

Pray 4 Me · *Judith Rose*

IT WAS THE SUMMER after her father died, and all Nell could do was read catalogs. Clothing, hunting specialties, hardware, auto and leisure, artificial flowers, toys, gardening tools, accessories: she read the lists like novels, perfect complete worlds where the protagonists lived enclosed and safe, surrounded by objects that glowed with independent life. L. L. Bean, Smith and Hawken, even Childcraft, absorbed her completely, pages of tents and waterproof boots, excellent shovels and rakes, wooden blocks to last a lifetime. Though Nell watched the two children, washed Luke's clothes, cooked and kept the house clean, the duties didn't occupy her; it was the mail she waited for, the glossy heft of it, the stuff to weigh down bad dreams, keep out the dark like socks full of buckshot laid under doors (Lillian Vernon, \$6.95).

In the mornings, when she struggled out of sleep, the kids were already watching TV downstairs. "They're draining the Atlantic Ocean! Only the Invincibles can save us!"

Birdcalls through the upstairs windows, jays and woodpeckers talking amid the cartoon heroes' efforts to save the world. Nell remembered no clear dreams, only the vague shapes of action and pain, unresolved. Still she knew her father appeared every night, dapper and young. He looked like he did at twenty-one, when he had posed in a straw fedora, clean-shaven, untried. Men didn't look like that anymore; they aged in a different way, earlier or later, none of them had that patina of inexperience and suavity. But Nell had seen it in old movies—a glimpse of Stewart or Cooper when Capra directed them, moving through silvery backgrounds and comfortable plots, finding the right solution, happiness, true love.

"How dare you interrupt the genius of crime?" from below, the Invincibles about to triumph, a jay's scream pulls her fully awake.

Weeks of this, of half life (she thought of the atoms deteriorating within her) and the summer was three-quarters over, now hot and eventless, the sky a blue void.

"Turn it off!" she calls, and for once, amazingly, they do. Both of them tromp up the stairs, Daisy first, wisps of blondish hair falling around her face, then Willy in his red striped shirt and shorts. He wears them to bed to save time in the morning. They climb in on either side, snuggle and

worm through the covers, kick each other over Nell's legs.

"Did you guys have breakfast?"

"No, I mean yes. Daddy gave us cereal," says Daisy. She has a faint scum of milk on her lower lip, and smells both sweet and sour, like cream on the edge of turning. Nell hugs her.

"So, what're you guys doing today?" she asks, working for lightness.

"Can I go to Charlie's? He's got a new Nintendo game, the one with the exploding princess."

"Yeah, but he needs to come over here too. You spent hours yesterday at his house."

"*He* doesn't care; he *likes* me to come there." Willy is curling backward over the edge of the bed, his hair touching the floor. Nell resists the urge to pull him up, set him straight, but can't quash a vague warning.

"Be careful, Willy. Okay for Charlie's, but lunch here." She turns to Daisy who is sucking her middle finger, comfortable, abstracted. "Daisy Maisy, you need to scoot downstairs and get your clothes on. Did Daddy feed the birds?"

"Uh uh. He was late again."

"Okay, scoot, scoot. I've got to get up and get going." Moving her left foot, she jogs Willy, who lands on his head. "Oh, Willy, dammit, ouch. Are you okay?"

He's way past crying at little falls, but he flushes a little, gulps. At seven, he's losing his baby fat, beginning to lengthen, becoming a real kid. She reaches for him, but he starts, moves away.

"You didn't have to knock me off, Mom." Willy pulls himself straight, walks stiffly toward the stairs. Nell feels something fall away inside her. The sun through the skylight is hurting her eyes.

"*Move*, Daisy," she says, and her words seem to echo in the suddenly still morning.

The car is full of hot summer afternoon, essence of sweaty kids and old upholstery. They have been school shopping, and Daisy is still crying because she got two dresses instead of three.

"But I told you I wanted the pink one, Mommy, I said that. It isn't fair. Not fair." She is winding down now, down to sniffles and whining. The car is incredibly hot, and Daisy has been crying for fifteen minutes.

Nell brushes the damp hair off her forehead. "Oh Daisy look, two

white horses. Or is it an appaloosa? Do you see it?"

