

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

AMY
and
ISABELLE

ELIZABETH STROUT



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AMY

and

ISABELLE

Chapter

1

IT WAS TERRIBLY hot that summer Mr. Robertson left town, and for a long while the river seemed dead. Just a dead brown snake of a thing lying flat through the center of town, dirty yellow foam collecting at its edge. Strangers driving by on the turnpike rolled up their windows at the gagging, sulfurous smell and wondered how anyone could live with that kind of stench coming from the river and the mill. But the people who lived in Shirley Falls were used to it, and even in the awful heat it was only noticeable when you first woke up; no, they didn't particularly mind the smell.

What people minded that summer was how the sky was never blue, how it seemed instead that a dirty gauze bandage had been wrapped over the town, squeezing out whatever bright sunlight might have filtered down, blocking out whatever it was that gave things their color, and leaving a vague flat quality to hang in the air—this is what got to people that summer, made them uneasy after a while. And there were other things too: Further up the river crops weren't right—pole beans were small, shriveled on the vine, carrots stopped growing when they were no bigger than the fingers of a child; and two UFOs had apparently been sighted in the north of the state. Rumor had it the government had even sent people to investigate.

In the office room of the mill, where a handful of women spent their days separating invoices, filing copies, pressing stamps onto envelopes with a thump of the fist, there was uneasy talk for a while. Some thought the world might be coming to an end, and even those women not inclined to go that far had to admit it might not have been a good idea sending men into space, that we had no business, really, walking around up there on the moon. But the heat was relentless and the fans rattling in the windows seemed to be doing nothing at all, and eventually the women ran out of steam, sitting at their big wooden desks with their legs slightly apart, lifting the hair from the back of their necks. "Can you *believe this*" was, after a while, about all that got said.

One day the boss, Avery Clark, had sent them home early, but hotter days followed with no further mention of any early dismissal, so apparently this wasn't to happen again. Apparently they were supposed to sit there and suffer, and they did—the room held on to the heat. It was a big room, with a high ceiling and a wooden floor that creaked. The desks were set in pairs facing each other, two by two, down the length of the room. Metal filing cabinets lined the walls; on top of one sat a philodendron plant, its vines gathered and coiled like a child's clay pot, although some vines escaped and fell almost to the floor. It was the only green thing in the room. A few begonia plants and a wandering Jew left over by the windows had all turned brown. Occasionally the hot air stirred by a fan swept a dead leaf to the floor.

In this scene of lassitude was a woman who stood apart from the rest. To be more accurate, she sat apart from the rest. Her name was Isabelle Goodrow, and because she was the secretary to Avery Clark, her desk did not face anyone. It faced instead the glassed-in office of Avery Clark himself, his office being an oddly constructed arrangement of wood paneling and large panes of glass (ostensibly to allow him to keep an eye on his workers, though he seldom looked up from his desk), and it was commonly referred to as "the fishbowl." Being the boss's secretary gave Isabelle Goodrow a status different from the other women in the room, but she was different anyway. For example, she was impeccably dressed; even in this heat she wore pantyhose. At a glance she might seem pretty, but if you looked closer you saw that in fact it didn't really get that far, her looks stopped off at plain. Her hair was certainly plain—thin and dark brown, pulled back in a bun or a twist. This hairstyle made her look older than

she was, as well as a little school-marmish, and her dark, small eyes held an expression of constant surprise.

While the other women tended to sigh a great deal, or make trips back and forth to the soda machine, complaining of backaches and swollen feet, warning each other against slipping off shoes because you'd never in a hundred years get them back on, Isabelle Goodrow kept fairly still. Isabelle Goodrow simply sat at her desk with her knees together, her shoulders back, and typed away at a steady pace. Her neck was a little peculiar. For a short woman it seemed excessively long, and it rose up from her collar like the neck of the swan seen that summer on the dead-looking river, floating perfectly still by the foamy-edged banks.

Or, at any rate, Isabelle's neck appeared this way to her daughter, Amy, a girl of sixteen that summer, who had taken a recent dislike to the sight of her mother's neck (to the sight of her mother, period), and who anyway had never cared one bit for the swan. In a number of ways Amy did not resemble her mother. If her mother's hair was dull and thin, Amy's hair was a thick, streaky blond. Even cut short the way it was now, haphazardly below her ears, it was noticeably healthy and strong. And Amy was tall. Her hands were large, her feet were long. But her eyes, bigger than her mother's, often held the same expression of tentative surprise, and this startled look could produce some uneasiness in the person on whom her eyes were fixed. Although Amy was shy, and seldom fixed her eyes on anyone for long. She was more apt to glance at people quickly before turning her head. In any event, she didn't know really what kind of impression, if any, she made, even though she had privately in the past studied herself a great deal in any available mirror.

