

# The Violet Notebook





*August 3, 2017 — Abiquiú, New Mexico*

When Lola went to San Francisco last year, she bought me what she thought was a sketchbook, one small enough for me to slip in my pocket and take on my early evening walks through the hills surrounding the village, when I might see hollyhocks I want to draw, or a desert cottontail, or any number of things. I never know where my walks will take me or what I'll see. The destination isn't what's important but the light, best in late afternoon. Artists chase the light.

The book is bound in faux leather and dyed a brilliant shade of bright blue, almost turquoise, one of the reasons Lola chose it for me. It was gray and gloomy the whole time she was in San Francisco, and when she saw the blue, it reminded her of the sky at home, and the sky reminds her of me. Lola once described our life together like this: Picture taking off in an airplane from a city where the weather is too bleak to bear. The airplane climbs and climbs and finally breaks through the clouds where there's nothing but light and blue sky. That's my life with Sylvia, she said. That's how it feels, and

that's how it looks. At an elevation of more than six thousand feet, the sky here is somehow bluer than the sea.

Lola always brings me gifts when she travels. It's part of our ritual, our little courtship dating back decades. She sometimes travels for work, taking a couple of big trips a year. I stay home, interested only in what's around me. The world to me is not *out there*. But Lola, like most people, doesn't see it that way; she ventures out, then returns home with small tokens to let me know she'd been thinking of me while she was away. I loved the blue book as soon as she handed it to me; I could imagine her buying it in a bookstore on one of those vertiginous San Francisco streets, she in a simple skirt-and-sweater set, silver-black hair pulled back into a low knot, a simple chain around her neck. No lipstick, never anything like that. Lola doesn't need adornment.

The blue book was wrapped in plastic, and when I opened it the next morning after Lola had gone to her study, I discovered it wasn't a sketch-book but a diary with lined pages. I decided not to tell Lola about the mistake she'd made, that I hated those lines that looked like bars on a cage. I see in flashes and impressions, color and light, not in words snaking across and down a page, that deep cavern of writing, which I rarely choose to enter.

I put the diary on the bookcase in my study and hoped Lola wouldn't mention it again, never suspecting that one day I would need to write in it with a sense of urgency.

That's not what I'm writing in now, that beautiful but disappointing blue diary. I *will* write in it — after today that is a certainty — but I have to warm up to this diary-writing business first.

I'm writing now in a Moleskine notebook I bought years ago in a bookshop in Taos. It's a radiant violet color, with an attached elastic band, also in violet, that wraps around the notebook from top to bottom. There were so many colors of Moleskines stacked on the shelves at the shop, and I picked through them, pulling out the violet one on instinct, thinking of Wordsworth: "A violet by a mossy stone, half hidden from the eye!" I tend to see colors as flowers. I bought the notebook thinking I'd use it to make shopping

lists, to-do lists, the sorts of prosaic things I'm not good at doing, but true to form, I've never used the Moleskine except to press a sprig of lavender inside the front cover, a sprig now flattened but still pungently fragrant.

I suppose I could call this notebook a diary, but I'm not going to do that. That raises expectations.

I've turned to this notebook now because Lola isn't here and I need someone to talk to. The truth is I have no one else.

I've never wanted to leave a trail. That might seem strange for someone in my position — an artist, and a rather famous one. I've certainly left a trail of paintings behind me going back decades, highly personal in many ways but really only breadcrumbs. People know my art but not me, and I always intended to keep it that way.

But today something happened that I wish I could say I'd dreaded for a long time, though that wouldn't be true. I was caught, as they say, *off guard*. That might be the downside of not writing in a diary, of leaving no trail. The diary isn't the point so much as what the lack of one reveals. I've been too willing to forget.

After lunch today, I walked to the post office, taking the usual route down the dirt road that runs around the edge of the village (I've always preferred edges), wearing my wide-brimmed sun hat that hides my face. Lola is in Brazil for about a month teaching a course on the art of perfumery at a prestigious institute, the name of which eludes me. When she's home, we take this postlunch walk together and chat about what we'll be working on in the afternoon until we meet again for dinner. (There's no talk of work allowed during meals, house rule.) Walking on my own, I was left to think about my afternoon and the large blank canvas that's been sitting on the easel in my studio for weeks, untouched. I've been dancing around it, not ready yet to approach it, so I spend my time doing sketches. The anticipation is delightful.

There are always letters in the post office box for me, almost none of them with my address. They are simply addressed to Sylvia Wren, Abiquiú, New Mexico, 87510. Only a handful of people know my full address, but in a village of around two hundred residents, the letters still find their way to me. It's kind of people to write, but the mail does pile up quickly and it begs a response even if the writers don't ask for one.

I employ a woman in Santa Fe as my assistant of sorts, one of those New Age white people who flock there dripping with turquoise jewelry and smelling of sage. I'd prefer to hand off all the letters to her. It's her job to turn down requests for whatever I'm being asked to do, whether it's interviews or speaking engagements or, God help me, commencement addresses. She's been my assistant for more than a decade now, and we meet for the occasional lunch when I go to town. I've never invited her to my house, though I know she's dying to visit. She jokingly refers to herself as the Mistress of Refusal and will probably write a memoir about me after I'm dead, titled something dreadful like *In the Shadow of Sylvia Wren*. I see her making mental notes every time we meet in the restaurant at La Fonda.

But I never give the fan letters to my assistant since Lola prefers to read and respond to them herself via a special postcard she had printed up. She's always loved reading my fan mail; when we were younger, I think it turned her on a bit, all those people clamoring after me, and she the only person in my bed.

I grabbed the letters from the PO box, darting in and out of the building in mere seconds; anything longer invites conversation. Back home, I struggled to open the gate, the only entry point in the low stucco wall that wraps around the property. We leave the gate unlocked during the day if we're home but always lock it at night and when we go out. No amount of oiling the lock has ever been able to fix it for me; Lola doesn't struggle with it like I do. I have a theory that the house doesn't like me to leave it, that when I do it punishes me, makes me fight for reentry. We are bound, the house and I, as much as any pair of lovers. I've lived and worked for decades inside its walls. Someday I'll die in them too.

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My study is at the back of the house, my desk positioned in front of the window that overlooks the flower garden and the hills, with the Cerro Pedernal in the distance, a mesa that looks like a neck with no head. The rocky hills behind the house are red, almost Martian in appearance; they deserve to be called “otherworldly” when so few things described that way actually do.

I sorted through the letters, fighting the urge to dump them somewhere. I have to make an effort at practicality while Lola is gone; she’s the one who normally handles that part of our life — paying the bills, doing the shopping, calling the plumber. I removed the electric bill from the stack of letters, then separated what was clearly fan mail, the air mail envelopes from Japan and South Africa, and the more familiar American envelopes, almost all of them with feminine handwriting. It’s mostly girls and women who write to me — I’m not an artist, after all, but a *woman artist*. There were two more letters that I would pass along to my assistant, both on professional-looking stationery, the addresses typewritten; one from the University of Nebraska, the other from a woman in Greenwich, Connecticut, both almost certainly requests for something I would refuse to do. But I at least peek at some of the letters so I’m not completely out of touch. The letter from Connecticut was the obvious choice.

I tore it open and pulled out the sheets of slightly pebbly pale-blue stationery. On the first page, printed at the top, it said: ELIZA L. MORTIMER, JOURNALIST AND DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER.

*Dear Ms. Wren,* the letter began. *I’m a great admirer of your work.* I groaned. Eliza, surely you can come up with something better than that.

*I’ve been desperate to get in touch with you. I’m a freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker covering the art world. I called your agent, hoping to connect with you, but he said you won’t talk to journalists under any circumstances and refused to even forward my let-*

*ter. Finally, after working through many of my contacts, a friend of a friend was able to get your mailing address from a gallery owner. (I'm sure you'll understand that I don't want to say who it was.) I hope this letter has actually made its way to you. I understand that you don't want to be bothered, but . . .*

On and on she went about how she loves my work and how she has a framed poster of *The Purple Iris* hanging in her bedroom. I didn't like the thought of my paintings as posters, as postcards, and likely as coasters and magnets and key chains. Why had I ever agreed to that? Accessibility, my lawyer had said when I'd signed the licensing agreement. "Art should be accessible to the masses." She'd implied I'm a snob, which is not the case. With my success, I could be living in a villa in the South of France, surrounded by acolytes and attending fancy parties, but instead I live in a modest adobe house and drive a fourteen-year-old car, finding pleasure not in the world but in my work, engaging each day in the ritual communion that produces it. I don't think it's too much to ask that this work not be turned into tacky trinkets destined to clog up a landfill.

I was about to abandon Eliza's letter since it was obvious her flattery was building up to an interview request, but my eye caught the start of the next paragraph: *At a recent luncheon at the Sandler Museum, I was seated next to a woman who grew up in Bellflower Village, Connecticut . . .*

I inhaled quickly — a stabby breath of panic.

*Her name is Pauline Levasseur and she's an art collector who splits her time between New York and Paris. She keeps a rather low profile and isn't flashy the way so many collectors are. Her maiden name is Pauline Popplewell. When I told her I'm based in Greenwich, she told me she grew up nearby in Bellflower Village. She recalled her childhood there fondly, saying she lived on St. Ronan Street in a big Victorian painted robin's-egg blue that according to her was the prettiest house in town.*

*I'm wondering if any of this sounds familiar to you?*



I laughed audibly, more like a scoff of confusion, alarm. *Why* would it be familiar to me? I'm Sylvia Wren, an artist who lives in Abiquiú, New Mexico. I was born and raised in Illinois and now I'm a New Mexican. I know nothing of New England. Or at least that's what I tell people.

But I kept reading the letter because Bellflower Village, the Popplewells, and the house in robin's-egg blue are not actually unknown to me — or rather to the person I used to be.

