the history of my body

A NOVEL

SHARON HEATH

the history of my body

a novel

sharon heath

Genoa House

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The History of My Body

ISBN 978-1-926975-02-3 Paperback

ISBN 978-1-926975-03-0 eBook

First Edition

Published simultaneously in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. For information on obtaining permission for use of material from this work, please submit a written request to: books@genoahouse.com

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to reprint excerpts from: "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen. ©1992 Stranger Music Inc. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203. All rights reserved. Used by permission. "When the Red, Red, Robin (Comes Bob, Bob Bobbin' Along)" by Harry Woods. © 1926 by Bourne Co. (Copyright Renewed). Rights for extended renewal term in USA controlled by Songwriters Guild of America on behalf of Callicoon Music. All rights outside the USA controlled by Bourne Co. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. "Hello Earth," music and lyrics by Kate Bush. © 1985 EMI MUSIC PUBLISHING LTD. And NOBLE & BRITE LTD. All rights in the US and Canada controlled and administered by SCREEN GEMS-EMI MUSIC INC. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by permission. *Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation*. "Rocket Man (I Think It's Gonna Be A Long Long Time)," words and music by Elton John and Bernie Taupin. Copyright © 1972 UNIVERSAL/DICK JAMES MUSIC LTD. Copyright renewed. All rights in the United States and Canada controlled and administered by UNIVERSAL – SONGS OF POLYGRAM INTERNATIONAL, INC. All rights reserved. Used by permission. *Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation*. Harold Pinter's Nobel Lecture. © The Nobel Foundation 2005.

Cover art by Lou Beach

Author photograph by Elizabeth Daniels

Butterfly glyph © Fotosearch

In memory of Bessie and Chaim Wodlinger,
my bubbie and zayda

"Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in."

Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*

chapter one

The Bible says that in the beginning was the void, and it hasn't escaped me how fast the Lord moved to take care of His own particular vacuum – dividing day from night, spitting out vast oceans, carving out competing continents that could one day have the power to blow each other up. What an inspired series of creations to keep the devil of boredom at bay. No wonder God kept seeing that it *was* good.

Maybe it all would have happened differently if the bird on the front lawn hadn't given me my idea about my grandfather's balls. Or maybe not. You never know in this life; there are too many variables. In ancient times they might have called it Fate, more recently the Butterfly Effect, but I like to think of it as the human race's chronic aversion to boredom. I figure any species lacking fangs and claws had a powerful incentive to evolve an active sort of mind.

I suppose I'm not the only one who likes to hear about her own beginnings. Luckily for me, Nana loves to reminisce about the period in her life that coincides with my first eleven years, when we all lived together on what *Time Magazine* once described as "Senator Robins' conspicuously spacious Tudor estate in the Main Line suburb of Gladwyne." While the rest of us spent virtually all our time on that property, Father often spared us his presence, commuting to an apartment in D.C., where, as he liked to put it, he served as the only senator from Pennsylvania defending the sanctity of human life.

I had my hands full defending my own. Looking back from the perspective of my fifteen years, I have to appreciate my infant ingenuity in keeping me just this side of the lurking pit of nothingness. Nana says I made more of a racket than all the saved babies combined, directing frantic tom-toms at my mother, who'd cry back at me from the foot of my crib, a drowning woman clutching her wine glass like a life raft. The crib still exists. I saw it a few years ago, its slats bearing the imprints I made with my bullet-shaped head.

I saw Mother defend me against Father only three times in my life. The first was on my tenth Easter. I remember because I was wearing the dreamy pale blue dress and matching strappy shoes Nana had bought me for just that occasion. Having talked Cook out of one of her yummy lemon squares after returning from church, I was humming and chewing my way toward the den until I realized Mother and Father had gotten there first. Father had already begun one of his rants against the devil abortionists. This time he added an extra twist. "Who knows," he taunted Mother, "how much you wanting to get rid of her made our only child autistic?"

Usually, when Father got mean, Mother ran up to her room, but this time she stood her ground, though her voice quavered noticeably. "That's not what Dr. Sand said!"

Father made a sound that was more like a bark than a laugh. "Oh, what's the difference? Doesn't matter a hell of a lot when everyone can see she's a freak. Spinning like a maniac her first day of Sunday school just because some kid made a dumb crack about the crucifix. Kids are like animals. They know. No wonder none of them would go near her after that."

"Don't!" Mother stepped back as if she'd been hit. "That's not fair! It was an awful thing for that boy to say. Dr. Sand isn't convinced she's even on the spectrum. You can't shove her into some category just because you don't know what to do with her." I watched her face turn a particular shade of pig-pink. "Besides," she added breathlessly, "if someone's getting punished, maybe it's the senator who had to marry the child he took out for a burger and a good screw after a pro-life rally."

Transfixed, I watched spit fly out of Father's mouth as he shouted, "Child? Hardly! But you're right about one thing. You may stink as a wife, but you were a hell of a good screw. As for the kid, maybe you're right about that, too. Maybe she's just a born space cadet. Or maybe it all comes down to maternal neglect. Maybe if you hadn't been at the bottle all these years, she'd be cured by now."

Just then, Sister Flatulencia rushed into the room and was steering me out of it and down the stairs toward the kitchen, one hand on my shoulder and the other frantically fingering her rosary beads. I had barely been able to follow my parents' argument – I had never heard the name *Autistic* before, and the part about screws was more than a little confusing – but I always felt sorry for Mother when Father blamed her for not wanting to have me. Why *would* she

have wanted a child like me, who was always driving people away with her words and her whirling and flapping?

When Sister Flatulencia and I entered the kitchen, it was apparent we'd walked in on the beginning of a game of Hearts, the three-handed variety they occasionally had to resort to when they couldn't scramble up a fourth. Nana and Fayga and Cook each held a clumsy spread of seventeen cards, and a one-card kitty interrupted the pattern of the washable Stars and Stripes tablecloth covering the small kitchen table.

Sister Flatulencia answered their upturned questioning faces with a curt, "They're at it again," but that didn't stop me from loosening myself from her grip and approaching Nana, asking, "What's *autistic* mean?"

Nana snorted and replied with a dismissive, "Shhh, don't be silly," cuffing me on the ear with her handful of cards more forcefully than she probably intended. That was the odd thing about Nana. For a nanny with an addiction to a game called Hearts, she had all the gentleness of a Mack truck. Just like the angel in the Bible who wrestled with Jacob and made his thigh go out of joint before blessing him, one minute she was treating me like a side of beef, the next she'd be showering me with little chicken-peck kisses that sent waves of pleasurable goose bumps over my oddly shaped head.

As Nana's eyes veered back to her hand, Fayga chipped in with a nasal, "I can't believe he actually said that in front of the child," her wriggling worm of an upper lip stretched tight and wide, like it was getting fried to a crisp by the sun. I'd often reflected that it was too bad about her face, which was so nondescript that it looked dangerously like a void punctuated by the teensiest salvation of a wormy lip.

Cook chimed in predictably, "I can't believe it either," looking around the table as if she'd actually contributed something. Cook was a weakling when it came to having her own opinions. When Fayga was mean, Cook thought she had to be, too, which made me worry that perhaps Cook wasn't real at all, just a little trick of the void to personify itself. Sometimes I had to remind myself that Cook was really one of my angels, the only one in our house who could bake angel food cake, which is my favorite food. Luckily for me, she'd baked a nice round loaf the night before, so when she set down her cards and pushed up from the table, her round body sailing past me toward one of the long kitchen counters, I held my breath, and not just because I'd gotten a whiff of her hands, which smelled eternally of garlic and onion.

