



THE

Kelly Flanagan

UNHIDING

OF

A Novel

ELIJAH

CAMPBELL



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SOMETIMES YOU DON'T KNOW YOUR LIFE has been on pause until someone or something hits play. My someone was Rebecca. My something was that leg of hers, lifted from the cracked and crumbling concrete of the old patio where we sat facing each other, and lowered onto my lap, bridging the gap between us.

It was beautiful and it was brash and it completely blindsided me.

We'd met a month earlier on the first day of orientation for our graduate program in clinical psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She'd spent most of the month going out of her way to connect with me, sending me signals that had gone well over my head. Finally, she'd decided to send me one that landed right in my lap.

The day had begun typically enough. A morning of study followed by a hot dog in the microwave for lunch, carried on a paper plate to the back patio of the dilapidated duplex I was leasing for the year. The patio was just outside some sliding glass doors that didn't look very glassy with all the grime caked on them and, for that matter, didn't so much slide as grind upon opening.

It was a Friday in October, a fall afternoon poised so perfectly between summer and winter that the former seemed a distant memory and the latter an impossibility. I was sitting in a plastic forest-green deck chair left behind by some previous renter of the duplex—the half-eaten hot dog perched on my lap, my face turned to the sun, eyes closed—when Rebecca walked around the corner of the building. Her shadow darkened the backs of my eyelids as she cautiously said my name, and I startled so dramatically the flimsy chair nearly toppled backward, the hot dog rolling to the ground where it collected flakes of fallen leaves.

She picked up the gritty frank, examined it theatrically, and said with bemusement, “Campbell, I’m not sure if I should apologize to you for ruining your lunch, or if you should thank me for saving you from this mystery meat.”

My embarrassment about being seen in such an unguarded moment was momentarily relieved by her playfulness. I paused for effect, then folded my hands into a namaste pose before bowing and saying with exaggerated solemnity, “Thank you.”

She laughed, and her laughter sounded like the autumn light.

Then she dragged the only other deck chair—a white one originally, now soiled and aged into a dull khaki color—so it faced mine, and she sat down with our knees almost touching. As we made small talk about our classes and our classmates, I asked her casually what she was doing that evening. Cue her leg in my lap. And her response:

“I don’t know, Campbell, what are *you* doing this evening?”

The whole thing sent a surge through me, twin threads of hope and fear intertwined—the conflicted response of someone whose loneliness is both their greatest wound and their most dependable defense. I stared down at the tattoo of a great egret

on her ankle, framed by skin still bronzed by summertime, and I suddenly felt like an understudy called into the spotlight on opening night. The heat of her attention brought out prickles of sweat on my brow.

“I, uh, well, you know, I’m not sure. Actually, I think I do have some plans, but, uh, yeah, they’re no big deal. I could probably cancel them. But, well, probably not, so, um, yeah . . .”

The truth was, my roommate had set me up on a blind date for that evening.

I took a deep breath and tried to recover my most reliable way of responding when my walls were about to be breached: a smile so bright no one’s scrutiny had ever survived its wattage. It wasn’t a calculated smile; it was instinctive—the closest cousin to sincerity—which is probably why it had always been so effective. I often paired it with some charismatic question or another and, voilà, the spotlight would swing away from me. Leaving me in the dark again, but safe at least.

I beamed, but the reiteration of my original question—“What are *you* doing tonight?”—came out sounding a little too desperate.

Rebecca studied me thoughtfully with her hazel eyes. The brown waves of her hair glinted in the sunlight, revealing natural auburn highlights. The prickles of sweat on my forehead threatened to become beads as I waited for her to judge me with those hazel eyes, lower her leg, and move on to a guy who could field a simple question about his whereabouts without acting utterly exposed.

Instead, she doubled down, lifting her other leg and crossing it over the first.

“It wasn’t fair to start with such a difficult question,” she announced matter-of-factly. We both knew it wasn’t a hard

question. Yet in her tone I could hear full permission for it to have been difficult for *me*. That felt like a gift. No one had given me a gift like that in a very long time.

“I tell you what,” she went on, “if I’m not going to get to know you better tonight, we should get to know each other better right now. Let’s play Two Truths and a Lie.”

It sounded like the kind of game I’d be about one-third comfortable with, but I was so grateful for the gift she’d just given me, I was hesitant to turn her down. “I haven’t heard of that one. How does it go?” Trying not to sound too cautious and mostly succeeding.

“It’s simple,” she answered, a smile in her voice and on her face. “I tell you three things about myself. Two of them are true, and one isn’t, and you have to guess which one isn’t. Then it’ll be your turn. Cool?” She held out her knuckles for a fist bump.

