ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 116
Printed in the Reach



ONE FOR ME AND ONE FOR YOU

CHEW Z

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AND ONE FOR YOU

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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THE BOOK BEFORE

The book before this one was about a piano teacher in the desert outside Tucson, a woman near the end of a long life, who had been given only months. She was not afraid of being dead. She was afraid of the one instant of it — the letting-go that nobody is allowed to practise, that you only get to do once, and get to do wrong. So she went to a man who lived past the edge of town and sat with the dying, and across one desert summer she taught herself, a little at a time, to make the crossing and come back, so that the last step, when it came, would not be a stranger.

Out there she met the thing she had spent thirty years refusing to grieve — in the shape of someone she had lost, long ago, to the water. What passed between them let her set down a weight she had carried too long, and go home, and mend what could still be mended with the living daughter she had let go cold. She finished a song she had never been able to finish. And when the last instant came for her, some days later, she was not afraid of it, and she did not hold on.

This book is about a different kind of staying, and a different mother, and a garden further west.

SYNOPSIS

A man comes home to the canyon above Santa Barbara to look after his mother, who is losing her memory, and finds the old house and its wild garden exactly as he left them — down to the big white flowers that open only after dark. On the good days she knows him and is wholly herself. On the others she drifts, and burns the pots, and asks when his father, dead forty years, is coming home; and every night, when the flowers open, she goes out into them and talks, low and happy, to someone who is not there.

Hunting the name she keeps saying, he uncovers a brother he never knew he had — a boy dead the same summer he himself was born, never once spoken of in fifty-four years — and he learns that the garden is not only a garden. It is a door. One his mother has been walking through, alone, every night, for fifty years.

To understand what she has been choosing, and who she has been choosing it over, he decides to walk through it himself.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Every book in this series stands at one door and tries to describe what is on the other side of it without lying about the door.

This one was the hardest, because this door is a liar by nature. The others at least have the decency to announce themselves — the light, the rush, the long tunnel, the sense of having left. This one leaves you exactly where you were, in your own kitchen, among the people you love, and lets you go on believing you never went anywhere at all. It gives you back your dead, as real as the chair, as real as the cup in your hand, and asks nothing of you but that you not notice. Most people don't. That is the mercy and the cruelty of it, and they are the same thing.

I have tried to write it as plainly as I know how, because the plainer you say a thing like this, the truer it gets, and because the woman at the centre of it was a plain woman and would not have wanted it dressed up. The canyon is invented and the family is invented. The flower is real, and old, and has been doing this to people for as long as there have been people near it to do it to, and everything this book says the flower does, it does. The names of what it is, and the names of the few who wrote it down, are at the back, for anyone who wants them. You do not need them to read the book. She never knew them either.

For the mothers who watched the whole time, and were never once seen doing it.

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I. THE GOOD DAY

1.

The road up to his mother’s house had not been paved in the years he was gone, and Milo was glad of it. The dirt was the one thing that had not changed.

It was the second week of July, late in the afternoon, and the light was coming down the canyon the way it only did in summer, thick and gold, catching in the dust his tires lifted so that he drove up through a kind of slow fire that was not hot and did not burn. Oaks on both sides. The dry grass gone the color of a lion. A hawk turning high up over the ridge, not in a hurry, the way nothing up here was ever in a hurry. He had forgotten that. In the city he had spent thirty years forgetting it on purpose, and now here it was again, handed back to him in one turn of the road, as if he had only been gone a weekend.

He was fifty-four years old. He fixed old films for a living. That is a real job, though people never believe it when he says it; there is a lab in Los Angeles, below street level, cold as a meat locker to keep the film happy, and in it Milo spent his days leaning over strips of other people’s pasts, a wedding from 1958, a birthday, a dead man’s hands opening a present, and he brought them back. A scratch is a thing you can take out. A faded face is a thing you can bring up again, patient frame by patient frame, until the mother in the home movie is young and laughing once more and the child on her knee is whoever that child grew up to be. People wept in his little cold room when he showed them. He was used to that. He was good at it. He had a gift, his boss said, for other people’s memories.

He turned the last bend and the house was there, and he stopped the car, and for a moment he did not get out.

It was smaller than he remembered. They always are. A low adobe with a tin roof gone to rust, a wooden porch his father had built the year before he died, a well house, a water tank up the slope on its stilts. And all around it, swallowing the fence, climbing the porch rail, pouring down the bank toward the dry creek, the garden. His mother’s garden. Gone wild now, gone enormous, a green riot that had eaten the yard and was working on the house, and through all of it, everywhere, hundreds of them, the white flowers.

He had grown up with those flowers and never once thought to ask their name. They were just his mother's. Big as a man's two hands cupped together, white going to a faint green or violet in the throat, shaped like the horn of an old gramophone, and they hung all over the dark green leaves and did nothing in the daytime, hung there limp and folded and closed up tight. But in the evening, when the light went the way it was going now, they opened. He had forgotten that too, and seeing them he remembered it in his whole body before he remembered it in his head: that the flowers opened at dusk, all at once, the way a held breath lets go, and that the smell of them came up then, heavy and sweet and a little too much, and filled the whole yard and came in through the window screens, and that was the smell of every summer night of his childhood. The smell of his mother's house after dark.

A few of them, in the shadow under the porch, had started to open already.

He got out of the car.

2.

She was at the screen door before he reached the steps, and she knew him. That was the first thing, and he had been afraid of it the whole drive up, and she knew him.

"Look what the dust brought," she said. "Emilio."

Nobody called him that anymore. In the city he was Milo, had been Milo for thirty years, had put the old name away in a drawer with a few other things from up here. But she said *Emilio* the way you say a thing you have kept, and something in his chest he had been holding tight came loose a little, and he went up the steps two at a time, fifty-four years old, and put his arms around his mother.

She was so small. That was the second thing. She had always been a small woman but now she was a bird, all bones and a cardigan, and he could feel her shoulder blades under his hands like the start of wings, and he held her carefully, the way you hold something you have just understood you can break. She smelled of the kitchen and of the flowers and, under that, of herself, a smell he had no word for and would have known in the dark anywhere on earth.

"You're too thin," he said, into her hair.

“Listen to him,” she said, to someone who was not there, which he did not notice, because people say that. “Come in, come in, I made too much, I always make too much.”

And she had. That was the good day, and he did not know yet that there were good days and the other kind; he only knew that he walked into his mother’s kitchen and it was a Sunday in 1980, the oilcloth on the table, the santos on the shelf, the pot on the stove, and she had made enough for six, and the two of them sat down and ate in the last of the gold light and she was sharp and funny and entirely herself. She asked about his work and listened to the answers. She told him the Padres were breaking her heart again. She remembered the name of a girl he had been in love with in high school and asked, wicked, whatever happened to her, and he said he had no idea, and she said good, she never liked the mother. She was his mother. For the length of one meal she was exactly and completely his mother, and if he had known to, he would have gotten down on his knees on the kitchen floor and thanked God for it.

He had come up because of the phone calls. A neighbor he had never met, a woman named — he would get her name wrong twice before he got it right — had tracked down his number and called him in May and said, kindly, that his mother should maybe not be alone up there anymore. There had been a thing with the stove. There had been a morning the neighbor found her out in the garden in her nightgown, confused, cold, at an hour when the flowers were still closed. Milo had said thank you and done nothing for six weeks, which he would also have to carry, later, among the other things. And then he had gotten in the car.

But sitting at the table that first evening, watching her tell a story with her hands the way she always had, he thought the neighbor must have exaggerated. He thought, with the enormous relief of a man who badly wants to be let off, *she’s fine. She’s old, and she’s fine, and I’ll stay a week and fix the stove and go home.*

The flowers opened while they ate. He watched it happen through the window over her shoulder, the whole garden coming awake in the blue dusk, hundreds of white horns lifting and spreading, and the smell came in through the screen, heavy and sweet, and his

mother stopped in the middle of her sentence and turned her head toward the window and was quiet for a moment, listening, the way you listen for a sound in another room.

Then she turned back and finished her sentence, and he thought nothing of it.

3.

He stayed up late that first night, too wired from the drive and the strangeness and the gladness to sleep, and he walked out into the garden in the dark.

It was a warm night and the flowers were wide open and the smell was everything. There was a moon, not full, and the white of the flowers caught it and held it so that the whole dark garden seemed lit faintly from inside, lamp after lamp after lamp, all down the bank toward the creek. Moths came to them. Big ones, the kind with the heavy bodies, hawk moths, hanging in the air before each flower and drinking from the deep throats of them with a long tongue, and the sound of their wings was a low hum you felt more than heard, and Milo stood in the middle of his mother's garden in the dark and the warm and the smell and the hum and was, for no reason he could have given, happier than he had been in years.

He remembered the rhyme then. It came up out of the same place the smell had come up from, some older room in him than memory.

