

**"Deeply
imagined"**

Will Weaver, author
of *Sweet Land*

IF

THE

TRAIN

"Heartwarming"

Christine Husom, bestselling
author of the *Winnebago
County Mysteries*

ARRIVES

HEATHER FELLIN TIERNEY

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For Mom

Author's Note

A note to train enthusiasts:

As a work of literary and historical fiction, this book involved research on the Midwest rail system, particularly focused on the years 1969-1970. Train historians will notice moments in the book where I took liberty to change facts for the sake of fiction and story-telling cohesiveness. (For example, an early morning route from Minnesota to Oconomowoc, arriving at 5:35, did not exist). Please allow grace for these changes, as I altered as little as possible—and only did so when needed for the plot.

My book is a work of fiction, and not, in any way, a commentary on the American railroad system.

A note to readers who connect with Lincoln's character:

My years of teaching have helped develop my beloved character Lincoln.

The Depot

If the train arrives at 5:39 then it is too late.

The passengers will look nervous. The lines will feel too hot. The women will wish to take off their hats; they will frown down at their children.

If the train arrives at 5:31 then it is too soon. They will not be ready. Fifteen to eighteen of them tend to get in line just minutes before, and their tickets will still be tucked away in their wallets. They will not expect it yet. At least one will miss it.

5:35 is the scheduled time. The time it must pull in. Today, 68 tickets, 68 passengers. One or two pieces of luggage for each. The train is coming from Minneapolis, heading to Milwaukee, then Chicago. It stops here in Oconomowoc, twice daily, and the passengers get in, get out, come and go.

He looks at his watch. Then he glances down the tracks, to see when it will come.

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The floors are wood and scuffed from years of luggage pulled across their surface. The luggage—each piece—is packed by its owner who is preparing for something, leaving something, returning or forgetting. One bag is a meticulously folded collection of dresses waiting to be worn to impress a lover; one bag is feverishly packed in haste when the decision was made to leave, to move on. This bag and that one—each with a story and a choice.

Day after day, year after year, the bags scrape, rest, and are pulled onto the train.

The floor warps with its knowledge.

Lincoln

Friday, November 27, 1970

He has worked here at the station for more than twenty years.

When he wakes each morning, he steps out to his porch and watches his bird feeder. He watches their routines for half an hour; there is a noisy, playful yellow finch this fall. Its color has muted with autumn. Lincoln eats pancakes with maple syrup and drinks a glass of milk. Then he dresses in his black shirt and gray pants and walks five blocks to the depot.

He lives alone. As a child, he remembers mostly playing alone too. His teachers talked quietly with his mother behind closed doors. He didn't write the answers down on his paper. He knew every answer in his mind.

It's 5:08 a.m. He sits next to the window, with his breakfast and birds; he knows the patterns of their day and the habits of their feeding. He knows their seasons, when they will migrate, and when the mother will return to her nest in spring. These patterns of nature—and the occasional break from the patterns—are what he loves about them. And even the unexpected behaviors he can tolerate—because even that is a pattern in itself.

He did marry once. He is still married, officially. But he doesn't see Evelyn anymore. They have a daughter, Anna, and she is sixteen. She has soft brown hair and gentle green eyes.

The day she was born, he held her in his arms and she opened her eyes for a moment and it startled him. She was beautiful, and she was his.

Then the doctor walked in and there was the news. There was what he said next. There was what he told them.

That was sixteen years ago, and that was when Evelyn left.

Now, Lincoln looks down at his breakfast plate. He thinks about the day he first saw her.

He remembers that he was ten years old, and—as he did every recess—he was sitting under a willow on the edge of the playground. It belonged to the white house next to the school and was not actually on school grounds, but its monstrous branches reached and hovered and spilled onto the grass where he sat. He was sitting cross-legged, looking down, studying an ant hill, wishing he knew what the tunnels looked like underneath, but not willing to kick it apart. He remembers this. And then he heard a girl's laugh and he looked up.

Every day he heard the voices of the other children on the playground; every day he saw them on the grass, in the leaves, through the snow—a world he was not part of. They meant nothing to him by then. He didn't even wish to be with them anymore.

But when he heard her voice, he looked up.

