



Louise  
Erdrich

*A Novel*

The Sentence

THE  
SENTENCE

A NOVEL



LOUISE ERDRICH



HARPER

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# Dedication

*To everyone who has worked at Birchbark Books, to our customers,  
and to our ghosts.*

# Epigaph

From the time of birth to the time of death, every word you utter is part of one long sentence.

—Sun Yung Shin, *Unbearable Splendor*



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# Time in Time Out

## Earth to Earth

**W**hile in prison, I received a dictionary. It was sent to me with a note. *This is the book I would take to a deserted island.* Other books were to arrive from my teacher. But as she had known, this one proved of endless use. The first word I looked up was the word 'sentence.' I had received an impossible sentence of sixty years from the lips of a judge who believed in an afterlife. So the word with its yawning *c*, belligerent little *e*'s, with its hissing sibilants and double *n*'s, this repetitive bummer of a word made of slyly stabbing letters that surrounded an isolate human *t*, this word was in my thoughts every moment of every day. Without a doubt, had the dictionary not arrived, this light word that lay so heavily upon me would have crushed me, or what was left of me after the strangeness of what I'd done.

**I** was at a perilous age when I committed my crime. Although in my thirties, I still clung to a teenager's physical pursuits and mental habits. It was 2005, but 1999 was how I partied, drinking and drugging like I was seventeen, although my liver kept trying to tell me it was over an outraged decade older. For many reasons, I didn't know who I was yet. Now that I have a better idea, I will tell you



this: I am an ugly woman. Not the kind of ugly that guys write or make movies about, where suddenly I have a blast of blinding instructional beauty. I am not about teachable moments. Nor am I beautiful on the inside. I enjoy lying, for instance, and am good at selling people useless things for prices they can't afford. Of course, now that I am rehabilitated, I only sell words. Collections of words between cardboard covers.

Books contain everything worth knowing except what ultimately matters.

**T**he day I committed my crime, I was sprawled at the skinny white feet of my crush Danae, trying to deal with an interior swarm of ants. The phone rang and Danae fumbled the receiver to her ear. She listened, jumped up, shrieked. Clasped the phone with both hands and screwed her face shut. Then her eyes waterbugged open.

*He died in Mara's arms. God, oh god. She doesn't know what to do with his body!*

Danae flung the phone away and vaulted back onto the couch, howling and thrashing her spidery arms and legs. I crawled under the coffee table.

'Tookie! Tookie! Where are you?'

I dragged myself up onto her cabiny moose pillows and tried to soothe my deranged dear, rocking her, clutching her frowsy yellow head against my shoulder. Though she was older than me, Danae was spindly as a downy pre-woman. When she curled against me, I felt my heart surge and I became her shield against the world. Or maybe bulwark gives a more accurate picture.

'It's all right, you are safe,' I said in my huskiest voice. The harder she wept the happier I felt.

'And don't forget,' I said, pleased by her needy snuffling, 'you're a big winner!'

Two days before, Danae had scored a once-in-a-lifetime casino win. But it was too soon to talk about the beautiful future. Danae was clutching her throat, trying to tear out her windpipe, banging her head on the coffee table. Filled with an uncanny strength, she

smashed a lamp and tried to gouge herself with a shard of plastic. Even though she had everything to live for.

'Fuck the win. I want him! Budgie! Oh Budgie, my soul!'

She rammed me off the couch.

'He should be with me, not her. Me not her.'

I had heard this rave for the past month. Danae and Budgie had planned to run off together. A complete overthrow of reality. Both had claimed they'd stumbled into an alternate dimension of desire. But then the old world clobbered them. One day Budgie sobered up and went back to Mara, who was not such a bad person. For instance, she'd got clean and stayed clean. Or so I thought. For now it was possible that Budgie's effort at getting normal again had failed. Though it is normal to die.

Danae was howling.

'Doesn't know what to do with his body! What, what, what is that about?'

'You are amok with grief,' I said.

I gave her a dish towel for the crying. It was the same dish towel I'd tried to kill the ants with even though I knew I was hallucinating. She put the cloth to her face, rocked back and forth. I tried not to look at the crushed ants trickling between her hands. They were still twitching their tiny legs and waving their fragile antenna stalks. Some idea stabbed at Danae. She shuddered, froze. Then she twisted her neck, blared her big pink eyes at me, and said these chilling words.

'Budgie and me are one. One body. I should have his body, Tookie. I want Budgie, my soul!'

I slid away to the fridge and found a beer. I brought her the beer. She knocked my arm away.

