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FALL 2015
DEBUT
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SAMPLER



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*The
Dressmaker's
War*

A Novel

MARY CHAMBERLAIN

The
**Dressmaker's
War**

— *A Novel* —

**MARY
CHAMBERLAIN**



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

PROLOGUE

Holloway Prison, February 16, 1948

They had weighed Ada and measured her. She was eight stone three pounds, and five feet six in stockinged feet.

She still had the slender figure of a mannequin, and a mannequin's grace.

The wardress handed her the thick, calico knickers with drawstrings. Ada wound the tapes fast round her thighs and waist, so nothing would leak. They would leave marks on her skin, when they came off. The wardress was biting her lip, putting on a brave face, Ada could see.

Ada removed her glasses and placed them on the table.

"I won't be needing these," she said. "Or these." She handed the notebooks to the wardress.

"Do something with them. I wrote it all down, what really happened in the war. What happened to women, what happened to me. The truth. Nobody wanted to hear."

"Are you ready?" the wardress said.

"No," Ada said. "No."



— ONE —

London, January 1939

ADA PEERED INTO THE BROKEN MIRROR PROPPED UP ON THE kitchen dresser. Mouth open, tongue to attention, she plucked at her eyebrows with a pair of rusty tweezers. Wincing and ouching until only a thin arc was left. She dabbed on the witch hazel, hoped the stinging would fade. Dunked her hair in clean, warm water in the old, cracked butler sink, patted it dry with a towel, and parted it along the left. Eighteen years old, more grown up this way. Middle finger, comb and straighten, index finger, crimp. Three waves down the left, five down the right, five each herringbone down the back, pin curls and a kirby grip tight to her skull, leave it to dry.

Ada was taking her time. She opened her handbag and fished around until she found her powder, rouge, and lipstick. Not too much, in case she looked common, but enough to make her fresh and wholesome like those young girls from the Women's League of Health and Beauty. She'd seen them in Hyde Park in their black drawers and white blouses and knew they practiced on a Saturday afternoon in the playground of Henry Fawcett's. She might think about joining them. It was good to be supple, and slender. She could make the uniform herself. After all, she was a dressmaker now, earned good money.

She rubbed her lips together to spread her lipstick, checked that the waves were holding their grip as her hair dried, picked up the mirror and carried it into the bedroom. The brown houndstooth skirt with the inverted pleats and the cream blouse with the enamel

pin at the neck—that was smart. Good tweed, too, an offcut from Isidore, the tailor in Hanover Square. Just fifteen she was when she'd started there. Gawd, she was green, picking up pins from the floor and sweeping away fabric dustings, plimsolls gray from the chalk and her hand-me-down jacket too long in the arm. Dad said it was a sweatshop, that the fat capitalist who ran it did nothing but exploit her and she should stand up for her rights and organize. But Isidore had opened her eyes. He taught her how fabric lived and breathed, how it had a personality and moods. Silk, he said, was stubborn, lawn sullen. Worsteds was tough, flannel lazy. He taught her how to cut the cloth so it didn't pucker and bruise, about biases and selvages. He showed her how to make patterns and where to chalk and tack. He taught her the sewing machine, about yarns and threads, how to fit a newfangled zipper so it lay hidden in the seam and how to buttonhole and hem. *Herringbone, Ada, herringbone*. Women looking like mannequins. It was a world of enchantment. Beautiful hair and glistening gowns. Tailored knickers even. Isidore had shown Ada that world, and she wanted it for herself.

She wasn't there yet. What with Mum demanding a share for her keep and the bus to work and a tea cake in Lyons with the girls on payday, there wasn't much over at the end of the week.

"And don't think you can come into this house and lord it around," Mum raised a stained finger at Ada, knuckles creased like an old worm, "just because you pay your way." Still had to do her share of the dusting and sweeping and, now she was trained up, the family's dressmaking, too.

Ada knew this life of scrimping and nit combs and hand-me-downs was not what she was meant for. She damped her finger and thumb with her tongue, folded down her Bemberg stockings with the fitted toe and heel, and rolled them up, crease by crease, *careful you don't snag*, so the seam sat straight at the back. *Quality* shows. *Appearances* matter. So long as her top clothes looked good, nobody could touch her. Lips pinched, nose in the air, *excuse me*. Airs and

graces, like the best of them. Ada would go far, she knew, be a *somebody* too.

She propped the mirror on top of the mantelpiece and combed her hair so it settled in chestnut waves. She placed her hat, a brown felt pillbox that one of the milliners at work had made for her, on her head, nudging it forward and to the side. She slipped her feet into her new tan court shoes and, lifting the mirror and tilting it downwards, stood back to see the effect. Perfect. *Modish*. Groomed.

Ada Vaughan jumped over the threshold, still damp from the scrubbing and reddening this morning. The morning sky above was thick, chimney pots coughing sooty grouts into the air. The terrace stretched the length of the street, smuts clinging to the yellow stock and to the brown net curtains struggling free from the open windows in the city-hobbled wind. She covered her nose with her hand so the murk from the Thames and the ash from the tallow melts wouldn't fill her nostrils and leave blackened snot on the handkerchiefs she'd made for herself and embroidered in the corner, *AV*.

Clip-clop along Theed Street, front doors open so you could see inside, respectable houses these, clean as a whistle, good address, you had to be a *somebody* to rent here, Mum always said. Somebody, my foot. Mum and Dad wouldn't know a somebody if he clipped them round the ear. Somebodies didn't sell the *Daily Worker* outside Dalton's on a Saturday morning, or thumb their rosaries until their fingers grew calluses. Somebodies didn't scream at each other, or sulk in silence for days on end. If Ada had to choose between her mother and father, it would be her father every time, for all his temper and frustrations. He wasn't waiting for Heaven but salvation in the here and now, one last push and the edifice of prejudice and privilege would crumble and everyone would have the world that Ada yearned for. Her mother's salvation came after death and a lifetime of suffering and bleeding hearts. Sitting in the church on Sunday, she wondered how anyone could make a religion out of misery.

Clip-clop past the fire station and the emergency sandbags stacked

outside. Past the Old Vic, where she'd seen *Twelfth Night* on a free seat when she was eleven years old, entranced by the glossy velvet costumes and the smell of tungsten spotlights and orange peel. She knew, just knew, there was a world enclosed on this stage with its painted-on scenery and artificial lights that was as true and deep as the universe itself. Makeup and make-believe, her heart sang for Malvolio, for he, like her, yearned to be a *somebody*. She kept going, down the London Road, round St. George's Circus, and onto the Borough Road. Dad said there was going to be a war before the year was out, and Mum kept picking up leaflets and reading them out loud: *When you hear the siren, proceed in an orderly fashion . . .*

Ada clip-clopped up to the building and raised her eyes to the letters that ran in black relief along the top. BOROUGH POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE. She fidgeted with her hat, opened and shut her bag, checked her seams were straight, and walked up the stairs. She was sticky under her arms and between her thighs, the clamminess that came from nerves, not the clean damp you got from running.

The door to Room 35 had four glass panels in the top half. Ada peered through. The desks had been pushed to one side, and six women were standing in a semicircle in the middle. Their backs were to the door, and they were looking at someone in the front. Ada couldn't see who. She wiped her palm down the side of her skirt, opened the door, and stepped into the room.

A woman with large bosoms, a pearl necklace, and gray hair rolled in a bun stepped forward from the semicircle and threw open her arms. "And you are?"

Ada swallowed. "Ada Vaughan."

"From the diaphragm," the woman bellowed. "Your name?"

Ada didn't know what she meant. "Ada Vaughan." Her voice crashed against her tongue.

"Are we a mouse?" the woman boomed.

Ada blushed. She felt small, stupid. She turned and walked to the door.

"No, no," the woman cried. "Do come in." Ada was reaching for the doorknob, but the woman put her hand on Ada's. "You've come this far."

The woman's hand was warm and dry, and Ada saw her nails were manicured and painted pink. The woman led her back to the others, positioned her in the center of the semicircle.

"My name is Miss Skinner." Her words sang clear, like a melody, Ada thought, or a crystal dove. "And yours?"

Miss Skinner stood straight, all bosom, though her waist was slender. She poised her head to the side, chin forward.

"Say it clearly." She smiled, nodded. Her face was kindly, after all, even if her voice was strict. "E-nun-ci-ate."

"Ada Vaughan," Ada said, with conviction.

"You may look like a swan," Miss Skinner said, stepping back, "but if you talk like a sparrow, who will take you seriously? Welcome, Miss Vaughan."

Miss Skinner placed her hands round her waist. Ada knew she must be wearing a girdle. No woman her age had a figure like that without support. She breathed in *Mmmmm*, drummed her fingers on the cavity she made beneath her ribs, opened her mouth, *Do re mi fa so*. She held tight to the last note, blasting like a ship's funnel until it left only an echo lingering in the air. Her shoulders relaxed, and she let out the rest of the air with a *whoosh*. It's her bosoms, Ada thought, that's where she must keep the air, blow them up like balloons. No one could breathe in that deep. It wasn't natural.

"Stand straight." Miss Skinner stepped forward. "Chin up, bottom in." She threaded her way through the group, came to Ada, and pushed one hand against the small of her back and with the other lifted Ada's chin up and out.

"Unless we stand upright"—Miss Skinner rolled her shoulders back and adjusted her bosom—"we cannot project." She trilled her *rrr*'s like a Sally Army cymbal. "And if we cannot project," Miss Skinner added, "we cannot pronounce."

She turned to Ada. “Miss Vaughan, why do you wish to learn elocution?”

Ada could feel the heat crawl up her neck and prickle her ears, knew her face was turning red. She opened her mouth, but couldn’t say it. Her tongue folded in a pleat. *I want to be a somebody.* Miss Skinner nodded anyway. She’d seen the likes of Ada before. Ambitious.

— — — — —

“I THOUGHT YOU were one of the customers,” the Honorable Mrs. Buckley had said, “when I saw you standing there, looking so smart.” Taken for one of the customers. *Imagine.* She’d been only eighteen years old when she started there last September. Ada had learned fast.

The Honorable Mrs. Buckley traded under the name Madame Duchamps. Square-hipped and tall, with painted nails and quiet earrings, she dazzled with her talk of *couture* and *atelier* and *Paris, pah!* She would flip through the pages of *Vogue* and conjure ball gowns and cocktail dresses from bolts of silk and chenille, which she draped and pinned round slender debutantes and their portly chaperones.

Ada had learned her trade from Isidore and her nerve from Mrs. B., as the other girls all called her. Where Isidore had been wise and kind and funny, *genuine*, Mrs. B. was crafted through artifice. Ada was sure the Honorable Mrs. Buckley was neither an Hon. nor a Mrs., and her complexion was as false as her name, but that didn’t stop Mrs. B. What she didn’t know about the female form and the lie of a fabric was not worth writing on a postage stamp.

Mrs. B. was a step up from Isidore. *Paris.* That was the city Ada aimed to conquer. She’d call her house Vaughan. It was a modish name, like Worth, or Chanel, but with British cachet. That was another word she’d learned from Mrs. B. *Cachet.* Style and class, rolled into one.

"Where did you learn all this French, madame?" The girls always had to call her "madame" to her face.

Mrs. B. had given a knowing smile, her head pivoting on the tilt of her long neck. "Here and there," she said. "Here and there."

Fair dues to Mrs. B., she recognized in Ada a hard worker, and a young woman with ambition and talent. Aitches present and correct without aspiration, *haspiration*, Ada was made front-of-house, Madame Duchamps's in-store, fresh-faced mannequin, and the young society ladies began to turn to her, rather than Mrs. B., whose complexion and waistline grew thicker by the day, to model their clothes.

"Mademoiselle," Mrs. B. would say. "Slip on the evening gown."

"The douppioni, madame?"

Midnight blue with a halter neck. Ada would lean into her hips and sway across the floor, swirl so her naked back drew the eye, and that eye would marvel at the drape of the fabric as it swallowed the curve of her figure, out and in, and fanned in a fishtail. She'd turn again and smile.

"And now the chiffon."

Veils of mystery and a taffeta lining, oyster and pearl and precious lusters. Ada loved the way the clothes transformed her. She could be fire, or water, air or earth. Elemental. Truthful. *This* was who she was. She would lift her arms as if to embrace the heavens, and the fabric would drift in the gossamer breeze; she would bend low in a curtsy, then unfold her body like a flower in bloom, each limb a sensuous, supple petal.

She was the center of adoration, a living sculpture, a work of art. A creator, too. She would smile and say, "But if you tuck it here, or pleat it there, then voilà." With a flourish of her long, slim fingers and that new, knowing *voilà*, Ada would add her own touch to one of Mrs. B.'s designs and make it altogether more modern, more desirable. Ada knew Mrs. B. saw her as an asset, recognized her skills and taste, her ability to lure the customers and charm them with an effortless eloquence, thanks to Miss Skinner's skillful tutoring.

“If you cut on the bias,” Ada would say, holding up the dress length on the diagonal to a customer, “you can see how it falls, like a Grecian goddess.”

She draped the fabric across the breast, a single, naked shoulder rising like a mermaid from a chiffon sea.

“*Non, non, non.*” Mrs. B. tut-tutted, spoke in French when Ada pushed the limits of decency. “That will not do, mademoiselle. This is not for the *boudoir* but the ball. Decorum, decorum.”

She’d turned to her client. “Miss Vaughan is still a little inexperienced, *naïve*, in the subtler points of social correctness.”

Naïve she might be, but Ada was good publicity for Madame Duchamps, modiste, of Dover Street, and Ada had hopes that one day she could be more than an asset but a partner in the business. She had developed a respectable following. Her talent marked her out, the flow and poise of her design distinguished her. She conjured Hollywood and the glamorous world of the stars and brought them into the drawing rooms of the everyday. Ada *became* her designs, a walking advertisement for them. The floral day dress, the tailored suit, the manicured nails, and the simple court shoes; she knew she was watched as she left the shop and sauntered west down Piccadilly, past the Ritz and Green Park. She would clip-clop along, chin in the air, pretending she might live in Knightsbridge or Kensington, until she knew she was free of curious eyes. Then finally she turned south, clip-clopped over Westminster Bridge and into Lambeth and past the sniggering urchins who stuck their noses in the air and teetered behind her on imaginary heels.

APRIL, BLACK RAIN fell in torrents and drummed on the slate roofs of Dover Street. Scooped from the oceans and let loose from the heavens, it thundered down to earth and soaked deep into the cracks between the paving, fell in dark rivers along the gutters, eddied in dips in the pavements and in the areas of the tall, stuccoed houses. It splattered off the umbrellas and somber hats of the pedestrians and

soaked the trouser legs below the raincoats. It seeped into the leather of the shoes.

Ada reached for her coat, a soft camel with a tie belt, and her umbrella. She'd have to bite the bullet today, turn left right away, pick up the number 12 in Haymarket.

"Good night, madame," she said to Mrs. B. She stood under the doorframe, then set out into the sodden street. She walked towards Piccadilly, looking down, sidestepping the puddles. A gust of wind caught her umbrella and turned it inside out, whipped the sides of her coat so they billowed free, and snatched her hair in sopping tentacles. She pulled at the twisted metal spokes.

"Allow me, please," a man's voice said as a large umbrella positioned itself above her head. She turned round, almost brushed the man's face, an instant too close but long enough for Ada to know. His face was slim, punctuated by a narrow, clipped mustache. He wore small, round glasses, and behind them his eyes were soft and pale. Duck egg blue, Ada thought, airy enough to see through. They chilled and stirred her. He stepped back.

"I apologize," he said. "I was only trying to protect you. Here, you hold this." He passed over his umbrella and took hold of hers with his free hand. He sounded continental, Ada thought, a sophisticated clip to his accent. She watched as he bent it back into shape.

"Not quite as good as new," he said. "But it will take care of you today. Where do you live? Do you have far to go?"

She started to answer, but the words tangled in her mouth. Lambeth. *Lambeth*.

"No," she said. "Thank you. I'll get the bus."

"Let me walk you to the stop."

She wanted to say yes, but she was frightened he'd press her on where she lived. The number 12 went to Dulwich. That was all right. She could say Dulwich, it was respectable enough.

"You're hesitating," he said. His eyes creased in a smile. "Your mother told you never to go with strange men."

She was grateful for the excuse. His accent was formal. She couldn't place it.

"I have a better idea," he went on. "I'm sure your mother would approve of this." He pointed over the road. "Would you care to join me, miss? Tea at the Ritz. Couldn't be more English."

What would be the harm in that? If he was up to no good, he wouldn't waste money at the Ritz. Probably a week's wages. And it was in public, after all.

"I am inviting you," he said. "Please accept."

He was polite, well mannered.

"And the rain will stop in the meantime."

Ada gathered her senses. "Will? Will it? How do you know?"

"Because," he said, "I command it to." He shut his eyes, stretched his free arm up above his head, raising his umbrella, and clenched and opened his fist three times.

"Ein, zwei, drei."

Ada didn't understand a word but knew they were foreign. "Dry?" she said.

"Oh, very good," he said. "I like that. So do you accept?"

He was charming. Whimsical. She liked that word. It made her feel light and carefree. It was a diaphanous word, like a chiffon veil.

Why not? None of the boys she knew would ever dream of asking her to the Ritz.

"Thank you. I would enjoy that."

He took her elbow and guided her across the road, through the starlit arches of the Ritz, into the lobby with its crystal chandeliers and porcelain jardinières. She wanted to pause and look, take it all in, but he was walking her fast along the gallery. She could feel her feet floating along the red carpet, past vast windows festooned and ruched in velvet, through marble columns, and into a room of mirrors and fountains and gilded curves.

She had never seen anything so vast, so rich, so shiny. She smiled, as if this was something she was used to every day.

"May I take your coat?" A waiter in a black suit with a white apron had appeared.

"It's all right," Ada said, "I'll keep it. It's a bit wet."

"Are you sure?" he said. A sticky ring of heat began to creep up her neck, and Ada knew she had blundered. In this world, you handed your clothes to valets and flunkies and maids.

"No"—the words tripped out—"you're right. Please take it. Thank you." She wanted to say, *Don't lose it*; the man in Berwick Street market said it was real camel hair, though Ada'd had her doubts. She shrugged the coat off her shoulders, aware that the waiter in the apron was peeling it from her arms and draping it over his. Aware, too, that the nudge of her shoulders had been slow and graceful.

"What is your name?" the man asked.

"Ada. Ada Vaughan. And yours?"

"Stanislaus," he said. "Stanislaus von Lieben."

A foreigner. She'd never met one. It was—she struggled for the word—exotic.

"And where does that name come from, when it's at home?"

"Hungary," he said. "Austria-Hungary. When it was an empire."

Ada had only ever heard of two empires, the British one that oppressed the natives and the Roman one that killed Christ. It was news to her that there were more.

"I don't tell many people this," he said, leaning towards her. "In my own country, I am a count."

"Oh my goodness." Ada couldn't help it. A *count*. "Are you really? With a castle, and all?" She heard how common she sounded. Maybe he wouldn't notice, being a foreigner.

"No." He smiled. "Not every count lives in a castle. Some of us live in more modest circumstances."

His suit, Ada could tell, was expensive. Wool. Super 200s, she wouldn't be surprised. Gray. Well tailored. Discreet.

"What language were you talking, earlier, in the street?"

"My mother tongue," he said. "German."

"German?" Ada swallowed. Not all Germans are bad, she could hear her father say. Rosa Luxemburg. A martyr. And those who were standing up to Hitler. Still, Dad wouldn't like a German speaker in the house. *Stop it, Ada.* She was getting ahead of herself.

"And you?" he said. "What were you doing in Dover Street?"

Ada wondered for a moment whether she could say she was visiting her dressmaker, but then thought better of it.

"I work there," she said.

"How very independent," he said. "And what do you work at?"

She didn't like to say she was a tailoress, even if it was bespoke, ladies. Couldn't claim to be a modiste, like Madame Duchamps, not yet. She said the next best thing.

"I'm a mannequin, actually." She wanted to add, *An artiste.*

He leant back in the chair. She was aware of how his eyes roamed over her body, as if she was a landscape to be admired, or lost in.

"Of course," he said. "Of course." He pulled out a gold cigarette case from his inside pocket, opened it, and leant forward to Ada. "Would you like a cigarette?"

She didn't smoke. She wasn't sophisticated like that. She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to take one and end up choking. That would be too humiliating. Tea at the Ritz was full of pitfalls, full of reminders of how far she had to go.

"Not just now, thank you," she said.

He tapped the cigarette on the case before he lit it. She heard him inhale and watched as the smoke furred from his nostrils. She would like to be able to do that.

"And where are you a mannequin?"

Ada was back on safer ground. "At Madame Duchamps's."

"Madame Duchamps. Of course."

"You know her?"

"My great-aunt used to be a customer of hers. She died last year. Perhaps you knew her?"

"I haven't been there very long," she said. "What was her name?"

Stanislaus laughed, and Ada noticed he had a glint of gold in his mouth. "I couldn't tell you," he said. "She was married so many times, I couldn't keep up."

"Perhaps that's what killed her," she said. "All that marrying."

It would, if *her* parents were anything to go by. She knew what they would think of Stanislaus and his great-aunt. Morals of a hyena. That was Germany for you. But Ada was intrigued by the idea. A woman, a *loose* woman. She could smell her perfumed body, see her languid gestures as her body shimmied close and purred for affection.

"You're funny," Stanislaus said. "I like that."

IT HAD STOPPED raining by the time they left, but it was dark.

"I should escort you home," he said.

"There's no need, really."

"It's the least a gentleman can do."

"Another time," she said, realizing how forward that sounded. "I didn't mean that. I mean, I have to go somewhere else. I'm not going straight home."

She hoped he wouldn't follow her.

"Another time it is," he said. "Do you like cocktails, Ada Vaughan? Because the Café Royal is just round the corner and is my favorite place."

Cocktails. Ada swallowed. She was out of her depth. But she'd learn to swim, she'd pick it up fast.

"Thank you," she said, "and thank you for tea."

"I know where you work," he said. "I will drop you a line."

He clicked his heels, lifted his hat, and turned. She watched as he walked back down Piccadilly. She'd tell her parents she was working late.

MARTINIS, PINK LADIES, mint juleps. Ada grew to be at ease in the Café Royal, and the Savoy, Smith's, and the Ritz. She bought rayon in the market at trade price and made herself some dresses after work at Mrs. B.'s. Cut on the bias, the cheap synthetic fabrics emerged like butterflies from a chrysalis and hugged Ada into evening elegance. Long gloves and a cocktail hat. Ada graced the chicest establishments with confidence.

"Swept you off your feet, he has," Mrs. B. would say each Friday as Ada left work to meet Stanislaus. Mrs. B. didn't like gentlemen calling at her shop in case it gave her a bad name, but she saw that Stanislaus dressed well and had class, even if it was *foreign* class. "So be careful."

Ada twisted rings from silver paper and paraded her left hand in front of the mirror when no one was looking. She saw herself as Stanislaus's wife, Ada von Lieben. Count and *Countess* von Lieben. "I hope his intentions are honorable," Mrs. B. had said. "Because I've never known a gentleman smitten so fast."

Ada just laughed.

— — — — —

"WHO IS HE then?" her mother said. "If he was a decent fellow, he'd want to meet your father and me."

"I'm late, Mum," Ada said. Her mother blocked the hallway, stood in the middle of the passage. She wore Dad's old socks rolled down to her ankles, and her shabby apron was stained in front.

"Bad enough you come home in no fit state on a Friday night, but now you've taken up going out in the middle of the week. Whatever next?"

"Why shouldn't I go out of an evening?"

"You'll get a name," her mother said. "That's why. He'd better not try anything on. No man wants secondhand goods." Her mouth set

in a scornful line. She nodded as if she knew the world and all its sinful ways.

You know nothing, Ada thought.

“For goodness’ sake,” she said. “He’s not like that.”

“Then why don’t you bring him home? Let your father and me be the judge of that.”

He’d never have set foot inside a two-up, two-down terrace that rattled when the trains went by, with a scullery tagged on the back and an outside privy. He wouldn’t understand that she had to sleep in the same bed with her sisters, while her brothers lay on mattresses on the floor, the other side of the dividing curtain Dad had rigged up. He wouldn’t know what to do with all those kids running about. Her mother kept the house clean enough, but sooty grouts clung to the nets and coated the furniture, and sometimes in the summer the bugs were so bad they all had to sit outside in the street.

Ada couldn’t picture him here, not ever.

“I have to go,” she said. “Mrs. B. will dock my wages.”

Her mother snorted. “If you’d come in at a respectable time,” she said, “you wouldn’t be in this state now.”

Ada pushed past her, out into the street.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” her mother yelled for all the neighbors to hear.

SHE HAD TO run to the bus stop, caught the number 12 by the skin of her teeth. She’d had no time for breakfast and her head ached. Mrs. B. would wonder what had happened. Ada had never been late for work before, never taken time off. She rushed along Piccadilly. The June day was already hot. It would be another scorcher. Mrs. B. should get a fan, cool the shop down so they weren’t all picking pins with sticky fingers.

“Tell her, Ada,” one of the other girls said. Poisonous little cow called Avril, common as a brown penny. “We’re all sweating like pigs.”

"Pigs sweat," Ada had said. "Gentlemen perspire. Ladies glow."

"Get you," Avril said, sticking her finger under her nose.

Avril could be as catty as she liked. Ada didn't care. Jealous, most likely. *Never trust a woman*, her mother used to say. Well, her mother was right on that one. Ada had never found a woman she could call her best friend.

The clock at Fortnum's began to strike the quarter hour and Ada started to run, but a figure walked out, blocking her way.

"Thought you were never coming." Stanislaus straddled the pavement in front of her, arms stretched wide like the wings of an angel. "I was about to leave."

She let out a cry, a puppy whine of surprise. He'd come to meet her, before work. She knew she was blushing, heat prickling her cheeks. She fanned her hand across her face, thankful for the cool air. "I'm late for work," she said. "I can't chat."

"I thought you could take the day off," he said. "Pretend you're sick or something."

"I'd lose my job if she ever found out."

"Get another," he said, shrugging his shoulders. Stanislaus had never had to work, couldn't understand how hard she'd struggled to get where she was. Ada Vaughan, from Lambeth, working with a modiste, in Mayfair. "How will she find out?"

He stepped forward and, cupping her chin in his hand, brushed his lips against hers. His touch was delicate as a feather, his fingers warm and dry round her face. She leant towards him, couldn't help it, as if he was a magnet and she his dainty filings.

"It's a lovely day, Ada. Too nice to be cooped up inside. You need to live a little. That's what I always say." She smelled cologne on his cheeks, tart, like lingering lemon. "You're late already. Why bother going in now?"

Mrs. B. was a stickler. Ten minutes and she'd dock half a day's wages. Ada couldn't afford to lose that much money. There was a

picnic basket on the pavement beside Stanislaus. He'd got it all planned.

"Where had you in mind?"

"Richmond Park," he said. "Make a day of it."

The whole day. Just the two of them.

"What would I say to her?" Ada said.

"Wisdom teeth," Stanislaus said. "That's always a good one. That's why there are so many dentists in Vienna."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"It's a toff's complaint."

She'd have to remember that. *Toffs* had wisdom teeth. *Somebodies* had wisdom teeth.

"Well." She hesitated. She'd lost half a day's wages already. "All right then." Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

"That's my Ada." He picked up the picnic basket with one hand, put his other round her waist.

SHE'D NEVER BEEN to Richmond Park, but she couldn't tell him that. He was sophisticated, traveled. He could have had his pick of women—well-bred, upper-class women, women like the debutantes whom she clothed and flattered and who kept Mrs. B. in business. Ahead of her the park gates rose in ornate spears. Below, the river curled through lush green woods to where the distant, dusty downs of Berkshire merged into slabs of pearl and silver against the sky. The sun was already high, its warm rays embracing her as if she was the only person in the world, the only one who mattered.

They entered the park. London was spread before them, St. Paul's and the City cast in hazy silhouette. The ground was dry, the paths cracked and uneven. Ancient oaks with blasted trunks and chestnuts with drooping catkins rose like forts from the tufted grassland and fresh, spiky bracken. The air was filled with a sweet, cloying scent. Ada crinkled her nose.

“That’s the smell of trees making love,” Stanislaus said.

Ada put her hand to her mouth. *Making love*. No one she knew talked about that sort of thing. Maybe her mother was right. He’d brought her here for a purpose. He was *fast*. He laughed.

“You didn’t know that, did you? Chestnuts have male and female flowers. I guess it’s the female that gives off the smell. What do you think?”

Ada shrugged. Best ignore it.

“I like chestnuts,” he went on. “Hot chestnuts on a cold winter’s day. Nothing like them.”

“Yes.” She was on safe ground. “I like them, too. Conkers, and all.”
And all. Common.

“Different sort of chestnut,” he said.

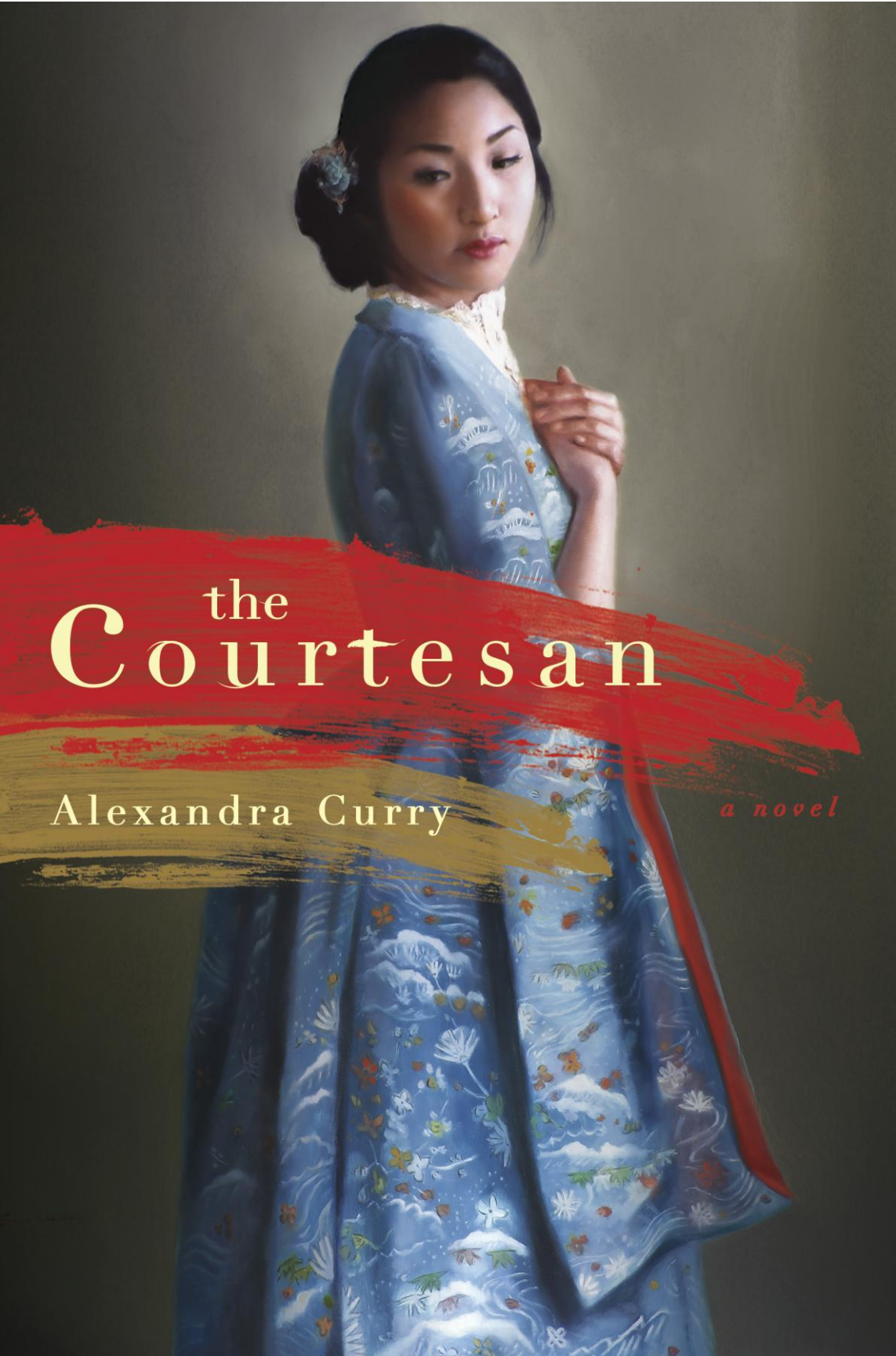
How was Ada to know? There was so much to learn. Had he noticed how ignorant she was? He didn’t show it. A gentleman.

“We’ll stop here, by the pond.” He put down the hamper and pulled out a cloth, flicking it so it filled with air like a flying swan, before falling to the earth. If she’d known she was going to have to sit on the ground, she’d have worn her sundress with the full skirt, enough to tuck round so she didn’t show anything. She lowered herself, pulled her knees together, bent them to the side, and tugged her dress down as best she could.

“Very ladylike,” Stanislaus said. “But that’s what you are, Ada, a real lady.” He poured two beakers of ginger beer, passed one to her, and sat down. “A lovely lady.”

No one had ever called her lovely before. But then, she’d never had a boy before. *Boy*. Stanislaus was a man. Mature, experienced. At least thirty, she guessed. Maybe older. He reached forward and handed her a plate and a serviette. There was a proper word for serviette, but Ada had forgotten it. They never had much use for things like that in Theed Street. He pulled out some chicken, *what a luxury*, and some fresh tomatoes, and a tiny salt and pepper set.

“*Bon appétit*,” he said, smiling.



the
Courtesan

Alexandra Curry

a novel



The
COURTESAN

A Novel

Alexandra Curry

DUTTON
— est. 1852 —

DUTTON

— est. 1852 —

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PREFACE

The story of Sai Jinhua has been told before. It has been told in the language of poems, plays, novels, and opera. Sai Jinhua has been called a heroine—and a woman of depravity. Her life has been shaped, and reshaped, and twisted into allegory. The courtesan's story was banned, at times, in the place of her birth; at other times she was praised to the nine heavens in her native land. Sai Jinhua has been a legend in China for a hundred years. What follows is a new telling—without agenda and without politics: the story of a woman's life the way it might have been.

I

THE DAY



Lao Mangzi

It is the Hour of the Snake, a time of day when the sun works hard to warm the earth. The black cockerel with the all-knowing eye struts, haunting the execution ground as he always does, and Lao Mangzi is wondering what he always wonders: *Is the man guilty?*

He is quite still, this man, a most venerable person kneeling in the shadow of a high pagoda, his eyes cast down toward the earth. He has a neat queue and a straight spine; his hands are tied behind his back. A mandarin, he is wearing glasses and a grass-cloth gown that is too thin for this morning's chill air, and he appears to be studying the splotches of blood, newly spilled and not his own, splattered on the ground in front of him. He seems unconcerned about the rabble that has gathered to watch his beheading.

With such a crowd at hand Lao Mangzi feels important and not a little conspicuous; although he cannot count so well beyond ten—or thirteen—he thinks there must be a thousand pairs of eyes at least, and all of them are looking at him. The apron he has just

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put on over his blood-spattered tunic is bright, imperial yellow; the color of an egg-yolk, his low and worthless wife said when she saw it. It is a color not often seen in this place, not that Lao Mangzi would know about that. To him, the apron is like everything else, a muted shade of gray. His name, Old Blind Eye, a name he was given and of which he is more than a little ashamed, implies that he is sightless, but this is quite inaccurate; it is only colors Lao Mangzi cannot see. Other things—most things, in fact—he sees quite as well as the next fellow.

It was the dead of night when the envoy arrived on a galloping horse from Peking. He carried a torch with a flame that soared, and he woke Lao Mangzi from a deep dream. *I bring this decree from the great and glorious Guangxu emperor*, the envoy said. *And from the Current Divine Mother Empress Dowager Cixi of the great Qing Empire*, he continued after a large breath. He handed Lao Mangzi a scroll and a package wrapped in silk. The scroll was an imperial order for the summary execution of the scholar official whose name is Sai Anguo of Suzhou Prefecture, a man who was born in the seventeenth year of the illustrious Daoguang emperor. *Decapitation without delay*, the envoy announced more loudly than was needed for Lao Mangzi's ears to hear. *The arrest is taking place right now*, he said, and sleepy neighbors peeked out of their doorways to see who had come at this late hour.

The envoy's horse was magnificent; his boots were black, his helmet richly tasseled. Later, when Lao Mangzi had unwrapped the egg-yolk apron and held it out to show his wife, she shrank away from it. Her eyes were round with fear. Lao Mangzi knows she doesn't like his line of work. But is he guilty, this kneeling, venerable mandarin? Does a man like this deserve the knife, the saw, the axe—the sword?

The boy, whose head has just rolled from his shoulders, whose

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blood is still seeping into the ground, was certainly guilty. Guilty of stealing a meat bun. Guilty of having an empty belly. An executioner knows better than most that a bowl of rice is a bowl of rice, and a man's fate is a man's fate. And yet, Lao Mangzi prides himself on knowing who is innocent and who is not. There is more to his craft than a swipe of the sword. The bowl of rice must be avenged, of course, but sometimes Lao Mangzi worries about the ghosts who are missing their heads when they pass to the spirit world in the Western Heaven. Sometimes Lao Mangzi sees blood in his dreams, and he sees it then the way others see it always. He sees it as the mandarin sees the boy's blood now: thick and rich and bright—and red.

Unlike the boy, the mandarin has been offered narcotics and a hood, both of which he declined, and a reed mat on which to kneel, which he accepted with a deep bow. He seems unafraid, something Lao Mangzi has never seen in one whose head he is about to cut off. The boy knelt hunched and shivering, and he drew his child-size shoulders sharply upward when Lao Mangzi signaled the final moment with a quick intake of breath and the raising of his two hands, sword in full swing. That last shrug and the vulnerable scrunch of the neck always come when the sword is ready to plunge. But perhaps not this time. The quiet mandarin is different from the others, Lao Mangzi thinks. He will not shrink back. This man is brave and dignified, someone to be honored.

