

LIBRIS

We know
books

'Brilliant . . . a study of young arrogance, a thriller, a comedy of campus manners, and an oblique Greek primer. It is a well written and compulsive read' *Evening Standard*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Tartt was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, and is a graduate of Bennington College. She is the author of the novels *The Secret History* and *The Little Friend*, which have been translated into thirty languages; and *The Goldfinch*.

The Secret History

DONNA TARTT



PENGUIN BOOKS

uniforms, the black crowds sprinkled over Mount Cataract like ants in a sugar bowl – without incurring a blink of suspicion. But walking through it all was one thing; walking away, unfortunately, has proved to be quite another, and though once I thought I had left that ravine forever on an April afternoon long ago, now I am not so sure. Now the searchers have departed, and life has grown quiet around me, I have come to realize that while for years I might have imagined myself to be somewhere else, in reality I have been there all the time: up at the top by the muddy wheel-ruts in the new grass, where the sky is dark over the shivering apple blossoms and the first chill of the snow that will fall that night is already in the air.

What are you doing up here? said Bunny, surprised, when he found the four of us waiting for him.

Why, looking for new ferns, said Henry.

And after we stood whispering in the underbrush – one last look at the body and a last look round, no dropped keys, lost glasses, everybody got everything? – and then started single file through the woods, I took one glance back through the saplings that leapt to close the path behind me. Though I remember the walk back and the first lonely flakes of snow that came drifting through the pines, remember piling gratefully into the car and starting down the road like a family on vacation, with Henry driving clenched-jawed through the potholes and the rest of us leaning over the seats and talking like children, though I remember only too well the long terrible night that lay ahead and the long terrible days and nights that followed, I have only to glance over my shoulder for all those years to drop away and I see it behind me again, the ravine, rising all green and black through the saplings, a picture that will never leave me.

I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.

Book I

Chapter 1

Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

A moi. L'histoire d'une de mes folies.

My name is Richard Papen. I am twenty-eight years old and I had never seen New England or Hampden College until I was nineteen. I am a Californian by birth and also, I have recently discovered, by nature. The last is something I admit only now, after the fact. Not that it matters.

I grew up in Plano, a small silicon village in the north. No sisters, no brothers. My father ran a gas station and my mother stayed at home until I got older and times got tighter and she went to work, answering phones in the office of one of the big chip factories outside San Jose.

Plano. The word conjures up drive-ins, tract homes, waves of heat rising from the blacktop. My years there created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. Which I suppose was a very great gift, in a way. On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers.

The dazzle of this fictive childhood – full of swimming pools and orange groves and dissolute, charming show-biz parents – has all but eclipsed the drab original. In fact, when I think about my real childhood I am unable to recall much about it at all except a sad jumble of objects: the sneakers I wore year-round; coloring books and comics from the supermarket; little of interest,

less of beauty. I was quiet, tall for my age, prone to freckles. I didn't have many friends but whether this was due to choice or circumstance I do not now know. I did well in school, it seems, but not exceptionally well; I liked to read – *Tom Swift*, the Tolkien books – but also to watch television, which I did plenty of, lying on the carpet of our empty living room in the long dull afternoons after school.

I honestly can't remember much else about those years except a certain mood that permeated most of them, a melancholy feeling that I associate with watching 'The Wonderful World of Disney' on Sunday nights. Sunday was a sad day – early to bed, school the next morning, I was constantly worried my homework was wrong – but as I watched the fireworks go off in the night sky, over the floodlit castles of Disneyland, I was consumed by a more general sense of dread, of imprisonment within the dreary round of school and home: circumstances which, to me at least, presented sound empirical argument for gloom. My father was mean, and our house ugly, and my mother didn't pay much attention to me; my clothes were cheap and my haircut too short and no one at school seemed to like me that much; and since all this had been true for as long as I could remember, I felt things would doubtless continue in this depressing vein as far as I could foresee. In short: I felt my existence was tainted, in some subtle but essential way.

I suppose it's not odd, then, that I have trouble reconciling my life to those of my friends, or at least to their lives as I perceive them to be. Charles and Camilla are orphans (how I longed to be an orphan when I was a child!) reared by grandmothers and great-aunts in a house in Virginia: a childhood I like to think about, with horses and rivers and sweet-gum trees. And Francis. His mother, when she had him, was only seventeen – a thin-blooded, capricious girl with red hair and a rich daddy, who ran off with the drummer for Vance Vane and his Musical Swains. She was home in three weeks, and the marriage was annulled in

six; and, as Francis is fond of saying, the grandparents brought them up like brother and sister, him and his mother, brought them up in such a magnanimous style that even the gossips were impressed – English nannies and private schools, summers in Switzerland, winters in France. Consider even bluff old Bunny, if you would. Not a childhood of reefer coats and dancing lessons, any more than mine was. But an American childhood. Son of a Clemson football star turned banker. Four brothers, no sisters, in a big noisy house in the suburbs, with sailboats and tennis rackets and golden retrievers; summers on Cape Cod, boarding schools near Boston and tailgate picnics during football season; an upbringing vitally present in Bunny in every respect, from the way he shook your hand to the way he told a joke.

