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LOVE MEDICINE



LOUISE ERDRICH

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
THE BEET QUEEN and *TRACKS*

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MEDICINE

A NOVEL BY

LOUISE ERDRICH

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, events and details of the setting are imaginary. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST FISHERMEN



(1981)

1.

The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. She was a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved. Probably it was the way she moved, easy as a young girl on slim hard legs, that caught the eye of the man who rapped at her from inside the window of the Rigger Bar. He looked familiar, like a lot of people looked familiar to her. She had seen so many come and go. He hooked his arm, inviting her to enter, and she did so without hesitation, thinking only that she might tip down one or two with him and then get her bags to meet the bus. She wanted, at least, to see if she actually knew him. Even through the watery glass she could see that he wasn't all that old and that his chest was thickly padded in dark red nylon and expensive down.

There were cartons of colored eggs on the bar, each glowing like a jewel in its wad of cellophane. He was peeling one, sky blue as a robin's, palming it while he thumbed the peel aside, when she walked through the door. Although the day was overcast, the snow itself reflected such light that she was momentarily blinded. It was like going underwater. What she walked toward more than anything else was that blue egg in the white hand, a beacon in the murky air.

He ordered a beer for her, a Blue Ribbon, saying she deserved a prize for being the best thing he'd seen for days. He peeled an egg for her, a pink one, saying it matched her turtleneck. She told him it was no turtleneck. You called these things shells. He said he would peel that for her, too, if she wanted, then he grinned at the bartender and handed her the naked egg.

June's hand was colder from the outdoors than the egg, and so she had to let it sit in her fingers for a minute before it stopped feeling rubbery warm. Eating it, she found out how hungry she was. The last of the money that the man before this one had given her was spent for the ticket. She didn't know exactly when she'd eaten last. This man seemed impressed, when her egg was finished, and peeled her another one just like it. She ate the egg. Then another egg. The bartender looked at her. She shrugged and tapped out a long menthol cigarette from a white plastic case inscribed with her initials in golden letters. She took a breath of smoke then leaned toward her companion through the broken shells.

"What's happening?" she said. "Where's the party?"

Her hair was rolled carefully, sprayed for the bus trip, and her eyes were deeply watchful in their sea-blue flumes of shadow. She was deciding.

"I don't got much time until my bus. . . ." she said.

"Forget the bus!" He stood up and grabbed her arm. "We're gonna party. Hear? Who's stopping us? We're having a good time!"

She couldn't help notice, when he paid up, that he had a good-sized wad of money in a red rubber band like the kind that holds bananas together in the supermarket. That roll helped. But what was more important, she had a feeling. The eggs were lucky. And he had a good-natured slowness about him that seemed different. He could be different, she thought. The bus ticket would stay good, maybe forever. They weren't expecting her up home on the reservation. She didn't even have a man there, except the one she'd divorced. Gordie. If she got desperate he would still send her money. So she went on to the next bar with this man in the dark red vest. They drove down the street in his Silverado pickup. He was a mud engineer. Andy. She didn't tell him she'd known any mud engineers before or about that one she'd heard was killed by a pressurized hose. The hose had shot up into his stomach from underground.

The thought of that death, although she'd only been half acquainted with the man, always put a panicky, dry lump in her throat. It was the hose, she thought, snaking up suddenly from its unseen nest, the idea of that hose striking like a live thing, that was fearful. With one blast it had taken out his insides. And that too made her throat ache, although she'd heard of worse things. It was that moment, that one moment, of realizing you were totally empty. He must have felt that. Sometimes, alone in her room in the dark, she thought she knew what it might be like.

Later on, the dark falling around them at a noisy bar, she closed her eyes for a moment against the smoke and saw that hose pop suddenly through black earth with its killing breath.

"Ahhhhh," she said, surprised, almost in pain, "you got to be."

"I got to be what, honeysuckle?" He tightened his arm around her slim shoulders. They were sitting in a booth with a few others, drinking Angel Wings. Her mouth, the lipstick darkly blurred now, tipped unevenly toward his.

"You got to be different," she breathed.

It was later still that she felt so fragile. Walking toward the Ladies she was afraid to bump against anything because her skin felt hard and brittle, and she knew it was possible, in this condition, to fall apart at the slightest touch. She locked herself in the bathroom stall and remembered his hand, thumbing back the transparent skin and crackling blue peel. Her clothing itched. The pink shell was sweaty and hitched up too far under her arms but she couldn't take off her jacket, the white vinyl her son King had given her, because the pink top was ripped across the stomach. But as she sat there, something happened. All of a sudden she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone. Sitting, she leaned down and rested her forehead on the top of the metal toilet-roll dispenser. She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked—only the skins were stiff and old. Even if he was no different, she would get through this again.