In his last moments the boy sobbed aloud, and he soiled himself, and Lao Mangzi decided to think of him as innocent. He knows just how tempting a meat bun can be. He knows the way that hunger can tug at your guts and whisk away all notion of what it is to steal another man's possessions.

This morning, the mandarin's first wife sent for Lao Mangzi. It was just before dawn, before the day had even begun—it was after

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her husband's arrest. Dry-eyed, mute, neither young nor old, with her face made strange by the flame of a lantern, she dropped a coin into his hand, and the coin gleamed more brightly even than the flame. A bodhi-seed rosary darkened the woman's wrist, and her eyes searched Lao Mangzi's face. She said nothing, but he understood her meaning. She wants a sharp sword. A single cut. A swift death for her husband. Lao Mangzi nodded and bowed, and he murmured, *A mi tuo fo*. A Buddhist blessing for the Buddhist wife. And he marveled at the great house in which the woman lives. Afterward, he honed the blade of his sword on a whetstone he turned with his callused toes and then tested it on the turnip his own wife will boil for supper. Lao Mangzi's stomach clenched at the sound of the blade slicing through crisp vegetable flesh, and with a single swipe the turnip split. It was his wife who bent down to pick up the pieces and carry them into the house.

A new twinge in his belly reminds Lao Mangzi now that he need not waste his pity. This woman with the dark rosary whose husband kneels and waits for death will dine this evening on much better food than a poor turnip and a few grains of rice. She is lucky in some things, maybe in most. And then Lao Mangzi thinks of something his late and virtuous mother said: *A single happiness can scatter a thousand sorrows*. His thoughts go to the coin in his pocket, and to the slab of pork he will bring home to his cold dwelling to boil with the turnip, and to his worthless old wife, who will give him a rare smile when she sees what he has brought. And then his eyes crinkle, and he smiles broadly at the thought of his children with their bellies full of not just rice but pork-meat as well, and maybe a skewer of candied fruit.

Now the crowds are pressing closer, hungry to see blood. Five guards wearing dome-shaped helmets snap their whips to hold them back. And yet, Lao Mangzi knows that when he raises his sword

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high in the air most of the onlookers will flinch and shrink back and turn their eyes away, and they will think of the wolf in front and the tiger behind, and how their own fates may change to the worst, and how this can happen in less time than it takes to drink a cup of water. *Almost*, Lao Mangzi thinks, *that quickly*. And then, when the sword has fallen and the blood has spurted and the head has rolled like a cabbage onto the ground, the crowd will rush forward as one, every man wanting to dip a coin or two in the mandarin's blood for good luck.

The black cockerel is blinking, and Lao Mangzi is thinking, not for the first time, that the lacquered creature is passing judgment. The bird steps in front of the mandarin and puts his profile on display, and his wide eye sees all. *Innocent*, the executioner confirms, and he is certain of the truth of this. The cockerel is almost never wrong, and as everyone knows, in these times even chance remarks can lead to a public execution.

The great bell at the Cold Mountain Temple is beginning to toll. Air is moving, and around the pagoda's roof in nine umbrella layers the sky is a cheerful color that to Lao Mangzi is just another shade of gray. It is time to shed the layers of imperial silk that cover his sword. They fall to his feet in a crumpled heap. The rooster ruffles his feathers, and the blade shines like a honed sliver of crescent moon, and Lao Mangzi runs his thumb across it one last time. A thin line of blood beads, and he nods and thinks briefly how lucky he is to be color-blind in daylight. The sun is moving across the sky, and the shadow of the pagoda tilts, then bows over the crowd and darkens the mandarin's face. Overhead, geese with wide wings and rough, untidy honks fly westward in a not-quite-perfect skein formation—and the mandarin looks up and murmurs something so sad, so full of anguish, that years later Lao Mangzi will remember what he said and how he said it. *A poet can capture the*

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essence of birds, he says, *with the choice of just a few words. If I had a single moment more to teach my tiny daughter, what are the words that I would choose? What would I say to make her strong for the life she will live, alone and unprotected in these troubled times?* He speaks so softly that only Lao Mangzi, bending to remove the mandarin's glasses, can hear him.

The crowd is restless. The mandarin is facing west, his chin lifted. Drenched in sweat, the executioner tightens his grip on his sword, and closes his eyes, and repeats the blessing: *A mi tuo fo. May the Buddha protect you. His hands soar, and his shoulders heave, and Lao Mangzi is thinking of the tiny daughter who will live alone in troubled times, and who will not learn one more thing from her father. He knows that the quick, guttural grunt of his breath will be the last sound her father hears. That, and the cockerel's all-knowing crow, and Lao Mangzi wonders, What will she do, this little child, when the mandarin father is dead?*



THE DAY BEFORE

Jinhua

“Baba, when you went to visit the emperor did you see his dragon chair and his tiger sword with sharpness on two sides?”

Baba is sitting at the edge of Jinhua's bed. His face is gold from the glow of the lantern and marked with feathery lines.

“I did, Small Daughter,” he answers, and the sound of his voice soothes her as it always does when it is late and time for bed. “I saw the dragon throne and the sword and much, much more. And to-

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morrow, when I have rested from my long journey, I will tell you stories about how it was in Peking with the emperor, and you, my little pearl, will tell me a story that I have never heard before.”

Outside in the garden, the crickets are singing because that is what crickets do in autumn before they die in winter, and the sound of them ebbs and surges like a vast ocean song, and the moon is huge and low and tinged with red.

“Baba, the Forbidden City is very far away from here. I really, really wish you didn’t have to go there ever again.”

“The distance is more than two thousand li,” Baba says. “And you know, Jinhua, that it is my duty to go whenever the emperor sends for me. That is why—it is the only reason why—I will ever go away and leave you.”

“I know, Baba. You have to go because the Guangxu Emperor is the ruler and you are the subject, and because it is written in the *Analects* that the subject must do what the ruler says in the same way that I must do what you say, and what my husband will say when I marry, and what my sons will say when my husband is dead.”

The lantern is putting dots like stars in Baba’s eyes, and he is smiling because Jinhua has learned what he has taught her about the way the world is ordered—and she has remembered the Three Obediences. He takes the lantern in his hand, which means that he is leaving now and it is time to sleep. Jinhua touches Baba’s sleeve.

“Since the emperor is only a child, Baba, when you go to his palace with the golden roofs, do you tell him stories the way you tell stories to me?”

“No, Daughter, I do not,” Baba answers. “A story is a garden you can carry in your pocket. The stories we tell ourselves and each other are for pleasure and refuge. Like gardens they are small places in a large world. But, Jinhua, we must never mistake the stories we

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tell for the truth. The emperor must protect the empire of the Great Qing. He must be wise, and to be wise he must know what is true and what is not, and this is why, Jinhua, I tell him only what is real about the way things are. I do not ever tell him stories.”

Baba kisses Jinhua on the top of her head and pulls the warm red quilt all the way up to her chin, and Jinhua shivers under the silk because she knows that barbarian men from faraway places have come with ships and guns, and they are making Chinese people sick from opium—and forcing them to worship barbarian gods—and they are stealing silver and even whole cities from the empire. She wants Baba to stay a while longer and to tell her that even though these men have come from the West, the emperor is strong and he will protect her, and Baba, and all of the people in China.

“Baba?” She hears him sigh and knows that this must be her very last question.

“What will I do if the emperor calls for you and doesn’t let you come back to me?”

“Do not worry, Jinhua, about what has not yet happened. The future is long. Now, close your eyes and sleep, and do not allow today to use up the moments that belong to tomorrow.”

“Baba?” Jinhua has one more thing to say, and she whispers it. “I wish that you would disobey the emperor and stay here with me forever and for always.”



Baba’s stories begin in the same way, always—*Long, long ago in ancient times, when just wishing a thing made it so . . .* Jinhua’s favorite story is the one he tells about the goddess Nüwa, who was just like Mama, and Baba says it is his favorite story, too, because Mama was

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the one he loved most of all—except for Jinhua—and he loved her that much even though she was only a concubine and not a first wife like Timu.

Long, long ago in ancient times, when just wishing a thing made it so, there lived a goddess—and here Baba always pauses, and he and Jinhua continue telling the story in unison because they have told it so often together that in each of their heads it is as ripe as a melon that rolls from the vine, and the words slip from their tongues in just that way. And the goddess was curious and wise and virtuous, and her name was Nüwa, and she was—just—like—Mama. The last part of this—the words just like Mama—they always say slowly because the story is really about Mama, and their words—Baba’s and Jinhua’s—fall precisely together like two bright cherries joined on a stem. Jinhua wriggles with joy, hugging her pajama-covered knees to her chest.

And—Baba continues the story by himself and Jinhua waits every time for every word—Nüwa explored the beautiful earth when there were no people, and there was East and West and North and South, and she went to all of these places, but she was lonely and sad. And that is why, on one very special day, she made thinking, laughing, dancing creatures out of golden clay to make the world alive. And then, Baba always adds, and Jinhua loves this part best of all, she made a little child like you, Jinhua. In just the way that Mama made you. And this is how it really was long, long ago in ancient times.

2

DESTINED TO BREAK



First Wife (Timu)

First Wife feels no grief. How could she? Just like something flying past your ear—*hua*—that quickly a husband is dead and the servants have stolen away.

She had no warning. She supposes her husband—her honorable husband—did not know himself that the emperor would order his beheading. When he returned from Peking he said nothing. And then she thinks that surely, almost certainly, he knew that this would happen and didn't say anything for the shame of it. That would be like him, to shrink from the shame when really she needed him to tell her what to do when he was gone, how to live a life that is not the same as it was before, and what to do with the concubine's child. He knows she isn't a strong woman. It was his long tongue, she supposes, that brought him this trouble.

The coffin maker's boy came quickly. He came to the third gate and said, *Lady, you will be needing a coffin.* He smiled and had an eye that wandered and was rheumy, and she didn't speak—of

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course. He dropped his gaze to the ground, where it lingered as though nothing were something. She sent him away with a wave of her hand. She is not prepared to do this thing, to order a coffin for her husband. It is all so sudden, and there is so much to be thought about, so terribly much to be done.

First Wife loops the bodhi-seed rosary around the loosely fisted fingers of her left hand. She positions it between the knuckle and joint of her forefinger in the place where the violet callus has bloomed from all her praying, and with her right hand she arranges the hem of her gown to kneel. One knee cracks—it is the right knee that gives her trouble in the autumn—and she lowers herself onto the flat, square cushion she uses when she sits in prayer. Her anger is close, and enlightenment feels very far away. Of all the things, it is the child about which she is most angry. About being left with her, just the two of them and no one else. The fat key with which she locked the gate to the courtyard, the child inside, has left flecks of rust on the palm of her hand, and she notices this only now. Her feet ache inside their bindings as she settles her weight on the cushion.

It is evening, and at last the child has stopped calling for her father. She does not yet know that he will never come again. A bald nut drops from a branch and skitters along the lichen-pitted roof tiles, and this is the only sound First Wife can hear. With her thumb she presses on the first bead of the rosary and feels pain like a bruise. *I feel and hear and remember as though from the inside of my own grave*, she is thinking. It has been this way for a long time even though she—unlike her husband, and unlike the concubine he loved so much—is alive and of this world. Freshly lit incense unleashes curling, potent veins of spice, and a dove calls out from the silver almond tree in the garden, where it is hiding under a pink sky. Its call is a ruffled, throaty sound that makes her want to weep. *Gulu, gulu, gulu.*

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First Wife moves her thumb to the next bead, and the rosary shifts across the callus. The dove calls out a second time from the same almond tree that the concubine planted when the child was plump in her belly. First Wife remembers angling her eye to the merest sliver of a crack in the gate and watching her. With her widening hips and the spill of her blue gown as she knelt to take the earth into her hands, the concubine was beautiful and virtuous and surrounded by people who loved her.

The tree was just a sapling then. Now First Wife's loathing blooms like a fresh boil, even though the concubine's joy was as brief, almost, as a drink of tea. She died giving birth to the child, whom she has locked behind the gate, and that was seven years ago. First Wife wished then that it had been the child who had died. She wishes it now. That would have been a just and equitable fate.

Outside, the pink sky is disappearing quickly to the west. It is getting dark and cold, and there is no servant left to light the lanterns or the brazier. No one to bring mimosa-bark tea to nourish First Wife's heart, or a simple meal for her supper. She overheard Lao Zhao, the cook, this afternoon warning the other servants. It is his habit to discuss things loudly, especially things that make him important in the eyes of others. He told the servants that a headless body cannot proceed in the proper way to the afterlife. He smacked his lips at the delicious sound of his own voice, and First Wife could not close her ears to what he was saying. At the edge of the kitchen wall she kept herself hidden, and she ground the beads of the rosary painfully into her palm, and she listened. She kept her eyes closed and heard cruelty in Lao Zhao's voice, and the creaking of the beads, and the *o's* and *a's* and *ai's* of the servants. Lao Zhao said that the master's ghost was tormented, that he would be back this very night to disturb the household. *Demand your wages and go*, was his advice to the others. *Smack. Smack.* He has such a large voice, and people listen to what

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he says, and he carried on for a long time. He said that he had gone to watch; he saw it happen, this terrible thing, and it took only one stroke of the sword to slice through the bone and tissues that joined the venerable master's head to his venerable body. Thank Old Heaven and thank Earth for that, First Wife thought when she heard this. The executioner has earned his silver coin, and in this, at least, she has been a worthy wife. She has given her husband the kind of death that happens in an instant. But then she heard Lao Zhao asking, *Who will fetch the pieces of the master's body? Will the lady do it? Does she have the strength?* And then he asked another question. *What will she do with the child, who is her sworn enemy?*

It was while Lao Zhao was talking that First Wife decided to lock the gate to the child's courtyard. Just for a while, she told herself, so that she could turn this all over in her mind. So that she could decide what to do. No one asked her if she needed any last thing. Not a single one of them, even though she paid them twice what they were owed, or more. She would not have answered if they had, of course. She has said nothing, not a word to anyone, since the day the child's mother was delivered in a red sedan chair, dressed as a real bride in vermilion, and carried to a bridal bed, a new one just for her that was littered with dates and eggs and pomegranate seeds to make her fertile. On that day, First Wife swallowed once, and with that swallow she consumed her own voice. *Forever and for always*, she told herself. Since then she has uttered only soundless prayers and had nothing at all to say in the worldly realm.

Now that everyone has gone and the child is locked away, First Wife moves her thumb to the third bead of the rosary and searches her memory for the words to the heart sutra, the way to a peaceful mind. A fly, orange eyed and glossy winged, alights on her wrist at the edge of her sleeve, and she cannot find the words to the sutra. She has not yet ordered her husband's coffin or arranged to collect

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the pieces of him, and her heart feels large and pulpy, like a swollen, aching piece of fruit that fills her chest. The fly meanders on pinprick legs along a vein on her hand, and First Wife is thinking of the child and wondering whether she has fallen asleep and reminding herself that she loathes her almost as much as she loathed the concubine, or maybe more. And she is thinking, too, that she should be weeping blood for her dead husband, but instead she wants to feel his touch in a loving way—just once more after all this time. Kneeling, she shifts her weight and the fly leaves her and she knows now more clearly than ever before that she, unlike the concubine, has not been loved enough in this life.



The go-between's vulture hands are what First Wife thinks of when she wakes from a brief sleep, her heart pounding. She did not mean to close her eyes. The sky is black, and it is cold. She lights a lantern, ties a fresh knot in her hair, and tightens the bindings on her feet. She is clumsy with these tasks that are normally done for her by others.

First Wife didn't much like the look of the woman who came to the gate almost as swiftly as the coffin boy did when the news got out. She was poor and ugly and unpleasant to look at. *Mama dead. Baba dead*, the woman said. *Lady want sell little girl?* She reached into the folds of her tunic with those awful hands, groping as though she were scratching herself. She pulled out a piece of paper, none too clean and badly folded, and held it up.

Contract, she said. *You look. Tomorrow I come back. We talk.* Her eyes moved, taking in the view of all that lies inside the gate, and First Wife felt uneasy. She allowed the woman to put that paper in her hand.

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There has been no evening meal, and there will be no breakfast this morning—but First Wife has left hunger far behind. The paper is on her writing table. It is just as it would be, of course: white, the color of mourning; grimy, like a contract to sell cabbages or chickens or pigs; awkwardly written, as by a near illiterate. She begins to read aloud, following the characters on the page with the pale tip of her fingernail. After years of silence, her voice is clear and beautiful and surprising, and the words she reads are easily said aloud—and her hands and her heart are steady.

Contract for Selling Child Who Is Not Wanted

According to the Contract, First Wife of Child's father is the Seller and Go-Between Li is the Buyer. Mother and Father of Child are dead, as of yesterday morning by chopping off head in the case of Father, and a long time ago although no one has said exactly when in the case of Mother, and no one wants to keep the Child. Therefore, First Wife is agreeing to sell her. The buying price is one silver tael per year, which is Seven Years Old. The Buyer, who is Li as is already said, has agreed to the price but before she pays the money she will check the Child for sickness and defects. After this, she will be sold as is. She will be taken away and no one can try to find her. It is hereunto agreed that after this Li will be allowed to sell the Child to any Buyer for any amount of coins and that the Buyer will be allowed to do anything to her that he wants, even punish her in any way or sell her to any other person. If the Child is killed or has any accident, all people will agree that it is the Will of Heaven and not the fault of anyone.



THE COURTESAN

First Wife's thumb is on the eighteenth bead. She is unwilling, but memories claw at her, and tonight, before she goes to her bed, she must visit one last time the large space in her mind in which her baby lived. Something in her arms is cold and precious. She cradles it: the damp and almost weightless husk of her newborn son. The fluids of a new life glisten on the baby's skin. His tiny fists are closed, as tight as walnuts; his eyelids, pink and petal thin, collapse in folds. He is all that matters, for a woman must bear her husband a son, and she has done this thing, and it was painful almost beyond endurance. His future is long, she remembers thinking about the child in her arms, and mine is now assured. And then she felt Si Shen in the room, and the death spirit threatened her quietly, gently, and then he took the baby's toes, his shoulders and his earlobes, his tiny elbows and his precious face. He made them still and took away her baby's life.

First Wife remembers kneeling on the flat gray pillow, just as she is kneeling now. Her husband's soft slippers came; he placed his fine hand on her shoulder, and he, too, was weeping. She turned away and knew it was forever; she knew then that she would become what she is now: a demon with an empty mouth for the rest of this miserable life that she has not yet finished living. The eighteen beads of the rosary cannot calm her today. She takes a breath into her demon's body and then another, and she tells herself, *The concubine's child means less than nothing.*

This is not the truth; the child means everything. First Wife's gown is damp with sweat from the backs of her thighs, and the sweat is as heavy as blood and as heavy as the fluids of birth, and she wonders in a fleeting way whether the child, alone behind the locked gate, is afraid of the dark. The words to the heart sutra come to her now and suddenly, and she needs them more than ever before.

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Go, go, go beyond. Go thoroughly beyond and establish yourself in enlightenment.

She speaks the words aloud. She repeats them over and over, long into the night, and understands impermanence. And when it is morning, First Wife goes in search of scissors and a razor, telling herself, *The child will be punished, but first I must begin to punish myself.*

3

TIME THAT HAS PASSED



Jinhua

A hacking cough in the distance is the night-soil man with the wobbly voice and opium in his throat. Jinhua lies still for a moment in her bed, busy with remembering. She has been waiting for Baba for one whole day and one whole night, calling his name until her voice hurt, waiting to tell him that she has lost her wiggling, jiggling tooth. She is hungry enough to eat the wind, and her eyes are fat from crying. She remembers now that the red gate was stuck shut yesterday for all the day. No one has come to look after her. No one has come.

Outside birds are twittering, *jijizhazha*, and now their conversation stops and the only noises are the sounds that Jinhua is making. She straightens a leg, shifts a hip tightly wrapped in bedding, and opens her eyes to a blank wall. She is not used to waking up alone. She is not used to putting herself to bed.

Last night when the sky turned black, she tried to think of a story to tell Baba when he comes. One that he has never heard

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before about the Monkey King, who is extremely strong and can leap a distance of one hundred and eight thousand li in a single somersault, and who traveled far, far to the west. She will invent a new and special story in which the Monkey King bravely defeats the barbarians in a great battle fought high up in the trees and then sends them and their ships, guns, and opium away from China, back to where they came from. She held the book about the Monkey King's journey in her lap but didn't open it. She lay down and curled herself around it. And then she told herself, *Tomorrow everything will be the way it always has been. Meiling, the maid, will come with breakfast rice and her soft, soft voice that is, Jinhua thinks, the way a real mother's voice would be.* And Baba will come too, through the red gate, wearing his blue gown that smells like sweet tobacco and has the word *shou* for "long life" woven into the fabric in more places than Jinhua can count—and she will run to him and Baba will catch her, and she will take his braided queue in her fingers and wrap it around her wrist as many times and as tightly as she can. And—even if the emperor calls for Baba he will—

Tomorrow all will be well, Jinhua told herself as her eyes fluttered shut and she drifted off to sleep.

So—now it is tomorrow, and the morning light is brown through wooden shutters, and the air smells of nothing. Jinhua turns toward the door. The bedding catches her hips like a belt tightening, and she gasps. The door is open. Someone is here in the room. The person is not Baba. It is not Meiling or any of the other servants. It is someone she does not know. Someone without any hair.

"In a single day all has become empty, and enlightenment is near." Dark eyes glitter in a silver face, and the words are a chant, and the face belongs to a woman, as thin as a needle, dressed like a nun in dull gray. Jinhua waits.

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“Your father was my husband before he loved your mother,” the woman says, and Jinhua sees that it is First Wife, Timu, standing there and saying these words. “And now there is only emptiness without body or feeling or will.” Timu’s voice fades in and out, and she is as bald as a mushroom, and Jinhua’s tongue explores the hard-edged gap where her tooth is lost. She doesn’t move. She is a little afraid, but more than this she is astonished because Timu is talking, saying things out loud even though she has made a vow to never speak and to always be sad, and she made this vow a long, long time ago.

In one hand, Timu is holding something long and white; in the other she has something dark and strange. She begins to move the hand with the strange, dark thing—it is Timu’s left hand—and she moves it very slowly. “Look,” Timu says. “This is emptiness.” Her prayer beads that she never doesn’t wear slip at the edge of her sleeve. “There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue,” she is saying, and Timu is spreading her fingers carefully like a fan opening, tilting her hand, making the beads tremble at her wrist. “Look, look, look,” she murmurs, and her face is scary, and she and Jinhua both watch as the dark thing falls, separating into clumps that drop to the floor and settle in mounds at Timu’s feet. “And now there is no hair. It was the last thing to hold me in the realm of earthly attachments, the last thing to make me a wife. Now it is gone, and so is your father.”

Air moves in the room, ruffling the mounds of Timu’s black hair freshly cut from her horrible, naked scalp. Jinhua’s breath comes in small gasps, and Timu takes a step closer to the bed. Tiny shoes peek out from the hem of her gown. They are watermelon red, embroidered bridal shoes.

“Your Baba has gone to the Western Heaven to join the ancestors,” she says now. The white thing hangs limply from Timu’s

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hand, not quite touching the floor—and *what is Timu saying?* Jinhua sees loose threads, a coarse weave, a ragged hem, a sleeve. She is shivering. It is a gown in Timu's hand. It is white, the color for mourning, a *xiaofu*. It is what people wear to weep and wail when a person is dead.

“Get up now, child. Put this on to show your grief,” Timu says, and something as large as an egg lodges in Jinhua's throat. It feels as though it will be there for a long time, and the gown looks far too big—and *Baba always comes back after a while. He always does, but where is he now?*

Timu is speaking quickly, and she is offering the *xiaofu* with two hands outstretched as though she were giving a gift, the prayer beads dangling at her wrist, the gown moving like a demon, a white one, slowly closer to Jinhua. And Timu is talking, talking, talking, and her eyes and lips and teeth are leaping from her face, and now the prayer beads are as shrill as a whistle close to Jinhua's ear. Timu says that Baba is dead. She says that the sword to cut off his head was the emperor's sword, and it was sharp. The sleeve of the white gown is a blur touching Jinhua's cheek, her ear, her forehead, brushing against her skin, hurting her. She covers her ears with her fists, and there is no air to breathe—and all that she can think about is that Timu is a liar. She should go away and please, please stop talking, stop saying those things about Baba—and while she thinks these things Jinhua is becoming more and more afraid—and *can it be true that the emperor's sword has cut off Baba's head?*

There is a sudden silence. Timu's breath is close, and her ears bloom neat and small against her hairless head, and she is perfectly still for a moment. Then she wails, “*We must both strive for virtue, child, you and I.*” And she howls, “*Shi bu zai lai.*” Time that has passed will never come back.

Jinhua goes limp. Light streams through the open door like

THE COURTESAN

narrow fingers; outside in the street a bucket of water hits the ground with a loud smack, and Jinhua folds herself around her knees. She bites down hard into her kneecap with her front teeth, and there is a gap for the one that fell out this morning, and she knows that Baba isn't coming back. And she knows more than this. She knows that it is the emperor who has cut off Baba's head with his tiger sword that has sharpness on two sides—and Jinhua's own words, the words she said to Baba, are in her ears now, clear and huge and terrifying—*Baba, I wish that you would disobey the emperor—*

Timu is nodding as though she knows all this, and Jinhua has a question, and the question is urgent. She asks it in a whisper that is like a sob.

“Who will look after me now?”

Timu covers her face with her hands. “I cannot give you an answer,” she says. “I am wind blowing from an empty cave, and I am neither more nor less than this.” And then, with two fingers extended from her fist, Timu makes the round gesture of chopsticks fetching food from a bowl, and the sound of the prayer beads is softer than it was before.

“There is rice on the table. Eat it, child. Today you will need *yuanqi*—you will need all of your strength when the go-between comes to get you.”

**THE
SURVIVORS**



A Cal Henderson Novel

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ROBERT L. PALMER



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For WPT and TAG
and the heights of Mount Olympus.
A most amazing day.

PROLOGUE

The wind gusted, rattling the old windows, and the four boys looked up from their game. “Ghosts!” whispered Scottie.

“Shut up,” said Alan, the oldest. “It’s Davie’s turn.”

They bent back over the board. “Five or better and he wins,” Scottie said, fingering the spinner.

They grew quiet as the sound of adult voices echoed up from the dining room on the far side of the house.

“Mom again,” Ron said. “I wish she and Dad—”

“Let’s just *play*,” said Davie. Ron and Alan were his big brothers, and he loved beating them. He played every game—checkers, cards, tag, board games like this—with the same pure intensity.

The voices rose again downstairs, loud enough so they could make out a few words, and their father cursed. That was followed by a bang. “That’s it,” Alan said. “Dad’s gone out.”

Scottie said, “We can hear them sometimes clear over at my house. My mom talked about calling the police once. She said maybe I shouldn’t come here anymore.”

“Then *don’t*,” Ron snapped.

Davie sighed and hung his head. Scottie was his friend, and a constant annoyance to the two older boys—with his lame jokes and bluntly chewed fingers, his pale red hair standing on end like a cartoon character. And now he was playing with the spinner again, nudging it to the edge of the three spot. Davie’s family had owned the game for years, and none of them had noticed the quirk of the spinner. Scottie figured it out the first time they let him play, but he only confided in Davie. Any spin that started on that spot always ended on six. He shot Davie a look, jumpy and furtive, a timid rabbit look. *C’mon buddy. All set. Spin*

and win! Eight-year-old Davie didn't want to disappoint anyone, but he wouldn't take the bait either.

"Let's do something else," he said.

"Yeah, this is lame." Alan slapped the board closed and the little plastic cars bounced across the floor.

"Like what?" Ron said.

They turned to Davie. He was youngest, but he was the ideas man here. It had been that way since he was old enough to run with the others, as if somewhere behind his dark and deep-set eyes there always was an answer. "Hide 'n Seek?" he said.

Scottie jumped up. "I'm it!"

"No," Alan and Ron said together.

Hide 'n Seek was a problem with Scottie. It was a special game for Davie and his family, something they all played together. Scottie was an outsider. Worse than that, when he was it, he didn't go searching for anybody. He just hid next to the base, and when the others tried to tag free, he was waiting to jump out and catch them. Rules didn't make any difference to Scottie, and no amount of advice from Davie could convince him otherwise. But that was mostly why Davie put up with him, even liked him. Scottie wasn't like any other kid Davie knew.

"I'll be it first," Davie said, "then your turn."

"OK," Scottie moped.

Ron and Alan smiled at each other. They could see the clock on the bedside table. There was only time for one round before Scottie would have to go home.

They headed in opposite directions, the three down the hallway and Davie around the corner to his parents' room. "Stay up here," he called. "Mom won't want us downstairs with her papers everywhere."

"Sure," one of the others mumbled.

They clicked the lights out as they went, leaving the upstairs dark except for the small lamp in their parents' room. They'd use the bed there as the base.

Davie went to the window that looked out on the backyard. It had started to rain, and fat droplets spattered the pane. He closed his

eyes, listening past the storm to the sounds of the other boys. When they played Hide 'n Seek as a family, he always teamed with his mom. They almost never lost because she had taught him the strategy. Listen carefully. Follow the others with your ears. Triangulate in your head to where they were hiding. Nothing random, all scientific. He heard a giggle and Alan muttered something angry. A door slammed—*bang*—and two more—*bang, bang*. In the closets, then. Probably the bedrooms at the top of the stairs.

He leaned into the wall to begin the count.

At fifty-seven, he heard something that sounded like the faint mewling of a cat. That couldn't be. Brookey was dead, two weeks ago. He looked out the window and saw his mother step into the yard. She wasn't wearing a coat or sweater. And the sound. The mewling was coming from her. She was crying. She'd cried for a whole day when Brookey died. Lately, she cried a lot.

She turned to face the house. The wind whistled through the pine trees behind her, and she shivered. No, she wasn't shivering but crying harder. Then she glanced up, and for an instant her eyes settled on him. Her hand moved ever so slightly, pressing down. It was a signal from Hide 'n Seek. *Get down, Davie. Stay quiet.*

Davie knelt, following instructions. He was always a good boy around her. From his new position, he could just see over the sill. Her hair was long and curly and blond, and the wind whipped it across her face. There was something in her other hand. Black. Heavy. Distorted by the raindrops on the window. She said something, a sentence or two, very low. Was his name part of it? He thought she would look up again and smile, maybe wave. She stared straight ahead.

Slowly, she raised her hand. Up beside her head. He'd never seen a real gun before, but of course he knew what it was. Muzzle at her temple. She lowered her face even more. The hair writhed around her eyes.

He opened his mouth to scream—*Mom don't!*—but nothing came out. It was as if a hand had clamped on his throat, strangling the words before they could form.

The gun fired. That was the *bang* he'd heard before. Not doors slamming.

Her body pitched sideways. There was no pirouette, nothing graceful—just down. She was still clutching the gun.

He kept trying to scream, but his voice wasn't there. In his head, he saw the last stricken look she'd given him as her hand patted the air. *Get down. Stay quiet.* Then his mind slipped over the edge. It was the same blank emptiness that came over him when he found Brookey's crushed body on the roadside. He'd knelt there, rigid and unmoving, until his mother found him and dragged him away.

The wind mounted again, battering the windows. He blinked and everything swam out of focus.

Davie crawled away from the window, something he wouldn't recall doing, and slid under the bed, using the springs to pull himself into the shadows. His wrist caught on a raw wire end, but he didn't feel a thing. He curled on his side with his knees to his chest and his arm impaled above him. Blood dripped off his elbow. Davie knew none of it, as he dove deeper and deeper into his own dark hole.



“Hey, there’s one in here under the bed!” the cop shouted. “Oh my God, look at the blood.”

The paramedics had just arrived and they burst into the room, a woman and a man. The woman dropped to her knees and reached in to untangle the boy’s arm. “This one isn’t shot, only bleeding from his wrist.”

She pulled him onto the rug. “Is he alive?” the cop said. This was his first call-out for a shooting and his voice was shaky.

“Yeah. Hard to tell how much blood he’s lost. Let’s get him outside to our rig.”

The cop—Damon Thierry—led the way, shoving another cop who didn’t move fast enough off the stairs. There were three police cars out

on the road, all with lights flashing. Scottie Glass's mother sat in the back seat of one, looking like she'd lost all touch with the world. She'd called it in.

Thierry ran to the ambulance and yanked open the doors. The paramedics laid Davie on the floor. They checked his heart, snapped a light in his eyes, then got a blood pressure cuff on his arm.

"What have you got?" a gruff voice called.

Thierry jumped to attention. "It's a boy, Captain. Found him under the bed in the biggest room upstairs. He seemed to be hiding."

Captain Gillespie grunted. He was tall and had a raw, red face, a combination of too much booze and pent-up anger. The drive from the Montgomery County Police station in Gaithersburg had left him even more short-tempered than usual. There was heavy traffic on I-270 and another tie-up down the road in the village of Damascus. The whole state of Maryland was getting to be a damned parking lot.

"How is he?" he said to the paramedics.

"Heart's steady, but his pressure's real low. He's lost some blood. Can't say how much. Pupils are non-responsive."

Gillespie bent in so he could see. "He wasn't shot?"

"No, just a bad cut on his arm."

"Lucky him." Gillespie stood up, rubbing a kink out of his lower back. He was going to have to start using that lumbar pillow his wife had bought him. "What a mess. Did you see what she did to her husband? Damn near blew his face off."

Thierry glanced at the boy. "Captain, he may be able to hear us."

Gillespie shrugged. "That doesn't change facts."

Lights from another police car swung over the rise in the road. This one was unmarked, so it would be the detectives. "You were first on the scene?" Gillespie said. Thierry nodded. "OK, walk me through it."

Thierry led him around the side of the house. "I'd just stopped for dinner—that new Pizza Hut." His voice was all over the place.

"Take a breath, son," Gillespie said. "Now start when you got here."

"OK. I met the neighbor out at the road. She was in bad shape. Kept screeching her son's name. *Scottie, Scottie*. She came over here

looking for him and found this.”

They had reached the woman’s body in the backyard. Her mouth was slack, and her hair was matted with blood. Another cop, an older guy Thierry didn’t know, was standing guard until the C.I. techs got there.

“How many vics?” Gillespie said.

“The woman here,” Thierry answered. “Husband you saw in the front room. Three kids in an upstairs closet.”

Gillespie sighed and rubbed his forehead. Then he stared hard at Thierry. “But you missed the other boy—the one under the bed.”

“I found the bodies, checked them over, and made a quick run-through of the place. I didn’t think to look under the beds.”

Gillespie continued to stare.

“Sorry, Captain,” Thierry mumbled. “I just missed it.”

“If that boy dies, don’t expect our friends in the press to miss it. And don’t expect me to cover your butt either.” Gillespie started to walk away. “Stay on with the detectives. You made first contact. Maybe you can help when they interview the neighbor.”

Thierry said, “Sure, Captain, I—”

“*Hey!*” someone screamed from inside. “Some help in here! I got a pulse on one of the kids in the closet!”

The paramedics sprinted for the front door.

Gillespie hissed a curse and jogged after them.

The older cop kicked his toe in the dirt and chuckled. “Oops.”

Thierry watched the dead woman’s hair ripple in the wind, and he wondered what his next career would be like.

ONE

“Doctor Henderson?”

“Yes,” I said, scrambling to remember what Michelle had asked me. “I think I read something about interest rates changing.”

Henry, Michelle’s husband, edged forward on the sofa. “So it’s a good time to refinance. Tell her.”

Couples therapy. It’s the worst part of my job. I wouldn’t do it, but everybody’s got to pay the rent. One of my professors said that for a psychologist, couples therapy is like trying to herd lemmings. There’s rarely a storybook ending.

I said, “Mortgages are a little outside my expertise. Besides, we’ve been through this a few times before. You both seem . . . stuck today.”

“I’m not stuck,” Michelle said, crossing her arms.

I rubbed the scar on my wrist. It’s a habit of mine when I make a mistake with a patient. Michelle had a defensive streak a mile wide, and I should have known better than use the word “stuck.” She actually was the most rigid patient I had. She wore the same sweater and shoes to every session, sat in the same spot on the sofa, always with her right leg crossed over the left. Henry was another story altogether. He was game for anything. He was fifty-six years old and in the last four months had taken up rock climbing and sky diving. He claimed to have invented streaking. The wilder he got, the more inflexible she became. Welcome to couples therapy.

“I didn’t phrase that well,” I said. “Michelle, I’m sorry.” I noticed I was rubbing my scar again and stopped. “I gave you some homework to do. Any progress there?”

They looked at each other and smiled. If I gave out gold stars, that would have earned one. “Great. Tell me about it.”

“You said I should try to do more around the house. Little things to surprise her,” Henry said. “I put the newspaper away every day, so she wouldn’t have to. And I picked up the dry cleaning. I even baked her a cake.”

“Really?” I said. “How did it turn out?”

“Must be pretty good. It’s half gone already.”

Tears immediately sprang up in Michelle’s eyes. They had remarkably similar builds: pole-bean arms and legs, plump around the middle. Henry carried the extra weight proudly, but it bothered the hell out of Michelle.

He turned red and stammered, “I mean, it’s nice, you know? Nice that she made a show of liking it so much.” He goggled at me for help.

I let a few seconds pass. “Michelle . . . ?”

“Yes, I liked the cake very much.” She carefully wiped her eyes and eased the throw pillow out from behind her back. I figured she might bury her face in it, a thing she sometimes did when she got upset. Instead she hefted it once, then slugged Henry across the face.