*I don't mean to be coy, Ms. Wren, so let me get to the point: Mrs. Levas-seur had a bit too much champagne at lunch and let slip that she knows a secret about you.*

I folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. If I pretended I hadn't opened it, maybe I could keep whatever it portended from happening. It's not possible to rewind time, but I was willing to try. I stuffed the envelope into the stack of letters, closed my eyes, and imagined I had just returned home from the post office, sat down at the desk, and hadn't opened a thing.

The dishes in the kitchen sink had begun to accumulate, so I set about washing them. I pride myself on doing housework since I was helpless in domestic matters until I met Lola, and I couldn't even boil an egg until age twenty. Now that Lola and I are getting on in years, we pay a young couple who lives nearby to do the more strenuous tasks for us, the mopping and scrubbing, the odd jobs that need doing, even the garden now, although I still do the watering and pruning.

I occupied myself with chores for a while, chopping up vegetables for a salad and cutting long stems of rosemary from my herb garden to put in a vase on my desk. I tried to keep busy, but it turns out you really can't rewind time. The letter and its tease of a secret were planted in my brain, a tiny seed that had sprouted green shoots of curiosity. Ignoring it wouldn't make it go away. I sat down at the desk again and continued to read.

The rest of the letter is enclosed.

*When I pressed her on the secret she claimed to know about you, Mrs. Levasseur told me that like her, you grew up in Bellflower Village. She said your real name is Iris Chapel, not Sylvia Wren, and that you were an heiress to the Chapel Firearms fortune. You had many sisters and all of them died, but no one quite understood what had happened to them. Apparently, Iris ran away when she was around twenty years old, in the late 1950s, but she was never forgotten. Mrs. Levasseur said no one of that generation in Bellflower Village could ever forget the Chapel sisters. Back in the seventies, a few people in the village saw a photo of Sylvia Wren in Life magazine and they knew she was actually Iris Chapel. But they've kept the truth to themselves, feeling protective of her, a daughter of Bellflower. She'd had such a tragic life; who could blame her for running away from the fate her sisters had suffered, which could have been her fate too?*

*I told Mrs. Levasseur that I wanted to look into her story to see if it's actually true. She was horrified, so please do not blame her — she didn't realize when we spoke that I'm a journalist, though I did tell her so when we were introduced. (She's a bit hard of hearing now, at her age.) I've begun digging around and I think Mrs. Levasseur might be right about you, so I'm reaching out now in the hopes that you'll talk to me.*

*I understand that you're a world-renowned recluse. I read that a biographer tried to write a book about you but gave up after a frustrating year. "Sylvia Wren is a ghost," she declared, and turned her attention to Edna St. Vincent Millay. A recluse, a ghost — I'm sure you have your reasons, but I believe your story deserves to be told. I've been speaking to editors at a couple of major magazines about writing this piece. Your cooperation would be invaluable.*

*Will you please reply to this letter, send me an email, or give me a call? I'd love to talk to you. You can find my card enclosed.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Eliza L. Mortimer*

I set the letter on my desk, then brushed it away and watched it sail to the floor as a toddler might. My hollyhocks waved just outside the window, trying to cheer me, but I wasn't in the mood.

The letter disturbed me, there's no question about that, but she would never discover the true story, which is impossible for anyone outside the Chapel family to know. And who is left of the Chapels to tell it? No one.

On one of the postcards Lola uses to respond to my admirers, which is printed on a thick ivory stock with a black-and-white photograph of the Abiquiú sky on one side and delicate blue bordering on the other, I wrote my message.

*Dear Ms. Mortimer,*

*I have received your letter, and while I admire your tenacity, I'm afraid  
I'll have to disappoint you. I am not Iris Chapel.*

*Yours,  
Sylvia Wren*

I stuck a stamp on the postcard, hoping to feel that I'd vanquished Ms. Mortimer, but I felt no such satisfaction. On the contrary, I was certain that everything was about to unravel.

*August 4, 2017 — Abiquiú, New Mexico*

I went to the post office after breakfast, not waiting for my postlunch walk. On the way there, I couldn't enjoy the cottonwoods or the cloudless sky, and I resented how thoroughly Ms. Mortimer had disrupted my daily rituals. They may seem silly, but for me, they're a necessity, especially when Lola is away. I didn't sleep well last night and that's always how things start to go wrong.

I slipped the postcard into the outgoing slot, then discovered a new envelope from Ms. Mortimer in my own mailbox. I waited to open it until I was back home in my study. Inside was a photocopy of a newspaper article with a green sticky note at the top.

*It's Eliza again. The Bellflower Village Historical Society finally reopened after the volunteer who runs it returned from her summer vacation. In looking through their archives, I found this article and wanted to send along a photocopy. Looks like Iris Chapel didn't just run away in the late 1950s but escaped in quite dramatic fashion. I'd love to discuss this with you.*

*The Greenwich Observer*

*August 19, 1957*

MISSING HEIRESS

The Connecticut State Police seek the public's assistance in locating Iris Chapel, 20, of Bellflower Village. Miss Chapel absconded yesterday from the psychiatric wing of the Seward Hospital. She did not have permission to leave the facility and now the police are searching for her.

Miss Chapel's doctor, Raymond Westgate, advises the *Observer* that Miss Chapel is unlikely to be a threat to the public, but she might be in a state of confusion and in danger of hurting herself.

Henry Chapel, president of the Chapel Firearms Company, is offering \$1,000 for information regarding his daughter's whereabouts. If you have any information, please contact Sergeant Wilkins at CSP headquarters.

Ridiculous. I rarely thought about Iris Chapel; she was, as far as I was concerned, dead. (Poor Iris.) But nevertheless, certain things were unforgettable. Yes, she was once briefly a patient in the psychiatric unit of the Seward Hospital (no shame in that), but she hadn't *absconded* from the hospital with the police in pursuit. Confused and in danger of hurting herself? Outrageous. I read the article again, stunned at the stories that had circulated after Iris had disappeared.

I began to wonder if Eliza Mortimer was really who she claimed to be. Was this even a real article? Anything can be faked nowadays, but regardless, I wondered if Ms. Mortimer was looking for a payout to keep quiet. Someone as famous and wealthy as I am is most certainly a target. My lawyer had warned me about that.

My thoughts immediately went to Lola. She'd know what to do. I wanted to call her, but I didn't know what time it was in Brazil. She taught her classes all day and had events in the evening so I hated to interrupt her. She'd taken her laptop and that was the only computer in our house since I'm not a fan of technology. I had no way to research my concerns. I considered calling my agent, but he's obnoxious. (Lola claims I just don't understand him, and he's really her problem anyway since she handles most of my business affairs.) Since this was a potential legal matter, I decided to call my lawyer in New York, the only one of my representatives who doesn't drive me completely up the wall. I had to be careful how I framed the situation. Rebecca, like most people, knew very little about me, and I intended to keep it that way unless things with Ms. Mortimer escalated.

When we connected, she searched online for me and verified that Eliza Mortimer was indeed a journalist and filmmaker based in Greenwich who covers the art world. "I'm looking at her website now," Rebecca said. "Interviews with Judy Chicago, Johnnie Marquis, Zaha Hadid. A documentary about the Glasgow Girls. She looks legit to me."

"I'm not so sure."

"Sylvia, you must receive interview requests daily. Why the panic over this one?"

"I'm not *panicked*," I said, covering the receiver with my hand to take a

steady breath. "This alleged journalist is claiming to know secrets about me. Isn't that blackmail?"

"Has she asked for money?"

"No, nothing like that. She wants to interview me."

Rebecca started to laugh but attempted to turn it into a cough. "That's what journalists do. It's not criminal."

"I don't like her snooping around."

"All right," Rebecca said. "You know I'm here to help. What secrets is she claiming to know? Anything damaging? I can always send off a threatening letter if she's telling lies about you. The good old *cease and desist*."

I didn't answer; my mind wandered, and I thought to myself: *Sylvia Wren is a ghost*, repeating the line from Eliza's letter. What a terrible thing, to be a ghost while still alive. Yet the assessment wasn't wrong. If women had family crests, a ghost would certainly be on mine.

I was aware of the silence on the line, the ticktock of the hourly fee, not that I cared. "Sylvia?" Rebecca asked, as if calling a cat that had wandered outside. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here," I said. "I'd like to get a restraining order against Eliza Mortimer."

"A *restraining order*? Sylvia, what's going on? Is Lola at home?"

I hung up the phone. A few seconds later, it rang and I didn't answer it. It rang all afternoon but I ignored it. I threw away the newspaper article and Eliza's note, and spent the rest of the day working in my garden. As the sun set behind the red hills out back, I sat with a glass of lemonade, content in the August breeze.

### *Middle of the night*

I hated everything about Eliza Mortimer's letter, but being called a "world-renowned recluse" bothered me as much as being called a "ghost," and I lay in

bed awake, fixated on it. I've so successfully blocked out the world beyond the borders I've set for myself that it's startling to be reminded of what I've become and how other people see me.

I never wanted to be a recluse. I wish people could know that about me. If I were going to respond to Ms. Mortimer in any meaningful way, I would tell her that I don't think it's in my nature to be reclusive. Growing up with five sisters, I felt like we were one being, like a Hindu goddess with many arms and faces. Becoming a recluse would have required a sense of individuality that was impossible for me to possess as a child, and don't those formative years shape everything that comes after?

It took time and effort to become what I am now, this *ghost*, this *world-renowned recluse* — all code, I know, for *weirdo*. My reclusiveness has become a key aspect of my biography, this thing I never wanted to be. It's long been assumed that I've been making some sort of feminist statement by refusing to be interviewed, for being entirely absent from public view, with only my art representing me. Women are raised to be accommodating, so I suppose a woman who draws clear lines that others are not allowed to cross becomes remarkable for that fact alone.

