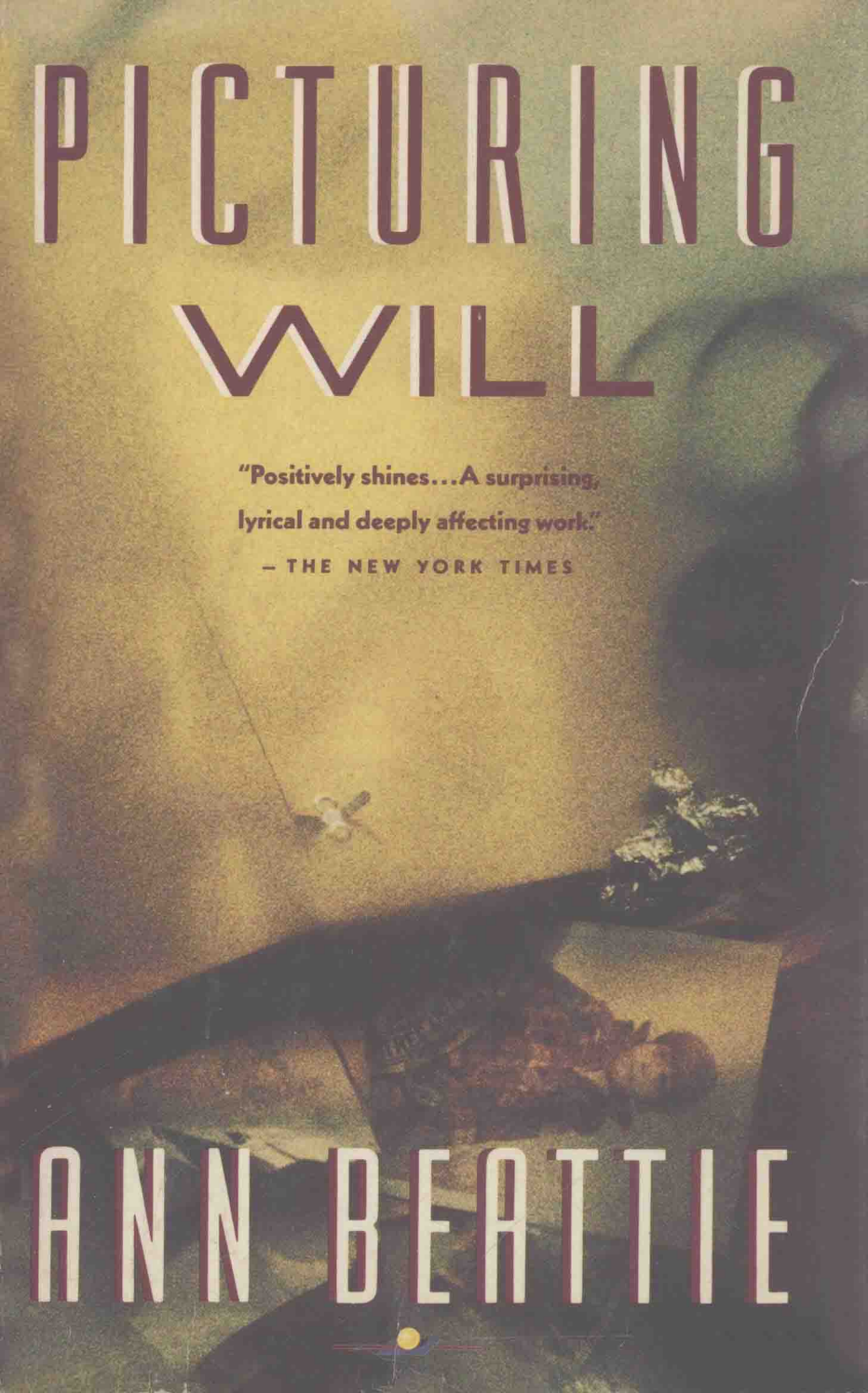
PICTURING WILL

"Positively shines...A surprising, lyrical and deeply affecting work."
— THE NEW YORK TIMES



