

Cora Daneli is a young woman looking for adventure.

Against the gorgeous backdrop of the Italian coast, she begins a journey that takes her to places she never wanted to go. And she is not alone.

Written from multiple points of view, this psychological novel stretches over several years, from Europe to the Black Hills of South Dakota. Characters' stories are woven together, taking the reader on an emotional ride, **blurring the lines** between reality and fiction, between dreams and nightmares, **between that which could have happened, and that which did.**

*So, I won't use my own name. I'll tell you this entire story, and you'll think I made it up. You'll have to; it's fiction. That's how fiction works. I'll write about that time when Cora Daneli was traveling around Europe with a friend she'd met in a youth hostel in Oxford. **That was before the boat, but that's my story, so I'll start at the beginning.***

CORA

When I first moved in with Ian, he was always trying to figure me out.

Staring at me. "Eyes are the windows to the soul," he'd say.

"I don't have a soul," I'd answer. "I outgrew mine. It shrunk in the wash." Back then I was working on a book. My first attempt at fiction. It took up a lot of time, and I never really put it away. Even when I wasn't writing, I was trying to figure it all out. When I finally let him read it, he quit asking all the psychiatrist questions, as if I had given him the answers in the chapters of that book, as if the character was me, and everything I wrote was absolutely true. He seemed to think he knew me then.

He stopped pushing to get married, stopped asking about children for a couple of years. For a while, I wondered which woman he was in love with. I invented the one on the page, gave her breath and allowed her to say whatever she wanted, whatever I wasn't able to say. Gave her eyes, windows to her soul. She had a soul. I know, I put it there. I wondered who he was in love with, because I didn't believe it could be me.

Maybe Caitlyn is wondering who loves her too. As the morning stretches into midday, I sit in my living room and wonder what I can do. I am the big sister. I used to hold her hand and make things better, but now we are both adults, and we have no mother, and the rules are all changed. Something is wrong, something under the skin.

I should invite her here. We can see the Black Hills from our window. We could talk and tell each other things.

CAITLYN

I'm not going to work. I'm not answering the phone. I'm not counting the snowflakes as they bash against the windowpane and pile up on the metal steps outside the door.

The trailer smells like after-shave. After-shave and stale beer. Greg drinks too much. Lately, the evenings are filled with empty beer bottles and blaring TV, and I could just as well be somewhere else, but I'm not. I'm here in my chair by the window watching winter come. My hands on my abdomen, trying to feel something growing. The silent hourglass has run out. The baby has grown too big to be ignored. I can't ignore it, but I'd like to. I'd like to ignore the telephone; it rings twice and then stops. Twice again in a minute. Like my sister Cora used to do when we were still at home and she wanted me to get the phone. Maybe it's her. Maybe it's an alarm going off in my head, and there's no one on the phone at all. No answer if I pick up the receiver. No voice to match my own.

AT SEA

1. The Beginning

So, I won't use my own name. I'll tell you this entire story, and you'll think I made it up. You'll have to; it's fiction. That's how fiction works. I'll write about that time when Cora Daneli was traveling around Europe with a friend she'd met in a youth hostel in Oxford. That was before the boat, but that's my story, so I'll start at the beginning.

Cora and Nancy first met while washing out socks and underwear in the huge communal bathroom at the Logan House hostel. Later, they strung a make-shift clothes line from the bedpost on Nancy's bed to the bedpost on Cora's. Nancy had majored in theater and just graduated from some college in Montana. Cora had finished up an English degree the winter before and had no idea what she was going to do with it. They spent the first night reading one-act plays out loud in their bunks. Nancy had certain parts memorized, and Cora used the book. A young woman from Denmark wrote postcards on the next bed and laughed occasionally. They all went out for a beer later.

The thing that first struck Cora about Nancy was her beauty. She had long auburn hair. Cinnamon eyes. Around her neck she wore a flat gold chain that rested in the curved indentation above her collarbones. Small hoop earrings. Dainty things. And yet Nancy wasn't dainty. She had worked on a ranch while she was in Montana and had the biceps to prove it. "All you need to do to stay in shape is lug around a couple dozen bales of hay a day. Or move sets for the theater. Who needs exercise programs? They're a waste of money."

"I can agree there," Cora said. "I've been carrying a backpack around northern Europe for four months. Forty to fifty pounds on my back. Check these out." Cora flexed her biceps. "I've never been in such great shape before." She sat on her bed, folding dry T-shirts into small rolls and putting them back into her pack. "What have you seen so far?"

