

ALL THE BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

A NOVEL



Elizabeth J. Church



BALLANTINE BOOKS

NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Hardback ISBN 978-0-399-18106-1

Ebook ISBN 978-0-399-18107-8

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Book design by Victoria Wong

Dance, when you're broken open.
Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance when you're perfectly free.

—Rumi

Lily Decker





The light from the gooseneck lamp on top of the church organ turned Mrs. Olson's face cadaver white as she played "O God of Mercy, God of Might." Seated next to Aunt Tate in the unforgiving wooden pew, twelve-year-old Lily wrapped her arms around her gut, which had harbored a deep, persistent ache since before the second hymn. Finally, Pastor Lester intoned the benediction and released the sanctified congregation.

Lily immediately headed downstairs to the church bathroom, which wasn't much more than a stingy coat closet. When she looked at the crotch of her panties, she saw blood. *Oh no oh no oh no oh no*. A string of dark, thick blood dripped from inside her, and there was more blood in the toilet bowl.

Was this God's doing? Was this one of the things that the all-powerful, vengeful God did to punish bad girls? She knew that what she did with Uncle Miles was evil, and God did seem so very fond of bloody atonement. Lily wadded toilet paper into her panties and then sat uncomfortably through her sixth-grade Sunday school lesson.

Aunt Tate was waiting in the car when Lily finished class. "What did you learn today?" she asked, waving to some of her Bible-study friends like Margaret Steepleton, who kept a handkerchief tucked between her bulwark breasts and blew her nose loudly at least seventeen thousand times during the pastor's tedious sermon.

"The story of the prodigal son," Lily dutifully reported. Then she took a deep breath, steeling herself to tell Aunt Tate about the blood and possible impending doom. "Aunt Tate? I'm bleeding."

Aunt Tate turned to look at Lily. “Where? Did you fall?”

“No.” It was hard, but Lily knew she needed help, that something was horribly wrong. “Down there,” Lily whispered, looking out the windshield and across the street to the Texaco station, thinking about the smell of gasoline, the way oil puddles on the asphalt formed galaxies of rainbows. “It hurts,” she said, still avoiding her aunt’s stare and holding a hand to the ache in her belly.

“Between your legs.”

“Yes.”

Aunt Tate closed her eyes and leaned forward until her forehead rested on the steering wheel.

So, it was true. Lily was going to die. Or at least she was very sick, and there would be hospital bills. She’d *bankrupt them*. They would be roaming the streets, *penniless*.

Margaret Steepleton knocked on Aunt Tate’s window. “Tate, honey? You all right?”

Aunt Tate rolled down her window. “She’s got the curse,” she said, tipping her head in Lily’s direction. “First time.”

Mrs. Steepleton leaned in the window and beamed across the seat at Lily, “Congratulations, sweetheart! Now you’re a woman!”

The curse? Since the accident, Lily had always known she was cursed. But was it a curse simply to be a woman?

“Lord, help me.” Aunt Tate sighed as Margaret Steepleton trundled off to join her husband and two boys. Her aunt’s voice was flat and unyielding, like the iron skillet that wouldn’t fit in the cupboard and so sat on the stove’s back burner, black, heavy, and inert.

They stopped at the drugstore on the way home, and Aunt Tate bought Lily a sanitary belt and a big box of napkins with a picture of a dreamy woman strolling through meadows of flowers. She showed Lily how to wear the belt low on her hips and had Lily practice attaching the napkin tabs snugly to the belt’s metal fittings.

“You’re growing up so fast. A young woman, nearly,” Aunt Tate said wistfully. “So much ahead of you,” she summed up.

“Does the aching go away?” Lily asked, and for a moment she saw confusion on her aunt’s face.

“Oh, the belly pain, you mean. Let’s get the hot water bottle.”

Aunt Tate helped Lily lie down with the soothing heat of the pig-pink water bottle planted squarely over her belly, and they split a special Almond Joy candy bar Aunt Tate called “medicinal under the circumstances.”

Lily fell asleep wondering about the connection between blood and womanhood. She hadn’t been able to make herself ask Aunt Tate *why* she was bleeding, if it had a purpose, other than inconvenience and ignominy. Was it something to do with God’s unending wrath toward Eve, the curse Aunt Tate talked about? Was that why only women harbored secret, open wounds?

ON SATURDAYS LILY swept and dusted. She got down on her hands and knees and scrubbed the kitchen’s green and white linoleum. In the bathroom, she held her breath and washed away the yellow splashes of urine Uncle Miles left on the porcelain toilet bowl.

Alongside Aunt Tate, she learned how to make stew and soups, chipped beef on toast, casseroles, and hash from leftover pot roast. She mastered pastry, crimping a perfect blanket of crust over apples, cherries, or peaches. Aunt Tate taught her to fold laundry properly, how to iron simple things like sheets, pillowcases, and dresser scarves. When Lily conquered the straightforward items, she moved on to more difficult things like Uncle Miles’ work shirts and Aunt Tate’s cotton blouses.

One afternoon, Lily opened the linen cupboard and shifted a pile of sheets to make room for her fresh ironing. Beneath the sheets, she found a cardboard folder that held a portrait of her parents. Her mother wore a light gray suit with a big chrysanthemum corsage, and her father had his arm about her mother’s shoulders, an unmistakable flash of joy in his eyes that Lily thought she remembered, even if she could no longer hear his voice.

There was a newspaper clipping folded inside, and Lily read the article from the *Salina Journal* dated June 10, 1957, four years ago. It featured a picture of her family's car, mangled and topless. Another picture showed the Aviator's brand-new, black 1957 Chrysler 300-C, which the caption said was a *production-line muscle car with enough power to reach one hundred miles per hour in second gear*. At the time of the accident, the Aviator was traveling an estimated 130 miles per hour.

