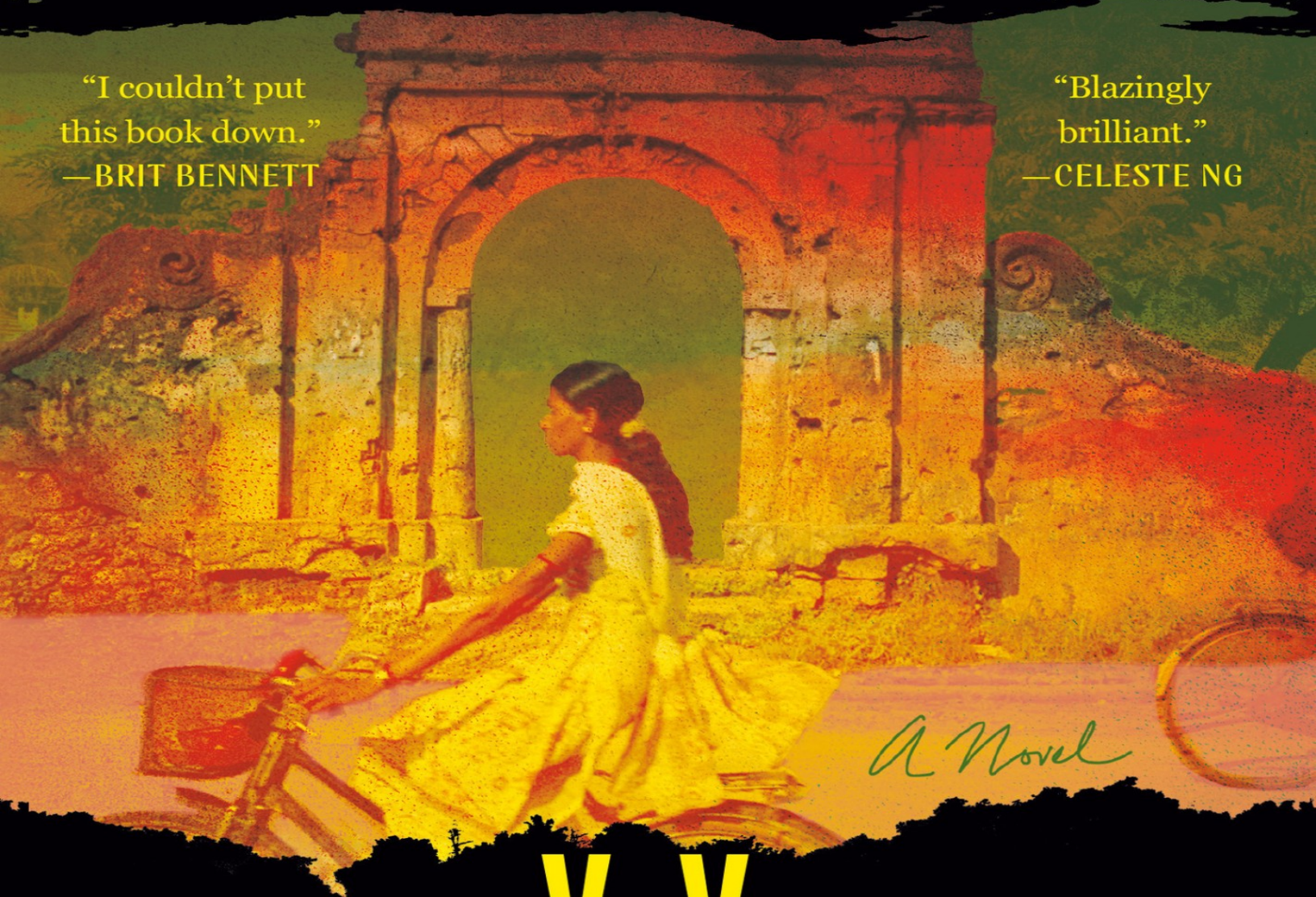


BROTHERLESS — NIGHT —

"I couldn't put
this book down."
—BRIT BENNETT

"Blazingly
brilliant."
—CELESTE NG



A Novel

— V. V. —
GANESHANANTHAN

PRAISE FOR

BROTHERLESS NIGHT

“The most fully realized new novel that I have read in a good while...[V. V.] Ganeshananthan’s considerable achievement, it seems to me, is in carrying off this big, ambitious thriller of a conflict novel—crossing years of growth and great events, fleshed out with ample research on the textures of moment and place—without losing the intimacy and reflective center of a character portrait.... *Brotherless Night* succeeds in telling all its stories—the historical and the personal, the factual and the ethical—as one, and that narrative has echoes. Ganeshananthan is writing about Sri Lanka, but she is an American novelist. This book, a careful, vivid exploration of what’s lost within a community when life and thought collapse toward binary conflict, rang softly for me as a novel for our own country in this odd time.”

