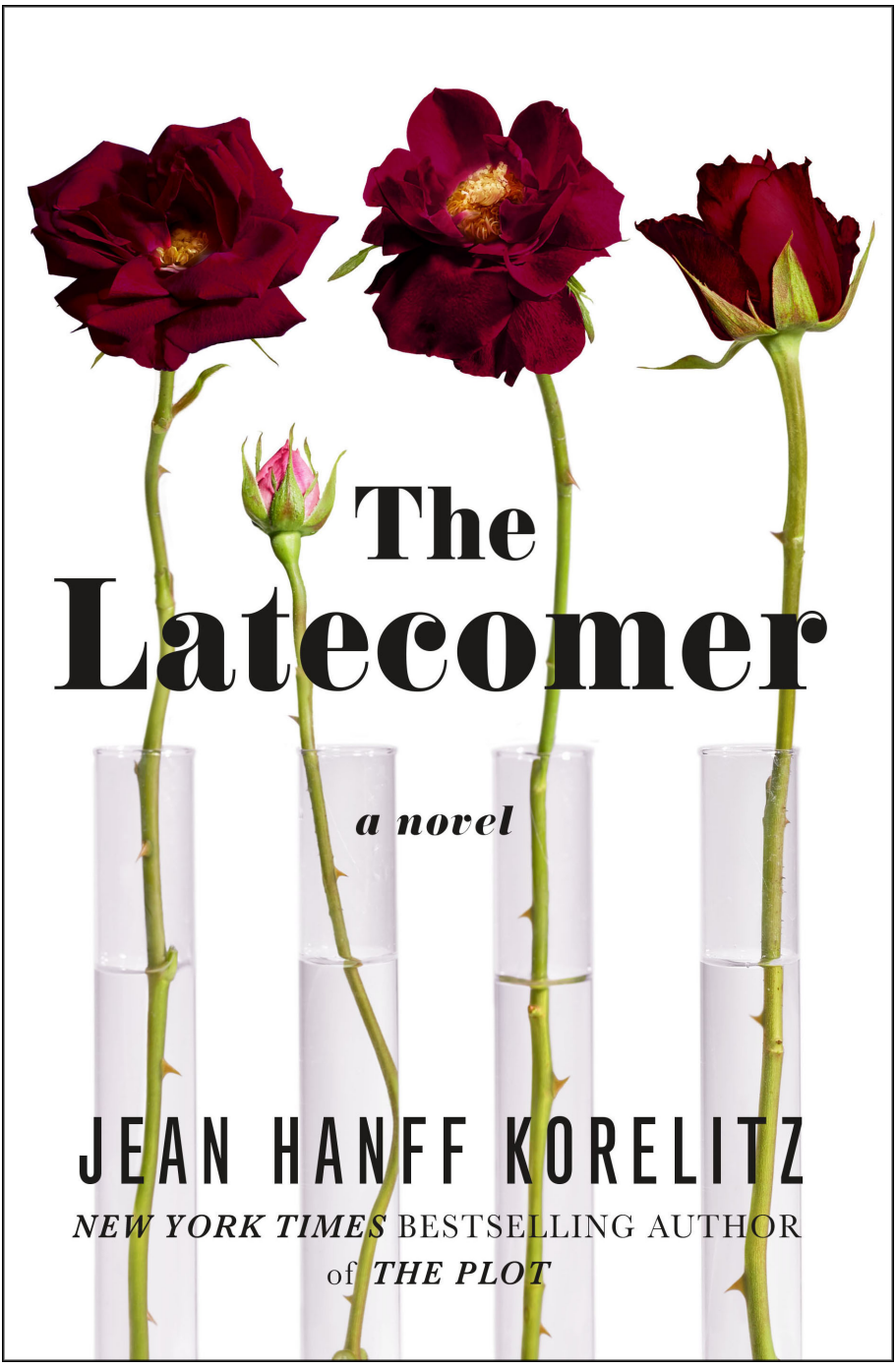
The
Latecomer
a novel
JEAN HANFF KORELITZ
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
of THE PLOT

The LATECOMER

Jean Hanff Korelitz

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Please note

The following excerpt from *The Latecomer* begins at chapter 5.

Chapter Five

Already Gone

In which the Oppenheimer triplets arrive and immediately commence to grow apart

Lewyn's first memory was of a rocky beach (later to be identified as the one behind our Vineyard cottage), and a long strand of brown seaweed he held up to the sun.

Harrison's first memory was of Jürgen the dog, growling at him.

Sally's first memory was of her brother Harrison grabbing a piece of apple out of her brother Lewyn's grubby hand.

What was the first shared memory? Settling on even that trifling common denominator would have required conversation and the acknowledgment of a shared history, and that was not to be, at least not while they were still children. Harrison, who did most things first, would opt out before the other two, but Sally wasn't far behind. Lewyn, poor Lewyn, held on longer than would be reasonable to anyone else. In fact, he wouldn't give up entirely until his sister dismissed him at the start of their shared freshman year at their mutual alma mater. But without the cooperation of the others, did it ever matter what Lewyn wanted?

Only days before their arrival, the house in Brooklyn Heights had been cavernous and still, classically proportioned rooms full of air, with only an

immobile woman upstairs in the bedroom and a lazy dachshund guarding the Esplanade from a couch in the parlor. Now three infants sent forth their existential discontents into the void, and two baby nurses and a housekeeper raced around in an endless cycle of feeding and comforting and changing and bathing as Johanna looked on in pain and disarray. Still, three new souls had entered the world! More than replacing the ones Salo Oppenheimer had taken! Our father might have read in this cosmic redress some whiff of redemption, a tether (three tethers!) to set against his ongoing and incessant ricochet through life, but he could not seem to get there. He stood over them in the NICU, and later in their beautiful wooden cribs at home, sincerely trying to recognize these tiny, wrinkled, angry bundles as being somehow associated with himself, but he failed to do it. He would always fail to do it. Still, our father had been looking at paintings—often quite difficult paintings—for years by then, and because of that he was able to read an essential truth about those three tiny people—that they had arrived as they already were and would ever be: Harrison wild for escape, Sally preemptively sullen, Lewyn full of woe as he reached out for the others. There was no changing them, just as he had no real hope for change, himself.

He made an honest attempt to hold them, to stare into their foreign little faces, but even as he seated himself in the strange gliding rocker and took awkward possession of a baby from one of the nurses, he felt the insurmountability of what he faced. The infant would be at its best, newly bathed and diapered and swaddled, sated from a bottle and drifting toward sleep, but despite such favorable conditions he invariably handed it back and went to find the dog to take him for a walk on the Esplanade. A fair and warm September evening. Across the river, Wurttemberg Holdings was hunched somewhere in the nineteenth-century lowland between the American International Building and the World Trade Center, and everywhere in that dense and frenzied triangle of Manhattan Island young men swarmed the bars, and young women slipped off their office heels and laced on their sneakers to power-walk home. He did not want to be there, particularly. But he did not want to be where he was, either. Johanna, his parents, the fraternity brothers who'd made a point of not shunning him, the colleagues who

deferred to him because he was an Oppenheimer, even these three little lives he'd helped to make; he recognized, not for the first time, that he didn't seem to want any of it. But what did he want, instead?

The joint birth announcement was accompanied by the first of the enforced photographs, taken after the last of the babies (Harrison) came home from the NICU: three long infants in matching onesies, one stoic, one sleeping, one in tears. The baby nurses had been standing by when the new family arrived home, all systems at the ready, but Johanna still couldn't settle. She was in a certain amount of *the worst pain she had ever experienced* from her caesarean, but she still had to fight the compulsion to jump up (and wrench open her sutures) whenever one of her children cried, which amounted to a near-constant challenge. The house, indeed, reverberated with infantile unhappiness (largely from Harrison, who gifted them all with his colic) and also stank of all the ordinary baby things. The two nurses didn't get along, and one quickly dispatched the other and replaced her with her own sister-in-law, a silent woman who merely glowered. The dachshund made a point of climbing many stairs, just to soil the carefully chosen carpet in the boys' room. (It was a lot of effort for him to go to, but apparently worth it.) Our mother's maternal anxieties shifted from gestation to lactation, and she spent those first months in an armchair on the parlor floor as one whiny triplet after another was brought to her and taken away. Then, an intervention of nannies, the pediatrician, and her sister Debbie (who certainly had *not* breastfed either of her superior sons) persuaded her that she had done her duty and the children would sleep a lot better if they got a little formula. In a rare show of unity, all three babies instantly declared an allegiance to the bottle, and refused the breast thereafter.

The house on the Esplanade became a twenty-four-hour factory of rocking and feeding and cleaning and airing and rocking again, and feeding again. The various tenders (Johanna, eventually, among them) handed off the various babies to one another when someone needed to sleep (or eat, or pee, but mainly sleep), and the babies did most of what they were supposed to do, in the mainly right order, though Harrison was first at every milestone and either Sally or Lewyn lagged, always. Harrison would only be distracted

from his colic when placed in his car seat and set on the dryer. Sally cycled through every conceivable food in search of something she wouldn't projectile-vomit. Lewyn was placid and amiable so long as someone was holding him. Two had eczema. Only one had hair. It was hard to imagine a time beyond this time, with its constant neediness, strong primal odors, and sheer physicality.

Johanna, for once, lacked the wherewithal to think about what Salo wanted, and so her husband fell more and more into the habit of stopping in Red Hook on the way home to sit in the presence of what he had made and was still making: not a thing to be rushed. The first time she paused for breath the children were four and in the pre-K program at Walden.

By then the baby nurses were long gone and also the two nannies who'd replaced them, and she'd downshifted to an afternoon-and-weekend assist from a couple of Hunter College students who came with her to Walden pick-up and helped walk them home or ferry them to activities. All three kids went to a Mommy and Child music class (where they shook little egg maracas and showed a dearth of musical feeling) and attended a Saturday-morning sports program in the little park by Cadman Plaza (where only Harrison agreed to keep running around after the first ten minutes). At home she furnished the basement playroom with every conceivable prop and aid, and waited for the magical creative synergy of her happy children to fill the house on the Esplanade.

And waited.

It meant everything to Johanna that her children be powerfully attached to one another, even *more* attached than some random sequential assemblage of "normal" siblings might have been, but the illusion took every bit of her will and strength to maintain. There was not, for example, one single thing that Harrison, Lewyn, and Sally seemed content to do together—not just at the same time and in the same place but *together*—no matter how she or one of the nannies (later babysitters) might suggest, cajole, bribe, or even admonish them. *Play some game! Cooperate!* Even persuading them to sit on the same couch in the basement and watch the same television show or video seemed to require a Himalaya of effort. The three of them might rise but

they simply declined to converge, even if they happened to actually share some interest or preference. Harrison and Sally were both readers, for example, but wouldn't talk to each other about what they were reading, even when they were reading the same thing. Lewyn and Sally had both been affected by the passing of Jürgen, but each came to Johanna, separately, and said they were fine with not having another dog. Harrison and Lewyn both went through a superhero phase—at the same time, no less—but even then had refused to cooperate in play. To call them collectively "quiet" or "self-reliant," for example, was to ignore the fact that Sally isolated herself to feel annoyed, Lewyn to feel wounded, and Harrison to simply escape the other two. So powerful was the mutual aversion, and so ironic, given the triplets had never actually been apart, that you might even have said it was the single thing the triplets actually *did* share.

In the house on the Esplanade, home to three toddlers, then three preschoolers, then three primary-school-aged children, the only time our mother heard the sound of kids at play was when one of her children had a friend over. Otherwise: silence in the basement playroom with its puppet theater and cupboards full of board games and arsenals of foam weapons for active children to hurl at one another, silence in the bedrooms and in the living room, where she not infrequently came across a child with a book or art project or solo game. Her home was quiet—*so quiet*—with not even the shared quiet of a video they all liked down on the basement couch, or the companionable quiet of concurrent reading. When they gathered for a meal conversation might be made, grudgingly, and light chores could be jointly undertaken without too much complaint, but at the first opportunity they parted again, to tend to homework or activities or recreation, and to think separate thoughts about who knew what.

