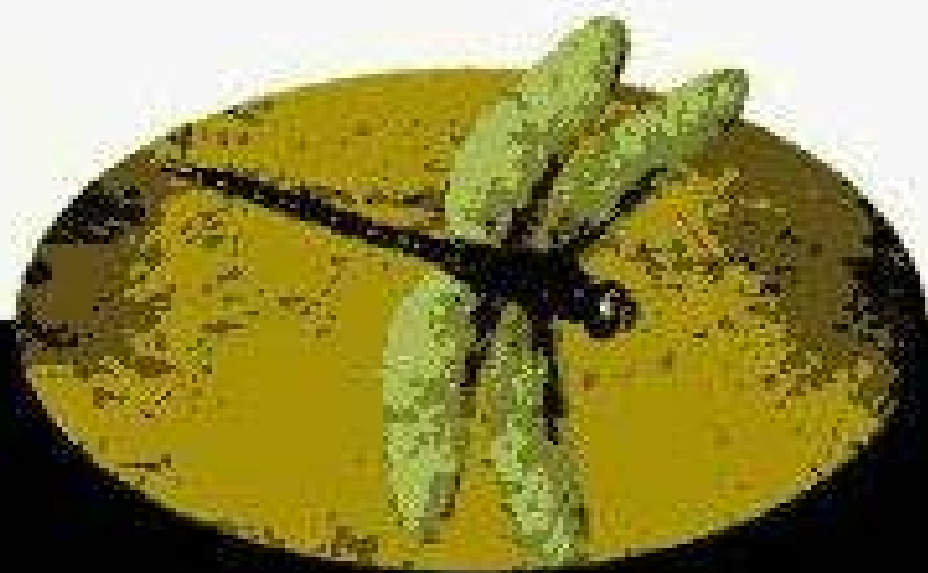


Alice

Hoffman



Here on Earth

Here On Earth

Alice Hoffman

March Murray returns with her teenage daughter to a small town in New England where she grew up, for a funeral, and finds herself being drawn back into a life she had thought was over.

Alice Hoffman

Here On Earth

Alice
Hoffman



Here on Earth

Copyright © 1990 by Alice Hoffman.

*To E.B.
For countless kindnesses and
twenty years of generosity and support
the author wishes to thank Elaine Markson.*

Part One

1

Tonight, the hay in the fields is already brittle with frost, especially to the west of Fox Hill, where the pastures shine like stars. In October, darkness begins to settle by four-thirty and although the leaves have turned scarlet and gold, in the dark everything is a shadow of itself, gray with a purple edge. At this time of year, these woods are best avoided, or so the local boys say. Even the bravest among them wouldn't dare stray from the High Road after soccer practice at Fire-men's Field, and those who are old enough to stand beside the murky waters of Olive Tree Lake and pry kisses from their girlfriends still walk home quickly. If the truth be told, some of them run. A person could get lost up here. After enough wrong turns he might find himself in the Marshes, and once he was there, a man could wander forever among the minnows and the reeds, his soul struggling to find its way long after his bones had been discovered and buried on the crest of the hill, where wild blueberries grow.

People from out of town might be tempted to laugh at boys who believed in such things; they might go so far as to call them fools. And yet there are grown men who have lived in Jenkintown all their lives, and are afraid of very little in this world, who will not cross the hill after dark. Even the firefighters down at the station on Main Street, courageous volunteers who have twice been commended for heroism by the governor himself, are always relieved to discover that the fire bells are tolling for flames on Richdale or Seventh Street -any location that's not the hill is one worth getting to fast.

The town founder himself, Aaron Jenkins, a seventeen-year-old boy from Warwick, England, was the first to realize that some localities are accompanied by bad luck. Jenkins built his house in the Marshes in the year 1663. One October night, when the tide froze solid and refused to go back to sea, he received a message in his dreams that he must flee immediately or be trapped in the ice himself. He left what little he owned and ran over the hill, even though there was a terrible storm, with thunder just above his head and hailstones the size of apples. In his journal, exhibited in the reading room at the library, Aaron Jenkins vows that a thousand foxes followed on his heels. All the same, he didn't stop until he reached what is

now the town square, where he built a new home, a neat, one-roomed house that is currently a visitors' center where tourists from New York and Boston can pick up maps.

Those foxes who chased after Aaron Jenkins are all but gone now. Still, some of the older residents in the village can recall the days when there were foxes in every inch of the woods. You'd see them slipping into the henhouses, or searching for catfish out by Olive Tree Lake. Some people insist that every time a dog was abandoned, the foxes would befriend the stray, and a breed of odd reddish dogs with coarse coats came from these unions. Indeed, such dogs were once plentiful in these parts, back when farms lined Route 22 and so many orchards circled the village that on some crisp October afternoons the whole world smelled like pie.

Twenty-five years ago, there were still hundreds of foxes in the woods. They would gather and raise their voices every evening at twilight, at such a regular hour people in the village could set their watches by the sound. Then one dreadful season the hunting ban was lifted, and people went crazy; they'd shoot at anything that moved. Most folks still regret what went on; they truly do. For one thing, the rabbits in these parts are now so fearless you're likely to see them sitting on the steps to the library, right in the middle of the day. You'll catch them in your garden, helping themselves to your finest lettuce and beans. You'll spy them in the parking lot behind the hardware store, comfortable as can be on a hot afternoon, resting in the shadow left by your car. They're pests, there's no doubt about that, and even the most gracious ladies on the library committee find themselves setting out poison every now and then.

There are so many rabbits along the back road to Fox Hill that even cautious drivers risk running over one. This, of course, is simply one more reason to avoid the hill. March Murray, who was raised here, agrees that it's best to stay away, and she has done exactly that for nineteen years. All this time she has lived in California, where the light is so lemon-colored and clear it is almost possible to forget there are other places in the world; these woods for instance, where one could easily mistake day for night on an October afternoon, where the rain falls in such drenching sheets no birds can take flight. It is exactly such a day, when the sky is the color of stone and the rain is so cold it stings the skin, that March returns home, and although coming back was not in her plans, she is definitely here of her own free will.