

The Mysterious Composition of Tears
The Further Adventures of Fleur, Book 1



A novel

by

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“What Will You Do?” Rainer Maria Rilke, 1922 (Public Domain)

XVI revelations of divine love shewed to a devout servant of our Lord called Mother Juliana, an anchorete of Norwich, who lived in the dayes of King Edward the Third. R.F.S. Cressy. Julian, of Norwich, b. 1343., Cressy, Serenus, 1605-1674. [London], MDCLXX [1670]

For Chris and Claire, lights of my life. The universe blessed me with you.

What will you do, God, when I die?

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake...

—Walt Whitman

Prologue



IT'S AS IF I'm watching a webcam, viewing a vast array of species crossing a log bridge in the darkest night. Or strategically positioned at one end of a wormhole, seeing how the other side lives.

It's the best ticket in the house, observing the busyness of a planet, each life form an intricate fractal of something larger than itself, of which it suspects nothing. Except for humans, who sometimes sense it.

My gaze aims itself intently, as if my hungry vision could take me there in the flesh. At any one moment, I could be monitoring the Rice Terraces of Longji, exquisite layers of verdant dumpling dough snaking up from the river to the mountain top. Or viewing rainbow-winged flies in Zimbabwe circling piles of elephant dung used by midwives to hasten the progress of a woman's labor. Or even studying a chemical plant spewing toxic black smoke over the medieval city of Rouen.

But more typically it's the relatively sedate environs of SoCal I'm drawn to, its human denizens making intricate patterns as they travel from Westwood Village to Venice, Santa Monica to Pasadena, San Fernando to San Diego, like birds hopping from branch to branch, like dancing filaments of vibrating energy. With the intentionality of a researcher at the Large Hadron Collider, I seek a unifying theme in what I see.

Observing those I feel compelled to watch, I'm stricken with wonder. Surprise slays me. I feel a longing so profound it's like a cosmic flu. I note all the idiosyncrasies of these creatures, witness the evidence of how their minds tick. How they struggle to get a handle on what vexes them, strive relentlessly to resolve their contradicting desires, prickle at insults real or imagined, cover their confusions, bemoan their inadequacies, push past obstacles of every description, seek the sweet solace of love. I see how each of their moments is colored by their attachments to the past, their imaginings of a future that in these dangling-on-a-thin-thread times is just as apt to be marked by terror as by glee. It's a sinister moment in the life of the species. To paraphrase the Clash, will they stay or will they go?

Since my current state of suspension can't stop me from caring, I tremble right along with them, grieve with them, chime in with their laughter, and against all odds align with them in their hope. And sometimes, making a formless visit, a Shimmer comes upon me. I weep a kaleidoscope of tears. Are they theirs, or are they mine?

One

AT FIRST IT was only the young people. Teenagers, mostly, though there were a few toddlers who seemed to indicate by gesture that they, too, could see them. Oh, and cats. To be fair, there were a few spaniels and retrievers and even cockapoos here and there that seemed to be in on the secret, but outside of humans it mostly seemed to be cats. You'd see them staring up at the ceiling or sky for minutes at a time, their pupils reduced to vertical black slits, their unenlightened humans frequently dismissing the objects of their pets' interest as dust motes, a hummingbird, or perhaps a common fly.

Some people called them angels. Or God. Or some miniature version of the aurora borealis. Those who were honest were reluctant to give a familiar name to the phenomena, choosing instead to try to describe each visitation as how it appeared to them: a quality of light and color, but also seeming to have substance, though when they reached out their hands, it disappeared. Like a wild creature that would not be tamed.

The descriptions were confusing, as the visitations rarely appeared in the same way more than once: now as curtains of vivid color, each panel a different hue; another time, floating boxes within boxes containing squares of varying Crayola-smudged pigment; occasionally, one would pop up bold and bright, its tones proudly displayed side-by-side like the SMPTE color bars once displayed on TVs. Boys and girls in the first bloom of puberty often reported seeing slender slats, like vertical or horizontal window blinds tinted the bright green of rye grass, orange so rich you could taste it, a turquoise more stunning than the Blue Lagoon.

The rarer visitations were translucent, like shimmering silvery drapes suspended to the ground from the sky, through which most people heedlessly passed. But the gifted few stopped for a moment to exchange glances with another startled soul who *saw*, as if to affirm that they weren't going crazy and weren't alone in their suspicions of inhabiting one particular universe in a spacetime continuum that actually contained many.

Wolf first met Finn in just that way. Wolf had been on his way to visit his godfather and godmother Stanley and Gwennie, biking at top speed as he liked to do and hurtling round the corner from Allen Avenue onto Rose Villa Street, when a giant screen appeared right before him with abstract pastel prints splashed across a fabric that looked to have the translucent texture of a Shoji screen. He veered sharply, nearly colliding with a mop-haired boy with eyes as spookily beautiful as moonstone.