Her purse dropped out of her hand, spilling. She sat up straight. The doorknob rolled out of her open purse and beneath the stall. She had to take that doorknob with her every time she left her room. There was no other way of locking the battered door. Now she picked up the knob and held it by the metal shank. The round grip was porcelain, smooth and white. Hard as stone. She put it in the deep pocket of her jacket and, holding it, walked back to the booth through the gathering crowd. Her room was locked. And she was ready for him now.

It was a relief when they finally stopped, far out of town on a county road. Even in the dark, when he turned his headlights off, the snow reflected enough light to see by. She let him wrestle with her clothing, but he worked so clumsily that she had to help him along. She rolled her top up carefully, still hiding the rip, and arched her back to let him undo her slacks. They were made of a stretch fabric that crackled with electricity and shed blue

sparks when he pushed them down around her ankles. He knocked his hand against the heater's controls. She felt it open at her shoulder like a pair of jaws, blasting heat, and had the momentary and voluptuous sensation that she was lying stretched out before a great wide mouth. The breath swept across her throat, tightening her nipples. Then his vest plunged down against her, so slick and plush that it was like being rubbed by an enormous tongue. She couldn't get a handhold anywhere. And she felt herself slipping along the smooth plastic seat, slipping away, until she wedged the crown of her head against the driver's door.

"Oh God," he was moaning. "Oh God, Mary. Oh God, it's good."

He wasn't doing anything, just moving his hips on top of her, and at last his head fell heavily.

"Say there," she said, shaking him. "Andy?" She shook him harder. He didn't move or miss a beat in his deep breathing. She knew there wasn't any rousing him now, so she lay still, under the weight of him. She stayed quiet until she felt herself getting frail again. Her skin felt smooth and strange. And then she knew that if she lay there any longer she would crack wide open, not in one place but in many pieces that he would crush by moving in his sleep. She thought to pull herself back together. So she hooked an arm over her head and brought her elbow down slowly on the handle, releasing it. The door suddenly sprang wide.

June had wedged herself so tight against the door that when she sprang the latch she fell out. Into the cold. It was a shock like being born. But somehow she landed with her pants halfway up, as though she'd hoisted them in midair, and then she quickly did her bra, pulled her shell down, and reached back into the truck. Without groping she found her jacket and purse. By now it was unclear whether she was more drunk or more sober than she'd ever been in her life. She left the door open. The heater, set to an

automatic temperature, yawned hoarsely behind her, and she heard it, or thought she did, for about a half mile down the road. Then she heard nothing but her own boots crunching ice. The snow was bright, giving back starlight. She concentrated on her feet, on steering them strictly down the packed wheel ruts.

She had walked far enough to see the dull orange glow, the canopy of low, lit clouds over Williston, when she decided to walk home instead of going back there. The wind was mild and wet. A Chinook wind, she told herself. She made a right turn off the road, walked up a drift frozen over a snow fence, and began to pick her way through the swirls of dead grass and icy crust of open ranchland. Her boots were thin. So she stepped on dry ground where she could and avoided the slush and rotten, gray banks. It was exactly as if she were walking back from a fiddle dance or a friend's house to Uncle Eli's warm, man-smelling kitchen. She crossed the wide fields swinging her purse, stepping carefully to keep her feet dry.

Even when it started to snow she did not lose her sense of direction. Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the distance. The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course. She continued. Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on.

The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home.

2.

ALBERTINE JOHNSON

After that false spring, when the storm blew in covering the state, all the snow melted off and it was summer. It was almost hot by the week after Easter, when I found out, in Mama's letter, that

June was gone—not only dead but suddenly buried, vanished off the land like that sudden snow.

Far from home, living in a white woman's basement, that letter made me feel buried, too. I opened the envelope and read the words. I was sitting at my linoleum table with my textbook spread out to the section on "Patient Abuse." There were two ways you could think of that title. One was obvious to a nursing student, and the other was obvious to a Kashpaw. Between my mother and myself the abuse was slow and tedious, requiring long periods of dormancy, living in the blood like hepatitis. When it broke out it was almost a relief.

"We knew you probably couldn't get away from your studies for the funeral," said the letter, "so we never bothered to call and disturb you."

