

The Actor

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For my grandfather

BOOK ONE

A Nice Home

1.

For a time we lived in a very nice house. This was when we still lived in town, four blocks from the university, and when Franny and I were young enough to be close friends without bothering each other too much. As sisters went, we were perhaps unconventionally close, due in part to the way we had been raised. We spent a great deal of time alone.

In 1967, we were eleven and thirteen years old, respectively, and we lived in Montana with our mother and father. I remember Montana during the years in the nice house as a very fertile sort of place. In later years, after almost all memory of the house had been abandoned, that impression would shift for some reason, and the state would recall itself in a dry and suffering way. As a grown woman, I would think about my childhood and feel the need to squint, to brace myself against something, the way one feels walking home in a determined and dusty wind, and every place of respite assumes a seemingly permanent distance.

During its reign, the nice house was a respite of sorts, a place sequestered away from most violence or confusion of the world. Our parents, Nora and David Birch, were educated and informed people, yet they chose to keep most external turmoil just outside the front door of our home. Franny and I were children produced by parents of simpler times. Our school clothes were unfashionable, our record

collections outdated, our wildness defined by a stolen cigarette or swear word; we had heard of the Beatles and loved them, we stared after girls in mini-skirts with faces full of envy, and we kept a secret pact that one day we'd run away from home and hitchhike to San Francisco. All of these curiosities were subdued by our own household that, while sheltered, was certainly not dull.

Our mother and father had been independent and rebellious in their youth, and as adults and parents they did not lose much of their tenacity. It was for this reason, perhaps, that Franny and I did not feel the need to rebel much. We had freedom enough. Our mother and father's inner life might have had its complications, but on the outside they managed to hold tight to some vestiges of a remembered and youthful existence, and by the 1960s, after the greatest challenges of work and childrearing and marriage seemed to have been met, they had created for themselves an unbound, creative, and comfortable life.

In the summer of 1967, life in the nice house began to change. The weather was unpleasantly hot. It would be the first summer of a five-year drought that spread across most of the state, its least effect upon our family, since the town where we lived together was a river town, and whose economy depended more upon the local university's draw than on the success of wheat or cattle. Beyond the city limits there were farms that lost an entire year's crop to three months of heat; there were ranches and mountain homes badly burned in wildfire, but in town, the only world Franny and I had ever known, the heat only posed problems of wardrobe, crowded swimming pools, sticky underarms and listless, unending afternoons spent draped in the dim, curtained living room of the nice house, trying to think of ways to pass the time.

The flowers that Mother had planted in half-moons by the side of the front stoop did not do well. The dried petals gave off a kind of brightly hued dust that hovered momentarily before falling to the ground. If we caught the petals early enough, just before their disintegration, Franny and I could grind them between thumb and forefinger and make a sort of rouge that could be spread over cheeks and eyelids. This interest lasted a single day. After that, we took to gathering the petals off the wild rose bushes that grew in the alley and stewing them in jars of boiling water. The water turned pink and smelled sweet, but after a few days the petals began to mold and the whole mess had to be thrown out. We walked to the library and read *National Geographic* and *Life*. We spent our entire allowances on penny candy. We cut pictures from magazines and pasted collages to our bedroom doors. We attempted brownies and lemon mousse. Our favorite activity, by far, was to rifle through the old boxes of photographs that were kept on the shelves in the den behind the television set. We could spend hours studying the younger versions of our parents found in these pictures; the slight suppleness of their youth, seen even in black and white, was strange to us, distant and unfamiliar. There was a photo of our mother in a long canoe with three other girls, their hair sleek and waved against their cheeks, their expressions dark and distracted. Another showed our father with his shirt off, standing in the sunshine in front of a wooden railing, a hammer slung through his belt loop while a second man, a stranger, stood with his arm draped over our father's thin shoulders. Often, after sorting through these pictures, Franny and I would not speak for an hour or two. We felt the need to settle ourselves somewhere to read quietly, patiently, as if proving our capacity for diligence and reflection.

There was a sunroom at the west end of this house. In this room, Mother kept the collection of ferns she had had since her law school days, plants that were so overfed and confident it took two men to lift them. This was her favorite room in the nice house; evenings she would sit there when the light came through the translucent panes in streaks of grey or gold and drink a cocktail. If Father were home and not working he would join her. They sat on the brown wicker chairs they'd found at a garage sale long ago and drank quietly, not speaking. Neither thought to bring a book or the evening paper to accompany the ritual. The idea was simply the sitting, the silence, the feel of the alcohol slowly taking hold and numbing any worry or sadness that the day had brought forth in them. They might sit like this for twenty minutes or so, and it was understood that sound was to be kept at a minimum during that time. Franny and I intuited this and respected it. In the early days of the nice house, my mother held her cocktail with slender, polished fingers.

