

Jane Brunette



LINEAGE

OF THE TREES



FIVE GENERATIONS

grandpa
abe grandma
sarah

grandpa grandma aunt
breton emmie marie
(pa) (ma) (ma's sister)

uncle aunt belle
jesse charlotte (lata's mom)

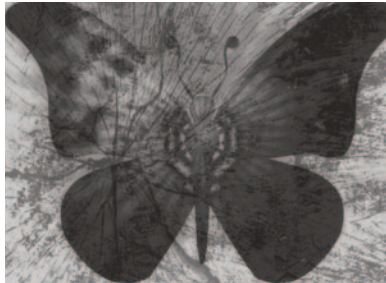
lata

[calla & millie]

OUR GREATEST RESPONSIBILITY
IS TO BE GOOD ANCESTORS.

JONAS SALK

LINEAGE OF THE TREES



a soul story

jane brunette

flamingo
press



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*for my mother
my Grandma Ethyl Marie Brunette Brewer
Uncle Doc & Aunt Mary Brunette
the Menominee tribe
and all people struggling
to remember their place
in the lineage of the trees*

Author's note

THIS BOOK is what I call a soul story. It is true in the way that myths and dreams are true and is best read through that lens. While it draws from the real history of the Menominee tribe and my own family history, it is a work of fiction.

The situations and characters emerged from my life experiences and concerns, but none of them represent factual events or individuals, living or dead. Rather, it is a mash-up between history, people I have known, challenges I've encountered, and aspects of my soul.

Any historical implications that might unwittingly be misleading are due to my own ignorance and limitations as a writer.

—*Jane Brunette*

Part **ONE**

I NEVER SAW A TREE
THAT WAS NO TREE IN PARTICULAR.
—ANNIE DILLARD

1



THE
WOMAN
WHO SET
FIRE TO
HER LIFE

Lata

THE DAY BEFORE MY EIGHTH BIRTHDAY, my Aunt Charlotte poured gasoline in a crooked line through the house and put a match at one end. I stood on the front lawn where she told me to wait. The last time I saw her, she stood in the attic window waving at me, a solid wall of fire behind her like a stage curtain.

Even now, I can see her in the attic pouring the gasoline into boxes of old clothes, then dropping a match into each box. How brilliant that first moment must have been, the sudden burst of light and heat, and then flames dancing like spirits. She had a plan on how to get out through the back door, how she would drop me at Grandma Emmie's and go on by herself. She wouldn't say where, but wherever she went, I knew there would be trees — lots of them.

One can of gasoline would reduce the whole house to ash is what Aunt Charlotte told me, and it would happen while we were safe in the taxi, but she hadn't counted on Mrs. Petty deciding to remove the wilted geraniums from her front porch so early in the morning. When she saw the smoke, Mrs. Petty rushed back inside to call for help while I stood still on the lawn, watching the first tongue of fire



emerge from the attic window and lick the roof. Silent witness to a fierce deity, I was — the breath of Kali with Aunt Charlotte as her carrier. Something in my girl-self knew this the way the belly knows things, but of course, I didn't have words to explain.

Still, it would take a lifetime to understand why Aunt Charlotte burned the house, and with it, the dreams of my sweet Uncle Jesse, who I last saw more than 40 years ago right there on the lawn, fire still thrashing from the windows. When he got the call, he raced home in his van, stopped with a violent jerk against the curb and left the door open, radio blasting, as he bolted toward the front porch with a force that required a firefighter and a police officer to restrain. They spoke firmly to him until his breath slowed and then he circled the lawn like a tiger as the hoses flooded his beloved house, his wife likely somewhere inside.

His eyes fell on me and instinctively he came, knelt before me on the lawn and put a hand on each of my shoulders. He was young then, and ruggedly handsome, dark hair falling like a question mark on his forehead, face bronzed and chiseled from a summer of hammering rooftops on tract houses. The eyes that looked out from him I barely recognized, so full of a wild and bewildered grief. He held my shoulders tight, urgent: *What did she say to you? What do you know?* But a strange silence had come over me and I was unable to move my lips — unable to move at all. I just stood there and looked into his eyes until I was lost in the deep blue lakes of them, floating on the water behind all the turbulence.

I understood why he didn't want to see me again. I saw



it then in his eyes: how they darkened into recognition and then fear as he shook my shoulders on the lawn and I was not there to answer. One of the firefighters led him away and a detective took me across the street to the screened porch of Mrs. Petty's house, where I sat on an old wicker couch with musty, daisy-print cushions and remained in that strange repose under the elder woman's nervous watch. She hovered, birdlike and flustered, serving me milk and packaged coffee cake until my mother collected me and brought me home.

Later, I overheard my mother tell Grandma Emmie not to be too hard on her son-in-law for avoiding me. "Jesse's crazy with grief," I heard her say. "And when he looks at Lata, he sees Charlotte's eyes." After that, when I looked in the mirror, I saw the eyes of the woman who had set fire to her life, and wondered where my own eyes had gone. Seeing through Aunt Charlotte's eyes, the world looked different: more harsh, more tender, and more strange.

Uncle Jesse told everyone that Aunt Charlotte died in the fire, but when I asked if I could see her body, my mother told me there wasn't anything to see. At first, I thought she might have been lying. She might not have wanted me to see her, blackened and shrunken, hollow sockets where her dark eyes had been. But I could never picture Aunt Charlotte that way — I could only picture the smoke gathering her up, freeing her from the house, and she, giddy with her sudden lightness, gliding off like a bird.

