

**EXCERPT**

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*The Gypsy Lover*



*A Novel*

*Roger Ladd Memmott*

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**A Gemstone Book**



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COVER ART

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Whatever you claim is mine is yours;  
whatever you claim is mine.

—*Yana Markovitch, Drabarni Extraordinaire*

What lies behind us and what lies before us  
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## Prologue

# The Voice

*Think of me and remember...*

**E**<sup>VAN—</sup> The voice shrank inside him like some phantom whisper from another world, cold and without shadow or even light.

*Evan—*

And he knew whose voice it was.

*I was of flesh and blood  
as other creatures be  
Yet neither flesh nor blood  
remains in me.  
My mother, black as ink,  
once rode on air  
Then, girlish, stood before you  
but was not there.*

He listened to the riddle and then to the sound of his own

name, as one fretful and wearied by dreams. Yet awake, he struggled even against the strange reassurance when the voice came to him, came like some inner fire yet cold, owing more to the realm of fantasy than fact. For when it came, it came with the confusions of heartache and joy. It came whispering the everyday enigmas of disaster and love. It came upon labored wings with fleeting visions of the other world where spirits abound. It came bespeaking desire and fate, sighing his name...*Ev-a-a-an*. Whispering *Remember me*. And if he heard, he knew. And if he knew anything at all, he knew the meaning—the answer—could be found in a single word, a phrase at the most, hidden somewhere in the telling of it, for contend as he might, he could not forget.

\* \* \*

“Come on, kid. You’ll miss your plane.”

The sheriff leaned toward him, a fleshy hand waving him through the terminal wing toward the security gate. Before they entered the metal detector, the sheriff turned around and said, “I guess I’d oughtn’t let you have this back, but I don’t always do what I ought. The department’s got no claim to it now.”

Evan unshouldered his bag and dumped it on the conveyer. He looked at the sheriff. Kentuckian, he’d bet, or maybe even deeper South than that, come North to sheriff across the river in Cincinnati.

“Go ahead.”

Go ahead?

He looked at the sheriff’s meaty palm and in it the bone-handled hunting knife that once belonged to his father. The police had found the knife within hours after he tried to get rid of it. They had held it as evidence until after the inquiry. Now here it was again, come full circle just like a prophecy in the words of a song. The sheriff held the knife toward him, inside a materials evidence bag that, for all intents and purposes, looked

like a plastic Ziploc sandwich bag. The cops hadn't even cleaned the thing; dried blood the color of rust smeared the handle and speckled the blade.

"You can't carry it on, of course."

No, he couldn't carry it on.

The sheriff turned and explained something to an airport security guard and the security guard looked at the knife and whistled. "This the kid in the papers?"

Evan walked through the scanner while the sheriff went around the gate in order to avoid triggering a beep. When they were on the plane, the sheriff handed the knife to the flight attendant and told her she could give it to "the kid" when they landed in Salt Lake City. "A family named Robbins will be there to meet him."

The flight attendant smiled kindly. "We'll take care of him." She reached up a little and patted his shoulder as though she were patting a dog. He didn't care. He could smell her perfume and she had nice legs.

In parting, the sheriff said, "Adios, kid. Don't take no wooden nickels and never pet a burning dog." He took off his hat and looked in the crown of it as if looking at something either humorous or obscene. "Adios," he said again, and then to the attendant, "You look after him now. He ain't quite to the center of hisself."

The stewardess led him to his seat and looked at him across her shoulder and smiled too brightly. She had the unmistakable hips of a girl, though she was older, of course, and her aroma was something wonderful. She took the satchel from him and put it in the overhead bin. It was the first time he had ever flown, and she leaned over to help him with his seat belt, her hair swept forward caressing his face. She adjusted the window shade and across the tip of the wing he could see a band of light brighter than the rest stretching along the horizon above and beneath the setting sun. She looked at him sympathetically and this time patted him on top

of his head. She had such a nice aroma, something he had never smelled before, and he couldn't help wondering all the wonderful things there are to wonder about a beautiful woman who smiles too brightly.

When she left, he sat back, undid his seat belt, and took from his pocket a small heart-shaped stone. But for the defect, fine as a filament and just off center, it was smooth as glass, translucent with light. He held it and stroked it with his fingers and listened to the turbines whine.

