

Ocean Beach, California

1995

The forecast was calling for a torrential season, the winter after James Butler was killed. Something Evelyn Butler didn't know at the time: that the war had finally knocked the breath out of him. Left a trail of his still-warm blood, a small stream on the summer pavement, baking in the lingering August sun. The same sun that took its time warming the sea, the clouds becoming thick with it over months. And now, long after the caravan of black sedans, there would be rain, the sort that held itself in the laden, heavy clouds until it couldn't take it anymore. This was a California winter: rain. The rain comes down, saturates the baked honey-brown earth, overwhelms the rugged shoreline; its barricades disappear, its pieces break off, grain by grain, stone by stone, and off into a furious gray-green sea.

It was November already. The days getting shorter. The nights longer.

Evelyn kept the television set on to drown out the silence. They always had the television on. James had never missed the news and now, the old channel tuner stuck on three with the help of a paperclip and a rolled-up piece of card stock, neither did she. "Historical proportions," the weather girl said, just before a map of Pacific Ocean took over the screen. There it was: a stirring, swirling red the color of hell flames in the middle of the deepest, spanning crystal-blue ocean with California, an insignificant sliver of mud-brown earth to the right of the map, in the waiting. "A warming trend in the ocean," the weather girl continued, her arm motioning in a frantic circle around the red swath. "Rare, yet cyclical," she went on. A chain reaction; this causes this causes this causes this. There will be wind and rain; a prickly rain and a swirling wind.

Evelyn stood in front of the television set, the glow of the screen casting a soft light on her features. Years of cold creams, rose-smelling lotions, and wide-rimmed sun hats had kept the deeper lines at bay, the milk-white skin giving way here and there, pulling and tugging only slightly around her light eyes and pale rose lips. Her face in the light of the glowing television was a stark contrast to the rest of it, the prosaic simplicity: the stale scent, the eroded wood floors, threadbare carpets, the fading colors that were once so vivid. The panorama of old age. Her lustrous hair that had gone dull and gray, her drab clothing hanging off her frail body: lavender polyester and purchased from an advertisement in the Sunday coupons, down to her slippers, peach with white embroidered flowers, a ring of brown stained along the sole.

The volume was set to eight to hear well over the buzzing of the relic that had brought man on the moon, miniskirts, and two American wars to her living room. James never wanted a new television: *Why? This one worked fine.* Something else she didn't know: he would have bought her a new one had she ever wanted it. But Evelyn didn't and so it went. She could still smell him. Sweet tobacco. The starch of his shirt. The pomade he combed through his wiry silver strands. The coffee in his breath. The polish on his shoe. He had always been so quiet at times, so much that she sensed that he was still there. It was like living with a ghost, then and now. He would wake up long before she did. With the moon fading into the clouds but still present, the sky a pale orange with twilight on the edges, he'd take his walks. She liked to sleep. It was their rhythm. So much that over the past months when she woke up alone in the mid-morning glare from the window she thought it might have been a dream. And then, grabbing two coffee cups and saucers from the cabinet, she'd remember it was real. That it had really happened that way on the street that day. That the cruel sun was out full blaze once again and that he was gone.

She rarely sat to watch the television. Not then and not now. That was part of it, too; the uneasiness of being carried by someone who rarely spoke. And there was her restlessness: *what can*

she do? What did she do? There was a long sofa of fabric with fat green leaves that had once been the jewel-toned color of Christmas and had since faded to olive, the here-and-there stains—cocktail parties, their only child—then covered in part with a knitted, multicolor blanket won at bingo in the church basement in 1979 on the only occasion they ever played, when they were clamoring for something in the dark, something to grasp in the universe, and in each other. (He would have bought a new sofa, too. He would have played bingo again, had she wanted it.) His chair, to the right of the sofa, had wooden arms and a seat that had sunken in quite a bit before she thought to put a frilly and fading pillow there to help fill the settling. The underbelly of which was embroidered with stars and the sea, and what would have been a whale and eventually a boat; a project from an art course she didn't finish. A half-finished, stone-colored whale James had once mistaken for the moon. The bubbled-screened television sat low in a corner between two windows, ivory drapes with tiny roses, yellowed against the brooding orange sun, playing peek-a-boo behind the swollen gray clouds.

