

Mona
Houghton

*The Woman Who Lives
in the Avocado Grove*

JACQUELINE LIVES IN A HOUSE in the middle of an avocado grove. Her husband, Frank, and her daughter, Pauli, used to live there too, in this house surrounded by the trees with the low and reaching branches, but now Jacqueline stays alone.

This morning Jacqueline wakes up with tears streaming down her cheeks. It is appropriate. She sits bolt upright in bed and sees herself in the mirror above the dark wood dresser. It is Pauli's twenty-first birthday today. Jacqueline says, "Maybe Pauli will call," but Jacqueline knows this will not happen.

She finds her own voice comforting, almost like hearing another person. Right after Frank left, hearing herself speak in the silent house startled Jacqueline, but she has grown quite used to it.

As Jacqueline sits on the end of the bed and pulls on the faded jeans and t-shirt she wore yesterday, she looks at the picture of her mother on the dresser, the one in the silver frame.

Frank, who will soon want to discuss their divorce, called last night. He is coming by for lunch today because it is Pauli's birthday.

"Pauli'll come back." "She's just being a teenager." "They all do crazy stuff sometimes." The other parents had tried to console Jacqueline and Frank after Pauli disappeared one day. Sixteen years old. The police insisted on calling her a run-away, one of thousands. The policeman said, "You don't know teenagers."

"But I do," Jacqueline insisted.

And that is what scared her. Jacqueline had taught history at Valley Center High, a school just six miles from the avocado grove, for fourteen years.

She knows teenagers. She knows how they can turn on you, like snakes. "Pauli gives great head." She found it scrawled on her blackboard one day in pink chalk. And Jacqueline was a favorite teacher among the students.

Jacqueline begins to wander through the house, not to visit its rooms, but to look out in each direction into the grove that contains her. She sees Miguel out by the tool shed. He is repairing a section of the drip system. It needs constant attention. The water comes from the Colorado River—dirty water. If Frank lived here, he would spend half of every day checking the nipples under each tree, making sure grime had

The Woman Who Lives in the Avocado Grove

not clogged the inner workings. But Frank no longer lives on the land and so now bigger sections of the system break down more frequently.

Frank believed Pauli ran away, too. Jacqueline couldn't stand it that he thought this. Jacqueline knew someone had kidnapped Pauli, someone had stolen her.

Pauli learned to walk while Frank and Jacqueline learned to graft one kind of avocado onto another's root system, turning trees that produced watery Zutanos into ones covered with creamy Fuentes, large, roundish Bacons, pebbly skinned Haases. It was spring, a Saturday, when Pauli took her first steps. The family had gone down to the trees growing along the river. Frank prepared the understock, splitting it several inches through the smooth, straight-grained section. Jacqueline, having shaped two of the scions into long and gradually tapering wedges, was easing them into position in the understock when she looked up and saw Pauli with her tiny hands wrapped around the edge of the wheelbarrow, pulling herself up into a standing position. Jacqueline had seen this maneuver hundreds of times before, but on this day her daughter's eyes caught hers. In them was a glimmer, a wonderment, the primitive awareness of a moment when the impossible is transformed and becomes, suddenly, reachable.

Jacqueline whispered to Frank, "Look," as Pauli's little fingers loosened their grip. They both watched as their daughter stepped out into the unknown. Back then that had seemed so exciting.

The screen door slams closed behind Jacqueline as she walks out into the August heat. At the sound, Miguel faces her. He takes a step back, says, "Good morning."

Jacqueline can only nod. On her way over to the sprinkler spigot she feels the blades of grass between her bare toes. Miguel's son is Pauli's age. He works summers at the nursery in town. Frank works there now, too, but he comes to the grove to talk to Miguel. Frank worked these fifteen acres too hard and for too long to simply walk away, or go very far. He lives in an apartment above a t-shirt store in town. It was supposed to be temporary, but it didn't turn out that way. He moved in there three years ago. When Jacqueline thinks of his apartment, she imagines the old one where he lived when they were students. She will not go to the new one.

Jacqueline met Frank at the Mediterranean coffee house on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley in 1964. They were both freshmen, but Frank was older; he had been in the army for four years. At the time a lot of boys had stopped shaving, or had never started, and peach fuzz covered their rosy cheeks, but Frank had a real beard, and his black eyebrow hairs met in the middle of his forehead.

Frank had seen Jacqueline on campus, in Murphy Hall. Jacqueline knew because this was Frank's opening line: "Aren't you in Mueller's history class?"

To Jacqueline, Frank seemed mature, sophisticated. He found Mueller's historical perspective "narrow and simplistic." Frank had a room of his own, off campus. Jacqueline had seen the place, a big, old, Spanish-style house with a painting of Castro on the front gate. Some of the people who lived there called it a commune. Frank called it a place to crash.