Lily saw *decapitated* and *ten-year-old Dawn Marie Decker thrown from the car* and *the miracle of Lily Francine Decker's survival*. Sheriff Ingram was described as having hot tears in his eyes when he said that no one would ever know why the Buick had been traveling on the wrong side of the road. "Could be the Deckers swerved to avoid hitting a coyote," he'd said. "Maybe a raccoon or a skunk. But it'll be a mystery, always." Ingram said the thirty-seven-year-old Aviator would not be cited, although he'd been cautioned to watch his speed. "No one to blame," the sheriff concluded.

Decapitated. Lily felt the word as a sharp, unexpected blow to her solar plexus. She hadn't known. They'd kept it from her—the gruesome death of her parents. And the Aviator hadn't told her the truth, not the whole truth. The Aviator had let her believe that the accident was his fault, but Lily's father had been driving on the wrong side of the road.

Lily tucked the clipping and portrait back beneath the sheets and closed the cupboard door. She put it all back where it was supposed to be, buried and hidden away.

SHE LICKED HER fingers and touched herself the way Uncle Miles had taught her. She wet her fingers in her mouth once more and sent them back as quickly as possible, not wanting to lose the sensation she was building, a skyscraper of guilty pleasure and release. She needed to keep the pressure steady and so had the idea to wedge the satiny edge of her blanket between her legs. She squeezed with her thighs, tight-

ened, released and tightened her muscles until it arrived—that sensation of heat and freedom.

After Lily was done, she swore she would never do it again. She would stop. No one had told her it was a sin or bad or sick, but she knew it was. If it had to do with Uncle Miles, it was bad. The knowledge of her perversity was solid.

Lily didn't understand any of it—not the irresistible impulse to engage or any reason behind the pleasure. It was a disgusting need that Uncle Miles had ignited within her. Surely other girls didn't feel this way, know these things, do these things. Her very core was diseased.

"I've been looking forward to this all day," he said one summer night when Lily felt a soft, cooling breeze coming through her open window. The Sorensons' yippy little dog had just finished a protracted, panicked bout of barking. Uncle Miles pushed up her nightgown and ran his rough hand up her leg. "You're getting such long legs," he said. "Young filly." Uncle Miles' hand reached her crotch. "What's this?" he said. "Off. Get them off of you."

"But—"

"Then I'll do it." He slipped his hand into the waistband of her panties and yanked. The sanitary belt stayed with the panties, slid down with them as he tugged. He spotted the pad.

"You've got your monthlies?" he said, pulling back.

She was surprised that Aunt Tate hadn't told him, but she was instantly grateful that her aunt had kept it to herself.

"Since when?" Uncle Miles asked, and Lily realized that for some incomprehensible reason, Uncle Miles was suddenly worried.

"A few months."

"Oh." He reached for the bedcovers and threw them over her exposed body. "Shit."

With the exception of a sporadic "damnation" when the wrench slipped and cut him or when the lawn mower refused to start, Uncle Miles rarely swore.

"Then that's that," he said, standing and looking down at her. He

walked out of her room and actually closed the door completely, the click of the latch an unprecedented explosion of sound.

Lily lay there, trying to comprehend. Some part of her knew Uncle Miles was gone forever, that he wouldn't come back. But why not? What had she done? And why was even a fraction of her feeling sadly rejected, as if she'd failed? Why was she anything other than joyfully relieved? *Now* what had she done wrong?

THROUGHOUT LILY'S EARLY teenage years, the Aviator continued to pay her dance school tuition. Lily studied tap and modern dance, which Aunt Tate pronounced "a good deal of meaningless thrashing." Lily learned ballroom dancing and started to work on ballet positions (*à la seconde, effacé*), but Aunt Tate couldn't afford the toe shoes, and because Lily would never presume to ask the Aviator for more, ballet remained a dream. Still, she could jitterbug and do the Charleston and shimmy and mimic Gene Kelly's easy, athletic leaps and Cyd Charisse's sexy, long-limbed elegance. *An American in Paris* and *Singin' in the Rain* instantly became her favorite movies when she watched them as reruns on *Dialing for Dollars* after school.

The Aviator faithfully attended all of Lily's *Tah-Dah!* dance performances, and Lily knew he'd be at the upcoming recital of *Enchanted Woodlands*, too. Some of the younger girls chose to be squirrels. One was a big, clumsy bear, and several flitted across the stage as chattering birds. This time Lily was nervous—largely (and as usual) because of the pressure she'd put on herself. With hard work, she'd earned a solo, which meant she could choreograph the final piece of the evening for herself.

Lily wanted to be different, to perform something that transcended childhood and matched the fact that she would soon be moving on to high school. In the library, she learned the word *diaphanous* and read the myth of Daphne, the beautiful nymph who spurned every suitor, even Apollo. When Daphne asked her father, a river god, to help her escape from Apollo, her father turned her into a laurel tree. It was an

abominable, cruel solution. A daughter asked for help, and her father's incomprehensible response was to sentence her to eternity as a tree, with roots bound to the earth.

Lily wanted to free Daphne—at least for a while—and so Lily's Daphne leapt onto the empty stage and danced as if escape were possible. She wore a green leotard, chestnut brown tights, and she'd sewn lengths of pink, rose, and fuchsia ribbons to the arms of her leotard. A diadem of leaves interspersed with ribbons crowned her loose, flowing hair. She felt free, transported. And beautiful.