"Gawwwd, did you see it?"

Only later did Wolf learn that the boy pronounced the word in such an overdrawn way because he'd been raised by a neo-evangelist, one of the thousands who'd sprung up after the Great Humbling, each preaching his or her own version of the end of times.

"I did," replied Wolf, climbing off his bike to reach out an elbow for a virus-free bump, then—reminding himself that they'd been freed, at least from that particular plague—holding out a hand.

"Phineas Thomas," said the boy who took it, his face flushing just a little. "But everyone calls me Finn." He hesitated, fingering with his other hand the initiation chain around his neck. Wolf was unfamiliar with its emblem. "It was like some kind of screen for me. What about you?"

"Same," said Wolf, removing his hand from Finn's as gently as possible, since the other boy's skin felt as delicate as rice paper. Wolf had a sturdy build and knew that his grip could be rather rough. He grinned with pleasure. It wasn't often that two people saw a visitation the same way.

“I’m Wolf,” he said. And he gave a lusty laugh. “Born Wolfgang, after the physicist, but I’ll give you a fight if you ever call me by it.”

With a nod, Finn acknowledged, “Don’t blame you. Pauli’s a hard one to live up to.” And then he glanced over toward the site of the disappeared screen. He blinked a few times. The long dark lashes brushing toward his pale, slightly olive-tinged, sculpted cheeks presented a sharp contrast to his almost iridescent, just slightly epicanthic blue eyes. “Not Manus, is it?”

Wolf sighed. He really didn’t want to get into that topic now, not so soon after the visitation. He liked to reflect on them afterwards on his own. If he had the time, he’d cycle over to the Huntington Gardens, park his bike hurriedly before flashing his membership card, and race toward the massive Ombú tree in the leaf-canopied Jungle Garden. Tucking his thick body inside one of the wide grooves created by the fat fingers of the tree’s many massive, grayish-brown trunks, he was like an elephant calf curling in to its mother. Inside that cocoon, he might absent-mindedly gnaw at his slightly scarred upper lip—the sole physical evidence (save his initiation emblem) of his first encounter with a bobcat. Just as often, he’d pensively stroke the dark soul patch he’d grown on a dare from his best friend Medr. And he’d replay the Shimmer over and over again. He took these post-visitation retreats, not so much trying to understand them—he’d given up on that ages ago—but to let them “soak,” as Stanley liked to say.

Once Wolf confirmed with a brief nod his connection to two of the most famous people in the world, he was relieved that Finn said nothing. Instead, his new acquaintance settled abruptly onto the curb and sat there, his tan trouser legs bent toward each other like a cricket’s jointed jumping limbs.

Wolf looked around at the neighbors’ sustainably landscaped front yards, as if seeking another screen. Or some new form of the phenomenon. But everything on Rose Villa was normal. An elderly couple, arm in arm and stooped to the same height, shuffled past as if they were wearing loose slippers rather than their sturdy Nikes. A calico cat stalked a monarch butterfly, and Wolf said a silent prayer of gratitude that the creatures his sister Callay liked to call “the genus *Danaidae*” had been saved, at least for now. A red-faced, white-haired man—Wolf thought his name might be Fidel—emerged from a home a few doors down from the Fiskes’ and began hand-watering his oddly shaped succulents with the barest of trickles escaping his garden hose.

Settling down onto the curb beside his companion, Wolf couldn’t stop himself from staring at him, he hoped unobtrusively. The boy was almost pretty, with his slim build, finely sculpted features, shoulder-length tangle of shiny black hair, and those startling moonstone eyes of his. In another era, he might have been called fey.

Wolf felt clunky and awkward. Yet he knew he was neither. Hadn’t he been the one chosen to give the speech at his group’s initiation ceremony because he was the fleetest runner, finest dancer, most eloquent speaker—and not to just humans? He’d felt positively puffed up being named as the one who could best communicate with the local coyotes, bobcats, deer, and, yes, wolves.

Wolf wondered what the qualities were that had earned Finn *his* initiation emblem. And what school he’d come from, one of the traditional public schools, or one—like Wolf’s own Resurrection Academy—formed by enlightened families for their young See-ers?

But Wolf wasn’t about to pry. He sensed his new friend would prefer to reveal his particulars in his own time. Instead, Wolf pushed himself up to stand a moment, watching the backs of the elderly couple round the corner after their sad eyes had moved curiously from the two abandoned bikes to the boys themselves.

He turned his own eyes back and smiled at Finn, who'd risen, too. It dawned on Wolf that the boy, who must be about half a foot shorter than he, was looking up at him with expectation, almost as if he knew what Wolf was about to say. Despite the uncanny sensation, Wolf spoke. "My godparents Stanley and Gwennie live just up the street. I was on my way to visit them. Gwennie's a grand baker. Wanna come?"

Finn laughed. "Stanley H. Fiske, right? I thought you'd never ask."