

FINDING EVELYN

by

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A Thesis
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my daughters.

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ABSTRACT

FINDING EVELYN

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George Mason University, 2015

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This thesis is the first half of a novel. The novel follows a heroine's journey plot structure and includes the stories of not only the main protagonist, Evelyn, but also the stories of her two mothers, Helen and Elizabeth (Bess). The primary story is set in the early 1950s and alternates between Washington D.C. and central Virginia. The mothers' stories are told in first person and the protagonist's story is told in close third person. The author explores agency in each of the main character's lives through this character-driven novel. During the first half of the twentieth century, women often had limited choices and opportunities, and those choices often had far-reaching effects—effects with which the three main characters must come to terms. Given that the novel takes place in the early 1950s, an important time period in the growing civil rights movement, race, prejudice, and confusing social mores are central to the story.

SECTION 1

CHAPTER ONE

Evelyn
1952

When Evie found her, she was curled up in a ball beside the pink toilet, its seat up, its basin ringed with rust. Her once fiery red hair, now diluted with streaks of white from middle age, fanned out beside her on the tile. An angel fallen or a newborn trying to re-enter the womb. Still dressed in a nightgown, her breasts tugged against the front buttons, strained and bulging like eyes. She lay motionless; her skin was ashen and a line of spit crusted at the corner of her mouth. The minutes slowed to a crawl in the time that it took for her to realize the red running across the tile was blood. Her mama's blood. When she lifted her by the shoulders, the metal of one of her daddy's old razorblades glinted on the baby pink tile below. Her wrists still leaked blood, a slow trickle like the brook that gurgled behind the house. She was breathing, but unconscious.

"Mama!" she pushed down the hysteria, pushed back the scream that had frozen in her throat.

Working quickly, she ripped towels with a strength she didn't realize she possessed. She tied the strips around her mama's wrists and dragged her across the wooden floor until she reached the phone in the bedroom. Behind her, her mama's bare feet bumped along the ground, moving from side to side, lifeless and limp like a giant rag

doll. Keeping pressure on the makeshift bandages to staunch the bleeding, she cradled the receiver beneath her chin and dialed Doc Wahlberg's number. A steely calm settled over her. The day, she felt, could be hung on a certain inevitability. At some level, she'd known it would come, much like she'd known as a child that her daddy would never leave her mama, even when her behavior would have driven other men away, much like she'd known that her mama never quite fit: in Nelson County, in Brownsville—surrounded by all those fruit trees, all that promising, shiny fruit. Her daddy always told her that her mama's demons ran deep; it was their job to help her contain them. That morning, as the autumn light cast a tenuous warmth across the room, Evie imagined a few of the demons were released, moving slow and thick through the valleys of grout between the tiles.

Her daddy was gone six months now, cold in the ground at St. Mary's, and Evie lived in Washington, several hours by train, a distance that suddenly seemed far. She couldn't let her die like this, with the indignity of it all, couldn't let her give up on things so easily. Her daddy wouldn't have wanted it. She pressed the cloth against her mama's wounds until her nail beds turned blue.

Doc Wahlberg arrived after what seemed an eternity.

“Doc!”

His boots sounded heavy on the stairs.

“Evelyn,” he said gravely while pushing his broad frame through the doorway.

Evie watched him take stock of her mama, motionless and ghostlike there on the floor. He shook his head and readjusted the dark hat on his head a few times. Before he

arrived, Evie had pushed the cotton nightgown down to cover her mama's legs and, with only the one hand, her other still pressing on the scraps of towel, struggled to close the top buttons on the nightgown bodice. Her fingers had gone cold and her hands shook as she worked, but when Doc Wahlberg arrived, she was glad she'd provided her mama with that bit of modesty. He leaned over her now and pressed a well-manicured finger against her neck and spread a hand wide across her chest. Obviously satisfied she was alive, he took off his coat and pulled open a leather bag.

"You've stopped the bleeding then," he said, pulling out his materials with practiced ease.

Evie nodded, her throat suddenly dry and words hard to come by. She crossed her arms and nervously ran a finger over the vaccine scar on her tricep, a small circle of bumps left by the bifurcated needle Doc Wahlberg had used when she was a child. With his enormous presence, his deep and serious voice, he'd slightly terrified Evie when she was young. That morning she found him a comfort.

"You did a fine job handling things now," he said as he examined the scraps of towel wound tightly around her mother's wrists. His southern twang reminded Evie that she wasn't in Washington. Already her ears had become accustomed to the perfectly blended sounds of the city, a place where accents only lingered as faint reminders of a person's beginnings. "She's lucky you arrived when you did."

He worked in silence, cleaning and stitching her mama's wrists, the thin needle catching the rose-colored glint of a beaded lightshade on the beside table; her mama must have left on the light. Evie wondered, did she sleep first? Did she wake suddenly and

make the decision impulsively? How does one decide such a thing? Evie got up and laid an afghan over her curvaceous form and was reminded of the alabaster stone sculptures on display in the new art museum on Constitution Avenue. This thought fixed her in the moment—this and the shock of the fact that the form lying still as a stone statue there in the morning shadows was her mama. The morning was full of those moments; one minute she was there, present and aware of what needed to be done, the next she was a stranger entering the scene anew, tiny shocks searing through her body.

Doc Wahlberg looked at her from over the top of his pointed metal eyeglasses. A thick salt and pepper mustache covered his upper lip. On the old pine floor, he adjusted his weight to his other knee and then leaned over to wrap clean white gauze around her mother's wrists. He pulled salts out of his bag and waved them under her nose. Evie had the fleeting thought that it was already too late, that she might not wake up.

But she began to moan and her eyelids fluttered. Doc Wahlberg sat back on his heels and looked at Evie from beneath hooded eyes.

“Now you know, Evelyn, I have to call the sheriff over this. Nothing I can do about it. It's protocol in these situations.”

Again he waved the salts beneath her mother's nose. Her face was as white as a pale, speckled eggshell. And so cool to the touch. Evie stared at the bloodstained towels that now lay in a heap on the floor and let the truth of the morning settle around her. She stared at the truth of her mama's weakness.

The shadows in the room played across a childhood drawing hanging on the wall. A hazelnut branch that Evie sketched while her mother napped on a blanket beside her.

She was nine. Evie remembered the way the charcoal scraped across the page, the way the branch came to life beneath her chubby fingers, still clumsy and unskilled, dark smudges across her knuckles and on the edges of her nails. Her mother insisted that Harley frame the drawing in cedar wood that was lying about in his workshop. The shadows in the bedroom danced across the now-faded lines, playing hide and seek with the morning light that peeked through the curtains. The frame hung rather forlorn on the worn wallpaper and Evie wished she could take it down.

It was a struggle to keep her emotions in check; the morning felt surreal. Doc Wahlberg droned on, as if filling the space to hear himself talk or perhaps to set Evie at ease. The words kept coming at her, like an annoying gnat that she wanted to bat away, his presence no longer a comfort.

I've been treating your family a long time

Your daddy now, he had a time of it

As a physician I can't say for certain whether it's safe for her to live at home on her own

Something needs to be done

You listening, now

She'll be waking soon enough. I'm sure you'll have questions for her.

Best to let us get her stable first, young lady

BY THE GRACE OF GOD YOU ARRIVED JUST IN TIME

There are new advances in psychiatry every day

Cures are not out of the question

Leave the thinking to me now.

An urge came over her to walk outside in bare feet, to feel dirt between her toes—to walk with her mama beside her, healed and whole, no sign of bloody bandages, of jagged skin and pencil thin stitches. Anything but this.

She found it hard to believe that just that morning she had boarded the Chesapeake and Ohio at Union Station. A crisp, sunny fall morning in the city. She had planned to leave the night before, but Mr. Chapman handed her a pile of notes to type up. Something urgent, something he said, “Can’t wait until next week, honey. You’ll need to stay late. You’ll have to break some poor boy’s heart tonight.” She’d sat at her desk in the General Accounting Office, back aching from a day of work already behind her, and tapped the keys, pounding them a little extra hard, satisfied by the black indentations they left on the paper. She’d hit the carriage return with force and pulled out each finished page so quickly that the paten sang into the quiet chamber. It was eerie in the building at night, with only the occasional sound of the security man’s heavy boots tapping on the marble floor. The light on her desk spit a yellow glow over her typewriter and neat piles of industry. Every so often, she thought she heard the scurrying of something, maybe a mouse, and she’d lift her feet, 2-inch heels hitting the back of her desk. She didn’t break her speed. She thought of her mama down in Brownsville, alone and waiting on her to arrive for a weekend visit. Damn Mr. Chapman. When the pile of notes had been translated into a finished pile of typed pages, Evie unlocked the bottom drawer, pulled out her purse, snapped off the light, and rushed home to pack. Would she be here, here in

this room with her mama's bandaged wrists and Doc Wahlberg talking about things she'd rather not hear if Mr. Chapman hadn't ordered her to stay late the night before? If only she'd taken the overnight train, instead of waiting until morning.

"You alright with how things are gonna go?" he said. "Once the sheriff gets here, it'll move fast. It's time to talk about something more permanent for her. You can't be running down from Washington every time she tries something like this. And believe me sweetheart, she will."

"What are you saying?" A chill snaked up her spine. She clasped her hands together to stop a tremor.

"Take the bull by its horns, Evelyn. Get in front of this before a day comes you don't make it here in time," he said. "You'll never forgive yourself. That's for certain."

Her mama began to whimper and bat her bandaged arms at something unseen; delicately veined eyelids still rested shut. Color had returned some to her face. Evie worried that she had heard the doctor's conversation.

"I can't put her somewhere. She's my mama!" Evie hissed.

"These things are of a medical concern."

"She has a brother in Albemarle," she said. "I could phone him."

"Not a bad idea. Sometimes it's best to let the men of the family make these kinds of decisions. Less emotion that way," he said. "We'll take her on down to the hospital in Lynchburg. Keep an eye on her. There are advances being made every day at these more permanent places. Could be what's best in this situation."

"How long will she be in the hospital?"

“Hard to say until we get a sense of how this blood loss will affect her. She needs caretaking, healthy food, rest. The nurses in Lynchburg will keep an eye on her. Don’t you worry now. You go on back to your job in Washington; we’ll take care of things down here. And Evelyn – do make that call to your uncle now.”

Her mama’s eyes finally opened. She stared vacantly at a spot on the wall across the room, lips moving soundlessly, a conversation brought back with her from wherever she had travelled. Doc Wahlberg held her up from behind and she leaned against him weakly, like a small child.

“Mama—mama, you’re alright now. You’re going to be fine.” Evie hated the pleading tone of her voice.

Bess’s gaze remained fixed on the imaginary spot on the wall. Evie wondered what she saw there. Images from the fantastical stories she so easily wove for Evie as a child? Images of Harley, Evie’s daddy, when he was still alive? Images of secrets that lay buried, hidden away from plain view? There was a side to her mother that had always lay hidden, and, like a puppeteer pulling strings, it left her vulnerable to strange and erratic behavior that came unbidden as the strings moved, pulling and tugging her every which way. A wizard behind the curtain.

“She’s still weak, Evelyn. It will take her awhile to come fully into her faculties.”

She turned to look at her and saw that her gaze had now fixated on Evie’s face. Evie stared back at her. There was something despairing in her eyes, eyes that were bright and soft blue. Evie leaned forward and brushed a wiry strand of hair from her forehead.

When Evie sat back on her feet again, she noticed her toes had gone stiff and cold. Her stockings rubbed against the irregular grain of the floor. A new run had started at her ankle and already made its way up the length of her calf.

“Now go on, hand me the phone,” Doc Wahlberg said.

Evie pulled the telephone from the bedside table, stretching the cord as far as she could until it reached his side. From his pocket he pulled an index card covered in tight, cursive script, numbers lining the edge of each entry, and dialed a number from the card, fat fingers sliding the rotary firmly. Evie leaned over her mama and passed a hand across her cheek, like her mama had sometimes done when Evie was sick as a child. Her skin was so cold. Evie pulled the afghan higher to cover her more, and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“I don’t know what to do here. Please talk to me. Why’d you go and do this?”

Her mama—Bess—turned to look at the window, where drapes were still drawn shut; morning light outlined the edges of the heavy fabric. Bess ignored her.

Evie heard Doc place the handset back in the cradle and felt Bess’s body move as his large hands pulled her toward him.

“Come on now Bess. Let’s get you up. Get some blood flowing,” he said.

He pulled Bess to her feet and placed his arm around her ribcage; she flopped weakly against him, her head leaning against his chest. Reality settled harshly around Evie. The bitter taste of the horrible truth of what had just happened burned in her mouth. It was then that she started to cry, soundless sobs she tried to swallow back down, but she

ended up choking from the effort and she couldn't tell whether she was crying or simply choking.

"Pull yourself together now. The sheriff will be here soon," Doc Wahlberg said.

"I'd – I'd like to ride with him. I'd like to go to the hospital with her," Evie said.

"That's not a good idea."

"She'll be scared."

"She'll be in good hands. We'll handle things down here. Go on back to Washington now."

"What will happen next?"

"We'll get her stable, settled in at the hospital and keep you updated. Nothing you can do, young lady."

Bess refused to look at Evie. Doc Wahlberg encouraged her to take small steps around the room. Evie realized that she was holding her breath, waiting for Bess to acknowledge her, to acknowledge what had just happened, but instead, she watched Bess take tentative steps like a docile child, leaning heavily against the doctor. Ignoring, obliterating Evie's very presence. Evie found it hard to breathe.

When the sheriff arrived to take Bess to the hospital, he ordered Evie out of the bedroom, and eventually out of the house; Bess yelled incoherently, hoarsely. Evie stood on the front lawn where she once played as a small child, Bess then the center of her world, a mother who played pretend as well any peer, who sang loudly and sewed sophisticated princess costumes from scraps of fabric. Her vitality and unpredictability

back then had been Evie's sustenance, not yet measured against the rest of society, against social norms and the opinions of others. She had been safe in their family bubble, which, in the early days, her father had continually wrapped around them all, his love a protective shield until Bess's madness took a firmer hold.

The sun's vibrant warmth startled her, standing there on the lawn. Crisp yellow leaves from a nearby ash tree skittered across the sidewalk, scratching the cement with their dry and brittle edges. A red maple was ablaze with color on the side of the house. It seemed impossible that the day had gone on, the sun moving in the sky at an ordinary pace, autumn descending hard, while she had been busy saving her mama's life.

She felt unprepared for the situation, unable to imagine a solution. How could she fix this? Bess's pain had grown beyond her. Down the street, she heard the mournful notes of a fiddle strummed slow and deep. Someone just sitting on a front porch, making some music. A few minutes later, she heard the tapping of something like a steel drum. An overturned washbin most likely. Neighbors passing the time.

At some point, Joe Baker joined her there on the lawn. He must have gotten word. How, she didn't know, but word travelled fast in Brownsville. It was all right that he was there. He'd known her daddy, played with her by the creek when they were children. He was a grown man now. Tall and serious. She felt the warmth of his body beside her, imagined that she smelled the tobacco embedded under his nails, the molten smell of earth that never left his clothing. He worked the land like his daddy had always done and his grandfather before him, and probably his grandfather's father. Only, he would've been a slave. They stood in silence; not a word passed between them, and their eyes were

peeled on the front door. Evie winced when she heard sounds from inside the house—uncertain and disoriented by the day, by the commotion, by a sense of desperation that had taken hold. And that fiddling. It just kept going, a musical score she would never get out of her head.

She couldn't watch when they took Bess out the front door, by then fully awake and aware, fighting the sheriff and suddenly, inexplicitly screaming Evie's name. Evie turned her back and smoothed her pencil skirt, choking on tears, fighting against a violent shaking that started in her chest and moved throughout her body. Her thighs shook and her legs almost gave out right there in front of the house.

After the sheriff's car disappeared down the street, Evie went inside the house, Joe following behind her. She filled a bucket with warm soapy water, pulled a rag out of the closet, and, in the silence left behind, scrubbed those demons away.

CHAPTER TWO

Bess

Harley is dead. “Now the truth of me can no longer be hidden.” This was the thought that occupied my mind during the funeral mass. So cold and drafty between those stone walls. No fire, no heat. Just cold like Harley’s long blue corpse laid out for all to see, his shiny black shoes pointing toward heaven.

We were sixteen when our story started.

He handed me his handkerchief. It was blue. An offering. I didn’t know him. The new boy in class. An outsider from up north. That’s why he handed me the handkerchief. Blue, and stiff, like his mama ironed it twice. I wiped my tears and handed it back to him, thinking, “That’s the last time he’ll hand me his ‘kerchief,” because soon he would find out. Word travelled quickly in Crozet in 1924.

I’m damaged. I was already damaged when he handed me that blue ‘kerchief. It matched his eyes. So crystal clear, like lake water mirroring a clear sky.

Is it possible to unpack all that binds you by the end of your life? This is what I grapple with. Lately I dream of pirouetting and leaping on air, bindings unraveling and billowing, sailing free. Light and free, no pain. But I’m clumsy, untrained. And the bindings, they threaten to rip open. A explosion leaving behind nothing but destruction.

Harley knew. Knew the truth of me, yet still he cared. At times he cared for me so much it hurt. I tried to leave him once. I was nineteen then. I wanted to learn how to tame my pain. Three months I spent in New York City, sheltered by its cement and stone and brick—to live the life of an artist. But the dark alleys of the city and the shadows where artists live, they scared me. I was hungry. Alone. So I wrote Harley. I told him, “You don’t know it all.” He wrote, “Then tell me.” And I did. I came home and we married and moved to Nelson County. Where no one knew Elizabeth “Bess” McGee. I painted our bedroom blue, surrounded by the calm of his blue. I kept a folded stack of his blue ‘kerchiefs at the ready. To catch my tears.

Water.

Two hydrogen atoms.

One oxygen atom.

Components of matter.

Tears, they are like ocean water. If you lick a tear, the tiny granules of salt taste as bitter as a mouthful of the sea.

Words to describe water: transparent, translucent, reflective.

On that first day, I imagine my tears reflected back Harley’s blue eyes, the soft blue of his ‘kerchief as I brushed it against my cheek. Water evaporates in heat. Without his blue ‘kerchief, I would have evaporated from the heat of my shame. He was salt to my water. An anchor to keep me moored.

Here I am today, bandaged, wrists bound tight. Alone again. In Lynchburg Hospital. I want to capture the industry of the nurses, the fast clip of the doctors’ strides. I

want to feel such purpose, such certitude of living. Have I ever? Perhaps. When Evelyn was first laid in my arms. When the lights are low and the other patients sleep, I welcome the tears. And I float, unmoored, in the tears that have been a lifetime in the making. And I ache with failure—my failure to gracefully unbind myself. My failure to die. The razor blade. Harley's razor blade, it wasn't sharp enough to slice a lifetime of bindings.

And still I live.

CHAPTER THREE

Evelyn

Riding the train car to work one morning later that week, a calmness fell over Evie, gently, smooth and sweet as honey. Suddenly things felt right again. The familiar jostle of the car, the still dream-encased quiet of the morning travellers, waiting for their first cups of coffee at the office, even the occasional sleepy horn on the street, seemed, well, right. Washington was settling around her again.

When she arrived at her desk, she slid off her wrap, hung it beside her on a hook, and pulled a cardigan from her bag. The two-story center of the building, where she worked, remained drafty no matter the time of year. Some of the girls wore fingerless gloves to keep their hands warm. Evie preferred to push the speed of her typing to keep her circulation up. The newfound peace had followed her into the building and she decided to rearrange her desk more to her liking before Mr. Chapman assigned her the day's work. The penholder took up too much room on the desk, so she emptied the pens and pencils into the drawer and threw the penholder into the trashcan. It landed with a satisfying *thunk*. The multi-level tray that held current and finished work was moved to a side table that sat next to the desk. She checked to be sure she could still reach it while sitting in her chair and was pleased to see that she could. The extra room on the desk

surface allowed her to move a lamp closer to the typewriter. When she snapped it on, her desk was flooded with yellow light. Satisfied with the new arrangement, she pulled out a non-urgent project that often got pushed aside for more urgent work and began to type.

She was so focused on her typing, she didn't hear Mr. Chapman approach her desk.

"Miss Johnson. Are you paying attention?" he barked—he always barked—as if he was still in the military and she was a subordinate officer.

He stood directly behind her. Light from the window shone on his polished shoes and glinted off his thick black eyeglasses. In his hand he held a pack of his funny clove cigarettes, which he began to tap against his palm, readying for a new light. He told her once that he had acquired his taste for clove cigarettes in the military, when stationed in Indonesia. Treats my asthma, he had said, promptly waving her away as if he had revealed too much about himself. She turned in her chair to face him.

"I'm sorry sir, I didn't hear you at first."

"I need the master budget report finished immediately. Three copies," he said. He placed a stack of files on the corner of her desk and leaned in to slide them toward her. His breath smelled of coffee and cloves. "I need it yesterday, Girl—get to it."

Evie nodded and pivoted back to the typewriter, her back now tight with new knots; he had a way of putting her ill at ease, even on her best days. She hated the smell of cloves. The notes she had been in the process of transcribing slid smoothly around the paten as she pulled the paper free. She rifled through unfinished transcription in the stacks of folders until she found what she needed, numbers scribbled on yellow paper in

Mr. Chapman's slanted, hurried script. Layers of carbon and paper wound smoothly around the paten as she rolled the handle to bring the paper in alignment with the typebars. She snapped the paper fingers closed. Slowly the knots in her back unfurled. Evie realized that she felt a new strength in the face of his sour moods and acidic cigarettes. She was determined that nothing would get to her today. The sound of the other typists clacking on their machines surrounded her; the return chimes a melody in her ears. The focus that returned to her was so great that she didn't notice the house sparrows, high in the ceiling overhead, jumping and flying and nesting on the windowsills, or the bird droppings that landed occasionally on the marble floors between them.

At break, Evie walked outside to get fresh air. Cars lined F Street and the air was filled with the smell of exhaust. She took in a deep breath despite it and buttoned her coat against the chill. The colors of autumn had faded abruptly and winter had fallen across the Washington streets. There was something sad and lonely about it, Evie thought. About a bare tree branch, naked and exposed; a crushed maple leaf, its brilliant color ground into a muted, dirty mound, trod upon by hapless pedestrians; or an overgrown bush, its pale and woody stalks drained of life. Evie lit a cigarette.

She saw Annette, a fellow secretary she was friendly with, walking up the steps and they continued together inside the building.

"Did you hear about the Kentucky band playing at Sonny's Theater on Friday? The Shelby Brown Band?" Annette asked her.

"Are they any good?"

“I’ve heard they know what they’re doing.”

“I haven’t been out much lately,” Evie said.

“Everything alright?”

“Family stuff.”

“Might do you good to get out then. I’m going with some friends—you should too.”

Annette was petite, face smooth and unlined, eyes almond shaped and a deep caramel brown. Evie admired her easy looks, her femininity. When she went to her first blues venue with Annette, all of the men had turned to look—at Annette, not at Evie. The looks Evie got were more of the ‘what’s a white woman doing here’ variety.

“Maybe I’ll catch it,” Evie said. “I might just go on and go.”

Evie returned from work at the end of the week with her paycheck in her purse. There was a lift in her spirits, a renewed sense of energy; she was comfortable again in her daily routine. She let herself into her apartment and stopped to assess the small space. There wasn’t much: a small couch Harley and Bess purchased for her when she first moved in, a green upholstered chair Evie bought on six-month layaway, and a small coffee table from home—a table Bess once stayed up all night sanding and refinishing with a whitewashed stain and tiny etchings of birds and flower blossoms along the edges. A map of the world hung above the couch. Evie threw her cloak across a chair and kicked off her shoes and headed into the kitchen at the back of the apartment.

From the breadbox, she pulled out southern style biscuits that had been on sale at Snyder's market and laid out prebaked ham from the butcher on 14th Street. She turned on the radio and rinsed her stockings in the sink, while she waited for the iron skillet to heat. Jazz filled the apartment while she chopped collards and sliced ham. When she sat down to eat, a thin layer of cooking smoke and the bitter smell of greens and garlic hung in the air. She washed the biscuits down with a gin and tonic that was topped with the last of an old lime from her refrigerator. The first truly satisfying meal she'd had since returning from Brownsville. As her food settled, she sat back in the chair and waited for the familiar warmth of the gin to spread through her. She relaxed in the solitude of her apartment, a quiet broken only by tinny jazz notes playing softly on the transistor. Her daddy had started his days with a coffee lace. You lacing your coffee again? Bess would say before he walked out the door. Evie shook her head at the memory. Despite the end of Prohibition, the men of Nelson County continued to favor their moonshine, and none more than her daddy. Moonshine and music, he often said, the two elixirs of the south. And your mama? He'd say. His third elixir.

There was a comfortable distance again between childhood and her life in Washington. She'd reclaimed her space, tucked away unnecessary memories and quelled the unease that had accompanied her on the train back from Charlottesville. The memories no longer threatened to envelop her, to overpower her like an unexpected ocean wave that pulls you unwillingly deeper into its depths. She walked along the edge of the water now, dipping in a toe occasionally, no longer floating untethered in the deep.

The phone rang while she was rinsing dishes.

“Just calling to check in.” It was her Uncle Tommy’s voice, low and quiet across the line.

“I’m doing fine. Any word on Mama?”

“There’s been some trouble in Lynchburg.”

“What does that mean?” Evie bit her lip. A wave of dizziness hit her. The gin and tonic?

“The details don’t matter. I’m taking care of things.”

“Is she alright?”

“Well now, that’s often the question with her, isn’t it?”

“What kind of trouble?”

“You know Bess. Not happy for long. Wanted to leave is all. Left, in fact, without the doctor’s okay.”

“Is she okay?”

“Sheriff found her wandering near the hospital grounds. In her hospital gown and without shoes. But she’s fine. Good thing the temperatures didn’t drop down here til today.”

“When will they let her go home?”

Evie heard him clear his throat on the other end of the line.

She sat back down at the table and lifted the phone cord over her head so it would reach. Her elbow knocked over a saltshaker and she watched the tiny white dots scatter across the Formica.

