

NO BOOK  
BUT THE  
WORLD

LEAH HAGER COHEN



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## *Contents*

### I

.....

PERDU 1

### II

.....

DENNIS 151

### III

.....

KITTY 187

### IV

.....

FRED 219

### V

.....

THE THING ITSELF 277

I know everything.  
Half of it I really know,  
The rest I make up.  
The rest I make up.

MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS, *Promenade*

I



PERDU

## *One*

I HAVE BEEN TOO FOND OF STORIES. Fred and me both. If I were called before a judge, that's the first thing I'd confess: how quick I have been to embrace them, stories, with their deplorable tidiness. Like a bakery box done up too tightly, bound with red-and-white string.

The second thing I'd confess: how I am responsible for Fred's fondness, how consequently he would have to be called blameless.

Oh Fred. Oh Freddy.

I could, would, gladly elaborate. In however much detail would help. I'd describe where it began, on the gray flowered couch where we often sat, half sunk in its cushions, a couch I haven't seen in over a decade, yet whose texture I recall with precision: the way it was coolish on our bare skin, glossy where the fabric was going threadbare and furred on the armrests where it had already frayed. I would testify to this, the fertile bed in which our fondness took root.

But look. Already—I throw up my hands. This is no more than a story itself, the one that goes Ava is guilty, Fred innocent. How eagerly the words spring into shape, winding themselves around a rigid latticework of meaning like the curling tendrils of some plant—like, in

fact, the skeletal branches of ivy that crisscross the window here in this room that is not my room, but which belongs to a Mrs. Tremblay, who is not happy about renting it to me.

The fine-boned ivy, whose intricate fretwork clings to the screen, is at this moment holding tight against a lashing wind and pelting rain as if in helpful illustration of my very point, which is to say my problem: the easy danger of stories, their adhesive allure. The way, once a story takes hold, it begins to choke off the view.

I can hear Mrs. Tremblay downstairs now, moving about in her kitchen. Each sound she makes, innocuous though it really may be—the faucet turned on, then off, the creak of a cupboard, the clank of a metal pot—seems to reprove. When she rented me the room yesterday she was pleasant enough, but earlier this morning when I went down for the breakfast that is included in the price of the room her manner was cooler. I can only imagine she must have become more informed in the interim about who I am.

Fred and I have different surnames. He is still a Robbins but I am a Manseau, having taken Dennis's name when we married. Why ever, and with what little consideration, did I shed my own? At the time I felt only impatience to don the costume of a married woman. Ava Manseau. Like playing dress-ups, I thought, although at twenty-five I was no child and should have been more deliberating, less hasty about the decision. But with its echo of *trousseau*, the very name seemed to waft and billow like the creamy organza of the imaginary gown I conjured and altered a dozen times during the weeks leading up to the wedding, at which I actually wore a sleeveless white shift from a consignment store. Too, there was the notion I'd be doing something that would please my husband-to-be. I was so eager, so impatient, to prove my willingness to conform. Later I allowed myself to realize—admit—that

I had ascribed this desire falsely. Dennis never minded whether I took his name or not.

The different surnames explain why Mrs. Tremblay did not make the connection—neither on Monday, when I called about the room, nor yesterday, when, after driving eight hours from Freyburg I arrived on her doorstep here in Perdu, “so far upstate you can practically see Canada out the window,” as she announced with a kind of practiced delivery and accompanying hand gesture toward this ivy-choked pane—even though Fred has been so much in the news. She has a squished sort of accent. “Canada” gets flattened into “Kyaneda,” and “far” sounds almost like “fire.” After a brief tour, during which she pointed out the bathroom with its pink toilet seat cover and matching floor mat, and the old black push-button phone perched on a stand at the top of the stairs (“Your cell won’t work. From town it might do, but we don’t get any reception at all out this way.”), she accepted my check for one week’s stay, \$196, made out to Mrs. Oliver Tremblay, taking time to read it over before putting it in the pocket of her boiled wool cardigan. I think she must be a widow.

