

A Girl Named Zippy

The Solace of Leaving Early

Something Rising (Light and Swift)

She Got Up Off the Couch

The Used World



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This one is for Scott Browning

and

*for Robert Rodi,
with my love and gratitude*

Contents

CHAPTER ONE: Two Dogs

CHAPTER TWO: Caduceus

CHAPTER THREE: Pluto

CHAPTER FOUR: Oneirocritica

CHAPTER FIVE: Puella Aeterna

CHAPTER SIX: Revenants

CHAPTER SEVEN: Nekyia

CHAPTER EIGHT: Kerberos

CHAPTER NINE: Eros

CHAPTER TEN: Familiaris

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Hekate

Acknowledgments

Each dream is a child of Night, affiliated closely with Sleep and Death, and with Forgetting (Lethe) all that the daily world remembers. Dreams have no father, no call upwards.

—JAMES HILLMAN, *The Dream and the Underworld*

“I did this,” says my Memory, “I cannot have done this,” says my Pride and remains inexorable. In the end —Memory yields.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil*

It was an easy birth, once it had been accepted, and I was younger.

—Martha, in EDWARD ALBEE'S

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

IODINE

Two Dogs

Dream Journal

I never

I never had sex with my father but I would have, if he had agreed. Once he realized how I felt he never again let me so much as lean against him while we watched television. I was never allowed to rest my head in his lap, or hold his hand. We gave up our late-night dancing in the kitchen to his favorite records; we stopped camping together. He took away my old hunting rifle, and when I rode behind him on his motorcycle I wasn't allowed to wrap my arms around his waist anymore. I had to let them lie on my own thighs, even when taking sharp corners.

Colt Pennington, Colt a childhood nickname that stuck. He was tall and leggy and too thin. There's just the one photograph of him as a boy, I think—he's standing in a dirt yard in Kentucky with two other boys his age. They are all tanned and barefoot and their hair has been buzzed for the summer, and Colt's head is turned, he's laughing at something one of the other boys has said. Just the one picture, and his head is turned. This is a perfect example of, I don't know, I forget, something about...Doors that close? Doors that were already closed before anyone knew they were open? The three of them, Colt and his two friends, don't look like boys today, in the same way child soldiers from the Civil War are foreign looking, so long lost. That is another example but I don't know what the word is.

His Gramaw Pennington swept the dirt yard but no one else did. She was the last of her kind in this family, out there swishing a broom around in the fine, dry soil, making patterns. The Last Dirt Yard Sweeper, right up until she killed herself with ant poison. I'm unclear on the details. Colt's mother, Juna? Hold a broom? No. There are a couple of pictures of her around here somewhere; Colt kept them. Juna was a cliché of the worst sort which I know because her type shows up all the time in books and movies, mostly movies, I guess. The too pretty mother who married young and never took to the whole thing, and in the movies there is her rouge and her stockings and the swirl of her skirt as she flies out the door while her little boy begs her to stay—he stands in the door watching as she gets in a stranger's car and drives away. But Juna wouldn't have been cast in that movie; she lacked the necessary...refinement. In Colt's photographs she's dressed like a singer at the Grand Ole Opry, the costume party equivalent. All Colt saw going out the door was (I'm guessing) some ratty old shoe and

a cloud of cigarette smoke. But he kept those photographs: one where she's holding him, he's about two years old and Juna is so miserable one side of her mouth has collapsed—she has had a stroke of misery. In the other she is modeling her Opry dress (white) (some predecessor to vinyl) and her white boots, along with her big hair which is black like Colt's and does appear to be leading her out of the frame and into whatever her future was, no one knows.

