

STRINGS

— COUNTED TWICE —



GLEN BRADLEY

THE OPEN OYSTER PRESS

Strings: Counted Twice

A novel of craft and inheritance

a novel by

GLEN BRADLEY

FREE SAMPLE — PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER ONE

The world is your oyster — open it.

CHAPTER ONE

Luigi Stagnetti had played to worse rooms, but not often, and not honestly.

The room was the back of the Garibaldi Social Club in Trenton, rented for forty dollars to a birthday party that had eaten first and drunk second and was now, in the third act, discovering that it had forgotten to want entertainment. Forty people. The bar along the wall, the cake plates going soft, a speaker in the corner leaking somebody's uncle's phone. Luigi had set his stage anyway.

He always set his stage. That was the first thing his father had taught him, in a kitchen in Baltimore with the smell of glue and boiled linseed oil: you set the stage whether they love you or not, because the stage is the part of the room that belongs to you, and if you set it right you can hold the rest of the room inside it for an hour.

The stage was a folding table, a black velvet cover, a proscenium frame of gilt card that he had painted himself the year his father died, and nine puppets hanging in the wings on their own little hooks, in order, the way his father had hung them, the way his grandfather had hung them in Naples before the war. Nine. He counted them every night before the lights, and he counted them every night after, because his father had counted them, and because nine was the number, and because the Bambino was always, always on the far left hook, smallest of the nine, made of wood dark with age, with real hair glued to its scalp in the old style, hair some long-dead aunt had donated from her own head.

Luigi put on the record — he still used the record, though he owned the files, because the crackle was the sound of his father's hands — and he picked up Punchinella, and he began.

A walk is different. A walk is weight.

That was the second thing his father had taught him. Anyone can make a puppet move. You pull the string, the arm goes up, children laugh, the party is a success. But a walk is a thing a puppet does alone, across the stage, one foot and then the other, and the audience leans forward without knowing why, because a walk says: this small wooden thing is carrying something, and that is either the funniest thing you have ever seen or the saddest, and you will not know which until it reaches the other side.

Luigi gave Punchinella a walk. Then Columbina. Then, because he could feel the room beginning to go, the old routine, the egg, the flour, the business with the fish that his father had sworn got a laugh in 1963 and had gotten a laugh every year since, in twelve states and three countries.

They were laughing. The uncle by the speaker had even put the phone face down, which in Luigi's professional opinion was the standing ovation of the modern era.

He reached for the Bambino without looking. You always reach for the Bambino without looking; it lives on the far left hook, it has lived on the far left hook since before Luigi was born, and his hand had found that hook in the dark of a hundred stages.

His hand closed on empty air.

He covered it the way professionals cover things. He brought Columbina back on for a bow, got the laugh, and let his eyes do what his hand was not allowed to do: a fast, practised sweep of the wings, left to right, the way his father had taught him to count.

One, two, three. Four, five, six. Seven, eight.

Nine puppets hung on their hooks, and all nine were in their places, and the Bambino was on the far left, where it had always been, small and dark and patient, its real hair combed flat.

Luigi Stagnetti was fifty-seven years old, and he had been hanging and counting these puppets since he was four, and in all those years, across

thousands of stages, there had never once been a moment when he reached for the far left hook and it was empty.

It was not empty now. He knew it was not empty, because he could see the Bambino there.

He could also still feel, on the palm of his right hand, the exact cold spot where his fingers had closed on nothing, like a coin pressed out of the air and taken back.

CHAPTER TWO

The van was a Ford Econoline older than some of the puppets, and it held, in order: the stage table, the proscenium frame in its quilted case, the rolled velvet, the record player in its wooden box, the strings, the tools, the greasepaint case, and the trunk. The trunk was oak, iron-cornered, and older than everything else Luigi owned except the nine. It rode behind the passenger seat with its own seatbelt, which was not sentiment. It was physics.

He loaded out alone, the way he always did, greeting the night porter, tipping the porter, carrying the pieces one at a time into the service corridor of the social club while the birthday party sang upstairs. By the second trip he had almost stopped thinking about the hook.

Almost. Professionals catalogue doubt the way they catalogue props, and put it away in its case, and do the job.

The job was done at eleven-forty. He signed the chit, he counted the fee twice in the porch light of the club, and he drove the eleven miles home along the river with the radio off because he needed to think and the radio was company, and company was the enemy of the kind of thinking he had to do.

The house on Sycamore Street was dark. Rosa had gone to her sister's in Edison for the weekend, the way she did most weekends now, and the porch light was the only thing that knew he was coming. He carried the trunk in first. He always carried the trunk in first.

The workshop took up the whole of the little front room, the way it had since his father died and the tools came east in the trunk. Bench, lamp, the glue pot that lived on the back of the stove in winter, and the rack on the wall where the puppets hung at night, in order, far left to far right, nine brass

hooks his grandfather had screwed into a beam from the old Neapolitan theater, brought over in 1911, screwed in again in 1954, and never once moved since.

Luigi hung the puppets. He hung them slowly. He hung the Bambino last, the way he always hung the Bambino last, and he stood back and did what he had done every night of his life since he was four years old.

He counted.

One, two, three. Four, five, six. Seven, eight.

Nine.

He stood in the quiet of the workshop, with the river smell coming through the window screen and a truck going over the bridge half a mile away, and he looked at the Bambino hanging small and dark on its far-left hook, its real hair combed flat, its painted eyes aimed at nothing, and he asked the question he had not permitted himself to ask since the moment his hand closed on empty air in front of forty people.

He said it out loud, the way his father had always said things out loud in the workshop, to the wood and the glue and the listening dark.

"Did you step out, little one?"

The Bambino hung on its hook. The truck crossed the bridge. Somewhere upstairs the house settled, a long familiar sound that Luigi had heard ten thousand nights and had never once, until this one, mistaken for an answer.

He went up to bed without turning the workshop light off, which he had never done in fifty-three years of living in this house, and at two in the morning, awake and listening with the covers pulled to his chin like a child, he heard from below, faint and unmistakable, the small dry sound of wood on wood — the sound a marionette's foot makes when it takes its first step off the rack.

A TASTE BEFORE YOU BUY

“Anyone can make a puppet move. A walk is different. A walk is weight.”

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