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THE PAPER PALACE

A Novel



MIRANDA
COWLEY HELLER

THE PAPER PALACE



Miranda
Cowley Heller

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*For Lukas and Felix, my own two loves
And for my grandmother Muriel Maurer Cowley
whose fierce love never wavered*

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About the Author

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest
thought.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To a Skylark"

Book One



ELLE

1

Today. August 1, the Back Woods.

6:30 A.M.

Things come from nowhere. The mind is empty and then, inside the frame, a pear. Perfect, green, the stem atilt, a single leaf. It sits in a white ironstone bowl, nestled among the limes, in the center of a weathered picnic table, on an old screen porch, at the edge of a pond, deep in the woods, beside the sea. Next to the bowl is a brass candlestick covered in drips of cold wax and the ingrained dust of a long winter left on an open shelf. Half-eaten plates of pasta, an unfolded linen napkin, dregs of claret in a wine bottle, a breadboard, handmade, rough-hewn, the bread torn not sliced. A mildewed book of poetry lies open on the table. "To a Skylark," soaring into the blue—painful, thrilling—replays in my mind as I stare at the still life of last night's dinner. "*The world should listen then, as I am listening now.*" He read it so beautifully. "For Anna." And we all sat there, spellbound, remembering her. I could look at him and nothing else for eternity and be happy. I could listen to him, my eyes closed, feel his breath and his words wash over me, time and time and time again. It is all I want.

Beyond the edge of the table, the light dims as it passes through the screens before brightening over the dappled trees, the pure blue of the pond, the deep-black shadows of the tupelos at the water's edge where the reach of the sun falters this early in the day. I ponder a quarter-inch of thick, stale espresso in a dirty cup and

consider drinking it. The air is raw. I shiver under the faded lavender bathrobe—my mother’s—that I put on every summer when we return to the camp. It smells of her, and of dormancy tinged with mouse droppings. This is my favorite hour in the Back Woods. Early morning on the pond before anyone else is awake. The sunlight clear, flinty, the water bracing, the whippoorwills finally quiet.

Outside the porch door, on the small wooden deck, sand has built up between the slats—it needs to be swept. A broom leans against the screen, indenting it, but I ignore it and head down the little path that leads to our beach. Behind me, the door hinges shriek in resistance.

I drop my bathrobe to the ground and stand naked at the water’s edge. On the far side of the pond, beyond the break of pine and shrub oak, the ocean is furious, roaring. It must be carrying a storm in its belly from somewhere out at sea. But here, at the edge of the pond, the air is honey-still. I wait, watch, listen . . . the chirping, buzzing of tiny insects, a wind that stirs the trees too gently. Then I wade in up to my knees and dive headlong into the freezing water. I swim out into the deep, past the water lilies, pushed forward by exhilaration, freedom, and an adrenaline rush of nameless panic. I have a shadow-fear of snapping turtles coming up from the depths to bite my heavy breasts. Or perhaps they will be drawn by the smell of sex as I open and close my legs. I’m suddenly overwhelmed by the need to get back to the safety of the shallows, where I can see the sandy bottom. I wish I were braver. But I also love the fear, the catch of breath in my throat, my thrumming heartbeat as I step out of the water.

I wring as much as I can from my long hair, grab a threadbare towel from the clothesline my mother has strung between two scraggly pines, lie down on the warm sand. An electric-blue dragonfly lands on my nipple and perches there before moving on. An ant crawls over the Saharan dunes my body has just created in its path.

Last night I finally fucked him. After all these years of imagining it, never knowing if he still wanted me. And then the moment I knew it would happen: all the wine, Jonas's beautiful voice in ode, my husband Peter lying on the sofa in a grappa haze, my three children asleep in their cabin, my mother already at the sink washing dishes in her bright yellow rubber gloves, ignoring her dinner guests. Our eyes lingered one beat too long. I got up from the noisy table, took my underpants off in the pantry, and hid them behind the breadbox. Then I went out the back door into the night. I waited in the shadows, listening to the sounds of plate, water, glass, silver clunking together beneath the suds. Waited. Hoped. And then he was there, pushing me up against the wall of the house, reaching under my dress. "I love you," he whispered. I gasped as he shoved himself into me. And I thought: now there is no turning back. No more regrets for what I haven't done. Now only regrets for what I have done. I love him, I hate myself; I love myself, I hate him. This is the end of a long story.

