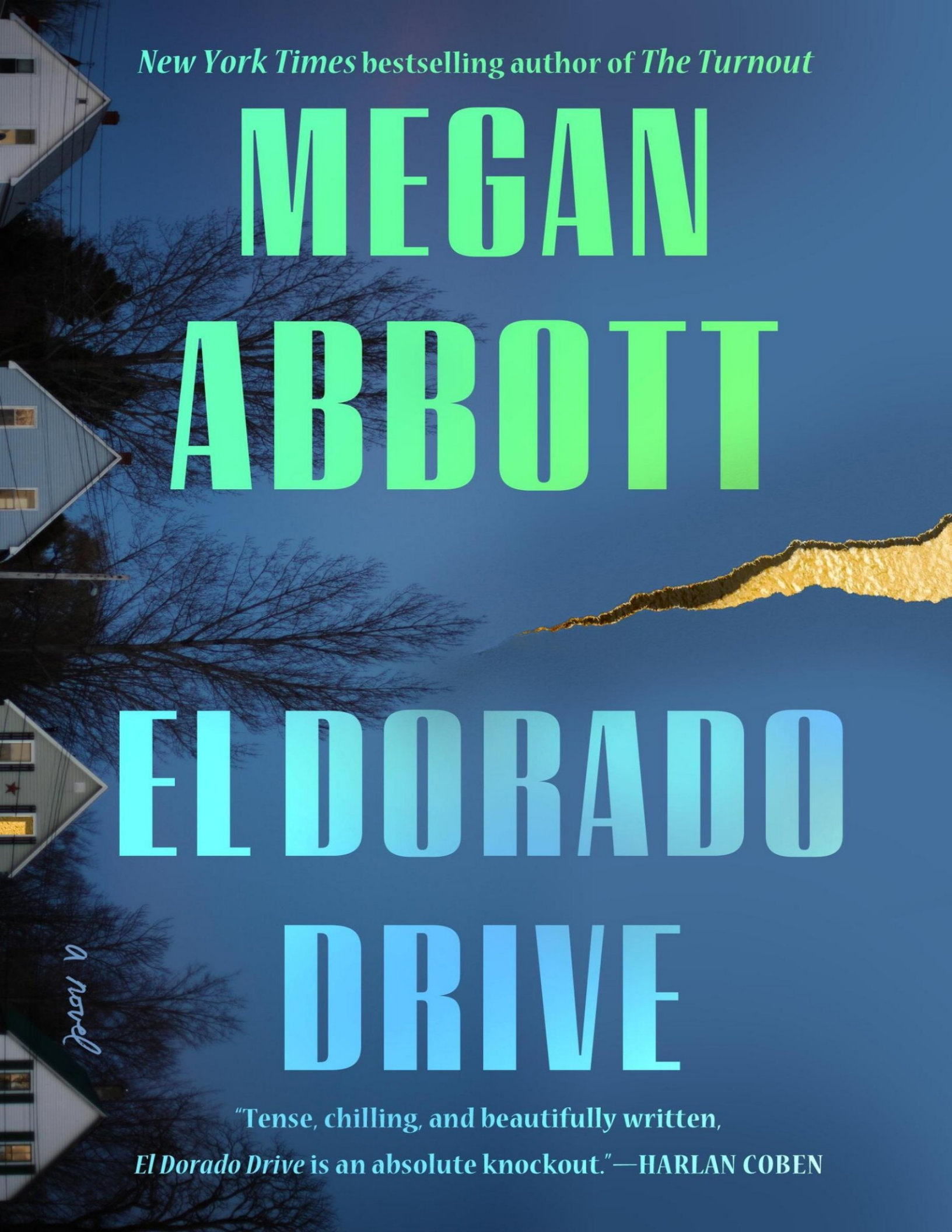
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The Song Is You
Die a Little

NONFICTION

The Street Was Mine

EL DORADO DRIVE

- A NOVEL -

MEGAN ABBOTT

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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About the Author

For Mom

Over the Mountains
Of the Moon
Down the Valley of the Shadow
Ride, boldly ride,...
If you seek for Eldorado!

—EDGAR ALLAN POE

All I want is to be innocent again.

She would always remember her sister Pam saying that, murmuring it as she dropped to her knees on the icy grass, that blond, blond hair of hers—the Bishop hair—glowing in the dark yard.

Harper had followed as her sister bolted from the house, back door swinging wildly, the Merry Mushroom cookie jar under her arm, coffee-stained. Holding it like she held her stuffed Pooh doll, age six, screaming that her sisters were pinching her, pulling her hair, scaring her, making her pee her pants.

