

(Excerpt from forthcoming novel, set at a midwestern college in 1965)

Esther and George

Esther's favorite place on campus was a building next to Strickling Chapel, one of a set of buildings attached by lengths of colonnade around a small quadrangle. Completed just weeks before the crash of '29, the complex had been conceived as a home for Belfort College's now-shuttered divinity school. The Romanesque revival chapel was at the center, its narthex and offices making up the south side of the quad. The west side was a dormitory, the north side a library, and the east side a refectory. The dormitory was the only one of the three buildings around the chapel still in use as originally intended. The library now housed administrative records, and the refectory was empty, seemingly forgotten, its heavy oak door not even locked. In the refectory, a high-backed bench was the only object in the room, running most of its length, opposite a wall of high casement windows that faced a small green quad. All that remained of what might have been a painted Flemish interior were the black and white tile floor and the milk-white light spilling in. No girl holding a letter by the window, no massive table piled with pheasants and plums.

To Esther the place felt like both painting and museum—maybe even better than a museum, because she could practice singing in its splendid empty acoustics. She loved museums for their quiet company of ghosts, the wisdom embedded in marble, the dramas and consolations of people whose dilemmas were fixed in panel and paint.

Judith is forever sawing off the head of Holofernes.

Arrows will never unpierce the torso of St. Sebastian.

Despite multiple reports of crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, Jesus is suffering the agony in the garden to this day.

Esther knew her Bible verses well enough, and what she didn't remember from Sunday school she relearned regularly singing oratorios and masses every semester, and from standing in front of old master paintings at Belfort's art museum. She knew that, as the lilies of the field were taken care of, she needn't worry about being provided for, who would feed and clothe her. But she also knew that this bit of Matthew's Gospel was not really for her. As it so often turned out, most things were not for her. She would toil and spin, plan and hoard and store, always more than she needed, in case. Why God had made her a rodent and not a lily, why His plans for her were so horribly mixed up, she could not tell. She also knew that God wasn't involved at all with this particular detail of her life; it was her responsibility, and opportunity, every day, to do better. To share cake.

To forget about the cookies passed around by the girls on her hall. Esther knew this. She knew lots. At her summer singing academy in Milan, she had had a conversation with an Italian conducting student, a young man with the longest eyelashes Esther had ever seen. Their conversation had been about early opera, not just Monteverdi but Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini and the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, all of which she had read about. He had said to her, admiringly, “You know so much things.” Indeed, if she couldn’t be a shirtwaist girl, effortlessly lovely and willowy and graceful without even thinking about it, she could at least, with some effort, be smart and talented. She could know so much things.

By the early 1960s, Strickling Chapel was no longer sanctified by the activities of the divinity school, but was sanctified instead by the offerings made daily, hourly, by the musicians who practiced and performed there. On Friday Strickling was the site of the Renaissance Singers’ spring Mass and Madrigals concert. For George, nothing about it went as anticipated. His initial impulse for joining the Renaissance Singers in the first place had been to be near-but-not-near Harlan. George had dug down in the fossil record, deep below Bach, hoping to get closer to the stuff Harlan was interested in—medieval masses and motets and all the mud-hut music that preceded the solid structures of classicism and romanticism where, for George, music really began. And the group met for weekly rehearsals in Strickling, from whose lamplit organ loft Harlan had looked down and greeted George so often that George would look up and see him there when he wasn’t there.

Harlan was not there tonight. George looked for nuance in Harlan’s absence, yet he knew there was no special flavor to any of it. Harlan had simply removed himself from George, and this absence was just normal, now. After they’d parted the previous Sunday, George had skipped dinner. Harlan skipped lunch the next day, and that Monday evening at dinner, Harlan had been polite but distant with George. He had made excuses and George had not pressed him. For days, George busied himself with his own excuses. In his thoughts, George began to loiter outside the door of his own decision not to go to dinner that Sunday after Dr. Holt’s service, after the long walk and the terrible nothing of a goodbye on his porch. He lingered there in his thoughts, as if he could change a single act from the past, as if by doing so he might thereby change the misery flowing from it.