Our mother, who had willed her children into existence (and suffered mightily along the way), would not give up her notion of what they might be. She grew adept at deflecting the "observations" of others—parents on the playground who joked about how the triplets steered clear of one another, or their teachers at Walden, who took some strange delight in describing the children's intra-aversion in parent-teacher meetings. Even her own

mother had a way of *tut-tutting* through her rare visits, whenever Sally, Lewyn, and Harrison declined to do something adorable together. So maybe the true, deep bond her children had for one another just wasn't registering in an obvious way, or was something only a mother could possibly intuit. So when Harrison called Lewyn fat and Sally put Harrison's chess medal (which came not from Walden, where everyone got a medal, but from the Brooklyn Chess League, where you actually had to win in order to get a medal) in the garbage, or Lewyn didn't want to share his puzzle with the other two, or Harrison lifted not one finger to help his brother conquer homesickness at summer camp, or Sally refused to agree to any movie or television show that Harrison wanted to watch (even if she also wanted to watch it), simply because *Harrison* wanted to watch it—our mother refused to attach great importance to any of these things, because on some deep, deep level, where it counted, she maintained the fragile notion that all three of her children were devoted to one another. And besides, close intimacy in childhood was no indicator of close intimacy in the fullness of time, which was much more important! (She herself had once been close to her elder sister Debbie, but now Debbie had her own life with Bruce and their boys, and the sisters hardly ever saw each other.)

Into this void Johanna poured routines and rituals—so many routines and so many rituals! Breakfast parfaits and walking to school one way in the morning and home from school another way in the afternoon, stopping at the same bodega for Snapple and OJ, building a family cookbook of recipes they voted on, and taking turns to choose the restaurant on Sunday nights. Disney movies at the Cobble Hill Cinema, stops at Lenny and Joe's on the drive to the Vineyard, the Flying Horses with the brass ring dispenser in Oak Bluffs. She had patchwork quilts made of their baby and kid clothes, so they'd remember. She took Sally for Saturday-morning pedicures and marched Lewyn and Harrison across the Brooklyn Bridge to buy roast-pork buns in Chinatown. On their birthday she took those photographs on the back porch of the Vineyard cottage, and hung them along the staircase wall in Brooklyn so they could see themselves grow up together every time they went upstairs. But if she faltered, even once—one Sunday, one birthday

photo, one route home after school—not one of them seemed to notice, let alone care.

When they were six, they departed Walden's nursery school building and entered the Lower School on Joralemon Street, where, for the first time, the three of them were assigned to separate first-grade homerooms and given individual class schedules. The transition would certainly be destabilizing, so our mother set out to prepare her kids, reminding them that the important thing was the comfort and strength of what they shared. She delivered solemn sermons to them over dinner as they approached this traumatic separation, and took them out separately to allay any fears. Harrison she brought to the bookstore on Court Street, treating him to a stack of books; Sally she took to a special lunch at Serendipity. Lewyn got a private walk on the beach, a few days before they left the island that summer. And when the momentous morning arrived, she woke them with excitement and pancakes and asked Salo to go in late to the office so they could walk the kids together, and all the way there she fretted over the approaching moment when two parents would somehow have to divide three children, leaving one or two or all three vulnerable to feelings of abandonment. Harrison was clearly the strongest of the three, so they would all accompany him to his homeroom and leave him, and that would be that. Then she and Salo would split up to take Sally to hers and Lewyn to his, and not leave any of them until each was truly okay. But when they got to the building that morning, the sidewalk and hallways were packed with first-day parents and caregivers and kids, and her boys suddenly announced that they knew where they were supposed to be, and walked off without a backward glance. Only Sally consented to be accompanied to her new classroom, and Johanna couldn't help wondering whether there might be an element of actual pity in the gesture.

When they were nine, all three of them went off to camp in Maine, but only Harrison lasted past the first year. Harrison loved Androscoggin, and would spend many summers there, piling up badges and honors, assembling a pack of admiring buddies, and mastering the arcane skills of the canoe before defecting to CTY at Johns Hopkins, to be with other teenagers who

knew what "Supply Side Economics" meant. For Lewyn, though, it was a torment from the moment his parents returned to the car. Oppressed by homesickness, scratching at rashes from plants and insects and sheer anxiety, and only occasionally managing to kick a ball or tie a knot, Lewyn failed to do manly things in the wilderness with the other boys, and begged to spend his summers on the Vineyard with his mother and Sally (who'd also defected, without explanation, after a single Pinecliffe summer).

And then came the September morning when her children, who were no longer children by then, entered the storied stone building that housed Walden's middle and upper schools, and marched off to their separate sixth-grade homerooms for the first time, each having asked Johanna *not* to accompany them. She had stood on the sidewalk, looking after them as they went inside, and then wandered home to her quiet house to spend the day wondering what she was supposed to be doing with herself. Climbing the stairs, she watched the three of them grow up in those magical birthday photographs, just as she had done thousands of times before, but this time she stopped in front of the picture she had hung only days before. Three individuals forcing rictus smiles, waiting for the shutter to click so they could each return to whatever it was they'd been summoned from. Johanna felt herself sit heavily on that top step to the landing, near a spot on the wall that had indeed, as her husband once predicted, borne the brunt of innumerable book bags and backpacks.

Finally, finally, the tiniest pinprick of reality came through the force field of her stubborn delusion, presenting Johanna with the first filament of an idea. That they were two adults plus three children, made concurrently. That they were five humans cohabiting. That they were not, and never had been, a family.

And her husband, what was more, while she hadn't been paying nearly enough attention, had slipped past them all and disappeared—not in terms of his physical self, of course, though his physical self came home later and later each night, after longer and longer visits to his warehouse in Coney Island or Red Bank or wherever it was—but his attentive self, his essential self, which by then lived somewhere else entirely.

Chapter Six

Outsider

In which Salo Oppenheimer remembers some additional injuries, and ceases to tumble

One January afternoon in 1993, Salo Oppenheimer walked into something called the Outsider Art Fair at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Chelsea, and looked around for his wife.

The two of them hadn't visited a gallery together for years, not since before the children were born, in fact, and he had long since moved the slow, deliberate, and frequently joyful perusal of art into the column of things he did away from the rest of them. But this had been Johanna's idea, offered over brunch at their local spot, the previous Sunday.

"Have you been over to see this thing?" She pointed at the Arts Section. All five of them were reading at the table. "Somebody at school was telling me."

"No. I don't know about it."

"She went a few nights ago. This mom. She said the place is jammed full of young people. Lots of energy. It's called Outsider Artists. It's where the art world is going, she said."

"Well, I doubt that." Salo, himself, had just bought another Twombly. Much smaller than his beloved rust-colored scrawl (which, along with its

peer-contemporaries, was part of something now being called the "Blackboard Series") and far, far more expensive. Increasingly, it seemed to him, the art world was going where he had already been, for years. That meant there was less to find, and way too many people waving around money.

"So what's an 'Outsider Artist' then?" he asked.

She turned the paper around.

Outsider Artist—the term was so new there was yet to be any strict consensus about its meaning—had something to do with the artist's lack of formal education or training, which didn't make much sense when you thought about it. How many of the artists in his own warehouse had declined or been unable to access formal education and training? Besides, from what this review of the new show described, a truer delineation ought to be based on the artist's sanity, or the lack thereof; they all seemed to be mental patients or street people, laborers building palaces out of toothpicks in their basements at night or self-ordained ministers proclaiming their vision of God. He studied the accompanying photograph: a truly bizarre picture by a Chicago janitor who'd apparently cut pictures of little girls out of magazines and painted them into battle scenes. Some of the little girls even had male genitalia. Sick!

"You should go see it," said our mother. "Actually, let's both go. It sounds bizarre, doesn't it?"

Salo agreed that it did.

"Well," he heard himself say, "that's a nice idea."

Now, at the Metropolitan Pavilion, Johanna was late, five minutes, then ten, then twenty. The entrance area was indeed jammed, with more people pushing past him and into the building. There was no seating, and he was growing irritated past the point of retrieval. Then he heard his name. Over at the registration desk, a harried young person was holding a cordless phone and looking around.

"Yes," he said as he made his way through the crowd, "I'm Salo Oppenheimer."

"Okay," the man said. He looked barely older than his own kids, but was wearing some kind of official badge. "Someone's calling for you. But please don't take long, we need the line."

Salo took the phone. It was Johanna.

"What's wrong?" he said. "What's happened?"

"Oh, I got a call from Aaron's office." She sounded frustrated, not frightened. "They wanted me to come in right away. I went racing over there, thinking something terrible was going on."

"But it wasn't?" He was relieved, and now annoyed. Aaron, who at any other school would be called the "principal" but at Walden was called the "head of school," had always struck him as histrionic and prone to exaggeration.

"No. Well, except that it started with Harrison being unhappy that his class was repeating some material from last year, then suddenly it morphed into serious concern about how the kids aren't speaking to each other at school, and is there something going on in the family that Walden needs to perform some kind of an intervention over."

"You mean an exorcism." This was Walden at its worst, Salo thought. All the drum banging and collective guilt and ethical processing—it was a far cry from his own Collegiate experience, but he had made his peace with that, and besides, he could see that all three of his children, even Lewyn, were reading and writing and doing age-appropriate math. Still, the delight these people seemed to take in breaching family privacy!

"What?"

"What did you tell them?"

He could hear her annoyance, even over the volume of the lobby.

"I said what I always say: Thank you so much for pointing this out, and our whole family will discuss it."

Salo nodded. There had been a similar incident the previous year, with Aaron. That time the instigating concern had been Lewyn's "self-isolation," but this, like the current round, had metastasized into Aaron's all-triplet-all-Oppenheimer expression of Waldenian concern, and the actual suggestion that the family enter counseling.

"So, no list of approved therapists this time?"

"Well, it was offered. But I said I still had the information from last year. I wonder if everybody gets this level of personal attention."

Even such a mild suggestion of fault-finding was noteworthy for Johanna, who having long ago chosen Walden for her children preferred not to question either its principles or its practices.

"Anyway, when I realized I wasn't going to get there at four, I went to the school office and tried to call the show. I ended up talking to some PR office in Soho before they could get me connected to the Pavilion itself. I'm sorry, Salo."

"No, don't worry. I'm sure this isn't our cup of tea, anyway."

The "our" was a gift.

"I'll just take a quick look and come home." Perhaps, he thought, with his now-liberated hours, after a stop in Red Hook.

"Okay," he heard her say. "I'm sorry, though. I was looking forward to it. Let me know if you see the one with the cut-out little girls."

The harried person behind the desk was giving him some very unhappy attention. He was not yet reaching out his hand for the phone, but that had to be imminent.

"See you later."

He expressed his thanks by purchasing a catalog, which indeed featured a cover photograph of a naked little girl shooting a rifle. Then he turned into the shock of another person, standing utterly still before him. Salo was significantly taller than this person, so he looked down.

"I heard your name called," she said, the person. She was looking up at him: a woman, short, slight, African American. She wore the contemporary art uniform of black pants and black shirt, and had a video camera slung over one shoulder. Her other hand held a takeout cup of coffee.

"Yes?" said our father, automatically.

"It's Salo, yes? Oppenheimer?"

"Yes," said Salo, mystified.

"I don't think you remember me," she said.

You don't think? I remember you? He gaped at her. Then it occurred to him: the wedding in Oak Bluffs. Where he had met Johanna. The bride had so many friends. Surely this was one of them.

"Oh, I do," our father said, trying to persuade them both. "Martha's

Vineyard, right? The . . . wedding?" But now he couldn't remember the name of the groom, his fraternity brother, let alone the bride. He'd lost touch with them both. And besides, after that weekend he was with Johanna, and the world had drawn itself around the two of them.

