Flora

A NOVEL

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I

There are things we can't undo, but perhaps there is a kind of constructive remorse that could transform regrettable acts into something of service to life.

That summer, Flora and I were together every day and night for three weeks in June, all of July, and the first six days of August. I was ten, going on eleven, and she was twenty-two. I thought I knew her intimately, I thought I knew everything there was to know about her, but she has since become a profound study for me, more intensely so in recent years. Styles have come and gone in story-telling, psychologizing, theologizing, but Flora keeps providing me with something as enigmatic as it is basic to life, as timeless as it is fresh.

At the beginning of that summer with her, I seesawed between bored complacency and serious misgivings. She was an easy companion, quick to praise me and willing to do what I liked. My father had asked her to stay with me so he could cross over the mountain from North Carolina into Tennessee while the public schools were not in session and do more secret work for World War II. This would be his second year at Oak Ridge. The summer

before, my grandmother had still been alive to stay with me.

Flora had just finished her training to become a teacher like my late mother. She was my mother's first cousin. Embarrassingly ready to spill her shortcomings, she was the first older person I felt superior to. This had its gratifying moments but also its worrisome side. She was less restrained in her emotions than some children I knew. She was an instant crier. My grandmother Nonie, that mistress of layered language, had often remarked that Flora possessed "the gift of tears." As far as I could tell, layers had been left out of Flora. All of her seemed to be on the same level, for anyone to see.

Nonie, who had died suddenly just before Easter, had been a completely different kind of grownup. Nonie had a surface, but it was a surface created by her, then checked from all angles in her three-way mirror before she presented it to others. Below that surface I knew her love for me resided, but below that were seams and shelves of private knowledge, portions of which would be doled out like playing cards, each in its turn, if and when she deemed the time was ripe.

My father, who was principal of Mountain City High School, was described as "exacting" or "particular" when people wanted to say something nice about him. If they were being politely critical, they might say, "Harry Anstruther can be very acerbic and he doesn't suffer fools gladly." His social mode was a laconic reserve, but at home, after a couple of drinks, he stripped down to his comfortable mordant sarcasm. His usually controlled limp, from a bout with polio in his teens, became more like a bad actor's exaggeration of a limp.

He married my mother when he was in his early thirties. He was assistant principal of the high school at the time and also

taught the shop classes for the boys. He had learned carpentry when he was convalescing from polio. My mother-to-be, a new teacher in her early twenties, came to his office to protest her new assignment. She had been hired to teach English, and after she got there they had added Home Economics, which she felt she had to swallow, she said, because new teachers couldn't be picky. But now the public school curriculum had introduced something called Girls' Hygiene into the Home Economics hour. "I cannot stand up in front of a class and teach this," she told my father. She held the little booklet apart from her body like a piece of garbage. Her disdain along with the "cannot" impressed my father. Though she was from Alabama, she spoke like someone trained for the theater. "The girls would be shocked and disgusted," she told him. "Or they would laugh me out of the room."

My father took the booklet home and after dinner he and Nonie took turns reading aloud from "Social Hygiene for Girls." As I got older, Nonie would recall hilarious examples from this booklet. It became her way of imparting the facts of life to me without the hush-hush solemnity. ("I'll tell you one thing, darling. It made me glad I was brought up on a farm and saw animals go about their natural business without all the clumsy language.")

My grandmother asked if the well-spoken new teacher was "the kind of person we'd like to invite to dinner." She probably wouldn't come, my father said, because she was a chilly sort and hadn't seemed to like him very much. But Nonie insisted on asking her and she came. Her name was Elizabeth Waring, but by the end of the evening she asked them to call her Lisbeth. She had been orphaned at eight and raised by two uncles and a live-in maid. The first thing she said when she walked into our house was how wonderful it must be to live in such a house. "I fell in

love with her first," Nonie liked to recall. "And then, one night, when the three of us were playing cards, Harry finally looked across the table and realized what he could have."

Flora came with her father, Fritz Waring, to my mother's funeral. They rode on passes because he worked for the railroad. My mother had caught pneumonia during a stay in the hospital. "There was a bad epidemic that year—if only they could have gotten Sulpha in time they might have saved her." When I was older Nonie explained that it had started with a miscarriage. "They'd been trying to get you a little brother or sister, but I guess you were meant to be one of a kind, Helen."

