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What Will You
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Excerpt Sampler

SPRING 2016

What Will You Read Next?

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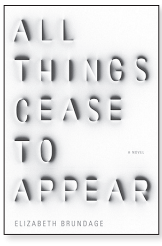

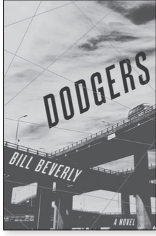

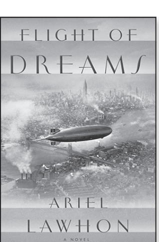

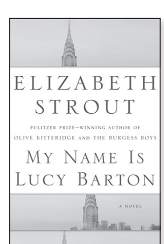

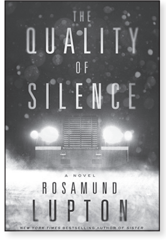

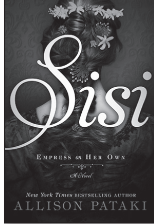

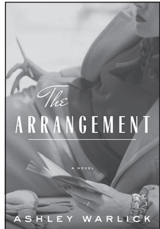

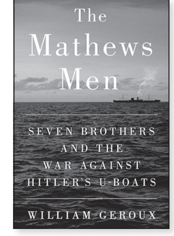

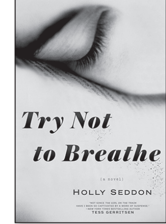

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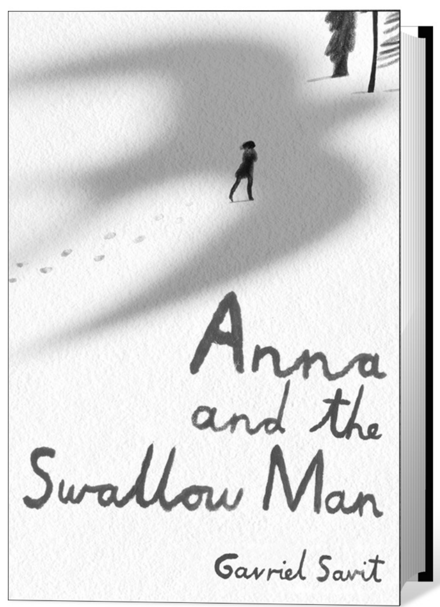

For readers of **The Book Thief, The Kite Runner,** *and* **Life of Pi.**

Kraków, 1939. A million marching soldiers and a thousand barking dogs. This is no place to grow up. Anna Łania is just seven years old when the Germans take her father, a linguistics professor, during their purge of intellectuals in Poland. She's alone.

And then Anna meets the Swallow Man. He is a mystery, strange and tall, a skilled deceiver with more than a little magic up his sleeve, and when the soldiers in the streets look at him, they see what he wants them to see.

The Swallow Man is not Anna's father—she knows that very well—but she also knows that, like her father, he's in danger of being taken, and like her father, he has a gift for languages: Polish, Russian, German, Yiddish, even Bird. When he summons a bright, beautiful swallow down to his hand to stop her from crying, Anna is entranced. She follows him into the wilderness.

Over the course of their travels together, Anna and the Swallow Man will dodge bombs, tame soldiers, and even, despite their better judgment, make a friend. But in a world gone mad with war, everything can prove dangerous. Even the Swallow Man.

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What Do You Say?

When Anna Łania woke on the morning of the sixth of November in the year 1939—her seventh—there were several things that she did not know:

Anna did not know that the chief of the Gestapo in occupied Poland had by fiat compelled the rector of the Jagiellonian University to require the attendance of all professors (of whom her father was one) at a lecture and discussion on the direction of the Polish Academy under German sovereignty, to take place at noon on that day.

She did not know that, in the company of his colleagues, her father would be taken from lecture hall number 56, first to a prison in Kraków, where they lived, and subsequently to a number of other internment facilities across Poland, before finally being transported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany.

She also did not know that, several months later, a group

of her father's surviving colleagues would be moved to the far more infamous Dachau camp in Upper Bavaria, but that, by the time of that transfer, her father would no longer exist in a state in which he was capable of being moved.

What Anna did know that morning was that her father had to go away for a few hours.

Seven-year-old girls are a hugely varied bunch. Some of them will tell you that they've long since grown up, and you'd have trouble not agreeing with them; others seem to care much more about the hidden childhood secrets chalked on the insides of their heads than they do about telling a grown-up anything at all; and still others (this being the largest group by far) have not yet entirely decided to which camp they belong, and depending on the day, the hour, even the moment, they may show you completely different faces from the ones you thought you might find.

Anna was one of these last girls at age seven, and her father helped to foster the ambivalent condition. He treated her like an adult—with respect, deference, and consideration—but somehow, simultaneously, he managed to protect and preserve in her the feeling that everything she encountered in the world was a brand-new discovery, unique to her own mind.

Anna's father was a professor of linguistics at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, and living with him meant that every day of the week was in a different language. By the time Anna had reached the age of seven, her German, Russian, French, and English were all good, and she had a fair amount of Yiddish and Ukrainian and a little Armenian and Carpathian Romany as well.

Her father never spoke to her in Polish. The Polish, he said, would take care of itself.

One does not learn as many languages as Anna's father had without a fair bit of love for talking. Most of her memories of her father were of him speaking—laughing and joking, arguing and sighing—with one of the many friends and conversation partners he cultivated around the city. In fact, for much of her life with him, Anna had thought that each of the languages her father spoke had been tailored, like a bespoke suit of clothes, to the individual person with whom he conversed. French was not French; it was Monsieur Bouchard. Yiddish was not Yiddish; it was Reb Shmulik. Every word and phrase of Armenian that Anna had ever heard reminded her of the face of the little old *tatik* who always greeted her and her father with small cups of strong, bitter coffee.

Every word of Armenian smelled like coffee.

If Anna's young life had been a house, the men and women with whom her father spent his free time in discourse would've been its pillars. They kept the sky up and the earth down, and they smiled and spoke to her as if she were one of their own children. It was never only Professor Łania coming to visit them; it was Professor Łania and Anna. Or, as they might have it, Professor Łania and Anja, or Khannaleh, or Anke, or Anushka, or Anouk. She had as many names as there were languages, as there were people in the world.

Of course, if each language is for only one person, then eventually a girl begins to wonder, *What is my father's language? What is mine?*

But the answer was quite simple—they were speakers of other people's languages. Everyone else seemed tied down to only one, at best to two or three, but Anna's father seemed to be entirely unbound by the borders that held everyone else in the wide and varied landscape of Kraków. He was not confined to any one way of speaking. He could be anything he wanted. Except, perhaps, himself.

And if this was true of Anna's father, well, then it must have been true for Anna, too. Instead of passing on to his daughter one particular language that would define her, Anna's father gave her the wide spectrum of tongues that he knew, and said, "Choose amongst them. Make something new for yourself."

In none of her memories of him was Anna's father not saying something. He lived, in her memory, like a vibrant statue, molded in the shape of his accustomed listening posture: right knee bent over the left, elbow propped against the knee, his chin in his palm. He adopted this attitude frequently, but even when so silently bound in attention, Anna's father couldn't help but communicate, and his lips and eyebrows would wriggle and squirm in reaction to the things people said to him. Other people would have to ask him what these idiosyncratic tics and twitches meant, but Anna was fluent in that language, too, and she never had to ask.

She and her father spent so very much time talking together. They talked in every language in every corner of their apartment, and all throughout the streets of the city. Of all people, she was certain that he liked talking to her best.

The first time Anna realized that a language was a com-

promise shared amongst people—that two people who spoke the same language were not necessarily the same—this was the only time she could remember asking her father a question that he could not manage to answer.

They had been making their way home from some outing or other, and it had been growing dark. Anna didn't recognize the part of the city where they were walking. Her father was holding on to her hand very tightly, and his long-legged strides forced her to trot to keep up. His pace quickened, faster and faster as the sun dipped beneath the rooftops and then the hills beyond, and by the time it happened, they were practically running.

She heard them before she saw anything. There was a man's voice laughing, loud and jolly, so genuinely amused that Anna began smiling as well, excited to see whatever it was that was making the laughter. But when they arrived at the street from which the sound was coming, her smiling stopped.

There were three soldiers.

The laughing soldier was the smallest. She didn't remember the two others very clearly, except that they seemed impossibly large to her.

"Jump!" said the smallest soldier. "Jump! Jump!"