Our father worked at the university in town. As such, our family did not have a large amount of money, but certainly enough to be considered 'appropriate' tenants of our manicured, middle-aged neighborhood. The nice house belonged to the school, and was rented out at a discounted, faculty rate. A professor of mathematics at the university had built the house when the school was only a crop of buildings in a wheat field. He had been an eccentric man with no family. In the living room and upstairs office, behind the posy print wallpaper that Mother had glued up when we'd first moved in, were rows of equations that this professor of mathematics had worked out in neat, feminine scrawl. None of us were of the left-brain, so we could not make much of the equations, but regarded the mural of numbers as only the curious nature

of a lonely man. Father, especially, found the numbers slightly haunting, even when papered over, and bestowed the upstairs office to Mother. He moved all of his work to his campus office, where he spent endless days sitting on a cracked leather couch, glasses perched on his nose, ankles crossed, every empty space hidden in a sea of scripts and books and loose paper. Even months after the equations had been hidden from sight he would not—when he was home—spend much time in the rooms that held the secret of the numbers, and at the time, I felt a kind of pity for him over what I imagined to be a deeply ingrained fear of anything formulaic. My father was an artist and not close to the parents who had tried to push more practical professions on their son. I imagined that his inability to compute the numbers on the walls sent him back in time to afternoons when he would come home to his mother and face her disinterest in the story he was writing or the painting that had been hung in the school hallway. These were a child's imaginings, of course; my father's parents had died before Franny and I had been born. The truth was that my father was simply not comfortable in any room of the nice house, save the kitchen, perhaps, and the sunroom at cocktail hour. I was a careful child, and I watched my father carefully, and I knew that it was a deep restlessness and devotion to his work that kept him away so long that I would sometimes not see him for days on end. From my bedroom upstairs, I could hear his coming and going through the floorboards as I woke in the morning or fell asleep at night. At thirteen, I forgave my father a great deal, enough to invent elaborate and sorrowful, life-long excuses for his absences.

He was an actor. At the university he taught acting to students he deemed 'inadequate leading men and rebellious debutants.' It was the rare student that caught my father's

praise or attention. Three afternoons a week, Franny and I would walk over to the theater where our father taught Intermediate Stage Acting and watch the inadequate performers attempt to impress him. They were handsome men and women, built like wires with long arms and legs. The women wrapped themselves in skin-tight, kaleidoscope colors. They exposed pale, knobby knees beneath black mini-skirts and pressed false lashes to their eyes. They all moved like dancers, with their chins up and backs straight. Franny and I revered them. We walked home from campus with pointed toes, our backs so straight our muscles ached, always feeling a little less sure of ourselves than we had when we'd first arrived at the theater. The male actors carried an air of European sophistication—at least, what Franny and I imagined to be European sophistication—in their manner and dress. They wore tapered slacks and matching jackets, their hair falling long and disheveled over their brows. It was all in fashion, to be sure. Not a single one was actually European, but to Franny and me they were perfection, acting out a role we found intensely romantic, as far away and fleeting as we could get from our own reality.

For all their success at fashion, they found trouble on our father's stage. I felt like taking them aside and telling them humbly that my father paid most of his attentions to his own work, that no one, not his daughters or even his wife, could capture his greatest interest. "You're fighting a pointless battle," I would imagine myself telling them, taking them into my confidence, laying a kind hand over their skinny, black-clad shoulders. "Why don't you try law school?" I would suggest. My mother taught at the law school.

Afternoons watching our father teach were some of the best that we spent growing up. The final spring and summer

in the nice house, we would walk to the campus drugstore, where the boy working the counter would compliment Franny's white-blond hair. We would buy bottles of 7-Up and candied cigarettes and cross to the theatre, its vaulted space dim and cool after the sun, and sit high in the balcony of the auditorium, the sea of empty velvet seats around us and our father down below, yelling or laughing or waving wildly up at the stage. We came to know an empty theater as a kind of tucked away oasis; outside the day might be blazingly hot or gray and frozen, but inside the theater, a thick-walled space like a secret, underground cave, the air was always expectant, cool and open. In such a space it would be criminal not to create great things, a belief that our father clung to fiercely. If his direction ever grew unforgiving, it was only because the room expected it of him. The smell of makeup and shoe polish and ladies' wigs filled the dressing rooms; the heavy velvet curtains that swept across the stage in a rush were old, moth-eaten and patched in places. The stage floor, its wood warped and worn, bore the greatest traces of what went on in the theater, the truest beatings and false steps. Even the most amateur actors considered their craft important and didn't lighten their movements, however unsteady. In socks, after rehearsals, Franny and I would take running slides across the stage, flying headlong into the musty folds of the curtains.

