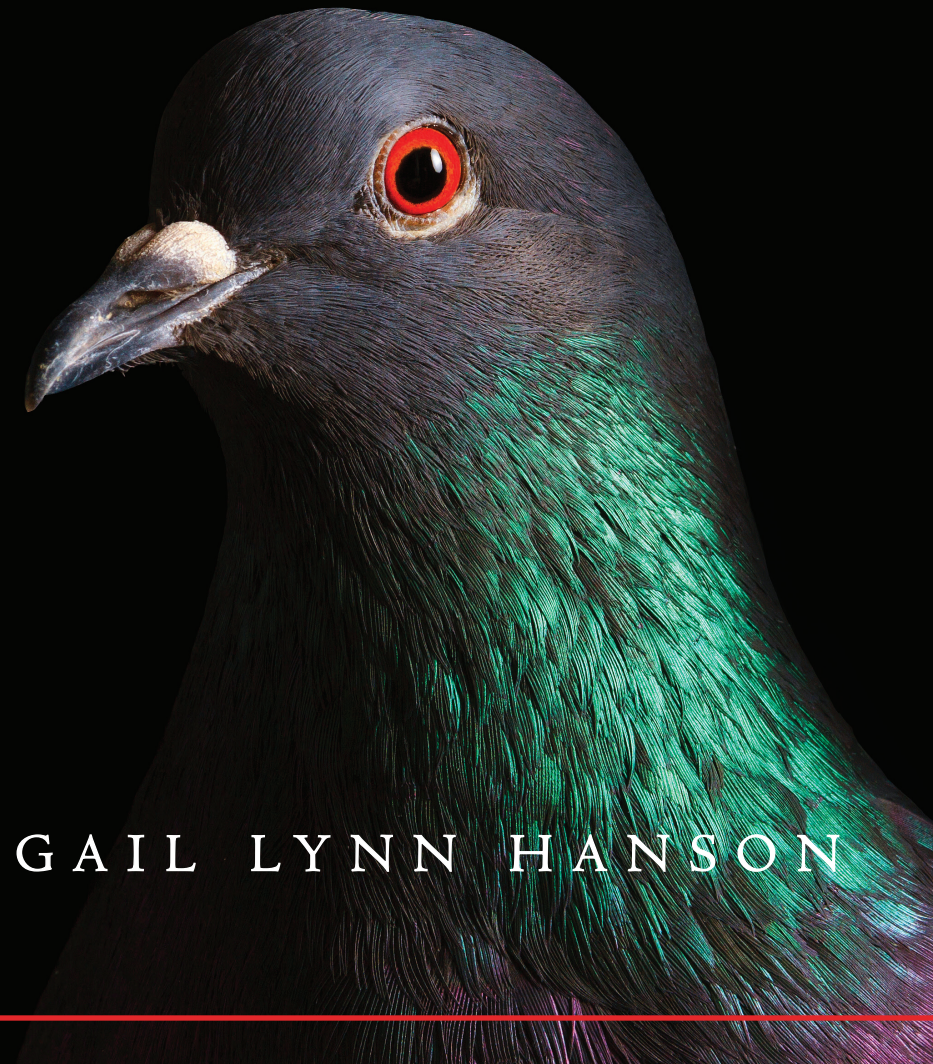


"A wonderfully claustrophobic tale of obsession and self-delusion."

—Kirkus Reviews

The Palisades

A NOVEL



GAIL LYNN HANSON

GAIL LYNN HANSON

The Palisades

Dorothy Fiske, eighty-three, adores movie stars, jewelry, murder mysteries, and men. At twenty-five, inspired by Judy Garland and Angela Lansbury, she moved to Los Angeles from a religiously strict Midwestern home. Despite the glamour, Dorothy, heartbroken, was childless. She blamed her sweet, unambitious husband, Eugene, claiming his sperm was weak, but Dorothy knows the truth.

Ruth, a sixty-six-year-old home health aide, fears eviction from her LA apartment due to her unusual, antisocial behavior. Previously fired from a nursing facility for residents dying under her care, Ruth targets Dorothy, a widow from a wealthy family in Pacific Palisades, California. Lonely yet prideful, Dorothy hires Ruth as a "lady's maid." Ruth accepts the position and masterfully entwines herself into Dorothy's life because she wants to live in Dorothy's house—alone.

The Palisades is a deliciously spun psychological suspense brimming with dark humor in which two women develop a peculiar relationship amid a miasma of Ruth's disturbing memories and Dorothy's pervasive delusions of old Hollywood. Poverty and privilege mingle, companionship turns bizarre, and identity is questioned as the women desperately try to fulfill their shared yearning for motherhood.