Charging across the backyard, both sisters shuddering in the night air, Harper's bum right knee throbbing, teeth aching from the cold of it, until Pam stopped short, in the far corner, under the soaring elm, its branches bare and veiny.

Harper watched, the March wind screaming in her ears, as Pam dropped to her knees like the drunk girl at the high school party, the private school boys circling.

All I want is to be innocent again.

But they both knew it wasn't possible.

Life only goes in one direction. And experience only gathers itself, accumulates, thickens.

—

Pam was digging with both hands.

The elm branches blowing, whispering all around, Harper watched her sister's ragged French manicure plunging into the black earth like when they

were little, making mud pies, digging out earthworms for Mr. Loccrichio next door.

What's wrong, Pammy? What is it?

And Pam, her knees sliding in the dirt, had looked up at her, those gray-blue eyes of hers bright and startled. Like she'd forgotten Harper was there.

Help me. Please. Harper, help.

—

Harper ran to the toolshed for a shovel, for anything, her breath squeaking, fumbling for a rusty shovel, a metal spade.

Later, she remembered seeing her face in it, pulled and strange.

—

They dug and dug, the frozen soil cracking, giving.

Soon enough, Pam's collie, Fitzie, joined them, churning his paws into the dirt, too, wanting to be a part of the game, the mad adventure.

Harper's arms were so much stronger than Pam's, strong from her three decades' work at the Hunt Club stables, and soon enough the hole was big, bigger.

Big enough for the Merry Mushroom cookie jar, stuffed to the brim with curling green swirls of bills packed like tight little cigars.

The Merry Mushroom jar that, an hour before, Pam had plucked from its hiding place in the basement, stuffed deep in a bulk Tampax Pearl box next to the wobbling dryer.

Their forearms aching, their hands split and bleeding, but at last the hole was deep enough for the cookie jar, for five cookie jars stacked on top of the other.

Kneeling, her knees cracking, Pam wedged the Merry Mushroom deep inside, nesting it against a wall of dirt.

Harper staggered back, trying to catch her breath, Fitzie licking her fingers.

She heard a clicking sound, Pam's teeth clattering from the cold, from an unnamed fear.

He can't ever find it, Pam said.

Or, *She can't ever find it.*

Or, *They can't ever find it.*

Which was it? The roar of the winter wind. It had all gone away.

—

All she remembered now were Pam's eyes, so wild, so frenzied, her headband sliding down her forehead and her turtleneck sprayed black with dirt.

Oh, Pammy, Harper promised, *it'll be okay. It'll be okay.*

But Pam only laughed, laughed in a strange, strangled way, her Tretorn slipping suddenly in the dirt mound, her ankle turning.

Harper reached for her just in time, their hands interlocking, stopping Pam from tumbling into the shallow grave.

—

Harper saved her from falling, but not from what came next.

In a few hours, Pam would be sprawled on the floor of her kitchen, her face pulped red.

In a few days, Pam would be deep in the dirt herself, her hair shellacked, her face put back together again, stiff and strained, her lips Clinique-painted, her nails shorn and clean, her body stuffed in the shiny emerald-green dress she'd bought at Jacobson's and worn for every birthday, Christmas, New Year's Eve, since her divorce three years before.

But Harper would never think of her like that, not ever. Instead, she always remembered her in her old house—the grand one, sold after the divorce.

She could picture her there now, standing at her glossy kitchen island, her hand curled around her clinking glass, her eyes dancing. Her eyes

promising you that she loved everyone and everyone loved her and she would never die. It was impossible that she should ever die.

—

After, they began filling the hole again, a much more joyous activity, Pam's shovel clanging against Harper's spade and Fitzie running ragged circles around them, yelping and howling into the night.

The top of the cookie jar, a white curl and then gone into the earth.

Is it gone, is it really gone? Pam asked, and Harper promised her it was.

Pam, her face dirt-speckled and her mouth open in the dark yard, reached for her sister's forearms, Harper lifting her to her feet.

Crying and laughing at everything. Laughing at the both of them, covered in mud, *dirty as a dishrag,* their mother would have said, *my slobby sues*.

And the ground packed tight beneath them and somewhere on El Dorado Drive a neighbor's hound howling at the moon. Fitzie howling back, scratching at the storm window. A bird crying in the night. The smell of the earth, wet and pure.

1

Nine months ago

"Everything's changing," Pam said softly.

"It always is," Harper said, squeezing her sister's hand as they sat, uncomfortably, on folding chairs sinking heavily into the football field lawn.