Evelyn rolled the volume knob until the television blinked off. Silence was better, for the red swirling on the screen had her stirring. And that never did her any good. She rubbed the translucent skin on her wrists. And shook her hands free. Maybe she'd be dead by then. *Weeks*, that's what she had heard. *One always follows the other*, agreed two middle-aged women from the church in hushed tones in the foyer of St. Mary's Star of the Sea, where an intimate gathering had taken place just before her husband was buried in a plot in the nearby national cemetery. *And probably it was for the best*, another funeral attendee said. Former patients, she surmised, and let their words fade from her ears. They thought they were whispering. They thought the old widow couldn't hear them. They thought she was next.

“Who would care for her?”

“The daughter? Useless. Really, it's useless. Never married. Never visits.”

Their eyes rolled in the direction of another, younger woman, directing an attendee, chatting, laughing with another. Sarah Butler was a polished woman in black, amber waves of hair like her mother once had. A tiny fissure ran from her Achilles tendon midway up the calf of her black stocking, unbeknownst or perhaps ignored like an old wound.

The cemetery was on a piece of land that jutted out past the bay and into the sea like a finger. His spot was near a tree with gnarled, knotty limbs that seemed to reach for the steel-blue beyond the cliff where the cemetery ended. On the other side of the isthmus was another cliff, more rugged than abrupt, and a swath of ocean, glittering in the sun. Just north of the cliff sat Ocean Beach, the seaside district where they made their home in 1946 and never left. Evelyn stood by the gray casket, the shine and sleek curvature of which reminded her of their first car, and half-listened to what those shaking her hands and kissing her cheek were saying. Hard to ignore was the warmth in their gaze, the stillness in their expression.

“Beautiful resting place.”

“Just lovely, Mrs. Butler, really.”

The voices scattered as did the people, back to their cars and lives. Back to the noise, the hum of the living.

It was as though, to them, the old man had died naturally.

By December Evelyn could see the storm coming in the rattling of dead leaves from the old palms that lined the street, this wind that would bring the rain. She watched one morning from her kitchen window, a piece of paper—A tissue? A wrapper? Something discarded and forgotten? —stirring up, whirling in a breeze, gently as though guided, as though dancing, until it hit the side of the wooden fence. Flat. Stuck.

By then she felt the change of season it in her bones. "It happens with age and the joints," her doctor had confirmed. The very things that hold a person together.

And then, it was in her dreams. A brewing. A brooding. A scurry of footsteps as certain and hard as hail. A march. A steady drumbeat. The rattling of a newspaper, blowing in the wind. Hush tones. Waiting for something from the heavens; something from the sky. Something from God.

She'd wake in darkness, and forget where she was.

Where in place.

Where in time.

San Francisco

December 7, 1941

Wake up Macushla.

My darling girl, Macushla, wake up.

The room is dark, the drapes closed and then, as was suggested in the newspaper that evening, a light blanket was tucked into the rod. Everything was silent but this clumsy, melodious whisper that rose and fell, singing softly. There are three beds in the room; Mary Margaret, the eldest, has her own. Simon, the eldest boy, his own. The twins share a bed. Peace is interrupted by the sour scent. The sloppy stumble. The singsong voice coming up the stairwell. Pa's nighttime song to his first girl, his Macushla, my blood.

"Pa?!"

"Shhhh... Shhh."

He exits. She follows. The air is chilly. There's a draft. It comes from the plank floor, the corners, the cracks in window sills. The holes you can't see. The stairs creak under her bare feet. The staircase is narrow. His head barely misses the ceiling of the second-floor landing of a house never built for a man of six-foot-four. He mumbles something, grunts and heads for the parlor room, fancy name for a fancy room in a house that was anything but. She follows. Her whispers grow louder. Frantic.

"Pa! We were looking for you. Mum, Simon, Peter, Mr. Grant, Father O'Sheary. Did you hear?"

"Shhh. Shhh."

