



The Quickening

Author's Note

I was twenty-two when my mother lent me my great-grandmother's recollection—fifteen pages in all, poorly typed, with photographs taped in the margins and my great-grandmother's date of birth—1880—at the top. Turned at the corners, the pages were light, though they covered more than seventy-one years. In the past few months, I'd been asking about our family's history, because the only thing I'd gotten out of my grandmother before her recent death was that we were Iowan. We were born in Iowa. We were raised in Iowa, and if my grandmother had her way, every one of us would die in Iowa. What reason did a person have to leave the county, let alone the state?

My great-grandmother did not begin her recollection until the final year of her life, after she'd lost her husband of more than fifty years. *And now here I am in February 1950, she wrote, broken hearted and sick in mind and body, begging God every day to take me to him or heal my afflicted body and show me what to do. I don't want to stay in this world. It is not my home, but for some reason I am left.* The pages end there, with more dread and longing in every sentence than I have heard altogether from my reticent family in more than three decades. Born and bred a farmwoman, my great-grandmother bore three children, mothered six grandchildren, and was a great-grandmother to seventeen. In the few pages I have, she repeated the word *work* eighteen times, *God* twenty-two, *love* eleven, references to death, accidents or sickness twenty-nine.

Much of my great-grandmother's story would shape Enidina, one of the two farmwives trying to survive the Great Depression who narrate *The Quickening*. But Enidina's physical presence is my grandmother's, a weighty and robust woman with hands as large as a man's—a woman who could break a chicken's neck with a twitch of her wrist. My great-grandmother's husband in the novel and in real life was Frank, a quiet, easy-going man known for storytelling. *I had always said my husband's name must be Frank, she wrote of the day she met him, and since this man's name was Frank, I thought perhaps this is my Frank.* It was Frank's death that sparked both my great-grandmother's pages and my own.

But my ancestor's stoicism, their disinterest in excessive emotion and the necessity to calmly keep up the fight, to avoid self-importance, made for a difficult book to write. A novel

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demands conflict and the rich inner lives of characters, shown not through exposition but actions, words, and gestures, yet my family considered it poor form to show any of this. I myself both admired and wished to express this temperament—work hard, pray, feed your family, mourn without indulgence, and die a quiet death. The landscape itself reflected it. “The sky here was low and wide,” Enidina describes. “A place you could spy the weather from a good ways off. Acres of farmland stretched in every direction, gray-green and buzzing. The sharp, sweet stink of mud and pigs rode the wind, our barn alone against the distance.”

I needed another voice, a voice at odds with the place— someone greedy, reckless, and self-righteous. In my great-grandmother’s story, it is her sister-in-law, Mary, who nearly kills Frank by insisting on feeding the man meat when he suffers a near-fatal mouth infection. This sister-in-law became my own Mary, not a family member but their closest neighbor, a woman Enidina considers “too delicate for such country,” yet who Frank reminds her might be “the only friend for you in miles.” Along with her volatile husband, Jack Morrow, Mary serves as the release valve for the book’s tension, though this release soon erupts into betrayal.

However deeply based in family history, this remains a work of fiction. Though it stems from a widow’s year of mourning, it is also a commentary about work and family, absence and companionship, public good versus private happiness. Still, just as my great-grandmother’s pages and Enidina’s own, I consider the novel a restoration—a successful pursuit of what otherwise might have vanished.

—Michelle Hoover

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