The voice surprised him, trembling into his thoughts like the stone itself disturbing the flat surface of a pond, a watery rush across his eyes, and then all at once on pounding wings, close to his heart, whispering *think of me and remember*, and before they had taxied to the end of the runway, a thousand ragged images and painful desires came flooding back. Was it some confused notion, or the pitch of the engines, crying like a raven in the dark? *Think of me and remember*. Had he been able, he would have saved the voice. He looked toward the flare of the brightening sky as the sun softly sank. He would have saved them all if he could. But the voice was without timbre, and the single dark eye of the bird whose pounding wings beat deep in his head and then in his breast was blue and cast and there was no reflection in it and nothing of the world. It was a dream and a voice within, without triumph or defeat, without discovery or loss, without even some sad and joyful exchange. It was a voice beyond remnants of light, beyond motion and sound, the flat dull echo on the shore of an unknowable void, and it gripped him like the witness to certain inevitable truths he could never escape.

*Evan—*

Listening, he closed the window shade and shut his eyes and worked the warm surface of the stone between fingers and thumb. The plane bounced and picked up speed, rolling toward takeoff.



THE SHERIFF HANDS ME A KNIFE in this grizzly looking bag and tells me to give it to the kid when we arrive in Salt Lake City. He tells me to look after him, as though I'm his mother or something, and I smile like an idiot and touch him and lead him to his seat. The funny thing is the way he looks back at me when I buckle him in. I've never in my life been looked at like that, and believe me I've felt the yearn of many a look. I patted the top of his head and hurried to the John to see if I had a button missing or a spot of something on my blouse or a makeup smudge. I think of it now, and it makes my stomach go small. I looked at myself in the mirror. I wondered if he had seen what I saw, leaning over him like that, and something inside me blossomed like fire. I flushed the toilet and shifted my breasts with my hands. I went back to the kitchen and took the knife out and looked at it. I didn't take it out of the bag. I motioned to Sheila and she went to the mike. I walked back down the aisle with the demonstration belt and oxygen mask. His eyes were closed and he looked older than I'd thought, not a kid so much. Sort of happy-sad. He was rubbing something in his hand. I wanted to touch him, his eyes, the shape of his mouth. After Salt Lake, I would probably never see him again. Sheila had started the spiel, and I couldn't get the belt to unbuckle. I felt like I was under some spell.



## I

### *Before the Telling of It*

*...that the world might be according to his hope.*

**E**VAN'S FATHER WAS KILLED two months before he was born. It was in all the papers, about the train carrying propane, a seal from one of the tankers thrown two miles, killing him where he stood watering the hedges between the sidewalk and the street in front of the apartment building he lived in with his pregnant wife. Evan's mother died when he was seven. A rose killed her. It is a medical fact, recorded in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Nicked on the back of the hand by a thorn from one of her beloved long-stemmed reds, she died after a brief period of infection.

Evan remembered the hospital and the dark unfamiliar odors of her bed. She cried out but once: *Let me have my baby!* But Evan's head was already upon her breast when she said these words, and he listened quietly to the breath in her, to the whisper of a wail in that final rattling sigh: *I see her. There! Standing in the window.* Shortly afterward, the nurse came in and put her hand on his mother's wrist, the unbandaged one. She looked at the boy with shining eyes, so dark and glistening he could see in them a longing for the

world's end. He looked toward the window, but there was nothing, not even a reflection against the black interior of the room.

*Sometimes, the nurse said, cupping her hand beneath his jaw and turning his face toward her, the only way to hang onto yourself is to leave everything else behind.*

Or had he read that in a book years later?

Before the death of his mother, his world was one of shadows that came and went, like images beyond some burnished gatelamp, somber and haunting as ghosts. At the time, he had little sense of those shadows or of the knowledge of what it meant to "leave everything else behind." But he had, and not knowing it made no difference, for memories and images that may or may not have been true—or at least accurate—were nevertheless his own, and he kept them inside himself, deep, like secrets he had swallowed with his mouth and that had gotten into the blood parts that washed through his veins. There, some remnant of his own dead sister lay feverish and red, but little more of her than a visit to the graveyard with a bouquet of roses and his mother softly singing,

*Here a sleeping child lies,  
Sung to sleep by lullabies.  
As you look, she will not stir  
The silent earth that covers her.*

She lay steeped in his blood, nameless and effaced, this and the simple account of her death the year before he was born, having lived only a month or two. So beautiful and tiny and dark, but nothing of her standing in the window of a hospital as his mother lay dying.

