

The Romantic



BARBARA GOWDY



HARPER COLLINS E-BOOKS

THE ROMANTIC

A NOVEL

Barbara Gowdy

 HarperCollins e-books

For S.B.

and in memory of M. L.

Contents

Cover

Title page

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHAPTER THIRTY

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CHAPTER FORTY

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

P.S. Ideas, interviews & features

 About the author

 Author Biography

 Select Awards

 About the book

 An Interview with Barbara Gowdy

 Read on

 Web Detective

 13 An Excerpt from Barbara Gowdy's *Helpless*

INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM FOR *The Romantic*

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About the Publisher

CHAPTER ONE

The past isn't fixed if it isn't dead. How are we supposed to preserve it? If it lives—lives on in our memories, as we're always saying—then it can spoil.

Right after Abel died, every memory of him was so fresh that it seemed part of an ongoing story, like the smell of somebody's cigarette smoke or perfume lingering in an empty room. I kept expecting to hear his voice. Whenever the phone rang, my heart would race, as if it might be him.

But within a few days, these kinds of feelings were already fading, and then the old memories started to arrive. You hear about a flood; mine washed up at odd moments and in pieces, like debris from a plane crash. I'd be brushing my teeth and see his hands on the piano keys twenty years ago, his boy's hands with their blunt fingers and chipped nails, and for a moment I'd know, as purely as such a thing *can* be known, what his mother had meant when she'd phoned and said, "He's gone."

By Christmas, everything I thought about him seemed, in hindsight, to be a warning. I remembered how he had found desolate landscapes inviting and how reluctant he'd always been to defend himself. His soft voice, his sympathies, his damaged friends, his bursts of extravagant generosity all struck me as proof of his self-destructiveness. He'd had a death wish, maybe he'd had it from birth. Perversely, it was why he could be so optimistic.

And then came months of memories connected to nothing and telling me nothing, and in this ambiguous atmosphere I stopped thinking of him as doomed. The memories themselves were generally pleasant. For at least a week I kept reliving the time he removed a splinter from my foot using surgical tweezers. Strangely, during this same week, a black Labrador retriever was accompanying me around town, appearing out of nowhere and trotting alongside me to the subway or the grocery store. As with the splinter memory, I had a sense of information being conveyed but through a medium too opaque to be grasped.

Now, three years since he died, I've gone over my memories so many times I hardly trust them. I can't imagine that every retrieval doesn't make for an infinitesimal alteration, an effect similar to photocopying the copy, and then photocopying the copy of the copy, and so on. Either that or all the handling turns to stone what were only questionable impressions to begin with, just one person's version of events. I hear myself talking about Abel, or about my mother, and I can't believe how confident I sound. I think, "Is that what really happened?"

I'm sure that my mother, at least, would say I'd got it all wrong. Abel might think I'd got it all wrong, too, except he wouldn't care. Looking back over his life never came easily to him, and for the sake of avoiding that ordeal—but also because, ultimately, he attached himself to nothing—he'd surrender to anyone's memories of him.

Even mine, these pawed-over resurrections. Even though he knew I loved him too desperately ever to be a reliable witness.

The Richters move into our neighbourhood on December eighth, 1960. The reason

remember the exact day is that it is also the anniversary of my conception. While my mother still lived in our house, no December eighth went by without her mentioning the provincial wide power failure and the bottle of French wine that conspired in the making of me. Early on I formed the impression that this event, which I knew centred on my father giving her seed—shaken from a paper packet, I imagined, placed on her tongue—involved government interference and my father's lecherous French-speaking boss, Mr. LaPierre, and it is still true by the time the Richters show up, when I am ten, that I think of myself as having exotic origins and therefore something in common with these new, foreign neighbours.

I fall in love with Mrs. Richter immediately, Abel the following summer. I know how unlikely that sounds, a ten-year-old girl falling in love at all, let alone with a middle-aged woman. But to say I become infatuated doesn't describe the gravity and voluptuousness of my feelings. I trail after her to the grocery store and touch the grapefruits she has fondled. I gaze at her flannel nightgown billowing on the clothesline and am uplifted, as if by music. Under the pretext of welcoming her to the subdivision or asking if she gives piano lessons or asking if she heard about the white-elephant sale at the church—any excuse—I write letters advertising my availability and qualifications as a daughter. "Lend a Helping Hand!" I write on the back of the envelopes, as if this were my motto. Down the margins of the letters I draw pictures of a girl doing the dishes, scrubbing the floor, dusting. I draw the girl in bed, eyes closed under a quarter moon to illustrate that, unlike Abel, I would never leave the house in the middle of the night.

He goes out at least twice a week. We all know because she traipses around the neighbourhood calling his name in a wavering soprano that sounds unnaturally loud, as if she carried a microphone.

On the nights she wakes me, I sit at my bedroom window and wait for her to appear under our streetlight. I am always unprepared for how invincible she looks, so dramatic, wearing hardly anything against the cold, only a white lambswool wrap over her nightgown, boots but no hat, dark hair rolling to her waist, and when she calls "Abelard!" the Dingwalls' dog starts howling.

There are never any shouts for her to be quiet. Abel is adopted, and the only other child—baby girl Mrs. Richter gave birth to years ago—had a hole in its heart and didn't live long. Among our neighbours it goes without saying that Abel's wanderings and her pursuits are connected to these events, not to mention the murky war history it is presumed must connect their household and from which a boy his age would understandably feel the need to escape.

