

A
THREAD
SO
FINE

a novel

BY SUSAN WELCH

A Thread So Fine

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This book is dedicated to Betty,
Margaret, and Kevin

“ . . . You must lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread to wherever it leads you. . . . But, remember, it may seem to you a very round-about way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too.”

The Princess and the Goblin,
George MacDonald, 1871

A NOTE TO READERS

This is a work of historical fiction. Some of Shannon's experiences are based on my mother's stories about her many months as a quarantined TB patient in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the mid-1940s when she was nineteen years old. While many sites in the novel are real, others are fictitious. Milner Hospital is an imagined representation of hospital facilities such as the one where my mother lived as a patient, and was treated with surgeries such as those described. The St. Paul Catholic Infants Home, cruelly nicknamed "Watermelon Hill," was real, but opened in 1954 in St. Paul, Minnesota. I'm told it is also the place I called "home" for the first days of my life in the fall of 1962.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

St. Paul, Minnesota – August 1946

*I*n the middle of a Charleston twist, one of the open-toed pumps Shannon had borrowed from Eliza snapped its heel. She slipped and careened into the belly of a foot-tapping gentleman who watched from the dance-floor sidelines, the very image of Sir Winston Churchill.

Shannon didn't see the fall coming, and later when she had nothing but hours, days, months(!) to ponder this and other of life's small details, she wondered which came first: The broken heel or the misstep? The dizziness or the tumble? Even before tonight's dance, she had felt not-herself for some time, weeks maybe, though she'd not shared the concern with anyone. Not even with her sister, Eliza, who'd persuaded her to brave the Autumn Ball with their brother, Ed, which meant, essentially, going alone.

Later, Shannon would attribute all that'd happened at the dance, and on her solitary walk home, and then all of the terribleness of the coming days to this muddled feeling, this sense of being weighted down, of trudging underwater, of trying to ignore, push away, not succumb to a mounting, disorienting fatigue. But tonight especially, Shannon forced back both her timidity and the strange, buzzy weariness, determined to enjoy the dance.

Resolute, and grateful for the soft landing, she straightened up, light-headed, hoping that perhaps only a few people noticed. Instead, her

ears burned and cheeks flushed with embarrassment as laughter erupted around her. Admittedly, if Eliza had been nearby, she wouldn't have minded and both would have laughed along. Anyone would find the scene funny, like a slapstick skit from Laurel and Hardy—she, the skinny, hapless klutz.

Shannon bent down to remove the traitorous shoes, irked that this morning's clandestine raid on her sister's wardrobe now required a confession. The elderly, broad-faced man, probably a professor or dean like her father, smiled while using his fingertips to straighten his bow tie. With a generous wink, he guided Shannon by the elbow and escorted her to a chair by the arched windows. Then, still chuckling, he delivered a cup of water from a nearby table and returned to his place as a spectator.

The band picked up the tempo with "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo." Shannon tucked a wavy strand of auburn hair behind her ear and inhaled deeply, willing herself to calm. For a moment, the mingled, bitter fragrances of newly stained wood, freshly painted walls, and polished floors stayed with her. She shifted impatiently in her chair, watching as dancers paired off and turned rowdy with fancy lifts and swooping drops. With Eliza, Shannon would've gladly stayed. The two would have danced the Lindy Hop barefoot, showing off moves they'd practiced all summer in the backyard—step, step, triple-step-twirl; step, step, triple-step-dip! Repeat, repeat, repeat, until they fell to the grass, exhausted, legs wobbling, arms aching, teasing each other, and laughing until their bellies hurt as when they were little girls. Instead, pumps in one hand, broken heel in the other, she left.

Night had fallen and white globes set like small moons atop slender poles illuminated the campus sidewalk. An open pack of Lucky Strikes on the wide steps of the college chapel caught her attention, and with no one to stop her, she sat down beside it. She pulled out one cigarette, rolled it between her thumb and fingers, and inhaled its earthy scent. She looked about; seeing no one, she smiled and dropped her elbow to her knee while gesturing with her hand and imagining herself as Greta Garbo in the film *Mata Hari*.

If Shannon had been with her sister, they'd have walked arm-in-arm straight through campus across the street and into the house they'd lived in since birth, chatting like two birds on a wire, and Shannon would never have met the boy with a tilted grin and a mess of curly black hair who showed up in front of her while the unlit cigarette still hung between her fingers.

"Nice move in there. I liked your quick recovery." He sat beside her, his trousers almost touching the tulle skirt of her summer gown; still grinning, he raised his brow in a practiced shortcut to affection.

She smiled back, forcing away shyness to look right at him. "I can teach it to you if you want. It took me years to learn, though." She held her gaze steady, secretly recalling the game she used to play with her brother, Ed: who could stare longest without blinking.

He reciprocated, inched himself closer, and told Shannon that she had pretty eyes, especially in the light of a full moon. She looked down, unable to manage a poised response, and laughed instead, the same timid giggle she'd disliked in herself since childhood. She felt heat rise to her cheeks and said his were pretty too. Big and chestnut brown with long, thick lashes, they were the nicest eyes on a boy she'd ever seen.

