COMPLIMENTARY COPY

Penguin Random House

Excerpt Sampler

SPRING 2017

What Will You Read Next?

Penguin
Random
House

Excerpt Sampler

SPRING 2017

What Will You Read Next?

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PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL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

First published by Crown, Knopf, Viking, and The Dial Press
divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Kensington.

First Printing, 2017


Printed in the United States of America.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE
The Windfall, American War, Fierce Kingdom, The Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley, and *The Life She Was Given* are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imaginations or a used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Penguin Random House

What Will You Read Next?

The Windfall: A Novel
by Diksha Basu 7

American War: A Novel
by Omar El Akkad 35

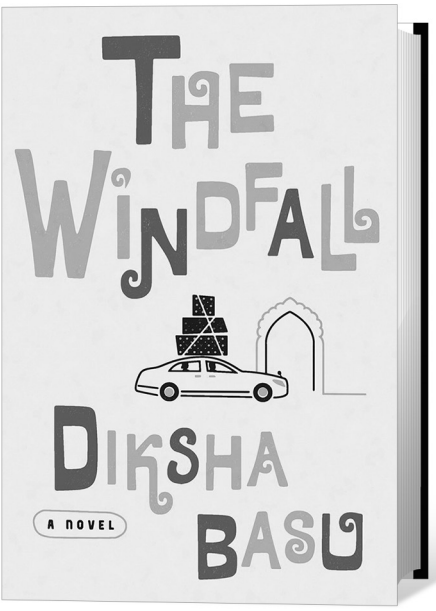
Fierce Kingdom: A Novel
by Gin Phillips 57

The Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley: A Novel
by Hannah Tinti 85

The Life She Was Given
by Ellen Marie Wiseman 117

Coming soon to your local library!

Be sure to place your holds early for the books everyone will be talking about!



***Perfect for readers of* Seating Arrangements, Crazy Rich Asians, The Knockoff, The Rocks, *and* A House for Mr Biswas.**

A heartfelt comedy of manners, Diksha Basu's debut novel unfolds the story of a family discovering what it means to be nouveau riche in modern India. Hilarious and wise, *The Windfall* illuminates with warmth and charm the precariousness of social status, the fragility of pride, and, above all, the human drive to build and share a home. Even the rich, it turns out, need to belong somewhere.

Available June 2017

Crown • Hardcover: 9780451498915 • eBook: 9780451498939

CD: 9781524774110 • AD: 9781524774127

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

crownpublishing.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
<~?~[CIP data]>

ISBN 978-0-451-49891-5
eBook ISBN 978-0-451-49893-9

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Elina Nudelman
Jacket design by TK
Jacket illustration by TK

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

ONE

Mr. Jha had worked hard, and now he was ready to live well.

"Now that all of you are here, we have some news," he said to the neighbors assembled in the small living room of his home in the Mayur Palli Housing Complex in East Delhi. He was nervous, so he looked over at his wife, who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, and his son, Rupak, who was at home for the summer vacation, sitting on a dining table chair. His wife met his gaze and nodded gently, expectantly, encouraging him to hurry up and share the news. And he knew he had to, before the gossip spread through the housing complex. Tonight they had invited their closest friends—Mr. and Mrs. Gupta, Mr. and Mrs. Patnaik, and Mrs. Ray—to tell them that after about twenty-five years (they had moved in when Mrs. Jha was eight months pregnant) they were moving out, and not just moving out, but moving to Gurgaon, one of the richest new neighborhoods of Delhi.

It would have been easier, in a way, to announce a move to Dubai or Singapore or Hong Kong. Mr. Jha himself had often been part of conversations that criticized families for moving to different Delhi neighborhoods the minute they could afford to. And certainly nobody of his generation had moved out in recent

years. He was fifty-two years old, his wife was forty-nine, and their twenty-three-year-old son was in business school in America. The move was going to be seen as an unnecessary display of his newly acquired wealth. And since the money had come from the onetime sale of a website, everyone in Mayur Palli treated it with suspicion. Nobody believed it was hard-earned money. "A lucky windfall," he had heard Mr. Gupta call it. But Mr. Jha knew that it had been anything but luck; it had been hard work.

If an outsider, a stranger, were to see them all gathered here, would he see that Mr. Jha was different, Mr. Jha wondered? He was five foot eight and was neither impressively fit nor impressively fat. The fact that he didn't have the traditional trappings of success worried him these days. He liked fitting in.

The new house in Gurgaon was a two-story bungalow with front and back yards, and they knew nothing at all about the neighbors yet. The house was tucked into a quiet lane away from the traffic and chaos of the rest of Delhi. Unlike in other parts of the city, all the drains were properly sealed and the streets were swept and cleaned on a regular basis. Big, decades-old neem trees lined both sides of their lane, and it was the kind of quiet that made it a place that hawkers and beggars avoided.

It was a much more lavish home and neighborhood than Mr. Jha had ever imagined himself living in. Not only did the doors fit in their frames, but most of the light switches had dimmers. There was a separate servants' quarter at the back, and a wall went around the periphery so nobody could look in or out. Unlike Mayur Palli, and the rest of East Delhi for that matter, the houses in Gurgaon were spaced grandly apart and interactions between the neighbors seemed minimal. Mr. Jha knew he was supposed to want that—that was how rich people's tastes were supposed to be.

Above his head a fat fly thumped repeatedly against the tubelight. The new house had better screens in the windows to stop flies and mosquitoes from invading. Mr. Jha took off his rimless glasses and wiped them with the white handkerchief he always

kept in his shirt pocket. He wished he had opted for a short-sleeved shirt today instead of the long-sleeved blue one he had neatly tucked into his khaki slacks.

The Jhas were one of the original residents of Mayur Palli when they moved there in 1991. Mayur Palli meant, literally, the home of the peacock, but Mr. Jha had never seen a peacock anywhere near the area. Four buildings, each five floors high, were built around a dusty courtyard small enough for everyone to be able to peer into their neighbors' windows. Every morning, wet laundry hung from ropes on the balconies, water dripping down to the courtyard. Downstairs, what had once been a space for the children to run and play and ride bicycles was now a clogged parking lot. A parking lot filled with scooters and Marutis and maybe the occasional Honda, bought for aging parents as a gift by adult children living abroad.

But now, on top of the fact that the Jhas were moving, the Mercedes Mr. Jha had ordered had arrived early and, embarrassingly, he had to take possession of it here in the old housing complex. He hadn't wanted the car salesperson to see his current home, or his current neighbors to see his new car. What must the delivery person have thought driving it across the bridge to the wrong side of the Yamuna River? The silver car was big and shiny and completely out of place in the middle-class neighborhood and was nearly impossible to navigate past the cows in the narrow lanes. And clearly the car was annoying others. Just the previous morning, the undersides of the door handles had been covered with toothpaste and Mr. Jha had had a very minty-smelling morning drive. He was grateful it was only toothpaste.

Sometimes Mr. Jha himself couldn't believe how much money his site had made. It had been such a simple dream—www.simplycall.com—that began as an online resource for local Delhi phone numbers and services. Mr. Jha had been trying to call his old friend Partha Sen in Chittaranjan Park to reminisce about their college days but had accidentally called another Partho Sen from

the directory. He had chatted with the unknown Partho Sen for a good four minutes before either of them realized it was a wrong number.

But he had sold the website a little over two years ago, after working on it for five years, Mr. Jha said to himself. And before that he had had several more complicated ventures that had failed completely. But all that was in the past. This was now and he had to break the news.

"You've found a bride for Rupak?" Mr. Gupta said before Mr. Jha could continue. He was leaning back on the sofa and holding a fistful of peanuts in one hand and a glass of whiskey with ice in the other. He wore a crisp white kurta and pajama, his uniform of choice ever since he had become the president of the housing complex, and his feet were bare and resting on top of his sandals. "Is she also living in America? Don't let her family talk you into having a wedding in America."

As the current president of the housing complex, and one of the biggest gossips in the neighborhood, Mr. Gupta was the one who was going to take the news the hardest. He would see the move from Mayur Palli as a betrayal. The Patnaiks, who were a few years younger than the Jhas and were quieter versions of the Guptas, would probably try to move on the Jhas' heels. Mr. Patnaik already dressed similarly to Mr. Jha and had recently bought the exact same pair of glasses but then claimed it was a coincidence. And if anyone asked Mr. Jha to describe Mrs. Patnaik without looking at her, all he would be able to say was that she had strangely curly hair but no other discernible features.

"That is true," Mrs. Gupta added. She was also eating peanuts, one of which had fallen and was cradled on her glasses, which were hanging off a metal chain around her neck. She wiped her hand against her sari and leaned forward to pick up her glass. "Our nephew got married there and all the Indian weddings end up in the huge halls of the local Hilton or Marriott. You make sure the wedding is in India, in a temple."

"Or outdoors," Mr. Gupta said. "Lots of young people these days want to get married outdoors."

"Personally I don't think that is a good idea. You don't want the flame of the fire to be blown out during the ceremony," Mrs. Gupta said.

"The flame will go out soon enough after marriage," Mr. Gupta said, laughing loudly and tossing the remaining peanuts into his mouth.

"That's not the news," Mr. Jha said.

"Rupak will find a good bride here," Mr. Patnaik said.

His wife nodded and added, "He will. It's best to find someone known. Someone close to the family."

She turned toward Rupak and smiled, but his attention was focused on his phone. Everyone in Mayur Palli knew that the Patnaiks wanted Rupak to marry their daughter, Urmila.

"No," Mr. Jha said. "This isn't about . . ."

"Oh dear. Is Rupak marrying an American girl?" Mrs. Gupta interrupted, twisting around on the sofa to try to look at Rupak.

"This isn't about Rupak," Mr. Jha said. "We have some other news. About us."

He stopped as Reema Ray entered his line of vision, settling into the seat across from him with a glass of white wine. He knew his wife had already told Mrs. Ray about the move but had still insisted on inviting her tonight for support. Mrs. Ray was leaning forward and fixing a strap on her sandal, and the pallu of her chiffon sari slipped off her shoulder. Her blouse was sufficiently low cut for the tops of her heavy breasts to be visible. Her hair, worn loose and messily around her shoulders—unlike any of the other women in the room—fell in front of her and she tossed it back as she leaned forward.

Mr. Jha looked toward Mrs. Jha, still standing near the entrance to the kitchen, wearing a stiff starched pale blue sari that was held up on the shoulder by a safety pin and her hair pulled securely back in a low bun. He knew that his wife would never run

the risk of letting her pallu casually drop. And even if it did, her blouse came up to her collarbones so nothing would be visible. And even if anything were visible, Mr. Jha would feel no thrill. Such was the problem with a stable marriage.

Mrs. Ray was sitting upright again, so Mr. Jha continued, "We wanted to invite all of you, our close friends, to dinner tonight, to tell you about our home. Our new home. Our—"

Mrs. Jha sniffed the air. "Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no. I've left the stove on. The chicken will be burnt."

She went rushing into the kitchen, irritated with herself. The stress of moving to Gurgaon was really getting to her. She wasn't sure she wanted to leave Mayur Palli. She didn't want to live surrounded by women in designer saris who shopped in malls. She didn't want to use olive oil instead of vegetable oil. She didn't want to understand what interior decoration meant. The point of life was not just to keep moving higher and higher. What happened if you made it to Buckingham Palace?

"Are you okay? Do you need some help in here?" Mrs. Ray came in after Mrs. Jha. "Your husband has now started on what the idea of 'home' represents. He's having a hard time making this announcement, isn't he?"

"The chicken is burnt. Oh, Reema. The chicken is burnt. And the packing isn't finished. I know I should be happy, but I'm exhausted. I don't know why we decided to do this whole move in the middle of summer. The heat is just getting to me."

"Where are your maids? Do you want me to send Ganga over every morning until you leave? She hardly has anything to do for just me these days."

"That's very nice of you, but we still have our maids. Anil has just decided he doesn't want them at home all the time."

Mrs. Jha stirred the pan, scraping the wooden spoon along the bottom, trying to pry free the burnt bits of chicken. The screw holding the red handle in place was coming loose and she still had not ordered new kitchen supplies. This kitchen was made for maids to use; it was small and badly ventilated, and being in here

meant being completely separated from the rest of the people in the apartment. The new house had a huge kitchen where a few people could stand around while the host prepared dinner or put together a platter of appetizers. That kitchen, in fact, was specifically meant for nonmaids. It was a kitchen that was meant to be shown off. It was a kitchen that needed new pots and pans with secure handles.

"Why doesn't he want maids?" Mrs. Ray asked.

"We got this dishwasher installed and Anil wants people to notice it. He's convinced that if there's a maid picking up all the dishes, everyone will just assume she's washing them by hand and won't know that we have an expensive imported dishwasher. I don't know. I don't understand half the things he wants these days," Mrs. Jha said. The kitchen was small and stuffy, but she appreciated Mrs. Ray coming in here with her. On the next stove, the pressure cooker hissed and Mrs. Jha jerked away from its angry sound. Mrs. Ray came to the stove and turned it off.

"Move," Mrs. Ray said. "You relax. Take the raita out of the fridge. I'll handle the stove. You didn't need to invite us all over in the middle of your packing."

Mrs. Jha stepped away and opened the fridge. She could feel the sweat gathering under her arms. She leaned down and allowed the refrigerated air to slip down the front of her blouse. She was gaining weight. She looked over at Mrs. Ray, who seemed to become younger and more beautiful every day. Granted, at forty-two, Mrs. Ray was seven years younger than Mrs. Jha, but her glow wasn't just about age. She looked younger now than she did when Mr. Ray had died five years ago. Mrs. Ray had been only thirty-seven when her husband died, but at first widowhood had forced her to immediately become older. Mrs. Jha had noticed Mrs. Ray gradually reversing that trend, and now she looked over at her friend with happiness and a sudden stab of envy. Even her hair seemed to have become thicker.

"Your hair is looking good these days." Mrs. Jha said, and shut the fridge. "Are you using some new hair oil?"

Mrs. Ray turned around from the stove, wiped her hands on the towel that was on the counter, and touched her right hand to her hair.

"It's improved, hasn't it?"

"Share your secret, Reema."

"The usual," Mrs. Ray said. "Lots of leafy green vegetables and coconut oil in the hair overnight once a week."

"We've been doing that for years. It must be something else," Mrs. Jha said.

Mrs. Ray laughed a little and turned back to the stove to open the pressure cooker.

"What is it?" Mrs. Jha asked. "What secret are you keeping from me?"

Mrs. Ray faced Mrs. Jha.

"Oh, Bindu, it's ridiculous. Prenatal supplements! I'm taking prenatal supplements because I read that it helps the hair, and it's true—my hair has never looked better! Every alternate day I take one pill," Mrs. Ray said. "I feel so crazy when I go to the chemist to buy it; I make up some excuse or the other each time, as if I'm buying it for my niece or for a friend or something. Imagine a childless widow getting prenatal vitamins."

Mrs. Ray spooned the daal into a glass bowl for serving. She shook her hair out and looked over her shoulder at Mrs. Jha, laughed, and said, "Prenatal vitamins for widows! Don't tell anyone."

In a way, being widowed young and childless allowed Mrs. Ray to have a second youth, one unencumbered by family. And as far as young deaths go, Mr. Ray's quick and powerful brain aneurysm five years ago at age forty was as simple as possible. At least he didn't suffer and Mrs. Ray didn't have to deal with the guilt in the aftermath of a loved one's suffering. Mrs. Jha knew it had been difficult for Mrs. Ray—young widows make people nervous. When Mr. Ray died, a lot of the other women in Mayur Palli treated Mrs. Ray like a bad-luck charm or a seductress—but Mrs. Jha looked over at her friend now and saw only vitality and

a good head of hair. She immediately felt guilty for envying a widow. *May God always keep my husband safe,* she quickly said to herself.

"Do you know what I had to do this afternoon? I had to unpack all the decorations for the drawing room and put them back up so the guests wouldn't guess as soon as they walked in," Mrs. Jha said.

She took out the bowl of chilled yogurt with onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and spices, pushed the fridge door closed with her hip, leaned against it, and sighed. Mrs. Ray was now ladling the chicken into a large glass serving bowl, and she laughed.

"You're living the dream, Bindu," Mrs. Ray said. "In any case, you should be glad you're getting out of here. This housing complex is not the same as it used to be."

Mrs. Ray reached over for a napkin to wipe the curry off the rim of the bowl. She turned off the second flame on the stove and faced Mrs. Jha.

"Someone stole a pair of my yoga pants from my balcony," Mrs. Ray said.

"What?" Mrs. Jha said. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent," Mrs. Ray said. "Anyway, it's silly. I didn't even want to mention it, but be glad you're moving. Everybody here interferes too much in each other's lives. You are lucky to be going somewhere where you will have some privacy. Count your blessings."

"Reema, you have to complain about this at the next meeting," Mrs. Jha said.

"And what? Draw more attention to myself? Forget it. It's my fault. I shouldn't be doing yoga on the balcony." Mrs. Ray said. She turned back to the counter and put a large spoon in each serving bowl. "Here, the chicken and the daal are in the bowls. I'll take them out to the dining room. Do you need anything else?"

Mrs. Jha turned to Mrs. Ray and said, "Thank you. Just send my husband in here, please."

Mrs. Jha picked up the pan from the stove and dropped it in

the sink. Water splashed out and wet her sari, darkening the blue fabric near her bellybutton.

Mr. Jha came into the kitchen. It was smoky and felt as though the loud exhaust fan above the window was pushing hot air back into the kitchen. It would be nice for his wife to have a new kitchen with a door leading out to the backyard instead of this small space that was the same size as one of the bathrooms in the new house. All the surfaces had become sticky with years of oil splatter. Mr. Jha wanted one of those kitchens he had seen in television cooking shows—all stainless steel with pots and pans hanging off hooks above the stoves. Even though he never cooked and hardly even entered the kitchen, he wanted the spices kept in clear glass bottles in a wooden holder hammered into the wall. He was sick of the salt and sugar being browned by fingertips and clumpy through humidity.

"I think they're ready for the news now," Mr. Jha said. "I tried to get them started on the idea of 'home.' Said it isn't defined by location. I made some quite moving points, I think. I talked about home being where the heart is and all that. No need to mention that home is where the double servants' quarter is." He paused, then continued, "What are you doing in here? I was just about to announce our plans when you rushed off screaming about the chicken. Would you prefer it if I called people in here? The Guptas have definitely not been over since we got the new dishwasher."

"I am not screaming about anything. I'm just trying to serve our guests a decent dinner. If you had let the maid stay, I would have had the help I needed. I have been spending all day every day packing boxes, going back and forth from Gurgaon in the heat, setting up the water filters, dealing with the air-conditioning installation—"

"It's your fault that you're going back and forth in the heat. I've told you a thousand times to take the car. You act as if you're scared of the car. The car, the new house, a washing machine, ev-

erything. Everything, Bindu. You think the new dishwasher will ruin the serrated knives—you're scared of everything."

Rupak entered the kitchen.

"What are you two doing? The guests are getting restless. And, Dad, Reema Aunty wants some more wine. Should I take out another bottle of white from the fridge?"

"Don't call him Dad!" Mrs. Jha said as Mr. Jha returned to the living room. "What's wrong with calling him Papa? You're studying in America, but you aren't an American."

Mrs. Jha didn't want Rupak turning into one of those typical rich kids who assume they'll never have to work hard. For that, she was grateful that they had lived very average lives until recently. But Rupak was changing fast. As soon as they were settled into their new home, it would be time for them to go to the United States to see how he lived.

Rupak ignored his mother and rummaged in the fridge for the wine. His parents had gone from keeping no alcohol at home, to keeping some Kingfisher beer and Old Monk rum, to keeping bottles of white wine that was made in vineyards outside Mumbai, to keeping imported bottles of red and white wine from countries as far as Chile. Rupak closed the fridge and opened the freezer to take an ice tray. It was next to a frosted bottle of Absolut vodka that still had the plastic seal around the neck. So much had changed at home since he had left for the States.

Once the food had been brought to the dining room and the guests sat down and began to serve themselves, Mrs. Jha whispered to her husband, "Will you please tell them? Stop avoiding it. I can't organize one more dinner like this."

Across the table, while serving themselves from big bowls of food, Mr. Gupta whispered to his wife, "I think you've taken enough chicken. Leave some for the others. It looks bad."

"The chicken is half burnt. I am doing Mrs. Jha a favor by eating so much of it," Mrs. Gupta whispered back, peering into the other bowls to see what else had been cooked. "Otherwise it will all be left and she will have to give it to the maids and she'll be embarrassed. I'm being kind."

"Would you like another drink?" Rupak asked Mrs. Ray on the other side of the table.

Ever since he had gone to America, Rupak had decided he would never date an Indian woman again, but seeing beautiful Mrs. Ray made him aware that there were exceptions to every rule. But Mrs. Ray wasn't that old, he reminded himself. He knew that she was friends with this group only because she had never had children, so now she had more in common with the older women whose children had left home. And glancing to his right and seeing Mrs. Gupta trying to pry a piece of burnt chicken out from her teeth reminded him of the rules.

"Rupak," Mr. Gupta said. "Bring me another whiskey and come and tell me more about America. My wife's niece also studies in America. Sudha, where does that girl study?"

"I can never remember," Mrs. Gupta said. "Perhaps New York? I will find out."

Mr. Gupta wobbled his head and said to Rupak, "Maybe you know her. We will find out where she is studying."

"I doubt it," Rupak said. He was always amazed by how small some people in Mayur Palli thought America was.

"Urmila is planning a trip to America next year," Mr. Patnaik added. "She should add Ithaca to her list of places to visit."

"You must meet lots of pretty women there," Mr. Gupta continued. "White skin, white hair—those girls are like cotton balls. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Do it," Mrs. Jha whispered to her husband across the table. "Tell them now, otherwise I will. You've done well, you've bought a new house—I don't know why you're so ashamed."

"A girlfriend?" Rupak said. Here was his chance to tell them. His parents would have to react calmly to the news of his Ameri-

can girlfriend if all the neighbors were watching. "Well, you know in the U.S. . . ."

"He doesn't have time for girlfriends while he is studying. A wife will come later. He's just like his father. They both want to do well in life," Mrs. Jha said. "Such ambitious men I'm surrounded by. In fact, that's why we called all of you here tonight."

"So that is all," Mr. Jha said. "Nothing too big to discuss. We are not selling this apartment. We are simply renting it out for now. We have found a lovely young couple from Chennai who are going to move in. They have a young son also. Very decent people. And next time we will have dinner in Gurgaon. Enough about us. Why don't we have some more food?"

"Wait," Mr. Gupta said, "This new house you've bought—is it through the Meritech company? I heard they got in trouble with the government about bribes. Did they accept the full amount in check?"

Mr. Gupta was certain that Mr. Jha was a tax evader. All these new-moneyed people were the same. People acted as though engineers were honest, simple-minded people, but look at Mr. Jha here—he was obviously making lots of money now and had probably paid for his house with mostly black money. But Mr. Gupta knew that just because he himself had been a police officer, the assumption was that he was corrupt. It was unfair. He had never taken a bribe over five thousand rupees. A lot of other policemen had worked their way up financially and drove fancy Hondas and Toyotas, but Mr. Gupta had simply upgraded from a scooter to a Maruti 800 to a Swift. He had been content with his life in East Delhi. He knew many young couples who used it as a stepping-stone to fancier neighborhoods, but people of his generation stayed put. They no longer got their walls painted after every monsoon, and they no longer complained about the regular electricity outages. Their lives, he thought, had fallen into a nice

comforting rhythm. They didn't need to impress their spouses or their neighbors. But now here was Mr. Jha announcing their move to Gurgaon while his pretty wife looked on proudly. Their son was visiting from the United States of America and probably had a white girlfriend by now. Mr. Gupta looked over at his own wife, who was back in the dining room heaping her plate with another helping of chicken curry. Their daughter, married to a chartered accountant and also living in East Delhi, was turning into her mother far too quickly, and Mr. Gupta knew he would never have the luxury of objecting to a white boyfriend.

"I really prefer not to talk about finances like this," Mr. Jha said. "Especially not in front of the ladies. But, you know, India is changing. International business comes with different standards."

Mr. Jha had in fact paid more than the usual amount with taxable money. It had raised the cost of the house considerably, but ever since he sold to a company based in America, he knew that the government was keeping an eye on him.

Mr. Gupta shook his head as he used his thumb to push another bite of chicken and rice into his mouth. These people would never give a straight answer about taxes.

TWO

Mrs. Jha switched off the light in the hallway and walked toward her bedroom door. It was hot in the hallway, the Delhi summer in full swing. There was an air conditioner in each room, jutting out of a window, but they never kept all three of them running at the same time. The electrical circuit would not be able to handle the load. Instead, they cooled only the rooms they were using. The kitchen, the bathrooms, and the hallway remained hot. When they first got an air conditioner installed, it was only in the master bedroom and Rupak would drag a thin mattress in and sleep on their floor.

