

A NOVEL

Lessons
FROM THE
Gypsy Camp

ELIZABETH APPELL

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For Allen, who is everything

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—Elizabeth Appell, November 2003

*...forty years ago you were caught by light
and fixed in that secret
place where we live, where we believe
nothing can change...*

MARGARET ATWOOD, GIRL AND HORSE, 1928
SELECTED POEMS, SIMON & SCHUSTER, 1976



*For every life and every act
Consequence of good and evil can be shown
And as in time results of many deeds are blended
So good and evil in the end become confounded.*

T.S. ELIOT, MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

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Chapter One



SPRING 1955

“**Y**ou can do this,” Lolly whispered to her reflection in the huge antique mirror. Jittery as a wind-up toy, Lolly stood in the coolness of the marble entry hall and chewed her cuticle. “You can. Tonight’s going to be different.”

She whirled madly to make her lemon-yellow seersucker skirt spread like flower petals. A gift from her father last week when she turned ten, the dress had become a part of her plan. She wanted to look especially nice, except for being barefooted. She wasn’t big on wearing shoes.

Excitement churned in her stomach. If she was going to get her father to take her seriously, she would have to stand up to him and state her case concisely, just as he did when he prosecuted cases in court.

Lolly opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch of the old Victorian house. Her mother always said it was a privilege to live in the Victorian, that it was a piece of history built during the days of the California Gold Rush.

She breathed the unusually warm late-afternoon air. An early summer had undulated into the Sacramento Valley, breathing fire into the orchards and rice paddies surrounding the town. Bo, her eighteen-year-old orange cat, followed her.

He curled his arthritic body on the canvas seat of the swing and lay panting.

A breeze stirring from the other side of the levee whiffled about her, tousling her sleeves and she leaned against the hand-carved railing. She raised her arms, pretending they were wings, and flew. In her mind, she soared over the gabled roof like Peter Pan.

“If I can’t get him to go along with me, Bo,”—he perked up at the sound of his name—“it means he doesn’t give a rat’s ass and we might as well run away.” She brushed her face against Bo’s. “Don’t worry,” she said. “There’s no way he won’t make the deal.”

The proposition she was about to make stemmed from her last visit to her occasional friend, Francie Johnson, a Protestant girl who lived down the street. It had been one of the few times that her parents allowed her to have dinner away from home.

At home, dinner meant sitting in the dark room her parents had dubbed the “add-on.” In the evening, its walls flickered with light from the black-and-white television they had bought to watch the Eisenhower-Stevenson debates. Her mother rarely joined them, but stayed upstairs in the bedroom, leaving her alone with her father to pick at their tepid TV dinners. He slouched in his overstuffed lounge chair, slurred his words, and demeaned everything and everyone who appeared on the screen, except when President Eisenhower came on. Then he would sit up and shush her if she spoke. “Have you no respect?” he would say.

So it was at the Johnsons’ that she realized she could eat her entire dinner without having to force food down between knots in her throat. That night, when her mother came into her bedroom to hear her prayers, Lolly knelt and made the Sign of the Cross. “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and

of the Holy Ghost. God bless Mama and Daddy and Bo and me. And God, please let us have dinners like they do at the Johnsons’ and have Daddy talk to me at the table.” She blessed herself and crawled into bed.

“Your daddy is who he is and nothing’s going to change him.” Her mother leaned over and gathered her into her arms.

Lolly twined her mother’s hair around her finger and breathed in her scents of Estee Lauder and Kent cigarettes. “I don’t want to change him. I just want him to talk to me.”

“Don’t bother with those kinds of prayers, Lolly. God made your daddy. Once the cherry pie comes out of the oven, you can’t turn it into a lemon meringue.”

“Do you love Daddy?” she asked.

Her mother sighed, then said, “Of course.”

Lolly liked the feel of her mother’s fingers combing through her unbraided hair.

“Do you think he loves you?”

