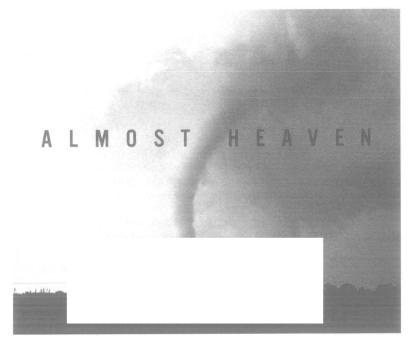
#### ALMOST HEAVEN

A NOVEL BY

## Marianne

# Wiggins

author of JOHN DOLLAR



A NOVEL

### Marianne Wiggins



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#### ALMOST HEAVEN

INSIDE THE CLOUD THE FUTURE STORM was staging, its raging eye caged in its fist, its potential for destruction masquerading as soft lofty brume: just another summer's afternoon in heaven.

This was weather: this is what the country was about.

Everywhere we went—New England or New York, the North, the South, the Plains states or the West—we talked about the weather. Because weather was news. For two nights in a row now, all the networks had led the evening news with bulletins about the weather: a heatwave in the South, a drought in the Midwest, a twister down in Texas.

This meant something, Holden knew. This meant something big. Something strange was going on. You can't stop feeling something strange is going on when people disappear entirely from the narrative, from news—when news starts coming at you faceless.

That's what news about the weather is, it's faceless.

It's the absence of man's fingerprint on history.

It's the advent of a new age of news where the only things worth sending crews to are encounters of the katabatic kind.

To hell with Bosnia. To hell with Kurds. To hell with Cuba when a cyclonic force is massing on the ocean off the coast of Florida and a robot in a satellite is on location, *live*.

That is our news in the millennium.

To hell with 60 Minutes and The New York Times. To hell with The Economist, Le Monde, the Beeb, Bernstein and Woodward. Honey, they are old and cold and it is hot out there. And you can catch a headline on the Weather Channel any time of day.

"Dja hear about that heat they's havin in the South?" the taxi driver asks him at the airport.

"-what kinda heat?"

"—it's record breakin. Scary."

"What's so scary about heat?"

"Murder rate goes up. People lose their cool. Me, I'm prayin soon a blizzard will move in."

"In August," Holden emphasizes.

"It's a long shot," the driver shrugs. "But stranger things has happen," he's been told.

#### MEANWHILE AUGUST IN VIRGINIA brews daily rain.

Baking air moils upward in a mass so solid you can see it. Sometimes it sits, yellow, stinking on the James, on Ol' Jim River, like an invalid too sick to rise. Sometimes it creeps into the city, seeks its dissipation in the streets. It stares at us, the heat: it draws its bead on us and makes us plead for breeze. It smothers us in sheets. It drives us crazy.

Every evening, from the creaking porches, from the screened-in vistas of the suburbs, from the fields of brown tobacco leaf and crackling corn in Surry and in Prince George Counties, we look skyward as the day fades, and we read the

clouds. Without knowing we are learning how, we learn to fore-cast August thunderstorms by omens, from the signs. We learn to tell when it is coming—*rain*.

Sometimes it's the birds who give the game away, taking to the trees.

Sometimes it's a smell, the smell of copper when the sky goes green.

Sometimes it's the rhumatiz, lightnin in our bones.

People who can read it best, the best storm prophets, are the ones who navigate through thunder on their runs to heaven and they had kept his airplane on the ground. Hour had ticked by. Then another. Two. The afternoon passed. The sky above the runways had turned dark, an amber welt had risen where the sun had slipped into the Potomac. Holden had been traveling by plane for more than fifty hours and he hadn't slept. Or at least he felt as if he hadn't slept. And anyway he had no memory of it. Sleep. Do we remember sleeping?

Or do we just remember dreams.

His only recent memory was of travel. Traveling from place to place where all the places seemed the same: He had gone from Sarajevo in an armored transport two, maybe it was now three, days ago. Since then he had been moving like a mechanized target through what seemed to be a single firing range along a midway of a carnival: series of airports: Belgrade—Frankfurt—Dulles—National. At some point, too, in the last fifty hours, he had taken a taxi into D.C. and checked into the Hay-Adams. His heart, perhaps to prove that it was ticking, skipped a beat when he caught sight of his nation's Capitol, its-pearly dome, in—what else?—dawn's early light. It had been morning: *shit: this* morning. Checking his watch against the local time on the Arrivals and Departures screen, he starts to realize just how well and truly fucked he is. Completely

hammered. No idea where he is in terms of days. "'Scuse me," he says. He leans forward toward this fat guy in a baseball cap. The cap—black cap—has *Orioles* in fancy script across the front of it in orange. "What day is this?"