And his father?

From the earliest days he could remember his father lingered inside his head or perhaps his heart, ghostly, cheerful, and dark. How easy it was for him to remember his mother and the sob in

her throat whenever she spoke of his father. Her memories were always his own, and though troubled at times, without accusation or spite. She told him, he was certain she had, how his father had been a railroad engineer for the Union Pacific, usually on the Iron Mountain or Las Vegas run, and in his spare time, something of a poet. Hadn't his mother told him that, too—that his father had an artistic bent—or had he inoculated himself with the notion for immunity's sake, another secret steeped in the blood? Hadn't she told him how his father had been away two, three, four days at a time, and then maybe home for a week before being called out again? And now, these years later, remembering, how he would come home at two or three o'clock in the morning and crawl into bed with her, fresh and alert with the energy of the night, and how she would receive him warm and delicious with her own drowsiness, unable to tell where her sleep left off and his adoration began? Hadn't she told him that, how one such night she had lifted herself into the tender embrace of those arms all for the hope of a son?

She told him, at least he thought he remembered her telling him, about dreams of his father's return at the moment of birth, as though he had been there, in the delivery room, was there, with Evan's first breath. Now, if he were to speak of his father, some undefined ambiguity of character the man must have possessed rottened certain hearts. It nagged and fascinated him at the same time, this secret of character that evil found so detestable. Perhaps it was some blessed insight into the world and its creatures at large, some quality approaching the divine, and he wondered what fraction of it imbued his own curious soul. Even though he knew his mother and father hardly at all, he supposed them the two most wonderful people in the world.

The nurse said, *You be good to him now.* And, at age seven, placing his hand in the damp palm of an aunt's, he came to know terror and blame, not just in the simple fear of dark closets and dank fruit cellars, not in the reasonable contemplation of loss, but

in the cruel exchange of a strop on the backs of his thighs, the welts so raw that blood leached through to the surface of his flesh, leaving a wafer of puss and scab.

*He's my husband's brother's boy, that is to say half-brother. We got responsibilities to kin and expect to own up. Don't dawdle, now. It's late and we got to git.*

Evan came to know her as Missy Begonia. From the landing outside his room at the top of the stairs, he would sometimes watch her through the stair rails in the kitchen below, weary with fascination and distaste, for she was a shrill piggish woman given to occasional fits, who lunged about with the over-stuffed look of someone ready to explode. Her lean-necked husband, whose red shock of hair and hooked nose gave him the uncanny resemblance to a rooster, always had a plug of tobacco in his jaw and a gob of spittle staining his chin. Evan soon concluded they were entirely brainless and evil only in the way that certain plants are poisonous.

From the time his mother died, the three of them lived on a potato farm at the center of the Mineral Range Valley, about two miles from the nearest town in Southern Utah. Because of the begonias she raised, Aunt Missy had gained a degree of notoriety throughout the valley. The blooms were perennial prize-winners, the biggest, most colorful begonias in the county, and she fussed and cooed over them as if they were children and could, in some queer way, return love in kind. "Mother Begonia," so to speak. The tuberous variety she raised were, in fact, rather pretty flowers—a bouquet looked like puffs of different colored smoke. But Missy remained lard-white. Still, her name was less a puzzle than her husband's. Since he looked more like a rooster than even a man, Evan could never figure out why they called him "Goose."

He told no one about the childhood beatings, neither his elementary nor Sunday School teachers, not even his friends. And

then one day, Alta Mae Robbins' mother saw the backs of his legs at a swimming party, just a few welts and scars, mostly scabbed and healed over. He was teetering on the brink of a dive from the edge of the pool, when she called to him. He knew she was there, leaning back in a chaise longue, wearing a two-piece yellow swimsuit. He had noticed her earlier, and even before she called to him, he could feel her presence, wondering if she had noticed him. When he turned, she was balancing a glass of iced lemonade on her upper thigh, but she rose a little from the lounge and waved him over.

"Evan—Evan Adamson. My gosh, honey. Come here."