She always used the royal *we*, to multiply the censure of what she said by invisible others.

I put down the letter and just stared, the way you do when you are hit by a bad thing you can do nothing about. At first it made me so angry that Mama hadn't called me for the funeral that I couldn't even feel the proper way for Aunt June. Then after a while I saw where I was staring—through the window at the level of the earth—and I thought of her.

I thought of June sitting tense in Grandma's kitchen, flicking an ash, jiggling a foot back and forth in a pointed shoe. Or smartly cracking her purse to buy each of us children a dairy cone. I thought of her brushing my hair past my waist, when it was that long, and saying that I had princess hair. Princess hair! I wore it unbraided after she said that, until it tangled so badly that Mama cut precious inches off.

June was raised by Great-uncle Eli, the old bachelor in the family. He'd taken her in when Grandma's sister died and June's no-good Morrissey father ran off to high-time it in the Cities. After she had grown up and looked around for a while, June

decided on my uncle, Gordie Kashpaw, and married him even though they had to run away to do it. They were cousins, but almost like brother and sister. Grandma wouldn't let them in the house for a year, she was so angry. As it turned out, it was an off-and-on marriage anyway. Being so much alike they both liked to have their fun. Then, too, June had no patience with children. She wasn't much as a mother; everyone in the family said so, even Eli who was crazy about his little girl.

Whatever she lacked as a mother, June was a good aunt to have—the kind that spoiled you. She always kept an extra stick of Doublemint in her coat pocket. Her neck smelled fresh and sweet. She talked to me the way she talked to grown-up people and never told me to play outside when I wanted to sit at the edge of a conversation. She had been pretty. “Miss Indian America,” Grandpa called her. She had stayed pretty even when things got so bad with Gordie that she ran off alone, “like a no-good Morrissey,” people said, leaving her son King. She always planned that she would make it somewhere else first, then send for the boy. But everything she tried fell through.

When she was studying to be a beautician, I remember, word came that she had purposely burned an unruly customer's hair stiff green with chemicals. Other secretaries did not like her. She reported drunk for work in dime stores and swaggered out of restaurants where she'd waitressed a week, at the first wisecrack. Sometimes she came back to Gordie and they made the marriage work for a while longer. Then she would leave again. As time went by she broke, little by little, into someone whose shoulders sagged when she thought no one was looking, a woman with long ragged nails and hair always growing from its beauty-parlor cut. Her clothes were full of safety pins and hidden tears. I thought now that her one last try had been Williston, a town full of rich, single cowboy-rigger oil trash.

One type I know is boom trash, the ones that bat around the

state in big pickups that are loaded with options. I know, because I worked with them, that to these types an Indian woman's nothing but an easy night. I saw it laid out clear, as I sat there at my table, how down to the limit that kind of life would have gotten June. But what did I know, in fact, about the thing that happened?

I saw her laughing, so sharp and determined, her purse clutched tight at the bar, her perfect legs crossed.

"Probably drank too much," Mama wrote. She naturally hadn't thought well of June. "Probably wandered off too intoxicated to realize about the storm."

But June grew up on the plains. Even drunk she'd have known a storm was coming. She'd have known by the heaviness in the air, the smell in the clouds. She'd have gotten that animal sinking in her bones.

I sat there at my table, thinking about June. From time to time, overhead, I heard my landlady's vacuum cleaner. Through my window there wasn't much to see—dirt and dead snow and wheels rolling by in the street. It was warm but the grass was brown, except in lush patches over the underground steam pipes on the campus. I did something that day. I put on my coat and went walking down the street until I came to a big stretch of university lawn that was crossed by a steam-pipe line of grass—so bright your eyes ached—and even some dandelions. I walked out there and lay down on that patch of grass, above the ground, and I thought of Aunt June until I felt the right way for her.

I was so mad at my mother, Zelda, that I didn't write or call for almost two months. She should have gone up the nun's hill to the convent, like she wanted, instead of having me. But she had married Swede Johnson from off-reservation, and I'd arrived premature. He'd had the grace, at least, to go AWOL from army boot camp and never let his face be seen again. All I knew of him

was pictures, blond, bleak, and doomed to wander, perhaps as much by Mama's rage at her downfall as by the uniform. I'd been the one who'd really blocked my mother's plans for being pure. I'd forced her to work for money, keeping books, instead of pursuing tasks that would bring divine glory on her head. I'd caused her to live in a trailer near Grandma so that there would be someone to care for me. Later on, I'd provided her with years of grinding grief. I had gone through a long phase of wickedness and run away. Yet now that I was on the straight and narrow, things were even worse between us.