"No." Burying her head in an old pillow stenciled with a smiling Raggedy Ann, Daisy hiccoughs softly.

"Yo, Willy," Nell speaks to the back seat, "did you see it?"

Willy grunts, lost in his comic book. On the front there is a mean looking turtle with a red bandanna. They are riding over a back road, a shortcut. Scattered vineyards and pasture slip by; the road ahead shimmers, blackens, appears again.

"Oh, Daisy, Daisy," Nell murmurs, but Daisy is almost asleep, curled around the seatbelt, her face still red with heat and anger. They are coming to a narrow stone bridge, and Nell slows to cross it. Suddenly it's a bit cooler, the old oaks on either side shading the bridge and the river. As they cross, she notices someone has written *Pray 4 Me* on the left side. If she could, she would stop the car, climb out and sit there on the bridge in the shade of the scrub oaks, watch the Napa River flow under her feet. All those years ago when Eva died, Nell had the odd luxury of long mourning—days, weeks when no one bothered her, asked for dresses or comics or mothering. Mothering. Eva tried with all of them, but it stretched her taut, like a violin string, and when Nell was 15, she just snapped.

"What was it like when your mother shot herself?" Luke asked her once. Like? Like hell, but she was all alone in it. Aunt Mary had all she could do, keeping the household together, feeding the boys, hurrying William to work. They all left her alone the whole summer long. In the long afternoons, she walked the two blocks to the park on Silver Lake, climbed out on an old white oak that twisted over the water. The sky would cloud slightly; aspen leaves floated in the shallows. Two years later she fell apart, left college, came home and painted for hours in her room. The silence reverberated in her head, but nobody tugged at her skirt. Painting in watercolors, she outlined the same face over and over, then washed it away. Nell still has the canvas somewhere in the attic; it looks a little like a Turner, ghosts of colors, something burning in the center.

Already at the intersection, she veers onto the highway, sprinting to 60. With the radio on, and the air blowing through the car, no one sees her cry, too.

Miles later, at the last curve before the turn up the hill, someone has planted a riotous patch of zinnias in front of a white farmhouse. Rows of

zinnias, like Nell's first garden, out of a packet with a little girl with a hoe on the front. Orange, purple, deep rust red, neon yellow, white. Papa showed her how to plant the neat rows, to cultivate between them, pull the weeds.

That day both of them were behind on the weeding, and the zinnias with their extraordinary, enthusiastic colors were taller than Nell's head, up to her father's shoulder. He had changed from his grey suit into some dirt-colored chinos and a greenish knit shirt, and was walking through the rows of corn holding a paper bag.

"Well Nellie, I think we got most of it on Wednesday, not much that's ripe today. Corn borer in this one." He tossed the suspect ear off in the distance, it landed near the old carriage house.

"But Papa, look, *look* at my flowers. There are even more today, do you think a hundred?" In the jungle of zinnias and cornstalks they were free from the voices of all the others: brothers, sister, mother. Nellie the zinnia queen, she thought. Green bean queen. "Should I pick some for Mama? Will she yell at me if there are spiders again do you think?"

"No, I'm sure she won't. That was a huge spider, Nellie, and Eva didn't realize it was there the other day. Better wash them off to be sure though. Did you ever identify the spider?"

"For sure it was an orb weaver, but there wasn't much left of it after Mama squished it," Nellie answered. "I think maybe it was a miracanetha."

"A micrathena? Really? Was the abdomen arrowhead-shaped?"

"Well I *think* so, but he moved pretty fast and so did Mama's foot."

Papa laughed, softly at first, then louder. At first Nellie felt confused, like he was laughing at her, but after a moment she laughed too. She thought they must look silly, standing there laughing in the middle of the garden—if Mama looked out she'd call out, "You buffoons, where's the corn?" Buffoon was her favorite word for Papa. Nellie knew it meant a kind of clown, but she thought it must mean a smart clown, one who knows more than anyone else, but doesn't mind being silly.

After a while, Papa moved away through the rows, humming a little. Ellen could see the silvery top of his crewcut above her zinnias as she snipped away with the clippers. Leaves brown at the edges, yellowing inward. The late September sun warming her hair and shoulders, a benediction.