Suddenly Fayga threw down her cards and flew out of her chair to the corner of the kitchen, stomping her Comfort Flex shoe on the floor several times. "Got you!" she cried. She hated roaches. Short of burning down the house, she did everything she could to kill them. Her mission in life was to keep dirt under control, which was pretty clever of her, because the earth is made of dirt, so her particular method of keeping the void at bay had a pretty good shelf life. But when she was overworked she tended to get mean and complain a lot, particularly about the washing she had to do for Father's saved babies: dirty diapers, pukey crib sheets, soiled terry cloth infant sacks constructed with arms but no feet as if we were host to mutant Martian babies with only one set of limbs apiece – all of it purchased in lots of a hundred from Leland DuRay, an infant clothing wholesaler who was one of Father's frequent contributors.

I tried to keep my eyes averted from the squished roach Fayga was scraping up from the floor as Cook motioned me to sit down at the table, setting my second dessert for the day in front of me. I was still licking my lips fifteen minutes later as I took the stairs two at a time up to my room to look up my new word.

I'd been using the dictionary and encyclopedia to battle boredom ever since teaching myself to read, my little bottom planted comfortably on a potty stool painted a pastel yellow that put my amber pee, stinking of vitamin drops and creamed asparagus, to shame. I created something of a household brouhaha back then by graduating so quickly from *Goodnight Moon* and *Green Eggs and Ham* to increasingly hefty dictionaries, Sister Flatulencia's *World English Bible,* and an assortment of dog-eared *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines Mother kept in the pretty pink basket in the corner of her bedroom. As you might imagine, sounding out words at the age of four was a lot easier than comprehending their meanings, but a couple of phrases have stayed with me to this day, like "an honest answer is like a kiss on the lips" (*Proverbs 24:26*) and "pearlescent pink and robin's egg blue are all the rage for spring" (*Vogue Magazine*).

Autistic sounded a teensy bit like me, but mostly it didn't. It wasn't that I hadn't been called names before. Sweetie Pie was one. I stopped liking it after dreaming of lying curled into a ball on a giant pie tin at the center of our massive, burled wood dining table – shined up so often by Fayga that every piece of food I ever ate there smelled like Ye Olde English Furniture Paste. On one side of me sat a slightly burnt apple pie with sickly-green crescent moons decorating the top and on the other a lemon meringue, one of my favorites ever since I discovered I could make Jillily sneeze if I put a dollop of meringue

on the tip of her pink triangle of a nose. But here's the worst part: everyone but Grandfather was salivating and aiming giant forks in my direction.

Fortunately my second name, Angel Face, didn't disrupt my sleep. Since my potty stool was convertible, with a lid that could be flipped over to stand on, I could slide it across the marble floor to the flower-and-butterfly-painted sink that Nana never failed to remind me was much nicer than the plain white ones in the big, bare bathroom Father built for the children he'd saved from the devil abortionists. Standing on tippy-toes, I'd spend hours staring at my angel face in the mirror, hoping I'd see wings start to sprout from the curved handles of my ears so I could fly out of the house and up to heaven.

I entered Father's new name for me in my diary. I liked to keep lists of words I looked up, taking particular pleasure in words with more than one meaning. But the reference to the major characteristic of the name *Autistic* – poor eye contact – made me nervous. I scrambled off my bed and stood in front of my dresser mirror, staring straight into my watery blue eyes and counting out a full sixty seconds without blinking, until I got distracted by the shape of my head, deciding it really was pretty pointy at the top.

Nana once told me that my bullet-shaped head is living evidence of my mother's distaste for anything too painful. She said that when it came time to push me out of her body, Mother gave one heave that allowed the tip of my head to squeeze through the swollen opening at her bottom, then decided it hurt too much and waited around until Father yelled bad words at her before reluctantly releasing me into the world. The other problem is that my bullet of a head is covered with funny-looking bumps and indentations. I saw them for the first time on the afternoon of my fifth birthday, when Nana said, "Oh, for heaven's sake, I'm not going to watch you scratch yourself like a monkey one minute longer," and drove me off to the doctor.

Only days before, I'd wandered over to the wing of our house Father had converted for the children he'd saved from the devil abortionists. Climbing into one of the new toddler's cots, I'd put my body right up next to hers so I could pretend we were Siamese twins. With her peach-fuzz cheeks and round blue eyes, she looked so much prettier than pale-eyebrowed, crooked-grinned, stringy-blond-haired me. Who knew she was going to infect me with a nasty case of ringworm and make me get my head shaved?

My rash prompted Father to permanently ban me from the saved babies' wing of the house, so I mostly struggled in secret with my insatiable curiosity about those other children. It wasn't as though I had a bunch of friends

to distract me. Thanks to my banging and flapping, none of the local private schools were willing to accept me, and Mother wasn't exactly rushing to organize play dates.

I suppose I should give Nana credit for the bumps and indentations on my head. It probably took her flinging me into hundreds of hard landings onto my old rock of an infant changing table for me to realize I could actively give myself pain. Nana still cringes when she describes the first time she caught me squirming around my crib, rhythmically banging my head against its slats as if I were consciously aiming at slightly varying angles each time. I personally count it my earliest achievement, a terrific means of dispelling the void. Because as sure as my grandfather's balls could qualify for the Guinness record of the world's most gargantuan testicles, conquering the feeling of emptiness was the chief challenge of my young life. After all, Nana couldn't spend all her time slathering my little butt with Johnson and Johnson's. There were all those other butts, that revolving door of children my father kept rescuing.

But it wasn't just pain and reading and making lists that kept me going. Ever since turning four, I've had Jillily. As long as I can remember, Sister Flatulencia liked to call Jillily a tuxedo cat, which set the stage for some awful confusion when Fayga remarked offhandedly sometime after my sixth birthday that tuxedos were how Father dressed when he went off to rake in the dough. On the next Saturday that Father stayed out late, I tried to keep myself awake as best I could, pinching and banging until he got in, so I could sneak into his bedroom when he was showering and try to find his cat suit and where he kept his dough. I didn't find either one, not even a streak of flour on his wide-lapelled jacket, although I detected some unfamiliar perfume mixed in with the sharp jolt of bitterness in the jacket's armpits.

I vowed to try again, so the next time Father didn't come home for dinner, I kept myself awake by busily pinching my belly fat in a room that was pitch dark except for a little circle of light around my night-light in the shape of a duck with a chip at the edge of its bill. My belly started hurting so badly that I opened my eyes and saw the silhouette of my mother at my doorway. She was craning her head in my direction, as if she couldn't quite see me, and she was holding her arms with her hands, as if she had to hold herself in one piece, and she was crying softly, just like Jillily after Cook shut the kitchen door on her paw. My room started smelling like the rubbing alcohol Nana dabbed on my knee whenever I fell, and I found myself hating Father, though I couldn't have explained why.

Under normal circumstances, when there was something confusing going on that I was trying to figure out, I felt good, because it filled up the you-know-what. But when my mother slipped away and took with her that disturbing smell, I had to pinch my tummy a lot harder to keep myself out of a pitch-black pit.

Nana yelled at me the next morning, "What's your doctor going to say when you go for your tests this afternoon?" I asked her why I had to go to so many doctors, anyway, if I wasn't even sick, but she turned away and muttered under her breath, "I have to see to the babies," and left the room without answering.

Needless to say, none of this resolved my confusion about Father's pits and the mysterious perfume he used to bring home with him instead of dough. The fact was, except on his late nights, Father had no smell to him at all. Which should have been a clue right there. Most people have the common courtesy to give off a little whiff of something to help other folks with their voids.

Nana, for instance, was pretty generous in that department, walking around the house with the perpetual stink of baby puke on her left shoulder and the faint perfume of Johnson's Baby Oil on her hands, and underneath them both, a hint of strong dirt somewhere under her skirt, like a body that lived mostly in caves without much air circulating around. Every once in awhile, all of those smells, the puke, the oil, the cave dirt, were overtaken by the sharp punch of chocolate, which was Nana's favorite food. She liked every kind of it – from bittersweet to creamy white. One time, I heard her whisper to Fayga and Cook that chocolate was better than sex, and they all giggled, but then Fayga slapped my arm for listening, and Cook got all flush-faced and nervous and sent me out of the kitchen, and I had to bang my head against the Laura Ashley floral wallpaper on my bedroom wall a couple of times to make myself feel better.