She was kind of skinny, and her tanned body glistened with oil, all up along her legs and across her stomach and the tops of her breasts. She had a narrow waist and unmistakable breasts haltered and slung in the yellow bikini top. She leaned on her elbow as Evan approached her, and her breasts up close were even more surprising than he'd thought. Alta Mae and her plump friend got out of the water and came and stood on the other side of the lounge, and looking at them he felt the rabbiting of his heart. In their one-piece suits, shiny and soaked through, they had hardly any breasts at all, arms clasped in shivering self-love, points of water dripping from eyelashes and chins—but still Evan could see an older Alta Mae in her mother, in the blue eyes, the damp, wheat-colored hair greased slick at the temples, and the little parentheses at the corners of her mouth. He remembered thinking even then that he could maybe sketch her like that, if only he could carry her away in his head, back to the dim light of his second story room. The arc of her jaw with a charcoal and the line of her nose smeared by his thumb. Her mouth was saying something or trying to; she was leaning toward him and her mouth went like a fish's, swallowing air in circular gasps.

"My gosh, Evan. Turn around," she finally said. "My gosh. Thomas, come here a second."

Alta Mae's father came from the patio, with a pair of hedge

clippers in his hand. He was prematurely gray, wearing a kindly smile beneath his moustache, and his legs were alarmingly white beneath the hem of his shorts.

“Holy shit,” he said.

“Daddy!” Alta Mae closed her eyes against the mortification in her voice.

He set aside the clippers and stooped up close to get a better look at the backs of Evan’s calves. He whistled.

“Bobbed wire,” Evan explained, looking across at Alta Mae, before he could even think.

“Barbed wire?”

He told them he had fallen into some barbed wire and the doctor had given him a tetanus shot and sulfathiazole.

“Well, you be careful in the water,” Mrs. Robbins told him. She leaned toward him and pecked him on the forehead, and he felt the singe in his cheeks and glanced away from her bikini top to the fixed blue of her daughter’s eyes. Mr. Robbins put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed in a friendly way and the sensation of it sank around him both hallowed and warm, each watching eye unknowing witness to something restored in his heart. Evan wondered about being part of their family, and briefly saw how it might be, where images of hope, fantasy, and expectation got hold of him and darkened all else, and he glanced from one to the other, father-mother-daughter, and wished that maybe he could have hugged one of them—Mrs. Robbins, he guessed.

Though it wasn’t Mrs. Robbins he attempted to sketch. Time and again, in his room at the top of the stairs, he brought out his sketchpad and tried to get the line of her jaw and the shape of the breasts she didn’t yet have, and the very thought of his trying was so warped and sometimes surreal, and, sketching, he often smudged the lines and burnished the charcoal to a sheen, either for longing or for spite.

He would tear the unfinished sketch from the pad and shred it with his hands and go to the window and look toward the

mountains for release. There, gazing out over the roof of the back porch, he could see the nearby foothills and the trailing edge of the Rockies' granite-slabbed Mineral Range Mountains. How, so young, could he translate the world around him and those he knew to a smattering of his own fanciful thought? Shape every molecule and atom with a stroke of the brush? Pattern events with his mind? Every notion of it was in the flesh, fluid, and bone of him, that the world might be according to his hope. He tried to see himself smiling there, standing atop a peak, hands on his hips, where nothing could touch him—nothing—certainly not his aunt Missy and Uncle Goose. He tried to feel in himself a change, imagining swift green outfits woven from softened flax, a feathered cap. He imagined himself flying above the rooftops and sodden fields up into the foothills where he could live as a true member of the wild, where he could escape every last tatter of shame. And imagining, it was almost as if he had been born unparented, a product of himself.

But he never came by the swift green or feathered cap of a Peter Pan. Instead, he stubbed among the potato ruts and milked the cows. He cut the wood and slopped the pigs and grew into the additional chore of changing the morning and evening water in the potato fields—cousin to a begonia. At school he listened but didn't speak unless he was called on. The teacher moved him into a class with older children who stared at him and whispered when he answered the questions they could not. Miss Butler gave him an A on his mid-term and told him it was this "raw unadulterated bliss of pastoral living" that would shape him and speak to his nature and give him a muse, but even as much as Evan had himself taken to poetry by his sophomore year, he saw life on the farm as no more than a couplet without rhyme or reason, longed for by some would-be poet-teacher writing hackneyed verse.