If only he'd been facing the camera you (I) could see his eyes, which were round, irises so black there was no end to his pupil. Hair from Juna, eyes from his father, Clyde Sr., of whom there are a number of photographs but no one is interested in them. Not much to him, as I understand it—he was born to be Juna's victim and live in the same house with his widowed mother and give up on raising his only child after the child's mother left, well what was the man to do but walk slumped over every day to his job at the gas station and...am I right—did his teeth eventually melt? I think so, I think his teeth melted. So Colt let his hair grow long and bought a wrecked 1950 BMW R512, which he worked on night and day in place of a formal education, and was it even running yet when he met L

his hair grew long and he rode that bike all the way from Kentucky, over the Ohio River and through Tell City, up up the middle of Indiana until he landed

a day laborer and then a carpenter but no one ever messed with him or said a word about that ponytail because he was fast as a whip crack, afraid of nothing, he carried a switchblade and walked with a slight left-leaning swagger from a childhood accident, he seemed cool in all ways but he was wound tight. His body rang like a piano string: I could hear him coming from miles away, an A note in an upper register, struck and struck and struck again. His hands were ruined with work and before he stopped touching me he would sometimes run his hand over my back and leave a dozen snags in the material of my shirts, he maybe didn't have fingerprints anymore.

In the winter he drove a '73 Ford truck, an F-100 with a 360, brown—that specific shade of brown of 1973. The muddy dogs jumped in the front seat, barn boots weren't even wiped in the grass before driving. The floor was littered with every imaginable kind of trash and tool and cast-off work glove (they assumed the shape of his hands), and the bed was scarred from loads of firewood and scrap metal. He thought only about what was under the hood, he took care where it mattered.

Cold had

Colt had me, his truck, his bike, his ruined hands, he had his black dog, Weeds. And cigarettes, which maybe Juna left him or taught him, I don't know how it happens. The Marlboro red pack, more of the music of my life: my father's barely in-tune A note jittering down the gravel road and up to the side of the house, and the ritual gestures. Peel away the silver strip that seals the rectangular box; pull off the upper cellophane. Throw it on the ground, in the bed of the truck, whatever. Knock the box

against your forearm three, four times to pack the tobacco. Flip the lid with just your thumb, choose the cigarette in the front, in the middle, put it in the corner of your mouth and light it with your hand cupped around the match or the lighter even if no wind is blowing, even if you're standing in your daughter's bedroom and she wakes up because of the sound of the flame, and she doesn't know what you're doing there but she sees you, she would give you anything, she would fillet herself to keep you

there, to take you in under the cheap coverlet. She is the dying, the cancerous, the starved or dehydrated, and you, he, Colt: morphine. bread. water. But he turns and walks away, as if he has prevented a disaster, and he takes the smoke with him, but the slight and fading sound of him remain

Trace Pennington pressed her tingling hands against her forehead, read what she had just written. She was supposed to be starting a dream journal for the class that began on Monday: Special Topics in Archetypal Psychology, an invitation-only course for senior Honors students who had either majored or minored in psychology. She was also enrolled in another senior seminar, Archetypal Analysis of Literature, available only to English or classics majors. Trace was both. At the last meeting with her adviser, a woman in a wig that had seemed deliberately stripped of color (it looked less like hair than fishing line) and styled to flip up at her shoulders, Trace had been told that in addition to her two majors and the psych minor, she had enough credits to declare minors in humanities and philosophy, and was one class away from a fourth in women's studies.

"So," Trace said, nodding.

"So do you want me to add them? You want them listed?"

"How did they happen, those minors?"

The adviser, *Mizzz* Birkle, studied Trace over the top of her half-glasses. "You took the classes."

"Yes," Trace said, trying to remember the past four years. When had she earned minors in four different subjects?

"You declaring them?"

"Wouldn't I?" Wouldn't she? Trace wondered if there was a rule somewhere, a code she had broken.

She tore the pages out of what was supposed to have been her dream journal and stuck them in one of the approximately two hundred unlabeled file folders scattered around the room she slept in. There were three bedrooms upstairs, all oddly shaped and dormered; Trace had chosen the smallest, the one at the back of the house, hoping it would be the easiest to heat. She had found a kind of plastic sheeting that attached to the windows with double-stick tape, and that one then turned into shrink-wrap with a blow-dryer. Having neither a blow-dryer nor electricity, she'd gone to the slick and overpriced store on campus that sold camping supplies (Daredevil Outfitting) and asked a young clerk who was striving mightily to look gentle and outdoorsy and daring at once, if there was such a thing as a blow-dryer that used batteries.

"Sure," he said, walking toward the back of the store. "We've got curling irons, too, but they use propane inserts."