"Only London and here. I want to see the Pollack exhibit. He's amazing. Do you like Jackson Pollock?" Nancy combed through her wet hair with her fingers, shaking out the bangs.

"I don't know; I've never heard of him." It was getting easier for Cora to be honest. She found that traveling around alone, people would take her for what she was or leave her alone. It was so much easier than playing games and worrying about what others thought of her knowledge or lack of it.

"Tomorrow, I'll show you the Jackson Pollock world of color." Nancy smiled. "It's a little crazy; that's why I love it. Wild explosions of spattered paint."

The next day they saw the art exhibit and ate at The Bear, a tiny seven-hundred-year-old pub. Cora finished her cottage pie. "I'm going to hitchhike toward France Friday and head down to the Mediterranean. I want to get to the actual sun and sand."

"Want some company? I'm not in any hurry." Nancy took a big drink of beer. "I'd like to travel with you. You seem to know a lot about it. Is this your first trip to Europe?"

"Yeah."

"Have you hitched much?"

Cora nodded. "A bit in Denmark. Lots around here. It's been fine. I'm pretty careful about who I ride with. I've got a tight budget. If I'm going to make it another month or two, I have to hitch some. I'd like to take a ship over to Greece for a few weeks. I definitely want to see Athens."

"I want to see Rome and Florence. You?"

"Sounds good, as long as the money holds out."

Cora had no preconceived plan other than her dream of seeing the Acropolis. In the fourth grade, she made a model of the Parthenon in social studies class. Clay, milk cartons, and toilet paper rolls. Mrs. Sibley had told her she would see the real one someday; then she touched the spray-painted columns with reverence, as if they were the real thing. Cora believed her. In high school, she took Western Civilizations and studied all about Greece. She did extra credit projects on the history of the Acropolis and read mythology. She knew it was a matter of time.

After college, she took the money she had inherited from her grandmother out of the bank. She had given her twenty-seven hundred dollars, “to be used before it was too late.” That was the grandma she had. “College is okay,” she used to say, “but you also got to get an education. See the world. Don’t get married right away. You hear me?” And Cora listened. She listened and planned her escape. Six days after graduation from college, she packed and headed for Kennedy airport on a Greyhound bus.

2. Writing a Novel

I’ve never written a long story before. I’m not sure how long it should be. There is a lot to the story, and it is difficult to tell. I don’t know what to leave out, what you need to know to understand. I mean, the flat tire outside Bristol isn’t important, not even that it was raining, but that is when Nancy told Cora about her mother. The professor of mathematics changed the tire on his old rusted Volkswagen while the two women sat in the rain and talked.

When he picked them up, Cora sat in the back seat along with the backpacks, textbooks, and a cardboard box of tools. She explained where Grace, Iowa was located, what her parents did for a living, how she’d been traveling for four months throughout Scandinavia and Britain. She told about Iowa’s last cold winter. Seventy-four inches of snow and below zero twenty days in a row. Cold, but not too bad.

Nancy talked about her uncle’s ranch in Montana. The mountains. The huge horse barns, her mare, and colt. She talked about the private school she attended. How she went home for the holidays.

The two women found out about each other as they told their stories. Cora found Nancy worldly and intelligent. She knew British history and European art; she asked the right questions. The driver beamed with national pride.

Nancy thought Cora was gutsy and self-assured. She admired her for traveling alone all those months, taking care of herself. She thought Cora fit the “still waters” cliché, layers upon layers of story left untold.

It was not until the flat tire two hours later that Nancy and Cora sat in the rain and talked about Nancy’s mother. It’s important to understand about Nancy’s mother, since it sheds so much light on the way Nancy behaves.

But we all have those stories, don’t we? And sometimes we hear the histories of other’s lives, and sometimes we are out of range. Nevertheless, we still go on interacting with folks and living our lives. Maybe some stories just go untold.

I guess it might get easier as it goes on: knowing what to tell and what to leave out. I’ll let them do the talking. I’ll write it down. I don’t know if this is a short story or a novel. I know the ending, but I can’t see across the gap yet, from the hostel in Oxford across the miles to that boat. I’m not a writer; I’ve never done this before. I can tell you about Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Shakespeare and Woolf. I have studied literature. I have learned about writers’ lives and have written papers on them. I haven’t lived a writer’s life; I don’t know what I’m doing.

