

FIRE

EXIT

A NOVEL

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consuming."
—Tommy Orange

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Award-winning author of *Night of the Living Rez*

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TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

For our children

And their children, and their children, and their children

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1

I wanted the girl to know the truth. I wanted her to know who I was—who I really was—instead of a white man who had lived across from her all her life and watched her grow up from this side of the river.

It was late spring. I sat outside drinking coffee and not smoking because my lighter had run out of gas. Fog rolled off the water that divided the Penobscot Nation from the rest of the state of Maine. I was waiting, as I usually did. Soon, across the river and on the reservation, my girl—a woman by that point—came out of the house and got in her car to go to work. I didn't know how many times I'd been through this same routine, but that morning, something took hold of me. Something was different this time.

She started her car and backed out of the driveway, and then, as usual, she was out of sight. I got up and drank the rest of my coffee and thought about calling Louise, my mother, but decided she was probably sleeping, so I went inside to make breakfast, not because I was hungry but because I needed something to do so I could think about what had come over me. Maybe the change had come about because I'd stopped working in the woods so much and had more time to think, but the fact was that I'd gone along for too long with Mary's plan to lie and say that the girl was another man's, an enrolled Native man's, so that she, our daughter, could be on the census—Mary's Penobscot blood plus Roger's—giving Elizabeth exactly what she needed to be enrolled. But that morning I wanted our daughter to know the truth. I was tired of holding that secret.

I was going to make eggs and some seasoned hash and think about all this, but when I cut up the washed potato, I nicked the tip of my thumb real good with the knife and got blood all over my hand and said forget it. I went to the couch and sat down, and I wrapped a paper towel around my thumb

and watched the blood seep through and then there was no denying what I wanted. I did want the truth to be known. The blood that came out of me was blood that ran through her veins. It's strange: all blood looks the same, yet it's different, we're told, in so many various ways and for so many various reasons. But one thing is for certain, I thought: you are who you are, even if you don't know it.

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I didn't know much about her, except what her mother used to tell me—which was years ago now, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four—when she'd come to check up on me, to give me a little news about her and to see if I was drinking. I was, but told her I wasn't, that it had been four days, eight days, twelve days. But I'll get to that, the lying—mine and hers.

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Her name is Elizabeth Eunice Francis, and her maternal grandparents were Eunice and Philip. She was born in January 1991. I'm afraid to say I don't know the exact date, but I think it was the fifteenth, sixteenth, or seventeenth. Those were the days her house was empty and I waited anxiously across the river for her to be brought home.

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She knew my house. She'd seen it, both from over there at Roger and Mary's—her parents—and once, when she was young, on my road with her mother. But she'd never been inside, and there was no reason to believe her mother had told her what it looked like. My father, Fredrick, and I built the house in 1983 (thirty-five years goes by fast, faster than the Penobscot River in spring with all that water and ice). I don't know if I can call it a house—it's only five hundred square feet—but this place, while small on the outside, feels big on the inside: there's the living room and kitchen, which are connected and form one room, and then there's a small hallway, just wide enough an entry to turn around in and go into the bathroom or bedroom. The doors to those

rooms open inward, but if you open the door to the hallway closet too wide it will catch the lightbulb hanging above that space. Over the years it filled with boxes whose contents I'd forgotten and the gun—a pump .22 Fredrick gave me when I was a boy.

Fredrick and I built the small house three years after the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act was passed. Fredrick was strongly against the act and spent a great deal of time with the tribal council trying to persuade them to go after a better deal as well as a great amount of time laying out his frustrations for my mother and me during dinner. The act, when passed by Congress, had restored to the tribe its inherent sovereignty, so they could make and pass laws. While the white folks who had owned land prior to the act could remain, as well as those who had married in, one of the first laws the tribe passed concerned non-Natives: anyone who wasn't Native at all had no right to live on the reservation. And since Fredrick was my stepfather, I wasn't Native, and so I couldn't remain on the reservation when I came of age. My mother, a non-Native, could stay, of course, since she had married in.

