JEN McCLANAGHAN

The Dead

1.

The dead often visit me in the guise of animals.

My great grandmother, Harriet, has arrived as an elegant shrimp in a stole made of cocktail sauce—what we always ate when my mom and I took the train to Manhattan on Saturday afternoons to visit her.

After my father died in late July, he returned as a squirrel outside my friend's porch. I felt this to be true by the way he considered me, how one paw smoothed the hair on his head and reached to adjust phantom glasses.

Later that week he returned as a dragonfly in my kitchen watching me as I did dishes. His lattice wings filled the air *whiskey, whiskey* until he settled on the paper towel dispenser at which point I described his memorial service. I told him of the snapshots at the funeral parlor, the small cards with Jesus on one side and an Irish blessing on the other, my mother who hadn't seen him in over twenty years, who debated the propriety of coming, who came hundreds of miles from Detroit to shed more tears than any of us.

My mother visits me (though alive), on the veldt of my imagination as part mom, part rabbit, and composite parts of me. She is Bunny who mixes vodka and tonic from small bottles in her purse. Bunny, who grew up fast and loved too many men who didn't love her back like she wanted. She has sensitive fur. This I have inherited from her.

And there's my grandmother who's at the center of me. Her name is Gloria, which is also my middle name. She killed herself on a Thursday in November, five months before I was conceived. My parents named me Jennifer Gloria McClanaghan. Gloria should have been the first name of their first daughter, but by the time I was born it was demoted to the middle where it's rarely heard. In my mother's mind, this was decided when my grandmother was found in the garage, her lungs dark as the skin of bats.

But to say the dead always visit me is not quite right. In fact, more often than not I'm going to them. I look for answers to questions I've thought up while sitting at my desk or out walking my dog, but the best questions are the ones I never knew to ask. For instance, my mother told me that my grandmother selected and paid for her expensive black marble headstone in advance. She consulted an architect friend of the family at length. Hours were spent designing the lettering, choosing which trees would flank the burial site. If you're in Lakeview Cemetery, it's impossible to pass by the black marble, *Keating* etched in perfect space, and not remark on its exquisite beauty. And once I learned of this stone, I couldn't let go of the horror I felt at her fastidious planning. I had questions about her last day and how she could bear to live from that date backwards, making sure everything was in order. And it is at this point where language always betrays me. I think of her death as a declaration she made to herself, *I will die on Thursday*. I think of the thousands of other declarations one can make with staggeringly different results by changing just a single word.

I will write on Thursday.

I am born on January 22, 1973, the day the Supreme Court decides in the case of *Roe v. Wade*. Women all over the United States are cheering, but in Greenwich hospital, Mrs. Cynthia Antoinette McClanaghan, née Keating, is losing her temper. She yells at the attending nurse to get the doctor. She yells at the second nurse, freshly dispatched to take her temperature, to get the hell out. She yells at the doctor who arrives tens of minutes later. She yells at the candy striper, the orderly, at anyone in starch, in earshot, in the maternity wing that she's in goddamned pain, because I've decided to get out of my amniotic bath. I want to take up my XX mantle and kick freely into air, to barbarically yawp, to sing from the rooftops. For a moment I am every woman, indistinguishable, unknown save for the anatomy that makes me female. But this isn't really true, is it? I'm born with Harriet in the grooves of my thumb, Gloria in the smudge of my earlobe, Cynthia in the moonrise of my nails.

As all of this unfolds in the maternity wing, my dad is somewhere in need of a drink. If we were looking at a photograph, he'd be far enough to the side to be just beyond the frame. And so it has always been. And so it will always be.

November 4, 1971. It's my grandmother's last day. You already know that I won't be born for fourteen more months but I'm here with her in the kitchen. You must trust me as I write myself into an impossible time in the past. In this partly fabled tale, time is a beautiful display of fireworks. I'm a young girl, let's say four, because at this age I lived at 392 Mariomi Road where my grandmother killed herself. I tell my grandmother a little about the future. She tells me a little about the future too, and these things, you must believe, are all true.

November 4, 1971. I'm looking through a catalog of winter clothes: coats that look like bedspreads, snowflake sweaters, bib ski pants that stretch. Gloria is making a grocery list on the back of the electricity bill. I'm blurting out anything that comes to mind, this being my only chance to be with her. "In sixth grade"—I barely know why I bring this up but my mouth is flooded—"my mom will buy me an outfit at Lord & Taylor for my school photo. She'll use the money set aside for the electricity bill. They'll cut us off the grid for nonpayment. No TV for an entire day!"