3.Devon

Cora stood on a thick castle wall, looking out to the sea. This was the place where the pilgrims departed for the New World. She tried to imagine the wooden ships stocked with smoked meat and kegs of water for the long voyage. “I found a fun place for some lunch.” Nancy came up behind her, wearing sunglasses and holding her student guide book to Europe. “It’s back near the post office.”

“God, there sure are lots of tourists,” Cora said.

“Yeah, despicable creatures.” Nancy smiled. “Nothing I like less than a tourist. I’m hungry. You?”

“You bet.”

After lunch, the two young women cinched up their backpacks and walked out of town. They followed the coast for about five miles, heading toward a small village. It was a warm, cloudless day. Cora had a pocket radio tucked into her backpack, and they listened to the BBC. Fleetwood Mac and Neil Young. The music reminded Cora of home. Dancing in college hangouts. Seeing her friends. Closing her eyes and letting the music take over. She thought about

home most when she was listening to American music. She missed her parents and her younger sister. Missed her house. Especially the bathroom: piles of thick clean towels on the shelf, small perfumed soaps in the shower, hot showers. Long, hot showers, and privacy. Traveling the youth hostel circuit made privacy impossible. Most of the time, it didn't matter. Occasionally, when the showers were dirty or the water ice cold, she would have given anything to be back in Iowa. But today, the south coast of England was exactly where she wanted to be.

They rounded a curve in the narrow, paved road. Out ahead, a long-deserted beach stretched before them like a quarter moon. The cove was a long way down from the road at the bottom of a slow, grassy slope. A rocky cliff formed another wall of the embankment. The two looked at each other and smiled, knowing what the other was thinking. As they tumbled to the bottom, Cora thought of how good it would feel to get the pack off her back. She thought about the warm sand on her feet.

They went for a swim in their shorts and T-shirts and then sat down on the sand to dry off. Nancy braided her wet hair. "So, were you in love with anyone when you left home?"

Cora shrugged. "Probably. I've always used the term rather loosely." She paused. "Not as loosely as most men I've dated, though. You?"

"No. I thought I loved my senior advisor for a while. He was fifty, married and gorgeous. He helped me with my senior project. In theater we had to do a one person show as part of the graduation requirement. I was Lillian Hellman. I did a cutting from her book, *Pentimento*. Fascinating material."

"Was this a crush or what? I mean..."

"You mean, did we get involved?"

"That's what I mean." Cora raised her eyebrows.

"Sort of."

"Not good enough. Details, please."

Nancy shrugged. "We might have gotten more involved if I hadn't realized that I was his senior project too. I think he had one every year."

"Wonderful."

"Yup. He used to give me private coaching on some of my parts in the plays, like I wasn't getting it or something and could I work on it and meet him in his office after the last act. The first time he touched my shoulders and looked straight in my eyes... God, I was gone. I was

supposed to be Antigone and devastated over my older brother's death. And there I was, looking at these gorgeous blue eyes. He kissed me. We started finding excuses to rehearse a lot more after that."

"I would have gone into shock if a professor of mine showed that kind of interest in me." Cora shook her head. "Weren't you scared?"

"Yes. No. He was in charge. He was my sexy teacher. I wasn't afraid of him, so where was the threat? His wife was a picture in a brass frame on his desk. He never brought her up, and I certainly didn't."

"So how did it end?"

"The night of my senior recital, I was backstage and glanced out from behind the curtain to see if people were showing up. He was standing by the door, running his fingers through his hair and talking to this junior who had volunteered to hand out programs. I knew right then. I asked her later if he'd made some comment to her about her show being only a year away. She looked shocked, like how did I know?"

"What a jerk."

"Exactly. It's getting late. We'd better get to Strete if we're going to find a bed-and-breakfast before the tourists in their motor coaches catch up with us." Nancy stood and brushed off her shorts. They were dry and warm again.

"I don't think this is a big stop on the tourist trail. No pilgrims or castles, from what I can tell in my book."

"Fantastic," Nancy said. "Let's go. I could use a lager and lime."

They spent the evening in a cozy pub, playing darts and talking to two young couples who had lived in the village all their lives. They explained where Montana and Iowa were located. Gave the facts about the weather and how big their houses were and what cars their fathers drove. Nancy lied and said her dad was a doctor and drove a Lincoln Continental. She said it was so big four adults could sit in the back seat. It was what the young man who had asked wanted to hear, since he knew Americans drove big cars and lived in outrageous houses. Someday he wanted to buy an old American Chevy. "Me too," Nancy said with a smile. "Me too."

