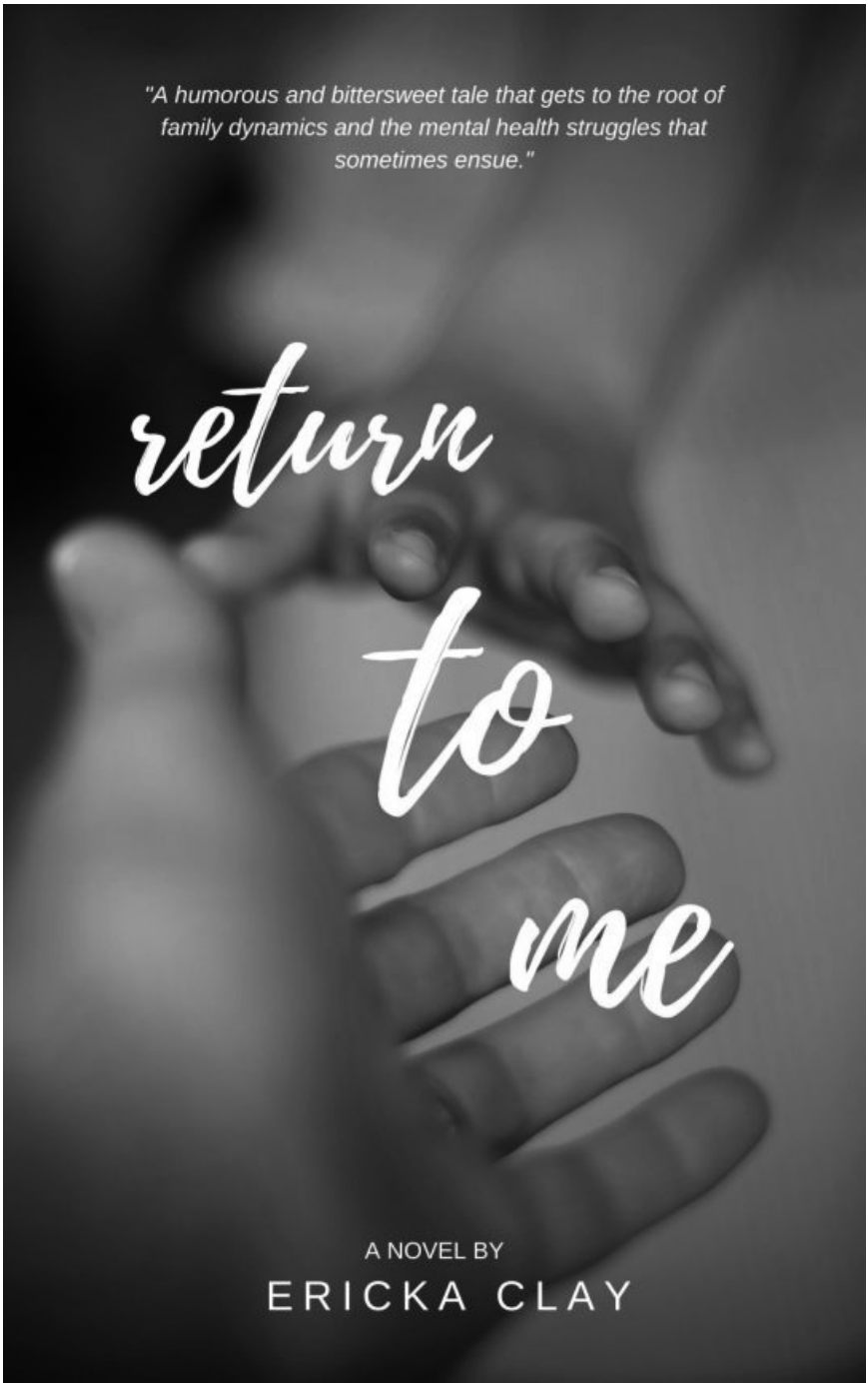
"A humorous and bittersweet tale that gets to the root of family dynamics and the mental health struggles that sometimes ensue."
return to me
A NOVEL BY
ERICKA CLAY

Return to Me

A Novel

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To all the mothers and daughters, and the God who loves them all.

"I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Isaiah 44:22

The Great American Novel

Hellie

"It's not...bad."

"Oh, great. What a relief."

"Don't– don't do that, Hel. You know these things take time," Brent says, quietly reviewing all that he's observed about empathy and attempting to offer it in his glance.

"Ah, got it. I was thinking six years was enough, but there I go again, prancing around through fairy land..."

"Done with the dramatics?" Brent looks at me again, this time like he's done since we were kids. Well, actually, he was a kid, I was sixteen, faux-mothering a five-year-old who had somehow managed a crash course in street smarts between leaving the womb and entering kindergarten. I, on the other hand, have never had much need for mothering, which is a good thing since I had to practically raise Daisy, too.