"Martha's . . . ?" said the woman. "No, I don't think so. Not a wedding. I'm Stella. We were . . . I mean, I was. In the car. With you."

It took a moment to land, and then another moment to release him, but by then he was lost to so many things: a clear sense of who he was, and where he was, and what he was supposed to be doing in the world. Because he had missed a signpost, a very, very important signpost, perhaps as far back as that long-ago morning, back past the years of tumbling through space while attempting to pass as a husband and father, back even further to that girl he hadn't looked at, only an extra body in the back seat, only a shadow over his wrist as the Jeep rolled in the air. Here she was, standing in front of him, up to his shoulder, dressed in black and, appallingly, smiling at him. He would never have known her, not on the street or in the lobby of an "Outsider" art fair or anywhere else, but suddenly, now, it all came searing back at him. Her name was Stella.

"Stella," he said.

An impatient man was actually pushing him aside, to get at the registration table.

"Excuse me," this person said, gruffly, after the fact.

That smile. It was small, because her mouth was small, and her teeth were perfectly aligned. Too perfectly, he thought with new horror. Had her teeth been smashed? Were these new teeth, false teeth? He struggled to remember in what specific ways he had damaged her: *arm, foot, concussion, suture.*

"You were in the hospital," our father said, like a fool.

She looked at him. "Well, yes. A long time ago, I was."

Mandy Bernstein, his acknowledged fiancée. Daniel Abraham, his fraternity brother and friend. Their two victim-spirits had been his companions every day since that day, two lost people fastened to him and walking gravely beside him, step by ponderous step, and never once did he imagine they might release him, because he truly did not believe he deserved release.

And not once, not one time in all these years, had he given a single thought to that other person in the back seat, that other body in the tumbling car, because he hadn't killed her and because there was so much else, too much else, in the way: Mandy and Daniel, who were dead. This woman wasn't dead. Had he ever even seen her? Had he turned back, offered a hand or a word of welcome? He had been listening, half listening, to Mandy as she narrated the story of the movie her sorority had screened the night before. He had been wondering if he shouldn't run into the fraternity house to use the bathroom before setting out. He had been questioning whether he'd fastened the canvas roof correctly the last time he'd had the car out and was showing somebody how the convertible top worked, but he was too proud to ask his girlfriend to get the manual out of the glove compartment. He had barely turned his head as the two of them, his passengers, climbed into the back.

Had Danny said: *Morning! This is Stella.*

Had Stella said: *Nice to meet you!*

Had Salo said: *Great to meet you, too.*

But he remembered nothing else, nothing about her at all, not even that she was Black, which was not a non-thing, not in 1972, and then he was turning in the air and they were dead and yoked to him forever, except that here this woman was in the foyer of the Metropolitan Pavilion.

"I'm sorry," he heard his own voice say. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Salo," she said quietly, "it wasn't your fault."

And right then, right there, he started to cry, not silently and not with restraint, and this was the first time, the only time, if he was being honest. All those years, not once: never by the roadside, or in the emergency room, or down in the horrible basement morgue with a pathetic Ace bandage on his wrist, or at either funeral. Never, it now occurred to him, with his wife, whose entire purpose, he knew, was to persuade him of the very thing this stranger had just, so matter-of-factly, said. Of course it was his fault. Every moment since that day had been formed around the understanding that it was his fault. He shook with the weeping, he felt its aftereffects on the skin

of his cheeks, and chin, and neck. Both of those men, the impatient one who had pushed him aside and the impatient one behind the table, were looking at him now. Salo could see it, from the extreme blurred edge of his vision, but he couldn't get himself to care about it. He might be a grown man in a business suit sobbing in the crowded entryway of the Metropolitan Pavilion, but for the first time in so many years our father was also standing still. Perfectly, beautifully still, and rooted to the ground. The endless tumbling that had been his life since that awful morning: it had all just . . . stopped.

"Do you want to come upstairs with me?" said Stella. "We could talk."

He nodded. He had not one thing to say. The delirium of stasis had silenced him.

He followed her up three flights, barely able to catch his breath as they climbed, his absent wife, his children who did not acknowledge one another at school, the little-girl soldiers somewhere in that building, all now utterly forgotten. Salo kept his eye on her, on her slim legs climbing the steps, on the video camera bouncing against her hip. When they reached the fourth floor she led him through the booths to the back of the building. There were people here, but not as many as he'd expected, not with those crowds in the lobby.

"I thought there'd be more people," he said to the back of her head.

"They're all on the second floor, where the Dargers are. Apparently, no one can resist a female child with a penis and a sword."

Their destination apparently was a square booth in one of the back corners, its walls covered with what looked like large framed blueprints and schematics. There was a glass-topped case in the center of the space, also full of smaller pictures of buildings. Misshapen buildings. The sign above the entrance said SANDRO BARTH, LLC. BERKELEY, CA. A young woman got up from her desk as they approached. "Thanks, hon," said Stella.

"No worries. Hope you found something drinkable."

"Doubt it," Stella said. She turned to Salo. He had stopped crying, which was a great relief to him. "We've invented this thing called coffee out on the West Coast. It's kind of like this," she raised her takeout cup, "in

that it's liquid and hot. But it's different because it tastes good. I feel sorry for you guys."

"We're just used to it," the woman said. She left.

"So . . . you live in California," said Salo. He took the seat beside the desk. A group drifted in and over to the glass-topped case.

"I grew up in Oakland. I went back after the accident."

She said this so easily, gliding on without a falter.

"You didn't . . . you mean you didn't graduate from Cornell?"

"Started over at Berkeley." She smiled her beautiful smile. "I love how you East Coast people do that whole Ivy League thing. I get this a lot. *What do you mean, you could have had a diploma from Cornell and you turned it down?* I was thrilled to be accepted there, but I would have gone to Berkeley if my parents hadn't persuaded me. Then, afterward, they were the ones who didn't want me to go back." She paused. "I sometimes think it was all harder on them than on me."

Salo wasn't surprised. The man's daughter had climbed into a ridiculous car with three white students, one of whom had sent the others hurtling into injury and death. And Salo had not even gone to the hospital to see her and the damage he'd caused, whatever it was. It had to have been terrible, but nothing alongside the damage he'd inflicted on the others.

"What," he began. "I mean, what were the . . . your . . . injuries? I can't remember."

She sighed. The topic seemed of little interest to her. "We don't have to talk about this. I want to hear about you! What are you up to? Married, I see! Do you have children?"

Our father looked down at his own left hand. He had come close to denying his children, not duplicitously, but because he'd genuinely forgotten them. "Yes. I have three children."

"Three! How old?"

He explained. It took so little time.

"My gosh, that's a lot to take on."

"I work for my family's company. Financial services."

She nodded. "Do you like it?"

"I . . ." The question didn't immediately compute. "Well, sure. And I started buying paintings, years ago. Nothing like this," he said apologetically. "I mean, they're very nice, but I'm just looking."

Stella burst out laughing. "Please! I'm not here to sell you art. These aren't even paintings, you know. All drawings. I think he's *much* more interesting than Darger, actually."

"He?" Salo asked.

He was a San Francisco draftsman named Achilles Rizzoli. He'd spent his work life in an architectural firm rendering office buildings. By night he'd conjured a fantasy city offering everything from matrimonial matchmaking to reincarnation. The city was weirdly beautiful, but the strangest thing about it was that its individual buildings were real people, transmogrified into architecture.

"Everyone he knew became a building," said Stella. "The thing is, he didn't know that many people. He was odd, very antisocial. And he never showed his work publicly except for one day a year. He put up a sign outside his apartment and charged people ten cents. Then most of those people ended up getting drawn as buildings. A little girl who lived on his street named Shirley became these towers he called *Shirley's Temple*. Another neighbor became a palazzo. And his mother was a cathedral."

"He must have been incredibly lonely," said Salo.

"Oh, he was."

Salo got up. For the next few minutes he walked around the room, looking. The pictures were all identically framed in pale wood, with a broad empty space around each image. The largest ones, the people-buildings, were fascinating; each had a grand title and a few sentences of praise, sometimes conveyed by or interspersed with puns, about the person who'd been remade into stucco or stone. *The Sayanpeau. The Kathredal. The Primal Glimpse at Forty*. There was a definite edge of sexual anxiety over a few of the drawings, too, notably the female ones.

"He was watching his neighbor's daughter playing," said Stella. He

turned to find her just behind him. "Her dress went up. She wasn't wearing underwear. This was how he dealt with the shock."

"Schizophrenic?" Salo heard himself ask.

"Interesting you should ask. Never diagnosed, and he held a job throughout his life. But it's not possible to say. I did show the work to a psychiatrist I know in Berkeley. He had a field day, gave me lots of reading on psychosis and manic depression, but declined to give me a diagnosis. Which is only right. There are some very off-kilter letters, and he wrote a massive novel that made no sense, which he couldn't get published. And there are hundreds of the smaller drawings, sketches and schematics for his imaginary city. I'd love to see all of this go to the same place, and stay together, but I don't think that's going to happen."

He nodded. "And you work for the dealer?"

"Oh no!" Stella said. "I'm a documentary filmmaker."

He looked at her. Her eyes were following two women as they moved swiftly past the displays. The women were dressed identically in black, with shaved heads.

The camera registered, then. She had placed it on her desk. It looked very different from the home-use versions Salo had occasionally used over the years, to videotape his children. More like the real thing.

She wanted to make a film about Rizzoli, Stella explained. That was why she'd come. To see people as they encountered the work, to find critics to interview. But the people and the critics were mainly downstairs, gaping at little girls.

"Rizzoli never left California, not once in his life. And of course he died with nothing, no heirs. All of the work was thrown away when his landlord cleaned out his apartment in San Francisco. And somebody, some total stranger, was walking past and saw all of this in a dumpster. And when he looked at it, it just blew his mind, so he took everything home with him and eventually brought it all to a dealer friend of mine in Berkeley. Sandro almost turned him away. He didn't think there was a market for a dead guy whose entire life's work ended up in a dumpster. But then this whole Outsider thing just kind of started to build momentum, so he had everything

framed and we drove it all across the country. I filmed some interviews yesterday. The *New Yorker* critic was here, and a few other dealers. But like I said, it's all about Darger at the moment."

Salo nodded. "Your guy should have thrown in a bit of male genitalia." It was remarkable how, without ever having seen a Darger, he felt entitled to an opinion. Well, that was the art world in essence. Outsider *and* Insider.

"Very sad men. Both of them. Very sad and very lonely men."

The collar of her shirt had slipped open, he saw. There was a bright pink scar across her clavicle.

Arm, foot, concussion, suture.

Clavicle. He remembered now. She had broken her clavicle. He had broken her clavicle.

When Sandro Barth returned, the two of them left, first for a bar on Ninth Avenue and then for Red Hook, where he walked her through his collection. She was amazed by it, by what he had done. She marveled at the triptych and recognized the Diebenkorn immediately. ("California artist," she said and shrugged.) She stood before the two Twomblys, hands on hips, silent. When he pointed to the large one and told her it was the first painting he had bought, she nodded. He didn't have to say more than that. They stayed for a couple of hours, then he took her back to her hotel and they had another drink in the lobby bar. The place was dark. They sat apart. She had never married, she said. She had wanted to have children, but she'd spent years filming a single mother in Oakland who was struggling to raise four kids, and she didn't think she could do that, or willfully put a child through it. The documentary, she told him, had won some awards and received some attention.

He went to find a phone booth in the lobby and called home, and our mother was actually pleased to learn that he had run into an old friend from college at the art show. He had lost touch with so many of his Cornell friends, his fraternity brothers. Even the couple, Michael and Dorothy, at whose wedding they'd met. She didn't ask for many details about his evening, but she told him she'd had a long talk with Harrison about his run-in with the head of school. Their son had agreed to stop tormenting Aaron

if they'd allow him to go to the Brooklyn Public Library on Remsen Street after school, and come home on his own. Salo nodded. But he wasn't paying attention.