Lily covered every corner of the boards with her leaps, and she let her arms float in graceful, ever-moving arcs so that her ribbons wove patterns about her. She threw her head back, closed her eyes in rapture as if she were thrusting her defiant face into Apollo's sun. Then, in keeping with the myth's inevitably, Lily began to freeze. Mustering great dramatic authority, Lily stuck her feet to the floor of the stage. Inch by inch, with exquisite control and painful slowness, Lily stilled her body until only her fingertips quivered with musical breezes. The ribbons hung lifeless. She held her mouth to the audience in a silent, open O—an arrested scream.

There was a long silence, and then they applauded. Someone even shouted "*Bravo!*" Lily bowed, letting her ribbons trail on the floor of the stage, and as she calmed her breath, she felt the audience's energy lift her skyward. She kept her eyes closed as a beatific glow possessed her. When one of the younger dance students touched her arm, Lily opened her eyes to a bouquet of lilies and baby's breath. She cradled the flowers in her arms and made a final bow, hoping the Aviator knew her thanks—her debt—was to him.

In the hushed car on the way home, Aunt Tate said, "What do you call that?"

"What?"

"That kind of flailing."

"Interpretive dance. It was my interpretation of the character, through dance."

Aunt Tate sighed. “Well, I guess as long as we’re not paying for it.”

A voice inside Lily said, *Don’t let her take this from you.* Still, it hurt. Wasn’t there anything she could do that would make her aunt proud?

Back at the house, Aunt Tate said that lilies smelled of funerals, and so Lily gladly set the vase on the nightstand next to her bed, where the scent of the Aviator’s tribute would perfume her sleep. Lying in the dark, still too fired up to sleep, Lily relived her performance, and she knew Aunt Tate and Uncle Miles had not succeeded. Lily had found a way; she’d done it. The audience had not only seen her, they’d loved her. Lily Decker was not invisible.

A COUPLE DAYS after her dance recital, Aunt Tate left a gift on Lily’s bedside table, next to the vase of fading lilies. When Lily tore open the wrapping paper, she found a crystalline box with a butterfly suspended inside, its wings spread wide as if in optimistic flight. The creature’s wings were a stunning sapphire blue—vibrant, even in death. A card written in her aunt’s cursive read *To match your beautiful eyes, and because you have more spirit than I ever did.* And then, the most amazing, bewildering part of all—Aunt Tate had written, “Love, Aunt Tate.” LOVE.

6



In high school, the bones of Lily's face emerged like the visage of a goddess rising from a deep seabed. She was no longer merely pretty or interesting; her beauty arrested. When she walked the sidewalks of downtown Salina, men spun in their tracks to look at her. Women eyed her with a mixture of studied curiosity and envy. Once, when she was grocery shopping with Aunt Tate, a complete stranger stopped to say, "Now I understand what was meant by 'the face that launched a thousand ships.'" To which Aunt Tate replied, "Well, we're in Kansas, and I don't see any ocean, do you?" At that, the woman walked on, but she turned briefly to shake her head and give Lily a secret, understanding smile.

Any baby fat that had dared to linger now melted from Lily's body. Standing five foot ten, she had a dancer's slim hips, abundant breasts, and she wore her hair bobbed and blunt cut with glowering bangs. Although it was already passé, Lily cultivated beatnik black, morose cool, and mystery touched by a hint of simmering, bedrock rage. She lined her eyes heavily in black, and the look suited her in a way that the perky flips, teased mountaintops of hair, and bright polyester fashions of the midsixties did not.

The Aviator remained in her life, a steady presence, a secret ally. For her sixteenth birthday in 1965 he gave Lily a light blue suitcase record player and fifteen dollars she could use to buy whatever albums she wanted. It was Dylan who spoke most clearly. She took to heart his advice that if you weren't busy being born, then you must be busy dying. She was a disciple of his cynicism, his challenges to everything

from teachers to the president to God. Dylan was her fellow iconoclast; like Lily he distrusted absolutely everyone. With the volume turned down low to keep Uncle Miles from shouting at her, Lily dreamed of highways, of the infinite variety of mountains, of escape.

At age sixteen, Lily walked into Masterson's Grocers and applied for a job. She needed spending money for makeup and sewing supplies, and Uncle Miles had decreed that it was time she contributed to her upkeep, which he set at thirty-five dollars per month. The manager, an already obese twenty-year-old named Harold, had dense patches of acne on his cheeks and daubs of ketchup on his mint-green clip-on bowtie. He hitched up his pants and slowly eyed the curves of Lily's body, letting her know in no uncertain terms why he'd be hiring an inexperienced girl. Harold handed her two pink-and-white uniforms to try on for size, and as she undressed next to shelves of canned goods in a back stockroom, she wondered if he was standing at a peephole, watching. Lily imagined his gaping mouth, his widened eyes, and she took her time before choosing the shorter, tighter dress, the one that would best follow the contours of her body.

Harold assigned her to mark prices and stock shelves—an obvious ploy to have her bend over repeatedly, lean over cases with her box cutter and reveal her cleavage. She was on display, just like the towers of canned peaches and pyramids of apples and oranges on the *This Week Only!* promotions at the endcaps of the grocery aisles. But Lily didn't mind. The grocery store was merely another stage, another setting in which she could experiment, learn what effect her lush body had on men.

She watched Harold's face, the faces of men who came in weary from driving a combine all day, their necks and arms dusted in wheat chaff. Lily learned how to signal bashful innocence, along with a sort of vulnerable availability. She learned how to encourage men to help her when she couldn't *quite*—not *quite* but *almost*—reach the shelves where the Corn Flakes, Froot Loops, and Alpha-Bits cereal boxes lived. She came to realize that men didn't want to see competent inde-

pendence; they wanted to see a slice of need. So she gave them that. Lily knew, too, that none of them considered that she might be intelligent. Her agile mind was not something a single, solitary man cared to consider.