It's never been easy for me, this disappearing act. We have to adapt to our circumstances, whatever they are. Nuns adapt to their cloisters, and birds to their cages, and I had to adapt to my way of living, pretending to be someone else and keeping anyone from finding out the truth. I was forced to be evasive, but it eventually became second nature. I'm not pretending to be Sylvia Wren anymore. I've become her.

And yet for all my talk of becoming Sylvia Wren, I know that's not the whole story — or rather that's overly simplistic.

Some years ago, I read about a Las Vegas show tiger, a docile creature that performed nearly every night for more than a decade, jumping through rings of fire for the amusement of the crowd. Then one night in the middle of a performance, for no apparent reason, the tiger turned on its trainer and

swiped at his neck, severing an artery with one of its massive claws. The man bled out on stage before help arrived, a scarlet pool spreading around him to the horror of the audience.

When you live in defiance of yourself, you can adapt to your circumstances, but remnants of who you are at your core remain. A bit of wildness that can't be tamed.

*Tap tap.*

This is how it starts. I was afraid this was going to happen. I hadn't thought about Iris in a long time, or her sisters, or the hospital, or her running away; I'm not surprised that poking those dormant memories caused a response.

I heard the tapping, sat up in bed, and turned on the lamp; I'd given up on sleep anyway. The curtains were closed, but I knew what was beyond them without having to look: the deepest darkness, endless fathoms of it, as black as outer space and as vast and unknowable.

The downside of living in middle-of-nowhere New Mexico is the night. That's why we keep a rifle under the bed, to make sleeping easier. The rifle is loaded and I know how to use it. I pulled it out from its hiding place and climbed back into bed with it. The gun brings me peace, an irony that only Lola would understand. When I have moments like this, when the darkness suffocates me, I need to hold on to something more powerful than myself.

I stayed still in my bed, waiting for the tapping to resume. The gun wouldn't help, I knew that, but I clung to what I had. The tapping on the glass is always the first sign of what's to come. It never happens when Lola is at home. My visitor only comes when Lola is away, when everything I've submerged rises up to the surface.

*Tap tap.*

"Here she comes," I said aloud. "Don't be afraid."



*asphodel grows  
in the underworld  
of my mind*

— calla chapel



# THE BLUE DIARY



*Volume One*



# Bellflower

1950

I.

Later, once the tragedies began to happen, one after another, the children in the village made up a rhyme about us.

*The Chapel sisters:  
first they get married  
then they get buried*

It didn't help matters that we lived in an enormous Victorian house that looked like a wedding cake. If this were a novel, that detail would push the boundaries of believability, but that's what our house looked like and I can't change reality. Our home, on the west side of Bellflower Village, was a foremost example of the so-called wedding-cake style of architecture. It was one of the most photographed private residences in Connecticut; I'm sure even now you can find a picture of it in a textbook somewhere.

The house, with its cascading tiers and ornamental details, looked as if it were piped with white icing. The eyes are drawn first to the central tower,

looming and Gothic, perched above the rest of the house and circled with tiny dormered windows. (You could imagine Rapunzel tossing her braid out of one of those windows.) Below the tower, the sloping mansard roof banded around the top of the house, punctuated by third-floor windows, which looked miniature from the ground. A prominent widow's walk and balustrade marked the second floor, then there was the ground floor, with its bay windows and portico, curlicues everywhere, and tall stalks of flowers ringing the base.

It looked like something out of a fairy tale, that's what everyone said. If you could have sliced the exterior of this wedding-cake house with a knife, you would have found inside six maidens — Aster, Rosalind, Calla, Daphne, Iris, Hazel — each of whom were expected to become a bride one day. It was the only certainty in their lives.

Dearly beloved.

Dearly departed.

2.

Aster went first. As the oldest, she was used to going first, so I suppose it's fitting this story begins with her walking down the aisle into what came after, what my mother called the "something terrible." Someone had to go first, and since Aster was always the kindest and most responsible, I'm certain she would have seen it as her duty to light the way for her sisters even if she hadn't been the oldest. As it was, she didn't know she was the beginning of a story. Only the younger among us would live to see it through.

The summer before Aster's wedding was the last normal summer. That's when she met Matthew. As much as I don't want to think about him and all that he wrought, there wouldn't have been a wedding without him.

That summer in 1949 we went to Cape Cod as we did every year, staying in a suite of three rooms at the hotel on Terrapin Cove, which was located at the elbow of the Cape. These two weeks in July were the only time of the year my mother and sisters and I traveled away from the wedding cake. Our sum-

mer vacation was our annual airing out, when the dome placed over us was lifted and we, choosing from any number of metaphors, scurried away like ants, flitted into the breeze like butterflies, scattered on the wind like petals.

Since we were used to being confined at home, we didn't scatter far and usually spent our days on the beach spread out on an assemblage of blankets. My father, never one for leisure, stayed at home during the week so he didn't have to miss work. He joined us on weekends, but even when he joined us, he wasn't really there, staying in the hotel for most of the day with his papers and ledgers. He'd come outside occasionally, looking out of place in his unfashionable brown suit, squinting into the sun, his hand a visor on his brow. He'd look for his wife and daughters, an island in the sand, and once he'd spotted us, he wouldn't wave or smile, only turn and go back inside, secure in the knowledge we were there. I assumed he had this scheduled on his calendar: *11 a.m., family time*.

My sisters and I sat with our mother on the beach in front of the hotel every day of our vacation, encircled by open parasols. Belinda (I'm going to refer to her by her name as much as possible; she was her own person, after all, not simply our mother) always held a parasol over her head at the beach, as she did when she worked in her garden at home. She wore white linen dresses, her long white hair (it had turned white in her mid-forties) looped into a bun like a Victorian's with just enough at the sides to cover her missing earlobes. Like the wedding cake, she seemed to exist outside our time. She looked like the austere, melancholy women in Julia Margaret Cameron's photography — wide downcast eyes, an oval face with prominent cheekbones and a subtly aquiline nose, and pale skin lined like a sheet of linen paper that had been lightly crinkled then smoothed back out.

She liked the beach; it calmed her in a way home never could. She didn't swim, didn't partake in sunbathing or any other merriment, but she liked walks. Mostly, she read books, which she stacked neatly next to her canvas chair, Emily Dickinson's poetry or a novel by one of the Brontës. Her nostrils would flare as she read, inhaling the salty breeze. It was as close as she'd get to *taking the waters*.

My sisters and I, pale-skinned like our mother but with dark hair, would

each claim a blanket and parasol for ourselves. We'd take our places after breakfast, each of us in modest swimsuits, and there we'd be most of the day, eating lunch from a hamper supplied by the hotel, usually quite a decadent feast, with little pots of foie gras, thick slices of ham and Emmental cheese, a French baguette, and an apricot tart. I would occasionally swim with my younger sister, Hazel — Zelig, everyone called her. We were only allowed in waist-high water. If the waves began to creep in, inching their way toward our nonexistent bosoms, we had to move back to the shore or our mother would call our names and embarrass us.

"How about a walk to the cove?" she asked Zelig and me one weekend afternoon (it had to have been a weekend since my father was in the hotel). We, as the two youngest and least cynical daughters, were the only ones willing to consider such an excursion. Zelig used this to bargain.

"Can I bring a turtle back to the hotel?" she asked.

"You know you can't," our mother replied.

"Then can we get a snow cone?"

The three of us trudged off, Belinda with her parasol, Zelig and I racing ahead of her to look for terrapins down the long stretch of marshy grass and sand, luxuriating in our mother's attention. We spotted only a pair of them that day, their diamond backs and speckly skin a delight, making it worth the walk.

Belinda, as always, was more interested in the greenery. "Those grasses are halophytic," she said, pointing to what looked like a vast green lawn edging into the sea. "Do you remember what that means?"

"Plants that grow in salty soil," I said quickly, before Zelig had a chance.

"That's right," she said, looking pleased. She knew everything about plants.

After a while, we made our way back to the beach, Zelig and I slurping raspberry snow cones. The rest of the family hadn't moved while we were away. My two oldest sisters, Aster and Rosalind, read magazines and sunbathed and gossiped away their days. Aster was slightly plump and Rosalind was long and lithe; in swimsuits the contrast was more apparent, but regardless of shape, both their bodies glittered with the sand dust that had stuck



to their sun cream. That's what I remember most about how they looked on the beach that summer, their limbs the color of sugar cookies still baking in the oven, a coating of sandy brown sugar all over them, making their skin a confectionery.

"They'll be engaged by Christmas," Rosalind said to Aster, as we approached, the two of them deep in conversation about some friend or other. "She's making a dreadful mistake. Do you remember that *awful* tie he wore to her birthday party?"

"You can't judge a man's character by his choice of tie," Aster said, swatting Rosalind on the arm with a rolled-up copy of *Glamour*.

"You most certainly *can*."

"Be serious, Roz. I think he's nice."

"You *would* think that, wouldn't you?" she said, only half teasing.

My middle sisters, Calla and Daphne, each sat cross-legged on a blanket nearby, absorbed in their projects. Calla scribbled poems in her notebook, shielded at all times from the sun by her parasol *and* a sun hat. Daphne kept herself busy with her watercolor set and sketch pad, and would usually eat an enormous amount of food, going through several foot-long hot dogs and bags of popcorn in the hours after lunch.

They worked side by side companionably, only occasionally erupting into argument. "You dripped purple paint on my toe," Calla said, shoving Daphne away. "I look like I have gangrene."

"Don't you find gangrene romantic?" Daphne flicked more paint onto Calla's foot. "All that withered flesh. Tennyson must have written about it."

"Whitman, I think," Calla said, nibbling on her pencil. Musing on this seemed to calm her.

Belinda reentered this scene reluctantly, sitting in her chair with a sigh and picking up her book.

"What on earth happened to you two?" Rosalind said, looking at Zelig and me, appalled.

