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DONNA TARTT

AUTHOR OF *THE LITTLE FRIEND*

THE SECRET HISTORY

A NOVEL

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—*The New York Times*

Donna Tartt

The Secret History

For Bret Easton Ellis, whose generosity will never cease to warm my heart; and for Paul Edward Mc Gloin, muse and Maecenas, who is the dearest friend I will ever have in this world.

I enquire now as to the genesis of a philologist and assert the following:
1. A young man cannot possibly know what Greeks and Romans are.
2. He does not know whether he is suited for finding out about them.
– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, Unzeitgemdsse Betrachtungen

Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes.
– PLATO, Republic, book ii

Prologue

The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He'd been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history – state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate New York, as far away as Boston.

It is difficult to believe that Henry's modest plan could have worked so well despite these unforeseen events. We hadn't intended to hide the body where it couldn't be found. In fact, we hadn't hidden it at all but had simply left it where it fell in hopes that some luckless passer-by would stumble over it before anyone even noticed he was missing. This was a tale that told itself simply and well: the loose rocks, the body at the bottom of the ravine with a clean break in the neck, and the muddy skidmarks of dug-in heels pointing the way down; a hiking accident, no more, no less, and it might have been left at that, at quiet tears and a small funeral, had it not been for the snow that fell that night; it covered him without a trace, and ten days later, when the thaw finally came, the state troopers and the FBI and the searchers from the town all saw that they had been walking back and forth over his body until the snow above it was packed down like ice.

It is difficult to believe that such an uproar took place over an act for which I was partially responsible, even more difficult to believe I could have walked through it – the cameras, the uniforms, the black crowds sprinkled over Mount Cataract like ants in a sugar bowl – without incurring a blink of suspicion. But walking through it all was one thing; walking away, unfortunately, has proved to be quite another, and though once I thought I had left that ravine forever on an April afternoon long ago, now I am not so sure. Now the searchers have departed, and life has grown quiet around me, I have come to realize that while for years I might have imagined myself to be somewhere else, in reality I have been there all the time: up at the top by the muddy wheel-ruts in the new grass, where the sky is dark over the shivering apple blossoms and the first chill of the snow that will fall that night is already in the air.

What are you doing up here? said Bunny, surprised, when he found the four of us waiting for him.

Why, looking for new ferns, said Henry.

And after we stood whispering in the underbrush – one last look at the body and a last look round, no dropped keys, lost glasses, everybody got everything? – and then started single file through the woods, I took one glance back through the saplings that leapt to close the path behind me. Though I remember the walk back and the first lonely flakes of snow that came drifting through the pines, remember piling gratefully into the car and starting down the road like a family on vacation, with Henry driving clench-jawed through the potholes and the rest of us leaning over the seats and talking like children, though I remember only too well the long terrible night that lay ahead and the long terrible days and nights that followed, I have only to glance over my shoulder for all those years to drop away and I see it behind me again, the ravine, rising all green and black through the saplings, a picture that will never leave me.

I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.

Book 1

Chapter 1

Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

A moi. L'histoire d'une de mes folies.

My name is Richard Papen. I am twenty-eight years old and I had never seen New England or Hampden College until I was nineteen. I am a Californian by birth and also, I have recently discovered, by nature. The last is something I admit only now, after the fact. Not that it matters.

I grew up in Piano, a small silicon village in the north. No sisters, no brothers. My father ran a gas station and my mother stayed at home until I got older and times got tighter and she went to work, answering phones in the office of one of the big chip factories outside San Jose.

Piano. The word conjures up drive-ins, tract homes, waves of heat rising from the blacktop. My years there created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. Which I suppose was a very great gift, in a way. On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers.