Still, what I wouldn't give to hear my name called so indulgently, with such love. I attribute to her the highest qualities: kindness, wisdom, bravery. Somehow I've gotten it into my head that during the war she concealed Jewish children under her skirt and walked them to safety. Not true, although, as I will eventually learn, she did save a rabbi from being crushed to death when his jack gave out while he was changing a tire. This happened after the war, on a highway outside of Halifax. She lifted the car's entire front end. It isn't hard to believe. She is a muscular woman, and tall, a head taller than Mr. Richter and some fifteen years younger, making her ten years older than any other mother in our neighbourhood. Her clothes are from another place, as are Mr. Richter's, but whereas he comes across as dignified, she, in her laced-up boots and long, loud skirts, with her hair either hanging to her

waist or roped around her head, could be a Spanish dancer. She has dark, heavy eyebrows and a big complicated nose flaring down to nostrils shaped like keyholes.

Obviously no beauty queen. But then beauty in mothers appeals to me not at all.

My former-beauty-queen mother left about a year before the Richters' arrival. Think of Grace Kelly and you have her, at least in appearance. In name, too. Her birth certificate says Helene Grace, but she always went by Grace.

Why she left and whether or not she is coming back we don't agree on, my father and I. He says, "She always loved and cherished you," the emphasis suggesting that I have the power to lure her home. It is possible she loved and cherished me; she never said. She *liked* me, I'm fairly sure of that. When she was doing the housecleaning, she wanted me there, not to help (her standards were such that they could be met only by herself) but for the company. "Louise knows when to keep her mouth shut," I heard her tell my father once. Another time "Louise is good for a laugh."

She had a squawkish laugh I never got used to, and yet I courted it. For her amusement I committed to memory several hundred jokes taken from a book called *A Thousand and One Side-Splitters* that I'd found in my father's study. Rather than tell the jokes at random, I blended them into the conversation and thus skirted the risk of blurting out what I really thought. If she wondered, as she often did, why our neighbour Mr. Dingwall had married Mrs. Dingwall, I'd say, "For Mr. Dingwall, marriage isn't a word, it's a life sentence. Or, "Beauty is in the eye of the *beer* holder." Not that she and I talked much. As she pointed out, I knew when to keep my mouth shut. With me, she tended to go on about the world in general, and for some reason these pessimistic but dispassionate observations turned into rants if she happened to be washing the kitchen floor. She'd start wringing the cloth like a neck, slap it onto the linoleum and grind it around. What was she stewing about? It could be anything: women who sewed their own clothes, bottle blonds, slobs, the royal family. Babies.

Babies drove her mad. Well, not babies so much as other women's craving for them. She would say that any cow could get herself pregnant, that the world was overpopulated thanks to people like "the grim weeper" (Mrs. Dingwall, who, after bearing two sets of twins, suffered a miscarriage and years later still burst into tears whenever she talked about it). She'd pull out her cigarette and glare at me sitting on the kitchen counter. Her pale blue eyes, admired by everybody, struck me as dangerously drained and therefore incapable of apprehending certain things essential to my well-being.

"Did you hear the one about the dumb mother?" I'd say. (To give an example; I had a dozen baby jokes at my disposal.)

She'd wait. It was at the very height of a harangue, when her indignation was so great she could hardly speak, that she was most willing to be entertained.

"This mother was so dumb," I'd say, "she had to stop breastfeeding because it hurt too much when she boiled the nipples."

And my mother would squawk and throw triumphant glances around the room as if I had slayed not only her but a whole company of cynics.

During my season of pining after Mrs. Richter, I am haunted by two related facts: that her baby girl died, leaving the position of daughter open, and that she *chose* Abel, and not as a lumpen newborn, either, but, according to my father, as a fully formed three-year-old. “The one,” she must have said. “The tall one with the curly brown hair. He is perfect.”

Perfect for a boy, yes. For a girl, I count on her wanting somebody small and wispy, Abel physical opposite. Otherwise, I imagine her wanting Abel and the girl to be alike, and there too, I am ideal, since he and I have a lot in common. We both collect stones, we are only children, neither of us has any friends. I wish Mrs. Richter would walk past the school one day, during recess, and then she’d find out that Abel isn’t the only one who migrates to the fringes of the yard and shakes the chain-link fence like a convict.

I am in grade five and he’s in grade four, so I see him outside of class, at recess, going to and from school. Sometimes I spot him in the ravine where, aside from collecting stones, he searches for the Indian artifacts that a camp counsellor named Big Bear said could be found by the eagle-eyed and pure of heart. (In the summer months a children’s day camp, Camp Wanawingo, establishes itself at the south end of the ravine across the river from the sludge factory, and the year that my mother disappears I spend two rainy weeks there pretending to be an Indian, that is to say, gathering twigs for the sputtering campfire and weeding a mostly dead vegetable garden planted by the campers from the first session.)

Abel snatches stones up fast, on the move. The steep wooded hillsides I can climb only if I grip roots and branches, he races up and down like an Indian, or as I have been led by Big Bear to believe Indians race: with stealth, scanning to the left and right. I wave at him and sometimes call “Hi!” In the ravine I have the courage to try to establish contact. He glances at me with the same alert indifference he confers on a squirrel. If he is nothing to me but a potential go-between, I am even less to him. I am that human over there. Skinny, female, no threat.

But one day, a Sunday afternoon in May, he approaches within a few yards of where I’m digging for artifacts down by the river.

