



46

'Such a wise and
humorous writer.'
Australian

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The

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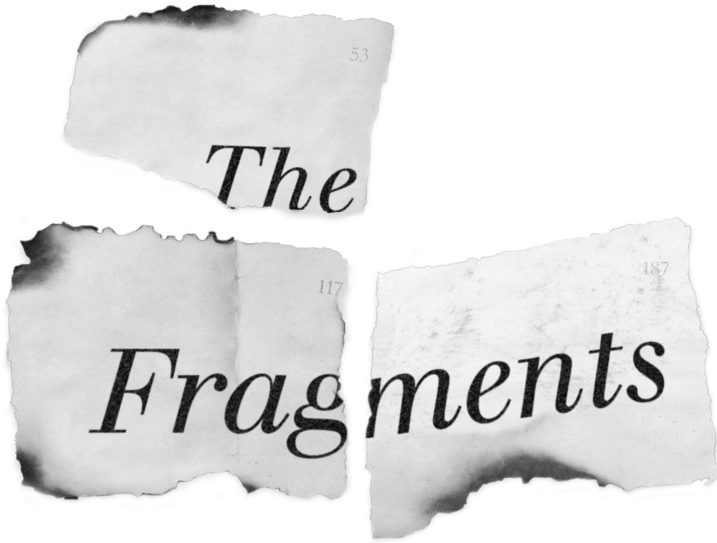
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TONI JORDAN



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New York City, 1938

Rachel Lehrer is grateful. The black Schrafft's uniform is scratchy and the white collar and cuffs are stiff, and she wonders how many other bodies sweated in it before it was starched and folded and given to her, but she's grateful. Her hair, every mousy strand of it, is wedged up under the cap and the pins pull tight, digging in. The other girls won't talk to her. Won't even look at her. It's early, before the breakfast rush. Last week the east coast was hit by a biblical storm and here in Manhattan the drains are still clogged with trees and street signs and sheet roofing. It's September and the weather is cooling after a summer that seemed to bake the green from the trees and sent half the city scurrying out to Rockaway or Belle Harbour. This morning she rose in the dark and detoured around the flooded streets and it took her an hour and a half on foot from Hell's Kitchen all the way down here to West Thirteenth and Fifth Avenue, but she's grateful.

‘Don’t make me regret it now,’ says Mrs O’Loughlin. Her folded arms make her bosom a fearsome promontory.

‘No, Mrs O’Loughlin,’ Rachel says.

‘I take people as I find them,’ Mrs O’Loughlin says, in her gull’s voice. ‘But I can be too kind-hearted. That’s my weakness.’

Rachel doesn’t trust her own face at this declaration. She stands straighter, flattens the corners of her mouth.

‘You’ll have your trial and sure as eggs if you can’t work as hard as the other girls there’ll be nothing for it. If you’re not an ornament to this restaurant it won’t matter who your mother’s aunt is.’

Mrs O’Loughlin should play the trumpet in the New York Philharmonic, Rachel thinks. Breathing in through your nose without a break in your diatribe: that’s a rare ability.

‘Yes, Mrs O’Loughlin,’ she says.

‘Take Bridget here.’ Mrs O’Loughlin inclines her head toward a stocky girl standing to the side of the main counter, neat in her black and white and cap, order book in her hand, weight even on her flat shoes. ‘Heaven knows she’s no beauty queen but you can’t hold that against her, straight off the boat from County Cork. You ask her if she’d rather be here or back on the farm with her twelve sisters and brothers. She’s in paradise, that’s what she’d tell you. Never had it so good.’

Bridget’s eyes narrow to slits.

Another *Yes, Mrs O’Loughlin*, tolls in Rachel’s head, but she’s not sure if she says this one aloud.

‘You take the orders, when directed,’ Mrs O’Loughlin says. ‘The customers, they’re your lord and lady for the day and if

you can't manage that, if you think you're too good for that missy, well your time here will be short make no mistake. You bring the people their egg salad and their cream cheese sandwich and their waffles and you always *always* use a tray. You say ma'am and you say sir. How do you hold the tray?'

'With straight arms, Mrs O'Loughlin.'

And on it goes. You do not speak to the men at the counter, even and especially if they speak to you. You do not speak to the soda boys. You do not speak to the girls behind the candy counter. Every morning before your shift you will be inspected because nothing kills the appetite so fast as a waitress with dirt under her nails fit to sprout potatoes. Coffee in the pot will be replaced after twenty minutes and if I see a pot with old coffee in it, there's the door.

'Are we clear?' says Mrs O'Loughlin.

We are clear. Her cheeks are burning, the other girls are smirking, but she nods. Rachel is grateful, so grateful.