GAIL LYNN HANSON has lived in Colorado, Texas, Illinois, and Ohio. She currently lives in Denver with her husband and two children. She holds a BA in environmental biology from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a master's in creative writing from the University of Denver. Gail is a long-time member of the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver. She founded a kitchen design firm, Studio H, where she currently works to

create beautiful culinary spaces. Gail enjoys gardening, baking, and traveling to rural places when she is not arranging cabinetry or words.



THE PALISADES

A Novel



GAIL LYNN HANSON



Copyright © 2023 by Gail Lynn Hanson
Cover image by Drakuliren

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles and reviews. For more information, contact Slipperyfishpress@gmail.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First Edition: October 2023
Published by Slippery Fish Press
Print book interior designed by Kirkus Book Prep

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023908620

ISBN (hardcover) 979-8-9882874-2-1
ISBN (paperback) 979-8-9882874-0-7
ISBN (eBook) 979-8-9882874-1-4

Gaillynnhanson.com

for Tim

I specialize in murders of quiet, domestic interest.

— AGATHA CHRISTIE

PROLOGUE



On July 4, 1922, a fire burned the last of the legendary movie studio Inceville, which had produced silent movies in a crevasse of the Santa Monica Mountains, its mouth gaping to the sea. Only a weatherworn church from the set remained. That same year, a town was born from the ashes, christened Pacific Palisades by the Reverend Charles H. Scott, a religious-intellectual commune perched on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

In that same year, Frances Gumm (Judy Garland) was born in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Also that same year, Frances Lillian Mary Ridste (Carole Landis), just three years old, half-Norwegian, was left by her father and moved by her mother from Fairchild, Wisconsin, to Southern California. And in that same year, a girl, all Norwegian, was born on Chicago's West Side to Lutheran parents who loved God more when she survived a near-fatal childhood illness.

In 1942, Angela Lansbury, age seventeen, moved from London to Hollywood via New York to debut in the award-winning film *Gaslight*. In 1946, Judy Garland, just four feet eleven inches tall, starred with Angela in *The Harvey Girls*. In 1945, Carole Landis, known as the "Ping Girl," a more beautiful

(some would say) but lesser known Marilyn Monroe, starred in a small role on Broadway with future novelist Jacqueline Susann, who later wrote *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), based on the tragic lives of Carole Landis and Judy Garland. And in 1947, the girl from Chicago, also four feet eleven inches, moved to Southern California, to the Palisades—her inspiration, a film about going west, starring both Angela and Judy.

In 1948, Carole Landis, age twenty-nine, died of a Seconal overdose after throwing a Fourth of July party at her home in Pacific Palisades, not accidental. In 1969, Judy Garland, age forty-seven, also died of a Seconal overdose in London, accidental. The Palisades lived on to shelter movie stars and the wealthy. And the girl from Chicago married rich, mingled with actresses, and like Angela, lived a very long time.

INTRODUCTION

1928

Jesus was in the room. He was everywhere, Father said, living inside of them because they were believers.

The Bible remained at the head of the bed where Dorothy lay, as if the book itself held power to heal her. Her mother's cool dishrag fingers touched Dorothy's forehead each hour, checking for fever. Mother leaned in from afar, never sitting, never asking Dorothy how she felt, distracted by Paul, the beautiful baby perched on Mother's hip, always hungry. Dorothy felt more like an object to be maintained than a child to be loved.

The Bible's black cover was soft and worn. It smelled nice, leather and paper. The onionskin pages with dingy edges, more so near the back, in the New Testament, marked where Jesus came in. The pages crackled, making Dorothy feel tingly and sleepy.

Dorothy only left the house to go to church, one her parents started with two other Norwegian Lutheran families. They'd walked door to door, asking people to join them in planting the church, as if they were planting a seed that would grow into a fruit-bearing tree rooted deep in their small community west of Chicago. Saint Paul's Lutheran Church, named by her mother,

had no money and no building, so the faithful group met in the mortuary rent-free.

The children's church, Sunday School, was held in the basement, where a single light bulb shone too brightly against the floor and offered nothing to the dark corners. Alongside a wall, Dorothy lay on a mattress with a dusky-yellow stain. The cement walls cried from various leaks, glistening in the low light. If she squinted, the water became diamonds.

Dorothy was certain a dead body, its juice seeping out, had rested on her mattress. It smelled sour, like Paul's spit-up and mildew. Would she die there, too? "Better not stain a good mattress," Mother might say.

For two hours each Sunday, she listened. Above, an organ vibrated, shaking the light bulb, making shadows quiver. Singing—Mother's voice was high and shrill, and Father's, low and steady, much lower than his speaking voice.