Her mother said, “Yes. But there’s two things I want for you, Lolly girl.”

“What are they, Mama?”

“I want you to need your own approval before anyone else’s, and I want you to be able to take care of yourself in case you ever have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that you mustn’t be afraid.”

“Of Daddy?”

“Of anything.”

Lolly propped herself up on her elbows. She wasn’t sure what her mother meant, but she felt uneasy, like she had that winter day just before last Christmas when she went to school and Sister Julie Delores, her favorite teacher, left and never came back. Some of the other fifth-graders said Sister Julie had

given up convent life. Others said she was sick. Reggie Cotton, the boy who sat in front of Lolly, said aliens had abducted her.

Now, Lolly stepped back from the porch railing and smoothed the puckery seersucker of her shirt. The scent of wisteria mixed with the heavy evening and the air pressed down like a suffocating blanket.

She listened for the sound of her father's car. This year it was a slick white 1955 Lincoln Capri. Every night at precisely five o'clock, he would gun the car up the long driveway and squeal to a stop.

"Lolly."

She heard her mother calling from the bedroom window that overlooked the front garden. Her mother's voice reminded her of the clear, bright bells rung in Mass. Even when her mother was in one of her sad times, her voice sounded like music. Her mother referred to her sad times as "being in the trough." Doc Pine, who came to the house to give her mother shots and pills, called it depression. "Here you go, Clarissa, something to smooth away the rough edges." He'd give her an injection or leave a bottle of pills on her nightstand.

"I'm on the front porch, Mama." Lolly jumped down the steps to look past the overhang and up at the window. Her mother had on a mauve linen blouse the color of a bruise. In one hand she held a cigarette, the smoke snaking passed her face. Her other hand ran manicured fingers over her neck and bare shoulders as though she was trying to soothe herself. There was something about her pale, perfect skin, cheeks tinged with pink that reminded Lolly of the ladies in Grandfather Jeb's photo albums: friends of his and his dead wife Lucy's. Those women had dark hair with stiff waves pasted close to their heads, while her mother was blonde with hair that curled softly around her face and her expression was sad.

"What are you doing, Lolly girl?" her mother asked.

"Waiting for Daddy. Feeling better, Mama?"

"A little low, darling."

A breeze stirred and touched the ribbons on Lolly's auburn braids just as the deep roar of the Capri reached her from the bottom of the driveway. She flipped her braids back over her shoulders and ran her hands over her pleated skirt. Her stomach lurched. She stole a quick glance up at her mother's window. It was empty.

Back on the porch she cupped Bo's face in her hands. "Okay, Bo," she asked. "Are you ready?" She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. When she opened her eyes, the Capri had pulled up.

Chapter Two



As the engine pinged, her father emerged lugging his bulging briefcase. Every night he hauled home stacks of work but the documents and files never left his leather attaché. Lately he had been edgier than ever. Anger had shot through his voice during the long phone conversations in his study. Lolly had picked up only bits and pieces but the issue seemed to be that someone was trying to take his job.

“Daddy!” she called even before he reached the stairs. “I have an idea...”

No, she thought, and closed her mouth. *That’s no way to begin.*

Her father headed up the walk with his familiar rolling tread, his off-white suit limp and deeply creased. It was April. Early for him to wear linen, but it was too hot for wool. He took two stairs at a time and he seemed enormous, so tall that when he had reached the arbor dripping with wisteria, she half expected—as she always did—that he would have to duck. It was strange how, although he loomed large when he arrived home, by the time he went to bed, he became shrunken and small. A hank of hair fell across his brow. It was only recently that strands of gray had begun to weave through his unruly dark mane. Quick brown eyes snapped at her and a carefully

trimmed mustache covered his upper lip.

“Hello, Lolly girl.” His hand ran lightly over her head and down one of her braids. “You’re looking mighty pretty tonight in your birthday dress. You braid your hair yourself or did your mama help you?”