"Your mouths are bright red," Aster said.

"We ate snow cones on the walk back," Zelig explained, as I wiped my mouth with my beach towel.

"You look like you bit the head off a seagull," Calla said. "It's disgusting."

The conversation descended into bickering from there, over what I can't recall, but then a roaring splash interrupted us. A creature had emerged from the depths of the ocean, having burst through the surface of the water like a submarine, or at least that's how I remember it. We hadn't seen him go in, but suddenly, where nothing had existed before, there he was, a bare-chested thirty-year-old in snug striped trunks, blond tendrils stuck to his forehead.

Until then, I hadn't realized men could be beautiful. I didn't necessarily feel an attraction to him, but I was drawn to his force, the way he throbbed with life, his skin the color of golden syrup, the muscles that rippled across his abdomen like a flag of flesh. Later we would find out he'd been a bombardier during the war, a hero who just four years earlier had sailed through the skies over Japan raining down fire on the people below. Sea or air, it didn't matter; he was a master of the elements.

He stumbled onto the surf, a male friend in tow. They were laughing and ribbing each other and not looking where they were going, and within a few seconds, the sea creature had almost stumbled onto our island. He quickly came to a halt and stared down at the seven female faces looking up at him.

"Ma'am," he said to Belinda, suddenly serious. He nodded at her. "I'm sorry. I hope we didn't disturb you."

"It's fine," she said, setting down her poetry, her face cloaked in the shade of her parasol. She looked beyond him to the sea. He didn't mean anything to her, not then.

"Ladies," he added, nodding at my sisters and me as we pulled our towels around us and tried to tuck in our arms and legs. "I'm Matthew Maybrick," he said. I couldn't take my eyes off the symmetry of his red nipples.

Mother looked back at him, clearly annoyed that he was still there. "Mrs. Belinda Chapel," she said.

"Chapel? Not the firearm Chapels?"

She winced, as she always did when the guns were mentioned. Her daughters turned to her instinctively, and Aster spoke up before something awkward could happen. "Yes, the firearm Chapels," she said playfully, glancing at Rosalind.

And with that, Aster, fresh off her nineteenth birthday, seemed to come into focus for Matthew. He smiled down at her in her orange-skirted swimsuit, a monarch butterfly stitched across the chest. She pulled the towel tighter around herself, her legs folded modestly beneath her, and brushed the dark curls from her shoulders. Matthew continued to stare and eventually she met his gaze, her face as round as a scallop, eyes sparkling and eager, beglossed lips closed into the shape of a tiny pinched heart. Matthew took her in rather brazenly, observing what was visible, probably imagining what wasn't, letting his eyes linger where they wanted, then turning to his friend, who had stayed a few feet behind. "Hey, Arnie, this is the Chapel family." He made one of his hands into a gun and shot it. Arnie waved shyly.

"I'm one of the Maybricks," Matthew said to us, the name laid over us like a blanket. It was clear his name was supposed to mean something to us, just as our name meant something to him. Matthew's family owned Maybrick Steel, which surely Belinda had heard of; most of the trains in America ran on Maybrick steel, and most of the skyscrapers in New York were constructed with it. The company had been founded by Augustus Maybrick, the most ruthless of the nineteenth-century robber barons.

But if Belinda recognized the name, she didn't give any indication. She didn't care about notable families and their scions. Normally, a family like ours would be in demand on the Cape, invited to sprawling seaside estates and lavish parties, but we lived our lives at a remove from everyone else of our class, and that's the way our mother preferred it.

"Is Mr. Chapel here?" Matthew asked, perhaps assuming he'd have more luck impressing him.

"He's working in the hotel," Aster said, prompting Rosalind to jump in.

"He's working on *business matters* in his *room*," she said. "He's not a bell-boy."

Matthew laughed and turned to his friend again. "We'd love to meet him, wouldn't we, Arnie?"

"It'd be an honor."

"*It would?*" Zelig said, and I elbowed her to be quiet.

We never gave our father much thought, so it was easy to forget how oth-

ers saw him. Like our mother, he preferred to live at a remove, and even at my young age, I knew he wouldn't have cared about impressing Matthew Maybrick and his friend. My father was one of the wealthiest men in New England, and our family name was emblazoned on guns that were sold around the world. It was something to be feared, the name Chapel. A man like my father, who manufactured a product that was a bridge to *the other side* — didn't need to impress anyone.

Belinda frowned at all this talk of guns and her husband, neither of which she had any affection for, and stood up from her beach chair and brushed the front of her dress. "Come along, girls," she said. "Your father will be wondering what happened to us." This was a lie, but we stood up anyway, knowing she didn't appreciate this intruder.

Matthew Maybrick was apparently unaware of the oddness of our family. Most people in Bellflower Village thought of Belinda as a madwoman, but it didn't seem as if her reputation had spread to New York City, where the Maybricks lived. Matthew, not realizing he was upsetting Belinda, not seeing himself as an intruder, made a gesture as we walked away. "I was wondering," he called after us. "Would your two older daughters —"

"Aster and Rosalind," I said, speaking to him for the first time. He winked at me in the way one winks at a small child.

"Would Aster and Rosalind like to have a drink with my friends and me before dinner?" When Belinda glared at him, he added hastily, less confidently: "My parents and sister will be there too."

Belinda turned without a response and continued to the hotel with Daphne, Zelig, and me in tow; Calla had already raced ahead to the lobby. Only Aster and Rosalind remained with Matthew, and half an hour later, they joined us in our suite of rooms, bouncy with excitement. They explained to our father that they'd been invited for drinks with Matthew Maybrick and asked for permission to go.

"Leland Maybrick's boy?" He seemed taken aback and removed his glasses, setting them on his legal pad. Glasses were for work, and this was a family matter, something he wasn't normally bothered with. "What does Matthew Maybrick want with you?"

“Daddy!” Rosalind practically shouted. She was the only one of us to call him by the more jovial-sounding *daddy*, as if she could cajole him into being that kind of man. “Why *wouldn’t* he want to invite two charming girls like us for a drink?”

“I see,” our father said, as Calla and Daphne and Zelig and I watched from the sidelines. Our mother had taken to her bed.

Aster had graduated from high school a year earlier and had gone on dates with young men whose families lived in the village or whom she’d met through their sisters at school, all from wealthy and respectable families, but a Maybrick was in a different league. “Please,” Aster said, her robe wrapped tightly around her, face flushed from a day in the sun. Aster was of legal age, and Rosalind nearly so, but they wouldn’t have presumed they could do whatever they pleased.

“Very well,” our father said, putting his glasses back on and taking up his pencil. The Maybricks were probably too flashy for his taste, but like Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel our mother read at least once a year, he had many daughters to marry off, and exceptions had to be made.

It was all arranged, and that evening I sat at dinner with my parents and three of my sisters in the hotel dining room while Aster and Rosalind mixed with the Maybricks on the terrace. There was a buffet in the restaurant every night, and I would make a dinner of hors d’oeuvres — shrimp cocktail and deviled eggs and potato puffs — and Zelig would copy me, which I hated. Our parents paid no mind to what we chose from the buffet, so Daphne loaded up on slabs of pink prime rib and crab claws and repeated helpings of duchesse potatoes, and we sat and looked at the ocean while we ate so we didn’t have to look at one another.

We could see the terrace from our table, with the ocean just beyond, and I watched Aster and Rosalind, their glasses filled with our favorite drink: club soda with a splash of grenadine syrup and a mint leaf, girly drinks; they were basically still girls. They mingled with the sea creature and his ilk, he in a pastel yellow button-down shirt and trousers. Aster and Rosalind wore the strappy sundresses they’d bought for the trip; the colors escape me now, but I remember their lovely bare shoulders in the evening sun, the honeyed seaside

light drizzled over them. I picked at my food, too distracted to eat. I knew this signaled a break in our story, a change already underway.

And, in fact, Matthew Maybrick, war hero and heir to the Maybrick Steel fortune, would ask Aster to marry him five months later. The intruder was inside the gates.

### 3.

Nearly a year after that first meeting on the beach, Aster and Matthew were set to wed. I'm trying to summon that week leading up to the wedding so I can describe it for you (*you* — who exactly are you?). But I've pushed that time down into what my sister Calla would call the "underworld of my mind." Imagine it: a cold and lonely place, asphodel growing through cracks in the concrete, the sound of distant dripping water, a creaking door.

Emily Dickinson wrote that it's not just houses that are haunted but that the "brain has corridors." Indeed. And mine are overflowing. The underworld of my mind — all those haunted corridors, however you want to describe it — contains shards of broken glass scattered all over the ground. I pick up a shard and describe what I see, then set it down.

This story is jagged, could cut a deep wound. It isn't a story I can tell with a thread and a needle, stitching in clean lines. It's shards or nothing.

### 4.

So let me try again. The week leading up to the wedding.

School had ended for the summer. Zelig and I were free to run wild through the grounds around the house, which were as big as a city park. Many wealthy people lived in Bellflower Village, which was only a twenty-minute drive from Greenwich, which was itself only a short train ride from New York City, but none of the other homes were as enormous as ours.

A vast expanse of grass stretched from the house to the street, sloping and

rolling as gently as a brook, and behind the house, there were flower gardens and a terrace, and farther behind that, a frog pond and a meadow. Across the street and to the north of the house, there was nothing but deep forest. Next to the house on the south side lay the family plot, enclosed by a pointy iron fence and a canopy of maple trees. When I was a little girl, there were only three graves there, my grandparents and a stillborn who had preceded my father. The rest of the plot had yet to be disturbed.

At home during the summer, Zelie and I usually spent much of our time outside; we liked to escape the dark gloom of our house and our noisy, bossy older sisters. As long as we stayed on the property, no one minded what we did. They wouldn't have been able to find us if they'd come looking, which they rarely did anyway. Our names were often merged together, *IrisandZelie*, as if we were one.