I later learned that when my mother said there was nothing to see, there really was nothing to see. Investigators searched the rubble for Aunt Charlotte's remains, but didn't



have any luck. There was too much destruction. The roof had collapsed through the second floor, taking most of the interior walls with it, so the only things left standing were a small section of the front porch, the fieldstone fireplace along with part of its chimney, and the sunroom, which shared a stone wall with the fireplace. The rubble was heavy and deep. A charred black mess was what they were going through, and it didn't seem there was much hope of anything being found.

As it turned out, the varnish Uncle Jesse had used to re-finish the floors was highly flammable and toxic fumes still lingered, creating lung problems for the investigators, so who could blame them when their efforts petered out? Everyone was already certain that Aunt Charlotte was dead. What else could have happened to her? Mrs. Petty claimed to have seen her in the attic window, same as me. Everyone agreed that there was no chance anything could have come of Charlotte except to have turned to ash, now buried deep in that heap of rubble, indistinguishable from the charred remains of Uncle Jesse's house.

When investigators questioned me about Aunt Charlotte's motives, I told them the same thing she had told me: that she had burned the house in order to release Uncle Jesse from the prison he had built for himself so he could do what he was really meant to do. "She didn't think of it herself," I told them and anyone else who asked. "The dreams told her to do it." I was certain this would absolve her in their eyes, but of course, no one understood. They tried to get me to change my story, but I kept insisting until they stopped asking. Still, everyone whispered about it and



I didn't like what they were saying—that what Aunt Charlotte had done was crazy, terrible and strange. Sometimes I had to fight those voices from seeping into me or they would have collapsed all the beauty and gift of her into their verdict of craziness, even as my belly told me that Aunt Charlotte was the sanest of them all.

Anyone could see that Aunt Charlotte was different from most people and I liked her the more for it. She had a translucent quality — an ability to walk through a room full of people as though she were the only one there. At times I felt she could pass right through me and never know it, waft around me like scented air. At the time of the fire, she was in her mid-20s, small and easily overlooked, with long dark hair that she wore in a single loose braid down her back — most definitely not the style at the time. All of her clothes had a well-washed look, as though they had already been worn out by someone else, and even in summer, she wore a pair of shabby cotton lady's gloves in ivory or pale pink, the kind usually reserved for proms, with fingertips grey from use. She looked vaguely foreign, although there was no telling from where — just that she hadn't come from the world she was living in.

After some time, Uncle Jesse didn't want to wait anymore for the verdict from the officials, so he filled his rucksack and left for good without so much as a nod toward me. With him gone, all living evidence of the summer had vanished. If I'd known how to get there, I would have ridden my bike to Hermitage Street and stood in the backyard of the burnt house with whatever was left of Aunt Charlotte's garden, just to be sure I hadn't made the whole thing up.

MY MOTHER HAD A TALENT FOR CREATING NORMALCY where there was no right to it, and so it wasn't long before my time with Aunt Charlotte took on the status of a dream — but that didn't mean anything about the hole she left behind. It felt like a keyhole, black and cool, with different air on the other side: the air she would breathe. Maybe the breeze held a bit of heat that had come from her lips as she slept. Imagining made it so, but it still wasn't the same as being in the hammock where the air was saturated with her, seeing as it had rubbed up against her insides over and over, and up against mine. To share the same air — that can't be replaced.

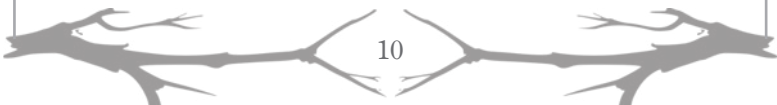
All that time with Aunt Charlotte in her garden had given me a taste for wildness. Now with her gone, I gravitated to the manicured cemetery down the street from my family house, where the trees towered. I clutched at the tiny islands of wildness along the edge of that cemetery — the places where the mower didn't go, where a half-dozen trees might stand together and make something that to me was more holy than a temple. In those places, seeds were planted by the wind — the fingers of God.

Sometimes I'd imagine how those islands could be made larger. If I scattered those seeds just right and watered them, they could expand inch by inch until they met other islands of trees. Then those islands would meet the trees that lined the streets and there would be a continuous forest. But when I looked around, I knew it wasn't possible. Not with all the fences around people's yards, the manicured lawn of the cemetery. They'd pull those little saplings out like weeds. But maybe someday all the fences would be gone, the lawns would become meadows, and someone like Aunt

Charlotte would come and be able to make a forest again. I thought about that a lot, lying on the ground in those tiny stands of trees at the edge of the cemetery.

In time, I came to see the “Char” in Aunt Charlotte’s name as an obvious omen. She was Charred-Lata, whereas I was thankfully just Lata — Lata Marie. I took comfort in this, until it finally dawned on me that the omens were just as obvious in my name. After all, I was named for her. And while my first name got hung on the infant of me by my mother’s love for her baby sister, the second, Mom said she chose because it sounded good. Her explanation never fooled me. None of us know on the surface what we’re really doing. We use logic to explain mystery and then say the things we made up as though they’re true.

Here’s the real truth: my fate hung on the pleasing ring of Marie beside Lata — it was my main inheritance, the doorway where the spirits could enter, for Marie was not only the hidden middle name of my mother, my grandmother and my great grandmother, it was also the given name of my great Aunt Marie. Aunt Charlotte once told me that to be given the name meant that Aunt Marie had sent her spirit back to help, and she lived and breathed in me. She often spoke as though I already knew the things Marie had told her. Maybe that’s why I wasn’t surprised when it turned out to be true that the knowings came to me in ways other than the usual.



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