

The Good Echo

A Novel

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Jesse, with whom I wander

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PROLOGUE

First, Cleveland. City of my birth, city of my death. City of brick and ice and buzzing streetcars. Sausages and perch, tornadoes and rain. City of the winding Cuyahoga, the long gray shore of Lake Erie, steel bridges pivoting. Factories purling steam into a white sky.

I am—I was—Benjamin Donald Bell, child of Clifford and Frances Bell. I died of sepsis from an infected root canal. My father was my dentist. For now, I won't muddle through the logic of language arranged by a ghost. For now, simply this: death has made a storyteller of me.

Second, a lake named Mazinaw or Massanoga or Bon Echo, depending on who you ask. A few years before my birth, my parents built a lodge deep in the Ontario forest, looking north at The Narrows. Long before I was born in 1903, the Ojibwe and Algonkian had been corralled into reservations or dragged away to anywhere else. Their children were sent to schools near the cities, sent to be educated by Anglicans and Methodists, taught to believe in Jesus and English and arithmetic so they might forget their parents and grandparents, the ways of their people. But the lake remained a quiet place, inhabited by fishermen and vacationers and pilgrims who went to listen to the echo that bounces from the rock, a tremendous wall of granite that rises 100 meters from the surface of the water, marked with drawings in ochre and iron, its holes and divots stuffed with sap and scratched with stories. People have always gone to the lake to listen.

Lake Mazinaw: home to mosquitoes, blackflies, gnats, frogs, fish, muskrats, rabbits, deer, turtles, black bears, and wolves. It is still a wild

place, and wildness is what my parents loved about it—what I loved about it. In summer, boys still jump from the rock—something I wasn't allowed to do. *When you're thirteen*, my mother said, but I was never thirteen. Girls, too, jump from the rock, in rubberized sandals and jeans cut short and fraying, their hair tangled with sun and lake water. They jump, and on the way down, they bellow to keep their fear at bay. Their bodies hit the water like joyful fists and they kick to the surface, gasping and alive. In winter, the water sleeps beneath thick ice. Cabins are boarded against snow. Stars spin slowly through long nights. A thread of smoke rises from a single chimney, and at daybreak, a solitary old woman ventures out, her breath steaming forth in the bright sun of January. She stomps her heavy boots, and the sound returns to her from the rock across the lake.

But we'll get to the lake soon enough.

Death has made a storyteller of me, and it is my parents' story I will tell. If things had gone otherwise—if I had not died a boy—perhaps it would be my own story I would tell, with my parents providing my genes and lessons in how to tie shoes, whittle sticks, do algebra. Or perhaps, had I lived, I would find no occasion for storytelling at all.

Does death make a storyteller of us all? Perhaps it makes musicians of some, carpenters of others. Perhaps nothing but sunlight and dust. I know only this story, these people—my mother and father, Clifford and Frances—and in life, they collected and invented stories. They told them to me, and they told them to each other. Perhaps they groomed me for this particular afterlife of listening and telling. And now I collect stories like a funnel, like a hole in a rock you put your mouth to and whisper. A hole in a rock you press your ear to. *Listen*.

In the history books, it is my father's story you will find. In the annals of dentistry, in journals and lab slides, in books he wrote. But you won't find me there, his son who died at the age of 12. A boy is nothing in the world. And you won't find my mother either, and so I listen especially for her voice.

I was a good-looking kid, if I say so myself. Curly hair. Bright eyes. Curious and smart. It's easy to believe in my lost potential. The viruses

or cures I would have discovered. The music I would have composed. The woman I would have loved. The children I would have raised. But I might as well have led a humdrum life. I might have been average. Most of us are, after all. What if I wanted to compose music, but was not accepted to Berklee or Oberlin or Juilliard? Or what if I was accepted—labeled *brilliant*—but my father saw no value in it. He was tone deaf, after all. He didn't care a lick for music. Only for science. Maybe I would have died a soldier or a sailor.

I don't remember my death. What I remember is the way, in life, the lens of my magnifying glass swelled and distorted every blade of grass, every embroidery stitch, the warp and weft of a linen napkin, the whorls of my fingerprints, the fur of mold on a slice of bread. I remember the echo at the lake, and the lake itself, a bright mirror winking in the sun. I remember my lunchbox with its rusty hinge, my school books stacked and cinched with a belt, and learning to tie my shoes: rabbit around the tree, down the hole.

I remember singing at the top of my lungs in a fort I built of broken branches and a tablecloth stolen from the laundry line: wood and cotton, cotton and leaves. How my tent filled with wind and sun and I lay there for hours, dreaming over a book. And how my father tore it down in a rage. And I see now, in death—where I am free to listen and to speak—that his anger was not about me or my tent of sticks and tablecloths. It wasn't that I sang too loudly. It wasn't about my muddy shoes or that I sometimes forgot to take out the trash. It was always about him. His frustration, his ambition, his guilt. It was always about him.