The dazzle of this fictive childhood – full of swimming pools and orange groves and dissolute, charming show-biz parents has all but eclipsed the drab original. In fact, when I think about my real childhood I am unable to recall much about it at all except a sad jumble of objects: the sneakers 1 wore year-round; coloring books and comics from the supermarket; little of interest, less of beauty. I was quiet, tall for my age, prone to freckles. I didn't have many friends but whether this was due to choice or circumstance I do not now know.1 did well in school, it seems, but not exceptionally well; I liked to read – Tom Swift, the Tolkien books – but also to watch television, which I did plenty of, lying on the carpet of our empty living room in the long dull afternoons after school.

I honestly can't remember much else about those years except a certain mood that permeated most of them, a melancholy feeling that I associate with watching 'The Wonderful World of Disney' on Sunday nights. Sunday was a sad day – early to bed, school the next morning, I was constantly worried my homework was wrong – but as I watched the fireworks go off in

the night sky, over the floodlit castles of Disneyland, I was consumed by a more general sense of dread, of imprisonment within the dreary round of school and home: circumstances which, to me at least, presented sound empirical argument for gloom. My father was mean, and our house ugly, and my mother didn't pay much attention to me; my clothes were cheap and my haircut too short and no one at school seemed to like me that much; and since all this had been true for as long as I could remember, I felt things would doubtless continue in this depressing vein as far as I could foresee. In short: I felt my existence was tainted, in some subtle but essential way.

I suppose it's not odd, then, that I have trouble reconciling my life to those of my friends, or at least to their lives as I perceive them to be. Charles and Camilla are orphans (how I longed to be an orphan when I was a child!) reared by grandmothers and great-aunts in a house in Virginia: a childhood I like to think about, with horses and rivers and sweet-gum trees. And Francis.

His mother, when she had him, was only seventeen – a thinblooded, capricious girl with red hair and a rich daddy, who ran off with the drummer for Vance Vane and his Musical Swains.

She was home in three weeks, and the marriage was annulled in six; and, as Francis is fond of saying, the grandparents brought them up like brother and sister, him and his mother, brought them up in such a magnanimous style that even the gossips were impressed – English nannies and private schools, summers in Switzerland, winters in France. Consider even bluff old Bunny, if you would. Not a childhood of reefer coats and dancing lessons, any more than mine was. But an American childhood. Son of a Clemson football star turned banker. Four brothers, no sisters, in a big noisy house in the suburbs, with sailboats and tennis rackets and golden retrievers; summers on Cape Cod, boarding schools near Boston and tailgate picnics during football season; an upbringing vitally present in Bunny in every respect, from the way he shook your hand to the way he told a joke.

I do not now nor did 1 ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a knowledge of Greek and the year of my life I spent in their company. And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too, though I realize that might sound odd in light of the story I am about to tell.

How to begin.

After high school I went to a small college in my home town (my parents were opposed, as it had been made very plain that I was expected to help my father run his business, one of the many reasons I was in such an agony to escape) and, during my two years there, I studied ancient Greek. This was due to no love for the language but because I was majoring in pre-med (money, you see, was the only way to improve my fortunes, doctors make a lot of money, quod erat demonstrandum) and my counselor had suggested I take a language to fulfill the humanities requirement; and, since the Greek classes happened to meet in the afternoon, I took Greek so I could sleep late on Mondays. It was an entirely random decision which, as you will see, turned out to be quite fateful.

I did well at Greek, excelled in it, and I even won an award from the Classics department my last year. It was my favorite class because it was the only one held in a regular classroom no jars of cow hearts, no smell of formaldehyde, no cages full of screaming monkeys. Initially I had thought with hard work I could overcome a fundamental squeamishness and distaste for my subject, that perhaps with even harder work I could simulate something like a talent for it. But this was not the case. As the months went by I remained uninterested, if not downright sickened, by my study of biology; my grades were poor; I was held in contempt by teacher and classmate alike. In what seemed even to me a doomed and Pyrrhic gesture, I switched to English literature without telling my parents. I felt that I was cutting my own throat by this, that I would certainly be very sorry, being still convinced that it was better to fail in a lucrative field than to thrive in one that my father (who knew nothing of either finance or academia) had assured me was most unprofitable; one which would inevitably result in my hanging around the house for the rest of my life asking him for money; money which, he assured me forcefully, he had no intention of giving me.