1966. December, New York City.

I am screaming. I scream and gasp until, at last, my mother realizes something is wrong. She races with me to the doctor's office, imagining herself Miss Clavel as she runs up Park Avenue, terrified, clutching her three-month-old baby. My father is racing, too, briefcase in hand, up Madison Avenue from the Fred F. French Building. Thoughts stammering, afraid of his own impotence, now, as in everything he does. The doctor tells them there's no time—if they wait, the baby will die—and rips me from my mother's arms. On the operating table, he slices me open across the belly like a ripe watermelon. A tumor has snaked itself around my intestines, and a toxicity of shit has built up behind its iron grasp, pushing poison into

my tiny body. The shit always builds up, and surviving it is the key, but this I will not learn for many years.

While the doctor is inside me, he cuts off an ovary, careless, rushing to carve the death out of life. This, too, I will not learn for many years. When I do, my mother cries for me for the second time. "I'm so sorry," she says. "I should have made him be more careful . . ."—as if she'd had the power to change my fate, but chosen not to use it.

Later I lie in a hospital cot, arms tied down at my sides. I scream, cry, alive, livid with rage at this injustice. They will not let my mother feed me. Her milk dries up. Almost a week passes before they free my hands from their shackles. "You were always such a happy baby," my father says. "Afterward," my mother says, "you never stopped screaming."

7:30 A.M.

I roll over onto my stomach, rest my head on my forearms. I love the salty-sweet way my skin smells when I've been lying in the sun—a nut-gold, musky smell, as if I'm being cured. Down the path that leads from the main house to the bedroom cabins I hear a quiet slam. Someone is up. Feet crunch on dry leaves. The outdoor shower is turned on. Pipes groan awake for the day. I sigh, grab my bathrobe from the beach, and head back up to the house.

Our camp has one main building—the Big House—and four one-bedroom cabins along a pine-needled path that hugs the shoreline of the pond. Small clapboard huts, each with a roof pitched to keep the snow off, a single skylight, long clerestory windows on either side. Old-fashioned, rustic, no frills. Exactly what a New England cabin should be. Between the path and the pond is a thin windbreak of trees—flowering clethra, bay and wild blueberry bushes—that protects us from the prying eyes of fishermen and the overenthusiastic swimmers who manage to make it across to our

side of the pond from the small public access beach on the far shore. They aren't allowed to come aground, but sometimes they will tread water five feet away, directly in front of our tree line, oblivious to the fact that they are trespassing on our lives.

Down a separate path, behind the cabins, is the old bathhouse. Peeling paint, a rusted enamel sink covered in the beige flecks of dead moths drawn to the overhead light at night; an ancient claw-foot tub that has been there since my grandfather built the camp; an outdoor shower—hot and cold pipes attached to a tupelo tree, water pooling straight into the ground, runneling the sandy path.

The Big House is one large room—living room and kitchen, with a separate pantry—built of cinder blocks and tar paper. Wide-board floors, heavy beams, a massive stone fireplace. On rainy days, we close up the doors and windows and sit inside, listen to the crackle of the fire, force ourselves to play Monopoly. But where we *really* live—where we read, and eat, and argue, and grow old together—is on the screen porch, as wide as the house itself, which faces out to the pond. Our camp isn't winterized. There would be no point. By late September, when the weather turns chilly and all the summer houses have been shut down for the season, the Back Woods is a lonely place—still beautiful in the starker light, but solemn and sepulchral. No one wants to be here once the leaves fall. But when summer breaks again, and the woods are dense, and the blue herons come back to nest and wade in the bright pond, there is no better place on earth than this.

The moment I step back inside, onto the porch, I'm hit by a wave of longing, a quicksilver running through my solar plexus like homesickness. I know I should clear the table before the others come in for breakfast, but I want to memorize the shape of it—re-live last night crumb by crumb, plate by plate, etch it with an acid bath onto my brain. I run my fingers over a purple wine stain on the white linen tablecloth, put Jonas's glass to my lips and try to taste him there. I close my eyes, remembering the slight pressure of his

thigh against mine under the table. Before I was sure he wanted me. Wondering, breathless, whether it was accident or intention.

