

MICHELLE T. CLEMENS

*The
Girls
of
Belvedere*

~ A NOVEL ~

The Girls of Belvedere

MICHELLE T. CLEMENS

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To my mother and her sisters

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1

The Leaving

The night after she died, it all came out. The bed, her clothes, the trinkets and bottles, the pictures, and the linens that would never come clean. Ryan threw all of it out the front door, where she had sat in the evening waiting for him to come home with the fish, tired from a day's work. Even in his mad grief, he remembered Caitlin's eyes and her smile as she jumped the fence to greet him every day of their time together. Until the last jump. The one where the fence had snagged her skirt and she came down hard and struck her head and twisted her pregnant body. He ran and lifted her up from the fence, but it was already too late as the life began to flow from her, and her eyes began to cloud from the bleed in her head that no one saw.

Ryan hauled it all to the beach and set it to flame. Feeding the fire with his rage. His arms moved up and down, calling on God to burn it all fucking down. Begging the devil to make sure it was all destroyed. They all ran to the beach and the men to Ryan, grabbing his arms to hold him off the flames. He wrenched away from their grip and went again for the fuel and ran to the fishing boat that was silent at the wharf. A quiet shadow waiting for his revenge. They tackled him then, by the hips, and brought him down before he could set her alight. Even the ship was no longer allowed to bear her name.

They all stood witness, and they smelled the sick of his vomit and

the stench of the smoky ruins that clung to the clothing and the wood of the house. The grime from the burn would stain the clapboard for years to come.

Hannah, Kitty's sister, tried to run to her dad, to hug him and to cry with him, but Kitty held her back and whispered, "He is not himself. He could do anything about now." So, she sat on the beach with Kitty and watched their family's possessions burn. They sat entwined until Aunt Dot collected them both and brought them to her house to get cleaned up before putting them to bed. Exhaustion won out over grief, and they slept.

The next morning, most of the community had come back from her mother's gravesite, and Kitty watched as all hands went into the Old Woman's house. Kitty had heard her grandmother being called the Old Woman by the boys who lived down the lane, and she thought it was a perfect fit, because her face was a portrait of her hard and bitter life. She knew if she said it to her face she would get a lickin' like no other, but it was safe to think it.

The women had a cup of tea and some sweetbread, and the men went straight for the rum and into the pot of fish soup that simmered on the back damper of the cast-iron stove. Her dad, Ryan, had gone directly to his home and shut up the door so no one else could get in. Uncle Jacob had called out to him, asking him to open the door, but he ignored his brother.

Ryan just sat in their bedroom and drank the day away. He sat on the bed where his wife, Caitlin, had died—the too-early baby came away from her body and her lifeblood along with it. When dark came on, he moved down into the kitchen and stared out the window that faced the ocean, just as Caitlin had wanted it. She wanted it to be different than the rest of the houses in the community that had the front door facing the road. No, Caitlin's house faced the water. She always wanted to see the ocean, and she would spend hours sitting on the front stoop watching her children play on the small beach in front of the house.

The Old Woman had gone out to her son's house, to make him come to the reception and to tend to the guests that were beating a path into her kitchen all day long. Kitty followed at a distance, and then she tucked her body down under the kitchen window to listen. She didn't need to see inside to know the Old Woman glared at her son in disappointment and disgust.

"God help us, you're out here drinking, and I'm supposed to tend on her crowd and all the other Nosy Parkers from miles around. Pull yourself together and come in and stop making a holy show of the family."

"There's no family now," he moaned, "with Caitlin gone."

"Give up your foolishness. You got a houseful of youngsters that you're leaving to me to deal with on top of all them guests."

"Jesus, Mother," he snapped. "How hard can it be with all of them bringing the food and the drink?"

"What would you know? You're brooding out here."

Kitty heard him shove the table, stomp across the floor, and return to the table to slam a glass on the table. She hugged the side of the house as she dug her nails into the rough clapboard.

"It brings me comfort to be here around her things. My comfort makes you mad, doesn't it, Mother? The fact that she brought me a bit of peace drove you to distraction."

