

## Chapter One

The day started out all right. I woke early and, still in my nightgown, walked out to the porch and began to paint the walls. I had never planned on doing this. The porch didn't need to be painted, and because of all its windows and high ceiling—not to mention the bicycles and muddy shoes and old couches that needed to be shoved aside—to paint it was a huge undertaking, one I never would have wanted to do. I must have woken from a dream in which painting the porch was occurring, because as I found myself prying off the lid of a leftover can of yellow paint and sinking a brush in, I felt perfect equanimity, as if I were merely continuing a project, rather than launching a new one.

The porch is enclosed with windows. Two face into the interior of the house; three walls are lined entirely with long windows that open outward, to the garden, as in a Danish farmhouse. Each is composed of many small panes of thick glass. Through the pocked glass, on this morning, the sky was heavy with pending rain, and the tips of tall white flowers peered in. Perhaps due to some remnant of the same dream, I had the feeling of seeing the garden from the portals of a boat, as if stretching beyond were not garden and stone but a calm, early morning sea, only just beginning to undulate from an oncoming storm, which for the moment was still in the distance. Birds dove below my line of vision. I sank the brush deep to its shoulders, and

stroked the excess off with two or three flops. Each time I slathered yellow on the wall, a path of lit water seemed to open.

My children ambled in. Alex is twelve, very tall, and has bright blue eyes. Clair is seven, round and dark, and her hair was tangled from sleep. They were quiet and sleepy. They lay down on an old couch. After a while of resting and watching me, they decided they wanted to paint too, and I found two more brushes, although one was only a little eyeliner brush. We opened cans of paint, left over from other projects. Due to our lax housekeeping habits, the cans had never been put away and had been standing on the porch for a long time.

"Let's paint whatever we want," I said. Clair made white and pink daisies along the windowsill. Alex painted a window frame the same grey-blue as the sky, and using the eyeliner brush, made tiny yellow dots, like hopeful lights. "Dad likes flowers," Clair said. While we chatted, the feeling of being in the middle of water persisted, and when I mentioned it, my kids nodded. The porch was a floating houseboat, the odds and ends and muddy shoes merely stuff we had heaped on board. When the wind threw the windows open, their ancient latches creaking, we held on to whatever we could grab, as if we were on the high seas.

After a while, Alex announced to Clair in a serious voice, "We have to do that thing," and she, delighted to be needed by her older brother, nodded, and they bade me goodbye, took their brushes inside to wash, and trooped off into the house.

I climbed up on the arm of the couch and, having found a can called "Summer Blue," began painting the trim of the large window that looks from the porch into the living room. When my children came back into the living room, they walked into the blue frame. They had changed out of their pajamas, and looked as if they were getting ready to go to work, which it turned out was sort of the case. My daughter was wearing a little vest over her T-shirt.

I couldn't hear them, but could see that they were clearly discussing an audiotope Alex was holding, a novel on tape he'd gotten from the library the day before. The book, I knew, was *Chasing Redbird* by Sharon Creech; this was the book he was supposed to read over the summer, in preparation for seventh grade. And he dreaded this. He had read another book by Sharon Creech for the previous summer's assigned reading, and hated that, said it was too "dark." So this summer, he'd settled on the idea of listening to *Chasing Redbird* instead of reading it. This way, he'd reasoned, he could have the company of his sister, and this would make the experience more "bearable."

I watched as they put the tape in the cassette slot. They were sitting side by side on the couch. I tapped on the glass, but they were engrossed now, waiting for it to begin. I was reminded of how the poet Pablo Neruda described tiptoeing to his parents to show them his first poem, but they "were immersed in one of those hushed conversations that, more than a river, separate the world of children and the world of grownups."

A woman's voice came on. I could not make out her

words, but the volume was high, and the feeling and quality of her voice permeated the glass. It was a low voice, with no lift or variation.

“Ah, a sad story,” I thought happily. Alex and Clair had spent the summer roaming around, reading *Harry Potter*, playing, swimming, and lounging. Alex had read a gamut of scripts and biographies of comedians. This foray into a sad tale sounded intriguing now, on this dark morning; it seemed important, more akin to “serious literature.” I imagined a little alcove, isolated but protected from wind by rocks. Sadness in books was often beautiful, or poignant. I painted and thought of the book *The Snow Goose* by Paul Gallico, which I barely remembered, save for the spare print and the windswept landscape, undercut with a feeling of loss. I thought of the book *The Victim* by Saul Bellow, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* by Carson McCullers. I knew my children were not listening to any of these, but they were the books that came to mind.