Writing Exercise

Backgrounds. College. Cora went to the University of Iowa. Nancy to Montana State. I would borrow experience from my own college days, but my four-and-a-half years at the university were uneventful. I was an excellent student. I made my share of mistakes. I didn't want to teach literature, so I pretended that studying literature was enough, and that I would find a job somewhere in the academic world. Employers would appreciate my vast knowledge of the classics and contemporary fiction. I could write a damn fine paper about the place of women in short fiction written by women in the early 1900s.

After a brief hiatus, I began working at a mortgage company writing letters to customers who were behind on their monthly mortgage payments on their mobile homes. I told them how far behind they were and what the consequences were going to be; eight or nine hours a day of typing letters to families who couldn't make their payments on a trailer house. I used to wonder what each home looked like inside, how the place was laid out. What the trailer park looked like. Carnation Acres. Melody Hills. East Lake Estates. It was an escape, a way to ignore the fact that my life was wilting.

My parents moved to Florida with my aunt and uncle for a trial semi-retirement. I left my hometown because I didn't have any reason to stay there and ended up in Rapid City, South Dakota. I had intended to go to the west coast, find a job, and see a different part of the country. My car broke down in Rapid City, so I stayed there. I was seeing a different part of the country. Folded into the pine-covered hills of South Dakota, I began again.

I rented a room from Geralyn Hendricks, a lifelong native of Rapid City. Her pale, yellow house sat in the hills just blocks from the main part of town. The room was small and musty, with faded red rose wallpaper. But she had a front porch and two wooden rocking chairs. She was seventy-three years old then and living alone. I figured one of the rocking chairs could be for me; I could sit out there evenings and read and forget about everything.

It turned out that Rapid City has a progressive, artistic pulse in the middle of a very conservative prairie. There's a new and used bookstore that sells more poetry and philosophy than self-help and cookbooks, a classical dance studio, and a health food restaurant. I got a job as a server at The Sunny Side. They serve mostly vegetarian food and have an open stage on Saturday night for local musicians and poets just getting their start.

I serve walnut, raisin, and cream cheese bagels and make enough money to live on. It makes as much sense as anything else. I never thought about what I wanted to be when I grew

up. College was simply a stepping stone for getting on to the next chunk of my life. Sitting on the porch with GERALYN on a cool summer evening, drinking a lemonade and rereading *Moll Flanders*, sometimes I get that content feeling that I am right in the middle of my life, that I'm where I'm supposed to be. Sometimes that feeling is harder to get a hold of, and it takes so much work to feel comfortable in my own skin.

Paris

The night ferry from Dover to Calais was full. Cora stood in the public restroom, brushing her teeth. It was her first time on a ship. She held the counter with one hand as the water in the sink slipped lazily back and forth, almost splashing over the steel rim onto the counter, moving with the graceful roll and tilt of the large vessel. A woman stood next to her with a baby cradled in one arm. She wet a cloth at the next small faucet and washed the child's face. The baby fussed and resisted. It was late, and the water was cold.

Nancy stood at the mirror braiding her long, thick hair. She smiled at the baby, at the woman. They smiled back.

Later, Cora and Nancy sat next to the woman and her family in the large open area for travelers without sleeping berths. Rows of uncomfortable chairs filled the room, every two rows facing each other. The woman, her baby, two other children, and the father sat across from them, pillows and small blankets spread out on the floor for the children. Their skin was a rich brown, and they all had deep black hair. Nancy thought they looked Indian or Pakistani. "Where are you going?" she asked politely.

"Home." The woman smiled a tired smile. Then, as if uneasy speaking English, she turned to her husband.

He nodded, opened his hands and looked at them, as if the story sat on his palms. "We travel home to Brussels from family funeral. Funeral of my young cousin." He looked at his wife, then at the two young Americans. "My cousin, he gave up living." The man said nothing more about it. He shrugged and furrowed his brow as the answer seemed puzzling even to him.

Later, the family shared their lunch with Cora and Nancy. The chairs were hard, and it wasn't easy to sleep, so they stayed awake and visited, the children nodding off for brief naps.

Nancy talked about her home in Montana, the mountains, and the wide sky. She said she wanted to be an actress and hoped one day to be in films. She did some pantomime for the

children, but they lost interest quickly. The woman and man spoke softly and asked broken questions about politics in America. Nancy spoke highly of the American government, telling them why it worked so well, why it was such a wonderful system. She talked on and on, and Cora played with the children.