ANN BEATTIE

PICTURING

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PART I

MOTHER

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ONE

At night, when Jody had trouble sleeping, Wayne seemed, in his sneaky way, always to be there in the shadows, his smooth voice still a whispered undertone of the breeze. They had divorced years ago, and except for talking to him on the phone periodically to arrange for Will's visits to Florida, she had no contact with him at all. His image had become blurry. She was confused about whether his gaze seemed more intense when he wore his glasses or contact lenses. She could remember that he was tall, but not what it felt like to stand beside him, let alone to be held in his arms. She could remember the pattern of the plaid shirts he wore in the winter, but not if he had tucked them in or left the shirttails hanging out. The only absolutely distinct memory she had—whether she was awake or during the many times she dreamed it—was of the day they married. They had gone to a justice of the peace. His brother,

and a girlfriend with whom she had since lost touch, had been the only witnesses. After the ceremony, she and Wayne had walked out the door with an arm around each other's waist and made a happy race for the car (his brother had overtaken them and managed to throw open the car door, bowing as if opening the door of a gilded carriage). There had been a split second when she looked down to where Wayne's fingers curved around her waist and suddenly saw their future as clearly as anyone looking into a crystal ball. His fingers were perfectly placed, but you could see how lightly their touch registered. Either the thing he touched was ephemeral, or his touch made it so; this many years later, she still wondered which. But in that instant, she had realized that she would slip through Wayne's fingers.

She had known him for only a few months before they married—months during which there was such frantic activity that by the time he proposed, Jody had begun to think that marriage must have been what they were headed for from the start. Their eyes had met when they passed each other, walking down a crowded street. Only a few steps beyond him, her heel had snapped. He had been looking over his shoulder—giving her the evil eye, she now believed—and when she stopped to take off her shoe, she was stopping for years. Years in which she'd move to the country, marry, and have Wayne's child. The thin little leather heel she held was the shed tail of a captured lizard.

She should have seen through it—the bullying and bravado—but the bullying was always accompanied by charming coercions (so many flowers he couldn't afford), and the bravado seemed at the time like real intensity. Wayne had always been *about* to create a life for himself, and for her. He borrowed money from his brother to go to school, then quit. He railed against city life—everything from the cracks in the sidewalk that caught the tip of your heel to the political wheel-

ing and dealing that determined the city's character. For Wayne, the plaster gargoyles on the buildings were always blowing an ill wind, but the night sounds of the country were the music of the spheres. They lived in a tiny house on a farm, where she looked after the horses, and Wayne read books—not to expand his horizons, as he said, but to reinforce the limits of what he believed. His brilliance, he claimed, would someday light up the world, but in the meantime he rewired lamps for a living and worked as the odd-jobs man on the property. And for quite a while she had been entranced with him, and with that life. Without knowing much about him—without even knowing, until they applied for a marriage license, that he had been married before, without ever pausing to consider how strange it was that he had no friends and that his own brother was mystified that he had been asked to attend the wedding, without any knowledge beyond what she saw in his eyes and what she felt when she touched his body—she was willing to leave behind worried friends, argue with and finally stop speaking to her parents, and view her own ambition with skepticism. Though it now seemed impossible that she had ever been under his spell, she continued to feel chastened by the experience. Still disturbed enough to roam the house at night, checking like some crazy worried lady to make sure torn-up love letters hadn't reappeared as untouched sheets of stationery, that the roses hadn't taken root to bloom again at the bottom of the trash.

Wayne left without leaving a note, when roses he had given her were only slightly wilted in the vase. She had awakened to Will's cries one morning in a house that felt intensely empty. She couldn't convince herself that he had gone out to fork hay for the horses. Or that he had decided to call it quits with his attempts to repair the car and had taken it to Smoky's garage. The horses were quiet, and the car was gone, and on the table by the door was his house key. Outside, dawn was breaking.