“Hi,” he murmurs. His eyes are on a pile of stones behind me, near the shore.

“Hi,” I say, coming to my feet. “You’re Abel Richter, aren’t you?”

He nods.

“I live on your street.”

Another nod. The stones are what interest him. He begins turning over certain ones, replacing each exactly as it was.

“What are you looking for?”

He keeps turning over stones, and then he finds something that he lifts so delicately I think it must be an artifact.

But it’s only a toad. He holds it out to me. I step back.

“It won’t hurt you,” he says. He has a soft, oddly husky voice. An orphan’s voice, I conclude, obscurely envisioning the beatings and damp living quarters that must have produced it. “I’ll show you something,” he says.

The toad’s eyes are closed. In the palm of his hand it sits perfectly still except for the

pulsing of its throat. "What?" I say finally.

"Just wait."

I can't bear to keep looking at it, so I look at Abel's forearm, which is slightly sunburned. I imagine Mrs. Richter examining his arms at the orphanage, and despite the ordeal he is forcing upon me, I have a pang of tenderness for him, as if in her stead.

"Come on," he says, giving the toad a little shake. Its eyes fall open. They shine gold, like sequins.

I am rudely startled. That something so glamorous could be contained in something so loathsome offends both my sense of fair play and my nervous grasp of cause and effect.

"Pretty spectacular," he says, "don't you think?"

Spectacular. A grown-up word. I remember what's at stake (my getting to meet his mother) and take hold of myself and say, "Is it ever."

He puts the toad back in its cavity and replaces the stone. "It's like a Martian toad," he says, straightening.

We look at each other.

His eyes, gold themselves but darker, the colour of maple syrup, hold nothing I perceive of cunning or sophistication, and yet I have a sense of being appraised by an intelligence superior to my own. A Martian intelligence. I look at the freckles on his nose, the dimple on his chin, his beautiful hair. I have a doll with hair like that ... that heap of dark brown curls. His lips are plump and chapped. When he starts chewing the lower one I realize I'm staring and I shift my gaze to the patch on the knee of his blue jeans. "*She* sewed that," I think mournfully. I think of how Mrs. Richter toils away: mending his jeans, cooking from scratch (or so I imagine), hanging her laundry on the line instead of using an automatic dryer, draping her carpet over the porch wall and beating it with a broom, beating it again after her dog pulls it by the fringe onto the driveway.

Remembering that dog, I say, "You have a dalmatian, don't you?" my idea being to say that I love dalmatians and ask to see his.

"A dalmatian-hound cross," he says.

"Oh." I'm thrown off course. "Well, I love dalmatians."

"It's more hound than dalmatian."

"What's its name?"

"Cane. Short for Canine."

"I never heard that name before."

"Dogs are canines. Like people are humans."

"Like birds are a flock?"

He looks up as a crow comes flapping low over avians."

"We had a budgie once."

It's true, we did, but I'd almost forgotten. It had a lime-green body and a lemon-yellow head. When my mother gripped it in one hand so that she could trim its claws, it opened an

closed its beak without making a sound.

“We called it Bird,” I say, as if this were in the same clever league as Canine. All it was, though, was that my mother never got around to settling on a name.

“Well,” Abel says, still looking up. “I’d better get going.”

“It died mysteriously,” I say.

But he is already moving away.

After only two weeks, it died. After plucking out all its feathers, a few of which I kept for years in a pink plastic purse.

CHAPTER TWO

Abel died on my twenty-sixth birthday. Drank himself to death, everyone says, and so do sometimes, it's just simpler. People know what you're telling them: he killed himself but he did it slowly and indirectly, maybe even unintentionally. They understand that there's probably a lot more to the story than you want to get into.

From the first crisis until the end took a little over a year, and during that time I saw him almost every morning, dropping by his apartment on my way to work. Usually he was still in bed, but he'd get up and I'd light him a cigarette while he stood swaying in his navy-and-white-striped pyjamas that made him look like a prisoner of war. They were clean, though no buttons missing, a tear at the shoulder neatly repaired by his own hands, which, as he took the cigarette, trembled so badly I had to steer it toward his mouth.

I couldn't watch him smoke. I'd wander around and be heart-stricken by the vacuum cleaner tracks in the carpet, the emptied-out ashtrays. He'd always been fastidious but this was different, this was him not wanting us—his parents and me—to worry any more than we already were.

He was so frail, so thin. Not gaunt, just sharper boned, his face suddenly sculpted, as if offering a preview of the handsome older man he would never become.

Why couldn't I save him? And if I couldn't, why couldn't Bach or astronomy, why couldn't trees? "I'm not important," he'd say, and it didn't help, my saying that he was, or, "All right, I'm important, what about me?" He'd give me a look that made me feel as though I were begging him not to run off with another woman. He loved me, he pitied me, I could see he did, but there was a wash of absence over him like nostalgia for a future he was already living in.

CHAPTER THREE

A hot windy night in late June of 1968 and I am on my way to a party where I'll go pregnant.

Not that I know this or intend it.

My date is Tim Todd, son of Big Ben Todd, who used to drink all the rye at my parents' annual charades tournament and then invite the other husbands to punch him in the stomach. Since he was their boss, a partner in the law firm, they were all obliged to take a turn. Of course, they pulled their punches, which only made Big Ben more belligerent. "Come on, he'd bellow. "Put some muscle behind it!"

