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## SPRING 2016 DEBUT FICTION SAMPLER

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# DODGERS

**BILL BEVERLY**

*A NOVEL*

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*A NOVEL*

**BILL BEVERLY**



CROWN PUBLISHERS  
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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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
TK

ISBN 978-1-101-90373-5  
eBook ISBN 978-1-101-90374-2

Printed in the United States of America

*Book design by Barbara Sturman*  
*Jacket design by*  
*Jacket photograph by*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

# THE BOXES

## 1.

The Boxes was all the boys knew; it was the only place.

In the street one car moved, between the whole vehicles and skeletal remains, creeping over paper and glass.

The boys stood guard. They watched light fill between the black houses separated only barely, like a row of loose teeth. Half the night they had been there: Fin taught that you did not make a boy stand yard all night. Half was right. To change in the middle kept them on their toes, Fin said. It kept them awake. It made them like men.

The door of the house opened, and two U's stumbled out, shocked by the sun, ogling it like an old girl they hadn't seen lately. Some men left the house like this, better once they'd been in. Others walked easy going in but barely crawled their way out. The two ignored the boys at their watch. At the end of the walk, they descended the five steps to the sidewalk, steadied themselves on the low stone wall. One man slapped the other's palm loudly, the old way.

Again the door opened. A skeletal face, lip-curved, staring, hair rubbed away from his head. Sidney. He and Johnny ran the house, kept business, saw the goods in and the money out with teenage runners every half hour. Sidney looked this way and that like

a rat sampling the air, then slid something onto the step. Cans of Coke and energy drink, cold in a cardboard box. One of the boys went and fetched the box around; each boy took a can or two. They popped the tops and stood drinking fizz in the shadows.

The morning was still chilly with a hint of damp. Light began to spill between the houses, keying the street in pink. Footsteps approached from the right, a worker man leaving for work, jacket and yellow tie, gold ear studs. The boys stared down over him; he didn't look up. These men, the black men who wore ties with metal pins, who made wages but somehow had not left The Boxes: you didn't talk to them. You didn't let them up in the house. These men, if they came up in the house and were lost, someone needed them, someone would come looking. So you did not admit them. That was another thing Fin taught.

Televisions came on and planes flashed like blades in the sky. Somewhere behind them a lawn sprinkler hissed—*fist, fist, fist*—not loud but nothing else jamming up its frequency. A few U's came in together at seven and one more at about eight, crestfallen: he had that grievous look of a man who'd bought for a week but used up in a night. At ten the boys who had come on at two left. The lead outside boy, East, shared some money out to them as they went. It was Monday, payday, outside the house.

The new boys at ten were Dap, Antonio, Marsonius called Sony, and Needle. Needle took the north end, watching the street, and Dap the south. Antonio and Sony stayed at the house with East, whose twelve hours' work ended at noon. Antonio and Sony were good daytime boys. The night boys, you needed boys who knew how to stay quiet and stay awake. The day boys just needed to know how to look quiet.

East looked quiet and kept quiet. He didn't look hard. He didn't look like much. He blended in, didn't talk much, was the skinniest

of the bunch. There wasn't much to him. But he watched and listened to people. What he heard he remembered.

The boys had their talk—names they gave themselves, ways they built up. East did not play along with them. They thought East hard and sour. Unlike the boys, who came from homes with mothers or from dens of other boys, East slept alone, somewhere no one knew. He had been at the old house before them, and he had seen things they had never seen. He had seen a reverend shot on the walk, a woman jump off a roof. He had seen a helicopter crash into trees and a man, out of his mind, pick up a downed power cable and stand, illuminated. He had seen the police come down, and still the house continued on.

He was no fun, and they respected him, for though he was young, he had none in him of what they most hated in themselves: their childishness. He had never been a child. Not that they had seen.

A fire truck boomed past sometime after ten, sirens and motors and the crushing of the tires on the asphalt. The firemen glared out at the boys.

They were lost. Streets in The Boxes were a maze: one piece didn't match up straight with the next. So you might look for a house on the next block, but the next one didn't follow up from this one. The street signs were twisted every which way or were gone.

The fire truck returned a minute later, going the other way. The boys waved. They were all in their teens, growing up, but everyone liked a fire truck.

“Over there,” said Sony.

“What?” said Antonio.

“Somebody house on fire,” said Sony.

The smoke rose, soft and gray, against the bright sky. “Probably a kitchen fire,” East said. No ruckus, nobody burning up. You could hear the wailing a mile away when someone was burning up, even

in The Boxes. But more fire engines kept rumbling in. The boys heard them on the other streets.

A helicopter wagged its tail overhead.

By eleven it was getting hot, and two men crashed out of the house. One was fine and left, but one lay down in the grass.

“Go on,” Sony told him. “Get out of here.”

“You shut the fuck up, young fellow,” said the man, maybe forty years of age. He had a bee-stung nose, and under his half-open shirt East saw a bandage where the man had hurt himself.

“You go on,” said East. “Go on in the backyard if you got to lie down. Or go home. Not here.”

“This *my* house, son,” said the man, fighting to recline.

East nodded, grim and patient. “This *my* lawn,” he said. “Rules are rules. Go back in if you can’t walk. Don’t be here.”

The man put his hand in his pocket, but East could see he didn’t have anything in there, even keys.

“Man, you okay,” East said. “Nobody messing with you. Just can’t have people lying round the yard.” He prodded the man’s leg lightly. “You understand.”

“I *own* this house,” said the man.

Whether this was true, East did not know. “Go on,” he said. “Sleep in back if you want.”

The man got up and went into the backyard. After a few minutes Sony checked on him and found him asleep, trembling, fighting something inside.

The fire’s smoke seemed to thin, then came thicker. Trucks and pumps droned, and down the street some neighbor children were bouncing a ball off the front wall. East recognized two kids—from a neat house with green awnings, where sometimes a white Ford

parked. These kids kept away. Someone told them, or perhaps they just knew. For the last two days there had been a third girl playing too, bigger. She could have grabbed every ball if she'd wanted, but she played nice.

East made himself stop watching them and studied the chopper instead where it dangled, breaking up the sky.

When he glanced back, the game had stopped and the girl was staring. Directly at him, and then she started to come. He glared at her, but she kept advancing, slowly, the two neighbor kids sticking behind her.

She was maybe ten.

East pushed off. Casually he loped down the yard. Sony was already bristling: "Get back up the street, girl." East flattened his hand over his lowest rib: *Easy*.

The girl was stout, round-faced, dark-skinned, in a clean white shirt. She addressed them brightly: "This a crack house, ain't it?"

That's what Fin said: everyone still thought it was all crack.

"Naw." East glanced at Sony. "Where you come from?"

"I'm from Jackson, Mississippi. I go to New Hope Christian School in Jackson." She nodded back at the neighborhood kids. "Them's my cousins. My aunt's getting married in Santa Monica tomorrow."

"Girl, we don't give a fuck," said Antonio, up in the yard.

"Listen to these little gangsters," the girl sang. "Y'all even go to school?"

Probably from a good neighborhood, this girl. Probably had a mother who told her, *Keep away from them LA ghetto boys*, so what was the first thing she did?

East clipped his voice short. "You don't want to be over here. You want to get on and play."

"You don't know nothing about what I want," boasted the girl. She waved at Antonio. "And this little boy here who looks like fourth grade. What are you? Nine?"

“Damn,” Sony cheered her, chuckling.

Somewhere fire engines were gunning, moving again; East stepped back and listened. A woman and a daughter walked by arguing about candy. And the helicopter still chopping. It tensed East up. There were too many parts moving.

“Girl, back off,” he said. “I don’t need you mixed up.”

“*You’re* mixed up,” said the girl. She put one hand on the wall, immovable like little black girls got. A fighter.

“This kid,” East snorted. The last thing you wanted by the house was a bunch of kids. Women had sense. Men could be warned. But kids, they were gonna see for themselves.

A screech careened up the flat face of the street, hard to say from where. Tires. East’s talkie phone crackled on his hip. He scooped it up. It was Needle at the north lookout. But all East heard was panting, like someone running or being held down. “What is it?” East said. “What is it?” Nothing.

He scanned, backpedaling up the lawn.

Something was coming. Both directions, echoing, like a train.

He radioed inside. “Sidney. Something coming.” The helicopter was dipping above them now.

Sidney, cranky: “Man, what?”

“Get out the back now,” East said. “Go.”

“*Now?*” said Sidney incredulously.

“*Now.*” He turned. “You boys, get,” he ordered Antonio and Sony. Knowing they knew how and where to go. Having taught them what to do. Everyone on East’s crew knew the yards around, the ways you could go; he made sure of it.

The roar climbed the street—five cars flying from each end, big white cruisers. They raised the dust as they screeched in aslant. East thumbed his phone back on.

“Get out. Get out.” Already he was sliding away from the house. *His* house. Red Coke can on its side in the grass, foaming. No time to pick it up.

Sidney did not radio back.

How had this gotten past Dap and Needle? Without a warning? Unaccountable. Angry, he slipped down the wall to the sidewalk. The smell of engine heat and wasted tire rubber hung heavy. The other boys were gone. Now it was just him and the girl.

“I told you,” he hissed. “Go on!”

Stubborn thing. She ignored him. Staring behind her at the herd of white cars and polished helmets and deep black ribbed vests: now, *this* was something to see.

Four of the cops got low, split up, and gang-rushed the porch. Upstairs a window was thrown open, and in it, like a fish in rusty water, an ancient, ravaged face swam up. It looked over the scene for a moment, then poked out a gun barrel. East whirled then. The girl.

“Damn!” he yelled. “Get out of here!”

The girl, of course, did not budge. The *pop-pop* began.

East hit the sidewalk, crouched below the low wall. Beneath the guns’ sound the cops barked happily, ducking behind their cars like on TV. Everyone took shelter except the copter and the street dogs, howling merrily, and the Jackson girl.

East fit behind a parked Buick, rusted red. His breath fled him, speedy and light. The car was heat-blistered, and he tried not to touch it. Behind him the air was clouding over with bullets and fragments of the front of the house. Cop radios blared and spat inside the cruisers. The gun upstairs cracked past them, around them, off the street, into the cars, perforating a windshield, making a tire sigh.

The girl, stranded, peered up at the house. Then she faced where East had run, seeing he’d been right. She caught his eye.

With a hand he began a wave: *Come with me. Come here.*

Then the bullet ripped into her.

East knew how shot people were, stumbling or crawling or trying to outrace the bullet, what it was doing inside them. The girl didn't. She flinched: East watched. Then she put her hands out, and gently she lay down. Uncertainly she looked at the sky, and for a moment he disbelieved it all—it couldn't have hit her, the bullet. This girl was just crazy. Just as unreal as the fire.

Then the blood began inside the white cotton shirt. Her eyes wandered and locked on him. Dying fast and gently.

The talkie whistled again.

“God damn you, boy,” Sidney panted.

The police in the back saw their chance, and three of them aimed. The gun in the window fell, rattling down the roof. Just then the four cops on the porch kicked in the door.

“You supposed to warn us,” crackled Sidney. “You supposed to do your job.”

“I gave you all I got,” East said.

Sidney didn't answer. East heard him wheezing.

He got off the phone. He knew how to go. One last look—windows blown out, cops scaling the lawn, one U stumbling out as if he were on fire. *His* house. And the Jackson girl on the sidewalk, her blood on the crawl, a long finger pointing toward the gutter, finding its way. A cop bent over her, but she was staring after East. She watched East all the way down the street till he found a corner and turned away.

## 2.

The meet-up was a mile away in an underground garage beneath a tint-and-detail shop with no name. The garage had been shut down years ago—something about codes, earthquakes—but you could still get a car in, through a busted wall in the lot below some apartments next door. Nothing kept people away from a parking space for long.

East took the stairs with his shirt held over his nose. The air reeked of piss and powdered concrete. Three levels down he popped the door and let it close behind him before he breathed again. A few electric lights still hung whole and working from a forgotten power line. Something moved along a crack in the ceiling, surviving.

East wondered who'd be there. Fin had hundreds of people in The Boxes and beyond. After things went wrong, a meet like this might be strictly chain-of-command. Or it might be with somebody you didn't want to meet. Either way, you had to show up.

Down at the end he saw Sidney's car: a Magnum wagon, all black matte. Johnny reclined against it, doing his stretches. He squared his arms behind his head and curled his torso this way and that, muscles bolting up and receding. Then he bent and swept his elbows near the ground.

Sidney stood away in the darkness with his little snub gun eyeing East's head.

“Failing, third-rate, sorry motherfucker.”

East went still. They said that down here people got killed sometimes, bodies dropped down the airshaft into the dark where nothing could smell them. He looked flatly past the gun.

Sidney was hot. “I don’t like losing houses. Fin don’t like losing houses.”

“I ain’t found out yet what happened,” East said simply.

“Your boys ain’t shit. Who was it?”

“Dap. Needle.”

“Someone’s stupid. Someone didn’t care.”

East objected, “They know their jobs. That was my house I had for two years.”

“I had the house, boy,” Sidney spat. “You had the yard.”

East nodded. “I was there a long time.”

“Best house we had in The Boxes. Fin loves your skinny ass—you tell him it’s gone.”

It was not the first gun East had talked down. You did not fidget. You showed them that you were not scared. You waited.

Just then, Sidney’s phone crackled. He uncocked his gun and stuck it away. Behind him, Johnny wagged his head and got off the car. Johnny was a strange go-along, dark black and slow-moving where Sidney was half Chinese, wound up all the time. Johnny was funny. He could be nice; he handled problems inside the house, kept the U’s from fighting with each other. But you did not want to raise his temperature.

“Sidney don’t relish the running,” Johnny laughed. “In case you wasn’t clear about that.”

East breathed again. “Did everyone get out?”

“Barely. They got some U’s. No money and no goods.”

“Who was shooting out?”

“I don’t know, man. Some old fool, shotgun in his *pants*. We was grabbing and getting. I guess you could say he was too.”

Sidney put his phone away. He turned, fuming. “Someone *did* get shot.”

“I know it,” said East. “Little girl.” He could see the Jackson girl, the roundness of her face, like a plum, a little pink something tied in her hair.

“In the news it ain’t gonna be no little girl,” said Johnny. “Gonna be a very big girl. It’s a little girl when *your* ass gets shot.”

This had been a bad time. Fin’s man Marcus had been picked up three months ago. Marcus kept bank, never carried, never drove fast or packed a gun, quiet. He had a bad baby arm with seven fingers on his hand. He knew in his head where everything came from and where it went, where it was—no books, nothing to hide. Twenty-two years old, skilled, smart: Fin liked that. But they had him now, no bail. No bail meant the PD could just keep asking him questions till they ran out of questions. Since then, everything was getting tight. One lookout picked up just loitering—they kept him in for three days. Runners getting scooped off the street, just kids, police rounding them up in a boil of cars and lights, breaking them down.

Some judge wanted a war, so everything had gotten hard.

They rode the black wagon south unhappily. Sidney coughed wetly, like the running had made him lung-sick. He wiped his gargoye face. “Don’t look at the street signs,” he snapped.

“Man, who cares? I know what street this is,” said Johnny.

Something went *pumma, pumma, pum* in the speaker box, and the AC prickled hard on East’s face. He closed his eyes, like Sidney said, and didn’t look out at the street.

Losing the house—it was going to be on him. He owned the daytime boys; he owned their failure. He’d run the yard for two years, and he’d taught the lookouts, and until today everyone said he’d done it well. His boys knew their jobs; they came on time,

they didn't fight, didn't make noise. He could not see where it'd gone wrong. That girl—he shouldn't have talked to her for so long. Maybe she would have wandered off. He could have let Antonio muscle her a bit. She wound up dead anyhow.

What could he do? That many cops come to take a house, they're gonna take it.

A pair of dogs went wild as the car slowed, but East didn't open his eyes. Some of the neighbors' dogs likely were Fin's. Most people would keep a good dog if you gave them the food for it. And the cops looked where the dogs were. You didn't keep dogs where you stayed.

“Don't look at the house numbers.”

“Man, how I'm not gonna see what house it is?” countered Johnny.

They parked down the street and walked. A little girl on a hollow tricycle scraped the sidewalk with her plastic wheels. The day had turned hot and windy. When Sidney said, “*Hyp*,” they all turned and mounted two steps up toward a flat yellow house.

FOR SALE, said a sign. Someone had blacked out the real estate agent's name.

Answering the door was a short, stark-faced woman East had seen once before somewhere. On her hair she wore a jeweled black net. Her mouth was thin and colorless, slashed in. She showed them in, then retreated, into a kitchen where something bubbled but gave no smell.

The room was empty, bare, brown wood floors. The drawn blinds muted the daylight into purples. A lonely nail on the walls here and there told of people who'd lived here once. There were two guns there too, Circo and Shawn. East had seen them before. It was never good, seeing them.

“Everyone get out your house when it happen?” asked Shawn. He was a tall kid, like Johnny.

“Little bitch didn’t even give us a heads-up,” flared Sidney.

East ignored it. It wasn’t Sidney he had to answer to now. He wondered how much about it everyone knew.

Shawn wiped out the inside of his cheek with a finger and bit his lips unpleasantly.

“Gonna need me in Westwood tomorrow?”

“Depends. See what the day brings,” said Sidney. “Miracles happen.”

Shawn laughed once, more of a cough. He patted the bulk in the pocket of his jeans approvingly.

A security system beeped, and down the hall a door opened—just a click and a whisper of air. The woman exited the kitchen softly, on bare feet, and turned down the hall. She slipped inside the cracked door and shut it. A moment later it beeped open again. East watched the woman. She had a spell about her, like her time in this world was spent arranging things in another.

She pointed at East, Sidney, and Johnny. “You can come,” she said calmly.

East had been in rooms like this before, where guns had talked vaguely amongst themselves. Until today, the day he’d lost the house, he’d found it exciting. Today he was glad to be summoned away. He caught a scent trailing from her body as he followed, and inhaled. Usually if he got this close to a woman, it was a U, heading in or out. Or one working the sidewalk, or stained from the fry grill. This woman was perfumed with something strange that didn’t come out of a bottle. He held his breath.

The net in her hair glistened: tiny black pearls.

The system beeped again as she unsealed the door.

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Fin's room: unlit except for two candles. He sat in a corner, bare-foot and cross-legged atop a dark ottoman, his head bowed as if in prayer, a candle's gleam splitting his scalp in two. He was a big man, loose and large, and his shoulders loomed under his shirt.

This room had a dark, soft carpet. A second ottoman sat empty in the center of the room.

Fin raised his head. "Take off your shoes."

East bent and scuffled with his laces. In the doorway behind them appeared Circo, a boy of nineteen with a cop's belt, gun on one side and nightstick on the other. He stuck his nose in, looked around, and left. *Good*. The door beeped as the woman pulled it shut behind her.

Johnny took a cigarette out.

"Don't smoke in here, man," Fin said.

Johnny fumbled it back into the pack. "I'm sorry."

"House is for sale." Fin wiped the back of his head. "Purchase it if you like. Then you can do whatever you want."

The three boys arranged their shoes by the door.

Dust curled and floated above the candles. Fin sat waiting, like a schoolteacher. When he spoke, it was with an ominous softness.

"What happened?"

Sidney answered, grievous, wheezing. "No warning, man. Paying a whole crew of boys out there. When the time came, no one made a call. Didn't shout, didn't do shit."

"I did call you," East protested.

"When there was police already banging on the door."

So Sidney was here to saw him off.

"Why didn't they call?" Fin said it quietly, amused, almost as if he were asking himself.

Sidney jostled East forward unnecessarily. This meant him: this was his *why*.

"There was a lot going on," East began.

Fin, quizzical: "A lot?"

“Fire trucks. House fire,” East said. “Lots of noise. The ends—Needle, Dap—maybe that’s what they was thinking: police going to the fire. Maybe. I mean, I ain’t spoken to them yet, so I can’t say.”

“I think your boys know to call when they see a police.”

“Oh, yes, they know,” East said. “Oh, yes.”

“And why ain’t you talked to them?”

“Something goes wrong, stay off the phone,” East answered, “like you taught.”

Fin looked from East to Sidney and back.

“Was there a fire for real?”

“I saw smoke. I saw trucks. I didn’t walk and look.”

“Maybe it don’t matter,” said Fin quietly, “but I might like to know.” He gave East a hard look and then veiled his eyes. East felt a beating in his chest like a bird’s wing.

A minute passed before Fin spoke again. “Close every house,” he said. “Tell everybody. Submarine. I don’t want to hear *anything*. I hate to say it, but people gonna have to look elsewhere a few days.”

“I got it,” said Sidney. “But what are we gonna do?”

“Nothing,” Fin said. “Close my houses down.”

“All right,” said Sidney. “But how is it this little nigger fucked up, and *I’m* not getting paid? Johnny neither?”

“I taught you to save for a rainy day,” Fin said. “And, Sidney, I taught you not to say that word to me. You know better, so why don’t you step out. You hear me?”

Sidney fell back and grimaced. “I apologize for that,” he said, and he turned to pick up his shoes.

“You too, Johnny. You can go.” Fin sighed. “East, you stay.”

“You want us to wait for him?”

“No,” Fin said. “Go on.”

East stood still, not watching the two boys moving behind him. When the door beeped open and they left, the woman was there, outside, barefoot, waiting. She brought in a tray with two steaming clay cups. She stood mute, and something passed between her and

Fin, no words, borne like an electrical charge. Then she placed the tray with the two cups on the empty ottoman.

Quietly she eyed East and then turned and left through the same door. *Beep.*

“How you doing?” Fin said. “Shook up?”

East admitted it. He was aching where he stood. Tightened up more than ever. His knees felt unstrung. “Yeah.”

“Sit.”

East lowered himself to the second ottoman stiffly and sat beside the steaming tray in the dusky room. Fin spread his shoulders like a great bird. He moved slowly, top-heavy, as if his head were filled with something weightier than brains and bone.

Fin was East’s father’s brother—not that anyone had ever introduced East to his father. Others knew this; sometimes they resented East for it, the protective benevolence he moved under. But it shaped their world too, the special care that was given him, his house, his crew. When East was a child, Fin had been an occasional presence—not a family presence, like the grandmother whose house held a few Christmases, like the aunt who sometimes showed up in bright, baggy church clothes on Sunday afternoons with sandwiches and fruit in scarred plastic tubs. Fin was a visitor when East’s mother was having hard times: to put a dishwasher in, to fetch East to a doctor when he had an ear infection or one of the crippling fevers he now remembered only dimly. Once Fin took East to the Lakers, good seats near the floor. But East didn’t understand basketball, the spitting buzzers and the hostile rows of white people in chairs, and they’d left long before the game was decided.

But since East had grown, Fin was the quiet man in the background. East had never had to be a runner, a little kid dodging in and out of houses with a lunchbox full of goods or bills. He’d been

a down-the-block lookout at ten, a junior on a house crew at twelve. He'd had his own yard for two years, directing and paying boys sometimes older and stronger than he was. Not often in that time had he laid eyes on Fin, but often he'd felt the quiet undertow of his uncle's blood carrying him deeper into the waves.

Did he want to do this? It didn't matter: it would provide. Did boys respect him because he could see a street and run a crew more tightly than anyone else, or because he was one of Fin's favorites? It didn't matter: either way he had his say, and the boys knew it. Was this a life that he'd be able to ride, or would he be drowned in it like other boys he'd kicked off his gang or seen bloody or dead in the street?

It didn't matter.

"Try it," Fin said.

East touched a cup, and his hand reared back. He was not used to hot drinks.

"Not ready yet?" Fin reached for his cup and drank soundlessly. The steam rose thick in the air. "Now tell me again why that girl got shot."

East saw her again, her face sideways on the street. Those stubborn eyes. He could still see them. "I tried," he said, and then his voice slipped away, and he had to swallow hard to get it back. He stared at the tea, the steam kicking up.

"I tried to make her go away," East said. "She been down the street all weekend playing ball and just came up that minute. Then the police. You couldn't tell her nothing."

"I see. Just her bad luck, then. Her bad timing."

"She was from Mississippi."

Fin sat and looked at East a long time.

"You know that girl hurts me more than the house," Fin said. "We got houses. We can move. Every time we move a house, we

bring along the old and we pick up the new. It's that girl that costs us. It's that girl that goes down on my account."

"I know."

"She died."

East swallowed. "I know," he said.

Fin agitated his cup and stared down into it. "Get up and lock that door," he said. "I don't want nobody walking in on us, what happens next."

East stood. He stumbled in the carpet's pile. The lock was a push-button, nothing more. East pressed it gently.

Fin's dark eyes followed him back to the cushion.

"So you're free now. Had a house. Had a job. Lost the house. Lost the job."

East hung his head, but Fin waited on him to say something. "Yes, sir."

"You wondering what comes next?" Fin smacked his lips. "Because maybe nothing comes next. Maybe you should take some time."

*Take some time*, East thought. What they said when they didn't want you anymore.

"There is something you might do for me," Fin said. "You can say yes or no. But it's quiet. We won't talk about it. Not now, next year, not ever. You keep it till you die."

East nodded. "I can keep quiet."

"I know. I know you can," Fin said. "So: I want you to go on a drive. At the end of that drive, I want you to do something." He curled a foot up and pulled on it. Fluid joints, a slow movement. "Murder a man."

East drew in his shoulder and carefully dried his mouth on it. A spark fired in his stomach; a snake curled.

"You can say yes or no. But once you do, you're in. Or out. So think."

"I'm in," East said automatically.

“I know you are,” said Fin. And he drank down the rest of his tea, then shook his head twice, a long shudder that might have been a laugh or might have been something else entirely. East felt Fin’s gaze then and swallowed the hard beating inside him.

“Be ready tomorrow, nine o’clock. You’re gonna clear out straight. So bring clothes, shoes. That’s all. No wallet. No weapons. We gonna take everything off you. Bring your phone, but you can’t keep it. No phones on this trip. And no cards—we’ll give you money. You hear?”

“All right.”

“Keep your phone on, and Sidney will call.”

“Sidney ain’t too pleased with me right now.”

“Sidney ain’t got no choice,” Fin said. “Okay? Be some other boys too going along. They a little older, more experienced. You might not feel you fit in. They might wonder too. Especially after today.” He swabbed the moisture from the inside of his cup with his fingers. “But I think you got something they need.”

This praise from Fin warmed him.

“Gone five, six days. You got a dog or a snake or something, find someone to feed it.”

East shook his head.

“Good,” said Fin. “Then we ain’t talking about nothing in here. Just catching up. Stay a minute and drink your tea.”

East picked up the heavy cup. He wet his tongue. The tea tasted old, like dust at first. Like something collected from the ground.

“You like this?”

East didn’t, but he tried not to show. “What is it?”

“No name. It’s good for you, though,” said Fin. “That woman, she owned a tea shop. Then she fell into some things. I helped her. She knows business. She knows about bringing in off the docks. And she knows how to brew.”

East nodded. “She’s from China?”

“Half Thai. Half everything else,” said Fin lazily. “How’s your mother?”

East coughed once. “She’s all right. She got a little sick, but she’s better.”

“House holding up?”

“Holding up,” said East. “Hold up better if she cleaned a little.”

“You the man of the family,” said Fin. “You could up and clean it. Stop and see her before you go.”

“Yes, sir. All right.”

“All right,” Fin said. “This is a big favor, man. This is not easy, what you’re doing. I want you to know that it is important to me.” Fin’s hands clasped his feet and stretched them, twisted them. Like bones didn’t matter, like they could be shaped any way you wanted. “I will remember it was you that did it,” Fin said again. He put his cup down with East’s. The two cups touching made a deep sound like the bell of a grandfather clock.

“Boy, go,” Fin said. “Not a word. Nine o’clock. Sidney will see after your crew, take care of them. Don’t worry. Stay low.”

East stood. He felt childish in his white socks.

Fin brought out a thick fold of bills. He counted out twenties—five hundred dollars. He handed it over without looking at it.

“Some for your mother there.”

“All right.”

“One more thing you want to know. Your brother, he’s in. He’s part of the trip.”

East nodded. But a little pearl of anger splattered inside his chest: his brother. Babysitting. Not that his brother was any baby.

“Maybe you ain’t gonna like it. Figured I’d give you a night to get used to the idea.” Fin rubbed down his feet, popped a toe. “You know why he’s going.”

East put the money away and laid his hand over his pocket. “Yeah, I know.”

---

A bad street. Dogs bashed themselves against the fences. Televisions muttered house to house through caged doors and windows. East was the only person moving outside. He stepped up to a porch and unlocked the door.

In the living room, in a nest of dull air, his mother lay watching a game show. She looked older than her thirty-one: runny-nosed, fat and anemic at the same time. She drank from a plastic cup, a bottle of jug wine between her knees.

East approached from behind. She noticed, but late.

“Easton? What you doing here?”

Her fierceness, as always, was half surprise. She sat up.

“Hello, Mama,” East said. He looked sideways at the game show.

“You come and sit down.”

He sat beside her, and she smothered him in a hug that he received patiently, patting her arm. She did not turn down the TV: it made the windows hum. When she released him, her nose had grown wet again, and she was looking for somewhere to wipe it.

“I thought I might see you. I made eggs and bacon.”

East stood up again. “I can’t eat. I just came by to check.”

“Let me take care of you,” she reproached him.

East shrugged. The TV swerved into a commercial, even louder. It made him wince. He split off half the fold of bills Fin had given him, and she took it without resistance or thanks. The money curled unseen in her hand.

East said, “Nice day. You see it?”

“Huh?” his mother said, surprised again. “I didn’t get outside today. Maybe. Where’s Ty? You see him?”

“I ain’t seen him. He’s all right.” He retreated to the kitchen, a little preserve behind a white counter littered with empty glasses. He could see her craning her neck, tracking him.

“He ain’t been to see me.”

“He’s doing fine. He’s busy.”

“He my *baby*.” Her voice rose frantically.

“Well, he’s doing fine. He’ll come around. I’ll tell him.”

“East,” she commanded, “you eat some eggs. They’re still in the pan.”

*Let me take care of you.*

When he flicked the switch, one of the two fluorescent tubes on the ceiling came to life. The kitchen was a wasteland. East bagged what could easily be thrown out. With a napkin from a burger bag he smashed ants. The eggs on the stove were revolting—cold and wet, visible pieces of shell. He turned away.

His mother had gotten up. She stood in the doorway.

“Easton,” she breathed, “you gon stay here?”

Embarrassed, he said, “Mama, don’t.”

Proudly she said, “There’s sheets on your bed.”

“I can’t tonight.”

“I ain’t seen either one of you,” she sniffed.

Like every minute weighed a ton. “Mama, let me get this trash out.”

“Whyn’t you have some eggs?”

“Mama,” he pleaded.

“Don’t neither my boys love me,” she announced to something on the opposite wall.

East dropped the bag of garbage. He found a fork in the congealed eggs, hacked out a mouthful, and shoveled it in. Sulfur. He tried to chew and swallow, eyes closed, and then turned to his mother. Eggs still milled around the sills of his teeth, horrible.

“You see.” His mother beamed.

East’s room was small but neat: twin bed with pillow, two photos on a shelf. A carpet he’d pulled up because he didn’t like the pattern

and laid back upside down. A little dust but no clutter. He shut the door, but the TV noise still buffeted him. He picked shirts, socks, and underwear out of the pressboard dresser and stuffed them into a pillowcase. He looked around for a moment before the door opened.

His mother, weary on her feet but still pursuing, stood in the doorway.

“Any of Ty’s clothes here?” he asked.

She let out a sickly laugh. “Ty’s clothes—he took them—I ain’t seen—I don’t know what Ty wear.”

“Shirts? Anything?”

Two years younger, but Ty had left first. Even the room they’d shared for ten years—Ty barely ever seemed to live there. No toys, no animals, nothing taped to the wall. Like it was never his.

She zeroed in. “You going somewhere? You look like a tramp.”

“Me and Ty need clothes for a few days.”

She hummed, casual but knowing. “In trouble?”

“No.”

“Suitcases in the closet. But they old.”

“I don’t need a suitcase,” East said.

He stopped and waited stock-still till she retreated. After a moment he heard the squeak of the couch springs: she was down. He was alone. He checked the block of wood he’d mounted inside his bed frame, underneath: tight. He loosened it with the thumbscrew. He left his ATM cards there, then tightened it back down.

At the door he said, “I’ll be back in a few days. Come see you then. Come and stay with you.”

“I know you will. I know you gon come back,” his mother cooed.

He took out the remaining money, peeled off three bills, and gave her the rest.

“I know you ain’t in no trouble,” she begged. “My boys ain’t.”

He tilted his face down, and she kissed him good-bye.

---

Down the street, freed from the shout of her TV, East heard the silence hiss like waves. He walked north until he entered an office park of sandy gray buildings nine stories high. Two of them stood in a sort of corner formation, and East walked around them. A faint hubbub of raucous people drinking came from somewhere in the darkness.

A narrow sidewalk led behind the air-conditioning island. The concrete pad full of AC units lent cover as East bent at the last building's foot. His fingers found the makeshift metal stay wedged between the panes of a basement window. The window fell inward, but he caught it before it made a sound. Quietly, twisting his body in one limb at a time, he crawled through.

The basement crawl space, dim behind dusty windows, was clean, its packed-dirt floor higher at the sides than in the middle. It was empty save for East's things and a faucet in one corner. It didn't turn on, but it wouldn't stop dripping either, and East had placed a wide stainless-steel bowl beneath it; there was always water, clear and cold. He tossed his bundle down and put his face over the bowl, watching his reflection swim in upside-down from the other side.

He drank. Then he washed his face, his hands, the caves of his armpits.

The spot where he slept was a pair of blankets, a pillow he'd bought at a roadside mattress store, and a large, heavy cardboard box the size of a washing machine. The air conditioners hummed all day, all night, washing out the hubbub and street noise. But that was not enough. East paused, stretched, then knelt on the floor beside the box. His hole. He tipped the cardboard up one side and straightened the blankets on the floor beneath it. He smacked the pillow straight and put his bundle of clothes down at the foot of the blanket. Then he slithered beneath and let the box drop over him. Like a reptile, a snake, calmest in the dark. Even the sound of the air conditioners vanished. Nothing. No one.

He breathed and waited.



A  
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
[CIP data]

ISBN 978-1-101-90511-1  
eISBN 978-1-101-90512-8

Printed in the United States of America

Jacket design by TK  
Jacket photography TK

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

*Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will  
be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only  
recover their senses slowly, one by one.*

— CHARLES MACKAY



VASSAR COLLEGE, AUGUST 1913

If she had to guess, Vera Longacre would say that most of the girls at Vassar College knew her name and could pick her out of a crowd, even if she could not do the same for them. Her peculiar brand of celebrity came without any effort on her part, much like the money, the houses, and appearances on the society page. Very few of her fellow students could claim to know her personally, and a still smaller group would be able to identify her favorite foods or pastimes or which room in the dormitory was hers. But almost everyone knew Vera's face well enough to whisper and nod discreetly in her direction as she glided past them on the quad. She sometimes felt like a walking magazine cover, with her name above her head in place of a title.

Not that she didn't have a social group. In her first two years, she had selected a couple of girls of adequate means and manners, with whom she ate dinner and studied from time to time. The classroom, however, was a sacred space for her. When the instructor lectured, she preferred to be out of danger of distraction. She found the third row of the classroom the perfect compromise. Freshman year she had made the mistake of choosing a seat too close to the professor's podium, and sophomore year had taught her the back of the room made it difficult

to hear over the whispers of less inspired classmates. Now, as a senior, she had found the perfect balance. Close enough to hear well, not so close that the professor would expect her to answer every question.

Vera liked to arrive a few minutes early. On that morning, she walked into the classroom in the Main Building to find only three other girls giggling in the back row. The auditorium-style seating sloped down to a lectern and desk at the front of the room, and three large windows at the back provided far more light than the new electric bulbs overhead. Once she had chosen her third-row seat, she opened her textbook to the assigned reading. She skimmed back over the paragraphs, then found her attention drifting to the plates, which showed richly colored prints of a set of neoclassical paintings. Who could read endless pages of dry description when the paintings were right there to be devoured?

A satchel thumped down beside Vera, but she did not bother to look up. Her two closest friends did not share any of her classes, and she didn't care for small talk. She flipped the page to a new painting as the girl in the neighboring seat let out a huff.

"If you ask me, the problem with the neoclassicists is all the lounging," the girl said.

Vera looked up to find a pretty girl with hair as black as her own, though her eyes were blue instead of Vera's brown. A playful smile lit up the girl's round face.

"I mean, look," the girl continued, gesturing at the plate on the page. "Every single figure here is draped against a marble wall or slumped against a column. Surely one of those painters must have known the ancient Romans or Greeks could stand and sit like normal people, don't you think? Just look at how this woman is flopping around."

"I . . . suppose." Vera could not think of a better answer to such an absurd observation. "It is part of the style, though."

The girl tapped the paper. "Oh, it's always part of the style. Anytime they're doing something silly-looking it's part of the style."

"How would you have done it, then?"

The girl pulled the book from Vera's desk and inspected it. She

waved her hand again, dismissing the painting in front of her. “I don’t know. Wouldn’t it be much nicer if it looked like real life? If it had real detail?”

“Like a photograph?”

A grin spread on the girl’s pink-cheeked face. “Exactly. See? You understand. With their eyes all rolled to the gods like that, it looks like they’re having fits. The worst thing is how lazy it is on the artist’s part. Making a person look real is far more of a challenge.”

Vera stared at the girl. At least she wasn’t talking about the weather. “I’m sorry, have we met before?”

“I don’t think so, why?”

Before she could prepare a more polite answer, Vera said, “Because most people introduce themselves before barging up to complain about women in neoclassical paintings having fits.”

The girl’s eyes widened. Vera thought for a moment she would get up and leave, but instead she laughed. “Then I’d better introduce myself. I’m Bea Stillman. Please, never, ever call me Beatrice.”

Vera’s brows shot up. “Stillman? I’m surprised we haven’t met before now. I didn’t know there were any Stillmans here.”

Bea shook her head. “Not those Stillmans. Related, though. He’s my father’s cousin. We left for Georgia before he left Texas.” She sat up straighter. “We’re the Atlanta Stillmans.”

The mention of Georgia explained Bea’s breathy cadence and drawn-out vowels. “I must say I’m surprised,” Vera said. “Why come so far north?”

The girl toyed with her bracelet. “I was at Agnes Scott, in Decatur, but my parents decided the New York set would be a good influence for me. Fewer pearls, more diamonds. Though I don’t know how good your manners are after all.” At Vera’s frown, Bea leaned forward. “You haven’t introduced yourself yet.”

“Oh.” Her stern look relaxed. “Right. I’m Vera Longacre.”

“Of course I knew there was a Longacre among us,” Bea said with a wry tone.

Vera turned to fuss in her bag. “Yes, that’s me.”

Bea paused at Vera's tightened expression. "Oh, now, don't be that way. That's not the first time you've gotten that reaction, is it, Rockefeller?" Her softened pronunciation of the final *r* made it sound closer to "fella."

Vera's features loosened into a smile. She adopted the tone her mother and her friends used to speak to the wait staff at the club. "We are not the Rockefellers, goodness."

Bea played along, lifting her nose into the air. "Don't like the comparison?"

"Certainly not, darling." Vera leaned in, lowering her voice to a hush. "New money."

The girls laughed. The room had filled as they were talking, and now most of the rows were occupied. The instructor walked in, set her briefcase on the desk, and turned on the slide projector. The slight, gray-haired woman's voice bounced around the oak-paneled room for about five minutes before Bea started scribbling on a scrap of paper. She passed the note to Vera.

*Are you a senior?*

Vera wrote *yes* and passed it back. After further scratching on Bea's part, the scrap returned.

*I'm a junior. I live in Josselyn. You?*

Ignoring the note for a moment, Vera put on a firm listening-to-the-teacher face. When she felt her point was made, she wrote *Strong Building*.

Bea didn't write back for a good while. At last, the paper returned to Vera, with a new line.

*You ought to get moved to Josselyn. We have showers.*

Vera wrote back, *Josselyn wasn't built when I started here.*

*Bad luck. Do you have a beau?*

This question took Vera by surprise, and she missed most of the discussion about the sculptor Canova as she chose an answer. Finally, she put *yes* on the paper and slid it back down the long desk.

Bea glanced at the paper and pursed her lips dramatically.

*That took a while to write.*

*I didn't want to miss any more of the lecture.*

*But you sure didn't look like you were listening. Who is he? Is it forbidden? I simply love forbidden romance.*

*It's not forbidden.*

*You can tell me. I'm good at keeping secrets.*

*Not now.*

Vera thought for a moment after this and added: *It's not a secret.*

When the professor dismissed the class, Bea stood and exhaled hard. "I must say, you have me in suspense, Vera Longacre. Why don't you come with me and tell me all about your scandalous love affair?"

Vera laughed. "It's not a scandal. It's the exact opposite of a scandal, as a matter of fact."

Bea scooped up her books, papers, and pen in one messy jumble with one hand and hooked her elbow through Vera's. "Well, come with me and tell me your deadly dull story anyway." She shot a look out of the corner of her eye. "I may as well say it. I wasn't planning to like you."

"Oh, no?"

"That's why I started talking to you." Bea led Vera down the stairs to the exit.

"You started talking to me because you thought you wouldn't like me?" Vera asked.

"That's right. I like to pick a serious-looking girl and say a few shocking things, to see how fast she moves to another desk."

Vera nudged Bea with her shoulder. "That's horrible."

"It is, but I'm starved for entertainment." She rolled her eyes and drawled out the word *starved*. "Anyway, you didn't move desks. You sat right there and said something clever." Bea released Vera's arm as they entered the hallway. "I'm afraid this means we have no choice. We simply must be friends."

Vera studied the odd, lively girl beaming in front of her. Papers dripped from the clumsy stack in her arms. Bea's careless stance sent

a shot of affection through her. Perhaps it was that carelessness that drew her to Bea. There was none of the social posturing Vera was so accustomed to. The girls she typically socialized with were so afraid of saying the wrong thing, they hardly spoke at all. Bea wasn't a breath of fresh air, she was a balmy gust.

"If we must be friends, then I guess we ought to go to lunch together," Vera said. "Would you like to?"

Bea nodded, and the two headed off, trailing paper all the way.

# « 2 »

NEW YORK CITY, JUNE 1923

The two-and-a-half-minute elevator ride from the penthouse to the lobby of the Angelus building was more than enough time for Vera Bellington to contemplate ways out of her weekly Wednesday lunch with her mother. What if she called to say she was ill? What if she got into the Packard waiting downstairs and directed the driver to a different restaurant? What if she got into the Packard, went to the usual restaurant, but sat at a different table and said nothing to her mother? She could pretend to be a stranger. *Terribly sorry, you must have me confused with someone else.*

Well, they would lock her up, no question about that. Her mother and Arthur would conclude Vera had lost her mind at last, and would spare no expense in finding her the best facility in which to go insane. Going to another restaurant was no solution, either. Her mother would simply come to the penthouse of the Angelus looking for Vera, and then there would be hell to pay. Feigning illness would also mean an unwelcome visit. Her fanciful options exhausted, Vera went out to the curb to meet the car. She did not have to say a word to the driver. He knew where to go for Wednesday lunch.

Her mother was already seated in the Tea Room at the Plaza

when Vera arrived, at their usual table. Lorna Longacre was a slender woman with steel-gray hair coiled in a knot at the back of her head and remarkably smooth skin for her age. This was, in part, because she refused to frown, citing the wrinkles such a disagreeable expression would cause. Of course, she did not smile much either, which probably had the same helpful effect.

Vera slid into the floral cushion of the chair with a quiet greeting, but her mother kept her gaze trained on a group of girls passing by the window. Something between disgust and satisfaction pulled on her face, as if insects had invaded and she looked forward to the pleasure of stamping them out one by one.

“What are you looking at?” Vera asked, as the waiter spread a napkin onto her lap for her.

“The clothing some of these—well, you can hardly call them ladies, can you? The skirts on them. Can’t decently call them skirts, either. Up to their knees. More like bathing costumes.” Her mother sniffed and turned her attention to Vera. “If you had dressed with so little sense at that age, I’d have thrown you out.”

“Which is why I would never have done such a thing, Mother. Good gracious.” Vera peered at the menu, though she always ordered the crab cocktail with sliced tomatoes.

Her mother shot her a pointed look but did not comment. “And that short hair,” she continued. “Though it’s not just silly girls doing that now. Do you know, the ladies at the club have convinced themselves it’s appropriate for women of their age? Petunia Etherington came in the other day with it chopped straight off at her chin.” Vera’s mother clicked her tongue. “Imagine.”

The two ladies ordered their meals, and Vera squeezed a lemon into her tea. They sat looking around the room for a moment in silence, before taking up the usual set of questions and answers that served as their script for these lunches.

“How is Daddy?” Vera asked.

Her mother picked an invisible thread from her jacket. “Forever

with his horses. I'm always half surprised he doesn't offer me a sugar cube and try to brush me when he comes in."

"When is the next race?"

"Not for ages. The next is Saratoga. I hope you'll come with us. I'll call your girl and have her put it on your calendar."

Vera nodded. "Did you go to the opera this weekend?"

"It was *La Traviata*."

"Mmm. Daddy hates that one."

"I went with the Stanfords." Her mother took a sip of tea. "She tried to hide it, but Eleanor wept like a baby at the end. Honestly, in public."

"It is a lovely opera, though." Vera inclined her head at the waiter as he set down their plates.

"Weeping in public is for infants and funerals, darling. And even then it should be done discreetly." Her mother lifted her fork over her chicken salad. "How is Arthur?"

The question should have been a throwaway one, but Vera's throat tightened at the mention of her husband. Thirty years of conversation with her mother had taught her better, but her response was out of her mouth before she could stop herself. "Mother, when Daddy was working . . . away a lot . . . did you ever get lonely?"

Her mother set her fork down on her plate and glanced around. "I hope that's a unique way of telling me you're having a child."

Vera looked at her hands in her lap, her face burning. She would have been better off confessing an urge to strip naked and dance around the restaurant than to admit something like loneliness to her mother. She struggled for the words to explain herself and settled on something close to the truth. "No, nothing like that. Nothing out of the ordinary. But Arthur has so many late nights, more trips away. It's been a bit difficult."

Her mother snapped her fork back into the air. "What did you think marriage would be like? Besides, lonely people are people without anything to do. Don't you have your charities? Your friends? Good heavens, if we expected our husbands to provide us with our only

company we'd all go mad." She narrowed her eyes. "Have you been reading those romances again? Those silly things will rot your brain."

"I'm sorry, Mother. Forget I said it."

"Yes, let's." Her mother took a sip of water. "Oh, I have something to occupy you. There's a painting I'm thinking of buying, but I want you to take a look for me first. One of my friends from the club introduced me to a dealer, and he says he's got a Dutch master. He's selling at an amazing price. I'm afraid the price is a little too good."

"Have you seen it yet?"

"I haven't." Her mother pursed her lips. "How much did your father and I pay for you to go to Vassar? We may as well get some use out of your studies, don't you think?"

Vera knew not to take the bait on that line of inquiry. "When do you want me to go?"

"Are you free tomorrow? The dealer phoned this morning, I told him I didn't think you had anything pressing."

Vera stifled a groan. She did have a luncheon with the ladies in her building, but her mother did not make requests. She mandated. "Who is he?"

"Fleming somebody. He's apparently a French dealer with an established gallery in Paris. He's just opened an offshoot in the city to better cater to his American clientele. I'll give you the address. He's a few blocks from here."

Vera tried frantically to think of some way she could redirect her mother's interest. The idea of traipsing through the city for a Dutch master her mother would not even really appreciate was not Vera's idea of an afternoon well spent. "Surely his Paris gallery would have a better selection if he's just setting up here. Why not wait until you're there next?"

Her mother shook her head. "No way of knowing when that will be. Your father won't go with me, and I certainly won't travel alone. Unless you'd like to go with me?"

An hour in a local gallery seemed a less daunting prospect than

a month in Europe with her mother, and Vera agreed to go see the painting. After they finished their meal, her mother wrote the gallery's address on a card. They walked out onto the sidewalk to wait for their drivers to bring their cars. Her mother's arrived first, and she waved a few fingers at Vera from the backseat. A hint of worry still lingered in her eyes, indicating she had not forgotten Vera's confession.

# « 3 »

VASSAR COLLEGE, SEPTEMBER 1913

After their first lunch together on the day they met, Vera and Bea ate together nearly every afternoon. At first, Vera had alternated between her usual lunch crowd and Bea. Once, she invited Bea to eat with her group, but the blend had not been a harmonious one. All Ella Gregory and Lillie Huntsfield could do was stare, and Bea had pronounced them “dull as flour, but with less taste.” After that, Vera adjusted her schedule to come in late enough that she and Bea missed her other friends entirely. The dreariness of her more appropriate friends could not compete with her new, vibrant friend from the South. Unfortunately, her lively lunches made dinner with her old crowd seem even more tedious. No one in her right mind would choose polite small talk and inquiries about her academic progress over Bea’s naughty asides.

Dinner seating was naturally trickier to navigate, since the evening lacked the casual atmosphere of lunch, and class schedules could not be blamed for interrupting the standing social appointment of the regular table. One night, emboldened by imagining what her new friend would do in her situation, Vera strolled through the dining room right past Ella and Lillie, nodding a greeting but saying nothing. The girls gave her stony looks but would never have dreamed of challeng-

ing Vera's choice. She wove her way around the square, white-clothed tables to take a seat beside Bea.

"Not sitting with the Opera Board tonight?" Bea asked, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Vera spread her napkin in her lap and scooted her wooden chair closer to the table. "They have each other. I thought you could use some company, too."

"Maybe they do teach girls up here manners after all." Bea leaned in and spoke under her breath. "You couldn't take it anymore?"

"Not for another minute." Vera laughed. "Your parents may have sent you up here for the good influences of the North, but you've been a bad influence on me, Bea Stillman."

"Impossible. Girls like you are incorruptible." Bea poked at the sliver of roast beef on her plate.

"I don't know about that."

"You'd rather be corruptible? I knew there was a sinner lurking inside you. Maybe now you'll tell me more about your summer romance." A familiar gleam brightened Bea's eyes.

Vera wanted to reply that Arthur's pursuit was hardly a romance, but she stopped. Of course, technically, it was a romance. He wouldn't have visited her so often last summer if he hadn't had marriage on his mind in some way. So why did Bea's description seem so ill fitting? "Maybe I will," Vera said at last. She had held off this discussion through weeks of lunches; it was probably time she gave her friend more than just a passing detail.

Bea turned, eyes shining. "Finally. What does Arthur look like? He must be handsome. Is he rich?"

"He is terribly handsome," Vera admitted. She ignored Bea's last question, leaving a discussion of Arthur's financial situation for a more private conversation. A maid appeared at her elbow, and Vera nodded. As the maid spooned green beans onto their plates, Vera tried to keep her voice low until the woman stepped away. "Tall, with dark hair. Not too slender. He's about ten years older, and very sophisticated."

Bea wrinkled her nose. “You sound like you’re describing a building. What are his eyes like? His lips?” She drew out the last word with relish, and Vera’s cheeks warmed.

“Goodness, does everyone in Atlanta talk like that in public?”

“Just me, as far as I know. Aren’t you lucky I came your way?” Bea chewed thoughtfully on a green bean. “So, dark hair. Tall. Promising start.”

Vera fixed a hard gaze on her food. “His eyes are lovely. They’re pale blue, like crystal.”

“Like forget-me-nots?”

“More silvery than that. I’ve never seen eyes like his.”

“Now, that sounds like something a lover might say. Much better.” Bea offered a quiet clap.

Vera glanced at the neighboring tables. “Do you have a beau?” she asked quickly.

Bea laughed. “You’ve seen the reaction I get from girls. Can you imagine what men think of me?”

“You’re pretty, outgoing, smart . . . I’d think your beaus would be tripping over each other.”

“If I meet a man I like, I’ll have you write me a letter of reference. My own mother wouldn’t be so complimentary.”

“I don’t know. It sounds like you get along well with her,” Vera said. Bea had described a soft-spoken, sweet woman with a wicked sense of humor that belied her poise.

“I do. Most of the time.” Bea shrugged. “But never mind her. What do you and Arthur do together? Hopefully more than sit in the parlor.”

“He took me to the soda fountain,” Vera said, with a hopeful lift in her voice.

Bea sighed. “I was hoping for something more interesting than the soda fountain.”

“Well . . . once we took a walk on the beach. He even took his shoes off.” Vera laughed at the memory, but the look on Bea’s face suggested the thought of a barefoot Arthur was not as funny to someone who didn’t know him personally. Her laugh died away.

Bea placed a hand on Vera's arm. "As long as you like him, that's the important thing. He sounds . . . he sounds very nice."

"I do like him," Vera said. She really did. There was something so solid about Arthur, like an anchor in rough waters. What better man to marry than one she could depend on? He might not be exciting, but Vera reassured herself there were qualities in a husband more important than being exciting. Anyway, as long as Vera stayed friends with Bea, she doubted she'd have to worry about a lack of excitement in her life.

New York Times Bestselling Author of  
*Cleo and Cats & Daughters*

# HELEN BROWN

A Novel

*It's the makeover of a lifetime...*

## *Tumbledown Manor*

*Excerpt from*

# **TUMBLEDOWN MANOR**

A Novel By

Helen Brown

Kensington

May 2016

## Chapter 1

A birthday ending in a zero was nothing to make a fuss about. There was enough to be grateful for—her health, a solid marriage, kids old enough to be off their hands (technically), a passable writing career. Why anyone would want to celebrate being another decade closer to filling a funeral urn was beyond Lisa Katz.

Nevertheless, she felt a prick of disappointment when, over breakfast at a diner near their apartment, she realized Jake had forgotten. But no wonder. Poor Jake was working crazy hours at the bank. His once lustrous tide of curls had receded to a charcoal reef, and the dark circles under his eyes had puffed out into pouches.

“You’re still my best girl,” he said, before draining his coffee and dabbing his lips with a paper napkin.

Standing, he bent over the table and brushed his lips against hers. It was one of their less awkward kissing positions, apart from when they were in bed together lying side by side.

As a teenager sprouting depressingly close to six feet, Lisa had imagined marrying someone as tall—if not taller than—herself. But while she was getting her head around the idea of wearing flats for the rest of her life, she began to notice that most tall men were obsessed with women the size of dolls. Lisa, on the other hand, was a magnet to pint-sized Napoleons.

Still, what Jake lacked in stature he made up for with vigor. The height difference had only increased the inventiveness of their sex life in the early days. Back then, he’d stroked her large buttocks as if they were the foothills of heaven.

Now, Lisa felt a ripple of fondness combined with relief as Jake slid into his overcoat and disappeared into the gray fall morning. Pulling on her hat, cape, and fingerless gloves, she stepped outside into her own private birthday, a day of doing just what she wanted for a change.

After a couple of hours at MoMA, Lisa had a session of guilty gratification with Mark. It seemed vaguely immoral to pay for a stranger to rub oil into her back like that, but Jake was too tired these days—and Mark’s hands never wandered.

Then, flushed and gleaming with oil, she headed home to their apartment building on the Upper East Side. Set several blocks back from the park and surely the ugliest building in the entire neighborhood, it frowned down on a narrow, shaded street.

At the door, Pedro greeted her with his eternal smile—a miracle, considering he held down three jobs to keep himself and his family alive. “Lucky you missed the rain, Mrs. Trumperton.”

He beamed.

She'd stopped asking him to call her Lisa. It was typical Pedro to use her professional name. To most people she was just Mrs. Katz, Jake's gangly appendage.

As she opened the door to their apartment, Lisa stumbled backwards.

"Surprise!"

Jake stepped toward her, his dark eyes glowing in triumph. What was he doing home this early? He took her hand and guided her to the living room.

"Happy birthday, Mom!" Ted encircled her in his arms, sending her hat tumbling to the floor.

"Ted? You came all the way from Australia?" Lisa was suddenly aware that she was shaking. "When did you get here?"

"This morning." Her son picked up her hat and dusted it off.

"How did you get time off?" She scraped her hands through her hair, hoping he wouldn't notice how oily it was from the massage.

"I've got a week before my next exam," he said.

The genetic slot machine had been kind to Ted. Not only had he inherited his father's Mediterranean coloring rather than her bloodshot, watery-eyed Nordic genes, but he was tall and well built. The shadow of a beard made his chin more pronounced and highlighted his eyes. Whatever he was up to besides architecture studies was doing him good.

Lisa was about to tease him about his Australian accent when the pantry door burst open. "Surprise!" Portia teetered toward Lisa in shoes that would qualify as stilts.

As her daughter bent to kiss her in a flurry of blond hair and blue fingernails, Lisa noticed a new Care Bear tattoo on Portia's neck. Had she lost weight? Either way, this wasn't the time to cause friction. Not when Portia had sacrificed hours of her glamorous Venice Beach lifestyle to show up.

Lisa's heart pounded in her ears. "How lovely," she quavered, wondering if they were expecting her to cook and, if so, what she could possibly feed them. Following her latest diet book's instructions, she'd gutted the fridge. From memory, the only thing in there was a half-dead bottle of Coke Zero. "I really had no idea. . . ."

"Surprise!"

A fresh surge of dread ran through Lisa. Kerry, her weekly lunch buddy, emerged from the hallway. Lisa relaxed a little. Armed with a potted peace lily, he was closely followed by Vanessa from the publishing house. Jake had chosen well. If he was going to startle her with

anyone, these were the best possible . . .

“Surprise!”

Not another. Her system could take only so much. Lisa’s blood drained to her feet as her older sister Maxine emerged from the bedroom with husband Gordon in her wake.

“We took the same flight as Ted,” Maxine gushed, floating toward Lisa in a lurid caftan that made her resemble a psychedelic emu.

Most women of a certain age fade into blond. Maxine had opted for ginger, which had deepened to fiery purple. It was a shade that shouldn’t have suited anyone, but it glowed against Maxine’s pearly skin in a way that was strangely compelling. With intense emerald eyes beaming out from her round, freckled face, Maxine could’ve passed as an extra from *Lord of the Rings*. Smiling shyly over Maxine’s shoulder was Gordon, his broom of white hair and podgy pink face resembling the features of a man-sized koala.

“But it’s such a long way to come just for me,” Lisa said.

“You always were the spoilt one,” crooned Maxine, brushing Lisa’s cheek with a kiss. “Just kidding.” Maxine’s smile flickered with complication, and Lisa wondered if her sister would ever let go of the endless list of evidence that proved Lisa was their father’s favorite. High on the list, for example, was the time Lisa had allegedly tricked him into believing she needed to stay home from school because of a “tummy ache,” while Maxine, who was the one coming down with authentic measles, was forced to go. Maxine needed therapy. She had nothing to complain about, not when she’d clearly been the center of their mother’s universe. The moment Maxine drew her first breath, their mother, Ruby, had recognized a mini replica of herself. Everything about Maxine—from the red hair and compact build to the terrifying presence on any sports field—screamed MacNally.

In contrast, their father, William Trumperton, had been a sensitive man who avoided conflict. Lisa still clung to what he’d told her in a rare moment of unguardedness—that he found it hard to believe she and Maxine were from the same stable. Once or twice, she’d wondered if he’d been speaking literally and they had different fathers. She wouldn’t have put anything past Ruby.

Now Maxine stood on tiptoe to help Lisa shed her cape. “Begging on the streets again, are we?” she said, casting an eye over Lisa’s fingerless gloves.

Under normal circumstances, Lisa would’ve cracked back about purple hair and caftans covered in hideous fake rubies. Maxine had been born with appalling taste that no amount of private schooling could cure. But the ambush of family affection had thrown Lisa.

Maxine wandered over to the kitchen area, pulled a bottle out of the fridge and inspected the label. Her eyes narrowed. “You know it has to come from a special part of France to be the real thing.”

Lisa assured her she was perfectly happy with sparkling wine from California. Jake had introduced it as part of their “post-global-financial-crisis” economy drive. It wasn’t too sweet and had the same effect, more or less.

Corks popped. Glasses foamed and were passed around. As Jake lifted a mosaic of hors d’oeuvres from the fridge, Lisa was reminded why she’d fallen in love with him. Jake Katz the romantic, the magician . . . “You are organized!” she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. She was amazed he even knew how to find a caterer.

“Well, my dear. It’s not every day you turn f—”

“Hush!” She gently covered his mouth. “But darling, it’s so thoughtful of you.”

Jake cleared his throat and puffed his chest out, which was his way of making himself taller. The room settled expectantly. Poor darling—what hair he had left was graying at the temples. But he was aging well. Not just in looks. Even though their sex life was intermittent these days, Lisa took silent pride in the fact he took no interest in advertisements for Viagra.

“I’d like to thank you all for coming here today, some of you from a very long way,” he said, raising a glass to Maxine and Gordon.

“Well, it was a convenient stop-off before our Alaskan cruise,” Maxine chimed in—unnecessarily, Lisa thought.

“Those polar bears will be counting the days till they see you.” Jake chortled.

Lisa’s smile froze. Jake and Maxine were too alike. Neither could stand the other’s hogging the limelight. To Lisa’s relief, Maxine lowered her eyes and took a swig from her glass.

“And we mustn’t forget Ted,” Jake continued.

Perched on the arm of the black leather sofa, Ted was engrossed in his phone. Hearing his name, he flipped out of whatever conversation he was having and aimed the gadget at his parents. Lisa hastily bent her knees so Jake could drape his arm over her shoulder and smile foolishly at the lens.

Portia stood cross-armed in a corner. She rolled her eyes as Jake asked to see the photo. “And you too, of course, Portia,” he said, nodding approval and handing the phone back to Ted. “Venice Beach isn’t exactly in the neighborhood. Anyway, I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank my wonderful wife of twenty-four years.”

“Twenty-three!” Maxine corrected.

“Oh, is that right?” Jake said, looking to Lisa for rescue.

Lisa was hopeless at maths. She had no idea.

“Yes,” Maxine said, pointing a glittering talon at him. “You two were married exactly two years after Gordon and me. Of course we had a church wedding. . . .”

As if nobody knew Maxine and Gordon Frogget’s union had been sanctified by God and half the stockbrokers of Camberwell.