And she had Will in her arms—Will, who smelled of the night's sleep: that mixture of damp diaper and Johnson's baby shampoo and sweat and powder that for years she thought she would never get out of her lungs. She had stood there by the closed door as if it were transparent and she could look out and see Wayne's car in the distance. Because even before she saw the key on the table, she knew that he was gone. He was gone and at the end of the month she and Will would be gone too, with the money she had borrowed from her father, whose note was so kind that she had crumpled it and thrown it away before finishing it. The gardener's wife had put a picnic basket—as if they were going for a day's pleasant outing!—in the backseat of the old Buick she had bought with her father's money. She drove an hour farther south and spent the next two weeks at a girlfriend's house in Charlottesville—a house that was miraculously empty, because the girlfriend had put it on the market and was on her way to join her boyfriend in New Orleans. It was a lie to think that photography and good luck had saved her, but it was still too painful to think that her father's small savings account had been the factor—or even that her girlfriend's generosity in leaving her not only the house but a series of friends she asked to call Jody (one of whom had invited her to the party where she met Mel) had foiled Wayne's plans to ruin her life.

Now she lived with her son—their son—in the same small Southern town she had driven to almost randomly, and she had gone from being a clerk in a camera store to working as a much-in-demand wedding photographer. Prowling through the house at night, a drink in hand for consolation, walking quietly in her stocking feet so as not to awaken Will, she was often mesmerized by what she had created. Not that it was particularly lovely or even expressive of who she was, just that it existed at all: the tripods and strobes and drop cloths, the entire dining room transformed into a photographer's studio.

She would feel her way around that room in the darkness: the pegs next to the fireplace, from which she had hung antique wedding dresses and straw hats; the mantel, where her lenses were lined up like soldiers; the built-in corner cabinet with her cameras inside and her light meter dangling from the front latch; the window seat Duncan had extended so she could lower the ivory-colored velvet curtain and photograph brides-to-be sitting prettily in the little niche; the chair bought at the Salvation Army and reupholstered (no modern chairs had such wide seat cushions) so the bride and groom could be shot sitting together without looking like Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Was it possible that at the end of the day doctors turned out the fluorescent lights in their offices and ran their hands over their stethoscopes and tongue depressors and syringes and felt perplexed at the unfamiliarity of those cold items and plastic packages? Did bakers take a secret finger-swipe at perfectly scalloped icing, taste it, and then repair the damage with their pastry tubes? Didn't people sometimes hover a bit above their lives, see that they were stranger than they seemed, and then—with their hearts fluttering—answer the ringing phone, say the perfunctory good night, continue on the same path?

Rhetorical questions were some help, but when Jody was awake—when it seemed that she was totally alone in the house, in spite of her child sleeping upstairs and her lover sleeping in New York City and dreaming dreams of her—only the slight absurdity, and the awkwardness of having created this life, seemed pertinent. She could have turned on the lights, but then everything would have looked too stark—the room would be obliterated by such brightness. She could have stayed in bed and thought about all this, but one of the advantages of being an adult was that she could rise and claim her territory without being challenged.

She sat alone in the big chair and listened to the sound of

the trees blowing in the night wind. An irregular patch of light from the street lamp jutted across the wood floor. She studied it as if it were a slip of test paper: What would be the proper exposure to register every gradation of white to black? It was a luxury, she knew, to be able to speculate, to seriously put observation before action. To be neither the harried mother nor the beleaguered artist.

She put her empty glass on the kitchen counter and looked through a pile of papers ready to slip into chaos. She got a large manila envelope and put into it the bag from the pharmacy, with the receipt stapled to the outside, that had held a bottle of eardrops for Will, and a crumpled receipt for the Chinese takeout they had eaten the night before. Will loved wonton soup. He loved the special spoon that came with it and had as much interest in the wontons sunk to the bottom as a fisherman looking at trout in clear water. Jody also dropped in a note she had no intention of responding to, from a woman whose wedding she had photographed, which asked for a written reminiscence of the day. There was also Will's printed request for another G.I. Joe, the letters enlarging and sloping as the pencil came near the edge of the paper; a computer letter offering Jody two free days in a Key West condo if she agreed to consider buying; the cartoon that came with a cube of bubble gum; a grocery receipt with a smudge of strawberry juice that looked like blood; another postcard from the Electrolux dealer, urging her to reserve a date for a demonstration; Hershey's Kisses wrappers; a Polaroid of Will holding one pajama leg high, trying to look elegant in a pair of pink satin high heels; a note from Will's teacher expressing her concern that Will's attention drifted too often; a place mat imprinted with a picture of a cardinal, the state bird, crayoned on by Will, who drew a stick figure pointing a gun at the bird's beak; the label from a jar of black currant jelly that Will had asked her to soak off and then

