EMERALD CITY

AND OTHER STORIES

JENNIFER EGAN

author of

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EMERALD CITY

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—Detour Magazine

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—News day

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—San Francisco Chronicle

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"Immediately apparent is Egan's versatility, and the confidence she has to create such dramatically different characters from numerous backgrounds."

—Bookends

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—Seattle Post-Intelligencer

“Egan displays a mastery of voice for a young writer…. Her voice moves easily and accurately between characters, her stories as beautifully crafted as they are darkly moving.”

—Charlotte Observer

“Both *Emerald City* and *The Invisible Circus* shimmer with moments when everyday life seems imbued with intimations of the marvelous…. Egan’s finely polished gems, mined from the expanse of her rich imagination, will surely retain their literary luster. “

—NewCity’s Literary Supplement

EMERALD CITY

JENNIFER EGAN

Stories

ANCHOR BOOKS
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

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SACRED HEART

In ninth grade I was a great admirer of Jesus Christ. He was everywhere at Sacred Heart: perched over doorways and in corners, peering from calendars and felt wall hangings. I liked his woeful eyebrows and the way his thin, delicate legs crossed at the ankles. The stained-glass windows in our chapel looked like piles of wet candy to me, and from the organ came sounds that seemed to rise from another world, a world of ecstasy and violence. I longed to go there, wherever it was, and when they told us to pray for our families, I secretly prayed for the chance.

We had a new girl in class that year whose name was Amanda. She had short red hair and wore thin synthetic kneesocks tinted different colors from the wash. She wore silver bracelets embedded with chunks of turquoise, and would cross her legs and stare into space in a way that suggested she lived a dark and troubled life. We were the same, I thought, though Amanda didn't know it.

During Mass I once saw her scrape something onto a pew with the sharp end of a pin she was wearing. Later, when the chapel was empty, I sneaked back to see what it was and found her single first initial: A. To leave one's mark on a church pew seemed a wondrous and terrible thing, and I found myself watching Amanda more often after that. I tried talking to her once, but she twirled her pen against her cheek and fixed her gaze somewhere to my left. Close up, her eyes looked cracked and oddly lifeless, like mosaics I'd seen pictures of in our religion class.

Though we were only girls at Sacred Heart, there were boys to contend with. They came from St. Pete's, our companion school three blocks away, and skulked relentlessly at the entrances and exits of our building. Unlike Christ, who was gentle and sad, these boys were prone to fits of hysterical laughter without cause. I was unnerved by stories I had heard of them tampering with the holy wafers and taking swigs of the sacred wines Father

Damian kept in his cabinet. They reminded me of those big dogs that leap from nowhere and bark convulsively, stranding children near fences. I kept my distance from these boys, and when the girls began to vie for their attention, I avoided them, too.

Late in the fall of that ninth-grade year, I saw Amanda cutting her arm in the girls' room. I pretended not to notice, but when I left the stall and began washing my hands, she was still there, her wrist laid out on the wood box that covered the radiator. She was jamming a bobby pin into the skin of her forearm, bunching it up.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Amanda glanced at me without expression, and I moved a step closer. She was working her arm in the fierce, quiet way you might work a splinter from your foot.

"It's not sharp enough," she said impatiently, indicating the bobby pin. It was straightened into a line, and the plastic nubs at its ends were gone. Amanda seemed unembarrassed by my presence, as though cutting her arm were no weirder than braiding her hair with ribbons. This intrigued me, and her urgency drew me in.

I was wearing a pin, a white goat my mother's husband, Julius, had bought me on a trip to Switzerland. I wore it to please my mother, for though a nicer man than Julius was hard to imagine, I just couldn't like him. It was as if my not liking him had been decided beforehand by someone else, and I were following orders. Now, as I touched this present from him, I wanted Amanda to use it—I craved it like you crave a certain taste. It was wrong and bad and exactly right. I felt a pleasant twisting in my stomach, and my hands shook as I unhooked the pin from my dress.

"Here," I said, holding it up. "Try this."

Amanda's face turned softer than normal. She held me with her eyes while I looked for a match to sterilize the pin. A lot of furtive smoking went on in that bathroom, and I found a book wedged behind the mirror. I took off my goat's head pin and held its sharp point in the flame until it turned black. I tried to give the pin to Amanda, but she shook her head.

