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## The Blue Diary

Alice Hoffman

### One

#### The Hanged Man

It's the last Monday of the month, a brutally gorgeous morning brimming with blue air and the sweet scent of honeysuckle which grows wild in the woods beyond Front Street, when Ethan Ford fails to show up for work. On this glorious day, the brilliant sky is filled with banks of motionless white clouds, fleecy as sheep, but so obedient and lazy they haven't any need of a shepherd or a fence. June in New England is a peerless month, with long days of glittering sunlight and roses unfolding. This is the season when even the most foolish of men will stop to appreciate all that is set out before him: the creamy blossoms of hollyhocks and English daisies; the heavenly swarms of bees humming like angels in the hedges, hovering over green lawns trimmed so carefully it can seem as though the hand of all that's divine has leaned down to construct a perfect patchwork, green upon green, perfection upon perfection.

On any other day, Ethan Ford would have already been hard at work, for in the town of Monroe, Massachusetts there is not a more reliable man to be found. On the chain that he carries, he has the keys to many of the local houses, including the Howards' on Sherwood Street and the Starks' over on Evergreen. For the better part of a month, Ethan has been remodeling both homes, renovating a kitchen for the Howards, installing a second bathroom for the Starks, a family whose three daughters are known for their waist-length hair, which takes half an hour to shampoo, so that there is always a line in the hall as one or another of the Stark girls awaits her turn at the shower.

Everyone knows that if Ethan promises a job will be done on time, it will be, for he's a man of his word, as dependable as he is kind, the sort of individual who never disappears with the last ten percent of a project left undone, tiles left ungrouted, for instance, or closet doors unhung. He's an excellent carpenter, an excellent man all around; a valued member of the volunteer fire department well known for his fearlessness, a respected coach who offers more encouragement to some local children than their own parents do. Most folks who know him would not have thought any less of him had they been aware that on this day Ethan doesn't show

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up for work because he's in bed with his wife, whom he loves desperately, even after thirteen years of marriage, and whom he still considers to be the most beautiful woman in the Commonwealth.

Jorie had been standing at the sink, washing up the breakfast dishes and staring out the window with a dreamy expression, when Ethan came to get his keys. He took one look at her and decided not to leave, no matter what a mess his schedule might become and how late he'd have to work for the rest of the week. Even the most dependable of men will stumble every now and then, after all. He'll trip over his own shoes, waylaid by bumps in the road or circumstances he never expected; he'll throw off the bonds of both caution and common sense. Fortunately, Jorie and Ethan's son was on his way to school on this Monday of the last week of sixth grade, for there was nothing that could have kept Ethan away from Jorie on this day, not when he felt the way he did. He came up behind her at the sink, and as he'd circled his arms around her and whispered what he planned to do once he took her back to bed, Jorie laughed, the sort of sweet laughter that summoned the sparrows from the trees, so that one after another perched on the windowsill, just to listen, just to be near.

We shouldn't be doing this, Jorie told him. She began to list the reasons they had to abstain, the many responsibilities facing them on this busy weekday, but even as she spoke, her tone betrayed her. She was already being drawn into the bedroom, diverted by her own desire, and she smiled when her husband locked the door.

People in town would not have been surprised to know that Ethan bent to kiss his wife then, and that she in turn responded as deeply as she had on the night when she met him, when she was twenty-three and convinced she would never fall in love, not really, not the way she was supposed to, head over heels, crazy and rash, all or nothing at all. It was that way for them both even now, though they had a house and a mortgage and a calendar inky with family obligations, those pot-luck dinners and Little League games, the intricacies of married life. Their union was a miracle of sorts: they had fallen in love and stayed there. Thirteen years after they'd met, it seemed as though only an hour or two had passed since Jorie had spied Ethan at the bar of the Safehouse one foggy November night, minutes after she and her best friend, Charlotte Kite, had set up a wager of ten dollars, the prize to be claimed by whoever found herself a sweetheart that night.

And now, on this hot June morning, when the sky is so brilliant and blue and the tree frogs in the gardens trill as though they were calling birds, Jorie wants Ethan just as badly as she had on the night she first saw him. She had left her friend Charlotte behind without even the decency of a proper good-bye, which simply wasn't like her. Jorie was as prudent as she was kind-hearted, so much so that when her older sister, Anne, arrived at the Safehouse to see her goody-two-shoes sibling leaving with a stranger, she ran after the truck, signaling for them to slow down; not that they paid Anne the slightest bit of attention or listened to her cries to be careful on the icy roads.

