ORDINARY MAYHEM

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EXCERPT FROM MARY OLIVER'S "THE USES OF SORROW," FROM THIRST, BEACON PRESS, BOSTON, 2006. USED BY PERMISSION

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PROLOGUE

I.

I was six.

It's a young age. Impossibly young, really. We think we remember six until we *see* six and then we see what six is. We say, *No, that's not six!* And we think it must be five or even four, and that *this* child is just big for her age, but really—that *is* six.

Six is small. Six is vulnerable. Six needs protection.

Six is A. A. Milne and Winnie the Pooh and Piglet and really just a bit past *Goodnight Moon*, which I never liked much, even if it *was* written by a lesbian with her own truly tragic story. Milne knew about six, that's why Christopher Robin is six and imaginative and yet has a robe with a hood and gets tucked into bed at night.

Now We Are Six is a classic because it resonates. We are old enough to read it ourselves—often our first "real" book. Even now, with kids and their tablets, parents and grandparents still give that book as a gift on a sixth birthday because *six* is right there, telling the child who gets the book, *This is about you, this is your life, here, in your hands. This is you, this is who you can be—adventuresome, an explorer, a friend to small, interesting creatures. This is your world, now you are six.*

My grandfather—Grand, I called him—gave me that book.

Grand gave it to me right after I saw my first dead bodies.

Now I was six.

The 100 Acre Wood and Pooh Corner were not my world, though, much as I wanted them to be. My world was somewhere else. Under the rocks of the 100 Acre Wood, perhaps. In the thick, rotted, fungal branches on the ground of the 100 Acre Wood. In the mouths of owls that ceased, by nightfall, to be intriguing intellectual characters with dyslexia and became instead marauding predators with a taste for small, vulnerable, bite-sized creatures, creatures whose blood was a delectable sense memory for them. My world was there, among them, small and bite-sized, in the leaves, scurrying, fearful, heart thumping, blood pulsing, head pounding. My world was the undergrowth, the mossy, lichen-covered ground, the place that always smelled a bit of dead things.

My world was not the 100 Acre Wood, or Pooh Corner. Death had touched me too young. Death had touched me at six. Death had touched me, and in touching me, owned me. It was my first "brush with death," as the phrase goes. It was my introduction to death, to mayhem, to the implacable, relentless ordinariness of pure horror. Hannah Arendt built her philosophical career on knowing, and stating with trenchant, defining clarity, that evil, in the end is, banal. Maybe. But if that's is true, then so, too, is horror.

Banal. From the French. *Ordinary.*

I knew at six that horror—real, true, hand-over-the-mouth-screaming horror—was ordinary. I knew that mayhem, that word we use for the most violent, most chaotic, most awful horror, was indeed ordinary. *Ordinary mayhem.*

I saw it first at six.

I've seen it ever since.

II.

They burned to death.

My parents burned to death.

Now you are six.

It was snowing, it was cold, fire met ice and they burned to death. While Christopher Robin imagined a coterie of cute, if somewhat wryly adult animals in the 100 Acre Wood, I imagined my mother's desperate, piercing, agonized screams from within the flames of our car. I imagined her arms flailing, clawing at the windows. I imagined my father shoving his athlete's body against the door over and over like a scene in a movie, trying to break through to the world without flames, the world in which they would both survive, unscathed, to be reunited with their young daughter in a snapshot of familial perfection.

But neither would escape. The car would be nothing but a burnt-out shell, an image in a photograph on the metro section of the newspaper I would, many years later, be taking photographs for myself—photographs like that one. Photographs of something awful. Obscenely, irrevocably awful.

Mayhem.

I imagined my parents dying, agonized, in our car, the car in which I would ride, curled in the corner behind my mother's seat, face pressed to the window, looking out, cataloguing, always cataloguing everything I would see. The greenish-brown rush of the river. The bright bursts of daffodils, forsythia, azaleas. The vivid yellow, scarlet, ochre of the turning trees. The snow—fat flakes falling as we rushed home to beat the storm.

Sometimes there were things I wished I hadn't seen—an animal killed in the road, guts spread in a thick red smear, a child crying hysterically while its mother slapped it repeatedly, nowhere for it to run or hide, a man hitting a woman on a street corner, people turning away, not intervening, allowing the brutality to go on and on way past when we'd driven by.

I still see all these images, all these years later.

I can't recall my parents ever telling me not to look, ever telling me to look away.

When you are six you begin to remember.