“Hey, don’t do that!” I bounced out of my chair and snatched the pillow from her.

I thought I might have to step between them, but they both burst out laughing. “Man, Doc, you’re ticked off,” Henry said.

“Right. Now both of you calm down.”

Henry showed me his palms. “No worries.”

I headed back to my chair. “OK, what’s going on?”

“More homework,” Michelle said. “You told me to try to find a way to express myself when he made me angry.”

“So you’ve been hitting him?”

“Only with pillows and oven mitts. Towels. Things like that.”

“You don’t look too happy, Doc,” Henry said.

Right again. The zipper on the pillow had left a small cut under Henry’s eye.

I pulled a tissue from the box on the coffee table and handed it to him. “You’re bleeding.”

He dabbed at it. “Sweetie! First time you’ve left a mark.”

They giggled together, but that stopped when they looked at me. “Jeez,” he said, “you aren’t going to throw us out of here, are you?”

I took a breath to calm down and thought *make the best of it*.

“Did you notice what he just called you?”

She beamed. “I did. And he’s a sweetie, too.”

Getting them to express affection like that was close to a miracle. But the hitting—that had to stop.

I said, “I’m really glad you’ve taken this step. But I’m going to need you—”

The lights dimmed and a half-second later came back up. It was the signal our time was nearly up. “I need you to promise—no more hitting. Zero tolerance on that.”

“Why?” Henry said. “It works.”

So far, I thought, imagining a room with no pillows, but a lamp or maybe a baseball bat. “An inch higher, and that cut would be a scratched cornea. Now promise—no hitting.”

“OK,” they both muttered.

“But keep working, Michelle. Find a way to let the anger out and let him know about it.” I stood up. “Keep up with your journal writing, both of you. We’ll start with that next week.”

We headed for the door, which opened before we got there. It was my receptionist, Tori Desia. She stared at Henry’s eye as they passed. “What happened to him?” she said after she shut the door behind them.

“Michelle—the pillow. She didn’t mean to do it.”

“I hope not.” She straightened the sofa and put the tissue box back in the center of the coffee table. Tori ran the office like a military operation. Not that you’d expect that by looking at her. She was the most strikingly attractive woman I’d ever known. Her mother had been a Norwegian soccer star. Her father was half black, half Cherokee. Tall, athletic, exotic—she would have been a dream catch to anchor any TV news show. Instead she worked for me. Scratch that. We worked together. Nobody could ever claim to be Tori Desia’s boss.

“Henry and Michelle are six weeks behind on their bills,” she said. “We should drop them.”

“They’re starting to make progress.”

“And that helps the bottom line how?”

“All right. I’ll talk to them about the bills next week.”

“You do that.” She handed me a file folder. “New patient up next. Edward Gaines. Likes to be called Ted.”

I flipped through the paperwork. “It doesn’t say how he found out about me.”

She gave me an innocent look. “No it doesn’t, but you’re a psychologist. Maybe you can get him to talk about it.”

“That’s cute.”

She turned for the door. “He’s an eel, by the way. Twitch-twitch. Went to the bathroom twice in the last fifteen minutes. And a *real* hound.”

She had animal designations for all the patients. The eels were manic. The hounds were perverts. Today she was wearing skin-tight cords. Often it was a micro skirt and five-inch heels. Most every man who entered my office ranked a hound.

I said, “We could bring back the old desk with the privacy panel.”

She knuckled me under the chin. “Now what would be the fun in that?”

As she reached for the door, two sharp raps came from the other side. “Eel,” she sighed. She swung it open.

“Dr. Henderson. Hiya.” He stuck his hand out to shake. He was wearing a Baltimore Orioles cap, which immediately made me warm to him. I’d been a Birds fan since I was a kid.

“Mr. Gaines, it’s nice to meet you.”

Tori quietly closed the door, and he looked around the room. “So this is it, huh? Pretty neat. Only five blocks to the Capitol Building. You get a lot of them here? Senators, judges, whatnot?”

“More of the whatnot,” I said. “Why don’t you sit down.”

“OK.” This usually presented a dilemma for patients. Take the couch (and all the baggage that came with it) or one of the chairs (and maybe look like a hard case). Without hesitating, he grabbed the nearest chair and dragged it next to the window, so he’d be able to look

outside and see me wherever I sat. He had an old backpack with him, and he plopped it on his lap. Whatever was in it was heavy. "Let's see." He ran his finger back and forth like a compass needle. "The Supreme Court is over that way?" The finger stopped moving.

I took a seat in the other chair. "That's right."

"Good. A new place, I like to get my bearings."

"Fair enough."

Tori had been right about the twitching. Already he had crossed his legs a couple of times. He was tall, well taller than my six-foot-plus, and his hands were very large. He fluttered them down the armrests of the chair. Then he felt the backpack, hefting whatever was inside, some sort of security for him.

"So, what do we do now?"

"Good question." I picked his file up from the coffee table. "There isn't much background in here about why you've come to see me. Just 'anxiety.' Did another doctor refer you?"

"No."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he only grinned. His eyes flicked to my face and away, and he rubbed the armrests of the chair again.

"How about this," I said. "Why don't you tell me about yourself. That's usually a good place to start."

He seemed confused. "Tell you about me?"

"Sure. Start anywhere."

"I . . . I live in Mount Pleasant."

I'd seen the address in the file. "It's nice up there. Near Rock Creek Park?"

He nodded but said no more.

"How long have you been there?"

"Eight years, same place."

He was about my age, early thirties. That meant he'd moved there shortly after finishing college, if he'd gone to college. He started jiggling his foot; his hands were still twitching. "Anxiety" seemed to be an understatement.

"You wrote on the patient form that you work for Callister

Resources. What do you do there? I haven't heard of it."

"Data research. Clerk stuff, mostly." Then his grin came back. "You don't get it, do you?"

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"Do you like my hat?" He touched the brim. "I got it just for you."

Every psychologist deals with unusual people. It's what the job is all about. But he was starting to push the creepy meter. "I don't understand."

He took the hat off. He had ginger hair, thin and cut unevenly. There was a bald spot off center, right of the crown. The flesh there was depressed and discolored, a wine-dark divot. Staring at me, he had a strange sheen in his eyes, intent and timid at the same time. That tickled the back of my mind, something familiar.

"Davie, it's me. Scottie Glass."

I shook my head stupidly and looked at the file with *Edward Gaines* on the label. I didn't think I'd heard him right.

"Sorry about the name. I wanted it to be a surprise." He gave a lop-sided smile. That hit a vague memory too, from way back when we were kids. He'd do something wrong and give that smile for forgiveness. "You dope," I'd say, and we'd be friends again. That brought it home. *Scottie Glass, in the flesh.*

"How . . . how did you find me?"

"It wasn't all that hard," he said, still smiling, but a little less intensely.

"What do you want?" That sounded more suspicious than I intended, but I hadn't seen him since I was a boy. I kept everything about that time boxed up, and I didn't like being waylaid by it.

He put the cap back on, and he wasn't smiling anymore. My mind had gone blank, then it began filling with pictures of my parents and brothers. I tried to shake that off, to say something about being glad to see him, but I couldn't come up with any words.

He fiddled with the straps on the backpack. "I'm sorry—the fake name," he said. "I should have called you instead."

"I guess that would have been better." I knew that was wrong too.

The name wasn't a problem—or maybe it was. I felt trapped, cornered in my own office, and those old pictures wouldn't stop coming.

He stood up suddenly and tugged the backpack over his shoulder.

“Wait . . . just tell me why you're here,” I said.

If he heard me, the edge in my voice only made him move faster. He strode out the door and slammed it behind him.

A rushing sound filled my ears. I stared at the chair where he'd been sitting.

Tori came in. “What was that all about?”

I didn't answer, and she stepped over and pried my hand away from my wrist. Her eyes snapped up in surprise. I'd left half a dozen deep scratches.

I got up and took my coat off the rack. Moving helped me focus. “Did you see which way he went?”

The
Improbability

of  Love

Hannah
Rothschild

A NOVEL

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
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Prologue

The Auction (1 July)

It was going to be the sale of the century.

From first light a crowd had started gathering and by the late afternoon it stretched from the monumental grey portico of the auction house, Monachorum & Sons (est. 1756) across the wide pavement and out into Houghton Street. At noon, metal barriers were erected to keep a central walkway clear and at 4 p.m. two uniformed Monachorum doormen rolled out a thick red carpet from the fluted Doric columns all the way to the edge of the pavement. The sun beat down on the crowd, and the auction house, as a gesture of good will, handed out free bottles of water and ice-lollies. As Big Ben struck six mournful chimes, the police diverted normal traffic and sent two mounted officers and eight on foot to patrol the street. The paparazzi, carrying step ladders, laptops and assorted lenses, were corralled into a small pen to one side where they peered longingly through the door at three television crews and various accredited journalists who had managed to secure passes to cover the event from inside.

‘What’s going on?’ a passer-by asked a member of the crowd.

‘They’re selling that picture, you know the one on the news,’ explained Felicia Speers who had been there since breakfast. ‘*The Impossibility of Love.*’

‘*The Improbability of Love,*’ corrected her friend Dawn Morelos. ‘Improbability,’ she repeated rolling the syllables slowly over her tongue.

‘Whatever. Everyone knows what I am talking about,’ said Felicia, laughing.

‘Are they expecting trouble?’ asked the passer-by, looking from the police horses to the auction house’s burly security guards.

‘Not trouble – just everyone who’s anyone,’ said Dawn holding up her smartphone and an autograph book that had the words, ‘Rock and Royalty,’ embossed in gold lettering across its front.

‘All this hullabaloo for a picture?’ asked the passer-by.

‘It’s not just any old artwork, is it?’ said Felicia. ‘You must have read about it?’

At the top of the broad steps of Monachorum four young women in black dresses and high-heeled shoes stood holding clipboards waiting to check off names. This was an invitation-only event. From certain vantage points, the crowd outside could just glimpse the magnificent interiors. Formerly the London seat of the Dukes of Dartmouth, Monachorum’s building was one of Europe’s grandest surviving Palladium palaces. Its hallway was large enough to park two double decker buses side by side. The plaster ceiling, a riot of puttis and pulchritudinous mermaids, was painted in pinks and golds. An enormous staircase, wide enough for eight horsemen to ride abreast, took the visitor upstairs to the grand saleroom, an atrium, its walls lined with white and green marble and top lit by three rotunda. It was, in many ways, quite unsuitable for hanging and displaying works of art; it did, nevertheless, create a perfect storm of awe and desire.

In a side room, two-dozen impeccably turned-out young men and women were being given their final instructions. Luckily, on this hottest of nights, the air-conditioning kept the room a steady eighteen degrees. The chief auctioneer and mastermind of the sale, Earl Beachendon, dressed for the evening in black tie, stood before them. He spoke firmly and quietly

in a voice honed by eight generations of aristocratic fine living and assumed superiority.

Beachendon had been educated at Eton and Oxford but owing to his father's penchant for the roulette table, the eighth Earl was the first member of his family for five billion years to have sought regular employment.

Earl Beachendon appraised his team. For the past four weeks they had rehearsed this evening, anticipating all eventualities from a broken heel to an attempted assassination. With the world's media in attendance and many of the auction house's most important clients gathered in one place, it was essential that events were managed with the precision of finely balanced Swiss clock. This evening was a game changer in the history of the art market: everyone expected the world record for a single painting to be smashed.

'The attention of the world's media is on us,' Beachendon told his rapt audience. 'An estimated two billion pairs of eyes will be watching. One small mistake will turn triumph into disaster. This is not just about Monachorum, our bonuses or the sale of one painting. This event will reflect on an industry worth over \$100 billion dollars annually and our handling of this evening will reverberate across time and continents. I don't need to remind you that the art market is an international arena. It's time that our contribution to the wealth and health of nations is recognised.'

'No pressure, my Lord,' someone quipped.

Earl Beachendon ignored his minion. 'According to our intelligence and extensive research, your respective charges will be the highest bidders – it is up to each of you to nurture, cajole and encourage them to go that little bit further. Convince them that greatness lies in acquisition; excite their curiosity and competitive urges. Use every weapon in your arsenal. Bathe them in a sea of perfectly judged unctuousness. Remind each of them how unique, how

talented, how rich they are and most importantly, that it is only here at this house that their brilliant eye and exquisite taste is appreciated and understood. For one night, forget friendship and morals: concentrate only on winning.’

Beachendon looked along the line of faces, all flushed with excitement.

‘You are each to make your assigned guests feel special. Special with a capital “S”. Even if they don’t succeed in buying what they are after, I want these Ultra High-Net-Worthers to leave this evening longing to come back, desperate to win the next round. No one must feel like a loser or an also-ran; everyone must feel that some tiny thing conspired against them but next time they will triumph.’

Beachendon walked up the line of employees looking from one to another. For them the evening was an exciting experience with a potential bonus; for him it boiled down to penury and pride.

‘Now remember, particularly the ladies, you are expected to serve and delight. I leave the interpretation of “serve and delight” entirely up to each of you but discretion is the name of the game.’ Nervous laughter rippled through the ranks.

‘As I read out the names of the guests I would like their minders to step forward. You should all be familiar with your charge’s appearance, likes, dislikes and peccadilloes.’

Beachendon paused before offering his wellpractised deliberately politically incorrect joke: ‘No offering alcohol to Muslims or ham sandwiches to Jews.’

His audience laughed obediently.

‘Who is looking after Vlad Antipovsky and Dmitri Voldakov?’

Two young women, one in tight-fitting black taffeta, the other in a backless green silk dress, stepped forward.

‘Venetia and Flora, Remember, given the chance, these two men will rip each other’s throats out. We have managed to keep their personal security to a minimum and have asked them to leave their firearms at home: prevention is our best policy. Keep them apart. Understood?’ Venetia and Flora nodded.

Consulting his list, Beachendon read out the next name. ‘Their Royal Highnesses, the Emir and Sheikha of Alwabbi.’

Tabitha Rowley-Hutchinson, the most senior member of guest relations. Unlike some of her colleagues, all of Tabitha’s pale skin was encased in royal blue satin; only her long neck and slender wrists were visible.

‘Tabitha – what subjects will you avoid at all costs?’

‘I will not mention Alwabbi’s supposed support for al-Qaeda, the Emir’s other wives or the country’s human rights record.’

‘Li Han Ta. Are you fully briefed on Mr Lee Lan Fok?’

Li Han Ta nodded gravely.

‘Remember: the Chinese may not triumph today but they are the future.’ Looking around the room he saw that every single person was in agreement.

‘Who is in charge of His Excellency the President of France?’

Marie de Nancy stepped forward wearing her trademark blue silk Saint Laurent tuxedo and matching pants.

‘I will ask him about cheese, his First Lady and French painting but I won’t mention another British victory in the Tour de France, his mistress or his popularity ratings,’ she said.

Beachendon nodded. ‘Who is managing the Right Honourable Barnaby Damson, Minister for Culture?’

A young man hopped forward. He was wearing a pink velvet suit and his hair was quaffed in a style once known as a duck's arse.

Beachendon groaned. 'More subtlety please – the minister might be of that "persuasion", but he doesn't like to be reminded in public.'

'I thought I might talk about the ballet – he loves the ballet.'

'Stick to football and cinema,' Beachendon instructed.

'Who is looking after Mr M Power Dub-Box?'

In recent months, the world's most successful rapper had surprised the art world by buying several iconic works of art. Standing at nearly seven foot tall, weighing two hundred and fifty pounds and flanked by an entourage of blacksuited minders and nearly naked women, Mr M Power Dub-Box was unmissable and, apparently, unbiddable. His behaviour, fuelled by various substances and pumped up by infamy, frequently lead to arrests but, as yet, no convictions. Two large men in black tie stepped forward. Vassily was a former Russian middleweight boxing champion and Elmore was an ex-Harvard Sports scholar.

Looking at the towering men, Beachendon offered a silent thank you to Human Resources for hiring these colossi in a world populated by fine-boned aesthetes.

'Moving on. Who is minding Stevie Brent?' Beachendon asked.

Dotty Fairclough-Hawes bounced forward. She was dressed as an American cheerleader in a tiny striped skirt and bra-let.

'This is not the baseball finals,' Beachendon snapped.

'It might make him feel at home,' said Dotty.

'He's a hedge-fund manager trying to create a smokescreen around significant recent losses. The last thing he needs is a demented Boston Red Socks cheerleader drawing attention to

the fact that he can't afford this picture. Dotty, you are the only person here whose mission it is not to let Stevie Brent buy. According to our sources he has negative equity of six billion dollars. I don't care if sticks his arm up at the beginning but sit on his paddle when the bidding gets above two hundred million pounds.'

Dotty left to locate her blue taffeta ball gown.

'Oh and Dotty,' Beachendon called after her. 'Don't offer him Coca-Cola – he shorted the stock far too soon – it's up eighteen per cent.'

Earl Beachendon continued through his list of VIP's making sure that each was linked to an appropriate minder.

Mrs Appledore? Thank you, Celine.

The Earl and Countess of Ragstone? Thank you, John.

Mr and Mrs Hercules Christantopolis? Thank you, Sally.

Mr and Mrs Mahmud? Lucy, very good.

Mr and Mrs Elliot Slicer the Fourth? Well done, Rod.

Mr Lee Hong Quiuo – Xo? Thank you, Bai.

Mr and Mrs Bastri? Thank you, Tam.

Venetia Trumpington-Turner raised her hand. 'Who will be looking after the vendors?'

'That important and delicate job falls to our chairman,' replied Earl Beachendon

Everyone nodded sagely.

'The rest of you to make sure that the lesser mortals are in the correct place,' Earl Beachendon continued. 'The directors of the world's museums are in row H. The editors of the newspapers are in I. The rest of the press are not allowed out of their pen apart from a few named journalists – Camilla has their details. The other high-net worthers are to go in J, K, L and M.'

Top dealers in rows P and Q. I want the odd model and actress scattered in between the others just to add a bit of sparkle, but no one over the age of forty or a dress size eight is worthy of an upgrade. Any celebrity who is not an “A” lister can stand.’

Beachendon stood tall and looked around. ‘Girls, go and reapply your lip gloss; boys, straighten your ties and line up by the entrance. Do your best.’

Mrs Appledore’s limousine was making slow progress. The drive from Claridge’s to Houghton Street normally took ten minutes but there were road works and diversions in place and traffic had slowed to a crawl around Berkeley Square. It was an unusually warm July evening. Londoners, convinced that this was the first and last glimpse of sun, spilled out of pubs and on to pavements. Men took off their jackets, revealing dark damp patches under their arms, while women wore sundresses showing off pink prawn-like arms and legs. ‘At least they look reasonably cheerful for once,’ Mrs Appledore thought. ‘The British are so dreary and taciturn during winter’. As her car crept up Berkeley Street, she wondered if this would be her last great sale. She was eighty next year and her annual trip to the London auctions was losing its sheen. Once she knew everyone in the sales room; more importantly, everyone knew her. These days one had no idea who anyone was; many came from unpronounceable, hitherto unheard of places ending in ‘-stan’.

Mrs Appledore kept her eyes fixed on the future but aspired to the manners and modus operandi of the past. Born Inna Pawlokowski in Poland in 1935, her entire family was murdered by Soviet troops in the Katyn Forest massacre of 1941. Cared for by nuns for the rest of the war, the young Inna was then sent, with three thousand fellow orphans, to America in 1948. She met her future husband Yannic on the refugee boat, the Cargo of Hope, and although they were only

thirteen years old, he proposed as they passed the Statue of Liberty. She promised to bear him six children (she carried nine) and he vowed to make them both millionaires (his estate was valued at 6 billion dollars). On the day of their marriage in 1951, Inna and Yannic changed their names to Melanie and Horace Appledore and never again uttered a word of Polish. Their first business, started the day after their wedding, was a hire company that rented suits and shoes to impoverished immigrants needing to look smart for job interviews. Soon Appledore Inc. expanded into properties, sweat shops and then private equity. Knowing from personal experience that immigrants worked far harder than natives, the Appledores provided seed funding for start-ups in return for a slice of the equity plus interest on capital. Thanks to the Displaced Persons Act, wave after wave of immigrants arrived on American shores and the Appledores helped and fleeced Europeans, Mexicans, Koreans, Caribbeans and Vietnamese. By the turn of the new century, Melanie and Yannic owned small but significant and highly profitable stakes in family businesses across all fifty-two states.

Melanie understood that money alone did not guarantee a seat at the top table. Determined to make her mark on the upper echelons of Park Avenue society, she knew she needed to learn about standards and expectations in order to be part of a seamless flow of gentility and accepted behaviour. To this end, she employed Nobel prize winners, museum directors and society ladies fallen on hard times to teach her every subject that would help her progress. She learned how to arrange silver at a table; about grape varieties; artistic movements; the difference between allegro and staccato; the amount to tip a duke's butler, which way to turn at dinner and the direction of travel for a bottle of Port. This new generation, Mrs Appledore thought wistfully, parade their vulgarity like a badge of honour.

Horace and Melanie gave to many cultural institutes; they supported the rebuilding of the Fenice in Venice and the restoration of a tiny church in Aix en Provence. However, their principal love was reserved for a mansion built by the industrialist Lawrence D Smith in 1924 as a token of love for his French wife Pipette. Located on the banks of the Hudson River, forty-five miles north of Manhattan, the Smith had a three hundred foot long façade and a floor space of nearly three acres. Unfortunately, Pipette died just after the house was finished and the broken-hearted billionaire never moved in. It remained empty and unloved until Horace and Melanie bought it in 1978 for the princely sum of one hundred dollars.

The Smith was renamed the Appledore Museum of French Decorative Arts. Horace and Melanie spent the next decades and the lion share of their fabulous fortune restoring the building and creating one of the greatest collections of French furniture and works of art outside Europe. For them, having matter made them feel they did matter. Now in her eightieth year, with a weak heart and a bad case of osteoporosis, Mrs Appledore had decided to blow every last cent in her charitable foundation on *The Improbability of Love*. She didn't care if that cleaned her out: she was almost dead anyway and her children were already provided for.

Mrs Appledore's Chanel dress made in a lime green silk, a shade almost identical to the foliage in *The Improbability of Love*, was chosen by her and Karl to complement the painting. The outfit was completed with a simple diamond necklace and ear clips – nothing should distract from her last great purchase. That morning she had asked for a new permanent wave, with a slightly looser curl and a blush of pink. She wanted to look perfect at the moment of her last hurrah. This time tomorrow, every paper would carry a picture of the painting and its new owner. At a press conference she would announce the immediate donation of her entire collection

complete with *The Improbability of Love* to her beloved Appledore Museum. If only her dear late husband was around to see this final masterpiece.

Sitting at his computer in his new house in Chester Square, Vladimir Antipovsky punched in seventeen different codes, placed his eye against the iris reader, ran his finger prints through the ultraviolet scanner and transferred \$500 million into his current account. His only regret was that his true love could not attend.

The Emir of Alwabbi sat in his bulletproof car outside London's Dorchester Hotel waiting for his wife, the Sheikha Midora, to join him. The auction was the Emir's idea of torture. A private man, he had spent a lifetime avoiding the flash of a camera, the peer and sneer of a journalist, indeed any kind of life on a public stage. The only exception was when his horse, Fighting Spirit, won the Derby and on that glorious day, the summation of a lifetime's dream, the Emir could not resist stepping up before Her Majesty the Queen to accept the magnificent trophy on behalf of his tiny principality. It pained the Emir that so few understood that all thoroughbreds were descended from four Arabian horses. The English, in particular, liked to think that through some strange alchemy of good breeding and natural selection, these magnificent animals had somehow morphed from their squat, bow-legged, shaggy-haired moorland ponies. The Emir wanted to build a museum dedicated to the horse in his landlocked country. His family's livelihood had for many centuries relied on the camel and the Arab horse; oil had only been discovered in the last thirty years. But his wife said no one would visit that kind of place; only art had the power to persuade people to travel. She pointed to the success of neighbouring projects in Qatar and Dubai, to the transformation of nowhere towns such as

Bilbao and Hobart. When those arguments failed to impress her husband, the Sheikha raged that it would take less than one week's output of crude oil to build the biggest museum in the world. As the mother of the crown prince of Alwabbi, the Sheikha mostly got her own way. The Emir gave in; her museum was built. It was universally agreed to be the masterpiece by the world's leading architect, a temple to civilisation and a monument to art. However, there was one fundamental problem that neither the Sheikha nor her legions of advisors, designers and even her celebrated architect had anticipated: the museum had nothing in it. Visitors would wonder around the cavernous white spaces marvelling at the shadow lines, the perfect temperature controls, the cool marble floors, the ingenious lighting, but there was little to break the monotony of the endless white walls: it was artless.

Four floors above her husband, in the Royal suite, the Sheikha sat at her dressing table. Betrothed at nine, married at thirteen, mother of four by the time she was twenty, the Sheikha was now forty-two years old. As the mother of the crown prince, her future was assured. There was little that her husband or courtiers could do to reign in her spending; they could only watch as she scooped up the best from the world's auction rooms and drove prices to new heights. The Sheikha needed a star turn, but unfortunately most of the great works were already in national museums or private collections. The moment she saw *The Improbability of Love*, she knew that it was the jewel for her beloved museum's crown. Here was a picture capable of drawing tourists from the world over. Unlike those who wanted to buy the painting for a reasonable price, the Sheikha wanted the bidding to go wildly out of control. She wanted her picture (she had made that assumption a long time before) to be the most expensive ever bought at auction, the more publicity the better. While her husband won horse races, she would triumph in the great

gladiatorial arena of the auction room – the image of the Sheikha fighting for her picture would flash on to every screen all over the world. After a long and bitter battle, the rulers of Alwabbi would snatch victory from the claws of the world's wealthiest and most avaricious collectors. It would be the final endorsement of her dream and the ultimate advert. Sitting in her hotel suite at the Dorchester, the Sheikha drew a last line of kohl around her beautiful dark eyes.

She clapped her hands together and seven ladies in waiting appeared, each carrying an haute couture dress. The Sheikha wore only a tiny percentage of the clothes made for her, but she liked to have options. Tonight she looked at the dresses; the Elie Saab, McQueen, Balenciaga, Chanel and de la Renta but after some deliberation, she decided to wear a new Versace, a gown made from black silk and real gold thread edged in solid gold coins that chimed gently as she walked. The dress would be hidden by a long black abaya but at least her Manolo Blahnik booties would be visible: mink-lined, white-kid leather with 24-carat diamond-studded heels that would flash in the photographer's bulbs as she stepped up to the podium to inspect her latest and greatest acquisition.

In another corner of London, East Clapham, in her one-bedroom flat, the art critic Delores Ryan sat mired in despair. The only way she could imagine salvaging her reputation was to destroy the picture or herself, or both. It was universally known that she, one of the greatest experts in French eighteenthcentury art, had held the work in her hands and dismissed it as a poor copy. With that one poor misattribution, one wrong-headed call, she had eviscerated a lifetime's work, a reputation built on graft and scholarship. Though Delores had more than four triumphs under her belt including the Stourhead Boucher, the Fonthill Fragonard and, most spectacularly of all, a Watteau that had hung mislabelled in the staff canteen of the

Rijksmuseum, these were now forgotten. She would be forever known as the numbskull felled by *The Improbability of Love*.

Perhaps, all those years ago, she should have accepted Lord Walreddon's proposal. She would now be the Lady of a Manor living in dilapidated splendor with a cacophony of children and ageing black Labradors. But Delores's first and only love was art. She believed in the transformative power of beauty. Being with Johnny Walreddon made her feel desperately bored; standing before a Titian reduced her to tears of sweet delight. Like a monk drawn to the priesthood, she had put aside (most) earthly pleasures in the pursuit of a higher realm.

The failure to recognise the importance of the work coupled with the mania surrounding its sale, represented for Delores not just a loss of face but also a loss of faith. She did not want to be part of a profession where art and money had become inextricably linked, where spirituality and beauty were mere footnotes. Now even Delores looked at canvases wondering what each was worth. Her beloved paintings had become another tradable commodity. Even worse, this rarefied subject, with its own special language and codes had become demystified: only yesterday she had heard two jobs in a cafe discussing the relative merits of Boucher and Fragonard. Delores was no longer a high priestess of high art; she was just another lonely spinster living in a rented apartment.

Delores wept for those wasted years of study, the hours spent reading monographs and lectures, the holidays stuck in subterranean libraries. She cried for the pictures that passed through her hands that could, if she had been more financially astute, have kept her in perennial splendour and comfort. She sobbed for her unconceived children and the other life she might have enjoyed. She was devastated that her younger self had lacked the foresight or wisdom to anticipate any of these outcomes.

At exactly 7 p.m., one hour before the auction began, an expectant murmur hovered over Houghton Street as the first limousine purred towards the auction house. Lyudmila knew how to make an entrance: very slowly she released a long leg, letting it appear, inch-by-inch out of the car. The paparazzi's bulbs exploded and had certain events not taken place, the image of Lyudmila's iconic limbs clad in black fishnets emerging from a black Bentley would have adorned the front pages of tabloid newspapers from Croydon to Kurdistan. Her fiancé Dmitri Voldakov, who controlled 68 per cent of the world's potash and was worth several tens of billion pounds, did not attract one flash. He didn't mind: the less people who knew what he looked like, the smaller the chance of assassination or kidnap. Dmitri looked up at the surrounding rooftops and was relieved to see his men stationed, armed and alert; his bodyguards, only two of which were allowed to enter the building, were already tucked in on either side of him. Dmitri supposed that the common little upstart Vlad would try and outbid him tonight.

'Lyudmila, Lyudmila!' the photographers called out. Lyudmila turned to the left and right, her face arranged in a perfect pout.

Two dazzlingly white, customised Range Rovers, each pulsating in time with booming rap music, drew up to the front entrance.

A whisper snaked through the expectant crowd. 'Mr Power Dub-Box. Power Dub-Box.'

A brace of large bodyguards dressed in black suits with conspicuous earpieces jumped out of the first car and ran to the second. As the door opened, the street vibrated to the beat of Mr M Power Dub-Box's number one sound 'I is da King'. The statuesque self-anointed High Priest of Rap appeared in jeans and a T-shirt followed by three women who appeared to be naked.

'Bet they're pleased it's a warm night,' Felicia said to Dawn, looking on in amazement.

‘Is the last one wearing anything?’ asked Dawn.

‘Her bra-let is the same colour as her skin,’ observed Felicia.

‘It isn’t the top bit I am talking about,’ said Dawn as she snapped a picture on her phone of the woman’s naked bottom as she disappeared into the auction house.

‘What a great pleasure to meet you, Mr M Power Dub-Box,’ said Earl Beachendon, stepping forward to shake the musician’s hand. He tried and failed not to look at the half-naked women beside the rapper. M Power offered him a half-hearted high five before turning to the waiting film crews. His three female escorts arranged themselves around him like petals framing a large stamen.

‘Hi there,’ cried Marina Ferranti, the diminutive presenter of BBC Arts Live greeting M Power Dub-Box like a long-lost friend. ‘Why are you here tonight?’

‘I like shopping,’ he said.

‘This is fairly high-end shopping!’

‘Yep.’

‘Are you hoping to buy this picture?’

‘Yep.’

‘How much will you spend?’

‘What it takes.’

‘Would it make a good album cover?’

‘No.’ M Power Dub-Box looked incredulously at the presenter. Surely the BBC knew that albums were so last century? These days it was all about simultaneous viral outer-play.

‘So why do you want to buy it?’ Marina asked.

‘I like it,’ he said walking away.

Unperturbed Marina and her TV crew circled Earl Beachendon.

‘Lord Beachendon, are you surprised by the amount of attention this picture has received?’

‘*The Improbability of Love* is the most significant picture that Monachorum has had the pleasure of selling,’ he said.

‘Many experts say that this picture is just a sketch and that the estimate is completely out of proportion to its importance,’ continued Marina.

‘Let me answer your question with another: how does one value a work of art? It’s certainly nothing to do with the weight of its paint and canvas or even the frame around it. No, the value of a work of art is set by desire: who wants to own it and how badly.’

‘Do you think this little painting is really worth tens of millions of pounds?’

‘No, it is worth hundreds of millions.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘I don’t decide on the value. My job is to present the picture in its best light. The auction will set the price.’ The Earl smiled.

‘Is this the first time that a painting has been marketed with a world tour, a biography, an app, its own website, a motion picture and a documentary film?’ asked Marina.

‘We thought it important to highlight its history using all varieties of modern technology. This is the picture that launched a movement, which changed the history of art. It also has a peerless provenance: belonging to some of history’s most powerful kings, queens, lovers and leaders. This canvas has witnessed greatness and atrocity, passion and hatred. If only it could talk.’

‘But it can’t,’ Marina interjected.

‘I am aware of that,’ the Earl replied with withering condescension. ‘But those with imagination and a soupçon of knowledge about the past could imagine what illustrious events, what significant personages have been associated with this exquisite jewel. The lucky new owner will become inextricably linked to that history.’

Marina decided to press a little harder. ‘I’ve only spoken to one person tonight, M Power Dub-Box, who actually likes the painting. Everyone else seems to want it for a different reason,’ she said. ‘The French Minister of Culture and his ambassador says that it of significant national importance. The Director of the National Gallery told me that French eighteenth-century painting is under-represented in Trafalgar Square. The Takris want it for their new museum in Singapore. Steve Brent wants it for his new casino in Vegas. The list goes on and on. Do you think that loving art is irrelevant these days, that owning pictures has become another way of displaying wealth?’

‘Some rather important guests are arriving. I should greet them,’ Beachendon said smoothly.

‘One last question?’ Marina called out. ‘How much do you hope the painting will make tonight?’

‘I am confident that a new world record will be set. Now if you will excuse me . . .’ Aware that he had said too much, Earl Beachendon moved quickly back to the reception line to greet the Sheik and Sheikha of Alwabbi.

Half an hour later, once all the major players had arrived and safely dispatched to their carers, the Earl slipped behind the two vast mahogany doors and into the inner sanctum of Monachorum’s auction room. Leaning on his dark wooden podium, he surveyed the rows of

empty chairs beneath him and looked over the banks of telephones lining the back of the room. This was his amphitheatre, his arena and in exactly twenty minutes' time he would preside over one of the most ferociously fought battles in the history of art. Their arsenals were full of pounds, dollars and other currencies. His only weapons were a gavel and the voice of authority. He would have to pace the assailants, draw out their best moves, keep the factions from destroying each other too quickly. Beachendon knew that when emotions ran as high as tonight, when so much more than pride and money were at stake, when gigantic egos and ancient sores sat in close proximity, much could go wrong.

He looked down at his secret black book, which held his notes on all the buyers, where they were sitting and how much they were likely to bid. In the margins, the Earl had lists too of the telephone bidders and those who insisted on anonymity. This afternoon, fourteen new hopefuls had registered and the Earl's colleagues had to scramble bank references and other securities. He already had an underbidder who had guaranteed £250 million pounds; the record was in place before the first public bid had been made. If no one bettered that price, the auctioneer would knock it down to an anonymous buyer on the telephone. Beachendon ran through a practice round, calling out imaginary bids from empty chairs and unmanned phone lines. 'Seventy million, eighty million two hundred thousand, ninety million three hundred thousand, one hundred million four hundred thousand. The highest bid is on the phone. No, it's on the floor. Now it's with you Sir. Two hundred and fifty million, five hundred thousand.' Later, each bid would be simultaneously translated into dollars, euros, yen, renminbi, rupees and rupiah.

The Earl sounded calm and collected; inside he was in turmoil. A little over a century earlier, this picture had belonged to a member of his mother's family, none less than Queen

Victoria; its disposal was yet another example of the inexorable decline of his noble line. Now the painting's fabulous price and its notoriety mocked Beachendon, reminding him of all that had been lost: 90,000 acres in Wiltshire, Scotland and Ireland; swathes of the Caribbean along with great paintings by Van Dyck, Titian, Rubens, Canaletto and Leonardo. If only we had hung on to this one painting, the Earl thought sadly as he looked at the tiny canvas resting in its protective bulletproof glass case. He imagined a different life for himself, one that didn't involve the Northern Line, kowtowing to the ridiculously rich and their shoals of hangers on, the dealers, advisors, agents, critics and experts who circled the big moneyed beasts like sucker fish in the waters of the international art world. Within half an hour the floor beneath him would be swimming with those types and it would be up to Earl Beachendon to tickle out the best prices. At least, the Earl consoled himself, his personal discovery of the picture proved that although the Beachendon family may have lost a fortune, they never lost their eye.

Along with the rest of the world, Beachendon wondered what the little picture would fetch. Even at its lowest estimate, it would be enough to buy a couple of streets in Mayfair, an estate in Scotland and the Caribbean, pay off his son and heir Viscount Draycott's gambling debts, and secure decent flats for each of his five daughters, the Ladies Desdemona, Cordelia, Juliet, Beatrice, Cressida and Portia Halfpenny.

Though he was a godless man, Beachendon was a pragmatist and he offered a small prayer to the heavens.

The Earl was so lost in a private fantasy that he didn't see a young male of Chinese origin dressed as a porter examining the velvet-covered plinth. Many hours later, as the security team and police reviewed the CCTV footage, they would wonder how one individual could have pulled off such an audacious move in front of the wily Earl, the silent cameras and security

guards. Most assumed he was someone's son on work experience, one of the legions of young people paid nothing for the glory of working for a big house and needing something to set their CV apart. Of course, the heads of HR and security fell on their swords and resigned immediately and the whole sector revised their policy of taking on interns but it was too late then. Much too late.

Chapter 1

Six months earlier (12 January)

Though she often passed Bernoff and Son, Annie had never been tempted to explore the junk shop; there was something uninviting about the dirty window piled high with other people's flotsam and jetsam. The decision to go through its door that Saturday morning was made on a whim; she hoped to find a gift for the man she was sleeping with but hardly knew.

