

round, a smooth water heart. I popped it into my mouth, sucking for whatever marrow was inside it.

Leaning back on my elbows, I slid down till the water sealed over my head. I held my breath and listened to the scratch of river against my ears, sinking as far as I could into that shimmering, dark world. But I was thinking about a suitcase on the floor, about a face I could never quite see, about the sweet smell of cold cream.



New beekeepers are told that the way to find the elusive queen is by first locating her circle of attendants.

—The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men



Chapter Three

Next to Shakespeare I love Thoreau best. Mrs. Henry made us read portions of *Walden Pond*, and afterward I'd had fantasies of going to a private garden where T. Ray would never find me. I started appreciating Mother Nature, what she'd done with the world. In my mind she looked like Eleanor Roosevelt.

I thought about her the next morning when I woke beside the creek in a bed of kudzu vines. A barge of mist floated along the water, and dragonflies, iridescent blue ones, darted back and forth like they were stitching up the air. It was such a pretty sight for a second I forgot the heavy feeling I'd carried since T. Ray had told me about my mother. Instead I was at Walden Pond. *Day one of my new life*, I said to myself. *That's what this is.*

Rosaleen slept with her mouth open and a long piece of drool hanging from her bottom lip. I could tell by the way her eyes rolled under her lids she was watching the silver screen where dreams come and go. Her swollen face looked better, but in the bright of day I noticed purple bruises on her arms and legs as well. Neither one of us had a watch on, but going by the sun we had slept more than half the morning away.

I hated to wake Rosaleen, so I pulled the wooden picture of Mary out of my bag and propped it against a tree trunk in order to study it properly. A ladybug had crawled up and sat on the Holy Mother's cheek, making the most perfect beauty mark on her. I wondered if Mary had been an outdoor type who preferred trees and insects over the churchy halo she had on.

I lay back and tried to invent a story about why my mother had owned a black Mary picture. I drew a big blank, probably due to my ignorance about Mary, who never got much attention at our church. According to Brother Gerald, hell was nothing but a bonfire for Catholics. We didn't have any in Sylvan—only Baptists and Methodists—but we got instructions in case we met them in our travels. We were to offer them the five-part plan of salvation, which they could accept or not. The church gave us a plastic glove with each step written on a different finger. You started with the pinkie and worked over to the thumb. Some ladies carried their salvation gloves in their purse in case they ran into a Catholic unexpectedly.

The only Mary story we talked about was the wedding story—the time she persuaded her son, practically against his will, to manufacture wine in the kitchen out of plain water. This had been a shock to me, since our church didn't believe in wine or, for that matter, in women having a lot of say about things. All I could really figure was my mother had been mixed up with the Catholics somehow, and—I have to say—this secretly thrilled me.

I stuffed the picture into my pocket while Rosaleen slept on, blowing puffs of air that vibrated her lips. I decided she might sleep into tomorrow, so I shook her arm till her eyes slit open.

"Lord, I'm stiff," she said. "I feel like I've been beaten with a stick."

"You have been beaten, remember?"

"But not with a stick," she said.

I waited till she got to her feet, a long, unbelievable process of grunts and moans and limbs coming to life.

"What did you dream?" I asked when she was upright.

She gazed at the treetops, rubbing her elbows. "Well, let's see. I dreamed the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., knelt down and painted my toenails with the spit from his mouth, and every nail was red like he'd been sucking on red hots."

I considered this as we set off for Tiburon, Rosaleen walking like she was on anointed feet, like her ruby toes owned the whole countryside.

We drifted by gray barns, cornfields in need of irrigation, and clumps of Hereford cows, chewing in slow motion, looking very content with their lives. Squinting into the distance, I could see farmhouses with wide porches and tractor-tire swings suspended from ropes on nearby tree branches; windmills sprouted up beside them, their giant silver petals creaking a little when the breezes rose. The sun had baked everything to perfection; even the gooseberries on the fence had fried to raisins.

The asphalt ran out, turned to gravel. I listened to the sound it made scraping under our shoes. Perspiration puddled in the notch where Rosaleen's collarbones came together. I didn't know whose stomach was carrying on more about needing food, mine or hers, and since we'd started walking, I'd realized it was Sunday, when the stores were closed up. I was afraid we'd end up eat-

ing dandelions, digging wild turnips and grubs out of the ground to stay alive.

The smell of fresh manure floated out from the fields and took care of my appetite then and there, but Rosaleen said, "I could eat a mule."

"If we can find some place open when we get to town, I'll go in and get us some food," I told her.

"And what're we gonna do for beds?" she said.

"If they don't have a motel, we'll have to rent a room."

She smiled at me then. "Lily, child, there ain't gonna be any place that will take a colored woman. I don't care if she's the Virgin Mary, nobody's letting her stay if she's colored."