Around that time Fredrick's father, Joseph, was dying, and the bills were adding up—and what little money I was making working in the woods wouldn't be enough for me to buy a place of my own off the reservation. When the time came to pay for his father's funeral—Joseph died, not peacefully, in the summer of 1982—Fredrick sold his father's camp and land, which got a lot of money. The place was densely forested and far from any town, and bear trappers stay out there now and take people out to hunt. Fredrick still owned his land, which was not very far from his father's, and after settling the medical bills he used the rest of the money to pay for my land and the building supplies. Since the settlement gave the tribe some land outside the reservation or the option to buy some at a low cost, Fredrick was able to buy from the tribe a lot cheaper than the state would have sold it. It was purely coincidental that the land we bought was across the river from Roger's house. I had no idea how important that place would be to me, or the role it would play in my being able to see her.

Fredrick and I spent all summer building the house. And it was a hot summer. My boss at the woodyard let me borrow the buncher—and so we were able to clear the land very quickly, just enough for a road and a yard. We laid the cement and put up all the walls with a good-quality chipboard, and we stuffed the walls with insulation, which we stapled, and we laid all the floors with a cheap linoleum, except in the bedroom, which is carpeted.

It took over four months to build the place. We measured and cut and swore and sweated and got dust and flakes of wood in our eyes, and we built each day after work and even more so on the weekends until it was finished. Louise, my mother, kept us fed during that time, when she was well enough, which was not most of the time. She suffered terrible bouts of depression, which she always would. It was three and a half decades since we'd built the house and I had yet to put trim up or even hang a picture. Who did I have to frame? I'd stopped saying I'd get to it.

As soon as it was built, Fredrick signed the land over to me, and for a number of years until he died, I gave him as much money as I could spare to help pay for what he'd put into this place, what he had given me. I insisted each and every time, but he always tried not to take the money, always said this is what fathers are supposed to do.

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We met once when she was three. For a few years after she was born, her mother used to visit me. It was always the same routine: park way down the dirt road and walk through the woods to the back of my house and crawl in through the window. She used to give me news about our child, the only one Mary would ever have, but sometimes she just showed up and gave me nothing but her company for an hour or so. Once she was inside, she would visit like a neighbor would, and we'd have coffee at my kitchen table. We'd smoke a few cigarettes and she'd ask after my mother and after my work and after my drinking and would tell me I should do something to the place, like get some decorations. "At least get a painting or something," she'd say.

It was during a late spring Saturday when Mary asked, "Do you think it would be a good idea if you met her?" She drank her coffee and smoked, lounging, taking her time because Roger was not home; he had taken Elizabeth ice fishing. I don't know who it was Mary felt bad for: Elizabeth or me. Maybe both of us?

"Of course I want to meet her," I said.

"But is it a good idea?" She held her hands together on the table.

"I don't know," I said.

"Neither do I. Get me a coin. A quarter, dime, whatever."

I got her a penny.

“Heads you meet her, tails we forget I asked.”

The coin landed on tails.

“Two out of three?” I said.

The next one landed on heads. And so too did the next one.

And that was it. Mary left through the window and every so often a branch would snap and echo in the woods. A car door slammed shut and the engine revved and faded until everything but my breathing quieted.

• • •

The week after Mary’s visit, I went to the grocery store. I bought two Lunchables. I didn’t know which she liked, or even if she liked them at all or if Mary ever bought them for her. I got one with crackers and squares of ham and cheese and another with chips made for tiny fingers and nacho cheese and salsa. I bought a two-liter of Sprite and a big bottle of apple juice and a small tub of red powdered Kool-Aid. As I went to check out, I remembered Mary. I went back to the deli and got slices of ham and roast beef and turkey and American cheese and a loaf of white bread. In the produce section, on my way back to the checkout, I grabbed a tomato and a head of lettuce that looked like it was dying.