She had met Robert five weeks earlier at an 'Art of Love' singles night at the Wallace Collection in Manchester Square. It was her first foray into dating since she was a teenager and she went with low expectations of meeting anyone but hoped at least to learn something about art. The flyleaf promised 'ice-breaking lectures' and 'world-class experts' on hand to discuss particular paintings. Robert caught her eye during a talk on 'Passion in the Court of Louis XIV'. His glance was awkward and only half-hopeful – instinctively she recognised someone else with a pulverized heart. He was nice-looking but uncared for – his hair was too long, his shirt poorly ironed and his demeanour a little battered. He was attractive in an unthreatening way. A few hours later, they kissed in a passageway behind Marylebone High Street. He had taken her number (Annie assumed out of politeness only). The following day he texted. 'Dear Annie, my grandmother used to say that after a bad fall, it's important to get back into the saddle. Do you fancy a drink?' After that Annie met Robert once or twice a week for energetic sex and desultory conversation. When Robert admitted that he was spending his birthday alone, Annie offered to cook him dinner. Against her better judgement, she struggled to keep hope at bay. Her longing to love and be loved was so strong that she overlooked her and Robert's incompatibility. At least, she thought, good solid dependable Robert, the solicitor from Crouch End whose wife had done

the unforgivable and eloped with his best friend, would never behave unkindly or unchivalrously.

Annie pushed the door of the shop and it opened with a reluctant shudder. In the corner there was a man, though it was hard to distinguish between his body and the armchair he was slumped in. Both were baggy and encased in brown velour. He was watching television with the sound off and Annie saw the reflection of horses racing in his spectacles.

‘Are you open?’ she asked.

The man waved her in never taking his eyes from the screen. ‘Hurry up, close the door, you’re letting the cold in.’

Annie shut the door gently behind her.

A telephone rang. The man snatched it up.

‘Bernoff’s Antiques, Reclamation and Salvage,’ he said in a flat South London accent. ‘Ralph Bernoff speaking.’ His voice was surprisingly highpitched and young. He looked fifty but was probably only thirty.

‘Gaz, my old friend, you watching Channel 4? Have you seen The Ninnifer has gone out to thirty to one?’ Ralph said. ‘I don’t fucking believe it.’

He paused to listen to the answer.

‘Course I don’t fancy that other pile of shit. It ran backwards at Haydock last week. Lend us a few quid. I know that Ninnifer is going to storm it. Please, mate.’

Pause.

‘What do you mean I owe you?’ Ralph said plaintively.

Pause.

‘So put that on the tab. Those cunts said they’d break my legs if I didn’t pay them tonight. Please, Gaz. Help me out.’

Pause.

Annie edged along the back wall of the shop past the rows of oddly matched china, paperbacks with embossed covers, chipped teacups, cracked bowls, piles of plastic beads, a reproduction Victorian doll and a nest of Toby jugs. She looked nervously from the man to the door wondering if his creditors were about to burst in.

‘No one is going buy anything,’ he whined into the telephone. ‘No one ever does. Just a load of bored Saturday morning time-wasters,’ he lamented casting a look in Annie’s direction.

Picking up a Victorian brass mould shaped like a comet, Annie wondered if she could use it. Robert had been born in 1972 and she was intending to cook him a seventies-inspired dinner. Perhaps an elaborate jelly would be better than the intended Rum Baba? She turned the mould over – it cost three pounds. Rather a lot for one dinner and besides there was not enough time for the jelly to set. She put it back next to a china doll.

‘If you’re not going to lend us a monkey, make it a pony. I’ll give it back with interest when I win,’ Ralph said.

Pause.

Gaz gave the wrong answer; Ralph slammed the phone down.

Annie walked to another table and thumbed a hardback edition of Stalingrad – would Robert like that? Brilliant but too depressing. She examined a box inlaid with mother of pearl. Pretty but too feminine. A few paces on she caught sight of a picture propped against the wall behind the rubber plant.

‘Can I?’ she mouthed to the man.

‘Suit yourself.’ He didn’t even look up but sat slumped looking at the television. Annie slid the picture off the filing cabinet; taking it over the window, she took a closer look.

‘What do you know about this?’ she asked.

‘It’s a picture.’

She looked at him trying to decide if he was stupid or rude.

‘Do they know the date, or who painted it?’

‘No idea, it’s been here for years.’

‘I’m looking for a present for a friend . . .’ Annie hesitated. ‘This might amuse him.’

Ralph Bernoff didn’t do conversation; he was used to lonely old ladies rabbiting on about this or that. This one was a few years younger than most of his regular customers but he knew the signs; sad, single and the wrong side of twenty-five. He looked her up and down – quite nice legs but too flat on top. If she got some highlights and a short skirt, she might stand a chance.

‘We share a certain interest in painting.’ Annie flushed feeling his eyes on her body. ‘My friend,’ she said firmly, ‘might like this. It reminds me of something we saw at the Wallace Collection.’

‘Right.’ Ralph kept checking his watch and digging around in his pockets as if some change might miraculously appear.

‘Do you know where it came from?’

‘No idea – it came with the shop. Bought the whole place and most of this rubbish with it. Worse decision my dad ever took.’ Ralph waved his hand around.

‘How much is it?’ Annie pulled the sleeve of her coat down and gently wiped away at the dust on the painting’s surface.

‘Two thousand four hundred but I will knock a hundred quid off.’

‘Oh, that’s a pity. I only have fifty pounds,’ Annie said.

Ralph snorted rudely. ‘There’s a whole load of clobber here. Pick anything else. I’ll give you a discount being a Saturday and all that.’ Ralph put his little finger deep into one ear and wiggled it about with all the concentration of a violinist aiming for a high C. Annie looked away and carefully placed the painting back on the filing cabinet. Ralph looked up at the Grandfather Clock; it was nearly three.

‘What! The Ninnifer’s gone out to fifty to one, bloody hell.’ Ralph jumped up from his chair and stabbed a finger at the screen.

‘There’s nothing else quite right,’ Annie said. She had had enough this rude man and his claustrophobic den.

‘Bloody time-waster,’ Ralph muttered under his breath.

Belting her coat tightly and pulling a woollen hat down over her ears, Annie opened the door. A cold gust of air that blasted into the shop and dust swirled around her face in luminous eddies. Annie took one last look at the painting. It was, even through the dust and the gloom, rather pretty. She would tell Robert about it later; it would be something to talk about in their sparsely populated conversational world. She stepped out on to the pavement and bent down to unlock the chain on her bicycle when Ralph came bursting out of the shop ‘Hang on. How much money do you have?’ Ralph asked waving the painting.

‘Fifty pounds,’ Annie smiled apologetically.

‘Five hundred quid and it’s yours.’ Ralph said holding out the painting.

‘I haven’t got anything like that kind of money,’ Annie said.

‘What have you got?’

‘I’ve got a hundred pounds out of the cashpoint but it has to cover dinner.’

She blushed slightly and moved from foot to foot.

‘Give us two fifty in cash.’

‘I said I haven’t got that.’ Annie was annoyed now. She put the chain in the bike’s basket and started to push it down the road.

‘You’ve got four minutes to decide love or the deal’s off.’

‘I’ll give you seventy-five – that’s my last offer,’ Annie heard herself say.

Ralph hesitated and holding out his hand said, ‘Seventy-five. Give it over. Quick.’

Chapter 2

I knew I'd be rescued but never thought it would take fifty years. There should have been search parties, battalions, and legions. Why? Because I am priceless and I am also the masterpiece that launched an artistic genre. And if that weren't enough, I am considered to be the greatest, the most moving, and the most thrilling representation of love.

I was inspired by feelings of deep joy, hope and gaiety but my decorative exterior masks a twisted soul drunk on the mysterious poison of despair. Unfortunately, and inadvertently, I exert a wayward, erratic power over men and woman – sometimes inspirational and affirming, sometimes the opposite. I am both the offspring and parent of tragedy.

Back to the present. Imagine being stuffed away in a bric-a-brac shop in the company of a lot of rattan furniture and reproduction pictures. I would not call myself a snob but there are limits. I will not converse with pisspots or faux pearl necklaces. Non! I am used to magnificence, the rustle of taffeta and le mouffle du damask, the flicker of candlelight, sheen of mahogany, the delicate smell of rose water and beeswax, the crunch of gravel and the whispering of courtiers. Not a pokey little room lit by bare bulbs and a greenish light straining through grime-encrusted glass. The atmosphere was most damaging to my delicate canvas: fungus and mildew. Not to mention the layers of cigarette smoke and human effluvium hanging like slices of mille-feuille in the stale air.

It's not the first time I've been neglected. Human beings are a capricious lot, slaves to fancy and fashion. They are destined to be perpetual amateurs – they don't live long enough to be anything more. What can one do in a mere seventy or eighty years? During the first part of their lives, all haste and fornication. Thence forward most of their efforts go into staying alive.

I am three hundred years old – as man's first paintings were made some forty thousand years ago I am a spring chicken in the panoply of art history but like to consider myself a marinated goose in terms of experience. I've hung in pride of place in the grandest palaces and salons of Europe, Russia, Scandinavia and even America as the beloved possession of royalty and connoisseurs. Occasionally, and most unhappily, the whim of some new mistress or the latest critical pronouncement has led to relegation; the red card and I have been marched off to the servants' quarters or the storage rooms.

This time was different. I was well and truly lost.

I sat at Bernoff's getting lonelier and lonelier. It is arrogant to assume human beings have the monopoly on communication – we pictures converse with like-minded objects. You try maintaining a relationship with a cake tin or a couple of Toby jugs. The latter were made in the East End of London, common as muck – it was all football, muggings and shagging. It rubs off you know. I catch myself coming out with terribly lewd and vulgar phrases. My first language is pre-revolutionary French but I have lived in Spain, England, Russia, Germany and Italy. My once perfect courtly vocabulary has become a frightful bastardised *franglais* suspended between several centuries.

Still, a masterpiece develops a certain *sang-froid* born from a belief in the triumph of excellence. After all, what are a few decades when there are centuries ahead in which to inspire, please, and inform? It was a question of patience: sooner or later someone would walk through that door and recognize my true worth. Then it happened; twice in one day. The first sighting was eerie. I never thought I would see him again. Those pale blue eyes – that darting sideways look and that huge frame hardly careworn or bent by time. I loathed him then; I loathe him now. I knew he had been looking for me for many years. For some reason he didn't buy me there and

then but tucked me out of sight behind a rubber plant and a cachepot. That mistake would be his undoing.

Only a few hours passed and a woman arrived, a mere scrap of a girl, obviously poor and largely ignorant. I sensed trouble. I have developed that antenna. Fat lot of good intuition does when one can't walk or scream out loud.

It was a typical Saturday morning in Bernoff's. The old man had taken the day off and the lamentable son Ralph was tending the shop. The heinous one (a complimentary term, I can assure you) was studying the form. Apart from the odd, blousy, cheap-knickered blonde who he'd have quickly, sweatily and noisily on the filing cabinet, horse-racing was the only thing that excited him. That day Cheltenham emanated from a small colour TV on the desk. The phone rang every few minutes. It was his 'mate' Gaz. 'Did he fancy this one? What about the Jock? Bad run at Haydock.' This went on every Saturday. Gaz got him all excited about a bay in the 3.30, name of The Ninnifer. Only problem was that Ralph had already spent his weekly at the pub. He did his normal trick, going through all the drawers, his father's coat pockets, and the petty cash box. The old man wasn't stupid; he'd cleared the lot out. Ninnifer was a dead cert, apparently. Ralph was effing and blinding. It was 2.30. He started to ring around his friends asking if he could borrow a tenner. They knew his tricks.

There was a ding and a rattle as the front door opened. 'Fucking hell,' Ralph grumbled down the phone to Duffy, 'another bloody time-waster.' Pause. 'How should I know, probably an old lady looking for a cushion for her cat.' Pause. 'Saturday punters never buy anything.'

I watched the young woman walk between the tables each groaning with unwanted knick-knacks: paperbacks with embossed covers, chipped teacups, cracked bowls, a pile of plastic beads, a reproduction Victorian doll. She picked up an older-looking hardback before

going to another table and examined a box, quite a pretty ilaid thing. She caught sight of me, approached and moved the rubber plant slightly to one side.

‘Can I?’ she said to Ralph.

‘Suit yourself.’ He didn’t even look up. Very gently, the young woman slid me off the filing cabinet, away from the potted plants and walked me over towards the window. I can’t see too well these days. It’s been a long time since I had a good clean: two layers of varnish and chain-smoking have left my surface more than a little murky. She looked at me hard, really hard. It’s a long time since I’ve been admired properly. One must admit one enjoyed it. I look over at her fingers. No ring. I might have known. Either a slattern or some desperate ‘jeune fille à marier’; it was odds on that she was broke so I was not too worried at that moment.

I was placed back next to the pot plant with a tiny shiver of relief. She leaves the shop. Suddenly, Ralph jumps up, snatches me off the shelf and runs out into the road towards the girl. She doesn’t really want me. I am willing her not to buy me. There’s some cursory haggling and then she fishes around in her bag: out comes an old compact, a notebook, two sets of keys, some lip salve, a mobile phone, a lidless pen, a half-eaten chocolate bar and scraps of paper. Finally she produces a tatty leather wallet bulging with receipts and photographs. She counts out the money, a paltry pittance: the utter shame.

What was I thinking? You may well ask. One was not jumping for joy, that’s for sure. There was no love lost between Ralph Bernoff and me. I was fed up with the fag smoke, the company, the television but I had got used to it and it was safe. I knew nothing about this scrappy girl. Or the birthday boy. Who knows what they were like? What they might be into.

I had a little dream. One day the door would open, the bell would tinkle tinkle and an earnest-looking man would enter. He’d be dressed in a soft tweed suit and sport those half-moon

gold glasses. His eyes would fix on my surface and he would know. Within days other men, handlers would appear with dainty white gloves and carefully lift me on to a red velvet cushion. Taken by armed guard to a special place, a gallery, all mahogany walls and plush carpets, I would sit in state, receiving experts while they pronounced and exclaimed. It would make the newspapers, of course. There would be specially commissioned pieces of research, a monograph or two. I would be gently cleaned and put in a decent frame. Best of all, I would be reunited with some of my master's other works.

As usual I had no say over what happened next, forever the victim of human whimsy.

Ralph stuffed me into a polythene bag, handed me to the girl, and hotfooted it in the direction of the local bookies. I could hear the girl's teeth chattering slightly as she put me into the front-loaded wicker basket of her bicycle. It was raining gently. Cold splats landed on clear plastic making it even harder to see. The chain on her bicycle was released, she mounted and off we went, riding against an icy wind. It was a new experience being among these growling, grinding, and screeching flat-sided monsters. They roared past, sucking us into a damp slipstream towards vast black wheels. She rode the bike like Peter the Great liked to gallop his horse, at great speed, no thought to anyone else, fast, arrogantly, without fear. I have survived many situations but have not been so jiggled and jostled since that journey across the Pyrenees when Philip and Isabella were sacked from the Escorial and their greatest works were loaded on to the backs of mules and sent to safety.

After ten minutes of weaving through traffic, bumping into watery holes, horns bleating, men shouting, dogs barking, an endless cacophony of commonness, we arrived at a market set in a lane about thirty-foot long lined with wooden tables covered with stripy awnings, glittering in

the damp air and piled high with produce. Some stalls still had the remnants of Christmas lights and decorations. The air of fake cheer hung over the place like a cheap perfume.

‘Nice Christmas, darling?’ one asked. ‘Did you go to the Caribbean?’

‘I stayed here and cooked a turkey for a friend,’ the girl answered, choosing some tomatoes carefully.

‘Want to keep me warm tonight?’ Another called out.

The girl did not answer.

‘There’s an arctic wind coming – you might regret it.’

‘These tomatoes are a little wintry,’ she said trying to deflect their banter.

‘It January, my angel, in case you had not noticed.’ The man guffawed.

She was known and liked in the market. Two traders asked her out. One gave her a free bag of oranges. Most called her Annie. The lack of a moniker or title was inauspicious. One has rarely been owned by a commoner let alone a person of no class or standing. I am not a snob, my master was hardly well born, but a title suggests reassuring things like wealth, breeding and security. I have yet to meet a queen named Annie.

She spent ages picking through fruit and vegetables, feeling and smelling is them, making sure each was perfect. She spent more time choosing a potato than she had moi. She enquired after the provenance of everything – did the stallholder know from whence they came or when they were harvested? One suspects that they indulged her only because she was fair of face. At the butcher’s, she deliberated over a fillet of beef but could only afford a cut called bavette, which I now understand is tasty and cheap.

At least the girl didn’t put the meat, the potatoes or other consumables in my plastic bag; one should be thankful for small mercies. The stallholders put a few things aside for her. One

had to admit one quite liked her. She had a pleasant breathy voice caused by sucking in a lot of air before talking. She had never been taught to breathe from her diaphragm and the shallow breaths made me think she was prone to panic attacks. Her accent was classless, definitely English, and at least she spoke in rounded sentences rather than that awful shorthand I had to put up with at Bernoff's. She had that terrible modern habit of letting words tumble over each other in the race to finish a sentence.

Eventually I was peddled back to her residence. How we made it I don't know; it was bumpy, noisy, more than once an automobile screeched to a halt to avoid a collision. She was chided for dangerous cycling. She seemed oblivious.

One was worried.

We stopped and she opened the front door. Imagine my disappointment when there were no servants to greet her, not even an aged retainer. A very bad omen. Up and up we climbed. I counted two, three, four and then five floors. Let me immediately disavow you of the romantic idea that artists like garrets. Poppycock. Artists are like anyone else – they want the grandest rooms. By the time you get to the eaves, where the servants live, the running boards can be as little as three inches high and the ceilings slanted and low. That was the first thing I looked at when the girl fished me out of the plastic bag. It was bad news; someone of very low social standing had bought me. As I'll explain again and again my survival depends good circumstances; wars, famine, weather, fashion and other acts of godlessness terrify one.

Propped up on a rickety wooden table I was able to get a good look at my new home. The room that ran the length and breadth of the house was painted a vulgar yellow. The ceiling was low; you couldn't have hung a major Rubens up here, Veronese would have had to be folded into eights. There were windows on three sides (sunlight for us paintings is another terrible hazard).

Behind a partition (you could not call it a separate room) I glimpsed an unmade bed. One side had been slept in; the other was still quite neat. She obviously lived alone. I noticed that the mattress rested on planks and bricks. On a packing crate by the messy side there were piles of books. Though my vision was distorted badly each and every tome seemed to be about food.

There was no art to keep me company. At least there were no signs of a child; I cannot abide children. Once the dauphin, that miserable son and heir of Louis XIV, a pudding of a child, a flat-footed numbskull, had a tantrum and threw a ball at moi! As far as I am concerned, children should neither be seen nor heard.

At the other end of the room there was an alcove with cooking equipment: a white metal box with dials, a stainless steel sink under a window facing out over the rooftops. Either side were shelves stacked untidily with pots, pans and china. Two old earthenware jugs contained a forest of cooking utensils, knives and forks. Small cupboards either side of the white box held a variety of packets and dry stores. There were few ornaments; a rather decorative but deeply ordinary chipped china jug with wilting flowers, a framed poster of a movie, Isabella and Ferdinand, and a worn out Teddy Bear with one eye and a red bandana around its neck. The floor was wooden, painted white but heavily scuffed and a blue-and-white rug was placed before two small armchairs with blankets thrown over their backs. On another wooden pallet, there was some kind of fern in a terracotta pot.

As she unpacked the shopping, I was able to get a clearer look at my new mistress. She was a slight thing; no more than five foot four. She wore dreadful clothes, those slouchy, pocketed trousers and a jumper, inexpertly darned at the elbows with bright pink thread. On her feet was a pair of pale brown boots with a wedged heel. She had marvellously pale skin and a cloud of dark auburn curls framing her face in a most fetching way. A little later she made a

warm drink and sat looking intently at me and I was able to see her better. The girl was not a classical beauty, no Mona Lisa or Venus de Milo, but she had something, a certain *je ne sai quoi*. Large green almond-shaped eyes, perfectly arched eyebrows, white teeth slightly chipped in the middle to form a perfect baby triangle. Her mouth was slightly too wide but a good deep plum red. Her skin was so pale that it glowed like a soft marble. A fraction too long in the face, which gave her a rather lovely serious, pensive look. Then she smiled. ‘Cor blimey’ as the earthenware boys used to say. ‘Mon dieu’ to quote old Nicolas Poussin. My saviour, I had to admit, was really lovely looking, *une belle pépée*.

‘I wonder what your story is?’ She spoke to me in a way I haven’t been spoken to for a long time. My *craquelure* shone with pleasure. ‘I wish I could see you better. Is it age or dirt? There’s something so touching about the man lying on the grass staring in wonder at the dancing woman. She’s not that interested in him, is she? She’s looking at us looking at her. She hardly knows or cares what he thinks. She is capable of inspiring great love, isn’t she? Where are they? It looks like a clearing in a wood. But the sun is coming from stage left, a beautiful honey gold light. Is that a ghost in the corner? Or is it a cloud?’

What could I say? She has the eye. The heart. She may be bog poor but she knows, doesn’t she? She can feel and sense my greatness. Like anyone, I need to be loved and admired.

She looked at the clock on the wall and jumped up, chiding herself. There was work to be done. It was clearly an occasion. She reached in the back of a cupboard and brought out a large white sheet. Not linen or damask. Placing it on the table, she smoothed the edges down carefully. Fishing some knives and forks out of a pot she polished them on the underside of the tablecloth. Pretty slovenly, you’ll agree. Taking four small enamel cups from the shelf, she arranged posies of paper whites in each. Marie-Antoinette was partial to *narcissi* – it took me back. Two wine

glasses were polished and placed opposite each other at either end of the table. Taking some pink napkins and wrapping each in scarlet ribbons, she placed them in between the knives and forks at a jaunty angle. What is wrong with the young? What is wrong with classical arrangements and doing things correctly? Still, it had a creative touch and looked festive. One had to give her that.

Taking the beef out of a bag, she rubbed powders into its surface, placed it in a bowl under a cloth. Then she went off into the little side room and soon I heard the noise of water. As she stepped out of the bath I saw flashes of naked pale flesh – long honey-coloured limbs that would have seen off a Titian, let me tell you. Velasquez's Rokeby Venus would have had conniptions if she'd seen the competition.

I watched her dress. She chose a white silk shirt and purple velvet trousers, worn at the knees and patched on one flank. What is wrong with a nice dress? She twisted and tamed her long hair into a knot and secured it with a chopstick. What is wrong with a brooch? Still she looked better.

I have had the odd spell in a banqueting hall and even a boudoir or two (Oh la la the stories I could tell you – the sex lives of kings and queens). I have never ever been consigned to a kitchen or seen a domestique at work. It was, one must admit, enjoyable watching her; she cooked as if she were conducting an orchestra, except that in the place of a baton there were glinting knives and wooden spoons. Her hands flew like swooping swallows sweeping over saucepans and a heavy wooden board. Vegetables were sliced into narrow juliennes; eggs whisked in frothy peaks while meat was hammered into papery slices. My girl kept one eye trained on her sauces, teasing, stirring and occasionally sprinkling a pinch of salt or some finely chopped herbs. Eventually something frothy and glossy was teased out of eggs and spooned on to slivers of ruby-coloured beef.

My erstwhile mistress, Marie Antoinette, used to employ scores of pastry chefs, there was a girl just to watch a gateau rise. Her remark about letting them eat cake was taken entirely out of context. It was a form of flattery. So what if there wasn't bread? Cake was more delicious. It was a little preposterous in the circumstances, I admit, but things were different then.

Placing candles on all the hard surfaces around the room, on the window ledges, a side table, on the mantelpiece and in the hearth, Annie lit them one by one and flicked off the lights. Outside dusk was falling and there was only the faintest orange glow of the street lights coming through the window.

Whoever my girl was waiting for was late. Then later. She couldn't settle. She rearranged the knives and forks. She opened the bottle of wine and poured herself a glass. And another. She opened and closed a book. I lost count of how many times she went to the window and squinted down at the street below.

My master was just the same waiting for 'her' to come. She was always late, if she turned up at all. My master would try to paint, taking up a brush stand before his easel. You could see him attempting to regain concentration but he would dash between his palette, the stairs and the window.

The girl looked at her watch. She paced. Frequently she picked up the telephone and started to press the numbers, and stopped. She poured a third glass of wine and then a fourth. In the candlelight I could see a flush in her cheeks, an added glitter in her eye. She rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. My heart sank. I didn't have her down as a smoker. She lit one and drew the smoke deep into her lungs. Coughing wildly she threw the stub into the empty hearth. The candles had burnt low. One or two had even gone out. Her guest was not coming. One didn't need three hundred years' experience to work that out.

She stood in the middle of the room and started to sway from side to side. Her legs began to move and her arms came out beside her and it was as if she was pushing air away. An awful mournful groaning wail came out of her mouth, gently at first but rising to an animalistic howl. As the noise grew louder, her movements sped up and soon she was moving and twisting like a young sapling in a high wind. One stared, transfixed. As she danced, her shadow whipped around in the candlelight and spun off the walls. Faster and faster she went, with her hair flicking this way and that, spinning around and around as if her head was going to fall off. Flashes of light caught on her bangles and reflected in the whites of her eyes. Her breathing became more and more intense. Then she stopped as suddenly as she'd started and sunk to her knees. Resting her head on the floor I heard this strange and eerie sound, like wind whistling under a door or a child playing an oboe. At first I thought it was the strange music starting up again. I realised it was her. Crying. It was a heart-rending noise. I had heard once before, from my master, when 'she' told him she would never marry him.

The girl lay on the floor rocking from side to side, still clutching her knees or putting her arms over the back of her head. She cried until the soft light of dawn broke over the rooftops and a lone bird started to sing.

a novel



KATHLEEN
SPIVACK

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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First Edition

Chapter 1. The Rat.

In the drafty reading room of the New York Public Library, Herbert opened his latest letter from the little Rat, his old friend Anna Zygorzka. Her letters were slow to arrive, and each one bore the marks of a censor, who dutifully opened and read and then indicated the readership before sending it on to New York. Even David, who worked in the war office somewhat connected with censorship and foreign mail, could not predict the letters that arrived occasionally, tattered and humble, addressed in fine, studied handwriting. Herbert smoothed the paper, which crackled as he spread it out in front of him. He fixed his spectacles more firmly onto his nose and bent down happily. "J'arrive!"

Beside him on the bench his grandchildren sat quietly. Philip studied his toes while he held a green balloon. And Maria, in her ruffled smocked dress and little sweater, bent over her own English book, as seriously as Herbert now bent over the handwriting of his letter. Maria's lips did not even move as she read; she was concentrating. Although the first signs of spring were coming to New York, the interior of the Library was cold and draughty. Herbert wrapped his coat more tightly around his shoulders, looking over to smile at the children. How good they were! So quiet and dear. He went back to the letter.

Herbert and Anna Zygorzka, second cousins, had been writing to each other for years. They corresponded in various languages; including Esperanto; they corresponded in French. Sometimes they alternated. Anna wrote to Herbert in German, and he answered in Russian. Then

they corrected each other's letters and started over again. And during that time they also corresponded in chess.

Herbert smiled as he deciphered the numbers and letters. "Aha, now I have you!" Anna had written in large, distinctive handwriting. "Check to your queen!" Herbert bent over the letter in delight. "We shall see," he thought. "We shall see."

He looked more closely. Undoubtedly, he could find the loophole in this. Then he laughed. She had done it. He had taught her well. But this was not the end of this particular game. Herbert still had a few tricks up his sleeve. The Rat would regret challenging the old chess master. He smiled. "Well, my dear friend," he read in her large triumphant hand, "are you not proud of me? Guard your queen indeed, my old fox!"

Herbert imagined her nose twitching in triumph. That exquisite ugliness! Her dark shiny eyes, peering at the chess board—he had loved to watch her sniffing round the game. He imagined her little snort, a muted shriek of delight when she saw an opportunity for triumph. The Rat!

Underneath, Anna had written, in an equally exuberant scrawl, a few quick words. "The good news, my old dear friend, is that I am coming. I shall arrive soon. I cannot say more. Speak to David." And then, as if to paraphrase her German, she wrote the same message hastily in French. "J'arrive!"

Herbert put the letter aside for a moment. As if disbelieving the message written, he bent to it again. "*J'arrive!*" How could that be?

Anna's image rose in his mind. The seaside. Summer holidays with his parents. The arrival of his second cousins from Hungary. The other side of the family. The two mysterious girls, slightly younger, both, than he and his brother. Anna and her younger sister. *The two girls.*

The two boys who awaited their arrival; a mystery unfolding.

What a disappointment it had been when he had first seen The Rat. She was small, unprepossessing, with a long nose. And could it be? Whiskers growing out of the mole next to her nose. Well, three long hairs, to be exact. A Rat with severe curvature of the spine that caused her to move in a painful crab-like way, hunched over, peering upwards over spectacles.

Anna and Herbert had looked at each other. Could this be the fabled cousin, so long awaited? Anna's younger sister was normal in every way. Only, she was too young to do anything more than tag after The Rat and Herbert and his brother, whining to be included. So he was stuck, summer after summer, with The Rat for a companion. And a deformed Rat at that. A Rat who had to spend most of every day lying on a sofa, A Rat who could not stand straight when she walked, who moved slowly, painfully, with a little cane. A Rat with the most beautiful eyes, the most seraphic smile. A Rat with the face of an angel, made more beautiful by the imperfections that called attention to her beauty. This Rat had the power to enchant. She trembled inadvertently from time to time, as if this power was far too great for her little body to bear.

One day The Rat dared to intrude upon Herbert's silent avoidance of her. It was during one of her little slow-paced promenades. Herbert hated to watch her progress down along the sea; it was so slow and cramped. The Rat came right up to him, to the rock on which Herbert sat, thinking drearily of the meaninglessness of his life. He didn't look at her directly, though he had covertly observed her approach.

Anna took a deep breath, gasping as she came to a halt beside him. "Why do you avoid me?" She asked, without any preamble. "Is it the way I look?"

"No." Herbert lied. He yawned.

"Come," Anna held out her hand. "We can still be friends." She touched his sleeve. A fine

vibration was coming off Anna and it flowed from her hand through his body. Anna was shaking, her breath coming quickly in little gasps. She pressed her knees together, and turned her head away.

Herbert took her arm and still not looking at her, accompanied her back to the house. He was furious with himself. "You know why they call me The Rat?" Anna said, still trembling, peering at him with deep, beautiful eyes. "Do I not resemble one?" Herbert tried to be polite. "It's true, isn't it?" persisted Anna. Herbert wanted to tear off her shawl, gaze at the nape of her neck, her twisted spine.

Anna shuffled beside him, bent over at a strange angle leaning on Herbert. "You know," she said forthright, "Its lucky papa has money. For I will probably never marry. And then," she repeated sadly, "who would want to marry me?" Herbert felt her resignation. He said nothing, walking beside his cousin, a girl already burdened by rejection. Her little paw-like hands pressed his elbow. "It's true."

Herbert searched for something to comfort. "But Anna, you are intelligent, educated. Don't give up hope. A young lady like yourself has a long life ahead." He repeated platitudes.

"Do you really think so? Oh Herbert!" Anna turned her face to his, looking upward. "Do you really think so? Do you think anyone will ever want to marry me?"

"Of course," answered Herbert. "Plenty of gentlemen will want to."

"Oh!" Anna's lovely eyes misted over with joy, and her face crinkled into a smile.

Herbert was delighted with the effect his words had on her, although he noticed that she looked more like a rat than ever—a happy rat. Then inspiration hit him. "Anna, do you know how to play chess?" he asked.

She looked suddenly downcast again. "No, cousin Herbert," she said.

"Well then, I shall teach you," said Herbert, feeling important. "We must not be idle just because it is summer."

Soon Herbert found himself spending time with The Rat as she lay on her sofa. All summer Herbert and Anna played chess together, and The Rat was happy to follow his lead in other things as well. When Herbert read philosophy, The Rat read every book he recommended. She listened when he read aloud to her—poetry, drama—and Herbert was delighted to have an audience for his developing interests and adolescent self-importance. The Rat had a passionate intelligence and was not afraid to debate with him. A willing pupil, her pleasure in learning was intense. Herbert found he liked to spend time with her, liked to watch her long nose quiver at an idea, sniffing out the exact meaning of each phrase. Her little hands trembled with excitement, her whiskers vibrated with joy.

At the end of the summer The Rat was disconsolate. Her eyes were magnified with the tears that fell un-wiped on the chessboard between them. She was more hunched than ever. They took a last walk together, their intensity augmented to the point where neither of them could stand it. "Let me," whispered Herbert softly. "Let me touch you just one time." Anna squeezed his hand. Gently, Herbert pulled back her collar and exposed the top of her spine. "I just want to look at you," he murmured. Anna held his other hand the while, squeezing tightly, as she trembled, her body pressed in upon itself. He let his mouth graze her queerly shaped body. Neither of them said a word; this was to be their secret. When Herbert had finished letting his lips travel the length of her deformity, Anna swooned. She would have permitted him everything, but he caught himself.

He rearranged the shawl about her shoulders, helped her straighten her dress. She was still trembling. "Come," said Herbert. He was overcome with the emotion of the situation; he wanted

her, would always want her in a desperate way. "We will write each other during the year. And we will see each other next summer." The Rat lifted her head, her eyes shining. "Yes," said Herbert. And we will correspond in different languages, we will write our thoughts and feelings and what we are reading, and we will continue our chess. Yes!" he continued, inspired by his own brilliance, and by the happy compliance of this Hungarian girl. "And next summer, we shall pick up again. For this must only be "au revoir," not "goodbye." He put his hand on her little paw, and her trembling stopped. She brushed a tear from her whiskers.

"Oh, Herbert, what will happen to me?"

During the school year, they both continued their separate lives, he in Vienna, she in Budapest. Their friendship grew through correspondence. Anna shared his passion for literature and language. Ever since this first summer, while they had continued to correspond during their absences from each other, Herbert thought about her incessantly: her deformity, her eyes. Yet on the surface he was getting to know other young ladies. It was as if Anna existed in a secret compartment, a delight only to be pulled out and played with during the summers. Their meetings each summer holiday were filled with joy. Always she approached him with shining eyes that drew him toward her secret. He loved to caress her hump. More was forbidden, and when he tried more she tightened her legs and shook her head. Then the next minute she was welcoming him, and it was Herbert who had to draw the line. He did not know if he hated or loved her; he was fascinated, and yet there was something forbidden in the skirts of her dresses, something that he both sought and shunned. "Let me look at you," he said, "I just want to look."

Herbert, of course, was to make a proper marriage, a proper *Christian* marriage, as was appropriate to his career in the Austrian government. His mother had found him Adeline and Herbert fell dutifully, romantically in love with the beautiful pianist.

The Rat was unable to attend the wedding. Anna, the emblem of his youth, was far away at that point. Her family had achieved the unimaginable. They had managed to buy for Anna and themselves a Russian Count. A penniless Russian Count, but a Count nevertheless. The terms of this marriage were, among others, that The Rat was to leave immediately for St. Petersburg, taking her fortune with her.

"And so, dearest cousin, "The Rat wrote, "What choice do I have? They do not explain to us the need for such a rush. But I am only a Lady Rat after all, and so I go to meet my husband happily."

Now, so many years later, in this suburb of war-torn Europe named "New York," The Rat's letters began to reach Herbert again. "Our last game, do you remember?" she wrote. "I was so stupid, not to cover my bishop. I lost the whole game on that. Well, now we begin again." Herbert smiled at her resolute handwriting and decisive approach. "I shall go first, my friend. Do not think you can so easily win now. I have been studying, yes, studying chess. And other things as well!" And then, as if there had been no break ever in their correspondence, Anna, choosing the first black pawn, opened the game again.

Of the intervening years, she wrote not one word. And Herbert, hardly knowing where to begin on his and Adeline's life and experiences, wrote also not one personal word back, except to mention that he was living now in New York with David and Ilse and their dear children. Herbert had decided that it was no use writing anything too personal, especially as he was now writing to a Poste Restante in Leningrad rather than to a real address. Who knew who might be reading, in fact, might even be writing, these letters concerning chess?

"And so, my dear lady, we will write of books. Literature. Yes, the literature we are reading and what is new and what is happening and what do we both think about it," Herbert

decreed. "I have just discovered a new Italian writer," he appended hastily to one letter to Anna, in which he had successfully avoided a threat to his last remaining knight. "His name is Leopardi. Do you know him?" Herbert then proceeded into a quick discussion of Leopardi. "Perhaps I shall find a copy and send it to you," suggested at the end of the postscript, knowing it was a futilely generous suggestion.

"Leopardi, no, I have not heard of him." Anna's response came six months later. "But then, I do not hear of many writers here...." The words were faint and wistful. "Now, dearest Herbert, watch out for my bishop," she wrote more strongly.

Try as he might through his many connections, Herbert could not locate the actual whereabouts of The Rat. Perhaps she was a spy. Always the letters bore the return address of the central post office. He was careful to write very little of importance in his letters—not even in invisible ink.

At first it had been a surprise when her notes had started to come to him in New York. He had been waiting in the Public Library for a meeting with a member of a committee for refugees, when a shabby man had jostled him. "I beg your pardon, Herr Doktor," the man breathed, showing bad teeth. "But I believe this is for you." He had shoved the small envelope into Herbert's hand, and then, as furtively, disappeared somewhere into the stacks again. "Who is that man?" Herbert later asked some of his committee. But no one, of course, knew.

"Who are you?" Herbert demanded, the second time this happened.

"A friend," answered the man. He looked at Herbert, shook his head once in warning, and disappeared again. From then on, Herbert never asked. "Thank you, my friend" was all he said, receiving these infrequent letters. Herbert smoothed out the crumpled paper and tried to figure out why, after all these years, Anna had decided to play chess again.

