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BOOTH

A Novel

**KAREN JOY
FOWLER**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

1822

The people who live there call it the farm, though it's half trees, woodland merging into dense forest. A two-story, two-room log cabin has been brought from a nearby acreage on rollers greased with pig lard. The walls are whitewashed, the shutters painted red. A kitchen is added on one side, a bedroom and loft on the other. The additions stand off the main room like wings. There is nothing special about this cabin with its low ceilings, meager windows, and canted staircase, and moving it was a costly business, every local ox and man hired for the job. This all left the neighbors with the impression that the new owner was a bit crazy, a thought they never had cause to revise.

The relocation puts the cabin beside Beech Spring, where the water is so clean and clear as to be invisible. But, and the neighbors suspect that this is the real purpose, it's also a secret cabin now, screened from the wind and the road by a dense stand of walnut, oak, tulip, and beech. Still, since everyone in the neighborhood helped move it, everyone in the neighborhood knows it's there.

The nearest neighbors are the Woolseys on one side and the Rogerses on the other. Bel Air, the county seat, is three miles away; the big city of Baltimore some thirty miles of rough coach road to the south and west.

Improvements are made. Orchards of peach, apple, and pear are planted; fields of corn, cane sorghum, barley, and oats; a kitchen garden of radishes, beets, and onions. A cherry tree sprig is set near the front door and carefully tended. A granary, stables, barn, and milking shed are built. Three large, black Newfoundland dogs arrive to patrol the grounds. They are chained during the day and loosed at night. The neighbors describe these dogs as savage.

Zigzag fences are erected or repaired. The mail is delivered on horseback once a week, thrown over the gate by a postboy, who whistles through two fingers as he passes, driving the dogs to a frenzy of howling and rattling chains.

A secret family moves into the secret cabin.

SIXTEEN YEARS PASS. The family grows, shrinks, grows. By 1838, the children number at nine, counting the one about to arrive and the four who are dead. Eventually there will be ten.

These children have:

A famous father, a Shakespearean actor, on tour more often than at home.

A paternal grandfather, skinny as a stork, with white hair worn in a single braid, his clothing also fifty years out of fashion, breech trousers and buckle shoes. He's come from London to help out during their father's long absences. He was once a lawyer, treasonably sympathetic to the American revolutionaries, enthusiastic for all things American. Visitors to his London house were made to bow before a portrait of George Washington. Now

that he lives here, he hates it. He likens the farm to Robinson Crusoe's island, himself a marooned castaway on its desolate shore. He's rarely sober, which makes him less helpful than might have been hoped.

An indulgent mother. A dark-haired beauty with retiring manners, she'd once sold flowers from her family nursery on Drury Lane. She'd first seen their father onstage as King Lear and was astonished, when meeting him, to find that he was young and handsome. He'd had to perform the Howl, howl, howl speech right there in the London street before she'd believe he was the same man. "When will you spend a day with me?" he'd asked within minutes of learning her name. "Tomorrow?" and she'd surprised herself by saying yes.

During their brief courtship, he'd sent her ninety-three love letters, pressing his suit with his ambition, his ardor, the poems of Lord Byron, and the promise of adventure. Soon enough, she'd agreed to run away with him to the island of Madeira, and from there to America.

Perhaps adventure was more implied than promised outright. After they'd left their families in England, after they'd had their first child, after they'd arrived in Maryland and leased the farm on a thousand-year lease, after he'd arranged to move the cabin onto it, only then did he explain that he'd be touring without her nine months of every year. For nine months of every year, she'd be left here with his drunken father.

What else could he do? he asked, leaving no pause in which she might answer; he was a master of timing. He needed to tour if they planned to eat. And clearly, she and the baby couldn't come along. There is nothing worse than an unhappy, complaining shrew for a wife, he'd finished, by way of warning. He didn't plan on having one of those.

So here she's been, on the farm, for sixteen years now. For seventeen years, almost without break, she's been either expecting a baby or nursing one. It will be twenty continuous years before she's done.

Later, she'll tell their children it was Lord Byron's poems that tipped the scales. She'll mean this as a caution but she'll know it won't be taken as such. All her children love a good romance.

None of the children know that they're a secret. It will come as quite a shock. They've no cause for suspicion. Much like the secret cabin, everyone they know knows they're here.



Lincoln and the Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions

Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs.

—Abraham Lincoln, 1838

In January of 1838, Lincoln delivers, to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, his first major speech. He is one month shy of his twenty-ninth birthday, recently reelected to his third term in the Illinois General Assembly. He's already been a farmer, a clerk, a postmaster, a surveyor, an army captain, and a lawyer.