I do not now nor did I ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a knowledge of Greek and the year of my life I spent in their company. And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too, though I realize that might sound odd in light of the story I am about to tell.

How to begin.

After high school I went to a small college in my home town (my parents were opposed, as it had been made very plain that I was expected to help my father run his business, one of the many reasons I was in such an agony to escape) and, during my two years there, I studied ancient Greek. This was due to no love for the language but because I was majoring in pre-med (money, you see, was the only way to improve my fortunes, doctors make a lot of money, *quod erat demonstrandum*) and my counselor had suggested I take a language to fulfill the humanities requirement; and, since the Greek classes happened to meet in the afternoon, I took Greek so I could sleep late on Mondays. It was an entirely random decision which, as you will see, turned out to be quite fateful.

I did well at Greek, excelled in it, and I even won an award from the Classics department my last year. It was my favorite

class because it was the only one held in a regular classroom – no jars of cow hearts, no smell of formaldehyde, no cages full of screaming monkeys. Initially I had thought with hard work I could overcome a fundamental squeamishness and distaste for my subject, that perhaps with even harder work I could simulate something like a talent for it. But this was not the case. As the months went by I remained uninterested, if not downright sickened, by my study of biology; my grades were poor; I was held in contempt by teacher and classmate alike. In what seemed even to me a doomed and Pyrrhic gesture, I switched to English literature without telling my parents. I felt that I was cutting my own throat by this, that I would certainly be very sorry, being still convinced that it was better to fail in a lucrative field than to thrive in one that my father (who knew nothing of either finance or academia) had assured me was most unprofitable; one which would inevitably result in my hanging around the house for the rest of my life asking him for money; money which, he assured me forcefully, he had no intention of giving me.

So I studied literature and liked it better. But I didn't like home any better. I don't think I can explain the despair my surroundings inspired in me. Though I now suspect, given the circumstances and my disposition, I would've been unhappy anywhere, in Biarritz or Caracas or the Isle of Capri, I was then convinced that my unhappiness was indigenous to that place. Perhaps a part of it was. While to a certain extent Milton is right – the mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell and so forth – it is nonetheless clear that Plano was modeled less on Paradise than that other, more dolorous city. In high school I developed a habit of wandering through shopping malls after school, swaying through the bright, chill mezzanines until I was so dazed with consumer goods and product codes, with promenades and escalators, with mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible: color without form, a babble of detached

molecules. Then I would walk like a zombie to the parking lot and drive to the baseball field, where I wouldn't even get out of the car, just sit with my hands on the steering wheel and stare at the Cyclone fence and the yellowed winter grass until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see.

Though I had a confused idea that my dissatisfaction was bohemian, vaguely Marxist in origin (when I was a teenager I made a fatuous show of socialism, mainly to irritate my father), I couldn't really begin to understand it; and I would have been angry if someone had suggested that it was due to a strong Puritan streak in my nature, which was in fact the case. Not long ago I found this passage in an old notebook, written when I was eighteen or so: "There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes. Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death – those monstrous upheavals of life that the Greeks call *miasma*, defilement – been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability and death death death."

This, I think, is pretty rough stuff. From the sound of it, had I stayed in California I might have ended up in a cult or at the very least practicing some weird dietary restriction. I remember reading about Pythagoras around this time, and finding some of his ideas curiously appealing – wearing white garments, for instance, or abstaining from foods which have a soul.

But instead I wound up on the East Coast.

I lit on Hampden by a trick of fate. One night, during a long Thanksgiving holiday of rainy weather, canned cranberries, ball games droning from the television, I went to my room after a fight with my parents (I cannot remember this particular fight, only that we always fought, about money and school) and was tearing through my closet trying to find my coat when out it flew: a brochure from Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont.

It was two years old, this brochure. In high school a lot of

colleges had sent me things because I did well on my SATs, though unfortunately not well enough to warrant much in the way of scholarships, and this one I had kept in my Geometry book throughout my senior year.

I don't know why it was in my closet. I suppose I'd saved it because it was so pretty. Senior year, I had spent dozens of hours studying the photographs as though if I stared at them long enough and longingly enough I would, by some sort of osmosis, be transported into their clear, pure silence. Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow.

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Established 1895. (This alone was a fact to cause wonder; nothing I knew of in Plano had been established much before 1962.) Student body, five hundred. Coed. Progressive. Specializing in the liberal arts. Highly selective. 'Hampden, in providing a well-rounded course of study in the Humanities, seeks not only to give students a rigorous background in the chosen field but insight into all the disciplines of Western art, civilization, and thought. In doing so, we hope to provide the individual not only with facts, but with the raw materials of wisdom.'