Jorie gave Ethan directions to her apartment over on High Street, where she brought him into her bed before she knew his full name. Certainly, she had never in

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her life been as reckless. She was the girl who did everything right and, as Anne would readily complain to anyone willing to listen, had always been their mother's favorite daughter. Jorie was the last one anyone would expect to act on impulse, and yet she was driven by what might have appeared to be a fever. Perhaps this explained why she veered from her normal, reliable behavior and unlocked her door for a stranger on that cold November night. Ethan Ford was the handsomest man she had ever seen, but that wasn't the reason she'd fallen so hard. It was the way he stared at her, as if no one else in the world existed, it was how sure he was they were meant to be together that had won her over so completely and effortlessly. She still feels his desire when he looks at her, and every time she does, she's the same lovestruck girl she was when they met. She's no different than she'd been on the night when he first kissed her, when he vowed he'd always been searching for her.

Today, Jorie has once again left her poor friend Charlotte in the lurch, with no explanations or apologies. Instead of meeting Charlotte to discuss the final weeks of her marriage to Jay Smith, blessedly over at last, Jorie is kissing her own husband. Instead of offering comfort and advice, she is here with Ethan, pulling him closer until all the world outside, all of Maple Street, all of Massachusetts, might as well have disappeared, every street lamp and apple tree evaporating into the hot and tranquil air. Some people are fortunate, and Jorie has always been among them, with her luminous smile and all that yellow hair that reminds people of sunlight even on the coldest winters day when the wind outside is howling and masses of snow are tumbling down from above.

Whenever Jorie and Ethan are hand in hand, people in town turn and stare, that's how good they look when they're together, that's how meant for each other they are. On evenings when Jorie comes to the baseball field at dusk, bringing thermoses of lemonade and cool water, Ethan always walks right up to her and kisses her, not caring if all the world looks on. Along the sidelines, people stop what they're doing—the mothers gossiping by the bleachers, the dads in the parking lot discussing what tactics might win them the county championship—they can't take their eyes off Jorie and Ethan, who, unlike most couples who have entered into the harsh and difficult realm of marriage, are still wrapped up in the vast reaches of their own devotion, even now.

It's therefore no surprise to find them in each other's arms on this June morning, in the season when the first orange lilies bloom along roadsides and lanes. They make love slowly, without bothering to pull down the shades. The sunlight coursing through the open window is lemony and sweet; it leaves a luminous grid on the white sheets and a crisscross of shadow upon their flesh. Next door, Betty Gage, who is nearly eighty and so deaf she can no longer make out the chattering of wrens nesting in her cherry tree or the chirrup of the tree frogs, can all the same hear their lovers' moans. She quickly retreats to her house, doing her best to walk briskly in spite of her bad knees, leaving behind the phlox and daisies she'd begun to gather in a ragged jumble of petals on the lawn. Startled by the strains of so much ardor on an ordinary morning, Mrs. Gage turns her radio to top volume, but even that doesn't drown out those passionate cries, and before long Betty finds herself

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thinking of her own dear husband, gone for nearly forty years, but still a young man when she dreams of him.

Later, Jorie will wonder if she hadn't asked for sorrow on this heavenly day. She should have been more cautious. She'd been greedy, renouncing restraint, forsaking all others but the man she loved. Who did she think she was to assume that the morning was hers to keep, tender hours to spend however she pleased? She was thoughtless, indeed, but the bees swarming in the garden seemed to be serenading them, the sunlight was a pale and lasting gold. If only such fleeting moments could continue indefinitely. If only they were cunning enough to trap time and ensure that this day would never alter, and that forevermore there'd be only the constant sunlight pouring in and only the two of them, alone in the world.

Jorie is not ordinarily prideful, but how can she help but see herself in her husband's eyes? She imagines ancient prehistoric flowers as he moves his hand along her belly, her spine, her shoulders. The flowers appear behind her eyelids, one by one: red lily, wood lily, tawny lily, trout lily, each incomparable in its beauty. She listens to the bees drifting through the hedges outside. If any of the men in town who thought they knew her, the ones she's been acquainted with since high school, for instance, the ones she runs into every day at the bakery or the pharmacy or the bank, were able to look through the window and spy upon her, they would have seen a different woman than the one they chat with on street corners or sit next to on the bleachers at Little League games. They would have seen Jorie with the sunlight streaming over her and heat rising up from her skin. They would have witnessed what true love can do to a woman.