But that summer Amy wasn't looking into any mirrors. She was avoiding them, in fact. She would have liked to avoid her mother as well, but that was impossible—they were working in the office room together. This summer arrangement had been arrived at months before, by her mother and Avery Clark, and while Amy was told to be grateful for the job, she was not. The job was very dull. She was required to add on an adding machine the last column of numbers of each orange invoice that lay on a stack on her desk, and the only good thing was that sometimes it seemed like her mind went to sleep.

The real problem, of course, was that she and her mother were together all day. To Amy it seemed as though a black line connected them,

nothing bigger than something drawn with a pencil, perhaps, but a line that was always there. Even if one of them left the room, went to the ladies' room or to the water fountain out in the hall, let's say, it didn't matter to the black line; it simply cut through the wall and connected them still. They did the best they could. At least their desks were far apart and didn't face each other.

Amy sat in a far corner at a desk that faced Fat Bev. This was where Dottie Brown usually sat, but Dottie Brown was home getting over a hysterectomy that summer. Every morning Amy watched as Fat Bev measured out psyllium fiber and shook it vigorously into a pint-sized carton of orange juice. "Lucky you," Fat Bev said. "Young and healthy and all the rest. I bet you never even think about your bowels." Amy, embarrassed, would turn her head.

Fat Bev always lit a cigarette as soon as her orange juice was done. Years later a law would be passed preventing her from doing this in the workplace—at which point she would gain another ten pounds and retire—but right now she was still free to suck in hard and exhale slowly, until she stubbed the cigarette out in the glass ashtray and said to Amy, "That did the trick, got the engine started." She gave Amy a wink as she heaved herself up and hauled her large self off to the bathroom.

It was interesting, really. Amy had not known that cigarettes could make you go to the bathroom. This was not the case when she and Stacy Burrows smoked them in the woods behind the school. And she didn't know that a grown-up woman would talk about her bowels so comfortably. This, in particular, made Amy realize how differently from other people she and her mother lived.

Fat Bev came back from the bathroom, sighing as she sat down, plucking pieces of tiny lint from the front of her huge sleeveless blouse. "So," she said, reaching for the telephone, a half-moon of dampness showing on the pale blue cloth beneath her armpit, "guess I'll give old Dottie a call." Fat Bev called Dottie Brown every morning. She dialed the telephone now with the end of a pencil and cradled the receiver between her shoulder and neck.

"Still bleeding?" she asked, tapping her pink nails against the desk, pink disks almost embedded in flesh. They were Watermelon Pink—she had shown Amy the bottle of polish. "Setting a record or something? Never mind, don't hurry back. No one misses you a bit." Fat Bev

picked up an Avon magazine and fanned herself, her chair creaking as she leaned back. "I mean that, Dot. Much nicer to look at Amy Goodrow's sweet face than hear you go on about your cramps." She gave Amy a wink.

Amy looked away, pushing a number on the adding machine. It was a nice thing for Fat Bev to say, but of course it wasn't true. Fat Bev missed Dottie a lot. And why wouldn't she? They had been friends forever, sitting in this room for longer than Amy had been alive, although it boggled Amy's mind to think that. Besides, another thing to consider was how much Fat Bev loved to talk. She said so herself. "I can't shut up for five minutes," she said, and Amy, keeping an eye on the clock one day, had found this to be true. "*I need* to talk," Fat Bev explained. "It's a kind of physical thing." It seemed she had a point. It seemed her need to talk was as persistent as her need to consume Life Savers and cigarettes, and Amy, who loved Fat Bev, was sorry her own reticence must provide a disappointment. Without forming the thought completely, she blamed her mother for this. Her mother was not a particularly talkative person, either. Look how she just sat there all day typing, never stopping by anyone's desk to ask how they were doing, to complain about the heat. She must know she was considered a snob. Being her daughter, Amy would have to be considered one too.

But Fat Bev didn't seem the least bit disappointed about sharing her corner with Amy. She hung up the telephone and leaned forward, telling Amy in a soft, confiding voice that Dottie Brown's mother-in-law was the most selfish woman in town. Dottie had a hankering for potato salad, which of course was a very good sign, and when she mentioned this to her mother-in-law, who everyone knew happened to make the best potato salad around, Bea Brown suggested that Dottie get up out of bed and go peel some potatoes herself.

"That's awful," Amy offered sincerely.

"I guess it is." Fat Bev sat back and yawned, patting her fleshy throat while her eyes watered. "Honey," she said, nodding, "you marry a man whose mother is dead."

THE LUNCHROOM in the factory was a messy, worn-out-looking place. Vending machines lined one wall, a cracked mirror ran the length

of another; tables with linoleum chipping from their tops were haphazardly pushed together or apart as the women arranged themselves, spreading out their lunch bags, their soda cans and ashtrays, unwrapping sandwiches from wax paper. Amy positioned herself, as she did every day, away from the cracked mirror.

