

My mother, Betty, was born February 12, 1954, in Ozark, Arkansas. She was born to a woman as telling as a dream and to a man who was a Cherokee, a moonshiner, and a mythmaker. One of twelve children, my mother came of age in the foothills of the Ohio Appalachians. This book is part dance, part song, and part shine of the moon. Above everything else, this story is, always and forever, the Little Indian's.

I love you, Mom. This book is for you and all your ancient magic.



Prologue



I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.

—PHILIPPIANS 1:3

I'm still a child, only as tall as my father's shotgun. Dad's asking me to bring it with me as I go out to where he is resting on the hood of the car. He lifts the shotgun out of my hands and lays it across his lap. When I sit next to him, I can feel the summer heat coming off his skin like he's just another tin roof on a hot day.

I don't mind that the tomato seeds, left over from his afternoon lunch in the garden, drop off his chin and land on my arm. The tiny seeds cling to my flesh and rise above it like Braille on a page.

"My heart is made of glass," he says as he starts to roll a cigarette. "My heart is made of glass and if I ever lose you, Betty, my heart will break into more hurt than eternity would have time to heal."

I reach into his pouch of tobacco and rub the dry leaves, feeling each as if it were its own animal, alive and moving from fingertip to fingertip.

"What's a glass heart like, Dad?" I ask because I feel like the answer will be greater than I can ever imagine.

"A hollow piece of glass shaped like a heart." His voice seems to soar above the hills around us.

"Is the glass red, Dad?"

"It's as red as the dress you're wearin' right now, Betty."

"But how is a piece of glass inside you?"

B E T T Y

"It's hangin' in there from a sweet little string. Within the glass is the bird God caught all the way up in heaven."

"Why'd He put a bird in there?" I ask.

"So a little piece of heaven would always be in our hearts. Safest place for a piece of heaven, I reckon."

"What type of bird, Dad?"

"Well, Little Indian," he says, striking the match against the sandpaper ribbon on his wide-brimmed hat to light his cigarette, "I think she'd be a glitterin' bird and her whole body would shine like little fires of light, the way Dorothy's ruby slippers did in that movie."

"What movie?"

"*The Wizard of Oz*. Remember Toto?" He barks, ending with a long howl.

"The little black dog?"

"That's right." He lays my head against his chest. "Do you hear that? *Thumpity, thump*. Do you know what that sound is? *Thumpity, thump, thump*."

"It's the beatin' of your heart."

"It's the noise of the little bird flappin' her wings."

"The bird?" I hold my hand over my own chest. "What happens to the bird, Dad?"

"You mean when we die?" He squints at me as if my face has become the sun.

"Yes, when we die, Dad."

"Well, the glass heart opens, like a locket, and the bird flies out to lead us to heaven so we don't get lost. It's very easy to get lost on the way to a place you've never been before."

I keep my ear against his chest, listening to the steady beating.

"Dad?" I ask. "Does everyone have glass hearts?"

"Nope." He takes a drag on his cigarette. "Just me and you, Little Indian. Just me and you."

He tells me to lean back and cover my ears. With the cigarette hanging in the corner of his mouth, he raises the shotgun and fires.

Part One



I Am

1909-1961

I



There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

—MATTHEW 8:12

A girl comes of age against the knife. She must learn to bear its blade. To be cut. To bleed. To scar over and still, somehow, be beautiful and with good enough knees to take the sponge to the kitchen floor every Saturday. You're either lost or you're found. These truths can argue one another for an infinity. And what is infinity but a tangled swear. A cracked circle. A space of fuchsia sky. If we bring it down to earth, infinity is a series of rolling hills. A countryside in Ohio where all the tall-grass snakes know how angels lose their wings.

I remember the fierce love and devotion as much as I remember the violence. When I close my eyes, I see the lime-green clover that grew around our barn in the spring while wild dogs drove away our patience and our tenderness. Times will never be the same, so we give time another beautiful name until it's easier to carry as we go on remembering where it is we've come from. Where I came from was a family of eight children. More than one of us would die in the prizewinning years of youth. Some blamed God for taking too few. Others accused the devil of leaving too many. Between God and devil, our family tree grew with rotten roots, broken branches, and fungus on the leaves.

