

*Bittersweet
Manor*

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A Novel

TORY MCCAGG

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To the memory of my father, with love.

If you bring forth what is within you,
what you bring forth will save you.
If you do not bring forth what is within you,
what you do not bring forth will destroy you.

—Gospel of Thomas, verse 70

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If it blew down in a hurricane. Or if it were struck by lightning and burned to the ground. If the house, home to the Michaels clan for three generations, were destroyed—what a relief. But no such luck. It would have to be a willed event on Emma’s part . . . and would her family survive the loss? The house had always been a safe haven, a familiar setting that, in her mind, evoked love and nurturance, even if the reality left her empty. What if by giving it up—not through a natural disaster but a real estate transaction—she was giving up what the house symbolized: her family and her past?

Did she even care?

Emma wondered this as she walked into the Poquatuck Village assisted living facility and headed for her grandmother’s apartment.

“She’s gone!” the attending nurse announced to Emma.

Of course. She had disappeared. Again. Her beeper bracelet lay on the bed, but Gussie herself was gone. While the Harbor View staff searched the premises, Emma surveyed her grandmother’s room—touched the crushed pillow on the bed, the rumped sheets. Where might she have gone? The old graveyard, as she had the last time she had “gone for a walk”? Impossible. Two years ago, Gussie was still driving, whereas now . . . Gussie’s wheeled walker didn’t do well in April mud.

A whiff of her grandmother rose up, stark in the back of Emma’s nose. Camay soap, Jean Nate body powder, molasses. Gingersnaps. Emma and her grandmother used to bake gingersnaps together,

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rolling the soft, spiced dough into balls with their bare hands, then through a drift of white sugar. She could almost feel her grandmother standing next to her. Could almost hear her saying, *You wouldn't dare*. And her grandmother would be right. Emma's determination to sell the family property dissolved into concern for Gussie, whose absence left room for breathless imaginations of what life would be without her. Even Gussie's Queen Anne desk suggested dearth. No bills to be paid. No robin's egg blue stationary. No chair to sit in and stare out the bedroom window at the view. At which thought Emma turned to leave. She knew exactly where her grandmother had gone.

Emma hurried out of The Harbor View and ran to the town docks. Maneuvering the sidewalk, with its sheen of black ice, she worried that her grandmother might have slipped and fallen. She picked up speed down Gold Street, heading to the harbor and the fishing pier. Then a moment of relief, because there sat her grandmother, profiled against the horizon, her posture straight, her chin up. She was staring across the gently ruffled water of Poquatuck harbor to the peninsula, and the family property, across the way. Emma cursed and resumed her race across the playground to the gazebo. She had somehow to protect her grandmother, who would be upset looking at the house. It was so different.

Stepping up into the gazebo, Emma paused to catch her breath through the knot in her throat. She reassured herself. Her grandmother was alive. She was fine. On the surface, anyway. Though upon closer inspection, and with foreboding, Emma saw a chilling likeness. Nostrils flared. Eyes wide and glassy. Her grandmother looked exactly as Emma's father had years before. Emma had not known then that she was seeing the resemblance backwards: that her father was looking like his mother. Instead, it had taken until now for Emma to see what they shared: fear. Of loss. Of mortality. Of what would their legacy be.

In so short a time, so many changes. For the first time in years, Emma had known exactly what she wanted: freedom from her family's expectations. Minutes before, at The Harbor View, she had

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intended to reject all that her grandmother had given her and to ask for her imprimatur on that decision. She had come for her grandmother's support. Now, instead, Emma would have to help her grandmother. As Gussie shifted her attention to her granddaughter, Emma wondered if she had the strength.

"You're back," Gussie said, her voice quavering. "I'm glad. I've been wanting to talk."

"Me too, Gram." Emma sat on the edge of the bench, as close as she dared. The fishermen shouted to each other as they stacked lobster pots and coiled thick ropes into neat piles on the dock. Terns screamed and dove. A solitary sailboat's halyard clanged against its mast.

"That clanking noise never happened in the old days," Gussie said. "Boats had wooden masts then. We owned a lapstrake-planked rowboat that Winston bought early on in our marriage. He used to row me into the village with the children. I can still hear the plunk of the oars into the water as Winston pulled us to shore. He was proud of his strength. I suppose I was, too."

