

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is not a book about mental health, but about how it can be used as a weapon.

It's a historical book. And as the people about whom I've written used their own contemporaneous terms to describe "madness" --such as *the insane* and *lunatics* and *maniacs* --I have used them too, though they're clearly not acceptable or appropriate in the modern age. As I hope this book will make clear, they were always blanket terms anyway, too broad and all--encompassing ever to be useful or sensitive to truth.

It's a nonfiction book. Everything in it is based on careful historical research. Every line of dialogue comes from a memoir, letter, trial transcript, or some other record made by someone who was present at the time.

It's a book that is set over 160 years ago. A lot has changed. A lot hasn't. We are only just beginning to appreciate exactly how a person's powerlessness may lead to struggles with their mental health. With that understanding, statistics showing higher rates of mental illness in women, people of color, and other disenfranchised groups become translated into truth: *not* a biological deficiency, as doctors first thought, but a cultural creation that, if we wanted to, we could do something about.

So in the end, this is a book about power. Who wields it. Who owns it. And the methods they use.

And above all, it's about fighting back.

There's no more powerful way to silence someone
than to call them crazy.

—Holly Bourne, 2018

Confusion has seized us, and all things go wrong,
The women have leaped from "their spheres,"
And, instead of fixed stars, shoot as comets along,
And are setting the world by the ears!...
They've taken a notion to speak for themselves,
And are wielding the tongue and the pen...
Now, misses may reason, and think, and debate,
Till unquestioned submission is quite out of date...
Like the devils of Milton, they rise from each blow,
With spirit unbroken, insulting the foe.

—*Maria Weston Chapman, 1840*

PROLOGUE

If she screamed, she sealed her fate. She had to keep her rage locked up inside her, her feelings as tightly buttoned as her blouse.

Nevertheless, they came for her. Two men pressed around her, lifting her in their arms, her wide skirts crushed by their clumsy movements—much like her heart inside her chest. Still, she did not fight back, did not lash out wildly, did not slap or hit. The only protest she could permit herself was this: a paralysis of her limbs. She held her body stiff and unyielding and refused to walk to her destiny, no matter how he begged.

Amid the vast crowd that had gathered to bear witness, just one person spoke. The voice was high-pitched and pleading: female, a friend. “Is there no man in this crowd to protect this woman?” she cried aloud. “Is there no man among you? If I were a man, I would seize hold upon her!”

But no man stepped forward. No one helped. Instead, a “silent and almost speechless gaze” met her frightened eyes, their inaction as impotent as her own subjected self.

She didn’t know the truth yet. In time, she would.

The only person who could save her was herself.

PART ONE

BRAVE NEW WORLD

A wife once kissed her husband, and said she, "My own dear Will, how dearly I love thee!"

Who ever knew a lady, good or ill, that did not love her own sweet will?

—*Chicago Jokes and Anecdotes for Railroad Travelers and Fun Lovers, 1866*

Unruly women are always witches, no matter what century we're in.

—*Roxane Gay, 2015*

CHAPTER 1

June 18, 1860
Manteno, Illinois

It was the last day, but she didn't know it.

In truth, we never do.

Not until it is too late.

She woke in a handsome maple bed, body covered by a snow-white counterpane. As her senses resurfaced after a restless night's sleep, Elizabeth Packard's brown eyes blearily mapped the landmarks of her room: embroidered ottoman, mahogany bureau, and smart green shutters that—for some reason—were failing to let in any light.

Ordinarily, her husband of twenty-one years—Theophilus, a preacher—would have been snoring next to her, his gravity-defying, curly red hair an impromptu pillow beneath his head. But a few long weeks before, he'd abandoned their marital bed.

He thought it best, or so he'd said, to sleep alone these days.

Instead, her senses were filled by the precious proximity of her slumbering six-year-old son. Unconsciously, Elizabeth reached out for ten-year-old Libby and baby Arthur too—the other two of her six children who'd taken to sleeping beside her—before remembering. Only George was there. The others were both away from home, in what she hoped was coincidence.

Elizabeth drank in the sight of her sleeping child. She could not help but smile at her “mother-boy”; George was at that adorable age where he had “an all-absorbing love for his mother.” He was

a restless child, for whom the hardest work in the world was sitting still, so it made a change to see him so at peace. His dark hair lay wild against his pillow, pink lips pursing with a child's innocent dreams.