I focused on how the spotlight was about to swing to her while ignoring that it would eventually swing back to me. “Cool,” I agreed, reaching out and tapping her knuckles with my own. When they touched, it closed some kind of circuit between us, and a current ran right through me. Suddenly, I was awake.

I had no idea I’d been asleep.

“Okay. Hmmm,” she said, and as she contemplated what to say, she used a forefinger to tug her lower lip down before releasing it with a *plop* as it returned to her upper lip. Over and over again. *Plop. Plop. Plop.* It was both very innocent and exceptionally attractive.

“Got it!” She looked me in the eye. “I once lost my passport while illegally squatting on an abandoned vineyard in the hills of Italy and got back to Maryland without any help from anybody.

I've been skydiving, twice. And I have three tattoos. Okay, which one is a lie?"

She recrossed her legs. The color of the great egret on her ankle changed from blue to purple as it shifted from light to shadow.

"I'm guessing the last one is a lie; you only have this one tattoo."

She smiled again, rotating her right arm to expose a tattoo of a cross on the underside of her wrist. "Wrong. I do actually have three tattoos."

She didn't show me the third. It made me wonder.

"The lie," she revealed, "was that I've only gone skydiving once. Okay, your turn!"

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her fist like Rodin's *The Thinker*, settling in to fully listen to me, and the scrutiny was like a thousand spotlights—no smile of mine could outshine it. I decided the quickest way to get out of the spotlight was to get my line over with, so I barreled ahead.

"I'm from a small town in Illinois called Bradford's Ferry. Pretty much everybody calls me Eli—yes, that rhymes with belly. And," I paused, trying to come up with a lie, "both of my parents are dead." That, of course, was a terrible way to get out of the spotlight. The guy who'd been voted Most Socially Skilled by his graduating class appeared to have exited stage left.

Rebecca's eyebrows creased and the hand she'd been resting her chin on covered her mouth. "Oh no, I hope it's the last one?"

I ran my palm over my forehead and it came away damp. "Yes, it's the last one. I'm sorry. It was thoughtless of me to insert that into a fun game. My dad passed away almost seven years ago, but my mom is alive and well in Bradford's Ferry." I saw the question in her eyes. "Heart attack while shoveling. Right before I got home for Christmas break, sophomore year of college."

"I'm so sorry," she said, and she sounded like she really was.

"It's okay. I mean, thank you. But I'm okay now, and my relationship with my dad was complicated . . ." I stopped, appalled by my apparent eagerness to tell her something I'd planned to take to the grave. "There I go again, getting all serious. Okay, your turn to be a buzzkill!" Self-deprecation. It worked. Perhaps Mr. Most Socially Skilled wasn't completely AWOL.

Rebecca smiled again and reluctantly but graciously stepped back into the spotlight. After taking a moment to collect herself, she offered her next round. "Someday, I want to be a therapist for underresourced children. I once found a two-legged turtle and nursed him back to health and he became my pet. I named him Geppetto. And I think I really like you, Elijah Campbell."

My smile was easier to find this time, and every lumen of it was for real. My rejoinder also came naturally. "Well, I certainly hope the last one isn't a lie."

"It's not," she replied, instantly yet gently.

"Then, I'm going to guess it's the second one."

"Correct you are, sir. Geppetto had three legs, not two."

At this, a genuine laugh escaped me, and the look on Rebecca's face suggested a laugh from me was the reward she'd come for.

"Okay, your turn," she said, returning to her *Thinker* position. But I was saved by a buzzing in her backpack. She pulled out her cellphone, flipped it open, and tilted her head to talk to the caller. More red highlights shimmered like the red leaves in the maple next to the patio. She slapped the phone shut.

"Gotta go," she announced as she lowered her legs and stood up. "My roommate and I are shopping for a used couch this afternoon, and she thinks she has a lead."

She held out her knuckles again. Again I tapped them. Again the electricity.

She turned on her heels and hollered, “See you, Eli!” over her shoulder, pronouncing my name correctly. She’d actually been listening. Her spotlight was already seeming a little safer than all the rest. And suddenly it was the prospect of her leaving that made me feel uncomfortable and impulsive. The impulse was to prolong the conversation just a little longer.

“Hey!” I called. She stopped and turned. “Do *you* go by any nicknames?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Just Rebecca. The whole name. I’ve always wanted it that way. It reminds me to show up with my whole self.” She paused, thoughtful. “I guess I expect others to show up with their whole self too. Even if they *have* shortened *their* name.” She smiled mischievously. “Well, if I don’t see you tonight, I’ll try to swing by again next Friday, maybe catch you sunning yourself like a turtle again.”

Like a turtle.

The phrase got into me. And a theory about Rebecca’s interest in me began to form: like a turtle I had a shell, and like Geppetto she sensed a wound beneath the shell. She seemed oblivious to the parallels, but the comparison put a lump in my throat.

Then, she was gone.