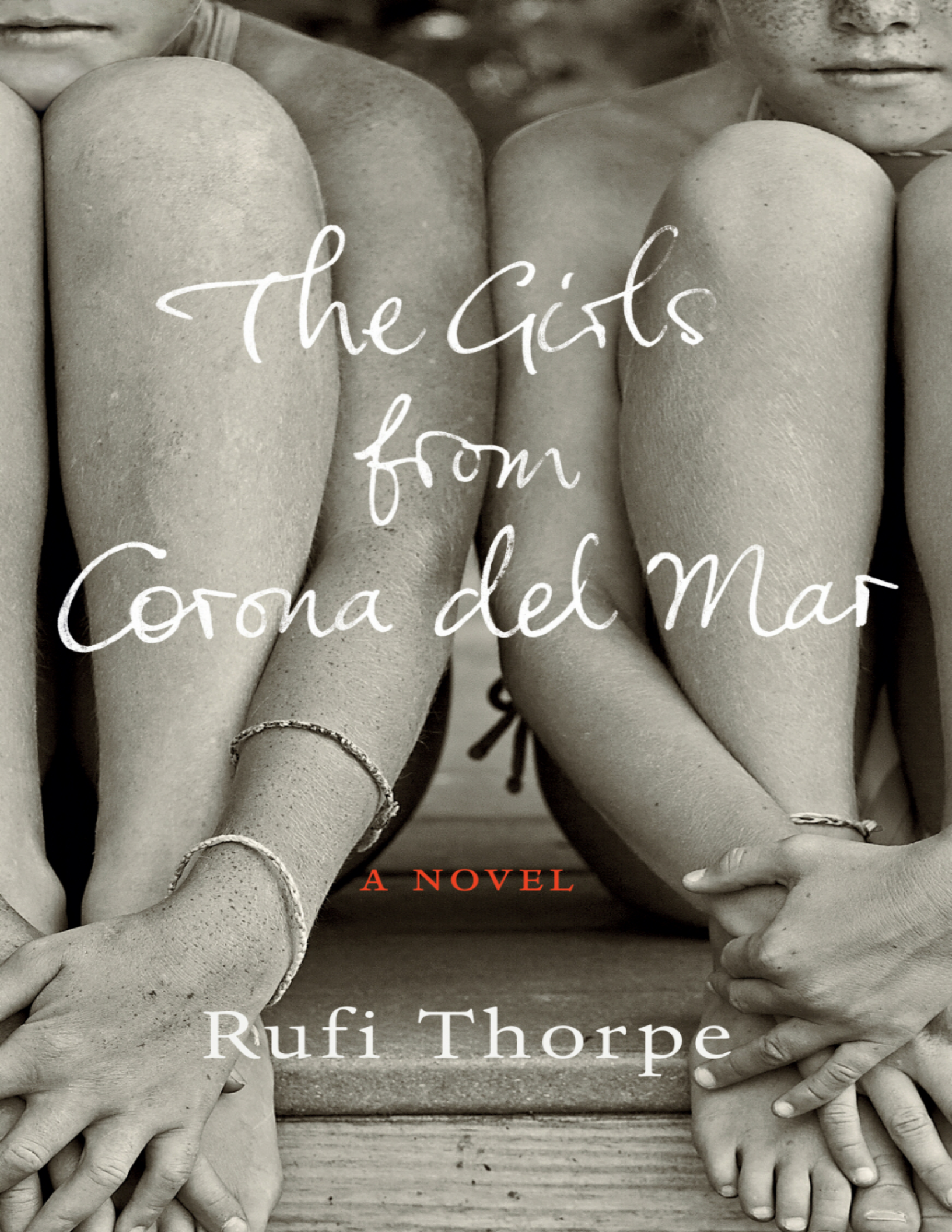
The Girls from Corona del Mar
A NOVEL
Rufi Thorpe

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‘Why did Lorrie Ann look graceful in beat-up Keds and shorts a bit too small for her? Why was it charming when she snorted from laughing too hard? Yes, we were jealous of her, and yet we did not hate her. She was never so much as teased by us, we roaming and bratty girls of Corona del Mar, thieves of corn nuts and orange soda, abusers of lip gloss and foul language.’

An astonishing debut about friendships made in youth, *The Girls from Corona del Mar* is a fiercely beautiful novel about how these bonds, challenged by loss, illness, parenthood, and distance, either break or endure.

