

OYCE CAROL OATES

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS

A N O V E L



"An American masterpiece... Oates's sprawling novel is the definitive history of an era... deeply imagined and utterly real. ... a triumph."

—JAMES ATLAS, VANITY FAIR

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PROLOGUE

June 7, 1953

She had been waiting for a sign to release her into Death, now the sign was granted.

She swallowed forty-seven aspirin tablets between 1:10 A.M. and 1:35 A.M. locked in the bathroom of her parents' rented house.

She swallowed the tablets slowly and carefully drinking tepid water from the faucet.

She knew to go slowly and carefully not wanting to get overexcited feverish not wanting to get sick to her stomach.

Better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness her father often said but she preferred the darkness.

She stood five feet three inches tall in her bare feet, she weighed eighty-nine pounds.

She was leaving no message behind.

Her tight fist of a heart beat hard, in pride in growing ecstasy she half believed it could never stop.

She had read about the subject at the library, she didn't intend to make the usual mistakes.

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She waited until the others were asleep, she'd always been practical shrewd sly, Enid Maria thinking her own private thoughts.

She began to feel bloated from so much water but the nausea was only in her head.

She'd taken a long dreamy bath earlier that evening and washed her hair while the others were watching television: Arthur Godfrey. She could hear laughter far away downstairs.

She'd powdered herself with talcum powder, shoulders breasts belly even between her thighs quick and rough. Stark-white sweet-smelling Jasmine Princess from Woolworth's.

She was thinking of the undertow at Shoal Lake, that eel-like coil of icy water sliding up her body. The sun had been beating hard on her head, the water warm, even sluggish, she'd thought at first the icy water might be a fish or a water snake, it slid swiftly up her legs then disappeared.

The warning was, if you swam in that part of the lake and the undertow got you you wouldn't have time to cry out for help.

The water like an icy slippery eel had slid up her body then disappeared. She'd kept on swimming.

She remembered her sister Lizzie the other day singing "Wheel of Fortune" along with Kay Starr on television.

She dressed herself like a bride to die in her white cotton nightgown from Sibley's with the wide lace straps threaded with a narrow white satin ribbon. A white satin ribbon at the neck too, fixed in place by a safety pin.

She had no pity for the face in the mirror. The bony ridges of her chest, the familiar delicate bones.

She had no pity for the small breasts faint and bazy through the fabric of the nightgown as if seen through frosted glass.

She remembered the sky at Shoal Lake above l'Isle-Verte mottled and luminous like old wavy glass. She remembered the island that was two islands, two halves of an island, above the lake and below the lake in the colorless water.

She remembered the smell of tobacco smoke.

She remembered his voice, Don't tell anybody will you.

She remembered her father teasing her, lifting her in his arms long ago, his whiskers scratching her face.

She was an honor student too smart to die by accident.

She was in control. She didn't believe in accident.

She gagged several times swallowing the pills, by then she had lost count but she knew there would be enough.

Her mother had said, Are you sick Enid, is it your period again so soon?—peering frowning into her face.

Her mother said, Do you have cramps Enid, let me get you some aspirin.

Prologue

She had toweled her hair then let it dry loose on her shoulders. Chestnut-red crackling with static electricity. She brushed it slowly getting out all the snarls. She hated snarls. Tiny clots of hair in the brush she pulled out of the brush, quickly dropping them into the toilet bowl, her eyes averted.

She remembered a mourning dove the boys had caught in the vacant lot then dosed with gasoline then lit with a match. The bird's wild wings flapping flying in looping crazy circles, ablaze, its beak opened emitting a terrible shriek. It flew up into the air higher and higher then suddenly fell to the ground.

She said, I didn't tell anybody.

She remembered kneeling at the communion rail at St. James's, her eyes shut her fingers gripping one another tight, she hadn't been able to thrust her tongue forward like the others.

She remembered the communion wafer melting on her tongue. You weren't supposed to chew it, just let it melt.

Only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

She was wearing around her neck: a necklace of tiny mother-of-pearl beads a gift from her sister Geraldine, a thin gold chain, a thin silver chain with a religious medal on it the Virgin Mary stamped on it, a confirmation gift from her Uncle Domenic who was a priest.

She lived at 118 East Clinton Street in Port Oriskany, New York, the east side of the city near the railroad yards and warehouses and the big factories along the lake—General Motors, U.S. Steel, Stubb Central Foundry, Swale Cyanamid. Mrs. Stevick, hanging wash in the back yard, complained of the stink in the air but most days you hardly noticed. The white sheets were dirtied the worst.

She was a virgin. He hadn't touched her there.

She didn't believe in God, she believed in Death.

She'd been waiting for a sign, now the sign was granted.

She hid the empty aspirin bottle in the wastebasket beneath the sink, she turned off the bathroom light before opening the door—be slow! be quiet! take your time!—she went back to bed slipping into bed holding her breath, but her sister Lizzie sleeping close by snoring faintly didn't hear.