The grizzled old man in front of them did his best to follow this direction, hopping up and down pointlessly in place, but there was very clearly something wrong with his leg—a bad break, perhaps. It was plain to see that he was in terrible discomfort. At great expense of effort, he kept his voice silent each time his shoes hit the cobblestones, despite the pain that twisted his expression.

This seemed to delight the small soldier even more.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this memory was the pure and unreserved delight of that laughter. In Anna's mind, the soldier was speaking—and, for that matter, laughing—in Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's language.

Herr Doktor Fuchsmann was a fat, nearly bald man who always wore a waistcoat. He had spectacles and a cane, which he used to help him shuffle around his small pharmacy all day long. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann was a man who giggled, and whose face was almost always turning red. In the short time that Anna had known him, he had snuck her more cookies than she had ever even seen in any other setting.

And the small soldier was speaking Herr Doktor Fuchsmann.

Anna was confused. She could understand neither the soldier in the context of the doctor, nor the doctor in the context of the soldier. So she did what any child would do in such a situation.

She asked her father.

If Anna's father had not been the man that he was, and if Anna had not been hearing and speaking and thinking, in part, in German for as many of her seven years as had the potential for speech in them—in short, if her accent had not been so compellingly native—this story might've ended before it began.

"Papa," said Anna. "Why are they laughing at that man?"

Anna's father didn't answer. The soldier turned his head.

"Because, *Liebling*," he said. "That is not a man. That is a *Jude*."

Anna remembered that word exactly, because it changed

everything for her. She thought she knew what language was, how it worked, how people pulled in different words out of the air into which they had spoken in order to shape their outlines around them.

But this was much more complicated.

Reb Shmulik didn't say *Jude.* Reb Shmulik said *yid.*

And this soldier, no matter what language he was speaking, was as different from Herr Doktor Fuchsmann as he wanted everyone to know that he was from Reb Shmulik the Jew.

In 1939 a group of people called Germans came into a land called Poland and took control of the city Kraków, where Anna lived. Shortly thereafter these Germans instituted an operation entitled Sonderaktion Krakau, which was aimed at the intellectuals and academics of the city, of whom Anna's father was one.

The day appointed for the execution of Sonderaktion Krakau was November the sixth, 1939—Anna's seventh year—and all Anna knew that morning was that her father had to go away for a few hours.

He left her in the care of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann shortly after eleven o'clock, and then he did not come back again.

It was not uncommon for Anna's father to leave her with his friends when he had some pressing business to attend to. He trusted her enough to leave her alone in the apartment for brief periods, but on occasion, of course, he needed to be gone for longer. She was still very young, and from time to time someone was needed to look after her.

Anna's father had done his best to insulate her from what had been going on in the city, but a war is a war, and it is impossible to protect a child from the world forever. There were uniforms in the street, and people yelling, and dogs, and fear, and sometimes there were gunshots, and if a man loves to speak, eventually his daughter will hear the word "war" spoken, furtively, aloud. "War" is a heavy word in every language.

Anna remembered vaguely that there had been a time before this heavy word had descended on every side of her like the weighted edges of a net, but more than the figure or face of any particular person—more even than the brief impression she had managed to form of her mother—what principally characterized her memory of that time was the vibrant outdoor life of an exuberant city: chatting strolls in public parks and gardens; glasses of beer, or cups of coffee or tea, at tables on the sidewalk; mothers and lovers and friends calling names out across reverberant stone streets, hoping to catch and turn a beloved head before it disappeared around a corner. Those had seemed like days of perpetual warmth and sun to Anna, but war, she learned, was very much like weather—if it was on its way, it was best not to be caught outdoors.

In his final months Anna's father spent quite a bit of time inside with her, talking and, when the inevitable need for silence arose, reading. He meant very well, but most of the books he had in the house were still far beyond Anna's level, and so she spent much of her time with one particular book, a thick volume of children's stories drawn from every source. Whether they were from Aesop or the Bible, or Norse myth or Egyptian,

they were all illustrated in the same comforting nineteenth-century hand, with pen and ink, reproduced there on thick, heavy paper.

Anna missed that book as soon as she was separated from it. Even before she missed her father.

For the first two or three hours after noon on the sixth of November, Herr Doktor Fuchsmann acted just as he always had toward Anna, teasing and laughing over his spectacles while the shop was empty, and immediately ignoring her as soon as the bell on the door rang a new customer inside. There were many fewer cookies now than there had been in past days, but Anna understood—Herr Doktor Fuchsmann had explained the dearth with reference to the war. This was a common practice, one with which Anna had already become quite familiar—whenever someone remarked something out of the ordinary lately, it seemed to be explained by pointing out the war.

Anna still was not certain what precisely was meant by this word "war," but it seemed, at least in part, to be an assault on her cookie supply, and of this she simply could not approve.

The shop was much busier that day than Anna had ever seen it before, and the people who came in after Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's relief seemed mostly to be young Germans in subtly differing uniforms. Even some of the older men in suits came in speaking a bright, clipped-sounding German that, though clearly the same language as the Herr Doktor's, seemed to Anna to lean forward with tight muscles, where his sat back, relaxed. It was all terribly interesting, but Herr Doktor

Fuchsmann became nervous when she paid too obvious attention to anything his customers had to say, and so she did her best to look as if she weren't listening.

He tried to mask his growing anxiety as the day drew on, but when the time came to close down his shop and Anna's father had still not returned to collect her, Herr Doktor Fuchsmann began to worry very openly.

Anna was not yet terribly worried, though. Her father had been gone for longer before, and he had always returned.

But now there were gunshots in the streets from time to time, and dogs barking constantly. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann flatly refused to take Anna home with him, and this was the first seed of worry in her. He had always been so sweet to her before, and it was confusing that he should suddenly turn unkind.

Anna slept that night beneath the counter of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop, cold without a blanket, afraid to be seen or to make too much noise as the streets filled up with German in the growing night.

She had trouble falling asleep. Her worry kept her mind just active enough to prevent her from nodding off, but not quite so active that she could stop herself from growing bored. It was in this never-ending threshold of a moment that she missed her book of tales.

There was a story near its back, a story at which the cracked binding had grown accustomed to falling open, of a spindly wraith called the Alder King. Anna loved to stare at his picture until her fright reached a nearly unbearable height and then

to shut it away. The fright disappeared reliably with the Alder King, trapped there between the pages of his book, and she longed to shut up her gnawing worry with him now.

In the morning Herr Doktor Fuchsmann brought Anna a little food. It comforted her, but by lunchtime it became clear that he meant not to keep her around. He was very apologetic, telling Anna that he would send her father straight along if he came back to the shop for her, but that he just couldn't have her in his shop anymore.

Everything he said made sense. Who was she to argue?

Herr Doktor Fuchsmann locked the door behind him when they left to walk Anna to her apartment. There it quickly became apparent to her that her father had locked his own door when they had left for Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's the day before. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann never learned this, though—as soon as they were within sight of the apartment building, he excused himself and hurried back to his shop.

Anna sat in front of the door to her apartment for a very long time. There was still a part of her that was sure that her father was on his way back to her, and she tried as best she could to prune her worry and encourage this certainty to grow in its place. Surely, he would be back soon.

But he did not come.

Whenever she felt her surety fading, Anna tried the apartment doorknob. Over and over she tried it, each time becoming slowly, thoroughly convinced that, in fact, her father had not locked her out, but that she had simply not turned the knob hard enough.

As much as she wanted it to be true, though, the door never budged. In days of peace, sometimes such fancies can prove true. Never, though, in times of war.

It felt like an eternity to Anna, sitting there, and in a sense it was. To a child, an empty hour is a lifetime. Anna sat there for at least two or three, and if it hadn't been for old Mrs. Niemczyk across the hall, she might've sat there waiting for her father until the war stopped her.

Mrs. Niemczyk frequently complained to Professor Łania (and others) that he and his girl spoke too loudly too late at night, but Anna's father had been convinced that she simply didn't like their bringing Gypsies and Armenians and Jews into the building. Mrs. Niemczyk spoke only Polish, and only very little of it at any one time. In all her life she had never spoken one word directly to Anna, though the old lady had frequently spoken of her to her father in her presence, usually to tell him how he was failing to bring his daughter up properly. Needless to say, she was never a particularly happy sight to Anna, and Anna was a girl who was rather well disposed to meeting people.

Shortly after Anna began her wait in front of the apartment door, Mrs. Niemczyk left her apartment briefly to run an errand. Her eyes lingered on Anna as she passed down the hall, and upon her return they didn't move from Anna once until she shut the door of her apartment behind her.

