

T H E E N D
of
T H E P O I N T

A N O V E L

E L I Z A B E T H G R A V E R



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DEDICATION

for my daughters, Chloe & Sylvie & in memory of my father, Lawrence Stanley Graver, 1931–2010

EPIGRAPH

When I began to tell you children about the different ways in which plants sent their young out into the world, I had no idea that I should take so much time and cover so many pages with the subject. And now I realize that I have not told you one half, or one quarter, of what there is to tell.

You have learned that seeds are scattered abroad by animals that eat the bright cases in which they are packed, and by animals into whose hair or clothing they manage to fasten themselves.

You know that sometimes seeds are blown through the air by means of silky sails to which they are fastened, or else by their little wings.

You discovered that certain plants actually pushed their young from their cozy homes in no gentle fashion, much as a mother bird shoves her timid little ones from the edge of the nest.

And in the last chapter you read that occasionally seeds were floated by water to distant shores.

—Mrs. William Starr Dana, *Plants and Their Children*

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FIFTEEN AXES, FIFTEEN HOES

ON THE STILLEST, emptiest days, you can almost but not quite imagine the place when it was lived on by its earliest people, the trapping and fishing, tying and smashing, the waves the same, the rocks the same, the beaches too, but no army base, no bisecting road or fighter planes up from Otis Air Force Base, Coonamessett Red. No houses unheated, built for summer, or mansions with heat, Wi-Fi and central air. No blinking eye on a metal gate (no gate). Neither headstones nor written alphabet. Later: *Here Lies John Corne*. *Here Lies Tabitha Brown*. Here, a stone fishing weir at the foot of the creek. Here, a summer wet inside, a woman labors upright, giving birth. Did they dunk the baby in the creek, wrap him in a new red blanket, dress him, as he grew, in a pair of woolen breeches? One year, they had to find another place to grow him into a man.

A deed appointed to be recorded. New Plymouth. November the 29th 1652.

Know all men by these Presents, that I, Wesamequin, and Wamsutta, my son, have sold unto Mr. Wm. Bradford, Capt. John Standish, Thomas Southworth, John Winslow, John Cook and their associates . . . all the tract or tracts of Land lying three miles eastward from a river called Cushnett, to a certain Harbour called Acoaksett, to a flat Rock on the Westerward side of said Harbour . . . with all the rivers, creeks, meadows, necks and islands that lye in or before the same, and from the sea upward to go so high that the English may not be annoyed by the hunting of the Indians in any sort of their cattle. And in consideration hereof . . . We the above-mentioned are to pay to the said Wasamequin and Wamsutta as followeth: Thirty yards of cloth, eight moose skins, fifteen axes, fifteen hoes, fifteen pair of breeches, eight blankets, two kettles, one cloak, £2 in wampum, eight pair of stockings, eight pair of shoes, one iron pot and ten shilling in another Commodity.

One iron pot to fill with corn mush, or with a rabbit trapped, skinned, boiled down to bone. John Cooke, signatory, will be the first to farm the rocky, wind-scoured fields of Ashaunt, the Point bare for two miles long, half a mile wide, hardly an appendage, more a stub, a neck without a head. A narrow peninsula, as in *paene* (almost), as in *insula* (island). *Ashaunt*, “lobster crawling backward” Wampanoag. The shoes have brass buckles; each shoe fits either foot. The blankets are woolen, red. An acre for a shoe, two acres for a shilling. Fifteen axes, fifteen hoes. One by one, they bend, the sign. *In the presence of JOHN WINSLOW Jonathan Shaw JOHN COOK Samuel Eddy WAMSUTTA. + + h mark.*

To crane this far back bends hard the mind, fills it with things crude and small, with other things whose necks have been wrung dead. Also with nostalgia (and its kissing cousin, anger). The place breeds it—for this old house, this old couch, this old tribe, one-speed bicycles, driftwood natural distressed. At one time, a saltworks stood at the foot of the Point. At another, a bootlegging outfit. Table salt hardens here. Books mildew. Diaries flip open. *Private Property: Please Turn Around*

Sometimes arrowheads or bits of pottery and china show up in the churned soil of the few fields still farmed. How fine they would look set in the antique printing box above the bed made up with white Wamsutta sheets, to the left of the nightstand where the clock has stopped again.

On the Point you can still find bones—fox skulls, rabbit femurs, porpoise vertebrae and, on the shore in the crevice between two hard-lodged stones, a milk tooth lost by a child no longer a child. From May through October, swimmers—mostly women—swim, and men dunk, and children jump from the top railing of the dock. One year (and then the next and next) a bloom of jellyfish will come up in August from the Gulf of Mexico on a wave of warmth. To swim among them is to swim inside a living body, a dividing cell.

A deed appointed to be recorded. From a certain Harbour to a flat Rock.

Two kettles, one iron pot.

Bargain, theft or gift.

