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Fates and Furies

Written by Lauren Groff

Published by William Heinemann

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FATES *and* FURIES

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125 YEARS

WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

William Heinemann
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

William Heinemann is part of the Penguin Random House
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First published by William Heinemann in 2015
(First published in the United States by Riverhead Books,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, in 2015)

www.randomhouse.co.uk

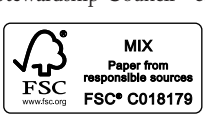
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781785150142 (Hardback)
ISBN 9781785150159 (Trade Paperback)

Book design by Gretchen Achilles

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



I

A THICK DRIZZLE FROM THE SKY, like a curtain's sudden sweeping. The seabirds stopped their tuning, the ocean went mute. Houselights over the water dimmed to gray.

Two people were coming up the beach. She was fair and sharp in a green bikini, though it was May in Maine and cold. He was tall, vivid; a light flickered in him that caught the eye and held it. Their names were Lotto and Mathilde.

For a minute they watched a tide pool full of spiny creatures that sent up curls of sand in vanishing. Then he took her face in his hands, kissed her pale lips. He could die right now of happiness. In a vision, he saw the sea rising up to suck them in, tonguing off their flesh and rolling their bones over its coral molars in the deep. If she were beside him, he thought, he would float out singing.

Well, he was young, twenty-two, and they had been married that morning in secret. Extravagance, under the circumstances, could be forgiven.

Her fingers down the back of his trunks seared his skin. She pushed him backward, walking him up a dune covered in beach-pea stalks, down again to where the wall of sand blocked the wind, where they felt warmer. Under the bikini top, her gooseflesh had taken on a lunar blue, and her nipples in the cold turned inward. On their knees, now, though the sand was rough and hurt. It didn't matter. They were reduced to mouths and hands. He swept her legs to his hips, pressed

her down, blanketed her with his heat until she stopped shivering, made a dune of his back. Her raw knees were raised to the sky.

He longed for something wordless and potent: what? To wear her. He imagined living in her warmth forever. People in his life had fallen away from him one by one like dominoes; every movement pinned her further so that she could not abandon him. He imagined a lifetime of screwing on the beach until they were one of those ancient pairs speed-walking in the morning, skin like lacquered walnut meat. Even old, he would waltz her into the dunes and have his way with her sexy frail bird bones, the plastic hips, and the bionic knee. Drone lifeguards looming up in the sky, flashing their lights, booming *Fornicators! Fornicators!* to roust them guiltily out. This, for eternity. He closed his eyes and wished. Her eyelashes on his cheek, her thighs on his waist, the first consummation of this terrifying thing they'd done. Marriage meant forever.

[He'd planned for a proper bed, a sense of ceremony: he'd stolen his roommate Samuel's beach house, having spent most summers there since he was fifteen, knowing that they hid the key under the hawksbill turtle carapace in the garden. A house of tartan and Liberty print and Fiestaware, thick with dust; the guest room with the lighthouse's triple blink in the night, the craggy beach below. This was what Lotto had imagined for the first time with this gorgeous girl he'd magicked into wife. But Mathilde was right to agitate for plein-air consummation. She was always right. He would know this soon enough.]

It was over too quickly. When she shouted, the gulls hidden by the dune buckshot the low clouds. Later, she'd show him the abrasion against her eighth vertebra from a mussel shell when he dug her in and dug her in. They were pressed so close that when they laughed, his laugh rose from her belly, hers from his throat. He kissed her cheekbones, her clavicle, the pale of her wrist with its rootlike blue veins.

His terrible hunger he'd thought would be sated was not. The end apparent in the beginning.

"My wife," he said. "Mine." Perhaps instead of wearing her, he could swallow her whole.

"Oh?" she said. "Right. Because I'm chattel. Because my royal family traded me for three mules and a bucket of butter."

"I love your butter bucket," he said. "*My* butter bucket now. So salty. So sweet."

"Stop," she said. She'd lost her smile, so shy and constant that he was startled to see her up close without it. "Nobody belongs to anybody. We've done something bigger. It's new."

He looked at her thoughtfully, gently bit the tip of her nose. He had loved her with all his might these two weeks and, in so loving, had considered her transparent, a plate of glass. He could see through to the goodness at her quick. But glass is fragile, he would have to be careful. "You're right," he said; thinking, No, thinking how deeply they belonged. How surely.

Between his skin and hers, there was the smallest of spaces, barely enough for air, for this slick of sweat now chilling. Even still, a third person, their marriage, had slid in.

2

They climbed across the rocks toward the house they'd left bright in the dusk.

A unity, marriage, made of discrete parts. Lotto was loud and full of light; Mathilde, quiet, watchful. Easy to believe that his was the better half, the one that set the tone. It's true that everything he'd lived so far had steadily built toward Mathilde. That if his life had not prepared him for the moment she walked in, there would have been no *them*.