Tim is small boned and careful, more like his mother. He is my age, seventeen, almost eighteen, but with his drawn face and hollow eyes he could pass for twenty-five. He drives slouched in his seat, brooding. Whenever I'm turned away from him, as I am now (leaning out my opened window to imagine I'm in a convertible), he thinks my mind is on Abe. Usually he's right. I can ignore his sullen spells. What I dread are the apologies: long, painful speeches, ambiguously tied to the writings of Ayn Rand or General Ulysses S. Grant, about why, in fact, he actually respects my attachment to a boy I haven't seen or heard from years. It drives me crazy.

The truth is, very little about him *doesn't* drive me crazy. I have developed the habit of punching his arm, a persecution he takes unflinchingly, in the tradition of his father. When we arrive at the party and he rings the bell, I go to punch him just as he turns toward me and somehow I end up socking him in the jaw.

"Oh, sorry," I say. "Are you okay?"

"What was that for?"

"The door's open. We're supposed to go right in."

Poor Tim Todd with his nursery-rhyme name and bad-tempered date. He is wondering what the two of us are doing here when we could be playing backgammon in the light of his tropical fish tanks. He's aggressively unsocial, but then so am I, or was, until yesterday on the Victoria Park bus when I sat beside a spectacularly beautiful girl who was inviting everybody around her, including the driver, to a party at her house in one of the wealthiest sections of the city. "Bring some cool guys," she said, addressing me specifically.

By which I knew she meant guys with long hair. Not Tim Todd, in other words, but as I thought I'd have nobody to talk to, I dragged him along.

I wish I hadn't. "Mafia money," he says when we enter the white marble foyer. He's still rubbing his jaw. When we enter the crowded living room and I say, "I wonder where Geri is," he snorts and says, "Not greeting her guests at the door."

The music, Grace Slick singing "White Rabbit," blows in from somewhere else, another room or from outside. "Oh," I say, "I love this song."

"Since when?" Tim says.

“Since right now.” I start swaying to the beat.

“It’s like an oven in here,” he mutters. He lifts his chin and sniffs. “Is that marijuana?”

“I don’t smell anything.”

“I think it is,” he says tightly. “I think it’s marijuana.”

“So what?”

He blinks at me, surprised.

“Why don’t you get something to drink,” I say.

“I’m not thirsty.”

“Well, then go look around.” I start squeezing through the group of people in front of u

“Try and find the aquarium.”

“They have an *aquarium*?”

“Rich people always have aquariums.” I give him a wave. “See you later.”

I make for the marijuana smokers, a circle of them passing each other a pipe the size of a clarinet. One of the smokers (it’s hard to tell from the back if it’s a girl or guy) has hair like an explosion, bursting out in coils. The guy relighting the pipe wears a Che Guevara bandanna. A rush of desire goes through me, not just for him, for all of them, they’re so shocking and nonchalant. I stand closer and inhale the smoke drifting my way. Maybe in a little while I’ll work up the nerve to join the circle. I’m in a strange, reckless mood tonight. I have a tremendous feeling of anticipation. A girl cradling purple lilac blossoms taps me on the shoulder, and because she looks at me in a haunted, searching way, I think she has something important to tell me, *me* personally. But she only hands me a blossom and strolls off.

I bring the blossom to my nose. It smells like mystery, glamour. I glance back at Tim, who is standing with three other short-haired guys and cocking his head at an earnest listening angle. I turn before he can catch my eye. Holding the lilac like a cigarette, I walk toward a pair of open French doors and through them onto a veranda.

The music has switched to something bluesy featuring a flute, and down on the lawn about twenty people, Gena among them, do solitary dances around a fountain in which naked female statues pour water from jugs. The water shoots sideways into sashes, I can feel the spray all the way to where I’m standing. I go to the railing, and there is the whole golf course-sized lawn, perfectly round bushes ranged across it like planets, causeways of white lights streaming overhead from the eaves of the house all the way to the aristocratic oaks and willows that thrash at the back of the property. In order to get down the stairs I have to step over the legs of girls sprawled against boys and wearing dresses so short you can see their underpants in the veranda lights. They’re friendly, these girls. “Sorry,” they say, shifting sideways. “Can you get by?”

I go to the fountain and sit on the edge. Gena’s dance is more like the dance of her long hair, which is really remarkable, jet black and sleek, like tar. While she slowly sways, she whips around in the wind. At one point she opens her eyes and looks in my direction and lifts a hand but I don’t think she notices. I get up then, and make my way along the edge of the property. When I reach the willows I see water farther along, behind a stone wall, so I keep going. A gate is in the wall, and I pass through it and walk over to a wooden bench th

is next to a wrought-iron replica of an old streetlamp. I sit and kick off my shoes. You can feel the coolness of the water gusting off the pond. There are water-lily buds like candle flames. Ducks, stationary as decoys, rock on the waves.

But they're not ducks, as I realize after a moment. They're geese. And the pond ... the pond is a wide place in a creek.

"Nothing is what it seems," I think. I find this to be a deeply exciting idea. I sense a faint flash of light to my left, and I hold my breath, wondering if it's angels. For as long as I can remember I've been prone to seeing scarves of white light out of the corners of my eyes, especially when I'm keyed up, and I call them angels because the air around me seems to glow somehow purer and emptier, a really spooky feeling. I have this feeling now. I turn.

Nothing. There's nothing.

