

PRELUDE

How Sound Entered the Forest

i.

Mrs. Macintosh picked up an acorn from the schoolyard and confronted our second grade class with her own version of Aristotle's famous question. Mysteriously lifting her eyebrows, she asked us, "If this acorn falls to the ground in the middle of a forest where there are no human beings or animals to hear it, will it make any noise?" Always inquisitive, I stood chewing on this puzzle and on a wisp of hair that had escaped my braids. I conjured up a picture of the empty forest and watched the acorn tumbling to the ground as our teacher moved more deeply into the question. "Do you think sound can exist without at least one ear drum for it to bounce off of?"

I was disturbed. If there was no sound without ears to receive it, was the acorn's plop something else entirely? Or nothing at all?

The question haunted me more than Mrs. Macintosh could have imagined. By second grade, I was already uncannily familiar with that soundless forest. My whole being trembled with a story that could not be heard. And I wondered, though never with words, if the story could not be heard, had it ever

happened? And if the story was me, then had I ever happened? Was I something else entirely? Or nothing at all?

It was no use trying to separate us from each other, me and the tragic tale that had befallen my family, as long as we were both stuck together in silence. The facts, of course, were no secret, but the utter havoc they had wreaked in my family's life could never be voiced. I felt compelled to wrap myself inside this story that could not be told. For decades that's how I saved it and some version of myself as well.

It was not a good era for families like ours. There was no traditional community to keen with us over the death of my older brothers and sister—one, two, three, all in a row—no tolerance for weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, no period of mourning. And there were no support groups, no grief counselors, no five stages of grief. We would not have dared to let the lonely inward cries of our anguish reverberate through our home, with nowhere else to go, no ears to receive them beyond our own. They would have shattered us. So we had no choice but to muffle them.

ii.

Decades later, when I began to indulge vigorously in wishes about my past, believing the universe had cheated me of life as it was meant to be, I created a fantasy, a different version of the story that would have allowed me to leave it behind. I imagined that after the third death, on February 6, 1959, after our parents drove the station wagon home from their fruitless vigil at the Chicago hospital, both of them refusing to glance back at Paul's empty mattress during the whole trip, so achingly silent lest they become a deafening echo chamber for their mutual grief, after they bravely slammed the car

doors shut and readied their empty, wan smiles for the third onslaught of bewildered mourners in ten years, suppose after all this a Witness approached them.

I created her as a great-bosomed, strong-voiced matron. In my fantasy, she introduces herself to my dazed parents as a doula, like the women who tend to a mother's needs after birthing. The only difference, she explains, is that she nurtures people after death has wrenched the beloved out of their arms. A grief doula. Of course my parents graciously remonstrate that they'll be just fine without her, really just fine, but the doula, with rumpled hair and a frumpy house dress, simply won't vanish. She is wickedly stubborn. She isn't asking permission at all. My mother and father trail her into their own kitchen, with the screen door banging behind, so that we children end up rushing not into their arms but into hers. She gazes around at all of us with stubborn compassion brimming in her eyes. She knows we have all merged into one catatonic orphan, parents and children alike. The grown-ups have clearly even lost the consolation of their tears—they were all used up with the first two deaths. We four surviving children can't find the earth to walk upon, and even the baby in my mother's womb senses the world has gone silent.

So she commands us: "Okay, all you Bernards, just pack up your empty shell bodies and come on out of this vacant house. The game's up. No more pretending with bedtime prayers, grilled cheese sandwiches, and Campbell's tomato soup. I'm moving you all to my place where your pain will have wider berth, where it can bounce off a thousand walls not your own." We are given no choice but to pile into the doula's Ford and be taken into her home, our whole family.