"You," she said.

I stood there a moment, holding the goat. Although I was frightened, there was something raw and beautiful in the sight of Amanda's smooth white arm against the chipped paint of the radiator cover. Gently I took her wrist and touched the pin to the scratch she had already made. Then I pulled it away. "I can't," I said.

Her face went slack. When I tried again to give her the pin, she turned away from me, embarrassed. I felt like a coward, and knew for sure that unless I helped Amanda to cut herself, she would never be my friend.

"Wait," I said.

I took her wrist and held it. I scraped the pin hard this time and made a thin, bleeding scratch. I kept going, not afraid anymore, and was surprised to find that the sharp point made a sound against her skin, as though I were scraping a piece of thick fabric. It was hard work, and soon my arms were shaking. Sweat gathered on my forehead. I did not look once at Amanda until I had finished an A like the one she'd carved on the pew. When finally I did look, I found her eyes squeezed shut, her lips drawn back as if she were smiling.

"It's finished," I told her, and let go.

When Amanda opened her eyes, tears ran from them, and she rubbed them away with her other hand. I found that I was crying, too, partly with relief at having finished, partly from some sorrow I didn't understand. In silence we watched her arm, which looked small and feverish under its bright tattoo. I noticed the hot light overhead, smells of chalk and disinfectant, my own pounding heart. Finally Amanda smoothed her hair and pulled her sweater sleeve down. She smiled at me—a thin smile—and kissed me on the lips. For an instant I felt her weight against me, the solidness of her, then she was gone.

Alone in the bathroom, I noticed her blood on my fingers. It was reddish orange, sticky and thin like the residue of some sweet. A wave of despair made me shut my eyes and lean against the sink. Slowly I washed my hands and my goat pin, which I stuck in my pocket. Then I stood for a while and stared at the radiator, trying to remember each thing, the order of it all. But already it had faded.

From that day on, when I looked at Amanda a warm feeling rose from my stomach to my throat. When I walked into class, the first place I looked was her desk, and if she was talking to somebody else, I felt almost sick. I knew each detail of Amanda: her soiled-looking hands with their bitten nails, the deep and fragile cleft at the base of her neck. Her skin was dry and white around the kneecaps, and this got worse as fall wore on. I adored these imperfections—each weakness made Amanda seem more tender, more desperate for my help. I was haunted by the thought that I had seen her blood, and would search her distracted eyes for some evidence of that encounter, some hint of our closeness. But her look was always vague, as if I were a girl she had met once, a long time ago, and couldn't quite place.

At that time I lived in a tall apartment building with my mother and Julius, her husband of several months. Julius was a furrier. The previous Christmas he had given me a short fox-fur coat that still draped a padded hanger in my closet. I hadn't worn it. Now that it was almost winter, I worried that my mother would make me put it on, saying Julius's feelings would be hurt. His lips seemed unnaturally wet, as though he'd forgotten to swallow for too long. He urged me to call him "Dad," which I avoided by referring to him always as "you" and looking directly at him when I spoke. I would search our apartment until I found him, rather than have to call out. Once, when I was phoning my mother from school, Julius answered. I said "Hello …" and then panicked over what to call him. I hung up and prayed he hadn't recognized my voice. He never mentioned it.

It was getting near Christmas. Along the wind-beaten streets of downtown the windows were filled with cotton-bearded Santas and sleighs heaped high with gifts. It grew darker inside the Sacred Heart chapel, and candles on thin gold saucers made halos of light on its stone walls. During Mass I would close my eyes and imagine the infant Christ on his bale of straw, the barn animals with burrs and bits of hay caught in their soft fur. I would gaze at our thin Jesus perched above the altar and think of what violence he had suffered since his day of birth, what pity he deserved. And I found, to my confusion, that I was jealous of him.

