

Vine Leaves Press *Book Sampler*

Finding a book that
inspires, gives you new
insights or makes you forget
about the world for a while
is hard to find. We hope
this sampler helps you.

*"You know you've read a good book when
you turn the last page and feel a little as if
you have lost a friend."*

Paul Sweeney

"Pour yourself a drink, fasten your seatbelt, and get ready for the trip of a lifetime."

Robert Adams, editorial director,
Passport Magazine

Prepare for Departure

Mark Chesnut

Notes on a single mother,
a misfit son, inevitable
mortality and the enduring
allure of frequent flyer miles.



1. The Last Road Trip

New York City, July 2015

My mother arrived in New York City with a black eye and one arm dangling in a sling.

By the time the dirty white van finally swerved to a halt after seven hours navigating the highways of New York State, I'd been waiting on the street for more than an hour. The truck looked like something that kidnappers might drive. The sign on its side—a cheap magnetic logo that identified the vehicle as a non-emergency medical transportation vehicle—seemed like a perfect ruse for spirited away some wealthy heiress to a remote cabin in the woods to await a ransom.

The driver jumped out and opened the back door, but there was no sumptuously garbed kidnapping

victim inside. It was just my eighty-nine-year-old mother, strapped into a wheelchair tethered to the wall of the otherwise gaping empty van.

“I thought that trip was never going to end,” she blurted as the lift lowered her wheelchair onto the steamy sidewalk in front of the Venerable Hills Care and Rehabilitation Center. I hadn’t seen her in nearly three weeks, but she offered no smile, no kiss hello. I kneeled and wrapped my arm around her bony frame as I kissed her forehead.

With her matted gray hair, limp right arm, and right eye ringed by oversized bruises, Eunice Chesnut looked like an ancient soldier returning from war. But my mother’s injuries weren’t combat-related; they were the result of her latest fall at the assisted living facility where she’d lived for just over a year in upstate New York.

Now, here she was, frowning at the sidewalk and examining her veiny hands. She didn’t cast even the briefest of glances at the imposing brick-and-glass building that towered in front of her.

Did she understand she’d be living here in New York City now? Did she remember selling her own home a couple of years earlier? Or retiring from her job at age eighty-eight, selling her car, and moving into assisted living?

“Well, so what are we going to do now, sweetie?” she asked, squinting into the sunlight as she smoothed her wrinkled blouse with her good hand.

Thanks to an extensive round of tests at a sprawling hospital on the outskirts of Rochester, we knew why my mother had become so confused and unbalanced in recent months. A large brain tumor had taken up residence inside her skull. When she’d gotten the news just a few weeks earlier, she’d called me from the hospital and declared that she would not seek treatment.

“I am *old*, and I don’t want them to do *anything* to me,” she had said, her voice weak but resolute. “There’s no point in putting myself through some awful surgery or any more suffering when I might only live another year or two. I’ve already had a very good life. But when it’s time to go, it’s time to go, kiddo.”

After the fall and the diagnosis, the assisted living facility in her town couldn’t meet her needs anymore. Neither could I nor my sister Glynn, since we lived in New York City and New Jersey and worked full time. So, after several days of research, I called my mother at the hospital to talk about her moving somewhere new—and I made sure to not call the new place what it really was: a *nursing home*.

“Momma, Glynn and I have found a really nice place for you to live, near where I live in New York City, so we can see each other all the time,” I said as brightly as I could. “Would you like that?”

“That sounds wonderful, sweetie.” She was almost always cheerful, even in the hospital. While her decades living in the Great Lakes region may have imbued her voice with a decidedly Midwestern tone, her Southern-born manners dictated the content of what came out of her mouth. That meant she remained upbeat and polite whenever possible.

The urgency of Eunice’s move to the Big Apple had thrown a monkey wrench into the Hollywood-style plans that I had previously concocted. I had wanted to fly up to Rochester to accompany her on the long ride down to the city. I had imagined a meaningful trip laden with emotional discovery and reconciliation, like something you’d see in some sappy TV movie. I’d be the doting son with a constant smile that illuminated the interior of the handsomely appointed black luxury SUV that would have surely been our form of transportation. We’d reminisce about all the vacations we’d taken together. Ponder how she gave me the travel bug and the tools to become a travel writer. Reflect on the symbolism of what would likely have

been our final road trip together. Maybe we'd even discuss weighty issues like why I had to cancel my wedding plans because of her. Or why she hid the only published book I'd ever written. So much to discuss! And so appropriate for the emotional bonding to take place as we charged down the New York State Thruway, the thoroughfare that had once served as a gateway for our long-distance adventures.

As we reviewed and resolved every possible aspect of our mother-son relationship during that final trip, heartfelt soundtrack music would swell as the driver finally opened the vehicle's perfectly polished door to welcome us to the glistening high-rise nursing home where Eunice would spend the last days of her life. My mother and I would be emotionally renewed and fortified, ready to confidently face her impending decline with Oscar-worthy strength, an even stronger mother-son bond, and a well-honed sense of humor. Cue the music again as we enter the facility, hand in hand. And cut.

But there was no time for that soul-strengthening voyage. My mother's latest fall and diagnosis had accelerated the need for her to move downstate, and I had to stay in New York City to hastily arrange her accommodations at the nursing home. A couple of


her wonderful, always-supportive friends saw her off, but she traveled on her own, bandaged up in a wheelchair, in the back of that empty white van. The cathartic moments would have to take place here, at the nursing home—although I now realized that I'd probably be journeying down memory lane by myself as her awareness continued to fade.

My mother was exhausted and confused, but sure of one thing as the nursing home's glass doors slid open with an air-conditioned whoosh: she was ready to leave this Earth.

Prepare
for
Departure
Mark
Chestnut

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The *Kwan Kew Lai*
Girl
Who Taught
Herself
to Fly



"A deeply moving
look at the boundless
power of education."

*Victoria Namkung,
NBC News*

A Memoir



1 Oh, to be able to fly

My life changed when Ah Yee, my mother, enrolled me in primary school. I was a fledgling, slowly growing her feathers and preparing her wings for a long flight into self-determination and independence.

Before then I watched with envy as droves of Tamil girls went to the school across from my home, to learn to read and write. They wore clean blue and white uniforms, carrying their school books in their shoulder bags, while I was the street urchin who remained uneducated, whiling away my time conceiving ways to play pranks on them.

On our way home from Kong Ming Chinese Primary School, my second sister, Kuan May, who was two years older than me, occasionally took a shortcut through the Tamil Indian village. The Tamils lived in

mud-houses next to a few open stalls where they kept their cattle and goats. The ground was always wet with cow dung and urine, and on rainy days, rivulets of animal waste filled the paths; we picked our way with great care around the puddles, trying to keep our white shoes white. The overwhelming stench defeated our effort of covering our noses with our handkerchiefs.

The Indians' houses were made of mud mixed with straw and cow dung. The women drew *kolam* early in the morning. After sweeping a patch of dirt at the front door of their homes and dousing it with water, they sprinkled finely ground rice flour freehand and with little hesitation created symmetric and geometric designs of vines and flowers. The *kolam* was a sign of invitation to welcome all into their home, including Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and wealth, and it prevented evil spirits from entering.