Mrs. Jha stopped in front of Rupak's bedroom. The air from inside his room trickled out from under the closed door and cooled her feet. She considered knocking, but she thought she heard a muffled voice. Either he was watching something on his laptop or he was on the phone, and she no longer felt comfortable letting herself into his bedroom to have a chat. She pushed her ear against the door, but the white noise of the air conditioner made it impossible to make sense of the voices. That was okay. She didn't need to interfere, she told herself. She just liked knowing he was

home and she liked feeling his presence. As much as she swore she never had a preference regarding the gender of her child, she was glad she had a son. A son who, despite quickly adopting some Americanisms she didn't much care for, was soon going to have a master's in business administration from Ithaca College in New York State. It really did give her a sense of security.

She continued to her bedroom and entered as her husband was coming out of the small attached bathroom. The warm smell of sandalwood soap and a hot bath filled the room.

"Did you turn off the geyser?" she asked.

Mr. Jha poked his head back in the bathroom to check the switch and nodded.

"The geysers in the new house are all automatic, which means we can leave them on twenty-four hours a day," Mr. Jha said. "That's twenty-four hours a day of not having to wait for hot water in the taps. In the sink too! Just imagine."

"I know," Mrs. Jha said. "I'm the one who got them all installed. But they say it's best to keep the switches off when they're not in use."

"You know in Korean apartments you can operate all your switches from your phone. Lights, gadgets, everything. You can even draw your curtains with a button on your phone. You can be on the way home and turn all the lights on so you don't have to enter a completely dark house."

"Couldn't you just leave a light on when you go out so it's still on when you come home?" Mrs. Jha asked.

Mr. Jha looked at her, thought for a second, and nodded. "That is another possibility."

A minute later he added, "You could turn the teakettle on so the water would be hot when you got home."

"That was a successful evening," Mrs. Jha said to her husband as he buttoned the top button of the white kurta he wore to sleep every night. For as long as she had known him, he had always worn the exact same outfit to bed. He owned four sets of kurta pajamas and he had asked her to stitch numbers onto each top and

each bottom so they would remain sets and, even though they were all identical, he would never wear a number two top with a number three pajama.

"That Mr. Gupta interferes too much," Mr. Jha said, rubbing a small towel through his hair.

"He was just being curious. Don't let it trouble you."

"I just think it's impolite—he wouldn't go asking other rich people how much they've paid in black money," Mr. Jha said.

"They're our friends, Anil. They can ask us such questions. Anyway, I thought you handled the question very gracefully. Now please forget it and come to bed. And don't rub your hair so roughly, it'll damage the roots."

"And why did he say we were too old for change? You heard what he said—he said at this stage to make a move like this was to become a small fish in a big pond and we'd understand that only after leaving the pond we know. I'm not a fish, Bindu. Is that any way to speak to a friend?"

"Those are his own issues. Forget it," Mrs. Jha said, although she hadn't been able to stop thinking about Mr. Gupta's comment either. How were they meant to start from scratch at this age? Why were they trying to start from scratch? They were happy. How was she supposed to make new friends and adapt to a new world? She was sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing Nivea cold cream into her cracked heels, trying not to let her husband see her concerns. Not tonight. It had been a difficult night for him.

"I read somewhere that fish have very basic nervous systems," Mr. Jha said. "I never get nervous. Except in airplanes, but that's understandable."

He stooped in front of the small mirror that was attached to the dresser in the corner of the room and combed his hair.

"I'm looking forward to having a full-length mirror in the bedroom," he said. "This is like looking into a phone camera, it's so small."

Let Mr. Gupta say what he wanted; he was going to get a full-length mirror in his bedroom. Mr. Jha thought about his mother.

She always took such pride in how she dressed but while she was alive, forget a full-length mirror, they did not even have a dresser. The only mirror she had to use was the small one that hung in the bathroom in a plastic frame above the sink and had become speckled with dried toothpaste over the years. Mr. Jha wished his mother had lived to see him become successful. She would have died a happier woman if she'd had any idea what her son would go on to achieve.

Mr. Jha's father had died when Mr. Jha was eight years old. Before he died, his father was doing well enough, climbing the ranks of an income tax office in the small, dusty, tier-three town of Giridih—which used to be in the state of Bihar but was now part of the new state of Jharkhand and was a town most people in Delhi hadn't even heard of. He wore black slacks and carried a briefcase every day. Once a week, they went out for dinner and Mr. Jha's mother would dress in the latest fashions of the town and push her feet into sandals with high heels and stiff straps that made her ankles bleed and she loved it.

But soon after his father died, Mr. Jha and his mother could no longer afford to live alone. They ran through Mr. Jha Senior's savings in a year, even without going out for dinner, and they had no option but to move from Bihar to the outskirts of New Delhi to move in with Mr. Jha's father's older brother and his wife. Even at that age, Mr. Jha always understood that they were an imposition, an addition. They didn't belong in Delhi. He never felt comfortable lingering in the bathroom, and he noticed that his mother always woke up when it was still dark outside so she could shower and use the bathroom before anyone else was awake. His mother taught him to take his dishes to the kitchen after every meal, wash them, and put them on the rusted metal rack that sat near the sink, even though a cleaning lady would come and wash all the other dishes later.

As a child, he often felt anger toward his mother for making them live their whole lives as guests. As he got older, he felt guilty

about that anger and so he worked. He studied and he worked hard to make sure he could give his mother a home that would be her own, and a reason to wear uncomfortable shoes again. And he had mostly succeeded. He had a nice wife, a son, and a stable job that gave him a small but reliable income every month and a domestic holiday every year. For years Mr. Jha had been the manager of a franchise of a Technological Training of India (TTI) center and supplemented his income by teaching specialized computer programming classes there on Saturdays. His mother saw all that, but she died before he managed to give her a full-length mirror to check the pleats of her sari.

"How do you manage to tie your sari so well without a mirror?" Mr. Jha asked.

"When you do it every day, it becomes the same as pulling on a pair of pants," Mrs. Jha said.

"But it'll be better for you to have a full-length mirror, right?"

"I suppose so, yes," Mrs. Jha said. She knew what was going through her husband's mind. "Are you thinking about Ma-ji?"

"She would have enjoyed tonight's dinner," Mr. Jha said. He sat down at the edge of the bed, tired after the evening and the adrenaline and the performance of hosting a dinner party. He took his glasses off and placed them on his side table. This bedroom was less than half the size of the master bedroom in Gurgaon. In here, there was room only for the bed, the attached wooden side tables, and two metal cupboards in which they kept all their clothes. One of the metal cupboards had a small built-in safe that was big enough to hold all their valuables. In Gurgaon, he had had a safe the size of one of their cupboards built into the wall of the master bedroom, and he was determined to own enough valuables to fill the whole thing. He rubbed his eyes. "She would have really enjoyed the new house. Forget traveling outside India, she died without even seeing the fancy side of Delhi."

"A lot of people do," Mrs. Jha said. "That's not something you need to feel guilty about. You gave her a very good life."

Mr. Jha pulled the sheet aside and got in under the covers. The Usha fan creaked overhead on every turn. Mrs. Jha reached across her pillow and placed her hand gently on his shoulder.

"It was a good night, Anil," she said.

Mr. Jha nodded.

"I'm glad Rupak was here," he added after a brief silence. "America is suiting him. Just imagine if he gets a job with a big multinational after finishing his MBA. I'll throw a party for the whole city when he gets a job—all our friends from here, and our new neighbors from Gurgaon."

"We must book our tickets," Mrs. Jha said. She had to go and see her son in America soon. She worried every day about how he survived on his own. He needed someone to take care of him while he studied. He had to do his own laundry, make his own food, even change his own bedsheets. She wanted him to come home after his degree so she could fuss over him for a little while. What was so bad about working in Delhi?

"Right after we are settled in, we will go," Mr. Jha said. "In business class, Bindu. We will lie flat on our backs while flying through the skies."

"Don't be crazy!" Mrs. Jha said. She gently slapped her husband's shoulder. "Business class tickets are ten times the price of economy! For what? Hardly twenty hours. We're getting carried away."

Mrs. Jha laughed, turned off the small lamp near the bed, and pulled the white sheet up to her shoulders. She ran her large toe against her husband's ankle and said, "Good night."

Mr. Jha rested his hand against her thigh.

"Why are you whispering?" Elizabeth said on the phone.

"My parents are still awake," Rupak said, and regretted it immediately.

"And you haven't told them about me yet."

He had promised Elizabeth that he would tell his parents about her this summer, and now the summer was almost over and he had still not told them. He also had not told them that he was starting his second year on academic probation because of his shockingly low grade point average the previous semester. They would both be so disappointed. He knew how proud they were that he was studying in America and seemed poised on the brink of a bright future. He had decided it was best not to tell them; he would work to get his grades back up this semester and they would never have to know. It was all his own fault, Rupak knew.

He got to America soon after his parents became wealthy, and he immediately fell in love—not with Elizabeth, but with the whole country, and with the bank account that his father kept replenishing. He found himself falling into a version of what he thought life in America was meant to be. He signed up for sailing lessons on Cayuga Lake and golfing lessons at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Course. But he didn't end up going for the golf classes, and now a thousand-dollar golf club set sat unused in his apartment. He bought an iPhone and an iPad and a GoPro camera and he downloaded Final Cut Pro and he spent his time filming his life in America and creating his own mini film versions of the shows and movies he had grown up watching.

His parents were under the impression that after his MBA, he would find a job with a big bank or consulting firm and then they would find him a suitable Bihari match. When Mr. and Mrs. Jha were introduced in 1989 through Mrs. Jha's uncle's friend who was the head of the Bihari Ladies' Club of East Delhi—Mr. Jha was finishing a master's in electrical engineering and Mrs. Jha had recently finished a bachelor's in social work and was working with a local organization to help collect and distribute free school supplies for slum children in the area. From what Rupak had heard, his parents had been allowed to meet alone once before they decided to get married. They were going to push for a contemporary equivalent for Rupak. He would be given at least a few months to get to know the woman and would technically have the right

to refuse. Even though the word *dating* would never be used, they would be allowed to go out for dinners and movies alone and the final decision would be theirs to make, but Rupak wanted to do it his own way. But he still had not managed to say anything to his parents, and he knew that was going to upset Elizabeth.

"What are you doing all day?" Rupak said to change the topic. She was spending the summer doing an internship in the finance department of Doctors Without Borders in New York, but he pictured her lying in her bedroom in Florida, her dog on the floor beside the bed. He sometimes thought he was more fascinated by her life in Florida than she was by his life in India.

"Working. And my mother's visiting so I'll take her out for dinner tonight. She says she wants sushi, but her idea of sushi is only shrimp tempura rolls," Elizabeth said. "How was your day?"

"Fine. Good. All my parents' friends were over for dinner just now. I grew up around these people but I feel so detached from them now. It's strange."

Rupak tried to picture Elizabeth being a part of tonight's dinner party. His parents would have no idea how to react to her and her snug jeans and T-shirts. They would all assume they knew everything about her based on what she looked like. She was about his height, and blond, and had visible collarbones, and Rupak himself found it difficult to see past her looks. She wore no jewelry and as far as he could tell, hardly ever used makeup. She took her contacts off and wore glasses in the evening, before bed, but he preferred her in her contacts so he could look at her face uninterrupted. How would Mrs. Gupta talk to her, he wondered? How would he explain her to them and them to her?

His father, always aspiring, had sent Rupak to an elite private school in central Delhi, and the world of his rich classmates, the world his parents were about to have in Delhi, was so much simpler to explain in America. In his classmates' homes, in leafy lanes in central Delhi where it always felt five degrees cooler than it did in East Delhi and where cars honked much less often and you could hear brief stretches of actual silence, at four p.m., trol-

leys with cheese toast and slices of Black Forest cake from Khan Market and bottles of Coca-Cola would be wheeled into the air-conditioned room where the children played. In his home, maids grumpily offered oily samosas from the local market and glasses of pink, syrupy roohafza. When he was young, they had no air conditioner, only a loud cooler that sat outside the main window in the living room and did little to actually cool down the apartment. Their television had no remote. His India was neither rich nor poor. There were no huge homes and elaborate weddings, nor were there slums and water shortages and child laborers. The middle ground was too confusing to explain to an outsider. It wasn't exotic enough or familiar enough.

"Hang on. My mom's calling for me," Elizabeth said. And then Rupak heard her shout out, "I'm leaving in half an hour. I'm on the phone with Rupak," and return to the phone and say, "My mom says hi."

"Hi," Rupak said.

"I miss you," Elizabeth said.

Rupak turned to his side and looked at his bedside table. On the top right corner were the remnants of a sticker of the Indian cricket team from 1996. He had tried, over the years, to scratch it off, so you couldn't make out the faces of any of the players anymore but you could see the blue uniforms.

He couldn't help but think about what Mrs. Gupta had said tonight after his father told them about the move and after her husband was done trying to ask how much they had paid in black money. Mrs. Gupta, with a mouthful of chicken and rice, had simply said, "Why?"

Rupak had been wanting to ask his parents that himself, but he hadn't, and seeing them stumble to find an answer made him glad he hadn't asked. "Why not?" his father had said, and his mother had just gotten up and started taking dishes back to the kitchen.

"Escaping the minute you can?" Mr. Gupta had said with a laugh.

"Hardly," Mrs. Jha had said from near the kitchen entrance. "This will always also be home. We raised our family here."

"But it will no longer be your home," Mr. Gupta had said, and Mrs. Jha had ignored him and walked into the kitchen.

And he was right, Rupak thought. This was no longer going to be home.

"It's nice being home with my parents," he said to Elizabeth. "Of course, I miss you too, though."

"Tell them to come visit soon," Elizabeth said. "Or I'll come to India with you next time."

Rupak scratched at the sticker of the cricket team again. A few small pieces came off under his fingernail, but the rest remained stubborn. He gave up and fell back against his pillow. Even though he was twenty-three, when he was at home with his parents, he immediately fell back to feeling like he was fourteen. For the last two weeks, his mother had been reminding him every morning to pack up his room so everything could be moved to Gurgaon, and Rupak still hadn't because he didn't quite believe that they were actually moving homes. Had the money come just five years ago, he would have been part of the transition, but now, like the neighbors of Mayur Palli, he felt like an observer. The money had made his parents more youthful, less parentlike. Under normal circumstances he would get a good job after his MBA and then buy a Mercedes and show it off to his parents, who would look on proudly. Instead, yesterday, his father had taken him out for a ride in the new car and insisted on heating the car seats despite the summer temperatures.

Rupak suspected that if his father had waited, he could probably have sold his website for much more than he did, but when he sold it, the twenty million U.S. dollars that was offered felt like more money than there was in the whole world. Another small startup, www.justcall.com, bought the site and used the technology and was now worth close to two hundred million U.S. dollars. He wondered if his father ever felt angry about how little he had made compared to how much the site was now worth, but he

realized, as he got older, that it was such an outrageous amount for his father that he could not actually understand the difference between twenty million and two hundred million dollars.

Mr. Jha had grown up with very little and, until the sale, earned the equivalent of two hundred dollars a month. Rupak thought now about how he had spent that amount on a pair of shoes recently.

"I think I would like India. Bring me back some books by Indian writers," Elizabeth continued.

Rupak hardly read. He didn't even know the names of the current Indian writers.

"Done. And you bring me books by writers from Pensacola."

"There's no such thing," Elizabeth said with a small laugh. Rupak heard her let out a small moan as she stretched her body in bed. "I should get to work."

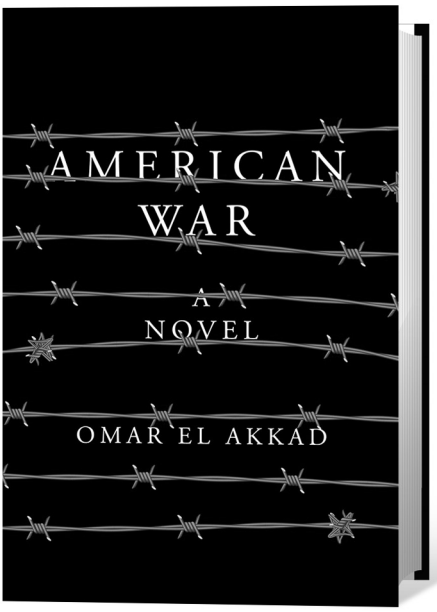
"I really do miss you," Rupak said.

"Send me more pictures. I like being able to see what you're seeing. Your pictures make India seem not so far away."

"What else should I get you from here?" Rupak asked.

"I don't need anything else," Elizabeth said. "Except knowing that your parents know about us. See if you can get me that."

Rupak wanted to get her that. He pictured her languorously getting out of bed and stretching her arms up over her head, a sliver of her stomach exposed, and he wanted to get her anything she wanted.



***Perfect for readers of* The Sympathizer, The Underground Railroad, Station Eleven, The Road, *and* The Dog Stars.**

An audacious and powerful debut novel: a second American Civil War, a devastating plague, and one family caught deep in the middle—a story that asks what might happen if America were to turn its most devastating policies and deadly weapons upon itself.

Sarat Chestnut, born in Louisiana, is only six when the Second American Civil War breaks out in 2074. When her father is killed and her family is forced into Camp Patience for displaced persons, she begins to grow up shaped by her particular time and place. Eventually Sarat is turned into a deadly instrument of war. The decisions that she makes will have tremendous consequences not just for Sarat but for her family and her country, rippling through generations of strangers and kin alike.

Available April 2017

Knopf • Hardcover: 9780451493583 • eBook: 9780451493590

🎧 CD: 9781524779818 • 🎧 AD: 9781524779825 • 👓 Large Print: 9781524779856

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

www.aaknopf.com

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data [tk]

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, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Jacket design by Peter Mendelsund

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

PROLOGUE

When I was young, I collected postcards. I kept them in a shoebox under my bed in the orphanage. Later, when I moved into my first home in New Anchorage, I stored the shoebox at the bottom of an old oil drum in my crumbling toolshed. Having spent most of my life studying the history of war, I found some sense of balance in collecting snapshots of the world that was, idealized and serene.

Sometimes I thought about getting rid of the oil drum. I worried someone, a colleague from the university perhaps, would see it and think it a kind of petulant political statement, like the occasional secessionist flag or gutted muscle car outside houses in the old Red country—impotent trinkets of rebellion, touchstones of a ruined and ruinous past. I am, after all, a Southerner by birth. And even though I arrived in neutral country at the age of six and never spoke to anyone about my life before then, I couldn't rule out the possibility that some of my colleagues secretly believed I still had a little bit of rebel Red in my blood.

My favorite postcards are from the 2030s and 2040s, the last decades before the planet turned on the country and the country turned on itself. They featured pictures of the great ocean beaches before rising waters took them; images of the Southwest before it turned to embers; photographs of the Midwestern plains, endless and empty under bluest sky, before the Inland Exodus filled them with the coastal displaced. A visual reminder of America as it existed in the first half of the twenty-first century: soaring, roaring, oblivious.

I remember the first postcard I bought. It was a photo of old Anchorage. The city's waterfront is thick with fresh snowfall, the water speckled with shelves of ice, the sun low-strung behind the mountains.

I was six years old when I saw my first real Alaskan sunset. I stood on the deck of the smuggler's skiff, a sun-bitten Georgia boy, a refugee. I remember feeling the strange white flakes on my eyelashes, the involuntary rattle of my teeth—feeling, for the first time in my life, cold. I

saw near the tops of the mountains that frozen yolk suspended in the sky and thought I had reached the very terminus of the living world. The very end of movement.

☆ ☆ ☆

I BELONG TO WHAT they call the Miraculous Generation: those born in the years between the start of the Second American Civil War in 2074 and its end in 2093. Some extend the definition further, including those born during the decade-long plague that followed the end of the war. This country has a long history of defining its generations by the conflicts that should have killed them, and my generation is no exception. We are the few who escaped the wrath of the homicide bombers and the warring Birds; the few who were spirited into well-stocked cellars or tornado shelters before the Reunification Plague spread across the continent. The few who were just plain lucky.

I've spent my professional career studying this country's bloody war with itself. I've written academic papers and magazine articles, headlined myriad symposiums and workshops. I've studied all the surviving source documents: congressional reports, oral histories, harrowing testimony of the plague's survivors. I've reconstructed the infamous events of Reunification Day, when one of the South's last remaining rebels managed to sneak into the Union capital and unleash the sickness that cast the country into a decade of death. It is estimated that eleven million people died in the war, and almost ten times that number in the plague that followed.

I've received countless letters from readers and critics taking issue with all manner of historical minutiae—whether the rebels were really responsible for a particular homicide bombing; whether the Massacre at Such-and-Such really was as bad as the Southern propagandists claim. My files contain hundreds of such correspondences, all variations on the same theme: that I, a coddled New Anchorage Northerner, a neutral country elite who'd never seen a day of real fighting, don't know the first thing about the war.

But there are things I know that nobody else knows. I know because she told me. And my knowing makes me complicit.

☆ ☆ ☆

NOW, AS I NEAR the end of my life, I've been inspecting the accumulated miscellanea of my youth. Recently I found that first postcard I bought. It's been more than a hundred years since its photograph was taken; all but the sea and the mountains are gone. New Anchorage, a sprawl of low buildings and affluent suburbs nestled at the foot of the hills, has moved further inland over the years. The docks where I once arrived as a disoriented war orphan have been raised and reinforced time and time again. And where once there stood wharfs of knotted wood, there are now modular platforms, designed to be dismantled and relocated quickly. Fierce storms come without warning.

Sometimes I stroll along the New Anchorage waterfront, past the wharf and the harbor. It's the closest I can come now to my original arrival point in the neutral country without renting a scavenger's boat. My doctor says it's good to walk regularly and that I should try to keep doing so as long as it doesn't cause me pain. I suspect this is the sort of harmless pabulum he feeds all his terminal patients, those who long ago graduated from "This will help" to "This can't hurt."

It's a strange thing to be dying. For so long I thought the end of my life would come suddenly, when the plague found its way north to the neutral country, or the Red rebelled once more and we were plunged into another bout of fratricide. Instead, I've been sentenced to that most ordinary of deaths, an overabundance of malfunctioning cells. I read once that a moderately ravenous cancer is, in a pragmatic sense, a decent way to die—not so prolonged as to entail years of suffering, but affording enough time that one might have a chance to make the necessary arrangements, to say what needs to be said.

☆ ☆ ☆

IT HASN'T SNOWED in years, but every now and then in late January we'll get a fractal of frost crawling up the windows. On those days I like to go out to the waterfront and watch my breath hang in the air. I feel unburdened. I am no longer afraid.

I stand at the edge of the boardwalk and watch the water. I think of all the things it has taken, and all that was taken from me. Sometimes I stare out at the sea for hours, well past dark, until I am elsewhere in time and elsewhere in place: back in the battered Red country where I was born.

And that's when I see her again, rising out of the water. She is exactly as I remember her, a hulking bronzed body, her back lined with ashen scars, each one a testimony to the torture she was made to endure, the secret crimes committed against her. She rises, a flesh monolith reborn from the severed belly of the Savannah. And I am a child again, yet to be taken from my parents and my home, yet to be betrayed. I am back home by the riverbank and I am happy and I still love her. My secret is I still love her.

This isn't a story about war. It's about ruin.

I

April, 2075
St. James, Louisiana

CHAPTER ONE

I was happy then.

☆ ☆ ☆

THE SUN BROKE THROUGH a pilgrimage of clouds and cast its unblinking eye upon the Mississippi Sea.

The coastal waters were brown and still. The sea's mouth opened wide over ruined marshland, and every year grew wider, the water picking away at the silt and sand and clay, until the old riverside plantations and plastics factories and marine railways became unstable. Before the buildings slid into the water for good, they were stripped of their usable parts by the delta's last holdout residents. The water swallowed the land. To the southeast, the once glorious city of New Orleans became a well within the walls of its levees. The baptismal rites of a new America.

A little girl, six years old, sat on the porch of her family's home under a clapboard awning. She held a plastic container of honey, which was made in the shape of a bear. From the top of its head golden liquid slid out onto the cheap pine floorboard.

The girl poured the honey into the wood's deep knots and watched the serpentine manner in which the liquid took to the contours of its new surroundings. This is her earliest memory, the moment she begins.

And this is how, in those moments when the bitterness subsides, I choose to remember her. A child.

I wish I had known her then, in those years when she was still unbroken.

"Sara Chestnut, what do you think you're doing?" said the girl's mother, standing behind her near the door of the shipping container in which the Chestnuts made their home. "What did I tell you about wasting what's not yours to waste?"

"Sorry, Mama."

"Did you work to buy that honey, hmm? No, I didn't think you did.

Go get your sister and get your butt to breakfast before your daddy leaves."

"OK, Mama," the girl said, handing back the half-empty container. She ducked past her mother, who patted dirt from the seat of her fleur-de-lis dress.

Her name was Sara T. Chestnut but she called herself Sarat. The latter was born of a misunderstanding at the schoolhouse earlier that year. The new kindergarten teacher accidentally read the girl's middle initial as the last letter of her first name—*Sarat.* To the little girl's ears, the new name had a bite to it. Sara ended with an impotent exhale, a fading *ahh* that disappeared into the air. *Sarat* snapped shut like a bear trap. A few months later, the school shut down, most of the teachers and students forced northward by the encroaching war. But the name stuck.

Sarat.

A HUNDRED FEET from the western riverbank, the Chestnuts lived in a corrugated steel container salvaged from a nearby shipyard. Wedges of steel plating anchored to cement blocks below the ground held the home in place. At the corners, a brown rust crept slowly outward, incubated in ceaseless humidity.