At night, Herbert held Anna's letters up to a candle to decipher if there were an invisible message beneath her spidery inked scrawl of numbers and letters. But there was none, just the chess game, the continuation of their adolescent passion shared.

There was very little else in The Rat's letters. The Rat had always included paragraphs in numerous languages, not forgetting Esperanto. The correspondence between Herbert and Anna had always included at least one passage in Esperanto. It had been Herbert's idea, one summer vacation together, that all the cousins should learn Esperanto. He assured the others that a universal language, in this case Esperanto, would eventually transform mankind's ability to communicate and thereby bring about world peace. Herbert and his brother, as well as the Rat and the Rat's sister, seized upon this idea enthusiastically, and for a while Esperanto became their private communication, especially during mealtimes with the families.

Then, years later, Herbert, for a time, gave lessons in Esperanto, zealous in his efforts to promote this universal language. He lectured and wrote in the newspapers on language and brotherhood; and this continued to be an interest long after he had entered government service. But German, Hungarian, Russian, and French had all proved more useful. Herbert had used his abilities in language to learn a bit of Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian; his tongue twisted around these savage sounds. Somehow, in the clash of nations, Esperanto was, if not forgotten, at least put aside.

Herbert's wife Adeline had not showed the slightest interest in all these language studies. For her, music was the only language she paid attention to. She sat at the piano, in a white dress, at dusk, and played the flowers to sleep in the garden outside. Herbert could not interest Adeline in reading; she felt literature too far removed from the real life of feeling. Adeline had been so beautiful, Herbert remembered. Yet, perhaps slightly...silly...Herbert had to admit it. But it was

her silliness he loved, after all. It was befitting in a woman. Or so he had thought at first. Later he had become a bit impatient with it, but in the beginning of their relationship he had found it charming. Yet, he would perhaps have preferred to spend more time with The Little Rat, to pass happy hours in conversation, sharing love of books, of ideas, of chess. But this was not to be

"J'arrive!" Now, in the Library, Herbert reread those last words. "Expect me! I arrive before you know it."

At that moment, both Maria and Philip, Herbert's grandchildren, who had been sitting so patiently beside their grandfather, began to twitch uncontrollably. Maria smoothed her dress again and again, as Philip opened his mouth in a wide yawn and began to howl at top voice. Maria roused herself out of her seeming passivity to cry anxiously. "Stop it! Stop it Philip. Immediately, do you hear? Stop it!" But Philip did not stop; he was just warming up for an operatic yowl. Herbert looked anxiously around him. "Ach, little ones, little ones," he reproved them gently, putting Anna's letter in his waistcoat pocket.

Most annoying, Maria's grandfather was refusing to pay attention to her. Maria pulled on his sleeve, irritated. "I'm bored," she complained. "Grandfather, I'm bored." Her grandfather appeared not to hear. "I'm tired of waiting here." She let her voice rise to a little whine, just loud enough to disturb the soft whispers about them in the library. Her grandfather appeared to shake himself out of his reverie for a moment, long enough to look at her and pronounce in an automatic and authoritarian voice the words: "Show me a bored child, and I'll show you a lazy child."

With slightly more compassion he patted her, but still abstracted. He softened. It must be hard for the children always to wait here. Still, there was no place else for them to be.

"A bored child is a lazy child." He repeated more kindly. "Is that not true, Liebchen? Now

surely you must have something to do. Where is that book you were reading?"

"I'm tired of reading."

In the half-light of the library, far down the corridors and into the reading room, elderly anxious faces turned away from their books and newspapers toward the commotion and clamor of Herbert's grandchildren.

Maria, in a frenzy of anger, reached over and yanked Philip's hair. "Shut up!" she hissed at him. This had the effect of making Philip yell even louder. "Children," Herbert clucked helplessly, reaching into a pocket for two shriveled candied violets, with which to pacify the children. But the proffered candies did no good: both children were squirming uncontrollably. The waiting grey heads looked toward Herbert and the children pityingly. Herbert was intensely embarrassed. In response he closed his eyes, letting himself lapse a delicious torpor, almost sleep. He pushed the noise of children far away, time for his nap.

But somewhere behind him, Herbert sensed a commotion, a reverberation of confusion that shattered his dream state. The light in the library fractured into shards, as if a noise of fingernails on blackboard had cracked it. There was the sound of scuffling somewhere, perhaps in the stacks, and then protesting, muffled shrieks.

In answer to that Maria leapt to her feet. "Grandfather," she commanded, "stand up. Something is happening." She reached over and raised little Philip to his feet beside her. Philip, surprised, stopped crying, stuck in mid-yowl.

Near them, the sounds of more scuffling. Herbert still tried to feign sleep. He tried to block out the sounds of a struggle and then, almost beside him, the faint sounds of terrified squeaks. "Grandfather!" Maria pulled at his coat. Herbert reluctantly opened his eyes.

At his feet, as if hastily deposited there, lay a small dusty bundle. But this bundle was

shaking; this bundle was alive. Herbert looked more closely. The bundle opened its small dark eyes, eyes that suddenly welled with tears and as suddenly, with laughter. Could it be? "Anna?" he asked falteringly.

"Yes, my dear Herbert. You see, 'J'arrive.' I have arrived! I am here." The creature closed its eyes again, but the long, pointy nose quivered as tears of joy rolled down her cheeks. The whiskers swayed, catching the tears; three long whiskers, now gone completely white.

"Anna?" Herbert bent down, and raised the bundle to its feet. "Oh, my Little Rat, but what have they done to you?"

"J'arrive, Je suis ici. I have arrived." whispered Anna, clinging to his arm. "My Little Rat." Herbert cradled her, surprised. The pointy little face looked up at him. "Oh Herbert, do not worry. I am here now; that is what matters."

"My dear friend." Herbert wondered how he would cope with this surprise.

Anna's face took in his, wonderingly. She passed a tiny hand over his cheek, as if in disbelief. Then she peered at the children who, suddenly silenced, stood watching. "And these?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Herbert. "These are David's children. My grandchildren."

"Children?" Anna breathed.

"Yes. This is Maria, and this is Philip." Herbert put his arm around the two children, who stood stock still, staring at the creature beside their grandfather. "Dear, dear children," Anna said. The children stared.

The Rat was tiny, no doubt the smallest woman Maria had ever seen; smaller than Maria herself. Anna, now completely bent over at right angles to the ground, twisted in a grimace of shoulder and torso as she took in the presence of the grandchildren.

Maria looked back into the face of the creature, the curved eager mouth fringed by two long white whiskers. The huge dark eyes peered damply, red rimmed, through spectacles. Anna's eager face strained to penetrate the heart of the onlooker. Maria was fascinated and immediately she fell in love, although she did not know what that felt like. She could not look away from The Rat's face and little body.

"They call me The Rat," Anna said, presenting her hand, unsteady and shaking, to each child in turn. Philip did not utter a word. Maria took The Rat's hand, and curtseyed, as she had been taught, quickly and respectfully. "Yes," Anna continued. "Do you not think I look a little bit like a Little Rat?"

Maria did not dare answer in the affirmative for fear of offending the creature. Grownups sometimes joked, but they did not expect you to joke back.

The Little Rat was by now so deformed that her spine resembled that of a Shrimp, curved and curled onto itself, more than it did that of a Rat. Maria stared at the long whiskers curving out of the mole near The Rat's nose. The dark pink rimmed eyes smiled kindly. These eyes were ringed with deep circles, the small face grooved with these dark bruised lines. "Yes, these circles are new," sighed Anna, as if defining the child's perceptions.

"My dear little Anna," Herbert finally found his voice.

"It does not matter," The Rat answered him, smiling through tears, patting his arm. "And your hair?" Herbert marveled. "It has gone completely white"

"Yes," answered Anna simply. "It turned white overnight. Suddenly. From shock." She looked at Herbert sadly. "But we will not speak of that now," she said. "Now we speak only of our happiness in being together, my dear friend."

"Come, children," Herbert said suddenly, commanding them. In one quick motion he bent

down, and picked up the Little Rat in his arms. She wrapped her ragged blanket around her shrunken body as Herbert swooped her up. How small she was. Her little body lay in his arms without weight. He felt the sharp curve of her spine, and gently, almost absently, he ran his fingers over it. His fingers remembered the shape of her body, and his own echoed with memories of desire.

"My dear Herbert," she asked, "Where are you taking me?" A cloud of dust motes rose around her clothes, and hung in the air of the library, turning golden in the late afternoon sun that slanted into the reading room.

"I am taking you back home with me," answered Herbert firmly, as he walked slowly, carrying the Little Rat in his arms, toward the large entrance doors. "Come, children." He did not turn around to see if they were following, for as usual, he expected and usually got total obedience from them. Maria took Philip's hand, and the two children, fascinated, followed Herbert and Anna toward the door. "David's wife is a good woman," Herbert said to Anna. "You will stay with us."

"But Herbert, are you sure?" Anna asked. Herbert didn't answer: he was not sure of anything.

"How did you find me?" Herbert was asking the Little Rat as he carried her, weightless, shrunk into a third of herself, in his arms through the streets. He bore her ceremonially, draped across his own body. The children followed, trying to catch the words of the older couple.

"It was not a problem, finally," answered Anna. "You have friends. Perhaps I have the same friends. It does not do to look too closely at such matters," said The Little Rat.

Herbert nodded yes. He was becoming resigned to yet another burden.

"What matters is that they brought me to you," sighed Anna, giving herself up to the

luxury of being cradled, carried like a child, to some unknown destination. She closed her eyes, and seemed to fall into a soft trance, assuaged, at the end of a long journey.

"Sleep, sleep, my dear Little Rat," Herbert breathed. His heart swelled. Maria caressed Philip's hand. "My dear little brother," she thought. She had rarely felt so tender toward him.

They walked past the inquisitive eyes of Shirley, the elevator operator, who closed the iron grating behind them. "Evening, Professor" did not require an answer. And they walked into the little room on the top floor.

Maria's mother looked up as they entered the little room that was home. She straightened, wiping her hands on her apron. She had been peeling potatoes, and the brown rinds lay next to the glowing globes, white knobs of potato bones in the half-light. Herbert set Anna down; who tottered feebly, and then straightened herself as best she could to her bent-shrimp position. The Rat looked upward, a tremulous unsure half smile on her face. The children's mother looked back, intently. Then she extended her hands to the older woman, drew her close, and, putting her arms around her shoulders, led her to a chair.

"So it is decided then?" asked Herbert, looking at his daughter-in-law.

"Yes, Papa. It is decided. It is fine." Ilse looked into the face of The Rat.

"Good." Herbert said. "Danke schön," he added quietly, so that only the air around him heard.

"You will share the daughter's bed," said Ilse. Maria looked up sharply, her lips parted. But something in her mother's eyes stopped her.

"Thank you," whispered the Rat. She turned her head painfully, so her eyes met those of the girl. "Thank you, child." So it was decided, and Maria stifled her hot protest.

Chapter 2. New York, New York.

New York, New York. City of Dreams. New York like a brace of trumpets welcomed them. Received all of them, the immigrants. They poured into her huge maw just as the steam poured out of the smokestacks of the large ships that brought them there. New York, City of Welcome. The trumpets screamed in unison, held to the large smiling mouths of sweating musicians. The sailors sweated in the engine rooms of the large ungainly steamships. New York. City of Refuge. New York, City of Hope. The strident avenues streaked across the city, silver: fiery arrows like long bright sounds, almost too much for the ear to bear. And still the band played. Louder. More volume. New York and the gleaming saxophones entered in chorus. New York. And now the trumpets rose to a wail, a cry of pain, and the saxophones sang of darker things. Sadness. Nostalgia. New York, City of Dreams Left Behind. *New York.*

The great ships drew in to the harbor, parting a dark veil of raindrops to reveal--Miss Liberty--a pigeon on her head. A strange language, sounding to the ears of the strangers like the guttural barking of dogs. Across the water, uptown and downtown, in the gleaming cathedral city, Manhattan, the jarring music lured. New York. Like a faraway walled city of many oblique castles. As in medieval times, there were the lords of the manor, whisked away silently in great soft cars. And there were the serfs, toiling in the streets, to be seen behind the quick frightened averted eyes, behind the racks of clothing wheeled through the open air, or, if lucky, behind the wheels of taxis, cunning, swift, opinionated, Serfs nevertheless.

The winds swept, merciless, about this city. Like the knife-sharp notes of a clarinet, rising with authority above the insistent throbbing bass notes of everyday street life. The wind pierced the thin bodies of the immigrants. But here, unlike their native Europe, the skies were blue and clear. The sun shone, jabbing at them through the cold. Snow fell on the city, and for a brief time

the snow sparkled in clean light. The sky was blue as a Cantata. There was some rain, of course, but never the low skies of Germany or Austria or Russia or Poland.

The immigrants sighed for the gray deceiving light of their native lands. They longed for the cloak of darkness. They had gotten into the habit of scheming. Underground life, in a certain way, suited them. They were not fit for such direct light. New York fixed its pitiless gaze on their struggles and laughed.

But they were to retain their habits of secrecy. Clutching their worn coats about them, those coats of what had once been "good tweed," they huddled, heads averted, through the city's arrowed streets, hiding their eyes from this cold, this wind, this all-seeing sky and sun. How could it be so cold and yet so blue? "Blue, blue, blue," sang the black musicians up in Harlem. But Blue was different there: a smoky, aching, shadow sort of "blue".

Each week the ships came into the harbor, disgorging the crippled remains of Europe, already charred, or at least forever marked. "Bring me your huddled masses," Miss Liberty had cried. And so they came. But for many of them, it was too late. Too late to join the concert of trumpets, too late for joy. They feared these bright Americans, with their "can do" and "will do" and easy self-assurance and "how do you do" and their too open gaze. They crept, half broken, onto the terrain that was New York and wanted only to rest.

But New York moved quickly. How could one rest? And where? The immigrants shuffled along as best they could behind the city's optimistic rhythms, searching the darkest corners, that stubborn dear familiar darkness, in which to hide.

The immigrants pulled their coats more tightly about their protesting bodies. The coats were worn, but the wool was strong as steel. What once was soft was now a rigid woven fabric of determination. Though the teasing New York wind found its way into the garments, the

immigrants held to their European values. Their beliefs in the triumph of Humanitarianism, all those examinations of ethics came into play as they attempted to find meaning in suffering. All that education, all that philosophy and music and history and culture: this was what would hold them upright now.

"Baby, I been missing you," moaned the cheerful musicians uptown. "Oh baby, I's so blue." The instruments wheedled and chorused, while the smoke of nightclubs wreathed around their heads. A shaft of early morning sunlight illuminated the smoke for a moment "Baby, I been missing you.'

The trains ran through New York, criss-crossing with a wet nostalgic sound. The traffic poured endlessly through the streets. Impatient, the dark horns of taxis hooted next to the horns of the great ships, swinging into and out of the harbor. And the horns of Harlem played; the music was picking up. Europe seemed far away.

But even while buses rushed through the streets there was a War going on. America was in it too. Too late. The immigrants bent their baffled heads and tried to find their way. They had much to tell, no one to tell it to. But for now, that didn't matter. They tried to get on with their lives.

New York New York, City of Light. The Great White Way, the waste of light. All that light. The immigrants sought a cool refreshment, shadow, which they knew and loved. The Museums. The Public Library. The dark recesses of the smallest, poorest cafeterias. The darkened rooms, unheated, of the tenements. If they were lucky, they found work. Somewhere, in a room without light. Anywhere.

So Herbert too, King Mole of all the Moles, had found his shadow space in which to operate. The Automat. The New York Public Library, a hushed dark place where one could conduct one's business in whispers.

Wherever he was, Herbert conducted his business. It was like an inflexible dance, which he must dance until he dropped from exhaustion. And even beyond that.

"May I have this dance?" Herbert waited and received his partners. Heads bent, their walk not a dance but a maimed shuffle, the refugees petitioned for favors. They fell at his feet, they slumped to their knees, they kissed his ring. Herbert tried to avoid, in a self-deprecating way, these attentions. The refugees looked directly into his eyes, and he saw in theirs a will that he do what they wished. He could only submit. "I am your servant," he comforted. "I am at your service." A long slow dance with no lack of partners cutting in and out. "I will do what I can," he promised again And he did.

Herbert kept no records, no written files on his work. He relied on his memory, his good word, and the promises of others. Nothing was ever to be found in writing on anything he undertook. When he died, it would be to leave behind only a few notes on Esperanto, a few old books on chess moves, and a small heap of shiny dust, glittering like gold powder, or like flakes of himself, shavings of dandruff or halo dust about his shoulders. Just a small shiny heap on the bed where he had floated, scheming.

Herbert's partners clutched him desperately, dictating the pace and turning in one direction only, inexorably counter clockwise: that is to say, against the clock. He could not persuade them otherwise. He did not know any other steps.

But uptown, elsewhere in New York, the city throbbed with its own beat. The Two Step, the Chicken, the Turkey, the Herky Jerky, the Foxtrot, the Charleston. Disjointed syncopation:

new steps invented everyday. The dancers, like masques of grinning animals, bobbed and pouted in their atavistic rituals. Forgetfulness was the name of the dance in New York, waiting to celebrate itself in all its brash optimism. The Yanks were here; the Yanks would do the job. Watch out, Hitler! Watch out, World!

The trumpets blared in their loud promise. Nothing was subtle about New York, nothing.

The sailors, the soldiers, the girls, the coupling, the smoky blues, all cried of entitlement, an arrogance and happiness and optimism untouched by the kinds of losses the immigrants had lived with for centuries. On the stoops of tenements old men sat uselessly, watching this strange new American race. Old women, and young ones too, sad and dark eyed, graven into headstones of themselves, watched with weariness, put down or picked up sewing, then put it down again, wondering. How would they survive such a harsh bright light?

Dusk was the hardest time. When the diamond lights went on in the big jagged city, when the bluish haze of smoke and evening came down from its perch somewhere up in the sky and curled itself around the avenues, New York began to come alive. A city of night, of jazz, of sound, both comforting and inexpressibly lonely, all at the same time. Hope and despair--loss of a girl, perhaps, or of love. This was jazz.

The immigrants thought of their other losses, all of them--everything lost. For them, dusk was a time of grief, no mocking gaiety to underscore, no irony. Maria, with her grandfather and little brother, after a day at the Public Library, saw the spirit of the city about her. People were moving happily, hopefully, going somewhere. But they were going to the makeshift little room where other people's pasts would always seem more real than any present moment she might ever choose to live.

Always the past, with its stately progression of dances. The formal waltz, partners held in a pattern of arms and posture that might have contained them all their lives, had not History happened. Passions so carefully contained that the merest flicker of a shadow was seen in its most significant perspective. The sun slanting toward autumn in the garden, a glance exchanged, a pressure of hands. A knock on the door. A few discrete words..."Herr Hofrat..." whispered. There were warnings everywhere, if one could but hear them carefully. Herbert had gotten the family out of Europe just in time. All but Michael.

He had not properly understood the whispered warnings. Never imagined they could be for him. It was David who understood them finally, poor shabby David, made for the real world in ways the rest of the family was not. "Herr Hofrat, if you know what is good for you, you will..." Eventually Herbert accepted.

Now he had gotten them into a dance that would never end. A strange dance in a strange city, too fast for them all. The dancers shuffled slowly, pausing to lean and gasp for breath. They would be lucky if Herbert could find jobs for them all, a place to live, papers, false if necessary. Their dance was more of a dirgelike shuffle.

Still, as long as there is life, there is the dance. Though the immigrants kept to their stately formal waltzes, their grandchildren might one day dance to the new rhythms in what would be a revival of jazz. But the first two generations had to live out their lives still in desperate partnership, not quite believing they were in a new place.

In their minds they would be always young, turning and spinning slowly under the flicker of candles, holding each other at arms length, the women's white shoulders, the gleam of flowers and eyes and hair, the crackle and gossip of a delightfully scandalized city, Vienna, bourgeois, staid, stuffy, and malicious. The Viennese Waltz--Vienna had even given its name to the form of

the dance. The music gathered, the string players hummed along with their instruments, and the city rustled with the sounds of the dance. Only David, Herbert's son, who worked a decoder in Washington DC, sat outside its skirted circle, still bent over the chess board in the garden, still trying miserably to figure it all out, decode, decipher, live up to his father's expectations.

So it was that he had heard the warning voices, figured out what was going to happen to them all much before it did. But no one would listen to him. Not for the longest time. They were all too busy, dancing.

And what had Herbert had to pay to get them all out of Europe, a Europe in flames? Herbert had given: his house in Vienna, his garden, his wife's jewels, the summerhouse by the seaside. He had given his bank accounts, all of them. His furniture, his large office on the top floor of the buildings that housed the Ministry, his library. He gave up his language; he gave up his wife's sanity; his profession, and that of his son, David and his son's wife, Ilse. Ilse, who could have safely stayed behind.

And finally, when there was nothing else left to give, he gave up his youngest son, paying for their escape with sacrificial blood. The boy was laid on the altar of escape- (Bless me, *bless me*, oh Lord.)-- With one resolute motion, Herbert slit his second son's throat. Michael thrashed against the doors of his own death, the boxcar carrying him away forever. Why, why? Adelaide stared into Herbert eyes, the last look of comprehension flaring and then, horrified, dying forever. "Forgive me," Herbert pleaded silently. The rest of the family was permitted to leave.

"Father, I forgive you!" But it was too late. Herbert paid.

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ANOTHER WOMAN'S DAUGHTER

A NOVEL

FIONA SUSSMAN

Chapter Four

October 1960

Celia

“Celia, the Master and I would like to talk with you after you’ve finished your dinner.”

It was an unusually chilly October evening and the Madam had rung the bell, summoning me to clear the dinner dishes. The Madam, the Master, and Miriam had just finished their evening meal.

The first time Miriam was invited to join the Steiners for a meal had come as a shock to me, as if I’d chanced upon a burglar in my room. Yet when I looked back, there were many clues; my eyes had just been blind to them. For Miriam to join the Steiners for dinner was as natural as one foot following the other.

Miriam loved everything about these evenings—the heavy pieces of silver cutlery, the stiff white napkins I’d starched and ironed earlier in the day, the salt and pepper cellars in the shape of small dogs. Best of all were the tales Master Michael would tell her—he could stretch out a story like a beautiful sunset, painting it with color and magic and wonder. Twisting his lips, peaking his eyebrows, and making funny accents, he’d captivate Miriam so completely I’d have to bump the back of her chair to remind her to eat. Stories were a luxury, food a necessity. I knew the steak would have no gristle and there would be no pockets of green in the potatoes.

Miriam’s favorite story was “The Gift of the Magi.” I came to know it well. She never tired of hearing how the two poor lovers each gave up the one thing most precious to them in order to be able to buy a present for the other. Whenever Master Michael told the story, Miriam was always hopeful that, somehow, their predicament

would be solved. But as Della's long hair inevitably fell to the ground, Miriam would be gripped by the calamity of it all, as if she was hearing the story for the very first time.

"*Hau, Master!*" she'd cry, devastated that Della had sold her hair to buy Jim a chain for his watch, only to discover he in turn had sold his watch to buy combs for her beautiful long hair.

And later, when the moon was high in the sky, she'd lie next to me, reliving the evening and retelling the well-worn tale over and over. "*Mme, Della was too silly. When my hair grows long I will never cut it!*"

I had been aware for some time of a change at the Saxonwold house. The mood had grown as light and easy as a butterfly in flight. Even the Madam seemed happy.

"Take Sunday off, Celia," she'd say. "Just set the breakfast table and that'll be fine." Or, "I've left out some pickled fish for you to have with your *mielie pap* today."

I noticed too that the bed in the spare room had often not been slept in, while most mornings the sheets on the big bed were in complete disarray.

The Master started playing records again, and his white man's music would travel out of the wide-open windows on an evening breeze to slip under my door and fill my room with gentle sound.

In the midst of everything, in the center of this new lightness, was my Miriam—her little brown body running, her infectious laughter ringing, and her wonderment spilling over into the airy, high-ceilinged rooms.

Then things started to *really* change.

Master Michael began coming home from work early to take Miriam fishing in the creek at the bottom of the garden, and one Saturday in late September, the Madam took her on an outing to the zoo. On another weekend the Master and Madam took her rowing on Zoo Lake, in one of the brightly colored boats I'd seen bobbing on the water's edge.

At first I was happy that my child had something to do other than follow me around on my mundane chores, but after a while, panic started to build inside me. Where would this end? Would Miriam grow up expecting a life that could never be hers? Would the police send me back to my homeland for ignoring the law?

But most of my misgivings would evaporate as soon as she rushed into my room panting like a puppy, her cheeks sticky with juice, her round eyes dancing. Then she would become the eager storyteller and I, her attentive audience.

This particular evening, however, the Steiners' request troubled me. Had something gone missing? Had a plate been chipped or a vase broken? Somehow I knew it would be more than this.

I was tired. My eyes were burning and my limbs ached. The long day and my monthly bleed had sucked the energy out of me. I dried the cutlery and set the breakfast table, then swallowed my dinner in the dim light of my room. The cornmeal porridge was stiff and the gravy cold, but I was too distracted to warm it.

My quarters came off the back of the house, my room opening onto a concrete yard and sagging washing line. Off to the right, down a steep flight of stairs, was the outside toilet I shared with Solomon, the gardener, and any other black, colored, or Indian tradesman who might visit.

My room was small and fitted little more than my bed, which balanced on four empty paraffin cans to keep Miriam and me safe from the *tokoloshe*—that mischievous evil spirit. Under the bed was stashed whatever I couldn't fit into the old wardrobe pushed hard up against the back wall.

The stale air of close living had dulled the white walls, leaving them sallow and grubby looking, even after I'd scrubbed them down.

Beside the door, on top of an empty tomato crate, was my Primus stove. When not in use, I covered it with a bright yellow tea towel the Madam had tossed out because of a rip in the hem. I had to be careful about taking things from the rubbish—once the Madam accused me of stealing a scarf she'd forgotten she had thrown out.

Across one wall of my room, hidden by a permanently drawn frill of faded orange curtain, ran a long narrow window—the slit of an eye looking over a shaded courtyard where the Steiners ate their lunch most weekends. The Madam had planted a vigorous bougainvillea creeper to block my window from view, and, successful in this task, it prevented all but the faintest thread of light from reaching my room. A thick woody vine had even nudged its way inside, preventing me from shutting my window completely. In winter the gap ushered in an icy draft and in summer, served as a highway for a steady stream of insects.

I put a chattering Miriam to bed, then made my way back to the house, hovering outside the lounge until the Madam called to me.

“Come. Come in, Celia. Sit down,” she said, gesturing to the couch.

Confused by this new familiarity, I balanced on the edge of the seat. It felt wrong to be sitting in the lounge I cleaned and dusted every day. Only once before, when the Steiners had been away on holiday, had I dared eat at their long dining room table—madam of their home for one day.

Master Michael stood behind his wife, his eyes avoiding me.

“The Master and I have been doing a lot of thinking lately,” the Madam began. She spoke in a slow, deliberate voice, as if it was important for me to understand every word. “This country has a lot of problems, no?”

I nodded.

“Too many problems,” she continued, sucking on one of her teeth. “It isn’t a safe place for us anymore.”

I waited for what was to follow, the Madam’s words stirring up the thick layer of dread that lined the bottom of my days.

“The Master and I have decided we cannot stay here. We are moving to England at the end of the year.”

My head started to spin, the security of the last nine years draining like water through a colander. I would need to find a new job. How would I send money to my mother? My children. Where would I live? Would I have to travel from the townships? When could—

“Celia.”

I heard my name from beyond the chaos of my thoughts.

“Celia?”

Rita and Michael Steiner were staring at me.

“We would like to take Miriam with us,” said the Master softly.

My mind landed back in the room with a thud.

“Celia, Master Steiner and I want to adopt Miriam.”

The Madam's words drove through me like an assegai.

"She is a lovely child and very bright. Wasted, really," she said, shaking her head. "We'll be able to give her a good life in England, far better than she could ever hope to have here. She'll get to go to a good school, have whatever she needs, and, most importantly, be away from the difficulties of this cursed country."

I tried to speak, but my tongue felt fat and slow in my mouth, like a sun-drunk lizard.

The Madam went on, leaving me behind as I tried to grab hold of the words she was tossing into the room. "You have three other children, no?"

I opened my mouth.

"And what help is that husband of yours . . . Patrick, isn't it? How often does he send you money from the mines?"

I tried to swallow, but my throat was as dry as kindling.

"Too busy spending it on his girlfriends and Kaffir beer, hey."

Her words stung—the pain of confidences betrayed.

"Meanwhile, you are left to feed and clothe them. It can't be easy, I—"

Michael Steiner put a hand on his wife's arm, and when he spoke his voice was quiet and tender. For a moment it felt as if we were alone in the room, just the Master and me.

"Celia, your daughter is very precious to us. We will do everything we can, with your blessing of course, to give her a happy childhood and a good life."

Your daughter, your daughter, your daughter. The words were sucked into the whirlpool of my mind.

The Madam sat down beside me. "Of course we'll leave you some money to tide you over until you find another job. In fact, I know someone who might be looking for a char from January."

She turned to the Master. "The greengrocers. Their char's pregnant again."

I slumped back into the couch.

"I know it's a lot to think about," Rita Steiner said, motioning to me to stand. "But try to make up your mind as quickly as you can. There will be much to arrange."

I heaved myself up.

Master Michael moved toward me and rested a hand on my elbow, his white fingers cool against my hot black skin.

I cannot remember leaving the room, nor passing through the kitchen and out into the still night. I only became aware of my surroundings with the screech of the neighbor's cat as it darted in front of me. I stumbled, going down heavily onto the slate paving and splitting open my knee on the jagged footpath. Dazed, I lay there, sprawled across the pavers, until my limbs grew cold and stiff.

By the time I picked myself up, the thick trail of blood tracking onto the paving was dry. Climbing the three concrete stairs to my room, I stepped into the darkness and, without undressing, sank onto the mattress beside my Miriam. She didn't stir.

When sleep finally came, it was troubled and fitful, and when I awoke, my pillow was wet with tears. But unlike waking from a nightmare to the warm relief of reality, the events of the previous evening were lying in wait to suffocate my day.

I turned to face the child asleep beside me—her small chest rising and falling with each whispered breath. With my forefinger, I traced the slope of her eyelids and caressed her long black lashes as they curled away from carefree dreams. I cupped her tiny ears in my hands, stroked her untroubled brow, and kissed each of her little fingers. It was as if she was a newborn again and I was seeing her for the very first time.

Then she was awake—my cheeky jewel glistening in the morning sunshine.

Chapter Five

November 1960

Miriam

The doors could not be closed properly, the church hall was so packed with people; I thought it would burst. Brown bodies were tossed in a salad of bright clothes and river-blue robes, faces glistened with sweat, and mouths were opened wide in song. I could see right to the back of one old *makhulu*'s mouth, to the two bits of pink skin dangling there. The granny was singing for all she was worth.

I was standing on a wonky chair, wedged between M*me* and a wrinkly man who smelled of beer and beef bones. From my position I could see right over the bobbing heads and staffs swaying in unison, to the pastor conducting the choir. I loved singing in church, because my voice joined with all the other voices to make one loud voice that felt all mine.

Soon the service was over and we were tumbling out into the golden afternoon to trestle tables laden with *mielie pap*, cream biscuits, and tins of sweet tea.

Church Sundays were my best. There were other children to play with, new hiding places to explore and trees to climb. And there was always lots to eat.

Mme was mostly happy too—talking and laughing and swinging her big bottom in time to the music. I liked *Mme* best on Sundays. When she untied her apron and removed the *doek* from her head, she shed her serious *don't-touch put-that-down, don't-talk-too-loud, maybe-later* skin, like a molting snake.

My favorite church friend was Siph*o*. He lived in Orlando township and saw his mother only on

Sundays. He was also six years old, but much cleverer than me. He could hop on one foot for an entire race without overbalancing and fold his tongue into a proper tunnel. My tongue just went out—never up and round like his.

After we'd drunk our tea and filled our pockets with biscuits, we ran off to play.

Sipho had made a car from bits of wire and scraps of wood. It had bottle-top wheels and a long, stiff handle, which meant he could steer it without having to bend down. It was a proper sports model—nothing like the old jalopies I sometimes made. We took turns driving it up and down the dirt track behind the hall, until one of the wheels came off. Then we had to look for a replacement. I searched everywhere for a suitable bottle top, but Sipho was very disparaging about the ones I found. He said there were much better ones to choose from in the township. I wished I lived there. It sounded like so much fun.

“Miriam.” *Mme* was calling.

“Just a bit longer, pleeease.”

“It's late, *Mbila*. After the bus, we still have a long walk home. I want to get back before dark.”

I loved it when she called me *Mbila*. It meant “hand piano” in Tshivenḡa. *Mme* said I reminded her of the cheerful sound it made.

By the time we got off the bus the light was fading and *Mme* walked quickly. I had to run and hop every few steps just to keep up with her. After a while, though, she forgot about the time and slowed to her usual giraffe-ambling pace, stopping every now and then to chat with a passerby. Then I would skip on ahead, leading most of the way, except for when I'd run back to show her some prize I'd found. My best find was a rusty padlock with the key still in the lock. I also found a whole snail shell. I decided to keep both for a trade with Sipho, just in case he brought some of those special township bottle tops next time.

When I was really far ahead, I flung myself down on the spongy grass sidewalk and gazed up at the sky dotted with toothpaste-white clouds. I could make out several shapes—a rooster, a tortoise, and a man with three heads. As I was lying there, waiting for *Mme* to catch up, a dog began to bark from behind a very low fence. I shot back to *Mme*'s warm, solid legs and stayed by her side for the rest of the journey.

She'd decided to take the route past the old apricot tree on Griswold Road. The detour added a few extra blocks onto our trip, but this being the beginning of summer, we were sure to be rewarded with good pickings. Already from the top of the avenue I could make out some of the sweet orange treasure scattered across the pavement.

The tree was alive with wasps and we had to be careful not to get stung as we stuffed our pockets. *Mme* even picked a few unspoiled apricots from an overhanging branch, while I kept lookout.

With our pockets bulging and the sun slipping behind us in the sky, we set off again for Saxonwold, *Mme* promising to make stewed apricots and custard for pudding.

I had just jammed a whole fruit into my mouth when I heard footsteps coming from around the corner; someone was running. Then a dog began to bark. After this came the screeching of a car.

We stopped, then *Mme* yanked me back into a bed of dark green ivy just as a boy came tearing around the corner.

He was as tall as a man, but I could see from his eyes he was still a boy; they were stretched wide—dark brown disks sucking up all the white. His shirt was stuck to his skinny black body in round wet patches and his trousers looked too big for him. He'd looped a piece of string through the belt holds to keep them up. On one of his feet flopped a frayed *tackie*, without laces. His other foot was bare.

As he sprinted past, my Sunday happiness disappeared into his hungry brown eyes.

Then came the skidding of wheels. *Mme* and I pressed ourselves up against the wall as a police van hurtled around the corner. Police vans all looked the same—cream-colored cab in front, cage on the back, green canvas curtains on either side. If the curtains were down, you couldn't see inside. These ones weren't. They were rolled up like the curlers the Madam sometimes wore in her hair, and we could see inside. Packed into the darkness were the whites of many more eyes.

The running boy stopped for a moment—you could hear air whistling in and out of his mouth—then he was scrambling over the wall we were standing against. The ivy stole his only shoe. I reached out and freed it from the dark leaves, but *Mme* jerked me back, and I dropped it. I put my hand to my nose and breathed in the sour smell of the running boy.

We heard him drop to the other side. Then someone screamed. It was a white-madam scream—high and sharp like broken glass. More dogs started barking. The boy was now clambering back over the gate, the silver spears on top poking big red holes in his hands.

I squeezed *Mme*'s fingers. She was so still standing there beside me in the dark green ivy—I wished she would say something.

The van stopped in front of us and out jumped a policeman and his dog.

Mme put a finger to her lips.

“*Vang hom! Catch him! Catch the blerrie Kaffir!*” yelled another policeman from behind the wheel. He sped off, the door flying further open before slamming shut with the speed of the van. The dog was let off its leash and began gaining on the boy.

All of a sudden the string around the boy's pants snapped and his trousers started to slide down over his bottom. He wasn't wearing underpants. He was naked underneath.

I didn't laugh.

He kept on running, all the while trying to pull his trousers back up, but when he turned to look over his shoulder, they fell down around his ankles and he tripped.

Then the dog was on top of him.

Mme put her hand over my eyes. I tried to pull it away, but she held firm, so I only got to look through the thin gaps between her fingers.

“*Asseblief, baas! Please, boss!*” the boy begged.

Mme didn't have enough hands to cover my ears.

I started to hum one of the songs we'd sung in church that morning as the policeman's brown boot moved back and forward, thumping into the boy's bendy body. After a bit, the thumping changed to *whistle . . . thwack, whistle . . . thwack*. I opened my eyes for a quick look. It was the sound of a *sjambok*—the policeman's rhino-hide whip.

. The policeman's face was like the side of a split watermelon—red and wet—and the boy's one-eyed snake was red too.

Tears spilled out of my eyes, but I held on to my voice so it couldn't escape.

After a while the street was quiet, except for the sound of a panting dog and a panting policeman.

The driver got out of the van and marched over to where the race had ended. He flipped over the boy, hiding his dust-dull face from the street's curious eyes. The other policeman put thick silver bracelets onto the boy's crooked wrists and both men dragged him along the road, his head bumping up and down on the gravel.

"*Een, twee, drie,*" they counted, before swinging him into the back of the van.

I knew what *een, twee, drie* meant because *Mme* had been teaching me to count in Afrikaans. She said I'd have to speak Afrikaans at school.

