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orphan train

a novel

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Orphan Train

Christina Baker Kline


WILLIAM MORROW
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DEDICATION

*To
Christina Looper Baker,
who handed me the thread,
and
Carole Robertson Kline,
who gave me the cloth*

EPIGRAPH

In portaging from one river to another, Wabanakis had to carry their canoes and all other possessions. Everyone knew the value of traveling light and understood that it required leaving some things behind. Nothing encumbered movement more than fear, which was often the most difficult burden to surrender.

—BUNNY MCBRIDE, *Women of the Dawn*

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Prologue

I believe in ghosts. They're the ones who haunt us, the ones who have left us behind. Many times in my life I have felt them around me, observing, witnessing, when no one in the living world knew or cared what happened.

I am ninety-one years old, and almost everyone who was once in my life is now a ghost.

Sometimes these spirits have been more real to me than people, more real than God. They fill silence with their weight, dense and warm, like bread dough rising under cloth. My gram, with her kind eyes and talcum-dusted skin. My da, sober, laughing. My mam, singing a tune. The bitterness and alcohol and depression are stripped away from these phantom incarnations, and they console and protect me in death as they never did in life.

I've come to think that's what heaven is—a place in the memory of others where our best selves live on.

Maybe I am lucky—that at the age of nine I was given the ghosts of my parents' best selves, and at twenty-three the ghost of my true love's best self. And my sister, Maisie, ever present, an angel on my shoulder. Eighteen months to my nine years, thirteen years to my twenty. Now she is eighty-four to my ninety-one, and with me still.

No substitute for the living, perhaps, but I wasn't given a choice. I could take solace in their presence or I could fall down in a heap, lamenting what I'd lost.

The ghosts whispered to me, telling me to go on.

Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011

Through her bedroom wall Molly can hear her foster parents talking about her in the living room, just beyond her door. “This is not what we signed up for,” Dina is saying. “If I’d known she had this many problems, I never would’ve agreed to it.”

“I know, I know.” Ralph’s voice is weary. He’s the one, Molly knows, who wanted to be a foster parent. Long ago, in his youth, when he’d been a “troubled teen,” as he told her without elaboration, a social worker at his school had signed him up for the Big Brother program, and he’d always felt that his big brother—his mentor, he calls him—kept him on track. But Dina was suspicious of Molly from the start. It didn’t help that before Molly they’d had a boy who tried to set the elementary school on fire.

“I have enough stress at work,” Dina says, her voice rising. “I don’t need to come home to this shit.”

Dina works as a dispatcher at the Spruce Harbor police station, and as far as Molly can see there isn’t much to stress over—a few drunk drivers, the occasional black eye, petty thefts, accidents. If you’re going to be a dispatcher anywhere in the world, Spruce Harbor is probably the least stressful place imaginable. But Dina is high-strung by nature. The smallest things get to her. It’s as if she assumes everything will go right, and when it doesn’t—which, of course, is pretty often—she is surprised and affronted.

Molly is the opposite. So many things have gone wrong for her in her seventeen years that she’s come to expect it. When something does go right, she hardly knows what to think.

Which was just what had happened with Jack. When Molly transferred to Mount Desert Island High School last year, in tenth grade, most of the kids seemed to go out of their way to avoid her. They had their friends, their cliques, and she didn’t fit into any of them. It was true that she hadn’t made it easy; she knows from experience that tough and weird is preferable to pathetic and vulnerable, and she wears her Goth persona like armor. Jack was the only one who’d tried to break through.

It was mid-October, in social studies class. When it came time to team up for a project, Molly was, as usual, the odd one out. Jack asked her to join

him and his partner, Jody, who was clearly less than thrilled. For the entire fifty-minute class, Molly was a cat with its back up. Why was he being so nice? What did he want from her? Was he one of those guys who got a kick out of messing with the weird girl? Whatever his motive, she wasn't about to give an inch. She stood back with her arms crossed, shoulders hunched, dark stiff hair in her eyes. She shrugged and grunted when Jack asked her questions, though she followed along well enough and did her share of the work. "That girl is freakin' strange," Molly heard Jody mutter as they were leaving class after the bell rang. "She creeps me out." When Molly turned and caught Jack's eye, he surprised her with a smile. "I think she's kind of awesome," he said, holding Molly's gaze. For the first time since she'd come to this school, she couldn't help herself; she smiled back.