"Can you weld with them?"

"I'm sorry?"

“Nothing—I’ll take the blow-dryer.”

It had worked; Trace had turned the dryer up as high and hot as it would go and directed it at the loose plastic, which became tighter at each spot she focused on, until finally the window was completely sealed. There was still the hole in the ceiling, but she’d covered that with cardboard, and the end she was glad to have the blow-dryer because on the very worst nights she could put it under her blankets and turn it on, warming the sheets just enough that she and the dog didn’t shake in the way she hated, the kind of shivering that hurt.

She chose a different notebook to serve as her dream journal. There were stacks available to her as there were file folders and ink pens and sticky notes and index cards. Working at the campus bookstore for four years had fulfilled her every office supply need. She didn’t have to steal a thing: if a box of legal pads came in damaged, she was to take them out to the recycling Dumpster and throw them away, then make a note on the Inventory Loss form, which then went to the higher powers for Trace didn’t know what—tax deductions or refunds or perhaps just regret. But in four years at the store (daredevilily named the Campus Book Store) no one had ever watched her recycle anything, nor had they seemed to care. As long as she made the note on the Inventory Loss form, and as long as the CBS superiors were satisfied, everything was fine. Their Loss became her Inventory Gain, just like that.

The scholarship she’d been offered to the University of the Midwest, in Jonah, Indiana, had included room and board, which Trace declined. The money was refunded to her, and for days on end before her freshman year she drove her father’s battered Ford truck up and down country roads so rutted and ruined they might have been Coventry in 1945, until she found an abandoned farmhouse set back on a quarter-mile lane she nearly missed. She had been there ever since.

After pulling ivy off the back door (she left the front untouched) and nearly being killed by a swarm of wasps, she and Weeds had shouldered their way into a domestic disaster. Every room was filled with trash: broken toys and abandoned cheap clothes and a series of televisions with shattered screens. It appeared that there had been two separate types here before her: whoever initially abandoned the house (that was the bottom layer—they were fast-food aficionados) and squatters after them, because there was an old upright piano in the living room above which someone had spray-painted the words *La Dolce Vita!* with real feeling, and also she had found a broken-spined and mildewy copy of Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy* lying on the floor, open in the middle and on top of a pile of rotting blankets. The first night she was there she did nothing but read it cover to cover by the light of a hurricane lamp.

There was no heat or electricity, but she had this Inventory Gain: above the well was a hand pump—not the old kind that required literal pumping; this one was orange and all Trace had to do for well water was lift a handle and fill a bucket. That took care of cooking on the Coleman stove, washing the dishes, bathing if she had to (she mostly showered at the truck stop out on the highway), and flushing the toilet in the truly horrifying bathroom just off the kitchen.

Winters in the farmhouse were so cold she often felt as if she were being lightly stung all over her body by a dentist’s drill, even with the three kerosene heaters she used: a small one in the

bedroom, a large one in the kitchen, where she often worked at the cheap and scarred table someone had left behind, a small one in the bathroom. She and Weeds reeked of kerosene, she knew, but there was nothing she could do about it. At the cheap Laundromat on the south side of town, the one where no one knew her, she was often afraid to wash her clothes for fear of an explosion. Kerosene was in her lungs, her bloodstream, but she didn't have options. Even if the fireplace hadn't been boarded up she wouldn't have dared use it, in the same way she never used light at the front of the house.

Using a clean notebook, Trace described the dream: Colt in a billowing white shirt, walking into the kitchen of a house Trace had never seen, juggling oranges. She tried to hold on to the feeling of the dream but it slipped even as she reached for it. Trace closed her eyes, opened and closed her numb hands. It was early afternoon of a bitterly cold January, in the abandoned farmhouse where she was hiding with the black dog, Weeds, who lay against her leg. She would need to leave soon; today was her standing visit with her oldest and only childhood friend, Candy Warner, formerly Candy Buck. The girl and the dog were as close to the heater as they could get, and yet they both shivered and were loath to leave.

It was a long drive to Candy's house outside Mason—sixteen miles—and all of it on rural roads. And Mason was Trace's hometown, it wasn't safe for her to be there, so she ended up taking strange detours and looking for roads that didn't exist, thinking that eventually she was going to find a route she'd missed, a sudden turn, an iron bridge in disrepair.

