

## Dilly and Mags: A Madrigal

### Chapter One

“When a poor man came in sight....”

When a poor man came down our street, Mags and me knew what to do, being familiar with poor men and their behavior. They foul the marble entrances to public buildings. They pretend to be sick or disabled and demand money. They sleep on curbs or under bridges, lying there all dirty and smelly in their rags. Sometimes they fall unconscious on railroad tracks and get their heads cut off. Often, they leap out from behind trees at Mags and me, their pants around their ankles, shaking their willies at us and making disgusting noises. We run away, but we don't shriek. Shrieking would make them think we're scared, but we're not. We're just appalled. So when this poor man who seemed new to our neighborhood wandered around, swaying from side to side, his hand out for alms, we rushed back to my house and into the kitchen and snuck a carving knife from the drawer of knives I'm not supposed to touch because they're so precious and costly. Mom and her friends were in the dining room, playing bridge and getting snockered on my Dad's bourbon. We tiptoed out of the kitchen and ran down to the creek and found a smooth stone to whet the knife on, to make sure it was sharp. My brother Alton taught us to do that, which he learned at a scout meeting deep in the woods. *Shrritt, shritt* went the knife as it sharpened itself on the stone. Mags said, “How

are we going to know if it's sharp enough?" An unfortunate beetle crawled by, laboring over twigs and leaves as if he couldn't wait to get home to his slippers, an easy chair and a martini, the evening news, a tuna-noodle casserole. I let the knife drop in a clean arc and split the beetle in two. "That's how," I said. So, now that the knife was sharp, we had to go find the poor man and persuade him that our neighborhood wasn't the right place for the likes of him. I was wearing my blue sundress printed with yellow flowers in the fashion of 19th Century Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh. Speaking of knives, Mr. van Gogh cut off his own ear, after suffering the humiliation of being spurned by a whore. He must have thought that was a fate worse than death. I hope he had sharpened the knife on a stone. Mags, on the other hand, was wearing a yellow shirtwaist dress with blue stripes. It's among my favorite of her dresses. We call each other the night before to plan what we're going to wear every day. We're best friends.

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"Angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold"

Mags scratched on my window at three in the morning. I opened the window and helped her climb in. Thank god my room is on the first floor. She had on pale pink pajamas and muddy brown rain boots. "Jesus, Mags, what's going on?" She opened her mouth to speak, but I whispered, "Shh, you'll wake up Duluth." That's my little sister. "I'm not going to wake up Duluth." She flopped down on my bed and said, *sotto voce*, "I just had a vision. I think it was a vision. I dunno. It felt so real." If one of us was going to

have a vision, it would be Mags. She had an Irish granny that cast spells on stupid people. Once, she made me fall in love with a bird. I followed that bird around for days until he got annoyed and flew away. I was only six then, so the lesson about longing and desire was lost on me. Mags' granny died not long after that episode. Instead of burying her in America, where you'd think there would be room to bury everyone a million times over, Mags' Mom and Dad had the old lady shipped back to Ireland. Mags told me that cost a fuck-all lot of money. "So, what was this vision?" She took off her boots, and we slid under the covers of my bed and held on to each other. "I felt wings brushing me. Like angel wings. All soft and fluffy but sort of stiff too, like real wings on a swan. And music. Like they were playing their harps. And maybe a flute and a cello. It was music from heaven. I saw their faces. They were staring at me." She started to cry. I hugged her tight and tasted her tears with my tongue. She said, "Oh, Dilly, it was so beautiful I wanted to die, but I was scared too." I said, "Shh, sweetie, shh. You're not going to die. I won't let you. Not ever." I kissed her and she kissed me, and Duluth, from the top bunk, said, "Will you perverts shut up? People are trying to sleep up here."

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"Field and fountain, moor and mountain...."

All year when we were 13, Mags and me chased boys all over the place. Lord have mercy, we loved boys! We were shameless. We were like the stars of boy-chasing. Mom was always "Would you let up for a damn minute with the boys? Get off

the phone!” We chased boys in arcades and thrift stores, we chased boys at the mall and the movie theater, we chased boys between classes and after school, down at the running track and the football stadium. The boys at practice in those tight-fitting pants! Woo-hoo! We were delirious with boys. Not that the boys paid any attention to us, except to get really pissed off. “Jesus, Dilly, will you stop chasing after me,” went the captain of the football team. “You and Mags go fuck yourselves.” Anyway, whatever all those boys thought to the contrary, we thought we were terrifically sexually appealing. One afternoon, we perched in an old crab-apple tree down at the corner, in a vacant lot where a house had burned to cinders and never been rebuilt, creating an ugly broken place in our otherwise Edenic neighborhood. A man came by, walking a German Shepherd on its stiff, funny legs. I said to Mags, “He looks pretty old.” Mags said, “The man or the dog?” “The man, dumb-ass! I bet he’s 40 if he’s a day.” Mags said, with an air of sophistication hitherto unrevealed, “Older men can be attractive.” We waited until the man and the dog came parallel to us, about 20 feet away, and I said, “Hey, mister!” They stopped, and the man looked at us. He seemed to be not so old, up close, and handsome in a scruffy, unshaved way. He was tanned, as if he just came back from a cruise with his girlfriend named Lola. He said, “Yes? Were you talking to me?” Like he was an English professor or something. I said, “Yeah. Hey, you wanna see our tits for five dollars?” We needed money for the make-up we’re not supposed to wear. The man and his dog tilted their heads, as if they were considering the prospect. They stepped a little closer. “Shouldn’t you girls be in your rooms doing homework?” Mags said, “Yep, we should, but right now we’re offering to place our tits on view, solely for your eyes. And your dog, I guess.” We unzipped our hoodies and pulled them open, so our tits