"I'm with you pal," the guy responds.

"You're with me ...?"

"If I'd drove I'd been back by now. It's the friggin weather."

"The weather, yeah. Everywhere you go. There it is. Weather."

"Wasn't always, though."

"-wasn't?"

"Nope."

"Oh, like 'in the good ol' days' . . . "

"Yep."

"... when there wasn't any weather."

"No there was weather. Didn't stop us doin what we wanted though. When we wanted to. Didn't have these laws back then."

"... the weather didn't."

"Back then the weather—it just was. Pure and simple. You could fly whenever you damn wanted. Go wherever. No one told you what was safe to fly or where or when to fly it. Took your life into your hands and flew. Now it's all this gov'ment regulation."

"Uh-huh," Holden confirms. "You got some problem with air safety?"

"Where you from?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why's it matter to you where I'm from?"

"Nothing. Maybe we both know someone. It's just a way of finding out."

"Like who?"

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"Anybody. Someone."

"What is that, some kind of code?"

"For what?"

"I don't know—the Masons. Fellows in Christ... what difference does it make?"

"What are you, paranoid?"

"Absolutely. Like if I'm paranoid I'm gonna sit here and admit it. To some guy in a bird hat, even."

"Hey the Orioles ain't birds."

"And hey the Redskins ain't the first Americans . . ."

That little inner mechanism that functions as his combination shit detector/smoke alarm goes off, reminding him to check his attitude.

"So is it Sunday?" he asks. "Or have I skipped a day somewhere?"

The guy just stares at him.

"I've been traveling without a break for almost fifty hours," Holden volunteers.

"Been on the road, have you?" the guys asks real sarcastic.

"More like 'in the air."

"Since when?"

"Since Thursday."

"No I mean since where from?"

"From Srebrenica."

Guy grunts.

"That's in your former Yugoslavia," Holden condescends. "Don't tell me you never heard of Yugoslavia . . ."

Guy grunts again.

"Ever hear of newspapers? Ever read one—?"

"How old are you, son—twenty-three, twenty-four? 'Cause you're an angry little shit for somebody your age."

#### your history lesson

- "—twenty-nine, actually. And all I asked was what day it is."
- "Sunday."
- "—thank you."
- "—August six. Ever heard of *that*? Dropped the goods on Hiroshima. You weren't even born."
  - "No. I wasn't. And frankly, that's my virtue."
  - "What is?"
  - "That I don't have to be your history lesson."

Guy leans forward on his knees and jabs a finger at him. "Oh but son, you are . . ."

OH, MAN: things weren't always thus.

Once upon a time he'd been this wunderkind from Brookline, Massachusetts. Only child—apple of his mother's eye, spoiled rotten to the core in Dad's opinion. Eager beaver smart-ass type, a jerk with girls. Verbal wizard, parents were the kind who talked things through. Things like The Environment. The Holocaust. Civil Disobedience. Our Role in Nicaragua. First kid in the neighborhood to own Nintendo. First to write a paper (after Star Wars) on the probable effect of computer graphics on the movie industry. First to start his own retirement fund (age twelve). First to run the Boston Marathon. First to keep a crimson banner in his junior high school locker that said "Harvard."

Yes indeedy he was going to be a millionaire by thirty: meet his Ur-Babe snowboarding in Telluride: give her that black lab in place of an engagement ring: fuck like rabbits: help her write her Ph.D. dissertation on pediatric mood disorders. Easy peasy: loft conversion in Tribeca, house on Tangier island, Chesapeake. Career in . . . ? Politics? Land and/or water rights? Venture cap?

Made no difference, really. Career was just a conduit from studenthood to tonsa-money.

So then what happened.

Something must have happened.

He'd remember in a minute.

Where do dreams go when they die?

