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The Girl with Wings

a novel

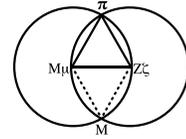
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THE GIRL WITH WINGS

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For Roger Mosher Brown
1947-2010

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.

Rene Descartes

And your doubt can become a good quality if you train it. It must become knowing, it must become criticism. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, why something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perhaps bewildered and embarrassed, perhaps also protesting. But don't give in. Insist on arguments and act in this way, attentive and persistent, every single time, and the day will come when, instead of being a destroyer, doubt will become one of your best workers—perhaps the most intelligent of all the ones that are building your life.

Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

Chapter 1

Exactly thirteen days before Gracie Cantonwine was abducted, graphic artist Linda Garbo was in her studio. She was holding a rustic-red paper sample at arm's length, considering the way the slate-like surface took the light, when her phone rang. Distracted, she said, "Good morning. Garbo Designs."

The caller was Annie Cantonwine. She had a question.

"You want me to be Gracie's godmother?" Linda's laughter hissed across the telephone. Met with silence from the other end, she put the paper sample down. "Go on," she said gently. "I didn't mean to laugh. I was just making up my mind about a project here. I'm listening."

A fly buzzing the plate glass window of the studio barely registered.

"I'm serious," said Annie.

"I know you are. You caught me off-guard, making up my mind about a project. I told the client I'd get it done today." The fly dive-bombed mere inches from Linda's face, as if it had the wits to demand her attention, too. She shifted the phone to her left hand. "Let's start over," she said, closing her fist around a fly swatter's wire-loop handle. "I'm all yours."

Annie repeated what she'd said right after hello: "We're planning Gracie's baptism, and we want you and Will to be her godparents."

"Of course." Linda swung at the fly and missed. "I mean, of course I understand."

"It's important to me," said Annie. "You'll do it? You sound mad."

"Not at you," said Linda. "I'm just a little stressed, preoccupied. Sorry. We're talking about making a promise in church, to teach Gracie to believe certain things?"

Over the phone, Linda could hear the baby's cry in the background. Then the double-click of a door shut out the sound. "John said yes to the godfather part," said Annie.

"He did? Already? When?"

"Just now. Will talked to him. All you need to do is stand up with us when the baby's christened. My mom wants it to be right away, before something bad happens to Gracie. She keeps saying that, and it's getting to me. I know paranoia is part of her illness and I should keep in mind what she's like when she isn't so crazy, but she's upsetting Will, too. He's talking about banning her from our house. I never thought that would happen." Annie's voice dropped to an urgent hush. "She keeps saying Gracie's in danger until she's been blessed in church. I'm hoping the baptism will calm her down."

"Baptism will calm her," repeated Linda.

"I'm hoping so, yes," said Annie. "She calls Daddy at the bank all day long, and so now he's pushing me, too, to have the baby baptized as soon as we can. Mom thinks it's magical, a precaution of sorts, and we've been meaning to do it anyway. I put things off, I guess, especially when it has to do with her these days, the way she's been so—"

Linda waited for Annie to finish her sentence.

"So embarrassing," said Annie. "I need you there. My mom needs you there, though god knows if she'll realize it in the state she's in. You're not afraid of her like some people. You're nor-

mal-acting and relaxed with her these days when her other friends stay away. If she makes one of her scenes, you'll be there, and that would mean the world to me. You still haven't said yes. I was sure you'd say yes right off."

"This coming Sunday?" Linda asked.

"Right. Daddy's setting it up with the minister." Annie pled like a child: "It'll be the four of us, in front of everyone. You and John and me and Will. We're so lucky to have people like you as practically part of the family."

A wish wrapped in flattery, thought Linda. It wouldn't kill her to do this for Annie. Their husbands were best friends, and Linda had been meaning to make more time for the younger woman, to get to know her better, but she'd imagined a movie or a lunch downtown, not standing up in church together. She really wanted to find some common ground with Annie. Maybe this would be it.

Linda was sitting at the front desk in her graphic design studio, gazing at the sign in the plate-glass window—lime-green neon, LINDA GARBO DESIGNS, in an oval of pink and lavender. Beyond it on the parking stood another sign, this one lettered red: FOR SALE. "To be honest," she said, "I'm not godmother material right now, Annie, given that I've been questioning my beliefs."