A lattice of old-fashioned solar panels lined the entirety of the roof, save for one corner occupied by a rainwater tank. A tarp rested near the panels. When storms approached, the tarp was pulled over the roof with ropes tied to its ends and laced through hooks. By guiding the rainfall away from the panels to the tank and, when it overfilled, toward the land and river below, the family was able to collect drinking water and defend their home from rust and decay.

Sometimes, during winter storms, the family took shelter on the porch, where the awning sagged and leaked, but spared them the unbearable acoustics of the shipping container under heavy rain, which sounded like the bowl of a calypso drum.

In the summer, when their house felt like a steel kiln, the family spent much of their time outdoors. It was during this extended season, which burned from March through mid-December, that Sarat, her fraternal twin, Dana, and her older brother, Simon, experienced their

purest instances of childhood joy. Under the distant watch of their parents, the children would fill buckets of water from the river and use them to drench the clay embankment until it became a slide. Entire afternoons and evenings were spent this way: the children careening down the greased earth into the river and climbing back up with the aid of a knotted rope; squealing with delight on the way down, their backsides leaving deep grooves in the clay.

In a coop behind the house the family kept an emaciated clutch of chickens. They were loud and moved nervously, their feathers dirty and brown. When they were fed and the weather was not too hot, they produced eggs. In other times, if they were on the edge of revolt or death, they were preemptively slaughtered, their necks pinned down between the nails in a nearby stump.

The shipping container was segmented by standing clapboards. Benjamin and Martina Chestnut lived in the back of the home. Simon and the twins shared the middle third, living in a peace that grew more and more uneasy as Simon neared his ninth birthday and the girls their seventh.

In the final third of the home there was a small kitchen table of sand-colored plywood, smeared and notched from years of heavy use. Near the table a pine pantry and jelly cabinet held sweet potatoes, rice, bags of chips and sugar cereal, pecans, flour, and pebbles of grain milled from the sorghum fields that separated the Chestnuts from their nearest neighbor. In a compact fridge that burdened the solar panels, the family kept milk and butter and cans of old Coke.

By the front door, a statue from the days of Benjamin's childhood kept vigil. It was the Virgin of Guadalupe, cast in ceramic, her hands pressed against each other, her head lowered in prayer. A beaded bouquet of yellow tickseed and white water lilies lay at her feet, alongside a melted, magnolia-scented candle. When the flowers died and hardened the children were sent out to the fields to find more.

Sarat skipped past the statue, looking for her sister. She found her in the back of the house, standing on her parents' bed, inspecting with steel concentration her reflection in the oval vanity mirror. She had taken one of her mother's house dresses, a simple sleeveless tunic whose violet color held despite countless washings. The little girl wore the top half of the dress, which covered the entirety of her frame; the

rest of the garment slid limply off the bed and onto the floor. She had applied, far too generously, her mother's cherry red lipstick—the jewel of the simple makeup set her mother owned but rarely used. Despite employing utmost delicacy, Dana could not keep within the lines of her small pink lips, and looked now as though she'd hastily eaten a strawberry pie.

"Come play with me," Sarat said, confounded by what her twin was doing.

Dana turned to her sister, annoyed. "I'm busy," she said.

"But I'm bored."

"I'm being a lady!"

Dana returned to her mirror, trying to wipe some of the lipstick with the back of her hand.

"Mama says we have to go have breakfast with Daddy now."

"OK, oh-*kay,*" Dana said. "Not a moment peace in this house," she added, misquoting a thing she'd heard her mother say on occasion.

Sarat was the second-born girl, five and a half minutes behind her sister. And although she'd been told by her parents that both she and Dana were made of the same flesh, Dana was her father's girl, with his easygoing wit and sincere smile. Sarat was made of her mother: stubborn, hard, undaunted by calamity. They were twins but they were not alike. Sarat often heard her mother use the word *tomboy* to describe her. God gave me two children at once, she said, but only girl enough for one.

☆ ☆ ☆

FOR A FEW MINUTES, after Dana had left, Sarat remained in her parents' room. She observed with some confusion the thing her sister had smeared all over her lips. Unlike the river and the bush and the beasts and birds of the natural world, the lipstick did not interest her; it held no promise of adventure. She knew it only as a prop in her twin sister's ongoing obsession with adulthood. Why Dana wished so desperately to join the ranks of the fully grown, Sarat could not understand.

Dana emerged from the house, still draped in her mother's clothes.

"Didn't I tell you not to go opening my dresser?" Martina said.

"Sorry, Mama."

"Don't sorry me—and pull it up, you're dragging dirt everywhere." Martina pulled the dress off her daughter. "I send your sister in to get you, and now you're out here looking like a mess, and she's inside probably doing the same."

"She can't put makeup on," said Dana. "She's ugly."

Martina knelt down and grabbed her daughter by the shoulders. "Don't ever say that, you hear me? Don't ever call her ugly, don't ever say a bad word about her. She's your sister. She's a beautiful girl."

Dana lowered her head and pouted. Martina cupped her jaw and lifted her head back up.

"Listen to me," she said. "You go back inside and you tell her. You tell her she's a beautiful girl."

Dana stomped back inside the house. She found her sister putting her mother's lipstick back in the makeup box.

"You're a beautiful girl," Dana said, and stormed out of the room.

For a moment, Sarat stood dumbstruck. She was a child still and the purpose of a lie eluded her. She couldn't yet fathom that someone would say something if they didn't believe it. She smiled.

☆ ☆ ☆

OUTSIDE, Martina cooked breakfast on a heavy firewood stove. On the plates and in the bowls there were hard biscuits and sorghum cereal and fried eggs and imitation pepper bacon cooked till crisp in its own fat.

In her slumping cheeks and dark-circled eyes, Martina's thirty-nine years were plainly visible—more so than in the face of her husband, although he was five years her senior and the two of them had lived half their lives together. She was wide around her midsection but not obese, with an organic rural fitness that made her able, when it was necessary, to lift heavy loads and walk long distances. Unlike her husband, who had sneaked into the country from Mexico as a child back when the flow of migrants still moved northward, she was not an immigrant. She was born into the place she lived.

"Breakfast!" Martina shouted, wiping the sweat from her brow with a ragged dish towel. "Get over here now, all of you. I won't say it again."

Benjamin emerged from behind the house, freshly shaven and showered in the family's outdoor stall.

"Hurry up and eat before he gets here," Martina said.

"It's all right, relax," her husband replied. "When's he ever been on time?"

"Where's your good tie?"

"It's not a job interview, just a work permit. I'm only going to a government office; no different than the post office."

"When was the last time people killed one another to get something from a post office?"

Benjamin sat at the table in the yard. He was a lean man with a lean face, his near-touching brows anchoring a smooth, large forehead made larger by setting baldness at the temples. He was at all times clean-shaven, save for a thin black mustache his wife worried made him look unseemly.

He kissed Sarat on the forehead and, when he saw his other daughter, her face smeared with red, kissed her too.

"Your girls been at it again," Martina said. "Won't learn manners, won't do what they're told."

Benjamin shook his head at Dana with mock disapproval, then he leaned close to her ear.

"I think it looks good on you," he whispered.

"Thanks, Daddy," Dana whispered back.

The family assembled around the table. Martina called out for Simon and soon he came around the front porch, carrying in his hands the recently sawed bottom half of the family's ten-rung ladder.

Seeing the look on his mother's face, the eight-year-old blurted, "Dad asked me to do it."

Martina turned to her husband, who bit happily into the bacon and drank the sour, grainy coffee. It was rancid stuff from the ration packs, designed to keep soldiers awake.

"Don't look at me like that. Smith needs a ladder," Benjamin said. "Got new shingles to put up; old ones have all gone to mush."

"So you're going to give him half of ours?"

"It's a fair enough deal, considering he's the one who knows the man at the permit office. Without him, we may as well try to shoot our way across the border."

"He's got enough money to buy himself a million ladders," said Martina. "I thought you said he was doing us a favor."

Benjamin chuckled. "A Northern work permit for half a ladder is still a favor."

Martina poured the last of her coffee in the dirt. "We need to get up and fix our roof just the same as the Smiths," she said.

"We don't need any more than a five-rung ladder to do it," Benjamin replied, "especially now that our own boy's grown tall and strong enough to get himself up there."

It was a point with which Simon vehemently agreed, promising his mother he'd climb up regularly to add chlorine to the tank and clean the bird droppings from the solar panels, just like his father did.

The family ate together. Benjamin, rail-thin his whole life, inhaled the bacon and eggs with shameless appetite. His son looked on, cataloguing his father's every minute ritual into an ironclad manual of what it means to be a man. Soon the boy too had wiped his plate clean.

The twins sipped orange juice from plastic cups and picked at their biscuits until their mother softened the bread with a smear of butter and apricot jam, and then they ate quietly, deep in guarded thought.

Martina watched her husband, her eyes still and silent, a look her children mistook for hardness but her husband knew to be just how she was.

Finally she said, "Don't tell them nothing about doing any work for the Free Southerners."

"It's no secret," Benjamin replied. "They know full well every man around these parts has done some work for the Free Southerners. Doesn't mean I picked up a rifle for them."

"But you don't have to say it. If you say it then they have to check one of the boxes on the form and take you into another room and ask you all kinds of other questions. And then in the end they won't give you a permit on account of security reasons or whatever they call it. Just say you work in the shirt factory. That's not a lie."

"Quit worrying so much," Benjamin said, leaning back in his seat and picking the stray meat from between his teeth. "They'll give us a permit. The North needs workers, we need work."

Simon interjected, "Why do we need to go to the North? We don't know anybody up there."

"They got jobs there," his mother replied. "They got schools there.

You're always complaining about not having enough toys, enough friends, enough everything. Well, up there they have plenty."

"Connor says going to the North is for traitors. Says they should hang."

Sarat listened intently to the conversation, filing the strange new word in her mind. *Traitors.* It sounded exotic. A foreign tribe, perhaps.

"Don't talk like that," Martina said. "You going to listen to your mother or a ten-year-old boy?"

Simon looked down at his plate and mumbled, "Connor's dad told him."

They finished eating and retreated to the porch. Martina sat on the steps and cleaned the lipstick from her daughter's face with a wet dishrag, the girl squirming and whining. Simon smoothed the ends of the half-ladder with a sandpaper block, putting his whole weight into the job, until his father told him he didn't have to work it so hard.

Sarat returned to the scene of her morning experiment, poking at the congealed honey thick in the knots of the wood, enthralled by the amber liquid's viscosity. It fascinated her, how the thing so readily took the shape of its vessel. With her pinky she cracked the crust and tasted a dollop. She expected the honey to taste like wood, but it still tasted like itself.

Benjamin sat on a hickory chair, the weaves of its backrest frayed and peeling. He looked out at the brown, barren river and waited on his patron to arrive.

"Do you know what you're going to say to them, at the permit place?" Martina asked. "Have you thought it through?"

"I'll answer what they ask."

"You got your papers ready?"

"I got my papers ready."

Martina shook her head and cast an eye out for signs of an incoming boat. "Probably there won't even be any permits," she said. "Probably they'll do what they always do and turn us back. That's their way, don't give a damn about nobody south of the Mag line. It's like we aren't human, aren't animal even, like we're something else entirely. They'll just turn you back, I know it."

Benjamin shrugged. "Do you want me to go or not?"

"You know I do."

When she was done wiping the lipstick, Martina set to braiding Dana's hair. It came down in long smooth strands of the deepest black, unlike Sarat's, which although the same color, was unruly and revolted to fuzz in the humidity.

"You girls know what the best thing about the North is?" she asked.

"What?" Sarat replied.

"Well, you know how at night here it gets so hot you just can't take it, and you wake up with your sheets all damp with sweat?"

"I hate that," Dana said.

"Well when you get far enough north, it never gets hot that way. And in the winter, if you go really far north, they don't even have rain—they have little balls of ice that drop from the sky, and the ground gets all thick with it till you can't see the roads anymore, and the rivers get so cold they turn to solid rock you can walk on."

"That's silly," Dana said. In her mind, these were more of her parents' elaborate fairy tales, the hardening rivers and falling ice no different than the fish with whiskers that her father said once swam in great schools through the lifeless Mississippi back when it was just a river, or the ancient lizards buried in the deserts to the west, whose remains once powered the world. Dana didn't believe any of it.

But Sarat did. Sarat believed every word.

"It's true," Martina said. "Cool in the summer, cool in the winter. *Temperate,* they call it. And safe too. Kids out in the streets playing till late at night; you'll make friends your first day there."

Simon shook his head quietly. He knew that even as she talked to the twins, his mother was really addressing him. With everyone else she spoke directly, with no sentimentality or euphemism. But to her only son, whose inner mental workings she feared she would never learn to decipher, she passed messages through intermediaries in weak, obvious code. Simon hated it. Why couldn't she be like his father? he wondered. Why couldn't she simply say what she meant?

☆ ☆ ☆

BY MID-AFTERNOON, Benjamin's ride had yet to appear. Soon Martina began to believe her husband had been forgotten. Or perhaps Benjamin's acquaintance had finally been caught in that old fossil-powered boat of his and had been arrested. It was true that the states

surrounding the rebel Red—a cocoon formed by Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina—were deeply sympathetic to the cause of the Free Southern State. And even though residents of these states still required a permit to move north to the real heart of the Blue country, the states were officially members of the Union nonetheless, and a man caught using fossil fuel in these parts was still an outlaw.

She thought about how much easier it would be for everyone if all these would-be statelets were simply allowed to break free from the Union, to form their own miniature nations along the fault lines of region or creed or race or ideology. Everyone knew there had always been fissures: in the Northwest they were constantly threatening to declare the independence of the proud, pacifist Cascadia; below them, so much of California, Nevada, Arizona, and West Texas were already under the informal control of the Mexican forces, the map of that corner of the continent slowly reverting to what it was hundreds of years ago. In the Midwest the old-stock nativists harbored a barely restrained animosity toward the millions of coastal refugees who descended onto the middle of the country to escape rising seas and severe storms. And here, in the South, an entire region decided to wage war again, to sever itself from the Union, rather than stop using that illicit fuel responsible for so much of the country's misfortune.

Sometimes it seemed to Martina that there had never been a Union at all, that long ago some disinterested or opportunistic party had drawn lines on a map where previously there were none, and in the process created a single country fashioned from many different countries. How bad would it really be, she wondered, if the federal government in Columbus simply stopped wasting so much money and blood trying to hold the fractured continent together? Let the Southerners keep their outdated fuel, she thought, until they've pulled every last drop of it from the beaten ground.

Martina watched the river and waited for the boat to come. She saw Sarat near the water, inspecting a discarded shrimp net that had washed up onshore a few months earlier; the children had made from it a makeshift trap for river debris. The net collected all manner of strange treasure: an iron cross, a neck-rest from a barber's chair, a laminated picture of a long-shuttered leper colony, a small sign that read, "Please No Profanity In The Canteen."

Sarat inspected the soggy pages of a waterlogged book caught in the net. The book's title was *The Changing Earth.* Its cover featured a picture of a huge blue mountain of floating ice. She leafed gingerly through the pages, peeling them from one another. The book was filled with maps of the world, old and new. The new maps looked like the old ones, but with the edges of the land shaved off—whole islands gone, coastlines retreating into their continents. In the old maps America looked bigger.

She saw the shadow of her brother, Simon, standing behind her. "What is it?" he said, snatching at the book.

"None of your business," Sarat replied. "I found it first." She pulled the book away and hopped to her feet, ready to fight him for it if she had to.

"Whatever," Simon said. "I don't even want it, it's just a dumb book." But she could see him inspecting the open page.

"Do you even know what that is?" he asked.

"It's maps," Sarat said. "I know what maps are."

Simon pointed to a corner of the page where the blue of water seemed to overwhelm a few thin shreds of land on the southern edge of the continent.

"That's us, stupid," he said. "That's where we live."

Sarat looked at the place on the map where Simon pointed. It looked wholly abstract, in no way reminiscent of her home.

"You see all that water?" Simon said. "That all used to be land, and now it's gone." He pointed back in the direction of their house. "And one day this'll all be water too. We'll have to get out of here or else we'll drown."

Sarat saw the faint smirk on her brother's face and knew instantly he was trying to scare her. She wondered why he seemed so obsessed with such tricks, why he so often tried to say things in the hopes of making her react in some fearful or foolish way. He was almost three years older than her, and a boy—a different species altogether. But still she sensed in her brother a kind of insecurity, as though trying to scare her was not some cruel way to pass the time, but a vital means of proving something to himself. She wondered if all boys were like this, their meanness a self-defense.

And anyway, she knew he was a liar. The water would never eat their

home. Maybe the rest of Louisiana, maybe the rest of the world, but never *their* home. Their home would remain on dry land, because that was the way it had always been.

☆ ☆ ☆

AROUND DUSK, Benjamin's acquaintance, Alder Smith, arrived. He was five hours late. His plywood fishing skiff bobbed softly on the parting water, its outboard motor gurgling and coughing fumes. It was an archaic thing, but still faster and nimbler than the Sea-Toks, whose feeble, solar-fed motors barely beat the current.

It said something to own a vehicle that still ran on prohibition fuel; it spoke not only of accumulated wealth, but of connections, of status.

"Mornin'," Smith said as he ushered the boat to the foot of the Chestnuts' landing, throwing a loop of nylon around the docking pole. Like Benjamin, he was tall, but boasted broader shoulders and a full head of brown hair made copper by too much time in the sun. Before the war his father owned a dozen fossil car dealerships between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Those businesses were now long gone but the wealth they bore still lingered, and Smith lived a comfortable life on the other side of the river. Among the families that still dotted the flooded south of Louisiana and Mississippi, he was known as a facilitator, a man who had plenty of friends. He knew Free Southern State government men in Atlanta and the smugglers who ran the tunnels across the Mississippi-Arkansas line; he knew consuls in the federal offices that dotted the tamed and broken parts of the Union-aligned South. He even claimed to know the right-hand men of senators and congressmen in the federal capital in Columbus.

"Mornin'," Martina replied. "Come on up, we got some sandwiches left, coffee too."

"Thank you kindly, but we're already late. Come on, Ben. Blues don't like waiting."

Benjamin kissed his wife and children goodbye and stepped inside to kiss the feet of the ceramic Virgin. He descended to the river with great care so as to keep from slipping in the clay and dirtying his good pants. He carried with him his old leather briefcase and the half-ladder. His wife watched from the edge of the flat land.

"Dock south and walk into the city," she told the men. "Don't let any government people see that boat."

Smith laughed and started the motor. "Don't you worry," he said. "This time next week you'll be halfway to Chicago."

"Just be good," Martina said. "Be careful, I mean."

The men pushed the skiff from the mud and pointed the hull north in the direction of Baton Rouge. The boat rumbled into the narrowing heart of the great brown river, twin spines of water rising and spreading in its wake.

Excerpted from:

FEDERAL SYLLABUS GUIDELINES—HISTORY, MODULE EIGHT: THE SECOND CIVIL WAR

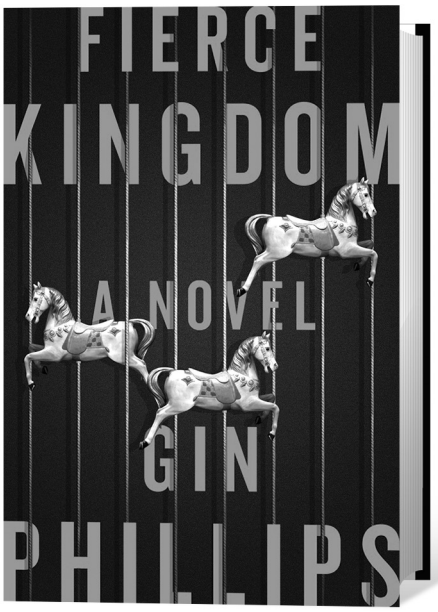
MODULE SUMMARY:

The Second American Civil War took place between the years of 2074 and 2093. The war was fought between the Union and the secessionist states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina (as well as Texas, prior to the Mexican annexation). The primary cause of the war was Southern resistance to the Sustainable Future Act, a bill prohibiting the use of fossil fuels anywhere in the United States. The bill, championed by President Daniel Ki, was in part a response to decades of adverse climate effects, the waning economic importance of fossil fuels, and a deadly oil train derailment in Williston, North Dakota, in 2069.

The war's key precipitating events include the assassination of President Ki by secessionist suicide bomber Julia Templestowe in Jackson, Mississippi, in December of 2073, and the deaths of Southern protesters in a shooting outside the Fort Jackson, South Carolina, military base in March of 2074.

The secessionist states (unified under the banner of "The Free Southern State") declared independence on October 1, 2074, the date often considered to mark the formal start of the war. Following a series of decisive Union military victories in the first five years of the war—primarily in East Texas and along the northern borders of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia ("The Mag")—the fighting largely subsided. However, rebel insurrectionist groups continued to engage in sporadic guerrilla violence for another half decade, aided in part by foreign agents and anti-American saboteurs. After a drawn-out negotiation process that was settled largely in the Union's favor, the war was set to formally conclude with the Reunification Day Ceremony in the federal capital of Columbus, Ohio, on July 3, 2093. On that day, a secessionist terrorist managed to

cross the border into Northern territory and release a biological agent (“The Reunification Plague”) that resulted in a nationwide epidemic. The effects of the plague, which claimed an estimated 110 million lives, was felt throughout much of the country for the next ten years. The identity of the terrorist responsible remains unknown.



Perfect for readers of **Room, We Need to Talk About Kevin,** *and* **Reconstructing Amelia.**

An electrifying novel about the primal and unyielding bond between a mother and her son, and the lengths she'll go to protect him.

The zoo is nearly empty as Joan and her four-year-old son soak up the last few moments of playtime. But what Joan sees as she hustles her son toward the exit gate minutes before closing time sends her sprinting back into the zoo, her child in her arms. And for the next three hours she keeps on running.

A masterful thrill ride and an exploration of motherhood itself—from its tender moments of grace to its savage power.

Available July 2017

Viking • Hardcover: 9780735224278 • eBook: 9780735224285

CD: 9780525492320 • AD: 9780525492337 • Large Print: 9780525492689

5:23 p.m.

Joan scans the sand pit for any forgotten plastic men, and then she takes Lincoln's hand and heads down the path leading out of the woods. She wonders when he will stop wanting to hold her hand, but for now they seem equally happy with the arrangement. In less than twenty steps the trees have opened up—it's only an illusion, the seclusion of this place—and there's the sound of the waterfall splattering on the rocks in front of the otter exhibit.

The otter is one of their favorite animals, one of the few that will still pull Lincoln from his stories. The two otters have a huge cavern-styled exhibit with faux-rock overhangs, and the animals curve and flip and dive in a greenish pool behind a wide glass wall. The rocks jut over the walkway, and a waterfall rushes over visitors' heads and spills down to a turtle pond thick with lily pads and reeds and some sort of purple-flowered stalk. The wooden footpath that winds over the pond has always struck her as the prettiest part of the Woodlands—but now it seems only empty.

Lincoln laughs next to her. "Look at the otter. Look how he swims."

He still struggles with words ending in -er. "Ott-o," he says, instead of "otter." Lex Luth-o. Score a goal in socc-o.

"I like his paws," she says.

"He has paws? Not fins? Real paws like a dog or finger paws like a monkey?"

She is tempted to stop and point out the anatomy of otters—this is what she wants most for him, maybe, to see that life is full of astonishing things, to know that you should pay attention—*Look, it's beautiful*, he said, staring into a puddle of gasoline in the zoo parking lot—but they don't have time. She gives his hand a tug, and he comes easily enough, though his head is slow to turn away from the otter. As

they step onto the wooden bridge, lily pads to either side of them, she wishes that they would see someone else, some other chattering family also running late. Not that it's unusual to have the path to themselves. They often see no one else all the way to the exit in the afternoon, and they are pushing it closer than usual to closing time. She picks up her pace.

"Want to race?" she asks.

“No."

"You want to skip?"

"No, thank you."

He plods along.

She sometimes wonders if his determination not to do a thing is in direct proportion to the amount of enthusiasm she shows for it. He continues meandering along the bridge, pausing to shrink back from a gnat or to stare down at a speckled koi. He comes to a complete stop to scratch his chin. When she asks him to hurry, he frowns, and she knows by the look on his face what he will ask for.

"I want you to carry me," he says.

"I can’t carry you all the way to the car," she says. "You're getting too big."

She watches his lip slide out.

"Here's my compromise," she says, before this escalates and slows them down further. “I’ll pick you up when we get to the scarecrows, and I’ll carry you from there. If you can do a good job of walking to the scarecrows."

"Okay," he says, although his voice is wobbly and his lip is extending more, and he is starting to wail even as he moves his feet in time with hers.

She did not, it occurs to her, specify that he could not cry as he

walks. He is technically meeting her terms. It is possible that he will cry himself out in a few seconds and get distracted by some passing thought of Thor's helmet or Odin's eye patch. It is possible that he will only cry more loudly, and she will give in and pick him up because he has actually walked quite a long way, uncomplainingly, on his small legs. It is possible that he will keep crying and she will stand firm and make him walk all the way to the car because she does not want him to turn into one of those children who throw tantrums.