The Old Woman's voice hardened. "She was a distraction. Always flitting around and grinning and dancing. This house filled with noise and foolishness."

His hand slammed on the table. "Woman, hold your tongue!"

"You don't get to talk to me like that. I'm your mother."

"Then act like it and let those girls stay home—here. Look after them like a grandmother. Like a woman should."

Kitty felt the heat build in her belly and the sweat pop out on her forehead as she eavesdropped. She felt excited and sick all at the same time, and she knew she should bolt away, but she stood still in fear and fascination.

"Yes, me. I stay and I raises your youngsters while you and your father go off to fish and to sail to God only knows where, taking up with women and drinking your pay. I'm not doing that again. I raised mine—you raise yours."

"Mom, daughters need a woman's hand."

"Well, my son, you should have thought of that before you got that flighty girl in the family way. If she wasn't up to all her silly ways, she'd be alive now to look after her own. Look around this place. All these bits and bobs you brought her back. Nonsense, and I'll not have it."

Kitty listened to the hard breaths of anger between the two of them, and she tried to hold her own. Her father snarled, "Get out!" and when Kitty heard glass crash, it startled her into flight. She swooped around to the back of the house and returned to the reception to hide among the guests at the Old Woman's house.

The next morning, Kitty took it upon her eight-year-old self, after she heard the whispers of the grown-ups and their talk about the orphanage, to visit each aunt and each uncle to ask if they would make room for just one more child. If she could stay with Aunt Dot, and Hannah could stay with Aunt Mary, and little three-year-old Ruth could stay with old Mrs. Gale, who doted on every baby in the cove, then it would be okay. Dad could give their relatives the money that he was using to send them to Belvedere, and wouldn't that be grand? Though she asked and asked, the answer was always no. Their homes were packed like sardines with children of their own, and there was no more room for another body and another mouth.

When word got back to Kitty's grandmother about what she was doing, the Old Woman tore through the community until she found her and dragged her back home. Grandmother's face filled with contempt when Kitty begged and promised. They would be quieter, they would be more helpful, they swore never to complain. Grandmother was resolute—she would keep the boy and their three-year-old sister, Ruth, because the nuns would not care for a child under six years of age.

Kitty was eight, Hannah six, and Ruth would join them in a few years at the orphanage. The boy, she said, would at least be useful. He could chop and carry wood, haul water, mend nets, and in a couple of years be a half-share on the boat. Boys earned, and girls cost, was what she said.

When Kitty tried to explain her plan to stay with aunts and uncles to her grandmother, she got a slap across her face for her audacity and a bump on her head when it struck the stove. "How dare you go about the lane begging. Have you no shame? You are a wilful brat, and the sooner I seen the last of your face, the better. This is your comeuppance, Kitty, for all the trouble you cause everyone with your running about and mischief. If you want to beg someone, try your mother's crowd in Sandy Harbour. Just to say, lassie, not one has come looking' for the likes of you."

The priest was called to the house for the third time that week, once for the wake of their mother, and twice to discuss the plans for the girls. This time, Father O'Reilly confirmed that the Sisters had room for Hannah and Kitty, and their father, Ryan, could borrow the priest's car to take them to town himself. A chance for a last visit with his girls. The priest reassured her dad that the education his daughters received would be as good as anywhere abroad and that they would be transformed into fine young ladies worthy to be married to any man in town. Ryan would leave the car in St. John's at the rectory, as he had to board a merchant ship heading to Boston. He had already missed a berth on a ship going to Barbados, and he had to secure a position. All that was left to do was for the girls to pack their belongings.

When Hannah heard that through the vent in the floor, she started to wail, the same as she had done at their mother's grave. Their dad looked at them through the grate, his eyes shadowed by the cast of the lantern. "That's enough of that. We leave tomorrow with or without your things. If you want anything other than the clothes on your back, you'd better get to gathering them up. You don't want to show up looking like orphans."

“But that’s what we are now, ain’t it, Dad? Orphans. You’re giving us away,” snapped Kitty.