A little Indian girl cared for her baby brothers, playing on a small patch of concrete floor at the back of their house, surrounded by dirt, dung, and mud. The Indian girl's dress, brown with dirt, was missing a shoulder strap. It draped across her chest, barely covering her nipple. No sunlight penetrated the thick waxy foliage of a mango tree; her corner of the world

was dark and dingy. She flashed a shy smile when we ran by. A woman, hair done up in a bun, hunched over a stove with blinding and choking fumes rising from the fire she had started with dried cowdung and coconut husks, yelled at the girl to fetch a pot from the house. Hidden in a forsaken corner of the earth, the government was not likely to discover a lone girl whose parents broke the law for not sending their children to the mandatory primary school.

One day when we took this shortcut, Kuan May and I stopped in our tracks. The Indian girl was dressed in bright silk while her brothers remained in tatters. Her face was powdered white, her eyes were outlined in black kohl, and her fingers were stained with henna. A colorful and glittery scarf draped over her head and numerous gold bangles dangled from her wrists. Her feet remained bare except for encircling golden anklets and toe-rings, and her nails were painted bright red. Her resplendence contrasted with the dark, squalid ambiance of the back of the mud house. Despite the stench we stood transfixed, admiring her transformed appearance, unsure why she was so richly attired. The red *bindi* on her forehead gave her away. At thirteen, although she looked more like ten, she had become a married woman.

By a cement tank outside the house, a grown Indian man splashed and poured a bucket of water over his curly black hair, taking his bucket bath. He had hair growing from his chest all the way down below his navel. Apart from a dirty loincloth, he was naked. We averted our eyes and ran past him.

Was this grown man, twice her size, her husband? He could have been her father. Did he live in the same village and own many head of cattle? A good marriage for her according to the Indian tradition.

Soon the little Indian girl's belly began to swell. Less than a year after she was married, she cradled her baby while still caring for her younger brothers. All while Kuan May and I continued running back and forth from school to home. Her world remained the same patch of concrete floor surrounded by the cow stalls and stench, her baby in a pack on her back while she prepared the family meals.

A frightening thought crossed my mind: What if my father decided to marry us off the same way? I shuddered.

Ah Yee, my mother, certainly could not prevent this from happening. She could not stop him from giving her baby, Wan, away to his brother, even before the baby was weaned. She was not even included in the discussion and had no say whatsoever.

I wanted to see the world and not be bound to a small forgotten fragment of the earth. I wanted to be free from the island's traditional marriage role for women.

I thought hard for days for a solution and concluded that if this was going to happen to me, I would run away. But where and how? Looming, troubling questions requiring urgent answers.

And I had none.

From that day on, I worked doubly hard at school. Somehow my racked brain told me that to get out of a world where girls had almost no control of their future, I had to excel in my education; I had to dig myself out.

Many women of my mother's generation married through arranged marriages. The parents of my peers, especially those from the low-income group, took them out of school to help raise younger siblings and earn money, eventually marrying them off.

Like Ah Yee, they were soon burdened with children. They lived with their parents-in-law and helped with chores, under the stern rule of their mothers-in-law. We counted ourselves lucky my father had not forced us to drop out of school to help him full time in his food stall. If he ever did, I hoped Ah Wee,

my adopted brother, would intervene. By that time, he was working full-time and helping with the family expenses; he carried a certain amount of financial clout to sway my father's decision.

My mother was a very fertile woman; she was in a perpetual state of pregnancy, breastfeeding, or cradling a baby. No sooner had a baby been weaned from her breasts then she was pregnant again; sometimes she became pregnant even before the baby was weaned. She never had time to recover from her previous pregnancy and remained thin, always nurturing life in or out of her womb, having hardly any surplus to fuel her fat reserves. She had so many children to take care of, a whole house to clean, laundry to be washed by hand and ironed with an old coal-fueled iron, and meals to prepare. Our stove was stoked either with coals or firewood which she chopped, and she had to boil water for drinking; laborious physical work that had to be done with a lot of planning. There was hardly any time left for herself. She warmed the water to bathe the children since she believed cold water caused sickness or could scare the soul out of a baby. One might as well be as good as dead with a soulless body.

Ah Yee made diapers from linen or cotton sarong she bought in the market, cutting the material into squares and folding the squares into triangles. When she had no

spare cash to buy new linen, she tore up her old sarong. She soaked the soiled ones overnight in a bucket of detergent. In the morning she hand-washed them and hung them on the lines to dry. Her hands became red, raw, and rough from all the hard work.

With the first batch of babies, my father arranged for help around the house for a month so she could devote her attention to the baby and recover from childbirth. As time went on, he stopped getting her the extra help. We pitched in and helped with the household chores. She ate special rice fried in sesame oil and ginger and drank the red post-partum wine, but they no longer lasted for an entire month.

One evening, as was typical, my father sat at the dinner table chewing his food, savoring the Tiger beer from a big mug, foam forming a mustache on his upper lip. Tapping his chopsticks impatiently on the side of a bowl, he grumbled as the specters of his discontent happened to pass through the kitchen.

“Gao liau bu-iong.” Useless lots. Although my father was Hakka, he spoke to us in the Hokkien dialect of Penang Island, the Chinese dialect of most of the islanders, the so-called Nanyan or the South Seas Chinese. The Hakka Chinese are largely descended from North Han Chinese in the northern provinces of China and migrated and settled in Southern China. In the nineteenth century,

many Hakka and Nanyan Chinese, including my father's parents, migrated to Malaya. Ah Yee was Teochew but she spoke Hakka and Hokkien.

My father considered us girls Ah Yee's children, and he had nothing to do with us. Whenever we did anything wrong, he said to her, "Lu eh cha-bó-kiá." These are your daughters.

It had been several years since my mother first gave birth to a baby boy, a ta-po-kiá, my brother Boon. He desperately wanted another.

Throwing down his chopsticks on the table, he pushed his chair back and got up with a loud groan. He had lost his appetite after such an unappetizing monologue. Ah Yee seldom if ever offered her opinion. He said, "Chooi kam kim," literally holding gold in one's mouth, afraid to lose it if one opens one's mouth to speak, referring to Ah Yee's silence. Wobbling to the front porch, he took out his folding reclining chair, slowly lowered himself into it, lit his pipe, and began puffing. The drink took effect and soon he began to snore.

While Ah Yee never argued with him when he blamed her for birthing the girls, my oldest sister Fong, his first-born, was not so reticent. Her nursing school education taught her the sex of a baby was a contribution from both parents. Their argument often got heated, but through it all, Ah Yee remained taciturn.

Finally, the heavens must have heard my father's prayer for whenever he could he went to the temples to burn joss sticks and incense, praying to the gods to bless him with another boy. Ah Yee's eighth baby was a *ta-po-kiá*, my brother Beng, born when I was eight years old. Happy at last, he celebrated the occasion with a bottle of Guinness Stout while it was Ah Wee who bought a bottle of post-partum red wine for Ah Yee. Father bragged about his *ta-po-kiá* to all his friends.

As a baby, Beng was prone to asthmatic attacks and frightened us when he experienced difficulty breathing. Such attacks always happened in the middle of the night. Ah Yee held his limp body, screaming. One night his asthma was so bad all we could hear was the loud wheezing, he looked exhausted and blue. Kuan May and I ran to the sundry store to wake up the shopkeeper, he owned a Ford. Ah Wee carried Beng to the car and they drove to the hospital. He ended up hospitalized for over a week and did not outgrow his asthma until he was much older.