Such a system of checks and balances—parenting—of projections and guesswork and cost-benefit ratios.

A dragonfly hovers and darts. A heron picks its way along the edge of the water. The wooden path cuts back and forth through trees and wild grass.

Lincoln has stopped crying, and she's fairly sure he's humming the Georgia Bulldogs' fight song-"Glory, glory to old Georgia! I Glory, glory to old Georgia!"-although as soon as she finishes the thought, he switches to the Texas Longhorns. No one in their family is a fan of either team, but he soaks up fight song lyrics as he soaks up superheroes and villains.

He is a collector. He accumulates.

Through the trees she can see the tentlike top of the merry-go-round. It shines white against the dishwater sky. They pass a chicken wire-enclosed exhibit for a one-legged eagle and a near-invisible enclosure for a pair of egrets. There are dead logs and monkey grass and lime-green weeds. She walks toward an overhanging branch, and one of its leaves detaches, turning into a yellow butterfly and weaving up to the sky.

Finally they are back on the concrete sidewalks, which are as wide as roads. Jack-o-lanterns perch on the fence posts.

They take a few steps into civilization, and she glances over at the merry-go-round. It is still and silent; the painted giraffes and zebras and bears and gorillas and ostriches are frozen. Lincoln used to

love the merry-go-round, although he would only ride a zebra. Now the carousel animals have rubber bats and tiny Kleenex ghosts floating around them, hanging from the wooden framework. She and Lincoln are close enough that the white canvas top covering the carousel spreads over them, bright and calm.

"Mommy," he says. "Carry me."

"When we get to the scarecrows," she says, ignoring his arms stretched toward her. "Just a little farther."

He doesn't protest this time. They hurry past the merry-go-round, toward the food court and the Kid Zone Splash Park, with the fountains of shoulder-high water still arcing onto the blue-raspberry-colored splash pads.

"Medusa's been here," Lincoln announces, and she looks beyond the spraying water to the shaded spot with the stone statues of a turtle, a frog, and a lizard. These days, anytime they see stone figures it is a sign that Medusa has passed by. *Spider-Man has been here*, he says to spiderwebs.

"Those poor guys," she says, because it is what she says every time they pass Medusa's victims.

"They should have kept their eyes closed," he says, because it is what he says every time.

She glances at the darkened glass of the Koala Cafe, with its shelves of plastic-wrapped sandwiches and jell-0 and hard boiled eggs, but she sees no sign of movement inside. The plastic chairs are upside-down on the square tables. The staff usually closes down the restaurants and locks the buildings fifteen minutes before closing time, so she's not surprised.

Off to their right is the playground with the rock mountains and swinging bridge. Once upon a time Lincoln was interested in Antarctica, and the big rocks were icebergs. Then last spring he was playing knights and castles on the swinging bridge, yelling at invisible

kings to bring out the cannons and to fill the catapults with rocks. Now that same bridge is always Thor's rainbow-colored pathway to earth. In a year he will be in kindergarten and these days of superheroes will fade and be re- placed by something she can't guess, and then at some point the zoo itself will be replaced and life will have gone on and this boy holding her hand will have turned into someone else entirely.

They are making good time now, scurrying past the gift shop and the wooden cutout where a kid can stick his head through a hole and pretend he is a gorilla. They slow by the algae-clogged aquariums at the edge of the children's area- Lincoln cannot resist looking for the giant turtle-and an older woman appears a few yards in front of them, just around the curve of the aquarium walls, staggering backward slightly. She is holding a shoe.

"The rock's out, Tara," she says, and there is a certain cheerful desperation in her voice that identifies her as a grandmother. "Come on, now."

Two blond girls, surely sisters, come into view, and the grandmother leans down, holding out the shoe to the smaller girl. Her hair is in pigtails, and she looks a little younger than Lincoln.

"We've got to go," says the grandmother as she works the rubber sandal onto a small foot Then she straightens.

The little one says something, too quiet to hear, even though they are all within a few feet of each other now. Several flies tap against the aquarium glass.

“I’ll take them off when we get to the car," says the grandmother, out of breath. She takes an off-balance step, holding the girls by their wrists. The girls blink at Lincoln, but then the woman is propelling them forward.

"That's a grandmother," Lincoln says, too loudly, stopping suddenly enough that he jerks Joan's arm.

"I think so, too," she whispers.

Joan glances toward the older woman—there is a flowery chemical smell in the air, perfume that reminds her of Mrs. Manning in the sixth grade, who gave her and no one else a copy of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* on the last day of school, but the woman and her grandchildren are gone now, already past the curve of the final aquarium.

"If I had a grandmother, is that what she would look like?" Lincoln asks.

He has been fixated on grandparents lately. She hopes it will pass as quickly as all his other phases.

"You do have a grandmother," Joan says, tugging him forward again. "Grandma. Daddy's mommy. She was here at Christmas, remember? She just lives far away. We need to go, sweet."

"Some people have lots of grandparents. I only have one." "No, you have three. Remember? Now we've got to get going or we'll get in trouble."

The magic words. He nods and speeds up, his face so serious and resolute.

There is another popping sound, louder and closer than before, maybe a dozen sharp cracks in the air. She thinks it might be something hydraulic.

They've come to the edge of a pond—the largest one in the zoo, nearly a lake—and she catches a glimpse of swans cutting through the water. The path forks: the right branch would lead them around the far side of the pond, up through the Africa exhibit, but left will take them to the exit in a few more seconds. She can see the green-and-red flash of the parrots up ahead, unusually quiet. She likes their little island in the middle of all the concrete—a bricked-in pool with a grassy mound and spindly trees—and it is always their first and last stop, the final ritual of every visit.

"Start practicing your parrot caws," she tells him.

"I don't need to practice," he says. "I just want to see the scarecrows."

"We'll have to look at them while we walk."

A long row of scarecrows has been propped along the fence that circles the pond. Many of them have pumpkins for heads, and Lincoln is fascinated by them. He loves the Superman one and the astronaut one-with the pumpkin painted like a white space helmet-and especially The Cat in the Hat.

"Alright, sweet," she says.

He drops her hand and lifts his arms.

She glances along the fence, spotting the bright blue pump- kin head of Pete the Cat. About halfway down the fence several scarecrows have fallen. Blown down by the wind, she assumes, but, no, it hasn't been stormy. Still, the scarecrows are collapsed, half a dozen of them scattered all the way down to the parrot exhibit and beyond.

No, not scarecrows. Not scarecrows.

She sees an arm move. She sees a body way too small to be a scarecrow. A skirt, hiked indecently over a pale hip, legs bent.

She is slow to lift her eyes, but when she looks farther, past the shapes on the ground, past the parrots, toward the long, flat building with public bathrooms and doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, she sees a man standing, facing away from her, unmoving. He is by the water fountain. He is in jeans and a dark shirt, no coat. His hair is brown or black, and other than that she cannot see details, but she cannot miss it when he does finally move. He kicks the bathroom door, his elbow coming up to catch it, a gun in his right hand, some sort of rifle, long and black, the narrow end of it stretching like an antenna past his dark head as he disappears into the pale-green walls of the women's bathroom.

She thinks there is another movement around the parrots, someone else still on his feet, but she is turning away by then. She does

not see more.

She grabs Lincoln and heaves him up, his legs swinging heavily as he lands against her hip, her right hand grabbing her left wrist underneath his bottom, linking her arms.

She runs.

5:32 p.m.

She goes forward, not toward the bodies, of course, but around the pond, toward Africa. As she's moving, it occurs to her that she could have gone back toward the woods and that she still could still turn around and aim for the shade of their sand pit or the tall trees, but she does not want to turn around, because she is not sure if the man—men? —saw them or not, if he might be following them, taking his time, because he is the one with the gun and for him there is no hurry. Also there is a part of her that resists going backward anyway, that thinks forward must be better. Safer.

Go. Go. Go. The word is in her head, repeating. Her feet slam the concrete in time to it.

She imagines the gunman watching them, taking his first steps toward them, rounding the lake, smile spreading. She imagines him picking up speed.

She cannot stand it. She glances over her shoulder and sees no one, but she cannot get a good look, because she does not want to slow down.

Her knit skirt stretches tight against her legs as she runs, and she would like to yank it higher, but she does not have a free hand. *Maybe it will rip,* she thinks hopefully. She can hear the tiny rocks scrape under her shoes. She clenches the thong of her sandal between her two toes, hearing her soles flap-one more fear, a shoe falling off.

There are Halloween lights strung all along this path, just above her head, lights glowing cheerfully every step of her way, white bright white, like when Lincoln accidentally shines the flashlight in her eyes.

The sky is darkening.

"Why are we running?" Lincoln asks, all forty pounds of him

bouncing against her hip bone, and she is amazed that he has been quiet for so long. Maybe he has only now noticed that they are not headed for the parking lot.

Her lungs burn when she tries to take in enough breath to form an answer.

“I’ll tell you" —she says; she has to inhale—"in a minute." His arms tighten around her neck. The railroad track is paralleling them, just beyond the bright lights, and what she would not give to see the little red-and-black train pulling up beside them now, ready to whisk them off, although she thinks she might be able to run at a faster speed than the train can man- age. Still, she wants the train. Her arms are already starting to ache, and she flashes to last week when they walked to the park—*do ducks have teeth? will they definitely not bite md do ducks have feet? why didn't I walk when I was a baby? did I have fret? did I have legs?* That afternoon she actually reached a stage on the way back home when she was unable to carry him farther and had to put him down on the grass even though he was crying as she did it.

She will not put him down.

"Mommy!" he says, frustrated, a hand on her face. "Not in a minute."

"There was a bad man," Joan says, and surely she would not have said it if she weren't panicked.

"Where?" he asks.

She has lost track. "What?"

"Where is the bad man?" he asks.

She hops over the railroad crossing in two steps—also, if the train came along, it would mean there was another human being driving it, and she would like to see another human being—and then the lake is behind them and the bodies and the man are on the other side of it, and that is a good thing. The winding, uphill path to Africa is lined with trees—broad-leafed things, rain forest plants—good for

blocking anyone's view of them. They are surely harder to see now, if anyone is looking.

"He was back there," she says, nearly stumbling.

She hears sirens. Impossible to tell how close, but it means the police are coming and they will fix everything, but that does not help her now.

"I didn't see a bad man. How do you know he's bad?" His chin rams into her shoulder.

It upsets him when she won't answer his questions, and she does not want him to start crying, because she does not want noise and also because then he would start fidgeting or, worse, go limp. He is twice as heavy when he goes boneless.

"We need to get away," she says, panting. "Right now. So help Mommy and just hold on—wrap your legs a little tighter—and let me get somewhere safe and then I'll answer you."

She barely gets all the words out. Her lungs are bursting. Her thighs scream. The sun has dropped behind the treetops, and the shadows of the plants are long and emaciated under her feet.

Her elbows brush a banana leaf, solid and broad as a wing. "Where?" he asks, because of course he will not stop asking. "Where are we going?"

She does not know. Which way? What next? What is she even looking for? Her feet keep their rhythm, and she curls her toes more tightly, and she wishes this way were not uphill.

She cannot do this for much longer.

Hide. They have to hide.

That must be the first thing, and then they can call the police or Paul or both. She thinks she should call the police—just to let them know that she and Lincoln are trapped in here? Surely they need to

know who is still inside the zoo? She shifts him from her right hip to her left and readjusts her hold on him. "Mommy!" he says, still wanting some kind of answer. Always wanting an answer.

Finally they have crested the hill, and the walls of perfectly wildly landscaped plants are past them, and she is staring at the African elephant exhibit, all sandy hills and grassland and flowing creek, and they must either turn left or right. Right would take them to the giraffes and lions and tigers; left would curve around to the rhinos and wild dogs and monkeys.

"Mommy!"

She kisses his head and turns left.

"I hit my tooth on your shoulder," he says.

"Sorry," she says.

She is glad now that she did not go to the woods and the familiar narrow paths of the dinosaur pit, because even with all the tall trees around, they would not have found much to hide behind, and the few good spots—the log cabin and the butterfly house, maybe—would have been far too obvious. Of course, there would have been room to run and maneuver if they'd been spotted, but how much can she really maneuver with Lincoln attached to her? No, they do not need space to run. If someone spots them, running will get them nowhere.

This strikes her as an important thought. Proof that her brain is pushing through the panic.

Yes. They will get nowhere running. They need to hide so well that they cannot be seen, not even if someone walks right past them. She needs a rabbit hole. A bunker. A secret passage.

He has stopped saying her name. Something of her fear must have communicated itself to him, and she is glad as long as it is the right amount of fear—enough to turn him docile but not terrified. She can't really know, but she will find out once they are safe.

The elephant exhibit stretches out forever, and as she skirts the railings of it, she hears music playing, and at first it is unintelligible, only a note here and there, but soon she can make out the *Ghostbusters* theme song. The music is cheerful and far too loud by the time she passes the Coke machines that Lincoln of- ten pretends are the Bat computer.

The Joker is up to his old tricks! To the Batmobile! Mommy, do you think there's a Bat carwash, because the Batmobile gets dirty but it's a convertible, so could they wash it? Her ankle turns slightly, but she does not slow down. There is an actual elephant, sleepy-looking, surprisingly close to the railing on their right, and she is glad for the substantial shape of it. She half sees the gentle ticktock of its trunk, registers the rhythm of it, but she is turning in the other direction, to her left, scanning the broad building only a few yards away. The Savannah Snack Bar. They've eaten raisins under its giant thatched roof, ceiling fan blowing on them in the summer air, but they have never sat inside the actual restaurant. She likes to stay outside, watch the elephants, pretend they are in Africa—she will take him there someday, she's always thought—she likes to think of all the places she will show him. *Did you really ride an elephant in Thailand, Mommy? Yes, that was before you were born.* She eyes the bathrooms as she passes them, slowing, but she thinks of doors being kicked in and speeds up again. The restaurant itself, now that might be safer—surely the doors have locks, and there would be more rooms inside, offices and storerooms with better locks, hiding places and closets, maybe chairs or tables or heavy boxes you could pile against a door. The thought is quick and tempting, and she darts under the shade of the thatched roof and shoves on the glass doors, but they don't budge, and everything is dark inside.

OPEN, says the sign.

WITCH'S BREW SLUSHY, says another sign, purple and pink. SPOOK-A-LICIOUS!

Joan spins and begins running again, and Lincoln's arms are tight around her neck, which helps take a little of his weight off her arms, but she is spent and off-balance, and she nearly runs into a concrete column.

There is a speaker above her head, she notices. The music is blaring from it. *An invisible man / Sleeping in your bed / Who you gonna call? / Ghostbusters.*

She backs away from the pavilion, away from the speakers, back into the dimming sunlight. The elephant and its graceful trunk are gone and how can anything that big disappear and she whispers *It's okay* into Lincoln's ear, over and over, and she speeds up again even though she is aimless. This is nothing like the steady rhythm of her regular runs around neighborhood streets. She is ill-prepared. She thinks of her big brother, back during his army training, when he was obsessed with something called rucking: strapping a thirty-pound bag to himself and running many miles with it. She hardly knew him by that time, because he had moved to Ohio with her father, had escaped long before she did, and she only saw him for two weeks in the summers and sometimes holidays. He was a grown man visiting her, and he slid his rucksack on her-that was, what, seven years before she ran her first marathon-and she tried to impress him but her back was wet with sweat and she was panting after two blocks. She is panting now, biceps burning, Lincoln's weight listing her to the side, and she'd be so much better off if she'd been rucking all these years.

How long has she been running? Three minutes? Four? No time. Forever.

Behind the eighties synthesizers in the music, she can still hear the sirens. Louder now.

She is nearly at the rhino exhibit. She sees two teenagers, a boy and a girl, running toward her, running as if they know something is wrong, not as if they are only trying to make it to the gate by closing time. She thought she wanted to see people, but now she finds she does not. People only complicate things. They slow down when they

see her-the boy grabs at his sunglasses, which are falling from his face-and they both talk at once, asking something, but Joan only steps around them, turning sideways as she moves.

The girl's skirt is orange with a fringe of black lace, so short and tight it barely covers her underwear and what kind of mother does this girl have at home and maybe actually a very good mother who has taught her she is beautiful even in a skirt like a sausage casing.

''Don't go toward the exit," Joan says, barely slowing. "A man is shooting people."

"Shooting?" says the girl.

The boy lets loose more words, too many of them, lost in the air.

"He'll kill you if he sees you," Joan calls over her shoulder, but she is long past them. "Go hide somewhere until the police come."

She does not look back. The only thing that matters is Lincoln. He cannot wind up bleeding on concrete.

It's good that the restaurant was locked. That would have been stupid. She and Lincoln might have been well hidden there, but the man would check the buildings, wouldn't he? Indoor places would be his first targets. Kicking in doors and smashing windows and knocking things down-it must satisfy him, breaking things-and there is not much to shatter in the open air, not like furniture and doors and bones, so solid.

She can hear her breathing and her footsteps, as soft as she can make them, but she can also hear the wind and the background noise of traffic not so far away and the leaves trembling on branches—all the background noise that she never bothers to hear. She needs this background noise, because Lincoln will never be perfectly quiet. He is a good boy, but he cannot be expected to stay completely silent, and what if a single whisper slaughters them?

Out in the open.

But hidden. Someplace no one would look.

She glances behind her at the open space of elephant habitat, which has plenty of rocks and entire walls of boulders, but there is a steep drop—not jumpable-down to ground level. And there are elephants, and the whole idea is moronic, but there is a spark there—something—the shooters would not check exhibits, surely?

She has thought this in no more than ten footsteps, so quickly and so slowly—if she turned around, she would likely still see the teenagers—and all this thinking is getting her nowhere. The lion roars, from a distance, and it is not a shocking sound, because they feed the animals right before closing, and the lion is always vocal, anticipating. It roars again, comforting almost. She is surrounded by wild things in boxes. She feels a thrum of solidarity.

A monkey chatters, high-pitched and aggressive, and she wonders whether maybe the keepers never got to the evening feedings. Maybe they were interrupted.

It comes to her then. The porcupine.

The buildings should all be locked, but maybe not? Maybe that last set of keys never made it up this way?

She prays as she has not in a very long time while she spins toward the primate building. She passes the African-themed playground on her left-drums and masks and seesaw and the statue of the dung beetle—and then she darts under the spider monkeys and their complicated ropes course, where they are lolling about, oblivious, swinging paw-to-tail, and then she is at the entrance to the Primate Zone, shoving the double doors, which give way immediately. She sprints deeper into the cool, dark halls of the building, passing lemurs with their black-and- white-striped tails, and then she is around a curve, everything shadowed, with tree trunks growing through the floor. As with most of the scenery here, she does not know whether the trees are real or manufactured, but when she puts out one hand to steady herself, the bark feels real.

"A man was shooting people?" asks Lincoln against her collarbone.

"Yes."

"Is he chasing us?"

"No," she says.

"Then why are we running?"

She can see natural light in the exhibits, sunlight trapped inside the glass, and she can't help but notice that the animals have boulders and caves to hide in, caves that might even lead into unseen rooms if you could only get through the glass barriers. But she cannot pass through walls—the Invisible Woman? One of the X-Men? —so she keeps jogging through the halls, brushing against smooth glass and cinder block walls that are rough and tidy.

There will be a point, she knows, when her muscles stop working. When her arms loosen and fall no matter how she fights them. For now, there is only a constant burn—pulsing—from her shoulders to her wrists, from her hips to her ankles.

"Mommy?"

"We're nearly there," she says, but the words come out barely formed.

There are monkeys and more monkeys, all unconcerned. Then she sees a glass door, and she rams it with her shoulder and they are outside again, cool air blowing. They're facing a weathered railing that comes up to her chest. Beyond it, there is a small fenced-in wilderness of pine trees and tall grass. She's standing on the wooden planks of a deck—a patio between the exhibit halls. To her left is another glass door that would lead to baboons and orangutans and other glassed-in habitats and open hallways that are no good to her. Here the sign on the brick wall explains the habits of the porcupine, although there is no explanation for why a porcupine was put in the Primate Zone. Months ago a zookeeper with a notebook in her hand admitted—

quietly, so Lincoln wouldn't hear—that the porcupine had died. Joan and Lincoln have been checking periodically for a new specimen. She told him the truth, since it wasn't as if he hadn't seen dead birds and squirrels and squished roaches and why act like nothing ever dies, and he has been hoping for a baby porcupine. But the pen has stayed empty.

She hopes it has stayed empty.

She steps closer to the railing, scanning the low-growing trees and hollowed-out logs. The bare patches of dirt and gravel overwhelm the few tufts of wild grass. The whole thing is unkempt and neglected. The middle section of the pen is what she's remembered—boulders three or four feet high. The wall of rock stretches maybe a dozen feet across, curving around so there is no clear view of whatever might be behind it. A chain- link fence half covered in vines seals in the space. The fence is easily fifteen feet tall, with the top panel angled steeply, prohibitively inward—did they really have any sort of trouble with climbing porcupines? —and pine trees tower along the edges.

It is hidden back here, deep in the twists and turns of the primate house. It does not look fit for humans, and that is what strikes her as perfect about it.

She lowers Lincoln onto the railing and gasps as she surrenders his weight. The railing will be easy enough to climb over, and there is a short ledge on the other side that's nearly as long as her feet. She can get her footing there and then lift Lincoln, and even if something goes wrong, the drop to the ground is no more than a couple of feet, and he wouldn't get hurt, but he might start crying and the noise would be—no, there is no danger of him falling. She can keep a hand on him the entire time.

"This is what we're going to do," she says. 'Tm going to sit

you right here while I climb over—"

He shakes his head and grabs tightly above her elbows.

"Mommy, we can't go in with the animals!"

"There aren't any, remember?" she says, trying to dislodge his fingers. "This is the porcupine's home. And there's no new porcupine yet."

"Fences are to keep the animals in and the people out," he says.

She has never been so sorry that he always follows the rules.

"The rules are different today," she says. "There are emergency rules now. The rules are that we hide and do not let the man with the gun find us."

Lincoln relaxes his hold, peers behind him, and clutches at her again.

"'I'll fall," he says. "It's too high."

"Would I let you fall?"

"No," he says, pressing closer to her. "Mommy."

"I'll have my hands around you. I'm just going to climb over now—"

"Mommy," he whimpers.

"Shhhhh. I've got you."

She boosts herself and straddles the railing, keeping her hands on either side of his body so that her arms are still bracketing him. It is awkward, but she swings herself the rest of the way over, the balls of her feet fairly stable on the ledge.

He has clasped a hand lightly on each of her wrists. She can hear him breathing, near tears. Because of a man shooting people or because of this complete break from the normal boundaries of things? She has no idea.

"Mommy."

'I've got you," Joan says, and she loops an arm around him, pulling him against her chest with the crook of her elbow. His heels thud against the iron mesh.

"I'm going to lift you down," she tells him, "and I want you to put your feet on this little step here and hold on to the metal part with your hands. Then I'm going to hop on the ground and scoop you up."

She lifts him even as she is still speaking, not giving him a chance to think more about it, because he does not usually get braver when he considers things, and she can have this over in two seconds. She holds tight to the railing with one hand and slides him back, bending her waist and holding herself far from the railing to make room for him, and there is one moment where he is in midair, anchored only by her arm and elbow, and she feels his panic, but then she has his feet on the same ledge she is standing on, his tennis shoes tucked between her own leather sandals. She wraps his fingers tightly around the mesh.

"Hold tight," she says.

She pushes off, landing soft and easy in the dirt beneath them, the grass high enough to tickle her wrists. She pulls him down to her, turning him so that his arms wrap around her neck. His legs clasp her hips, and she is moving again, watching her footing as much as she can with him obscuring her view—she remembers how a pregnant belly made uneven ground an unseen obstacle course—and finally they are behind the tall rocks she had found so tempting.

She lowers herself, sinking down so that her back is against the rock-hard and cold—and her legs are splayed on the ground. He is still curled around her.

5:42 p.m.

Lincoln has not loosened his hold on her, so she pulls her phone from her purse with one hand and then holds it in front of her, just past the curve of his skull, her palm brushing his tangled curls, which are always matted in the back, like he has been rubbing syrup into his scalp. She swipes her thumb across the screen, and then she freezes, still not sure whether to call the police or Paul—the police are here already, surely, and maybe they would have questions for her. But it is Paul's voice that she needs to hear.

And then she sees a text from Paul already. She stares at his black-and-gray message, the squared-off bubble of it so familiar.

You didn't go to the zoo this afternoon, did you? let me know asap.

He has no idea where they've gone, of course. She usually doesn't know their destination until Lincoln declares his choice for the afternoon as she buckles him into his car seat. Paul can only be asking because he knows something.

She types back, and she has a thought of calling him instead, but her thumbs have automatically begun responding. It is habit.

Yes. At zoo. Do you know what's happening? Hiding in porcupine exhibit right now.

There is no way he will know where the porcupine exhibit is. He does not visit the zoo nearly as often as she does. She adds:

In the Primate Zone.

She pushes Send, then immediately begins a second message.

Call police. Saw bodies at the entrance. Man with gun.

Again she pushes Send-there's something wrong with the order of her messages—they are jumbled up—but she cannot stop her thumbs from typing. She likes watching them move, likes seeing the letters string themselves together into sentences, likes the light of the screen, and as long as she is typing there is nothing but blue shapes filled with words, stacked one on top of the other.

