

FIRE

EXIT

A NOVEL

"Utterly
consuming."
—Tommy Orange

MORGAN

TALTY

Award-winning author of *Night of the Living Rez*

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TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

For our children

And their children, and their children, and their children

FIRE EXIT

1

I wanted the girl to know the truth. I wanted her to know who I was—who I really was—instead of a white man who had lived across from her all her life and watched her grow up from this side of the river.

It was late spring. I sat outside drinking coffee and not smoking because my lighter had run out of gas. Fog rolled off the water that divided the Penobscot Nation from the rest of the state of Maine. I was waiting, as I usually did. Soon, across the river and on the reservation, my girl—a woman by that point—came out of the house and got in her car to go to work. I didn't know how many times I'd been through this same routine, but that morning, something took hold of me. Something was different this time.

She started her car and backed out of the driveway, and then, as usual, she was out of sight. I got up and drank the rest of my coffee and thought about calling Louise, my mother, but decided she was probably sleeping, so I went inside to make breakfast, not because I was hungry but because I needed something to do so I could think about what had come over me. Maybe the change had come about because I'd stopped working in the woods so much and had more time to think, but the fact was that I'd gone along for too long with Mary's plan to lie and say that the girl was another man's, an enrolled Native man's, so that she, our daughter, could be on the census—Mary's Penobscot blood plus Roger's—giving Elizabeth exactly

what she needed to be enrolled. But that morning I wanted our daughter to know the truth. I was tired of holding that secret.

I was going to make eggs and some seasoned hash and think about all this, but when I cut up the washed potato, I nicked the tip of my thumb real good with the knife and got blood all over my hand and said forget it. I went to the couch and sat down, and I wrapped a paper towel around my thumb and watched the blood seep through and then there was no denying what I wanted. I did want the truth to be known. The blood that came out of me was blood that ran through her veins. It's strange: all blood looks the same, yet it's different, we're told, in so many various ways and for so many various reasons. But one thing is for certain, I thought: you are who you are, even if you don't know it.

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I didn't know much about her, except what her mother used to tell me—which was years ago now, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four—when she'd come to check up on me, to give me a little news about her and to see if I was drinking. I was, but told her I wasn't, that it had been four days, eight days, twelve days. But I'll get to that, the lying—mine and hers.

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Her name is Elizabeth Eunice Francis, and her maternal grandparents were Eunice and Philip. She was born in January 1991. I'm afraid to say I don't know the exact date, but I think it was the fifteenth, sixteenth, or seventeenth. Those were the days her house was empty and I waited anxiously across the river for her to be brought home.

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She knew my house. She'd seen it, both from over there at Roger and Mary's—her parents—and once, when she was young, on my road with her mother. But she'd never been inside, and there was no reason to believe her mother had told her what it looked like. My father, Fredrick, and I built the

house in 1983 (thirty-five years goes by fast, faster than the Penobscot River in spring with all that water and ice). I don't know if I can call it a house—it's only five hundred square feet—but this place, while small on the outside, feels big on the inside: there's the living room and kitchen, which are connected and form one room, and then there's a small hallway, just wide enough an entry to turn around in and go into the bathroom or bedroom. The doors to those rooms open inward, but if you open the door to the hallway closet too wide it will catch the lightbulb hanging above that space. Over the years it filled with boxes whose contents I'd forgotten and the gun—a pump .22 Fredrick gave me when I was a boy.

Fredrick and I built the small house three years after the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act was passed. Fredrick was strongly against the act and spent a great deal of time with the tribal council trying to persuade them to go after a better deal as well as a great amount of time laying out his frustrations for my mother and me during dinner. The act, when passed by Congress, had restored to the tribe its inherent sovereignty, so they could make and pass laws. While the white folks who had owned land prior to the act could remain, as well as those who had married in, one of the first laws the tribe passed concerned non-Natives: anyone who wasn't Native at all had no right to live on the reservation. And since Fredrick was my stepfather, I wasn't Native, and so I couldn't remain on the reservation when I came of age. My mother, a non-Native, could stay, of course, since she had married in.

Around that time Fredrick's father, Joseph, was dying, and the bills were adding up—and what little money I was making working in the woods wouldn't be enough for me to buy a place of my own off the reservation. When the time came to pay for his father's funeral—Joseph died, not peacefully, in the summer of 1982—Fredrick sold his father's camp and land, which got a lot of money. The place was densely forested and far from any town, and bear trappers stay out there now and take people out to hunt. Fredrick still owned his land, which was not very far from his father's, and after settling the medical bills he used the rest of the money to pay for my land and the building supplies. Since the settlement gave the tribe some land outside the reservation or the option to buy some at a low cost, Fredrick was able to buy from the tribe a lot cheaper than the state would have sold it. It was purely coincidental that the land we bought was across

the river from Roger's house. I had no idea how important that place would be to me, or the role it would play in my being able to see her.