"It grows bitter and gnarled," Dad would say of the large pin oak in our backyard, "because it doubts the light."

B E T T Y

My father was born April 7, 1909, in a Kentucky sorghum field downwind from a slaughterhouse. Because of this, the air smelled of blood and death. I imagine they all looked at him as if he were something born of these two things.

“My boy will need to be dunked in the river,” his mother said over his tiny reaching fingers.

My father descended from the Cherokee through both his maternal and paternal lines. When I was a child, I thought to be Cherokee meant to be tethered to the moon, like a sliver of light unraveling from it.

“Tsa-la-gi. A-nv-da-di-s-di.”

Following our bloodline back through the generations, we belonged to the Aniwoadi clan. Members of this Cherokee clan were responsible for making a special red paint used in sacred ceremonies and at wartime.

“Our clan was the clan of creators,” my father would say to me. “Teachers, too. They spoke of life and death, of the sacred fire that lights it all. Our people are keepers of this knowledge. Remember this, Betty. Remember you, too, know how to make red paint and speak of sacred fires.”

The Aniwoadi clan was also known for its healers and medicine men, those who were said to have “painted” their medicine on the sick or ill. My father, in his own way, would continue this.

“Your daddy’s a medicine man,” they would tease me in school while flapping feathers in my face. They thought it would make me love my father less, but I only loved him more.

“Tsa-la-gi. A-nv-da-di-s-di.”

Throughout my childhood, Dad spoke of our ancestors, making sure we did not forget them.

“Our land used to be this much,” he would say, holding his hands out to either side of him as he spoke of the eastern territory that had once belonged to the Cherokee before they were forcibly removed to Oklahoma.

Our Cherokee ancestors who managed to avoid going to this alien land called Oklahoma did so by hiding in the wilderness. But they were

told if they wanted to stay, they would have to embrace the way of the white settlers. The higher powers had made it the law of the land that the Cherokee must be “civilized” or be taken from their home. They had little choice but to speak the English of the white man and convert to his religion. They were told Jesus had died for them, too.

Before Christianity, the Cherokee celebrated being a matriarchal and matrilineal society. Women were the head of the household, but Christianity positioned men at the top. In this conversion, Cherokee women were taken from the land they had once owned and worked. They were given aprons and placed inside the kitchen, where they were told they belonged. The Cherokee men, who had always been hunters, were told to now farm the land. The traditional Cherokee way of life was uprooted, along with the gender roles that had allowed women to have a presence equal to that of men.

Between the spinning wheel and the plow, there were Cherokee who fought to preserve their culture, but traditions became diluted. My father did his best to keep the water out of our blood by honoring the wisdom that had been passed down to him, like how to make a spoon from a squash leaf and stem or how to know when it’s time to plant corn.

“When the wild gooseberry bush has exploded in leaf,” he would say, “because the wild gooseberry is the first to open her eyes from her winter nap and say, ‘The earth is warm enough.’ Nature speaks to us. We just have to remember how to listen.”

My father’s soul was from another time. A time when the land was peopled by tribes who heard the earth and respected it. His own respect filled up inside him until he was the greatest man I ever knew. I loved him for this and more, like how he planted violets but never remembered they were purple. I loved him for getting his hair cut like a lopsided hat every Fourth of July and I loved him for holding a light on our coughs when we were sick.

“Can you see the germs?” he’d ask, shining the light beam on the air between us. “They’re all playin’ violin. Your cough is their song.”

Through his stories, I waltzed across the sun without burning my feet.