Anna wasn't sure what she thought Mrs. Niemczyk would do, but the old lady began cracking her door open every so often to check and see if the little girl was still sitting in the hall,

and every time Anna saw her, what little of Mrs. Niemczyk's face she could see behind the door looked somehow better and better pleased.

If it hadn't been for old Mrs. Niemczyk, Anna might very well have stayed to wait for her father.

If it hadn't been for old Mrs. Niemczyk, Anna might very well never have met the Swallow Man.

There were scores of apartments and rooms, even cafés and taverns, across Kraków where Anna would've been welcomed in any number of languages for a day or two by one of her father's scattered friends, but still, she made her way back to Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop. After all, this was the last place she had seen her father. This was where he thought her to be.

It was getting later. Anna was hungry, and as the sun began its descent toward the horizon, she began wondering where she would sleep that night. It was a new feeling to her, that worry—up until the night before, the only place she'd ever slept in her life had been the little bed behind the locked door of her apartment, just down the hall from her father.

Herr Doktor Fuchsmann was busy with a customer when Anna arrived in the street outside his shop. She could see him through the big plate-glass windows, talking to a man in a suit, and though he looked directly out at her, he did not seem to see her.

It was cold there in the street.

Though she was in many ways accustomed to comporting

herself like an adult even at her age, Anna was, in those days, never short of the most childlike obedience. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann had told her he couldn't have her in his shop; no matter how sure she was that the circumstances were different from what he had thought, no matter how desperate she became, she wouldn't go in unless she was told that it was all right.

This was what adults called "being a good girl."

Anna settled down on the street to wait for a father who would not come. The street that held Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop was short—a curving, cobbled way, and narrow, that connected two major thoroughfares and continued beyond neither. There wasn't a lot of traffic there, and aside from those customers who came to the pharmacy and the few other shops on the ground level, most of the people that came or went from the little street lived up above it and did not linger as they arrived or departed. Anna kept her eyes down, silently pleading with each passing person not to see her, or else to be her father. She passed the time by fidgeting and seeking out what loose threads her skirt could offer for pulling.

It was the sound of shoes that finally caught her attention. The *klak-klak* rhythm must've gone up and down the street a hundred times that afternoon, circling around, back and forth, disappearing for a while and then returning again, before the sound of his wooden heel blocks against the stones of the street finally became familiar to her. When she raised her head in surprise, it was in the certainty that she knew those shoes. It wasn't long after she did that the man above the shoes noticed her noticing him.

The man was tall and exceedingly thin. His suit, brown wool and in three pieces, must've been made specifically for him. It was difficult to imagine any other man with such measurements, and his clothes fit him closer than a glove. He carried an old physician's bag, the brown leather worn a bit lighter than the color of his dark suit. It had brass fittings, and on the side of the bag was the monogram *SWG* in a faded red that must've originally been the color of his dark necktie. A tall black umbrella rode between the two handles of the bag, stacked on its top, despite the clearness of the sky.

The thin man stopped when he noticed Anna looking at him, and he looked back down at her from a terrible height through his round, gold-rimmed spectacles. There was an unlit cigarette in his mouth, which he took between his long, spindly fingers and removed, breathing in to speak.

At precisely that moment, the bell rang a young German soldier out of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop and into the street. The thin man turned his head sharply to the young soldier and addressed him in bright, crisp, supremely lettered German, asking him if this was the famous doctor's establishment that everyone seemed to like so much. Anna found that she had been holding her breath.

The tall man and the stranger spoke briefly, congenially, the soldier vouching for the quality and eagerness of the service within. After all, the physician was German, and you could hardly expect one of these *Polish* doctors to rival him.

After an appropriate pause the thin man nodded his thanks to the soldier and turned his eyes toward the shop. He had an

air of authority about him, and Anna began to wonder, as the soldier must've, if she ought to know who he was. The young soldier, well used to the customs of the implicit superior, interpreted the nod of curt thanks as the dismissal it was intended to be, but before he'd gotten very far off, the thin man called him back again.

"I wonder, *Soldat,*" he said, "if you might light my cigarette." The thin man's long hands were clasped behind his back. There was no question at all that he might be troubled to light the thing himself.

The young soldier dutifully complied. The thin man made no eye contact and offered no word of thanks, or even of acknowledgment.

He took a long drag on his cigarette.

The soldier disappeared out into Kraków.

The thin man took another chestful of smoke before turning back to Anna.

"So," he said in his fine German, as much smoke as sound escaping his lips. "Who are you?"

Anna had no idea how to answer this question. Her jaw worked, trying to find some word in any language to sculpt out of the air—she knew that there was a version of "Anna" that the Germans used for her, but it felt somehow wrong to say to this stern authority of a man that that word was who she *was.* She was, just as much, cold, and hungry, and frightened, and her mind labored to recall which particular diminutive it was in the first place.

The thin man raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to the

right. He frowned and switched to Polish. “For whom are you waiting?”

Where his German had been bright and crisp, his Polish was just as round and swift. He was the first person Anna had heard since her father who had an equal command of more than one language.

She wanted to answer him, wanted to talk, but she didn’t know what she could tell him. It occurred to her to say that she was waiting for her father, but, in point of fact, she was not so sure of the truth of this anymore, and if one thing was clear about this tall stranger, it was that he was not someone to whom one offered a lie.

The thin man nodded in answer to Anna’s silence and switched to Russian. “Where are your parents?”

This question should’ve been easy to answer, except that Anna honestly couldn’t say because she didn’t know. She was about to tell him so, but by this point the tall man had grown used to her unresponsiveness and he cycled rapidly and spoke again: Yiddish.

“Are you all right?”

It was this question that made Anna cry. Of course, in their way, the others and their answerlessnesses were just as confounding, just as troubling. Perhaps it was the sudden softening of his tone—him, a man who was more than a little frightening to her then, towering up there above her, suddenly concerned. Things had been getting progressively less all right for weeks and months now, and she couldn’t remember anyone else ever having asked how she was. Even her father had been

so busy laboring to provide an acceptable sort of all-rightness for her that he had neglected ever to ask if it had worked.

Perhaps it was the Yiddish. That was Reb Shmulik's language. Anna had not seen Reb Shmulik in many weeks, and though she was a child, she was not blind to what was happening to the Jews of the city. Part of her had been unsure that Yiddish still survived at all until the thin man had spoken it.

The most likely explanation for Anna's tears, though, was that this was the one question that, with certainty, she knew the answer to:

She was not all right.

The thin man seemed more puzzled than concerned by her tears. Again his brows bunched together, and he cocked his head to the side as he looked down at her. As much as anything, the thin man seemed curious.

The man's eyes were very sharp. They were deep-set in his head, and even if a girl was working very hard to hide her tears from the world, she would have quite a time of trying not to watch them. Like fishhooks, his eyes captured Anna's and drew them in to him.

The next thing he did changed Anna's life forever.

The thin man turned his sharp eyes up toward the eaves of the buildings that huddled around the short street. Anna's captive gaze followed close behind. Spotting what he wanted, the thin man brought his lips close in together and spoke a chirruping, bright whistle of a phrase up in the direction of the sky.

There was a sudden noise of wings, and a bird came plummeting down to the street like a falling bomb. It spread its

wings to gather in the air and slow its descent, alighted on a small gray paving stone, hopped, blinked, and cocked its head to the side, looking up at the thin man.

He passed his cigarette from his left hand to his right, and crouching down to street level, his peaked knees reaching nearly to the height of his ears, the tall man proffered his left forefinger, pointing right, parallel to the ground.

For a moment the bird was still. The thin man spoke to it again, and as if called by name, it flitted up to perch on the branch of his finger.

He turned slowly, carrying the bird over to Anna, looked her straight in her wide eyes, and raised his right forefinger to his lips in hush.

It was unnecessary. Wary of frightening the beautiful, delicate little creature, Anna had not only already stopped her crying, but again found that she was holding her breath.

Anna could see the creature incredibly clearly where he held it out to her, just inches from her face. Its head and wings were a bright, vibrant, iridescent blue, and its face and ruff were pale orange. Its tail was split in a wide fork, and it moved in quick bursts, otherwise holding itself in absolute stillness, looking up at her, as if the thin man had managed to produce a series of perfectly lifelike sculptures to perch atop his hand, each of which he seamlessly replaced with the next.

Anna smiled in spite of herself and reached out her hand to touch the bird. For a moment she thought she might just lay her fingertips on its soft feathers, but in a shocking burst of motion, it flew off, up into the sky, rather than stay and be touched.