JANE'S ALL THE WORLD'S FIGHTING SHIPS AND AIRCRAFT

1942

I

THE ARMY HAD paved the road. It was the first thing Bea noticed, coming back with the Porters this summer when most other families stayed away—how the rutted dirt, grassy bumps, heaves and jolts were gone. Instead, a ribbon, gray and smooth. Mrs. Porter complained about it; the two older girls did too. People will speed now, army trucks. A gash on the land, said Helen dramatically. A wound. Bea didn't think so. Bea, sitting in the far back seat with Janie half on her lap and one leg asleep from the long trip, was glad for the change. Where are the soldiers, asked the older girls, craning and peering. Where are the U-boats, the enemy planes? If it wasn't safe, we wouldn't have come, their mother said, but her voice was vague; she was trailing her hand out the window, gulping in the sea air. And even Bea, who silently resisted coming every year—and especially this one—inhaled and felt the salt air rush, moist, into her throat.

Other things had changed too; you could see that right off, although the bigger changes, the ones that might make a life swerve or stay on course, did not show themselves until later on. There was a high wooden spotting tower as you drove onto the Point, where civilian volunteers took turns staring through binoculars at the sky. There was an army truck parked by the path down to the boat dock and farther down—shouting distance from the Porters'—a high wooden gate across the road, with wire fencing on either side. On one side of the gate, a soldier, pink-faced, boy-faced. On the other side, another soldier. Sit nice, Bea said to Janie, for the girl was awake now, leaning out the car window. Who are they, asked Janie. She was eight; it was 1942. She knew nothing about war, though something about suffering. No one you should talk to, Beatrice said.

At the house, it was almost like any other year, Stewart hauling Mr. Porter into his wheelchair, and inside, the three girls flying about, skipping, galloping, Janie running after Helen and Dossy, who went up the stairs, down the stairs, shouting like banshees while their mother went into the kitchen with the maids. The trunks had been sent ahead, the maids and Agnes too, along with Blackie, Janie's dog, who was yapping now, pushing his nose into people's palms. Bea went upstairs to her room, which was next to Janie's on the second floor. There, the white nubbed bedspread, the maple bed frame, the watercolor by Mrs. Porter's mother, where the rosehip looked less like a flower than like a startled open mouth. There, her trunk. She opened it, hung a few dresses in the corner cupboard, propped her photograph of her mother on the bureau, slid her shellflower supplies beneath the bed. Then she closed her window—the curtains were flapping, the room windblown—stopped in the bathroom to relieve herself and splash water on her face, peeked into Agnes's room (not there) and went back down.

Take the rest of the day to settle in, Mrs. Porter had said, but Bea wanted to collect Janie, get some food in her, brush her hair, scrub car grime from her face. All over the house, windows were open for airing. The wicker set was on the porch, the clothesline hung with sheets. In the living room, there was, as always, Mr. Porter wheeling himself to his spot by the picture window. There was the ocean outside, framed by the window so that it looked more like a painting than an actual sea. Bea caught

Mr. Porter's eye as she walked by, and he smiled at her. She liked him when he wasn't angry. He cared about things more than the usual man, and unlike his wife, he did not begrudge Bea her attachment to Janie and hand the child off to her at the same time. And like Bea, he lived far from where he had begun—for her, Scotland; for him, a body strong of limb.

"The girls are happy," she admitted to him, their laughter sounding out around the house as if the three of them had split and multiplied, Janie's voice ringing out the highest notes.

He nodded. He was a large man, his torso powerful, his legs like sticks. "Out of time," he said.

She did not know if he meant outside of time or running out of time, and she did not ask. Sometimes, even after all these years, she still felt the language here as foreign, hardly English at all, though the family itself, so full of nicknames, shortenings and codes, had become for her almost a second tongue.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Yes, Bea. Thank you."

"The girls must be hungry. I'll round them up."

They were always wild on Ashaunt. She needed to set a schedule right away, remind them of how things went in Grace Park. Tea at three, supper at six. Janie listened, most of the time. With the other two, Bea had more or less given up, and anyway they were mostly Agnes's, and hardly hers at that.

Outside, in front of the house, then, a tremendous rumble, a dreadful, rolling, grinding noise, and the children's laughter stopped. Bea looked out the window at two lorries going by, soldiers in the back and on the sideboards. For a moment, she felt a great surge—of fear or patriotism, excitement or remorse. Her brother, Callum, his right leg shorter than his left, was an air raid warden in Glasgow. Two of her cousins were in the war. Still, until this moment, it had all seemed, had all been, quite far away.

"What on earth—" said Mr. Porter, but by the time Bea got his wheelchair around, the lorries—trucks—were gone.

"IF IT WASN'T SAFE, WE wouldn't have come," but it wasn't safe, not safe enough, or else why would most of the other families have left their houses empty, Ashaunt a quarter as full as it usually was except for the end, which was overstuffed with men, machinery and guns? People disliked the noise, claimed Mrs. P., but the Porters came—Bea was quite sure of it—not because they were sure that it was safe, but because to be here was as close as they could get to Charlie, who was off at Army Air Corps training school in Texas; as soon as he earned his wings, he'd be shipped off. He had grown up in New Jersey except for school and summers, but if you asked him where he was from, he'd say Ashaunt. *Charlie's Beetle Cat is still at the boatyard and needs to be put in; Don't carry off the piece—that's Charlie's favorite puzzle*, and his room was kept ready and empty, his fishing poles in the corner, his Yale pennant and a photo of his girl, Suky, on the wall. He was their firstborn and only boy, handsome, charming, fast and funny, and he loved this place as nowhere else. Bea was not fond of him, especially—he brought the devil out in the girls and did not pay her much mind except to tease—but even she was startled when she came upon his empty sand shoes in a closet; even she saw, in the faces of the youngest soldiers on the Point, Charlie's face.

