

THE PROBABLE FUTURE

ALICE HOFFMAN



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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INTO HER NOVELS,

sometimes as an element of the plot;
always in the quality of her writing.”

—*The Hartford Courant*

“*The Probable Future* dazzles with its bristling examination of life’s trying tests of the women of the Sparrow family. The electrifying result is an under-the-microscope look at love, friendship, and the ties that blind and bind.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“[A] bewitching story of gifted women unlucky at love ... Hoffman is now expert at sketching the New England landscape in the past and future, and the equally chilly psychological landscape of extraordinary women trapped in an ordinary world. ... She shows a deft hand at tracing the movement from child to adult, showing an unusual ability to create sympathetic characters of all ages.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Hoffman has perfected her very own entrancing style of magical realism and mystical romance anchored to the moody, history-laden Massachusetts countryside. ... Hoffman’s newest cast of characters is unfailingly magnetic, from her eye-rolling teenagers to her wryly in-love seniors to her suddenly aflame fortysomethings, and the story she tells is as lush as it is suspenseful, as rich in earthy and sensuous detail as it is sweet and hopeful.”

—*Booklist*

“Hoffman is at her best, chronicling in meticulous and beautiful detail the ways the three Sparrow women are transformed ... The characters are richly drawn, each idiosyncratically real and yet each just a bit of a sorceress.”

—*Book magazine* (four stars)

“Full-bodied, wholly absorbing characters ... Hoffman’s storytelling is as spellbinding as ever.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

also by

ALICE HOFFMAN

Blue Diary

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Local Girls

Here on Earth

Practical Magic

Second Nature

Turtle Moon

Seventh Heaven

At Risk

Illumination Night

Fortune's Daughter

White Horses

Angel Landing

The Drowning Season

Property Of

FOR CHILDREN

Green Angel

Indigo

Aquamarine

Horsefly

Fireflies

THE
PROBABLE
FUTURE



ALICE HOFFMAN



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*In memory of
my mother, Sherry Hoffman, who did not believe in limits,
and
my dear friend Maclin Boccock Guerard, a beautiful writer and a beautiful soul.*

PART ONE



THE VISION

I.

*A*NYONE BORN AND BRED IN MASSACHUSETTS learns early on to recognize the end of winter. Babies in their cribs point to the brightening of the sky before they can crawl. Level-headed men weep at the first call of the warblers. Upstanding women strip off their winter clothes and dive into inlets and ponds before the ice has fully melted, unconcerned if their fingers and toes turn blue. Spring fever affects young and old alike; it spares no one and makes no distinctions, striking when happiness is least expected, when joy is only a memory, when the skies are still cloudy and snow is still piled onto the cold, hard ground.

Who could blame the citizens of Massachusetts for rejoicing when spring is so close at hand? Winter in New England is merciless and cruel, a season that instills a particular melancholy in its residents and a hopelessness that is all but impossible to shake. In the small towns surrounding Boston, the leaden skies and snowy vistas cause a temporary color blindness, a condition that can be cured only by the appearance of the first green shoots of spring. It isn't unusual for whole populations of certain towns to find they have tears in their eyes all through the month of March, and there are those who insist they can see clearly for the very first time.

Still, there are some who are slower to discern the signs of spring. They distrust March and declare it to be the most perilous time of the year. These are the stubborn individuals who continue to wear woolen coats on the finest of days, who insist it is impossible to tell the difference between a carpet of snowdrops and a stretch of ice in this slippery season, even with twenty-twenty vision. Such people cannot be convinced that lions will ever be turned into lambs. In their opinion, anyone born in March is sure to possess curious traits that mirror the fickle season, hot one minute, cold the next. Unreliable is March's middle name, no one could deny that. Its children are said to be just as unpredictable.

In some cases, this is assuredly true. For as long as their history has been known, there have been only girl children born to the Sparrow family and every one of these daughters has kept the family name and celebrated her birthday in March. Even those babies whose due dates were declared to be safely set within the snowy margins of February or the pale reaches of April managed to be born in March. No matter when an infant was due to arrive, as soon as the first snowdrops bloomed in New England, a Sparrow baby would begin to stir. Once leaves began to bud, once the Blue Star crocus unfolded, the womb could no longer contain one of these children, not when spring fever was so very near.

And yet Sparrow babies were as varied as the days of March. Some were calm and wide-eyed, born with open hands, always the sign of a generous nature, while others arrived

squalling and agitated, so full of outrage they were quickly bundled into blue blankets, ward off nervous ailments and apoplexy. There were babies in the Sparrow family who had been born while big, soft snowflakes fell and Boston Harbor froze solid, and those whose births took place on the mildest of days, so that they drew their first breaths while the robins built nests out of straw and twigs and the red maples blushed with a first blooming.

But whether the season had been fair or foul, in all this time there had been only one baby to be born feet first, the mark of a healer, and that child was Stella Sparrow Avery. For thirteen generations, each one of the Sparrow girls had come into this world with inky hair and dark, moody eyes, but Stella was pale, her ashy hair and hazel eyes inherited, the labor nurses supposed, from her handsome father's side of the family. Hers was a difficult birth, life-threatening for both mother and child. Every attempt to turn the baby had failed, and soon enough the doctors had begun to dread the outcome of the day. The mother, Jenny Avery, an independent, matter-of-fact woman, who had run away from home at seventeen and was as unsentimental as she was self-reliant, found herself screaming for her mother. That she should cry for her mother, who had been so distant and cold, whom she hadn't even spoken to in more than a decade, astounded Jenny even more than the rigors of birth. It was a wonder her mother wasn't able to hear her, for although Elinor Sparrow was nearly fifty miles from Boston, Jenny's cries were piercing, desperate enough to reach even the most remote and hard-hearted. Women on the ward who had just begun their labor stuck their fingers in their ears and practiced their breathing techniques, praying for an easier time. Orderlies wished they were home in bed, with the covers drawn up. Patients in the cardiac unit felt their hearts race, and down in the cafeteria the lemon puddings curdled and had to be thrown away.

