



The
Other

*A
Novel*

Mother

Rachel M.

Harper

The

Other

Mother

ALSO BY RACHEL M. HARPER

This Side of Providence

Brass Ankle Blues

The
Other
Mother

• *A Novel* •

RACHEL M. HARPER

Counterpoint
Berkeley, California

*for my father,
Michael S. Harper
(1938–2016)*

*“Every shut eye ain’t asleep,
Every goodbye ain’t gone”*

Music was the one way of keeping the past alive, his father said. There's more future in the past than there is in the future . . .

—JACKIE KAY, *TRUMPET*

Only the vanished truly leave their mark.

—PAULA McLAIN, *CIRCLING THE SUN*

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· BOOK I ·

The Son

September 2015

Through the fence, between the powder black wrought iron pickets, he can see the bell tower. The clockface is green with age, so bright it seems to glow. Its hands are folded together, signaling twelve o'clock, yet nothing happens. For a long time, he stares at it, waiting for the bell to ring. His first day on campus.

He checks his watch, then looks again at the tower—from limestone base to soaring red brick trunk—and wonders if he's made a mistake. Is there another bell tower on the green? While other first-years brush past him, heading to orientation, Jenry leaves the group and walks in the wrong direction. He abandons the sidewalk, steps directly onto the grass. His eyes scan the domed cap, searching the shadows for a hint of copper coloring—the wide waist of the bell, the curved lip—but all he sees are phantom shapes, and after a few moments he wonders if, all these years later, the bell has been removed.

When his mother went to school here, when she stood in the same spot more than twenty-five years ago, it did ring. She used the sound of the bell to mark time, to pace herself during walks around the quad, struggling to memorize the periodic table, and to make sure she was never late to class. His father was also a student here, but Jenry doesn't know much more than that; doesn't know if his

father ever counted the crows as they landed on the edge of the balustrade, or why, after growing up in Providence, he chose to attend Brown University; and perhaps more importantly—if he would have wanted his only son to do the same.

What Jenry does know is that he doesn't belong here, which is how he's felt about almost every place he's been. Call it the mark of illegitimacy. But somehow this campus feels different. He's come here to find something; more specifically, to find someone, which alone gives his presence a purpose. He has come to find his father. Not the actual man, who died when Jenry was two, but some version of him—re-created out of facts and stories, resurrected like a ghost.

The word *father* doesn't mean much to him; or rather, what it means doesn't elicit an emotional response. It doesn't move him. He's never had a father, so the word exists as only an idea. An absence. Like how the stump evokes the presence of the missing arm more powerfully than the arm itself. What Jenry has is a name, and the idea of what a father should be; that is what he is looking for. He wants to know the man who should have been his father. And now, imagining him here, Jenry hopes to justify his own place in this world, to see how he measures up, to prove that he belongs.

His grandfather is the closest thing to a father Jenry's known, but Victor lives in the shadow of the other man, the one who exists in a few black-and-white photographs, images taken from a yellowed copy of *Life* magazine found under his mother's bed when he was a child, looking for answers she refused to give. Jasper Patterson is the name—the myth, the legend—but who was the man?

"Are you lost?"

The voice—female, sharp—brings Jenry back to the sun on his face and the grass under his feet, to the view of a clock tower in the distance.

"Can I help you find something?" She is smiling at him. A pretty smile.

"No, I'm okay."

The girl keeps moving, her messenger bag knocking against him as she passes by. "Don't look so panicked, classes don't start till Wednesday. You've got plenty of time."

"The clock, on the bell tower—"

“It’s broken,” she cuts him off. “For like the last twenty years or something.” She stands with her back to the sun, her hair haloed by the light.

“Someone climbed up there to fix it and then fell off and died. Or maybe he broke it as he fell, I can’t remember.” She rolls her eyes and laughs again. “But it’s been wrong ever since. The old president left it stopped to honor the dead.”

“Oh, okay,” he says, trying to feign nonchalance, “I thought it would ring. For meals or something.” He’s not sure why, but he feels disappointed.

“You should have come here in the sixties, when they still wore ties to class and the girls went to Pembroke.”

He’s heard stories of the Pembroke campus from his mother: how she’d lived there for the first two years of college, rooming with a soccer player who had to be close to the athletic fields for their two-a-day practices; how she volunteered at the Sarah Doyle Women’s Center and found a new group of friends, activists who experimented with vegetarianism and smoked clove cigarettes, one of whom ended up starting the first Cuban Student Alliance during an all-night game of spades in the boiler room and now works for President Obama; how she spent her free time at the Sci-Li, collecting work-study hours to supplement her scholarship. He thinks of sharing one of these anecdotes but decides not to. He doesn’t want to hear another person tell him how lucky he is to be a double legacy and how the school had no choice but to let him in. Never mind the 4.0 GPA and SAT scores that made his mother cry.

“By the way,” the girl says, yellow hair gleaming in the sunlight, “orientation is that way, on the Main Green.”