"Well, what was the point of the Civil Rights Act?" I said, coming to a full stop in the middle of the road. "Doesn't that mean people have to let you stay in their motels and eat in their restaurants if you want to?"

"That's what it means, but you gonna have to drag people kicking and screaming to do it."

I spent the next mile in deep worry. I had no plan, no prospects of a plan. Until now I'd mostly believed we would stumble upon a window somewhere and climb through it into a brand-new life. Rosaleen, on the other hand, was out here biding time till we got caught. Counting it as summer vacation from jail.

What I needed was a sign. I needed a voice speaking to me like I'd heard yesterday in my room saying, *Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open.*

I'll take nine steps and look up. Whatever my eyes light on, that's my sign. When I looked up, I saw a crop duster plunging his little plane over a field of growing things, behind him a cloud of pesticides parachuting out. I couldn't decide what part of this scene I represented: the plants about to be rescued from the bugs or the bugs about to be murdered by the spray. There was an off chance

I was really the airplane zipping over the earth creating rescue and doom everywhere I went.

I felt miserable.

The heat had been gathering as we walked, and it now dripped down Rosaleen's face.

"Too bad there's not a church around here where we could steal some fans," she said.



From far away the store on the edge of town looked about a hundred years old, but when we got up to it, I saw it was actually older. A sign over the door said FROGMORE STEW GENERAL STORE AND RESTAURANT. SINCE 1854.

General Sherman had probably ridden by here and decided to spare it on the basis of its name, because I'm sure it hadn't been on looks. The whole front of it was a forgotten bulletin board: Studebaker Service, Live Bait, Buddy's Fishing Tournament, Rayford Brothers' Ice Plant, Deer Rifles \$45, and a picture of a girl wearing a Coca-Cola bottle cap on her head. A sign announced a gospel sing at the Mount Zion Baptist Church that took place back in 1957, if anyone wanted to know.

My favorite thing was the fine display of car tags nailed up from different states. I would like to have read every single one, if I'd had the time.

In the side yard a colored man lifted the top of a barbecue pit made from an oil drum, and the smell of pork lathered in vinegar and pepper drew so much saliva from beneath my tongue I actually drooled onto my blouse.

A few cars and trucks were parked out front, probably belonging to people who cut church and came here straight from Sunday school.

"I'll go in and see if I can buy some food," I said.

"And snuff. I need some snuff," said Rosaleen.

While she slumped on a bench near the barbecue drum, I stepped through the screen door into the mingled smells of pickled eggs and sawdust, beneath dozens of sugar-cured hams dangling from the ceiling. The restaurant was situated in a section at the back while the front of the store was reserved for selling everything from sugarcane stalks to turpentine.

"May I help you, young lady?" A small man wearing a bow tie stood on the other side of a wooden counter, nearly lost behind a barricade of scuppernong jelly and Sweet Fire pickles. His voice was high-pitched, and he had a soft, delicate look to him. I could not imagine him selling deer rifles.

"I don't believe I've seen you before," he said.

"I'm not from here. I'm visiting my grandmother."

"I like it when children spend time with their grandparents," he said. "You can learn a lot from older folks."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I learned more from my grandmother than I did the whole eighth grade."

He laughed like this was the most comical thing he'd heard in years. "Are you here for lunch? We have a Sunday-plate special—barbecue pork."

"I'll take two of them to go," I said. "And two Coca-Colas, please."

While I waited for our lunch, I wandered along the store aisles, stocking up for supper. Packages of salted peanuts, buttermilk cookies, two pimiento-cheese sandwiches in plastic, sour balls, and a can of Red Rose snuff. I piled it on the counter.

When he returned with the plates and drink bottles, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, but it's Sunday. I can't sell anything from the store, just the restaurant. Your grandma ought to know that. What's her name anyway?"

"Rose," I said, reading it off the snuff can.

"Rose Campbell?"

"Yes, sir. Rose Campbell."

"I thought she only had grandboys."

"No, sir, she's got me, too."

He touched the bag of sour balls. "Just leave it all here. I'll put it back."

The cash register pinged, and the drawer banged out. I rummaged in my bag for the money and paid him.

"Could you open the Coke bottles for me?" I asked, and while he walked back toward the kitchen, I dropped the Red Rose snuff in my bag and zipped it up.

Rosaleen had been beaten up, gone without food, slept on the hard ground, and who could say how long before she'd be back in jail or even killed? She deserved her snuff.

I was speculating how one day, years from now, I would send the store a dollar in an envelope to cover it; spelling out how guilt had dominated every moment of my life, when I found myself looking at a picture of the black Mary. I do not mean a picture of just any black Mary. I mean the identical, very same, exact one as my mother's. She stared at me from the labels of a dozen jars of honey. BLACK MADONNA HONEY, they said.