ANYONE IS POSSIBLE

Frank took her there that afternoon, to his room with the Indian bedspreads billowing down from the ceiling and the candles lining the window sills. A flag hung across the opening to the closet. A water pipe occupied the desk, and books on Buddhism, nihilism, and existentialism covered the floor beside the mattress with the grayish, crumpled sheets.

Frank eased Jacqueline in through the door and asked, "Want a bowl?" as he walked over to the water pipe and picked up one of its octopus arms.

Jacqueline had smoked pot before, but always discreetly, in thin joints, or in the shells of emptied cigarettes—never in a hookah pipe.

"Come on, let's get high," Frank said.

Jacqueline turned around on the heel of one foot. By the time she had completed her circle, Frank was breaking the buds.

Pauli was smoking pot at twelve. Jacqueline caught her doing it in her room, alone, and had a different reaction than she ever would have expected. She pretended she didn't see it or smell it. She pretended she didn't notice her daughter's glazed eyes. Pauli used a bong pipe. Jacqueline found it the next day while Pauli was at school, hidden inside a roller skate. Jacqueline never told Frank because she knew Frank would want the three of them to *discuss* it.

Jacqueline hasn't taken any illegal drugs in almost fifteen years. The only buds she worries about these days are the ones on the avocado trees. If blooms come too early, a frost might take a whole crop. But it is summer now, the fruit is set, the avocados are on their way. In six weeks it will be time to pick the majority of the Haases. She finally manages to say "Good Morning" to Miguel.

Jacqueline inherited the land from an uncle, her mother's brother, a man she hardly knew. He had bought the place years before as an investment. Jacqueline had never even been there, to that valley sixty miles north of San Diego and thirty miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. She knew three things about the area: it had mild winters, hot summers, and soil that avocado trees loved. Soon after the title papers arrived, she and Frank drove down to see what an avocado grove actually looked like.

As the probate lawyer drove around the perimeter of the property, all the green seduced Jacqueline. She barely heard him, the pluses and minuses: six of the fifteen rolling acres covered in producing trees, flood damage from the heavy rains in '63. Then the lawyer took them down to the end of the dirt drive, to the buildings. When Jacqueline saw these, when she stepped out of the car and stood in front of them, a calm came over her, something captivating. Unlike the other ranches in the valley, the house and the work shed on this property sat in the middle of the grove. Avocado trees enveloped them.

Jacqueline and Frank spent the next five days working their way through the old house, poking into the attic, the basement, the closets, making love on the sun porch. They found magazines from the forties, and a drawer full of crocheted antimacassars. And in the heat of the afternoons, they would go out to the grove, to one of the trees near the house, and they would each grab hold of one of those low, horizontal limbs and pull themselves up onto it. They would each straddle a branch and talk.

The Woman Who Lives in the Avocado Grove

Jacqueline gave birth to Pauli the first summer they spent in the valley and Jacqueline fell in love with her new baby, and Frank and Jacqueline fell in love with each other all over again.

Jacqueline's own mother had died when Jacqueline was six years old, of a brain tumor. Two weeks after the funeral, Jacqueline's father gave her the framed picture that stands on her dresser today. In the picture Jacqueline's mother, at twenty-one or twenty-two, leans against the Chrysler Building in New York City. She is smiling. She has on a fashionable forties dress and her eyes look clear and bright. The same day that Jacqueline's father gave Jacqueline the picture, he put all the rest of his wife's personal belongings into the car and drove them down to the Goodwill. The photograph in the silver frame was all Jacqueline had left of her mother. She turns from Miguel and walks toward her house.

In Berkeley, in the house with Castro on the wall, Jacqueline and Frank found out all sorts of things about each other. They spent afternoons, whole weekends, in that bed with the crumpled sheets. Jacqueline loved the sex of it, the sensuality—the smells, the tastes, the sounds. She also dreamed of a little girl, but still she was careful, for Jacqueline also knew how she wanted it to be—for them to have a real house and real jobs, to be a real family.

Frank was spiritual, back then. Jacqueline's soul intrigued him. He found it mysterious, as curious as the night sky, he used to say. He described it as something dark that lurked inside of Jacqueline, between the practical part, the way she alphabetized the books on the shelves under the window, and the secret part, the way she, each night, placed her brush and hand cream and the silver-framed photograph of her mother on the thrift-shop dresser they had bought the week Jacqueline moved in. It would be years before Frank actually understood he would never be allowed to see into the dark, that Jacqueline would keep him out forever.