When Ah Yee became pregnant for the ninth time, she consulted our neighbor Fat Choo who loaned her money during hard times, wanting to know how to get rid of it.

Snapping green beans at the kitchen table, she said to Ah Yee, "Jiak ong lai," Eat pineapples. Apparently, she believed that eating anything sour would cause the womb to contract and push the baby out.

In the fruit orchard, a few anemic pineapple bushes grew under the dense shade of the rambutan trees, but they failed to produce any fruits. Ah Yee had to spend what little she had to buy them from the market.

One day, waves of abdominal cramps overcame her. She lay on the floor next to my father's cot, groaning. Thick dark slimy fluid oozed between her legs and through her *sarong*. She asked Kuan May to hurry and fetch Fat Choo.

Fat Choo came running in her wooden clogs, her bosom heaved and bounced below her *sarong*, "Aiyo, lueh bui see?" You want to die?

She washed Ah Yee and tucked her in bed while I prayed to God to spare her life. Ah Yee rested in bed for a few days, then got up and wobbled to the kitchen to resume being our mother again. She had lost that baby, but a few months passed and her belly grew big again. Alas, it was another *cha-bó-kiá*, a girl!

Upset, my father stayed away from home till late, returning drunk. Skipping dinner, he changed into his *sarong*, went straight to bed, and never once took a look at the baby.

Ah Yee did not try to get rid of her subsequent pregnancies after the scary attempt.

Perpetually short of food, we were often hungry even though my father's share of dinner was always plentiful. Each night one of us placed a stake for his left-overs which invariably there would be, for he was a small eater. What with snacks at the *toddy* shop or *kopitiam*, coffee shop, and more drinking at home, his belly became full quickly. Just as soon as he left the dinner table, we all partook of the left-over food like vultures.

"*Iao lau kao.*" Hungry monkeys, Ah Yee called us as she eyed the dishes with longing but she never touched a morsel. When Ah Wee worked late, she set aside a generous portion of the dinner for him. He often ate at work and because he had a delicate stomach, eating before bedtime caused him heartburn. Ah Yee left the best part of the meals for her children and her husband, eating the least desirable parts of a chicken such as the head, neck, feet, and the bishop's nose, the head of a fish or the fatty part of pork when we had meat in our diet, which was rare. She became increasingly thin and malnourished.

In the Malay house, my parents slept in the same room with us. I slept on the floor directly next to their

bed. Their rhythmic lovemaking often woke me up, watching the wrought iron bed and its canopy rocking synchronously with their bodies. Many nights I lay awake waiting for my father to get up from the cot, hitching his *sarong* as he picked his way over our sleeping bodies to go to Ah Yee.

Even in my young mind, I knew that was how my parents made their babies. Later in our home at Hye Keat Estate, my parents had their own bedroom, the wrought iron bed took up most of the floor. It fitted snugly with its three sides against the walls, leaving space on the fourth wall for Ah Yee's wardrobe. My parents continued to sleep with the youngest baby. I did not have to witness them making love anymore. But since Ah Yee continued to be pregnant, it was certainly still happening.

At eighteen, Fong had had enough. She asked my father to curb his sexual appetite and reminded him of his parental responsibilities of child-rearing. He was well into his sixties by then. Fong asked Ah Yee to stop having babies. Ah Yee gave her a blank stare. All her life she could never say no to my father when he came to her at night.

In nursing school, Fong had learned about the birth-control pill. The good news was Ah Yee could

get it free from the local government clinic. The pill, she told her, would stop her from making any more babies, and she need not have to tell my father about it. Fong accompanied her to the local clinic, but she became pregnant again, much to my brother Boon's consternation. Boon was her first son who was also training to be a hospital assistant in the same nursing school as Fong.

He asked her, "*In hô tōa-pak-tó?*" Why does your belly continue to get big? Ah Yee admitted she had forgotten to take the pills. The family planning nurse came for a home visit, fortunately, my father was not home.

When she reached term with her twelfth and last baby, she experienced contractions during the day but continued her chores until evening. Only then did she pack a small bag and Kuan May and I walked her to the bus station, a mile away. She boarded the bus; there was no money for bus fare for us. I felt a deep sadness watching her climb up the stairs into the bus alone. Where it dropped her off, she had to walk another mile to reach the maternity hospital, all in the midst of her labor pangs.

In the evening my father came home and learned that Ah Yee was in the maternity hospital. He ate his

dinner by himself and drank his Tiger beer, we all stayed away from him. The next day he biked to the hospital to visit her. To his great disappointment, she had another *cha-bó-kiá*. When he returned at the end of the day, the glum, drawn look on his face told us all too well he had not gotten his boy.

Ah Yee came home with Ean. She walked with her legs spread apart in obvious discomfort, having to deal with fresh wounds from the delivery, never once complaining about my father or getting mad at him.

Ean means swallow in Chinese. Ah Yee's last baby became her favorite. My father wanted to give her away, but the older siblings intervened. My mother used her savings accumulated through the years from her other working children's financial contributions to put Ean through university. She became the first child to receive a university degree in Malaysia.

With the birth control pills, Ah Yee was free at last from the burden of perpetual pregnancy. My father never suspected his daughter and son had sabotaged him. He had attempted birth control before—I had found a condom in the fruit orchard many years before. Boon was already in nursing school and said it prevented babies from being made.

In my early teens, I made up my mind not to submit myself to living a life like Ah Yee, completely financially dependent on my father. Although given the choice and the right circumstances, she would have loved to find herself a job and be rid of her dependency. Her lack of education hampered her, and she was overburdened with too many children. She tried hard to be financially independent by raising her brood of fowls, but that was fraught with uncertainty. I remembered the little Indian girl living on a small forgotten patch of the earth. The solution for me to escape the cycle of poverty was to get a good education, a career, and not be financially dependent on a man. Even if I did get married I would have a say in what I could and could not do.

When I was six, living in the orchard with the wild fields at the back of our house, I watched the swallows, or the *burung layang-layang*, flying excitedly in the evening, swooping fast and low with their tuxedo scissor-like tails temptingly close to me, teasing and challenging me to follow their lead. It was then Ah Yee asked us what we imagined ourselves to be if we could change into an animal. I told her without hesitation I wished I could fly as free as a swallow. This thought stayed with me, and it spurred me to pursue

a drastic course to leave my loved ones, my home, and my country to fulfill my dreams. I fell in love with the idea of being free, independent, and the one to steer my own destiny. I wanted to be like the swallow, the *burung layang-layang*, I wanted to be able to fly.

I never asked Ah Yee what she wished to be. Did she also dream about being free to choose, and oh, to be able to fly?

The *Kwan Kew Lai*
Girl
Who Taught
Herself
to Fly

Enjoyed this sample?
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"The eroticism of Highsmith and the intensity of Ellroy in an ingenious gender-swapped take on the Leopold & Loeb case."