'This is a time to keep our heads crystal clear!'

I chugged the beer and said it was the time to get wrecked.

'We are wrecked! What's crazy is that she, who wouldn't give him sex for a year, has his god-given body.'

'He had an ordinary body, Danae. He wasn't a god.'

She was beyond my message and the ants were fire ants; I was scratching my arms raw.

'We're going in there,' Danae said. Her eyes were now flaming red. 'We're going in like the goddamn Marines. We're gonna bring Budgie home.'

'He's home.'

She pounded her breast. 'I, I, I, am home.'

'I'll be leaving now.'

I crept toward the broken door. Then came the kicker.

'Wait. Tookie. If you help me get Budgie? Bring him here? You can have my win. That's a year's salary, like, for a teacher, honey. Maybe a principal? That's 26K.'

I froze on the sticky entry mat, thinking on all fours.

Danae felt my awe. I reversed progress, rolled over, and gazed up at her cotton-candy upside-down features.

'I give it to you freely. Just help me, Tookie.'

I had seen so much in her face. Seen the sparkle glow, the tinfoil Ferris wheels, and more. I had seen the four winds travel the green wide-woven world. Seen the leaves press up into a false fabric, closing out my vision. I had never seen Danae offer me money. Any amount of money. And this amount could set me up. It was disturbing, touching, and the most consequential thing that ever happened between us.

'Oh, babe.' I put my arms around her and she panted like a soft puppy. Opened her pouty wet mouth.

'You're my best friend. You can do this for me. You can get Budgie. She doesn't know you. Mara's never seen you. Besides, you have the cold truck.'

'Not anymore. I was fired from North Shore Foods,' I said.

'No,' she cried. 'How come?'

'Sometimes I wore the fruit.'

I'd put melons in my bra and that sort of thing when I delivered groceries. Cukes in the trou. Well, was that so terrible? My thoughts spun out. As always when I held down a job, I had copied the keys. When inevitably fired, I gave the old keys back. I kept my key copies in a cigar box, clearly labeled with their use. Souvenirs of my employment. It was just a habit. No thought of mischief.

'Look, Danae, I think you're supposed to have an ambulance or hearse or something.'

She stroked my arm, up and down in a pleading rhythm.

'But Tookie! Listen. Clearly. Listen! Clearly!'

I focused elsewhere. The stroking was so nice. Finally she coaxed my gaze to her and spoke as though I was the unreasonable child.

'So, Tookie honey? Mara and Budgie relapsed together and he died. If you wear a nice dress? She'll let you put him in the back of the truck.'

'Danae, the trucks are painted with plums and bacon, or steak and lettuce.'

'Don't let her see the truck! You'll hoist him up and load him in. He'll be . . .'

Danae could not go on for a moment. She gagged like a toddler.

'. . . safe in a refrigerated condition. And then the money . . .'

'Yes.'

My brain revved up with money-sign adrenaline and my thoughts came on furiously. I could feel the neurons sparking. Danae's voice went sweet and wheedly.

'You're big. You can heft him. Budgie's on the slight side.'

Budgie was measly as a rat, I said, but she didn't care what I said. She was beaming through her tears, because she could tell I was ready to do her bidding. At that point, the job I currently held took over. Reader of contracts. That's what I was at the time. A part-time paralegal who read over contracts and defined the terms. I told Danae that I wanted the deal in writing. We'd both sign it.

She went straight to the table, wrote something up. Then she did a better thing. Wrote the check out with zero after zero and waved it in my face.

'Put your dress on. Fix up. Go get Budgie and the check is yours.'

She drove me to North Shore. I walked up to the warehouse. Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling out in a delivery truck. I was wearing heels, a painfully tight black cocktail dress, a green jacket. My hair was combed back and sprayed. Danae had swiftly applied my makeup. Best I'd looked in years. I carried a notebook, a file

from Danae's daughter's stack of schoolwork. There was a pen in my purse.

What was Danae going to do with Budgie when she got him? I asked myself this question as I swiftly rolled along. What on earth is she going to do? Answer there was none. The ants came up under my skin.

**B**udgie and Mara lived just west of Shageg, the casino town, over the border between Wisconsin and Minnesota. They inhabited a slumping gray cottage. I parked in the street, where the truck wasn't so conspicuous. A collapsed pit mix in a chain-link enclosure just beside the house lifted its head. It didn't bark, which chilled me. I'd had run-ins with the silent surprisers. However, this one slumped back. Its colorless eyes rolled up as I pressed the doorbell, which must have been installed in better times. From inside there came a civilized *doodly doo*. Mara fumbled at the door and threw it wide open.