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had lost interest in. In the morning she would stop at the post office and mail the envelope to Wayne. She took some pride in her audacity, even though there would be no acknowledgment, even though she might as well be sending it to Mars. She just wanted him to know things: the price of a quart of soup, the fact that medicine had been prescribed. She thought of some of the things she enclosed as wide-angle views of their lives and other things as close-ups. Nothing much could be made of a parking ticket—a common enough occurrence—but there was something almost intimate about sending the pharmacy bag.

She ran her finger along the flap of the manila envelope. The first time she mailed one to Wayne, she had realized what a devilish thing it was to do. But after the second and third, when he never responded, she realized she had found a way to confound and intimidate him.

She sealed the envelope tightly, licking until the glue of the top flap became wet enough to adhere perfectly to the dry strip of glue underneath. At the same time, she took care not to cut her lip on the paper. This was what the careful kisses of years ago—the lightly placed night kisses, meant to register without awakening Wayne—had become: a lick along a line of glue, and a flap folded and pressed in place with the strength of one person strangling another.

When she finished putting things in the envelope she began to straighten up a bit, even though she knew Mel would say that of *course* she couldn't be expected to be the perfect housekeeper when she was raising a child and supporting herself. Mel understood final notices and took fines for not paying on time in stride. He urged her to be even-tempered when cops stopped her for speeding, and he didn't hesitate to run out into the rain to tip the paperboy at Christmas. Mel was nobody's fool and came close to being ideal. He was a more patient lover than Wayne and found Will's laughter contagious. He loved

her and had let it be known that he was very sad that she had not yet chosen to marry him and move to New York.

That was a good part of the reason why she stayed awake at night, pacing like a lost person. Because she suspected that she would have to relocate, be lost, capitulate, in order to keep what she had. She was feeling another version of the anxiety that had made her pace through the house years ago, mesmerized by late-night fears about what would become of her and Will. Though she had found a way to make a stable life for them, she still felt everything could become precarious. That once again she would walk out her door and be a night traveler, but that this time she would have to go it alone because she wouldn't dare awaken Will. When Will was a baby she had held him in her arms and taken him for walks. If he couldn't sleep, she couldn't sleep. It always surprised her that there were not other mothers who were nightwalkers. At three or four in the morning she and Will would start down the hill, and along the way she'd ask, "What's this?," and really the question would be as much for herself as for him. The Indian cigar tree did look surreal at night: something of a mix between an upside-down birthday cake whose candles improbably stayed stuck in the icing and the mobile that had once dangled over Will's crib. "What's this?" she'd say, pointing at the sky, and they'd both say, in unison, "The moon." Even on the coldest winter nights they'd wander through a strange dream that distorted the daytime world, noticing what was highlighted by streetlight or by starlight. There was hardly ever a noise. Sounds, certainly—the cat darting out of the bushes, leaves rustling in the breeze—but the overall impression was of quiet. The neighbor's old blue car glowed lavender when the moon was full. Falling snow looked as solid as pearls. Tar could look like satin. Sometimes her own voice would imitate the breeze; lips on top of Will's ear, she'd whisper, "What's that?," drawing out the last word so that the *a*'s,

exhaled, caused their own air current. "Whose baby are you?" she'd say, and Will would say, "Yours." She'd point: "Whose house is that?," and he'd say, "Mine." A kingdom to be claimed. Who could have blamed him for feeling powerful? Moving through the night, she became for him a galloping horse with an unerring sense of direction. Smell the air: danger there. Feel the breeze, coming from the north.