Mia and Lorrie Ann are lifelong friends: hard-hearted Mia and untouchably beautiful, kind Lorrie Ann. While Mia struggles with a mother who drinks, a pregnancy at fifteen, and younger brothers she loves but can’t quite be good to, Lorrie Ann is luminous, surrounded by her close-knit family, immune to the mistakes that mar her best friend’s life. Then a sudden loss catapults Lorrie Ann into tragedy: things fall apart, and then fall further—and there is nothing Mia can do to help. And as good, kind, brave Lorrie Ann stops being so good, Mia begins to question just who this woman is, and what that question means about them both.

A staggeringly honest, deeply felt novel of family, motherhood, loyalty, and the myth of the perfect friendship, *The Girls from Corona del Mar* asks just how well we know

those we love, what we owe our children, and who we are without our friends.

A Note About the Author

Rufi Thorpe received her MFA from the University of Virginia in 2009. Currently, she lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and son. *The Girls from Corona del Mar* is her first novel.

The Girls from Corona del Mar

Rufi Thorpe

HUTCHINSON
LONDON

For Simone

CHAPTER ONE

The Best Tea in the World

“You’re going to have to break one of my toes,” I explained. Lorrie Ann and I were sunning ourselves in the tiny, fenced-in patio of my mother’s house on thin towels laid directly over the hot, cracked pavement. We had each squeezed a plastic lemon from the supermarket into our hair and were praying to be blonder, always blonder, our eyes closed against the sun. There was jasmine on the wind.

In the narrow cove of our nineties California neighborhood, there was no girl more perfect than Lorrie Ann Swift, not so much because she was extraordinary, but because she was ordinary in a way that surpassed us. Her parents loved her, and she loved them. In fact, it was difficult to even get an invitation to their house, so much did they prefer one another’s company to the company of outsiders. Even her older brother, instead of cruelly taunting her or running her over with his bike, shared his CD collection and advised her on her breaststroke.

Most of our parents had wound up in the sleepy ocean hamlet of Corona del Mar through a series of increasingly devastating mistakes. The Southern California real estate market, which had seemed throughout the eighties to have no ceiling, had suddenly crashed, and many fathers were now stay-at-home dads whose time was divided equally between the bottle and the couch, an ice pack over their eyes, as their wives scrambled to become certified dental hygienists. One girl, Miranda, had a mother who worked at Disneyland during the day and then worked all night from

home as a telephone hotline psychic. “It pays better even than phone sex,” Miranda reported one afternoon as we licked sugar-free orange Jell-O powder from tiny saucers. I remember too that they had four extremely aged rottweilers, two of whom had lost control of their bowels.

Mostly, our parents had assumed that life would be self-explanatory and that, bright and eager as they were, they ought to be able to handle it just fine. This faith, a faith in their own capableness, was gradually leaving them and being replaced, at least in the case of my own mother, with an interest in the occult and a steady red wine habit. Some have characterized the boomers as optimistic, but to my view they were simply soft and rather unprepared. They didn’t know how to cook or sew or balance their own checkbooks. They were bad at opening the mail. They got headaches while trying to lead Girl Scout meetings, and they sat down in folding chairs with their fingers pinching the bridges of their noses, trying not to cry over how boring and hard life had turned out to be, as around them feverish little girls screamed with laughter over the fact that one of them had stepped in poop.

Lorrie Ann’s parents were not losing faith, though. They were living in some other, better world. They went to church every Sunday. They rented classic horror movies every Friday night, and even Lorrie Ann’s older brother, then sixteen, stayed in to watch, as they ordered Domino’s and made popcorn in the tiny one-bedroom apartment all four of them shared. Her father, Terry, had an earring (a big golden hoop like a pirate’s) and wore a black silk top hat to parent-teacher night. He was a Christian rock musician, and Lorrie Ann’s mother, Dana, was a preschool teacher who collected gnomes: ceramic and wooden gnomes of all sizes and styles, standing on the floor and on tables and shelves, their backs to the wall, their dull eyes turned on the center of the room.

Certainly, it seemed to me, Lorrie Ann would never have been stupid enough to get pregnant in tenth grade by a boy she didn't even like, which was precisely what I had done. And yet, the spring I was fifteen, it was Lorrie Ann who came with me to get the abortion, who helped me to plan it all out. She had already turned sixteen and gotten her license, but I didn't just need her as my driver. I needed her, in all her goodness and her primness, to forgive me, to give her consent by participating in my scheme.