His mother used to sing it, out here, at night. A little counting song, nothing, the kind of thing you make up for a child. You counted the flowers as they opened. *One lamp, two lamps,* she would sing, soft, walking the rows, *three lamps, four, who's awake and who's asleep, who's coming in and who's not yet.* He could not remember the rest. He was not sure there was a rest; it might have been the kind of song that just went on as long as there were flowers to count, which up here, on a July night, was as good as forever.

He found himself singing it under his breath. *One lamp, two lamps.* And then he stopped, because from the dark at the bottom of the garden, down by the creek where the flowers were thickest, he heard his mother singing it too.

He had thought she was asleep. He had heard her go to bed. But there she was, a small pale shape in her nightgown down among

the white flowers, moving slowly along the rows in the dark, singing the counting song to herself, very quietly, very content. *Three lamps, four.* He opened his mouth to call out to her, to say Mamá, what are you doing out here, come in — and something stopped him. She looked so peaceful. She looked like a woman doing a thing she had done ten thousand times and loved. And he thought, standing there, that he did not want to frighten her, and that it was a warm night, and that there was no harm in an old woman walking in her own garden.

So he watched her for a while, his mother counting her flowers in the dark, and then he went in and went to bed, and he slept better than he had in the city in a year, with the window open and the sweet heavy smell pouring over him all night long.

He would think about that night a great deal afterward. The first night. How happy he had been. How he had watched her down there among the flowers and felt nothing but tenderness, and gone to bed. He did not know yet what the flowers were. He did not know what she was doing down there, or who she was doing it with. He only knew that his mother was in her garden on a summer night, and that he was home, and that it was good.

It is important, I think, to tell it that way. To let it be good first, the way it was. Because everything that comes after was already there that night, already true, already fifty years old, humming under the surface of the evening like the wings of the moths. But he could not see it. All he could see was the white flowers and his mother among them, and all he could feel was glad.

4.

The week he had planned to stay became two, and then it stopped being a number.

He fixed the stove the second day; it was nothing, a cracked igniter, twenty minutes. But by the second day he had also seen the other things, and he had stopped being able to pretend he hadn’t. The way she would set a pot on to boil and walk away and forget it, and he would come in to the smell of it burning dry, and she would look at the black pot with a mild, puzzled face, as if someone else had done it. The way the mail had piled up unopened for months in a

basket by the door, bills and letters and a jury summons two years old. The way she sometimes, in the middle of the afternoon, with the sun pouring in, would ask him when his father was coming home, and his father had been dead since 1979.

He learned, those first days, that there were good days and bad days, and that the good day he had arrived on had been a gift, maybe the best one he would get. On a good day she was nearly herself, slow and forgetful but *there*, able to laugh, able to know him. On a bad day she was somewhere else. She would look at him and he could see her working, trying to place him, and not being able to, and being too polite and too frightened to say so, calling him *dear* and *you* and watching him the way you watch a stranger who has been very kind and whom you cannot for the life of you remember inviting in.

He called the neighbor and apologized for the six weeks. He called a doctor in town and made an appointment he already knew what it would say. He started, without quite deciding to, to stay.

And he started to notice how much of her day pointed at the garden.

She was fine in the mornings, mostly. The flowers were closed in the mornings, folded and limp and ugly, and his mother was folded and ordinary too, puttering, present enough. It was the evenings. As the light began to go, as the first flowers began to open under the porch, a change would come over her, a kind of readiness, a leaning-toward. She would go quiet and turn her face to the window. She would get up from whatever she was doing and go to the screen door and stand there, looking out at the garden coming awake, and her face in that moment was not the face of a confused old woman. It was the face of a woman waiting for someone she loved, who she knew was coming, who was nearly here.

And when it was full dark and the flowers were all the way open and the smell was pouring in, she would go out into them, every night, and walk the rows, and sing the little counting song, and talk.

That was the part he could not get used to. She talked, out there. Low and warm and ordinary, the back-and-forth of a real conversation, question and answer, a laugh, a scold. From the porch he could not make out the words, only the music of them, the

up and down of a woman talking to someone she was easy with. He told himself it was the dementia. He had read the pamphlet the doctor's office gave him. *Patients may converse with persons who are not present.* He told himself that. But it did not sound like a sick old woman talking to the air. It sounded like his mother on the phone with an old friend. It sounded like company.

One night he could not stand it and he went down into the garden after her, through the white flowers and the heavy smell, to bring her in. She was standing very still at the bottom of the garden, by the creek, her back to him, talking softly, and as he came up behind her he heard, for the first time, clearly, the name.

She was saying it the way you say a name you have said a million times and love in your mouth. Saying it, and waiting, and saying it again. A boy's name. A name Milo had never in his life heard in that house or any other.

"Rafa," she was saying, into the dark and the flowers. "Rafa. There you are. Come here to me. Where have you been all day."

THEY DID NOT KNOW THEY HAD GONE

In the year 1676, after the colony at Jamestown had been burned and the fighting put down, soldiers were sent to the Virginia settlements to keep the peace, and somewhere on that long duty, hungry, they gathered a green weed that grew thick by the water and boiled it up for a salad, the way you do with greens when the rations are bad.

For eleven days they were not themselves.

They did no harm, or they were kept from it, gently, in a locked room. One of them blew a feather up into the air and watched it come down and blew it up again, for hours, delighted. One sat in a corner with no clothes on and grinned like an ape. One would reach out and stroke the face of a friend who was not there and murmur to him kindly. They were, by every account, happy. And at the end of the eleven days the weed let go of them, one by one, and they came back into their right minds — and not a single one of them could remember any part of it. They did not know where they had been. As far as they knew it had been one ordinary night. They had to be told that eleven days were gone, and they did not quite believe it.

II. THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN

5.

The doctor in town was gentle and said the word Milo already knew, and a second word he did not.

The first word was the one everybody knows now, the one that is in all the pamphlets, the long slow forgetting. The doctor said it kindly and said there were things that could help a little and nothing that could stop it, and that she was, all things considered, in fair health for a woman her age, her heart a little fast, her eyes a little strange, and that Milo should think about what came next, about help in the house, about a place in town, about the paperwork a person signs while they can still sign it. Milo nodded and took the folder. He had restored enough home movies of old people to know how this went. He thought he was ready.

It was the second word that stayed with him. The doctor had looked in his mother's eyes with the little light, the way they do, and had paused, and looked again, and said, in a different voice, a voice with a small frown in it: "Has she been taking anything? For sleep, or her nerves. Anything from the garden, anything a neighbor gives her." And Milo had said no, not that he knew of, why. And the doctor had said her pupils were very wide, wider than the light in the room should make them, and her mouth was dry, and her skin was warm and flushed and had been when they came in, and that these were not things the forgetting did. These were things a medicine did. Some old people, the doctor said carefully, the old country people especially, kept things. Teas. He did not want to frighten Milo. But if there was something she was taking, he should find it, because at her age and with her heart, something that widened the eyes like that could stop the heart like that, in a night, in a chair, and no one would ever know it was anything but her age.

Milo drove her home down the gold canyon with the folder on the seat between them and looked at his mother's eyes in the rearview mirror. The black middles of them were huge. He had thought it was the dark coming on. He had thought a lot of things were the dark coming on.

That night he did not go to bed. He sat on the porch in the warm and watched the flowers open, and watched his mother rise from her chair at the first of them the way she did every night, and go

down the steps and out into the white garden, and he watched what she did there with new eyes, the doctor's eyes.

She went to the flowers at the bottom, by the creek. She did not just walk among them and sing. She stopped at certain plants, the oldest and biggest ones, down where the green was blackest, and she bent to them, and she did something with her hands he could not see, and once she brought her hand to her mouth. And after a while — he timed it, later, on the other nights; it was about half an hour — after a while her talking changed. It got slower and warmer and further away, and her walking got careful, like a woman crossing a stream on stones, and the person she was talking to got realer to her, not less. By the deep part of the night she was not an old woman in a garden anymore. She was somewhere else entirely, standing in her own backyard, and she was happy there, happier than Milo had seen her be in the daylight even once, and she was not alone.

He understood then that his mother was not only losing her mind.

She was taking something to leave it.

6.

He started with the name, because the name was the thing he could not let alone.

On a good morning, with the flowers shut and his mother at the table with her coffee and mostly herself, he sat down across from her and took her hand and said, carefully, "Mamá. Who is Rafa?"

He had expected her to not understand, or to drift. He had not expected what happened, which was that his mother went completely still, and her face, which had been soft and vague, came into focus all at once, sharp and frightened, an old animal's face, and she took her hand out of his and said, "Where did you hear that name."

"You say it," he said. "At night. In the garden. You say it a lot."

"I don't," she said. "I don't say that." And then, lower, not to him, "You're not supposed to say it in the house." And she got up, too fast, knocking the chair, and went to the sink and ran the water and stood with her back to him and would not turn around, and when he

came and put his hand on her shoulder she was shaking, and she said, in a small voice that was fifty years younger than the rest of her, “I didn’t tell him he could go down there. I told him and told him.”