With rare composure, Jake loosened his tie and slid some notes from his breast pocket. “When we first met in Fiji all those years ago, I had no idea how deeply I was going to fall for this Aussie girl,” he read.

“Oh, Jake,” Lisa said, her eyes moistening.

“Lisa, I can’t thank you enough for moving across oceans to make a life with me and raise our two kids here. You’re my rock, my inspiration. . . .”

Lisa felt guilty for all the times she’d yelled at him for coming home late and going to those interminable conferences.

“You’re the artist to my knuckleheaded bean counting,” he went on. “The sunflower-covered straw hat to my suit. You remind me of what really matters in life. You’re the—”

“Wind beneath your wings?” Portia said archly.

Honestly, there were times Lisa could have throttled her offspring. Temporarily, of course.

Jake composed himself and glanced down at his notes. He always liked his speeches to have a serious core. Lisa could tell he was building up to a crescendo.

“When you were struck with breast cancer last year we all faced the terrible prospect of losing you. . . .”

Oh God. She’d packed all that away in a mental filing box labeled Forget About It. She was fine now, just fine.

There was a tap at the door. Ted moved silently across the room to open it while Jake continued. “And now, knowing you have the all-clear, we treasure you even more. . . .”

The room glowed with admiration as Ted reappeared with an enormous basket of red roses. Lisa had never seen anything like it. The arrangement was so huge it dwarfed her son.

“Oh Lord, Jake!” She reached for the small white envelope dangling from one of the stalks.

Jake suddenly turned pale. He lunged in front of her and tried to snatch the envelope. Smiling, she nudged him away.

Lisa could feel her cheeks reddening as she tore open the envelope and pulled out a heart-shaped card. Jake could be such a romantic devil. She blew him a kiss, but his eyes were blank, his mouth slightly open.

“To my darling . . . Belle,” she read aloud.

There had to be a mistake. The handwriting was Jake’s. Lisa’s throat tightened. She tried to stop, but her voice kept reading the words aloud. “I cannot wait until we are together forever.”

Lisa’s body slowly turned to stone. She knew Belle, the blonde from HR at the bank. Belle of the enormous boobs and pipe-cleaner legs, who said she’d read every book Lisa had ever written and was her biggest fan.

“So I can bury my head in your thighs every night . . . All my love, Jake.”

Silence.

Jake’s face flushed with panic as the room’s gaze swiveled from Lisa to him. “This is outrageous!” he declared, grappling for the phone in his suit pocket. Temples gleaming, he stabbed the numbers for Eva the florist.

Usually when Jake turned purple, Lisa tried to calm him down, because he loved cheese and didn’t exercise enough. But the normal Lisa had vanished and been replaced by a hate-filled clone who was willing the arteries around his heart to explode.

“What do you mean you sent them to the usual address?!” Jake shouted at the plastic rectangle in his hand.

He should’ve known not to trust Eva. Ever since her mother had died, she’d started talking to her carnations. Now Eva had sent the ridiculous arrangement to the usual address without thinking.

Lisa watched as a crazed woman roared across the room and walloped Jake across the face. Who was she? Oh, that’s right. It was the other Lisa, the one so outraged and wounded she was about to commit murder. Or, on second thought, serious injury. Jake would be on life support for weeks. She’d enjoy the luxury of watching him suffer with tubes and probes sprouting from every orifice until she had the pleasure of switching off the machine.

Then she noticed Portia and Ted clinging to each other in the corner, as if they were watching a 3D version of *The Evil Dead*. Nice Lisa, their mother, wanted to protect them from the ugliness of this scene. But evil Lisa required them to witness the rawness of her pain, to know who the victim was.

She grabbed Jake by the shoulders and shook him savagely. Somewhere in the background, a

door clicked. Vanessa and Kerry had made a discreet exit, leaving the peace lily as sole evidence of their presence.

Gordon lumbered over to the kitchen and stooped over the sink. He unraveled the rinse hose and studied it as if it might contain the solution to global warming.

Lisa the lunatic pummeled Jake's chest with her fists. Then a giant emu wafted over and peeled her off Jake and enveloped her in its wings.

Maxine's muscles were strong and tense as Lisa sobbed into her neck. Her earrings jangled. Lisa smelled Dior's Poison on Maxine's neck and champagne on her breath.

"Get out, you bastard!" Maxine yelled.

Lisa was suddenly six years old again, in the schoolyard. Big sister Maxine was shielding her, throwing sticks at Colin the bully from the butcher shop until he slunk around the corner of the bike sheds.

Jake stood frozen, wild-eyed, like a mouse about to be devoured by a snake.

"And take your lousy flowers with you!" screeched the crazed woman Lisa now recognized as herself, as she tore roses out of the basket and hurled them in Jake's face. A sane part of her was grateful the roses were thornless—not that she would have minded making him bleed.

Jake scuttled into the bedroom.

"Liar!" she bellowed, clawing his back as he passed. "I hate you!"

Jake dragged a weekend bag from the closet and stuffed it frantically with socks and underpants.

"When did it start?" Lisa spat at his bald patch.

Jake pretended not to hear.

"When?"

"Dunno . . ." he mumbled. "Nine months ago or so."

She did the calculation. That would've been three months after her surgery, around the time of her last book launch. Belle had been all smiles as she waited in line for Lisa to sign a copy of Charlotte, the first in her trilogy called Three Sisters. "Such a brilliant idea to write historical romances based on the Brontë sisters," Belle had sniveled, all teeth and fake diamond earrings.

Hang on a minute. What if they weren't fake? Maybe Belle's earrings were the cause of Jake's latest economy drive restricting them each to one latte a day. Anyway, Cow Belle (that's what Lisa was going to call her from now on) had sworn she couldn't wait to read about Emily Brontë in Lisa's next book, Three Sisters: Emily. Belle had then scurried off to screw the

author's husband. Nice work, Cow Belle.

"Do you love her?" Lisa asked, her voice steeped in ice.

Jake stopped and stared at the carpet.

Soon after the book launch, Jake had gone away for a two-week conference, which, come to think of it, was suspiciously long. Now Lisa scoffed at her own stupidity. She should've been savvy enough to check his e-mails. But she'd trusted him so naïvely, she hadn't even bothered to memorize his password.

Then there was the condom-packet-in-the-toiletry-bag incident. She'd been rummaging for dental floss one morning when the silvery little sachet had brushed her fingers. It was strange, because she hadn't had a period for months. When she had showed it to him, he had blushed before swearing it was leftover from ages ago and tossing it in the bin.

Why did she always believe him?

"I said, do you love her?" Her tone was dangerous now.

"I don't know," he replied quietly.

"You don't know?!"

"There are two sorts of loving," he said after a long silence. "Having and desiring. I have you . . . but . . ."

"You desire her!"

Lisa galloped to the living room, and grabbed what was left of the flower basket. Back in the bedroom, Jake was on his knees jamming T-shirts into his bag. With a rush of satisfaction, she emptied the remaining roses and the contents of the well-filled vase over his head.

Jake stood up and brushed the water off his suit. Then he picked up his bag, rearranged his hair, and ran. Lisa chased him as far as the living room, but he was too nimble on his feet. He slid out the door toward the elevator and was gone.

As she stood panting, gazing at her open-mouthed guests, Lisa understood exactly what she was having—a birthday ending with a zero.

## Chapter 2

Lisa woke safe and warm inside a cocoon of sheets. Judging by the gray frame of light around the curtains, the sun—or what there was of it—had already dragged itself out of bed. Her tongue slid around the comforting shape of her mouth guard. According to the dentist, she'd been grinding her teeth at night. Lisa was pretty sure his insistence that she be fitted with a mouth guard had more to do with upgrading his Audi than her pummeling her teeth to powder. Lisa “teamed” the mouth guard with a pair of ear plugs—Jake’s snoring wasn’t getting any quieter. She’d put them in the night before out of habit—and to assure herself nothing was going to change.

She quietly fished out the mouth guard and earplugs and slid them into their boxes. Then she rolled over and reached for the familiar shape of Jake’s head. But his pillow was as vacant as the wastelands of Antarctica. Lisa curled up in the fetal position and sobbed into her pillow—quietly, so as not to disturb Maxine and Gordon or the kids. It was her favorite pillow, so old it probably harbored superbugs. She’d tried to throw it out, but always stopped at the garbage chute and carried it back to bed. Stuffed with meager lumps of feathers and down, it was anorexic compared to Jake’s anti-snoring plank. But it was a forgiving object, snuggling into the folds of her face without any attempt to improve her posture. Now tears drained into the feathers, reducing them to a soggy swamp.

When she could cry no more, she rolled on her back and ran her hand over the chasm her left breast had once inhabited. The surgeon had offered her reconstruction at the same time as the mastectomy. He said the mastectomy itself would take only forty minutes to perform, while the reconstruction would drag on for seven hours or more. After hours trawling the Internet and talking with friends who knew people who’d had reconstructions and those who hadn’t, she’d decided to bide her time. It wouldn’t be long before you could take a pill to grow a new breast.

Giving an excellent impersonation of a supportive husband, Jake had said he was happy to go along with whatever she wanted. She’d felt a surge of affection when he said appearances made no difference to him. And anyway, the surgeon had assured them she could have the reconstruction further down the track. She’d still not gotten around to it and now doubted she ever would. After all, Lisa had never been burdened with vanity. Her mother, Ruby, had made sure of that. (“Tidy yourself up, Lisa. . . . Cut back (on the pastries, girl. They’ll be calling you thunder thighs. . . . Run a comb through your hair!”) The scar ran in a horizontal line across her

torso like a ruler marking the end of a school essay.

Though Jake had claimed it didn't worry him, he'd never expressed interest in or even curiosity about her wound. During lovemaking, he'd lavished attention on her right breast, stroking and kissing (never sucking, because that would set her on a postcoital jag about the pathetic idea of grown men sucking breasts). He'd avoided her left side as if it were an abandoned neighborhood turned dangerous.

She couldn't believe how he'd lulled her into thinking their marriage was fine. For all his talk, he was just another primitively wired male who wanted a woman with two C cups. Clearly Jake was going through some kind of man-opause. Surely it would just be a matter of time before he'd come to his senses and beg to come back.

A vacuum cleaner hummed on the other side of Lisa's bedroom door. The thought of facing up to her guests was almost unbearable. Still, how often did she get the chance to see her kids? So after showering and dressing, she padded out into the living room.

Maxine was Hoovering up the previous night's wreckage. Ted was in the kitchen, wrangling a garbage bag. They both stopped and looked up at her as if she were a piece of crystal that might shatter at the slightest movement.

Gordon emerged from the guest room to fiddle with the coffee machine while Maxine assailed her bedroom with the vacuum cleaner. Lisa offered to help, but Maxine insisted she sit down and relax.

The black leather sofa squeaked as Lisa flopped onto it. The buttons dug into her backside. Everything about the apartment reeked of Jake. He used to go along with her love of what she called "soul objects." New Guinea masks and paint-peeled Buddhas took her back to the freedom of her traveling days. All that had changed when he started taking banking seriously and Jake readjusted his tastes. In the end it had been simpler to let him move "her stuff" into her study and succumb to his obsession with "clean lines." Now glass tabletops and piles of yachting magazines lent the apartment the air of a medical waiting room.

Lisa ran her eye over Jake's collection of second-tier Fauvists. Given the choice, she'd have preferred Ted and Portia's kindergarten daubs. Life-sized stainless-steel nudes stood in a corner, entwined in an outlandish position the sculptor had called the Lustful Leg. She'd tried to replicate the posture for Jake's pleasure a couple of times. Flinging her leg back over her shoulder had, however, made something in her hip lock in a sharp spasm of agony. As for the white baby grand piano that only Ted knew how to play, she pretended it wasn't there.

She wondered how she'd let herself slide into such an unlikely setting. Had she been too engrossed with the children, or working too much? She remembered feeling tired a lot of the time, perhaps even borderline depressed. She was a terrible banker's wife, anyway. Her hair wasn't blond-bobbish enough, her laugh too deep and brazen.

The coffee machine hissed and farted, enveloping Gordon in a cloud of steam. It was Jake's pride and joy, though it had never produced a decent cappuccino in its life. Gordon presented her with a pool of muddy liquid inside a mug emblazoned with a malevolent snowman. Happy Holidays curled in red letters around the rim. The mug usually lurked at the back of the top shelf. Christmas was more than two months away. Proof the dishwasher needed emptying.

To fill vacant air space, Gordon asked how her writing was going. Did people ask plumbers about their drains? Part One of her Brontë trilogy was selling okay, but she'd sunk into a boggy patch with *Three Sisters: Emily*, which was still not much more than a list of bullet points. She'd been a fool to sign a contract promising to have the manuscript in by March, and now the deadline was approaching with the menace of an asteroid about to collide with Earth.

Portia emerged ashen, her pale hair a mass of tangles. Lisa ached to scoop it into a tidy French plait the way she used to when Portia was six. Her own mother would've had no qualms about assailing her adult daughter with a comb. Lisa curled her fingers into fists. Every generation has to be an improvement on the last. If she was going to learn anything from Ruby's mistakes, it was to control the French-plait compulsion.

Maxine put on a pair of wooden earrings the size of Samoa and a gold vinyl jacket ("You New Yorkers call this autumn?" Ted reminded her the correct term was *fall*). Then she spread a map of Manhattan over the piano lid.

Lisa knew what Maxine was up to. When they were little girls lying awake at night listening to their parents yelling down the hall, Maxine would play "Let's Pretend Nothing's Happening." As their mother's voice rose to a series of barks through the walls, Maxine would become a princess, or Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Lisa had to be the princess's servant, of course. Or the Scarecrow.

Tight-lipped with denial, Maxine set about organizing everyone's day. The girls would go on a retail-therapy binge while the boys walked the Brooklyn Bridge.

Gordon's face rose like the red planet from behind the coffee machine. He wasn't sure he'd brought the right shoes. Maxine patted his wine gut and assured him she'd packed his trainers.

After a mind-numbing morning traipsing through shops, the three women stopped at a French bakery. Before sinking her teeth into a croissant, Maxine offered to cancel the cruise so she and Gordon could stay on and “provide support.” Lisa smiled at the image of Maxine as a giant brassiere.

When Lisa declined, Maxine’s relief was palpable. “I talked to Ted this morning,” she continued, dabbing her lips. “He’s willing to change his flights and keep you company for a week or two.”

Lisa felt like a starving bear presented with a plate of meat. To have Ted all to herself would be . . . But his exams!

“Never mind. I’ll be fine,” she said, patting her daughter’s knee.

Portia stood up and flounced to the Ladies’. Heads turned as the gaunt goddess wafted past in a trail of golden hair. Lisa checked the menu for the number of calories in the three dandelion leaves Portia had chomped through (approximately seventeen). It was hard to imagine what was going through the child’s brain. Maybe she was traumatized by her parents’ behavior.

“Don’t worry about that one,” Maxine said, sinking her fork into a perfectly formed strawberry tart.

Lisa guessed from Maxine’s tone that Portia had refused the opportunity to linger in New York to bathe her mother’s wounds. Maybe through some distorted logic Portia had decided to side with Jake.

An unwelcome image of Jake sprang into Lisa’s head. He was running his hands over Cow Belle’s buttocks while he licked her pointy Chrysler Building nipples. His hand drifted to the mound between Cow Belle’s legs, waxed bald as a newborn’s. Jake had texted Portia saying that he was moving into a hotel, but everyone knew he was in that woman’s Chelsea apartment asphyxiating himself between her legs.

Exhaustion washed over Lisa. She was desperate to go home, but Maxine had other ideas. With the compassion of a slave-ship captain, she urged them on to the Empire State Building and then to see the skaters at the Rockefeller Center.

When the family finally reassembled at the apartment, Lisa imagined Jake and Cow Belle knee to knee in a darkened restaurant. He’d be ordering champagne, the real French stuff. His hand would be gliding up Belle’s thigh.

While Maxine corralled Gordon into the guest room to help squeeze Macy's shopping bags into their already overstuffed suitcases, Ted and Portia sat on the sofa like a pair of orphans. Portia wound her hair around her fingers and crossed her skinny legs. Someone, or thing, had taken a razor to her black jeans and slashed them to pieces. Ted made urgent little stabs at his phone.

"So when will I be seeing you two again?" Lisa asked in as breezy a tone as she could muster.

Portia picked at a thread dangling from one of the slashes in her pants. "I've got to get home to LA," she said.

LA was home?

"We've set up a theater group," Portia continued. "We're writing a play. They really need me."

And Lisa didn't? "What about Thanksgiving?" she asked.

"That's close to opening night." Portia whined. "I thought this visit could double as Thanksgiving."

Thanks a bundle, thought Lisa. She turned to Ted. "So I'll keep the spare room for you next year?"

Ted's dark hair draped over his forehead. She'd seen a photo of her father around the same age, and, with his long face and soulful eyes, Ted was almost an exact replica—apart from the darker coloring. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Actually, I'm thinking of staying on in Australia," he said.

A concrete ball settled in Lisa's stomach. "Oh. I guess you'll want to fit in a month or two's surfing before you come back," she said.

Ted let his phone tumble nonchalantly out of his hand. The brown checks in his shirt brought out the color of his eyes. "I've had a job offer," he said.

"You mean you're going to stay on selling mushroom burgers at the market?"

Ted shook his head and smiled. "It's an architecture firm. They like my environmental approach."

He was staying in Australia? "That's great," Lisa lied. She wanted to weep at the thought of Ted stranded indefinitely on the other side of the world. Still, it was hard enough for graduates to find work anywhere these days. "You'll be based in Melbourne?"

Ted nodded, his color deepening. Lisa sensed something else going on. For all her

disappointment about his decision to stay in Australia, her interest was piqued.

The next morning, Lisa's guests stood hunched against the cold, their bags scattered on the sidewalk while she tried to hail a cab. Pedro the doorman had seemed disappointed when she turned down his offer to do it. No doubt he would've been quicker at catching a driver's eye, but her Australian upbringing still left her uncomfortable when people performed menial tasks on her behalf. Cab after cab sailed past. They were either busy or ignoring her.

"Don't worry, Mom," Portia said when one finally pulled in. "I was the only one in my friendship group whose parents were still together. We're normal now." Portia always spoke of her "friendship group" with worshipful respect.

"Look after yourself," Lisa said, fighting the urge to pull Portia to her chest and never let go.

Portia flicked her hair and slid into the back of the cab with the effortless ease of youth. The child-woman hadn't heard a thing. White wires in her ears sealed her off in her own world. Inside her head Portia was already back among the hipsters of Venice Beach.

Maxine rested her hands on Lisa's shoulders and planted a kiss on each cheek. "You take care," she said in a big-sisterly tone before climbing into the front seat next to the driver.

Gordon flashed Lisa an awkward smile. He was limping from yesterday's walk. Brooklyn Bridge had turned out to be longer than it looked. Leaning forward, he aimed his lips at Lisa's cheek but collided with her chin. Blushing, he retreated into the shadows of the backseat.

Saying good-bye to Ted made Lisa's heart fray around the edges. She and he were carved from the same stone. They both had to fight the Trumperton tendency to sink into moroseness. They laughed at the same things and would finish each other's sentences. Australia was too far away. "See you at Christmas?" she asked, trying to eradicate hints of neediness.

"Sure. Come visit," he replied. "You can sleep on our sofa."

"Thanks, but the CIA should hire that thing out as an instrument of torture." So if she had any hope of seeing him in December she'd be the one climbing on a plane.

She kissed Ted and nudged him into the back of the cab next to Gordon.

Maxine's window glided down. She fixed Lisa with an emerald gaze. "I never liked that prick," she said.

As the cab dissolved into the traffic, Lisa caught a glimpse of Ted's profile in the shadows of the backseat. The unmistakable Trumperton nose. Gulping a buttery lump at the back of her

throat, she waved good-bye.

Back in the apartment, Lisa was sucked into a vacuum of loneliness. She turned James Taylor up loud and plunged into a frenzy of housework. The kids had left her study a mess. She dredged one of Ted's socks out from under the sofa bed. For once it was hole-free. Someone was looking after him. As usual, Portia had stolen Lisa's shampoo and conditioner from the bathroom. Lisa wrote it off as a contribution to the starving artist of the family.

Once her study was looking half-civilized, she switched on her computer. The bullet points about *Three Sisters*: Emily glowered back at her. She had no hope of writing an entire book in four months. The first sentence was always the hardest. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Then, in a cruel twist of what Portia would call irony, a deliveryman arrived with a sheath of freshly ironed shirts. Lisa didn't have the energy to refuse them. Instead, she carried them numbly to the bedroom. As she hung the shirts in Jake's side of the closet, she wondered whether they might herald his return. Perhaps he'd realized he'd made a terrible mistake, that he loved Lisa and wanted to come home. He'd promise to never see Cow Belle again.

She dug her phone out of her handbag. "Yr shirts r here," she typed, her fingers trembling.

She made a mug of coffee. James Taylor crooned "*How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You.)*" He'd moved on to "*Fire and Rain*" by the time her phone buzzed to life. "Thx. Will come over."

Sure enough, toward evening there was a tap on the door. Lisa opened it a crack. Jake peered through like a naughty schoolboy. Why was he knocking when he had a key? They examined each other in silence. Lisa would take him back after a decent interval of punishment, of course. They had too much shared history.

"Sorry," he muttered. "My shirts."

"Oh," she said, blood draining from her face.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Of course." Her voice was as cold as a surgeon's blade. "Just a minute." She left him fidgeting in the doorway while she collected the sheath.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said as she handed it to him.

What could she possibly need?

His forefinger was turning purple from the coat-hanger hooks cutting off the circulation.

Lisa knew what he wanted. If she exploded with rage again he could scurry away, confident she was a total witch. But she couldn't do it.

Instead, she watched as the boiled egg of his bald patch disappeared down the hall toward the

elevator. She noticed a white thread on his shoulder. Jake had a neurotic loathing of imperfection, and she was about to call after him. But that wasn't her job. Not anymore. All Jake maintenance was over to Cow Belle. She could trim his ear hair, too.

The elevator doors sighed shut.

Lisa was officially and permanently alone.



*Yaa Gyasi*  
Homegoing

a novel

## *Effia*

THE NIGHT EFFIA OTCHER was born into the musky heat of Fanteland, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father's compound. It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. There, it disappeared, becoming one with the night.

Effia's father, Cobbe Otcher, left his first wife, Baaba, with the new baby so that he might survey the damage to his yams, that most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families. Cobbe had lost seven yams, and he felt each loss as a blow to his own family. He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued. When he came back into Baaba's hut to find Effia, the child of the night's fire, shrieking into the air, he looked at his wife and said, "We will never again speak of what happened today."

The villagers began to say that the baby was born of the fire, that this was the reason Baaba had no milk. Effia was nursed by Cobbe's second wife, who had just given birth to a son three months before. Effia would not latch on, and when she did, her sharp gums would tear at the flesh around the woman's nipples until she became afraid to feed the baby. Because of this, Effia grew thinner, skin on small bird-like bones, with a large black hole of a mouth that expelled a hungry cry

which could be heard throughout the village, even on the days Baaba did her best to smother it, covering the baby's lips with the rough palm of her left hand.

"Love her," Cobbe commanded, as though love were as simple an act as lifting food up from an iron plate and past one's lips. At night, Baaba dreamed of leaving the baby in the dark forest so that the god Nyame could do with her as he pleased.

Effia grew older. The summer after her third birthday, Baaba had her first son. The boy's name was Fiifi, and he was so fat that sometimes, when Baaba wasn't looking, Effia would roll him along the ground like a ball. The first day that Baaba let Effia hold him, she accidentally dropped him. The baby bounced on his buttocks, landed on his stomach, and looked up at everyone in the room, confused as to whether or not he should cry. He decided against it, but Baaba, who had been stirring *banku*, lifted her stirring stick and beat Effia across her bare back. Each time the stick lifted off the girl's body, it would leave behind hot, sticky pieces of *banku* that burned into her flesh. By the time Baaba had finished, Effia was covered with sores, screaming and crying. From the floor, rolling this way and that on his belly, Fiifi looked at Effia with his saucer eyes but made no noise.

Cobbe came home to find his other wives attending to Effia's wounds and understood immediately what had happened. He and Baaba fought well into the night. Effia could hear them through the thin walls of the hut where she lay on the floor, drifting in and out of a feverish sleep. In her dream, Cobbe was a lion and Baaba was a tree. The lion plucked the tree from the ground where it stood and slammed it back down. The tree stretched its branches in protest, and the lion ripped them off, one by one. The tree, horizontal, began to cry red ants that traveled down the thin cracks between its bark. The ants pooled on the soft earth around the top of the tree trunk.

And so the cycle began. Baaba beat Effia. Cobbe beat Baaba. By the time Effia had reached age ten, she could recite a history of the scars on her body. The summer of 1764, when Baaba broke yams across her back. The spring of 1767, when Baaba bashed her left foot with a rock, breaking her big toe so that it now always pointed away from the

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other toes. For each scar on Effia's body, there was a companion scar on Baaba's, but that didn't stop mother from beating daughter, father from beating mother.

Matters were only made worse by Effia's blossoming beauty. When she was twelve, her breasts arrived, two lumps that sprung from her chest, as soft as mango flesh. The men of the village knew that first blood would soon follow, and they waited for the chance to ask Baaba and Cobbe for her hand. The gifts started. One man tapped palm wine better than anyone else in the village, but another's fishing nets were never empty. Cobbe's family feasted off Effia's burgeoning womanhood. Their bellies, their hands, were never empty.

In 1775, Adwoa Aidoo became the first girl of the village to be proposed to by one of the British soldiers. She was light-skinned and sharp-tongued. In the mornings, after she had bathed, she rubbed shea butter all over her body, underneath her breasts and between her legs. Effia didn't know her well, but she had seen her naked one day when Baaba sent her to carry palm oil to the girl's hut. Her skin was slick and shiny, her hair regal.

The first time the white man came, Adwoa's mother asked Effia's parents to show him around the village while Adwoa prepared herself for him.

"Can I come?" Effia asked, running after her parents as they walked. She heard Baaba's "no" in one ear and Cobbe's "yes" in the other. Her father's ear won, and soon Effia was standing before the first white man she had ever seen.

"He is happy to meet you," the translator said as the white man held his hand out to Effia. She didn't accept it. Instead, she hid behind her father's leg and watched him.

He wore a coat that had shiny gold buttons down the middle; it strained against his paunch. His face was red, as though his neck were a stump on fire. He was fat all over and sweating huge droplets from his forehead and above his bare lips. Effia started to think of him as a rain cloud: sallow and wet and shapeless.

“Please, he would like to see the village,” the translator said, and they all began to walk.

They stopped first by Effia’s own compound. “This is where we live,” Effia told the white man, and he smiled at her dumbly, his green eyes hidden in fog.

He didn’t understand. Even after his translator spoke to him, he didn’t understand.

Cobbe held Effia’s hand as he and Baaba led the white man through the compound. “Here, in this village,” Cobbe said, “each wife has her own hut. This is the hut she shares with her children. When it is her husband’s night to be with her, he goes to her in her hut.”

The white man’s eyes grew clearer as the translation was given, and suddenly Effia realized that he was seeing through new eyes. The mud of her hut’s walls, the straw of the roof, he could finally see them.

They continued on through the village, showing the white man the town square, the small fishing boats formed from hollowed-out tree trunks that the men carried with them when they walked the few miles down to the coast. Effia forced herself to see things through new eyes, too. She smelled the sea-salt wind as it touched the hairs in her nose, felt the bark of a palm tree as sharp as a scratch, saw the deep, deep red of the clay that was all around them.

“Baaba,” Effia asked once the men had walked farther ahead of them, “why will Adwoa marry this man?”

“Because her mother says so.”

A few weeks later, the white man came back to pay respects to Adwoa’s mother, and Effia and all of the other villagers gathered around to see what he would offer. There was the bride price of fifteen pounds. There were goods he’d brought with him from the Castle, carried on the backs of Asantes. Cobbe made Effia stand behind him as they watched the servants come in with fabric, millet, gold, and iron.

When they walked back to their compound, Cobbe pulled Effia aside, letting his wives and other children walk in front of them.

“Do you understand what just happened?” he asked her. In the distance, Baaba slipped her hand into Fiifi’s. Effia’s brother had just turned eleven, but he could already climb up the trunk of a palm tree using nothing but his bare hands and feet for support.

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“The white man came to take Adwoa away,” Effia said.

Her father nodded. “The white men live in the Cape Coast Castle. There, they trade goods with our people.”

“Like iron and millet?”

Her father put his hand on her shoulder and kissed the top of her forehead, but when he pulled away the look in his eyes was troubled and distant. “Yes, we get iron and millet, but we must give them things in return. That man came from Cape Coast to marry Adwoa, and there will be more like him who will come and take our daughters away. But you, my own, I have bigger plans for you than to live as a white man’s wife. You will marry a man of our village.”

Baaba turned around just then, and Effia caught her eyes. Baaba scowled. Effia looked at her father to see if he had noticed, but Cobbe did not say a word.

Effia knew who her choice for husband would be, and she dearly hoped her parents would choose the same man. Abeeku Badu was next in line to be the village chief. He was tall, with skin like the pit of an avocado and large hands with long, slender fingers that he waved around like lightning bolts every time he spoke. He had visited their compound four times in the last month, and later that week, he and Effia were to share a meal together.

Abeeku brought a goat. His servants carried yams and fish and palm wine. Baaba and the other wives stoked their fires and heated the oil. The air smelled rich.

That morning, Baaba had plaited Effia’s hair. Two long braids on either side of her center part. They made her look like a ram, strong, willful. Effia had oiled her naked body and put gold in her ears. She sat across from Abeeku as they ate, pleased as he stole appreciative glances.

“Were you at Adwoa’s ceremony?” Baaba asked once all of the men had been served and the women finally began to eat.

“Yes, I was there, but only briefly. It is a shame Adwoa will be leaving the village. She would have made a good wife.”

“Will you work for the British when you become chief?” Effia asked.

Cobbe and Baaba sent her sharp looks, and she lowered her head, but she lifted it to find Abeeku smiling.

“We work *with* the British, Effia, not for them. That is the meaning of trade. When I am chief, we will continue as we have, facilitating trade with the Asantes and the British.”

Effia nodded. She wasn't exactly sure what this meant, but she could tell from her parents' looks that it was best to keep her mouth shut. Abeeku Badu was the first man they had brought to meet her. Effia wanted desperately for him to want her, but she did not yet know what kind of man he was, what kind of woman he required. In her hut, Effia could ask her father and Fiifi anything she wanted. It was Baaba who practiced silence and preferred the same from Effia, Baaba who had slapped her for asking why she did not take her to be blessed as all the other mothers did for their daughters. It was only when Effia didn't speak or question, when she made herself small, that she could feel Baaba's love, or something like it. Maybe this was what Abeeku wanted too.

Abeeku finished eating. He shook hands with everyone in the family, and stopped by Effia's mother. “You will let me know when she is ready,” he said.

Baaba clutched a hand to her chest and nodded soberly. Cobbe and the other men saw Abeeku off as the rest of the family waved.

That night, Baaba woke Effia up while she was sleeping on the floor of their hut. Effia felt the warmth of her mother's breath against her ear as she spoke. “When your blood comes, Effia, you must hide it. You must tell me and no one else,” she said. “Do you understand?” She handed Effia palm fronds that she had turned into soft, rolled sheets. “Place these inside of you, and check them every day. When they turn red, you must tell me.”

Effia looked at the palm fronds, held in Baaba's outstretched hands. She didn't take them at first, but when she looked up again there was something like desperation in her mother's eyes. And because the look had softened Baaba's face somehow, and because Effia also knew desperation, that fruit of longing, she did as she was told. Every day, Effia checked for red, but the palm fronds came out greenish-white

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as always. In the spring, the chief of the village grew ill, and everyone watched Abeeku carefully to see if he was ready for the task. He married two women in those months, Arekua the Wise, and Millicent, the half-caste daughter of a Fante woman and a British soldier. The soldier had died from fever, leaving his wife and two children much wealth to do with as they pleased. Effia prayed for the day all of the villagers would call her Effia the Beauty, as Abeeku called her on the rare occasions when he was permitted to speak to her.

Millicent's mother had been given a new name by her white husband. She was a plump, fleshy woman with teeth that twinkled against the dark night of her skin. She had decided to move out of the Castle and into the village once her husband died. Because the white men could not leave money in their wills to their Fante wives and children, they left it to other soldiers and friends, and those friends paid the wives. Millicent's mother had been given enough money for a new start and a piece of land. She and Millicent would often come visit Effia and Baaba, for, as she said, they would soon be a part of the same family.

Millicent was the lightest-skinned woman Effia had ever seen. Her black hair reached down to the middle of her back and her eyes were tinged with green. She rarely smiled, and she spoke with a husky voice and a strange Fante accent.

"What was it like in the Castle?" Baaba asked Millicent's mother one day while the four women were sitting to a snack of groundnuts and bananas.

"It was fine, fine. They take care of you, oh, these men! It is like they have never been with a woman before. I don't know what their British wives were doing. I tell you, my husband looked at me like I was water and he was fire, and every night he had to be put out."

The women laughed. Millicent slipped Effia a smile, and Effia wanted to ask her what it was like with Abeeku, but she did not dare.

Baaba leaned in close to Millicent's mother, but still Effia could hear, "And they pay a good bride price, eh?"

"Enh, I tell you, my husband paid my mother ten pounds, and that was fifteen years ago! To be sure, my sister, the money is good, but I for one am glad my daughter has married a Fante. Even if a soldier offered

to pay twenty pounds, she would not get to be the wife of a chief. And what's worse, she would have to live in the Castle, far from me. No, no, it is better to marry a man of the village so that your daughters can stay close to you."

Baaba nodded and turned toward Effia, who quickly looked away.

That night, just two days after her fifteenth birthday, the blood came. It was not the powerful rush of the ocean waves that Effia had expected it to be, but rather a simple trickle, rain dripping, drop by drop, from the same spot of a hut's roof. She cleaned herself off and waited for her father to leave Baaba so that she could tell her.

"Baaba," she said, showing her the palm fronds painted red. "I have gotten my blood."

Baaba placed a hand over her lips. "Who else knows?"

"No one," Effia said.

"You will keep it that way. Do you understand? When anyone asks you if you have become a woman yet, you will answer no."

Effia nodded. She turned to leave, but a question was burning hot coals in the pit of her stomach. "Why?" she finally asked.

Baaba reached into Effia's mouth and pulled out her tongue, pinching the tip with her sharp fingernails. "Who are you that you think you can question me, eh? If you do not do as I say, I will make sure you never speak again." She released Effia's tongue, and for the rest of the night, Effia tasted her own blood.

The next week, the old chief died. The funeral announcements went out to all of the surrounding villages. The proceedings would last a month and end with Abeeku's chief ceremony. The women of the village prepared food from sunrise to sunset; drums were made out of the finest wood, and the best singers were called upon to raise their voices. The funeral attendants began dancing on the fourth day of the rainy season, and they did not rest their feet until the ground had completely dried.

At the end of the first dry night Abeeku was crowned Omanhin, chief of the Fante village. He was dressed in rich fabrics, his two wives

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on either side of him. Effia and Baaba stood next to each other as they watched, and Cobbe paced the crowd. Every so often, Effia could hear him muttering that she, his daughter, the most beautiful woman in the village, should be up there too.

As the new chief, Abeeku wanted to do something big, something that would bring attention to their village and make them a force to be reckoned with. After only three days in office, he gathered up all of the men of the village to his compound. He fed them for two days straight, got them drunk on palm wine until their boisterous laughing and impassioned shouting could be heard from every hut.

“What will they do?” Effia asked.

“That does not concern you,” Baaba said.

In the two months since Effia had begun to bleed, Baaba had stopped beating her. Payment for her silence. Some days, when they were preparing meals for the men, or when Effia would bring back the water she had fetched and watch Baaba dip in with cupped hands, she would think they were finally behaving as mothers and daughters were supposed to behave. But then, other days, the long scowl would return to Baaba’s face, and Effia would see that her mother’s new quiet was only temporary, her rage a wild beast that had been tamed for the moment.

Cobbe came back from the meeting with a long machete. The handle was gold with carvings of letters that no one understood. He was so drunk that all of his wives and children stood around him in a circle, at a distance of two feet, while he shuffled about, jabbing the sharp instrument this way and that. “We will make the village rich with blood!” he screamed. He lunged at Fiifi, who had wandered into the circle, and the boy, leaner and quicker than he had been in his days as a fat baby, swiveled his hips, missing the tip of the machete by only a few inches.

Fiifi had been the youngest one at the meeting. Everyone knew he would make a fine warrior. They could see it in the way he climbed the palm trees. In the way he wore his silence like a golden crown.

After her father left and Effia was certain that their mother had gone to sleep, she crawled over to Fiifi.

“Wake up,” she hissed, and he pushed her away. Even in half sleep he was stronger than she was. She fell backward but, with the grace of a cat, flipped back onto her feet. “Wake up,” she said again.

Fiifi’s eyes flashed open. “Don’t worry me, big sister,” he said.

“What will happen?” she asked.

“It’s the business of men,” Fiifi said.

“You are not yet a man,” Effia said.

“And you are not yet a woman,” Fiifi snapped back. “Otherwise you would have been there with Abeeku this very evening as his wife.”

Effia’s lips began to quiver. She turned to go back to her side of the hut, but Fiifi caught her arm. “We are helping the British and the Asantes with their trade.”

“Oh,” Effia said. It was the same story she had heard from her father and Abeeku just a few months before. “You mean we will give Asante gold and fabric to the white men?”

Fiifi clutched her tighter. “Don’t be stupid,” he said. “Abeeku has made an alliance with one of the most powerful Asante villages. We will help them sell their slaves to the British.”

And so, the white man came to their village. Fat or skinny, red or tanned. They came in uniform, with swords at their sides, their eyes looking sideways, always and ever cautious. They came to approve of the goods Abeeku had promised them.

In the days following the chief ceremony, Cobbe had grown nervous about the broken promise of Effia’s womanhood, nervous that Abeeku would forget her in favor of one of the other women in the village. He had always said that he wanted his daughter to be the first, most important wife, but now even third seemed like a distant hope.

Every day he would ask Baaba what was happening with Effia, and every day Baaba would reply that she was not yet ready. In desperation, he decided to allow his daughter to go over to Abeeku’s compound with Baaba once a week, so that the man could see her and remember how much he had once loved her face and figure.

Arekua the Wise, the first of Abeeku’s wives, greeted them as they came in one evening. “Please, Mama,” she said to Baaba. “We weren’t expecting you tonight. The white men are here.”

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“We can go,” Effia said, but Baaba clutched her arm.

“If you don’t mind, we would like to stay,” Baaba said. Arekua gave her a strange look. “My husband will be angry if we come back too early,” Baaba said, as if that were enough of an explanation. Effia knew that she was lying. Cobbe had not sent them there that night. It was Baaba who had heard that the white men would be there and insisted that they go pay respects. Arekua took pity and left to ask Abeeku if the two of them might stay.

“You will eat with the women, and if the men come in, you will not speak,” she said once she had returned. She led them deeper into the compound. Effia watched hut after hut pass by until they entered the one where the wives had gathered to eat. She sat next to Millicent, whose pregnant belly had begun to show, no bigger than a coconut, slung low. Arekua had prepared fish in palm oil stew, and they dug in until their fingers were stained orange.

Soon, a maidservant Effia had not noticed before came into the room. She was a tiny girl, only a child, whose eyes never lifted from the ground.

“Please, Mama,” she said to Arekua. “The white men would like to tour the compound. Chief Abeeku says you are to make sure you are presentable for them.”

“Go and fetch us water, quick,” Millicent said, and when the servant came back with a bucket full of water, they all washed their hands and lips. Effia tidied her hair, licking her palms and rubbing her fingers along the tight baby curls that lined her edges. When she finished, Baaba had her stand between Millicent and Arekua, in front of the other women, and Effia tried her best to seem smaller so as not to draw attention to herself.

Before long the men came in. Abeeku looked as a chief should look, Effia thought, strong and powerful, like he could lift ten women above his head and toward the sun. Two white men came in behind him. There was one who Effia thought must be the chief of the white men because of the way the other glanced at him before he moved or spoke. This white chief wore the same clothes as the rest of them wore, but there were more shiny golden buttons running along his coat and

on the flaps above his shoulders. He seemed older than Abeeku, his dark brown hair flecked with gray, but he stood up straight, as a leader should stand.

“These are the women. My wives and children, their mothers and daughters,” Abeeku said. The smaller, more timid white man watched him carefully as he said this and then turned to the white chief and spoke their strange tongue. The white chief nodded and smiled at all of them, looking carefully at each woman and saying hello in his poor Fante.

When his “hello” reached Effia, she couldn’t help but giggle. The other women shushed her, and embarrassment like heat began to move into her cheeks.

“I’m still learning,” the white chief said, resting his eyes on Effia, his Fante an ugly sound in her ears. He held her gaze for what seemed like minutes, and Effia felt her skin grow even hotter as the look in his eyes turned into something more wanton. The dark brown circles of his pupils looked like large pots that toddlers could drown in, and he looked at Effia just like that, as though he wanted to keep her there, in his drowning eyes. Color quickly flooded into his cheeks. He turned to the other white man and spoke.

“No, she is not my wife,” Abeeku said after the man had translated for him, his voice not bothering to hide his annoyance. Effia hung her head, embarrassed that she had done something to cause Abeeku shame, embarrassed he could not call her wife. Embarrassed, too, that he had not called her by name: Effia the Beauty. She wanted desperately then to break her promise to Baaba and announce herself as the woman she was, but before she could speak, the men walked away, and her nerve faded as the white chief looked over his shoulder at her and smiled.

His name was James Collins, and he was the newly appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle. Within a week, he had come back to the village to ask Baaba for Effia’s hand in marriage. Cobbe’s rage at the proposal filled every room like hot steam.

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“She is all but promised to Abeeku!” he yelled at Baaba when Baaba told him that she was considering the offer.

“Yes, but Abeeku cannot marry her until her blood comes, and we have been waiting years now. I tell you, husband, I think she was cursed in that fire, a demon who will never become a woman. Think about it. What creature is that beautiful but cannot be touched? All of the signs of womanhood are there, and yet, still, nothing. The white man will marry her regardless. He does not know what she is.”

Effia had heard the white man talking to her mother earlier that day. He would pay thirty pounds up front and twenty-five shillings a month in tradable goods to Baaba as bride gift. More than even Abeeku could offer, more than had been offered for any other Fante woman in this village or the next.

Effia could hear her father pacing all throughout the evening. She even awoke the next morning to that same sound, the steady rhythm of his feet on the hard clay earth.

“We must make Abeeku think it was his idea,” he finally said.

And so, the chief was called to their compound. He sat beside Cobbe as Baaba told him her theory, that the fire that had destroyed so much of their family’s worth had also destroyed the child.

“She has the body of a woman, but something evil lurks in her spirit,” Baaba said, spitting on the ground for emphasis. “If you marry her she will never bear you children. If the white man marries her, he will think of this village fondly, and your trade will prosper from it.”

Abeeku rubbed his beard carefully as he thought about it. “Bring the Beauty to me,” he said finally. Cobbe’s second wife brought Effia into the room. She was trembling and her stomach pained her so much that she thought she might empty her bowels right there in front of everyone.

Abeeku stood up so that he was facing her. He ran his fingers along the full landscape of her face, the hills of her cheeks, the caves of her nostrils. “A more beautiful woman has never been born,” he said finally. He turned to Baaba. “But I see that you are right. If the white man wants her, he may have her. All the better for our business with them. All the better for the village.”

Cobbe, big, strong man that he was, began to weep openly, but Baaba stood tall. She walked over to Effia after Abeeku had left and pulled out a black stone pendant that shimmered as though it had been coated in gold dust.

She slipped it into Effia's hands and then leaned into her until her lips were touching Effia's ear. "Take this with you when you go," Baaba said. "A piece of your mother."

And when Baaba finally pulled away, Effia could see something like relief dancing behind her smile.

\*

Effia had passed by the Cape Coast Castle only once, when she and Baaba ventured out of their village and into the city, but she had never been in it before the day of her wedding. There was a chapel on the ground level, and she and James Collins were married by a clergyman who had asked Effia to repeat words she didn't mean in a language she didn't understand. There was no dancing, no feasting, no bright colors, slicked hair, or old ladies with wrinkled and bare breasts throwing coins and waving handkerchiefs. Not even Effia's family had come, for after Baaba had convinced them all that the girl was a bad omen, no one wanted anything to do with her. The morning she left for the Castle, Cobbe had kissed the top of her head and waved her away, knowing that the premonition of the dissolution and destruction of the family lineage, the premonition that he had had the night of the fire, would begin here, with his daughter and the white man.

For his part, James had done all he could to make Effia comfortable. She could see how much he tried. He had gotten his interpreter to teach him even more words in Fante so that he could tell her how beautiful she was, how he would take care of her as best he could. He had called her what Abeeku called her, Effia the Beauty.

After they were married, James gave Effia a tour of the Castle. On the ground floor of the north wall there were apartments and warehouses. The center held the parade ground, soldiers' quarters, and guardroom. There was a stockyard, a pond, a hospital. A carpenter's

shop, smithy, and kitchen. The Castle was itself a village. Effia walked around with James in complete awe, running her hands along the fine furniture made from wood the color of her father's skin, the silk hangings so smooth they felt like a kiss.

She breathed everything in, stopping at the gun platform that held huge black canons facing out toward the sea. She wanted to rest before James led her up his private stairwell, and so she laid her head down against one of those cannons for just a moment. Then she felt a breeze hit her feet from small holes in the ground.

"What's below?" she asked James, and the mangled Fante word that came back to her was "cargo."

Then, carried up with the breeze, came a faint crying sound. So faint, Effia thought she was imagining it until she lowered herself down, rested her ear against the grate. "James, are there people down there?" she asked.

Quickly, James came to her. He snatched her up from the ground and grabbed her shoulders, looking straight into her eyes. "Yes," he said evenly. It was one Fante word he had mastered.

Effia pulled away from him. She stared back into his piercing eyes. "But how can you keep them down there crying, enh?" she said. "You white people. My father warned me about your ways. Take me home. Take me home right now!"

She didn't realize she'd been screaming until she felt James's hand on her mouth, pushing her lips as though he could force the words back in. He held her like that for a long time, until she had calmed. She didn't know if he understood what she said, but she knew then, just by the faint push of his fingers on her lips, that he was a man capable of hurting, that she should be glad to be on one side of his meanness and not another.

"You want to go home?" James asked. His Fante firm, though unclear. "Your home is no better."

Effia pulled his hand from her mouth and stared at him for a while longer. She remembered her mother's joy at seeing her leave, and knew that James was right. She couldn't go home again. She nodded, only barely.

He hurried her up the stairs. On the very top floor were James's quarters. From the window Effia could see straight out to the sea. Cargo ships like black specks of dust in the blue, wet eye of the Atlantic floated so far out that it was difficult to tell how far away from the Castle the ships actually were. Some were maybe three days away, others merely an hour.

Effia watched a ship just like this once she and James finally got to his room. A flickering of yellow light announced its presence on the water, and with that light, Effia could just barely make out the boat's silhouette, long and curved like the hollowed-out skin of a coconut. She wanted to ask James what the ship was carrying and whether it was coming or going, but she had grown tired of trying to decipher his Fante.

James said something to her. He smiled when he spoke, a peace offering. The corners of his lips twitched almost imperceptibly. She shook her head, tried to tell him that she didn't understand, and finally he gestured to the bed in the left-hand corner of the room. She sat. Baaba had explained what would be expected of her on her wedding night before she had left for the Castle that morning, but it seemed no one had explained it to James. When he approached her, his hands were trembling, and she could see the sweat building on his forehead. She was the one who laid her body down. She was the one who lifted her skirt.

They went on like this for weeks until, eventually, the comfort of routine began to dull the ache that missing her family had left her with. Effia didn't know what it was about James that soothed her. Perhaps it was the way he always answered her questions, or the affection he showed her. Perhaps it was the fact that James had no other wives there to attend to and so every one of his nights belonged to her. She had cried the first time he brought her a gift. He had taken the black stone pendant that Baaba had given her and put it on a string so that Effia could wear it around her neck. Touching the stone always gave her great comfort.

Effia knew she was not supposed to care for James, and she kept hearing her father's words echoing through her mind, how he had

wanted more for her than to be the Fante wife of a white man. She remembered, too, how close she had come to really *being* someone. Her whole life Baaba had beat her and made her feel small, and she had fought back with her beauty, a silent weapon, but a powerful one, which had led her to the feet of a chief. But ultimately, her mother had won, cast her out, not only of the house but of the village entirely, so that now the only other Fantes she saw regularly were the spouses of the other soldiers.

She'd heard the Englishmen call them "wenches," not wives. "Wife" was a word reserved for the white women across the Atlantic. "Wench" was something else entirely, a word the soldiers used to keep their hands clean so that they would not get in trouble with their god, a being who himself was made up of three but who allowed men to marry only one.

"What is she like?" Effia asked James one day. They had been trading languages. In the early mornings, before he went off to oversee the work of the Castle, James would teach her English, and at night, when they lay in bed, she taught him Fante. This night, he was tracing his finger along the curve of her collarbone while she sang him a song that Baaba used to sing Fiifi at night as Effia lay in the corner, pretending to be asleep, pretending not to care that she was never included. Slowly, James had started to mean more to her than a husband was supposed to mean to a wife. The first word he had asked to learn was "love," and he said it every day.

"Her name is Anne," he said, moving his finger from Effia's collarbone to her lips. "I haven't seen her in so long. We were married ten years ago, but I've been away for so many of those years. I hardly know her at all."

Effia knew that James had two children in England as well. Emily and Jimmy. They were ages five and nine, conceived in the few days he was on leave and able to see his wife. Effia's father had twenty children. The old chief had had nearly a hundred. That a man could be happy with so few seemed unfathomable to her. She wondered what the children looked like. She wondered, too, what Anne wrote James in those letters of hers. They came at unpredictable intervals, four months here,

one month there. James would read them at his desk at night while Effia pretended to be sleeping. She didn't know what the letters said, but every time James read one, he would come back to bed and lie as far away from her as possible.

Now, without the force of a letter to keep him away, James was resting his head on her left breast. When he spoke, his breath was hot, a wind that traveled the length of her stomach, down between her legs. "I want children with you," James said, and Effia cringed, worried that she would not be able to fulfill this want, worried too that because she had a bad mother, she herself would become one. She had already told James about Baaba's scheme, how she had forced Effia to keep her womanhood a secret so that she would seem unfit for the men of her village, but James had just laughed her sadness away. "All the better for me," he said.

And yet, Effia had started to believe that perhaps Baaba was right. She'd lost her virginity on the night of her wedding, but months had passed without a pregnancy. The curse may have been rooted in a lie, but perhaps it bore the fruit of truth. The old people of her village used to tell a story about a woman who was said to have been cursed. She lived under a palm tree on the northwest side, and no one had ever called her by her name. Her mother had died so that she might live, and on her tenth birthday, she had been carrying a pot of boiling hot oil from one hut to another. Her father was napping on the ground and she, thinking that she could step over him instead of going around, tripped, spilling the hot oil onto his face and disfiguring him for the rest of his life, which lasted only twenty-five more days. She was banished from the house, and she wandered the Gold Coast for years, until she returned at age seventeen, a strange, rare beauty. Thinking that perhaps she no longer courted death wherever she went, a boy who had known her when she was young offered to marry her as she was, destitute and without family. She conceived within a month, but when the baby came out it was half-caste. Blue-eyed and light-skinned, it died four days later. She left her husband's house the night of the child's death and went to live under the palm tree, punishing herself for the rest of her life.

Effia knew that the elderly of her village only told this story to warn the children to take care when around hot oil, but she wondered about the end of the story, the half-caste child. How this child, both white and black, was an evil powerful enough to force the woman out into the forest of palms.

When Adwoa had married the white soldier, and when Millicent and her mother had wandered into the village, Cobbe turned up his nose. He had always said that the joining of a man and a woman was also the joining of two families. Ancestors, whole histories, came with the act, but so did sins and curses. The children were the embodiment of that unity, and they bore the brunt of it all. What sins did the white man carry with him? Baaba had said that Effia's curse was one of a failed womanhood, but it was Cobbe who had prophesied about a sullied lineage. Effia couldn't help but think that she was fighting against her own womb, fighting against the fire children.

"If you don't give that man children soon, he will take you right back," Adwoa said. She and Effia had not been friends when they lived in the village, but here they saw each other as often as possible, each happy to be near someone who understood her, to hear the comforting sounds of her regional tongue. Adwoa had already had two children since leaving the village. Her husband, Todd Phillips, had only gotten fatter since Effia had last seen him, sweaty and red in Adwoa's old hut.

"I tell you, oh, Todd has kept me flat on my back since I arrived in this place. I am probably expecting right now as we speak."

Effia shuddered. "But his stomach is so big!" she said, and Adwoa laughed until she choked on the groundnuts she was eating.

"Eh, but the stomach is not the part you use to make the baby," she said. "I will give you some roots from the woods. You put them under the bed when you lie with him. Tonight, you must be like an animal when he comes into the room. A lioness. She mates with her lion and he thinks the moment is about him when it is really about her, *her* children, *her* posterity. Her trick is to make him think that he is king of the bush, but what does a king matter? Really, she is king and queen and everything in between. Tonight, we will make you live up to your title, Beauty."

And so Adwoa came back with roots. They were no ordinary roots. They were large and swirled, and when you pulled back one strand, another would appear to take its place. Effia put them under the bed and they only seemed to multiply, spilling leg after leg out until it seemed the root would pick the bed up on its back and walk away, a strange new spider.

“Your husband should not be able to see any of it,” Adwoa said, and they worked to push back the strands of root that insisted on peeking out, pushing and pulling until finally it was contained.

Then Adwoa helped Effia prepare for James. She plaited and smoothed her hair and spread oil on her skin, and red clay on the apples of her cheeks and the curve of her lips. Effia made sure that when James came in that night the room smelled earthy and lush, like something there could bear fruit.

“What’s all this?” James asked. He was still in his uniform, and Effia could tell that he’d had a long day by the way his lapel drooped. She helped him pull off his coat and shirt and she pressed her body against his, as Adwoa had taught her. Before he could register his surprise, she grabbed his arms and pushed him to the bed. Not since their first night together had he been this timid, afraid of her unfamiliar body, the full-figured flesh, so different from how he had described his wife. Excited now, he pushed into her, and she squeezed her eyes as tightly as she could, her tongue circling her lips. He pushed harder, his breathing heavy and labored. She scratched his back, and he cried out. She bit his ear and pulled his hair. He pushed against her as though he were trying to move through her. And when she opened her eyes to look at him, she saw something like pain written across his face and the ugliness of the act, the sweat and blood and wetness they produced, became illuminated, and she knew that if she was an animal tonight, then he was too.

Once they had finished, Effia lay with her head on James’s shoulder.

“What is that?” James asked, turning his head. They had moved the bed so that now three strands of the root were exposed.

“Nothing,” Effia said.

James jumped up and peered underneath the bed. “What is it,

Effia?” he asked again, his voice more forceful than she had ever heard it before.

“It’s nothing. A root that Adwoa gave me. For fertility.”

His lips formed a thin line. “Now, Effia, I don’t want any voodoo or black magic in this place. My men can’t hear that I let my wench place strange roots under the bed. It’s not Christian.”

Effia had heard him say this before. Christian. That was why they had been married in the chapel by the stern man in black who shook his head every time he looked at her. He’d spoken before, too, of the “voodoo” he thought all Africans participated in. She could not tell him the fables of Anansi the spider or stories that the old people from her village used to tell her without his growing wary. Since moving to the Castle, she’d discovered that only the white men talked of “black magic.” As though magic had a color. Effia had seen a traveling witch who carried a snake around her neck and shoulders. This woman had had a son. She’d sung lullabies to him at night and held his hands and kept him fed, same as anyone else. There was nothing dark about her.

The need to call this thing “good” and this thing “bad,” this thing “white” and this thing “black,” was an impulse that Effia did not understand. In her village, everything was everything. Everything bore the weight of everything else.

The next day Effia told Adwoa that James had seen the root.

“That is not good,” Adwoa said. “Did he call it evil?” Effia nodded, and Adwoa clicked her tongue three times. “Todd would have said the same thing. These men could not tell good from evil if they were Nyame himself. I don’t think it will work now, Effia. I’m sorry.” But Effia wasn’t sorry. If she was barren, so be it.

Soon, even James was too busy to worry about children. The Castle was expecting a visit from Dutch officers, and everything needed to run as smoothly as possible. James would wake up well before Effia to help the men with the imported store items and to see to the ships. Effia spent more and more time wandering around the villages surrounding the Castle, roaming the forests, and chatting with Adwoa.

The afternoon of the Dutch arrival, Effia met with Adwoa and some of the other wenches just outside the Castle. They stopped beneath the

shade of a patch of trees in order to eat yams with palm oil stew. There was Adwoa, then Sarah, the half-caste wench of Sam York. There was also the new wench, Eccoah. She was tall and slender, and she walked as though her limbs were made of thin twigs, as though wind could snap and collapse her.

This day, Eccoah was lying in the slim shade of a palm tree. Effia had helped her coil her hair the day before, and in the sun, it looked like a million tiny snakes rising from her head.

“My husband cannot pronounce my name well. He wants to call me Emily,” Eccoah said.

“If he wants to call you Emily, let him call you Emily,” Adwoa said. Out of the four of them, she had been a wench the longest, and she always spoke her opinions loudly and freely. Everyone knew that her husband practically worshipped at her feet. “Better that than to listen to him butcher your mother tongue over and over.”

Sarah dug her elbows into the dust. “My father was a soldier too. When he died, Mama moved us back to our village. I came to marry Sam, but he did not have to worry about my name. Do you know he knew my father? They were soldiers together in the Castle when I was just a small girl.”

Effia shook her head. She was lying on her belly. She loved days like this one, where she could speak Fante as fast as she wanted. No one asking her to slow down, no one telling her to speak English.

“My husband comes up from the dungeons stinking like a dying animal,” Eccoah said softly.

They all looked away. No one ever mentioned the dungeons.

“He comes to me smelling like feces and rot and looking at me like he has seen a million ghosts, and he cannot tell if I am one of them or not. I tell him he must wash before he touches me and sometimes he does, but sometimes he pushes me to the floor and pushes into me like he has been possessed.”

Effia sat up and rested a hand against her stomach. James had received another letter from his wife the day after he’d found the root underneath their bed. They had not slept together since.

The wind picked up. The snakes in Eccoah’s hair snapped this way and that, her twig arms lifted. “There are people down there, you

know,” she said. “There are women down there who look like us, and our husbands must learn to tell the difference.”

They all fell silent. Eccoah leaned back against the tree, and Effia watched as a line of ants passed over a strand of her hair, the shape of it seeming, to them, to be just another part of the natural world.

After that first day in the Castle, James never spoke to Effia about the slaves they kept in the dungeon, but he spoke to her often about beasts. That was what the Asantes trafficked most here. Beasts. Monkeys and chimpanzees, even a few leopards. Birds like the king crowns and macaws that she and Fiifi used to try to catch when they were children, roaming the forests in search of the one odd bird, the bird that had feathers so beautiful it seemed to be set apart from the rest. They would spend hours on end looking for just one such bird, and most days they would find none.

She wondered what such a bird would be worth, because in the Castle all beasts were ascribed worth. She had seen James look at a king crown brought in by one of their Asante traders and declare that it was worth four pounds. What about the human beast? How much was he worth? Effia had known, of course, that there were people in the dungeons. People who spoke a different dialect than her, people who had been captured in tribal wars, even people who had been stolen, but she had never thought of where they went from there. She had never thought of what James must think every time he saw them. If he went into the dungeons and saw women who reminded him of her, who looked like her and smelled like her. If he came back to her haunted by what he saw.

Effia soon realized that she was pregnant. It was spring, and the mango trees outside the Castle had started to drop down mangoes. Her stomach jutted out, soft and fleshy, its own kind of fruit. James was so happy when she told him that he picked her up and danced her around their quarters. She slapped his back and told him to set her down, lest they shake the baby to pieces, and he had complied before bending and planting a kiss on her barely bulged stomach.

But their joy was soon tempered by news from her village. Cobbe

had fallen ill. So ill that it was unclear whether or not he would still be alive by the time Effia made the journey back to see him.

She was not sure who had sent the letter from her village, for it was addressed to her husband and written in broken English. She had been gone two years, and she had not heard from anyone in her family since then. She knew that this was Baaba's doing, and indeed she was surprised that anyone had even thought to notify her of her father's illness.

The journey back to the village took about three days. James did not want her to make the trip alone in her condition, but he could not accompany her, so he sent along a house girl. When they arrived, everything in the village looked different. The colors of the treetop canopies seemed to have dulled, their vibrant browns and greens now muted. The sounds seemed different too. Everything that once rustled now stood still. Abeeku had made the village into one so prosperous that they would forever be known as one of the leading slave markets in all of the Gold Coast. He had no time to see Effia, but he sent along gifts of sweet palm wine and gold to meet her once she arrived at her father's compound.

Baaba stood in the entranceway. She looked to have aged a hundred years in the two that Effia had been gone. Her scowl was held in place by the hundreds of tiny wrinkles that pulled at her skin, and her nails had grown so long that they curled like talons. She didn't speak a word, only led Effia to the room where her father lay dying.

No one knew what sickness had struck Cobbe. Apothecaries, witch doctors, even the Christian minister from the Castle, had been called upon to give their opinions and pray over the man, and yet no measure of healing thoughts or medicines could spit him out of the lips of death.

Fiifi stood beside him, wiping the sweat off his forehead carefully. Suddenly, Effia was crying and shaking. She reached out her hand to her father's and began to stroke the sallow skin there.

"He cannot speak," Fiifi whispered, glancing quickly at her bulging belly. "He is too weak."

She nodded and continued to cry.

Fiifi dropped the drenched cloth and took Effia's hand. "Big sis-

## *Effia*

ter, I am the one who wrote you the letter. Mama did not want you to come, but I thought you should get to see our father before he enters Asamando.”

Cobbe closed his eyes, and a low murmur escaped his lips so that Effia could see that the Land of the Spirits was indeed calling him.

