



Prologue: It Begins

“There is only one Evil: Disunity.”

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

One Hundred and Four

Suzie Marten was ten years old when she died.

Her passion was dancing. Spinning herself dizzy in search of rhythm, pirouetting until her toes hurt. Her father had bought her a pair of ballet shoes—a perfect fit, and with pink ribbon laces that wound all the way up to her ankles. She scuffed and broke the soles with a serrated kitchen knife she snatched from the kitchen drawer. Suzie adored those shoes with a pure love that only children can seem to feel for inanimate objects. She was wearing them when she was torn apart.

It was November 12th, 1995.

To Suzie, Sunday morning was the final stop between freedom and school. She both loved and hated Sundays. Suzie despised school and feared her raven-faced, balding teacher, who would sometimes get so mad he threw things. She imagined he spent his Sundays alone, watching the clock, eager for Monday to arrive so he could overturn another desk. He had done this to her best friend. Books and pencils had crashed to the floor, an eraser bounced up and clipped one boy's ear. At recess Suzie sat beside her humiliated friend and wrapped an arm around his shoulder—a brave move considering his sex—because as any ten-year-old girl knows: where there are boys, there's a whole lot of germs. "It's okay," she whispered in his ear. "I saw on the

T.V. that teachers can't hurt kids and we can sue him if we want. He's such a...dirty shit."

They looked at each other, shocked. *Dirty shit.*

"Suzie Marten, you can't say that! If *they* hear you, they'll send a letter home to your mom and she'll wash your mouth out with soap, or something. I saw that one on the T.V. too."

"Na-uh she won't. My mom's too tired to do that. Always in bed. And besides, she says words like that! She works the dogwatch at the hospital—whatever that means. She gets home from work when everyone else is getting up. I don't know what a dog has to do with it. I once saw this boring black-and-white movie about a vampire who only ever came out at night. He could turn into a bat and flew around eating people—or something—and during the day he slept in a box. Did'ja ever see that one?"

Suzie once teased her mother's mouth open with a spoon while she slept, to see if she had fangs. Donna Marten bolted awake, grabbed her daughter by the wrist and pulled her under the sheets. They laughed. That night they had Fruit Loops for dinner.

On the morning of the ninth, Donna fell into bed after a ten-hour shift. Her knees ached, the smell of disinfectant and cigarettes sweating out of her pores. She was too tired to shower. Suzie pulled the blankets up to her mother's chin.

"Mo-om," Suzie said, her voice drawn out and meek.

"What is it, honey? I'm dead on my feet."

“Well...”

“Come on, out with it. I’m two ticks from dreaming.”

“Well, I was just wondering. How come on television moms don’t get old? How come Julia Roberts never gets wrinkles, or anything, but you’re starting to look like an old lady? Like a bit of an old rag.” Mother stared into her daughter’s innocent eyes... *Innocent*, Donna had to remind herself. *Innocent*.

Forgive her, for she knows not what she says—it was an expression her own mother had been fond of using, and often. Donna never really understood its meaning—its weight—until that moment. There in her bedroom with her daughter. For the last time.

“Count yourself lucky I love you, Suzie,” she said, wishing her little girl were old enough to start lying like everyone else. But despite this, they kissed goodnight and all was forgiven. She watched her daughter pull the door shut, taking with her the smell of Strawberry Shortcake and pre-teen sweat.

Suzie passed a cabinet full of her gymnastics trophies in the hallway, the glass planes shaking as she bounced along. Her reflection twittered from one family photo to another. Leaping into the kitchen, she slid to the refrigerator in her socks. It was covered in drawings and magnets, school reports and shopping receipts. Alone at last.

Her father was away on another business trip. Where he went she rarely knew, but she was always glad to see him go, as he never came back empty-handed. Once he brought a packet of windup crayons—the good kind, unlike those some of her friends owned, which would have to be thrown away if you twisted too far—and another time, the ballet shoes.

She watched *Sailor Moon* over cereal. Afterwards, she pulled her hair into a ponytail and brushed her teeth, the bristles as frayed as the wheat stalks on her uncle's farm after a storm. Suzie didn't see much of her extended family any more, least of all her uncle in Morpeth, not with her father always traveling and her mother sleeping day after day.

Donna Marten found dried toothpaste splashes on the bathroom mirror a week later. She licked them off and fell to the floor, her mouth tasting of mint and the briny tang of tears.

Suzie put on her headphones even though the padding itched her ears, and slipped into a pink leotard and tutu. She pressed Play on her Walkman and music filled her ears. She slammed the front door as she went into the yard.