And that was all. The window closed. When she turned around she was vague again, and she smiled at him and asked if he had eaten, and the sharp frightened woman was gone back under the surface where she lived, and Milo stood in the kitchen with his heart going hard and knew two things he had not known that morning. That the name was real. And that it was the most important thing in his mother’s life, and always had been, and that it was not his.

He searched the house that afternoon while she slept.

He was not proud of it. He went through her things like a thief, the drawers, the closet, the top shelf, the old suitcase under the bed. He told himself it was for the medicine, for the thing the doctor said to find, and that was partly true. But it was the name he was hunting, and he found it, in the end, in the place you always find the thing a person cannot look at and cannot throw away: at the very back, under everything, in a box inside another box.

A small white shoe. One, not a pair. A lock of dark hair tied with thread. A paper, folded so many times the folds had gone soft as cloth, and he opened it with great care in the yellow light of the closet, and it was a certificate, the county’s, the kind with a seal, and it said that a child had died. A boy. *Rafael.* Six years old. The summer of 1971.

Milo was born in the spring of 1971. He did the arithmetic sitting on the floor of his mother’s closet with the soft paper in his hands, and the arithmetic was very simple and it took the breath out of him. He had had a brother. A brother six years older than him, who had died the same year he was born, in the months after he was born, when Milo was a baby too small to remember anything, too small to remember ever having a brother at all. And no one had ever told him. Not his mother, not his father, not one person in fifty-four years. He had grown up an only child in a house that had lost a child, and the loss had been all around him his whole life, in the air, in the garden, in his mother’s turned back, and nobody had ever once said the boy’s name out loud where he could hear it.

He sat on the floor a long time. He thought he would cry and he did not. What he felt, under the shock, rising slowly, was something he was ashamed of then and would be more ashamed of later, and it was this: a cold, old, childish anger. Because he understood, sitting there, that he had spent his whole life competing with someone, losing to someone, standing in a doorway while his mother looked at someone over his shoulder — and now he knew who. Now the someone had a name and a little white shoe. And the anger said, in the ugly voice that lives in all of us: *so that's it. That's what was wrong with her. That's why she was never there. She was with him. She was always with him. And I never even got to know I was losing.*

7.

Here is a thing about his childhood that he had never known what to do with, and now did.

His mother had three rules, and she did not have many rules, she was not a strict woman, she let him run wild up the canyon all summer like a dog. But she had three rules and about these three she was not his gentle mother at all. She was iron. She was frightening. And the three rules were these: you do not go down to the bottom of the garden. You do not touch the white flowers, not the flower, not the leaf, not the green fruit with the spines, not ever, not for any reason. And you do not put anything in your mouth that you find growing, not a berry, not a seed, not a leaf, nothing, you come and you ask me first, every time.

He had thought, as a boy, that she was strange about it. The other kids ate things off bushes all the time. He had thought, later, as a grown man looking back, that it was one more sign of the thing that was wrong between them, her coldness turning hard and arbitrary over nothing, over flowers. Once, when he was five or six, he had picked one of the white blooms to give to her, just that, a flower for his mother, and she had crossed the yard so fast he never saw her move and knocked it out of his hand and gripped his wrist so hard it left marks, and knelt down and put her face right up to his face and said, in a voice he had never heard her use before or mostly since, *you never touch these. Do you hear me. You never, ever touch these. Promise me.* And he had promised, crying, not

understanding, frightened of her, and he had carried that, the marks on his wrist and his mother's terrible face, as one of the first proofs that his mother did not love him the way mothers were supposed to.

He understood it now. He understood it on the closet floor with the death certificate in his hands, and the understanding was so simple and so total that it was almost worse than not knowing.

She had not been cold about the flowers.

She had been afraid. She had been out of her mind with fear, every single day of his childhood, that the garden would take the second one the way it took the first. That he would do what Rafa did. That she would come out some morning and find another small body in the green at the bottom of the garden where the flowers grew thickest. And so she had made the rules, and she had made them with iron, and she had frightened her living son on purpose, over and over, because a frightened boy who never touches the flower is a boy who is still alive.

He did not see, yet, how far that went. He saw the rules. He did not yet see the rest of it, the whole shape of what she had done and why, the thing that would not come clear to him until he had gone where she went and seen what she saw. That was still ahead of him. On the closet floor he only saw the rules, and even that much was almost too much, and he sat there holding the little shoe until the light went orange and then blue, and outside the window, without him there to watch it this time, the flowers began to open.

8.

The neighbor's name was Rosario, and everyone called her Chayo, and she was older than his mother and sharper than his mother and she had known them all, the whole family, since before Milo was born.

She lived a mile down the canyon in a trailer behind a stand of oaks, and she had goats, and she received Milo on her step with a cup of coffee and a long, level look, as if she had been expecting him for some weeks, which she had. He asked her about Rafa. He did not have to say much. She nodded, slow, and looked off up the canyon toward his mother's house, and she told him.

She told it plainly, the way the old tell the oldest things, without drama, because the drama has long since drained out and left only the facts, which are heavy enough. There had been two boys. Rafael first, a beautiful boy, serious, his mother's whole heart. Then, six years later, the baby, Emilio. And that same summer, the summer of the baby, the older boy had gotten into his mother's flowers at the bottom of the garden and eaten the seeds out of one of the green spiny fruits, the way a child will, and by the time anyone understood what was wrong with him it was too late, there was no hospital close enough and no car fast enough, and the boy had died in two days, out of his mind, not knowing his own mother, seeing things that were not there, in the back bedroom of the house while his mother held him and the new baby cried in the next room.

"The flowers," Milo said. His voice did not sound like his.

"The flowers," Chayo said.

"Then why." He gestured, helpless, up the canyon, at everything. "Why would she keep them. Why would she grow more. The whole garden is full of them, it's nothing but them, she lets them take over, she — why would a woman keep the thing that killed her child and plant more of it and sleep in the smell of it every night of her life?"

And Chayo looked at him for a long moment, and Milo saw that she was deciding something, deciding how much he could carry, the way his mother used to decide, and she said: "Because they are not only the thing that killed him."

And she told him the other half. That the flower was old, older than the county, older than the church, that the people who were here before anyone had known it and used it and been careful with it in ways that got lost. That it was a door. That taken the right way, the old way, in the right amount by someone who knew — and his mother knew, his mother had learned it from her own mother, it came down the women like a recipe, like a wound — it opened a door, and on the other side of the door you could go to places and people that the daylight did not let you reach. That his mother, who had lost her boy to the flower, had found, in her grief, the one use left for it. She had learned to open the door. And she had gone through it, that first terrible year and every year since, down to the

bottom of the garden in the dark, to be with Rafael. To have him back. An hour, two hours, as long as it held. Her boy, alive, the right age, laughing, come in from playing. Every night for fifty years.

“It is not a sickness, what you see at night,” Chayo said. “Or it is, but it is not only. She is going to see her son. She has been going to see her son your whole life. She goes down to the bottom of the garden and she opens the door and she sits with Rafael, and then she comes back up to the house, to the living.” The old woman’s eyes were not unkind, but they did not spare him either. “You grew up in a house with a door in the garden, mijo. And every night your mother went through it. You just never knew what was on the other side.”

Milo drove back up the canyon in the dark with his hands shaking on the wheel. The flowers were open all down the road, white and glowing in his headlights, lamp after lamp after lamp, and he understood now what he was driving up into, and it was worse than dementia and it was worse than a secret, it was a mother who had, every night of his childhood, left her living son asleep in his bed and gone down into the garden to be with the dead one. Who had chosen, night after night after night for fifty years, the boy who was gone over the boy who was there.

That was what he believed, driving up the canyon. That his mother had loved one son so much she had poisoned her mind to keep him, and loved the other one so little she had let him grow up alone a few hundred feet from where she sat laughing with a ghost.

He was wrong. He was so wrong that when he finally understood how wrong he was it would nearly kill him. But he did not know that yet, and a man can only act on what he knows, and what Milo knew, that night, driving up into the glowing flowers, was that there was a door at the bottom of his mother’s garden, and that his whole life was on the far side of it, and that he was going to go through it himself if it was the last thing he did, and find out what she had chosen over him.

THEY DID NOT KNOW THEY HAD GONE

There is a thing that happens on hospital wards, and the nurses know it, and they have seen it many times.

An old man lies in a clean bright room and talks, all evening, with his brother. The brother is dead and has been for years. He is sitting, the old man will tell you, right there in the chair by the bed. The old man is not frightened of him. He is pleased. He laughs at the things his brother says. And all the while his hands are busy at the blanket, picking at it, plucking small invisible threads out of the air and setting them aside, patient and tidy, hour after hour. If you speak to him he turns and answers you, sensible enough, and then goes back to his brother in the chair.