Emma considered her grandmother, the matriarch of the Michaels family. Faded, hazel eyes; tousled, short grey hair; skin soft as a calf's on a feather-stuffed pillow. At eighty-seven, Gussie exuded beauty and formality. It was easy to imagine her as the young woman who had overseen the work in her garden, involved herself in church duties, and raised her children—and eventually her grandchildren, too. All those ages, child to adult, were layered and shifting like sand on a beach exposing seashells and sea glass, secrets of the depths. Were there secrets? Gussie looked at Emma sideways.

"You wouldn't happen to have any gingersnaps in that satchel, would you?" she asked.

"I didn't know I was coming to see you," Emma said.

"You didn't?" Gussie flushed with offense. Emma sat up, reminded of her strict, not her weak, grandmother. "How did you end up here, then? Just happening by, after absenting yourself for

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months and months?” Gussie paused to look about them, her spine stiff. “Certainly, I wasn’t expecting you. In fact, I assumed I would never see you again. I’m not young anymore, you know. I could die any day.”

“Especially if you catch pneumonia walking around in the cold without a coat,” Emma replied and stood up.

“You’re already leaving?” Gussie asked, and again that tremulous voice, the vulnerability.

“No, Gram,” Emma replied, bending to kiss her on the cheek, grateful for the opportunity to do so. Her grandmother was right. Emma had taken a terrible risk not coming sooner. What if her grandmother had died? Then what would Emma have done? She shivered and took off her oversized peacoat. “Put this on. You’re cold.”

Emma tried to cover Gussie, who pushed her away.

“I’m perfectly fine. I survived an entire winter without your ministrations.”

“You don’t have on socks. You have goose bumps, and your lips are purple.”

“Don’t be insulting.” Gussie sat up. “Fresh air and exercise. That’s what everyone says I need. I intend to stay out here and enjoy this superb weather.”

“I guess we do what we do for good reasons, even if, from a distance, it looks foolish,” Emma said, earning a sharp glance from her grandmother. Maybe it was better not to point fingers.

“Watch the seagull dirt.”

Gussie pointed to a dribble that lay on the shoulder of her argyle sweater.

“Oh.” Emma set aside the coat. “At least it brings good luck.”

“That, Emma, is an old wives’ tale made up to make a weeping, mortified five-year-old girl feel better.”

Emma rummaged through her knapsack, removed a roll of toilet paper.

“Conner told me that when a bird shat on me on our first date.”

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Emma began to clean the sweater. "I took it as a good sign. I guess I was wrong."

"About what?"

"Conner. My boyfriend. You never met him. Too bad. You would have liked him."

"Why the past tense? I'm not going anywhere. You can bring him to visit anytime."

"We broke up. He's my ex, as of last night." Emma's chin trembled, her throat tightening to the extent that she could not express how afraid of the world she would be without him.

Gussie shifted her contemplation from her sweater to Emma. "Fortunately, one survives such losses," she said.

"I know," Emma replied. "You have only to keep breathing, right? Even if you don't want to."

Gussie didn't respond. Emma had not expected her to. Because it was true. The heart kept beating, the lungs expanding and contracting, though the chest was compressed and the soul contorted. In and out. Every breath fanning the pain of living. What could words do to alleviate that? "Why did you remove your beeper bracelet, Gram?"

"Shackles." Gussie looked back to the house.

"You get disoriented, remember? You have to keep it on so we can find you."

"How can I get lost in a one-bedroom apartment?"

"When you leave it."

"I suppose I know the village well enough."

"I suppose you do. It's more for the staff. They're looking for you."

"They should look where you looked," Gussie replied with a familiar crispness. "How did you know?"

Emma shrugged. "This is where I'd come," she said.

"This is where you came. Home. It's fascinating, isn't it, to look in instead of out?"

Gussie indicated the property across the way, cloaked by a striated white mist that hovered just above the ground. Her father,

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Mr. Willard, had bought the land nearly one hundred years before, at the turn of the twentieth century. He had built a house on the gently sloping fields. Cows grazed on the stony granite ledge that, over centuries, had been covered by sand, soil, grass, and slowly, with habitation and plantings, by bushes, hedges, and trees. Small chunks of the property were sold off and built up. What was left Mr. Willard divided and handed down to Gussie and her brother. Gussie's brother sold his share and moved West. He never came back.

