

LITHIUM

A NOVEL

BY THOMAS LITCHFORD

PART ONE

DEPRESSION

---Onset---

In a way, it's like envisioning the moment just before your own birth: you were there, but you were in no way responsible for what happened next.

As my mother lay awake next to my father, I slept in the next room, a child, not quite four years old. In her journal, she wrote:

I had to wait until Mark was in bed and Quinn fell asleep and the house was dark and quiet. This was as much for them as it was for me. We're all of us starting new lives today, and I hope, truly, that they will be better for my leaving.

Quentin was and still is one of those enviable people who sleep quickly and deeply, rarely waking even to urinate. Marianne, in contrast, woke frequently; this was due, she said, to “a complete absence of bladder.” Over the course of the past year, her sleep patterns had become even more erratic. They were not really patterns, at all. Some nights she didn’t sleep a wink and didn’t feel inclined to sleep. It was not insomnia—she was sure of this—because she was fully awake and alert and productive during those nights, taking advantage of the quiet to sit alone in the living room in the ripped and dusty recliner, curling her feet beneath her to keep them warm, bent over her notebook, pen moving like Morse code, a long bit here, followed by a pause, then a short dash, pause, short dash, long, etc. Other nights she read novels or poetry or whatever else she could find that interested her, barely moving within the cone of light thrown by the reading lamp. She was a constant and determined reader, and at the time she was making her way through Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bishop.

All our earliest feminists were writers. What did they see? What did they know before the rest of us? Was it the anonymity of the page that enabled them? It wasn't a long time between George Elliot and Edith Wharton. It's a small step from disguise to mediation. The men took it rather well.

Marianne’s habitual nighttime roaming made it easy now to slide from the bed when Quentin’s breathing slowed and became rhythmic. She felt a change coming over her as her feet touched the wood floor. She moved carefully through the room, though she knew it was unlikely he would wake until morning even if the house were on fire. Her nerves were hot with anxiety, and she imagined the electricity arcing across her brain, imagined it projecting a halo around her

head, and wasn't that strange? This is how she often felt during her sleepless nights, even when she sometimes forced herself to stay in bed, and what if Quinn *did* wake up and *see* it, this halo?

Tonight was somewhat different. Tonight her whole nervous system was alight. Again, in her journal, she wrote:

Though I knew it was a damn shameful thing to be doing, walking out on my family, it was exhilarating. Everything felt right to me, and not just because I'd spent so much time rationalizing; it felt right cosmically, as if fate guided my actions. Years later, I still believe this. I was never meant to be a housewife, and Quinn was never meant to be a monogamist, but in his way he's more stable than I am. Mark's better off with Quinn alone than with the both of us.

Sometimes, Marianne just did not want to get out of bed. She felt anxious and barely slept, and this made her want to leave the folds of cotton even less when the ever-unshielded Columbia Valley sun lit up the bedroom, which was—bad luck!—on the southeast corner of the house and had windows in both exterior walls. She asked for blackout curtains, but Quinn wouldn't hear of it. "It's unnatural," he told her. Quinn did his best to care for her, encouraging her to eat on days she stayed in bed, watching me himself or calling Mrs. Fulton to come over and baby sit.

Marianne had left a pair of flannel pajama pants and a big T-shirt folded near the dresser, and she pulled these on by starlight, moving in inches. There was a new moon tonight. She winced as she dressed. A knot of tension had materialized between her shoulder blades and it was getting worse by the minute. It had the weight and heat of red-hot steel.

Neither of my parents understood what was wrong. Marianne complained of unhappiness, and, considering the circumstances, this was not surprising. Marianne was not living the life she'd planned for, and the cliché of the whole ordeal saddened her immensely. She didn't feel sick, even when she was stuck in bed, and usually felt quite good, even great. When she was especially energetic, she wrote, and she was happy, doing what she'd always wanted to do. She didn't dwell on these contradictions of mood. Indeed, she was barely aware of them.