Candy lived with her husband, Skeet, and their two little boys in a trailer at the back of Skeet's parents' property. Trace drove slowly down the dirt drive, in which there were holes deep enough to break an axle, past the senior Warners', their garage and workshop (which seemed to be missing part of its roof), to the place Skeet's domain began. It wasn't hard to find, marked as it was by dead cars and stripped trucks, lawn mowers that were unrecognizable in any season. There were tires and hubcaps and busted aluminum chairs. There was an old refrigerator and the hulking remains of a coal burning stove. Trace had long since ceased cataloging or even seeing what was in front of the trailer—Candy's front yard looked like a thousand other front yards in Hopwood County.

Trace parked the truck so it couldn't be seen from the road, and stepped out carefully, Weeds following. Some parts of the ground were snow, some were ice. Everything was muddy, mixed with chunks of salt thrown carelessly, so that most of it was on the vehicle graveyard and not on the path that led to the steps.

From behind the chicken-wire fence attached to the trailer, one of Skeet's hounds, Blue, jumped and bayed and pulled against his chain. He was behind a fence and yet chained to his doghouse. Weeds stopped and looked at Blue. Trace stopped. Skeet had two dogs; where was the other? He called the missing dog Coon but Candy refused and referred to him as Bon Jovi. There was the second doghouse, the second chain, no dog. She took the last few steps and grabbed the handrail of the unsteady metal stairs.

Candy wore her hair in a style known as the Mall: permed on the sides, with bangs curled up into a roll and sprayed with Aqua Net. She had been pretty in high school, cheerful and bright-eyed, but had dated no one but Skeet Warner. From eighth grade on: Skeet's sullenness, his cars, his temper, his boots, the chain he wore connected to a wallet. The Skoal ring in the back pocket of his jeans. The issue of him was not up for discussion, not with Trace or Candy's parents or anyone else; for him she

revealed a stubbornness that just grew heavier and more inexplicable as the years passed, and now, seven years later, she certainly had him or he had her but in either case the talking about it was over.

They sat at Candy's Early American kitchen table, which was covered with a plastic tablecloth. Candy smoked one cigarette after another and drank six cups of coffee, three of them so hot she burned her tongue and had to go to the kitchen for ice. The tablecloth was sticky from cereal and baby food and runny eggs and spilled beer and soda, so Trace kept her hands in her lap. As she smoked and drank coffee, Candy also managed to wrangle her eight-month-old son, Duane (named after a dead Allman Brother), who sometimes clung to her and sometimes tried to throw himself off her into the smoky air.

"You know how much weight I gained with this one?" Candy asked, squinting past her cigarette.

"You look fine," Trace said, taking note of the bruises on Candy's forearm, the shadow under her jaw, as if someone had taken sandpaper to her face. There was no denying it—Candy was now officially fat. Her legs were wide, her neck had disappeared. She no longer even had any wrists, just creases where her hands bent.

"*Ninety* pounds. I gained seventy-five with Danny Rae and I thought that was as bad as it could get. And I hadn't lost most of that before I was pregnant with this one."

"That's what happens to pregnant women, right? They gain weight?"

"I'm thinking smoking will help." Candy tucked the baby under her arm and patted the tabletop for the lighter she'd lost. "Dusty's got two girls, she didn't gain weight."

Trace studied her, said nothing on the subject of Dusty, Trace's sister.

"Of course, I don't have what she has to keep me skinny, there's one problem right there." Candy laughed nervously. "Seen her? Or the girls?"

Trace shook her head. "It's been a month or so."

"Them little girls is what makes me sad." Candy juggled Duane fiercely, and he bobbed his head up and down on her fat shoulder and fell asleep.

Them little girls, well yes. Erin and Jessie, five and three. Beautiful surprises, blond like Phil's family. After Erin was born Trace snuck into the hospital in the middle of the night and sat for an hour watching Dusty sleep, the baby tucked up next to her, against hospital policy. The last time Trace saw them Erin was wearing pink fingernail polish she'd put on herself. Half was chipped off but the rest still sparkled, and Jessie had gotten mad at her mother for forgetting to put the chocolate in her milk and cried, in a voice so small Trace couldn't imagine how she was able to imbue it with such misery, *You. Broke. My. Heart.* Pointing to it, pointing at her chest.

