



callie feyen

twirl

my life with stories, writing & clothes

Prelude

In the pause between spring rain
a woman pirouettes in a field.

Her skin is a thousand mirrors.

— *Sholeh Wolpé*

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*to mrs. lewandowski,
who showed me the wild things
and the changing leaves.*

thank you for making me look.

—callie feyen

Contents

In the Beginning

An introductory note from the author	9
1. Trying to Hold Fire	11
2. Orange Heels	19
3. Eel in the Library	25
4. Look at the Leaves	28
5. Twirling	33
6. Into the Woods	47
7. Leftover Astonishments	55
8. Accessories	59
9. Kind of Blue	69
10. Crew Girls	78
11. Something to Be Afraid Of	86
12. Sunshine	93

13. The Duster	97
14. Lessons in Folly	104
15. Threshold	110
16. How to Dress Like a Reading Diva	112
17. Bloom	119
18. How to Avoid the Tragedy of Becoming Only One Thing	127
19. A Tiger and a Chameleon	134
20. Where the Wild Things Are	140
21. Heroes Journeying	144
Acknowledgements	156
Credits & References	158

In the Beginning

It was Adam and Eve who got me interested in clothes and stories. I was around 5 or 6, and in Sunday School, listening about their exile from Eden.

Frankly, Eden terrified me. I didn't understand what was so great about a place where animals were just walking around, and the only other person to talk to was a boy. And he had no clothes on! Where were the toys? Where was the candy? Why was a snake talking to people?

So when Eve bit that apple, I was relieved. Finally! Something's about to happen! And even though I knew she wasn't supposed to do what she did, I liked that it was the girl who did the bad thing. It was the girl who moved the story forward. My story repertoire so far consisted of Cinderella and Snow White—princesses I adored (Those dresses! Those tiaras! Those satin gloves!), but they hadn't done anything wrong. They hadn't really done *anything*. Boys were always the ones causing mischief; it was always the boys who learned the lesson. Eve knew she wasn't supposed to eat that apple, and she did it anyway. *Now what?* I thought eagerly.

"And then they knew they were naked," one of the Sunday School teachers would say, and she would say it with sorrow, while I wanted to stand up and shout, "Hooray! Bring on the clothes!" Why would being aware that you're naked be a bad thing? Why was wearing clothes a bad thing? I loved clothes.

My outfits have always been a compass; they pointed to who I could be on any given day: A red Longfellow Center T-shirt I wore on floor hockey game days made me feel strong

and aggressive. A bouncy black skirt dress I wore on band concert days had me feeling classy and musical. I clipped my sunshine yellow overalls on, and I was whimsical. I zipped up a royal blue sequin spaghetti strap dress and I was sassy. Clothes meant opportunity. They meant experience. Putting together an outfit complete with accessories gave me control. I got to decide who I wanted to be; I got to decide what story I wanted to walk around in.

I worried it was wrong to point out this curious rumination I had about Eve, so I decided to keep it to myself.

One afternoon, years later, when I was flipping through an *InStyle*[®] magazine, I stopped on a perfume advertisement. There were a man and a woman on the page, but my eyes went to the woman, who was holding a green apple. I can't remember whether the apple had been bitten or if she was about to take a bite. It didn't matter. From the look on her face, she knew exactly what she was doing. She looked beautiful and powerful, and it was the man who looked utterly powerless. He also knew what she was doing and, right or wrong, he wanted a part of it.

This was not the Eve I grew up with, but she was the Eve I remembered, and it was uncomfortable—like hearing a secret told publicly—to see her. Still, I wanted to step into that story. I wanted to try that power on. I wanted to bite the apple. Like Eve, I wanted to be the one who moved the story forward.

1

Trying to Hold Fire

I am standing on Interstate 94, because my car is on fire.

I was driving home from my teaching job in Detroit when symbols I didn't recognize lit up the dashboard. Then, the steering wheel started shaking, and the lights in the car blinked on and off like a last call at a bar. Finally, smoke billowed out from the hood and also into the car. Still driving, I called my husband, Jesse, and told him what was going on. The dialogue went something like this:

Jesse: Hello?

Me: THE CAR IS ON FIRE!

Jesse: What?

Me: THE CAR! IT'S ON FIRE!

Jesse, who is a scientist and quite a rational fellow, basing all decisions on sturdy facts and well-researched theories, attempted to ask me a series of questions to determine whether the car was, in fact, on fire. He could've been in the car with me, seeing for himself, and it wouldn't have made a difference. I was living the car fire narrative.

"Pull over and call 911," Jesse said, because I wouldn't or couldn't give him answers to any other questions (although, the fact that I was in the car and still driving probably tipped him off that I might have been exaggerating).