He went back to the table, and Stella, and she told him more about her life and her world, the world of documentary film, which was slow-moving: grants and investment and red tape and eternally ongoing conversations. He nodded. The idea of an ongoing conversation with her was already blooming, uncomfortably, thrillingly. He hoped she couldn't tell, and she couldn't, or so she would say, afterward, and why would she lie to us about something so important?

Just after ten in the evening they shook hands and he leaned down to give her an awkward kiss on the cheek. Then he went home.

His own father, as Salo himself well knew, had for years carried on an arrangement with his executive assistant, a woman precisely as old and objectively as attractive as our grandmother, but single and childless and content to remain so. This person had lived in a tidy apartment on Madison Avenue and Sixty-Sixth, over a gourmet chocolate shop, and whenever Hermann was not at the office, or at home on Fifth Avenue, or at their weekend place in Rye, or somewhere else with his wife . . . well, that was where he was more likely than not to be, for years and years until the lady in question (known to our father as "Miss Martin, from the office") suffered a stroke in her tidy apartment and died alone at Lenox Hill Hospital. It was less an affair than a parallel marriage with different terms, and Salo had no idea what, if anything, his mother knew about it.

This was not that. This was not that, at all.

Our father, for one thing, was not a person given to tracking beautiful women as they walked down the street or gathered in front of the school, and there were many, many beautiful women around Walden, aerobicized in the '80s and increasingly yoga'ed or Pilate'd as the '90s got underway. Some of these women worked, in the parlance of the day, "outside the home"; others took care of their kids and more highly calibrated care of themselves. A few Walden moms were even famous—actresses and media figures—yet they made a good-faith effort to leave their outside lives at the door and be

informal and approachable within the school's social enclosure. Salo hardly ever gave any attention to these women. Not even the beautiful ones. Not even the *famously* beautiful ones. "Tell me her name again," he would ask Johanna as they made their way home after the fourth-grade play or all-school fundraising evening. "I know I've met her. She seems so familiar."

"She starred in that movie you liked, about the bank heist," our mother would say. "That's why she seems familiar."

Sometimes he told himself that their marriage worked because each of them ceded the authority of their respective spheres to the other. The fact that they didn't crowd each other or push their way into each other's daily affairs, that was a good thing. Wasn't it? And of course he valued the work our mother did, running the family so smoothly that he could spend his hours in Red Hook or fly to Europe to see a picture or attend an auction, just because he wanted to. From the beginning our father had addressed family life as a party of one, setting a schedule around his personal needs and responsibilities and interests, while she was a many-tentacled creature, staying on top of the vaccinations and tutoring (for Lewyn, who needed help in math) and vet appointments (while the dog was alive) and upkeep on the house (both houses) and oversight of her parents (because her mother was beginning to have some difficulty with language, and her father refused to accept this, and Debbie was so busy and Bobby was incapable of doing a single thing in aid of anyone who wasn't Bobby) and incidentally Salo's parents as well. (Hermann had fallen the previous spring, on the corner of Seventy-Seventh and Park, and the resulting hospital stay had left him with an invasive staph infection leading to endocarditis. He was home now, but much diminished and not all that fun to be around, not that he ever had been. Johanna visited at least once a week.)

So our father certainly understood that he was not what was now being called an "involved" or "attached" father, but naturally he felt responsible for his children, and he approved of them, in general. Sally was fractious but she also had some deep strength the others did not—that boded well for a world in which people were always, essentially, alone. Lewyn was easily wounded, but he had a reserve of human warmth that our father respected.

Harrison he never worried about for one moment. Harrison's dark days were right now, with the constraints of Walden upon him, but once he went out in the world he would proceed directly to wherever his true peers were congregating, and be as content with those people, in those places, as he was capable of being.

The triplets, by this point, had reached the precipice of Walden Upper, home of the legendary Walden creativity and scholarship (and drug experimentation and broadly supported sexual expression); beyond that, the vision of their departure for college began to shimmer in the distance. Neither of our parents was blasé about this symbolic finish line, but beyond that tiny point of agreement they saw things very differently. Even before that day at the Outsider Art Fair, our father had long been aware of a certain excitement in the way he thought about the children's departure, and what the transition might mean for his own future. Sometimes he thought of the houses he himself owned on Coffey Street, a few of them still with tenants, one empty. That appraiser hadn't been wrong about the neighborhood, exactly, but there had been certain intriguing signs in the years since his ill-advised purchase: artists taking over the old buildings, young couples repainting the wood-frame homes. There was a new restaurant on Van Brunt Street that was surprisingly good, not all that different from the expensive places in Brooklyn Heights (or even, for that matter, Manhattan). Sometimes, before he got back into his car at night, he walked down to the empty house at the end, his favorite of the properties. No one had lived in it since his purchase, but Salo had been inside a number of times and he had some recurring thoughts about a renovation: bathrooms, a kitchen, care for the cracked walls. There was income potential there, possibly, especially with the intrepid young people now exploring Brooklyn's nether regions. There was even some vague talk about a regular ferry service to and from Manhattan. But in the end it came to him that no one should live in this house but himself.

Johanna had no such daydreams about houses or apartments. Neither were there excited plans to work again, or go back to school, or even just enjoy herself once the day-to-day concerns of parenting came to an end.

Our mother, on the contrary, contemplated the future with deep and growing dread, and Salo had good reason to worry about how she'd navigate this treacherous passage to whatever came next. Her life recoiled, even as his sped toward an opening.

Stella went back to Oakland, where her life was. Of course she did. Salo, when he thought of her, which was often, had reason to be grateful she lived so far away. But when she came to the city he met her for dinner in some formal restaurant, the kind where people conducted business affairs, not personal ones. And they did have business to discuss, now that the Rizzoli paintings were safe in the collection of a single owner, an owner more than willing to make the works available to her for filming and study. She moved to secure funding from her previous partners: the Arts Council of California, the National Foundation for the Arts. Her project moved at the usual glacial pace, but it did move. Certainly, the film she envisioned was impacted by the public's unyielding interest in Henry Darger, the painter of little girls at war who, to no one's surprise, had become the shining star of the entire genre of Outsider Art, casting all other artists into corresponding shadow. Already there were books about Darger, and films about Darger, and innumerable magazine stories about Darger, and the works themselves were making their way around some of the country's most important art museums. No one seemed interested in a *different* backward, antisocial guy who'd left his life's work in a hopeless pile after his lonely death. It frustrated Salo but not Stella, who reminded him that documentary filmmaking was a long game, and any number of superb, even classic films had taken years of dogged stewardship and suffered many varieties of setbacks on their way to getting made. In the meantime, she had actually managed to find a couple of elderly San Franciscans who'd worked with the reclusive draftsman, and a neighbor who'd once stepped into his apartment on the day of his annual exhibition to the public. (And emerged moments later, mystified.)

Our father lived in torment. We understand this now. We also understand that he tried, for a time, to do what he thought was right—he wasn't Hermann Oppenheimer and Stella wasn't "Miss Martin from the office"—but also that this right thing was untenable. Twice a year, then more often. He always

took her to dinner in staid and well-lit places, and he sat as far away from her as he could, because he was afraid of what might happen. This was the person he'd run into at that strange art fair, he reminded our mother when he came home after their dinners. This was the old friend from college, he said, leaving out the detail of what he had done to her all those years ago. It was exhausting to pretend not to feel what he felt every moment they were together and every moment they were not together. He couldn't bear the thought of hurting her any more than he already had. He engaged in diversionary tactics: introductions to potential investors, meetings with curators, notably at the Museum of American Folk Art, who were already planning a major show for Darger (of course). He went back to the Outsider Art Fair with her each year. He even brought our mother out to dinner with Stella one January night when the kids were in eighth grade or ninth—Stella couldn't remember the year and none of us ever asked our mother—the three of them at Aquavit under the waterfall, carefully eating arctic char and talking about this woman's life in California and the movies she'd made and her current documentary subject, a strange and obscure artist from San Francisco who turned people into buildings.

"What a hard way to live," Johanna told Salo in the cab, going home. "Good for her."

It was the last kind thing she would ever say about Stella Western.

Salo, naturally, would have simply handed her the money for her film, but he knew she would never take it, not with their history, which was always between them even if they never spoke of it. The least our father could offer was access to the pictures themselves, to study them, to film them whenever she wanted, a few times to bring in experts to examine them. He had gone back to see Sandro Barth on the last day of that first Outsider Art Fair, intending only to buy one or two of the human buildings, but the Berkeley dealer was anxious to move on, perhaps to other corners of the Outsider market, perhaps to something a little more conventional. By the time their meeting ended later that evening (at one point it moved to the Gotham Bar and Grill), Salo Oppenheimer had purchased the contents of that corner booth two floors above the Henry Darger exhibit, and everything would be delivered

a few days later to the warehouse in Red Hook: those strange buildings-as-people and the schematics for Rizzoli's mythic city and the illustrated poems addressed to his dead mother and even the hand-drawn signs the artist had constructed to hang outside his apartment on that one day per year he allowed the public inside. All of it, comprising the entirety of the extant work of the very obscure (and likely to remain so) Achilles Rizzoli, would spend the next decade in an upstairs room of that former sugar refinery on Coffey Street, behind a closed door. And then it disappeared.

Chapter Seven

Warrior Girls

In which Sally Oppenheimer learns something new

Sally was the first of them to find out, and, for a long time, the only one who knew.

She was a newly minted teenager then, and not thinking about our father much, if at all, just as she wasn't thinking about our mother or our parents' marriage, all of which made her a very ordinary thirteen-year-old and, in that respect at least, entirely like her brothers.

Besides, she had other things on her mind.

Fifth grade had been the year of backyard Truth or Dare—a surprising number of Walden kids lived in brownstones, with backyards—and sixth grade had seen the first couples, breaking up and making up in the school corridors, sometimes with the help of intermediaries. By seventh grade there was open speculation about who had gone well beyond kissing, and one particular couple (granted, the boy was a ninth grader) was widely believed to have gone all the way. No boys seemed unduly interested in Sally, which was just as well since Sally was terrified one would be. Three years earlier, she had been so horribly captivated by one of her Pinecliffe coun-

selors, a sweet girl from Shaker Heights who attended Northwestern, that she'd informed her parents she wouldn't be returning to camp. After this, there had been a fallow period during which Sally just about persuaded herself that the counselor was an aberration, but then Lewyn mentioned that a girl from a popular TV show was actually in the Walden class behind them, and this had proved horribly true. It was obvious that Lewyn himself had a pathetic crush on this person, which only made things more stomach churning, and Sally did her best to defang her feelings by loudly and frequently making fun of her brother. It didn't help. The girl was so pretty, with long hair parted along a razor-straight line and falling nearly to her waist, and long legs toned from years of ballet. (According to *Sassy* magazine, she had first been spotted at the School of American Ballet by another girl's mom, who worked in casting.) Now, Sally saw this girl constantly: in every Walden corridor, in the middle school cafeteria, even in combined gym class, which was excruciating. She saw her in the mornings, on the sidewalk in front of Walden, with her mother. She even saw her one Saturday in Bloomingdale's as Johanna force-marched her around the second floor, desperately trying to bond. (The girl, by contrast, was with a couple of friends, carrying armloads of stuff to the dressing rooms.) Of course, Sally never once spoke to her. She didn't *want* to speak to her. But she didn't want Lewyn to speak to her, either.

One afternoon, as she was leaving Walden's signature Ethical Conflict Resolution class, a girl named Willa fell in with Sally and said the strangest thing. It was so strange that Sally actually had to ask her to repeat it, even though she didn't know Willa all that well and didn't much like the parts she did know.

"Sorry, *what*?"

"I *said*. I *saw*. Your *dad*."

Okay, Sally nodded dumbly. She was fighting the urge to roll her eyes. She had as little interest in her father as Willa likely had in her own.

"With his *girlfriend*."

