

Chapter One

THE THING YOU CAN COUNT ON IN LIFE IS THAT Tennessee will always be scorching hot in August. In 1985 you could also pretty much count on the fact that the U-Haul truck you rented to drive from Tennessee to Iowa, cutting up through Missouri, would have no air-conditioning or that the air-conditioning would be broken. These are the things I knew for sure when I left home to start graduate school. The windows were down in the truck and my stepsister, Tina, was driving. We sat on towels to keep our bare legs from adhering to the black vinyl seats and licked melted M&Ms off our fingers. My feet were on the dashboard and we were singing because the radio had gone the way of the air conditioner. "Going to the chapel and we're—gonna get mar-ar-ried." We knew all the words to that one. Tina had the better voice, one more reason I was grateful she had agreed to come along for the ride. I was twenty-one and on my way to be a fiction writer. The whole prospect seemed as simple as that: rent a truck, take a few leftover pots and pans and a single bed mattress from the basement of my mother's house, pack up my typewriter. The hills of the Tennessee Valley flattened out before we got to Memphis and as we headed north the landscape covered over with corn. The blue sky blanched white in the heat. I leaned out the window and thought, Good, no distractions.

I had been to Iowa City once before in June to find a place to live. I was looking for two apartments then, one for myself and one for Lucy Grealy, who I had gone to college with. I got a note from Lucy not long after receiving my acceptance letter from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She said that initially when she heard I had gotten into the workshop she was sorry, because she had wanted to be the only student there from Sarah Lawrence. But then our mutual friend Jono Wilks had told her that I was going up early to find housing and if this was the case, would I find a place for her as well? She couldn't afford to make the trip to look herself and so it went without saying that she was on a very tight budget. I sat at the kitchen table and looked at her handwriting, which seemed oddly scrawny and uncertain, like a note on a birthday card from an elderly aunt. I had never seen her writing before, and certainly these were the only words she had ever addressed to me. While Lucy and I would later revise our personal history to say we had been friends since we met as freshmen, just for the pleasure of adding a few more years to the tally, the truth was we did not know each other at all in college. Or the truth was that I knew her and she did not know me. Even at Sarah Lawrence, a school full of models and actresses and millionaire daughters of industry, everyone knew Lucy and everyone knew her story: she had had a Ewing's sarcoma at the age of nine, had lived through five years of the most brutal radiation and chemotherapy, and then undergone a series of reconstructive surgeries that were largely unsuccessful. The drama of her life, combined with her reputation for being the smartest student in all of her classes, made her the campus mascot, the favorite pet in her dirty jeans and oversized Irish sweaters. She kept her head tipped down so that her long dark blond hair fell over her face to hide the fact that part of her lower jaw was missing. From a distance you would have thought she had lost something, money or keys, and that she was vigilantly searching the ground trying to find it.

It was Lucy's work-study job to run the film series on Friday and Saturday nights, and before she would turn the projector on, it was up to her to walk in front of the screen and explain that in accordance with the New York State Fire Marshal, exits were located at either side of the theater. Only she couldn't say it, because the crowd of students cheered her so wildly, screaming and applauding and chanting her name, "LOO-cee, LOO-cee, LOO-cee!" She would wrap her arms around her head and twist from side to side, mortified, loving it. Her little body, the body of an underfed eleven-year-old, was visibly shaking inside her giant sweaters. Finally her embarrassment reached such proportions that the audience recognized it and settled down. She had to speak her lines. "In accordance with the New York State Fire Marshal," she would begin. She was shouting, but her voice was smaller than the tiny frame it came from. It was no more than a whisper once it passed the third row.

I watched this show almost every weekend. It was as great a part of the evening's entertainment as seeing *Jules et Jim*. Being shy myself, I did not come to shout her name until our junior year. By then she would wave to the audience as they screamed for her. She would bow from the waist. She had cut off her hair so that it was now something floppy and boyish, a large cowlick sweeping up from her pale forehead. We could see her face clearly. It was always changing, swollen after a surgery or sinking in on itself after a surgery had failed. One year she walked with a cane and someone told me it was because they had taken a chunk of her hip to grind up and graft into her jaw.

We knew things about Lucy the way one knows things about the private lives of movie stars, by a kind of osmosis of information. I do not remember asking or being told. It was simply passed through the air. Not only did we know about Lucy's childhood, her cancer, her bravery, everyone in school knew that Lucy was the poet. Better than a

very good college poet, she was considered by both teachers and hipsters to be a serious talent. She was always picked to give readings in the coffee shop on Parents' Weekend. People pressed into the little room to listen, her voice as small as it was when she directed us to the emergency exits on Friday nights, but more self-confident.