Daisy. Something leaps in my heart like I've left the kettle burning on the stove or forgot to feed the dog (neither of which I actually own. Tea is disgusting, and I like dogs...but I would probably forget to feed one). But then my system settles down when I realize Daisy died months ago, and I don't have to rap on her front door until she finally wakes up or listen to her talk to me like we're two strangers waiting for a bus. I find a calm, a peace in that. But I also find something beneath those things that begins to boil.

"I imagine Fogerty would act a lot like you, you know...if he were humanoid." Brent takes a sip of his doctored "coffee" – a poor excuse for the beans that died for this concoction of cold cream and enough Splenda to

make a grown man weep. Fortunately, Brent is far from one of those, so he can't even taste the irony.

"Somehow, I take that as an honor and privilege, good sir," I say. Fogerty is Brent's dog, one of those animals that you forget isn't somehow biologically related to you and fully capable of giving you advice on your 401k. He's more cat than canine, slowly moving about Brent's studio apartment in a way that suggests he's the one who pays the rent, and it's only out of the goodness of his heart that my brother has shelter from the elements.

Brent would definitely never forget to feed Fogerty because he values his existence.

"And Fogerty would act nothing like me," I add. "He has more sense than to write a 'not entirely palatable' novel for nearly a decade of his life."

"I didn't call it 'not entirely palatable.' And no, no, he wouldn't." Brent is gazing off over my right shoulder, staring at what I assume is an unsuspecting person in one of the booths behind me. It's something I had to get on to him growing up. He's on the spectrum or ADHD (or both, maybe), but it wasn't exactly something that was overly diagnosed back in the day, and even if it were, we were never in the financial situation to come close to broaching the subject. Not to mention mentally capable of handling the logistics with Daisy pretending to steer our ship.

My heart leaps again and rattles against my ribs. I settle it down with slow sips of breath from some meditation video I found on YouTube. It typically works...until it doesn't.

"Shouldn't we be celebrating 'small wins' or something just as nonsensical nowadays?" Brent says. He gives me his version of a warm smile–one part maniacal, two parts strained and then goes back to studying whatever it is that's captured his attention behind my left shoulder.

You did good, *Hellie*, I imagine him saying to me. But it's stupid, I know, to expect anyone to change.

The Defective Bin

Daisy

There's nothing worse in this life than a woman.

It was my father's mantra that played like a warped record in my head whenever Helene was born. I didn't even like that name, Helene, but it was the name of the nurse they gave me, who was pretty terrible, but there's something about delivering a watermelon through the wrong end of you that zaps all imagination.

But with Brent? It was something different.

Beautiful, really.

I've always admired men. I mean, not my father (or Brent's father either for that matter), but I never looked at him like a representative of his gender. Carson was one of the outliers, the kind on the conveyor belt that the factory workers threw into the "defective" bin.

And he was the only parent I ever knew. If that's not typical, I don't know what is.

I wanted to be different for my children. I didn't want to be like the man who once tried to kill my bunny because it was looking at him the wrong way. I wanted to love them so fiercely, they'd never worry that one day, I'd just up and leave them like he left me.

Sixteen, alone in that shanty of a house.

I wanted them to know the warmth of another person who has all their faculties and doesn't blame the world for everything they lack.

I wanted Helene to know, it's not so bad being a girl, and one day, a woman.

I wanted, wanted, wanted.

But you can't change what you are.

Peeled Grapes

Hellie

Brent invites me to his apartment after coffee. I know it's part of his program, and I'm quietly proud of him for practicing the tools they're teaching him at the MLK. They offer group sessions at the Martin Luther King Community Center two blocks over from Brent's apartment, and he goes there regularly (for the stale coffee and day-old donuts, as he says). And I'm proud when he remembers to be courteous, but I don't say it out loud.

It's just not something we do.

"Hello there, Fogerty, my good man." Fogerty is perched up on "his chair," fully embracing his genetics and giving off incredibly fierce chihuahua-mix vibes. He's rotund and pointy-eared, and you'd think I was meeting the president himself with how he gives me a soft look of pity coupled with just a hint of arrogance.

"He's not himself today. I forgot to get the wet food."

"Well heaven forbid," I say, skirting around Fogerty's chair to the peasant's quarters on the couch. I've been here a handful of times since Brent moved in, mainly to carry up his crap from the first floor to the third when he was moving in and also that one time he panicked and jumped ship for a few days . I found it in my heart during that time to feed Fogerty, who you would think would still be grateful that I didn't let him starve, but alas, he has an incredibly short memory.

"So how are classes?" I ask. Brent is in his kitchen, a metallic, open-concept configuration that reminds me of an operating room. He takes out a container of individually portioned peeled grapes and forgets to offer me any. I'm thankfully relieved.

"Good. I have a friend. She's a girl." He mumbles the last part, stuffing grapes into his mouth to muffle the sound. This is where I have to do my nonchalant face so that I don't scare him into celibacy forever.