He's standing at the window that faces the silent street, peeking past the drab curtain, watching dead leaves dance in the slow breeze. He senses he had been followed here. He ducks. Sinks, almost

to the floor. His face is oily. His dark hair slick to the side. Mary Margaret, her sandy copper hair set in pin curls, has seen her father like this before. Her mother is asleep in a bed in the dining room. The bed creaks. The girl pauses to listen again and to her relief, hears the snoring that rises and recedes, and seems to rattle the doorframe. And behind that, there's the tick-tock of the grandfather clock her father had tried to sell once but could find no one with a feasible plan for retrieving the hunk of mahogany that had been in his family since 1908, when times were good and the house with the tall staircase and narrow door was built on a hill that seemed to be the top of the world. He had kept the clock working, for when times were good he could fix anything, but the time was always off by minutes and the children, who faced humbling lashes on the hands if they were late for their classes, knew never to rely on it.

Mary Margaret gets closer to her father and begins to whisper, but can't seem to calm herself, her voice rising with every breath: "We looked for you. We were worried. Everybody is worried."

"Macushla, reme'ber the story of the Banshee? I seen her. She and her rumblings, past me, angry, fast like wind. Draped in gray cloth. Hair wild and gray, she was. An' she was laughing. Laughing. Da y' hear me?"

Mary Margaret, in her tattered nightgown and bare feet, doesn't answer. She crosses her arms and hugs herself tightly. There's another draft, a strong wind that rattles the glass in its frame. She sighs. He rises. She's startled by this. He gets closer to her face, close that she sees his ink-dark eyeballs surrounded by a soft shade of pink, redness at the corners where his nose juts out. Slow, steady breathes. There it is, she thinks. *Whiskey*. She had sipped it once. Or was it sherry? Or gin? Something in a near-empty glass on the table nearest to the door of the Celtic Tavern, and on a dare from another girl in a group, all popping bubble gum and walking two-by-two on their way to Holy Cross Drugstore to look at glossy movie-star magazines, to marvel at the *Better Home and Gardens* as they often did, to run their ink-stained fingers along the gloss of grandeur with its bowls of peaches

and embroidered tablecloths, and to later daydream about it all the way up and down the hills to where her crumbling house stood like a boulder in the path. “Do it. Do it,” a whispering chorus beckoned. Mary Margaret could never resist her beating heart. She walked right in, her quick steps in knee socks and saddle shoes drowned out by the lazy, sloe-gin voice on the radio. She pulled the crystal-like glass to her nose, her eyes tearing from the sting, and then to her lips, and to this audience of giggling onlookers in matching forest-green wool jumpers with mint-green Peter Pan collared shirts, down it went. The strong burning sensation on her throat, she coughed. Pine or ammonia, she thought, something her mother uses to clean the house with. That which is now in her Pa’s breath. His face is sallow and glistening from sweat. He is speaking in brisk syllables, missing a letter or two. She wondered: *Had he seen the newspaper? Did he know?*

“Pa. Please. Shhh.”

“The Banshee. I seen ’er. Mine own two eyes.”

She puts her hands on his elbow. He is tense, and jerks his arm away. Her frail forearms and dainty hands are that of a child’s although everything else about her, at age seventeen, is that of a woman. If Mum wakes up she knows she’ll be reprimanded first for having forgotten her robe. It was the nightgown that her mother had worn early in her marriage and was the only thing that fit the young girl as she filled out into what her mother had understood as the curse. “’Tis a raven to see a girl like that sprout up in your house,” an old woman from the old country had told her mother one day on the street, and followed with, “nothing good can come from it.” Mary Margaret, in turn, was unaware of herself in that manner and still did childish things; skipping across the church playground after mass as the men, both young and old, of the congregation stood and watched. Their doughnuts uneaten in their hands, sugar-powder on their neckties and on the creases of their mouths, their wives and mothers witnessing the spectacle and nudging them back from wherever their wild eyes had taken them.

“Pa. that’s just a story. Remember? A story. You’ll wake Mum. Please. Close that.”