When you are six, you can no longer forget.

III.

I couldn't forget my parents burning alive. I couldn't forget the words: *burned* and *alive* or how they became inextricably linked in my consciousness so that whenever I heard *burned* it was immediately followed by *alive* and the images of my parents resurfaced, even if I hadn't thought of them in forever, because after a while, I almost never thought of them. After a while I had to pull out photographs to remember them. After a while they seemed like people I had only met briefly, who I had never really known.

After a while. But not in the beginning. In the beginning I thought of them all the time. In the beginning, I felt their loss more deeply than anything I had ever felt. I felt their loss and the loss of everything familiar to me. In the beginning all I could think about were those words *burned alive.*

In the beginning, when I was living with my grandparents, I would turn on the stove

while my grandmother wasn't around and hold my hand in the blue flame, hold it as long as I could, hold it in the flame, counting. I never got past five before I had to pull my fingers out and run them under cold water, tears pricking the backs of my eyes. *Burned. Alive.*

It stays with you, *burned alive.* It stayed with me.

Now you are six.

I imagined my mother and my father—such a beautiful couple, everyone said so—incinerated. I imagined them like I would later imagine Joan of Arc burning at the stake when I read about her at St. Cecilia's in religion class. I imagined them as I counted, my fingers in the blue flame, and tried to imagine not screaming, not pulling my hand away until it was like the long ash at the end of my father's cigarette as he sat outside, only half-smoking, staring at something, I never knew what, because I was only four, five, not-yet-six then, and my memory of my parents blurred so quickly, even though it should have been so precious.

But then so many things happened after they died, after my parents died, after they left me.

So much more.

After they died, I saw my first dead bodies.

They were not my parents.

They were not anybody's parents.

But the memory of them was seared as brutally, as grotesquely as my parents were in that car on that cold, heartless, icy night.

My grandfather handed me the little book of poems. Short little bits he knew I could read. Inside he had written, *For Faye, who would never go down to the end of the town, love Grand.*

The inscription referred to a line from A. A. Milne's poem, "Disobedience," in which the

mother of a small boy goes down to the end of the town and is never seen or heard from again. There are condolences for the child, James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree, but we never know what happens to him. Or where his father is. Or what became of his mother. It's a cautionary tale, of course, like most fairy tales and nursery rhymes, but it's a particularly unsettling one for a small child and its almost jaunty sing-song rhyme does nothing to mitigate the awfulness of what has happened to this small child, orphaned and alone.

I still have the book. I still have everything Grand ever gave me.

Most of all, I still have death.

That was his first gift to me. I was, you see, his apprentice. It took a long time for me to figure it out. It took till that night, at the gallery, when I saw him again. All the faces, all the bodies, all the stories I had seen and told and remembered came flooding back in that moment. In that moment, death touched me again—touched me like it had that first time.

I was, you see, no longer six. Now I knew what it all meant. Now I had that clarity, like Arendt must have had as she watched Eichmann in the dock and made her now-infamous declaration about the banality of evil that still shocks. Now I understood the gifts, all of them. And where I stood, in that moment, that knowing moment, the blood draining from my face, my heart beating out of my chest, was in fact, ironically, so very ironically, at the end of town.

Chapter One
Open in Red Light Only

The fascination began when Faye was a child. The darkroom, the red light, the big black and white timer that made a loud ticking noise as it wound down, the trays of liquid that turned the paper into pictures as her grandfather moved them back and forth with his fingers or a pair of big wooden tongs with plastic on the tips. She would sit on the high stool in the darkroom and watch as the paper came out of the big yellow boxes and then slid into the white pans of fluid that had that slightly acid smell that reminded her of the dead mice they sometimes found near the basement door.

Her grandfather never spoke to her when they were in the darkroom. He just moved from tray to tray, making the papers swim gently in the liquid that glowed red in the light. When the timer went off, the images would begin to appear on the paper: jagged pieces of clothing, a half-formed face, a disembodied leg, the flail of an arm. When the completed pictures finally came through, he would pull the photographs out of the fluid and hang them by the corners with little wooden clothespins on a thin piece of rope that ran the length of the darkroom.

Then he would take a magnifying glass and look at each picture. Sitting behind him, Faye would see an eye bug out, or a mouth go askew, or the side of a face puff up. In the hazy cast of the darkroom light, everything looked red, everything looked as if it had been soaked in blood.