She was fifteen years old. She was very happy. The date was June 7, 1953.

I

THE GREEN ISLAND

November 1944-
June 1953

Not once upon a time but a few years ago. Last year. Last week. Last Thursday. On Union Street, on Cadboro, up in the Decker project, up behind the high school in that alley. In Kilbirnie Park. Out by the reservoir. In the middle of the night, at six in the morning. In broad daylight.

The Buehl girl in ninth grade with the frizzed snarly hair her eyes slightly crossed, nobody wanted to sit near her because of lice, then they were saying somebody's got her pregnant was it her own daddy? then they were saying somebody got rid of it was it her own mommy?—aborted with a coat hanger, maybe it was an ice pick, she didn't die but they didn't let her back into school and afterward the family moved away: went where? Good riddance to bad rubbish even the teachers at De Witt Clinton said, and Mrs. Stevick, who'd heard the worst of it from Father Ogden's housekeeper. Then there was that family in the Decker project, one or another of those low ugly asphalt-sided barracks, a GI with a Bronze Star medal it said in the paper, Sunday morning he cut everybody's throats with a butcher knife not even sparing his eighty-nine-year-old grandmother, tiptoed in the

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dark just before sunrise taking his time, six people altogether, but with himself he just slashed his wrists and arms, wasn't dead when the police came. And then there was that thirteen-year-old girl locked up in a house on Niagara north of Clinton: she'd run away from home they said—a farm around Foxboro, Olcottsport—met some guy at the Greyhound station downtown, he brought her to this house he and his buddies were renting together, then they wouldn't let her go kept her locked up did things to her all kinds of things, what would you expect? Up and down the block it was known *something* was going on in that house, a half-dozen motorcycles parked on the street some nights, car doors slamming any hour, bottles smashed on the sidewalk, people were afraid to complain, a week, ten days, twelve, finally somebody did complain and the police broke in and found the girl, took her to St. Joseph's, she was unconscious, she'd lost so much weight they said in the papers, quoting a doctor, she was a "living skeleton." Also she was covered in cuts, scabs, cigarette burns, one of the guys arrested told the police the girl gave them a hard time, that was why they punished her sometimes but they didn't mean anything by it, they were going to let her go.

("Living skeleton"—Enid kept thinking about that. Said it out loud, shaped the words in silence. "Living skeleton." Staring at herself in the bathroom mirror, naked, regarding with clinical distaste the jutting collar bones, the knobby shoulder bones, the thin pale envelope of skin rippling over her ribs. Yes she saw it, yes it was there. Her mother was always trying to make her eat though she *did* eat all she wanted, all that wouldn't make her sick, she'd grown two inches in a year, now she didn't want to grow any taller.)

One morning a few years back, she couldn't have been more than eight or nine, she was at her father's store, Daddy was waiting on some customers up front and she was poking around in the books and magazines he kept near the back, old mismatched volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, mildewed damp-smelling back issues of *Life*, *Collier's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, there were children's books she sometimes read when she was visiting Daddy for the day but this morning she was leafing through *Life* staring at photographs from the war, she knew her Uncle Felix had been in the war, her cousin Joe Pauley who had died, then she saw photographs of extermination camp victims, emaciated men in uniforms that were comical, striped, "living skeletons" of Bergen-Belsen they were called, Buchenwald prisoners staring at the camera through barbed wire looking so calm, so quiet. There were piles of the dead along a country lane, there was a little

boy in short pants her age squinting at the camera looking as if he might smile hello, it was all so calm and ordinary. Enid turned a page and then she was staring at the face close up of a boy who had died trying to squeeze beneath a barn door through a space of—was it three inches or so? so small!—a face smudged and broken yet beautiful in sleep, in death. Enid stared. Enid wanted to memorize. This was a face she would often see in her lifetime but it meant her no harm, it brought with it the conviction simple as a lock clicking into place that the human world was wrong, she'd been born into it by error.

Daddy came seeking her out, she was so quiet; she smelled his pipe tobacco but didn't look up, no she wasn't crying no she wasn't upset, her mouth felt cold that was all, she didn't look up at Daddy though he spoke to her, it seemed she could not look away from the face of the dead boy until he released her. That head—that human head—so improbably forced beneath a door! Those shut eyes, that dirt-smudged mouth! Daddy snatched the magazine out of her hands saying, You shouldn't be looking at such things, they're not for your eyes. He sounded angry at first, panting, sucking at his pipe, but really he wasn't angry, she knew to stay quiet and his mood would pass.

They always spoke of it as their house at 118 East Clinton but it was only rented, two-story gray shingleboard that needed paint, the roof and chimneys repaired, in fact it was a duplex they had to share with another family, Mr. Stevick was saving up to make a down payment on a house of their own but it wouldn't be on the east side, maybe out by Prudhoe Park where some of his relatives lived. It was only meant to have been temporary, the Stevicks living in this neighborhood so close to Tuscarora, so close to the factories on the lake, that smell from U.S. Steel was the worst, grit everywhere you couldn't help but breathe, but there was Swale Cyanamid where Mr. Stevick had worked during the war so he was an expert: the real poisons in the air you can't even detect.