B E T T Y

My father was meant to be a father. And, despite the troubles between him and my mother, he was meant to be a husband, too. My parents met in a cemetery in Joyjug, Ohio, on a day given to the clouds. Dad wasn't wearing a shirt. It was in his hand and fashioned into a sack. Inside it were mushrooms that looked like pieces of a smoker's lung. As he scanned the area for more, he saw her. She was sitting on a quilt. You could tell the quilt had been handmade by a girl still learning. The stitches spaced unevenly. The crookedly cut sheets of fabric in two different shades of cream. In the center of the quilt was a large appliquéd tree made out of scraps of mismatched calico. She was seated on this tree and was eating an apple while facing the headstone of an unknown Civil War soldier.

What a peculiar girl, Dad thought, to be sitting in a cemetery chomping an apple with all that death beneath her.

"Excuse me, miss. You seen any of these around?" He held his shirt sack open. She briefly looked in at the mushrooms before glancing up at his face and shaking her head.

"You ever had one of these mushrooms, miss?" he asked. "Fried with butter? Mighty delicious."

She said nothing, so he went on to say she was a girl of many words.

"I bet you're the guardian of a lost language," he said. "That soldier one of your people?" He motioned toward the grave.

"How can he be?" she finally spoke. "No one even knows who he is." She flicked her hand in the direction of the headstone. "THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER. You can read, can't you?" She asked harsher than she meant to.

For a moment, he thought he might leave her be, but part of him existed there better with her so he sat on the grass outside the edge of the quilt. Leaning back, he looked up at the sky and remarked how it looked like rain. He then picked up one of the mushrooms and twirled it between his long fingers.

"They're ugly things, ain't they?" She frowned.

"They're beautiful," Dad said, insulted on the mushroom's be-

half. "They call 'em the trumpet of death. It's why they grow so well in graveyards."

He held the small end of the mushroom to his mouth and made the noise of a trumpet.

"Toot-toot-ta-doo." He smiled. "They're more than beautiful. They're a good dose of nature's medicine. Good for all sorts of ailments. Maybe one day I'll fry ya some. Maybe I'll even grow ya an acre all your own."

"I don't want no mushrooms." She made a face. "I'd like lemons, though. A whole grove of 'em."

"You like lemons, do ya?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I like how yellow they are," she said. "How can you not be happy with all that yellow?"

She met his eyes but quickly looked away. For her sake, he turned to the mushroom in his hand. As he studied it, rubbing his fingers over its crinkled flesh, she slowly moved her eyes back to him. He was a tall, sharp-boned man who reminded her of the walking-stick insects that would climb the pane of her bedroom window every summer. His muddy pants were too big for him and were held up by a scuffed leather belt cinched around his thin waist.

He had no chest hair, which surprised her. She was used to seeing the curly coarse hairs on her father's barrel chest and the way they felt like tiny wires in her hands when she grabbed hold of them. She forced the image of her father out of her mind and continued to consider the man in front of her. His thick, black hair was cut short on the sides but left long on the top, where it flopped up as high as her hand, then down in waves.

Pappy would not approve, she said to herself.

She knew the man must have come from a household run by women. It was the way he had sat outside the quilt, rather than sitting on it. She could see both his mother and his grandmother. He held them there in his brown eyes. She trusted this about him. That he should hold women so close.

B E T T Y

Something she could not ignore was his skin color.

Not negro dark, she thought in those 1930s, but not white either, and that is just as dangerous.

She lowered her stare to his bare feet. They were the feet of a man who traveled the woods and washed in the river.

“He’s probably in love with a tree,” she said under her breath.

When she raised her eyes, she found him staring at her. She turned back to her apple, which had only a few bites left.

“Excuse the dirt, miss,” he said, dusting it from his pants. “But when you’re the gravedigger, you can’t help but get a little dirty. It ain’t bad workin’ here. Though it’s bad for the folks I’m diggin’ the holes for.”

He saw her begin to smile from behind her apple, but she caught herself. He wondered what she thought of him. He was twenty-nine. She was eighteen. Her shoulder-length hair hung bagged in a white crocheted snood. The color and texture of her hair reminded him of pale wisps of corn silk in the light of the sun. Her skin was peachy against her mint-green dress while her small waist was girded tightly by a dingy white belt, matching her soiled crocheted wrist gloves. She was a girl of little means up close, but from afar she could look like she was more.