“Thank you,” she said to Fiifi, and he nodded.

He began walking out of the room, but before he reached the hut’s door, he turned. “She is not your mother, you know. Baaba. Our father had you by a house girl who ran away into the fire the night you were born. She is the one who left you that stone you wear around your neck.”

Fiifi stepped outside. And soon, Cobbe died, Effia still holding his hand. The villagers would say that Cobbe had been waiting for Effia to come home before he could die, but Effia knew that it was more complex than that. His unrest had kept him alive, and now that unrest belonged to Effia. It would feed her life and the life of her child.

After she had wiped her tears, Effia walked out of the compound and into the sun. Baaba sat on the stump of a felled tree, her shoulders squared as she held hands with Fiifi, who stood beside her, now as quiet as a field mouse. Effia wanted to say something to Baaba, to apologize perhaps for the burden her father had made Baaba carry all of those years, but before she could speak, Baaba hacked from her throat, spit on the ground before Effia’s feet, and said, “You are nothing from nowhere. No mother and now no father.” She looked at Effia’s stomach and smiled. “What can grow from nothing?”



**WE  
COULD  
BE  
BEAUTIFUL**

**SWAN HUNTLEY**

**A NOVEL**

1.

I wanted a family.

I was rich, I owned a small business, I had a wardrobe I replaced all the time. I was toned enough and pretty enough. I moisturized, I worked out. I looked younger than my age. I had been to all the countries I wanted to see. I collected art and filled my West Village apartment with it. My home was bright and tastefully bare and worthy of a spread in a magazine.

I was also a really good person. I volunteered at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving, I paid my housekeeper well and on time. I was a good sister, a good daughter. I had been a pretty good student. I'd gone to Sarah Lawrence and then NYU. I had substance. I was conscientious. I'd seen enough documentaries to make me a vegetarian. I voted. I recycled. I tipped generously. I gave money to homeless people on the street. I gave extra to gypsy mothers, their sooty babies, always sleeping, maybe drugged, hanging heavy from their necks in hammocks made from ratty T-shirts.

But, despite my good deeds and my good fortune, I felt incomplete. I had always felt incomplete, even as a small child. I have a memory of myself, age four, cheek pressed against the cold black smoky design of the bathroom tiles, my hot breath fogging the smooth marble, thinking: I am dead. I am dead but I am alive. I am dead and this is a dream.

That I didn't have a family yet wasn't for a lack of trying. I felt I had always been trying. I'd been engaged twice. I'd had a million boyfriends, and even one girlfriend, but none of them had stuck. I tended to like addicts. Maybe by definition those people didn't stick around – they were always running, that was their nature. I also tended to like poor people, impoverished

sculptors like Jim, who were a little too desperate for my good sheets and my big TV screens and my masseur, who came once a week.

There was something about having money that made the incompleteness sharper. If you were broke, it was an excuse for almost everything. You couldn't afford to fix the shower, so it kept leaking. You didn't have time for friends or exercise or charity – you were always working because you had to work, and work was the best excuse for your misery.

If you had money, you had no excuse. And people didn't feel sorry for you either. Instead, they decided not to like you before they even knew you. They said: if you're sad, can't you buy a new house somewhere, can't you take a trip? Don't you have so many choices, so many resources? They said: we're not stupid and we know you can't buy happiness, but we also know you sort of can, too, because money means choices and choices mean you don't have the limits that we do, and that means you should shut up now and be happy – look at everything you have, it's limitless.

And those people were right. It was limitless. I got a headache just thinking about how limitless it was. If you could afford any end table in the world, how could you be sure you were getting the right one? If you could go anywhere, where would you go? And in what order? And for how long? If you had any goals at all, why had you not attained them? If you hadn't attained them, it wasn't because you were broke, it was because you had failed.

And so it was that I felt not only incomplete, but also like a failure. I went to the Gala for Contemporary Folk Art that night not because I really wanted to, or because I had planned on meeting anyone. I went because I had promised Susan I would go, and I was a good friend who kept my promises.

Wine stem between just-manicured (always manicured) fingers, I stood in the pool of people, looking up at this enormous tapestry. Buttery light, the clinking of glass, low polite voices, one person laughing too loud. Men in tuxedos pressed and crisp and smelling slightly of the dry cleaning bags they'd been taken out of just before, and women in gowns that made them look like jellyfish, their hair coiffed into oceanic shapes. I wore white, which is funny to think about now. Of course I wore white. All I wanted was to be married, and that want was obvious, subliminal, cellular – it was in everything I did, whether I knew it or not.

The tapestry was big, as big as a swimming pool, and so intricate, all those tiny pulls of string. It was a modern triptych, three panels in brilliant colors, almost neon: a woman floating in water, a woman standing on land, a woman curled at the foot of a mountain. It was beautiful and depressing and overwhelming and all I could think was: I am forty-three years old and I am alone and where the hell is Susan?

Of course it was just when I'd decided to leave and go home and curl up in bed that I saw him. A stunning, square-jawed man with gentle eyes and elegant gray hair, full and parted to the side. He made his way closer until he was standing beside me. We watched the tapestry like it was a movie. We said nothing to float other for what felt like a long time. There was something familiar about him. Maybe he looked like an actor, or maybe he was just one of those people who looked familiar to everyone, or maybe his dry-cleaned scent reminded me of home.

“It's nice to see you,” he said finally. His voice was smooth and cool, like metal, brilliantly polished. He held out his hand. On his pinky was a ring – a turquoise stone on a tarnished silver band. That intrigued me. It seemed out of place and special. It suggested a character.

“Do I know you?”

“William Stockton.”

“Catherine West.”

I remember his hand felt as smooth and as cool as his voice. I remember thinking: there is something about this guy, there is some kind of electricity between us. It was big, enormous, unavoidable. From the very beginning, it felt like a current pulling me blissfully toward a whirlpool. Before you drown, the spinning just feels like a dance.

2.

William Stockton and I had never met, but it turned out our families had been friends. “In fact,” he was saying, “I believe I remember your mother pregnant, and it must have been you she was pregnant with.”

It was three days after the gala, a night which had ended in Susan never showing (the flu), and William buying the huge tapestry, and taking my phone number, and calling to ask me out for this coffee we were now having in the park, very near to William’s new apartment on Seventy-Eighth Street – he’d just moved back from Switzerland – and also near to my childhood apartment on Eighty-Fourth, where William had apparently visited “more than once.”

“If she was pregnant with me, we must have just missed each other.” I twirled my long chocolate-colored hair around my fingers. The plan was to mesmerize him, and I was pretty sure it was working. More softly, I said, “Ships in the night.”

“Uncanny.” When William smiled, the lines around his mouth creased. Those were the only real lines on his face. His skin was strangely intact for a man of his age. It glistened, lightly bronzed, almost golden. And his hair. Despite being gray, it was silky, well-conditioned. It bounced with just the right amount of bounce as we walked.

It was a warm Saturday in May, the first real warm day after what had felt like the longest winter of my life, and I was feeling alive, finally alive, and also kind of over-stimulated. It was my bare exposed skin, which hadn't seen light for so long – I felt almost naked in my summery dress – and it was the buzz from the coffee, and it was this man: this handsome, extremely tall, extremely independently wealthy man who was articulate and Old World in a way that didn't seem contrived, and who knew me – not me personally, but he knew my family, and in this way we shared a history. We came from the same place. I trusted him immediately.

He had brought his dog, Herman, a long-haired dachshund with gold-brown hair that curled slightly at the ends, very cute. As we veered from the asphalt onto the curving dirt path, under the shadows of tree branches, their outstretched limbs begging for sun, children stopped to pet Herman, and William was very sweet with every one of them, lingering patiently, saying, “This is Herman, and what is your name?”

We passed a group of young boys building something with sticks, and a lesbian couple on a plaid blanket, eating scooped-out cantaloupe balls from a dewy Ziploc bag like they were really in the wilderness. A line of little day campers in bright white shirts moved like a twinkling diamond bracelet over the knoll. Someone far away was flying a kite shaped like a fish.

It smelled like grass and dirt and, in certain moments, when we walked close enough together, there was the faint trace of William's clean, salt-dipped scent. I would never figure out exactly what that scent was – maybe the combination of his hair products and his detergent and the aftershave he used, and the unique way it reacted with his skin. Vaguely, it reminded me of a hotel where I'd stayed on the Amalfi coast when I was thirteen and still obsessed with pasta Bolognese.

We were talking, of course, about what he remembered. “Let’s see,” he said, sipping the last of his coffee and stepping in front of me (“Pardon me, Catherine”) to throw it in the wiry basket, which prompted me to do the same, even though my coffee was still basically full – I’d been too over-stimulated to drink it. “I remember the stone lions by the door – not replicas because they were missing facial features – and, of course, the plants. There were so many plants.”

“Yes, oh my God. Those plants are what everyone remembers, it’s so funny.” My mother loved her plants – she could have almost been called a hoarder of them. Ferns lined the walls, succulents lined the windowsills, and roses (always roses) were a mandatory centerpiece on every table. She spent a good deal of time explaining to her assistants (she called them all assistants, whether they were housekeepers or nannies or decorators) what her plant visions were, and kept a list for the florist alongside a grocery list in the kitchen drawer. Her collection of plants was the one way in which my mother diverged from her typical Upper East Side existence. It may have been the only eccentric thing about herself she let people see.

“It was nearly a forest, wasn’t it?”

“It was. Especially in the fountain room. The running water made it more forest-like. Do you remember that?”

William squinted into the sun. His face was the shape of a heart or a strawberry, with lips that were just pink enough, just full enough. “Yes,” he said, nodding, “yes, of course, how could I have forgotten that? It was a stone fountain, wasn’t it? Like the lions, it was made of stone that had been worn away outside, by wind and rain. Do I correctly recall cherubs?”

“Yes! I thought they were so scary as a kid because they had no pupils.”

“I also remember the bathroom with the yellow walls,” he said, “I very distinctly recall its mustard color.”

“The mustard bathroom, yes!”

“And the reclining chair your father loved.”

“Yes, oh my God, this is so crazy. You know so much about my life and I only just met you. It’s crazy.”

I probably said, “It’s crazy” twenty times. Although, as we kept talking, I realized maybe it wasn’t so crazy. People in New York knew each other, and apparently, not only were our mothers involved in a lot of the same art organizations, our fathers had both been close to Pierre Mallet, the reclusive artist who lived in the Catskills with too many dogs. I remembered Pierre, of course, though not well, because he rarely came to the city. What I remembered most clearly was that every time Pierre’s name came up, my mother said, “He needs to quit smoking. He’s going to die.”

William’s father, Edward Stockton, had also been an artist, William told me – “though he never achieved fame or money, which was a shame – he wanted those things very badly.” He and Pierre had collaborated on many projects, including a series of orb-like sculptures, one of which my parents had bought and put in the living room.

“I didn’t realize that was your father’s sculpture!” I remembered it exactly. It looked like a planetary system, with all white planets and one blue one, which bore a red X. I recalled many afternoons spent lazing on the couch, looking at that X and vaguely wondering what it meant.

“In part, it was, yes,” William said. “I believe it was Pierre who introduced our fathers initially.”

“What happened to Pierre?”

“He passed away some years ago,” William said. “Lung cancer.”

Based on his choice of outfit for a weekend walk in the park (blue dress shirt, buttoned to the neck, deep tan khaki pants, tight brown leather shoes), I was not surprised to find out William had turned out to be a banker. He’d spent a long time at UBS, and now worked at a small investment bank downtown, way downtown, south of Wall Street at the very tip of the island. My initial response to this was: no. I had gone out of my way to not date finance guys because I didn’t want to end up marrying my father, who had worked too hard and died too young, and also because I just thought finance was boring. But William didn’t seem boring to me. The turquoise ring – he wasn’t a typical banker. It also helped when he said, “I enjoy my job very much,” and I actually believed him. The way he spoke – he was so charismatic. He could have sold water to the ocean.

“I sometimes wonder if it was your father who inspired me into this position,” he said. “In my youth, I was surrounded by bohemians, and your father – well, he was different. He made an impression. He was so very powerful – the way he dressed and the way he spoke.”

I said, “Thank you, yes, he was,” and I remember I got the feeling that William could have been describing himself just then. The shine of his Italian shoes reminded me of something my father said often: “A great man’s shoes should always be polished.”

We walked for a long time, going through the requisite first date stuff. School, family, hobbies. Favorite foods, vacation spots, whether or not Starbucks had good coffee. I was so rapt by everything he said, and by his cool way of saying it that I looked up at one point and realized I didn’t even know where we were in the park.

William did not like the coffee at Starbucks. (“Too much acidity.”) He had no siblings (“In fact, they hadn’t planned on having me either.”) During his early childhood in the city, the

Stocktons had lived just near the Met, and he had gone to Dalton. (“You *would* go to Dalton,” I teased, flipping my hair, to which he said, “Yes, my mother befriended the dean, and so I was allowed to attend for free.”) He had studied the violin “fairly seriously” during his youth, and it was still something he liked – he was even thinking of volunteering as a tutor now, if he could find any extra time to indulge in that.

His parents had inspired his love of folk art. His mother, who had grown up in Mexico City and then Santa Fe, was drawn to it as a Catholic, and particularly loved the works of Reverend Howard Finster and Sister Gertrude Morgan. She made art herself – “mostly crotchet, she was very patient” – but didn’t consider herself a real artist. She was talented, but lacked dedication. His father, who William thought possessed less natural talent, was dedicated enough for the both of them. Edward Stockton was extremely hardworking, almost obsessed. Every day – even on Sundays, which bothered his mother – he awoke at four o’clock in the morning to work. “Work was all that mattered to him, and my mother understood there could not be two stars in one family. My father was the star, and my mother, I suppose, was the sky. He wouldn’t have existed without her.”

William went on to explain that his father’s severe stutter made him self-conscious about speaking. “But when he began to stutter, my mother was there to finish his sentences.” She carried him through every party, every opening, every event. She had a knack for people and people adored her. In the art world, in the supermarket, at church. Church was very important to her.

Yes, William was still a Catholic. “It’s a part of me, I hope you won’t judge me too harshly for it,” he said, and I blurted out, “Isn’t Catholicism all about judgment?” I immediately regretted this and backtracked. “Sorry, sorry,” I said, “I’m only kidding.” And he said, “It’s

okay, I'm used to it, really, it's not very la mode to be Catholic these days, I understand." In an attempt to appear kind and interested, and also because I wanted to know how serious he was about the whole thing, I asked him how often he went to church. He liked to "stop in every so often," mostly to pay his respects to his parents. Both of them were gone now: a freak car accident on an unpaved road. It was recent – they'd died only months ago. "I regret that I didn't have the chance to say goodbye," he said.

Now, William had his own "modest collection" of folk art. I wondered how modestly he was defining "modest." It included sculptures and tableaux in cross stitch – he adored those, probably because they reminded him of his mother – plus all of his father's work, of course, and a few Joseph Yoakum landscapes, which were his favorites. I didn't know who that was, but heard myself saying, "Oh yes, of course, I love his stuff."

When I said, "I like your ring," he explained that it was a family heirloom, dating back exactly one generation – his mother had bought it the day she had arrived in the States, when she was ten. She had given it to William on his tenth birthday, and, at some point in his life, he would pass it on to his own child, if he was "lucky enough to have one."

He had been married before, yes. At the age of thirty-six. Gwen had died four years later. Breast cancer. He'd dated since then, but hadn't found anyone he wanted to spend eternity with. I felt bad for thinking Gwen was a fake princess name, and then I felt bad for William that he had lost her. I couldn't even imagine that, I told him. He said it was horrible, but at least, unlike with his parents, he had been given the chance to say goodbye.

On a lighter note, William enjoyed skiing and running. Stracciatella gelato was his preferred treat. He could eat it all night and all day. But not literally, of course. He'd briefly lived in Italy after university at Oxford. He spoke some Italian, and also French, German, and Spanish.

He'd grown up speaking Spanish with this mother, who he'd been very close with, unlike his father, who "gave the impression that he was a man simply out of reach." His father was German, though he had learned that language mostly at school. Despite their nearly identical looks ("typically Nordic – hard and pale, as though chiseled from ice"), William felt he and his father had had very little in common. He and his mother, on the other hand, shared a "deep internal sameness." She had passed on none of her physical features ("she looked Native American, everyone thought so"), besides her very long limbs. When William said this, he extended the arm that wasn't holding Herman's leash. "See?"

"Wow," I said, and imagined how good it was going to feel when I had that arm wrapped around my waist.

More seriously, he said, "My mother was a wonderful human being, I miss her dearly."

"I'm sure you do, I'm so sorry."

I don't know what it was that made us stop walking, or what made us look at each other then. His face was perfect, his body. The air was perfect. The electricity between us. Even Herman's bark had a musical ring to it. I remember thinking: you look like you could be the one. Even then, I knew. William Stockton and Catherine West. Those two names were going to look great on an invitation. And then, without acknowledging that we had stopped or why, which made it even more perfect because it implied we understood each other without the annoyance of finding words to speak our understanding, William began to walk again, and I followed.

"And your parents? Are they still at Eighty-Fourth?"

"No. My mother moved out recently. And Dad's gone. He died of a heart attack." It had been a while – ten years – so I didn't feel completely devastated saying it anymore, but it still

upset me, especially being here, so close to where we had lived. William also seemed upset to hear this news, and sighed heavily in a way that confirmed he hadn't known.

"That's terrible. I adored your father. I mean that, I truly adored him. Once he took me to an exhibit about the railroad system in America. No one would go with him – your mother certainly wasn't interested."

"I'm not surprised."

"It's odd to think of now. Where were my parents? I can't recall. But I remember that day well. Your father tipped the waitress a hundred dollars. I was very impressed."

"He did that all the time!" I wanted to tell William I was generous like that, too, but there was no humble way to drop this.

We had gotten to edge of the reservoir: joggers in their skintight Lululemon, a French couple taking pictures of one another, and the water, so still – a barely moving reflection of the sky.

"Shall we make the loop?"

"Let's make the loop," I said, as though making the loop had much a greater significance than just walking in a circle.

It had been about a year since I'd been up here, since we'd sold the apartment. My mother's Alzheimer's had progressed to the point where the task of living alone was beyond her. For a while, she had caretakers, but my mother was a difficult person, and these people kept quitting. My sister thought we should put her in a home. At the time, I thought it was so shitty of us, but it actually turned out to be the best thing. She had friends there, or at least other forgetful people her age who seemed friendly enough, and the interior of the place – the sofas, the walls, everything – was either cream or yellow or a combination of cream and yellow, which looked

lame in the pamphlet but had a surprisingly uplifting effect in person. It was completely unlike the dark apartment on Eighty-Fourth Street with its heavy velvet curtains and its stone animals and its long disturbing hallways filled with plants.

Even though it had been the right thing to do, I still hated that we had sold. It felt like my father was preserved in that apartment, and without it, there was no palpable evidence of him: nothing to remind me of his peppery smell, or of the particular way the air rushed in through the window of his study sometimes, blowing apart all his papers. Besides a few trips to the dentist and exactly two baby showers (bane of my existence), I had managed to avoid the Upper East Side completely since Mom had left. Which hadn't been hard. Especially since my sister, in a move that surprised everyone – everyone being me, because I was the only one left, at least the only consistently coherent one – had relocated all the way across town to the Upper West Side to be near her doctor husband's practice, and now lived conveniently within blocks of our mother.

Walking with William now, I felt surprisingly at ease being here. I wasn't as pissed off or as sad as I'd expected to be. The reservoir reminded me of so many things, and I actually felt like sharing them. It was out of character for me to open up so easily. I took this as a good sign.

“We used to drink Vermouth on those rocks in high school.” I pointed to the gray boulders. “And – oh my God – one day, walking here with my dad – maybe I was five, six? – I threw my stuffed panda bear into the water, over this gate.” I touched the metal. It was warm. Herman circled back because we had stopped. He sniffed my toes.

“Did you?” William said thoughtfully. He was a good listener. He paid attention. He understood how to draw people out of themselves. He put a hand on the metal next to mine.

“Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to remember, but nothing came to mind. “I became difficult around that age.”

“Really?”

“My dad said I changed when my sister was born. I was jealous.”

A pause. “I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“Caroline. She’s younger, so you wouldn’t have known her, I guess.”

“No,” he said. “Our families must have lost touch by then.”

“Why, do you think? Did something happen?”

In a lower voice, he said, “I think people simply lose touch sometimes.” He looked at the water. His nose, in profile, was long, dignified. He had the strong jaw of a warrior. I couldn’t see his eyes.

Then, without words, he took my hand, and led me to the street, which wasn’t far. We walked over the cobblestones to the curb. We had spent almost two hours together and I had assumed, for some reason, that our date would include dinner. I thought the next words out of his mouth would be, “Catherine, I would love the pleasure of having dinner with you,” or at least, “How do you feel about sushi?” but instead, he said, “I have an appointment for a haircut,” and looked at his watch – a Patek Philippe with roman numerals and a simple black band – “at four o’clock.” This seemed like a too-abrupt ending (had I done something wrong?) and his hair looked great, but I said, “Okay, right, haircuts are important,” and smiled (too enthusiastically – I was overcompensating) and reminded myself that two hours was a very long time, and that I had to stop being unrealistic with men. It was unrealistic to think you would meet a person for coffee and then never leave their side. We weren’t teenagers.

He raised his long, elegant arm for a cab. “Perfect,” he said, in his cool, even way. I got the impression then that William was a person who wouldn’t show you what he didn’t want you to see. Because it was four-fifteen and he didn’t seem stressed at all that he was late. He was serene, the flat surface of unmoving water, liquid that appeared solid. I remember thinking: he must be great at his job.

Looking back, this might have been my first little warning. A haircut, now? It felt like a lie. What was he hiding? At the time, this warning registered only in the vaguest way – a slight constriction in my chest, maybe, a tiny pang that disappeared, a single skipped beat I told myself didn’t matter. It was just a haircut. It was nothing.

A cab stopped. He stepped forward and opened the door in one fluid movement. The way he moved had a naturally sensual quality to it. We watched Herman jump in, and then jump back out. Was it odd that we said nothing about that? Was it odd that we hadn’t been speaking? Then William put his fingers below my chin like my face was something delicate, and he kissed me. His lips were perfect. And his taste: of mint dipped in sea salt. He was careful, confident, familiar, strange. He was exactly what I’d been waiting for.

3.

The next day, Susan made a circle with her finger on the couch and said, “Is this new?”

“Do you like it?” I had bought two new couches. We sat on one and looked at the other. White, downy fabric that reminded me of clouds (who doesn’t want a couch like a cloud?) paired with a low-backed, contemporary body that was long and near to the floor.

I had been redecorating. I was going through a period where I wanted everything in the house to be white. It felt cleaner to me, and softer, and, as my architect had rightly pointed out, white didn't compete with the art.

"It's good," she said, in her absolute way. Susan only spoke in absolutes. She was the most decisive person I knew. She also had good taste, so her opinion mattered to me. I was relieved she approved of the couch.

Today Susan wore a giant yellow scarf that looked more like a blanket, and was feeling a lot better after her episode with the flu, though she still wanted to baby herself, which was why she was swaddled, drinking tea, and which was also why she had conveniently planned this visit to coincide with Dan the masseur's usual Sunday appointment. Dan loved me, so he usually didn't mind adding another body to the roster, especially if it was Susan.

Susan was my closest friend. We had gone to Deerfield together and now basically led parallel lives – same gym, same hairdresser, same magazines in the bathroom. Physically, we were total opposites, which was only annoying because it disproved my theory that short people and tall people didn't mix in meaningful ways, though this theory still held up with everyone in my life besides Susan. I was tall, Susan was short. I had brown hair, Susan had blonde hair. Susan was fair-skinned, I was olive-skinned. Our color themes even extended to the tea we were drinking right now. Me: Earl Gray. Susan: Chamomile.

"I think one of my people got me sick," she said, curling her small legs underneath her blanket/scarf.

"Who? Henry?"

“Please, don’t say his name.” She mock-cried. “Oh, I need to text him. Thanks for reminding me.” She rummaged around her giant salmon-pink purse until she found her phone. I was surprised it wasn’t in her hand already. Susan was a little addicted to the screen.

By “her people,” Susan (lovingly) meant the people who worked at her shop, Bonsai, a sweet boutique that sold, obviously, bonsai trees. It turned out Susan had landed on a goldmine with this very niche market that combined artistry and mini fauna, and she was killing it. Henry was her manager. He was also twenty-four and wanted to fuck her. He’d made this obvious through the many doting cards he left around the shop for her to find. With his spirited curly hair and the cut offs he wore in summer, Henry looked like a gardener from a 90s movie. (“I half expect to find him singing into a hose every time I go in there,” she said once.) But, as much as she thought sleeping with Henry would be “wholly entertaining,” he was too young, and he was her employee. Susan had self-respect, or at least she wanted it to appear that way. So her approach was to dismiss the cards entirely – she didn’t mention them to Henry at all. Yes, of course she kept them. She kept them in a box at home and that was no one’s business.

Working was a big thing Susan and I had in common. Most of our friends didn’t work, especially the ones from Deerfield. They were too busy raising kids (or paying people to do that), and taking care of the household (or telling their assistants how to do that), and going to Pilates and lunch and dotingly removing their husbands’ coats at night after long, money-making days at the office.

Susan and I, both still childless (she didn’t want them) and unmarried (which bothered me more than it bothered her), each owned small businesses within a few blocks of each other in the West Village, where we both also lived. Mine was a handmade stationery shop. The goal in starting it was to promote new artists, and give them a way to make some extra cash, while also

giving people cool, original, not-Hallmark cards. Susan had actually named the shop for me: Leaf. First we thought Paper, but that was taken, and Leaf – ha – went with the bonsai theme. As in: bonsais had leaves, most of the time. (Yes, we may have come up with this idea while tipsy on pink champagne one late afternoon at Le Gigot.)

Although neither of us actually needed to work, we often did. It was nice to have something tangible and straightforward to do during the day. I hated to be such a cliché, but if I had nothing to do, I shopped. Which was bad, but better than drugs. Of course I was grateful to have the luxury to buy whatever I wanted, but I also knew I didn't fully understand gratitude for material things like other people did. By "other people" I obviously meant poorer people, which also happened to be most people. I knew I was lucky because people told me I was lucky. I knew it to the extent that I could know it. But I actually resented my good fortune sometimes – I may have had distorted, over-simplified notions that romanticized a hunter/gatherer/stranded-on-a-desert-island-in-a-good-way(?) -type life – and this, the resenting, proved that I didn't get it at all, because, as Susan pointed out, "Only trust fund babies have the audacity to resent money." She was allowed to say this because she was a trust fund baby too.

I watched her beady little blue eyes scan the screen. Susan was pretty in sort of a pinched way. She had small features – a button nose and the itty bitty mouth of a pocket-sized fairy. As a child she had been adorable. Now she was what people usually called "cute." She hated that – no one called tall people "cute." But, she argued, she did get more leg room where tall people didn't, though this would have been more advantageous if she flew coach, which would never happen.

She chuckled to herself, said, "Wow."

"What?"

“Nothing.”

In a way, Susan and I were still the skinny, naïve girls we’d been at Deerfield. When she said “nothing” now, I saw her saying “nothing” at age fourteen, when she had a crush on Tommy Charles and didn’t want to talk about it.

“Um,” she looked up. She had forgotten what she was going to say. And then she remembered. “Oh, should we get sandwiches?”

“I don’t know. Do you want a sandwich?”

“I wouldn’t be asking you if I didn’t want one.”

“Okay, but let’s order in.”

“Oh yeah, I’m not walking anywhere.”

So I called the sandwich place, and got a veggie hummus wrap and a Coke for Dan, like a real Coca Cola, which no adult except for Dan actually drank, and which was hilariously not in synch with his holistic approach to life at all.

I took a sip of my tea and noticed how the leaves on the tree outside my window were so much bigger and greener than they had been the week before. I thought: you can be in the same rut for so long, and then, seemingly out of nowhere, everything changed and you remembered what the point was. The point was, of course, love. To love someone, to be loved by someone: that was the point. Even in my best relationships, I wasn’t sure I had ever been truly in love. This bothered me. A lot. I thought about it all the time. I was sure it was part of the incompleteness I had always felt. None of the people I’d been with seemed to be the missing piece. They were always the wrong shape, sometimes very obviously and other times in a more irritatingly mysterious way. I told myself I was not stupid to think that with William, it would be different, though of course I knew I had said this many times before.

I didn't know why I was waiting to tell Susan about him. Usually, it would have been the first thing out of my mouth. Maybe I didn't want to jinx it. Or I didn't want to find out she hated him, because if she did, her opinion would be hard to cast aside. I had to tell her, though, and if I waited too much longer she'd accuse me of withholding. "Do you know William Stockton?"

Susan looked up immediately. "Stockton, Stockton," she said quickly. She was a person who talked very fast unless she was sad. When she was sad, she talked very slow. "I know Maureen Stockton, I know Callan or Cameron Stock-ard. William. William. Will-yam. Does he do Dick or Will or anything?"

"I don't know."

"Not helpful."

I drank more tea, even though I knew it would be cold now, which it was.

"Who is he?"

I gave it to Susan in bullet-points – those resonated with her. "Met him at the gala, we had coffee yesterday, he just moved back from Europe, he knows my family, he knew them before I was born. Very good looking, has a dog, literally just moved back."

"Huh." Susan stretched her feet out onto the glass coffee table, with one foot on either side of the lilies I had bought earlier. She curled her toes back (her toenails matched her fingernails today: eggplant), then pointed them forward. She kept doing this, back and forth, and we stared at her feet because they were something to stare at. "Is he married? Kids? Why is he back now?"

"Work."

Susan, a lover of gossip, squinted attentively as I went on to explain William's memories of Eight-Fourth Street, and of my parents, and what he looked like (very tall, maybe six-four,

gray hair, sensitive eyes, strong jaw, chiseled yet childlike features – I had been thinking about words to describe him), and the kiss at the end. I skipped the part about the haircut.

“Sensitive eyes? Okay, you’re fucked.”

“I know. But it’s good, right? Doesn’t it sound good?”

“Definitely good,” Susan said, “almost too good.” When she looked up and saw my reaction to that – not happy – she said, “But, listen, you deserve it. Oh my God, you deserve it. After the ride you’ve had, and Fernando – shit, girl.” She pointed a finger in the air. “Good stuff is coming, don’t worry.”

By “the ride you’ve had,” Susan meant: all the terrible people you’ve chosen, including, most recently, Fernando Delarus, who asked you to marry him and then left you for someone else – not even a young model, but an old, old woman, so the only problem could have been your personality.

So yes, I was ready for the good stuff. I think, honestly, I hoped this business of getting young artists exposure and money would count as something Good I was doing, something to enhance the Good that would be returned to me by the universe. But that sounded so terrible and selfish and Bad that I wouldn’t have mentioned it to anyone, not even Susan.

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Dan arrived just after the sandwiches, wearing his usual massage outfit – coal-gray stretchy pants and a white V-neck under a colorfully striped alpaca hoodie. When he smiled, the gap between his two front teeth reminded me, as it always did, of Madonna. It was also very endearing.

“Hi,” he said, and kissed me on the cheek.

“Dan-nay,” Susan said.

“Susan.” He went to kiss her.

“Can you fit me in or do you have a meditation retreat to go to?”

Dan paused. He did this a lot. He liked to think about things. He looked at the ceiling – he often found the answer up there. “I can fit you in.”

“Good, sit,” Susan patted the couch.

Dan rubbed his hands together – he did this as a reflex, it was what he did to warm his hands before touching skin – and did as he was told.

“Okay, let’s go around. Updates, Danny, updates.” Dan and Susan hadn’t seen each other in a few weeks – she’d been in St. Barth’s avoiding the cruel end of spring. “I’m getting over the flu. Don’t worry, Dan,” she touched his arm, “I’m not contagious. Other than that, I am still single. Nobody good goes to St. Barth’s in May. I am considering buying a new car this summer. Not a red convertible, no. I am not having a midlife crisis, no, no. What else? My doctor told me to do yoga for my back. I hate yoga. It drives me insane, it’s too slow.” Dan and I laughed.

“That’s it. Catherine, go.”

“Met someone and feeling hopeful.”

“Really?” Dan said.

I shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Dan?”

“I turned thirty-one this week.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Baby,” Susan said.

“I’m so sorry I forgot,” I said. “But we did get you a sandwich.”

We moved to the table, the large glass dining table overlooking my tree and my street. I loved this street, and I had waited for a long time to buy the perfect home here. It was narrow and quaint and reminded me of France.

Susan said, "I'm feral for this, I haven't eaten real sustenance in days," and dug into her sandwich (chicken salad), and Dan thoughtfully unwrapped his. I wasn't that hungry but I took a bite because it was there. It tasted mostly like carrots with a dash of cucumber because that's exactly what it was.

"Thanks so much for this," Dan said.

"Of course."

"You should come get a bonsai, Dan," Susan said, her mouth full, "from the store. For your birthday."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She went on to explain about the different kinds.

He nodded at the right times, said, "yes," "okay," at the right times, took small bites of his wrap and chewed with his mouth closed. He opened his Coke, took a sip, placed the butt of the can back down in the circle where it had been. I always watched Dan with a certain interest because he was so strangely at ease with himself. How could a thirty-one-year old be this comfortable in the world? Shouldn't he be stressed, schlepping around on the subway all day with his backpack, going from one knotted back to the next, trying to make a buck?

He was also so polite. His good manners came from being raised partly in Tokyo – that's how he had explained it when Susan had asked once. He was half-Japanese, and exotically handsome (black hair and blue eyes), and it was odd that neither Susan nor I had romantic feelings for him. He was attractive, sweet, and (I was pretty sure) straight. He just really felt to us

like a younger brother – that’s what we said when we talked about it. Susan was strict about not dealing with anyone under thirty-five anyway, and I was strict about my height requirements.

Dan was five-five – way too short.

Even though we all acted like friends, I sometimes worried Dan secretly thought we were assholes. He never talked about money, but I assumed he was broke, maybe because he wore the same outfit all the time and lived in a neighborhood in Brooklyn I’d never heard of. I didn’t know much about his personal life except for that he had a dog and worked really long days. I tipped him a lot, of course – I tipped everyone a lot – but then that made me feel kind of pathetic: rich lady buying friendship of young masseur. It was impossible not to be a cliché of yourself. Every little choice was just another opportunity to be so obviously – well – you.

Susan crumpled her sandwich paper and flicked it a couple of inches away from her on the table. “I demolished that.” Susan talked like a stoner sometimes because she had spent her childhood in San Francisco. Her younger sister, who still lived there, actually referred to eating as “grinding,” as in, “Let’s go grind some food.”

“This was delicious, thanks again.” Dan wrapped the half that was left and slid it into his floppy fabric backpack. He stood up, pushed his chair in. “I’ll set up the room,” he said, and went down the stairs.

“Can I go first? Do you mind?” Susan looked at her phone. A sly smile appeared on her face in reaction to whatever she was reading.

“No, that’s fine.”

“Thanks.” She threw her yellow blanket/scarf/pashmina thing over the side of the couch, placed her phone on top of that, and walked her little fairy feet down the stairs.

I cleaned off the table, and put my uneaten wrap in the fridge. I knew I wouldn't eat it later, but felt too guilty throwing it away – this was a habit left from Jim, who had called me wasteful once.

I could hear Susan laughing. I opened a book about apartheid. It was one of those books everyone said you *had* to read. From at least three people, I'd heard: "It takes some time to get into, but you *have* to read this book." I read the opening paragraph and closed the book. (I had done this at least twelve times.)

I looked around the room. It looked good. My gorgeous white house, my art: red Mark Rothko on one wall, lithographs of an obscure French printmaker on the other, Asian vases, huge ones, in the corner. A modern chandelier that looked like it was made from white rose petals floated above the table. Of course, I couldn't stop myself. I was always looking past what was good to what was wrong, and right now what was wrong was that the vases needed to be dusted. I knew Lucia was scared to touch them, but we had already gone over how to dust them lightly. I would bring it up again. A voice in my head said: you have become your mother. Another voice said: no, you're fine, and you pay the cleaning lady to clean things, so she should clean them.

Earlier that morning, before I had gone out to buy the lilies, William had written me an email, which I reread now.

Catherine, It was lovely to see you. I will be in touch very soon. Yours, Wm.

Even though I knew what it said, I reread my response: Look forward to hearing from you. C.

Was my response too cold? Fernando used to call me cold. He'd even called me a bad hugger once. My mother was cold. But no, it was fine. He would be in touch very soon.

I Googled him again. The thumbnail next to his bio showed William in a red tie, smiling with those brilliant-white teeth.

“William Stockton, MK Capital. Head of Corporate Client Solutions. Mr. Stockton served as Head of European Investment Banking at UBS, and prior to that, was Head of European Rates Trading. Mr. Stockton holds an MA from Oxford University.”

He was smart. He was fashionable. He was practical. He was classy. And as the time between yesterday and today widened toward dusk, he became smarter and more fashionable and more practical, and classier, and taller, and a more caring dog owner. His gait, which I now found a word for, was stately.

I sat back on the couch, folded the computer. Kids on the street played with a ball – someone shrieking, “Arthur!” – and birds made noise, swarming the tree, and the traffic on Seventh Avenue whirred like a distant stream, or like the hum of small and comforting appliance. The noises of the city reminded me of its constant movement, and this soothed me. Because I hated silence. Silence made me anxious.

Sundays also made me anxious. I hated Sundays more than anything. Every week, it was like time stopped to show me how lonely I was. People meandered in lazy, loping strides, rudely forgetting how sidewalk traffic works. They had no direction, no goals. It was brunch time and family time and time to enjoy yourself, and it felt like an immense amount of pressure to be happy.

I wasn't unhappy, though, I reminded myself of that. Look at this house, how could you be unhappy here?

I got up to look out the window – yes, there were the kids with the ball, one of them was the famous actor's son – and I reminded myself that my home and the light in my home were

beautiful and welcoming, and that I was open to new, great people in my life. It would happen. And maybe – I thought and then un-thought; I would not get ahead of myself – great things were already happening.

I moved back to the dining table and began to fill an online cart with Frette pillowcases. I had been meaning to get some more for the guest room. These were sand-colored and Egyptian cotton, a thousand thread count. I clicked to see a closer view. Buying fabrics online was hard – it was better to touch them. But, returning things was so easy nowadays. You just put them back in the bag. I often thought that a person could spend their entire life buying things and making returns. I was glad I was not that person.

Susan emerged looking jet-lagged and dumbly contented. “I’m leaving. And I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

“Sure you are,” I said. Susan was terrible at relaxing. She wouldn’t take the day off unless she was bleeding from the head. This was another thing we might have had in common.

“Seriously.” She poured herself a glass of water. “That man has the magic touch.”

“I know.” I had been hovering the cursor over the Add To Cart button, and then I pressed it. I turned around to find Susan gulping the last of the water in the glass. Her yellow hair was sticking straight up from the middle of her head. She looked like a parakeet.

“Aaaaah.” She set the glass in the sink, and made her way over to her phone (a quick look at the screen) and her yellow thing, which she put around her shoulders. She bent slowly to pick her bag up off the floor, and started down the stairs. I followed her down, and smoothed her parakeet hair on the way. “Your hair looks crazy, I’m helping you.”

Dan stood in the doorway on the second floor. “Dan, aaaaaah,” Susan said. In the room, I could see he had already changed the sheet. He was so good. “You’re a miracle.” She patted him on the chest. As I watched her kiss his cheek, I thought Susan was a little touchy-feely with Dan today, but then she kissed me and I remembered that no, Susan was like that with everyone.

“Call you later.” She hugged her yellow thing tighter around her little body as she made her way down the last flight of stairs and out the red door. That was the one thing that wasn’t white – the red front door.

Dan, mocking the experience of a more formal – or a Japanese? – massage, gave me a short nod with prayer hands and motioned for me to enter. He could be pretty dorky.

He waited by the door as I changed behind the shinju panels. It felt nice to be in this room. The windows were tinted to make the light feel bluer, and I’d chosen a nice thick carpet. The towel folded on the black lacquer chair was warm from the sunlight through the window. I didn’t really need to it because I knew Dan wouldn’t look, but I threw it around myself anyway. I walked the few steps to the table, let the towel drop, and laid face down and looked at the carpet, which, yes, had been a great choice.

“Okay,” I said, “ready.”

I heard his footsteps. Then I saw his feet – clean and manicured, a normal alignment of nice-looking toes, a tattoo of a scorpion on his ankle. He smoothed the blanket over my back. It felt wonderful to be touched so sweetly. Dan did have the magic touch. He just got it. He knew how much pressure to apply and when. He knew what I wanted. From the first time he massaged me, which had been about a year before, around when we had sold Eighty-Fourth Street, I knew I needed him on the payroll. I wasn’t in love with the masseur I had before Dan anyway. Donald, a rough Swede, was all business and no warmth. While I had been dating Fernando, I used Dan’s

touch as a point of comparison. During the week, I would tell myself Fernando was fine, and then every Sunday, Dan would remind me that no, Fernando was seriously lacking in the touch department.

Sometimes we liked to talk. With me on the table like that and Dan at work, he had more nerve to talk about the things he might not have said if we were sitting face to face, and so did I. Today, he said, “So, tell me more about this guy.” He ran his hands up and down my legs, warming them.

“I mean, it’s just out of nowhere. He seems very put together.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Dan had this very non-judgmental nature that made me want to tell him things. I told him about Herman and how he’d been so good with those kids at the park.

“I can see why you feel hopeful,” he said.

And then we said nothing for a while, and I drifted off. That was the other thing I liked about Dan – he knew when to talk, and he also knew when to stop talking.

At some point, I may have noticed I was imagining that Dan’s hands were William’s hands, and that Dan’s breath was William’s breath. With Fernando, I hadn’t done that. With Fernando, all I could think was how I wished he would touch me like this. Fernando hadn’t been love. He was a stand-in, he was filler. And he wasn’t even great filler. After we broke up, I was finally able to admit that he smelled like deli meat most of the time. When Fernando wasn’t around, I didn’t pine for him, I didn’t even think of him much. He was like a figurine I moved around to the places in my life where I needed a plus one: Fernando in a tux at the ball, Fernando in Sperry loafers on the boat, Fernando, the figurine-man who posed in pictures beside me.

AND  
AFTER  
MANY  
DAYS

*A NOVEL*

JOWHOR  
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AND  
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A Novel

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JOWHOR ILE

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BOOKS

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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Published in the United States by Tim Duggan Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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

ISBN 978-1-101-90314-8

eBook ISBN 978-1-101-90315-5

Printed in the United States of America

*Book design by Lauren Dong*

*Jacket design by Michael Morris*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

## CHAPTER TWO

If you'd ever lived in Port Harcourt, you would know what a wet, tiring month September could be. June and July are heavy rain months. The rains stomp through the city, throwing punches, felling trees, striking down electric poles overnight across roads so that early-bird motorists get stranded, their headlights trapped in the predawn wetness, counting on the help of passersby to move a fallen tree off the road, to pry out tires stuck in loam. By early August everyone, even the TV stations, celebrates the onset of "August break": two dry weeks of sharp sunlight, more or less. Wedding planners gauge and take advantage. On Saturday mornings, Trans Amadi Road clogs up with traffic. A tangle of cars, buses, trucks, and taxi motorbikes storms out from Garrison Junction to Nwaja Bridge, all the way to Elekahia. Various wedding parties run late for the service, hurrying the other way across town toward their reception venue.

Ajie once saw a bride, her dress blindingly white in the sunlight, her pineapple hairstyle tightly gelled and held down with a tiara, alight from a black Benz with visible encouragement from her cohort. They had flagged down an *okada* for her while she snaked her way through the traffic with her maid of honor on her tail. She hoisted up her satin dress (the maid of honor holding on to the chapel train) and then heaved herself onto the pillion of the motorbike to make her own wedding ceremony in

time. There was the early gleam of sweat on her neck and forehead, and the bouquet of flowers in the grip of her left hand was pink and yellow and plastic.

Evening air swells from blaring microphones as churches set up camps in open fields for crusades and miracle revivals. The crowds spill out on the field; parked cars litter the adjacent roads. The congregation amasses before a makeshift stage with a wooden lectern mounted at the center, banners tied up and billowing behind it and all around. Voices rise in praise and worship; clap-hand choruses with keyboard accompaniment suffuse the cool evening air.

The heavy rains return soon after, but only briefly. By September they mellow. The skies open and drop water all day—drizzle this time, but the streets get flooded, drainages overflow, *okada* men in rain capes hang about under the eaves of roadside shops, shielding their motorcycles from the water, ignoring prospective passengers. Auntie Julie came in the drizzling rain when she heard Paul had disappeared. She banged on the gate, and when Ismaila let her in, she walked right past, her slippers in her hand, her wrapper dripping water all over the floor of the veranda as she made her way into the house.

She wasn't the first person to visit after hearing about Paul. Mr. Pepple, an integrated science teacher from Ma's school, was the first. He was a quiet-looking man with veins running sideways on his face from forehead to temple. He lived somewhere near Ordinance, not too far from the house, and Ma occasionally gave him lifts to Garrison Junction after work. He placed his sandals neatly beside the doormat and Ma protested. "Ah-ah! Please come inside with your shoes, I beg you." Mr. Pepple still left his sandals by the door, came inside, and took a seat.

Worry knotted his brows and thickened the veins that ran

from his temples into his receding hair. He must have heard everything there was to be heard from Ma, but he found it necessary to ask, “Any news?”

“No,” Ma said, “we are still waiting.” The police required forty-eight hours before they could declare Paul a missing person.

“God forbid!” he spat out. He looked like the sort of man for whom all strong emotions came out looking like anger. Ajie couldn’t tell if he was angry that Paul was missing or angry with Paul for going missing or whether he was angry at all. Whichever way, it was clear his sympathy was with Ma.

“He can’t be *missing*,” Mr. Pepple said with conviction, relaxing his shoulders. “That’s not your portion, my sister.”

“He told his brother he was going over to our neighbor’s house just across the road,” Ma explained, looking at Ajie. Ajie confirmed with a nod. He was the last person to see Paul, the last person Paul spoke to; they always returned to that moment and settled on it as if the mystery had to be unearthed from there. “But our neighbors traveled over a week ago . . .” She drifted off. “I don’t understand it. What would he tell a lie for? Or maybe he was going somewhere else and said that in error?”

Mr. Pepple allowed some time to pass before he leaned over for the bottle of malt on the tray before him. He had said he didn’t need a glass; he held the brown bottle by the neck and tilted his head back. The man’s throat worked itself up and down as he swallowed another mouthful of the sweet, dark malt drink. Then he took a breather and rested the bottle on the tray. “Does he follow bad friends?” Mr. Pepple asked.

“No,” Ma replied, “Paul is not like that.”

Ajie was irritated by Mr. Pepple’s silly questions, but he couldn’t help noticing how tired the man looked in his fading

blue shirt: a little disheveled, like an item picked up and dropped all of a sudden.

“How are the roads?” Ma asked. Over the last few days, there had been student demonstrations that had gradually escalated. Apart from the roadblocks set up by the students, police vans were burned, students shot at—shot dead—no one was sure exactly what had happened.

“No problem at all,” Mr. Pepple answered. “I think the police have calmed things down a bit. Nothing happened in the house?” he asked. By which he meant had there been a quarrel that might have led to Paul disappearing. Ma said no again, her hands faceup on her lap. There were those stories of children who fell out with their parents or stole things from home and ran off with friends for a week or two. Like the prodigal son, they always returned, disgraced, in a bad state, and begging for mercy.

“Did Paul carry anything, a bag or something? Who saw him when he was leaving?” Mr. Pepple was asking all these questions when Bibi pushed a thick encyclopedia off the dining table, and it hit the floor with a loud thud that made everyone jump. Ma asked Bibi what that was, and Bibi gave some indistinct response. Ma continued, explaining to Mr. Pepple that Paul had gone with his school bag. She further explained that it wasn’t unusual. Paul sometimes had cassettes, videotapes, magazines, books, or video games in his bag when he went over to see his friend.

“Just number eight here,” Ma said, pointing in the general direction of their neighbor’s. Ajie’s eyes followed the stretch of her hand as she pointed to the parlor wall, and he imagined Paul trapped within it, hearing them worry aloud about him but unable to speak or free himself.

Disbelief hung across Mr. Pepple's face. Ajie would come to spot this reflex in people—their keen questions, then the sudden letting go, as if something in the story didn't add up but they were prepared to accept it all the same.

Auntie Julie wasn't like this. She fell into Ma's arms once she got into the parlor and cried out with a loud voice. Her hands gripped Ma around the waist. Ma stood stiff in Auntie Julie's grip, her own clothes taking up water.

"Come and change your clothes, Julie," Ma said, "before cold enters your body." When they came out, Auntie Julie was wearing one of Ma's *boubous*, made from green *adire*. The loose gown with wide-open arms seemed a little too big for her.

Julie sat on the sofa and shivered her legs while Ma went into the kitchen to make her a hot drink. She asked Bibi to get her a blanket from the bedroom, then she began talking aloud, to no one in particular, about how devastating it must be to carry a child in your womb for nine months and then this. These children have no sense. How could he just go somewhere without telling anyone? Where did he go? They just don't understand what a mother feels. Her soliloquy was about to flow into mournful singing when Ma came out of the kitchen with a steaming mug of Bournvita. She handed Auntie Julie the chocolate drink and warned her that it was hot.

Auntie Julie took the mug from Ma. "Thank you," she murmured, and immediately placed it on the side stool as if the drink were getting in the way of something much more important. "These children." Auntie Julie sighed, looking at Bibi and then Ajie as if they might have it in them to behave the same way Paul had. If their brother could act in this manner, God only knew what to expect from the pair of them. Ma, already

burdened with her own worry, had to play consoler, silent arbiter in the room, and protector of the two children; her voice also took on a warm braveness to soothe Auntie Julie.

“It’s okay,” she said, “Paul will come home. We will find him.”

“Hmm.” Auntie Julie nodded. “How many days now?”

Ma put her fingers up. “Nearly three days now. About twelve-thirty Monday afternoon was when he left.”

“Three days!” Auntie Julie’s voice hit the ceiling. She shook three fingers in front of Ma’s face. “Jesus Christ! I thought it was only last night. You know these quiet ones. They are the ones who surprise you.” Bibi left the parlor. Ajie just sat there looking up at the clock. They were expecting Bendic from the police station.

**Later that night**, after Bendic had returned from the station, they all sat in silence before the television. Auntie Julie was sunk into the sofa, folded inside Ma’s oversize green *boubou*, the heavy embroideries snaking their way all around the neck. She shook her legs rhythmically where she sat, then made a fist and held up her jaw with it. Ma went into the kitchen, and Ajie heard her lock the back door. She did not return to the parlor immediately, and Ajie wondered what she was doing. All evening, her face had a calm, steely cast while she made dinner, and called Bibi every now and then to pass her that spoon or that ladle, or to “sit down and pound the pepper.”

Ma was not the type of woman, Ajie thought, you could find brooding with her hand under her chin or weeping silently into the kitchen sink. She was their mother, a biology teacher, the vice principal of a boys’ school that once was the most notori-

ous in town. A school she had turned around single-handedly in a year. Twice, the parents' association had opposed and pressured the Ministry of Education to reverse her transfer. Twice, they had canvassed and rallied funds to keep the parent/teacher scheme she'd set up from going under.

Ma returned to the parlor, wiping her hand on a napkin, just as the final news recap came on at eleven. Government, the newsreader said, had gone into dialogue with the university students regarding their grievances. All citizens, the man continued, were being admonished to "give peace a chance, to refrain from violent, nefarious activities, and to engage in dialogue with government for the betterment of the state."

The national anthem was played by a full military band. On the TV screen was a fluttering flag hoisted high: bands of rich green on either end of the flag and a white band in the middle with the coat of arms printed on it. The pledge was recited by a choir of unseen children, and then the station went off the air.

There was silence and intermittent bursts of conversation. All Ajie could think of was Auntie Julie weeping that afternoon as though Paul were dead; Bibi sitting for so long in the dining area until it was dark and she became one with the woolly shadows of the shelves. And now there was Bendic with a newspaper adrift in his lap, although he had put his glasses away. Auntie Julie shifted in her seat. She let out a deep sigh and leaned back in the sofa. For a moment she seemed to have dropped into sleep, and then the song came out of her in a low stream, as if from some secret speakers hidden beneath her seat. Her eyes were now closed.

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceaseth  
His mercies never come to an eeeeeend . . .*

Her voice glided over the high notes and her hands were held together in a tight ball, between her legs, on the slope of her gown. Bendic leaned back and watched. Bibi, Ma, Ajie, all sat as if uncertain of their position—should they join in or remain mere spectators? Were they being called on to take roles in this play they weren't familiar with? Ajie felt his bladder fill up, and he knew he would have to get up and go to the bathroom. Auntie Julie leaned to one side as she rummaged through the pocket of the *boubou*, the song still coming out of her, and brought out a white hankie that she spread out over her head. She looked at Bibi in a way that perhaps should have persuaded Bibi to find a covering for her head as a woman in the posture of prayer, but Bibi sat there, her lips barely moving. The song was common enough, even for irregular churchgoers. Ma joined in. Ajie stood up, looked at Bendic as if asking to be excused, then pointed toward the bathroom. Auntie Julie made a smooth segue into a church chorus:

*He can never never change*  
*He can never never change*  
*He can never never change*  
*Jesus the same forever*  
*He can never never change*

In the bathroom, Ajie looked in the mirror and thought his face looked bigger than it really was. He heard Ma's voice rise as the singing continued. They sang the same chorus over and over, in different languages—Kalabari, Igbo, Yoruba, Ogoni. Ma's voice strained over the high notes, but she kept on, steady, pushing through by the sheer strength of her lungs. Her voice stood apart, raw and singular, like a howl in the forest. Ajie

lifted the toilet lid and sat down. After the singing had died down, he stood up and flushed the toilet and then returned before the mirror to brush his teeth. He heard Auntie Julie say good night, and then the slow slap-slap of her rubber slippers as she walked past the bathroom door and down the corridor. He didn't hear Bibi leaving the parlor, but he heard the sharp click of her door when it closed.

Bendic was talking to Ma now. Ma interrupted, her voice tense, impatient. "No mortuary, please, Ben. You can check hospitals. Emergency units." He heard Ma snap her fingers. "God forbid—what are you thinking?" Bendic's low voice kept saying something back to her.

Ajie bared his teeth before the mirror the way people did in toothpaste commercials. He picked up Paul's toothbrush and ran his thumb over the bristles. Moist. He put it back in the cup. He then used his fingers to push the corners of his lips up as if to pull a smiley face. *If something really bad is happening, Ajie thought, is it possible to try to smile, even if it is only a pretend smile? And if you are able to smile when "something really bad" is happening, does that count? Could that be a sign that things will turn around for good?* He pushed the corners of his mouth upward. This time, three front teeth showed. He picked up Paul's brush again and ran his thumb over the bristles but wasn't sure anymore if the moisture was from the brush itself or just his own fingers.

**Ajie awoke from** a dream and looked across to Paul's bed, and there he was, carelessly asleep, covered in a blanket. He was lying on his chest with his face down, his hands folded over the pillow. Then he turned onto his side, drew up his legs, and held

the blanket close around his neck; he stretched out his long legs across the bed and threw a sleepy arm over his face. Now he was on his front, with his legs drawn up under him like someone attempting to crouch. Then he lay still for a while. A person under a blanket could sometimes look like a camel, a camel with its hump, or a pitched tent under a dark desert sky. Paul stirred. Then the inky edges of the blanket became vague and wavy, as if he weren't there anymore. Outside, the moon moved and threw a light on the empty pillow. Ajie kept staring at the bed, willing Paul's form back on it, but he couldn't remember how Paul used to look while lying on his bed.

When Ajie got up in the morning, it was already bright, and he heard Ismaila's voice carry through from the front of the house, where he washed the car. The singing ended. Ajie didn't imagine that singing of any sort could occur when no one knew where Paul was.

Ma and Bendic didn't leave early for work, as they used to. On the windowsill beside Paul's bed (Paul had the window bed, since he was older), the blue beetle-shaped digital clock sat, its screen facing outside. What time was it? The forgotten dream came back to him. He was sitting with Auntie Julie by a well. She stood up to leave, then tripped over a bucket and fell into the well. He looked into the well and saw her head bobbing, water splashing around her. She wasn't shouting or crying for help. She just bobbed up, down, up, down, kicking and splashing the water with her hands. As if it were all planned, Ajie lifted the lid and covered the well and hooked it shut with a piece of metal. Muffled echoes of his name began to come from below, like someone shouting into a pillow. As he walked away from the scene, he looked up, and there was Paul sitting high in a nearby tree, looking down at him with accusation in his eyes.

It annoyed Ajie, now that he was awake, that it didn't occur to him to ask Paul where he had been those four days when everyone was looking for him.

**Auntie Julie was** getting ready to leave when Ajie walked into the parlor. She had changed into her own clothes and was holding a little bag in her hand. "You have woken up. Your sister is at the back of the house," Auntie Julie said somberly, as if Bibi were just the right person for him to see now that he was out of bed.

His memory of Auntie Julie began with conflict. When he was either four or five, Auntie Julie came to visit one day, and while Ma and Bendic talked with another visitor in the parlor, Auntie Julie jostled the children into the kitchen to interrogate them about what she said was their complete lack of respect. She shut the door behind her and right away asked, "Why do you people call your father by his name?" At first no one moved to answer. She scanned their faces disapprovingly and then focused on Paul's. "You cannot answer me?"

"Our father's name is Benedict," Bibi offered. "We, we call him Bendic, and—"

Auntie Julie cut her off. "What is the difference?" she asked, but didn't wait to get an answer. "You children have no fear at all. I see the easy hand with which your parents are raising you."

"Bendic hasn't complained about it," Paul began slowly, "and that's what we have always called him."

"Paul!" Auntie Julie shot back. "Don't you have any sense? You are the eldest, yet you cannot set a good example. I don't know what your mother teaches you. A man like your father,

look at his age, look at you. Can't you see that he is old enough to be your grandfather?" She paused and pouted. "Okay, that aside, a big man like your father, don't you see how other people greet him? Yet you open your mouth and call him Bendic, Bendic, Bendic. Don't you hear what other children call their fathers?"

At this point Ajie was fed up and hoped Bibi would say something out of turn, blurt out words in exasperation, but she didn't.

"If you want to be respectful children," Auntie Julie continued, "you must call him Daddy, Papa, Pa. Choose one, but this Bendic rubbish must stop. Today!"

She looked at Paul to see if the matter could be left there, if he could be trusted this time to enforce the new rule. She stood over them and their little eyes flashed back at her: three tadpoles and one big fish. Auntie Julie called Bendic "sir," Ismaila the gateman and Marcus the driver both called Bendic "Oga," as they should, because he was their boss. Ma called him Ben, or Benedict sometimes. But the children called him Bendic. Ma said one day when Paul was about two, their father came in from work, and Paul jumped to his feet and called him "Bendic." Bendic and Ma were so happy that their formerly taciturn son had eventually found his tongue, they cooed the word back at him, encouraging him to say it again and again, and the name stuck. Bibi and Ajie took it up when they came along.

For some reason, Ajie's resentment of Auntie Julie sharpened that morning as he walked through the kitchen to the back of the house, where Bibi was sitting on the septic tank.

What sort of person, Ajie thought as he turned the doorknob that led to the backyard, would think giving their father

an endearing name was equal to taking away the respect that was due him? What sort of person would force them to call their father *Daddy*, like all those silly children at school with their stupid plastic cartoon lunch boxes? It riled him even to think that someone like Auntie Julie could survive, was allowed to survive, in a world where his own brother could go missing for days.

That afternoon, when Auntie Julie had cornered them in the kitchen, they had all nodded, but her request was denied, firmly, silently. There was no Daddy, Pa, or Papa in their mouths. She mistook their silence for acquiescence; she rubbed their heads and pulled their little forms close in a kind of embrace, smothering their faces against her wrapper, her squishing blouse. The heavily sequined wrapper tied on her waist felt lukewarm on Ajie's cheeks. The smell of camphor (common with clothes left for too long at the bottom of a trunk) made Ajie feel malarial, sick enough to turn out his bowels in a feverish bout. He held his breath, counting and waiting for the embrace to end. He was on four and a half when she finally let go and he stood on his own feet. He looked down and saw her feet: the open front of her high-heeled sandals, the chipped red polish on her big toenails.

When Ajie opened the back door, he could hear Auntie Julie talking to Ismaila as she left. Bibi was sitting on the concrete slab of the soakway, with her back to the house, looking over at the neighbors' compound. The mango tree by the fence was thickly green with leaves but was without fruits.

"Bibi," he said as he came down the steps, "Bibi."

Bibi did not respond.

"You mean he didn't say anything at all before he left?" she

asked without turning her back. “He must have said something to you.”

Ajie stopped dead in his tracks, and guilt rose like tide-water up to his chest and made breathing very difficult. If anyone could have spared Paul from going missing, it should have been him.



# LILAC GIRLS

*A Novel*



MARTHA HALL KELLY

# Lilac Girls

A Novel

Martha Hall Kelly

Ballantine Books

New York

# Part One

# Chapter 1

## Caroline

September 1939

If I'd known I was about to meet the man who'd shatter me like bone china on terra-cotta, I would have slept in. Instead, I roused our florist, Mr. Sitwell, from his bed to make a boutonnière. My first consulate gala was no time to stand on ceremony.

I joined the riptide of the great unwashed moving up Fifth Avenue. Men in gray-felted fedoras pushed by me, the morning papers in their attachés bearing the last benign headlines of the decade. There was no storm gathering in the east that day, no portent of things to come. The only ominous sign from the direction of Europe was the scent of slack water wafting off the East River.

As I neared our building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-ninth Street, I felt Roger watching from the window above. He'd fired people for a lot less than being twenty minutes late, but the one time of year the New York elite opened their wallets and pretended they cared about France was no time for skimpy boutonnières.