Of course, the most aromatic member of our household was Sister Flatulencia, who, by the way, was never called that name to her face. Nana made it clear to me early on that she was to be addressed simply as Sister. For all I knew, Sister Flatulencia had never been given a proper name at all, but she was anything but anonymous. She was the tallest person in our household, taller even than Father, and though most of the time she kept her hair wrapped inside a royal blue bandana, she couldn't seem to fasten the scarf tightly enough to stop little grizzled curls from peeking out of it. She might have looked a little prettier if, besides her bandana, she didn't dress exactly

like a man, with a white shirt tucked so tightly into her tailored black trousers that even her meager little breasts didn't show. As it is, with no makeup on her face, she looked just like a very tall man playing at being a woman by sticking a bandana on his head.

Speaking of whiffs, when I tried to ask Sister Flatulencia why I had to go for so many tests, she just passed some of her famous fruity wind and batted her eyelashes over her flying saucer eyes and kept muttering her name for me over and over again, "You Poor Child, You Poor Child, You Poor Child." I didn't particularly like that name, either; it made my tummy feel like those balloons they tie up at the county fair to look like animals, but they never do. What kind of animal had no eyes, or nose, or even a mouth? An animal without a mouth would die in a couple of days from starvation. I shuddered to think of it, imagining what it would be like to float in the void with that bored-as-hell God, who wouldn't even let you get born so you could do things like give yourself pain to save yourself.

Not that Sister Flatulencia would have seen it that way. Before she became Mother's companion she was a nun, or at least she had been until she had a nervous breakdown. Nana told me that the nervous breakdown came from taking care of all those babies my father saved and feeling bad that she never had one of her own. I guess that's why Nana could do it, since she had her very own baby, even though he died serving his country. One time I tried asking her, "Was your son a waiter or a cook like Cook, and how do you serve a whole country? It sounds like such a lot of work to do. Did he die of working too hard to make his whole country fat and happy?"

But Nana just said, "Shhh," and got up and acted like she had a lot of things to do, even though she'd seemed quite content the minute before to sink with me into the softest of our chintz sofas to watch re-runs of *I Dream of Jeannie*.

I used to wonder why they don't let nuns have babies. Maybe it was because nuns are married to Jesus. This is how my thinking went:

1. Father says that Jesus is God, so maybe God needs nuns to send every single bit of their love His way because it helps fill His void;
2. God is pretty big, so it figures He has a bigger void than any of us to fill;
3. Come to think of it, a country's pretty big, too, so it makes sense that a son who's trying to serve it could end up dying from over-work;

4. Maybe Sister Flatulencia's nervous breakdown saved *her* from dying of over-work.

Sometimes I passed the time by wondering, what is a nervous breakdown, anyway? Is it a constant state of gas? That is what Sister Flatulencia had, which worked to our advantage when it came to sitting by ourselves in the middle of the Majestic, with lots of space between us and little groups of teenagers making disgusting slurp sounds to force the Coke up their straws from the bottoms of their paper cups. Myself, I didn't really mind Sister Flatulencia's farts. They were much sweeter than a lot of people's smells, definitely sweeter than Father's pits and Nana's pukey shoulder and Mother's medicine odor whenever she stood in my doorway. I'd take them any day over Jillily's vomit, when she ate grass and it came out the same shape as it went in, but surrounded by stinky brownish goop, murky tide pools all over the carpet. Sweeter, too, than the sickly pee smell of Grandfather when his balls started to swell from congestive heart failure.

And just so you know, I haven't said much about Grandfather so far, but not because he wasn't important. On the contrary, he was my favorite person in the whole world.

I used to find it confusing that the name Grandfather could belong to more than one person in a family. Nana used to call my two grandfathers Grandfather Phillips and Grandfather Robins, which was pretty strange, because it was Grandfather *Phillips* who used to watch the birds with me. Grandfather Robins didn't watch anything but his pennies; at least that's what Cook used to say. Come to think of it, I'm not sure anyone had to tell Cook about that, so maybe she wasn't so opinionless after all.

Nana said that Cook didn't like anyone who pinched pennies because it took a lot of money to buy the freshest meats and vegetables. That comment of hers was extremely helpful in the void-management department. I used to spend hours trying to imagine how you could pinch a penny. Belly fat, yes. The little bit of flesh hanging from the underside of your arm, easy. Really, anything that has a little plumpness to it is pretty pinchable. Not Jillily, though. I learned that the hard way. Before I learned that not everybody likes pain the way I do, I made Jillily cry.

I tried to tell myself that it would never have happened if she hadn't gotten taken to the vet to get fixed. Personally, I had no idea why she had to get fixed. I never noticed anything about Jillily that looked broken. To me, she was perfect in every way. But in the weeks after coming back from the vet, she

walked funny, her white furry belly all loose and hangy and swaying from side to side. I figured anything that pouchy-looking was fair game for a pinch, so one day, when I came into my bedroom and she was lying on her back on a little patch of sun on the carpet the way she likes to do, with her legs spread open and her paws flapped up in the air, I felt the itching for a pinch come over me, the way it can. Everybody laughed at Jillily when she struck that particular pose of hers. Fayga would call her Charlotte the Harlot, but then Sister Flatulencia would make a mean squint of her flying saucer eyes and Nana would say, "Hush!"

Anyway, there was Jillily, my favorite person in the whole world besides my grandfather, even though Nana has always insisted that Jillily isn't really a person. Sometimes Nana's mind is just a little limited, if you know what I mean. But Nana wasn't there when I reached down and gave that empty-looking belly a nice, squeezy pinch. In one quick second, the world went black as the blankest void. Jillily yowled and gave me a look like I'd sold her to the devil abortionists, then she ran away from me and squatted under my four-poster, with her body clenched up all tight and the muscles in her back twitching like she was being bitten by fleas. I flattened myself like a crocodile to slither under the bed and coax her back out, and I had to give her a thousand chicken-peck kisses all over her back and ears and belly before she let her motor whirr again, and when she finally let me kiss her little pink triangle of a nose, I could see the wet gook in the corners of her yellow eyes and I knew that I'd made Jillily cry.

That was my first time realizing there are some things worse than boredom. My whole body felt like something ugly and stinky and I kept wishing that my skin was a pair of pajamas I could just take off and fling into Fayga's dirty clothes bin, along with all those Martian infant sacks. A part of me wanted to bite off my ugly, stinking fingers, but Jillily's whirring told me she needed me to keep patting her, so I kept my fingers out of my mouth and stroked Jillily with them, instead.

That afternoon, I told Grandfather what I'd done. We were sitting together facing the big lead-paned front window of Grandfather's bedroom, Grandfather in his recliner and me in my giant-sized, cushiony rocking chair that I'd inherited from my mother. We were watching our tree like we always did, and I kept opening my mouth to say what was on my mind and then closing it again. It was only after the last mockingbird had flown away and the branches looked as desolate as a motherless baby that I finally turned to Grandfather

and told him. For a long time, he looked at me, his eyes brimming over with kindness, and then he stretched out his big, twisty hand and put it over my evil, Jillily-pinching one and he made his sounds.

Nana said that the sounds Grandfather made sounded like *ugga umph ugga*, but what if they did? Grandfather's infirmity didn't stop Nana from inviting him up to her bedroom at the end of the day if she needed him to make a foursome. If you're not a cards player you might not know that it takes four people to play a proper game of Hearts. Grandfather wasn't so good at Hearts. He hardly ever won.

But when Grandfather put his Hearts-losing hand on mine and looked so tenderly into my eyes, my hatred at myself for making Jillily cry flowed right out of me. After a while, Grandfather let go of my hand, and we both turned back to watch our tree. A pair of sparrows was hopping from branch to branch in a complicated zigzag pattern. They like to keep busy to fend off the void. I snuck a quick look at Grandfather. The edges of his lips were turned up in a peaceful grin.