“Likely that’s to be decided soon.”

“Maybe you could have her at the farm for awhile—until she’s feeling better.”

“I don’t reckon the farm is the right choice for her.”

“Why’s that?”

“No use hashing it out now, is there?”

Silence filled both ends of the line. She heard her Aunt Jean calling for the kids to sit down to supper in the background.

“Well now, let us know if you’re coming down. Just wanted to check and see how you’re doing.”

“I’m fine, Tommy. Please—keep me posted. I’ll come down to see her as soon as she’s sent home—when you and Doc think it’s best.”

She heard the dial tone before she realized he had already hung up. Small talk pleasantries no longer suited him when he returned from the war, from the Pacific Theater, where he fought as an aerial gunner. Unfolding a clean towel from the drawer, she began to dry dishes, sliding the towel thoughtfully over each plate and bowl. Bess was nearly seventeen years older than her brother; he was closer in age to Evie. When he returned, she had found his tall and imposing presence darker, more menacing than the gangly young man who first left for the war. Evie still remembered the first time she saw him again: his face was lined, his t-shirt sleeve rolled tightly around a pack of cigarettes. His eyes no longer smiled, they shined unnaturally, reflecting back the soulless experiences of war. Whatever it was that he brought back, he threw into his work on the farm, which eventually grew beyond anyone’s expectations.

She picked up a small wooden stallion that sat on her windowsill over the sink, and ran her fingers over the fine lines of the mane her grandfather had whittled with the edge of his knife. Horses ran in Tommy's blood, just like his father's. Bess said that her father had died where he was happiest: in the barn with his horses. What about Bess? Where had she been happiest? Evie wondered if maybe that was where she was headed when the sheriff found her wandering on the hospital grounds. Maybe, in fact, all of her wandering was simply a search for that happy place.

Evie felt spun up from the call. It was the silence between his words, she thought. The long pauses that were louder than his few words. They left her with a sense of unease. She decided to re-organize the dishes in her cupboard, then moved on to tackle a basket of clean laundry that hadn't been folded, before rearranging pictures that hung on the wall in the narrow hallway that led to the bedroom. Finally she sat back down in the dim kitchen to sip on a second gin and tonic, this time without the lime. The crisp liquid felt sharp against her tongue and soothed her nerves. She moved the transistor radio into her bedroom and fell asleep to the sound of a man's voice crooning across the wire.

~

After a few days, when Evie didn't hear from Tommy again, she placed a call to Doc Wahlberg. But he was with a patient, so she left a message with his wife, who handled all of his calls. She began to feel nervous about the length of time Bess was in the hospital.

The following week, she returned from work and placed a third call to the doctor. But he still wasn't available, and his wife said, "I've given him all your messages dear. I'm sure he'll get back to you soon."

~

At the end of one summer, when she was nine, Evie was sent to stay with her grandparents, Bess's parents. Evie found out Bess had gone missing again when Harley fetched her from Hammond's Creek, where she was skipping rocks with Joe and Clyde and their sister Camilla.

"Come on Evie, get on out of the creek," he called down to her.

"Can I stay awhile longer?" Evie called back. A stack of smooth, nearly round rocks rested on a log next to her. She cupped one in her palm and shook it back and forth in her hand before bending a knee and releasing the stone with a quick flip of her wrist. It skipped a few times before sinking to the bottom of the creek.

"You come out of there now," Harley said. The Baker kids looked at Evie when they heard Harley's sharp tone.

She put a few rocks in her pockets and offered the rest to the other kids. She joined Harley on the trail and they walked together down the path.

"Your mama's missing," Harley finally said. "I'm taking you to your grandparents' farm in Crozet."

Evie noticed the slump in his shoulders, the way his eyes didn't smile even as he forced his mouth into a smile while tousling her hair.

"You'll have fun," he said. "I gotta find your mama. Then I'll come get you, alright?"

The roads were windy between Brownsville and Crozet. Harley's truck bounced over gravel and craters in the road. Dust coated the windshield. Red chigger bites covered Evie's legs and she tried not to scratch them, licking her fingers and pressing them on the bites instead.

"Will mama be alright?" Evie finally said in a whisper over the drone of the engine.

Harley looked over at her. He had one hand on the steering wheel and the other resting outside his door, fingers splayed in the wind.

"What?"

"Will mama be alright?" Evie said louder.

"Yeah. She'll be alright. Once I find her."

He dropped her off with a packed bag and few words. They were locked in mutual worry, a familiar dance of tense silence, a dance to which they knew the steps well. By then her grandparents lived in a small cabin at the front of the farm and Bess's brother Tommy and his new wife Jean lived in the main house. She watched her daddy's truck speed down the gravel road, dust kicking up behind it. A knot tightened in her stomach.

That evening, Evie played jacks in the shadow of her grandparents' silence, bouncing the rubber ball, gathering metal jacks in her palm, again and again, bouncing,

gathering, bouncing, gathering. Her grandmother had lost most of her teeth, and rarely smiled. The humidity of the summer day had collected inside the cabin. Sweat left the hair at the nape of Evie's neck damp; every few minutes she wiped the back of her hand across her damp forehead. Her grandfather napped in his cane chair, whittling knife and half-finished figures lay on his lap. Her grandparents tolerated her, but she got the distinct impression she made her grandmother uncomfortable, so she tried her best to match the silence of the home.

They ate their dinner on the north-facing porch and made their beds on the sleeping porch, which had a wall of screening to keep out the bugs. While lying that night beneath a thin summer quilt, Evie wondered if Harley had found Bess. She missed her bed, her room, the familiarity of home. The peepers and crickets grew louder as the dark fell deeper and Evie heard the rustling sounds of small animals in the brush. She felt small and unprotected sleeping outside. Her grandfather snored on his cot. Her grandmother's face was shrouded in shadow, but she thought she saw the whites of her eyes flash toward her. Evie held her breath and tried not to move. Eventually she fell asleep.

The next morning, she couldn't help but make some noise, just to see if the old people would react. She picked up her grandfather's fiddle, which lay idle in the morning light, and pulled the bow across its strings, cringing a little when all that came out was a squeak; it was nothing like the beautiful tunes her grandfather had once played. Her grandmother appeared at her side and wordlessly, lips sunken and tight as if she'd just sucked on something sour, held out a hand for the bow, simply setting it and the fiddle

back on the table before walking back to the dark kitchen. The cuckoo clock struck nine. Evie felt as if the bird were shouting at her, chastising her for picking up her grandfather's fiddle.

There were no children with whom to play, no neighbors close by. When the main house received indoor plumbing, her grandparents had the outhouse moved closer to the cottage, content with the old ways. Evie hated running to the outhouse in the dark and tried not to think of monsters and other creatures that might hide at the bottom of the pit. She kept her fears hidden from her grandparents and the knot, which had begun when Harley drove away, continued to tighten in her stomach.

Later that day, Evie walked on tiptoe through the house, pretending to be an Indian princess in leather moccasins. Her grandmother was in the garden and had told Evie to mind herself, which Evie knew to mean *don't disturb the old man*. She pretended that the sound of the voices of her uncle Tommy and grandfather were soldiers hunting for her and sidled up to the wall beside the door. Two glossy black braids, loosely plaited and cinched by thin pieces of fabric from her grandmother's scrap basket, lay across her shoulders.

"She's not one of us." Evie heard her grandfather say. He sat on the porch, smoking a corn cob pipe, his mouth making a sucking sound every few minutes. Evie thought it smelled good.

"Sure she is."

"Well just because we got her here, doesn't mean something."

"Da. She's a child."

“Yeah. That she is.”

“Harley’s got it hard, y’know. Taking care of Bess. He says things are getting worse.”

“Ha. Don’t know what that has to do with the child. What was he thinking? Isn’t she enough for one man?”

“The child is good for her. I’ve seen it. Makes her happy.”

Evie’s heart beat fast in her chest and she screwed up her face to fight back tears. What did he mean?

“You out there girl?” her grandfather said suddenly.

Evie held her breath and tiptoed back to the kitchen, no longer an Indian princess, but now a soldier, looking for a place to camp. She found her grandmother shelling peas at the small wooden table where they took their meals. Wordlessly, with the same sour face, she handed Evie a basket of corn to husk and shoed her outside.

Tommy found her on the porch.

“Wanna go horseback riding?” he asked her.

“Really?”

“Really. Come on, kid, change out of that dress and put some pants on.”

Tommy was waiting for her in the stables. Hay floated in the air, glowing in streams of light. The smell of horse grew stronger the deeper she made her way into the barn.

“You’ll be riding this ole’ mare,” Tommy said, patting the horse’s flank. “She’s plenty gentle. Hand me the saddle.”

Evie pulled down the saddle that rested over the stall door. It fell heavy into her arms and made her lose her balance, but she recovered her footing and handed the saddle to Tommy.

“Why don’t you feed her some apples while I’m saddling her up?”

The basket of apples sat outside the stall. She picked out two small apples—a pink, summer variety—and returned to the stall. The mare nudged her arm until she held an apple by its mouth. Her hand was wet and sticky by the time she had eaten both apples and Tommy was done saddling the horses.

They trotted away from the farm with a comfortable silence between them. Soon they were in the open space, expansive green fields dotted with maples and sycamores and ash trees.

She reveled in her bare feet warm against the horse’s smooth hair, in the way she learned to communicate with the slow mare so that it trotted comfortably down the hills, while she slid rhythmically side to side in the leather saddle. Eventually they were at a cantor, almost a gallop, and Evie felt as if she were flying, escaping. Escaping from all of the strangeness of the past few days. She felt free beneath the expansive blue sky.

Eventually they dismounted their horses and sat beneath a shade tree, relieved by then to be out of the Virginia sun. Evie wove herself a fan of poplar leaves and grapevine. Tommy unpacked their lunch from the saddlebags. The bread and butter were warm from the heat and slid effortlessly down her throat. Tommy found some bones beneath the tree, on the other side of its wide trunk.

“Likely deer bones. This here’s an old antler,” he said as he handed them to Evie.

She ran her fingers over the smooth, sun-bleached surface, trying to imagine a full-fledged deer, soft doe or buck eyes, white upturned tail, gracefully bounding through the field. She examined the small indentations and narrow lines etched long ways down the bones. They felt heavy, solid like a piece of wood, and *real* in her small hands. She closed her eyes and whispered a prayer for the animal that had died. When she opened them, she saw Tommy staring at her with a crooked smile.

“Can I keep one?”

He laughed.

“Sure, if you like. Whatcha gonna do with it?”

“I can paint it real pretty and put it on my windowsill. I think it would like that.”

“Not sure it really cares now that it’s dead,” he said. He leaned to the side when Evie tried to punch him in the arm.

He tore apart a piece of bread and stuffed the largest part in his mouth. Sweat had collected beneath his arms and on his chest and back. A large hat shaded his face.

“Were you spying on your granddaddy and me?” he asked.

Evie squirmed on the blanket. She hadn’t been spying exactly.

“No,” she said.

“I thought I heard you in the house when I was talking to your grandpa on the porch.”

“Wasn’t I shucking corn when you found me?” Evie asked with feigned indignation.

“Sometimes adults talk about confusing things is all,” he said. “Don’t want you listening to things you shouldn’t be.” He pulled off his hat and lay back on the blanket with his eyes closed. Eventually Evie plucked the hat off his stomach and put it on her head. It was damp on the inside and smelled of sweat and horses. She took it off, placed it on her stomach, and laid back on the blanket next to him, listening to the rustling of the leaves, the sounds of the horses. The suffocating humidity wrapped around them like a warm, cozy blanket, and eventually they were both asleep. Evie woke when the mare nudged her face with her mouth.

Tommy woke too. He packed their bags, placing the largest deer bone in his sack and throwing the other, smaller bones back beneath the tree.

“It’s time to head back.”

There was a peace that day on the farm. A peace that Evie remembered wanting to package and bring home. In Albemarle, it was with Tommy that Evie finally felt visible—he had been young and muscular back then, a new husband and heir to his father’s small horse farm. He cracked jokes and pulled on her braids, more boy than man. A year after her visit, he would enlist in the Army and leave to fight the Japanese in the Pacific. It was the beginning of the American involvement in World War II.

When Harley knocked on the screen door the next day, Evie was drawing at a small table in the kitchen. While her grandmother answered the door, she hurriedly rolled up her drawing and ran to the bedroom to gather her things. Her heart beat fast in her chest and she allowed all of her worry about Bess to rush in full force. He must have

found Bess, if he was there. But what if something worse had happened? What if he was there because she was never coming home?

Holding her things in her hands, she walked with trepidation to the front room where the adults sat quietly talking. She examined their faces, trying to decipher their moods, their emotions—the story. Harley motioned for her to join him on the couch. She sat close to him and leaned her head against him, relieved to feel the heat of his familiar body.

“Likely she didn’t realize how long she was gone,” Harley said, finishing the story he’d been telling.

“Not saying a word to you.....”

“You’re a good man, Harley.”

“Thank you for taking Evelyn. I hope she was no problem.”

“She was no problem.”

Evie closed her eyes as if she could shut out the sound of their words if she couldn’t see them. At some point she realized that the adults were no longer talking and the room was filled with silence and the sound of Harley breathing beside her. She kept her eyes closed until she felt something hard and small placed in her hand.

“Ya’ little one, take these home with you,” her grandfather said. He stood stooped in front of her, holding a collection of carved miniature birds and foxes in his hands. One perfectly rendered stallion sat in her own hand. She took the rest from him, examining them one by one. His knife had whittled them to life, each an unexpected gift that she

held in her small hands. Perhaps he remembered the day before when he sat on his porch smoking his corncob pipe, talking with Tommy.

On the ride home, she clutched the collection in her lap. Harley kept his eyes on the road and soon the truck was filled with gravel dust and the smell of honeysuckle. She stroked the curves on the stallion's mane and thought about the day before when she'd overheard her grandfather and uncle, when she'd been an Indian princess turned soldier turned corn shucker. And she carried the uneasy feeling that she had overheard more than she should have.

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Evie dreamed of a giant woodpecker. Translucent green feathers covered his dark head and he pecked against her front door incessantly. Eventually she woke enough to realize that someone was knocking on her door. Confused and dry mouthed, she pulled on a robe and stopped in the bathroom to gargle with Listerine. The knocking persisted. Her eyes burned and she felt light-headed and in need of food. It was nine a.m. on a Saturday morning. She'd been out late at a music club.

She was surprised to see Jean when she opened the door.

“Aunt Jean! What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk,” she said, pushing past Evie and settling herself on Evie's couch. The apartment was small, and Evie felt self-conscious with Jean in her space. Except for Harley, no one from Brownsville had visited her in Washington. She watched

as Jean took off her coat and slid off her gloves, finger by finger. She stared solemnly at Evie while she unpinned her hat, her eyes perfect round o's.

“Sit,” she said.

Evie sat across from her on an armchair.

“A lot has happened back home. I don't think it's right that you not know.”

“What? What's happened? Is Mama okay? The doctor. He won't return my calls.”

Jean picked up her gloves again and massaged them between her hands as she considered her words.

“Evie, do you know what a guardianship is?”

“Yes...I think so. Something the courts give to parents or other adults who are responsible for children.”

“Oh, Evie. This is a different kind of guardianship. You know—actually—this may take awhile. Can you put on coffee?”

“Of course. Yes. Coffee is good. I'll take a moment to get properly dressed as well—if you don't mind.”

“Of course not.”

Evie took her time in the bedroom. She pulled on a practical wool dress and stockings, and folded and put away the sleeker silk blouse and pleated skirt she had worn the night before. She threw the crumpled dark stockings in the back of her dresser drawer. Why on earth was Jean here? This thought slowed her down. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she reviewed the options: Jean and Tommy had taken in a child, something had happened to one of their children, or, what Evie feared most: this had something to

do with Bess. In the bathroom she ran a comb through her hair and lipstick over her lips. There was no way to hide the tired creases around her eyes or the red rims of her lids. If she had known Jean was coming, she wouldn't have stayed so late at the club. The hangover left her feeling unsteady, as if she were still moving on the dance floor. Her ankles and feet were tired and sore. There was a vague memory of leaving the club with a man, but his face was unclear, and the feel of brick against her back, the pressure of his lips on hers in the cool night. He hadn't ended up in her bed. In the bathroom, she took out the Listerine and rinsed again, hard and serious swirls to drive away the cottonmouth.

Feeling a little more composed, she went to the kitchen to prepare the coffee. After it was brewed, she returned to the living room, where Jean was thumbing through one of the National Geographic Society magazines Evie kept stacked on the coffee table.

“These pictures are striking. It really is a great big world, isn't it?”

“Yes. It really is. Would you like a cigarette?”

“No thank you, dear. Just the coffee.”

Evie was surprised to see that her hand shook when she handed Jean a cup. She sat back down and tapped a cigarette against her wrist, before pulling it out and lighting it. Cigarette in one hand and coffee cup in the other, she looked at Jean. Waiting for her to speak.

“Jean, please, can you tell me why you're really here?”

“Tommy and I have argued over this, Evie. Really we have. In fact, he didn't know I was coming here. I left him a note.” As if on cue, Evie's phone began to ring.

“Leave it. Don't answer it. He probably found the note after coming in from the barns.”

“Now you’re scaring me.”

“Oh, Evie.” She leaned over to place a hand on Evie’s knee. Before sitting back, she gave her a quick squeeze.

“Don’t you know? Tommy petitioned for guardianship of Bess last week.”

Evie sat her coffee cup down and stood up. She turned her back on Jean. Tears smarted at the corners of her eyes. She began to pace back and forth, taking furious drags on her cigarette.

“And he was granted it. But, Evie, there’s more. After she went missing at the hospital, he and Doc Wahlberg, well, they talked at length, and there was a hearing.”

“Hearing? What do you mean? Mama didn’t break any laws!”

Evie sat down hard in the chair again.

“No, she didn’t dear. But after the, well after what happened in Brownsville, and with the way she behaved in the hospital, well, the men, they decided that some time in the asylum might do her good.”

“In Staunton? Mama’s in the asylum in Staunton? How could they?” Evie clenched her fists together until her knuckles turned white. “Why didn’t anyone consult me?”

“It all happened so fast,” Jean said quietly. “I think Tommy wanted to take care of things so that your life wasn’t disrupted further.”

“I can be the judge of that myself,” she said angrily. Evie felt dizzy and had a hard time catching her breath. She picked up the coffee and took a sip, but it only made her heart beat faster and the room spin around her.

What she wanted right then was a shot of something strong, a coffee lace. Standing up, she went to the kitchen with cup in hand. Jean was quiet in the living room. The phone began to ring again. Evie placed her hand on the handle, cool metal vibrating beneath her fingers. With each ring, the handle jumped a little, as if Tommy were willing it from Crozet to land in her hand. Don't answer it, Jean had said. What she wanted most in that moment was to shout at Tommy, to pick up the phone and ask him, Why? And, How could you? She was too agitated, too emotional, too angry. If she were to pick up the phone, the sum of her emotions would only come to no good. When it finally stopped ringing, she stood still and unmoving in the sundrenched kitchen. Her mind began to race again. She searched for something to add to the coffee, uncapped a bottle of Irish whiskey, and poured it into her cup before returning to the room. It wasn't her daddy's moonshine, but it would do. The sun had been unbearable on that summer day when Tommy took her horseback riding before he left for the war. What happened to those old deer bones they found? The ones Evie painted purple, dotted with tiny white flowers, like fall's feverfew. She waited for the heat of the whiskey to take the edge off the hangover—and the visit.

“You know, this may actually be for the best,” Jean said quietly when Evie returned to the front room. She had gained weight, Evie could see. Maybe the onset of menopause, or the result of a lifetime of southern cooking. Evie had never felt close to her. Ironic that it was Jean sitting in her living room, that it was Jean who had made the trip to Washington. She pulled the drapes fully open to let more light into the room, and then turned to face her.

“How could he have done this without talking to me?” she said.

“It’s his way. He’s always protected Bess. In ways you may not fully understand,” Jean said. She looked down and pulled at a loose thread on her skirt. “This may be what’s best for her, Evie.”

“Who signed the order? Where was the hearing?” Evie’s voice raised angrily. “Really, Jean, I don’t know what to think.” Her mouth went dry and her jaw tensed until a sharp pain settled in her cheek.

“It was held in Brownsville. The Judge, well now, he’s known your family a long time, you know that. I’m sure he took your mama’s history into account.”

The thought of the three men, of Doc Wahlberg, the Judge, and Uncle Tommy, standing in the wood paneled courtroom discussing her mama’s fate made her feel sick. It had all happened without her. She couldn’t help but feel betrayed. And ashamed. It had been easy for her to return to Washington. To tell herself that things would be handled. She felt a fool and took sips of her coffee to keep from rushing to the phone to confront Tommy.

“What does this mean? For me? For Mama? How long will she be there?”

“Doc Wahlberg has assured Tommy that Bess has the best chance of getting better if she’s in the asylum where they can give her full-time care. He said to expect a stay of at least six months. In his experience, six months can make the world of difference. Oh, Evie, our hope is that you are able to have a greater peace of mind now. She’ll be cared for full-time. And they have visiting hours for family.”

Evie looked away, out the window, where the sun pierced the glass with an unusual intensity. She tried to imagine what Bess's week had been like. Had she been present for the hearing? Had she asked to go home? Evie had been completely unaware while this had been unfolding, completely self-absorbed in her own life, really. A familiar guilt slid over her skin, making her itchy and uncomfortable.

"Can I offer you something to eat?" Evie asked, unable to think of more to say.

"No, dear. I want to head back to Crozet as soon as possible."

Initially, Jean didn't show signs of leaving. Evie sipped her coffee again and waited on the whiskey to work its magic. An awkward silence settled between them. Smoke swirled in front of Evie's face. She tapped her cigarette in the ashtray every few minutes and drew her tongue over her teeth, finding comfort in the film of smoke and whiskey. Eventually Jean pulled on her gloves and coat, and held her hat in her hands absentmindedly. After a few minutes, she pulled her gloves off again to better place the hat on her head and secure it with two hatpins; she then pulled the gloves back on a second time.

"I wanted you to know," Jean said quietly.

"I appreciate that."

"Tommy has everyone's best interests at heart. I really don't know what he was thinking in not telling you. Of course you'd have to know eventually. I hope you're able to take some time to visit her. You may feel better, once you see her getting well."

Still Jean sat on the couch, making no effort to leave.

“Are you alright, Evie? You look—you look, well, tired. Are you taking good care of yourself? You know, young men, they like women who tend to their appearances! If you need tips—“

“I’m fine Jean. It was a late night is all. I worked late and met some friends for drinks.”

“Well that sounds exciting. Look at you, living the city life. An independent girl and all!”

Evie smiled and stood up, hoping to encourage Jean to take her leave. She leaned over and crushed the end of her cigarette in the glass ashtray on the coffee table.

“What do I do now, Jean? About Mama, I mean.”

Jean stood and placed her hands on Evie’s arms.

“You pray, honey. You pray that she finds some healing and you trust the men to make the right decisions.”

“I’ll try to visit her. Is it—is it scary there?”

“Oh no, honey. It’s not scary. At least the doctor didn’t say that it is. We haven’t been, you see. Tommy thought it best that we not disturb her while she gets settled in. But you go on now and see if you can’t get down there. We’re all hoping that Bess is better soon.”

Evie stood at the window and watched her walk down the street. The trees were nearly bare and it seemed as if the naked branches were bending over Jean, prodding her home. She saw Jean reach out her arm to hail a taxi, tentatively, and then bravely,

brazenly. She wasn't a city girl and she'd travelled a long way to tell Evie about Bess.

There was that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bess

There's a picture of my mother. She stands outside our home, in front of the porch that da built. A dress I remember as blue silk appears a worn out grey in the photo. It hangs awkwardly from her narrow shoulders. Her hair is pinned back tightly from her pale, freckled face. I can see she is uncomfortable as a subject. Her face is haggard, her bottom lip thick from holding a frown so often. Perhaps this is after another of her miscarriages. In the faded image, I see eyes that shine with disappointment. Despondency perhaps. But maybe I read too much into it. I'm known to do that.

But here is what is important. It's the girl who stands to the side of the porch. A girl of about twelve. Sallow-skinned and scrawny, sinew and muscle. Elbows dirty, dress dingy, feet bare. I don't remember her well. Why is that? I know it's me there in the shadows, there on the edge of the frame, but my twelve-year-old self is a stranger.

I think about this image every day. I think about mothers and daughters. I think about Evelyn. We protected her, Harley and me. We did our best.

But really this story began long ago, on a pile of damp leaves, in the woods. The space for what happened, it must always have been there. And now, in old age, it seems certain. A certain attraction. A certain look on my girlhood face. That's what led me here

to this cold asylum, these halls of echoes and other worldly souls. It was inevitable, I suppose, that I always held that space as possible. Perhaps the attraction didn't start in girlhood, perhaps it started earlier in my mother's womb, when my cells were forming and my bones were knitting. Perhaps my mother passed it on to me through the umbilical cord. Perhaps the space broke open at the moment God decided to create me.

Now I am old and alone. I am filled with fears. I fear what tomorrow will bring and comb the darkest reaches of my mind, looking for traces of hope. I fear I will never leave this place. The pain of the patients who surround me gathers like molecules in the air, filling the spaces between us. I drown in our collective wounds. To stay afloat, I write on this paper. I trace what memories are left. I chase them, hunt for truth. It's all I have here, even as they try to wipe my mind clean.

I hear the nurses whispering. They whisper behind corners, becoming silent when they see me approach. They whisper behind white-gloved hands. They whisper in deep, throaty voices, sharp with their united sense of superiority, naïve as a flock of baby birds who haven't yet felt the hard truth of freefalling through life— their starched uniforms still untouched by all that is dark and scarring, by the wear and tear of grief. They do the doctor's bidding, without question. They bind us up and strap us to tables and watch us levitate, bodies leaving spirit, there on the table, flopping in the air like fish. We return to the table stunned and still, our eyes glassy and unfocused, our throats dry, our minds drained. The cells of our very being rearranged, altered. I watch as another clump of my hair falls to the ground, lost among the dust and germs that collect on the floors, in the

dark corners of our rooms. They empty us. Empty the pain that tortures us, that has turned us into misfits. The pain that has led us here.