This, undeniably, hit just as intended, and Sally was temporarily robbed

of her breath, her speech, and her wits, roughly in that order. More than anything else, the sentence failed to compute, and then, in a great cumulative clanking of pieces sliding into place, it did.

"So?" Sally managed, desperately trying for nonchalance.

"Well, if it was my dad, I'd want to know."

Ah, but it wouldn't be Willa's dad, would it? Willa's dad was a surgeon who was always flying off to war zones to fix the damaged hearts of poor children. He was perfect. He probably had his affairs safely on the other side of the world. (It was remarkable, Sally observed, that she had gone from ignorance to snark so quickly.)

She didn't ask for the rest, but she got it anyway: Willa and her mother and sisters had been coming out of Odeon into a rainstorm, and there were no cabs. Then: there one was, splashing to a stop right in front of the restaurant. Willa's mother waved at the driver and the girls huddled under one umbrella as they waited for the passengers to get out, which was when Willa had recognized him.

Not for one single second did Sally doubt that what her classmate had said was true, or that Willa had correctly interpreted what she'd seen. Willa and Sally (and, of course, Sally's brothers) had been classmates since kindergarten. Hadn't Willa seen Salo Oppenheimer at any number of parents' nights and play performances and holiday parties and Halloween observances? Hadn't Salo Oppenheimer picked her up at Willa's house on Tompkins Place, more than once? There had even, before Sally had decided Willa was a bit of a wuss, been the occasional sleepover at the house on the Esplanade, with her father in the kitchen the following morning. Of course Willa had recognized Sally's father, getting out of a cab and ducking through the rain into Odeon.

Willa had not, however, recognized the woman whose hand Sally's father was apparently holding.

"What makes you think I don't know about it?" she told Willa. Then she went to her last class of the day, fuming.

What really pissed her off, she later decided, was not that Salo had done this—to herself, to "the children," even to our mother—but the notion

that he might actually be making an effort with another person, which was something he hadn't ever done with any of the aforementioned people, not in Sally's own opinion. For a technically intact family (and intact families were not the norm at Walden; most people seemed to have steps and halves or a parent who had simply checked out) the Oppenheimers didn't really operate as a unit, and when they did things together they mainly did them for Johanna's sake. Yes, all five of them got dressed up to see *The Nutcracker* every year, because it was a family tradition. Yes, they walked over the bridge to Chinatown on Christmas Day and then went to see a movie, because that was what New York Jews did (if they weren't actually observing the holiday!). Yes, they celebrated the magical anniversary of the (scheduled) birth together on Martha's Vineyard. These were things the five Oppenheimers undertook together, but it didn't mean they had tangible intimacy with one another's lives, or (especially) that they actually liked one another. Sally's family was not given to warm gestures, reassurances, encouragements, deferrals. They were not one another's "biggest fans" or "persons." They didn't have one another's backs. They weren't, you know, *close,* and despite the tragic efforts of our mother, none of them ever tried to pretend they were.

Sally's father had never once, for example, held Sally's mother's hand anywhere, let alone in public. Not that Sally could recall.

That first night she found herself watching him attentively when he came home, which was, as usual, after the three of them and our mother ate dinner. He sat in the living room with Johanna as he usually did, speaking pleasantly to the kids as they passed through, reading his art magazines and looking through his catalogs. How had the eighth-grade social studies teacher liked Harrison's report on John Jay? Had Lewyn made up his mind about Androscoggin this summer? Was that a new shirt Sally was wearing?

Polite enough. Attentive enough. It was basically the way Salo had always behaved toward them, as if the fatherhood protocol had been explained to him by authorities, and he ceded to their expertise. Also, he was a benign sort of person, not at all a mean person. He'd probably never hurt anyone in his whole life.

And at the end of that evening, like any other evening, our mother and

father went up the stairs lined by those birthday photographs and closed the door of their bedroom. Sally might hear *David Letterman* as she went up to her own room or down to the kitchen, but she never heard them speaking to each other (or—God forbid—any other kind of interactive activity). They were a quiet couple. We were a quiet family, that was all.

Except, as is now apparent, even to those of us who wouldn't find out for years, that was obviously not all.

She began to pay closer attention. What, if anything, did he say about how he spent his time? And what, in particular, did he do with himself in the evenings?

"How come Dad never eats dinner with us?" she asked Johanna, once she'd worked up her nerve.

"He eats dinner with us," our mother said, which wasn't untrue, but it also wasn't very common. Maybe one night a week.

"Would Dad take me with him sometime to look at the galleries?" she asked.

"Oh Sally, I think he'd love that."

But for something he'd love, he never invited her, or either of the others.

"Dad," she finally said, "are you busy tomorrow night? I thought maybe we could do something. Go to a play or something."

But he had a work thing. He actually seemed genuinely sorry about it, too.

"What kind of work thing?"

"Just a dinner with some clients. They like Delmonico's. Have you ever been to Delmonico's?"

Of course she had never been to Delmonico's.

"Well! We should go," our father said. "It's like visiting the nineteenth century."

Sally, who had no great wish to visit the nineteenth century, just nodded.

One night, as he gathered up his catalogs at the end of the evening, an invitation fell out at her feet. He didn't notice, and she picked it up and looked at it before handing it back. It was for the opening of a show at the American Folk Art Museum, for an artist named Henry Darger. The front

of the invitation showed a line of little girls all tied together. Behind them was a row of men on horseback, each holding a flag.

"Who's Henry Darger?" she asked, handing it over.

"An Outsider Artist," her father said. "The most famous Outsider Artist, but not the only one."

Sally had no idea what that meant, but those little girls seemed like more of an issue. "This is kind of sick," she noted.

Salo actually smiled. "You're not wrong."

"They look like something he cut out from a magazine."

"Yes, I think he did that."

"And you're going to buy something from this guy?"

"No," our father said, a little too emphatically.

"But you want to meet this artist?"

Our father shook his head. "No, he won't be there. He's dead."

"Oh." This made even less sense to Sally, because when you went to these art openings, didn't you at least get to meet the artist? "So why would you want to go to this?"

"Well, you know, I'm always trying to learn something new."

That wasn't much of a why, but more to the point, it wasn't an "I'm not going," either. In a little less than three days, this museum was where our father intended to be, perhaps even with the woman Willa had seen getting out of the taxi.

Sally decided that she would be there, too.

The thing with the camp counselor might have been a classic lesbian childhood trope, but Sally was no Harriet the Spy. (She hadn't even liked that book, and following folks around to discover things about them and write it all down in her notebook? It seemed like a lot of trouble to go to, and also a little bit mean.) She viewed her upcoming mission not as a great adventure or some piece of an ongoing fact-finding mission, but as a likely unpleasant task that she just needed to perform, and not for anyone's edification but her own. Pretty much the only pleasurable element of her plan was the fact that she would be withholding information about it from her brothers, and as a result she might conceivably know something they did not

know when it was over. For that reason alone, she hoped the woman would be there, and that she'd be able to get a good look at her for subsequent analysis.

On the day in question she called her mother from a pay phone to say that she and a few friends were heading to Manhattan to see *Clueless,* after which one of the dads would be bringing them all home in a cab. Then she went straight to Lincoln Center and lurked, finding the American Folk Art Museum right beside the Latter-Day Saints visitors' center. The museum was closed to set up for that night's big event, so she couldn't go inside to scout out a place not to be seen, but she did go into the gift shop where there were endless postcards of quilts and weathervanes and two apparently new and very expensive coffee table books all about Henry Darger, the "Outsider Artist" of the moment. Sally, seeing more of the man's work, was thoroughly mystified by the weird simplicity of those cut-out girls and cartoony backgrounds, often featured in states of pain or degradation. Just looking at it gave her a funny feeling, and not a pleasant one, but she kept turning the pages: girls being throttled, girls being hung, girls being stabbed. At least the illustration on our father's invitation had merely showed them tied together. She wondered if he knew about the rest of it.

When they closed the gift shop she went to get herself a falafel, and ate it across the street from the New York State Theater, watching the dancers duck-walk to the stage door. Then she went into the Library for the Performing Arts, back behind the opera house, and changed into a simple black dress and a pair of black boots with a bit of a heel. (Even at thirteen, Sally was a New York Woman. She knew how to wear black.) She also put her hair up in a bun, like those dancers going in the stage door. She wasn't in disguise, exactly, but she knew she didn't look like her usual self, the one who attended Walden with her brothers and (official version) hadn't liked summer camp in Maine. The way she looked, it was entirely possible that, even if our father happened to see her, he might very well not recognize her. Not that she intended to be seen.

She'd been worrying about a guard or someone checking tickets, but there was nothing like that, only a woman who wanted to take her coat and

a man offering wine and water. Sally darted deep into the galleries, searching for places where she could look at others without being looked at herself, but nobody seemed to be looking at anything but the pictures. They were huge and bright and on all of the walls, but also suspended in the middle of the rooms: long and uncoiled scrolls of paper, some of them painted on both sides; those little girls, naked or with butterfly wings, armed and dangerous against orange or seafoam skies, or spurting blood on the battlefields. She tried to avert her eyes from them as she moved, searching for Salo Oppenheimer's tall and angular shape, but when she looked up it was into the face of an agonized girl being bayonetted by a grim, almost bored-looking man, or some other beautiful outrage. No one had spoken to her, not since the man with the tray of wine and water glasses. No one seemed to regard her with any interest, let alone suspicion. Perhaps the presence of so many tormented children detracted from one not-quite child making a creditable attempt to look even older than she was, or perhaps Sally really had succeeded in camouflaging herself at a New York art event in the year 1995. She nearly felt invisible as she completed her circuit of the rooms.

Just as she returned to the lobby in search of a safe place to watch the door, two things of immense significance happened, almost simultaneously. The first was that Sally found herself immobilized by the exposed back of a woman who happened to be standing a few feet in front of her, near one of the long double-sided panels. This back, narrow but muscled, delineated by a visible spine, warm brown in color, was on display between the slim white straps of a linen dress all the way down to where it curved into hidden places, and its impact on Sally was immediate. She felt this not just in the form of conscious admiration, but in a breathlessness and a bolt of weakness, and, perhaps most distressing of all, in the sharp, hollow feeling between her legs, so powerful and so impossible to dismiss that it mocked every one of her efforts to deny the obvious. Before her eyes, as the woman that back belonged to turned to the person on her right and then to the person on her left, alternately speaking and nodding in agreement, that warm back tensed and relaxed, flexed and straightened. The woman had long dreadlocks, but they had been swept aside and over her left shoulder,

obscuring her neck. The white dress was long, but not so long that Sally could not see her calves and lovely ankles. Those ankles confused her. She could not understand why they seemed to matter so much.

Anyway, that was the first thing.

The second thing followed so closely on the first that Sally did not immediately separate them, especially since, in a wave of bonus confusion, there was a certain sensory overlap. That sharp, hollow feeling where her two legs met was moving decisively into a related but distinct sensation, less sharp than dull, less hollow than unarguably . . . moist. Sally had a sudden powerful and unhappy conviction of what it might signify.

She turned and made her way to the bathrooms beside the gift shop, went in and took the farthest stall, and there, with trepidation, she reached under her black dress and pulled down her underpants.

Oh. Naturally.

For fuck's sake.

A year or so earlier, when she'd gotten her period for the first time (at school, between classes, and while wearing very unfortunate white jeans), there had been no rush of delight at having achieved, however misattributed the term, *womanhood*. In fact, Sally had been dreading the great milestone, and was actually enraged at the brown stain on her underpants. That she'd also been completely unprepared, from a practical standpoint, when the great day arrived, was totally her bad, since Walden had been drilling down hard on health and sexuality for years by that point and many of the girls in her class had already jumped from one side of the roster to the other, often broadcasting the fact to their classmates.