Steven Powell, author of *Love Me Fierce In Danger: The Life of James Ellroy*

JAZZED

JILL
DEARMAN

A NOVEL



CHAPTER ONE

WILL

Clean lines, geometrics, and sharp angles marked the foyer that led to the sitting room. The Raab home was designed to dazzle. Gorgeously decorated in canary yellow and rich vanilla, the interior cried out for a spontaneous party, and it seemed that's what awaited Wilhelmina. Thoughts of her own lifeless house with its heavy furniture and drab colors made Will want to hide behind the glittery gold drapes.

A bunch of old clucks filled the seats. Dolly skated through the maze of them, cracking jokes, swinging her arms around as she came forward to greet Will—all noodly limbs and nervous energy. It was as if a dozen puppeteers were pulling her strings. Dolly's hair shone fair to match her manner, light as a champagne bubble.

She tamed her curls into a stylish bob. Her blue eyes did not need any makeup to bring out their radiance, but Dolly apparently knew just how to apply the right amount to wow an audience.

Will remembered her sole encounter with Dolly at Brearley the week of final exams. Dolly had made a deal with some seniors with low academic records to provide stolen answers to tests in exchange for cash and ready access to bootleg liquor. And she'd pulled off her scheme. Everyone buzzed about it.

Will had been sitting out track, weak from a lingering cough, when she noticed Dolly sneak under the bleachers with a lanky basketball player. The girl handed over a wad of bills to Dolly, who slipped it down her gym skirt. She didn't see Dolly pass her anything in return, except, she imagined, a promise. Dolly caught Will's eye as she dashed like an Andean Fox out into the open. Dolly winked, and Will didn't even have time to smile; she was so taken aback.

Will wondered if Dolly would remember her. Probably not. There was no reason to. Dolly vibrated with excitement; Will stiffened around people.

Now, inside her lavish manor, she finally twirled her way over to Will. Before Mrs. Raab could make the formal introduction, Dolly leaned over and whispered in Will's ear, "The bleachers, right? Nod if you remember."

Will felt Dolly's breath on her ear. She nodded.

"You'll keep my secret, won'tcha?"

Dolly spoke so softly that Will strained to hear. But she'd transmitted her message with the speed of a white-throated needletail. So, Dolly *had* noticed her. Someone a cut above the rest like Dolly remembered her after one fleeting encounter. She even saw fit to conspire with Will to keep her secret. Well, well, well! That could mean the mirror Will had been gazing into all these years was distorted, twisted to fit the image of those twits.

Dolly took flight once more as the ancient, stoop-shouldered butler wheeled in a tray of tea and set up the Alfred Meakin pot and china with the floral garland borders. The time on the gold Sunburst clock read 4 p.m.

"Wilhelmina, dear, I hear you can speak nine—or is it ten—foreign languages?" the lady with the bluest hair asked.

"Actually, eleven."

"Ohhh! Is it true you speak Persian? I'm told it takes years to master."

"Well, not if you have a system for mastering linguistics. Technically it's *Old Persian*. Mostly spoken in the southwestern part of the region."

“How exotic!”

Soon they were all dusting off their bits of finishing-school French and Italian on her. She indulged them, while she felt someone tapping her foot under the table. Will looked up, and Dolly made a dozing-off face and rolled her eyes. It was thrilling to be part of a secret communication with someone like Dolly. Will usually detested popular types, but Dolly was changing her mind. Perhaps she shouldn't have judged her so harshly.

Mrs. Raab asked Will, “You study birds, dear?”

“Yes. I'm an ornithologist.”

Gloved hands found pruned, lipsticked mouths, in awe of such a colossal word from such a young lady.

“Oh, and what birds are native to New York State?”

“Perdix perdix or the gray partridge,” Will recited, paying attention only to the feeling of Dolly's now-bare foot rubbing her ankle. “The Phasianus colchicus, also known as the ring-necked pheasant; Bonasna umbellus or ruffed grouse; Tympanuchus cupido or the greater prairie chicken; and Meleagris gallopavo or wild turkey.”

“Well, chicken and turkey I know!” One of the biddies laughed.

“Girls, why don’t you play a little duet for the ladies?” Mrs. Raab said. “You brought your clarinet, dear?”

Will nodded.

“I’m not in the mood,” Dolly said.

Was she joking, Will wondered, as Dolly sprang out of the room, leaving them all to speculate.

Mrs. Raab approached Will. “She’s always full of tricks.”

Will stood circled by the hens, with nowhere to retreat. On several chairs, she noticed a small bound book with a gray cover and gold embossed letters bearing the title: *Eugenics, Ethics & Immigrants*.

“What brings you ladies together today?” Will said.

Eugenics cut both ways where the Jews were concerned. It seemed prudent to find out where this crowd stood before broaching the subject. Dolly’s father was Jewish; her mother, gentile.

“Oh! Well, we’re a sort of de facto local chapter of the Immigration Restriction League,” Mrs. Raab said. “It turns out that many of us here on Sutton Place and the whole East Side are passionate about Eugenics.”

“I see,” Will said. “Is that Prescott Hall’s book?”

“Indeed!” another hen piped in. “He helped author the whole Immigration Restriction Act six years ago and right now, we need to ensure that the gates stay closely manned, if not closed altogether.”

“Yes, for their own good as well as ours,” Mrs. Raab said.

“Their?” Will asked carefully. “Which ‘their?’”

Mrs. Raab looked at her quizzically, and Will immediately regretted pushing the subject. As an outsider, Will felt a kinship with anyone else deemed an “other,” but it was foolish to expect the rich matriarch of the Raab family to feel the same way. Clearly, she felt her charity was enough.

Dolly returned with a pewter beer mug raised high above her head. With the deftness of a magician she slid a coaster under it and sat down at the piano.

“A stein for the Steinway.” Dolly giggled, rolling out an arpeggio on the keys. “For tips.”

The hens laughed. Will kept her expression neutral and opened her black hard-shell clarinet case with a satisfying *clack*. Dolly scanned the sheet music then stage whispered to Will in a perfect German accent: “Der hert auf dem Felsen. D. 965?”

“Schubert?” Will replied. “Ja!”

The ladies laughed. Suddenly Will was the cut-up. This was a first!

She stood at the ready with her instrument and nodded at Dolly. Dolly’s fingers moved lightly across the keyboard, the first few notes almost silent, only

to be followed by a rush of thrilled excitement like a fox circling a henhouse, and then—nothing. It was time for Will to begin. She exhaled into a few deceptively logy measures and soon they were together. On the white baby grand, Dolly played with feeling; her surprising lack of artifice made Will's body loosen, so their notes could find each other in the ether and dance together.

The two girls played with classical precision, but as the music rose into an aria, Dolly gave Will a playful look. She could hear her change the tempo just the tiniest bit to quicken Schubert's last hurrah with a bit of swing. Will warbled in time and then noticed one of the ladies cock her head. Dolly must've seen it too, and so they retreated back to coloring inside the lines.

They'd never played together before, but this was jazz! Improvisation. Will had no idea that the classics could be toyed with so mischievously, and with such nuance. During another passionate section of their duet, Dolly gave Will that look again. Will waited to see if she would play another trick, but she didn't. Her eyes softened as she looked at Will, and Will's mouth turned powdery, almost too dry to blow; to compensate, she breathed in deep and let a sultry sound vibrate from her horn.

Dolly responded in kind, allowing her fingers to tap the keys with an extra tingle just one octave lower than the score required. The jazzy twist made Will lean backwards—perhaps two inches, no more—and blow a little higher into the sky, as if their notes could meet in heaven, if there were such a place.