EVERYONE WAS READING Truman Capote's new book about the murders in Holcomb, just a couple hundred miles southwest of Salina. Even Uncle Miles had thumbed through the novel, afterwards puffing out his chest and announcing that those two killers would never have gotten through the door of *his* home. Lily imagined her uncle ineffectively bonking one of the killers over the head with his dusty *Hawaiian* ukulele, like the cartoon horse Quick Draw McGraw's alter ego, the masked and black-caped El Kabong. *Kabong!*

Lily also thought a lot about the killer Perry Smith, about his childhood, his longing for love and his constant leg pain. It threw her—that Perry could be the sympathetic one in the duo, the one with artistic aspirations, but the one, ultimately, who did the butchering. Lily also wondered about the murdered teenage girl who had hidden her watch in the toe of her shoe. The unfairness of it all. Even if you followed all the rules—got straight A's as Lily did—it was no guarantee against wanton destruction.

The state of Kansas had hanged the two men last year, in 1965. For so long, it seemed to be the only thing on the news. Perry Smith and Dick Hickock murdered Kansas' innocence. They killed the myth of idyllic, small-town safety far from the big cities with their slums, poverty, and drugs. Now, people in Salina locked their doors at night. And yet, Lily didn't share the titillating fears of the girls at school; she knew that danger didn't necessarily come from a stranger.

LILY STOOD WITH a towel around her neck and used the ends to catch streams of sweat. They'd been practicing flick kicks, falls, and recoveries. Effortlessly, she folded herself in half, stretching her hamstrings.

“Lily? Might we take a few minutes to talk about your future?”

Mrs. Baumgarten, the owner of the *Tah-Dah!* Dance Studio, leaned against a nearby wall.

Lily was still awash in the complete relaxation she felt after a hard workout, and her thoughts had been elsewhere. “What?” she asked. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Baumgarten, I didn’t hear you.”

“I was saying that I know you plan to dance, but what kind of dance career do you have in mind? Where do you plan to go from here, when you leave Salina?”

Lily took a deep, luxurious breath and tilted her neck to one side until her ear nearly met her shoulder. “I was thinking Hollywood or New York, I guess.” It was the first time she’d ever dared to speak her dream.

Mrs. Baumgarten continued to watch Lily as she stretched. “Your forte is jazz. That’s where I see your skill, your aptitude. And it’s what best fits your body—you have to pair your body with the right movements. It’s as much about a look as it is about technique. And, actually, I have an idea for you. Are you ready?” Lily’s teacher smiled mischievously. “Viva Las Vegas!”

“Elvis? Ann-Margret?” Lily smiled.

“For you, for dance,” Mrs. Baumgarten replied. “Las Vegas is where there’s an exciting, growing jazz dance scene. You’d find it easier to break in there than L.A. or New York. You’d gain valuable experience, build your dance résumé. Then you can try for the more competitive venues.”

“You think I should head to Sin City?” Lily could easily imagine her aunt and uncle’s response to that particular plan.

Mrs. Baumgarten continued as if Lily hadn’t spoken. “The casinos compete with each other for floor shows, dance numbers. And celebrities flock there to perform, to see and be seen.” Lily’s teacher began counting off on her fingers. “Debbie Reynolds. Liberace. Judy Garland. The Rat Pack. *Sammy Davis, Jr.*,” she said with great emphasis, knowing that Lily was wild about his tap dancing. “Think what you could learn, what you’d see. The exposure you’d have.”

Before Lily left that night, Mrs. Baumgarten handed her a stack of *Dance Magazine*. Then she leaned close, and Lily felt her teacher's kiss on her cheek, a brief brush of tenderness. "We'll talk again," she said.

At home in her room, Lily used the photos in *Dance Magazine* to prod her body into new, more complicated movements and configurations. Looking into the mirror above her dresser bureau, she mimicked the professional dancers' hand gestures, the way they held their arms. She jutted her chin, narrowed her eyes, dared her mirror image the way that Nureyev dared the camera, and wished she had his boldness. She'd been twelve when Nureyev defected from the Soviet Union, and she remembered watching news footage of him striding across an airfield in Paris, hearing Uncle Miles say that the sissy's rejection served the commies right. "He can never go back? Never go home again?" she'd asked her uncle. "Never," Uncle Miles pronounced, his fingers dribbling flakes of tobacco into the fold of his cigarette paper. "He'll never see his family again," he'd said with an oddly self-satisfied smile.

Lily began to believe Las Vegas was the answer, and she started to plan. She pulled out the atlas in the school library, studied the route from Salina to Vegas, and counted the state lines she'd cross. She studied the figures in her savings passbook, totaled up how much more she'd be able to save between now and graduation, in just slightly over a year. She'd need bus fare, plus spending money to keep her afloat until she landed a job. Her columns of figures made the whole enterprise increasingly real, and Lily volunteered for extra shifts at the grocery store, just to see the totals multiply satisfyingly. Lily felt a burst of hope. The tallies told her she could do this—would do this. Escape was not only possible; it was within her grasp.

ONE EVENING WHEN Lily, now a senior in high school, got off work, the Aviator was waiting for her. He leaned against the waxed black shine of his car, his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses.

"You need to watch yourself," he said without preamble. "You're asking for trouble."

“What’re you talking about?”