At last the child arrived, after seventeen hours of brutal labor. The obstetrician in charge snapped one tiny shoulder to ease the birth, for the mother's pulse was rapidly dropping. It was at this very moment, when the baby's head slipped free and Jenny Avery thought she might lose consciousness, that the cloudy sky cleared to reveal the silvery splash of the Milky Way, the heart of the universe. Jenny blinked in the sudden light which poured in through the window. She saw how beautiful the world was, as though for the very first time. The bowl of stars, the black night, the life of her child, all came together in a single band of light.

Jenny hadn't particularly wanted a baby; she hadn't yearned for one the way some women did, hadn't gazed longingly at rocking horses and cribs. Her stormy relationship with her own mother had made her wary of family ties, and her marriage to Will Avery, surely one of the most irresponsible men in New England, hadn't seemed the proper setting in which to raise a child. And yet it had happened: this baby had arrived on a starry night in March, the month of the Sparrows, season of snow and of spring, of lions and lambs, of endings and beginnings, green month, white month, month of heartache, month of extreme good luck.

The infant's first cries weren't heard until she was tucked into a flannel bunting; then little yelps echoed from her tiny mouth, as though she were a cat caught in a puddle. The baby was easily soothed, just a pat or two on the back from the doctor, but it was too late: her cries had gone right through Jenny, a hook piercing through blood and bones. Jenny Sparrow Avery was no longer aware of her husband, or the nurses with whom he was flirting. She didn't care about the blood on the floor or the trembling in her legs or even the Milky Way

above them in the sky. Her eyes were filled with dizzying circles of light, little pinpricks that glimmered inside her eyelids. It wasn't starlight, but something else entirely. Something she couldn't comprehend until the doctor handed her the child, the damaged left shoulder taped up with white adhesive as though it were a broken wing. Jenny gazed into her child's calm face. In that instant she experienced complete devotion. Then and there, on the fifth floor of Brigham and Women's Hospital, she understood what it meant to be blinded by love.

The labor nurses soon crowded around, cooing and praising the baby. Although they had seen hundreds of births, this child was indeed exceptional. It wasn't her pale hair or luminous complexion which distinguished her, but her sweet temperament. Good as gold, the nurses murmured approvingly, quiet as ashes. Even the most jaded had to agree this child was special. Perhaps her character was a result of her birth date, for Jenny's daughter had arrived on the twentieth of March, the equinox, when day and night are of equal length. Indeed, in one tiny, exhausted body, there seemed to exist all of March's traits, the evens and the odds, the dark and the light, a child who would always be as comfortable with lions as she was with lambs.

Jenny named the baby Stella, with Will's approval, of course. For despite the marital problems in the marriage, on this one point they agreed: this child was their radiant and wondrous star. There was nothing Jenny would not do for their daughter. She, who had not spoken to her own mother for years, who had not so much as mailed a postcard back home after she'd run off with Will, now felt powerless to resist the mighty forces of her own maternal instinct. She was bewitched by this tiny creature; the rest of the world fell away with a shudder, leaving only their Stella. Jenny's child would not spend a single night apart from her. Even in the hospital she kept Stella by her side rather than let her be brought to the nursery. Jenny Sparrow Avery knew exactly what could happen if you weren't there to watch over your child. She was quite aware of how wrong things could go between mothers and daughters.

Not everyone was doomed to repeat history, however. Family flaws and old sorrows needn't rule their lives, or so Jenny told herself every night as she checked on her sleeping daughter. What was the past, after all, but a leaden shackle one had a duty to try and escape? It was possible to break chains, regardless of how old or how rusted, of that Jenny was certain. It was possible to forge an entirely new life. But chains made out of blood and memory were a thousand times more difficult to sever than those made of steel, and the pain could overtake a person if she wasn't careful. A woman had to be vigilant or before she knew it she'd find herself making the same mistakes her own mother had made, with the same resentments set to boil.

Jenny was not about to let herself relax or take the slightest bit of good fortune for granted. There wasn't a day when she wasn't on guard. Let other mothers chat on the phone and hire baby-sitters; let them sit on blankets in the Boston Common on sunny days and on blustery afternoons make angels in the snow. Jenny didn't have time for such nonsense. She had only thirteen years in which to prevail over her family's legacy, and she planned to do exactly that, no matter the cost to herself.

In no time she became the sort of mother who made certain no drafts came in through the windows, who saw to it that there were no late-night bedtimes or playing in the park or

rainy days, a sure cause of bronchitis and pleurisy. Cats were not allowed in the house, too much dander; dogs were avoided, due to distemper, not to mention allergies and fleas. It didn't matter if Jenny took a job she despised at the bank on Charles Street or if her social life was nonexistent. Friends might fall away, acquaintances might come to avoid her, her days of reviewing mortgage applications might bore her silly, but Jenny hardly cared about such distractions. Her only interest was Stella. She spent Saturdays chopping up broccoli and kale for nourishing soups; she sat up nights with Stella's earaches, stomachaches, bouts of chicken pox and flu. She laced boots and went over lessons, and she never once complained. Disappointments, fair-weather friends, math homework, illnesses of every variety were dealt with and put in their proper place. And if Stella grew up to be a wary, rather dour girl, well, wasn't that preferable to running wild the way Jenny had? Wasn't it better to be safe than sorry? Selfish pleasures dissolved the way dreams did, Jenny knew that for certain, leaving behind nothing more than an imprint on the pillowcase, a hole in your heart, a list of regrets so long you could wrap them around yourself like a quilt, one formed from a complicated pattern, *Love knot* or *Dove in the window* or *Crow's-foot*.

Soon enough, Jenny's marriage to Will Avery fell apart, unwound by mistrust and dishonesty, one thread and one betrayal at a time. For quite a while there had been nothing holding these two together but a shared history, the mere fact that they'd grown up together and had been childhood sweethearts. If anything, they stayed together longer than they might have merely for the sake of their daughter, their Stella, their star. But children can tell when love has been lost, they know when silence means peace and when it's a sign of despair. Jenny tried not to think what her mother might say if she knew how badly their marriage had ended. How self-righteous Elinor Sparrow would be if she ever found out that Will, for whom Jenny had given up so much, now lived in his own apartment on the far end of Marlborough Street, where at last he was free to do as he pleased, not that he hadn't done so all along.

