

“Impeccably researched and detailed, a triumph!”

—Ashley E. Sweeney, author of *Eliza Waite*

The
Path Beneath
Her Feet
A Novel



JANIS ROBINSON DALY

For my parents, who came of age during the Great Depression
and served upon the seas and at the home front during World War II.

The Greatest Generation.

Their history is ours. Let us not forget it. Let us learn from it.

*The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost,
to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.*

Eleanor Roosevelt

PART I
CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1936

Boston, Massachusetts

“I’m sorry, Dr. Edwards.”

Seated across the desk from the hospital administrator, Eliza Edwards stared into Dr. Miles’s steel-gray eyes. His blank expression offered no sympathy.

“Surely, you must understand. The Peter Bent Brigham Hospital cannot add a position to our payrolls in this economic climate,” he said, running his index finger down a list of names and dates. He shook his head in defeat. “I’ve double-checked. No one is retiring this year from the maternity ward. Dr. Gallagher’s date is closest, although he may decline. He may be unable to give up his wages. He lost a great deal in ’29 and I’ve heard his daughter and her four children moved in at Christmas.”

Eliza sighed with an audible groan. *I’m sorry*. That short phrase had become a constant refrain as it reverberated around the country and in her ears over the past six months. *I’m sorry*, said every administrator she spoke with about a position. *I’m sorry*, said the landlord as he reminded Eliza that she and Olga Povitsky owed rent on their office space. *I’m sorry*, replied the druggist when Eliza asked him to reduce his prices on prescriptions that she wrote for her patients who struggled to buy groceries, let alone a month’s supply of pills to ease menopausal symptoms.

Eliza stood. She should have worn higher heels, not for the extra femininity they would present, but for a taller stature they could provide than her five feet two inches. Although she doubted that even an Amazon woman standing before Dr. Miles could alter the facts on his staff sheet. She offered her hand. “I’m sorry, too, Dr. Miles. I believe my years of experience would be a great asset to the Brigham.”

As Eliza headed toward the door, Dr. Miles’s voice halted her reach for the glass knob. “I’ve a thought. It’s radical, but I have enough sway around here to make an exception.”

Eliza turned to hear his idea. At this point, she could manage radical.

“Every year, like clockwork, it happens,” he continued. “Our new hires, with the ink barely dry on their certificates, find themselves with a diamond on their fingers soon after, which means many of them disappear off to birthing their own children before they get started. I realize you’re married, but we could make an exception given, well, I don’t suppose you’d be coming in to announce a pregnancy?”

Her eyebrows shot up as he suggested her child-bearing years had passed. She had taken great care to conceal her fifty-seven years. She had fought enough battles in her life to prove her abilities as a woman. She didn’t need to pile on proof she still had all her faculties about her.

Dr. Miles’s face colored to the same red as the bowtie at his chin. “Would you consider a nursing position?”

Eliza’s cheeks flared to match his, not from embarrassment, but from fury. She doubted that he offered the same alternative to the young man, with his freshly minted Harvard degree, whom she had met in the waiting area.

“As I said, Dr. Miles, thank you for your time. However, may I remind you, again, I hold a degree from the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania and have run a successful private practice with Dr. Povitsky. I am a doctor. I intend to remain one for many more years.”

She wasn’t sorry.

* * *

The day following her meeting with Dr. Miles, Eliza stood on the stoop of her office. The pale buds on the cherry trees lining Irving Street pressed against their bound petals, waiting. Spring in Boston seems to arrive later and later every year, Eliza thought. Perhaps the season also felt the defeatism which hung in the air and infected the walls of American homes and workplaces. A light breeze sent the sign over her head into a sway. For sixteen years, the sign’s lettering had welcomed women to step inside the office of Edwards & Povitsky. When had she and Olga last repainted the black lacquer for a fresh shine?