Over the next few months, Molly got bits and pieces of Jack's story. His father was a Dominican migrant worker who met his mother picking blueberries in Cherryfield, got her pregnant, moved back to the D.R. to shack up with a local girl, and never looked back. His mother, who never married, works for a rich old lady in a shorefront mansion. By all rights Jack should be on the social fringes too, but he isn't. He has some major things going for him: flashy moves on the soccer field, a dazzling smile, great big cow eyes, and ridiculous lashes. And even though he refuses to take himself seriously, Molly can tell he's way smarter than he admits, probably even smarter than he knows.

Molly couldn't care less about Jack's prowess on the soccer field, but smart she respects. (The cow eyes are a bonus.) Her own curiosity is the one thing that has kept her from going off the rails. Being Goth wipes away any expectation of conventionality, so Molly finds she's free to be weird in lots of ways at once. She reads all the time—in the halls, in the cafeteria—mostly novels with angsty protagonists: *The Virgin Suicides*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Bell Jar*. She copies vocabulary words down in a notebook because she likes the way they sound: *Harridan*. *Pusillanimous*. *Talisman*. *Dowager*. *Enervating*. *Sycophantic* . . .

As a newcomer Molly had liked the distance her persona created, the wariness and mistrust she saw in the eyes of her peers. But though she's loath to admit it, lately that persona has begun to feel restrictive. It takes ages to get the look right every morning, and rituals once freighted with meaning—dyeing her hair jet-black accented with purple or white streaks,

rimming her eyes with kohl, applying foundation several shades lighter than her skin tone, adjusting and fastening various pieces of uncomfortable clothing—now make her impatient. She feels like a circus clown who wakes up one morning and no longer wants to glue on the red rubber nose. Most people don't have to exert so much effort to stay in character. Why should she? She fantasizes that the next place she goes—because there's always a next place, another foster home, a new school—she'll start over with a new, easier-to-maintain look. Grunge? Sex kitten?

The probability that this will be sooner rather than later grows more likely with every passing minute. Dina has wanted to get rid of Molly for a while, and now she's got a valid excuse. Ralph staked his credibility on Molly's behavior; he worked hard to persuade Dina that a sweet kid was hiding under that fierce hair and makeup. Well, Ralph's credibility is out the window now.

Molly gets down on her hands and knees and lifts the eyelet bed skirt. She pulls out two brightly colored duffel bags, the ones Ralph bought for her on clearance at the L.L.Bean outlet in Ellsworth (the red one monogrammed "Braden" and the orange Hawaiian-flowered one "Ashley"—rejected for color, style, or just the dorkiness of those names in white thread, Molly doesn't know). As she's opening the top drawer of her dresser, a percussive thumping under her comforter turns into a tinny version of Daddy Yankee's "Impacto." "So you'll know it's me and answer the damn phone," Jack said when he bought her the ringtone.

"*Hola, mi amigo,*" she says when she finally finds it.

"Hey, what's up, *chica?*"

"Oh, you know. Dina's not so happy right now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's pretty bad."

"How bad?"

"Well, I think I'm out of here." She feels her breath catch in her throat. It surprises her, given how many times she's been through a version of this.

"Nah," he says. "I don't think so."

"Yeah," she says, pulling out a wad of socks and underwear and dumping them in the Braden bag. "I can hear them out there talking about it."

"But you need to do those community service hours."

“It’s not going to happen.” She picks up her charm necklace, tangled in a heap on the top of the dresser, and rubs the gold chain between her fingers, trying to loosen the knot. “Dina says nobody will take me. I’m untrustworthy.” The tangle loosens under her thumb and she pulls the strands apart. “It’s okay. I hear juvie isn’t so bad. It’s only a few months anyway.”

