



WHISKEY
& RIBBONS
LEESA CROSS-SMITH



READING
GUIDE

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR + EXCERPT + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

ON SALE

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WHISKEY & RIBBONS

Set in contemporary Louisville, Leesa Cross-Smith's mesmerizing first novel surrounding the death of a police officer is a requiem for marriage, friendship and family, from an author Roxane Gay has called "a consummate storyteller."

Evi—a classically-trained ballerina—was nine months pregnant when her husband Eamon was killed in the line of duty on a steamy morning in July. Now, it is winter, and Eamon's adopted brother Dalton has moved in to help her raise six-month-old Noah.

Whiskey & Ribbons is told in three intertwining, melodic voices: Evi in present day, as she's snowed in with Dalton during a freak blizzard; Eamon before his murder, as he prepares for impending fatherhood and grapples with the danger of his profession; and Dalton, as he struggles to make sense of his life next to Eamon's, and as he decides to track down the biological father he's never known.

In the vein of Jojo Moyes' *After You*, *Whiskey & Ribbons* explores the life that continues beyond loss, with a complicated brotherly dynamic reminiscent of Elizabeth Strout's *The Burgess Boys*. It's a meditation on grief, hope, motherhood, brotherhood and surrogate fatherhood. Above all, it's a novel about what it means—and whether it's possible—to heal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A PEN Open Book Award Nominee, Leesa Cross-Smith has been a finalist for the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and Iowa Short Fiction Award. She is the author of the short story collection *Every Kiss a War* and lives in Louisville, KY.

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A note from the author

I STARTED WRITING A VERSION OF *WHISKEY & RIBBONS* NOT long before September 11, 2001. I wanted to write a short story about two best friends and a woman who loved them both equally. I also considered writing it as a play and a screenplay, too. After September 11, I couldn't write anymore because the world was too dark, too confusing, too sad. I put the story away, wrote very little and finished college. In 2003, I began writing obituaries for our local newspaper and in 2004, my husband and I welcomed our first baby, our daughter, into the world. I wasn't reading very much and I was writing even less. In 2005, a local police officer was killed and although that thankfully doesn't happen very often around here, the pain and shock of it turned our city upside down with sadness. I was especially attuned to local deaths because of writing obituaries but I was no longer

working at the newspaper—I was a full-time mom. The police officer’s funeral was broadcast live on television. I held my daughter and cried watching the spring rain as Jesus wept. This young man’s funeral, his grieving widow, his family and friends. It was heartbreaking—a senseless, sudden act of violence.

By 2010 I’d had another baby, our son, and was a full-time mom to two children. By the time they were both in school during the days, I decided to put together a collection of short stories and I kept thinking about *Whiskey & Ribbons* and the story I’d abandoned back in 2001. I knew I wanted there to be a smallish cast of characters and I decided to make one of the main characters, Eamon, a police officer and to have him ripped away from his wife and their unborn child, his best friend and adopted brother. And since I love snowed-in stories, I decided to restart the story with the idea that the reader would meet Eamon’s adopted brother, Dalton, and Eamon’s wife, Evangeline, six months after Eamon’s death, during a blizzard that has trapped them inside for the weekend. I decided that Dalton and Evangeline would be snowed in together without Eamon and Evangeline’s six-month-old baby Noah—that Noah would be safe and warm at Evangeline’s parents’ place. I was particularly interested in the idea that Evangeline and Dalton would begin admitting their tricky feelings for one another while attempting to piece their shattered lives back together and move forward, however impossible that seemed. I finished the story and submitted it Carve Magazine’s Raymond Carver Short Story contest and didn’t tell a soul about it besides my husband because I was embarrassed and shy about entering, assured that it wouldn’t win. But it did. It won Editor’s Choice. I included it in my debut short story collection *Every Kiss A War*.

I put *Whiskey & Ribbons* away and wrote two more books. But I never stopped thinking about Eamon and Evangeline and Dalton. In the short story, I’d written from only Evangeline’s point of view but I knew I wanted to write a longer version, including Eamon and Dalton’s points of view as well. I attempted writing Eamon’s obituary first, had to stop and cry into my

hands because killing him felt too real because he had become so real to me and I'd fallen in love with him. Again, I put the book away, unable to finish it, unsure of how to approach it. But one day I was watching *Mozart In The Jungle*, not really even thinking about writing and it occurred to me that I could try writing a novel-length version of *Whiskey & Ribbons* as a piece of music. So I researched fugues...pieces of music with more than one voice. I read a lot about fugues and how composers intertwined voices and how sometimes one voice can drop away and leave the others. I decided to write *Whiskey & Ribbons* as a fugue with three distinct voices, three distinct points of view throughout the course of the novel. And after Eamon's death, only two voices remain.

