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CHERRY
ROBBERS

ALSO BY SARAI WALKER

Dietland

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C H E R R Y
R O B B E R S



SARAI WALKER



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To my sister, Michelle

And to all the women throughout my life who have been sisters in spirit

bell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,

bell must open like a red rose

for the dead to pass.

— H.D.

From “Eurydice”

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T H E C H A P E L S

Belinda Holland Chapel (*born 1900*)

Henry Chapel (*born 1893*)

Aster Chapel (*born 1930*)

Rosalind Chapel (*born 1931*)

Calla Chapel (*born 1933*)

Daphne Chapel (*born 1935*)

Iris Chapel (*born 1937*)

Hazel "Zelie" Chapel (*born 1939*)

The Violet Notebook



August 3, 2017 — Abiquiú, New Mexico

When Lola went to San Francisco last year, she bought me what she thought was a sketchbook, one small enough for me to slip in my pocket and take on my early evening walks through the hills surrounding the village, when I might see hollyhocks I want to draw, or a desert cottontail, or any number of things. I never know where my walks will take me or what I'll see. The destination isn't what's important but the light, best in late afternoon. Artists chase the light.

The book is bound in faux leather and dyed a brilliant shade of bright blue, almost turquoise, one of the reasons Lola chose it for me. It was gray and gloomy the whole time she was in San Francisco, and when she saw the blue, it reminded her of the sky at home, and the sky reminds her of me. Lola once described our life together like this: Picture taking off in an airplane from a city where the weather is too bleak to bear. The airplane climbs and climbs and finally breaks through the clouds where there's nothing but light and blue sky. That's my life with Sylvia, she said. That's how it feels, and

that's how it looks. At an elevation of more than six thousand feet, the sky here is somehow bluer than the sea.

Lola always brings me gifts when she travels. It's part of our ritual, our little courtship dating back decades. She sometimes travels for work, taking a couple of big trips a year. I stay home, interested only in what's around me. The world to me is not *out there*. But Lola, like most people, doesn't see it that way; she ventures out, then returns home with small tokens to let me know she'd been thinking of me while she was away. I loved the blue book as soon as she handed it to me; I could imagine her buying it in a bookstore on one of those vertiginous San Francisco streets, she in a simple skirt-and-sweater set, silver-black hair pulled back into a low knot, a simple chain around her neck. No lipstick, never anything like that. Lola doesn't need adornment.

The blue book was wrapped in plastic, and when I opened it the next morning after Lola had gone to her study, I discovered it wasn't a sketchbook but a diary with lined pages. I decided not to tell Lola about the mistake she'd made, that I hated those lines that looked like bars on a cage. I see in flashes and impressions, color and light, not in words snaking across and down a page, that deep cavern of writing, which I rarely choose to enter.

I put the diary on the bookcase in my study and hoped Lola wouldn't mention it again, never suspecting that one day I would need to write in it with a sense of urgency.

That's not what I'm writing in now, that beautiful but disappointing blue diary. I *will* write in it — after today that is a certainty — but I have to warm up to this diary-writing business first.

I'm writing now in a Moleskine notebook I bought years ago in a bookshop in Taos. It's a radiant violet color, with an attached elastic band, also in violet, that wraps around the notebook from top to bottom. There were so many colors of Moleskines stacked on the shelves at the shop, and I picked through them, pulling out the violet one on instinct, thinking of Wordsworth: "A violet by a mossy stone, half hidden from the eye!" I tend to see colors as flowers. I bought the notebook thinking I'd use it to make shopping

lists, to-do lists, the sorts of prosaic things I'm not good at doing, but true to form, I've never used the Moleskine except to press a sprig of lavender inside the front cover, a sprig now flattened but still pungently fragrant.

I suppose I could call this notebook a diary, but I'm not going to do that. That raises expectations.

I've turned to this notebook now because Lola isn't here and I need someone to talk to. The truth is I have no one else.

I've never wanted to leave a trail. That might seem strange for someone in my position — an artist, and a rather famous one. I've certainly left a trail of paintings behind me going back decades, highly personal in many ways but really only breadcrumbs. People know my art but not me, and I always intended to keep it that way.

But today something happened that I wish I could say I'd dreaded for a long time, though that wouldn't be true. I was caught, as they say, *off guard*. That might be the downside of not writing in a diary, of leaving no trail. The diary isn't the point so much as what the lack of one reveals. I've been too willing to forget.