Sally had not been one of those eager for public transition. She had not been eager for transition at all. She had no great need to bleed into her underpants every month (a prospect that seemed, at the very least, totally gross) and no desire to be any closer to the awesome prospect of motherhood or, for that matter, sex. (Sex was a thing she'd been trying hard not to think about.) She was generally resentful about the extra burden she would now have to shoulder, and had a particular resentment for the kind of sacred mother-daughter sharing that was a standard scene of Young Adult fiction:

Johanna, who had already burdened her with words about how important this was, and already asked, on more than one occasion, whether there had been any sign of Sally's period. (Sign? What kind of a sign would that be? Surely it had either materialized or it hadn't!) In response to these queries, Sally had issued a silent plea—to whom she didn't know—for more time. More months, another year . . . maybe never? And indeed, at twelve-going-on-thirteen, she'd been one of the last girls in her grade to reach the momentous milestone. So yes, she'd had a decent run, but you couldn't stay lucky forever.

It had come twice since that first time: sporadic, irregular, abbreviated. This was the third time, and once again, of course, she was totally unprepared.

Women were coming into the bathroom now, but there were plenty of stalls. Sally stayed where she was, motionless and silent, trying to play out the various options open to her. The tampon dispenser she'd noted on her way in, beside the door, was useless to her (this being a transition she still hadn't made), but she obviously couldn't do nothing, and another drone of pain was even now surging through her lower abdomen. That pain was a sharp reminder of how deeply unfair this all was. Lewyn and Harrison would never hunch over a toilet seat in the name of procreation, just as they would never be called upon to waddle around with a bloody pad inside their underpants, or shove cotton up their revolting penises. (She assumed they were still revolting. She hadn't actually seen them for years.) All for the privilege of that *greatly multiplied sorrow* in the *bringing forth of children*!

Resigned, she took a fistful of paper from the dispenser, rolled it around her hand and inserted it between her legs, then she pulled up her underpants around it. It felt absurd, like wearing a diaper, but at least her dress was loose. At least it wasn't white, like her jeans that first time, at school. Like the dress that woman had been wearing out there in the lobby.

The memory of that woman's back, its descending spine, momentarily displaced her discomfort and resentment.

She flushed the toilet and opened the door of her stall.

And there, like something preordained, like something totemic, was that very back, contained by those same white linen straps, inclining forward over one of the sinks, only this time the dreadlocks of its wearer were tumbling down to the shoulder blades. Sally stopped where she was, stupidly, in the open door of the stall, just as the woman straightened up with a damp paper towel in her hand and began to wipe the skin under her eyes. She looked up into the mirror and Sally couldn't look away. Apparently, she couldn't keep her mouth shut, either.

"Hi," she heard herself say.

The woman looked into the mirror, into Sally's eyes, and Sally felt again that terrible sensation, less sharp than dull, less hollow than . . .

"Hi yourself," the woman said. Then she stopped dabbing her face and looked again. "You okay, hon?"

Sally, in a perfectly rational response to this question, burst into tears.

"Uh-oh," the woman said. And before Sally could stop her—and she totally, totally would have stopped her—this person had taken three steps in her direction and was giving Sally Oppenheimer possibly the most encompassing and terrifying hug of her entire life.

"You're okay. You're okay," the woman said, as if this were an established fact. Her embrace was horrifying but also horrifyingly not-unpleasant. She stepped back out of the woman's arms, and at that moment the door opened and two other women entered, parting like people in a square dance around Sally and the woman with the beautiful back, and slipping into the stalls on either side.

"C'mere," she said. She meant the little sitting area beyond the sinks: two armchairs and a low table, beneath a framed poster for a show on ship figureheads. Sally sat, uncomfortably crossing her legs over the wedge and trying not to look at the front of that white dress, which, while not nearly as low as the back, was pretty low. The woman had a scar, bright pink, at her collarbone. Sally stared at it.

"Do you want me to get someone for you?"

Sally shook her head, no. Who was there to summon: her father, *his girlfriend*?

"No, that's okay. I came on my own."

"Oh? Just had to see those Dargers?"

"No, no. I mean, well, yeah." Her voice shook. She was horrified by the drivel coming out of her mouth, and also by the tears. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried. And to cry here? In the women's room at the Museum of American Folk Art? In the midst of her super-brave mission to catch her father in a nefarious act?

"Like moths to a flame," the woman said, ruefully. "Like there's no other Outsider Artist on the planet."

"What?" said Sally, who was remembering that her father had used this exact term.

"I mean, not that he wasn't a genius, of a kind. Of course he was. And he had an awful life. But I mean, those girls . . ."

"Oh, yeah." Sally crossed her legs the other way. The paper in her underpants felt massive, like a rolled-up *New York Times*. "I mean, they're kind of crazy, but they're also kind of beautiful."

"And that's what upset you? The pictures?"

The pictures? The pictures might be both strange and strangely beautiful, but they were just pictures. Whatever weird thing her father had about pictures, she didn't have it. Nothing against a pretty painting or photograph, or even, she supposed, a ship figurehead, but she wasn't ever going to prostrate herself before a work of art.

"I don't even like art," she heard herself say, and rather forcefully. "My father collects paintings. He's always running around after them and fawning over them and spending probably a lot of money to buy them, and then he just hides them away someplace in Brooklyn and goes to look at them on his own. I've never even been there."

It was the most critical thing she had ever said about Salo, at least to another person, and now she was saying it to a total stranger? It made no sense, and of course there was now a barely suppressed look of shock on the woman's face, even if she was trying to cover it up by smiling, as if what Sally had just said were witty or hilarious. Then she said, "My name is Stella. What's your name?"

But Sally didn't want to say her name. She just wanted to keep on doing what she was doing, which was looking into the woman's—Stella's—smile, and at the pink scar at her collarbone, and the long coiling dreadlocks down that lovely back. But she forced her gaze away.

"I'm so sorry," Sally said. "You know, I think you're right about those girls. I guess I didn't realize how upset I was. I'm just going to wash my face." She forced herself to her feet, the wedge shifting uncomfortably in her underpants. She might have missed our father's arrival by now, which meant at the very least that she'd have to repeat her reconnaissance mission around the galleries but which also might mean, if she was particularly unlucky, that Salo was standing near the door to the women's room with his girlfriend, and that there'd be no way to not be seen by him when she tore herself away and went out there.

"Well, okay," the woman said. "If you're all right."

"Of course I'm all right," Sally said. Even to herself she sounded borderline insulted. "I mean, thank you, I appreciate your concern."

Stella nodded, and to Sally's great relief she turned without another word and left the bathroom, and Sally thought what a kindness it would be to never have to see this woman's face (or her back) again for the rest of her life, although she would never forget the humiliation and mystery of this encounter, not ever, even without what happened next.

She went back into a stall and (unnecessarily) switched out the wedge of rolled-up toilet paper, and then, her face still flushed with embarrassment but at least newly washed, she left the bathroom herself. Her father wasn't there, just outside the door, and he wasn't there in the lobby, or in the main gallery, but in the farthest corner of the farthest room from the entrance she encountered, again, the unmistakable contours of that lovely dark back, Stella's back, and the hand on that back—intimate, unhurried, and, even from where she stood, across the room, obviously full of love—was instantly recognizable to Sally, and would have been even without the utterly known body attached to it.

She stood for a long moment watching the two of them, watching the

space between their bodies narrow and widen and narrow again as they spoke to each other with unmistakable familiarity and ease, not caring that either or both of them might at any moment turn and notice her. She was as appalled at herself as she was at Salo. She was enraged that his was the hand permitted to touch this woman's back (and, Sally now inferred, every other part of her), which was awful and unfair, and it made her feel sick and it made her feel deeply angry and it made her hate our father, which had never been true before that night but which was going to be true after it, and also she hated the woman, Stella, with her beautiful smile and coiling dreadlocks and kindness. Sally had to fight an urge to rush at them through the crowds and pound them with her newly washed fists, even as she also wanted to run out onto Columbus Avenue and far away from them, and all the others who dressed up to drink wine and look at repellant—but also undeniably beautiful—scenes of tortured children. Either act would have served to bring this ill-judged and horrendously successful expedition—successful because she'd actually done what she'd gone there to do, and learned the thing she'd gone there to learn—to the same pathetic conclusion, but it still took Sally ages to actually turn away from them and go.

Chapter Eight

The Last of the Oppenheimers

In which Johanna Oppenheimer makes a purchase and pays a bill

When the kids began ninth grade, Harrison joined the swim team, mainly because he liked the fact that when he had his head underwater people didn't talk to him. Lewyn retreated to his room, where he indulged in his hopeless crush on the movie star a year behind them at Walden. Sally, who declined to share her secrets with either of her brothers, of course, was the only one with a seminormal social life, and this she weaponized to keep herself out of the house and away from the other Oppenheimers, as much as possible.

What that meant, in practical terms, was away from her mother. Salo had always been thin on the ground when it came to family time, but he had made himself even more scarce, arriving home on a typical weeknight later than ever, and nearly always after the kids had bolted themselves inside their rooms. He could still be seen in the morning, cooking his own eggs, making coffee for his wife and even his children, asking the kind of terribly interested questions all three of them had come to know and deflect. As for the triplets themselves, fourteen years of honest and even benign lack of affinity had naturally solidified into unmistakable avoidance. Truly, all three

of them were, in the idiom of the day and of their generation, not just over it but SO over it.

Still, Johanna soldiered on, hopeless forays across the dinner table.

"So, anything interesting happen today?"

Grunts and downcast eyes.

"Anything *not* interesting?"

Silence again, this time with rolling of the eyes.

"You have a lot of homework?"

Nods, at least. But nods unaccompanied by noncompulsory speech.

"I went to see Grandpa Hermann today. He asked if you're going back to camp next summer."

She meant Harrison. Harrison did not bother to answer. His mother knew that he would not be returning to Androscoggin.

"I told him about the program at Hopkins. I don't think he understood why you'd give up Maine for Baltimore."

"Gotta go," said Harrison. "History paper."

That was hard, but ordinary. Harrison had been holding her at bay for years.

"Me, too," said his sister.

That was harder. She could still remember snuggling in bed with Sally on weekend mornings, reading books and watching TV.

"Me, too," said Lewyn.

That was when she knew it was over.

Her family. The salve to her husband's mortal wound and the great work of her own life; the *art* of her life, she might even have said. Those birthday photographs running up the staircase wall: three babies, three toddlers, three children, three young people. Three young people wild to leave.

Johanna spent a lot of energy trying not to think about this. Thinking about this made her take to her bed for long, agonizing days during which she sometimes tried to trick herself into being happy. It was a fine, fine thing that her children were growing up! Children were supposed to grow up, and then they were supposed to go away! It's what you wanted them to do.

Except that her departing children would leave nothing behind.

And she did mean nothing.

She was not, of course, the first woman to forgo the satisfactions of work "outside the home," and she would not be the first mother to feel the sharp emptiness of abandonment, the fog of purposelessness, when her children departed for their own lives. Probably, there were support groups out there, full of people feeling precisely what she was feeling and fording the exact same dangerous waters, but Johanna had never been much of a group person. Actually, now that she was really considering her situation, she hadn't been all that much of a one-on-one person, either.

She was the triplets' mother, which was exactly what she'd sought to be. And lest she forget, it had taken an act of will—many acts of will—to make that happen. Making that happen had been the signature achievement of her existence.

And here it was, nearly at an end, and also—finally, even she was forced to admit—some form of a failure.

Not because the three of them looked incapable of negotiating the world of adulthood, or were not good people. Not because they were hooked on drugs, had criminal records, or ran away from home to spend wanton nights at raves or in Tompkins Square Park. None of the three had so much as lifted a ChapStick from a corner bodega or failed a class, let alone gotten a girl pregnant (or gotten pregnant) or been caught selling a bag of weed (real or faux) like her own brother. Not one of them had even cursed at our parents or failed to present himself or herself for the rare command appearances in the combined Hirsch/Oppenheimer calendar: Hermann and Selda's anniversary, Johanna's mother's birthday dinners (increasingly sad as she retreated into dementia), the Seder hosted by Debbie and Bruce. Harrison, Lewyn, and Sally were normal young people in just about every obvious way, well educated (despite what even she recognized as Walden's worst tendencies), globally aware, and not even particularly acquisitive, despite our astonishing privilege. Individually they were a credit to themselves, if not to her.