In her big old kitchen we sit down at a trestle table laden with the legendary pot of chicken soup, baskets of buttery

dinner rolls, and pecan pie, and we seal a new covenant. We all agree there will be no stiff upper lip and no pressure to grow up. We five children and our shell-shocked parents will ask nothing of each other except the sheer act of staying awake, in our own survivors' bodies and souls, no matter how painful, no matter how strong the temptation towards psychic death. Staying awake, listening to the storm lashing at our hearts, that is enough, and it is everything. The doula will set up tea parties under the apple trees, and with a lap as vast as God's, she will hold tightly our sobs and our silences, our rage and bewilderment, without ever expecting any gratitude.

We live by that covenant for a very long time. How long, I'm not sure, but long enough to regain our footing. Then eventually, each in our own time, and not sooner, we all walk freely out into the forever-changed world, still wistful, no doubt, but with our voices resounding in their own essence as voices are meant to, even the voice of an acorn, or a child.

iii.

My little sister Betsy and I, sitting on our twin beds in our striped pajamas, used to imagine together in lovely detail another version of this haven. What would it be like, we wondered, if we each had a servant to bathe and dress us, brushing our long hair with leisurely delight till it shone, braiding it so gently and loosely it would never hurt, tickling our backs till we fell asleep at night, picking up all our clothes and toys, speaking soft words to us no matter how spoiled and imperious we acted? A purring feeling curled around my chilled heart during these reveries. "What lazybones!" I giggled guiltily, believing our fantasy was just a selfish desire to get out of work. I could not account for the intensity of

my own longing, more vibrant than the Shangri-La mirages of cartoon characters hopelessly lost in the desert, whose thirst I could taste, dry as sawdust.

I know now that it was the doula I longed for. But it was not so obvious back then, when I was lost in the silence. To the people who drove past our home on those snowy nights after Paul's death, our lamps cast the same inviting golden glow against the white draperies as any other house's lights. You could glimpse in the opening between those drapes lots of warm bodies: a pretty, vivacious pregnant mother on the phone, a tall, handsome dad heading calmly into his study, and four little girls bouncing and fighting or bent over schoolbooks or blowing on the windows and writing their names in their breath.

But someone might have murmured, "That's the Bernards' house. You know, their only son Paul was the one in the fourth grade at Madison who just died of cancer, and their oldest girl, Mary-Louise, died three years ago when she was in second grade. And I hear their first son drowned in a fishpond as a toddler." They might have stared a bit harder, hoping subconsciously to see something dramatic, a keening woman, perhaps, tearing her hair out in fistfuls. And they would have wondered guiltily, never out loud, what terrible sin these people were being punished for. How else could they have distanced themselves from our fate, so peculiar in a culture where children weren't supposed to die?

There were no relatives or friends who knew what to do with such sorrow as ours. "The curse of the Egyptians," my father had called it in a letter to his father, after only the second death. And three? How could it all be explained? What was the use, though, of dwelling on our grief? We seemed to be coping so well. We asked for no one's intervention,

but armored ourselves in self-sufficiency, shying away from people's bewilderment and certainly from their tears, which just reminded us guiltily of the ones none of us could cry. My father hid his pain within his nerve cells, where it silently set off the ravages of multiple sclerosis. Still, we just carried on, the grown-ups for the sake of the kids, the kids for the sake of the grown-ups.

And we carried on beautifully, beyond anyone's imagination. Our family carried on with high-honor-roll academics and public servanthood. We carried on with magic Christmases and Fourth-of-July parades. We tackled educational systems and the Church, creative ventures and long road trips. We wrote essays, cultivated gardens, built houses, reared new babies, and stood before assemblies.

But just suppose there had been that doula to take us all into her arms and croon, "There, there now. You don't have to be so incredibly brave and strong." Perhaps we would have found the freedom to be tender with one another. Perhaps I would have felt safe enough in my family's embrace to keep my feet on the ground and turn my gaze toward the future.

iv.

