

CHAPTER SIX

Morgan's Story

We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies.

—Shirley Abbott

“Since it was my idea, I will tell the first story,” Morgan declares.

She walks around the dark room with a single candle, searching for her wine selection. The tall, thin flame tosses shadows across the walls and the faces of the group. Percy, Mr. Frisch, and Cherie all sit at the long tasting table with their glasses. Kim sits on the floor across from Morgan, Indian-style, with her wine glass between her legs. David is crouched inside the window frame. He has tucked his glass into his shirt pocket.

“I’m going to select the *North Slope Syrah*,” Morgan says as she pulls a bottle from a shelf on the far wall and hands it to Percy.

“They call this ‘*immediate and rich*,’” Percy says, reading the wine menu. He removes the cork, sniffs it, and slowly fills each of the outstretched glasses, holding a candle near the rim as he pours.

Morgan samples the wine and takes a long, deep breath—the kind that clears your head. She looks around the room at the unfamiliar faces in the candlelight, and marvels at what they

are about to do. Stories are the threads and fibers of the human fabric. They are the ancient blankets that we wrap around ourselves to feel less alone in this often-cold existence. They are the firelights of memory, the galleries of the soul, the visions that we keep in our heart so we can one day look back and ponder whether it was a good life.

“My story must start with my grandmother,” Morgan begins. “She came to America from Ireland at nineteen, with empty pockets and a head full of dreams. She was a domestic servant. They called her a *greenhorn* which I always found to be an odd description. As a child, I believed that she actually had *green horns* and had somehow shed them once she became an American. I used to look for remnants of them in her white hair, particularly when she slept.

“She was a passionate Irish woman who lived her life in the coat linings of her immigrant journey. She had been so cold as a child that she searched for warmth her entire life. As much as I recall the contours of her face, I also remember her bright Irish cardigans, shawls, and lap blankets. Grandma didn’t *talk*, she *described*, and the Irishness of her words, the rawness of her nouns and verbs were modified by weather and long walks across old bridges. She was a woman who had so very much to say that it was impossible not to always be listening.

“In her pale, soft blue eyes, I experienced the dance halls, the lads, the picture shows, and the mad drink of New York City in the 1920s. She shared a sisterhood with fellow Irish servant girls—Sheila, Mary, Ellen, Bridget—who cooked fine meals, washed fancy clothes, and carried generations of wealthy, old incontinent women to and fro. These teenage girls set out for a new world and became the wait staff of the Mayflower rich, working in the big houses on the sprawling country estates of New York’s ultra-wealthy.

“There were long days of prepping and polishing. There were silk stockings and fine bed linens. There were bright-eyed Irish girls in tight, white aprons carrying heavy serving trays up narrow staircases. They gossiped, wrote letters, and kept diaries.

“Years later, I would find myself watching my grandmother’s hands. They were small and misshapen. They had held their share of paring knives and cast-iron skillets. When I asked what happened to her fingertips, she told a story about a crown roast of lamb, mashed potatoes, and a very heavy dumbwaiter door.

“Well into her nineties, she spoke with great affection of Master Ted and Miss Edith. Despite the drudgery of her servitude, she was grateful that they had taken her in. Aside from a marginalized existence of back rooms and leftovers, her life was civilized. And at a time when most domestic employment stipulated that the Irish ***NEED NOT APPLY***, my grandmother had work, food, shelter, and, most important of all, a warm place.

“After saving her wages for over eight years, she arranged my grandfather’s passage on Cunard’s ***White Star Line*** out of London. It’s an interesting word, *passage*. For the Irish, it meant breaking away, escaping, and transcending impossible cycles of poverty. Ireland, at the turn of the twentieth century, was a tired country, and so many of her young were looking for ‘The Land of Heart’s Desire,’ as described by WB Yeats:

*Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,
For I would ride with you upon the wind,
Run on the top of the disheveled tide,
And dance upon the mountains like a flame.*

“In America, my grandmother and her troupe of greenhorns saved their day wages and danced their nights away. They frequented halls in Greenwich Village, Times Square, and Harlem. Back in Ireland, my grandfather waited. He was sober, dutiful, and strong. He fought in the resistance, worked in the breweries, ran the *picture show*, and made barely enough to help feed his siblings. He had no way out—except for her. When he arrived in New York almost a decade later, they were married.

“I realize now that my grandmother matriculated in a world of indomitable women—models of old-world feminism and new-world persistence. Her American friends were just as irrepressible as all those gritty greenhorns. There was Silvia, Helen, and Hildy. Exiles from Italy, Poland, and France, who joined the she-woman melting pot of tough New York immigrants.

“Silvia came in the wave of southern Italians who, much like the Irish, fled abject poverty. She was a large woman with a prominent voice and a pile of dark hair stacked high on her head. Each time I saw her, she would shout my name and hug me, as if meeting me for the very first time.