But as a family, they were still a failure.

And when they left, which was now on the not-so-distant horizon, they would not come back. They would keep on going.

She remembered something she had once read in the memoir of a famous writer. After he left home for college, he never went back to visit, or even called his mother and father. Why not? *He hadn't known he was supposed to.*

It was her greatest fear, and the anticipation of it her greatest pain. Still, it didn't occur to her that there was anything to be done about it, anything she hadn't already tried, and not even the one thing that would seem so obvious to all of us, in retrospect, and which might have been done at any point while we were growing up, not left to its absurdly latter-day implementation. That, not one of us would understand.

One spring morning in the triplets' eleventh-grade year, our mother went to a parent meeting in the gym on the top floor of the school, where at least a hundred chairs had been set up. This was their introduction to Walden's college counselors: two young people hired from their first admissions jobs at Harvard and Princeton and the department head, a woman named Fran. Fran had been at Walden so long she actually remembered a time before the arrival of the first helicopter parent, a time of "well-rounded" students each submitting five or six handwritten applications (one to a safety school that truly was a safety school). She was a tall and lean woman with a long gray braid, artfully arranged over her shoulder. She stood before the crowd with a beatific smile.

That didn't last long.

The purpose of this meeting, Fran explained, was to make a preemptive plea for calm before the parents hurled themselves, lemming-like, over the cliff of madness.

Maybe it was supposed to get a laugh. It didn't. Even at Walden, that lemming had bolted.

Colleges loved Walden students, said Fran to her palpably tense audience. They always had! Walden students were independent thinkers, intellectually robust and thrillingly creative. Walden students had been admitted to colleges and universities all over the world, some of them with famous names, oth-

ers less well-known but perfectly suited to that individual applicant. Every Walden student would receive the focused guidance of one of the three college counselors, and individual meetings would commence at precisely the right time, which was now, in the spring of the students' junior year, when a holistic approach to finding the right fit for each young person would be applied. Every Walden student would receive *personal attention* and *custom support*. Every Walden student would be treated as the *unique and capable young adult* he or she was. And when it was all over, every Walden student would be admitted to a college that would eminently fulfill his or her needs. That was a promise she felt very comfortable making!

Any questions?

In a flash, those laid-back parents who had chosen Walden over Brearley, Walden over Dalton, Walden over Riverdale, and Walden over Collegiate transformed into obsessive, ruthless, competitive despots.

Won't it hurt our kids that Walden doesn't grade?

What about class rank? How was an admissions officer supposed to tell if a student was at the top of his or her class or the bottom?

Would transcripts indicate the difference between, say, an advanced seminar and a tie-dye-for-credit course?

Were the college counselors going to persuade certain kids not to apply to certain colleges? And if so, how did they plan to justify that?

"If my wife and I went to Harvard, does our daughter have an advantage there?"

(Just pure nastiness, for its own sake, this particular father being a well-known asshole.)

Fran, of course, had been here before, and "here" was getting worse with every passing year. She reiterated her points, reissued her Zen, and recommended that parents read a recently published book that she herself had been learning a great deal from: *Colleges That Change Lives*. "If you look beyond the name-brand schools there is so much out there! Even I didn't know some of these places! The educational landscape is so *varied and fascinating*! I really look forward to *meeting you,* and *working with your children*!"

Johanna left with the others, spilling out onto Joralemon Street in a scrum

of frantic people. Many of these mothers and fathers had been together since their children started pre-K; now, suddenly, they were at the opening bell of a steeplechase, and everyone knew far too much about everyone else. Tommy Belkow was a piano prodigy. Lizzie Wynn had spent the previous summer in China doing a language immersion, and her older sister was at Princeton. Julia Wu was straight-up brilliant, and she had already taken the SAT. Twice. Both of Carla Leavitt's parents—as her father had just reminded over a hundred truly disgusted people—had attended Harvard.

"Poor you," Nancy Farrell said, behind her. "You've got three!"

She said this as if it was news to Johanna.

"Maybe that'll keep me from getting too stressed out about any one of them."

"I'd be out of my mind. I still haven't recovered from Daisy."

Daisy was a sophomore at Brown, where Nancy herself had gone to college.

"I suppose Harrison's going to want to apply to Yale or Harvard."

Johanna had no idea whether Harrison was going to want to apply to Yale or Harvard. Even if he was already thinking about college—and he was the only one of the three who conceivably was—he was hardly confiding in her.

"Wherever he wants to apply is fine."

That felt like a pretty strong statement to Johanna, but obviously not strong enough.

"Where did Salo go? Remind me."

"Cornell."

"Oh! Well, I bet Cornell would take them all."

Johanna looked at her.

"Sammy says he doesn't want to go to Brown but I told him he needs to apply. At least have the option."

"I have to go," Johanna said. She didn't, and she was surprised to hear herself say it.

"Oh. Okay. Where you off to?"

"Bookstore." Another surprise. "I have to get some books."

Nancy laughed. "Well, that would be the place for it. Hey." She leaned close to Johanna's ear. "Carla Leavitt's dad. What a tool."

Johanna nodded.

She took off down Clinton Street, leaving the scrum behind. It was a bright spring day, and she couldn't quite believe that they were really here, all five of them. She'd been grateful for the parents' meeting, the excuse it gave her to walk to school behind the kids this morning, but the day still stretched before her, a long straight line to sleep, itself a preamble to waking again with this same terrible feeling of not one wonderful thing to look forward to in the years ahead. Then, as she turned down Court Street, she found herself circling that thoughtless comment of Nancy's, about all of her children going off to college together, at Cornell. Neither she nor any of the children had actually ever been to Cornell. Salo had never been able to love the place—how could he, after what had happened there?—so there had been no class reunions with the family in tow, no football weekends or visits to show the kids where he had spent four years of his life. Still, as Johanna walked, she found herself consumed by a powerful reverie about the three of them, together at Cornell, and somehow finding one another there, at last sitting together in class, meeting for dinners, even studying in one another's rooms. Could that happen? Had it only, ever, been a question of their leaving home, leaving herself and Salo, to find what had been so *not there* among them all these years? If it were possible, even if it left her out, she would still rejoice at the thought of it: all three of her children, reconciled at last over whatever had driven them so relentlessly apart. Calling home to report that Harrison and Lewyn were joining the same fraternity, or Sally's room was the place they gathered to study, or Lewyn had found a great restaurant in town and they were meeting there for dinner every Sunday night. When she and Salo went up for Parents' Weekends they would find the children waiting, arms around one another and full of love, and at last, at last, the five of them would be that thing she had given herself over to making, and which was *not* a failure.

But then it struck her that Harrison would never, under any circumstances, even apply to a college his brother and sister were applying to. So that fantasy crashed to the pavement.

All New Yorkers walk quickly, even as they daydream, and it took only a few minutes for Johanna to reach BookCourt. Inside, the usual Brooklyn literati, actual and wannabe, davened among the volumes. For a moment she forgot the specific books she had come here to buy; then, as another Walden parent from the eleventh-grade meeting came into the store and made for the SAT prep volumes, she remembered, and followed.

She didn't know this guy, though they nodded to each other. His child—daughter, Johanna thought—had been a ninth-grade arrival at Walden, and by ninth grade even the most socially active among the parents were tired of meeting new moms and dads. He was holding two thick workbooks and seemed to be evaluating them on the basis of weight. She stepped beside him and began to pick her way down the shelf. *The Yale Daily News Guide to the Colleges*. *Getting In. 100 Winning College Essays*. Then she noticed a small paperback at eye level. *Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools You Should Know About Even if You're Not a Straight-A Student.*

"Oh, that's the book she mentioned," said the Walden dad.

Johanna looked up. "Yes, I guess so. Do you want it?"

He smirked. "No. My daughter's Stanford or bust."

Well, I hope for her sake it isn't bust, Johanna nearly said.

She opened the book and read her way down the table of contents. Forty schools, as promised, and, as Fran had mentioned, far from "name brand." In fact, Johanna hadn't heard of any of them: Whitman, Grinnell, Roarke, Reed, Hendrix.

"Happy reading," said her fellow Walden parent. He took his prep books over to the counter. Johanna looked around for a chair.

The college section was adjacent to the children's area, an open space with a bright, multicolored rug and a number of fabric-covered cubes for small people to sit on. There were toys underfoot, and a couple of moms were down there with toddlers on their laps, turning the pages of board books and talking over their children's heads, a maneuver that Johanna remembered as having been all but impossible for her with three kids. These two towheaded children—one with a haircut straight out of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and a pair of Boo Radley overalls to match—were perfect exemplars of the new

Brooklyn, prematurely literate kids with names like Otis and Mabel and parents who made jewelry or kombucha, and still somehow lived in gleaming brownstones on the side streets of Cobble Hill and the Heights. She wondered what it would be like to be starting now, in an obvious renaissance of this sturdy borough, with its new rules and rituals and so much more of everything to fight over. Then a new child walked over to the rug and got down on the floor and began, on his own, to read.

It was Lewyn, though obviously not Lewyn. It was Lewyn as he had been, at two or two and a half: compact, intense, with sharp features and a frown, and curly brown hair cut close to his head, though not as close as this child's. That was a difference. Another difference, obviously, was that this child was African American. (Or perhaps just plain African? There were entire neighborhoods of new immigrants in Brooklyn, though not necessarily *this* particular neighborhood.) But apart from that: Lewyn. Two-year-old Lewyn, reconstituted with taupe-colored skin and reading a book that surely was too advanced for him (and would certainly have been far too advanced for two-year-old Lewyn, the last of her children to read).

Our mother stopped looking for a chair. She stepped closer to the children. One of the moms looked up at her, then went back to her conversation. Johanna was gripping the book, *Colleges That Change Lives,* in her right hand. She felt her left hand want to reach out and she stopped it, of course, but she could not stop her eyes from swallowing him whole. Lewyn. At that moment a half mile away in some discussion group or eleventh-grade language lab, but also here and transmogrified into an alternate version of his earlier self. She understood that it was strange. She could not understand why it bothered her so much.

Then a slender woman stepped between Johanna and the boy, and scooped him up onto her hip, and ran out of the store.

Even in the blur of that instant—red dress, bare brown leg, small head, dreadlocks—our mother understood it all. This child who was not her son Lewyn; his mother, that fleeing woman, was Stella Western, and his father was our father, Salo Oppenheimer.

Johanna stumbled out onto the sidewalk and looked around, still with

the paperback book in her hand. She turned first to the right, back in the direction of the Walden School, and saw nothing. She turned to the left and saw Stella Western, far away on the next block and moving fast: a tiny, narrow woman with an obviously protesting small boy jolting along on her hip. The boy was also still holding his book. Johanna felt sick. She watched them go. It would not be possible to catch up with them. Why, for what reason, would she want to catch up? What could there possibly be to say?

She went back inside and numbly paid for her book. *Colleges That Change Lives.*

Then she walked home, down the same streets that had enclosed her life as a mother and as a wife. It was all so ridiculous, the effort she had put into everything, the fiction she had made for herself to live inside. She thought of how hard she must have worked to not know this obvious thing, all the way back to that night Salo had brought her to dinner to meet this old friend from Cornell. The woman had been lively and good-natured. She'd asked Johanna about the children. She'd spoken about the documentary she wanted to make, about some artist who turned people into buildings, and our mother had told herself, afterward, *Well, that was a harmless evening.* Never thought of again, at least not by her. Never mentioned between them again. And yet, Stella Western—her name retained in some overly efficient cerebral locker room inside our mother's head—had slipped from that unremarkable restaurant meal into some netherworld of her husband's life, and implanted herself. All those hours in Coney Island or wherever it was. With the *art.* All of her own compensation, perhaps, for our father's suffering. And now, here was an actual human child with her own child's face and, for all she knew, an equal claim to Salo's time, name, and everything else, which was not fair, not after she had wound her own life around him, like a suture.