Amanda grew thinner as winter wore on. Her long kneesocks slipped and pooled in folds around her ankles. Her face was drawn to a point and sometimes feverish, so her eyes looked glossy as white marbles against its

flush. Our homeroom teacher, Sister Wolf, let her wear a turquoise sweater studded with yellow spots after Amanda explained that neither one of her parents was home and she had shrunk her uniform sweater by accident. That same day her nose began to bleed in science class, and I watched Sister Donovan stand for fifteen minutes behind her desk, cupping Amanda's head in her palm while another girl caught the dark flow of her blood in a towel. Amanda's eyes were closed, the lids faintly moist. As I stared at her frail hands, the blue chill marbling the skin of her calves, I knew that nothing mattered more to me than she did. My mouth filled with a salty taste I couldn't swallow, and my head began to ache. I would do anything for her. So much love felt dangerous, and even amid the familiar, dull surroundings of my classroom, I was afraid.

Later that day, I saw Amanda resting outside on a bench. With my heart knocking in my chest, I forced myself to sit beside her. I glanced at her arm, but her sweater sleeves reached the tops of her wrists.

"Are your parents on vacation?" I asked.

"They're getting a divorce."

Uttered by Amanda, the word sounded splendid to me, a chain of bright railway cars sliding over well-oiled tracks. Divorce.

"My parents are divorced," I told her, but it hissed when I said it, like something being stepped on.

Amanda looked at me directly for the first time since that day in the girls' room, weeks before. Her irises were broken glass. "They are?" she asked.

"My father lives in California."

I longed to recount my entire life to Amanda, beginning with the Devil's Paint Pots I had visited with my father at Disneyland when I was six. These were craters filled with thick, bubbling liquids, each a different color. They gave off steam. My father and I had ridden past them on the backs of donkeys. I hadn't seen him since.

"I have a brother," Amanda said.

The Devil's Paint Pots bubbled lavishly in my mind, but I said nothing about them. Amanda crossed her legs and rapidly moved one foot. She fiddled with her bracelets.

“Why do you watch me all the time?” she asked.

A hot blush flooded my face and neck. “I don’t know.”

Our silence filled with the shouts of younger children swinging on the rings and bars. I thought of the days when I, too, used to hang upside down from those bars, their cold metal stinging the backs of my knees. I hadn’t cared if my dress flopped past my head and flaunted my underwear. But it was ninth grade now, and nothing was the same.

“If you could have one wish,” Amanda said, looking at me sideways with her broken eyes, “what would it be?”

I thought about it. There were plenty of things I wanted: to poke freely through the cupboards of our altar, to eat communion wafers by the fistful and take a gulp of the sacred wine. But I told Amanda, “I’d wish to be you.”

I had never seen her really smile before. Her teeth were slightly discolored, and her gums seemed redder than most people’s. “You’re crazy,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re really nuts.”

She hunched over and made a high, thin sound like a damp cloth wiping a mirror. I thought at first that her nose was bleeding again, but when I leaned over to look at her face, I saw she was only laughing.

Each morning, as the arc of frost on my windowpane grew taller, I worried about the coat. It hung in my closet like an eager pet I knew I would have to feed eventually. When I touched the soft fur, it swung a little. I had an urge sometimes to stroke it.

While I was dressing for school one day, my mother came into my room. Her face was puffy with sleep, her lips very pale. It still amazed me to think that she and Julius shared the big bed where she had slept alone so many years, where I had slept, too, when I had nightmares. I imagined an extra room where Julius slept, an inner door outside which he and my mother kissed good night and then did not meet again until morning.

“It’s cold outside,” my mother said.

I nodded, scanning my closet for a sweater. I could feel her watching the coat. She was quiet while I pulled on my kneesocks.

"You know," she said, "Julius really likes you. He thinks you're terrific." Her voice was filled with pleasure, as if just saying his name felt good.

"I know it," I said. And I did—he fixed me pancakes in the morning and had offered many times to take me to his warehouse, where I pictured row after row of soft, beckoning furs. "Pretty soon," I would mutter vaguely.

"Sarah," my mother said, and waited for me to look at her. "Please won't you wear it?"

She had flat hair and an open, pleading face. When she was dressed up and wearing her makeup, my mother could look beautiful to me. But now, in the early white light of a winter morning as she balanced her cup on her kneecap, she looked worn out and sad.

"I will," I said, meaning it now. "I'll wear the coat when it's freezing."

Two weeks before the start of Christmas vacation, Amanda wasn't in school. When I saw her empty chair, I felt a flicker of dread. I came inside the classroom and sat at my desk, but without Amanda to hook my attention to, the room felt baggy. I worried, before the teacher had even called her absent, that she would not be back.