She had started thinking this was just normal adult life. (She certainly remembered days when her own mother had spent the day in bed and behind a closed door.) She told herself nothing was wrong, she was just moody, disappointed at being stuck in rural Washington, far from the northeastern megacities she thought of as home. But what Quentin had done to her crumpled the careful origami of her delusion. Now, staying made no sense to Marianne whatsoever.

Since that day, the day of Quentin's betrayal, she had worked hard to convince herself to leave, and this decision was even more delicate than the mental self-trickery she had employed to make herself believe she could tolerate life in Walla Walla. Hence all the barefooting around in the dark: she was sneaking out on *herself*.

The most difficult moment came when she stood in the doorway of my bedroom. She stepped in and leaned over and kissed my sleeping temple and mouthed, "Goodbye." She wanted to say much more, but what could she say to a three-year-old about what she was going to do? Perhaps she did say more, words, phrases, even whole sentences never recorded in her journal, a secret message wrapped in sleep; perhaps she whispered her reasons in my ear as she knelt by my bed; perhaps she begged for understanding and forgiveness. Anything she said, if it

penetrated the biology of sleep at all, riding along the auditory nerves to my dreaming brain—would it stay there? What does the brain do with this information? The sound waves are real. The impulses are real. Are her words still nestled somewhere in my tangled neurons?

She walked from my room with less care, half-hoping I would wake up and speak that one word that could keep her from leaving. But I didn't. I slept on, the sweaty, rosy-cheeked sleep of a child, mouth open, on my stomach with my left leg curled up and both hands by my head on the pillow. My pajamas were blue and white polyester and had pictures of cars and trucks on them. This image of me from the bedroom door, my figure lit by a nightlight on the sky-blue-painted chest of drawers, was the one she clung to all her life, her one constant source of raw emotion and loss.

In another, later account she remembered the moment differently:

Turning my back on my son was surprisingly simple. I was running, after all, at least in part, from him. Maybe I'm missing part of what it takes to be human, because I hate myself for doing what I did, but I would do it again. That knowledge alone makes me unfit for motherhood.

She left no note (can you imagine someone so completely composed of words as Marianne Caxton resisting the urge?), but Quinn would know, wouldn't he? After what he'd done, after the shouting and the biting words of the last month—the critical mass of Annie Roth—he had to know something was coming—or rather: Flying apart.

Chapter 1

A contrail stretches out from the East, a shock of white against blue. The sky has been empty for two days, and the appearance of these vapor trails now is a sign of a partial return to normal. I can feel myself being pulled back into the gravity of routine, even though it's obvious everything is different now.

As I sit and watch, I spot more contrails vectoring away from the big busy East Coast airports. In the slow currents of the upper atmosphere the ice crystals drift apart and merge into fat tubes of cirrus-like cloud. I imagine what it would be like to float up and through the clouds, to feel them against my arms and face. I wonder about the jets' passengers, their anxieties, their destinations, how long they've been waiting to go home.

It is Thursday morning, September thirteenth.

I take a cigarette from the case on the table and light it, automatically offer one to John sitting at the next table. John S. is Greek, third generation. And he is one of Ann Arbor's homeless, but thankfully, blessedly, he is usually quiet about this. It only took him two weeks to stop telling me his long story about shrapnel in his knee from some war, shrapnel that moved from one knee to the other and sometimes to the hip depending on the day he told the story, and how he lost all his money to "that bitch," his wife, and if he could just get a few dollars saved up he would take the Greyhound back to Detroit to see his daughters, his "beautiful little girls." Mostly he sits without talking, drinking one cup after another of hot coffee until the paper cup starts to disintegrate and he has to buy a new one, which he pays for in dimes and nickels and pennies. He gets a special rate from the counter staff at Espresso, their small charity. I buy him a muffin each morning from the bake case when I arrive at seven to make myself feel better

about helping him on his quest for slow suicide by providing him all the cigarettes he can smoke—Marlboros by the carton, which I carry in my courier bag and dole out one pack at a time. He has already finished this morning's pack and is mooching mine because I'm lingering here longer than usual today and am too distracted to bother digging out another box for him.

