

April Snow

OLIVIA VAN GUINN



"Violent, baroque, and beautiful.
A captivating debut by an outstanding new writer."

- Suzette Mayr, *Giller Prize Winner*



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For my mom.

PROLOGUE

A portrait must be painted of two parasites. They eat each other, gnawing with serrated teeth, swallowing so ravenously that soon, one may bite down on itself inside the belly of the other. Imagine the dialogue:

“My boy.”

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“Sit here. Sit with me.”

It's at this time that the narrator ponders—*what is a person?* Is a person his arms, legs, heart, brain, and stomach? A self-sustaining organism which can reason and react on his own accord? Then, is the portrait of a person his arms, legs, heart, brain, stomach, and all the food he consumes? Is Lars McKenzie his arms, legs, heart, brain, stomach, and also the rubber straw in his yellow skin, the IV pole and its dangling fruit, the cuff around his arm, and the monitors on his chest?

The boy locks the door and sits.

“Sir, how are you feeling?”

“Oh...the pain is nothing. The pain does not keep me awake. It is not the suffering which drains me. Don't concern yourself with that.”

“Okay.”

Two parasites devouring each other. From the boy, Lars McKenzie swallows hours, saps strength, sucks up funds and food like fruit juice. From his white sterile throne he lies, each gasp of air the rarest and most bitter of poisons. But the boy is parasitic as well. To him, the old man is

Scheherazade, and each of his few remaining words are precious blood drained drop by drop. Storytelling is a loss for the storyteller in the act's own poignant way.

"My boy," says Lars. "My boy, come closer. Put your ear to my lips. I must confess an awful truth to you. I have enjoyed our time together. You have been precious to me. But I'm afraid our arrangement cannot continue much longer, for I've nearly run out of wisdom to share with you."

The boy frowns. "What? But..."

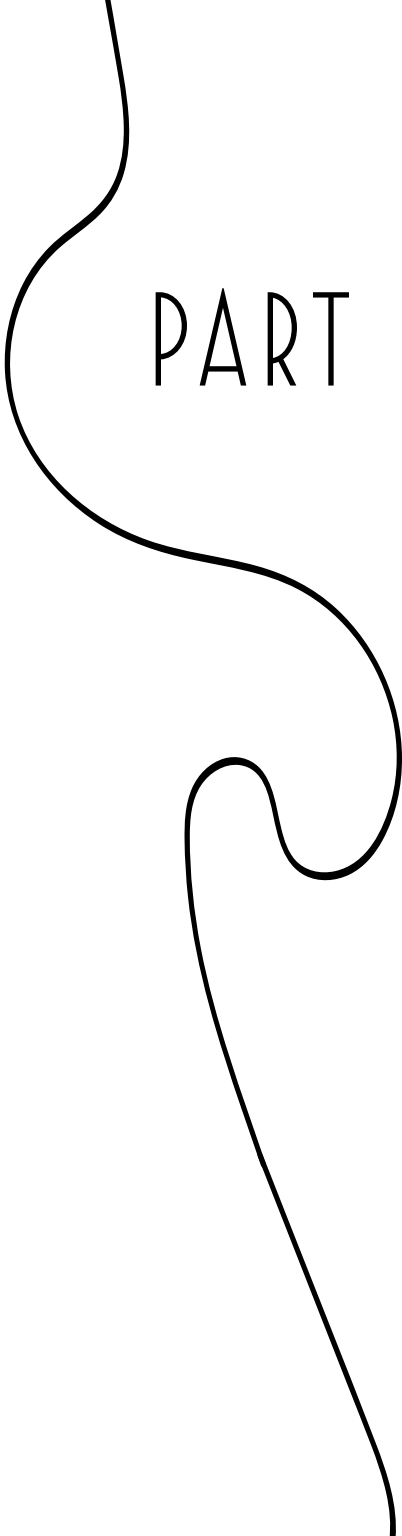
"Yes. It saddens me. All the wisdom I've accumulated in my nine decades, all revealed in a few months' time. I have only one long tale left to tell. Then I fear it's time to move on. You must pursue greater avenues than the maintenance of one old man who has far outlived his expiry. And I must pursue greater answers than can be found in this world. But not yet. First things first. First, one final story."

"N-No."