Cora wasn't so patriotic; she thought things were a mess back home, but she liked to listen to Nancy talk. She had a trained and smooth voice; she was on stage, performing her charming routine. Well read, well versed, well received. Cora played with the children, telling fairy tales and stories of snowbanks that reached the sky above Iowa.

Paris was more than they had expected. It was beautiful. It was terrible. The night crossing on the Channel and the long bus ride into Paris wore both women out. They arrived at 8:30 in the morning, hungry, tired, and stiff. The station was a muted gray. People spoke in soft voices, dragging luggage on wheels. Stretching their shoulders.

Nancy spoke some French, but not well enough to suit most of the people they talked to. She wanted to see the Louvre and the Champs-Élysées. Cora wanted to see the Eiffel Tower. They asked for directions. An older man who was walking his bike waved them off, got back on the bike muttering, and rode in the opposite direction. A woman with three loaves of fresh bread sticking out of her colorful bag smiled and said, "Take a taxi. You Americans are rich!"

"This is not starting out well," Cora said, looking at her watch. It was 10:15. "Let's hunt down the youth hostel first and try to get a bed for tonight. We can get a city map and go from there, don't you think?"

"Sure." Nancy pulled out her guidebook and directed them down a maze of streets to the subway. After finding the public transit, the rest was easy.

The city was only a backdrop for the people. Dirty streets, gray, and black buildings. Cement. The air tasted of diesel and bus fumes. It was a city, like New York or L.A., but the people seemed different. Proud, inaccessible, busy people finding their way around on a hot summer day. Cora wasn't impressed. It was the first place she'd been where she felt like a foreigner who wasn't welcome.

"For five francs you could talk me into getting on the next train out of here and heading south. Paris doesn't impress me." Cora was setting up camp at the hostel. She put out her bedroll and was digging in her pack for dirty clothes. The bedroom had four sets of bunk beds lining the wall. A small sink and a bidet stood along the other wall. The toilet and shower were down the

hall. Outside the window was a string clothesline attached to the brick building across a narrow courtyard. Cora planned to catch up on her washing.

“Give it a chance. I’ve always heard the people here were stand-offish. Maybe they’re shy.”

“Right.”

“Give it two days, then you can pick the next place on the map we head. Deal?” Nancy smiled her gracious smile. All white perfect teeth.

“Two days. Okay, whatever. I’m in. I can handle anything for two days, right?”

Characters

I want you to understand some things about Cora. She isn’t as interesting as Nancy, so it’s hard to get her story out. She is not beautiful, so she seems less interesting. People don’t look at her on the street the way they look at her friend. She is average. Like some census taker compiled data about young, college graduate females and made up a composite picture of the average one. Five-foot six-inches tall. Wavy, reddish-brown hair. Average body. A few freckles.

The thing about Cora is that she seems more attractive when she isn’t around Nancy. Comparisons are human nature. She could go into a small disco in Copenhagen alone, and men would look at her. They would ask her to dance, and she would have a delightful time. She’s pleasant and intelligent and if the men are decent, things are fine. But when Nancy showed up, Cora dissolved slowly out of the picture. She could see less and less of herself as the days went on.

Nancy is the center of the stage; she knows all the jokes and can make any ordinary event charming. She is social, and graceful, and well educated. Although Cora is friendly, she has never been one to dazzle people.

Everywhere they go, men look at Nancy. Women follow her with their eyes. Even children are not shy around her. Cora can sense this. She doesn’t blame them, and she doesn’t blame Nancy; she’s mesmerized by her charm too. But, day by day, her strong will and confidence dwindle. She becomes dependent. Nancy knows more about art and French cuisine and culture. Nancy can speak the language. Without realizing it, Cora lets her make the decisions. Then she rationalizes it all. She doesn’t care where they go, as long as she gets to Greece. By the middle of August, she wants to be standing on the Parthenon steps.

So, Nancy never even hears much about Cora's past. It was uneventful. Her mother wasn't a famous dancer whose life ended in tragedy. Her mother was a secretary. Her father worked his own small business and came home every evening. Her little sister was starting college in the fall.

How does one weave the daily workings of a person's life into their story? Cora Daneli lived for twenty-one years before she boarded a plane and headed for Copenhagen. She lived through adolescence, a house fire, a broken leg and four years of piano lessons, but for whatever reason, she didn't tell Nancy much about her life; she is left walking around Paris like some flat paper doll.

It might take an event to get her talking. Like the rainy night and the flat tire. Maybe the next time Nancy will listen, but Cora needs to have something to say. I expect she'll start talking one of these days. I'll wait around and take notes; I have nothing better to do.