"If it comes to it you'll take them, won't you? You won't let them go to the state?"

"I can't, Candy—I can't even talk—"

"You would."

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve been knowing you since we were six years old and you showed up on Granddad’s hilltop outta nowhere.”

“You *always* bring that up. You must stop bringing it up.”

Candy stood, took the three steps from the table into the narrow kitchen. She came back with a box of doughnuts. Duane snored slightly. The cartoons playing in the living room suddenly got very loud and Candy yelled, “Danny Rae! Turn that TV down or I’ll put a hammer through it!” Still the baby slept on, and gradually the television quieted. “Today I’m bringing it up for a reason, not to change the subject, and you’re just gonna have to sit your college butt still and listen to me. Now I know you don’t hold with almost anything, you think most everything was designed for retards, but I have to tell you about something I heard on the radio last night. Take a doughnut, they’re good.”

“I don’t like doughnuts.”

“Take a doughnut.”

Trace chose a glazed and ate it. It was good.

“Now you know how there are people who have been abducted by aliens,” Candy said, as if she were reminding Trace that there are full moons, or a country called Brazil.

“No, I do not know that.”

“Well yes you do and apparently it happens all the time, like *constantly*.” Duane raised his head up and made a sound, a roosterish little squawk, then collapsed back into sleep. Candy pounded on the baby’s back as if he were choking, and he just snored harder. “And there was a man on a talk radio show last night, I’ve forgotten his name already after like five minutes, and it turns out that he spent *years* getting abducted by aliens and he described what it was like, how they could come in through his bedroom window and they’re little like dwarves and they dress in blue police uniforms.”

“Candy? Were you and Skeeter maybe just the tiniest bit high?”

“We have stopped all of that, Tracey Sue, since Danny Rae was born that funny color.” She reached over and took the cup of cold, bitter Folgers Trace hadn’t touched and drank the whole thing in three big gulps. A stream spilled down her chin and onto her white T-shirt, which said, in gold letters, *SLIPPERY WHEN WET*, but the coffee blended with a number of other things that had found their way to Candy’s chest over the course of the day. There were stains all over her pants, too, which weren’t exactly blue jeans but more like the denim used to cover papasan chairs. “And here’s the thing about this guy: he was so sane. He was maybe the sanest person I’ve ever heard talking on the radio. He was so calm and reasonable and you could tell he was not making up *one word* of what he was saying, he was just telling it like it is: he is a one-hundred-percent victim of alien abduction and they want him for something but he doesn’t know what. The poor, poor man. He had the sweetest voice, too. And I kept thinking, If Tracey were here she’d tell me if this person is a bald-faced liar or if he’s telling the truth, or if, *even worse*, he believes he is telling the truth but he is lying because he doesn’t know the difference, in which case he is not sane in any way.”

~~“A conundrum,” Trace agreed, unconsciously resting her elbows on the table. A variety of crumbs ground into her sweater, but she didn’t react. “If he truly believes it and he’s completely sane it happened. And if he completely believes it and it didn’t happen, he’s crazy. And if it happened, we are all in a bind here, where the aliens are concerned.”~~

Candy nodded vigorously. “That is it exactly. I wish you’d been here.” She rubbed the rim of her coffee cup with her thumb, a gesture Trace had seen her make a thousand times. “Do you want some coffee?”

“No thanks. But get more for yourself if you want.”

“And I’ve got to tell you something else about that UFO guy.” Candy swallowed, lit another cigarette. “One thing he kept talking about was how many people have been abducted and don’t know it, because their minds protect them by throwing up a *screen memory*. That’s what he called it.”

“A screen memory.”

“Like this: he has a vivid memory of sitting on his grandmother’s front porch and seeing a pack of gorillas come up over the hill in front of the house, coming toward him. He’s completely sure that the gorillas are a screen memory for the first time the little midget policemen took him up in the spaceship and stole his sperm.”