If Mum wake up there will be trouble. It’s Mum who gets him started and then, the children get him going. If Simon hears, there will be trouble. At sixteen he had the same stature as Pa, tall with square shoulders. Trouble like the time Father O’Sheary had to come at twenty past two, the heavy moon lighting the cracked sidewalk as he dragged Pa to the rectory basement two blocks away, the splotched-face children watching from the windows, watching Pa sink down the hill with the priest in plain clothes. There was a cot and a bucket in the basement there. Simon had seen it when he was at the rectory stacking the wood for winter and told Mary Margaret about it. *Bastard*. That’s what Simon called Pa. He didn’t help look for Pa earlier in the day and helped himself to a second serving at dinner when Mum had told him to save some for his father. Simon never worried about the leaning old patriarch and he wasn’t about to start, even if the world around them was exploding, he told the wide-eyed figures seated at the table that night, their glowing faces growing incensed in the candlelight as Simon went on with his rant. Mary Margaret, more silent than usual, knew Pa would come home that night.

She reaches to close the drape. The room goes dark. Pa pulls at it again and crouches to look. A sliver of moonlight catches the stubble on his jaw, gray whispers glistening. His salt-and-pepper hair is slick to one side. He begins sweating again. She thinks: *Did he run home? Did he steal something? Did he not pay his tab?*

“I’ll stay here. Just wait here. I’ll watch and wait,” he tells her.

She touches his elbow again. He turns. Grabs for her hand, squeezes it in assurance, then turns back to the window, her hand in his grip. The scent in his breath passes once again. *Rancid*. She pulls away. He’s shaking.

The eldest child, she knows by now what to do. Pa is having one of his spells. That’s what Mum called it. It’s not just the drink. It’s a spell. Leave him. Let it pass. It always passes. “Some things can’t

be helped,” her Mum had told her once and she believed it. Of all things Mum ever said this is the one thing she wanted to believe. The girl turns to the staircase—it’s chilly and she can see her breath—and ascends, quietly, step by step. To the right is another room and two beds. Past that, the door to the toilet and next to it, another room with two beds and four sleeping children and a very small window. Hers is straight down the hall, to the back room. There, three beds in an arrangement Mum had deemed long overdue for change: move all the girls in one room and all the boys in the other, she argued recently. Mary Margaret didn’t see why. She had always slept in the same room as Simon; the two had been playmates and at one point like all the others, even shared a bed.

Simon abruptly rolls to face the wall. She knows he heard everything. The bed creaks. She takes a seat at the bed beside his. She won’t bother him about this one. One foot up then two feet, under the covers as though nothing had happened. To forget she had gotten up. To forget she had seen her father and that he had mentioned the banshee. That he was having a spell. To mention it to no one and later in the morning when Mum asks about the creaking of the staircase, to deny it. To simply, go back to sleep. *If only.*

It took her a while to fall asleep the first time and she wouldn’t be able to the second time. The evening log had burned through to a warm, charred blackness. Her mind is racing. *What did it all mean, exactly? Would there be school tomorrow? Mass? How long will it last?*

How much can change in a day?

In a moment?

There had been much talk of war in headlines in all-capital letters, bold prints, of places they had never heard of, faraway islands with faraway people, places that sat an ocean away, across the tallest mountains. The faraway lands of the Chinamen and something their Pa had called dirty Krauts. “Stories. That’s what they are my love,” Pa had told her. “Everybody remembers the other

war and we'd be crazy to get caught up in some European affair that had nothing to do with us," he would said say on lucid days, days when he had work, days when it all seemed like things would be different from here-out. The days he could fix Peter's bicycle. Like the time he fashioned a play kitchen out of scrap—crates, jugs, chipped saucers—for Fiona and Sarah. The days he made pancakes at the stove from the sunny-day yellow Bisquick tin. The times there was maple syrup and butter and sausage, even, if they were that lucky. The days he could tell the difference between Matilda and William.