I can always tell when it's not going to be a quiet morning because he says, "Morning, Mark" when he sees me coming up the sidewalk, as he did this morning. Some of the tiredness leaves his face, then, and he will talk like a talk radio host terrified of dead air. On these mornings he betrays his true self, the real John S. he hides from passersby, and I wonder if he is under the influence some drug, other than nicotine. I think he probably is, but I don't know if he's doped up when he's silent or when he's talkative. It could be he's doped up all the time, just on different things, amphetamines, barbiturates, whatever he can get his hands on. He tells stories of his childhood, his father (who died of a massive stroke while John was in the Vietnam), his college days after he came home and got out of the Army, of marrying Jenny "before she went crazy," of teaching his girls to swim at the Y. He ran a market in Greektown that he lost in a fire. Then he wasted the insurance money on a restaurant venture, and I suspect this was what led to the dissolution of his marriage, though he's never said as much. His stories swirl around a sort of black hole. He won't talk about it except in passing, preferring to dwell on the happy times, if you can believe there actually *were* any. He only speaks of his current tragic life when he solicits money from strangers, people who make the mistake of sitting down at one of the tables out here or making eye contact or slowing their steps when he addresses them. Thankfully, I am spared that kind of talk, maybe because I'm here every day, maybe because of the cigarettes. Probably the cigarettes. It's an ideal relationship. I still can't bear to talk too

much. The only available subjects are too depressing. All John wants is for me to listen, and in a way he gives me hope. At a minimum, at least I know I'm not the only one with problems.

“What's up, Mark,” he says.

“Hey,” I say.

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

People keep telling me this, that I look “tired” or “kind of pale.” A couple weeks ago, the guy behind the counter at Espresso said, “Are you feeling OK? You look kind of...gaunt.”

“I haven't been sleeping well,” is what I tell people when they say things like this.

Before long my thoughts are wandering, and I'm watching the morning student traffic flow past on the sidewalk. If I weren't so depressed, it would be a great time to be a twenty-two-year-old in a college town. These girls in their tank tops and short shorts, their low-rise jeans, their tattoos. The guys all look like they're in the same fraternity or in the same punk band, their big designer jeans and professionally ripped and faded cargo shorts, Polo shirts and wise-ass slogan T-shirts, tattoos of barbed wire around their biceps. What differentiates them is their hair—short and mussed or dyed and long—and their pierced or not pierced faces. These kids look healthy and industrious with their great backpacks and courier bags. I look down at my own clothes and try to imagine myself from their perspective: I must almost look like one of them.

John is the real outsider, here. John's too tired for this city, too old. Even the nine-to-fivers look younger than him in their New York wannabe clothes and hair styles. The professors have a look of being perpetually interested in the life around them, as if they are observing and thinking about wonderful things. This is a quality I envy and strive for. They look exalted.

John, on the other hand, though younger than the professors and the same age as the various professionals, has three days of patchy beard growth, and rapidly thinning unkempt hair. He wears black jeans and a black heavy metal band T-shirt featuring spattered blood and a stringy-haired skull atop a spear. A sticker on one of his ragged boots says, “Fuck Work.”

I lean over to pick up the paper bag from the bookstore. Inside is Marianne Caxton’s *Collected Poems*, just released in hardcover. On the dust jacket is a recent black and white photo of the poet sitting at her desk. She’s smiling—almost laughing—with her head resting in her left hand, her elbow on the desk next to her Underwood manual typewriter. Her long face has begun to show the lines of age. Her hair is straight and shoulder-length. I can’t tell if her hair is gray or blonde. I would suspect gray. Aren’t poets concerned with bigger things than dying their hair? She’s wearing a dark V-neck sweater with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Her body has softened with age, though she is far from overweight. Her bright eyes are focused on something to the left of the camera lens, and I wonder who or what it is.

Sitting on the table are two different volumes of Caxton’s poetry, *Tangled* and *Fractured*. The title pages identify the publisher as Stratford off Avon Publishing Company, Ann Arbor. The copyrights are 1998 and 2000, respectively.