That Will was unfaithful should have been evident: whenever he lied, white spots appeared on his fingernails, and each time he was with another woman, he developed what Jenny's mother had called "liar's cough," a constant hacking, a reminder that he'd swallowed the truth whole. Every time Will came back to Jenny, he swore he was a changed man, but he had remained the same person he'd been at the age of sixteen, when Jenny had first spied him from her bedroom window, out on the lawn. The boy who had always looked for trouble didn't have to search for it after a while: it found him no matter where he was, day or night. It followed him home and slipped under the door and lay down beside him. All the same, Will Avery had never presented himself as anything other than the unreliable individual that he was. He'd never claimed to have a conscience. Never claimed anything at all. It was Jenny who had insisted she couldn't live without him. Jenny who forgave him, who was desperate for one of his dreams, one that would remind her of the reason she fell in love with him in the first place.

Indeed, if Elinor Sparrow found out they had broken up, she certainly would not have been surprised. She had correctly judged Will Avery to be a liar the moment she met him. She knew him for what he was at first sight. That was her talent, after all. One sentence and she knew. One shrug of the shoulders. One false excuse. She had marched Will Avery right out of the house when she found him lurking in the parlor, and she'd never let him return, not even

when Jenny begged her to reconsider. She refused to change her opinion. Elinor was still referring to him as The Liar on the brilliant afternoon when Jenny left home. It was the spring of Jenny's senior year of high school, that feverish season when rash decisions were easily made. By the time Jenny Sparrow's classmates had been to the prom and were getting ready for graduation, Jenny was working in Bailey's Ice Cream Parlor in Cambridge supporting Will while he managed to ruin his academic career with hardly any effort. Effort on the other hand, was all Jenny seemed to possess. She washed dishes after a full day of work; she toted laundry to the Wash and Dri on Saturdays. At eighteen, she was a high school dropout and the perfect wife, exhausted, too busy for anything like regret. After a while her life in her hometown of Unity seemed like a dream: the common across from the meetinghouse where the war memorials stood, the linden trees, the smell of the laurel, so spicy just before blooming, the way everything turned green, all at once, as though winter itself were a dream, a fleeting nightmare made up of ice and heartlessness and sorrow.

The month of March had always been particularly unreliable in the village of Unity; the weather could change in a flash, with ninety-degree heat yielding to snowstorms overnight. The town center, only forty minutes north of Boston, halfway between the interstate and the marshes, had a latitude which intersected with the yearly flight of returning cowbirds and blackbirds and sparrows, flocks whose great numbers blocked out the sun for an entire day every year, a winged and breathing eclipse of the pale, untrustworthy sky. People in Unity had always taken an interest in Cake House, the home of the Sparrow family; during the migrations, many came to picnic on the edge of the lane. Most residents couldn't help but feel proprietary, even proud of what had been decreed to be one of the oldest houses in the county. Friends and family visiting from outside the Commonwealth were often taken to the hillock where a fine view of Cake House could be had, if a visitor didn't mind peering through the hedges of laurel or getting down on hands and knees to gaze through the holes in the boxwood chewed by rabbits and raccoons.

The house had begun its life as a washerwoman's shack, a simple edifice with a dirt floor. Mud and weeds had been used as chinking between the logs; the roof had been made of straw. But every generation had added to the building, piling on porches and dormers, bay windows and beehive ovens, as though smoothing icing onto a wedding cake. Here was a crazy quilt built out of mortar and bricks, green glass and whitewash, which had grown up a life of its own. Local people liked to explain that Cake House was the only building in town, excepting the bakery from which Hull's Tea House now operated, to withstand the fire of 1785, a year when the month of March was so terribly hot that the woods turned to tinder and a single spark from a lantern was enough to set all of Main Street on fire.

History buffs always pointed out the three tilted chimneys of Cake House, each built in a different century, one red brick, one gray brick, one made out of stones. These same experts also made certain not to venture too near the Sparrows' house, even when picnicking, despite the structure's architectural appeal. It wasn't just the NO TRESPASSING signs that persuaded them to keep their distance, nor was it the brambles in the woods. At Cake House, what looked inviting was often poisonous. Take a step, and you might live to regret it. Kick over a stone, and you could easily stumble over a garden snake or a wasps' nest. Out-of-town guests were carefully instructed not to pick the flowers; the roses had thorns that were as sharp as

glass and the hedges of laurel, with their pretty pink buds, were so toxic that honey from the blooms could poison a man in a matter of hours.

As for the calm, green waters of Hourglass Lake, where yellow Egyptian water lilies floated, several witnesses had reported that the catfish which swam in the shallows were so fierce they actually crawled onto the grass, chasing after rabbits that had wandered too close to shore. Even the most historically minded residents of Unity—the members of the memorial society, the board of the town council, the librarians who were in charge of the town artifacts and records—refused to venture very far down the dirt driveway, for there were snapping turtles dozing in the muddy ruts; there were yellow jackets that would sting for no reason. The wildest boys in town, the ones who would jump off the pier at the marsh to challenge each other to run through patches of stinging nettle, would not dare to charge through the reeds on a hot summer day nor dive into the lake where Rebecca Sparrow was drowned so many years ago, with a hundred black stones sewn into the seams of her clothes.

ON THE MORNING of her own thirteenth birthday, Jenny Sparrow had awoken to a chorus of peepers calling from the shallows of the lake. She was hardly responsible back then. Frankly, she was waiting for her life to begin. Right away, in the first hours of her birthday morning, she knew something irrevocable had happened, and that was perfectly fine. Jenny had no qualms about leaving childhood behind, for hers had been miserably lonely. She had spent many hours in her room, with her watercolors and her books, watching the clock, wasting time. She'd been anticipating this morning all her life, counting minutes as she fell asleep. Xing off days on her calendar. The other children in town envied her living in Cake House; they swore that Jenny Sparrow's bedroom was larger than any of the classrooms at school. She was the only one among them who had her own boat and spent idle summer hours drifting across Hourglass Lake, in waters where the turtles would have surely bitten off anyone else's fingers and toes. Her father called her Pearl, the children said, because she had been his treasure. Her mother, it was whispered, let her do as she pleased, especially after the father's death, a sudden accident that was said to have left Elinor Sparrow reeling.