“It's just stories Macushla, my darling girl. Remember? Stories?” He was good at telling stories, the ones his mother had told him when as a boy he begged for the most frightening ones, tales that made him shiver and made his heart beat faster. Anything that got the blood rushing. This desire that Mary Margaret would inherit. She remembered well that of the banshee, the old woman who showed up before death, a wicked fairy in frayed plainclothes that had scared her so as a young child. The memory was a blanket. She and the others, tucked in their beds, Pa by candlelight, telling of fairies and hooded creatures, things that are neither here nor there, tales that traveled the oceans and made their way here, to the tall, tall gray house. Pa and his fairy stories to counter Mum's Bible stories; the tales of wrath, of the sowing and the reaping, of bad things happening because somewhere, somehow one did something unspeakable and it angered God Almighty. They planted some bad seed and it grew, and grew and grew and grew. Pa's stories were of things that happened just because the wind had turned; nature had taken its course. The banshee showed up. Mary Margaret believed a little bit of both. When times were good, as they sometimes were, the tall house was full of splendor. Theirs was the tallest on what Mum called a lane because that's what they called it in the old country, even though here, they called it a street. Theirs was a small village in a city of hills. Of ups and downs.

They still believed Pa when the headlines in the newspaper got larger.

Nothing will happen, love.

Until it did.

And Pa was nowhere to be found.

Mary Margaret had promised to take the children to the theater after mass. Beatrice Connor spent her Sunday afternoons sweeping the doughnut crumbs from the floor in the fellowship hall and wiping the coffee rings from the tables, the milk splatters on the floor. It's how she got a tuition break for eight children: one dollar a week instead of two. Simon helped sometimes, too. Father O'Sheary knew of the frequent trouble with Pa: the sour scent, the wobbled walk up the hill, stopping to sit on a doorstep for rest, falling asleep on the sidewalk, the gaining of jobs, the losing of jobs. That morning he asked about Pa, who had slept in late. "He is working now," Mary Margaret told him. "The docks. We have fish now. We have fish for days." When she uttered the words she imagined Jesus, and his loaves of bread and fish. It was a lie, one that Beatrice, had she overheard, might not have corrected because Father O'Sheary had tried so many times and it was the first Sunday of a holly, jolly, holy month and it was a good thing to try to think something good even though the truth was far from it. That's how the woman with eight children lived. Ignoring what she could. Thinking something good. Especially when she had lost all control.

"Ah it's a good day then." He was outside shaking hands. He had known the eldest girl to lie often, for he was the representative of God on the other side of the confessional and knew her tone: a breathy, light voice. But they were harmless lies. Mary Margaret was only trying to live a normal life, he supposed. Even if there was a chance it was true. Bidding a good day, he reached into his pocket, past the folds of his ivory robe. "Go in peace," he said, putting three dimes in the girl's hand when everybody, it seemed, had passed on, walking, talking about the Christmas sales at the shops on Market and how good it all was that the old rickety cable car had been replaced with a

street car, how we all seem to be moved along into whatever came next, how all of their children were growing.

Down the hill on Twenty-fourth Street there was a theater run by what the children had overheard Mum call a heathen, which must have been a good thing for often and usually on Sundays the ticket man would let one or two pass for free. It was when admission was discounted, when the features were on the second run, tattered reels that were two years maybe three out of the Hollywood's ornate, wrought-iron gates. Mum always allowed this, the going off somewhere after mass when she had work to do. Sometimes they rode the cable cars up and down the hill; Simon, when he was younger, was fascinated by the enormous cord that lugged the cars. He imagined that God himself pulled at the cable for who else could be stronger? The theater may have been run by a heathen but it was one place, one dark place, where no one would see them all seated there alone and not at a supper table, which is where good Catholics went after fasting all morning for Communion. And there never was a guarantee with Pa's condition—home wasn't good. Had he ventured in late and clumsy the night before? Best to let them run along, Beatrice thought. And it was much to the delight of the children, teen-aged Mary Margaret even. With the dimes plus what the pennies the girl had set aside for the cinema, there could be taffy, or Hershey bars, or some other confection. The girl walked, child in each hand. The others walking in front and behind. The letters on the marquee were crooked: THE WIZARD OF OZ. It was their first Technicolor, a tint that made the songs, the silence, the fears and the dread all the more real. Little Sarah cried during the part when the wizard, voice like thunder, told the little girl in the blue dress and glittering red shoes that he wouldn't help her. That she couldn't go back. Couldn't go home. That she was lost. Mary Margaret felt an immense pounding in her chest, closed her eyes, and held her younger sister close, whispering, as the screen emitted an eerie glow of green: "It's just a story Sarah. Make pretend. You know..."