“But—you didn’t steal that book.”

Cradling the flat phone to her ear, she puts on the necklace, fumbling with the clasp, and looks in the mirror above her dresser. Black makeup is smeared under her eyes like a football player.

“Right, Molly?”

The thing is—she did steal it. Or tried. It’s her favorite novel, *Jane Eyre*, and she wanted to own it, to have it in her possession. Sherman’s Bookstore in Bar Harbor didn’t have it in stock, and she was too shy to ask the clerk to order it. Dina wouldn’t give her a credit card number to buy it online. She had never wanted anything so badly. (Well . . . not for a while.) So there she was, in the library on her knees in the narrow fiction stacks, with three copies of the novel, two paperbacks and one hardcover, on the shelf in front of her. She’d already taken the hardcover out of the library twice, gone up to the front desk and signed it out with her library card. She pulled all three books off the shelf, weighed them in her hand. She put the hardcover back, slid it in beside *The Da Vinci Code*. The newer paperback, too, she returned to the shelf.

The copy she slipped under the waistband of her jeans was old and dog-eared, the pages yellowed, with passages underlined in pencil. The cheap binding, with its dry glue, was beginning to detach from the pages. If they’d put it in the annual library sale, it would have gone for ten cents at most. Nobody, Molly figured, would miss it. Two other, newer copies were available. But the library had recently installed magnetic antitheft strips, and several months earlier four volunteers, ladies of a certain age who devoted themselves passionately to all things Spruce Harbor Library, had spent several weeks installing them on the inside covers of all eleven thousand books. So when Molly left the building that day through what she hadn’t even realized was a theft-detection gate, a loud, insistent beeping brought the head librarian, Susan LeBlanc, swooping over like a homing pigeon.

Molly confessed immediately—or rather tried to say that she’d meant to sign it out. But Susan LeBlanc was having none of it. “For goodness’ sake, don’t insult me with a lie,” she said. “I’ve been watching you. I *thought* you were up to something.” And what a shame that her assumptions had proven correct! She’d have liked to be surprised in a good way, just this once.

“Aw, shit. Really?” Jack sighs.

Looking in the mirror, Molly runs her finger across the charms on the chain around her neck. She doesn’t wear it much anymore, but every time something happens and she knows she’ll be on the move again, she puts it on. She bought the chain at a discount store, Marden’s, in Ellsworth, and strung it with these three charms—a blue-and-green cloisonné fish, a pewter raven, and a tiny brown bear—that her father gave her on her eighth birthday. He was killed in a one-car rollover several weeks later, speeding down I-95 on an icy night, after which her mother, all of twenty-three, started a downward spiral she never recovered from. By Molly’s next birthday she was living with a new family, and her mother was in jail. The charms are all she has left of what used to be her life.

Jack is a nice guy. But she’s been waiting for this. Eventually, like everyone else—social workers, teachers, foster parents—he’ll get fed up, feel betrayed, realize Molly’s more trouble than she’s worth. Much as she wants to care for him, and as good as she is at letting him believe that she does, she has never really let herself. It isn’t that she’s faking it, exactly, but part of her is always holding back. She has learned that she can control her emotions by thinking of her chest cavity as an enormous box with a chain lock. She opens the box and stuffs in any stray unmanageable feelings, any wayward sadness or regret, and clamps it shut.

Ralph, too, has tried to see the goodness in her. He is predisposed to it; he sees it when it isn’t even there. And though part of Molly is grateful for his faith in her, she doesn’t fully trust it. It’s almost better with Dina, who doesn’t try to hide her suspicions. It’s easier to assume that people have it out for you than to be disappointed when they don’t come through.

“*Jane Eyre*?” Jack says.

“What does it matter?”

“I would’ve bought it for you.”

“Yeah, well.” Even after getting into trouble like this and probably getting sent away, she knows she’d never have asked Jack to buy the book.