Fredrick and I spent all summer building the house. And it was a hot summer. My boss at the woodyard let me borrow the buncher—and so we were able to clear the land very quickly, just enough for a road and a yard. We laid the cement and put up all the walls with a good-quality chipboard, and we stuffed the walls with insulation, which we stapled, and we laid all the floors with a cheap linoleum, except in the bedroom, which is carpeted.

It took over four months to build the place. We measured and cut and swore and sweated and got dust and flakes of wood in our eyes, and we built each day after work and even more so on the weekends until it was finished. Louise, my mother, kept us fed during that time, when she was well enough, which was not most of the time. She suffered terrible bouts of depression, which she always would. It was three and a half decades since we'd built the house and I had yet to put trim up or even hang a picture. Who did I have to frame? I'd stopped saying I'd get to it.

As soon as it was built, Fredrick signed the land over to me, and for a number of years until he died, I gave him as much money as I could spare to help pay for what he'd put into this place, what he had given me. I insisted each and every time, but he always tried not to take the money, always said this is what fathers are supposed to do.

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We met once when she was three. For a few years after she was born, her mother used to visit me. It was always the same routine: park way down the dirt road and walk through the woods to the back of my house and crawl in through the window. She used to give me news about our child, the only one Mary would ever have, but sometimes she just showed up and gave me nothing but her company for an hour or so. Once she was inside, she would visit like a neighbor would, and we'd have coffee at my kitchen table. We'd smoke a few cigarettes and she'd ask after my mother and after my work and after my drinking and would tell me I should do something to the place, like get some decorations. "At least get a painting or something," she'd say.

It was during a late spring Saturday when Mary asked, "Do you think it would be a good idea if you met her?" She drank her coffee and smoked,

lounging, taking her time because Roger was not home; he had taken Elizabeth ice fishing. I don't know who it was Mary felt bad for: Elizabeth or me. Maybe both of us?

"Of course I want to meet her," I said.

"But is it a good idea?" She held her hands together on the table.

"I don't know," I said.

"Neither do I. Get me a coin. A quarter, dime, whatever."

I got her a penny.

"Heads you meet her, tails we forget I asked."

The coin landed on tails.

"Two out of three?" I said.

The next one landed on heads. And so too did the next one.

And that was it. Mary left through the window and every so often a branch would snap and echo in the woods. A car door slammed shut and the engine revved and faded until everything but my breathing quieted.

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The week after Mary's visit, I went to the grocery store. I bought two Lunchables. I didn't know which she liked, or even if she liked them at all or if Mary ever bought them for her. I got one with crackers and squares of ham and cheese and another with chips made for tiny fingers and nacho cheese and salsa. I bought a two-liter of Sprite and a big bottle of apple juice and a small tub of red powdered Kool-Aid. As I went to check out, I remembered Mary. I went back to the deli and got slices of ham and roast beef and turkey and American cheese and a loaf of white bread. In the produce section, on my way back to the checkout, I grabbed a tomato and a head of lettuce that looked like it was dying.

I left the grocery store and drove up to the strip mall across the way from the on-ramp to I-95. I smoked a cigarette before I went into the dollar store. They had two aisles of toys, and a lot of stuff was for the summer, plastic buckets and shovels for sand and crinkly bags stocked with water balloons and mesh bags bulging with colored blocks for building. The bottom shelves were filled with stuffed animals, and I crouched down and pawed through them, holding and turning them over in my hands, petting

them for their softness, squeezing them to see if any made noise. Buried deep in one metal bin was an elephant, upside down. I squeezed its soft center and out came the most realistic elephant trumpet I'd heard, and I started laughing, this slow, low laugh that took me over, and I kept squeezing and squeezing the elephant and laughing and laughing and shaking until my face was wet, until the noise coming out of me was so unclear that a worker, a man in a green vest whose name was written in unreadable cursive on the sewed-on name tag, stood over me and asked if I was all right.

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On the day Mary decided she'd bring our child by, I waited all morning outside, sipping coffee and smoking. I watched their house across the river. Roger had left about seven, and Mary's car remained. It must have been about eleven or twelve when I saw them come out of the house. Mary helped her into the car. Then she got in, started it, and backed out.

About halfway down my dirt road, I waited. But Mary didn't show up. I went back to the house and saw across the river that Mary had returned, her car parked and nobody in it. I sat again, waiting and waiting and waiting. Finally, she came out of the house again with our child. It was about two in the afternoon. Again her car started, backed up, and disappeared from view.

I went back to that same spot on the dirt road. Cars drove by at the end, and each vroom made me more and more nervous. Then came a car that slowed, a green Elantra that eventually became Elizabeth's, and it turned toward me. I started walking back to the house a bit. I had this feeling I had to move. But then I turned and watched Mary park her car where she always did.

