

Cricket in a Fist

NAOMI K. LEWIS



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The epigraph is an excerpt from “Liberation” by Abraham Sutzkever, translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav and published in *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1990).

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I woke into a white room full of cut flowers, and my whole life slipped away like some epic, complex dream that leaves a formless uneasiness in the wake of its details. People gathered round me — people I recognized but couldn't place. A woman spoke to me, said a name that was clearly mine. I grasped at my few remaining threads of memory, but they receded, leaving me empty-minded. All I could recall was a rush of red, a multi-hued fluttering. When I tried to remember more, this redness barricaded the past, leaving me with nothing but the present moment. The younger of the two girls, who I realized later were my daughters, began to cry. Days and weeks passed in a blur. There were always people around my bed, and I was certain they wanted to stop looking at me, but, smiling bravely, they took me home instead.

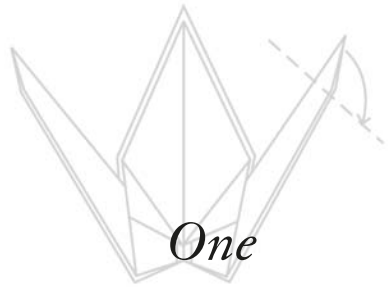
For the first few months I was very quiet. I had broken my ankle at the same time as injuring my head, and it was in a cast, so I sat at the kitchen table, where I could see out the window, and waited. When people spoke to me, I couldn't think of a response. I began to read my old journals and books, and soon I realized that I remembered things. I knew about my childhood, how I'd grown up with my mother and grandmother. I remembered my father's death and my grandmother's, remembered marrying and having children. I kept waiting for the accompanying feelings to return, but they never did. I remembered loving my husband, remembered the torment at the times when I didn't love him. But I felt — nothing. Not even loss; not even guilt.

As my therapist recommended, I began to write daily, whatever came into my head. My handwriting kept changing. In my house, in the hospital, limping down the street on my crutches, I was disoriented and lost, like a recent arrival on an alien planet. What's more, I felt pursued. I often perceived a presence just behind me, and when I turned, no one was there. I'd wake in the night panicking, sure that someone was standing beside my bed; but when I opened my eyes the room was empty. My husband, a neurobiologist, was very much involved in my treatment. He and the doctors told me that sensed presences are common after certain kinds of head trauma, but I still believe I was haunted at that time. My lurking pursuer was not a physiological phenomenon or a metaphor — she was the ghost of my former self, armed with all the miserable memories and cynical beliefs that made her the way she was, trying to scare me out of moving forward.

In The Willing Amnesiac I will tell stories about the figures that haunted the shadowy dream-life I led before waking up and taking control. All names have been changed for the protection and privacy of those still living. I do not wish to slander or misrepresent anyone, and I acknowledge that, ultimately, this story is only about me. It is worth mentioning that I have changed my own name as well, and though I was called by many names throughout my former life, the one I have now is unique because I chose it myself.

J. Virginia Morgan

The Willing Amnesiac: Reappearing into the Present



I spent the day sitting on my dirty white sofa, sewing a scarlet A across the chest of a thrift-store cocktail dress. I'd cut the letter from a large piece of felt, and I leaned close, smoothing the fabric, making each even stitch tiny and tight. Each time I pushed the needle through, I remembered that it was Halloween; it had been nine years.

And when I sat back, my task complete, I noticed that my neck ached, my fingers were cramped, and the sun had risen high and then set. I hadn't eaten all day. I prepared spaghetti and tomato sauce and ate at my desk, then showered and dressed and put in my contacts. With my hair up, eyes dark and lipstick lurid, I turned in front of the mirror, running a finger along my letter's edge, the perfect seam. I pulled on my shoes and jacket, turned back to answer the phone, and thought of that one misstep. The first cancerous cell in my family's now unrecognizable body.

I brought the phone to the mirror. "I'm just going out to a party," I said, rubbing concealer under my eyes. I lived in a huge, square room with a small, separate kitchen and a bathroom too tiny for a tub. The building had once housed offices, and my apartment still had grey industrial carpet from wall to white wall, even in the kitchen. Lamps in every corner meant I never had to use the acoustic-tiled ceiling's flat, fluorescent lights.

