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Opening extract from

The Apothecary

Written by

Maile Meloy

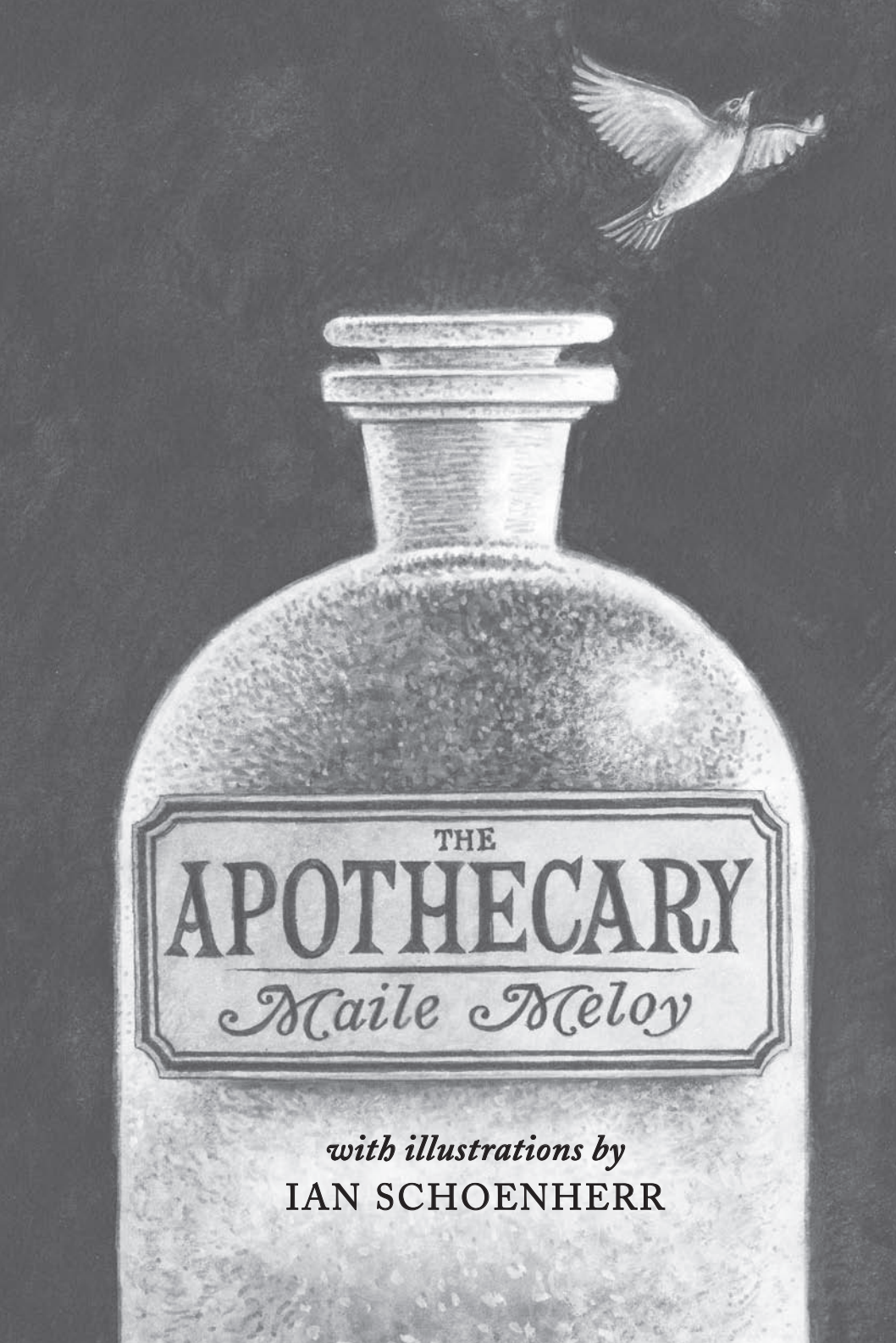
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A note to the reader:

My memories of what happened to me in 1952, when I moved to London from Los Angeles with my parents and met Benjamin Burrows for the first time, aren't perfect, for reasons I'll explain in this book. I didn't 'forget' those months the way I sometimes forget where I left my glasses, or what was happening in the novel I put down last week, or the name of the woman who sells oranges at the farmers' market. I lost what happened to me in the spring of 1952 in a much deeper, more profound way than that.

But I kept a diary that year, when I was fourteen and my life changed in such unforeseeable ways. The diary was taken from me, but later it was returned. When I read the entries, they were in my own handwriting, but they were as strange to me as if I had written them while asleep, about a dream that had vanished.