At that moment, Mrs. Raab shot Dolly a nasty look and the two girls returned to the predicted fare. When they completed the piece, Mrs. Raab began to applaud, and the ladies followed with slappy seal claps. Enthusiastic as her hands were, Mrs. Raab maintained those icy eyes.

“Darling, why don’t you show Wilhelmina your room?” Mrs. Raab said. “No sense letting us old ladies bore you ...”

“Why yes, let’s let the young people be young!”

“All right, Mumsie,” Dolly said before flitting off to the south staircase and calling for Will to follow.

The paint glowed sunshine. The brass legs on her canopied bed were shined to a glow. White scalloped easy chairs added elegance, while the leopard print rug heightened the energy in the space, adding a sense of unpredictability. Pennants from football games adorned the walls. White wooden shelves held trophies: Tennis. Riding. Skiing. Ice Skating. Golf.

Track and Field. Each golden statuette outsized the next. It seemed there was no sport Dolly didn't excel at. On the adjacent wall hung framed photographs of Dolly performing piano recitals. What a thrill to be within these walls.

It was only that morning her older sister ambushed Will with a demand to put on feminine attire.

"You have a social engagement, remember? It's very important you make friends," Estelle said.

"Important to whom?"

"You and Dolly have a lot in common. You're both Jewish."

"She's half-Jewish," Will corrected her.

"Besides that, you girls are geniuses—IQs over 140. When I ran into Mrs. Raab at their department store last week we both agreed. You two should get to know each other before freshman year begins."

"If we were boys, we would have been skipped ahead to college by now," Will said.

"Why would you want to be a boy?" Estelle asked.

It was almost like a challenge. Her sister stood appalled at Will lounging in her silk trousers, legs spread wide, reading Goethe, barefoot and beholden to no one. Estelle appeared dead as a strangled fowl in her sad brown frock noosed by lackluster pearls. Her

sister possessed no taste, no refinement. Who was she to judge?

“You both graduated from Brearley with honors,” Estelle said. “They’re a very influential family.”

Everyone knew who they were. Full German Jews on the paternal side, the Raabs were the first and only Jewish family to purchase a home on Sutton Place in New York City. In the spring of 1921, Erich, who inherited Raab’s Department Store from his grandfather, and wife Frances, of Irish-Catholic descent, moved with Dolly and her younger brother Sheffy, from the Fox Meadow section of Scarsdale to Number 16 Sutton Place.

Wilhelm Reinhardt moved Momma, Will, and Estelle two miles south, also to Sutton Place around the same time. Wealthy German Jews were beginning to find their way to the East 50s with little resistance.

“Don’t be such a prig. You’re a year older than Dolly. She’s even more academically advanced than you, Will. You’re both starting at Barnard in two weeks, and you could use a friend,” Estelle said as Waldek opened the car door. “*Especially* one who’s a social butterfly.”

“Actually, Estelle, that’s a misnomer. Butterflies tend towards solitude, with the rare exception of course, such as the South American Heliconius.”

“I thought you were an ornithologist. Now you’re an archeologist as well.”

“I think you mean, *entomologist*, one who studies insects, not just arachnids, or spiders.”

Estelle ignored the comment and sent her on her way.

But now that she was here at Dolly’s, Will felt a certain largesse of spirit towards her sister. Dolly pulled out a silver flask from the pocket of a plaid jumper hanging in her closet.

“Drink?” she offered.

The flask fit Will’s hand well, and she could still feel the heat of Dolly’s grip on it. The gin went down like syrup. She swigged a few more warming little gulps, pretending to be a pro, and noticed those hands. Almost chubby with dimples you’d see on a toddler, they didn’t seem to match those long, restless arms. Will stared at them as Dolly lit up a Chesterfield and passed it to her.

“Sit down,” Dolly said from the bed with the quilted silver headboard. “Smoke?”

She nodded and took a puff, a couple of gritty bits of Dolly’s lipstick sticking to the cigarette. She rubbed her lips together and let out an embarrassing set of choking coughs.

“Easy, cowgirl,” Dolly said. “If you can’t handle ...”

“I can handle it.” Will handed her back the stick. “But I’d just as soon leave it. I prefer liquor to smoke.”

“I’ll finish this one. Have some more gin.”

It felt sharp on Will’s tongue after the smoke, but she was getting used to it.

“You’re really fine on the keys,” Will said.

“Stride baby, stride.”

“Hmm?”

“Stride piano—it’s a jazz style. Here, I’ll show you.”

Dolly let the cigarette hang from the corner of her mouth and from under her bed she pulled out a cardboard cut-out of a piano keyboard.

“You buy that?” Will asked.

“No, silly. I made it. Cardboard and black ink.”

“Impressive.”

Dolly sprang up and whirled over to the Victrola in the corner of her room, flipped through her discs as she puffed, and picked out a James P. Johnson record.

“The old man hates jazz. Gotta practice in secret,” she said with an eye roll. “More fun that way. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and can see the music all spread out before me, just waiting for my fingers to bring it to life.”

“So you play on this without any sound?”

“I let it simmer in my head, and it comes out even better when I sit down to play for real.”

Dolly cranked the volume, pulled up a chair, plunked the paper keyboard on her bed and began “playing” for Will. Dolly’s left hand mimed with lightning speed. She’d play a four-beat pulse with a single bass note, octave, seventh or tenth interval on the first and third beats, and a chord on the second and fourth beats. It was the super-rhythmic “oom-pah” sound that Will had heard on Fats Waller records.

“You’re pretty good yourself,” Dolly said. “We should go check out the jazz in Harlem together, don’tcha think?”

She remembered how she’d squirmed over meeting Dolly. How wrong she’d been.

“Sure,” she said. “How’d you learn this technique?”

“I’m a genius, remember?” Dolly laughed. “Besides, ragtime plays it too straight. Improvisation is sweeping the nation.”

This Johnson fellow on the record had a lively, jumpy sound. Will could hear why Dolly was so excited.

“Atta girl,” Dolly laughed when Will turned the flask over to show there was not a drop left.

“You go to Harlem a lot?”

“I had a gal uptown who showed me the lay of the land.” Dolly winked. “You know what a bulldagger is?”

She felt her cheeks flush. Of course she’d heard it. A woman who dressed and acted like a man and liked other women. Will nodded

“Is she ... does she ... live in Harlem?”

“You trying to find out her race, Ace?” Dolly laughed. “Yeah. C.C.’s Black. Or more like what they call ‘high yellow.’ She really knew about jazz. Great set of pipes, and might delicate moves for a big woman. She told me all about how she learned cabaret routines from her grandmother who toured Europe performing with the pickaninnies.”

“The child dancers?”

“Yep. Those dances are supposed to make the southerners all sentimental for the plantation days. Jeez. You know they pretty much bred negroes into slavery. Can you believe that? The master would hop from his white wife’s bed to his slave’s in the downstairs quarters. He’d have kids who were his—what was the way C.C. put it? Oh yeah—his ‘progeny *and* his property.’ You know it’s amazing that the negroes in this country haven’t risen up and staged a revolution. Could you imagine being born a slave? And then being bred like a goddamn animal to breed more slaves so the *massa*

has more chattel working for him on the plantation? I mean, think about it, Will. What kind of a savage country is this? Yet it's the negroes who are called savages."