Gussie stayed. She and her fiancé, Winston Michaels, built a house in the year of their engagement and marriage, 1929. There, their children were born—Auggie in 1930, Livy in 1931, and Alyssa in 1936. Gussie and Winston had rebuilt what was destroyed of the house by the Long Island Express hurricane, that “annoying bit of weather,” in 1938. The repairs and additions had given the house, with its wraparound porch and abbreviated L-addition to the front, a hodgepodge look.

Soon after the work was done, Gussie's parents died, suddenly and relatively young. The Willards' house was sold, leaving Gussie to maintain what was left of the family's holdings. Days and evenings—hundreds, thousands of them—she and her growing family had sat on the porch, enjoying the property with its sinuous paths. They all led to the beach that overlooked the harbor to the village. There had been less and less of a view each year, given the overgrowth of trees and bushes. Gussie had moved to the assisted living facility in her eighty-second year, leaving the property to be dealt with by her children. The result: Emma inherited her father's share, the house. There it was, modestly exposed and sandwiched between the scar left by Livy's house to the south and Alyssa's to the north.

“The distance,” Gussie said, “allows one to appreciate the details.”

“Do you miss it, Gram?” Emma asked, hesitant because what if the answer were yes?

“Why would I?”

“Usually when people lose what means something to them, they

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miss it,” Emma said, irritated by her grandmother’s composure around a subject that so jarred her. Or perhaps her grandmother was better at hiding feelings, having had years of practice. But then, so had Emma.

“I haven’t lost a thing.” Gussie straightened the skirt of her dress and patted her purse. “You’re the one who’s tried to, and unsuccessfully. You remind me of your father. Auggie used to rail against the house, too, but he’s always come back. We all do.”

“I’m not back,” Emma said with a lift of her chin and more confidence than she felt. “I’m selling the house, and I’ve come to ask—”

“Crying wolf!” Gussie scoffed. “At Thanksgiving, you intended to move in. Then a big to-do and you left in a snit, not to be heard from since, other than sending off a slew of letters telling everyone you’d put the house on the market and not to contact you. Spiteful, ridiculous threats. We’re family, Emma. You can’t divorce us.”

“I thought I might try.”

“A Sisyphean task.”

Emma tossed the wad of toilet paper into the trash can a few yards away, then draped her coat over her grandmother’s shoulders. How true—it was a Sisyphean task, because here she was, right back where she had been four months before, resentful of and alienated from the person she felt closest to: her grandmother.

Not closest to. Most understood by.

Or, if not understood, connected to by history and the house. Which exposed the rub. Her grandmother might recognize the connection, but not the need to be free. She would never agree to sell the house.

Sitting down on the bench, Emma crossed her arms, wishing she had stayed on the train. If she had, she would be arriving at New York’s Penn station now, losing herself in the masses of people, each with his or her own dreams, horrors, and history. Were hers so much better or worse?

“My favorite color in the world is the sunrise over the village as seen from the house,” Gussie said, taking Emma’s hand and

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squeezing it, as if that would make it all better. “The mix of yellows and reds and oranges burnishing the houses and the harbor. The peace of knowing the children are asleep, safe. With the slow dissipation of the fog, the rising anticipation of the day and all it holds.”

“That’s not a color, Gram.”

“A feeling, then. A place. It would kill me to lose that forever.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at her grandmother.

“Not if you keep breathing. Remember? One survives such losses.”

“My point being, you missed a lovely sunrise,” Gussie concluded with that clenched-jaw smile that had formerly been reserved only for her husband. “The storm clouds looked like billowed steel, tinged with pink and yellow.”

“How did you see it from the house?” Emma asked.

“I dreamed I was there. It was good to be back. Isn’t it? Good to be home again?”

Emma studied her grandmother. She, too, had dreamed of the house. The dream had been full of varying shades of fear.

“It’s not my home anymore, Gram.”

“It most certainly is. You should be grateful to have it.”

“Shackles.”

“Nonsense. Our situations are entirely different. No comparison.” Gussie paused. “You make the house sound like a curse.”

“I feel cursed. Last night when Conner found out I own that?” Emma indicated the land, the family house, with a nod of her chin. “He looked at me as if I’d morphed into a monster.”

Gussie gave Emma a shrewd look.

“How long have you been dating?” she asked.

“Two years. One month. Two weeks and three days.”

“And he didn’t know you own the house?” Gussie asked after a long moment. Emma hesitated, shook her head. “Then why the surprise? That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? For him not to know you. Or us. My goodness. Why such secrecy?”