Some of the photos her grandfather would mark with a silver pencil that came out white in the corner of the pictures, which were still wet—she could see they were wet, which made the images swim together. Some he left alone. There was a small black fan that ran all the time, back

behind the trays. The photographs would move ever so slightly on the line, but they never blew around, never touched each other. When they were all hung up and all checked, or not, with the silver pencil, then the red light would go out and the door would open, and he would tell her they had to wait for the photographs to dry. Sometimes she would look back to see what was there, but the room was dark without the red light and she could see nothing at all. It was all black inside.

Later, they would sit at the kitchen table together and her grandfather would set things out on a big piece of yellow oilcloth. It was still the era of the Polaroid, and had been for several decades. Color photographs aged badly. People's eyes glowed like demons. Everything turned a kind of red the color of dried blood. People came to Faye's grandfather for portraits, for a classic photo that would withstand whatever time they thought they would have. Faye's grandfather's photographs were the next best thing to a painting. He was known as an artist as well as a photographer and Faye understood that what he did was two different things—take the photographs and then do the art.

The art was a different kind of magic from the darkroom. On the table Faye's grandfather laid out a dozen or more little white glass pots with heavy, dark, oily paint in them. Reds, magentas, purples, and blues that looked like small organ meats with their thick, gelatinous consistency. The greens and yellows seemed like mold or fungus, but without the thick furring at the edges Faye had seen sometimes on rotting food. The paints smelled sharp, a smell she could never place because it wasn't like anything else.

Her grandfather would give her little pieces of his canvas board and a pencil and three

pots of her own and some Q-tips. He let her draw and paint while he sat bent over the black and white photographs, slowly turning them to color. He would twirl tight little pieces he tore off cotton balls, dip them gently in the thick paint, and paint the photographs with the delicate details their owners wanted.

Faye would always watch him before she started her drawings. Watch the slow, meticulous way he twirled the cotton and how carefully he worked on the linen photographic prints. Sometimes he would take a cotton ball and rub it over a photo to make the color softer and lighter. She always noticed how red the lips were. From where she sat they always looked like wounds in the faces of the people. Deep gashes that would never, ever heal.

They could do this for hours—sit at the table with the white pots and the cotton and the photographs—without speaking. When the photographs were finished, he would slide them into sleeves of parchment paper and put them in the cabinet behind where the cameras and tripod were kept until whoever's photographs they were came to pick them up.

Sometimes, when no one was watching, Faye would open the door to the darkroom and turn on the red light. She would set the timer and slide pieces of paper from the yellow boxes marked with big letters, OPEN IN RED LIGHT ONLY, into the trays of fluid. She would sit on the stool and wait, but no images would appear in the trays. She would think about what images they would be: She would squint her eyes the way she had seen her grandfather do over and over and she would imagine the pictures.

The images she saw always looked like slices of bodies, half-finished faces, torn shreds of clothing. And always, they were bathed red, like the darkroom light, like blood, like the gashes of mouths her grandfather painted on the photographs. When she closed her eyes, they were still there: the charnel house images that were the bits and pieces from the pans of liquid.

When she closed her eyes, the red light still burned behind her eyelids and pulsed, like a vein, until she turned off the light and left the room.

Chapter Two
The Grotto

Later, when Faye was sent away to the convent school for girls, she was often called to Mother Superior's office for this or that minor infraction. At first, in the early days, she felt fear, but soon she began to like the trips from the building where her class was over to the one where Mother Superior's office was. She liked the solitude, she liked the opportunity to explore. She would walk across the schoolyard, stopping briefly at the grotto with the sleek, despondent Virgin Mary standing within the hewn gray stone recess. Faye would stare up into the face of Mary and wait to see if she would speak to her like she had to the children at Fátima or to St. Bernadette at Lourdes. Sometimes there would be leaves at the feet of the Virgin and other times she would find small dead things—rodents or birds, because the grotto was set into a wooded area and there were feral animals, foxes and raccoons and cats, that came out from behind the trees to kill.

When she found dead animals, Faye would pick them up with leaves or sticks and take them to the bushes and lay them on the ground. She kept a notebook of sketches and each time she found a dead animal, she would draw it later, trying to remember exactly how it had been when she'd found it—if the neck was broken, if the mouth was open in a final scream, if it had puncture wounds or missing parts, if it was stiff and cold, or still limp and warm. Sometimes, when there was more than one, she would arrange them together on piles of leaves, sort of like a burial pyre she had seen in a book. She wasn't sure exactly what it was she was cataloguing with the drawings, but she knew they were important and she knew they meant something, so she was

meticulous about them and would look at them later to be sure she had gotten everything right. She never killed anything herself, but she was always grateful that it was she who had found the dead things and not someone else. It was like a secret between herself and God. Or so she imagined it was.