The November rain is blowing sideways, crazing the glass. What is it about extreme weather that gives one the feeling of having traveled back in time? As if the past somehow had more weather; as if weather is one of those things that has dwindled or languished with modernity. It was raining, too, when I arrived yesterday, though more lightly then, the drops as tiny as if pressed through cheesecloth. Still, it was enough to slicken the flagstone path, and when, after Mrs. Tremblay took my check, I went back to the car to retrieve my suitcase, I slipped. One moment I was striding confidently on two legs. The next, my right foot slid forward and my left was no longer aligned in any way useful to holding me up. For one protracted moment the dun-and-gray world



seemed shot through with color, and I caught a whiff of something sharp and bright: lemons, onions. Flailing, I managed to right myself, but that oddly invigorating moment of imbalance has stayed with me. Last night when I was trying to fall asleep it replayed several times in my mind and each successive time, rather than intensifying in fright, it seemed softer and more expansive, and finally almost pleasurable, like a dream of flying.

Now the rain is really slashing down. I long for another cup of tea—breakfast was hours ago—but although yesterday Mrs. Tremblay showed me the tray she keeps available in the kitchen for guests, stocked with Tetley, Swiss Miss and packets of artificial sweetener and nondairy creamer, I am reluctant to go downstairs. On Monday, at home in Freyburg, while researching places to stay, a guesthouse had sounded cozier than a motel, not to mention less expensive and more convenient, the nearest motel I could find being twenty-three miles from where Fred is—but I'd pictured something different from this saltbox house with stained siding, hunkered stoically right on the edge of the county road. I'd pictured a place with more than one guest room, and a bar of soap by the guest sink that was not already pared down and riven with cracks, and a proprietress who didn't seem so inconvenienced by, well, an actual guest.

It's not as if I'm stuck. I have the car, could drive to town.

The prospect is not enticing. Four miles in the rain on a snaking one-lane road and then the lone diner where I ate last night. That's the town, as far as I can tell: one diner, two bars, three churches, a handful of storefronts, a dozen shingles hung from front porches—family dentistry, chiropractic, dog grooming, tax prep—and running behind the row of old brick buildings that line the main street, a narrow, foul-smelling mill river the color of a paper clip.

Anyway, once there, what would I do? Sit at the counter on a vinyl-

covered stool and stare at the cakes under glass, all the while being stared at by the other customers, who would know at the very least that I am “from away,” if not the details of what has brought me. Of who has brought me. I suppose I could ask for a cup to go. And then what? Drink it in the car. Behind the opaque waterfall of the windshield, beneath the rain beating its tiny fists on the roof. Or I could drive back here, bring the tea up to the aseptic stillness of this angular room under the eaves. How strange that would seem to Mrs. Tremblay.

She is shaped, I have noticed, like an eggplant, and her mouth looks permanently pursed, her lips jutting out as if fastened around a sour ball. She’d glance up from—what? her ironing, her coupons, her cross-stitch?—eye me coming in with my paper cup, the shoulders of my coat dark with rain, and be sorry all over again that she’d taken my check.

I reach into my bag and pluck the torn envelope on which I have written the assigned counsel’s contact information and the time he has agreed to meet: four p.m. He has one of those inverted names—Bayard Charles—which seems very lawyerly and formal of him. His office isn’t in Perdu but over in Criterion, the county seat. I have decided to allow myself a full hour to get there, and still that means I have three hours to slog through before I leave, and the weather has conspired to pen me here.

So I remain, tealess, in this chilly bedroom I think must once have belonged to a daughter or a son, but which has been stripped of any indication; it is a neutered space, pared down to bare essentials and a few desultory efforts at decoration: a faded print of geraniums over the bed; a faded print of a barn and silo on the opposite wall; a dusty succulent in a plastic pot on the rattan table by the window, where I sit with the composition book Kitty gave me unopened in my lap. I have