No one was keeping track of Jenny's whereabouts, that much was certain; often, she was the last customer at the soda fountain in the old pharmacy on Main Street. From the bedroom windows, children in town often spied her walking home in the dark, past the oak tree on the corner of Lockhart Avenue. There she was, un-tended and unafraid, at an hour when the other children were held back by pajamas and bedtimes and overprotective parents who wouldn't have dreamed of letting them wander about on their own.

Those boys and girls who gazed at Jenny with envy had no idea that during the winter months, the bedrooms in Cake House were so cold Jenny could see her breath in the air floating out of her mouth in icy crystals. The plumbing in the walls rattled, and sometimes gave up altogether, so that flushing was achieved only by pouring buckets of lake water into the commode. There were bees in the porch columns, birds' nests in the chimneys, carpenter ants at work on the foundation and beams. The house had been cross-stitched together and was always unraveling, a quilt whose fabric was worn and frayed. Things broke, and keys breaking, and nothing was exactly what it seemed. Jenny, that free spirit the children in town spied running past their windows, was seriously afraid of the dark. She was prone to asthma

attacks, nail-biting, stomachaches, migraines. She was regularly plagued by nightmares and, unlike the other children, when she cried out in the middle of the night, no one responded. No one ran down the hallway, with a cup of tea or a hand to hold until she could again fall asleep. No one even heard her call.

Jenny's father had died the year she turned ten, and after that her mother had pulled further and further away, retreating behind her closed bedroom door, her garden gate, her armor of distance and discontent. Elinor Sparrow's sorrow over the loss of her husband—a bad loss, a nasty loss, with unexpected surprises—turned from distraction to detachment. Soon enough she was estranged from anything that connected her to this world, Jenny included, Jenny especially, Jenny who would be best served if she learned to stand on her own two feet and take care of herself and not be bogged down with emotions, surely the safer way to navigate this world.

In truth, Cake House was a cold place in which to live, cold in spirit, cold in each and every room. A chill filtered through the windows and under the doors, a rush of unfriendly air that made a person want to stay in bed in the mornings rather than face the day, with quilts piled high, removed from the rest of society, dreaming when life got too difficult, which, frankly, was every day. But this was not the case on the morning of Jenny's thirteenth birthday. On this day, the weather was sunny, with temperatures rising into the sixties. On this day, Jenny sat bolt upright in bed, ready for her life to begin.

She had long black hair, knotted from a restless sleep, and olive skin, just like her mother and grandmother and all of the Sparrow women who had come before her. Like them, she awoke on the morning of her thirteenth birthday with a unique ability that was hers alone. This had been the case ever since Rebecca Sparrow rose from sleep on the first morning of her thirteenth year to discover that she could no longer feel pain, not if she strayed through thorn bushes, not if she held her hand directly over a flame, not if she walked barefoot over broken glass.

Ever since, the gifts had varied with every generation. Just as Jenny's mother could discern a falsehood, her grandmother, Amelia, could ease the pain of childbirth with the touch of her hand. Jenny's great-grandmother, Elisabeth, was said to possess the ability to turn anything into a meal: rocks and stones, potatoes and ashes, all became soup in Elisabeth's competent hands. Elisabeth's mother, Coral, was known to predict the weather. Hannah, Coral's mother, could find anything that had been lost, whether it was a misplaced ring, a wandering fiancé or an overdue library book. Sophie Sparrow was said to be able to see through the darkest. Constance Sparrow could stay underwater indefinitely, holding her breath long past the time when anyone else would have turned blue. Leonie Sparrow was said to have walked through fire, and her mother, Rosemary, could outrun any man in the Commonwealth. Rebecca Sparrow's own daughter, Sarah, needed no sleep except for the tiniest of catnaps; a few moments' peace was said to provide her with the energy of ten strong men and the heart of the fiercest March lion.

As for Jenny, she awoke on the morning of her birthday having dreamed of an angel with dark hair, of a woman who wasn't afraid of water, and of a man who could hold a bee in the palm of his hand and never once feel its sting. It was a dream so odd and so agreeable that it made her want to cry and laugh out loud at the very same time. But as soon as Jenny opened

her eyes, she knew it wasn't her dream. Someone else had conjured these things; the woman and the bee, the still water and the angel. All of it belonged to someone else. It was that someone, whoever he might be, who interested Jenny.

She understood that this was the gift she'd been given, the ability to dream other people's dreams. Nothing useful, like predicting the weather or perceiving lies. Nothing worthwhile, such as the ability to withstand pain or a talent for seeing through the dark or running as fast as a deer. What good was a dream, after all, especially one that belonged to someone else? Rain and snow, babies and liars, all of it intersected with the sturdy universe of the waking world. But to come to consciousness with a stranger's dream in one's head was not unlike walking into a cloud. One step, and she might sink right through. Before she could stop herself, she'd be yearning for things that didn't belong to her; dreams that made no sense would begin to make up the signposts of her everyday desires.

On that morning, right in the center of the most unreliable month of the year, Jenny was surprised to hear voices rise up from the driveway. Local residents avoided the dirt road dubbed Dead Horse Lane by the children in town. They might picnic in the lane on the occasion of the spring migrations, but on all other days they circled round the woods, dodging the laurel and snapping turtles, making a wide berth around the wedding-cake house, no matter if it meant a route that doubled back to Lockhart Avenue, the long way into town. The NO TRESPASSING signs were nailed to the trees, and all of the closest neighbors, the Stewarts and the Elliots and the Fosters, knew not to cross the property lines if they wanted to avoid one of Elinor's calls to the police and a nuisance complaint registered down at the courthouse.