A high-pitched tone pierced Trace’s inner ear and she shook her head as if to dislodge it. The sound stopped. “A pack of gorillas, huh?” Trace asked, smiling. One corner of her mouth twitched and she hoped Candy hadn’t noticed. “A spaceship? Just to get some sperm?”

“And that made me think”—Candy spun her Bob Seger Commemorative Concert lighter on the table, spun it around until it was pointing at Trace—“about that time when you were six and you showed up on my granddad’s hilltop, and when he asked you where you come from, you said you’d just had a picnic with a coyote, and at the end the coyote had put a little rock in your neck.”

Trace’s elbows ground against the food on the plastic tablecloth even harder. “Why must we always *talk* about this?”

“Is that rock still in your neck?”

“It isn’t”—Trace waved the question away—“it isn’t a rock—it’s a knot. And anyway it’s a calcium deposit or some sort of little, I don’t know what. It’s a little *knot*.”

“Can I feel it?”

“No, you cannot feel it! I should get going. I want to visit your parents today.”

“The other thing he saw?” Candy moved the limp, sweaty Duane to her other shoulder. “Tracey? Was a man walking through the train station, he was just a little boy with his dad at the time, and they passed another man walking a wolf on a leash. And eventually”—Candy talked faster, as if to make Trace hear it all, everything that could be said—“he gave up on the screen memories and he began to face what was happening to him, even though he was helpless to stop it. I think that’s true. Although

seem to recall a moment at a Halloween party when he thinks he's seeing a child in a costume and it's really one of the dwarves, and that was *really* scary."

Trace reached for her bag, which she'd hung on one of the empty kitchen chairs.

"Doodlebug?" Candy reached over and grabbed Trace's hand, gripped it hard enough that Trace stopped moving. "Sit still a minute."

Trace sat back, let her body go limp.

"Your mother—Loretta, I mean—called." Candy's eyes filled with tears, but even so she seemed that same cheerful girl she'd been at fourteen, fifteen; even under all the weight and the bruises and the terrible color her skin had taken, she was a lovely prize, squandered. "It's not good."

"No." Trace could barely speak. Loretta would have asked, as she had asked Candy (and Candy's elderly parents, and everyone else Trace had ever known) where Trace lived, and Candy would have said she didn't know, because she didn't.

Before he knew the truth about her, Colt used to spin her around in the kitchen, her socks gliding over the slick linoleum floor, and he'd sing, *You with the stars in your eyes*. Sometimes Loretta would be there, sometimes she would hum along. She was the singer, after all—the real thing. If she was there she would slip in between them, between Trace and her daddy, and she would dance with him in a way Trace could only puzzle over. Loretta was so short, her hips were wide, and her breasts were enormous—how could she be graceful at all? How could she move so meltingly, and sing at the same time, and look Colt in the eye and keep him there? What was Trace failing to do, how could she possibly do more than master the finicky old Winchester .22 he'd given her, or catch a bigger fish than that largemouth bass last summer? Out on Lake Chapman she knew not to speak; she cast her line like a pro. She had spent hours working on his motorcycle with him, his truck, handing him tools, rolling cigarettes for him on the arched roller with the rubber grip when his store-bought were gone. Patient hours, patient, silent years she had given him, and all Loretta had to do was slip in and sing a few notes, move her body like a snake with an undigested meal, and his youngest child vanished, the other two already gone.

"They found out where Billy is. But he doesn't know they know."

Trace jumped, hitting her knee on the underside of the table. Billy, gone five years? Her brother Wild angel boy, now *he* had *loved* Loretta, he charmed her and picked her up off the floor to show her his strength. He had inherited the best of them, of his parents. Funny and tall and a great runner, he would hold open his arms to Trace and she could run and jump and he could catch her as if she weighed nothing; he spun her and read to her, and he was the one who took care of her after—he got shocked a lot. Was that it, electricity? He took some very bad shocks, once while turning on the basement light, standing in an inch of water, and another time he—there was a guy wire, a storm, a bird, Trace tapped her hand against her ear, there was that sound again, but not as bad. "Where. Where is he?"

Candy shook her head; of course she didn't know.

"Loretta said Marty found him through some buddy. She was crying—"

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