After lunch today, I walked to the post office, taking the usual route down the dirt road that runs around the edge of the village (I've always preferred edges), wearing my wide-brimmed sun hat that hides my face. Lola is in Brazil for about a month teaching a course on the art of perfumery at a prestigious institute, the name of which eludes me. When she's home, we take this postlunch walk together and chat about what we'll be working on in the afternoon until we meet again for dinner. (There's no talk of work allowed during meals, house rule.) Walking on my own, I was left to think about my afternoon and the large blank canvas that's been sitting on the easel in my studio for weeks, untouched. I've been dancing around it, not ready yet to approach it, so I spend my time doing sketches. The anticipation is delightful.

There are always letters in the post office box for me, almost none of them with my address. They are simply addressed to Sylvia Wren, Abiquiú, New Mexico, 87510. Only a handful of people know my full address, but in a village of around two hundred residents, the letters still find their way to me. It's kind of people to write, but the mail does pile up quickly and it begs a response even if the writers don't ask for one.

I employ a woman in Santa Fe as my assistant of sorts, one of those New Age white people who flock there dripping with turquoise jewelry and smelling of sage. I'd prefer to hand off all the letters to her. It's her job to turn down requests for whatever I'm being asked to do, whether it's interviews or speaking engagements or, God help me, commencement addresses. She's been my assistant for more than a decade now, and we meet for the occasional lunch when I go to town. I've never invited her to my house, though I know she's dying to visit. She jokingly refers to herself as the Mistress of Refusal and will probably write a memoir about me after I'm dead, titled something dreadful like *In the Shadow of Sylvia Wren*. I see her making mental notes every time we meet in the restaurant at La Fonda.

But I never give the fan letters to my assistant since Lola prefers to read and respond to them herself via a special postcard she had printed up. She's always loved reading my fan mail; when we were younger, I think it turned her on a bit, all those people clamoring after me, and she the only person in my bed.

I grabbed the letters from the PO box, darting in and out of the building in mere seconds; anything longer invites conversation. Back home, I struggled to open the gate, the only entry point in the low stucco wall that wraps around the property. We leave the gate unlocked during the day if we're home but always lock it at night and when we go out. No amount of oiling the lock has ever been able to fix it for me; Lola doesn't struggle with it like I do. I have a theory that the house doesn't like me to leave it, that when I do it punishes me, makes me fight for reentry. We are bound, the house and I, as much as any pair of lovers. I've lived and worked for decades inside its walls. Someday I'll die in them too.



My study is at the back of the house, my desk positioned in front of the window that overlooks the flower garden and the hills, with the Cerro Pedernal in the distance, a mesa that looks like a neck with no head. The rocky hills behind the house are red, almost Martian in appearance; they deserve to be called “otherworldly” when so few things described that way actually do.

I sorted through the letters, fighting the urge to dump them somewhere. I have to make an effort at practicality while Lola is gone; she’s the one who normally handles that part of our life — paying the bills, doing the shopping, calling the plumber. I removed the electric bill from the stack of letters, then separated what was clearly fan mail, the air mail envelopes from Japan and South Africa, and the more familiar American envelopes, almost all of them with feminine handwriting. It’s mostly girls and women who write to me — I’m not an artist, after all, but a *woman artist*. There were two more letters that I would pass along to my assistant, both on professional-looking stationery, the addresses typewritten; one from the University of Nebraska, the other from a woman in Greenwich, Connecticut, both almost certainly requests for something I would refuse to do. But I at least peek at some of the letters so I’m not completely out of touch. The letter from Connecticut was the obvious choice.

I tore it open and pulled out the sheets of slightly pebbly pale-blue stationery. On the first page, printed at the top, it said: ELIZA L. MORTIMER, JOURNALIST AND DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER.

Dear Ms. Wren, the letter began. *I’m a great admirer of your work.* I groaned. Eliza, surely you can come up with something better than that.

I’ve been desperate to get in touch with you. I’m a freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker covering the art world. I called your agent, hoping to connect with you, but he said you won’t talk to journalists under any circumstances and refused to even forward my let-

ter. Finally, after working through many of my contacts, a friend of a friend was able to get your mailing address from a gallery owner. (I'm sure you'll understand that I don't want to say who it was.) I hope this letter has actually made its way to you. I understand that you don't want to be bothered, but . . .

On and on she went about how she loves my work and how she has a framed poster of *The Purple Iris* hanging in her bedroom. I didn't like the thought of my paintings as posters, as postcards, and likely as coasters and magnets and key chains. Why had I ever agreed to that? Accessibility, my lawyer had said when I'd signed the licensing agreement. "Art should be accessible to the masses." She'd implied I'm a snob, which is not the case. With my success, I could be living in a villa in the South of France, surrounded by acolytes and attending fancy parties, but instead I live in a modest adobe house and drive a fourteen-year-old car, finding pleasure not in the world but in my work, engaging each day in the ritual communion that produces it. I don't think it's too much to ask that this work not be turned into tacky trinkets destined to clog up a landfill.