This concert in Strickling became for George just a thing, like every other thing—every class, every lesson, every morning and afternoon and night, every meal—to be endured. He was stunned by the cruelty of art, which demands of you that you hold open your heart. There was even special cruelty to the physical task of making intelligible pitches and rhythms with his larynx, which felt knotted. He wondered how the “real” singers did it, how they held open their hearts *and* their throats. George did not know how he could hold anything open

today for the words: “Draw on, Sweet Night, friend unto those cares / Which do arise from painful melancholy,” words which were then pulled on long strands of melody from which he could feel himself hanging. The torture of the task was almost comical. He endured the dress rehearsal, and the concert itself, singing pitches and rhythms and syllables. He sang the bassline. He just stood there, holding the thing up. The fact that the day’s drizzle had become a downpour, drumming audibly on the chapel roof at several points during the concert, hardly registered.

But there in the narthex afterwards, wearing a light green jacket, was Esther, her blonde hair in an elegant pile. A bird from a warmer climate. She caught sight of George and sent him a smile. He went to her. Of course he went to her. She was one of the apostles, who had lately touched the hem of Harlan’s garment.

“It was a beautiful concert,” Esther said. She looked at George and saw a wretched pile of bones. She had an urge to gather them up, but instead she touched his arm. The lightness of their back-and-forth, never without Harlan, was missing. The freedom of their midnight swim was far away, buried beneath formal clothing and behind months that felt like years. There was not even the usual cheek-kissing after this show. There was an extinguishing vacuum about George.

“Thanks,” he said. And about Esther, there was a vigilance, maybe out of loyalty to Harlan, or maybe from fear of catching the plague of George’s sadness. George asked her, “Do you want to go somewhere? Have a cup of coffee at the diner?” He did not know what he expected from her. Of course, he wanted a transmission from Harlan or, if there could be none, then simply to be near her for what she contained, all the words Harlan had ever spoken to her, a reliquary.

Esther’s quick assent was a relief. “Sure,” she said, placing the word down gently. “Let me just talk to Cindy a minute.”

Cindy was preparing to leave with a small group, but they were slowed by a much larger group blocking the door, waiting for a fresh downpour to let up.

“Actually,” Esther said as she returned to George, looking at the mass of people, and thinking of the refectory, “do you want to go somewhere a little less crowded in the meantime?”

She couldn’t say why she offered this. There was no reason. There was no reason for this boy George to be wrecked. It was strange and sad, and what was she to do with a strange, sad boy in a tuxedo but lead him out of the narthex and down a hall to an enormous echoing room and sit down on its lone bench and stare at the dull, rain-washed light on the tile floor as he stretched out beside her, laid his head in her lap, and cried.

“I’m sorry,” he said, the sobbing finishing for now, the wet regret beginning.

“It’s okay. It’s really okay,” she said. She stroked George’s head as a person unaccustomed to animals might touch someone’s pet.

George took a handkerchief from his pocket—a provision packed by his wiser, pre-concert self—and wiped his face. He pulled himself upright, stretched his legs and rested his head on the wall behind the bench. He felt a vibration of shame at his misery, at its volatility. The jolt had come and gone, but there were aftershocks. “God, I’m so sorry.”

Esther smoothed her skirt, folding and unfolding her hands. “I can’t really give you a report,” she said, “if you were hoping for a report.” In response to this George closed his eyes and half-shrugged, brushing away the idea. She continued, “It’s not that I’m, I don’t know, taking sides or anything. We just don’t really talk about that kind of thing.” George sat close to her, and he reached over to clasp her hand. She was not startled. “And you know how he is,” she added, clasping back. “Buttoned up to the eyeballs. Can’t drag a thing out of him.”

She spoke as if they had known Harlan since he was a baby. Her words, the kindness of them, the friendship of them, were rain on parched ground. George’s cracked clay burst in microscopic explosions under the droplets.

“Thanks for understanding,” he managed.

Esther most certainly did not understand, neither the terrible sadness between him and Harlan, nor the togetherness that preceded it, nor the skinned surface of herself which she found George sticking to, lint on a wound. Whatever George and Harlan had (or used to have), Esther found it came in and out of focus. She could understand it as what went on between a boy and a girl—only it was two boys. Logic and illogic, back and forth. Simple, impossible, obvious.