—Nathan Heller, *The New Yorker*

“Perhaps Ganeshananthan’s finest achievement in *Brotherless Night* is showing, with meticulous accuracy, what it feels like to inhabit a day-to-day life onto which someone else, from the privilege of great distance, can throw a word like ‘terrorism,’ and be done.... *Brotherless Night* is a novel deeply concerned with real moments in a real war, real bloodshed.... The narrator’s deliberative mode of describing her life feels, by the end of the novel, like the only way this story could have been told.”

—Omar El Akkad, *The New York Times Book Review* (cover)

“The best historical fiction novels don’t just tell a great story—they reveal a side of history that their readers may not be familiar with. V. V. Ganeshanathan’s *Brotherless Night* does just that.... [It] is a powerful work of fiction; one that reminds the reader what it means to live through war, and stand as a witness to history.”

—*Town & Country*, “The Best Books of 2023 So Far”

“Propulsive...Ganeshanathan’s attention to the small details of love, of caring, of human empathy make the reader feel deeply for all her characters.... Riveting, heartbreaking and extraordinary for both its empathetic gaze and its clear-eyed depiction of the brutality of war, *Brotherless Night* is a masterpiece.”

—May-lee Chai, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Searing and intimate.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A beautifully written story of resilience, loss, human connection and survival amidst the complexities and violence of war.”

—*Ms. Magazine*

“Moving...a story about ‘terrorists’ that destroys the very sense of that word.”

—*BookPage* (starred review)

“Ganeshanathan’s prose, like the medicine Sashi is learning to practice, is precise, with a singing simplicity that can make you catch your breath.... Ganeshanathan is a superb writer. The pace and tone of her tale is

exquisitely judged and the prose almost electrically alert to the nuances of the story she is telling. I wept at many points in this novel and I also wept when it was over.”

—Christina Patterson, *The Sunday Times* (London)

“Prepare to have your heart well and truly pummelled by this searing story about a young Tamil woman growing up as the Sri Lankan civil war explodes around her.... At times, it’s hard to remember that this rich and nuanced novel isn’t actually a memoir—so convincing is Sashi’s voice and so compelling her story.”

—*Bookseller* (Book of the Month)

“A coming-of-age story that unfurls itself with expert pacing and remarkable depth of characterization.”

—Aditya Mani Jha, *Mint Lounge*

“Luminous and deeply affecting.”

—Lopamudra Basu, *World Literature Today*

“[Ganeshananthan] handles her story and her characters with control and clarity to create an authentic work of art. Somehow, threads of Tamil shimmer under her English, forming a narrative fabric of rare beauty.”

—Latha Anantharaman, *India Today*

“*Brotherless Night* is a gut-wrenching counter to the moral absolutisms hawked in all conflicts throughout history. It is also a love letter to the act of telling (or, more accurately, writing) truth to power.”

—Hattie Garlick, *Tortoise Media*

“Stunningly great.”

—Curtis Sittenfeld, bestselling author of *Romantic Comedy*, via Twitter

“A blazingly brilliant novel...With immense compassion and deep moral complexity, V. V. Ganeshanathan brings us an achingly moving portrait of a world full of turmoil, but one in which human connections and shared stories can teach us how—and, as importantly, why—to survive.”

—Celeste Ng, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Little Fires Everywhere*

“A heartbreaking exploration of a family fractured by civil war, this beautiful, nuanced novel follows a young doctor caught within conflicting ideologies as she tries to save lives. I couldn’t put this book down.”

—Brit Bennett, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Vanishing Half*

“*Brotherless Night* is my favorite kind of novel, one so rich and full of movement that it’s only later I realize how much I have learned. V. V. Ganeshanathan drew me in from the very first line, and the intricacies of her characters’ lives made it easy to stay.”

—Sara Nović, *New York Times* bestselling author of *True Biz*

“A beautiful, brilliant book—it gives an accounting of the unimaginable losses suffered by a family and by a country, but it is as tender and fierce as it is mournful. It is unafraid to look directly at the worst of the violence and

erasure we have perpetrated or allowed to happen, but is insistent that we can still choose to be better.”

—Danielle Evans, award-winning author of *The Office of Historical Corrections*

“A remarkable, unflinching novel that delicately, with surgical precision, exposes the deep wound at the heart of a long, cruel war.”