If there is one thing she hates most about being in the foster care system, it's this dependence on people you barely know, your vulnerability to their whims. She has learned not to expect anything from anybody. Her birthdays are often forgotten; she is an afterthought at holidays. She has to make do with what she gets, and what she gets is rarely what she asked for.

"You're so fucking stubborn!" Jack says, as if divining her thoughts. "Look at the trouble you get yourself into."

There's a hard knock on Molly's door. She holds the phone to her chest and watches the doorknob turn. That's another thing—no lock, no privacy.

Dina pokes her head into the room, her pink-lipsticked mouth a thin line. "We need to have a conversation."

"All right. Let me get off the phone."

"Who are you talking to?"

Molly hesitates. Does she have to answer? Oh, what the hell. "Jack."

Dina scowls. "Hurry up. We don't have all night."

"I'll be right there." Molly waits, staring blankly at Dina until her head disappears around the door frame, and puts the phone back to her ear. "Time for the firing squad."

"No, no, listen," Jack says. "I have an idea. It's a little . . . crazy."

"What," she says sullenly. "I have to go."

"I talked to my mother—"

"Jack, are you serious? You told her? She already hates me."

"Whoa, hear me out. First of all, she doesn't hate you. And second, she spoke to the lady she works for, and it looks like maybe you can do your hours there."

"What?"

"Yeah."

"But—how?"

"Well, you know my mom is the world's worst housekeeper."

Molly loves the way he says this—matter-of-factly, without judgment, as if he were reporting that his mother is left-handed.

"So the lady wants to clean out her attic—old papers and boxes and all this shit, my mom's worst nightmare. And I came up with the idea to have you do it. I bet you could kill the fifty hours there, easy."

"Wait a minute—you want me to clean an old lady's attic?"

“Yeah. Right up your alley, don’t you think? Come on, I know how anal you are. Don’t try to deny it. All your stuff lined up on the shelf. All your papers in files. And aren’t your books alphabetical?”

“You noticed that?”

“I know you better than you think.”

Molly does have to admit, as peculiar as it is, she likes putting things in order. She’s actually kind of a neat freak. Moving around as much as she has, she learned to take care of her few possessions. But she’s not sure about this idea. Stuck alone in a musty attic day after day, going through some lady’s trash?

Still—given the alternative . . .

“She wants to meet you,” Jack says.

“Who?”

“Vivian Daly. The old lady. She wants you to come for—”

“An interview. I have to interview with her, you’re saying.”

“It’s just part of the deal,” he says. “Are you up for that?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Sure. You can go to jail.”

“Molly!” Dina barks, rapping on the door. “Out here right now!”

“All right!” she calls, and then, to Jack, “All right.”

“All right what?”

“I’ll do it. I’ll go and meet her. *Interview* with her.”

“Great,” he says. “Oh, and—you might want to wear a skirt or something, just—y’know. And maybe take out a few earrings.”

“What about the nose ring?”

“I love the nose ring,” he says. “But . . .”

“I get it.”

“Just for this first meeting.”

“It’s all right. Listen—thanks.”

“Don’t thank me for being selfish,” he says. “I just want you around a little longer.”

When Molly opens the bedroom door to Dina’s and Ralph’s tense and apprehensive faces, she smiles. “You don’t have to worry. I’ve got a way to do my hours.” Dina shoots a look at Ralph, an expression Molly recognizes from reading years of host parents’ cues. “But I understand if you want me to leave. I’ll find something else.”

“We don’t want you to leave,” Ralph says, at the same time that Dina says, “We need to talk about it.” They stare at each other.

“Whatever,” Molly says. “If it doesn’t work out, it’s okay.”

And in that moment, with bravado borrowed from Jack, it is okay. If it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out. Molly learned long ago that a lot of the heartbreak and betrayal that other people fear their entire lives, she has already faced. Father dead. Mother off the deep end. Shuttled around and rejected time and time again. And still she breathes and sleeps and grows taller. She wakes up every morning and puts on clothes. So when she says it’s okay, what she means is that she knows she can survive just about anything. And now, for the first time since she can remember, she has someone looking out for her. (What’s his problem, anyway?)