were full on display. The breeze on my skin felt sweet, filled with sunlight and happiness. The man laughed. "O.K., fine, but you call those tits? I'll meet you back here in a couple of years." He laughed again. I think the dog laughed too. I always hated German Shepherds after that. The man said, "You should be paying me for wasting my time, but you're so pathetic ... Down, Bob." The dog maneuvered himself into a lying down position, his front legs thrust out ahead of him like the Sphinx of Old Egypt. The man reached for his wallet, searched the innards and pulled out two five-dollar bills. "Here, a Lincoln for each of you. Don't spend it all in one place!" He pulled at Bob's leash, the dog lurched up to his feet, and they walked away down to the next street, still laughing. It seemed as if Bob was laughing most of all.

*Don't spend it all in one place. What an asshole.*

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I know a place, in the ivy on a tree,  
Where a bird's nest is, and the eggs are three,  
And the bird is brown, and the eggs are blue,  
And the twigs are old, but the moss is new,  
And I go quite near, though I think I should have heard  
The sound of me watching, if I had been a bird.

John Drinkwater, "The Bird's Nest"

I'll tell you about a really bad thing I did, a different bad thing. This was when I was about five, after my dad had given up running as a vocation. He used to run all the time, early in the morning before breakfast, when he got home after work, on the

weekends. He ran in races and marathons. He was lean as a bean and twice as cute. Then one night he was hit by a bicyclist at a dark running place and ended up with a shattered knee and broken ankle. That put an end to running. After he healed, though, and after a few months of therapy, he took up walking. He was like a man who couldn't stay still. Walking, he said, was sort of a relief. Even keeping up a good pace, he felt that he was communing with nature, feeling more at home in the world. He began looking closely at things – mushrooms and lichen, leaves, flowers, rocks, even trash people threw away in the street or in the parks where he liked to walk. He started to collect stuff. Going through a pile of gravel or stones, he sometimes found small fossils. And, alongside some path, half-hidden in leafy shadows, rarely but magically, bird's eggs, wee things, pale blue, speckled brown, creamy beige, fallen from nests. He kept three of these tiny eggs on a glass tray on the table on his side of the bed. He told me the tray was an old-fashioned pen and ink holder, from when people wrote in cursive mode. That took some explaining. Pen? Ink? Cursive?

Anyway, one Saturday morning, early, after I woke up Duluth and parked her in front of the television with a bowl of cereal to watch cartoons – Alton was already at his weekend job blowing up balloons for kids' parties – I tiptoed in the parental bedroom and stood, quiet as the space between heartbeats, looking at the eggs. Mom and Dad slept on, breathing and sighing, maybe having dreams. I wondered if they ever dreamed about each other or about me. I took the brown speckled egg between my thumb and first finger, contemplated it for a minute with nothing whatsoever in mind, and cracked it. A swarm of microscopic fairies burst from the broken egg in a glittering haze of fluttering pastel wings, their naked perfection as ethereal as the last amen of a dying hymn. No,

actually, those were my tears, because I immediately started to cry, but though I knew it was wrong, very wrong to do what I was doing, I cracked the other two eggs, shattering them all to infinitesimal pieces. The noise was tiny, a gnat-speck of a noise, but my father opened his eyes, focused on me and said “What the fuck are you doing?” It was the first time I heard the word *fuck*. He sat up in bed and grabbed my arm. “You broke my birds’ eggs. I loved those little things.” I thought he was going to shake me hard so I broke to pieces and my blood smeared the wall or slap me until my head fell off and crashed to the floor, but since by this time I was sobbing like a crazed penitent, he took my face in his hands and said “That was really bad, Dilly. I’m ashamed of you. What you did hurt my heart.” I kept crying and saying “I’m sorry, Daddy,” while the tears flowed and snot bubbled from my nose and I was a general mess. My Mom woke up and said “What in the world is going on? Jesus, it’s only 7:30.” My Dad said “It’s nothing, hon. Go back to sleep.”

So she went back to sleep, my Dad lay down and turned over, and I went out to the den and sat on the couch and watched cartoons with Duluth. Silly animals running all over the place, exploding. I guess I learned my lesson, yessir.