

Prologue The Compassion of the Dead

It is now, in your time, twenty-six months since my passing. In those seven hundred and ninety days, while you circled the sun twice, I have been among the dead and my body has been with dust and ash. The atoms that congregated for a time, making and remaking the person I was, are now sprinkled throughout heaven and earth.

Nearly an entire year passed before death brought a kind end to my demise. Nearly three hundred days after that relentless disease crushed what few memories remained of my life. Moving like a glacier, grinding to nothing but pebbles and dust everything in its path, it destroyed the last remnants of the person known to my loved ones as Georgia Daisy.

Before that terrible disappearance there were three long years of erosion and decay. The present eaten by locusts. Those dreadful days followed the years when it was still possible to laugh and pretend that misplacing the keys, losing my glasses and notes to myself, were simply silly lapses in attention. These were easily forgotten in ways I had mastered much earlier in my life, managing the painful events of this world.

Eighty years of forgetting the painful. Eighty years of remembering all I could to prevent the memories of all I could not bear from breaking into pieces the glass figurine of happiness that was Daisy. The Daisy whose smile was sunshine on leafy trees. Whose smile made the sky blue and drove unhappiness away like a lioness chasing predators from her cubs. It was Daisy who hid from her friends, from her husband, and, with great success, from herself, the horrible reminder living at the edge of her dreams, always threatening to wake her from forgetting this terrible truth: she lived divided. Cut in two like the pretty girl in a magician's performance, lying in the box that looks like a coffin, smiling and willingly sawed in half and still smiling and living as though magic will make everything right in a world gone wrong where the closest thing to magic is forgetfulness and the power of that smile.

Everyone dies. Every last bit of self returns in order to leave. The lost and unborn, the refugees who fled from armies of custom and conformity, the emaciated forms of personality that never found enough light to stretch and flower, all these and others never dreamed of return to enjoy a moment of life in the great expanse that exists between the final breaths.

By that time, Georgia was gone. Daisy's smile no longer warmed the night. By that time, the English teacher correcting the grammar of unrepentant students was gone, the mother of two boys was gone, as was the wife of their father. The charming little girl, the Southern lady, the story-teller, the pleaser - all of them, gone. What was left of me, what remained after the passing of every last character, every last impostor and ghostly spirit was what you would call a soul. No larger than my thumbnail. Weighing no more than a picture in your mind. It could be that light because it no longer carried what was so heavy: the burden of the forgotten.

It could be that light. That light. Enough so that following the final breath, which was more like a farewell kiss, a cottonwood blossom making its way on the wind, it grew smaller, smaller than the tip of a needle, smaller than a fraction of a

strand of hair, and in that blessedness slipped from the body.

I didn't assume a voice to talk about death. What good is it? No one can tell you and you will know soon enough. That is not my purpose. But I know you have wondered and your mind is full of more wonder and dread. And if I tell you, perhaps you will settle and listen to what I'm going to say. Then, perhaps, you will be able to forgive. And that is my desire.

You will not forgive me, though I have committed many wrongs and you will hear of these. You will not forgive me because I am forgiven. That was immediate and complete. As was the expansion of my being into unfathomable dimensions, into a radiance that required no stars and galaxies, into an effortless delight that gathered my soul in its arms and brought me to the silence that is home. I will not tell you about that silence because I cannot. I cannot because in it I am not. But you will know it as do I.

Enough. It is time. There is no need for worry. What is needed now is listening and a readiness to enter into dreaming. Because many voices wish to speak and invite you into the dream that was their life, and if you are not prepared to understand and forgive, you will fall prey to anger and the judgment of the damned because no one can bear the murder of a mother without demanding such retribution.

I brought two babies into this world. Two sons. Each one dazzling to me as a glorious sunrise. Each one as different from the other as rain is to snow. I loved them more than the moon and the stars. I loved them more than my own self. A day did not go by that I did not cherish their presence and the gift of caring for them. And still they found it necessary to kill me. Each in his own way. You will be shocked, but I tell you, one must understand.

One has joined me in the radiance. He has suffered greatly, walking over hot coals, since leaving you. Understanding his motives will change the world. The other is among you and finds little peace in his heart. He stands condemned and you will do the same when you hear our story. You will feel condemnation, and you must resist, with all your might, the temptation to throw him to the ground and hurl stones at him, calling him a monster. "You monster! How could you do such an evil thing? How could you say those things about your mother?" And you would be wrong and doomed if you fail to see into the depths of his world and my life. And he will suffer an injustice for his efforts and die a slow death alone in the desert. Therefore I will help you. I will teach you the compassion of the dead, and then I will leave and you will be on your own to navigate your own tendencies, your own lust for blood.