Below, Mrs. Larsen read about slaves and the Red Sea, blood and bravery, miracles, blindness, lameness, washing feet, wells, throwing stones, a baby, a garden, an apple, a snake, a donkey, palm leaves, and a robe of many colors, which Dorothy liked best. They sang about God holding the world in his hands and how Jesus loves children. But Dorothy did not sing. It hurt her chest to breathe deeply.

The children whispered about the other room, the one down the hall, dark, where the door was kept closed. The room contained dead bodies in coffins or laid out on tables. The grown-ups dressed them up nice with makeup and fancy clothes so that they didn't look so dead. One boy said dead bodies shouldn't be kept out loose because with all the Jesus talk upstairs, they might come back to life, like Lazarus.

Dorothy kept an eye on that doorknob. She had a good view from her mattress. Once, she saw it turn. Another time, a girl said she smelled something nasty. Green gas seeped from under the door; Dorothy was sure of it. That same day, an older boy told a younger one that he would lock him in there if he didn't

hand over everything from his pockets. The little boy, bright fear in his eyes, emptied his pockets—a piece of swirly taffy, a dime, two blue marbles, and a dead beetle with an iridescent green shell like a jewel.

Dorothy was sure she'd be put in that room. She often tried to sit up, but Mrs. Larsen always coaxed her down, pressing her body into the stain. She hoped she really would be dead, the door locked, and her coffin shut tight. She didn't want to wake there, Jesus or no Jesus. But mostly, she hoped her body would not leave a stain.

Dorothy's sickness was a test of faith. Her parents memorized all the parts of the Bible that spoke of faith, how faith, even a little faith, a mustard seed, would be rewarded. One day her parents would say, "Now pick up your mat and walk." And she would. She would do it because everyone believed.

The sickness had started with a lingering cold that dropped to her lungs, a cough, a deep bark, fevers, and finally, pain with every breath. Empyema, it was called, where pus collects in the lining of the lungs, caused by bacteria. The only treatment was to drain the fluid and hope the body would recover.

Weeks passed. Life moved around her. Father sat on the edge of her bed most evenings, reading and looking into her eyes with identical eyes, pale blue and round. He prayed even when her mother's faith faltered, reading about all the people Jesus healed. But when her fevers rose, Mother insisted they do something.

When the doctor came, her parents shuffled back as he entered the house. Tall and thin, a tree in winter, the man dressed only in black, black hair, a black bag, a black mole on his cheek, and one black thumbnail. His face remained somber, as if he led the dying to the other side and found his job very sad, or maybe he didn't care for what he was about to do.

A rib, a floating rib, would have to be removed in order to access the lung. Maybe the rib wasn't connected to anything and

could be plucked out without much trouble. Dorothy brightened at the thought, but Mother gasped.

The doctor asked for whiskey to ease any discomfort.

Father, eyes wide, brows raised, said, "We don't keep whiskey in this house, sir."

Mother panted. The hollow of her throat pushed in and out. She paced, Paul bouncing on her hip, while staring at Dorothy's body.

Dorothy closed her eyes, sorry she had caused so much trouble. With her father's presence, she lifted her heavy lids. He brought her hand to his lips, smiling with such tension Dorothy feared his face might break.

The doctor said, while opening his bag, "I may have some in here." He produced a small bottle, filled the dropper. "One, two, three." It spread across her tongue. She felt power in the burn.

Her mother's face, contorted and old, and her father's, serene and hard, both looked alarmed, as if she'd done something evil, so she closed her eyes and listened to the rain and low rumble of thunder rattling the china in the cabinet nearby. She liked how the rain made the street shiny.

Mother opened the window and left the room, but her father stayed; the scent of his aftershave lotion rode the cool breeze. He took both her hands and held them firm inside his own.

The doctor lifted her nightgown and touched her side. Father squeezed tighter. The first sting of the blade, the shock of pain, caught her breath. Mouth open, jaw tight, as if to scream, but no sound left her body.

Father said, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The pleasure of him holding her was greater than the pain. His deep voice and warm hands anchored her. Father's hands were the hands of God. Jesus held her hands. If it took a rib to hold God's hand, then it was worth it. God had removed a rib from Adam to make Eve, after all.

What would her rib look like? What would the doctor do with it? Her mother made ribs for dinner a week ago. She hadn't eaten, but she'd examined the curved bone, white beneath the meat. Would hers have meat, too? Mother always collected the bones in old newspaper for the dog next door. When Dorothy played in the neighbor's yard, she'd find them again, dry and clean.

The doctor worked. Father prayed. Thunder grumbled. Would Mother throw her rib to the dog? Would he chew it clean?