Did she remember this day? Did she remember it at all? Or was she too young, as Mary hoped, to remember? Did she know this history—this story—her body held secret from her?

She was here, on this road.

Mary took her from the back seat, and her feet touched the dirt. Mary said something and pointed down the road. She started to run-wobble in my direction, but Mary chased after and held her by the hand. She pulled her back, told her to wait. Mary was getting something from the back seat.

Elizabeth waited, holding back an eagerness in herself to get to me, to get to the end of this road.

And when Mary started for me, not through the woods and through my window but directly for me, she followed. But then she saw something and stopped moving. She grabbed her mother's leg. No amount of ushering her along could get her to move from that spot. I realized, right then, that she hadn't seen me, but now she had, and once she did, the sight of this man down the dirt road frightened her.

Mary picked her up and carried her down the road, with her face buried in Mary's hair and neck, and right as she got close she started to scream, started to yell so loud it echoed, the noise carrying every which way. Mary walked her back to the car, stopped, put her down, and waved me over.

She didn't look at me and held Mary's leg. I couldn't get over how full her face was, her cheeks more precious than air.

"She's just shy," Mary said. We leaned on the hood of the car and watched.

"Is she hungry? I bought her lunch. And you too, if you want."

"We're fine," Mary said. "What did you buy?"

I told her.

"She doesn't like the ham. She likes the cheese and crackers, but that's it. She's never tried any of the others."

We were quiet. Some birds chirped and bounced from branches. Elizabeth kicked at the hard dirt and waved a long piece of grass. Then she smelled it.

"Keep that away from your mouth," Mary said. "Come over here and say hello."

I thought it was funny that she didn't listen, that she stayed right where she was, sniffing that piece of grass.

"Hey," Mary said. "Doosis. I'm talking to you."

I turned to face her by the brush. "You want to see something?" I asked.

She didn't look at me and kept on swinging the grass.

"I'll be right back," I said to Mary, and I walked down the dirt road to the house and inside I got the elephant. I held it behind my back as I returned.

“You want to see something?” I repeated.

She looked at her mother, who looked at what I held behind my back.

“You didn’t need to,” Mary whispered.

“Well I did,” I said.

Mary looked at her. “Wait until you see this,” she said. “You’ll like it.”

The long piece of grass fell to the ground. She lifted her little hand and extended her even littler finger. She pointed, and her nails—on that one hand, anyway—were painted pink. The gesture, the first time recognizing me, how could I forget it? And to have it followed by her voice, the first intelligible words I heard her speak, so near, the only time I’ve regretted the wind, wished it away, that slight breeze that carried her breath away from me.

How terribly did I want to know her.

“What is it?” she said. She spat out her hair that was in her mouth. She reached for it, the animal I’d forgotten I held behind my back. I held it out for her.

“What do you say?” Mary said.

“Wikawət.” Please.

Together, we held the elephant between us. She didn’t try to take it. She simply touched its gray soft ears and long trunk, squeezed its legs, and patted its head.

She called it a cow.

“It’s an elephant,” I said. She did not repeat my words, and she wouldn’t take the stuffed animal from my hands. She kept touching it, feeling it, inspecting it for something unknown to everybody but herself.

“Here,” I said. “You can have it.”

She took the elephant and held it.

“Let me show you,” I said.

My hands held her hands as she held the elephant.

I don’t know if I should have prepared her for what was to come, should have said something else, like “Ready?” or “Listen to this!” but I didn’t say anything besides “Let me show you.” I gave her hands holding the elephant a squeeze, and out from the elephant came that loud, realistic trumpet. Her eyes widened and she let go.

“No, cow! No!” she said, and she started to cry and ran to Mary, who was laughing.

“No more,” Mary said, either to me or to her, I don’t know. She picked her up and put her in the back seat of the car.

“You’re leaving?” I said, holding the elephant to my side.

“She’s tired.”

She was still crying, calling for her mother. Mary went to her, calmed her a little bit, but she started again the moment Mary left and came back to me.

From outside the car I waved to her, a hello and a goodbye. She kept on crying.

“I take it she won’t want this,” I said about the elephant.

“I have to go,” Mary said.

“Should you bring her back here?” I said. “Another day?”

“Charles,” Mary said.

“I’m just asking,” I said.

There was nothing but her screaming.

Mary went to the car and dug around in the center console. She got out of the car but leaned back in.

“Heads another day, tails no more.”

It landed on tails.

“Two out of three?” I asked, again.

But Mary said no, and it took me some time to realize that that would be the last time for a long, long while that we’d all be so close.

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Now, more than twenty years later, I knew something Elizabeth didn’t know, or something she didn’t remember.