Now, sometimes in the spring, he would ride the little appaloosa up above the pasture lands into the foothills, as high up as Rock Corral or Griffith Springs and from there, on a ridge above

the cedars, he would look back over the expanse of the valley. Beyond the patchwork of fields and irrigation streams he could see the farmhouse, the barn and corrals and other outbuildings, and bordering the farmyard the dark earth of perfectly furrowed fields ready to plant. The Sevier River glinted back at him and wound its way like a loose snake from one end of the valley to the other. A few miles north of the river's southernmost bridge lay the old roundhouse and a scattered network of switchfrogs, semaphores, and glistening rails where the yellow diesels, with their red, white and blue shields and the words Union Pacific in red block letters along their sides, hostled back and forth, between the stockyards and the roundhouse, banging and coupling and uncoupling the cattle cars and flatbeds and switching them throughout the yard, from one track to another, back and forth, up and down, ceaselessly both night and day. On the sidetracks an inventory of boxcars from the great railroads of the nation stood idle: Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, Baltimore & Ohio, Rock Island, Norfolk & Western, Sante Fe, St. Louis Express, and others that only the ghost of his father might know. Further yet to the north by at least a quarter mile, the white adobe facade of the depot—with its arched porticoes, fluted columns, and green tile roof—stood with its back to the town, and on a bright, cloudless day, he could see the town clearly. He could see the peaked cauldron of the water tower glinting above the trees, the high school where it stood as prominent as the Parthenon of Athens on the highest knoll, and the huge earthen mounds of the potato pits with their tall wooden gates. And he would look beyond the town, toward the upper reaches of the valley, his eyes following some hotshot as it rode the distant diminishing rails to a vanishing point, disappearing with the subtle waves of heat into a watery blink. He would sit on the ridge, listening to the horse stamp and blow, yearn for his father, and consider the geography of his life.





HE ASKS HOW ME AND GOOSE tied the knot, and I tell him. I tell him about Goose cut the eyes from a bull. Old Cow we called him cause he had balls size of an udder. A big reddish thing, and his eyes was red. I remember it on toward dark, and Goose, he's gone crossed the corral, just a hired man, to half-halter Bess. I up the fence as Old Cow gets the notion he'd rather Bess than Goose leading her out. I shout, "Goose," and Old Cow paws and lets swing them balls, and Goose, he lets go that rope and dodges without a backward glance. Old Cow thumps Bess and circles and Goose trying to make the fence. I seen him step to the side to grab a horn, Old Cow bellowing like a calf, slobber and snot. He come up from down under, hugging that horn. Old Cow plants them feet and slings him like a rag through manure and mud, Goose hanging tight, but I seen how he got to a pocket and bit the blade with his teeth. He gouged one eye and Old Cow stumbled and shit and threw blood and rammed Goose to the rails, and Goose gouged the other and let loose and rolled like a man on fire under the fence. Old Cow hollered and stamped and looked around with his nose and his ears, blind as he was. Next thing, Goose comes out the house with Pa's 30.06 and shoots that bull dead. Simple as that, I tell him. I tell him I says to myself, "any man with balls big as that bull's deserves a place in my bed. Yours should be so big someday." He just looks at me with them sissified eyes and asks how come we never had any kids.

## How a Thing Comes to Mean

*He had a curious sense of himself and the space he occupied.*

“LOOKY HERE,” SAID GOOSE. “You paint that shit?”  
“He won a prize for it,” laughed Missy. “Don’t be hard on the boy.”

Goose scratched back in the kitchen chair and spat a gob of sheer diarrhea in his picked-over salad dish. He pinched a pair of half-lenses from his shirt pocket and poked them on his nose and in doing it rolled the slop to the other side of his cheek. He snorted and swallowed. He tilted back in the chair and tipped the canvas this way and that, apparently to diminish a throw from the overhead light.

“Who’s this in the background? This girl?”

“Why that’s the little Robbins girl,” Missy said. “See here?”

“No it’s not,” said Evan.

“O, you bet it is,” Missy said. “Look at that prissy little nose.” She leaned across the table with a grunt and put her thumb on the paint. “Hair’s a tad dark. Eyes, too.”