I suppose I should explain about Grandfather's inability to make language. Nana said that Grandfather had suffered a stroke. I already knew that stroke is one of those double-meaning words, so I asked her, "Did somebody pat Grandfather the wrong way, like somebody rubbing Jillily's fur from her backside to her head instead of the right way around? Or did he go swimming one day and do the butterfly stroke so fast that his words dissolved like butterfly wings in the swimming pool?"

But she just laughed and said, "No, Angel Face, nothing so fancy. A stroke is just an infirmity – a sickness like a bad cold, only it doesn't go away." She added, "It's a good thing his stroke didn't affect anything but his ability to make words." I knew from personal experience she was right. He could read just fine. If anything, he understood way more than most. But he couldn't write anymore, let alone speak comprehensibly.

Grandfather didn't seem to mind that he couldn't talk like the rest of us. It didn't stop him from taking his bulldog-headed cane for a slow walk around the grounds every day, it didn't stop him from poring over the pile of newspapers beside his place-setting at our Ye Old English Furniture Paste-smelling dining room table each morning, and it didn't stop him from sitting by my side in his room, stroking my hair and sneaking me red jelly candies and listening to me copying all the bird calls as we watched our tree.

Grandfather and I had a lot in common. We both knew what it was like to not be understood. I could say words better than Grandfather, but that didn't guarantee that people wouldn't look at me as if I'd just said *ugga umph ugga* when I talked to them. Grandfather and I both liked to watch birds. Birds have a couple of very good ways of dealing with the void – they can fly and they can sing. They also provided Jillily with an antidote to boredom. When birds flew past the window, she made deep noises in her throat that sounded friendly, but they weren't. They were about wanting to kill, which made me have second thoughts about Jillily until I remembered how much I liked to tear hunks of chicken off the bone with my teeth and forgave her.

Speaking of eating, another thing that Grandfather and I had in common was a taste for red jelly candies, which were hard and shiny and sweet. The only trouble was, when I went to brush my teeth at night, if I'd sucked a red jelly candy that day my tongue would still be bright red at bedtime. No amount of brushing would make the redness go away. When I get an idea into my head, it's not so easy to get rid of. Plus, there's something about the nighttime that's just an invitation to the void, so once I got the idea into my head that red was the color of blood, I started to worry I was dying. After that, whenever Grandfather would slip me a piece of red jelly candy, I'd pretend to put it in my mouth, but really I'd stick it in my pocket. But then I worried I might be saving myself, but what about Grandfather? What if those candies had given him his stroke?

That was when I decided to sneak into Grandfather's bedroom while he was taking one of his walks and steal his candies from him. I found the drawer where he kept his crinkly plastic bags of red jelly candies. Right next to them, though, was something even more interesting: a photograph of my mother when she was a teenager and marrying Father, who wasn't a teenager at all. I could tell that Mother was getting married because of what she wore. I thought she looked very pretty, her long white dress bulging at her middle as if she'd eaten a couple of Cook's biggest angel food cakes.

I knew Grandfather still had an hour to go before he'd finish circling the grounds, so I settled into my mother's rocking chair and studied the photo. There was a much younger version of my grandfather peeking into it from the uppermost left corner. The top of Grandfather's head was chopped off by the white border, but he didn't seem to mind; he was smiling a big fat smile at his only daughter. My father was there, too, tall and skinny, with his hair pale yellow and fluffy, like one of Fayga's mops. I almost laughed, but when I noticed

the way my father was looking down at my mother in the photo, goose bumps started marching up and down my arms. Father had the same exact look in his eyes as a dog I'd encountered in front of the doctor's office when I was little, all sharpy-tooth lunging at me with a volcano growl coming out of his throat and Nana yelling, "Hey, buddy, that dog needs to be put down!" before wrapping her thick arms around my body and chicken-peck-kissing me.

That photo took my bad feeling about my father from the Saturday night I'd heard Mother cry and turned it into a rock in the middle of my chest. I just couldn't understand why my beautiful young girl of a mother in her white dress wasn't running from my father as fast as her feet could take her. And, worse still, why my grandfather was smiling. Shouldn't he have been shielding Mother with his body, yelling, "That man needs to be put down?"

I realize this doesn't begin to explain about the bird on the lawn and my grandfather's balls, but I hope I've given you enough of a preview of coming attractions to help keep your void at bay. As for me, I'm afraid I've worked myself up a little. But don't worry – give me a moment to recover, maybe a pinch or two, and, as Nana likes to put it, "Bob's your uncle, I'll be as right as rain."

chapter two

I fear I may have given you the impression that I thought you had an uncle named Bob. Maybe you do, and maybe you don't, but I certainly don't, at least not that anyone else ever knew about. I don't even have an aunt.

The fact is, *Bob's your uncle* is just an expression – which is different from the look someone gives you when they're trying to tell you something but they're too stingy to put it in words. It wasn't unusual for me, back in the early days, to manage the void by wondering what kind of expression my Uncle Bob would wear. First of all, he would look nothing like Father or Mother. He would, however – at least in the quizzical, pale-eyed department – look just a little like me.

The best Uncle Bob I ever thought up – and the one who managed to stick around, developing a life of his own – had an ability to expand and shrink that was quite amazing. Sometimes, he was exactly the same height as me and he liked to skip. The two of us would skip in unison all the way to the first fountain, counting the number of trees we passed, even though we both knew there were exactly fifteen. And sometimes, if Nana came running out of the house, yelling, "How many times do I have to tell you you're not to play on the grounds without me? Do you want me to get fired?" he'd shrink to the size of the palm of my hand, so I could shove him into my pocket to hide him from her, his curlicue moustache tickling my fingers as I tucked him in.

With or without my expandable Uncle Bob, it was always a treat to roam the grounds of the house I was born in, even before I found out that most people never got to see so much grass and so many flowers except in a public park. Nana used to say that the one thing my mother was good for was caring for her beds of David Austin roses. I never could find the beds, but you couldn't miss the roses. When springtime came, you could close your eyes and follow their noisy scent right out of the house and straight to where Mother had planted them. They budded, blossomed, and dropped their petals in void-filling patterns along a sunny stretch of grass beyond the second fountain,

where the glowering giant fish at the corner spewed mossy spitballs at the floating water lilies.

I hated that fish. It figured in some of my worst nightmares and even swallowed Uncle Bob in one of his miniature phases. But I liked the roses a lot, even though I learned early on to try not to get too attached to them. The first time I found the stem of an Abraham Darby hanging limp and beaten over his sad loss of apricot petals, I could have watered a dozen of his brothers with my tears.

Though none of the other trees meant as much to me as the sycamore that Grandfather and I kept watch over, they all had their ways. The weeping willow by the first fountain kept its void at bay by constantly sweeping its longest limb across baby Eros' peeing member. "Member" was Sister Flatulencia's word for it. Nana called it a penis, but said I should never say that word out loud, so I never mentioned it to my skipping uncle and I certainly never uttered it around Father.

The fact was I was less likely to see Father at home than on TV, talking about how we owed it to Jesus to take care of the helpless. I, personally, didn't think his television appearances did him much good, given the fact that the screen made him look like a lizard. He was extremely tall and unusually skinny, and his greenish-tinged skin looked tough and rubbery – just the opposite of Mother, whose arms were so white and delicate that you knew they should never be touched.

I can't tell you how many times I dreamed of leaning my head against Mother's waist and going right through her body to her other side. It was just like the chutes in Chutes and Ladders. One minute you'd be on her left side, staring up at the beauty mark beside her left nostril, wondering whether it really was shaped like a teensy-weensy Uncle Bob, and leaning in toward her body to get a better view, and the next thing you knew you'd be on her other side, looking up at the right side of her nose, unmarked and lonely for an Uncle-Bob-ish kind of friend.