I turned at the corner, the morning sun alive in the gold-leaf letters chiseled in the cornerstone: LA MASON FRANÇAISE. The French Building, home to the French Consulate, stood

side by side with the British Empire Building, facing Fifth Avenue, part of Rockefeller Center, Junior Rockefeller's new complex of granite and limestone. Many foreign consulates kept offices there then, resulting in a great stew of international diplomacy.

"All the way to the back and face the front," said Cuddy, our elevator operator.

Mr. Rockefeller handpicked the elevator boys, screening for manners and good looks. Cuddy was heavy on the looks, though his hair was already salt-and-peppered, his body in a hurry to age.

Cuddy fixed his gaze on the illuminated numbers above the doors. "You got a crowd up there today, Miss Ferriday. Pia said there's two new boats in."

"Delightful," I said.

Cuddy brushed something off the sleeve of his navy-blue uniform jacket. "Another late one tonight?"

For the fastest elevators in the world, ours still took forever. "I'll be gone by five. Gala tonight."

I loved my job. Grandmother Woolsey had started the work tradition in our family, nursing soldiers on the battlefield at Gettysburg. But my volunteer post as head of family assistance for the French Consulate wasn't work really. Loving all things French was simply genetic for me. My father may have been half-Irish, but his heart belonged to France. Plus, Mother had inherited an apartment in Paris, where we spent every August, so I felt at home there.

The elevator stopped. Even through the closed doors, we could hear a terrific din of raised voices. A shiver ran through me.

"Third floor," Cuddy called out. "French Consulate. Watch your—"

Once the doors parted, the noise overpowered all polite speech. The hallway outside our reception area was packed so tightly with people one could scarcely step through. Both the *Normandie* and the *Ile de France*, two of France's premiere ocean liners, had landed that morning in New York Harbor, packed with wealthy passengers fleeing the uncertainty in France. Once the all-clear horn signaled and they were free to disembark, the ships' elite streamed to the consulate to iron out visa problems and other sticky issues.

I squeezed into the smoky reception area, past ladies in Paris's newest day dresses who stood gossiping in a lovely cloud of Arpège, the sea spray still in their hair. The people in this group were accustomed to being shadowed by a butler with a crystal ashtray and a champagne flute. Bellboys in scarlet jackets from the *Normandie* went toe-to-toe with their black-jacketed counterparts from the *Île de France*. I wedged one shoulder through the crowd, toward our secretary's desk at the back of the room, and my chiffon scarf snagged on the clasp of one ravishing creature's pearls. As I worked to extract it, the intercom buzzed unanswered.

Roger.

I pressed on through, felt a pat on my behind, and turned to see a midshipman flash a plaquy smile.

*"Gardons nos mains pour nous-mêmes,"* I said. Let's keep our hands to ourselves.

The boy raised his arm above the crowd and dangled his *Normandie* stateroom key. At least he wasn't the over-sixty type I usually attracted.

I made it to our secretary's desk, where she sat, head down, typing.

*"Bonjour, Pia."*

Roger's cousin, a sloe-eyed boy of eighteen, was sitting on Pia's desk, legs crossed. He held his cigarette in the air as he picked through a box of chocolates, Pia's favorite breakfast. My inbox on her desk was already stacked with case folders.

*"Vraiment? What is so good about it?"* she said, not lifting her head.

Pia was much more than a secretary. We all wore many hats, and hers included signing in new clients and establishing a folder for each, typing up Roger's considerable correspondence, and deciphering the massive flood of daily Morse-code pulses that was the lifeblood of our office.

*"Why is it so hot in here?"* I said. *"The phone is ringing, Pia."*

She plucked a chocolate from the box. *"It keeps doing that."*

Pia attracted beaux as if she emitted a frequency only males could detect. She was attractive in a feral way, but I suspected her popularity was due in part to her tight sweaters.

*"Can you take some of my cases today, Pia?"*

*"Roger says I can't leave this chair."* She broke the shell of the chocolate's underside with her manicured thumb,,stalking the strawberry crèmes. *"He also wants to see you right away, but I think the woman on the sofa slept in the hallway last night."* Pia flapped one half of a one-hundred-dollar bill at me. *"And the fatty with the dogs says he'll give you the other half if you take him first."* She nodded toward the well-fed older couple near my office door, each holding a brace of gray-muzzled dachshunds.

Like Pia's, my job description was wide-ranging. It included attending to the needs of French citizens here in New York—often families fallen on hard times—and overseeing my French Families Fund, a charity effort through which I sent comfort boxes to French

orphans overseas. I'd just retired from an almost two-decade-long stint on Broadway, and this felt easy by comparison. It certainly involved less unpacking of trunks.

My boss, Roger Fortier, appeared in his office doorway.

"Caroline, I need you *now*. Bonnet's canceled."

"You can't be serious, Roger." The news came like a punch. I'd secured the French foreign minister as our gala keynote speaker months before.

"It's not easy being the French foreign minister right now," he called over his shoulder as he went back inside.

I stepped into my office and flipped through the Wheeldex on my desk. Was Mother's Buddhist-monk friend Ajahn Chah free that night?

"*Caroline—*" Roger called. I grabbed my Wheeldex and hurried to his office, avoiding the couple with the dachshunds, who were trying their best to look tragic.

"Why were you late this morning?" Roger asked. "Pia's been here for two hours already."

As consul general, Roger Fortier ruled from the corner suite with its commanding view of Rockefeller Plaza and the Promenade Cafe. Normally the famous skating rink occupied that sunken spot, but the rink was closed for the summer, the space now filled with café tables and tuxedoed waiters rushing about with aprons to their ankles. Beyond, Paul Manship's massive golden Prometheus fell to earth, holding his stolen fire aloft. Behind it, the RCA Building shot up seventy floors into the sapphire sky. Roger had a lot in common with the imposing male figure of Wisdom chiseled above the building's entrance. The furrowed brow. The beard. The angry eyes.

"I stopped for Bonnet's boutonnière—"

“Oh, that’s worth keeping half of France waiting.” Roger bit into a doughnut, and powdered sugar cascaded down his beard. Despite what might kindly be called a husky figure, he was never at a loss for female companions.

His desk was heaped with folders, security documents, and dossiers on missing French citizens. According to the *French Consulate Handbook*, his job was “to assist French nationals in New York, in the event of theft, loss of property, serious illness, or arrest and with issues related to birth certificates, adoption, and lost or stolen documents; to plan visits of French officials and fellow diplomats; and to assist with political difficulties and natural disasters.” The troubles in Europe provided plenty of work for us in all those categories, if you counted Hitler as a natural disaster.

“I have cases to get back to, Roger—”

He sent a manila folder skidding across the polished conference table. “Not only do we have no speaker; I was up half the night rewriting Bonnet’s speech. Had to sidestep Roosevelt letting France buy American planes.”

“France should be able to buy all the planes they want.”

“We’re raising money here, Caroline. It’s not the time to annoy the isolationists. Especially the rich ones.”

“They don’t support France anyway.”

“We don’t need any more bad press. Is the U.S. too cozy with France? Will that push Germany and Russia closer? I can barely finish a third course without being interrupted by a reporter. And we can’t mention the Rockefellers . . . Don’t want another call from Junior. Guess that’ll happen anyway now that Bonnet canceled.”

“It’s a disaster, Roger.”

“May need to scrap the whole thing.” Roger raked his long fingers through his hair, digging fresh trenches through the Brylcreem.

“Refund forty thousand dollars? What about the French Families Fund?” This was my pet cause, an offshoot from Mother’s friend Mme Mitterand’s American and French Children’s League. “I’m already operating on fumes. Plus, we’ve paid for ten pounds of Waldorf salad—”

“They call that salad?” Roger flipped through his contact cards, half of them illegible and littered with cross outs. “It’s *pathetique* . . . just chopped apples and celery. And those soggy *walnuts* . . .”

I scoured my Wheeldex in search of celebrity candidates. Mother and I knew Julia Marlowe, the famous actress, but she was touring Europe. “How about Peter Patout? Mother’s people have used him.”

“The architect?”

“Of the whole World’s Fair. They have that seven-foot robot.”

“Boring,” he said, slapping his silver letter opener against his palm.

I flipped to the *L*’s. “How about Captain Lehude?”

“Of the *Normandie*? Are you serious? He’s paid to be dull.”

“You can’t just discount every suggestion out of hand, Roger. How about Paul Rodierre? Betty says everyone’s talking about him.”

Roger pursed his lips, always a good sign. “The actor? I saw his new play in previews. He’s good. Tall and attractive, if you go for that look. Fast metabolism, of course.”

“At least we know he can memorize a script.”

“He’s a bit of a loose cannon. And married too, so don’t get any ideas.”

“I’m through with men, Roger,” I said. At thirty-seven, I’d resigned myself to singledom.

“Not sure Rodierre’ll do it. See who you can get, but make sure they stick to the script. No Roosevelt—”

“No Rockefellers,” I finished.

Between cases, I called around to various last-minute possibilities, ending up with one option, Paul Rodierre. He was in New York appearing in a new musical review at the Broadhurst Theatre, *The Streets of Paris*, Carmen Miranda’s cyclonic Broadway debut.

I phoned the William Morris Agency and was told they’d check and call me back. Ten minutes later, M. Rodierre’s agent told me the theater was dark that night and that, though his client did not own evening clothes, he was deeply honored by our request to host the gala that evening. He’d meet me at the Waldorf to discuss details. Our apartment on East Fiftieth Street was a stone’s throw from the Waldorf, so I rushed there to change into Mother’s black Chanel dress.

I found M. Rodierre seated at a café table in the Waldorf’s Peacock Alley bar adjacent to the lobby as the two-ton bronze clock sounded its lovely Westminster Cathedral chime on the half hour. Gala guests in their finest filtered in, headed for the Grand Ballroom upstairs.

“M. Rodierre?” I said.

Roger was right about the attractive part. The first thing a person notices about Paul Rodierre, after the initial jolt of his physical beauty, is the remarkable smile.

“How can I thank you for doing this so last minute, Monsieur?”

He unfolded himself from his chair, presenting a build better suited to rowing crew on the Charles than playing Broadway. He attempted to kiss my cheek, but I extended my hand to him, and he shook it. It was nice to meet a man my height.

“My pleasure,” he said.

His attire was the issue: green trousers, an aubergine velvet sports jacket, brown suede shoes, and worst of all, a black shirt. Only priests and fascists wore black shirts. And gangsters, of course.

“Do you want to change?” I resisted the urge to tidy his hair, which was long enough to pull back with a rubber band. “Shave perhaps?” According to his agent, M. Rodierre was a guest at the hotel, so his razor sat just a few stories overhead.

“This is what I wear,” he said with a shrug. Typical actor. Why hadn’t I known better? The parade of guests en route to the ballroom was growing, the women stunning in their finery, every man in tails and patent leather oxfords or calf opera pumps.

“This is my first gala,” I said. “The consulate’s one night to raise money. It’s white tie.” Would he fit into father’s old tux? The inseam would be right, but it would be much too tight in the shoulders.

“Are you always this, well, energized, Miss Ferriday?”

“Well, here in New York, individuality is not always appreciated.” I handed him the stapled sheets. “I’m sure you’re eager to see the script.”

He handed it back. “No, *merci*.”

I pushed it back into his hands. “But the consul general himself wrote it.”

“Tell me again why I’m doing this?”

“It’s to benefit the French Families Fund. To assist displaced French citizens all year, plus we help orphans back in France whose parents have been lost for any number of reasons. With all the uncertainty abroad, we’re one reliable source of clothes and food. Plus, the Rockefellers will be there tonight.”

He paged through the speech. “They could write a check and avoid this whole thing.”

“They’re among our kindest donors, but please don’t reference them. Or President Roosevelt. Or the planes the U.S. sold France. Some of our guests tonight love France, of course, but would rather stay out of a war for now. Roger wants to avoid controversy.”

“Dancing around things never feels authentic. The audience feels that.”

“Can you just stick to the script, Monsieur?”

“Worrying can lead to heart failure, Miss Ferriday.”

I pulled the pin from the lily of the valley. “Here—a boutonnière for the guest of honor.”

“*Muguet?*” M. Rodierre said. “Where did you find that this time of year?”

“You can get anything in New York. Our florist forces it from pips.”

I rested my palm against his lapel and dug the pin deep into the French velvet. Was that lovely fragrance from him or the flowers? Why didn’t American men smell like this, of tuberose and wood musk and—

“You know lily of the valley is poisonous, right?” M. Rodierre said.

“So don’t eat it. At least not until you’ve finished speaking. Or if the crowd turns on you.”

He laughed, causing me to step back. Such a genuine laugh, something rarely found in polite society, especially where *my* jokes were concerned.

I escorted M. Rodierre backstage and stood awed by the enormity of the stage, twice the size of any I'd stood upon on Broadway. We looked out over the ballroom to the sea of tables lit by candlelight, like flowery ships in the darkness. Though dimmed, the Waterford Crystal chandelier and its six satellites shimmered.

"This stage is enormous," I said. "Can you carry it?"

M. Rodierre turned to me. "I do this for a living, Miss Ferriday."

Fearing I'd only antagonize M. Rodierre further, I left him and the script backstage, trying to dismiss my brown-suede-shoe fixation. I hurried to the ballroom to see if Pia had executed my seating chart, more detailed and dangerous than a Luftwaffe flight plan. I saw she'd simply tossed several cards onto the six Rockefeller tables, so I rearranged them and took my place close to the stage between the kitchen and the head table. Three stories of red-draped boxes rose up around the vast room, each with its own dinner table. All seventeen hundred seats would be filled, a lot of unhappy people if all didn't go well.

The guests assembled and took their seats, an ocean of white ties, old mine diamonds, and enough rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré gowns to clean out most of Paris's best shops. The girdles alone would ensure both Bergdorf and Goodman reached their third-quarter sales goals.

A row of journalists collected alongside me, pulling their pencils out from behind their ears. The headwaiter stood poised at my elbow, awaiting the cue to serve. Elsa Maxwell entered the room—gossipmonger, professional party hostess, and self-promoter *non plus ultra*. Would she remove her gloves to write terrible things about that night in her column or just memorize the horror of it all?

The tables were almost full when Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, known to Roger as “Her Grace,” arrived, her four-story Cartier diamond necklace ablaze at her chest. I gave the signal to serve as Mrs. Vanderbilt’s bottom made contact with her seat cushion, her white fox stole, complete with head and feet, draped over her chairback. The lights dimmed, and Roger lumbered to the spotlighted podium to heartfelt applause. I’d never been this nervous when I was the one on stage.

“*Mesdames et Messieurs*, Foreign Minister Bonnet sends his sincerest apologies, but he cannot be here tonight.” The crowd buzzed, not sure how to react to disappointment. Did one ask for one’s money refunded by mail? Call Washington?

Roger held up one hand. “But we have convinced another Frenchman to speak tonight. Though not appointed to a government role, he is a man cast in one of the best roles on Broadway.”

The guests whispered to one another. There is nothing like a surprise, provided it’s a good one.

“Please allow me to welcome M. Paul Rodierre.”

M. Rodierre bypassed the podium and headed for center stage. What was he doing? The spotlight cast around the stage for a few moments, trying to locate him. Roger took his seat at the head table, next to Mrs. Vanderbilt. I stood nearby, but outside of strangling range.

“It’s my great pleasure to be here tonight,” M. Rodierre said, once the spotlight found him. “I am terribly sorry M. Bonnet could not make it.”

Even sans microphone, M. Rodierre’s voice filled the room. He practically glowed in the spotlight.

“I am a poor replacement for such a distinguished guest. I hope it wasn’t trouble with his plane. I’m sure President Roosevelt will be happy to send him a new one if it was.”

A swell of nervous laughter rolled around the room. I didn’t have to look at the journalists to know they were scribbling. Roger, skilled in the art of the tête-à-tête, managed to speak with Mrs. Vanderbilt and send daggers my way at the same time.

“True, I cannot talk to you about politics,” M. Rodierre continued.

“Thank God!” someone shouted from a back table. The crowd laughed again, louder this time.

“But I can talk to you about the America I know, a place that surprises me every day. A place where open-minded people not only embrace French theater and books and cinema and fashion but French people as well, despite our faults.”

“Shit,” said the reporter next to me to his broken pencil. I handed him mine.

“Every day I see people help others. Americans inspired by Mrs. Roosevelt, who reaches her hand across the Atlantic to help French children. Americans like Miss Caroline Ferriday, who works everyday to help French families here in America and keeps French orphans clothed.”

Roger and Mrs. Vanderbilt looked my way. The spotlight found me, standing at the wall, and the familiar light blinded me. Her Grace clapped, and the crowd followed. I waved until the light, mercifully quickly, whipped back to the stage, leaving me in cool darkness. I didn’t miss the Broadway stage really, but it was good to feel the warmth of the spotlight on my skin again.

“This is an America not afraid to sell planes to the people who stood beside them in trenches of the Great War. An America not afraid to help keep Hitler from the streets of

Paris. An America not afraid of standing shoulder to shoulder again with us if that terrible time does come . . .”

I watched, only able to look away for a few peeks at the crowd. They were engrossed and certainly not focused on his shoes. Half an hour passed in an instant, and I held my breath as M. Rodierre took his bow. The applause started small but rose in waves like a tremendous rainstorm pelting the roof. A teary-eyed Elsa Maxwell used a hotel napkin to dry her eyes, and by the time the audience rose to their feet and belted out “La Marseillaise,” I was glad Bonnet didn’t have to follow that performance. Even the staff sang, hands over their hearts.

As the lights came up, Roger looked relieved and greeted the crush of well-wishers that lingered near the head table. When the evening wound down, he left for the Rainbow Room with a gaggle of our best donors and a few Rockettes, the only women in New York who made me look short.

M. Rodierre touched my shoulder as we left the dining room. “I know a place over on the Hudson with great wine.”

“I need to get home,” I said, though I hadn’t eaten a thing. Warm bread and buttery escargot came to mind, but it was never smart to be seen out alone with a married man. “Not tonight, Monsieur, but thank you.” I could be home in minutes, to a cold apartment and the leftover Waldorf salad.

“You’ll make me eat alone after our triumph?” M. Rodierre said.

Why not go? My set ate at only certain restaurants, which you could count on one hand, all within a four-block radius of the Waldorf, nowhere near the Hudson. What harm could one dinner do?

We took a cab to La Grenier, a lovely bistro on the West Side. The French ocean liners sailed up the Hudson River and docked at Fifty-first Street, so some of New York's best little places popped up near there, like chanterelles after a good rain. La Grenier lived in the shadow of the *SS Normandie*, in the attic of a former harbor master's building. When we exited the cab, the great ship rose high above us, deck bright with spotlights, four floors of portholes aglow. A welder at her bow sent apricot sparks into the night sky as deckhands lowered a spotlight down her side to painters on a scaffold. She made me feel small standing there, below that great, black prow, her three red smoke stacks, each bigger than any of the warehouse buildings that extended down the pier. Salt hung in the end-of-summer air as Atlantic seawater met Hudson River fresh.

The tables at La Grenier were packed with a nice enough looking crowd, mostly middle-class types, including a reporter from the gala and what looked like ocean-liner passengers happy to be on terra firma. We chose a tight, shellacked wooden booth, built like something from the inside of a ship, where every inch counts. Le Grenier's maître d', M. Bernard, fawned over M. Rodierre, told him he'd seen *The Streets of Paris* three times, and overshared the details of his own acting in Hoboken Community Theater.

M. Bernard turned to me. "And you, Mademoiselle. Haven't I seen you on the stage with Miss Helen Hayes?"

"An actress?" M. Rodierre said with a smile.

At close range, that smile was unsafe. I had to keep my wits about me, since French men were my Achilles' heel. In fact, if Achilles had been French, I probably would have carried him around until his tendon healed.

M. Bernard continued. "I thought the reviews were unfair—"

“We’ll order,” I said.

“One used the word ‘stiffish,’ I believe—”

“We’ll have the escargot, Monsieur. Light on the cream, please—”

“And what was it *The Times* said about *Twelfth Night*? ‘Miss Ferriday sufficed as Viola’? Harsh, I thought—”

“—and the Parmesan. And no garlic. Undercook them, please, so they are not too tough.”

“Would you like them to crawl to the table, Mademoiselle?” M. Bernard scratched down our order and headed for the kitchen.

M. Rodierre studied the champagne list, lingering over the details. “An actress, eh? I’d never have guessed.” There was something appealing about his unkempt look, like a *potager* in need of weeding.

“The consulate suits me better. Mother’s known Roger for years, and when he suggested I help him, I couldn’t resist.”

M. Bernard placed a basket of bread on our table, lingering a moment to gaze at M. Rodierre, as if memorizing him.

“Hope I’m not running off a boyfriend tonight.” He reached for the breadbasket as I did, and my hand brushed his, warm and soft. I darted my hand back to my lap.

“I’m too busy for all that. You know New York—parties and all. Exhausting, really.”

“Never see you at Sardi’s.” He pulled apart the loaf, steam rising to the light.

“Oh, I work a lot.”

“I have a feeling you don’t work for the money.”

“It’s an unsalaried position, if that’s what you mean, but that’s not a question asked in polite society, Monsieur.”

“Can we dispense with the ‘Monsieur’? Makes me feel ancient.”

“First names? We’ve only just met.”

“It’s 1939.”

“Manhattan society is like a solar system with its own order. A single woman dining with a married man is enough to throw planets out of alignment.”

“No one will see us here,” Paul said, pointing out a champagne on the list to M. Bernard.

“Tell that to Miss Evelyn Shimmerhorn over there in the back booth.”

“Are you ruined?” he said with a certain type of kindness seldom found in achingly beautiful men. Maybe the black shirt was a good choice for him after all.

“Evelyn won’t talk. She’s having a child, poorly timed, dear thing.”

“Children. They complicate everything, don’t they? No place for that in an actor’s life.”

Another selfish actor.

“How does your father earn your place in this solar system?”

Paul was asking a lot of questions for a new acquaintance.

“*Earned*, actually. He was in dry goods.”

“Where?”

M. Bernard slid a silver bucket with handles like gypsy’s earrings onto the table, the emerald-green throat of the champagne bottle lounging against one side.

“Partnered with James Harper Poor.”

“Of Poor Brothers? Been to his house in East Hampton. He’s not exactly poor. Do you visit France often?”

“Paris every year. Mother inherited an apartment . . . on rue Chauveau Lagarde.”

M. Bernard eased the cork from the champagne with a satisfying sound, more thud than pop. He tipped the golden liquid into my glass, and the bubbles rose to the rim, almost overflowed, then settled at the perfect level. An expert pour.

“My wife, Rena, has a little shop near there called Rena’s. Have you seen it?”

I sipped my champagne, the bubbles teasing my lips.

Paul slid her picture from his wallet. Rena was younger than I had imagined and wore her dark hair in a china doll haircut. She was smiling, eyes open wide, as if sharing some delicious little secret. Rena was precious and perhaps my complete opposite. I imagined Rena’s to be the type of chic little place that helped women put themselves together in that famous French way—nothing too matchy, with just the right amount of wrong.

“No, I don’t know Rena’s,” I said. I handed the picture back. “She’s lovely, though.”

I finished the champagne in my glass.

Paul shrugged. “Too young for me, of course, but—” He looked at the photo a few moments as if seeing it for the first time, head tilted to one side, before slipping it back into his wallet. “We don’t see much of each other.”

I fluttered at the thought and then settled, weighted by the realization that even if Paul were available my forceful nature would root out and extinguish any spark of romance.

The radio in the kitchen blared scratchy Edith Piaf.

Paul lifted the bottle from the bucket and tipped more champagne into my glass. It effervesced, riotous bubbles tumbling over the glass's edge. I glanced at him. We both knew what that meant, of course. The tradition. Anyone who's spent any time at all in France knows it. Had he overpoured on purpose?

Without hesitation, Paul tapped his finger to the spilled champagne along the base of my glass, reached across to me, and dabbed the cool liquid behind my left ear. I almost jumped at his touch, then waited as he brushed my hair aside and touched behind my right ear, his finger lingering there a moment. He then anointed himself behind each ear, smiling.

Why did I suddenly feel warm all over?

"Does Rena ever visit?" I asked. I tried to rub a tea stain off my hand only to find it was an age spot. Delightful.

"Not yet. She has no interest in theater. Hasn't even come over here to see *The Streets of Paris* yet, but I don't know if I can stay. Hitler has everyone on edge back home."

Somewhere in the kitchen, two men argued. Where was our escargot? Had they sent to Perpignan for the snails?

"At least France has the Maginot Line," I said.

"The Maginot Line? Please. A concrete wall and some observation posts? That's only a gauntlet slap to Hitler."

"It's fifteen miles wide."

"Nothing will deter Hitler if he wants something," Paul said.

There was a full-blown ruckus in the kitchen. No wonder our entrée had not arrived. The cook, mercurial artiste no doubt, was having a fit about something.

M. Bernard emerged from the kitchen. The port-holed kitchen door swung closed behind him, flapped open and shut a few times, and then stood still. He walked to the center of the dining room. Had he been crying?

*“Excusez-moi, Ladies and Gentlemen.”*

Someone tapped a glass with a spoon, and the room quieted.

“I have just heard from a reliable source . . .” M. Bernard took a breath, his chest expanding like leather fireplace bellows. “We have it on good authority that . . .”

He paused, overcome for a moment, then went on.

“Adolf Hitler has invaded Poland.”

“My God,” Paul said.

We stared at each other as the room erupted with excited exchanges, a racket of speculation and dread. The reporter from the gala stood, tossed some crumpled dollars on the table, grabbed his fedora, and bounded out.

In the hubbub that followed his announcement, M. Bernard’s final words were almost lost.

“May God help us all.”

LAST CALL  
AT THE  
NIGHTSHADE  
LOUNGE



COVER  
NOT  
FINAL

*A novel of magic and mixology*

PAUL KRUEGER

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## CHAPTER ONE

Bailey Chen was taking care of some serious business.

“Hello?” She plugged a finger into her non-cell-phone ear. “Jess? Are you still there? I was just saying that I think Divinyl’s doing some really interesting things with their business model—”

“Yup!” A perky female voice emanated through her phone’s tinny speaker. “That’s great! So you probably know we’re—”

“A revolutionary return to revolving music,” Bailey recited. “The company that’s bringing the retro sound of vinyl to the convenience of a mobile platform. I think that’s really, uh...” She cast around for the right word. Cool? Awesome? What could you really say about an audio filter app that took sharp and clear mp3s and re-rendered them into record-styled, hiss-and-pop-filled “retro” playback?

Anything, she reminded herself. Anything as long as it landed her an interview.

“...really innovative,” Bailey finished. “And I’d love to come in and talk with you.”

There was a crackle on the other end of the line, and Bailey wondered for a split-second if it was an intentional, retro part of Divinyl’s corporate phone system or just a side effect of her shitty cell reception.

“Totally!” Jess said. “God, can you believe we haven’t talked since, like, high school? We have so much to catch up on.”

“Oh,” Bailey said. “Um, yeah!”

Bailey could believe they hadn’t talked since, like, high school, because they hadn’t talked that much in high school. But maybe Jess was one of those people who had dramatically changed in college. Besides, if Bailey landed the job, Jess would probably be her first office friend. They could do business-lady things like go out for chopped salads together. Or even better, make an intern bring them chopped salads, and eat together in their spacious, window-filled corner offices while they

planned total domination of their market sector. (And maybe online-shopped for statement necklaces, since it was, after all, their lunch break).

Bailey smiled. If she'd ever had a mental picture of success, that was it: lunch delivery, ruthless business sense, and power jewelry.

"Bailey?"

Bailey nearly dropped her phone. "Sorry, Jess, I'm here. So do you have any time coming up this week, or—"

"Bailey!"

This time, her name was not coming from the phone. Zane Whelan's shaggy-haired head appeared over the end of the bar, square glasses gleaming. "There you are!"

Shit. "Um, gotta go," Bailey chirped into her phone, "but callmebackwhenyougeta ch—"

Zane frowned. "Are you...talking to someone?"

"Hydrangeas," Bailey said quickly.

"Huh?"

"Hydrangeas, wisterias, oleander, rhododendron, and anthurium," Bailey said, nodding to the trivia emcee in her bright blue Chicago Cubs windbreaker, who was gamely grinning down at a clipboard from behind her microphone. "Five of, uh, the most common poisonous plants."

"Anthurium?" Zane blinked. "That sounds like something from a B-movie."

Bailey pocketed her cell phone. "Well, it's real."

Beside them, the emcee paced the bar floor, shooting pleading glances at each team in turn. "Come on, guys," she said, with microphone-added reverb. "I only need five. You've still got twenty seconds left to—yes! You."

The captain of a team of yuppies had leapt to his feet. "Oleander, poinsettia, dandel—"

But as he'd said "dandelion," a buzzer drowned him out.

"Duh," Bailey said under her breath. "Dandelions are actually edible."

“Really?” Zane said.

“They’re good in salads.”

“Sorry.” The emcee shook her head like a rueful gameshow host. “Dandelions may not taste great, but they’re not poisonous. They’re actually—”

Bailey mouthed the end of the sentence along with her: “—edible and good in salads.”

“Wow.” Zane tapped out a few polite claps. “I’m impressed.”

“Oh, um, don’t be,” Bailey said, praying that he wouldn’t ask about her phone call. “Poinsettias aren’t toxic to humans unless you eat, like, five hundred leaves. She should have called him on that one.”

“Hey, ease up. Not everyone in this bar’s an Ivy League graduate.”

Bailey flushed. “I didn’t mean—”

But Zane was grinning. “Because that distinction is the exclusive territory of our smartest barback.”

He patted her shoulder, and Bailey tried not to cringe.

“Right,” she said. “Um, thanks.”

“And as the smartest barback at the Nightshade Lounge,” Zane went on, “you really should know better than to go...sit on the floor during a busy shift.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Bailey rushed out. “I just had to, uh, the music...”

“Music?” Zane shook his head. “Bailey, that jukebox has probably been here since the sixties. It totally doesn’t work. You know that.”

“Right,” Bailey said. Sometimes it felt like nothing worked at the Nightshade Lounge except Bailey. And Zane, of course.

Zane gave the jukebox a fond pat on its cracked front window and pushed up his glasses.

“Anyway. Don’t slack on me, okay?”

“I’m not,” Bailey protested. If there was one thing she wasn’t, it was a slacker. “I’m just—”

“Look, Bailey, I told my uncle you could do this job with no experience,” Zane went on. “And you

can do it. But if you don't do it..." He cleared his throat. "I don't want to have to fire you your first week," he said in a low voice.

Bailey could only nod. She wished she could explain—sorry, Zane, that I'm not only looking for the first opportunity to ditch the job you pulled major strings to get me, but doing it while on the clock—but instead, she gave him the truncated version: "Sorry. Yup."

"Good." Zane smiled. He'd shown up to work that night wearing what he always wore: a slim old three-piece suit, complete with a loosely knotted tie and rumpled dress shirt, which made him look like a Swinging London Modster about to zip off on a candy-colored scooter. "And in return, I'll continue to pay you and act as your beneficent overlord."

"More glasses!" Trina, the redheaded bartender who was Zane's counterweight at the bar that night, yelled down at them from the other end of the bar. "Sometime this century, please?" she added. "Not those glasses, Zane. You already made that joke, like, five minutes ago."

Zane crammed his spectacles back onto his face. "I still think it's funny."

"On it," Bailey said, glad for the abrupt end to her conversation. She scooted along in the narrow space behind them, calling out, "On your back! On your back!" as she passed. She deposited a freshly cleaned stack of old fashioned glasses by Trina's side, then glanced at her garnish tray.

"Thanks," Trina said. "I'm low on—"

"—Cucumbers," Bailey said, nodding. "On it. On your back, on your back..."

"Bailey—" Zane said as she passed him.

"More towels?" Zane could never have enough towels.

"Damn, you're good." He plunged a spoon into his shaker and stirred its contents into a froth.

On one hand, he was right: Bailey was well suited to the job of bar-back. Her small size meant she could traverse the cramped bar with ease. Her sharp eye for details and logistics often allowed her to solve problems before they became problems—say, for instance, a shortage of cucumber slices. Her Ivy League education...well, she'd gotten a a really nice UPenn bottle opener that came in handy.

And while she liked people well enough, she wasn't always the best at dealing with them. As a bar-back, she didn't have to. She just had to keep shuttling supplies and ensuring things on the line moved smoothly.

On the other hand, though, bar-backing was a terrible job.

The Ravenswood neighborhood had plenty of bars, but the Nightshade was an institution (which, in Chicago, was more or less equivalent to a place that stubbornly stuck around for years and refused to close). The dark drapes, low lights, and worn-down booth cushions the color of emeralds evoked a kind of comfortably faded Second-City swank—emphasis on faded, because Bailey was pretty sure they hadn't been replaced since at least the Carter administration. But while the place obviously wasn't trendy enough to serve fourteen-dollar cocktails, it wasn't crappy enough to sell just cheapie cans of light lager, either.

Even though it seemed to Bailey like Garrett Whelan had no business savvy whatsoever, the Nightshade did a brisk business selling mixed drinks to mixed company. So in theory, her duties as bar-back should have been:

- 1) Keep the bartenders supplied with a steady stream of clean glasses, while removing the used ones.
- 2) Make sure each garnish tray is well-stocked at all times.
- 3) Regularly check the garbage, and make sure to take it out before it overflows.

(Bailey did her best work when she could take a moment to prioritize everything, preferably in list form.)

At the height of a rush, however, her list was far more likely to look like this:

**DO EVERYTHING**

RIGHT NOW

or else

All night, every night, she never stopped moving. No matter how on top of things she was, there was always another fire for her to put out.

And then there were the customers. For the most part, they started the evening pleasant enough. But a few rounds of drinks had the same effect as a trip to Pinocchio's Pleasure Island: they could turn anyone into an ass.

"So that'll be a martini for me..." one of the hardcore trivia enthusiasts slurred at her, a while later. She leaned over the bar and gazed down at Bailey with eyes as glassy as marbles.

Bailey greeted her with her most patient smile. "I'm sorry, but I'm just a bar-back," she said. "I can't make—"

"...two glasses of whiskey with ice..." the girl continued. "And for Trev...hey, Trev! What do you want?"

A few paces away, Trev muttered something.

"Oh yeah," said the girl. "A Long Island Iced tea." With her lazy, boozy diction, the order came out lawn-islan-icy.

Bailey doubled down on her outward customer-friendliness, even as her internal patience evaporated. "I'm sorry, ma'am," she said again. "But I—"

Zane appeared like magic. "Ladies," he said smoothly, positioning himself between his bar-back and the members of the "Wreck Your Privilege" trivia team. "I know a thing or two about making a decent Long Island. Why don't you leave it to me?"

His performance felt increasingly unreal as Bailey watched. The Zane she'd always known had been clumsy and awkward, but apparently a lot changed when you didn't see someone for five years. This version of Zane effortlessly charmed his customers, entertaining them while he mixed their drinks with the showy vigor of a stage magician.

Speaking of people who've changed since high school, she thought, and then squashed the notion as quickly as it appeared. Yes, high-school Zane had been the kind of guy who couldn't admit to his feelings for his best friend Bailey until a couple beers at Luke Perez's graduation party had loosened his tongue...and Bailey's pants. Yes, talking to Zane two weeks ago had been a catch-up session even more awkward than her theoretical upcoming "please give me a job, please" chat with Jess. But no, overall, things were good now: Zane and Bailey were friends again, and it wasn't too awkward (which was good). And he'd even given her a job to help get her parents off her back (which was even better). And if the only side effect was her own sudden, terminal uncoolness? Well, so be it. She probably deserved it.

"You know," Bailey said as he sent those customers on their way, "it'd probably help if you taught me how to make drinks. Just when you or Trina are too busy, or something like that." The bar lifestyle had wreaked havoc on her sleep schedule and her social life, and the pay sucked, but calling herself a bartender was at least kind of cool, and would sound less embarrassing when she got around to having friends again.

Zane shook his head. "No dice," he said. "No offense, but you're not ready yet."

"Not ready?" Bailey was incredulous. "What happened to the smartest barback?"

"You're also our only barback," Zane said. "And right now, that's where I need you. Okay?"

Bailey tried not to scowl. "Okay."

---

*The Screwdriver.*

A drink to lend gravitas to the beginner bartender.

---

1. *Fill a highball glass with ice.*
2. *Pour glass one-third full of vodka.*
3. *Fill remaining two thirds of glass with orange juice.*
4. *Stir once and serve.*

The screwdriver is one of bartending's most basic cocktails, but also one of its most useful. Though one cannot oversell the importance of a quick mind and a good heart in the life of a bartender, there are occasions when the best tonic is pure brawn. In this department, the screwdriver remains unmatched.

Bartenders favor this cocktail for myriad reasons. Its ingredients are few, cheap, and easily obtainable in all but the most remote places. It can be mixed quickly in the event that one has been caught flat-footed while also conveniently within arm's reach of a fully stocked bar. And while the abilities granted by the proper preparation of other libations may require years of steady practice to master, drinkers of the screwdriver have found that hitting things very hard in the face until they die is rather straightforward.

#### VODKA.

Records of vodka in the pre-Blackout era are unfortunately sparse; however, its use is known to date back to at least the 1400s, when its existence is first attested in Polish court documents. Vodka (diminutive of voda, water) was then—anecdotally—the only thing known to convince Slavic men to even leave their homes in the dead of winter, let alone hunt prowling tremens. Traditionally distilled from sugar-rich cereal grains or potatoes, vodka also found a secondary medicinal use as a restorative aqua vitae, its strengthening properties being mistaken for healing ones.

Post-Blackout, vodka found its way to American shores in the saddlebags of Polish cavalier

Casimir Pulaski, who encouraged its bibulation amongst the cavalrymen he trained to fight in the American Revolution. Though he expressly forbade its use in open battle, his horsemen would frequently be dispatched with rations of vodka to patrol the fringes of his encampments and root out lurking tremens.

---

#### ORANGE JUICE.

The logistical difficulty of producing mass quantities of orange juice sidelined it for many years as a bartending curiosity and little else. It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century and the advent of widespread refrigerated trucking systems that bartenders were able to regularly incorporate it into their repertoires. For best results, a fresh-squeezed juice is recommended; if none is available, canned orange juice, with its higher vitamin C content, is in fact preferable to standard grocery bottles or cartons. It's unknown who first created this particular combination, but the name "screwdriver" was coined by Frederick Leeds, a Florida bartender who claimed he used the drink to help him remove a screw from his boat hitch that had rusted into place.

The  
Translation  
of Love

A Novel

Lynne  
Kutsukake

# The Translation *of* Love

A NOVEL



Lynne Kutsukake

*Doubleday*

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland



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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Book design by Maria Carella  
Jacket design by Emily Mahon  
Jacket photograph: Gallery Stock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kutsukake, Lynne.

The translation of love : a novel / Lynne Kutsukake—First United States edition.

pages ; cm

ISBN 978-0-385-54067-4 (hardcover)—ISBN 978-0-385-54068-1 (ebook) 1. Girls—  
Japan—Fiction. 2. Friendship—Fiction. 3. Sisters—Fiction. I. Title.

PR9199.4.K865T73 2016

813'.6—dc23

2015024191

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First Edition

## Tokyo, 1947

*The car is in a parade all by itself. Traffic must stop whenever the boy's father travels, so the road is completely empty. Crowds line the street to watch them. Normally the boy is not allowed to ride in the big Cadillac, the special car reserved for work, but today is special. Today the boy is in the parade, too.*

*It is a short ride to GHQ, General Headquarters, the office from which his father rules Japan.*

*"Look at all the people!" The boy raises his finger to the car window. He sees a tiny old woman in a gray kimono, a sunburned man in a white shirt and black pants, a mother with a baby strapped to her back.*

*"Arthur, don't point."*

*The voice is firm but not harsh. Even when it reprimands him, it is the voice he loves. "Yes, Father," he murmurs and steals a glance at the figure seated beside him in the backseat. His father has not turned his head once since they got into the car, not toward the boy or toward the crowds.*

*"Your mother explained about the photographers, didn't she?"*

*"Yes, sir." He will have his picture taken with his father, and it will appear in all the newspapers and magazines in America.*

*"You're not nervous are you, Sergeant?"*

*"No, Father."*

*"That's right. Nothing to be nervous about. Just a few photos. You should be yourself. Act natural."*

*"Yes, Father."*

*“When we’re finished, your mother will meet you and take you to the PX. The photographers may want to take more pictures of you. Maybe your mother will get you one of those special hamburgers. Would you like that?”*

*His father’s mouth takes the shape of a smile, but the boy cannot see his eyes. The dark lenses of the sunglasses reveal nothing.*

*Up ahead, the boy spots two girls lining the route. He can’t help noticing other children, especially if they look at all close to his own age. Suddenly one of the girls breaks from the crowd and dashes onto the road. She is heading straight for them, as if she means to run directly in front of the car’s path. There is shouting, loud cries in an unintelligible language.*

*The girl is close to the car now, close enough for the boy to see her eyes. She is staring right at him, locking her wild gaze on him, and he finds he cannot turn away. Then as abruptly as it started, it is all over. A Japanese policeman grabs her and her body snaps backward as if she has reached the end of an elastic band. The boy cranes his neck to see what is happening. He wants to turn around and look out the back window, but he doesn’t dare. He wants to tell his father what he has seen, to share this extraordinary thing that has happened on this extraordinary day, but General MacArthur is chewing on the end of his pipe, deep in important and private thought.*

*F*ver since her sister had gone away, Fumi looked forward to the democracy lunches with a special, ravenous hunger. The American soldiers came to her school once a week with deliveries, and though she never knew what they would bring, it didn't matter. She wanted it all, whatever it was. Sometimes it was powdered milk and soft white bread as fluffy as cake. Sometimes it was a delicious oily meat called Spam. Occasionally it was peanut butter, a sticky brown paste whose unusual flavor—somehow sweet and salty at the same time—was surprisingly addictive. The lunch supplements supplied by the Occupation forces reminded her of the kind of presents her older sister, Sumiko, used to bring in the days when she still came home. Fumi's hunger was insatiable, and although she couldn't have put it in so many words, some part of her sensed that her craving was inseparable from her longing for her sister's return.

All the pupils knew that the lunches were to help them think clearer, think freer. To become creative and independent. On very rare occasions, hard-boiled eggs were distributed. Eggs were a special treat, high in protein, and while not strictly speaking an American food, they were said to make you democratic faster. They were Fumi's favorite. Throughout the war and ever since the surrender, fresh eggs had been in extremely short supply in Tokyo, almost impossible to obtain except at great expense in the black market.

She knew today was an egg day because Akiko's younger brother

Masatomi had spotted the army jeep at the end of recess and a GI had given him one. From that moment on it was all Fumi could think of. Under her desk, out of Kondo Sensei's sight, she cupped her hand in her lap and pretended she could already feel the weight of the egg in her palm. It was nature's most perfect food, she'd decided, for what else came in its own self-contained package, a smooth thin shell that peeled off in sheets to uncover the slippery skin inside.

The eggs were especially coveted because the Americans never seemed to bring enough to go around. The other items—the milk, the bread, the peanut butter—could easily be stretched so that everyone got something, but an egg was an egg. The elementary grades were served first and inevitably there was a shortfall by the time the older pupils like Fumi, who was twelve and in the first year of middle school, had their turn. On the last egg day, despite jumping up as soon as class was dismissed, she had been pushed out of the way by two larger girls who were determined to beat her to the line. She vowed she wouldn't make the same mistake again. Strategy was key. This time she planned to use her smaller size to her advantage, to slip between everyone's legs, crawl on the floor until she was through the door, and then run down the hall to where the makeshift distribution table was set up.

So Fumi simply couldn't understand why, today of all days, she had gotten stuck with looking after the repat girl.



The new girl had arrived shortly before noon. There was a sharp rap at the door and the principal, who was rarely seen outside the teachers' office, stepped into the classroom. Everyone automatically stood up, bowed in his direction, and remained standing while he and Kondo Sensei conferred in low whispers. The principal was a short, stout man, not much taller than most of the girls in their all-girls class, and Fumi couldn't help noticing that he stood on tip-toe when he was speaking into Kondo Sensei's ear. After this brief consultation, the principal returned to the doorway and reentered, this time followed by a girl who hunched her shoulders like an old

woman and hung her head so low no one could see her face. She looked miserable.

“This is your new student,” the principal said aloud. He was speaking to Kondo Sensei but now everyone could hear.

“I see.”

“Shimamura. Aya Shimamura.” He jerked his chin in the girl’s direction. “She’ll start today.”

“Yes, sir. But as the term has already started—”

“Please. Do your best.” The principal turned and walked away. It wasn’t clear to whom this last remark was addressed.

There was a moment of confusion, with some of the girls continuing to bow toward the empty doorway through which the principal had retreated. Kondo Sensei rapped his pointer on the side of his desk.

“Class, rise!” he said, even though everyone was still standing. “Let’s welcome our new classmate, Miss Aya Shimamura.”

They bowed formally, but not quite as low as had been required for the principal. After all, this was only another student.

“As of today, Miss Shimamura will be joining our class. We are very lucky.” He paused as if uncertain how to continue. “She is from America.”

This remark caused an almost electric charge to flow through the classroom.

“From America,” he repeated, his voice stronger. “As you are all aware, the mastery of English is one of the goals of our new middle-school curriculum, and I am sure that Miss Shimamura will be able to make many helpful contributions toward this end.”

He paused and looked from left to right until his eyes fell on the desk Fumi shared with Akiko in the center of the front row. Briskly he tapped his pointer on the side where Akiko sat.

“Right here. Miss Shimamura, you can sit at this desk. Fumi, it will be your responsibility to look after your new seatmate. Take care of her. Make sure she knows what to do.”

Fumi immediately sat up straight. What about Akiko, she wanted to protest. But Akiko had already gathered her books and Kondo Sensei was directing her to a desk at the back.

No sooner had everyone gotten settled than a bell began ringing and Kondo Sensei looked at his watch. He sighed and set his pointer lengthwise across his desk.

“Very good. Class dismissed for lunch.”

Fumi was halfway to the door when she heard her name.

“Miss Tanaka!”

The other girls rushed past her and stampeded out of the room.

“Sensei?”

“What are you doing? Come here. Did I not give you a special responsibility?” He tipped his head in Aya’s direction.

“But, Sensei, it’s an egg day.”

“Well, take her with you and help her get something.” He picked up a book from his desk and left.

The new girl was frozen in the same hunched posture she had assumed as soon as she sat down, her forehead within inches of resting on the desk. They were alone in the classroom.

“You heard the teacher. Come on!”

The girl did not move or give any indication that she heard or understood.

“Get up, let’s go! We have to hurry or we’ll miss out.” Fumi leaned over and put her mouth next to Aya’s ear. “What’s wrong with you? Are you deaf? Get up!”

Still the girl didn’t budge. Instead, she seemed to be trying to retract her head into her neck like a turtle. Something about that ridiculous action infuriated Fumi and she grabbed the sleeve of Aya’s blouse. “Get up!” Fumi tugged once, twice, and on the third tug the thin material tore right off at the shoulder. For the first time the girl came to life. She burst into tears and ran out of the room.



“How’s your new friend?” Akiko’s laugh sounded a bit malicious.

“Yeah, the repat.” Tomoko snickered.

“How should I know?” Fumi muttered.

“My mother says the *imin* shouldn’t have come back. The immi-

grants eat all our food. There's not enough to go around." Tomoko spoke with authority.

"Stupid *imin*," Fumi said. "She can't even talk."

"Do you think she knows Japanese?"

"She can't even move, never mind talk."

"Stupid. *Baka*."

"*Imin no baka*."

Fumi was beginning to feel a bit better. She'd debated running after Aya, but hunger led her to the distribution table, just in case something was left. As she expected, everything was gone. By the time she joined her classmates, they had finished eating and were gathered under the shade of the big oak tree in the far corner of the schoolyard. Her own lunch, minus the hard-boiled egg she had so looked forward to, had been a millet "rice ball," which she'd had to eat very fast because she was late. She could still feel it stuck like a hard stone in the middle of her chest just below her breastbone. It hurt a bit when she laughed. Akiko and Tomoko were laughing, too, and didn't seem to hold it against her that she had to sit next to the *imin*. The three girls joined hands to form a circle and swung their arms back and forth, higher and higher, acting as childishly as the elementary pupils with whom they shared the yard.

Just as Fumi was starting to get a bit light-headed, she felt Akiko and Tomoko let go of her hands and in the spot where they had been standing Kondo Sensei appeared. He stepped directly in front of Fumi and slapped her hard on the cheek with his open palm. Fumi felt the entire schoolyard go quiet and still. Her cheek burned. Although she'd been disciplined many times at school before, this was the first time by Kondo Sensei, the new teacher.

"What did you do to Aya Shimamura!" he shouted. His face was mottled purple right up to his receding hairline, and his thick glasses had slid to the end of his nose.

"She wouldn't move." Fumi began to cry.

"Is that any reason to tear her clothes! How am I going to explain this to the principal? I had to send her home. On her first day!"

There was an audible gasp from Akiko, Tomoko, and the other pupils who were nearby.

“I didn’t mean to.” She could hardly get the words out between sobs. “She wouldn’t get up. I missed my egg.”

“Nobody cares about that.” Kondo Sensei turned to the other students. “What are you staring at? Go back to the classroom. Immediately! Go!”

The girls began running away before he had even finished talking.

“As for you, Fumi Tanaka, you stay here. Stand facing this tree and don’t move until I come back to get you. Do you understand?”

At that, he turned and marched back to the main entranceway, little puffs of dust rising behind his heels.

Fumi kept her head hung low for the rest of the afternoon just in case Kondo Sensei was looking out the window to check up on her. The sun was warm, flies buzzed around her head, and the sand in the schoolyard blew up into her eyes. Her cheek stung for a long time, a prickly tingle like millions of tiny pins. To distract herself, she tried pretending that each tingle was a grain of white rice, that she was being showered mercilessly with buckets of rice. But it didn’t really help. So instead she thought about how the shiny oval bald spot on the back of Kondo Sensei’s head looked just like an egg. *This* made her feel much better.

It was all the fault of the stupid new girl. Why had Fumi gotten stuck with her? Why hadn’t Aya been paired with Sanae? Skinny, ugly Sanae who might be the smartest in the class but who had bowed legs and unsightly blotches on her face. Or Tomoko who was the prettiest, no one could argue with that, but who had a stuck-up nature. For that matter, why not Akiko? At least her father had a proper job. In her mind, Fumi went through the list of all the things she was not. Not the prettiest, not the most popular, not the best at sports, certainly not the one with money. She knew that to most people she was just an average ordinary girl. But her sister had always told her she was special, and whether it was true or not, Fumi missed hearing it. She missed Sumiko and wished she knew how to find her and make her come home.

*A*ya was too ashamed to tell her father about the horrible thing that had happened at school. She hid her torn blouse under a pile of dirty clothes and then crawled into the cramped dark closet where they had to store their bedding during the daytime. Pushing her face onto the futon, she cried openmouthed into its worn musty folds. Although she hated the miserable lodgings that her father had found for them, for the first time she was glad to be here, glad only because she could be alone. Everything in Japan was worse than she could possibly have imagined.

Her father had accompanied her to school that morning as if she were starting kindergarten. The school had a long name—Minami Nishiki Elementary and Middle School—so she had expected a much grander structure than the run-down building that stood in the middle of a dirt yard. The roof looked like it was sagging at one end and many of the windows were broken. The concrete walls were full of cracks. Aya's father bowed several times to the principal before producing an envelope from inside his jacket, which he offered with yet another deep bow. Then he told her to remember her manners and left.

Aya was given slippers that were torn at the toe and much too wide, forcing her to half shuffle, half slide in order to keep up with the principal as he led her from the main entrance and down the long corridor. She kept her head low and concentrated on the slap-flap slap-flap of his slippers. His feet hung over the backs, revealing

a ragged hole in the heel of his left sock that seemed to get bigger with each step he took. Even though the wooden floors were not very clean, it seemed that no one was allowed to wear shoes inside. Later she would notice that none of the other students wore slippers. They were all barefoot.

The principal stopped at the last classroom.

“Class, rise!”

Aya heard the teacher announce her name and say she was joining the class. He said she was from America. America, America, he kept repeating, and she didn’t know how to correct him. Not America—*Canada*. She hung her head even lower until her chin touched her collarbone. Her name was repeated over and over. If she weren’t feeling so nervous, she could have understood more of what he was saying, but as it was, the only thing she caught for sure was her own name and “America” and the word “English.” *Ingurishu* was what it sounded like.

“You must bow properly. *Zettai wasureruna!* Don’t forget!” She recalled her father’s instructions delivered in his gruff Japanese. Keep your arms pressed tightly against your sides and bend your upper body at a ninety-degree angle. Hold for as long as you can. It was important to know how to bow, how to behave. Every phrase had a correct counter-phrase, every gesture a precise and appropriate response.

“You have to learn how to behave like a real Japanese or you’ll never survive,” he’d said. “We’re here now. We’re here forever.”

She realized with horror that she had missed her chance to bow earlier when she was standing in front of the class. Now the opportunity was gone and she was being urged to hurry and sit down. The narrow bench wobbled when she slid onto it. Aya shot a sidelong glance at the girl beside her, who had quickly turned her head away and moved to the far side of the bench. All Aya could see of her was her thick black hair cut straight across just below her chin. The surface of the desk felt rough, the wood unfinished. Aya put her hands in her lap, reluctant to take up any space on top of the shared desk, and squeezed her fists tighter and tighter until the knuckles turned

white and shiny. Then, with her head bent low, she stared at the two fists in her lap. They didn't look like her own hands.

Nothing was recognizable anymore, not even her hands.



Aya was in Japan because her father had signed the papers to repatriate. *Go east of the Rockies and disperse, or go to Japan*—that was the choice Canada had given them. No Japanese Canadians would ever be allowed to return to the west coast. In the spring of 1945, even before the war was over, officials arrived in the internment camps with forms to sign and gave everyone three weeks to choose between going “back” to Japan or scattering to unknown parts across Canada.

Aya heard the panicked discussions among her father and other adults. Strange terms like “deportation” and “forced exile” confused her, but other things they said were perfectly clear: “Everything we have is gone,” “They want to get rid of us,” “How can I start over again at my age?” Clearest of all, though, was this: “They hate us. No matter where we go in this country, they will always hate us.” It was her father’s voice.

He signed, and with his signature gave the government what it wanted—the ability to deport him. Once the war ended, he was not allowed to revoke what had been done. Aya knew she would have to go with her father. It was just the two of them now that her mother was dead.

They did not leave until the fall of 1946, boarding their train in Slocan City to make the same journey in reverse as when they had been interned. From the interior of British Columbia, they traveled over jagged mountain passes, across endless tracts of forest, along the length of the mighty Fraser River with its thunderous roar pounding in their ears. At the port in Vancouver they waited under guard in the immigration shed for the American military transport ship that would take them to Occupied Japan.

They were told they could take as much luggage as they liked,

but they had next to nothing. Aya's mother's ashes were in her father's suitcase, inside a small square box that had been sealed tight and wrapped in a white cloth. Sometimes she wanted to make sure her mother was still there, but she didn't dare open his suitcase to look. Inside her own suitcase she had all her clothes, including the winter coat that had once been too big but that now barely fit her. And in a corner of the suitcase she'd also tucked the handkerchief in which she'd wrapped six little stones from Slocan Lake. They were ugly and gray, not like the sparkly stones she and her friend Midori had collected when they were pretending to be prospectors searching for precious gems. The stones weren't heavy at all. For Aya, they could never be heavy enough.



As soon as their ship came within sight of Japan, a cry had gone out that spread from family to family. "We're approaching the coast. We should be able to see Nippon any minute now!"

It was drizzling, but everyone, including Aya and her father, climbed up to the deck and crowded around the railing. They peered into the thick mist. No land was visible yet, although they could see a few small fishing boats close by dipping in and out of the ocean waves.

"*Mieru?* Can you see?" Her father pointed into the murky distance.

She couldn't see anything, not even the horizon. The sea, the sky, and the rain were all of a piece, a flat wash of gray.

"We're here at last. Our journey is over. Our long, hard journey." His voice cracked with emotion. She sensed that he meant something more than their two-week sea voyage.

"If it weren't for this damn rain, we could see Mount Fuji. That's a beautiful sight, Mount Fuji is. There are lots of beautiful sights in Japan, Aya. You'll see them soon enough. You'll be glad I brought you here."

She looked at his profile. The stubble of his beard was flecked

with more gray than ever before, making the shadow of his sunken cheek more pronounced. His jawbone moved just below his ear, in the spot where he was continually grinding his teeth. All the tension and resentment always found its way to that spot.

“If only your . . .” He was staring out at the sea. Rain glistened on his hair and forehead.

Aya knew better than to respond. It had become taboo to talk about her mother, for it made them both too uncomfortable. Her death had pushed Aya and her father farther apart, not closer, as if her mother’s absence was a solid mass that sat between them. Absence was not emptiness or nothingness, she had discovered. It was the opposite. Insistent and ever present.

When the rain stopped and the mist thinned, the shoreline came into sight and they could see the sunburned faces of fishermen on boats that bobbed in the harbor. Soon they could even make out tiny figures on land. They were slightly southwest of Tokyo, bound for disembarkation at Uraga.

“Look!” Her father suddenly cupped his hand against the back of her head as if he needed to make sure she was facing the right direction. She could feel his rough calluses. “This is Japan. These are *Nihonjin*! Japanese people. Everyone looks like us. We’re home.”

They were close to landing. Aya stared at the group of unkempt men in ragged clothing who were running barefoot along the dock where their ship was coming in. These were the *Nihonjin* who had come to greet them. They were shouting something in Japanese.

What are they saying, she was about to ask when she made out the words on her own. Not hello or welcome back, but “*Amerikajin! Cigaretto!*”



Initially they moved in with her father’s relatives, an older couple who lived on the outskirts of Tokyo. But it soon became clear that the house was too small, resources too limited, the circumstances too strained. “There’s nothing here,” the husband said repeatedly,

in a weary monotone. "This is what happens when you lose." He was a remote man but not unkind. His wife, whom Aya was told to address as Aunt Ritsuko, terrified her.

"Why didn't you teach her to speak Japanese better? She's thirteen, but she sounds like a six-year-old!"

Aunt Ritsuko's shrill voice echoed throughout the tiny wooden house, and Aya feared her sharp staccato words as if they were capable of drawing real blood. She quickly learned it was better to be quiet, to listen but not speak, and this habit became her way of coping. If she spoke at all, she whispered, and gradually she felt her throat drying up, her voice pulled thinner and thinner like a strand of toffee. She would have liked to stop talking entirely, but it was still necessary to reply if someone spoke to her. Neighbors and shopkeepers peppered her with questions: "Where are you from?" "How long are you staying?" "Where's your mother?"

"Don't tell anyone anything," her father had said right after they arrived. "People here are nosy. This is a country of busybodies." Inside the house, he and Aunt Ritsuko clashed constantly. Whenever he complained about how bad things were in Japan, she would snap, "Well, what did you expect? Why did you come back?" Outside the house, Aya's father had many different voices, depending on whom he was talking to, sometimes formal, sometimes obsequious, sometimes carrying on about topics he knew nothing about. But Aya noticed that the times when he was the most polite to a person to their face was usually when he would turn around and curse them behind their back.

"Not good enough, never good enough," he muttered under his breath whenever yet another odd job abruptly ended.

Everyone here was busy, always rushing. Aunt Ritsuko did everything fast. Despite the way her feet turned inward, pigeon-like, so it looked as if she might bump into herself with every step, she could actually walk faster than anyone Aya had ever known. Dawdlers, it seemed, were viewed with suspicion. Outsiders even more so.

"Don't expect me to translate for you," Aunt Ritsuko said, pushing the loose strands of her wiry gray hair back into her tight bun. "I don't have time. Don't expect me to guess what's on your mind, either."

Sometimes Aya understood, often she didn't. It seemed to depend less on what people said than on how. If they spoke to her slowly and gently, the way her mother always had, then the words were like drops of warm rain that dissolved magically into her brain, and she understood every single word. Aya's mother had come to Canada as a young picture bride to marry Aya's father. She had never learned much English and spoke to Aya only in Japanese. Aya could still hear her mother's soft cadence. "*Aya-chan, ii ko desu, ne. Aya-chan, you're a good child. You help me with everything. Aya-chan, what would I do without you.*"

But none of that mattered now. Hardly anyone here spoke like her mother. Everyone was in too much of a hurry. Even after she and her father moved to their own place, Aya found that most people she met sounded just like her aunt, so cross and impatient that it was impossible to understand them. Their words swirled around and around, circling her head like angry black crows.



After the incident with Fumi, Aya was afraid to return to school, but she was more afraid of not going. The other option—explaining to her father what had happened and exposing her shame—struck her as much worse. Her shame would become his shame. She decided she had no choice. She would go back to school, hang her head, and pray. Pray that Fumi would ignore her, pray that the teacher would disregard her, pray that no one would ask her anything, pray that the time would pass and that each day would eventually come to a close. Anything could be endured, she had discovered, if she could only package the time into discrete little packets. She imagined taking the minutes, each one like a pellet, and wrapping them up—one minute, five minutes, fifteen, thirty. Once she had managed to survive a full hour, she could put the packets of time into a box, tie it with string, and push it down a conveyer belt. Just one more minute, one more hour, one more day.

Fumi ignored her. Although this was exactly what she wanted, Aya found herself so confused by the activities at school, she became

desperate for someone to ask. Except for the bell and the loud yelling that announced lunch or the end of the school day, she didn't know how to anticipate what was going to happen next. The rhythm of the classroom was erratic. One minute the students were called to the blackboard to write complicated kanji in large exaggerated strokes, the next minute everyone was doing calisthenics in the aisles beside their desks, stretching their arms wildly or jumping up and down. Sometimes they recited aloud. Sometimes they sat in silence reading quietly to themselves. The textbooks were old and the pages inside were covered with thick bars of black ink, long passages the students had been ordered to censor themselves.

