

CHILDREN
AND
LUNATICS

a novel

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For John, Patrick, and Willy

Children and lunatics cut the Gordian knot which
the poet spends his life patiently trying to untie.

—Jean Cocteau

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I.

THE MOON

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She was beginning to be known.

“I saw you,” they said. “I saw you on California Street, on the river path, on Broadway, on the steel steps going down. I saw you downtown.”

They spoke with their eyes.

“I saw you walking.”

She could change her route or the time of day. Then different people would see her, and they would comment, the words piling up, coming from all directions.

“I saw you at the stoplight by the post office. I saw you going into Macy’s. I saw you at the bus station. I saw you on the footpath. I saw you leaving the restaurant.”

Even if she wore a disguise, sunglasses, a big floppy hat, a baseball cap, a hooded jacket.

They saw her and their eyes made comment.

~

She walked in all kinds of weather and every season of the year. She walked in the middle days of April when tulips stood lonely and disconsolate under the leaden sky, the temperatures remaining unseasonably cold, the people in the restaurant complaining that

they were tired of their winter clothes. She dressed warmly so that she didn't fall into bleakness the first few blocks, the leaves on the trees begrudging in their small display, the sky without color. She carried one of her many satchels, so that she could shed layers as the world improved, stuff them away and continue on, stride unbroken.

She walked in the summertime at high noon, hiding under a straw hat with a leather string tie. She walked in a mission town in Mexico in another century. She walked in the fall, her favorite time, when the afternoon glow transformed the world into a lamp-lit room, a chapel with stained glass, the ceiling painted blue. She walked in winter, hearing her feet, anticipating each moist and gravely footfall.

She walked and walked and walked, and people noticed. Their eyes spoke.

"I saw you."

"I saw you walking."

~

On the left for one block, on the right for the next, she could possibly live in every third house. She tried not to look too far ahead, that would spoil it. Every third house. She knew all the houses along her regular walks, but choosing every third house, first left then right, made the order of appearance irregular, hence unpredictable, a surprise, a kind of prize. Her house. Her lucky number.

A bland, sad house with no shrubs or plantings whatsoever. She would put bright plastic flowers in the scattered pots on the empty cement patio. She would place a chair next to a pot. She would hang a straw hat on a nail on the patio wall. The chair would be secure and sturdy, with arms.

A low-roofed house, practically a shed, with one window cracked. Set far back from the sidewalk, the lawn a mass of weeds,

the little house needing paint. Maybe the dwelling place of a wrinkled little man with a bit of garden out back. A forgotten gnome. She would look at this small house and hear wind chimes from across the street, sounding one tone, then another, higher . . . then silence . . . then the first tone again, the air barely stirring. And she would think: It is Wednesday afternoon. It is Wednesday afternoon for everyone, all across the town.

Here was a beautiful, well-kept house with a wide front porch. Hanging planters with late-blooming geraniums and a slatted swing and a sign with curling, wood-burned letters: The Albee's. Spacious and shaded, and inside there would surely be a television and a piano against the wall and books. She wondered about the apostrophe. It likely was a mistaken way to indicate more than one. Certainly, there would be more than one Albee in such a nice, big, shingled bungalow. The apostrophe might also indicate possession. This house belongs to the Albees. But it should come at the very end, then, the apostrophe. This is the Albees' house. This is the Albees'.

It bothered her that the Albees would put up that incorrect sign. But maybe there was, after all, only one of them. The Albee. The Albee's. This is his house.

~

The wide-brimmed hats numbered thirteen, the baseball caps twelve. There were six woolen berets in different colors and three bucket hats, which she didn't wear because they looked like buckets. If she were to have hair to her chin and if it were to be thick and chestnut brown, she would wear a bucket hat. But she wasn't to have that kind of hair, not now, not ever, not in this life. She was to have wispy short hair. She tried to make it a warm Chestnut Brown or a cool Ash or a soft Honey. But it was variously a dark, flat brown that

was almost black, as if it had been colored by a permanent marker, or it was an oddly tinged gray, an oil slick in a rain puddle.

She often wore one of the woolen berets to her Wednesdays, to First Wednesday and to all the other Wednesdays. In fall she wore dark green or, this year, a new, taffy-colored pink. In winter she wore black or dark brown, in spring and summer she wore cream or pale gray. Unless it was very hot, in the high nineties, woolen berets did not seem to provide occasion for comment. Once, though, a young woman on the street offered her a white linen beret, right from her own blonde head. But it didn't lay right or feel substantial.

Although she loved them the most and had many, she only wore the wide-brimmed hats when she was planning to walk at a steady clip and—apparent to any observer—not intending to stop anytime soon, if at all. When it was necessary to pause on a street corner to wait for a light, or when she positioned herself at a SMARTbUS stop, the wide-brimmed hats were likely to provoke looks, possibly remarks, as if she were trying to be fancy. In fact, she was traveling incognito. When she wore her wide-brimmed hats she felt that she joined a vast, timeless, faceless coterie of sojourners. The sun beat down on her hat from on high, but she existed within the rim, a secret, shaded area.