In the morning he is worn out and himself again and remembers none of it. He thinks he slept. When you tell him what he did and said all night he shakes his head, a little offended, certain you have him confused with someone else. He did not know he had gone anywhere. And in a way he was right: he had not gone anywhere. He had been here the whole time, in the clean bright room, with us — and with the dead man in the chair that only he could see.

III. THE OLD MEASURE

9.

Chayo would not help him, and she told him why, and it was the first true warning he got and he did not listen to it, the way none of us listen to the ones that matter.

“It is not a thing you want, mijo,” she said. They were on her step again, the goats working the dry hill behind her. “You think it is a door you walk through and walk back. It is not. It is a measure. A little, and nothing happens, you sit in the dark like a fool. A little more, and it opens. A little more than that” — she held up her hand, thumb and finger almost touching, to show how little — “and you do not come back. Or you come back and you are not all there. Something stays on the other side. It does not come home with you.”

“She comes home,” Milo said.

Chayo looked at him for a long time. “Does she,” she said. Not a question. “Look at your mother, and tell me she comes all the way home.”

And he understood what the old woman was telling him, and it went into him like cold water. The forgetting. The burnt pots and the dead husband coming home and the face that could not find his face. He had thought of it as a sickness that had arrived, the way sickness arrives, from outside, by bad luck. Chayo was telling him it was a bill. Fifty years of going to the door and coming back a little less each time, a little more of her left on the far side with the boy, until what sat in the kitchen in the mornings was most of a woman, and getting to be less. His mother was not losing her mind to age. She had spent it. She had been spending it, a coin a night, for fifty years, to buy an hour with Rafa. And she was almost out.

“Then why would you let her keep doing it,” Milo said, and his voice broke on it, because he was angry and he did not know who at.

“Let her,” Chayo said softly. “You don’t let Dolores do anything. You never did.” She stood up, done with him. “And it is the only thing she has left that she wants. Would you take it? Would you be the one to go up there and take the boy away from her a second time?” She went to her door. “Go home, Emilio. Sit with her in the

mornings while there are still mornings. That is the door you should be walking through. Not the other one.”

He did not go home and sit with her in the mornings. Or he did, but it was not all he did. Because Chayo had told him the one thing she should not have, which was that it could be done, that the door was real, that his mother went somewhere and it was not nothing — and a man who fixes other people’s memories for a living, a man who has spent his whole life standing outside the glass of other people’s lives bringing them back up to brightness frame by frame, is not going to sit in a kitchen and drink coffee while a door to his own lost family stands open a hundred feet down the garden.

He was going to go through it. He had decided that on the drive up the canyon the night before. Everything after was just working out how.

10.

He found the reel while he was looking for the measure.

He had gone back into her things, more carefully this time, learning her, learning where she put the parts of her life she could not throw away. And in the bottom of the old suitcase, under a hymnal and a wedding dress gone the colour of weak tea, in a round flat tin that had once held something else, he found a reel of film. Eight millimetre. Home movie. No label, or a label worn blank. Small, maybe three minutes of it wound on the little spool, and old, the leader gone brittle and brown.

His hands knew it before his mind did. This was the one thing on earth he was built to do.

He had brought gear up from the lab, out of habit, the way some men never travel without a good knife; a cleaning kit, a little hand-crank viewer, the cotton gloves. He took the reel out to the porch in the morning light with the flowers shut and ugly around him, and he cleaned it, every inch, slow, the way you clean something you are afraid will break in your hands, and he threaded it into the viewer and he cranked it, and he held his breath, and he looked through the little glass at a thing no living person had seen in fifty years.

His mother was young.

That was the first thing and it stopped his heart. His mother, maybe thirty, in a cotton dress, in this same garden when the garden was small and tended and the flowers were just a tidy row along the fence. Young and dark-haired and laughing at whoever held the camera — his father, it had to be his father, dead twenty years before Milo could even picture him. She was laughing. He had not known his mother's face could do what it was doing in the little glass. He had never once seen it do that.

And there was a boy.

A dark, serious boy, five, almost six, running into the frame and out of it, showing off for the camera, turning cartwheels on the grass that was green then, a boy with his mother's exact face, and Milo, cranking the little handle on his mother's porch at fifty-four years old, said out loud, to no one, "Rafa," and it was the first time he had ever seen his brother, and his brother was alive, and moving, and happy, and gone.

He cranked on. His hand was shaking and he made it steady, because you do not let the hand shake, that is the job. And the camera turned, wobbling, the way the old ones did, and found his mother again, sitting now on the step of the small house, and in her arms, wrapped up against the summer for no reason except that new mothers do that, was a baby. Him. He was the baby. This was that summer. The summer of them both, the only summer there ever was of them both, caught on three minutes of film because his father had bought a camera for the new baby the way fathers did.

And here is the thing he saw, and did not understand, and would spend the rest of the book coming to understand.

His mother, in the film, is holding the baby. But she is not looking at the baby. She is looking off to the side, out of the frame, to where the boy must be, to where Rafa is turning his cartwheels on the green grass near the bottom of the garden. And her face, which a moment ago was laughing, has changed. She is holding the new baby tight against her, both arms, and she is watching the older boy at the edge of the garden with a look on her young face that Milo had no name for at twenty, or forty, but knew at fifty-four from the inside, because he had worn it himself in his cold lab over a thousand strips of other people's lives. It was the look of a person

watching something they love move toward an edge. It was fear. Bare, wide-awake fear, on a summer afternoon, with a baby in her arms.

The film ran out. The tail flapped around the spool, *tick, tick, tick*, and the light came through plain and white, and Milo sat on the porch and did not move for a long time.

He thought he understood it. He thought: she was already afraid of the garden, even then, even before. He filed it with the three rules, with the gripped wrist. One more proof of a frightened woman. He was close. He was so close to it, sitting there with the warm tail of the film ticking in the viewer, and he did not see it, because the truth was still on the far side of a door he had not yet walked through, and some things you cannot be told. You have to go and see them.

He wound the film back up, careful, and put it in its tin, and put the tin in his own bag, not back in the suitcase. And then he went and found what he had really been looking for, because he had watched his mother for four nights now and he knew where she kept it and he knew, more or less, how much.

11.

He waited for a night she was deep under, so she would not see.

It was easy, in the end, which was part of the horror of it, looking back; that a thing like this should be so easy, should take only a little green husk off a plant in your own backyard, a thing you could do with your hands in the dark in under a minute, the oldest and simplest transaction there is, your mind for a few hours, cash on the barrel. He did what he had watched her do. He did not let himself think about Rafa in the back bedroom, out of his mind, two days dying. He thought about it anyway. He did it anyway.

Then he sat down on the porch step in the warm dark with the flowers open all around him and the smell coming up thick and sweet, and he waited for the door.

He did not know what he was waiting for. He had read, over the years, in the idle way you read such things, the accounts people gave of the other doors, the ones in the magazines, the ones the young men went to the jungle for — the colours, the geometry, the

god at the end of the tunnel, the fireworks of the mind. He waited for something like that. He waited to feel it coming, a wave, a rush, a change, a line crossed with a sound.

It did not come.

He sat on the step. The flowers were white in the dark. The moths worked them, humming. His mouth was a little dry and he thought it was nerves. He was warm and he thought it was the night. After a while he decided, with a flat grey disappointment that surprised him with its size, that Chayo had been right, that he was a fool sitting in the dark, that he had not taken enough or had taken the wrong thing or that there was no door and never had been and his mother was only a sick old woman after all and he had poisoned himself a little for nothing.

He got up off the step to go inside.

And that is the last thing he could ever afterward be sure was true.

12.

He went inside, and the kitchen light was on, and his mother was at the table, and she was herself — sharp, present, young in the eyes — and she looked up at him and said, “There you are. Sit. I kept it warm.”

So he sat, and she had kept it warm, and they ate, the two of them, late, in the yellow light, and it was like the first night, the good day, except better, because she was wholly there, more there than she had been since he arrived, and she talked and she laughed and she called him Emilio and she reached across the oilcloth once and put her small dry hand over his and said, “I’m glad you came home, m’ijo. I prayed you would come before I couldn’t tell you things anymore.” And his eyes stung and he said, “Tell me now, then.” And she smiled and said, “All right. I will. Let me get the coffee.”

She got up to get the coffee.

A moth had come in. It was on the wall by the window, a big one, the heavy-bodied kind from the garden, and Milo watched it while she ran the water, watched it sitting there with its wings in a tent, and then he looked back at his mother’s back at the sink, and when

he looked at the wall again the moth was gone, and he had not seen it fly, and the window was shut.

“I’m glad you came home, m’ijo,” his mother said, setting the coffee down. “I prayed you would come before I couldn’t tell you things anymore.”

He heard it. Some small cold part of him, far down, heard that she had said it twice, word for word, the exact same, the same reach of the hand. But it slid off him. It was a warm night and his mother loved him and he was not going to pick at it. He looked at the clock over the stove to see how late it had gotten, how long they had been sitting, and the hands of the clock were there, he could see them plainly, and he could not read them. He looked and he knew it was a clock and he knew the little hand and the big hand and he could not, for the life of him, make them resolve into a time. He looked away. He thought: I’m tired. He looked at his mother and she was lovely in the lamplight and whole and his, and she said, “Let me get the coffee,” and got up to get the coffee.