After two months were gone and my classes were done, and although I still had not forgiven my mother, I decided to go home. I wasn't crazy about the thought of seeing her, but our relationship was like a file we sharpened on, and necessary in that way. So I threw a few books and some clothes in the backseat of my Mustang. It was the first car I'd ever owned, a dull black hard-driven car with rusted wheel wells, a stick shift, and a windshield wiper only on the passenger side.

All along the highway that early summer the land was beautiful. The sky stretched bare. Tattered silver windbreaks bounded flat, plowed fields that the government had paid to lie fallow. Everything else was dull tan—the dry ditches, the dying crops, the buildings of farms and towns. Rain would come just in time that year. Driving north, I could see the earth lifting. The wind was hot and smelled of tar and the moving dust.

At the end of the big farms and the blowing fields was the reservation. I always knew it was coming a long way off. Even in the distance you sense hills from their opposites—pits, dried sloughs, ditches of cattails, potholes. And then the water. There would be water in the hills when there wasn't any on the plains, because the hollows saved it, collected runoff from the low slopes, and the dense trees held it, too. I thought of water in the roots of trees, brown and bark smelling, cold.

The highway narrowed off and tangled, then turned to gravel with ruts, holes, and tall blue alfalfa bunching in the ditches. Small hills reared up. Dogs leaped from nowhere and ran themselves out fiercely. The dust hung thick.

My mother lives just on the very edge of the reservation with her new husband, Bjornson, who owns a solid wheat farm. She's lived there about a year. I grew up with her in an aqua-and-silver trailer, set next to the old house on the land my great-grandparents were allotted when the government decided to turn Indians into farmers.

The policy of allotment was a joke. As I was driving toward the land, looking around, I saw as usual how much of the reservation was sold to whites and lost forever. Just three miles, and I was driving down the rutted dirt road, home.

The main house, where all of my aunts and uncles grew up, is one big square room with a cooking shack tacked onto it. The house is a light peeling lavender now, the color of a pale petunia, but it was never painted while I lived there. My mother had it painted for Grandma as an anniversary present one year. Soon after the paint job the two old ones moved into town where things were livelier and they didn't have to drive so far to church. Luckily, as it happened, the color suited my Aunt Aurelia, because she moved into the house and has taken care of it since.

Driving up to the house I saw that her brown car and my mother's creamy yellow one were parked in the yard. I got out. They were indoors, baking. I heard their voices from the steps and smelled the rich and browning piecrusts. But when I walked into the dim, warm kitchen they hardly acknowledged me, they were so involved in their talk.

"She sure *was* good-looking," Aurelia argued, hands buried in a dishpan of potato salad.

"Some people use spoons to mix." My mother held out a heavy tin one from the drawer and screwed her lips up like a coin

purse to kiss me. She lit her eyes and widened them. "I was only saying she had seen a few hard times, and there was bruises. . . ."

"Wasn't either. You never saw her." Aurelia was plump, a "looker." She waved my mother's spoon off with a caked hand. "In fact, did anybody see her? Nobody saw her. Nobody knows for sure what happened, so who's to squawk about bruises and so on . . . nobody saw her."

"Well I heard," said Mama, "I heard she was with a man and he dumped her off."

I sat down, dipped a slice of apple in the bowl of sugar-cinnamon topping, and ate it. They were talking about June.

"Heard nothing," Aurelia snapped. "Don't trust nothing you don't see with your own eyes. June was all packed up and ready to come home. They found her bags when they busted in her room. She walked out there because"—Aurelia foundered, then her voice strengthened—"what did she have to come home to after all? Nothing!"

"Nothing?" said Mama piercingly. "Nothing to come home to?" She gave me a short glance full of meaning. I had, after all, come home, even if husbandless, childless, driving a fall-apart car. I looked away from her. She puffed her cheeks out in concentration, patting and crimping the edges of the pies. They were beautiful pies—rhubarb, wild Juneberry, apple, and gooseberry, all fruits preserved by Grandma Kashpaw or my mother or Aurelia.

"I suppose you washed your hands before you put them in that salad," she said to Aurelia.

Aurelia squeezed her face into crescents of patient exasperation. "Now Zelda," she said, "your girl's going to think you still treat me like your baby sister."

"Well you are aren't you? Can't change that."

"I'm back," I said.

They looked at me as if I had, at that very moment, walked in the door.