The priest cleared his throat. “The nuns will deal with that attitude of hers. This will be for the best, Ryan. You wait and see.”

“She’s got her mother’s liveliness, that’s for sure.”

“And your sharp tongue. Not a good combination in a girl,” said the priest.

Ryan showed the priest out the front door.

Kitty turned to Hannah, gripped her by the shoulders, and brought her into a fierce hug. “Don’t give him any more of your tears, Hannah. They’re not worth it, and it ain’t going to make any difference. Sure, that place can’t be any worse than living with the Old Woman.”

Hannah reached up and touched the handprint on Kitty’s face. “Yeah, the Old Woman.” Hannah tried to stop the tears, but they kept on coming, silent now.

Kitty touched her sister’s face and wiped away her tears. “Hey, let’s pack so well that the Old Woman will be weeks looking for some of the stuff we’ll take. Let’s do just as Dad says. We’ll take all her things so that no one believes we is orphans.”

They turned their backs to the vent and began hauling their bits of clothing out of the cupboard and the small dresser they shared. Then Kitty watched out the upstairs window until her father went down the lane to Uncle Jacob’s for a drink. When she saw Uncle Jacob’s back door open and close, she snuck down the stairs and looked through the cupboards, picking up the china cups and saucers. She crept into the parlour to see if there was something of her mother’s that her father had missed. Something he had not thrown in the bonfire on the beach.

Kitty could only see the shadows of the pictures of her mom that once hung from nails on the walls. The dust still held a spot for the trinkets her father had brought back from away, when he travelled in the winter to trading ports all down the coast of the United States. There was nothing for Kitty to secrete in her luggage except for the cups and

saucers he had missed in the kitchen cupboard. Not his domain. The china she used when the priest came to visit or when her sister came over from the harbour. The ones they would take out to play “Lady Tea” with their mother during stormy winter nights, when the howl of the wind woke them from their sleep. When only sipping tea with their mom, while sticking out pinky fingers and giggling, could distract them from the storms. Kitty took the cups and saucers, all three sets, and wrapped them in their spare undershirts and nightgowns, one in Hannah’s suitcase and two in hers, just to safeguard them from an accident.

“What will the Old Woman say when she sees them gone?” asked Hannah.

“Not that I give a fiddler’s fart,” said Kitty. Hannah giggled, and Kitty felt wonderful for having made her laugh. “She’ll only think that Dad threw them in the fire and they’re gone for good. But we’ll have them.”

“Is that all there is?”

“Yeah, I looked and looked,” said Kitty. *It will have to do*, she thought. “Now get into bed, Hannah. Dad won’t be back the night.”

Kitty went to the crib and drew little Ruth to her shoulder, and the toddler nuzzled under Kitty’s chin, seeking warmth. Kitty walked her quickly to the bed where Hannah lay and placed Ruth next to her. Then she climbed in on the other side so Ruth was sandwiched between them.

“I thought you hated it when Ruth slept with us,” said Hannah.

“Yeah, I kind of do, but it’s the last night, isn’t it? You and me, we’ll get to sleep together at Belvedere, but she won’t,” said Kitty.

“Maybe she can sneak in with the Old Woman,” said Hannah with a grin.

“That would be like sleeping next to an old wooden board. Sure, Pop don’t hardly do that. He sleeps on the daybed in the kitchen most.”

“He says he does it so he can keep the stove going through the night.”

Kitty gave Hannah big eyes. “He does it same in the summer.”

“Well, maybe Ruth can be like Pop and sleep on the daybed,” replied Hannah.

Kitty reached over and held Hannah's hand, and they both held Ruth a little closer. "Hope so," said Kitty. Even as Kitty studied the face of her baby sister in the dark, her tired body drifted off into sleep.

Kitty was up early the next morning, and she lit the fire in the stove and pumped the kettle full of water for the tea. There was bread from Aunt Mary and a few tea buns left over from the wake. She sliced them down the middle and buttered them up, then wrapped them in a white cotton tea towel for the long drive to town. Kitty found a sealed bottle of jam and decided to save it for the trip. There was a noise on the stairs, and she glanced up, expecting to see her sisters, but it was Little John, their five-year-old brother. He was dragging a full sack behind him down the stairs. It thumped on each step. John dragged the bag into the room and stopped in front of Kitty.

