

Chapter One

There is a slight sour smell in the air. I leave it behind. I leave behind the nurses in their station, who are eating doughnuts and filling out forms. I leave behind the dull throb of the overhead television in the common room. I leave behind the man who runs up and down the hall, screaming about his missing M&Ms. But the dark inside comes with me.

In the hospital I wanted my father. I did not want my mother. Once, when I was on the border between light and dark, I sensed her standing at the edge of the bed, leaning over me. The light perfume she wore accosted my senses. The outline of her face was framed in a tendril of her hair falling across her temple. A face in a fog.

As the shadow stood over me, a neuron fired in my brain. A tenuous thought floated up through flickering consciousness.

“Make her go,” I said to the nurses. “Make her go.”

As soon as the hospital called my father, he’d arranged, somehow, to have his classes covered, and had come down from where he taught in the North Country. He’d stayed with a friend from college who lived in the city.

“Are you ready for the world?” Dr. Kahn asked. His question was rhetorical. It was time to leave whether I was ready or not. *No*. I wanted to say. *I’m not ready. I’m not ready for anything*. Instead, I forced a smile.

My father reached out to shake the doctor’s hand. “Thank you. Thank you so much for taking care of my daughter.”

“That’s what we do here, Mr. Klein.” He turned to me. “You know what you have to do, Julie, soon as you get up north,” Dr. Kahn said. “Right?”

“Find a psychiatrist. Someone to give me my meds.”

“And therapy. Find someone who does good therapy.” He looked at my father. “She’ll get better. It will take time.” He held out his hand to me.

I shook it. My hand was limp. His grasp was firm and strong. The same as on the ward. Firm and Strong. Dependable.

“You have to sign the discharge papers. The head nurse will help you with that. You can pick up your meds in the pharmacy on the way out.”

My hand shook as I scribbled my name. I waved to Jean, and she came to give me a hug. She was supposed to leave before me, but the staff caught her cutting.

“Good luck,” she said.

I returned her hug.

My father and I leave the hospital around nine. We spend the rest of the morning clearing out my dorm room at Hunter College. I take every book, to surround myself with the familiar once I get up north. I take my computer. The mini fridge I give to a girl down the hall, for free. Some guy comes in and sees me moving out.

“Do you need that futon?”

I shake my head.

“How much you want for it?”

“Take it.”

I have emerged from the pit. I can see. I can talk. For a long time, I could not talk at all.

We get in the car and drive north. I am twenty two. I will not finish college.

On the New York Thruway, my father and I speed towards the Adirondacks. We will pass through and across the mountains, down into the St. Lawrence River Valley, where my father teaches politics in a small college town tucked away among dairy farms. He took the job not long after my parents divorced. He sits behind the wheel, intent upon the road, listening to classical music on the radio.

I am going to live with him.

The music from the dashboard makes me sleepy. But the sun is coming through the windshield and hitting my eyes. I can't fall asleep. The trees and countryside are a blur. An exit sign comes up. KINGSTON, it says. I recognize that sign. I have a thought. Words come. Just a few.

“Isn't that the exit to camp?”

“Yes,” my father says. He looks over at me. There is surprise in his voice. “It's back in the mountains somewhere. About twenty, twenty five miles. Near one of the city reservoirs. The Ashokan.”

“The Ashokan. We used to take hikes there.” I close my eyes.

I remember when I was small, before I was in a group in camp, sitting on a step on a white cabin, watching my father sitting in circles with groups of campers, planning program. He was the program director.

I remember my mother dragging me behind her across the big ball field to the wood shed, where she would yell at the men responsible for fixing things and for driving the bus. She was the assistant director. She would bring me to the kitchen while she talked to the cook about what would be for dinner. In the mornings, in our family's single room cabin, on the hill behind the Main House, she yelled and pinched and pulled and hit, because I wasn't getting dressed quickly enough.

The car keeps moving north. We go through a toll booth. I am passing through space, but not time.

"I hated the language," I say to my father.

"What? What are you talking about?" He reaches to turn off the radio.

"The language in camp."

I went to a summer camp all through childhood. In the beginning, my parents worked there. It was a radical left wing camp. The director had been a member of the Communist Party.

"Camp? You haven't said anything for an hour. You're thinking about camp still?"

I remember what I said in the writing tutorial. "The goddamn jargon is ringing in my ears. I can't stand it."

"What jargon?"

"Struggle. Responsibility. Fight for a better world."

"Oh, the ideas. What we called the ideas. It was jargon to you, huh?"

"Words. Empty, fucking, hollow words."

"The language of revolution."

“Oh, is that what it was.”

My father doesn't answer.

“Do you know what it's like to have no language? To recede into a place where there is none, and the last thing you want to ask, but can't is, ‘Why am I in a hospital?’”

“No, I don't, darling,” he says finally. “I don't know what it's like to be without language. I'm sorry.”

I want to say, *That's not good enough*, but cannot find the will to transform thought into speech.