Yet there were voices in the driveway, it was true, and one of them belonged to Jenny's dreamer, the dream that had awoken her to the start of her new life, the dreamer she wanted for her very own. Jenny went to the window, groggy, sleepy-eyed, curious to see who had shared the dream she had shared. It was a mild day and the air smelled like mint. Everything was sweet and green, and Jenny's head spun from the pollen. The bees had already set to work, buzzing away in the buds first forming in the laurel, but Jenny ignored their droning. For there he was, standing at the edge of the driveway, a local boy named Will Avery, sixteen years old and already looking for trouble at this early hour. His younger brother, Matt, as thoughtful an individual as Will was undisciplined, trailed after him. Both boys had spent the night on the far side of the lake, having dared each other to do so; the winner could not bolt for twelve hours straight, not even if the dead horse of legend rose from the still water. As it turned out, they'd both made it through till morning, despite the frogs and the mud and the season's first mosquitoes, and now the boys' laughter rose up through the air.

Jenny stared at Will Avery through the mossy haze of spring. Right away she knew why she felt dizzy. She had always been in awe of Will and too shy to speak to him. He was handsome, with golden coloring and a brash manner, the sort of boy who was far too interested in having a good time to adhere to any rules or consider anyone other than himself. If anything dangerous was about to ensue, any reckless mischief at all, Will Avery would be there in no time flat. He did well in school without even trying, all the same he loved a good party; he lived to take chances. If there was something to enjoy, wreck, or burn down, he'd be the first one in line. People who knew Will tended to fear for his safety, but

those who knew him best of all feared far more for the safety of those around him.

Now that Jenny had shared his dream, she felt emboldened. It was as though Will Avery belonged to her already, as if their dreaming and waking life had twisted around each other and their lives were now interwoven, one and the same. Jenny shook the knots from her hair and crossed her fingers for luck. She willed herself to be the fearless woman in his dream, the one who would walk through water for the person she loved, the girl with the dark hair who wasn't afraid to go after what she wanted most of all.

Come here, Jenny said softly, the very first words she uttered on the first morning of her thirteenth year.

The sound of the peepers was filling her head. Spring fever was in her blood. Other girls her age knew what they wanted for their birthdays long before the day arrived: silver bracelets, gold rings, white roses, presents tied in silk ribbon. None of these possibilities had interested Jenny Sparrow. She hadn't any idea of what she desired most until she saw Will Avery. Then she knew: she had to have him.

Turn now, she said, and that was when Will looked up at the house.

Jenny quickly pulled on her clothes. She ran downstairs in her bare feet and went outside into the mild, green air. She felt as though she were flying, as though Cake House were disappearing behind her with its sodden, abandoned rooms turning to ashes. If this was desire—the cold grass under her feet, the scent of mint as she breathed in, the ferocious speed of her pulse—she wanted more of it. She wanted it all the time.

The spring migration had occurred only days earlier, filling the sky with birds. Cowbirds too lazy to rear their own offspring, were perched beside the nests of sparrows and jays already tumbling out the azure and dappled eggs that rightfully belonged inside, replacing them with their own larger progeny that were genetically timed to hatch first. The sunlight was surprisingly strong and hot for March; it was the sort of heat that could go through a person's clothes, straight into the bloodstream. Before this morning, Jenny had been quiet and moody, afraid of the dark and of her own shadow. Now, she was someone else entirely: a girl who blinked in the glittery light, someone who could fly if she wanted to, a person so brave that when Will Avery asked if he could see inside Cake House, she didn't hesitate for a moment. She took hold of his hand and led him right up to the door.

They left Will's brother crouched down behind the forsythia, goosebumps rising on the poor boy's arms. Will shouted for his brother to come along with them, but Matt, always so cautious, thoughtful to a fault, refused. He'd heard stories about what had become of trespassers at Cake House. Even at the age of twelve, Matt Avery was law-abiding. Certainly he wanted to view the Sparrows' house as much as anyone, but he was also a student of history, and he knew what had happened to Rebecca Sparrow more than three hundred years earlier. Her fate made him queasy. It made his throat go completely dry. He was well aware that local boys had been calling the dirt road Dead Horse Lane for centuries, and that most people avoided this place; even the old men in town swore there was a skeleton floating just below the lily pads and the reeds. Matt stayed where he was, glowering with shame, unable to break any rules.

Will Avery, on the other hand, would never let a dead horse or an old superstition det

him from having a good time. He'd even gone swimming in the lake once, back when Henry Elliot had bet him twenty dollars that he wouldn't have the nerve, and the only price he had to pay afterward was an ear infection. Now a pretty girl was escorting him across the lawn, and he'd be damned if he backed off, despite the rumors in town. He kept on even when Matt shouted for him to come back, reminding Will that their mother would soon discover they hadn't slept in their beds. Let good old Matt hide in the shrubbery. Let him feel some witch who'd been dead for more than three hundred years. When Monday came around, Will would be the one who would be announcing to his friends that he'd been inside the Sparrows' house and had lived to tell the tale. Before he was through, he might snag a kiss he could brag about, perhaps even filch a souvenir of his exploits to show off to the crowd that would gather admiringly in the school yard, hushed at the very thought of his exploits.

Just thinking about the adulation to come thrilled Will. He liked to be the center of things even back then. He smiled at Jenny as they sneaked in the front door, and his smile was a gorgeous thing to behold. Jenny blinked, surprised by his attentions, but then she smiled back. This was not an unexpected response. Will had already learned that girls responded when he seemed to be attracted to them, so he tightened his hold on Jenny's hand, just the slightest bit of pressure, enough to assure her of her appeal. Most girls liked anything that passed for charm; they seemed to appreciate his interest, whether or not it was real.

Do you have anything that belonged to Rebecca? Will asked once they were headed down the hall, for that was what everyone wanted to see: something, anything, that had once belonged to the witch from the north.