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“I knew if he found out, exactly what happened would. It’s awful. He thinks I’m rich.”

“We aren’t so terribly rich.”

“Gram, look across the way. The house exudes wealth. Owning it suggests privilege. That I’m entitled.”

“Of course, you are.”

“I know, but it’s not as if I had a choice in the matter.”

“You certainly know how to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Gift? It sucks up every dime I have. I’d give it up in a heartbeat, if I could.”

“Then why don’t you?” Gussie snapped. She sat up, alarmed. “But you won’t. Imagine giving up all we’ve been given. You love the house. Just like your father. You just don’t have the sense to appreciate it. Entitlement needn’t be a bad thing. It’s what you choose to do with it.”

“Choose, Gram?” Emma asked with a flare of resentment that curdled into shame. Why punish an old woman for the past?

“Yes. All you need to do, Emma, is decide what you want to do.” Emma only stared at the ground. She had decided, and once again it was the wrong decision. Gussie prodded her. “You used to dance.”

“Yes, Gram. I used to dance,” Emma said, annoyed and trusting that her grandmother would leave it at that. Gussie did. Emma couldn’t. She remembered too clearly the last time she had dared to dance, truly dance, with her heart: years before, in the cabin that her grandfather had built out behind the garage as a study for her father. She had used it as a dance studio. Its hard wood flooring worn down by age. Its picture windows opening to a view of the harbor and village. Sun had flooded the room as Emma tapped the floor with a toe. Exacting and absolute, she had raised her arms. Left hand gently touching a wall, right arm lifted out. Feet into fifth position. With her weight on her left foot, she had glided her right leg straight out to the front, heel up, toe pointed. Slowly, she slid her foot to the right, stretching. And then to the back. *Battement tendu*. Repeat. Heart cringing. Stop thinking. Balance. It was about balance, not

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turning, she had reminded herself as she broke away from the wall and pirouetted around the room. Bare wood against slippers feet. Around and around. Each turn a petal from a daisy. Do I. Do I not. Stop . . . ping. Bending backwards, stretching as if reaching, debating, her body expressing soul as she twisted and turned. Every movement had felt right. She would never have believed then that it would be for the last time.

“I dreamed last night that I was a tree,” Emma said. “It had been raining for days and the earth was loose and mucky. I was all excited by the idea of walking. Like an Ent in those Tolkien books. My leaves shivered as I pulled my roots up out of the ground, one and then another. I lost my balance. Instead of walking, I toppled over. I lay in the mud and what leaves were still exposed rustled in the breeze.”

“That will teach you not to try to be an Ent when you are a tree,” Gussie said dryly.

“Have you never wanted to escape yourself?” Emma asked. “Be someone entirely different?”

“No,” Gussie said, though after having said it she appeared to think about the question. “How can you hope to be different, if you don’t know who you are?”

“But I do know who I am. I’m my family, trapped in old behaviors. I can’t seem to escape them. For all my privilege and entitlement . . . I’m lost. I have trouble telling the difference between what I want and what I think is expected of me, and end up doing things that seem right at the time but turn out to be all wrong. Nothing feels true anymore. Sometimes I suspect that I’m killing myself day by day, holding back, not living for fear of life. I worry that one day I’ll realize that I’ve been dead all along, or might as well have been, but it’ll be too late. My life will be spent, wasted, and I want to do so much.”

Gussie didn’t respond at first, staring out at the breakwater, the piles of granite that stretched across the mouth of the harbor and ended in a strip of beach with a high-tide mark of salt and sun-dried seaweed, black and crunchy on the sand.

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“Years ago, on my eighteenth birthday, my tutor said the same thing to me that your Conner said to you.” Gussie paused, as if distracted by a thought or, perhaps, by the seagull that had landed on a pylon and was screaming, its head thrust forward, an open maw. “*Gussie Willard, you’re entitled!*” Lawrence said as he led me to the enormous chestnut tree. Do you remember it, in the old graveyard off Bittersweet Lane? It was neglected even then, the gravestones all enmossed and pitted, leaning every which way. I did not consider it a morbid place to spend my birthday. On the contrary, it promised quiet and beauty, hope. An opportunity for a lesson on gravestone rubbing. Or, given neither of us had brought pencil and paper, on remembering the dead. We sat down under the chestnut tree. Lawrence allowed me a puff of his cigarette. I told him entitlement need not be a bad thing. It’s what you do with it.”