Where are *IrisandZelie*? This question wasn't asked often enough.

But that summer, the summer of Aster's wedding, was different. I didn't feel like our usual hijinks. It was incredibly hot that June, with temperatures regularly reaching the upper nineties. As miserable as that was, worse still was that I, at thirteen, had recently started my monthly bleeding. Aster had shown me how to use the belt with the pads, an awful contraption, but it was all we had back then. When the bleeding started, I knew my days of running free were over. I didn't understand much about what was happening to me, but I knew it was a secret. We weren't allowed to wear pants, so I checked my bare legs all day for signs of exposure.

I suggested to Zelie that we go on nature walks and look for ladybugs and butterflies. I took a sketch pad and pencils with me. We didn't talk about my bleeding though she knew. It wasn't something that was discussed openly even among my sisters; I hadn't even told my mother, not that she would have cared much. But the bleeding and the heat laid a pall on that summer even in its early acts. If I mixed a palette for June 1950, I'd start with vermillion, then add hematite, then a deep russet brown, the shades of my cotton pad the filter of my memory.

I'm sure we went to church that Sunday, my father and sisters and I. Back home, I tried sketching Zelie at the frog pond. She would have been chatting

incessantly about the wedding in that long-ago little-girl voice just on the cusp of puberty: “Isn’t Matthew dreamy?” She loved to call boys that. “I can’t wait until we get our flower-girl dresses.” She loved talking about the dresses too, which she called “princess dresses.” They still weren’t finished, which worried Aster — two items she couldn’t check off her list.

She would have continued chatting, and I would have tried and failed to sketch her. She was far beyond my talents at the time, a raven-haired pre-Raphaelite shrunk to the size of an eleven-year-old. She and Aster, the two bookends in our row of sisters, A to Z, looked the most similar. They shared a ripe roundness, which today would likely be described as fat in the negative way fat has come to be spoken about, but in those days, things were different. Aster and Zelig looked as if their skin couldn’t contain what was inside them, as if I could press my finger against Zelig’s arm and the juices would come spilling out. I can taste that juice, a tangy peach. I think of that poem by Christina Rossetti, the sisters and the goblin men: “Come buy, come buy.” My sisters and I loved that poem; we’d no sense then of its eroticism.

Soon after that, we walked back to the house for water and food, and spotted Belinda in her garden, a slim figure in her long white dress, head obscured by a pink parasol in full bloom like a dahlia; she was surveying the flowers, a swath of purples and pinks and yellows.

The flower garden was next to the terrace at the back of the house, and it was Belinda’s domain entirely; the groundskeeper did much of the work, but she directed all of it. Her flower garden was the only thing about her that was neat and organized, with its rose-entwined trellis, hydrangea bushes, and tidy sections of petunias, salvia, and zinnias. Utterly different than her mind, a jumbled thicket of fear and sadness locked behind a gate only she could open. I can’t imagine sunlight ever penetrating that mind of hers, not the kind of luxurious light that bathed her flowers.

“Mother!” Zelig called excitedly, and Belinda turned. She watched us approach, and I could tell by the tight set of her lips that she didn’t want to be disturbed, but she smiled anyway.



Unlike our sisters, we were always happy to see her. We didn't see her often, usually only at mealtimes and other stolen moments. I was never entirely sure how she spent her days. She consulted with Dovey about the running of the household, tended to her garden, wrote in her spirit journal, did a bit of needlework and sketching. She'd nap in the afternoons since she never slept well at night. It's difficult to see how those activities added up to entire days, but her life unfolded mostly out of view.

"Look at the two of you," she said with concern, cupping her hand under my chin and turning my head to one side, then the other. "You're both as red as radishes." She put her free arm around Zelig and gave her a squeeze. "It's too hot to be outside today."

"*You're* outside," Zelig said. This was notable, as Belinda didn't normally come outside during the heat of the day.

"Hmm," she replied. We stood with our arms wrapped around her waist, her body cool despite the weather. She smelled of Violet Fleur, her favorite perfume, a re-creation of Empress Joséphine's favorite scent. The perfume wasn't marred by the smell of sweat, and Belinda's face was freshly powdered. She hadn't been outside long.

"Are you going to make a bouquet for Aster's wedding?" Zelig asked.

Belinda glanced at her but didn't respond. She'd had no involvement in her eldest daughter's wedding, showed no interest in it at all. In retrospect, perhaps that should have been a clue of the trouble to come.

"I came outside to check on my flowers — they're struggling in this heat. I'm worried." She freed herself from us, handing me her parasol as she bent down, rubbing her thumb across the petals of a sagging purple petunia, then a sweet pea. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

Belinda had an intimate connection to her flowers, as a baby does to its mother through an umbilical cord; her flowers fed her life. After a long winter, she came alive at the sight of petals in her garden blooming like lights turned on after months in darkness. But now it was only June and they were fading.

"My flowers are dying," she said, which wasn't true; they were lagging like the rest of us, but like the rest of us, they were still alive at that point.

"They're not dying, just sunburned," Zelie said, placing a hand on Belinda's back as she leaned over her flower bed. "They'll be all right."

"I fear they won't be." Belinda stood up, and we both inched closer to her under the shade of her parasol and wrapped our arms around her waist again. We looked up at her, but she said nothing more, offered no comforting return of our gazes. Her eyes moved along her flower beds, taking in their slightly withered flesh.

"You better go inside, petals," she said, and released herself from our embrace again. She was slippery like that. "I'm going to lie down for a while. I have a headache." She pulled a white handkerchief from her pocket and I thought she was going to wipe her brow, but she held it to her mouth and nose instead, and breathed in. "Go into the kitchen and get some water. Go on."

Dismissed, we reluctantly left her in the garden. We plodded through the grass around the side of the house, wounded by the sting of maternal rejection. When I turned around, hoping for another glimpse of her, she'd disappeared through the door in the courtyard.

Dovey corralled us at the kitchen table and we drank two glasses of water each. "You girls," Dovey said, shaking her head. "Likely to faint in that sun. Just look at you with that water, like two thirsty spaniels."

She must have been around fifty then, the same age as Belinda. She'd been in America for a little more than twenty years, having somehow found her way from Ireland into the Chapel family's employ soon after my parents were married. Her official title was housekeeper, but she did much more than that.

"We saw Mother in her flower garden," Zelie said, water spilling down her chin, drenching the front of her dress.

Dovey frowned a little, not caring if we noticed, and refilled our glasses from a pitcher. "The sun'll do her some good." She wore a plaid skirt and white blouse, her shabby blond hair permed into a crown of tight curls. Miss Edna Dove was her full name, but we all called her Dovey, and if she minded,

she'd never said so. She lived in the third-floor servants' quarters, which were empty except for her. The cook and the maids lived out.

On the kitchen table there were paper bags of Jordan almonds, and spools of ribbon, and tiny gauze pouches in gold. There were pretty things all over the house, all for the wedding. "Can I have one of those?" I asked, attempting to pick up one of the pouches of almonds, but Dovey swatted my hand away.

"No you don't. I've been working on those all morning." She took our lunch from the icebox, a platter of ham and mustard sandwiches on white bread, and a bowl of strawberries with shredded coconut sprinkled on top.

"Ham and mustard again?" I said, taking one of the sandwich halves.

"If you don't like it, take it up with Mrs. O'Connor."

Mrs. O'Connor was the woman from the neighboring village who'd cooked all our meals since before I was born. After her son was killed in the war, she missed two months of work, and when she came back, our father forbade us from complaining about her food. "No thanks," I said.

"She's not here anyway," Dovey said. "She's gone home. Aster is cooking the dinner tonight."

"Aster doesn't cook," Zelie said, and we both laughed. The thought of Aster cooking anything was hilarious.

"She's going to start. She'll be running her own household soon enough, and she'll have to cook for her husband, won't she?"

Zelie stuck out her tongue at the thought and picked up a sandwich half, then another. "I better eat up . . ." She took a big bite of her sandwich, and dots of mustard oozed out from between her lips.

"Try to be supportive of your sister," Dovey said. "It's not easy running a household. I should know." She opened the icebox again and stood in front of it, moving it open and closed like a fan. There were sweat stains under her arms. "I don't want you two going outside again this afternoon — the newspaper says it'll be dangerously hot."

Dovey stepped in on a daily basis to make sure Zelie and I didn't perish of thirst or hunger, heatstroke or frostbite, even though it wasn't her job.

"Go find your sisters now, it's my afternoon off and I'm going out," she said, shooing us away. "Tell them I'll leave lunch in the dining room."

• • •

We had our own wing on the second floor of the wedding cake — the girls' wing, as it was called, three bedrooms and a sitting room. Despite the enormity of the house, we'd always been confined to this wing, two girls to each bedroom. The walls of the bedrooms were covered in flowers. Our mother had painted them when we were young, inspired by a French book of botanical drawings, swirls of petals and leaves, a garden in each room, and each one at the edge of a dark forest.

Aster and Rosalind's bedroom was painted with asters and roses, but there were far more asters. Belinda had never been fond of roses, and even the name Rosalind sat slightly askew from its origin, an attempt at honoring her mother, Rose, without giving in fully to a flower she hated. But asters were her favorite. She'd painted the asters as if they were stars; *aster* is Latin for "star" — each bloom purple with pointy rays and a golden center. When I was little, Aster would take me onto her lap and point to the wall of aster stars, and say, "Make a wish," and each time I would wish for something different, something more spectacular than before. After Aster was taken from us, I sat in front of the wall of stars and wished for her to return. "I wish, I wish," I would say, my eyes squeezed shut. I wished for her to climb up through the dirt in the family plot and come back to us.