The drizzle thickened to drops. They hurried across the last stretch of beach.

[Suspend them there, in the mind's eye: skinny, young, coming through dark toward warmth, flying over the cold sand and stone. We will return to them. For now, he's the one we can't look away from. He is the shining one.]

Lotto loved the story. He'd been born, he'd always say, in the calm eye of a hurricane.

[From the first, a wicked sense of timing.]

His mother was beautiful then, and his father was still alive. Summer, late sixties. Hamlin, Florida. The plantation house so new there were tags on the furniture. The shutters hadn't been screwed down and made a terrific din in the wild first passage of the storm.

Now, briefly, sun. Rain dripped off the sour orange trees. In the pause, the bottling plant roared five acres across his family's scrubland. In the hallway, two housemaids, the cook, a landscaper, and the plant's foreman pressed their ears to the wooden door. Inside the room, Antoinette was aswim in white sheets and enormous Gawain held his wife's hot head. Lotto's aunt Sallie crouched to catch the baby.

Lotto made his entrance: goblinesque with long limbs, huge hands and feet, lungs exceeding strong. Gawain held him to the light in the window. The wind was rising again, live oaks conducting the storm with mossy arms. Gawain wept. He'd hit his apex. "Gawain Junior," he said.

But Antoinette had done all the work, after all, and already the heat she'd felt for her husband was half diverted into her son. "No," she said. She thought of her first date with Gawain, the maroon velvet in the theater and *Camelot* on screen. "Lancelot," she said. Her men would be knight-themed. She was not without humor of her own.

Before the storm hit again, the doctor arrived to sew Antoinette back together. Sallie swabbed the baby's skin with olive oil. She felt as if she were holding her own beating heart in her hands. "Lancelot," she whispered. "What a name. You'll be beat up for sure. But don't you fret. I'll make sure you're Lotto." And because she could move behind wallpaper like the mouse she resembled, Lotto is what they called him.

The baby was exigent. Antoinette's body was blasted, breasts chewed up. Nursing was not a success. But as soon as Lotto began to smile and she saw he was her tiny image with her dimples and charm, she forgave him. A relief, to find her own beauty there. Her husband's family were not a lovely people, descendants of every kind of Floridian

from original Timucua through Spanish and Scot and escaped slave and Seminole and carpetbagger; mostly they bore the look of overcooked Cracker. Sallie was sharp-faced, bony. Gawain was hairy and huge and silent; it was a joke in Hamlin that he was only half human, the spawn of a bear that had waylaid his mother on her way to the outhouse. Antoinette had historically gone for the smooth and moussed, the suave steppers, the loudly moneyed, but a year married, she found herself still so stirred by her husband that when he came in at night she followed him full-clothed into the shower as if in a trance.

Antoinette had been raised in a saltbox on the New Hampshire coast: five younger sisters, a draft so dreadful in the winter that she thought she'd die before she got her clothes on in the morning. Drawers of saved buttons and dead batteries. Baked potatoes six meals in a row. She'd had a full ride to Smith but couldn't get off the train. A magazine on the seat beside hers had opened to Florida, trees dripping golden fruit, sun, luxe. Heat. Women in fishtails undulating in mottled green. It was ordained. She went to the end of the line, the end of her cash, hitched to Weeki Wachee. When she entered the manager's office, he took in her waist-length red-gold hair, her switchback curves, murmured, *Yes*.

The paradox of being a mermaid: the lazier she looks, the harder the mermaid works. Antoinette smiled languorously and dazzled. Manatees brushed her; bluegills nibbled at her hair. But the water was a chilly seventy-four degrees, the current strong, the calibration of air in the lungs exact to regulate buoyancy or sinking. The tunnel the mermaids swam down to reach the theater was black and long and sometimes caught their hair and held them there by the scalp. She couldn't see the audience but felt the weight of their eyes through the glass. She turned on the heat for the invisible watchers; she made them believe. But sometimes, as she grinned, she thought of sirens as she knew them: not this sappy Little Mermaid she was pretending to be but the one who gave up her tongue and song and tail and home

to be immortal. The one who'd sing a ship full of men onto the rocks and watch, ferocious, while they fell lax into the deep

Of course, she went to the bungalows when summoned. She met television actors and comics and baseball players and even that swivel-hipped singer once, during the years he'd made himself over into a film star. They made promises, but not one made good. No jets would be sent for her. No tête-à-têtes with directors. She would not be installed in a house in Beverly Hills. She passed into her thirties. Thirty-two. Thirty-five. She could not be a starlet, she understood, blowing out the candles. All she had ahead of her was the cold water, the slow ballet.