When she first arrived at Great-Aunt Vera's house in Park Slope she was black and blue, and close to fainting from hunger. Vera fumed at the sight of her. She let her sleep on a camp bed in her pantry and fed her soup. That man was trouble, she'd told Mary over and over. Rachel, being half her father, was trouble too and that was plain to see. Vera had no time for trouble. She wasn't well herself. She'd help Rachel find work and a place to live but that was the end of it.

For the first few weeks, Rachel ironed in the laundry of the Methodist Episcopal Hospital close to where Vera lived. One of the mending girls had a cousin looking for a roommate in

a tenement on Ninth Avenue. Carol was not quite five feet tall and stocky as a miner, blinking and fidgety, and the room was drafty and dank. The other laundry girls thought Rachel was crazy moving to Hell's Kitchen but in those early days in New York, Rachel seemed cured of any kind of fear. The city was laced with tiny treasures that she alone noticed: golden robed statues on top of traffic lights; patterns made by the morning sun reflecting on canyons of marble and granite. The power of this city. The arrogance of all that steel piercing the sky—and the men pulling handcarts stacked with lumber in Chinatown, like another country altogether.

Then Great-Aunt Vera found her this job, closer to her new home than the hospital. She's done her duty by Rachel, twice over. She isn't to bother her again.

Waitressing is a step up and Rachel doesn't intend to waste it. She spends the day with her head down. The other girls, mostly Irish like Bridget and more used to milking cows, don't speak to her, and it's not just because Rachel was born here in America or because her Great-Aunt Vera was the midwife who saw Mrs O'Loughlin's daughter through a difficult confinement. It's more than that.

Rachel has been here before, as a customer with her mother and Vera on a rare visit to the city when she was small, when the farm still seemed like an empire. That was the day she first saw a neon sign and an aeroplane floating in the clouds. Her mother ordered the blue plate special, which was eggs cooked in butter, and for Rachel, a crushed strawberry sundae. It tasted of all the things that were waiting for her in the future.

Now, all morning as she's waited tables, she's had the

sensation of being split in two—she’s a girl sitting on a stool beside her mother, swirling red and pink through white, yet she’s also the straight-armed, clean-nailed waitress who takes her order. Rachel looks up from the menu and sees Rachel standing there in cap and apron. Does she recognise herself? It’s as if there’s been another Rachel hidden inside her for all this time but she hasn’t yet emerged, not really. She’s still lunching Rachel—but costumed and acting, like in a play.

It’s busy at Schrafft’s and it makes the day go quicker. By the time the breakfast rush is over, Rachel has the hang of the trays and the way the orders are passed to the kitchen. A matronly customer yells ‘Maid!’ to attract her attention. By the end of lunch, she can feel blisters on her heels. She’s been doing all right, she thinks: she knocked over a glass of water on seventeen but wiped it in a flash and the lady there only smiled. Maureen’s been here for weeks and she dropped an ice cream soda on the counter and some dripped on a woman’s shoe.

It’s nearly three o’clock when the girl comes in: Rachel sees her right away near the door. Looking back, she can’t put her finger on why she noticed her among the constant stream of customers. Was there something furtive about the way she stood? Schrafft’s customers are mostly women from all levels of society but for all of them it’s a treat, coming here. The shiny checkerboard floor, the polished chrome and dark wood and the long curving marble counters. The cocktails and fancy boxes of candy and uniformed staff. Women glide through those swooshing doors as if visiting an ancestral mansion, as if sitting on high stools and drinking fruit cocktails through

a straw is a return to their rightful state.

From the moment Rachel sees her, though, she can tell that the girl doesn't feel this sense of homecoming.

Mrs O'Loughlin sits the girl in Rachel's section. The girl looks barely out of her teens but her eyes dart like someone older. She's slender like a birch from back home. Wears an oversized man's coat too light for this fall weather, cotton maybe but made from a black, white and grey twill that looks like fine patchwork. The girl keeps it on, the coat, instead of hanging it on the racks by the door and it pools around her as she sits. If not for her radiant face and her hair she'd look like a bum. Her hair. It's in a long plait and so blonde it's white; so blonde it hurts Rachel's eyes to look at it. You could cut yourself on her cheekbones from a distance of ten feet.

When Rachel greets her, the girl doesn't speak. Maybe she can't, Rachel thinks. Or not English, at least. It's not shyness. She looks right at Rachel with eyes that seem somehow too big for her face. She wears no makeup and there's a freshness to her skin that brings to mind dark fir trees and meadows and mountain lakes. She orders a hot chocolate with whipped cream by pointing to the menu. When Rachel brings it and places it in front of her, she wraps two china-white hands around it and bows her head.