After Faye left the grotto, walking back down the slate path and on toward the high school building where Mother Superior's office was, she sometimes heard crying. She was never sure exactly who it was, but it always seemed to come from the same place, the music rooms where one of the nuns, Sister Anne Marie, would compose different kinds of music for the girls to sing at the regular musical events that were held at the school. The place was named for St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, and so music was a major part of the school's activities. Faye thought Sister Anne Marie was probably the person she heard crying. She thought it must be hard to love music so much but never be able to choose what music you listened to because nothing here was a choice, it was all up to God, or so they were told every morning in catechism class.

Sometimes Faye would walk closer to the place where the music rooms were—the small, two-story cottage across the stretch of lawn from where the grotto was—because she liked Sister Anne Marie. Faye thought she was nice, but sad, and there didn't seem to be anything that made her less sad. It was always the same—the sadness. Sometimes, when the nun played the piano for them in music class, she looked different. Not happy, exactly, but something else—glowing. Like the angels in the pictures in the catechism books. Music made her glow. Faye knew that there was something else, she just didn't know what it was. But she was sure that was who was crying, because another time she had seen Sister Anne Marie in the grotto, on her hands and knees in front of the Virgin Mary, her forehead touching the ground. And she was crying then,

too, and hitting the slate of the grotto with her hands, slapping it over and over again, pounding it with her hands flat against the rippled gray slate. She was saying something, but Faye could only hear certain words. The only ones she was sure she heard were “sacrifice” and “terrible” and “killing.”

Faye had stood behind a bush near the grotto and watched. When Sister Anne Marie got up, there was blood on her hands, and little bits of leaves and twigs had stuck to them. She had looked at her hands and then she had turned and looked back at Mary. When she turned back around, Faye could see that the expression on her face was exactly the same as Mary’s—sad. Very, very sad.

After Sister had walked away and gone back to the music rooms, Faye had gone up to the spot where the nun had been. The slate apron in front of Mary had smears of blood where Sister Anne Marie had been. Faye could see the mark of her hands on the slate—a thick, dark-red gore. She had bent down and touched it, had rubbed her fingers together, feeling the consistency of the blood mixed with dirt and a little bit of leaf matter. Faye had taken out her notebook and pressed the blood onto a page, wiping the blood off her fingers onto the paper. Then she had closed the book and stared up at Mary for a long time.

There was a fire escape that ran down the side of the building where the music rooms were. Once there had been a fire drill and Faye had heard the alarm and one of the girls hadn’t known it was a drill and she had started to cry, saying that they were all going to be burned alive and it would be like going to hell. Sister Anne Marie had looked at Faye with a look Faye didn’t quite recognize—some kind of distress. Faye thought she was upset because Faye’s parents had been burned to death in a car crash. The words *burned* and *alive* stung when she heard them come from the mouth of the girl in her class, but they seemed far away, those words, masked by

the sound of the alarm. It had been the first time she had heard those words since she'd left her grandparents' house. They were strange, somehow, and Faye heard the faint echo of them in her head, like they were being said from the end of a long hallway, another place, the place where no one knew exactly what those words meant.

Faye knew all about *burned alive*. Knew what the girl did not. Knew about the blood and the smoke and the flames in the snow and of course, especially, the screaming. Faye was always sure there had been screaming, because one day she had turned on the stove in the kitchen at her grandparents' house and put her hand in the flame and held it there for as long as she could, until she started to scream, involuntarily. Her grandmother had come running in and grabbed her hand out of the blue flame and put it under the cold water of the tap, then she had put ice on it. Faye's hand had turned red and there had been blisters on her fingers and the blisters had split open and underneath the skin was raw and bloody like meat and she had thought how terrible it had been for her parents in the car, screaming, with no one to come and pull them out. But now she knew what it would be like, the fire. Now she knew.

Faye had turned to the girl and said, "There's no blue flame. There's no smoke. There's no blood. So we won't die. And it won't be like hell, because there would be snow, too, and flames in the snow, and there's no snow."

The girl had stopped crying, but she still looked scared. Sister Anne Marie had stared at Faye, then. Her eyes seemed wider than before. The look on her face was strange, Faye thought. And not much different from that of the girl.