Then Sallie walked into the theater set under the water. She was seventeen, sun-scorched. She'd run away; she wanted life! Something more than her silent brother who spent eighteen hours a day at his bottling plant and came home to sleep. But the mermaids' manager just laughed at her. So skinny, she was more eel than nixie. She crossed her arms and sat down on his floor. He offered her the hot dog concession to get her up. And then she came into the darkened amphitheater and stood dumbstruck at the glinting glass, where Antoinette was in mid-performance in a red bikini top and tail. She took up all the light.

Sallie's fervent attention dilated down to the size of the woman in the window and there it would stay, fixed, for good.

She made herself indispensable. She sewed sequined posing tails, learned to use a respirator to scrape algae from the spring side of the glass. One day a year later, when Antoinette was sitting slumped in the tube room, rolling the sodden tail off her legs, Sallie edged near. She handed Antoinette a flyer for Disney's new park in Orlando. "You're Cinderella," she whispered.

Antoinette had never felt so understood in her life. "I am," she said.

She was. She was fitted into the satin dress with hoops beneath, the zirconium tiara. She had an apartment in an orange grove, a new

roommate, Sallie. Antoinette was lying in the sun on the balcony in a black bikini and slash of red lipstick when Gawain came up the stairs carrying the family rocking chair.

He filled the doorway: six-foot-eight, so hairy his beard extended into his haircut, so lonely that women could taste it in his wake when he passed. He'd been thought slow, yet when his parents died in a car crash when he was twenty, leaving him with a seven-year-old sister, he was the only one to understand the value of the family's land. He used their savings as down payment to build a plant to bottle the clean, cold water from the family's source. Selling Florida's birthright back to its owners was borderline immoral, perhaps, but the American way to make money. He accumulated wealth, spent none. When his hunger for a wife got too intense, he'd built the plantation house with vast white Corinthian columns all around. Wives loved big columns, he'd heard. He waited. No wives came.

Then his sister called to demand he bring family bits and bobs up to her new apartment, and here he was, forgetting how to breathe when he saw Antoinette, curvy and pale. She could be forgiven for not understanding what she was seeing. Poor Gawain, his mat of hair, his filthy work clothes. She smiled and lay back to be adored again by the sun.

Sallie looked at her friend, her brother; felt the pieces snap together. She said, "Gawain, this is Antoinette. Antoinette, this is my brother. He's got a few million in the bank." Antoinette rose to her feet, floated across the room, set her sunglasses atop her head. Gawain was close enough to see her pupil swallow her iris, then himself reflected in the black.

The wedding was hasty. Antoinette's mermaids sat glinting in tails on the steps of the church, throwing handfuls of fish food at the newlyweds. Sour Yankees bore the heat. Sallie had sculpted a cake topper in marzipan of her brother lifting a supine Antoinette on one arm, the adagio, grand finale of the mermaid shows. Within a week,

furniture for the house was ordered, help arranged for, bulldozers gouging out dirt for the pool. Her comfort secured, Antoinette had no more imagination for how she'd spend the money; everything else was catalog quality, good enough for her.

Antoinette took the comfort as her due; she hadn't expected the love. Gawain surprised her with his clarity and gentleness. She took him in hand. When she shaved away all that hair, she found a sensitive face, a kind mouth. With the horn-rimmed glasses she'd bought him, in bespoke suits, he was distinguished if not handsome. He smiled at her across the room, transformed. At that moment, the flicker in her leapt into flame.

Ten months later came the hurricane, the baby.

IT WAS TAKEN FOR GRANTED by this trio of adults that Lotto was special. Golden.

Gawain poured into him all the love he'd swallowed back for so long. Baby as a lump of flesh molded out of hope. Called dumb for so long, Gawain held his son and felt the weight of genius in his arms.

Sallie, for her part, steadied the household. She hired the nannies and fired them for not being her. She chewed up banana and avocado when the baby began to eat food, and put them into his mouth as if he were a chick.

And as soon as Antoinette received the reciprocal smile, she turned her energies to Lotto. She played Beethoven on the hi-fi as loudly as it would go, shouting out musical terms she'd read about. She took correspondence courses on Early American furniture, Greek myth, linguistics, and read him her papers in their entirety. Perhaps this pea-smeared child in his highchair got only a twelfth of her ideas, she thought, but no one knew how much stuck in child brains. If he was going to be a great man, which he was, she was certain, she would start his greatness now.