The despondency on my mother's face. I've seen it on my own, at times when I didn't expect it. A glimpse of myself in a store window. The morning I slid Harley's razor across my wrist, my reflection staring back at me from the mirror that hangs on the medicine cabinet. Bone from her bone, blood from her blood. Ma suffered in her lifetime. I suffered a horror so great, I would never fill the void. I remember her lilting, lyrical voice. It rings clear in my ears now, the way it raised and fell with all the inflections of her people. As a child, I didn't appreciate the beauty of her voice. Why is that? The disappointment she bore most of my girlhood, it lifted when baby Thomas was born. I remember the way her foot tapped once again, in time to da's fiddling, the way she smiled while Thomas suckled on her breast, a new baby full of life and promise. Untouched. His peach fuzz soft and glistening in the lamplight. I wished I could crawl in her lap and suckle too. But I was grown by then and already that space had been confirmed. That certain girlhood look had already ruined my face—made that space possible. The space where things happen on piles of damp leaves in the woods.

I wore my mother's dress to the Mayfest. I remember dancing around the pole, pretending that it all had never happened. I loved that blue faded dress.

CHAPTER FIVE

Evelyn

At first, Evie didn't recognize Bess. She leaned against a wall, her forehead touching snowy swirls of plaster; an overhead light cast a buttery glow on her hair. Her arms moved back and forth as if wrestling with something unseen, and her once ample hips, now narrow and boney, swayed side to side. Before Evie saw her face, she heard her voice, raspy and unused, muttering a singsong melody. When Bess turned to look at her directly, she held Evie's gaze. The minutes slowed and Evie stood still, examining this woman who resembled Bess, but whom she had a hard time believing was really her mother. The rocking and hum came to a stop. They stood like two caged cats, waiting for the other to pounce first. She had deteriorated beyond anything Evie could have imagined. A sliver of fear and, if she was being honest, a sliver of loathing, came over her. It had been hard to come. To watch the asylum loom high on the hill as the taxicab snaked wound closer. Shame, fear, anger, and sadness, comingled uncomfortably.

"Mama," Evie whispered, the word catching at the back of her throat. When she stepped forward the tap of her heeled shoe echoed on the linoleum floor. Bess didn't move toward her, yet stared intently at Evie. When Evie reached her side, she placed a hand on Bess's sleeve and forced herself to kiss her cheek, smooth and smelling faintly of

soap. Someone had bathed her then. That was something. Bess stood still, receiving Evie's kiss without protest. Evie nodded to the attendant who had been hovering close when he saw that Bess was agitated.

"We're fine," she said to him. To Bess, she said, "Would you like to walk a bit?"

Bess nodded. Her gait was loose and Evie was surprised to feel Bess grip her arm. She needed steadying.

"Oh mama, what has happened?" Evie asked.

"It's the way of things," Bess said sagely.

"I'm so sorry—I didn't know about the hearing."

"Hearing?" Bess looked away and seemed to disengage from the conversation. A full dialogue was too much too much to expect. Evie adjusted her expectations.

They walked at a slow, tentative pace. Another patient appeared to have a visitor. They sat in chairs lined up next to one another. The young woman, the patient, twirled her hair absentmindedly, while the older woman, perhaps her mother, talked in hushed tones. But it could have been the reverse, Evie realized. The older woman talking may have been the patient and the younger, disinterested woman may have been her daughter. That was the way in an asylum, she decided. Evie turned to look at them again. It was the girl. She was wearing the same linen gown and slippers as Bess. They reached the end of the hall, where it opened onto a large sunny room. Patients milled about, their dresses making them appear anonymous, a homogeneous always-moving entity. Fireflies alight, transient, difficult to pin down. The room was filled with a pitchy hum, each voice discordant with the other.

“That’s Patsy,” Bess said. She pointed to a young pregnant girl with a long braid. The girl couldn’t have been more than seventeen. She sat in a corner; her legs splayed in front of her and she appeared to be having an imaginary conversation. Her fingers pointed accusingly in the air, punctuating her words. The braid lay on the front of her dress. Unbound, it might have snaked past her waist. As it was, the tail lay curved across her swollen belly. Evie tried to imagine how she ended up pregnant. Was she already a patient? Did it happen before coming to the asylum? Who was the father? The possibilities, most of them dark and unthinkable, sent a chill up her spine.

“I heard the nurses talking. Schizophrenia,” Bess said with authority.

“Is she a friend?”

“No. I have no friends here,” Bess looked up at her and Evie felt shame flush across her cheeks.

They walked in a slow circle around the room.

“You’ve cut your hair,” Bess said, reaching to touch Evie’s hair; it slid easily across Bess’s fingers, glossy, black, short and straight, reaching just past Evie’s chin.

“Are you drawing?”

“Sometimes. I’m busy Mama, busy at my job.”

“You should continue your drawing.”

“Yes, Mama.”

They didn’t discuss what happened in Brownsville; Evie wondered if she should bring it up. The halls were cold, the building built in a time when ceilings were raised to grand heights and walls plastered by artisans. Elegant moldings edged windows made of

antebellum glass, windows that were now cased in metal diamond gates. Bess shuffled beside Evie at a slow pace. It seemed that Evie was a mother leading a child. The role reversal made her uncomfortable.

The peace of the walk was broken by the shouts and cries of a patient down a dark hallway, beyond a set of barred doors that stood at the west side of the large room. Evie heard the jangle of keys and raised voices, likely staff. The shouting became louder and Bess cringed and covered her face, her long and stringy hair swinging like a curtain in front of her. Evie felt Bess's hand tremble on her arm before she let go. She was frightened.

“It’s all right Mama, if you’d prefer, we can walk the other way. Okay?”

The sounds grew louder. Footsteps echoed down the hall. A whistle blew. The patient’s voice rose above the other shouts and frenzied noise.

*They’re gonna get us they’re gonna get us I didn’t mean to I didn’t Let me go
Damn you Damn you Damn you No God damn motherfucker Fuck you Fucking God
damn motherfucker Fuck Fuck Fuck motherfucker*

The cries stopped suddenly and an eerie silence settled across the asylum. Like the sound at the bottom of a pool when you’re holding your breath. Evie shivered. The silence faded and in its place came the sounds of moaning, silverware banging against plates, fists pumping walls, cries that made you think of young children, infants, not adults. Anxious, Evie reached behind her for Bess. But she wasn’t there. Evie had moved ahead of her, unconsciously making her way toward the noise, the barred doors, losing sight of Bess behind her. She turned to find Bess cowering on the floor, squatting with

her nightgown billowing like a wedding dress around her legs. She pulled at her hair. A deep, full-throated scream filled the room. A scream coming from Bess.

An attendant, dressed from head to toe in white, her shiny dark face the color of coffee bark, came toward them.

“Come now Bess. You gotta stop that screaming,” she said sternly. “Stop that screaming now.”

Evie saw a look pass between Bess and the woman, whose very girth and height made her imposing. Bess stopped screaming. The sounds of the other patients quieted as well; a calm after a storm. The woman helped Bess to her feet and handed her back to Evie. Bess hung her head, avoiding Evie’s gaze.

“Do you know your way to the private visiting rooms?” the attendant asked.

Evie shook her head no.

“I’ll walk you then,” she said. “It’d be best if you take her away from the commotion for a bit.”

They walked the hall in silence, Bess staring at the floor as the other women guided her. The attendant’s shoes squeaked on the polished floors, Evie’s pointed heels tapped severely, and Bess’s feet made a muffled, shuffling sound, her feet hardly leaving the floor. A discordant harmony between them. They passed a small windowless room, where Evie saw patients strapped in wheelchairs. Their heads were irregular shapes, their hair shorn short. One patient stared blankly at them. A line of drool dripped from her open mouth and down her chin. Evie shuddered and looked away.

The visiting rooms were located close to the front doors, just beyond the front desk and the elegant spiral staircase that greeted visitors when first arriving. The attendant opened the door and Evie saw a table and two chairs, situated just below a large grated window. A bible, its black leather spine cracked and worn, sat before a lamp on the table.

“I’ll leave the two of you for a bit. If you need help, just call for a nurse,” the attendant said. Relief washed over Evie when the door was finally closed and it was just the two of them.

“Evie.” Bess’s voice was still hoarse and her hand trembled when she waved Evie toward her. Evie moved the chair so that it faced Bess and placed a hand over Bess’s hands, which now lay on her lap. The linen of her dress was pressed and clean, but Evie saw wear, threadbare patches from many washings. The number 2899 was stitched at the hem.

Despite its stringy appearance, Evie could see that Bess’s hair had been brushed and recently washed.

“I took care of the house,” Evie said. “It’s locked up tight now. I turned off the pipes for winter and scrubbed down the bathroom. Are you cold? Here, let me sit closer and warm you up.”

“Did your daddy help you much?”

Evie looked away for a moment to keep her composure.

“Mama, remember now, daddy’s gone.”

Bess nodded her head, but Evie had the uncomfortable feeling that she didn't remember. Or refused to remember.

"Come here. Closer." Evie moved her face directly in front of Bess's face.

"Honey, I know why they've brought me here. There's a reason," she said sincerely. "To steal my memories. They empty them all out, you see. Take them from us."

"How?"

"Electricity," she whispered conspiratorially. She looked back and forth suspiciously before continuing in a whisper. "Every time they use it, I don't remember so well. Soon, you'll have to be my memory teller. That way at least we'll have the memories from your sweet life. That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

Her sweet life. Evie could almost taste the whiskey from the night before.

"Tell me more, Mama," she said. "What electricity? What do you mean?"

Bess averted her gaze. She pulled at a strand of hair and twisted her mouth into a lopsided grimace. Evie could sense her fear.

"Mama. What do you mean?" she said more insistently.

"That's what they do here," Bess said. "Lightening bolts into our heads. Electrocutation. Fish in water getting hit by lightening. Flopping and lighting up." It came out in a whisper and Evie leaned in close to hear her better.

In what context could she understand this? Evie wanted to believe Bess, but it sounded outrageous. Was Bess hallucinating? She looked at her closely. Tired creases lined the corners of her eyes, which ran rheumy and were red-rimmed. She had aged, surprisingly so, in the short amount of time she'd been in the asylum. At her daddy's

funeral, Evie thought Bess had never looked more beautiful. Her copper and silver-streaked hair had been looped in an elegant bun and she had worn a crisp navy blue suit and silver pumps, a string of pearls around her neck. But today, today she had aged by more than two decades, her hair thin and brittle, her skin blotched and lined, her eyes ancient, old, haunted.

“Do you – do you want them to take your memories?” Evie asked.

Bess tugged at the hem of her dress, pulling it tight over her knees. Her white slippers were scuffed and dotted with dirt stains. Evie had an image of Bess shuffling through the halls, lost and resigned.

“Memories. They bind us,” she said cryptically. “Even as I lose them, older ones rise to the surface....what day is it Evie?”

“December fourth, mama. It’s December already, can you believe it?”

“It’s kind of you to come all the way from Washington to see me,” Bess said with an uncharacteristic politeness. This diminished version of Bess alarmed Evie.

“I’ll come every few weeks, if that’s okay with you,” she said. “Have they told you how long you’ll be here?”

Bess shook her head.

When an attendant pushed open the door, the hinges squeaked sharply.

“Visiting hours end in five minutes,” she said. She stood in crisp white shoes, shiny and unmarred. Shoes separated the workers from the patients, the visitors from the patients, Evie thought. Evie nodded to the attendant and then leaned down to brush her

fingers across the dirt stains on Bess's slippers. Bess closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair.

“Mama, I don't like the sound of this ‘electricity.’ Can you tell me more? How does it work?”

“You don't worry yourself over that now, Evie. Get on back to Washington and live that exciting life you've made for yourself. *Live your life*. No sense in worrying about me.”

Evie took Bess's hands. “I can't help but worry, mama. That's what I do. Is it working? The treatment?”

Evie ran her fingers over the scars forming on Bess's wrists. Bumpy and jagged, soft and protruding. Bess jerked her arms away.

“Who can know, really?” she said as she crossed her arms across her chest.

Bess's resignation made Evie's heart sink. Where was the bigger than life Bess of her childhood? The Bess who screamed and yelled when the sheriff drove her away? Evie wanted her to protest, to get angry, to fight harder.

The sound of Bess's shuffling steps faded away as Evie walked with the attendant toward the front lobby. She hadn't found the courage to ask Bess why she had done it, why she used an old razor blade to end her life. The questions sat unspoken and heavy between them. The desire to know more—to know why Bess had wanted to die so badly—ate away at Evie. What makes a person decide to die? Does it happen slowly or is it made in one fast moment? Did Bess cut her wrists on impulse? Was it something she

planned? For days—or weeks? If it had been planned, Evie thought, that would be worse. If it were a just whim, a sudden lapse in judgment, a trick of her mind, it would mean that maybe, just maybe she still wanted to live.

The lobby was shiny; this thought stayed with her after she passed through the stately front doors of the asylum. Shiny floors, shiny and polished wood, shiny double-paned leaded glass windows. It was slightly irritating—the shininess—the way it eclipsed the shabbiness of the patients, their disordered and raw vulnerability. All of them, locked away, trapped in the echoing chambers of the asylum. Shuffling ghosts in white slippers. What separated their realities from Evie's? Were they really that different? She often felt lost and afraid in Washington—as if she were playing a game, pretending at adulthood. The asylum walls kept them locked away, just as Evie's fears held her hostage in Washington.

There was time before the taxicab arrived. She decided to walk around the perimeter of the building. It had been beautiful in its day. Each brick laid by hand, each column carved and fitted for this very purpose. In the beginning it was a sanctuary, a place of rest with carefully tended gardens and walking paths, rocking chairs and benches for contemplation. Overgrown bushes now snaked up the brick, tiny tentacles of vines sucking at the clay, searching for an escape. Evie pulled at one, just to see how badly it wanted to climb. A tiny thorn pricked her finger, but the vine came away easily, attaching instead to her hand with its sticky leaves. Nothing was permanent.

As a child, Evie never knew where Bess went when she disappeared for days on end. But her wandering was something she grew to expect. When Evie was ten, Bess's

father died and the wandering got worse. One day shortly after his death, Evie saw Bess while she walked home from the bus stop. She saw the unpinned hair, the un-tucked blouse, and the unsteady gait, and she knew. It was a wandering day. She pretended she didn't notice Bess across the street and laughed extra loud at Priscilla's jokes that weren't very funny, and called out a race to the soda fountain, leading them all away from the sight of the crazy lady across the street. Later, when she found Bess at home, rocking and crying on the rug, she felt ashamed. She took Bess by the elbow, led her upstairs and tucked her into bed. After a wandering day, Evie could count on a few good days. Days when Bess had meals on the table and she took Evie on spontaneous adventures—spy games in the neighborhood, day trips to Rag Mountain, or rowing down Hammond's creek, while Bess weaved tale and myth with an ease that delighted young Evie. On the good days, Bess would let Evie use her art supplies, which were packed in a steamer trunk in the extra bedroom. Standing next to the brick asylum in the stark winter light, Evie thought about the day she and Bess explored a deserted cemetery and made up stories about the ancient corpses buried beneath the ground; as dusk fell, she remembered, their voices had become hushed and they had watched for signs of ghosts wandering among the headstones. Moonlight shined on their flushed faces when they finally left the cemetery.

The taxicab honked in the distance. She wiped the sap of the vine leaves on her coat and hurried to the front of the asylum. As they drove down the lane that curved away from the building, Evie turned to look out the back window. The sun was setting behind the hills and the asylum stood in shadow, imposing and ghostly in the purple light of

dusk. Turning back to look ahead of them, she was relieved to see the blue hood of the cab pointing away, pointing toward the station, where a train waited to take her back to Washington. She pulled a cigarette from her purse. Her hands shook as she lit it. She inhaled deep, pulling the smoke to the back of her throat; it snaked through her teeth on the exhale. She drew on the cigarette twice more for good measure, until she felt her nerves settle and the memories of Bess's screams were silenced in her mind.

CHAPTER SIX

Bess

Sometimes my young self visits me. I watch as she hovers and dips and dances before my eyes. I see her clearly: at the locked door, in front of the barred window, floating above my mattress, copper hair streaming behind her. A heart marked but still capable of hope. I tell her, 'I'm trapped in this old body, nothing to hope for any longer.' She glares at me. Accuses me. I tremble beneath her gaze.

When I was four, my father put me on my first horse. Da! I said. Get me down! I was so frightened there up high on the horse. How could he put me up so high, without the sureness of his familiar arms around me? I remember the way my heart beat double and the palms of my child hands sweated on the leather reigns, knuckles turned to white. Come now, don't be afraid. It's in yer blood. He whistled as he led us around the field. I watched in terror as he let go of the lead and released the horse, me still on its back. I wet myself a little and bit my lip so I didn't cry. He was so proud of me, da. When men stopped by and shared a cup, he told them how brave his wee one had been up there on the thoroughbred. Belly as full of pride as pints. They were new, his thoroughbreds, new additions to the farm. He was breaking them in.

I see his mustache and the way his eyes curved at the corners. I see the creases that framed his eyes like a sunburst, deep and furrowed by the time he died. His mouth was wide and firm, his lips full and strong, and he parted his hair in the middle so that it curled up like bookends on either side of the part. His ears rode low on the sides of his head, his nose was wide and rounded at the tip. I have his mouth.

He had such plans for me, me his firstborn, his only daughter.

I lie on my cot and wait for my younger self to appear. Sometimes it's just a tickle, a feeling, or the sound of a bird chirping loudly outside my window. And then I know she's near. I first saw her when Doc Wahlberg stitched my wrists while I lay there on the floor in my blue bedroom. I savored the pain of the needle puncturing my severed skin. Tasted the sweetness of death, even as I tasted the bitterness of returning to life. I saw the horror in my younger self's eyes when she looked at my wrists, when she realized what I had done. I watched hope leave her until she became faint, a featureless form hovering there behind him.

Or was that the day the asylum doctor removed my sutures, my wrists raw and puckered. When the bandage was removed, it was curled and stiff with dried blood. I choked on vomit at the sight of it. That was the first time they tied me up. They tell me I didn't stop screaming.

How is it possible? To not remember the sounds that came from my own mouth? What tricks does my mind play on me now?

I tell them I'm frightened of that younger self, that apparition with copper streaming hair. Of the spirit that hovers in the air, angry and full of despair. Keep her

away, I tell them. Keep her away. She reproaches me. Accuses me. Reminds me, pulling and tightening the bindings as she does.

The course of my life was set. Certain. Sitting high up on the thoroughbred when I was four, I was scared. From that vantage point I could see far in the distance. The fields stretched farther than I could ever have imagined. An endless swath of green. A foreboding came over my four-year-old self. I sensed all of the sadness coming my way like a dust storm rushing unchecked across the land.

I just wanted to feel my da's arms around me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Evelyn

Maybe it was numbness she was after. Sometimes she thought her drinking was meant to soften the edges, smooth the inconsistencies. Tonight, though, she wanted something more—the opposite of numbness. Leaving the asylum behind had been a relief. She didn't quite know what to do with it all, with Bess, with the asylum, with *a mother in a lunatic asylum*. She sipped on her third drink of the night and watched as Sam, her date, lifted a sweating glass to his mouth. The music grew louder.

A saxophone blared and smoke swirled in the air between them. Evie felt as if the pianist were hitting the keys right up her spine. Now the saxophone was singing, so strong it hit her in the gut. They were the only white faces in the club. Some nights there were others—when Muddy Waters came to town, or Big Joe Turner. Tonight the band was local. She watched as the man at the piano worked his hands, sweat dripping off his forehead, eyes closed. He felt the music. Felt it deep. Evie wished she could feel something, anything, as deep and as real. Sometimes her emotions felt close, but often they left before she could settle on them. She placed a cigarette between her lips, inhaled deeply, and raised her chin in the air to send smoke into the collective cloud hovering heavily above them.

“You sure we’re alright here? There’s only negroes.”

“Nobody cares. Everybody’s here for the same thing. The music,” Evie said, suddenly irritated that she’d brought him here. His nervousness took her out of the dream the musicians were creating up there on the stage.

“You want another?” he nodded toward her empty glass. Sure. There was something about the music that loosened her up. Another one would be good.

Evie watched him walk without his usual swagger toward the bar. He looked small in here. Take him out of his world and he lost some of his shine. She was unusually edgy, keyed up.

She sipped on the fresh Manhattan he put in front of her and looked around the room. Annette sat at a table with friends. She smiled when Annette looked her way. It’d been Annette who first brought her to a U Street club. A Chicago band had been in town. Annette had said that if the band were from Memphis or Chicago, you knew it was good. Evie remembered watching the couples dance close or far apart, shaking their hips and their shoulders, shaking their heads, arching their backs and bending forward, going wherever the music took them. She envied those dancers that first night. Envied the way they could find their way into the music. And she studied them, determined to find her own way in.

Sam sat back down in his seat and shook a new glass in the palm of his hand, ice cubes clinking against the sides. At work, he’d been relentless in asking her out. Evie couldn’t say why she said no so many times, but when she heard that a local band was playing that night, she finally said yes—only if he wanted to come along with her to the

club. It had been a bit of a challenge, a challenge she had secretly thought he would fail. Not many men from the GAO would have been willing, she was sure of that.

“You come here a lot?” he asked over the music. The tempo was fast, the energy palpable. If Evie reached out her hand in the space between them, she was sure that her hand would jump in time to the music.

She nodded.

“Annette brought me here a few months ago. There’s just nothing like it.” The four Manhattans were working their magic. Evie lit another cigarette and leaned her elbows on the table. “How about you? Where do you go after work?”

“You know, the usual spots with the guys. Nothing like here.”

When Evie turned her chin to blow smoke to the side, she saw Annette headed their way. Two girlfriends flanked either hip. They laughed at a shared joke and one of the girls pointed to the tall, heavysset saxophonist on stage. He was ripping it up, the horn wailing, notes sailing through the air. His shirt was unbuttoned so that Evie could see a ribbed undershirt grey with sweat. He swung the saxophone side to side, his cheeks billowing round and hard as if giant gumballs were lodged inside.

“Hey there Evie! You enjoying the music?” Annette said loudly to beat back the music. “Hey there, Sam.”

Evie noticed that Annette had changed out of her work clothes—now wearing a loose blouse and pleated skirt. Better for dancing. Candy red lipstick, like a wide generous smudge of chalk, spread across her lips.

“They’re *good* Annette. Almost as good as that Chicago band we caught a few weeks ago.”

Annette leaned back and placed a hand on each her friends’ shoulders.

“So this is Henrietta, we grew up together in Baltimore. And this is Racine. She works at the Treasury. You know each other?” They shook their heads no.

Evie tapped her cigarette out and stood to clasp their hands. Racine’s skin was smooth and damp, as if earlier lathered in Ponds, now made liquid from the heat of dancing. Henrietta held her hand stiff, her handshake unyielding. She had a story.

“It’s nice to meet you. And this is Sam. Sam Bates. He works with Annette and me at the GAO. He’s not a typist, of course. He’s an accountant.”

Sam stood so fast, his chair tipped behind him. He grabbed the chairback with one hand, while holding out the other hand to greet the girls.

“Nice to meet you both. Annette, good to see you. Some club, isn’t it?” He ran a hand through his shiny brown hair that hung low across his forehead.

Annette smiled and nodded her head slowly, as if she had an inside joke she were chewing on.

“Some kind of club is right. You must be some kind of crazy, like Evie here, to come all the way to our parts!”

“It’s been a nice evening so far,” he said with a quick smile.

Evie watched him sit back down, fast, and take a large sip of his scotch. She leaned in closer to Annette and her friends.

“Why don’t more people know about this place? There’s nothing so real in Dupont or Logan Circle. In those places it’s all Big Band and crooning that puts you to sleep.”

Annette turned to Racine.

“You see, I told you she got it.”

Racine and Henrietta laughed and the group became more visibly relaxed, continuing to chit-chat until one of them mentioned how parched she was, how she wanted a drink before hitting the floor again. When they left, she watched them walk in one synchronized movement toward the bar, teetering, all of them, on high heels, legs exposed below full skirts that moved silky and smooth, like an ocean wave folding onto a beach. Evie admired

“That was awkward,” Sam said.

“It’s no different than seeing someone from work at one of the bars close by the GAO. We just happen to be the ones who’ve travelled to get here.”

Sam nodded his head. Maybe giving thought to what she said.

Her glass was empty again, and she felt loose and relaxed, content even, sitting in the familiar space, music weaving through their conversation. Sam got up to refill his drink and Evie noticed he had another Manhattan in his hand when he returned. It would be an interesting night, she thought, when the smooth heat of the Manhattan coated her throat again. Her head began to spin.

The bassist started a new song. A drawn out, mournful melody rolled up and out of the saxophone. A clarinet chimed in with a high, slow thread. Gentle, carefully, not

overpowering the sax. It brought tears to her eyes. She watched as couples took to the floor. She felt an overwhelming sense of desire. For what, she wasn't sure. The heat of it made its way through her, from head to toe. She pulled at Sam's shirtsleeve, pulled him behind her as she took to the floor. She felt him behind her and the desire grew bigger, filling the space around her. They moved between the other couples until they were close to the stage. She smelled perfume and sweat and smoke. She pulled Sam close to her so that their hips moved in time, like the other couples around them—instructing him, inducting him into the world of the Blues.

She hiked her skirt high and closed her eyes and swayed with the music. Sam pulled her closer and pushed hard against her. Tears came to her eyes because she now felt everything; the music a tonic. She smelled Sam, cedar and musk, before she felt his lips on hers. She opened her eyes and saw that his were closed as he kissed her. He was grinding against her more forcefully. The song ended with a note that dropped suddenly, landing her back on the dance floor, the wood hard beneath her feet. Evie felt like crying; the dream had ended too soon. They broke apart and made their way to their table.

“Let's get out of here,” Sam said, pulling his jacket off the back of his chair.