The thin man's mouth was locked in an impassive expression, but his sharp eyes flashed with a sort of fire of triumph, and with startling speed and fluency he unfolded himself back to his full height and began to make his way across the road toward Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop. Anna was shocked that he could even hear her when she breathed her little question to herself out into the air.

"What was that?" she said.

"That," said the thin man, not turning back, "was a swallow."

The bell on the pharmacy door jingled shut.

It was clear to see, when the thin man pushed his way out of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop, that he had no intention of engaging in further conversation with Anna. His eyes, purpose-made tools for the capture of others like them, swept fluidly past her where she huddled against the wall, without even pausing, and before Anna could push herself to her feet, his gunshot footsteps had carried him halfway to the mouth of the small street.

But Anna had been ready when he came out of the pharmacy.

In a rapid riot of conflicting languages, she answered all his questions.

In Yiddish she said, "I am better now," and then in Russian, "I do not think my father will come back." In German she said, "I am myself," and then in Polish, "And now I am waiting for you."

The tall man was silent for a moment in the street. Any other man alive would've been dumbfounded, but he registered

no particular impression at all, only watched Anna closely with dark, evaluative eyes.

When she couldn't wait any longer, Anna added, in French, because it was the closest thing she could think of, "And I don't speak Bird."

This was the first of three times that Anna heard the Swallow Man laugh.

"I don't speak French," he said.

He stood a moment in silence then, watching Anna's stillness, as if waiting to see some sign or signal of what was to come in the expansion and contraction of her small rib cage.

Anna felt herself drowning in the empty stillness. It was the first time she had said it, the very first time she had even allowed herself to think it so clearly:

She did not think her father would come back.

It felt rough and wrong to have said it, like tearing jagged, rusted metal with her bare hands—as if her father had called out to her from across a crowded courtyard and she had heard him and turned away.

Everything was still.

Abruptly the thin man made some sort of decision, and when Anna saw him begin to stride across the way toward her, she was surprised to find herself suddenly frightened.

There was no question that the tall stranger was not a reassuring presence. There was a menace to him, a quiet intensity that was in no way akin to the sort of quality that people cultivate in order to attract the affections of children. All the same, though, there was something in him—perhaps the part

that had spoken so easily to the swallow—that fascinated her. He was strange, to be sure, this man, but his was a pungent, familiar sort of strangeness. Perhaps Anna and her father had not had a language of their own—or perhaps their language had been every language. Anna felt irresistibly that in this tall stranger she had found another of their rare tribe—a man of many tongues.

By the time the thin man had, in a few long strides, covered the distance across the road to her, Anna was ready, despite all her fear, to hear that this stranger had been sent to collect her. She was ready to be told that if only she would trust and follow close behind him, she would be taken back to where her father was, that this man had been sent to be her guardian and caretaker until she could be returned to her proper place.

She had decided.

But the man made no such declaration. Instead, crouching down low, he handed her a cookie, exactly like the ones Herr Doktor Fuchsmann had always given her.

Just a cookie.

But in Anna's made-up mind, this was a sort of transubstantiative miracle; it indicated a kind of transfer of fatherly ordination between Herr Doktor Fuchsmann and the tall man, and this development was better than any of the other possible, more verbal scenarios she could have imagined. Not only was it delicious—this was a kind of magic. And also, it was delicious.

The tall stranger watched with real pleasure as Anna bit into the cookie. She had not eaten in a very long time for a lit-

tle girl, and certainly nothing so delicious as a buttery, sugary sweet. It wasn't long before the whole thing was gone.

By the time Anna lifted her attention from the suddenly, inconceivably vanished cookie, the thin man had straightened back up and was standing far above her.

"Stay out of sight," he said after a long moment. Turning his eyes back out to Kraków, he added, "For as long as you can."

And then, wooden heel blocks loudly announcing his progress, he walked away from Anna and disappeared into the busyness of the far street.

It was perhaps a bit late, but at age seven Anna was still very much in the process of figuring out how the world really worked. Seven short years had been punctuated by a series of incredible upheavals and overturns in the way that her life functioned—her mother gone, and then a world at war, and now a father disappeared as well. For all she understood, this was The Way of Things. What one knew did not linger; what one expected disappeared. For a coddled girl of seven, then, Anna had become exceedingly skilled at adaptation. Whatever language someone spoke to her was the language she spoke back.

So when the thin man came, speaking to swallows and pulling her favorite cookies out of the air, why should she not have learned to speak his language? And the thin man's language was an erratic, shimmering thing: to soldiers he spoke with an authority that bordered on disdain; to small birds of the air he spoke with gentle tenderness.

And yet there had been something behind his impassive

face as he watched her reach out for the swallow, or taste the sweet stuff of the cookie—there was something in him other than all that dazzle and shimmer, something solid and firm and true. Something hidden.

This was a man who did not always say what he meant or felt.

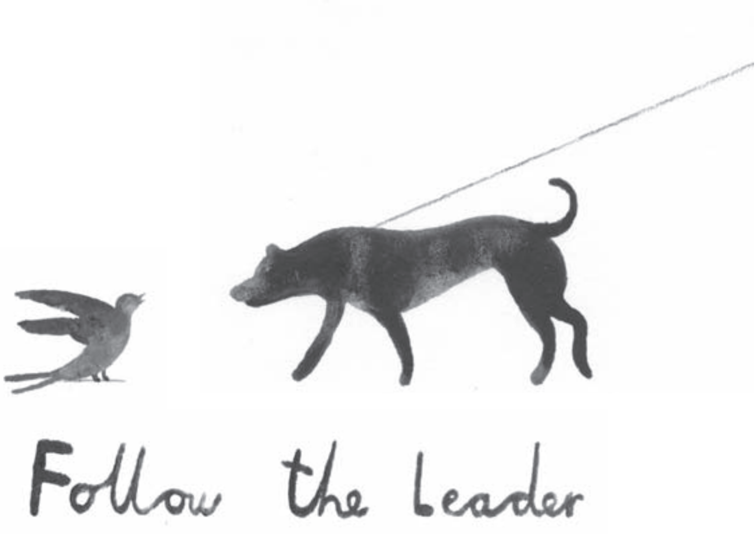
Anna knew that different languages dealt in nuances of expression with different levels of explicitness—in one tongue an idiom might lay out quite directly what the speaker meant to communicate, whereas in another, via the legerdemain of a self-effacing metaphor, a depth of feeling or a sly opinion might very well only be hinted at.

All this is to say that Anna knew with a startling fury, great enough to give her the strength to tear through cold iron with her own bare hands, that there were other words between those that the tall stranger had said to her.

"Stay out of sight," the tall man had said. "For as long as you can."

Anna smiled to herself. "Here I come."

She had decided.



Anna had never been outside of Kraków, but she had accompanied her father to many of the public gardens of the city before the pall of war had descended, and when, far off ahead of her, she saw the tall stranger reach the hills, she thought with a thrill that he was taking her into the grandest park she had ever seen.

It had not been difficult for Anna to track the thin man through the streets in the city center. He stood at least a head above most everyone he passed, and even from far behind she had no trouble locating the head that sprouted up beyond all the others, so long as she did not allow it to escape around a corner.

What was difficult was staying out of sight, as the thin man had instructed. There are two kinds of children in wartime streets—those who provoke passing adults to turn their heads toward their plight, and those who provoke them to turn away. Anna was, if inconveniently under the present circumstances,

fortunate enough to be one of the former; those children who fall into the latter camp are, more often than not, far beyond help.

Nonetheless, Anna very much wanted to avoid attention, and it was not long before she discovered the trick of doing so. A well-fed little girl in a pretty red-and-white dress immediately raises alarm if her face is covered with concern and effort, if she strains to see what is far ahead of her, if she moves only in fits and starts—and this was precisely what her present labor required her to do. At one intersection, though, she felt certain she had seen Monsieur Bouchard, her father's old French friend, in the street ahead, and suddenly, impulsively, abandoning all effort of following the tall stranger, she smiled and ran gleefully toward the familiar man.

In the end he was not Monsieur Bouchard, but the effect of this burst of glee was immediately apparent to her. When she passed through the street hesitantly and with concern, the grown-ups who saw her seemed to latch on to her distress, trying to carry it off with them despite themselves, and the strain of the effort would cause a kind of unwilling connection between the adult and the child until they were out of one another's sight. For the most part Anna felt certain that their intentions were good, but it seemed only a matter of time before someone stopped her, and then she did not know what might happen.