He follows her eyes to the row of brick buildings behind them, trying to think of something clever to say. His mind draws a blank.

“It’s not just you,” she adds. “All the first-years look a little shell-shocked.”

Jenry feels his face turn red, though she won’t recognize it. He likes how his complexion can hide feelings of embarrassment or shame, how his natural expression betrays no emotion. His mother used to call it his mask, telling him, “I could skate across that face, it’s so frozen,” until he eventually gave in, melting for her. “There,

that's my boy," she would say, his face dissected into angles she could finally recognize.

Jenry shifts his weight, crossing his arms as he wonders how to salvage the moment, and why he cares. "Maybe you can help me with something else," he says. "If I wanted to research someone who went here a long time ago, where would I go? They must keep those records somewhere."

"Sure." She nods. "You could start at the Alumni Center, across from Res. Life. But you might be better off going straight to the Archives, if the person was really important. Those are at the John Hay."

"The library?" He remembers hearing it mentioned on the tour.

"Right there." She points behind him. "They have all the rare books and special collections. Things you couldn't imagine anyone still caring about."

He glances at the large building on the corner, its white marble gleaming in the sunlight. "Okay, thanks."

"But bring a jacket. It's always freezing in there, and they won't let you take in a bag. Just a pencil, I think. They're very strict."

"How do you know so much?"

"English major," she says. "I spent last semester TA-ing for Professor Dennison. She had me in the basement for weeks, looking for old playscripts."

"Sounds fascinating."

"It is. Assuming you care about anything that happened before the invention of the iPhone."

"What makes you think I do?" His tone is playful, bordering on flirtatious.

"Most people don't notice the tower even has a bell. And I don't think they arrived on campus worrying about alums."

He tilts his head to avert the sun from his eyes. "Oh I see," he says, lowering his voice to draw her closer, stoking the tiny embers that smolder between them, "you're saying I'm weird?"

She breaks into an easy grin. "Either that or interesting." She backs away, one small step at a time. "Don't worry," she says, her voice rising playfully, "your secret's safe with me." She walks away with a purposeful step, confident he's still watching.

Jenry's gaze follows her across the green: the cut-off shorts loose on her hips, her pale calves rounded like mangos, leather flip-flops wide enough to fit a man. An athlete, he thinks, soccer or field hockey. Tennis. An East Coast sport popularized by the bored and wealthy. He won't say it out loud, but he finds most athletic endeavors tedious. Something to bridge the time between therapy sessions and online shopping. Even if he weren't strapped to a piano all day, he doubts he'd ever pick up a racket. Still, he regrets not getting her name.

He loses her in the crowd and soon the feeling is gone. He didn't come here to date or fall in love, that isn't what drove him a thousand miles away from home. He came here to get answers—to learn about the past so he could face his future.

Every part of the John Hay Library's exterior, even the staircase, is made of white marble. From across the street it had looked almost new, but as he gets closer, Jenry notices the markings of age: the steps are stained gray, with rust-colored grooves running like veins along the dulled surface, no longer shiny and flat, but worn down in the center from a century of daily use. When he opens the library's heavy wooden door, a thought arrives like a headache, sudden and sharp. *This is where I'm supposed to be.* It lingers in his head as he repeats it, questioning something he wants to be true.

He asks the receptionist where to find the University Archives, and is directed to the Special Collections Reading Room, two flights down. He takes the stairs, his footsteps echoing in the stairwell. A middle-aged librarian sits behind a desk in the foyer, just outside the entrance to the Reading Room. She removes her glasses as he approaches.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for information about someone who went here—"

"Did you check our website first? To make sure they're part of the Archive?"

"I tried," Jenry admits, "but I couldn't get into any documents. Guess I did it wrong."

“Access depends on your credentials. And where the papers are stored.” She rolls her chair closer to the desk, adjusting her keyboard. “Are you a student?”

Jenry nods. “Just got my ID today.”

“Let’s make sure you’re in the system.”

She motions for the card and he passes it over the desk. After swiping it, she starts typing.

“Okay, Mr. Castillo, let’s start with the easy part. What was his name?”

“Jasper Patterson.”

“One or two t’s?”

“Two.”

She types quickly, the tips of her manicured fingernails clattering against the keys. “Do you know his graduation year?”

“Um . . . yeah,” he pauses, trying to remember. His mother was the class of 1992, and he knows Jasper was a few years older. “Nineteen eighty-nine, I think. Or maybe ’88.”

“Not a problem, I’ll search both.”

Jenry glances at the floor, unable to look at her while he waits. He feels nervous, as if waiting for test results he’s not sure he’s ready to hear. The sound of her typing is erratic but also comforting, like a piece of music he was composing.

The woman coughs into the sleeve of her sweater and takes a sip of water. There’s a part of Jenry—the part that doesn’t want to bother anyone, the part that will work, even at his own expense, to make other people comfortable—that considers turning around and leaving the library. Who would care, if he ended his search before it’s even begun? But it’s more than that: he feels afraid; afraid to be so close to what he’s always wanted, to getting answers that reveal not just Jasper’s past, but something about Jenry himself, now, in the present.