The voice on the tape continued, shaking the walls with its sad thunder, and I suddenly wondered if I was making a mistake, painting the porch these summery colors. It got so cold in here when the weather turned. There was no heat, and these windows, no matter how tightly bolted, flew open in the wilder winds, which thrashed hats, gloves, and old newspapers. The porch was the last place to get through before one was safely inside. Shouldn't it be left as a simple passing-through room, to be exited as quickly as possible? I imagined the bleak sky, the “stale” grass, as Clair once described winter grass, rolling beyond the windows. Would this room be comforting to enter then? What

does one want in winter? Great majestic red? Would these dreamy colors feel annoying? Or insubstantial, a child offering only a thin cardigan?

The terrible voice on the tape—it had become a drone—suddenly shut off; I had my brush poised in midair. The silence was pure relief. My children were now standing, and I watched as Alex gave one curt nod to Clair, and at that signal, they both proceeded to march, elbows bent, in a tight circle. They stopped abruptly, and did five or six deep knee bends. They looked as if they were in an old Jack LaLanne commercial. I knew they probably had some sense of comedy about acting like this, taking an allotted exercise break—their sense of the absurd was in full swing. But when they sat down again, and Alex switched on the audio, and the drone commenced, they looked tense, not giggly, and the phrase “bracing themselves” came to mind.

What exactly was this book? Aside from the title, I knew nothing about it. In fact, all the books Alex was assigned in school were foreign to me. I recalled his last year’s language arts teacher, on Back to School Night. I had been excited to meet her, because Alex adored her and her class. She was a graceful young woman, in a cream pants suit—a new teacher, hip, brimming with enthusiasm. “A delight,” she’d said of Alex as we shook hands.

But now I remembered that I had felt a slight wariness with regard to the school’s choice of books. I remembered her gesturing to the paperbacks the class would be reading. “Most of these books are recommended by the American Library Association, and many are Newbery prize winners.” The books were propped around the room. They all

had teens on the covers. I didn't recognize a single title. I had picked up one and read that it promised "profound struggle." I put it back carefully.

The good warm feeling in the room had persisted. When the teacher cited an experience she'd had the previous year, during which a mother "came up to me and said, 'Gee, thanks a lot, my daughter was up all night crying because of the death of a whale in that book'" (it wasn't *Moby-Dick*), we all laughed a bit at the sarcasm, and from a certain happiness we felt at the idea of a child being so swept up in a story. But now I remembered something else that had been said: "You see," the teacher had gone on to explain, "A good book should make you cry."

These words came back to me as I watched my children now. They were sitting so stiffly, their spines arched. Their posture was the opposite of how they sat when they were absorbed. Why, exactly, did school want them to cry?

I had seen Alex like this many times during the year, when I'd passed his room in the evening; he always left his door open. There he'd be, reading one or another book assigned from school, under the cone of his desk lamp. He never looked at ease while he read. I had tried adjusting his light, and suggested he close his door. No, he always wanted the door open when he read, didn't like to be alone with these books. "Everyone dies in them," he told me wearily. He'd recited the litany: a story about a town besieged by radioactive poisoning; one in which a girl searches for her mother, only to find her mother has committed suicide; children being abused in foster care, never told why their mothers weren't coming back. The list went on.

It can't be that bad, I always thought; reading, after all, is good. His teacher was a fine captain; I trusted her sense of direction. (But the choice of books?) I had never offered too much sympathy. Once or twice I'd picked up a book and studied the cover, where a photograph of a teen stared back at me, challengingly, such that I always lowered my eyes. Once in a while I had put my hand on Alex's shoulder and, wondering what to say, found only these words: "Just do it."

What had I meant? I meant it in the same way someone might have once said, "Just drink your milk," or "Just take your cod liver oil," or, I realized suddenly, the way someone might believe that a child ought to endure a beating, because even though it hurt, it was a "good beating," would make him better, build character.

Was this kind of reading akin to a "good beating?"

Would the monotony of the voice break? I was listening for a shift in tone, a ravine of mystery, but no shift came. I realized no change would come. I had been listening for a certain music of sadness; instead, these were the brittle and fatty sounds of heavy depression. The voice was aggressive too, the way depression can make someone hostile.

"You know nothing about how bad life really is," it seemed to be droning. "You need this big dose of reality I am giving you. It's killing me, this talking, but I'm doing it for you."

Alex and Clair looked drained, and tired. What dour and horrible future were they boning up on? I thought of banging on the glass with my fists. I wanted to yell, "Come out!" I wanted to yell, "You won't have to go it alone like the

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kids in those books! That isn't literature! That isn't life! Step back in the flow!" I saw my reflection: Mother in her nightgown, balancing on a getaway gondola with a paintbrush. I wanted to cry, "What crazy modern port have we landed in?"