"What's in that?" Kitty nodded her head toward the bag.

"My stuff," he replied with his eyes glued to the floor.

"Where are you going with it?"

Little John shook his head and spoke to the floor. "Dad's moving us in with Gran. He don't want to step foot in here again with Mom gone."

"So, you going to the boys' orphanage?"

Little John shrugged his shoulder. "Gran says that I can earn me keep." He moved past Kitty and headed to the door, the bag dogging his footsteps. He looked over his shoulder. "I'll see ya later?"

Kitty's mouth hung open as she studied her little brother. She lifted her shoulders and dropped them again. Little John pulled his sack outside the door and pulled the latch down to hold the storm door closed.

Kitty turned to the stairs in the hall and watched Hannah walk to the stove. The water boiled, and it hissed and spat on the hot black top. Hannah reached over to grab Kitty's hand. They stared at the closed door that he had walked through. "We don't want to live with the Old Woman, right?"

"No, not the Old Woman."

Kitty nudged Hannah in the ribs and pointed to the food. "If we can't eat it, we'll take it in the car."

But there was no eating in the car. Not only was the car pristine and the priest had a list of warnings as long as an arm, but the road was also so rutted and twisted that they were sick to their stomachs in no time at all. Their father's breath reeked of the rum he had drunk the night before, but the windows stayed closed to keep the dust from filling the car. By the time they hit Bay Bulls, each girl had thrown up their supper from the night before.

The roads stayed rough until they arrived at the edge of the city of St. John's. Finally, they were driving down the main commercial road with banks, warehouses, and shops running on both sides of the street. Their mouths hung open as they passed the railway station, and their father avoided cars and people alike. The street teemed with people. Workers moved cargo on and off trucks, and women stepped into shop after shop. Children ran in packs along the street and danced between cars and adults before disappearing down lanes and around corners.

Kitty and Hannah both wanted to stop the car and explore the city, but the grim, tight expression on their father's face told them they had better not say a single word. He turned left up a long, steep street, and they passed by four churches in quick succession. They looked up in awe at the tall stone steeples that clawed into the sky. Next, they passed a couple schools that had just released their charges and hundreds of boys hollered and streamed out the doors. They rushed across the street in waves, stopping the traffic and scattered like leaves in all different directions.

Soon they turned the car into a narrow lane, and it stopped in front of a fancy building. It had a double-door entrance, grand tall windows, and a curved top floor with glass cut around at the top. It was higher than any house they had seen before in their outport community of Grey Harbour. It looked more like a church than a school or a home.

Kitty gazed up at the building where they were now supposed to live, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop the tears that threatened to fall. She gripped her sister's arm from hand to elbow and said, "The place is not so big we can't find each other."

She whispered to Hannah, "Remember, Dad said this was more like boarding school, like rich folks did in England. They sent their children to school for the year. He is paying for us to be there—we're not charity cases."

Their father opened the car door and directed the girls up the stairs. He followed a few steps behind but did not mount the final step to touch or hug them goodbye.

"Be good for the Sisters, you two. Kitty, look after Hannah." His eyes travelled every inch of Kitty's face.

"I always do," she replied.

"I'll be gone for the winter but back come the spring to fish. I will come to see you then."

"Will we be coming home?"

He gingerly reached out to pat them on the shoulder but caught the eye of the Sister and withdrew, even as the girls leaned for it.

"We will talk about it then. You two settle in. It's for the best."

"Come now, girls, your father needs to go, and you need to find your place here at Belvedere. Pick up your bags and bring them inside. Now."

Hannah went to move toward her father as he took the steps down, two at a time, but Kitty grabbed her hand and held on to her. Kitty drew her in close and whispered, "It's too late for that. We're here now. Stick close to me."

She handed a bag to Hannah and collected her own. They turned to the doors. Kitty whispered, "Do not look back. Do not look back."