By the end of the first week, word had gotten out about Aya, the repeat girl, and after class the boys in the lower grades followed her. They called her names and threw handfuls of sand. She was always relieved to reach home until she looked around at her surroundings. The tatami mats were so old and moldy they sank with each step she took, and the wooden walls so full of holes, the dust blew right in. To cook they had to use the charcoal *shichirin* in the outdoor hallway. The communal sink was downstairs; the shared toilet was a hole over which she had to squat, holding her nose and hoping she wouldn't fall in. The other residents of the *nagaya*—tenement house, she learned it meant—were strangers. Through the walls Aya could hear an old lady cackling loudly to herself. A middle-aged man who sat at home all day kept telling her father he should put Aya to work. "Why bother sending her to school? That's a waste of time." Aunt Ritsuko had said more or less the same thing. It was yet another reason why Aya and her father had moved out and found the place where they now lived in the center of Tokyo.



Three weeks passed, then four. Kondo Sensei announced one morning that they would have a short test. Aya sat with her hands in her lap, aware that she had forgotten to bring anything to write with. It didn't really matter, as she would never be able to understand the test. Beside her she saw Fumi reach for her threadbare cloth pencil

case and take out a short pencil stub. Then she watched as Fumi pulled out a second stub, just as short as the first, and without turning her head, slid it over to Aya's side of the desk. The stub was less than two inches long, but the tip had been whittled carefully with a knife into a clean sharp point.

Aya didn't know if this was meant to be an apology, but it didn't matter. She took the pencil. She would take anything.

Saturday classes were half days, and Kondo usually liked to conduct review lessons to wind up the week. But today the girls seemed more tired than usual. He'd given them an arithmetic test two days ago, and they'd all done poorly. He wondered if it was as demoralizing to them as it was to him. This was his first year at Minami Nishiki, and sometimes he felt as if he were starting all over again as a freshman instructor instead of the experienced teacher that he was. Few of the girls looked up; most kept their heads down, staring either at their fingers or at some blank spot on the top of their desks. The new girl, Aya, was the worst. She never raised her head in class, and so far she hadn't spoken a word.

The school had recently received a donation of maps for the new geography program, and he decided this was a good time to open the kit he had been given.

"I have a surprise for all of you." He could tell by the way they shifted their weight that he had caught their attention. "It's for your social studies lesson. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, Sensei!"

It was hard to tell if they were genuinely interested or simply humoring him.

"In the past when we studied history and geography, we mistakenly studied bad history and bad geography. We don't want to study bad things anymore, so that's why we have a new program called social studies. As we know, American children are more democratic

because they are taught social studies.” He cast his eyes around the room. Most of the students were looking down at their desks again. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sensei!”

“Very well. This will only take me a moment.” He went to the cupboard in the corner of the classroom, pulled out a long thin box, and carried it back to his desk. From the box he took out several long metal tubes. After a few minutes of fiddling, he managed to snap them together into the shape of a stand. He reached into the box again and pulled out a large roll of canvas that he attached to a hook at the top of the stand. Carefully he unfurled the map.

Kondo took a step back and examined his handiwork. The metal roller running across the top was bent so the map hung slightly lower on one side, and the edges of the map were frayed. In the bottom left corner, he could make out “Property of Iowa District School Board” stamped in light blue letters. Everything was in English, but the girls couldn’t read English yet except for a few rudimentary words and phrases. Of course the map also looked different in more significant ways. Japan was no longer in the center and the vast stretch of red that had once represented the empire across Asia was entirely gone.

“Class, this is a map of the world,” he said.

There was a long silence until a small voice at the back of the room asked, “Sensei, where is Japan?”

After squinting at the map for a moment, he picked up his pointer and touched a spot so close to the edge of the map it looked like it could fall off. “Here. This is Japan.”

It resembled a shriveled bean.

“This is what the world looks like. This is what we will study.” He moved his pointer to the opposite side of the map and placed it in the center of the United States. “Class, what country is this?”

He looked meaningfully at Aya, but she dropped her gaze immediately.

“Sanae?” he said, picking the one student he could always count on. “I think you know what country this is. Can you please tell the class?”

Sanae looked down at her desk. “America?” she whispered timidly.

“That’s it. Speak up so everyone can hear.”

“America.”

“Very good. And what is America most famous for?”

Again silence.

It was almost time to end class. Kondo wondered if they were tired or bored or simply hungry. He slapped his pointer against the map a second time, hitting it a little harder than he intended. The metal stand wobbled unsteadily. “Come now, it’s not a hard question. You know the answer. What is America most famous for?”

*Chocoretto.* He heard the whisper at the back of the room but he wasn’t sure who had spoken. Some of the girls started to giggle.

The bell rang and he set down his pointer. Kondo tried to muster his most authoritative tone of voice—it should be confident, full of energy, in control. He wanted them to look forward to the new social studies program. He wanted them to understand everything that this map represented.

“We’ll continue next week. That’s all for today. Class dismissed!”

After the last student had left, Kondo sat down at his desk. He listened to the girls’ high-pitched chatter grow fainter and fainter as they walked down the school corridor. Once they had exited the building, he was conscious of them again, this time from outside, as their voices floated up to his ears through the open windows and mingled with the cries of the boys and girls in the younger grades who had been let out earlier and were playing in the school yard. From the distance, all their voices sounded so earnest. Every so often he heard shouts of “Stupid!” or “That’s mine!”—the little boys seemed particularly prone to fighting—and he felt his heart twist at their innocence and their youth. Even though the students in his class were older, they were still such young girls.

The children struck him as so much more adaptable than adults. The younger they were, the quicker they seemed to make the transition to whatever was new. They switched from miso soup to milk, from rice to bread, and back again with barely any need to stop sipping or chewing. Maybe they were hungry, but it was more than

that. Change was in the air, and the children handled it with an insouciance that he envied.

It didn't surprise anyone that the Americans demanded major reforms in the education system. Naturally the old teaching, especially the morals, history, and geography classes, had to go—too feudalistic, too militaristic—to be replaced by a new curriculum that emphasized principles of democracy and individualism. The secondary-school system was also radically revamped by being split into two levels: a middle school of three grades and a high school of three grades. All levels of education were ordered to become coeducational as quickly as possible. Fortunately many elementary schools already had boys and girls attending the same school, so the change was not difficult, but for the higher grades making the shift was more challenging. Many parents found it unthinkable not to have separate education for boys and girls from the age of puberty, so this delicate transition was being phased in more gradually.

The Americans even thought the new middle-school grades should have their own separate buildings (they liked to call them junior high), but everyone recognized the absurdity of such a demand. The economy was precarious and large sections of the city were still in ruins. Many schools, like the one where Kondo used to teach, had burned to the ground during the bombings, and at Minami Nishiki, although they were lucky the foundation had been made of concrete and the building itself survived, there wasn't enough money to repair the classroom walls or windows, never mind erecting a separate structure. So they came up with an eminently practical solution: to create the new "middle school" by simply putting a handwritten sign over the doors of the classrooms used by the girls who were twelve and up. The older boys had been sent to a neighboring school.

If they could, Kondo was sure the Americans would have changed the school year, too, so it started in September the way their schools did. They seemed to have opinions on everything. Just thinking of the enormous disruption such a change would cause made him cringe. Anyone could see that at least in this regard the Japanese way was better. April, when the cherry trees were in full bloom, was clearly the best time to begin a new course of study.

But what difference did the views of one individual like himself make? Whatever was going to happen would happen—a new social studies curriculum, different classroom arrangements, American food for the school lunches. He had to admit that the students seemed to display no resistance at all. Maybe the Americans were right, and even if they weren't, it didn't matter because no one here could stop what was happening. Change was moving fast, like a giant tsunami, and Kondo did what everyone else around him did. He ran as fast as he could to keep from being crushed by the wave.

He was lucky; he knew that, too. Many former teachers had been purged at the end of the war. They were the ones who had been too patriotic, the kind who were a bit too eager to report on others who they felt were not contributing as fully to the war effort as they should. These teachers hadn't thought much of Kondo, whose special subject area was English, the language of the enemy, and whose ineligibility for the draft seemed very suspicious. He explained that he had tried to sign up many times, but no matter how desperate the army recruiters were, even when they were taking older men, they said they had no use for someone so nearsighted. One of them had laughed in his face. "With your eyes, you'd shoot one of us, not the enemy!" In the last three years of the war, he had spent most of his time in a munitions factory, supervising students who had been deployed from school to the war effort. He sometimes wondered what had become of them. How many had been sent to the front and died there?

His relatives and neighbors had felt sorry for him. What a shame he couldn't serve, what a shame he couldn't sacrifice himself for the empire, as their own sons were doing. After the war was over, although no one said it, he sensed that people didn't pity him so much as they resented him. He was alive, their sons were not. He was whole and able-limbed, while their boys had returned damaged and broken.

"Give it back!"

"*Bakayaro!*"

Kondo got up and stood at the window. Two boys in the school

yard were fighting. One boy was holding something up over his head, trying to keep the other from getting it.

“Say you’re sorry, you *baka*.”

“No way! You stink! *Kusotare*.”

“You stink more.”

“Your father stinks!”

Kondo thought he recognized one of the boys. He looked like the younger brother of one of his students, Akiko Hayashi. What was his name? Masayoshi? Masatomi? Something like that. Both boys wore tattered clothes that were no better than rags and even from a distance Kondo could see the outline of their ribs through their thin undershirts. What could they possibly be fighting over? Probably some useless scrap. Well, let them enjoy their scuffle. He wondered if they knew that they were also the lucky ones. He’d seen plenty of boys their age at Ueno train station, orphaned and forced to fend for themselves. You grew up quickly in a circumstance like that. Those little boys had no compunction about following the GIs and their *panpan* women, cadging cigarettes, chewing gum, and who knew what else. A school-yard scuffle belonged to another era for them.

He turned away from the window and looked at the front row of empty desks, his eyes resting on the spot where the new girl sat. She didn’t seem able to talk at all, and he wasn’t sure how much she understood of what went on. What on earth was she doing here? Who ever heard about Japanese coming back from America? Why would anyone in their right mind do that? Leave a land of plenty for this. Only the desperate came here, and there were lots of those. They were from places like Manchuria and Korea, boatload after boatload of *hikiagesha*, repatriates driven out of Japan’s former colonies. They flooded back to the homeland with nothing except the clothes on their backs and the few possessions that they managed to strap around their shoulders. “Go home.” He mouthed the words in English. Was he talking about the repats? Or was he really thinking of the Americans? “Go home, GI Joe.” He tested the sound of this phrase, speaking the words aloud this time and listening self-consciously to the echo his voice made in the empty room. It wasn’t

that he hated the Americans—he didn't even really dislike them—but it seemed as if they had already been here long enough. A year and a half, soon it would be two years, and no sign of anyone leaving.

As for Aya Shimamura, well, he'd done what he thought best, but look at what had happened. How could he have predicted that Fumi would behave the way she had? The principal had some ludicrous idea that Aya's presence would somehow stimulate English-language learning. "Kondo-kun," he'd said, "I want our school to get a head start with all this English study. You figure out how to do it. It's going to be English all the way from this point on, you mark my words." Kondo couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he had the sense that something beyond sheer love of pedagogy was behind the principal's method of running his school. He was a hustler in his own way, yet Kondo had to admit that the principal was able to get things done. Hadn't he managed to make their school one of the first to receive the new maps from America? Of course, all schools were going to get them sooner or later, but the fact that the principal had gotten his hands on one of the first was an accomplishment you had to admire.

Kondo stood up and walked over to the map where it still hung on its spindly metal frame. He was about to roll it up and put it away when something held him transfixed. Slowly, softly, he began pronouncing the English names he saw stamped in thick black letters across the different countries. The world was so vast, it struck him, so much vaster than any of them could ever imagine, living as they did in their one tiny corner of the globe.

He should write the names of the most important countries and capital cities in Japanese underneath the English lettering, he thought. That would help his students. They were good girls but not all of them were as sharp as he wished they were. Yes, he could do that much. He had a fine calligraphic hand, and he would bring his good brush and ink from home. But it would have to wait until next week. Right now he had to set off for his spot in the Alley, a place near Shibuya station that he felt confident none of his fellow teachers knew about. As the weather was so nice, he decided to walk. It would take well over an hour but he wanted to save on streetcar fare.

The

WOLF  
ROAD

A NOVEL

BETH LEWIS

## The Wolf Road

## The End a' Old Me

I sat up high, oak branch 'tween my knees, and watched the tattooed man stride about in the snow. Pictures all over his face, no skin left no more, just ink and blood. Looking for me, he was. Always looking for me. He left red drops in the white, fallen from his fish knife. Not fish blood though. Man blood. Boy blood. Lad from Tucket lost his scalp to that knife. Scrap of hair and pink hung from the man's belt. That was dripping too, hot and fresh. He'd left the body in the thicket for the wolves to find.

I blew smoky breath into my hands.

"You're a long way from home, Kreagar," I called down.

The trees took my voice and scattered it to pieces. Winter made skeletons of the forest, see, made camouflage tricky 'less you know what you're doing, and I know exactly what I'm doing. He weren't going to find no tracks nor footprints nowhere in this forest what weren't his, I know better'n that. Kreagar looked all around, up high and 'neath brushes, but I've always been good at hiding.

"Who's that talkin' at me out in the trees?" he shouted. His voice was like rubbing bone on bark. Something raw in it when he raged, but when he was kind it was soft rumbling that cut through a chill night. I didn't want to think about him being kind no more. His kindness was lies and masks.

"Saw what you did to that boy," I said, "saw where you put him. See his curly hair on your belt."

Kreagar sniffed hard. Cold making his nose run into his beard. Teeth bared like one of them mountain bears. Didn't even have a shirt on, never did when he did his killing. Blood splashed all over his chest, mingling with the tattoos and wiry black hair.

"That you, Elka girl? That my Elka playing squirrel in the trees?" he shouted.

"I ain't yours," I said, "never was, never gonna be."

I took out my knife. Long blade, barbed saw teeth on the back, and staghorn handle.

Kreagar stamped around the forest, showing all the critters where he was, trailing blood like a damn invitation.

"Come down, give ol' Kreag a hug. I've missed you."

"I don't think so. Think I'll stay right where I am."

His eyes searched the trees. Black as pitch them eyes, black as disease and disorder and hate and lies. He grinned, flat white teeth like gravestones, and twirled his little fish gutter in his fingers, flinging blood everywhere, rolling out the red carpet.

"Elka, you know I don't mean you no harm." His voice turned friendly. "I'd never hurt my Elka."

He wandered around like a blind man, trudging through the snow, steam lifting off his body. Always hot after a killing. He was lean, carved out of wood some say, and but for the tattoos had a face you'd take home to your mother. He leaned up against a cottonwood tree, panting to keep the cold out, getting sick of hide-and-seek.

"Could a' killed you a hundred times, girlie," he said, slow. "Could a' taken my pig sticker and cut your neck to navel while you slept. Could a' peeled your skin off easy as boiled trout."

I remembered all those years calling him Daddy and felt sick.

"Could a' made my winter boots out of your back," he carried on, voice getting more excited, smile getting bigger, like he was reeling

off courses at a feast. “New belt out of your arms. Could a’ stuffed my mattress with your silky brown hair.”

He laughed and I felt sicker. He raised his knife, pointed it into the trees, right at my face though he didn’t know it.

“You’d make a fine pair of boots, Elka girl.”

Heard it all before but it didn’t stop the cold creeping up my back, cold that weren’t snow. Cold that weren’t ice and winter. I’d heard him say worse but never to me. I was still afraid of him, the things he’d done, the things he made me do. But damn if I wasn’t trying to turn it to good.

“All these months you been looking for me, Kreagar, and I found you first.”

I raised up my own knife. Weighted right nice for throwing. I told him in my head to stay there against the tree, told him don’t you move a muscle.

“I been worried something rotten for you, Elka. This world ain’t no place for a kid like you on your own. There are worse things than wolves in the dark. Worse things than me.”

But for the blood he could have been a normal Joe out on a stroll. But for the kid’s scalp swinging in the breeze, he could’ve been anyone. But he wasn’t. He was Kreagar Hallet. Murdering, kid-killing bastard Kreagar Hallet. Took me far too long to figure that out and no prettied-up words would change it now.

I stood up on the branch without making more’n a snowflake shudder and wound back my arm. Breathed out. Pictured him like a deer. Threw my knife with all the force I had, straight and true and hit him in that soft spot just below the collarbone. That metal went through his shoulder into that tree, pinned him hard, heard that wood thud you get during target practice. And I’d done a lot of target practice. Damn if that weren’t a perfect shot.

Hollered and howled he did, more out of shock than pain. Didn’t

think his little Elka could throw that hard, I'll bet. Kreagar shouted some things I daren't repeat, some threats that shouldn't see light of day. His own blood met the boy's. The fat black lines on his chest now coated red, hot and steaming fresh in the cold.

He tried to pull it out, but I cut them barbs deep. He screamed like a dying sow when he tried.

"Get here, girl, I'm gonna rip you up!"

Still looking around for me, screaming up something fierce. He roared at me, filling the forest, making birds flee their nests, rabbits scabble into their warrens, but he still couldn't see me. Ghost I was in those woods. He'd taught me well.

"I'm gonna find you! I'm gonna kill you slow, Elka!"

I couldn't help but laugh. I had him. Finally. Sprung the trap and caught me a rabid bear.

"Magistrate Lyon's going to find you first," I said. "Told her where you is and where the boy is too. She'll see what you did to him. She's been hunting you a long time, across mountains she's gone, looking for you."

That shut him up. Color drained right out of him. Nobody wants Lyon and her six-shooter on their tail, and Kreagar had for months. But then, so had I.

He started pleading, trying the friendly on me, but I wasn't hearing it. Strands of spit hung off his beard, flaring out with every breath. I watched him until I heard the clomping horse hooves, kicking up snow and soil. Steam rising off hard-ridden flanks. I smiled. Magistrate Lyon and her lieutenants, here to bring in the bad guy. Another life and that bad guy could a' been me.

No reward, of course; gold don't mean nothing to me no more, only life got value in my mind.

I saw them coming through the trees, Kreagar still stuck and hollering, panicking and pulling on the handle, that blood trail leading them right to his feet.

Lyon's smarter than Kreagar, got eyes like a sparrow hawk, she'd see me in half a breath and she'd take me too for what I done. She'd have questions. Big ones I didn't feel much like answering.

Kreagar heard them hooves, heard them whinnying mares. His eyes went wide like a buck about to be shot, and that's when I got to leave it up to the law. Shame about the knife. That skinned me many a rabbit and marten, saved my life more'n once too. A good knife is hard to come by, about as hard as finding a good person in this damned country. When your life is your only currency and you got debts to pay, a good knife can make all the difference. I might've lost my blade, but I paid my debt. Lyon shouldn't come looking for me no more. Unless a' course, Kreagar tells her the truth.

## The Beginning, or Close as You Gonna Get

When the thunderhead comes, drumming through the sky, you take cover, you lock your doors, and you find a place to pray because if it finds you, there ain't no going back. When the thunderhead came to Ridgeway, my clapboard town, I had nowhere to hide. Seven years old I was and screaming up something fierce at my nana. She wanted me to go collect pine resin for the lamps. Said it made 'em burn with a pretty smell. I told her pretty is for fools and I didn't want no pine smelling up my house.

"My house, girl," she said, "you just a guest here till your parents come back. Pray that it be soon."

I think I had a different name back then. Don't remember Nana ever calling me Elka.

I told her to go spit seeds and started howling.

"That mouth of yours is black as the goddamn devil's," she shouted in that tone what meant I was in for a beating. Saw her reaching for her walking stick. Had me welts the shape a' that stick fresh on my back.

"My mouth ain't nothin', you ain't my momma, you can't tell me nothin'." I was wailing and trying my damndest to push over the eating table, to send all them plates and three types a' fork scattering all over. That'd show her, I figured, show her good.

Nana let out one a' her big sighs. Seen other old folk in Ridgeway sigh like that, like they weren't just sick a' the person giving them

ire but sick a' the world what was full a' them. All them years, Nana must a' been hundreds, all them wrinkles creasing up her face, that sigh is what them years sound like: wheezing, long, and dog tired.

"Your momma," Nana said, "my fool of a daughter, running off with that man." She looked at me like I was Momma for a minute, kindness in her eye, then must a' seen that Daddy half a' me and got mad again. She clenched up all her teeth so hard I wondered brief if they was going to crack and fly out her head.

"They coming back to get me," I said, whining voice full a' tears. "Daddy gonna show you the back a' his hand for beating me."

Nana laughed, high-pitched and trilling like a shrike bird. "Your daddy's too busy hunting gold up in the north and your momma's too busy shining his boots to think of you, girl. You're stuck with me and I'm stuck with you, so you better go out and get that resin or so help me child I'll beat you blue."

Nana's fists was tight and her body was shaking. She was a rake of a woman but she was Mussa Valley born, built head to toe out a' grit and stubborn. She had strength in her what you'd never credit behind that paper skin. Broke my arm once, she did, with just them hands a' hers.

I crossed my arms over my chest and I huffed and I said I didn't want no pine and I hated pine 'bout as much as I hated her.

Then she threw up her arms, sick of me, and said she was going walking.

"Don't you follow me," she said, "I don't even want to look at you no more."

She'd been gone not half an hour when the sky boomed black, cut out the sun. Sounded like a mountain splitting apart. No matter how many times I've heard that since, I get the fear. Cold runs up my bones from my toes to my skull. I shake. I sweat like a snow fox in summer. All because of that day. All because my nana left me alone when the thunderhead came.

Our little two-room shack, far out in the forest, didn't stand a chance against that weather. Nana said her and Grandpa, afore he died in the Second Conflict some twenty years past, rebuilt that shack a hundred times and she'd rebuild it a hundred more no doubt. Nana and me was like butting rams most days but not all my thoughts a' that shack were dark. When that thunderhead came, I sure as shit wanted that woman and them iron arms 'round my shoulders.

I saw the thunderhead coming down from the north, rolling 'tween the hills at the top of our valley. Our idiot valley. Acted like a corral, funneled all that raging storm right toward our forest, our front door, and to Ridgeway a few miles down the way. It kicked up rocks and broken branches and mashed them all together with ice and rain. I saw it out the window, roaring down the hill like a grizzly in heat.

Ground shook. My toes went cold. The roof ripped off and smashed against the cedars. I don't remember screaming but I'm sure I was. Felt like all hell was coming down on my seven-year-old head. Cracking thunder all but deafened me. Hail and rain all but froze me solid. I hid under the eating table, arms and legs wrapped tight around its leg, and shouted at it all to go away, leave me be. Shouted for my nana to come back. Cursed her name more'n once.

Then I was in the air. Table lifted up like a dry leaf and afore I knew it, I was too high to let go. I dug my nails into the wood and scrunched up my eyes. Rocks and twigs snagged at me, cut up my arms and legs, pulled out my hair in clumps. Tiny balls of ice hit my face and felt like hot metal filings. That wind threw me and the table around like we was nothing. Only existing for the fun of the thunder. Table got ripped away or I let go, I don't know. Spinning and careening and screaming. No idea if sky was up, rock was down, or if I was already dead.

I don't know much a' what happened next. The storm must a'

let me go, had enough of playing. Next thing I knew I was falling, rushing air pulling at me, storm passing off to the east. Headfirst into the Thick Woods. I fell through close branches, smells of cedar and alder and cypress. Cradled me, slowed me, till one a' them branches didn't want to let me go. My vest ripped and snagged and I was swinging ten feet up from the dirt. Felt blood on me and cuts stinging and my lungs was stripped from screaming. Then my vest ripped and I dropped. Landed with a thud on the moss, a pain shooting right up my back.

Dazed, I was. I remember that clear as spring. The thunderhead blew itself out over the ridge. They never last long though they make sure you never forget them. I sat in that same spot in the Thick Woods, swaying, gathering up all that had just happened in my baby head. Trying to make some kind a' sense of it all. Could a' been ten minutes. Could a' been half a day. Think it was when I started to get hungry that I snapped out of it.

Everything was green and brown. Couldn't see the sky for the branches. Couldn't see more'n a few feet in front of me. Lucky I was small and could squeeze 'tween the trunks.

"Nana," I shouted, "Nana, where you at?"

But the forest didn't answer. Didn't take me long to realize Nana weren't coming.

She said we lived south in the valley. Ridgeway town was souther still. Showed it me on a map one time. I figured the thunderhead came from the north, so that's where it took me back to. My young head said go south. South was down on the map so that's the way I went. Down any hill I could find.

Got lost quick.

I tried picturing all those places on that map of BeeCee. That's what we call our country now, just letters of its real name what most people have forgot or don't care to remember. The map said that old name behind all the scribblings, all the new borders and ter-

ritories my nana drawn on, but I could only read letters then, not whole words. All I know is that one day all the maps became useless and we had to make our own. The old'uns called that day the Fall or the Reformation. Nana said some down in the far south called it Rapture. Nana was a babe when it happened, said her momma called it the Big Damn Stupid. Set everything back to zero. I never asked why, never much cared. Life is life and you got to live it in the here-now not the back-then. And the here-now for little me was the Thick Woods, with night coming fast.

I had these little boots on, cute things stitched from marten pelt, soft and warm but no good for traveling. They tore up in a few hours. The thunderhead torn a swatch out a' the knee of my denims and them trees had chewed up my vest so's it was barely hanging on to me. Seven-year-old me walked till it got dark. Belly rumbling worse'n the storm. I started crying proper then, big fat tears, blubbering and wailing. I huddled myself inside a hollowed-out log as the darkness crept through the trees. Bugs and grubs crawled all over me. I shivered so hard it shook rotten wood dust into my hair.

Never been alone before. Always had Nana close by and afore her, though I barely remember them, my momma and dad. Nana said they'd gone north—far, far up the world to find their fortune and bring it home to me. That was a few years ago. They sent a letter 'bout a year after they went, brought to the Ridgeway general store by some kind traveler heading that way. I couldn't read it, 'course, but I made Nana read it to me till I knew all them words like I know my own name. Words like “gold” and “sluice” and them what sounded foreign and exciting; “Halveston,” the “Great YK,” “Carmacks,” “Martinsville.” My momma and daddy's names. I made Nana read them over and over. Made the world and them sound close and far all at one time, that letter did. I kept it 'neath my pillow, ink fading with readings and years. Put an ache in my chest thinking the thunderhead took it.

I sniffed hard, sucked up all my fears, and tried to sleep. Worst night of my life that was. No matter all them nights that came after. No matter all those cold, dark things that happened. That one night was the worst. It was the first time I realized that you're all you've got in this world. One moment you can be in your home, fire in the grate, clothes on your back, your kin nattering beside you, the next moment you're lost. Taken up by the thunderhead and dropped into nowhere. No point fixating on all those other things. My nana weren't there, that letter weren't there. My parents sure as shit weren't there. I had me and I had that log and, though I would've loved some hot stew right then, I couldn't much complain. I wriggled about, got somewhere close to comfort, and shut my eyes.

Something scratched at the side of the log. Claws running down bark. My eyes sprang open.

My heart damn near stopped. Night was full, I must a' been sleeping. Moonlight cut through the branches. Sky's always crystal after a storm, almost brighter'n day sometimes. But these woods were thick and old and I couldn't see farther than the swaying fern tips an arm's reach outside the log.

Fern twitched. Heart raced.

Scrabbling got louder. Came closer.

I stopped breathing, hoping it wouldn't find me. I thought I saw bear claws, heard big grizzly sniffing. Forest was playing tricks. I burst out that log quicker than a rabbit down a hole and ran. Ran and ran and ran. Didn't look back once. Not a clue how long I ran for, how far. Then I smelled smoke and saw a light.

"Nana," I shouted. "Nana! I found you!"

The hut sat square in a small clearing. This weren't Nana's shack. This place was smaller. A pipe out the roof puffed smoke and the light spilling out the window showed the fire inside was burning hot. A wooden awning came off the front, propped up with two thick trunks and below it, close to the door, two A-frames stretch-

ing deer hide. Dozen or so metal traps clinked together, hung over a branch. Wire snares, broken and not, littered all over the ground and hanging from trees. Thin strips of red meat dried on racks. Sight a' them made my belly grumble and filled up my mouth with water. Nana always told me not to steal from good folks, but I figured there were so many the trapper wouldn't miss just one strip. 'Sides, I didn't know if he was good folks and Nana never said nothing 'bout stealing from the bad'uns.

I snuck up, quiet as a wolf on the hunt, listening all around for trouble. The racks were just under the awning and I had to pass by one of the windows. I told myself I was a shadow, invisible in the dark, and I could run so fast no fat old trapper could catch me. The smell of that meat was a drug. That metallic tang, that sting of salt and smoke. I thought I could smell juniper in it, maybe even some applewood. Sweet and salty and close enough to touch. I yanked a wide strip of that jerky and a high-pitched bell rang at the door. Smart trapper. Alarmed his dinner in case of bears and hungry girls.

Big boots stomped inside. I shoved the jerky in my mouth and ran. Couldn't tell what meat it was, deer or moose or something else, but it tasted as good as it smelled. The hut door flung open. The trapper didn't shout, but I looked back anyway. Hat on his head, just a black shape, but he had a shotgun. Wasn't no law out in those parts and he had every right to shoot a thief on his land. I forced my tired legs to run.

Then I heard him coming after me.

I was a hare darting quick and low and quiet. He was a lumbering ox, crashing through.

My heart thundered. I didn't want to die in that forest, shot for taking a mouthful of meat I didn't even get to enjoy. Curse that thunderhead for dropping me here, I cried and bawled. Must a'

been screaming. That trapper followed me close. He never shouted for me to stop, same as you don't shout for a buck to stop afore you pull the trigger.

He's going to kill me, I thought. Shoot me to shreds.

A trailing scrap of fur on my boots caught on a branch, tripped me. Don't know how I kept that jerky in my mouth, but I did, even as I fell ass-over-face into a dry creek bed. Landed face-first in the dirt and everything went quiet. No more ox crashing. No more footsteps.

I'd lost him. I'd got the better of that trapper. Got his jerky and got away. I sat up on my knees and ripped off a chunk of that meat, swallowed it whole.

Something made me look over my shoulder. That feeling you get in your bones when someone is watching you. A shadow stood over me.

Big and black and breathing. I didn't even see the butt of the shotgun.

Woke up in the trapper's hut with a sore head wrapped in a bandage. He sat on a chair by the door, staring at me with eyes like the devil. Shotgun rested against his leg, his hat on his knee. He must a' fallen too, his face was all covered in streaks of black dirt.

"Where'd you come from?" he said. His voice had a breath of kindness to it.

Nana told me not to speak to strangers, and this man, living far out in the woods all by himself, was the strangest I'd met.

"Where you going to?" he said. Didn't seem all that surprised I weren't talking. "You got a momma and daddy? Where they at?"

I blinked then, shook my head. "Just my nana."

He smiled, showed off a row of flat white teeth.

"Now we gettin' somewhere," he said. "Where you and your nana live? Dalston? Ridgeway?"

Something in my face must a' gave me away.

"Ridgeway then," he said. He rubbed his cheek but none of the mud came off. "You a long way from home, girl."

He put his hand on the shotgun barrel and relaxed in his chair.

"You can just point me the right way," I said, "and I'll be gone afore you know it."

"There are beasts in these woods would eat you up quicker'n you can scream. Couldn't let you do that."

I shuffled a bit on the bed, felt my cheeks get hot and red. I couldn't tell much about the trapper, other than he wore old denims like me and his shirt was ripped like mine. A coat made of fur and skins hung next to the door with a pair of snowshoes propped up under. His shirt, once white, had spots and smears of something dark brown on it, maybe dried blood from the animals. He stared at me long and hard and my belly started growling again.

"I ain't got no real way of telling if you're speaking true or false," he said. "You could be a troublemaker on the run from the law. You could be a thief and stolen worse than a bite of jerky. You could be anyone."

My nana would a' said I was a troublemaker, but I weren't telling him that.

"I'm headin' down to Ridgeway in the morning to trade some pelts—two-day round-trip, mind." He stopped, rubbed his face again, mud stayed put, and by then I weren't sure if it was really mud.

"Your business is your own, girlie, but I'll do some asking and see if I can find your nana. If I do and she wants you back, I'll take you to her."

"I'll help you find her quicker," I said, scooting off the edge of the bed. I got dizzy then and fell down, landed hard on my hands and knees.

The trapper didn't move to help me, just said, "you couldn't walk

more'n a mile in that state. You're just a baby, no more than a few winters on you. You're dead weight until you can carry a rifle.

"Go to sleep," he said, and picked up his hat. "I'll be gone when you wake up. Keep the fire lit and don't touch nothing."

He put his hat over his face and leant his head back against the door.

I climbed back onto the bed and pulled up the blanket. "You got a name?" I asked.

"I got a few," he said without moving his hat.

Something in the way he said that put a seed of fear in me. I pulled the blanket up close to my chin and hunkered down. There was no chance of me sleeping that night. I didn't take my eyes off him. He didn't make a sound all night. Not a snore. Not a sniff. Didn't move, didn't even let go of the shotgun. Even my nana slept louder than that. He was like one of them statues carved out of stone. Nana took me down to Couver City to see them last summer. She said I needed *culturing*, whatever that meant. Couver was hit hard in the Damn Stupid, says Nana, and only a few of them statues are left in the ruins. Three-day ride up and down that was. After six days in the saddle, sitting awkward 'tween Nana and the horse's neck, I told her I didn't care for culturing.

I must've slept because one moment I was fixing my eyes on the trapper and the next it was dawn and the chair was empty. Shotgun and him were gone. Keep the fire lit, he'd said, and don't touch nothing. I never been much good at following the say-so of grown-ups, not even now I'm grown-up myself.

First thing I did was get another strip of jerky from the rack outside. Then I stoked up the fire and roasted up that meat so it was crispy and charred at the edges, and I had me a fine breakfast. Then I went through the trapper's things. Found a few coins no one uses no more, bowls carved out a' cherrywood, a little wooden box locked up tight, and a knife sharp enough to skin a boar in three

seconds flat. It had a long bone handle, probably deer or moose leg, and the blade was longer'n my forearm. Beautiful thing, I remember thinking, and I sliced up my jerky just to feel it in action. I told myself then that I would have a knife like this. Maybe I could get the trapper to make me one.

I got bored quick. Two-day trip to Ridgeway and back he said. Meant I was further from home than I'd ever been and I didn't know north or south or up or down or which way would take me back to Nana. Shit, by then, that knife in my hands and no grown-up telling me what-for, I weren't even sure I wanted to go back.

Trapper didn't have much of anything and once I had a full belly, I didn't have nothing to occupy me. I went outside, kicked dirt, climbed trees, watched the sun reach noon and start falling into dusk. I wondered if he'd reached Ridgeway yet. If he'd asked around about me. Strange that he didn't ask for my name. Strange that he didn't ask where 'bout in Ridgeway I lived. Because, strictly, I didn't live in Ridgeway. Nana's shack was up the valley. Enough people in town knew about us that I thought he wouldn't have no problem finding her.

I kept the fire hot and twirled that bone-handle knife in my little hands. Thinking of all the things I could do with it. How thin I could slice jerky, how neat and quick I could kill a rabbit. Night came fast with those thoughts swimming inside me and I fell asleep on the floor by the fire.

Woke up to spring dawn singing through the trees and spent that day much as I had the last—exploring the land, finding rabbit runs. I even reset one a' the trapper's squirrel poles what must a' fallen in the thunderhead.

Sun was dipping and I was sucking on another piece of meat, knife in hand, when the trapper came back. He came in the door with a sack over his shoulder. He stared at me, jerky hanging out my mouth and blade in my hands and he didn't say nothing. Something

in his head ticked over and he stopped a beat, then dropped the sack with a sound like logs tumbling off a pile.

“Found your nana,” he said, and hung up his coat.

Felt a sting in me, like my fun was cut short and I’d be back to beatings and her schooling tomorrow. I set down the knife on the floor and I stared at that blade like I was giving up my favorite toy.

“You takin’ me back tomorrow?” I said. Part a’ me wanted to see my nana, but I knew soon as she saw me she’d have me hauling planks to fix the shack or learning letters at that whiteboard a’ hers.

Then he said, “your nana got caught out in the thunderhead, tree fell on her.”

“She dead?”

Trapper nodded once and kept his eyes on me.

Shame on me that my first thinking was: Hot-damn, I don’t got to go back to schooling. Shame on me twice that my second was: Serves her right for treating me rough. Then came the aching like my insides was full a’ river mud, thick and sucking me down, a deep place a’ sorrow I didn’t want no part of. I weren’t all that sure how to feel in them moments. Should I be crying? But I didn’t feel nothing like crying. Should I be whooping for joy? But I didn’t feel like doing that neither. I stared at that knife, chewing on that jerky, quietlike for an age. Trapper didn’t say nothing, he just watched me, waiting to see what I’d do, what kind a’ person I was.

He shifted his foot, floorboard creaked. My eyes was locked on that blade and my head and my heart came together and told me how to feel. I reached for the knife.

Soon as I touched that white bone handle I realized quick I chose right. I didn’t much want to go back to Nana’s shack; she never let me eat jerky and play with knives. Her ways were learning letters and sums, clean hands and clean clothes. Them ways weren’t mine and much as she’d tried to force it, they never were.

The trapper nodded at the meat ’tween my teeth.

“You like that?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You know how to use that knife?”

I weren’t quite sure what he meant, but I nodded again.

“You ever skinned a hare?”

I flinched then. I had, year or two ago, but when Nana caught me she whipped my back bloody. Second time she caught me she broke my arm.

“You ever skinned a hare, girl?” he asked again, something raw in his voice.

“Yes, sir, I have.”

“If you can skin a hare you can ’bout skin anything,” he said, and pointed to the sack. “Traded my furs for a pig. I already jointed it for easy carryin’. Take off the skin and fat, take off the meat, and cut it thin for smokin’. Got it?”

I nodded and stepped forward. The trapper lifted up the sack and poured out the chunks of pig. Pink skin and pale flesh, it would work fine with applewood; I could almost taste it already. Even though I was just seven, I always knew I was born to work a knife. Took me most of the night but I did it, and all while the trapper watched over me, sipping on a flask. He didn’t once tell me to be careful. Didn’t say much ’cept “other way,” when I got to separating the knuckle.

Come dawn we both laid the strips on racks and hung them up in the tiny smokehouse outside.

The trapper put a hand on my shoulder then and said, “You got a gift with a blade, girlie, I’ll teach you to use it right. Names don’t mean nothing in these woods, but I got to call you something.”

Then he looked at me, pulled at my scruffy hair.

“Rougher’n elk’s fur, this,” he said.

So he called me Elka, ’stead of Elk, on account of me being a girl. I stopped asking for his name after a few weeks and just called him

Trapper in my head. He taught me to tie a snare, taught me to set a deadfall trap and shoot a squirrel from fifty yards. All I had to do was help him clean the kills, prep the traps, stretch and scrape the furs, and tend to the hut. I slept on the floor by the fire and him in his bed. Though, thinking about it, I don't think he slept much. He hunted a lot at night, said the wolves come out at night but he never brought back a wolf pelt.

That was my life then and damn if it weren't fun. I was a new person, I forgot my old name quick, and I was Elka from then on. I could make a bow and arrow from sticks and shoot me a marten. I forgot my sums and my letters. I forgot my nana and near forgot my folks, though them words in the letter never went out my head. All them skills Trapper taught me I remember to this day, but there are big ol' patches a' them years that are fuzzy and dark, whole months a' winter what went in a blink. Much as I tried, I couldn't fill up them gaps.

But hell, I was an idiot kid. Trapper was my family even though I didn't know a sure thing about him, but I figured quick I didn't know much more 'bout my parents and they was kin. Trapper was the kind a' family you choose for yourself, the kind that gets closer'n blood. He was my daddy from then, I just needed to find myself a momma.

"This thrilling tale... will be a strong choice for readers who enjoyed  
Paula Hawkins's **THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN** and authors such as  
Liane Moriarty (**BIG LITTLE LIES**)."



# TWISTED RIVER

A NOVEL

**SIOBHÁN  
MACDONALD**

# **TWISTED RIVER**

**Siobhan MacDonald**

(0)

PENGUIN BOOKS

# Oscar

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CURRAGOWER FALLS, LIMERICK, IRELAND

LATE OCTOBER

She would never have fit as neatly into the trunk of his own car. He presses two fingers against her beautiful neck. Just in case. No pulse. The blow was fatal. He looks at her one last time and closes the trunk.

Her blood is all over his hands. Oscar stares at the curious patterns forming on his pale skin. No latex gloves this time. He tries to think. In the cold he hardly moves, watching the tiny pearls of red slide down the coarse hairs to his wedding band. The burning in his stomach spreads upward to his chest. His control is slipping, his panicked breath forming small clouds in the dark. Oscar is in turmoil. From man to shivering animal in the space of three minutes.

Across the road, water rages over the falls. Oscar has felt like this before. It was a long time ago but the memory is vivid. In fourth grade, he punches Annabel Klein so hard in the stomach that she vomits. Another memory flashes before him. This time he's standing over Birgitte, watching her die. Up the road, the church bells sound a mournful chime. What's done is done.

There comes the sudden beat of wings. Looking up, Oscar sees an arrowhead of swans slicing through the night sky. A splutter of rain starts

to fall, the drops making a tinkling sound on the plastic bags scattered at his feet. Shards of glass from a smashed jar of peanut butter mingle with exploded bags of popcorn. There's a squashed banana-the flesh pulped from its skin-and a packet of brownie mix daubed in blood.

*Should he look in the trunk of the car one more time to make sure?*

He fumbles for the catch. It isn't like his BMW. This is a VW sedan. The car they'd agonized in, attempting to sort things out. He'd so wanted to straighten things out. His fingers slip left and right, searching for the catch. The VW badge is smeared with blood. There it is. He squeezes with his thumb and forefinger.

"Dad?"

He freezes. He hadn't seen the kids pick their way across the gravel.

"Elliot?"

His nine-year-old is shivering in pajamas in the driveway. Jess, his twelve-year-old daughter, is behind him.

"You've been gone a long time, Dad," says Elliot.

It's more a question than a statement.

Jess stands there, perplexed, eyes innocent and wide. He sees her scanning the debris of the grocery shopping all over the driveway. His children cannot know what just happened. They must be protected, no matter what. The roaring in his ears begins to build again. He wills his mouth into a smile, pulling his lips over his teeth. He hopes it looks convincing.

Jess's face drains of color as she edges toward him. The sound in his ears is almost unbearable.

"What is it, Jess?"

He can see her mouth is moving. She is asking something.

"What did you say?" he shouts.

"Where's Mom?" she shouts back.

# Kate

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CURRAGOWER FALLS

EARLY SEPTEMBER

Kate could never quite make up her mind whether she loved or loathed September. A flurry of withered leaves danced over her feet as she scurried down the steps of the Clare Street campus and set off briskly for home. Snatching a quick glance at her watch, her heart skipped a beat. She was cutting it fine. She quickened her step. She had to make it home before five. Not a second later. It was anew routine, now that summer break was over. It had been harder with all the idle time this year. Things had been different when they'd had the beach house.

Today had been difficult. Once upon a time Kate would have jumped at the chance of becoming assistant head of the Visual Communications Department. She would have been thrilled to bits. But that was before there were other demands on her. She should have been elated at being offered the position so soon after her return to the workforce. Instead, she felt a bittersweet sadness at having to turn it down. Life was about choices and this was a choice she had to make.

Simon Walsh, the head of department, had looked at her in disbelief "This is a windup. You're teasing me, right?"

With a heavy heart, Kate shook her head.

"But , Kate, you're the best person for the job," Simon protested.

"You know that. I know that. I know you're only just back but you've got the talent and you know this department like no one else."

"I know that, Simon. And I'm flattered. Really, I am. But things at home, you know . . ." She hesitated. "It's just not that easy. The job I have now I can manage. Assistant head is a whole other proposition. Extra responsibility, more time here on campus. I have thought about it. Believe me."

Realizing she was serious, Simon ran a distracted hand through his long hair. "There has to be a way. I was so looking forward to having you as my wingman."

Again, Kate shook her head. She'd made up her mind.

"I'm sorry. There'll be other equally suitable candidates. Anyway, surely the job has to be openly advertised?"

Disgruntled, Simon had taken off, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his crumpled linen jacket.

Already Kate was at the Abbey Bridge and a gust of wind pulled at her slackly fastened chignon, threatening to loosen it. A man on a bicycle swept by, close to the curb. She smiled to herself. It appeared he had every worldly good he owned in his pannier. A black and white dog with attitude sat in the basket up front. Again she looked at her watch. There were scarcely fifteen minutes left. Would she make it? In the old days she might have taken the car but they had only one car now and Mannix had it today. Her laced-up boots started to chafe against her skin as she broke into a jog.

Suddenly, Kate heard the pounding of feet from the rear. Two guys with white hooded tops ran past her. It wasn't clear if one was the quarry and the other the prey or if they were running together. Moments later a squad car screamed through the evening traffic pursuing the two fleeing creatures until they disappeared through an alleyway and out of sight. Unperturbed, Kate continued her journey, the satchel full of papers clapping up and down on her hip.

This was a city where the haves lived side by side with the have-nots. A city whose messy bits were not hidden from view. Even though these encounters were common enough, Kate was always cautious

making her way home past the inner-city housing schemes by the old walls of the city. She was panting now. She glanced again at her wrist. Five more minutes to go.

Once she got to the ancient walls of King John's Castle, Kate could just about see her house across the river. She could imagine it in her mind's eye, just around that bend of houses that overlooked the falls. Kate liked this part of town. She liked the fact that it had probably looked largely the same over the span of centuries. Thomond Bridge with the falls on one side, the low humpbacked rolling hills on the other. The whalebone-white arches of Thomond Park Stadium in the distance. The Treaty Stone with the somber bulk of St. Munchin's Church across the road. The boardwalk.

She scurried over Thomond Bridge, her calves hot and sweaty and her hair eventually escaping and swishing about her face in the wind. Her mouth had gone dry. Why the hell had she not ended that last lecture just five minutes early?

Rustling through sheaves of papers and the crumpled tinfoil of hastily eaten sandwiches, Kate searched for the jagged clump of keys at the bottom of the canvas bag. She managed to stumble through the front door just as the church bells began to chime five. She'd made it!

"Fergus? ... Izzy? ... I'm home."

Kate clambered up the stairs to the kitchen, heart in her mouth.

There, curled up in a blue fleece blanket in a corner of the chaise longue, staring intently at the clock on the wall, was Fergus. He looked from her to the clock and back again. The TV flickered busily at the other side of the room.

"See, I told you," said Kate, out of breath. "I told you, five o'clock. Home by five."

"I see that, Mum. It's five o'clock now. But you're very *nearly* late ..."

He turned back to the TV.

"Whew!" she mouthed to Izzy, who was leaning over the breakfast counter in an apron.

Izzy knew only too well the consequences of her mother arriving after the agreed time. She too had witnessed that thinly veiled anxiety,



"I'll help Fergus with his homework." Inasmuch as anyone could help Fergus with his homework, Izzy tried. She tried her little heart out.

"Is Dad home for dinner? He promised to take me to Guides tonight." Izzy undid the apron and handed it to her mother.

"He'll be on his way," Kate responded with more conviction than she felt. Mannix's behavior had been erratic in recent months, but he had a lot on his mind with the new job, and anything was better than all those months of unemployment.

Alone in the room with Fergus, Kate set to chopping peppers and onions. Every now and then she looked over at the velvet chaise longue that she had personally reupholstered. Fergus was cocooned and fetal under his blanket.

"Today not so good then, Soldier?"

Fergus's face suddenly blotted up and he bit his lower lip. Kate stopped chopping.

"There was writing," he said. "On the wall." Dislodging his glasses, he screwed a fist into an eye socket.

Kate's heart sank. "What do you mean?"

"Writing on the wall in the school yard over by the wheelie bins. They were all laughing. Everyone was laughing ..."

He rubbed the other eye now, desperately trying to keep in the crying.

"I don't care," he said. He twisted the blanket.

"What did it say?"

How stupid of her! How incredibly stupid! How could Fergus tell her what it said? He could scarcely read. Even after five years of learning support, reading did not come any easier. They were going to have to go private. She knew that. She'd known it for some time. But it was the money. Always, the money. They'd do their own research, find their own therapists.

"Who was it, Soldier?" she asked this time. "Who was it that wrote on the wall?"

Fergus looked at her as if she already knew.

"Frankie?"

==- *Siobhan MacDonald*

Of course.

"It was Frankie, wasn't it?"

Silence.

A tough kid with a shock office-ridden carrot hair, Frankie Flynn was a latchkey kid. In the beginning, Kate tried tolerance. Frankie Flynn didn't have it easy. His mother discarded her fluffy dressing gown only to go to her evening job in the off-license, and it was said she was paid in kind.

"I'll sort this out, Soldier," said Kate calmly. "I'll take time out tomorrow and go to the school."

Fergus shot up.

"No!!! You are NOT to go to the school," he screeched. "If you go to the school I will NEVER EVER talk to you again. EVER. And stop calling me Soldier!" He ran from the room dragging his blanket behind him.

Kate was stunned. Onion fumes mixed with tears of hurt for her child. She needed a moment to think. Going to the window, she edged herself into the wicker seat suspended from the ceiling and looked out at the river. An elderly couple huddled over the handrail in the riverside park. They were throwing scraps to the swans below. A young mum pushed her toddler in a miniature car propelled by a long plastic handle. A couple of joggers ran past in conversation and continued on up the boardwalk. Some pleasure craft had moored on the far side of the river, over the weir outside the seventies LEGO-like office block that hung somber and gray over the water. The silhouette of buildings on the far side of the river was a curious melange of old and new. Striking and gauche. Elegant and unremarkable. A microcosm of the city at large. It was a view Kate had grown to love as much as she loved this house with its upside-down layout.

Their house had been the place to be at on New Year's when fireworks rained down against the castle walls and bled in multicolor on the water below. Kate stared out now at the late evening sunshine, a golden glint on the ripples over the falls. The tide was ebbing and there would be fishermen out in the shallows later. Urban fishermen

who pitched up with crooked bicycles and bits of old shopping bags. She often wondered if they ever caught anything.

She closed her eyes, feeling the soothing warmth of the low sun caress her eyelids. When she opened them again, the elderly couple was shuffling off, possibly uneasy with the appearance of a thin man pulling a mastiff terrier on a chain—the animal's chest broader and more menacing than its owner's.

Click. The turn of a key in the door downstairs. Mannix. Kate felt her chest grow tight. His steps were heavy on the stairs. One at a time now, not like they used to be.

"You look chilled ..."

That smile—brilliant as always. That was what she had fallen for—his smile. His shirt still looked fresh and crisp against his sallow skin. In his hand he held his laptop.

She half-smiled, not wanting to start the evening on a sour note.

"The kids?" he asked, draping his raincoat over the back of a breakfast stool.

"In their rooms."

"Good. Good." He rubbed his chin pensively and took a few steps toward her. He stopped then as if he'd thought of something.

"All right?" she asked.

He took a few more steps and then sat gingerly on the edge of the chaise longue.

He cleared his throat. "Look, Kate, there's something I have to tell you ..."

"There's something I have to tell you as well," she interrupted. She would have to get this out of the way.

"Okay, then ..." He hesitated. "You first."

She told him about Fergus. About the episode in the school yard—the latest installment in a catalog of incidents that now seemed to be descending into a regular pattern of bullying.

"That little prick!"

Mannix shook his head, his face gripped by a spasm of anger.

"So, what's this? This is the third or fourth time since the new school year. So our Fergus is that little shit's latest punch-bag?"

Kate's stomach knotted. It was true. It looked like Fergus was set to be Frankie's target for the year. First, there was the disgusting incident with the sandwiches, then the sports bag soaked in urine, and now this.

"Fergus doesn't want me to, but I'm going to the school. I've decided." Kate stood up wearily out of the chair and padded across the polished floorboards.

Mannix shook his head. "And just what do you hope that will achieve? Come on, Kate. You know what we're dealing with here. Look what happened to that Polish kid's dad ..."

"What Polish kid?" asked Kate.

"You know, the scrawny fella. What's this the kids call him? Oh, yeah-Polski Sklep."

"I know who you mean-what happened to his dad?" Kate remembered Polski Sklep being bullied and knew that his mother had gone to the school to complain. But she wasn't aware of any repercussions beyond that.

"Oh, Kate! You don't think his father's two broken ribs happened by accident?"

"What do you mean?" The knot in her stomach pulled tighter.

"Polski Sklep's father is ... was ... a bouncer at a nightclub in town. He got beaten up in the lane outside. That was down to Flynn's oldman."

"I thought Frankie Flynn's dad was in prison."

"And you think that stopped him?"

Kate sighed.

"How do you know all this, Mannix?" she asked, her plan of action now looking futile.

"Spike."

Spike was Mannix's brother. The other half of the O'Brien brothers. As Kate tossed the vegetables onto the sizzling wok, her face set in a

frown. Spike would know. He was in the nightclub business. Spike was in any business that he thought would make him money.

"Hi there, honey." Mannix's face softened at his daughter, who'd floated silently into the room. She was neatly dressed in her Girl Guides uniform. "Oh, shit . . ." he added.

"Aw, Dad, you haven't forgotten, have you? You said you'd take me to the Guides tonight."

"No, no, of course, Izzy, that's fine. It's just that . . . no, never mind. Of course I'll take you."

Izzy looked at her mother.

"You told him, then? About Fergus?"

"Yes, I told him," said Kate, doling out four equally sized portions into black patterned noodle bowls.

"What exactly did Frankie Flynn write on that wall?" Mannix looked at Izzy.

Izzy hesitated a moment as if she didn't want to say.

"Well?" said Mannix.

Kate held her breath.

"Do you really want to know, Dad?"

"I really want to know," said Mannix.

"Fergus O'Brien is a fucking spastic, that's what it said."

Kate felt like she'd been slapped across the face. For a few moments none of them said anything. Mannix's eyes narrowed.

"Did it, now?" he said eventually.

Izzy looked from Kate to Mannix, slowly drinking in their reactions.

"I hate Frankie Flynn." Izzy's voice was ice-cold.

"Don't you worry about that little bollocks," said Mannix, circling his daughter's waist.

"Mannix!" Kate protested, but noticed the profanity had softened Izzy's expression. She had the makings of a grin. Father and daughter were alike in so many ways. Quick to anger, quick to judge, impetuous.

"What are you going to do?" Izzy wasn't letting it go.

Kate squirmed, her parental authority under siege from the piercing stare of her young daughter. The truth was she didn't quite know. Not yet.

"Let's have dinner, Izzy," she said breezily. "It's not your job to worry about this. It's mine and Dad's. Go downstairs and get Fergus, will you?"

Izzy opened her mouth as if to speak but clammed it tightly shut again.

"K," she muttered.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me," rhymed Kate, but her words rang hollow and trite. Izzy turned her back, but not before Kate registered the look of disgust on her daughter's face.

The meal was stilted and awkward, Mannix trying to cajole Fergus without actually addressing the issue, Kate aching to smother her fragile eight-year-old with love. She'd give him anything she could to protect himself. Anything to boost his self-esteem. If Fergus could only walk into that school with his head held high, maybe then he wouldn't wear the mantle of a victim quite so readily. If she could just conjure up something to make him more resilient, more robust. Maybe then Frankie Flynn would move off to prey on someone else. It wasn't a noble solution, she knew, but at the moment all she wanted was Frankie Flynn to leave her son alone.

Even though she'd prepared the meal just the way he liked it, she half expected Fergus would leave his meal untouched. Surprisingly, in between monosyllables, he ate. He did his usual circle trick with the vegetables. He picked a yellow pepper from the yellow pile, a carrot from the orange pile, and then some onions. And back to the yellow pile to start all over again. He was trying his best to put on a brave face in front of his father.

Izzy ate her meal in moody silence. As Kate cleared the dishes she knew they were going to have to do something about Fergus, but for the life of her she didn't know what. Something would come to her over the course of the evening. She went out to the hall to retrieve her satchel in the hope of going over some papers.

Mannix passed her in the hallway carrying a flowery pillowcase.

"Domestic skills at last?" Kate raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, this-it's for Izzy, something for Guides, I think." His lips

grazed her cheek as he breezed past, freshly showered and having swapped his suit for jeans.

"I turned down that job today, by the way."

Given the amount of agonizing she had gone through, she was surprised he hadn't asked her about it already.

"Job?" He looked at her blankly.

"The assistant head of department? The job that Simon offered me?"

"Oh, that ..."**he** said dismissively. "Sexy Simon will have to look for his assistant elsewhere, I guess," he added sarcastically.

Kate felt hurt. It had been silly of her to expect any acknowledgment or recognition of what she had just turned down. Mannix had somehow gotten it into his head that Simon's interest in her was more than professional. But Kate couldn't help feeling let down nonetheless.

"Ready, Izzy?" Mannix shouted, going down the stairs.

At the bottom, he turned round. "Oh, Kate, by the way, I'm calling over to Spike for a bit. We'll talk when I get back, okay?"

"Spike?"

"Kate, don't start. Give the guy a break."

Her expression must have said it all.

"I didn't say a thing," said Kate. "Pints in the Curragower Bar, then?" She kept her tone even. It wasn't as if they could afford them.

"No, Kate. I'm going round to Spike's flat. See you later," he said, sounding resigned. He ushered Izzy out the door and slammed it a little too forcefully behind him. Kate sighed. She should have bitten her tongue.

Just before heading up to the study on the third floor, she looked in on Fergus's bedroom and was alarmed not to see him there. Not on the bed with his Nintendo. Not making models with his K'NEX. As she stood in the twilight she heard a heavy panting sound coming from the other side of the bed.

"Fergus?" she said tentatively, walking around the bed.

More huffing and puffing.

"What on earth are you doing?" Although it was perfectly obvious what he was doing.

He stopped then and propped himself up on one arm.

"Push-ups. Thirty tonight. And more tomorrow. I'm going to get up to a hundred a night."

"Isn't that a bit much?" He'd never shown any particular interest in gym work before. Still, she smiled, glad to encourage any new endeavor.

"It's not too much . . ." he huffed. "I'm going to be a beast!"

"A beast?" Kate laughed.

"Yeah. I'm going to become an absolute beast. And then I'm going to kick the living crap out of Frankie Flynn."

The smile froze on Kate's lips.

"Oh, but Fergus, that's not . . ."

He glanced up briefly, and then without answering he went back to his push-ups. Kate shut the door softly. She definitely had to talk to Mannix about this.

With a slew of papers spread out on the desk in the study, Kate tried to concentrate. She stared at the letter she'd received last week from Oberstown House, the young offenders' facility. They'd invited her to make a presentation to their further education students. Again, she was conflicted. The logistics were difficult. That was a trip the whole way to North County Dublin, a longer day at each end, and more upheaval for Fergus. As much as she relished the idea of broadening their student base and making their courses more accessible, she knew where her priorities lay.

Next, Kate attempted to jot down some advice on the portfolio proposals her second-years had handed in. But the words swam around in a slurry of language. What advice could she offer her own child? She looked around the book-lined room and at the woven tapestries hanging on either side of the long sash window. Darkness had now fallen and the lights from City Hall shimmered on the river.

And then it came to her. She spent so much time worrying about the future. Their future. Fergus's future. But the time was now. She needed to do something now. Putting the sheaf of papers to one side, she turned on the desktop and settled herself into the office chair. An hour must have slid by easily before she found what she was looking for.

"Oooooowww!!!" came an agonized howl from down the stairs.

Good Lord-what had Fergus done now? Tearing down the stairs, she nearly went over on her ankle. There, in the gloom, was Fergus, doubled over, holding on to a foot.

"What happened?" She rushed to comfort him.

"My toe is all messed up," he said, sobbing.

"How did that happen?" His big toenail had split and blood was seeping out from underneath. On closer inspection, she saw that the edge of the toolbox was poking out from the cupboard door underneath the stairs. He had stubbed his big toe on the corner. She didn't doubt the pain and he was in full throttle now. The injury was the final straw in his day of humiliation.

"Dad . . . I want Dad . . . Get Dad!" he howled.

"Let's put a plaster on first. He'll be home soon, Soldier," she said, trying to placate him.

No go.

"Get Dad now! I want my dad now!"

The bleating descended into a pitiful moaning. Her heart went out to him. She wanted to scoop him up and squeeze him and cuddle the pain out of him. But it was no good. He wanted Mannix.

"Okay, okay, okay . . . hang on, I'll phone him."

The stark light of her mobile lit up in the gloom. "*Calling Mannix mobile.*" It went to voice mail. There was no point in leaving a message. Fergus wanted him now. She knew what she should do. She didn't want to, but she knew she had to. She'd have to call him. She'd have to call Spike.

"*Calling Spike mobile.*"

No answer. She'd try the apartment landline.

"Hi, Spike, it's Kate."

"Kate-my favorite sister-in-law!"

Kate squirmed. She was Spike's only sister-in-law.

"Can I have a quick word with Mannix?"

She heard his breathing and could almost see his languid movement as she heard him drawing on a cigarette.

"Sorry, Katie. No can do. Haven't seen my bro for weeks."

"Oh, I see ... Oh, well, then ..."

"But ifhe pitches up, I'll get him to give you a bell, all right?"

Spike was enjoying ~~this~~—the fact that Mannix had lied to her.

"No problem—I'm sure he'll be home soon."

"Tm sure he will, Katie."

She hated being called that. And he knew it.

"Thanks."

Now she wished she hadn't called.

"Where's my dad?" Fergus said, sniffing, still in a heap on the floor.

"I don't know," she said snappily, sympathy for her son now replaced by a gnawing sense of unease. "I don't know where your dad is."

It was only then that she remembered Mannix had wanted to tell her something when he'd come home from work. As she coaxed a bruised Fergus upstairs with hot chocolate, she tried to dampen the worry that had lodged in her gut.

*Where was Mannix? And why had he lied about going to Spike's?*

# Mannix

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CURRAGOWER FALLS

EARLY SEPTEMBER

**T**hings had been getting a little uncomfortable for Mannix. He'd always liked the view from the edge, it made him feel alive. But there were lots of balls in the air at the moment. Too many, in fact, and some of them needed to be taken out of circulation. He'd tried to do that tonight. It would take time before he knew if it had worked.

Sitting in the VW saloon, he felt as if he were skulking-like some of the other characters who drew up in the lay-by. They looked like they were waiting for something or someone. But Mannix's business was done. He was taking a breather, trying to cool down with the damp night air coming in off the river.