She wanted to say she had done it herself, but this was no night for tall tales, just straight talk. Just like in court, because that was what he understood.

“Mama helped,” she said. “But I picked out the ribbons.”

He opened the screen door and held it for her. Bo jumped off the swing and slithered inside first. Dropping his briefcase on the marble floor, her father shrugged off his suit jacket and draped it over the back of one of the twin antique French chairs that sat on either side of the antique mahogany console table. Thanks to her mother, it always held a vase of fresh flowers. Today they were freesias.

“Where’s your mama?” her father asked.

“Upstairs. She’s having a head hammer.”

“Is that what you call them? Head hammers?”

Lolly nodded and grabbed his hand. “Can we go into the living room?” she said trying to keep her voice strong. “I need to talk to you.”

There, she thought. Her plan was in motion and she felt pleased with herself.

“I’m a tired man tonight, Lolly pie. Daddy needs a small libation and some peace. And I don’t think I’m going to find either of those in the living room.”

She knew his routine only too well. Straight to the kitchen, where he’d pull out a bottle of vodka and pour himself what he called “a horn of corn,” knocking back the first jelly glass in three gulps, sometimes two before pouring himself a second glass and then a third. By the third horn of corn he’d be

slurring his words and his eyes wouldn't snap at anyone. They'd leer, and his teeth would clamp down in a mean, desperate way. Then he'd stagger into his study to play the saxophone.

"Please," she said and tugged at his hand. Sighing, he followed her into the dim living room where heavy velvet curtains had been drawn because of the heat.

Bo had already made himself comfortable on the plush green couch, but when Lolly's father sat down beside him, loosening his tie and taking Lolly on his lap, the cat moved to the far end and curled in a circle of fur. Lolly smelled the aroma of cigar smoke that clung to her father like an invisible jacket, a reassuring smell because he smoked only when he worked and when he worked he never drank.

"So what's this all about?" He fingered her braids. "Your hair's getting longer and prettier every week."

She took a deep breath. "I want to...I want us to try and make..." Her hand brushed his loosened tie.

"Well, young lady, out with it. What's on your mind?"

She knew exactly what she wanted, knew it as completely and precisely as she knew her prayers. But her father was like a ferocious brown bear ranging through her life, and sometimes it felt like she and her mother were his only prey. Now that she was sitting on his lap, the words wouldn't come. Frustration scalded the back of her throat and seared away the words.

"I don't have all night." He nudged her off his lap, forcing her to stand.

Her lips moved, but no words came out. She should have known he wouldn't give her a chance to tell him anything. He never did.

"All right, Miss Candolin, you've had your chance. If you have something to say, put it in a memo," he said impatiently. He leaned forward to stand, but her hands came down on his

shoulders with her full might and shoved him back. It wasn't her strength that kept him from rising, but surprise.

"I won't tolerate this nonsense!" He was angry now. "I've had a hell of a day, Lolly, and I need to relax!"

"I know," she whispered. The words she needed to say clanged inside her head. "I want to have dinners like they do at Francie Johnson's and I want you to..."

"Fine." He shrugged. "Talk to your mother. I'm sure she can get Ruth Johnson to share her recipes."

"No! You don't understand!" He was so smart. Why was this so difficult for him?

His eyes flickered over her. "Well, I guess I don't. But I do understand that your old daddy here needs a horn of corn, so that's my next stop."

Lolly bunched her skirt in her fists. She wanted to say, "I don't want you to drink horns of corns! I want us to sit at the table instead of in front of the television, and I want you to talk to me and not say bad words or spill your dinner or put napkins on your head!"

She felt her unspoken words hanging between. She took a step toward him but she was silent.

He leaned back against the couch. "Well?"

And then her words broke through. "If you stop drinking horns of corn, I promise I'll never cut my hair!" She buried her face in her hands. That wasn't what she had meant to say. But there it was. An ultimatum.