Baseball caps were good. She might be a lined and haggard older woman, or she might not. She was trim, from all the walking. When she saw herself in the storefront windows, when the sun was bright and her face was shadowed, she might be a younger person, or even a boy.

Mexico, Italy, the Eastern seaboard of the United States. She walked down many different streets. Baltimore, Maryland at the Turn of the Century. She walked through pages of old magazines, distributed for free on the table in the foyer of the public library. A high mountain village in Nicaragua, a windswept bluff in Mongolia, the ancient civilization of Angkor, collapsed.

Are We Alone?

On a glossy cover was a picture of a pockmarked moon.

Searching the Heavens for Another Earth.

~

2.

First Wednesdays meant the first Wednesday of every month. It didn't mean first Wednesdays and then something else. It was an arbitrary day to go to the restaurant and have a bargain lunch, whoever wanted to. There were signs and reminders about it here and there, in the library foyer, at the SMARTbUS terminal. The cost was two dollars for any of the lunch combos on the menu. Two dollars from eleven a.m. to one p.m. and the rest of the usual charge (\$4.50 and upwards) the restaurant donated out of its own funds to nonprofit businesses that supported causes. Secret Treasure, Bargain Box, Goodwill, the Food Bank, they all were beneficiaries of First Wednesdays. As were the restaurant patrons themselves, on those particular days.

She always ordered the soup and salad combo. It came with a basket of bread and little pats of butter and packets of jam. She used one packet of jam and put one packet in her pocket. She drank water, the drinks being extra. The salad might be garden green or pasta. The pasta was macaroni. She always had the pasta salad because the garden green salad was not chopped or shredded very finely, it was a pile of large lettuce leaves that invariably drooped out around the edges of most people's mouths, at least initially, upon the first bite. The cold macaroni could be secreted away quickly, tucked out of sight.

From her own door to the door of the restaurant, walking straight, no stopping, took eleven minutes. It might take twelve or thirteen minutes if the light was wrong at the corner by the post office. After the end of her block there were no houses on the way to the restaurant, just the federal building, the post office, some business offices, a few shops. She kept her eyes straight ahead and took note of no potential abodes.

It took anywhere from eight to ten small bites to eat the pasta salad. She kept her hat on while she ate. She sat alone at the table for two in the corner. It took anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five minutes, the whole thing, the lunch. And then she was done.

Back inside her rooms, the yellow comforter was folded neatly at the foot of the bed. The *Welcome* mat was two inches from the door frame and centered exactly. Outside in the dim hallway, her key lay secret behind the radiator, waiting for her return.

~

Coming home from the restaurant, she walked a big loop. First she continued on down Main Street and entered Macy's, walking past the cosmetics counter, where she squirted perfume samples on her wrists and neck and clothing. The counter lady's eyes looked at her, but she did not look back. She left by the bank street door, then, and waited for the *Walk* signal at the intersection, then went over Monroe Bridge and carefully descended the steep, steel steps to the riverfront walking path. Sometimes she stopped in at LauraLee's Bakery and had a free sample. Or she went into Bitterroot Herbs and smelled the aromatherapy oil heating in its small dish and examined wooden massage implements, as if thinking to buy one. She had choices. She could choose to go into LauraLee's Bakery or into Bitterroot Herbs. If

the day was clear, then she did. If the clouds were high. She examined the sky. Each day when she awoke, she looked for the faceless morning moon ushering the fate of the day.

The steep, steel steps at the end of the bridge led to the walking path at the side of the river. She headed west on the path, ignoring the college joggers, and the young women with their big dogs and the mothers and occasional fathers pushing toddlers in needle-nosed strollers that looked like narrow, cozy wheelbarrows, the solemn-faced child some kind of produce. She walked on the river path for about half a mile, and then, some days, she turned left and wended her way up California Street, sticking close to the edge, since there were no sidewalks, and fast cars with reckless drivers sometimes came around that blind corner, taking a shortcut from one busy street to another. She walked along junkyards and weeds up California Street until she came to the Bargain Box, the Catholic charity thrift shop next to the Sister Agatha Shea Sports Center and adjacent playing fields.

She thought about those words, “reckless drivers.” The word: “reckless.” NEGLIGENT. *Reck*—worry, care, matter; to care for, regard; to matter to, concern. *Reckless*. Without concern.

~

Some days, after heading west on the walking path, she turned to the right, back toward the river, and she walked until she came to the foot bridge that allowed access back to the other side. After the foot bridge there was a short section of trail paved to accommodate motorized wheelchairs captained by odd-bodied inhabitants of a nearby group home. This trail abutted a youth home, too, where at-risk youths lived. One side of the river was for the general citizenry, joggers and bicyclists and strollers, and middle-aged women

in pairs, wearing pedometers. This other side of the river had not yet been improved. She could see the at-risk youths' stuffed animals and other jumbled objects in the windows, but she never saw the youths themselves. The grass around their home was thick and green and untrammelled.