The theater patrons poured, dizzy, from the dark theater onto the bright sidewalk and made their way into small huddles, laughing, shading their eyes from the glaring sun. They could hear commotion. That was strange. Commotion. Cars roaring past on a lazy Sunday in December. Mary Margaret's eyes darted side to side and then, she turned to gather the children, counting ginger and sandy blond heads, Sarah, always by her side, the only dark-haired one among them. Simon helped pull them aside, letting the crowd pass. The cluster then walked swiftly down Twenty-fourth. Businesses usually closed on Sunday were open and people gathered. The radios on full volume. The ticker of typing over the airways. Telegrams read aloud. She could hear, faintly, the immediacy in the voices, of the "this just in." It was the official voice not unlike that of Dorothy's wizard and it forced this eldest girl, who had been accustomed to shielding the children from terrible things and thoughts, a reprieve from her duties for there was no hiding it. Even Mary Margaret was terrified.

"Hurry," Mary Margaret told them, tugging them along, as they walked up the hill to the lane, where they saw their Mum waiting near the overlook across from their house. On a clear day one could see the steel towers of the shipyards miles away and just beyond that, the glistening of the bay, and maybe, a passing blur of gray and a wake of snow-white froth. The ships, Pa had pointed out once, "off to destiny, a cruel, cruel place."

Beatrice had hoped to see her husband coming up the hill, for she already knew where the children were. When she didn't see him, the passing relief at seeing her children was overshadowed by the concern that her husband had left the bed sheets of the bed in the dining room rumpled and hadn't eaten the biscuit she left him, along with a note. That maybe he didn't even come home the night before, that she sometimes lost track, and now, with this all happening. "Have you seen Pa?"

Mary Margaret shook her head. Sarah began to weep, talking of a big wind that was coming to take them away. Mary Margaret saw that her mother was wringing her hands in her apron although

her fingers were bone dry. The crease in her brow was there. Like the time they couldn't pay the coal note and the cellar was empty and it was January.

"Should we go inside?" Mary Margaret was stumped for what to do.

There was no radio in the household. There had been but Pa sold it. Simon, who could no longer listen to the baseball games, was furious all over again, shaking his head and biting at the skin along his thumbnail. *Bastard*. There was the abruptness of sirens in the background, coming from down the hill. Father O'Sheary was heading up the hill from St. Paul's, a newspaper in his hand. He handed it to Beatrice.

In the paper, just under the fold, was a map and block letters, the Pacific Ocean. The typeface was small: "From the fog off the Golden Gate the enemy awaits..." Bold arrows from Japan to Hawaii; San Francisco just 5,428 miles to Tokyo. Hawaii a sprinkle of land. In the misshaped islands, an explosion of some sort, with a tag "Pearl Harbor," accompanied by flames. California a sliver to the right, faraway but not faraway enough. San Francisco in bold. Their insulated small world, where things that happened to faraway people in faraway places, had gotten larger with its cartoon arrows. The dots connected. In a day. In that very moment.

Beatrice stood on the first step with the battered newspaper loose in her grip until a gust of wind came and off it went.

"Nevermind that Mrs. Connor," Father O'Sheary interrupted her cold stare in face of the wind. "Get inside. The children, too."

She didn't move. Mary Margaret gathered the children.

He received a call at the rectory, he continued, and that there was going to be a blackout, that everyone was to get inside, turn off the lights, and close the drapes, and stay inside. That they could be next. Beatrice rubbed her fisted hands on her apron and invited him in.

"No missus. Much to do. Much to do."

Father O'Sheary left the house and made a left instead of a right, and walked down the hill to the business district, where, he suspected, the taverns would have opened just after the first wave of news hit. He did what he always did: looked for their Pa. It was true: everything had opened that day. And then, abruptly, everything was sealing shut, the streets went cold silent as the air raid sirens pierced the air and the sky went from orange to lavender.

And then to black.

Only the daring few peaked out of windows and looked up to the heavens, waiting for whatever was to come.