

Chapter One, Jimmy

I took care of the boy in my New York City apartment. He wasn't my child. They told me the rules when they gave him to me:

- 1) you must have clean hands
- 2) speak clearly, no murmuring
- 3) keep him unsullied, completely pure in every way
- 4) someone will come daily to bath him; you can feed him, clean his bed pan, brush and arrange his hair on a pillowcase, etc.
- 5) move him carefully if you must move him.

The boy was relentlessly pale with fine, black hair. All he could do was blink.

One blink was *yes* and two blinks *no*.

I wanted to ask about what came in between the yes and no but I didn't. I was distracted with my own choices, problems, and memories. I wanted to atone for my life, for what I had done. The boy needed someone and this was my chance to make amends. But to whom? Who was left? Taking care of the boy, Aaron, had initially sounded easy enough.

They told me I wouldn't have to tend him for long because the world I knew was going to end, maybe in a year or two. They said there would be a big stubborn flood like water spilling from an overfilled glass. Or was it fire, raging, hot and devouring, like an insatiable wife? They said I'd see the end only at the very last minute when it would be too late. Or maybe they called it The Change instead of The End. They wouldn't give me details. *Watch*, they said. *It doesn't matter where you go or how high*. My mind argued with them. *Do something*, it whispered. *What about my friends? Couldn't we change anything?*

But I knew they'd only answer about the next life. Perhaps I'd even have a new body, a better one. In the meantime my ancient body grew more afflictions:

- 1) red, spreading rashes on my limbs
- 2) stomach aches in waves that crashed against my abdominal skin
- 3) headaches that simmered between my brain bones
- 4) and some of my kinky white hair fell out.

I was hoping to be preoccupied with the illnesses to take my mind off of everything else. But the lake of my mind remained as well as the shore that surrounded it. Who could tell the difference?

“Jimmy,” they said, the chorus of them, “you must tend Aaron. He’s the key to the rest of the world. We’re his locks.” At least they let me know that much.

“Where’s he from?” I stared at his wormy, white fingers, the way his small body fell and tossed around limply when they carried him into the extra room of my apartment.

“Maybe Romania or Russia. We believe he learned English a few years ago, from living here. But not a lot. Didn’t you, Aaron?” The man in the suit was standing in front of the child but he hadn’t touched the child.

One blink.

“How old is he?”

“Fourteen.” A pause. He scratched his head. “We think.”

One of the women in a dress smiled, smoothing the new bed sheets. “We know that you’ll take good care of him.”

I wanted to say that I wasn’t sure but nothing came out of my mouth. I hardly knew these people, owed nothing to them or to the boy. “How will I explain him to neighbors, family, or friends?”

“What family?” The man in the suit straightened a photograph near the boy’s bed of a forgettable landscape, the standard field, flowers, and trees, that were in the frame when I bought it. He looked around. “What family do you have left, old man? Jimmy, we know that you’re good-hearted. Just be careful around friends and neighbors.”

“The child, Aaron, is blind and mute and he can’t walk,” a woman with a flowered apron over her plain dress said plainly. “No one will even know that he’s here.” She went over to my sink and began to clean the dishes I hadn’t used yet.

The man in a suit said, “He’s a gift. You’re privileged. So please treat him like a precious object.” Then they were gone.

I was afraid of the child at first. I tried to ignore him by doing my usual things, reading, watching television, doing crossword puzzles, sitting at my kitchen table, watching the young couple with their new baby across the street. That young woman zigzagged a spoon in the air like a snake preparing to strike before it reached the baby’s mouth. Was that something I was going to have to learn to do? Traffic and the noise of the city ebbed and flowed while sunlight consoled me. I lifted my coffee cup to my lips just as someone upstairs shattered something on the floor above my head. I spilled a little. I couldn’t hear anything from the child. His silence filled me.