Her father reached out and gripped her upper arms. His hands were strong and they hurt. But then he seemed to think better of whatever he was going to do or say and, pushing himself up from the couch, walked past her into the kitchen, his shoulders slightly more stooped now, his breath a bit more labored.

She knelt beside Bo and stroked him. From the kitchen, she heard the familiar clink of the bottle connecting with the rim of the glass. Once. Twice. She knew it was vodka he was pouring.

She then heard his footsteps, one after the other, as he climbed the stairs.

Lolly's anger boiled. *It's so easy, she thought. All you have to do is drink milk instead of that stupid vodka. All you have to do is sit at the table and talk to me. All you have to do is...*

Then came the challenge.

I'll show you.

She sat on the couch in the darkened room contemplating her next move. The scent of cigar smoke lingered. Bo climbed into her lap and purred, a small furry motor.

She heard her parents' voices upstairs, beginning as the soft murmurings of a man and woman discussing the day and what to have for dinner, but soon the level rose. She crept to the bottom of the stairs.

"What do you expect?" It was her mother's voice.

"Goddamn it, Clarissa..."

"You can't blame her." Her mother's words came high and shrill. "Your drinking scares her!"

"Nonsense!"

"She made you an offer, Regan. Can't you at least talk to her about it?"

Lolly tiptoed up to the landing.

"You should have heard her," he said. "Barely able to get the words out of her mouth. It's time she learns that if you want to get somewhere in life, you damn well better know how to speak up."

"She's only ten!"

"I don't give a good goddamn! And then threatening to

cut her hair! I don't work myself like a jack mule all day to come home and have my daughter greet me with a take it or leave it deal at night. Who the hell does that girl think she is?"

"Don't call her 'that girl'! She's your daughter!"

Lolly clung to the banister and forced herself to breathe.

"I'll be damned if I want her to turn out a pill-popper like you!"

"That's what you always do!" her mother retorted. "Act as if I'm to blame! She just wants you to notice she's alive!"

"Look who's talking!"

Lolly fled into her room and slammed the door behind her, but her parent's voices seeped through the door like toxic gas, so she ran into her bathroom, banged that door shut, and knocked her head against the shiny-white painted wood.

I'll show you. I'll show you both!

She yanked open the medicine cabinet. Sobs hiccupped in her chest and her eyes stung. Her hands flailed at the narrow glass shelves, knocking down her toothpaste tube and toothbrush, a Noxzema jar, some baby aspirin, the lipstick she had secretly bought two weeks ago with Francie while they'd been waiting for Francie's mother to pick them up at the dime store. But what she was looking for wasn't in the cabinet. She banged the cabinet shut and riffled through the drawer under the sink.

The scissors glinted in the light.

She looked at herself in the mirror, a thin, bony kid with swollen eyelids, the rims red and raw. Her reflection reached half way up the mirror. She was a head taller than most of the other ten-year-olds in her class, a head and a half taller than Francie.

"I hate him," she said to the girl in the mirror. The reflected girl looked confused. "Isn't that a sin?"

From across the hall, the battle had resumed. She stepped

out of her room. Through their closed bedroom door she heard her father roar, "I'm sick and tired of coming home and finding you in bed."

"Maybe I wouldn't be in bed if you wouldn't anesthetize yourself every night," her mother wailed.

Lolly fled back into her bathroom. "I'll show you what's a sin," she said to the reflection staring at her. Breathless. She picked up the scissors in one hand and her left braid in the other.

Can I do this? She knew her father loved her braids. According to him they were what saved her from being ugly. She didn't care. She wanted to hurt him and this was the only way she knew.

She began hacking at the hair and finally severed the braid. Still tied to the yellow ribbon, it fell to the bathroom floor.

Her breathing came in starts and stops, and she had to blink to see through her tears. Running the back of her hand across her face, she smeared away the wetness before cutting the other braid.

Lolly looked at herself in the mirror. "Oh, dear Jesus," she whispered. "What have I done?" The scissors clattered to the floor.