On the other hand, when she ran through the street with a smile of anticipation, passing adults still took notice, but they

did not try to carry off her joy with them—instead, it engendered a kindred kind of joy inside of them, and well satisfied with this feeling, particularly in the eternally threatening environment of a military occupation, they continued on their way without giving her a moment's thought.

It was with joy, then, and not concern, that she followed the thin man past the guards at the outskirts of the city—they didn't give her a second glance—and by the time Anna was alone in the twilit hills, this effort of counterfeiting happiness had brought to bear a true sort of excitement within her.

The problem was that the thin man's legs were very long, and every quick stride of his required three or four of her own to match its progress. Now that they were out of the city and out of the sight of its thousand shifting denizens, Anna thought it time for the two of them to reunite; after all, she had fulfilled the task the tall man had set for her, avoiding attention until there seemed to be none left, and now she very much wanted the security of company in the growing dark.

The sun had been gone beyond the horizon for many minutes when the thin man stopped short in the middle of the packed earth path he had been following. His stillness was so sharp and abrupt that Anna herself instinctively froze for a moment before realizing that this was her chance to make up ground.

It was in that moment of stillness that she realized just how cold it had become. The wind whipped around her as she made her way down the hill toward the tall man, but just when she

thought she was drawing near enough to call out to him, he turned and, with redoubled speed, lit out into the dark, open pasture to his right.

Without thought Anna followed him.

It was only when she looked over her shoulder, back toward the road, that she saw the bobbing, jostling motion of the beams of flashlights, and heard the clamoring conversation between whoever it was that had been coming down the road.

"Stay out of sight," he had said.

It had been difficult for Anna to keep pace with the thin man before. Now it seemed nearly impossible. He was making his way into the wide fields off the road as quickly and quietly as he could, and as the darkness gathered in around him, Anna began to worry that she would lose sight of him. She broke into a trot, and then into a run, and it seemed to her ages and ages that she ran into the uncharted darkness after the thin stranger.

Before she knew it, the darkness was deep and thick, and she could scarcely see who or what was moving down in the fields ahead of her. She wanted to call out, felt the growing throb of panic in the idea that she might have found a way to make herself yet more alone than she had been before, but something in the notion of raising her voice felt forbidden by the very air that surrounded this tall man. His entire existence was like a giant, silent forefinger raised to the lips of the universe.

Hush.

But then she saw it—approaching the thin man in the dark, cutting in quickly from some deeper corner of the pasture, in front of her but behind him—the soft, reflected flicker of a

shielded lantern. The flattened glow of the flame was vague, but in the field of sudden night, it shone forth to her eye like a beacon, and she clearly saw the figure of a broad, tight man following after the taut leash of a great dog.

Anna was a young girl of uncommon attention, but it had taken no particular skill to learn, in the Kraków from which she had lately come, what a dog at the end of a taut lead meant.

There was no hesitation in Anna's voice. "Hey!" she called, and again, "Hey!"

Three heads turned swiftly to face her. The tall stranger's response was fluid, nearly seamless, as if Anna and he had rehearsed it.

"Oh!" said the thin man on a breath of unspeakable relief, and dropping the bag that he carried, he ran as quickly as he could to where Anna was standing.

"Thank God," he said. "Are you all right?"

Anna was going to speak, but the thin man smoothed past any moment in which she might've, a swift torrent of chastisement and relieved affection pouring forth from him in "What were you thinkings" and "You had me so worrieds."

With one long hand he gathered Anna in close to his side. With the other he swiftly, deftly pulled the spectacles from his face, depositing them in an inner pocket of his coat, which he closed up to the neck in order to hide the well-tailored suit beneath its wide, upturned lapels.

The broad man and his dog stood where the thin man had dropped his bag, and Anna was now shepherded gently back toward them. She was overwhelmed in the torrent of attention,

so much so that when the thin man asked her a direct question, she didn't think to respond.

He stopped and asked again.

"Sweetie—I said, do you promise to be more careful?"

Anna frowned. She had been very careful. It had been the thin man who had not seen the approach of the dog and lantern man. But then again, he had told her to stay out of sight, and she'd very deliberately called attention to herself. Perhaps this was what he meant. She hated breaking the rules and doing the wrong thing, and even this peculiar kind of transgression, of which she had little understanding, engendered real contrition in her.

Anna nodded ruefully. "Yes," she said. "I promise."

The thin man sighed heavily and turned a conspiratorial gaze to the man behind the lantern, as if to say, *Why do children never learn?*

"This must be your land, hm? I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Sweetie, apologize to the man."

By now Anna had admitted her wrongdoing, and in this state no child will fail to apologize, at the very least half-heartedly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Thank you," said the thin man. "Ah! We're much later than we said. Grandma will be worried. You have to be more careful!"

Anna couldn't for the life of her think of whom the thin man might be talking about. None of her grandparents were even still alive.

There was no time for questions, though. With fluent but unhurried speech, the thin man turned again to the man behind the lantern and spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm all turned around. Can you point me back to the road?"

There was sudden silence.

This was the first moment in which the man of the dog and lantern had been required, even allowed, to speak.

The thin man's question hung in the air.

Anna did not breathe.

Finally the broad man lifted his arm and gestured with the lantern. "That way," he said in rough, rolling Polish. "Ten minutes' walk."

The thin man smiled. "Thank you," he said, and gathering Anna in close, he turned and, with deliberate steps, led her toward the road.

Anna did not know what she'd expected, but it had not been this. They walked silently, the two of them, and the air between them was heavy and hard. Had she been wrong to alert the thin man of the coming danger? Should she have stayed farther out of sight? For the first time since he had handed her the cookie in Kraków, she found herself wondering if, in fact, the tall man had meant for her to follow him in the first place.

But all the same, she had felt real shelter when he had gathered her into his side, felt real concern when he'd run across the field to her. The feeling that she recognized now in the air—this was not a simple, monolithic sense of adult displeasure.

This was a fraught thing—divided, thick with cross-woven and conflicting kinds of worry. Something was going on, something inside the tall stranger, hidden just behind the curtain.

This, Anna knew with perfect, intuitive certainty. She was a child.

At home in Kraków, Anna had developed a habit of understanding people by comparing them to those with whom she was already acquainted—as if she were translating the unfamiliar phrase of each new human being using her full, multilingual range of vocabulary. Frequently when, in the presence of her father, she had been introduced to new people, she had found herself looking forward to a private moment in which she might tell him of whom else this new person was composed:

"Like Mrs. Niemczyk if she had never gotten old, and was not mean."

Or:

"Like Professor Dubrovich if he spoke Madame Barsamian's Polish and had the goofiness of Monsieur Bouchard."

Sometimes, in the course of these descriptions, Anna had hit upon some distinct quality or attribute—the aforementioned goofiness had been one—that was shared amongst many people, and her father had named it for her.

Goofiness.

Resilience.

Assurance.

Deference.

Pride.

Now, trying to understand the thin man, Anna thought that perhaps she had discovered a new example of such a quality.

Of course, the thin man was like her father in his facility with language. That was obvious. But that was not what Anna meant when she thought of daddiness.

Any child who plays out and about in the world quickly learns to distinguish between the grown-ups who have learned to deal with children and those who can be exploited for their lack of such experience—some adult authority is a well-supported fortification, and some is a flimsy, often over-elaborate, unbacked facade. It is a child's business to test these edifices, and Anna had learned as well as any to recognize both kinds.

This quality of daddiness was in part composed, in Anna's mind, of the more experienced sense of authority—but only in part. There was something else, too, something that she struggled to describe to herself, something that made her feel the kind of thorough safety and security that frequently, at the end of a childhood, ceases ever to have existed. This thing was the better half of daddiness. Not every man is in possession of much talent in this area, just as many men cannot sing in tune or compellingly depict a sunset.

But the thin man had many talents.

Not a word had yet been spoken when they reached the road. The thin man had not looked down at Anna once as they walked, but this did not mean that he wasn't watching her.

Anna was well prepared to start back along the dirt track once they found it, but this was not the thin man's intention,

and without a word of explanation, he continued on past the path, bending his course to head for a thick stand of trees on the horizon. She was about to ask him where they were going when he broke the silence.

"Thank you," he said. "For warning me."

Anna was terribly confused by this. Was he grateful for what she had done, or angry? She didn't understand. She did, however, know that it was impolite not to answer when someone said thank you.

"You're welcome," she said with as much assurance as she could muster.

The thin man sighed and said, "You did well."

He had slowed his gait significantly out of deference to the difference in their strides, but Anna still had to take two steps to every one of his, and now the only sound that broke the silence of the night was the rapid subdivision in the grass of his footfalls by hers.