I've been launching into these little prophecies all morning. My grandmother listens to me with only half her hearing. The other half is tuned into her own thoughts, but she says this: "Keep an eye on your mother." I nod up, down. "She's going to be a secretary which she'll blame me for." My grandmother is right about this. My mother will be a legal secretary until she runs off with a man I'll never warm to, especially since I'm left alone my last year of high school. She doesn't run off for love but when the options are weighed, being a secretary is a lot worse than being with George. "She'll tell you that one day if you ever follow her into this career, she'll cut off all ten of your fingers. Wait."

My mom is certainly not the first in her lineage to leave her family behind for a man. She hated her life, so what could she do?

I will run off with George on Thursday.

As my grandmother and I talk, the family dog, Smokey, is twitching her legs against the red linoleum floor. She must be dreaming about birds with slow wings. Or maybe she dreams that we let her out the back door and the yard is filled with hamburgers, all the way to the woods.

Let me give you some background. My grandmother has four children by two husbands. As for the husbands, she divorced the first

and the second died of a heart attack. As for the children, my mom is the oldest. On the day my grandmother dies, my mother's in her early twenties living in Boston. She's been dating my father for a year. The first night she saw him he was wearing a gorgeous cable-knit sweater (knit by an old girlfriend), leaning against a pool table. By February 1971, three months away, they'll be married.

Then there are my three uncles, Bobby (12), Kevin (16), and Eddie (17). They're really my mom's half brothers, though in my family this is an invisible distinction. Since today is Thursday, the boys are in school.

Back in the kitchen, my grandmother puts the cap on the pen, puts the pen down, and drags her eyes across the red wallpaper, the red rotary phone, and the knotted pine cabinets in the kitchen. Very seventies. She drops her eyes to Smokey, a line of brown fur, and we go out to the station wagon. We wait for the car to warm. We reverse under the skirt of blue sky. A handful of clouds float above us—squiggles and question marks inching towards the end of the earth.

When my parents carried me home from the hospital that late January day, I was wrapped in a plaid traveling blanket sent by my great-grandmother, Harriet, in New York. Until his death, her husband, my great-grandfather Nelson, was the comptroller of Bergdorf Goodman. Over the years, many of our clothes arrived in Bergdorf's lilac boxes.

My mom and I visited my great-grandparents in their apartment at 480 Park Avenue. Nelson must have been working those Saturdays because I remember it was always just Harriet, my mom, and me eating our shrimp cocktail.

My great-grandmother was beautiful with smooth skin and very long hair that she pulled into a loose bun. She had impeccable taste in every respect except for a half-dozen very dark portraits she bought at Hammer Galleries that hung throughout the apartment. In the foreground of one painting, which is representative of them all, a teenaged girl in a simple blue dress plays guitar. Behind her is a moody depiction of an Italian landscape. And though these paintings are not what I really want you to know about, they point to one of the most superficial differences between my great-grandmother and me, one of taste. The real differences go much deeper. Come

away from the Italian landscape. Come back in time with me to St. Louis, 1902.

The Atkins are a well-off family. There're four children, all girls, and Harriet is her father's favorite. The adoration is mutual, though on a warm night in June, if you were to stand outside their house at 22 Windermere Place, you'd see Harriet climbing out her bedroom window. She is sixteen and her father has forbidden her to marry Ollie Haupt, even though he owns the first Ford dealership in St. Louis. That night she not only leaves her family behind, she chooses between the two men she loves. After the elopement, Harriet's father disowns her.

It's a brave act of disobedience on Harriet's part, but she's smart and strong-willed and makes decisions in accordance with her heart, even if this means breaking it a little in the process.

And it's this disobedience, this unwavering faith she had in herself that sets the two of us on different banks of a pearling river. Even in her eighties, my great-grandmother was defiant of men. You see, she loved to drink but Nelson forbade it after she slipped and hurt her hip. She wasn't deterred. One afternoon, she called the liquor store down the block and made arrangements: they would loosen the cork on a bottle of white wine and then deliver it to the service entrance of her apartment. My great-grandmother secreted the bottle into the lettuce drawer of the fridge where Nelson would never chance upon it. In the late afternoon she poured herself a glass, concealing it in another drawer in her desk. At night Harriet's greatest pleasures were talking on the telephone to my mother, and clandestinely sipping wine.

II.