Every day, the moment the postman came, Mrs. Porter was at the box. Often, a letter arrived, and once a week or so, a phone call. When Mrs. P. got a letter, she took it off to read it before sharing it with her husband and daughters. One day, she passed Bea and Janie on the stairs—they coming down, she going up. Her hands were empty; the postman had just come and gone. She met Bea's eyes. "I'm grateful you don't have any," she murmured. It was a terrible moment, one Bea would never quite

forgive her for, though as the years passed, they became in their way dear friends.

Suffer your tongue, Bea wanted to tell her. It was something her grandmother used to say. But she said nothing, Janie said nothing. They were alike that way. It was nearing lunchtime, but Bea took a hunk of bread, two apples and some cheese down the path to the beach and did not scold Janie for soaking her hem as she bent over the tide pools. Up above them, the sky was empty. In the distance the Elizabeth Islands lay green and low. Skip a stone with me, said Janie. Her brother knew how, her sisters too. Bea's brother had also known how. She, in her memory, had never tried. Together she and Janie found flat stones, bent their wrists in, flicked and watched the stones sail over the water and sink down.

"No matter," said Bea.

"Yes, matter." Janie flung a stone over her shoulder in the wrong direction, where it disappeared among its kind.

"You'll learn," Bea said.

"You've got to teach me."

"Aye."

If not Bea, then who? Janie's sisters ignored her, mostly. Picked her up now and then, whirled her or bossed her, then ran off to places where she was not, under Bea's watch, allowed to go. They disappeared down paths. They went up to the attic, where it was too hot to breathe, and came down dressed like tramps or vamps and laughing too hard, for show.

"You can't." And now there was a hard fury in Janie's eyes. Now there was a blue-black rage she'd never let her parents see. "You can't. You don't know how."

Never enough, never enough, and why should it be, water not blood, wages not a womb. Except that Janie loved Bea, and in no casual way, and Bea knew this—had always known it—to be true. Except that the love she felt for this child was the thickest love, aside from what she'd felt for her own mother, that Bea had ever known.

II

THE OTHER TWO untethered, set free: it was what Helen lived for, and why, as spring in Grace Park showed itself each year crocused and forsythiaed, the changes registered for her not as themselves but as signals of migration toward Ashaunt. She was, by temperament (how often had she heard it?), high-strung, restless girl, and thus subject to constant chiding—from Agnes and Bea, from her teachers. Don't leave a trail of clothes and shoes and broken-backed books; go to bed before midnight; organize your desk—you are no longer a child! Finish finish finish what you've begun! Live up to your potential (her end-of-year marks were high in some subjects but not in all, and she had not gotten Best in Class). Even her mother, who largely left her children's manners to the nurses, found her daughter's energy an irritant: stop *circling* (Helen walked as she talked, walked as she read. When forced to sit, she jiggled; her right leg had a little motor of its own). Or worse, her mother saying almost desperately, Could you just stop *talking*, darling, and Helen's eyes would prick with angry tears.

Of all the adults, only her father, locked in his wheelchair, seemed unbothered by her, and only he could stop her in her tracks. A tidbit from the newspaper, she'd offer forth to him, or a Shakespearean sonnet she had memorized, then feel hope rising: Say it, Daddy—*Sharpest knife in the drawer*, or even just *Good girl*—his eyes resting, settling (and so she'd settle too) on her face. Or not. Increasingly, as his body warred against him, as the war warred, his dark moods intensified. If no response came from him, her own seep of darkness, but she did not have to stay with it; she could leave him there, stuck in his corner. She was young, she had legs, she could run.

On Ashaunt it was first to the water with Dos, no matter how cold it was. Most years they stripped naked at the dock, but this year, soldiers, so they swam in their underclothes, then darted to the house to the tub with its familiar ring of rust, water sputtering out cold, then lukewarm, the two of them peeling off their clothes, stepping in (when had her sister gotten so pretty, with her mop of ringlets and little sorbet mounds of breasts?). With the water finally right, they were jostling for space, and soon again out, into peg-leg trousers and summer tops. "Teal Rock," Helen said, and again they were off, past Janie who called out, to their bikes in the garage, down the road to the path behind the Stricklands', to the rock with its cliff faces, and so—finally—they climbed.

There at the top, they stood first in the wind, then back on the path where huckleberry bushes bloomed white-pink among poison ivy and the air was nearly still. Only then did they stop to catch their breath.

"I hope he doesn't die," Dossy said abruptly.

Helen bent to pick a dried-up lily of the valley and inhale its faint scent. "He's in Texas, Dos. Not in a foxhole somewhere. Gosh. You're as bad as Mummy."

"You don't worry?"

"Not a bit."