Jenny nodded, even though she felt as though her heart might burst. If Will had asked her to burn down the house at that moment, she might have agreed. If he'd asked for a kiss, she most definitely would have said yes. *This must be love*, she thought standing there. *It can't be anything else.* She could not believe Will Avery was actually beside her. She, who was all but friendless, more alone than Liza Hull, the plainest girl at school, now had Will all to herself. She wasn't about to say no to him. She brought him into the parlor, even though she'd been instructed never to allow anyone there. Guests were not invited to Cake House, not even on holidays or birthdays. And should some delivery man or door-to-door salesman manage to get inside, he would certainly never be brought into the parlor, with its threadbare rugs and the old velvet couches no one sat upon anymore, so that their pillows spit up dust, whenever they were fluffed. Even the paperboy threw the *Unity Tribune* from the foot of the driveway and was always paid by check, via the mail, so that Elinor didn't have to see him. Occasionally, the plumber, Eddie Baldwin, was allowed into the house, but he was always asked to remove his muddy boots and Elinor made certain to stand over him as he plunged frogs out of the toilet or unclogged water weeds and tea leaves from the kitchen sink.

Most importantly, no outsider was ever to be shown anything that had belonged to Rebecca Sparrow. Those busybodies over at the library, who were always begging for a trinket or scrap of cloth for their history of Unity displays, were never allowed past the front door. But of course this day was different from all the rest, and this visitor was different as well. Had Jenny been hypnotized by Will Avery's dream? Is that what convinced her to bring him over to the far corner of the parlor where the relics were kept? Was it love that caused her

reveal her family's most treasured possessions, or was it only spring fever, all that film green light so thick with pollen, those peepers in the muddy shallows of the lake with the dreamy chorus, calling as if the world were beginning and ending at the very same time.

Along with everyone else in town, Will Avery wanted to see exactly what Jenny herself had always done her best to ignore, what she'd branded the Sparrows' own private and personal museum of pain. What family was foolish enough to keep the things that had hurt them most of all? The Sparrows, that was who, although Elinor and Jenny did their best to ignore that pain. The corner where the display was kept was dusty and neglected. There were oak bookshelves lining the wall, but the leather-bound books had been un-tended for decades; the seashells that had once been pink had turned gray with age, the hand-carved models of bees and wasps had been attacked by carpenter ants, so that the wood fell to sawdust when touched. Only the glass case had been protected, kept well out of harm's way.

Jenny snatched off the embroidered coverlet, meant to safeguard the family heirloom from sunlight and ruin. When he saw what was before him, Will gulped down a mouthful of air, for once in his life at a loss for words. What he'd always assumed was nothing more than rumor was indeed quite real. Now he'd have a story to tell. He started to grin right there, right there. Now they'd all be gathering around him on Monday, and if they didn't believe what he told them about Rebecca Sparrow, at least he himself would know it was true.

He leaned forward, affected in some way he didn't understand, almost as if he'd had a heart. There in the glass case before him were the ten arrowheads people talked about, handed down through the generations, preserved under glass, much the way another family might document their history with photographs or newspaper announcements of weddings and births. Against a field of satin, fading from red to pink, but carefully arranged, were three more pieces of the Sparrow archives: a silver compass, a tarnished bell, and what Will thought at first was a coiled snake, but which was, in point of fact, a plait of dark, braided hair.

Still, it was the arrowheads that kept Will's attention; they were handmade, filed out of the local stone. Each one had a line of blood at the tip. Whether these mementos had been kept as proof of human cruelty or human frailty was uncertain. All that was known was what a farmer named Hathaway had written of his own experience in his journal, indexed in the historical records room at the library on Main Street. Hathaway had gone down to the dock to retrieve a mirror, an extremely expensive gift for his wife, in the time when the marshes were still a deep harbor, not yet filled in by mud and silt. But after claiming his treasure, he ordered a year earlier and all that time at sea, Hathaway had stumbled over the roots of a twisted swamp ash; before he had time to steady his hold, the mirror had fallen and broken into a hundred bright pieces. Hathaway had stood there for a very long time, wondering how he would explain himself to his wife; he stayed so long, in fact, that he'd been the only witness when Rebecca Sparrow walked over the broken glass, her arms piled high with laundry, barefoot and bleeding, but not uttering a single cry.

As soon as the boys on the farms around Unity discovered that Rebecca Sparrow could not feel pain, they began to shoot at her with arrows, for sport. They tracked her as they would a pheasant or a deer, relentlessly, forsaking the rules of charity. They cheerfully took aim whenever they came upon her at the far end of Hourglass Lake, where she took in laundry

from the wives in town who could afford to send dirty homespun and linens out to be washed by someone whose hands were already burned from lye. Several of these boys left behind guilt-ridden letters, now in the Unity library, documenting the fact that their target never once flinched. Rebecca only slapped at herself, as though fending off mosquitoes; she kept to her work, washing the woolen laundry with the strongest soap, made out of ashes and fat, carefully soaking the delicate silks in green tea. She didn't notice when she'd been struck, not until she went home and undressed. Only then did she discover she'd been wounded by one of their arrowheads. She had no idea she'd been hurt until she traced a finger over the trail of blood that had been left behind.

WAS IT ANY WONDER that Jenny was so apprehensive as her daughter's thirteenth birthday drew near? She so dreaded the day she had already bitten her nails down to the quick, a girlhood habit that reappeared in trying times. Perhaps others forgot their own histories, but Jenny remembered hers only too well. She remembered racing across the cool, dewy grass, though it had happened hours ago. She could instantly bring to mind the trill of the peepers and the way her heart had felt, thumping against her chest as she and Will stood in the parlor, examining the memento case. It was this memory that caused Jenny to stay up all night long on the eve of Stella's birthday, perched on a chair beside the bed as her daughter slept. It was the fact that thirteen had been reached yet again that left Jenny's dark hair in knots, her complexion ashen, her nails bitten until her fingertips bled.

Let her wake as she was when she closed her eyes. That was all Jenny asked for. That was all she begged for on this March night that was perfectly equal to the day, unique in all the season. *Let her be the same sweet girl, unburdened by gifts or sorrow.*

There they were, the guarded and the guardian, but it was impossible to ward off time, no matter how vigilant or alert an individual might be. Jenny knew the hour had come when she heard the morning traffic echo on Commonwealth Avenue and Storrow Drive. Blink and the years passed right by you. Turn around twice and you were walking in the land of the future. Daylight was breaking over Marlborough Street, and it would continue to do so even if Jenny kept the curtains drawn and the door bolted shut. Newspapers were being delivered, trash was collected in the alleyways, pigeons were cooing on windowsills and telephone lines. The day had begun, cool and clear and absolutely impossible to avoid.