Daisy is damp and very heavy, and as Nell reaches the door the screen swings shut. "Oh shit shit shit," she repeats like a mantra, as she tries to slowly open the door without waking the child. Willy is already lying on the sofa, reading the third comic. It is a little cooler inside, and Daisy sighs and shifts her weight as she's carried to her bed. With a caught fall, Nell deposits the sweaty little body on the bed, pulls the curtains, then stands still a moment in the partial darkness. Daisy's tears have dried on her cheeks in long splayed lines; Nell puts her hand up to her own face. It is tight and dry and dusty, and she can feel the dry tracks she did not wipe away as she drove.

"Fool," she whispers. Daisy is snoring a little as she sleeps, lying on her back, arms out, dirty sandals spread out on the quilt, smear of dust across the multicolored hearts. Above her the headboard from Nell's old bed with its stenciled squash and plums, cornucopias pouring out nothing. Does Daisy look up at it on summer evenings when she can't sleep, trace the brownish stencils? The light is almost the same here, forty miles from the Pacific, as it was in Delaware, a half hour from the Atlantic. Cicadas buzz through the afternoons in the same tone.

"God," Nell breathes, sitting on the floor. In a moment she lies down like Daisy, with her arms out, and stares at the ceiling. The light fixture is covered with plastic stars that glow after the light is out; she can see a few dead moths and beetles inside the half-globe. On the curved side of the glass the curtained window is reflected, with the faint dusty green beyond. Cooler than she's been all day, Nell closes her eyes.

"Mom. Mom. Mommm!" Willy's voice is irritated, insistent. Nell leaps up, slips out the door, closing it carefully behind her.

"Willy, shut up." Her voice sounds harsh in her own ears. She takes a breath. "You'll wake your sister and she'll start screaming again. What is it?"

"I want something to drink," Willy says, stung.

Slightly dizzy, dazed in the brighter light from the hall window, Nell grabs him, hugs the wiry little body. He hugs back, surprised. "So go get it, Dodo. You don't need to yell all over the house," she says.

"I couldn't reach the glasses. They're way back."

"Okay. Come on." And in a moment, "Did the turtles win?" They are in the kitchen.

"It's not like that. They aren't in a war," Willy states.

She hands him apple juice in an orange plastic cup. "At the table, kiddo."

He bounces over, splashing a little juice. But the floor is already tracked, littered with seed from the cockatiel's cage, Cheerios, toy debris.

"Sit *down*, Willy. You want to get the mail in a minute?" Nell has pulled a pile of socks from the dryer, sits beside him to sort them out.

"Okay. Did you ever look through the bottom this way?" Peering through the cup sideways, one elongated orange lens.

"Yeah. You're dripping. How about the mail?"

Willy leaps up, is gone, propelled by three minutes of stored kinetic energy. None of the socks match. She arranges them in a row of descending size, stares out the window. Below the empty cylindrical birdfeeder, a pinecone spread with peanut butter and birdseed hangs on a string—Daisy's project one long afternoon. Dust on the leaves, fading gladiolus, gloriosa daisies. A yellow jacket zings past the glass. Willy bangs the door on his way in; the cockatiel screams raucously, rings his bell.

"Can it, Huxley," she hisses, takes the mail from Willy. "Do you want to go back over to Charlie's?" she asks, the glossy weight in her hand, waiting. If only Daisy will sleep.

"I dunno. He was going to Nathan's football practice."

"Well, ride up and see. Then you guys can come back here for cookies after a while." Putting the mail on top of the orderly socks, Nell turns to grab Willy's shoulders, kiss the top of his head, propel him outside.

"Wait, I need my hat," he protests, but she has grabbed it from the chair's arm, put it on his head.

"Be back by four. Have fun." Then it is suddenly quiet, even the bird has stopped screaming. Sitting down slowly, she pulls off the rubber band, opens the warm packet of mail. Telephone bill, electric bill. \$87.00 phone bill, all the calls to her brothers and her sister last month, calls home from Delaware, calls to Aunt Lizzie, Aunt Mary. She sets the bills aside in a neat pile; reads the postcard from Lila, who is in Mexico with her lover:

Dear Nellie,

Sun, cheap sand, we drink beer and coconut milk all afternoon. Hot paradise. We'll stay till September when Zia teaches again and I go back to my studio. Kids okay? I am burning off memories in the sun, funerals, hospitals, Lizzie in her diamonds. Write to me here,

but don't tell me your troubles. No trouble allowed here, just sun,
grass houses and a little dope.

