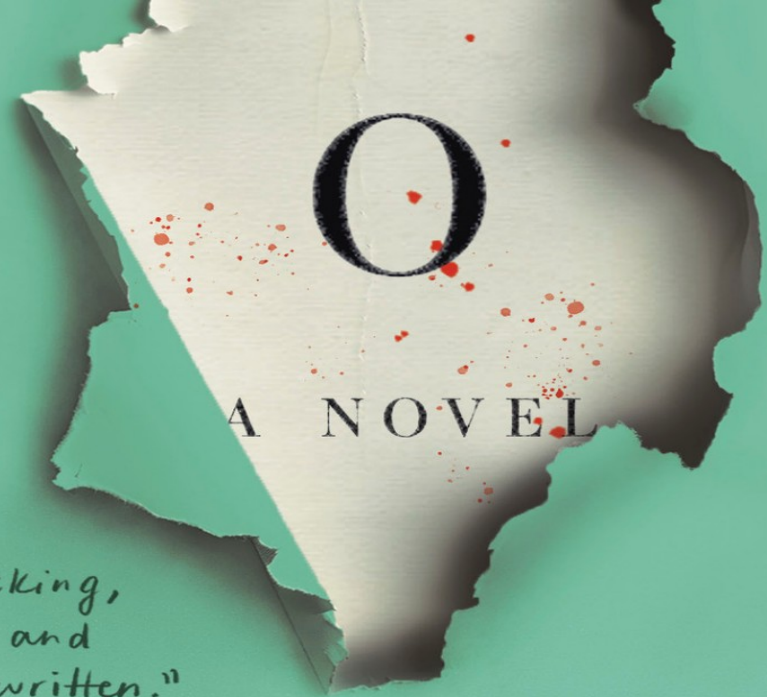




FOX

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FOX

A NOVEL

J O Y C E C A R O L O A T E S



HOGARTH
London • New York

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FOR MARK MIRSKY

*Little Lamb
Here I am,
Come and lick
My white neck.
Let me pull
Your soft Wool.
Let me kiss
Your soft face.*

—WILLIAM BLAKE, “SPRING”

*Or, my scrofulous French novel
On grey paper with blunt type!
Simply glance at it, you grovel
Hand and foot in Belial's gripe...*

—ROBERT BROWNING, “SOLILOQUY
OF THE SPANISH CLOISTER”

All is possible that is not impossible.

—H. ZWENDER

PROLOGUE

There was never a time when I was not in love with Mr. Fox.
There was never a time when Mr. Fox was not my life.

Because before Mr. Fox came into my life our souls knew each other in the time before where there is no time.

Because we are born of such knowing. Of the time before as when waking in the morning we carry the memory of the beautiful dreams we have lost in waking.

In the time before there is no time as we understand it on Earth, it is a great void like the ocean in which droplets of rain fall & vanish.

In the time before we are children together, there is no “age” that separates.

This, Mr. Fox explained.

Saying, My darling there will never be a time when our souls are not joined.

Saying, Our (secret) pledge will be, we will die for each other if that is asked of us.

We will never reveal our secret, we will die together & our secret will die with us.

For there is no Death in the time before. Souls are joined in love in the time before.

This, Mr. Fox explained.

To me only, Mr. Fox explained.

I

WIELAND WATERLANDS
NATURE PRESERVE
SOUTH JERSEY

2013

THE TROPHY

WIELAND POND
29 OCTOBER 2013

It will be no ordinary morning.

Heavy rain has fallen through the night with a din of crazed castanets. The sky at dawn is clotted with dark tumors of cloud through which a sudden piercing light shines like a scalpel.

In the mud-softened service road leading to the Wieland Township landfill, shimmering puddles in long narrow snakelike ruts. A smell of brackish swamp water from the vast marshland beyond and in the near distance black-winged turkey vultures like flattened silhouettes high in the air silently circling, swooping with a look of grisly frolic.

At 7:36 A.M. in the adjacent nature preserve there comes jolting along the service road a steel-colored vehicle with four-wheel drive to park at a trailhead fifty feet from the murky still-standing water of many acres—choked at shore with rushes, cattails, barely submerged trash, a rumor of leeches in its black-muck bottom—known locally as Wieland Pond in rural Atlantic County, New Jersey.

The driver of the steel-colored vehicle cuts her engine, headlights. Glances about the clearing to see with evident satisfaction that she is alone. No reeking sanitation trucks lumbering out to the nearby landfill at this hour, deepening ruts in the roadway. No fellow dog-walkers, hikers. No one with whom P. Cady will be obliged to exchange inane greetings.