"Can't you just say you're having your period? Why do I have to break your toe?" Lorrie Ann asked, her eyes hidden behind the dusty lenses of my mother's borrowed sunglasses.

"Who misses a championship game because they have cramps?" I argued. Trying to get an appointment at Planned Parenthood had been a nightmare. There wasn't any way I could reschedule, and I doubted I could play softball the very next day. I wanted Lorrie Ann to break my toe so that I could show my coach a real and visceral damage. Also, in some strange way I viewed the breaking of my toe as the price of the abortion itself, a way of reassuring myself that I was still a decent person—it was the punishment that makes the wicked good again. Though raised entirely without religion, I was somehow Catholic through temperament alone.

"Just say you're sick!" she insisted.

"I don't like lying, and this is as close as I can get to making everything true."

Lorrie Ann looked at me dolefully. "You're nuts," she said. "You lie all the time."

"Yes, and I hate it. It'll be fine. We'll get drunk and you'll just do it."

It made a lot of intuitive symbolic sense to force the beautiful, pure, and good Lorrie Ann to break my toe and punish me for my abortion. To us, Lorrie Ann's family was

magic, and this magic transferred to Lorrie Ann herself. It honeyed her golden hair and deepened the oceanic blue of her eyes. It made her upturned nose seem elegant, instead of Irish. It was what made it sweet, not dorky, that Lorrie Ann was the last girl in sixth grade to start shaving her legs. I think we all were jealous of those fine golden leg hairs, like a shimmer of fairy dust along Lorrie Ann's calves. Why did it look so beautiful on her and so ugly and shameful on our own stolid little shins? Why did Lorrie Ann look graceful in beat-up Keds and shorts a bit too small for her? Why was it charming when she snorted from laughing too hard?

Yes, we were jealous of her, and yet we did not hate her. She was never so much as teased by us, we roaming and bratty girls of Corona del Mar, thieves of corn nuts and orange soda, abusers of lip gloss and foul language, daughters to sham psychics and newly certified phlebotomists.

And so, just after high school, when terrible things began to happen to Lorrie Ann, we were all shocked. It was like some bizarre postmodern rendition of Job. We were transfixed, struck dumb, without access even to the traditional gestures of delivered casseroles and decent silences. The story of Lorrie Ann became the thing stuck in our throats, keeping us quiet as we nervously chose careers and, with many doubts and superstitions, consented to marry the men we were in love with. (All of our parents had gotten divorced—how could we fail to be afraid? All of our parents except, of course, Lorrie Ann's.)

In a way, Lorrie Ann made me everything I am, for my personality took shape as an equal and opposite reaction to who she was, just as, I am sure, her personality formed as a result of mine. People do that kind of thing. They divvy up qualities, as though reality, in order to be manageable at all, should be sorted, labeled, pinned down. To this day, my mother considers herself the smart one and her sister the

pretty one, even though her sister went on to get a PhD in marine biology and my mother became a makeup artist. For me, my friend Lorrie Ann was the good one, and I was the bad one. She was beautiful (shockingly so, like a painting by Vermeer), but I was sexy (at thirteen, an excess of cherry ChapStick was all that was required). We were both smart, but Lorrie Ann was contemplative where I was wily, she earnest and I shrewd. Where she was sentimental, I became sarcastic. Normally, friendships between girls are stowed away in boxes of postcards and ticket stubs, but whatever was between me and Lorrie Ann was not so easy to set aside.

And so, the following weekend, we had gone to the Planned Parenthood on Nineteenth Street in Costa Mesa, I had gotten the abortion, and then we had eaten In-N-Out afterward. I felt ill enough that probably I should have just gone home and curled up on the couch like it was a sick day in elementary school. A heating pad and a handful of Advil would have been heavenly. But I didn't want to admit that I needed coddling. I wanted to be tough, even violently blasé, about what had just happened, because maybe if I acted like it didn't matter, then it would actually matter less. When I requested In-N-Out, Lorrie Ann had no choice but to drive me there. "Are you sure?" she asked. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fucking aces," I said, and Lorrie Ann laughed nervously.

But after we ordered and were sitting on the scalding stone picnic bench with food that neither of us wanted, we didn't seem to be able to talk, and I knew that in order for us to be friends completely once more, I would need to find a way to let her in, to give her access to those cold and brightly lit minutes I had just spent without her.