'Sure and that's an odd one,' Bridget says, when Rachel returns to her place.

Rachel serves another table next, then another single, an older woman who orders a hot butterscotch sundae with vanilla ice cream and toasted almonds and after her two women who might be mother and daughter, who both have

the chicken à la king. There's a boy with them in a peaked cap, younger than George, who decides after much deliberation on grilled cheese cut in triangles. She makes it clear on the docket, even draws the shape but the grilled cheese comes out in squares and must go back and then the boy doesn't want it anymore, he wants chocolate and maple fudge—no, chocolate with the marshmallow in the centre.

'That's not allowed,' one of the women tells him, eyes flicking to Rachel. 'It's against the rules. Isn't that so?'

'You have to eat your lunch before you're allowed dessert,' she says to him, and as soon as she sees his face she regrets being an accessory to this type of thinking. Eat the fudge, she wants to say to him instead. Eat the cherry patties and the thin mints and the peanut butter cups. Everything might change tomorrow. You might never be a customer here again.

By the time the grilled cheese has been restored and she looks up, she sees the woman with the plait heading to the cashier's desk, check in hand. There's a slide to her steps as though she's skating. She swerves toward the candy counter and trails her fingertips along the glass, dawdling over the cookies and cakes and trays of fudge as if she has all day.

Along the top of the counter are glistening jars of jams stacked in pyramids and velvet boxes of candy of various sizes and shiny tins, square and round, gold or silver or embossed with flowers and tied with ribbons and bows. The girl picks one up in a random browsing way, turns it to and fro to admire it, and replaces it. She chooses another, examines it, puts it back. Then she picks up a third, a small crimson chest

of chocolate bon bons with a bright satin flower on the top, and drops it in her pocket.

Rachel feels the tiny action reverberate around the restaurant like a sonic wave. She looks around: no one else reacts. No one yells or runs toward the girl. Is Rachel really the only one who saw it? She thinks about her mother, the way she could see, yet somehow fail to register, her father's anger. It's as if an action has to fit with the observer's reality in order for it to happen. No one would ever contemplate that stealing chocolates in front of Mrs O'Loughlin was even a remote possibility, therefore it isn't.

All around Rachel, everything is normal. Busboys pass with heavy trays, clinking with crockery. People eat their sandwiches and their salads and their parfaits, they talk about their cousin's wedding and their plans for the afternoon. Waitresses thread between tables like swallows and the hostess watches everything from the door. Perhaps Rachel is mistaken.

The blonde girl doesn't hesitate. She continues walking to the cashier. Rachel is paralysed with the thought that the girl won't have any money at all, not even to pay for her hot chocolate, and she tastes acid in her mouth as if she is the one about to be hauled off in front of everyone. The tension vibrates in her skin and just as Rachel thinks she can't bear it another second, that she'll have to excuse herself and rush out to the back, the girl reaches in another of her pockets and pays casually with a note large enough to warrant smaller notes in the change. Then she leaves and no one stops her, and Rachel? She is welded there.

After the girl has left, Mrs O'Loughlin calls them all

together in a huddle at the door to the kitchen. ‘That girlie in the coat,’ she says. ‘A coat like that, with those pockets and not wanting it hung up. If she comes in again, I’ll thank someone to keep an eye on her.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Rachel says.

When she reaches the top stair and lets herself into the tenement at the end of her first day, it’s dark again. At Schrafft’s, the shifts are shorter than most places and the waitresses don’t rely on tips, but her feet don’t know that. It’ll get better, Rachel tells herself as she opens the door. This won’t be forever. This is just for now.

She knows straight away that Carol isn’t home—there’s nowhere to hide in this tiny room. The two of them sleep head to tail in a pull-down bed that latches against the wall, the broad heat of Carol’s shins pressing on Rachel’s back. The couch was there when they arrived and there are two chairs and a rickety card table where Carol’s half-written chain letters are stacked next to envelopes. No closet, even. All their dresses hang on nails. There’s a thumping radiator under the window that makes more noise than heat and a galaxy of mould sprinkled across the ceiling, and there are the things that make the room hers: tiny plants lining the walls and ledges, growing in Mason jars and coffee tins and dried-milk canisters, and there’s a pile of secondhand books in one corner. She has *Out of Africa* and *Of Mice and Men* now, as well as the ones she brought from home, and she’s read them twice each. There’s a cold-water sink in the kitchenette where they’ve both been known to wash when they’ve been too tired or disgusted

to face the bathroom at the end of the hall. It's supposed to be women only, this floor, and maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Yet she's lucky, she knows that. On the floors below, families of six and eight live in two rooms and a tiny kitchen.