But I am the wound at the center of my parents' story. I am the heart, burning like the one the Catholics paint within the chest of their Jesus. I am your tour guide: the recorder, the mythmaker. I am the funnel of an ear and the open mouth, singing. I am the quilter, the stitcher of squares. I am the storyteller.

So, where should I begin? A dark night. A hut on the banks of the Nile. Or a canoe on a lake in Ontario, way back when Clifford and Frances were newlyweds, before me, before they had even imagined me? They

paddled a boat together for the first time, gliding across the smooth surface of the water. They hardly knew each other then, and they hardly knew themselves. They had not yet had a son. They had not yet lost him.

Or before they met, when their lives were still separate? When my father was a farm boy, and my mother was Frances Anthony, a tomboy in overalls who learned to sew so she could repair the tears in her clothing after her mother refused.

I know all the details. The trouble, sometimes, is choosing which to tell, which to stitch together. And beginnings? Beginnings are pliable tools for a storyteller. Let me build a threshold: shall I use paste or string? Thread or nails or staples? Of course: I will use words.

Clifford Bell and Frances Anthony were married on a Saturday in November, 1902, in the Methodist Church of Brampton, Ontario—Frances' hometown. The church was brick and sturdy and silent. Yellow light slanted through the high windows, touching the thinning hair on Cliff's head and lighting Frances' veil. They were both Methodist, but Clifford believed it all a little more than Frances, who felt no lasting presence after her father died, who watched fish decay on the shore, growing putrid, swarming with flies, eventually only delicate pale bones licked clean (and even those eventually disappeared, fish bones being so fine). But they called themselves Methodists when they married. As their story lengthened, they met trickster gods and gods that traveled in lightning bolts, gods that loved cattle or beer, dung beetle gods, and goddesses that birthed the moon. Tangled with these others, their God came out changed. Cliff or Frances might have said that all these gods were different faces of the one God with whom they began. But that comes much later, after they lose me. After they give up on everything they knew before. After Cleveland. After root canals. After the quiet brick house on Euclid Avenue. After the grief and the guilt and the grave beneath a pear tree. After they leave Ohio for Alaska and Switzerland and Egypt.

So where do we begin?

Close your eyes. Point to a place on the map—a game of the young and in love. It doesn't matter where they go, where they end up, how

they get there. What matters is that they are together, walking the trail, or speeding down some gravel road, dust rising behind the tires of their car, the picnic in the basket, the camera loaded with film. What matters are the stories that pass between them. Go ahead: lay your finger down.

Switzerland, then! Switzerland it is!

June, 1931. A wet day, and rather dark. Here we find them, the dentist and his wife, Clifford and Frances Bell, my parents, years after my death, on a train, winding southwest through the belly of a mountain in the Alps. Soon enough, they'll board a bus to travel further into the hills, to higher villages built at the receding edges of glaciers. I will channel their voices for you. I will stitch the squares. It is my mother that speaks first, my mother that speaks most. So much of this story is hers.

Listen.

I.

SWITZERLAND

Frances, 1931

The train window is smeared with fingerprints and nose grease. Outside, silent houses and faded timber nestle against the flanks of the mountains. Our train moves swiftly, but outside is the slowness of soil creep, dirt pushing at itself like skin cells sloughing, always downward, always toward the river, always toward the sea. We slide past it all, each car pulling the next around this bend, around the next, higher and higher into the low-hanging sky.

In the aisle seat, Clifford examines a stack of photographs he has taken of grinning Scottish and Swiss children. He squints and compares, jots in his notebook, squints and compares, rarely looking up, not even to glance out the window. On my lap, I have a map of Switzerland and a small wooden box filled with teeth. Mostly, they are the teeth of animals, but a few come from human mouths, teeth that were pulled or fell out of their own accord—baby teeth and teeth tunneled with decay, teeth in various shades of white, yellow, and brown, with sharp edges and creases and cracks, rooted and rootless, each with its story.

This black shark's tooth: I turn it between my thumb and forefinger. It came from the Potomac, where, years ago, my sister Elizabeth retrieved it from the mucky banks and gave it to my son Benjamin, who was 8 or 9 then, and carried a small magnifying glass with him everywhere he went. "Pleistocene era," Elizabeth said, setting the tooth in his palm. Benjamin accepted it with a look of awe.

A porter delivers two tiny cups of coffee to the women in the seats in front of ours, whose voices bubble in Italian. I understand the melody of their language, but not the words, and on this journey, this is often the case. I exist within sounds, within music, but not in words. I understand so few languages. I have heard that Italian babies are sometimes born singing. That they slide from the womb slick with blood, or are yanked out gangly and blue, and when the doctor delivers a firm smack to open their lungs, they wail in the Dorian mode.