The actors had been taught their conviction; our father had drilled it into them. His belief was that every gesture was a performance of sorts. In life, he felt, there must never be any faltering or doubt, there must simply be decision followed by action, done swiftly and without regret. Doubt, my father believed, bred weak actors and weak lives. The actors—boys and girls, really, not one of them past the age of twenty-one—could not have imagined more desired advice. This was the allowance

they'd always longed for, living in the back bedrooms of their parents' houses, forced to work weekends at their fathers' body shop or feed store. No one, they believed, had truly seen them as they now saw one another, as they believed my father might see them if only they could be loud enough, unique enough; if only they could inhabit their given roles as they now performed their daily lives—without the slightest admission of cowardice.

At rehearsals, because we were our father's daughters, Franny and I were granted a kind of star status. Franny fed on the role more than I did. At eleven, she was shaped like a colt, all arms and legs like the actors themselves, only on a smaller scale. Her white-blond head was like a bulb in the darkened theater. She was brave, telling rude jokes or doing imitations for the students that crowded to her after class. At thirteen, I was five foot seven with thick, unruly hair and braces. While the students teased and admired Franny, I would help my father gather his books and papers together. "Do you like this play?" my father would ask me. I would tell him yes, but that the female lead needed to be louder, more courageous. It was a practiced response, but it drew a slow and approving smile from him, an appraisal that I bathed in and clutched to for as long as it remained.

After rehearsal, Franny and I walked with our father to the law school, where we would sneak to Mother's office window and tap on the glass until she looked up from her desk, her glasses cinched at the end of her nose, her shirtsleeves rolled up exposing tawny, freckled skin. When she worked, her hair came loose from its bun and her face flushed with concentration. She did not like interruptions, but when she would look up from her desk to find us peering in at her, she made her smile resolute and relieved. She would smile as if she had been waiting for such an interruption all day long.

Most evenings, Father would leave me and Franny with Mother and go to a work related dinner, or to run lines for extra rehearsals if a play was about to open. If it was a Friday, or had been a hard working day for Mother, or if Franny or I had done well on an exam in school, we would walk to the Felix Diner across the street from campus and drink malts and eat bowls of chili for dinner. The chili would invariably give Mother heartburn and when we got home she would have to put herself to bed with a cocktail and a wet rag across her chest, keeping still in the dim room with her eyes closed, periodically bringing her glass to her lips.

I loved these afternoons and evenings, even with heartburn and Father gone. There remained the knowledge that at some point in the night, we would all be together under the nice roof, in our nice beds. I was not a popular girl at school, so to leave those unwelcoming halls and find myself accepted by three people I knew by heart was a kind of miracle. I know that I took them for granted; they were my family and I was born to them. Even so, I recognized a certain luck-of-the-draw feeling in myself sometimes at night when I went to bed. Lying in the dark, I would forget why I had ever hated myself for bushy hair and braces. I would see these facts of myself as temporary and unimportant burdens, burdens made lighter because they did not prevent me from being loved by those I loved the most. During the last summer we lived in the nice house, I went through each hot day forgetting I had ever known such adult truths, but when night came and I was between cool sheets, with the windows open and the clean smell of well-kept lawn falling through my mother's embroidered curtains, the feeling of random luck would engulf me again. I would bless every night of the past and the future that I could not see, every

moment that had led to my conception and emergence into such a world, every moment that would carry me onward.

2.

The battle for our father's attention was a daily ritual; Franny and I watched our mother begin each morning seeking some glimpse of recognition from him. Sometimes it would come if the coffee was good or if rehearsals had gone well the night before, but our mother was an independent woman, and if after a few minutes Father had shown little promise of emerging from his mood, she would resolutely turn herself inward. Franny and I were sometimes less daughters than friends to our mother, drawn unknowingly into a silent alliance, and many nights we slept alongside her in the big bed when Father would return home drunk from the actors' parties and collapse on the couch in the den.

I do not know that my mother was ever a very happy woman, but if she was not, she hid her sorrow well, and when I think of her, I think of a woman expansive with hope. The nice house gave her hope, because she finally had enough space in which to be alone. Her office was at the end of the second-floor hallway. It was a wide room with its own washroom and two enormous, double-paned windows that looked out onto the backyard where there grew a scattering of flowering trees. In late spring and early summer, these trees were flush with color and saturated the air with a sweet, heavy scent. Mother loved them, their smell and color, and she wrote poems about them when she was distracted from her work. These poems were surprisingly sensual; they seemed to recall a past of longing that I had trouble connecting to my mother, who for the most part had always appeared quite staunch and sensible, even in moments of distress. She would sometimes