I left the grocery store and drove up to the strip mall across the way from the on-ramp to I-95. I smoked a cigarette before I went into the dollar store. They had two aisles of toys, and a lot of stuff was for the summer, plastic buckets and shovels for sand and crinkly bags stocked with water balloons and mesh bags bulging with colored blocks for building. The bottom shelves were filled with stuffed animals, and I crouched down and pawed through them, holding and turning them over in my hands, petting them for their softness, squeezing them to see if any made noise. Buried deep in one metal bin was an elephant, upside down. I squeezed its soft center and out came the most realistic elephant trumpet I’d heard, and I started laughing, this slow, low laugh that took me over, and I kept squeezing and squeezing the elephant and laughing and laughing and shaking until my face was wet, until the noise coming out of me was so unclear that a worker, a man in a green vest whose name was written in unreadable cursive on the sewed-on name tag, stood

over me and asked if I was all right.

• • •

On the day Mary decided she'd bring our child by, I waited all morning outside, sipping coffee and smoking. I watched their house across the river. Roger had left about seven, and Mary's car remained. It must have been about eleven or twelve when I saw them come out of the house. Mary helped her into the car. Then she got in, started it, and backed out.

About halfway down my dirt road, I waited. But Mary didn't show up. I went back to the house and saw across the river that Mary had returned, her car parked and nobody in it. I sat again, waiting and waiting and waiting. Finally, she came out of the house again with our child. It was about two in the afternoon. Again her car started, backed up, and disappeared from view.

I went back to that same spot on the dirt road. Cars drove by at the end, and each vroom made me more and more nervous. Then came a car that slowed, a green Elantra that eventually became Elizabeth's, and it turned toward me. I started walking back to the house a bit. I had this feeling I had to move. But then I turned and watched Mary park her car where she always did.

Did she remember this day? Did she remember it at all? Or was she too young, as Mary hoped, to remember? Did she know this history—this story—her body held secret from her?

She was here, on this road.

Mary took her from the back seat, and her feet touched the dirt. Mary said something and pointed down the road. She started to run-wobble in my direction, but Mary chased after and held her by the hand. She pulled her back, told her to wait. Mary was getting something from the back seat. Elizabeth waited, holding back an eagerness in herself to get to me, to get to the end of this road.

And when Mary started for me, not through the woods and through my window but directly for me, she followed. But then she saw something and stopped moving. She grabbed her mother's leg. No amount of ushering her along could get her to move from that spot. I realized, right then, that she hadn't seen me, but now she had, and once she did, the sight of this man

down the dirt road frightened her.

Mary picked her up and carried her down the road, with her face buried in Mary's hair and neck, and right as she got close she started to scream, started to yell so loud it echoed, the noise carrying every which way. Mary walked her back to the car, stopped, put her down, and waved me over.

She didn't look at me and held Mary's leg. I couldn't get over how full her face was, her cheeks more precious than air.

"She's just shy," Mary said. We leaned on the hood of the car and watched.

"Is she hungry? I bought her lunch. And you too, if you want."

"We're fine," Mary said. "What did you buy?"

I told her.

"She doesn't like the ham. She likes the cheese and crackers, but that's it. She's never tried any of the others."

We were quiet. Some birds chirped and bounced from branches. Elizabeth kicked at the hard dirt and waved a long piece of grass. Then she smelled it.

"Keep that away from your mouth," Mary said. "Come over here and say hello."

I thought it was funny that she didn't listen, that she stayed right where she was, sniffing that piece of grass.

"Hey," Mary said. "Doosis. I'm talking to you."

I turned to face her by the brush. "You want to see something?" I asked.

She didn't look at me and kept on swinging the grass.

"I'll be right back," I said to Mary, and I walked down the dirt road to the house and inside I got the elephant. I held it behind my back as I returned.

"You want to see something?" I repeated.

She looked at her mother, who looked at what I held behind my back.

"You didn't need to," Mary whispered.

"Well I did," I said.

Mary looked at her. "Wait until you see this," she said. "You'll like it."

The long piece of grass fell to the ground. She lifted her little hand and extended her even littler finger. She pointed, and her nails—on that one hand, anyway—were painted pink. The gesture, the first time recognizing me, how

could I forget it? And to have it followed by her voice, the first intelligible words I heard her speak, so near, the only time I've regretted the wind, wished it away, that slight breeze that carried her breath away from me.