No. There's a boy, tightrope walking along the peaked stones that form the top of the wall. Shoulder-length dark hair, bare muscled chest shining like tin. A tall, lean boy with a white cloth in one hand and a beer bottle in the other. When he gets to where I am he jumps, and that's how I know him, by the graceful landing.

"So it *was* you," he says. The same soft, hoarse voice, only deeper. He comes and stands in front of me. The cloth is a T-shirt. At my eye level a silver belt buckle catches the light.

I swoon.

He grabs my shoulder. "Are you all right?"

I nod.

"Are you sure?"

"I just got a bit dizzy."

He must think I'm drunk or stoned.

"Can you stand?"

"Why?"

"I want to show you something."

I come to my feet, dropping the lilac, and he tucks the T-shirt into his belt and takes my hand.

We go over to the wall. "There," he says, releasing me to point.

Up and down the stones, in the chinks, are dozens of green embers.

"What are they?"

"Glowworms. Look at them all."

"Glow worms," I say, remembering that they are the larvae of fireflies and that he showed them to me once before, down in the ravine. I say, "They're like little Christmas lights."

He twists around, his expression young and happy, and in his eyes I see him. There he is. He blinks and seems suddenly shy.

"I spotted you on the lawn," he says. "The back of you. I wasn't certain. But the walk. I thought, 'I know that walk.'"

I can't look at him. I look at his cowboy boots, his bell-bottomed blue jeans, the long slice

of his thigh. In my mind, I'd kept him boyish, or at least not so tall. Handsome, of course, but not this handsome. I feel shaky, on the verge of tears. I move back to the bench and sit. "What are you doing here?" I say.

"The hostess is a friend of a friend's."

He has friends.

"How about you?" he asks.

"What are you doing *in Toronto*?"

"Oh." He sits beside me. "My dad flew out on business. I tagged along."

His dad. I imagine him bent over and feeble by now. When they left Greenwoods, Mr. Richter said it was because the Vancouver climate would be better for Mr. Richter's rheumatism.

"How is he?" I ask.

"Fine. Working too hard."

Tears start streaming down my face.

"Hey." He touches my shoulder. "Are you crying?"

"I guess."

"What's the matter?"

"It's just that ..."

"What?"

He offers me his T-shirt and I take it and wipe my eyes. "It's just that I never thought I'd see you again."

He glances at me and then down. He grips the bottle in his lap.

"I can't believe it," I say.

"It's been a long time," he says.

"Four years."

He takes a sip of his beer.

"Why didn't you ever write? I wrote you all those letters and you never once wrote back."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"But why didn't you?"

"I'm not ..." He sighs.

"What?"

"I'm not good at writing letters."

He looks so tormented that I soften and say, "Oh, well, you're here now. Out of thin air." He takes his hand and lifts it. "Abel Richter. In the flesh."

He sets his beer on the grass and brings both of our hands closer to the lamp. His hands are big, his long fingers cool from the bottle. My fingers are thin and bony but I know he likes them because he said so once, he said I had the hands of a tarsier, which is a small monkey.

Another time, in the same fascinated voice, he said my hair was like milkweed tuft.

Frowning, very intent, he runs a finger over the scar on my thumb. All the nerves in my body are flocked there.

“How’d you get that?” he says.

“Slicing onions.” Without even thinking, I say, “I still love you.”

The finger halts. We look at each other. And then we’re kissing.

It’s a long, un frenzied kiss. I never knew you could kiss like this, holding each other so lightly, nothing moving except for your mouths. When it’s over, I say, “We love each other. We never stopped.”

He nods.

“We never stopped.” I stroke his hair, feeling an immense tenderness.

He reaches for the bottle. “Want some?”

“No, thanks.”

I nestle against his chest. Behind us, at the party, people sing along to “All You Need is Love.” Down here, the ringing of crickets rises like an electric mist I can hardly distinguish from the quivering of my own body. I feel as if I have been lifted out of my life. Only a few hours ago I was sad and unlucky; now I’m one of the lucky ones. The miracle of him being here washes over me like a spell, like voices murmuring into an anxious dream, “You’re all right, you’re all right.” In a kind of trance, feeling immune now to anything but happiness, I start unbuttoning my blouse.

“What are you doing?” he says quietly.

“Taking off my clothes.”

I stand and remove the blouse and drape it over the back of the bench. “I want us to be together,” I say. I reach around and unhook my bra and let it fall on the grass. I am very serene, but excited, too. I know what he sees. Me fearlessly undressing. How white I am, the breeze off the water raising goosebumps on my skin.

He stands and faces me. He looks almost frightened. Hasn’t he done this before either? “You’re so pretty,” he says, as if he wishes I weren’t.

Nearer the creek, away from the light, we lie on the grass. Just before he enters me I am seized by a bursting feeling and I cry out, startled, then lose myself as the feeling branches down my legs in delicious, subsiding jolts. The pain of penetration is like a hundred tiny bones snapping, but it lasts only seconds.

“Are you all right?” he gasps. “Is this okay?”

Afterwards, after we have our clothes on, we smoke a joint. Holding our shoes, we walk across the creek and climb the bank onto a neighbouring lawn where we lie down and watch the sky, our old occupation. There it all is: the Milky Way, the North Star, the Little Dipper. He says Polaris, Cassiopeia, Ursa Major and Minor, Hercules, names he’d taught me and I’d forgotten.

What I see, though, isn’t constellations, but a code, like Braille, all the stars positioned so as to tell us something. I ask him what he thinks it is and he says it’s, “Look. Look up.” On

that. He rests a hand on my belly. I pull him toward me.