We are fine. Totally safe, she tells him, and then her thumbs pause, thinking of what can come next.

Lincoln's hair tickles her arm. He is beginning to shift and wriggle. Under her breath she hums "Edelweiss," the lullaby she and Paul sing him every night. She is humming too fast, too high, the song on fast-forward.

She needs to type something else. Her fingers tap slightly against the air, twitchy.

"Why are you on your phone?" Lincoln asks, his voice muffled against her shoulder.

"Daddy," she says, just as Paul sends another message.

read this. am calling you now. love.

There is a link below the message. She glances at the blue string of underlined letters and numbers, and then the phone rings, trilling far too loudly—it has not occurred to her to silence it—and she immediately answers.

"I can't talk," she says, sounding somehow professional. Like she is in the middle of a meeting. She is not sure where this voice has come from. "We have to be quiet. I don't know where they are."

Maybe it was more than habit that had her texting earlier. Maybe some part of her already knew what the rest of her has just realized: the phone is a risk. It makes noise. When she talks on it, she makes noise. Noise will bring the men.

It is simple, almost. If she thinks of it a certain way, it all makes

perfect sense.

She starts again. "We're okay, but—"

Her husband starts speaking before she has finished, and his voice is too loud.

"What's going on?" he says. "Is anyone with you? Have you seen the police? Is Lincoln okay? What do you mean that you're safe? Can they get to you? God, I'm sorry I'm not there, honey—I'm so sorry—"

She lets him talk. She understands his need to hear her, and she thought she had the same need, but his voice does not make her feel like he's with her—it makes him feel farther away, or, no, it makes her feel farther away. Like a part of her is floating toward him, out of the zoo, into life as she knows it, and she does not want to float anywhere. She cannot. She must be here, completely here. She cannot console him at the moment.

"We're fine," she whispers, still talking in some lawyer's voice. Some CEO's voice. If those kinds of people ever whispered. "We're hiding."

"What did you see?" he asks.

"I love you," she says, "and we're okay, but I can't do this. I need to pay attention. I saw a guy from a distance. There were"—she glances down at the top of Lincoln's head—"there had been some shooting by the entrance, and I was walking by after it happened. Then we ran and hid. That's all I know. Don't call back, though. I'll call you when we're safe."

"I'll call 9-1-1 and tell the police you're in the porcupine exhibit," he says, his words coming out in a rush of breath. The way he sounds when he is walking up the steep hill to his office, calling to serenade her with whatever song is stuck in his head—he is always singing—and he knows she will laugh and hang up on him. "I love you. Tell him for me. Be safe."

She silences the phone, turning to Lincoln. He is fidgeting

uncomfortably against her, kicking out with his legs, digging at her sides with his tennis shoes. She slides her hands under his armpits and helps him spin around and get his feet under him. He stands up, and she keeps a hand around his waist.

"So that was Daddy," she whispers.

He leans back against the rock behind them. "I know."

"Whisper," she says. "He says he loves you."

"I know he does."

"A little quieter," she says.

"Okay," he whispers.

He is bouncing his knees again, his feet steady but his whole body sproinging. His shoulders inch up and down, and it is a strange, loose-limbed dance.

The sky is starting to pinken, long swathes of lavender stretching across the tops of the trees.

He is chewing on his shirt, gnawing away at the collar. Normally she tells him to stop, but this time she ignores it.

“I’m thirsty," he whispers.

She is glad for the change of subject. She reaches into her purse, glad that this was not one of the days when she insisted that he could drink from water fountains.

"Here are your sips," she says, handing him his plastic water bottle.

"Mmm," he says after a long swallow. He has a shiny wet mustache along his upper lip. "Still cold."

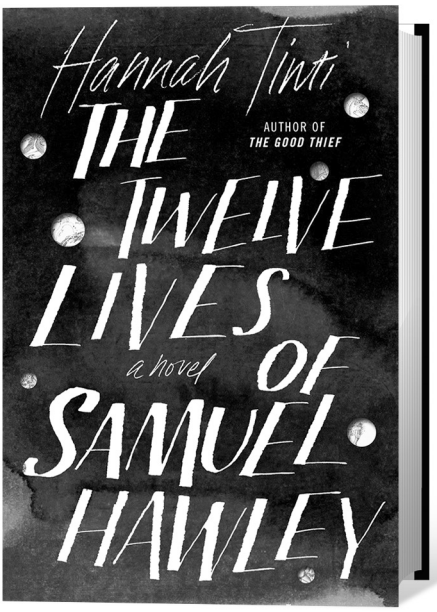
He drinks more, water dribbling down his jaw, and finally he lowers the bottle and wipes his mouth with his shirt.

A time or two she has used the word "sips" instead of “drink" when speaking to adults. It is as real and accepted a word around their house as anything in the dictionary, one of the many words that were not words before he came along. A bib is a "neat dog," because they had a book where a sloppy dog spilled his food and a neat dog wore his bib. *Can I have a neat dog?* he'll ask if he sees his shirt getting dirty. He calls his knuckles his finger knees. And he had a whole vocabulary of nonwords when he was small, so small that he was not yet him. For a while he called balls "dahs" and raisins "zuh-zahs." His sign for painting was a sniff of his nose, because they once tried nose painting instead of finger painting and apparently that made an impression.

He stuck one arm in the air, his wrist bent, and that was the sign for "flamingo."

He made a hissing sound when he was asking for more eggs. *Sssssssss*, like the sound they made when they hit the frying pan. He brought his own language into existence.

There are so many things that did not exist before him.



***Perfect for readers of* The Good Thief, The Goldfinch, The Story of Edgar Sawtelle, *and* Life After Life.**

Samuel Hawley isn't like the other fathers in Olympus, Massachusetts. A loner who spent years living on the run, he raised his daughter Loo on the road, always watching his back. Now that Loo's a teenager, Hawley wants only to give her a normal life. In his late wife's hometown, he finds work as a fisherman, while Loo struggles to fit in at the local high school.

But, Loo grows more and more curious about the death of the mother she never knew. Soon, everywhere she turns, she encounters the mysteries of her parents' lives before she was born. The demons of her father's past spill over into the present—and together both Hawley and Loo must face a reckoning yet to come.

Both a coming-of-age novel and a literary thriller, *The Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley* is an unforgettable story that explores what it means to be a hero—and the cost we pay to protect the people we love most.

Available March 2017

The Dial Press • Hardcover: 9780812989885 • eBook: 9780812989892

Large Print: 9781524756383

Published in the United States by The Dial Press, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Tinti, Hannah, author.
Title: The Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley : a novel / Hannah Tinti.
Other titles: 12 lives of Samuel Hawley
Description: First edition. | New York : The Dial Press, [2017]
Identifiers: LCCN 2016021409| ISBN 9780812989885 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780812989892 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Fathers and daughters—Fiction. | Domestic fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Literary. | FICTION / Family Life. | FICTION / Coming of Age.
Classification: LCC PS3620.I56 T94 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016021409

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

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Book design by Susan Turner

Hawley

When Loo was twelve years old her father taught her how to shoot a gun. He had a case full of them in his room, others hidden in boxes around the house. Loo had seen them at night, when he took the guns apart and cleaned them at the kitchen table, oiling and polishing and brushing for hours. She was forbidden to touch them and so she watched from a distance, learning what she could about their secrets, until the day when she blew out birthday candles on twelve chocolate Ring Dings, arranged on a plate in the shape of a star, and Hawley opened the wooden chest in their living room and put the gift she had been waiting for—her grandfather's rifle—into her arms.

Now Loo waited in the hallway as her father pulled down a box of ammunition from the front closet. He took out some .22 rimfires—long-rifle and Magnum—as well as nine-millimeter Hornady 115-grain. The bullets rattled inside their cardboard containers as he slid them into a bag. Loo took note of every detail, as if her father's choices

were part of a test she would later have to pass. Hawley grabbed a bolt-action Model 5 Remington, a Winchester Model 52 and his Colt Python.

Whenever he left the house, Loo's father carried a gun with him. Each of these guns had a story. There was the rifle that Loo's grandfather had carried in the war, notched with kills, that now belonged to her. There was the twenty-gauge shotgun from a ranch in Wyoming where Hawley worked for a time running horses. There was a set of silver dueling pistols in a polished wooden case, won in a poker game in Arizona. The snub-nosed Ruger he kept in a bag at the back of his closet. The collection of derringers with pearl handles that he hid in the bottom drawer of his bureau. And the Colt with a stamp from Hartford, Connecticut, on the side.

The Colt had no particular resting place. Loo had found it underneath her father's mattress and sitting openly on the kitchen table, on top of the refrigerator and once on the edge of the bathtub. The gun was her father's shadow. Resting in the places he had passed through. If Hawley was out of the room, sometimes she would touch the handle. The grip was made of rosewood, and felt smooth beneath her fingers, but she never picked it up or moved it from whatever place he had set it down.

Hawley grabbed the Colt now and tucked it under his belt, then strung the rifles across his shoulder. He said, "Come on, troublemaker." Then he held open the door for them both. He led his daughter into the woods behind their house and down into the ravine, where a stream rushed over mossy rocks before emptying out into the ocean.

It was a clear day. The leaves had abandoned their branches for the forest floor, a carpet of crimson, yellow and orange; crisp and rustling. Loo's father stopped at an old maple, where a rusted paint can hung from a branch. He cracked it open with a knife, used the brush tied to the handle to mark a pine tree at one hundred yards with a small spot of white paint, then walked back to his daughter and the guns.

Hawley was in his forties but looked younger, his hips still narrow, his legs strong. He was as tall as a longboat, with wide shoulders that

sloped from the years of driving his truck back and forth across the country with Loo in the passenger seat. His hands were callused from the day jobs he'd work from time to time—fixing cars or painting houses. His fingernails were lined with grease and his dark hair was always overgrown and tangled. But his eyes were a deep blue and he had a face that was rough and broken in a way that came out handsome. Wherever they had stopped on the road, whether it was for breakfast at some diner on the highway, or in a small town where they'd set up for a while, Loo would notice women drifting toward him. But her father would make his mouth go still and set his jaw and it kept anyone from getting too close.

These days his truck wasn't going anywhere except down to the water, where they dug clams and hauled buckets of shells. Quahogs, Hawley called them. But also littlenecks, topnecks, steamers and cherrystones, depending on their size and color. He used a rake to hunt but Loo preferred a long, thin spade that could pierce the surface before the creatures began to burrow. Early each morning father and daughter rolled their pants above their knees and slipped on rubber boots. The shells were pulled from the salt marshes and mudflats, from the sandy bay and at low tide along the shore.

Hawley took the Remington off his shoulder and showed Loo how to load the clip. Five bullets slid inside, one by one. Then the magazine clicked into place.

"This is for starters. A practice gun. It won't do much damage. But still," he said. "Keep the safety on. Check your target and what's behind your target. Don't point it at anything you don't want to shoot."

He opened the bolt, retracted, then closed it again, pulling the first live round into the chamber. Then he handed his daughter the rifle. "Plant your feet," he said. "Loosen your knees. Take a breath. Let half of it out. That's when you want to squeeze the trigger. On the exhale. Don't pull—just squeeze."

The Remington was cool and heavy in Loo's hands, and her arms

shook a little as she raised the stock to her shoulder. She had dreamed of holding one of her father's guns for so many years that it was as if she were dreaming now. She tried to level the sight as she took aim, pulled the handle in close, lifted her elbow and last, last of all, flipped off the safety.

"What are you going to shoot?" her father asked.

"That tree," said Loo.

"Right."

In her mind she imagined the trajectory of the bullet, saw it going for miles, creating its own history. She knew every part of this gun, every gear and bolt, and she could sense each piece now—the spring and the carrier and the chamber and the pin—working together and sliding into place as she touched the trigger.

The explosion that followed was more of a pop than a blast. The butt of the rifle barely moved against her shoulder. She expected a thrill, some kind of corresponding shudder in her body, but all she felt was a tiny bubble of relief.

"Look," her father said.

Loo lowered the barrel. She could just make out the white mark in the distance, untouched. "I missed."

"Everyone misses." Hawley scratched his nose. "Your mother missed."

"She did?"

"The first time," he said. "Now slide the bolt."

"Did she use this gun?"

"No," said Hawley. "She liked the Ruger."

Loo pulled back on the lever and the casing flung through the air and onto the forest floor. She locked the bolt back into place, and the next bullet slid into the chamber. Her mother, Lily, had died before the girl could remember. A drowning accident in a lake. Hawley had shown Loo the exact spot where it had happened, on a map of Wisconsin. A small blue circle she could hide with the tip of her finger.

Hawley did not like to speak about it. Because of this the air shimmered a bit whenever he did, as if Lily's name were conjuring some-

thing dangerous. Most of what Loo knew about her mother was contained in a box full of mementos, a traveling shrine that her father re-created in the bathroom of each place they lived. Motel rooms and temporary apartments, walk-ups and cabins in the woods, and now this house on the hill, this place that Hawley said would be their home.

The photographs went up first, around the bathtub and sink. Her father affixed each carefully so they wouldn't rip—shots of Loo's mother and her long black hair, pale skin and green eyes. Next he arranged half-used bottles of shampoo and conditioner, a compact and a tube of red lipstick, a bent toothbrush, a silk bathrobe with dragons sewn on the back and cans of Lily's favorite foods—pineapple and garbanzo beans—along with bits of handwriting, scraps of paper discovered after her death, things she had needed from the grocery store, lists of activities she had hoped to finish by the following Saturday and a parking ticket with fragments of a dream scribbled on the back. *Old car with hinges folds down into a suitcase.* Every time Loo used the toilet or took a bath, she faced her mother's words, watching the letters bleed together over the years and the ink fade from the steam of the shower.

The dead woman was an ever-present part of their lives. When Loo did something well, her father said: *Just like your mother*; and when she did something bad, her father said: *Your mother would never approve.*

Loo squeezed the trigger. She did it again and again, reloading for over an hour, occasionally nicking bark from the tree but missing the target every time, until there was a pile of brass shells at her feet and her arm ached from the weight of the gun.

"The mark's too small," said Loo. "I'll never hit it."

Hawley pulled a wallet of tobacco from his pocket and shook it back and forth at her. Loo put down the gun. She walked over and took the pouch from him, as well as a package of rolling papers. She slid one thin piece of paper away from the rest, folded it in half with her finger and then tucked some of the tobacco along the crease. Then she placed the filter and began rolling, pinching the ends, licking the edge to seal

the fold. She handed the cigarette to her father, and he lit it and settled onto a rock nearby, leaning into the sun. He had started a beard, as he did whenever the weather turned cold, and he scratched it now, his fingers catching in the wiry brown hair.

"You're thinking too much."

Loo tossed the pouch at him, then picked up the rifle again. Her father had hardly spoken during the lesson, as if he expected her to already know how to shoot. She'd been excited when they started, but now she was losing her nerve—in the same way she did in the bathroom surrounded by scraps of her mother's words and cans of her mother's favorite foods and pictures of her mother's effortless beauty.

"I can't do this," she said.

The tide was coming in. Loo could hear the ocean beyond the ravine, gathering strength. One wave after another advancing upon the shore. Hawley tucked the roll of tobacco back into his pocket.

"There's nothing between you and that tree."

"*I'm* between it."

"Then get out of the way."

Loo flipped the safety on and put the rifle down again. She dug a rock out of the dirt with her fingers and threw it into the woods as far as she could. The rock sailed halfway toward the white mark and then crashed into some bushes. Birds scattered. The sound of a plane passed overhead. Loo looked through the branches at the flash of aluminum in the sky. Thirty thousand feet away and it seemed like an easier target.

Hawley's cigarette had gone out as he watched her and now he relit the end, striking a match, the ember glowing once, twice, as he brought it to his lips. Then he crushed the cigarette against the rock. He blew smoke out of his mouth.

"You need a mask." Hawley lifted his giant hands and covered his own face. Then he opened his fingers, framing his eyes and forming a bridge across his nose. It made him look like a stranger. Then Hawley dropped the mask and he was her father again.

"Try it," he said.

Loo's hands were not as big but they did the job, closing her off

from the woods and her own disappointment. It was like blinders on a horse. Things got blurry or disappeared when she turned her eyes left or right.

"How am I supposed to shoot like this?"

"Use it to focus, then pick up the gun," said Hawley.

Loo turned back toward the target. The sun was beginning to set. The white spot of paint caught the light and was glowing. What surrounded the tree—the earth, the sky, its own branches—fell away. This was how her father must see things, she thought. A whole world of bull's-eyes.

Just then, beyond the mark, there was a shuffling of leaves. Some kind of movement in the woods. Loo dropped her hands from her face. She held her breath. She heard only the sound of the wind. The rattle of birch leaves flipping back and forth. The distant echo of the plane in the clouds. The scratch of a squirrel's claws as it scrambled up the bark of a tree. But her father was listening for something else. His chin was down, his eyes cutting left. His face tensed and ready.

Hawley was always watching. Always waiting. He got the same look when they went into town for supplies, when the mailman came to their door, when a car pulled alongside them on the road. She heard him late at night, walking the living room floor, checking the locks on the windows. Digging on the beach for clams, he kept his back to the sea. These were small things, but she noticed. And she noticed now, as his whole body became still. He reached behind to his belt, and his hand came back with the Colt.

Loo spun around and picked up the rifle. Her fingers went tight on the grip. She scanned the woods, but she saw nothing. Her father was standing and he was staring in the direction of the tree. At the small white mark one hundred yards across the ravine.

"Loo! Now!"

He shouted her name as if their lives depended on it. And in one movement the Colt pushed through the air like an extension of his arm, and he was firing into the forest, the gun was flashing, blasting over and over, echoing against the hills. Loo spun, brought the rifle to her chest,

and she pulled the bolt and fired, pulled the bolt and fired, pulled the bolt and fired, and it wasn't until the fifth pull that she realized her father had stopped and that she was out of bullets. Click, click, click.

Loo lowered the barrel of the rifle, expecting to see—well, she wasn't sure exactly what she was expecting. A monster waiting for them in the trees. A shadow from her father's past. But there was only the narrow pine with a new yellow strip, as if Hawley's Colt had peeled the bark straight from the trunk, and two feet under, in the middle of the white spot he'd painted, three dark holes.

Loo's father jogged over to check the target. He took his knife from his boot and dug out one of the bullets. He walked back to Loo and dropped it into her palm. A tiny piece of metal the color of gold. The bullet was from her rifle, small and shiny and hard and broken. Remade by the impact of hitting its target. Hawley smiled, his eyes bright.

Then he said, "Just like your mother."

The Greasy Pole

Loo had spent her life moving from place to place. She was used to leaving things behind. Hawley would settle them in a town for six months or a year, and then she would come home from school and her father would have the truck packed and they would drive through the night, or two nights or even weeks—living in motel after motel after motel and sometimes sleeping in the backseat underneath an old bearskin rug, with the doors locked. When she was little it was an adventure she looked forward to, but as the years passed it became more difficult to start new schools, to make new friends, to always be the one who didn't get the joke. She began to dread the moves but a part of her also itched for them, because it meant that she could stop trying to fit in and simply slip into the place where she belonged: the passenger seat of her father's truck as they barreled down the highway.

They kept only a few belongings. Her father would bring his guns, and the box of Lily's things from the bathroom, and Loo would grab

their toothbrushes and some clean socks; a short, handheld telescope Hawley had bought her to look at the stars; and her planisphere—a circular map about the size of a dinner plate, made of plastic and cardboard, that tracked the constellations. It had belonged to her mother. Hawley had given it to Loo on her sixth birthday. Each new place they traveled to, she would wait until dark, spin the dial, set the right date and time, and the chart would reveal Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Taurus and Pegasus. Even if there were too many streetlights, and only the Big Dipper or Orion's Belt was visible, wherever they were would start to feel like home.

Once they unpacked, her father would buy them new clothes and Loo new toys and whatever else they needed. There was a certain kind of joy in this. And another in cracking the fresh spine of a book that Loo had read three times before. She would not say goodbye to the neighbors when they moved, or to her teachers, even if they were nice to her. She would not say goodbye to her friends, either, if she had friends, which she usually didn't.

Hawley and Loo ate ramen noodles in hot-water cups meant for tea. They opened Campbell's soup with hunting knives and warmed them on cans of Sterno. On special occasions they ordered Chinese. It didn't matter if they were in California or Oklahoma. They could always find a Fortune Palace. Fried egg rolls and wonton soup and scallion pancakes and hoisin sauce were Loo's comfort foods.

On her eleventh birthday they were in San Francisco, and there were so many Chinese food places to choose from that Hawley collected a dozen menus and let Loo pick whatever she wanted. When he came back to their motel room, carrying bags of fried rice and sesame noodles and moo shu chicken, Loo had set up a game of chess on the floor. The board was a birthday gift she'd opened that morning, wrapped in the comics page of the newspaper. They had played checkers all afternoon, but the set also came with pieces for chess.

"You're on your own with that one," said Hawley. "I don't know how to play."

"There's instructions," said Loo. "Each piece moves differently.

The castle goes up and down and side to side. The bishop goes diagonally. The queen moves any way she wants."

"Let's eat before the food gets cold."

Hawley opened a beer and turned on the television. They sat on the beds and dug into the rice and noodles and watched an old Marx Brothers movie together. When it was over, Hawley picked up the food containers and threw them into a bag and Loo sat back down on the floor with her game. Usually they played cards after dinner. Gin Rummy, Crazy Eights or Heads-Up Poker. For chips they used Hawley's spare change, and the winner got to choose dessert from the vending machine. But Loo was ready to do something new. Her eyes had gone toward the chess pieces the moment she'd opened the box that morning. She checked the instructions again.

"Need some help?" Hawley asked.

"I want to figure it out."

"Suit yourself." Hawley tied off the garbage. He tucked his Colt into the belt of his pants and pulled his shirt over it. He took the key and locked the room from the outside, and then she heard his footsteps as he carried the bag down the cement walkway toward the bins.

Loo chose a knight and moved it in the shape of an *L*, two spaces forward and one to the left. Then she got up and went to the other side of the board and sat down. She tried to solve the game like a puzzle. She shifted one of the pawns. Then she got up and went to the other side of the board and did the same thing.

The key slid in the door. Hawley came through and reset the locks, put the Colt on the bedside table, rolled a cigarette and cracked the window. There was a game show on the TV and the audience was clapping. But Loo knew how to drown out noises. She'd been drowning things out for as long as she could remember. And there was something exciting happening on these black and white squares, on this piece of cardboard with the crease in the middle. She'd hatch great strategies while playing the white, and the moment she picked up a black piece those plans faded against the backdrop of this other side that also wanted to win.

She played until the sky darkened outside the motel window and the neon lights from the highway shone across the board and there were only the two kings left and one black rook. She couldn't get the rook close enough to checkmate, and so she was just using it to push the white king across the board. Both kings, black and white, stumbled one step at a time in different directions until Loo lost patience and swept the remaining pieces down all at once with her arm.

The TV was still on. A different game show now. The contestant trying to guess the right answer. A giant clock spinning and clicking off the seconds and the audience holding their breath. Hawley wasn't paying attention. He wasn't even facing the screen. He was sitting in the chair by the window. The ashtray on the ledge was filled to the brim with the ends of his cigarettes, and his eyes had been on Loo the whole time.

"Who won?"

"Nobody," she said.

Loo went into the bathroom and shut the door. She didn't know why she was angry. The game had started full of possibility, but in the end it was as if she were surrounded by empty spaces, taking step after step to nowhere. She brushed her teeth and looked at her mother's things. She spit and leaned closer to a photo strip of her parents taped to the left of the sink, next to the mirror. They were pressed close together in some roadside carnival booth—four pictures snapped in sequence, her mother making faces, her father edging out of the frame. They looked like they were sharing a wonderful secret that Loo would never know.

When she came out of the bathroom the TV was off and the game had been folded up and put away. Hawley had fixed her bed and turned down the covers, as he always did, no matter where they were sleeping, even if it was in the back of the truck. Loo got under the blankets and he tucked her in.

"I know where we're going next," he said.

"Where?" Loo asked.

"Someplace you won't have to play alone."

"But I *like* being alone."

"I know," said Hawley. "But you shouldn't."

The following June they arrived in Olympus, Massachusetts. Hawley told her it was her mother's hometown. Lily had grown up in the ice-cold Atlantic waters, and Loo should have the same experience, ride the waves and hike to the lighthouse, canoe down the Megara River and sail from the Point to Tire Island. A normal life, Hawley said. With a real house and a neighborhood and friends her own age and a school where she could find a place to belong.

They checked into a motel right on the water and went to the beach. Loo made a giant sandcastle, poking windows in the towers with her finger and dripping wet sand to seal the cracks, while Hawley built a wall to hold back the rising tide and then dug a moat so deep that the ocean seeped up and filled the channel. They used mussel shells for the doors and draped seaweed over the ramparts. Then they ate hot dogs and watched the sun go down and when it started to get cold they pretended they were monsters and smashed the castle to pieces, roaring and stomping and crushing the kings and queens and villagers beneath their feet.