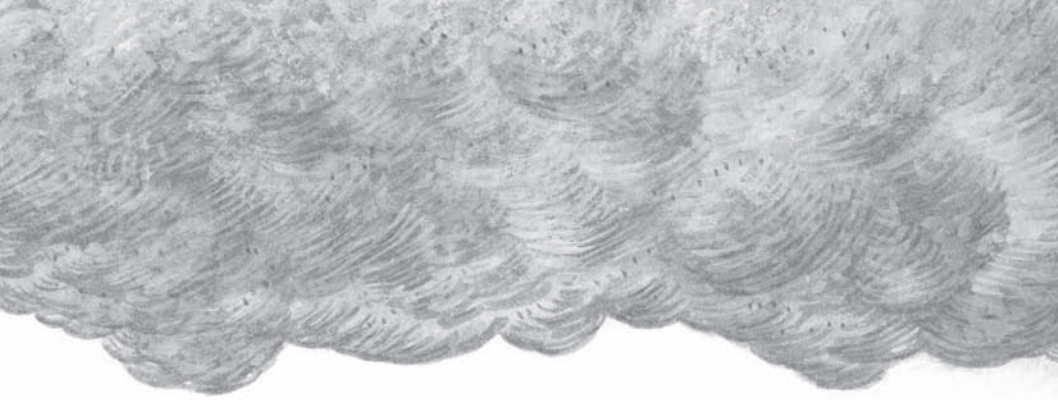
People describe their childhoods as magical, but mine – it really was. While I was complaining to my parents about having to leave Los Angeles, a chemist in China was narrowly escaping arrest, and a Hungarian physicist was perfecting the ability to freeze time. I was drawn, through Benjamin and his father, into the web of what they had created.

But if I tell you all this now, you won't believe me. I'll tell it in order, as I reconstructed the events after meeting Benjamin again. For a long time the memories seemed – however fantastic – to be important only to me personally. But lately it has seemed more and more urgent to tell this story now.

Jane Scott

LOS ANGELES, 2011





CHAPTER 1

Followed

I was seven and living in Los Angeles when Japan surrendered at the end of World War II, and my first vivid memories are of how happy and excited everyone was. My parents took me to a parade on Fairfax Avenue, where my father hoisted me onto his shoulders and sailors kissed girls in the streets. In school we made little paper flags to wave and learned that an evil force – *two* evil forces – had been defeated. We weren't going to have wars anymore.

Some of my parents' friends said it wasn't true that we had ended war for all time.

'People said that about the *last* war,' they said, sitting on our back patio, surrounded by tall green hedges, drinking wine or lemonade, which is how I remember all of my

parents' friends from that time: the women with their hair up in French twists, the men with their ties undone, on the back patio with a drink in hand. 'And look where we are.'

Others said that such terrible things had happened that the world would never be the same again. But my parents gave those friends hard looks when they knew I was listening.

My father said gasoline wasn't going to be rationed anymore, and we could drive to Kings Canyon, which I imagined was populated with kings, to see the giant trees. My second-grade teacher said we would get real butter again, not white oleomargarine with the yellow colour capsule you could add to it. I didn't remember real butter, and I liked the white oleo on toast with sprinkled sugar (my mother never added the yellow colouring because she hated fakery of all kinds), but I did believe that life was going to be better. We would have real butter, whatever that was like, and I might get a baby sister out of the deal. I would name her Lulu. The war was over and the bad guys had lost. A golden era had begun.

For a while, it actually seemed true. I never got a baby sister, but I had the cleverest, funniest parents I knew, and they had friends who were almost as clever and funny. They were a writing team, Marjorie and Davis Scott, and they had started in radio and worked together on television shows, first on *Fireside Theatre,* then on *I Love Lucy*. They had story retreats in Santa Barbara, and the other writers' kids and I would run through the avocado fields, playing elaborate games of tag

and kick-the-can. We would gather avocados that fell from the trees, and eat fat, green slices with salt right out of the shell. We swam in the ocean and played in the waves, and lay in the sand with the sun on our skin.

In my parents' front yard, there was an orange tree, with blossoms that made people on the street stop and look around to see what smelled so sweet. I used to pick myself an orange when I came home from school and eat it over the sink to catch the juice. In school we read a poem with the line 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!' It was supposed to be about the French Revolution, but I thought it was about my life.

But that was before I started being followed.

First the whole world changed. Another war started in Korea, against the Chinese, who had been our allies in the last war. The Russians, who had also been our allies, had the atomic bomb and seemed inclined to use it against us. The Communist threat was supposed to be everywhere, though my parents thought it was exaggerated.