I wanted the voices to echo one another. There are some phrases that are repeated by all three of the characters. I wanted the reader to know exactly who was speaking even without the header telling them who it was. I wanted the reader to feel equally close and emotionally connected to all three of them. I wanted all three of them to have secrets and rich inner lives. I wanted the reader to get to the last page and feel like they knew these characters, had shared space with them and understood their hearts and actions and motivations. I wanted the book to resemble music because Evangeline is a ballerina and Dalton is a pianist and music is very important to them, a huge part of who they are and who they've always been and it's something they share, together.

More than anything I wanted to do justice to good, flawed, kindhearted people whose lives are broken by trauma and sudden tragedy. A story that can be held up to the light, that shimmers with hope, even in the darkest of circumstances, even under the heaviest fog of grief. I wanted to tell their story with compassion and tenderness and kisses, too. *Whiskey & Ribbons* took a bit shy of two decades to come together properly, but I know in my heart it was worth the wait.

I.

Evangeline Royce

MY HUSBAND EAMON WAS SHOT AND KILLED IN THE LINE of duty while I was sleeping. I was nine months pregnant with our son Noah. Me, a full-bellied cashew in our windows-open bedroom, our summer bed. Eamon heard the call over the police radio—domestic dispute. He was on his way home to me, but decided to swing by the disturbance since he was close. I think of him making the drive, the gentle peachy July morning light illuminating his last moments, his last heartbeat, his last breath. The God glow and invisible shadow of death, haloing him. The kid who shot him was only sixteen. He'd gotten in a fight with his stepdad. The kid jumped from his bedroom window and shot Eamon. Eamon's cop buddy Brian had just parked his patrol car in the grass. He put the kid down.

Brian and another cop came to the house, woke me up. I don't remember walking to the kitchen where Dalton found me, shaking, peeing across the floor like an animal. He came as soon as I called. I don't remember calling but he told me I did. Dalton had been long-adopted by Eamon's parents—they were brothers. Brian and the cop left. Dalton wouldn't leave me.

We cut our hair together the Sunday after the funeral.

Finale.

Da capo. From the beginning.

That was six months ago. Noah is six months old; he is a living, ticking timer for how long Eamon has been gone.

Where did you come from? I ask Noah sometimes. *Where is your daddy?*

But last night.

Da capo.

Dalton and I kissed.

I kissed him.

I kissed Dalton.

He was playing piano and I sat on his lap, facing him. Wine as dark as a dragon's heart was involved, gold-bright whiskey too. We were nearing drunk. We were waiting at the right stop and the drunk train was five minutes away.

Dalton is an exquisite pianist. His mom was a concert pianist, a piano teacher. He can play anything. He played through several songs before deciding on the jangly part of "Piano Man" with hilarious gusto because he knows I like it and Dalton is a natural entertainer. He plays piano as if he's busking for tips and not in our living room, the two of us, alone. I say *our* living room because he lives here now with Noah and me.

Last night it was snowing and snowing and snowing and snowing but before that, it iced. I'd dropped Noah off at my parents as a

twofer. They'd get to spend sweet time with their only grandbaby and I'd get to have some time off from being Mama. On the way home, I got a flat. Luckily, Dalton was driving past and saw me, changed the tire. But before he changed the tire, I rode with him to drop off a girl named Cassidy who comes into B's, the bike shop he owns.

Dalton changed the tire and we came home and made hot chocolate. My mom called, told me the storm was getting worse and I should stay home because it would be safer for Noah to spend the night with them. Deal.

I properly grilled Dalton about Cassidy and whether or not he was into her. He said no. I asked him questions the way only a girl best friend and sister-in-law can and I listened well, even when I was convinced he was lying to me. He said no, but maybe he meant yes.

Grief radiates. Since Eamon was killed, my bones ache with sadness. There is a gritty black tea stain on my heart, every organ.

But sometimes.

Sometimes when I'm with Dalton, sometimes when Noah gives me his biggest smile—*Eamon's smile*—sometimes the tea stain pales. Even when it's quick, even when it comes back darker. I still ache for the lifting. How can I not ache for the lifting?

Cassidy or any other woman could potentially throw a wrench in that lifting. If Dalton leaves us, if Dalton loves her. If Dalton ever loves her more than me, more than us. So yes, I grilled him. And later, I kissed him. It was a kiss of ownership. It was a hot, dripping wax seal. The kiss was a lock and a key. The kiss was a creaky gate in the wind.

At first Dalton wouldn't kiss me back. He stopped playing and looked at me.

"Evangeline," he said.

Sometimes I was Evangeline. Evi. Sometimes, Leeny or Evangeleeny. I was never only E. Eamon was E.

Dalton said my name. I said nothing.

I kissed him again.