Evie followed him out of the club, carefully watching her steps, drunk by that point and still out of breath. She heard one last run on the piano that was so clear, so precise, so beautiful, it almost hurt. She'd had a lot to drink.

Out in the crisp night air, she sobered up a bit. Sam put his coat around her shoulders and held out a hand to call a taxi.

“Your place?” Sam asked as they slid into the taxi.

She made it a policy not to sleep with co-workers, but the Manhattans were still coursing through her bloodstream, softening the edges in her mind, weakening her usual resolve. She could still feel his kiss and way their bodies moved together on the dance floor. Almost, she almost said yes, but she couldn't lose her job.

“How about some coffee? I've had too much to drink.”

She watched him hide his disappointment.

“Sure. There's an all-night diner a few blocks up from your place.”

He leaned forward to give the driver instructions. The driver looked in the rearview mirror at Evie, eyes dark and damp in the streetlight. She looked away, feeling ashamed. Of what, she wasn't sure. Of the desire that had overcome her? Did she wear it on her face? Or of the way Sam looked at her, obvious and eager?

Sam put his hand on her thigh and leaned in to kiss her. It wasn't a kiss with a question; it was a kiss with purpose, with entitlement. Evie felt the desire rush out of her, leaving her cold and empty. The taxi cut through the dark streets, taking them out of the U Street Corridor. Outside the taxi window, she watched couples walking hand in hand. Women in heels, women in white gloves, some with pin hats on carefully arranged hair. Men in dark suits with equally dark hats atop their heads. Puffs of warm breath in front of their faces with every exhale. She watched as one couple stopped in front of a jewelry store and kissed. A kiss of promise.

In the diner, they sat across from each other, hands encircling their respective cups of coffee.

“Damn Evie. You surprised me back there in the club,” he looked at her with a crooked smile.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean. Damn. You know how to move. And that music. It’s something. Can’t help but loosen up and enjoy yourself.”

Evie was quiet as she sipped her coffee. This couldn’t work. Co-workers, seeing each other every day, dating. How could she let him down gently?

“My mother’s in an asylum.” She swallowed hard, wishing she could swallow the words back down the moment she spoke.

“Holy shit. Are you kidding me?” He sat back in his seat.

It must have been the Manhattans, but she kept talking.

“She’s always been a little different, you know. I never knew if I’d come home to her crying or full of energy and cooking up a storm, or sometimes, she’d just get a wild hair and we’d go on these trips to the ocean or to the mountains or she’d be out in the garden all day, still working in the moonlight after I’d gone to bed. My daddy, he died last spring. She tried to kill herself a few months ago.” She started to cry and then she couldn’t hold back loud choking sobs. Tears, emotions that had been stored up for months, just waiting for an opening. Her crying was messy: her nose ran, her eyes stung, and her blouse was damp with sweat. A perfect way to let him down. Well, maybe not so gently. More like kicking him on the way down, scaring him off. She didn’t know how to do this. Have a conversation in a diner, with a man. How to let someone in gracefully. She’d made a mess of it.

Sam handed her a napkin and signaled for the waitress to bring water. He rubbed his hands together and waited for Evie to stop crying.

“What’s your family like?” she finally said, wiping the corners of her eyes with the napkin and taking deep breaths to calm down. She pulled a tissue from her purse and blew her nose.

“Plenty crazy, just not locked up. The usual: a boozy aunt, a brother who’s a disappointment, a sister who’s married and has kids. A mom who keeps up with everyone at the country club, a dad who works all the time.” He laughed. “But seriously. That’s something. You get to see her much?”

“I’ve seen her once. Took the train down,” she said. “Home is central Virginia. Where’d you grow up?”

“Connecticut. I can tell you for a fact that there’s no Blues in Connecticut. At least not where my family lives.”

“My daddy told me once that the soul lives in the blues. Big band, it’s all right, he said, but in the Blues the instruments sing the soul. He was as white as you can get. Norwegian. He really appreciated the music coming out of the colored communities. These clubs in the city, they’re nothing like the local haunts my daddy found around home.”

“I thought you were Italian or something, with your dark hair. Is your mother Italian?”

Evie shook her head no; it was a question she was used to hearing.

“Believe it or not, my mama has red hair—well some of it’s gone white now. Daddy said a few of her people were dark Irish. I must’ve gotten it from them.”

“What brought you to Washington?”

“Same as most girls, I suppose. There aren’t many jobs where I’m from. My school friends are married now, but I guess I knew that I wanted to live in a big city—at least for awhile. Pay my own way, live alone, so I can figure things out. Does it seem shocking to you?”

“Somewhat,” he said, smiling. “But more girls are working now. Did you go to college?”

“I took a few classes, but it was a stretch for my parents. I wanted to support myself as soon as possible. I took secretarial classes and then came here.”

“I wasn’t given an option. Our family anthem was: *The Bates don’t quit. We are proud to stand on Walnut Hill. Tufts college all the way.* My dad went there. My grandfather went there. My uncles. I didn’t have a choice, y’know? It was fine. A good education and all that.”

Evie watched a flush make its ways across his face. He ran a hand absently over his chin, rubbing it back and forth.

“Would you have chosen a different path?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I like to build things, do things with my hands. My mother’s father was a cabinetmaker. Came over from Germany. I always liked the sweet smell of his workshop. Cedar, pine, oak. The way he could make something functional,

something beautiful from slabs of wood. Accounting is all right, though. A solid career. How can I really know any different now?"

He signaled for the waitress to bring more coffee.

"How can we ever know?" Evie said softly, placing her empty cup back on its saucer and watching the brown liquid swirl as it filled the cup.

The alcohol buzz had faded and she suddenly felt cold sitting in the vinyl booth; a chill made its way through her thin blouse and nylons. She wished she were back in the warm, smoky club, still enveloped by the music, where things made sense, where things felt easier.

Later, when he walked her to the door outside her building, he leaned in to kiss her, more hesitantly this time, which Evie appreciated. The kiss was kind, and she was surprised to discover that she wanted more. An ache settled over her, a familiar ache, a feeling that something was just out of reach, that something was holding her back. She watched him disappear around the block and turn onto P Street. She was struck suddenly by the idea that he might tell their co-workers about Bess. Washington wasn't Brownsville—she reminded herself of that. Yet, still, her indiscretion at the coffee shop worried her.

A curtain moved on the landlady's first floor window when Evie turned her key in the lock. She was a busybody, but harmless. Evie was certain that she'd seen men leaving her apartment in the early morning hours, but she'd never said a word. Just kept to herself, occasionally asking if Evie had a "special man" yet. Evie would say no and just smile. She didn't mind her nosiness; at least there weren't silly rules. Some girls she

knew had curfews and landladies that equated renting a room with running a convent, or guarding a virgin until a prince could claim his prize.

She kicked off her pumps and reached for the clips of her garter, bunched her skirt up around her hips, and pushed her nylons off her legs. She blushed when she remembered the way she had pulled her skirt up on the dance floor, probably far enough for someone to see the edges of the garter. It was the music. The dancing. The way those instruments touched her soul and released something real. Most days she felt like she was searching, cut off from the lives she saw others living. On the nights she danced at the clubs, she felt in step, in flow, floating effortlessly on the notes. It was easy to forget about Brownsville, about her mother. About learning to make small talk with men who might take her seriously.

She changed into her nightgown and stood at the bathroom sink while she removed her make-up. Her dark reflection stared back at her. She ran a finger over the bridge of her nose, which was long with a strong ridge; over her dark eyebrows, which grew thick and straight; and over her lips, wide and thin. Italian? She could look Italian. When she was a young girl, some of the boys at her school taunted her with “EYE-talian,” but when Harley heard about it, he had words with the principal. She sometimes heard them snickering behind her on the playground, and when she’d turn to look at them, they’d mouth the word, while pointing to their eyes, to be sure she got their meaning.

Her toothbrush slipped out of her hand, landing on the tile floor. When she bent to pick it up, unbidden—unwelcome—images rushed in: Bess, finally acknowledging her,

yelling her name from the back of the sheriff's car; Evie, holding rags on Bess's wrists, Bess's unconscious body heavy as a corpse on the bedroom floor between Evie's legs; Bess, pale and lifeless lying on the pink tile in the bathroom, a thin stream of blood seeping into the grout.

The apartment was cold. Cool air whistled between the thin leaded windows and poorly plastered walls. Evie walked listlessly—her steps heavy and clumsy—into the bedroom. She slid open a dresser drawer. Nestled between her scarves was a tiny bundle. A narrow scrap of pink towel, tinged brown in places. She put the bundle in her hand and slowly unraveled one end until a glint of metal made its way onto her palm. The edge of the razor was stained a dull and crusty brown. She ran warm water over the razor and patiently picked at the congealed blood with a fingernail. The effects of the earlier drinking left her movements easy and loose, but her head foggy. The blood flaked in the sink like flecks of old paint. Water swirled in slow circles as the drain holes sucked the dark specks away. When it was clean, she took her time drying the razor on a fresh dishtowel.

As if in a dream or sleepwalking, she padded quietly into the dark kitchen. There was enough moonlight to see the knobs on the transistor radio that sat on the counter. She turned the receiver knob until a quiet river of sultry notes and voice rushed into the room. *You haunt me with reveries of days gone by...you taunt me with memories that never die..in my solitude.* Evie wanted to understand the pain that drove Bess, the pain that contorted her life. In the dark of her kitchen, Billie's voice as her guide, Evie drew the razor close and bunched up her nightgown to expose a full, naked thigh. Her thoughts

raced. The evening could have gone better. She'd had too much to drink. Her confession to Sam left her vulnerable, exposed. It had been foolish to blurt it out. And, she couldn't get Bess and her suicide attempt out of her mind. She slid the sharp edge over the inside of her leg. Metal met skin. Sharp, stinging pain. She closed her eyes to dull the smarting in her eyes. *You taunt me...memories that never die.* There was something comforting in the pain, it crystallized her thoughts, brought her more fully into the room. She lifted the razor and placed it on the outside of her thigh, curious to see if it would feel the same. She cut a thin line and watched a trickle of blood weave its way down her leg. She imagined the trickle joining Bess's blood on the pink tile, intertwining, merging into one stream of pain. Her thin attempt at recreating Bess's experience was just that: thin. She didn't have Bess's courage.

Light streamed through the window and lit up the telephone that hung on the wall. Evie put the razor down and picked up the receiver. She dialed the number for her childhood home and listened as it rang and rang without end. A drop of blood made its way down her calf and foot and settled, sticky and warm, between her toes. *In my solitude.* Billie's voice brought her back into the room. She hung up the receiver and walked back to the bathroom, where she used a damp cloth to wipe up the blood. She couldn't say why, but the two cuts made her feel as real as the music did at the clubs. She thought about Bess, about the way she'd slashed her wrists, certain and decisive, choosing suicide as the way to die. What she really wanted to know was why had she been willing to leave her? To leave Evie behind?

A despondency settled over her, and Evie picked up the stained scrap of towel and wrapped the razor back in its folds. The despondency followed her into the bedroom, where she tucked the razor back into the dresser drawer, and it wove itself through her dreams, dreams that alternated between feelings of desire and feelings of dread and hopelessness, a confusing maze that left her spinning in her sleep.

The next morning, a migraine tugged at the edges of her vision and waves of dizziness hit her whenever she stood. She couldn't shake the feeling of having been battered, tattered and torn, lurched from side to side, all night long. A sea journey through emotional memory. She wanted time to regroup. Curled up beneath the blankets, her mind wandered through childhood memories. Bess dressing up for a night out in Charlottesville with Harley. Bess growing colorful gardens so fantastical, so wild and unyielding that Evie had believed she had the ability to spin magic from her green thumbs the way the miller's daughter spun gold for Rumpelstiltsken. Wading into memories of Bess's darkness was more difficult. Plates crashing and breaking on the floor. Raised voices and accusations. Bess's disappearances, her wandering days. Harley had been the centripetal center to her mother's force. He kept her from spinning too far from earth. Evie feared that she didn't have the ability to keep Bess tethered to life.

She hardly left the bed for two days. When the sun began to set Sunday evening, Evie reached for a bottle of bourbon that sat high on an open shelf in her kitchen. *Now here it is three o' clock in the mornin' And I can't even close my eyes.* A man she'd met at a bar one night had come back the next day, the bottle of bourbon in hand, expecting

something. Evie didn't know what to say when she saw him at the door. It had been a drunken tryst, an unsatisfying and slightly embarrassing exercise she had hoped to put out of her mind after he left in the morning. He'd been clumsy and his kisses had not only covered her mouth, but her chin and upper lip as well. She shuddered, remembering the way her face had stung from the salty saliva before she asked him to leave. When he stood in her doorway on that later day, she thanked him for the gift, said it was nice to meet him, and tried to close the door as quickly as she could. But he had lodged his foot between the door and the doorframe and leaned into her apartment. The menacing look on his face had scared her. She managed to push him back and closed and latched the door, her heart beating fast in her chest.

She had stopped going to the bar where she met him, and didn't see him again. The bourbon had sat on the shelf in the kitchen, its brown liquid reminding her of the one-night mistake, the huge error in judgment. She was more careful, more selective after that day, unable to forget his jeering, menacing face at her door.

The bourbon slid down her throat, burning a little. She spun the brown liquid in a circle at the bottom of her glass and thought about the Manhattans she'd had at the club, about Sam, about dancing, about how the music filled up all of the emptiness, no sign of Nelson County or Brownsville. Or Bess. She felt a twinge of guilt. She ran her fingers over the still tender cuts just beginning to heal on her thigh.

The music, she decided, was a language her body understood. Did her father feel the same way? Had he lost himself in music to escape their homelife? Whiskey was his drink. Whiskey he kept tucked away in a pewter flask in an inside jacket pocket. All the

men drank whiskey in Nelson County, a language between men. Ya want a taste? Sure is good fire-starter. That's a smooth mule kick. He was never flashy about it, never made a big deal over it. But there were times when he went in search of some "soul music" and came home with whiskey on his breath. Ole Man Wiley's whiskey most likely, his favorite local brew, a holdover from Prohibition days. Joe Baker's dad drank it too. Joe. Joe had seen her fall apart on that day. Watched her mother come undone in a sheriff's car. She remembered the way he patiently slid his knife around an apple, cut it into slices, and placed it in front of her. Here. Eat something. She could hardly get it down, her throat so swollen with tears.

Evie called in sick on Monday; by then the hangover and migraine had extended for three days. The bourbon didn't help things. She determined to find a way to leave her bed, her apartment, to leave her thoughts and turn things around. If she didn't, she was certain she would disappear.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bess

I could have told em who took me there. Who kept me trapped between the wide poplar trunks. Left me there on the ground to die. But I couldn't make the words come out. All I could think over and over was: pin the tail on the donkey, pin the tail on the donkey. On the donkey that's nailed to the tree in Penny's backyard. I didn't get a piece of birthday cake. The three layer cake covered in white puffy icing and spring violets. Later I might tell what else I remember. Not today.

She doesn't quit washing me. She rubs me real hard. It hurts. I'm pink all over. Even down there. I've made her mad. Don't cry Ma. I didn't mean to. Promise. I just wanted to pick spring flowers for Penny. Cross my heart.

Scared to close my eyes: I see his face, spit at the corners of his mouth, bristles of beard moving when he talks through those yellow teeth. Close my eyes and feel cold mud on my neck and the sharp point of a twig in my back. The smell of damp, rotting leaves. I see my white satin hair bow, stained, on the ground. Scared to go into the woods.

He sings off-key. That's how I know he's there, in the house. When I hear his brogue, his loud voice, I pee my pants. I scrub them real good in the basin with a bar of

soap, so she won't know how bad I am. I hide under the bed and wrap the green and pink quilt around me.

My tummy hurts, I tell them, and they bring me supper in my room. I can hear all of them down there, sitting and eating and drinking. I use my fingers to keep my eyes open when they want to close. I hear them talking about Éire.

The grandparents who live in Connemara. I imagine them with kind smiles and warm hugs, the kind of people I can tell. The kind of people who sing story and weave tales. Who can weave a world that includes someone like me.

Sometimes at night, she comes to my room when she thinks I'm sleeping. She tells me about the fairies of Éire. Only the children can see them, she says. I hold my breath and lie real still, so she won't stop talking. "When yer bad, real bad, you see, the fairies, they make sure yer surrounded by magic. They protect ya. Tomorrow we'll look for a hawthorn tree and the moss where the fairies live. Maybe if we find 'em here, y'll be alright again."

I wait all day the next day, but we don't look for the tree. She jist scrubs at the clothes on the washing board and cries. She lost another one. I hear them talking about it. Something wrong with her tummy, it can't keep them in right. There's a big bright moon outside my window. I look hard to see its face and draw it in my diary.

It's my birthday soon. She tells me to quit asking her when. Maybe I can have a garden party. Something fancy. We'll all wear dresses and drink tea with our pinkies in the air.

It's my ninth birthday. But we're not celebrating. Da says she doesn't feel well. She's sick from something makes her cry all the time. I ride on the back of Maggie while da holds the lead and whistles to her. I like the feel of her strong, smooth muscles and the way her head bobs up and down. She's seems taller when I'm up high on her! I can see all around the field from up there. When I take a deep breath, the smell of leather fills my nose. He sings *My Wild Irish Rose* and smokes his pipe while we walk round and round. His tweed cap leaves his face in the shadows. I wonder, does he cry the way she cries?

When Da tells me that Uncle Tom and Aunt Birdie are coming with a present, I can't help it, I cry. He gives me a good wallop on account of my UNGRATEFULNESS. They don't come over after all. I put myself to bed while Da works out in the barn. She doesn't come out of her room all day. When I walk by her door, she's a dark shape on a dark bed in a dark room, her room. I could of swore I heard her whisper something. I crept up to the door and stood so still I was afraid my breathing was too loud. I heard her sigh and turn over on the bed—it creaked loud. I wondered what words were sitting in there with her. I wanted to tell her everything would be okay.

I didn't play with Penny again. The smell of wet leaves scare me. They tell me to stop screaming in my sleep. Hush now. That's enough. Get a hold of yerself cailín óg.

One Christmas, St. Nicholas came to the house. I heard his knock, but was afraid to open the door. When they opened it, I saw the devil standing next to him. He waved his chains at me and dark eyes peered out from his black face covered in coal. I knew he had come for me. I could tell him that I already knew who the devil was. "Damn German

neighbors,” Da said after he closed the door. I couldn’t stop my shaking. I knew he had come for me.

But those are memories. Shape shifting in my mind. Life is bending in here, so that I don’t know what’s today and what’s the past. I thought I heard my Da’s fiddle. But how could that be. He’s long dead. I ache with this thought. Endings. My ending is near. There is much to take care of, but this fogginess, this in-between space where I find myself, makes it hard for me to decide. What do I tell Evelyn? Evelyn. The only thing good to come of my life. But is that fair? Harley, he was good. A good man, a flawed man. He found me Evelyn; he made her happen. No one but Harley believed I could be a mother.

CHAPTER NINE

Evelyn

Washington was quiet in the middle of the day. Empty train cars slid smoothly over the electric rails with so little weight to impede progress. Evie took one to the National Museum, one of her favorite places to explore. Whole worlds were revealed: bones and stones and photographs of exotic places, wide-eyed animals, frozen in time, often mid-step. She carried a sketchbook in her bag and planned to spend some of her time drawing; drawing had always grounded her as a child. Wandering aimlessly, relaxed and relieved to be out of her apartment, she peered into cases, looking for something to inspire her. A butterfly and moth exhibit extended across the top floor. Tiny pins held wings spread wide on cards. Monarchs and skippers, firetips, longtails, and flashers. Who knew there were so many of each kind? She studied the Canadian Tiger Swallowtail in detail. Its ebony edges and red spotted abdomen, the bright yellow-green of its wings. She imagined it resting safely on a tree branch, camouflaged among the flora of its home. Running her finger over the glass to trace its outline, Evie committed to memory the pattern of its wings.

It was lunchtime when she sat down on a bench to pull out the sketchbook. Most of the school children had left on buses already. The cool marble of the museum collected

the echoes of distant footsteps and the soft glow of the lights that hung along the corridor. She began to sketch the Canadian Swallowtail in the notebook, hesitantly at first, erasing and rubbing off the edges when the lines didn't match her memory. When she was satisfied with the outline, she began to add more detail, the blue smudges at the base of its back, the red spots near the bottom of its abdomen and the tear drop shape so delicately rendered by nature at the lowest point, and the intricate patterning of its wings. She wrote below the image "Canadian Tiger Swallowtail. Lives in British Columbia and on the Vancouver Islands." Closing the sketchbook, she leaned her head against a column that stood next to the bench, her eyes closed. The cool marble felt good against her forehead, where a tension headache still pulled at her temples. Her biology teacher in high school had encouraged her in her nature drawing. She'd carried her notebook on field trips and to the University when she accompanied her father in the summers between terms. Days spent fishing in her daddy's boat on the river, running a pencil over blank paper to pass the time, replicating the beauty she spied in nature, had always brought her a sense of peace. She'd bring this one to Bess. She'd like that.

"You can't draw with your eyes closed."

A petite, elderly woman stood before her, her back stooped in an s-curve, hands on her round hips. Her thin hair was pulled back by hairpins. The only adornment to her utilitarian, striped cotton dress was a small porcelain brooch at her neck. She wore no other jewelry.

"Show me what you have there in your sketchbook," she said.

Just behind Evie, on the floor below, museum workers were installing a new skeleton; laughter and conversation floated up to the second floor. Evie looked down at her sketchbook, at its tattered cardboard cover, unadorned and smudged with pencil. Opening herself up to criticism, to potential judgment had always seemed a pointless exercise, and she rarely shared her sketches. She leafed through the pages until she spotted the swallowtail drawing, then held the pages open to the stranger, her heart pounding.

“Why that’s quite nice! Do you always use color?” she asked. “I’m Agnes, by the way. You are?”

“Evie. Nice to meet you.” When Evie stood, she noticed Agnes’s watery blue eyes hidden behind her wire-rimmed glasses. Her mouth was sunken and lips thin from age. Creases at the corners of her mouth marked a lifetime of expression. Laughter or cynicism?

“I do like to use color,” Evie said.

She felt as if she towered over Agnes’s petite form. Yet, Agnes’s presence was so strong, so assured, Evie felt more like a schoolgirl standing in front of a teacher or principal.

“Yet, the use of charcoal or pencils with varying hardness can allow for a subtler rendering. Color has its place too. Very nice.” She handed the notebook back to Evie, and studied her. “Come find me any time you’d like to share those drawings of yours. Just ask for Agnes. They’ll know where to find me.”

“You work here?”

“Yes I do. I draw grasses.”

“Grasses?”

“Grasses—their anatomy, their classifications, their regions, their habitats. I document all of it. I can tell you that while your swallowtail there may flit among the flowers and grasses of Canada, it prefers the woodlands. They lay their eggs on the branches of the Wild Black or Choke Cherry trees. Sometimes the Tulip tree. When the caterpillar first hatches, its first meal is its own egg. You won’t find them around here. Only in the northern part of the continent. Here we’ve got the Eastern Swallowtail. Not as beautiful, if you ask me,” she said. “You sound southern. You from down south somewhere?”

“Virginia. Not far from here, a few hours, but as soon as you head south from Washington, there’s no doubt you’re in the south. Have you been to Canada? To study grasses?”

“Oh my, yes. I’ve been to Canada, Panama, Brazil, anywhere I can find new grasses to study. If you come back one day, I’ll show you my pictures from my travels—and drawings. Keep it up. You have a fine hand.”

Evie felt her face flush.

“So nice to meet you.”

“You come see me! And don’t be afraid of charcoal!”

“I will,” Evie promised. She watched Agnes walk, stooped yet surefooted, down the hall. A woman unafraid of life. A woman who had lived and travelled, who had seen the world. Someone satisfied with life.

She sat back down and rested her hands on her notebook. A career in drawing. Not just a hobby, not just something private or a way of escaping from bigger concerns—concerns like what the other schoolgirls were saying, or whether Bess was having a good day or a bad day, whether she'd done something to bring on Bess's erratic moods. Whether she could climb into the quiet of her drawings, into the beauty of the natural world she saw around her, insulated and safe. Whether she could find that same quiet inside herself. She wondered, did Agnes feel exposed with her drawings so public?

Evie thumbed through her older sketches. A Rock Creek Park landscape, the bank of the Potomac. A female thrush. Spring violets. A red cardinal on a winter day, regal and bright on an exposed tree branch. A sketch of a saxophonist, strokes thick and quickly rendered; she had erased and redrawn the lines again and again, maintaining fast strokes each time. She had wanted the energy of his music to come across. Evie turned to the swallowtail again and ran her fingers over the pencil lines, smoothing a jagged line on one of its wings. She took out the pencils again. On the next page, she sketched a green caterpillar with sharp jagged teeth. At the point of a tooth, she drew a shell coming apart, broken and fragmented. Using the edge of her pencil, she shaded shell pieces, smoothing the lines with the side of her finger, rubbing until the shell took form. She sat, satisfied, on the hard bench for a few moments.

Her back began to feel stiff and sharp pains shot down her hip. She twisted to stretch her spine and noticed a large, colorful poster: Indian Costume Exhibit. Come Explore The Tribes Of The Americas Through Costume. A lost memory suddenly resurfaced: a dark haired woman who used to bring her Indian dolls and necklaces when

she was small. At the University, on a blanket, the woman picnicking with Evie and Harley. A University woman, he'd said. Did he really say that? Did it really happen? You can call me Helen. Feeling warm and content while playing on the grass, the adult conversation a quiet hum behind her. Memory was a funny thing. Evie didn't know whether to trust the memory fragments, but she did wonder if she searched the house in Brownsville, if she would find one of those dolls. In the corner of the poster, she noticed a woman's photo, Professor Boehm. Dark and stern, the shadows made it difficult for her to make out her face. She couldn't remember the features of the woman of the picnics. As a child, the dolls and jewelry had enchanted her, eclipsing the woman herself. Shadowed in her memories in the same way the professor's face was shadowed on the poster. Evie would have been quite small the last time she saw her.