I met her puffy red eyes with extractive sympathy.

'I am so sorry for your loss.'

We reached out and clutched fingers, the way women do, transmitting emotion to each other via our ragged nails. Mara was interestingly cogent for one who did not know what to do with a body. She tossed her retro Joan Jett shag. It turned out she had her reasons.

'Sure, I thought of calling the fire department,' she said to me. 'But I didn't want the siren! He looks so peaceful and contented. And I don't like funeral homes. My stepdad was an undertaker. I don't want Budgie pumped full of preservatives and looking like a wax museum. I just thought I'd put it out there . . . to the universe . . . make some calls. . . .'

'Because you knew the universe would answer,' I said. 'Giving back to nature is a natural thing.'

I entered the house as she stood aside. She blinked unknowing hazel greens at me. I nodded at her with sage sympathy and went into selling mode, where the things that come out of my mouth are

all intuition for what the buyer truly wants. Partly, my rugged face makes me trustworthy. Partly, it makes me very good at trying to please people. Mostly, homing in on another person's deep needs is my best skill. I took my cues from Mara's questions.

'What exactly do you mean, giving back to nature?'

'We don't use chemicals,' I said. 'It's all biodegradable.'

'What then?'

'A return to the earth. As our psycho-spirituality intended. Thus our name: Earth to Earth. And trees. We surround the loved one with trees. So that a grove springs up. Our motto: Graves to Groves. You can go there and meditate.'

'Where's this place?'

'In the fullness of time, I will take you there. For the present, I need to assist Budgie in beginning his journey. Can you show me where he reposes?'

I cringed at the word 'repose'—over-the-top smarm? But Mara was already showing me the way.

**T**he back bedroom in Mara and Budgie's house was stuffed with unwrapped merchandise—looked like they had a problem I could help with—but I left that for later. Budgie lay slack-jawed on stained pillows, squinting in perplexity at the stack of plastic containers in one corner. It was like he'd been mildly puzzled to death. I gave Mara forms. They were permission forms for Danae's daughter's class field trips, which I'd grabbed off a counter top. Mara read them through carefully and I tried to hide my panic. Few people read official forms; it sometimes feels like I am the only one, due of course to my current employment. Then again, sometimes people read them for show, with their eyes and not their brains. Mara was doing this. She winced as she entered Budgie's name in the first blank. Then she signed the forms at the bottom with an air of miserable finality, pressing down hard on the sticks of the *M*.

That earnest gesture got to me. I am not heartless. I went to the truck and rummaged behind the dairy coolers to where I knew there would be a tarp. This I brought in and laid out beside Budgie's body.

He was still somewhat pliant. He was wearing a long-sleeved T under a ripped fake vintage Whitesnake shirt. I rolled him into the tarp and was able to straighten his legs and fold his arms across his chest as if he were, say, a disciple of Horus. I closed Budgie's inquiring eyes and they stayed shut. While I was accomplishing all of this I thought, *Do now. Feel later.* But brushing my fingers down to shut his eyelids got me. Forever not to see the answer. I needed something to hold his chin. All I had in the truck was a bungee cord.

'Mara,' I said, 'would you prefer I go out to my vehicle and get professional bindings, or do you have a scarf you could gift George as a token of your love in the next world? Non-floral if possible.'

She gave me a long blue silky scarf with stars on it.

'My anniversary present from Budgie,' she said, very quiet.

I was surprised, because to my knowledge Budgie was cheap. Perhaps the scarf was an *uh-oh* gift from a guilty returning spouse. I wrapped George's head in the scarf to pull up his jaw, stood back. Wondered if I had a calling. Suddenly he had a wise preternatural look. It was as though he'd only pretended to be an asshole in life but was really a shamanic priest.

'It's like he's . . . all knowing,' said Mara, impressed.

We twined our fingers again. All of this began to take on a shattering significance. I nearly broke down and left Budgie there. Now of course I wish I had. But my ever reliable sales persona took over and kept things moving.

'All right, Mara. I am going to start Budgie on the next phase of his journey, and usually it goes better if the bereaved one has a cup of tea and meditates. You don't want to hold him back.'

Mara bent over and kissed her husband on the forehead. Then she straightened, pulled in a deep breath, walked into the kitchen. I heard water rush, presumably into a teakettle, and I rolled Budgie into firefighter carry position. While Mara was making her tea, I lugged him through the door, past the depressed pit mix, and deposited him in the back of the truck. I had to kick off my heels and jump aboard to pull him in. The adrenaline helped, though my dress ripped. I rolled in behind the wheel and drove him to Danae's.