I was three when my mother died and have no recollection of the funeral, or of fifteen-year-old Flora, though Nonie told me Flora would sit me on her lap at meals and try to feed me little morsels from her plate, which I refused. "One time she cried into your hair. She had been telling us how, since she was a small child, she and your mother slept in the same bed. She confided to us she had always slept with one leg over Lisbeth to keep her from going away. At this point your father rolled his eyes and left the table.

"It was a very strange week for us. This was the first time we had met any of your mother's people. This little man with shaggy eyebrows and a bulldog face steps down from the train with his arm around a sobbing young girl in a black coat way too old for her. 'She feels things,' were Fritz Waring's first words to us. Immediately after the funeral, he apologized for having to ask us to drive him back to the train station. He had to be on duty next day. 'But we've hardly even spoken to the two of you,' I said. 'Oh, Flora can stay on with you awhile,' he said, 'if she won't be any trouble.'

"I was pretty surprised but I tried to hide it. I told him we would love to have her stay on *for a little while*. After all, this was your mother's own first cousin. Shouldn't we want to know her better? And, as a student of human nature, I have to say I found Flora's visit eye-opening. It was interesting to observe how very different two girls could be who had grown up in the same house. Though of course there was the big age difference: Lisbeth was twelve when the infant Flora came to live with them. Even their speech! Whereas Lisbeth spoke like a stage actress and held herself back in speech and person, Flora's Southern accent was so thick you could cut it with a knife and she burbled and spilled herself out like an overflowing brook. She asked us the most intimate questions and offered disconcerting tidbits about her people in Alabama. She wanted to know why your mother was in the hospital in the first place and where everyone slept, and she would stand in the open door of the wardrobe where your mother kept her clothes and snuffle into her dresses. She told us proudly that the black coat she wore had been borrowed from the Negro woman who lived with them. One time when she was retelling how she had slept with her leg over your mother "so she wouldn't abandon her," she went on to explain that her own mother had left town as soon as she was born. Your poor father found more and more excuses to go out on errands and by the end of Flora's visit he was taking his cocktails up to his room."

The year after my mother's funeral, Fritz Waring was shot during a high-stakes poker game and Flora's and Nonie's great correspondence began. The sixteen-year-old Flora had written Nonie a long, emotional letter with the gory details (he had been shot between the eyes) and Nonie had answered back. Immediately came a second letter and Nonie felt it was her duty to reply, and

this went on until her death. Flora always started her letters, "Dear Mrs. Anstruther," and signed them, "Your Friend, Flora Waring."

"The poor child thinks I am her diary," Nonie would remark, reading Flora's latest letter. Sometimes she would shake her head and murmur, "Gracious!" The letters disappeared before anyone else could read them. "Young people shouldn't write down personal things they might regret later," Nonie said.

Flora rode the train to Nonie's funeral in the spring of 1945. She was in her last year of teachers college in Birmingham and hoped to begin teaching in the fall.

"Flora's turned into a looker," said my father, making it sound like something short of a compliment. "Though not in your mother's style."

When friends came back to our house after the funeral, Flora greeted them and passed platters and refilled glasses like she was part of the family, which I suppose she felt she was. After the crowd had thinned, we noticed that a cluster of people had gathered around Nonie's wing chair and then we saw that Flora was sitting in it—the first person to do so since Nonie's death. She appeared to be telling a story. Everyone was rapt, even Father McFall, the circumspect Rector of Our Lady's, though he was careful to register a degree of separateness by the quizzical twist of his brow. Flora, softly weeping, was reading from something in her lap. When my father and I edged closer we saw that she was reading aloud from Nonie's letters.

I can still see Flora, the way her large moonlike face floated out at you from the frame of the wing chair. She wore her dark hair swept back from a middle parting, then falling in soft waves

over the ears and pinned up loosely at the nape of the neck, a style you often see in movies and television dramas being faithful to the late 1930s and early '40s. Her forehead was spacious, though not high, and her wide-apart brown eyes, when they were not silky with tears, conveyed an ardent eagerness to be impressed.