Instead, with no ears to receive it, I swallowed my sadness whole. It became only a chilly longing. And my horror gave way to a dull sense of impending doom. I held the future hostage through my keen certitude that I must not grow up. While I had only known my brother Vic indirectly, through my parents' unvoiced grief, our home still resounded with Paul and Mary-Louise's laughter. Who would be waiting for them when they finally came out of their hiding places? I felt quite disturbed that no one else ever asked this question. No

one else insisted on the obvious, that time be stopped until the lost ones could catch up. I concluded that I alone had been solemnly appointed, in some forgotten ritual, to keep vigil for them. And so began an exquisite loneliness.

As long as I remained a child, there was hope. And through the years of childhood, I held fast to my magic, intently guarding the integrity of my mission: I may laugh, though never with abandonment; I may play, though only if the play claims itself as a secret code for my sacred fantasy. And when adolescence began to impinge, I knew I had to stop it cold. While my budding breasts and expanded intellect entered adolescence readily, my psyche, kicking and screaming, held on for dear life to childhood. Surely, if time would be patient, the ghosts would catch up, and we could all take up where we had left off, like the inhabitants of Sleeping Beauty's castle. Surely the lost ones were just waiting to be found, perhaps behind the dining room door on Wakewa Avenue, in the Council Oak Tree at the cemetery, in a neighbor's shed along our pebbled alleyway?

In all the years I spent split between this private, unconscious vigil and my public duty to grow up, I thought of our family tragedies as ancient history, fascinating yet barely relevant. But I carried a secret fear for my sanity. And very carefully I hid all that disturbed and shamed me: panic attacks, an intense regressive fantasy life, fear of dying at any moment, over-seriousness, religiosity, a disinterest in sexuality, and a desperate need to stay distanced from all sin, lest I be sucked into the ever-ready quicksand of my survivor's guilt.

Despite myself, I grew into adulthood, carrying with me all my secrets. Moving through my twenties with bravado, I ran more successfully from my chronic anxiety than from

my loneliness. I saw myself as confident, proactive and sure-footed, but my maturation came at the terrible cost of alienation from my family. I distanced myself through lifestyle, geography, perspective, and political activism. I would later compare this breaking away process to a baby bird flinging itself out of the nest, recklessly, yet I really had no choice. As long as I stayed within the family, I felt paralyzed by absolute loyalty to something I did not understand. Yet in my growing autonomy I never could put to rest a profound sense of loss, a pining away, the guilty hope for a return to the nest.

I longed for a man's love, marriage, and children to fill the emptiness. All my other lively pursuits, all ambitions, political passions, and my work as a campus minister felt somehow peripheral. It seemed to me I had been waiting an eternity when at age twenty-seven I met Gerry. We married the following spring. And I allowed myself finally to bask in my decades-old fixation on the strongest kind of magic: now I could have babies who would recreate for me the sweetness I had lost. I pictured the family my husband and I would create together gathered nightly around our dining room table, the children chattering happily, a complete and harmonious circle, no one missing.

BOOK I
Falling into Silence

CHAPTER 1

The Forbidden Reply

1961

Eight Years Old

You see where I'm sitting at our dinner table tonight? It's my usual seat, right next to my dad. I wonder how I ever got this choice spot. Have I always been here, ever since I grew out of the high chair, or did Mommy say to Daddy one day long ago, "Let's put Anne to your left so you can make sure she eats her peas?"

Behind Daddy is a whole wall papered with New Orleans shops. It's Mommy's pride and joy. My dad was a child in New Orleans long ago, before he joined the Navy and fell in love with my mother's photograph. His mother, Mère, is in their wedding picture, wearing some kind of creepy mink around her shoulders, but she died before any of us kids were born. Mommy says I look like her, but I don't think so. For one thing, she was definitely plump. Père, Dad's dad, just died a few months ago. I can't get it through my head he won't be taking vacations with us up in Michigan anymore. It didn't surprise the grown-ups when he died, because he was really old, but I thought he'd just keep living on and on.