Isabelle sat at the same table, shaking her head as the story was told of Bea Brown's egregious remark to Dottie. Arlene Tucker said it was probably due to hormones, that if you looked carefully at Bea Brown's chin you'd see she had whiskers, and it was Arlene's belief that women like that were apt to have nasty dispositions. Rosie Tanguay said the trouble with Bea Brown was that she had never worked a day in her life, and the conversations broke into little groups after that, desultory voices overlapping. Quick barks of laughter punctuated one tale, serious tooth-sucking accompanied another.

Amy enjoyed this. Everything talked about was interesting to her, even the story of a refrigerator gone on the blink: a half gallon of chocolate ice cream melted in the sink, soured, and smelled to high hell by morning. The voices were comfortable and comforting; Amy, in her silence, looked from face to face. She was not excluded from any of this, but the women had the decency, or lack of desire, not to try to engage her in their conversations either. It took Amy's mind off things. She would have enjoyed it more, of course, if her mother hadn't been there, but the gentle commotion of the place gave them a certain respite from each other, even with the black line between them continuing to hover.

Fat Bev hit a button on the soda machine and a can of Tab rocked noisily into place. She bent her huge body to retrieve it. "Three more weeks and Dottie can have sex," she said. The black line tightened between Amy and Isabelle. "She wishes it was three more months," and here the soda can was popped open. "But I take it Wally's getting irritable. Chomping at the bit."

Amy swallowed the crust of her sandwich.

"Tell him to take care of it himself," someone said, and there was laughter. Amy's heartbeat quickened, sweat broke out above her lip.

"You get dry after a hysterectomy, you know." Arlene Tucker offered this with a meaningful nod of her head.

"I didn't."

"Because you didn't have your ovaries out." Arlene nodded again—

she was a woman who believed what she said. "They yanked the whole business with Dot."

"Oh, my mother went crazy with the hot flashes," somebody said, and thankfully—Amy could feel her heart slow down, her face get cooler in the heat—irritable Wally was left behind; hot flashes and crying jags were talked of instead.

Isabelle wrapped up the remains of her sandwich and returned it to her lunch bag. "It's really too warm to eat," she murmured to Fat Bev, and it was the first time Amy had heard her mother mention the heat.

"Oh, Jesus, that would be nice." Bev chuckled, her big chest rising. "Never too hot for me to eat."

Isabelle smiled and took a lipstick from her purse.

Amy yawned. She was suddenly exhausted; she could have put her head on the table right there and fallen asleep.

"Honey, I'm curious," Fat Bev was saying. She had just lit a cigarette and was gazing through the smoke at Amy. She picked a piece of tobacco from her lip, glancing at it before she flicked it to the floor. "What was it made you decide to cut your hair?"

The black line vibrated and hummed. Without wanting to, Amy looked at her mother. Isabelle was applying lipstick in a hand mirror with her head tilted slightly back; her hand with the lipstick stopped.

"It's cute," Bev added. "Cute as could be. I was just curious, is all. With a head full of hair like yours."

Amy turned her face toward the window, touching the tip of her ear. Women tossed their lunch bags into the trash, brushing crumbs from their fronts, yawning with fists to their mouths as they stood up.

"Probably cooler that way," Fat Bev said.

"It is. Much cooler." Amy looked at Bev and then away.

Fat Bev sighed loudly. "Okay, Isabelle," she said. "Come on. It's back to the salt mines we go."

Isabelle was pressing her lips together, snapping her pocketbook shut. "That's right," she said, not looking at Amy. "There's no rest for the weary, you know."

BUT ISABELLE HAD her story. And years before when she had first shown up in town, renting the old Crane house out on Route 22,

installing her few possessions and infant daughter (a serious-looking child with a head of pale, curly hair), there had been some curiosity among the members of the Congregational church, and among the women she joined in the office room at the mill as well.

But the young Isabelle Goodrow had not been forthcoming. She answered simply that her husband was dead, as well as her parents, and that she had moved down the river to Shirley Falls to have a better chance at earning a living. Really, nobody knew much more. Although a few people noticed that when she had first arrived in town she wore her wedding ring, and that after a while she didn't wear it anymore.

She did not seem to make friends. She did not make enemies either, although she was a conscientious worker and as a result went through a series of promotions. Each time there was some grumbling in the office room, this last time in particular, when she had risen well above the others by becoming the personal secretary to Avery Clark, but no one wished her any ill. There were jokes, remarks, made behind her back at times, about how she needed a good roll in the hay to loosen her up, but that kind of thing lessened as the years went by. At this point she was an old-timer. Amy's fear that her mother was seen as a snob was not particularly warranted. It was true the women gossiped about one another, but Amy was too young to understand that the kind of familial acceptance they had for each other extended to her mother as well.