The door opened, and a family came in fresh from church, the mother and daughter dressed alike in navy with white Peter Pan collars. Light streamed in the door, hazy, warped, blurred with drizzles of yellow. The little girl sneezed, and her mother said, "Come here, let's wipe your nose."

I looked again at the honey jars, at the amber lights swimming inside them, and made myself breathe slowly.

I realized it for the first time in my life: there is nothing but mystery in the world, how it hides behind the fabric of our poor, browbeat days, shining brightly, and we don't even know it.

I thought about the bees that had come to my room at night,

how they'd been part of it all. And the voice I'd heard the day before, saying, *Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open*, speaking as plain and clear as the woman in navy speaking to her daughter:

"Here's your Coca-Colas," the bow-tied man was saying.

I pointed to the honey jars. "Where did you get those?"

He thought the tone of shock in my voice was really consternation. "I know what you mean. A lot of folks won't buy it 'cause it's got the Virgin Mary pictured as a colored woman, but see, that's because the woman who makes the honey is colored herself."

"What's her name?"

"August Boatwright," he said. "She keeps bees all over the county."

Keep breathing, keep breathing. "Do you know where she lives?"

"Oh, sure, it's the darndest house you ever saw. Painted like Pepto-Bismol. Your grandmother surely's seen it—you go through town on Main Street till it turns into the highway to Florence."

I walked to the door. "Thanks."

"You tell your grandma hello for me," he said.

Rosaleen's snores were making the bench slats tremble. I gave her a shake. "Wake up. Here's your snuff, but put it in your pocket, 'cause I didn't exactly pay for it."

"You stole it?" she said.

"I had to, 'cause they don't sell items from the store on Sunday."

"Your life has gone straight to hell," she said.

I spread our lunch out like a picnic on the bench but couldn't eat a bite of it till I told her about the black Mary on the honey jar and the beekeeper named August Boatwright.

"Don't you think my mother must've known her?" I said. "It couldn't be just a coincidence."

She didn't answer, so I said louder, "Rosaleen? Don't you think so?"

"I don't know what I think," she said. "I don't want you getting your hopes up too much, is all." She reached over and touched my cheek. "Oh, Lily, what have we gone and done?"



Tiburon was a place like Sylvan, minus the peaches. In front of the domed courthouse someone had stuck a Confederate flag in the mouth of their public cannon. South Carolina was Dixie first, America second. You could not get the pride of Fort Sumter out of us if you tried.

Strolling down Main Street, we moved through long blue shadows cast from the two-story buildings that ran the length of the street. At a drugstore, I peered through the plate glass at a soda fountain with chrome trim, where they sold cherry Cokes and banana splits, thinking that soon it would not be just for white people anymore.

We walked past Worth Insurance Agency, Tiburon County Rural Electric office, and the Amen Dollar Store, which had Hula Hoops, swim goggles, and boxes of sparklers in the window with SUMMER FUN spray-painted across the glass. A few places, like the Farmers Trust Bank, had GOLDWATER FOR PRESIDENT signs in their windows, sometimes with a bumper sticker across the bottom saying AFFIRMATION VIETNAM.

At the Tiburon post office I left Rosaleen on the sidewalk and stepped inside to where the post office boxes and the Sunday newspapers were kept. As far as I could tell, there were no wanted posters in there of me and Rosaleen, and the front-page headline in the Columbia paper was about Castro's sister spying for the CIA and not a word about a white girl breaking a Negro woman out of jail in Sylvan.

I dropped a dime into the slot and took one of the papers, wondering if the story was inside somewhere. Rosaleen and I squatted

on the ground in an alley and spread out the paper, opening every page. It was full of Malcolm X, Saigon, the Beatles, tennis at Wimbledon, and a motel in Jackson, Mississippi, that closed down rather than accept Negro guests, but nothing about me and Rosaleen.

Sometimes you want to fall on your knees and thank God in heaven for all the poor news reporting that goes on in the world.



Honeybees are social insects and live in colonies. Each colony is a family unit, comprising a single, egg-laying female or queen and her many sterile daughters called workers. The workers cooperate in the food-gathering, nest-building and rearing the offspring. Males are reared only at the times of year when their presence is required.

—Bees of the World



Chapter Four

The woman moved along a row of white boxes that bordered the woods beside the pink house, a house so pink it remained a scorched shock on the back of my eyelids after I looked away. She was tall, dressed in white, wearing a pith helmet with veils that floated across her face, settled around her shoulders, and trailed down her back. She looked like an African bride.

Lifting the tops off the boxes, she peered inside, swinging a tin bucket of smoke back and forth. Clouds of bees rose up and flew wreaths around her head. Twice she disappeared in the fogged billows, then gradually reemerged like a dream rising up from the bottom of the night.

We stood across the road, Rosaleen and I, temporarily mute. Me out of awe for the mystery playing out and Rosaleen because her lips were sealed with Red Rose snuff.