Evelyn was wearing a green sweater with a white collar. She had two red-haired ponytails popping from both sides of her head, and she was running toward him. She was chasing a ball. *Please don't come closer*, he remembers thinking, but he knew about inertia and speed and knew the ball would bounce to the end of the playground—the perimeter he was safely outside of—and he knew she would follow it.

Should he get up? Instead, he looked back down. And the ball arrived only a few feet away, and then there were her feet.

"Hi!" she said.

He tried to be motionless.

He remembers her hair dangling closer to him. She leaned over, her hands on her knees.

"Hi, I said." A playful, annoyed tone.

"Hi," he mumbled. He studied the ant hill closer.

"Bye!" she yelled. He looked up when she skipped away. She actually did skip. He remembers that too. Her hair bounced behind her, and then she disappeared into a group of girls and boys and balls and jump-ropes. They were all waiting for her.

He began to look for her out there.

Out there. Among all of them.

She was usually easy to find. He knew what to look for: ponytails (but by then he knew four girls in her group usually wore them), saddle shoes, a running or jumping game, laughter. He would sit under the willow that had become his friend, he would think about his predictions for upcoming weather, and he would search the blending of faces until hers came into focus.

And then one day, he realized, he saw their faces too: the kids he tried to ignore. In his search for her, he noticed them. One boy, Billy, (he knew many of their names by then, as he heard them call to each other) cried every day if he wasn't picked first for a team. Caroline would hang on two other girls, draping her arms territorially around them. Ira broke his hand during a football game—the teachers came running from all directions.

Her name was Evelyn. He knew that now. "Evelyn, Evelyn!" the other girls would call. They all wanted to be next to her. They would lean into her, braid her hair, whisper with their hands cupped around her ear. She was at the center of the circle, and they would flutter around her. Like bees, he thought. But she didn't seem to notice their eagerness—their need to be near her.

He wanted to be near her too.

The day he decided he loved her was about one month later. Love was the word he heard the girls use. I love Cary Grant and Humphrey Bogart, they would say. The word lost meaning.

He knew what love meant: he counted on his mother to tuck him in before bed, even though he would need to rearrange the covers more comfortably when she left the room. He wanted his grandfather to invite him out to the garage, to ask him to hold the wrench or pliers while he worked on the car. He knew he needed those things, these people.

One afternoon he was walking through the hallway and Evelyn was coming from the other direction and he darted to the side and dug into his pockets. She stepped into his path.

"Hey. Do you like math? Miss VanPilson said you were a math genius." She stood right there, in front of him.

“I’m not a genius,” he said. He shuffled his feet. Then: “I do like math.”

“I knew it! I love, *love* math,” she said. “It’s the best! Let’s start a club. Tomorrow after school? Let’s meet by that tree you like.”

He didn’t like to share math with other people. Or the willow. But these things weren’t his, he knew that.

“See you then!” she said, and was gone, swallowed by voices. He wasn’t sure what to think. But you don’t just leave people waiting when they expect you to show up somewhere, so the next day after school, he went out to his tree.

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All the girls thought it was odd. He knew they whispered about it. The boys chuckled when he walked by. Sometimes they’d slap his back aggressively.

But every day after school, for 52 days until school ended and summer began, he met Evelyn at the edge of the playground and he would listen to her talk about fractions and denominators. She knew and loved the numbers he cared about, the facts and figures that gave sense to his world, and he would concentrate on the sound of her voice and the way she giggled when she miscalculated—and how she’d click the toes of her shoes together with her legs outstretched on the grass. Her legs, with their tiny orange hairs and scratches.

At first he’d just listen, but soon he found himself explaining how Lake Michigan’s lake effect influenced Milwaukee. And how the temperature that day compared to the reading from last year. And soon (how did it happen? he wonders now), he would tell her about other things he knew, and the hours would pass and it would be getting dark, and it was time to walk home because Mom would be waiting with dinner.

At recess, she was out on the playground and he was still under the tree. She never asked him to come out and play; he knew that she understood he would not. It didn’t need to be asked or said. But every day, at least once—while she twirled and spun in her world—she would turn to him and wave. He would wave back.

It didn’t matter: after school, she was his.