Their brother—also their father—thought worry was for sissies. This was, after all, a just and necessary war, and Charlie wanted nothing more than to reach the stage when he could pilot his own plane and get shipped out. She would not rend her garments and keen like a woman in a Greek tragedy because her brother was at Army Air Corps training camp. If anything, she envied him. To learn to fly a plane, perhaps even help change the course of history. To fly! Still, from the moment they'd arrived she'd felt his absence everywhere, even more than in Grace Park. She missed his fun, that was it—missed how he'd have told them to quit making a scene about his being away. She missed how *happy* he made people; he was lighter than the rest of them, fleet. He was cocky, headstrong and only sporadically interested in school; still, somehow, he was the golden boy and impossible for even her to resent. When she was six and he ten, he had snuck her out on a sailboat to Penikese Island, just the two of them. He was the one who had named her Hellion. He was madly in love, now, with Suky, her best friend, making Helen at once linchpin and third wheel. His letters were filled with jokes, patriotism and cheery complaints about the food. All of them wanted and did not want him to earn his wings.

In front of them, the sea was ruffled by a light wind; a lobster boat passed in the distance. You could look and never even know there was a war.

She turned to Dossy. "Let's go meet the soldiers at the gate."

"Really? Just like that?"

"Sure. They must be lonely and bored, out here for months on their own. It's our duty to cheer them up."

"What will we say?"

"Good day, good soldiers." Helen curtsied in her trousers. "Welcome to Ashaunt!"

"But they're already here. We've only just arrived."

"So? It's ours." She scowled. "Do you think there's one passably handsome or smart fellow in the bunch?"

"You may not fall in love and leave me."

"I never would. They're just ordinary boys from anywhere. Foot soldiers, not like Charlie. You're the one I should worry about."

"Me? I'm fourteen!" When Dossy laughed, curls blowing, dimples creasing, she looked like a cross between Shirley Temple and Rita Hayworth.

"You're too pretty," Helen told her. "And you'd wander off with anyone."

They started down the rock and along the kelp-strewn beach, where sand fleas rose in swarms every step.

"We could bring Janie too, as an icebreaker," said Helen. "Everyone loves a little girl."

"Janie? Over Bea's dead body."

"Bea too, then. Soldiers love dead bodies."

"*Don't*," said Dossy. "You scare me when you talk like that."

Helen sprinted ahead. At the start of the path she paused to wait, but as soon as Dossy saw her stop she stopped too, waiting until she started up again, and so Dossy matched her pace—start stop, start stop—the distance between them remaining stubbornly the same. They reached the road, continuing on like this, and might have kept it up the whole way home were it not for the army truck approaching from the end of the Point. Dossy broke into a trot and Helen stopped, so that by the time the truck passed, they were standing together, arms linked, ready with a smile and a wave.

III

IT WAS A week into summer, as Bea returned from swimming with Agnes, that she met Smitty for the first time.

“Good afternoon, young ladies.” He took off his cap.

They laughed. Beatrice was thirty-six, Agnes thirty-four.

“Good afternoon, young soldier,” Agnes said, bolder, prettier. As a girl, she had won medals for her dancing, the Sword Dance, the Highland Fling.

The soldier was tall and broad, red-faced from the sun, and no boy himself from the look of him. “Oh,” he said. “Blimey! Not from these parts?”

“Scotland,” said Agnes. “And yourself?”

“Me? Shipped to this hunk of rock from Saint Louis, Missoura.” He turned to Bea. “And you miss?”

Bea wore a towel coat over her bathing suit. Her white rubber swim shoes stuck to the paved road. Her hair—always her best feature, thick and brown—was damp; the swim cap never kept the water out. The rest of her was pink and salty, a slab of fish. Behind them, the maids were coming along; they always swam at the dock at the same hour, and those who could not swim watched. “Me? Scotland, well.”

“Better to be here right now,” he said. “You watch the little blond girl, don’t you? And the older ones? They come to the gate.”

She nodded. The maids, all four of them, had caught up now, hovering. Their hour break was almost up.

“Cute kid, the little one—reminds me of my niece,” he said. “Bring her by when I’m on gate duty. I’ll take you to the P.X. when I get off. She can pick out a candy bar. You ladies too.”

Bea shook her head. “I thought . . . the sign says—”

“You’re neighbors, I can get clearance in a flash. Anyway, we’re all in this together, aren’t we?”

He looked at her, then. Later, she would have to wonder why, with the flock of them all there, it was she that he fixed on. She should have said no, the child’s parents would never allow it. She should have stayed on her own side of the fence. Instead, her mouth twitched into a small smile.

“Sergeant Raymond Smith.” He tipped his cap. “Smitty. And you?”

Her voice was thin. “Beatrice. Bea.”

“She’s Nurse Beatrice Emily Grubb,” Agnes said, and the others rocked with laughter.

“A nurse?” he asked.

Stanching the blood, cleaning the stumps of soldiers. It was the most important work, and in another life she might have done it well, but she was grateful not to have to.

“Children’s nurse,” she said. “Janie’ll be needing me. It’s time I get back.”

“Jane’s all the world’s fighting ships and aircraft,” said Smitty.

She had no idea what he meant.