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The train car was filled to capacity on the way home. Women in skirts and dresses, heels, long a-line coats and gloves. Men in suits. Dark suits with dark hats and heavy woolen coats. Like ants, like factory workers, all in uniform, dressed alike, likely government workers like her. She thought of the swallowtail's lifeless form pinned to a card, preserved, stuck forevermore mid-motion beneath the museum lights. Its home, its rightful place a forest filled with evergreen and deciduous trees; a forest edge where it could soar over grasses and fields of wildflowers, catching Pacific and mountain breezes. Sipping nectar, flitting about, free. At home with the other butterflies that had also

recently emerged from chrysalis forms, delicate and fragile. She remembered her father telling her that the first days of a butterfly's life were most crucial. Even the slightest contact could mean death. So fragile and vulnerable, yet later able to fly among the trees and grasses, dipping and dancing.

Eating your own eggshell. Surviving.

She finished her workweek in a trancelike, mechanical state, counting down the hours until she left for Staunton again. Sam smiled and waved when he walked past her desk, but didn't stop. He was friendly enough. She pushed away thoughts of their dancing, their intimate kiss on the dance floor. It had been meaningless. A product of the music, the alcohol. Still, his distance left her feeling hollow and sad, an ache from that night reappeared.

The night before she was scheduled to leave for Staunton, for the asylum, she took a taxi to a new club on U Street. Alone. She saw the looks people gave her and shrugged them off. After her first Manhattan she didn't care. After her second, she took to the dance floor and danced, sometimes alone, sometimes with strangers. After her third, she was joined at the table by a few men who offered to buy her another drink. Only one. Another? No, she said, she had a train to catch in the morning. She remembered them helping her into the taxi, and the way the music stitched itself into her soul, calming her like the gentle wings of a butterfly moving beneath her skin.

CHAPTER TEN

Bess

In the shadows of the asylum I walk with the others. White apparitions, partial souls, orphans, all of us split from our centers. In the middle of the green space I see the remains of a garden. I imagine running my fingers through the dirt until it fills in the cracks. Seeps into my emptiness. I see peony bushes and black-eyed Susans and sage. I see bees, wings spinning, hovering, sipping nectar from the blooms. I blink. In its stead, I see the empty winter mound. Weeds, neglect. A botanical graveyard. Grief seeps into my bones.

Memories flutter at the edges of my mind. Some are lost forever. They slip away even as I try to catch them. Remember, they say. I see little Evelyn, dark and vulnerable, skipping through tall grass. I fear she'll disappear, that she she'll skip beyond me and no longer be mine.

I feel frightened now that I'm outside, now that locked doors don't hold me in. The world feels too vast. Great spaces have always frightened me. Spaces, I've sensed, which hold the pain others shed as easily as snakes shed skin. They move beyond, light and free. That discarded pain. It pulls at me. Pulls me into great spaces. The winter sun blinds me and I stumble. I fear I will drown in the collective pain of this place.

A memory. I am twelve. I ride an old and patient mare. Da holds its lead. I see the top of his weathered hat, the leathery skin of his neck and I want to reach out and tap him on his back. I want to whisper into his ear, “Can you ever love me again?” We walk down the trail that leads to a creek. We skip rocks while the mare laps the cool water. Da whistles *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. When his back is turned, I walk into the creek and feel cool water rush into my boots and suck at my wool socks. My long skirt fans beside me. I wonder, if I go deeper, will my skirt take flight like a hot air balloon? Water fills my nose and washes over my closed eyelids. I sink, heavy and weighted, muddy earth pulling me close. I feel his hand on my neck and suddenly I am exposed, chilled and wet in the cool air. His anger is silent, but palpable. It accompanies us on the trail back home.

We walk in circles, single file, through the green space of the asylum. The only piece of living on the outside we are allowed. I see a town laid out below. And a train track that brings Evelyn to me. How old am I now? These are the memories that elude me. What I do know: Harley is gone. I see dormant lilac bushes scaling, untended, the brick walls of this orphanage of split souls.

The woman before me has a braid that trails the length of her back, white and thick and coarse. She gestures into the space above her; incoherent words reach me. I can't make sense of them. A young girl walks at the front of the line. Her gown is unbuttoned, immodestly. Her lush, full breast pushes through the linen as if straining to be free. The edges of her hem are tied so that her thighs, young and lithe and muscular, are exposed. I see her touch the male nurse and cock her head to the side so that she is

looking at him through half lids. This gesture. With this gesture I know for certain what they are. Lovers. I turn away from the sight of them.

The staff places blankets on the lawn. I sit close to a mound. A flower garden once. I touch my thinning hair. The bald spots shock me. I knead my fingers into my scalp. I dig, nail cutting skin, so that when I lower my hands I see blood on the tips of my fingers. I place my lips on my fingers and a metallic taste fills my mouth. Proof that I'm still alive—not just an apparition, a phantom in a white gown.

I start to dig in the dirt beside me. The earth moves beneath my hands. I want to tend a garden. To dig, to prune until I find my center.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Evelyn

Bess looked diminished. Evie watched her walk toward her, her gait fragile and slightly off balance, a nurse by her side to keep her steady. Sunlight from the diamond paned windows played across her face, thin crisscross shadows across her gaunt cheeks. The light flashed across her round forehead. She'd lost weight and her hair was unkempt, curls stringy and heavy. A dark skinned young man, dressed in white pants and long white shirt, skipped down the spiral staircase with a large box in his hands. When he saw Evie, he tucked his chin to his chest and lowered his eyes to scan the floor. She shifted her weight to her other foot and pushed the edge of her nail against a cuticle and then pulled at a hangnail on another finger until it came loose. Her finger stung.

When Bess finally reached her, Evie didn't move. She didn't know the rules of this world. Should she embrace her? Bess reached for Evie first, circling her thin arms around Evie's waist, delicate, frail, childlike, in the way she embraced her. She smelled like ammonia and sweat, not the peonies and roses of Evie's childhood.

"Hi mama," she returned the hug with one arm. She had never grown used to the way she towered over Bess, not since she first surpassed her in height during middle school, a gawky and uncomfortable time for Evie. Most of the girls at her school had still

been petite and childlike, not changing until high school. But Evie had watched with horror as her body morphed and changed into a woman's body, practically overnight. Large-boned, they told her; she would have made a good basketball player had she been born male. Her adolescent growth spurt fell during that unfortunate age when every change felt like a disaster; her once sleek, straight hair grew wiry and stiff, and she spent much of her adolescence trying to soften it. Now she kept it cut short, a sleek bob just below her chin that satisfied her with its simplicity.

Evie looked at the nurse.

“May I have a comb please? And some soap and a cloth? I'd like to take her to the washroom.”

The nurse, a stocky woman with masculine features, frowned.

“I'll have to check with my supervisor. We like to keep all of the patients within eyesight,” she said. “To keep them safe, of course.”

She disappeared just as Bess released her hold on Evie. Evie removed her coat and gloves and placed the gloves in her purse. They settled on a bench at the foot of the spiral staircase. Bess tugged nervously at her hair, pulling it straight and then stroking it gently with her bony fingers. Another nurse, petite and neatly dressed, sat behind a desk, watching them. A large black telephone sat in front of her, squat and fat and self-important. The chill of the winter day made its way into the asylum. When Evie touched the marble on the wall behind them, it was cold and unyielding beneath her fingers.

“Are you cold? Would you like to wear my coat?” Evie moved to wrap the coat around Bess's shoulders. Bess coughed and Evie thought she heard a rattle in her chest.

“That’s not allowed,” said a voice behind the desk. Now that Evie was seated she could no longer see the nurse. The extra drinks from the night before had left her mouth dry, like a mouth full of chalk, and a heavy fatigue tugged at her.

“A man stole some buttons and tried to choke on them,” Bess whispered, her voice hoarse.

Evie wrapped an arm protectively around Bess. She felt her tremble beneath her arm. She was frail, like a child.

“What do you think goes on up there?” Evie asked.

Bess looked up the staircase. Natural light flooded the stairs from a large and stately window at the top.

“That’s where they decide when to take our memories away,” Bess said.

“What do you mean?”

“They erase the bad ones from our minds.”

“Oh mama. That’s ridiculous.” This was the second time Bess had talked about her memories. Evie would ask a nurse or doctor what she was talking about.

The first nurse reappeared. She swung a heavy set of keys from her hands.

“Alright. You have permission, but I’ll have to supervise.”

They followed her to a locked door just behind the front desk. A small bathroom with a cracked sink and toilet stood behind the door. After they all squeezed in, the nurse closed and locked the door behind them. It was tight.

Ignoring the nurse, Evie began to comb Bess's tangled hair in front of the mirror, wetting the comb occasionally. The cool water stung her finger where she had pulled the hangnail.

"Remember when you used to comb my hair?" Evie asked Bess. Bess stared blankly into the mirror, examining her face. Was this the first time she'd seen her reflection since she'd been admitted? "I remember when you used to get frustrated because my hair wouldn't stay in the braids you spent so much time plaiting; it was too slippery, too thick. Do you remember mama?"

"Come on now. Don't take all day. You only have an hour with her today," the nurse barked.

"An hour? That's not much time."

"Well, you'll have to talk to this one here. She's not been behaving herself and she's lost privileges. Her visits have been modified."

Bess lowered her head and pulled at her hair, alternately twisting and smoothing strands that hung around her face.

Evie reached around her to turn on hot water. She ran the cloth beneath the faucet and rubbed it with soap until it foamed. She lifted Bess's arms in the air and wiped her armpits, then her chest and the fronts of her arms. She kneeled down at Bess's feet and ran the warm cloth up her shins and calves and behind her knees. When she stood again, she saw tears collected in Bess's eyes.

"It sounds like we don't have much time, mama. Why don't we take a walk?"

“The doctor didn’t okay outdoor therapy for her,” the nurse said gruffly. A glossy black nametag read Polly on her dress front.

“Well we can walk to the visiting room then,” Evie said. “We know the way, no need to accompany us. Come on mama.”

Nurse Polly unlocked the door and Evie led Bess away from the front doors and back down the hall where Bess had come from. Evie heard clanking, a low rumble of groaning and moaning, the pitch of fevered voices, as they walked down the hall. So much unhappiness housed between the asylum walls. The building pulsed sadness. The halls smelled of vomit and bleach, of unwashed bodies and urine. She stared at the other patients as they passed, people dressed in the same linen gown as Bess, people trying to keep their demons at bay.

The visiting room was a large and sunny room with tables that held cards and puzzles. They picked a table near the window, away from the other patients. Evie moved her chair close to Bess. Evie’s head throbbed. They sat in silence for a while. It was new, this silence. Bess had always filled the space with talking and singing, or, alternately, tears and hysterics. Evie got up to use the drinking fountain. When she returned, Bess was staring listlessly out the window.

“I’ll try to see the doctor before I leave, mama. Maybe I can get a better idea of when you can leave here.”

Bess’s gaze remained fixed on the window, her mouth slack, her shoulders hunched over.

“I won’t be leaving.”

“Mama. Please. This is not permanent. I just need to find a doctor to talk to. Surely they have a plan in place.”

Bess turned to stare at Evie. A web of lucidity dropped over her sunken features.

“Don’t you see? This is where people like me belong. Look around you.”

A woman stood behind the door, next to the wall. Her shoulders were covered in a worn shawl, which she picked at every few seconds, as if there were nits or lint covering its smooth fabric. Fine, white hair trailed down her back. She reminded Evie of a bird, delicate and fragile, picking at seeds with its beak. At a table not far from them, Evie watched as a young man formed words with his mouth, but no sound came out. His hands punctuated the movement of his lips with jabs in the space in front of him. Evie noticed a young woman staring intently, angrily at them from a couch that ran the length of the wall behind her. She frightened Evie. Evie looked back at Bess.

“She’s a new friend,” Bess said. “But maybe not, you can’t be too sure of things in here.”

“Uncle Tommy sends his regards.” Evie said as she swallowed the bitter disappointment she felt in him. She kept it hidden from Bess, the truth of his indifference.

Bess looked away and began to pull at her bodice; a faint red rash crept up her neck.

“Uncle Tommy and Doc Wahlberg told me it was best if you came here,” Evie said, not convinced by her own words. “Surely they are doing things to help you, so you can come home. You’ve always trusted Doc. He must know more about these things than we do.”

When Bess turned back to look at Evie, Evie saw tears running down her cheeks.

“Tommy did this?” She shook a little in her chair. “I’m sorry,” she said and pulled the front of her dress over her face to dry her cheeks. A damp mottled pattern was left on the fabric. “It’s hard to hear.”

“What did you expect when you cut your wrists?” Evie said as quietly as possible, so that the other residents didn’t hear.

“What did I expect? I—I expected to die.”

It was the first they had spoken of that day. Bess’s flash of anger surprised Evie, but strangely, it was a comfort. Maybe it meant she was getting better and could return home soon. When Evie placed her hand on Bess’s hand, she was surprised by how delicate it had become, her skin was thin and more translucent, her veins pronounced and loose. She coughed, followed by a long, drawn out wheeze. The coughing brought on more tears.

“You need to wear more clothing, mama. Do you have a sweater?” Evie said.

“No. Not allowed. I have a blanket back in my room. It keeps me warm. Evelyn, listen here, I need to tell you things.”

Evie was afraid of what she might say.

“I don’t believe you wanted to die that day,” Evie said. “I really don’t. You wanted me to find you. You wanted me to save you. You want to live, I know you do.”

“A daughter’s wish. Things are not always as you may think. They never are. All I can tell you is that when I smelled those salts and was pulled back from the edge of death, I felt nothing but disappointment. I have no more life to live, Evie.”

Evie watched as the directness, the clarity that had overcome Bess just moments before, leave. Bess leaned across the table; her eyes were lit and glassy and shook from the effort of holding Evie's gaze to her own. A familiar unease settled around Evie.

“Have I ever told you about my special place? It's wonderful, another world, much like where your grandparents came from,” Bess said with a wistful smile on her face. “My da, he says it's ‘the green, fertile womb of the earth!’ So lovely. When I get tired of looking at these walls, you see, I escape there. It's just so easy. Don't you see? There's no need for you to worry about me in here—or that you stopped me from doing what I wanted. I travel there when I need to.” She paused and looked around the room, and then in a whisper said, “Don't tell anyone! They might try to take it away.”

Evie grabbed Bess's other hand. She squeezed tight and leaned forward until her forehead touched Bess's. She was losing her. Before long there wouldn't be much left of the mother she knew.

“I'm going to get you out of here mama. You'll see.”

Bess turned her hands over so that their hands clasped. Evie watched her fight valiantly against tears. “I know you'll try,” Bess whispered.

They stayed locked together, forehead to forehead, hands entwined until it was time for Evie to leave.

~

The doctor was dismissive, angered by Evie's questions.

“She’s very sick, Miss Johnson. We’re using aggressive therapies, but the rage fits and erratic thoughts, her often circular mania, well, let’s just say that she’s not well.”

“She’s sad,” Evie said, “She lost my father last spring.”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes. For the dam to break. For people like your mother, it’s a matter of time before it can’t be controlled. Leave it to us. This is what we do here.”

Evie sat straightbacked in the uncomfortable wood-slatted chair. Her ankles, crossed tightly, hurt from the pressure, but she couldn’t make herself uncross them. She studied his close shaven hair, the grey stubble above his ears; his eyes, which he narrowed slightly when he talked, sat close together, like the eyes of a small bird or a winged predator. A hawk perhaps. She wondered if the sound of a clarinet could move him. Or a saxophone. If he had ever danced so that the music made him feel things he’d thought he was incapable of feeling. Was he truly capable of tending to the patients’ stories?

“It’s best you learn to let her go. Build a life, get married to a nice man, have your own children. Don’t worry about taking care of Elizabeth. She’s not your burden any longer. We’ll take care of her.”

Evie wanted to shout, SHE’S NOT A BURDEN, but she couldn’t make the words come out. They stayed stuck in her throat like hard pebbles. Her jaw tightened and she clutched her purse as if he might, at any moment, reach across his desk and take that away from her too. The truth was, she wasn’t sure whether it was burden or duty, if this was something she was really be prepared for.

“When do you think the therapies will start working? She doesn’t seem to be getting better.”

“For some patients, there is no getting better. We aim to keep them stable, employ the latest therapies. It’s a bit of wait and see.”

The ambiguity of his words was unsettling.

“What does Doctor Wahlberg have to say?”

“He has no bearing on our therapies here.”

“He’s been the family doctor for years. Surely his opinion should matter.”

“Psychiatry is my expertise, not a family doctor’s expertise.”

“And my uncle? Has he been here to assess things?”

“Your uncle?”

“Tommy. Tommy McGee. Her legal guardian.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course. He left the decision making to me. I don’t believe he intends to involve himself further. The Judge is in regular contact. It seems that everyone is in agreement that this commitment is what is best.”

Everyone involved. Evie felt a flash of rage.

“My mother – Elizabeth – she mentioned something about electricity.”

“Of course. An exciting mode of therapy. We have great success with it. Your mother is the perfect candidate. Most of our suicide-attempt patients benefit greatly from its psychological effects. Electroconvulsive therapy.”

“Convulsive?”

“Miss, you have no need to concern yourself with our methods. We, along with the Eastern State Asylum, have some of the most gifted physicians and full support from the state to care for this population. Why don’t you leave the care to us now.”

After the heavy wood doors clanged shut behind her, Evie hesitated on the steps. Unkempt bushes and weeds lined the sidewalk. She wondered whether Bess spent much time outside and imagined that Bess’s fingers would itch to coax the overgrown gardens back to their former beauty. A canvas, Evie, the garden is an infinite canvas. A flash of memory, of her small hands cupping a rose head that Bess had cut for her. The earlier pinch of a thorn and startling drops of blood. As a child, Evie loved spending time in the garden with Bess. The smell of rain and earthworms and sweet summer blossoms. In the garden, she could count on Bess’s mood, those moments of contentment that otherwise could elude her.

Standing on the cement steps, her hand resting on a cold metal rail, Evie remembered the drawing of the swallowtail that she’d brought for Bess. She pulled it from her purse. But the staff wouldn’t let her back in.

“No more visitors, Miss. You’ll have to come back tomorrow,” an orderly said, his face flat and unmoving.

“But I was just in there! I forgot to give my mother something.”

“She’s not allowed to receive packages.”

Evie hated the pitying look he gave her. Anger swelled inside her. Growing up, the people in Brownsville would say the crazy were cursed with evil spirits, with Evie

sitting within earshot, as if to be sure that she heard. But Evie had always believed the real curses were the whispers and stares and lack of charity. “Lunatic Asylum.” Once the hospital had been called the “lunatic” asylum. Standing at the door, a winter chill blowing through her coat, she wanted to smack the pity off the young boy’s face, so arrogant and self-satisfied. He shut the door in front of her.

She didn’t leave right away. Instead, she moved down a grassy hill away from the asylum, toward a row of young oak and spindly ash; ash trees sprang up, ugly and scrawny, when the earth needed repair. Once, it might have been farmland, or a space where old growth trees had been razed when the asylum was first built, then a healing spa for the worn out, the off balance, the ill. Her heels sunk in the moist earth. Grabbing hold of the back of a shoe while balancing on one foot, Evie pulled one shoe off and then the other. The grass was cold beneath her stocking feet.

A light rain misted against her face. The air had turned colder; the warm weather teaser of the morning had disappeared with the sun when it moved behind grey clouds. Below a tall naked oak, she saw what looked like a flock of large birds spread across the lawn. It was too early for geese to return. Moving closer, she saw that the birds were actually headstones, thin rectangular slabs poking up from the ground at odd angles. Whose? An old family graveyard? The grass was tall, brushing against the fronts of the stones, many of which were faded and chipped. Evie kneeled down and ran her fingers over the front of one. They weren’t letters. Rather, they were numbers, etched into the stone by the edge of a knife or rock, scribbled like a small child’s unpracticed handwriting. They were numbers like the ones she’d seen sewn on the linen gowns the

patients wore in the asylum. Looking up from where she kneeled, Evie saw hundreds of stones erupting from the earth as if in protest, scattered below, covering the expanse of the sloping hill as far as she could see. Grey clouds hovered just above the knoll behind the stones. Hundreds of stones. Numbers without names. Patients. Cast-offs. Forgotten by their families in death. She felt sick to her stomach.

All of these patients, their stories reduced to numbers scratched on a gravestone. No longer people with family or a home. Evie wiped away the moisture that had collected on her face. It was really raining now, no longer just a mist. Evie stared at the sea of stones. This couldn't be Bess's future. Her feet had gone numb and the chill of the ground ran up her legs. Unclasping her purse, she pulled out the picture she'd drawn of the Canadian Tiger Swallowtail, the picture she'd meant for Bess. Shivering now, she folded the drawing up smaller than a postcard, so that it wouldn't blow away, and placed it on the headstone with a rock as a weight. 5784, the stone read. 5784 she repeated in her mind again and again.

5784 she whispered out loud later on the train. 5784, someone who once had a name.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Helen

1954

My earliest memories are finely etched with the exotic—spices and foods, perfumes and dress, throaty vowels and consonants of other dialects. The sights and sounds that defined my childhood were that of the foreign; yet for me the foreign became normal. I learned to appreciate the culinary traditions of different regions and people, to attune my ear to the linguistic uniqueness of foreign tongues, to expect the unexpected, whether in unusual form of dress or lack of dress, and customs that differed greatly from place to place. It was in the safety of my father's shadow that I discovered the world: carrying his notebooks; following his dark shape into the jungle; listening to his patient and methodical questions, often relayed to the person of interest through a translator; sitting beside him while fire flames licked and snapped at our feet. These 'others' my father took in with all of his being, recording, observing, evaluating with great interest. I was his only child, his only family, yet I remained on the periphery of his vision. He studied regional history for universities, a study that would one day be deemed anthropology, a field in which I would find myself continuing as an adult.

My mother died just as I took my first breath in this world. She was drenched in sweat, lost in a fever that would take her from this world into the next. The city doctor said it was lucky that I emerged when I did; her heart stopped just as I began to breathe on my own, just as my skin changed from blue to pink, like the fall of an evening sky at twilight. I like to think that she fought against death in order to bring me forth, but there is no way to know if that's true. The painting of her that sat in my father's library is all that I have to know her by. She was dark, with long, coarse hair loosely pinned, as if she really didn't want to conform to the standards of the times of severe parts or tightly curled bangs—the rest of the hair tamed into a bun. I imagine her as a woman of passion and confidence. My father said little of her, his grief so all encompassing that I always feared if I questioned him, it would overcome us both, like an ocean tide that suddenly overtakes a calm sand dune, rushing in and pulling pebbles and seashells back into the sea. While father was of German heritage, educated at university in Berlin, my mother was from the Caribbean, of French descent, I would assume, but father never spoke of her background. Nor did he speak much of the life that he had left behind in Germany when he took a post at an American university. He met my mother while visiting St. Lucia Island and they spent the first years of their marriage traveling to many continents, remote edges of the world. I didn't arrive until they had been married for more than ten years. With my arrival, he lost his soul mate, his *amour de ma vie*. He was crushed by the loss, alone with an infant daughter, and dependent on nannies and nursemaids. Later he would make the decision to take me with him on his expeditions. It was just the two of us in this world, and I am grateful that he allowed me to accompany him on his travels.

I learned to be small, invisible, even as I grew tall and angular; I learned to be silent, even when words threatened to rush into the space between us; and I learned to listen carefully to the silence between the words, not only of my father, but of the people that he studied. In short, I learned to be a scientist, during a time when very few women attended high school, let alone college. Most of my gender would never have dreamt of the sciences, although there were the rare exceptions—and we would seek each other out at conferences later in my career. As a child, my classroom was without walls: the Amazon jungle, the igloos of the inuits, the monuments of the Mayans, and the shamanic dances of the Hupa healers. I knew that my father's attention was on his work, not on his daughter; my place was beside him, observing and learning his trade. Although I sometimes longed for an encouraging touch or a meeting of our hearts, I knew that his gift to me was that of the intellectual, not the emotional. A mother would have filled this void, but without one, I was left to steal away and sit at the feet of women bending and threading thin river reeds into baskets, or to join indigenous women in their dancing and ceremony. I found maternal ministrations with the women that my father studied; the people who were a curiosity to him became teachers on the path to womanhood. As I grew into a young adult, I thought more and more about my mother, that dark woman with the unbound hair who pulsed passion and confidence from the canvas, and I knew that what beat in my veins was the passion of my mother and the intelligence of my father. It would be this combination that would lead me to one of the most difficult decisions in my life, but I am getting ahead of myself.

I looked forward to the times my father was so engrossed in his research that I could conduct my own studies. I was fifteen, when we walked with the Navajo, in 1923, surrounded by red rock so high that it felt we were protected by all that was sacred. We had grown accustomed to the dust in our faces and I wore a large straw hat to protect my fair skin from the harsh and unforgiving sun. The Navajo were of particular interest to my father; he was concerned that they would soon disappear. When we stopped in an area surrounded on all sides by rock, I overheard the translator tell my father that many of their people had been massacred by Mexican soldiers on this site.

How many died? My father asked. I didn't hear the answer, but I saw him drop to his knees. His bent form threw shadows across the dry ground and the sun, low in the sky, cast a red glow on his dark figure. His hat fell to the ground and rolled in the dirt. When I realized that he was crying, I turned away, embarrassed by the sight of it. A native man knelt next to him, pointing at the space in front of them and talking in the native tongue. The translator hung back and we all watched as my father was comforted by the sound of the man's foreign tongue, there between the towering rock.

Later, two native women gestured for me to follow them across a flat sea of rock that rippled and moved beneath our feet like water. Just over the stand of rock was a large flock of sheep, white and black and brown. They grazed on the small, tough grass brave enough to withstand the desert heat. To the right of the sheep, just below a wide and low cottonwood branch, stood a pile of rock and timbers. The women pointed at the pile, smiling and gesturing to me, and one of them grabbed the edge of my shawl and pulled me along as we approached. The oldest of the women, an ancient who was as weathered

as the impressive stands of rock, her skin tumbled by the dust of the desert, pulled a small woven sack from her skirt pocket. The cloth that tied her white braid fluttered in the warm breeze. In her other hand she held a twig of cedar, which she must have brought with her, as we hadn't seen cedar since we'd left their village.