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Even the name had an austere Anglican cadence, to my ear at least, which yearned hopelessly for England and was dead to the sweet dark rhythms of the little mission towns. For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light – different from Plano, different from anything I had ever known – a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence.

My mother knocked on the door, said my name. I didn't answer. I tore out the information form in the back of the brochure and started to fill it in. *Name:* John Richard Papen.

Address: 4487 Mimosa Court; Plano, California. Would you like to receive information on Financial Aid? Yes. And I mailed it the following morning.

The months subsequent were an endless dreary battle of paperwork, full of stalemates, fought in trenches. My father refused to complete the financial aid papers; finally, in desperation, I stole the tax returns from the glove compartment of his Toyota and did them myself. More waiting. Then a note from the Dean of Admissions. An interview was required, and when could I fly to Vermont? I could not afford to fly to Vermont, and I wrote and told him so. Another wait, another letter. The college would reimburse me for my travel expenses if their scholarship offer was accepted. Meanwhile the financial aid packet had come in. My family's contribution was more than my father said he could afford and he would not pay it. This sort of guerrilla warfare dragged on for eight months. Even today I do not fully understand the chain of events that brought me to Hampden. Sympathetic professors wrote letters; exceptions of various sorts were made in my case. And less than a year after I'd sat down on the gold shag carpet of my little room in Plano and impulsively filled out the questionnaire, I was getting off the bus in Hampden with two suitcases and fifty dollars in my pocket.

I had never been east of Santa Fe, never north of Portland, and – when I stepped off the bus after a long anxious night that had begun somewhere in Illinois – it was six o'clock in the morning, and the sun was rising over mountains, and birches, and impossibly green meadows; and to me, dazed with night and no sleep and three days on the highway, it was like a country from a dream.

The dormitories weren't even dorms – or at any rate not like the dorms I knew, with cinderblock walls and depressing, yellowish light – but white clapboard houses with green shutters, set back from the Commons in groves of maple and ash. All the same it never occurred to me that my particular room, wherever

it might be, would be anything but ugly and disappointing and it was with something of a shock that I saw it for the first time – a white room with big north-facing windows, monkish and bare, with scarred oak floors and a ceiling slanted like a garret's. On my first night there, I sat on the bed during the twilight while the walls went slowly from gray to gold to black, listening to a soprano's voice climb dizzily up and down somewhere at the other end of the hall until at last the light was completely gone, and the faraway soprano spiraled on and on in the darkness like some angel of death, and I can't remember the air ever seeming as high and cold and rarefied as it was that night, or ever feeling farther away from the low-slung lines of dusty Plano.

Those first days before classes started I spent alone in my whitewashed room, in the bright meadows of Hampden. And I was happy in those first days as really I'd never been before, roaming like a sleepwalker, stunned and drunk with beauty. A group of red-cheeked girls playing soccer, ponytails flying, their shouts and laughter carrying faintly over the velvety, twilight field. Trees creaking with apples, fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground and the steady thrumming of wasps around them. Commons clock tower: ivied brick, white spire, spellbound in the hazy distance. The shock of first seeing a birch tree at night, rising up in the dark as cool and slim as a ghost. And the nights, bigger than imagining: black and gusty and enormous, disordered and wild with stars.

I was planning to sign up for Greek again, as it was the only language at which I was at all proficient. But when I told this to the academic counselor to whom I had been assigned – a French teacher named Georges Laforgue, with olive skin and a pinched, long-nostriled nose like a turtle's – he only smiled, and pressed the tips of his fingers together. 'I am afraid there may be a problem,' he said, in accented English.

'Why?'

'There is only one teacher of ancient Greek here and he is very particular about his students.'

'I've studied Greek for two years.'

'That probably will not make any difference. Besides, if you are going to major in English literature you will need a modern language. There is still space left in my Elementary French class and some room in German and Italian. The Spanish' – he consulted his list – 'the Spanish classes are for the most part filled but if you like I will have a word with Mr Delgado.'

'Maybe you could speak to the Greek teacher instead.'

'I don't know if it would do any good. He accepts only a limited number of students. A very limited number. Besides, in my opinion, he conducts the selection on a personal rather than academic basis.'

His voice bore a hint of sarcasm; also a suggestion that, if it was all the same to me, he would prefer not to continue this particular conversation.

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

Actually, I thought I did know. Laforgue's answer surprised me. 'It's nothing like that,' he said. 'Of course he is a distinguished scholar. He happens to be quite charming as well. But he has what I think are some very odd ideas about teaching. He and his students have virtually no contact with the rest of the division. I don't know why they continue to list his courses in the general catalogue – it's misleading, every year there is confusion about it – because, practically speaking, the classes are closed. I am told that to study with him one must have read the right things, hold similar views. It has happened repeatedly that he has turned away students such as yourself who have done prior work in classics. With me' – he lifted an eyebrow – 'if the student wants to learn what I teach and is qualified, I allow him in my classes. Very democratic, no? It is the best way.'

'Does that sort of thing happen often here?'