She was waiting on the front deck. I got out of the truck. She came rushing at me, but before I gave her Budgie, I wiggled my fingers. She took the check out of her back jeans pocket, unfolded it, but said she had to see his body first. She licked her pulpy lips and smiled. It was like turning over a rock.

My love for Danae sloughed off me like an old skin. Sometimes a person shows you something. Everything. Budgie had attained a reflective dignity. Danae was freakishly eager. I could not put these two things together. We went around to the back of the truck. I reached in and tugged back the tarp, but restrained myself from looking at either Budgie or Danae. She handed me the check, and then she climbed in beside him. I made sure the check was properly signed. Then stepped away from the truck in relief. From what I did next, you can tell I am no professional body snatcher, as was later alleged. I left. I threw the keys in the truck's front seat and got into my little Mazda beater. I was out of there in two tails. I mean, I should have helped her bring Budgie into the house. I should have sneaked back the truck. Wait. I shouldn't have taken Budgie's body at all. But leaving the body in the refrigerated truck actually did me the most harm in the end.

That, plus not looking in his armpits. However.

It was still only midafternoon, so I went straight to the bank and deposited the check. Minus the cash amount that my account would cover before the check cleared. Sixty dollars. With those twenties in my purse, I drove along and distanced myself, telling myself to breathe, to not look back. I went to the steakhouse/bar I used to frequent when I was flush. It was a few miles down the highway, in the woods. At Lucky Dog, I bought myself a whiskey and a fancy rib eye. It came with a green salad and a twice-baked potato. Delectable. My senses opened up. The meal and the money cured me. The whiskey killed the ants. I was a new person, one whose fate would not be to end this life squinting at a stack of tubbies. One whose destiny had been forged during unusual circumstances. I mulled over my creative burst. The business I'd thought up on the fly, Earth to Earth, could go places. People were looking for alternatives. Plus death was recession proof and could not be easily

outsourced to another country. I knew there would be laws and hurdles and regulations, but with this grubstake of Danae's, I could get a life.

As I laid out my promising future, he slid into the booth across from me. My nemesis. My alternate crush.

'Pollux,' I said. 'My Potawatomi conscience. Where's your cute Tribal Police outfit?'

Pollux had once been a keen-eyed boxer. His nose was mashed, left eyebrow dented. He had a false tooth. His knuckles were uneven knobs.

'I'm off duty,' he said. 'But I'm here for a reason.'

My heart lurched. I feared that Pollux was here to provide a special service.

'Tookie,' he said. 'You know the line.'

'We've got to stop meeting like this?'

'I knew it was you when I saw the truck. Innovative.'

'A thinker, I am that.'

'The tribe didn't send you to college for nothing.'

'Yes they did,' I said.

'Tell you what. I'll buy you another whiskey before we go through the hoopla.'

'I was going to start a beautiful business, Pollux.'

'You still can. In twenty years, max. You did a good job, really. Eyes were on your friends. If only they hadn't gotten all hysterical and started bragging you up.'

(Danae, Danae! Other coin of my heart.)

'You're kidding about the twenty. Woooo, I'm scared. Did you talk to Mara?'

'She praised your service, your compassion, yes, even after we told her Danae was behind it.'

'Oh really?' I was pleased even under the circumstances. But he hadn't admitted he was fake-intimidating me.

'Pollux, give your ol' pal Tookie a break. And hey what, twenty?'

'I'm hearing things,' he said. 'You could be . . . I mean, with your past record. You never know. It could go double.'

Now I was trying not to hyperventilate. Yet there was something missing. A crime.

Pollux gave me the eye—the dark sad eye from under his scarred brow. He was staring into the nervous slush of my heart. But I saw now he was struggling.

‘What is it? Why the twenty fucking years?’

‘It isn’t my place to figure out if you know or don’t know what Budgie was carrying.’

‘Carrying? What he usually carries, tragic bullshit. You haven’t answered my question.’

‘You know the routine. But it would help if you would not deposit that check.’

‘I’m not stupid. Of course I deposited it.’

He said nothing. We sat some more. His damaged brow lowered. He sipped at a whiskey and wondered sadly into my eyes. While in some lights I am striking in a Hell Girl way, Pollux might be considered definitively ugly under any light. But as a man, a fighter, it doesn’t lose him many points. Rugged, he is called. He looked away. I knew it was too good to last, him staring at me.