When Ben was born, he did not cry. Not at first. When, finally, his head emerged from my body, and the doctor pulled him out and cut the umbilical cord, there was a collective pause, an underwater silence. I thought he was stillborn. Only hours earlier I had felt him moving within me, but now, it seemed he was dead. The doctor held him up, a tiny thing with curled hands and grayish skin, smeared with blood and yellow, but he did not cry. The doctor and nurse huddled over him. I was so exhausted. My eyes closed. This baby that had grown within me was not me after all. He could die and I would go on living. My head was so heavy I could not lift it from the pillow.

But then the doctor held him up, and I saw his mouth, wide and red, and he cried loudly. His tiny hands grabbed at air, and I reached for him, and his wail was nothing Dorian, nothing operatic. It was complete disorder. It was all the scales in the world collapsing upon each other. It was a building burning in midwinter—that horrifying, glorious clatter as the roof caves and the windows burst and the girders crash: this was my child's voice. But I took him from the doctor, and I looked into his howling mouth. Every part of me hurt. I knew that screaming baby would be my only one, my only child. I held him against my skin and he stopped crying. He looked at me, quiet and blinking and perfect.

Benjamin would be grown now, twenty-four years old if he had not died a boy. He has been dead 12 years—as long as he was alive. Perhaps, if he had lived, I would not have grown so tired of Cleveland winters, of the neighbors' children rolling and stacking snowman after snowman. Wilting carrot noses and coal buttons fell into the snow and left black

patches until spring. I grew to hate the dull sky of March, the endless rain of May, the houses facing square to the street, one after another, block after block, hunching their brick shoulders, exhausted and obedient.

After Benjamin died, Cliff began to proclaim the evils of root canals, but it wasn't something people wanted to hear. They preferred to keep their teeth in their mouths, even if they were drilled with holes and filled with gold and silver, molybdenum and mercury. They did not believe in the threat of the microscopic world. But if Benjamin had not died, Cliff might not have learned what he now knows—about root canals, first, and then about nutrition. He would have gone on as the president of the dental association, pulling teeth, attending conferences. We would not be here on this train through the Alps, and while I would give almost anything to have my child back, to have watched him grow into a man, to know him still, it is beautiful here, and strange.

In the months after Ben's death, I sometimes found myself clutching things I had no memory of picking up. A comb. An onion. Where had it come from? And why was it in my hand? Each time, each object, when I noticed it, was damp with sweat, or had left marks on my palm, as if I had gripped it too tightly. When I was a child in Brampton, I knew a part-Ojibwe woman, a seamstress, whose husband had died or left her. I never knew the whole story, but her daughter was taken away, sent to a school for Indian children, and while the child was there, she died. The mother, the seamstress, was silent after that, taking orders in her shop, completing her work, but for a long time she carried with her a doll made of birch bark and her child's hair. If it was not in her arms, it was tied into her dress. A mourning doll, my mother said. My mourning doll was a rotating cast of dishcloths and acorns, a toy truck, a butter knife.

My sister Elizabeth has always blamed Clifford for Ben's death. "Careless with his own son," she said then, when we still spoke of it, when the loss was fresh. "Negligent. With his own son." The first time she said it, we were walking home from the cemetery after placing flowers on Ben's grave. Every day for weeks after the funeral, I did so. I stopped going only because I knew I would never stop if I waited for the pain

to fade. I would go to that cemetery every day for the rest of my life if I waited to stop missing him. And I stopped going because I thought of his body down there, his slender twelve-year-old body, already decaying. Were the worms and insects already gnawing through his clothing, through his skin? I stopped going.

It was 1919 and all across Europe men had died in the mud, shot and mortared and gassed. I was not alone in grieving. But grief is always private. And mine was for a child. A small death, but it was tremendous to me.

I stopped talking about him. It began to seem as if speaking his name was some sort of betrayal. No one, not even my sister, who was my closest friend, understood exactly, and their words of sympathy sometimes angered me.

Elizabeth wasn't there when Ben died. It was routine surgery that Cliff himself performed. A root canal is not particularly complicated. You dig the channel. You drain the decay. You fill the hole. But in Ben's mouth, the hole swarmed with spirochetes and staphylococci, microscopic swimmers that entered through his tooth into his gums, invisibly writhing daggers and corkscrews. From there, the path to his heart was short, and the heart is easily susceptible to such poisons.

Elizabeth wouldn't stand to be in the same room as Clifford. She came to the funeral, but wouldn't stay at our house. Grief quieted me, stealing my words, but Elizabeth was angry.

"It's a chain of events, Frances," she said. "Simple cause and effect."