He and her five other children—Arthur, Libby, Samuel, Isaac, and Theophilus III, who ranged in age from eighteen months to eighteen years—were truly “the sun, moon and stars” to Elizabeth: priceless “jewels,” her “train of stars.” She spent her days making their world as wondrous as she could, whether enjoying bath times in the bake-pan or gathering her children about her to tell them tales of her Massachusetts childhood. To see their “happy faces and laughing eyes” offered such blessed light. It was particularly welcome in a world that was becoming, by the day, increasingly black.

Such melancholy thoughts were uncharacteristic for Elizabeth. In normal times, the forty-three-year-old was “always rejoicing.” But the splits that were even now threatening her country—with some forecasting an all-out civil war—were mirrored in her small domestic sphere, within her neat two-story home. Over the past four months, she and her husband had retreated behind those enemy lines, prompting much “anxious foreboding” from Elizabeth.

Last night, that ominous sense of foreboding had plagued her until she could not sleep. Around midnight, she'd given up and crept out of bed. She wanted to know what Theophilus was planning.

She decided to find out.

Quietly, she moved about the house, a ghostly figure in her nightdress, footsteps as muffled as a woman's gagged voice. To her surprise, her husband was not in his bed. Instead, she spied him “noiselessly searching through all my trunks.”

Elizabeth's heart quickened, wondering what he was up to. He'd long been in the habit of trying to control her. "When I was a young lady, I didn't mind it so much," Elizabeth confided, "for then I supposed my husband...knew more than I did, and his will was a better guide for me than my own." She'd grown up in an era when the superiority of men was almost unquestioned, so at first, she'd swallowed that sentiment, believing "woman's chief office is to bear children" and that it was "natural for the moon [woman] to shine with light reflected from the sun."

But over the years, as Theophilus had at various times confiscated her mail, refused her access to her own money, and even removed her from what he deemed the bad influence of her friends, doubts had surfaced. The net he cast about her felt more like a cage than the protection marriage had promised. Once, he'd even threatened to sue a male acquaintance for writing to her without his permission, demanding \$3,000 (about \$94,000 today) for the affront.

In all their years together, however, he had never before rifled through her things at night. Fortunately, he was so engrossed in his task he did not see her. Elizabeth slipped back to bed, her sharp mind whirring, reviewing the events that had led them to this point.

The Packards had married in 1839 when Elizabeth was a "green" twenty-two and Theophilus a "dusty" thirty-seven. Theirs had been a clumsy, awkward courtship, throughout which Elizabeth feared her curt fiancé, fifteen years her senior, "did not seem to love me much." But as Theophilus was a long-time colleague of her father and Elizabeth an obedient daughter, she'd married "to please my pa," committing herself to her new husband "with all the trusting confidence of woman."

At first, all had seemed well. Elizabeth had been raised “to be a silent listener” and her preacher husband contentedly became the sole mouthpiece in their marriage. “To make him happy was the height of my ambition,” Elizabeth wrote. “That’s all I wanted—to make my husband shine inside and out.”

The problem in their marriage had been he didn’t make her shine in return. Their characters were as opposite as it was possible to get. Where Elizabeth was vibrant, sociable, and curious, Theophilus was gloomy, timorous, and—in his own words—“dull.” A typical diary entry of his read: “This Sabbath is the commencement of spring. Rapidly do the seasons revolve. The spring—time of life is fast spending. Soon the period of death will arrive.” No wonder Elizabeth described their marriage as “cheerless.” She wrote with feeling: “The polar regions are a terrible cold place for me to live in, without any fire outside of me.” Her husband seemed “totally indifferent” to her. Sadly, she concluded that he did “not know how to treat a woman.”

Nevertheless, she said nothing to him directly, enduring this “blighting, love strangling process silently, and for the most part uncomplainingly.”

That is...until everything changed. In 1848, the first Woman’s Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, unleashing a national conversation about the rights of women. It was one in which Elizabeth and, less willingly, Theophilus took part. “Wives are not mere things—they are a part of society,” Elizabeth began to argue, but Theophilus’s belief, according to his wife, was that “a woman has no rights that a man is bound to respect.”

Countless times, the couple had “warm discussion[s]” on the subject. It was Elizabeth, naturally blessed with “a most rare command of language,” who triumphed in these fights. Yet her

victories came at a cost. She felt the demonstration of her intellect prompted "jealousy...lest I outshine him." Theophilus was "stung to the quick," and his grievances slowly grew. He was the kind of man who counted them like pennies, recording slights in his diary with the miserly accuracy of a rich man unwilling to share his wealth. He grumbled crossly, "My wife was unfavorably affected by the tone of society, and zealously espoused almost all new notions and wild vagaries that came along."

Perhaps the notion that caused him most consternation: in Elizabeth's words, "I, though a woman, have just as good a right to my opinion, as my husband has to his."

