

I.

A BOOK OF PSEUDONYMS
AND LIES

“First the facts, next the proof of facts, then the consequences of the facts.”

—*Henry Clay Trumbull,*
Teaching and Teachers, 1884

- WHO:** V, mother of my mother. Absent and erased. V, maternal grandmother. Both missing and maternal?
Mr. C, maternal grandfather?
June, born of V and Mr. C.
June, my mother not maternally inclined.
- WHAT:** The mystery: My mother’s lost beginning. V unknown.
A fifteen-year-old girl.
Files unsealed by the county with permission from the court. Buried family facts unearthed.
Making sense of fact with fiction. Always fiction.
- WHEN:** The Research: 2001 to present day.
The Story: 1935 to ad infinitum.
The length of time V’s cells transmit her trauma to us all:
June’s children, and our children, and—
As in today: Call sibling in the psych ward.
- WHERE:** Hennepin, Nicollet, LaSalle: Minneapolis streets named for explorers. (The men always explorers.)
The Cascade Club. The Belvedere Hotel.
Minnesota Home School for Girls, Sauk Centre, Minnesota.
Probation placement: Possibly Duluth?

WHY: Because the truth was always missing. Because there is
 no truth.
 Because June could not bond with her children.
 Because V was erased, a secret.
 Because I need her to be gone.
 Because I need to find her.
 Because V leapt into traffic, a shock on someone's
 windshield.
 Because June lost V, lost her family's story.
 Because we are living in V's white space
 where very little can be known.

VadaVali

VanessaVelvet

VenaVera

VernaVerity

VestaVeronica

VitaVictoria

VelmaVy

VondaVilma

VickyVina

VioletVlasta

Valentine

Venus

V

How It Starts: Minneapolis, 1935

V floats like a feather far from school. Late November loose. A pain in her back tooth that can't be fixed. Hunger acid in her belly. Her best friend Em beside her, a tether to this world.

Always V and Em end up downtown. V performing on the streets, singing for the men who still have money for young girls.

A dime a dance, Em calls. *A nickel for a song*. Em, the stubborn banker, holds the sailor cap for coins. Money they will save for a picture show and popcorn, or a quick stop at the Lolly Jar on Sixth.

V cancan and she shimmies, sings, "Ain't We Got Fun," then lands hard for a laugh. One week into fifteen, V's a red-haired Ruby Keeler, a Ziegfeld Follies hopeful sure she'll be discovered. V has what it takes to be a star.

You've got talent, one man says, his face as clean as a fresh page, his hands as smooth as snow, his thumb under her chin like a good father. (V's good father has been dead for five hard years.) *You shouldn't waste it on the street. I could put you on the stage.*

The stage? V says, her heart falling to his hands.

How much? Em asks. Em is the accountant; Em always knows exactly what V's worth.

More than this, he says, pulling a quarter from his pocket and slipping it in V's. *More than you earn now.*

The Proposition

Inside the empty Cascade Club, tiny V contemplates Mr. C's sweet proposition: Seven dollars every week, plus tips. *Can't your family use the money? Aren't times tough for a kid?*

Yes, V nods, trying to mask the thrill trapped in her throat. His offer so much better than the solo prize she won at Powderhorn last year. Nine thousand people at the park to hear her sing. V's name printed in the paper. Page 23. Her own single column clipping pressed into her scrapbook full of famous stars. Picture shows of Broadway, V dreams of either one.

Except V's not in a dream right now, she's real. Mr. C is real. This squat brick bar on Nicollet is real. Watery block windows. No bright lights marquee, but floor show posters plastered on the door. DANCING. DRINKS. HOT NIGHTS AND HAPPY GIRLS. .75 FOR FUN. No stage, he lied about the stage. The smell of last night's party wafting from the walls. Beer and whiskey. Cigarettes. Cigars. Rickety round tables with chairs stacked on the tops. A nightclub like those nightclubs where so many stars began. V knows that from the newspaper, the rags-to-riches stories of so many girls like her. Houston. Chicago. Kansas City. V's story will begin in Minneapolis.

And what about your folks? he asks, pouring V a Coca-Cola to close the deal. *I can't risk any trouble, even for a little thing like you. They going to want their pretty daughter working here?*

Sure, V lies, the heat of that last pretty burning her young skin. And anyway, I mostly sleep at Em's.

Spider bites and pinups in Em's attic, no radiator heat, but V would rather freeze than go home to that man her mother married last July. Her mother's good Norwegian-Lutheran God, gone now from their house.

You like licorice ropes and picture shows? he asks. Dark-eyed Mr. C, the handsome heartbreaker on every starlet's arm. *Silk stockings? Streetcar fare? You'll never have to walk downtown again.*

You bet, V says, but she would sing without the licorice. The streetcar fare. Her body like a radio, a steady thrum of music yearning to be heard. All the dances that she's learned without a lesson longing to be seen.

V discovered at fifteen.

And so she takes the job.