The passenger window had jammed halfway down. Like him, the car was beginning to show signs of wear and tear. It was a relic from his former job. They'd allowed him to keep it as part of his severance package, a little sweetener to make sure he'd go quietly in the end.

He hadn't seen that one coming. No, sir, not at all. Normally, his instincts were good, but he'd been caught off guard. It had been two years ago now, but he still winced at the memory. All those years in the same company, going in as a technician, Kate encouraging him to

take night classes, and gradually rising up through the ranks. They'd become used to the pay rises, the bonuses, the stock options, the dividends. It had become the natural order of things.

Mannix had never been more pumped up and manic than during that time, investing and reinvesting. Like an addict, he'd enjoyed the rush it gave him. He'd started taking bigger risks. He started in on property. The apartments first and then the beach house. It seemed like the only way was up. Then one day it was simply as if someone suddenly called time on the party. It was over. He watched the wealth he had amassed fizzle away like air seeping out of a gaudy party balloon until it collapsed, all shriveled and sunken. He hadn't seen that one coming either. But he was not alone there. It was a global meltdown.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror without turning on the cabin light. The light from the streetlamp by the boat club was enough. In the amber half-light he looked clammy and shaken. His face was still blotchy and he'd have to somehow change his shirt when he got home. Examining the stains on the pale blue cotton, he became aware of a movement in the shadows to his left. He pulled the beanie farther over his head and slunk down in his seat, not wanting to be seen. But the figure hovering by the railings was not interested in Mannix. It hovered by the bouquet of flowers that was tied there and then crouched down to read the messages pinned to the torn cellophane. A tribute to a soul that the river had swallowed. After a few moments the figure got up again and shuffled off into the night. "Christ," said Mannix to himself. "No matter how bad things get I hope I never end up in the river."

A loud guffaw and the sound of chatter interspersed with the urgent wail of an ambulance making its way over the Condell bridge. Two figures were making their way out of the boat club and joking together.

*Shit!*

Mannix recognized them both. He thought the place would have been locked up by now. Everyone gone home. He slunk even farther down in his seat. He didn't need any questions about where he'd been the last few weeks. How come he wasn't training? His scull was on a rack inside. It hadn't been out on the water for months.

"All right there, sir?"

Mannix jumped. A garda car had pulled up alongside him, and a female garda was now looking at him disapprovingly.

"Yes, Garda, of course." He pulled himself into an upright position and smiled broadly. "Is there a problem?"

She looked at him as if she were trying to make up her mind. "Some of the residents ... ." She gestured to apartments on the other side of the road. "Some of them have rung in with complaints of soliciting ..."

He laughed then, loudly. "Me? Soliciting?"

Fuck sake! He'd been accused of a lot of things but this was definitely a new one.

She didn't respond but looked wordlessly at a couple of long-legged women leaning against the trunk of a huge sycamore tree a few yards away.

"Garda, I assure you, I'm just enjoying the night air."

She looked at him dubiously, eyeballing him as her window wound slowly upward. The squad car crawled off, doing a three-point turn outside the boathouse, and crawled in his direction again. In the rearview mirror, he could see that it had pulled in to where the two women were now smoking. It was laughable. That was all he needed—a charge for soliciting.

Mannix turned the key in the ignition and the shiny green numerals on the dash read 9:55. He flexed his arms on the steering wheel. He could turn around and drive back up the strand, over the bridge, and home. He'd try again to tell her. He'd tried earlier but she'd deflected him. Maybe it was fate. He wasn't meant to tell her. But he knew that wasn't true. *He was definitely going to tell her . . .*

Or he could go to the Curragower Bar for just the one.

That's where she thought he was going to end up anyway. He wouldn't get any brownie points for coming home early, not with the mood that she'd been in these last few weeks. Preoccupied with Fergus and their finances. Still, he'd take her preoccupation over the explosive spats that had erupted out of nowhere when he'd been unemployed.

He was procrastinating. He knew that. He should go home but

the anonymous conviviality of the Curragower Bar was very appealing. It had been a long day. He succumbed to the lure of the bar.

"Mannix." His neighbor turned around and saluted him as he walked into the bar.

He wasn't going to get the anonymity that he had hoped for.

"Roger." Mannix jerked his chin, returning the salute.

Mannix scraped a stool alongside him. In the tiny bar there was nowhere to hide and there was no point in offending the man. There were only two other couples in the front bar and they were deep in conversation.

"Pint?" asked Roger.

"You're grand. I'll get my own," Mannix replied, signaling the barman, pointing at Roger's pint, and holding up one finger.

After a while, he smelled a faint tang of salt and sweat and felt embarrassed as it dawned on him that the waterproof running jacket he'd found in his kit bag in the back of the car probably hadn't been washed since the last time he was out with the club. He'd needed something to cover up the stains. Had that female garda noticed? Probably not in the dark of the car.

"I hear you're back in the saddle," said Roger by way of a conversation opener. It was the last thing Mannix wanted to talk about.

"Yeah, coming up for six months now." Mannix sipped from the creamy head.

"Tough going?" Roger addressed his query to Mannix's reflection in the mirror behind the counter.

Roger considered work of any description tough going. He'd been on the dole for years, and he wasn't called Roger the Dodger for nothing. In fact, he wasn't even called Roger. It was something more like Sean or Harry.

"Under the capitalist's yoke," said Roger, sighing, when he didn't get an answer.

"Well, it sure beats hanging around like a tool all day!" said Mannix, who was beginning to regret coming in now. Roger irritated him, coming over all superior as if he were somehow against work on

the grounds of some high-minded ideology or principle. Roger was a lazy arse and that was the holy all of it.

"Ah, I dunno," drawled Roger. "Where else would you want to be on a sunny day apart from sitting on the deck out front here, looking at those mad young fellas trying to canoe up the falls?"

He turned then and looked directly at Mannix, his hooded eyes slowly blinking, lizardlike. It was then that Mannix noticed the curl of the lip and realized that he was being taunted.

"Fleck off, Roger." Mannix smiled, thinking that he should really relax a bit. Not let things get to him so much.

"Well, I'm not exactly living the dream, I'll give you that," said Mannix, opening up. "My new boss is twelve years younger than me, what do you make of that?"

What did he expect Roger to say? How could he really expect Roger to commiserate? To empathize? What would Roger know of Mannix's belittling daily grind? Of how it felt to bite his tongue and rein in the caustic comments that bubbled to the surface in the face of constant corporate drivel. It was a job. That was all. He should be grateful. And Mannix knew he just had to grin and suck it up.

"That's what happens, you see, Roger ..." The dark sticky liquid was beginning to hit the spot. "When you're back into the workplace after a break ... you have to start at the bottom all over again."

"I suppose ..." replied Roger, talking again to the mirror.

"You know what this kid asked me the other day-my boss, bearing in mind that this kid is barely out of braces ... asks me where I see myself in five years' time. Asks *me* what my short-to mid-term goals are, what my long-term career plan is. And all the while I'm sitting there like a spanner, staring at the downy fluff of the baldy beard he's trying to grow."

"Oh, sure, I know where you're coming from ..." said Roger, with conviction.

Like fuck, Roger knew. He couldn't possibly know the daily humiliation Mannix faced.

The couple in the corner looked over in Mannix's direction. He

was talking too loudly. Far too excitedly. The other couple must have made a silent exit, slipping out unseen into the night.

"Ever think of joining that brother of yours?" Roger was swilling the dregs of his pint around in a circle. "Spike?"

"Yeah, Spike . . ."

"Oh, I thought about that one many a time . . ." Mannix grinned ruefully. When he lost his job it seemed like a no-brainer. The most obvious thing in the world to do. But he hadn't made much progress with the idea. A brick wall would not be putting too fine a point on it.

"Was chatting to Spike in here last week," said Roger, gulping the last foamy dregs and slipping the glass back down noisily on the counter.

"Spike likes the pint in here, same as me," said Mannix, also finishing his drink.

"Yeah, haven't seen him at all this week." Roger paused. "A couple of guys came in here looking for him last night . . . the Bolgers, I think." Roger addressed the mirror again, casual as you like.

"Is that right?" said Mannix, slipping off the stool and putting his beanie cap back on. Suddenly he felt uncomfortable again. Time to go. "You off, then?"

Roger seemed disappointed to be curtailed in his line of questioning. "You won't have another?"

"Can't afford it, mate," said Mannix, heading for the door. As it was, he shouldn't even have had any. But after the night he'd had...

# SLEEPING GIANTS



S Y L V A I N  
N E U V E L

## PROLOGUE

It was my eleventh birthday. I'd gotten a new bike from my father: white and pink, with tassels on the handles. I really wanted to ride it, but my parents didn't want me to leave while my friends were there. They weren't really my friends though. I was never really good at making friends. I liked reading; I liked walking in the woods; I liked being alone. And I always felt a little out of place with other kids my age. So when birthdays came by, my parents usually invited the neighbors' kids over. There were a lot of them, some whose names I barely knew. They were all very nice, and they all brought gifts. So I stayed. I blew out the candles. I opened the presents. I smiled a lot. I can't remember most of the gifts because all I could think about was getting out and trying that bicycle. It was about dinnertime by the time everyone left and I couldn't wait another minute. It would soon be dark; once it was, my father wouldn't let me leave the house until morning.

I snuck out the back door and pedaled as fast as I could into the woods at the end of the street. It must have been ten minutes before I started slowing down. Perhaps it was getting a little too dark for comfort and I was thinking about going back. Maybe I was just tired. I stopped for a minute, listening to the wind throwing the branches around. Fall had arrived. The forest had turned into a motley landscape and given new depth to the hillsides. The air suddenly got cold and wet, as if it were about to rain. The sun was going down and the sky behind the trees was as pink as those tassels.

I heard a crack behind me. It could have been a hare. Something drew my eye to the bottom of the hill. I left my bicycle on the trail and started slowly making my way down, moving branches out of my way. It was hard to see, as the leaves hadn't fallen yet, but there was this eerie turquoise glow seeping through the branches. I couldn't pinpoint where it came from. It wasn't the river; I could hear that in the distance, and the light was much closer. It seemed to be coming from everything.

I got to the bottom of the hill. Then the ground disappeared from under my feet.

I don't remember much after that. I was out for several hours and the sun was coming up when I came to. My father was standing about fifty feet above me. His lips were moving, but I couldn't hear a sound.

The hole I was in was perfectly square, about the size of our house. The walls were dark and straight with bright, beautiful turquoise light shining out of intricate carvings. There was light

coming out of just about everything around me. I moved my hands around a bit. I was lying on a bed of dirt, rocks, and broken branches. Underneath the debris, the surface was slightly curved, smooth to the touch, and cold, like some type of metal.

I hadn't noticed them before, but there were firemen above, yellow jackets buzzing around the hole. A rope fell a few feet from my head. Soon, I was strapped onto a stretcher and hoisted into daylight.

My father didn't want to talk about it afterward. When I asked what I had fallen into, he just found new clever ways of explaining what a hole was. It was about a week later that someone rang the doorbell. I called for my father to go, but I got no answer. I ran down the stairs and opened the door. It was one of the firemen that had gotten me out of the hole. He'd taken some pictures and thought I'd like to see them. He was right. There I was, this tiny little thing at the bottom of the hole, lying on my back in the palm of a giant metal hand.

PART ONE

# **BODY PARTS**

**FILE NO. 003**

**INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROSE FRANKLIN, PH.D.,  
SENIOR SCIENTIST, ENRICO FERMI INSTITUTE**

**Location: University of Chicago, Chicago, IL**

**—How big was the hand?**

—6.9 meters, about twenty--three feet; though it seemed much larger for an eleven--year--old.

**—What did you do after the incident?**

—Nothing. We didn't talk about it much after that. I went to school every day like any kid my age. No one in my family had ever been to college, so they insisted I keep going to school. I majored in physics.

I know what you're going to say. I wish I could tell you I went into science because of the hand, but I was always good at it. My parents figured out I had a knack for it early on. I must have been four years old when I got my first science kit for Christmas. One of those electronics kits. You could make a telegraph, or things like that, by squeezing wires into little metal springs. I don't think I would have done anything different had I listened to my father and stayed home that day.

Anyway, I graduated from college and I kept doing the only thing I knew how to do. I went to school. You should have seen my dad when we learned I was accepted at the University of Chicago. I've never seen anyone so proud in my life. He wouldn't have been any happier had he won a million dollars. They hired me at the U of C after I finished my Ph.D.

**—When did you find the hand again?**

—I didn't. I wasn't looking for it. It took seventeen years, but I guess you could say it found me.

**—What happened?**

—To the hand? The military took over the site when it was discovered.

**—When was that?**

—When I fell in. It took about eight hours before the military stepped in. Colonel Hudson—I think that was his name—was put in charge of the project. He was from the area so he knew pretty much everyone. I don't remember ever meeting him, but those who did had only good things to say about the man.

I read what little was left of his notes—most of it was redacted by the military. In the three

years he spent in charge, his main focus had always been figuring out what those carvings meant. The hand itself, which is mostly referred to as “the artifact,” is mentioned in passing only a few times, evidence that whoever built that room must have had a complex enough religious system. I think he had a fairly precise notion of what he wanted this to be.

**—What do you think that was?**

—I have no idea. Hudson was career military. He wasn’t a physicist. He wasn’t an archaeologist. He had never studied anything resembling anthropology, linguistics, anything that would be remotely useful in this situation. Whatever preconceived notion he had, it must have come from popular culture, watching Indiana Jones or something. Fortunately for him, he had competent people surrounding him. Still, it must have been awkward, being in charge and having no idea what’s going on most of the time.

What’s fascinating is how much effort they put into disproving their own findings. Their first analysis indicated the room was built about three thousand years ago. That made little sense to them, so they tried carbon--dating organic material found on the hand. The tests showed it to be much older, somewhere between five thousand and six thousand years old.

**—That was unexpected?**

—You could say that. You have to understand that this flies in the face of everything we know about American civilizations. The oldest civilization we’re aware of was located in the Norte Chico region of Peru, and the hand appeared to be about a thousand years older. Even if it weren’t, it’s fairly obvious that no one carried a giant hand from South America all the way to South Dakota, and there were no civilizations as advanced in North America until much, much later.

In the end, Hudson’s team blamed the carbon dating on contamination from surrounding material. After a few years of sporadic research, the site was determined to be twelve hundred years old and classified as a worship temple for some offshoot of Mississippian civilization.

I went through the files a dozen times. There is absolutely nothing, no evidence whatsoever to support that theory, other than the fact that it makes more sense than anything the data would suggest. If I had to guess, I would say that Hudson saw no military interest whatsoever in all this. He probably resented seeing his career slowly wither in an underground research lab and was eager to come up with anything, however preposterous, just to get out of there.

**—Did he?**

—Get out? Yes. It took a little more than three years, but he finally got his wish. He had a stroke while walking his dog and slipped into a coma. He died a few weeks later.

**—What happened to the project after he died?**

—Nothing. Nothing happened. The hand and panels collected dust in a warehouse for fourteen

years until the project was demilitarized. Then the University of Chicago took over the research with NSA funding and somehow I was put in charge of studying the hand I fell in when I was a child. I don't really believe in fate, but somehow "small world" doesn't begin to do this justice.

**—Why would the NSA get involved in an archaeological project?**

—I asked myself the same question. They fund all kinds of research, but this seems to fall outside their usual fields of interest. Maybe they were interested in the language for cryptology; maybe they had an interest in the material the hand is made of. In any case, they gave us a pretty big budget so I didn't ask too many questions. I was given a small team to handle the hard science before we handed everything over to the anthropology department. The project was still classified as top secret and, just like my predecessor, I was moved into an underground lab. I believe you've read my report, so you know the rest.

**—Yes, I have read it. You sent your report after only four months. Some might think it was a little hasty.**

—It was a preliminary report, but yes. I don't think it was premature. OK, maybe a little, but I had made significant discoveries and I didn't think I could go much further with the data that I had, so why wait? There is enough in that underground room to keep us guessing for several lifetimes. I just don't think we have the knowledge to get much more out of this without getting more data.

**—Who is we?**

—Us. Me. You. Mankind. Whatever. There are things in that lab that are just beyond our reach right now.

**—Ok, so tell me about what you do understand. Tell me about the panels.**

—It's all in my report. There are sixteen of them, approximately ten feet by thirty--two feet each, less than an inch thick. All sixteen panels were made around the same period, approximately three thousand years ago. We . . .

**—If I may. I take it you do not subscribe to the cross--contamination theory?**

—As far as I'm concerned, there's no real reason not to trust the carbon dating. And to be honest, how old these things are is the least of our problems. Did I mention the symbols have been glowing for the last seventeen years, with no apparent power source?

Each wall is made of four panels and has a dozen rows of eighteen to twenty symbols carved into it. Rows are divided into sequences of six or seven symbols. We counted fifteen distinct symbols in total. Most are used several times, some appear only once. Seven of them are curvy, with a dot in the center, seven are made of straight lines, and one is just a dot. They are simple in design but very elegant.

**—Had the previous team been able to interpret any of the markings?**

—Actually, one of the few sections of Hudson's report left intact by the military was the linguistic analysis. They had compared the symbols to every known writing system, past or present, but found no interesting correlation. They assumed each sequence of symbols represented a proposition, like an English sentence, but with no frame of reference, they couldn't even speculate as to their interpretation. Their work was thorough enough and documented at every step. I saw no reason to do the same thing twice and I declined the offer to add a linguist to the team. With nothing to compare this to, there was logically no way to arrive at any sort of meaning.

Perhaps I was biased—because I stumbled onto it—but I felt drawn to the hand. I couldn't explain it, but every fiber of my being was telling me the hand was the important piece.

**—Quite a contrast from your predecessor. So what can you tell me about it?**

—Well, it's absolutely stunning, but I assume you're not that interested in aesthetics. It measures 22.6 feet in length from the wrist to the tip of the middle finger. It seems to be solid, made of the same metallic material as the wall panels, but it's at least two thousand years older. It is dark gray, with some bronze overtones, and it has subtle iridescent properties.

The hand is open, fingers close together, slightly bent, as if holding something very precious, or a handful of sand, trying not to spill it. There are grooves where human skin would normally fold, others that seem purely decorative. All are glowing the same bright turquoise, which brings out the iridescence in the metal. The hand looks strong, but . . . *sophisticated* is the only word that comes to mind. I think it's a woman's hand.

**—I am more interested in facts at this point. What is this strong but sophisticated hand made of?**

—It proved nearly impossible to cut or otherwise alter by conventional means. It took several attempts to remove even a small sample from one of the wall panels. Mass spectrography showed it to be an alloy of several heavy metals, mostly iridium, with about 10 percent iron and smaller concentrations of osmium, ruthenium, and other metals of the platinum group.

**—It must be worth its weight in gold?**

—It's funny you should mention that. It doesn't weigh as much as it should so I'd say it's worth a lot more than its weight, in anything.

**—How much does it weigh?**

—Thirty--two metric tons . . . I know, it's a respectable weight, but it's inexplicably light given its composition. Iridium is one of the densest elements, arguably the densest, and even with some iron content, the hand should easily weigh ten times as much.

**—How did you account for that?**

—I didn't. I still can't. I couldn't even speculate as to what type of process could be used to achieve this. In truth, the weight didn't bother me nearly as much as the sheer amount of iridium I was looking at. Iridium is not only one of the densest things you can find, it's also one of the rarest.

You see, metals of this group—platinum is one of them—love to bond with iron. That's what most of the iridium on Earth did millions of years ago when the surface was still molten and, because it's so heavy, it sunk to the core, thousands of miles deep. What little is left in the Earth's crust is usually mixed with other metals and it takes a complex chemical process to separate them.

**—How rare is it in comparison to other metals?**

—It's rare, very rare. Let's put it this way, if you were to put together all the pure iridium produced on the entire planet in a year, you'd probably end up with no more than a couple metric tons. That's about a large suitcaseful. It would take decades, using today's technology, to scrounge up enough to build all this. It's just too scarce on Earth and there simply aren't enough chondrites lying around.

**—You lost me.**

—Sorry. Meteorites; stony ones. Iridium is so rare in Earth rocks that it is often undetectable. Most of the iridium we mine is extracted from fallen meteorites that didn't completely burn up in the atmosphere. To build this room—and it seems safe to assume that this is not the only thing they would have built—you'd need to find it where there are a lot more than on the Earth's surface.

**—Journey to the center of the Earth?**

—Jules Verne is one way to go. To get this type of metal in massive quantities, you'd either have to extract it thousands of miles deep or be able to mine in space. With all due respect to Mr. Verne, we haven't come close to mining deep enough. The deepest mines we have would look like potholes next to what you'd need. Space seems much more feasible. There are private companies right now hoping to harvest water and precious minerals in space in the very near future, but all these projects are still in the early planning stages. Nonetheless, if you could harvest meteorites in space, you could get a lot more iridium, a whole lot more.

**—What else can you tell me?**

—That pretty much sums it up. After a few months of looking at this with every piece of equipment known to man, I felt we were getting nowhere. I knew we were asking the wrong questions, but I didn't know the right ones. I submitted a preliminary report and asked for a leave

of absence.

**—Refresh my memory. What was the conclusion of that report?**

—We didn't build this.

**—Interesting. What was their reaction?**

—Request granted.

**—That was it?**

—Yes. I think they were hoping I wouldn't come back. I never used the word "alien," but that's probably all they took out of my report.

**—That is not what you meant?**

—Not exactly. There might be a much more down--to--earth explanation, one I just didn't think of. As a scientist, all I can say is that humans of today do not have the resources, the knowledge, or the technology to build something like this. It's entirely possible that some ancient civilization's understanding of metallurgy was better than ours, but there wouldn't have been any more iridium around, whether it was five thousand, ten thousand, or twenty thousand years ago. So, to answer your question, no, I don't believe humans built these things. You can draw whatever conclusion you want from that.

I'm not stupid; I knew I was probably putting an end to my career. I certainly annihilated any credibility I had with the NSA, but what was I going to do? Lie?

**—What did you do after you submitted your report?**

—I went home, to where it all began. I hadn't gone home in nearly four years, not since my father died.

**—Where is home?**

—I come from a small place called Deadwood, about an hour northwest of Rapid City.

**—I am not familiar with that part of the Midwest.**

—It's a small town built during the gold rush. It was a rowdy place, like in the movies. The last brothels were closed when I was a kid. Our claim to fame, besides a short--lived TV show on HBO, is that the murder of Wild Bill Hickok happened in Deadwood. The town survived the end of the gold rush and a few major fires, but the population dwindled to about twelve hundred.

Deadwood sure isn't thriving, but it's still standing. And the landscape is breathtaking. It's sitting right on the edge of the Black Hills National Forest, with its eerie rock formations, beautiful pine forests, barren rock, canyons, and creeks. I can't think of a more beautiful place on Earth. I can understand why someone would want to build something there.

—You still call it home?

—Yes. It's part of who I am although my mother would probably disagree. She appeared hesitant when she answered the door. We barely spoke anymore. I could sense that she resented the fact that I never came back, not even for Dad's funeral, that I left her all alone to cope with the loss. We all have our way of dealing with pain, and I suppose that deep down my mother understood that this was just my way, but there was anger in her voice, things she would never dare to speak out loud but that would taint our relationship forever. I was OK with that. She had suffered enough; she was entitled to resentment. We didn't talk much the first few days, but we quickly settled into some form of routine.

Sleeping in my old room brought back memories. When I was a child, I often snuck out of bed at night and sat by the window to watch my dad leave for the mine. He would come to my room before every night shift and have me pick a toy to put in his lunch box. He said he would think of me when he opened it and come spend his lunch break with me in my dreams. He didn't talk much, to me or to my mother, but he knew how important little things can be for a child and he took the time to tuck me in before every shift. How I wished my dad were there so I could talk to him. He wasn't a scientist, but he had a clear view of things. I couldn't talk to my mother about this.

We'd been having short but pleasant discussions for a few days, which was a welcome change from the polite comments about food we'd been exchanging since I arrived. But what I did was classified and I did my best to steer our conversations away from what was on my mind. It got easier with every week that went by, as I found myself spending more time reminiscing about childhood mistakes than I did thinking about the hand.

It took nearly a month before I hiked to the site where I'd first seen it. The hole had long since been filled. There were small trees starting to grow back through the dirt and rocks. There was nothing left to see. I walked aimlessly until nightfall. Why did I find the hand first? Surely there must be other structures like the one I fell in. Why did no one find them? Why did it happen on that day? The hand had been dormant for millennia. Why did it happen then? What triggered it? What was present twenty years ago that hadn't been for thousands of years?

Then it hit me. *That* was the right question to ask. I had to figure out what turned it on.

**FILE NO. 004**

**INTERVIEW WITH CW3 KARA RESNIK,  
UNITED STATES ARMY**

**Location: Coleman Army Airfield, Mannheim, Germany**

**—Please state your name and rank.**

—You already know my name. You're staring at my file.

**—I was told you would cooperate with this process. I would like you to state your name for the record.**

—Maybe you could start by telling me what this "process" is about.

**—I cannot do that. Now, state your name and rank for the record.**

—"I cannot do that . . ." Do you overarticulate everything all the time?

**—I like to enunciate things. I find it allows me to avoid misunderstandings. If there is one thing I loathe, it is to repeat myself . . .**

—Yes. My name. You can say it, if it's so important to you.

**—As you wish. You are Chief Warrant Officer 3 Kara Resnik, and you are a helicopter pilot in the United States Army. Is that correct?**

—Was. I've been removed from flight status, but you probably know that already.

**—I did not. May I ask what happened?**

—I have a detached retina. It doesn't hurt, but my vision is affected. I'm scheduled for surgery tomorrow. When I asked, they said there's a reasonable chance I might be able to fly again . . . which sounds suspiciously like "no" to me.

What did you say your name was again?

**—I have not.**

—Then why don't you? For the record . . .

**—There are many reasons why, some more relevant than others. From your perspective, it should suffice to know that you would never be allowed to leave this room alive if I did.**

—You could have just said no. Do you really think threatening me will get you anywhere?

—**I sincerely apologize if you felt threatened in any way, Chief Resnik. It was never my intention to make you uncomfortable. I simply did not want you to think I was being coy.**

—So you were concerned for my safety? How chivalrous. Why am I here?

—**You are here to talk about what happened in Turkey.**

—Nothing happened in Turkey. Nothing interesting, anyway.

—**I will be the judge of that. You know that my clearance is several levels above yours, so start at the beginning.**

—I'm not even sure what that means.

—**How did you end up in Turkey?**

—I was called on NATO duty. I arrived early in the morning and got some sleep. Mission briefing was at 16:00. They introduced me to my second, CW Mitchell, and we went over the mission. We would fly out at 02:00 on a modified stealth UH--60 out of Adana. We were to enter Syrian airspace at very low altitude and collect air samples about twelve miles south of the border, near Ar Raqqah.

—**You said you had never met your second--in--command. It is my understanding that the Army likes to keep its crews together. It seems odd for them to break up a team just before a dangerous mission and have you fly with someone you barely know. Why not have your usual co--pilot come with you?**

—He was reassigned.

—**Why is that?**

—You'd have to ask him.

—**I did. Would it surprise you to know he asked for any post as long as it was with another pilot? I believe the words he used to describe you were: *obdurate, volatile, and irascible*. He has quite the vocabulary.**

—He plays a lot of Scrabble.

—**Is that why you did not get along?**

—I never had a problem with him.

—**That seems somewhat beside the point. You do not often see people willing to jeopardize their military career simply to avoid having to spend time with another person.**

—We disagreed over a lot of things, but I never let it get in the way of our flying. I can't help it if he wasn't able to do the same.

—**So it is not your fault if people have a problem with you. That is just who you are.**

—Something like that. Look, you want me to say I'm not the easiest person to get along with? I'll give you that. But somehow, I don't think we're here to discuss my charming personality. You want to know how I crashed a twenty-million-dollar helicopter into the middle of a pistachio farm. Is that it?

—**We can start with that. You said you were supposed to collect air samples. Do you know why?**

—NATO believes that Syria has been pursuing a nuclear weapons program for years and they want to put a stop to it. Israel bombed a suspected nuclear reactor back in 2007, but NATO doesn't want to do anything that drastic on a whim.

—**They would prefer to have some hard evidence before they take military action.**

—They wanna catch them with their pants down. A source in the Syrian Military Intelligence told the US that underground testing was going on near Ar Raqqa, and since Syria is refusing to allow inspectors to visit suspected nuclear sites, we were to use a more covert approach.

—**Did this surreptitious inspection involve anything other than collecting air samples?**

—No. We were to fly in and out. They brought in some pretty big equipment with us to detect signs of nuclear activity from the air samples we'd bring back. We left Incirlik Air Base at 02:00 as planned. We went east along the border for about an hour and turned south into Syria. We flew nap-of-the-earth for about twelve minutes with an AGL of eighty feet. We reached the designated coordinates around 03:15, collected air samples, and headed back the way we came.

—**Were you nervous?**

—You're funny. I get nervous if I forget to pay my phone bill. This is a little different. You're ground-hugging at 160 miles an hour over possibly hostile territory, at night, with night-vision goggles. If that doesn't get your heart pumping, I don't know what will. So yeah, we were both on edge. You can't see anywhere but straight ahead with the NVGs on. It feels like flying through a narrow green-lit tunnel at an incredible speed.

—**Did everything go as planned?**

—Like clockwork. We were back in Turkish airspace in less than twenty-five minutes. I climbed up to eight hundred feet while we put some distance between us and the border. We were approaching Harran when we noticed some light directly below us. It wasn't city lights. We were over farmland, and the color wasn't right. Then out of nowhere, the engine stopped,

and the entire cockpit went dark.

We could hear the rotors slowing down, then nothing. There was this turquoise glow emanating from the fields below. Countless small bush-like trees planted thirty feet apart with nothing but dirt in between. We just sat there, staring. It was surreal, very . . . peaceful. Then we dropped like a rock.

The air bag slammed into my visor and knocked me out when we hit the ground. I woke up a few minutes later. I was alone in the helicopter. An old man in a white cotton tunic was trying to undo my restraints. He must have been at least sixty. He had dark, leathery skin. He looked at me and mumbled something he must have known I couldn't understand. Then he just smiled. Some of his lower teeth were missing, but he had very kind eyes. I regained my composure and helped him unstrap me from the seat.

He helped me out slowly, putting my arm over his shoulder. Someone grabbed my other arm, a young girl, maybe sixteen years old. She was very pretty. She kept looking down, spoke only a little bit when the man addressed her. He could have been her father, maybe her grandfather. They sat me down about a hundred feet from the helicopter and the man gave me some water out of a canteen. The young girl showed me a piece of cloth and gestured toward my forehead. As I didn't object, she put the wet cloth over my right eye. She removed it and quickly put it away, probably hoping I wouldn't notice the blood.

**—Where was your co-pilot?**

—I didn't know at first. It took a minute or two before I noticed several people gathered a few steps behind the helicopter. I couldn't make out any of their faces, only their shadows against the turquoise light. I got up. The young woman kept repeating the same few words—"don't get up," I suppose. I started walking toward the light. I made it to the edge of this huge crater that defaced the pistachio field. The light was so bright.

Mitchell was there with some locals. He grabbed my arm and put it around his shoulder, then held me to his side. He seemed genuinely happy to see me. I'm not quite sure what we were staring at, but it was the most awe-inspiring thing I've ever seen.

It looked like a whale made of dark metal—maybe a ship, or a submarine, though it seemed a little small. It was sleek and curvy, like the body of a 747, but with no apparent opening, no propeller. It looked more like an Italian work of art than it did anything practical. Turquoise veins were running through the surface at regular intervals forming a weblike pattern.

**—How long were you there?**

—I don't know. Maybe ten minutes. We were distracted by the sound of other helos and the wind blowing sand in our faces. Four Blackhawks landed around the crater, letting out more Marines than I could count. They brought Mitchell and me to one of the helicopters and we took off immediately. The Marines on the ground were moving people away from the crater. I saw two

of them attempting to stop the local police from approaching the site.

—**Yes, it was . . . unfortunate . . . that the local authorities got involved. It would have been a lot easier had they arrived a few minutes later. Please go on.**

—That's it. There's nothing more to tell. I was taken to the infirmary at the base in Turkey. Then they flew me here for eye surgery an hour ago. How did you even know I was here?

—**Does it really matter?**

—I'll take that to mean you won't tell me. Can you at least tell me what that thing was?

—**The State Department is now asking the Turkish government permission to repatriate wreckage of a secret WWII airplane found by local farmers in the Urfa Province.**

—You've got to be kidding. Some old plane wreck didn't bring down my helo. You really expect me to believe that?

—**What you believe is not particularly important at this juncture. What is important is what the Turkish government believes. What they need to believe is that we are taking a seventy--year--old US plane wreck back to America.**

—So what was it?

—**What do you think of Chief Mitchell?**

—You're not going to answer my question?

— . . .

—Mitchell's fine. He handled himself well.

—**That is not what I meant. What do you think of him personally?**

—Look, I nearly died because there's a big shiny thing out there capable of bringing down a fully armed Blackhawk helicopter from a distance in a matter of seconds. You really wanna know what I think of my second on a personal level?

—**I do. I am well aware that your helicopter crashed. I would have to be blind not to see that you find it insufferable not to know why. If time were not an issue, we could talk about it for a few hours to validate your feelings, but I have to leave soon.**

**You may see what I ask as insignificant. What you must understand is that I have access to a tremendous amount of information you are not privy to. Consequently, there is very little you can tell me that I do not already know. What I do not know, and what I wish to hear from you, is what you think of Mr. Mitchell.**

—What do you want me to say? I was with him for an hour and a half. We're both from Detroit.

He's two years older than me, but we went to some of the same schools. He thought that was quite a coincidence we ended up on the same bird. He likes country music, which I can't stand, and neither of us thinks the Lions will make the playoffs. Is that personal enough for you?

**—What is his first name?**

—I have no idea. Ryan, I think. Are you going to tell me what that thing was? Can you tell me if there are more of these things lying around?

**—Thank you very much for your time, Ms. Resnik . . .**

**I almost forgot. If it means anything to you, your former co--pilot also said you were the best pilot he had ever seen.**

The Year of the  
Runaways



*a novel*

Sunjeev Sahota

*Short-listed for the Man Booker Prize*

## Chapter 1



### Arrivals

Randeep Sanghera stood in front of the green-and-blue map tacked to the wall. The map had come with the flat, and though it was big and wrinkled, and cigarette butts had once stubbed black islands into the mid-Atlantic, he'd kept it, a reminder of the world outside. He was less sure about the flowers, guilty-looking things he'd spent too long choosing at the petrol station. Get rid of them, he decided, but then heard someone was parking up outside and the thought flew out of his head.

He went down the narrow staircase, step by nervous step, straightening his cuffs, swallowing hard. He could see a shape through the mottled glass. When he opened the door Narinder Kaur stood before him, brightly etched against the night, coat unbuttoned despite the cold. So, even in England she wore a kesri. A domed deep-green one that matched her salwaar kameez. A flank of hair had come loose from under it and curled about her ear. He'd forgotten how large, how clever, her eyes were. Behind her, the taxi made a U-turn and retreated down the hill. Narinder brought her hands together underneath her chin—"Sat sri akal"—and Randeep nodded and took her suitcase and asked if she might follow him up the stairs.

He set her luggage in the middle of the room and, straightening right back up, knocked his head against the bald light bulb, the wire

flexing like a snake disturbed from its tree. She was standing at the window clutching her handbag with both hands.

"It's very quiet," Randeep said.

"It's very nice. Thank you."

"You have been to Sheffield before?"

"My first time. What's the area called again?"

"Brightside," he said.

She smiled, a little, and gazed around the room. She gestured towards the cooker.

"We used to have one like that. Years ago."

Randeep looked too: a white stand-alone thing with an overhanging grill pan. The stains on the hob hadn't shifted no matter how hard he'd scrubbed. "There is a microwave, too," he said, pointing to the microwave. "And washing machine. And toaster also, and kettle and sofa-set . . . carpet . . ." He trailed off, ridiculous to himself. "The heater works fine. It's included in the rent. I'm sorry there's no TV."

"I'm used to it." She looked to the wall. "Nice map."

"Oh. Thank you. I thought . . ." What did he think? "I want to visit every continent of the world." She smiled politely, as if he'd said he wanted to visit the moons of Jupiter. "It's one of my dreams."

There were only two other rooms. The bathroom was tiny, and the pipes buffalo-groaned when he forced the taps. In the centre of the greenish tub the hand-held shower lay in a perfect coil of chrome, like an alien turd.

"And this is your private room," he said, opening the second door.

She didn't step inside. There wasn't much to see: a double bed, a rail for her clothes, a few wire coat hangers. Some globs of Blu-Tack on damp, loose wallpaper. There was a long, hinged mirror straight ahead which they found themselves staring into, him standing behind her. She didn't even reach his shoulders. It was cold and he noticed her nipples showing through her tunic. Frowning, she pulled her coat shut and he averted his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's too small. And dirty. I'll look for something else tomorrow."

“It’s fine. Honestly. Thank you for finding it for me.”

“Truly?” He exhaled relief. “There is a bus from the bottom of the hill that can take you into town.”

“And that hill will keep me in shape.”

“And this isn’t an area with lots of apneh.” Her lips parted, but she didn’t speak. “Like you asked,” he reminded her. “And the gurdwara’s only a few stops away. In Burngreave. I can show you? If you like?”

“We’ll see,” she said. “It’s late. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Of course. But you should know that the flat downstairs is empty. So no disturbances.” He smiled, pleased with himself. “Yes, this flat was a special find. Especially at this time of year, it is not easy. We were lucky.” That “we” was problematic and knocked him off balance. “But I should go,” he said hastily. He took up his red tracksuit top and zipped it to his chin, pushing the short sleeves up to his elbows.

She walked him to the stairs, saying, “You should probably bring a few of your things and leave them here.”

He nearly blurted out that his suitcase was just outside, in the genel. “I will bring some. But I will telephone you first.” He wouldn’t be one of those boys who turned up at a girl’s house unannounced and unexpected. Then he remembered about the meter tokens. “The light.” He pointed down the stairs. “There is a meter underneath. It takes the pink electric tokens. Not the white ones. The pink ones. There is a shop around the corner. The aunty there sells them.”

She looked confused. “Do I have to collect these tokens? Like vouchers?”

“Collect them from the shop, yes. Only be careful you put the cards in straight. Would you like me to show you? The meter?”

She’d never heard of electricity being pink, or white for that matter, but she was tired from the journey and said she really did just want to sleep. “But thanks for everything, Randeep.”

She used his name, without “ji” and to his face, which hurt him a little. But this was England. “No problem. And do not worry. You won’t need any for a while yet. I put lots in before you came.”

She thanked him again, then—perhaps out of nerves, needing her

fingers occupied—retightened her chunni over her turban and under her chin. It made her eyes look bigger, somehow.

Randeep opened his wallet and held out some notes to her. “Next month’s.” He was looking away. He hated doing it like this. At least when she lived in London it had gone by post. She too seemed embarrassed to take it.

He said goodbye. Halfway down the stairs he stopped, looked round. “I hope you don’t mind, but is everything all right? You are not in any trouble?”

“Oh, I just need to rest. I’ll be fine tomorrow. Can I call you?”

“Of course you may. Of course.” He smiled, then went down the remaining steps and opened the door. He nodded a final goodbye. She leaned forward out of the doorway, arms folded. She looked uncertain.

Randeep held his suitcase across his lap on the bus ride home. Of course she wasn’t going to ask him to stay. It was stupid of him to have thought she might. If anything, he wondered now if she’d seemed eager for him to leave her alone. He spat coarsely into his hankie and worked out a bit of dirt on the brown leather of his case, which still gleamed, in spite of the coach to Delhi, the flight to London, and now three months spent wedged on the roof of that disgusting wardrobe.

He got off right outside the house and saw the grey-blue light of the TV flickering behind the closed curtains. He’d hoped they’d be asleep by now. He went the long way round the block, stopping off at the Londis for some of those fizzy cola-bottle sweets.

“You are leaving?” the Singh asked. The suitcase.

“I was helping a friend move only.”

The TV was still on when he got back. Randeep turned the key gradually, wincing at the loud final snap of the metal tongue, and went straight up to his room on the second floor. He sat there polishing his workboots with the toilet roll and after that he changed the blanket on his mattress, taking care with the corner-folds. Then he lay down,

the darkness roomy around him, and with no real enthusiasm reached for the toilet roll once more.

It was near midnight when the clanging of the gate woke him up. He hadn't meant to fall asleep afterwards and the scrunch of sticky toilet paper was still in his hand.

Downstairs, he went through the beaded curtain and found Avtar gulping straight from the tap. The back of his uniform read CRUNCHY FRIED CHICKEN. Randeep stood in the doorway, weaving one of the long strings in and out of his fingers. There was a calendar of tropically naked blonde women on the wall by the fridge. Someone would have to get a new one soon.

Avtar turned off the tap, though it continued to drip. "Where is everyone?"

"Asleep."

"Did someone do the milk run?"

"Don't think so."

Avtar groaned. "I can't do everything, yaar. Who's on the roti shift?"

Randeep shrugged. "Not me."

"I bet it's that new guy. Watch, they'll be bhanchod burnt again."

Randeep nodded, sighed. Outside the window, the moon was full. There were no stars though, just an even pit of black, and if he altered the focus of his eyes, he saw his vague reflection. He wondered what his father would be doing.

"Do you think Gurpreet's right? About what he said this morning?"

"What did he say this morning?"

"You were there."

"I was asleep."

"He said it's not work that makes us leave home and come here. It's love. Love for our families." Randeep turned to Avtar. "Do you think that's true?"

"I think he's a sentimental creep. We come here for the same reason our people do anything. Duty. We're doing our duty. And it's shit."

Randeep turned back to the window. "Maybe."

"And I asked bhaji, by the way, but there's nothing right now."

The job, Randeep remembered. He was relieved. He'd only mentioned it during a low moment, needing solidarity. One job was enough. He didn't know how Avtar managed two.

"How'd the thing with the girl go?"

"Nothing special," Randeep said.

"Told you," and Avtar picked up his satchel from where it rested against the flour barrel. He took out his manila college folder and wriggled up onto the worktop.

Randeep had learned by now that when Avtar didn't want to be disturbed he just ignored you until you went away. He let the beads fall through his hands and was turning to go when Avtar asked if it was true that Gurpreet hit him this morning in the bathroom queue.

"It was nothing," Randeep said.

"He's just jealous, you know."

Randeep waited—for sympathy? for support?—but Avtar curled back down to his book, trying out the words under his breath, eyes glinting at the end of each line. Avtar's posture reminded Randeep of the trips he used to make between college and home, his own textbook open on his lap.

In his room, he changed into his tracksuit bottoms, annoyed he'd forgotten to warm them against the oven, then slid inside the blanket. He knew he should try to sleep. Five hours and he'd have to be up again. But he felt restless, suddenly and inexplicably optimistic for the first time in months. Years? He got up and moved to the window and laid his forehead against the cool pane. She was somewhere on the other side of the city. Somewhere in that dark corner beyond the lights, beyond that pinkish blur he knew to be a nightclub called the Leadmill. He wondered if she'd noticed how he'd spent each evening after work scrubbing the doors and descaling the tiles and washing the carpet. Maybe she was thinking about all he'd done right now as she unpacked her clothes and hung them on the rail. Or maybe she'd decided to have a bath instead and was now watching TV, thick blue towels wrapped around her head and body the way British girls do. His forehead pressed harder against the glass. He was being ridiculous again. There was no TV, for one thing. But he couldn't lose the sense

that this was a turning point in his life, that she'd been delivered to him for a reason. She'd called him in her hour of need, hadn't she? He wondered whether she'd found his note yet, the rose-scented card leaning inside the cupboard above the sink. He cringed and hoped she hadn't. At the time, in the petrol station, he'd convinced himself it was the sophisticated thing to do. Now, he exhaled a low groan and closed his eyes and forced himself to remember each carefully written word.

*Dear Narinderji, I sincerely hope you are well and are enjoying your new home. A beautiful flat for a beautiful person. And a new start for us both maybe. If I may be of any assistance please do not hesitate to make contact. I am at your service day and night. In the interim, may I be the first to wish you, in your new home, a very Happy NewYear (2003).*

*Respectfully yours, Randeep Sanghera.*

It was gone 2 a.m. and Avtar was still sitting up on the counter. He'd long set aside his college notes. His ankles were crossed and the heels of his trainers lightly tapped the cupboards. He could feel his eyes start to close, a shallow dark descending. He jolted himself upright. "Come on, come on," he said, half to himself, half to Bal, the guy he was waiting for. He checked his phone. He recounted the money. He had enough, had earned enough. Then his phone rang, too loud for that time of night. It was them.

"So we come to yours?"

"No, no. Keep to the gardens." He didn't want them knowing where he lived.

He zipped up his jacket and sneaked out of the house and down onto Ecclesall Road, heading away from the city. The shabby restaurants were all closed, the pound shops shuttered. He liked this road in the day, a place of business and exchange, a road that seemed to carry on into the hills. Tonight, though, there was only a scrappy silence, and the city at his back, the countryside glowering ahead. He gripped the top of the zip between his lips, flicking it with the end of his tongue, and breathed out puffs of air that hung briefly in the cold.

He turned up towards the Botanical Gardens and saw them sitting in their rich black BMW, faces flooded by the car's interior light. The engine was still gunning. Bal got out, the eldest of the three brothers, all long leather and shaped facial hair. The gold ring on his right hand was the size and shape of a fifty-pence piece. Avtar nodded, jogged to meet him.

"Why so late? I have work soon."

"True what they say, man. Fuckin' cold up north."

"You were held up?"

"By another one of you chumps. In Birmingham. He won't be doing that again."

Avtar handed the money over. "It's all there. So tell your uncle not to bother my family. Do you understand?"

Bal counted it, note by note. "Good. It's just my share, then."

"Arré, go fuck a cow. I can't pay extra every—"

He slapped Avtar. "It's two o'clock in the bastard morning, I'm in the arse-end of nowhere and you want to argue the fucking toss?"

Hand on his cheek, Avtar looked over to the two in the car, the baseball bat he knew they kept in their boot, then back at Bal's heavy face. The height, which stretched the fat out of Bal's body, couldn't do the same for his slabbed cheeks and jaw. He took three more notes from his pocket and threw them across. "If we were in India, bhaji, I swear I'd break all your bhanchod bones."

Bal feigned confusion. "What would I be doing in India?" Then he laughed and pinched Avtar's cheek, as if he were a child.

Three hours of sleep later, Avtar forced his stiff second pair of socks up over the first and pulled on his oversized workboots. He stuffed the sides with kitchen towel until they fitted. Then he picked up his rucksack, his hard hat and reflector jacket, and locked the door quickly. He was late.

He and Randeep were the last of the twelve to come down the stairs. They mumbled a quick prayer over the smoking joss stick and rushed out. Avtar didn't mind: it meant they got the nearest waiting

point. The street lamps were still on, spreading their winter yellow. The chill was sharp as needles.

“So cold, yaar,” Randeep said, and tucked his gloved hands into his armpits.

They turned onto Snuff Mill Lane and waited beside a twiggy hedge near the Spar. The National Lottery sign reverberated in the wind. Any van pulling up would look like it was only delivering the day’s newspapers.

“There used to be a flour mill here,” Randeep said. “Hundreds of years ago. I read about it.”

“Yeah,” Avtar said, too tired to really talk.

They took out their Tupperware boxes and peeled off the lids. Avtar held up one of his chapattis: a brittle misshapen thing full of burn holes. “No joke, I genuinely think my cock could do better.”

Randeep smeared the chilli gobi around his roti, then rolled it all up like a sausage.

The white Transit arrived and they climbed into the back and squeezed onto the wheel arches. The others were already in there, eating, or asleep on the blankets that covered the corrugated floor. Randeep squashed his bag under his knees, behind his legs. Opposite, Gurpreet was drawing on his roll-up and looking right at him.

“Did you wear that jacket all the way down the street?” Gurpreet asked, rocking side to side. “Do you bhanchod want to get seen?”

“I was in a hurry.”

“In a hurry to get us all caught, eh, little prince?”

He’d have to take some of his clothes over to her soon. He concentrated on that.

“So what was she like, then?” Gurpreet asked. “Our Mrs. Randeep Singh?”

Randeep pretended not to hear.

“Oy! I asked you something.”

“Nothing. Like any girl.”

“Oh, come on. Tall, slim, short? What about . . . ?” He mimed breasts.

Frowning, Randeep said he didn’t notice, didn’t care to notice.

“And she didn’t let you stay?”

“I didn’t want to.”

Gurpreet laughed. “Maybe one day you will.”

“Leave him alone,” Avtar said, strongly, eyes still closed.

“Where are we going today?” Randeep asked quickly.

Vinny—boss, driver—spoke up: “A new job, boys. We’re off to Leeds.”

They all groaned, complaining about how late they’d be back.

“Hey, ease up, yeah? Or maybe I need to get me some freshies who actually want the work?”

Someone in the back closed his fist and made the wanker sign, a new thing that had been going round the house recently.

The proposed hotel site was directly behind the train station. A board so white it sparkled read, *Coming soon! The Green: a Luxury Environmentally Friendly Living Space and Hotel in the City of Leeds*. But right now it was just a massive crater, topsoil scraped off and piled in a pyramid to one side. At least all the bushes and trees had been cleared.

They assembled in the corner of the station car park, looking down onto the site. Another vanload joined them. Mussulmans, Randeep guessed. Bangladeshis even, by the look of them. A man approached, his hard hat askew on his big pink head. He went straight to Vinny and the two spoke and then shook hands.

“All right, boys,” Vinny said. “This is John. Your gaffer. Do what he says and you’ll be fine. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

The van reversed and Vinny left. Randeep moved closer to Avtar: if this John was going to pair them off then he wanted to be with him. But John began by handing out large pieces of yellow paper, faintly grid-lined. Avtar took one, studied it. Randeep peered down over his shoulder.

“These are the project plans,” John said, walking back and forth. “As you can see there’s lots to do, lots to do, so let’s just take it one step at a time, yes? You understand?”

“We could do this with our eyes closed,” Avtar muttered. “Saala bhanchod.”

“Oy! No, bhaji!” John said, bursting into Panjabi, pointing at Avtar with the rolled-up paper. “I no longer fuck my sister, acha?”

Avtar stared, open-mouthed, and then everyone was laughing.

They put on their hats, smoothing their hair out of the way, chose tool-belts and made for the footings stacked in neat angles on the wooden pallets. John called them back. He wanted stakes in first.

“But it will take twice as long,” Avtar said.

John didn’t care. “We’re doing this properly. It’s not one of your shanty towns.”

So Avtar and Randeep piled a wheelbarrow with the stakes and bumped on down to their squared-off section of the site. “You put in the stakes and I’ll follow with the footings,” Avtar said.

Randeep dropped onto one knee and held a stake to the ground. With a second glance towards the plan, he brought down his hammer. “Like last time?” He wasn’t going to fall for that again.

“It’ll take all week just to do this,” Avtar said. “It’s as big as one of their bhanchod football grounds.”

At lunchtime, they found their backpacks and joined the others sitting astride a large tunnel of aluminium tubing, newly exposed from the dig. Beside them, a tarpaulin acted as a windbreak. They slid off their helmets. Their hair was sopping.

Afterwards one or two pulled on their coats and turned up their collars and sank into a sleep. The rest decided on a cricket match to stay warm. They found a plank of wood for a bat and several had tennis balls handy. They divided into Sikhs and Muslims, three overs each. Gurpreet elected himself captain and won the toss. He put the Muslims in to bat.

“No slips, but an edge is automatic out,” he said, topknot swinging as he ran back to bowl.

He was knocked for fourteen off the first over, the last ball screaming for a six. Gurpreet watched it arc above his head and land somewhere in the car park.

“Arré, yaar, there’s something wrong with that ball.”

“Right,” Avtar said. “The fact that it is being bowled by you.”

Randeep laughed but when Gurpreet glowered he fell silent.

They needed thirty-one to win and came nowhere near, with Avtar going for glory and getting caught, and puffing Gurpreet easily run out.

“These Mussulmans,” he said, throwing aside the bat. “Cheating is in their nature.”

John approached and for the first time Randeep noticed his gentle limp.

“Bohut good work, men, bohut good work. But come on, jaldi jaldi, it looks like you’ll have it all khetum in no time.”

Avtar and Randeep stowed their lunchboxes and trudged down the site. Another six hours to go.

Vinny was late that evening.

“Some of us have other jobs to get to, yaar,” Avtar said.

“Sorry, sorry,” Vinny said. “I had to go to Southall.” He was forced to turn left. “Crazy one-way system in this city.”

“Is there work in Southall?” Avtar asked, up and alert.

“Hm? No, no. The opposite. I’ve found another one of you slackers. You’ll have to make some more room back there.”

No one spoke. It was nothing new. They came and went all the time.

Soon they hit the motorway. Someone asked if Vinny Sahib had heard anything about any raids? Because one of those Mussulmans, you see, he was telling that the raids have started again.

Vinny whistled a single clean note while shaking his head. “I’ve not heard a thing. Why would I? Far as I’m concerned you’re all legit, ain’t you? You all showed me your papers. Nowt to do with owt, me.”

The van continued in the slow lane, the tyres rumbling away under Randeep, a vibration that felt vacantly erotic. Then something made him sit up. At first he thought it was rain but it was too slow and gentle to be that. Then he understood, and touched his fingertips to

the back window. “Mashallah,” someone said, as Randeep felt them all brimming up behind him, pressing and jostling to stare at the sky, at the globe of tumbling snow around each street light.

At the house, Avtar persuaded Vinny to drop him off at the chip shop, leaving Randeep to eat alone in his room. Soon he was in bed, too exhausted to call Narinderji, too exhausted even to sleep, and he was still awake when he thought he heard a door sliding shut, like a van’s side door, and the downstairs bell being rung. He swiped clear a patch in the window—Vinnyji again?—and went down the first flight of stairs. Gurpreet and the others had edged into the hallway, shushing one another.

“It’s Vinnyji,” Randeep called down but no one seemed to hear him.

Gurpreet bent to the letter box, just as Vinny’s voice came through, shouting that he was freezing his fucking kecks off out here. Quickly, the door was opened and he hurried in. He was hunched over, looking shorter than usual, and each needle of his spiked hair was topped with a bobble of snow. Behind him was someone new.

Randeep joined them in the front room, glancing around for Avtar. The others were all there: some perched on the mattress laid over the metal trunk, two squatting on an upturned milk crate, several flopped into the Union Jack deckchairs nicked from a garden a couple of weeks ago. The TV was balanced on a three-legged stool in the middle of the room, playing their favourite desi call-in show.

“This is Tochi,” Vinny said, his thumb chucked towards the new guy. “Starts tomorrow, acha?”

He was very dark, much darker than Randeep, and shorter, but he looked strong. The tendons in his neck stood out. Twenty-one, twenty-two. One or two years older than him, anyway. So another he’d have to call bhaji.

“I’ve got a spare mattress in the van. He’ll be staying in yours, OK, Ronny?”

It wasn’t really a question but Randeep said he was absolutely fine with that.

He and Tochi carried the mattress up the two flights and leaned it against the wall. They’d have to take out the wardrobe first.

“Wait,” Randeep said and placed his suitcase to one side, out of harm’s way.

“Cares more about that fucking suitcase . . .” Vinny said.

They bullied the wardrobe out and shoved in the mattress and then Vinny said he had to go.

“Have a beer,” Gurpreet said, joining them on the landing.

Vinny said he couldn’t. “Was meant to be back an hour ago. She’ll have the face on enough as it is.” He turned to the new guy and made a star of his hand. “Five sharp, you understand? These lot’ll show you the ropes.”

When the three of them were left, Gurpreet folded his arms on the shelf of his gut, slowly. “So. Where you from?”

Tochi walked into the room and closed the door. Gurpreet stared after him, then pushed off the banister and huffed downstairs.

Randeep waited. He wanted to make a good first impression. He wanted a friend. He knocked and opened the door, stepping inside. The guy looked to be asleep already, still in his clothes and boots, and knees drawn up and hands pressed between them. He’d moved his mattress as far from Randeep’s as was possible in that small room: under the window, where the chill would be blowing down on him, through the tape.

“Would you like a blanket? I have one spare,” Randeep whispered. He asked again and when he again got no reply he tiptoed forward and folded out his best blanket and spread it over his new roommate. Downstairs, there were still two rotis foil-wrapped in the fridge. He heated them straight on the hob. He liked the froggy way they puffed up. Then he coated them with some mango pickle. He didn’t want to join the others in the front room, where he could hear the TV blaring, but he didn’t want to disturb his new roommate either. So he stayed there, marooned in the middle of the kitchen because there wasn’t a single clean surface to lean on, tearing shapes out of his roti and feeding himself.

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By 3:15 the next morning Randeep was awake and washed and dressed and in the kitchen binning the previous day's joss stick and lighting a fresh one. He said a quick prayer, warming his hands by the cooker flame, and set about getting what he needed: frying pans, rolling pin, butter and dough from the fridge, a cupful of flour from the blue barrel. He dusted the worktop with the flour and tore a small chunk from the cold brown dough, softening it between his palms. He had just over an hour to get sixty rotis done.

He paced himself and rolled out the dough-balls methodically. Four rolls up, turn it round, four rolls more, a pinch more flour, three more rolls on each side and then into the pan. He found himself whistling even as his upper arms filled with a rich, dull ache. There was movement around the house: radio alarms, the thrust of a tap. He quickened up and once the rotis were done and wrapped he dumped the frying pans in the sink for whoever would be on washing duty that night and replaced them on the hob with four large steel pans of water, full gas. He added tea bags, cloves, fennel and sugar and while all that boiled he gathered up the five flasks and dozen Tupperware boxes stacked on the windowsill. Each box bore a name written in felt-tip Panjabi. He found an extra box for his new roommate, Tochi, and spooned in some potato sabzi from the fridge. As he carried a six-litre carton of milk to the hob, Gurpreet wandered in, the bib of his dungarees dangling half undone. He was pinning his turban into place.

"All finished? Thought you might have needed some help again."

Randeep flushed but concentrated on pouring the milk into the pans.

"Clean the bucket after you wash, acha?" Gurpreet went on, moving to the Tupperware boxes. "None of your servants here."

He had cleaned it, he was sure he had, and his family had never had servants. He didn't say anything. He just watched Gurpreet moving some of the sabzi from the other boxes, including Randeep's, and adding it to his own. He wondered if he did this with everyone or only when it was Randeep on the roti shift.

"Where's your new friend from?"

Randeep said he didn't know, that he went to sleep straightaway.

"His name?"

"Tochi."

"Surname, fool."

Randeep thought for a moment, shrugged. "Never said."

"Hmm. Strange."

Randeep didn't say a word, didn't know what he was driving at, and stood silently waiting for the pans to come to the boil again. He had the twitchy sensation he was being stared at. Sure enough, Gurpreet was still there by the fridge, eyes fixed.

"Bhaji?" Randeep asked. Gurpreet grunted, seemed to snap out of it and left, then the hiss of the tea had Randeep leaping to turn off the gas.

Soon the house was a whirl of voices and feet and toilet flushes and calls to get out of bed. They filed down, rucksacks slung over sleepy shoulders, taking their lunchbox from the kitchen counter; next a rushed prayer at the joss stick and out into the cold morning dark in twos and threes, at ten-minute intervals. Randeep looked for Tochi but he must have gone ahead, so he paired up with Avtar as usual. Before he left the house he remembered to take up the pencil strung and taped to the wall and he scored a firm thick tick next to his name on the rota.

Overnight, the ground had toughened, compacted, and at the end of the morning they were still staking it out while Langra John—Limping John—and three other white men went about in yellow JCBs.

"Wish I had that job," Randeep said, closing his lunchbox. "Just driving about all day."

Avtar clucked his tongue. "One day, my friend. Keep working hard and one day we'll be the bosses."

Randeep leaned back against the aluminium tunnel. He shut his eyes and must have nodded off for a while because the next thing he heard was the insistent sound of Gurpreet's voice.

"But you must have a pind. Was that in Calcutta too?"

Tochi was sitting against a low wall, the soles of his boots pressed together and knees thrown wide open.

“I’m talking to you,” Gurpreet said.

“My pind’s not in Calcutta.”

“Where, then?”

Tochi swigged from his water bottle and took his time screwing the top back on. He had a quiet voice. “Bihar.”

Gurpreet looked round at everyone as if to say, Didn’t I tell you? “So what are you?”

Avtar spoke up. “Arré, this is England, yaar. Leave him.”

“Ask him his bhanchod name.”

Shaking his head, Avtar turned to Tochi. “What are you? Ramgarhia? Saini? Just shut him up.”

“Ask him his bhanchod name, I said.”

Tochi made to get up, frost crackling underfoot. “Tarlochan Kumar.”

Randeep frowned a little but hoped no one saw it.

“A bhanchod chamaar,” Gurpreet said, laughing. “Even the bhanchod chamaars are coming to England.”

“Who cares?” Avtar said.

“Only backward people care,” Randeep said, but Gurpreet was still laughing away to himself and then John limped up and said they better get a move on.

“Do you think he’s got a visa?” Randeep asked, when they started up again.

Avtar looked at him. “When did you last meet a rich chamaar?”

“His parents might have helped him.”

“Janaab, don’t go asking him about his parents. He’s probably an orphan.”

That evening Gurpreet knocked on their bedroom door and said he and a few of the others were going out, so Randeep and Tochi would have to help with the milk run. “You’ve got Tesco.”

“Where are you going?” Randeep asked and Gurpreet made a fist and pumped it down by his crotch.

“And stop buying those bhanchod cloves and whatnot. We don’t have money to waste, little prince.”

Randeep waited until he heard him on the stairs, out of earshot. “He’s that ugly he has to pay for it.”

Tochi was threading his belt around himself. The swish of it sliced the air. “You’ll have to do it yourself.”

“I can’t carry all that milk. Do you know how far it is? Can’t you help me?”

“Join one of the others.”

“But we can’t all go to the same place. The gora gets suspicious.”

Tochi said nothing.

“I respect you, bhaji,” Randeep said. “Can’t you help me?”