What she was reading from my grandmother's letters seemed to be snippets of the kind of soldierly counsel Nonie loved to dispense to everyone. About taking control of your life and making something of yourself. But after listening for a minute, my father sent me over to tell Flora he wanted to speak with her in the kitchen and that was the end of the performance.

I have often wondered if that was when he broached the idea of her staying with me while he went back for his second summer to the construction job in Oak Ridge, where they were making something highly secret for the war effort. This would have been in character. My father loathed displays of emotion and he may have decided to offer me up, since he needed someone anyway, rather than to reprimand Flora about the letters and evoke her gift of tears.

II

My grandmother died while choosing her Easter hat. She was downtown in Blum's department store and had just pinned on a Stetson trilby with a dashing black plume that had tiny seed pearls sewn into it like random raindrops. "You're coming home with me, handsome," she addressed the hat in the mirror. Her last words were, "Mrs. Grimes, could I trouble you for a glass of water?" When the saleslady returned with the water, Nonie was pitched forward, her hand deep in her purse. She had been reaching for her vial of nitroglycerin tablets. Mr. Blum insisted we were under no obligation when my father said he wanted to buy the hat. "But my daughter wants it, you see," my father explained. "It was Helen's idea." "In that case, allow me to make a gift of it to her," said Mr. Blum. "It's a becoming hat that will never go out of style. She can wear it herself someday."

This exchange was reported to me by my father. Just as Nonie's last moments were reported by others to him. Yet I saw both scenes as though I had been there. I was also achingly present at an alternative scene in which I had been standing right behind her, watching her try on the hats in the three-way mirror.

"This one suits me, doesn't it, Helen?"

"Oh, it really does."

Whereupon she would have addressed the handsome hat. And then: a sudden widening of the eyes, a hand slapped to her chest: "Quick, darling, go in my purse and fetch me . . . " She trusted my nimble fingers to do the rest: root in the bag, twist open the familiar vial, hand over the doll's-sized pill.

("And if I should have already fainted, Helen, you know what to do." "Open your mouth and slip it under your tongue." "That's right, darling, like a baby bird feeding the mamma bird.")

We had rehearsed it.

Later, when I had attained an age she never reached, there was a television commercial that never failed to choke me up. A man and his son are walking in the country when suddenly the father clutches his chest, the landscape turns a sickly sepia, and the father falls. But the son whips out a Bayer aspirin, the father rises to his feet, embraces the son, and technicolor is restored to their lives.

"Don't worry, I have every intention of sticking around till I've finished raising you," Nonie always assured me after one of her episodes, and I could hear her saying it again that day—the day we never had. If only she had waited till my school was out so I could have been there to whip out the little vial in Blum's and save the day.

The day after Nonie's funeral, my father and I drove Flora to the train station. She had to return to her teachers' college and finish the semester. "For the rest of my life, whenever I see or hear a locomotive, I'll miss Daddy," she said, starting to weep as the Birmingham train pulled in. My father rolled his eyes and handed over his handkerchief. "Keep it," he said. "We'll see you in June."

"Why did you say that about June?" I demanded as soon as we were alone.

"I've asked Flora to stay with you this summer while I'm at Oak Ridge. I can't pay her a whole lot, but she'll be saving on her expenses, and she wants to do it."

I was stung. All the more so because this had been decided between them behind my back. "You mean, like a baby sitter?"

"Ten is not old enough to stay alone, Helen."

"I'll be eleven in August."

"Even if you were going to be sixteen in August, that still wouldn't be old enough. I thought you and Flora got on."

We were driving across the bridge that arched above the railroad yards. The "put-upon" voice that my father always employed with Nonie when she was backing him into a corner was now being directed at me. Did Flora and I get on? It was more like Flora praised and deferred to me and I tolerated her because she was my mother's first cousin and showed up at family funerals. Until now, I had assumed both my father and I considered her somewhat awkward and childlike. Yet here he was putting her in charge for the summer.

"This is such a strange time for me," he said in the same keep-clear-of-me voice he'd used when he'd picked me up at school on the day of Nonie's death. "Mother is gone," he had said. "Just like that, in Blum's. Don't ask me what we're going to do next because I don't know."