Love from your wicked sibling,

Lila

At the bottom she's scrawled an address in the Yucatan. Nell turns the card over, a photograph of greenish brown palm trees, beach, sunset. Lila has sketched herself into the picture with a Rapidograph, a tiny figure in a hammock strung improbably between two distant palm trees. The little figure has a minuscule smirk. Nell slips the postcard into the pocket of her skirt. Finding it would only irritate Luke, who has become less and less tolerant of his sister-in-law as the years have passed. But she takes it out again, looks at the little figure, and the scrawled, smeared message, even sniffs the card. It smells very very faintly of coconut suntan lotion.

Slipping the card away again, she rifles the pile; Daisy is coughing and will wake soon. Here's a new one: *Colonial Garden Kitchens/ Save a hearty (hearty?) 43% . . . Tomato Press makes fresh sauce super fast . . . see page 44.* Deadly boring, it goes to the bottom of the pile. The next catalog has a cover full of perfect, real roses; on the first page there is a bench (*Pemberton Lightweight Range*) covered with glasses of irises, watering cans full of lilacs, sketchbooks, a half-full wineglass, paintbrushes, French linens, and beautiful broken pastels. Immediately, she's lost in the improbable array; the pastels look like those she used at eleven, when art was all hers, before Lila discovered that she could draw too. The roses in the picture are blowsy, tired, petals strewn everywhere. Nell's not foolish enough to imagine that the scenes are real, still, if this were her yard, her life, all of it filled with flowers and wine, sweet to the point of satiety, if . . . Daisy coughs and moans a little; the minutes are numbered. Leafing through to the teak steamer chair, the Victorian tin plates (\$12 each), the wicker rocker, she reads, *Warm summer evenings on the veranda seem made for a wicker rocker like this one.* Only \$275 for a life of rockers and verandas. On the seat there's a pink straw hat that one of the sweet, brassy heroines might have worn in that Capra movie she keeps dreaming. Or hopes she does. Like Lila, she doesn't want to dream the hard light of the hospital, or her father's swollen, dying body. "Eighty is a respectable age," said Aunt Lizzie, meaning something else.

Nell closes the catalog, conscious of wasted time, unsorted socks, din-

ner not started. But there's another below it (she seems to be on every mailing list in the universe), *Daedalus Books*. She leafs through, thinking that she hasn't finished a book all summer, instead has done this, paged through possibilities. *An Island Garden, Magdalena & Balthazar, Life: A User's Manual*. At *Colour: Why the World Isn't Grey*, she stops, reads the blurb, something about matter, energy and eye structure. Why isn't the world grey? Out the window the dust and heat have muted color; the world could be that quiet now, could be grey and brown like a dog's vision.

Muffled noise from the bedroom. Daisy is awake finally, has gotten up and put a tape on her new recorder, Raffi singing "One light, one sun, one sun lighting everyone . . ." Now she's turned it over, and he's singing a wholesome, bouncy tune with a chorus of children who sing, "Hi, Raffi!" Turning it up so the house reverberates, Daisy moves into the living room, as Raffi moves on to *Take me out to the ballgame*.

"Daisy, turn it down!" Nell hollers, but of course Daisy can't hear her.

Now the tape is grinding out an upbeat version of *Octopus's Garden*, "I'd like to be under the sea . . ." Nell gathers the mail, the socks, as it plays. An immeasurably sad song, she always thought; still, she wanted to visit the garden, have tea with the cephalopods (biology and art were her passions when she had passions). "Because we know we can't be found," Raffi sings cheerfully, but leaves out the part about "knowing that we're happy and we're saved."

"Daisy, Daisy," she calls as the song ends.

"Mama?" Daisy calls back, but she's drowned in "Digging, digging, this is how we dig our ground." Nell dumps the socks back in the basket, tosses the mail on the counter, strides into the next room.