"I don't get it," complained Goose, wiping his mouth. "This girl in the background and the ghost of hisself coming out of hisself all spooky around these flowers and fowl?"

"Them's begonias, ain't they, honey? And that'n's a rooster or duck."

"Hisself coming right out of his guts. You've no better time but to paint shit like this, I can find you something to do."

Evan snatched the painting from between his uncle's hands, and Missy's hand bounced up and struck the top of Goose's head who, in turn, smacked it away.

"Put your fat thumb out of my eye, old woman."

Missy smacked him again as Goose fended with an arm and struggled to re-right his chair, and Evan took to the stairs that led to his room. In growing older, the abuse of Missy and Goose had turned mostly to threats, and if not threats directed toward him, they instead tore at each other with a ceremonious brutality that was akin to a cockfight. Each of them promised the other with a variety of shameful deaths. Goose fought his wife the way a coward fights, with feet and fingers and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a cartoonish feminine way—with rolling pins and frying pans, and occasionally a glass or plate would sail toward his head. At least that is how Evan sketched them, using a wide nib and diluting the ink. In reality, they scrapped, skirmished, and finally brawled, all the time groaning and cursing and spitting. This together with the cloistered sound of falling things, and flesh on unastonished flesh.

Evan watched the two of them, then watched himself, how he sometimes scurried, sometimes trudged, toward the refuge of Miss Butler's "raw, unadulterated bliss," abandoning himself to the nearby fields and streams, the rabbits and pheasants and ducks, getting it all down in a rush of chalky pastels between the distractions of school and chores, thieving back whatever time he might for a good book and bluegrass tunes on his harmonica. Gazing across the fields from a vantage point against some

bloody evening sun, he watched the jokin jackhares scramble and check and scramble again, their bullet eyes never ablink. He would rather sketch one than shoot it, much to Goose's chagrin. He worked hard to get the attitude of a hawk taking wing, a fox on the sly. Even coyotes ranged in from time to time. And then one morning, with the coming of light at the world's most distant edge, the ugliest little mongrel bitch. He found her in the south field, hesitant at first to approach him, favoring her left front paw. He turned his baseball cap backwards on his head and kissed for her to come, at the same time placing his sketchpad and charcoal on a stump.

"C'mere, Bozo."

When he knelt, she laid her ears back and squirmed toward him, her lips furled in a ludicrous grin, and her tail whipping back and forth like a windshield wiper in a downpour. In this squirming, snarling fashion, she inched her way toward him until her head was in his lap. The head of a Golden Retriever, possibly, but skinny, with the markings of a coyote.

"You what?" said Goose, thumping the kitchen table with his hand.

"I want to keep her."

"What kind of name is that for a dawg?" said Missy.

"It's a goddamn clown's name," said Goose.

"That dog a clown dog? That dog jump through a hoop?"

"We're the ones jumpin through a goddamn hoop."

"What's a boy without a dog," said Missy. "Maybe it'll give him a sense of who he is." She leaned against the kitchen sink and wheezed. "Ain't Bozo the name of a boy clown? Thatn's a bitch."

"She's a bitch damn right. Flea-ridden and vicious for all we know." Goose rolled a slop of juice in his cheek. He turned and spat in the sink. He wiped his chin with the back of his hand. "That miserable cur has pups on this farm'n I'll drown em ever goddamn one. Member old Buddy, how he got to the hens? Raised in a barnyard, too, but didn't I do him right slick?"

"Thanks." He didn't add, "for nothing."

"Don't thank me. It's your aunt who's give in."

Poor Bozo!

"The day you were born," said Evan, stooping and roughing-up her ears and looking at his uncle with a squint, "they should have put a bullet through your head or drowned you in a ditch."

Goose looked at Missy as if struggling to complete a thought and Evan stood up and grabbed an apple and took the dog outside, letting the door slam hard.