"To me," said Annie, "it's just a matter of saying you'll be Gracie's friend, like an aunt or something, while she's growing up, someone she can count on. The main thing you have to believe is that we all love her more than anything."

"I do believe that, of course," said Linda. The fly was back, low over the drafting table. "Give me time to think about it."

"But not too long," said Annie, her voice an octave too high by then, needy and girlish. "It's in *four days*. I know it's short notice, but if I have to get someone else— I have my *heart* set on you, so, Linda, *please- please- please?*"

Linda glanced at the clock. She had so much work to do and needed to get on with it, so she raised her right hand and struck the fly one lightning-quick blow and watched it fall dead onto the

dusty windowsill. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll lighten up. For you. For Gracie. Of course I will. Maybe it will calm me down, too. I’ll do it. Yes.”

On Sunday, September 8, 2002, the weather was hot and humid. A haze drowsed over the Linden Grove United Church of Christ. Linda tried to smooth the creases from the lap of her linen dress as she got out of her husband John’s Toyota. She watched him pull his jacket out of the back seat and hang it by a thumb over his right shoulder. His long hair, still damp from the shower, was pulled back into a rubber band. At the temples he was gray. “Your tie,” she said.

He hardly ever wore one. He wiggled the knot back and forth, observing her face as if it were a mirror. One nod from her and they headed up the steps of the redbrick building, hand-in-hand.

In the pastor’s study, Will Cantonwine, a sturdy man with curly blond hair, held his infant daughter Grace. Beside him stood Annie, a pretty woman in her early twenties with long, dark hair and high color in her cheeks. A yellow sundress showed off the fragile folds of her collarbone. Seeing Linda, she hurried toward her. “I’m nervous,” Annie whispered.

“Just breathe,” said Linda, and Annie took a deep, deep breath, smiling with relief, then, as if it had helped.

The Reverend Gustavson was barrel-chested, tan, and sported a well-trimmed beard. He reviewed the meaning of the sacrament. While he spoke of water, “to wash away,” Annie stroked the baby’s cheek, and two-month-old Gracie opened her mouth toward the touch. She shook her topknot of wild, dark hair like a tiny exotic bird. “You respond, ‘I will,’ said the minister. “Remember your cue: Will you endeavor—?”

“I will,” said Will. “I will.”

Annie groaned and rested her head against his sleeve. “Can’t we just say yes? Or else I’ll laugh.”

“Works for me,” said the minister, smiling. “Since the baby’s quiet, you might as well go on in. Remember: listen for the word *endeavor*.”

Linda's stomach lifted. Eating something usually helped the morning-sickness. She reached into her purse to finger a soda cracker as the two couples headed for the front pew.

"I'll be glad when this is over," Will said quietly to Annie, handing the baby off to her. Annie giggled. "I will, too."

Annie's about to jump out of her skin, Linda was thinking when Reverend Gustavson sailed through the side door, black robe billowing. He sank out of her line of vision, beyond the pulpit, as he sat, and she felt queasy.

She broke the corner off a cracker.

She savored the salt.

She looked around.

The sanctuary walls were blue; the pews were curved, the carpet worn. She took it in with a tourist's eyes and longed for something there to make her sure what to believe. The organ played a reedy tune with a baleful under-moan. Two oscillating fans sighed back and forth. Sulfur hanging in the air from just-lit candles on the altar made Linda want to stand and run from her uncertainty. Instead, she leaned forward slightly to look at Will, her husband's closest friend, who was confiding something to Annie that made her nod. He was smitten with his beautiful young wife. That was obvious.

The hard oak pew, too small for Linda, who was six-foot-two, pressed painfully into the soft part of her back, just below the shoulder blades, but at least her stomach had settled down. John's gaze met hers, and then moved beyond. "They're here," he whispered.

Annie's parents had arrived. Esther Hebring settled herself at the end of the pew, while Frank, a portly, balding man with patient eyes took Linda's hand in both of his to say, "Good morning."