Onstage, Pam's son, Patrick, gauntly handsome in his goblin-green Norseman robe, rose from the folding chair to accept his high school diploma.

Harper felt her eyes fill. How was he still not age six, elbows on the table, meticulously removing the plastic and eating two rolls of powdered mini-donuts in one sitting, his fingers, his face, even his long eyelashes, dusted white?

An average student, Patrick had devoted most of his energies to running track, to all his jobs—painting fences and mowing lawns until he was burnished brown, his arms like carved banisters. And, most of all, to the care and maintenance of his little sister, Vivian, who sat beside Harper now, chin trembling, shaking off mascara tears.

But if you looked at Patrick on that stage—so solemn, his polyester robe glinting like spun satin—you might think he was valedictorian, class president, most likely to succeed. It was the way he carried himself, so regal, very grand, and Harper wanted to cry, too, Pam sobbing beside her now.

"I'm just so proud," Pam kept saying, but Harper wondered if there was some strange kind of relief too. Relief that he'd made it, he'd graduated, and,

thanks to a modest track scholarship, he was going to some college in Chicago—*away,* further away than any of them ever had.

When he turned to wave to them from the dais, the look on Patrick's face reminded Harper of a skittish colt, eyes darting. He'd made it through a calamitous childhood, scissored in two by his parents' ugly and endless divorce. He had gotten out. Somehow, Pam had gotten him out. Or he had gotten himself out.

So Harper decided not to see it as an omen when his diploma slipped carelessly from his long fingers as he glided across the stage, the kid behind him accidentally stepping on it, flattening it under his penny loafer.

—

It was only when the caps flew in the air that Harper realized her niece, Vivian, had abandoned them, a flash of chlorine-blue hair slinking behind the football stands with another girl. The two of them nearly disappearing inside their spray-painted hoodies, their bare legs poking through.

"This is going to be hard for her," Harper said.

Pam nodded gravely.

No one knew what they'd do about Vivian, once a sweet, earnest little girl who followed her big brother everywhere and loved nothing more than riding. Harper herself had put her on her first, an old gray quarter pony named Lumpy, at age five.

Now a surly sixteen with a midnight-black manicure and pierced tongue, Vivian spent most of her time riding around in strangers' cars, a vodka bottle necked between her knees, pouring for a parade of sweet-faced girls, many of whom would kick off their sparkly sneakers in Vivian's bedroom and slide under her satin comforter, licking Vivian's laughing face, insisting, if Harper opened the door, *It's a slumber party, we swear*.

Pam didn't seem to register any of it, but Harper marveled over their ease and comfort, Vivian and her girlfriends. Times were so different now, she wanted to say.

How do you keep track? Harper would tease her niece.

And Vivian would remind Harper in that scratchy voice of hers, thick with tar, *I'm young*.

But that was before her mother laid down the law on New Year's Eve—Vivian cuffed inside a patrol car, kicked out of some warehouse party in Corktown, jaw clenched and hands purple, something about a potato chip bag full of MDMA. That was before her father threatened to send her to boarding school—*and not the kind you'd like,* he warned in the all-caps text Vivian promptly showed Harper.

But Patrick had stepped up, taking Vivian everywhere he went, to the mall movie theater with the sticky carpeting and the neon arcade games, to National Coney Island for chili dogs or to Sanders Chocolate Shoppe for hot fudge ice cream puffs at the counter, like the hundred times Pam had taken them as little kids, as their mother had taken them.

Every day after school, Vivian sat high in the stands, watching her brother run track, pretending to do her homework while carving graffiti on a bleacher bench, but—at least—behaving, staying still, *keeping,* as Pam would say with a sigh, *her panties on*.

But now Patrick was leaving.

It'll be just me and Vivian, Pam had said that very morning, her brow damp from making a hundred mortarboard candy pops for the graduation party. Adding with a laugh, *One of us is coming out in a body bag*.

It wasn't until after the ceremony that their big sister, Debra, finally appeared, her husband, Perry, trailing behind in the same linen Hickey Freeman sports jacket all the fathers in Grosse Pointe wore, trying to catch his breath.

"We weren't late," Debra insisted. "Perry couldn't make it up the stands. I can only guess you forgot to reserve us seats on the lawn…."

"It doesn't matter," Pam said, winking at Harper, who tried not to laugh. That morning, they'd made a twenty-dollar bet on how quickly Debra would complain about the seating.

“Well, it matters to *me,*” Debra started to say, then stopped herself, kissing Pam on both cheeks.

“Hell, Pammy, you did it,” Perry said, squeezing Pam’s arm. “By hook or by crook, you got your boy through.”