Easter that year fell on April first, only a few days after Nonie's funeral. I felt self-conscious in church. I had gone everywhere with Nonie, and I could hear people silently wondering

how I was ever going to manage without her. Those who hadn't known us well enough to come to the house for the funeral reception gathered round after church to offer condolences. My father and I were worn out by the time we got home. He made us grilled pimento cheese sandwiches in the skillet, letting them get too dark, and washed his down with Jack Daniel's in an iced tea glass. Then we sat side by side at the dining room table and answered more sympathy letters. He wrote the messages and I addressed the envelopes and licked the flaps and put on the stamps. When I pointed out that the recipients would notice our different handwritings, he said, "Fine. They'll be all the more charmed and touched." His voice had edged over into sarcasm by then.

Then came a letter that made him swear.

"Who's it from?"

"That old mongrel we saw crying at the funeral home."

"What does he want?" I knew my father was referring to the old man who had showed up at Swann's funeral home demanding to "see" Honora and had broken down and cried when we told him she had stipulated that her casket remain closed. It was Nonie's hated stepbrother, brought to her father's farm by the housekeeper who would become her father's second wife. His name was Earl Quarles and he had inherited all the property that should have gone to Nonie.

"He says he wants to keep in touch," my father sneered. "Get to know us better before he meets his maker. Swann told me he came back to the funeral home after we left and tried to bribe him to open the casket."

"Fat chance," I said.

"Most people have their price," said my father.

"But if Mr. Swann had taken the bribe he wouldn't have told you about it, would he?"

"I probably shouldn't say this, Helen, but I look forward to the day when you can spot the unsavory truths about human nature for yourself." He crumpled the letter in his fist and to my disappointment shoved the whole wad, envelope included, into his jacket pocket. No chance now of my fishing it out of the wastebasket. Without bothering to put in fresh ice, he sloshed more Jack Daniel's into his iced tea glass and lurched upstairs.

I wandered into Nonie's room, which was on the ground floor, next to mine, and climbed up on her bed. I turned down the spread and buried my face in her pillows. Her smell was markedly fainter than yesterday. The insidious Sunday afternoon light pushed at me through the drawn curtains. Nonie, who could bend time to her purposes, was no longer here to protect me from emptiness. Even when she had closed her door to lie on her three pillows and take her appointed afternoon rest, the connection between us had been maintained. It always felt like she was in there refueling for us all.

Desperate to burrow back to that connection, I ground my face and body into her bedclothes. This time last Sunday she would have been lying here. The sheets had not yet been changed. She had died on Monday, and Mrs. Jones, whose day was Tuesday, had been postponed for a week. Nonie's black satchel purse presided aloofly from the top of the chest of drawers. Inside was the little vial of nitroglycerin, useless now. "Handsome" languished, unseen on Easter Day, in its hatbox on her closet shelf.

How could she be so here and not here? I tried to make myself cry into her pillows before the smell of her cold cream vanished altogether. If she was gone, what parts of me had she taken

with her? The parts she talked to, taught things to, told her stories to, would never again be addressed by her. And yet her way of saying things was all around me, they were inside of me.

All around me was our house, which pulsed with her stories of it. "Old One Thousand" she called it, because that was its number, it was the last house at the top of Sunset Drive. She and my grandfather and their young son had shared its rooms and porches with the Recoverers, back in the days when it catered to a few well-paying convalescent tuberculars or inebriates, and occasional souls whose nerves weren't yet up to going back to ordinary life.

If Nonie were still here, lying on her raised pillows on this Sunday afternoon, I would likely be upstairs on the Recoverers' South porch, reading or daydreaming on the faded horsehair cushions of a chaise longue. Back when Old One Thousand had also been Dr. Anstruther's Lodge, there was a view of the town below and the ranges of mountains encircling it, but now the view was blocked by a hectic tangle of branches just beginning to leaf out. The Recoverers would sit on this porch playing cards and sharing the news of their latest clean x-ray or sobriety day-count or session with the local psychiatrist until the sun had moved over the roof; then they would gather their things and move over to the West porch. They were all just figments now, the real people departed long before I was born, but Nonie had told me about them and also about the grandfather I hadn't known, "Doctor Cam," a man thirty years older than herself. How she as an eighteen year old girl had been walking to town carrying her valise, running away from the farm and her greedy new stepmother and menacing stepbrother, when this man had reined in his horse and called down in a low-country accent from his cabriolet: "Young lady, can I carry you somewhere?"