Most of the buildings on the block were duplexes nearly identical with their own, some of them shabby and rundown, eyesores, a few newly painted with plots of grass tended out front, up the street was the Union Commercial Corrugated Box & Handling Company, a long low concrete building painted a shade of gray so faint it was no color at all. The box company was of virtually no interest to the neighborhood children, even its windows were opaque with a thick film of grime, but its parking lot was surrounded by a six-foot wire mesh

fence they enjoyed climbing, it was broken in parts, badly rusted, their mothers worried they'd get tetanus from it, that meant lockjaw, still it was a game of sorts—climbing the wire fence when no one was there to stop them, breaking it down in stretches. Enid learned to jump six feet to the asphalt pavement not even crying out in surprise or pain, landing on the balls of her feet, her arms extended for balance.

Beyond the parking lot was a vacant lot, perhaps two acres of scrubby trees and bushes, broken glass, debris, rubble strewn among the tall grasses; there were large burnt patches where neighborhood boys had set fires. (For the hell of it on summer nights!—somebody would turn in an alarm, the firemen would arrive within minutes, the fire truck with its shrieking alarm; that meant an hour or so of excitement and nobody was ever caught.) The lot was crossed by numerous paths leading down the steep slope to the canal and to the narrow plank footbridge that spanned the canal perhaps twelve feet below the railroad trestle. The footbridge was maybe five feet wide and shaky and if a train came by the noise was deafening, terrifying, the planks of the footbridge vibrated and it was natural to think the bridge would fall apart and you'd fall into the canal far below and drown—along this stretch just north of downtown Port Oriskany the canal walls were thirty feet high just solid rock face and nothing to grab hold of except scrubby little trees that would break off in your hands. It had the look of a nightmare and Enid dreamed of it often.

The vacant lot was a place for wild rough games, games the girls didn't always want to play, once the boys caught a boy named Jimmy Schultz pulled down his pants and underwear and rubbed dirt, mud, leaves on his genitals, another time they caught a mourning dove, sprinkled gasoline on it and set it afire—the bird flew up, its wings flapping, it turned in circles, shrieking, ablaze, then suddenly it gave up, it fell straight down to the ground just a patch of burning feathers. Later that day Enid's brother, Warren, came over to bury it, said afterward it wasn't anything but some burnt stuff but he buried it anyway—felt sorry for it. Enid hadn't come back to watch.

By night sometimes people dumped things in the lot, broken-down iceboxes, wrecked chairs, torn and scorched sometimes blood-stained mattresses—the boys made jokes, saying, Hey you know what *that* means! Once in a while raw garbage was tossed down, even out by the sidewalk so you could see it and smell it, and Mrs. Stevick was furious almost in tears: Some people are just *pigs*. Some people don't deserve to *live*.

Even Warren who was big and husky and strong, aged eleven, didn't go near the lot after dark—he didn't belong to the Clinton Street gang. The story was, though, the worst things that happened there didn't happen to boys.

There was a story Geraldine heard in ninth grade—a soldier on leave and a woman were found dead one Sunday morning in a parked car above the canal. They'd driven through the lot to the very edge of the precipice, made sure the car was hidden behind trees, fixed a length of hose to the exhaust pipe, and let the motor run all night, filling the car with exhaust. They poisoned themselves, Geraldine told her sisters, with carbon monoxide.

"Why would anybody do that?" Lizzie asked.

"For love," Geraldine said.

"Yes, but why?" Lizzie asked. At the age of nine she was a big-boned girl with a wide blunt almost-pretty face. Brown eyes narrowing in derision.

Geraldine said evasively, "One of them was married to somebody else. Or maybe they were both married to somebody else."

"Okay but why do *that*?" Lizzie said.

"Because they did! Because it's what some people do, stupid!" Geraldine cried.

The soldier had stuffed the window opening around the hose with his army jacket—or was it navy? Geraldine couldn't remember for sure—then the two drank a bottle of whiskey, smoked cigarettes, half lying in each other's arms with the car radio playing, the woman's head resting on the man's shoulder when they were found. In the morning the car's gas tank was empty and the motor was off and they were both dead.

"Okay but *why*?" Lizzie persisted.

"For love, asshole," Geraldine said.

Lizzie and Enid explored the lot when nobody was around, looking for evidence, but they found nothing—only broken bottles, debris, scorched mounds of earth. No car tracks: only bicycle tracks on the paths, muddy and rutted. Most of the hill was lushly overgrown, scrub oak and scrub willow, flowering weeds taller than their heads, in late summer the earth had a ripe rich slightly rotting odor. The air hummed and glittered with insects. "Why would anybody want to kill themselves," Lizzie said in contempt, "—look how *nice* the water is!"

The canal was sluggish and mud-colored, said to be polluted, but from certain angles its surface reflected the sky and shone with the