You wouldn't have wanted to touch Father, either, but for an altogether different set of reasons. For one thing, in spite of saving so many children, he didn't like them under his feet. At least that's what he always said, which made no sense at all. To my knowledge, not one of those saved children had the gift of shrinking like my private Uncle Bob, so I didn't see how they could fit under my father's size thirteen shoes. Whenever I had to walk past him, I pretended I was balancing a vase full of roses on my head. That gave me an

excuse to keep my eyes focused forward, so I didn't have to see him purse his lips at me and squint his eyes, as if he were trying to decide whether he should have saved me from the devil abortionists after all.

The advantage of having Father captured on TV was that it shrunk him nearly as small as miniature Uncle Bob, which made it a lot safer to scream at him while he made one of his speeches about caring for unwanted children and unwanted senior citizens – actually using Grandfather as an example – and making his voice lower than it ever was at home. The truth was, Father's real voice had a little squeak to it, and not too long after I started keeping track of double-meaning words, I made a separate section in one of my diaries for listing the number of squeaks I heard coming out of Father's mouth. I had to ask Nana to buy me a whole new leather-bound notebook just for that purpose after I got up to two-thousand-and-three.

I never screamed at Father when he was his regular-sized self, not even when he made Mother cry. That was because of those mean eyes of his and his habit of pinching my arm when he got mad at me. His pinches belonged to an entirely different category from the ones I gave myself to break the spell of boredom. When Father twisted and turned my flesh with his powerful grip, it gave me an uh-oh-I'm-about-to-faint feeling and made Nana curse so much after chicken-peck-kissing my bruises that Sister Flatulencia had to cross herself and leave the room.

You could keep the boredom at bay for hours just thinking about all the ways my father's eyes could look mean. Strangely enough, the worst shape I ever saw them in had nothing to do with children underfoot. I was eleven then, and we were enjoying a break in what had been an unusually severe Pennsylvania winter. Cook had made a particularly yummy bouillabaisse to celebrate. Afterwards, Mother retired, as usual, to her bedroom, while Nana and Sister Flatulencia and I went into the den with Father to watch TV.

I sat pleasurably squeezed between the two women on our cozy chintz couch. Father was perched on the very edge of his leather ottoman. To our dismay, we were just in time to see the 76ers lose to the Celtics. The buzzer went off, the crowd roared, and Father angrily whipped the remote from a side table, changing the channel to a preview of upcoming *60 Minutes* segments. I instantly wished he hadn't. Mitchell Manus, the other senator from our state, was telling an interested-looking Ed Bradley about "the hypocrisy of Senator Robins' so-called support for the value of human life." I already knew about the feud between Senator Manus and Father, thanks to Grandfather slid-

ing me the front section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* each morning after he'd read it from cover to cover. When I read the newspaper, I felt even closer to Grandfather, since it gave me some idea what he was thinking about.

Anyway, there was Senator Manus, speaking quietly but confidently on TV, and there was Father, sitting a few feet away from me, looking like his eyeballs were going to pop out of his head. Senator Manus added to the overall tension in the room when he continued, "It's so typical of the far-right – trying to marginalize universal health care by calling it socialism, when Canada and virtually all our European allies offer it. You have to admit it's pretty hypocritical, denying the most basic of rights to all those children they insist should be born." Father threw down the remote so violently it came perilously close to cracking the glass-topped coffee table. Without a word, he stormed out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, Nana heaved a sigh of relief, her ample breasts resettling themselves on her belly. But then she said rather ominously, "We haven't heard the last of this." And she was right.

I don't know if I've mentioned this, but I don't like change, particularly when it comes to people I know. And having them disappear all of a sudden is particularly nasty in the void department. I learned the next morning that I wasn't the only one. Feeling that predictable waking-up urge for a pee, I shuffled down the hall in my fuzzy polar bear slippers, coming out of the bathroom again just in time to see Nana at the top of the stairs, saying to a particularly dried-worm-mouthed Fayga, "None of us is safe around here anymore, not with the media giving Senator Manus so much air time. Talk about scapegoating. The asshole fired Cook because he says she was ripping him off."

I tiptoed back down the hall to Grandfather's room. Grandfather lit up as soon as he saw me, but once he registered my expression, his own face dropped and he scooted over to the side of his bed to make room for me. This was hardly the first time I'd curled on top of his duvet while he lay under it, his left arm stretched over the covers and around my shoulder and his milky breath warming my cheek.

I told Grandfather about Father saying Cook was ripping him off. I knew Cook would never steal. "She's not a taker-awayer, Grandpa. She's a putter-inner. She tells anyone who'll listen to her that Father could use a little more meat on his bones. She's always spooning extra servings of that Irish stew he likes onto his plate before she lets Fayga take it out to him." The more I talk-

ed, the more indignant I felt. "Grandpa, she always says her angel food cake tastes so good because of the extra egg white she adds to the thirteen eggs in her mother's recipe to take her cake out of the unlucky thirteen category, but that didn't make her lucky enough to keep herself from getting fired. That's what Father did to her." Grandfather looked just as outraged as I was.

Settling my head more securely into the crook of his arm, I added, "I don't know about you, but I love Cook's cooking. I feel sorry for her that everyone in our family is so skinny, since she's always trying to make us fat." Grandfather laughed then – not so much with his voice as his belly. It jiggled under the covers. Before I knew it, I was laughing, too, partly because of Grandfather's bouncing belly and partly with relief that someone understood exactly how I felt.

Things got a lot more complicated in our house after Cook left. For one thing, Dhani was hired to take her place, but not until Fayga nearly poisoned us with her cooking. The day Cook left, Fayga got it into her head that she could replace her. She failed on her very first attempt at Cook's recipe for cumin-and-lime-marinated chicken. I had something of a history with that particular dish. It had given me a terrible fright the first time I saw it in its pre-cooked state when I snuck down to the kitchen after bedtime for some soy milk and cookies, only to discover a Pyrex dish full of helpless little bird wings in the refrigerator, drowning in what looked suspiciously like baby poop.

It wasn't that Fayga's cooking was all that bad. Her presentation was certainly impressive. She marched her sizzling platter into the dining room with the expression of Jillily springing onto my bed with a giant roach in her mouth. But when Mother and Father and Grandfather and I lifted our first forkfuls of chicken to our lips, we were nearly overcome by the metallic tang of silver polish. Mother carefully replaced her fork onto her plate, avoiding Father's eyes. Grandfather held his own fork up to the light, turning it around and around to see if Fayga had forgotten to wipe the silver after polishing it. As for me, I knew that Fayga tended to over-wipe the silver, if anything, but I did wonder if she'd immersed her hands in cleansers and polish for so many years that she was doomed to contaminate anything she touched.

There I sat, taking advantage of this priceless opportunity to fill the void by trying to figure out how I could avoid eating my chicken without mortally wounding Fayga's feelings, when Father piped up, his eyes all lizard-slitty, "What? One of them schemes to rob me blind, and now this one is trying to kill us?" I had to bite my upper lip until it bled, which wasn't very pleasant, I

can tell you, because my tongue had to suffer a sickening slurry of salty blood, a little lime, a lot of cumin, and more silver polish than I'd ever wanted to know the taste of.

Luckily for us, Fayga didn't take it too personally. I think she was secretly relieved to get back to her mounting piles of dirty Martian infant sacks. As for me, I was relieved to discover, when Dhani Srivastava was sent out by the housekeeping agency the next day, that she was a proper cook, just like Cook. It turned out she liked to spice things up with cumin, too. The similarity between the two of them ended right there. If Cook was round and heavy and given to turning red in her opinion-less mode, Dhani had lots to say about nearly everything, all of it spoken in what Nana called the King's English, though I never figured out which king. Small and dark and filled with a lively energy, she moved from stove to sink to cutting board with the easy fluidity of Jillily chasing a fly.