How terribly did I want to know her.

"What is it?" she said. She spat out her hair that was in her mouth. She reached for it, the animal I'd forgotten I held behind my back. I held it out for her.

"What do you say?" Mary said.

"Wikawot." Please.

Together, we held the elephant between us. She didn't try to take it. She simply touched its gray soft ears and long trunk, squeezed its legs, and patted its head.

She called it a cow.

"It's an elephant," I said. She did not repeat my words, and she wouldn't take the stuffed animal from my hands. She kept touching it, feeling it, inspecting it for something unknown to everybody but herself.

"Here," I said. "You can have it."

She took the elephant and held it.

"Let me show you," I said.

My hands held her hands as she held the elephant.

I don't know if I should have prepared her for what was to come, should have said something else, like "Ready?" or "Listen to this!" but I didn't say anything besides "Let me show you." I gave her hands holding the elephant a squeeze, and out from the elephant came that loud, realistic trumpet. Her eyes widened and she let go.

"No, cow! No!" she said, and she started to cry and ran to Mary, who was laughing.

"No more," Mary said, either to me or to her, I don't know. She picked her up and put her in the back seat of the car.

"You're leaving?" I said, holding the elephant to my side.

"She's tired."

She was still crying, calling for her mother. Mary went to her, calmed her a little bit, but she started again the moment Mary left and came back to me.

From outside the car I waved to her, a hello and a goodbye. She kept on

crying.

“I take it she won’t want this,” I said about the elephant.

“I have to go,” Mary said.

“Should you bring her back here?” I said. “Another day?”

“Charles,” Mary said.

“I’m just asking,” I said.

There was nothing but her screaming.

Mary went to the car and dug around in the center console. She got out of the car but leaned back in.

“Heads another day, tails no more.”

It landed on tails.

“Two out of three?” I asked, again.

But Mary said no, and it took me some time to realize that that would be the last time for a long, long while that we’d all be so close.

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Now, more than twenty years later, I knew something Elizabeth didn’t know, or something she didn’t remember.

2

It was 1996 when I started AA, and I made it a point to reconnect with my mother. Maybe I felt enough years had gone by for us to move past what had happened.

I knew where she lived off reservation because I had helped her move in years before, not long after Fredrick died, but when I arrived, I found out from the landlord that she hadn't lived there for more than three years. I felt something like betrayal, but not quite so, that my mother would move without letting me know. She called every so often and would leave these long voicemails telling me about her day or week, and so I wondered why she hadn't told me she was moving or had moved.

The place my mother now rented was, as the landlord said, three streets over and at the bottom of a steep hill. I'll never forget it: I drove to the top of that high hill, and as I started descending, I saw something at the very bottom, right where the road leveled out. It looked like a hole—not a pothole—that stretched the width of the street, and it looked portal-like, and endless. The closer I got to it, the more frightened I became. But before it could swallow me and the truck, I splashed through it: a puddle.

I buzzed the buzzer that went to my mother's apartment, but my mother was not home. Her neighbor—a tall, skinny guy I learned Louise called “shovel man” because he was always outside shoveling snow or, when there wasn't snow, dirt, which he used to keep his dirt driveway flat—was outside, sitting on the bottom step, smoking and inspecting a worn nightstand, its wood chipped and flaking. He seemed to have a lot of garbage in his driveway, right at the end near his house. I felt him watching as I kept buzzing the buzzer to my mother's apartment next door, and when nobody answered I started for my truck, but thought maybe it was worth asking him

about her.

And so I did, and he said to me, “I ain’t selling anything right now.”

“No, no,” I said, looking at the nightstand and other junk he had there. “Louise. The lady that lives here. Do you know her?”

He set the nightstand aside and stood up. “Who are you looking for?” he said.

Again, I told him who. I still stood by my truck.

“Your mother?” he said. “What’s your name?”

I told him that too.

He laughed. “I thought she was making you up,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

He waved me over. “My throat’s sore and I’m not going to yell.”

He told me Louise had told him to tell me that she was going away, that she’d be back in a few days, and that I shouldn’t worry. “She’s been telling me to tell you that for years, every time she left. I thought she was crazy. But you are real.”