He leaned back and took a brass lighter from his pocket. In a swift motion, his thumb flipped open the top and spun the striker wheel down to ignite the wick, which shone a halo of flickering light onto their faces. She brought the cigarette to her lips, wondering if he saw her hand tremble, and reminded herself to exhale as if she were whistling silently up to the sky, just like she'd seen in the movies.

She inhaled the bitter smoke and a set of sharp coughs followed. She sputtered, her eyes watering enough for a single, embarrassing tear to form. She wiped it away with a laugh. Her throat burned as if she'd swallowed hot sand, and she wished she'd not taken the puff at all, and then wished she hadn't laughed. She passed the cigarette to the boy, grateful he didn't laugh too, though she caught his slight smile as he put his arm on her shoulder. He patted her back—not in a firm, functional way as to help her regain a steady breath, but lightly, as if to

say, “There, there, child; you’ll be all right.” After taking a single short drag, he dropped the cigarette and smashed the glowing end into the step with his shoe.

He leaned toward Shannon as if suddenly wanting to share a secret. His cheek grazed hers and lingered there, a musky fragrance of chocolate and cinnamon mixing with words as he whispered in her ear, “You’re a sweet gal. Come visit me sometime. Southeast corner of Marshall and Fairview.” He put the lighter in his back pocket and loped off to join his friends. Halfway across the lawn, he turned to look at her—or at least she thought he did—and she realized she didn’t even know his name.



The next morning as church bells tolled nine, Shannon stepped away from her bedroom window and the mounted square of rag paper on which she’d penciled an outline of the red-brick chapel across the street. She cocked her head to the side and ran a hand through untidy hair, surprised at how her scalp, moist and hot with perspiration from the humid August air, bristled with sensitivity as if needles tipped her fingers. Glancing at the broken heel on her dresser, her cheeks flushed again as she imagined the boy from last night watching her careen into the man on the dance floor. She would never be as comfortable as Eliza around boys. With few exceptions, they made her feel out of sorts, and, aside from last night’s little encounter, she’d rather not think about them at all.

Only if she saw this boy again would she tell her sister about her interrupted walk home after the dance-floor incident. She knew better than to tell Eliza about even one try at a cigarette—it would be just like telling Mother—but Shannon could imagine describing how the boy had moved close, his cheek brushing hers, how he’d whispered in her ear, and how her nostrils had filled with the spicy-sweetness of his skin. Even as she relived the moment, uncertainty picked at her thoughts—had he been flirting with her or did she just want it to be so?

Absent-mindedly exploring a tender bump in the crook of her neck, she leaned against the window’s dark frame. For three days now streams of

young men—mostly GIs in olive drabs—had been milling about campus like so many ants in a colony. Finally home, the soldier boys, as her father called them, poured back into daily life seeking more jobs than existed. Many, like Ed, had accepted the government's offer for free education instead. Distracted from her sketch, she watched from her upstairs perch as they strayed from sidewalks onto summer-browned grass and branched off in pairs toward the military surplus huts positioned in two rows on the field facing the Malone home. From the comfortable distance of her room, she searched their faces as best she could, ignoring the unlikely odds of recognizing a particular boy—especially one she had met only once and at night—amidst the campus activities of Orientation Week.

She returned to the watercolor, which, if it turned out, would be a long-promised birthday gift for Eliza. One leg of her easel—a clever French portable device from her grandparents who had traveled to Paris between the First and Second Wars—met the wall inches under the windowsill. A late-morning ray of sunlight pierced the glass rinsing jar, and captured by a brush's metal ring, reflected back into the pink water, illuminating it as if it were electrified. Shannon imagined crimson poppies—a jarful of glorious, translucent petals bursting from spindly, opaque stems.

She crossed the room for a fresh perspective on the glowing water with stemlike brushes, the open window, her white paint box dotted with vibrant colors, and the easel itself, all part of her composition. Hesitating near the door, she peered into the darkened hallway where the burgundy wool runner cascaded down the steps to the kitchen at the back of the house. She closed her eyes and wished for familial sounds—Mother working at the sink; Fa in his office preparing his satchel for work on campus; Ed cleaning eggs from the backyard hens. Eliza, who would normally be quietly moving about earlier than Shannon on a summer morning, remained at the lake house after deciding at the last minute to forgo the dance and help Grandma Edith in her garden.

An image of the boy resurfaced, and Shannon told herself she wouldn't be so timid if she met him again. What harm would there be in strolling through campus together one afternoon? . . . If she found

him. She looked at her diary where she'd written down the cross streets he'd whispered in her ear and, despite nagging ambivalence, a new thrill traveled from her wrist to her neck, causing her to blush again.

All was quiet, she and the house, and the unwanted silence overcame her suddenly, like a tiny earthquake. A sharp kernel of air caught in her throat, provoking an unexpected cough that reminded her of the horrible cigarette. She returned to her easel and looked out again to the cream-colored masonry of the new Science Building and to the chapel's wide, stone steps where she'd met the boy last night. A couple sat so close that their thighs touched, and they laughed as they tried to calm their child, who danced about while pulling at his infant sister as if she were a doll. The young mother coaxed her little boy to relent, caressing him and whispering—perhaps promises of treats for good behavior.

Shannon only half smiled.