A special assembly was called. Our headmistress, Sister Brennan, announced to the school that Amanda had run away from home with her brother, a high school dropout who worked at Marshall Field's, and several stolen credit cards. As Sister Brennan spoke, there was a vast stirring around me, like on the day when we learned that Melissa Shay, two years below me with long gold braids, had died of leukemia during summer vacation. This stir was laced with delight, a jittery pleasure at news so shocking that it briefly banished all traces of normal life. I twisted around with the other girls, exchanging pantomimed amazement. It comforted me to feel like one of them, to pretend this news of Amanda meant no more to me than a shorter math class.

After that, I couldn't concentrate. I felt physical pain in my stomach and arms as I walked through the doors of Sacred Heart, this place Amanda had discarded. She'd left me behind with the rest: Father Damian in his robes, the

old chalkboards and desks, the solemn chapel with its stink of damp stone and old lint, its stale echoes of the same words endlessly repeated. As Father Damian lectured to us on Amanda's sin, I noticed how the clerical collar squashed and wrinkled his neck, so it looked like a turkey's, how his eyes were thick and clouded as fingernails. I looked at Jesus and saw, where His crossed ankles should have been, the neatly folded drumsticks on a roasting chicken. I stopped looking at Him.

What compelled me instead was her desk. For weeks and weeks—who knew how long?—Amanda had sat there, twirling her pen against her cheek and planning her escape. After school sometimes, when the shadowy halls had emptied, I would sit in her chair and feel the ring of her absence around me. I opened the desk and fingered her chewed pencils, the grimy stub of her eraser, a few haphazard notes she had taken in class. One by one I took these items home with me, lined them carefully along my windowsill, and watched them as I went to sleep. I imagined Amanda and her brother padding over thick dunes of sand, climbing the turrets of castles. In my thoughts this brother bore a striking resemblance to Jesus. As for Amanda, she grew more unearthly with each day, until what amazed me was less the fact that she had vanished than that I had ever been able to see her—touch her—in the first place.

One night, when my mother had gone to a meeting and Julius was reading in the den, I took a razor blade from the pack he kept in the medicine cabinet. I held it between my fingers and carried it to my bedroom, where I sat on the edge of my bed and took off my sweater. I was still wearing my school jumper with the short-sleeved blouse underneath, and I placed a pillow across my lap and lay my bare arm over it. My forearm was white as milk, smooth, and full of pale blue snaking veins. I touched it with the blade and found that I was terrified. I looked around at my childhood bears, my bubbling aquarium, and my ballerina posters. They were someone else's—a girl whose idea of mischief had been chasing those fish through their tank with her wet arm, trying to snatch their slippery tails. For a moment I felt her horror at what I was about to do, and it made me pause. But I had to do something. This was all I could think of.

Gently but steadily, I sank one corner of the blade into the skin halfway between my elbow and wrist. The pain made tears rush to my eyes, and my

nose began to run. I heard an odd humming noise but continued cutting, determined not to be a baby, set on being as fierce with myself as I'd seen Amanda be. The razor went deeper than the pin had. For a moment the cut sat bloodless on my arm—for an instant—and then, like held breath, blood rose from it suddenly and soaked the white pillowcase. This happened so fast that at first I was merely astonished, as though I were watching a dazzling science film. Then I grew dizzy and frightened by the mess, this abundance of sticky warmth I could not contain.

I'd done something wrong, that was obvious. From the kitchen I heard the kettle boil, then the creak of Julius's chair as he rose to take it off the stove. I wished my mother were home. I tried to go to Julius and ask for help, but my arm felt so damaged, sending blood wherever I looked, and I couldn't seem to lift it.

"Julius?" I called. The name sounded unfamiliar, and it struck me that I hadn't said it aloud in nearly a year. The kettle was still whistling, and he didn't hear me.

"Dad!" I hollered, and it sounded even stranger than "Julius" had.

From the next room I heard the stillness of a pause. "Dad!" I called again. The wet warmth was soaking through to my legs, and I felt lightheaded. As I leaned back and shut my eyes, I remembered the Devil's Paint Pots with their wisps of steam, the man beside me on a donkey. Then I heard the door to my room burst open.