Giving up, I fall asleep.

At dusk, we pull into my father's driveway. The house is grey with white trimming. On the front porch are a rocking chair and a grill. His street is just off the main road, lined with trees, and old Victorian homes. He lives just a block from the campus. My father walks there every morning to teach.

We get out of the car.

“Welcome to Grasse River,” I mumble.

“You've been here before,” my father says. “Many times.”

“Yeah, but not for keeps.”

In my room is a single bed, an old chest of drawers, a small closet.

“I thought we could go shopping for a chair,” my father says, “and curtains. We can get the room painted, too. Any color you want.”

I plop down on the bed, my head in my hands. There's nothing for me here.

"I'm tired, Dad. I want to turn in early."

"No dinner?"

"Thanks, I'm not hungry."

Once alone, I turn off the lights, lie down on the bed fully dressed, and stare at the ceiling.

I started coming up here once a year when I was ten. Only at those times, I was excited, happy for a break from my mother, from the city, from school. Glad for the quiet.

But this time, I am here to stay, and the quiet frightens me, because it speaks to an empty future, void of purpose.

Something sharp is pressing against my body. I cannot breathe.

I sit up. My insides are tense, heavy, and dull. I have been dreaming. My fists are clenched, the nails breaking through the skin of my palms. I remember where I am, climb out of bed and go downstairs. My father is drinking coffee at the kitchen table.

"Well, hello," he says. "How are you? Do you know it's almost noon?"

I don't want to answer this question so I avoid it. I sit down and say nothing.

"What would you like for breakfast?" he asks.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eggs?"

"I said I don't want breakfast, Dad."

“I could make you French toast.” He gets up. “How about I make you French toast?”

“Dad! I said I’m not hungry! Jesus.”

He sits down again. I pick at my fingernails. And we sit there, not saying anything. I try to stuff down the panic rising in me.

“Is there a place to walk around here? I need to go for a walk.”

“There’s a nature trail that goes right along the river and comes out on a big flat rock. The Grasse River. It’s behind the college. And if you want to see people, there is always downtown.”

A river. A place to be alone. A place possibly, to walk into, drop under, and disappear.

I decide to explore downtown first. I walk two blocks to the center. A movie house. A McDonald’s. Four bars. A New Age shop, called *Song of the Spirit*. A Rite Aid. A ‘For Lease’ Sign. An accountant. Two insurance agents, three law firms, and a realtor. I sit down on a bench. I want to scream.

I find the trail behind the college. Walk under a canopy of trees. There are pines. I examine the braided cones on the ground, remembering that pine cones were the only thing about camp I liked. Pine cones I could feel, touch smell. Pine cones are solid and real. On the ground in camp, I would sink into rocks, roots, earth. Away from the adults and their meaningless tropes. Away from my mother’s anger.

I sit down on the flat rock and stick my feet into the stream. The day is hot but the water is so cold my toes are numb. The rushing sound does not calm me. I cannot live

this way. Perhaps I can toss myself into the river. I consider this for a moment. But I must find a way to be in the world.

I decide to go out that night, to a local bar. Classes have just started. I will pick up a boy and forget the gnawing in my gut. I tell my father I am going out.

“Going out?” he says. “Where?”

“Out. Just out.”

“What are you going to do? It’s nine o’clock. All that’s open are McDonald’s and the bars.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m sure not in Kansas anymore. I’ll find something. I’ll follow the yellow brick road. Don’t wait up.”

The stools at the bar are all taken. There are several booths, one with girls laughing, one with boys chugging beer from tall mugs, and one with a boy and girl looking into each other's eyes. I slide into the only booth that’s empty.

I can't drink alcohol—my anti-depressants will stop working, not that they they’re working so great now. I order a non-alcoholic beer.

It’s hot. I’m wearing a low cut teal tank top that shows cleavage, and cut off shorts. A boy slides into the empty seat across from me. Aquiline nose, curly blond hair, baby blue eyes. Chiseled, even cheek bones.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asks.

“Not at all.”

“I’m Jack.”

“Julie. Julie Klein.” I’m warm and tingly in my belly and between my legs. It wouldn’t take much. I remember freshman year. I picked up guys all the time. It was easy. Just like this is easy.

“I haven’t seen you around. What’s your major, Julie Klein?”

“Haven’t got a major.”

“No major? So what’s your year?”

“Haven’t got a year.”

“No major? No year? Do you even go here?”

“I’m from New York. Hunter College. I’m taking a leave.”

“Yeah? So why Grasse River?”

“My father teaches at the college. I’m escaping the city for a while. You know.”

“I do? I would never leave the city for this dump. You know how cold it gets in the winter?”

“Sometimes I visit for Christmas.”

“What’s your father teach?”

“Politics.”

“Good. I hate politics. That means I’d never take a course with him. Want to get out of here? Got my own place and everything. It’s a one room shit hole but free of loud drunks.”

