

8

From the fourth of Jessie's notebooks

The place: Tulsa, Oklahoma

The time: Spring 1944

My mother decided I should go to Monte Cassino so I wouldn't have to feel bad about being a burden. She couldn't be home much; she was looking for the right husband, slow work the third time around. I didn't see why Ada couldn't take care of me, until I overheard my mother telling Ada she would have to let her go, money was tight.

I didn't like Monte Cassino except for the jungle gym in the playground where I could hang upside down and no one yelled about seeing my underpants because we were all girls. The kids made fun of me because I didn't have a uniform, and Joyce Webster stole my mother's picture from my bed table one afternoon and made me buy it back from her. I told Sister about it, but she told me that Joyce was a sinner and God would punish her. It was hard to figure out when God would punish you and when the sisters would, and which would be worse. The sisters taught you penmanship by hitting your hand with a ruler, and they made you go to classes even if you had a sore throat. You had a choice: you could go to class, or you could have your throat painted with Argyrol and then go to class.

Sister Ann Joseph was nice, though. She gave me an empty stamp album and some of her more common duplicates. Sometimes she took us to the woods to learn forest woodcraft, and sometimes we went with her into the grotto to plant bulbs and flowers.

It was pretty there in the grotto, a kind of secret garden, like an outdoor theater. The high, arched rocks made a kind of stage set for the Virgin Mother, her robes deep blue like late afternoon, her head tilted slightly, arms outstretched, eyes looking down on me with a look that told me she knew I was a good girl. Which proves it was only a statue, because after I did what was bad—not that I knew it was bad when Myra and Myrna made me do it—the approving look stayed sweet just the same.

You could only tell Myra and Myrna Daley apart because one of them had a left blue eye and a right brown; the other had a right blue eye and a left brown. Some of the girls said it was Myra with the blue right eye, and some said it was Myrna, and Myra and Myrna wouldn't say at all, so I got mixed up which was which. On Columbus Day we only had a half day of school because it was a holiday, and after lunch Myra and Myrna asked me if I wanted to go out behind the grotto with them and play. They said first I had to prove I was brave. "You're new here, so you don't know. But no one will ever play with you without you pass the bravery test."

"I can pass," I said.

"You'll have to climb up the back of the grotto—over on the left side, where there's moss—walk across the top till you get to the other side, then jump down and kiss the feet of the Virgin Mother."

I was wearing the new shoes my mother bought me when we packed for school. They were still slippery, and I didn't want to scuff the toes by pinching them in between the rocks, so I mostly used my hands to hold tight and tried to get my knees to support me more than my feet. I tore my dress a little when I got both my knees kneeling on it and had to tilt myself to one side and tug it free. But I made it to the top and I stood

up tall, not even hunched over, almost like a real tightrope walker stretching out my arms and balancing my way across. I got to where I had to jump down on the other side, and it looked awfully far down to the bottom, but I knew it wasn't as far as it seemed. I knew because I learned to not be scared of high places by jumping off the stoop at Mrs. Grace's school, starting at the lowest step and going higher and higher and when that got easy, by jumping off the wall in Central Park clean over the bushes and onto the grass. So I took a deep breath and I jumped and I landed right under the smile of the Virgin Mother.

I no sooner kissed her cold, rough toes than Myra and Myrna started hopping up and down like they had to go to the bathroom and pointing their fingers at me. "Ooh, ooh, I'm gonna tell. Ooh, you're in trouble. You were on the grotto. Ooh, ooh!" And off they ran to find Mother Superior, zigzagging around the beds of still-blooming fall flowers.

But I could run faster. Even Teddy Draper, who is two years older than me—and a boy!—can't beat me when we race. So I got to Mother Superior first. At the door of the Convent House I stopped short, pulled my dress down from where it had gotten hiked up way over my knees and wiped the sweat off my forehead and from my cheeks and upper lip, using the backs of my hands and fingers so I wouldn't mix in all the dirt with my sweat and look messy. I didn't want Mother to send me off for a good face washing before I got to say anything, or she'd wind up hearing from Myra and Myrna before she heard from me.

I pushed open the thick carved-wooden door and stepped into the cool of the tiled rotunda. Mother Superior was in the library. She and Father Thomas were sitting in two high-backed, black-leather chairs that crackled when one or the other of them sat forward or leaned back. I tiptoed over to the doorway of the room and reached up and rapped the library knocker. Mother Superior looked over at me, smiled like she was copying the statue in the grotto, and held out her arm, beckoning me. I took a few silent steps on the thick Oriental rug.

Father Thomas watched me come, not looking cross or anything, and not puzzled either, really just nothing at all on his face except nice. I stopped and curtsied. Now, that's my specialty. I lift my skirts out like a fan with both hands, put my right toe behind my left foot, bend my knees and lean back, then slowly lift my head and chest and smile just ever so slightly. I am the only kid I know who can do it that way. I learned it from Mlle Dumas at the lycée back in New York and also to count in French and to sing "Sur le Pont d'Avignon" and "Au Clair de la Lune."

Being in a hurry, I could have done the short quick-dip curtsy, but anyone can do that, and besides, this was a formal occasion. I was in the Convent House, and that's not something you get to do every day.

"Yes, my child?"

"Mother Superior, excuse me." I stood very upright and looked her square in the eye and never fidgeted or twisted my hands or anything. "I just did something I found out afterward was a terrible thing and I wanted to tell you about it myself. I climbed the grotto."

"I see," she said, same bountiful smile holding there, outstretched arm maybe turning inward but only a smidgen. Her eyes looked over at the father's. My eyes traveled with hers, and they saw the left side of his lip curve upward and his eyes crinkle, just barely. He raised his teacup and took a sip. She looked back at me. I was still standing quietly without moving, still meeting her gaze. "Well, you didn't know. But thank you for being so honest with me. I'm very proud of you. You go on out and play now, you hear?" I nodded. "And try the playground this time. Instead of the grotto."

"Yes, ma'am," I said and curtsied again, a quick-dip this time. "Thank you, ma'am." With quick, tiny steps I headed into the rotunda.

The front door came crashing in, banging heavily against the wall. Myra and Myrna tumbled after it, breathing heavily, looking sweaty, their socks run down into their shoes. Myrna (I think) had a freshly bruised knee. She stuck her tongue out

at me as the two rushed past me through the open library door. They didn't even stop to knock. They just burst in, shouting "Mother! Mother!" I heard sharp crackling from the leather chairs, and then I heard Mother in her deep assembly voice. "Just what is the meaning of this rude intrusion?"

"Jessie did something bad," said one of them.

"Real bad. A sin," said the other, whoever had the sketchier voice.