Now, as semi trucks and cars zoom past me creating a

wind so strong I can barely stand, I'm surprised how long it's taking for anyone to get here. Did the cops not hear my tone of voice when I called?

I'm a safe enough distance from the car in case it blows up, but the smoke has ceased and the orange flames I was sure I felt at my feet while driving are not there. Except for the traffic creating a breeze, so that the wildflowers I'm standing next to endlessly cower and right themselves, nothing is happening.

The petals on the wildflowers barely move; it's the stem that does all the work and I think that these flowers must have tremendous roots to withstand this relentless whipping wind.

I think about pulling a flower from the dirt to study its roots, but I don't. For one thing, lifting it means I kill it. For another, I don't want to step into the dirt with high heels.

The shoes are a neutral faux suede from a brand called Chinese Laundry. I bought them with a royal blue pair of heels on my birthday a couple of years ago. Both pairs boast a heel that I like to call, "stand up and pay attention" height. Which is one reason I bought them. My posture is better when I'm wearing heels, my strut more assured.

The neutral pair, I knew, would go with everything, and I figured the royal blue pair would provide a nice pop to an otherwise dull outfit. Those blue shoes were electric and, putting them on, I'd feel like I was lightning.

I hadn't worn the royal blue heels in a while. As a matter of fact, since I started teaching in Detroit, the shoes were still in a cardboard box waiting to be unpacked. We'd recently made a move from Maryland to Michigan and I hadn't taken them out, because for some reason I felt like I'd reveal some-

thing I wasn't ready to reveal. Or maybe I didn't want to. Maybe I thought imagining myself as lightning was foolish and childish.

I don't know, but I took what I thought was essential out of the box, and that's why I'm wearing the neutral shoes. Standing on the side of the road, I have them on with a pair of maroon slouch pants, a white T-shirt, a necklace that matches the heels, and a retro turquoise leather jacket.

I look at the car that, by now, appears just fine and not at all like it was about to burst into flames as I'd convinced myself it would. I survey the traffic, looking hopefully for emergency lights, but I see nothing except slowing, gathering cars telling me rush hour is beginning. Soon, the wildflowers will get a reprieve from the vehicles' wind. I turn my attention to the weeds again and try to imagine I'm in a garden or backyard and not standing on the side of the interstate.

My heels are killing me. I want to take them off, but not only would that look ridiculous, I won't be able to put them back on. I don't understand what's happening. These are my comfy heels.

It didn't used to be this way. I could wear heels and teach like it was nothing, but since I've taken this job in Detroit, I can barely make it to 2:30. I don't know what's changed, or what's changing, but I feel like I've lost something. I no longer carry lightning.

In Detroit, I teach 6th grade English and since school began we've been reading *The Lightning Thief*. I don't love the story. I think there's too much action that simply overtakes the characters, fast. However, any student I've taught recently, includ-

ing my 6th graders, loves Percy Jackson, so I do my best to make the story come alive for them. We're about six chapters in, so today I thought it'd be fun to do a little review game. Percy Jackson, the main character in the story, learns he is the son of Poseidon. Poseidon and Zeus are in a fight over a lightning bolt and Percy is supposed to get it back. So the object of the English hour when my kids come to see me is to obtain lightning bolts by completing a certain amount of tasks. I have a vocabulary station, a theme station, a Greek mythology station, but my favorite is the summary station. We've been practicing articulating the gist of a sentence, then a paragraph, then a page, and now I want them to tell me the gist of each chapter. I have the students complete a worksheet taking note of what each chapter is about, and then they have to write a poem, rap, or song about the first six chapters.

I have four English classes, and all of them wanted to do this station first. My classroom turned into a room of beats—hands and fists smacking out rhythms, bodies swaying side to side to catch the beat and match words to it. It gave me shivers to watch. Many of my students are struggling readers. Every day, we read *The Lightning Thief* out loud and so many raise their hands enthusiastically because they want to read and of course I let them, but we all hear how physically exhausting it is to put together letters. Today though, in my classroom-turned-rap-studio, the students became artists: fluid and striking, dropping rhymes about Percy and his mom, Percy and Grover, Percy and Poseidon, Percy and Medusa.

One set of boys stole the show. They were a group of three: one who has trouble writing a sentence, another who is bright but spends his energy doing everything he can to hide

that fact, and the third has never stopped talking long enough to write his name on his assignments. Throughout the hour, they were huddled up in a corner mumbling and writing and pounding out a rhythm so intricate I knew poetry was happening.

When it was their turn to perform, they rapped a set of about six couplets that summarized the book, and then bounced out the refrain: I'm a half-blood, I'm a half-blood.

It was brilliant because Percy Jackson learning he is half-god, half-mortal is the crux of the story. What will he do now that he understands who he is? What do we do once we know who we are?