Still, no one would claim to know Isabelle. And certainly no one guessed the poor woman right now was going through hell. If she seemed thinner than usual, a little more pale, well, it was dreadfully hot. So hot that even now, at the end of the day, the heat rose up from the tar as Amy and Isabelle walked across the parking lot.

"Have a good evening, you two," Fat Bev called out, as she hoisted herself into her car.

THE GERANIUMS ON the windowsill over the sink had bright red heads of bloom the size of softballs, but two more leaves had turned yellow. Isabelle, dropping her keys on the table, noticed this immediately and went to pluck them off. If she had known the summer was going to be this horrible she would not have bothered to buy any geraniums at all. She would not have filled the front window boxes with lavender

petunias, or planted tomatoes and marigolds and Patient Lucys out back. At their slightest drooping now she felt a sense of doom. She pressed her fingers into the potted soil, checking for dampness and finding it too damp, actually, because geraniums needed bright sun, and not this soggy heat. She dropped the leaves into the garbage beneath the sink, stepping back to let Amy get by.

It was Amy who made their dinner these nights. In the olden days (which was the phrase that Isabelle used in her mind to refer to their lives before this summer) they used to take turns, but now it was all up to Amy. A tacit understanding: this was the least Amy could do—open a can of beets and fry some hamburgers in a pan. She stood now opening cupboards slowly, poking an idle finger into the hamburger meat. “Wash your hands,” Isabelle said, and moved past her toward the stairs.

But the telephone, tucked neatly into the corner of the counter, began to ring, and both Isabelle and Amy felt a quickening of alarm. As well as startled hopefulness: sometimes it went for days without making a sound.

“Hello?” Amy said, and Isabelle stopped with her foot on the stair.

“Oh, hi,” Amy said. Putting her hand over the phone and not looking at her mother, she said, “It’s for me.”

Isabelle walked slowly up the stairs. “Yeah,” she heard Amy say. And then in a moment Amy said more quietly, “How’s your dog these days?”

Isabelle walked softly to her bedroom. Who did Amy know that owned a dog? Her bedroom, tucked under the eaves, was stifling at this time of day, but Isabelle closed the door, and did it noisily, so Amy would hear: *See how I give you privacy.*

And Amy, twirling the telephone cord around her arm, heard the door close and understood, but knew her mother only wanted to look good for a moment, score an easy point or two. “I can’t,” Amy said into the phone, pressing her palm over the hamburger meat. And then, in a moment, “No, I haven’t told her yet.”

Isabelle, leaning against her bedroom door, did not think of herself as eavesdropping. It was more that she was too agitated to go about the business of washing her face or changing her clothes while Amy was still on the phone. But Amy didn’t appear to be saying much, and in a few moments Isabelle heard her hang up. Then there was the clanking

sound of pots and pans, and Isabelle went into the bathroom to shower. After that she would say her prayers, and then go down for dinner.

Although really, Isabelle was getting discouraged with this prayer business. She was aware of the fact that by the time Christ was her age he had already gone bravely to the cross and hung there patiently with vinegar pressed to his lips, having gathered his courage previously while he wandered through the olive groves. But she, living here in Shirley Falls (although she had suffered her own betrayal by her Judas-like daughter, she thought, shaking baby powder over her breasts), had no olive trees to walk through, and no courage to speak of either. Perhaps even no faith. She had doubts these days if God cared about her plight at all. He was an elusive fellow, no matter what anyone said.

What the *Reader's Digest* said was that if you kept on praying, your ability to pray would improve, but Isabelle wondered if the *Reader's Digest* might not have a tendency to make things a bit simple. She had enjoyed those articles "I Am Joe's Brain" or "I Am Joe's Liver," but the "Praying: Practice Makes Perfect" was really, when you thought about it, a little mundane.

After all, she had tried. She had tried for years to pray, and she would try again right now, lying down on her white bedspread, her skin moist from the shower, closing her eyes against the low white ceiling above her, to pray for His love. Ask and you shall receive. This was tricky business. You didn't want to ask for the wrong thing, go barking up the wrong tree. You didn't want God to think you were selfish by asking for *things*, the way the Catholics did. Arlene Tucker's husband had gone to Mass specifically to pray for a new car, and to Isabelle this was appalling. If Isabelle was going to get specific she wouldn't be so vulgar as to ask for a car—she would pray for a husband, or a better daughter. Except she wouldn't, of course. (*Please God, send me a husband, or at least a daughter I can stand.*) No, instead she would lie there on her bedspread and pray only for God's love and guidance, and try to let Him know she was available for these things if He cared to give her a sign. But she felt nothing, only the drops of sweat arriving once more above her lip and beneath her arms in the heat of this small bedroom. She was tired. God was probably tired as well. She sat up and slipped on her bathrobe and went down to the kitchen to eat with her daughter.

It was difficult.