Eventually he spoke again. "Listen very closely," he said, slowly releasing another sigh. "The world as it exists is a very, very dangerous place." His voice had turned cold and measured.

Anna was unprepared for the sudden fright and sadness that this statement brought about in her. Usually when adults spoke of danger in her presence, they were quick to assure her that everything would be all right, that she would be safe. The thin man did none of this, and his omission rang out as true in the night as his words had.

Everything he said, even—perhaps especially—the things he left out, seemed to carry the reliable weight of truth.

Anna did her best to choke down her sudden snuffle, but the thin man was perceptive. "Does that frighten you?" he said.

She nodded. "Yes."

The thin man frowned. "Good."

Ahead of them the dark trees loomed up like a clutch of wooden giants, each one an echo of Anna's companion.

"You know people in Kraków?" said the thin man.

Anna nodded.

"People who will take care of you?"

Anna had no good answer for this. Before, she might've said yes, but before, she would've spoken of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann as amongst the very first rank of those who looked after her. What was more, though she never would've allowed herself to admit it, Kraków itself had become threatening. What was that place now, what were its rooms and sidewalks, what was each inch of negative space between the buildings and automobiles and boot heels of the city, if it was not the great open mouth that had swallowed her father up?

For the first time since they'd begun walking together, the tall man looked down at Anna in her silence.

His tone was gently instructive now, and his voice fell into the authoritative lilt of someone well used to imparting information to the less informed. "Listen to me: if you ever doubt that you have something good or comforting to rely upon, then you must assume that you don't." Again the thin man fell silent for a moment. "This is no time for hoping."

Anna didn't answer. Together the two of them crossed in beneath the low hem of the tree branches.

For a longer time again now, they didn't speak. The thin man walked them around and around the thicket of trees, until finally he settled down in a corner far removed from the road. Anna sat down beside him. The ground was cold and hard, and the roots of the trees poked at her uncomfortably.

As soon as she'd squirmed herself into a position she could hold for several minutes at a stretch, the tall man stood up and began to peel layers off of himself. He handed to Anna his long-armed suit coat, which she wrapped around herself gratefully against the cold, and then he shrugged back into his great overcoat.

"In the morning," he said, "I will take you back to Kraków, and we shall find someone to look after you. It is not good for a girl to be without a father these days."

With that, the thin man turned over and closed his eyes.

Anna's heart sank like a heavy stone down into the pool of her gut.

"In the morning," he'd said, "I will take you back to Kraków."

This was impossible. She knew very well that there was no Kraków anymore, at least not in the true sense. She could not be there.

But everything he said was heavy, like truth.

All the same, something bothered Anna about the summary decision that the thin man had made.

She just didn't believe it.

She couldn't stop thinking of the way he had laughed

when she'd spoken to him in all her languages, couldn't stop remembering the glint he'd hidden in the depths of his eyes as he'd watched her reach out for the swallow he had conjured.

To be sure, there were people in the world who seemed to have no use for children, people who had been born with an allergy to anything that stood below hip height—usually people who spent a very long time each day on the appointment of their clothing or facial hair. But was this thin man one of them? Most emphatically not. He was frightening in some ways, certainly—in many ways, even—but he was also bright and exciting and potent.

And good.

Despite the weight of truth in each of his words, to Anna it felt very much like a lie that this man would throw her back unattended into the maelstrom of Kraków.

Anna had always been what adults called "precocious," and this was a word, her father had once upon a time explained, with various uses. To some adults it allowed an escape from the wise clear-sightedness of a child:

"Ah," they would say in the face of an observation of unwelcome young wisdom, "how precocious she is!" and they would move on.

To others it functioned as a reminder of their easy badge of adult supremacy:

"Ah," they would say in the face of some inconveniently valid challenge to their grown-up certitude, "how precocious she is!" and they would move on.

Anna was afraid to ask the thin man the question that

would not leave her mind now—it had the undeniable ring of the questions most often labeled precocious and packed away by adults for later, surreptitious disposal—but she very much wanted to hear, in the truth-laden voice of this tall man, if her father had taught her correctly.

Whenever she had grown indignant at the dismissal of her thoughts and ideas and questions by those adults who had grown too old to see past her precocity, her father had reassured her softly, wiggling his mustache and smiling.

"It's their failure, my little Anna, not yours. Men who try to understand the world without the help of children are like men who try to bake bread without the help of yeast."

This had seemed so true.

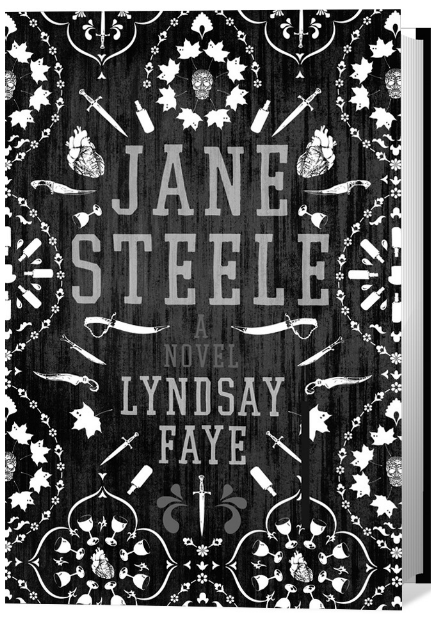
She struggled there, beneath the trees, deciding first to speak her precocious question and then to stay silent, over and over and over again, until finally, her mind already half immersed in sleep, she gathered her courage.

"I'm sorry," she said through a wide yawn. "I know it's not good for a girl to be without a father these days. But is it any better for a father to be without a daughter?"

There was silence in the grove of trees for a long moment.

And then she heard the thin man begin to chuckle, low and bright and impossibly sunny in the dark night.

This was the second time that Anna heard the Swallow Man laugh.



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ONE

"I wouldn't have her heart for anything. Say your prayers, Miss Eyre, when you are by yourself; for if you don't repent, something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney, and fetch you away."

Of all my many murders, committed for love and for better reasons, the first was the most important.

Already this project proves more difficult than I had ever imagined. Autobiographies depend upon truth; but I have been lying for such a very long, lonesome time.

"Jane, will you be my friend again?" Edwin Barbary had asked.

My cousin's lips were gnawed red, his skin gleaming with exertion and desire. When his fleshy mouth next moved, the merest croak emerged. He breathed precisely five more times, the fat folds of his belly shuddering against his torn waistcoat, and then he stilled like a depleted clockwork toy.

More of my homicides anon—the astute among you will desire to know why a dyed-in-the-wool villainess takes up pen and foolscap in the first place. I have been reading over and over again the most riveting book titled *Jane Eyre*, and the work inspires me to imitative acts. My new printing features a daring introduction by the author railing against the first edition's critics. I relate to this story almost as I would a friend or a lover—at times I want to breathe its entire al-

phabet into my lungs, and at others I should prefer to throw it across the room. Whoever heard of disembodied voices calling to *governesses*, of all people, as this Jane's do?

Hereby do I avow that I, Jane Steele, in all my days working as a governess, never once heard ethereal cries carried to me upon the brawny shoulders of the north wind; and had I done, I should have kept silent for fear of being labelled eccentric.

Faulting the work for its wild fancies seems petty, however, for there are marvellous moments within. I might myself once have written:

> *Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one's favour?*

I left such reflections behind me in childhood, at the bottom of the small ravine where my first cousin drew his final gurgling breaths. Yet I find myself pitying the strange, kindly Jane in the novel whose biography is so weirdly similar; she, too, was as welcome in her aunt's household as are church mice in the Communion larder, and was sent to a hell in the guise of a girls' school. That Jane was unfairly accused of wickedness, however, while I can no better answer my detractors than to thank them for their pains over stating the obvious.

It was the boarding school that taught me to act as a wolf in girl's clothing should: skulking, a greyer shadow within a grey landscape. It was London which formed me into a pale, wide-eyed creature with an errant laugh, a lust for life and for dirty vocabulary, and a knife in her pocket. It was Charles who changed everything, when I fell in love with him under the burdens of a false identity and a blighted conscience. The beginning of a memoir could be made in any of those places, but without my dear cousin, Edwin Barbary,

none of the rest would have happened at all, so I hereby commence my account with the unembellished truth:

Reader, I murdered him.

I may always have been wicked, but I was not always universally loathed. For instance, I remember my mother asking me at five years old, “Are you hurt, *chérie*?”