In school, at Hollywood High, we watched a safety film in which a cheerful cartoon turtle named Bert explained that when a nuclear bomb came, we should get under our desks and put our heads between our knees. It had a little song that went like this:

There was a turtle by the name of Bert
And Bert the turtle was very alert

When danger threatened him, he never got hurt
He knew just what to do!
He'd duck – and cover
Duck – and cover!
He did what we all must learn to do
You – and you – and you – and you –
Duck – and cover!

Our teacher, Miss Stevens, who had been born deep in the last century and wore her white hair coiled up like a ghost's pastry on the back of her head, would lead us in a bomb drill. 'Here goes the flash,' she'd say. 'Everyone under the desks!' And under we'd go – as if our wooden school desks full of books and pencils were going to protect us from an atomic bomb.

The important thing, the films emphasised, was not to panic. So instead, everyone maintained a constant low-grade anxiety. I was only in the ninth grade and I might have managed to shrug off the worry, except that I'd started to think that someone was watching me.

At first, it was just a feeling. I'd get it walking home: that weird sensation that comes when someone's eyes are on you. It was February in Los Angeles, and it was brisk and cool but not cold. The tall palm trees by the school steps were as green as ever.

On the way home I practised walking like Katharine Hepburn, striding along with my shoulders back. I wore

trousers whenever I could, and my favourites were bright-green sailor ones, with four big buttons and flared legs. They were worthy of Hepburn as the cuffs swished along. She was my favourite film star, and I thought if I could walk like her, then I could feel and *be* like her, so sure and confident, tossing her head and snapping out a witty retort. But I didn't want anyone to see me practising my Hepburn walk, so at first the sensation of being watched only made me embarrassed. When I looked over my shoulder and saw nothing but the ordinary traffic on Highland Avenue, I hugged my books, rounded my shoulders, and walked home like an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl.

Then there was a day when I had the watched feeling, and looked back and saw a black sedan cruising more slowly than the rest of the traffic. I could have sworn it was driving at exactly the speed I was walking. I sped up, thinking that Kate Hepburn wouldn't be afraid, and the car seemed to speed up, too. Panic rose in my chest. I turned down an alley, and the car didn't follow, so I hurried along the side of the buildings, past the trash cans. When I got onto Selma Avenue, which was quiet and tree-lined, there was a man outside a house pruning his roses, but no cars.

My heart was pounding and I made myself breathe slowly. I nodded to the man with the roses and kept walking down Selma. I told myself it was silly to be afraid: No one was following me. They had no reason to follow me. I tossed my hair, wishing it would move in one glossy, curly mass,

and then the black sedan came round the corner ahead and cruised slowly towards me. I felt a cold flush, as if ice water had been pumped through my veins.

I looked back to the rose man, but he had gone inside his house. I gripped my books to keep my hands from shaking, and I kept walking as the black car drove towards me, ridiculously slowly. As it passed, I kept my chin very high and slid a glance sideways. In the car were two men in dark suits. The one closest to me, in the passenger seat, had hair so short he looked like a soldier, and he was watching me. There were two dark, brimmed hats on the backseat. I didn't know any man who wore a hat.

I kept walking, and the black car stopped and idled at the curb. I turned on Vista, my own street, and when I thought I was out of sight, I ran for the house, fumbling for my key. My parents were at work and wouldn't be home yet. I dropped the key and picked it up off the sidewalk as the black sedan turned onto Vista, and then I got inside and slammed the door and slid the chain.

'Hello?' I called to the empty house, just in case. No one answered.

I dropped my books and ran to the back door, which led out to the patio, and I made sure the door was locked. Sometimes we were careless about that door because it led to the hedged-in garden, not to the street, but the bolt was thrown, so the house had been locked all day. I looked out the front window and saw the sedan parked by the curb at the end of

the block, waiting. I closed the curtains and turned on the lights in the kitchen, my hands still shaking. The kitchen was the room where I felt safest, because it was where I sat every night with my parents, doing homework while they cooked, listening to them talk.

I told myself it was fine, it was probably in my mind. It was my imagination taking over. I made myself a peanut butter and honey sandwich and started doing my algebra homework. Each problem was like a puzzle, and it helped take my mind off the men who might or might not be sitting in their black car on the corner of our street, behind the curtains I was determined not to open.

At six o'clock, I was deep in a hunt for the value of x when I heard the door open and hit the end of the chain hard. My heart started to race again. I'd managed to pretend that the men weren't really after me, but here they were, breaking in.

'What *is* this?' a man's angry voice said.

Then I realised the voice was more annoyed than angry, and then I realised it was my father's. 'Janie?' he called, more alarmed now than annoyed. 'Are you here? What's going on?'