Will nodded, though she honestly hadn't thought much about it before. Dolly surprised her. Behind that symmetrical face, she possessed a radical mind. "You still see her?" she asked.

"Nah, she got roused by the cops, and nobody seems to know what happened to her. Cops love to raid the joints and it's always gals like C.C. who get the worst treatment. Hey, you know we should go back down there, ask for another round of high tea, and slip a dose of something lethal into one of those old bitch's precious china cups. Wouldn't that be a lark? You could wow them some more with your knowledge of foreign tongues. And me? I can do the slipping in of the poison."

"Poison?"

"Nah, a few crushed sleeping pills. Just enough to make 'em dozy, not kill 'em. But even if it did, what's the loss really?"

"Sure," Will said, attempting nonchalance.

"What, are you scared?" Dolly said.

"No. Scared of what?"

Dolly ignored the question. She slid down to the floor, pulling a well-worn teddy bear from her bed to hug. “Want to play a game?”

“What game?”

“Questions and Commands.”

“How do you play?”

“It’s a Christmas game I learned from Mumsie. We keep a lid on it around Daddy since Mumsie gave up the cross for him.”

“Tell me the rules,” Will said, slinking closer to Dolly and impulsively grabbing a fresher-looking stuffed rabbit from the bed.

“The commander bids her subject to answer a question. If the subject refuses or fails to satisfy the commander, she must pay a forfeit ...”

“A forfeit?”

“Follow a command,” Dolly answered.

“And if the subject refuses to follow the command?”

“Then she must have her face dirtied beyond recognition by the Commander.”

“And I suppose *you* want to be the Commander,” Will said.

“It’s not a choice. It’s my destiny to rule over you.”

“How do you figure?” Will said, somehow knowing this to be true.

Dolly lunged at Will, landing her long body on top of her. She made wild attacking sounds as she pounded the stuffed rabbit Will held up as a shield. She sat up then, leaving Will shaking on the floor, hypnotized.

“All right, Teddy,” she said, directing her words at the bear. “What do you think of Willsie-poozy? Think she could join our secret little bear-cub club?”

Dolly put the toy’s mouth to her ear and opened her eyes wide. Will leaned forward in rapt attention, straining to hear the judgment Teddy would render upon her.

**JILL
DEARMAN**

**J
A
Z
Z
E
D**

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“knocked my socks off”

FRANK FROST, AUTHOR OF *GERSHWIN'S LAST WALTZ AND OTHER STORIES*

CHAPTER 1.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A JUNKIE

We're in back of the van when Zooey's hair catches fire.

She's on the Nod and dips her faded pink bangs into the flame of the candle—the same flame we use to cook our dope. I smack her forehead until the pink-orange fireball is out. My eyes water from the stench of burnt, unwashed hair, as the Rush of the Speedball tickles my face, and then crawls down the back of my neck and into my shoulders, arms, torso, my hips, thighs, knees, down to the green laces of my black Chuck Taylors. With one eye on Zooey, I grab a plastic grocery bag and puke in it, tie the handles in a knot and throw it in the corner with the rest of the vomit bags, then cook up another Shot. Mikey's eyes roll inward like white, slimy marbles—he hasn't put enough Coke in his shot, so the Heroin dominates his high. I cover him with a brown, crusty blanket, and thirty seconds later Mikey's in a sleep so deep, I wonder if he'll ever wake up.

Zooey tries to mix herself another shot but struggles to stay awake. I worry she'll miss the vein and get an infection. Or worse, spill the last of the dope. Using the sleeve of my black leather jacket, I wipe the pink chunks of puke from my dry, ashen lips.

"You want me to help you with your shot, baby?"

Her eyelids flutter, and a slight slur trickles from her paling lips. "No ... I got it."

"Please, just let me help you, baby."

Brownish blood slithers through the tattoos on her noodly arm—through the black static hair of Lux Interior, to the mangled flesh of a crucified Jesus Christ. "No, I got it."

But I watch to make sure she lands her shot, then return to my own.

I draw the plunger back, and watch the scarlet tornado slither through the murk of my filthy night cap. I push the dope into one of my last healthy veins and watch the prickled hair on my arms fall on my grey, oily skin. I rest my head against the wall of the van and slide the needle from my arm. Zooey's head falls hard on my lap, and her hand slides down my bony chest.

"I love you, baby."

"I love *you*, Jonny."

I gently rub her back. Ten seconds later, we are sound asleep.

I wake twelve hours later, sodden in sweat.

The sun shoots through the windshield of the van, the rays like sandpaper on my shrunken face. Mikey is still—I hope, at least—sleeping under his old, dirty blanket. Zooley is outside, smoking one of our last Camels. I open the side door and climb out of the van, give her a kiss on the cheek, then take a drag from the long, Camel 99. After a few puffs, I climb back into the van to wake up Mikey. I pull the blanket from his face. He is white like death. I stare at him for a few seconds, not knowing what to do. I am pissed he would even *think* to die on me. I slap him hard on the face, and to my pleasure, he jumps and thrashes and kicks his arms and legs, like something hideous has crawled up his ass. I turn to run, but he pulls on the tail of my black T.S.O.L. shirt and stops me.

“What the fuck, man? What the hell was that for?”

“Sorry, brother,” I say and laugh. “Swear to God, I thought you were dead.”

“You thought I was dead, so you hit me?”

“Hey man, not everyone is good under pressure.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Give me a cigarette, you weird fucker.” I reach into Zooley’s bag and hand him the last smoke.

“Is Mikey dead?” Zooley calls from outside.

Mikey peeks his head out to answer. “Nope, unfortunately not.”

“Come on you guys, we gotta get going!” Zooey says.

“Dude, don’t say that shit Mikey, you fuck,” I say with a small lump in my throat.

“Jonny, Mikey, it’s already *way* past noon. Please, let’s go.”

It’s been a year since my wife and I split.

Living with her and our two girls, in our one-storey house on Guss Drive in the suburbs of Huntington Beach, is no longer an option. Rehabs, sober livings, and various couches were home for the first nine months of this year, until six weeks ago, when I parked my black Chevy van roadside when the engine died—an obvious suicide. Now, in the mid-summer of 2010, I, quite literally, live on Atlanta Avenue, on the brink of downtown Huntington Beach in a 1984 hunk of steel I spray-painted black and lined with black sheets hung on the inside of the windows to hide the candle flames that flicker till dawn.

For the first month of this new, sad existence, I sat in the back of the van, alone, poking myself with dirty needles every night until I passed out. It’s the only way I know how to live without the presence of my two

towheaded daughters, whom I am forbidden to see of course, by decree of their disapproving mother.

Fortunately, a month into this isolation, I meet Zooey.

Soon after that, my good friend Mikey is kicked out of his place, so he joins us as well. Mikey and Zooey are both HB locals and punk rockers—Junkies covered head-to-toe with tattoos, Mikey with about ten on his face alone, including the word *Creature* over the brow of his right eye and the Pabst Blue Ribbon logo on the left side of his face where sideburns would be. One is my lover and the other my friend, both Hypes and a blast to get stoned with—our little Junkie family is all we have now.

