JULIA GRAY

ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Julia Gray to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Julia Gray, 2018

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 691 9

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Limited, Bungay, Suffolk, NR35 1ED

For my
grandmother,
Lois Sieff

My name is Nora Tobias. I am seventeen years old. I've noticed that this is how stories often begin: a name, an age. The formula seems safe enough. I am a quarter English, a quarter Scottish and half French. I'm on the short side. I have a birthmark that covers the upper left portion of my face. My father used to say that it looked like a map of France, and my mother that it was a squished starfish.

I live with my mother, whose name is Evie, on the eighth floor of a tower block on a housing estate in South London. We have lived there for nearly ten years. My mother works freelance for the costume departments of different television companies. She is a reformed Goth: her hair is no longer bottle-black-and-blue, but her ears are still pierced in eleven places. There is nothing she doesn't know about corsets.

My father's name was Felix. He came from a small village in Normandy, and he died when I was six. I remember certain things about him very well. Other things, not so well at all. He had dark hair. Green eyes. He was of medium height. His thoughtful voice barely broke the surface of a whisper; everything he said was accentuated with hand gestures, soft but precise. An artist and illustrator, who

worked mostly with watercolour and pencil, he did commissions for books and magazines. Everything he drew was careful, meticulous, never coloured outside the edges he marked with such certainty. My mother seemed loud and chaotic by comparison, I recall, although she does not seem that way to me any longer.

I wonder what else would be appropriate to mention.

My early childhood was spent in Paris. After my father's death, Evie and I came to England. We lived in London, but went often to Glasgow, to visit my newly-widowed grandmother. But if ever a home appears in my dreams, it's not our Paris apartment, or the one where Evie and I live now, or Nana's old rose-covered bungalow, before she moved a year or so ago into sheltered housing. I see the little cottage near a Normandy beach, where I spent many childhood summers. This is the place I associate most with my father.

At present, I am staying with my Aunt Petra, who is not my aunt at all, but a lifelong friend of Evie's. The name 'Petra', she tells me, means *rock,* but there is nothing rock-like about my non-aunt, who is as curved and soft as candyfloss. She runs a guesthouse here, in the Scottish Highlands, with her husband Bill. People come to relax, and meditate and heal. They walk beside the lochs that lie on either side of the peninsula; they learn about Thai food and how to build walls. I've been here a fortnight or so, but I've learned none of those things. There are six other guests, and mostly we keep ourselves to ourselves. Two people are doing

a silent retreat, which makes for minimal interaction. Another guest, with whom I'm now on quite friendly terms, is recuperating after an accident. The rest are yoga devotees.

It's July, not that you can tell; every day dawns uniformly grey, and the rain cycles from a spatter to a thundery relentlessness. When the sun does come out, it does so apologetically, like a ballerina who is unsure of her entrance on stage. I do not mind the weather. The climate suits me.

Aunt Petra is keen for me to take part in classes and workshops: T'ai Chi, for example, or Spiritual Healing (this one, she feels, might be especially appropriate). Each morning, over porridge resembling wet sand in colour and texture, she tries to sign me up. Each morning, I decline. I came to Scotland for peace and silence, not to participate in her Organised Wellness. However, I do quite often agree to take her dog, Oscar, for a walk. He purports to be a Jack Russell, but there's a touch of Rat somewhere in his heritage, I'm sure. As long as it isn't raining too hard, Oscar and I wander through fields thick with stubby nettles, beating pathways down to the loch; or else we follow one of the narrow tracks that crisscross through woodland to the top of the peninsula, passing isolated farms and small rivers, until we reach one of the nearby villages. And then it begins to rain harder, and we wait for a bus to take us back.

Sometimes, I wonder why Aunt Petra, with all her talk of Zen and just-being and mindfulness, isn't more content to let me do nothing. Perhaps it's because the state of doing

nothing, of thinking and feeling nothing, is allegedly hard to attain but I already excel at it. I don't really know what she's thinking when she enquires, like clockwork, about my plans for the day. Perhaps it is simply part of her repertoire, essentially without meaning.

This morning, I made an announcement. I don't know who was more surprised, Aunt Petra or me.

'I'm going to write,' I said.

Aunt Petra paused at the breadboard. 'To . . . to what, love? To light?'

'Write,' I said.

'Poems? Fairy tales?'

'Something like that.'

She couldn't have been more pleased. Before I knew it, Bill was bringing in an old sewing table with a missing foot, like a lame calf, and setting up a computer with a yellowed keyboard and arthritic mouse.

'What about your wounded arm?' Petra said, looking down at the bandage that hid the savage purple scar on which all her lotions and potions had had little effect. I said I'd go slowly, which was very much my intention, and see how it felt. She should have guessed that I didn't mind pain.

So here I am, with time, as well as potions, on my hands.

I have never tried to write anything before. I'm more of a reader; I don't like to commit myself to the page. I'd rather judge others for what they have chosen to commit. There's

a daunting finality to writing. Even though I am working on a computer, and hardly carving quill-ink letters onto leathery parchment, even though I can delete and redo to my heart's content, the words still glower darkly from the screen. *We are finished articles*, they say. *We are evidence. We can be used against you.* In their straight-line sentences, they form a solemn procession, like ants plodding towards a cliff edge. They look 'right': that's one of the problems with typed words. I think I am scared of that, and of what may be used against me.

Because this is no fairy tale.

It is almost, for want of a better word, a confession. I'd say 'memoir', only that conjures something more grown-up than this, something less messy. I quite like the word *chronicle*. What I mean to set out is a series of events – perhaps not always strictly in chronological order, because my memories aren't arranged in such a linear way – at which I was present.

I want to explain what I did, and with whom. And where, and when and why. What happened, and what happened next.

The Chronicles of Nora, if you like.

And it will be a true story.

What will become quickly apparent is that I have not always told the truth before. To put it another way: I have told a number of lies. Some of them have been small, and some of them have been significant. I am writing this now

because the lies I have told have resulted in some bad things. Whether I think I shall lessen my guilt through the act of setting things down, or whether I think I will be able to make sense of what has happened by so doing, I am not quite sure.

Aunt Petra is delighted with this pursuit. Already, a *Do Not Disturb* sign hangs outside my door. Only Oscar comes in from time to time, to rub his rodenty fur against my ankle.

I am growing familiar with these ancient keys, and it is appropriate that they are keys, I keep thinking, because something is being unlocked. And although sometimes I think this will drive me mad – the endless, oppressive silence, the rain, the view of the loch through my window – a small part of me knows that what will really drive me mad is if I let this go unwritten.

So here are my hands, at a keyboard. Here is an open document. And here, at my elbow, is an envelope on which I have scribbled, in pencil, a kind of shape.

A timeline, with loops and bends.

A map for me to follow.

I would like to start in January.