—Romesh Gunesekera, Booker-shortlisted author of *Reef*

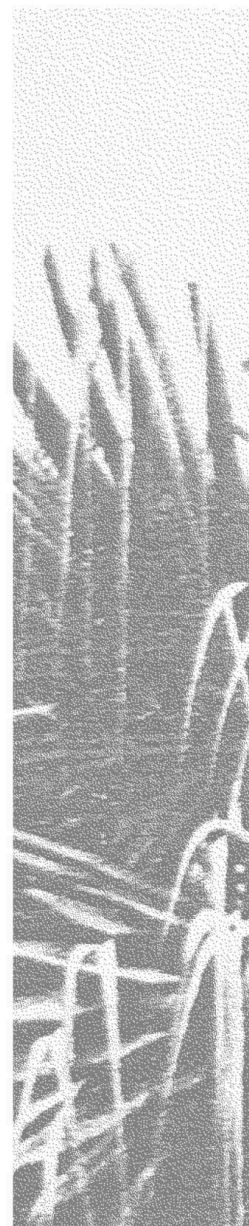
“*Brotherless Night* brings to life a seminal period in Sri Lankan Tamil history with an emotional intensity that kept me turning the pages. This is an important book for anyone to read, but especially for the new generations of the Tamil diaspora, who will get to experience, in the pages of this extraordinary novel, the history that shaped their destiny.”

—Shyam Selvadurai, award-winning author of *Mansions of the Moon* and *Funny Boy*



R A N D O M H O U S E

N E W Y O R K



BROTHERLESS NIGHT

A N O V E L

V. V. GANESHANANTHAN

Brotherless Night is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Vasugi Ganeshanathan

Book club guide copyright © 2024 by Penguin Random House LLC

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin
Random House LLC, New York.

RANDOM HOUSE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random
House LLC.

RANDOM HOUSE BOOK CLUB and colophon are trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Random House, an imprint and
division of Penguin Random House LLC, in 2023.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Shelbi Polk and Shondaland.com for permission to
reprint, in slightly different form, an interview between Shelbi Polk and V. V.
Ganeshanathan, which appeared on Shondaland.com on January 10, 2023. Used by
permission.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Ganeshanathan, V. V., author.

TITLE: Brotherless night: a novel / V. V. Ganeshanathan.

DESCRIPTION: First Edition. | New York: Random House, [2023] IDENTIFIERS: LCCN
2021059571 (print) | LCCN 2021059572 (ebook) | ISBN 9780812978278 (paperback) |
ISBN 9780812997163 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCGFT: Novels.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3607.A455 B76 2023 (print) | LCC PS3607.A455 (ebook) | DDC
813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021059571>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021059572>

Ebook ISBN 9780812997163

randomhousebooks.com

randomhousebookclub.com

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for ebook

Cover design and art: Donna Cheng

Cover photograph: Jeremy Suyker

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT** for the **ARTS**
===== arts.gov

ep_prh_6.2_146139109_co_ro

THERE IS NO LIFE FOR ME APART FROM MY PEOPLE.

—*Rajani Thiranagama*

HISTORY IS ALSO A CASUALTY OF TERROR.

—*Rajan Hoole*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: NEW YORK, 2009