You are everything to me, Ethan tells her on this morning, and maybe that sentiment was too arrogant and self-absorbed. Assuredly, they were only thinking of themselves, not of their son on his way to school, or the shades they hadn't bothered to close, or the neighbor at her window, listening to the sounds of their desire. They weren't the least bit concerned about the friends they'd kept waiting, Charlotte Kite, who'd already left the bakery for her doctor's appointment, or Mark Derry, the plumber, one of Ethan's closest friends, stranded outside the Starks' house without a key, unable to work without Ethan present to let him in. The phone rings, long and loud, but Ethan tells Jorie not to answer—it's only Charlotte, and Jorie can talk to her anytime. Or it's her sister, Anne, who Jorie is more than happy to avoid.

How often do we get to do this? Ethan asks. He kisses Jorie's throat and her shoulders, and she doesn't say no, even though it's close to ten o'clock. How can she deny him, or herself for that matter? Love like this isn't easy to find, after all, and sometimes Jorie wonders why she was the one who'd been lucky enough to meet him that night. November in Massachusetts is a despicable and ruinous month, and Charlotte had needed to talk Jorie into going out for a drink. You have your whole life to sit around by yourself, if that's what you want to do, Charlotte had assured her, and so Jorie had grudgingly gone along. She hadn't even bothered to comb her hair or put on lipstick. She'd been there at the bar, already itching to leave, when she felt a wave of energy, the way some people say the air turns crackly before the weather takes a turn, or when a star is about to fall from the sky. She

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gazed to her left and she happened to see him, and that was when she knew it was destiny that had made her trail along after Charlotte on that damp, foggy night. Fate had led her here.

She closes her eyes on this, their stolen morning, and as she lets the phone ring unanswered, she thinks again of lilies, shimmering on their green stems. She thinks about the pledges they've made to each other, and about devotion. What she feels for him is so deep, she aches. She supposes this is what people refer to when they say the pangs of love, as if your innermost joy cannot help but cause you anguish as well. It is painful when he leaves her merely to go into the kitchen, where he fixes them iced coffees and bowls of strawberries from the garden. He loads their breakfast onto a silver tray, a wedding present from Charlotte, and brings it back to bed for them to enjoy. Jorie still has never seen a man as handsome as Ethan. He has dark hair and even darker eyes. He isn't a lawyer cooped up in an office like Barney Stark, whose wife complains that he's grown fat, or a beer drinker like Mark Derry, who spends most evenings sprawled out in an easy chair. Ethan uses his body, and the results are evident. When he takes off his shirt at the baseball field, the women stare at him, then look at each other as if to say, That's what I wanted, but that's not what I got.

All the same, Ethan is the sort of man who doesn't seem to be aware of his own good looks. His visits to the gym aren't driven by vanity, but are a necessity for the work he does as a member of the Monroe Volunteer Fire Department. He needs strength and stamina, both readily apparent last fall when he climbed onto the roof of the McConnells' house, long before many of his fellow volunteers had gotten out of their trucks. That particular fire had started in a pan of bacon, but by the time the first volunteers arrived, it was burning through the house, one of those sly, scarlet infernos that moves with unexpected speed. There was so much smoke that day, the white chrysanthemums outside Hannah's Coffee Shoppe turned gray and remained that way for the rest of the season; frogs in the shallows of the lake began to dig themselves into the dirt, ready to hibernate, misreading the ashes falling from above for an early dusting of snow.

When it became clear that the regulation ladder wouldn't reach the McConnells' little girl's window, Ethan had taken matters into his own hands. From his perch on the roof, he went on; he pulled himself across the shingles and over the peak, then went in through the window. Outside, the crowd watched as though bewitched. Not a word was said after Ethan disappeared through the window, especially not after the flames rose up, a burst of heat circling into the clotted gray sky. Ethan found the child hiding in her closet, and it was a lucky thing he'd been so nimble scaling the roof, for the girl hadn't more than a few minutes left before she would have begun to suffocate. By the time Ethan carried her out of the house, half the town was gathered on the lawn below, holding their breaths, inhaling smoke, blinking the soot from their eyes.