I was about to abandon Eliza's letter since it was obvious her flattery was building up to an interview request, but my eye caught the start of the next paragraph: *At a recent luncheon at the Sandler Museum, I was seated next to a woman who grew up in Bellflower Village, Connecticut . . .*

I inhaled quickly — a stabby breath of panic.

Her name is Pauline Levasseur and she's an art collector who splits her time between New York and Paris. She keeps a rather low profile and isn't flashy the way so many collectors are. Her maiden name is Pauline Popplewell. When I told her I'm based in Greenwich, she told me she grew up nearby in Bellflower Village. She recalled her childhood there fondly, saying she lived on St. Ronan Street in a big Victorian painted robin's-egg blue that according to her was the prettiest house in town.

I'm wondering if any of this sounds familiar to you?

I laughed audibly, more like a scoff of confusion, alarm. *Why* would it be familiar to me? I'm Sylvia Wren, an artist who lives in Abiquiú, New Mexico. I was born and raised in Illinois and now I'm a New Mexican. I know nothing of New England. Or at least that's what I tell people.

But I kept reading the letter because Bellflower Village, the Popplewells, and the house in robin's-egg blue are not actually unknown to me — or rather to the person I used to be.

I don't mean to be coy, Ms. Wren, so let me get to the point: Mrs. Levasseur had a bit too much champagne at lunch and let slip that she knows a secret about you.

I folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. If I pretended I hadn't opened it, maybe I could keep whatever it portended from happening. It's not possible to rewind time, but I was willing to try. I stuffed the envelope into the stack of letters, closed my eyes, and imagined I had just returned home from the post office, sat down at the desk, and hadn't opened a thing.

The dishes in the kitchen sink had begun to accumulate, so I set about washing them. I pride myself on doing housework since I was helpless in domestic matters until I met Lola, and I couldn't even boil an egg until age twenty. Now that Lola and I are getting on in years, we pay a young couple who lives nearby to do the more strenuous tasks for us, the mopping and scrubbing, the odd jobs that need doing, even the garden now, although I still do the watering and pruning.

I occupied myself with chores for a while, chopping up vegetables for a salad and cutting long stems of rosemary from my herb garden to put in a vase on my desk. I tried to keep busy, but it turns out you really can't rewind time. The letter and its tease of a secret were planted in my brain, a tiny seed that had sprouted green shoots of curiosity. Ignoring it wouldn't make it go away. I sat down at the desk again and continued to read.

The rest of the letter is enclosed.

When I pressed her on the secret she claimed to know about you, Mrs. Levasseur told me that like her, you grew up in Bellflower Village. She said your real name is Iris Chapel, not Sylvia Wren, and that you were an heiress to the Chapel Firearms fortune. You had many sisters and all of them died, but no one quite understood what had happened to them. Apparently, Iris ran away when she was around twenty years old, in the late 1950s, but she was never forgotten. Mrs. Levasseur said no one of that generation in Bellflower Village could ever forget the Chapel sisters. Back in the seventies, a few people in the village saw a photo of Sylvia Wren in Life magazine and they knew she was actually Iris Chapel. But they've kept the truth to themselves, feeling protective of her, a daughter of Bellflower. She'd had such a tragic life; who could blame her for running away from the fate her sisters had suffered, which could have been her fate too?

I told Mrs. Levasseur that I wanted to look into her story to see if it's actually true. She was horrified, so please do not blame her — she didn't realize when we spoke that I'm a journalist, though I did tell her so when we were introduced. (She's a bit hard of hearing now, at her age.) I've begun digging around and I think Mrs. Levasseur might be right about you, so I'm reaching out now in the hopes that you'll talk to me.

I understand that you're a world-renowned recluse. I read that a biographer tried to write a book about you but gave up after a frustrating year. "Sylvia Wren is a ghost," she declared, and turned her attention to Edna St. Vincent Millay. A recluse, a ghost — I'm sure you have your reasons, but I believe your story deserves to be told. I've been speaking to editors at a couple of major magazines about writing this piece. Your cooperation would be invaluable.

Will you please reply to this letter, send me an email, or give me a call? I'd love to talk to you. You can find my card enclosed.