The commotion had drawn quite a crowd, but *Mme's* and mine were the only black faces on the street. There were some shivering children—their bathing costumes still dripping—staring through the bars of the gate until a white madam hurried them inside. There was also a group of men dressed in white, leaning on their tennis rackets.

Luckily the day was already yawning and the sun so low that long afternoon shadows helped hide us in the ivy.

I looked at the boy's *tackie* poking out of the leaves. I was sure he'd want it, especially since he'd only had one to start with. But as I tried to reach for it, *Mme* yanked me back hard, hurting my arm. Suddenly I felt scared.

I was about to start crying again, when a master from the ivy-walled home walked out to speak with the policemen. "No, nobody harmed. Just saw this black leap over the wall and of course my wife got a terrible fright. I think her screams scared him off," he said with a chuckle.

"*Jirre!* Bloody Kaffirs," cursed the policeman. "Probably has no pass. She all right?"

"Thank you, yes. She's fine. Just a bit shaken."

They spoke as if they were good friends, as if they knew each other. White people were always friends with one another. They weren't really white, though, like *Mme* said, they were more a yellowy-pink color.

“Beda be going,” said the policeman, straightening his safari suit.

My whole body was getting itchy in the ivy. Then my nose started to tickle. I scratched it. But the tickle grew . . . “Haichoo!”

The policemen swung around.

I heard *Mme*’s breathing go faster.

“Hey, you . . . Kaffir. *Kom hier!* Come here!”

Mme squeezed my hand. Sticky apricot juice had collected in heavy drops under my wrist. I crept behind her legs and quickly emptied my pockets, letting the apricots fall softly to the ground. Then we were moving toward the big khaki man.

“*Maak gou, ek het nie die heel dag tyd nie.* Hurry up, I don’t have all day,” he barked. “Where is your book? *Dompas?* Give it.”

Mme looked so small standing beside him. His face was thick and wide, and his head had been stuck straight onto his body without a neck in between. The back of his hat was wedged into bulging folds of scalp and the front was pulled down so low I couldn’t see his eyes. He was wearing the usual police uniform—green safari suit, leather strap over right shoulder, shiny brown belt, gun holster, truncheon. Droplets of sweat trickled down the thick strips of orange hair on his cheeks. He also had a box of brown bristles above his top lip. I ran my tongue over mine, trying to imagine what it would be like to have broom bristles there.

Mme fumbled with the top button on her dress and reached into her bra, pulling out a small worn book, the brown cover buckling at the corners. She always kept special things in her bra. I couldn’t wait to have a bra so I could hide my treasures.

She handed the book to the policeman. I wondered what story was inside. I hoped it wasn’t the one about Della and Jim, because the policeman didn’t seem to be the kind of person who would like it.

His fat fingers flicked through the pages. The dog, now back on its leash, started to growl. Its teeth were all pointy and yellow, and it had ugly black gums.

“*Mme!*”

I couldn't help myself, even though I knew I was meant to keep quiet. But I'd seen how the dog had taken a big chunk out of the boy's skinny leg and I didn't want the same thing happening to me.

The policeman laughed and tugged on the leash.

As we were standing there, a white madam—I think it might have been the one who'd screamed—came out of her gate, carrying a tray. On it were two frosted glasses filled with guava juice and a plate of chocolate biscuits.

“Very kind of you,” the policeman said, taking one glass and passing the other to his friend seated in the van.

The juice slopped everywhere and the open pages of *Mme's* book sucked up the pink liquid, smudging the important black ink.

After a few gulps, the policeman shoved the book back into *Mme's* trembling hands. “*Nou voetsek—scat!*”

“Yes, *baas*,” she said, dipping her head.

We started walking straight away, and I looked back only once to check that the dog wasn't following us.

Celia

Back at my room in Saxonwold, Miriam sat cross-legged in the deep dip of our bed, the bedclothes steepled high, her small body swallowed up by the mattress. She paged absently through her storybook, but even the charm of her favorite story now seemed to elude her.

It had been dark by the time we'd turned into the Steiners' driveway. We had run all the way, Miriam clutching my hand so tightly that pins and needles had blurred the ownership of our interlocking fingers.

As our feet hurried over familiar ground, I replayed the scene in my head, hoping for something, anything, to relieve me of the burden I now carried. But my load simply grew heavier, and my

powerlessness more real. Nothing could change what had happened. I had been helpless to hide the horror. And in just a handful of minutes, my child's innocence had been stolen.

The window had misted up and the room felt airless. Even though the door stood ajar, the night was still and offered little relief.

“Miriam.”

She looked up, her beetle-brown eyes meeting mine.

I paused, wrestling with what was waiting to be spoken, then I broke into Tshivenda, my native tongue, and the difficult words slipped more easily into the space between us.

“Miriam, would you like to go on a holiday?”

She tilted her head.

I focused on her shiny, rounded forehead, avoiding her questioning eyes. “To a special place over the sea.”

I had never seen the sea, though I knew its taste; I knew its smell. On my request, the Steiners often brought me back a bottle of seawater from their travels. Just uncorking it would release the magic of nature's *muti*—the wind and salt and healing secrets.

Miriam picked up Tendani, the rag doll I'd made from old orange bags stuffed with newspaper. She pulled at a loose thread and the doll's face began to unravel.

“Why?”

I tried to silence the screaming inside my head. I had one chance to convince her. She was a willful child—more so than her brothers. Once she had made up her mind, there was no persuading Miriam otherwise.

I sucked in a deep breath. “The Master and Madam want to take you to England.”

Her eyes grew wide. She knew about England from the Master's dinnertime stories.

“Where the queen lives?”

I nodded.

“The one with jewels?”

“The one with jewels,” I said too loudly.

Miriam’s face was still painted with the darkness of that afternoon.

“You’ll have your own bedroom,” I said quickly.

“I don’t want my own—”

“And you’ll be able to go to school with other children.” I knew how much she longed for this. “One day, if you work hard, you might even become a teacher like *Mudedekadzi Mafela*.”

She stood up. “I want to be a doctor like the Madam.”

Little mountains crumbled inside me. “Or a doctor,” I said quietly, taking her hand as she balanced on the edge of the bed. The light was seeping back into her eyes.

“Okay, *Mme*,” she said and, without any warning, leapt into my arms.

I staggered backward, and we both tumbled onto the floor, laughing. As I lay there, her tiny body a wisp of cloud on top of me, I should have felt some relief. I had managed to persuade her to go. But I felt no such satisfaction.

She pushed my nose flat with her fingers.

“Will we still sleep in the same bed?”

My throat tightened.

“*Mbila*,” I said, my voice faltering, “I must stay here. Who will look after my mother, your *makhulu*? Who will keep an eye on your brothers?”

“Oh,” she said, pulling back to scrutinize me.

“But you will come back soon,” I said, allowing the truth to lose its way. “Then we will stay up long after even the owls have gone to bed, and you will tell me all about your adventures.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” she cried, bounding off my lap onto the bed again, the weary bedsprings creaking and groaning under her excitement. “*Mme*, does the queen have only one crown, or does she have lots?”

It was then, with that simple question, that I first glimpsed the enormous toll Africa was about to exact from me.

THE VISITORS

A Novel

SIMON SYLVESTER



THE VISITORS

1

In the bay, a seal bobbed once, dipped and vanished. A light tide sluiced through the ripples and washed the surface clear, leaving no sign. From the headland, the ocean was a lung. Inhale, exhale. Breathe. Focus.

It was the day before Richard left the island, and he was learning how to smoke. The various components were laid out on the grass before him. He broke a pinch of tobacco from the plastic pouch, shaped it into a rough cylinder and tucked it into the fluttering crease of paper. Frowning in concentration, he tried rolling this clumsy package between his fingers, but it kept slipping, and eventually he simply folded it into something like an envelope. He gummed it closed, tongue kitten pink as it slid along the white paper, saliva turning the fibres translucent.

He held it up, proud of his work, crooked and creased, and stuck it in one corner of his lovely, lovely mouth. It was an obvious pose, but it suited him. Hair combed back and ruffled by the breeze, staring out to sea. Sitting down, one knee folded up and close into his body, the other leg sprawled loose in the grass, cigarette in mouth, match in hand. Ready to go. Ready when you are. Ready to light the fuse, blow the keg. Ready for anything. It was the author picture on the jacket of a poetry book. He was practising for the years to come. His own author photos, maybe. The wind puffed out the first match,

and it took him a couple of attempts to light the cigarette. He took a deep, dramatic inhalation, then exhaled carefully, a thin white curtain tugged out between his teeth. The smoke was whipped away on the breeze, out to sea, away from here, away from the island, away from me.

‘Aye,’ said Richard, ‘I could get used to this.’

He tried hard to savour the smoke. He held his cigarette like a film star, cupped inside his hand. Looking thoughtful, trying not to cough. Through his cheek, I could see the movement of his tongue inside his mouth, tasting the corners.

He offered me a drag. I shook my head, no, and hugged my knees, slouchy jumper wrapped around my bare shins. He shrugged. He smoked in careful puffs. Exhalation revealed the space inside him, the smoke giving body to the air he breathed. This was the volume of his lungs.

The cigarette was barely halfway smoked when he ground it underfoot. He pocketed the stub, leaving a blackened smudge on the beach grass. My favourite place, charred with ash and tar. I scowled at him. He sat back, wind licking through his hair, and didn’t notice.

We sat together on a little headland on the west coast of Ban-cree, dangling our feet above a narrow inlet and looking out to sea. The cove below the headland was called Still Bay, named after generations of whisky moonshiners. It was a dream landing for smugglers, back when the island creaked with illicit stills and there was money to be made in bootleg whisky. The island was a haven until the customs men started to take it seriously. Faced with jail, the old moonshiners packed it in. They were dead, now, and their grandsons and great-grandsons worked in the fish farm or the big distillery up in Tighna.

Still Bay was sandy but studded with rocks and pebbles. It mapped a long curve of four or five hundred metres, and

ended at another headland on the far side. Weeks of receding high tides had left shells and wood and weed in long dark bands, their contours evenly spaced as they spanned the bay. Running parallel to the beach, separated by curtains of dune grass and reeds, a crumbling, potholed single-track road wound along the coast. The road passed through the dozen cottages clustered at the far end of the bay. That was the village of Grogport. A dozen houses and a bus stop. My home.

Beyond the bay, maybe two hundred metres into the water, lay Dog Rock. This tiny islet, barely a hundred metres long, was a curling extension of the southernmost headland, shaped somewhere between a comma and an inkblot. It projected from the sea like an accident, an afterthought in the geography of Bancree. A cottage sat on top of the islet, though I'd never known anyone to live there. It seemed so pointless, its whitewash chipped and faded to nothing, its roof bowed in the middle. Waves licked white against its crooked pontoon. On the far side of Dog Rock lay the full weight of the Atlantic. The coastal currents jumbled blue, reflecting pinpricks of September sun. It was the end of summer, the last weekend before school returned. School, school again. The clouds lay teased in threads like wool on barbed-wire fences.

Richard attempted to light matches on the zip of his jacket. No matter how often he struck the match, it never caught, only chipped the sulphur until the wood was bare. He harrumphed and tried it on his thumb instead, wincing as pieces of the match lodged beneath the nail. He wasted a dozen before I put him out of his misery.

'They're safety matches,' I said. 'You shouldn't play with fire.'

He huffed and tossed them down beside the tobacco. Tomorrow he'd be leaving for university in Bristol, and I wouldn't see him for weeks. Months, maybe. Half-term, perhaps,

depending on how it went. But it would be fine. It would be fine, babe. These were his words, not mine. I didn't say much. I ached deep and vague, caught somewhere between melancholy and spite.

'We can always speak on the phone,' he said.

We both thought of the mobile reception on the island. We couldn't always speak on the phone.

'We'll see each other soon, anyway. Of course we will.'

I wasn't sure I'd ever see Richard again. We'd meet, of course. He'd be back for the summer holidays, no doubt, and he'd come home for Christmas. But it wouldn't be him, and I wouldn't be his girlfriend any more. He'd have another girl. She'd be sophisticated and funny and smart and she'd be taller than me and older than me and louder than me and not Scottish. She'd be French, or Spanish, and she'd smoke too. They'd light their cigarettes from the same flame. He'd probably get a Zippo. When he came back to the island, smoking might suit him. With his mini-skirted girlfriend in tow, he'd sneer at everything he used to know and how small it seemed, how quaint. The harbour – the mountains – me.

'We'll be fine, you know,' he said. 'You and me.'

The wind whipped my hair into my face, and I let it. Strands caught in my mouth. Inland, clouds rolled across the ragged top of Ben Sèimh in stupendous white waves. They collided above the little mountain and trailed down the other side, dissolving into blue. The wind farm beat against the breeze. My heart was cumulus, rolling and beaten, tugged into pieces by the turbines.

We'd sat on this little headland hundreds of times in the last few years, looking out onto Still Bay and the sea. We were sitting here when Richard first held my hand. Fingers reaching, creeping across the grass to mine. I'd pretended not to look as he inched nearer, though we both knew what would

happen. This was where we came to kiss. And now he needed to shave once or sometimes twice a week, and he was leaving for university, leaving for the mainland.

Leaving the island.

Bancree was small. Barely twenty square miles of long, thin rock, ten or so long and two or so across, stretching out into the ocean. Little mountains bumped along the spine of the island like a pod of orcas, but even Ben Sèimh fell some way short of being a Munro. Our traditional industries were fishing, whisky and peat. Only the whisky had survived. Scores of islanders worked for Clachnabhan Malt, up in Tighna. Without the distillery, Bancree would be deserted. There was nothing on the island that wasn't already dying. Half the houses were for sale. The island population numbered only a few hundred, and that dripped away, year on year. Now Richard was leaving, too. I'd known him all my life, and he was leaving before me.

A slice of me despised him for it.

'Who's that?' he said, squinting in the sun.

I followed his gaze. On the far side of the bay, a grubby white van slowed to a crawl as it passed through Grogport. I could just make out the logo of a mainland hire company. It paused outside each house, looking for something, and passed out the other side, heading up the hill towards the northern end of the island. Then it stopped, lurched backwards, and reversed with a piping sound that floated across the bay. The van turned along the track on the far headland, bumping down towards the decrepit jetty that served only Dog Rock.

'No way,' said Richard. 'No way. Do you think someone's moving in?'

The hire van stopped at the end of the track, lurching with the handbrake. Richard started rolling another cigarette. We

were both fascinated. Dog Cottage had been uninhabited as long as I'd been alive. No one ever moved to Bancree, let alone the tiny islet.

On the far side of Still Bay, a man climbed out of the driver's side. He walked around the van and into view. He was middle-aged and dark-haired, wearing dark trousers and a pale T-shirt, but the opposite headland was too far to distinguish any more than that. He arched his back and reached his arms up overhead. Mid-stretch, he saw us. Richard waved enthusiastically, the cigarette hanging crooked from a corner of his mouth. A sour puff of smoke passed across my face. The man gave a curt wave and turned away. On the near side of the van, a girl climbed down and stood beside the driver. She looked a lot younger than him. She looked about my age. All I could see at that distance was that she had dark hair, tied into a bunch behind her head.

'Must be his daughter,' suggested Richard.

'Maybe.'

'Someone for you to talk to.'

When you've gone, I thought.

'I don't even know her,' I said, and tore a blade of grass from the headland.

'Well, yes. But this is Bancree,' said Richard. 'It won't take long, will it?'

She wore shorts and a blue hoodie, hands plunged deep into the pockets. She kicked at the ground. The man walked to the back of the van and opened the doors. He studied the contents, then started to tug and haul on something. He called to her for help, his voice muzzled by the distance between the headlands. The girl joined him, and after a few moments of wrestling, they dragged out an inflatable dinghy, bright yellow against the grass. A foot pump followed, and the man started to inflate the boat with ceaseless, monotonous movement. All

the while, he looked across the bay at Dog Rock, sitting squat between Bancree and the sea. I glanced across, too, but the ocean offered only wave upon wave upon wave. The girl carried bags and boxes from the van, wading through the grass and stacking them on the beach.

'I can't quite believe it,' crowed Richard, 'that someone's actually moving into that old place. What kind of idiot would do that?'

As if he'd heard us from across the bay, the man looked up. For a heartbeat, he stared, and then he returned to work. Despite the sun, I felt a cold twist in my neck.

'It's a bit weird,' I murmured.

'Isn't it odd that someone's moving in now, of all times? It's like they know about the disappearances, and they've come to fill the gaps.'

'There aren't any disappearances,' I said.

'Yeah? Tell that to Doug MacLeod and Billy Wright.'

'Wheesht. They can take care of themselves.'

Richard snorted. 'Dougie couldn't care for a cardboard box.'

He played with the matches, trying again to light them on his nail. This time, I let him.

From our perch on the headland, Dog Cottage seemed little better than a wreck. It was still standing, but the walls were compounded as though carrying a great weight, and the door was peeled almost bare. The islet was bounded by a blackened rocky shore, and foxgloves and ferocious weeds sprouted everywhere. Stunted walls of gorse had grown dense since the islet was last inhabited. The scrub was studded yellow with flowers and sculpted the same shape by the Atlantic breezes.

The couple carried the inflatable dinghy down to the shore of Still Bay. He attached an outboard motor, then backed the boat into the surf. The girl began to pass him boxes. When the

load was full, she kicked off her shoes and waded in to push out the boat, then hopped up onto the prow. He jerked an arm at the outboard motor, twice, three times, and it coughed into life, farting little blasts of purple smoke, sounding like a wasp against a window. It took them a couple of minutes to reach the pontoon on Dog Rock, their inflatable nodding into shallow waves. The girl stepped out gingerly, hauling herself up on a pole and testing the weight of the boards. As she tethered the dinghy, the man started offloading boxes onto the crooked wood. She took them to solid ground. When they'd finished, they returned to Bancree, immediately packing another round of bags and boxes into the boat.

'It's like everything they own is in that van,' said Richard.

'If they're moving in, it will be.'

'I wonder where they've come from.'

I shrugged. 'Dunno. First people to move in since . . .'

We both paused, thinking. A lot of houses went on sale in Ban-cree, but there weren't that many bought.

'Do you think they're English? Or foreign? Another holiday cottage,' said Richard, 'just what the island needs. She must be about our age. Your age, anyway. She might go to school. Could be in your year. You'll find out soon enough.'

Like I'd have a choice. The island grapevine would be pounding with the news.

'Well, I guess I'll have to let you know,' I said.

I felt bad about sounding catty, but Richard didn't notice. He rolled another cigarette. This time, it looked like the real thing. I traced pictures in the grass with my fingertip while he smoked. Sometimes he pushed at my shoe or ankle, but I ignored him. The strangers finished their second run in the boat.

'We should go around and help.'

'Your call,' he smirked. 'They're your new neighbours. Not

mine.'

Leaning back, he took a deep drag of the cigarette. And then, brow furrowed, Richard tried to blow a smoke ring.

Like a fresh sheet on a bed, realisation settled on me. Watching him flick and fumble with the matches, I suddenly understood that he was trying on a character. A new persona. Right in front of me, testing it on an audience. He hadn't even waited to leave. I wondered how long he'd been planning the new him. Testing new looks in the mirror, testing faces, clothes. Deciding to become a smoker. Learning how to smoke.

I felt nauseous to think of how long I'd missed this truth, even when it stared me in the face. Everything churned and curdled. Everything turned sour.

I was a dress rehearsal.

'It's nice,' said Richard, watching Dog Rock, watching them carry their boxes, 'to be out here with you. To spend this time together. Before I go. Really nice.'

'Is it? Is it really nice?'

He wouldn't meet my eye. He was supposed to be my boyfriend, but I was no longer certain what that meant. We'd known each other all our lives, and had been pretty much a couple for the last two, but he'd become a stranger in the time it took to roll and smoke a cigarette.

Low and fierce, the sun started its retreat into the west. Afternoon shadows crawled out behind us, even as we looked into the sea. Whatever I had with Richard suddenly felt very juvenile. Our relationship sloughed off one skin, and evolved into something new. Once, I'd thought it might be love, but now it felt little better than convenience. We were the only kids on this side of the island, and we'd been bundled together since we were babies. I felt pangs of sluicing sadness. Our parents had declared us childhood sweethearts, and so we were.

What choice did we have? There was no one else. It was the easy option.

He was nice. I liked him a lot. He was leaving without me. I couldn't stand to be near him. I stood up and brushed down my legs, sweeping off the crumbs of grass and sand.

'You're going?' he said, surprised.

'Aye. I'm off home.'

'Oh,' he said, turning puppy dog. 'I was going to watch the sunset. It'll be my last one for a while, Flo.'

'Well, don't let me stop you. I'll be watching the sun set every night.'

'You'll come and see me?'

'We've had this conversation a hundred times,' I snapped.

He looked at me, confused.

'OK then,' I told him. 'Sure, of course. Whatever you want.'

He wanted the audience. Standing over him, I'd a sudden urge to slap at him, to lash out. He wasn't sad at all, and it made me boil. He'd brought me out here for a glimpse of his new character. A sneak preview. Not Richard from the island, but Richard who lives in Bristol. Richard who smokes. He was casual, easy, flippant. He was leaving, and I'd be stuck here, trapped on an island that could fit inside a snow globe.

He stood up and came to kiss me. I let him, but didn't kiss back, feeling his hands around my shoulders, his lips pushing against mine. His cigarette breath was acrid on my upper lip. Richard moved his head to one side and pecked my cheek instead.

'Look, it'll be OK. You know that, right?'

'Aye, well. Call me when you're settled. If you like.'

'If I can get through,' he said, wounded.

'If you want to,' I corrected, and turned away, his fingers tugging mine as I let go of his hand. I waded through the deep beach grass and back onto the road. The sun burned hot on

one side, the other cool in shadow. I could feel him watching me, but I wouldn't boost his ego by turning for another look. I felt too raw.

'Flo,' he called, 'wait.'

With each step, my left shoe squeaked on the road. Only a few hundred metres to Grogport, and I felt him watching like a weight. A wee stone bridge spanned the creek at the near edge of the village, right beside my house. That bridge meant home and respite. I kept my head down, and forced myself to count the potholes against left shoe squeaks. Locked into myself, and with my gaze fixed on the road, I didn't see the new girl until I'd walked straight into her.

2

She stood in the centre of the bridge, gazing at the trees beyond the village. She hadn't seen me coming. At the last moment I spotted her feet and jerked my head up, but momentum carried me right into her. She bounced off me, staggering, and I threw out a hand to catch her arm.

'Sorry!' I gasped.

'OK, I'm OK.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said, letting go her arm, 'I wasn't looking.'

'Don't worry about it,' she said, rubbing her side, 'I'm fine.'

'Well,' I hesitated, 'hello, anyway. I'm Flora. I live . . . well. I live right here.'

I pointed at our croft. It stood directly beside us. I felt suddenly ridiculous. The new girl gestured across the bay to Dog Rock.

'That's my new house. I've just moved here with my dad.'

It was weird. She couldn't look me in the face. She was short and skinny and pale. She had dark, wavy hair. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of her hoodie, and she stood half-on to me. She was quite pretty, but there was something strange about her.

'So . . .' I said, 'where are you from?'

When she frowned, her whole face crumpled.

'All over, really. We only left Islay yesterday.'

'Far enough, I suppose. Welcome to the bustling

metropolis of Bancree.’

The half-smile played again, and for an instant, she looked up and right at me. Her face was astonishing. Her cheekbones and jaw were well defined and sinuous. Her mouth was full, but pursed and nervous. She had large, peaty eyes, the iris dark enough to blend into the pupil. The whiteness of her skin made the contrast with her eyes all the more unnerving. Just as quickly, she dropped her gaze back to the road. A horn blast cut through the afternoon. By the jetty, the man stood beside the cabin of the van, waving at the girl.

‘Better go. See you later.’

‘Aye,’ I said, ‘see you.’

She turned and jogged to the jetty. Her dad grabbed her roughly by the arm and steered her towards the inflatable dinghy. I watched them pack another load into it before turning back to my house.

The porch was still. Motes of dust hung in sunlight, fostering silence. I kicked off my sneakers and pulled the front door closed. It was that strange summer hour between late afternoon and early evening, and no one was home. I traipsed through the little living room, kicking Jamie’s toys under the table, already feeling calmer. In the kitchen, I made a cup of tea and sat at the window, looking out onto Still Bay. We kept binoculars on the sill, and I combed the waves, hoping for otters or dolphins, or perhaps the seal I’d spotted that afternoon. The dune grass was alive with finches, and a heron stalked the shallows, but there was nothing extraordinary. I focused again, looking this time at Dog Rock. Boxes stood in stacks beside the pontoon. I frowned. They were all office storage boxes, the cardboard buckled with use. Some of them spilled paper. There were dozens of them. Who moves house with stationery?

I swung the binos to the headland where I’d sat with

Richard, peering along the low line where the land fell into the sea. He'd gone. So much for watching a final sunset.

I simmered in sadness and frustration, furious with Richard for leaving, for changing. I liked him. I did. I'd miss him because he'd always been there. But I didn't need him. It was clear that Richard had pretty much finished with me. Or maybe I'd been the one to do the finishing. Didn't matter. Either way, it was finished.

I felt utterly and suddenly drained.

Across the bay, smoke trailed like handwriting from the Dog Cottage chimney stack. They'd need plenty of fires to dry out that old place. I imagined mushroom carpets, all the floorboards carped and creaking, a thousand cobwebs on the ceiling. Paint and plaster falling from the walls in lumps. I bet they bought the place for a song, hoping to do it up. They hadn't wasted any time. A mound of rubbish had already accumulated outside the door. Through the binoculars, I could make out a roll of lino, dark with dirt. There was a stack of broken tiles, and what looked like old paint tins, and a red-stained electric hob, rusted into disuse. The man appeared at the door, carrying a roll of ratty brown carpet. He dumped it at the door, looked up, then turned back inside. My heart thumped one beat harder. For a moment, I saw him perfectly. Absolutely perfectly. The man. The stranger. Her father.

Even sitting there alone, I blushed red to my roots. I lowered the binoculars, had another sip of tea, thought a moment. He was in his forties or fifties. Medium height, medium build. And he was striking. Handsome, perhaps. No, scratch that. He was pure gorgeous. Really, really good-looking. Almost unnervingly so. Stunning. Weather-beaten. Dark eyes. A full head of dark hair. He had model good looks, his face carved from almost sensual lines. He'd cause quite the stir on the island, if he'd come here alone. There'd be a string of

spinsters queuing up to nab him. Andrea Simpson, she'd be there. And that dreadful Janet Campbell. I could just imagine her standing on the shore, waving a tray bake and yoo-hooing for the dinghy, fishing for an invite in. He'd have every Bancree spinster beating down his door. Poor man wouldn't know what hit him.

There was a flicker of movement on the islet. I jerked the glasses up, hoping to see him again, and banged my eyebrow on the binoculars. By the time I'd settled and focused, all I saw was the strange girl, turning back inside. It was only the briefest of glimpses. I wondered if she'd be in school. Even exuding that odd, skittish atmosphere, she'd probably be popular. With the boys, anyway.

I spied a little longer, but there was no more movement on Dog Rock, and nothing in the sea. No porpoises, no seals. Just gulls and gulls and gulls. It was turning into a glorious evening. I took my tea into my bedroom, and turned on the laptop. There was no internet reception. There was never internet reception. I only checked out of dumb optimism.

The falling sun made half my room glow golden. Books, stereo, a rack of CDs. Clothes bundled in a heap in one corner. There were band posters on the crooked walls, years out of date and suddenly foreign. At that moment, it was someone else's room. I lay back on the bed, stretched out, my arms half-open to grip the edges of the single mattress. The coolness in the sheets washed across me. Sun tumbled through the window on columns of dust, fragments of human skin. I looked at the ceiling and thought numbly of kissing Richard on the bed. This was where we'd lost our virginity. We lit candles. It was all right. It was something to do. It was a secret, something unique between us. And now he was gone, and it wasn't anything at all.

I was furious to find my eyes prickle hot with tears, and

bit them back, scrubbing my face with a sleeve. Standing up, I leaned in close to the mirror and studied my reflection. Too serious, no curves, too thin. Dull blonde hair. Romany, Slavic, gypsy, with almond-shaped eyes and broad, high cheeks. I dressed weird. I had no friends. I was a weirdo.

Pathetic, Flora.

I didn't need Richard. Or anyone else. Reaching over, I clicked again on the computer, refreshing the internet. Nothing. I clicked again. Nothing. Page broken. No connection. My phone had no signal and besides, there was no one I could call. I turned on the radio. Static. The hiss and fuzz of static, creeping down the frequencies. Scattered scraps of distant music rang in fragments of pop, hip-hop, classical. The murmur of voices could be talk show radio or walkers on the road outside. It all filtered in the same. It all blended in together. Nothing here worked the way it should.

The island was built of things that had been abandoned and left to waste: houses, boats and people. Especially people. People who would never get away. Stuck here for ever because that was all they knew.

That would never be me.

I didn't know how it would happen, but I was leaving, and soon. My time on the island was drawing to a close. The walls of the snowglobe were pushing in around me, and I was ready to break out, to crack the walls and run. I knew this like I knew the peat blood thrumming in my veins or the salt tracks cracking from the corners of my eyes.

3

I woke to the sound of fractured voices. The sun had dipped and almost gone, leaving my room a ghostly blue. Voices. I'd left the radio on quiet, and there was a German-sounding talk show fuzzing and crackling at low volume. The words sounded strange, as though the radio was under water. Or maybe it was me. I stretched, cricking my neck, crooked and hazy from the nap. Sleeping during the day always threw me wrong. I'd been asleep for less than an hour, but it had flattened me. I sat on the bed in the gloaming and waited for my brain to catch up. I swung my legs to the floor, and stood up to stretch. Something squelched. I looked down. Beside my bed, small patches of carpet pooled darker. I kneeled to investigate. The floor was sodden.

I prodded at the wet spots, looking around for an explanation. I checked the ceiling for a leak, but it was fine. Beside me, the distorted stereo burred in the half-dark. Maybe something had burst beneath the floorboards. I'd have to tell Ronny about it. The room was cool. I frowned to see the window open, when I could have sworn I'd left it shut. Outside, Still Bay glowed with dusk, the sky a violet curtain. The breeze blew sharp with the march of autumn. I closed the window, but even as I latched it shut, the radio burred with a sudden crash of static and I flinched, spooked at the surge in volume.

I turned the stupid thing off. With my room quiet, a

muted clatter drifted through the walls. Someone was home. As I moved for the door, my foot caught on something solid, and there was a dull clunk against the leg of the desk. My mug. I'd left my tea beside the bed. I must have knocked it over while dozing, and not realised. It was a weird splash. The damp spots looked like two kidney shapes, quite distinct, shaped the same and evenly spaced. I collected the cup and turned for the door.

In the kitchen, Ronny was making meatballs. Leaning over the worktop, he was wrist-deep in a plastic bowl, shaping mince and onions, parsley and garlic. The mixture escaped between his fingers in a grey paste. He had long hair and seldom shaved, which made him look a bit like a Viking, or a werewolf. Him and Mum had been together five years. I used to fight them both about that, but I grew out of it. They were just trying to get by. They were scared of being alone, just like everyone else. Ronny was a good guy. Plus he was drip-feeding me his 80s and 90s rock records, from AC/DC to ZZ Top. He worked hard at Clachnabhan, he loved his wife and baby, and he cared well enough for me. He had his shirtsleeves rolled high, his hair tied up in a little samurai topknot. His arms wriggled with muscles from raking barley.

'Hey, Ronny,' I said. He started at my voice. He looked tired.

'Hi, Flo. How's it going, poppet?'

I shrugged. 'All right. Richard's away tomorrow.'

'Aye, of course. You OK?'

'I think so,' I said. 'I'll miss him, but maybe it was reaching a finish anyway. We've been sitting out there for ages, not really talking. To be honest, I think he can't wait to get away.'

'Sounds like someone else I know.'

'Right enough.'

He smiled, blankly, shoulders hunched, hands in the bowl

of mince. It was rare to see him without a spark of laughter.

‘What’s the matter, old-timer?’

‘Ah, nothing,’ he said, feeling for the words. ‘Probably nothing. It’s just Dougie. I wish he’d turn up.’

‘He’ll be fine. He’ll be on the booze somewhere.’

Ronny shook his head.

‘We’ve called round all the bars, put up posters all over Tanno. It’s been more than a week, and no one’s seen him. We’re worried he might be in a ditch. Or that he fell into the water.’

Ronny sometimes worked with Doug MacLeod at the distillery. He was an odd-job man, equal parts cleaner, labourer and stevedore. He camped out in the woods over summer, and stayed in people’s outhouses during winter. He was also a drunkard, but the right sort for all that, soft as butter. Everyone had seen him, mid-afternoon bloated outside the Bull Hotel, or in one of the Tanno harbour bars. He’d sit on a bench outside the pub, a permanent flush to his face, hollering hellos and trying to light cigarettes. He was forty-something, and looked like he was sixty. Most nights he drank until he slid quietly to the floor. Ronny was right. It would be too easy for him to fall into the harbour on his stagger home. A heavy coat and work boots would take care of the rest, and that would be the end of Doug MacLeod.

‘He’s a daft old lad, but . . . well. We’d miss him.’

Ronny looked into his bowl of meat and onions. I didn’t know what to say.

‘It’ll be fine,’ was the best I could manage. ‘He’ll show up somewhere.’

Ronny paused. ‘Billy never did,’ he said, and that made me think again.

Bill Wright was another island name. He’d disappeared the previous winter, vanished overnight. Someone had called

round his house to give him a lift to work, and he wasn't to be found. The ashes were cold in the grate, the door wide open. The constabulary sent out a dog team and searched the woods and coast around his house, but that was the last anyone had seen of Billy. Even then, it was hard to be especially worried.

'Come on, though. Billy's a wanderer. He likes to walk, he likes to travel. It's just like him to up sticks and vanish for a while.'

'Aye. But he always said goodbye, and he always came home. And now, with Dougie too, it's getting to me.'

'You don't think it's the same thing?'

'Naw,' said Ronny. 'There's lads at the distillery saying as much, but it's only gossip. Sad, that's all.'

We stood and listened to the shoreline, listened to the pan lid clunking on the stove.

'Well. What's next on the CD list? I'm done with the last lot.'

'What did you think of Kyuss?'

I pulled a face. 'Bit monotonous for me. I preferred the Credence Clearwater lot.'

'You're an idiot.'

'Love you too.'

He grinned at me, but his smile was forced and brittle. Dougie MacLeod. Poor old Doug. He looked around the kitchen. He held up goeey hands.

'It's meatballs for tea,' he said.

4

Mum came home half an hour later, spilling bags of shopping. She was followed through the door by a hulking giant of a man. He carried a kit bag in one hand and a wriggling baby Jamie in the other arm, and all my melancholy vanished in a wink.

‘Uncle Anders!’ I shouted, and darted to the hallway. I put my arms around him, giving him a delighted hug. He dropped the kit bag, his hand settling on my shoulder like a blanket.

‘*Hej, Flora,*’ he boomed, crushing me into his stomach, and Jamie giggled as he grabbed for my hair.

‘I found this rascal wandering the streets in Tanno,’ said Mum, smiling through her tiredness. ‘Thought I’d better fetch him in for tea.’

‘Are you sure?’ I said, suspiciously, and patted his barrel stomach. ‘I don’t think he needs any more feeding.’

‘You cheeky bastard,’ growled Anders, then erupted into laughter. He grabbed Ronny’s outstretched hand, and hauled him into a bear hug.

Anders Tommasson was an engineer on an oil rig. He had been brought up in Denmark, but he’d been on the island longer than I’d been alive. When he wasn’t on the rigs, he lived alone on the north-east coast of Bancree. His was the last house on the island before the abandoned crofts. He and Ronny went back years. They’d worked on the fish farm when

they were younger men, before Ronny started with the distillery and Anders found money on the rigs. He was Jamie's godfather. Whenever he was home, the two would meet up for a drink in Tanno or in Tighna, and a grinning, swaying Anders would show up the next morning with Ronny passed out on his shoulder. On one occasion, they turned up three mornings later, having accidentally found themselves in Copenhagen. Ronny was in the doghouse for a month, but Mum had a real soft spot for Anders, and never stayed mad at them for long.

'How you doing, man?' grinned Ronny. 'We weren't expecting you for another couple of weeks.'

'I had to come home early,' said Anders, gravely, and his face fell. 'It is most urgent.'

'Why? What's going on?'

'Perhaps you will understand if I say . . . it is a matter of international importance.'

Ronny's eyes widened.

'You don't mean . . .?'

'I do. I do.'

Laughing, the two men embraced again. Anders thumped Ronny's back, making him cough.

'What on earth is going on?' said Mum.

'It's the football, Cath. He's come back for the game.'

'What game?'

'Scotland–Denmark. Kick-off Friday night.'

'Of course,' grinned Anders, 'I could not allow you to lose all alone. I should be there to make it much worse for you.'

'You wish. This is grand. Dancer. Pure dancer.'

'Never mind your football,' said Mum. 'Dance off to the bathroom and put Jamie through the tub.'

Chuckling, the two of them went to run the baby through his bath and bed routine. Jamie was ridiculously small in the

big man's arms, but Anders held him like a bluebird. Mum started setting the table. She looked shattered.

'I'll do that, Mum. You sit down.'

She hesitated, then sunk into a chair. Mum was assistant manager at the Co-op in Tanno. She worked the afternoon shift five days a week. Jamie stayed with my grandparents in Tighna while Mum was at the shop, then she picked him up on the way home. She'd only been back from maternity leave for a couple of months, and the work routine had hit her hard.

'You OK, Mum?'

'I suppose so, love. The delivery was late, as usual, which means I was late, as usual. We were lucky to catch the last ferry.'