Then as now, I owned a pallid complexion and listlessly curling hair the colour of hazelnut shells. Having just fallen flat on my face in the garden behind our cottage on the outskirts of Highgate House, I considered whether or not to cry. The strawberries I had gathered were crushed under my apron, painting me with sweet gore. I pored over the best stratagems to gain my mother’s undivided attention perennially in those days—back when I believed I might be merely naughty, fit to be punished in the here and not the hereafter.

As it happened, my mother had been well all day. We had navigated no weeping, no laudanum, no gnawing at already-bleeding fingernails; she was teasing and coaxing, snatching my hand up as she wondered whether we might cover some biscuits with berries and fresh honey and host an impromptu picnic.

Therefore, I saw no need to cry. Instead, I stuck out my tongue at the offending root and gulped down the swelling at the back of my throat.

“I’m fine,” I told her, “though my wrist is sore.”

Smiling from where she sat on a quilted blanket beneath our cascading willow, she called, “Come here then, and let me see.”

My mother was French. She spoke to me often in that language, and I found this flattering; she directed her native tongue at no one else unless she desired to illustrate their ignorance. She seemed to me unpredictable and glimmering as a butterfly, one worthy of being collected and displayed under glass. I was proud of her; I belonged to

her. She noticed me when no one else bothered, and I could make her laugh when she could bear no one else.

Ma mère studied my wrist, brushed the specks of juice and flesh from my pinafore, and directed a dry look in my eyes.

"It is not very serious," she declared lightly in French. "Not even to a spun-sugar little girl."

"It hurts," I insisted, thinking, *It may have been better to cry after all.*

"Then it is most profoundly serious to me," she proclaimed, again in French, and proceeded to kiss me until I was helpless with giggling.

"And I lost all the berries."

"But consider—there is no harm done. We shall go and gather more. After all, have you anything of consequence to do?"

The answer was no; there was nothing of consequence to do, as this garden party took place at midnight under a wan, watchful moon. Having spent my entire life in my mother's company, I thought nothing amiss herein, though I was vexed I had not seen the root which had tripped me. Surely other little girls donned lace-trimmed frocks and enjoyed picnics featuring trifle and tea cakes, sitting with their mothers under the jewel-strewn canopy of starlight, never dreaming of sleep until the cold dew threatened and we began to shiver.

Do they not? I would anxiously ask myself.

It is relevant that my beloved mother, Anne-Laure Steele, was detested throughout our familial estate, and for two sound reasons. First, as I mentioned, she was—tragically and irrevocably—French. Second, my mother was beautiful.

I do not mean beautiful in the conventional insipid fashion; I mean that my mother was actually *beautiful,* bizarrely so, in the ghostly, wide-gazed sense. She possessed a determined square chin, a chin I share, so that she always looked stubborn even when meekness was selling at a premium. Her hair was dark with a brick-red

sheen and her almond-shaped eyes were framed beneath by pretty caverns; her wrists had thin scars like pearlescent bracelets which I did not then understand.

At times she screamed under the indifferent moon in French for my dead father. At others she refused to budge from the bed until, groaning at the slanting afternoon light, she allowed our combined cook and housemaid, Agatha, to ply her with tea.

What's the matter, Mamma? I would ask softly. Now I am grown, I comprehend her answers far better than I did then.

Only that yesterday was so very, very long.

Only that my eyes are tired and nothing in the new novel I thought I'd like so well means as much to me as I imagined it would.

Only that I cannot think of a useful occupation, and when I do, the task daunts me, and so cannot attempt it anyhow, sweet one.

Never could I predict when her smile would blaze forth again, nor earn enough of the feathery kisses she would drop to my brow inexplicably—as if I was worthy of them for no reason at all.

In short, my mother and I—two friendly monsters—found each other lovely and hoped daily that others would find us so as well.

They did not.

I shall explain how I embarked upon a life of infamy, but first what my mother told me regarding my inheritance.

When I was six years old, my mother announced in French, in August, in the shade-dappled garden, "One day you will have everything, *chérie,* even the main house. It all belonged to your father and will always be yours—there are documents to this effect despite the fact inheritance for girls is always a highly complicated matter. Meanwhile, our cottage may be poor and plain, but you understand the many difficulties."

I did not fully understand the many difficulties, though I as-

sumed my aunt and cousin, who lived in the estate proper, did so because they were haughty and wanted the entire pile of mossy stonework, complete with dour servants and tapestries hanging sombre as funeral shrouds, to themselves. Neither did I think our cottage, with its mullioned windows and its roaring fireplaces and its cheery bay windows, was either poor or plain. I did, however, understand particular difficulties, ones regarding how well we got on with our relations.

"You see the way your aunt looks at me—you know we cannot live at the main house. Here we are safe and warm and friendly and ourselves," she added fretfully, worrying at the cuticle upon her left thumb as her eyes pooled.

"Je déteste la maison principale," I announced.

Passing her my ever-ready kerchief, I dried her tears. I plucked wild sorrel to sprinkle over our fish supper and told everyone who would listen—which amounted only to my mother and frayed, friendly Agatha—*Let us always live just as we please, for I love you both.*

Such was not to be.

My aunt, Mrs. Patience Barbary, mother of Edwin Barbary, was, like my mother, a widow. She had been wed to Mr. Richard Barbary; Mr. Richard Barbary was the half brother of my own father, Jonathan Steele, whose claim to Highgate House was entire and never called into question in my presence. I presumed that our Barbary kinfolk resided with us due to financial necessity, as my aunt could not under any circumstances be accused of enjoying our company.

In fact, one of our visits to the main house, shortly after my ninth birthday, centred around just such a discussion.

"It is so very kind of you to have us for tea," Anne-Laure Steele said, her smile glinting subtly. "I have said often to Jane that she

should better familiarise herself with the Steele estate—after all, she will live here when she is grown, and *mon Dieu,* to think what mismanagement could occur if she did not know its—I think, in English—intricacies?"

Aunt Patience was a sturdy woman wearing perennial mourning black, though she never otherwise appeared to regret her lack of spouse. Perhaps she was mourning something else entirely: her lost youth, for example, or the heathens in darkest Africa who perished in ignorance of Christ.

Certainly my uncle Richard was never mentioned nor seemed he much missed, which I found curious since his portraits were scattered throughout the house—a wedding watercolour from a friend in the drawing room, an oil study of a distinguished man of business in the library. Uncle Richard had owned a set of defined, almost pouting lips, an arched brow with a tuft of dark hair, and something rakish in his eyes made him seem more dashing than I imagined "men of business" ought to look—ants all walking very fast with their heads down, a row of indistinguishable umbrellas. I thought, had I known him, I should have liked him. I wondered what possessed him to marry Aunt Patience of all people.

Thankfully, Patience Barbary was blessed with a face ensuring that conjugal affronts would not happen twice, which did her tremendous credit—or at least, she always threw beauty in the teeth, as it were, of my own Mamma, who smiled frigidly following such ripostes. Aunt Patience had a very wide frog's visage with a ruddy complexion and lips like a seam in stone-masonry.

"So much time passed in our great Empire." Aunt Patience sighed following my mother's uncertainty over vocabulary. "And despite that, such a terrible facility with our language. I ask you, is this a proper example to set for the—as you would have it—future mistress of Highgate House?"

"It might not be," my mother replied with snow lacing her tone, "but I am not often invited to practise your tongue."

"Oh!" my aunt mused. "That must be very vexing."

I yearned to leap to my mother's defence, but sat there helplessly dumb, for my aunt hated me only marginally less than she did my mother. After all, I was awkward and gangly, possessed only of my Mamma's too-thin neck and too-thoughtful expressions. My eyes were likewise catlike—voluptuous, in truth—but the plainest of ordinary cedar browns in colour. My mother ought to have done better by me, I thought on occasion. Her own irids were a strange, distant topaz like shards of frozen honey.

I never blamed my father, Jonathan Steele, for my shortcomings. I never expected anything of him—not remembering him—and thus could not expect *more* of him.

"*Aimes-tu ton gâteau?*" my mother asked me next.

"*Ce n'est pas très bien, Maman.*"

Aunt Patience simmered beneath her widow's weeds; she supposed the French language a threat and, in retrospect, she may have been correct.

"*Pauvre petite,*"* my mother commiserated.

Mamma and Aunt Patience embarked upon a resounding and communicative silence, and I felt Cousin Edwin's eyes on me like a set of hot pinpricks; when the adults abandoned decorum in favour of spitting false compliments and heartfelt censures at each other, he launched his offensive.

