

## *Independence*

**New Orleans, Louisiana. November 4, 1992. 5:20 a.m.**

I've been telling my daughter all her life that her father is dead. In a few days I'll no longer be a liar.

This is a morning that suits the task before us: chilly, overcast even in the predawn darkness, long, as if a promise of daylight is something that will stay on the horizon, teasing, but never show itself fully.

The alarm went off at 4:20, but I was already awake. I'm not sure I slept even twenty minutes in total last night. Not sure if she did either. I saw the yellow from her bedside light underneath the door to her room when I rose after midnight. I can't know what's in her head and I know better than to ask. All I'll get is her usual shrug. It frustrates me at times, of course. But I know to give her her space. I remember what it's like to be sixteen.

So it was in silence that we left the house, not bothering to eat anything. Just too early for any kind of appetite and we'll have plenty of time for all that anyway. It'll take us a whole day plus—some twenty-two hours—for this trip, New Orleans to Sioux Falls. I don't know how I'll do it. Patience isn't one of my virtues. That's for sure.

We place our bags of clothes and food above us and settle into our seats. Right away, she puts on her Walkman. And she's lost again. A girl of few words anyway, once she's got those headphones on, forget it. No getting through. I suppose I can't blame her too much. Only twenty minutes in, dark outside still, and already everyone around us yammering about the election and most folks seem angry about it. I don't understand the fuss; Louisiana went for the winner. It was weird to look at that map, though, this straight line right up the country, this side of the Mississippi all blue for Clinton, that side, my old side, where we're headed now, all red for Bush. Me, I didn't even vote. I had to work that day, and, honestly, I just couldn't get excited about it either way.

We've left the city behind and I watch her face in the reflection of the window. Quiet and reflective as she is, just staring out at the early morning sky, still dark in spots, gray in others, the day trying to come on. I know that face well. Of course I do, as it's my face, too. People always ask us, You two twins or something? Makes me laugh still, and blush a bit. Cause to me, it's a compliment. But as she gets older, it makes her more and more angry, or embarrassed, or something unpleasant. I can see it in the way her eyebrows move and the way the ends of her lips curve down, this little pouty thing that flashes across her face. I wonder if that's a thing I used to do. I don't think so. It's more him. I can see him in there.

It's only been a week since she found the letter from him, asking for us to come see him before the execution, that it would allow him to die like a man. Just once. He needed to see her. And she wanted to see him, which I understand. Everything in my soul wanted to fight her, but in the end how could I? This is her father, and this is the man who was once my whole life. So, hard as I expect it to be, we'll go. On this long journey, reverse from the journey I'd once made, there will be plenty of time to tell what she wants to know.

She'll take off the headphones at some point. Either her ears will start to ache, or the batteries will die—though I suspect she's brought extras with her—or she'll get tired of listening to the same five tapes over and over. So there will be time. Time for me to tell her the whole story. One I've wrestled over for years. Sixteen of them, to be exact. The whole of her lifetime.

A big part of me says I shouldn't leave out anything, that it's her right to know it all. But then there's this other big part of me. We all need our secrets and, well, let's be honest: is it more for me to tell, confession as it were, or is it for her?

Who knows the line between what is selfish and what is selfless until after we act?

**Paris, South Dakota. April 22, 1976.**

Mama was on the phone, kind of whispering, and when she hung up she had this big smile on her face.

Hank's comin' home, she said.

I noticed it right away, how she used the word 'home'.

You mean here?

Well now . . . she said, and she didn't need to say anymore.

You'll be getting married then.

Lilly, don't I deserve some happiness, after all this time?

I couldn't argue with her. It had been nine years since Pop left so I was sure she got lonely at times. Still, she had me. Wasn't she always telling me that I was all she ever needed? Plus, when she started sentences with my name, it meant she was agitated, so I knew to leave it be.

I'll head over to Mr. Robeson's, I said. Get breakfast.

And I walked out the door.

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I was barely a hundred yards from the house when I first saw Lee. He was standing against the Petersens' fence and it was that more than anything else that got my attention. The fence was long, running around the whole yard. It was always a beautiful clean white, no matter the weather. My guess was that one of Mr. Petersen's gardeners scrubbed down that fence every night, and now there was some stranger with his boot on it.

Sure, he was good looking and all—the best looking person I'd ever seen, truth be told, with his dark hair and the way it fell over his light eyes. But the way he looked at me, with that smile of his, he seemed cocky. So I kept walking, all the while he was still looking at me.

Mama never really talked to me much about men except to tell me they're almost always snakes and think of themselves first. Men she'd known seemed to think they owned you the moment the bloom went off. All sweetness and light, as she called it, and then once you're dependent, well, that's the time you can depend on them least. Until Hank, that is. She seemed to think Hank was the one different one.

When I got about twenty yards or so near the stranger, he raised his hand and said hi, still smiling at me.