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All of that was so long ago, Lincoln thinks now. They had only been ten—and then they grew up.

Anna was born and the doctor came into the room, and that is when Evelyn left.

When She Left

It is 5:15. Lincoln is right on time. It is a six-minute walk to the depot.

He sees his reflection in a store window: clean-shaven, lean build, and his dark hair pressed under his hat. He is pleased when he catches his fine posture. He notices a poster in the window: Fall Dance 1970—Go Raccoons! It is two days later than last year's poster.

The mascot has not changed, and Lincoln likes that. There is something to be said about seemingly small things that remain constant—although, back in high school, he was not a fan of these types of celebration weeks. He thinks back to his senior year.

At that time, Evelyn had painted her room purple—the school color—and covered the walls with pennants and homemade posters. They made him dizzy.

Of course, when he was seventeen, he wasn't allowed in her room. Of course, her parents wouldn't have it. But a few times he walked down the hallway and looked in. He was curious.

He remembers, on the night of the Fall Dance, watching her brush her hair, then twist it up and pin it. She was looking at herself in the mirror, and she saw him watching and smiled. She motioned for him to come into the room, and he shook his head, his feet just at the edge of the blue carpet in the doorway. She turned and held out a violet ribbon.

"Just hold this for me," she said. He glanced up and down the hallway, then stepped forward and took the ribbon. She turned back to the mirror, added a few more pins, then reached out her hand.

"Thank you," she said softly. He held out his palm where the ribbon was waiting, and her hand—so gentle—touched his. She smiled again, laced it around her hair, and tilted her head to see it in the reflection.

That night was the senior semi-formal, and he would not go. But she

would, and her boyfriend would sit with her on the gym bleachers, and Lincoln could picture them together, close, sitting on his sport coat: her, swaying to the music, and him, trying to subtly pull her closer.

It is probably 5:17, he thinks now. It is still dark, and only the streetlights are awake.

He did not like the boyfriend. Not that he knew him, but a few weeks before the dance Lincoln stood waiting for Evelyn at the end of her street, and when she walked down the road, she was crying—eyes that ached. The boyfriend had taken another girl to The Kiltie. The boyfriend had lied. The boyfriend confessed.

That afternoon, Lincoln had touched her arm as he walked her home on the quiet, gravel road that led to the white farmhouse just outside of town. He didn't know what to say. Evelyn spoke with words he never knew from her: each phrase unfinished, words tossed into the air. It reminded him of a math worksheet washed in water, pieces soaked and fragments floating. He listened to her and heard brokenness. What if she would not heal? She was sure she would not.

When they reached her house, she said she wanted to be alone. He forced himself to raise his eyes to her, and he touched her cheek with his hand.

“Please don't cry,” he said.

She suddenly wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging like a child to her father, and poured out loud, wounded sobs. He held her. He felt angry: the boyfriend did this.

But here she was, now, with her messy, confusing hair draping across his chest, and her curves against him, and her Dove soap smell and muffled tears, and he knew she preferred Dove over Ivory.

When she let go, she straightened her blouse. “I'm sorry, Lincoln,” she said. He picked up her books—she had dropped them just a moment ago—and put them back in her arms. She forced a slight smile.

He watched her disappear onto the porch, a quick wave before the screen door shut behind her. He stood there, in the gravel, for a few moments. The late autumn sun was already thinking of setting—a watercolor brush across the sky. As he walked home, he witnessed the colors fade.

That night seems so long ago. Now, he is forty years old.

At the moment, he is three minutes away from work. Three and a half minutes, he thinks, and quickens his pace. He passes Dick's Barber Shop, Annie's Candies, and the candy shop. He passes them every day. The bait shop used to be the optometrist's office; when it emptied and the front window refilled with rows of candy, Lincoln felt irritated every time he passed it. He had never been to the eye doctor's office—never needed to—but he expected it to be there. It took a few weeks to get used to it.

With the Fall Dance approaching, the teenagers in town are louder than usual. They've painted the store windows purple and gold. It is messy, but he knows the owners allow this.

When Evelyn came home from that dance, so many years ago, he had waited on her front porch. Her parents were asleep.