In the main room, everything is exactly as it has always been: pots hanging on the wall above the stove, spatulas on cup hooks, a mason jar of wooden spoons, a faded list of telephone numbers thumbtacked to a bookshelf, two director's chairs pulled up to the fireplace. Everything is the same, and yet, as I cross the kitchen to the pantry, I feel as though I am walking through a different room, more in focus, as if the air itself has just awakened from a deep sleep. I let myself out through the pantry door, stare at the cinder-block wall. Nothing shows. No traces, no evidence. But it was here, we were here, embedding ourselves in each other forever. Grinding, silent, desperate. I suddenly remember my underpants hidden behind the breadbox and am just pulling them on under my bathrobe when my mother appears.

"You're up early, Elle. Is there coffee?" An accusation.

"I was just about to make it."

"Not too strong. I don't like that espresso stuff you use. I know—you think it's better . . ." she says, in a false, humoring voice that drives me insane.

"Fine." I don't feel like arguing this morning.

My mother settles herself in on the porch sofa. It is just a hard horsehair mattress covered in old gray cloth, but it's the coveted place in the house. From here you can look out at the pond, drink your coffee, read your book leaning against the ancient pillows, their cotton covers specked with rust. Who knew that even cloth could grow rusty with time?

It is so typical of her to usurp the good spot.

My mother's hair, straw-blond, now streaked with gray, is twisted up in an absent-minded, messy bun. Her old gingham nightgown is frayed. Yet she still manages to look imposing—like a figurehead on the prow of an eighteenth-century New England schooner, beautiful and stern, wreathed in laurels and pearls, pointing the way.

"I'm just going to have my coffee, and then I'll clear the table," I say.

"If you clear the table, I'll do the rest of the dishes. *Mmmm*," she says, "thank you," as I hand her a cup of coffee. "How was the water?"

"Perfect. Cold."

The best lesson my mother ever taught me: there are two things in life you never regret—a baby and a swim. Even on the coldest days of early June, as I stand looking out at the brackish Atlantic, resenting the seals that now rear their hideous misshapen heads and draw great whites into these waters, I hear her voice in my head, urging me to plunge in.

"I hope you hung your towel on the line. I don't want to see another pile of wet towels today. Tell the kids."

"It's on the line."

"Because if you don't yell at them, I will."

"I got it."

"And they need to sweep out their cabin. It's a disaster. And don't you do it, Elle. Those children are completely spoilt. They are old enough to . . ."

A bag of garbage in one hand, my coffee cup in the other, I walk out the back door, letting her litany drift off into the wind.

Her worst advice: *Think Botticelli*. Be like Venus rising on a half shell, lips demurely closed, even her nakedness modest. My mother's words of advice when I moved in with Peter. The message arrived on a faded postcard she'd picked up years before in the Uffizi gift shop: *Dear Eleanor, I like your Peter very much. Please make an effort not to be so difficult all the time. Keep your mouth closed and look mysterious. Think Botticelli. Love, Mummy.*

I dump the garbage in the can, slam the lid shut, and stretch the bungee cord tight across it to keep out the raccoons. They are clever creatures with their long dexterous fingers. Little humanoid bears,

smarter and nastier than they look. We've been waging war against each other for years.

"Did you remember to put the bungee cord back on, Elle?" My mother says.

"Of course." I smile demurely and start clearing plates.

1969. New York City.

Soon my father will appear. I'm hiding—crouched behind the built-in modular bar that separates our living room from the front hall foyer. The bar is divided into squares. One houses liquor, another the phonograph, another my father's record collection, a few oversize art books, martini glasses, a silver shaker. The section that holds the liquor bottles is open through to both sides like a window. I peer through the bottles, mesmerized by the blur of topaz—the scotch, the bourbon, the rum. I am three years old. Next to me are my father's precious LPs and 78s. I run my finger along their spines, liking the sound I make, breathe in their worn cardboard smell, wait for the doorbell to ring. Finally my father arrives and I don't have the patience to stay hidden. It has been weeks. I hurtle down the hallway, throw myself into his bear-like embrace.