"When I dream of fire," she read, "you're still the one I'd save / though I've come to think of myself / as the flames, the splintering rafters."

As I sat in the audience, watching, I believed we had something in common even though I wrote short stories. People liked my work but had trouble remembering me. I was often confused with another writer named Anne who was in one of my classes, and with a girl named Corinna who lived downstairs from me. Unlike Lucy, I had a tendency to blur into other people. I had come to Sarah Lawrence from twelve years of Catholic school where we were not in the business of discovering our individuality. We dressed in identical plaid skirts, white blouses, saddle oxfords, and when we prayed, it was together and aloud. It was impossible to distinguish your voice from the crowd. There is an art to giving yourself over to someone else and as a group we mastered it. While Lucy had discovered that she was different from all the other children in her grade school because she was sick and was different from all the other children on the hospital's cancer ward because she continued to survive, I had discovered I was so much like every other little girl in the world that it always took me a minute to identify my own face in our class photo. Still, I thought, in my shyness, my blurriness, it would not be so unreasonable to think that the famous Lucy Grealy and I could be friends. But when I waved to her in passing or said hello in the cafeteria, she would look at me blankly for a minute and then turn away as if we had never met. Once I stopped her at the window where we returned our trays and dirty dishes.

"My father and stepmother live in Los Angeles," I said. "They invited a couple of the midshipmen from the Naval Academy over for Thanksgiving dinner and it turns out one of them went to high school with you. His name was Bobby something."

She stared at me as if she could not possibly imagine why I was speaking to her. I made another stab at my story. "I guess Sarah Lawrence came up and they figured out we both went there, so he asked my parents to ask me to tell you hello." I gave her a little smile but it went nowhere. "So, hello."

"Okay," she said, and walked away.

Lucy Grealy was much too cool for the likes of me, a girl from Tennessee who did not go to clubs in the city.

I graduated from college early and went back home to Nashville. When I got Lucy's letter, I never considered telling her no, she could find her own place to live. Lucy had the pull of celebrity, and while she had always ignored me, I was flattered to be asked for help. Besides, she would be the only person I knew in Iowa. I borrowed my mother's car and drove up in June to look at the cut-up houses and makeshift rooms used to store graduate students through hard winters. I quickly found that there was not a single apartment Lucy could afford, nor was there a single apartment I could afford. There were very few that we could have managed if we pooled our resources, and so I rented the only practical thing I could find, half of a very ugly green duplex on Governor Street for \$375 a month, where we could at least have our own bedrooms. When I got home, I wrote Lucy and told her we would be roommates. It was not one of the options she had given me, but the numbers spoke for themselves. Neither of us could manage more than \$200 a month.

I never thought that there was anything brave about moving to another state to live with someone I barely knew and yet suspected

didn't like me, any more than it would have seemed hard to be broke and in pursuit of such an unlikely profession. Because my life had no shape, I was willing to accept whatever happened. If Tina had turned to me in that scorching U-Haul and said, Let's keep the truck, let's drive though Canada and take the Alcan Highway to Alaska, I probably would have been thrilled. Tina was good company and I very much wanted her to stay with me, but she was planning on her own adventure, riding her bicycle across America as soon as she dropped me off. Besides, by the time we made it to Iowa City, we were tired of the truck. We were sticky from sweat and all the candy we had eaten on the way. As we turned onto Governor Street, Lucy pulled up in the passenger seat of a gorgeous antique convertible driven by a handsome man. She waved ecstatically. "I'll be right there!" she called, and then they zoomed away.

I thought that things must be going well for Lucy.

The front door of the house was open wide. The living room was completely empty and the linoleum floor was shining wet and smelled of Pine Sol. I walked into the room, leaving a trail of footprints behind me.

"Did it look like this when you rented it?" Tina asked.

It looked like a storage unit. "I think it got worse."

We weren't there five minutes before Lucy was back. When I turned around to say hello, she shot through the door with a howl. In a second she was in my arms, leaping up onto me, her arms locked around my neck, her legs wrapped around my waist, ninety-five pounds that felt no more than thirty. She was crying into my hair. She squeezed her legs tighter. It was not a greeting as much as it was a claim: she was staking out this spot on my chest as her own and I was to hold her for as long as she wanted to stay.