A nasty smell, musty, like spoiled meat, engulfed them. Father let go. Dorothy opened her eyes to see him cover his face with a white handkerchief. Her abandoned hands, suddenly cold, grasped, only to find the stiff edge of her mattress.

The doctor's hands were streaked red. He, too, held a sour look, dark brows spiked like caterpillars, white lips pressed tight. A metal pan, a shiny tool, the blood, it all should have alarmed her. But she was not alarmed until she realized the putrid smell rose from her own body. The shame, Father disgusted by her body. She closed her eyes and held still, as if obedience might contain the odor.

A week later, Dorothy sat on the davenport with a picture book of farm animals. The room seemed different, everything turned. Father hung his hat with the black and white feather on the peg by the door. A broad smile spread. He walked to her and clutched her hands. "My girl, you are feeling better?"

On a Saturday afternoon in June, Dorothy walked to the front porch, where her mother and Mrs. Larsen stood talking. Mother held a broom as Paul played with a green toy car at her feet. They screamed. Paul cried. Mother picked him up, held him close, and stepped back. Mrs. Larsen laughed. "Welcome to the land of the living."

She hadn't died, or had she? Had she been resurrected like Jesus? Mother stared while cradling Paul's fuzzy head. Dorothy waited for her to smile, maybe laugh like Mrs. Larsen. But she

merely leaned forward, touching Dorothy's forehead with icy fingertips.

Once she was back in bed, Paul crawled up and patted her head with fat outstretched fingers. Dorothy laughed as he touched her face with sticky hands smelling of bread. She reached to hug him, but Mother pulled him back. "Don't get him sick. One sick child is hard enough."

Her sickness was punishment. What sin? Sneaking cookies, forgetting prayers—or was it wanting love from anyone besides God himself? "A jealous God," Mother said. Dorothy touched the tender tip of Paul's finger. Being jealous felt a lot like being mad. She hoped Mother would sit with her, but she took Paul and left the room. And so she knew how God felt and was sorry she'd made him angry.

PART I



CHAPTER I
DOROTHY



Dorothy Anderson grew up in a home where movies were strictly prohibited. Card playing, dancing, secular music, alcohol, and socializing with Catholics were also banned, but the only thing that mattered to Dorothy was the movies.

As a sophomore in high school, Dorothy was going steady with a lean, blue-eyed senior who'd presented her with his class ring, which she found rather ugly. One summer night, in 1939, they secretly met at the downtown theater to see *The Wizard of Oz*. Judy Garland was almost Dorothy's exact age. Her voice, her lips, the curves of her body—Dorothy realized how Hollywood and a camera could turn an ordinary girl into a movie star and that people, men in particular, loved movie stars. It didn't matter that the movie star did not return love because it was about *being* loved by many people, an abundance of love, rich with love, love that could be stored away, even wasted. Dorothy wanted not one man, but thousands.

In 1940, when Dorothy's boyfriend left for basic training, she went to *One Million B.C.*, alone. The theater-release poster featured a blonde woman dressed in a skimpy red garment slit up the thigh. See *The Most Exciting Adventure in a Million Years*. The

actress, Carole Landis, head flung back, eyes closed, large-mounded breasts prominent, spilled over the arms of a dark-haired man with a square jaw and bare chest, who ran from an enormous green dinosaur.

In the following months, Dorothy focused on her body. She practiced a new walk, loose and sultry, tilted head, pouty lips, a coy smile. Styling her white-blonde hair in voluptuous curls and staining her cheeks and lips with her mother's lingonberries, she decided she was beautiful, too.

Her father inspected her at breakfast, over his glasses. Her full figure was well developed, which bothered her parents, she knew, by the way her mother insisted she wear a sweater in summer. She was short, four foot eleven, like Judy, but that was easily corrected with heels.

In 1943, Dorothy graduated from Saint Olaf's College in Minnesota, where she had studied English literature and piano. Her postcollege mission plans in the Orient fell apart when both China and Japan instituted policies that denied American travelers, so instead, she moved home with her parents and brother, Paul, to teach English at the local high school. Dorothy had been relatively content with her mother cooking and washing (it's what her mother did best), but deep down, she itched for something more.

Dorothy had become an exceptional pianist. She played church hymns at Saint Paul's Lutheran Church. Saint Paul's had finally raised enough money to build a modest structure, moving from its temporary, yet lengthy, location at the mortuary. The rectangular barn-shaped building, painted white, was nothing like the small, yet impressive, Catholic cathedral across the street, but they got money from headquarters.