In Calla and Daphne's room, Belinda had painted calla lilies in a vase next to an open window — she was afraid of the toxicity of lilies, which she claimed could cause asphyxia if placed in a closed room. For Daphne, there were pale pink daphne blooms and a laurel tree standing in isolation. Our mother told us the story of the naiad Daphne, who had vowed to remain untouched by a man but was pursued through the forest by the amorous Apollo. Daphne ran from Apollo, screaming for her father, a river god, to protect her, so he turned her into a laurel tree before Apollo could catch her. I didn't think this was fair, that Daphne should become a tree. It was Apollo who deserved to have his greedy hands frozen into scaly branches that would never know the embrace of true love. But even at that age, I knew that it was often women who suffered the consequences of men's actions.

In the room I shared with Zelig, irises were spread out as a carpet of purple, similar to the constellation of asters, but these flowers were firmly rooted in the ground, extending into a vast distance, leading to a dark forest. For Zelig, there was a wall of witch-hazel blooms, the spidery yellow flowers not at all beautiful despite our mother's efforts. This is perhaps why Hazel became Zelig soon after she was born; the name Hazel didn't seem to fit our youngest sister, who was as round as a peony.

The girls' sitting room at the end of our long hallway continued the garden theme. It looked like a greenhouse, with windows all around; the windows were framed with green curtains that puffed out in the breeze like a frog's throat. All the fabrics were verdant, with sofas and chairs in Nile green, and ceramic pots of ferns in the corners, walls covered in hand-painted ivy vines. The only thing that didn't fit was the portrait that hung over the fireplace: Annie Oakley with a Chapel rifle slung over her shoulder. The portrait was a gift from Annie, who had used Chapel rifles in her Wild West shows with Buffalo Bill. She had visited the house on multiple occasions when my father was a boy. The painting had hung in his den for years before he decided we should have it.

Zelig and I found our four older sisters in the sitting room. Thanks to the heat, they were in various states of undress, their long white arms and legs sprawled on the sofas and chairs, their delicate fingers twirling strands of dark hair. They rested their heads on sofa arms and velvet pillows, the pale cylinders of their necks stretched out. The climate in the room was humid, but I didn't mind the smell of their sweat. They were mesmerizing to look at, the four of them languid and beautiful, like swans in a marsh.

It took a moment for them to notice us in the doorway. "The little ones are here," Rosalind said in her rasp of a voice nearly the octave of a bee's hum. She'd picked up her head for a moment to look at Zelig and me, then set it back down again on a pillow wedged against the sofa arm. "Close the door, darlings. We don't need anyone looking in."

"My heavens, you two look rough," Aster said in dismay at the sight of Zelig and me. "What have you been doing since church?" She was lying on the sofa at the opposite end from Rosalind, their ankles entwined in the

middle. There was a Baedeker guide to Paris on the floor in front of the sofa, pages folded down to mark the places Aster and the sea creature would visit on their honeymoon. "Whatever will happen to you when I'm gone?" she said, her cheek resting on the sofa arm as she peered at us.

"You're here now and look at the state of them," Daphne said. "Practically feral." She reclined on another sofa, one of her lurid paperbacks in her lap, *Vixen* or *Sin on Wheels*.

"You must pitch in after I'm gone," Aster said to Rosalind, Calla, and Daphne. "All of you."

Calla, curled in a chair near the fireplace and staring blankly out the window, reluctantly turned to look at Zelig and me. "They don't look so bad," she said, then turned back to the window.

"That's the problem," Aster said. "None of you take notice."

"We notice," Daphne said. "We just don't care."

Rosalind sat up and summoned me to sit next to her. I left Zelig at the doorway and slid carefully onto the cushion, worried I might leave a bloodstain but too embarrassed to say anything. Rosalind removed the ribbon from my hair, releasing it from its ponytail. She made an attempt to untangle my shoulder-length hair, tugging at a few strands, pulling at a knot, then giving up with a sigh. "Might be easier just to cut it all off," she said, flopping back.

"Rozzy, what will you do when you're married," Aster asked, sitting up so Zelig could sit next to her. "Children will be expected or have you forgotten?"

Rosalind considered this. "I'll have a well-behaved daughter," she said. "Just the one. And if it turns out I'm not the motherly type, I'll put her in a Moses basket and leave her on someone's doorstep."

"That's horrendous, even as a joke," Aster said. "The things you *say*, Rozzy."

"I wish our mother had done that with us," Daphne said.

"It's an interesting thought," Calla responded, appearing taken with the idea. "To imagine what other fates we might have had."

I didn't like this discussion of marriage and children and fate. It was bad

enough Aster would be leaving us soon; I didn't like to think of Rosalind also leaving. "I don't want you to get married too," I said to Rosalind, nestling into the steamy crook of her arm, which she then wrapped around me. Aster's trunks had been stacked in the hallway for months while she'd filled them, her "trousseau," as she called it. When she'd finally finished, they had been taken away.

"Don't get married? And stay in this house forever? *No thank you.*" Rosalind picked up her glass of lemonade from the side table and held it to her cheek. "There's only one way out of this house, girls. Our Aster is leaving first, and I won't be far behind."

"Is that so?" Daphne asked. "What's his name?"

"Don't know yet," said Rosalind, biting her bottom lip. "But I'll be gone by next summer, you can count on that. I don't care *who* he is." She turned to Daphne. "And what about you, Daph? What kind of man do you plan to marry?"

"How about no kind of man," she said, exchanging a look with Rosalind.

"Marriage seems so dull," Calla said. "So *tragic*, in a sense. Look at our mother."

"Our mother was tragic before she ever got married," Rosalind said.

"Yes, but it certainly didn't help matters." Calla picked up her notebook and pencil from the table next to her. "Her womb is probably shredded like cabbage, poor dear. Just think for a moment about the utter destruction of the female body over the course of a woman's life, of the female *soul*, and for what? To perpetuate the human race when just a few years ago all of humanity was almost obliterated." She shook her head in disgust and wrote something in her notebook.

"Golly," Aster said, as Daphne laughed. "Is that what you envision is about to happen to me when I get married, Calla? My utter destruction?"

Calla looked up from her notebook, tapping her pencil on the armrest for a moment. "Perhaps," she said, without any emotion. Then she went back to writing.

Aster looked demoralized, so Rosalind jumped in to smooth things over. "Just ignore them, Aster dear. They're rotten with jealousy."

I twisted the rings on Rosalind's fingers, topaz on one finger and a coral cameo on another. First Aster, then Rosalind — they'd all leave eventually. I could see the aftermath: Zelig and I alone in the house with our parents, the silent hallway of the girls' wing, the empty bedrooms, the tedious dinners. "I hate being the youngest."

"Second youngest," Zelig corrected me, refusing to give up her place at the tail end. I pulled at the coral cameo, slipping it over Rosalind's knuckle before she snatched her finger away.

"It's not so bad," she said, readjusting the ring. "When we're old women, you and Zelig will still be young — or at least younger."

"I don't want to be younger."

"Come now, you're being unreasonable," Rosalind said.

Zelig rose from the sofa and went to the fireplace, taking a peacock feather from a vase on the mantel and holding it out in front of her, using it to fan us, its blue and green eye swaying hypnotically.

"They need a nanny," Aster said, watching Zelig in her damp dress, her toes and sandals brown with dirt.

"Absolutely not," Daphne said. "Our father will bring in another bossy Irish girl who thinks she can tell *me* what to do and I don't need looking after."

"Nor I," Calla said, as Zelig continued to fan us. Our last nanny had fled years ago and hadn't been replaced.

"Well, someone has to look out for them after I leave," Aster said.

"They *do* have a mother," Rosalind said, and the older girls, even Aster, began to laugh.

## 5.

Our mother thought our house was haunted. That's one of the reasons she was a figure of ridicule. She'd told us many times that on the day she first stepped into the wedding cake she felt the chill of a house paid for by death. She heard voices. She saw things. She had always believed in ghosts, from her



earliest days, before she ever met my father and became his wife. From the start of her marriage, she knew the wedding cake was full of spirits and that they wanted to talk to her and her alone.

Our house *was* paid for by death, which couldn't be denied. My father had inherited the house from his father, whose own father had built it in the 1870s with the profits he'd made from the Civil War. That's how our family made money, after all: war, murder, suicide, animal slaughter. As macabre as it was, the Chapel rifle was nevertheless a treasured American icon, and my father had photos of himself with General John J. Pershing and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Chapel factory, which employed hundreds during peacetime and thousands during war, was located just outside the village. The workers, who couldn't afford to live in the area, were bused in from elsewhere, then promptly bused out again every afternoon at four o'clock.

The Chapel factory had a global reach, and that was a source of local pride. During the war, many of the women in the village worked in the factory, and the rifles they helped manufacture were shipped to the troops in Europe and the Pacific, where they were used to gun down Nazis and Japanese soldiers.

But my mother wasn't like everyone else. For her, there was a cloud over Bellflower Village thanks to the Chapel factory and the weapons and ammunition it produced, a cloud of moral pollution. As a girl, I didn't understand why Belinda hated guns so much; like my sisters, I thought she was just strange — embarrassing even. She didn't feel proud of the Chapel conquests — wars won, territories claimed — when seemingly everyone else did.

She had little to do with village life and never spent an afternoon on Main Street in the village shopping for housewares and eating *éclairs* with the other wives of her class. It was possible to live in the wedding cake as if marooned on an island. Maybe that was part of the problem. (The "problem." Where Mother was concerned, we were always in search of the root problem — a fruitless endeavor, I should know better by now.) No other signs of life could be seen from the house, not even through binoculars. Belinda professed to hate the wedding cake, yet she rarely left it, staying inside,

cut off from the world, roaming the hallways in her long white dresses, living in a world of daughters, flowers, and spirits.

As a girl, I knew there was something wrong with my mother, but I didn't quite know what. I assumed that other mothers didn't wake up screaming in the night as she did, claiming she'd seen or heard a ghost. I assumed they didn't spend their mornings writing about their ghostly encounters in a notebook. She wrote in a notebook, a book like I'm writing in now, because her family didn't believe her stories.