PART I: A NEAR-INVISIBLE SCAR

1. THE BOYS WITH THE JAFFNA EYES, JAFFNA, 1981

2. A GOOD SISTER, JAFFNA TO COLOMBO, LATE 1981–1983

3. DISPLACEMENT, COLOMBO TO JAFFNA, 1983

4. RECRUITMENT, JAFFNA, 1983–1984

PART II: MOVEMENT

5. WHAT THE WOMEN SAID, JAFFNA, JULY 1984

6. SUPPORTERS, JAFFNA, AUGUST 1984

7. POSSIBLE MILITANT, JAFFNA, LATE 1984—EARLY 1985

8. THE DOCTOR BEGINS, JAFFNA, LATE 1985—EARLY 1986

PART III: THE HALF-DOCTOR

9. REFUSAL, JAFFNA, 1986

10. LIGHTS OUT, JAFFNA, 1986

11. LIBERATION, JAFFNA, 1986—1987

12. SAVIOURS, JAFFNA, MID-1987

PART IV: THE END OF HUNGER

13. K BECOMES K, JAFFNA, SEPTEMBER 1987

14. THE AUTHORS, JAFFNA, LATE 1987

15. INNOCENT PEOPLE, JAFFNA, LATE 1987—1989

16. HOSPITAL NOTES, JAFFNA, OCTOBER 1987

PART V: THE PALACE OF HISTORY

17. HIPPOCRATES, COLOMBO/JAFFNA, 1989

18. SAFE PASSAGE, COLOMBO TO JAFFNA, LATE 1989

19. THE BODY, JAFFNA, 1989

20. THE NEXT REPORT, SOMEWHERE IN THE AIR, 1989; NEW YORK,
2009

AUTHOR'S NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A BOOK CLUB GUIDE

PROLOGUE

NEW YORK, 2009

I RECENTLY SENT A LETTER to a terrorist I used to know. He lives near me, here in New York City, and when I opened the envelope and slid in the note that said *I would like to come and see you*, I thought of how much he had always required of me and how little I had ever asked of him. Even when I was growing up in Sri Lanka, before I had ever heard the word *terrorist*, I knew that if a certain kind of person wanted something done, I should comply without asking too many questions. I met a lot of these sorts of people when I was younger because I used to be what you would call a terrorist myself.

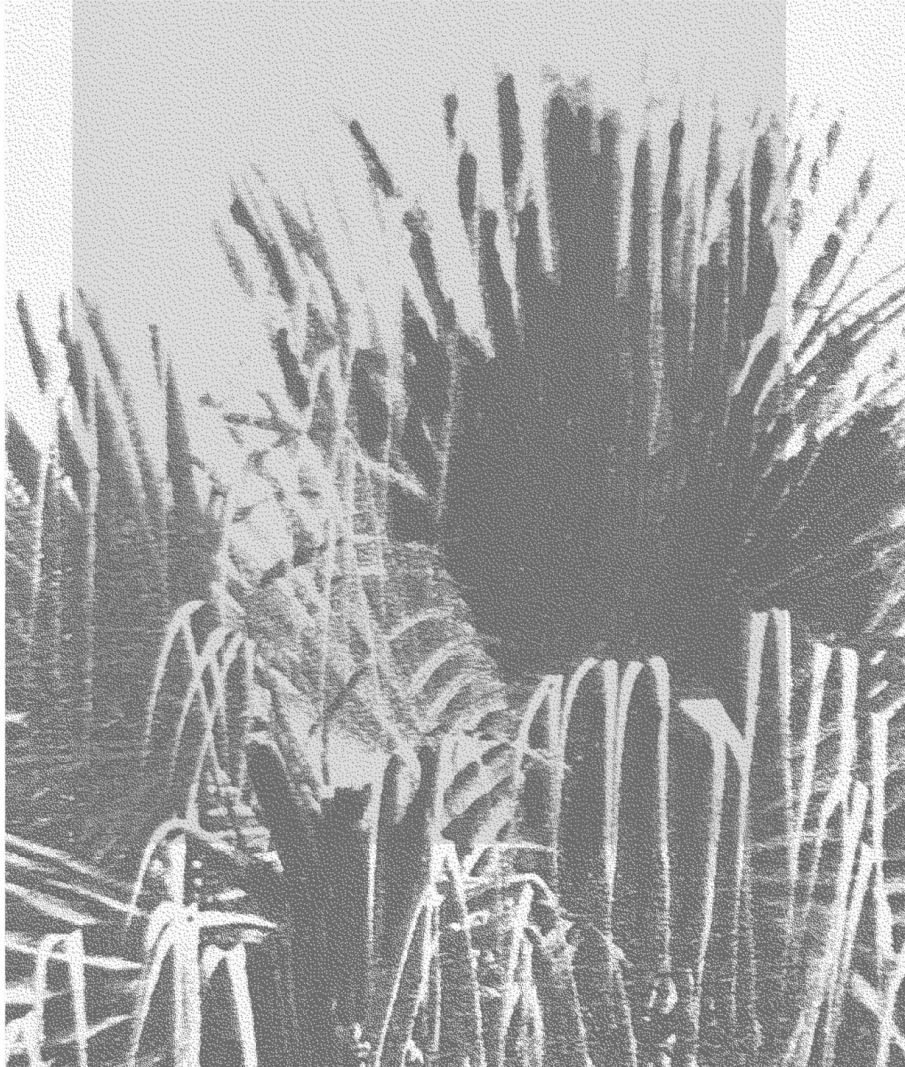
We were civilians first. You must understand: that word, *terrorist*, is too simple for the history we have lived—too simple for me, too simple even for this man. How could one word be enough? But I am going to say it anyway, because it is the language you know, and it will help you to understand who we were, what we were called, and who we have truly become.

We begin with this word. But I promise that you will come to see that it cannot contain everything that has happened. Someday the story will begin with the word *civilian*, the word *home*. And while I am no longer the version of myself who met with terrorists every day, I also want you to understand that when I was that woman, when two terrorists encountered each other in

my world, what they said first was simply hello. Like any two people you might know or love.