"Don't protest." Lars reaches forward with one frail, trembling arm, and with a leathery yellow finger, he punctures a teardrop sat on the boy's left cheek. "My final story is the dearest to my heart, for in it contains the final secret of my life. You see...my father held the belief that we are all put on this world for a singular task; everything that comes before is to prepare you for this task; everything that comes after is excess. In this story is my final climactic task, in which is the secret to my being. Are you ready to finally hear it?"

The boy closes his lips, and his lips remained closed.

The old man begins.



PART ONE

I.

It was the early days of Enemy as we know it, dancing in the jaws of a monstrously bitter winter. At the time, the skyline was little more than pebbles and blocks on a playground slope which plateaued at the city's periphery, all the way to the jagged border where land tapered into the surrounding river. I remember a grey colour in the earth, unsullied. It was so quiet...*oh, so quiet...* that a footstep would travel for miles. The wizened skies were still; the geese had fled like divorcees, and the webbed footprints and forgotten feathers only made the land feel emptier. And cold hung in the air, a scentless poison, a sigh of relief which lulls one into the black magic of frostbite and pneumonia.

That September, a fresh dusting of pearly slush blanketed the suburban roads. People not familiar with the neighborhood would charge onto it, ignorant of the compressed bed of black ice underneath; they'd fall flat on their backs. This is what happened to Edward Montgomery, six years old, a newcomer. When a child falls, it's comical because his body is so light and his limbs are so short, and he's bundled up so tightly by a cryophobic mother that he can hardly bend his arms. The red face and the tears and the gasping breaths are unfathomable.

Let me begin the image a little sooner.

For that half second in the air after bursting from the front seat of his parents' rental car, arms spread like feeble bird wings, Edward felt he was soaring. The bottom of his tiny red souvenir jacket lifted, and he pictured it flapping

behind him like the ribbon of a kite as cold air rushed up his body—*omens of bad things*. He expected to land on his feet with his hands on his hips like an action hero, the first of his family to step on the pavement of his new house. His eyes widened in that split second of realization when it clicked in his head that the ground was slipping out from under him, and his heels went forward.

“Hey, Champ.” Summoned by the noise of the crash, Edward’s father appeared. Percival Montgomery came around the other side of the car with small steps as to avoid falling himself. He grabbed his son’s tiny hands between his first three fingers and got him back on his feet with one strong tug. At that age, one’s father is capable of superhuman feats. Red blotched Edward’s face, so his father knelt and held his open palm against Edward’s cheek for warmth. “You need to be careful, Eddie. These roads aren’t like the ones back home.”

“There’s too much snow, Dad.” Edward rubbed the growing ache, the bruise darkening on his lower back. It had been a warm fall day when they boarded the plane. His father had warned him about Enemy’s weather, but Edward treated it like trivia to be tossed away.

Percival laughed. “Remember how excited you were to make snowballs an hour ago?”

Edward gave his father a grimace full of crooked gaps. “Later. It’s too cold. I want to go inside now. Can we go inside?”

“You want to go inside?”

“Yes.”

“Come on, then.”

Edward’s mother emerged from the car straining to hold a cardboard box full of her valuables which she insisted

on keeping close by. She called, "Eddie, zip your jacket up," but her voice hardly reached the boy. With her feet planted firmly on the snow, Angelou placed her valuables on the roof of the car, then stared out for a moment at the surrounding neighborhood, her breath fogging into frigid air.

"We did it, Ange," said Percival, approaching with open arms. Angelou was still. Even as Percival put a hand on her cheek and leaned in until their lips were an inch apart, she was still. "This is our new home."

"You said we would have a tree," she said, speaking away from his face, looking out at the front of the house where a tree stump bulged from the ground like a cyst.

Percival nodded. "The condo board must have cut it down since they took the pictures."

"I wanted a tree."

"Once we're settled in, I'll have a conversation with the condo board about it. Just—try to focus on the positives."

She murmured to herself, off to the side. "Back home, we had a tree."

"Hey...." Percival held her by the shoulder so she wouldn't slip away. He smiled a timid smile, the corners of his thin lips digging deep in his sallow face. He pushed his glasses up his nose and took in a breath. He said, "I—" and then his words drowned in a gust of wind.

Angelou frowned. "What?"