*Yours sincerely,
Eliza L. Mortimer*

I set the letter on my desk, then brushed it away and watched it sail to the floor as a toddler might. My hollyhocks waved just outside the window, trying to cheer me, but I wasn't in the mood.

The letter disturbed me, there's no question about that, but she would never discover the true story, which is impossible for anyone outside the Chapel family to know. And who is left of the Chapels to tell it? No one.

On one of the postcards Lola uses to respond to my admirers, which is printed on a thick ivory stock with a black-and-white photograph of the Abiquiú sky on one side and delicate blue bordering on the other, I wrote my message.

Dear Ms. Mortimer,

*I have received your letter, and while I admire your tenacity, I'm afraid
I'll have to disappoint you. I am not Iris Chapel.*

Yours,

Sylvia Wren

I stuck a stamp on the postcard, hoping to feel that I'd vanquished Ms. Mortimer, but I felt no such satisfaction. On the contrary, I was certain that everything was about to unravel.

August 4, 2017 — Abiquiú, New Mexico

I went to the post office after breakfast, not waiting for my postlunch walk. On the way there, I couldn't enjoy the cottonwoods or the cloudless sky, and I resented how thoroughly Ms. Mortimer had disrupted my daily rituals. They may seem silly, but for me, they're a necessity, especially when Lola is away. I didn't sleep well last night and that's always how things start to go wrong.

I slipped the postcard into the outgoing slot, then discovered a new envelope from Ms. Mortimer in my own mailbox. I waited to open it until I was back home in my study. Inside was a photocopy of a newspaper article with a green sticky note at the top.

It's Eliza again. The Bellflower Village Historical Society finally reopened after the volunteer who runs it returned from her summer vacation. In looking through their archives, I found this article and wanted to send along a photocopy. Looks like Iris Chapel didn't just run away in the late 1950s but escaped in quite dramatic fashion. I'd love to discuss this with you.

The Greenwich Observer

August 19, 1957

MISSING HEIRESS

The Connecticut State Police seek the public's assistance in locating Iris Chapel, 20, of Bellflower Village. Miss Chapel absconded yesterday from the psychiatric wing of the Seward Hospital. She did not have permission to leave the facility and now the police are searching for her.

Miss Chapel's doctor, Raymond Westgate, advises the *Observer* that Miss Chapel is unlikely to be a threat to the public, but she might be in a state of confusion and in danger of hurting herself.

Henry Chapel, president of the Chapel Firearms Company, is offering \$1,000 for information regarding his daughter's whereabouts. If you have any information, please contact Sergeant Wilkins at CSP headquarters.

Ridiculous. I rarely thought about Iris Chapel; she was, as far as I was concerned, dead. (Poor Iris.) But nevertheless, certain things were unforgettable. Yes, she was once briefly a patient in the psychiatric unit of the Seward Hospital (no shame in that), but she hadn't *absconded* from the hospital with the police in pursuit. Confused and in danger of hurting herself? Outrageous. I read the article again, stunned at the stories that had circulated after Iris had disappeared.

I began to wonder if Eliza Mortimer was really who she claimed to be. Was this even a real article? Anything can be faked nowadays, but regardless, I wondered if Ms. Mortimer was looking for a payout to keep quiet. Someone as famous and wealthy as I am is most certainly a target. My lawyer had warned me about that.

My thoughts immediately went to Lola. She'd know what to do. I wanted to call her, but I didn't know what time it was in Brazil. She taught her classes all day and had events in the evening so I hated to interrupt her. She'd taken her laptop and that was the only computer in our house since I'm not a fan of technology. I had no way to research my concerns. I considered calling my agent, but he's obnoxious. (Lola claims I just don't understand him, and he's really her problem anyway since she handles most of my business affairs.) Since this was a potential legal matter, I decided to call my lawyer in New York, the only one of my representatives who doesn't drive me completely up the wall. I had to be careful how I framed the situation. Rebecca, like most people, knew very little about me, and I intended to keep it that way unless things with Ms. Mortimer escalated.

When we connected, she searched online for me and verified that Eliza Mortimer was indeed a journalist and filmmaker based in Greenwich who covers the art world. "I'm looking at her website now," Rebecca said. "Interviews with Judy Chicago, Johnnie Marquis, Zaha Hadid. A documentary about the Glasgow Girls. She looks legit to me."

"I'm not so sure."

"Sylvia, you must receive interview requests daily. Why the panic over this one?"

"I'm not *panicked*," I said, covering the receiver with my hand to take a

steady breath. “This alleged journalist is claiming to know secrets about me. Isn’t that blackmail?”

“Has she asked for money?”

“No, nothing like that. She wants to interview me.”