He was a sublime kisser once he kissed me back. His kiss was a song. The piano started playing itself with the small of my back, the apple curve of my ass as Dalton repositioned us. *Adagio, discordant*. I was well-trained in classical ballet, taught it to tiny girls and boys who smelled like baby powder and oatmeal, but no—there was no grace here.

I was kissing Dalton Berkeley-Royce in the house I used to live in with my husband Eamon. I was kissing Dalton, my brother-in-law, my friend. *Only*. I'd known him as long as I'd known Eamon because Dalton and Eamon were a package deal and everyone knew it. Dalton's mom died when he was in middle school. After that, he was raised by the Royces, with Eamon. I knew their history as if it were my own. Eamon was mine, Dalton was his. Dalton and I were always close. He was my brother from the moment I married Eamon and now Eamon was gone. Disappeared. Dead. I was a widow—a word so ghostly and hollow, a word that *should've* been a palindrome but wasn't, those w's with their arms stretched wide, begging for mercy.

I wanted to grow wings and fly into Dalton's mouth, scratch and claw both of us, bleed inside him. Teardrop-spill all over him like honey. The snow was still falling. Falling still. The house, quiet. Lilac mint whiskey kisses. Heartbeat-breaths. Thrumming piano strings, slowing. Slower. *Nocturne*.

Dalton pulled away. I didn't. He put his hands on my shoulders, hot-pink heat flashed my cheeks. The fireplace clicked.

"Let's talk about this first," he said.

I shook my head no and kissed him again, saw the glitter sizzle and spark when I closed my eyes.

Caesura.

The phone rang.

My mom. Making sure we weren't out driving in the snowstorm, making sure I was safe at home like I said I was. I was paranoid I'd mention something about the kissing. Accidentally say the

word *mouth* out of place or mention Dalton's tongue. Dalton's lips. They weren't Eamon's. Eamon's mouth was fuller. He had a bottom lip I could've chewed on for a week. I could still feel it between my teeth. Eamon was gone forever, but he was everywhere. How did that happen? I even heard his sea-god timbres in the blue of Noah's cry.

I had my mom put Noah's ear to the phone so I could tell him goodnight. When the call was over, I covered my face and cried.

"Heyheyheyhey," Dalton said quietly, like he always did. As if he could stop me, catch me before the tears took off, pause it all before I rained.

But it didn't work.

I rained and rained and rained because it's what I do. I've gotten good at it. Rain Queen.

I tried to catch my breath, but couldn't. Dalton went into the kitchen to get me a glass of water and I slid down the living room wall and rained more.

Dalton crouched to be closer to me, his long legs, his knees spread wide.

"Evi, drink this. Glass of water. I put lemon in it. Drink a little for me, please?" he said calmly. Also something else he always did. Especially when I wandered during the space between.

The space between: there were sixteen days between Eamon's death and Noah's birth, as if their spirits had spent those sixteen days together in the sky, an airy boys' club somewhere I couldn't reach. They rested for sixteen bars—sixteen bars of music transposed into sixteen thick, dark days that felt like sixteen *hundred* endless nights—*au repos*.

Backyard-wandering, full-moon pregnant in my turquoise maternity dress and tobacco-colored cowboy boots, I'd lose my way. Dalton would find me. He was always finding me. He'd try to lure me inside with lemon water, with sticky, stinky cheeses or a small green bowl of almonds, the darkest chocolate chips. He would

shake the bowl, like I was a kitten waiting to hear the rattle of food. Once inside, I'd get in bed and sleep for hours, usually waking up to Dalton making food or cleaning or working on a bike in the garage. Sometimes he'd put down towels and work on a bike in the living room, the TV or music turned down low so he wouldn't wake me. He became my protector, *our* protector, Noah still womb-safe and warm.

The wandering didn't happen so much after Noah was born. Noah grounded me. Kept me still. A welcomed weight.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What were your expectations before starting this book?
- Do you think Evangeline and Dalton would've kissed if not for being snowed in? Do you think the circumstances leaned themselves to this action, or do you think Evangeline had been thinking about this before?
- Dalton carries a lot of the emotional burden in the book, perhaps even more than Evangeline. What do you think about how he handles his emotions?
- Do you think Dalton and Frances were truly in love at any point?
- Do you think it was wrong of Eamon to keep Calvin's secret from Dalton? What reasons can you think of for why Eamon did so?
- Do you see Eamon as more dominant in his and Dalton's relationship? Do you seem them as equals?
- How do you think Eamon would feel about Evangeline and Dalton deciding to be together?
- How do you think Evangeline and Dalton should handle telling Noah that Dalton is his biological uncle? What would you do in that situation?
- Do you think Evangeline and Dalton will stay happily married? Why or why not?
- If you could ask the author one question about *Whiskey & Ribbons*, what would it be?

INTERESTED
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