I've named by mother Bunny, but she doesn't know this. In my mind, the name suggests someone who's flirty and impractical while also being incredibly pragmatic about "the way things go." It's one bulwark against getting her hopes dashed, but Bunny also laughs easily. She holds grudges, and never really worries over the major calamities of her past. There is also something both helpless and pugilistic about rabbits, always springing on great legs. And as my mother will tell you, great legs run in our family though she'll say that hers are the best.

And how can I not mention that the women in my family have their spectacular moments of failure as mothers: Harriet who couldn't see how depressed her daughter had become, Gloria who killed herself, and my mother who ran off with George. Who returned to me at holidays as Bunny.

And in addition to all of this, Bunny, my mother, is a wonderful storyteller. I ask a question and she searches for the family history.

"What kind of car did my grandmother die in?" I ask.

"A Ford Torino wagon."

If I close my eyes I can see a snapshot. My mother is a teenager wearing a stylish plaid dress, far above the knee. Her hair is in a neat bob. She is the tallest and her brothers, all in suits, stand next to her in descending order. They are in the driveway with their backs to the Ford Torino. Snap. My mom tells me one story that took place in that car.

It's summertime. She's in the back seat sandwiched between her brothers, Eddie and Kevin. Bobby is an unknown, still several years off. My grandparents are arguing.

"We should have left hours ago." My grandfather, Ed Keating, strikes the steering wheel. They are only just underway.

"Ed! There's so much to get ready!" my grandmother protests, praying they don't get tangled in more than the usual Amagansett traffic.

In the back seat my mother and her brothers are still, not even daring to move a finger. The mood is tense so they're playing it safe, going for total invisibility. For forty-five minutes the children are not even there, and then Charles Dickens unexpectedly rises out of a daydream, a literary mist shaping itself in my grandfather's thoughts. His face darkens to storm clouds. And soon it's as though this dead Englishman, so far from his grave, has squeezed himself into the packed back seat of the car, wondering aloud about Miss Havisham. Asking wistfully, "Wasn't Pip to join you on your three-week vacation? He was rather looking forward to it."

The car is a mausoleum.

"Cynthia," my grandfather catches her eye in the rearview mirror, "did you bring *Great Expectations* with you?" It's on her summer reading list. She left it at home on purpose. She knows she's dead.

"I forgot?"

All the rage of the late start, the endless packing and unpacking, all the dark clouds shadowing my grandfather's face unleash in a storm. He twists in his seat and slaps my young mother hard across the face.

"We're turning around," he announces, mad as hell.

My grandmother doesn't try and stop him and she won't say a word about it. Not on this trip or any of the others. Not when the family drives to Washington to pick my mother up from boarding school. A few months before, they signed a form granting her permission to smoke at school. She is sixteen. When she gets in the car she puts a cigarette in her mouth and leans forward, asking her father for a light. His slap leaves the cigarette in broken pieces on her lap. Her eyes are warm. Her lips hum like a hundred bees.

My grandmother smoothes out the front of her skirt. She turns to face her window.

III.

My parents are playing bridge, I'm thinking about banana splits, Bobby is counting dollar bills, and the bats are on the move. They've recently taken up residence in our attic (there are two), and tonight they've decided it's time to come on down. We are in Bobby's room on one of the twin beds. Smokey is on the other bed making like a dog that stopped breathing an hour ago. Smokey? Her tail sweeps the comforter. It thwacks the big tongue on the Rolling Stones poster. Lick. The bats knock on the door in the bathroom.

"Did you hear that?" I ask Bobby.

"What?" He's fully engrossed in what appears to be a whole lot of money for one Good Humor man. Since he started driving the truck, the neighborhood kids think he's a superhero of the rocket pop. Aquaman of the ice cream sandwich. Tonight he is just my uncle and my babysitter while my parents are at the neighbors' house.

Another knock. This time it's insistent and there's a voice that says "Bobby."

We look up. We look at each other. Over my shoulder Bobby sees my parents framed in the window. They are wobbly and in good spirits, crossing the woods toward home. He rushes me into my own room where he drops me on my pillow like a lit firecracker. Boom. He isn't supposed to keep me up this late. Boom. My parents step over a broken limb.

In my room it is licorice dark. Once Bobby has bolted from my side, I get myself flat in bed pretending I'm far away in a dream. It is only when I'm super quiet that I hear the other voices in my room: they're coming from the Barbie Dream House.

Barbie has friends visiting for the weekend—girls she knows from before she met Ken. They're still single and eat French fries in the guest bed, gossiping. They say many mean things about Barbie, but Ken on the other hand looks really good on the roof with his shirt off.