He sat at his mother’s table in the warm yellow light for what might have been an hour or a night or no time at all, and she kept it warm, and she loved him, and she told him she was glad he came home before she couldn’t tell him things anymore, and she got up to get the coffee, and a moth that was not there sat on a wall by a shut window, and it was the happiest he had been in his whole life and some small drowned part of him was screaming, and he could not hear it over how good it was.

He came back on the porch step. Just like that. No line crossed, no sound. He was sitting on the porch step where he had started, and the flowers were still open, and his mouth was dry, and the sky to the east over the ridge had gone the grey it goes before light.

The whole night was gone. And his mother — he found her when he went in shaking to look, afraid of what he would find — his mother was asleep in her own bed, where she had been the whole time, where she had been all night, an old sick woman asleep and alone, who had never gotten up, never kept anything warm, never said a word to him, never once in the real dark of the real house reached across any table and put her hand on his.

He stood in her doorway in the grey light and understood, finally, in his body, the thing the doctor and Chayo had both tried to tell him and that no telling could carry. There was no door you walked through. That was the lie of it. There was no moment where the world changed and you knew you had left it. You just went on, in the same kitchen, in the same light, with the same people, and everything was exactly as real as it had ever been and none of it was happening, and you could not tell, you could not ever tell, there was no test you could run from the inside, and the ones you loved would sit across from you and love you back and it would be the truest thing you ever felt and there would be no one there at all.

This is what she lives in, he thought, standing in his mother's doorway. Every night. For fifty years.

And for the first time since the closet floor, since the little white shoe, the hard thing in him toward her moved, and cracked, and let something else in behind it. Because he had gone looking for the happy place she chose over him. And it was not a happy place. It was this. A woman alone in the dark not able to tell the living from the dead, reaching across a table at no one, for fifty years.

He had blamed her for going somewhere wonderful.

He did not yet know the half of where she went. But he knew now it was not wonderful, and that was the first stone out of the wall, and once the first one is gone the rest do not take long.

THEY DID NOT KNOW THEY HAD GONE

The people who lived along this coast before there was a town here told it this way.

There was an old woman who lived by herself at the edge of things. A widow. Rich, in her fashion, and alone, and able to see a little way into what had not happened yet. When the great Flood came and the world was made over new, she did not drown with the rest. She turned into a plant. And she is still here. She grows in the dry washes and along the fences and at the bottoms of the gardens, and she still does the thing she did when she was a woman: she shows you what is coming.

If you drink the water she has washed her hands in, the stories say, you fall down as though you had died, and while you are down she opens your own life to you — the part still ahead of you, and sometimes the part already behind, already lost. The old people said that a living soul who could look at itself this way need never be afraid to die.

They did not say it was safe. They said, plainly, that not all of the children who drank of her came back. They knew what she was. They knew exactly. They went to her anyway, because she was the only one who would show them, and there are things a person will trade anything to be shown.

IV. THE WATCH

13.

He gave himself three days before he went back in. He told himself it was to be careful. It was really because he was afraid, and the fear was the right fear, and he went anyway.

Those three days he was good to her. He sat with her in the mornings, the way Chayo had said, while the flowers were shut. He made her eggs. He went through the two years of mail in the basket and paid what could still be paid and he found, doing it, the small sad architecture of her solitude — the subscriptions to nothing, the church envelopes, the one card every December from a cousin in Bakersfield, the rest of the world narrowed down over the years to a trickle and then to this. On the good mornings she helped him, remembering a name, a date. On the bad ones she sat and watched him work with her hands folded, calling him *dear,* and once, softly, watching him lick a stamp, she said, "You have his hands." And he looked up, careful not to scare it off, and said, "Whose, Mamá?" And she had already drifted, and smiled at him, and asked if he had eaten.

You have his hands. He wrote it down that night, in the notebook he had started keeping, the way he kept notes on a film — what was damaged, what was recoverable, what was gone for good. He had his brother's hands. He had spent his life thinking there was nothing of his he could point to that had ever been first. And it turned out he had been carrying his brother's hands at the ends of his own arms the whole time and had only now been told.

On the third night he did not take the small measure he had taken before. He took more. Not much more — he had Chayo's thumb and finger in his mind, that terrible little gap — but more, because the first time the door had opened onto his own kitchen and his own wishes, a warm lie built out of what he wanted, and that was not what he was going for. He did not want to be comforted. He wanted to go where *she* went. He wanted the bottom of the garden. He wanted that summer. He wanted to see his brother with his own eyes and not in three minutes of film, and he had decided, with the flat certainty of a man who has stopped being reasonable, that he would take exactly as much as it took to get there and not one grain more, and that if he got the measure wrong it would be the same

death his brother died and there were worse ways to go than the way your brother went.

He did not do it on the porch this time. He went down to the bottom of the garden, to the place by the creek where the flowers grew thickest and blackest, where she went, where the boy had died. He sat down in the middle of them in the dark with the smell of them all around him like warm milk, and he waited, and this time he knew not to wait for a wave.

He watched for the small things instead. He had learned that much. He watched for the moth that would not fly, the clock he could not read. He was going to catch the door this time in the act of opening. He was sure of it.

He did not catch it. No one ever does. That is the whole nature of the thing.

14.

It was afternoon.

That was the first wrong thing, and he caught it, and it did him no good at all to catch it. It had been the dark of two in the morning and now it was four in the afternoon in high summer, the light coming down the canyon thick and gold, and he was standing — not sitting, standing — in the garden, and the garden was small.

It was the garden from the film. Tidy. Young. A single neat row of the white flowers along the mended fence, not the wild black flood he had been sitting in. The grass was green and cut. The house up the slope had a fresh coat on it and the porch his father had not died yet to build was new, the wood still pale. A radio was playing somewhere inside, a song he half knew, a song from before he was born that he should not have known at all and did.

He knew it was not real. That was the difference this time, and he held on to it with everything he had — *this is the door, this is not real, you took the measure, you are sitting in the dark by the creek, this is four in the afternoon fifty-four years ago and it is not real.* He held it the way you hold your breath underwater, knowing it will not last, knowing the water is patient. And it did not help. Knowing a thing is not real does nothing to how real it is. The sun was warm on

the back of his neck. A fly bothered his ear. He could smell cut grass and, under it, the flowers.

And there, on the green grass near the bottom of the garden, a boy was playing.

He was turning cartwheels. The same cartwheels, the exact ones, as if the film had come up off the little spool and stood itself upright in the sun and gone on past the three minutes into all the minutes there had ever been. A dark, serious boy, almost six, with his mother's face and, Milo saw now, with the hands — the boy had the hands, Milo's hands, their hands — and he was showing off for no camera now, just for the pleasure of it, just because he was six and it was summer and his body could do it.

"Rafa," Milo said.

And the boy stopped, mid-cartwheel, and came up onto his feet, and looked right at him. Right at the grown stranger standing in the garden in his city clothes. And he was not afraid. Children in that world are not afraid of much. He looked at Milo with his head tipped, curious, and he said, "Are you one of my mom's?"

Milo did not know what the question meant. He would understand it later and it would break him. In the moment he only said, because it was true, "Yes. I'm one of your mom's."

"She has a lot of you," the boy said, matter of fact, and looked Milo up and down, and seemed to decide he was all right. "You're the biggest one, though." And then, losing interest the way children do, already turning back to the grass: "Don't go down by the water. She doesn't like it."

15.

And then Milo saw her, and understood what he was looking at, and everything he had believed turned over in the warm afternoon light like a body coming up in water.

She was at the edge of the garden. His mother, young, thirty, in the cotton dress from the film. And she was not laughing. She was not sitting on the step enjoying her living boy in the sun. She was standing a little apart, tense as a wire, her whole body pointed at Rafa, and she was watching him. Watching him the way you watch a

pot that is about to boil over, the way you watch a child near a road. Her eyes did not leave him. When he cartwheeled left, her eyes went left. When he drifted three steps toward the bottom of the garden her hand came up off her side without her seeming to know it, ready. She was watching her son the way a person watches the one thing in the world they cannot afford to lose, every second, with no rest in it at all.

And under her breath, steady, not a lullaby, not sweet — Milo heard it now for what it was — she was counting.

One lamp, two lamps, three lamps, four. Who's awake and who's asleep, who's coming in and who's not yet.

It was not a song for a child. It was a watch. It was a woman counting her children to keep them, counting them over and over because if she counted them she knew where they were, and if she knew where they were they were safe, and the song was the thread she held them on. *Who's coming in and who's not yet.* She was keeping the tally. She was standing in the sun of a summer afternoon fifty years gone and she was keeping her boy on a thread made of a counting song, and her eyes never left him, and Milo understood, all at once and far too late, that he had had it exactly backward.