Every day at about noon when we wake up, Zooey calls Jefe, our Connect about an hour away in Los Angeles. We drive Zooey's red Jetta—in the scorching heat with no AC—to the city of those crass and fallen Angels to Cop enough Heroin to use and sell for the day. We take the 405 North to the 110 North and exit Ninth Street, and wait for the Runner in the clamour of downtown L.A., always on a different corner of the busiest street. After our pick up, we Fix in the twenty-four-hour parking lot, just off the 101 on Slauson Avenue, and across the street from the L.A. Coliseum—one of our many clandestine stops under the sun.

Our other Connect is a Peruvian dude in Long

Beach, Putz. Putz walks with a cane—a cane I stole and traded him for H—and sells much stronger Heroin than Jefe does in L.A. Putz’s Heroin gets us much higher than Jefe’s, but it’s Heroin we can’t sell because it’s too potent for the average user, so we keep Putz’s for ourselves and sell Jefe’s to the assholes in HB. After we pick up the Black, we grab two grams of excellent Coke—the other half of our beloved Speedball—from a twenty-one-year-old Hype named Crissy, and then drive around the rest of the day, mostly in Huntington Beach to sell enough dope to do it all over again. We only make enough for more drugs, a little gas, and *maybe* a pack of smokes.

Nothing extra.

We live and die for the Fix.

The three of us stand outside the van on Atlanta Avenue and wait for Zooley’s Jetta to warm up. It smells like a urinal. Of course we don’t have a toilet, so in the middle of the night Mikey and I piss into Big Gulp cups we pick from 7-Eleven’s trash, then dump our urine into the gutter so we are not seen exiting the van in the middle of the night.

Zooley has her own method.

She waits until morning, then goes outside and squats in a catcher’s position, pulls her skirt up—or one leg of her

jeans—then pulls on the top of her vagina, and we watch in utter amazement as the long, yellow arc soars through the summer air, making a perfect puddle ten feet away in the middle of the sidewalk. Zooney's ability to projectile-pee is by far the most glorious talent I've witnessed this summer—an aptitude that always makes the three of us laugh.

Tonight, after our habitual mission to score and sell dope, we end up at a friend's girlfriend's house for a small summer party. I always forget her name, but she is a tall brunette with a nice giant ass, and she's throwing a party at her parents' single-storey, model home of HB's Suburbia, the same kind of house the lot of us grew up in: green grass, beige siding and stucco, red brick chimney, white trim around the double-paned windows, new gable roof—the typical dwelling of the Orange County native. Mikey wears black Dickie pants and a white, long-sleeve Aggression t-shirt—currently his favourite band of all time. Zooney and I wear black leather jackets and black jeans, with ripped white t-shirts underneath. Her hair is red, but has slightly faded to pink and mine is a customary black. All three of us wear black Chuck Taylors, but mine have bright green laces. I stole the shoes from my recently deceased friend, Craig. Now I wear his Chucks and white Cramps t-shirt almost every day

and night. Wearing Craig's dirty rags is the only way I know how to cope with his untimely death. That and shooting as much H as possible.

The first thing we do at the party is shoot-up in the hallway bathroom, while everyone mingles in the backyard and sips their drinks and tries to get laid. After we Fix we go out back and pour ourselves beers from the keg. People gather around the pool, and the concrete deck is littered with cigarette butts and empty beer cans. Red Solo cups scattered like disease are kicked into the pool. A black cat and American husky saunter around the party. Both animals rub on people's legs and lick the beer that is spilt on the pool deck. I ask the whatshername hostess if I can use the computer to check my email. She says yes and leads me through the hallway where dozens of framed family pictures cover the walls from ceiling to floor. The black cat follows close behind and purrs as the hostess brings me to the room with the computer. As she heads back down the hall, I imagine her ass un-hanging all those phony framed portraits and family pictures, and laugh out loud.

I have a message from the wife of a couple I haven't seen in quite a few months telling me to call her as soon as I get the message. I pick up the house phone,

and after three rings, she answers.

“Hey, is Michelle there?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“It’s Jonny. How are you guys?”

“Oh, hi, Jonny. I’m good, I guess.” Her voice slow, sad.

“You guess, eh? Why, who died?”

“Ugh, I figured you hadn’t heard because you’ve been MIA.”

“I don’t get it, heard what?”

“Jonny, uh, Jimmy died a couple weeks ago.”

“What! Oh my god, what the fuck?”

“He took a whole bottle of methadone and killed himself.”

“Fuck.”

“The funeral is tomorrow.”

“Jesus Christ. I’m so fucking sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“So, if you can make it, great, but if not, I understand.”

“Oh my god ... I can’t believe this ... where’s the funeral?”

“It’s all the way in the valley, where his family lives.”

Jimmy is the second friend who has died on me this month. I hold back the tears and tell her I’ll try to make the funeral. But in my head, I can’t imagine squeezing a friend’s funeral into our busy day of Copping, selling, and shooting Heroin. We talk for a few more minutes,

then say goodbye.

I return to the backyard. Zooey is talking and laughing with three young strangers as they drink beers from their red plastic cups. They ignore Yours Truly, but I don't care. The only one who notices something is wrong is Mikey. He walks up to me and puts his arm on my shoulder.

"You alright, buddy?"

"I don't know, dude." I fight the tears when I tell him what's happened. "I don't get it, Mikey. God just keeps taking our friends and leaving the rest of us here to suffer."

I don't expect an answer on the topic of God. I have never heard Mikey mention Him the entire time we've known each other. I am embarrassed to admit I believe in God. Without another word, we head for the bathroom, and cook up the biggest Shots of the day.