Eliza’s knotted fingers, which had soothed countless foreheads of women in the grips of labor, stroked a rabbit’s matted white fur to settle it in the crook of her arms. A highly unusual form of payment by a patient, Eliza had relented and accepted the rabbit when Mrs. Luchetti succumbed to a public plea on the sidewalk. Eliza pushed the door open. Their office space in Olga’s apartment remained stocked with supplies of their trade. Thermometers, sanitary pads,

blood pressure cuffs, speculums, and womb veils, or diaphragms as women now preferred their prescription sheets read. Syringes, sponges, and gauze lay in neat piles. Dark blue and brown bottles of morphine, chloroform, and ether stood capped in rows behind locked glass cabinet doors like soldiers awaiting orders. She took down a sterile porcelain bowl with a red rim from the top of the cabinet. The rabbit would fit. If she wasn't scrubbing her own hands for an examination, she might as well use the bowl as a rabbit bathtub.

Strands of gray hair fell from her up-do. Her battle to retain her natural auburn tresses had ceased a year ago. Eliza finger-waved the loose hairs back into place. The door swung open. Olga ambled through the entrance. She sized Eliza up and down and stopped on the white bundle in Eliza's arms.

"What in God's name?" Olga said.

Eliza lifted her chin to the ceiling. What new reprimand would Olga snort this time? Bringing her head back to an even level, Eliza turned to Olga. "It's a rabbit," she said.

"I can see that. But what is it doing here?"

"Don't worry, I don't need your help. Mrs. Luchetti caught up with me on the sidewalk just now. Poor thing. She's been beside herself, not paying for her last two appointments. I couldn't turn it down when she thrust it into my arms, pleading if I'd take it as partial payment. How could I say no?"

"Easy. 'Mrs. Luchetti, like everyone else, we need fees paid in cash. The electric company, nor the Medical Board, will accept payment in the form of rabbit stew.'"

"Stew? I'm not boiling this sweet creature in the bowl. I only mean to clean it up, tie a ribbon around its neck, and give it to the grand nieces and nephews for Easter."

Olga tossed her briefcase to a side table and plopped into her desk chair. The indents on the worn leather inset matched her form. Resting her chin on the heels of her hands, she massaged her temples in rhythmic circles. Since 1929, the creases in the corners of her eyes had deepened. She drew her lips in, tight and motionless. Eliza settled into her matching chair after depositing the rabbit on the floor. With a twitch of its nose, it set off to explore the vastness of a room after a life spent piled in a hutch.

Olga extended her hand across the expanse of the two desks. "Eliza. My dear, my innocent *podruga*. Mrs. Luchetti had no intention of that rabbit wearing a pink bow. She wanted

to pay you with something she thought would be valuable, putting a meal on your table the way she does.”

As year after year unfolded since the Great Crash, a hearty meal became an all-consuming task for millions of families like the Luchettis. Unemployment rates matched the lengths of soup lines and numbers of shanties erected under highway overpasses and along riverbanks of outlying towns alike. Eliza picked up the pen laying across the appointment calendar. Blank spaces covered the page. Before 1930, names had filled the weeks, giving Edwards & Povitsky busy days and frequent nights at the hospitals for deliveries. She rolled the pen between her fingers. From its nib, she had inked prescriptions and care instructions. Women who entered their office desired not only medical professionals but also the empathy and sympathy which only women doctors could provide. Their trust in Eliza and Olga never failed them.

Now, if a pregnancy or ailment required a medical professional, women sought midwives or checked into hospitals when a situation became dire. Eliza understood a decreasing ability to pay private practice fees. But, when she probed one patient about a canceled appointment, her sympathy dissolved, hearing that the woman’s husband refused to pay a woman doctor’s fees. If he made any payment, those monies would go to a male doctor, the head of a household like himself, trying to support his family. Eliza could offer no rebuttal. She and Olga carried no such responsibilities.

“I know Mrs. Luchetti’s intent, Olga,” Eliza snapped. “For just a moment, I guess I slipped into a place where rabbits hop about as a child’s pet. Or a Nivens McTwisp.”

Even at fifty-seven years old, Eliza would often reference her favorite childhood book. The copy sat on the bottom shelf of their bookcase, its gold lettering on the red leather spine and cover erased by thousands of children’s fingers. While Eliza and Olga treated and counseled their mothers, the children flipped the pages, their fingertips gliding along the lines as Lewis Carroll’s adventures carried them to a land of rabbit holes, tea parties, and a screeching queen playing croquet.