She had not come here to be happy.

She had come here to stand the watch she had failed to stand. She came every night, down the garden in the dark, through the door, into this afternoon — not to laugh with a ghost, not for comfort, not for one warm hour of her boy alive. She came to *watch him.* To keep her eyes on him this time. To not look away. To do, for one hour, two hours, as long as the measure held, the one thing she had not done the one time it mattered: to never once take her eyes off her son near the bottom of the garden where the flowers were.

This was not her reward. It was her sentence. She had sentenced herself to it, and carried it out, alone, every night, for fifty years. And the forgetting, the burnt pots, the husband coming home, the face that could not find Milo's face — that was not the illness taking her. That was the cost of the watch. She was paying, a night at a time, a piece of her mind at a time, for the right to stand in this garden and keep her boy from the water. And she would pay all of

it. She would pay until there was nothing left to pay with. She had as good as said so, in the kitchen, in the real kitchen, the first morning: *I didn't tell him he could go down there. I told him and told him.*

Milo's eyes were streaming. He was standing in the false afternoon crying like a child in front of his young mother who could not see him, and his brother turned cartwheels on the grass, and he said, to her, knowing she could not hear, "Mamá. You can stop. You can stop now. It wasn't—"

He did not get to finish. Because the afternoon, which had held so still, so bright, began to move. And he felt it move the way you feel a held note begin at last to fall, and some part of him knew what was coming, because it had already happened, because it always happened, because it was the one thing in all the world that this garden was built to make happen again and again forever.

16.

The boy drifted toward the bottom of the garden.

It was nothing. It was how children drift. He was bored of the cartwheels and there was something down there in the green, down where the flowers grew, and he wandered toward it the way water finds the low place, idle, humming, in no hurry at all. And the mother's eyes were on him, right on him, her thread still holding, *who's coming in and who's not yet,* and Milo thought, *she has him, she sees him, this time she sees him, it will be all right —*

and from the house, up the slope, through the open window with the radio in it, a baby cried.

It was a small sound. A new baby waking from its nap, the thin rising complaint of it, nothing, the most ordinary sound a house can make. But it went into the mother like a hook. Milo saw it go into her. He saw her whole body hear it — the baby, the new one, hers, awake and crying and needing her — and he saw the war in her, the half-second war, the boy at the bottom of the garden and the baby in the house, and he saw her eyes, which had not left Rafa in one hour, in fifty years, begin, helplessly, the way a mother's will, to turn toward the house. Toward the baby. Toward the sound of the

child who needed her right now, this second, where the other child was only playing, was fine, was right there, was safe.

He saw his mother begin to turn her head.

And Milo understood, in the last clear instant before the garden tore itself apart and threw him back into the dark by the creek, whose cry it was. He understood whose nap it had been, whose thin small voice had reached out of that window and taken his mother's eyes off her son for the one half-second the bottom of the garden needed. He understood why the boy had looked at him so strangely and said *you're the biggest one.* He understood what he had been, that summer. What he had cost, before he could speak, before he could remember, before he had done one single thing in his life except wake up from a nap and cry for his mother the way every baby that was ever born has cried.

He understood that he was the sound that made her look away.

THEY DID NOT KNOW THEY HAD GONE

Of all the doors, this is the only one a person goes through without taking a step.

The others announce themselves. There is a rushing, or a falling, or a great light, or a long bright tunnel, and you know, even as it takes you, that you have left the ordinary world and are somewhere else now, and that you must hold on and let it happen and wait to be returned. You are never in any doubt that you have gone.

This door does not do that. There is no rushing. There is no light and no tunnel and no sound. The kitchen stays the kitchen. The afternoon stays the afternoon. The people you love go on sitting across the table from you and saying the things they always say, and you answer them, and nothing tells you — not one thing, not a flicker — that you have crossed over, because the country on the far side has been built, lovingly, exactly, out of the country you left, down to the last cup on the last shelf and the last word in the last mouth.

The other doors let you know you are dreaming. This one lets you go on believing you are awake. That is the whole of its mercy, and it is also the whole of its cruelty, and they turn out to be the same thing, and there is no test you can run from the inside to tell which of the two is being done to you. There never was. There is only, afterward, the grey light, and the hours gone, and the question of who was really ever in the room.

V. WHO’S COMING IN

17.

He came back by the creek in the grey before dawn, on his side in the wet dirt among the flowers, and he was sick, and then he lay still a long time and let the knowledge finish arriving.

It arrives slowly, a thing like that. It does not come all at once even when you have already seen it. It comes the way cold comes into a house when the fire goes out, room by room, and you keep finding another room it has gotten into. He lay in the dirt and the knowledge went room by room through his whole life and there was no part of it the cold did not reach.

He was the cry. He had always been the cry. Every day of his childhood, every turned back, every supper eaten in a silence he could not name, every time his mother looked at him and seemed to be looking at something just behind him — he had thought, his whole life, that he had come second, that there was some brightness in him that had failed to arrive, some reason he was loved at a distance, from across a room, with the care you give a thing you must not drop but cannot bring yourself to hold. He had been right that there was a reason. He had been wrong, so wrong, about what it was. The reason was not that he was less. The reason was that he was the sound. He was the small living sound that had reached out of a window on a summer afternoon and taken his mother’s eyes, for the only half-second it took, off the boy at the bottom of the garden. His whole existence, the fact of him, his first breath and his first cry, was woven into the single worst moment of his mother’s life. She could not look at him without it. And she had looked at him anyway, every day, for fifty-four years, because he was hers and she would not leave him unlooked-at. She had just never once been able to do it without the garden in her eyes.

He lay in the dirt and cried the way men his age do not let themselves cry, ugly and without any dignity at all, and the flowers closed around him as the light came up, folding away one by one, the way they do, lamp after lamp going out, and up at the house his mother slept, who did not know he knew, who had spent her whole life making sure he never would.

18.

Because that was the other thing, and it was the thing that finished him, lying there. The thing he understood last and that reordered everything else.

No one had ever told him.

He had taken it, at first, on the closet floor, for a kind of cruelty — that they had kept his brother from him, kept a whole dead boy a secret in a small house for half a century, never spoken the name where he could hear. He had taken the silence as one more wall between himself and a mother who could not love him right. And it was a wall. But he saw now which side of it she had been standing on, and who she had been keeping behind it, and it was not herself. It was him.

She had decided — he could see her deciding it, the young woman from the film, in the hardest days of her life, with one son in the ground and one in a crib — she had decided that her living boy would not grow up as the boy whose cry had killed his brother. He would not carry it. He would not spend his childhood knowing that the simple fact of his being alive and hungry and awake had cost the family its first and finest. He would get to be just a boy. An only child, loved, if loved strangely, in a house with a garden. And so she had taken the whole weight of it — the name, the shoe, the certificate, the afternoon, the reason — and she had folded it up small, the way she folded that certificate, and put it at the very back, under everything, and she had carried it alone every day and gone down every night to stand in it alone, so that her son could grow up light. So that he would never know what Milo now, at fifty-four, lying in the dirt by the creek, knew.

Everything turned over again, and this time it turned all the way, and it stayed.

The three rules. *You do not go to the bottom of the garden. You do not touch the white flowers. You do not put anything in your mouth.* Not a cold woman being strange. A mother who had buried one child under those flowers and had decided, with everything she had, that she would not bury the second. The iron in her voice. The gripped wrist, the marks, her terrible face up against his: *you never*

touch these, promise me. That was not coldness. That was the most naked love he had ever been shown and he had spent fifty years reading it as its opposite. She had frightened him on purpose because a frightened boy lives. She had made herself the monster at the edge of the garden so the garden would never get him.

The distance. The not-touching, the love from across the room. He understood that too now, and it was the saddest of all of it. She could not hold him close the way a mother holds a child, could not bury her face in him, because he was the cry, because to pull him in against her was to feel again the exact small warm weight that had been in her arms the instant she looked away. She loved him too much to keep him at a distance and could not bear him close enough to hold. So she had done the only thing left. She had stood a little apart, all his life, and watched him, and kept him alive, and let him think it was coldness, because letting him think it was coldness was kinder than the truth, and she had chosen, every single day, the kindness that cost her and spared him.

You have his hands. She had not been drifting. She had been giving him, at the very end, when the walls were coming down and she could not hold them up anymore, the one piece of his brother she had left to give.

Milo got up out of the dirt. The sun was up. He stood in his mother's wild garden among the closed flowers, fifty-four years old, and he made the only decision the knowledge left him room to make.

He would not tell her.