Stella opened her eyes to see her mother staring at her. Always a sign of trouble, to have your mother huddled over you, watchful as a bulldog with all those knots in her hair. Always a bad start to a day, birthday or not. Stella leaned up on her elbows, her eyes rimmed with sleep dust. She hadn't bothered to unbraid her hair and now a halo of stray bits stuck up from her scalp. All night she had dreamed of dark water, and now she blinked in the sharp morning light.

"What are you doing here?" Stella's voice was still dream-infected. Jenny understood why the words sounded liquid; she had dozed off and caught a bit of her daughter's dream, and it brought her little comfort. Jenny Sparrow knew precisely where the water was darkest, where it never seemed to end, and so she'd drunk coffee and cola and kept alert. "What are you looking at?" Stella asked when her mother didn't respond, annoyance creeping into her voice.

How was Jenny to explain when she herself didn't know? She was searching for a sign of something burning up inside her little star, that was all. An ability that was bound to set her apart, just as surely as if she were a giantess, or a girl who ate fire, or a woman who could walk over glass without feeling the slightest bit of pain.

"I just wanted to know what you wanted for your birthday breakfast. French toast? Waffles? Eggs over easy? I've got raisin bread. The kind with the walnuts."

If it had to happen, let it be something simple and helpful, the ability to mend clothes with a single stitch, perhaps, or a talent for trigonometry. Let it be an aptitude for foreign languages, or an open heart, or a resilient nature. If worse came to worst, perhaps she could see in the dark, always a welcome attribute, or quiet wild dogs with a mere gesture.

"I don't eat breakfast anymore. For your information. And I can't be late. I have a math test first period and Miss Hewitt doesn't care about birthdays. She doesn't care about anything but algebra." Stella had tumbled out of bed and immediately began to search through a rumpled pile of clothes on the floor.

"Would you like me to iron that?" Jenny asked when Stella's disheveled school uniform had at last been unearthed and pulled from the tangle of jeans and underclothes.

Stella eyed her uniform, then shook out the blue skirt and blazer. "There," she said, with the hot edge of defiance that had surfaced at the start of ninth grade. Stella had skipped a year of school, passing directly from fourth to sixth grade. She'd been so quick, such a good reader, naturally they'd been proud of her abilities. But now Jenny wondered if they hadn't made a mistake, if Stella hadn't somehow been rushed into something she wasn't ready for.

"All better," Stella said of her clothes. As she turned, she caught her mother staring at her. Yet again, and this time with a sour expression, as though in studying her daughter, Jenny had happened upon head lice or fleas. "Is there something wrong with me? Is that why you keep looking at me that way?"

"Of course not." At least there was no green light, no calling frogs, no fork in the road that would surely lead to disaster. "Although you might want to brush your hair."

Stella peered at herself in the mirror. Too tall, too thin, with teeth that weren't quite crooked enough for braces and hair that looked like straw left out too long in the rain. She scowled at her own reflection, then turned to face her mother, still defiant. "My hair's fine the way it is, thank you."

Last night, Jenny had counted backward through time until she reached Rebecca Sparrow, the lost girl who was their first recorded blood relation. Stella, she'd realized, was the thirteenth generation in their history. That ominous, unlucky number. Why, some people wouldn't keep thirteen dollars in their pocket, some architects passed directly from the twelfth to the fourteenth floors, insuring that no elevators would stop at that ill-fated destination. And now here Stella was for an entire year, stuck with that number, trapped by her own destiny. Thirteen, no matter how the years were counted. Thirteen, until the next twelve months had passed.

"How about a present?" Jenny brought forth a gift box. She had shopped carefully, trying to pick something Stella might like, but such an endeavor was hopeless. Jenny wasn't surprised at the disappointment that showed on Stella's face as soon as the cashmere sweater

she'd chosen had been unwrapped.

"Pink?" Stella said.

Nothing Jenny did seemed right; that was the only thing they could agree upon lately.

"Do you even know me?" Stella carefully folded the sweater back into its box. True enough, everything in Stella's closet was black, navy blue, or white.

Something had begun to go wrong between mother and daughter around the time Will left last summer, or maybe it had begun in those last few months of their marriage, when all Will and Jenny could do was fight. They had sunk so low that Jenny had flung a glass of milk at Will after finding a woman's phone number in his jacket pocket. He'd responded by smashing her favorite platter on the floor. They'd stopped to look at each other then, panting, surrounded by broken crockery and white puddles of milk. Then and there, they knew the marriage was over.

Will had packed up that night. He'd gone off, even though Stella had tried her best to hold him back. She'd begged him to stay, and when he wouldn't, she ran to the window to watch as he waited for a cab.

"He won't go," Stella had whispered hopefully, but hope faded when the taxi pulled up. When it was clear Will was leaving, as it should have been for several years, Stella turned to Jenny. "Call him back." Stella's voice was perilously high. "Don't let him go!"

But Will was already gone, and he had been for ages. Jenny thought about the day when she saw him on the lawn; his dream had been her first taste of desire. But no matter how many nights they had spent together since, she had never again been granted access to his dreams. She was quick to pick up her landlady's dreams, and the dreams of her neighbors; such things came to her unbidden, eclipsing what dreams she might have had on her own. There were the overheated sex dreams of the young man on the first floor, so feverish, Jenny had trouble looking him in the eye when they met by chance at the incinerator. There were the cool, spare dreams of the old woman at the end of the hall, images of Nile-blue landscapes from half a century earlier that always refreshed Jenny, even when she'd been standing on her feet at work all day. Walking through the Boston Common, she'd been privy to bits and pieces of the dreams of homeless men who dozed on the benches, dreams of warm woolen coats and turkey dinners, dreams of everything these men had lost, and everything that had been stolen from them, and all that they'd thrown away.