“What you’re doing. With men. I’ve seen you,” he said, dropping the end of his cigarette to the asphalt and crushing it beneath his boot. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

She couldn’t see his eyes, but the set jaw, the taut striations of his neck muscles, told her that he was dead serious.

“I’m not doing *anything* with men,” Lily said. “I don’t even date.” High school boys stared at Lily but were too intimidated to approach her, and she did nothing to encourage them.

“Boys are one thing.” The Aviator picked up the cigarette butt and folded it into his handkerchief. “Leading *men* on—men who would be only too happy to *take* what they see—that’s another story entirely.”

“You’re talking about *flirting*? You’re telling me not to flirt? Who do you think you are?” She paused and then daringly added, “It’s not as if you’re my father.”

The Aviator moved to within a foot of her, and she felt the implicit threat of his height, his muscles. His shadow covered her. But there was a surprising tenderness in his voice when he said, “No, Lily, I’m not your father. I am your friend, and I’m trying to watch out for you.”

Before she could come up with a sarcastic, dismissive response, he climbed into his car, started the engine, and left her there to decide.

LILY FREQUENTED THE thrift store in the basement of the Episcopal church. She’d just this year discovered that the wealthier women of the congregation regularly donated nearly new clothing; some pieces even bore designer labels. Lily had found a pair of Balenciaga boots—black suede that came up and over her knees—for just five dollars. And, there was more: silk blouses, sunglasses, fringed leather purses. She found more fashionable pieces and at better prices than she could at J.C. Penney or Sears, and no one was the wiser.

When she came across a particularly pretty cardigan sweater in a lovely teal, she brought it home for her aunt who, standing before her

bedroom mirror, said, “But with this open weave. It’s a little impractical, isn’t it? What will the girls in Bible-study class say?”

In that moment, Lily felt sympathy for the girl who’d been named Tatum, who’d endured a younger sister who was much, much prettier than she, who’d had to watch her sister marry well. And then who’d been saddled with a bewildering, cast-off child and a husband who night after night sat in his chair, adhered like fungus to the Naugahyde. Lily saw her aunt’s stoicism, her self-defensive rigidity, how desperately she tried to conceal her confusion and fears of inadequacy. And Lily saw that her aunt would never, ever go anywhere. She would never leave Kansas.

It made Lily wonder. Would Mama be thick around the middle, and would Daddy be balding and forgetful? Would they still live in Salina, or would they have moved to a new town, to new sights? What would Dawn be like? Would she be in nursing college or married to a farmer or a railroad engineer or an aircraft mechanic? Would she already have toddlers who would call excitedly for Aunt Lily when she stopped by with Popsicles? Would Dawn make Mama’s Swedish meatball recipe and plan elaborate picnics next to the Smoky Hill River? Would she admire the dance costumes Lily designed and applaud when Lily stood on stage?

“Do you ever think about them?” Lily asked in her sentimental moment of weakness.

“Never,” Aunt Tate said, pulling her arms from the sweater and heading for her bedroom. “And you shouldn’t either,” she added. “Pure self-indulgence.”

Lily heard her aunt’s closet door open and close with finality, and she knew Aunt Tate would never permit herself the treat of the delicate sweater. She’d keep it in that closet, undisturbed, and she’d instead relish her ramrod austerity. Lily nearly went to embrace her aunt. Tate was suddenly such a sad creature, believing that her habitual ferocity could protect her from loss and pain. *Walls*, Lily thought,

keep out the good as well as the bad. She was determined to remember that, not to let fear overtake her, never to risk losing her joy.

FOR THE FIRST Annual *Tah-Dah!* Dance Studio Scholarship Fundraiser, Mrs. Baumgarten rented the Fox-Watson movie theater on South Santa Fe Avenue and managed to get ahold of a print of *Ocean's 11* with Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Peter Lawford, Angie Dickinson and—best of all—Sammy Davis, Jr. Lily sold all of the five-dollar tickets she could at school and work, and she bought a Simplicity pattern for a clean-lined, spaghetti-strap dress. She made it in dark gold satin and hemmed it so that it ended two thirds of the way up her thighs. Even though it was almost too warm for them, she paired the dress with the Balenciaga boots, and she tied a length of black satin ribbon around her neck as a choker. For added drama, Lily moistened her cake of black liner and outlined her eyes as usual, and then she added a third dark line along the crease of her eyelid, like Twiggy. Using an eyebrow pencil, she extended the outer edges of her eyebrows. She applied a pair of false eyelashes and a light-blue cream eye shadow, and finished with Yardley beige-pink lipstick.

“You’re not leaving my house dressed like a whore,” Uncle Miles said when he spied her trying to make a quick exit through the kitchen door. He put both his hands on her forearm and twisted them in opposite directions—a version of what the kids called an Indian burn. When he released her arm, Lily stepped back and accidentally smacked the back of her head against the furnace door.

She felt her upper lip reflexively lift into a snarl. “You’re calling me a whore?” she said, and then waited a meaningful beat. “Quite a statement for a man who *Fucks. Little. Girls.*” she spat, and then caught sight of Aunt Tate standing in the entry to the kitchen.

Aunt Tate sagged heavily against the doorjamb as if her skeleton had been dissolved in acid and all that was left of her was limp, loose skin. Lily cut past Uncle Miles and reached for her aunt’s arm.

“Stay away! Get away from me! I don’t need your help!” Heavy-limbed, Aunt Tate kept a balancing hand against the wall until she reached the kitchen stool and dropped into it. She pressed her lips together, looked from Lily to her husband and then back again. In her aunt’s eyes, Lily saw a teeter-totter of indecision, of weights and balances. And then, it happened. Lily knew before her aunt said a word, and so the words when they came were mere confirmation: “Your uncle’s right. You look like a hooker.”