The next morning Hawley drove Loo over to meet Mabel Ridge. She was Loo's mother's mother, which meant that she was Loo's grandmother. Hawley was nervous and wore his best shirt. He even made Loo put on a dress and brush her hair, something she rarely did. It had taken nearly an hour to get all the snarls out. The ones she couldn't she cut with scissors, until her hair was chopped and uneven, like an animal had chewed one side.

Mabel's house was near a five-mile stretch of hard rocky woodland called Dogtown, set between Olympus, Gloucester and Rockport. Hawley told Loo that no one lived in Dogtown anymore, but three hundred years ago it had housed Puritan farmers and then fishing widows, freed slaves, outcasts and packs of abandoned, feral dogs that gave the place its name. Now the land was mostly a bird sanctuary, held in

trust and crisscrossed with hiking trails, but the dug-out cellars of the old stone houses were still there and drifters still passed through and people still occasionally got stabbed or robbed in the woods.

"So you shouldn't go in there," Hawley said. "I want you to promise."

Loo promised. "How do you know all this?"

"Your mother." Hawley pulled the truck over and parked in front of a run-down house, with slanted stairs and peeling paint and a rusted Pontiac in the driveway.

"Is this where she grew up?"

Hawley nodded and Loo pressed her face against the window. There was an old brass knocker on the door in the shape of a pineapple.

"Your grandmother and I need to talk about some things," said Hawley. "So I want you to stay in the car for now."

"I want to go inside."

"You will," said Hawley. "But we need to be invited first."

Her father got out of the truck and shuffled up the porch steps. He carefully lifted the brass pineapple hanging on the door and let it drop. The knocker seemed familiar to Loo, like something out of a half-remembered dream—the crown of leaves spread out like a flower, the golden color gleaming in the sun.

An older woman opened the door, wearing goggles and wiping her hands on the front of her shirt. She did not seem like the grandmothers from Loo's storybooks. She looked like the kind of woman who could field-dress a deer.

Hawley said a few words. Mabel Ridge said a few words back. Her hand went to the doorknob, but Hawley said something else and it stopped her. She bent and peered around him. The girl and the woman locked eyes for a moment. Then Loo touched her chewed-up hair, and Mabel Ridge slammed the door. When Hawley got back to the truck he punched the dashboard and broke the radio. Loo was too afraid to ask what had happened and they rode back to the motel in silence, Hawley's knuckles bleeding into the cuffs of his shirt.

Back in their room, Loo took off her dress and put her jeans back

on and Hawley pulled his bloody shirt over his head and threw it in the corner. They went down to the boardwalk and got some ice cream and sat on the beach in the same spot where they'd knocked down their castle the day before. The tide had washed over everything but there were bits and pieces of shells left behind and the moat was still full of water.

"Do you like this place?" her father asked.

"Sure," said Loo.

"Because we can leave if you want."

"We just got here."

"I know."

Loo watched her father's torn knuckles bend and bleed as he licked his cone. She took another bite of ice cream, and let the chocolate melt on her tongue.

"Let's stay," she said. "Screw that old bag."

"You shouldn't say that," Hawley said, laughing. "Your mother wouldn't approve."

The next morning they started looking for a place to live, and instead of signing a short-term lease, her father used cash from a safe-deposit box in Boston to buy the old Henderson place by the water. The property circled out to the edge of the bay and covered five acres. It was the first time they had lived in a house with stairs. Loo's bedroom was on the second floor, and had two windows and a small roof outside that she could climb out onto. Her father's room was at the end of the hall. At first she had trouble falling asleep with all that quiet, tucked into her new bed, the bearskin pulled across her shoulders. The only thing that helped was listening to Hawley walking around the house at night. A sliver of light cut through the room as he checked on her. She closed her eyes. She tried to look peaceful.

"Faker," her father said.

Then he closed the door and she listened to his footsteps walking away.

Sometimes Loo caught glimpses of her grandmother at the market or heading to the Catholic church on Sundays. If the old woman saw

them on the street she stepped into a store and waited until they had passed. When Loo pointed her out, Hawley would say only that Loo looked an awful lot like her mother, and that eventually Mabel Ridge would come around.

"We're family," he said. "Whether she likes it or not."

A MONTH PASSED AND THEN another. Little by little Loo got used to the quiet in their new house, to hearing the floors creak in the middle of the night and the rattle of old storm windows instead of highway traffic. When he was home Hawley cut through the silence, kicking off his boots and shouting her name up the stairs. But her father knew how to be quiet, too. More than once he'd snuck up on her in the kitchen, or startled Loo on the roof outside her window. He would not be there. And then—he was there. Clearing his throat or striking a match and making her jump.

One morning she woke to the sound of a bell ringing outside. She ran downstairs and saw Hawley coasting past on a new yellow bicycle. It was her first. He showed her how to ride it in the driveway. He kept his hand on the back of the seat until she got her balance, running alongside. It took most of the day, but eventually she made it down the street and then around the block. She did not notice when he let go.

Together they went to the marine supply store and picked up waders and tools for fishing and clamming. Hawley had learned how to cast and dig for quahogs from his father, and Loo could tell he was excited to show her what he knew. Just before sunrise he shook her awake and led her through the woods to the shoreline. She had never seen the tide out so far, the water just a streak in the distance. The uncovered sand was littered with shells and crabs and a multitude of tiny, tiny holes.

"Watch this," her father said. Then he crouched and jumped, all six foot four inches, lifting his knees high. His body hung in the air, suspended for a moment, before both of his feet came down with a loud, hard thump. All around them the buried clams released streams of water, squirting straight into the air like hidden fountains. And at that

moment Loo knew that they would really stay, that this place was different from all the others: the whole beach springing to life in the early morning, and her father grinning from ear to ear, like he'd just shown her the best thing in the world.

At the end of summer Loo enrolled in the local junior high. Hawley dug out her transfer file—which included past report cards, recent test scores, copies of her birth certificate and records to prove she had all her shots—and brought it with them to the principal's office. Loo had gone to seven schools in seven states. This was number eight.

After her placement test they were told that she'd done well enough to skip a year ahead, and would be joining the eighth grade. The principal was a portly, soft-spoken Swede with hair so blond it was nearly white, and a habit of belching whenever he was nervous. He smiled and shook Loo's hand with his meaty fingers.

"Your mother and I went to school together."

"Here?" Loo asked. "In this place?"

"There've been improvements, of course, but yes, it's the same building."

Loo looked around at the steam pipe radiators, the giant windows, the marble steps and lines of old metal lockers. The students eyed her as they walked by. The boys and girls seemed friendly enough. Maybe eight was her lucky number.

"So you knew her," Hawley said. "Lily."

"We were friends," said Principal Gunderson.

"Tell me something."

"What?"

"About her." Loo's father had stepped up close to the principal. He was at least a foot taller than Gunderson, and she could tell he was making the man nervous. Hawley was missing his left earlobe—the cartilage scarred and twisted just beneath the canal—and the principal was trying not to stare.

When she was younger her father used to tell her that a bird had

snatched his ear away. Then it was a horse, then a lion, then a cow, then a dog. Loo would imagine each of these animals, setting their teeth into his skin, then she would pull on Hawley's hair to cover it up.

"She was a free spirit," said Principal Gunderson. "Everyone liked Lily."

"That's not what she told me."

"I mean, well, I mean," the principal released a gush of air, then attempted to swallow it back down. "*I* liked Lily. Perhaps that would be more accurate. I liked Lily very much."

Hawley remained close, looking down at the man in front of him, as if he was trying to figure out a problem. And then he stepped back, and held out his hand. "Thanks," he said, "for taking care of Loo."

"If there's anything I can do to help you settle in, just let me know." The man was relieved now, talking fast. As if he had passed some test of his own. "And you should come by the Sawtooth, my family's restaurant. We've got the best fish and chips in town."

"How about clams?" Loo asked. "Do you sell clams to people, too?"

"Yes, clams too," said Gunderson.

Hawley glanced at his daughter. Then he reached up and tugged his missing ear.

When the fishermen heard that Samuel Hawley was selling his catch directly to Gunderson's restaurant, there were complaints, especially from Joe Strand and Pauly Fisk, who sold their shellfish at the weekly market and didn't like outsiders or competition. Joe Strand and Pauly Fisk had grown up in Olympus. Neither of them had ever left. Fisk was on the portly side, and always wore the same baseball cap with the words "Hong Kong" sewn in the front. Strand liked to keep a small patch of wiry scrub at the base of his lower lip, that he credited with attracting the ladies. They both had ex-wives and sons who lived with them that they struggled to like.

Neither of the men picked a fight out in the open with Hawley, but that didn't stop them from spreading rumors about folks getting sick off

his oysters, or from pouring bleach down on Hawley's shoreline, either, killing off a whole mess of littlenecks.

Through it all, Loo's father didn't say a word. Not until he came home one afternoon and found his waders gone and his gear fouled. Then he went straight to the Flying Jib and broke Joe Strand's jaw. After that he tracked down Fisk, who was hanging out at the wharf wearing Hawley's waders, and threw him off the pier. The waders filled and dragged the man under. Fisk might have drowned if it wasn't for Hawley going in after him and cutting the straps.

Loo watched all this happen from her father's truck. She opened the door for Hawley as he staggered back across the dock. When he slid into the driver's seat he was soaked through and dripping, blood in his hair and his knuckles swollen. He gripped the steering wheel, breathing hard. His face had taken on a kind of smoothness, as if all the lines of age had left along with his conscience. It was only after they got home, after Hawley had locked himself up for hours with her mother's things, after he came out of the bathroom wrapped in towels and Loo brought him a glass of whiskey, that he looked like himself again.

The fishermen left Hawley alone after that. So did everyone else. But no one besides Principal Gunderson would buy his catch, even though he set up a table at the weekend market. Things got worse as the cold weather drove off the last of the tourists and it was only the locals left selling to each other. Throughout the winter and into the following spring Hawley had to travel four or five towns over—even Rockport and Newbury were too close. And he also had to bring Loo with him to get customers. It was a role she knew well from their time on the road together. Softening up strangers. Asking for things her father could not. Loo would spend the day emptying buckets, sharpening her pocketknife and arranging shells into an intricate, cascading pattern that threaded around their stall. Whenever someone stopped to admire her handiwork, she would stand by Hawley while he offered up a price.

By this time Loo was twelve and a half years old and nearly as tall as a grown woman. She carried the rough-and-tumble look of children being raised by men, but she also seemed clean even when her face was

dirty. Living in a small town had not made her life normal, or given her a place to belong. Since her father's outburst, the fishermen had told their kids to stay away from her, and she had grown strange, the way children will when set apart.

It was not long before she became a target.

The sons of Joe Strand and Pauly Fisk started it all. They were both in Loo's homeroom. Pauly junior had been elected the class treasurer, then spent the collected dues on a new guitar for himself, smashing it onstage during the school talent contest. Jeremy Strand sat by the windows, smelling of sauerkraut. Their greatest joy was jumping off the cliffs surrounding the quarry on the outskirts of town. Their second greatest joy was convincing other kids to jump off those same cliffs. The quarries were full of abandoned construction equipment, lost when the granite miners struck water. Occasionally someone would land in the wrong place, and one day Jeremy Strand did. The police airlifted him out with a brain injury, but as soon as he could walk again, he was back, and, together with Pauly junior, continued shoving other kids off the seventy-foot drop.

The boys threw food at Loo during a class trip to the local whaling museum. It made her hair smell like baloney, and after she went to wash it out in the bathroom, they waited outside and tripped her. The rest of the class all saw this and laughed, and no one helped Loo gather her books from the floor, or helped her when Jeremy and Pauly junior tossed her backpack down the stairwell. Instead the boys and girls turned away and snickered and rolled their eyes so that they would not be next. Then their teacher appeared and clapped her hands and made everyone line up for a tour. Loo hurried down the stairs to collect her bag. By the time she caught up, the other students were gathered around a life-size model of a whale's heart.

The whale's heart was made of red and pink plastic, with giant veins and arteries twisting around it like the roots of a tree. The model was as big as a child's playhouse, big enough to crawl inside. There was a sign encouraging children to do so, and after the rest of the class moved on to the next exhibit, Loo did, shuffling on her hands and knees

through the tunnel of the aorta, slipping past a valve into the left ventricle. The space was not designed for someone her size, but it was comfortable enough to move around. Even cozy. Loo pressed her back against the flesh-colored plastic. The sides were rippled and full of shadows and echoed as she shifted her weight.

She was relieved to be out of sight for a few moments. To let go of the face she put on in public. It nearly always felt like she was pretending, as if her insides were only full of locked doors. Loo knocked on the wall of the heart with her fist. *Boom. Boom.* She imagined the muscles around her alive and churning, a whoosh of blood pushing through two hundred tons. Their teacher had said that the human heart was the size of both fists together. Loo squeezed her hands tight. Compared herself to the whale. If someone ever tried to climb inside her heart, they'd have to shrink down to the size of a chess piece.

There was a thud outside the shell. A knocking that answered her own. Loo poked her head out and found Jeremy and Pauly junior waiting for her again, right by the vena cava. They'd brought a shaggy boy named Marshall Hicks with them, who was best known for bottling homemade maple syrup that he brought to school and tried to sell whenever the cafeteria served pancakes. Marshall was the one knocking on the heart, and when he saw Loo he seemed confused. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Marshall smiled like a dog before it gets sick, and Jeremy and Pauly junior pinned Loo down and stole her shoes. She'd been taught by her father to never be a rat, so she lied to the teacher that she'd lost her shoes, and spent the rest of the trip in mismatched socks full of holes. On the bus ride home Jeremy and Pauly junior smacked Loo in the head with her own sneakers. Everyone saw, and the next day the rest of the kids started in on Loo, too.

She took it all at first, the cutting remarks, the tacks on her chair, the stolen lunches, the worms in her books, even the clods of dirt and stones thrown at her back on the way home, never quite understanding the reasons but feeling the cause must be some personal defect, some missing part of herself that the others recognized, a rotting, empty hole that whistled when she walked, no matter how quiet she tried to be.

Loo did not tell her father what was happening at school. Instead she moved to the corners of classrooms. She did her homework but refused to raise her hand, even when she knew the answers, and eventually her teachers stopped calling on her, as if they, too, had caught the scent of her strangeness. Soon, Loo could go entire days being nearly invisible.

This disappearing began at her wrists. It was the only part of her body that Loo considered delicate, and she could always feel her skin thinning there first. Afterward it spread to her fingers and up her arms, across her shoulders, ran down each leg to her toes and then back through her stomach—a sense of coming loose, of filtering away into nothing, winding around her neck until her head felt light and empty and she could wander the halls of the school and no one would look at her, and she could walk the streets and people would turn away, and she could go down to the beach and wander the dunes and feel not like a person anymore but a ghost.

At night Loo sat in the bathtub and stared at her mother's pictures. The way she narrowed her sharp green eyes and the way she smiled with her teeth like she was not afraid to use them. The woman who existed in the bathroom wore bright-red lipstick that smelled like candy, wrote her dreams down on the backs of parking tickets and ate peaches straight from the can. Loo's mother had been dead for years but she had never been invisible. If someone put a tack on her chair, she would take that tack and stuff it up his nose.

And then one day Marshall Hicks decided it was his turn to steal Loo's shoes.

He'd been enjoying a brief period of celebrity. Not because he was friends with Jeremy and Pauly, but because his stepfather was on television. An environmentalist, Captain Titus had recently gotten his hands on a decommissioned Coast Guard cutter, and was now using it to ram whaling ships in the Arctic Circle. A documentary crew was filming his escapades. The show was on public television, but still—it was television—and that made Marshall indirectly famous, and made the

girls in Loo's homeroom talk about him in nervous, giggly whispers. The other boys, upon noticing this, got jealous. So they spread rumors that Marshall was secretly boning Loo, and that when this sex happened, the two would pour Marshall's homemade syrup on each other.

Marshall was so embarrassed that he stopped bringing in his golden bottles of syrup (that he'd been so proud of and tapped himself from local trees), but the more he denied the claims, the more the other boys teased him. And so, finally, to prove that he was not having sex with Loo, Marshall followed her from school, pushed her onto the sand, took her sandals and threw them in the ocean, so far out she had to swim for them before they were swept away. She got pulled under and dragged along the bottom of the sea and swallowed so much sand and salt water she felt it coming out of her eyes. When Loo finally made it back to shore, her clothes were sealed to her skin, just as her father's were when he had climbed back onto the pier, and after she crawled and coughed and clawed her way free, she was a different person than when she went into the water. She was no longer afraid.

Loo picked up a piece of driftwood and staggered after Marshall Hicks. She knocked the boy unconscious. Then she chose his index finger and bent it backward until it broke. With this snap of bone she sealed her fear away, like sliding a cover over a barrel and nailing the lid shut.

Before she left the beach, Loo took a large, heavy stone, carried it to her house and slipped it into one of her father's socks. She brought it to school the next day in her backpack. She expected some kind of revenge from Marshall, or at the very least to be suspended, but instead he told everyone he'd fallen from a tree. His finger was wrapped tightly in a splint, and a bewildered look crossed his face each time they passed each other in the halls.

At the army-navy store, Loo changed her sandals for a pair of steel-toed boots. On her hands she slid rings with the stones pried out, the sharp metal prongs raised to cut. Loo remembered everything everyone had done to her, wrote each name down on a list. At the top were Jeremy Strand and Pauly Fisk, Jr.

She kept the rock-in-a-sock close and waited for the right moment.

When it came, Loo snuck into the boys' bathroom and hid in a stall. Once she heard Jeremy and Pauly junior's voices at the urinals and knew their hands were busy, she came out swinging the rock and cracked both of them in the face and broke their noses, splattering blood across the mirrors. The boys writhed on the white tile, screaming and cursing, and she propped open the door so everyone passing by could see, and then she went back in and kicked them both in the ass with her steel-toed boots, over and over, just to make sure they were really hurting.

After the incident was broken up, they were dragged to Principal Gunderson's office, where he gave the boys ice packs and then called everyone's parents. Soon the fathers were in the room: Joe Strand and Pauly Fisk, Sr., and also Samuel Hawley. It had been five months since the men had fought, but Strand's jaw had never healed properly. He'd recently had a second surgery, and his mouth was wired shut. But Fisk had plenty to say.

"It's the principle of the thing!" Fisk pounded the table. "There's a principle to life and this girl doesn't give a damn about principles. It's like she never heard the word! *Principles* mean not busting people's noses for no reason. *Principles* mean not trying to kill somebody just because he borrowed your waders."

"Mr. Fisk," said Principal Gunderson. "The girl is not the only one at fault here. Your boys confessed to wrongdoing as well. I'm sure we can come to some understanding."

Strand opened his lips and moaned behind clenched teeth. He pointed at the wires in his chin, then gestured at Hawley.

"Exactly," said Fisk. "*Principles* mean paying for somebody's doctor bill when you break their jaws."

Strand moaned again. He pantomimed pouring something into an invisible glass and raised the glass to the ceiling.

"What's he saying now?" Gunderson asked.

"*Principles* mean you at least buy them a drink."

Hawley ignored Fisk's lecture and Strand's grunts. But when Gunderson showed him the rock-in-a-sock that Loo had used, covered in blood, his face grew troubled. And when Jeremy and Pauly junior were finally led to the nurse's office, their nostrils filled with toilet

paper, Hawley picked up Loo's rock in one hand and placed the other on her shoulder. He pushed her out the door and into one of the chairs lining the hall.

"You would have done the same thing," said Loo.

"Not like that," said Hawley. "It was sloppy. You got caught."

"Yeah," said Loo. "But now they'll remember."

Her father rubbed his beard.

"Let's move," said Loo. "Somewhere else. Then none of this will matter anymore."

Hawley took in his daughter's boots and chewed-up hair, the blood splatters on her T-shirt. He hefted the rock in his hands. "It always matters," he said. Then he went back inside the office and closed the door.

For the next hour Loo sat in the hallway listening to the men's voices. There was talk about expulsion and suspension and detention and threats and favors, but after a long negotiation, all three teenagers were released with their enrollment and school records intact. The price for this clemency was paid for by their fathers. Strand, Fisk and Hawley were now officially pledged members of Principal Gunderson's Greasy Pole Team.

The Greasy Pole Contest had been an Olympus tradition for nearly a century. Every June, during the blessing of the fleet, a forty-five-foot wooden mast, planed down from a Scotch pine, was covered with inches of lard and grease and set out over the city pier. At the end of the pole was nailed a tiny red flag. The first team that made it to the end of the pole and captured that flag had bragging rights and drinks at the Flying Jib for a year. Sometimes the contest would take hours. Others it would take days. But they would not stop until the flag was captured. The greasy pole started as a drunken contest between sailors, and was now a serious battleground of old neighborhood rivalries, where generations gathered to watch the men of Olympus receive concussions, twist ankles, break arms and slip off the pole into the ocean.

Loo's principal had dreamt of winning the Greasy Pole Contest

ever since he was a little boy. Each year he inflicted his obsession on his students, lecturing on the history of the contest and his attempts to build a winning team, driven by decades of ribbing by his older brothers, who spent their time out on the water catching swordfish. These brothers had hairy chests and laughed easily and did not have poor vision or fallen arches or wives who had left them. And so each spring Principal Gunderson would attempt to win the flag, and his students and teachers would cheer him on, until he fell, belching, into the sea.

There were three main tactics for winning the contest. The first was slow and steady—the man tried to walk the mast like a balance beam. This usually got him at least halfway to the end, but inevitably ended badly—too much grease would build under his feet and send him flying. The second tactic was the crawl—the man went hands and knees. This nearly always ended with an inverted hug, the man slipping underneath the pole and dangling for a few moments, the crowd joyfully screaming a countdown, before he lost his grip. The last tactic, the most spectacular, was the slide—the man took the pole at a full run and tried to surf the grease to the end. The slide was a crowd favorite, resulting in the most varied wounds, bloody gashes, broken teeth and absurd-looking pitches into the harbor, face-smacks and groin-holds and every kind of belly flop.

On the day of the contest, Principal Gunderson gathered his team on the old wooden pier and went through each of these methods carefully, using a notebook and pen. He had perfected his own style over the years, which involved a combination of balance, crawl and last-ditch slide. Strand and Fisk sat on the plastic cooler they had brought and watched Gunderson diagram all the ways they could fall. The probable injuries to their bodies (and pride) had dampened their spirits, and they were now trying to raise them with beer. Fisk pounded his drinks. Strand sipped his delicately through a straw.

The other men had stripped down to shorts, but Samuel Hawley kept his shirt and jeans on, as if he might back out at any moment. He remained on the pier throughout the day, quietly observing the other contenders, listening to Gunderson and even sharing a drink with

Strand and Fisk, though he seemed to take no pleasure in the proceedings. It was clear that he was participating in the Greasy Pole Contest for one reason and one reason only: Loo.

Hawley's daughter was on the beach just below the pier. She sat alone in her steel-toed boots, piling rocks one on top of the other until she had balanced six or seven. Small stone monuments along the shore. Around her the crowd whispered; there was talk at seeing Hawley and his old adversaries together. Some people were hoping for a fight. But that morning Loo's father had spent nearly an hour in the bathroom, soaking in the tub and looking at his wife's pictures. He'd watched Loo solemnly as she made breakfast and then pinched her chin before they left, and the girl knew that meant he was not angry—only worried.

By the time Gunderson's team took their places for the contest, the sun was high and beating down on the crowd, the water far below the pier looking more and more inviting. The grease had turned rancid, mixed with the sweat and disappointment of a hundred fishermen, and the tiny red flag still taunted them all, waving at the tip of the mast in the breeze. The whole town had come out to watch the show—the harbor was full of motorboats and sailboats, rubber rafts and dinghies, all strung together into a massive flotilla of drunken men and women, each armed with a boat horn, which they blew in appreciation and regret as fisherman after fisherman slid off the greasy pole into the churning waves below. The rest of the spectators were on the beach, settled in with their lawn chairs and coolers, enjoying crab cakes and lobster rolls and Italian ices while they waited for a winner.

Even Mabel Ridge had come to watch the men fall. She sat on one of the park benches, her hands working a crochet hook. The early-summer heat was sweltering, but the old woman was dressed for a chill, her jacket collar turned up and a roll of bright-red yarn unspooling in her lap. She wound the yarn around her finger, then stabbed it with the hook, drawing the metal in and out and around and then tugging the knot into place. She made another knot and then another. One for each man on the mast. And as each team failed, she spun the square she was making and started a new row.

She was well on her way to a full-size blanket by the time it was Principal Gunderson's turn. He insisted on walking the greasy pole before the rest of his team, too anxious to delay and not wanting to share the glory if he succeeded. He made it past the first ridge, inch by inch, before moving slowly to his knees and pressing his face into the grease, wrapping his arms around the mast and convulsing forward a few feet in an awkward but loving embrace. Then one of his dimpled knees gave out and he was sent tumbling down with a splash.

Strand tried next, grinning with fear, the metal in his jaw drawn even tighter than usual. He'd sipped too much beer and missed the pole entirely, catching his foot before spinning over the edge of the wharf and crashing into the ocean. But he gave a wave when he broke the surface, and stayed with Gunderson, treading water, as was the tradition, until all the members of the team were through.