When Jenry started high school and finally got his own computer, he would occasionally comb the internet for Jasper’s name, long tired of asking his mother for details she claimed to forget or never know. He would invariably end up with the same results: the *New York Times* obit, the Wikipedia page, a few articles in dance magazines. And of course, the images of Jasper performing—in

Romeo and Juliet or *Don Quixote*, wearing that embroidered jacket; shirtless and soaring across the stages of the Met or Lincoln Center, toes pointed and captured in flight. He'd seen those photographs dozens of times, as familiar to him as the images of famous figures in American history, men like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr., and equally remote. His mother tried to remind him that it was a different time: the internet didn't exist like it does now, and everything wasn't catalogued and tracked. But Jenry wanted to know—not about what Jasper did, but who he was. He was convinced there was more to find.

"All right," the librarian says, "I found him."

Jenry sees her squinting at the computer screen. His heart beats faster.

"Jasper Lucas Patterson, dancer and choreographer," she reads, "graduated on May 26, 1988, summa cum laude, major in Theatre Arts, minor in French." She stops to adjust her glasses. "Is that who you're looking for?"

Jenry nods. "Is there more?" he asks, his voice thick with anticipation.

"Shall I read the whole summary? Or would you prefer that I print out a copy?"

Jenry feels his eyes suddenly focus. "I'd like a copy please."

"He was quite accomplished. That must be why his name sounds familiar. I'm surprised I can't place it."

Jenry shrugs. "He died a long time ago."

"Some of our archives go back two hundred years." She removes the paper from the printer, handing it to Jenry. "The nineties are practically yesterday."

Jenry reads over the summary, impressed by the contents of the collection.

Materials include photographs, video/film recordings, biographical information, correspondence, writings, print material, pen and ink sketches, clippings, dance awards, pamphlets, and other documents dating from 1976–1999.

"This list of materials, is that all kept here? I mean, can I see it?"

She smiles. "That's why we have it. But let me check something first." She scans the computer screen again. "Unfortunately this collection is housed off-site. You need to make a request via email and then come back in forty-eight hours to look at the files."

"Forty-eight hours?" He thinks of the time he has already waited, practically his whole lifetime. "I don't know if I can wait that long."

The librarian gives him a strange, almost pitying look. "Patience is the heart of all research, don't you agree?"

She goes on to tell him that their library has a very prestigious collection, with first-edition copies of *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, a Shakespeare folio, and slave narratives, all under one roof; that it's a historian's dream, really, one of the best rare book collections in the nation; that people come from all over New England to use their facilities; and how fortunate he is to have been given access to such privileges, just by being enrolled here. If he can only wait two more days.

She points him toward a patron computer, where he can place the request for the entire collection to be brought to the Reading Room, all forty-nine boxes. Jenry sits down in front of the monitor. He rereads the printout, his eyes scanning each line. At the very bottom he sees a line he didn't notice before, "Related Collections: Patterson Family Archive." He returns to the librarian's desk, asking what it means.

She leans forward, putting on her glasses to see it clearly. "Hmm, let me look it up." She is back at the keyboard, clicking away. "The archives are linked, but I don't see this one listed on the main database, there must be a hold or something." She leans in, peering at the monitor. "Oh, I get it. This is a new acquisition, so it's still being catalogued. Let me see who the contact librarian is."

She picks up the phone and dials a four-digit extension. Jenry leans forward, hoping to read the screen himself, but the monitor is blocked from view.

"Hi, Rosemary, it's Gayle. Who's the contact on the new Patterson Family Archive? Oh, really? Must be important." Gayle adjusts her glasses. "Yes, that makes sense." She nods, listening intently. "Oh, I see. I didn't realize that." She is silent for a long time. "What's the availability right now? I've got a gentleman here who's

interested in a related archive, for Jasper Patterson.” She looks again at the screen. “No, he didn’t, not yet. A first-year.” She clears her throat. “Okay, I’ll tell him. Three boxes. Yes, I understand. Thank you, Rosemary.” She hangs up the phone and turns to Jenry.

“This must be your lucky day, Mr. Castillo. The Patterson Family Archive hasn’t been fully processed, but it does include papers and media relating to Jasper. As of today, three boxes have been catalogued and are available for viewing.”

“Right here? Now?”

“In the Reading Room. Just fill out this slip and leave your belongings in one of the lockers by the wall.” She hands him a request slip. “Rosemary can answer any other questions. She knows everything about everyone.” Then she lowers her voice. “She only takes the families with, how shall I say it, historical significance. The Pattersons must be important.”

Jenry fills out the request and hands it back to her. He wants to say something to convey his gratitude, but all he can muster is a simple thank you. She gives him a tight smile and a freshly sharpened pencil, referring him to the list of rules and regulations posted on the Reading Room’s glass doors. He deposits his things as instructed and carries nothing but the pencil into the room.