Take, she said, smiling at me toothlessly.

She placed the twig on the rocks. I peered into the sack and saw it was filled with ground maize, one of the foods they considered a gift from their god.

We offer this here, she said to me. Like this.

From the sack in my hands, she pulled a handful of maize and threw it into the center of the rock and timber, which I then realized had an opening at the front. Much later I would understand that it was a cairn shrine, a site for prayers. She gestured for me to do the same as she had. I sifted my fingers through the maize; it was surprisingly silky and smooth. When I threw a handful into the opening, I felt something open within me. The image of my mother hanging in my father's library was suddenly before me, and I realized that my father's sobs, brought on by the truth of what had happened between those rocks, were a sign of his ever present grief for my mother, for the loss of the life he had once had in which companionship and love were a constant. He must have felt the Navajos' loss acutely, just as he felt our own.

Now that you have placed this offering here, you must ask for a blessing or need, she said.

Tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. My father's grief had been tangible enough for this wise woman to understand, just as it had been obvious to me, his

daughter. I was thankful for her kindness, for sharing the intimate ritual of her people. I would be sure to record this interaction, as my father had always instructed me, but in that moment, I was simply cradled by the ritual, uplifted by their understanding of what lay between my father and I, of why I was so often in the shadows while he carried out his work. It was one of those moments when I felt I had stumbled upon a piece of mothering, a blessing from the universe, a universe that understood how the motherless need nurturing. I asked, in that moment before the shrine, that my father feel the nurturing of the universe just as I did in that moment, that his pain would dissipate and that this trip would prove to be healing. I wondered if the nine days of Mountain Chant, a medicine ceremony for which we had traveled so far to witness, had provided us with a medicine we hadn't even realized we'd needed. Whether his tears were a testimony to the medicinal chanting.

The next morning, my father allowed me to rise with the sun and join the women while they sat before their looms built of twigs and irregular timber, secured by rocks at the base. The yellow morning light bounced off the surrounding rock and streamed through the cottonwood branches. The women wove the wool of their sheep, which had been dyed with berries and flowers of the desert, into blankets of rich color and design. They sang blessings in their tongue as their hands expertly moved the colorful strands. While I didn't understand the words, I felt comforted by their ways and the female companionship.

I sat on a tree root, which grew above the ground, reaching for the sky from thirst, the desert floor too dry to offer necessary nourishment. I knew the women would soon

leave me to tend to the churro sheep. My heavy cotton skirt spread below me in the dust and I rested my boots on the backs of my heels. I worked with charcoal in my notebook, trying to capture the essence of the weavers. I sketched the woman closest to me who had the beginnings of Two Gray Hills, a traditional black and white blanket they often wore in the colder months. More colorful blankets were reserved for trade. Her hands moved expertly and the pattern grew before my eyes. My own creation, crude lines meant to create a realistic image, came to life in the same way, the blanket growing on my page as it grew before me on her loom. Each time I took my charcoal off the image of the blanket to sketch other elements, my hands quickly found their way back to the blanket. I sketched the scarf tied low across her forehead, the wool shawl covering her shoulders, and the profile of her wide, prominent cheekbones riding high on her face.

Soon my father appeared at my side, where he stood without speaking. We hadn't discussed his breakdown in the Canyon del Muerto. When we retired the evening before, a thick silence had filled our tent before we settled into sleep. There beside me, he was most likely assessing my skill, analyzing the accuracy of the image for his later documentation. My sketchbook would be an important element in the fieldwork, bringing images that lingered in our memories, hazy and unformed with time and distance, to life again. With my drawings he would be able to test his recollections before publishing his final papers.

"They will be leaving soon," I said. "Would you like for me to do something more when they are gone?"

He removed his hat and mopped his brow with a handkerchief that was covered in the desert dust. It left a brown streak on his skin.

“Yes. I would like for you to observe the young medicine man this morning. He will be performing a healing ritual for a man who has recently returned from a journey south. I am most interested in the sand art, which they sometimes use. If you can capture the sand art in your drawings, it would be most helpful.”

“Of course.”

The morning sun had risen to full height. I reached for my straw hat to protect my face from its harsh rays. He remained next to me, heavy with silence again. We were surrounded by mud hogans, which rose from the ground as if the earth had offered them up for the people. We would begin our trip back to New York that evening, first a ride on horseback, second a trip by wagon, and finally by train. A part of me yearned to stay with the Navajo, the sandstone rock made red by the sun, a fortress against my own culture to which I would be returning. If we had had a different relationship, I may have confessed my feelings to my father. Instead, I returned to my drawing, the scratches on my paper the only sound between us.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Evelyn

Something compelled her to drop in on Agnes, the old woman from the museum. She couldn't say what, curiosity or a desire to draw again, maybe a little of both. Agnes had appeared out of nowhere, on a day Evie was so hung over, the sound of schoolchildren's voices felt like nails clawing at her skin. Agnes had cut through the hangover fog, with her no-nonsense style of speaking. Punctuated syllables, sharp consonants. A staccato rhythm like a pianist's strokes on a keyboard. Afloat with so much change and uncertainty, Evie felt a need to hear the old woman's voice again. That was it, really: the sound of her voice. It was reassuring, Evie thought, the way Agnes, now in her eighties, had lived such a full life, a life set against the backdrop of what Jean had called on the day she visited Evie in her apartment, the "great big world." How small Jean's life in Crozet, or Bess's life in Brownsville seemed right then to Evie—the very thought of which made her throat constrict. She instinctively took in a deep, cleansing breath of dry winter air.

A light snow fell as Evie walked from the train car stop to the front of the museum. It wasn't long before it would close. With Mr. Chapman away at a government executive training, she'd finished the day's stacks of transcription uninterrupted and in

record time. No one questioned her when she slipped quietly through the doors an hour early. The streetlights came alight as she walked up the stone steps to the museum. Her toes slid on the slippery surface and she slowed her pace. Damp snowflakes danced in the air around her, and the winter breeze was dry and cool against her cheeks. Evie loved the way the city quieted when the tourists finished for the day. The interior lights of the museum gave off a warm glow, almost as if beckoning for her to make her way inside.

A docent escorted her to the second floor, where Agnes's office was located in a back corner.

She saw her bent over a large drafting desk, magnifying glass in one hand and a fountain pen in another. Her glasses shone beneath her task lamp. Cases of specimens lined tables and large wooden cases with slender worn-out drawers, which stood against the walls.

"Mrs. Chase, ma'am, there's someone here to see you."

Agnes pushed the task lamp down and peered out into the room.

"Who's that now?"

Evie stepped forward.

"We met the other day. In the museum. I was drawing—"

"Oh yes. The young lady with a butterfly. Canadian Tiger Swallowtail, right?"

"I hope I'm not disturbing you. If there's a better time, I can come back—"

"At my age, it's best not to plan too many things in advance. Come in, come in.

You can see what I'm working on. Here—put a net over all of that black hair."

Evie unclasped her wool wrap and placed it on an empty chair. It was still damp from the snow. She pulled the netting over the edges of her hair. It took a few tries, but eventually she had it all tucked away. The netting drawn over Agnes's hair melded into her fine, silver waves.

“Now see, this is how we botanists work. We're given a sample, or we collect our own sample, and then we spend time getting to know it. I use this handheld microscope here, and I study every line, every groove, every characteristic that makes the specimen unique. See here? This *Paspalum splendens* that I'm examining has a unique root system; it grows in small tufts and can survive in sand and gravel. Very hardy. This particular one comes from Uruguay. How about that?”

Evie smiled.

“I'm sure the artist in you wants to know about the act of drawing, but you see, if you rush the drawing, you may miss an important detail. A vital element of scientific drawing is observation. Observation and familiarity. Did you bring your notebook?”

The room was warm and cozy despite its size. She settled in and listened to Agnes explain the art of drawing grasses, the art of collecting specimens, the art of working in the field of science as a woman. The time passed quickly and easily.

“When I first started going on exhibitions, I was told that women couldn't do them,” Agnes said. “There was no money for us. So I saved and I paid for them myself. I wasn't going to let anyone stop me from doing what I knew I was meant to do.”

“That must have taken a long time,” Evie said.

“Well, not really. You see I had friends, both male and female, who helped me out. The men in secret, the women more openly.” She let out a short laugh. “But I stuck to my guns and eventually I carved out a spot for myself here at the museum. Very satisfying in the end.”

“Did you ever marry?”

Agnes looked at her intently and Evie watched sadness make its way into her clear eyes.

“Yes. I did. Very young. But he died not long after. We never had children, so that complication wasn’t there. I loved him very much, and I couldn’t see marrying another man. Tell me—do you have a young fellow in your life?”

“No, not really.”

“Times are changing. More choices, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Evie thought about the way the government men barked at their secretaries, about the way men whistled at her on the street and bought her drinks without asking, about the way her Aunt Jean worried that she wouldn’t attract a man.

“You know, you can be the change any way you’d like. When I was young, we women didn’t have a vote. Now THAT was a fight,” she paused and drew her hands into two fists that rested on the table. Her mouth tightened with more story unsaid. “But tell me, Evie, what brings you here tonight?”

Evie took in a deep breath and thought about how to answer.

“I don’t really know, I guess. I’m intrigued by scientific illustration. It’s really not something I thought about before I met you. And, well, I’d like to find something to fill my time, something fulfilling. My job at GAO is secretarial. Quite boring.”

“Well, it allows you to live independently, which is important. Okay then. Let’s start with some lessons. Why don’t I gather up a few specimens and supplies and then we’ll practice.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight. At my age, you never know if there’s a tomorrow.”

Agnes disappeared into the back of the workroom. When she returned, she held in her hands a long and narrow skull, with large brown antlers.

“An antelope skull. An example specimen to study for your first assignment.”

She heaved the unwieldy skull onto the worktable in front of Evie.

“Take out your drawing book and pencil. I want you to start with a blind contour drawing. But first, use your hands to *feel* the specimen. Run your hands, like this, over the antlers. How would you describe them?”

“Hard. Ridged.”

“Go on.”

“Like a unicorn horn.”

“Stay with your senses. What else?”

“Smooth when I move my fingers around the ridges.”

“Good. Now, move on to the skull. What do you see?”

“Holes and lines and bleached bone.”

“Excellent. Now, run your hands over the skull with your eyes closed. What do you feel?”

Evie palpated the skull gently, running her fingertips over the solid bone. She was surprised by the texture and intricate lines she could make out. Even with her eyes closed, she could sense shape and form.

“A line that runs jagged, a round hole that fits three of my fingers, a smooth edge of bone that extends the length of the skull. Bumps, regular, chunky bumps, like a row of teeth. Indentations, rounded edges. And delicate. Delicate small pieces of bone.”

“Very good. Now, without looking at your paper, follow the lines of the skull with only your eyes and the pencil in your hand. Don’t worry about the final drawings, they will be silly and out of proportion. Just concentrate on what your eye sees and capture it honestly. Trust yourself.”

Evie spent more than an hour drawing blindly, her pencil scratching softly across the paper. She’d never felt such an intimate connection with something she had drawn. She studied the skull from every angle, every inch of the bone and antlers closely examined, every tooth, every loop and curve and shadow followed with her eye and rendered blindly on paper. By the end, her final drawing captured the animal with light and shadow and line elegantly close to its real life form. Spent and satisfied, she rolled up her drawings and slipped a rubber band around them. Agnes was finishing a sketch of the specimen she had been examining when Evie first arrived. *Paspalum splendens*. The task light glinted on a silver charm she wore around her neck. As quietly as possible, Evie

packed up her drawing supplies and pulled on her wrap, waiting until Agnes looked up to bid her good night.

“I see you’ve finished,” Agnes said when she placed her pen in the inkwell. “How did they turn out?”

“By the end, I think I knew what I was doing. I’ve never felt, well, so connected to something I’ve drawn. Thank you.”

“It’s the best way to start. Next week, you’ll show me your drawings.”

“Next week?”

“Of course. We’ll continue the lessons.”

Evie left the museum feeling content, full. Purpose had replaced the spinning, the confusion and pain that haunted her. Riding the train car toward her apartment, the rhythmic clacking of metal against rail sounded like a steady drumbeat in her ears, a drumbeat driving her toward something new.

The lessons continued for several weeks. Agnes made a copy of her key so that Evie could come after hours during their agreed upon meeting times. She looked forward to the scratch of the dip pen, the drops of ink on the palette, just waiting to be formed into lines. First, she copied old drawings that Agnes had already published. She studied them between lessons, tracing her finger over each line, paying attention to at least one unique characteristic per grass. Agnes would quiz her as soon as she arrived. She learned to sketch in pencil in quick, confident strokes, before beginning the painstaking detailed painting with ink. It was in this room, surrounded by animal and insect specimens, plants

and bones, that Evelyn found the peace that had been eluding her. She slept better, dreamt deeper, and she found it easier to concentrate at work—even when Mr. Chapman lost his temper.

When Evie arrived at the museum one evening, she saw that Agnes had placed the Canadian Tiger Swallowtail specimen on the table. She was grinning from ear to ear when she spied Evie coming through the door.

“A surprise.”

“Is it allowed? What about the exhibit?”

“It’s about to be rotated out, dear. I thought it might be a fun exercise to see how far you’ve come in your drawing. What would you say to a pen and ink rendition? A watercolor wash might be a nice way to start.”

Evie was touched that Agnes remembered her fondness for the butterfly. By then, she knew her way around the workroom. She assembled her supplies, slipped on the hairnet, and tied a smock around her waist. Agnes worked on a large grass drawing while Evie lightly brushed her paper in a burnt umber wash. She waited for it to dry before beginning a pencil sketch.

“Dear, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you these past weeks. There are days that you come in with the weight of the world on your shoulders. I don’t mean to pry, but is everything alright?”

Evie swirled her brush in a cup of water and then pulled it out to rest on a rag. She felt Bess close by and wasn’t sure she wanted her there. She had hoped to keep Bess separate, separate from this experience, separate from her friendship with Agnes. But,

clearly she was never far from Evie. Clearly Evie was unable to keep her out of the museum.

“Some weekends I visit my mother. She lives in Staunton.”

“Well that’s not too horribly far, is it? Is she well?”

“No, no she’s not.”

“I see.”

“She’s in a lunatic asylum.”

Agnes was quiet. Evie felt a vacuum of cool air between them and heard the scratching of Agnes’s pen begin again. A pit settled in her stomach. She didn’t want Bess to change things. To change this, this time between Evie and Agnes.

“There were many who called us hysterical when we marched,” Agnes finally said. “Many who said we were lunatics. We were jailed. Beaten. Force-fed. Strong women have often been labeled lunatics throughout history.”

Evie stood mutely in front of the table and tears filled her eyes; she didn’t want Agnes to see them, so she brushed them away quickly. She hadn’t expected such understanding.

“The life of a woman is never easy, Evie. I’m sorry that your mother is in an asylum. Is there anything that can be done?”

“I—I don’t know. My uncle holds her guardianship and he had her committed. After her suicide attempt.”

Agnes put down her pen and moved to stand closer to Evie. Small and diminutive, the top of her head only reached Evie's shoulder. Yet, she contained such presence. A presence that filled a room.

"In my experience, a suicide attempt is simply a chapter from a greater, longer story. She must hold a lot of chapters in her heart. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Evie shook her head no.

"That's difficult—a heavy burden for a daughter. Well. Stick with your drawing. Set some goals for yourself. When you have a portfolio, we'll discuss your options. I have connections."

With that, the conversation about Bess was over. Evie felt relieved. She found her concentration again and reveled in the quiet of the workroom, in the soft glow of the task lamps, in the comforting sound of Agnes's pen scratching on paper, in the comforting warmth of Agnes beside her, equally focused on her own project that lay draped across the table. The ink sketch on burnt umber wash turned out better than she had hoped. Using two tiny clips to secure each corner, Evie hung a fully realized Canadian Tiger Swallowtail on a wire that stretched in front of a window. The glow of the streetlights lit the paper and illuminated the wings of the butterfly.

Before leaving, Evie walked down an aisle in the workroom, examining specimens and picking up random bones and artifacts. Rodents and small animals, stuffed and perfectly preserved, looked back at her with cold, beady eyes. Eyes of the dead. She leaned down to look closely at a prairie dog. Its nose had been brushed with a clear gloss to give the effect of beads of moisture and its hair lay as if it had been extensively

brushed. It was frozen in position, resting on its hind legs, hands bent as if pawing at the air. They were prisoners, she thought. Imprisoned mid-step, studied, examined by scientists, poked and prodded and molded, paralyzed. She thought of Bess and the other inmates at the asylum. Of their vacant eyes, of their interrupted lives, halted mid-step. Of the scientists, experimenting on their minds. A shiver went through her, and she turned to walk away from the artifacts, away from the poor, preserved animals.

The dead animals' dark, beady eyes haunted her sleep.

~

One October, when Evie was fourteen, Bess disappeared at the Apple Harvest Fair—the pinnacle event for Brownsville, the one time of year the county came together – farmers, townspeople, workers from the cannery, farmhands—even the genteel landowners and their staff.

It had been a difficult week. Evie came home from school on Monday to find the front room furniture pushed against the back wall. Tables balanced haphazardly on the couch and lamps were strewn across the rug. All of the walls were bare. On the longest wall, which ran the length of the side of the house, Bess had hung ten sheets of gessoed linen with straight pins. When Evie moved closer, walking gingerly to avoid a shattered light bulb, she could still smell the oil and see that the corners were damp. She heard Bess in the kitchen at the back of the house, clanging about.

“Mama?”

When Bess came around the corner, Evie saw that familiar glassy eyed look, that look that sometimes spelled trouble. A colorful sash cinched Bess’s long skirt, and she wore one of Harley’s button-down shirts, tied in a knot at her waist. Evie put her book bag on the floor by the door and waited to see what Bess would do.

“You and your daddy will have to get your own supper tonight. I’m in the middle of something.” She held in her hands an old tin can filled with paintbrushes, but Evie didn’t see paint tubes.

“What are you painting, Mama?”

“I’ve had a vision. I can’t get it out of my head.”

“What are you painting with?”

“It’s a process,” she said elusively.

The painting went on for three days. The first morning, when Evie came down for breakfast, there were no marks on the canvas. Bess had stayed up all night, dry brushing across the canvas “to get the feel” of the image. But when Evie came home from school the next day, Bess had changed to pencil and had drawn an enormous stallion’s head and shoulders. He leered menacingly from the wall and slightly scared Evie with the sheer size of his face and the aggression in his eyes. Bess painted through several nights, going without sleep or food, or even water, despite their attempts to convince her to take a break. Dixieland Jazz played round the clock on the record player. Evie couldn’t find a room in the house that didn’t smell like paint.

Harley and Evie went about their routines, going to work and school, tiptoeing around Bess at home. Four days later, when the stallion was finished, on all ten panels, Bess complained of a migraine and took to bed and slept until the morning of the fair. Harley returned the front room to its usual order, but left the panels pinned to the wall, a new installation in the center of their family life. Evie tried not to look into the stallion's dark eyes. She couldn't help but feel that it would come to life and charge right through their home.

When they first arrived at the fair, Bess walked closely beside Evie, her fingers looped tightly around Evie's arm. Later, Evie would find faint bruises and a tear on the sleeve of her dress. She had wanted to attend the fair without Bess, but since the painting had been finished, she and Harley had been on pins and needles, waiting for more to happen, like it sometimes could, and Evie knew better than to expect she could leave Bess to her own devices so soon.

“Stay close now, Evie.”

“Yes, Mama,” Evie said, pulling at the waist of her dress, hoping to dislodge Bess's grip.

They passed crates of shiny apples divided by variety. Bess pulled Evie toward the tables that held apple butter and jam, pies, and paper sacks of cider donuts. She picked up jars and oohed and ahed over the pies, all the while keeping Evie in her grip. Evie stifled the desire to find her school friends and participate in the games. Harley had

long since disappeared. The last Evie had seen of him, he was tapping a corn cob pipe on his shirtsleeve while weaving through the crowd.

“Oh look, Evie—an Apple Betty. That looks enticing, Edna. Did you use shortening or butter?”

“Shortening of course. It makes the flakiest topping, don’t you think?”

Evie shifted her weight to the other foot and placed a hand on her hip, hoping her elbow would finally release Bess’s grip, which had begun to hurt. Bess dropped her hand and moved close to whisper in her ear.

“Don’t you go leaving me now. You know how hard these crowds can be for me.”

“Yes, mama,” Evie said, rubbing her arm.

They wove through the crowd together, side by side until they reached the courthouse steps, where a mime was juggling apples.

“Let’s stay and watch,” Bess said.

Evie scanned the audience gathered on the lawn, looking for some of her school friends.

“Okay.”

Bess seated herself beside Evie, her skirt draped across bent knees, her legs tucked to the side. Evie watched Bess unlace her shoes and set them in front of her. Other mothers kept their shoes on. Evie prepared herself for the unwelcome flick of stares and sidelong glances she knew all too well, but the crowd was full of new faces, people from neighboring towns, a small and unexpected kindness to the day. The afternoon light turned golden, a prelude to the fast falling dusk of autumn, and Bess’s red curls shifted

beneath the light, turning more gold than red, shimmering like precious metal before Evie's eyes. It reminded Evie of the wheat in the farm fields they passed on their way to St. Mary's on Sundays. She wanted to ask Bess about the stallion. To ask her what she thought about as she painted for days and nights. Why a stallion? Evie shivered when she thought of its eyes that bore into her from the moment she stepped through the front door.

The mime stepped off the steps and glided among the audience, bending to pull a flower from behind a young girl's ear, twirling in circles, and then performing a cartwheel in the thickest part of the crowd. Voices rose in excitement and small children clapped their hands. Bess pulled dandelions from the grass beside her and began to braid them into a child-sized necklace, her paint-stained fingers moving with practiced ease, like a harpist running her fingers over the strings.

“Remember these Evie?”

“Yes, mama.”

“Yes, mama? You're a lady of few words today.”

Evie felt a flush make its way up her neck.

“I was just thinking—thinking about your painting.”

“Oh.”

“What does it feel like? I mean to stay up nights, painting.” Evie played with the penny in her loafer.

Bess turned and looked at the trees bordering the lawn. When she turned back, Evie saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

“I don’t know. It’s something that I can’t explain. It just comes over me. Something grabs me, hangs onto me until I can’t do anything but what it’s compelling me to do.”

“That sounds scary.”

“It can be.”

Eventually Evie saw the mime making his way toward them. He stopped with a dramatic flourish, dipping in a low bow, arms outstretched, just in front of Bess. Placing the dandelions on her lap, she looked at him warily. He hopped from foot to foot and then picked up one of Bess’s shoes, soft and worn, its black leather scuffed at the toe. Holding it above his head, he turned his chin from side to side, before pulling it close and taking an exaggerated whiff of the open foot bed. He pinched his nose and Evie cringed at the collective laughter. Bess’s face turned scarlet, and she didn’t join in the laughter until it had mostly died away. Evie looked around her. Not far away, she saw her friend Ellen and her little sister Patty. Ellen waved at her. Evie hoped the mime would move on soon.

After picking up the other shoe and examining it this way and that, the mime bent down to put the shoe on Bess’s foot. Then he touched her hair and pretended to have been burned, hopping from one foot to the other, blowing on his hand and wetting his fingers, one by one in his mouth. Bess turned to Evie. It was time to leave.

“I’m sorry mama,” Evie said after he had gone and was back on the courthouse steps, where he was blowing up balloons for the young children.

“It’s alright,” Bess said quietly. “So. What should we do next?”

“How about some hot cider?” Evie offered.

Bess's hands were clasped in her lap, the dandelions now shredded into pieces on her skirt. A cool gust of air disturbed a pile of leaves on the edge of the lawn. Bess pulled her sweater closed.

"That sounds perfect."

Evie tried not to care when Bess grabbed her hand. At least there wouldn't be more bruises on her arm. She waved to Ellen and Patty, who were waiting in line for the balloons. The sound of a clarinet grew stronger as they drew close to the cider tent. Evie saw a few of the older boys and the high school band teacher on the wooden platform. The sounds of the trombone, horn, and drums joined in and Evie struggled to hear Bess in the loud din of the music.

"Sounds like *Clarinet Marmalade*," Bess said, smiling at Evie. "Song of my childhood."

They moved on, passing a cluster of sailors, home on leave, and Evie noticed them notice Bess; she had that effect on men.

"Have you seen daddy lately?" Evie asked Bess while they waited for their cups of cider.

"You know how he hates big band. I'd imagine he's found some kind of folk somewhere. Maybe with that Joe Baker. Who knows what those two talk about. He'll be around again."

The line was long and the tent crowded. Evie noticed Bess's toe tapping against the dirt.

"Do you want to go home mama?"

“No.”

The cider warmed Evie’s hands. Bess stared into her cup as if divining the future. Her cheeks turned pink from the steam.

“You don’t want your cider?” Evie asked.

Bess took a fast sip.

“What a silly question.”

Evie dunked a cider donut into her cider and plopped it in her mouth, where it melted until only the sugar crystals were left on her tongue.

They moved to the outside of the tent, where there were less people. The sun was getting lower and Evie rubbed her arms to keep warm. Across the way, in the apple bobbing tent, Evie saw a few of her school friends—Peggy and Mary, and Ellen too—and some of the boys from her school. She waved and Peggy motioned for her to join them. Mary and Ellen turned to wave too.

Without thinking, Evie moved across the empty space between the tents, effortlessly, mindlessly, untethered. In fact, as her penny loafers touched grass and led her toward her friends, she forgot Bess and easily lost herself in schoolgirl chatter once on the other side. When it was her turn to bob, Evie kneeled on the cold ground, hands on either side of the tin bucket, and plunged her face into the water, determined to snatch an apple with her teeth on the first try. Peggy held back her hair. Evie dove so deep, her whole face was submerged and she opened her eyes beneath the water. Dark round shadows moved on the bottom of the bucket, darting in circles like untethered amoeba, and startling flicks of light moved through the water between them. Evie’s heart beat fast

and she drew her head out of the water, taking deep, panicked breaths. She stood, water dripping down her face and over the front of her dress, and she looked back to the cider tent. Bess was no longer there.