"You're crazy, Clarissa!"

Lolly stormed into her parent's room just as her father flung a vial of her mother's pills across the room. The tablets made a sound like a hundred ticking clocks. Small red dots peppered the bedspread and the nightstand. Some rolled into corners and clusters landed on the overstuffed chair and under the ottoman.

Her mother had just picked up a perfume bottle and drawn back her hand when she saw Lolly in the doorway and froze.

Lolly's breath stuttered. Her face prickled and her bangs stuck to her forehead. She raised her hands and cupped them over the coarse stubs of hair where her braids had been. They felt like stalks of late-summer corn.

"Baby!" Her mother took a step toward her, her face suddenly focused.

"Don't!" Her father stepped in and blocked her path. "Stay right where you are!"

Taking Lolly by the shoulders, he shook her. She tried to pull away, but he clamped her chin with his large hands and twisted her head from side to side.

Then he said one word. "Consequences."

Pushing Lolly aside, he headed downstairs.

"He can't help himself," her mother cried, taking her in her arms. "The drinking—it's a sickness, like having a bad cold. Lolly, please..."

Wrenching herself free, Lolly ran out of the room and down the stairs, stopping dead in the kitchen doorway as she saw her father slosh vodka into his glass. He raised it, hesitated as though making a private toast, then knocked it back in one swallow. Slamming the bottle back into the cupboard, he strode out to the garage.

Lolly followed at a distance and watched him roam about the workbench, tearing open boxes, pulling out drawers.

What's he looking for?

From behind the workbench he tugged out a rough woven material: a burlap bag with a rope drawstring.

Turning, he waved it under her nose. "Consequences," he said.

Her heart pitched and her breath stopped. In the past, when his anger erupted, she had counted on the effects of the vodka to slow him and dampen his anger. This time was differ-

ent. Bag in hand, he stormed back into the house toward the living room. She ran to keep up with him.

The dim room hummed with the drone of the air conditioner. For a moment, she thought his anger had died. Bo, who was still curled up in the corner of the couch, raised his head and perked up his ears in alert.

Her father stood in the coolness, staring at Bo and swaying back and forth, the bag hanging from his hands. Then Bo twisted into an instinctive crouch, ready to leap, and Lolly knew she had to get between her father and her cat. Before she could move, her father grabbed Bo by the scruff of his neck and shoved him into the bag, tied it off.

“Regan.” Her mother stood in the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Come with me, Lolly,” he growled and dragged Lolly from the room, out the front door, and down the porch steps to the Capri, the burlap bag alive with the cat’s struggle. Bo yowled and his claws stuck through the coarse weaving.

“Daddy, why are you doing this?”

Her mother followed behind them. “For God’s sake, Regan!” she pleaded. “I’m begging you. Stop now. Don’t do it!”

Regan whirled on her. “This time she’s gone too far, Clarissa! Pure defiance! I’m going to damn well see she learns a goddamn lesson! Lolly, get in the car!” He opened the trunk, tossed in the bag, and slammed the lid shut.

“Don’t do this,” her mother pleaded. “Let the cat go. I’ll discipline Lolly. I promise. I’ll ground her.”

“Go upstairs and take some your pills,” her father sneered. He turned to Lolly. “I’ll not say it again. Get in the car.”

Lolly slunk around and tried to open the car door, but it was too heavy for her and it wouldn’t budge.

“Damn it!” her father grunted, pulled out of the car,

tromped around and swung it open. The moment she sat down, he slammed the door as if he were punishing it.

Back in the car, her father turned the key and the engine screamed. They peeled down the driveway and out into the quiet street. Lolly twisted and saw her mother standing in the shadow of the house.

“Daddy!” she begged. “Where are we going?”

Lolly had never driven with her father when he was angry and it made her frightened. *Why would he do this?* Something bad was going to happen. *Hail, Mary, mother of God.* She pressed her hands together and huddled down into the seat.