But her exotic Indian beauty proved to be a bit of a problem. Toward the end of her first week with us, I went down to the kitchen for my before-bed cookie, only to find Father leaning against the refrigerator, saying, "You're a lovely woman, you know." It was Dhani he was talking to. She wasn't looking at him. She was sweeping a dishcloth in graceful arcs across the granite counter. Father was so intent on watching her he didn't even notice I was there.

I was in shock. Father never showed his face in the kitchen. And I'd never heard him speak in such a gentle tone. But watching Dhani rhythmically wiping the counter, the lace at the hem of her white apron twisting coyly at her calf, I had to agree with him. I made a little cough, and Father looked up, his expression instantly changing. He carelessly knocked my shoulder with his elbow as he pushed past me out the door.

The room felt lighter as soon as he was gone. When I told her what I wanted, Dhani's dark eyes crinkled with pleasure. She sat me down at the kitchen table with a glass of soy milk and the last of Cook's peanut butter cookies. Sliding into the chair opposite me, she asked what I'd done that day, frowning just a little as I listed all the Austins I'd managed to visit. The grandfather clock in the hall chimed ten times while Dhani absent-mindedly ferried an errant peanut butter chip around the saltcellar. Finally aware of what she was doing, she laughed at herself and scraped back her chair. "It's a bit late, don't you think?" she asked, rising. "School day tomorrow for you, my girl."

Licking the last crumb from the corner of my lip, I corrected her. "I don't go to school."

Dhani cocked her head. "Why ever not?"

A hot, prickly feeling came over me, but I resisted the urge to pinch. "Nana calls it home schooling. She says it's the schools' fault and who needs them anyway, but I think if I'd only been able to…"

Dhani sat down again, favoring me with a look that seemed to say, "Well?"

I didn't really want to continue, but Dhani's gaze was so warm and unwavering, so obviously *interested*, that I did. I told her how all the private schools in our neighborhood claimed they were full as soon as they met me. How Father swore that, until I shaped up, he wouldn't dream of sending me to our local public school. How Mother had driven me herself all the way to Radnor to enroll in the new Willow Tree Montessori – putting on her best linen suit and cream silk blouse the morning of our appointment before finishing off her ensemble with a generous spritz of Chanel. How I'd made a complete hash of Mother's efforts, screaming so piercingly when the Principal asked Mother to leave us alone in the office for my interview that Mother had no choice but to drag me back to the car. What I didn't tell her, feeling it would be some kind of betrayal, was that Mother had cried like a sick baby all the way home.

By the time I finished, my face was on fire and Dhani's black eyebrows had inched together into one long caterpillar. But her voice was so calm I couldn't help but relax. "I see," she said slowly. "So, your mum teaches you your lessons?"

I hastened to explain that it wasn't really like that. "Ever since I taught myself to read, I've pretty much been learning on my own. Nana helps, of course, and, when I need to have something explained that she doesn't understand, she takes me to the Gladwyne Free Public Library. Mrs. Perle, the head librarian, is terrifically helpful. Sometimes I think she's read every single book on the shelves. Actually, we go there once a week, no matter what. I get to bring home all the books I want, as long as they cover the basics."

Dhani's eyebrows lifted like butterfly wings. "The basics?" she prompted.

"Mm hmm. You know, math, history, nature studies, literature, essay writing. And I study the Bible with Sister Flatulencia on Sundays."

"But what about mates?"

"Mates?" I asked, confused.

"Friends. Girlfriends. I haven't seen any other children around, except for the…"

"Oh," I replied airily, fighting a feeling of pressure at the back of my throat. "I've got Nana and Jillily and Sister Flatulencia and Fayga. And I used to have Cook."

Dhani fell silent. She seemed to be turning what I'd been saying over in her mind. Then she looked up, smiling faintly. "Well, I hope you'll come to include me in your list." She pressed her hand lightly against my cheek before reaching to clear my plate from the table, using my soiled napkin to sweep my crumbs onto the dish. "I'm afraid that's the last of the batch. You'll have to tell me all your favorite desserts."

And I did, right there and then. But all the while, I had to dig my nails into my palm to remind myself to stop staring at her naturally-red-jelly-candy-colored lips and her dainty chin with a tiny Uncle-Bob-sized pinch taken out of it. I was all too aware of my own boring blue eyes and dead-grass-colored hair and pale white skin that turned a little yellowish every winter.

As the days wore on, we all grew quite fond of Dhani. Except for Mother, that is. I'm sure Mother would have liked her, too, if only Father had kept his hands to himself. As it turned out, there was something about Dhani that kept more than one man's hands out of his pockets. That other man was our new gardener Ignacio, whom Father hired just a few weeks after Dhani came to us.

It occurred to me later that Father fired our old gardener Franklin because scapegoating Cook hadn't been enough. But he claimed at the time it was because Franklin was letting the garden get out of control. I didn't know gardens needed controlling and I didn't know much about Franklin, only that his face was red and criss-crossed with wrinkles and whenever I skipped past he acted too busy to speak to me.

It was different with Ignacio, who was a talkative sort of man. He told me the first time I met him that he'd only lived in Pennsylvania for a year, Texas having been ruined for him after his wife Rosa was murdered while sneaking back across the border to Mexico to help her cousin Hilda with her new baby.

Anyone hearing that would have to feel pretty bad about Ignacio, but when you learn about our first meeting, you might feel just a teensy bit sorry for *me*.

That's because of the weeds. I don't know about you, but I have never met a weed I didn't like. Whether they are thick or thin, dull or shiny, the bright green of rye grass or pale yellow, like wheat, they all seem to be propelled by a

void-vanquishing knowledge of where they want to go, and that's closer to the sun. They make themselves at home in well-watered plots of earth, right next to flowers that someone has planted, or else they force themselves up through little cracks in the sidewalk, edging and pushing and sidling through, just so they can signal, "Here I am, sun!" and breathe.

I'd discovered all this only a month before, having fled the house after Mother and Nana started yelling at each other about Father's idea that I should be sent away to some school for children like me. Needless to say, I was more than a little curious about what children like me were *like*. I'd known for years that I was different from most kids. Whenever Nana took me to the doctor or we went shopping for clothes at Born Yesterday or made our weekly trips to the library, I'd make a beeline for anyone close to my size, trying to help them with their voids by filling them in about Nana and Cook and Fayga and Grandfather and Mother and Jillily and Sister Flatulencia. They would usually do one of two things: laugh with their mouths but not their eyes (always a bad sign) or slowly back away with their fronts facing me, which sent me straight to the mirror when we got home again, worried that I'd turned into a dangerous dog that Nana would have to put down.

Actually, it was when I was trying to put down one particularly determined weed that I discovered weeds' true nature. It was the shiny kind, and I guess that was what first caught my eye as I ran toward Mother's invisible flowerbed. The weed was sparkling with dew and trying to get the sun's attention by sticking up straight and tall from a jagged crack in the path just beyond the first fountain. But then I noticed that it was trailing a second, ground-hugging shoot that seemed to be aiming itself in the same direction I was heading. I stopped and studied it until I was overcome by the inky pit-ish conviction that this might be some kind of alien martian plant with a particular appetite for David Austin roses. With a pounding heart, I tried to squish the weed back into the crack with the heel of my shoe. When that didn't work – my shoe was too clunky – I got down on my hands and knees and sort of shmooshed it back in.

But every day after that it managed to pop right up again. I know because I kept checking. As I may have mentioned, I was terribly fond of those roses. Worse still, each day the weed got thicker and stronger and harder to stuff back down. After a particularly bad flu kept me inside for a whole week, I bolted out to the garden as soon as I was better, only to discover that the weed, like one of Father's unwanted babies, had undergone a sudden growth spurt,

sending shoots way across the path and lacing itself into coarse knotty clumps that even the strongest of Uncle Bobs couldn't yank out.