Despite her parents' rules, Dorothy was a grown woman and continued to spend her free time at the local theater. In 1946, *The Harvey Girls*, starring Judy Garland and Angela Lansbury, was featured. Dorothy sat in the dark theater, eating popcorn and drinking Coca-Cola. Dorothy had become a big fan of both

actresses because Judy was short and musically talented, and Angela seemed mature and independent. Angela looked old, even then, but Judy was pretty, with her petite figure, full and shapely. She imagined they'd be friends if they ever met. Dorothy had thought a lot about Hollywood, and with this film about going west, she felt even more compelled to do the same.

A week later, her Aunt Hedda, her father's sister, called and asked to speak with her. "You're twenty-four now?" Hedda asked in her cool California style, breezy and loose, as if she were on vacation. "I've been thinking about you lately, wondering how long you plan to live at home."

Dorothy glanced at her parents sitting side by side on the davenport, watching her. "I have a job here and everything."

Hedda said, "It's the everything part that sounds dull. How about California?"

Stylish Aunt Hedda. Oceans and movie stars. Hollywood.

Although Dorothy's parents were not happy with her decision, they were comforted by the fact that Aunt Hedda was not wild. However, they didn't know that she was on the periphery of things that were.

Hedda had become acquainted with a prominent family, Walter and Judith Fiske, by way of Dorothy's paternal grandfather, who knew Walter's father, Charles Fiske, from his ties to the Chicago West Side. Hedda and her husband were often invited to Judith's lavish parties in Brentwood, where she also came to know Walter and Judith's children: Esther, Eugene, and Frank.

Once in California, at a party, Hedda handed Dorothy a hand-cut crystal glass of pink punch while eyeing Esther, who stood alone, hunched and homely in a shapeless brown dress. "She's too big."

"Yes, she is." Dorothy sipped.

Hedda flipped her hair from her shoulder. "Men don't like big women. And she's bossy."

"Schoolteachers often are." Dorothy scanned the room. A beautiful blonde with curls framing her face and deep-red lips, lingonberries, was surrounded by jovial men. The woman touched her bare neck and sipped sparkling champagne, aloof to the desperate faces that fought for her attention. "I know what men want."

Hedda raised her eyebrows. "Don't ever let your father hear you say that. He'll blame me."

Dorothy giggled, still watching. A pale-pink dress, silk, sleeveless, clung to the woman's full breasts. She looked familiar. "You have to let men think they're in charge, let them decide some things, make it sound as if all the good ideas are theirs, and then they'll do whatever you want."

Hedda studied the blonde woman. "And where did you learn this?"

"I've watched a lot of movies." Dorothy looked back at Esther. "Poor thing." She set down her cup and pulled at the sides of her dress, trying to make it sit properly. "Men like petite women. It makes them feel more powerful."

Hedda smirked, as if she agreed but would never say. Her husband, equally stylish and handsome, whispered in the blonde woman's ear. The beautiful woman's lips moved as he laughed, wide-mouthed, like the martini glass he held too high.

Dorothy looked again. "Wait. Is that—"

Hedda nodded. "Yes."

"She's . . ." Dorothy could not find words. She wanted to stand closer, inspect every bit of her. She wanted to be her.

"Gorgeous, I know, and separated. She's with Rex Harrison." Hedda raised one brow. "She lives a few minutes from here."

Coy and seductive, Carole Landis flirted and swayed as she sipped her champagne. The handsome men surrounding her, with their Hollywood hair and smug smiles, competed for her attention. One man stood out, dumpy, short, too young to be balding, with sagging jowls and tapered fingers.

“Have you met Esther’s brother, Eugene?”

Dorothy recalled meeting him but had forgotten the encounter as if it had been an incident on the periphery. “No, I don’t believe so.”

Dorothy sauntered toward the men, knowing Hedda would follow. She straightened her back, trying to add an inch, then paused to let Hedda pass.

“Eugene, this is Dorothy, Inga and Rolf’s daughter. She’s recently moved here from Chicago.”

Dorothy gave Eugene a quick, flirtatious smile—he was a man, after all—but she studied Carole. For a moment, their eyes met, blue, before Carole turned to face a window with a view of the gardens. Pale, luminous skin, with impossible pouting lips, Carole gazed beyond the glassy pool.

Eugene’s relentless smile, such eagerness, no effort needed, Dorothy looked away.

“You smell nice,” he said while stepping a bit closer.

Dorothy barely heard, so focused on Carole. They looked alike—the hair, the eyes. Carole was taller, of course, but Dorothy had smaller feet.

Eugene handed Dorothy champagne. “I studied theater in college. Mother thought I’d make a good actor, so I gave it a try, but I prefer painting.” Dopey-eyed, pants pulled to his ribs, Eugene lifted his cheeks higher, revealing more teeth.

Dorothy couldn’t figure them out. She decided that his face was misaligned. Glancing around his parents’ lavish home, she saw that everything was gold and gilded, Judith’s magnificent jewelry twinkling with every gesture. “I studied piano and literature.”

