

FREEFALL

A Divine Comedy

A NOVEL BY
LILY IONA MACKENZIE

SAN FRANCISCO, CA
1999

TILLIE DECONSTRUCTS HER FEARS

Tillie woke to another overcast morning in San Francisco, rattled by the dream image of her old friend Daddy wasting away in a jail cell. Burrowing deeper under the covers, she tried to ignore a tiny flicker of panic in her stomach. She'd lived with this low-grade anxiety for years, a tiger prowling the edge of her consciousness, ready to pounce. Her cash wasn't flowing—her latest artist grant hadn't come through yet—and the rent was due in a few days. She needed to find a new roommate or else get a smaller place. Her golden years didn't look promising.

No wonder she was thinking more about her youth, longing to reclaim it. Almost sixty, she'd sooner look backward than forward. Even her dreams offered up images of her late teens and twenties. The latest was an image of her friend Daddy in trouble. Daddy's original name was Darilyn, but her friends renamed her because Daddy had more zip. She and Daddy talked on the phone and exchanged letters now and then, but they hadn't seen each other all that much over the years.

Tillie dreamed of her often, though. It was always a variation on the same theme: her old friend was in the clink and it was up to Tillie to get her out. She was savvy enough to realize that the imprisoned Daddy could be some facet of Tillie that was locked up and wasting away, but she hadn't figured out why she was imprisoned or how to free her.

Tillie threw back the covers and climbed out of bed, bending and stretching to loosen her limbs. Pretending to draw a sword from its sheath

LILY IONA MACKENZIE

on her hip, she parried with unseen foes on the way to the bathroom, refusing to let her fears get the best of her. She reminded herself she still had good health, she loved life, and she was resourceful. Something would turn up. It always did.

Bladder emptied, face washed, teeth brushed, and ready to meet the day, Tillie turned on her favorite jazz station and danced her way into the kitchen, stopping to make coffee. She poured it into a mug, added milk, dropped in two teaspoons of sugar, stirred vigorously, and glided over to her favorite perch, a burgundy brushed-velvet wingback she had picked up at the Salvation Army. Her command center, the phone sat on the table next to the chair, her sketchpad nearby so she could jot down ideas for her installations.

How the later stage in life got labeled “golden” remained beyond her. Pewter made more sense. All that dull drabness. So far her current phase had been anything but golden. Tillie was poor. She didn’t have a permanent partner. She was still a nomad. And her work as an installation artist hadn’t given her the prominence she’d sought. She also seemed to be experiencing the identity crisis she had skipped in her teens.

Yet Tillie didn’t color her hair. There was no point. In spite of everything, she’d still be in her late fifties. Trying desperately to fool the world, she couldn’t say sixty. That fast-approaching milestone weighed her down. What she wanted was a completely new body.

It was why she refused to try things some women did to fend off age: Botox, face-lifts, body tucks. There was always something the doctors missed; she couldn’t remove all of the evidence. Tillie had read they even could give new life to a sagging vagina, the first giveaway, unless you had sworn off men. Even now, they were the only game in town—that is, when she could find an available one who could still get it up.

A late bloomer in all ways, Tillie also might be late for her own death. If she were lucky.

The phone shattered Tillie’s reflections. Whenever it rang, she feared the worst: her mother, May, had croaked. At ninety-four, she was still feisty—her arms dripping with multi-colored bracelets, face powdered and rouged, lips painted bright orange, earlobes drooping under the weight of

FREEFALL: *A Divine Comedy*

gold earrings, white hair tinted with blue streaks. So far, May could care for her one-bedroom triplex in Calgary on her own. She did the laundry, cleaned, and cooked her meals, as independent as she ever was. Most days she took the bus uptown and hung out at the Canadian Legion and other haunts that Tillie hadn't quite sorted out.

Tillie picked up the phone. "Mother?"

"I'm lonely. It's no fun being on my own. I miss Fred. At least he was a warm body to sleep with. I don't even have a cat anymore."

"I know what you mean. I didn't think I'd miss Frank."

"That jerk! You're lucky he's taken a powder. Permanently, I hope."

"Jeez, Mum. I thought you liked him."

"He wasn't my type. Too arty."

"If you're lonely, visit me. I'll scrape up airfare."

"You're always busy with your work. Anyway, the things you make give me the creeps."

"Thanks. I *love* your honesty."

"Well, I won't lie to you. That's why I won't visit."

"Maybe it's time to move to an assisted living place."

"Maybe it isn't."

The phone went dead. Tillie stared at it. May always had a way with words.

Their relationship wasn't flooded with love and goodwill. If it overflowed with anything, it was resentment and hostility, on both sides. The more guilt Tillie felt for having such responses to her mother, the more she resented her. She couldn't get away from the voice that hammered at her daily: *You should be spending more time with your mum. She's ninety-four. She could go any minute.* But there had been too many abandonments. Too many hurts. Too many unspoken words that were now irrecoverable and barred better communication.

The word "bar" reminded Tillie of Daddy being in the clink. The dream image intruded on her thoughts, blotting out May. Perhaps talking to her friend on the phone would shake loose some ideas of what the dream meant. She set down her coffee mug, looked up Daddy's Miami phone number in the dog-eared address book, and punched in the numbers on her blue Princess receiver.

LILY IONA MACKENZIE

While she waited for the phone to ring, Tillie thought of Sibyl and Moll, two other friends from the late '50s. They had all called themselves the Four Muskrateers. Naming themselves after a close relative to Canada's beaver made them feel patriotic.

Daddy answered the phone and Tillie asked, "What's a muskrat have that a beaver doesn't?"

"Tillie! I was just thinking of you," Daddy shrieked.

"You didn't answer."

"Softer fur!"

"You've won the first round in Double Jeopardy."

"It's great to hear your voice—where are you?"

"Not sure. Getting older has me in a tizzy. You know, all of us Muskrateers will be sixty in 2000?"

Daddy laughed. "Should we go into mourning? Or celebrate lasting this long? There's something to be said for endurance."

"I don't know. My mum's endured. She's ninety-four, you know. But lonely."

"May is ninety-four. Wow!"

"Yeah, that's what I say. I just wish I liked her better."

"It ain't easy having a mother."

"No kidding. But we've survived. Do you think Sibyl and Moll have?"

"Got me, babe," Daddy said. "Haven't talked to Sibyl for ages—she isn't dead because I get these weird Hallmark cards every Christmas."

"You too? No message."

"I know," Daddy said. "Just a bloody stamp that says 'Raleigh & Sibyl.' Fucking eerie."

"I've called her a few times to catch up."

"What about Moll? Haven't seen *or* talked to her since Toronto. Can you believe it's been forty years?"

"Haven't seen her either," Tillie said. "We didn't part on the best of terms. Remember? She thought I was a bad influence on you guys."

"Moll? Who's she to talk?"

"Sibyl's kept in touch with her. She's mentioned seeing her now and then. They both still live in B.C."

FREEFALL: *A Divine Comedy*

“Wouldn’t a reunion be a gas?”

“A reunion?” Tillie stared at the overcast sky. The cloud cover seemed to shift, allowing a few shreds of sun to seep through. It might not be a bad day after all.

“Why not? We aren’t getting any younger.”

“Don’t remind me. I’m game.”

You should go visit your mother instead.

Get lost, Tillie said to the voice in her head. *I’ll see her after the reunion.*