Considering Mama's opinion of men, and the fact this guy was no one I knew, I should probably have ignored him or, at most, just said hello to be polite but then kept on walking. But it was the adventurous side of me that made me stop. If nothing else, it meant that day wouldn't be like every other. It had already been set off-kilter with Mama's declaration that she and Hank were most likely getting married and moving in, so why not see what other changes the wind blew in.

Hi, I said, though I didn't smile.

Whatcha you up to?

Do I know you? I asked.

He shook his head, keeping his eyes on me. He was handsome, that's true. But I still didn't much like the way he kept looking at me, slowly shaking his head before he said to me, No, missus, you didn't. But I plan to rectify that.

I suppose I knew what he meant by that, but still, in the way he kept looking at me, like no one ever told him it was rude to look at people like that: I didn't like it, that's true. But to my surprise I came to realize that in some weird way, I kinda did like it, too. There had been other boys who'd looked at me like that before, and I usually hated them for it. But with Lee, it seemed I was of a different mind straight away

Ain't your mama taught you it's rude to stare? I asked.

He shook his head again, bent down, picked up a rock, and threw it. Hit the stop sign fifty clear yards away. Right in the middle.

My mama never taught me much, he said. Except maybe how to drink a whole can of beer in five seconds flat.

I laughed. He didn't. It wasn't meant to be a joke.

You made a mess of that fence, I told him.

He shrugged his shoulders.

You a relation of the Petersens?

Nope. I'm an auto mechanic. Been working over in Carney.

Never heard of it.

Barely a few towns away. Didn't take me but half a day to get here.

Still never heard of it.

Near to the Wyoming line, he said. Shop closed up, so I come here to Paris looking for work. This guy in town, he told me, 'I don't know of any work, but you may want to try Swensen Petersen. Used to be the mayor and owns just about every acre from town out to Eagle Butte, where the Indians live.' Much obliged, I told the man. And then I asked him where I might find this Mr. Petersen. He points me down this street here, says, 'Look for the big white house. Paris's one palace—probably the only one in all the Dakotas.' Found it easy enough, of course, so I figured I'd get an early start and try and catch him as he came out.

Good luck. His wife is real ill and no one sees him much anymore. They just pretty much stay hunkered down in there all the time. And when he does come out, he hardly talks.

Lee looked at the house, and then shook his head.

Goes to show you, he said.

What's that?

You can have all the money in the world, and it still don't get you what you need in this life.

Lee looked at me like he was waiting for my confirmation. When he stared at me, with those eyes of his, the way his face had of taking me all in, it did make me blush.

I guess, I mumbled.

They have any kids? Lee asked.

I shook my head.

How do you like that? Just him and his wife in that big old house.

I'd thought that very thing many times.

I often saw Mrs. Petersen on their porch watching the world go by. I always waved to her. She never waved back, but I figured maybe she couldn't because of her illness, so I kept on waving. I wasn't losing anything by being neighborly. Sometimes at night I could see a light on on the lowest level of the house and I wondered if the Mrs. didn't sleep much on account of her condition, whatever it was. Or maybe it was Mr. Petersen awake. I could picture him, in a study or library, at a desk, awake with worry, probably looking over a stack of bills or something. I'm sure there's no fun in being poor, but it never seemed to me that being rich is any better path to happiness. In fact, being rich probably just gives you more things to worry over. And it sure didn't keep Mrs. Petersen from spending her days in a wheelchair anyway.

No doubt about it: give me one solitary room and my working legs over a palace and a steel chair.

What's your name? Lee asked.

Lilly.

Pretty name, he said.

People were always telling me that, I guess because it's also a flower, but I didn't see it. Seemed a boring name to me. Always did. So I told him as much.

Yeah? What would be a more proper exciting name then?

I don't know. Calpurnia.

What kind of crazy name is Calpurnia? he said. And he laughed and laughed.

It's in a book. Nothing you'd know about.

Now, now, he said, seeing he'd angered me.

And what about you?

Lee, he said, and he did a silly bow.

I could barely keep from laughing.

He walked over to me, leaving muddy tracks from the bottom of his shoe against the white of the fence. I liked seeing that mud on the fence. It was like Lee wasn't afraid of anything. It was also like Lee was one thing and the Petersens' fence, and everything else I knew, was another.

He put his hand on my waist and said how sorry he was for laughing at me.

Almost any other guy and I would've slapped his face for putting his hand on me like that and in such a familiar place, too. But I let him stay. It was like he had some kind of power or something. Right from the start. Plus, I wanted to show him that I was no little girl.

How old are you? he asked.

Fifteen.

He nodded, told me he remembered fifteen, like it was some long time ago, though I could tell he wasn't much past eighteen himself.

So you know of anyone looking to hire here in Paris? he asked me.

How would I know about that?

You live here, don't you?

I'm not one who does any hiring. That I can tell you.

He stuck his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and looked at the ground like a boy who'd just been scolded. I wanted to laugh. He was funny. Handsome and funny.