Esther's lovely face was bloated, scrubbed, all the pinks and reds gone to her hands, to lacquered fingernails and ring — a ruby circled with diamonds, real, no doubt, but ostentatious, out of fashion, out of place. Her plum-colored suit looked beautifully made, but tight, too warm for the weather. Frank rested a protective arm along the pew behind her. When the minister raised a

hand for silence and the organ came to a rest, everyone stood to pray with him.

All, that is, but Esther. “I told you this would happen, Frank.” Her voice was an actressy, insistent whisper everyone in the place could hear. Annie stiffened, a sure sign of embarrassment, as her mother leaned forward and pointed a bright red fingernail at Linda, whose heart sank when Esther said, with more than a hint of venom, “What’s that Garbo woman doing here?”

It was her illness talking, that intimation, delivered so dramatically, that Linda was not her friend. Linda didn’t let it get to her. That would have been like abandoning Esther over an estrangement she couldn’t help. Anyway, at the best of times, Esther was known for her theatricality. On her one-woman local radio show called *Willing Suspensions*, she read stories full of harried waitresses, gritty cowgirls, enthusiastic mayors, little children, thieves. She was amazingly good at dialects, from Mississippi drawls to the uninflected vowels of Minnesota, as well as many foreign accents. For her latest story, set on the western coast of Ireland, her west-country accent was so convincing—even when she ad-libbed digressions so seamless they seemed to be part of the story—none of her listeners would guess she was suffering a relapse of schizophrenia. Those who had seen Esther there in the front pew the last few Sundays had grown accustomed to her outbursts. Linda heard a ripple of sound from the worshipers behind her. *Unstable*, they might have been whispering to each other. *Poor Frank*.

Gracie shook her tiny fists and wailed along as the choir sang, “*Lead Me to the Water*,” processing up the center aisle. When the Reverend Gustavson led the Call to Worship, Linda was too out of practice to join in. She reached into her purse and broke the corner off another cracker. Will and Annie stood, and Linda took her place, with John, beside them as Grace’s crying went up a notch or two.

“— baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son —” The minister projected his voice above the baby’s cries: “—and the Holy Spirit, with water, the sign of God’s forgiveness.”

Linda returned his gaze and longed for holiness. She wanted awe. She missed the grandfatherly God of her childhood, with his everlasting arms. Infant baptism was a lovely sacrament, she thought. *Maybe today will be a blessing for all of us, at the very least.* That's what she was thinking when the minister said, "Will you endeavor—?"

"I will," said Anne and Will and John.

Linda had missed the cue.

"I'll *try*," she said. The congregation was on its feet. They covered her mistake with the creak of floorboards, delivering their oath: "—and we promise our support."

By that point in the service, Grace's cry was loud and rhythmic. She arched her back as Annie passed her into the minister's arms where, like magic, she grew still. "What name shall be given to this child?" he asked. The answer: Gracie Ellen Cantonwine.

Then Reverend Gustavson carried the baby into the center aisle and raised her forward in both his hands. "This child is yours," he said to the congregation, "to nurture and protect, a reminder that we believe in a loving, caring God." He lowered the baby. He kissed her on the head.

And then he placed her in Linda's arms.

She wasn't expecting that. She hadn't held a baby for a long, long time. Gracie's weight in her arms, the Johnson & Johnson's scent of her hair, the formality of the four adults standing shoulder-to-shoulder facing a congregation of people who taught in the Linden Grove schools, sold groceries and hardware and used cars, plowed the fields along country roads, lightened her heart and, through her body, relaxed Gracie, too. The baby looked up at Linda without blinking for the longest time. Then she smiled.

The minister spoke enthusiastically. He asked them all to encourage her in the church until she reached the age of confirmation. Well, thought Linda, there were plenty of people in the room to share in that. If she could love Gracie — like an aunt, as Annie had proposed — she wouldn't be a hypocrite. Linda thought of the ham in the oven at home, the dinner she had prepared for the fam-

ily — in part to keep in touch with Esther during the paranoid and angry summer days she'd had to be without her meds, a *washout period*, Esther had called it, to prepare for a change in medication. The sanctuary blurred with tears as the baby curled against Linda, and she felt maternal consolation right down to her toes.

But Esther broke the spell. Chin high and sighing over-dramatically, she stepped into the center aisle and hurried toward the minister, who had closed his eyes to pray in his commanding baritone. She paused, then walked around him toward the double doors. Halfway there, she stopped and raised her right arm to point toward the back. There stood two men in shirtsleeves — and a girl with long, fuzzy, wheat-blond curls and wearing black, perhaps a late arrival waiting to be seated.