"Here, let's turn that off. Did you sleep okay?"

"Uh huh, I guess. I want to listen, don't turn it off." Her cheek is slightly creased from the pillow and her hair is matted.

Nell picks her up, carries her into the bathroom saying, "You can listen in your room, but it's too loud for me. But I want you to wash up a little. You can help make dinner if you want." The little girl snuggles against her, and Nell feels a small, untrustworthy rush of joy. Daisy makes faces in the mirror before and after she's scrubbed, wiggles away, grabbing the tape recorder.

"Okay, okay—but only in your room," Nell says. "Come on in and

help me when you're finished." She hangs up the washcloth, glances at her own reflection, mimics Daisy's final grimace.

Back in the kitchen, Nell pulls out the bag of potatoes, sets them on the counter. Something smells off; she checks the plastic container of garbage, grabs it to take outside. The compost pile is crawling with yellow jackets, but they scatter when she dumps the garbage, covers it with dirt. On her way back Nell checks the tomatoes, picks the two ripest ones for the salad. The garden needs weeding, thinning—all things she should have done instead of reading catalogs. Still, there's a line from a poem she learned in college, what is it . . . "the soul has no assignments . . . it wastes its time. It wastes its time." There's more to it—it neither cooks or . . . something. As she walks into the kitchen she repeats, "It wastes its time."

The smell is still there. A mystery. Nell opens the bag of potatoes, pulls out several, then drops them quickly. One of them is rotten, a slimy dark brown, covered with maggots. Turning on the faucet, fighting nausea, she washes her hands over and over and over.

She has dumped the rotten potatoes in the compost, and washed the others three times, watching the last of the white bodies slide down the drain when Daisy calls.

"Mama, there's a package, a big one. Can I open it?"

Nell walks to the door, drying her hands. The box must have been left earlier, when they were shopping, and been missed when they came in the side door. Whatever it is, it's huge, and Daisy is making no progress dragging it across the threshold.

"Is it for me, *is* it? Can we open it now? Who's it from?"

"Slow down Daisy, let me look," Nell says, pulling it in. When she stoops to read the return address, she realizes with a start it is her father's address in Delaware—but, no, this is Aunt Mary's tidy handwriting. Turning to the child, she says, "I don't think there's anything for you baby, but you can help me open it."

Daisy leaps to grab the scissors off the table, struggles to cut the packing tape.

"Can't do it Mama, you try."

Cutting neatly along the folded edge, Nell exposes a layer of newspaper; Mary always was a careful packer. She lifts it. There, drycleaned, encased in plastic, are her father's jackets and ties, atop them a note with

Aunt Mary's initials in entwined script. As she opens the folded note-paper, a newspaper clipping falls out; setting it aside, she reads:

Ellen dear,

Neither of your brothers thought that they could use your father's clothing, so I thought I would send it along to Lucas. He and William always seemed the same size when they stood side by side. It is all very fine quality and should wear well. Everything has been cleaned (the bill was \$49.50!). I hope you and yours are doing well. Your Aunt Lizzie and I had a lovely visit before she returned to New York. I will continue here for a few months, then make future plans. My very best to you all.

Loving thoughts,
Aunt Mary

Nell makes a dutiful mental note to send a check for the cleaning, opens the clipping. It is her father's obituary. Leaving it on the table, she turns to the box. Daisy is kneeling next to it, sucking her fingers. Everything is packed beautifully, as if Mary had been sending her brother on a trip. Paisley ties in muted colors that Luke will never wear, heavy woolen sport jackets that he'll say are too warm, even an unopened package of undershirts. All of it folded carefully under an unwrinkled section of the *New York Times*—Papa's eyes had failed in the last six months.

"Let's close it up for now, Daisy. They're just clothes for Daddy," Nell says abruptly.

"But where did they come from?"

"They were Grandpa's . . ."

"He's *dead*," says Daisy with finality, and wanders out of the room. In a moment Nell hears Raffi's voice again, "Yippie yie oh, yippie yie ay, flying in the sunset at the closing of the day."