That’s what the gloves are for, he thought. To pretend she’s a lady and not another muted beauty expected to rust her way out of creation like some broken-down tractor in a field.

The apple was nearly at its core, but a patch of red skin was still visible around its stem. When she took a bite, the juice escaped out of the corners of her mouth. As he watched the wind blow the loose strays of hair above her small ears, he felt a gentle rain falling on his bare shoulders. He was surprised he could still feel something so soft and light. Hardness had not yet gotten the better of him. He looked up at the darkening sky.

“You don’t get clouds like that unless they aim to prove they got a storm in ’em,” he said. “We can either sit here and become part of the flood or seek to save ourselves best we can.”

She stood and dropped what was left of the apple to the ground.

He noticed her feet. She was barefoot. If she and he were the same in anything, it was the way they walked the earth. He was about to say something he thought would interest her, but the rain fell harder. It beat on the two of them while the sky brightened with lightning. The storm was laying claim to my parents in ways not even they could have understood.

“We’ll get some cover under that shagbark hickory,” Dad said.

Keeping a grip on his shirt of mushrooms, Dad grabbed the quilt up off the ground to hold over her head. She allowed him to lead her to the tree.

“It won’t last long,” he said as they found relief beneath the dense canopy of the hickory’s branches.

He shook the raindrops off the quilt before touching the shaggy bark of the tree.

“The Cherokee would boil this,” he told her. “Sometimes for ailments, but sometimes for food. It’s sweet, this bark. If you bubble it in milk, you’ve got a drink that’ll—”

Before he could finish, she laid her lips upon his in the softest kiss he had ever known. She reached up under her dress to pull down her fraying panties. He stared at her and wondered, but he was a man, after all, so he set the mushrooms off to the side. When he spread the quilt on the ground, he did so slowly in case she wanted to change her mind.

Once she lay on the quilt, he lay down, too. In the fields around them, the ears of corn shot up like rocket ships while they smelled of each other and did not fall in love. But you don’t need love for something to grow. In a few months’ time, she could no longer hide what was developing inside her. Her father—the man I would come to call Grandpappy Lark—noticed her growing belly and struck her several times in the face until her nose bled and she saw small stars in front of her eyes. She cried out for her mother, who stood by but did nothing more than watch.

“You’re a whore,” her father told her as he removed his heavy leather belt from his pants. “What grows in your belly is sin. I should let the devil eat you alive. This is for your own good. Remember that.”

B E T T Y

He hit her across her midsection with the belt's metal buckle. She dropped to the floor, doing her best to cradle her stomach.

"Don't die, don't die, don't die," she whispered to the child inside her as her father beat her until he was satisfied.

"God's work has been done here," he said, slipping his belt back into the loops of his pants. "Now, what's for dinner?"

Later that night, she laid her hand upon her belly and felt certain that life continued. The next morning, she walked to find her mushroom man. It was the summer of 1938 and every expecting woman was expected to have a husband.

When she got to the cemetery, she scanned the open expanse before finding a man digging a grave with his back to her.

There he is, she thought to herself as she walked in between the rows of stones.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The man turned and was not him.

"I'm sorry." She looked away. "I thought you were someone I'm lookin' for. He also works here diggin' graves."

"What's his name?" the man asked, not stopping his work.

"I don't know, but I can tell you he's tall and thin. Black hair, dark brown eyes—"

"Dark skin, too?" He stabbed the shovel into the dirt. "I know who you're talkin' 'bout. Last I heard he got hired at the clothespin factory out on the edge of town."

She walked to the clothespin factory, where she stood outside the gates. At noon, when the horn blew, the men emerged from the building with their lunches. She strained to find him in the crowd of blue shirts and even darker blue pants. For a moment, she thought he was not there. Then she saw him. Unlike the other men, he had no lunch tin. He rolled and lit a cigarette, feeding on its smoke as his eyes moved across the treetops.