The Reverend didn't miss a beat: "Loving this child will take us on a journey —" But when he paused for breath, Esther shouted, "*No you don't.*" The eyes of worshipers flew open as she yelled toward the door, in an odd, atonal voice. "*Get out. I told you to stay away. Everyone here will watch out for her, in case the water's not enough.*" At first Linda thought the angry words might be for her, but then Esther turned her face toward the congregation to her right and jabbed a red fingernail in that direction: "*The baby's cry made the devil run. Did you see that?*" She stage-whispered, "*The one with wings? I recognize her hair.*"

A silence fell. Linda's heart was thumping. Someone coughed. The baby clung to her. The men at the back — one might have been an usher, printed programs clutched in a fist — moved aside, one to the left and one to the right. The girl with all the fuzzy curls rushed out between them, and the two men looked at their feet with embarrassment. "*Ah-men,*" Esther shouted in their direction, as if she'd won an argument.

She returned to her seat. She bowed her head.

Linda wished with all her heart she could help her friend. She'd never seen Esther so wild and outside of herself. Even here, among friends and neighbors, the world had gone dangerous in Esther's lovely, dark eyes.

When the congregation stood for the benediction, Esther Hebring took off in a hurry, down the center aisle. It wasn't her usual graceful walk, but the arm-pumping, belly-first march of an angry child. Frank followed her close behind. He inclined his head as if to hear her better, though she was still loud enough for Linda to recognize the same words she'd spoken before: "*the one with wings.*"

The organ filled the room with triumphant, brassy song. Someone slapped Will on the shoulder and got him to exchange his grim look for a grin. Friends shook hands over the backs of pews. Reluctantly, Linda gave Gracie up to Annie, hugging them both in the process, then stood motionless to gaze at the largest stained glass window, at the golds and greens of a dove descending, alighting on a leafy branch. What sort of creature, *the girl with wings*, had Esther seen in her psychotic state?

Outside the church, Esther pressed close to Linda on the wide front steps. "I've decided not to come to dinner, I guess you know." Her eyebrows were tweezed and darkened, pencil lines visible in the harsh sunlight. "I should be the one preparing it, not you."

"I hope you'll change your mind," said Linda gently. "We want you to see what we've done to the house since the last time you were there. The day wouldn't be complete without you and Frank. Annie helped me plan the menu. It'll be just the seven of us."

"Seven?"

"Including Grace."

"Of course," said Esther. "Including Grace. I'm afraid for her." Esther turned away to take Frank's hand and head for their car, parked right there at the curb. "I have my reasons," she said over her shoulder. "You'll find out."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," said Linda under her breath as she watched Annie carry Gracie down the sidewalk. There she placed the baby in the arms of Becka Gustavson, one of the minister's twin daughters, whose yellow shirt displayed a pointy design that looked like fire. Becka rocked the baby in her arms, showing Gracie off to her high school friends—under Annie's watchful eyes. Beside her, a girl in a black t-shirt took one of the baby's tiny feet

into her hand. In bright sunlight, the girl's skin and hair were so pale as to seem almost translucent, dreamlike, barely real. Still, Linda probably wouldn't have noticed any of that at all, if not for what the girl was wearing.

Even at that distance — Grace was thirty feet away — Linda had eyes only for the baby's wide-open gaze, and that flag of unruly dark hair that made her look surprised. Holding Gracie's foot, the stranger turned and bowed her head to talk to her, and the silver design on her t-shirt flashed in the sun.

Linda looked around for John to ask him, "Who is that girl?" He never missed a Sunday service. He'd grown up in Linden Grove and was editor of *The Linden Times*, so he knew everyone in town, but when Linda turned to point her out, the girl was gone. She might have been one of Esther's apparitions, the way she vanished in a moment like that. Linda asked Annie—and Becka, too— but neither of them remembered seeing a girl in a black t-shirt embossed with a silvery horse in flight.

"It was Pegasus, the mythical horse." Linda tried to explain — just as Esther had, in her schizophrenic rage — "the one with wings."

Probably a coincidence.