When she switches on the light, she sees the note from Carol on the table, weighted down with a Boston fern in a rusting K plum jam tin. *At Zoe's, it says, for a little party. Come if you like.*

Rachel doesn't like. The good news is that Mrs O'Loughlin said she could come back tomorrow. The bad news is that her back throbs and her arms quiver like jelly. She couldn't manage the walk home. The Fifth Avenue coach cost a dime, twice the cost of a normal bus, but she wanted something special to celebrate her first day. She shouldn't have spent it, she thinks now. She doesn't know how long this job will last. Instead of Zoe's party, she boils a saucepan and fills up their aluminium tub and drops a spoonful of lumpy seltzer in it.

The thrill she felt when she first stepped off the bus from Allentown: it's there still, somewhere under the blisters. The city was so swathed in fog that first day that she could barely make out the towers lancing the clouds. But this was the city that called to people around the world. Rachel knew she needed to be here.

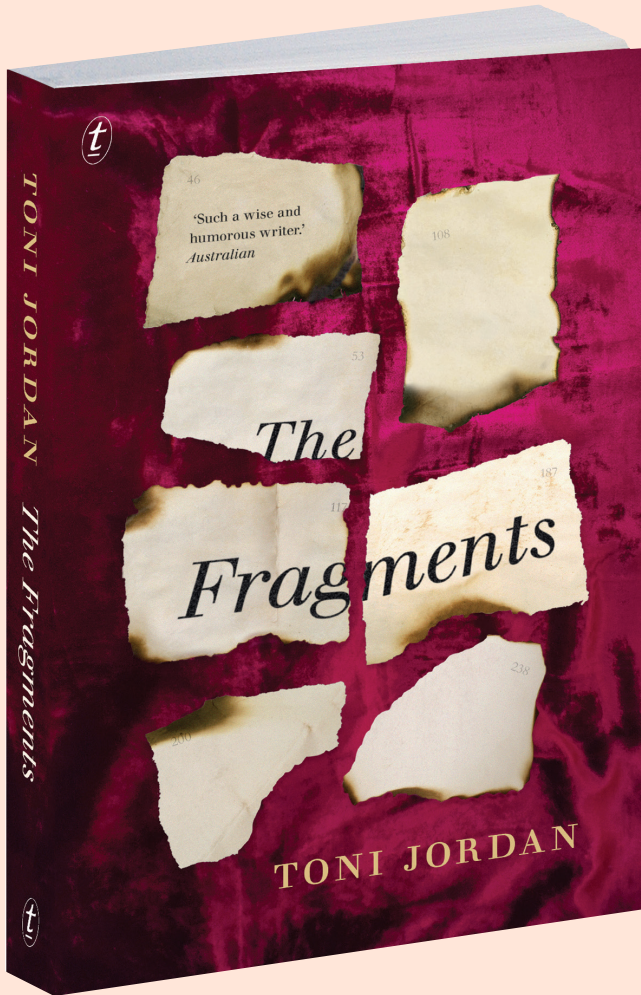
She can't undress yet, or feed herself. She's not hungry anyway, not when the cooking smells that invade the hall are a whole league of nations clashing and bubbling in her throat. Her feet, they're what matter. The heat of the water uncurls her toes and softens her skin and drops her shoulders. She wonders if the girl in the coat is eating the box of

bon bons right now, on a park bench somewhere or huddled in a tenement even shabbier than her own. Bread, she could understand. Stealing eggs or a hunk of pastrami or an apple. That girl took a hell of a risk for something so impractical. She swirls the bathwater with pointed toes. She's used to long days and knows she can manage it again tomorrow, and the next day and for as many days as necessary, provided she keeps her eyes on the horizon.

She sits with her feet in the water until the last trace of heat has gone. Rachel's dinner will be leftover liver loaf with mashed potato. She might even sit outside on the iron fire escape to eat it, if she can force herself to disturb the pigeons on the railings. There are barely any stars here. If she'd known this was the way of things, she'd have tried to memorise the ones at home. She'd thought the stars as constant as the sun.

If she had a radio, she'd listen to *The Hermit's Cave*. But there is no radio. She reaches for *All Has an End* and starts again from the beginning. The bravery of Cadence, the way she never gives up on her father. It brings tears to her eyes. These are the kinds of books she likes the most—of struggle and victory, or even honourable defeat. The tense wondering about what will happen next.

Before she goes to bed, she'll water her plants from the tub that holds her feet. She is too tired to sleep easily but when she does, she'll dream she's lying on a bed of whipped cream floating on a hot-chocolate sea while an ivory hand feeds her stolen bon bons that taste of chocolate and of woodsmoke and cloves, warm and smooth and sweet on her tongue.



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