And then Tim Todd is hovering over us with his white spaceship face. He's the one who's driving me home, says, "How do you know you're not knocked up?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Greenwoods takes its name from the oak and maple forests that the developers have bulldozed, and like any other Canadian subdivision, it has the bungalows, the wide looping streets, the young housewives with their herds of children. As an only child I am regarded as strange and spoiled, and while I can't argue with that, the presumption that I get whatever I want couldn't be more wrong. All I get are clothes. Which I never wanted.

Clothes is my word. My mother rarely uses it, she's more specific—she says “your tunic,” “your organdie,” “your pink cotton empire.” Speaking of my clothes all together she says “wardrobe”—“Let's consult your wardrobe.” Which we do, daily. We fret over it, tend to expand it, weed it out.

It contains at least twenty outfits, one for every school day in a month. Certain outfits are the child's version of the lady's. I have the leopard-patterned skirt and jacket, my mother has the leopard-patterned coat and Juliette hat. How do we afford this? My father isn't a full-fledged lawyer, he's only a law clerk, and yet he doesn't seem to worry about money. Whenever we get the clothes I know well enough. From the Eaton's catalogue, which guarantees our satisfaction. If something fails in the tiniest detail, such as a slight swerve in a line of stitching, back the outfit goes. The ease of these transactions strikes my mother as hilarious and unsound. She'll wear a dress for an entire day and then return it the next day to “those suckers.”

My heart sags when the Eaton's truck pulls up and the driver climbs out and starts unloading. To spend an entire morning or afternoon watching my mother pose before her full-length mirror while she leans against the door frame or cha-chas with one hand on her stomach would be entertaining if I didn't know that my turn would come next. Never do I feel more like a scrawny genetic aberration than when I slowly twirl before my raving beauty of a mother while she laughs at how awful I look. “Like a pinhead!” Or, “Like Zazu Pitts. Whoever *she* is.”

Some of the girls at school get their clothes from Eaton's as well, which I realize when Julie MacVicker shows up in a reversible tartan kilt exactly like mine, but their mothers never go so far as to buy the matching blouse and jacket, the beret, the gloves. And nobody owns the volume of outfits I do. In my class, girls tend to wear the same dress at least twice a week. Girls with older sisters wear hand-me-downs. Small wonder I gall them.

Well, I don't, I am too unremarkable; it's my wardrobe that gets them worked up. And as soon as they hear about my mother's disappearance it's my wardrobe they seek to comfort. They pat my angora bolero sweater, my rabbit-fur coat, they beg me to wear my sailor dress and my umbrella-patterned flare skirt. A big bossy redhead named Maureen Hellier tells me a vote has been taken and I am now allowed to join a club she formed called the Smart S Club, whose members do nothing except leaf through catalogues and magazines, cut out pictures of the models and paste the pictures into scrapbooks. At the Thursday-afternoon meetings, I pretend to gush over the child models my mother must have wished I looked like the woman models she *does* look like. In the most recent Eaton's catalogue some of the

models have on clothes I own, as Maureen never fails to notice. The captions, which she reads out loud, are especially excruciating for how they include descriptions of the outfit on the ideal wearer: “Swirl-skirted charmer to suit *a pert little miss.*” “Glamour cardigan for *the young sophisticate.*”

“Oh, Louise!” she cries. “Cut her out!”

While I still have a mother, my clothes mark me for a show-off and imposter. “Miss La-da-da,” Maureen says when I come to school wearing something new. The day I turn up in a lime-green cardigan that has a pompom drawstring collar and she says everybody knows one, redheads are supposed to wear lime green, I take the cardigan off and hand it to her. “Go ahead,” I say. “It’s too big for me anyway.”

She considers, then accepts, holding it by one pompom. “It’s drenched in her germs,” she informs the other girls. She carries it to a puddle and lets it drop.

I may as well leave it there. I know I’ll never wear it again. My mother sends all my clothes, aside from underwear, socks and pyjamas, to the cleaners; anything too soiled for the cleaners she tears into rags or throws out. Easy come, easy go, and lucky me I’m not slapped when I spill grape juice on a white dress, but I am unsettled by how smoothly she slides from worship to indifference. A nice new sweater, that’s what you live for. The same sweater with a stain on it never existed.

When I show her the muddied lime-green sweater, she stuffs it in the metal wastepaper basket and sets a match to it. “See how it burns?” she says. “Sizzling like hair? There’s nylon in the weave, I knew there was. I knew that pure-virgin-wool label was crap.”

The next day, in front of Maureen, I deliberately smear my pink chenille jacket with grease from a bicycle chain.

“You’re a mental case!” Maureen cries, but at least I have graduated from contemptible to alarming.

After that I occasionally poke a pencil through a skirt, pour finger paint on velvet. My mother is irritated only by what seems to be the onset of a clumsiness from which I, the daughter of a woman whose many beauty-queen trophies include two for comportment, should be exempt. The carnage to my wardrobe she almost welcomes, since it necessitates buying the replacements. Here, of course, is the catch. Every time I ruin something (and you ruin a blouse, you might as well throw out the matching skirt) I have to try on a half-dozen new outfits before she decides on the one that doesn’t make me look like a pinhead.