The boyfriend brought her home. They pulled into the driveway—he drove too fast—and they were in the car for a few moments and then she closed the door and walked toward the house. She was smiling to herself with her purple ribbons and lipstick.

"Lincoln!" she exclaimed.

He realized, then, that he had startled her. He realized, then, that his presence may or may not be welcomed. He wished he had thought of that before.

"Why are you here this late?" she had asked. Was she annoyed? He searched her face. He knew the secret was to search faces.

"I wanted to be sure you were okay," he said.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?"

The answer was obvious in his mind. "Three weeks ago he went to the Kiltie with a girl and you cried."

Now her face was mad. He could see that.

"I know that, Lincoln!" she suddenly shouted. She looked up at her parents' bedroom window. Then: "Go home, Lincoln. I had a great night. You should go out to things. Then you'd understand." She stepped past him and onto the front porch, then went inside.

You should go out to things. Evelyn had never said that before—it was their unspoken agreement. Did she want him to go to dances with her? Or just go? Did she think this for years?

Lincoln remembers walking home that night, not sure who he was to her.

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Years later, she married him. And within that year, Anna was born.

The baby would eventually need to be in a home, the doctor had said. It was an odd expression to describe a place that was not their own, Lincoln thought: *a home*. This declaration was made only three minutes after Anna was born. How could he know this? She had barely breathed on her own, and now her life had been determined. He put that idea away.

Lincoln did not struggle caring for an infant. When the baby cried, it made sense: she is hungry. She is tired. She wants to be held or changed. The signs and the solutions were by design. The timing of the cries eventually became predictable too—if you looked at your watch, you would see that her demands came in rhythms. There are reasons for the rhythms, and he sorted them in his mind: biology, mammal, bodily functions.

Those first three months with the baby, he remembers, Evelyn was tired. She slept most of the time. Wait—she did not sleep. But she was in bed, her eyes closed. Lincoln would knock on the door at noon—the space dark with the drawn curtains—and when her faint voice answered, he would bring her a sandwich with bacon and milk. If she sat up, he'd prop a pillow behind her, and if she lay still, he would leave the tray next to the lamp on the small, bedroom table. He would close the door quietly.

She did not want to hold Anna anymore. She could not, she said. So Lincoln learned to carry and cook and cradle. He thought of his mother. He had watched women do this. He had seen how they washed with a hand and wiped the floor with a foot and all of this at one time.

One evening he had filled the tub with warm water and even bubbles for her. He arranged her shampoo and Dove. He was reaching into the running water to be sure the temperature was adequate, then he turned to call her, and there she was. There, behind him. She was in her long, white nightgown and her red hair fell across her shoulders. She was gasping—he had not heard it against the rush of the water filling the tub—and her hands, her body, were shaking. Her eyes were lost.

“Help me,” she said. Lincoln stood still. The water behind him reached the

top of the bath; it spilled over and crashed against the tile floor.

“Lincoln, help me,” she said again. She shook her hands out in front of her body, as if to break something free, as if the movement would explain her plea. She glanced quickly at the walls around her; she shuddered with the sight of each corner in the small, mauve room.

She needed him. Lincoln knew this. But why? It did not make sense to him. He could establish in his mind no reason for it.

“Do something!” she screamed. Her face pleaded and asked and he stood still and said nothing; her face retreated and her expression changed. Now, it was anger and sadness and he had let her down, somehow, and he reached out a hand to her, but she drew back with disgust, amazement.

It was too late.

She wrapped her arms around herself, shivered, and walked out. That was the day when everything changed.

Three days later, after he had filled the bird feeder—a squirrel had spilled the seeds over the ground again—Lincoln walked back inside the house and Evelyn was standing in the kitchen, holding a bag. Her hair was combed and a velvet band held it off of her face. She wore a gentle, black blouse with gold vines stitched around the sleeves. She had her coat over her arm.

“Where are you going, Eve?” he asked. She sighed and raised her head higher. She looked past him, and he turned around to see where her gaze fell. Nothing was there. He turned back to her.

“Why?” he said next. She was leaving. He understood that now. He saw it in her eyes. She was leaving him, and Anna.

“Why not,” she said. It was not a challenge, it was not a question. It was a final chance.

Lincoln said nothing. Then: “You are my wife. And Anna.”