Comparing the table of contents of these two slim volumes with that of *Collected Poems*, I confirm they are absent from the new collection, and this raises a number of questions. Are the poems in *Tangled* and *Fractured* truly Caxton’s work? If not, who wrote them? If so, why aren’t they included in what purports to be the definitive collection of her poetry? Why don’t more people know about them? Who was in charge of Stratford off Avon Publishing Company? Do they know they got the preposition wrong? Why did the company seem not to exist? (I had

looked and found no phonebook listing, no reference in any business directory, a series of dead links after a Google search.) The questions, as always, pile up.

*

Marianne Caxton is the reason I'm in Ann Arbor. The city is noteworthy primarily because of the university located there, and I'd never have come if not to research the famous writer. Though once I got here and settled in I found it to be quite a pleasant place. There's an organic feel about the whole city with its tossed salad approach to campus and city integration and the campus's hodgepodge of architectural styles.

People will remember Caxton, who died earlier this year, mostly for her novel *Mr. Underwood*, the story of a typewriter repairman who watches his livelihood disappear and his marriage disintegrate late in the twentieth century. John Underwood, the title character, then rebuilds his life when he meets and falls in love with a writer named Marianne Caxton who writes solely on a manual typewriter. The novel has been called "a beautiful meditation on what it means to be human in the late 20th century...a tour de force that is at once of our times and ahead of them...in a word, a magnificent achievement." I don't remember which one of the critics wrote that, or even which magazine or newspaper. It's on the book jacket if you want to check. I'm not even sure if I've got the wording exactly right, but it doesn't matter; they all say the same thing.

Marianne was fond of postmodern techniques like injecting herself into her fiction. She has been hailed for her strong ironic voice and her refusal to pronounce judgment on her characters' sometimes hideous actions. During her twenty-year writing career, she wrote four novels and six slim volumes of poetry (though only four reached wide circulation; see above).

Her novels have always sold well by literary standards, and she received good reviews, and her poetry is consistently praised by people who still read poetry.

When she was chosen as the University of Michigan's poet-in-residence in 1996, it was amidst scandal. She'd been living in Ann Arbor at that point for almost a year, and no one at the university seemed to know it, except for Nicholas Fineman, who was on the selection committee and failed to offer this information to the rest of the committee. He would later claim he thought it irrelevant because it was not public information. Marianne was one of those writers who fiercely maintained her privacy, neither giving interviews nor allowing her photo to be printed in periodicals or on book jackets (until she had no say in the matter, hence the cover of *Collected Poems*, published posthumously by her longtime publisher Shoemaker & Heller and edited by Jacobson Reilly. I vaguely remember signing off on something sent via registered mail from the publisher on a hazy Tuesday in May. The check I received and deposited and the monthly statements for the savings account I opened for the receipt of royalties are the only real proof the transaction took place.). Marianne didn't go on book tours. Her correspondence passed through her agent in Manhattan. But to refer to her as reclusive, as journalists like to do, is inaccurate. Her journals chronicle an active life. Without her image in wide circulation, she had disappeared even as she walked freely through the world.

The scandal eventually went away because the committee's decision had been unanimous and decidedly uninfluenced by her presence in the city. It also helped that Marianne had agreed in a letter to give a series of readings during the 1996-97 academic year on the condition that they were not videotaped or photographed. Fineman kept his mouth shut about his history with Caxton, and the details of their relationship would remain secret until her death—until now.

Little has been published about Caxton's personal life. My intention is to find out exactly who she was. She left behind an enormous amount of biographical material in the form of journals and unpublished poetry that I hope will tell the story of her intimate life. I came to this Midwestern giant of a college town four months ago to research this celebrated American writer who died before she could produce what would likely have been her best, most mature work, and, until two days ago, I hadn't cracked the pages of even a single one of the notebooks in her packed study.

*

You're probably wondering what took me so long, what I've been wasting my time with. I could tell you what I've been telling my father, that I've been doing "background research," learning about the literary world, etcetera, but you'd see through that, wouldn't you? No, the truth is, for two months I did almost nothing. Then I started some half-hearted "research," which consisted of sitting at bookstores and cafes and the Graduate Library reading room, and this went on for another two months. But it was just avoidance. I couldn't face the task straight-on. It was like looking into the noon sun...so instead I examined the clouds and looked for shapes in them, like a child, until something happened that grabbed me by the head as though with my father's strong hands and forced me to gaze into that bright void in the sky. And once I looked, and kept looking, I found that it was not so bright, after all.