"The nurse had kind of a mustache," I said finally. I was thinking about her face, hovering over me during the

procedure—that was what they had kept calling it, “the procedure.” The expression in her eyes was hard to parse; it was not pity, but it was not judgment either. There was no overt emotion, and yet her face was honest and open. Finally it struck me: the nurse was looking down at me in the same casual way one looks at one’s own face in the mirror—studying it without any sense that the face belongs to another.

“I think she hated me,” I said. “Or else she hated all of it: abortions and young girls getting them on Saturdays. Or maybe she was just bored. Maybe she was just bored during my abortion. That’s weird, isn’t it? That it can be the biggest, scariest, worst thing that’s ever happened to me, and for her it’s just another day at work?”

“I’m so sorry,” Lorrie Ann said, setting down a fry. She flicked her fingers to get rid of the salt. “I just keep thinking that I wish it were me, that I could have done it for you so that you didn’t have to do it yourself.” She was on the verge of tears, which was helpful. If she was going to cry, then I couldn’t, and it was easier to comfort her than to comfort myself.

“It really wasn’t that terrible,” I told her. “They kind of keep it from all the way happening to you. They hide it from you. Maybe it would be better if they didn’t, if you got to see, if you knew. But really, I’ve had trips to the dentist that were worse on a pain and ickiness scale.”

Lorrie Ann looked at me, then laughed softly. “Fucking liar.”

Afterward, we went back to my house, where my mother was annoyingly home and annoyingly drunk. What was most upsetting about my drunken mother was how sentimental she became. “I love you girls so much,” she whispered as she tweezed our eyebrows for us, her own eyes filling with tears. “You’re so beautiful.”

I remember I was bleeding like a Romanov, going through Kotex after Kotex all afternoon, as she gave us facials, the one fan making a clicking sound every time it feebly rotated around the living room. I had to lie and say I had the runs to explain my frequent bathroom breaks and glassy-eyed distraction. I could feel Lorrie Ann worrying about me, and I kept trying to smile and shrug at her, mouth that I was fine, whenever my mother's back was turned. But the finer I claimed to be, the more frantic I became inside, which resulted in a peculiar, languorous anxiety.

My brothers, struck dead by the heat, lounged on the leather sofas. Really, they were my half brothers, progeny to my new stepfather, Paddy. My real father was off living some kind of glamorous car-salesman life in San Francisco, where I visited him annually, usually for two or three days, though we were often exhausted from trying to be nice to each other by the end of the very first day. My father never felt like family, not like my brothers. They were five and six then, naked except for their Superman briefs, their satiny tan skin seeming to glow against the black leather.

"This is an exfoliating serum," my mother informed us, slurring only slightly. She was a makeup artist for Chanel, and my whole life was a series of sample-size beauty products: tiny tubes of cream pressed into my palm as talismans against danger.

All afternoon and evening, Lorrie Ann and I waited: for our new faces to be revealed, for my mother to finally pass out, for my little brothers to go to bed (they still loved *Goodnight Moon* then—God, what a boring book! Good night this, good night that, over and over again). Finally, past midnight, Lorrie Ann and I snuck out to the small patio with the claw hammer.

I remember Lorrie Ann was chewing on her fingernails. Her mother, Dana, to discourage this habit, had painted them with a product disturbingly called Hoof Hands. But

Lorrie Ann confessed to me that she liked the bitter taste and positively gnawed the polish off in flakes that melted on her tongue like battery acid, only to beg her mother to please paint them again.

"I can't, Mia," Lorrie Ann said, setting down the hammer and immediately beginning to chew on her nails again.

"Bitch, do it!" I shouted. We were both very, very drunk. My mother had been buying jugs of Carlo Rossi ever since my stepfather had been fired from the Italian restaurant where he worked. Supposedly, now he was going to become a hair stylist.

"I just can't," Lorrie Ann had said, starting to cry.

"Fine," I said, "you fucking baby." I remember that the night sky was clear, simply swimming with stars. And I grabbed the hammer and brought it down as hard as I could on my toe.

As to how I had gotten pregnant in the first place, I was one of what must be a magnificently small percentage of girls who become pregnant at the loss of their virginity. In my case, his name was Ryan Almquist, and he had insisted that the condom, when I asked for one, went on at the end. We were in his van, which smelled of surfboard wax and mildew, a combination that was not entirely unpleasant.

"At the end?"

"Yeah, dummy," he said, kissing my neck.

Since I knew that the condom's purpose was to catch all the sperm and that this definitely happened at the end, and was, in fact, The End of sex, it did not seem so improbable to me. Afterward, and especially after I realized I was pregnant, I was mortified by my naïveté.