I stood in the sun and considered my predicament. I pretended to look away, then whirled back around and eyed it suspiciously, but the weed didn't move; if anything, it looked like it was hunkering down, spooked, under the cloud of my long spiky shadow. I thought a little harder. Any martian weed in its right mind would never have used up all of its rose-eating energy tying itself into knots.

I knew about knots; sometimes in the middle of the night when I woke from a nightmare and Nana was snoring too heavily to hear my screams, I would try to curl my legs and arms into knots so that not one of the monsters hiding under the bed could grab hold of a finger or toe to yank me into the hole of everlasting emptiness. It occurred to me that maybe I had everything backwards. What if I was supposed to be that weed's friend and not its enemy? After all, it had given me no end of respite from the void.

After that, I made sure that my weed got plenty of attention. I snuck little plastic bags of water out to it when the weather was hot and dry, even though Uncle Bob complained the whole time that no pocket was meant to hold both an uncle and a water-balloon of a plastic bag.

You can imagine how I felt on the day I was doing my fastest skipping past the ugly fish in the first fountain, only to see a dark-skinned man up ahead of me, wearing an olive green uniform and an Uncle-Bob-ishly thick mustache (but without the curlicues) and holding a clear plastic bottle with something attached to it that looked suspiciously like a gun. And what do you think he was aiming his gun at but my weed!

I skipped even faster and yowled in my best imitation of Jillily when someone accidentally catches her swishy question mark of a tail in the swinging kitchen door. The man stopped what he was doing and stared at me. As I got closer, I saw a second plastic bottle, smaller and brown and gunless, sitting on the ground by his feet and giving off the most putrid smell – nothing that you'd ever want to fill *your* void with.

By this time, I was upset enough to disobey Nana's rule never to speak to a stranger. Eleven years old, and three-quarters as tall as Grandfather's doorjamb, I felt entitled to speak out against injustice. "What are you doing to my weed?"

The man looked very surprised and didn't answer right away, and I worried that in my distress I'd actually said something like *ugga umph ugga*. But then

he grinned, and I must confess there was something about the apostrophe mark dimples on each side of his smile that made me relax a teensy bit in spite of the sickening smell that enveloped us. Then he did something that surprised me – he knelt on one knee, setting his gun down on the path, and put the cap on the little brown bottle. The air got better right away. Pushing himself up, he said, "You must be Senator Robins' daughter. My name's Ignacio. Ignacio Hertado. I'm your new gardener." He started to reach out his hand, then seemed to think better of it and stuck it into his pocket.

I was still pretty worried about my weed, so I repeated my question.

He shrugged. "What do I do with any weed? I kill it. Your father has spent a lot of money to make a perfect garden. He wants me to keep it that way. No more weeds."

The enormity of what he was saying hit me like a blast of one of Sister Flatulencia's more sulphuric farts. So that was why Father was so determined to send me away to school. I wasn't perfect enough for his perfect house and his perfect garden. I looked around for something to bang my head on, but then I remembered my weed. "How can you even think of killing this weed? Do you have any idea how hard it's working to get where it needs to go?"

Ignacio's smile turned upside down and his face paled. He looked like he was going to fall over. Instead, he sat down, pulling his knees up to his chest. And then he cried. I had never seen a man cry. Mother, yes. Me, absolutely – there is nothing more satisfying than watching yourself cry. The uneven pattern of red splotching alone is well worth the price of admission.

I settled onto the grass next to Ignacio and asked why he was crying. It was then that he explained about the death of his wife Rosa. I explained about my weed. We came to a pretty good understanding, particularly when I assured him that Father never set foot on the grounds, except for photo-opportunities in front of the house.

"So." Ignacio brushed some dirt off his pant leg and shot me an appraising look. "The *muchacha* knows more than her years. But she also has a good heart and wants to help living things stay alive. That reminds me of something that happened to me when I was young myself – not so young as you, but still young. Want to hear a story?"

Was he kidding? Hadn't stories been invented expressly to fill the void? I nodded, and he began. "Everybody wants to come to this great country, but it's not easy for some of us. I came here knowing just a couple words of English, but I studied three nights a week for eight years at San Antonio College and

got my papers, thanks to the *amnistia*. I wanted to get Rosa her papers, too, but we only had enough money for a lawyer for one of us, and Rosa said it would be worse for us if I were sent back, since I was the one who made more money." Ignacio looked like he was going to cry again, but forced himself to go on. "I was sixteen when I came to this country. I came in secret and on foot with three others from my village near San Luis Potosi. Our walk was hard and long, but we still managed to have a laugh or two." He shook his head. "We didn't laugh when we saw a skeleton a couple of miles inside the Mexican side of the border. We knew it had been left there by *La Migra* to discourage people like us."

I was careful not to flinch. I wanted him to keep talking.

"We were crossing the desert in the middle of summer. We'd planned to come in May, but my cousin Francisco promised his wife Catalina that he would be there for the birth of their first child." Ignacio frowned. "It was bad. The child came out quiet and yellow. He didn't even live long enough for Catalina's milk to come down.

"It was hot as a griddle by the time we came to the border. I didn't like to complain, but my feet were bleeding from walking too far in shoes that were too tight. Only the devil himself knows how something like that can get the best of you. We knew we had to wait for night to make our crossing. I walked a little away from my *companeros*. That was when I saw *el coyote*." Ignacio scratched his nose with his thumbnail and looked off into the distance. "He wasn't the kind of coyote who takes your money and leaves you to find your own way across the desert, but an animal, a wild dog. This one was young, not much bigger than my two hands."

Ignacio showed me how small his coyote had been, putting one flat, open hand next to the other, and I couldn't help but notice the lines and calluses on his palms.

"I knew *el coyote* was there because of the sounds he made, like my little brother Pablocito, only louder. As I approached him, he growled, but I could tell from the iron smell that there was blood, and since he didn't move I knew he was caught in a trap. A trap meant for people like me."

Ignacio stood abruptly and started to pace back and forth. "I went back to our camp. Took my jacket and wrapped it around my arm." He pointed a finger at me. "Here's something you should know, *muchacha*. Never try to save a trapped animal with your own skin exposed. In its fear it will try to kill you." Ignacio was so intent on his story he didn't notice me shuddering. This was

like a suspense movie, the music driving you nearly to the edge of the void, but there's no way you're going to stop watching.

He went on. "I could tell he was a survivor. He'd been chewing at his leg to work himself free. It wasn't easy to loosen the wire that bit into his flesh. He snarled and tried to sink his teeth into me. But it was *his* blood that covered my jacket, not mine. I wondered if he'd be able to walk, with only three good legs and a fourth heavy with pain." Ignacio shook his head. "I didn't need to worry. Once I worked the wire off, that coyote ran like the wind."

All this time, I had been sitting very still, cross-legged, averting my eyes from the poison gun on the grass. As if he could read my mind, Ignacio grabbed the gun and the brown bottle. "What's the matter with me?" he scolded himself angrily. Then he shot me a sideways look. "I don't know what it is about you, *muchacha*. Easy to forget you're a kid. Forget what I said. I'd hate to think I gave you bad dreams."

But I told him I liked his story, especially the part about the coyote running free. Ignacio asked me if I'd like him to walk with me back to the house. We took a brief detour to the garden shed, which I'd never been inside before. There were so many bottles labeled *danger* and *poison* that I worried about their easy accessibility to my father, given how he felt about growing things that are flawed.

When we got back to the house, Ignacio insisted on going inside the back way. He gestured for me to go first. I saw Dhani at the sink, her rounded forehead shiny with sweat and rainbow colored soap bubbles popping in the air around her. She looked up at me and her face crinkled her welcome, but then her eyes went right over my head and I could see her dark lashes flutter like hummingbird wings. If I knew then what I know now, nearly four years later, I would have understood that those wingy eyelashes were a sign that Dhani felt a special feeling for Ignacio in her tweeter.