Evelyn waved her hand, pushing his words away.

“Lincoln, I’m not well here. I can’t do this. I just can’t.” She picked up her bag. It was the same bag she had packed when they went to the hospital to have Anna: gray with faded black trim. Then she looked at him: “Tell me why I should stay.”

Her eyes were so intense—so green—he had to look down. He could still feel them. They were memory and pain and the doctor’s words when Anna was born and the weight that hovered above their heads and threatened to fall on them at any moment: it was always there, waiting to crash.

“Tell me,” she offered again. She threatened.

And Lincoln thought of recess and the playground and the willow tree, its roots elbowing up through the spring grass; of Evelyn playing kickball, her pig-tails bouncing as she cornered each base; her laugh tossed into the air like a balloon he could catch and hang onto and soar with. He thought of their picnics and blankets and the way she nodded even when he knew she wasn’t listening, and the way she smiled when he talked about air currents; the way she rested her head on his shoulder and he could feel her breath slow down.

He wanted her to understand all that she was to him—all that she’d been.

“You wore a green sweater with a white collar,” he said quietly, “and I was under the tree.” He almost whispered it.

Evelyn took a deep breath; he saw her chest rise and fall. He saw disappointment in her eyes. She clutched her jacket.

“That is not enough,” she said angrily. Then, softer, “That is not enough anymore, Lincoln.”

She pulled her bag close to her side, pushed past him, and left.

The door slammed and there was the sound of her car engine in the driveway—the fade of it down the road. Lincoln stood still in the kitchen, listening to the quiet. He could hear the clock above the sink. He could feel the heat outside the window. *Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn.*

He is not sure how long he stood there next to the table where they ate their breakfast, not sure when his stillness turned to pacing—his steps back and forth from the sink to the door—across the tile floor. Not sure when the pacing shifted to crying: surprise, now, at the wetness on his cheeks and the sound of his soft, low groans.

“You wore a green sweater with a white collar,” he said again. The room did not care.

The clock clicked gently, wound itself into place. Lincoln glanced up. It was 7:00. Anna needed feeding.

Vera

Friday, November 27, 1970

She packed light. It was just one week, and she didn't need to bring much. There was the dress her father had sent her: flowered, flowing, a fabric she had never owned before. She packed heels in case they went out to dinner, and she'd buy a scarf when she got to Chicago: something city-like, something confident. Maybe she would have time to stop at a store when she got off the train.

She had not seen him for nine years. She was a child at the time, and he was traveling through on his way to Madison for work. He stopped at their house, a small one-story outside of town, and when he swooped through the front door it smelled of cologne and money.

He was tall and wearing a suit; Vera remembers he nodded at her mother—who turned away from his glance—then he reached down and handed Vera a small blue box. It was a locket with her initials, and he drew his arms around her neck and clasped it for her.

“For my little girl,” he said, and he smiled in her eyes. Then he left again and nine years went by.

Now, as she pulls her luggage across the floor of the depot, she wonders if she should have packed something more practical. She remembers what he had written when the dress arrived in the mail. He bought it at a boutique and had asked the salesgirl—she looked just like Vera, he wrote—what the latest fashion would be. She brought his dress.

She reaches into her blouse where she tucked the ticket under her slip. 5:35, it reads. Vera looks at a large, wooden clock that towers at the front of

the depot like a watchful deity. Its scolding hands proclaim 5:27.

She glances across the room. There are businessmen wearing angry scowls, walking in hasty steps. There are tired mothers with outdated lipstick colors pulling children by the wrists. There's a young couple—about her age—kissing in such a way that Vera turns her eyes down. There is a long boarding line along the side of the wall. She steps around the back of it, walks to the front, and taps the shoulder of a man holding a rope across the entrance to the platform.

"Excuse me," she says. "Is this how I get on the train to Chicago?"

The man does not look at her, and instead checks his watch. "The end of the line is at the back of the depot," he says.

"I've never been on a train before," she offers. The man does not acknowledge this.

Vera feels her hands sweat under the handle of her bag. She feels heat on her neck. The train to Chicago takes less than two hours. And then her father will be there.

"Are the windows on the train able to open?" she asks now.