Eugene handed her a silver cocktail napkin embossed with a cursive *F*. “I’d like to hear you play. Maybe this coming week? I’m free most days.”

Carole wandered off arm in arm with a thin woman in a black backless dress. The men, sullen, turned to one another, amused, as if someone had told a dirty joke. Admiring Carole’s

hourglass figure from this new angle, lustful, they nearly panted. Dorothy waited for them to notice her.

Dorothy and Eugene began dating the following week, not because she enjoyed him, though he was pleasant enough, but because she could not resist the context in which he inhabited. For months, Dorothy told Hedda that Eugene was a stuffed shirt, but she finally gave in when he presented her with a large diamond and a promise of a house in the Palisades. She grew to appreciate his useful qualities—his incapacity to get angry, his disinterest in her excessive shopping, and his compliance with their social calendar.

Eugene's parents bought them a house on Via De La Paz. Dorothy liked the sound of it, fancy and exotic. She practiced letting it roll off her tongue. Judith decorated it and approved of an eventual second story. Walter, Eugene's father, gave Eugene a few apartment buildings to manage, which he did from home. Dorothy kept teaching because she had nothing else to do and didn't want to spend all day in the house.

In 1948, a few months after the wedding, including a month in Hawaii, a gift from Eugene's parents, Dorothy fixed a plate of eggs and bacon for Eugene as he read the newspaper.

Eugene cleared his throat, then softly said, "Carole Landis died."

Dorothy felt her body stiffen before setting down Eugene's breakfast. She didn't want to appear overly interested in movie stars. Judith said it was uncouth. But once Eugene went to putter in the garage, she took the newspaper to her bedroom.

Carole had been found facedown on her bathroom floor, dead of an apparent drug overdose. She'd been not so secretly having an affair with the married Rex Harrison. Two suicide notes were reported, one to her mother and one to Rex, who had denied their relationship.

Dorothy sat on her bed with the paper. More news revealed

details of Carole's life—she had only wanted to be married and have children like normal people, but the endometriosis had prevented this. Dorothy wiped a tear from her cheek. She wished she could have been there for Carole as a true friend, to talk things through, come up with a solution. If Carol had only known that a true friend was nearby, a friend who could relate in so many ways, maybe she could have been persuaded to keep going, to find a new man, a better man, one who would appreciate her and love her for her true self, a woman almost too beautiful for this world—beauty can be a burden—but a woman nonetheless, one who just wanted to be a mother.

Dorothy touched her stomach. She was still not pregnant. To her surprise, she enjoyed being with Eugene. Her mother had no trouble, so why should she? The only explanation was that Eugene could not provide the essential ingredient.

Dorothy bought Eugene looser pants with an array of belts to hold them up, hoping a bit of fresh air and less constriction would resolve the problem. Eugene never knew this, of course; he simply followed her orders, chuckling, happy to please.

When a new jewelry store opened in the village, Judith suggested it to Eugene, to cheer Dorothy up. Over the years, he shopped there often, Carson's Fine Jewelry, named after the owner, whom Eugene grew to trust for his good taste and upscale clientele. Dorothy was regularly presented with an array of fine jewelry. Eugene treated her with extra kindness, taking her out every Friday night, buying her even more jewelry, and agreeing to attend formal benefit dinners so that she'd have plenty of places to wear it. The jewelry became her obsession, a distraction; it filled a void, and this allowed Eugene to live in relative peace, painting and eating while Dorothy shopped, watched movies, and read murder mysteries.

In 1964, Dorothy turned forty-two. After nearly eighteen years of marriage, she realized that she would not have children. At forty-one, her cycles had changed. She cried privately and avoided the children's department at Bullock's, where she'd

spent years buying a slew of irresistible dresses, an angora baby blanket, a white bunny with floppy ears. It helped, buying things, as if the act itself might make a baby come. The collection became quite large, an entire wardrobe for a baby girl's first year. Diapers, for the baby smell. Baby lotions and baby creams labeled with cute baby bees or fuzzy baby animals. Baby shoes for all occasions. Baby books. Baby hats. A baby raincoat with baby galoshes. All of it hidden away. When the sense of loss overwhelmed her, she thought of Carole Landis, because beautiful women sometimes didn't have children, even though they were the ones who should.

The Fiske properties continued to increase in value. Walter sold some, bought more. The numbers worked in his favor, so Judith and Walter moved into a larger home in Brentwood. The house was impressive but not as lavish as the home across the street, which had recently been purchased by Judy Garland. Judy had separated from Sid Luft, so it was just her and the children. Joe was eight, Lorna eleven, and Liza had already gone to New York. Judith sent an extravagant bouquet of flowers to welcome them and received a very nice note in return.