And Percival blinked, eyes suddenly falling away. "I said I love you."

Angelou nodded and tore her shoulder out from under his hand. "Ah. Couldn't hear you the first time."

In dreams, people and objects appear without any rhyme or reason, and there is no questioning this because the

mind reconciles this irrationality by telling its owner that *this person has always been there*. This is accepted without protest because time in a dream is short. Here, Percival Montgomery felt as if in a dream, and he therefore did not question the sudden presence of a little girl running down the walkway of the neighboring house, her pigtails smacking the back of her head. Yet she dressed boyishly, in oversized sneakers and a big black t-shirt.

This little girl's trajectory pointed to Edward, and she might have collided with him if Percival hadn't stood in the way. "And what's your name?" he asked.

At this moment, Percival became aware of more figures on the street, and his openness began to decline. If these new people threatened to introduce themselves, it'd exhaust him, as already the rest of his day was filled with movers and agents and people from the bank. There was a small source of comfort: the couple coming toward their daughter seemed well-off, plump and well-groomed, foreign in their attire. Neither was dressed for the cold. Neither expected to be out long.

"Sorry! She's ours!" called the man. His little girl seemed reluctant to return, so he dragged himself out further to strengthen his paternal magnetism. It didn't work. He chuckled to Percival. "So sorry. Completely our fault, the wife and me. Our daughter loves to run out to explore whenever we leave the door unlocked. Once, the whole neighborhood had to help find her. Imagine how embarrassed we were!"

Percival laughed as well, straightening his brown coat. "No problem at all. She must have seen our son fall and ran out to help."

"That would be it." The man wagged his finger at his

little girl. “Always so happy to make friends and help others, but you can’t leave the house without telling Mommy or Daddy, okay?”

The little girl grinned.

“Say, you’re not moving in next door are you?” asked the new neighbour.

Percival nodded. “Indeed, we are.”

“Look at that! And here we are to welcome you. Don’t you love when everything works out? So glad we got to meet. My wife back there is Dot Burgess. I’m Dick. Richard, if you prefer. Oh, won’t you come in for dinner?”

“We have a long day ahead of us...”

“A glass of wine then. I’ll open a fresh bottle of our best Malbec.”

“I don’t know if a glass is a good idea—”

“You drive a hard bargain. Two then!”

Percival chuckled, turning back to his wife who was frosting over in the cold, and glancing down at his son whose eyes followed the little girl his age skipping around the street. The Burgess matriarch gently shepherded her daughter from the road but couldn’t manage to dampen her spirits. Percival shook his head and sighed. “Well, I suppose in that case, we have to.”

“Need any help with the boxes?” asked Dick.

“I absolutely wouldn’t refuse.”



Wine like a bloody sunset washed the walls of Dot’s glass when she swirled the stem. She handed a glass of the same wine to Percival who took a sip and then opened his lips to air out the sting.

"No," said Dot, pleasantly. She had an accent. Her husband did not. "Let it sit on your tongue for a moment. Let it touch all of your tastebuds. This is how you take a proper sip."

Percival listened to her. Notes of apples and lilacs lay on his tongue.

"There," she smiled.

"And have some dinner rolls," said Dick Burgess. "They're leftovers from yesterday morning, but still good. You can see the logo on there—*DD*?" He laughed. "Dot and I own a bakery off 11th, *Dick and Dot's*, and let me tell you, those dinner rolls put us on the map. Compliments from the mayor, aldermen, John James—who's a famous guitar player. You're lucky you caught us on a day off, Percy. Otherwise, we'd be over there working our asses off! So then, what brings you all the way to our budding city of Enemy? And don't say the great weather. Ha!"

From the outside, the Burgess's dwelling twinned the next-door house that Percival saw in the real estate pictures. But inside, Percival couldn't reconcile those pictures of an empty house with a home so cluttered, clenched, claustrophobic. All around the living room, the owners had strewn about nativity sets and doilies and elaborately woven tapestries. Acrylic and watercolour portraits hung in front of clover-green wallpaper applied crookedly by the homeowners themselves. Dense clouds of dust coagulated the air. And then there were toys all around—a girl's toys, pink and frilly—that stuck up from the ground like animal traps.