“We’d all like to escape from the mess around us. But I’m afraid, despite what your fine President Roosevelt says every day on his campaign stump, that day is not around the corner. It’s not down the street, past the Charles River, and out into the countryside of Acton. It’s nowhere, just like this office. A hole as dark and unending as Alice’s but without secret potions to change

our predicament. It's time, Eliza. We must discuss the date we'll announce my departure. I've barely seen a client in two years, and I doubt any request me over you. We owe them full disclosure of the state of the practice."

Eliza closed her eyes, their ocean blue deepening as a storm roiled. Mimicking Olga, she rubbed the crevices around her eyes and forehead. Olga's leaving and closing their office weighed on Eliza with a dull ache in her heart. She shouldn't be surprised. The mechanics of change had crept into their lives with the darkness of the depression. By 1933, when every month brought more closed business doors, a steep decline in patient counts sent Olga in search of another source of employment.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, keenly aware of the impact of polio, mandated his New Deal would include additional funding for overburdened public health departments. Infections invaded the masses as hunger wormed its way through empty bellies, taking advantage of weakened immune systems. Pellagra, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and pertussis ravaged the young and the old. Poliomyelitis outbreaks claimed limbs and lives every summer. As a result, Olga had found a part-time position at Boston's Department of Health, where she buried her head amidst slides, petri dishes, microscopes, and copious notes in the solitude of research. Her extra wages covered their rent and kept the sign swinging outside their door.

Eliza opened her eyes. Throughout the years of assisting her patients in the last stages of labor, she had taught how controlled breathing could calm the mind. She inhaled deeply. The suspension of her exhale compelled the tension in her neck and shoulder to exit when she released the slow stream from her mouth. "I know, Olga. I know. We, or rather, I, have delayed the announcement. It's hard to admit a loss," Eliza murmured.

"We can't call it a defeat. Look at how long we've stayed open. How many women have we tended to over the past sixteen years, giving them the care and respect they may not have found elsewhere? We've done a remarkable job. I haven't lost. Neither have you, neither have they. We took nothing for granted. We've won, Eliza." She gathered a stack of papers strewn across her desk, tapped them into a neat stack, and headed to her bedroom off the back of the office.

The sense of loss enveloped Eliza on a personal level, not a professional one. She would miss her confidante, her classmate, her partner, her sister. Only Olga could lift Eliza's spirits and dress down her worries. In three weeks, Olga would board a train at South Station, heading to a

spare bedroom in her sister's home, and a full-time position with the New York Department of Public Health in Manhattan. She had plans for a new beginning. Eliza had none.

Although the Boston hospitals hired a select few women for their residency positions each year, the administrators would scoff at an application from a woman thirty-five years out of medical school. A woman in medicine presented enough challenges. A box on an application form filled in with the number fifty-seven, male or female, would head straight to a corner basket. Thirty-five years of experience crumpled into a ball of worthless waste.

But did Eliza truly need a position? Her few shares in the Edwards Wool Company provided a small income. Her husband, Harrison Shaw, from whom she had separated seventeen years ago, paid for their sons' education and when he moved to Washington, D.C., he gave her their home on Beacon Hill. Despite its empty rooms, it put a roof over her head. While millions suffered and struggled, her basic needs for food and shelter were tended to with relative ease. She should be grateful for her blessings. Why then couldn't she slow her pace like other women her age, content to pick up knitting needles or cross-stitch? Pearl Buck's entire trilogy lay stacked on Eliza's nightstand, its matching leather spines uncracked. An imaginary trip to China in *The Good Earth* could carry her away like when she had escaped as a child with the adventures penned by Jules Verne. Yet, sitting idle by a hearth with a shawl draped over her shoulders never entered an adult Eliza's mind.

Ever since meeting Anandibai Gopal Joshi in the library of the Woman's Medical College when Eliza was a young, directionless, eighteen-year-old, Anandibai had inspired many of Eliza's decisions in life. She adopted the words from Anandibai's application essay as her own. *My soul is moved to help the many who cannot help themselves.* The way to help was to act.

But how? And where?