Moonlight throws a blue rectangle along the wall, Nell stares at it, willing sleep. Luke is snoring lightly beside her; she reaches for his shoulder, pushes him over on his side. He sputters a little, stops snoring. But it's no use; she's traced the insides of her eyelids for hours. Without turning on the light, she gets up, walks softly down the dark stairs. The living room is quiet, blue light through the closed curtains. Too bright in the kitchen;

she sets the water to boil, goes back to the living room where the box is still waiting. Touching it, she feels as if something might leap out, a tiny man, a flash of light.

“Ninny,” she breathes to herself.

Carefully reaching inside, she lifts the grey jacket out, slips her arms into it. It almost fits her, though the sleeves come to her knuckles; by the time her father was 75, he was only an inch or two taller than she was. The satin lining is soft against her arms; it feels like another skin, oddly cool and warm at once. She smells the sleeve, faint chemical scent, nothing of Papa’s burl tobacco or Bay Rum. Sitting on the sofa, she switches on the lamp beside her, picks up the obituary that Mary sent.

William Renford Treat, 80, Dover, died at 3:18 AM on July 15. A memorial service will be held at Christ Church on Saturday, July 20 at 11 AM. Burial will be at Christ Church cemetery, Dover. There will be no visitation.

Mr. Treat was born on February 3, 1909 in Washington, D.C., son of Cassius and Eleanor Renford Treat. On September 12, 1941, he married Eva Hart, who predeceased him on November 18, 1968.

He is survived by two sons, Gregory Treat of Chicago and Duncan Treat of New Haven, Ct. and two daughters, Ellen McVeigh of Rutherford, CA and Delilah Treat of New York.

Mr. Treat was a research chemist who was employed by the U.S. Bureau of Standards and the DuPont Company, from which he retired in 1974. After retirement, he travelled around the world and published a book of essays, *Paracletean Inquiries*. He also published numerous scientific papers during his professional career.

A member of various honorary chemical societies, Mr. Treat received several awards for outstanding publications.

Memorial contributions may be made to Christ Church or to the Scholarship fund of the University of Virginia, Box 802, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

It makes such a damn tidy story, someone’s story, not his. Nothing about the Italian light — that long letter from Florence in ’78 when he discovered the Uffizi, and wrote to say he finally understood Nell’s love of painting. He enclosed twelve postcards, Botticelli, Fra Angelico, Masac-

cio, annotated in tiny script. Nothing about Eva—God, “predeceased.” Nell thinks of the photograph of the two of them she has on her desk upstairs: Eva wearing a wide-brimmed hat, her fine blond hair blowing around her eyes; Papa smiling into the wind, his arm around her shoulders. Eva was already pregnant with Gregory, the beginning of the end. But here in newsprint all the raw ends are tied up, made respectable. Aunt Mary did a good job; maybe by now everyone in Dover has forgotten the truth.

At his eightieth birthday party, in February, with the cake and lit candles before him, he’d held Daisy on his lap and asked her if she understood combustion. When she shook her head, he explained it, in great detail, while all of them stood watching the wax drip down on the icing. At last he looked up, smiled, and he and Daisy blew out the candles.

Now Nell takes the obituary and methodically tears it into smaller and smaller pieces. She is trying to see her father’s face, not the swollen mask in the hospital, but his real face, narrowed down to bone and experience. Gathering the pieces into her coat pocket, she gets up and walks out the door into the front yard. Under her bare feet, the grass is surprisingly cold. The moon is one day away from full; there are no stars.

She reaches down into the grass. The ground beneath is solid, rocklike; Nell remembers that she hasn’t watered for more than a week. But she scratches and digs with her fingers, and in a moment a clump of grass comes up, a neat little circle. One by one she puts the torn scraps of newspaper in the hole, thinking that Lila would love this scene, would laugh and laugh.

Behind her a high, thin, insistent whistle. The teakettle. Nell replaces the circle of grass, pats it down. When she stands up, she’s looking straight at the setting moon. Eva used to tell them all moon stories, long fables where the moon came down to earth wearing a silver robe. Nell thinks of *Luna*, the goddess, of the word *lunatic*, of the scrawl on the bridge over the river.

“You can pray for *me*,” she says to the white disc low on the horizon, and turns back toward the house.