IV

SPEED BONNIE BOAT *like a bird on the wing, onward the sailors cry, carry the lad that's born to be king over the sea to Skye.* Her grandmother had sung it to her mother, and her mother had sung it to Bea (no matter that none of them had ever been to Skye), and Bea sang it to Janie when the child came to her in the night and slipped into bed and asked for nothing, just turned her back and lay, waiting for a cuddle and a song. The songs rose of their own accord from Bea's half-waking body: *Can you no hum your weeping-o, ah the wee birds are sleeping-o . . .* Once Janie was asleep, Bea would lift her up, take her back to her own room—it was getting harder as the girl grew bigger—and tuck her in. In Grand Park, she had to walk out her bedroom door, into the hall and through Janie's door to return the child, but on the Point their rooms were connected by an inside door, and each also had a door to the hall. They never spoke of these visits in the morning, so that sometimes Bea wondered if Janie even remembered that she'd come.

When Bea was small and woke with a fright, it was her mother she'd gone to, crawling out of bed and squeezing past her brother's trundle into the kitchen where her parents lay heavily sleeping. There, she would lean through the curtain and prod at her mother, who would heave toward the middle to let her in. Her father always smelled of sweat and railway yard, her mother of soap and Colman's Starch, and one night Bea came upon him moaning and atop her—she looked, then looked away—and the next day her mother told her she was old enough to stay on her own all night. And so she did, that night and the next and forever after, until she grew up and her mother grew sick, and then her father moved in beside her brother and Bea slept with her mother in the kitchen bed, which seemed to grow bigger as her mother grew smaller. And then it was pennies on her mother's eyes and rest in peace and ache.

It was not that Janie's mother did not love her. Was it? No, there was love there, but it was of a most peculiar kind. Now and then, Bea would catch Mrs. P. stopping mid-stride to stare at her youngest daughter as the girl sat drawing on the porch or ran across the front lawn. And she read to her, Mrs. P. did, from stories about princesses and India, and books by Mr. Porter's own mother, who wrote about flowers and ferns. This, the reading, took place in the summer during Bea's swimming hour. After lunch, Bea would bring Janie to her parents' bedroom, where Mrs. P. had often drawn the curtains halfway shut and was sitting on the loveseat in the half-light, waiting.

"Hello, Janie." And Mrs. Porter would pat the space beside her.

"Hello, Mummy."

"What shall we read today?"

"You choose."

Have a nice swim, Mrs. P. would say, or Thank you, Bea, or sometimes nothing, turning to Janie and a book. Did they talk or just read, mother and daughter, during this odd, still hour to themselves? Bea didn't know, but she could tell that for Janie, this was the best time of the day, the thing to wait for, though Janie (so thoughtful already, Bea had seen to that, and some children could be so selfish

unkind) knew better than to say it aloud to her nurse.

Bea would leave them, then, together in the bedroom they'd added on off the living room when Mrs. P. could no longer take the stairs. She'd walk away, feeling light and free but also wobbly, untethered like a balloon let loose from its string. Then to Agnes and the others, the chatter and water, the sea's cold suck. She liked to swim, especially early in the season, the shock of it around your ankles as you descended the ladder at the dock, the way, as you went in farther, it became the thing you were used to, and it was, of course, the same water as the water on the other side. At Arbroath, where they'd taken the train to her cousins' when she was young, the sea had been colder still, and yet they'd gone in, laughing and squealing (all save her father, who stayed on shore) as the cold hit hard.

From Bea, Janie learned to lace her shoes and plait her hair, to knit and crochet, to sing in tune. She learned bread and butter before bread and butter and jam, and *opsy-daisy hold your nose, swallow hard and down she goes*, and about the Sandman. She learned that a fresh egg sinks to the bottom of a glass of water and a middling egg floats halfway down and a bad egg floats on top. She learned that after breakfast every day, you must go upstairs and do your business, and if your system is sluggish, milk and magnesia will set you right, and if that doesn't work, an enema. She learned to stand up straight and walk beautifully, as if carrying a creel. She learned steadiness and manners and how to remove herself if her father was in a storm, and how not to follow her sisters—sometimes she learned this—in mischief.

Gay things too, she learned—to skip rope, chanting, “*Old Mrs. Mason broke her basin on the way to London Station*”; to play with her doll, Rose—really play, not just plunk the doll in its cot. Bea helped Janie fold a blanket into a swaddle, and they'd fill a baby bottle with water, and by the time Janie was seven she could do basting and running stitch on Rose's clothes, and they'd set up tea parties, inviting the teddies and dolls that Helen and Dossy had abandoned right out of the box. Sometimes Bea found herself talking for an hour in the voice of a bear or a doll. She'd rarely done this kind of playing as a girl, and to do it now brought her a furtive happiness: the teacups filled with mint tea, the growling American or high-English voices coming from her mouth, and (mostly) the pleasure it gave Janie to pretend like this, to pretend with her.

From her mother, Janie learned, what? The stories in those books. They were nearly all about orphans, from what the child told Bea. An orphan from India, an orphan from Switzerland. One girl slept in a hayloft; another heard screams coming from a locked-up room. They seemed unlike the stories for a child, but Janie spoke of them matter-of-factly and with great interest, so who was Bea to say? From her grandmother's books, Janie learned the names of plants and flowers: beach peas and heal-all, Plymouth gentian, ladies'-tresses orchid. Janie pointed the plants out to Bea and told her how the apple was a jewel case for the seeds inside and the burrs on her dress were for carrying seeds to their new home, like a tramp stealing a ride from a train. You could make one from your shells, she'd tell Bea when they came across a wildflower, not understanding that Bea didn't aim for her shellflowers to look real, and burrs were for picking off.