"It was a turn of phrase South Carolinians used, but I'd never heard it before. A cabriolet? It was a small two-wheeled buggy with a retractable hood. The hood was down so I could get a good look at him before I decided whether to get in. He more than passed inspection—he had a neat gray moustache and nice clothes and was old enough to be my father, if I had been lucky enough to have such an elegant one—so I climbed aboard. While we were settling my valise in the little space in front of my feet, he asked where I was wanting to go and I said, 'Today I'm only traveling as far as the Battery Hill Hotel, so anywhere you let me off in town will be fine.' I had prepared this answer in case I was offered a ride. The Battery Hill was the best hotel, and I was hoping to get work there as a maid or laundress, but I wanted to convey the impression I was staying there as a guest waiting for a train the next morning. He said it would be no trouble to take me to the hotel, and then started right in giving information about himself, the way thoughtful people do when they want to put you at your ease. He was a physician and a widower from Columbia, South Carolina. His wife had died of T.B. in a sanitorium here, and he had fallen in love with the pure air of the mountains and decided to stay on and establish a home for convalescents who were out of danger but still needed rest and care. This morning he had gone to an estate auction in the country and had been lucky enough to acquire some useful items, including a twelve-gallon ice cream freezer, which he was having delivered. It was the same estate sale my father and stepmother and odious stepbrother had gone off to that morning, which had given me my opportunity to escape. I remember sitting in that cabriolet taking me further and further away from the farm and recalling Elise telling my father that very morning

she was going to come home with that ice cream freezer if it was the last thing she did. It made me smile and the doctor noticed it and looked at me so kindly that I almost told him the truth right then. But I thought better of it. It's best to keep yourself to yourself—especially when you are running away. So I just smiled and kept silent. Oh, I can still see that horse's sleek rump rotating in the sunshine and I can smell the leather from the reins in the doctor's hands and the masculine scent of the toiletry he wore. It was a beautiful May morning and everything was starting to bloom. Before he let me off at the Battery Hill hotel he gave me his card and said he sincerely hoped I'd get in touch if he could be of further assistance. The card had his Columbia address scored through and he'd written below in a fine copperplate hand: Anstruther's Lodge, Cameron Anstruther, M.D., Director, and the local address.

"That was the first Anstruther's Lodge; it was right in town. We bought this house on Sunset Mountain when Harry was going on ten and people had cars. I'll take you past the old Lodge if you like, but do keep in mind it was in a better part of town in those days and looked a lot nicer than it does now.

"I got a job as a laundress at the hotel until they found out I could cook and promoted me to the kitchen. But then my father tracked me down and sent my stepbrother Earl Quarles to bring me home. Earl made a scene at the hotel. But I had things to hold over him, and I told him if I was forced to go back to the farm I would see that my father was informed of those things and Earl would be out on his ear.

"What things? Oh, darling, Earl had so many bad traits it would be hard to single one out for you. Let's just say he was sneaky and bullying and thought nothing of taking what wasn't

his. He had his eye on that farm from the beginning. I don't know what lies he told them when he returned without me, but father didn't send him back again."

"Didn't you and your father ever make up?"

"No, darling, we never did. Fate was unkind in that regard. After I had Harry, I was planning to go out and see Father and show him his grandson. And then I opened the paper one morning and saw his obituary. He was only fifty-two but had died of a massive heart attack. The obituary was in the paper from several days back so I couldn't even go to his funeral. But I'm getting way ahead of myself.

"Earl's scene at the hotel had cost me my job. It was not the kind of hotel where visitors of employees were allowed to threaten and scream. It was then that I remembered the doctor and called on him at his Lodge. It was only a few minutes' walk from the hotel. I started cooking for his convalescents and ran the household for him. Until one day he asked me if he was too old for me to love, and I gave him a good long look and said, 'No, you are exactly right.' "

Nonie was a born storyteller. It is not so remarkable that I have made a life and a living from storytelling. But there were dangers and drawbacks in her ways of telling and her ways of not telling. Gradually I have come to wonder how deeply her methods have infiltrated mine.