In the house a mechanic hum escaped the freezer; the grandfather clock ticked away. Gentle draughts tickled the wind chimes near the window until they laughed. And through it all Donna Marten snored.

Suzie danced to *Mister Boombastic* ("say me fan-tas-tic!") on the front lawn. In her opinion she lived on the most boring street in all of James Bridge, maybe even all of Australia: a rarely traveled stretch of road on the outskirts of town. Suzie had no neighbors, but should a car come along she liked the idea of being seen. This was why she danced, and why she danced so well. She didn't twirl and then fall for herself, but for *everything*. There was simply nothing else to do.

Autumn was hot that year, the house surrounded by matchstick grass. The valley hissed when the wind blew through the dead trees, a desperate, lonely sound.

Suzie spun and curtsied, laughing to herself. *I could do this all day*, she thought. *And I will! Go on, stop me. Dirty shit, dirty shit!*

She loved watching her shadow on the lawn, the way it was a part of her. But when she leapt into the air they were separated. *If only I could fly forever*, she thought and then withdrew. *But I would miss my shadow. That would be sad, like losing a friend.*

Four hours after falling asleep, panic reached into the dark and ripped Donna from her bed. Her stomach knotted, brow flecked with sweat. It had not been the sounds of screeching tires, or the muted gunshot that awoke her—fatigue had seen to that. It was that her mind had fled her body and her flesh had no choice but to follow.

She threw open the door and ran from room to room. Nothing.

“Suzie!” she yelled. Her voice was feral, unrecognizable as her own. Something inside fueled her dread. The house was empty.

Donna stumbled outside, her eyes squinting against the sunlight. Pain thudded in her head and shot down her spine. Suzie was not in the backyard. As she rounded the house and neared the front gate, she felt heat waves coming off the brick wall to her right. She fumbled with the latch. Next to her were the trashcans, their stench reaching out to grab her, to make her feel ill. The latch opened and the gate swung wide—a sharp cry of metal grinding metal.

Donna ran onto the front lawn and stopped.

The Walkman was shattered near the gutter, ribbons of gray tape fluttering in the wind. Suzie Marten was strewn in pieces across the road.

Crows fluttered over intestines, disturbing the stillness. One hopped onto Suzie’s head, spread its bloodied wings and squawked. It lowered its beak and bit the child’s tongue, which had been cooking against the tar.

Her daughter's ballet shoe lay in front of her, distorted by heat waves and the foot still inside. Donna screamed.

Her breath came short as her nostrils filled with the stink; a putrid mix of chemicals and sugarcane, shit and salt. She would never forget it.

Darkness flittered over her vision and Donna ran to her child, lashing out at the birds. They twirled and cawed, sprinkling blood drops over her face. "Get away from my baby!" she screamed, arms thrashing. But the beaks returned to meat, to gorge.

Those delicate, soft stabbing sounds.

A crow settled on Donna's shoulder, feathers brushed against her cheek. Her world emptied. She clambered over gravel. *This isn't happening*, she thought. *It can't be. I'm dreaming—that's it! I'm still sleeping, my baby isn't torn to pieces.* Donna started to laugh, short, deep bleats. Parents were not equipped to see these sights; to smell such insane, bitter scents.

She fought the birds again, kicked out, punching. Donna didn't comprehend what she was doing until she held one of the animals in her hand. Its scream mingled with her own, formed a single high-pitched mewl that echoed across the fields. She let it drop, its wings broken.

Donna fell to her knees and attempted to scoop up as much of her daughter as she could manage. Her arms swept wide in manic, possessive hugs, pulling the larger chunks closer and closer to her chest. Tears slipped down her face. She gave in and settled on the largest intact fragment: Suzie's head, neck, collarbone and left arm, which seemed to be only holding on by a thinly stretched tendon. But the birds were hungry and selfish and would not let their bounty escape without a fight. They swooped. Their black-on-black eyes were empty and so cold.

The chunk of Suzie was only a quarter of the corpse, but Donna thought it was heavier than her daughter had ever been intact. She turned her back to the crows, deflecting swoops and scratches.

And then without warning, the weight in her arms lessened and Donna felt something slap against her shins. Something warm and something so very wet.

Donna was a nurse and assisted doctors in surgery. What she saw sitting on her shins was unlike anything she had ever seen at work. It was small and childlike. A healthy heart that still had many years of beating left to do.

Donna collapsed amid a flurry of dark wings, dark shadows.