From her mother, Janie learned to play Charades and Murder in the Dark, to run three-legged races to spot hermit thrushes, towhees (Mrs. P. said the towhee's call was “Drink your tea!”; Bea said it was “Brush your teeth!”), and tell the prairie warbler from the Maryland yellowthroat and the great horned owl from the barred owl by their calls. She learned to think always of one's friends, for Mrs. P. had a great many friends, and when they came (which was not often, that summer), she flitted like a sparrow gathering seeds. From her mother, Janie learned cheerfulness—from Bea too—and never to mention her father's wheelchair or the sister who had died. Over the mantels, both here and in New Jersey, hung oil portraits of that sister, a gold-and-blue girl who had died in her sleep just months after Helen

was born. Her name (somehow Bea knew) had been Elinor, but no one ever said her name. From her mother and Bea both, Janie learned about keeping one's word. From her mother, she learned to save aside her old toys for the poor children in Newark and go to the store before Christmas to pick out a doll for a child Santa might forget. From Bea, she learned about Scotland, how beautiful it was. Twenty shades of green, Bea told Janie. Twenty shades of green and little lambs.

From whom did Janie learn more? Well, look at her sisters, who'd had a series of nurses before Agnes and more of both their parents than Janie ever did. It wasn't just good behavior that Helen and Dossy were lacking in. There was ferocity to their actions, an unhealthy desire to be seen. They ran naked across the lawn and no one even noticed. They went camping out of doors one night (they couldn't have been more than seven and nine) and left a note—*we ran away to sleep outside don't worry dont you wish you knew where we where, HMP, DCP*—and their mother said, Oh, they'll come in when they're cold or eaten by bugs. Bea remembered it; she'd been holding Janie, feeding her from a bottle, and she'd raised the baby for a burp and thought, Not you.

In the early days, during the long summers on Ashaunt, what she had mostly done with Janie was walk. She'd tie a bonnet on the girl, settle her in her pram and start down the road, greeting anyone who said hello to her: the Porters' cousins and second cousins; the stable boy leading the ponies; the dark-haired French governess one family brought along, so pretty she turned heads; the local men come to fish; the farmer hauling salt hay for his fields. A child needed daily fresh air, and after Janie learned to walk, Bea would fasten her to a harness she'd bought at a shop in Orange and take her out. People thought it strange at first ("Good Lord, you've put my monkey on a leash!" said Mr. P.), but no one told her not to do it, and a child could dart before a car or horse, and anyway Janie liked the contraption, raising her arms for it, crowing "Go!" Sometimes they'd meet up with another nurse, Agnes would come with the big girls on their bicycles, or Charlie would appear suddenly, swoop upon his sister (Bea had to drop the harness, give her up) and fling her to the sky. Ashaunt, so narrow across, was nearly two miles long, and Bea and Janie would often walk the length of it with Blackie on their heels, stopping to pick blackberries. On sunny mornings, they met up with other nurses and children at Garrisons—the only sandy spot, the rest a pile of rocks—and spend an hour there before lunch and nap.

Then Janie turned four, then five, and now (how fast it happened, even as it felt like several lifetimes ago that Bea had arrived at the family's door) was eight. She was at school nearly all day during the year. She had a best friend, secrets, a diary with a lock. Moods. She had arithmetic homework that Bea left to the tutor to sort out. She sometimes grew bored with long summer days with her nurse, yet she was too young—and for this Bea was grateful—to keep up with her sister. "Where is everybody?" she kept asking that summer, for there were few children about, just the Andersons, Stricklands and Childs come down for a stretch, and each with only boys.

Let's sew a pillow for Rose, Bea would suggest. Let's go for a swim. Or walks and baking, checkerboard shell crafts; like a suitor, she offered things forth. Sometimes Janie would frown or shake her head, but other times she'd sit by Bea and stitch her rows, or jump her checker piece across the board, or walk (skip, scooter, jump rope, as Bea hurried breathless behind) along the road. Once in a while Janie would even ask Bea to play Rose and Teddy, or Rose, Annabel and Laura, though not if her sisters were around. Still, it was not like other years when they'd been, well, *in love* was the way Bea had once described it to Agnes, then wished she had not, for something—jealousy? judgment?—had crossed Agnes's face. Agnes was, of the two of them, the more professional, the crisper; if you didn't know her, you might even be afraid. *In love*, but in the easiest, most companionable way.

Lately, Janie's blue eyes had darkened in color, becoming cloudier, almost bruised and who could

blame the child, with everything going on and the push and pull of growing up besides? But what do? ~~And did anyone notice? Janie might have been a half-tamed hedgehog for all her parents seemed~~ to worry about her whereabouts or even Bea's role in looking after her. Set out a bowl of milk; keep an eye out for foxes. But she would grow wild, but she would turn rude and prickly like her sisters. The family would (as was their right; still it felt like thievery) claim her as their own.