Fisk turned to Hawley, and then, like a soul bravely facing his doom, he leaned in, whispered something and shook the hand of his teammate. Loo's father looked surprised. They nodded at each other. Then Fisk straightened his Hong Kong baseball cap, made the sign of the cross, took a few steps back and ran full out, screaming at the top of his lungs, trying for a foot-first slide. He made it farther than any of the rest, leaving a trail behind in the grease with his hip, but he lost control and careened over the edge, toes splayed, still screaming, until his body splashed into the water below.

And then it was Hawley's turn. The crowd went quiet as he stood at the end of the pier and untied his boots, peeled off his socks, then began to unbutton his work shirt. Down below, Gunderson, Strand and Fisk bobbed in the waves. Now that Loo's father was following through with his promise, a feeling of genuine camaraderie seemed to wash over the men, and they lifted their arms out of the water and clapped, then watched as Hawley's shirt fell.

Across his body were rounded scars—bullet holes, healed over. One hole in his back, a second through his chest, a third near his stomach, a fourth in his left shoulder, another through his left foot. The scars were dark and puckered in places, as if the bullets that had entered Samuel

Hawley had eaten their way through his flesh. A breeze came and the flag at the end of the pole fluttered and the town stared while Hawley crouched and rolled his pant legs, revealing two more scarred holes—one in each leg.

There was a collective breath, and then the crowd began to murmur. The only person who did not respond was his daughter, still piling rocks by the shore. The marks on her father's body had always been there. He did not show them off to Loo but he did not hide them, either. They reminded her of the craters on the moon that she studied at night with her telescope. Circles made from comets and asteroids that slammed into the cold, hard rock because it had no protective atmosphere to burn them up. Like those craters, Hawley's scars were signs of previous damage that had impacted his life long before she was born. And like the moon, Hawley was always circling between Loo and the rest of the universe. Reflecting light at times, but only in slivers. And then, every thirty days or so, becoming the fullest and brightest object in the sky, as he did now, when he finished rolling his jeans, stood at the edge of the pier, raked his fingers through his beard, stepped onto the greasy pole and started to dance.

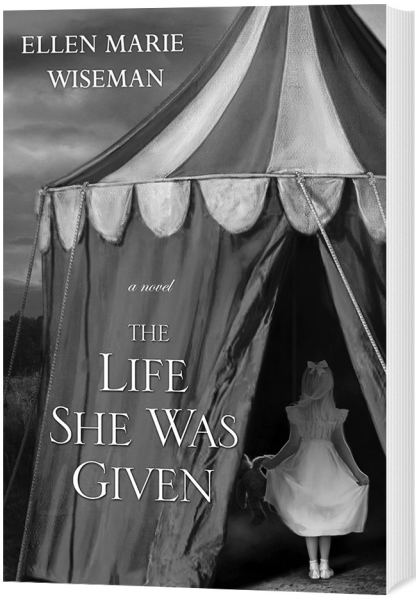
At least it looked like dancing. His feet moved so fast it was hard to keep track, knees bobbing up and down and arms flapping to the side. He moved sideways down the pole, as if he were log-rolling, grease splattering out from the soles of his feet. A few times his heel went too far and he fell back and the crowd cried out and then his other ankle swung around and he caught himself and started again with the flapping. He made it past the first notch and then where Gunderson fell and then he reached the last of Fisk's trail. When he moved beyond it he hit a glob of grease, his giant frame contorting in the air, until he caught himself once more, feet flying furiously in a jig, and the town of Olympus roared.

A ball of yarn dropped off of Mabel Ridge's lap as she lifted her crochet hook, unraveling a thin line of red that sped down toward the edge of the water, where Loo was still watching, her pants wet up to the knees. The boats blew their horns and the girl covered her ears. She

took a step and then another into the ocean, her eyes never leaving her father.

The flag bounced at the tip of the mast to the beat of Hawley's dancing. He was two lengths away, then one, the wood thinning as he neared the end. His chest and face were splattered with black grease, his body silhouetted by the sun, a man against the elements, a whirligig gone wrong. The prize was right in front of him now, and as he stretched out his hand, he put everything behind it—every part of himself that had been built to keep on living.

And then suddenly it was over. The lunge threw him off balance and he flipped backward, so that for a brief shining moment he was upside down, his feet still madly pedaling the air, and then the full weight of Samuel Hawley crashed down on the tip of the greasy pole, snapping the end of the mast in two, shooting splinters across the harbor, bringing the entire town to their feet, and sending a jumble of wood and grease and man exploding into the sea—followed by a tiny red flag, fluttering slowly past the pandemonium and into the open, waiting, grateful arms of Principal Gunderson.



Perfect for readers of* Water for Elephants *and* Orphans of the Carnival—*a vivid, daring novel about the devastating power of family secrets.

On a summer evening in 1931, Lilly Blackwood glimpses circus lights from the grimy window of her attic bedroom. Lilly isn't allowed to explore the meadows around Blackwood Manor. She's never even ventured beyond her narrow room. Momma insists it's for Lilly's own protection, that people would be afraid if they saw her. But on this unforgettable night, Lilly is taken outside for the first time—and sold to the circus sideshow.

More than two decades later, nineteen-year-old Julia Blackwood has inherited her parents' estate and horse farm. For Julia, home was an unhappy place full of strict rules and forbidden rooms, and she hopes that returning might erase those painful memories. Instead, she becomes immersed in a mystery involving a hidden attic room and photos of circus scenes featuring a striking young girl.

Available July 2017

Kensington • Trade Paperback: 9781617734496 • eBook: 9781617734502

KENSINGTON BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

eISBN-13: 978-1-61773-450-2
eISBN-10: 1-61773-450-0
First Kensington Electronic Edition: August 2017

ISBN-13: 978-1-61773-449-6
ISBN-10: 1-61773-449-7
First Kensington Trade Paperback Printing: August 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER 1

LILLY

July 1931
Blackwood Manor Horse Farm
Dobbin's Corner, New York

Nine-year-old Lilly Blackwood stood in the attic dormer of Blackwood Manor for what felt like the thousandth time, wishing the window would open so she could smell the outdoors. Tomorrow was her birthday and she couldn't think of a better present. Sure, Daddy would bring her a new dress and another book when he came home from Pennsylvania, but it had rained earlier and she wanted to know if the outside air felt different than the inside air. She wondered if raindrops made everything feel soft and cool, the way water did when she took a sponge bath. Or did the outside feel warm and sticky, like the air inside her room? She had asked Momma a hundred times to change the window so it would open, and to take the swirly metal off the outside so it would be easier to see out, but as usual, Momma wouldn't listen. If Momma knew Daddy let her play in another part of the attic when she was at church, Daddy would be in big trouble. Even bigger trouble than for teaching her how to read and for giving her a cat on her third birthday. Lilly sighed, picked up her telescope off the sill, and put it

to her eye. At least it was summertime and she didn't have to scrape ice off the glass.

Daddy called this time of day twilight, and the outside looked painted in only two colors—green and blue. The row of pine trees on the other side of the barn, past the fields where the horses played, looked like the felt Lilly used for doll blankets. Shadows were everywhere, growing darker by the minute.

Lilly skimmed the edge of the woods, looking for the deer she saw yesterday. There was the crooked willow tree. There was the rock next to the bush that turned red in the winter. There was the broken log next to the stone fence. There was the—She stopped and swung the telescope back to the fence. Something looked different on the other side of the woods, near the train tracks that cut through the faraway meadow. She took the telescope away from her eye, blinked, then looked through it again and gasped. Air squeaked in her chest, like it always did when she was excited or upset.

A string of blue, red, yellow, and green lights—like the ones Daddy put above her bed at Christmastime—hung above a giant glowing house made out of something that looked like cloth. More lights surrounded other houses that looked like fat, little ghosts. Lilly couldn't make out the words, but there were signs too, with letters lit up by colored bulbs. Flags hung from tall poles, and a line of yellow lights floated above the railroad tracks. It looked like a stopped train. A really long one.

Lilly put down the telescope, waited for her lungs to stop whistling, then went over to her bookcase and pulled out her favorite picture book. She flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for—a colorful drawing of a striped tent surrounded by wagons, horses, elephants, and clowns. She hurried back to the window to compare the shape of the tent in the book to the glowing house on the other side of the trees.

She was right.

It was a circus.

And she could see it.

Normally, the only things outside her window were horses and fields, and Daddy and his helper working on the white fences or

yellow horse barn. Sometimes, Momma walked across the grass to the barn, her long blond hair trailing behind her like a veil. Other times, trucks pulled into the barn driveway and Daddy's helper put horses in and out of trailers or unloaded bags and hay bales. Once, two men in baggy clothes—Daddy called them *bums*—walked up the driveway and Daddy's helper came out of the barn with a shotgun. If she was lucky, deer came out of the woods, or raccoons scurried along the fence toward the feed shed, or a train zoomed along the tracks. And if she put her ear to the window, the chug of the train's engine or the shriek of the whistle came through the glass.

But now there was a circus outside her window. A real, live circus! For the first time in her life, she was seeing something different that wasn't in a picture book. It made her happy, but a little bit mad at herself too. If she hadn't been reading all afternoon, she might have seen the train stop to unload. She could have watched the tents go up and caught sight of the elephants and zebras and clowns. Now it was too dark to see anything but lights.

She put down the book and counted the boards around the window. Sometimes counting made her feel better. *One, two, three, four, five.* It didn't help. She couldn't stop thinking about what she'd missed. She pressed her ear against the glass. Maybe she could hear the ringleader's cries or the circus music. The only thing she heard was air squeaking in her chest and her heartbeat going fast.

On the windowsill, her cat, Abby, woke up and blinked. Lilly wrapped an arm around the orange tabby and pulled her close, burying her nose in the animal's soft fur. Abby was her best friend and the smartest cat in the world. She could stand on her hind legs to give kisses and lift her front paw to shake. She even jumped up on Lilly's bed and got down when told.

"I bet Momma will go to the circus," Lilly said. "She doesn't have to worry about people being afraid of her."

The cat purred.

What would it be like to see an elephant in person? Lilly wondered. *What would it feel like to touch its wrinkly skin and look into*

its big brown eyes? What about riding a pink and white horse on a carousel? Or walking among other people, eating peanuts and cotton candy? What about watching a real, live lion perform?

As far back as Lilly could remember, there had been times at night after her light was out when she snuggled in her bed, her mind racing with thoughts of leaving her room and going downstairs. She'd read enough books to know there was more than one floor in a house, and she imagined sneaking across the attic, finding a staircase, making her way through the bottom floors of Blackwood Manor, and walking out the front door. She imagined standing with her feet on the earth, taking a deep breath, and for the first time in her life, smelling something besides old wood, cobwebs, and warm dust.

One of her favorite games during Daddy's weekly visits was guessing the different smells on his clothes. Sometimes he smelled like horses and hay, sometimes shoe polish or smoke, sometimes baking bread or—what did he call that stuff that was supposed to be a mix of lemons and cedar trees? Cologne? Whatever it was, it smelled good.

Daddy had told her about the outside world and she had read about it in books, but she had no idea how grass felt between her toes, or how tree bark felt in her hand. She knew what flowers smelled like because Daddy brought her a bouquet every spring, but she wanted to walk through a field of dandelions and daisies, to feel dirt and dew on her bare feet. She wanted to hear birds singing and the sound of the wind. She wanted to feel a breeze and the sun on her skin. She'd read everything she could on plants and animals, and could name them all if given the chance. But besides Abby and the mice she saw running along the baseboard in the winter, she'd never seen a real animal up close.

Her other favorite game was picking a place in her book of maps and reading everything she could about it, then planning a trip while she fell asleep, deciding what she would do and see when she got there. Her favorite place was Africa, where she pictured herself running with the lions and elephants and giraffes. Sometimes she imagined breaking the dormer window, crawling out on the roof, climbing down the side of the house, and sneaking over to

the barn to see the horses. Because from everything she had seen and read, they were her favorite animals. Besides cats, of course. Not only were horses strong and beautiful, but they pulled wagons and sleighs and plows. They let people ride on their backs and could find their way home if they got lost. Daddy said Blackwood Manor's horses were too far away from the attic window to tell who was who, so Lilly made up her own names for them—*Gypsy, Eagle, Cinnamon, Magic, Chester, Samantha, Molly,* and *Candy.* How she would have loved to get close to them, to touch their manes and ride through the fields on their backs. If only it weren't for those stupid swirly bars outside her window that Momma said were there for her own good. Then she remembered Momma's warning, and as quickly as they started, her dreams turned to nightmares.

"The bars are there to protect you," Momma said. "If someone got in, they'd be afraid of you and they'd try to hurt you."

When Lilly asked why anyone would be afraid of her, Momma said it was because she was a monster, an abomination. Lilly didn't know what an abomination was, but it sounded bad. Her shoulders dropped and she sighed in the stillness of her room. There would be no circus for her. Not now, not ever. There would be no getting out of the attic either. The only way she would see the world was through her books. Daddy said the outside world was not as wonderful as she thought, and Lilly should be happy she had a warm bed and food to eat. A lot of people didn't have a house or a job, and they had to stand in line for bread and soup. He told her a story about banks and money and some kind of crash, but she didn't understand it. And it didn't make her feel better anyway.

She gathered Abby in her arms and sat on her iron bed tucked beneath a wallpapered nook with a rounded ceiling. Her bedside lamp cast long shadows across the plank floor, meaning it would be dark soon and it was time to turn off the light. She didn't want to forget again and have Momma teach her another lesson. Momma had warned her a hundred times if anyone saw her light and found her up there they would take her away and she'd never see her or Daddy or Abby again. But one night last week, Lilly started a new book and forgot.

She put the cat on the bed and examined the scars on her fin-

gers. Daddy was right, the lotion made them feel better. But oh, how the flame of Momma's lantern had burned!

"Spare the rod and spoil the child," Momma said.

Lilly wanted to ask if the Bible said anything about sparing the fire, but didn't dare. She was supposed to know what the Bible said.

"I wonder what Momma would do if she found out I read the books from Daddy instead of that boring old Bible?" she asked Abby. The cat rubbed its face on Lilly's arm, then curled into a ball and went back to sleep.

Lilly took the Bible from the nightstand—she didn't dare put it anywhere else—moved the bookmark in a few pages, and set it back down. Momma would check to see how much reading she had done this week and if the bookmark hadn't moved, Lilly would be in big trouble. According to Momma, the Holy Bible and the crucifix on the wall above her bed were the only things needed to live a happy life.

Everything else in the room came from Daddy—the wicker table set up for a tea party, complete with a lace doily, silver serving tray, and china cups. The matching rocking chair and the teddy bear sitting on the blue padded stool next to her wardrobe. The dollhouse filled with miniature furniture and straight-backed dolls. The model farm animals lined up on a shelf above her bookcase, all facing the same way, as if about to break into song. Three porcelain dolls with lace dresses in a wicker baby pram, one with eyes that opened and closed. And, of course, her bookcase full of books. It seemed, for a while, like Daddy would give her everything—until she read *Snow White* and asked for a mirror.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when she was certain everyone was asleep and there was nothing but blackness outside her window, she turned on her light and studied her reflection in the glass. All she saw was a blurry, ghost-like mask looking back her, the swirly metal outside coiling across her skin like snakes. She stared at her white reflection and touched her forehead and nose and cheeks, trying to find a growth or a missing part, but nothing stuck out or caved in. When she asked Daddy what was wrong with her, he said she was beautiful to him and that was all that mattered.

But his eyes looked funny when he said it, and she didn't think he was telling the truth. He'd be in big trouble if Momma found out because Momma said lying was a sin.

Good thing Lilly would never tell on Daddy. He was the one who taught her how to read and write, and how to add and subtract numbers. He was the one who decorated the walls of her room with rose-covered wallpaper and brought her new dresses and shoes when she got too big for the old ones. He was the one who brought Abby food and let Lilly in the other part of the attic so she could walk and stretch. One time, he even brought up a wind-up record player and tried to teach her the Charleston and tango, but she got too tired and they had to stop. She loved the music and begged him to leave the record player in her room. But he took it back downstairs because Momma would be mad if she found it.

Momma brought food and necessities, not presents. She came into Lilly's room every morning—except for the times she forgot—with a tray of toast, milk, eggs, sandwiches, apples, and cookies, to be eaten over the rest of the day. She brought Lilly soap and clean towels, and reminded her to pray before every meal. She stood by the door every night with a ring of keys in her hands and waited for Lilly to kneel by her bed to ask the Lord to forgive for her sins, and to thank Him for giving her a mother who took such good care of her. Other than that, Momma never came in her room just to talk or have fun. She never said "I love you" like Daddy did. Lilly would never forget her seventh birthday, when her parents argued outside her door.

"You're spoiling her with all those presents," Momma said. "It's sinful how much you give her."

"It's not hurting anyone," Daddy said.

"Nevertheless, we need to stop spending money."

"Books aren't that expensive."

"Maybe not, but what if she starts asking questions? What if she wants to come downstairs or go outside? Are you going to say no?"

At first, Daddy didn't say anything and Lilly's heart lifted. Maybe he would take her outside after all. Then he cleared his throat and said, "What else is she supposed to do in there? The

least we can do is try to give her a normal birthday. It's not her fault she—"

Momma gasped. "It's not her fault? Then whose is it? Mine?"

"That's not what I was going to say," Daddy said. "It's not anyone's fault. Sometimes these things just happen."

"Well, if you had listened to me from the beginning, we wouldn't . . ." She made a funny noise, like her words got stuck in her throat.

"She's still our daughter, Cora. Other than that one thing, she's perfectly normal."

"There's nothing normal about what's on the other side of that door," Momma said, her voice cracking.

"That's not true," Daddy said. "I talked to Dr. Hillman and he said—"

"Oh, dear Lord . . . tell me you didn't! How could you betray me like that?" Momma was crying now.

"There, there, my darling. I didn't tell anyone. I was just asking Dr. Hillman if he had ever seen . . ."

Momma's sobs drowned out his words and her footsteps hurried across the attic.

"Darling, wait!" Daddy said.

The next day, Lilly quit praying before every meal, but she had not told Momma that. Since then, she had disobeyed her mother in a hundred little ways. Momma said it was wicked to look at her naked body and made Lilly close her eyes during her weekly sponge bath until she was old enough to wash herself. Now Lilly looked down at her milk-colored arms and legs when she bathed, examining her thin white torso and pink nipples. She felt ashamed afterward, but she wasn't being bad on purpose. She just wanted to know what made her a monster. The only thing she knew for sure was that her parents looked different than she did. Momma had curly blond hair and rosy skin; Daddy had a black mustache, black hair, and tan skin; but her skin was powder-white, her long, straight hair the color and texture of spider webs. It was like God forgot to give her a color. Is that what made her a monster? Or was it something else?

Now, hoping she'd be able to see more of the circus tomorrow, she changed into her nightclothes, climbed into bed, and switched

off the light. Then she realized Momma hadn't come up to make sure she said her prayers.

Lilly curled up next to Abby and pulled her close. "She's probably at the circus," she said, closing her eyes.

The next night, after Lilly first saw the circus outside her window, the rattle of a key in her door startled her awake. She sat up and reached for her bedside lamp, then stopped, her fingers on the switch. It was the middle of the night and if Momma saw the light, it would mean big trouble. Maybe Momma had found out she'd spent the entire day watching the circus through her telescope instead of straightening her room and reading the Bible. The circus looked tiny through the end of her telescope and she couldn't make out every detail, but no matter what Momma did to her, it was worth seeing the elephants and giraffes being taken into the big top. It was worth seeing the crowds of people outside the tents and the parade of wagons and clowns and costumed performers. It had been the most exciting day of her life, and nothing was going to ruin it. She took her hand away from the lamp and, one at a time, touched her fingers with her thumbs. *One, two, three, four.* The door opened and Momma slipped inside carrying an oil lantern. Lilly watched her enter and her belly trembled. Momma never came into her room this late. At the end of the bed, Abby lifted her furry head, surprised to see Momma too.

Momma—Daddy said her real name was Coralline—was a tall, pretty woman, and she always wore her long blond hair pinned back on the sides. Her only jewelry was the wedding band on her left hand, and she dressed in simple skirts and sensible shoes in the name of modesty and for the glory of God. Daddy said Momma put on her best dresses and furs when she went out to important dinners and parties, but only because that was what everyone in the outside world expected. Lilly didn't understand why Momma changed what she looked like, but Daddy said that was okay. One time, Daddy showed her a picture of Momma all dressed up and Lilly thought it was someone else.

Daddy liked to tell the story of how he had first spotted Momma between the barn and the round pen, sitting on a barrel watching

the horses play in the field. Momma's father, a retired Pentecostal minister who always dreamed of raising horses, had come to Blackwood Manor Horse farm to buy a stallion. Daddy thought Momma was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. But it was six months before she would talk to him, and another six before she agreed to have dinner. For some reason, Momma's parents didn't trust Daddy. But eventually Momma and Daddy were walking hand in hand through the apple orchards; then they got married. When Daddy got to that part of the story, his face always changed to sad and he said Momma had a hard time growing up.

Now, Momma came into Lilly's room in a flowery dress and pink heels. Her lips were painted red and she was wearing a yellow hat. Lilly couldn't stop staring. She had never seen Momma dressed like that, not in person anyway. Momma's cheeks were flushed and she was breathing hard, as if she had run up the stairs.

Lilly's stomach turned over. Daddy was supposed to come back from Pennsylvania tomorrow. He promised birthday presents first thing. But he had told her a long time ago that she didn't need to worry about being left alone when he and Momma went out because his helper was always downstairs in case someone called about a horse. If "something" happened to Daddy and Momma, the helper would read a letter in Daddy's desk. He would find Lilly in the attic, and he would know what to do. Lilly wasn't sure what "something" was, but she knew it was bad. What if Momma was here to tell her "something" happened to Daddy and he wasn't coming back?

Lilly touched her tongue to each tooth and counted, waiting for Momma to speak. *One, two, three, four . . .*

Then Momma smiled.

Momma never smiled.

"I've got a surprise for you," Momma said.

Lilly blinked. She didn't know what to say. Daddy brought surprises, not Momma. "Where's Daddy?" she managed.

"Get dressed," Momma said. "And hurry up, we don't have much time."

Lilly pushed back her covers and got out of bed. Abby sat up

and stretched her front legs, treading the blanket with her claws. "Is someone coming to see me?" Lilly said.

Besides her parents, no one had ever been inside her room. One winter she got sick and Daddy wanted to call a doctor, but Momma refused because the doctor would take her away and put her "some place." Instead Daddy spent three days wiping Lilly's forehead and applying mustard powder and warm dressings to her chest. She would never forget the sad look on his face when she woke up and said, "Daddy? What's 'some place'?"

"It's a hospital for sick people," Daddy said. "But don't worry, you're staying right here with us."

Now, Momma watched Lilly take her dress from the back of the rocking chair. Lilly's legs felt wobbly. What if someone was coming to take her "some place"?

Momma chuckled. "No, Lilly, no one is coming to see you."

Lilly glanced at Momma, her stomach getting wobbly too. Momma never laughed. Maybe she had been drinking the strange liquid Daddy sometimes brought up to her room in a silver container. Lilly didn't know what the drink was, but it made his eyes glassy and gave his breath a funny smell. Sometimes it made him laugh more than usual. What did he call it? Whiskey? No, that was impossible. Momma would never drink whiskey. Drinking alcohol was a sin.

"Why do I have to get dressed, Momma?"

"Today's your birthday, remember?"

Lilly frowned. Momma didn't care about birthdays. "Yes," she managed.

"And I'm sure you saw the circus outside."

Lilly nodded.

"Well, that's where we're going."

Lilly stared at Momma, her mouth open. Her legs shook harder, and her arms too. "But . . . what . . . what if someone sees me?"

Momma smiled again. "Don't worry, circus performers are used to seeing people like you. And no one else will be there but us. Because against my better judgment, your father insisted on paying the circus owner to put on a special show for you."

Goose bumps popped up on Lilly's arms. Something felt bad,

but she didn't know what. She glanced at Abby, as if the cat would know the answer. Abby looked back at her with curious eyes. "Daddy said he wasn't coming back until tomorrow," Lilly said.

Momma smiled, but her eyes changed. The top half of her face looked like it did when Lilly was in big trouble. The bottom half looked like someone Lilly had never seen before. "He came home early," Momma said.

"Then where is he?" Lilly said. "He always comes to see me when he gets home."

"He's waiting for us over at the circus. Now hurry up!"

"Why didn't he come get me instead of you?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Lilly wished she hadn't said them.

Momma walked toward her and her hand rose with a sudden speed. It struck Lilly across the jaw and she fell to the floor. Abby leapt sideways on the bed and crouched next to the wall, her ears back.

"You ungrateful spawn of the devil!" Momma yelled. "How many times have I told you not to question me?"

"I'm sorry, Momma," Lilly cried.

Momma thumped her with the side of her foot. "What did I do to deserve this curse?" she hissed. "Now get on your knees and pray."

"But, Momma . . ." Lilly's sobs were too strong. She couldn't get up and she could barely breathe. She crawled to her bed with her hair hanging in her face and pulled herself up, air squeaking in her chest.

"Bow your head and ask for forgiveness," Momma said.