Two horrific murders, the first of a black man, the second of a white, form the backdrop to this speech. The first was the lynching of twenty-six-year-old Francis McIntosh in St. Louis. McIntosh was tied to a tree and burned alive. A grand jury being convened, the judge instructed them not to blame the mob, but rather those abolitionists who had stirred things up. He called one out by name—the minister and newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy. Lovejoy then fled St. Louis for Alton, Illinois, where the

mob killed him anyway. In *that* trial, the jury chair had been part of the mob and the judge himself was called as a witness for the defense. In neither case was anyone found guilty.

The death of the white man, Lovejoy, has a national impact. This is allegedly the moment John Brown decides to devote his life to the eradication of slavery. But both murders affect Lincoln deeply. In his speech, he warns of two possible threats to the republic. The first is found in the lawless actions of the mob, the second in the inevitable rise someday of an aspiring dictator. The gravest peril will come if the mob and the dictator unite.

BOOK ONE

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any
other word would smell as sweet.*

—W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Rosalie

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THE LIVING

Rosalie, the oldest daughter, is sitting on the steps that lead down to Beech Spring, watching her baby brother and sister make boats out of leaves. She is thinking of Ophelia, drifting in her sodden gown, her hair spread over the water, her face surrounded by flowers. She is dreaming of what it would be like to be beautiful and dead. The month is March, the year 1838. In July, Rosalie will be fifteen years old. She finds Love Tragic more satisfying to contemplate than Love Triumphant.

Rosalie is neither dead nor beautiful though the first is easier for her to imagine than the second. She resembles her father and her older brother, but in miniature, and with little feminizing of their features. Reclusive, reticent, stocky, she is not witty and graceful like the rest. Nothing is expected of her, except that she be a good girl and a help to her mother. She wants little attention and gets less—the most unremarkable child in this remarkable family.

The long winter is just coming to its end. The blackbirds have

arrived, the robins are expected, and Rosalie feels the turn in her breath, in her bones. She is not quite happy, but surprisingly close to it. She feels light. Perhaps the bad times are over.

The moment she registers the feeling, it slips away. There is a palpable relief whenever Father leaves on tour. Mail day is the exception. By noon, Mother will be reading a letter from Father. The letter will be good or it will be bad. Mother will need her desperately or she won't need her at all.

The sky above the trees is pale and bare and skims in reflection over the flat surface of the water. It's not a warm day, but it's a dry one. Rosalie is wearing her shawl, her bonnet, and a pair of sturdy boots that were bought some years ago for her brother June.

At sixteen, June is the oldest child. He's off in the barley fields this morning, because Father has read an article on some new fertilizing technique and so it must be tried at once. Father is always impatient for the completion of projects in which he has no part. He often berates his own father for lack of industry. Father thinks Grandfather drinks too much.

Grandfather thinks the same of Father. They quarrel about this endlessly whenever Father is home, often from their customary chairs at the Churchville Tavern, where all such arguments can be fueled by the jolly god.

Rosalie doesn't know where her grandfather is just now. Since her little brother Henry Byron died, Grandfather is often hard to find, and mostly they don't look. He comes. He goes. Sometimes he misses a meal, but not often. He used to give the children lessons, but really this was just for Henry; none of the other children are promising enough to interest him. Not June, who is more brawn than brains, a handsome, genial disappointment they once hoped would be a doctor or lawyer. Certainly not Rosalie.

Upslope, Mother appears at the door of the cabin, stands look-

ing across the lawn. Her arms curve around her belly, holding it up like a great globe. She can't put on her shoes now or hook the laces without Rosalie's help.

Her face is in the sun, her eyes closed to better enjoy the warmth. She looks tired, but peaceful. She looks, just for the moment, like a young girl. "Someone is having a busy morning," she says, "swimming about in there." And then, opening her eyes, aging instantly back into her cares and worries, "Don't let Asia play so near the water." She vanishes back into the dark cabin.

As if Rosalie is not watching every move Asia makes.

As if Asia will do anything Rosalie asks! Asia is the youngest, if you don't count the swimmer in Mother's belly. Two years old, but only recently named and Rosalie still isn't used to thinking of her as Asia. Her parents had settled on Ayesha, or maybe Sidney, unable to choose between the two. Then suddenly, a letter from Father. "Let her be called Asia," he wrote, "because God first walked with man on that continent. With Frigga for a middle name since she was born on a Friday." Mother wasn't entirely pleased so they surreptitiously call her Asia Sidney now, and will until she's grown enough to bear the full weight of Frigga.

In point of fact, Asia was born on a Thursday.

Edwin, Rosalie's little brother, is four. Edwin is crying, which he does the way he does all things, quietly. He's been trying to collect pebbles and seed pods to be passengers in his boats, but Asia keeps taking them and throwing them into the spring.

Rosalie comes to kneel beside him, pushes up her sleeve with one hand, and reaches into the cold water with the other. She's distracted momentarily by the magic of her fingers elongating and refracting. Asia cannot throw well. Edwin's pebbles are easily rescued. She hands three back to him, wiping her cold hand on the hem of her skirt.