2

St. John's, 1948

Kitty stood with Sister Mary at the entrance to the bedroom and took in the ten steel-framed beds with their identical white sheets and tan blankets. Each bed had one pillow. At the foot, a dark brown wooden footlocker sat for each girl's belongings. The only thing that distinguished one child's space from the other was its position in the room and the wear and tear on the footlockers and bed frames. This room was identical to the one they put Hannah in.

Sister Mary placed her hand in the centre of Kitty's back and moved her into the room. They stopped halfway into the space, where Sister pointed to the second bed on the left. "That one is yours. You have fifteen minutes to unpack your things. Make sure all items are stored in your footlocker. There will be no displaying of personal property, as it causes jealousy and ill will amongst the girls. Your school blouse and uniform are to be hung in the dressing closet by the washrooms once you have sewn your name onto all the items issued to you today. You can do your sewing now in the common room while the other girls are in afternoon class. For today, you and your sister can meet there and work on this together. Prayers are in the Chapel at four thirty, and supper is at five in the dining room. Are there any questions?"

"If I talk with the other girls and they want to switch rooms, can I have a bed in the same room as Hannah?"

“Siblings are separated so as not to encourage favouritism, envy, or discourse with the other girls. You are not members of separate families at Belvedere, but you are members of a single group of girls, each unto themselves, in the same way that each Sister, at the convent, is now a member of the convent, regardless of where she came from. No child is less or more here. Your loyalty and obedience are to me and to God.”

Kitty opened her mouth to speak but closed it again when Sister Mary took her hand from under her robe and gave Kitty a too-tight smile. She moved to her footlocker and dropped the school clothing on top of the bed.

“Father O'Reilly said you were bright enough, but wilful. Remember, Katherine, there is only one will here.” Sister Mary placed her finger under Kitty's chin and hooked into the soft flesh under the bone. She raised it until Kitty was looking directly in her eyes. The nun raised her arm and her hand up until Kitty was on her tiptoes and the air in her windpipe whistled under the restriction. “He won't be back. The men forget. You'll come to understand.”

She released Kitty and turned and left the room. Kitty sank to the floor and splayed into the small space between the beds. All she saw were spools of colour swirling across her eyes. She sucked in deep, clean breaths and listened to her heart pound in her ears. The colours receded, and the white of the ceiling came into view and blurred again through the tears that flooded her eyes. She covered her mouth with her hand to muffle the keening that escaped. Kitty missed her mother and her home so much. She glanced to her side and saw the small space under her bed and considered its dark safety for a few more breaths. Her heart slowed, and she thought, *Hannah*.

Kitty sat up and wiped her face with the blanket on the bed. She walked on her knees to the footlocker and the suitcase, which stood on its side. Lifting the lid of the locker, she found it devoid of even a shelf. Hannah unpacked her bag and placed it all inside. She

double-checked the teacup folded in her undershirt and examined the school-issued clothing, reminding herself she was expected to wear the navy blue knee socks. Taking one of her home-spun socks, she placed the cup inside it and used its mate to hide the saucer. The remaining skirts, blouses, and one pair of pants were laid on top. Kitty closed the box and slid her suitcase under the bed. Checking under the other beds in the room, she saw no other girls had tucked any items under the frame, so she thought better of it and sat her bag on top of her locker. She would ask about this later.

Kitty loaded her arms with her school uniform and scooted out of the dorm and back down the side staircase toward the common room. She passed by the first-floor classrooms, glancing through the half glass doors to see the girls seated in rows. As she passed each classroom, she noticed an increase in the ages of the girls. She walked to the end of the hall to the common room, which contained large wooden tables and chairs. The room's walls contained shelves of books, and there were small reading tables pushed against the opposite wall. Kitty's eyes fell on Hannah, who sat with a stack of clothes on her lap as she took in the room with large eyes. When Hannah saw Kitty, she bolted up and the uniforms all fell to the floor as she ran to her sister. Kitty put her stack on the nearest table and ran to her, too, toppling a chair along the way. Hannah gripped her tight around the waist and started to wail.