Père was amazing for at least two reasons. Every day when he'd visit us he'd walk five miles to and from the post office just to mail a letter! He just did it because he liked to walk. I've never met anyone else who just likes to walk when the car's sitting right there in the driveway! Second, he always brought giant Hershey's bars to the kids when he came to visit. Daddy said he was crazy about chocolate, which runs in his family because they're French.

Another French thing was when we'd travel with him on our summer vacations, he'd say something real quiet to my parents up there in the front seat where he sat between them, and right away whoever was driving would pull over to the side of the road, and Père would stand right outside the car with his back to us and go wee-wee the way boys do and not seem to mind about us watching or the passing cars or anything. I noticed that there were some German boys at our school this year whose father was some kind of prince, they claimed, (but Mom says it was a lie because they just wanted to sponge off people) and they used to go to the bathroom right outside in the bushes that way too until our teacher told them that wasn't what kids did over here. But New Orleans is in America. It's just that lots of people speak French there, like my dad did when he was little, and everyone has strange names, like my middle name Elvina, who's my aunt, and Peggy's real name, Lucie Marguerite, which she hates.

When Père died last January, it was just before my little sister Ellen was due to be born. Daddy went down to New Orleans for a while, and then he came back, and there was nothing more to say. Is he sad? I don't know. He doesn't get much of a word in edgewise most of the time. The rest of our family is all girls. We do a lot of planning and talking about

moving out of this house where we've always lived to the huge mansion we're going to share with the Cleland School. That's the school my mother started just for me when I was in first grade. Every time we're sitting around getting bored, which happens a lot, someone will say, "Let's talk about the Fish Estate," and we do, and then life feels exciting, as if we're rich. I don't know if Daddy's too excited, but he keeps all the plans for the new house and school in his head, and sometimes he'll give us all a little thrill with some new news, like they're going to build a wooden fire escape that will run along the whole porch roof!

I'll tell you some South Bend history I learned from my mother. The Fish Estate is called that because many years ago the Studebaker family who had gotten very rich making wagons first and then cars had a daughter who married a man named Fish so she couldn't be called a Studebaker any more, but she still was one. She needed a fancy home to live in, so they built her a twenty-four room mansion right next to theirs. I don't know how long they lived there but our school bought it from some nuns. That's why there's a saint's statue in the yard. We are fixing up the third floor for our bedrooms and part of the first floor. We'll never be late to school again.

At our big dining room table where the days get changed into nights, I'm listening to my mother talk about the wallpaper she's going to put in our new dining room. She's sad we can't take the New Orleans wallpaper with us, like we can the chandelier, but she's found something she says is very elegant and not too pricey. I am picking at my food as usual. It's Friday and we have halibut, my only good fish, but with it are rice and lima beans. Yuck! My stomach wants something puffy like mashed potatoes, soft and smushy and

warm. I'm pushing the grains of rice around my plate. They are dry and always stick in my throat. If I get lucky, Daddy will be too tired to make a fuss.

There are four children now sitting at the table, besides Suzie in the high chair and Ellen wiggling in Mommy's lap. Six of us total. The number has been wobbling ever since anyone remembers, additions at the bottom and subtractions at the top. I remember in the spring of first grade when I filled out Mrs. Emery's little card, I started to write there were three other children in my family besides me. But it felt funny, because that seemed like such a small family, and I was used to living in a big family. So I changed it to three and a half because soon our mother was going to have a baby. Her tummy was popping out so far it looked like she'd fall over.

I was thinking that day that no one else in my class knew anything about how a family could shrink sometimes. After it shrank to four then it grew to five after Suzie was born early. Then I held my breath this year to see if the number would grow to six, and it did! I felt very proud that we made it through two new babies in a row without any deaths happening. Five is the wobblest number, I've figured out. Because the first time we went from four to five, when Betsy was born, we went down to four again before we could reach six. Then again when Kate was born it didn't stick. It's all sort of like Chutes and Ladders, except no one knows how close we are to the finish. I didn't know when I was little if there was a finish line for our family. I thought maybe if we kept getting lopped off at the top, we would be able to keep adding at the bottom. My mother always said she couldn't imagine a day when she wouldn't have a baby in her arms. How empty it would feel! I feel

sad thinking of that faraway day too, because what she can't imagine, I can't either.