I studied her. Mum had me when she was very young, the age I am now. I'd seen the photos of her pregnant, and she was like a girl. She was now in her mid-thirties, and that left seventeen years between me and Jamie. He was pudgy and smiley and thought everything in the world was great. And it probably was, for him. Mum said I was an awful baby. Jamie had proved a nice surprise. I felt more like his babysitter than his sister, most of the time, but it was good to have him in the family. Even with the late nights and early mornings, he'd made things easier in the house. Jamie was something we all had in common, a splash of blood shared amongst us.

Splashing resounded from the bathroom, and Jamie shrieked with delight. I lowered my voice.

'Ronny's really worried about Dougie.'

She softened. 'He's a crooked penny, is Doug. He'll turn up.'

'Aye, I know. I hope so. I'll get tea served up.'

We settled down to eat. Anders plonked a bottle of whisky on the table, and Ronny fetched cold beers from the fridge.

'If I'd known you were coming, I'd have cooked more.'

‘I am a growing lad,’ said Anders.
‘Aye, outwards,’ I muttered. He threw a pea at me.
‘Come along, children,’ warned my mother.
‘Sorry, Mum.’
‘Sorry, Cath.’
‘Hey,’ I said. ‘Did you know about the people on Dog
Rock?’
‘No.’
‘There’s folk moving into the cottage.’
‘You’re kidding?’
‘Really?’
‘Aye. We saw them moving in.’
‘So what were they like?’
‘There’s two of them. A father and a daughter. He looks
about late-forties, I guess, and she’s about my age. They turned
up in a van, and shipped all their stuff over in a blow-up din-
ghy. They had all their stuff in those boxes you get in offices.’
‘I thought that place would stay empty until the day it fell
over.’
‘It’s a mess.’
‘Would have been a good place for a still,’ lamented An-
ders.
‘They’ve been at it already. Chucking out the old stuff.’
Mum stood up from the kitchen table and crossed to the
window. She peered into the evening blues.
‘There’s a light on,’ she confirmed. ‘And a fire.’
‘Tell you what, though. He’s really good-looking,’ I said.
‘Flora! And with Richard barely gone,’ said Ronny, feign-
ing shock.
‘That’s really funny, Teenwolf. No, I was thinking more
about Andrea Simpson or that Campbell woman hanging
round.’
That gave them pause for thought.

'Lord. Imagine having Janet Campbell as a neighbour.'
'Come on. We don't know this new lot at all. They say better the devil you know.'

'Aye, well they never knew Janet Campbell.'

'I knew Janet Campbell,' said Anders, smugly.

'None of that in front of the kids, Tommasson.'

'Sorry, Cath.'

'Dog Cottage. Fancy that.'

'It'll have barely cost them pennies,' said Ronny. 'Still, it'll be nice if the girl's your age, Flo.'

I rolled my eyes. 'We're never back to this again?'

'No attitude, Miss,' said Mum. 'You can share the bus to school.'

'But what if I hate her?'

'Now, whyever would you hate her?'

'I'm just saying. There's no guarantee I'll like her. She might be a terrible person.'

'I suppose so,' said Ronny, then gestured helplessly at the kitchen window. 'But look around, Flo. Who else is there?'

'I've learned something today. I'd sooner be alone than stuck with someone because they're all that's left. No more easy options for me.'

'Only teenagers actually want to be alone. Trust me,' said Mum.

'I'm eighteen next year,' I protested.

'That's exactly what I'm talking about.'

'Come on, Mum. I've always looked after myself.'

'You're very independent, love. And you know your own mind. We just wish you'd spend more time with folk your own age.'

'Like I have a choice,' I said. 'Back to school tomorrow.'

Mum and Ronny exchanged glances.

'Maybe you'll try a little harder with other kids this year,'

said Ronny.

‘Aye, and maybe they’ll try harder with me,’ I glowered, and hunkered down into my tea.

I didn’t want any friends my own age. With Richard gone, the last thing I needed was something else chaining me to the island.

I didn’t speak much for the rest of the meal. My folks and Anders talked a wee while about what might bring people to Bancree, but couldn’t find that many reasons. They could only think of reasons to leave.

‘Hey,’ said Ronny, softly. ‘You heard about Dougie?’

‘I heard,’ said Anders. ‘The police called me.’

‘What on earth for?’ asked Mum.

‘Dougie was staying at my house sometimes.’

‘When he had nowhere else to go,’ chimed in Ronny.

‘My place is empty so much. It is not good to be always without a fire in the hearth. It was important to have him there. A house needs a life inside it. And now he is gone. I wanted to see this for myself.’

‘That’s really why you’re back, isn’t it?’ said Ronny.

‘Yes, my friend. They have looked for him, but I must look also.’

‘I’ll help.’

‘Then we will look together. But we must watch the game also. And we must drink to absent friends.’

‘Not here you don’t,’ yelled Mum. ‘Last time you two started howling at four in the morning, and the baby’s only just gone down.’

‘It was a full moon.’

‘It was awful. Go on. Bugger off to the Bull, and come in quietly. And you, Ronald McLoughlin, mind you’re working tomorrow.’

Ronny and Anders grinned across the table, then headed

for the door.

Mum went to read her book, and I did the dishes. The water in the sink ran brown with peat, and my hands disappeared into the murk at the bottom of the basin.

I couldn't stop thinking about Richard and his escape. It was like fumbling at a splinter, but only ever pushing it deeper. I imagined myself on the bus south, the train, my head resting against the window, feeling engines rumble through the glass. New people, new places. Freedom.

The splinter ground in deeper.

It should have been me.

I went to my room.

I felt restless, both wired and exhausted by my afternoon nap. I was uneasy about the new girl, and Richard had left me sad, and angry. Reading didn't help. I was sick of my book, and irritated by everything I knew. The ceiling was too low, the lamplight too invasive. I was sick of my room, sick of my clothes. I wanted something different.

The air felt thick and strange, the evening edgy and unsettled. Part of it was the emptiness of the last night before school, but there was something else, too, something almost tangible. Dusk was growing into night, dark and ribbed with cloud. Scanning through radio channels, I found a rock'n'roll show on Radio 2. The damp spots on the carpet were drying out already. I wandered to the window and tried to relax, losing myself in sunset's shadows.

About now, Richard would be stretched out in an armchair, watching a film or playing cards with his folks. I let my mind wander to his house, his room – his bed – but couldn't place him. There was only laughter in downstairs rooms, and cold sheets on an empty mattress. It was sad to think of how much I might miss him. It was sadder still to think that I might not.

The Atlantic shifted black against a band of pale horizon. A slice of moon shimmered on the crests of scattered waves, turning the sea indigo dark in contrast. There were lights in the windows of Dog Cottage. Being nosy, I trained my binoculars on the islet. Magnified so many times, I caught the tiny windows glowing in the dark. I watched for a while, hating myself for spying, but couldn't see anyone. Bored, I scanned idly to one side, sweeping from Dog Rock out towards the sea, then jerked with shock. I doubled back, training the binoculars again on the islet. There was something in the inky sea. Peering, eyes screwed tight, I scrutinised the waves splashing at Dog Rock. There was definitely something there. A dark shape, black against the blue, bobbing in the surf. Or was it only waves, slopping on the shore? Ducks, feeding late into dusk? The shapes bobbed further from the islet. Not ducks. It was something swimming. It must have been an otter, or a seal, but I'd never seen them out so late. Little wonder when they're so hard to spot, dark on dark on dark.

The clouds drew back, allowing more of the thin moonlight to filter down. I gasped and jammed the binoculars into my sockets. For a fraction of second, the shape in the water was a head. The focus wheel slipped and the image blurred into total blackness. I hastily refocused and looked again, desperate to find the shape in the water. There was nothing but the sea. The shape had gone.

A head. A face. The old man of the sea.

I'd thought it was a head. A human head. I quickly panned across to look at the cottage, but a curtain had been pulled across the window, leaving a dark and muted orange. The strangers were inside, and now the dark sea swelled empty. There was nothing bobbing in the water.

I must have been wrong. It was ridiculous. The moonlight was too dim to see anything for sure, and no one would swim

so late at night. It would be stupidly cold and lethally daft. It must have been a seal.

I watched through the window until the last rind of light on the horizon dimmed to black. Waves breathed on the shore. Mad gulls made cat calls in the night, and I looked out onto a magnified nothing.



THE
LONGEST
NIGHT

A NOVEL

ANDRIA
WILLIAMS

The LONGEST NIGHT

PAUL

IDAHO FALLS

January 3, 1961

*P*AUL WAS SO LOST IN THOUGHT THAT NIGHT, DRIVING, THAT IT TOOK him a moment to notice the ambulance heading toward him on the horizon. It arced up over the road, a starry flare against the black sky until it passed him, bright and soundless. A minute later, two fire trucks and the chief's station wagon followed, traveling in a tight pack, their lights whirling yellow and white and red.

Paul's heart tightened into a fist. He tried to tell himself that the trucks could mean nothing or anything, that they could be headed to any of the reactors at the testing station, but that was bullshit and he knew it. It was bullshit just like the supervisors had been feeding them for a year: that all the CR-1's glitches were minor, that when the reactor shut down you just started it up again, when it got too hot you just did what you had to do to cool it off: *Use your heads, boys, and make the damn thing work. Keep it alive until that new reactor core arrives in spring. Then this thing'll be running so smooth, you'll be sorry you ever complained.*

So they'd waited through fall and early winter, holding out for spring.

But here it was, the coldest night in an Idaho January, seventeen below zero, and every vehicle in the fire department fleet had just blown past, headed due east for the CR-1.

Paul pulled onto the shoulder and turned his car to follow them, tires grinding on the gravel. He didn't know what he'd find when he got there. Please let them be lucky, please let it just be a false alarm so they could all endure a nice dressing-down from the fire chief, who'd had it up to here with the reactor's problems. But it was the night of the restart, the riskiest operation they performed, when they took the reactor from stone-cold nothing to full power. He sent a silent thought to the boys on shift. He thought of his wife, Nat, too, the way he'd left her at home, the awful things he'd said. If he didn't get a chance to apologize, this would be how she'd remember him, hard and cruel, driving off with a backseat full of clothing. His car bumped onto the dirt road toward the reactor and his thoughts became scrambled by fear. Here were the swirling lights of all the vehicles, the steam pumping in a white cloud into the air, Nat watching him drive away, his daughters in their beds, the fire chief waving his arms at Paul's car and calling something—and he felt the sinking sensation that he was too late for all of it, for Nat, for the boys, for his daughters, for everyone, and it was just as he had always feared: When the time came it would happen before he knew it, it would happen without him there; despite everything he had always done to be ready, he would be too late.

I

COUPE DE VILLE

NAT

June 1959

*N*AT WAS THE FIRST ONE OUT OF THE CAR. SHE STEPPED INTO the dirt parking lot, her low-heeled shoes printing chevrons into the red-dish dust. Ahead of them the lake shimmered blue, dancing with sun. They were somewhere in northern Utah, one day out from their final destination in Idaho Falls, and not a moment too soon.

For the past two and a half weeks they'd been driving cross-country: Virginia to Idaho in the '55 DeSoto Fireflite her husband, Paul, had bought used a couple of years before. Paul was starting his next army tour in Idaho Falls as an operator for a small nuclear reactor. You moved for Uncle Sam, he told Nat, but you still found your own transportation. So, with their two young daughters packed into the backseat they headed west, sleeping in hotels and farmhouses and even, on two regrettable nights, in the car. Nat was beginning to feel that they might be vagabonds forever, nomads wandering the rough western states, eating crackers by the side of the road in a hot wind, loitering at the edge of decent farmers' land, scrambling after barn kittens, urinating in gas stations.

Paul opened his driver's side door and stepped out. He bent to help

Liddie squeeze past the seat, a damp spot showing at the small of his back. Liddie was one and a half, and she hit the ground running, hustling toward the beach with a toddler's steady, impressive lack of hesitation or common sense, belly leading the way in pink cotton overalls. Samantha, who was three, scampered out through the passenger seat, her rumpled pale-blue dress flapping around her legs. Nat followed them, shading her eyes to the sparkle of the water and the glow of pent-up energy that seemed to rise from their daughters' small bodies like incandescence.

The round crystalline lake before them was held between mountains as if cupped in a palm. The spring air smelled sweet, and Nat was filled with a sudden stirring of hope.

She smiled up at Paul. "We just might make it," she said.

Paul's brown eyes were weary, a little bloodshot. He scratched his head, two brisk strokes over his close army haircut. "Let's hope so," he said. Then he smiled back. "How you holding up?"

"Good," she said. They trailed after the girls, Paul rolling up his shirtsleeves, Nat's shoes dangling from her fingers.

There was a faint, distant splash up the curve, followed by muted applause and whistles, and Nat turned her head. She spied a rock outcropping that jutted into the water and was surprised to see the silhouettes of people atop it. A moment later one of them sprang off the end of the rock, sailed downward in a gentle parabola, and entered the water with only the slightest sound.

"Rock divers," Nat said as the head bobbed up. She checked the girls' location—still a good distance from the water's edge, their twinlike heads of chocolate-brown hair mingling as they bent to stack rocks—and turned back to the jumpers. The dazzling water, the leap and burst were so familiar that her heart hurt. She had grown up in San Diego; swimming and diving were the things she'd loved. Some of her strongest memories were of leaping off the Sunset Cliffs in Point Loma, watching the white froth swirl before plunging in.

Paul was watching her from the corner of his eye.

"I'm going in," she said.

"Going in where?" he asked, the suspicion in his voice showing he knew her well enough.

“Up there. I want to jump in.”

His forehead crimped with uneasiness, and a pulse of guilt ran through her. “That’s crazy,” he said. “You’ll be wet on the drive.”

“With this air? I’ll dry in half a minute. Here, hold my shoes.” Before he could argue she handed them to him and jogged through the sinking, rocky sand, pebbles coating her calves and flinging up around her knees.

“You don’t know those people,” Paul called.

She turned and waved. “It’s okay! Be back in a second.”

The girls hopped and cheered beside their father as she poked her way up the rock. Even from a distance she could see Paul’s disapproval, the tenseness of his shoulders and straight line of his mouth. For that one moment she didn’t care.

When she reached the top she saw the jumpers, two men and two women. They lounged on the side of the rock now, sun-warmed and serene. They seemed about Nat’s age, twenty-four, and she wondered at their lives, at what had brought them to this rock midday, free from the responsibilities that regulated her own hours: children and meals and cleaning and ironing. She had been like them once, only a few years ago, and for a moment she paused as if watching grainy silent footage of herself.

“Hi,” one of the men called, and Nat came to her senses and said hello. Now that she was this close to them she felt a little self-conscious, and she said, “The water just looks so alluring.” As soon as she said “alluring” she regretted its dark, slightly affected tone and wished she had used a more regular word instead.

“It’s wonderful,” said a woman, plucking at the tight-fitting skirt of her red swimsuit. She looked up at Nat, cocking an eyebrow. “But you’re going in like that?”

“I guess so,” Nat said, smiling. She stepped to the edge and curled her toes. Her dress hung around her knees. This was no wild ocean but a placid, glass-smooth lake, and the water below her was clear and blue. She pointed her arms, felt the tendons behind her knees hollow and tense, her back stretch long to the tips of her fingers, and dived.

She fell through three long heart-throat seconds—one-a-thousand, two-a-thousand, three-a-thousand—before piercing the water. She could

feel that it wasn't a perfect entry, feet tipped a little too far back over her head, but she didn't care. The sheer, pure cold sucked the air from her body and she surfaced, stifling a scream. Then she burst into laughter, paddling back toward her family. She hadn't done something like that in years. How could anyone not love this sensation? It slapped you in the face and shouted *You're alive!*

"Nice!" a man called above her.

Her toes reached sand and she waded toward shore. As she caught sight of Paul and the girls waiting for her, however, the excitement began to dwindle. She suddenly felt silly. Her dress suctioned squishily around her; she was forced to take small, awkward steps. By the time she got back to them Paul was fuming, her shoes clenched in his hands.

"Why did you do that?" he cried.

She squeezed out her hair, avoiding his eyes. "For fun," she said, her voice small.

Paul shook his head. "You didn't know what was under the water there. What if you dived down and hit something and never came up, right here in front of your little girls?"

"I knew it would be fine," she said. And while she'd never admit it to Paul, the relief of not striking anything—that moment of plunging into the water and feeling herself go down, down, unimpeded, the cold exploding past her face and neck and body until her own air pulled her up again—was part of the fun. It *had* to be a little scary to count for anything.

She remembered that swimming was a different thing for him than it was for her; he'd grown up poor and never learned to swim until he got to boot camp, practicing every night, he'd said, in a pond near Fort Dix. This was one of the few concrete details she had of his youth, and it was a curious, poignant image: thin teenage Paul easing himself into the shallow dark, thrashing quietly along the shoreline until he could glide two strokes alone, three, four. Even then he passed the entrance test by the skin of his teeth, just enough to fill a pair of boots destined for Korea. It was no wonder, really, that the mild risks Nat liked to take scared him: the long swims to clear her head, cliff jumping, diving. But he acted as if she were doing it just to spite him, when in fact it had nothing to do with him at all. Which maybe, from his perspective, was even worse.

What if you never came up? She always came up.

He scooped their daughters into each arm and strode ahead, and she followed, feeling contrite, wishing she hadn't been so defiant and so stupid. And yet she knew it wasn't just worry on his part: Having an audience had made it worse. He'd had to sit by and watch strangers cheer her on for something he'd not wanted her to do, as if their approval was more important than his concern.

When she got back to the car he didn't speak to her. Her dry shoes waited on her seat, side by side.

PAUL

A DAY LATER, AFTER TWO AND A HALF WEEKS ON THE ROAD, Paul and Nat and their daughters made it to Idaho Falls, where they'd been assigned to a small yellow house in a neighborhood near downtown. There was no base housing, so military personnel lived scattered among civilians. Paul began reactor training the day after they arrived, while Nat stayed behind in the empty house with the girls bouncing off the walls. He felt bad about leaving her with so much work, though slightly relieved to get out of the house, even if starting the new job made him nervous.

It took another week for their boxes to arrive, all their belongings jumbled into weird combinations. Each day when Paul got home from work, it seemed that another item or two had been put in its proper place—towels appearing in a cabinet that had, when he'd left that morning, been bare, the blender suddenly standing on the countertop—but this was moving at a slower pace than he'd expected. He tried to be patient. He knew Nat was busy with the girls.

He had three weeks of in-class training and observation, then his first week of work on the reactor itself. The CR-1 was as small and simple as everyone said, a reactor that could be run by just three enlisted men. They worked in shifts, and Paul's first shift had been the overnight with two other guys: a lead man, Franks, and a young enlisted named Webb,

who was as new as Paul was. They sweated on a hot reactor floor that churned and groaned with steam, then took breaks outside in a world that felt quieter than the dawn of time. The desert at night looked endless in every direction, pitch-black at ground level with stars overhead, suspended in swaths of nebulous cream.

Now, having finished his training and his first week on the reactor, Paul stepped out into the cool morning air, breathing in the tang of sagebrush and the steamy bitterness of coffee in its paper cup. The modest promise of the weekend sat before him, two days without a lick of work. He liked thinking about it even as the sweat on his forehead began to dry from the last shift. He wedged an unlit cigarette between his lips, patted his pocket for his Zippo. Any minute now the blue government bus would pick him up for the fifty-mile ride back into town, but he couldn't yet see it on the horizon. Behind him, the CR-1 pumped clouds into the quiet sky, living its vigorous, inanimate life; ahead of him, stretched somewhere across nine hundred square miles of desert, were the thirty or so other reactors at the testing station. He saw a glint of light off a couple of them, but had never visited and did not know their crewmen. All of them were bigger than his own reactor, busier, more prestigious.

The CR-1 was the prototype for compact, portable units the army was building in the Arctic Circle, run by just two or three men. Its appearance was underwhelming: It looked like a silo. It was three stories tall, with smooth, windowless, shiny steel walls, and if it hadn't been built on testing station land, no one would have thought a nuclear reactor was housed inside. This was, from a strategic standpoint, a plus: The reactors modeled on its design would be small, cheap, easy-to-build units that could be assembled on-the-spot across the Arctic, where American soldiers would wait, able to hit pay dirt pretty much anywhere in Russia if the Soviets did anything stupid.

"Does it make you feel bad?" Nat had asked on the drive to Idaho, in a moment of reflection. "All those missiles pointed at the Russians, and none of them has ever done anything to us?"

The question had silenced him for a moment. It was just like Nat to think about the other side: sweet, and also impractical. He could still see her concerned brown eyes, the wrinkle in her brow when she'd asked.

Nat, who'd almost never left San Diego, a place so beautiful and floral that it hardly seemed real; Nat, whose skin was permanently divided into tan and white parts from all the teenage hours she'd spent on the beach, who was smart and funny but as apolitical as a wedding or a waterfall: The thought of their American missiles must have saddened her, or she wouldn't have put the question to Paul. This rankled him a bit because it felt like a judgment, but it also filled him with a contradictory little swish of love for her when the memory came back to him later at work.

He rarely thought about *the Soviets*. There was plenty of rhetoric going around about them: tough talk, blustery threats. He figured most Russians were probably fine and it was their government that caused problems. Starving its own people, letting the economy go to hell. It wasn't his job to analyze such things. His job was simply to do his job: to walk onto a reactor floor and keep the machine running, keep the feedwater valves pumping and the rod drive seal from leaking and the pressure from getting too high or too low.

This testing station land, they'd learned in reactor school, had once been populated by Indians, then by the Mormons who built Idaho Falls, and was later used as the Minidoka internment camp for Japanese Americans during the war. After that it spent several years as an artillery proving ground for all branches of the military, with explosives of every kind blasted across the scrub. Sometimes the operators caught Mormon kids sneaking over the chain-link fence on a dare, hunting for the six-inch slugs left from weapons trials.

Paul alternated between the steaming welcome of his coffee and the brisk lung burn of the cigarette, thought of Nat home without him, sleeping on the floor because they still didn't have a damn bed. The cross-country move and the start of his new job hadn't made for an easy time. He felt they'd just performed some marathon stunt, like climbing Mount Everest together, only to roll down the other side and land in a dusty pile of their own belongings. His new career as a nuclear operator, after eight often dull and frustrating years in petroleum supply, was supposed to offer all manner of benefits: more prestige, pay bonuses, endless opportunities. So far most of these had not materialized, and he certainly didn't feel that he and Nat were growing closer. He had no idea if his

great personal gamble would work, and, finally in Idaho with reactor school behind him and his young family in tow, no going back, did the gravity of what he'd risked wash over him.

DUST ON THE HORIZON caught Paul's eye, but it wasn't the slow plume the government bus always made; it was a lower, faster-traveling cloud, and as it got closer he saw it was pulled by a flashy cream-colored car. The car was the only eye-catching thing on the whole barren desert. It looked almost like a mirage the way it gleamed, speeding along the flat highway.

Behind Paul the door to the reactor building opened and his shift leader, Specialist Franks, stepped out. He stood beside Paul and lit his own cigarette, watching the approaching car from beneath heavy eyebrows.

"Who's that?" Paul asked, pointing with his cigarette.

Franks looked surprised. "You haven't met Master Sergeant Richards? He's the day-shift supervisor."

"I've only worked the night shift," Paul said. The car grew louder now as it came closer, its engine a steady, throaty rumble. *This* was their Master Sergeant, this man in the unexpectedly beautiful car? Paul had been told that Richards, who supervised the day shift, worked next door to them in the Admin building but spent most of his time drinking in his office. Supervisors were notorious for boozing their days away on remote assignments like the CR-1; to be stuck in a leadership position on this tour was considered something of a punishment.

But the car was a showstopper, a pearly Cadillac Coupe de Ville, '57 or '58. It pulled up in front of the chain-link gate, front-loaded and pristine as a palomino. Didn't seem like Richards was feeling *too* sorry for himself.

Paul said, "I thought we were all supposed to ride the bus."

"We are," said Franks. "But that does not deter Sergeant Richards from driving his own car when he damn well pleases. He's not shy about it, either, as you can see."

"No kidding."

Franks strode over to let the car in the gate. Paul tried not to betray too much curiosity as Richards parked and stepped out, wagging his khaki cap down onto his head. He had assertive blue eyes and early gray-hair that gave him an air of authority beyond his rank.

When Richards reached them, Paul and Franks stood a little straighter, echoing one after the other, “Good morning, Master Sergeant,” “Master Sergeant.”

“Morning,” Richards said, looking up at the steam that pumped from the reactor into the chilly morning air. “How was the night, fellows? Will I go in there and find a logbook that agrees with me?”

“Yes, Sergeant. Nothing out of the ordinary,” said Franks.

“Glad to hear it. Where’s the young guy?”

“Webb? Latrine, I guess.”

As if on cue, the door opened and Specialist Webb, the last of their three-man crew, flew out. He was a tall, jointy, young-looking fellow with a missing tooth on one side that hollowed his cheek in. He spotted Richards and pulled up crisply. “Good morning, Master Sergeant.”

“That john on fire, son? You came out of there like a bat out of hell.”

“No, Sergeant. It wasn’t on fire, Sergeant. I thought I’d missed the bus.”

Richards chuckled. “Well, don’t get your knickers in a twist about it.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Say, Collier,” Richards said with a smirk, “why don’t you come inside with me? We’ve never had our little welcome-aboard chat.”

Paul hesitated. There was the matter of the bus: He could see it on the horizon now, a blue dot wending its way toward them. It was eight A.M. and another one wouldn’t be by until the end of the next shift, eight hours away. Of course the master sergeant knew this. But it was their first meeting, and Paul didn’t think he had much choice other than to say “Yes, Sergeant” and follow Richards into the administration building.

The Admin building seemed an even lonelier place to work than the reactor itself; it was a long, low wooden portable left over from WWII, with tall, narrow windows. Inside, a hallway divided two rows of thin-

walled offices, five on each side. Richards's rank and name had been typed onto a small manila square and tacked to a door on the right, which he pushed open to reveal a modest desk piled with endless disheveled papers. Behind the desk was a file cabinet and a dusty American flag that sagged slightly along the back wall. Richards stepped behind the desk and sat down on a small, creaky black folding chair. He linked his fingers behind his head and leaned back a little, watching Paul, who settled into an identical chair opposite.

"So, we finally get a chance to talk," Richards said, as if he'd been pursuing Paul unsuccessfully for days. "What do you think of this place? The CR-1, is it like you expected?"

"Just about," Paul said. "Things are going fine. Thank you for asking."

"Good. And how's your family? Your wife like it here?"

"She seems to."

"Excellent. You've got to keep your wife happy, you know."

Paul nodded uncertainly. On Richards's desk he spotted a framed photo of an elegant red-haired woman holding a child. With the woman's curled hair, pearl earrings, and soft, cultivated smile it could have been a picture cut from a magazine, but the toddler on her lap wore the unfocused expression and irregular eyebrows of a normal, non-movie-star child. "Your family?" Paul asked, pointing.

Richards flashed his self-regarding, deep-dimpled smile. "So I'm told."

"It's a nice photo."

"Thank you." The sergeant stretched in his chair. "So, do you go home and brag to your wife that you work on the smallest reactor the army's got?"

"I don't really mind it," Paul said, unsure why his wife, whom Richards had never met, kept coming up. The CR-1's size didn't bother him. He'd rather work in a quiet building than in one of the big-name operations on-site, with all the lab men and scientists around, asking the operators for coffee and treating them like janitors.

Richards leaned forward. "*I* wouldn't mind a touch more prestige

around here, I'll tell you that." His arm snaked into a desk drawer and he pulled out two tumblers and a bottle of bourbon, which he poured neat, passing one to Paul with a grin that was somehow both friendly and challenging. "What is it you like to do, Collier? Do you ski? The skiing's amazing around here."

"I've never been skiing," Paul admitted.

"Never have—" Richards swatted his knee, breathless with disbelief. "Why, that's something. Well, do you fly-fish?"

"I've—I've fished. I don't fly-fish."

"What are you into? Cars? Sports?"

Paul stared at him, drawing a blank, suddenly horrified—nothing. He was into nothing. What was there to be into? He worked, he went home, he fixed things and sat with his wife while she listened to the radio. He'd never had much time or money to spare. The awareness of this seemed to come crashing down upon himself and Richards at the same time.

"What are you, Collier? Some kind of bumpkin?" Richards laughed, baring his teeth. He held up a hand. "No, no. Don't worry about it."

"I just—"

"Never mind. You're a quiet, studious one, I could tell the moment I saw you." He glanced away as if he'd already lost interest: Paul's poverty of leisure was not compelling.

Paul shifted in his seat and looked again at the woman in the photo on Richards's desk. Her expression seemed almost condescending to him now.

Richards sucked on his drink, bored; then a thought came to him and he leaned forward. "Well, listen," he said, almost brightening. "We have a certain way of doing things around here—you've probably noticed."

"All right," Paul said, relieved by the change of topic though he wasn't quite sure what Richards was talking about.

"Deke Harbaugh—you'll meet him, he's our lead man from Combustion Engineering," Richards said. "He's a civilian, but he understands where we're coming from better than the other pricks they've got up there. Pardon me." Richards raised a hand again and grinned. "Anyway, Harbaugh's on our side when things come up."

Paul absorbed this, wondering: *What comes up?*

“What we try to do around here,” Richards said, “is keep things close, keep things army. I like to say that the buck stops here. We’re *operators*.” He made eye contact to check that Paul was following. “If there’s an . . . irregularity, a concern, you can bring it to me before you even write it in the log. It’s a can-do attitude kind of thing. If we fix it before it hits paper, all the better. Otherwise, we’re always having to go to the Combustion Engineering guys, asking permission for every last thing, like teenage babysitters.”

Paul nodded. This was not how he’d been trained; in reactor school they were taught to document any occurrence, large or small, to the point that it seemed overdone. But Richards was Paul’s new boss, and Paul had found it was best to listen awhile before you talked, so he did.

“Excellent,” said Richards, as if Paul had agreed to something complex. “Just a can-do culture around here. I could tell you were exactly the right kind of guy for this.”

Paul wanted to ask what *exactly the right kind of guy for this* meant but decided to take the praise at face value. So he stood; they shook. Paul hoped Richards would decide to head home around midday, as his reputation suggested he liked to do, and offer Paul a ride to compensate for making him miss the bus. Maybe Richards would even use him as an excuse to leave early—*I made this poor Joe stay late, so I’d better get him on home now*.

But if Richards had such a plan, he didn’t mention it. “Collier, you go on and have a good day now,” he said. “Close that door for me, will you?” He tossed his feet onto the desk, stretched his chair back so that it creaked, and closed his eyes. Paul hesitated, clicked shut the door.

He’d encountered master sergeants like Richards before and knew his type: men who silvered into maturity, enjoying the flirtations of women and the subordination of men, who remained athletic in that lazy way where, despite the small potbelly nudging the bottom of their brass-buttoned shirts, they could still trounce you in horseshoes or twenty-one at a division barbeque and laugh heartily about it. These were not men Paul generally liked.

He wandered into the lounge and settled onto the small, hard couch, pulling his knees up; might as well make himself comfortable. He wondered if it were admirable that he'd refrained from mentioning the missed bus, or if he'd just been a patsy. Probably a little of both.

HE MUST HAVE DOZED, because the next thing he knew he heard a soft noise in the parking lot outside: the distinct sound of a classy car clearing its throat.

He got up and went to the window. His eyes widened when he realized it was Richards's car leaving without him. Before Paul could even get to the door, he heard the propulsion of tires against gravel.

"What the hell," he cried. He jogged into the parking lot, waving his hands above his head. "Master Sergeant!"

There was no way Richards could hear him; the car was through the gate now, heading for the highway.

Surely Richards would stop. *Surely* he'd remember that he'd stranded Paul fifty miles from home in the desert, and turn back. Paul called out again, even gave a pathetic little jump, hoping he'd be spotted in the rearview mirror. But the car glided down the road, shiny as a pearl in the afternoon sun. Richards was headed home to relaxation and family and comfy slippers, leaving Paul outside the goddamn reactor in his uniform.

Do not chase your boss's car down the road. You are not going to act desperate.

He shuffled back toward the building. Was this some kind of power play? Was Richards drunk, did he just not give a shit, what? Nat was going to ask why Paul was eight hours late, but if he told her this sad little tale she'd pepper him with all sorts of further questions. It would be better just to keep it to himself, but the thought made him feel like a lonely fool. He kicked the doorframe and stalked back inside to wait for the bus, to let Richards's dust settle on the ground and rocks, which, if nothing else, seemed better than standing there and letting it fall on him.

BACK IN THE LOUNGE he paced, agitated, humiliated almost out of proportion. Being made to stay eight extra hours for a ten-minute meeting seemed an infuriating absence of consideration, or an act of outright hostility. Richards had shown no respect in assuming Paul would stay, and even less in leaving him there, fifty miles from home with no ride.

He was too steamed up to sit still. Richards's smug questions dogged him: *What are you into? Skiing? Fly-fishing? I knew you were exactly the right kind of guy for this.* Whether it was logical or not he felt that Richards had somehow seen right through him, deduced in minutes that he was a man who could be dismissed, no repercussions.

Paul was used to being snubbed; he was from people with no money and learned early on that this made him easy to brush aside. All the tokens and symbols he used to armor himself—his uniform, operator's badge, wedding ring—meant nothing to Sergeant Richards, who blew them off in an instant and made Paul feel groveling and worthless. He didn't want to be angry now, didn't want to knock around hostile, pessimistic thoughts for the next few hours, but he had never found a way to fight that train of thought once he got on it.

He had grown up in a rural Maine cabin as quiet as a deep snow, punctuated by outbursts of inexplicable and embarrassing violence. More than once he could recall standing flat against the log wall, breathing shallowly as if he could avoid being noticed while his father, drunk, swished past in an itchy rage like some creature from the zoo. When his pa did address Paul it was mockingly, making Paul stammer and squirm, squelching his hate. His mother was not much better. She'd taken to drink as far back as Paul could remember, and one of his earliest memories was of sitting by her bed, playing with her limp fingers as she snored.

The lack of control people showed repelled him. They brought their trouble upon themselves, one person after another, and it was impossible to feel sorry for them. He wasn't surprised when his mother sought relief in bars and men; he wasn't shocked, either, when she was brought

home one cold morning on a wooden sled, her eyes punched in, and left in the shed for the ground to thaw and the serviceberries to bloom.

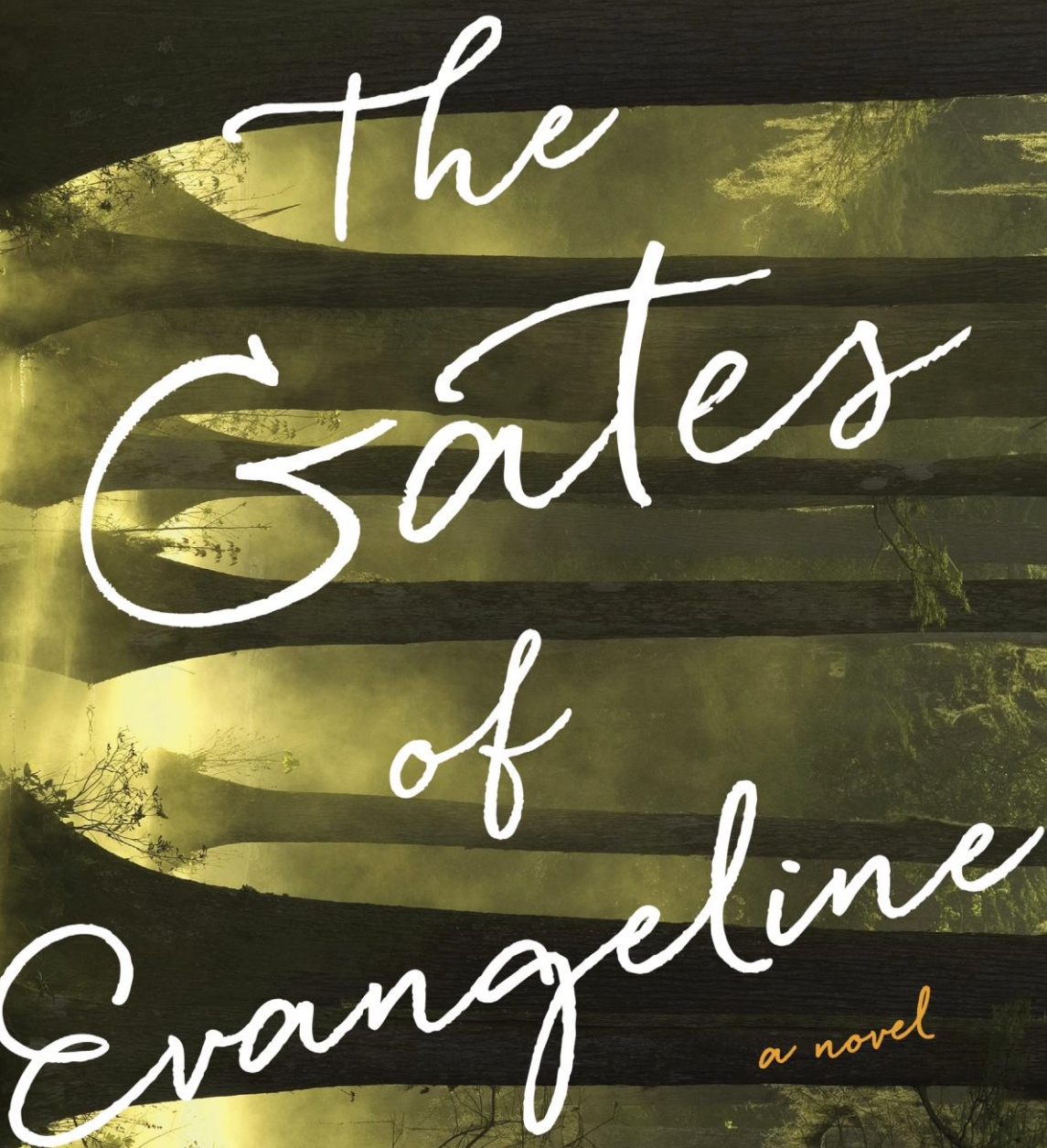
At sixteen he stole his father's boots, hitchhiked to Portland, and enlisted in the army. When he first joined up he trusted everyone, all these people he'd dreamed about for years who were not his family, who'd decided to live upstanding and useful lives. These, finally, were his people! But he learned, to his disappointment, that they were often just as flawed as his own family had been; that even with all the military did to raise them up, they settled back into their character defects like a dog curling into a round bed.