But at the time, all I wanted to do was run upstairs to Grandfather. It had finally dawned on me that, if I was sent away to school because of my imperfection, there would be no one left at home to watch over Grandfather, whose *ugga umph uggas* and increased tendency to pee in his bed might make some people think he was very flawed himself.

Grandfather was already stationed by the window when I reached his room. I figured he'd seen me and Ignacio through the window because he shot me an unusual number of *ugga umph uggas*, so I explained about saving my weed and the death of Ignacio's Rosa and *el coyote* running like the wind and how

important it was not to try to save a trapped animal without protecting your own skin. I knew that Grandfather appreciated Ignacio's warning, because he nodded vehemently and took my hand and looked so pointedly into my eyes that I had to look away. It was then that I noticed that, compared to Ignacio's hands, Grandfather's were white and small and covered with twisty pop-up veins, but in their favor they were as soft as the silk on Jillily's belly.

Luckily for me, the school idea died as surely as Ignacio's skeleton in the desert. It seemed that none of the schools Father visited accepted new students in the middle of the school year. So we continued our current arrangement, with me using the books Mrs. Perle gave me to learn as much as I could on my own.

But there are some things you'd rather not know. I may have been minus a whole host of ghostly grandmothers and unshrinkable uncles, but I'd never lost a Rosa. For several weeks, I tried going back in time and reinventing Ignacio's fate by imagining that Rosa had played a trick on everyone and purchased a round trip ticket for herself and flown safely down to Mexico and was so busy helping take care of Hilda's new baby that she'd forgotten to write. But inside I could feel myself joined like a Siamese twin with the real Rosa, for whom poverty and bad luck had purchased a one way ticket to one of the deepest layers of the void, where it's all black, but sticky, too, like flypaper, and no matter what you do you can't escape.

Acknowledgments

Many hands have assisted in the birthing of this novel. Its emergence would not have been possible without discerning commentary on various drafts and extraordinary transfusions of practical and emotional support from my keen-eyed, luminous-souled offspring Claire and Chris Heath, as well as "friends of Fleur" Harriet Friedman, Constance Crosby, Judie Harte, Robin Palmer, Jessica Trupin, Molly Jordan and Hawk Koch, the late Elizabeth Strahan, Deborah Howell, Sharon Weiner, Susan Bredhoff, and Bill Hornaday. I am indebted, as well, to the helpful advice and generous encouragement of Gilda Frantz, Michael Gellert, Naomi Lowinsky, Patricia Damery, Jeremiah Abrams, Deena Metzger, Jennifer Karson Engum, Tom Karson, Gene and Linda Karson, Barbara Horton, Siri Simran Khalsa, Judy Altman, Daniel House and Patty Micciche, Nancy Mozur, Cydny Rothe, Robin Wynslow, Jeanine Roose, JoAnn Culbert-Koehn, Maggie Gwinn, Kathie Clarke, Bryan Heath, Carolyn Raffensperger, Deborah Jiang Stein and the rest of my social media tribe, the stellar students of my Creative Daimon seminar, and the Women Analysts' Meeting of the C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles. Lou Beach's extraordinary artwork and Elizabeth Daniels' gifted photography have swaddled this baby in divine raiment, and few authors have been blessed by the kind of conscious midwifery offered by Fisher King's Mel Mathews and Patty Cabanas, to whom I will be eternally grateful. And since I've played so fast and loose with science in this work of fiction (for which I should be held solely and personally responsible), my gratitude is great to Ara Chutjian, who tried to ensure that I didn't entirely butcher the kaleidoscopic worldview of quantum physicists, those masterful riders of the waves of cosmic reality and human possibility of whom I stand in absolute awe.

Other Notable Fiction Titles For Your Consideration

Requiem by Erel Shalit
ISBN 978-1-9267150-3-2

Snakes by Patricia Damery
ISBN 978-1-926715-13-1

Timekeeper by John Atkinson
ISBN 978-0-9776076-5-5

Timekeeper II by John Atkinson
ISBN 978-1-926715-11-7

Dark Shadows Red Bayou by John Atkinson
ISBN 978-0-9810344-7-8

Chronicles of a Wandering Soul by Mel Mathews
Book 1: LeRoi ISBN 978-1-926715-33-9

The History of My Body by Sharon Heath
ISBN 978-1-926975-02-3

Main Street Stories by Phyllis LaPlante
ISBN 978-0-9813939-1-9

Feasts of Phantoms by Kehinde Ayeni
ISBN 978-0-9813939-2-6

Phone Orders Welcomed
Credit Cards Accepted
In Canada & the U.S. call 1-800-228-9316
International call +1-831-238-7799
www.fisherkingpress.com

You might also enjoy reading these Jungian publications

The Creative Soul by Lawrence Staples
ISBN 978-0-9810344-4-7

Guilt with a Twist by Lawrence Staples
ISBN 978-0-9776076-4-8

Enemy, Cripple, Beggar by Erel Shalit
ISBN 978-0-9776076-7-9

Divine Madness by John R. Haule
ISBN 978-1-926715-04-9

Farming Soul by Patricia Damery
ISBN 978-1-926715-01-8

The Motherline by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky
ISBN 978-0-9810344-6-1

The Sister From Below by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky
ISBN 978-0-9810344-2-3

Animus Aeternus by Deldon Anne McNeely
ISBN 978-1-926715-37-7

Becoming: An Introduction to Jung's Concept of Individuation
by Deldon Anne McNeely
ISBN 978-1-926715-12-4

Eros and the Shattering Gaze by Kenneth H. Kimmel
ISBN 978-1-926715-49-0

The Art of Love: The Craft of Relationship
by Bud & Massimilla Harris
ISBN 978-1-926715-02-5

Resurrecting the Unicorn by Bud Harris
ISBN 978-0-9810344-0-9

Deep Blues by Mark Winborn
ISBN 978-1-926715-52-0

Phone Orders Welcomed
Credit Cards Accepted
In Canada & the U.S. call 1-800-228-9316
International call +1-831-238-7799
www.fisherkingpress.com

FICTION

A delicious meal you won't want to end. Sharon Heath's sense of irony is both savory and sweet, transporting us into a world where the improbable is at once real and mysterious, and where the sparkly presence of a memorable girl named Fleur will remind you that true wisdom is born of innocence.

—Jeremiah Abrams, author of *The Dreamtime Journey* and *Meeting the Shadow*

I wanted to ride the merry-go-round world of Fleur's mind all day long, where science meets spirituality, where aloneness is not necessarily lost, and where being lost doesn't always mean we're alone. *The History of My Body* calls us to reconsider who's an outsider and who is not, and to look more deeply into the value of mentoring and friendship as we engage with our fate.

—Deborah Jiang Stein, author of *Even Tough Girls Wear Tutus*

A twist on the traditional coming-of-age story, *The History of My Body* is young Fleur Robins' own telling of her quixotic attempts to save her beloved grandfather amid a hectic household composed of a crusading pro-life father with a distaste for actual children, a helpless wreck of an alcoholic mother, a middle-aged nanny with all the finesse of a Mack truck, a flatulent ex-nun, and a peripatetic population of babies saved from "the devil abortionists." Is Fleur autistic or gifted? Most people find her more than a little odd, with her penchant for pinching and flapping, fondness for fanciful word play, and preoccupation with God and the void. When Fleur fails to revive a dying baby bird in her father's garden, she sets in motion a series of events that thrusts her into the center of a culture war over the reach and limits of the human imagination.

Sharon Heath is a Jungian analyst in private practice and a faculty member of the C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles. She has given talks in the United States and Canada on topics ranging from the place of soul in social media to gossip, envy, secrecy, and belonging. This is her debut novel.

ISBN 978-1-926975-02-3
90000>
9 781926 975023

To Order Call 1-800-228-9316
Toll Free in Canada & the US
International +1-831-238-7799
www.fisherkingpress.com