My parents open the front door. I can hear them making the noise of two people coming home. Down the hall from me the knocking recommences. By this time, I can imagine Bobby sitting responsibly in the den with a *Reader's Digest*. They ask him what the sound is.

"Hmmm?" He's feigning deep engagement with an Isaac Asimov story entitled "Life Without Fuel." Upstairs I make like a corpse when they pop their heads in to check on me. From the bathroom door someone screams "Bats!" It's my mom. "Fuck a duck," she says.

The bats made a home in our attic a few days ago. You can get to the attic through a trap door in the ceiling of our bathroom closet. There are two and they are, as far as I'm concerned, outlaws: breaking into homes, on the lam, living life large. Thelma and Louise. They've never knocked on the trap door before tonight, preferring to do their wild stuff alone, hatching plans that don't involve us.

My parents and Bobby pile into the bathroom. Someone has a broom. Someone else jerks open the closet door. Thelma knocks over a row of brown towels and lands in my mother's hair, wings beating.

"Joe. *Joe!*" My dad doesn't like commotion and turns from the scene.

"Right back," he says halfway to the living room bar.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." My mother believes she's the only one capable of getting things done.

The second bat heads for a clearing below the broom's guillotine.

"Bobby!" My mom's voice is tight. "Go low!"

Bobby is a hockey player and the broom hits the ground like the blade of his stick. Swing. The bath mat sails to the other side of the toilet and the bat, having narrowly escaped, flies turbulently into the hall. From my bed I can feel her crazed heartbeat. She is Louise, and she disappears into my parents' room as though she knows what

she's doing. Then she comes to me, perching first on the upstairs terrace of my Barbie Dream House. She peers into the windows and pushes open the terrace door with her wing. Ken's on the roof replacing shingles. She gives him a quick look—"I know how Barbie brings you glasses of iced tea naked," it says. Barbie is in bed brushing her hair one thousand strokes. This bat, this outlaw Louise, glides to the corner of my bed, nibbles at the stars in my mobile, then hops onto my blankets, considering me for many seconds. She speaks: "This life you're beginning here, this will get hard. Your mother never listened to me. Your father drinks too much—there were so many signs. Ah! She should have named you Gloria."

IV.

November 4, 1971. I accompany my grandmother to the Grand Union. I'm sitting in the cart checking things off the list. She's pulling things down from the shelf. By the time we're done, my legs are pressed in by cuts of meat too delicate to be tossed into the haphazard mouth of the basket.

"To be frozen for future use." She makes sure I understand this, pointing to the embankments of chuck and sirloin on one side of me, pork chops and a leg of lamb on the other. When she isn't looking I push a finger through the cellophane to touch the hindshank of a steak. As soon as I do this, I'm in a dandelion meadow where a cow has raised his head. He's chewing his cud and turning to see the tip of my finger on his haunch. He looks me over, then drops his moon-pie eyes back to the grass. I trace a small heart on a brown spot of hide before we both disappear back into the grocery cart. My grandmother rolls us into the checkout line to pay, which she does using a check. In a few weeks my mother will sit at the kitchen table with the canceled check, having arrived that afternoon from the bank, and think the thousand things one thinks when confronted with the handwriting of the dead.

On our way home in the station wagon the radio plays Three Dog Night's "Joy to the World," which I will learn again at camp when I'm twelve. I'll send my mother a postcard that says "CAMP NEWS" on one side and "I ♥ you, I miss you" fourteen times on the other. I will also send a letter: "Hi! It's raining right now! Horseback riding was sooo fun! I rode my favorite horse Shabumi! Marie is such a jerk! Oh well! Write again soon! Love, Jennifer." My grandmother

doesn't look at me as I sing to the radio but keeps her eyes on some dreamy space up ahead. When we pass the Harveys' house I look at the marmalade exterior and a silhouette crossing the bay window inside. I say to my grandmother that Kevin will run through the woods to their house when he finds her body, and Mrs. Harvey will call the police. What I don't say is that as I get older I'll read stories about old hotels crumbling, about wounded men returning from war, and in my mind they will always be set in the Harveys' family room: a place so full of bad news.

We pull into the garage and take the groceries inside. Smokey is a wild animal when she sees us. She sniffs the meat and her dream of hamburgers comes to her. She runs in loops around the carpet. Good girl. I look through four bags until I find her new bone. My grandmother puts a package of sponges below the sink. I think of all the beautiful skin inside her dress. She's going through the ordinary routine of being a mother.

