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Juxtaposing the most common and the most gothic, the humorous and the tragic, author Jeffrey Eugenides creates a vivid and compelling portrait of youth and lost innocence. He takes us back to the elm-lined streets of suburbia in the seventies, and introduces us to the men whose lives have been forever changed by their fierce, awkward obsession with five doomed sisters: brainy Therese, fastidious Mary, ascetic Bonnie, libertine Lux, and pale, saintly Cecilia, whose spectacular demise inaugurates "the year of the suicides." This is the debut novel that caused a sensation and won immediate acclaim from the critics—a tender, wickedly funny tale of love and terror, sex and suicide, memory and imagination.

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ONE

On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope. They got out of the EMS truck, as usual moving much too slowly in our opinion, and the fat one said under his breath, "This ain't TV, folks, this is how fast we go." He was carrying the heavy respirator and cardiac unit past the bushes that had grown monstrous and over the erupting lawn, tame and immaculate thirteen months earlier when the trouble began.

Cecilia, the youngest, only thirteen, had gone first, slitting her wrists like a Stoic while taking a bath, and when they found her, afloat in her pink pool, with the yellow eyes of someone possessed and her small body giving off the odor of a mature woman, the paramedics had been so frightened by her tranquillity that

they had stood mesmerized. But then Mrs. Lisbon lunged in, screaming, and the reality of the room reasserted itself: blood on the bath mat; Mr. Lisbon's razor sunk in the toilet bowl, marbling the water. The paramedics fetched Cecilia out of the warm water because it quickened the bleeding, and put a tourniquet on her arm. Her wet hair hung down her back and already her extremities were blue. She didn't say a word, but when they parted her hands they found the laminated picture of the Virgin Mary she held against her budding chest.

That was in June, fish-fly season, when each year our town is covered by the flotsam of those ephemeral insects. Rising in clouds from the algae in the polluted lake, they blacken windows, coat cars and street-lamps, plaster the municipal docks and festoon the rigging of sailboats, always in the same brown ubiquity of flying scum. Mrs. Scheer, who lives down the street, told us she saw Cecilia the day before she attempted suicide. She was standing by the curb, in the antique wedding dress with the shorn hem she always wore, looking at a Thunderbird encased in fish flies. "You better get a broom, honey," Mrs. Scheer advised. But Cecilia fixed her with her spiritualist's gaze. "They're dead," she said. "They only live twenty-four hours. They hatch, they reproduce, and then they croak. They don't even get to eat." And with that she stuck her hand into the foamy layer of bugs and cleared her initials: C.L.

We've tried to arrange the photographs chronologically, though the passage of so many years has made

it difficult. A few are fuzzy but revealing nonetheless. Exhibit #1 shows the Lisbon house shortly before Cecilia's suicide attempt. It was taken by a real estate agent, Ms. Carmina D'Angelo, whom Mr. Lisbon had hired to sell the house his large family had long outgrown. As the snapshot shows, the slate roof had not yet begun to shed its shingles, the porch was still visible above the bushes, and the windows were not yet held together with strips of masking tape. A comfortable suburban home. The upper-right second-story window contains a blur that Mrs. Lisbon identified as Mary Lisbon. "She used to tease her hair because she thought it was limp," she said years later, recalling how her daughter had looked for her brief time on earth. In the photograph Mary is caught in the act of blow-drying her hair. Her head appears to be on fire but that is only a trick of the light. It was June 13, eighty-three degrees out, under sunny skies.

When the paramedics were satisfied they had reduced the bleeding to a trickle, they put Cecilia on a stretcher and carried her out of the house to the truck in the driveway. She looked like a tiny Cleopatra on an imperial litter. We saw the gangly paramedic with the Wyatt Earp mustache come out first—the one we'd call "Sheriff" when we got to know him better through these domestic tragedies—and then the fat one appeared, carrying the back end of the stretcher and stepping daintily across the lawn, peering at his police-issue shoes as though looking out for

dog shit, though later, when we were better acquainted with the machinery, we knew he was checking the blood pressure gauge. Sweating and fumbling, they moved toward the shuddering, blinking truck. The fat one tripped on a lone croquet wicket. In revenge he kicked it; the wicket sprang loose, plucking up a spray of dirt, and fell with a ping on the driveway. Meanwhile, Mrs. Lisbon burst onto the porch, trailing Cecilia's flannel nightgown, and let out a long wail that stopped time. Under the molting trees and above the blazing, overexposed grass those four figures paused in tableau: the two slaves offering the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the truck), the priestess brandishing the torch (waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips.

Mrs. Lisbon rode in the back of the EMS truck, but Mr. Lisbon followed in the station wagon, observing the speed limit. Two of the Lisbon daughters were away from home, Therese in Pittsburgh at a science convention, and Bonnie at music camp, trying to learn the flute after giving up the piano (her hands were too small), the violin (her chin hurt), the guitar (her fingertips bled), and the trumpet (her upper lip swelled). Mary and Lux, hearing the siren, had run home from their voice lesson across the street with Mr. Jessup. Barging into that crowded bathroom, they registered the same shock as their parents at the sight of Cecilia with her spattered forearms and pagan nudity. Outside, they hugged on a patch of uncut grass that Butch, the brawny boy who mowed it on Satur-

days, had missed. Across the street, a truckful of men from the Parks Department attended to some of our dying elms. The EMS siren shrieked, going away, and the botanist and his crew withdrew their insecticide pumps to watch the truck. When it was gone, they began spraying again. The stately elm tree, also visible in the foreground of Exhibit #1, has since succumbed to the fungus spread by Dutch elm beetles, and has been cut down.

The paramedics took Cecilia to Bon Secours Hospital on Kercheval and Maumee. In the emergency room Cecilia watched the attempt to save her life with an eerie detachment. Her yellow eyes didn't blink, nor did she flinch when they stuck a needle in her arm. Dr. Armonson stitched up her wrist wounds. Within five minutes of the transfusion he declared her out of danger. Chucking her under her chin, he said, "What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets."

And it was then Cecilia gave orally what was to be her only form of suicide note, and a useless one at that, because she was going to live: "Obviously, Doctor," she said, "you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."

The Lisbon girls were thirteen (Cecilia), and fourteen (Lux), and fifteen (Bonnie), and sixteen (Mary), and seventeen (Therese). They were short, round-buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recalled that same dorsal softness. Whenever we got a