Rebecca started to laugh but attempted to turn it into a cough. “That’s what journalists do. It’s not criminal.”

“I don’t like her snooping around.”

“All right,” Rebecca said. “You know I’m here to help. What secrets is she claiming to know? Anything damaging? I can always send off a threatening letter if she’s telling lies about you. The good old *cease and desist*.”

I didn’t answer; my mind wandered, and I thought to myself: *Sylvia Wren is a ghost*, repeating the line from Eliza’s letter. What a terrible thing, to be a ghost while still alive. Yet the assessment wasn’t wrong. If women had family crests, a ghost would certainly be on mine.

I was aware of the silence on the line, the ticktock of the hourly fee, not that I cared. “Sylvia?” Rebecca asked, as if calling a cat that had wandered outside. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” I said. “I’d like to get a restraining order against Eliza Mortimer.”

“A *restraining order*? Sylvia, what’s going on? Is Lola at home?”

I hung up the phone. A few seconds later, it rang and I didn’t answer it. It rang all afternoon but I ignored it. I threw away the newspaper article and Eliza’s note, and spent the rest of the day working in my garden. As the sun set behind the red hills out back, I sat with a glass of lemonade, content in the August breeze.

Middle of the night

I hated everything about Eliza Mortimer’s letter, but being called a “world-renowned recluse” bothered me as much as being called a “ghost,” and I lay in

bed awake, fixated on it. I've so successfully blocked out the world beyond the borders I've set for myself that it's startling to be reminded of what I've become and how other people see me.

I never wanted to be a recluse. I wish people could know that about me. If I were going to respond to Ms. Mortimer in any meaningful way, I would tell her that I don't think it's in my nature to be reclusive. Growing up with five sisters, I felt like we were one being, like a Hindu goddess with many arms and faces. Becoming a recluse would have required a sense of individuality that was impossible for me to possess as a child, and don't those formative years shape everything that comes after?

It took time and effort to become what I am now, this *ghost*, this *world-renowned recluse* — all code, I know, for *weirdo*. My reclusiveness has become a key aspect of my biography, this thing I never wanted to be. It's long been assumed that I've been making some sort of feminist statement by refusing to be interviewed, for being entirely absent from public view, with only my art representing me. Women are raised to be accommodating, so I suppose a woman who draws clear lines that others are not allowed to cross becomes remarkable for that fact alone.

It's never been easy for me, this disappearing act. We have to adapt to our circumstances, whatever they are. Nuns adapt to their cloisters, and birds to their cages, and I had to adapt to my way of living, pretending to be someone else and keeping anyone from finding out the truth. I was forced to be evasive, but it eventually became second nature. I'm not pretending to be Sylvia Wren anymore. I've become her.

And yet for all my talk of becoming Sylvia Wren, I know that's not the whole story — or rather that's overly simplistic.

Some years ago, I read about a Las Vegas show tiger, a docile creature that performed nearly every night for more than a decade, jumping through rings of fire for the amusement of the crowd. Then one night in the middle of a performance, for no apparent reason, the tiger turned on its trainer and

swiped at his neck, severing an artery with one of its massive claws. The man bled out on stage before help arrived, a scarlet pool spreading around him to the horror of the audience.

When you live in defiance of yourself, you can adapt to your circumstances, but remnants of who you are at your core remain. A bit of wildness that can't be tamed.

Tap tap.

This is how it starts. I was afraid this was going to happen. I hadn't thought about Iris in a long time, or her sisters, or the hospital, or her running away; I'm not surprised that poking those dormant memories caused a response.

I heard the tapping, sat up in bed, and turned on the lamp; I'd given up on sleep anyway. The curtains were closed, but I knew what was beyond them without having to look: the deepest darkness, endless fathoms of it, as black as outer space and as vast and unknowable.

The downside of living in middle-of-nowhere New Mexico is the night. That's why we keep a rifle under the bed, to make sleeping easier. The rifle is loaded and I know how to use it. I pulled it out from its hiding place and climbed back into bed with it. The gun brings me peace, an irony that only Lola would understand. When I have moments like this, when the darkness suffocates me, I need to hold on to something more powerful than myself.

I stayed still in my bed, waiting for the tapping to resume. The gun wouldn't help, I knew that, but I clung to what I had. The tapping on the glass is always the first sign of what's to come. It never happens when Lola is at home. My visitor only comes when Lola is away, when everything I've submerged rises up to the surface.

Tap tap.

"Here she comes," I said aloud. "Don't be afraid."

*asphodel grows
in the underworld
of my mind*

— calla chapel