This time, the man turns slightly toward her. *Lincoln*, says the nameplate on his vest. She wonders if he is the same Lincoln she's heard of.

"Do not open the windows on a train," he says. His eyebrows lower. "The windows are for emergencies only." Then: "You should get in line. It is 5:31."

Vera nods and pulls her bag past the faces in line. At first she smiles as she passes them, but—at their avoiding or simply nonexistent glances—she instead looks to the back of the depot and reaches in her blouse to check her ticket again.

"Passenger boarding to Chicago," a solemn voice crackles across a speaker. *What will father look like? she wonders. Will he still have hair? Maybe it has thinned a little on the sides.*

"Last call for boarding to Chicago," the voice interrupts. Vera glances behind her. Now, a few others have joined and she is not the last one waiting. She suddenly feels as if she were a child contemplating cutting out of the rollercoaster line, looking up at the riders at the tip of the coaster's drop, hearing their helpless screams on the irreversible descent.

I will tell him how I won second place in the 4H flower decorating contest, she thinks. The thought immediately feels foolish. She straightens

her back and smooths the fabric below her neck. She pushes her chest out a bit, attempts to glance at herself without much notice in a window reflection, and then relaxes her posture.

I will tell him about singing in the school play. I will tell him how the auditorium applauded—and about the bright lights, the faint outline of the front row audience, the scratchy fabric of the costume. I will tell him all of it.

“Ticket.”

It is him again—with the polished nameplate. Vera reaches inside her top and offers her ticket to his extended hand. He notices from where she pulls it and draws his hand back momentarily. He hesitates, then pinches the ticket’s corner with his thumb and index finger, drops it in a metal box, and wipes his hand on his vest.

“Seat 33. Two steps up,” he says. “Watch the first one.”

Vera steps out to the platform, grabs the rail of the stairs, and pulls herself in. She scans the numbers along the rows. Seat 33; she sits. A window seat. Through the glass she sees the evening and morning wrestle.

I don’t want to go, she thinks now. I don’t want to see him. She’s suddenly sure of it. She sees the sunlight cast a shadow across the platform outside.

Her heartbeat gawks at this sudden change of mind. *I’m sure of it, she thinks. I need to get out.*

There is the decisive sound of steel doors closing: a vault. The air feels sucked from the train car, like a tomb that’s just been shut. It is the sound of certainty.

Vera turns from the window, snatches her bag off the floor, and abruptly stands. Now, a passenger blocks her from the aisle—when did she sit down?—and Vera finds herself aggressively pushing past her. A hand reaches up and grabs her lower arm.

“Hey, you can’t leave now,” the woman says, looking up. She looks about Vera’s mother’s age, she is smiling, and wearing long wispy leather fringe. “The train is leaving.”

Vera glances up the aisle: backs of heads, newspapers open, indifference.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” the woman says. “It will be alright.” She pats the seat next to her.

Vera does not move. *I will tell him that I got a purple bike at my twelfth*

birthday party, she thinks. And how I once sat on a chocolate candy bar at a baseball game and everyone on the bleachers saw it. And I wore a yellow flower on my graduation dress and the day was hot and the flower wilted. I will tell him—

“There’s a war going on,” the woman says. She nods as if agreeing with her own fact. “Vietnam is not over. Still more bloodshed.” The woman pats the seat again. “That’s a problem. But you can do this, right? This thing you’re doing?” She shrugs at Vera, then moves her knees to let Vera back through.

Vera slides past, sits back down, and glances at the woman next to her.

“Peace,” the woman says, and shuts her eyes.

The train whistle wails like a restless tea kettle. The engine boasts its strength with a growl that feels as if it were snarling deep within Vera’s chest. She places her forehead against the window. She sees a gust of wind sharply slug the trees. Her eyes land on a figure pacing frantically back and forth on the platform, reaching his arms up—and then down—with each step. It is the ticket-taker, she recognizes. Lincoln. The breeze must have caught something, and tickets are fleeing in all directions, this way and that way across the train platform, across the grass, and now across the road. Vera can feel the wheels spin on the track beneath her, and slowly the train lurches forward. She tilts her head closer to the glass as the train pulls away. Smaller and smaller he looks, now, as he chases the force of a mocking wind.