I would have been angrier if I believed Ryan had intentionally deceived me, but I felt fairly sure he really was just an idiot. That was, after all, part of why I had chosen him to lose my virginity to. Lorrie Ann had been patient with me as I explained my reasoning to her, though

I could tell she was not convinced: one of us had to go first, I argued, and it might as well be me. Ryan was (a) harmless, (b) hot, and (c) in possession of a van. Besides, he went to a different high school and so resulting gossip would be minimal.

"Don't you want to love the person you do that with?" Lorrie Ann had asked.

"No," I said. "Because what if it hurts and it's awful and you wind up embarrassing yourself and crying or bleeding or farting or something? It's better to do it with someone you don't care about at all."

"I think I'd rather do it with someone I loved," Lorrie Ann said softly.

"Well, that's an option for you," I said, "but who am I going to love with this black heart of mine?"

Lorrie Ann and I often joked that my heart was nothing but a small, dark stone, lodged painfully in my chest, glittering dully like graphite or charcoal.

"I don't even love my own mother!" I would cry out as Lorrie Ann collapsed in peals of laughter.

"You do too," she would say.

"No," I would say, breathless, laughing, "I really don't."

Years and years later, in Istanbul, I would still worry that my heart was a stone. It was Franklin, a visiting scholar at UMich, who introduced me to cuneiform, the very first system of writing ever invented, which was his subject, and it was also he who first made me wish my heart were made of something else: bunny rabbit essence, perhaps, or pixie dust and nougat, or just whatever tender flesh a regular girl might have.

I had not studied cuneiform before; my subject was classics, in particular Latin. But in the spring of 2005, we decided to try to do a translation together of the full Inanna cycle, a series of ancient songs that tell the story of the Sumerian goddess Inanna. As a classics scholar, I had come

across my share of goddesses. In fact, I credit my mother's midlife crisis purchase of *Goddesses in Everywoman* for my later decision to study Greek and Roman literature and culture. I can still remember reading that peeling paperback in the bathtub as my brother Alex pounded and pounded to get in so he could use the toilet. I was fascinated by the gods: their amorality, their capriciousness, their bloodlust. But even in all my reading, discarded books littering my apartment like the carapaces of beetles, even in graduate school, those seven strenuous years of tugging myself slowly toward excellence, I had never come across a goddess like Inanna. She was a fucking rock star. She tricked her father into giving her all his wisdom while he was drunk and then gave it as a gift to her people. She married a mortal man and made him a king. And then, when she had it all, when the entire world was hers, she developed a hunger for death and insisted on traveling by herself to the underworld, where she was killed and then reborn.

No one had ever published the full Inanna cycle before. Her story was still unsung, waiting inside those clay tablets simply covered in peculiar wedge-marked script, the writing without punctuation or spaces between words so that it reminded me of the lacy designs on Ukrainian Easter eggs. Only small pieces of it had been published in papers all through the last hundred years, so in the fall of 2006, we received the grants and the funding and we moved to Istanbul together to begin the first cohesive translation of the entire Inanna cycle.

Before Franklin, I hadn't even heard of Inanna. Franklin explained there was a reason for this. When the fragments, which had lain undiscovered for some four thousand years in the ruins of Nippur, were discovered in 1889, the spoils had been divided evenly between the University of Pennsylvania, which was funding the excavation, and the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, which was allowing

the excavation to take place. But no one was reading the tablets as they were being sorted, so they were simply divided equally and shipped off to their separate destinations. And so it came to be that half the tablets containing the story were in Istanbul and half were in Philadelphia, and no one alive had read the entire story.

So that's what I was doing in Istanbul: turning Franklin's rough translation into something Americans would actually want to read and falling in love with a goddess no one had worshipped in thousands of years. In our apartment building, there was a little girl named Bensu, which means "I am water." She lived in the apartment below us and was perhaps five, with a pursed plum of a mouth and huge, rolling green eyes that seemed fashioned out of lab-synthesized emerald, and a tongue that curled out neat little phrases of English or Turkish, as though she were a toy designed by a multicultural idealist. And because of the innocence I projected onto her, I was time and again surprised by the perversity of Bensu's whimsy.

"Just for a minute," Bensu said to me. "Just for ten seconds," she said.

What Bensu wanted was for me to stop in the stairwell, set down my grocery bags, and pretend to drink tea out of a plastic doll shoe. She did not have a tea set, and so she made do with the shoes of her biggest doll. She poured the tea into these shoes by artfully tilting a pincushion that must have belonged to her mother.