Well, I wish you luck, I said. I gotta go.

You mind a little company?

Free country.

Lee followed me to the stores downtown, chattering all the way. Got his start working garages in his hometown, he told me, some out of the way place no one'd ever heard of, near 'the confluence of Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma'. Got a car, he told me also, and a lot of money from the old job. Even got me a monster set of tools, he said.

I didn't see how any of that was my business one way or another and I surely hadn't asked. But I didn't mind just listening to him talk.

When we reached the grocer, Lee followed me inside. I acted like I didn't know him, which, really, I didn't. And I acted like we hadn't come in together, which, really, we hadn't, even though we sort of had. Strangers always got a second look in Paris. It was one of those things about living in Paris, or any small town, I guess, where everyone knows each other: strangers can generally count on being looked after, cared for, given what they need. And yet locals will still look at them with suspicion. You don't know them, you don't know what they're capable of. And Lee was a stranger.

I said hi to Mr. Robeson and he said, Hi, Lilly, how's your ma, like he always did. He looked at Lee, tipped his head in greeting but didn't say anything. Just stared at him a bit.

Lee paid it no mind and followed me through the aisles to the refrigerator and when I reached in to grab a bottle of milk, he threw himself in front of me and grabbed the milk himself. I

stood there staring at him and he was staring at me and it all seemed so foolish and then he looked around and galloped to the front of the store and got a cart and put the milk in and then raced back over to me, almost knocking down a pyramid of cereal boxes, and then slowly wheeled the cart behind me while I walked down the aisles. Every now and then I looked back at him; he'd put both feet on the bottom rail so he could kind of glide and once or twice his weight caused the cart to tip up in the air a little bit. I wanted to laugh at him, but I hid my face when I felt it coming on.

I got the few things I needed and Lee unloaded the items onto the counter. Mr. Robeson was looking at us like he didn't know what, but still he didn't say anything. I suddenly got a sick feeling in my stomach thinking that Lee was gonna take some of his own money and try and pay for my things. But he didn't. Just stood there and took the bag from Mr. Robeson and tipped his head to him in thanks and then we walked out into the sun.

We were outside maybe thirty seconds before Lee said, Hold it. One minute. And he went racing back into the grocer. I was thinking I should walk away, but I stayed. Seemed rude of me to just leave.

He came racing back out holding two vanilla ice cream cones and immediately they started melting in the sun. He ran his tongue over one of them and handed me the other.

Only had vanilla, he said. Kind of place sells ice cream doesn't have chocolate?

I shrugged my shoulders.

I like pistachio the best, I said.

Well, seems we already have one thing in common, Miss Lilly. Pistachio's my favorite, too.

I wondered what were the chances of that and thought maybe he was putting me on. But I didn't say anything. Didn't seem a thing worth questioning about.

You in school? he asked.

Yup. Just about finished up for the year.

What's your favorite subject?

I like history.

He nodded.

In those days, I liked poetry, too—couldn't get enough of it—but I didn't tell him that. He didn't need to know everything. That seemed to me a secret worth keeping. I liked Emily Dickinson the most. I hardly ever understood the meanings in her poems, but I liked to try and puzzle them out and I could spend a whole afternoon doing that. Such a line as this: 'Demur,—you're straightway dangerous / And handled with a chain . . .' It still puts a flutter in my chest when I think of it. It has a different meaning every time I ponder it, depending on my mood. It didn't matter to me if I was getting it right or not. She was long gone by the time I discovered her, Miss Dickinson, and what she left behind were just the words on paper, and they didn't mean a thing all by themselves until someone like me came along and read them. So in that way I couldn't ever be wrong about those poems, and it kept me reading.

I'm guessing you're all excited about this bicentennial then, Lee said.

What do you mean?

Two hundredth birthday of America. It's exciting.

Seems overdone. Everything done up in red, white, and blue. And here barely into June. It's like putting up Christmas decorations in October.

I disagree with you there. A country only turns two hundred once. Seems a thing to celebrate all year long.

I shrugged.

Besides, didn't you just tell me you like history?

But the bicentennial is the present. It's not history.

He laughed, shook his head. I guess you're right about that, he said, When you think about it. I'll give you that.

When we got a block from my house, I told him to give me my bag.

I can help you all the way to your house, he said.

My mama sees me with you, you holding our groceries, me eating ice cream for breakfast .

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What about it? he asked me.

Well, that's just it. I don't know what about it and she'll be liable to have questions I don't have answers for.

He looked around, still holding my bag, like he was thinking of running off with it or something, and then he handed it over without a word.

Well, Miss Lilly, he said finally, I aim to see you again.

At first I just stood there and didn't say anything because I had nothing to say. But then it became awkward, just standing there in the street not talking. So finally I said, Well, that's your prerogative, and I walked away.

I didn't look back, but I could tell: he was watching me.

And I liked that.

Mama could have her man, and I could have mine.