Lily closed her eyes, dropped her chin to her chest, and slumped against the wall. She wanted darkness. And tears. The release of ten years’ worth of tears—everything she’d held back seemingly forever. But she would never give them that. Instead, she envisioned using her nails to pinch the soft skin inside her upper arm and thought about the relief of leaving half-moon bruises. Or maybe stabbing a fork into her thigh. Razor blades. Any kind of distracting pain.

A thick silence settled over the kitchen. Lily thought she smelled the garlic and onion of ten thousand meals, the sulfur of rotting eggs, hamburger meat gone bad.

Don’t let them diminish you, Scallywag, she told herself, and then, wordlessly, Lily straightened her shoulders and left through the kitchen door. No one tried to stop her. When she reached the curb, she used trembling fingers to light a cigarette and stood in the spot where she habitually waited for her friend from dance class to come pick her up. Even though the evening was mild, she wrapped her arms around her shoulders and began shivering. Her whole body vibrated; she could feel her legs shaking, her lips trembling. She shuddered—big shudders that hunched her shoulders suddenly, made her throw her head back as if she were having a seizure. She stomped her feet, did a little softshoe to warm herself, tried to trick her body out of its inclination toward a state of shock. She felt as though she’d been hit, and hit hard, by something harsh and unforgiving.

Lily looked back at the scene that played out in the kitchen win-

dow. She saw Uncle Miles lower his bulk into one of the kitchen dinette chairs, Aunt Tate frozen in place on the pedestal of the kitchen step stool. They made her think of a brightly lit department-store window display—something some deluded romantic would call Domestic Bliss.

It had been coming, this revelation. Inevitable. Barreling down the pike toward them, for years. And now it was done. Anticlimactic.

She'd been right never to have told Aunt Tate. Look at her there, diminished, stalled on that kitchen stool. Aunt Tate wouldn't have stood up for a younger Lily any more than she did now. She wouldn't have protected Lily. She wouldn't have chosen Lily over her husband. No, instead she would have said, *No, no, no. I don't think so not the man I married.* There was too much Aunt Tate would have to admit to herself, were she to hear what Lily had to say.

Anger born of rejection bubbled up, and Lily was tempted to go back inside. She wanted destruction. She wanted to pull down Aunt Tate's curtain rods, leave craters where the bolts had once fit so snugly within the wall. She wanted to empty the kitchen cabinets of the china Aunt Tate had bought using the Green Stamps Lily had so faithfully pasted into booklets. Lily pictured hurling those cheap plates against the wall. She imagined shackling Uncle Miles to a radiator, holding the flame of a lighter beneath his chin, and making Aunt Tate watch it all. But mostly, Lily wanted to make herself bleed. To slice the tender, sweet skin of her forearms until red rivers flowed and her true wounds were rendered visible.

THE FOX-WATSON THEATRE, where the *Tah-Dah!* fundraiser took place, was a wonderful art deco concoction of crystal chandeliers, a fantastic stairway, and luxurious, gold-leaf highlights. Still feeling an uneasy trembling in her legs, Lily stood in the lobby and leaned against the cigarette machine, taking it all in. Mrs. Baumgarten appeared in a silk caftan and turban, rings and bangles and long, dangling earrings. The silk was tangerine with a pattern of tumbling crimson tulips.

She kissed Lily on both cheeks and gently, inconspicuously, took Lily's forearm in her hands. She held Lily's arm between them, intimate. "Who?" she asked, indicating the bruise that was surfacing like lies long buried.

But Lily just smiled weakly into her teacher's face. She didn't want a scene, and it was too late for remedies. She just wanted out. Out of Salina in four weeks and six days. She covered her arm with the opposite hand, held it against her waist, and failed to come up with any response, even though her teacher's sympathetic gaze lingered.

The movie was disappointing. Sammy Davis, Jr., sang, but he didn't dance—not as he had in *Robin and the 7 Hoods*, when he twirled guns, tap-danced on and off of a bar and a roulette table, and exuded boundless energy. Still, there were Vegas dancers in the background in several scenes, and Lily focused on those segments, memorizing every detail. The girls' outfits were perfect—lots of plumage, bared legs with beautiful pointed heels and sky-high kicks.

After the film, people milled about in the lobby saying their good-byes. Lily spotted a lovely woman standing beside the Aviator. His date wore an aqua jacket and skirt, and the collar of a bone-colored silk blouse peeked shyly from beneath her short jacket. She had brown hair cut just below chin level and a delicate nose. *Rarified*, Lily thought, like Jackie Kennedy—sophisticated, simple. But maybe just a little bit dull and unimaginative.

The Aviator left his date's side and crossed the room to Lily. He took in the tall suede boots, the now much-wrinkled homemade dress, and he ran a hand across her hair, smoothing flyaway strands. His touch sent a shock through her. "You're beautiful," he said. Then he seemed to sense the intimacy of his grooming of her, and he shoved his hand into the pocket of his blazer. "You're so grown-up," he said wistfully before turning to find his date.

Lily stood there, becalmed, as she watched him walk away. It had never before occurred to her that the Aviator could have any woman in his life, other than Lily.

. . .

A FEW AFTERNOONS later, Aunt Tate found Lily at the sewing machine in the corner of the dining room and asked, “What are you working on?”

Other than perfunctory, necessary phrases, it was the first time Aunt Tate had spoken to her since the night of the fundraiser. Lily recognized the overture, released the pressure on the sewing machine’s knee-operated control lever, and peered up at her aunt, who looked completely enervated, as if she hadn’t slept in weeks. Aunt Tate was pathetic, Lily realized—a weak, albino stalk of a flower struggling to grow in the dark of a closet shelf.