When Bea was Janie's age, she had minded her brother each afternoon while their mother finished her shift. She had put the ticket in the window, spread newspaper on the floor for the coal man, taken Callum round to the shops and Green, done everything but iron and cook, as her mother did not let her near the stove. At her grandparents' in the country, she'd fetched water from the well, the bucket attached to a metal hoop that kept the splashing from your legs. In town, she had run messages to her mother's sister in one direction, to her father at the goods yard in the other. She's built like a boy, her father said once in front of Callum, insulting both of them at once. Bea had known how to swim—her mother, who'd lost a sister to drowning, had seen to that—and Janie was a strong swimmer herself though she was not to go in alone (about this, both Bea and her parents stood firm). At eight, Janie still listened, but there was an out-of-sorts-ness to her that summer, an itchiness, that later Bea would view as partly her own fault—first, for hovering too close, then for letting her attention split in two.

YEARS LATER, BEA, AGNES AND MRS. P. were drinking sherry in Bea's room before lunch—it had become a habit they all looked forward to—and that summer came up, and Bea confessed that she worried she'd not watched Janie closely enough and had let things slip a bit. Jane was twenty-four by then, married to Paul Strickland, a boy she'd met on the Point, expecting her first child.

"There was a war on," said Mrs. P. Just that.

Perhaps it was forgiveness Bea was looking for. Or perhaps a part of her wanted to tell the whole story; even Agnes never knew it all. But it was not her way to hold the past up to the light, any more than it was Agnes's or Mrs. P.'s. "I hope she doesn't name the baby something dreadful," said Mrs. Porter cheerfully, and they went on to talk about nursery colors as Bea knitted a sweater—yellow, with white edging—for Janie's baby. "It will be a boy," said Agnes (a girl, it would be, named Elinor). Together, they drained their glasses, then rose for their separate lunches.

There was a war on—as if that explained everything.

And in a way, perhaps, it did.

V

IT WAS A SUMMER of waiting, eyes fixed on the sky. Grandmother Porter had given Helen a pair of birding binoculars for her sixteenth birthday, and she wore them around her neck, training the lenses on sky, sea or in between. My spyglass, she called the binoculars, and though she'd entered the summer with an interest in bird-watching, it evaporated before the twin pulls of men and war. You could look and look so hard you thought you spotted something ominous, but then the plane behind the clouds would be another cloud, the hump rising in the water a rock made visible by low tide. You could, if situated right (her bedroom window worked; so did the bow window in the attic), aim the binoculars at the soldiers manning the gate—here, one scratching under his arm, there, one cleaning his gun as he chewed gum. “He has a gun?” Dossy would grab the binoculars, try to focus, close one eye and try again. “He’s a *soldier*,” Helen would say, though her pulse had sped up, as much for the hands on the gun as the gun itself, as much for the face, which had turned in her direction while she watched, rotating toward her as if the soldier (handsome in a blocky, ordinary way) felt the heated pressure of her gaze.

One afternoon, Bea, Janie at her heels, caught Helen and Dossy at the landing window with the binoculars.

“Let me see!” Janie lunged forward.

Bea caught her by the collar, held her back. “Put that away, girls.”

“Why?” Dossy asked.

“For one thing, it’s extremely rude.”

“Not to mention illegal,” said Helen.

“Illegal?” Bea’s voice went high. She was beautifully easy to shock.

Helen shrugged. “It’s all classified information over there. But don’t worry—we’ll use what we discover for the common good.”

Bea reached for the binoculars. Helen ducked away, and Bea turned to call down the hall. “*Agnes!*”

“Call in the troops,” Helen muttered.

Agnes appeared from her room. “Well. What’s all this about?”

“These two”—Bea jutted her chin toward them—“are spying on the soldiers.”

“Give me those glasses,” Agnes said.

Dossy, who’d gotten hold of them, dropped them deftly around her neck. “Don’t you love bird-watching? I think I saw a scarlet tanager.”

“I’ll tell your father,” said Agnes.

Helen blanched, but she would not let on. “Daddy? That we’re aiding the war effort? Just wait—we might spot a submarine. We’ll catch a spy. Heinrich Heidelberg. Or Masako Fujiwaka.” She liked the sound of German and Japanese, read aloud the words in the newspaper, collected them in her war scrapbook.

“Who?” Janie asked, panicked. “Where?”

“This war,” Bea said, her face gone pale, “is not a game.”

“Her brother’s in it,” Agnes explained. “On the other side. Where there’s bombings.”

“The other *side*?” Janie shrieked. “Your brother’s a *German*?”

“The other side of the *sea*, love.” Bea’s voice shook. “He’s an air raid warden in Glasgow. You know, the picture in my room? The little boy? That’s Callum, my only brother. It’s just the two of us I’ve told you about him.”

Janie turned to her sisters. “Bea’s only brother is in the war!”

“Your only brother’s in it too,” Helen told her. Bea had never liked Charlie; they all knew it. She liked girls better than boys, Dossy better than Helen, Janie better than the Queen of England, which she said a lot. “And rising up the ranks. He could get shipped out.”

“Enough.” Agnes flew into motion, ushering Helen toward her bedroom. “Helen, really—you’ve got a queer idea of a joke.”