The divorce is not final, but almost. They will have to cross the border into Juárez to do that. The end will come as my older sister Anna and I sit patiently on the edge of an octagonal Mexican-tiled fountain in a hotel lobby, transfixed by the goldfish swimming around an island of dark-leaved tropical plants in its center. Many years later, my mother tells me she called my father that morning, divorce papers in hand, and said, "I've changed my mind. Let's not do this." And though the divorce had been entirely her choice, and though his heart was broken, he said, "No. We've come this far—we might as well finish it, Wallace." *Might as well*: three syllables that changed the course of everything. But in that moment, as I sat

feeding the goldfish crumbs from my English muffin, kicking my heels against the Mexican tile, I had no idea a sword hung over my head by a hair. That it could have gone a different way.

But Mexico hasn't happened yet. For now my father is falsely jolly and still in love with my mother.

"Eleanor!" He sweeps me up in his arms. "How's my rabbit?"

I laugh and cling to him with something approaching desperation, my loose blond curls blinding him as I press my face to his.

"Daddy!" Anna comes running now like a bull, angry that I got there first, shoves me out of his arms. She is two years older than me and has more right. He doesn't seem to notice. All he cares about is his own need to be loved. I nudge my way back in.

My mother calls out from somewhere in our sallow prewar apartment, "Henry? Do you want a drink? I'm making pork chops."

"Love one," he booms back, as if nothing between them has changed. But his eyes are sad.

8:15 A.M.

"So, I thought that was a success last night," my mother says from behind a battered novel by Dumas.

"Definitely."

"Jonas was looking well."

My hands tense around the pile of plates I'm holding.

"Jonas is always looking well, Mum." Thick black hair you can grasp in your fists, pale green eyes, skin burnished by sap and pine, a wild creature, the most beautiful man on earth.

My mother yawns. It's her "tell"—she always does this before she says something unpleasant. "He's fine, I just can't stand his mother. So self-righteous."

"She is."

"As if she's the only woman on earth who has ever recycled. And Gina. Even after all these years, I still can't imagine what he was

thinking when he married her."

"She's young, she's gorgeous? They're both artists?"

"She *was* young," my mother says. "And the way she flaunts her cleavage. Always prancing around as if she thinks she's the cat's pajamas. Clearly no one ever told her to hide her light under a bushel."

"It's bizarre," I say, going into the kitchen to dump the plates. "Self-esteem. She must have had supportive parents."

"Well, I find it very unattractive," Mum says. "Is there orange juice?"

I take a clean glass from the dish drain, go to the fridge. "As a matter of fact," I call out, "that's probably the reason Jonas fell in love with her. She must have seemed so exotic to him after the neurotic women he grew up with. Like a peacock in the woods."

"She's from Delaware," my mother says, as if this closes the subject. "No one is from Delaware."

"Exactly," I say, handing her a glass of juice. "She's exotic." But the truth is, I've never been able to look at Gina without thinking: *That's* who he chose? *That's* what he wanted? I picture Gina: her petite, perfect little bee-sting of a body; curated dark roots growing into peroxide blond. Evidently, stonewashed is back.

My mother yawns again. "Well, you have to admit she's not the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"Was there anyone at dinner you *did* like?"

"I'm just being honest."

"Well, don't be. Gina is family."

"Only because you have no choice. She's married to your best friend. You've been oil and water from the day you met."

"That's completely untrue. I've always liked Gina. We might not have a ton in common, but I respect her. And Jonas loves her."

"Have it your way," my mother says with a smug little smile.

"Oh my god." I may have to kill her.

"Didn't you once throw a glass of red wine in her face?"

"No, Mum. I did *not* throw a glass of wine in her face. I tripped at a party and spilled my wine on her."

"You and Jonas were talking the whole night. What were you talking about?"

"I don't know. Stuff."

"He had such a crush on you when you were growing up. I think you broke his heart when you married Peter."

"Don't be ridiculous. He was practically a kid."

"Oh, I think it was more than that. Poor creature." She says this idly as she returns to her book. It's good she isn't looking at me because, in this moment, I know my face is transparent.

Out on the pond the water is absolutely still. A fish jumps and, in its wake, leaves a trail of concentric circles. I watch them bleed out around the edges until they are reabsorbed, as if nothing ever happened.