Beyond the youth home the paved trail abruptly ended in thick river brush. Any determined pedestrian had to continue down a graveled alleyway that abutted the back doors of a derelict motel. She rarely saw a motorized wheelchair in this corridor; the ride was bumpy and the eventual crossing on Broadway was dangerous. She might see a derelict standing in a doorway, the gloomy scene within one of casual despair, the unmade bed and random possessions strewn across the floor seeming permanently provisional.

The graveled alleyway ended at a section of Broadway that was a no man's land for anyone not in a car. Traffic here zoomed past in waves, exceeding the 30 mph limit, shooting from downtown to the big box stores on the edge of town and to the airport. There was nothing much to stop for here and little to see except more river on the left, and ancient, family businesses on the right. Eastside Door. Custom West Glass. A-Z Autobody. Rowdy's Roost, a faded steakhouse casino with two hand-scrawled signs propped against the window: "ATM Inside" and "Expresso," the second tipped and sliding down, half out of view.

Secret Treasure was directly across from the derelict motel. It supported the YWCA's Battered Women's Shelter (itself in a secret location) by selling for pennies the cast-off clothing and housewares of wealthy ladies.

She thought about the wealthy ladies. Rich and settled and organized and safe. Unbattered. Ticking sprinklers on the lawn and patio furniture that was as nice as any inside furniture, coordinated and padded. Iced tea on hot afternoons. Plug-in air fresheners.

Memo pads and pencils next to the phones, and the comforters folded just so.

She told herself that she would take the long loop if the weather was indicative, the sky just right. In actual fact she took the long loop home every Wednesday, with no deviation. And when she reached California Street, depending on the previous trip, she turned either to the left or to the right. And then she was rewarded by either the Bargain Box or Secret Treasure after her long trek, after braving the college joggers and the babies in strollers on the river path, the reckless drivers on California street, the lumpish bodies in humming wheelchairs crossing the foot bridge, the invisible at-risk youth and the despairing derelicts, who invariably emitted a friendly "howdy," swaying slightly in their doorways and proffering gappy grins or comments on the clouds.

After that the neighborhoods were residential again, with potential places to live, every third house.

~

3.

In her rooms (the yellow comforter folded neatly at the foot of the bed, the *Welcome* mat exactly two inches from the door, the key now placed in its china saucer on the shelf), she imagined she should feel sobered and sad, thinking of the stuffed animals in the windows of the youth home, and remembering the smells of ashtrays and ancient cooking from the seedy motel, and thinking of the battered women. But instead she almost always felt a low thrum of pleasure deep inside her chest as she filled the tea kettle, a tiny bit of secret glee, because she usually had found a good bargain or secret treasure—a soft cardigan in her favorite red, a little purse with a sea-shell clasp. She paid her one, two, or three dollars and brought her item home and felt the same happy satisfaction she had felt whenever as a child she had found a plastic egg with a winning number at the Kiwanis Club Easter egg hunt at Riverside Park. A movie pass, a free drink with purchase of a hamburger, the prize specifics or transactional value didn't matter that much. What mattered was finding the egg with the number, in among all the empty others.

She hung a new sweater with her many other sweaters, according to color and type—cardigans together, pullovers together, reds, blacks, blues—sometimes sacrificing a lesser version in order to make room, stuffing the reject into a sack in the back of the closet, a sack that eventually would be tucked discretely behind an alley

garbage can somewhere distant. If a newly-acquired sweater carried a faint aroma of some other human she stood still and held it close to her nose and smelled it.

She thought about the person, the lady who had donated the item. She was comfortably well-off, this person who had grown tired of her red sweater, or the purse with the seashell clasp. She sat in her freshly-painted house, secure, a stuffed chicken in the oven and matching furniture in the living room and books on their shelves and mail on a tray in the hall and a magnet on the refrigerator holding the week's shopping list. There was a set of encyclopedias in the bookshelf and a dictionary on its own stand and a globe of the world. There were pictures on the wall, family photos, people lined up at weddings, children in sets of two, clustered close, the older girl's hand on the smaller boy's shoulder. And there was a television encased in wood, and plants, and many lamps with shades that glowed red and yellow. There were candles, slender and tall or thick and squat, carefully unused, candles just for show, next to the bouquets of cloth flowers. And there were many other items lined up inside the cupboards, closets, and drawers.

This person, the wealthy lady, drove to Secret Treasure in her big car to drop off her donation. Then she drove on to the large stores on the edge of town to buy more items. And then she had coffee with a friend, her legs crossed and her coat slung over a chair. She stayed as long as she liked. And then she returned home, swinging the big car off the street and up the driveway as the garage door opened in welcome.

Sometimes she thought about this person all the rest of the afternoon until it was time to pull the shade in her tiny foyer and turn on the rose lamp.