For it is the purpose of driving out to the Wieland wetlands at dawn, on the average of five times a week, to exercise her high-energy rescue animal of mixed ancestry (terrier, hound) from the Wieland Township Animal Shelter, and to exercise herself, alone.

“Here we go! *Good girl.*”

Opening the passenger door of the steel-colored vehicle out of which leaps as if catapulted by force the small wiry dun-colored dog in a paroxysm of excitement, barking, yipping, whining, pleading, tail slavishly wagging in seeming deference to the tall bossy individual gripping the leash, her human, gripping the leash on *her* neck, speaking sternly yet not without affection as if anything uttered in fatuous human speech could have the slightest interest for the eager little dog at this crucial moment.

“This morning, you will *behave.*”

Large limpid brown eyes brimming with facile promise—*Yes, I will behave.*

“You will come back when I call you. You will not *run wild.*”

Oversized hound-paws scuffing frantically in the wet leaves, shameless whining, whimper—*Yes yes I will do anything you ask.*

“And not in the water! D’you hear?—*not in the damned water.*”

Sniffing sodden leaves at her human’s booted feet. Stubby tail furiously wagging, bony rear shimmying, how then could her (naïve, trusting) human not believe such slavish deference, doggie-devotion—*Yes of course, I will obey. Just let me go!*

“I’m warning you—*do not run wild.*”

At last released from the leash, a panting yelp of gratitude before turning to bound joyously away, stopping within a few yards to sniff at underbrush, squatting to urinate, but fleetingly, for there is no time to tarry, these early-morning hikes under the command of her human are rarely more than forty minutes to an hour; restraining herself to remain on the trail at least initially, trotting in the direction in which her human habitually hikes on the 2.5-mile loop around the pond that will return them to the vehicle parked at the trailhead; but soon then, within fifty or so feet, even as her human calls after her in a voice of chiding concern the eager little dog has

trotted off-trail to investigate something small scuttling in the underbrush—(rodent? black-feathered bird?)—splashing through puddles, very muddy puddles, paws sinking into muck halfway up her forelegs, still she takes time to pause every few yards to sniff, squat, urinate in quick agitated dribbles against underbrush, mounds of leaves, trunks of stunted trees in a haze of great happiness seeming scarcely to hear her human now shouting after her in a voice of outrage and indignation *Come here! Come back! Princess! Now!* as inexorably as gravity she is drawn into the marshy woods off-trail where the most delicious odors waft to her sensitive nostrils.

On this morning in late October there are a half-dozen red-winged blackbirds taunting her from six feet above, razzing her, a trespasser in their territory, if they were but large enough they might attack her, stab their sharp beaks into her, failing to find at all “beautiful”—“adorable”—her somewhat coarse brindle-brown short-haired coat, greedily they would peck out those caramel-colored moist eyes her human finds so “intelligent,” captivating.

Bravely and defiantly she trots on, she *is* a trespasser, a hunter. Literally, a born hunter! Ignores the noisy bullies for these are not local predator birds (hawk, owl) large enough to carry away a small dog in their talons, and devour her.

Soon then the pleading voice somewhere behind the little dog has faded, becomes inaudible amid the cries of swamp birds and the sound of her own panting, the tumult of smells assailing her nostrils, overcharging her thrumming brain, her human’s cry irrelevant as artificial light on a blind-blazing-sun day.

■

WHAT IS THAT AHEAD?—a sudden movement, a splash and ripples in the still dank water, mallard? turtle? water snake?—as she approaches on her disproportionately large paws, with a clumsy sort of stealth, crouching, preparing for the pounce, the kill, whatever it is, or was, a living thing like

herself, but cannier than she, more cunning, desperate to survive, seems to have disappeared.

Cautiously exploring the dank interior of the marshland amid fallen and calcified trees, weak eyes lowered in deference to her exquisitely tuned nostrils, terrier-ears pricked upright, all of her senses alert, thrilled, her small brain near to swooning with overstimulation after seven hours of confinement in the dull-darkened house of her human; it's as if whatever force fierce as a vacuum's suction catapulted her out of the steel-colored vehicle continues to draw her forward venturing—recklessly, naughtily—ever farther from her human, or rather the memory of her human, the tall stern-voiced individual whose smallest, most petty commands she is obliged to obey, and surely will obey again, except just not yet, not now, not while trotting eagerly in this dazzling place where the most thrilling-reeking smells rush at her, some familiar, some unfamiliar, it is the unfamiliar that draws her, the tantalizing-new, new odors of carrion, irresistible as food to a ravenous beast.

