

PROLOGUE

Gertrude Janine

(Called Trudy)

My mother, a classical actress, named me Gertrude Janine. She explained, from as young an age as I can remember, I was given that name in honor of a kind neighbor who helped her through a troubled childhood. But from the first time I attended Hamlet, I believed otherwise. My mother has a history of performing impish acts, then feigning innocence. So when I saw the play Hamlet, which was on a junior high school field trip, and encountered Gertrude, that character, I felt the warm, prickly force of betrayal. To make things worse: my mother played the role of Gertrude; my mother was the entire reason our class went to see the play. She not only had the acting role, but also arranged our school's free tickets and bus transportation.

The response of my classmates? Because I was named Gertrude but (thank you Mom) called Trudy, they did not have any reason to connect my name with that questionable character. And they thought it was impressive to have a parent who stood tall and got attention for something as unusual as acting.

After I saw the performance, I read and re-read the play, focusing on the character I believed to be my namesake, Gertrude. The weak, easily-led Gertrude. This was the sort of mischief I understood my mother to make: she would say she had named me after someone beloved since childhood, when actually naming me after a famous literary figure, and not a heroine. When I asked my mom how could she name me after such an awful woman, she

answered that I should not judge Shakespeare's character so harshly, especially since I have never been a wife, a mother, a widow or queen. And that the Gertrude she named me after was not that literary character (who on stage she had played to acclaim, though long after I was born), but a kind neighbor whose last will and testament allowed my mother a large amount of money. My mother had a rough childhood. Over the years I have heard the stories. Lack of parental attention, dirty floors and sinks, shabby clothing. A father who came home late, drunk, and smelling of perfume; a mother who responded by taking up nighttime gardening. "Your grandmother was a gentle woman, but a ferocious gardener," my mother told me. "She channeled her sadness and humiliation of being cheated on and poor, of having the sickliest farm animals in the county, into making and caring for her garden. No one could ever figure out when she did it, but I can tell you: she did it at night. I heard her go outside. Father, either drunk or passed-out, on the couch or floor, never heard her. But I heard. I watched her from outside her bedroom window. If the night was pitch black I could not see, but knew she was working hard because I heard her breathe, grunt. But if there was a full moon or a starry sky I could see. And it was astonishing to watch her little body crouch, dig, rise, cut, snip, groom. All day long she was busy with regular farm jobs: feeding animals, picking fruit, digging vegetables, bathing children. But at night she worked on her own plot of land, turning it into something remarkably pretty. On the other hand, gardening was tough on her looks, giving her a deeply bent back and hunched shoulders.

She never had time for me, her only daughter, but our neighbor, Gertrude, did. Gertrude saw that I was uncared for. She saw that I did not like being outside or doing the dirty farm jobs. So she took me in. She taught me how to knit, sew, wash, and bake. My mother was never one to spend time inside. Gertrude gave me small jobs (drying dishes, darning socks, polishing silver) and paid me

enough to buy toothpaste, shoes, and notebooks.

That is the woman you are named after, Trudy. If it were not for her I never would have gone to drama school, I would never have gone onto become a classical actress. If you do not believe me, there is nothing more for me to do.”

This is a very, very good story. But if you knew my mother the way I know my mother, you may not believe it. You may still wonder if you were named after the weak literary character. I could travel to my mom’s town, or telephone people from there. I could ask around, check records to learn if a woman named Gertrude lived anywhere near my grandparents. But that would mean dealing with data. And one thing I learned from my mother is this: finding and facing facts is not necessarily an approach that provides you with serious advantage, enriches your position, or lands you any closer to contentment.