That first spring away from home, still in boot camp, he'd received news of another nonsurprise: His father had been discovered by hunters a few miles from home, having fallen through the ice on one of his weaving walks back from town. Paul was an orphan, and he was relieved.

It turned out that his parents' deaths neither cured nor worsened things. Paul embarked on a program of self-control and betterment. In his locker he taped a Robert E. Lee quote: "*I do not trust a man to control others who cannot control himself.*" Amazingly, as the years went by, he won the job, the girl, and an amount of respect that seemed neither stingy nor extravagant: It seemed just right. But like many hard-forced things his veneer was delicate, and he found that he became easily panicked. He'd fought so hard for what he had that he could imagine countless ways it might be taken away.

Which brought him back to Sergeant Richards, this day, this room. This disastrous blowing-off, this bitter, stupid stranding. Maybe Richards was just an asshole who would've left anyone at the reactor; maybe he had simply stayed in his office, gotten mildly drunk and let Paul slip his mind easily as any other minor chore. But Paul could not stop it from driving him crazy. There was something satisfying about the way an obsession fired up every spot on his brain all at once: pain, pleasure, anger, desire, defiance. Fuck everyone who had treated him like he was nothing; fuck Richards for treating him like nothing now. He would revel in this small torment, his mind churning cycles of concession and resistance, anger and acquiescence until he wore himself out.

He knew better than to fight it. There was only one thing that could soothe him and that would be walking in his front door, calmed by the golden kitchen light like a violent, rogue archangel. Nat would smile at him, knowing exactly who he was, the man he'd made himself to be, good provider and husband, father of the two little girls who would be skipping toward him, kissing him with their little crumb-covered faces: All this goodness he'd made for himself out of nothing, scaring his old self right back from where it came.



The
Gates
of
Evangeline

a novel

Hester Young

1.

The sky is a dismal gray when I finally go to remove my son's car seat. It's raining, a cold autumn rain that feels both cliché and appropriate for a moment I've spent more than three months avoiding. I stand by my Prius, peering through the rear window at the empty booster seat, wondering for the hundredth time about the thin coating of mystery grit Keegan always left behind. And then I do it.

I don't give myself time to think, just proceed, quickly and efficiently. Loosen the straps. Dig into the cushions of the backseat and unhook the metal latches. One tug, and the car seat lands with a thunk on my driveway.

They never end, all these little ways you have to say good-bye. I turn my face toward the drizzle.

The summer has gone, slipped away without my noticing it, and somehow October is here, flaunting her furious reds and yellows. Squinting, I take in the houses of my neighborhood, their wholesome front yards: trim lawns, beds of waterlogged chrysanthemums, a couple pumpkins on doorsteps. And leaves, of course, everywhere, blazing and brilliant, melting into the slick streets, clogging gutters.

I put my hand to my pocket, feel my keys and wallet. Blink. Try to

remember what I'm doing, where I planned to go. Try not to think about the car seat lying behind me in the driveway.

I inhale deeply, wet earth and decaying leaves. It's Sunday, I remind myself. I'm going to see Grandma. I climb into the driver's seat and turn on the car, but it all feels wrong. I give myself a minute, wait to see if the anxiety will pass, before conceding that I've lost this battle. I can't drive around town with that gaping void in the backseat. Not today.

Baby steps. One thing at a time.

I exit the car abruptly and head to the garage. Find my bike. It's Sunday, and I am going to see Grandma. I will stick to the plan. I will hold it together.

Breathe, I tell myself. Breathe.

"GOOD GOD, CHARLOTTE, YOU'RE SOAKING." Standing in the doorway of her modest apartment, my grandmother looks uncharacteristically rattled.

"I biked."

Once, Grandma would have been impatient with my running around in the rain, inviting sickness. But life is no longer ordinary. My grandmother's granite eyes register concern, compassion even, as her gnarled hand waves me inside. I step into the foyer, dripping. Wet strings of hair cling to my forehead and neck.

Grandma peels off my jacket without comment. I can feel her watching, assessing, setting aside her own sadness to make space for mine. It's a look I first saw when I was fourteen, back when my father died and she took me in. A look that has made an unfortunate resurgence in recent months.

"There's a bathrobe somewhere," Grandma says. "Want a drink? Something hot?"

We are not a demonstrative pair. We are stoic New Englanders who maintain what my ex-husband sarcastically termed “the proper Yankee distance.” Feelings, in the Cates family, are more private than politics or religion. Hot tea, a mug of cocoa—this is the kind of warmth my grandmother has to offer.

“I’m okay, Grandma. I just want to sit down.” To describe myself as “okay” is, of course, a brazen lie. My face tells the story: cracked lips, eyelids puffy from sudden crying spells, skin pale and sickly after a summer spent hidden from the sun.

It’s obvious that I am *not* okay, but Grandma says nothing. She puts a hand on my shoulder and gently ushers me into the living room. I assume my usual post on the creaky old rocker while she arranges herself in a high-backed wooden chair. My grandmother was a beautiful woman in her day, and though she’s lost most of her vanity with age, pride in her good posture has endured.

The living room is, as always, immaculate. Grandma hates knickknacks. Her bookshelf consists largely of reference materials, although the bottom shelf holds a few guilty pleasures: some Stephen King novels, *Cold Crimes* magazine (my first steady writing gig), and old issues of *Sophisticate*, from before my promotions, back when I was a staff writer. Grandma remains a loyal reader of *Sophisticate*, although she isn’t exactly the target demographic for articles like “What You Need to Know About Pre-nups” and “Preparing Your Baby for an Ivy League Future.”

If my home is one of managed chaos, Grandma’s is one of enforced order. Even my son understood this, and obediently organized his books, games, and art supplies before we left here every Sunday.

“You didn’t have to come, Charlie,” Grandma murmurs. “I know it’s Sunday, but you didn’t have to come.”

“How else would I see you?” My grandmother gets around well for a woman her age, but she no longer drives, and expecting her to navi-

gate the bus system is a little much. “Besides, it’s probably good for me to get out.”

“Did you leave your bike outside?” she asks. “It might rust.”

I shrug. “It was Eric’s bike.”

My grandmother’s eyes narrow at the mention of my ex-husband. “Has he called you? Even once, to see how you’re doing?”

There’s venom in her words. She hates Eric with a passion I can no longer muster for his hipster glasses and ever-receding hairline. *The Spermator*, my friend Rae took to calling him after the divorce, aptly summarizing his one lasting contribution to my life.

“Eric and I have nothing to talk about,” I say. “I told him not to call.” I don’t bring up Melissa, his new wife, but my grandmother cannot contain herself.

“I’ll never understand what he sees in that woman.”

My friends made similar comments after the funeral. They all knew she was the Other Woman. I suppose they expected more: good looks, big boobs, animal prints, the kind of trashiness that might have predictably turned Eric’s head. But Melissa, like Eric, was unremarkable.

“He did you a favor, really,” my grandmother declares. “You don’t waste caviar on a man who wants corn dogs. She’s exactly what he deserves.”

My whole family was outraged when Eric arrived at our son’s funeral with Melissa in tow. *He has to rub her face in it*, I overheard my aunt Suzie say, and maybe that was true. Maybe, in some childish way, Eric has something to prove. I didn’t care about the wife. I was angry that he showed up at all. Eric had visited Keegan only once since he and Melissa moved to Chicago. What right did he have to fatherly grief?

And still, Melissa comforted him. Held him as if the loss were his. No, I wanted to tell them both, *that’s MY son*.

“You know she works in waste management,” I inform Grandma, suddenly ready to take what cheap comfort I can.

“That explains why she loves trash,” Grandma mutters.

I manage a wobbly smile. We are Yankees. These are her love words.

TWO HOURS AT MY GRANDMOTHER’S house have, more or less, the intended effect. When it becomes clear that I don’t want to talk, she fills the silence. She tells me about the small fire her elderly, somewhat senile neighbor started. She comments on a recent article in *Sophisticate*, an exposé on Botox that she reacts indignantly to. It all feels familiar. Not normal, exactly, but familiar. A life I vaguely recognize as my own.

I’m picking myself up, preparing for the return to my empty, silent house, when Grandma speaks. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

It’s the closest she has come to acknowledging tragedy, and it chokes me up. I swallow and shake my head. There is nothing she, or anyone else, can do.

“I wanted to ask you . . .” She gathers herself up and I can see her steeling herself, preparing to ask an unpleasant question. “The church across the street is collecting donations. They’re looking for children’s items, and of course, I have all these toys around . . .”

It is an entirely reasonable thing for her to ask, and yet I resent it all the same.

“Did you want to hang on to them?” Grandma asks, sensing resistance in my silence. “There’s no hurry.”

“No, no, donate them.” I know the right words, even if I don’t truly feel them. “I’m sure some kid could find a use for all that stuff.”

My grandmother nods and collects my wet coat. I’m halfway out the door and headed for the elevator when she calls after me. “Charlotte?”

I turn.

“Do you dream about him?”

It’s an odd question.

“I never dream,” I tell her. “Ever. Do *you* dream about him?”

She shakes her head. “Sometimes I wish I did.” She blows me a kiss, a gesture I find unexpectedly tender. “Be careful riding home.”

THAT NIGHT, sprawled across the couch in the dark, I wait for my sleeping pills to kick in. Even before I lost Keegan, I needed pills. Now I need more. *Charlie’s only off switch*, Eric used to joke, and it’s true.

My body goes slack. My mind swirls. I’m on my way out.

Mom. From behind me, I swear I can hear Keegan’s voice. *Mommy, are you listening?*

I try to sit up, but Ambien is pulling me under, filling my head with nothing.

You have to listen, Mommy. It’s time to start listening.

The last thing I’m aware of is the sweet smell of his shampoo, his curls tickling my face. Then the drugs take me away.

2.

When my friend Rae shows up with an eggplant dish her husband made, I know exactly what play she's running. It's a move I've grown accustomed to. The food gets her inside, where she guilts me into eating *just a little, so I can tell Mason you tried it*. Then, as I dutifully pick at her husband's cooking, she tackles chores around my house.

In the beginning, her little check-ins drove me nuts. I wasn't hungry. I didn't *want* my laundry done. Dishes were beside the point. Now I realize the neighborly love behind the visits, understand the time Rae and Mason set aside each week for me, and I'm grateful—though they still drive me nuts.

Today, I don't even have time to retrieve a spoon before she's attacking my kitchen, poking a broom into the dark crevices beneath the fridge and dishwasher. I'm in no mood for it.

"Would you *stop* cleaning, damn it? The house is fine."

She sets the broom down slowly. Sighs. Sucks in her cheeks and runs a fingernail up and down her long, brown throat. "Just trying to take something off your plate." Her gaze slides around my kitchen: its

sticky counters, my ever-growing mound of mail, the overflowing garbage.

I know that she wants to help, wants to bring light or at least some Pine Sol into my cave of misery, but Rae doesn't know this mess like I do. She sees smudgy sliding glass doors, and I see my son's fingerprints. She sees an old Cheerio, and I see a breakfast when he sat with me, fidgeting, complaining, dawdling.

"So what did Mason make today?" I ask, peeling back the tinfoil on her casserole dish. "It looks good."

"Eggplant rollatini."

I have an obligatory spoonful. "Tell him I like it," I say, although it tastes like nothing to me, the way everything does now. "Did Zoey help? Is she still talking about being a chef?"

"Nah, she's back to ballerina again." Rae fiddles with one of her springy Afro curls and then changes the subject, as she usually does these days when I ask about her daughter. "So, Charlie, honey," she begins, "I have to ask. Are you seeing somebody?"

I'm confused. "You mean a boyfriend?"

"I mean a therapist. A grief counselor."

I wave a hand dismissively. "I have pills, I'm fine."

Rae squints at me. "Pills are good. But maybe you need to *talk* to someone, too. You've got a lot to sort through. Most of us can't do that alone."

The thought of explaining myself to someone, giving name to my feelings—it's exhausting. "I'll figure it out."

"I know you will," she says, softening. "You're the strongest person I know. Maybe *too* strong. It's okay to be a blubbering mess for a while."

"For a while?" I give a shaky laugh. "I don't think I'll ever stop."

"Oh, sweetie." Rae crosses the room and envelops me in the kind of rib-crushing hug my grandmother and I could never exchange. "This is your low. This is your rock bottom. I don't know when and I don't

know how, but you'll get through this. And you'll kick life in the balls just as hard as it's kicked you. Remember when you found out Eric was cheating?"

The question, I assume, is rhetorical. It was not the sort of moment you'd forget. Eric took me to a restaurant for a so-called date night and, shortly after our appetizers arrived, began his dramatic confession. *Charlie*, he said, gazing into the distance like a character on a soap opera, *I did something terrible*.

Two years after the fact, it still makes my blood boil. "He wanted me to make a scene," I tell Rae. "That freaking drama queen."

"Oh, I'd have punched him," Rae says. "But you didn't. You held it together. Because you're a tough-ass bitch."

I shrug. My anger that day was with myself just as much as Eric. Because I should have known, should have seen the affair coming. Our marriage had been on the rocks since Keegan's birth, and I never mistook Eric for a model of moral virtue. I just didn't think he'd get the opportunity.

We've had problems for a long time, Eric said, delivering a speech that was clearly rehearsed. *But we can get past this. For Keegan. Our son needs us*.

He expected tears, a choice between two women, but I remained calm, determined not to follow the script. *No*, I corrected him, through a mouthful of crab, *our son needs me. I want primary custody. And if you do anything to fight me on this—anything at all—I will have you paying child support out your ass for the next sixteen years. This can be hard, or this can be easy*.

In the end, he made it easy. For me, but mostly for himself.

I want to tell Rae that I'm not tough, just dumb to have married an asshole like Eric in the first place, but I can't regret Eric. Because I could never regret my son.

"Listen," Rae says, "I better go. You hang in there, Charlie-girl. One day at a time."

She doesn't tell me that she's going to pick up Zoey, but it's Thursday. Zoey has dance on Thursdays. I haven't forgotten. As I watch her drive away, I wonder if our friendship can survive this. Can I forgive Rae? She has somewhere to go. She has a child waiting.

THAT EVENING I get a call from Bianca, my art director at *Sophisticate*. I mute the TV, some program I wasn't really watching about ancient Egyptians, and answer my cell, grateful for the distraction of work.

"Hon, how *are* you?" I'm used to Bianca enthusing over beautiful layouts and agonizing over the font and color of text. Discussing my personal life is another story.

"I'm fine," I say cautiously. "You?"

"Good, good." Bianca doesn't linger on niceties. "So listen . . . I wanted you to be the first to know." She takes a deep breath. "Dunhaven's looking to sell the mag."

The TV casts eerie blue shadows across the wall of my living room. I stare at the images of mummies and ancient tombs, trying to absorb her words. Bianca and I have never exactly been a fan of our publisher, but a sale could mean a massive, catastrophic shakeup at work. This is a big deal, a very big deal, and yet I can't quite summon the energy to get riled up.

"Huh," I say.

My response is not what Bianca anticipated. "Look," she says, "I'm not supposed to say anything, but Longview Media's already made an offer. It could be accepted as early as next week."

"You think they'll restructure?" I ask.

"I can guarantee it," she says. "I know you've been working a lot from home these last few months, but that's not gonna fly with Longview. I'm telling you this as a friend, Charlie. Starting next week,

you make it to the office *every day*, okay? Because heads are going to roll. And you know how bad Tina wants your job.”

“Okay,” I tell her, and in some distant way I do appreciate that she’s looking out for me. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

After our call, I sit staring at the phone, wondering why I’m not more concerned about the job I spent most of my adult life chasing. *Twelve years*, I realize in disbelief. I began working for the magazine at twenty-six. Once I determined my stint at *Cold Crimes* magazine was going nowhere, I started freelancing for *Sophisticate* until they offered me a staff writer position. *Sophisticate* was a complete 180 from writing about old murders and advances in forensics, but it was a steady job and paycheck. Now, many years and several promotions later, I am managing editor and I have an amazing career. Right?

An amazing career and almost no social life. Hardly any family. And no son.

I wander into the bathroom, in search of my Ambien. Kick aside a heap of mildewed towels, ignoring the smell. Pry the lid off my pill bottle.

Would losing my job really be a bad thing? For years, I’ve dedicated myself to a magazine that promises today’s affluent professional woman a life of happiness and ease. But where is *my* happiness? *My* ease?

I slip myself an extra sleeping pill, the last of the bunch. I don’t want to think anymore, don’t want to remember what I’ve lost. Don’t want to ask myself where I would be without my job now, too.

Ding, ding, ding.

I’m jolted from my medicated fog by the doorbell. I sit up on the couch, head pounding, stomach lurching. An Ambien hangover. That’s what happens when you double the recommended dose.

The doorbell rings again, three times in quick succession. It's a sound I haven't heard in a while. Zoey. Her "secret" ring for Keegan.

In the last few months, Rae has kept her daughter's visits to a minimum, and I don't blame her. I'm still fragile, unprepared to deal with Zoey's relentless questions. How do you explain to a kindergartener that her playmate is dead when you yourself can't fully grasp the implications of that word? I consider ignoring the doorbell altogether, but I've known Zoey most of her life. I love her to pieces. She is the only child I have left in my life.

I open the front door and blink away the morning sunshine. Zoey's face tilts up toward me; she's a tiny, even more gorgeous version of Rae. Smooth coffee skin, strictly managed curls. A fashionista in training. Rae stands behind her, hesitant. I have no doubt that she's coached her daughter thoroughly, but Zoey's only five, still a bit of a wild card.

"Hi-hi!" Zoey studies me. "Are you sick?"

"Zoey." Rae's tone is a warning.

"I came to show you my new outfit." She holds out the skirt of a lime-green ensemble and spins around for me.

I kneel down to her level. "It's beautiful."

"She wanted to say hello," Rae murmurs. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, I'm glad you came by." I glance at the living room clock. "Looks like I overslept."

"We'll let you get started on your day." Rae puts a hand on Zoey's shoulder, attempting to steer her child away. "We need to go too, baby. Time for school."

Zoey glances back at me. "Hey, wanna come to my dance show? It's gonna be really good."

Her mother obviously didn't anticipate the invite. "Charlie's really busy. Maybe another time."

Is she protecting me, I wonder, or shielding Zoey? "Are you having a recital, Zo?" I ask. Even before I lost Keegan, I envied Rae for her

daughter, the princess dresses, purple tutus, and glitter paint. I've haven't been to either of Zoey's recitals since she started lessons.

Zoey beams at my interest. "Yeah, we're having a show. And I get a costume. It's *really* pretty."

"Wow," I say. "I'd love to go."

Zoey hugs my knees.

"Are you sure?" Rae looks dubious, like she doesn't think I can hold myself together.

"Of course."

"The recital is Sunday afternoon. I could pick you up at three."

I can tell that she's still not convinced.

"If Sunday gets here and you don't feel like it, no biggie."

I attack Zoey with tickle fingers, ignoring her mother. Zoey squeals in delight.

"I'll see you on Sunday, sweetie. I can't wait."

"Yaaay!" She does a celebratory dance, and her joy is so innocent and pure, I think my heart will break.

IN THE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS BEFORE Zoey's recital, I become strangely agoraphobic. The idea of leaving the house fills me with panic. Can I really smile and applaud as I watch other people's children on display? Fueled by my anxiety, I stop lazing around the house and start cleaning. It's time. Objects are not the same as memories, I remind myself. My son is more to me than a Ninja Turtle backpack and a hallway littered with Matchbox cars.

I put away all of Keegan's toys, stacking puzzles and games on shelves, packing blocks and Legos away in boxes. I make his bed, wash and fold his clothes, alphabetize his books. These items mean nothing now to anyone but me. I am the only one who remembers the seven thousand times we read *Moo, Baa, La La La!* and the games of Candy

Land he shamelessly cheated at. There are no new memories to be made.

When I am through, the room is neat and impersonal. Blue walls, green trim, a *Sesame Street* bedspread. It looks like an IKEA display, a room waiting to be filled by some anonymous little boy, not my little boy, but someone else's.

Afterward, I turn on the shower, step in with all my clothes on, and sit down. I cry. Cleaning has never felt this bad.

In these two days, I stop taking sleeping pills. I don't want to check out, don't want to numb myself. I need to feel. Sleep, without pharmaceutical aid, has always been elusive; now it's an impossibility. At night, I leave the TV on, letting the enthusiastic voices of infomercials keep me company. I clean out the refrigerator, attack the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush. I cringe with self-loathing as I go through past issues of *Sophisticate*, the articles on diets and plastic surgery. I think, *At least I never had a daughter to screw up*. A cold comfort indeed.

ON SUNDAY, I sit on the couch and wait. This is it. My day to look normal, to fake it as best I can. Sunlight filters weakly through the curtains. I hear birds. Days and nights without sleep finally take their toll, and before I know it, I'm gone.

Birds, first. Crows squabbling, the light receding, then red. Red flowing, rippling, shimmering. I dip my hand in it and watch fabric spill from my fingers. Someone giggles. I peel back layers of red and Zoey emerges, sequins falling from her hair. *I'm not ready*, she sings to me, *I'm not ready for the end*. Suddenly she's dancing. Spinning, twirling, leaving me nauseous with all her circles. *I'm not ready*, she sings, *I'm not ready for the end*. I reach for her, trying to steady her, but a curtain descends. Not my green curtains, but black curtains, crushing in their weight. Now Zoey is gone, swallowed in their black folds, screaming.

Zoey! I exclaim. *Zoey!*

My ankle, she whimpers from beneath the black. *My ankle*.

I awake to Rae shaking me. “Charlie? It’s time to go. You still wanna come?”

Head throbbing, I try to remember where I am. “Where’s Zoey? Is she okay?”

“Mason drove her over early.”

The sun has shifted, leaving the room to the afternoon’s advancing shadows. “What about her ankle? Is it broken?”

“Zoey? She’s fine, hon. There’s nothing wrong with her ankle.” Rae leans against the arm of the couch, trying not to stare at her watch. “Are *you* okay? You look like you could use some more sleep.”

“Was I sleeping?”

“I think you were dreaming.”

“Oh.” I sit up and rub my face, though I’m more uneasy than tired. “Let’s go, then.”

THE RECITAL IS BEING HELD at the local elementary school, in a musty auditorium with a drooping flag. When I look at the program, I realize Zoey’s class is just one of eight performing. As the youngest group, they go first, and then appear again in the finale.

Mason sees my look of consternation and tries to reassure me. “It goes fast,” he promises.

I like Rae’s husband, but I know bullshit when I hear it.

The first number goes as expected. The curtain opens, and Zoey and her compatriots scuttle out in red sequined leotards. Dazed by the floodlights, the children form two haphazard lines and perform a dance so jerky and out of sync they look like marionettes.

Once Zoey leaves the stage, my mind wanders. I watch restless audience members move in and out of their seats, count the number

of glowing cell phones set to record. I pick at the chipped varnish on my wooden seat, trying to tune out the rustling jackets and programs. The performances drag on until finally we reach the last number, some wretched pop song about a girl resisting her boyfriend's attempts to dump her. *Boy, you got to believe that / I ain't ready for you to leave yet*, she croons.

The routine begins with older girls while the little ones line up in the wings. Rae touches my shoulder and points to Zoey, who peeks out from behind the curtain, oblivious to the fact that everyone can see her.

"Uh-oh," Rae whispers. "She's going to miss her cue!"

And it does look that way. Lips moving like she's singing, Zoey twirls and grabs a handful of curtain. She leaps up, trying to sail through the air like she's Tarzan on a vine, and—

Collapse.

A mess of black fabric crashes down, engulfing her.

Over the tinny speakers, the music reaches a dreadful crescendo. *I'm not ready*, the singer moans, *I'm not ready for the end*.

I see Rae leap to her feet. I see a woman hurry out from backstage. I see Mason push his way past unyielding laps and knees and footwear, trying to get to the stage.

The music continues, its chorus familiar and horrible, as confused dancers wonder whether or not to carry on with the show: *I'm not ready, I'm not ready for the end*. Someone has pulled Zoey from the curtain, a competent-looking man. She's crying. He talks to her patiently, touches her leg, locating the source of her pain. She points, and I feel a dark thrill of recognition at this final, inexorable detail.

Because, of course, it's her ankle.

3.

That night, I try to drown out the noise in my head with more noise. I turn up the radio, run the garbage disposal, vacuum. None of this does anything to shake my sense of foreboding, but I prefer a pounding anxiety to quiet dread. At some point after eleven, Rae appears in my living room. I switch off the vacuum, startled to see her at this hour.

“I knocked,” she says. “I don’t think you could hear me.” She looks around the newly tidy house, eyebrows raised. “Wow. This place looks good.”

“How’s Zoey?”

Rae rolls her eyes. “We just got back from our whole emergency room odyssey. She’ll be fine.” She slumps down onto the couch, her thigh landing on Keegan’s Popsicle stain from last June. “I saw your light was on, so I figured I’d stop by. Glad you made it home.”

“I took a taxi. It wasn’t a big deal. So . . . did Zoey get crutches?”

She nods. “She loves them. We practically had to wrestle her into bed.” She leans back against the couch, peering at me sideways. “It was broken, by the way. Her ankle.”

“I guess that’s lucky. It could’ve been a lot worse.” I don’t say how much worse, and Rae isn’t thinking of the son I lost, not now.

“It’s weird, isn’t it? How you dreamed it?” She watches me closely.

I’ve been a queasy bundle of nerves the last few hours, turning it over in my mind, but I don’t want her to know that. Rae is completely superstitious. She believes in *everything*. Ghosts and past lives and tarot cards—all that crap. I don’t want her to believe in *this*.

“It was just a dream, Rae. I don’t think it means anything.”

“You woke up from your nap asking if Zoey’s ankle was broken,” Rae persists. “That totally means something!”

“You’re right,” I say with an eye roll. “I’m basically one step short of Nostradamus. I’ll give you a call when I start dreaming about lottery numbers, okay?”

“You get to work on that, I’m not even playing!” She stretches her legs, as if amused by my skepticism. “I better get to bed. Thanks for coming to Zoey’s recital, even if it did turn out crazy.”

I follow her outside, watching from my driveway to see that she arrives safely at her house. It’s a cold night, the kind of cold that feels clean when you inhale it. I cross my arms, shivering. Rae waves from the brick walkway of her yard as Mason opens the front door for her. She’s made it. She’s safe.

I step inside and lock the door behind me. I don’t usually keep things from Rae, don’t want to add to the distance between us now, but I can’t tell her everything. Because it wasn’t just the ankle. It was the red sequins, the black curtain. That awful song. I don’t know what this means, not yet, and so I stuff it somewhere deep with all the other things I’m trying not to think about and I vacuum. I dust. Wash the kitchen floor and make beds.

Sometime after four a.m., I survey my house and discover that for the first time in the five years I’ve owned it, my home is clean. Nothing-left-to-do clean. Bianca was right. It’s time to return to work.

. . .

I WORK with a lot of women. There's a handful of gay men, and presumably a straight guy buried somewhere in the ranks, but for the most part, *Sophisticate* runs on a very specific type of estrogen: bitchy, hypereducated New Yorker.

In my twenties, I loved it. That was who I aspired to be. By thirty, I had perfected the wry smile, the raised eyebrow, the long and jaded sigh. I could argue about which bagel joint on the Upper West Side was best, pay eight dollars for half an avocado without batting an eye. I jogged through Central Park and thought I was communing with nature. The city wore on me, though. One day in a restaurant I saw my reflection and thought, *I never smile. I smirk.*

I was only too ready to escape when I met Eric, my knight in shining argyle, my ticket out. We dated just five months before marrying. Three months later, I was pregnant. Stamford, Connecticut, isn't as ritzy as Greenwich or Darien, but we found a cozy three-bedroom just a few miles from my grandmother's assisted-living facility. Even after Eric left, I loved my home. I'd watch Keegan digging in the sandbox or splashing in his kiddie pool and my heart would rise up in my chest with happiness—until the morning's long commute back into Manhattan.

On this dreary Monday, I walk the dozen blocks from Grand Central, feeling too claustrophobic for the tightly packed bodies of the subway. Between hulking skyscrapers, I catch fragments of sky and swirling clouds. Hair whipping around my face, I fight my way through wind tunnels, kick away blowing trash. None of the other pedestrians look at me, and I wonder how many people I've passed, how many faces I've ignored over the years.

I'm doing the best impression that I can of Charlie Before, but the whole side-swept-bangs-to-hide-the-grow-out thing isn't working this morning and my trousers are a bit wrinkled from the month they

spent dangling from a shower rod. Truth be told, I have my doubts about *Sophisticate*. After all that I've been through, can I really muster up any enthusiasm for a magazine that is, if I'm being honest, an up-market, slightly less sex-obsessed version of *Cosmo*? We actually ran a "How Oral Sex Can Save Your Marriage" article in September's issue.

At work, only a few people mill about. It's eight forty-five. I'm early, and deadline for the printer was last week, which tends to quell the chaos for a few days. Having spent most of my waking hours in this office the last decade, I've always appreciated the chic and modern décor, but this morning the white, windowless walls and glaring chrome remind me of a hospital. I head into the break room in search of a coffee jolt and discover Lauren, my editorial assistant, pouring yesterday's sludge down the sink.

"Charlie!" Her eyes are two wide circles of black eyeliner. "Didn't know you were coming in today."

"I should be in the office full-time now." I rifle through the cabinet for a clean filter. "You look cute. I like the haircut."

"Thanks . . ." Lauren sports a new choppy bob and a pair of Miu Miu heels that, given her salary, I can't figure out how she affords. Once, we would have dished at length about the hair and shoes, but I seem to have lost my taste for superficial chitchat.

"Did the photos ever come in for that piece on Tahitian weddings?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's done. Tina dealt with everything, don't worry." She watches as I measure out coffee grounds. "I guess you heard Longview Media is buying the mag."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. So nothing pressing I need to handle?" I'm both relieved and disappointed.

"Nah." She pauses for a minute, thinking it over. "You did get a phone call on Friday, Isaac Somebody from Meyers Rowe. He said you know him."

“Meyers Rowe, the publishing house? Must be Isaac Cohen.” I’m not often in touch with my old editor from *Cold Crimes* magazine, but perhaps the true-crime division of Meyers Rowe has a book they want us to review. Isaac would never hesitate to call in a favor. “Well, thanks, Lauren. Sounds like you’ve got everything under control.” I flip on the coffee maker, figuring our conversation is done, but Lauren hasn’t moved.

She clears her throat. “It’s good to see you around. We’ve all been thinking about you.” She takes a step closer to me, and I’m afraid for a moment that she might hug me. “If you need anything . . .”

“I’ll ask.”

Deciding that I’m best left alone, Lauren makes a clumsy exit, but her sympathy hangs in the air like too much perfume. I feel my throat constricting, my eyes watering. I grope around for a cup. Coffee is the answer, I tell myself. Burning, acrid office coffee will get me through this day.

I SPEND THE MORNING sifting through e-mail, avoiding encounters with my coworkers. Though I leave the door to my office shut, a few people stop by to say hi. I keep things professional, remind them semi-politely of the work I have to catch up on. I immerse myself in query letters, correspondence with our various freelance writers, questions and complaints from our production editor. Somewhere in all the mess I see an e-mail from Isaac Cohen.

Hi Charlotte,

How are you faring amongst all the lipstick and designer handbags? Hope all is well. Just heard through the grapevine that Longview Media purchased your mag. Those assholes are brutal. They’ll cut the best and brightest if it saves them a dime, so watch your back. If

things get ugly and you need an escape hatch, give me a call. I have a job you might be interested in.

Take care,
Isaac Cohen
Senior Editor
Meyers Rowe, True Crime Division

A job offer. Unexpected, but well-timed. I feel a surge of gratitude toward Isaac for thinking of me. I haven't seen him in years, but I remember him well from our days at *Cold Crimes*. He's a few years older than I am. Lanky, hairy, incredibly strange, but an excellent editor. He didn't seem like the type to assign stories about crimes; he looked like he'd be out there committing them. I wrote several pieces for him about individual cold cases. Although I found the work engaging, the magazine was small-scale, the pay low, with no hope of advancement. I'm not surprised that Isaac has continued working in the crime genre all this time—though Meyers Rowe is a major publishing house and a marked improvement from *Cold Crimes*—but I'm not sure I have the appropriate experience for a job in that division.

Oh, what the hell, I tell myself. It's an opportunity, even if it's a long shot. A chance to get out of here.

I find a phone number on the bottom of his e-mail signature and grab a pen to jot it down. Somehow in the process, I knock over my cup of pens and pencils. As I'm crawling around under the desk to retrieve them, I hear people in the doorway of my office.

"It doesn't look like she's at her desk."

"Oh, well. I'll just ask Tina."

I try to place the voices. One of them sounds like Lauren. I can't identify the other. A normal person would stand up and address her visitors, but I don't. I remain on my hands and knees, not moving.

“I think Tina will be our go-to girl indefinitely.” Lauren’s voice, I’m sure now. She lowers it as she prepares to gossip. “When new management steps in, Charlie’s gone, you watch. Did you see her this morning?”

“No, how’d she seem?”

“Out of it. Poor thing.” The voices move closer and one of them drops something on my desk. “It’s weird,” Lauren continues, oblivious to the fact that I am just a few feet away. “You know how she is, all business, all the time. I thought she’d be pissed about Tina taking over, but I don’t think she’s even noticed.”

“I don’t blame her. If something happened to my kid . . . what did Bianca say it was, a brain aneurysm?”

“Yeah. Her son was at preschool, got a headache, and was gone before she even made it to the hospital.”

“That’s crazy.” Their voices are moving farther away now. “My uncle had a brain aneurysm, but he’s, like, sixty. And it didn’t kill him. I didn’t think kids got those.”

“They don’t. It’s like a one-in-a-million thing.”

My head begins to swim. I stay under the desk for a long time, face pressed to my knees. I can’t work here anymore. Clinging to the familiar only highlights how much everything has changed. How much *I* have changed.

When I’ve calmed myself down, I call Isaac Cohen and schedule a meeting for Wednesday morning. Whatever job he has, I’ll take.

THAT NIGHT, IN BED, I try to numb my mind with television. This proves surprisingly difficult, since all the local stations are running an alert for a missing child. *Nine-year-old Hannah Ramirez has been missing since three o’ clock, when she left Bonner Elementary School. Distraught family members say that Hannah often made the ten-minute walk home alone and*

had been instructed never to talk to strangers. Authorities ask anyone with information about Hannah to call this toll-free number.

I switch through three channels before I finally rid myself of Hannah's smiling fourth-grade photo. Something bad has happened to her, and I don't want to think about the treacherous world I live in. A world where a little girl vanishes one afternoon, and one must presume the worst. A world where blood spills into the brain of a little boy, and without warning, he dies.

Your son suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage . . . incredibly rare in children . . . probably present from birth . . . not your fault, just very, very bad luck.

I settle for game show reruns, hours of artificial smiles and encouraging applause, until I feel myself slipping away. Sleep, or something like it. I fight my fatigue at first, but really, it's a pleasant sensation, better than the heaviness of pills. A nice, warm, floating feeling.

Then it's like waking, everything becoming sharper.

Night. I'm standing by an old, inground swimming pool. No one's actually been swimming here in a while, from the look of it; the surface is covered in rotting leaves. Two diving boards, one short and one tall, extend over the fetid water. Across from the diving boards, a sagging house awaits repair. I hear a dripping sound from the shadows behind me, and my breath catches. I'm not alone.

There's a girl curled up in a broken lawn chair, watching me.

Hi, she says.

I don't know this girl, but I've seen her face before, the long dark hair, crooked bangs, and liquid black eyes.

Hannah?

She nods. The dripping sound continues in steady rhythm.

Everyone's looking for you. They all think you're missing.

I know.

I try to understand.

Are you hiding?

She shakes her head, and I see that she has small, heart-shaped earrings. A headband with a pink flower made of ribbon.

I want to go home, she says, but I can't.

Is that your house?

That's Laci's house. Hannah rises from the chair and joins me. *Laci's my friend from school. We're in the same class.*

The dripping noise unnerves me. I glance back at the broken chair and see a puddle forming underneath, though it's not raining. *You went to see Laci after school?*

She was home sick. I was bringing her the homework, but nobody opened the door. So I went back here where you can see her room.

It makes sense. I look at the upstairs windows of the house. In daylight, Hannah's friend could see us plainly, if she bothered to look down.

She was watching TV, Hannah says. I waved at her. To tell her about the homework.

Did you give it to her?

She shakes her head. *It's still in my bag.* She points to the tall diving board. For the first time, I notice a child's backpack at the bottom of the ladder. My skin begins to prickle.

She didn't see me, Hannah explains, so I climbed up on the high board to get taller.

The dripping sound accelerates, as if echoing my heartbeat. I look down and find myself standing in water. Is it me? Am I the one dripping?

Come on. She takes a few steps back toward the shadows, expecting me to follow.

But something doesn't feel right. My hair. There's something in my hair. I touch my head, and a slimy trail of decomposing leaves trickles down.

Hannah? The water at my feet is rising now, swelling to my knees,

and I know that she's doing this somehow, taking me someplace I don't want to go. *What's happening?* I demand. *I want to leave. Make it stop.*

She reaches for my arm, drawing me in deeper, and her fingers melt like ice when they meet my skin.

Shhh, she whispers. *We're going swimming.*



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