Lilly put her hands together beneath her chin and counted her fingers by pressing them against each other. *One, two, three, four.* "Oh Lord," she said, pushing the words out between wheezes. *Five, six, seven, eight.* "Please forgive me for questioning my momma, and for all the other ways I have made her life so difficult." *Nine, ten.* "I promise to walk the straight and narrow from here on out. Amen."

"Now get dressed," Momma said. "We don't have much time."

Lilly got off her knees and put on her undergarments with shaky hands, then took off her nightgown and pulled her play dress on

over her head. Her side hurt where Momma kicked her and snot ran from her nose.

"Not that one," Momma said. "Find something better."

Lilly took off the play dress and half-walked, half-stumbled over to the wardrobe. She pulled out her favorite outfit, a yellow satin dress with a lace collar and ruffled sleeves. "Is this one all right?" she said, holding up the dress.

"That will do. Find your best shoes too. And brush your hair."

Lilly put on the dress and tied the belt behind her back. She brushed her hair—*one, two, three, four, five, six* strokes—then sat on the bed to put on her patent leather shoes. Abby edged across the covers and rubbed against Lilly's arm. Lilly gave her a quick pet, then got up and stood in the middle of the room, her ribs aching and her heart thumping. Momma opened the door and stood back, waiting for Lilly to go through it.

Lilly had waited for this moment her entire life. But now, more than anything, she wanted to stay in the attic. She didn't want to go outside. She didn't want to go to the circus. Her chest grew tighter and tighter. She could barely breathe.

"Let's go," Momma said, her voice hard. "We don't have all night."

Lilly wrapped her arms around herself and started toward the door, gulping air into her lungs. Then she stopped and looked back at Abby, who was watching from the foot of her bed.

"That cat will be here when you get back," Momma said. "Now move it."

CHAPTER 2

JULIA

November 1956
Hatfield, Long Island

Eighteen-year-old Julia Blackwood glanced up and down the supermarket aisle to make sure no one was watching. The store was small, maybe thirty feet wide by forty feet long, and she could see over the shelves and into each corner. A pimple-faced teenager sat on a stool behind the counter, chewing gum and staring at a black and white television above the cash register. A radio on a shelf played "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" while a gray-haired lady checked eggs for cracks next to the open dairy cooler door.

Julia took a deep breath, went down on one knee, and pretended to tie her grease-spotted Keds. She glanced both ways down the aisle to make sure no one was watching, grabbed a can of Spam off the middle shelf, slipped it into her coat pocket, then straightened and pushed her hair behind her ears. The boy at the counter absently picked at a pimple on his chin, his eyes still glued to the television. Julia let out her breath and made her way to the next aisle, walking slowly and pretending to examine the groceries. She plucked a small apple from a produce bin, put it in her pocket, and made her way toward the counter.

"Can I get the key to the restroom?" she asked the pimple-faced boy.

Still watching television, the boy reached beneath the cash register and handed her a key on a brown rabbit foot. Then he snapped his gum and grinned at her. "Just replaced the soap this morning."

Heat rose in Julia's cheeks and she had to fight the urge to leave. The boy knew why she wanted to use the bathroom. It was the fourth time in as many months that there was no water in her room above the liquor store—this time due to frozen pipes instead of an unpaid bill—and she hadn't washed her hair or taken a shower in three days. Sure, no one at work would know whether or not she'd had a bath, but who wanted an oily-haired waitress serving them fried eggs and onion-covered burgers? Big Al's Diner was already a greasy spoon; it didn't need any more help in that department. She swallowed her pride, took the key from the boy, and trudged to the back of the store.

The cold, green-enameled restroom smelled like rotten food and old socks. Grime and black mold colored the grout between the broken, mismatched floor tiles, and a jagged yellow crack ran across the toilet seat. Julia washed her hands in the silver-legged sink, dried them with brown paper towels, then ate the apple as fast as she could, trying to ignore the stench of old urine. When she was finished, she stripped down to her underwear and bra, folded her cranberry-colored waitress uniform on top of her coat, and put them on the toilet tank lid—the only place that looked halfway clean. Shivering, she scrubbed her face and armpits with paper towels and Lava soap, then washed her hair in the sink, trying not to get soaked. The water was ice cold and the gritty lather made her hair feel like straw, but at least it would be clean. When the last of the soap was out of her hair, she used paper towels to squeeze out the excess water, then got dressed again, combed the tangles out of her hair, put it in a bun, and studied her reflection in the tarnished mirror.

The stealthy progress of time since she ran away from home three years ago showed in her pronounced cheekbones and the rings under her eyes. Her tanned, smooth skin had turned pale and

chalky from too little sleep and too little sun. Even her blond hair, which was once the white-blond of angel wings, seemed darker and thinner. Her fingernails were chewed to the quick, and her shoulders pointed sharply through the fabric of her uniform. She leaned closer to the mirror to examine the yellow remnants of a bruise around her left eye. Thankfully it was almost gone. *How did you end up in a place like this, stealing food from an express mart and washing your hair in a public bathroom? You could have waited another year and gone to college, far away from Blackwood Manor. Mother would have paid for everything. Instead, you traded nine o'clock curfews and Sunday confessions for double shifts and a controlling boyfriend who hits you and spends money faster than either of you can make it. Maybe Mother was right. You aren't going to amount to anything. So what's the point of trying?*

Mother—with her spite and bony fists—was a rule maker and a rule follower. And she expected the same from everyone around her. Among the countless rules of Blackwood Manor—where certain rooms were kept locked and entire floors were off limits—Julia was to pray three times a day, keep her room spotless, do her chores, get perfect grades, and follow the guidelines at school. She could watch her parents' horses from a distance but wasn't allowed in the barn because it was a business, not a playground. Makeup, poodle skirts, pedal pushers, and tight sweaters were unacceptable, and dresses had to be a modest length. Most importantly of all, she had to remember that bad things would happen if she didn't behave.

After spending the majority of her life wondering why her parents had her, running away seemed like the solution to everything. Yes, she had been clothed, fed, and had everything of monetary value she needed. But Mother was too busy praying, cleaning, cooking, and making rules to give her any guidance or affection. And her father, who she considered the demonstrative one, only hugged her on Christmas and birthdays. Most of the time he was in the barn with the horses, or drinking behind the locked doors of his den with the same scratchy gramophone record—"Little White Lies"—playing over and over and over.

For years, she wondered what it meant when her father went on

vacation "to recover" or "get help." It was a strained time, more than usual, a time of keeping going and pretending, of being "normal" and not fussing. The Blackwoods never bared their souls, or poured out their hearts. Then, when Julia turned twelve, Mother explained her husband's alcoholism and said it was Julia's fault for being such a difficult child.

She thought back to the day her father was killed. The sky was clear and blue. The breeze was gentle and scented with pine. Who would have expected someone to die on a beautiful day like that?

She had skipped church to go to the lake. It was the last day of summer, a hot, humid day, perfect for swimming, and one of the popular girls had *finally* invited her to hang out with her and her friends at the isthmus. When it came time to leave for church, Julia locked the door to the bathroom and pretended to be sick. As long as she made it back before Mother returned, everything would be fine.

But when Julia came home, there was a police car in the driveway, the early-afternoon sun glinting off the chrome and the windshield. Then she saw Mother on the front steps, one hand gripping the balustrade, and her heart sank. Had Julia gotten the time wrong? Had Mother called the police because she wasn't in her room when she returned from church? Either way, she was in deep trouble. When Mother saw her coming up the driveway, she rushed down the steps and marched toward her, her face contorted in anger, her long skirt twisting around her legs.

"Where have you been?" Mother shrieked.

"I . . . I . . ." Julia said.

"Speak up, girl!"

"I went swimming with some friends. It's the last day before school starts and they never invited me before. I knew you wouldn't let me go so—"

Mother slapped her, hard across the face. Julia's head whipped to the side and her damp hair flew in her eyes and stuck to her skin.

"I told you something bad would happen if you didn't follow the rules!" Mother cried.

Julia put a hand over her cheek, her eyes burning. "What are you talking about? What happened?"

Mother reached blindly for the porch railing again, her face suddenly gray. "Your father was . . ."

Julia started trembling. She had never seen Mother like this. "My father was what?" she said. "Tell me."

"He was in a car crash."

Julia's breath caught. "Is he okay?"

Mother gaped at her, shaking her head, as if she couldn't believe what she was about to say. "No, he's not okay. He's dead."

The ground tilted beneath Julia's feet and her knees nearly buckled. It seemed, for an instant, that she was falling. But then she realized, somehow, she had remained upright. In what sounded like slow motion, she heard herself say again, "What happened?"

"He was looking for you," Mother said. Then her face contorted and changed. The grief in her eyes turned to anger and hate, and her mouth twisted into a sneer. She raised her arms and pounded on Julia's head and shoulders with bony fists. "It's your fault!" she screamed. "It's your fault! It's your fault!"

Julia put her arms up to protect herself, but Mother's blows slammed into her head and chest and face, even after she knocked her to the ground. The police pulled Mother off, but not before she split Julia's lip and bruised her cheek and shoulders.

That night, Julia stole the tithe money from the canister inside the spice cupboard, ignoring the gaze of Jesus on the decorative tin, then packed a bag and left Blackwood Manor, vowing never to return. There would be no more early curfews and strict rules, no more nightly prayers and weekly confessions, no more locked rooms, no more blame for her father's drinking. From that day on, she'd be free to do as she pleased. She'd take her future into her own hands. And she'd never let anyone blame her for anything again.

Except things hadn't turned out the way she planned. Sure, freedom was fun at first, taking the bus to Long Island and making friends on the boardwalk, pawning her jewelry and moving into an apartment a mile from the beach with Kelly, a cocktail waitress, and Tom, a veteran from the Korean War. The first few months were lost in a haze of music, parties, beer, and marijuana. Then Kelly moved back home, winter came, the boardwalk closed, and the

money ran out. Julia wasn't exactly sure how it happened, but she and Tom moved to a cheap room in the city, and things stopped being fun a long time ago. Tom had trouble keeping a job, and he warned her over and over that something bad would happen if she didn't keep hers.

Now she came out of the supermarket bathroom, gave the key on the rabbit foot back to the pimple-faced kid at the cash register, and left the store. Earlier, when she went in, it was snowing, but now it had stopped.

The new snow brightened the street. The neighborhood was still seedy, grimy, and litter-strewn, but it didn't look half as bad as it did yesterday, without the snow. Big Al's Diner sat near the corner, flanked by a liquor store with bars over the windows and a pawnshop with a soggy, ripped carpet in front of the door.

Julia buttoned her coat, hunched her shoulders against the cold and, trying to ignore the slush seeping through her Keds, made her way toward the diner. She touched the can of Spam in her pocket to make sure it was still there, wishing she'd grabbed something else to go with it. When she got out of work ten hours from now, Spam on white bread would be her and Tom's supper, like it had been every night for the past four days. Today was payday, but her entire check had to go toward rent. Otherwise, they'd be out on the street by the end of the week.

When she reached Big Al's diner, she passed the front entrance, went around the corner, and entered the alley behind it. For some reason, Big Al had a thing about the help coming and going through the front door, as if the diner were a fine restaurant instead of a greasy spoon. The smell of bacon and fried potatoes filled the cold air in the alley and, despite the apple she'd eaten earlier, Julia's stomach growled with hunger. A boy in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt dug through the Dumpster next to the diner's back steps. Beside him, a thin brown dog sniffed the air, waiting patiently for his owner to find something good. When the dog saw Julia, it wagged its tail and ambled toward her, all feet and ears and fur. Julia bent down to scratch the dog's scruffy head.

"Hey, buddy," she said to the dog. Then she straightened and

called out to the boy. "You know what Big Al will do if he catches you out here again, Danny?"

The boy spun around, his eyes wide. "Oh," he breathed. "It's you."

He was nine years old, with hazel eyes and shaggy hair the color of coffee. Julia met him last year when he and his dog were begging for change in front of the pawnshop.

"Where's your coat?" she said.

Danny shrugged. "My brother needed it."

"Your dad out of work again?"

Danny nodded. "And Mom's sick."

Julia took the Spam out of her pocket. "Here, take this. After my shift, I'll try to stop by with something else."

Danny took the Spam, immediately pried off the lid, shook the pressed meat into his hand, and took a big bite. "Thanks." He broke off a hunk and gave it to the dog, who swallowed it whole.

"You're welcome," Julia said. "Now get out of here."

Danny smiled and ran down the alley, the thin dog at his heels.

Julia went up the back steps of the diner, knocked on the entrance, and stepped back to wait. On the other side of the door, footsteps tramped across a tile floor. Someone fumbled with the doorknob and the door swung open. It was Sheila, one of the other waitresses.

"Where have you been?" she whispered. "Your shift started two hours ago. Big Al is about ready to fire you!"

Julia frowned. "What do you mean? I don't work until ten on Wednesdays." She entered the diner, already taking off her coat.

"It's Tuesday!" Sheila said.

"Shit," Julia said. She hung her coat on a hook, took an apron from the basket outside the walk-in cooler, slipped it over her head, and hurried into the kitchen, tying the apron strings behind her back. Sheila followed.

Big Al came through the swinging doors between the kitchen and dining area, his forehead covered in sweat, his greasy salt and pepper hair hanging in his eyes. As his name implied, he was a big man, over six feet tall with wide shoulders and thick legs. But it was his enormous belly that earned him the nickname Big Al. Covered in a greasy white apron, it hung over his pants like a beluga whale.

"Look who decided to show up for work today," he snarled.

"Sorry," Julia said. "I thought it was Wednesday."

"And I thought it was my birthday," Big Al said. "That's why I got to wait on tables and cook at the same time."

"I'm sorry," Julia said. "I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

Big Al grunted. "Damn right it won't. I'm holding your paycheck until next week. Maybe by then you'll figure out if you want this job or not."

"But I . . ." Julia said. "Please, Al. I need it for rent."

"Maybe you should have thought about that before coming in late," Big Al said. "Now shut up and get your ass to work."

Julia gritted her teeth and pushed through the swinging doors into the dining area. The counter and nearly every booth were packed. Sheila came out of the kitchen behind her, two plates of eggs and a plate of pancakes balanced in one hand, a plate of French toast in the other.

"Can you cover the counter, hon?" she said to Julia. "Just 'til the breakfast rush is over."

"Sure," Julia said. She grabbed a pad and pen and scanned the counter for the next customer. A man in a black jacket and fedora sat at the far end, the menu closed in front of him. She started toward him.

"Can I get a refill on my coffee," someone said as she went by.

"Yes, sir," she said. She put her pen and pad in her apron, grabbed the coffee urn, refilled the man's coffee, then went to wait on the man in the fedora. She turned over a white mug in front of him.

"Coffee?" she said.

"Yup," the man said.

Julia filled his cup, set the urn on the counter, and dug her pen and pad out of her apron.

"Miss?" someone shouted from the other end of the counter. "Where's my pancakes?"

Julia forced a smile. "I'll be right with you."

Just then, the bell over the entrance jingled and a man in a pinstriped suit and shiny shoes held the door for a woman and a young girl in matching blue coats. The little girl held the woman's hand

and they both smiled as they took a seat in one of the booths. Cold air reddened the identical tips of their noses and the round apples of their cheeks. Julia stared at them, her pen poised above the pad in her hand. *Mother and daughter,* she thought. The mother took off her gloves, then smiled and reached across the table to help the girl take off her mittens. The daughter laughed when the mother rubbed her hands between hers to warm them. *I wonder if it's the little girl's birthday,* Julia wondered. *Or maybe they're on a shopping trip.* Then the mother kissed the little girl's fingertips and Julia's eyes grew moist. She looked for the man in the pin-striped suit, assuming he was the little girl's father. But he stood in the center of the room skimming the diner as if looking for someone. Maybe he was lost. He didn't look like he belonged in this neighborhood.

"I'll have two eggs over easy," the man at the counter in front of her said. "With toast and butter."

Julia blinked and looked down at him, as if she'd forgotten where she was. She shook her head to clear it. "Um, okay. Sorry. Coming right up."

She headed toward the kitchen to place the order, berating herself for getting distracted. She had to stop daydreaming. If Big Al caught her staring off into the distance, she'd be fired for sure. But sometimes she just couldn't help it. She was drawn to watching people who clearly loved each other, especially parents and their children. She loved seeing their faces light up with affection and recognition of their unconditional love, and the fact that they knew how important they were to each other without ever saying a word. She wondered what it felt like.

"I asked for ketchup ten minutes ago," a woman said to Julia as she hurried by.

Julia grabbed a squeeze bottle of ketchup and put it in front of her.

"Where's my bill?" another woman said.

"I'll find it," Julia said. She placed the order on the kitchen turnstile, rang the bell, and asked about the missing pancakes. Big Al pushed a pile of pancakes through the window and wiped his forehead on the back of his arm, glowering at her. Julia took the hot plate and delivered it to the customer. When she went back to the other end of counter, the man in the pin-striped suit was there,

standing behind the stools. She dropped off the woman's bill and went over to see what he wanted.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"I'm looking for Julia Coralline Blackwood," he said.

Julia's mouth went dry. *Is this guy a cop? Is he here to arrest me for stealing from the supermarket?* With a knot in her chest, she smiled. "She's not working today. Can I can give her a message for you?"

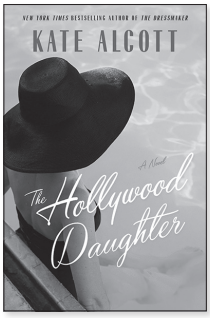
The man reached into the breast pocket inside his suit, pulled out a photograph, and turned it around so she could see it. Julia felt the blood drain from her face. It was her high school picture, taken the year she left home. How did he get it? And what did he want?

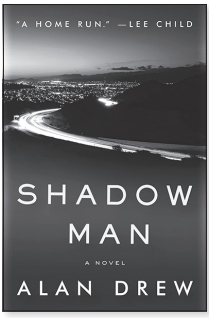
"I'm a private investigator, Miss Blackwood," the man said. "Hired by your parents' attorney." He reached into his pocket again and pulled out an envelope. "I've been searching for you for nearly a year. This is for you." He handed her the envelope. "Have a good day." He tipped his hat and left the diner.

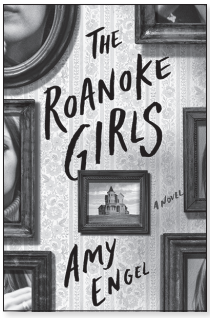
Julia stared at the envelope in her shaking hands. Mother had found her.

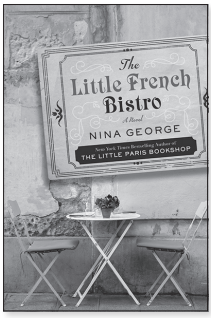
More Great Books

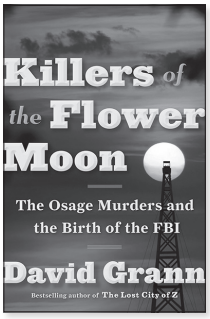
COMING THIS SPRING . . .

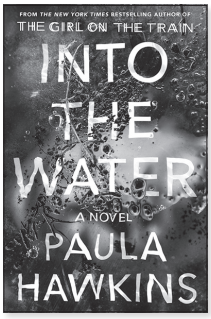


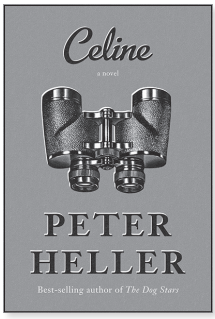


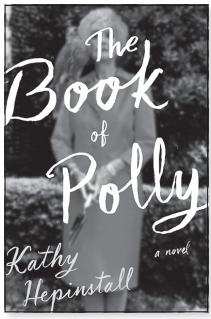


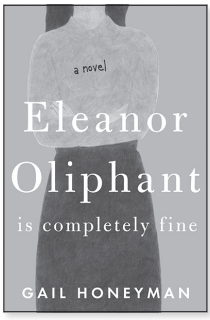


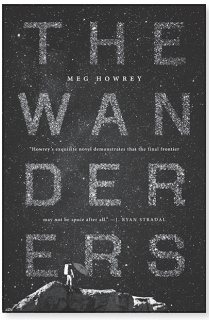


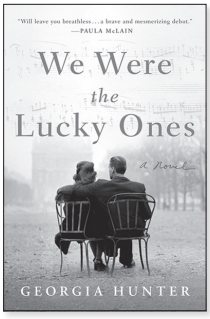


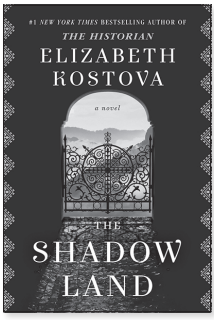






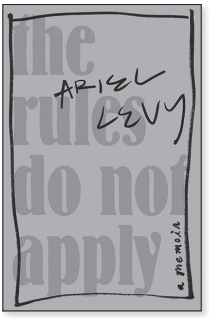


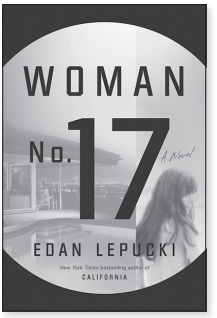


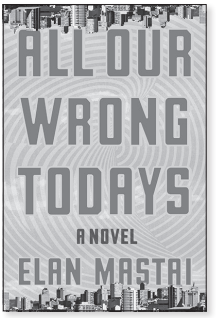


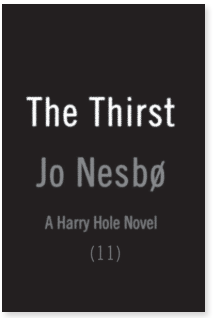
To learn more about these and other Penguin Random House books, sign up for our monthly eNewsletter at:

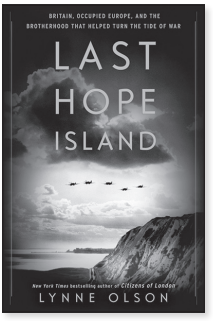
from Penguin Random House

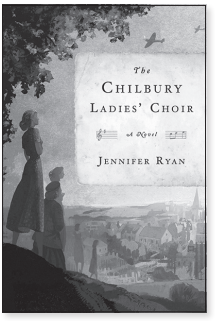


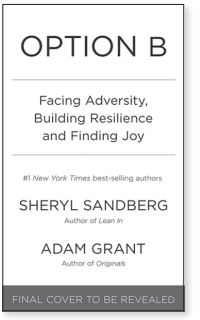


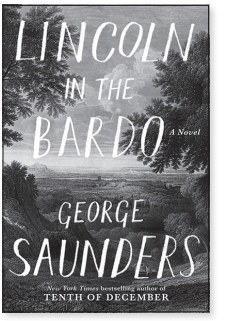


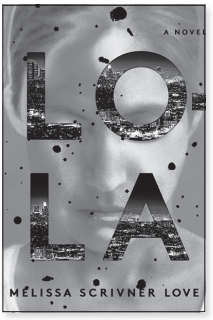


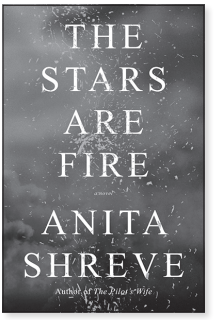


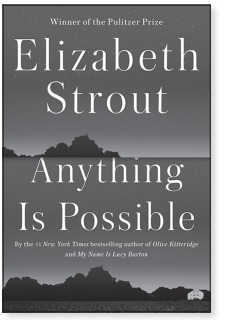


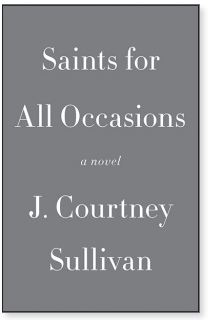








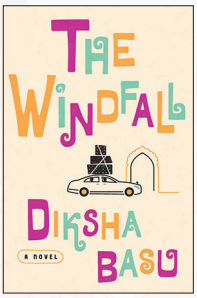




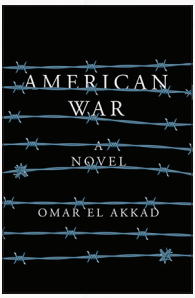
TinyUrl.com/BorrowReadRepeat

What Will You Read Next?

Take a look inside for a sampling of these wonderful new novels.

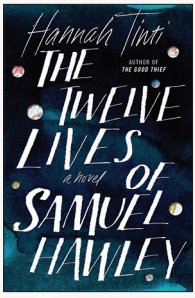


The Windfall: A Novel
Diksha Basu
Crown | **June 2017**

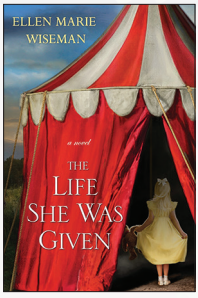


American War: A Novel
Omar El Akkad
Knopf | **April 2017**

Fierce Kingdom:
A Novel
Gin Phillips
Viking | **July 2017**



The Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley:
A Novel
Hannah Tinti
The Dial Press | **March 2017**



The Life She Was Given
Ellen Marie Wiseman
Kensington | **July 2017**

Read
BORROW. READ. REPEAT.

For more great suggestions from the stacks, visit: BorrowReadRepeat.com.

To sign up for our eNewsletter, visit: TinyUrl.com/BorrowReadRepeat.

Penguin Random House

COMPLIMENTARY COPY