"Oh, that's neat," I say to one of the throw pillows I'm not allowed to touch. I just recently got promoted to peasant couch, and I don't want to wear out my welcome. I wait for him to say something, anything about this mystery woman who has an affinity for a man who eats peeled foods and keeps a dog with the subtle air of a war lord, but in true Brent fashion, he just chews and vacuously stares.

"And now...?"

"And now...?" Brent repeats, slowly moving his lips in a way that makes me feel like Annie Sullivan trying to break through to Helen.

"Remember what they taught you about reciprocation?"

"Oh," he says, putting down his half-eaten grape and wiping his hands with one-half sheet of paper towel. "And, might I ask, how have you been?"

"Other than the book, not too shabby. Pearl just got a new A/C unit." This has literally been the highlight of my week, my month – nay – my year. My elderly landlord/BFF forever just bought a state-of-the-art Fleischman's 2000 wall unit and has anchored that bad boy in the downstairs living room window. That's all you need to know about Pearl – that she's the kind of person who could have kept that thing hidden in her own bedroom, but instead, made sure to share its glorious gusts with her single, middle-aged tenant who likes to pretend she hasn't watched every single episode of *The Golden Girls*.

I'd probably let her read my diary if I had one.

"And..." Brent pauses, studying a half-eaten grape harder than anyone probably ever has in all of history. "How is Pearl?" he manages to force out. I almost ask if he needs to sit down for a second.

"She's good," I lie. Things have gotten a little more complicated for Pearl. Her COPD is the worst it's been and her son, "The Insurance Agent," is off somewhere in the Bahamas while I make sure his poor mother doesn't cough up a lung. It's unfair, this life. Here this dude has the whole world in a woman like Pearl, and he treats her like he probably does waitstaff. And my own – Daisy – would have never shared her air conditioner, if she had even thought to buy one in the first place.

Brent has his concerned face on, and I know it's because my worry lines are boasting again. I do my best to smooth them out and smile.

"Well, this has been exceptional. Thank you for the invite." I've been here all of seven minutes, but that's seven minutes in dog years for Brent who looks like he's spontaneously combusting from the inside.

"Oh, yes. Yes, we should do this again," he says, extending his hand mechanically. I take it. It's a bit limp, but I can tell he's been forced to practice it at the MLK. Thank the gods for those beautiful souls who give up their Saturdays to teach my brother to be halfway human.

"See ya, Fogerty," I say. His little chihuahua head perks up but then he gives an annoyed sigh when he discovers it's just me again. I take leave of Brent's apartment complex, the insides as sterile as Brent's kitchen, thankful that I at least have my brother. And you know, I have Pearl too. *It could be worse*, I think, and then I do that thing where I start considering everything I could add to my life to make it more "robust": a goldfish, a knitting club, a boyfriend with the unflappable presence of my brother's dog...

And just like that I'm out on the sidewalk in the late morning light, getting the eerie feeling that somebody is staring at me. And somebody is. A cat.

Bottle Caps

Daisy

The first time I learned about women, I was three years old. My mother had been gone for about a year by then, but I don't remember registering that. I did register, however, sitting with my father in his recliner, he with a bottle of PBR in one hand and a postcard from her in the other, as I balanced my tiny body on the armrest.

"Dayton," he said and snorted, taking a strong sip from his bottle. I looked at the postcard. There was a big red building on it with cars parked under its sides like Mother Ginger lifting up her skirts, welcoming back her little Polichinelle children. Of course, at the time, I hadn't endured hours of torture with the Arkansas Civic Ballet and had no idea what Mother Ginger was, let alone the *Nutcracker*. And being three, I couldn't process that this motel was what my mother had left me for.

"She's cleaning up other people's shit, but soon enough, she's going to be the local weather girl. Look at you having a fancy mama like that." He was in a good mood because he was drinking and because he was making fun of her. And maybe because he was making fun of me also, but it hadn't become official yet. It wouldn't be until years later when I did stupid things like not grow breasts in time or drive into our garage door at fourteen, practicing for my driver's permit.

I thought about the woman on the other side of that card for so many years later. The day he split, he benevolently gave it to me as a gift, the backside down on the kitchen table so I could read her tangled writing. Did she look like me or me, her? Did she ever become a weather girl? What's so great about an invisible dream when you're given all the flesh and blood you could ever really want?

He snorted again, rested the motel postcard on my leg, and poured a small amount of beer into his bottle cap. "A toast," he said, lifting bottle and cap, one in each hand. I studied him as he did it, seeing something beneath the deadening happiness in his eyes, something that maybe could have told me who he used to be before I ever knew him, his own three-year-old version who had once been tiny and small and prone to the whims of all who claimed a part of his life.

"To Jackie, our own little hometown nobody. May she get where she's going or strike us all dead." He put the cap to my lips, and I sensed the beer like a cat at its bowl, its scent strange, and watched my father gulp down all the things just as invisible as Jackie's dream – his fears, regrets, an underlying sense of never being enough.

And I drank down mine too.

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