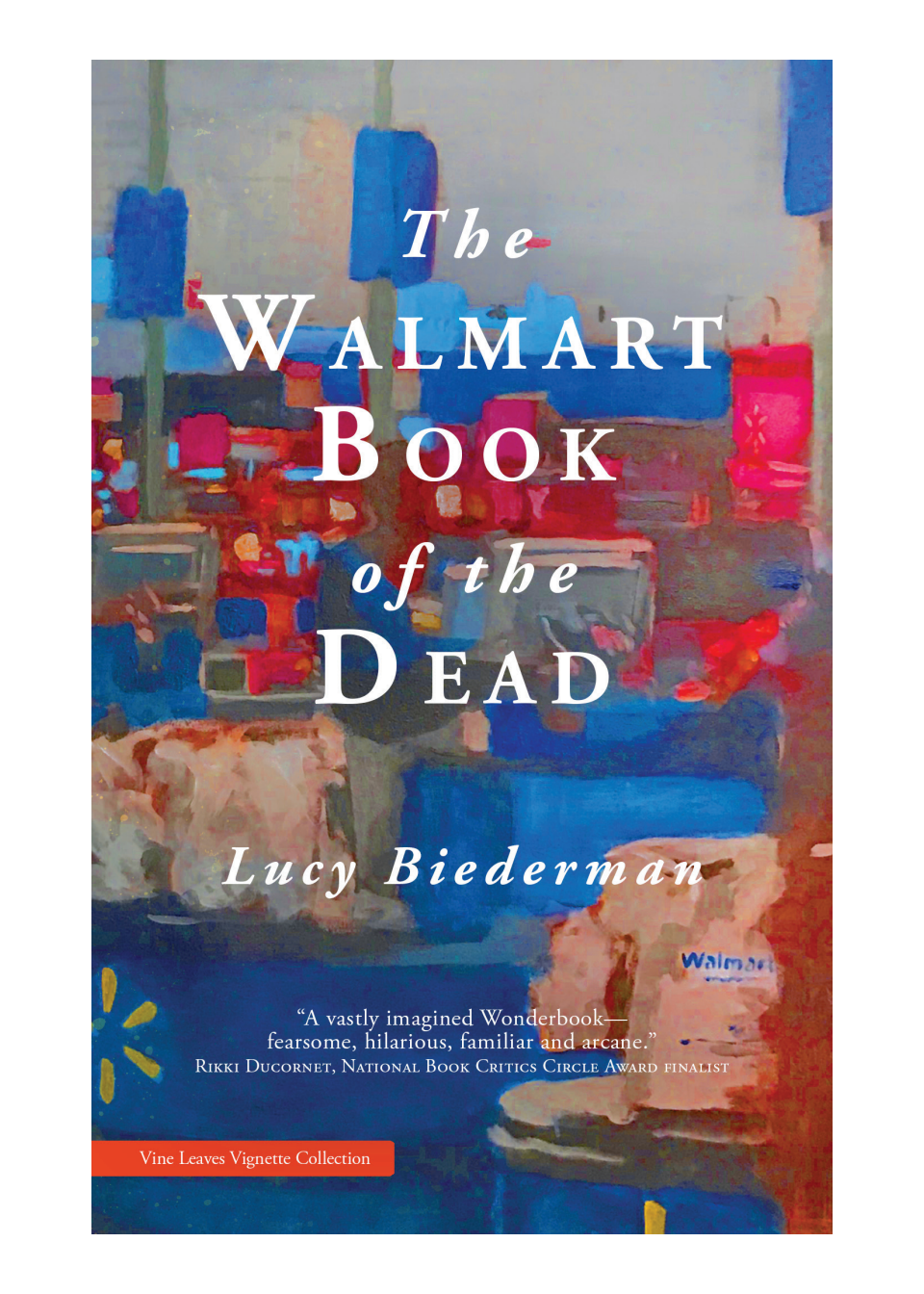
It is 2:00 a.m. and everyone at the party is drunk.

I say goodbye to the husky and give the cat a kiss on its head, and the three of us get in the car and head back to the van for our nightly routine. Zooey drives, and on Beach Boulevard a cop follows us for a block or two, but, surprisingly, lets us be. We get to the van and crawl in one by one. I light the candles, and Zooey pulls the dope from her panties. Ten minutes later we

are fresh out for the morning, just as I suspected. I lie down and blindly use a bag of vomit for a pillow, then fall asleep with my head underneath the driver's seat, while the neighbourhood dogs howl their loud and terrible tunes.

the taste of cigarettes

Enjoyed this sample?
Purchase the entire book from Vine Leaves Press.

The background is an abstract painting of a Walmart store interior. It features vibrant, saturated colors like blue, red, and pink, with visible brushstrokes and a textured surface. In the lower right, a shopping cart is depicted with a Walmart logo on it. The overall style is expressive and somewhat chaotic, reflecting the 'Wonderbook' theme mentioned in the quote.

The
WALMART
BOOK
of the
DEAD

Lucy Biederman

“A vastly imagined Wonderbook—
fearsome, hilarious, familiar and arcane.”

RIKKI DUCORNET, NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD FINALIST

Vine Leaves Vignette Collection

SPELL to Enter Through the Gates of Night.

At a calm time, Saturday morning or Wednesday afternoon, you may be in Walmart, but you have not passed through the GATES OF NIGHT. At a calm time, it's just a store, a woman in a hijab laughing with her husband, Woolite in their cart, America unflavoured. This BOOK is for the dark hours, the seam that ties the end of the evening to sunrise, when the bad, wrong things people do in and around Walmart are a hospital infection, red Rit dye in a load of whites, a gun in a classroom: by the time the problem is identified, it's already ruined everything.

ILLUSTRATION: She registered at Walmart. Her boyfriend served a tour in Iraq and bleeds out of his ear from time to time. He changed his name to Timothy when he returned stateside, but she didn't ask him

why. She guesses it was his business. She didn't really want to hear about it, to be honest, and isn't it rude to ask a question you don't want to know the answer to? He got a new Social Security card saying his name is Timothy, then a new driver's license. She didn't go to the DMV with him, because she hates official stuff like that. She never even got a driver's license herself, as much as Mom relies on her to drive, so why should she help someone else get theirs? He has to learn that it's an every-man-for-himself world. She loves him and all but he can't be depending on her too much, and Mom agrees. A man needs to be a man, each one for himself. He came to pick her from their apartment after he was done at the DMV. He said he wanted to take her to Ruby Tuesday to celebrate his new driver's license. She smoked some weed after he texted to say he was on his way, forgetting that she had already taken a pill she found in the couch. There might have been some mould or something on the weed, or maybe it reacted strange with the pill. On the way to Ruby's, she begged him to turn off the sky. But when he did (by drawing down the sunroof), before her came a sense, nearly visual, of every major good feeling she'd ever had, the excitement of Christmas when she was little, visiting her dad in prison, picking quarters from

a jar at Gramma's house, her Disney wedding board on Pinterest: They were as thin and indistinguishable as moth wings, stacked together until her life was done. She huddled inside her misery. She didn't say anything about it to him or anyone. Now she hates the Ruby Tuesday croutons. Before he made the change, his name was Greg. She's due in August.

And Another SPELL Like It.

They've let go the greeters, too expensive. Now armed guards man the doors, more expensive still.

ILLUSTRATION: The part of the wall that holds the guns in Walmart throbs, as if lit differently than anything else on earth, constructed from different particles. People on the other side don't understand. Either that, or they turn away, fearing that, in their heart of hearts, they do. He was once like them, until God lifted the veil from his eyes. He wishes for their sake they are given the grace to hold one, shoot one: let them walk right up to face the power God gave man. It's serious business, a matter of extreme responsibility. He feels about guns the way the hippies who once lived in the trailer next to his felt about LSD. Up until the day they were evicted, they invited him to

share their spaghetti dinners and play with their rat. It was actually kind of cute. You wouldn't think a rat could be cute, but it had a really gentle disposition. "I didn't know who I was until I got high," one of them told him. Though he, himself, wasn't comfortable speaking so openly, he believed he knew exactly what she meant. A weightlifter since high school, he hadn't known anything could be so heavy until he held a gun for the first time. It was a Sig Sauer—just a simple, double action handgun, it hadn't even been loaded. He felt the desire to die when he held it, and, buzzing right alongside that desire, the means by which to do so. And when he pulled himself back from choosing to use it like that, the choice he had made felt as physical a thing as pulling a hood from his head. *Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, he read in a meme, but that we are powerful beyond measure.* He stands with his hands in his pockets, beholding Walmart's wall of guns. At the range this morning, he squeezed the trigger of his PAP M92 and his body absorbed the recoil, pushing out his tendency for thought. Afterward, he took it apart and ran it, piece by piece, under scalding water, to guard against rust. Spread across his dinner table, its great power holds. Miles away from it, he feels its hum.

The
WALMART
BOOK
of the
DEAD

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