Angelou had gone to the guest bathroom without urgency and did not stir there. Meanwhile, out of sight from the adults, the kids roughhoused each other up and down the stairs; Edward did not want to go up and his new friend

did not want to stay down, but neither of them wanted to part from each other.

"No, clearly not," answered Percival. "But I do imagine the weather grows on you. No, I'm here for work, actually. I'm a private criminal investigator. I have been for the past almost fifteen years, and on this particular case I'm working on, my leads have brought me here to Enemy."

"A criminal investigation here?" Dot said, wincing. "It's always so quiet here."

Percival shrugged. "I don't deny it. But in terms of organized crime, most movement passes through these sorts of places—developing cities with disparate communities. I've been contracted to follow one case in particular. Maybe you've heard the name on the news? They're calling him the Hacksaw Killer. And a very convincing lead points to Enemy, so I thought I'd set up a base of operations here."

"So dedicated," said Dot.

"Hey! Dot, what's he got that I don't?" Dick threw his head back and bellowed laughter. "'The Hacksaw Killer.' Who comes up with this stuff? Ah, that's admirable, Percy. And you brought the wife and kid along to keep you company, that's good. Enemy is a fine, fine place for your young boy to grow up. There's the elementary school just two blocks down toward Irving and it's a fine school from what Fay tells us."

Percival looked over at the kids settling at the top of the stairs. "Fay. That's your daughter's name?"

"Fenella, actually," said Dot. "To Mom and Dad, she's always Fenella Burgess. To everyone else, she's Fay. She's such an independent thinker. On her first day of kindergarten, the first thing she did was come up with her own name, and once it caught on with teachers, well—what does a girl

like that need Mom and Dad for?" She and her husband started to laugh. They were beginning to feel the wine.

Percival put his glass back on the table, half empty. "How long have you been married?" he asked.

The question stunned Dick slightly—the abruptness of it. "Well...seventeen years last month," he answered, then retorted, "How long have you been married to Edward's mama?"

"Two years."

"Newlyweds!"

"Compared to you," Percival laughed. "And...do you think Enemy has been good for your marriage?"

The couple looked at each other. "It can't have been bad," said Dick. "We're soulmates, Dot and I. Through October storms and April snow, nothing can keep us apart. What about you? Do you think that you and Ange are soulmates, Percy?"

"I hope so. For Edward's sake."

"You can tell if you are. You can always tell." Dick reached outwards and caught Dot's hand floating by his shoulder, their wedding rings clinking together. They pulled each other closer. "With us, I knew Dot was my soulmate after... *pfft*, a couple of months. It was that road trip across the harbour when I nearly fell in trying to showboat. I'd never been closer to death. Boy, that look Dot gave me when I came back to the car...fury, fear, every part of true love. That's when I knew I'd found the one for me, and for our future child, whoever that might have been."

"I love Ange," said Percival. He picked up his wine glass again but did not sip. "And she's a good, responsible mother to Edward."

"But?"

He grimaced, stirring the glass, wondering whether he'd be divulging as much without the aid of the wine. "She's a real homebody and I think convincing her to move out here...well, took its toll on us."

Dot gave her husband's hand a squeeze. "Percy, let me help. We all have a soulmate. But a soulmate is not a gift from the cosmos. Where would the fun be in that? No, your soulmate is the soul that for whatever reason and in whatever way, God decided you *deserve*. Whether that's you and Angelou will reveal itself with time."

It was then that Angelou came out of the bathroom without turning off the lights. Getting anxious to unpack, she crossed the house with brisk steps and knelt in front of Edward. She tried to draw him away from a show-and-tell with Fay and all her toys and trinkets, but the boy was immovable, swatting away her hands. Soon losing patience, she simply grasped Edward's arm and stood, pulling him to his feet.

A sigh escaped Percival, though he quickly presented a smile to Dick and Dot. "We should go. But thank you both. You don't know what it means that the first faces we've seen in Enemy were so welcoming."

Dick sputtered. "Any time! We're so happy to have met you. As far as you and your wife are concerned, our home is your home whenever you like. In fact, you have to bring Edward back for a playdate later this week. We're arranging a little get-together for Fay and her friends."

"I will. That sounds great."

"Oh, and take the rest of the bottle, please. It's a house-warming present from our house to yours."

"I couldn't."

"You have to! Positively. Later tonight, Dot will come by

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