What are these clothes for? My mother’s, I mean. She leaves the house only when she has to go to shop for groceries, get her hair done, occasionally to take me to the dentist’s or doctor’s. Unlike everybody else’s mother she doesn’t attend church, she isn’t a member of any committee or club. Her friend, Phyllis Bendy, always comes to *our* house for coffee. My mother is a woman who goes nowhere, both in the sense of being a homebody and the sense that when she packs her bags and leaves, of heading off to a place so undiscoverable it may as well not exist.

But the clothes don’t accompany her. Even the police detective is flabbergasted by what she abandons—“Is that real mink?” She takes her jewellery, her beauty-queen crowns and

trophies (which, alone, must fill one suitcase), a framed picture of her father as a young man in his soldier's uniform (chosen over the photograph of me as a baby that hung next to it) and the white satin bedsheets. It's my father's conviction that she has been enticed away by "smooth-talker," "a fancy Dan lady's man." And yet how can this be? When I am grilled for possible candidates, I can only come up with the Eaton's delivery man and Mr. LaPierre whose first name is Daniel and who kisses her neck at our charades parties.

Every year up until the year my mother disappears, on the Saturday night nearest January eighteenth, we invite people to our house to play charades. These people are not neighbours or friends (my mother hates our neighbours, and she has only the one friend); they are the men my father works with and their wives, and January eighteenth is not a monumental date unless you're my father and then you celebrate the birthday of Peter Mark Roget, the compiler of the first thesaurus. My father loves synonyms. He himself can hardly ever say "love" without adding "cherish" or "adore" but his delivery tends to be self-mocking and theatrical, he makes people laugh. My mother laughs when the words lean toward the racy or ridiculous. Now and then she surprises us with her own string of synonyms, a sarcastic burst. I remember her cooking eggs one morning, and my father asking, "Are the eggs scrambled?" and her slapping his portion onto a plate and saying, "No, as a matter of fact they're mixed up, confused, rattled," and so on, all the way to "stark raving mad," by which time my father looked petrified.

Ordinarily, though, her forays into his territory delight him, as does word play of any kind from challenging verse forms (at nine years old I am acquainted with Spenserian stanzas and enjambments) to crossword puzzles, anagrams, clever song lyrics, horrible puns and his own name—Sawyer—shortened, when he entered professional life, to Saw so that he could introduce himself as Saw Kirk the law clerk. Scrabble he is addicted to, and he would prefer a Scrabble party, but my mother says the wives are too stupid.

On the morning of the party she goes to the beauty parlour as she does every Saturday morning, but instead of her normal pageboy she gets her hair pulled back into a French sweep, which shows off her tiny ears and her white neck, precariously long it seems to me, in danger of drooping. Back home, she washes and pin-curls my hair, then sets about doing her normal daily chores: scrubbing the floors and sinks, the toilet, vacuuming the carpets and pulling down the Venetian blinds, waving the vacuum nozzle through the air to suck up dust before it settles, but dusting anyway, her mood sour at the thought of the wives, with their dyed hair and girdles, tramping through her house. After lunch, while my father hides in his study, she gets down to the deep cleaning that charades night demands. With a paring knife she gouges out dirt from between the floorboards. She shines a flashlight on all the walls to reveal fingerprints, and here, because my eyesight is sharper than hers, I can be of assistance. We are a good team—zealous, aghast. "There!" I point, and she pounces.

Once the walls are immaculate, I am idle until it is time to pour pretzels and peanuts into bowls and dab Cheez Whiz into celery sticks. Late in the afternoon, while my mother tries on a half-dozen outfits before deciding what to wear, her spirits elevate to wry and I can make her laugh by telling some of my memorized jokes as if they feature the two wives she despises most: Mrs. LaPierre and Mrs. Todd. "If ignorance is bliss, Mrs. LaPierre should be one happy gal." "Mrs. Todd is so ugly that when she makes tea she can't even get the kett

to whistle.” To me the jokes are either inscrutable or not very funny, and yet I know the humour is cruel and I know what a traitor is and when the wives arrive and compliment my dress and already sagging ringlets, shame makes me sullen and my mother flourishes her cigarette and says they should ignore me.

At the last party, two weeks before she disappears, she says to Mrs. LaPierre, “Miscellaneous Congeniality, Louise is not.”

Provided I keep quiet, I am allowed to stay up and watch the game. There are five couples including my parents, and whatever team my mother is on always wins. It’s uncanny how quickly she can translate someone’s smallest gesture into the title of a book or movie. You see one of the wives or husbands all geared up for a pantomime, grinning, preening, circling her fist at one ear (“Movie!”), holding up four fingers (“Four words!”), holding up three fingers (“Third word!”), then opening their hands and eyes to convey pleasurable surprise.

“*It’s a Wonderful Life*” says my mother, sounding a little bored, a little contemptuous.

“Right,” the stunned person says.

“Objection!” one of the husbands quips. “Sustained!” from one of the others. “Request for an adjournment!”—that sort of talk.

The husbands joke and drink hard liquor, and the looks they sling my mother are empty and frequent. Mr. LaPierre, once he starts slurring, paws at her when she passes too close to his chair, follows her into the kitchen and slobbers into her neck while she absently swats her jowls. Mr. Todd invites her to punch his stomach; she is the only wife he extends that honor to. She gives him a soft sock in the mouth, and he kisses her knuckles. If such behavior makes my father jealous, he doesn’t show it. He’s too happy on charades night, he wants everyone to have a great time. And of the husbands, he’s the most handsome with his black hair slicked to his head like paint, a square-jawed man, tall and gangly, thick leaping eyebrows, long-lashed brown eyes capable only of drastic expression—exhilaration, terror, anguish—and pleasantly loose boned in his blue gabardine suit as he careens through a charade or strides around the room, which he does constantly, there not being enough chairs.