We are a big, noisy family for sure, and we are very proud of it. My mother says big families are the best, that small families with one boy and one girl whose houses are always very neat are boring, and the kids grow up all fussy over everything, and they have to have their mom and dads watching what they're doing all the time. Our house is always messy, and Betsy's friend Toni Upton came over after school one day and said it smells like dirty diapers here, peeyou! When my mom heard that she got real mad and said it did not. She says our house is neat and clean, just not as immaculate as Presbyterians' houses. I think Toni Upton might be a Presbyterian. A lot of kids at our school are.

At our dinner table, what happens depends on whether we have company or not. Tonight we don't. I wish we did. Company changes everything. Makes the dark scary corners in the room curve close around into the light, cozy and happy. Makes our mother sparkle, and our dad like a king and a wise man. People ask him questions and wait for his slow-drawled deep-voiced answers, and they always say, "Why, is that so? Isn't that fascinating?" And when I notice their eyes dancing I feel something springy and warm swelling inside me, and it hurts my stomach, and I see it in my sisters' faces too.

Our father comes home each day from Notre Dame, where he is called Professor Bernard or sometimes Doctor Bernard, which is funny because he is certainly not a doctor and hates blood and vomit and diarrhea and won't ever let anybody talk about these things. He spends his days in a crowded messy office in a building called O'Shaughnessy, full of papers and books piled high, and when we pick him up

there, that building feels strong and echo-y with footsteps, so mysterious, and it wraps him up busy and important with all those other men we sometimes know from church and parties but forget their names.

When company comes there's little breezes dancing around our dining room from this place where Daddy works. And when I look at my dad through those breezes, I can't always recognize him. I see him as if I weren't his kid. I get to wondering whether he is not Daddy at all, but a tall bald guy with dimples in his smiles who can tell people about history stuff and France.

Tonight there is no company and so we have to just talk silly. Our mother has swallowed her food in five minutes, the way she always does, because she doesn't chew. She says she's forgotten how. Maybe it happened when she started Cleland School, which makes her happy and full of projects. My mother is a project person and a meeting person, meetings practically every night, school meetings, Ladies of Notre Dame, St. Ann's Society, Christ Child, bridge club, Pi Phi, more school meetings. She's not a chewing person.

Every time she leaves for her meetings I feel the bottom falling out of me. Daddy is silent in his study far away downstairs. The little girls are tucked in the bedrooms at the other end of the hall. Peggy is bowed over her homework on her bed, plotting to teach Prudy Carmen a lesson. Betsy is dozing off in her bed under the spooky high-up windows looking out on our street. You have to stand on the bed to see out those windows. When I was very little I stood there watching a band come marching past our house. Mommy says it never happened, that it was just a dream, but how come I remember it? It's still

marching right through my brain, but it's turned into a spooky parade, drums beating loud, everyone marching toward the river—no one can run away from being in that parade even if they want to real bad.

Often at night before her meetings I hear my mother rocking the babies to sleep, and she sings like this:

Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh.
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.

The shadows are what I don't like. That's why, sitting at this table, my stomach is saying these strange words: "Oh please, oh please, don't let our dinnertime end, don't let the shadows in the corners round us all in and smother our faces deep and forever into night. Oh please, oh please, make time stop here, big chattering family feasting on Friday fish. Oh please, please, go away, night, with your spooks floating towards our beds down the long hallway from the stairwell: Bloody Bones on the First Step, Bloody Bones on the Second Step, Bloody Bones on the Third Step ..."