Many times she has dismayed her overfastidious human by reveling in carrion, rotted flesh, stained bones the most luxuriant sensation, leaping into what she has discovered in the woods, what has seemed to be lying in wait for her to discover, rolling in it, excitedly barking, yipping, growling deep in her throat in ecstasy, the most profound kinship with whatever it is that remains of a living creature like herself, yet not-herself, deer carcass, fox, raccoon, another creature like herself: dog, most wondrous: *dog*: a carrion-cloak in which to wrap herself, myriad drunken smells swarming into her brain, overcharged as an electrical socket. Many times she has incurred the disgust of her human, unmistakably the *human words* signal the most extreme disgust, no disgust other than the *human*, as there are no words other than the *human*. At such times, discovered, reviled, chided, despaired-over, and needing to be thoroughly bathed (by her human, or by the groomer with the deft kind assured hands), she has been quick to express remorse, or has seemed to express remorse, for upsetting her human, for this is expected of her, this is her responsibility to the (needy) human, her pledge. In her doggy soul, she understands. She concurs. She is not a rebel.

She adores her human, she knows that her human has been her savior since the blurred chaos of puppyhood, tossed like trash onto the shoulder of the old state highway, reddened infected eyes swollen shut, skeletal ribs, rat-skinny tail, wheezing breath and puppy-intestines swirling with parasites, discovered and brought to the bright-lit antiseptic shelter, rescued, resuscitated, with oversized puppy-ears, puppy-paws, yearning moist-brown eyes adopted out of a cage at six months, of course she understands that her human is her salvation, but her human, though sharp-eyed and often capable of reading her mind *is not here to observe*, and so for the time being she has forgotten her human, when a human *is not here to observe* it is only natural to forget the human, exploring now a patch of sinister black muck that sucks at her paws, her swift-sniffing nose has led her gaily off-trail, far off-trail, it is a thrill to forget all that her human has taught her, or tried to teach her, for the marshland is teeming with yet more life, always more life and though it is some distance away she can smell the sodden smoldering trash of the landfill, a place of slovenly treasures she has explored in the past, slipping under the rusted and partly collapsed ten-foot chain-link fence, on all sides in the landfill there are rife garbagey smells that pique a mild interest, but there again is the fresh carrion-smell, unmistakable, irresistible, and not so far from her, upwind.

Dimly behind her are pleading, plaintive cries, words recognizably *human*, yet scarcely words but mere syllables, sounds—...*are you? Princess! Please*—hardly to be distinguished from the vulgar and menacing shrieks of crows, always at dawn there are predator-crows in the marshes, scavenger birds, buzzard hawks and vultures in a slow continuous Möbius circle above the six-acre landfill on the farther side of the pond but not this morning: no.

Beginning to exult, rejoice in whatever it is, the ecstasy that awaits: her catch, her *trophy*.

For she is a fierce hunter, or would be if properly trained, not a mere *house-pet*, destined to eat too much, to become heavy and short of breath, wheezing, sleeping away what remains of her short life, but not yet, *not yet* for she is on the scent now, she is single-minded as a missile flying to its

destination trotting excitedly on, panting, tongue lolling, all of her being drawn irresistibly forward, the rich rot carrion-odor calls to her, more forcibly than any merely human voice; in a haze like lust, hypnotized, rapidly sniffing nostrils yank her forward, along a brief peninsula of land amid the marsh, on all sides broken and dying, barkless trees, human litter—cans, Styrofoam—sodden articles of discarded clothing—in the trail are tire tracks, for this trail is the width of a small vehicle, she is trotting more quickly now, urgently now, her tongue is hanging from her mouth, she is panting harder, it is the new smell, the new strong smell, the carrion-smell that has hypnotized her.

As overhead, turkey vultures circle on wide flapping wings like black crepe, eyeing her, dismissing her, a creature too small to threaten them, and alive, animated—not (yet) a meal they can digest.

Now nearing the source of the smell! Her little heart is pounding in her chest, she is so thrilled. No barking, no yipping. No crude distractions. Every sense electric-alert. *For this, I was born.*

In a tangle of flattened rushes the bloodied meat-thing lies lacerated and torn, an insubstantial object in itself, the size of a small rodent, but eyeless, presumably sightless, surely there is more, somewhere nearby there is more, but she is thrilled to discover this tidbit, this token, small jaws clamping together claiming the trophy, shaking it, to break its neck, snuff the life from it, if it were a living thing and not mere meat, *human-meat* by the smell of it.

■

“PRINCESS DI! WHAT DO you have in your mouth!”