I asked him if he knew where she’d gone, and he said he didn’t know. “I told you all she told me.”

“Do you have a phone I could use?”

“I don’t,” he said. “You got a cigarette?”

I gave him one, and he lit it.

“Hey what’s that in your truck there?” he said, blowing smoke and pointing. “You throwing it out?”

He was talking about my fuel tank for work. And I told him as much.

“Fuel tank, huh?” he said.

I didn’t find Louise that day and when she finally called I wasn’t at home—I was at work up north clearing land—and I called her back in the evening. This was a few days after I’d gone looking for her. We talked for a bit. She sounded tired, like she wasn’t up for talking, and so I didn’t tell her anything about having gone to her old house and then to her new apartment. I just said I’d come by on Sunday, and it was then that she told me she’d moved and it was my turn to act surprised by it.

When that Sunday came, I almost didn’t go. Elizabeth was outside, in her backyard, with her father. She was playing ring toss. I didn’t know how big

or small five-year-olds were, but she was so little and couldn't throw the rings very far. What she did was toss one, then take a step forward, reaching, and toss another, and so on until she was right over the pole, and she'd drop the last ring from her hand, and it wobbled in place.

I stayed watching until Roger looked at me, and then I walked to my truck.

Louise was outside when I showed up. I don't know what I expected when we saw each other. It had been at least three years since I'd seen her, but she acted as if she had just seen me the other day, as if I had just seen her. The only time she got close to acknowledging how long it had been since we'd seen each other came when she said, "You look good." That was it. My mother didn't care very much for discussing things in the past. I don't think she liked talking about the future, either, and she always, when I was young, changed the subject when Fredrick talked about the what-ifs of the Settlement Act, particularly my having to leave the reservation when I turned eighteen.

From that day I saw her on as many Sundays as possible, which was typically once a month. She gave me a key to her place—both the house door and her apartment door—and when I asked about the dead bolt, she said it didn't work so I didn't need to worry. She stopped telling shovel man to tell me she was leaving, and instead would call me and say, "I'll be out and about on Sunday, so don't come by." Out and about. I learned where she went eventually when I saw the medical bills on her kitchen sideboard. She went to the wellness center, where they gave her a bed and fed her and monitored her for a few days. She never told me though, and I don't know if she knew I knew. But when I heard her say "out and about," I came to know where she was.

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When I began to visit her more often, I only ever asked her a few questions about her past. One was about my father, what his name was.

"His name?" Louise repeated. "Brian. Isn't that a boring fucking name? Brian." She stopped talking for a bit, and then said, "I wonder where he is."

She never said what happened to him, but I took it he left. You'd think men would come up with a better story, or a different one.

I came to realize, through my visits with her, that I didn't really know my mother. I started to think that Fredrick had understood her in a way nobody else could. It explained how well they worked together. But what exactly made them so close I never found out. I guess the simple answer is: Just because. That's how it happened. They fit together. Louise's mother, my grandmother, who Louise and I lived with when my birth father left, eventually disowned my mother for seeing Fredrick. And apparently she tried—and was successful, only for a bit—to get me taken away by telling the state that Fredrick beat me. I was almost four, but not old enough to remember.

“And when they saw you had no bruises,” Louise said, “no swelling, nothing at all, they let us take you back. We were all in court, even my mother, who thought she was going to leave that day with my child. That's the last I saw or heard from her.”

For days after hearing that story, I felt strange. There was this history I was a part of, a history my body had experienced and moved through, but I never knew it. It made me wonder how much I didn't know. We had that in common, Elizabeth and I. And I felt she should know her body was special, and she should know its history, especially the one it would not tell her and the one she could not see. And I decided to tell what I knew, because she deserved to know it.

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For the first time in nearly two and a half decades, I spoke with Elizabeth's mother. I wasn't seeking her out—I just wanted to know about burial rights. After seeing my mother age, I'd started to think a great deal about how, like all mothers everywhere, mine would one day die, and I hadn't given any thought to what would become of her body. She had never said what she wanted done at the end. Maybe she didn't care, or maybe she was like me: afraid to talk about it. My guess was that she would like to be buried with Fredrick on the reservation and that was my business: to see if that was possible, since my mother was not Penobscot.