Our conversation tonight is crazy as it can be. Peggy is whipping it all up, and our mother is answering for our father: "Don't be ridiculous. Don't you know parents love all their children just the same, and you'll understand that someday when you all are mothers." Still we won't stop pestering our dad boldly with this new question no one has ever asked ever, and even inside the huge silence of my own head I've never asked it. It sucks away my breath, getting spoken out so many times in all the different voices around our table, big girls' and little girls' sassy voices while Daddy is looking at us with a little smile playing around his lips. We

are asking him, each kid, “Which daughter do you love the most?” Even Kate who’s only four years old, blue-eyed sulky Kate, “K-K-K-Katie, Beautiful Katie, You’re the only one that I adore,” even Kate’s little voice is piping up, begging at him, wanting to know.

I can hear my own voice asking now too: “You love me the most, don’t you?” I don’t even mean these words. They sound silly. I just don’t know what else to do but join in when Peggy starts a game. Why do we have to ask this dumb question? Shouldn’t I just sit quiet? Inside me way down, the yucky squishy place has been churned up, and I start scratching the eczema on my neck. I’m stuck in a trap, scrambling back and forth between real and fake Anne. If I didn’t talk, then I would feel like my quietness would be screaming at everyone, “Look at Anne! Everyone knows why she can’t even dare ask!” But now, joining in the stupid question, haven’t I invited Peggy to mock me the way Cinderella’s stepsisters did, “You? What nerve! Everyone knows it’s certainly not you! Why, you’re not even close! Don’t you ever notice how when Daddy dries everyone off with a towel after a bath, he always does you the shortest? You’ve never even dared ask for longer! Why do you start now?” So now I’m going to just watch the game, smiling a little, in a holy, humble way, to show I don’t expect to go to the ball. I’ve been able to be holy like this ever since my First Communion.

You should hear how loud it is now. My sisters’ voices are scratching at the air. Who does Daddy love the most? I’m trying to imagine what he’s going to say, and my throat is feeling like it’s getting stabbed. All around the room I can see the air being scratched raw. Scream the warning! “Everyone run for your life!”

But when I'm running, the police will say, "Go back home, little girl. Your parents know best, and you have nothing to worry about."

"No, no, they won't stop it! Maybe they can't see it happening!"

"You'll be safe, little girl. Go home to your parents."

I'm glued to that room anyway. Inside my watching self, I'm burning with curiosity, wondering. But when Daddy answers this question, this question that never should be asked, won't it be just like in Betsy's book *Millions of Cats*, everyone tearing at each other's eyes and throats with their claws until they're lying in a bloody circle around the plates of half-eaten halibut and the peonies in the silver bowl? I'm tasting all the danger in my mouth, and I know I can't stop what is going to happen. You see, in the story there's a scrawny little kitten hiding under the bush, and she comes out after they're all gone, and the old people just have one kitty-cat after that. Everywhere in this room I taste green greedy hungry cat's eyes.

My father's hazel eyes are twinkling suddenly. And when he answers us in his deep voice, we all sit silent as if Mommy's prized crystal chandelier just swung down, hitting everyone at the table all at once. Even our mother says nothing. I keep my eyes down so I can't see her, just in case she is crying. "Mary-Louise is my favorite daughter," Daddy's told us, smiling just a little.

I can feel everyone's claws pulled in, up close to their not-breathing tummies. You wouldn't find anyone happy at that table, except Daddy, who's all pleased with himself for finding the perfect answer. The tricky one. The sly answer for greedy kitty-cats, to make them go away, just leave him alone. He knows he's done a terrible thing, slashing into

Mommy's sadness with the name only she ever says. But it feels as if Daddy has been dead up until now, and he's just crawled out of his grave, rising up with that sly-fox smile I've never ever seen, saying words I've never ever expected. A little sob comes out of my throat. I hope nobody hears it. Then suddenly everyone has figured out Daddy's perfect answer. It's really just a joke. Mary-Louise has been dead for five years. She can't count. She is not part of the game.