The concept was dazzling. "I have got a mind of my own," she realized, "and a will, too, and I will think and act as I please."

Elizabeth's newfound autonomy was anathema to Theophilus. "Wives, obey your husbands" became a scriptural passage oft quoted in their home. But Elizabeth was no longer silently listening. She felt that Theophilus might, "with equal justice, require me to subject my ability to breathe, to sneeze, or to cough, to his dictation, as to require the subjugation of my...rights to think and act as my own conscience dictates." Defiantly, she kept on articulating her own thoughts, asserting her own self, inspired by the women's rights movement that it was her right to do so.

Theophilus's response was telling. He did not allow his wife agency. He did not encourage her independence. Instead, he wrote that he had "sad reason to fear his wife's mind was getting out of order; she was becoming insane on the subject of woman's rights."

On the morning of June 18, 1860, Elizabeth shifted uncomfortably in bed, her disquiet slowly intensifying. Beyond her bedroom window, the noise of the nearby prairie filtered through the closed green shutters. Elizabeth loved living in the Midwest. "Action is

the vital element out here," she wrote approvingly. "The prairie winds are always moving—no such thing as a dead calm day here."

By this point, that lack of calmness applied to the Packards' marriage too, because their differences had only increased after the family moved west five years earlier. The change of scene had reflected Elizabeth's literally widening horizons. Shelburne, Massachusetts, where the Packards had lived for most of their marriage, was a place dominated by mountains and trees: a landscape that spoke deafeningly of what had always been and always would be. In contrast, the open prairies and wide skies of the Midwest seemed to herald endless possibilities—what *could* be, not what had been. Elizabeth felt strongly that "woman's mind ain't a barren soil," and once she was living in the fertile Midwest, she'd gotten busy planting seeds. "No man shall ever rule me," she declared, "for I ain't a brute, made without reason... I'm a human being, made with reason...to rule myself with."

She put that reason into practice. Soon, it wasn't just her appetite for women's rights that disturbed Theophilus. Elizabeth had a fiercely inquiring mind, and once she began to pull at the threads of their misogynistic society, the whole tapestry of their lives started to unravel. Both Packards were extremely devout, yet Elizabeth became wary of mindlessly swallowing what other people preached, including the sermons of her husband. Instead, she read widely about other faiths and philosophies until eventually her independent thinking led her to question her husband's creed.

In fact, almost by nature, Elizabeth and Theophilus worshipped different gods. To Elizabeth, God was love. But to Theophilus, He was a distant tyrant who dispensed His mercy so sparingly and secretly that one never quite knew if one had done

enough to be saved. Where Elizabeth saw good in all, Theophilus believed everyone was damned unless they found *his* God—and that included himself. The pastor, fearful God would find out the least sin in his naturally dark heart, “used to tell God what an awful bad man he was, in his family prayers.” Elizabeth commented wryly, “I was almost ashamed to think I had married such a devil, when I had so fondly hoped I had married a man.”

Theophilus’s beliefs extended to his children, too. He felt their hearts were “wrong by nature, and *must* be changed by grace.” For their own good, he told them so, bluntly describing the hellish fate that awaited them until the children cried. Her heart hurting, Elizabeth would comfort them. She’d counsel, in opposition to Theophilus’s teachings, “Be your own judge of your own nature...don’t be deluded into the lie that you are bad.”

Her “irreligious influence” caused Theophilus “unspeakable grief.” He professed himself worried for his children’s souls. When, each Sabbath, Elizabeth and the children would gather in her kitchen for “good talking times” after church, Theophilus could not contain his disapproval. He’d grumble as he retired alone to his study that they were “Laughing! On the brink of hell!”

Elizabeth was not laughing now.

She wondered anxiously what her husband’s actions the night before meant. As she mulled over what she’d witnessed, her suspicions “assumed a tangible form.”

“I was sure,” she wrote, “arrangements were being made to carry me off somewhere.”

Over the past four months, Theophilus had made it plain he wanted her gone. He could not cope with his newly outspoken wife, with her independent mind and her independent spirit—not least because Elizabeth did not keep her new character confined to

their home. She asserted herself in public too, such as in a Bible class run by his church. Although at first she had been reticent—“[I] felt so small somehow,” she confessed, “I didn’t feel that anything I said was hardly worth saying or hearing”—as the weeks had passed she’d grown more confident until she frequently contributed, voluntarily reading her essays aloud.