Ignoring the cries of her friends, encouraging her to try again, Evie ran to the cider tent. Bess's overturned cup lay beside a set of black, worn out shoes. Evie called out for Bess and ran around the tent and up and down the path that ran through the fair. She'd lost her.

Evie's feet took her out of the fair and toward the Baptist church on the hill. She wove recklessly through the gravestones in the cemetery, where she normally tried not to step on the coffin side of the stones. She hoped the departed would forgive her. Soon, she was in the churchyard, where the colored community had set up their Apple Harvest Fair tables. Some of the women were packing up.

"Where you headed so fast, honey?"

"I gotta find my daddy. Where's the music?" Evie said breathlessly, slowing down to hold her side, which was cramping. She was suddenly aware of the fact that she shouldn't have been running like she'd been. She was fourteen now, not ten, and wearing a dress.

"You looking for Harley?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"He's likely with Joe senior over that way. Follow the music, you'll see the lean-to."

Evie ran around the side of the church and sure enough, she heard the slow, mournful tunes her daddy liked. Eventually she found the lean-to, a falling down, faded old shack, with overturned buckets lined up near the doorway. She saw men sitting and tapping hands on their knees and moving heads and shoulders to the music.

“Harley, your girl’s here,” one of the men called into the shack.

The musicians stopped playing and Evie felt funny sitting there waiting in the sudden silence.

Harley poked his head out.

“Everything alright, Evie?” he asked. “Butler, go on and play.”

He slipped out of the doorway and placed a hand on Evie’s back to guide her away from the other men.

“What’s happened?” he asked. Evie could smell the whiskey on his breath and noticed his gentle eyes were bloodshot.

“Mama’s gone. She’s missing. I’m real sorry. I just wanted to bob for some apples. She was fine, daddy, she was. I’m real sorry.”

“Evie, calm down now. I’m sure everything’s alright. Nothing wrong with bobbing for apples at an Apple Harvest Fair now. Don’t you worry, I’ll go looking for her in a bit. You go on and enjoy the last of the fair before it’s all packed up.”

Evie nodded and wiped her nose, which had begun to run. She would have liked to have stayed with him and the other men and listened to the music, but she knew better. Harley squeezed her shoulder affectionately.

“You go on now.” Evie watched as he disappeared into the shack, into the center of the music that, unlike the big band music at the fair that was upbeat and energetic, seemed to be telling a story, a sad story with heart, one that Evie wanted to stay and hear.

Despite what Harley said, she wandered through the fair, keeping an eye out for Bess. She picked up Bess’s shoes at the cider tent and ran home to see if she was there, but the house was empty and dark. She didn’t want to be home alone and decided to walk down to the creek before it got too late.

She followed the familiar path, a path she had walked most of her life, first with Harley or Bess holding her hand and later running with Joe and Clive and Mary or other friends, fishing poles and towels thrown over their shoulders. Light was falling fast, but her feet knew the way and she moved nimbly between the shadows of the bushes and rock. Some days she brought her sketchbook and sat beside the slow moving water.

When she climbed the last hill, she heard splashing water and the low hum of male voices. She slid behind the wide trunk of a sycamore and leaned past it to look down at the creek, even though she’d know those voices, that laughter anywhere. Clive and Joe and their younger brother Bolivar.

Evie stayed hidden, holding onto the peeling bark of the trunk. Her heart beat fast against her chest and she was acutely aware of the fact that she was wearing a dress and a slip. The boys were dressed in overalls, clothing better suited for the creek. Kneeling down, she got onto all fours and crawled to the edge of the bank, peering through the brush.

Joe and Clive took turns skipping rocks across the water, shouting out when one of them made a rock dance all the way to the other side. Bolivar's pants were rolled above his knees and he waded along the creek's edge. Moonlight shined on the boys' faces, so that Evie could see their features clearly. Joe and Clive were young men now. She felt a lump in her throat. It was Bess who had explained how she couldn't associate with the Baker boys in public anymore. Or Mary. It was the way of Brownsville, the way of things in Virginia. She was a young woman now; she was menstruating, wearing a bra. Evie looked down at her buttoned bodice, dismayed at the way it had so quickly filled out, angry that becoming a woman meant the end of friendships.

"Come on, Bolivar, we gotta get home," Evie heard Clive call out.

Sucking in her breath, Evie jumped to her feet.

"D'you hear something?" Joe asked.

Evie stood still, every muscle tense. She and Joe had always had an unusual connection. What if he could sense her there? If he could read her thoughts, with her so close by? She tried to wipe her mind clean of thoughts.

"Naw, it's just an animal or something," Clive said. "Bolivar, come on now!"

Holding her breath, afraid she'd betray herself, Evie took a few soft steps before taking off in a sprint down the familiar path, branches tugging at her sleeves and scratching at her face. She ran until her side hurt again and she was off the path and back in Brownsville. She ran until she made it back home, where she now saw light shining from behind the windows. Bess. She'd forgotten about Bess. Out of breath, she stood on the front lawn, looking through the front windows, a voyeur strangely unconnected to the

scene inside, a scene that to strangers might look like any normal family on a Sunday night. She saw Harley and Bess walk into the sitting room, probably settling in to listen to a radio show. She was home then, no longer missing. Evie walked up the stairs. Bess's shoes had been moved. Evie put her hand on the doorknob, and in the window beside the door, she could see the dark, menacing eyes of the stallion staring back at her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bess

Memories don't let me go, even as they flee my mind. My fingers probe my body, bones sharp, jagged. Here is what is real. Flesh and skeleton. My skin lying loose, stretching flaccid, hanging from my bones. Here are my hips, my stomach flat as it shouldn't be. A woman of my age. I imagine instead my stomach stretched and pouch-like, folds lying like an accordion now empty, but once taut and hard, containing life. My bones shake, rattle with emptiness. I run my hands over my breasts. Old woman breasts, small, too forgiving, never to have known a newborn's urgent suckling. Never to have been hard and full.

You'll likely never have a baby. That's what the old doctor with his tight lips and heavy, furrowed brow told me. Bitter seeds between my teeth. Ma in the corner, crying into her handkerchief. My body still sore from the poking and pulling and pinching, his hands inside me. His whiskers glistening in the light that shone from the window up high on the wall. Tobacco breath hurling toward me. *You'll likely never have a baby.*

Girlhood abrupted. Sixteen. Shivering on the table and half-dressed. A grief too big to comprehend. Hollow cave of my abdomen, where echoes sound. Echoes of children's voices never to be heard, of cries never to be soothed.

The chill of the asylum runs through me now, settling in my bones. Bones knit from my mother's bones, never to have knit another. My barrenness carved into me on a pile of damp leaves in the woods. Nine. Nine birthday candles on Penny's cake. Nine bluebells clutched in my hand. Mud on my neck. Leaves in my hair.

Here is what I remember. I was seventeen.

"Push!" the granny midwife said to Ma. "Push!"

Just me and the midwife and Ma. She pants and screams something terrible. I have a cloth wrapped good and tight around one hand, the other end wrapped good and tight around Ma's. Every time the midwife yells at her to push! I pull on the cloth and Ma pulls back. When she pushes, her eyes bulge and she clenches her teeth together like a horse whinnying in the air.

"Come on now Brida, you've got to push real hard with the next wave. If you don't," the midwife says firmly, "this baby's not going to make it."

The words send chills down my spine. I find myself pushing too, straining like I'm the one pushing a baby out. I watch her face turn red as a beet; sweat glistens on her pale forehead. I've never seen Ma so determined. She's a warrior, fighting for that child. It brings tears to my eyes.

William Thomas comes into this world with a giant yelp. After all that silence in the room and all the low, deep groaning I never knew Ma was capable of, it takes

me by surprise to hear his high-pitched cry. It pierces the air and sends a shiver down my spine. An omen of something to come. The midwife hands him to me first. Ma too worn out to hold him, and the midwife says Ma still has more work to do. He's warm and solid in my arms. I tuck the blanket around him real tight, so he'll feel safe. When I place him in the bassinet, I whisper to him, "I'll always keep you safe. Promise." I have a brother.

When Ma passes the afterbirth, and I see it lying there so red, veins branching over its surface like the veins on an autumn leaf, I run to the hallway with a basin still crooked beneath my arm. I retch til I can't feel anything left in my stomach, til I spit up clear phlegm and my throat is sore. I catch a whiff of damp leaves standing there alone in the dark hall. It mingles with the sour smell of my vomit. Da appears at the top of the stairs, eyes big with fear. Everything is fine, you have a son. He comes down the hall toward me, grabs me, holds me while he cries. From relief, I think. We are all relieved that Ma and baby made it both.

I wish my stomach wasn't sour, that I could feel as happy as Da. The midwife brings the baby into the hall and I watch as Da pokes and prods the creature still wrapped tight in the blanket. He pulls on its toes and lays his cheek against its forehead. Probably to be sure he can feel the sureness of his sweet breath. I push the basin away from us with the toe of my boot and hope Da doesn't smell my weakness.

I hear the nurse's keys jangling outside my door. My mouth is dry, so dry, and my tongue catches on the roof of my mouth. My old mind confused. I still smell Tommy's sweet newborn smell when I walk down the hall, my linen dress rubbing

against my legs. I open my hands to receive my pills. Three white pills, round and perfect like the top of his newborn head. I take the cup of water and drink. Bitter seeds between my teeth. Hollow womb. Bluebells lying in the dirt. The memories that don't let me go.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Evelyn

When Evie stepped off the train in Staunton, snow fell softly, collecting on her hair and eyelashes. The snow melted as soon as it touched the ground, leaving the sidewalk slick and the winter lawn damp. Virginia snowstorms often disappointed, not amounting to much, never quite fulfilling its full promise. She decided to walk into town before calling for a taxi to take her to the asylum.

She pushed against a bitter breeze as she climbed the hill that took her into town. The breeze grew stronger and lifted her hat, carrying it off her head. She ran after it, catching it in her fingers before it tumbled further. Schoolboys chased each other down the other side of the street.

“C’mon! Don’t be a nigger!” one of the boys yelled at his friend who was winning the race.

“Yeah—I’m winning, so I ain’t a nigger!” the taller, faster boy yelled behind him.

Evie watched them play out their ideas of social constructs with a cool reserve. *You don’t still see that Baker boy, do you?* She re-pinned her hat and bit back words she wanted to hurl at the young boys. *Be polite. Keep a ladylike distance.* What would Harley have done? Take a drink from his flask and chastise the boys? Or walk on by and decide

the joke was on them? *Friends are friends, Evie. Don't you forget that. Don't matter the color. The world can be cruel.* The boys disappeared before Evie could decide what to do.

Main Street was still decorated for the holidays: tinsel snaked around window displays, Christmas lights hung from roof lines, and Evie saw a nativity scene still standing in the window of a jewelry store. The holidays had passed quietly for Evie, marked simply with midnight mass at the Basilica, where she lit candles for Harley and Bess. Jean had invited Evie to Crozet, to the farm, but she wasn't ready to see Tommy. She exchanged gifts with Agnes. A set of new watercolors and pen and ink for Evie, and a scarf and pin—arching, delicate stems of grass dotted with tiny rhinestones—for Agnes.

The empty seats in a diner appealed to Evie and she made her way to the counter, happy to smell freshly brewed coffee and to see fresh pastries in a glass case. The trip had felt long. In fact, it still felt as if the wheels of the train were clacking beneath her.

“Coffee please,” Evie told the man behind the counter. “And one of your Danishes.”

She pulled off her gloves and unsnapped her purse to pull out her wallet.

“Where you from?” he asked as he poured the coffee. Faint stains covered his apron, which was tied double around his large belly.

Evie hesitated. Brownsville or Washington? Brownsville would unite them, fellow Southerners, connect them as Central Virginians; Washington would immediately separate them. Southerners didn't trust people from Washington. She thought of the young boys running down the street. *Nigger!* They cut their teeth on Southern teachings.

“Washington,” she said.

“Just passing through?”

“Not really. I’m here to visit my mother.” Evie pulled out a cigarette and the man slid an ashtray across the counter until it stopped in front of her.

“Whereabouts?”

“The asylum.”

When he placed the Danish in front of her, Evie was certain the plate was set extra hard, a dense and intentional clatter. Leave, the sharp sound seemed to say. She sipped her coffee in quiet. The Danish was strangely satisfying. So was sitting in the man’s diner knowing he was uncomfortable. She supposed that the townspeople were used to people passing through because of the asylum, but she doubted that many people were honest about why they were visiting. *Your mama’s demons run deep. It’s our job to contain them.* Evie wasn’t sure how to keep up her end of the deal any longer. She hadn’t seen the suicide attempt coming. Or Tommy’s decision.

When the coffee and Danish were gone, Evie tapped out her cigarette and asked the man to call her a taxi. The sky had brightened, the snow stopped. She pulled on her wool cloak. Dishes clattered in the back kitchen. She walked through the door, the melodious bell ringing above her. The taxi idled on the road, Charon’s boat, waiting to take her to the other side.

She found Bess curled up on a bench in the common room, more waiflike than the last time she saw her, her gaze glazed and unfocused. Small scratches covered her

forearms. Evie sat down beside her and put her arms around her. She was so diminished in size, it was like holding a small child.

“Oh mama, you’ve lost more weight.”

Bess smiled demurely and raised a hand to run her fingers through Evie’s hair.

“So dark. So beautiful.”

She ran a finger down the bridge of Evie’s nose, a slight tremble making it feel like a tap-tap on Evie’s skin.

“Regal, like a princess.”

Let’s play Indian princess. I’ll plait your hair like an Indian Maiden and we’ll make beaded necklaces.

Bess settled back into Evie’s shoulder. There was a bald spot on the top of her head and Evie smoothed Bess’s hair to cover it.

“You came out feet first. Stubborn even then. Didn’t see your black hair until the midwife broke your shoulder and pulled you all the way out.”

Evie had a hard time understanding her. Her words weren’t fully annunciated, as if she had a ball of cotton in her mouth. Bess clacked her tongue against a dry mouth and wiped a hand across her lips.

“You’ve never talked about my birth,” Evie said softly.

“What? How could I?” Bess pulled away from her, agitated. “Where’s Harley?”

“Mama. Mama—Daddy’s gone. Remember?”

Cold floors of the church. Ashen, waxy skin. Harley at rest. Evie slipping a pewter flask into his suit pocket, a few drops of Old Man Wiley’s Pooch in the bottom of

the flask. Bess and Evie side by side, their center missing. Bess radiant in those moments of grief.

“He gave me his handkerchief.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Evie was shocked at her decline. Much had changed since the last visit.

“Let me see your hands. Why are they trembling so?”

“Medicine. Medicine to make me flat.”

Evie held her hands, running her fingers over the tops, smoothing and stroking to calm the trembling.

“They still have Christmas decorations out in town. Seems late, doesn’t it?” Evie asked Bess, hoping small talk would help her confusion. “Did you get the blanket I sent you?”

Bess looked at her blankly. Evie wondered if they staff gave it to her after all.

“My friend died,” she said.

“What friend?”

“Magde. She couldn’t return.”

“Return?”

“To the outside world.” *World* sounded more like |wuud|. “The young doctor, he said she didn’t belong here. Thirty years. Her children.”

“Her children?”

“Thought she was dead. The young doctor with the accent said she didn’t belong here. Taken from them. Told she was dead.”

“How sad. But she left the asylum? Went home?”

“She came back. She couldn’t fly. No wings.”

She wiped her hand across her mouth and clacked her tongue again.

“Got the cough out there. She came back. We can’t leave.”

Evie could see that Bess was distressed.

“Would you like to take a walk?”

She nodded and Evie laced her wool wrap on her shoulders, which were birdlike and pointed. So delicate.

“She got the cough,” she said again. “My friend died.”

Evie was relieved that Bess was no longer coughing.

“Why did your friend come here originally?”

“He called it something complicated—something to do with—I tasted metal,” she clacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth again. “Something to do with her pregnancy. Psychosis.”

Bess motioned for Evie to lean down.

“Tried to drown her baby,” she whispered.

Evie felt a wave of revulsion. Perhaps the woman had belonged in the asylum. She hid her reaction for Bess’s sake.

“I’m sorry your friend died.”

“She couldn’t leave. See? We don’t leave. We don’t survive outside these walls.”

“Oh mama, that’s silly. You’ll be home again. Just wait and see.”

They walked down an empty hallway, but the sounds of the other patients still reached them. Sudden allocutions, thumping, incessant talking—rambling, endless strings of words.

“Tell me about your life in Washington,” Bess said, her shoulders hunched and dwarfed beneath Bess’s wrap. The linen gown swung below the wrap’s hem.

“I’m taking drawing lessons. At the Natural History Museum, with a botanist.”

Bess turned away and Evie wasn’t sure that she followed the conversation, her confusion a veil that continued to fall between them.

“You refused to turn when the midwife tried to move you.”

“What?”

“You were stubborn even then.”

Evie swallowed hard. Bess’s mind wandered aimlessly, leaving Evie unsure how to navigate the visit. She wasn’t sure whether to believe the story of her birth, a story she’d never heard before. Was Bess hallucinating? Two cardinals landed on a nearby windowsill.

“Look Mama. Cardinals. It’s nice to see their color in the dead of winter, isn’t it?” Evie said, trying to pull her back to the present.

“If they let me have my paintbrushes here, I could paint them.”

“That would be nice. You’ll paint again—when you’re home.”

Bess put her hands on the inside of the window and peered closely at the birds who peered back, moving their heads from side to side, assessing Bess. Evie could see that Bess’s scars had faded so that they were hardly visible.

“I want to go back to my room,” Bess said suddenly. “I don’t want to visit anymore.”

They headed back to the nurse’s station, moving slowly, Bess’s short, shuffling steps setting their pace.

“Just in time,” a nurse said. “Time for your Lithium, Elizabeth.”

Bess held out her hands, willingly, docilely, and the nurse placed a paper cup on her palm. A second cup filled with water was passed to her after the white tablets lay on her tongue. Bess took the pills and then turned back to Evie. A dark look passed across her face.

“Now I’m flat. Just the way everyone likes.”

Not me, Evie thought. Suddenly, the idea of losing the Bess who could stay up all night painting for days on end, the Bess who created giant stallions that threatened to gallop off the wall, the Bess who created worlds from tubes of paint and gessoed canvas, was unthinkable. How did they arrive here?

“You go on now. Go live your life in Washington. Go on!” Bess tore at the wrap that still lay across her shoulders. Evie picked it up from the floor, tears smarting in her eyes. An attendant appeared to escort Bess, agitated, frail, away from Evie.

“We don’t leave!” Bess cried out, her back to Evie, her gait uneven as she continued down the hall beside the attendant. She’s a stranger, Evie thought. She was slipping away, turning into someone she hardly recognized. A lump settled in her throat and Evie hardly knew what to do with herself, standing there beside the nurse’s station, in the heart of the asylum, where pills were dispensed and people disappeared.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Evelyn

Agnes's home, a brick Tudor on a tree-lined street in Tenleytown, was exactly as Evie had imagined. The inside was orderly and tidy, yet comfortable. She could detect the smell of the museum, of artifacts and bones, of things old—from what she wasn't certain; perhaps it rode home on Agnes's clothing. A bare minimum adorned the pastel colored walls; she noticed a few of Agnes's grass drawings framed and placed strategically here and there, intentional, but not too obvious. A French secretary in the sitting room held a row of botany and sketchbooks; a small photograph of a young man sat on a shelf, encased in a simple gold frame. Evie thumbed through the titles on the secretary, while warming herself beside the fire, where flames licked and curled lazily, snapping occasionally. She thought about Bess, frail and trembling in her linen dress, wandering the cold halls of the asylum.

“Here you are dear. Gin and tonic with a lime,” Agnes said, holding out a glass.

“Can I help you in the kitchen?”

“Why don't you unwrap that cake you brought and set it on the table. Guests will be helping themselves tonight—my days of serving are long past.”

Evie followed her into the kitchen, which was just as neat as the rest of the home. The smell of pot roast wafted through the room, stimulating Evie's appetite. She watched Agnes snap the ends of green beans and then chop them with a sharp paring knife, deftly, her hands moving as expertly with a knife as they did with a pen or a paintbrush. When the pot was filled with bright green beans, she ladled a Béchamel sauce over them and placed it in the oven.

"How is that mother of yours holding up down in Staunton?" Agnes asked, her back to Evie. She pulled the pork roast out of the oven and poked at the tender meat with a fork.

Evie pictured Bess, hands held open as if receiving the Eucharist, willingly, docilely, accepting pills. *To make me flat.*

"She's—well, she's diminished. I hardly recognize her.... you know, she was once a talented painter."

"Well now, that's something I didn't know. I suppose that's something between you. The artistic ability. You know, there's always been a thin line between art and madness. The perennial question has always been just how to walk the line and not lose oneself. And of course if you're a woman, society judges your artistic nature all the more harshly." Agnes returned the roast to the oven and looked at the time on her wristwatch, tapping a finger on the watch face as if committing to memory the time. "So, she's worse then, is she?"

Worse. Yes, she was worse. The knife slid effortlessly through Evie's chocolate cake, buttercream frosting giving way easily, the cake moist and solid. Bess sliding

Harley's razor blade through her tender skin, wrists giving way. Evie piercing her own thigh. She pulled the knife from the cake and placed it on a plate.

"She's disappearing—confused. I'm at a loss as to what to do. What can I do?" Shrugging her shoulders, Evie picked up the cake plate and carried it to the dining table, where she saw that five place settings had already been laid out, white cut-out napkins folded neatly on each plate.

When she turned around, she saw Agnes watching her from the doorway. The evening light cast blue shadows on her soft hair, which was pinned back loosely above her ears. Evie thought of her grandmother, a countrywoman, toothless, far from her homeland, a woman who couldn't let herself love Evie. She thought of the secrets and regrets that lay buried behind the shadows.

"What does your mother want?" Agnes asked quietly. "Do you know?"

The doorbell rang, a sharp, shrill sound that startled them both. Agnes removed her apron quickly and made her way to the front door. The bell rang again and soon Evie heard mingled voices and laughter in the sitting room.

"To die," Evie whispered in the silence of the dining room. But was it the medicine, the treatments that made Bess that way, or was it truly what Bess still wanted, she wondered.

Feeling spun up and not ready to greet the other dinner guests, Evie went into the kitchen to check on the pork roast and green beans. She busied herself by rinsing dishes in the sink and folding Agnes's damp tea towels and sipping on her gin and tonic.

"Evie, come meet our guests!" Agnes called out from the front room.

She took a deep breath, smoothed her skirt, and made her way to the front of the house, where the fire was sputtering and spitting. It was a cozy and intimate space, a home. Agnes spoke animatedly with three guests. One of them, an elderly man, tall and stooped, moved to shake Evie's hand when he saw her enter the room.

"I've heard much about you," his handshake was firm, confident, despite a faint age tremor. "Phillip Moehle."

"Evelyn Johnson," Evie said softly.

He cocked his head to the side and looked at her intently.

"Well how is that? A Swedish name. You don't appear Scandinavian. Tell me more...."

Agnes moved to stand between them.

"Phil, really, let us finish the introductions before you start interrogating my guests with your anthropological inquisitions." Her voice was firm, commanding, and Evie noticed the effect she had on the others in the room. "Evie, Phil—Dr. Moehle—is a doctor of anthropology. He studies people, cultures. Don't mind him. Come meet Frances—my neighbor and a painter."

In addition to Dr. Moehle and Frances the painter, an entomologist from the museum joined them. They made their way to the dining room, and true to Agnes's prediction, all of the guests served themselves from the dishes that were laid in the middle of the table. Conversation swung seamlessly from the guests' travels to Dwight Eisenhower's new presidency to botany and bugs. Sitting at the dining table, Evie noticed how quiet it was in Tenleytown. No sirens or honking, no loud voices outside the

windows—just the occasional bark of a dog or gust of wind prattling a window. The conversation continued to weave easily between the dinner courses, and Evie would later find herself associating a nutty, creamy Béchamel sauce with the blue banded morpho butterfly; the smell of a tender pork roast with First Lady Mamie’s pink inaugural gown and pearl-encrusted purse; and the crisp edges of a potato gratin with the American chestnut tree blight.

“Evelyn, did you grow up near Prince Edward County?” Maude, the entomologist asked during dessert.

“I believe it’s not too far from Nelson County. Just south of where I grew up.” Evie sipped her drink, nursing it slowly, determined not to exceed two drinks that night. “Why do you ask?”

“A Virginia court just ruled for “separate but equal” education. I just don’t understand how that can be. Equal yet separate. Hogwash. That’s just an excuse to avoid change.” Maude had been drinking red wine all evening and her cheeks were flushed.

Evie slid the last bite of cake across her plate and then back again, the tines of her fork ringing melodiously.

“I don’t know anything about a court case. What was it for exactly?” she finally asked, feeling under-prepared for the discussion—far out-ranked in education, in worldliness, by the others in the room.

Maude looked at Evie intently.

“Education is the key. Vital to a true democracy, to independence,” Maude said forcefully. “And students at the black high school in a town—I believe it’s called

Farmville—have been learning in unsavory conditions – no heat, leaks in the roof, overcrowding. A young girl—only sixteen—organized a strike and that led to a lawsuit requiring the district to integrate the schools so that all students, black or white, receive the same education. A girl, mind you! Separate but equal. Really. What was that court thinking?” She clacked her tongue to emphasize her point.

“I—I don’t follow the news that closely.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s been buried plenty. But I do believe that this case will continue to move forward somehow. It could be pivotal. How can we claim to be a democracy, yet continue to learn, to live separately? Treating the races differently?”

“Who would like coffee?” Agnes asked, holding up an enamel coffee pot, which had been sitting, plugged in, on a small buffet table. Her print dress was wrinkled down the back of her skirt from the long evening of sitting. She winked conspiratorially at Evie; the coffee was an intervention.