On Ecclesall Road the roadworks still hadn’t finished and the street was all headlights and banked-up snow. Randeep pulled his woolly hat lower over his ears and marched through. Tarlochan only had on his jeans and a shirt which kept belling in the wind. His jeans had no pockets, as if they’d been torn, and his hands looked raw-white with cold, like the claws of some sea creature.

“Next time I will insist you borrow my gloves,” Randeep said. “You can have them. I have two pairs.”

As they passed the turn-off for the Botanical Gardens, Randeep pointed. “That’s where Avtar bhaji’s second job is. Through the gardens and carry on straight.”

“Whose garden is it?”

“No one’s. Everyone’s. Maybe the government’s. But they’re pretty. I always think it’s like we have the city, then the gardens, then the countryside.” He nodded towards the hills, made smoothly charcoal by the night. “Shall we go there one day? To the countryside?”

“How many apneh work with your friend?”

Privately, Randeep felt “apneh” was perhaps a little too far, given their background. “A few, but no one else from the house. You looking for a second job too?”

He didn’t say anything. Instead he turned sharp left down a road, his head bent low. Randeep yelled his name, then ran to catch up.

“Police,” Tochi said, still walking.

Randeep turned round and saw the blue lights revolving by. “No visa, then.”

“I guess not.”

“How did you get here? Ship or truck?”

“On your mother’s cunt.”

Randeep stared glumly into a dark coffee-shop window. It didn’t seem to matter how hard he tried.

“Sorry,” Tochi said. He looked annoyed with himself.

“I’m on a marriage visa.” Randeep expected a reaction but got none. “I got married,” he went on, aware he was starting to blather. “To a girl. She came over to Panjab. From London. But she’s here now. In Sheffield, I mean.”

“So why not live with her?”

“She’s Sikhni. But I’m not that bothered, if I’m honest with you, bhaji. I’m going to take some clothes over soon but that’s it. It’s just one year, get my stamp, pay her the money, get the divorce, then bring my parents and sisters over. It’s all agreed with Narinderji.” And he wished he’d not said her name. He felt like he’d revealed something of himself.

They bought milk, flour, bread, potatoes and toilet roll and went back to the house. Others were returning with their milk and shopping too, and it all got piled into the fridge, done for another week.



Randeep took a step back from the door and looked up to the window. The light was on. He rang the doorbell again and this time heard feet on the stairs and Narinderji appeared on the other side of the thick glass—“I’m coming, I’m coming”—and let him in.

“Sorry. I was in the middle of my paat.”

“I didn’t realize,” Randeep said, following her up to the flat.

With each step his suitcase hit the side of his leg, and, as he entered, the gurbani was still playing. She hadn’t changed anything much. It was all very plain. The single plain brown leather settee. A plain tablecloth. The bulb was still without its shade. Only the blackout cur-

tains looked new. A pressure cooker was whistling on the stove, and the whole worktop was a rich green pasture of herbs. In the corner, between the window and her bedroom door, she'd created a shrine: some kind of wooden plinth swathed in a gold-tasselled ramallah, and on top of this both a brass kandha and a picture each of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind. In front of the plinth, on a cushion, her gutka lay open, bound in orange cloth, and beside that a stereo player. The gurbani began to fade out and the CD clicked mournfully off. Randeep set his case by the settee.

"How have you been?"

"I'm getting used to it." Her hands were clasped loosely over her long black cardigan.

"You are getting to know your way around?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"At least the weather is getting a smidgen better now. I thought the snow would never stop."

She gave a tiny smile but said nothing. Randeep wondered if she just wanted him to hurry up and leave again. He knelt before his case and thumbed the silver dials until the thing snapped open.

"Well, as I said on the phone, I've brought some clothes and things for you to keep here."

He draped a pair of matching shirts across the creased rump of the settee, along with some black trousers and starched blue jeans, all still on their bent wire hangers. He took a white carrier bag tied in a knot at the top and left this on the table. "Shaving cream, aftershave, that kind of thing. And also some underwear," he added in the casual manner he'd practised on the way down. Then he reached back into his suitcase and handed her a slim red felt album. "And these are the photographs I think we—you—should hang up."

He watched her palming through the pages. The first few were taken on their wedding day, in a gurdwara outside his city of Chandigarh. The later ones showed them enjoying themselves, laughing in a Florentine garden, choosing gifts at a market. "They look believable to me," she said.

"Vakeelji sorted it all out. He said sometimes they ask to see where

we went on holiday.” He sidestepped saying “honeymoon.” “There are dates on the back.”

“Are there stamps on our passports?”

“It’s all taken care of.”

Suddenly, her nose wrinkled and she held the album face-out towards him: the two of them posing in a busy restaurant, his arm around her waist.

“Vakeelji said there have to be signs of—intimacy.” He’d looked past her as he’d uttered the word.

“I don’t care what Vakeelji said.” She shut the album and dropped it onto the settee. “This isn’t what I agreed to.”

He felt himself getting riled, as if discarding the photos in some way reflected her feelings towards him. “Look, can’t we just do what Vakeelji said? I’m the one with everything to lose here.”

“I’ve put a lot at stake too.”

“Yes. I’m certain you have. And I’m very thankful for all you’re doing. I’m sorry if that isn’t clear. We won’t use the photos.”

The silence seemed calculated, forcing her to relent.

“Most are fine to use,” she said, and he nodded and retrieved the album.

“I only hope we’ve got enough. I’m hearing rumours of raids.”

There was a sort of frozen alarm in her face which thawed to incomprehension. “You think this place will be raided? By who?”

“It’s just people at work talking. And there are always rumours. But it’s better to be prepared. Maybe I should come and live here?” he said, testing the water a little.

The shock of the suggestion seemed to force her mouth to open.

“I was not being serious.”

“It’s too small. And the weather,” she said, randomly.

“I understand completely,” he said, layering smiles over his disappointment. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so warm in a house, with food smelling as good as that on the cooker.

She made to walk him to the door.

“Shall I help you with this first? It’s not fair to leave you to pack it all away.” Delay tactics. She said she’d do it later. That it wasn’t a

problem. Reluctantly, Randeep followed her down the stairs. As she opened the door he took the notes out of his pocket and handed them to her.

“Another month,” she said. “The year will be over before we know it.”

“Yes!” he replied, shaking his head, as if amazed how quickly the time was passing, when really it seemed to him that each new week took on the span of an entire age.

After he'd gone, she collapsed onto the armrest of the settee, face hidden. This was too hard. This was too much to give. What had she got herself into? She lifted her head out of her arm and was met with the images of her gurus. They spoke to her, reminding her that she always knew it was going to be hard, that doing the right thing is never the easy choice, but to remember that Waheguru is her ship and He would bear her safely across. She felt Him beside her, and felt her resolve return, as if the blood was pumping more thickly through her body.

She fetched from the drawer the map she'd picked up from the station and zoned in on her street. The surrounding areas didn't sound like places she wanted to visit: Rawmarsh, Pitsmoor, Crosspool. Burngreave. Killamarsh. They sounded so angry, these northern places, like they wanted to do you harm.

Across the city, Randeep lay on his mattress. Everyone had eaten early and gone to sleep, tired out from a whole muddy week of shovelling up and levelling out cement. No one had even mentioned his second visit to the wife. He replayed their conversation and was more or less pleased with how it had gone. They seemed to understand each other and if the year carried on like that everything would be fine. He was hopeful of that. He heard the downstairs door go and the kitchen beads jangling. Probably Avtar would stay in the kitchen for an hour, eating, studying, counting how much money he had, or didn't have.

Randeep wouldn't join him. The last few times he had gone downstairs he'd got the impression he was only getting in the way.

Rain pattered against the glass. He turned his head towards Tochi. Yesterday, Tochi had moved his mattress out from under the window and turned it at a right angle, so he and Randeep now lay parallel to each other, the door at their feet. Randeep guessed it was so he could sleep facing the wall. His boots were crossed at the ankles and were the only part of him that poked out from under the blanket. Randeep's blanket. Which he'd not even been thanked for.

"Bhaji, are you awake?"

Nothing.

"Bhaji?"

"What?"

Randeep didn't know what. He hadn't had a conversation planned. "I can't sleep." Then, a minute or so later, "This is strange, isn't it?"

"Go to sleep."

"I mean, when you were a kid, did you ever think you'd be working in Sheffield, in England, and living in a house like this? I'd never even heard of Sheffield." There was silence and Randeep asked, "Do you still have people back home?"

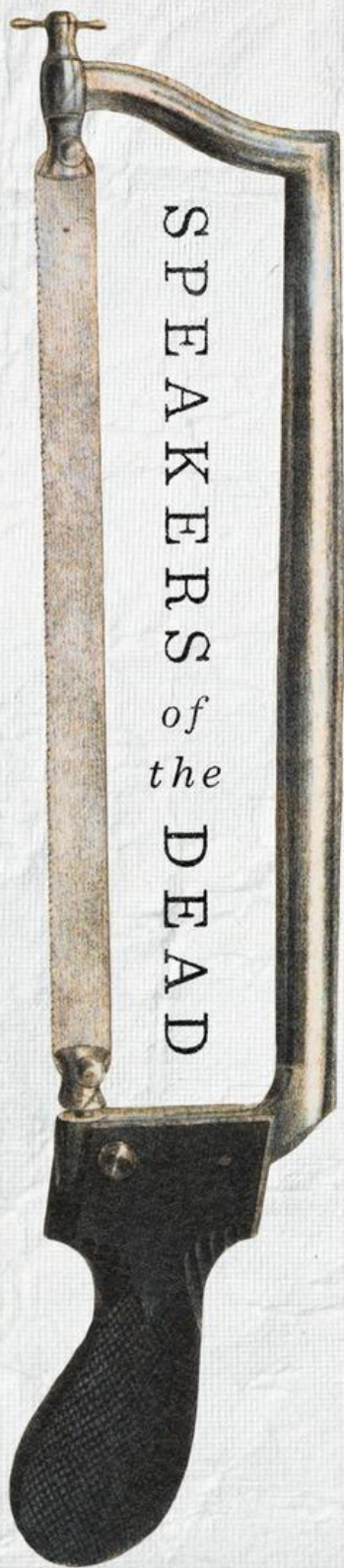
Tochi didn't reply. The rain seemed to be plashing harder and Randeep drew his blanket up around his neck.

"Bhaji?"

"What?"

"I like hearing the rain outside."

A pause, and then Tochi: "Me too."



SPEAKERS  
*of the*  
DEAD

A



*Walt Whitman*



*Mystery*



J. AARON

SANDERS

## Chapter 1

*T*hey are going to kill her.

Walt Whitman, reporter for the *New York Aurora*, is standing in the courtyard of the Tombs, with several hundred New Yorkers who have crushed past his cold, aching body for a glimpse of the execution.

The sun is at the halfway point on its short cycle through the winter sky, and its low angle casts long shadows from west to east, shadows that cover all but the east wall of the prison. It is on this wall that Lena's large and lonely shadow is cast as if by stage light.

The noose dances in the harsh winter wind, and below the gallows, a layer of frost blankets the dirt. Walt pushes his way to the front of the crowd, the ice crystals crunching beneath his boots. They are all waiting for Sheriff Jack Harris to return from his meeting with Mayor Morris about whether or not to grant Mrs. Stowe a stay on her execution because of her pregnancy. Walt worries that the decision to deny the stay is a fait accompli, which is why he brought with him a sheaf of testimonials from

Lena's medical students in which they argue that the fetus has quickened, a legal problem for the city, because if the fetus has begun to move, New York would be executing two of its citizens instead of one.

The sheriff's coach, a new yellow phaeton, rumbles through the prison gates, around the crowd, and skids to a stop. Jack Harris's silver hair is stuffed under a top hat, his bearded face deceptively slight compared to his stout body. By reputation, he is a man who sometimes puts instinct before protocol.

Whitman calls out to the sheriff, and when he tries to follow the lawman, two guards block his way. He scurries back around to the front of the gallows for a better view. The arrest and trial were rushed affairs, rigged against her from the beginning, it seemed, and her defense never gained real traction with anyone but those closest to her. The students know Lena and Abraham. They spent time with them every day for months, and they saw what Walt saw: a couple who, despite their problems, had become closer. None of them even considered Lena as a suspect until Sheriff Harris arrested her.

At the sheriff's appearance atop the gallows, the crowd quiets.

The silence presses down on Walt, and he fights back feelings of despair. The woman who treated him like a son is beautiful and haggard, still wearing the medical school-issued black dress and white apron stained with her husband's blood, having refused to change since her arrest. Her long black hair ribbons stream in the wind, and her dark eyes are red and swollen. His heart aches to see her suffer like this.

The sheriff approaches the condemned woman, her body quivering, and he whispers in her ear.

There is a moment of nothingness—

—and then she reels backward, emitting a preternatural scream that convulses Walt’s soul.

Lena flails until the wiry priest powerfully grips her shoulder. “And God hath both raised up the Lord,” he calls out in his baritone voice, “and will also raise you up by his own power.”

“But the baby!”

Whitman rushes the stairway but is again blocked by the two guards. He shuffles backward, stands on his tiptoes. Behind him, the bloodthirsty crowd stirs.

Harris pauses for a moment, then nods to the jailer, Little Joe, who holds Lena fast while the sheriff ties her hands behind her back.

Walt’s heart races.

This time Whitman charges, using his large frame to knock one guard to the side, the other to the ground, before ascending the staircase, two steps at a time.

On the hanging platform, half a dozen coppers line the back end. There’s the priest, wide-eyed and hunched over. There’s Little Joe, twice as big as any other man in the city, and there’s Sheriff Harris. Walt holds up the leather-bound sheaf. “These medical testimonies demonstrate that Mrs. Stowe is quick with child.”

The sheriff shakes his head. “Mr. Whitman, our medical expert reached a different conclusion.”

A few feet away, Lena’s sobs are muted by the wind.

Walt takes a step toward the sheriff, and two policemen meet him. “Mrs. Stowe’s colleagues disagree.”

“Those women are not doctors.”

The sheriff turns away, but Whitman catches him on his shoulder. “You’re a good man. I saw how you restored order after the cigar girl was murdered.”

“The law is the law.”

Whitman pushes a little harder. “This city does not need another controversy.”

At the delay the crowd jitters, the kind of tottering that precedes a mob action.

The sheriff briefly looks Walt in the eye, then gestures to two of his men, and they promptly take Walt into custody.

“Her death will be on your watch,” Whitman shouts.

Knowing that Walt has failed, Lena resumes her struggle to get free. She rolls toward the edge of the platform and nearly goes over—

But Little Joe grabs her from behind and lifts her to her feet.

During the commotion, Walt wrestles away, but a third man kicks him in the stomach, and the other two retake him. The pain is searing. He rolls to the side. The watchmen have the platform covered, and there are more of them on the ground for crowd control and even more at the gate. He is surrounded.

The sheriff slips the black hood over Lena’s head and reaches for the noose, and that’s when the men holding Whitman loosen their grip just enough—

He wiggles free, dodges Harris, and scoops up Lena, black hood and all. She is heavy in his arms, but the adrenaline drives him to brave the blockade of six men, their Colt pistols drawn, their faces blank. He charges through them, and miraculously sees daylight between him and the stairway. If he can only make it down—

—and then the space closes, and the men are upon him. Walt clings to Lena with all his might until she whispers, her voice strong and deliberate from beneath the hood, “It’s over, Walt. You did your best.”

He holds back his tears. “But you’re innocent.”

“Keep the college going so our deaths are not in vain.”

He holds her tighter.

It takes four men to hold Whitman, and two more to pry Lena away from him. The men push him to the ground and cuff him, the metal cutting into his wrists. Walt screams, curses, thrashes about, mad with rage over what is about to happen.

He watches as the sheriff slips the noose over Lena's head, positions her over the trapdoor, and addresses those who condemned her to this fate: "For the murder of Abraham Stowe," he bellows, "you have been sentenced to death by hanging, after which your body will be dissected at the Women's Medical College of Manhattan."

The crowd roars.

Walt breathes in.

The sheriff claps three times, the lever is pulled, and the floor falls away—

Lena's body drops.

—her neck breaks.

—and Walt Whitman collapses on the platform, sobbing now, and waits for his friend and her unborn child to die.

## Chapter 2

Whitman's wrists sting where the skin has abraded, and his spirit is raw. He wants to look away from the gruesome scene, but out of respect for Lena's wishes, he will bear witness. Before him, her body twitches, and two men with pistols stand guard over him. He watches until she stops moving altogether, her last prayer smothered in its utterance.

At that moment, Coroner Barclay, a tiny excuse for a man, creeps onto the scene and pronounces Lena dead. Little Joe cuts the rope suspending her body midair, and she drops into the back of the coroner's wagon. Barclay tosses a tarp over her, and drives away.

As Walt stands, restrained, the sheriff finishes up interviews with James Gordon Bennett from the *New York Herald* and Horace Greeley from the *New York Tribune*. The fact that Greeley and Bennett, both with readerships in the twenty thousands, are in attendance illustrates the enormity of what has happened, and Walt will add his own account to the *Aurora* as soon as he can. Before joining the *Aurora*, with its five thousand readers, he worked as a

printer for Park Benjamin at the *New World*. While there, several of his short stories were published by Benjamin, who later hired him to write the novel *Franklin Evans*, despite their public disagreements that led to his departure from the *New World*.

The meeting disbands, and Harris approaches. Walt holds out his hands to be released.

“Sorry, Mr. Whitman. You’ll be coming with me.” He tugs at the heavy metal cuffs. “The newspapers are about to run wild with your antics.”

“But I have an appointment to transport Mrs. Stowe’s body from the coroner’s to the women’s college today.”

“That is the coroner’s responsibility.”

“I promised Miss Blackwell, and Dr. Barclay agreed.”

“Perhaps you should have had this in mind before you attempted to halt the execution.”

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The watch house jail stinks like an outhouse, and is as dark. Walt squints to see better but has to rely on sounds—the shuffling, scraping, and breathing of confined men.

The sheriff leads him to a cell near the back of the hallway. With a key larger than his hand, Harris unlocks the door and uses his full body weight to push it open. He nudges Whitman into the cell, where a freckle-faced boy with bright red hair sits on the cell’s one cot. Dressed in socks but no shoes, tattered pantaloons, and a ripped white shirt, he can’t be more than thirteen years old.

“This is for your own protection,” Harris says as he swings the cell door shut.

“Do those words ease your conscience?”

“You rushed the gallows,” Harris says. “You assaulted my men. You should be grateful I don’t lock you up for a year.”

Whitman stands strong and tall until the sheriff is out of sight, then doubles over in grief. He is surrounded by stone and one window, less than a square foot in size and set above eye level, the only break.

The boy catches him eyeing the window. “There’s no way out,” he says. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Walt sinks to the floor. He cannot escape this situation, nor his own grief. Lena is gone forever from this world, and he’ll never sit across the table from her or Abraham—no more conversing into the late hours of the night, no more comparing their readings of Emerson, or listening to Abraham and Lena discuss Oliver Wendell Holmes’s latest précis on hygiene and disease.

The boy asks, “You tried to stop the hanging?”

“Of an innocent woman.”

“No offense, mister, but she had good reason to kill her husband after what he did to the cigar girl.”

The boy’s version of events matches popular opinion: Abraham Stowe had an affair with Mary Rogers, the pretty cigar store clerk. She became pregnant, Abraham botched the abortion, and Rogers died. Abraham panicked and tossed her body in the river. Lena found out about the affair and abortion, and killed him. The State of New York executed her. Done.

“I know what has been said about this matter, but the City of New York has made a terrible error.”

The boy leans forward. “You couldn’t find proof that she didn’t kill her husband, could you?”

“It’s an eventuality.”

“But she’s dead. Why not leave her be?”

Walt locks eyes with the boy. “The truth always matters.”

The boy does not pursue the topic further. Instead, he con-

fesses his own crime. “I was arrested for grave robbery.” The boy pauses, then continues. “I tried to dig up the body of my neighbor, Mrs. Abernathy.”

Whitman tries to ignore him, but the boy persists. “Have you ever dug a grave, mister?”

He shakes his head. “Of course not.”

“It ain’t as easy as you might think. The ground is frozen solid, and it took me two hours to break up the dirt.” The boy stands, pretends to dig. His movements are pained, but he perseveres. “I’m shoveling and shoveling. *How far down is she?* I’m in the hole about waist deep when I finally reach the casket. *I’ll chip the lid off the casket and slide her out that way.* If I’m still at it by sunrise, I know I’ll end up”—he flashes his biggest smile—“I know I’ll end up in jail.”

“The sheriff arrested you before you could sell the corpse?” Walt presses, warming to his subject. He knows about the resurrection men and their grisly trade in dead bodies.

The boy shakes his head. “Mrs. Abernathy’s brothers were standing guard, looking out for folks like me. They’d slipped away for a couple of pops, and when they returned, I had her nearly out.”

Walt understands this too about body snatching: The burden is on the families to guard their loved ones’ bodies—whether by armed guard or by technology. The Patent Coffin, for one, is made out of wrought iron and lined with spring catches so the lid won’t open. There are cages, straps, or even *dead houses*—places where loved ones can leave the bodies safely until they are no longer good for dissection. Or, as in this case, the family itself might stand guard—

Suddenly, Walt is concerned about the boy. His face shows no sign of injury, but the way he moves—“And they roughed you up?”

The boy coughs.

Whitman joins the boy on the cot and reaches for his shirt. The

boy resists at first, but Walt reassures him with a soft look and a nod. The bruises, deep browns and purples, cover his chest and back.

“Where are your parents?”

He pauses. “Dead, sir.”

Maybe Walt can give the boy a chance, bring him to the women’s college, where they’ll look after him until he’s recovered.

“I’m sorry for your loss, mister.”

Memories of Lena come unbidden, and Walt is flooded with the awe he felt observing her medical lectures, Abraham always in attendance. Her distinguished beauty matched her quick wit. Her strong, confident voice would fill the room, and when the students’ questions inevitably came, she fielded them with a generous tone and a precise logic.

And now he’s crying.

The boy slides close and wraps his scrawny arm around Walt’s neck. “It’s okay, mister. My mother used to tell me that death is not the end but a start to something better, something glorious. Do you believe that too?”

Whitman considers himself a deist with Quaker leanings, a man who believes that death is a curvature of the ringed self, all part of a larger cycle of comings and goings, that the mind and soul are eternal. But the tragedy of Lena’s and Abraham’s untimely deaths has undercut these beliefs. For now, he will have to rely on the boy’s faith. “I do believe that,” Walt says. “Absolutely.”

“We’re all right, then, the two of us,” the boy says.

A clatter of footsteps sounds in the hallway. The key clanks, the chamber turns, and the heavy iron cell door opens to reveal a young man whose sculpted cheekbones and square jawline are framed by dark shoulder-length hair. His low-crown top hat tilts rakishly toward a wilted pink boutonniere on his lapel.

“Henry?” Walt faces his past.

“You look terrible, Mr. Whitman.”

After a short courtship, the men had parted a few years earlier—Henry bound to his family farm in northern Manhattan, and Walt to teach school in Brooklyn. They had promised to write letters, and while Walt had written several, Henry had written none.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m your new boss at the *Aurora*,” Henry says, leaning on his chestnut walking stick. “And Mr. Ropes sent me here to bail you out.”

Walt rises to shake Henry Saunders’s hand—his skin is soft and his grip strong. “I’m grateful,” he says, “but the only way I’m coming with you is if you bail out my friend here, Mr.—” He turns to the boy.

“Smith.” The boy stands despite the pain. “Azariah Smith.”

## Chapter 3

Walt follows the coroner, Dr. Kenneth Barclay, down a long white hallway that opens up to a makeshift morgue. Once inside, Dr. Barclay removes the sheet with all the flair of P. T. Barnum revealing an exhibition.

Walt gulps back tears.

Lena's dark eyes are open, her mouth twisted halfway between a smile and a scream. Walt attempts to close both her eyes and jaw—her skin is cold and greasy—but they won't stay shut.

"I'm afraid that's physically impossible." Barclay places his hand on Walt's. "I could have had the body delivered to spare you this sight."

Whitman backs away. "I made a promise."

"Very well. I'll need just a moment with her."

The coroner reviews the autopsy report, comparing his notes to the body, spending most of his time in the neck area. "I knew the Stowes well." Barclay breaks the silence. "Abe was my col-

league at NYU. He and Lena invited me to dine with them several times. I admired them greatly.”

Barclay waits for Walt to respond. He doesn’t.

“I could have never imagined it, Lena killing Abraham.” Barclay glances up from his work. “But after what he did to Mary Rogers—”

“They are innocent.”

“Innocent? Oh, Mr. Whitman, we must face the truth.”

“What do you know about the truth?”

“I saw Abe with Mary Rogers,” Barclay says. “And she was only one of many women Abe seduced, his students among them.” Barclay forces eye contact. “What Lena did breached morality, but she was driven to the brink. Abe betrayed her with woman after woman, and then the Mary Rogers affair?”

“She *didn’t* kill him.” Walt gathers himself, recalling Lena’s vow to preserve her marriage in spite of her husband’s infidelity: *We are stronger now than before.*

Barclay folds the autopsy folder shut, puts his finger to his chin. “Jealously is powerful motivation.” He packs his pipe with tobacco, lights it, takes a puff. “At first, Mr. Whitman, I too believed she was innocent.” Pipe smoke laces the frigid air. “But I examined the evidence. Abraham becomes involved with this Mary Rogers. She gets pregnant. He administers the abortion. Something goes wrong and she dies. So what does he do? He bludgeons her body to make it look like murder and dumps her in the river.” Barclay takes another puff, then blows the sweet tobacco smoke in Walt’s face. “Gruesome.”

Whitman stanches the verbal assault: “Abraham did not kill Mary Rogers, and Lena did not kill Abraham, and I will prove it.”

Barclay scoffs. “*You* will prove it? What can you possibly know that the sheriff has not already investigated?”

Walt shoots back, "The sheriff is not infallible."

"How do you explain the arsenic found on Lena, the same arsenic that killed Abraham?"

"Obviously, I cannot, or she wouldn't be dead on your table."

"Crimes," Barclay says, placing his hand on Lena's shoulder, "are not sensible. That quality is for writers like Mr. Poe to explore in his stories. Poor, poor Lena." The coroner traces his finger along her stomach. "And her poor child."

"That is enough!" Walt grabs Barclay by the collar and lifts him off the ground. "Is Mrs. Stowe's body ready?"

Barclay nods, a twinge of fear in his eyes.

"Good." Whitman drops the coroner to the floor. "Because I wish to take leave of this place."

## Chapter 4

Walt Whitman drives the horse-pulled flatbed freight wagon he borrowed from Dr. Liston, Abraham Stowe's colleague at New York University, through the hundreds of New Yorkers who have lined the route to the Women's Medical College of Manhattan. Men, women, and children of all social classes, craning for a glimpse of the body. They are eerily silent now, and Walt fights back the urge to tell them they are partially responsible for his friend's death.

He directs the horses onto Centre Street, leaving the white light of the gas lamps and the parade of New Yorkers behind. Poorer streets like these are marked by the absence of light. And sound. The Broadway omnibuses are barely audible from a few streets over, the drivers preferring to remain where the money flows.

The Women's Medical College of Manhattan comes into view, and along with it the protestors. A group of twenty or so gathered in front of the college the day after Abraham's murder and has since grown into the hundreds. Their leader, the antidissectionist

Father Allen, stretches his arms toward the sky like some Old Testament prophet: “Dissection stops the resurrection!”

Whitman has met the opportunist priest before, and has observed his skill at wielding human vulnerability, drawing on the fear of a public that believes a dissected corpse cannot rise from the dead. Walt assesses the mood of the crowd, recalling that only a month ago, a mob in New Haven burned down the medical school lab and lynched one of the young medical students.

The college is housed in a black-shingled granite-slab building accessible by a wooden staircase that leads to a porch. Just over the second-floor door, a single window stares like an eyeball. He recalls his first visit to the college a year earlier for an article in the *New World*, and how he got along with the Stowes straight away. They welcomed him in like family, and it was as if he had known them for years. He half expects Abraham and Lena to emerge in the entryway right now, holding hands, as they always did.

Walt steers the wagon right into the midst of the protestors, and stops in front of the stairs.

With Lena in his arms, Whitman keeps an eye on the priest, who at the crucial moment gestures his followers to remove their hats, bow their heads, and make way for him. A sliver of humanity in the madness.

Walt nods his gratitude as he passes.

Once inside the college, his eyes adjust to the gaslight shining from each corner of what was once a dining room. Anatomical drawings on butcher paper hang from the walls over rows of chairs and desks.

He carries Lena past the bar turned lectern, the chalkboard behind it, and the dangling skeleton. To get into the dissection room, he has to walk underneath the sign painted in blue script: *She must mangle the living, if she has not operated on the dead.*

Walt lays Lena on the very dissection table where only two weeks earlier Abraham was murdered. He straightens the tarp so that it covers her from the shoulders down. A wave of emotion hits him, and he wipes his eyes with a handkerchief. He needs to be strong for the students.

Upstairs the students begin to stir. Whitman can't bear the thought of them seeing their instructor's lifeless body. They appear on the landing, one by one, each of them wearing the same black dress and white apron as Lena. They approach, place a hand lovingly on their teacher, their faces haggard and raw.

He knows each of them by name. Marie Zakrzewska, or Miss Zacky as the other students call her, is from Berlin. An ethereal redhead, she escaped a pogrom that killed her parents, two sisters, and three brothers, then she studied medicine in Europe and, as a midwife, ran a maternity ward in Switzerland. It was her dream to learn from the Stowes.

Blond-haired and blue-eyed Karina Emsbury, from Hartford, was disowned by her pastor father for studying medicine, then connected to Abraham and Lena through her school's headmistress and Abraham's cousin, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Olive Perschon, short and mousy, from Philadelphia, is the daughter of abolitionist parents supportive of her medical aspirations. And Patricia Onderdonk, a tall, powerful woman from the Netherlands who claims to have been orphaned in a coastal flood.

Elizabeth Blackwell, the Stowes' most loyal supporter and handpicked successor, breaks the silent procession. "This is madness." She shakes her head, squeezes her hands into fists, her British heritage evident in every syllable. "How could they?" She clenches her square jaw and thin lips. Her dark hair is pulled in a tight bun at the back of her head. Miss Blackwell will display her determination but never her devastation in front of her students.

Walt and Miss Blackwell will keep the medical college going. The students need Elizabeth to be strong. So Whitman takes her by the hand, and they form a prayer circle around the body. *Our Father who art in heaven*, he begins, and for once he lets someone else's words do what his own simply cannot.

When the last of the *amens* has echoed through the chamber, he steps back. Watching grief seize their young faces and shatter their confidence, he vows to honor the family circle Abraham and Lena provided for them here at the college.

As they had done for him.

He wants to stand on the table, call them to arms. *We will fix this injustice, we will storm the city, crash their homes, shout from the rooftops.* His army, these strong young women and their new leader, Elizabeth Blackwell. But now is not the time. He will stand down, he will let them cry, and he too will cry.

Miss Blackwell joins him at the back of the room. "Your friend, young Mr. Smith, is resting upstairs," she says. "We blocked off a corner for him."

"Thank you," Whitman says. "How are his injuries?"

"I'm afraid his internal organs may be severely damaged," Elizabeth says. "I gave him a dose of laudanum to help him rest."

Walt says, "I'll look in on him later."

"He said he has no family."

Whitman nods.

Elizabeth shakes her head. "Poor dear."

Behind them, a distraught Karina Emsbury throws herself across Lena. The other students blanch at this naked display of grief.

Amidst the jumble of emotion, Miss Zacky approaches Walt. "Your wrists." She takes his hands into hers. "They're bleeding." She slides up his coat sleeves and examines the long scrapes from the handcuffs, rubbed raw and bleeding. "We need to clean and dress

these.” Miss Zakrzewska has become Elizabeth’s most reliable help, though their styles of practice diverge. She touches where Elizabeth withdraws from physical contact. She knows the power of her beauty, bewitching others with her penetrating gaze.

Walt says, “I tried to save her—” Flashes of Lena on the platform intervene, the hood, the noose, the floor dropping away, and he grits his teeth in agony.

“We know.” Miss Zacky pulls him close, wraps her arms around his neck. It feels good to be held like this, as Henry used to hold him, and in that moment he needs her, and so he presses up against her even more, holding tight.



**THE  
MIRROR  
THIEF**

**MARTIN SEAY**

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MIRROR  
THIEF**

**A NOVEL**

**MARTIN SEAY**

 **MELVILLE HOUSE**  
BROOKLYN • LONDON

# **THE MIRROR THIEF**

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First Melville House Printing: May 2016

Melville House Publishing      8 Blackstock Mews  
46 John Street    and    Islington  
Brooklyn, NY 11201      London N4 2BT

mhpbooks.com    facebook.com/mhpbooks    @melvillehouse

ISBN: 978-1-61219-514-8

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A catalog record for this book is available from  
the Library of Congress

# P R E P A R A T I O

**MAY 20, 1592**

And seeing in the Water a shape, a shape like unto himself, in himself he loved it, and would cohabit with it; and immediately upon the resolution ensued the Operation, and brought forth the unreasonable Image or Shape.

Nature presently laying hold of what it so much loved, did wholly wrap herself about it, and they were mingled, for they loved one another.

—*Pimander*

## 23

The acolyte lights the candles as the priest opens the book. The long wicks flare, and the image of the Virgin appears in the vault above the apse, her gray form steady against the flickering screen of gold. The glass tesserae of her eyes catch the dim light, and her gaze seems to go everywhere.

The priest's hand moves across the psalter; its thick pages curl and fall. *Venite exultemus Domino iubilemus Deo salutari nostro*, he intones. *Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.* At the priest's back are the relics of Saint Donatus, along with the bones of the dragon he slew by spitting in its mouth. Overhead, the wooden roof slopes outward like a ship's hull.

Even now, hours before dawn, the basilica is not empty. Solitary figures pass in the aisles: sleepless fishermen, glassblowers between shifts, veiled widows impatient for Christ's return. Some kneel and mutter prayers. In the narthex, at the base of a marble column, a lone drunkard snores.

At the south end of the shallow transept a man drifts along the uneven floor. His steps are cautious, slow, measured by the soft tap of his walkingstick. His downcast eyes trace images on the mosaic floor: eagles and griffins, cockerels bearing a trussed fox, peacocks eating from a chalice. Beneath the clean flames of the beeswax candles the patterned checks of porphyry and serpentine blend into a fluid surface, undulating and unfathomable. The man lifts his black morocco boots like a heron hunting frogs.

Picture him there, between the piers of the old brick church: gaunt and sinewy, around thirty-five years old, wearing the long black robe of a

Bolognese doctor. His small forked beard is trimmed close, his red-blond hair cropped a bit shorter than is the current fashion. He is somewhat less filthy, less flea- and louse-ridden, than those he moves among. His velvet cap and brocade jerkin are rich but not ostentatious. His worn lopsided face suggests a difficult birth and many misfortunes suffered since. There is a strangeness to his aspect, a detachment, that those who meet him tend to ascribe to his erudition, or to his many years spent abroad, although in doing so they are mistaken.

*The sea is his, and he made it*, chants the priest. *His hands formed the dry land*. Mist rises from the canal outside, wedding the ocean to the darkness, bearing a chill through the heavy wooden doors. The black-robed man shivers, turns to go.

Let this be him, then. Crivano, the Mirror Thief. Let him bear the name. Who else can claim it?

## 24

As he crosses the threshold, Crivano can hear the *Te Deum* echoing from the convent of Saint Mark and Saint Andrew, two hundred yards north. A bright halfmoon lingers in the western sky; beneath it, the Campo San Donato is all but deserted. In the distance, across the wide canal, torches light the path of a procession as it leaves the new Trevisan house. By the entrance of the baptistery just ahead yawning linkboys trade taunts with a pair of rude commoners, watchmen of the Ministry of Night. Crivano raises his stick as he descends the church steps, and one of the boys puts a taper to his wrought-iron lantern. Here's your light, dottore, the boy says.

I'm looking for a ridotto called the Salamander.

Sure, dottore. It's across the long bridge, near San Pietro Martire. Do you want to get a boat?

I'll walk, Crivano says.

They cross the square and follow the canal south, then turn west when it merges into a broader channel. A gap in the buildings widens toward the lagoon, and for a moment Crivano can see the lights of the city, over a mile away: weak glimmers from the Arsenal, and further on the orange blaze atop the belltower in the Piazza. The sea is calm. A few boats are already on the water, bearing lanterns in their prows, and he wonders whether Obizzo's craft is among them.

The wide *fondamenta* grows busier as they approach the long bridge. Merchants hurry to boats moored at quayside, bearing bundles or pushing carts laden with bronzeware and majolica and spindled glass beads, eager to cross the lagoon to their booths in the Piazza San Marco before the festival crowds gather. A week ago, when Crivano last came here to Murano to meet with his co-conspirators, he found many shops along this canal closed for the *Sensa*, having moved their business into the city. Meanwhile, in the Rialto, the guilds had to cajole and bully their members to abandon their storefronts and show their wares in the Piazza. The guilds' case seemed difficult to make. When your whole city is a market, why bother with the fair?

From the bridge's lofty midpoint Crivano can see a tremble in the air over the buildings ahead: heat rising from glass factories. Once lit, their furnaces burn at a constant temperature for weeks on end, even months. The boats below the bridge are stacked with hewn alderwood, soon to be unloaded.

The linkboy leads him past a church, then into a bustling *campiello*. The workers they pass are flush-faced and soot-blackened; their eyes are red-rimmed and hard, like they've come lately from battle. Near the *campiello's* wellhead a workman is beating and cursing another, pounding heavy fists on his skull and shoulders. The attacker wears a thick bandage on his forearm; the man he strikes is little more than a boy. When the young man falls, his assailant kicks him until his nose and mouth are well-bloodied. Then a pair of stout fellows steps in and halfheartedly pulls them apart.

Here, *dottore*, the linkboy says. The Salamander.

Crivano gives him a few copper gazettes and sends him on his way. No sign marks the building: an ordinary two-story shop, its shutters replaced by rectangles of clear aqua glass, firelight falling through the drapes behind them. There's another window set in the door, this one stained a startling orange, with a translucent red lizard wriggling at its center. The door swings open with a touch.

He's not sure what to expect inside—knife-wielding gamblers, bare-bosomed whores—but it's a quiet place: a large room lit by oil lamps with a hearth at the far end; an old woman and what must be her grown son at work behind a long wooden counter; a ceiling hung thickly with game, sausages, cured hams. In the corner a young man strums a cittern, singing wordlessly. A halfdozen or so laborers are scattered across eight tables, dining or sipping cups of wine. Crivano spots the two he's looking for right away, but stands empty-faced in the entrance until the old woman comes for his stick and robe.

Would you care for soup, dottore? We have good sausage, too. And a pheasant.

Just wine.

Crivano seats himself at an empty table. After a moment, the glass-maker Serena appears at his elbow, his hat in his hand. Dottore, he says.

Maestro. Will you join me?

Thank you, dottore. Please allow me to present my eldest son, Alessandro.

The boy is twelve or thirteen, with a serious face. He already bears small scars on his hands and forearms from the furnaces. His bow is dignified and respectful. His eyes are a man's eyes. Crivano thinks briefly of his own youth: when he and the Lark left Cyprus for Padua, they were this boy's age. He doubts greatly that either was so poised.

You help your father in the workshop? Crivano says.

Yes, dottore.

He also studies with the Augustinians, Serena says. He's a good student.

Serena musses the boy's chestnut hair with his broad right hand. His

first three fingers lack their tips; each ends abruptly with a variegated whorl of scar tissue. Crivano hadn't noticed this before. Do you enjoy your studies, Alexandro? he asks the boy.

No, dottore.

Serena laughs. He'd rather be working the glass, he says. He thinks the lessons are worthless. Sometimes I agree. The friars make him learn Latin, and the language of court. Why? Better for a tradesman to learn English, don't you think? Or Dutch.

As he says this, Serena gives Crivano a pointed look that makes him uneasy. Well, maestro, Crivano says, those are the languages of the nobility. And tradesmen want to sell to the nobility. Is this not so?

Tradesmen want to sell to those with access to money and markets, Serena says. Like the English. And the Dutch.

As Serena settles into the chair his son pulls out for him, Crivano steals a glance across the room. The silverer Verzelin hasn't moved from his spot by the fire. He's slumped forward, his head on the table. Crivano knows him by the tremors in his legs.

Serena has placed a parcel on the oak planks. Those sketches you gave me were very good, dottore, he says. Very clear and detailed.

Yes. I didn't make them.

Serena smiles. My compliments, then, to your friend's draughtsmanship, he says. He leans forward. I understand why your friend wants to remain in the shadows, he says. This kind of work—not everyone will do it. Not these days.

You don't want the job?

I'll do the job, dottore. But I'll have to choose my help with care. As you've seen, there has been—how to put it?—an increase in piety throughout the patriarchate. Piety of a particular sort. And all of us praise God for this, of course. But often we're surprised to find practices once thought merely eccentric now being decried as heresy. I see this happen in my own workshop. So I must be cautious. For this piece, of course, we also need a metalworker who can be trusted. Fortunately I know of one.

Crivano nods. He has opened his mouth to reply when a yelp comes

from near the hearth; Verzelin is upright in his chair. He jerks his head left and right, barking gibberish, then slouches to the table again. The cittern player shoots a quick look at him, but never breaks time.

He's drunk? Crivano says.

He's mad.

Crivano looks at Serena, doing his best to feign surprise.

Serena shrugs. It happens to them sometimes, he says.

To whom?

To the silverers. They go mad. No one knows why. Runs in their families, I suppose.

Crivano looks at Verzelin again. He's rolling his forehead back and forth across the wood, spilling his wine. Can he still work? Crivano asks. As if this concern has only now occurred to him.

Serena is silent for a moment. Then he flips aside the folds of white cotton that envelop the parcel before him.

The gesture seems to uncover a hole cut through the tabletop. Leaning forward, Crivano expects to see Serena's legs, but his eyes find instead the exposed beams of the ceiling—and then a face, his own, with terrible clarity. He puts a hand on the table's edge to keep his balance.

Go on, dottore. Pick it up.

Crivano slips his slender fingers beneath the cloth and lifts the mirror to his face. It's about a foot long, several inches across, rounded at the corners, in precise accordance with Tristão's sketch. The glass is perfectly flat, uniformly thick and clear. Crivano tilts it toward the firelight to check the silvering and finds no blemishes. A dancing ghost-light appears across the room, on the wall above the hearth, and then vanishes when he tilts the glass back.

Verzelin made this? Crivano asks.

Serena smooths his thick beard, watching Verzelin with weary eyes. Made it, he says, or caused it to be made.

It's remarkable. Flawless.

Nearly so, yes.

Is the glass that your shop makes so clear?

Serena grunts. Even clearer, *dottore*, he says. If I want it to be. But if you ask me, which I admit you did not, I'd tell you that this glass is *too* clear. Your friend had better keep the damp off it, or in a year or two—

He makes a flatulent sound with his mouth.

—it's gone. Melted away like a fancy sweet. Very clear glass cannot abide moisture, *dottore*. Your friend should keep this wrapped in dried seaweed, always. For what he's paying he should make it last.

Crivano is barely listening, staring at his own face. Like every gentleman, he owns a small steel mirror, and over the years it has taught him to recognize himself. But this glass has made it a liar. He sees himself now as others see him, have always seen him: the shape of his head, the way his expression changes, the space his body fills in a room. He scans the map of damage written across his face and wonders how much can be deciphered: the divot in his jaw from a janissary arrow, the ear notched in Silistra by a whore's hidden razor, the front tooth chipped by the boot of a Persian *onbashi* in the instant before the musket went off. With a quick intake of breath Crivano replaces the cloth and pushes the parcel back toward Serena. How long to attach the frame? he asks.

Not long. No more than a day.

My friend won't need it so quickly.

Once it's finished, Serena says with a sad smile, I don't want it in my shop.

He reaches into his tunic—good fabric, Crivano notices, and fairly clean—and produces a rectangle of white paper, folded and closed with a blue wax seal bearing the device of the Siren, his family's shop. Give this to your friend, he says. It's my estimate, along with a list of alterations I've made to his design. If any are unacceptable, I must be informed prior to sundown tomorrow. Otherwise I'll complete the piece.

Crivano takes the paper, tucks it into his own doublet. There's a commotion: Verzelin is on his feet, staggering. The man with the cittern angles away, ignoring him, pretending to tune his strings. *Christ!* Verzelin shouts, followed by something Crivano can't make out. A thread of phlegm dangles from his beard, golden in the firelight. Crivano sees a pair

of dark stains on the table Verzelin left. The smaller is spilled wine; the larger, he realizes, is saliva.

Verzelin walks toward them, lurching spasmodically at every other step. *He walks among us, brothers!* he hisses. He's pointing at Crivano. *Promises! Promises! Promises of deliverance!*

Crivano keeps his eyes steady. The front of Verzelin's shirt is soaked with sweat and drool. Amazing, Crivano thinks: all those hours at the furnaces, and still so much phlegm. Surely he's incurable now. Still, best not to take chances.

Verzelin shapes his words with effort, seeming to gag on them. *I have called!* he says. *I am his prophet! The peacock, he's a holy bird, isn't he a holy bird? He walks our streets! Follow him, brothers!*

He's out the door, gone. Crivano tenses, tries to keep the strain off his face.

That, Serena says, is not quite the sort of piety I was talking about.

I should speak with him.

Not much of a point, dottore.

I have his payment. For the mirror.

*I'll pay him for the mirror, dottore. You pay me for the finished piece.*

Serena looks at Crivano with narrowed eyes, like he's an imbecile, but Crivano is already rising to his feet. I'll return to collect the piece in two days, he says. Send word to me in the city if the project is delayed. I'm lodged at the White Eagle.

It takes Crivano a moment to pay for his wine and to retrieve his robe and stick. By the time he's muttered his valedictions and returned to the campiello, Verzelin is nowhere to be seen. He can't have gotten far in his condition, but which way? Crivano looks for the linkboy who brought him here, but the boy has moved on. He could ask anyone else, of course, but he doesn't want to leave more of a trail than necessary.

He opts to turn right, down the Street of the Glassmakers. It's long and straight and brightly lit—by glazed lanterns hung over doors, and also from within, by the white-hot furnaces—and edged along its left-hand side by a small canal choked with boats. If Verzelin came this way,

he'll be no trouble to spot.

Crivano hurries forward, his walkingstick clutched by his side. He notes the brightly colored insignia of the shops he passes: an angel, a siren, a dragon, a cockerel devouring a worm. The shutters are all opened, the wares are on display, and more than once he's startled by the image of his own anxious face.

## 25

A hundred yards down the fondamenta, just past a small fishmarket, Verzelin sways in front of the Motta mirrorworks, the shop that employs him, bellowing at his colleagues inside. The shop's racks and shutters are a gallery of silvered panels—ovals and circles and rectangles, pocket-sized or inches across, with frames of inlaid wood or wrought metal or chalcedony glass—and they render him in fragments: his hollow chest, his twisted limbs, the silent O of his shouting mouth.

*I've caught the Lord!* he says. *I have, I have, we all have! But what's the good of catching if you never follow?* No one in the shop comes to the windows; passersby give him wide berth. The bricks at his feet are spritzed with white foam.

Crivano watches from a short distance up the quay. This is better, he thinks: better that he and Verzelin left the Salamander separately, and better that he's had time to think. By now Obizzo will have moored the boat; he'll be nearby, half a mile at most. The question is how to move Verzelin in the right direction. Crivano dealt with too many madmen during his years in Bologna to believe himself capable of anticipating their actions, but he has an intuition about this one, and no better ideas.

He saunters forward, giving the mirrormaker an empty stare. Verzelin goes silent, his febrile eyes returning Crivano's gaze, his lean bearded face a riot of tics and twitches. Then Crivano walks past him, carrying on

down the fondamenta, the iron ferrule of his stick clicking sharply on the pavement.

Confounded, Verzelin discharges a spate of rapid gibberish, unintelligible and bestial, and Crivano picks up his pace. There's an opening on the right: the Street of the Potters. He makes the turn. Another glassworks here, along with two osterie and a lusterware factory; the other shops are dark and shuttered. Halfway down the block, Crivano steps into the recessed doorway of a mercer and waits.

Verzelin isn't far behind. With each step, his body angles left; he corrects himself like a ship beating to windward. The few people on the street hasten from his path. He murmurs as he comes. *The peacock*, he says, *he's a holy bird, a holy bird, a holy bird.*

Crivano steps into the open; the moonlight catches him. Verzelin, he says.

Verzelin blinks, squints. Dottore? he says. Dottore Crivano?

Yes. I'm here.

I conjured you, Verzelin says. I called you from the glass.

We must go, Verzelin. Do you understand? We must leave Murano tonight.

Verzelin stares without comprehension, then squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head, like a child who's tasted raw onion.

Listen to me. The guild and the Council of Ten have learned of our intentions. The sbirri are looking for you right now. There's a boat nearby waiting to take us to Chioggia, but we must hurry.

Verzelin grimaces, stares at his shuffling feet. In his expression Crivano can see an army of fleeting impulses being enveloped by profound weariness. I will follow, Verzelin mutters. I have looked. In the glass. What I have seen. And I will follow.

Crivano finds a dry spot on Verzelin's upper sleeve and tugs it to urge him along. There's a wide square ahead—early-rising merchants' wives filling pails at the well—and they angle away from it, following the curve of the street until they're parallel to the glassmakers' canal. Potters are at work nearby, singing a maudlin song about a drowned sailor, but he and

Verzelin have the pavement to themselves.

Crivano speaks softly and rapidly, reminding Verzelin of what they're doing and why. From Chioggia we'll sail to Ragusa, he whispers. In Ragusa an English cog will be waiting to take us to Amsterdam. We'll be there in three weeks, God willing. And the guild's prayers to Saint Anthony will be very fervent this year, I think.

Don't want, Verzelin says, *don't want* to go to Amsterdam. Heretics! Full of heretics, it is.

Well, you'll have to convert them all, won't you, Alegreto?

Verzelin's tremors have faded, but his feet are dragging, and his voice is blunted by his dripping mouth. Can't work, he says. Lift the glass. Not anymore. *My hands, dottore! My hands!*

Crivano wraps his fingers around Verzelin's arm, glances ahead. He can see the lagoon now, and the quiet fondamenta where Obizzo is to have moored the boat. You won't have to work the glass in Amsterdam, Crivano says, pulling him forward. They've found good workers for you there. Experienced men. You need only teach them to apply the silvering.

I am afflicted, Verzelin moans. *I have seen!* There is no time, no time. Have you? Do you follow?

Of course, maestro, Crivano says. Of course I do.

Shutters open on a shop to the left, but Crivano doesn't look back. *I have caught him!* Verzelin whispers, clutching Crivano's hand. In my glass! *I have, I have caught.* Hold a mirror up to Christ, dottore! Is that not the Second Coming? Have you seen, dottore? Have you? What good is it to witness, if you never tell?

They've reached the fondamenta. The lagoon is before them, black and limitless, with a scattering of lanterns across its surface, a careful thread of light that joins the mainland to the Grand Canal. From nearby buildings issue snores, muffled voices, the sound of a couple fucking, but no one is afoot. A hundred yards south along the quay is a stand of hollyoaks; Crivano spots a white rag draped over one of the lower limbs. Come on, he whispers, pulling Verzelin's arm. Quickly.

I worked so hard, Verzelin says. So hard. Now I see. The peacock, he's

a holy bird, dottore. Just count the eyes on his tail.

Crivano takes a moment to scan windows and balconies, but no one seems to be watching them. They're almost to the trees. On the quay before them, two kittens are picking at the discarded head of a small mullet; aside from them and the water, nothing moves. Crivano lets Verzelin step ahead, then puts a gentle hand on his back.

The draped branch points to a palina where Obizzo's small black sandolo is moored. Obizzo has removed the passengers' chairs from his boat; there's a wadded sheet of sackcloth in the bare hull, partly covering a coil of hemp cord and an irregular block of limestone. Obizzo himself is hunched in the stern, hidden under a broad-brimmed hat and a shabby greatcoat. As Crivano and Verzelin draw even with the bow, he stands and scrambles forward.

Verzelin gasps, stops in his tracks. Even in his blighted state he recognizes Obizzo at once. *You*, he says.

Crivano lifts his walkingstick crosswise in both hands and drives it against the base of Verzelin's skull. Verzelin's head pops forward, he staggers, and Crivano slips the stick under his chin, laying it across his neck just above the thyroid cartilage. Then he tucks the right end of the stick behind his own head, levers it back with his left arm, and crushes Verzelin's larynx.

Verzelin struggles, clawing the air, and Crivano catches his right wrist with his free hand to wrench it immobile. Obizzo has Verzelin's legs; he twists them, grimacing fiercely, as if Verzelin is a forked green sapling he's trying to snap in two. Held off the ground, Verzelin writhes, grasping at nothing with his unbound left arm. There's a dull pop—a femoral head dislocating from an acetabulum—and Verzelin's body goes heavy and slack.

Like Antaeus, Crivano thinks. He holds on awhile longer, certain that the stick is tight across the carotid artery. Many years have passed since he last did this. He thinks about those other men—the touch and the smell of them, the sound of their interrupted breath—as he waits for Verzelin to die.

*Come on, come on, damn it!* Obizzo whispers. His hat has fallen; he retrieves it, puts it on backward, turns it around, watching the lights in the nearby buildings with stray-dog eyes. Every soul in Murano would know him at a glance.

All right, Crivano says. Take his legs.

They put Verzelin's body in the bottom of the hull and hide it with sackcloth. Crivano wraps the cord around the torso—both legs, both shoulders, a double-loop at the waist—and ties it with a surgeon's knot.

Obizzo is in the stern, his long oar at the ready. That's enough, dottore, he says. Get out and cast me off.

Crivano springs to the quay and plucks at the dockline. Be certain to put him in the water at San Nicolò, he says. Sink him in the channel. If the cord breaks, he should float out to sea.

When will I hear from you?

Crivano loops the line and drops it into the sandolo's bow. I'll find you in the Rialto, he says.

When?

Crivano doesn't answer. He watches Obizzo bring the small boat about. The sleeves of Obizzo's coat slide back when he lifts his oar, baring his thick forearms, and Crivano wonders what wild canards he tells his passengers to explain the burns that mottle his furnace-roasted skin. After a few long strokes and an angry backward glare, Obizzo fades into the dark.

The insipid honking of geese comes from somewhere overhead. Crivano looks for the pale undersides of wings, but finds none. When the sky grows quiet again, he pulls the white linen from the holly-oak branch, wipes Verzelin's spittle from his gown and stick, and throws the damp cloth into the lagoon. Then he rounds the point and returns to the Street of the Glassmakers, following it back across the long bridge, studying the shop windows along the way.

His locanda is on the Ruga San Bernardo: lively by day, quiet at night, with no lock on its outer door and stairs to the lodgers' rooms directly off the foyer. The widow who runs the place will hear him come in, but she

won't remember the hour. He bolts his door and rests his head against its wood and breathes deeply, conscious of the gallop of his pulse. Then he lights the clay lamp on the little table, hangs his clothes on the pegs beside the bed, and unties his purse.

Two pinches of basil snuff cool his blood, but he'll stay awake until he returns to the Rialto. He performs a few stretches that he remembers from the palace school at Topkapı, then sits and breaks the blue wax on Serena's letter to Tristão. Unfolded, the outer layer of rag paper reveals a second document with an identical seal; Crivano sets this aside. Then he flattens the sheet that enclosed it, holds it over the lamp's flame, and waits for the hidden writing to appear.



*Try Not  
to Breathe*

{ a novel }

**HOLLY SEDDON**

"NOT SINCE *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*  
HAVE I BEEN SO CAPTIVATED BY A WORK OF SUSPENSE."  
—NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**TESS GERRITSEN**

## Chapter One

Amy, 18 July 1995

Music thudded through Amy's body and seized her heart. Music so loud that her eardrums pounded in frenzy and her baby bird ribs rattled. Music was everything. Well, almost everything.

Later, the newspapers would call fifteen-year-old Amy Stevenson a "ray of sunshine", with "everything to live for". Her headphones buzzed with rock and pop as she trudged the long way home, rucksack sagging.

Amy had a boyfriend, Jake. He loved her and she loved him. They had been together for nearly eight months, walking the romance route around the 'top field' at school during break time, hot hand in hot hand, fast hearts synchronised.

Amy had two best friends: Jenny and Becky. The trio danced in a perpetual whirlpool of back stories, competition and gossip. Dizzying trails of 'she-said-he-said-she-said' preceded remorseful, sobbing hugs at the end of every drunken Saturday night.

Nights out meant lemon Hooch in the memorial park or Archers & Lemonade at The Sleeper pub, where a five-year-old wouldn't have been IDed. Nights in meant *My So Called Life* and *Friends*. After school, time ticked down to the 6pm phone calls once it hit the cheap rate. She would talk until her step-dad, Bob, came into the dining room and gave her *that* look: it's dinner time, get off my phone.

Amy's Kickers bag grew heavier with every step. She shifted it awkwardly to the other shoulder, tangling her headphone wires so that one bud pinged out of her ear, the sounds of the real world rushing in.

She had taken the long way home. The previous day she'd got back early and startled Bob in the kitchen as he stirred Coffee Mate into his favourite mug. At first he'd smiled, opening his arms for a hug before realising that she'd made it back in record time and must have gone across the field.

She'd had to sit through half an hour of Bob's ranting and raving about walking the safe route home, along the roads: "I'm saying this because I love you, Ames, we both love you and we just want you to be safe."

Amy had listened, shuffled in her seat and stifled yawns. When he'd finally stopped, she'd stomped upstairs, flopped onto her bed and smacked CD cases around as she made an angry mix tape. Rage Against The Machine, Hole and Faith No More.

As she'd surprised Bob the day before, Amy knew he was likely to be home already. Waiting to catch her and have another go at her. It wasn't worth the hassle even though the longer walk was especially unwelcome on Tuesdays. Her bag was always really heavy as she had French and History and both had stupid, massive textbooks.

Amy hated learning French with a passion, the teacher was a dick and who needs to give a window a gender? But she liked the idea of knowing the language. French was a sexy language. She imagined she could seduce someone a bit more sophisticated than Jake by whispering something French in his ear. She could seduce someone older. Someone a lot older.

She loved Jake, of course, she meant it when she said it. She had his name carefully stencilled onto her bag with a Tippex pen and when she imagined the future, he was in it. But over the last few weeks she had begun to see the differences between them more and more.

Jake, with his wide smile and deep brown puppy-dog eyes, was so easy to spend time with, so gentle. But in the time they'd been going out, he'd barely plucked up the courage to put his hand inside her school shirt. They spent whole lunch hours kissing in the top field, and one time he'd climbed on top of her but she'd got a dead leg and had to move and he was so flustered he barely spoke for the rest of the day.

It had been months and months and she was still a virgin. It was getting embarrassing. She hated the idea of being last, hated losing at anything.

Frustrations aside, Amy hoped Jake had skipped Judo club so he could come and meet her. Jake and his younger brother, Tom, were driven home from school every day because his snooty mum worked as the school secretary. His family lived in the double-fronted houses of Royal Avenue. He was always back before Amy reached the two-bedroom terrace house in Warlingham Road where she lived with Bob and her mum, Jo.

Jake's mum, Sue, didn't like Amy. It was like she saw her as someone who would corrupt her precious baby. Amy liked the idea that she was some kind of scarlet woman. She liked the idea of being any kind of woman.

Amy Stevenson had a secret. A secret that made her stomach lurch and her heart thump. None of Amy's friends knew about her secret, and Jake certainly didn't know. Jake could never know. Even Jake's mum, with her disapproving looks, would never have guessed.

Amy's secret was older. Absolutely, categorically a man. His shoulders were broader than Jake's, his voice lower, and when he made rude remarks, they came from a mouth that had earned the right to make them. He was tall and walked with confidence, never in a rush.

Her secret wore aftershave, not Lynx, and he drove a car, not a bike. Unlike Jake's sandy curtains, he had thick, dark hair. A man's cut. She had seen through his shirts that there was dark hair in the shallow dip at the centre of his chest. Her secret had a tall, dark shadow.

When Amy thought about him, her nerves exploded and her head filled with a bright white sound that shut out any sense.

Her secret touched her waist like a man touches a woman. He opened doors for her, unlike the boys in her class who bowled into corridors like silver balls in a pinball machine.

Her mum would call him "tall, dark and handsome". He didn't need to show off, didn't need to boast. Not even the prettiest girls at school would have thought they stood a chance. None of them knew that Amy stood more than a chance. Way more.

Amy knew that he would have to stay a secret, and a short-lived one at that. A comma in her story, nothing more. She knew that she should keep it all locked in a box; perfect, complete, private, totally separate from the rest of her soundtrack. It was already a memory, really. Months from now she would still be snogging Jake at lunch time; bickering with her friends; coming up with excuses for late homework. She knew that. She told herself she was cool with that.

The feeling Amy got when he touched her hip or brushed her hair out of her face was like an electric bolt. Just the tips of his fingers made her flesh sing in a way that blocked out everything else in the world. She was both thrilled and terrified by thoughts of what he could do to her, what he would want her to do to him. Would they ever get the chance? Would she know what to do if they did?

That kiss in the kitchen, with the sounds of the others right outside. His hands on her face, a tickle of stubble that she'd never felt before. That one tiny kiss that kept her awake at night.

Amy turned into Warlingham Road and the ritual began. She put her bag down on the crumbly concrete wall. She unrolled the waistband of her skirt so it was no longer hitched up. She decanted her things, finding her Charlie Red spray and cherry lip balm.

Amy shook the spray and let a short burst of sweet vapour fill the air. Then, after looking around self-consciously, she stepped into the perfumed cloud, like she'd seen her mum do before a night at the social club.

She ran the lip balm along her bottom lip, then the top, kissing them together and then dabbing them matte with her jumper. On the off-chance that Jake was waiting, she wanted to be ready, but not make it obvious that she'd tried.

Amy's Walkman continued to flood her ears. *Do You Remember The First Time?* by Pulp kicked in and Amy smiled. Lead singer Jarvis Cocker smirked and winked in her ears as she set everything back in the bag, shifted it to the other shoulder and started down the road.