But I wondered where the chain began, and to what it was anchored. I was the one who let Ben eat strawberry jam, root beer barrels, birthday cake. He ate them, and the sugar did its work. Or, as Clifford thought years later, maybe the trouble began before Ben was even born. Maybe it began when I was pregnant. Maybe I had eaten the wrong foods. Maybe it began when I was a girl, in those hazy years after my father's death, when my mother hardly cooked for us. Maybe it was *my* fault. Maybe I was the cause. I have never been able to blame Clifford. But Elizabeth still addresses her letters only to me.

Our wandering life is full of canoes and prop planes, trains and riverboats, igloos and thatched roofs and mountain ranges. We meet children with perfect dental arches and children with half their teeth rotted out. Everywhere we go, lines of children wait, ready to open their mouths for Clifford and his camera, and Clifford collects photographs of them, collects samples of their foods, measures their jaws and foreheads, the distance between nostrils, the width of their mouths, and we move on to the next place, the next people. We move on. We move on. There are always more teeth to see. More people to study. The feeble-minded boys at the school in Ohio, the Seminoles of Florida, the Incas of Peru, the Inuit in Alaska, the Hebrides Islanders, and now these children of the Alps. Clifford asks, and they open wide and let him look at their teeth. Or most of them do, while a few do not understand his request, or pretend not to, despite the interpreter standing by, despite the way Cliff stands behind his camera, waiting, the dark cloth draped loosely over his shoulders. He shows them examples, photographs of boys from Ohio, front- and side-views, displaying off-kilter jaws, gapped and overlapping teeth. The children lean in and study the photos, curious about their counterparts from the other side of the world. They take the photos from Cliff's hands and turn them over, studying the writing on the backs where Cliff pencils names, dates, and locations. The children bend the corners and soften the edges. They leave fingerprints on the faces of the boys from Ohio. I look at the children and they look back. Sometimes we smile at each other. I never really know them.

As a general rule, people living far from cities have lovely teeth, solid and square. But in city mouths, we find teeth that butt against each other, shove each other aside, are twisted and withered and chipped. City mouths chew mostly white bread, sugary jam, polished rice, and soggy canned goods. City teeth gap. They are too long or too short, or half-transparent, with grooves, serrated edges and receded gums. Molars are decayed—rot runs through them like ore through rock. From city mouths comes the smell of the trash heap, the wet stink of the killing floor. And these mouths are malformed, the arches too narrow to fit their teeth.

Sometimes a child stares placidly at the camera, or bares his teeth fiercely. Sometimes, Cliff asks the child on the other side of his camera to laugh because he wants to see her dental arch. He demonstrates, tipping his head back and laughing a loud, false laugh, which often makes the child laugh, and he snaps the photo, but the sound of Cliff's braying always makes me cringe.

There is no photograph of me in the collection, but if there were, it would show that my teeth, too, are imperfect—one front tooth overlaps another. I have had three carious teeth, each filled by Clifford years ago, before Ben died. He no longer fills cavities—he simply pulls the rotten tooth—but since I am healthy, he has agreed I should keep my fillings. A photo of me would show a bland woman, a schoolteacher by training, gray-ing brown hair, five-foot-two-inches tall, round but not fat, spine slightly concave. I would not laugh for Cliff to photograph my dental arch.

A photo of me would not show how, in this wandering life, I have walked for miles through grass as tall as I am. How I can sing so a child will sleep, and so a child will dance. How I can make myself invisible—it is not hard when one is a plain woman. How I can sometimes speak loudly—although this is still a challenge. “From the diaphragm,” Clifford always says. He exhales, singing a long note, and I join him, and we sing a chord in perfect thirds, trained by years in a church choir. I hold my note longer and longer, until I have pushed every bit of air from my belly. Until I feel my abdomen pushing in on itself, pushing on my uterus, that withered old husk.

We have been travelling for much of three years, collecting photographs and samples of food, collecting teeth that have fallen out, or teeth that have been pulled, measuring jaws and skulls, counting carious teeth, measuring decay and nostril distance, but still Clifford wants the Torres Strait Islands, New Zealand, the Australian Outback, the Amazon. And there is nothing for me in Ohio anymore.

I spread the map of Switzerland across my lap. At its edges are parts of Germany, France, Austria, Italy, the curving blue of the Mediterranean Sea. We will spend a week in these Swiss villages, and then take a

train to Genoa. With my finger, I trace the coast. We will board a boat and cross the sea to Egypt, to Port Said, where the land will be loose and yellow and the people, I am told, live in houses of baked earth. From there, we'll travel overland to Cairo, from Cairo to Luxor, and then along the Nile to Aswan. We will spend some weeks in The Sudan and Ethiopia and in the jungles of The Congo, about which I know almost nothing, with only the word of the missionaries and the writings of the anthropologists to prepare me.

If I lined up all the maps we've traveled across, hinging them together like tiles, Cleveland would not even fit on this train, so many panels of blue would stretch between us and the dot that would mark New York City. Cleveland is 5,000 miles—a lifetime—away.