Come to think of it there was never any weather in your former Yugoslavia. People died and people starved and people turned venous blue with cold but all the while he never noticed weather. Even though there must have been some. What the sky looked like behind the shelling. Why everybody said their legs were cold. How everybody's boots got soaked. Why everything was drenched. You just don't see specific weather when you're in a general climate. When that climate is called war. Nobody's ever gonna ask you, "Bosnia? Oh really? What's the weather like out there?"

Replacement Theory Number One:

When you're already in a killing storm, you don't need a bigger picture to inform you where the trouble lies. You don't need a satellite. You need a different life.

HELL, WHEN HE'D LEFT HARVARD eight years ago he had been master of his universe. He'd known Everything. Everything there was to know for every situation. Primed and glib and (this had been his major asset): *doubtless*. George Stephanopoulos type

waaay before George Stephanopoulos. And for every George, a built-in Clinton. Built-in Bill. Built-in teacher/mentor/alter-ego.

For most of the time he was growing up, Holden's had been his dad. Everything he had done back then he did to try to please his father. Because he thought his father was the *best*, the best at everything, best at reconciling moral and political dilemmas, best at counseling the poor the sick the hungry the dispossesed, a civil saint inside the government for whom selfless civic duty was man's highest calling. Except, as is the case of many heroes, the man he was in public life was not the man he was in private.

Replacement Theory Number Two: Where one idol falls erect another.

If you can, eradicate all traces of the first.

Keep moving.

SO HE'S NOT THE FIRST SON TO DO SOMETHING STUPID OUT OF ANGER WITH HIS FATHER.

That guy's name was Adam, anyway.

Or Cain.

Sons who pull the long straws off their fathers are exceptions, not the rule.

That's what your Harvard education *doesn't* teach you: that it was ever thus. That history, as a calculus, is fixed to repetition. That men have ever taken issue with their fathers. And the world, despite the best re-imaging, isn't shaped for change. Peace is not a habit of our species. He wished his education had been different, that it hadn't led him to believe in history as a learning exercise, as a measure for improvement. History, he believed, now,

with all the callow cynicism of a man in his late twenties, was not an evolution. It was a season of repeats. Been there. Done that. Ethnic cleansed at Wounded Knee; ethnic cleansed at Auschwitz. At Soweto. In Krajina. Mankind doesn't seem to profit from these massacres, Holden had come to learn. Profit morally, that is. We keep coming up with what we think are brand new reasons to extend the killing instead of saying cool your jets, here, we're too advanced for this, my daddy saw this crap in Vietnam. His daddy saw this crap with Hitler-et cetera, et cetera-all the way back to the first two monkeys, Cain and Abel, through a heap of daddies. Okay maybe there'd been some progress, the establishment of so-called international peace keepers, the empowerment of global cops, global tribunals: but it seemed to him it wasn't enough, it seemed to him, maybe entirely selfishly, that by the time it got to him, the progress of history should have amounted to a whole lot more.

So maybe Mister Orioles is onto something. Maybe the fat guy's right:

Four thousand years since the first Olympic Games you still can't find a person under thirty these days who knows how to put a baseball cap on straight.

It's my ponytail, isn't it? Holden asks the guy.

Guy shrugs. "If you're stupid enough to think I think your hair expresses some kinda policy position then that's your problem. Personally, my motto is? 'Free country.'"

It was the same thing with the Customs guy earlier this morning. When he told Holden to hand over the knapsack.

"You've come from where?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;—um, you mean today?"

"What do you think?"

"Europe."

"Feel free to be specific."

"Frankfurt."

"And before that?"

"Your former Yugoslavia."

"And what took you over there?"

"-what?"

"What took you over there?"

"—um, another airplane."

"Sure. Business or pleasure?"

"It's a war zone. What do you think?"

"And this is—?"

"This is a modem."

"Buy it over there?"

"Well if you notice it says 'Made in the USA' right here—"

"And how long have you been gone?"

"Eight years."

"Eight years. And this is all you have?"

"Yes, sir."

"See your passport please?"

"How come you stopped me out of all these people? It's my ponytail, isn't it?"

"What's the nature of your trip to Washington, Mr. Garfield?"

"Is it the ponytail or not?"

"Just answer the question please."

"I'm an American, that's the nature of my trip to Washington. This is my country. Thomas Jefferson had a ponytail you know. So did George Washington. So did Ben Franklin."

"So does Dolly Parton."

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