I wondered why she couldn't behave normally, and drive us to school like the other mothers did, and stand with them at the gates as classes let out for the day dressed in a colorful frock with a matching handbag and shoes, hair perfectly rolled. But she never came to our school and was noticeably older than my classmates' mothers — taller too, at five foot nine at least. (Were you imagining her small? She wasn't small.) She was quite thin though, elongated, and with her white dresses and shock of white hair, she might have resembled a cotton swab from a distance.

Since none of us believed her stories, we weren't afraid that our house was haunted. We were more afraid of Belinda and the power of her imagination; we pitied her, my father and sisters and I. As far as we were concerned, it wasn't the house that was haunted but Belinda herself. I grew up believing our mother was haunted, and since my sisters and I had each lived inside her for nine months, I wondered if we were haunted too.

## 6.

With her life as a housewife in the New York City suburbs imminent, Aster set about cooking our family dinner that evening. Mrs. O'Connor had been sent home, and our mother couldn't be expected to provide any oversight. She'd taken no part in preparing her oldest daughter for married life.

Without any other assistance, Aster received help from her new Betty Crocker cookbook, which Mrs. O'Connor had labeled an abomination. Aster chose to make pot roast for us that night with mashed potatoes and green

beans. It was far too much for her, even more so on a sweltering summer evening, but it was Sunday and our father expected a Sunday dinner.

It didn't seem as if Aster had any idea what she was doing. Rosalind, who'd offered to help, was nowhere around. "What a catastrophe," Aster said, dabbing her forehead with a dish towel. She wasn't talking to anyone in particular. Zelig and I watched from the kitchen table, with strict instructions not to get in the way.

After freshening up in her room for far longer than was necessary, Rosalind finally appeared. "I see things have gone downhill since I nipped upstairs," she said, as she walked in.

"You've been gone for *ages*."

"Have I? Mea culpa," she said. "In my absence, you've gone and gotten mashed potato all over that stunner of a diamond." Rosalind, seemingly shocked at Aster's disheveled appearance and the state of the kitchen, led her to the sink to wash up.

"I don't know if the roast is done," Aster said, as she dried her hands with a fresh towel.

"Gosh, don't ask me." Rosalind plumped her hair, the dark wavy pageboy that Aster had trimmed for her the night before. The sides were pulled back loosely and fastened with tortoiseshell combs, revealing tiny hoop earrings. She picked up the cold bottle of beer that was meant for our father and took a swig. When she was done, she shook her head rapidly, as if braced. "Call Mrs. O?"

"I have to do this myself. Mrs. O'Connor won't be living with Matthew and me."

"I should hope not," Rosalind said. "That doesn't sound like much fun, does it, girls?"

Rosalind was the froth and fizz in the family, the rest of us having sunk to the bottom of the glass by comparison. She's the only one of us who carried the spark of our firearm legacy. I often wonder what would have become of her if she'd been born into another family. I can see her as a lady pilot in a Luscombe 10 doing somersaults over the Atlantic, or in a hot-air balloon over a field of red poppies in the South of France, or climbing a snowy peak

in the Andes. Rarely do I see her tethered to earth. As it was, she seemed wasted on us, all that boundless energy and heat locked in the chill of the wedding cake, with marriage the only way out she could imagine.

Rosalind opened the oven to check on the roast, then turned to us behind Aster's back, her expression a silent *Eek*. "The poor little fella looks kind of dark. Is that smoke I see?" Rosalind coughed and moved away from the oven, fanning the smoke from her face. Aster, armed with pot holders, pulled the roasting pan from the oven and set it on the stove top.

"Oh no," she said, almost tearful. "It's burned."

"I'm sure it's fine on the inside." Rosalind flicked the charred crust with her scarlet fingernails. "Chin up," she said, placing a hand on Aster's shoulder. "After you're married, you don't want Matthew coming home from work to find you in a state like this, do you?"

"Of course not. But I have to learn to feed him."

"Heavens, he's not a German shepherd," Rosalind said. "Listen, he's managed to keep himself alive for what — thirty years? The man has flown bombing raids over Tokyo, for crying out loud. He can survive a burned roast, a burned chicken, and whatever else you might burn in the future."

Aster looked around helplessly at the wreck of a kitchen, the mixing bowls strewn all over, the pots rattling on the stove, spitting out water and steam. "Your reaction is all that matters," Rosalind continued in her most soothing voice. "What would Katharine Hepburn do in this situation? She'd laugh it off with a cocktail."

"Katharine Hepburn? Rozzy, that's not helpful." Aster went back to her potato mashing, and Rosalind, chastened, tried to help by taking the bread rolls out of the pan and putting them into the breadbasket for the table. "These rolls look wonderful," she said, sniffing one. "Well done."

"Mrs. O'Connor made those," Aster said without looking up from her bowl.

"Oh." Rosalind turned to Zelig and me, mouthing *Oops*.

We Chapel girls had very little experience with domestic chores. A house like ours was so large that it needed to be run by a staff, and a woman of my mother's social standing wouldn't have been expected to slave over a hot

stove and mend clothes. For women of our class, learning to run a household meant learning to manage the other women who did the actual work.

Aster and Matthew wanted a different kind of life. “Modern,” as Aster described it. Matthew rejected his parents’ offer of a townhouse on the Upper East Side and instead used his own money to make a down payment on a colonial in Rye within walking distance of the commuter rail to Manhattan. Matthew would take the train into work every day, as senior vice president of Maybrick Steel, and Aster would stay at home, where she would cook, perform light cleaning (a maid would visit a couple of days a week to do the rough stuff), and eventually care for the children she and Matthew were eager to have. She didn’t want to live in a castle, she said, describing our life in the wedding cake, and Matthew didn’t want his parents’ life, his mother’s martini-soaked evenings, his father’s affairs, their endless arguments.

“You’ve done all you can, Aster darling,” Rosalind said. “*À table!*” She untied the apron from Aster’s waist and began turning the dials on the stove to the off position.

Aster sent Zelig and me into the dining room with the drinks. Rosalind brought the basket of rolls and the bowl of mashed potatoes. Our father and Calla were already seated at the table, linen napkins on their laps. They weren’t speaking to each other since Calla was reading a book of poetry by Tennyson and ignoring him.

As Zelig and I began to pour the drinks, Daphne came into the dining room in capri pants and a sleeveless gingham shirt tied in a knot just above the waist, her hair in a stubby ponytail. Our father looked up as she made her entrance, then looked down without acknowledging her. He didn’t approve of pants on females nor the sight of belly buttons. Any of the rest of us would have been sent upstairs to change, but Daphne wasn’t worth arguing with.

“Where’s dinner?” she said, while I filled her glass with lemonade. We ate every evening at 6:30 and dinner was already ten minutes late. She resented any extra time spent at the table with our parents.

“Let’s be nice about the dinner,” our mother said, as she came into the dining room, sitting down in her usual place at the opposite end of the table

from our father. "I'm sure Aster has worked hard on it." She looked tense, as she had in the garden earlier.

As I took my usual seat next to her, we heard a calamity from the kitchen, and Aster's voice: "*Oh no!*" Daphne laughed mid-drink. Rosalind went back to see what had happened.

Our father poured himself some beer. We hadn't seen him since church. Whenever he was home, he was working in his den. "What did you do today?" he asked Zelig and me. He loosened his collar a bit but hadn't removed the brown suit jacket he'd worn to church despite the heat.

"Iris sketched me at the frog pond," Zelig said.

"Do you have lessons this week?"

"We have our piano lesson on Monday," I said.

"And I have ballet class on Friday," Zelig said. She sat stiffly in her chair, only relaxing once it appeared the questioning was over. His questions were usually anodyne, but it was best to be on guard.

"And what about you, Calla?" he asked. "What are you reading so intently that you can't look away even at the table?"

"The Lady of Shalott," she said, and began to read aloud: "She lives with little joy or fear. Over the water, running near, the sheepbell tinkles in her ear. Before her hangs a mirror clear, reflecting tower'd Camelot."

"Yes, thank you," our father said, raising his eyebrows and straightening the cutlery next to his plate. "I've never been one for poetry."

"No," Calla said. She set down the book and picked up her water glass, sipping from it delicately. She had beautiful plump lips, but their resting position was a frowning pucker. It sort of ruined the effect.

At last Aster and Rosalind arrived with the roast beef and green beans. The slices of roast beef, on a white platter, smelled pleasant but were unadorned. Mrs. O'Connor usually added a flourish of salad greens to the platter or some sprigs of parsley and orange slices, but Aster hadn't done that. The meat sat in an oily liquid, as if it had been dropped into a rainy puddle. We each hid our distaste as we used the fork to lower slices onto our plates.

Daphne began to eat before everyone else was served, attempting dramatically to cut the meat with her knife before picking it up and eating it

with her fingers. Our father observed her, then turned away in disgust. Aster looked around at the rest of us, awaiting our verdict. At dinner she was usually freshly coiffed, but tonight she was ruddy-cheeked, hair as frazzled as Albert Einstein's, with a splatter near the collar of her white dress, the palest of pink blood, likely from the raw piece of meat she'd handled hours earlier.

"You'll never guess who RSVP'd today," Rosalind said, having returned from the kitchen with the forgotten gravy boat. She took her seat next to our father, ending the unbearable silence. He turned to her, sipping his beer, unwilling to play a guessing game.

"Samuel Colt," she said. "Samuel the fifth or sixth or who knows what number they're on now. He's the younger one, around twenty, I think."

He set down his glass and considered this. "Who invited him?"

"We did, of course," Rosalind said. "Daddy, you approved the guest list."

"Did I?" His mind often seemed to be elsewhere, on more important things.

"All your gun people are coming," she said.

