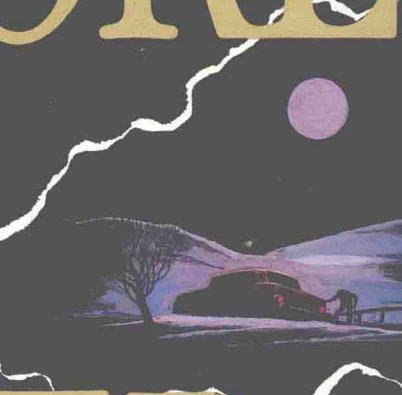



BEFORE AND AFTER

A small, stylized illustration in the upper right corner of the cover. It depicts a landscape with a dark, silhouetted tree in the foreground. In the background, there is a building with a red roof and some lights. The sky is a deep purple, and a large, pale purple circle representing the moon is visible. A jagged, white, torn-paper-like line separates the title text from the illustration.

A NOVEL

ROSELLEN
BROWN

A small graphic element in the bottom left corner, consisting of a series of vertical red and white stripes, resembling a book spine or a decorative element.

B E F O R E
A N D
A F T E R

Rosellen Brown

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ALSO BY ROSELLEN BROWN

Civil Wars

Some Deaths in the Delta

Street Games

The Autobiography of My Mother

Cora Fry

Tender Mercies

A Rosellen Brown Reader

BEFORE
AND
AFTER

*To my beloved New Hampsbire friends,
who have kept a place for me
at their fires and at their tables*

My thanks to the Ingram Merrill Foundation for their financial assistance and the trust that accompanied it.

I am grateful for the help of numerous prison officials in Westmoreland, Manchester, and Concord, New Hampshire, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and for the assistance of L. Phillips Runyon, Susan Howard, Paul Schweizer, and Glenn Gotschall. I am especially indebted to Judge Mary Bacon of the 338th Criminal Court of Houston for more than technical advice: for a demonstration of judicial practice informed by humane ideals and a love of the complexities that fiction—the stories of a thousand strangers—can bring to the law.

When one does not love too much one does not love enough.

—Pascal

BEFORE
AND
AFTER

The little boy's smile is so wide, sun in his eyes, that he seems to be crying. He is fair-haired, not quite blond. Or it's the white light that douses his head and shoulders with pallor. Suddenly he flings his arms up, straight up, and catches a bar in his hands. He is six or seven—tall enough to catch the bar and hoist himself up and over, swinging like one of those little wooden monkeys who leap between two squeezed sticks and flip over and plummet down in a single fluid curve, the kind, no battery needed, that will repeat the trick without complaint as often as he is squeezed. But after two assaults on the bar the boy stands in the scuffed dirt before the camera, spreads his arms wide, grinning wildly, then clamps his arms around himself, hugging hard, his hands squeezing so tight you'd think it would hurt. He holds himself in a delighted embrace, his eyes a little crazed-on-purpose, as if to say, See me, I'll do anything! He is beaming.

She is about eight, all dressed up, her fair hair shining. She stands stiffly as if for a still photograph, then, grim-faced, salutes and abruptly vanishes. There is a lot of awkward focusing and unfocusing, crowds, shoulders, a fat boy turning to give the finger to the camera, amiably smiling. Even he, like the others, is wearing a suit; the girls flash by in festive dresses.

Finally, pitching and crooked in the frame, a graduation procession begins to shape up at the rear of the hall. Middle school, this must

be, to judge by the half-fledged look of them, some of the boys still children, just as many of the girls fully in bloom. A flood of shiny red gowns pours down the aisle, a few accented with gold braid and a tassel at the end. This is for academic achievement; it is called the "dork ribbon" by the boys who don't have it, joined enthusiastically by those who do.

As he comes close, the boy, now fairly tall, his face victimized by blemishes cast across it like pebbles, smiles broadly, again that look that could be a wince, the way his cheeks draw back and wrinkle. Then he remembers himself and ducks his head, turning away.

There are no smooth fades between shots. Each refocusing is a wrench, subjects appear with the suddenness of a shout. The little girl is standing, who knows how long she's been patiently waiting there, with a paper cup in her hand. She is saying something—there is none of that intimate commentary of the wielder of the video camera who mutters like the broadcaster at a pro golf game—and gesturing toward the cup, making a vile face: sick, she seems to be saying. This stuff will make you sick. She is wearing her brother's dork ribbon, she raises its golden tassel to her face and moves it against her cheek like a little brush. She still doesn't smile, having obviously decided that gravity is more fun, more mysterious, in any event, than conviviality. Then her brother is there, suddenly, and she is brushing his cheek and he is defending himself with his elbows, he is pretending to strangle her. He pulls at the ribbon, disorganizes her hair. He looks very happy, in fact: sticks his tongue out, slaps his cheeks, hers, and then they perform a complicated set of maneuvers—only best friends or brothers and sisters have time to work out such rituals—with linked fingers, knuckles against heads, handclasps, and finally an elbow grip. They are falling over laughing. She disappears from sight entirely, apparently fallen to the floor under his feet.

Then, against a bulletin board, jostled and interrupted by the heads of passersby not thoughtful enough to stay out of the camera's way, a blond woman and a bearded man join the boy and girl, also smiling ceremonially and speaking unheard words.

The woman is not beautiful but she has the kind of attractiveness that comes of self-assurance, good, understated clothes, and possibly the sheen of money (long since overcome but evident, clinging like an

old rumor). The man looks, in his dark, curly, red-tinged beard, to those who wish to see him that way, rabbinic. (There are, in fact, truck drivers, masons, and gas-station attendants who wear beards like this around here and no one would think such a thing about them.) He is not quite broad—certainly not heavy—but he gives the feeling of warmth and solidity, a good solid chest to nestle against and, evident here, the habit of making frequent small comforting movements around his children, smoothing, adjusting, resting his hand companionably on shoulder or arm. He and the woman turn to each other at one point, just after the large shadow of a passing family darkens them like a cloud, and, as if they were clasping hands, grin at each other above the heads of their clowning children.

PART I

CAROLYN

She wasn't on ER, never was during the day when she had patients, but they called her in on it. She was feeling around Jennifer Foyle's neck and groin for tenderness, talking over the girl's curly head, speaking for some reason about smallpox, Jennifer's mother insisting that one of these days they'd all pay for discontinuing vaccinations—the mother rolled up her blue flowered blouse sleeve and showed off a large mark, very badly done. She speculated that AIDS might be the result of this generation's having missed their vaccinations. Maybe, Carolyn thought, she just wanted everyone else to have a crack at a scar like that, which was as large as the gold locket she wore around her neck, and pebbled.

Then Karen poked her head in without knocking and told her she was needed downstairs. "Really right away," she added with mock sternness, because she knew Carolyn's propensity for thoroughness, the fetish she made of finishing consultations neatly and carefully so that everything was understood, every question answered.

Grudgingly, Carolyn wrapped things up. "Okay, kid," she said direct to Jennifer, who giggled. "Nothing wrong that a little preventive antibiotic won't take care of." She wrote the prescription, smiled at the child and touched her sweet bare shoulder reassuringly, and hurried out the back way because the waiting room was full and the mothers there would, when they saw her heading out, either stop her for one quick question or simply be offended, in spite of reason, that