I’ll escape, Lily thought, but this poor woman will never leave. I’m stronger than the both of them. And so, feeling somewhat conciliatory, Lily said, “This is my final project for Miss Lambkin’s class.” She held up the deep rose brocade. “It’ll be a lined evening-dress jacket, something I can wear over a skirt, maybe dress up with a piece of costume jewelry.” She’d already sewn a pair of bell-bottom pants out of the material and loved the way the fabric stretched across what some of the other dance students referred to as “the Grand Canyon of your hips.” That canyon took two hundred sit-ups a night on the rag rug next to Lily’s bed, but it was worth it.

“Pretty,” Aunt Tate said. “But it’s musty in here. You should open a window.” She touched Lily’s shoulder fleetingly, so lightly that it could instead have been the minute brush of a passing moth’s wings.

“Aunt Tate?”

Her aunt paused but kept her back to Lily as if she somehow knew that Lily was going to take that one, placatory gesture and use it to open a chasm in their lives.

“I’m not a liar. I never have been,” Lily said and watched her aunt’s back stiffen.

Without a word, Aunt Tate left the room, and soon Lily could hear her in the kitchen, putting together the evening meat loaf.

Lily sat with her hands in her lap. She picked a few spent threads from her jeans. It was only when she heard her aunt snuffle and then blow her nose that she knew Aunt Tate was remembering all the nights Uncle Miles had left their bed and made his way down the darkened hallway to Lily.



“But I do have a plan,” Lily said as the Aviator stood beside her. Although it was her day off, she was in the produce section of Masterson’s, doing Aunt Tate’s grocery shopping. A couple of women who’d been poking at the pears and cantaloupes looked up, but the Aviator charmed them with a smile, and they returned to their quest for peak ripeness. “I *do* have a plan,” Lily repeated.

“College?” He filled a paper produce bag with exactly seven Granny Smith apples and folded down the top with precision.

Lily snorted. “No.”

“Why not?”

“For starters, we can’t afford it.”

“But you can.”

“Right,” she said, looking at her aunt’s list, the one her uncle had added to in his left-handed, back-slanting cursive: *dow nuts, choclut Marshmello cookys*.

The radio station was playing the just released Beatles album, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and Lily heard the lyrics of “She’s Leaving Home.” It was as if the Beatles had written the song just for her. The girl in the song stepped outside her front door and was free. Soon, Lily would do the same.

Seeing her distraction, the Aviator said, “Let’s talk in the parking lot.”

Lily sat in the passenger seat of the Aviator’s Thunderbird and double-checked the change the clerk had given her. She folded the receipt and shoved it all into the front pocket of her hip-hugger jeans.

“You’re a bright, bright girl,” the Aviator began, and she could smell his aftershave—a tart, citrus scent. He was wearing camel-colored khakis and a soft, white cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled loosely to his elbows. His fingernails were perfectly manicured, the nails buffed—a decided contrast to the decades of grease that accumulated beneath the nails of Uncle Miles’ sliced and diced mechanic’s hands.

“I’m a dancer. Not a college girl.”

“With an IQ of 155.”

“Who says?”

“Your guidance counselor.” He pushed in the cigarette lighter when he saw her shake a Salem from her pack.

“You were talking to Mrs. Holcomb about me?”

“I was.” He held the hot, orange coil of the lighter to the tip of her cigarette.

“I didn’t even know,” she said, rolling down the window and blowing smoke out into the parking lot. “I purposely did not go in to hear my scores.” Lily noticed that the Aviator smoked Marlboros. “Come to Marlboro Country,” she said, using her deepest voice to imitate the commercial. It fit the Aviator—the long, lean, isolated cowboy who was a man in every sense of the word. Took no guff, lived life his way.

He sighed. “I’m trying to have a meaningful conversation with you.”

“I know,” she said, pulling open the ashtray, tapping her cigarette. It didn’t surprise her that the Aviator’s ashtray looked as if it’d been washed clean in a sink. “You’re a bit of a neat freak, aren’t you?” she said.

“I like to do things right. Which is why I’m trying to talk to you.” Together they watched a young mother pushing a baby stroller while trying to pull up the strap of her shoulder bag. “You realize that 100 is average. A score of 155 is in what’s considered the very superior range.”

She hadn’t. All she knew was that when they took the test, she’d

finished an easy twenty minutes before everyone else, and not because she'd put her pencil down and decided not to try.

"Let's go at it from another angle," the Aviator said, all efficiency and logic. "What *is* your plan?"

"To dance."

"To dance." He sighed. "A girl with an IQ of 155 should be capable of more specific planning. Even if she has been brought up by heathens."

"You know, that's what my dad called them. Heathens," she said, looking at the Aviator, his upright posture, his flat abdomen. She saw something flash across his face—a mixture of pain and memory. "I'm sorry," Lily said, touching his forearm. "I didn't mean . . ."

"Do you see the irony of this?" he pleaded. "You? Apologizing to me?"

A soft rain had begun to fall, dotting the windshield with drops that ran until they randomly joined each other. *Is that what people did, too?* Lily wondered. Fall and drift until they collided with one another, the way the Aviator had collided with her ten years ago?

As he rested his fingertips between his brows, she realized her hand was still on his forearm, and she kept it there, increased the pressure. "You've been good to me," she said. "Better to me than anyone else. I've always known I could depend on you."

"Then let me help you. Let me help you with college. There's money," he said, now earnestly looking at her. "I've saved. You have a college fund. Please don't throw your life away."