She had spent her life so that he would never carry this. He could not give it back to her now — could not go up to that house and say, *I know, Mamá, I crossed over and I saw, I know I was the cry* — because to tell her he knew was to tell her the whole thing had failed, that the secret she had bled for fifty years to keep had gotten out after all, that her boy had grown up light only to end up here in the dirt as heavy as she was. He would not do that to her. He would take it, now, the way she had taken it. He would carry it himself and let her believe, to the end, that she had kept it from him. That was the only gift he had that was worth anything. The gift of her not knowing he knew. He would spend whatever was left of her giving it

to her, the way she had spent her whole life giving him the mornings.

19.

She did not have long, and he knew it, and he spent it well.

He stopped trying to stop her going into the garden. He saw now what it was and that he had no right to it, and more than that, he saw that it was the only thing she had that she had chosen, the one square foot of her life that was hers, and he would not be the one to take the boy from her a second time, Chayo had been right about that. So in the evenings when the flowers opened and the leaning-toward came over her and she rose from her chair and went to the screen door, he stopped bringing her back. He held the door for her. He walked her down the steps and as far as the top of the garden and he let her go on alone into the white, down toward the bottom, to stand her watch, and he sat on the step and kept his own watch over her watching, and when she came back up out of it, an hour, two hours later, slow and far away and spent, he was there to take her arm and walk her in and put her to bed. He became the sitter she had never had. The one who holds the measure. The one who calls you back. He gave her, those last weeks, the thing the old way was supposed to have and that she had done without, alone, for fifty years: someone on the near side of the door, keeping the light on, waiting for her to come home.

And in the mornings, while the flowers were shut, he gave her the mornings.

He did not waste them anymore. He did not spend them paying bills. He sat with her at the oilcloth in the good light and he let her be his mother for however long the day would hold her, and when she was there he drank it, and when she drifted he waited, patient, the way you wait out a bad frame, and brought her back up when she surfaced. He told her about his work. He told her about the films he had saved, the weddings, the birthdays, the dead men's hands opening presents, and she listened and said once, clear as a bell, out of nowhere, "That's a good thing to do with a life, m'ijo. Bringing people back." And he had to get up and go to the sink so she would not see his face.

He asked her to teach him the counting song. The whole thing, all the way through. He said he had forgotten the end of it and he wanted it back. And she taught him, on a good morning, pleased, a little shy, the way you are about a thing you made up long ago for love. *One lamp, two lamps, three lamps, four. Who's awake and who's asleep, who's coming in and who's not yet.* And then the part he had never been able to remember, the part that only came after you had counted them all, the part that closed the tally:

Count them twice and count them true, one for me and one for you.
When the last light's come inside, shut the door and say goodnight.

He wrote it down. His hand shook and he let it this time. He understood that he was being given the whole of it at last, the end of the song she had sung over two sons on a thousand summer nights, the song that was a watch, the counting that kept them, and that the end of it was a door being shut and a goodnight being said, which was the one thing she had never once in fifty years been able to do. She had never gotten to shut the door. She had never gotten to say goodnight. She had been counting the same four lamps in the dark since 1971, coming in and not yet, awake and asleep, and never once reaching the end of her own song.

20.

It was the heart, in the end, the way the doctor had said it might be, in the chair, in the night, and Milo was there, which the doctor had also said no one usually was.

She had gone into the garden at dusk as she always did, and he had walked her down and let her go, and she had stood her watch among the flowers, and he had sat on the step. But this night she did not come up on her own. When the deep part of the night came and she had not started back, he went down into the white and the heavy smell to get her, the way he had the first time, the night of the name, and he found her at the very bottom, by the creek, in the thickest of the flowers, sitting down in them now, small and folded, and when he knelt and put his arms around her she was very light and her heart under his hand was going wrong, fast and then slow, a bird against a window, and he knew, the way you know, and he did not run for the phone, because there was no phone close enough and no car fast enough, there never had been, not for

anyone in that garden, and he was not going to spend her last minutes anywhere but holding her.

So he held her, in the flowers, in the dark, the way she had held his brother in the back bedroom, the way she had been too afraid ever to hold him. He held her close, finally, all the way, and she let him, and he was not the cry now, he was just her son with his arms around her at the end, and he put his mouth to her hair and he began, very quietly, to sing her the song.

One lamp, two lamps, three lamps, four.

And she heard it. He felt her hear it. She stirred against him and her breathing changed and she came up, one last time, out of wherever she had been, up through all the years and all the forgetting, up to the surface where he was, and she turned her face, and she looked at him. Really looked. Her eyes found his face and did not slide off it, did not look at something just behind him, found *him,* the living one, the one she had watched from across every room of his life because she could not bear to watch him close, and this time she watched him close, and she knew him.

“Emilio,” she said.

His name. Not Rafa. Not into the dark, not over his shoulder, not to someone who was not there. His own name, said straight into his own face, by his mother, who knew him. *Emilio.* Fifty-four years he had waited to be looked at like that and had thought he never would be and here it was, at the very end, in the flowers, the whole of her love arriving at once and far too late and exactly, unbearably, on time.

“I’m here, Mamá,” he said. “I’m here. I came home.”

“I know you did,” she said. “I kept you.” And then, fretful, the old watch stirring in her even now, even here: “Is everyone in? I have to know who’s in.”

And Milo understood that he had one thing left he could give her, one last gift, and it was a lie, and it was the truest thing he ever said in his life, and he gave it to her.

“Everyone’s in, Mamá,” he said. “I counted. Rafa’s in. He came in a while ago, he’s asleep. Everyone’s come inside. You don’t have to watch anymore. You can shut the door.”

He felt her let go of it. Fifty years of it. He felt it go out of her, the leaning, the listening, the terrible readiness, the watch she had stood every night since the summer the camera was new — he felt her set it down, because her son had told her the last light was in, and she believed him, because he was hers and he would not lie to her, and she was so tired, and the song said that when the last light was in you could shut the door and say goodnight.

“Shut the door, then,” she said, very soft, almost gone. “And say goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Milo said, into her hair, in the flowers, in the dark. “Goodnight, Mamá. Everyone’s in. Goodnight.”

And she said goodnight, or he thought she did, he could never afterward be sure, there was never any way to be sure of the last thing, and then she was not breathing anymore, and the flowers were open all around them, lamp after lamp after lamp, every one of them lit, and for the first time in fifty years every light was accounted for and the door was shut and the counting was done, and Milo sat at the bottom of the garden holding his mother until the sky went grey and the flowers, one by one, all of them, came in.

WHAT IT DID

The flower in this book is a real one. In the dry country of the American Southwest and northern Mexico it is called **sacred datura** — *Datura wrightii* — a low sprawling plant with big white trumpet flowers that open at dusk and close by day. The people who lived along the Santa Barbara coast before the town was there called it **momoy**. Further south it is **toloache**. Older books call the whole family **thorn-apple**, or, from one bad week in colonial Virginia, **Jamestown weed**, which the tongue wore down over the years into **jimsonweed**.

Every part of it is poison. What does the work is a small family of compounds called **tropane alkaloids** — **scopolamine**, **atropine**, **hyoscyamine** — and sacred datura is especially rich in the first. In the body they do a simple thing with enormous consequences: they block one of the signals the nervous system uses to talk to itself, the one carried by a messenger called acetylcholine. Block enough of it in the brain and the mind comes loose from the world.

But it does not come loose the way the other doors in this series come loose. This is the thing worth understanding, and it is why this book is built the way it is. The famous visionary plants and medicines — the ones people cross oceans for — produce what the clinicians carefully call *pseudo*-hallucinations: you see impossible things, but some part of you knows they are coming from inside you, knows you have taken something, knows you are under. This plant is not like that. This plant produces **true hallucinations** — sights and voices and whole people indistinguishable from the real ones, stitched seamlessly into the actual room you are sitting in. There is no sense of onset, often no memory afterward, and long stretches — the doctors call them *lucid intervals* — where you seem, to yourself and sometimes to others, entirely normal. People under it hold conversations with the dead and do not know the dead are dead. They pick at threads that are not there. They lose days and believe they lost a night. It is the one door a person can walk through and back and never once know they left.

It is also, plainly, dangerous. The same compounds race the heart, stop the breath, and drive the body's temperature up to killing heights, and they can do all of this **even in small amounts** — the gap between the dose that opens the door and the dose that stops the heart is cruelly narrow, and nobody can measure it from the inside. The eyes blow wide and the skin goes hot and dry and the mouth goes to paper; a kind of blindness can set in that lasts for days. Children who find the spiny seed-pods and eat the seeds have died of it, quickly and terribly.

And there is a longer, slower cost, which this book leans on and which should be named honestly. Years of blocking that same brain-signal appear to wear the mind down. The best evidence we have is not about this plant but about ordinary medicines that work the same way — a large study followed older people for years and found that the more of these acetylcholine-blocking drugs a person took, over time, the more likely they were to slip into lasting forgetting. It is a fair inference, not a proven chain, that fifty years at this particular door would take its toll the same way — that the forgetting is the fare. This book treats it as the fare. The reader should know that the inference is the author's, drawn across a gap in what is actually known.