Some days I gave in, and some days I did not. But when I did, Bensu raised her doll shoe and smiled at me, her eyes twinkling. "My tea is very good, isn't it?"

"Yes, Bensu," I said. "What do you put in it that makes it so tasty?"

Bensu sipped slowly at the air inside the doll shoe. "That's a secret," she said.

"No fair!"

“Even if I told you the secret”—Bensu sighed, tired and patient—“you would not be able to make it taste as good as I can make it because I make better tea than anyone in the world.”

“In the whole world?” I asked. “Wow. That’s incredible.”

Bensu nodded modestly and sipped once more from her doll shoe. Suddenly and with great passion, she reached out for my knee. “Don’t worry,” she said, those huge emerald eyes glittering as though lit from within, “I’m sure someone will still marry you. Even though your tea is not very good.”

“My tea isn’t very good?” I asked.

Bensu shook her head sadly. My tea was so bad that it made her sad.

“It will be very difficult, but we will find you a husband,” Bensu said.

“What about Franklin?”

Bensu knew Franklin, my boyfriend, who lived with me upstairs.

“I’m afraid he’s been being paid off.”

“Paid off?!”

“Yes, your mother has been paying him to pretend to be in love with you.”

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

“Because she felt sorry for you because of your tea.”

I never knew this kind of canny cruelty that lurks in even very little girls when I was growing up, half raising my little brothers, who were more like animals than children at times: perfect, golden little animals. Lion cubs. But even five-year-old Bensu was able to detect that there was something wrong with me that would keep me from finding a mate.

Was Lorrie Ann ever this cruel? I don’t know anymore. I cannot say. I can only answer for myself, the girl who once literally spat in her mother’s face, the girl who chose a boy

to fuck because he was dumb, the girl who once, shamefully, kissed her two-year-old brother full on the mouth just to see what it would be like: yes, yes, yes. I was and am awful and terrible. I am sure I said treacherous things when I was five. In fact, I seem to remember informing a babysitter that our dog liked to hump everyone but her, and that it was probably because she was ugly.

And yet it was not me but Lorrie Ann whom the vultures of bad luck kept on visiting, darkening the yard of her house, tapping on the panes of her windows with their musty, blood-crusted beaks. “Wake up, little girl!” they cried. “We’ve got something else for you!”

CHAPTER TWO

Lost Worlds, Both Invisible and Physical

To be perfectly precise, I suppose I would have to say that tragedy began to nibble at Lorrie Ann as early as junior year of high school, though at the time it all seemed so glamorous that we were not able to be suitably sympathetic, but were, instead, almost jealous of her. A full year after my de-virginization debacle and ensuing abortion, Lorrie Ann's father, Terry, was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Because her father didn't survive the crash, and because the other driver (of a bright blue 1984 Toyota pickup) was drunk, it was never entirely clear what happened. "I didn't see him. I didn't even fucking see him!" the pickup truck driver insisted. He had turned left directly in front of Terry's bike, which was going about forty miles an hour—five miles under the speed limit. It was mid-afternoon. No one was clear on why the pickup truck driver was simply unable to see Terry, who was a large man on a large Harley. Even dead drunk, the driver should have been able to see him—the only vehicle in those lanes of oncoming traffic.

"I didn't even fucking see him," the man repeated to Dana in the hospital waiting room, as though these words could do anything for her. I was waiting with Lorrie Ann in that room, the two of us perched on chairs like nervous birds, ready to take flight. We did not yet know that Terry "hadn't made it." We were waiting for the doctor to come out, to let us know what was going on.

“Didn’t even fucking see him.” I remember the look on Dana’s face as she regarded the man, still slightly drunk, presumably under arrest, but present at the ER for his own injuries. His attendant police officer, a chubby woman with dolorous eyes, wearing sharp perfume, shifted her feet as though to lead him away. But Dana only looked at him with the same sad patience as if he had been a child asking her to take a snotty Kleenex.

“I know you didn’t,” she said, with a kind of grace I knew my own mother would never have been capable of. My mother would have said something snide and then begun crying.

The whole family, of course, was devastated and mourned in the beautiful way that only perfectly happy families can. When Tori Stephenson’s little brother Graham died of leukemia when we were in eighth grade, her mother had gotten drunk at the funeral reception and barfed in a plant. On the way to the car, Tori’s stepfather, Rex, had slapped her, leaving a huge red handprint on her cheek.