Maude held up her cup and Agnes moved to fill it.

“We all hold education in high esteem Maude,” Agnes said. “Equal education for women and for those students of color is a worthy cause. Your doctorate, for instance, Maude, has given you many advantages as a woman in science.”

Steam rose from Maude’s cup and Evie thought she saw her face soften from Agnes’s compliment.

“It was a fight, that’s for certain. A worthwhile one,” Maude said. “I know firsthand just how important the willingness to fight for equality is and I commend the young Virginia girl. I never could have dreamed where my education would take me

when I began college. I was young and idealistic and only knew that I loved science and insects—no-one was going to stop me from finishing my education. A career at the National Museum was a dream I didn't dare to dream, even as I studied. A wonderful outcome, however." She turned to Evie again. "Tell me Evie, did you attend college?"

"I took a few courses at a school in Lynchburg, but didn't pursue a degree."

"Evie is a talented artist," Agnes interjected, before taking her seat at the other end of the table. Evie blushed. "She has a particular talent. You should all become familiar with her work."

"Oh—what kind of art?" Frances asked, her hands fluttering above her plate, bracelets clicking against one another. Younger than the other guests—Evie would guess mid-fifties—she wore a colorful scarf around her head, its ties hanging over one shoulder. Evie admired Frances's charcoal lined eyes and bold, red lipstick; she had no problem drawing attention to herself.

"Drawing mostly, but some watercolor," Evie said. "It's really just a hobby. I work as a secretary during the day."

"I would love to see your artwork some day," Frances said. "You should come by my studio!"

"Maude, you'd be interested in her Canadian Tiger Swallowtail drawing—it's quite stunning," Agnes said.

"A secretary, is that right?" Dr. Moehle said. "A lot of young girls are working these days. These women are right: education, it's vital. Would you consider returning to school?"

Evie felt like one of Maude's bugs or one of Agnes's grasses, all eyes examining her, sizing her up.

"I have to support myself. I don't think it would be realistic," Evie said quietly before leaning back to draw a cigarette from her purse. The conversation moved on and Evie was relieved to retreat into the background.

The evening ended back in the sitting room. Dr. Moehle added more kindling and paper to the fire so that it flared back to life and soon Evie felt lulled into a relaxed state. She half-listened to Dr. Moehle talk about his research with a small indigenous population in East Africa. Frances had traveled to Africa and interjected with her tourist observations. The professor goodheartedly reminded her several times that Africa was a large continent.

Evie and Dr. Moehle stayed to help Agnes after the other guests left. They worked companionably, quietly, comfortably. When the kitchen and dining room were back in shape, Evie put on her coat and picked up her cake plate, reading to leave.

"Thank you for inviting me," Evie said when Agnes and Dr. Moehle joined her in the front hall. She had the fleeting thought that they might be a romantic couple. Perhaps he was staying the night. Evie blushed at the thought.

"Of course. The evening wouldn't have been complete without you here, dear," Agnes said. "Phil, did you remember to talk to Evie about your psychiatrist friend? The one who worked in a Virginia asylum?"

The cold of the Eastern State Asylum ran over Evie's skin. She couldn't stop the images of the spiral staircase, linen hems and numbers, Bess frail and confused, from

racing through her mind. Evie felt the plate slip from her fingers. It clattered on the tile floor and shattered into several pieces.

“Oh—I’m so sorry!” Evie said, bending down to pick it up.

“Not to worry. I’ll get a bag to carry it in. You might be able to glue it back together. Waste not and all that,” Agnes said. “Dear, I hope you don’t mind that I told Phil about your mother. He’s very astute about people and actually knows quite a bit about psychiatry. He may have some insights that can help you. Can you stay just a bit longer? I’ll put on a fresh pot of coffee.”

A familiar knot formed in Evie’s stomach. Coffee with a whiskey lace, she thought even as she nodded yes and shrugged off her coat. They settled back on the couch, which backed to the front window. A cold draft of air whistled through the panes of glass, but the room was still warm from the fire.

“Tell me. Tell me about your mother,” Dr. Moehle said kindly.

Evie felt as if she were wading into the deep of an ocean. Memories washed over her, memories from her childhood, memories she wasn’t even sure were her own. How to explain Bess?

“I don’t know where to start,” Evie said, looking down at her hands.

“Why not just choose a beginning point and go from there?”

“Okay. Well, what I know is that she was born in Crozet, Virginia. Her parents—my grandparents—were from Connemara, Ireland, the west coast. She grew up on a farm. My daddy too, but he grew up in the north—Wisconsin—and moved to Virginia later. They met in high school,” she paused, took a breath, while she thought of more to say.

“Oh—I don’t know. She was always bigger than life to me. She could be dramatic and artistic and magnetic, drawing people to her. Like a magnet pulling metal, my daddy often said. But she could also be erratic, depressed. When I got older, she would disappear for days. My daddy and I, she really needed us sometimes.”

“It sounds like it was an unusual childhood.”

“I suppose.”

“Tell me about the asylum. How are they treating her there?”

“She’s told me that they use electricity to take away her memories.”

“ECT therapy.”

“And they are giving her Lithium, which seems to make her calm, but “flat” she calls it. I’m not sure what else they are doing. It’s hard to tell what is her imagination and what is really happening there. She’s confused all of the time now—she wasn’t this bad before, that’s all I know.”

Dr. Moehle leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees and clasp his hands together, making a triangle with his forearms. He nodded sympathetically. Evie felt a rush of warm feeling toward him. She imagined that his students were often the recipients of his attentiveness, his kindness. She missed Harley with a deep ache in that moment. Missed the smell of his whiskey breath, the warmth of his hand on her shoulder when he knew she needed a reassuring touch, the intensity in the gaze of his clear blue eyes. She missed having a father.

“The conditions in those hospitals can be questionable,” he said. “My psychiatrist friend trained in the Western State Asylum and has shared his experiences with me. He’s

now in private practice here in the city, a much-preferred way to practice to hear him tell it. How did she end up in the asylum, if you don't mind my asking?"

Evie told him about Harley's heart attack, about the day she found Bess on the bathroom floor, about Tommy's guardianship, the commitment hearing.

"So, if I understand you correctly, you didn't have a say in her commitment?"

"No." Tears smarted in her eyes.

"That's unfortunate. Does your uncle consult with you at all?"

Evie shook her head no. "He doesn't even visit her. I think he's just washed his hands of her."

"Families often do. The mentally ill behind closed doors is easier for many," he said. "Yet, psychiatry in this country is still rudimentary. It simply seeks to control, not necessarily to heal," his voice was low and calm. "Therapies are surgical, or done for shock value—insulin, electricity, ice baths."

"Ice baths?" Evie sat back in her seat.

"Used for rage fits. Bathtubs filled with ice. Brutal," he shook his head.

Bess coughing, shivering, the nurse telling Evie that Bess had "misbehaved."

Agnes returned with fresh coffee steaming in mugs on a tray. A small pint of whiskey sat beside them. Evie looked up at Agnes in surprise.

"I suppose you don't remember telling me about your father's morning whiskey? I had the thought you might like a teaser yourself," Agnes said. "You told me about the tar paper lean-tos where he listened to the Blues as well. Phil—there's plenty of

anthropological fieldwork to be found in Southern Virginia. No need to travel all the way to Zambia.”

He chuckled.

“That will be the work of the next generation, I’m afraid. Evie, you might be interested in hearing about my studies with the Ndembu and traditional forms of healing.”

Evie poured whiskey into her coffee and blew on it, waiting for it to cool.

“Do you know what many African healers would say about someone like your mother?” he said. “That she is a medium who bring messages from the spirit world, treated as an important part of the community. In fact, a shaman might say that the ancestral ties were broken when your mother’s parents left Ireland. Here we’ve built large institutions to house the mentally ill, but perhaps instead we need those very patients to remind us of our country’s foundation, which is immigrant—a nation of the lost, missing their ancestors, far from their ancestral grounds.”

Evie chewed on her lip, and then dug in her purse for a cigarette. After it was lit, she thought more about what he had said. Drawing heavily on her cigarette, she exhaled a thick cloud of smoke that hung in the air in front of her and waved her hand to disperse it.

“And healing?”

“The Ndembu have their own particular rituals—ng’oma, which literally means to drum. A shaman will lead the ritual, which involves singing and drumming, dancing, and the making of shrines. Symbolic objects can be important. The shaman will work at revealing spirits or witchcraft powers,” he said. “You see, it’s accomplished through a systematic process: first Separation, then Seclusion, and then the ritual of

Reintegration—native shamans here in America refer to this as “soul retrieval.” It’s really something to witness, and I’ve been fortunate to have the opportunity.”

Evie wondered if the Ndembu really got better. Whether a healer could heal all that haunted Bess.

“For instance,” he continued. “Your mother might have a shrine built to honor her ancestors back in Ireland. She could add anything symbolic to the shrine or to the healing ritual. Something that the healer identifies as central to her fragmented state. It’s all about story, and history, and community. The whole community takes part in the singing and dancing and drumming. Quite the opposite of the isolation of an asylum patient here in the States.”

Agnes leaned forward and patted Evie’s knee.

“A different way of thinking about things, isn’t it?”

Evie nodded.

“What does your psychiatrist friend say about asylums, Dr. Moehle? Can someone get better there?” Evie asked.

“Well, I think he would say that it depends on the severity of the illness. For instance, if someone were psychotic or severely paranoid schizophrenic, hospitalization may be necessary for the patient and the safety of the community. But in other cases—well, he felt extreme measures were taken too often. He questions whether decisions were being made in the best interests of the patient. There are many experimental therapies conducted in asylums. Often without the patient’s consent. I would caution you on that

front. Be sure that you know what is really happening to your mother. My friend assisted in a lobotomy that went horribly wrong. He still has nightmares about it.”

“Lobotomy?”

“A radical and invasive surgery in which the surgeon removes sections of the brain.”

Evie felt sick to her stomach. Removing parts of the brain?

“Now from what you’ve told me, your mother was suicidal, not psychotic or schizophrenic.”

“The psychiatrist has used the term bi-polar,” Evie said, drinking the last of her coffee to quell the queasiness in her stomach.

“Well, it sounds like you have your work cut out for you, Miss Johnson—we’ll have to discuss your name and ethnic lineage another time, I haven’t forgotten! But it’s late,” he said, unfolding himself from the couch, his long lanky form still agile and quick-moving despite his age. “I hope that you find answers and that your mother fares well in the end.”

Evie tapped out the butt of her cigarette and placed her mug back on the tray.

“Thank you, thank you for sharing what you know. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

They were all standing at once and Evie made her way to the hall, where her coat hung on the banister.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday?” Agnes asked.

“Yes, of course. I’m looking forward to it,” Evie said, buttoning up her coat and wrapping a scarf around her neck. “Thank you again. It was a lovely evening.”

Evie walked the streets of Tenleytown, grateful for the crisp, cool air and the time to think. Revealing, reintegration, drumming and singing and dancing. What would Bess think of the Ndembu? Streetlights flickered like fireflies between the branches of the giant oak lining the street, winking and dancing in the pitchy night sky. Evie wondered what it would feel like to drum or dance or sing for her mother’s healing. She imagined Canadian Yellow Swallowtails dipping and twirling around her, and the sight of her mother’s face, radiant and fully healed.

When she returned to her apartment, she went immediately to the dresser in her bedroom. She pulled the tattered and stained towel from the top drawer and unrolled the razor. It sat small and harmless in her hands. How could something so small, so quotidian, something that Harley had used each morning, have caused something so irreversible?

She walked to the kitchen with the razor and towel still in her hands and placed the towel in the sink, where she lit it with a match. She watched the flame flare, leaping and growing quickly. Eventually it ate away at the fabric and smoked on the porcelain surface of the sink. The putrid smell of old blood mixed with smoke. Evie opened the window and a cold blast of winter air moved past her. She placed the razor on the windowsill next to the wooden creatures her grandfather had carved long ago. It occurred to her that the sill was becoming an altar of sorts. A shrine filled with symbolic objects. After putting a pinch of ash on the sill, she rinsed the remaining ash and burnt fibers

down the drain and closed the window. In the quiet of her kitchen, she arranged the fox and stallion and other creatures so that they all faced her. She placed the razor on its side so that it could rest against the stallion.

All eyes were on her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bess

My feet are unsteady. My mind empty, flat. I catch sight of myself in a reflection on a multi-paned window. Who is this woman with hair so grey, face so pale? Stray strands of hair in a frizzy halo; ECT fuzz. I watch as the reflection repeats in each pane. Six versions of my asylum self. Penance. I walk dead through these halls. Penitent with open hands. Pills as wafers on my palm. Only say the word and I shall be healed. No one suspects; pills nestle secretly in my pocket. Only water washes down my throat. Blood of my blood. Later I will grind the pills into dust.

I chase down memories while I sit at the window. Sunlight warms my legs through the thin gown that covers me. Signs of spring on the other side of the glass: tree buds, birdsong, lawn full and green. Harley kept the grounds at the University. His fingers stained green, hands rough, marked by old cuts, skin thick and coarse from the sun. Green pants, green shirt, work boots by the back door, mud and grass clippings fixed to the heels. The smell of boxwood and earth.

“I met a woman at the University this week,” he said that day.

“Are you leaving me?” I asked, feeling the ground give way beneath me. I stood at the sink, hands raw from hours of peeling and chopping. Canning time. A good day for me.

“What? No!” Harley laughed and circled his arms around me, nestling his lips against my neck. “You’re salty.”

“Of course I am,” I said, turning so that I could wrap my arms around him too. “This August heat is ungodly.”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Who?”

“The woman I met.”

Envy courses through me, and my hands ache from its force.

“She’s a professor, a lecturer. Unmarried.”

“Oh,” I say. Our sunny kitchen suddenly feels empty, quiet. I look into Harley’s blue eyes and run my fingers through his coarse, white-blond hair.

“You can’t really tell yet. She’s hiding it.”

“How did you find out?”

“She was picnicking one day and we struck up a conversation,” he said. He was a good listener. “One thing led to another and I told her how you wanted to be a mother. She told me how she couldn’t keep the baby—the scandal of an unmarried professor, y’know.”

I didn’t understand the significance in that moment.

“Don’t you see Bess? We can have a child. We can raise the baby as our own.”

The memories. I chase them down—try to catch them long enough to make sense of them. I can still feel the sticky peach juice on my fingers and Harley’s coarse hair beneath my hands. I sit in my linen dress on this bench and remember how my empty womb leapt at his words. How my heart was full with the thought of a baby in our home with its sunny kitchen and blue bedroom.

“And Bess, the thing is, come here, sit down with me.” We sat at the table and I wiped my sticky hands on my apron. “Bess, the baby, you see....”

“What is it, Harley? Just tell me,” I said, hope draining from me.

“The baby will be, well, there’s no telling what the baby will really look like. You see, the father, he’s an Indian. The professor, she’s French, German—European—but the father, he’s Indian. The baby, it will be a half-breed,” he said, drumming his fingers nervously on the table.

I sat with this. A baby. A baby of our own. A child to raise. A half-breed in Brownsville, in Virginia. Adrenaline coursed through me. A headiness overtook me.

“We can do this,” I said. “We can raise this child as our own, protect the child. Right? We can do this?”

Harley reached for my hands. We were united there in our sunny kitchen.

“We can do this. Give this child a life. Give this professor an answer to her predicament.”

In here, babies are born and taken to the outside world. Wombs go empty. Arms ache for phantom babies. Did the professor’s arms ache, I wonder. Even as I held the

baby, my new baby in my arms, did her womb go empty? Those early years, full of fear. Fear that she could change her mind. That it was all a dream.

Born breech. Among the Navajo. Feet first, reaching for the red dirt, determined to find the ground beneath you. Dark head of hair. Wide mouth. We waited for her to return, to deliver you to us. An eternity. Sleep eluded me; anticipation drove me to the canvas. Harley's eyes full of concern. The baby, the baby, I would say, that's all I need. I'll be better when the baby is here. I promise. I promised.

Memories hide in the corners of my mind. Memories that don't return. How long did we wait? Months. How many months? The tree buds, the birdsong, the return of color. Forsythia ablaze. Daffodils bending beneath the spring rains. Your warm breath on my chest, your dark eyes searching my own. Who are you? You seemed to ask. Your mama. Your mama. A daily chorus. I sang until my throat was raw, until we both believed it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Evelyn

It was B. B. King night at the Canal Street club. Harley would have said the Blues were gentrifying. Evie's taxi cut through the dark streets in record time. The Potomac River glistened under the night sky and the smell of fish wafted through the air, greeting Evie when she stepped onto the pavement. She followed two couples into the club, both white. This wasn't U Street. A horn solo greeted them as they moved through the doors into the large room. Evie felt a familiar thrill, a rush, when she drew closer to the band.

It was a mixed crowd and the tables at the back of the room were designated for colored guests. Evie hesitated. This was something she hadn't thought about beforehand. *Can't find my baby*. Where to sit? Annette hadn't arrived yet; she had further to travel. *3 o'clock in the morning*. Evie sat alone at a table in the back of the white section. Would someone really move them if Annette sat with her? The room was crowded, filled with smoke and conversation that wove between the notes. Evie preferred to listen to the band without conversation. The conversation for her was with the notes, not other patrons. The piano keys rattled and she settled in to listen. *Look all around me people, well my baby can't be found*. A horn drew strong and then faded away, making room for the bass. She

closed her eyes to listen without distraction. Her hands were empty, no drink to wrap her fingers around, but she felt strangely satisfied, alone at the table, the music moving her.

“Are you waiting for someone?”

She opened her eyes, the magic broken by Sam’s voice.

“May I?”

Evie nodded and reached into her purse for a cigarette.

“Annette.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m meeting Annette here.”

Sam looked around him.

“Are you planning to sit here?”

“Why not? Such silly rules in this place. I much prefer U Street clubs.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. A familiar gesture, Evie realized, after just one night spent together. An ache settled over her. He smiled at her.

“That’s what I like about you,” Sam said. “You’re different, Evie. It’s refreshing.”

“Who are you here with?” She tapped ashes into a glass ashtray.

“Oh—a few guys I know from back home. They live in Washington too. Can I get you a drink?”

Evie let smoke swirl in the back of her throat before exhaling. The ache had turned to nerves, and so she nodded. Just one. Annette arrived while Sam was at the bar.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, standing in front of Evie. “You know I can’t be here—
at this table.”

“Why not try and see what happens?”

Annette gave Evie a sharp look.

“I’m not comfortable with that. It’s not that easy for me.”

It was easy for Evie, not much at stake, she realized, and, she felt ashamed of her arrogance. She tapped out her cigarette butt and gathered her things so they could move to the back section. How easy it was for her to move from one section to another. There was a catch in her throat. They moved together into the farthest corner, where the only empty seats remained. The B. B. King stand-in was performing a solo on a high-neck guitar. *Going to quit you woman.*

“Not the same as B. B. King,” Annette said as they sat down at the table.

“And certainly not Lucille,” a man seated next to them said. Square and solid, he filled in his brown pinstripe suit as if leaving no room for error. “Not too shabby though. You ever seen B. B. King in person?”

Evie shook her head no.

“Who’s Lucille?” Annette asked. His eyes lit up when Annette turned her smile on him.

“His bass. B.B.’s that is. He names his guitars. All of them are called Lucille. Like a lover, don’t you think? The way he plays her? Like making love. Ahh. Nothing like seeing him live. I saw him in Memphis.”

Evie wanted the conversation to turn and was grateful when other guests at the table began to talk about a murder trial going on in Florida.

“Damn shame. Didn’t even give her a fair trial. All white jury,” a man dressed all in black said from across the table.

“What you expect down in swampland?”

“Town’s right on the Suwannee River. Ever been there?”

“Yeah man. I been there. Visited a woman friend’s family near there. Those trees along that river hang a lot of strange fruit.”

Laughter, deep and melodic, rippled around the table.

“She kept saying she didn’t know why she shot the man. Seems to me she had plenty of reasons,” the man in the brown pinstripe said.

“What kind of reasons?” Annette asked.

“I heard her baby girl was the white doctor’s daughter. Ruby’s sister held her up for all the jury to see, but no-one paid any kind of attention.”

“She was having an affair with the doctor?” Annette asked.

“If that’s what you call it when a white man decides he wants a negro married woman. Doubt there was much choice now.”

Annette looked down at her hands. The rest of the table grew quiet.

“Her husband’s dead too. Suicide.”

Silence fell over them all again. Evie turned to look at the band. A guest fiddler had jumped onto the stage. The energetic strains of fiddle mixed with the smooth tone of the saxophone. The fiddle took Evie back to her childhood, to the days when her

grandfather still played the tunes of his homeland. Unlike her grandfather, this fiddler was black. His arms were wiry and muscular, and his brow and hair were beaded with sweat. Answer and call. A conversation between instruments, a conversation that filled in the silence left behind by the story of Ruby McCollum.

Evie wondered if Sam would find her in the smoky, dark corner. Eventually she saw him making his way toward her. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. He was more in his element in the Canal Street club, she could tell, but he didn't hesitate to join them at the table in the colored section.

“Manhattan, right?”

“Sure. I've not been drinking much lately. Manhattan. Whiskey. Gin & tonic. Any would do.”

Evie noticed a colored couple enter the club.

“Sam, maybe we should move—there aren't any more seats.”

He looked up to see them scanning the tables and turned back to nod at Evie. Sam walked up to the man, who was dressed in a sharp suit, and offered their seats to them. Evie and Sam moved to stand against the wall, not too far from the table.

“I didn't take you for a whiskey girl,” Sam said, resuming their conversation.

“Something my daddy liked. A little bit of home, I suppose.”

Sam rested a hand on the wall behind her.

“How's your mother doing?”

Confused. Sad. Fading. Disappearing before her eyes. A ghost, a spirit floating half-formed through the cold hallways. An apparition in linen. Fragile and bird-like. Dying. A number.

“Fine.”

The bands were changing and Sam dropped his voice, leaning in close until Evie could feel his breath on her hair.

“You know, you sometimes seem so alone. You can talk to me. I’ll listen.”

A confused set of emotions tangled in a knot and Evie moved back to the table to grab a cigarette, to take a moment to find her composure. The man at the table who had been talking to her earlier offered a light, and Evie leaned in, tip to flame. When she stood back up, she noticed that he didn’t acknowledge Sam, standing behind her. She thanked him and moved back to the wall. An in-between spot. Not in either section. Sam stood with his back against the wall, nursing his drink slowly.

Evie bit her lip. Such a kind offer. She should acknowledge it.

“I’m not used to talking about things. Especially not my mother,” she finally said. She rested a hand on her skirt and ran a thumb over one of the scars on her thigh, now thick and tough so that she could feel its bumpy ridges through the fabric. A scar, she realized, she made the last night she had spent with Sam. Ash fell from her cigarette on the carpet at her feet.

“That can change,” he said.

A new band filled the stage, and Evie noticed they had a female singer accompanying them. Not Bille Holliday, but a woman all the same. The pianist ran

fingers lightly across the keys. A saxophonist ran a cloth over the horn, and the vocalist sipped on a drink until the bassist began to play in earnest. Music filled the room again and Evie reached for the notes that awakened the deepest emotions, relishing they way they wove between everyone, touching everyone in the club. Everyone. Some day the tables would be as mixed as the band on stage. And picking a table would be as simple as taking a seat, no fear in a friend's eyes, no averted gazes.

“Want to dance?” Sam asked.

“Yes.”

She set her glass on the table in front of Annette and turned to reach for Sam's glass too.

“We're going to dance,” Evie leaned down to tell Annette, who smiled at them both. Evie could sense her matchmaking wheels turning, and shook her head knowingly at Annette. They both laughed.

“Go on!” Annette said.

It was a different kind of dancing at the Canal Street club. Polite. Less contact. Evie couldn't help but wish she'd had more to drink. To find that familiar magic. Yet she felt a new sense of anticipation, as if waiting for something important to happen. Sam's hand on her back felt like dangerous contact, but she knew it looked harmless to others on the dance floor. The bassist strummed and pulled until the chords were leading them, guiding them. Much like Sam moved confidently with her on the floor. He locked eyes with her. She felt exposed under his gaze, yet realized she only wanted to move closer, to rest her head on his shoulder—to tell him about the flock of birds on the lawn of the

asylum, the nameless stones beneath the oak, about Harley and Nelson county, about Bess and her family in Crozet. About stallions and swimming in the creek with the Baker boys, fishing and picnicking at the University when the university men had all gone home. About memory fragments and Canadian Tiger Swallowtails. About the Ndembu and dancing and drumming, about the shrine on her windowsill. About Bess's paint-stained finger beds and riding the train south to Staunton, to the cold hallways of the asylum, where one woman died because she couldn't survive outside its walls.

Soon they were dancing closer, and her head was leaning on his shoulder. The female vocalist wove between the notes until they were all taken to the edge, where emotion and desire converged. Sam pulled her close, and it was then, while encircled in his arms, that Evie knew, knew for certain that it was time for her leave Washington.

BIOGRAPHY

Sheryl Louise Rivett grew up in Northern Illinois. In 2004, she received her Bachelor of Individualized Studies in Women's Studies in Communication from George Mason University. She went on to receive her Master of Arts in Creative Nonfiction Writing from Johns Hopkins University in 2011. She then received her Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Fiction) from George Mason University in 2015. Sheryl has taught college composition, creative writing, and art. Her teaching has brought her into community colleges, public schools, and private schools, and has included in-services about creative writing for teachers. In addition, she has worked as a freelance writer in technical and business writing, public relations, and health policy. Always in search of story and justice, she has also worked at a psychiatric hospital; with the mentally ill homeless and teens, in a day treatment center; and with at-risk pregnant women and young mothers. She served as the Blog Editor for *So to Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art* while in the George Mason University MFA program. Currently she serves on the editorial team at *ROAR Magazine: A Journal of the Literary Arts by Women* and curates her website: sheryllouiserivett.com. In the coming year, she hopes to finish her novel, as well as a memoir-in-progress about intergenerational illness and healing.