Nothing in these pages happens that the flower cannot do. Where the book shows a woman kept company, nightly, for fifty years, by someone who is gone, it is not reaching for a metaphor. That is, exactly and clinically, the kind of thing this plant does to the people who go to it. The only liberty taken is to believe that it mattered to her — and that, the flower has nothing to say about either way.

THE MAPMAKER

The people who charted this particular door did not go looking for a drug. They went looking for a vanishing language, and the door came with it.

Most of what is known about **momoy** — the sacred datura of the Santa Barbara coast — survives because of one obsessive man. **John Peabody Harrington** was a linguist who spent the first decades of the twentieth century, roughly **1912 to 1928**, among the last fluent Chumash speakers, writing down everything they would tell him: words, place-names, recipes, and the old stories, faster than the language was dying. He published almost none of it. He left behind an enormous disordered mass of field notes that scholars are still working through a century later.

It was from that mass that the anthropologist **Thomas Blackburn** drew the collection ***December's Child: A Book of Chumash Oral Narratives*** (University of California Press, **1975**), and it is there that momoy appears not as a plant but as a person. In the stories she is an old woman, a widow, living alone at the edge of the world, who could see a little way into the future; who did not die in the Flood but became the datura; and who shows those who drink of her their own fate — the parts still coming, and the parts already lost. The old tellings hold that a living person who could look at his own soul this way need not fear death. They also hold, without flinching, that not everyone who drank came back.

For the wider story of the plant — how far it reaches, how many peoples found their way to it independently, from the valley of Mexico to the Virginia tidewater — the standard account is the lifework of the Harvard botanist **Richard Evans Schultes**, who spent his career mapping the plants that open doors and set datura among the oldest and most widespread of them.

And then there is the plant's other, harder name. In **1676**, in the wreckage of **Bacon's Rebellion**, soldiers sent to the Virginia colony boiled the local weed for a meal and spent eleven days out of their minds and happy, remembering nothing after. The colonist

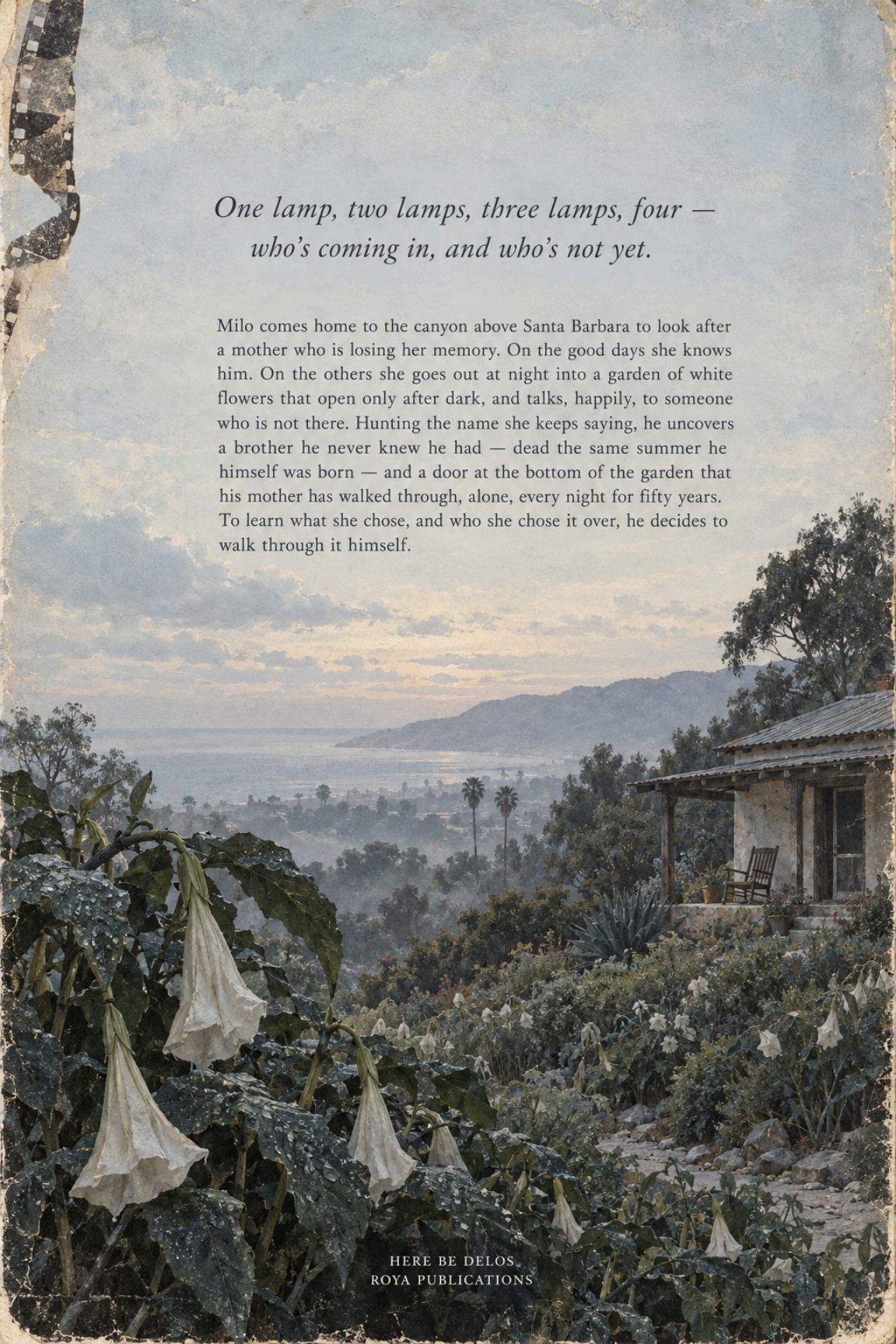
Robert Beverley set the story down in his *History and Present State of Virginia* in **1705**, and the place where it happened gave the plant the name most of the English-speaking world still uses for it. The Chumash had a gentler name, and an older one, and theirs is the one on the map at the front of this book.

GLOSSARY

Spoken-word note: respellings break each word into English syllables; the syllable in CAPITALS takes the stress. No symbols, nothing to decode — just say it as it reads.

- **adobe** — [uh-DOH-bee] — sun-dried earth brick; a house built of it.
- **anticholinergic** — [AN-tee-koh-lin-UR-jik] — describing a substance that blocks acetylcholine, one of the nervous system's chemical messengers; the family this flower belongs to. (Also **antimuscarinic** — [AN-tee-MUSS-kuh-RIN-ik] — the same blocking action, named for the particular receptor it blocks.)
- **anterograde amnesia** — [AN-ter-oh-grohd am-NEE-zhuh] — the inability to form new memories during a span of time, so that the span comes back afterward as a blank.
- **atropine** — [AT-roh-peen] — one of the three poisons in the flower.
- **Bacon's Rebellion** — [BAY-kunz] — an armed uprising in the Virginia colony in 1676.
- **Chumash** — [CHOO-mash] — the native people of the Santa Barbara coast, the Channel Islands, and the ranges behind them.
- **datura** — [duh-TOOR-uh] — the plant family; *Datura wrightii* [duh-TOOR-uh RY-tee-eye] is sacred datura, the Southern-California species in this book.
- **deliriant** — [dih-LEER-ee-unt] — a substance that produces true delirium: hallucinations indistinguishable from the real world, rather than the recognised inner visions of other drugs.
- **hyoscyamine** — [HY-oh-SY-uh-meen] — the third of the flower's poisons.
- **jimsonweed** — [JIM-sun-weed] — worn down from *Jamestown weed*; the common English name for the plant, after the 1676 incident.

- **momoy** — [MOH-moy] — the Chumash name for sacred datura; in their stories, an old woman, a widow, who became the plant and shows those who drink of her their own fate.
- **m’ijo / mijo** — [MEE-hoh] — “my son”; an affectionate address, short for *mi hijo*.
- **santos** — [SAHN-tohss] — small carved or painted figures of saints kept in a home.
- **scopolamine** — [skoh-POL-uh-meen] — the chief poison in sacred datura, and the one most responsible for its true hallucinations and its danger to the heart.
- **toloache** — [toh-loh-AH-chay] — the Mexican-Spanish name for datura, from a Nahuatl word understood to mean, roughly, *to bow the head*.
- **tropane alkaloids** — [TROH-payn AL-kuh-loydz] — the chemical family that includes scopolamine, atropine, and hyoscyamine.



One lamp, two lamps, three lamps, four —
who's coming in, and who's not yet.

Milo comes home to the canyon above Santa Barbara to look after a mother who is losing her memory. On the good days she knows him. On the others she goes out at night into a garden of white flowers that open only after dark, and talks, happily, to someone who is not there. Hunting the name she keeps saying, he uncovers a brother he never knew he had — dead the same summer he himself was born — and a door at the bottom of the garden that his mother has walked through, alone, every night for fifty years. To learn what she chose, and who she chose it over, he decides to walk through it himself.

HERE BE DELOS
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