We walked that night to Musso and Frank's, which was my favourite restaurant, but it didn't feel like a treat. My parents tried to pretend everything was just fine, but we took back alleys, and they watched the corners at every street. My father

walked so fast that my mother and I had to walk double-time just to keep up.

We took a booth, and I ordered the thin pancakes called flannel cakes for dinner. I wanted my parents to object and make me order chicken and vegetables – I wanted things to be normal – but they didn't even notice.

'So who *are* those men in the car?' I asked.

My mother sighed. 'They're US marshals,' she said. 'From Washington. The government.'

That didn't make any sense. 'What do they want?'

'We've been wanting to tell you, Janie,' she said. She always got right to the point, but now she was dancing round whatever she was trying to say. 'We have news, and we think it's good news. We're – well, we're thinking we'll all move to London.'

I stared at her.

'It will be an adventure,' she said.

I looked at my father. 'What did you do?' I asked.

'Nothing!' he said, too loudly. A woman at another table looked at us.

'Davis,' my mother said.

'But I *haven't* done anything! This is all so ridiculous!'

A waiter brought water glasses to the table, and my mother smiled up at him. When he was gone, she said, 'I don't know if you remember Katie Lardner.'

'Only from birthday parties,' I said, slumped in the booth. I was being what my mother called *a real pill*, and I knew

it, but I didn't want to move to London. I liked my friends, and I liked my school. I liked junior lifesaving at the beach, and trips to Santa Barbara, and oranges growing in the front yard. I liked everything except being followed by men from Washington for whatever my parents had done.

'The Lardners moved to Mexico,' my mother said, 'because her father became a target. It became impossible for him to work here.'

'No,' I said. 'They moved because her father was a Communist.' Then the floor of Musso and Frank's seemed to open beneath me. 'Oh, *no*! Are you *Communists*?'

Both my parents glanced around to see if anyone was listening. Then my father leaned forward and spoke in a low voice that wouldn't carry.

'We believe in the Constitution, Janie,' he said. 'And we've been put on a list of people they're watching. That's why they're watching you, when it has nothing to do with you. And I will not have them following my *child*.' He thumped the table, and his voice had started to rise again.

'Davis,' my mother said.

'I won't, Marjorie,' he said.

'I don't even understand what Communism *is*,' I said.

My father sighed. 'The idea,' he said, in his low voice, 'is that people should share resources, and own everything communally, so there aren't wildly rich people who have everything and desperately poor people who have nothing. That's the idea. It's just hard to get it to work. The trouble

right now is that the US government – or at least something called the House Committee on Un-American Activities – has gotten so paranoid about the *idea*, as if it's a contagious disease, that they're going after innocent people who may hold the idea, or have held it in the past. It isn't fair, or rational, or constitutional.'

I was determined not to cry, and wiped my nose with my napkin. 'Can I at least finish the semester here?'

He sighed. 'Those men want to make us appear in court, under oath,' he said. 'We could answer for ourselves, but they would ask us to testify about our friends, and we can't do that. We've heard they'll confiscate passports soon so people can't leave the country. So we have to go right away.'

'When?'

'This week.'

'This *week*?'

My mother broke in. 'There's someone we've worked with before,' she said. 'Olivia Wolff. She already moved to London, to produce a television show about Robin Hood. She wants us to work on it, which is . . . Janie, it's an amazing opportunity. It'll be like living in a Jane Austen novel.'

'You mean I'll get married at the end?' I asked. 'I'm fourteen.'

'Janie.'

'And Jane Austen was *from* there, she wasn't American. I'll be so out of place!'

'Janie, please,' my mother said. 'This is a great chance that Olivia's giving us. We don't have a choice.'

'*I* don't have a choice. *You* had a choice, and you got on that list!'

'We didn't choose to be on the list,' my father said.

'So how'd you get on it?'

'By believing in freedom of speech. By having faith in the First Amendment!'

The waiter came and slid our plates in front of us. 'Flannel cakes for the little lady,' he said.

I gave him a weak smile.

My father stared at my stack of pancakes, with the pat of real butter melting on top. 'That's what you ordered for *dinner*?'

'She can have whatever she wants,' my mother said.

I glared at my father in defiance, but when I took a forkful of my last thin, golden, delicious Musso and Frank's flannel cakes for a long time – maybe for ever – they tasted like sawdust, and I made a face. My father couldn't resist the joke.

'You look like you're eating real flannel,' he said, smiling. 'Pyjamas with syrup.'

'Very funny,' I said.

'Look, kiddo,' he said. 'If we can't laugh together, we're not going to make it through this thing.'

I swallowed the sawdust. 'Don't call me kiddo,' I said.