I was shivering. My teeth knocked together so hard that I bit my tongue. Julius wrapped me in the fox-fur coat and carried me to the car. I fell asleep before we reached it.

At the hospital they stitched my arm and wrapped it in white gauze. They hung it in a sling of heavy fabric, and despite my shock over what I'd done to myself, I couldn't help anticipating the stir my sling would cause in homeroom. Julius spoke to my mother on the phone. I could tell she was frantic, but Julius stayed calm throughout.

When we were ready to go, he held up the coat. It was squashed and matted, covered with blood. I thought with satisfaction that I had ruined it for good.

"I think we can clean it," said Julius, glancing at me. He was a big man with olive skin and hair that shone like plastic. Each mark of the comb was visible on his head. I knew why my mother loved him, then—he was the sort of man who stayed warm when it was cold out, who kept important tickets and slips of paper inside his wallet until you needed them. The coat looked small in his hands. Julius held it a moment, looking at the matted fur. Stubbornly I shook my head. I hated that coat, and it wasn't going to change in a minute.

To my surprise, Julius began to laugh. His wide, wet lips parted in a grin, and a loud chuckle shook him. I smiled tentatively back. Then Julius stuffed the coat into the white cylinder of the hospital garbage can. "What the hell," he said, still laughing as the silver flap moved back into place. "What the hell." Then he took my hand and walked me back to the parking lot.

Months later, in early summer, Sacred Heart and St. Peter's joined forces to give their annual formal dance. I was invited by Michael McCarty, a handsome, sullen boy with bright blue eyes, who had the habit of flicking the hair from his face more often than necessary. He seemed as frightened as I was, so I said yes.

I needed white shoes. After school one afternoon in our last week of classes, I went to a large discount shoestore downtown. I walked through the door and shut my eyes in disbelief.

Amanda was seated on a small stool, guiding a woman's foot into a green high-heel. There were crumpled tissue papers around her. I noticed her hair was longer now, and she was not so thin as before.

I had an urge to duck back out the door before she saw me. Although I hardly thought about Amanda anymore, I still clung to the vague belief that she had risen above the earth and now lived among those fat, silvery clouds I'd seen from airplane windows. What I felt, seeing her, was a jolt of disappointment.

"Amanda," I said.

She twisted around to look at me, squinting without recognition. Her confusion shocked me: for all the time I'd spent thinking of Amanda, she had

barely known who I was.

"Oh yeah," she said, smiling now. "Sacred Heart."

She told me to wait while she finished with her customer, and I went to look for my shoes. I picked white satin with tiny pearl designs sewn on top. I brought them to the cash register, where Amanda was waiting, and she rang them up.

"Where do you go to school?" I asked.

She named a large public school and said she liked it better there. Her fingers moved rapidly over the keys.

Lowering my voice, I asked, "Where did you go?"

Amanda flipped open the cash drawer and counted out my change, mouthing the numbers. "Hawaii," she said, handing me the bills.

"Hawaii?" It was not what I'd imagined.

My mind filled with a vision of grass skirts, flower necklaces, and tropical drinks crowded with umbrellas and canned cherries. Julius had been there, and this was how he'd described it.

"We were there two weeks," Amanda said. "Then my dad came and got us." She did not sound ashamed of this in the least. As she handed me my box in its plastic bag, she said, "He came all the way over, he had to. Or else we would've stayed forever."

Amanda closed the register drawer and walked me out to the street. The day was warm, and we both wore short sleeves. Her arms were smooth and lightly tanned. On my own arm, the scar was no more than a thin pink line.

We stood a moment in silence, and then Amanda kissed me goodbye on the cheek. I caught her smell—the warm, bready smell that comes from inside people's clothes. She waved from the door of the shoestore, then went back inside.

I felt a sudden longing not to move from that spot. I could feel where her arms had pressed, where her hands had touched my neck. The smell was still there, warm and rich like the odor a lawn gives off after hours of sunlight. I tried to spot Amanda through the store windows, but sunlight hit the glass so that I couldn't see beyond it.

Finally I began to walk, swinging my bag of shoes. I breathed deeply, inhaling the last of her smell, but it lingered, and after several more blocks I realized that what I smelled was not Amanda. It was myself, and this day of early summer—the fresh, snarled leaves and piles of sunlit dirt. I was almost fifteen years old.