Lotto's formidable memory revealed itself when he was two years old, and Antoinette was gratified. [Dark gift; it would make him easy in all things, but lazy.] One night Sallie read him a children's poem before bed, and in the morning, he came down to the breakfast room and stood on a chair and bellowed it out. Gawain applauded in astonishment, and Sallie wiped her eyes on a curtain. "Bravo," Antoinette said coolly, and held up her cup for more coffee, masking the tremble in her hand. Sallie read longer poems at night; the boy nailed them by morning. A certainty grew in him with each success, a sense of an invisible staircase being scaled. When water men came to the plantation with their wives for long weekends, Lotto snuck downstairs, crawled in the dark under the long dinner table. In the cavern there, he saw feet bulging out of the tops of the men's moccasins, the damp pastel seashells of the women's panties. He came up shouting Kipling's "If—" to a roaring ovation. The pleasure of these strangers' applause was punctured by Antoinette's thin smile, her soft, "Go to bed, Lancelot," in lieu of praise. He stopped trying hard when she praised him, she had noticed. Puritans understand the value of delayed gratification.

In the humid stink of central florida, wild long-legged birds and fruit plucked from the trees, Lotto grew. From the time he could walk, his mornings were with Antoinette, his afternoons spent wandering the sandy scrub, the cold springs gurgling up out of the ground, the swamps with the alligators eyeing him from the reeds. Lotto was a tiny adult, articulate, sunny. Until first grade, he knew no other children, as Antoinette was too good for the little town of Hamlin and the foreman's daughters were knobby and wild and she knew where that would lead, no thank you. There were people in the house to silently serve him: if he threw a towel on the ground, someone would pick it up; if he wanted food at two in the morning, it would

arrive as if by magic. Everyone worked to please, and Lotto, having no other models, pleased as well. He brushed Antoinette's hair, let Sallie carry him even when he was almost her size, sat silently next to Gawain in his office all afternoon, soothed by his father's calm goodness, the way once in a while he'd let his humor flare like a sunburst and leave them all blinking. His father was made happy just by remembering Lotto existed.

One night when he was four, Antoinette took him from his bed. In the kitchen, she put cocoa powder in a cup but forgot to add the liquid. He ate the powder with a fork, licking and dipping. They sat in the dark. For a year, Antoinette had neglected her correspondence courses in favor of a preacher on television who looked like Styrofoam a child had carved into a bust and painted with watercolors. The preacher's wife wore permanent eyeliner, her hair in elaborate cathedrals that Antoinette copied. Antoinette sent away for proselytizing tapes and listened to them with huge earphones and an 8-track beside the pool. Afterward, she'd write huge checks that Sallie would burn in the sink. "Darling," she whispered that night to Lotto. "We are here to save your soul. Do you know what'll happen to nonbelievers like your father and your aunt when Judgment Day comes?" She didn't wait for the answer. Oh, she had tried to show Gawain and Sallie the light. She was desperate to share heaven with them, but they only smiled shyly and backed away. She and her son would watch in sorrow from their seats in the clouds as the other two burned below for eternity. Lotto was the one she *must* save. She lit a match and began to read Revelation in a hushed and tremulous voice. When the match went out, she lit another, kept reading. Lotto watched the fire eat down the slender wooden sticks. As the flame neared his mother's fingers, he felt the heat in his own as if he were the one being burned. [Darkness, trumpets, sea creatures, dragons, angels, horsemen, many-eyed monsters; these would fill his dreams for decades.] He watched his mother's beautiful lips move, her eyes lost in their sockets. He

woke in the morning with the conviction that he was being watched, judged at all times. Church all day long. He made innocent faces when he thought bad thoughts. Even when he was alone, he performed.

Lotto would have been bright, ordinary, if his years continued so. One more privileged kid with his ordinary kid sorrows.

But the day came when Gawain took his daily three-thirty break from work and walked up the long green lawn toward the house. His wife was asleep by the deep end of the pool, her mouth open and palms facing the sun. He put a sheet gently over her body to keep her from burning, kissed her on the pulse of her wrist. In the kitchen, Sallie was pulling cookies from the oven. Gawain went around the house, plucked a loquat, rolled the sour fruit in his mouth, and sat on the pump beside the wild roselles, looking down the dirt lane until at last there was his boy, a gnat, housefly, mantis on his bicycle. It was the last day of seventh grade. The summer was a broad, slow river before Lotto. There would be rerun orgies, the originals he'd missed because of school: *Welcome Back, Kotter*; *Charlie's Angels*. There would be gigging for frogs in the lakes at midnight. The boy's gladness filled the lane with light. The fact of his son moved Gawain, but the actual person was a miracle, big and funny and beautiful, better than the people who made him.

But all at once, the world contracted around his boy. Astonishing. It seemed to Gawain that everything was imbued with such searing clarity that he could see to the very atoms of things.

Lotto got off his bike when he saw his father on the old pump, apparently napping. Odd. Gawain never slept during the day. The boy stood still. A woodpecker clattered against a magnolia. An anole darted over his father's foot. Lotto dropped the bike and ran, and held Gawain's face and said his father's name so loudly that he looked up