So I studied literature and liked it better. But I didn't like home any better. I don't think I can explain the despair my surroundings inspired in me. Though I now suspect, given the circumstances and my disposition, I would've been unhappy anywhere, in Biarritz or Caracas or the Isle of Capri, I was then convinced that my unhappiness was indigenous to that place. Perhaps a part of it was. While to a certain extent Milton is right – the mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell and so forth – it is nonetheless clear that Piano was modeled less on Paradise than that other, more dolorous city. In high school I developed a habit of

wandering through shopping malls after school, swaying through the bright, chill mezzanines until I was so dazed with consumer goods and product codes, with promenades and escalators, with mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible: color without form, a babble of detached molecules. Then I would walk like a zombie to the parking lot and drive to the baseball field, where I wouldn't even get out of the car, just sit with my hands on the steering wheel and stare at the Cyclone fence and the yellowed winter grass until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see.

Though I had a confused idea that my dissatisfaction was bohemian, vaguely Marxist in origin (when I was a teenager I made a fatuous show of socialism, mainly to irritate my father), I couldn't really begin to understand it; and I would have been angry if someone had suggested that it was due to a strong Puritan streak in my nature, which was in fact the case. Not long ago I found this passage in an old notebook, written when I was eighteen or so: 'There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes. Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death – those monstrous upheavals of life that the Greeks call miasma, defilement – been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability and death death death.'

This, I think, is pretty rough stuff. From the sound of it, had I stayed in California I might have ended up in a cult or at the very least practicing some weird dietary restriction. I remember reading about Pythagoras around this time, and finding some of his ideas curiously appealing – wearing white garments, for instance, or abstaining from foods which have a soul.

But instead I wound up on the East Coast.

I lit on Hampden by a trick of fate. One night, during a long Thanksgiving holiday of rainy weather, canned cranberries, ball games droning from the television, I went to my room after a fight with my parents (I cannot remember this particular fight, only that we always fought, about money and school) and was tearing through my closet trying to find my coat when out it flew: a brochure from Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont.

It was two years old, this brochure. In high school a lot of colleges had sent me things because I did well on my SATs, though unfortunately not

well enough to warrant much in the way of scholarships, and this one 1 had kept in my Geometry book throughout my senior year.

I don't know why it was in my closet. I suppose I'd saved it because it was so pretty. Senior year, I had spent dozens of hours studying the photographs as though if I stared at them long enough and longingly enough I would, by some sort of osmosis, be transported into their clear, pure silence. Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow.

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Established 1895.

(This alone was a fact to cause wonder; nothing 1 knew of in Piano had been established much before 1962.) Student body, five hundred. Coed. Progressive. Specializing in the liberal arts.

Highly selective. 'Hampden, in providing a well-rounded course of study in the Humanities, seeks not only to give students a rigorous background in the chosen field but insight into all the disciplines of Western art, civilization, and thought. In doing so, we hope to provide the individual not only with facts, but with the raw materials of wisdom.'

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Even the name had an austere Anglican cadence, to my ear at least, which yearned hopelessly for England and was dead to the sweet dark rhythms of the little mission towns. For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light – different from Piano, different from anything I had ever known – a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence.

My mother knocked on the door, said my name. I didn't answer. I tore out the information form in the back of the brochure and started to fill it in. Name: John Richard Papen.

Address: 4487 Mimosa Court; Piano, California. Would you like to receive information on Financial Aid? Yes. And I mailed it the following morning.

The months subsequent were an endless dreary battle of paperwork, full of stalemates, fought in trenches. My father refused to complete the financial aid papers; finally, in desperation, I stole the tax returns from the glove compartment of his Toyota and did them myself. More waiting. Then a note from the Dean of Admissions. An interview was required, and when