She took back her hand, stared into her lap. "Thank you," she said. "I'm grateful, really. But if you truly want to help me, then help me get to Las Vegas. To dance. That's what I want."

"Vegas?"

"Mrs. Baumgarten says it's the best place for jazz dance. A place where I can learn from real pros. *Accessible*," she said, coming up with the best word she could think of to summarize the perfection of her Baumgarten-assisted plan.

She watched him struggle with the idea, weighing his will against hers. Finally, he said, “That’s what you really want? You’re certain?”

“It’s the one thing I do know,” she said, simply.

“Well then. I won’t stand in the way of your dream.”

You can’t stand in my way, she thought but did not say. *No one can.*

She thought about explaining to him that dance was something she needed. How it purified her body. How, when she exerted herself physically, she felt the strength of her limbs, that they belonged only to her. That for however long she moved to music, Uncle Miles’ proprietary insistence became obsolete. But Lily didn’t explain. She could not pass through that stone wall from shameful shadow to bright sunlight—not even for the Aviator.

The rain came down more insistently, and through her open window it wet the sleeve of her paisley-patterned blouse. “I have to get going.” She used her sleeve to wipe water from the car upholstery. “Or I’ll catch hell.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” he said, his voice soft, sad.

Taking the grocery bag into her arms and opening the car door, Lily pretended not to understand.

At dance class the next day, Mrs. Baumgarten delivered one of the Aviator’s books to Lily. It was a gilt-edged 1942 edition of Walt Whitman’s collected poems, and on a plain white strip of paper intended as a bookmark, the Aviator had written “*The hungry gnaw that eats me night and day.*” *I understand this is your need to dance.* She saw the line embedded in the poem “From Pent-Up Aching Rivers.” The gift, Lily thought, was not the book. It was his understanding.

IN THE WEE hours of the morning after she graduated as one of the top ten in the class of 1967, Lily left a bouquet of daisies on the dining room table. She set it next to a blouse she’d made for her aunt, along with a card that said *Thank You* on the front in silver embossed letters. Inside, Lily had written a paragraph of gratitude for taking her in, teaching her, and providing for her. She signed it with *love* because the

other options—*sincerely, fondly, best wishes*—all seemed needlessly cruel. And maybe—in fact, honestly—she did love her aunt, despite everything. It was no one’s fault that they were mismatched, just as much or more so than Mama and Aunt Tate had been. And Aunt Tate really had done her best. She simply wasn’t capable of more—or she might long ago have left her husband. Escaped Salina.

Lily didn’t leave anything for Uncle Miles, certainly no forwarding address or information other than that she was leaving Kansas to dance. Then, Lily walked out of the house and climbed into the Aviator’s waiting car.

It was barely after four A.M. when she stood with him in the bus depot parking lot. About her neck Lily wore a fine gold chain on which she’d strung her mother’s engagement and wedding rings—a graduation gift from Aunt Tate. Lily pulled the rings from beneath her blouse, fingered them and thought of her mother’s hands dusted in flour, sewing a button on her father’s shirt, and teaching Lily how to tie her shoes. Had her mother braced those beautiful hands on the dashboard when she saw the Aviator’s car coming?

“I’m sorry I didn’t make you a gift,” Lily told him. “But nothing would have been enough, and I didn’t know what would say goodbye in the right way.”

The Aviator took her chin in his hand. He lifted her face, and for a moment she thought he might kiss her lips. A part of her wanted that. Instead, he slipped his thumb into the cleft of her chin, let it rest there, calm and steadying. She saw that he might cry, and so she took his wrist, closed her eyes, and kissed his beating pulse.

Leaving the Aviator was like leaving her real family, once and for all. The finality of it hit her, hard, and she felt her knees threatening to drop her to the pavement. Instead, she turned and walked into the bus terminal.

AT SOME POINT, every girl in Kansas dressed as Dorothy for Halloween. Pinafore, petticoat, simple white blouse, a straw basket for trick-

or-treat candy, demure ankle socks, and red shoes. *Goodbye, Dorothy*, Lily thought, *good riddance to you and all of your “There’s no place like home” bullshit.*

Lily remembered when a teacher had told them that Kansas was once a vast inland sea. She’d hunted fossils with Beverly Ann and tried to imagine how change could have occurred on such a massive scale. She remembered the tadpoles she and Dawn had caught and watched grow. If Kansas could go from sea to prairie, if a frog egg could radically transform itself from an almost-fish with gills to an amphibian that left water for land, then Lily could transform, too.

At the Colorado border Lily decided that her new self deserved a fresh name. Lily Decker would become Ruby Wilde. She thought it worked—her dark red hair, the elegance lent by that extra *e*, like *shoppe*.

Lily looked at her palm, studying the lines of influence on her Mount of Venus at the base of her thumb. The lines were said to represent the friends, teachers, enemies, and lovers who change and shape existences. Lily had countless fine lines on her palm, and many of the lines touched, even traveled across her life line. She recognized the deep lines of her childhood: Aunt Tate, Uncle Miles. The Aviator. Her parents. Dawn.

People come and go, Lily thought. Sometimes they vanish unwillingly, the resulting break adamant, like a sharp slap of the ruler across the palm—decisive, unequivocal. Others leave with as little thought as the tip of the finger that snuffs out the life of an ant crawling across a pantry shelf.

Beyond her window, Lily saw fence posts and dull-eyed cattle. Black hawks circled, eyeing the ground for deer mice and lizards. Clouds coalesced and broke into discrete puffs. It was June 9, 1967, exactly ten years since her family had dissolved like sugar stirred into iced tea. Lily settled back into her seat and relaxed. She’d done it. Ruby Wilde was on her way.