What is he looking at? she wondered as she, too, looked at the leaves blowing in the wind.

When she lowered her eyes, he was staring at her.

Is that the girl? he asked himself. He couldn't be sure. It had been

some time since. Besides that, there were now bruises disguising her features. Her swollen eyes certainly didn't help. Then he saw the way her hair blew like corn silk over her ears and he knew she was the girl from the rain. The girl who had quickly put her panties on after.

He noticed how she rested her hand ever so gently on her stomach, which was not as flat as he had remembered. He exhaled enough smoke to hide his face as he walked back into the factory. The smell of wood, the grating sound of the saw, the fine dust filling the air like constellations of stars all did nothing but take him back to that moment in the cemetery. He thought of the rain and how it had dropped in between the tree branches and splashed against her pupils, the water puddling at the sides of her eyes to run down her cheeks.

When the factory's final horn blew hours later, he walked outside ahead of the other men. He found she had not left. She was sitting on the ground outside the factory's iron gates. She looked weary, as if she'd just marched a million funerals, the sole pallbearer at every one. She stood as he approached her.

"I have to speak with you." Her voice shook as she dusted dirt off the back of her skirt.

"Mine?" He motioned toward her stomach before starting to roll a fresh cigarette.

"Yes." She made sure to answer quickly.

He chased a bird across the sky with his eyes, then turned back to her and said, "It ain't the worst I've done in my life. You got a match by any chance?"

"I don't smoke."

He finished rolling the cigarette only to slide it behind his ear.

"I got work until five every day," he said. "But I get an hour for lunch. We'll go over to the courthouse. It's the best I can do. That okay?"

"Yes." She dug her bare toe into the ground between them.

He began to silently count her bruises.

"Who gave 'em to ya?" he asked.

"My pappy."

B E T T Y

“How long the devil been livin’ in your daddy’s heart?”

“All my life,” she said.

“Well, a man who beats a woman leaves me with little more than anger. The type of anger I can taste in the back of my throat. And boy is it a bad taste.” He spit on the ground. “Pardon my action, but I can’t keep that sort of thing to myself. My momma always said a man who strikes a woman has a crooked walk and a man with a crooked walk leaves behind a crooked footprint. You know what lives in a crooked footprint? Ain’t nothin’ but things that set fire to the eyes of God. Now I ain’t a man of many talents, but I know how to spend my anger. Seein’ how he is your daddy, I won’t kill him if you don’t want me to. I’ll yield to your wishes, sure enough. But you’re soon to be my wife and I wouldn’t be worth a damn as a husband if I didn’t raise my hand to the man who raised his to you.”

“What would you do to him if you didn’t kill him?” she asked, her swollen eyes brightening.

“You know your soul is right here?” He gently touched the bridge of her nose. It felt more intimate than anything they’d done before.

“That really where my soul is?” she asked. “In my nose?”

“Mmm-hmm. It’s where everyone’s soul is. When God told us to inhale our soul through our nostrils, it stayed right where it first entered.”

“So what would you do?” she asked again, more impatient than before.

“I’d cut his soul out,” he said. “That’s worse than death in my opinion. Without a soul, who are you?”

She smiled. “What’s your name, sir?”

“My name?” He dropped his hand from her face. “Landon Carpenter.”

“I’m Alka Lark.”

“Pleased to know you, Alka.”

“Pleased to know you, Landon.”

They each said the other’s name once more beneath their breath as they walked to his old truck.

“I ain’t used to takin’ ladies on drives,” he said, moving the dandelion roots off the seat for her to have a place to sit. “That’s thyme you smell, by the way.”

Tiny rocks embedded in the backs of her thighs when she sat. He closed the door after her. She carefully watched him walk around to get in on the driver’s side. When he started the engine, she felt certain there was no going back.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?” he asked, seeing her eyes fill with the moment.

“It’s just that . . .” She looked at her belly. “I’m not sure what kind of momma I’ll be or what kind of baby I’ll be gettin’.”