But while I was stuck in the middle of this "depressive episode" (if that's really what it was), I was paralyzed by it. I've wondered what exactly caused it and why I lost control those first two melancholy months. I have searched my thoughts for reasons and justifications, and I've come up with some good theories, and some worrisome ones. The answer to what brought

on the depression is easy. The answer to why it was so extreme and complete is not. What brought it on was my mother's death in April of this year. Marianne Caxton was my mother.

That doesn't mean I know any more about her than anyone else. In fact, I know even less about her than the average reader of her books. She was not an autobiographical fiction writer (her own self-conscious forays into the text were mostly as yet another fictional presence), but consuming a writer's work, if you subscribe to the psychoanalytic critical view, anyway, gives you a window into his or her mind. Personally, I've never had the stomach for my mother's writing. I get nauseous, I have trouble breathing, and it gives me a headache. I've tried, though. Don't think I haven't. I tried in high school when I first learned that Marianne Caxton was Annie Roth, wife of Quentin Roth, mother of Mark Roth (me). I tried again and again over the years, giving my greatest effort to *Mr. Underwood* because of the vast ocean of praise surrounding it. I read all the reviews, every word I could find about that rare literary bestseller. (Once I knew who she was, I read everything I could find about Marianne Caxton. I was the geek with the "Arts" section of *The New York Times* at the school lunch table, the kid who spent his afternoons paging through journals at the University of Washington library.) The mouth-lolling fawning of the critics gave me a toothache, but I felt obligated to try reading the novel. I fought through the first chapter over the course of a month. Putting the book down, I realized I couldn't remember anything of what I'd read, but I left the bookmark where it was in the hope it would come to me as I read on, that it would clarify, but it never did, and I gave up.

It has only been the last couple days that I've been able to read *anything* she's written, and that's only so I can get a sense of her history.

See, I never knew her, my mother. She abandoned me in 1982, leaving me with my father. I was three years, nine months, and seventeen days old. She left in the middle of the

night without a word. My father hired a private investigator who learned she was going by her maiden name. He tracked her to a volunteer firewatcher position at Yosemite National Park but she had already moved on by then. It was after that that the divorce papers came.

We lost track of her whereabouts but followed her career closely. She published *Distance* in 1985 and began publishing poetry in major periodicals. New novels arrived every couple years. She was like a Pynchon or a Salinger but published more and more often. From the accounts of the Michigan scandal, we know she came to Ann Arbor in 1995. She put the finishing touches on *Mr. Underwood* and stayed here until her death.

Upon hearing the news that she'd died, I felt that I'd been abandoned a second time. At the moment I was contemplating closure, she died. She died in a motel bedroom. She died.

That short, complicated sentence, the simultaneous agency and passivity of the verb, my mother as both subject and object, taunts me with its perfection. Because it isn't true. To be accurate, I must say "she was murdered." In a motel bedroom in Toledo, Ohio. She was murdered. Now she becomes the object of the passive verb. Now I'm hitting the band just outside the bull's eye. If I could think of her death that way, the victim of random violence, I like to think I'd feel differently, that maybe I'd feel sorry for her. But it still isn't the truth. It was not random violence. (Violence rarely is.) Someone took her away from me, and it is, in a way, her fault, because if she had simply stayed in Washington with me and my father surrounded by mountains and grapevines, she'd never have met Nicholas Fineman.

This is my convoluted way of staying angry with her. To be honest with you, if it had been a car accident that took her, or cancer, or any of a million other things, I'd find a way to blame her. Because aren't we in control of our lives and deaths now, in the twenty-first century? We wear seatbelts, we don't smoke (well, we shouldn't), we have prescriptions, we don't eat

excessive carbohydrates, we spend time with people who will impact our lives in positive ways. Follow these guidelines if you want to live. When you die in this country, let's be honest, it's almost always your own fault.