Dana and Lorrie Ann and her brother, Bobby, did not barf in any plants, nor did they cry too loudly, nor fail to cry enough, nor slap one another, nor do anything except do everything just right. Lorrie Ann looked miraculously beautiful in her black dress—a simple cotton thing that managed to make her look almost freakishly long waisted, as though she spent summers performing in Cirque du Soleil. Her bitten fingernails, crimson and bloody, served only to show off her long-fingered, elegant hands. The black eyeliner my mother put on her made her look like a dwarf hotot rabbit, the pure white kind with black rings around their eyes that they sold at the mall, so shy they simply froze when you lowered your hand into their pen, their tiny hearts hammering with the fury of a kamikaze pilot’s. Lorrie Ann was full of this same ferocious vulnerability

after her father's death, which made it almost painful to look at her.

To be honest, I was insulted that her sadness seemed to somehow exclude me. I had imagined us weeping together, imagined myself comforting her. We had always shared even our smallest and most ridiculous tragedies with each other. Instead she was behind layers and layers of glass. It made me furious. I was sixteen; I had a little black stone for a heart; what more can I say? But Lorrie Ann had suffered a profound loss.

Terry had been, to a large extent, the raison d'être of the entire Swift family. It was for him, and out of love for him and his dream of being a musician, that they all scrimped and saved and shared the tiny one-bedroom apartment. (Lorrie Ann had annexed a portion of the living room behind some bookcases; Bobby had moved onto the balcony and slept in a tent out there even when it rained.) Dana faithfully taught preschool, which paid badly, but was work she enjoyed, and Terry played as a set musician sporadically, but lucratively, and pursued his own musical projects full-time. They believed they were blessed to be so lucky as to do work that they believed in.

His band, called Sons of Eden, despite the name, did not sound particularly Christian. None of their songs even mentioned Jesus. Then again, they didn't mention sex, drugs, or alcohol either, which was remarkable in and of itself in a rock band. Terry didn't want to shove his religion down anybody's throat. He just wanted to be a decent man who was also a musician. It bothered him that so many rock stars were such revolting ethical specimens. Why on earth did people take a musician more seriously if he was loaded? How did that make his music more authentic? And yet it seemed to. Terry experienced every day this peculiar kind of discrimination. "Even if you're not loaded, try singing like you're loaded," a record exec had once advised him.

But Terry would not, and his crisp vocal annunciation and technically brilliant guitar playing allowed him to get small record contracts that rarely made any money at all, but did provide a creative outlet and some tangible proof for the family that all their sacrifices had been worth it.

I remember that I found it particularly maddening that he wrote songs for Lorrie Ann. We went once to a summer festival where his band was playing. It was a glorious day, filled with cotton candy and sunburn and corn dogs. Bobby's friend Tio was there, and I was convinced that somehow Tio might fall in love with me and decide that our six-year age difference was of no consequence. Both boys were indulgent of us and let us follow them around without making us feel like hangers-on. It was wonderful. And just as the sun was setting, Sons of Eden took the stage, and they started the set like this: "This song is for my angel, my little girl, my Lorrie Ann."

And then Terry proceeded to sing the most beautiful song I think I'd ever heard, with strange surreal lyrics I could barely follow wherein Lorrie Ann seemed to be conceived as some kind of barefoot angel that went around Southern California on the bus system, giving comfort to homeless schizophrenics and fat little kids and women who were afraid their husbands no longer loved them. The chorus went: "Get back into the bus, Lo-Lola / Get back into the bus, Lo-Lola!"

I had never been so jealous in my life.

And so when Terry died, an era ended for the Swifts. They went on living in the one-bedroom apartment. Lorrie Ann kept on going to high school. Bobby kept on going to community college, though what his ultimate plans were became vaguer and vaguer. But now they were all living in an untenable situation surrounded by far, far too many gnomes for no good reason. In a very literal sense, their lives had lost their music, their rhythm. Without Terry, they

slowly stopped gathering for Friday-night horror movies or family trips to the world's oldest McDonald's, in Downey.

Perhaps the worst part of all this was that Lorrie Ann stopped singing. She had always been a talented singer with a sweet and natural soprano like one of those Appalachian folksingers. Her voice had a crystal-clear quality that made your heart shiver, as though the notes were all wineglasses falling but never hitting the floor. She had loved to sing complex harmonies with her father, and he had been teaching her both the six-string and the twelve-string guitar, at which she had shown tremendous promise. She stopped practicing entirely, as far as I knew, though perhaps she began again after I went off to college.