One of the things Esther knew—so much things—was accepting without understanding, because there was pain here, and she could accept pain, let it wash in and out. She did not panic, did not try to bail it out, sop it up. She had not been afraid, that time at a sleepover party in eighth grade when the popcorn pot caught fire on the stove, to grab a dishtowel and wrap it around the handle and whisk the frightening thing into the sink. The other girls had stared uselessly at the flames.

“Well. There’s no coffee here,” said Esther.

“The service is terrible,” said George.

“Isn’t it though? I’d expect at least one table.”

“At midnight, the waiters come.”

“Ghosts of waiters past!”

Then they sat in silence again, accepting the small relief brought by their jokes.

“Should we test the rain and go to the diner before it’s too late?” George asked. They had a little over an hour before close of diner and close of Braddock’s door behind Esther at curfew.

“Sure. Are you up for it?”

“Yeah. I think I’m ravenous. I might have forgotten to eat dinner.”

“Oh, George. I thought I could hear your stomach growling.”

“God, you can hear everything growling. I’m a fucking mess.” He rose, took off his jacket and threw it on the bench, shook his arms and pulled down his cuffs.

“Let me,” said Esther, moving to straighten his bowtie.

“No—why am I still wearing this. God no wonder,” he said, as if the bowtie contained all his misery. He pulled it off and stuffed it in his pocket, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, and then in an act of the kind of sweeping foolery Esther remembered about George from before she knew him, gave her a hard look, took the fullness of her face in his hands, planted a kiss square on her lips, and threw his arms around her. He squeezed her tightly until a squeal escaped her. Delight eclipsed shame. She held him too. If she had begun to re-enter her body earlier, she now settled deeper into it, as if George’s arms packed her into herself, concentrated her.

After a few seconds, though, alarm eclipsed delight. She felt the bottom of the seductive depth and pushed off with all her might back to the surface. This was the casual touch on the back of her arm, like the piano boy. This was what people did, she knew.

“Let’s fix you up with pie,” Esther said, having reached the surface and grabbed any old thing to pick up and say. George carried his jacket in his left hand and took her hand with his right.

“I’ll buy,” he said.

They walked hand in hand—not the least bit strange—out of the refectory, down the echoing hall to the exit, where they stood under the sandstone portico, measuring the air.

Why did George exude such sweetness, and why, as he walked Esther home after their date at the diner, did the night wrap them in a pressing web of humidity, layer upon layer? How was Esther’s heart to distinguish this romantic softness from any other kind of romantic softness?

That night George found himself hearing Esther’s voice playing in his head after he’d walked her to Braddock (the first time without Harlan), after they’d said goodnight. Esther’s singing was a rare phenomenon, but even her speaking voice had a depth, a front and a back, a substance and a shadow. George liked the in-

between voices: men with some singsong, women who could growl and belt. He loved Judy Garland, for example, for some of the standard sissy-boy reasons: when she made her technicolor mark in 1939 it was with the campiest animal-vegetable-mineral trio ever assembled on screen; and she was a lonely lost girl with a howling hurt in her big brown eyes. But chiefly, George loved her for that copper gong of a voice.

Just days before Christmas break his freshman year, George had watched, along with a group that included a wider audience that night than the usual crowd of known queers and possible queers and apparently-not-queers, the *Judy Garland Show*. He and some studio-mates had crossed the street from Collins to watch it in the nearest TV lounge, the basement of Trevor. That night Judy sang a stylized, impassioned rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” to an audience quivering with loss, the president’s death only three weeks new. She was all spine and limbs, magnificent lungs filling her fragile chest, every breath a wracking of her glitter-draped bones.

George wept, of course, but he blended right in. So many people were criers then. Women as they reached for a box of detergent in the supermarket, men as they tucked their children into bed. A professor as he played an excerpt of Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony and had to take off his glasses and put them back on again. So many had become porous. In a moment of clarity he never told anyone about (not even Margaret, and certainly not Harlan), George realized he felt a sense of belonging when America was a sodden mess. He would never have asked for the national grief, but he found—just as perverse as anything else that went on backstage at the *Théâtre Georges*—that there was solace there. He alone, he always thought, had been chosen to be bruised by the slightest contact with an arrangement of sound or shape, cruelly susceptible to grief and desire. He didn’t know if it made him fragile, or useless, or holy. For a moment, at least, everyone was fragile, and useless, and holy.