“What sort of baby?” He chuckled. “Well, I’m not a very smart man, but I do know it’ll be a boy or a girl. And they’ll call me daddy and you momma. That’s the sort of baby it’ll be.”

He pulled the truck out onto the road.

“There are poorer things to be called than momma, I reckon,” she said before raising up in her seat in order to see over the herbs drying on the dash and give him directions to what had been her home.

When they arrived at the small white house, Grandpappy Lark was on the porch swing. Mamaw Lark was serving him a glass of milk. Mom walked so quickly past them both, she was nearly running, ignoring their questions of who the man with her was and why he thought he could just walk up on their porch.

Mom could hear the anger in Grandpappy Lark’s voice growing as she raced into her bedroom. She started throwing what clothing she could grab on top of the quilt on her bed.

“What am I forgettin’?” She looked around the room.

She walked to the open window, but instead of focusing her eyes outside on her father—who was on his back in the yard, repeatedly being punched in the face by Dad—she looked at the short cotton curtains framing the window. The curtains were yellow and had little white flowers printed on them. She wondered if she needed such prettiness to dress up the place she was going, wherever that might be.

“Yes,” she answered herself.

She yanked the curtains until the rod broke. She listened to her father scream outside as she removed the curtains and tossed them to the pile of clothes.

"That should do it," she said, pulling the edges of the quilt together and slinging it like a bag over her shoulder. On her way out of her room, she made sure to grab her pair of cameo earrings from off the dresser.

"I wouldn't forget you," she said to the girl etched into each earring just before she put them on.

Feeling as if the earrings meant there was more than one of *her*, she stepped out into the yard, less afraid. She walked past Mamaw Lark, who was still screaming. By that time, Dad had Grandpappy Lark by the hair and was pressing and twisting his face into the ground. When he let Grandpappy Lark up to breathe, Mom saw that her father had three teeth less than he did when the day had started.

"Only one thing left to do," Dad said to Mom as he got his pocket-knife out.

He put the wiggling Grandpappy Lark in a chokehold, then laid the blade against his nose.

"No." Mom held up her hand.

Dad looked at her, then back down at the knife.

"Sorry, Alka," he said. "But I told ya I was gonna cut his soul out, and that's what I'm gonna do."

Dad didn't hesitate pressing the blade into Grandpappy Lark's skin, causing a stream of blood to emerge alongside the metal. Grandpappy Lark cried out in pain as Dad cut the blade in deeper. More blood gushed and ran down Grandpappy Lark's cheek. Mamaw Lark disappeared up onto the porch, where she hid whimpering behind a post.

"You've done enough," Mom tried to tell Dad.

"Still ain't got the soul out of him just yet," Dad said, slicing the blade against the bone deeper until a flap of Grandpappy Lark's skin peeled up.

Dad removed the knife so he could look into the cut he'd made.

"Hot jumpin' coal," Dad told Grandpappy Lark, "you ain't got no soul. There ain't nothin' of God in ya. You're already hollowed out and damned, old man."

Having no fight left in him, Grandpappy Lark let his cheek rest on the dirt as Dad stood. He took the quilt bag off Mom's shoulder as he told her, "We best leave before you start to feel sorry for the old bastard."

"You don't have to worry about that."

Removing half of a chocolate bar from out of her dress pocket, she walked to her father. He rolled over onto his back and stared up at her. She laid the chocolate bar half on his chest.

Only when she heard the squeak of Dad's truck door opening behind her did she spit on her father and leave.

Mom thought the ride would be silent, but Dad asked her if she minded the smell of gas. At the time, he was renting a small room off the back of a filling station. The room had one window, upon which Mom hung her curtains. They laid the quilt on the bed, uniting hers with his old one beneath.

"I'll try to be a good husband," he told her. "A good man."

"That would be nice," she said, rubbing her stomach. "That would be awfully nice."

When I think of my family now, I think of a big ol' sorghum field, like the one my father was born in. Dry brown dirt, wet green leaves. A mad sweetness there in the hard canes. That's my family. Milk and honey and all that old-time bullshit.