Jacqueline and Frank smoked the hookah pipe a lot when they lived in that house. They dropped magic mushrooms, hitched into San Francisco to the Fillmore to hear Hendrix and Joplin. They marched against the war, threw water balloons at policemen in riot gear, took bad acid and ended up at the Free Clinic begging for hits of Thorazine. Frank practiced Buddhism for a couple of years—he ate nothing but whole grains and lentil beans and he always smelled like incense. Jacqueline was more focused. She spent most of her free time concentrating on classes—Social and Intellectual History of Europe to 1815, History of War in the Modern World, Comparative Socialism. The subject intrigued her.

Pauli hated history. Pauli hated science, English, art history. Pauli hated school, period. Nor did she like baseball, or after-school ballet lessons. She didn't want to play with any of her classmates, whom Jacqueline would have happily had over any afternoon. To witness her daughter choosing this isolation pained Jacqueline in places she hadn't known before. Jacqueline ended up screaming at her little girl, "Talk to me." Pauli glared at her and turned around and walked away. Frank tried to help. He read books, he talked about boundaries and respect. Jacqueline screamed at him, "Don't interfere." Frank screamed back, "We're talking about our Pauli."

ANYONE IS POSSIBLE

Jacqueline knew exactly how she and Pauli should be together. She had known this since she was eight or nine years old. It was supposed to be like it would have been with her mother—they in harmony with each other and with the world. Jacqueline experienced the need for this primitively, like hunger, like desire. And when it didn't happen she felt senselessly terrorized.

But that can only last for so long. In time, Jacqueline stopped feeling anything.

Frank cried in Jacqueline's arms one night after he tried to make love to her. He wanted back into his wife's heart. Jacqueline could only see Pauli, ten years old now, standing in the schoolyard, her mouth filled with grass, dirty tears streaking her cheeks, three of her classmates around her, jeering, and Pauli yelling back at them, "Sons of bitches."

Standing at the kitchen sink, Jacqueline watches through the window. The rain-bird spits water out over the small patch of lawn by the back door of the house. Miguel works at the bench in front of the shed, cutting a piece of plastic pipe with a hack saw. Jacqueline says, "I should help him." But she doesn't move, for she knows she can no longer cooperate. Jacqueline tried to get Pauli's picture onto the milk cartons in L.A. county. Mr. Morley, the man in charge, said, "Sounds like a run-away to me."

The last fun Jacqueline had was on the night in 1985 when the Rolling Stones played the Los Angeles Coliseum. Frank and Jacqueline's best friend from Berkeley, Ted, was visiting. He had arrived that Friday morning. He had been down in Baja, Mexico, fishing, and when he and Frank walked in through the screen door, Ted looking so big and tan and relaxed, his blond hair gleaming, Jacqueline started to look forward to the weekend, to the three of them spending some quiet time together. Pauli, now a surly fifteen, was going to ride up to Los Angeles with a group of friends for the concert and then spend the night at an aunt's house. Frank had called the aunt to confirm Pauli's plans. Jacqueline had been against the trip. "I don't trust her," she had said to Frank. Frank's attitude was more accepting. "She's a teenager, Jacqueline. Cool down." To Jacqueline, Frank sounded like some new-age guru. He didn't understand how wrong it all felt to her—their lives, everything that happened in the house. Pauli had shaved her hair off above her right ear. Jacqueline could hardly bear to look at her. She dreaded being around her own daughter, yet was anxious when Pauli left the house. Still, part of Jacqueline felt relieved that Friday afternoon when Pauli got into the car with her friends and they all drove away.

She breathed the relief out in a sigh as she finished washing the home-grown lettuce she had traded for avocados earlier in the day. Ted was sitting at the breakfast table, a bottle of tequila and a bottle mescal in front of him. He had bought them before crossing back over the border. Ted said, "It's just a haircut, Jacqueline."

By the time they finished dinner Jacqueline and Frank and Ted had worked their way through half the bottle of mescal. Frank and Ted had been at the Stones' Altamont concert in 1969. Drinking shots made the remembering all the more vivid. While Jacqueline and Ted did the dishes, Frank dug out all his old Stones albums from 1966 and '67 and '68. Pretty soon "My Sweet Lady Jane" and "Back Door Girl" and

The Woman Who Lives in the Avocado Grove

"Ruby Tuesday" blared out from the living room speakers. Shot glasses in hand, the three of them sang along with Mick Jagger. They sang at the top of their lungs. For the first time in years, Jacqueline actually lived for a few hours without Pauli haunting her. She looked at Frank and felt turned on. She started twirling around the room. Frank and Ted followed her—the three of them dervishes spinning toward some moment of clarity. They emptied the bottle of mescal and ended up dividing the worm three ways, each eating their piece solemnly, like a sacrament.