She saw Bob's van in the road. Amy was twelve doors away from home. As she squinted, she could make out a figure walking towards her.

She could tell from the way the figure walked - confident, upright, deliberate - that it wasn't Jake. Jake skirmished around like a startled crab, half-running, half-walking. Amy could tell from the figure's slim waist that it wasn't Bob, who was shaped like a little potato.

When Amy realised who it was she felt a rush of nausea.

*Had anyone seen him?*

*Had Bob seen him?*

*How could he risk coming to the house?*

Above everything, Amy felt a burst of exhilaration and adrenalin thrusting her towards him like iron filings to a magnet.

Jarvis Cocker was still talking dirty in her ears, she wanted to make him stop but didn't want to clumsily yank at her Walkman.

She held her secret's gaze, biting her lip as she clicked every button until she crunched the right one down and the music stopped. They were toe to toe. He smiled and slowly reached forward. He took one headphone, then the other from the side of her head. His fingers brushed her ears. Amy swallowed hard, unsure of the rules.

"Hello, Amy," he said, still smiling. His green eyes twinkled, the lashes so dark they looked wet. He reminded her of an old photo of John Travolta washing his face between takes on *Saturday Night Fever*. It had been printed in one of her music magazines and while she thought John Travolta was a bit of a nobhead, it was a very cool picture. She'd stuck it in her hardback Art & Design sketch book.

"Hello..." she replied, in a voice a shade above a whisper.

"I have a surprise for you... get in." He gestured to his car - a Ford Escort the colour of a fox - and opened the door grandly like a chauffeur.

Amy looked around, "I don't know if I should, my step-dad's probably watching."

As soon as her words were in the air, Amy heard a nearby front door, and ducked down behind the Escort.

A little way up the pavement, Bob set his tool bag down with a grunt. He exhaled heavily as he fumbled for his keys and opened his van. Unaware he was being watched, Bob lumped the tool bag into the passenger seat and slammed the door with his heavy, hairy hands. He waddled

around to the driver's seat, heaved himself up and drove away with a crunch of gears, the back of his van shaking like a wagging tail.

As excited as Amy was, as ready as she was, a huge part of her wanted to sprint off up the road and jump into the van, safe and young again, asking Bob if she could do the gears.

"Was that your step-father?"

As she stood up and dusted herself down Amy nodded, wordless.

"Problem solved then. Get in." He smiled an alligator smile. And that was that. Amy had no more excuses and she climbed into the car.

## Chapter Two

Alex, 7 September 2010

The hospital ward was trapped in a stillborn pause. Nine wordless, noiseless bodies sat rigidly under neat pastel blankets.

Alex Dale had written about premature babies, their seconds-long lives as fragile as a pile of gold dust.

She had written about degenerative diseases and machine-dependents whose futures lay in the idle flick of a button. She had even detailed every knife-twist of her own mother's demise, but these patients in front of her were experiencing a very different living death.

The slack faces in the Neuro-disability ward at the Tunbridge Wells Royal Infirmary had known a life before. They were unlike the premature babies, who had known nothing but the womb, the intrusion of tubes and the warmth of their parents' anxious, desperate hands.

The patients weren't like the dementia sufferers whose childlike stases were punctuated by the terror of memories.

These rigid people on Bramble Ward were different. They had lived their lives with no slow decline, just an emergency stop. And they were still in there, somewhere.

Some blinked slowly, turning their heads slightly to the light and changing expression fluidly. Others were freeze-framed; mid-celebration, at rest or in the eye of a trauma. All of them were now trapped in a silent scream.

"For years patients like this were all written off," said the auburn-haired ward manager with the deepest crow's feet Alex had ever seen. "They used to be called vegetables." She paused and sighed. "A lot of people still call them that."

Alex nodded, using scrappy shorthand to record the conversation in her Moleskine pad.

The ward manager continued. "But the thing is, they're not all the same and they shouldn't be written off. They're individuals. Some of them are completely lacking awareness, but others are actually minimally conscious, and that's a world apart from being brain dead."

"How long do they tend to stay here before they recover?" Alex asked, poising her pen above the paper.

"Well, very few of them recover. This summer we had one lad go home for round-the-clock care from his parents and sister but that was the first one in years."

Alex raised her eyebrows.

"Most of them have been here for a long time," the manager added. "And most of them will die here too."

"Do they get many visitors?"

"Oh yes. Some of them have families that put themselves through it every single week for years and years." She stopped and surveyed the beds.

"I'm not sure I could do that. Can you imagine showing up week in, week out and getting nothing back?"

Alex, tried to shake images of her own knotty-haired mother, staring blankly into her only daughter's face and asking for a bedtime story.

The ward manager had lowered her voice, there were visitors sitting at several beds.

"It's only recently that we've realised there are some signs of life below the surface. Some patients like these ones," she gestured to the beds behind Alex, "and I'm talking a handful across the world, have even started to communicate."

She stopped walking. Both women were standing in the centre of the ward, curtains and beds surrounding them. Alex raised her eyebrows, encouraging her to continue.

"That's not quite right, actually. Those patients had been communicating all along, the doctors just didn't know how to hear them before. I don't know how much you've read, but after a year, the courts can end life support if they're being kept alive by machines. And now with the NHS funding cuts..." the nurse trailed off.

"How terrible to have no voice," said Alex, as she took scribbled notes and swayed, nauseated, amongst the electric hum of the hospital ward.

Alex was writing a profile piece for a weekend supplement on the work of Dr Haynes, the elusive scientist researching brain scans that picked up signs of communication in patients like these. She hadn't met the doctor yet and was skidding towards her deadline. A far cry from her best work.

There was one empty bed in the ward, the other nine quietly filled. All ten had identical baby blue blankets within their lilac curtained cubicles.

Inside those pastel walls, nurses and orderlies could hump and huff the patients into a seated position, wipe their wet mouths and dress them in the clothes brought in from home and donated by arms-length well-wishers.

A radio fizzed from behind the reception area, as chatter and 'golden oldies' alternated with each other. The barely audible music jostled with the sighing breaths of patients and the beeps and whooshes of machinery.

In the furthest corner of the ward, a poster caught Alex's eye. It was Jarvis Cocker from Pulp, limp-wristed and swathed in tweed. She strained to see the name of the magazine from which it had been carefully removed.

*Select* magazine. Long-dead, long-forgotten, it had been the magazine of choice throughout Alex's teens. She'd deluged the editor with unanswered letters begging for work experience, back when music seemed to be the only love anyone could possibly want to read or write about.

The dark blue uniformed manager who'd been showing Alex around had been snagged. Alex spotted her talking quietly and seriously with the watery-eyed male visitor of a patient in a stiff pink house-coat.

Alex soft shoe shuffled closer to the corner cubicle. Her shins seared with pain from her morning run, and she winced as she quickened her steps. The thin soles of her ballet pumps ground into her blisters like grit.

Most of the patients were at least middle-aged but the cubicle in the corner had a queasy sense of youth.

The curtains had been half pulled across haphazardly and Alex stepped silently through the large gap. Even in the dark of the cubicle Alex could see that Jarvis Cocker was not alone. Next to him, a young Damon Albarn, the lead singer from Blur, mugged uncomfortably at the camera. Both had been carefully removed from *Select* some years ago, dust tickling their thumbtacks.

The scene was motionless. The bed's blanket covering a peak of knees. Two skinny arms lay skewiff on top of the starched bedclothes, tinged purple, goose-pimpled, framed by a worn-in blue t-shirt.

Alex had avoided looking directly at any of the patients so far. It seemed too rude to just stare into the frozen faces like a Victorian at a freak show. Even now, Alex hovered slightly to the side of the Britpop bed like a nervous child. She gazed at the bright white equipment that

loomed over the bed and scribbled needlessly in her notepad for a bit, stalling until she could finally let her eyes fall on the top of the young woman's head.

Her hair was a deep, dark chestnut, but it had been cut roughly around the fringe and left long and tangled everywhere else. Her striking blue eyes were half-open and marble-bright. With Alex's long, pony-tailed dark hair and seaside eyes, the two women almost mirrored one another.

As soon as Alex let her eyes fall on the full flesh of the woman's face, she recoiled.

Alex knew this woman.

She was sure of a connection, but it was a flicker of recollection with nothing concrete to call upon.

As her temples boomed with a panicked pulse, Alex built up the courage to look again, mentally peeping through her fingers. Yes, she knew this face, she knew this woman.

It wasn't that long ago that Alex's powers of recall would have been razor sharp, a name would have sparkled to light in a blink. A mental rolodex gone to rust.

Alex heard thick flat soles and heavy legs coming towards her apace. The penny dropped.

"So sorry about that," the ward manager was saying as she puffed over. "Where were we?"

Alex span to look at her guide. "Is this..?"

"Yes it is. I wondered if you'd recognise her. You must have been very young."

"I was the same age. I mean, I am the same age."

Alex's heart was thumping, she knew the woman in the bed couldn't touch her, but she felt haunted all the same.

"How long has she been in?"

The manager looked at the woman in the bed and sat down lightly on the sheets near the crook of an elbow.

"Almost since," she said quietly.

"God, poor thing. Anyway," Alex shook her head a little. "Yes, sorry, I have a couple more questions for you, if that's okay?"

"Of course," the nurse smiled.

Alex took a deep breath, gathered herself. "This might sound like a silly question, but is sleep-walking ever a problem?"

"No, it's not a problem. They're not capable of moving around."

"Oh of course." said Alex, pushing strands of hair away from her eyes with the dry end of her pen. "I guess I was surprised by the security on the ward, is that standard?"

"We don't sit guard on the door like that all the time, just when it's busy. Other than that, we tend to stay in the office as we have a lot of paperwork. We do take security very seriously though."

"Is that why I had to sign in?"

"Yes, we keep a record of all the visitors," said the manager. "When you think about it, anyone could do anything with this lot, if they were that way inclined."

#

Alex drove slowly into orange sunlight, blinking heavily. Amy Stevenson. The woman in the bed. Still fifteen, with her Britpop posters, ragged hair and girlish eyes.

As Alex slowed for a zebra crossing, a canoodling teenage couple in dark blue uniforms almost stumbled onto the bonnet of her black Volkswagen Polo, intertwined like a three-legged race team.

Alex couldn't shake the thought of Amy. Amy Stevenson who left school one day and never made it home. Missing Amy. TV-friendly tragic teen in her school uniform; smiling school photo beaming out from every national news programme; Amy's sobbing mother and anxious father, or was it step-father? Huddles of her school friends having a 'special assembly' at school, captured for the evening news.

From what Alex could remember, Amy's body was found a few days later. The manhunt had dominated the news for months, or was it weeks? Alex had been the same age as Amy, and remembered the shock of realising she wasn't invincible.

She'd grown up thirty minutes away from Amy. She could have been plucked from the street at any time, by anyone, in broad daylight.

Amy Stevenson: the biggest news story of 1995, lying in a human archive.

#

It was 12.01pm. The sun was past the yardstick, it was acceptable to begin.

In the quiet cool of her galley kitchen, Alex set down a tall glass beaker and a delicate wine glass. Carefully, she poured mineral water (room temperature) into the tall glass until it kissed the rim. She poured chilled white wine, a good Reisling, to the exact measure line of the wine glass and put the bottle back in the fridge door, where it clinked against five identical bottles.

Water was important. Anything stronger than a weak beer or lager would deplete the body of more moisture than the drink provided, and dehydration was dangerous. Alex started and

finished every afternoon with a tall glass of room temperature water. For the last two years, she had wet the bed several times a week, but she had rarely suffered serious dehydration.

Two bottles, sometimes three. Mostly white but red on chilly afternoons, at home. It had to be at home.

As Matt had stood in the doorway of their home for the last time, carrying his summer jacket and winter coat with pitch perfect finality, he had told Alex that she "managed" her drinking like a diabetic manages their condition.

Alex's rituals and routines had become all-encompassing. Staying in control and attempting to maintain a career took everything. There was nothing left for managing a marriage, much less enjoying it.

Alex hadn't expected to be divorced at twenty eight. To most people that age, marriage itself was only just creeping onto the horizon.

She could see why Matt left her. He'd waited and waited for some inkling that she would get better, that she would choose him and a life together over booze, but it had never really crossed her mind to change. Even when she had "every reason" to stop. It was just who she was and what she did.

They had met during Fresher's Week at Southampton University, though neither of them could tell the story. Their collective memory kicked in a few weeks into the first term, by which time they were firmly girlfriend and boyfriend and waking up in each other's hangovers every day.

Drinking had cemented their relationship, but it wasn't everything, and it became less important to Matt over time. They talked and laughed and did ferociously well throughout their

courses, (his Criminology, hers English Literature) partly through frenzied discussion, partly through competitiveness. From the very first month, it was *them*. Not he or she, always them.

It had been nearly two years since the decree absolute, and she still defaulted to 'we', her phantom limb.

Every afternoon, before the first glass touched her lips, Alex turned off her phone. She had long closed her Facebook account, cleaned the web of any digital footprints that could allow drunken messages to Matt, his brothers, his friends, her ex-colleagues, anyone.

Alex had a few rules come the afternoon: no phone calls, no emails, no purchases. In the dark space between serious drinker and functioning alcoholic, there had been no rules. Cheerful, wobbly pitches had been sent to bemused editors; sensitive telephone interviews had taken disastrous, offensive paths; Alex had evaporated friendships with capitalised, tell-all emails and blown whole overdrafts on spontaneous spending sprees. And far worse.

Things were better now. She was getting semi-regular work, she owned her own home. She'd even taken up running.

At least once a week she planned her own death, and drafted an indulgent farewell letter to Matt and the child she'd never planned, the child they would now never have.

She sat down at her desk and opened her Moleskine notepad.

"Amy Stevenson".

Alex had a story, and it was far more interesting than the one she had been sent to write.

## Chapter Three

Jacob, 8 September 2010

Jacob loved his wife, he was sure of that most of the time, but when she talked for forty five unbroken minutes about an extension they didn't need and couldn't afford, the lies felt slightly softer on his conscience.

He watched Fiona's mouth moving, forming the words so resolutely. There were just so many of them, so many bloody words, that they blended into one, ceaseless noise.

Her pink mouth was now entirely for talking. How long had it been since those lips had softened for a kiss? Or whispered something sweet in his ear?

"Are you even listening to me?" her fierce brown eyes filled with salt water, ready to burst their banks without notice. How long had it been since they'd made each other laugh until tears squeezed from the corners of their eyes?

"Of course I'm listening." Jacob pushed his half-finished cereal bowl away, trying desperately not to be outwardly aggressive, or passively aggressive, or break any other unwritten golden rule.

When Jacob and Fiona had first met, they talked about everything. Well, almost everything. She had fascinated him, she always had so much to say and he liked to hear it.

As boyfriend and girlfriend they had sparred, joked, talked into the next morning. On their wedding night, they had failed to consummate the marriage, wrapped in each other's words

until they realised it was the next day, Fiona's legs tangled in her ivory dress train, faces sore from smiling and laughing, sobering with the sun.

But Fiona had stopped asking about his work, stopped expecting to be told anything. Now they wrangled over inane household topics, and not much else.

When had it happened? At the start of the pregnancy? Before?

She had certainly been myopic about ovulation dates and optimum positions but she had still been Fiona, they had still laughed and talked.

It went beyond disinterest.

Fiona used to grill him, question the who, where, when of meetings and social activities, cross-referencing what she was told with diary dates, previous conversations, outfits he'd chosen, throwaway remarks.

*"So exactly who is going to this Christmas party then? How come it's not wives and girlfriends? It's normally wives and girlfriends... are any wives and girlfriends going?"*

Maybe she didn't care now. Fiona had her little nugget growing in her belly, and nothing else mattered. If so, that flew in the face of the Fiona he had fallen in love with, the Fiona he had married. And for all the pressure that had led to it, he had been over the moon when the second blue line appeared on that fated stick many months ago. Terrified, but over the moon.

Now sitting at the tired breakfast bar, he watched his wife unsteady on her feet. Her sense of balance had been eroded over the last few weeks as her belly had ballooned with a new urgency.

Jacob sighed. Every conversation nowadays led to this topic: the small, hellish kitchen.

The new kitchen extension would fix everything: the storage problem, the tricky access to the garden, where to keep the pram, tension in the Middle East.

The new extension was everything. And if Fiona didn't get it, however impossible the sums were, the world would explode. He couldn't be entirely sure that it was his baby in that cartoon belly, and not a ticking time bomb.

The 1930s semi in Wallington Grove, Tunbridge Wells had seemed like a palace when they moved in, just two years ago. It had taken prudence, abstinence and overtime to save a deposit, and the newlyweds had agreed that work and salary had to be the main focus for at least three years; they had to feed the machine. Fiona had agreed wholeheartedly, absolutely, the mortgage was a stretch, it would take two full-time salaries to service it and they both must do their bit.

Some eighteen months later, after a concentrated campaign veering from the subtle to the tearful, they had started to try for a baby and conceived almost instantly. And now the baby needed an extension.

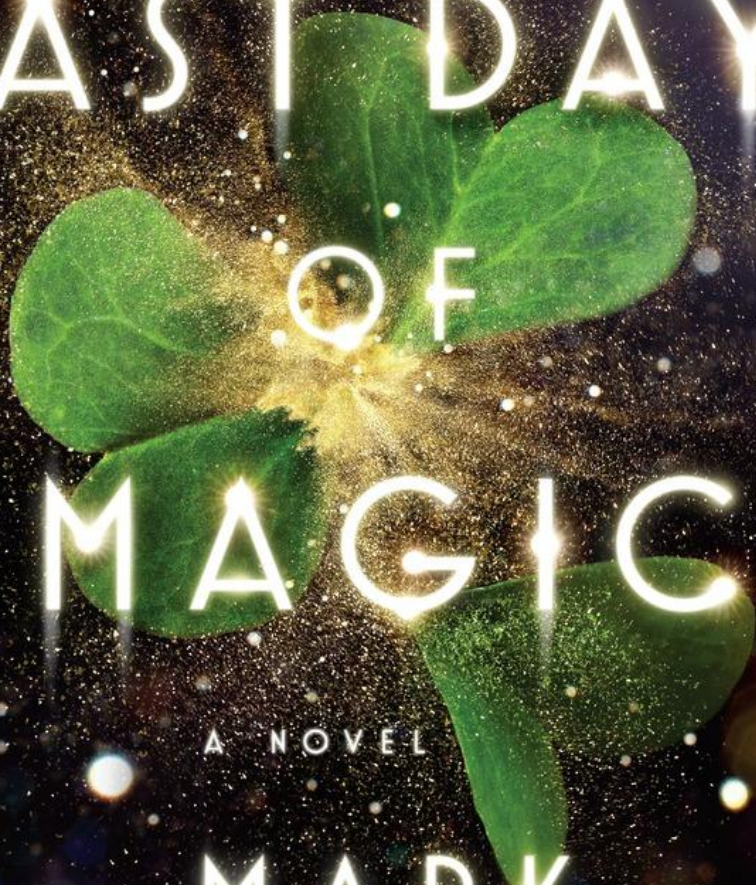
"Fi, look, I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be shitty but I really have to go. I've got some really awful meetings today and my head's all over the place."

'Sure,' she said, "whatever."

She didn't ask for more than that. Why didn't she ask for more than that now?

They both needed to leave. Fiona for work as a graphic designer, Jacob for the hospital, where he did not work.

THE  
LAST DAYS



OF  
MAGIC

A NOVEL

MARK  
TOMPKINS



FPO

THE  
LAST DAYS  
OF  
MAGIC



MARK TOMPKINS

VIKING

*Kingdom of Meath, Ireland*  
*September 1387*

Aisling fell through the rain in a land bright and dark, where the edges of contrast were sharp, often bloody. She had thought, even at thirteen, that she understood the many dangers of this land where the boundaries of the human and the Sidhe realms merged, as only someone who had been trained since birth to rule both worlds could. Now it was knowing, not understanding, that was carried on the tip of the arrow that had slipped beneath her left shoulder blade on its way to her heart. Launched from her galloping horse, her body attempting to flee the arrow's intrusion, her arc ended abruptly in mud, facedown. Then the pain came, an edge flaying her chest from the inside.

Riding beside her as he always did, Liam, guardian of the Morrígna twins, twisted on his horse to follow Aisling's unexpected flight. A moment earlier his attention had been drawn across the clearing ahead, where he had sensed a rush of fear and desire, a sudden movement of iron, and a flood of intent. He had thrown his dagger even before the assailant he perceived—a crossbreed like himself, neither pure human nor pure Sidhe—had fully emerged from behind the ring of seven standing stones. The knife had caught the attacker just under the chin, lifted him off his feet, and sent his already drawn arrow flying wide. As if a single iron-tipped arrow would ever make it past him and on to her without one of them deflecting it. Now, seeing Aisling land in the mud, he wondered how he could have fallen for such a diversion. The arrow that pierced her back had come from the opposite direction, undetected from the woods behind them.

Two of the four guards who had thundered into the clearing with Liam and Aisling wheeled and charged the tree line. The others, swords drawn, surveyed their surroundings while reining in their horses, whose nervous hooves sprayed more mud across Aisling's body.

Liam sat calmly, turning his mount to scan the woods, then walking it over to where she lay, the shaft protruding from her back. He had inherited his muscular build from his human father, who was of a warrior clan, while his dignified stature came from his mother, a Sidhe—a Celtic term for those the Irish Christian Church called Nephilim or, more casually, faeries. Leaning a forearm on his horse's neck, Liam studied Aisling. The splattering of rain mixed with the sounds of branches snapping as the guards zigzagged their horses through the undergrowth in a futile search for the second archer.

"Are you going to get up?" demanded Liam. "The high king's waiting for us. We can't dally here all afternoon. You're going to make us late for the full-moon ritual, and I don't want to miss the feast. You have to be stronger than this."

Aisling dragged one arm under her chest, then the other, and struggled up to her hands and knees. Water trickled from her deep red hair, leaving pale streaks down the side of her grime-soaked face. Liam could not see her eyes but knew they would have gone from light gray to vivid green. He also knew that she should be on her feet already—something was wrong.

"Poison," Aisling gasped. "In . . . my . . . heart. Spreading. Burning."

"Great Mother Danu!" exclaimed Liam in frustration. "I told the king that we should have you in mail already, even if you haven't been enthroned yet." He reached down and tore the arrow out. She grunted and collapsed back into mud that was beginning to take on a red tint—her red.

"He thinks if one of you is safe, then the other is too. Well, now he'll grasp that he has too narrow a view of 'safe.'"

As a warrior, Liam had to admit that the shot had been remarkable. The archer had to adjust for a target galloping away in the rain.

At that angle the bowman had to miss the shoulder blade and hit the gap between the seventh and eight ribs to catch the only part of her heart not protected by bone. Shot too softly, the arrow would not reach the critical vessel, too hard and the tip would pass through the heart, taking the bulk of the poison with it. He knew of no human archer with such skill.

Aisling was back on her hands and knees, head hanging limp. She reached out and fumbled for the dangling reins of her horse. Raising her head, she climbed the reins with both hands until she was standing, clinging to the bridle, shaking.

Liam studied the unusual arrow, making no move to help her. It had been carefully constructed to be undetectable even by a cross-breed such as himself, whose senses were inhumanly sharp. There was nothing unnatural or even animal to draw his attention, to differentiate it from the wooded background. A hawthorn shaft, he noted; a Celtic assassin would have used elm. No human would dare to cut a hawthorn tree, sacred to the Sidhe, not in this land and suffer the curse that was sure to follow. Instead of feathers, ash leaves, meticulously sliced lengthwise along their stems, were used for flights. The head was made of oak, hardened by centuries buried in a bog and then polished razor sharp. The Sidhe archer had to have been a member of an old-line assassin clan or the arrowhead purchased from one at a high price. Few could afford such a rare thing. Sniffing, Liam was surprised that he could not identify the poison, but there had been a lot of it, judging by the warren of small channels drilled into its head.

*But why bother?* Liam wondered. Whoever had staged this attack would have known that Aisling could not be killed, not so long as her twin sister, Anya, was safe. And Liam always made sure that Anya was protected in a secure room while Aisling was traveling. *Were they trying to send a message?* He shook his head. No, there had been too much effort and expense; there was serious intent to kill here. Then it hit him: Anya must not be safe. They must have found

a way to get to both twins. Liam jumped from his horse, reaching Aisling just as she began screaming.

As he held her, his chest too tight to utter any words of comfort, he feared that he must have failed in his duty, his oath to protect the Morrígna twins. He picked Aisling up and carried her to his horse while her screams faded into sobs.

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Earlier that morning the courtyard of Trim Castle was full of wagons being loaded with barrels of ale and wine, casks of fresh-ground flour, bushels of vegetables, and whole sides of beef. Tender piglets crowded into cages squealed high-pitched above the low grunts of their older cousins as all were loaded alongside stacks of the iron roasting spits with which they would soon be intimate.

There were shouts of “Careful! Careful! Quick, grab the other end!” as long banners bearing the emblem of the Morrígna—three strands intertwined in a complex knot—were lowered from the high windows where they had hung for the last year. Folded and wrapped in oilcloth, they were packed into the last of the wagons about to depart for the Irish capital city of Tara, where they would be rehung. Trim was the birthplace of the current incarnation of the Morrígna twins and so was sponsoring much of their coronation ceremony, to be held in the capital four days hence, on their fourteenth birthday.

Punctuating the hubbub came the rhythmic *snap, snap, snap* of pendants on their poles above guard towers, being tested by the wind rolling gray-black clouds overhead. A gust swirled down into the courtyard, whipping the white robe about the old, wiry body of Haidrean, the high druid. He stood with Aisling and Anya, frowning as he took note that tradespeople and nobles alike, hurrying to finalize preparations, either rushed their bow to the twins or forgot altogether. As if the pending coronation festivities were the important thing, instead of the twins themselves. Two handmaids walked up carrying identical coronation gowns.

“Why aren’t those packed?” barked Haidrean, causing the handmaids to cringe.

Anya came to the rescue. “Because I wanted to see them first. Aren’t they beautiful!”

“They’re fine,” replied Aisling, giving the dresses—white silk elaborately embroidered with gold and silver thread—little more than a glance.

“Get them in their trunk,” ordered Haidrean, and the handmaids rushed off.

Though Anya and Aisling were identical twins, few had trouble telling them apart, due to their different countenances. Anya, older by minutes, was as joyful and mischievous as her sister was serious. Aisling bore the tight mouth and often furrowed brow of a young woman who had already watched a man die on her sword. Even though it had been a training accident, she knew that more deaths would follow, which would not be accidents but the cost of her destiny. And there was their hair, thick red against pale skin; Anya let hers fall free over her shoulders and down her back, while Aisling kept hers in a long plait, swept up and out of the way. Tall, even for their family, and slender with light gray eyes. They would walk into rooms full of kings never knowing what it felt like to bow, thirteen-year-olds who had not been allowed to have a childhood, trained since birth to unlock their Goddess nature and source enough primordial magic from the spirit realm—drawn by way of Anann in the Otherworld—to rule over both Sidhe and Celts.

With a cry of “Yeeup!” a driver snapped the reins on the back of his pair of horses, and the first wagonload of provisions rolled out the castle gate, followed by others. They would return the next day to load up the tents, great ones for parties and smaller ones for lodging, and soon afterward the castle and village would empty out as people flocked to Tara for the once-in-a-lifetime event.

Liam, imposing in a mail tunic, a battle-ax strapped to his back and a brace of daggers and a claymore hanging on his belt, made a

straight path through the bustle leading two horses. People instinctively moved out of his way. Reaching Aisling, whose face had brightened at his approach, he handed her the reins of one of the horses.

“Is everything prepared?” he asked his counterpart, Haidrean.

Over the years they had become surrogate parents to the twins, Haidrean as tutor—primarily to Anya—and Liam as fighting instructor—primarily to Aisling, though foremost among Liam’s duties was that of bodyguard. Anytime either or both twins were not with him, he took great measures to ensure their safety within the strong walls of the castle keep, which were fortified with incantations.

“I renewed the enchantments myself. Anya will be fine,” said Haidrean. A drop of rain fell heavily at his feet. “You two better be on your way.”

“The high king sent word that he will be coming to the full-moon ritual as well. We will stay overnight with him there—”

“So Liam can sleep off the ale,” broke in Aisling.

“So he can escort us to Tara,” corrected Liam.

Anya threw her arms around her sister. “Can you believe it? Next time I see you will be at our coronation. We will finally be Goddesses!”

“One Goddess,” corrected Haidrean.

“In four days, then,” said Aisling. She kissed her sister on the cheek and slipped from her embrace.

Haidrean ushered Anya into the keep, knowing that Liam would not ride out until she was secure inside.

“Breakfast before studies,” declared Anya, taking the corridor toward their private dining chamber. The guards followed closely behind them.

When they eventually moved to the library, Anya was laughing at a comment Haidrean had made about the bishop of Rome’s being unable to read or write.

“It gives him an excuse to keep a stable of young scribes he calls

into his bedchamber to read to him at night.” Twitching his ample eyebrows, Haidrean added, “Young male scribes.”

Anya leaned toward him. “So you’re smarter than the pope?”

“They don’t seem to elect popes for their intellect,” Haidrean responded, and Anya slipped into laughter again.

As he had done in the dining chamber, Haidrean took a large iron key from his pocket, so large that it would not have fit the lock if he had tried. Instead he touched it gently to the door, which shuddered as if it had been struck with great force, indicating that the room was sealed. Anya plopped into a chair at the heavy wooden table, which was ornately carved with intertwined foliage and fanciful animals in the Celtic La Tène style. Screens constructed from stretched sheep intestine, scraped almost clear, were set into the tall, narrow windows, keeping the increasing rain and wind out of the stone chamber on the second level of the castle. What little light entered from the exterior gloom was reflected off the lime-washed white walls and supplemented by four candles in a silver holder on one end of the table and three simply stuck into a mound of wax on the other end. Expensive wax candles, because Haidrean refused to subject his books to the smoky animal fat of cheaper tallow. “The king may grumble, but he can afford it,” said Haidrean as he lit another candle and stuck it on the mound.

“Perhaps he can also afford a second candle holder,” Anya offered, rolling a ball of fresh wax between her thumb and forefinger.

A large fire radiated heat and a warm glow. On this gray day, it was the only operating hearth in the castle without dogs sleeping in front, as druids do not keep dogs. Books were stacked in large piles on shelves and chests around the room. Hadrian placed two books on the table, the title *Rome* written across their buckskin covers, and opened them to reveal vellum pages dense with script.

Crossing her arms, Anya gave one of her rare frowns. “Aisling gets to ride around with Liam, learning to fight, while I’m confined here with you, learning the ways of these Roman Christians.”

“Before you were born, the Morrígna designated you as her sage aspect,” said Haidrean, tired of repeating himself on this point, “and Aisling as her warrior. You can’t change that.”

“That may be, but Aisling’s aspect is more fun,” replied Anya. “And she’ll get to stay up here in the sun.”

“Sun?” asked Haidrean, looking at the window.

“My point is that after our coronation I’m meant to reign from a damp underworld. But I have decided that the day I’m crowned, I’ll decree that forevermore both Morrígna twins are allowed to live out in the light of the human world.”

“The Sidhe need an aspect of the Morrígna in the Middle Kingdom for your rule to be recognized. That is your duty and your destiny and why there are two of you. You and Aisling will be Goddess of both lands. Besides, your new palace won’t seem like a damp underworld to you after the coronation.”

“You really think I’ll feel different then?”

“Of course,” Haidrean assured her. “Already you feel Aisling as part of yourself. Concentrate and try to describe it.”

She turned her focus inward. “It’s like she is sitting right here with me, only more so. She fills half the very essence of who I am. I can’t think of myself without thinking of her. She brings strength to me, as I know I bring knowledge to her.” Anya shut her eyes. “At the same time, I am also with her. We are galloping through the woods, I feel the wet and cold she feels.” Anya shivered and gave a little laugh. “We are urging our horse to run faster, trying to out-pace Liam.”

“During the coronation ceremony, you will take the next step,” said Haidrean. “You will no longer feel Aisling inside you, because you will not sense yourself as separate from her. You will finish becoming one being. You might not even remember there was a time when you were two.

“Now open your eyes and return to your lesson on the Roman Church.” Haidrean leaned across the table and slid a book toward her.

“For centuries they plotted against Ireland, and they plot still. You need to understand them.”

Anya pushed the book a few inches back toward him. “The Vatican wouldn’t dare attack us, not after we routed Strongbow the last time they tried. And my Irish Christian Church is as much an enemy to the Roman Church as we are. It grows ever stronger and has as many monasteries across Britain and Europe as the Vatican does.” Anya grinned as she added, “Is it true what they say about Strongbow, about how he acquired that moniker, that he was gifted below the waist?”

“Remember,” said Haidrean, ignoring her question, “the Irish Church will not fall under your rule, so you cannot count on them to fight for you. The Morrígna commands the armies of the Celts and the Sidhe only.”

“And the Fomorians. No ships will get past them without my permission,” added Anya.

Haidrean loathed Fomorians, the fierce race of amphibious Nephilim who stalked the seas around Ireland, always reeking of rotten fish. They were troublesome creatures, but between Celts and Christians, Haidrean knew they preferred to eat Christians, any Christians. “They were of great assistance stopping Strongbow,” he conceded, “so I suspect you can count on them with proper gifts and firm threats. But even with those forces at your command, you’ll need to be vigilant and prepared. In the two hundred years since the Vatican sent Strongbow to invade Ireland, the Roman Church has fallen and risen anew, stronger and more deceptive than ever. I believe that you’ll have to fight them once more, very soon.”

“Surely the Skeaghshee are a more pressing problem,” insisted Anya.

“You can worry about negotiations with them after your birthday, young lady. They’ll submit to your authority once you’re enthroned.”

Even as Haidrean said this, he worried that it might not be true. The law called for the twins to ascend to the throne at the age of

fourteen, in four days, and Haidrean felt in his bones that they would be tested early and severely. Anya and Aisling were born the Morrígna—the Test had proved that; however, the reincarnated Morrígna arrived trapped in their human shells. From that day they had to be taught to connect to their Goddess selves and to strip away their human frailties fortified by fear and insecurity. They had to learn to act as one, in order to bring the Morrígna to the forefront of their being, and be trained to control the supernatural power that would be fully unleashed upon their coronation.

To prepare for his role, Haidrean had studied the journals of the earlier tutors and discovered that preceding sets of Morrígna twins had found it increasingly difficult to transcend their human limitations. The last set never fully merged. It had looked as if this world was becoming less willing to accept the Goddess. Then, when the current Anya and Aisling were born, suddenly every druid in Ireland began foretelling that they would become the strongest twins in an age. That prediction was the source of his worries as he watched Anya creating another ball of wax. If the Morrígna needed to manifest such strong physical aspects, these twins must be destined to face some monumental challenge.

Haidrean wondered anew if the Skeaghshee—tree-worshipping Sidhe who were in increasing conflict with the Celts—were truly going to submit to the twins' authority or if they were the threat that had called the Morrígna back to this world. The Skeaghshee's insolent King Kellach had not returned the Morrígna heart segment left in trust with his clan as required by law. When that segment went missing seven years back, druids stopped predicting how powerful the current twins would be and instead began trying to foresee how much their strength would be impaired.

No, he thought, the Roman Church would be the main threat. He just hoped he had been a worthy teacher.

“The Vatican doesn't worry me, no matter how strong they have become,” said Anya, as if reading his mind.

“They should worry you,” replied Haidrean. “The condottieri army of indentured prisoners, mercenaries, spies, and assassins assembled by Cardinal Albornoz reunited the Papal States and returned the pope to Rome from his Babylonian captivity in Avignon.”

“The bishop of Rome is back in Rome. How convenient.” Anya laughed.

“Few in Europe found it funny. The Vatican’s new army killed everyone in their path who’d opposed the restoration of a Roman pope. Since then the Vatican has been consolidating independent Christian factions at the point of a sword. Now the new pope eyes the remaining church holdouts, and the Irish Church is the largest by far. Their home in our land vexes him as much as does our alliance with the Middle Kingdom.”

“My forces will keep them out of my lands,” Anya said.

“As the power of the Morrigna has kept the Vatican’s forces at bay, so have Rome’s forces kept us confined to these islands. The Skeagh-shee may be your first challenge once you assume your throne, but I’m sure the Roman Church will be your greatest,” replied Haidrean.

Anya leaned her chair back to balance on two legs. “You promised to tell me how you became a druid, but you haven’t yet. Tell me now.”

Haidrean knew she was trying to distract him to avoid further history lessons; he also knew that underneath her playfulness she was anxious about her pending enthronement. The wind rattled a window screen free, and it fell. He caught it with a spell and sealed it back in place. Corporeal magic had once been an embarrassing weakness of his, but to his wonderment even these enchantments had worked well for him since the twins arrived.

Anya was waiting expectantly. Unable to resist her request, Haidrean began, “I was called, without knowing I was being called, as all true druids are.

“I’d borrowed my father’s silver knife and before dawn went out to gather purple betony for a healing potion. As I rested at a well and

watched the sunrise, I became aware of a sound. My father was the bard of our village, so even at seven years old I knew enough not to be Pixie-led. Still, there was something”—his eyes stared into a distant past—“something like song, a song that bore the scent of an unknown flower, that drew me. I followed it through a doorway in a Sidhe mound, traveling with new purpose. There was a Middle Kingdom sunset and a moonrise and voices in a dark that seemed to extend forever, until I felt the touch of a woman, the woman who had sung to me. She took my hand, and we danced and laughed and lay together.”

“At seven?”

“I was no longer seven. What seemed like only a day and a night had changed me physically. When I awoke to another sunrise, I was alone, back at the well in our land, and my body had passed into manhood. I could still feel her lips against my ear, whispering secrets that I struggle to understand even today. I wrapped my too-small cloak around my now-adult waist, gathered the betony, and returned to my father’s house to learn that I’d been gone seven years and a day.

“Soon I began to realize that I saw, felt, heard everything differently. There was new knowledge open to my thoughts, new skills coached by memories of those voices in the dark. A week after my return, the previous high druid arrived bearing a druid’s brooch for me. He’d witnessed my change in a dream and offered to teach me to understand what I’d been told in the Middle Kingdom. I left with him for Tara that day.”

“And the woman, the Sidhe of your passion?” asked Anya.

“We need to return to your studies.”

“Tell me, please. I fear growing old alone in my bed in the Middle Kingdom, while the Sidhe around me remain young. Your story keeps hope alive for my own passions.”

“She continued to come to me, some nights, in my dreams. Nights full of the taste of her skin and the smell of her hair . . .” Haidrean’s words drifted off.

“Not just in dreams, if your son is any evidence.”

“With those from the Middle Kingdom, it’s often difficult to tell the difference between dreaming and being awake. I’m not sure it matters to them. My son appeared in a dream one night, a fresh wiggling baby, and was still there when I awoke.”

“Does she come to you still?”

“Occasionally, though not to my bed. Now she only stands in the forest, as young as ever, watching our son gather wild rose by moonlight. I often wonder if one day he, too, will go on a long walk and if he’ll return at all. You know, I hope to go back to the Middle Kingdom someday—I think possibly when I’ve learned enough to understand all her whispered words, after you’re enthroned and I’m no longer needed.”

Anya did not hear him.

Haidrean saw that her eyes had turned vivid green. Behind him he heard the sound of small stones falling to the floor, followed by a sharp crack. He turned to see a fresh, rough opening no more than a foot tall in the stone wall. From it a Skeaghshee emerged and straightened up to his full seven-foot height. Haidrean recognized him as Cinaed, brother to Kellach the Skeaghshee king. Without a word Cinaed strode toward Haidrean, drawing a long, slender sword from the scabbard strapped to his back.

*No, this can't be,* thought Haidrean. *She hasn't been given the chance to negotiate their grievances.* He turned back to Anya and could see that she was with her twin, her eye color and the pain moving across her face telling him everything he needed to know. Aisling had also been attacked. All was about to be lost. Leaning across the table, he spoke urgently into her ear, “Send Aisling all your strength. Now. It’s the only hope.”

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As Liam and Aisling were riding out of Trim Castle, Kellach stood on a low rise not far away in the midst of dozens of fresh tree stumps. The gathering storm whipped his long hair, the brown of

oak bark, about his thin face that was contorted with fury, for he was king of the Skeaghshee, Sidhe of the open and wild forests, and before him was a scene of murder. Running his hand over the rough wood he tried to comfort the dying base and roots. He could feel the presence of the tree's ghost, as an amputee feels a missing arm and the sudden, sharp sting of the ax it had suffered.

Skeaghshee were the Sidhe clan most in contact with the Celtic world, as they lived out in the woodland that covered Ireland rather than within the Middle Kingdom. While many Sidhe ate as humans ate, Skeaghshee drew all their sustenance, pleasure, and joy from the trees they loved.

*The time has come to stop this slaughter, Kellach thought. After today the Celts will have no say over my trees, there will be no Mor-ríghna in this world to subjugate our clan, and the truce between the Sidhe and the Celts will be broken.*

Sensing his younger brother Cinaed approach, Kellach said, "I summoned you to make sure you saw this before your sortie. Behold another assault on our clan."

Cinaed bowed and said, "A tragedy, my king. My heart weeps with yours."

"Celts are creatures who think only of their own pathetic needs: wood for their carts and their furniture and their fires and their buildings," Kellach continued. "Some say the truce is adequate, with prayers and offerings each time a tree is taken, but now they have gone too far, allowing the Vikings to cut trees for their ships and even to export wood to the French to make barrels for their wine. More and more often, our clan is left grieving over offenses such as this."

"I understand the stakes, my king. I will not fail you."

"My brother." Kellach grasped Cinaed's shoulders. "Others worship the earth or the sun or even water, but trees, trees are all three brought alive, living, breathing, talking to our people. No offering is adequate for the death of even one of our trees. Celts and their allies will never allow our woods to remain sacred, never truly respect our

kind. If the Skeaghshee are ever going to be free, we must act now. You are my champion. Remember what I have taught you and you will prevail.”

“My sword is hungry, my king.”

Watching him stride away, Kellach felt confident that his moment of victory was at hand.

The rain had started in earnest, pounding the land above as Cinaed stood impatiently in a tight earthen tunnel facing the foundation stones of Trim Castle. He longed to be through with his task. Sidhe do not concern themselves with the height of the passages through which they travel; that is not what troubled him. He was troubled by a faint, nagging voice inside his head. Different from Kellach’s ravings and his own obedient responses, this voice told him that he was about to break a sacred oath and that he had been led astray.

On each side of him stood a Grogoch, a shorter—relatively speaking in this confined space—much stockier Sidhe clan, reciting to the stones. For a millennium and longer, the Skeaghshee had intimidated the Grogoch into leaving a warren of secret faerie passages in the stones that they provided to the Celts for their castles, invaluable for spying. Once the existence of these passages becomes known to their druids—humans pretending to be Sidhe witches—they will be found and destroyed, thought Cinaed. It will be a great loss, but worthwhile under the circumstances. Glancing at one of the creatures now singing to the wall, Cinaed willed it to hurry. *Grogoch think as slowly as the rock they love.*

The song of the Grogoch faded, taking with it the enchantment that had been hiding the passage he needed, this was the first time this one had been used. In front of him, a small door appeared, set in the face of a single foundation stone, two feet high by four feet wide. Opening it with a word, he bent and entered.

Cinaed stepped into Haidrean’s library at last and straightened up to his full height. He had been delayed, not long, but maybe too long.

He flung a silent curse back down the passage at the waiting Gro-goch, ignored their muffled cry of pain. Some clumsiness or laziness or double-dealing by their kind centuries earlier had left this passage without an exit door in the last stone. He'd been forced to break through into the chamber. In doing so he had triggered an enchantment designed to protect the room and, more problematically, alerted the druid Haidrean to his approach.

He pushed briefly against the enchantment with his consciousness and realized that he was not going to survive. It had closed too late to keep him out—the druid who cast it must not have considered an attack through the wall—so now it was going to keep him in. Reaching for his sword, Cinaed strode toward the pair at the table, but the old druid was already whispering to Anya, “Send Aisling all your strength. Now. It’s the only hope.”

Cinaed’s sword swept down, severing Haidrean’s head. He leaped over the table and thrust at the unmoving Anya. As he carved through breast and bone, he could feel that the Morrígna was already leaving. There was little more than this shell left. *Gods, don’t let me be too late*, he thought. Kellach had stressed that the attacks on the twins had to be simultaneous in order to kill them both. Cinaed reached into the cleft he had made in her chest and pulled out a heart that began to shrivel in his hand.

Still, he hesitated. In the fifteen hundred years since the Battle of Tailltiu, which led to the truce between the Sidhe and the Celts, three attempts had been made to assassinate a physical aspect of the Morrígna, yet no assassin had ever held half the Morrígna heart in his hand, as he now did. *What will the two worlds become without the Goddess to connect them?* he worried. She was the ruler of their high kings, the one being to whom all Sidhe and Celts alike owed allegiance, bound by ancient oaths.

Looking down at the heart folding in on itself, he could feel the enchantment fading at the chamber door. Soon the guards who had been shouting for Anya would be able to enter. He thought of the

words of Kellach. Raising the heart to his mouth, he bit off a large chunk and began to chew. The dagger of the first guard reached him as he swallowed the last piece.

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Aisling could feel Anya's energy flowing into her body, keeping her alive, when suddenly a wound she did not know could be inflicted opened up in her, bringing pain that eclipsed that of the arrow and its poison. In that instant her bond with her sister was ripped away, and with it her connection to the Otherworld. Screaming, she collapsed into Liam's arms, knowing for the first time since conception what it was to be alone, to be less than whole.

Kellach watched Liam carry a limp and sobbing Aisling to his horse. Having made himself indistinguishable from the surrounding trees, the Skeaghshee king stood in the rain at the edge of the clearing. A brief shudder passed through him, like a faint gust through leaves, as he felt the death of his brother, Cinaed. Knowing that Liam could sense the presence of a powerful Sidhe, Kellach was careful to remain concealed. Although he detested all crossbreeds, Liam was one whom he would prefer not to fight by himself. So he waited until the guards regrouped, collected Aisling's horse, and galloped back the way they had come.

Expelling the Morrígna with concurrent attacks had been too much to hope for, he thought. Kellach had preached to his followers that if each of the twins' hearts could be destroyed before its share of the Morrígna could retreat to the Otherworld, the Treaty of Tailltiu would be broken and all the Sidhe clans would at last unite and rise against the Celts and the Christians and reclaim the land they had lost. He, Kellach, would lead them to victory.

As his concealment enchantment faded, Kellach retreated into the woods. He should not have had to sacrifice his brother. He should not have had to deal with the twins at all, he thought, his anger

rising. They were not truly entitled to rule and should not have participated in the Ceremony of Hearts seven years ago, even if they had survived the Test. He alone of all the kings of the Middle Kingdom had stood up to the Morrigna's tyranny. He alone had refused to return the pitifully small segment of heart that had been granted to the Skeaghshee clan for safeguarding, after the passing of the previous Morrigna twins. Without it the Ceremony of Hearts had been a sham, he told himself.

But now even the high kings would have to acknowledge that the surviving twin was flawed and, by the laws of both the Sidhe and the Celts, could not rule either race. Aisling had been wounded as never before. With her diminished state, he would seize the next chance he got to kill her and banish the Morrigna for all time.



# Daredevils

**SHAWN VESTAL**

A NOVEL

WINNER OF THE PEN/ROBERT W. BINGHAM AWARD

# TWO DESERTS



EVEL KNIEVEL ADDRESSES  
AN ADORING NATION

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When did we first think of jumping a canyon? It seems now that we always thought it. That it was always there for us to think. What do you call that, when the world guides you toward its purpose? We believed, America. We believed we could do anything we tried to do. We believed we could do anything we said we would do. We believed in ourselves and the things we were saying. We believed that in saying these things, we were already making them true.

*July 6, 1974*

SHORT CREEK, ARIZONA

Loretta slides open her bedroom window and waits, listening to the house. She pops out the screen and slowly pulls it inside. The summer night is blue and black, filled with plump, spiny stars and the floral waft of alfalfa and irrigated fields. She swings one leg out, then the other, and sits on the sill. A tiny, muffled creak sounds, and she can't tell if it comes from the house or the night or inside her jangled mind. She spends every day now thinking about the night, and this moment is always the same—the exhilarating passage from here to there. To the brief, momentary future. To Bradshaw.

She drops to the ground and sets off across the lawn, hunched as if trying to stay below the searching beam of a powerful light. She is wearing her jeans, the one pair her father lets her keep for chores, and her clogs. Her Gentile clothes. The mountains, red by day, stand black and craggy against the rich ink of night. Their home is on the edge out here, on the edge of the Short Creek community

just as she and her family are on the edge of it—half outsiders, not yet inside the prophet’s full embrace—but that makes it easier to sneak away without being spotted by the prophet’s men. The God Squad, Bradshaw calls them. If she sees car lights, she crouches in the ditch grass until they pass, but tonight she sees no car. She walks the barrow pit for a quarter mile, grass cool on her bare ankles, to where the dirt lane runs into county road and she sees Bradshaw’s Nova on the wide roadside, pale luster along the fender, signal lights glowing like the hot eyes of a new beast coiled against the earth.

As she comes to the car, the passenger door opens, as if on its own, and the interior light blares, and there he is, Bradshaw, smile cocked on his hard, happy face. She feels it again, the sense that she doesn’t know if she loves him, or even if she likes him, because sometimes she yearns for a glimpse of him and sometimes she feels desperate to get away from him—Bradshaw, sitting there with his wrist draped on the steering wheel like a king—but what is certain is that she cannot resist his gravity. She falls toward him at a speed beyond her control.

“*There* she is,” he says as she slides in. “Holy hell, Lori, you are a vision.”

He leans over and presses his chapped lips against her mouth. He tastes of beer, yeasty and sour. He pulls away and looks at her searchingly, ghostly eyes somehow alight, head tilted, one curly sideburn grazed by the green dashboard glow.

“Did you miss me, sweet Lori?”

“I missed you.”

“Did you think about me a whole bunch?”

“I thought about you all the time.”

She loves how much he seems to love her. He kisses her again, cupping the back of her head with a hand. She puts her hands on his back, feels the knots of muscle there. Sometimes she thinks he is trying to press his face through hers. To consume her. She wants this, always—this sin—but when it arrives she does not enjoy it, because he loses himself. He spreads a palm on her rib cage, thumb an inch from her breast. Then closer.

They part. He breathes as if he's been sprinting.

"Did you think any more about it?" he says.

He wants her to leave with him. To take off for good and put The Crick in the rearview mirror. To be together, he says. *Together* together.

"I did," she says. "I want to. But I don't think yet. I don't think now."

"Aww, Lori," he says. "Don't say that. Don't you say that to me."

She wants to go. She wants to fly into her future, but she feels she must be very careful, must be precise and exact, or she will miss it. She is sure that her future is a specific place, a destination she will either reach or miss, and it awaits her out there somewhere away from all that is here. Away from the long cotton dresses. Away from the tedious days in church school, studying the same scriptures they study all day on Sundays. Away from her father's stern but halfhearted righteousness and her mother's constant acquiescence. And, mostly, away from the looming reality that no one ever says a word about: she is fifteen, she is eligible, she is a means now for her father to pursue his own righteousness. He cannot take another wife himself, but he can still serve the Principle—the principle of plural marriage. *Celestial marriage*. They have been welcoming certain brothers for dinners in their home. The men are always bright with questions for Loretta.

Bradshaw wrestles her to the seat for a while, and then they drive and talk. He loves to be listened to. He loves to tell her about the way he has handled something, the way he has put someone in their place. He is talking about his new boss, the turf farmer outside St. George.

“So he keeps handing me the eleven-sixteenths, and I keep asking for the thirteen-sixteenths, and then he does it again,” he says, slapping a hand on the dash. “I say, Bud, you got your glasses on?”

His laugh is like a chugging motor. Why does he think she wants to hear this? The strange thing is, she does. She loves listening to him talk, to his strange locutions, his crudeness. *So hungry I could eat the ass out of a cow*, he'll say. *Shit oh dear. That smarmy bastard*. He never utters a righteous word. It wasn't all that long ago that Loretta thought he was her savior, the one who'd rescue her. She has been heading out into the night since she was thirteen, she and her friend Tonaya, meeting up with the Hurricane boys, the St. George boys, the boys the prophet had exiled. They were the crowd Loretta and Tonaya chased around whenever they could, sneaking out at night, joyriding on dirt roads, drinking beer, building bonfires in the desert, shoplifting at the grocery store, riding in the backseat as the boys bashed mailboxes or keyed cars, coming home before dawn, climbing back in that bedroom window, back into the world where no one watched television, where they prayed constantly, or sat over scripture, or sang hymns, or walked to the neighbors to weed a garden. Out there, into the worldly world, and then back home, to reverence and boredom.

The night she met Bradshaw, she and Tonaya were wedged in

the backseat of an old Rambler station wagon owned by one of the boys, parked outside the 7-Eleven in Hurricane looking for someone to buy them something—a six-pack, a bottle of sweet wine. That night, it was Bradshaw. Almost immediately, when he came around the side of the store and handed the bag into the car, he looked into the back and found Loretta’s eyes. He was older than the boys she was hanging around with, but younger than the men in Short Creek, the men whose eyes she felt on Sundays at church, the men who blushed if she returned their gaze. Bradshaw didn’t blush, ever. Everything about him announced that he did not harbor a doubt—his quick, bow-legged walk, eyes of washed-out blue and angular face, and the way he was always doing something handsome and prominent with his jaw, cocking it this way or that. Soon she was meeting him alone, and every time she climbed into his car he looked thrilled and he said, “*There* she is,” like he was announcing something the world had long awaited.

Now, tonight, Bradshaw turns onto a dirt road and guns it, fish-tailing the Nova into the desert. They drive up into a bump of low hills where he will find a reason to stop again. It’s past midnight, almost one, Loretta guesses, and she remembers that tomorrow is Fast Sunday, the first Sunday of the month, and she has forgotten to stash something to eat.

“There’s probably nothing open now, is there?” she asks.

“Open for what?”

“Some food. Anything. Tomorrow’s Fast Sunday.”

“Tomorrow’s *what* Sunday?”

Does Bradshaw not know what Fast Sunday is? The day of fasting? He’s lived down here all his life.

“Fast Sunday. No eating. I get headaches if I don’t sneak something.”

Bradshaw brays laughter. “A day of no eating. You Mormons. I swear.”

*You Mormons.* Loretta doesn't think of herself—of her family, of Short Creek—as Mormon, exactly, although everyone here thinks of themselves as the only true Mormons. In her mind, Mormons were what they were before they came here seven years ago. Mormons were what they were when they lived in Cedar City, went to the church on Main Street, the tan-brick warehouse on a street with ordinary homes and a grocery store and a gas station. Mormons, she thinks, live in the real world, or at least closer to it. They had a television back then, and a radio in the kitchen. Her mother listened to country music. They dressed like real people, like worldly people—though, she knows, they were farmier and more country than Salt Lake City Mormons, the rich, blond Mormons, the ones you can barely tell are even Mormons at all. Mormons, she thinks, marry one person at a time.

They came here when she turned eight—the age for her baptism. Her father had grown up in Short Creek, on the desert border between Utah and Arizona, among the polygamists and fundamentalists, but he had left as a teenager, a rebellious boy encouraged by the prophet to leave. They had lived in Cedar and Loretta's parents raised eight children, and he worked fixing cars at the town's auto dealership. Loretta came late and unexpected, as her father had begun turning back toward the faith he had departed and hardening against the soft ways of the mainstream church. When it came time to baptize Loretta, he found he could not do so. They moved back to The Crick—where his brothers lived, where his parents had died. You cannot exactly join this church, Loretta knows; you can-

not simply show up and convert to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but because of his family and his history and his willingness to submit, her father was allowed to return, half-caste. Still, all these years later, they are not yet fully in the United Order—the inner circle of the most righteous, those living in the Principle of plural marriage—and yet are allowed to hope, to strive, probationary.

She remembers the spring night her father told them they were returning. They sat around the small kitchen table, the smell of cut grass pungent through the screen door. A Pyrex dish of hamburger casserole, a meaty stew run through with ribbons of noodle and brownish clumps of tomato, sat before them. Her mother wore an ankle-length dress, nothing like she would usually wear. An exhausted pall shadowed her face, and she did not say one word. Loretta's father, stout and slow, spoke in the deliberate voice that made him seem dumb; his hands were flat on the table beside his plate, grooved in engine black. He answered all of her questions in a tone that made it clear the decision had been made.

"It is for your eternal soul, Loretta, that we do this," he said. "Even if you can't see that."

Loretta's mother sat twisting her hands, galaxies of red dots spreading across her face and neck. They were both so old, Loretta knew even then—like grandparents. Her father was always wearily heaving himself up and around, always groaning toward the next task, and her mother moved with slow, weary resignation. And now there she was, dressed like a sister wife, dressed the way you would see the Short Creek women dressed when they came to town. Loretta wanted her mother to say something then, to say anything at all.

Loretta has never felt right here. She hates to braid her hair. She

hates to sit quietly while the boys run and shout. She does not want to live in one of these strange, huge families, the men orbited by constellations of wives and children. She imagines her future as something like the ads in magazines she has glimpsed in stores, in the hair salon in St. George, those times her mother has let her go. Modern clothing and fast cars and makeup and shining tall buildings that glow at night and cigarettes and cocktails and every forbidden thing. She loved the lipstick ad with the beautiful girl in black jeans lying on the hood of a pink Mustang and smirking into the camera. The name of the lipstick like a password: Tussy.

Bradshaw's hand is inside her blouse, crawling over her back. Her mouth is sore, her neck is tired. He puts his hand on the inside of her thigh and squeezes. He takes the skin of her neck in his teeth and bites gently, but not gently enough. "Some night I won't be able to stop myself," he says, breath like a furnace. "I can't be responsible."

Sometimes he holds her wrists so hard he leaves small bruises. He says he can't help it, and she believes him because he acts like he can't help it. She wants to do it, too, although she's also scared it will create something unstoppable in Bradshaw, and she resents the way he pressures her. Still, she spends her days thinking about coming out into the night with Bradshaw and so she wonders if he is not a savior after all but a demon, since she will keep coming to him even as she wants it less and less.

Finally, they stop. He begins to ask her again about leaving.

"Not yet, baby," she says. "Not now." She calls him baby because she wants to calm him, like a baby, and because she knows that this is how people talk to each other out in the world where her future lies.

“Well, holy shit, Lori, what are we waiting for?”

“Money,” she says. “A plan or something.”

“I got your plan right here,” he says, taking her hand and placing it on the stiffening in his jeans.

She yanks it back and says, “I’m serious.”

If they leave now, all she’ll have is him.

Pink light is etching the hilltops when she returns. It is the coolest time of the day, the very early morning, and she yearns for sleep, wondering how she will steal slumber today. She crosses the lumpy, wormholed backyard and comes to her window. The house, the small Boise Cascade rancher in light blue and navy blue, is silent. Stepping between her mother’s paper flower bushes, she uses a finger to open the slider, hoists herself into the bedroom, and takes up the screen and replaces it. When she turns at last she leaps and gasps, startled by the sight of her father sitting on her bed.

“I had not guessed you to be such a rebellious harlot,” he whispers.

Loretta is frozen, her mind a storm.

“Can you say nothing? Can you not invent some lie?”

She is somehow not terrified, though she can’t think what to say or do. Her father stands. He comes toward her slowly, his sore-hipped walk, rage purpling his face. Her mother watches from the doorway. Loretta could outrun them, overpower them, probably, but she does not. He seizes her ponytail and slaps her on the side of the head. A slow-motion slap. It hurts less than she expects. He is large bellied and top-heavy, ready to tip, and it is this that she seizes on as he swings his arm slowly again and again, each strike hurting less than she expects, each blow breaking through whatever is hap-

pening now and making a path forward, she thinks, toward her future. He is speaking to her, growling, grunting, but she doesn't hear him, and soon she can't feel his blows. The flesh on the side of her face fills and puffs, rising like dough. He is old, he is old, and she is on her way to somewhere else.

The day follows, still and silent. It is unspoken that she will remain in her room. Awaiting what, she does not know. Her father does not go to his brother's ranch, to care for the livestock they raise for the United Order. They do not go to church. Her father comes to put a lock on her bedroom door, a toolbox in his left hand and the lock in the other. He doesn't look at her, canting his head away as if from light of punishing brightness. He mutters and fumbles. Her mother comes in with toast and eggs on a tray, red eyed and pale in her housecoat. Loretta wonders if they have forgotten it is Fast Sunday.

She should have gone with Bradshaw. Should she have gone with Bradshaw? Which unknown path should she choose, and how should she choose it? All she knows is that while she waited for an answer, the paths closed down. Bradshaw won't even know why she will stop showing up.

Her father finishes and leaves. Then she hears him outside her bedroom window, doing something to the slider. Hours pass. Loretta, still clothed in her jeans and work blouse, lies on the bed. Everything has a thickened feel, as if all of life will be reduced now to this: a room, some food, and time. She falls asleep hard, and when she awakens to the clicking of the lock on her door, she is groggy and disoriented. She sits up to see her mother entering.

As she sits on the bed, Loretta notes that she is still in her housecoat, the pillared flannel plaid. Loretta doesn't speak. She has not said one word to them since climbing back in that window. She

wonders if she will ever say another word to them. Her mother's face looks older than Loretta has ever seen it, collapsing like fruit that's turned. She speaks tentatively, tearfully.

"Your father has made a decision," she says.

The words come at Loretta as if through water.

"What you've done—" Her mother stops. "He feels—"

She smooths her trembling hands outward along her legs, as though brushing crumbs to the floor.

"We feel that you are in peril. That your soul is in peril."

Neither she nor her mother has anything to do with this. Neither has any part in it but to obey. Her father has agreed to place her with Brother Harder, with Dean Harder, the man who runs Zion's Harvest, the food supply, a righteous man, a faithful member of the Order, who is ready to add to his heavenly family.

"Place me?" Loretta asks.

"You know," her mother says, so quietly that Loretta can barely hear her over the sound of a sprinkler fanning the lawn outside. "You've known."



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