It only took one refrain for the rest of the class to join in. I felt like a VIP in a private concert. We got louder (obviously) and rowdier, and kids in the hallway even stopped by, nodding their heads to the beat or raising a hand in the air.

I'd been with these kids for over a month and today was my favorite day. Today, it felt like we not only held lightning but threw it and set the room on fire. Today was the first time since I started this job that my heels didn't hurt.

Now I'm standing on the side of the road with the wildflowers and my car that's clearly not on fire, and my feet hurt. Not only that, this jacket is too hot, and I hate these pants. The white T-shirt, the oldest thing I have on, is the only part of my outfit I like. I've had this shirt since my youngest, Harper, was born. It is almost a decade old, and I would wear it every day if I could. When I get home, I'm ripping off all these clothes except this shirt, and I'm putting on jeans and Converse.

I think about the refrain my students came up with. It's

catchy and bouncy, and impossible not to bop your head along with. The boys could've made this rap angry or sad. After all, up until this point, Percy had no idea who his father was and why he left in the first place. Not only does Percy have to go on this ridiculous journey, but his mother, in an attempt to push Percy to safety, was attacked by a minotaur and turned into gold dust. Plus, Percy is only half-god—he doesn't really fit in with humans, and he doesn't really fit in with gods.

Many of my students know about fathers leaving. They know about mothers' desperate attempts to push their children into the world while at the same time trying to keep them safe. They know about the impossible quest to hunt for what shines, without a complete understanding of what it is they are doing. This rap could've been beyond depressing, but my students made it powerful. They celebrated Percy. He is a conqueror. He is a hero. They identify with Percy, and so this means they are conquerors and heroes, too.

Despite the bad taste that *The Lightning Thief* leaves in my mouth, what I love about the story is that it is Percy Jackson's weaknesses that make him a hero. He's been diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. He's been told he has a temper. However, when he finds out who he is, he begins to understand that these can be used as strengths. This is what I want my students to relate to—that their weaknesses can be used for good once they have a better understanding of themselves.

I wrap my arms around my belly as if I'm cold. I take a deep breath and hold it. Someone told me once this was a good way to calm down. It never works. I take a deep breath anyway. I smell the wildflowers.

Jesse shows up in our red Jeep. I watch as he slows, headed

for where I'm standing. I take a few steps backward to give him room and watch his face to determine if he's mad at me. He looks serious, studious.

When Jesse steps out of my car, his work shirtsleeves are unbuttoned and rolled up, and his tie is loose.

"What happened?" he asks, looking back and forth from me to the car.

"I don't know," I mumble. "There was all this smoke, and the steering wheel froze, and the interior lights were blinking on and off."

"Sounds like the engine died," he says.

"Not a fire, then?" I say.

"Not a fire," he confirms, and takes out his phone.

I climb into the Jeep and wait.

Why did I overreact? I think, as I watch Jesse scroll through his phone, probably to call a tow truck. Why was this story so easy for me to step into?

I think back on the last two hours. Symbols on the dashboard lit up in the parking lot of school when I turned the key in the ignition. I ignored them. I could've called Jesse then. I could've taken a picture and showed him. I didn't though, because I can't stand to be at this school any longer then necessary. I wanted to come home.

Normally, after teaching, I'm happy to stay in the classroom and straighten up, and get ready for the next day's lesson. I like the empty quiet and the evidence that so much was going on here earlier: broken pencils, crumpled-up notebook paper. Even reading silly cartoons or phrases on desks makes me happy.

Not here, though. All I feel here is the necessity to rush.

I understand now that if I am going to make it in this school, I have to do things quickly: think, plan lessons, grade, and, most importantly, all of it has to be successful. There is no opportunity to linger. There is no margin for mistake, or failure.

I watch Jesse on the phone, and I realize now that the car fire story was easy for me to believe because it's how I feel. I am the fire, or I'm trying to hold fire, or I *am* on fire.

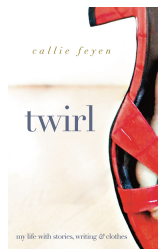
Jesse gets into the car and puts a hand on my leg.

"You okay?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say, looking out the window at the wildflowers. "I'm sorry," I offer.

The tow truck arrives, as does an emergency vehicle, and I grimace at the frantic 911 call I made earlier. While one guy hooks up our dead car to the truck, another talks to Jesse and I through the window of the Jeep. "No fire," Jesse tells the emergency responder. "The engine died."

Jesse follows the tow truck into traffic. I kick my heels off onto the car floor and throw my jacket into the back seat. I cross my legs and play with a loose thread on my pants. I look out the window again at the wildflowers. I don't have roots like them. My spine doesn't feel stable enough to be whipped around like that all day. Tears well as I think about Jesse's words to the responder: *No fire. The engine died.*



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