“Helen was from Warsaw. Her exodus came amid war, oppression, and marauding Russians and Austrians. She was fair-haired and large-breasted—attractive and modish. She wore brooches and bright earrings, and was fond of Macy’s and Central Park. Her maiden name was long and hard to pronounce. I knew her only as Mrs. Price.

“Hildy had a square face, a thin nose, and eyes so sunken they seemed swallowed up by her cheekbones. She was a French Jew with raw recollections of the occupation, the roundups, the yellow stars, and cattle wagons stacked with straw and packed with humans. She was a slight, nervous woman, and a chain-smoker who held her cigarettes close to her face as she talked about things a lifetime away.

“Thirty years removed, and she still lived moment by moment, minute by minute, with the sound of boots, dogs, whistles, and throaty voices steps above her head. She talked about holding her breath and counting. ‘*There was never a place quiet enough or dark enough in which to hide,*’ she would say in still-broken English.

“When I met her, Hildy’s husband had long since passed, and her children had grown and gone away. They never bonded with their mother. It was hard to do. She was forever *occupied*, holding her hand over her own mouth in that hollow wall or false floor that mankind must forever answer for. ‘*Where was God?*’ I remember her asking me. Not knowing if she wanted a response, I just shook my head and shrugged. Hildy sighed, ‘*He was with the Devil in those days.*’

“I never remember my grandmother crying, but the time she came the closest was the morning they found Hildy on the floor of her small apartment in upstate, New York. She had died alone and had been there for many days. The sadness in my grandmother’s eyes was familial and tribal as she whispered, ‘*You see, Morgan? Sometimes surviving is still a form of dying.*’

“Ann Brown was one of my grandmother’s few American-born friends. She lived several doors down the hall of her Manhattan apartment complex. She was a handsome woman with a pleasing smile. A native New Yorker, Ann was elegant and educated. She spoke of visiting Le Louvre and the Vatican. From her apartment, one could hear the orchestral swells of *La Bohème* and *Tosca*. Her living room displayed stunning photos of the French and Italian Alps.

“When I first met her, she gently touched my shoulder and then my head. With fixed gray eyes, she looked down, to the side, and smiled. My grandmother never actually told me she was blind until years later, and I was never certain whether Ann went to all the places she spoke

about or merely took journeys in her mind. But she could describe Michelangelo's *David* down to the musculature. She knew each swing of the conducting baton when directing Puccini, and she described the views and vistas of Mont Blanc and Gran Paradiso with the clarity of one who had seen them.

“Ann was the first blind person I had ever met and, after my grandparents moved to the suburbs, she would write them letters with their names askew, the address in the wrong place, and the stamp in the lower back left corner. When I asked my grandmother how the letters possibly made it to her, she said the mailman knew Ann. ‘*Everyone knew Ann Brown.*’ Back then, the world was a bit smaller, and our hearts were a bit bigger.

“It was an early lesson in community and camaraderie—something else automation has taken from us. I realize now that Ann Brown *saw* far more than most sighted people ever do, and back in the mid-twentieth century, my grandmother saw her no differently.

“They were all strong, determined women. They were poor together; they endured together, and they broke barriers together. Despite their youth and lack of means, they understood that the future belongs to those who are irrepressible and free.

“When I think back to my grandmother's face at the edge of my pink canopy bed—smiling, singing, easing me to sleep—I can still hear her favorite Irish folk song and realize now that it was actually the anthem of her American dream.

Well, I know where I'm going

And I know who's going with me.

I know who I love,

And my dear knows who I'll marry.

*I have stockings of silk,
Shoes of bright green leather,
Combs to buckle my hair,
And a ring for every finger.*

“I remember the last time I spoke to her. It was near the end of her long life. I asked her how she was feeling. She replied, ‘*No sense in complaining.*’ My grandmother did not ascribe to self-pity. She came to America with nothing but a pair of gold earrings which she sold to a tall man with sweaty hands shortly after disembarkation. Against all odds, she made a life for herself. Her journey changed the fabric of our family and her singular drive allowed me to hope and dream as far as my creative vision and imagination can take me. While there are countless stories like Sadie Holden’s, each one matters. Our forebearers were young once. They had hopes, dreams and ambitions. They were us. Their lives must not be locked away in old, black and white photo albums in the bottom drawer of a hallway dresser. Their story is our story.”

Morgan stops and stands in front of the dark vineyard window. She turns and looks around the room as five sets of wide eyes watch her through the firelight. “That’s my contribution for tonight.”

“Enthralling,” Percy says.

“Powerful,” says Mr. Frisch. “There’s no other word. A lot to think about.”

“I am so upset about Hildy,” Kim says. “I don’t understand why she died alone.”

David shifts in the windowsill and mutters, “People die alone every day.”

“It was tragic and beautiful, Morgan,” Cherie states from the end of the long tasting table.

“I would like to go next.”

“Yes, thank you, Cherie,” Morgan replies. “You are officially next!”

“Pick out a wine, and I will start filling glasses,” Percy adds.