Helen sprang away and slipped sideways into her room, where she slammed the door and leaned on it, though no one was trying to get in. A joke? What none of them could see was that she was dead serious—serious in how she watched the sky and sea, serious in how she wrote to her brother every single day, serious in how she followed the news. The murders in Lidice. The lists of casualties. She had begun reading the newspaper last year in an attempt to impress her father, but it quickly became more than that. If she were old enough, she would sign up to be a lady reporter or join the WAC.

She cracked the door open, expecting them still to be there, but they had disappeared, even Dos. She took off the binoculars, let her skirt drop to the floor and crawled into bed, where, after a run of muffled, cleansing tears, she fell asleep.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, SHE WOKE to a dusk so dense it was hard to make out your own hand and turned on the nightstand lamp to read. She was partway through *A Farewell to Arms*, and while the book cover—a man and woman naked from the waist up—had announced the romance (which she expected, having seen the movie), it was the bits about war that held her rapt. A world limned and burnished. A road. Leaves. Bodies (wounded, dying, longing, healing, dead). Trenches. Big ideas. The book was full of things she could almost but not quite say, nor even quite think, so that reading it was like watching her own mind—a better, smarter, more worldly version of it—cross the sea and come back to report. “All thinking men are atheists,” said the young lieutenant, which seemed potentially true to her, though awful, but what then of her prayers, for she’d begun praying some nights before bed, a new thing, a secret she kept even from Dos. Her prayers were childish—she saw that now—once too specific and too general (*Let Charlie go to active duty AND keep him safe. Let us win the war*), and worse, arrogant, for even if God existed, why should He listen to her, she who knew nothing who’d been nowhere and made of war an attic game and thought her own brother the only brother in the world (it turned out Bea had one. Nearly everybody did). As for love, she had always felt it to be—like Frederick Henry had too at first—a sort of game, but as she read on, she saw that it was not a game for Frederick and Catherine; it was something else, a religion almost, and so was God love, sweating and tangling, in the bodies of a man and woman together? The thought upset her; she had always thought God, if there was such a thing, would be spread across the sky or, if embodied, be a giant brain of sorts, quivering, brilliant and alone.

I loved to take her hair down, Helen was reading as her mother entered without knocking and went straight for the windows, lowering shades with a flick of her wrist and a snap. Helen slid the book under the bedclothes. While her parents didn’t much bother with what she read, to be interrupted no

felt like both a risk and an affront.

~~“I was outside and saw your light,” her mother said. “You need to *think*, darling. If you don’t pull down the dim-out shades, the soldiers can see you clear as day!”~~

“How thrilling for them.” Helen propped herself up. “The shades are so the *enemy* can’t see us. And our ships, which get lit against the coastline if there’s light on shore.”

She had broken a central rule from “Additional Restrictions If Your House is Visible from the Sea”—and she the one constantly to remind the others. She had pasted the flyer in her war scrapbook where she kept every little thing—ration cards, newspaper clippings, the stamps from Charlie’s letters. *People living in these areas visible from the sea must not only shade those windows and doors visible from the sea, but they must not allow any light to shine upward from any window, skylight, or lightwell, no matter what direction they face. Like everybody else, you must keep shades drawn as low as the bottom of the lowest light in the room.*

Her mother stepped over her skirt. “Get dressed for dinner, please.” She peered at Helen, who had slipped back under the sheet. “What is it? Are you ill?”

“I’m fine.”

“Then what?”

“I’m just lost in my book. And not hungry.”

“Reading is not an excuse to mangle in bed at dinnertime.”

Somebody else’s mother, or even Helen’s mother at another time, might have phrased it differently—*please come down, we’d like your company*—or offered to have Lizzy bring up dinner on a tray. Somebody else’s mother might have set herself on the edge of the bed, kicked off her shoes and brought her feet up onto it, sunk into a pillow, asked *what are you reading, what are you thinking about?* or said *it’s not easy, is it, to have Charlie away, to have Daddy ill, to be sixteen?* Her mother stood, neither going nor staying, and then, in a motion so fluid that Helen didn’t see it coming, flipped the covers back, leaving both Helen and the book exposed.

“Why are you hiding that? It’s”—her mother picked up the novel— “Hemingway. *A Farewell to Arms*. Why are you hiding Hemingway?”

“I wasn’t.”

“I suppose the cover is racy. I didn’t like that book—it’s my copy, you know. I found it cynical, and the ending too sad, in a hopeless, unredeeming sort of way. Sad for no good reason.”

The ending of the movie was oddly dim in Helen’s mind. Birds flying, music swelling, Helen Hay and Gary Cooper in an embrace. “I didn’t think it was so sad.”

“You’ve finished it? And you still won’t come to dinner?”

“I saw the movie.” Charlie had taken her, with a friend he’d brought home from Yale. Helen’s elbow had grazed the friend’s elbow all the way through, which had been thrilling—to watch two lovers while her skin grazed a college boy’s skin—though in daylight the boy was pompous, his skin too pale, his lips too red.

“Does she die in childbirth in the movie?” her mother asked.

“Mummy! You’ve ruined it!”

“I’m sorry.” Her mother held the book against her chest, the front cover turned in. “Now you can read something else.”

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