"They're not *my* gun people," he replied. Most of the gun manufacturers in America were based in Connecticut and Massachusetts — Colt, Smith & Wesson, Winchester, the Springfield Armory, Mossberg, Ruger, Remington — but he and his brethren in bloodshed were, for the most part, competitors, not friends.

Our father made an attempt at the roast as Aster watched nervously. He sliced off a hunk, put it in his mouth, and nodded at her as he chewed.

Belinda's plate contained a single slice of roast beef and a scattering of green beans, but it was clear she had no intention of eating them. She buttered a bread roll and chewed it absentmindedly, staring out at the forest to the north of the house through the window that was behind her husband. Sometimes, when she was feeling particularly stressed, she radiated the kind of spaciness that was typical of someone who'd been medicated, staring into the void, then snapping back into conversation. But I didn't think she was actually drugged. The doctor rarely visited our house, and on the occasions I snooped around her bedroom or used her bathroom when the one in the girls' wing was in use, I never saw any pills besides aspirin. Belinda didn't

seem to have any vices — didn't smoke cigarettes or drink coffee or alcohol; she faced every day head-on, defenseless. As a result, she seemed to shrink away from life; as if she were staring into the sun, she couldn't help but turn away.

"The Wessons are coming too," Aster said. "Elvira Wesson and her mother."

"We would have invited Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill if they were still alive," Rosalind replied in jest, and our father grunted in agreement.

The wedding had ballooned into a huge affair, thanks to the Maybricks. They'd invited hundreds of people, nearly all of whom had accepted, so the reception was moved from our house to Wentworth Hall, an estate near Greenwich used for society weddings and other grand events. Our side had far fewer invitees. Our father was an only child and his parents were dead. Our mother's parents were also dead. She had a half brother with his own family in Boston, but she hated him; we had no contact with him at all. A handful of prominent residents in Bellflower Village had been invited and some of the New England gun manufacturers, but that was it.

"The thing is —" Rosalind began.

"I . . ." Belinda said suddenly, this single word drawing our collective attention. We all turned to Mother, but the rest of the sentence wasn't immediately forthcoming. She kept staring out at the woods, her eyes vacant. We waited for her to snap back to attention, and when she did, she continued her thought: "I have a feeling something terrible is going to happen."

There it was finally. She had opened the door to all that would come after.

"What I mean is . . ." She set down her roll on the edge of her plate. "The wedding is going to bring about something terrible. I don't know what exactly, but I think we should consider postponing."

Mother's odd behavior was like the smell of fresh paint. You noticed it at first but then you got used to it. I wasn't yet old enough to know for sure when something she did or said was truly noteworthy, but this certainly seemed to qualify. Her announcement was soon followed by the sound of sil-



ver clanking against china as my father and older sisters set their cutlery on their plates and turned to her in various states of alarm.

Our father was the first to speak. "My dear, what are you talking about?"

"Mother?" Aster asked in a nervous voice.

Belinda had uttered only a couple of sentences in the softest tone of voice, but they knew what she was capable of. Her propensity for drama was endless. "I have a terrible feeling about it and I simply don't see the rush," she said, reaching for one of her jagged earlobes and caressing it slightly.

"The rush? I'm twenty years old." Aster sounded panicked. She was so close to getting out — less than a week to go — and now this.

"That's right. You're still young," Belinda said. "You have no understanding of what marriage is really like. How you'll belong to a man once you marry and cease to be yourself."

"Oh Mother," Rosalind said, rolling her eyes.

"There's no need to rush into it," Belinda said. "I didn't get married until I was twenty-nine."

"Yes, but you —" Aster said quickly, loudly, her voice more high-pitched than usual. Rosalind elbowed her, and Aster paused and took a breath.

"You didn't *want* to get married, Mother," Rosalind said. "Aster does, so you see, there's the difference."

Our father picked up the saltshaker and shook it over his green beans, all the while staring at Rosalind, waiting for some kind of acknowledgment that she'd made a faux pas, but she was oblivious. It wasn't a secret that Belinda hadn't wanted to be married. No need to dance around it.

"Most of my friends are married or engaged," Aster said. "That's what I want, to be a wife and mother."

"There's plenty of time for that. I had Zelig when I was almost forty."

"Forty!" Rosalind said. "Mother, you do say the most astonishing things. Who wants to wait to have a baby until they're almost forty?"

"My point is that she could stay in college for now. At least until this bad feeling subsides."

Aster had attended Darlow's Ladies College for a year but wouldn't re-

turn in the fall now that she was getting married. Rosalind, having just graduated from high school, would be starting in September. Darlow's Ladies College wasn't a college so much as a finishing school for well-off young women. The more academically minded would have gone to Wellesley or Smith to bide their time until marriage, the less well-off to secretarial school, but our father wouldn't have allowed any of that. A Chapel girl didn't need a college education, he said, since she would never need to work for her living. He'd allowed Darlow's Ladies College because Aster couldn't very well sit at home all day between high school graduation and her eventual marriage. She needed to better herself, to learn social graces and how to run a household.

"I plan to stay in college for as long as I can," Daphne said. "I want to go to art school in Europe."

"I'm not paying for any art school," our father said. "Put that out of your mind."

"I'll pay for it myself," she replied, and the thought was too ridiculous to prompt an argument.

"Why should I stay in college?" Aster asked. "So I can study to become a teacher or nurse?" She said "teacher or nurse" in the same tone she might have said "hobo or prostitute." She looked to our father for assurance. He nodded his head.

"Nothing is being postponed," he said.

"Matthew certainly wouldn't wait for her," Rosalind said. "A man like Matthew doesn't wait."

Mother sat back in her chair, defeated. She'd been foolish to think she could postpone the wedding. She'd never used much of a guiding hand with her daughters, had never tried to steer us in any direction, since most of her energy went into her own day-to-day survival. Her girls had progressed through the normal stages of life, and now one of them was at the marriage stage and it was too late to set a different course.

"Something terrible is going to happen," she said again, mostly to herself. My sisters glanced at one another. Our father looked down at his plate. Belinda was full of strange ideas, but I couldn't remember her ever sharing a premonition with us.

"She wants me to end up like Millie Stevens," Aster said. Millie was the most tragic figure in our village. She was unmarried at twenty-eight, having earned a law degree from Columbia, where she'd gone only because Yale Law didn't admit women, and after graduation, she'd had the door of every law firm in New England slammed in her face. Defeated on practically every level, she lived with her parents on Birch Street and gave piano lessons to earn money. Her other part-time job — inspiring horror in Bellflower Village's female population — went unpaid.

"I've always liked Millie," Belinda said, and it was true. Millie came to our house once a week to give Zelie and me our piano lesson, and our mother occasionally engaged her in conversation, which she rarely did with anyone else.

"I suppose you'd prefer to have Millie for a daughter?" Aster said, having crossed the line into histrionics.

When Belinda didn't reply, Aster stood up from her chair and tossed her napkin onto her dinner plate. She pushed in her chair, then stilled her trembling hands by gripping the back of it. "I haven't said anything all these months, Mother, but —"

Our father attempted to stop her. "Please don't, dear."

"I'm sorry, but I must. I've been carrying this inside me and I have to express how I feel." Aster turned to our mother. "You haven't shown any interest in the wedding. For my friends' mothers, their daughters' weddings are the highlight of their lives, but not for you. It couldn't be more obvious that you don't really care."

I looked down at my lap as Aster spoke and wished I could disappear. My sisters and I talked about Mother behind her back all the time, but none of us had ever confronted her to her face like this.

"I don't know what's wrong with you, Mother, and I never have." Aster seemed to be emitting some kind of scorching heat with her words; we were baking in it. "But I'm not going to let you ruin this for me."

"I'm not in the habit of ruining things," Belinda replied calmly, though I knew she was anything but calm inside.

Daphne snorted. "That's practically *all* you do."

"Enough," our father said. He told Daphne to go to her room, to which she replied: "Hallelujah."

Aster followed Daphne out of the dining room, her stint at cooking dinner apparently not extending to the cleanup afterward. Rosalind dabbed her lips with her napkin, then tucked it under the side of her plate and left as well.

My parents, Calla, Zelig, and I were left at the table. At some point during the discussion, Calla had picked up her poetry book again and was reading to herself, having pushed aside her dinner plate, which had been cleaned of potatoes and green beans, leaving the single piece of grayish meat, like a tiny mouse corpse, to rest on the white china.

In the silence, she began to read aloud, apropos of nothing but capturing the mood of the room: "A pale, pale corpse she floated by, Deadcold —"

"Stop," our father said.

"Deadcold, between the houses high, Dead into tower'd Camelot."

"Enough," he said, and Calla left the table, taking her Tennyson with her.

Zelig looked from Mother to Father, her eyes filling with tears. Such open warfare had never broken out at our dinner table before. Disagreements usually happened behind closed doors, in hushed voices.

"I don't want something terrible to happen," she said, waiting for someone to do something or say something that would make everything all right.

"You can't believe your mother," our father said to Zelig. "Nothing terrible is going to happen to anyone." He pushed his dinner plate away, half his meal uneaten, and stared down the table at his wife. "I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"It had to be said."

"Did it really?" He finished his glass of beer, then directed Zelig and me to go upstairs.

I hesitated to leave our mother alone. Zelig, as was her custom, waited to see what I was going to do. I wasn't afraid my father would strike our mother or shout at her. He was never violent, would never even yell. He ruled over a house of women without ever raising his voice. Still, I didn't want to leave her. She needed an ally. She rarely had one.

“Did you hear me?” he said.

I stood up, a coward, and pulled Zelig along. Belinda looked down, seemingly too ashamed to meet my gaze, so I leaned over and whispered in her ear: “I believe you, Mother.”

I didn’t know if I actually did then. But she would end up being right, of course. Something terrible *was* going to happen, and later on, after it had, I wondered how it was possible that she had foreseen it.