“How many beers have you had?”

“Two.”

“Still sober?”

“On two beers? I need at least five just to get a little buzzed.”

I don't believe him, but I've always tried not to have sex with wasted men. I don't tell him. He'll want to know how many I've screwed. None of his goddamn business.

“Okay.”

We walk the two blocks to his house. He lives in a studio over the one hairdresser in town.

He's right. He does live in a shit-hole. Futon on the floor-no frame. Dishes in the sink. No kitchen, just a hot plate, microwave and mini-fridge. A desk with papers all over it. There is a tattered yellow love seat against one wall with a television in front of it. There is one book in the room. *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth.

“You only have one book,” I say.

“If I need books I borrow them.”

“You like Roth?”

“I like *Portnoy's Complaint*. I like the sex.” He sits down on the futon and pats the place next to him. I've never played it coy when I wanted to fuck.

He leans over me, feels up my breast over my shirt, then slips his hand underneath and unhooks my bra. His breath is hot. I stick my tongue into his mouth and we dry hump for a while. We pull off each other's clothes, and he reaches for a condom—there is a little pile of them next to his bed.

At midnight, I get up and get dressed. “Gotta go.”

“That was good,” he says. “We should do it again sometime.”

“I'll find you.”

“You don't even know my last name.”

“You hang around in the bar?”

“Most nights.”

“I’ll find you.”

I walk home. My father is up, waiting downstairs.

“Hi, Dad.”

“I’m not going to ask you where you were. You’re a big girl. But you should know I was worried.”

“Why were you worried? I’m twenty-two, not fifteen. What trouble can I get into up here?”

“You could call. Even to say you’re not coming home.”

“Next time.”

“Okay, Julie. Whatever you want. I’m going to bed. I have an 8:30 tomorrow.”

He goes upstairs, leaving me alone in the living room.

I walk around the room, sitting on the couch, then the stuffed chair. I walk out onto the porch and look up at the stars. I go back inside, upstairs to knock on my father’s door, to maybe talk some more, but decide not to. I walk up to campus, restless. I walk around the quad, sit on bench, then under a tree outside the library. The library is pouring light through its windows into the night. The panic is back. I will screw Jack again tomorrow and that will make everything alright.

I sit under the tree for a long time, pressing my palms against my eye lids, trying not to cry. I get up and go walk behind the library to the trail I traipsed this morning. The lights of the university disappear behind me and I am surrounded by the dark. The gravel

is rough underneath my feet, and I can barely see. I keep going. If I disappear into the dark, I can leave the fear behind.

After walking only a few feet down the path, I hear someone call my name.

“Julie?”

I make a sharp turn.

“Julie!” It’s my father.

“Dad?”

“I’ve been looking all over for you.”

I walk to where he is standing. I cannot see his face clearly. There is only light from a single lamp post at the head of the path.

“Julie.” He reaches out his arms. He wants to hug me.

I let him. But something snaps inside my heart. I am afraid. I don’t want his hug. I don’t deserve his hug. I run away down the path. I make out a tree stump in the dark, stop and sit on it, out of breath

“Julie!”

I remain frozen for a moment. I stand, run back. He takes my shoulders and tries to hug me again. I do not want him to. I turn and run down the path a second time.

“Julie!” he calls. “Where are you running to? Stop. You are going to hurt yourself.”

I stop. I turn, and slowly walk back. I sit down on the gravel at the head of the path, and he sits with me. We are silent, for a long while.

“You okay?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know. The future.”

My father doesn’t answer.

“Say something. Tell me something. Tell me what’s going to happen.”

“If I had a crystal ball, I would. You only just got here. There’s time to figure things out.”

It’s my turn not to answer.

“Want to go back to the house?” he asks after a while.

We head back to the house, not home. I’m not sure I can ever call it that.

I come down the next afternoon, in my bathrobe, bleary eyed. My father is back from school and eating lunch.

“Good morning,” he says.

“You’re not going to offer me breakfast, are you? Because I’m still not hungry.”

He smiles. “No,” he says, “Because it’s lunchtime.”

I move across the kitchen to make coffee.

“You want to talk about last night?” he asks.

That’s the last thing I want to do. I go silent again.

“Julie? I can’t hear you.”

“I didn’t say anything. I don’t know.”

“Maybe we can figure it out together.”

I go upstairs and throw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

“I’m going out,” I say to my father. “To the stream.”

Out of the house, I walk to the trail, where I was the night before. I get to the top of the path. I stop. I walk back. I sit on the steps. A school bus comes and drops off some kids. The sun begins to drop behind the houses, and long shadows cast themselves onto the street.

My father comes out of the house. "Want some dinner?"

"I'm not hungry. Thanks." He walks back inside.

It is night now. College kids walk down the middle of the street towards the bars. They disappear in the direction of town. That's right. I was going to look for Jack, but I have lost my desire for sex.

I sit and watch as the sky blackens and fills with stars.