One day, Judith called. "Dorothy, come over."

Dorothy painted her lips, spritzed her neck, grabbed her pink sunglasses, and drove three minutes to Judith's house. Judith led her into the back sunporch, which overlooked a swimming pool surrounded by palm trees intermingled with birds-of-paradise, hibiscus, and bougainvillea. The maid brought iced tea on a silver tray. With a sly smile, Judith handed Dorothy an invitation. Dorothy admired the engraved silver lettering.

Astonished, Dorothy looked at Judith, who smirked with such delight that Dorothy thought she might burst. "Are you going?"

"Of course! Who wouldn't?"

The invitation, signed by Judy Garland, included a smaller reply card with a thick envelope already stamped.

"It's her son's birthday, Joe. Walter wouldn't care a thing about this, so you're coming with me."

Dorothy felt a flutter in her chest. She giggled and nodded until Judith told her to stop.

Dorothy spent weeks shopping. After trying Saks, Neiman Marcus, and Bullock's, she found the perfect thing at a small boutique in Brentwood—a halter dress in blue-and-white gingham. Eugene seemed uninterested but suggested she wear her ruby earrings.

"Eugene." Dorothy removed beauty products from a thick shopping bag with a gold-ribbon handle and set them on the dining table. "Do you realize that Judy and I were born only three days apart?"

"Isn't that something." Eugene ate a cold sausage left from breakfast. The grease shined his lips. He wiped his face on his sleeve, then burped.

Dorothy smeared lotion on the back of her hand. "Too bad about the drugs, but she's better now."

Eugene stifled a belch. "Is she?"

"Oh yes, after Carnegie Hall and her own show. It was the greatest comeback. You know, I saw *The Wizard of Oz* when I was seventeen and she was seventeen, of course, and with my name." Dorothy looked at the ceiling. "The irony. It was a tiny theater back home. It got me thinking about California."

Eugene chewed; a piece of sausage fell from his mouth. "I'm very glad you saw it."

"People said she wasn't pretty, but I don't know what they meant—she was gorgeous on the big screen. And that voice, well, there just aren't words."

Eugene took Dorothy's hand. "You're as pretty as her."

Dorothy pulled away. "All those men married her for her money. Men can be so greedy." Dorothy admired the gigantic tangerine opal, a fire opal, on her finger (Mr. Carson said it was

one of a kind). A smooth, rounded dome, alive, like a baby's forehead. It flashed red and orange under the chandelier, changing with the light, growing. "But not you, darling."

On the day of the party, Dorothy wore rubies and red heels. She bought Joey an expensive red firetruck and had it gift wrapped, paid extra for premium paper and ribbon.

A maid wearing a black and white uniform opened the door. Dorothy and Judith were ushered through a lavish entry hall of marble, silk, and flowers to the back, where little boys were squeezed into jackets with bulging buttonholes and girls were decorated in bows from ponytails to shoes. The children screamed and ran around in cone-shaped hats. Dorothy loved the energy, the laughing children, all dressed up like dolls.

The adults stood a distance away, drinking champagne. Judith talked and laughed with her friends. Dorothy didn't drink alcohol during the day, so she looked for Judy. The maid piled Dorothy's gift on top of a mountain of others. Dorothy stepped over to make sure the card had not slipped off. When she turned to rejoin Judith, a clown wearing large red shoes blocked her way.

"Excuse me," Dorothy said, taking a step back.

"I'm the only one who's supposed to dress up, lady," he slurred. "Are you *Dorothy* or something?" Lifting his foot, he said, "Look, we both have red shoes." His rancid breath, tinged with alcohol, blew across Dorothy's face. Pointing at her shoes, tipping his head back, and opening his mouth wide, cackling, the dangly thing wobbled in his throat.

Dorothy scanned the other guests, who all wore subdued, elegant dresses.

"Are those real rubies, *Dorothy*?"

"Of course they are! Aren't you supposed to be playing with the children?" Dorothy straightened her rings. "Does Miss Garland know that her clown is drunk?"

“Judy?” The clown tipped his head back again and screamed with laughter. People looked. “I work all her birthday parties. I take the job because the drinks are abundant.”

Dorothy looked past him. “Where is Miss Garland?”

“Who knows?” The clown staggered away, knocking the sofa table with his big shoe.

Dorothy looked down at her shoes, the crisp gingham of her dress, and the flash of her rings. The clown, from across the room, pointed. Children appeared confused. Women turned to each other and covered their mouths. It had seemed like a good idea—clever, even—not to dress in costume, of course, but to dress in theme. But now heat radiated from her face.