I will kill myself in an hour.

We take a break and sit at the kitchen table. "I met your real grandfather when we were skating in the Ice Capades." She's wearing a black dress she knit herself. Her initials are monogrammed between her collarbones. "Jimmy was a lousy husband. As soon as your mother was born I took her to Las Vegas with me and filed for divorce. We lived in a hotel for six months until the paperwork went through."

This tale is another that commands a yawning river between who I think I am and the stories of the self-possessed women before me. It seems incredible, akin to a moonwalk, this idea of moving to Las Vegas to file for divorce. I come from a line of women who take matters into their own hands, women with no patience for destiny or convention.

Ten years after her divorce, my grandmother marries Ed Keating. She and her best friend are both dating men who drag their heels about marriage, so they send each other staggering bouquets of roses. They invite their boyfriends for dinner; the bouquets are so romantic by candlelight. Jealously gets the best of both men and soon it's a season of marriages. My grandmother gives birth to her three sons, and her new husband adopts my mother though he will never truly love her.

And so it goes. Sometimes like this: as a teenager my mother had a midnight curfew. One night a huge snowstorm blew into town. Her date was navigating his Bonneville through the rise and fall of wooded streets. When they turned into the driveway a few minutes after midnight, Ed Keating was already on the front porch. A stern figure in blue pajamas. Her date was so scared he refused to take her to the door and my mother was grounded for a month.

Men.

v.

This writing is a dream. My imagination wears the frocks of the past. Charles Dickens is in the back seat of the Torino holding a large marble stone, *Keating* etched across its face. The dragonfly hovers near his shoulder. I'm wearing a black velvet dress with a Peter Pan collar and a white lace butterfly stitched onto the front. I have on white socks and patent leather shoes, my best outfit. My hair is blonde and featherweight as it was when I was a child. I turn on the engine. Three Dog Night, again. I sing: Jeremiah was a bullfrog. I sing: I'm a high-life flyer and a rainbow rider. I sing: Joy to the world, and on until my grandmother joins me. Her car door closes with an everyday click.

Afternoon light comes through the garage windows, stirring dust into a small audience. I lift a sheet of paper out of the glove box. It is cold in my hand and makes me think ahead to November 1973, the two-year anniversary of my grandmother's death. There's an ice storm and all life in New Canaan, whether human or animal, will retreat into its home. The thousands of icicles, their high notes, will be a requiem for each grandmother in the ground.

I read from the paper: "Gloria Haupt Keating. Female. November 4, 1971. White. 46. Widowed. Housewife. 392 Mariomi Road." This information is typed. The rest is in the hand of Thomas P. Cody, Assistant Medical Examiner. He has a beautiful signature and clear penmanship. This is important to my grandmother since her handwriting is the most beautiful I've ever seen. She knows it. She forced my mother to practice writing just like her and the difference now is indistinguishable. Notes for school, grocery lists, the quick scribble on the phone—it's all the pale hand of Gloria.

I read Thomas P. Cody's writing: "Carbon Monoxide Intoxication. Acute. Mental Depression. Suicide. Exhaust Fumes. 4:40 p.m." My

grandmother already knows about the burial in Lakeview Cemetery where she'll join Ed Keating. On her other side, many years away, will be Harriet.

By this time we're all getting tired. The dragonfly hovers between us. In one wiry hand he holds the body of a fly filled with whiskey. "Can you believe that Ed had six heart attacks?" My grandmother says this to no one in particular. "He took so long to marry me... how can I raise three boys alone?"

She closes her eyes, and the station wagon's engine is the sound of a river dividing us. On one side is Gloria. On the other side there's my mother and father. They're eating hot dogs from Fenway Park, laughing; sauerkraut blends into my father's knit sweater. In a few hours, when they receive the news of Gloria's death, their courtship will dispense with all frivolity.

Harriet is on their side too. She's just come from buying shoes at Bergdorf's. She admires her new pair of kid gloves in the light. I join them and so do many others in a long parade. We are hopeful. We declare our love for this world on our side of the river.

On the other side Gloria is getting into a small boat. She turns on the outboard motor and lets it hum for a long time. When she grows tired she starts on her way, waving to our large group as she passes. Each of us is waving back, shouting our goodbyes. Our arms swing like mad. We don't want it to be so.

How is it so? What have I come to learn, Gloria, as your beautiful figure diminishes to a speck, then disappears into the vast plain of sky? Your wake, which touches me long after you've passed, always lifting its white lace to the shore.