"What happened?" I said, and I put my arms around her back.

There was never such a little back, and I felt it heave and sob. A bird in the hand. I thought something horrible must have happened. Only something truly outside of my understanding of bad things could drive this girl into my arms.

She pulled back to look at me. She kissed me and smiled and cried again. "I'm so glad you're here," she said.

I do not remember our love unfolding, that we got to know one another and in time became friends. I only remember that she came through the door and it was there, huge and permanent and first. I felt I had been chosen by Lucy and I was thrilled. I was twenty-one years old and very strong. She had a habit of pitching herself into my arms like a softball without any notice. She liked to be carried.

Dearest anvil [she would write to me six years later], dearest deposed president of some now defunct but lovingly remembered country, dearest to me, I can find no suitable words of affection for you, words that will contain the whole of your wonderfulness to me. You will have to make due with being my favorite bagel, my favorite blue awning above some great little cafe where the coffee is strong but milky and had real texture to it.

Lucy had mopped the floor three days before in honor of my impending arrival but the air in the duplex was so hot and humid and utterly motionless that the water and Pine Sol had simply puddled and stayed. For three days she had been waiting for me in the dampness.

"I thought you were never going to get here," she said. She was still holding on to my arm, even though her feet were now on the floor.

"How long have you been here?"

"Weeks, years. This place is horrible." She didn't say it unkindly, just as a statement of fact.

"Horrible," Tina said, nodding in sympathy.

"It was all I could find," I said, but I still felt guilty. "I'm going to get some things out of the truck."

"No," Lucy said. "We have to talk. There's too much I have to tell you." It was as if I were her oldest friend in life, just stumbling in through the door after ten years lost in Borneo.

The three of us went and sat on her bed on the floor. This was the story she told: On her first night in town she had gone to the local auction, where farmers who were going bust came to sell whatever they had left. She bought a futon mattress, a rug, a rickety table with chairs for the kitchen, and a grocery sack full of Harlequin Romance novels from the fifties, whose covers she planned to tear off and use to paper the bathroom. Then she promptly ran out of money.

"You're going to paper the bathroom in romance novels?"

"No, no, listen to me," she said, her voice high with excitement. "I met somebody. The guy in the car. I had sex."

B—— was twice her age and drove her home from the auction in his antique Jaguar convertible, whose turn indicators were two small flags that shot up from either side of the car and waved to establish the driver's intentions. Such charming turn indicators, coupled with a little attention, was all the reason Lucy needed. After a brief courtship in which he lent her several interesting books, they had sex. She was twenty-two and thrilled to be relieved of the burden of her virginity. In fact, she told me and Tina, it hadn't just been losing her virginity, it was solid experience. She had managed to sleep with him regularly since then.

"We'll go to the auction," she said. "I'll introduce you."

We went in the U-Haul, which didn't need to be turned in until the next day, and parked in the rutted grass. In a long barn there were

cafeteria-style tables set out with boxes. One contained seven dolls with plastic heads and matted hair, four chipped cups, a coil of rope, pulleys, and two spades. The next had a toaster and a thick stack of record albums, half a dozen extension cords, several packs of playing cards, countless forks. Every box was an inexplicable collection of items that had to be purchased as a unit. There was no picking out what you wanted. Past the boxes were chairs and blankets and paintings of birds, an impressive assortment of Crock-Pots. Farmers and wives and children made slow loops around the tables, carefully studying what was available. They only raised their eyes from the merchandise to gawk at Lucy.

GAWKING IS A LOOK stronger than a stare. The gawk was full of brazen curiosity, pity, and fear, every unattractive human emotion rolled into one unflattering facial expression. If she saw them, and she must have since this was not a discreet spy job, she didn't let on. She had on shorts and a little red bowling shirt, dingy Keds. Up and down the aisles she held my hand. She was happy to be in Iowa, happy that Tina and I had arrived, happy she had a lover, even if we saw no sign of him that night. But I couldn't stop seeing those people. People who, had you set them down anywhere on the island of Manhattan, would have received some vicious gawking themselves. I would stop and stare at them until they noticed me. I would hold their eye for the seconds it took to make their faces warm and then watch as they scuttled outside to look at the heavy machinery. It was a trick I learned a long time ago, when I was nine years old, the year my sister and I were in the car accident. I remembered what it was like having people double back in the grocery store to get another look. Until the gawkers swung by for the