But her opinions deviated from her husband’s prescribed position. The classes were staged in part because Theophilus’s Presbyterian church had recently switched from following New School to Old School doctrines—the latter a more conservative creed—and Theophilus needed to persuade his congregation to adopt the change. But to his horror, Elizabeth challenged him theologically and encouraged her classmates to think critically too. Though she’d write in her essays, “I ask you to give my opinions no more credence, than you think truth entitles them to,” she was such a naturally persuasive person that, woman or no, her husband feared her influence. Elizabeth possessed “an irresistible magnetism.” The pastor, in contrast, felt “unusual timidity” when it came to public speaking. Even without trying, she easily eclipsed him.

He asked her to stop attending the class.

“I am willing to say to the class,” Elizabeth offered, “that as...Mr. Packard [has] expressed a wish that I withdraw my discussions...I do so, at [his] request.”

But that wouldn’t do. That would only draw attention to her divergent views.

“No,” Theophilus responded crossly. “You must tell them it is your choice to give them up.”

Elizabeth exclaimed truthfully, “But, dear, it is not my choice!”

Her recalcitrance was new. Previously, Elizabeth had always

been a peace--maker—"I had rather yield than quarrel any time"—but now that she'd begun to find her voice, she refused to be silenced. For decades, Theophilus's had been the only voice in the room. Was it too much to ask to share that space, now she'd ventured to speak the odd sentence? And did it really matter so very much that she did not think as he did?

But it *did* matter. As a preacher, Theophilus was supposed to lead his community, but now his own wife wouldn't follow him.

Yet Elizabeth refused "to act the hypocrite, by professing to believe what I could not believe." (An example: the new creed was ambivalent about abolition, but Elizabeth was *for* the freedom of the slaves.) She could not understand why Theophilus could not accept her independence. "I do not say it is wrong for others to do this," she pointed out, "I only say, it is wrong for *me* to do it." Yet in the face of her impassioned eloquence, Theophilus felt powerless and furiously impotent.

He conceived a plan. He kept it simple. Just seven words intended to silence her once and for all.

When the Packards next argued, he warned Elizabeth, if she did not conform, "I shall put you into the asylum!"

It wasn't quite as crazy an idea as it might at first have seemed. On the national stage, the women's rights campaigners were openly derided as "fugitive lunatics." Theophilus had simply adopted those same terms to describe his quick--witted wife.

Elizabeth had laughed, at first, at his outlandish threat. "Can [a woman] not even think her own thoughts, and speak her own words, unless her thoughts and expressions harmonize with those of her husband?" she asked archly. And did she not live in free

America? It was written in the Constitution that freedom of religion was sacrosanct. Elizabeth saw no reason she should be any less entitled to that right—even if she was a woman.

But by the morning of June 18, there was no more humor. The more she'd spoken up for herself, the more her husband had undermined her. In the Bible class, he dismissed her ideas as "the result of a diseased brain." He told their neighbors she was sadly suffering from an "attack of derangement." His evidence was that she now acted "so different from her former conduct," his obedient wife having been transfigured into this harridan. Her unwillingness to adopt his viewpoint and insistence on her own made for "strange and unreasonable doings, in her verbal and written sayings." And then there was the killer proof: "her lack of interest in her husband." What could be madder than a woman who wanted to be more than just a wife?

Elizabeth had confronted him. "Why do you try to injure and destroy my character rather than my opinions?" She thought it nothing short of cowardly, the way he avoided debating her directly.

But he'd had to take action because Elizabeth had not been cowed by his threat. In fact, in May 1860, she'd only grown bolder. She took the courageous decision formally to leave his church. "To...be false to my honest convictions," she said, "I could not be made to do."

But the pastor feared others might follow in her footsteps. He had to ensure that no one else, whether wives or worshippers, replicated her revolutionary stance.

That morning of June 18, Elizabeth's eyes were drawn again to the green shutters in her bedroom. There was a reason they no longer let in light.

Theophilus had boarded them shut.

He also locked her in her room, supposedly for her health. He felt it best she be “withdrawn from conversation and excitement.” Though Elizabeth knew the truth—-that she was being “kept from observers...[because] my sane conduct might betray his falsehoods”—-she’d been powerless to stop him.

But she was not entirely powerless now; she still had her powerful brain.

She used it.

After Theophilus’s behavior the night before, Elizabeth’s former forebodings shifted, sliding from suspicion into certainty. Thanks to her husband’s warning, she could even color in the future he had sketched. A hulking, gray insane asylum loomed on her horizon.

Elizabeth knew the plan. She knew the perpetrator. The only question left was: when would he make his move?

At that moment, footsteps suddenly sounded outside her door.