I didn't know who to speak with and so I went to the chief's office at the community building next to the school. I looked for Elizabeth's car, the green Elantra, the one Roger had kept alive over the years until Mary had passed it

down, but didn't see it. Nobody was at the community building. Nobody at all. And all the lights were off. It was when I was leaving that I saw the printed pink sign on the door that said all offices had been moved across the street to the building behind the health center. I wasn't surprised the tribe was tearing down the community center; it had been there for so long that it must have needed to be taken down before it decided to do so on its own.

I walked across the street and took the small path behind the health center to the building where the pink sign said everyone was. Every room in that building was occupied, some doors open, some shut, but each with a sign: "Finance," "Department of Natural Resources," "Tribal Clerk," and so on, and I checked almost all the doors until I found the chief's office. The door was partly open, and so I pushed it open to find not the chief but instead Elizabeth's mother. Mary sat behind a large brown desk, a computer in front of her. She never wore glasses when I'd known her. At first, I did not recognize her. But when I did, I forgot what I wanted to know—about burying my mother—and I asked what she was doing there, and for a moment she stared at me, or maybe she wasn't staring but thinking about things shared and hidden, a thing that, no matter what, connected us.

"I work here," she said, and whatever wall had come down between us for those brief seconds was back up. "Can I help you?"

I asked her what I wanted to know—if my mother could be buried with Fredrick on the reservation—and if someone had asked me such a question about a person I had known and liked but hadn't seen or heard of for many, many years, and especially with no other context, I too would have reacted how she did. She stood up from the desk.

"Louise?" she said, that wall coming down again. "She passed away?"

"No, no, no," I said. "She hasn't died. But she's ill."

"With what?" She sat back down.

"Old age and what comes with it," I said.

She said she was sorry to hear it. She asked again what it was I wanted to know. She thought my mother could be buried with Fredrick, but she needed to call the funeral director of the church on the reservation to make sure. She called, and I don't know who she talked to, but it wasn't the director.

"He's going to call in a minute," Mary said, hanging up. "He's away for the moment."

She said I could have a seat. There were two chairs, one on each side of a small end table with a lamp that was turned on. I sat. Neither of us spoke while her keyboard clacked.

I could have said or asked a number of things in those moments while we waited for the call: “Louise asks about you,” or “How’s your family?” or “I’ve been sober for twenty-two years,” or “How could you have done this?” or “I understand why you did this,” or “What is she like?” or “Are you as lonely as I am?”—or, or, or. So many things I could have said, but I said nothing, asked nothing, and it was sadder than anything I could have said or asked. Here we were, Mary and I, in the same room, both at the same end of our lives’ biggest secret.

The phone rang and Mary answered.

“Calling about what?” she said, and she took off her glasses as if that helped her understand whatever the person on the phone was saying to her, as if the voice needed to be seen to be understood.

“I did?” she said, and it must have been me in that room who reminded her why the person was returning her call, and it must have been me too in that room who had made her forget. “That’s right, sorry, busy day.”

When she got the answer, she hung up.

“Since they were married at the time of his death,” Mary said, “Louise has the right to be buried next to him.”

I said OK, and Mary coughed.

“But you have to buy the plot beside his,” she said.

Dying isn’t cheap and I didn’t ask how much the plot was.

Before I left, I found the courage to ask, in a whisper, how Elizabeth was doing.

“She could be better, but she’ll be OK,” is what she said. It hurt me deeply to know that she was not well, and it hurt just as deeply not to know what was wrong, and it hurt more than both those things to know I couldn’t do a damn thing to fix it. I couldn’t help but feel that I had abandoned my daughter, and I was afraid to know if what I was feeling was the truth.

I hoped it would get better, whatever was going on with her. For the next several days, I speculated on why she could be unwell, and each time I arrived at the reason I most feared: that she was suffering in the same way my mother had all her life.