Just before dawn Frank led them to the highest point on the property, up to where the trees that made the best avocados stood. Ted picked a tree (he said the tree picked him) and they all climbed up into it. Jacqueline, the lightest, stood on the highest and thinnest branch. She hadn't, in years, looked beyond, hadn't really seen a whole landscape. She felt herself open up inside, hard crusts peeling away, as the three of them, there in the branches, watched the sun rise up over the valley.

After Jacqueline turns the rainbird off, she decides to take a shower, wash her hair before Frank comes over for lunch. She looks at herself in the mirror. With the end of a finger, she smooths out the skin around her eyes. She notices that her lips are getting thinner, her nose broader. In the bedroom, after pulling a comb through her wet hair, Jacqueline finds a pair of clean jeans in the dresser, and a blouse, an ironed one, in the closet. She looks out the window, into the avocado trees, as she dresses.

Jacqueline used to love the trees with their hearty leaves, their long, elegant limbs, and that fruit, tender and seamless. And she used to love the house too. In the summer there was no better place to be in the valley than in this house, cooled by the air under that canopy of green. A little breeze would blow through and the house would swell with the sweetest scents—just hints of earth and trunk, and sometimes, late in the afternoon, a trace of alfalfa, especially if Old Man Walker had watered recently. And Pauli was growing tall and strong. Her kindergarten teacher called her a rebellious child, but this didn't worry Jacqueline. A little rebellion never hurt anyone.

By the time Pauli was seven years old, Jacqueline was driving one hundred miles a day to a special private school for difficult children in Escondido. The counselor at the local grammar school had recommended the institution. Pauli simply made no effort to get along with her peers, her teachers, with anyone. And at home, Jacqueline knew, Pauli refused to participate. At meal-times she wouldn't eat if Jacqueline or Frank insisted she use a fork or spoon or knife, and she could go without food longer than either of her parents could refuse her. And sometimes a day or two would pass when Pauli wouldn't utter a word. Jacqueline's feelings started wrapping around themselves, becoming tangled. Every time she tried to think about Pauli, every time she tried to plan a talk with her, she found herself helplessly confused, up against some wall inside herself that she could not get over. Frank wanted to help Jacqueline; he insisted that somehow the two of them could survive anything—that nothing could stop them as long as they were together. But part of Jacqueline lived behind a barrier, in the dark, with her mother, in the cloudy childhood corners, in the time before the

ANYONE IS POSSIBLE

tumor slowly compressed her mother's brain and turned her wicked. Jacqueline would not discuss this though, not with Frank, not with a psychiatrist, not with anyone.

Pauli came home from The Rolling Stones concert with a tattoo on her arm—a large rose with “I love Mick” in script beneath it. Jacqueline went crazy when she first saw it, some three weeks after the concert. She happened to walk into Pauli's room one afternoon while Pauli was changing her clothes. Pauli tried to hide the scabby mess on her arm. She said, “You didn't knock.” When Jacqueline started screaming and hitting Pauli, Pauli laughed at her. By the time Pauli disappeared she had two more tattoos: a snake around her ankle, and a tear rolling down her cheek.

Jacqueline hears Frank's truck rattling its way up the drive. By the time she gets back to the kitchen, Frank, tall and as thin as he was in Berkeley, is standing in front of the work bench talking to Miguel. When Jacqueline opens the back door, Frank turns, as if sensing her. He waves. “I'll be right in.”

Today is Pauli's twenty-first birthday. It is the fifth time Jacqueline and Frank have celebrated the day alone. Yesterday Jacqueline picked up a cake at the bakery, a small one. Frank will come inside in a few minutes. They will make tuna fish sandwiches and share a beer as they eat them. Then they will have the cake. Together, they will cry. Frank will hold Jacqueline and kiss her hair and they will feel themselves break again.

This is the last birthday Frank wants to celebrate. He will tell Jacqueline this as he gives her a present, a picture of Pauli in a silver frame. Pauli will be fourteen years old in the photograph. She will not be smiling, but will look beautiful.

Frank and Jacqueline will sit together, without speaking, for a little while, and then Frank will leave and as he leaves Frank will take the rest of the birthday cake out to Miguel and Miguel will eat it in the shade behind the shed. Later, Jacqueline will take the picture in the silver frame to her bedroom. She will stand it next to the one of her mother.

That night, in a dream, Jacqueline will find herself in a fantastic palace. She will be the tattooed woman, every inch of her body covered in an exotic design. When she looks out the leaded windows, she will see her trees, their trunks covered with tattoos like her own. She will walk out to them and stand, like a goddess, arms raised, chin high. When the wind blows, the grove will swell with the sweetest smells.

For years people in the valley will whisper about the woman who lives in the avocado grove.