"Shush, shush, Hannah, you've got to be quiet or they will hear us, and we are sure to get a smack. That old bat, Sister Mary, got the devil in her, and whatever she does may be worse than what the Old Woman would do."

"I want to go back to the Old Woman. Anything is better than here." Hannah burrowed into Kitty's neck. "You said we would be in the same bed, at least in the same room."

"Hannah, who'd have thought they'd give us each a bed? Nobody gets their own bed back home." Kitty stepped back from Hannah and

said, "We got to be smart and watch out for the mean ones and do what we're told until I can figure things out."

She glanced over Hannah's shoulder, saw the clothes on the floor, and went to them, taking her sister with her. "Here, pick all this up and we'll fix it together." The two girls folded Hannah's clothes and placed them in a pile on the table. Hannah picked up the sewing basket, gathered up the threads, pincushion, and notions that had fallen, and set it all next to the basket and the uniforms.

"Hannah, you need to crawl under the table and make sure you got every piece. You'd better bet that someone knows every little thing that was in it."

"I don't know how to sew! She told me to sew my name into every piece of clothing. I told her I didn't know how, and all she said was you'd better learn fast or it will be hard to sit. Kitty, I've never been spanked before. It's always you that gets punished." Tears started to roll down her little heart-shaped face.

"I don't think your blue eyes and sooky face are going to get you out of trouble here, Hannah."

"What will?"

"I don't know. Not yet, anyway. For now, I'll show you how to thread the needle and we'll get going. The letter 'H' is not that hard to do. We'll start there."

3

The Cloister

Sister Mary marched into the cloister and headed toward her office. Dealing with the two orphans had put her off her schedule. New admissions were usually tended to on Friday mornings when there was time to process them, assign them their belongings, and have them attend the afternoon motivation assembly, where the rules of the school could be modelled by all the girls. This interference on a Monday was most distracting. Father O'Reilly pressed his will, and she had no choice but to obey, and it still squeezed at her throat days later.

Mary looked up to see Sister Theresa heading in her direction. She was another trial for her to endure. Theresa was a softie. Mary had hoped that a girl from the harsh southern coast of Newfoundland had some grit to her, but she could not find it. Theresa had spent her first years in St. John's training as a nurse, but she did not find the work "suited her." The arrogance of the girl to dare question what suited her . . . but Sister Luke, her sponsor, was another weak-willed woman. She spent her time on board the coastal boats assisting the doctor and collecting strays for the orphanage and the Order. When she was in town, she fussed about them like an old nurturing grandmother. Sister Luke had thrust Theresa on her and the school a year ago to see if Theresa "liked" teaching math to the girls. Teaching Theresa her place again was a job for another day.



Michelle T. Clemens is a writer, producer, director, and actor born in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. She won two Arts and Letters Awards. *Showdown* won the 2023 Dramatic Script, and *Ready, Aim* won in 2022 for Poetry. *Showdown* had a dramatic reading at Persistence Theatre's Year of the Arts Women's Play Festival in 2024, and it was part of the Playwriters Guild of Canada's International Craft Bites Program. Michelle's three-act play *Mummering, Mischief and Murder: A Tibbs Eve Farce* sold out in December 2023, and *Boomerang*, another three-act play, debuted at the Barbara Barrett Theatre to near-capacity houses.

Clemens wrote, directed, and produced *The Odds of That*, a short film, which won Best First Time Film at the 4Theatre Film Festival and was selected for several film festivals: the Nickle International, the Smith Sound, and the Parrsboro Atlantic. She wrote and starred in the comedy *It's All Fun and Games*, which also screened at the Smith Sound in 2023. Her screenplay *Success* won the Best Short Film Screenplay at Australia's Sydney Science Fiction Film Festival 2024. She has co-written and produced half a dozen other short films since 2022. Michelle is a regular storyteller with St. John's Storytelling events, where she performs her original short stories.

The Girls of Belvedere is her first novel. Michelle is blessed with a supportive husband, family, and friends who are essential to her success.

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