When the husbands play against the wives, my mother, who I notice never places herself too close to any of the other women, perches on the kitchen stool while the wives crowd together on the chesterfield. The wives are all attractive enough, but next to my mother, with her delicate head, champagne hair and slim white limbs, they are swarthy and dwarfish and know themselves to be, you can tell by the looks they give her, which are uneasy or too bright or, in Mrs. LaPierre’s case, when she believes herself to be unobserved, purely miserable.

As for my mother, she tends to look around the room. I imagine she is judging the effect of having rearranged the furniture and hidden her beauty-queen trophies in the broom closet (One day I will decide that, at the final party, anyway, those looks were her debating whether or not our house made living with my father and me worth the tedium.) Why put the trophies in a closet, though, why not broadcast the official proof of her physical supremacy? Because she worries about the drunken husbands knocking them off our ricketty end tables? Probably. Partly. And partly because she’s shy.

Yes, shy. I say this not as a child watching the party from the floor, squeezed between the

dining-room wall and the stereo cabinet, but as a woman only four years younger than my mother was when she disappeared. I know more about her life now; my father has finally told me. I'd always known about her being an only child, but I'd thought she had grown up in luxury and that her father had died after she'd left home. It turns out he died when she was only six months old and that the white house she'd once described to me—white walls inside and out, white tile floors—wasn't something she could have remembered because a year after the funeral Grandma Hahn sold it to pay off the creditors. She and my mother then moved into an apartment, a good-sized place in a respectable downtown Montreal neighbourhood, only by that time Grandma Hahn had given up on life. "Abandoned ship," as my father put it. All she cared about was going to seances so that she could conjure up Grandpa Hahn and yell at him for reading the books of French poetry she believed had brought on his brain cancer. Around the apartment nothing got done: unwashed dishes sat in the sink, a pile of dirty laundry sat next to Grandma Hahn's bed for so long that she started using it to hold her ashtray and bottles of pills. More than once the superintendent had to order a fumigation.

How all that would have humiliated my mother. But it's what gave her the gumption to make something of herself, or so my father believes. And yet she never bragged about her years as a beauty queen and then as a top professional model in Montreal. And it's not as if she showed herself off outside the house or even ordered clothes from exclusive shops. Compliments annoyed her so much that my father found it more profitable to be insulting. "That's a dress? I thought it was a gunny sack, a feed bag ..." This being ridicule, she squawked. She knew what she looked like, and who in Greenwoods had enough taste to influence her own opinion of herself? Oh, she was arrogant, all right. But shy, too, I think. How to make friends was probably nothing she'd ever learned, and so with the exception of Mrs. Bendy (another misfit) she steered clear of people and the possibility of their prying into her life, gossiping about her, judging.

But what *about* her squawk? Can somebody with a laugh like that be called shy? I suppose it depends on whether or not she hears herself. I don't think my mother did. She was totally deaf, which didn't stop her from singing along to blues songs on the radio (all those songs about women crying and carrying on—behaviour she would certainly have ridiculed had she encountered it in real life).

The effect of her laugh at the charades party, her first laugh of the night provoked by a particularly foolish guess or off-colour remark, was dramatic. The wives touched their throats, the men's heads snapped back. They'd heard that laugh on other occasions, they must have been expecting it. Still. From then on the atmosphere loosened, so it seemed to me. A laugh that can shatter glass tends to break the ice.

A couple of months after she disappeared, my father said—to my amazement—"I miss her laugh."

Disappear is the verb my father uses, for months the only one. To him, her defection is so sudden and unforeseeable that anybody who says she "left" or "ran off" gets a long-winded correction. Leaving and running off are not, he points out, the sort of actions that occur instantaneously. What my mother did—defrost the refrigerator freezer one day and put a goodbye note on it the next (in fact, there was no goodbye, only: "I have gone. I am not")

coming back. Louise knows how to work the washing machine”)—he equates with the snap of a finger and the great mysteries.

He doesn't doubt that a man, fancy Dan, more or less hypnotized her. This man he quickly broods into complexity. "A towhead," he says, "a blond." He says that my mother has a soft spot for blonds like herself, and for moustaches, so Dan sports a weaselly pencil moustache. He's a "two-bit wheeler-dealer," he peels hundred-dollar bills from a fat wad, he files his nails, his ties are pure silk, his hats cashmere, Dan knows his fabrics, nothing but a "flim-flam man," and the worst of it is, my mother isn't the first happily married woman he has made disappear.

Or vamoose, or fly the coop, high-tail it. By summer, the sacred verb has spawned synonyms.

But even then, when his shock has slackened to gloom, my father sticks to his theory that she left in a thrall, on a whim: "You don't defrost the freezer one day, and the very next day ..."

Yes, you do. Just as you buy a dress one morning and send it back the next. Not that I voice my opinion. I know as soon as I see her goodbye note that on charades night she was counting the days. After the last husband and wife were out the door, I said, "Mommy, you were the best player," and she waved away her cigarette smoke to get a good look at me, then stroked my face with the back of her fingers and said, "Honey" (she had never before called me honey), "nobody would believe you were my daughter."

If she took me with her, she meant.

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