This was the flaw in making a bargain with yourself. There is no one else there to agree to the terms.

Her feet were dragging. She fought the urge to stop, to collapse on any one of the famously lovely Brooklyn stoops, where happy families passed warm afternoons together on the weekends, something she and her husband

and her children had never done, not once. And Stella Western, who at the time of their pleasant dinner supposedly lived somewhere in the Bay Area, had looked very much at home on Court Street, rushing past the shops and restaurants that Johanna and her family had been walking past if not patronizing for years. *Their* streets. *Their* shops and restaurants. *Their* neighborhood. *Their* family.

I have given too much, our mother thought. And she had asked far, far too little in return.

Back at the house, and safely alone, she sat down at her desk just off the "gourmet kitchen" and began to cry. This built-in spot was a part of the design their architect had once identified as the "menu planning area," though our mother was no more a planner of menus than she had been a creator of gourmet meals. Over time the location had acquired the less fanciful purpose of appointment arranging and bill paying, and performing all the aspects of family maintenance that she did in fact perform: school trip forms, passport renewals, the pathetic paperwork of being a mother, wife, and person. From this desk and the Power Macintosh that occupied most of its surface, Johanna had overseen the workmen and vendors who made it possible for them to drop in on the Vineyard house and find the pipes running clear and the rooms free of invasive species. She had kept track of everyone's health insurance claims. She had made sure Sally had leotards for gymnastics and Harrison the next size of Suzuki violin, and Lewyn the math tutor he'd needed in middle school. She had scheduled the parent-teacher conferences and squabbled with her brother and sister over the care of their parents in New Jersey. She had managed, in other words, that deflated charade that had been the Oppenheimer family, or at least *her* Oppenheimer family, the one now ticking down to its failed and sad conclusion, after which, she supposed, her husband intended to move on with Stella Western and the boy who looked like Lewyn. All three of her own kids mad to leave, and her husband ready to step directly into his next Oppenheimer family, already in progress, perhaps close by, leaving her alone in this enormous, sad place with its astonishing views of the harbor and lower Manhattan. What more could she have done? What sacrifice had she not made, or effort not spent,

in the single-minded pursuit of her husband's remission, the goal she had understood them to share, beyond all others? Something, obviously. But what?

It wasn't fair. It so wasn't fair.

For a miserable half hour more she wept, with no one to see her in that house of five full-time occupants (plus a part-time housekeeper not due till four in the afternoon). For once the emptiness of the rooms felt like a gift.

There was a stack of invoices on the bit of desk not occupied by the computer, things that had come in over the past few days. The caretaker and oil company bills from the Vineyard, the tuition for CTY, for which Harrison would be forsaking Androscoggin this coming summer. And on top, by providence—if you believed in that, which Johanna, long after this day, would claim she did—the annual bill from Horizon Cryobank of Torrington, Connecticut, wherein the last of her embryos resided in liquid nitrogen. Horizon Cryobank had changed names and owners a couple of times, and once, even, its location, since that day in 1981 when the blastocysts that would be Harrison, Sally, and Lewyn had been placed inside a deeply pessimistic (and frankly resigned to failure) Johanna Oppenheimer. That day, indeed, it had been *this* sequestered embryo, and not the ones painfully inserted into her own uterus, on which she had pinned her ultimate hopes; when the transfer failed, as all previous attempts had failed, *this* was the embryo intended for somebody else's *competent* womb, where it would—if she was very, very lucky—turn into a single child around whom she and Salo would make their longed-for family. But then Loretta, the Irish sonographer, had prayed a rosary for them, and lo: the miracle of the triplets had upended everything. And this sequestered child, the one who was supposed to be born, but who had never been born, had become—if not a forgotten thing, then a thing only thought of by one person (herself), and that only once a year, when she paid this very bill. She had never told the children. What would be the point? And for Salo the cloistered embryo had simply ceased to exist once his triplets came thumping into the world through Loretta's magic wand.

But they hadn't been triplets, really, it occurred to her now.

Torrington, Connecticut. Johanna wasn't even sure where that was, nor could she remember the name the storage facility had previously used, before being bought by a company that apparently managed many such facilities across the country. Cryo-Gen? Reproduction Options? Over the years there had been occasional notifications of these changes, all with assurances of the great care being taken and the profound understanding of responsibility, along with the annual rate increases. Johanna was a busy mother, and not sentimental about all of this technology. If anything, she regarded the annual bill as a kind of superstitious rite to be observed, and the embryo itself an inanimate object magically linked to her precious sons and daughter, but it never went further than that. It was a speck in liquid ice in a building somewhere in Connecticut. It was not even a thing in itself, and certainly not a person with any claim on her at all, let alone a claim even remotely comparable to that of her *actual* children.

And yet, the decision to send this one of the four into such an artificial abyss: it had been so . . . random, hadn't it? Because wasn't this one just as entitled to life?

Johanna picked up the invoice. She wasn't crying now.

The goal of Dr. Lorenz Pritchard's interventions had been to circumvent whatever wasn't working, naturally, in her own body. This they had done. The promise of Horizon Cryobank of Torrington, Connecticut, was to circumvent the essential unfairness of human reproduction: that there was, yes, a *horizon* for women, beyond which they simply could not conceive children, but no such horizon for men. Salo, if he wished, could continue to father sons and daughters and to make new families with new women until the day he died in his bed many decades from now, surrounded by progeny.

She, on the other hand, would never be able to have another child.

Unless. Unless.

Here, in her hand: one tiny gesture of redress for all that inequality. If it all worked, of course, as advertised. And if she really wanted it.

She thought of the babies her tall and sullen teenagers had once been: default dependent, wild for her attention. She thought of the years she had

been charged with the important work of keeping them alive and safe, years in which no one, herself included, had ever once questioned her purpose or worth. She thought of the wet, toothless smiles, the little arms enfolding her neck and squeezing tight, the reading of bedtime books, the planning of activities, the listening to scales being indifferently practiced on musical instruments, the checking of homework, the discovery of nature, and culture, the making—and remaking—of every choice, past and future, that she had ever made. She thought of how her husband sometimes referred to their family—or at least to himself and the children—as "the last of the Oppenheimers," as if he were solely authorized to make that pronouncement, as if he had been the one longing them into existence and presiding almost entirely over their daily lives and being the parent who was actually there and not communing with modern art in some warehouse in Coney Island or Sheepshead Bay.

As if she had not faithfully paid this very bill, once every year since 1981, for a purpose she had never really understood. Or at least not until now.

Dr. Lorenz Pritchard was still in the same office suite on Fifth Avenue. He welcomed her back, asked for photographs of the kids, and listened to her explain why she had come in. He did her the courtesy of not looking surprised, or ever once asking: *Are you absolutely certain?*

Yes, it was possible, he told her. Very possible, though this time there would have to be a Gestational Carrier; only one outright miracle per family, that was his rule! She'd be okay with a Gestational Carrier, he assumed?

The Johanna Oppenheimer in his consulting room was a far cry from the Johanna Oppenheimer of two decades earlier.

Yes, she was perfectly okay with a Gestational Carrier.

The following morning our mother made the unprecedented request that Salo stay home from work. She told him what she knew, and then she told him what she wanted. She also had forms from the gestational surrogacy agency, ready for his signature, and he signed them. Of course he did. And that was how the person who really *could* be called "the last of the

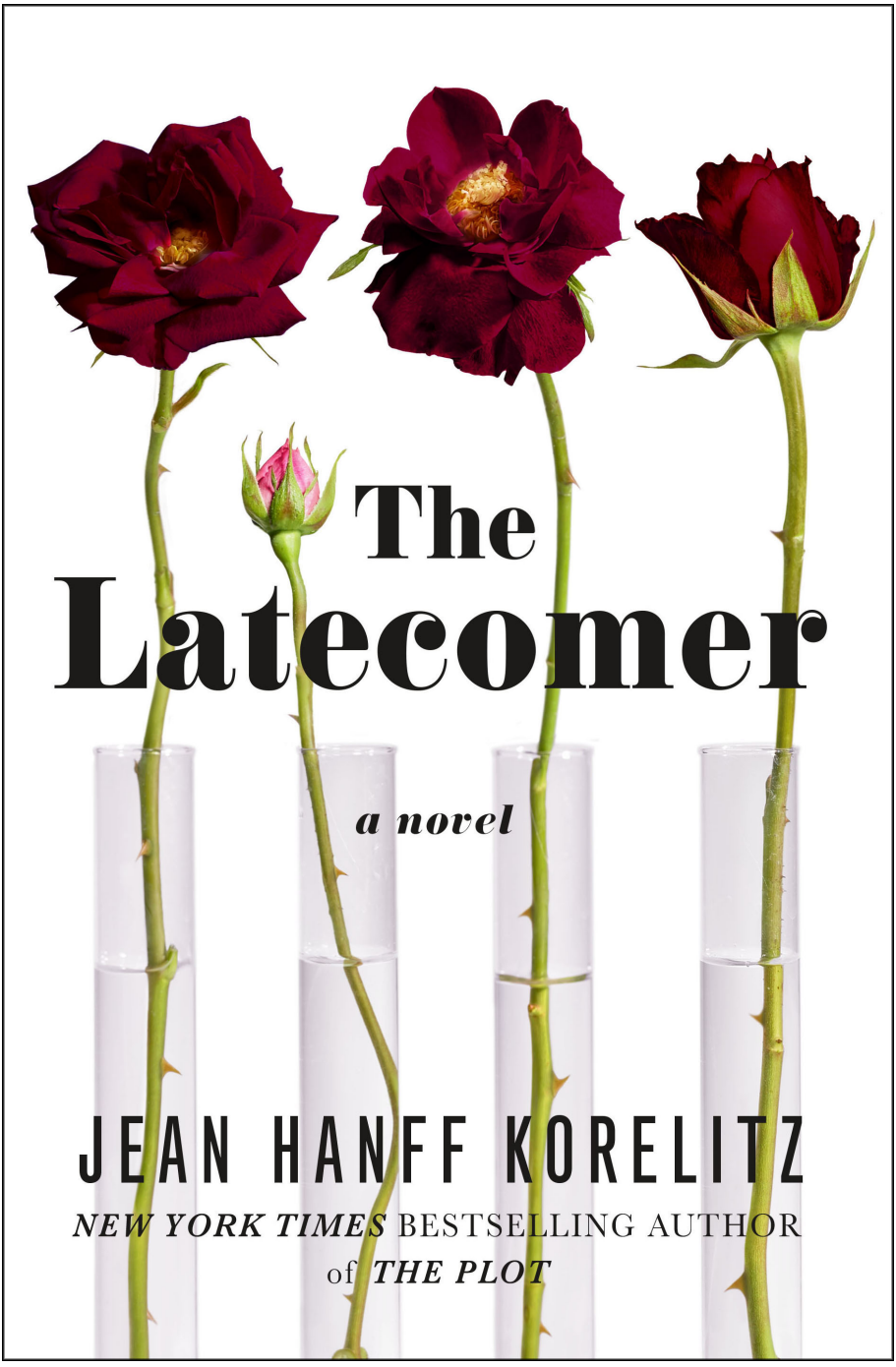
Oppenheimers," *her hour come round at last,* began slouching toward Brooklyn Heights, to be born.

Johanna and Solomon Oppenheimer
with Harrison, Lewyn, and Sally Oppenheimer
joyfully announce the birth of

PHOEBE ELIZABETH OPPENHEIMER

June 20th, 2000
8 pounds, 2 ounces, 22 inches

Thanks to our wonderful "team" at the office of Dr. Lorenz Pritchard and of course our fabulous Gestational Carrier, Tammy Sue Blanding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