Everything was changing so fast. And Terry's death was just the first thing, the first *tap-tap* on Lorrie Ann's windowpane by those bad luck vultures. Over the next few years, more and more of them would come, bobbing their burned-looking heads, the skin of their faces red and raw and peeling.

In fact, the Corona del Mar in which Lorrie Ann and I grew up actually ceased to exist almost at the exact moment we left it. You can, of course, still go there now, but you will find only young women pushing Bugaboo strollers in Lululemon yoga pants, flaunting their postpartum tummy tucks. The playgrounds are swollen with little Jaydens and Skylers. The old bungalows have been ripped down and replaced with mini-mansions with two-car garages. More and more expensive restaurants serving "American cuisine" have opened along the highway, and boutiques have replaced most of the mysterious Oriental rug emporiums that once dominated that stretch of Pacific Coast Highway.

But when Lorrie Ann and I were girls, Corona del Mar was half empty, somewhat decayed, beautifully perfumed. Always there was jasmine on the wind, or the subtler, greener scent of potato vine, or the almost hostile peppery

scent of bougainvillea. In every median and useless ditch, ice plant grew with frightening tenacity, and you could break off sprigs of it and write with water on the sidewalks, secret messages that the sun would dry to invisibility like disappearing ink. There were tufts of some kind of sour yellow flower you could chew as you marched along the highway, swinging your backpack on your shoulders so that it whacked you in a satisfying rhythm, on your way to the Chevron, where you intended to buy Dr Pepper but steal gum. There were hardly any cars, hardly any people. You walked around on sidewalks as blank and shining as drafting paper!

It was a distinctly unreal place, and I don't think any of us had any intention of staying. There were no jobs in the area; the houses were too small and too expensive. We couldn't picture ourselves making actual lives there. Even our parents planned on leaving, on moving somewhere more reasonable, eventually.

Still, back in the spring of Terry's death, we had no idea how quickly we would lose Corona del Mar. We thought, or at least I thought, that Terry's death was just another of the exciting things that was happening to us, a plot event planned out by the writers in advance to provide occasions for good dialogue and new romantic entanglements. I thought we were just a few digits off from being 90210, and, frankly, I resented the Terry Death Plot because it seemed to cast Lorrie Ann in the lead, and she was always cast in the lead!

When would it be my turn? When, when, when?

If my thoughts during this period were both predictable and disappointing, Lorrie Ann's were doubtless more interesting. I was given only fleeting glimpses into the labyrinth of her mind, and so was forced to piece together her inner world through inference and observation.

I already knew that Lorrie Ann had a peculiar predilection for the ethical. As a simple example, when we

read *Little Women*, her favorite character was Beth. It so happened that I had read ahead and knew what happened in the book. (We often read books together, and I often read further and faster than she did, so that it became our practice to buy only one paperback copy, which I would then tear in half once I had reached the nadir of the novel, giving her the beginning and reserving for myself the end.)

"You can't like Beth best," I told her. "Pick someone else."

"But Beth's my favorite!" Lorrie Ann had insisted.

"You should like Jo," I said. "Beth's stupid."

"She is not. She's the only one who really cares about the soldiers and the war. She's always knitting socks and things. All the other girls are just kind of selfish."

I craned my head to look up at her. Lorrie Ann was sprawled on her narrow twin bed, which was canopied in a waterfall of fluffy mosquito netting and pink ribbons, her mother's budget version of every little girl's dream, and I was sitting with my back braced against the side of the mattress, facing away from her, so it hurt to crane my head to look at her. Her face was upside down to me, which made her mouth look like the mouth of a frightening monster, even though her teeth were nice and straight. (My teeth were not. They suffered from "crowding." I had had braces at one time, but then something catastrophic happened, and we were no longer able to afford it, and so I was given a retainer instead, which I promptly lost.)

"Beth dies," I said.

"No, she doesn't," Lorrie Ann insisted, sure that I was just messing with her.

"She does. Skip ahead. She dies." I was still craning my head awkwardly to look up at her upside-down face. Lorrie Ann bit her lip, and then—and this was such a Lorrie Ann thing to do, it almost made me sick—she said nothing.

"You don't believe me?" I asked.

"So she dies," Lorrie Ann said. "She's still my favorite."

You simply couldn't disabuse her of this kind of nonsense.