third time, and then the fourth, I hadn't really understood how badly I'd been hurt. My sister, Heather, had been seriously injured and stayed in the hospital for another month after I was wheeled out to the pickup area. My problems, I had been told by family and doctors, were mainly cosmetic. My nose was broken, my lower lip had been torn through and reattached, my long hair had been cut off because it was too matted with blood, my face and neck were solid purple and green. I had a fractured wrist and a fractured skull. Shards of glass worked their way out of my head and through my hair for months. I was forever pricking my finger when I reached up to scratch my scalp. But sharp sudden headaches could not compete with the people who were looking at me. When I went back to a plastic surgeon at nineteen to have my nose rebroken and set again and the lower half of my face dermabraded off to lessen the scars (a second accident had sliced open my right cheek), I had not accounted for the fact that the world's tedious curiosity would be mine all over again, that it wasn't only battered-looking children that gawkers settled on.

Oh, people like to say when they hear this part of the story, this is why you and Lucy are so close. You went through the same thing. But nothing could be farther from the truth. I read one slim volume of the available information. Lucy read the library. My experience only left me smart enough to comprehend my own stunning lack of comprehension. When, as a child, I returned to school after a two-week absence, one of the older nuns took me aside to tell me that they were still offering the mass for my sister every day. Her superior grades had merged with her superior injuries and while she was plugged into a respirator she seemed to be a candidate for beatification. "God knew she was stronger than you," the nun told me. "That's why she was in the front seat. Because she had more grace, she was allowed to endure more pain." In short, it was God's love that had crushed my sister's larynx

and His disappointment in my weakness that had let me off with comparatively so little damage. Even in the third grade I found this reasoning suspicious. I wasn't in the front seat because my sister was three and a half years older and had never let me sit in the front seat, not once, when she was in the car. There was no lesson there about God's love.

THE FIRST WEEK we were in Iowa, another student in the fiction program finally got up her nerve to ask me the question she had been wondering all along: How I could stand to look at Lucy every day? "Lucy's great," she said, "but I'd find it too upsetting. I'd always be thinking about her face."

I told her I had no idea what she was talking about and then I left abruptly, hoping she would feel horrible for having said it. But then I wasn't a good person to ask. I had stopped noticing Lucy's face years before, seeing her in the cafeteria or walking up the hill to class, always in the center of the most popular students. Or I saw her onstage, saying her lines, being cheered for her poetry or her introduction to *The Wizard of Oz*. And even though I didn't know her then, I had seen her face change significantly over the years. I thought it had improved. Her lower jaw had been a ledge falling off just below her cheekbone when we started college, making her face a sharp triangle, but now the lines were softer. She couldn't close her mouth all the way and her front teeth showed. Her jaw was irregular, as if one side had been collapsed by a brutal punch, and her neck was scarred and slightly twisted. She had a patch of paler skin running from ear to ear that had been grafted from her back and there were other bits of irregular patching and scars. But she also had lovely light eyes with damp dark lashes and a nose whose straightness implied aristocracy. Lucy had white Irish skin and dark blond hair and in the end that's what you saw, the things that

didn't change: her eyes, the sweetness of her little ears. In Iowa she wore a four-by-four gauze pad, folded once and taped to the left side of her face, and while it was strange at first, it actually gave her a nice balance. It made it look like whatever was wrong was temporary, in the process of being fixed, when it was in fact part of a synthetic prosthesis that had worn a hole in her skin and was poking through. I asked Lucy countless times to let me see, but she wouldn't. The pad stayed fixed in place.

Lucy always said it was better when people just came out and asked her what had happened. A straight question was preferable to the awkward avoidance. "If they have the nerve to ask me, I'll tell them the truth," she said. Unless of course they asked her on a bus, in which case she would lean in close and whisper, "Bus accident." Or "Plane crash" or "Car wreck," depending on the mode of transportation at the moment.

B—— never seemed to mind Lucy's face. He was giving her a chance she thought she was never going to get, and so she was committed to following his lead. The first lesson was obedience. She came home early most mornings looking ruffled and calm. She would pour a cup of coffee and sit down across from me at the table.

"Bondage," she would begin patiently, "is not about a desire to be dominated."

And so began our sexual education, with Lucy attending the demonstrations at night and me reading off her notes in the morning. I would make her a bowl of Cream of Wheat while she talked about pornography, fetish, and whatever had happened the night before.