"I did it," Minnie said. "I'm not bullshitting you. I'm in the

terminal. The Toronto bus terminal. I told you, I told you I was going to do it.”

I suspected she was calling from Ottawa, sitting comfortably on her bed, hoping to shake me up. It had been nine years today, and she knew it. But I could hear that she was in a large, open space, with strangers walking past her. My little sister was in the wrong city. My city. “But,” I said, “how did you get there?”

“On the bus. What do you think? Didn’t you get my e-mail? So can you come and get me, or what?”

I looked at the two long, backless bookcases that served as a wall between my bedroom and living room; Minnie would look outside and see my view of the adult video store, a billboard featuring a cowgirl drinking beer and a streetlight that shone on my pillow all night, impossible to block out completely. I loved my apartment; no one I was related to had ever seen it.

“Agatha!” she said. “Hurry, okay? I’m about to get kidnapped or something. Don’t tell Dad,” she added, and hung up.

Thinking of Dad and Lara’s hardwood-floored house with its stainless steel appliances, diagonally folded napkins and avocado-coloured dining room walls, the kind of house Min was used to, I hurried to straighten my dusty lampshades. I rearranged my great-grandmother’s old green and brown shawl to hide the frayed upholstery on my yard-sale armchair. I stopped halfway to the bed and hesitated, looking back toward the door. I didn’t have time — I settled for shaking out my duvet and letting it fall over the crumpled sheet, still crooked, then shoved a pile of clothes from the floor into the laundry hamper. And my bookcases — I wondered if she’d notice the shelves of women’s autobiographies organized chronologically, beginning with *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*. I took a cardigan from the back of a chair and tucked it over the slew of celebrity memoirs and self-help books that concluded the collection.

I couldn’t leave Minnie alone or bring her to the party; I’d made the costume for nothing. In the bathroom, I unzipped my jacket and looked at the dress, short, tight and lettered, and stared at my reflection, willing it to change. I looked sallow. I knew it was just the light, but my red lipstick seemed garish, my skin jaundiced, and

my hair so yellow it was greenish, the shadows under my eyes like bruises. I'd barely thought about my sister's latest e-mail, now several days old. She'd written something about not being able to take it anymore. *Any tips?* she'd written. *I'll e-mail again when I can. Don't tell Dad.* She rode the bus away from Ottawa, toward Toronto and toward me, alone, down the 401, and I had forgotten about her. I was stitching around the edge of my scarlet letter, dressing by the bathroom's gruesome light, and pulling on my fishnets. I was examining it again — the scene I had replayed in my head until it incorporated itself into my breathing and my heartbeat to become as constant and essential as any bodily rhythm.

She was walking downstairs fast, pointy-heeled black pumps clicking on the salon's grey-tiled stairs, and I was standing hand in hand with my four-year-old sister. Minnie was disguised as Fireman Jeff, a character of her own devising, and my hair was bright red. From the top step, I watched my mother's descent. Below me and Minnie, the back of Mama's trench coat swished, her stiff-sprayed hair bounced; we watched her hurry down the stairs, one hand skimming the orange handrail. I saw where Mama's left foot was headed, saw the roof of Minnie's beloved plastic fire truck. I don't know what I heard first — my sister's shriek, the audible crack of ankle bone or the fire truck clattering down the stairs. Mama's ankle buckled and her body twisted as she struggled for balance. She spun around, arms thrown up as if in surrender, and she was facing us when she fell. Ankles bent unnaturally, arms raised inelegantly, she looked right at me like a diver who'd already leapt. She seemed to hover there before her fists clutched air, knees gave way, head bent back. The smells in the stairwell were faint and chemical: perm solution, hair dye, nail polish remover. The wallpaper was brown and beige paisley with little orange leaves that matched the handrail and the door.

Our grandmother, Tam-Tam, heard the crash from behind the front desk of the salon; she pushed past us down the stairs, held