Without him, she would have perished. Only a baby—someone who truly needed her care—could have made her rise to the occasion. Held tightly against her chest, Will became her buffer against the world. When he had bad dreams and she consoled him, the warmth of his body had made her relaxed enough to sleep. Now there was enough money to get by, enough time to work and to play, and there was Mel—even the person closest to her had no idea that she and Will had ever been night travelers. If she did not confide in him about that time, she would forget it sooner, she was convinced. Why remember your vulnerabilities? It was a great advantage that her accomplice in those days had been a baby, who would forget the wind blowing through his hair and the rush of hot and cold as she put her lips to the brim of his stocking cap and tried to breathe evenly, getting over her anxiety about how they would live and what would become of them. That would all be as lost to him as the moment of birth. It would matter no more than a lost marble mattered a month after its disappearance. Your secrets were always safe with babies. With adults—and sometimes even with yourself—they were not at all safe.

TWO

The day after Jody photographed a wedding on an estate east of town she called the housekeeper to see if she could return to rephotograph the grounds. Something about the house—nothing architectural; some nebulous *something* that seemed to be in the air—had gotten her attention. She was not sure herself what she wanted. She only knew she wanted another opportunity to poke around.

Though she photographed weddings for a living, her real interest was in the photographs she took for herself. She had gotten good enough, she knew, to start thinking seriously about showing her secret work. Photography had been a fascination at first—nothing she thought she would ever be involved in. Will had been an infant then, and her marriage had just about collapsed. She would buckle Will into a car seat and drive into Washington every week to see photography shows,

or to browse through museum bookstores and look at books she couldn't afford. How vulnerable she must have seemed to anyone who noticed her: a pretty young woman with an infant in a Snugli slumbering on her chest, attention riveted to the book she was examining, as if it could provide her with clues about the rest of her life. Where had the photographers positioned themselves, and why? The photographers' preoccupations became clear, their level of aggression measurable. In the best photographs, the photographer's presence was palpable. Though she had revised her thoughts now and was inclined to think just the opposite, she was interested, then, in trying to understand what the photographers revealed about themselves. The risks they took were the ultimate fascination. She had tried to figure out when the photographers thought they were hiding, and to what extent this was true. Sometimes the photographer disappeared as unconvincingly as a child playing hide-and-seek who couldn't help peeking around the corner to see how the game was going. Other times you couldn't help thinking that the photographer had orchestrated the moment in order to make a personal statement, which did not express the subject's feeling at all. Looking at photographs was a little like sleuthing, but in so many cases the mystery transcended anything that could be explained.

She bought photographs from the Library of Congress.

Wayne asked her why she wanted pictures on the walls of people she didn't know.

She cashed the Christmas check she got from her father and bought a Canon TX.

Wayne reacted like someone whose cat has proudly brought home a dead mouse.

She bought a developing tank and practiced prying open a roll of film with her eyes closed, trying to wind it on the reel by her sense of touch.

As she tipped the tank back and forth, Wayne looked at her

as if she were a deaf person shaking maracas that had no seeds inside.

Memories of those years could overwhelm her when she least expected it. Perhaps the road she was driving on reminded her of the road she and Wayne had lived on. Certainly it was not the sight of the wedding house itself, one of many big houses that had been kept up but not extensively renovated, painted over too many times without having been scraped, the shutters hanging a bit awkwardly. Still, there were nice things about the big white house: leaded-glass windows that ivy would have to be pulled away from when spring came; huge maple trees with gnarled roots that twisted along the ground, and ash trees, recently planted, with slender trunks no thicker than a broom handle.

Getting out of the car, she stepped on shards of gold crushed in the gravel: the plastic champagne glasses from the day before. Her friend Duncan, who often catered such events, said that pilfering had become such a problem that many of the rich people now relied on plastic for large gatherings.

Because she thought someone might be watching her approach, she did not stop to photograph the crushed plastic. It was also too obvious a thing to photograph, though she often allowed herself to work her way into feeling something about a place by photographing in a perfunctory way: documenting what was there, then moving on. Seeing the obvious through the viewfinder always sharpened her eye for odd, telling details. Photographing a tree, she would see ants swarm a bit of food on the ground; shooting the side of the house, she would catch the reflection in the window of two trees whose overlapping branches seemed to form the shape of a cross.

"Do you believe this is the same place where we had all that excitement one day ago?" the housekeeper said, throwing open the door. Jody could tell from her tone of voice that she was truly welcome. Except for the housekeeper's wiry hair, it might not have been obvious that the woman was black. She

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