PART I

A NEAR-INVISIBLE SCAR



1.

The Boys with the Jaffna Eyes

JAFFNA, 1981

I MET THE FIRST TERRORIST I knew when he was deciding to become one. K and his family lived down the road from me and mine, in one village of the Tamil town called Jaffna, in Sri Lanka. The Jaffna peninsula is the northernmost part of the country. Many people have died there: some killed by the Sri Lankan Army and the state, some by the Indian Peace Keeping Force, and some by the Tamil separatists, whom you know as the terrorists. Many people, of course, have also lived.

In early 1981, I was almost sixteen years old. I already wanted to become a doctor like my grandfather, and I had recently begun attending my brothers' school, where girls my age were accepted for Advanced Level studies. In those days, I thought mostly about the university entrance exams. K, too, dreamed of medical school. And this was what made us alike, long before K chose the movement, long before I treated patients in a New York City emergency room. Long before we became so different.

K had the upper hand from the first, not because he was one year older, or a boy, but because I was his patient. Our meeting was both gruesome and fortunate for me. On the day that we met, I was boiling water for tea. I had to

use a piece of cloth to hold the pot's metal handle. But that morning the cloth slipped, the handle slipped, and the pot slipped, pouring scalding water all over me. I screamed and screamed for my mother—*Amma!* My shrill voice carried out onto the road, where K was passing. Letting his bicycle fall in the dirt at our gate, he ran inside.

By the time he reached me in the kitchen at the back of the house, Amma had already found me. As bubbles rose and popped on my skin, I shut my eyes, but I could hear her sobbing, and the sounds of pots and pans clattering to the floor. With every clang, heat flared around and inside me. Under my skin, another skin burned. I cried and called for Murugan, Pillaiyar, Shiva.

“Sashi!” he said, and I opened my eyes to his face without recognising it. “Sit!” he said, and pointed to a chair. When I kept screaming but did not move, he grabbed my hands, pushed me down into the chair, and peeled my blouse up, baring my scorched stomach. I heard Amma's *aiyo!* beside me as though she were speaking from a great distance. Snatching a bowl of eggs off the table, K began cracking them onto the wounds.

“I have to fetch water—” Amma said. Clutching a pan, she tried to move past him.

But he put his shoulders between her and the doorway. “This will cool the burn,” he said.

She stood there uselessly. I stared at him, trying to focus on anything but the pain, and saw only his thumbs working in and out of the eggshells, scraping the slime of the whites cleanly onto the swelling rawness. He did it very swiftly, as though he had had a lot of practise, as though every scrap of egg was precious. My skin was so hot that even now, when I remember those quick and clever hands and the slippery shock of relief, I cannot quite believe that the eggs did not just cook on my flesh.

When the last one was cracked and steaming on my skin, K looked up at Amma. “Are there more?” She did not respond, still stunned. “More eggs?” he said. She blinked, then nodded. “Good—keep covering the burn. I'll go for the doctor—”

When K returned with the physician half an hour later, the older man looked over the makeshift dressing with approval. “It should heal,” he said. “You may not even have a scar. My own mother used to crack eggs onto burns. This is not the kind of medicine they teach in school. Whose idea was it?”

K glanced at me without saying anything. I crackled inside still.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Amma said softly.

“His idea,” I said.

So I began as K’s patient, though he ended as mine.

—

SO MANY FOODS REMIND me of K now.

When he came to visit me a few days after the accident, his aunt Neelo came with him, bearing my favourite maampazham—mangoes—and vaazhaipazham, the special small, sweet bananas that grew in their yard. My mother must have mentioned that I liked them. The fruit pleased me, but for once, I felt more interested in the boy, who until this moment had belonged more to my brothers than to me. I tried to examine him without being too obvious. His shirt was tucked unevenly into his trousers, which were too large. He looked sturdy, but not skinny, and had a rim of hair on his upper lip that was not quite a moustache. It barely showed—he was dark from the sun. Thick, black-framed spectacles dominated his thin, sensitive face. He wiped them carefully with a handkerchief so worn it was nearly transparent. I did not know then that it had belonged to his late mother.

He replaced his spectacles, and when I realised that he was studying me with equal intensity I looked away. Everyone always spoke about how clever K was and what an excellent physician he would be. But those people were only speculating. I knew absolutely, with an indebtedness that ran through my body, and I felt both envy and something else that confused me. The thick lenses distorted his eyes, but it was too late; I already knew they were