‘Now tell me,’ I said. ‘Twenty?’

‘You finally went big-time, Tookie.’

‘It was a substantial check. I was thinking charity, you know? After business expenses . . .’

‘Not the check, although that will enter into it. But Tookie. Stealing a corpse? And what he carried? That’s more than grand larceny. Plus the truck . . .’

I nearly choked. I did choke. Tears even welled up. I had not even considered what I was doing to be a crime. Grand larceny has a swell ring, unless you’re looking at the time.

‘Pollux, I wasn’t stealing! I was relocating a body. Doing a friend a favor. Okay, and so I borrowed a truck. What was I supposed to do when she screamed out, *Budgie, my soul?*’

‘Yeah, Tookie. But you deposited the check. Also, the truck was refrigerated. Like maybe you did it to harvest body parts.’

I couldn’t speak.

Pollux bought me that drink.

'You're one of a kind,' I finally said. 'Plus a Potawatomi. Tribal kin.'

'And kith,' said Pollux. 'We surely go back an eon. We evolved together on Turtle's Back. Oh Tookie, my endless . . .'

'Endless what?'

He didn't answer. I asked again. 'We'll get it reduced,' he said. 'I'll weigh in on your behalf. Maybe some kind of deal. I don't think body stealing should be that big a crime. And you didn't know . . .'

'Right on. Why's it a crime? It's just Budgie.'

'I know. And the body parts thing . . .'

'It's stupid. He wasn't near fresh enough to sell.'

Pollux gave me a serious look and told me not to say that in court.

'Tribal won't be involved,' he went on. 'This goes federal. People in that system don't know your sense of humor. Your charm. You'll just be a big mean-looking Indian like me.'

'Though also—' He was going to amend. I butted in.

'Only you became a tribal cop. Wise choice.'

'You could be anything,' said Pollux. 'You make my brain boil. You make my heart [he delicately touched his chest] flip over. Twist in a knot. It's like you never learned that our choices get us where we are.'

Truer words were never spoken, but I could not respond. My thoughts were barging around in my skull.

We stared into each other's eyes. I rolled up the sleeves of my green jacket and slid my arms across the table. That's when he pulled out the cuffs and arrested me. Right there.

\* \* \*

I'm not much of a TV watcher, so as I waited for the trial in jail, I used my call to ask Danae to drop off books. Her number was disconnected. Later I called Mara, same. To my surprise, it was my seventh-grade teacher in the reservation school who came to my rescue. I'd always thought Jackie Kettle had been nice to me because it was her first year of teaching and she was very young. But it turned out she kept track of her students. She found out I'd been jailed, went to a rummage sale, and bought a dollar box of

tomes. Mainly, they were inspirational, which is to say, comical. But there were two or three seemingly tossed in from forced freshman college reading. Yesteryear reading. They let me have an old *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. It got me through. I didn't have many visitors. Pollux came once, but I think he may have started to cry, so that was it. Danae had got me hauled in with her story, which made what I did into a special thing and all—she wasn't thinking. I forgave her, but I didn't want to see her. Anyway, the anthology blurred the time and soon enough I had to see L. Ron Hubbard. Indeed, our tribe had a defense attorney who was a Scientologist. This is what happens to the stewards of the land. But his name wasn't really L. Ron Hubbard. We just called him that. His real name was Ted Johnson. Ted and I were meeting in the same dreary little room we always had before. Ted Johnson was the most nondescript person ever, sad-sack in baggy Men's Wearhouse suits, floppy 1980s ties, a half-bald pate sprouting hair just at the ear line, a curly swatch he kept tucking back. He had a round bland face with perfectly opaque green eyes and pinhole pupils cold as drill bits. Unfortunately he was not covering up a preternatural shrewdness.

'Tookie, I'm surprised.'

'You're surprised, Ted? I'm surprised. Who made this a crime?'

'It is body theft!'

'It was not theft. I didn't keep the body.'

'Good. I'll use that. You did, however, accept payment of over twenty-five thousand dollars, which under statue etc.'

'Under statue? Aren't you missing the *t*?'

'Yeah, like I said.' Ted didn't flinch. I was in trouble.

'The human body itself is worth ninety-seven cents,' I told him.

'Boiled down to its minerals and so on.'

'Good. I'll use that.'

He paused.

'How do you know that?'

'My high school chemistry teacher,' I said. Then it occurred to me what a ditz Mr. Hrunkl had been and also that, on some black market for body parts, Budgie would possibly have been worth a lot more. I felt cold, kept talking.