“Hook *and* crook,” Pam laughed. “And a lot of sweaty glad-handing at the PTA.”

“The question is,” Debra asked, looking around, fanning herself with her program, “where’s the proud papa?”

—

It had been the big unknown, whether Patrick’s father, Doug, would show, *maybe in a puff of sulfur,* Pam had joked, knowing her ex-husband all too well.

“It’s okay, Mom,” Patrick said after the ceremony, slipping one arm around her and his other around Vivian. “He’s been working a lot. I figured he might not make it.”

“He could still come to the party,” Vivian said softly, her eyes raccooned from crying all day, a bandage hanging loose, her brother’s name newly tattooed on her calf.

“I’m sure he’ll try,” Harper said, curling her arm around her niece.

But you never could be sure with Doug, and part of her was relieved he hadn’t yet appeared. All day she kept thinking she saw him from the corner of her eye—a flash of madras, the smell of his clove-thick aftershave. It made her nervous. It had been so long.

—

The sky heavy with looming rain, there was an anarchic, spooky feeling in the air as the parking lot filled with crushed graduation caps and trampled robes, with sweat-slicked parents trying to corral their whooping seniors, some of them jumping on random car hoods, a champagne bottle crashing, spattering green glass, foam.

Zigzagging through the crowd, Harper ran into her nephew Stevie, Debra's sweet burnout of a son.

"Where'd everybody go?" he asked, scratching his head.

It turned out his parents had left without him, *forgotten him,* as Stevie put it, laughing in his slouchy jeans, his eyes red and sad. Stevie, who had no driver's license after last year's second DUI.

Harper offered him a ride in her beat-up minivan, a cast-off of Pam's, twelve years old and two hundred thousand miles.

Nudging their way to the school exit, Harper and Stevie witnessed two separate fender benders and a dad-on-dad shoving match, a bristle of panic rolling through the lot.

"I can't believe it," Stevie said, punching the cigarette lighter. "Patrick's doing it. He's really doing it."

"Going to college?" Harper said, pulling at last onto Vernier Road.

"Getting out," Stevie said, his sunglasses falling over his nose as Harper hit the gas. "The great escape…"

Harper guessed the unremarkable school Patrick had squeaked into was as exotic as the Sorbonne to Stevie, still technically a freshman at Mercy College three years after his own high school graduation. Even if he'd had the grades to get into a state school, Debra and Perry couldn't have helped pay for it, not after Perry got sick.

No one knew how Pam planned to swing Patrick's tuition. *Hope and lottery tickets,* Pam said whenever Harper asked. Or, *Hope and witchcraft*. Or, *Hope and dollar slots*. Lately: *Hope and turning tricks*.

Hope and big loans, more likely. High-interest loans, car title loans, payday loans, towering credit card debt, who knew what else.

You have to give them everything, Pam had said to Harper that very morning, stuffing an envelope with a thick ripple of cash to give Patrick later that night. Everything left in her checking account minus two months' rent.

Pammy— Harper started, but what could she say?

I've never done anything, Pam said, turning her head away, sealing the envelope, *but I can say I did this.*

Everyone assembled at Pam's rental house on El Dorado Drive for the party she had been planning for weeks, maybe months. Planning it like it was a wedding, a royal wedding even, and Harper half expected Patrick to arrive in a horse-drawn carriage.

Mom, you don't have to, Patrick kept assuring her, worried until the last minute that he might not make that gentleman's C in trigonometry. *We can just hang out. It's cool.*

But Pam was the sister who planned parties, who hosted, who threw herself into everything with the sweaty fervor of a general readying her troops for the final battle, the one to win the war. It made sense when she was married to Doug, when she was president of the Junior League and chair of the Parents' Club, when she lived in a five-bedroom, six-columned mansion on a canopied boulevard near the lake and hosted three or more parties a month—dinner parties, fundraisers, meet-and-greets, luncheons, receptions.

But those days were gone, long gone, which was maybe why this party meant far more, why it had the weight of a coronation, the eerie desperation of D-Day.

"It's beautiful," Harper told her, barely catching her sister as she flitted in and out of the house with trays, bags of ice, bug spray.

"I tried," Pam said with a sigh, the back of her hand on her forehead like a soap opera actress. "I just want him to remember it forever."

They both stood for a minute to take it all in: the backyard glimmering with candles and string lights, Norseman-green-and-gold balloons, a half-dozen rented tables draped with gold linen, branches strung with miniature graduation cap streamers, garlands shimmying with graduation tassels, the ancient elm tree thick with bright paper lanterns: *Class of 2008!*