But wasn't it the wormy little mutt who turned his life around, set his head in the opposite direction, and spun him on a separate course? Until she came whimpering into the picture, life on the farm wasn't without its problems. A powder keg with a short fuse, maybe, but still unsparked. Instead of sugarplums, Evan dreamt of Cherry Bombs in Missy's mincemeat pies and sand in Goose's chewing tobacco. Goose hadn't locked him overnight in either a closet or the fruit cellar for a couple of years, and only seldom did Missy lay into his backside with a shaving strop. He figured it was because he was putting on some meat, shooting up in the space of a few months to nearly as big as Goose. Life had been reduced mostly to threats and fantasies. So it wasn't only the dog. It was time and circumstance. Missy and Goose had grown a little weary, it seemed, and even before Bozo came along, Evan had started developing a sense of himself. There was a shift in the way he saw things, a growing intolerance for two spooky creatures whose joint mentality was less than a slug's.

"Damned if he don't put away more'n the two of us combined," growled Goose, ladling gravy over his potatoes and meat and then slopping the corn. "Pass the horse shit."

Evan looked up.

"Radish, goddamnit. What do you think?"

"It's the hollow leg of a teenager," Missy griped. She pointed. "Them peas."

"I know it. Plus a head hard as them peaks to the east. Salt."

“What? You lay awake in bed at night feeling your bones grow?”

“Which bone you mean?” Goose gabbled like a hen. He troweled butter along the edge of a bun with his knife. “You can bet at his age he lays awake feeling a bone all right. Not long and he’ll run smack into his nature, them hot little biddies chasing him around. It’s all there if you look, in them eyes like his Pa’s.”

Evan waited until the conversation turned and then looked at himself in the back of his spoon. He widened and considered his eyes. After supper, he went to the bathroom and shut the door and locked it and studied his face in the mirror. True, he had to admit, in a convoluted way, but he was past humiliation. His body had already defined itself in dreams and admonitions—in spite of any likeness Goose might loathe.

Then, in the spring, Alta Mae Robbins and a couple of her friends sashayed through puberty and redoubled his fits. They got him up close to his nature and so lost in his dreams he thought he might come out the other side, and the oracular powers of his uncle drove him again to the bathroom for another wide-eyed search. He anguished and looked but found little more than himself lallygagging downtown after school with a bunch of other kids or sitting next to Alta Mae at church or in a booth at the Hong Kong Café, the both of them discussing affairs of the heart if not the head and sharing fries. At a table nearby, Owen Roberts and a couple of pimply-faced jocks, toked a joint and spiked their Cokes from an unlabeled fifth. Beyond them, in a booth against the wall, sat an old woman and a dark-eyed girl Evan had never seen but for an odd and unsettling glint of recognition as she glanced up from her plate from time to time. Her face was as if whittled from soap and clear as butterscotch scorched in a pan. The old woman had a face like the soft petrified bark of a tree if there was such a thing, which of course there wasn’t.

“So tell me.”

“Tell you?”

"It's not your fault, Evan. Any of it. And I'll tell you again—this assignment and such notions of fate..."

Alta Mae leaned across the table in her loose yellow dress and it was hard for him to keep his eyes on her face and he wondered if she knew how hard. He wondered, too, about Mason Talbot and the rumors about the two of them and whether she held an image of him yet in her head and, if so, what sort of image that might be. But now she was looking at Evan, searching. There was a pinch of lipstick encircling the end of the straw in her glass and when she kissed and sucked at the straw the vacuum of it caved at her cheeks in a maddening way. She swallowed and for emphasis touched the back of his hand.

"Well?"

"Not me. Miss Butler."

"But you agree with her. Your own sense of loss, I mean, and such notions of guilt—the way you see yourself in terms of this assignment and all."

He shrugged.

"There. She's looking at you again."

"I don't think so."

"Gypsies, I bet." Her voice got husky and low. "So romantic, don't you think?"

"Just migrants. Late for planting, early for harvest."

"But look at that face. Checking you out." She clucked her tongue. "Those eyes, that hair, and looking at you like that."

"You're looking at me."

"She's got a face you could paint, all that glossy black hair." Alta Mae blushed, but didn't really. "I want," she said and cut herself off. "I want you to paint me someday." She glanced at him and then looked at the girl across the way, and he thought he knew what she meant. "Your art, the things you write, they give meaning, don't think they don't, to the world around you. What does Missy know anyway, your Uncle Goose? That's plain crap,

no reason for stuff when it happens—one the epitome of chaos, the other despair.”

. . . .