For two people who didn't know one another, Lucy and I had a lot in common, not only friends and classes from college and a vaguely stunned feeling about having found ourselves in the Midwest, we also had about four hours experience with men. We had both

made it through high school without a single date. We both had our first kiss from the same boy in college (a sainted and tender soul who must have made it his business to kiss the girls who would have otherwise graduated unknissed). We were younger than any other twenty-two-year-old girls in the world, still believing absolutely that there was nothing more important, more romantic, than Yeats. Lucy, of course, had lived a larger life than I had, and she had infinitely more flair. Not only had she suffered, she had danced in New York's finest transvestite clubs, sometimes on the tables, where she was again regarded as a sort of lovable mascot. She had had adventures that, if not sexual, were at least sexy. And now she was having sex.

B—— was a cautionary tale about being careful of what you wish for: he was handsome and bright and attentive. He picked up Lucy in his fancy car and drove her into town for ice cream and coffee and all of the other students saw them and talked about it, just the way she hoped they would. According to the reports I heard every day, he liked sex, providing her with as many experiences as there were ice creams to choose from. But B—— was never going to love Lucy, and he seemed to take a real pleasure in telling her so. As much as Lucy had spent her college years dreaming that someday someone would want to have sex with her, she was slowly figuring out that wanting sex was knotted together with wanting love. The more B—— insisted the two be separated, the more confused and desperate Lucy became. The only avenue she had with B—— was sex, and she tried frantically to use it to make him love her. It was a bad habit she established, and it stayed with her for the rest of her life, long, long after B—— was gone.

Dearest Axiom of Faith [she would write to me later from Scotland, telling me a story about coming home and not being able to reach either of the two friends she had locally], *It was a sorry sight, me standing there*

by the phone, racking my brain for someone to call. I was seized with a profound loneliness and sense of desperation. My first impulse was to go to bed and feel very sorry for myself, but I forced, and I mean forced, myself to go out to a blues band playing at a bar down the street. I decided that if I was going to feel sorry for myself, I should at least do it in public with a drink in my hand and blues in the background. I ended up being chatted up by this man, D—— and we got drunk and ended up trying to have sex on the beach in a rainstorm (unsuccessful). He came back here with me and it was strange. He's in his mid-30's and was dumped by some woman he was desperately in love with only a few months ago. He's from aberdeen but lives in london. He was up here for the holidays, but was supposed to go back already, but kept putting it off because he was too depressed to face his job, which is for a shoe company. The sex part was great—a real missionary sort of guy, but a great body. Oddly, he was like B—— in many ways: same sort of body, same body smell, a few of the same physical quirks: I felt like I was actually with B—— in a few ways. This was really great for me, for the fact that it'd been so long since I'd had sex, I'd begun to idealize the sex I'd had with B——, and this experience showed me he's a very replaceable person. I'm not sure the logic of that is too clear, but you can probably see what I'm getting at. The negative part of it was that he told me it wasn't physical attraction, but because of the conversation we'd had. He's all into spiritualism in a very new age sort of way, and I have to ashamedly admit I very proudly gave him all the soul-talk I knew. I'm ashamed of this because I took something very very important to me and used it as a device to get sex, and, worst, I talked about it in a way I knew to be (somewhat) false. I'm all for the roots of new-age and all that, but it seems to me too often confused with psychology and emotional happiness and self-awareness by certain types of people who are very sensitive and needy, yet not able to find what they want and need via art or more

traditional (and far more demanding and harder) philosophies and/or religions. Personally, I think true spiritualism contains aspects of the above mentioned things, but more often than not it shows you just how hard things are, not how easy (well, you know what I mean). Psychology wants you to adapt to society; spiritualism often tells you that you must not adapt (conform). Oh, anyway, this is all getting too jumbled. He was a very very sweet, very needy guy, who, after three nights, said he couldn't sleep with me any more because he didn't love me, and he was in a position in his life where he only wanted to make love, not just fuck. He went back on this when, after disappearing for four days he showed up again (still not having gone back to London) and we had another three nights of sex. I guess he's finally gone back now, or at least I haven't heard from him. We had some good conversations, and now he's gone I'm feeling very lonely, the way I did before I met him. It's like a big circle. I've gone on a get-a-man crusade, but so far it's been a disaster and I'm feeling as bad about myself as I ever have. I know I'm a great person and all that, a good friend, but I feel like real bottom of the barrel girlfriend material. D——told me I should do "affirmations," which is when you say positive things about yourself so as to posit them in the astral realm and counteract all the negative things you've ever said about yourself. In a weird way it makes sense (not the bit about the astral realm). Anyway, I'm trying very hard to be positive.