Dorothy wandered around admiring the furnishings and knickknacks until she found a pretty powder room. The wallpaper, large tropical birds, the pink toilet and sink, the glass faucet handles with ornate brass, and the gilded mirror offered a pleasant retreat in which to fix her lipstick. She took a thick floral guest towel and tucked it inside her purse. When she opened the door, she bumped into the clown.

“What is it with you, lady? You’re so small, I can’t even see you. Might step on you with my big shoe.” He lifted his foot and snickered, spraying Dorothy with spit.

“I’m the same size as Miss Garland. For your information, we are also exactly the same age. And my name *is* Dorothy!”

Shrieking, the clown struggled for breath, then slapped his knee. “This might be the funniest thing I’ve ever seen. Maybe she can help you find your way home! Judy is probably down there.” He pointed down the hall. “She should get a load of you.” He stumbled back to the party.

Dark and quiet, the hall clearly led to the family’s private quarters: yellow carpet, blue walls, landscape paintings. She secured her rattan basket purse in the nook of her elbow, glanced at her shoes, then walked toward a large gold-framed mirror. The doors were all shut but one at the end. As her image became larger and clearer in the approaching mirror, she

thought about what she might say: *Excuse me, I must have gotten lost. I was using the mirror. I was intrigued by all the fascinating art in the hall.*

Dorothy poked her head in the open door. The room glowed pale green, indistinct, like an underwater landscape. Gold drapery, seagrass, billowed around tall glass doors leading to the backyard, obscured by another layer of gauzy fabric. Through the sheers, Dorothy made out the faint sparkle of the pool. An impressive canopy bed, adorned with dozens of tasseled pillows anchored the room. A chandelier reacted to a current of air. The crystals, barely visible through the vague light, vacillated with hesitation.

Dorothy stepped in and took a deep breath. Perfume? Alcohol? She would remember everything. The wide dressing table, much like her own, displayed framed photos of the children, a porcelain Scottie dog, and a pair of earrings. She picked one up. Diamonds, of course. Or emeralds? Hard to tell through the haze. She set the earring down with the slightest clink, then paused, relishing the moment. She turned. A small figure in a large chair sat motionless.

Judy, wearing a long emerald dress, blended into the spring-pea walls and velvet cucumber lounge chair where she slumped, asleep. Dark lashes rested upon her cheeks, black-cherry lips parted, but her head was turned at an odd angle. A glass of champagne fizzed on the side table, alongside a few prescription pill bottles. Her darling bare feet hung free above the ground.

Dorothy whispered, "Miss Garland?"

A step closer revealed her slack face, lipstick painted beyond her lips, severe arched brows, a dark half circle under one eye, and an ivory comb slipping from her hair. Diminutive and smudged, mousy-faced, Judy opened her eyes and looked around, blinking as if she'd fallen asleep by mistake. Her head stopped at Dorothy. Gasping, she looked her up and down. "Dorothy?"

Dorothy stepped closer. "Yes! Judith Fiske must have told

you I was coming. It's wonderful to finally meet you." Dorothy sashayed to Judy, holding out her hand.

Judy reached for the champagne, downing it in one giant gulp, burped, dropped the glass, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand before laughing in short, flittering giggles that bubbled around the room.

"We are the same age and the same height." Dorothy slipped off her heels. "See?"

Rolling and spinning, Judy's eyes would not hold still.

"You're the reason I'm here. I'm from the Midwest, too. I know about going west, like *The Harvey Girls*." Dorothy waited. "I also play the piano."

Judy pushed the arm of the chair with her elbow, but it slipped, so she slouched back down.

Dorothy turned back to the photos on the dresser. "Your children are so talented. Lorna sang beautifully on your Christmas special." Dorothy swallowed the rock in her throat. "My husband and I couldn't have children. I wanted a girl. Singing lessons, dance lessons, acting lessons." Dorothy turned back to Judy, whose eyes had closed again. "I even bought her a necklace. Carson's wrapped it in a silver box with a pink bow. An aquamarine, for a child, to match her eyes." Dorothy felt her eyes moisten. "I still keep it in my bedside table."

Judy snored through her cavernous nostrils.

"Joey must wonder where you are." Dorothy looked toward the door. "His party?" She stepped into her shoes.

Judy's jaw went slack, her throat pulsed, taffeta bunched around her waist, and her feet, like those of a child with painted red toenails, twitched.

Dorothy remained. Everyone needed a rest now and then, a glass of champagne, a pill to calm the nerves. It's a lot of work, throwing parties and raising children. And Judy deserved her privacy.

Judy pulled her head up and opened her eyes, which whirled a full rotation before focusing. "Dorothy, go home."