And, yet, with her own husband, there was only emptiness, the blank space of an individual who could fall into slumber without a single thought, without a care in the world. Dreams as empty as Marlborough Street after he'd gotten into the cab on the evening he left, dark as the brown twilight of Boston that always fell so quickly, like a curtain drawn across window glass.

"I hate you," Stella had said that night. She'd gone into her room and closed the door and had been that way ever since, much like the closed doors of Jenny's childhood, only in reverse. Her mother then, her daughter now. Even today, on her birthday, Stella didn't wait for Jenny near.

"Do you mind if I get dressed, or do you have to watch me do that, too?" Stella had her hands on her hips, as though she were speaking to an intrusive maid who couldn't follow

instructions, a poor fool she had to put up with until the day when she was finally all grown up and free.

Jenny went into the kitchen, where she fixed herself a cup of coffee, then warmed a corn muffin for Stella. Jenny was of the belief that breakfast was the most important meal of the day, no matter what Stella might say.

“I’m just fixing you a bite,” Jenny called when she heard Stella moving about in the hallway. “Just to keep your energy up.”

Jenny grabbed the muffin and a tall glass of orange juice; she started for the living room but when she reached the doorway, she stopped at the threshold. Stella had been rummaging through the hall closet, searching for her black boots, but she’d found something else instead. Now she sat cross-legged on the floor examining the box that had arrived from Unity. A very bad start to an enormously untrustworthy day.

Jenny had thought she’d hidden the gift well, fitting the large packing crate neatly behind the jackets and coats. She had assumed there’d be no reason for Stella to look in the closet before Jenny found the opportunity to get rid of this birthday present, the way she’d gotten rid of all the others for the past thirteen years. Every time Elinor Sparrow had sent a gift, Jenny had destroyed it before Stella could discover the gift and be won over. It made no difference if the box contained a doll or a sweater, a music box or a book; anything with a Unity postmark was sent down to the incinerator. But now the past had reached out to them, drawing them back to everything Jenny had left behind. Why, on this morning she would not have been surprised to find a snapping turtle in her own bathroom sink, or a mud puddle under the hall carpeting, perhaps even a memento from the museum of pain carefully wrapped in tissue paper and twine, fallen into her daughter’s hands. There was no way to stop this now: Stella had already pulled off the tape. Packing niblets had spilled onto the carpet.

“Well, well,” Stella said, in a tone that included delight and fury at the very same time.

Inside the box was Jenny’s toy house, the one her father had made for her, an exact replica of Cake House, with all three chimneys set in place. There was the garden gate, painted freckled green, and the birds’ nests, formed of sticks and string, positioned above the porch. There was the forsythia and the hedge of laurel, with tiny felt leaves glued to each wavering branch and even tinier bees fashioned out of satin and cherry stones, clinging to the pale gauzy blossoms.

“When were you going to show this to me?” The packing stuff clung to the skirt of Stella’s uniform in white puffballs. “Never?”

Jenny’s father, Saul, had spent a full year building the house, but after he died, she never played with it again. The miniature house went from a shelf in her bedroom to a corner of the parlor to a storeroom in the cellar, and there it had moldered for years. Now, someone had cleaned the floors with a toothbrush. The rugs had been washed; the kitchen table, whittled out of local pine, was shiny with furniture wax. It was lemon oil, Jenny realized, a scent which reminded her of her father and often caused her to cry.

Stella lifted the model of Cake House onto the trestle table in the hall.

“Did you plan to destroy it, like you have everything else my grandmother’s sent me?”

Jenny took a step backward, as though she'd been slapped. There were tears in her eyes brought on by the lemon oil. She opened her mouth to try to explain herself, but there were no excuses. Just as Stella had suspected. No reason at all, other than selfish pride.

"Don't tell me you thought I didn't know." Red spots had appeared on Stella's cheeks. Had she grown overnight? Had she always looked quite so adult? So extremely self-righteous? "How stupid do you think I am? I've known since my seventh birthday. I followed you down the hall and watched you throw my present into the incinerator chute."

"Of course I don't think you're stupid," Jenny said. "I was only ..."

"Trying to protect me? Making certain I wouldn't be contaminated. By what? A teddy bear? A dollhouse? Or did you think she might pack my presents in poison? Maybe if I touched one, arsenic would course through my bloodstream. Was that it? Or maybe I would just know that someone cared about me."

"Stella, you don't understand my mother. How manipulative she is, now that she wants something. That something is you. She can rectify her mistakes. But she was never there for me. She only thought about herself."

Stella actually laughed, but the sound was bitter. She'd practiced sneering in front of the mirror, and now she put that practice to use. "You can't be serious." Stella grabbed her books and was pulling them on. Her mouth was pinched; her skin white as ice. "She was the one who thought only of herself? And of course you're perfect. This is exactly what she said would happen. She told me you'd try to turn me against her. She said you'd blame her for everything."

"What do you mean, she told you?" Everything Jenny had ever wanted for her daughter seemed to be slipping away in this very instant, on this very day. Everything she had tried to do so right seemed to have somehow gone terribly wrong. "Have you been talking to your grandmother?"

"I've been talking to her for years. That's right! We call each other when you're not around. When you can't butt in and ruin things for us the way you ruin everything."

Stella wound a scarf around her neck. Her eyes were cold, flecked with yellow. The same eyes her father had. She had more of his attributes than she had ever imagined. She realized that in the instant when she saw that she'd hurt her mother. She didn't have to be the good girl, minding her manners, doing as she was told. Stella could tell that the balance of power had shifted and it felt good. Somehow, while her mother wasn't paying attention, Stella had gained control.

"Well, I love this present my grandmother sent, and I don't care what you think. If it's not here when I get home from school, I'm leaving. I mean it. I'll move in with my father."

"Oh, Stella, don't be ridiculous." Will was too self-centered to take care of anyone; he hadn't even had Stella sleep over at his place. In order for her to stay at his apartment, he had to have to clean up, he'd have to go to the market, buy milk and bread, set his alarm clock, think about someone other than himself.

All the same, Jenny felt pinpricks of fear along the back of her neck. People lost each other all the time, didn't they? People walked right out of each other's lives.

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