It was a short walk to the library, and once there she sat on the grass with her knees together and her legs to one side propping herself with an arm and twirling a length of grass in her teeth. No, no. She looked up and shaded her eyes from the sun and told him to sit. He turned his baseball cap around so the bill shaded his neck and sat, but slowly, looking at her all the time, his eyes fixed on the again fallen strap and the surprise of the partial sphere of her breast, and she produced a daisy and plucked its petals one by one and glanced up at him now and then from beneath her brow with a half smile fixed on her lips and he could see the blue in her eyes. He faked a little camera click with his hand in front of his face and it made her laugh. He watched her and scooted back against the city monument and took out his harmonica and watched how loose and compact she fit in her dress and how the sun astonished her hair and, watching, he rested an elbow on his raised knee and riffled off some bluegrass melody he had learned listening to tapes in his room at the top of the stairs. Self-taught, self-connsoled, and forever surprising those who gave an ear. He was playing and watching her fingers so cruel and so kind, and she was everything he could possibly imagine. Everything he could possibly hope. As she plucked, her lips moved in silent adulation forming the words of the song, and he watched her as much as he could take her in and played, so far at the moment from worrying about how a thing comes to mean. He played and watched her and watched until Owen Roberts and his runted sidekick confused the issue and, like a recurring, unfinished dream, hoisted themselves up over the retaining wall from the sidewalk to the grass and stepped toward them with a dismal



jaunt. It was only then that Evan noticed a kind of roostery look about the two and his nightmare was complete.

"Go ahead, country boy. Don't let us stop the serenade."

"And whatever else is under development here." Stud grinned at them all around and shouldered himself against the stone monument, the closed slit of his lipless mouth begging them to believe he knew more than they might think. An irksome silence, and Owen gave his buddy a look to wipe away that grin in an otherwise deadpan face.

"She's just sizing up his dumbstick, talking about old lady Butler's bullshit in class and doing it like dogs. What d'you think, Stud?"

"Like goats in rut. That's what I think."

"Maybe they'll have that drink with us now."

"What did I say before?" Evan started to get up.

"Don't bother, farm boy. Just a snort."

"You got wax in your ears?"

"Whip his ass," said Stud.

"One snort."

"What don't you understand?"

"Watch it. Farm boy's getting ready to rumble."

"Whip his ass," said Stud.

"In your dreams."

"Wait. Not on my dress, please!"

Alta Mae scabbled to all fours and then to her knees, brushing at the front of herself, and he could see how it was before it happened. He had barely given it a thought, and before she rose to her feet, the harmonica was in his fist but undamaged. He felt the pain of it grooved there, and the pain of it again, and he watched as the bottle went sailing up over the monument in an arc and sort of drug itself back sloshing a piss-colored rain. It turned once and in turning startled the sun and then smashed against stone.

"Get up, *dude*."

"No, Evan. Leave him. You broke his nose, I think."

"Get up. Tell her you're sorry."

"It'll wash. Come on, Evan. You broke his nose, I think."

"Say you're sorry, city boy. Get him up, Stud, and his sorry ass for home."

She gripped his harmonica-gripped fist and leaned into him—her shallow whispering breath—all the while the both of them watching the bloodied mess crab about and cup its hands beneath a weeping nose.

"I know your aunt Missy will have a fit," she whispered, "but the dance tonight. If you can get away, I'll be ready by eight."

\* \* \*

That afternoon, Evan sat by the window in his room watching the lightning and the rain. He sat and sketched that sodden land in broad strokes, the hint of a ghosted express coiling its way along the prairie floor and up toward the foot of glistening crags now lost in their ascent among clouds that roiled back between the peaks, the wires of light, but he could not sketch how that panorama so vast and contained sparked within some reclusive nerve, nor the droning of his flesh nor the soothing of his bones, for in spite of any weather either without or within he was beginning to have a curious sense of himself and the space he occupied as if by some divine token his very spirit had been made radiant, and he by no means ordinary, all so familiar and yet unknown. And for the first time, as the rain lifted and the granite peaks of the Mineral Range Mountains came into view, he had a clear vision of life and the possibilities beyond. He had only to unfocus his eyes to see. The glistening rails looped beneath and around the base of those peaks like filaments lighting a way—where beyond, the valley streams fed into the river and the river into the multi-faceted wonders of a glimmering sea.

**End Excerpt...**