"I've a new bow and arrows I should show you, Jane," he murmured.

For a child's tones, Edwin's were weirdly insinuating. The quick bloom of instinctual camaraderie always withered upon the instant I recalled what my cousin was actually *like.* Meanwhile, I wanted to

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* Translation: "Do you like your cake?" "It isn't very good, Mamma." "Poor little dear."

test his new bow very much indeed—only sans Edwin or, better still, with a different Edwin altogether.

My cousin was four years my elder, thirteen at the time. Our relationship had always been peculiar, but as of 1837, it had begun to take on a darker cast. I do not mean only on his behalf—I alternately ignored and engaged him, and was brought to task for this capriciousness by every adult in our household. I let them assume me fickle rather than snobbish when actually I was both. Granted, I needed him; he was closer my own age than anyone, and he seemed nigh drowning for my attention when no one else save my mother noticed that I breathed their cast-off air.

Edwin, on the other hand, was what his mother considered a model child; he was brown-haired and red-faced and sheepdog simple. He chewed upon his bottom lip perennially, as if afraid it might go suddenly missing.

"Have you seen the new mare yet?" he inquired next. "We might take a drive in the trap tomorrow."

I maintained silence. On the last occasion we had shared a drive in the trap, the candied aroma of clover in our noses, Edwin had parted his trouser front and shown me the flesh resting like a grubworm within the cotton, asking whether I knew what it was used for. (I do now; I did not then.) Other than gaping dumbly as he returned the twitching apparatus to its confines, I elected to ignore the incident. Cousin Edwin was approximately as perspicacious as my collection of feathers, which made my own cleverness feel embarrassingly like cheating. It shamed me to disdain him so when he was my elder, and when the thick cords of childhood proximity knotted us so tightly to each other.

Just before arriving home, he had asked whether I wished to touch it next time we were in the woods, and I laughed myself insensible as his flushed face darkened to violet.

"You are a wicked thing to ignore your own kin so, Jane," Edwin persisted.

Kin, kin, kin was ever his anthem: as if we were more than related, as if we were *kindred*. When I failed to cooperate, he stared as if I were a puzzle to be solved. My dawning fear was that he might think I was *in fact* a puzzle—inanimate, insensible. Though I no longer presume to have a conscience, I have never once lacked feelings.

"But perhaps you are only glum. I know! Will you play a game with me after tea?"

Games were a favourite of my mother's, and of mine—and though I was wary of my cousin, I was not afraid of him. He adored me.

"What sort of game?"

"Trading secrets," he rasped. "I've loads and loads. Awful ones. You must have some of your own. It'll be a lark to exchange them."

Considering my stockpile of secrets, I found myself reluctant.

I tell Agatha every night I'll say my prayers, but ever since I skipped them and nothing happened six months ago, I don't.

I tried my mother's laudanum once because she said it made everything better, and I was ill and lied about it.

My kitten scratched me and I was so angry that I let it outside, and afterwards it never came home and I feel sick in my belly every time I imagine my kitten shivering in the dark, cold woods.

I did not want Edwin to know any of these things.

"Fiddle! You aren't sharp enough to know any secrets worth having," I scoffed instead, pushing crumbs around my plate.

Edwin was painfully aware of his own slowness, and hot blood crawled up his cheeks. I nearly apologised then and there, knowing it was what a good girl would do and feeling magnanimous, but then he rose from the table. The adults, still merrily loathing each other over the gilt rims of their teacups, paid us no mind.

"Of course I do," he growled under his breath. "For instance, are you ashamed that your mother is no better than a parasite?"

My mouth fell open as I gaped at my cousin.

"Oh, yes. Or don't you hear any gossip? Doesn't anyone come to visit you?"

This was a cruel blow. "You know that they don't. No one ever does."

"Why not, Jane? I've always wondered."

"Because we are kept like cattle on our own land!" I cried, smashing my fist heedlessly against a butter plate.

When the porcelain flew through the air and shattered upon the hardwood, my cousin's face reflected stupid dismay. My mother's was equally startled, but approving; I had only been repeating something she slurred once during a very bad night indeed.

Aunt Patience's face practically split with the immensity of her delight, as it is no unpleasant thing when an enemy proves one's own point gratis.

"I invite you for tea and this is the way your . . . your *inexcusable* daughter behaves?" she protested shrilly. "I should beat the temper out of her if I were you, and lose no time about it. There is nothing like a stout piece of hickory for the prevention of unseemly habits."

My mother stood and smoothed her light cotton dress as if she had pressing obligations elsewhere. "My *inexcusable* daughter is bright and high-spirited."

"No, she is a coy little minx whose sly ways will lead her to a bad end if you fail to correct her."

"And what is your child?" Mrs. Steele hissed, throwing down her napkin. "An overfed dunce? Jane does not suffer by comparison, I assure you. We will not trouble you here again."

"You will not be *welcome* here again," Aunt Patience spat. "I must

offer you my congratulations, Anne-Laure. To so completely cut yourself off from polite society, and then to offend the one person who graciously allows you to sit at the same table—what an extraordinary effort on your part. Very well, I shall oblige both our tastes. If you cannot control that harpy you call a daughter, do keep entirely to your residence in future. I certainly shall to mine."

My mother's defiance crumbled, leaving a wistful look. Aunt Patience's plodding nature would have been forgivable had she been clever or kind, I decided; but as she was common and gloating, I hated her and would hate her *forever.*

Mamma softly pulled her fingers into small fists.

"Please in future recall my daughter's rights, *all* of her rights, or you will regret it," Mrs. Steele ordered, giving the table a single nod.

She departed without a glance behind her. Mamma often stormed away so, however—ferocious exits were decidedly her style, so I remained to assess what damage we had wrought this time.

Aunt Patience, though purple and fairly vibrating with rage, managed to say, "Would you care for more cake, Edwin and Jane?"

"I goaded her, Mummy. I'm sorry for what I said before," Edwin added to me, his tooth clenching his lip. He wore a stiff collar that afternoon, I recall, above a brown waistcoat and maroon jacket, and his neck bulged obscenely from its confines.

"That's all right, Edwin. Thank you for tea, Aunt Patience." Like most children, I loathed nothing more than embarrassing myself, and the sight of the fragmented china was making me physically ill. I rose from the table. "I had better . . . good-bye, then."

Aunt Patience's eyes burnt into me as I departed.

I went to the stables that evening, where I could visit the docile mares and peer into their soft liquid eyes, and I could stop thinking about my cousin. Thinking about Edwin was a private class in self-loathing: I hated myself for indulging his mulish attraction, yet it had been a tidal pull for me over years of reluctant camaraderie.

Flattery, I have found, is a great treat for those born innately selfish.

For the hundredth time, the thousandth time, I stood listening to soft whinnies like lullabies, pressing my cheek against sinewy necks; whether the horses at Highgate House liked me or my sugar cubes I have no notion, but they never glowered, nor warned me I teetered upon the hair-thin tightrope of eternal damnation. Smelling sweet hay and their rich, bristly coats always calmed me—and I calmed them in turn, for a particularly fidgety colt often stilled in my presence.

My thoughts drifted from the horses to the uses I might make of them. I daydreamed of riding to an apple-blossom meadow where my mother and I should do nothing save eat and laugh; I envisioned charging into war, the heads of Aunt Patience and Edwin lying at my feet.

Mamma and I never took more than a light supper in the springtime, and following a departure as precipitous as the one she had just executed, I knew that she would lock herself away with her novels and tonics, and thus I stayed out until the wind began to nip through the slats in the great stable door and the horses' snuffles quieted under my caresses . . . never realising until the following day, in fact, that I had been left entirely, permanently alone.

The ominous liquorice aroma of spilt tincture of opium drenched our cottage when I arrived home at eight o'clock. I learnt my mother had retired to bed at seven, which was unfortunate timing, as I never saw her again. Our servant Agatha found her the next morning, still and cold in her bed, marble eyes directed at the window.

TWO

What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection!

"You cannot attend," Aunt Patience explained in a strained drone for the third time. "You are far too hysterical to appear in pub—"

"Please, oh, please—I won't say a word, won't make a *sound*!"

"Gracious, child, show a little restraint!" my aunt cried. "Pray for her soul, and accept God's will. It is a hard thing to lose your mother so suddenly, but many others have lived to tell the tale."

I took the news that I would not be allowed at my mother's funeral precisely as well as I took the news of her inexplicable death. Skilful knives had carved the heart out of me, leaving me empty save for the sick, unsteady fear flickering in my bones telling me *alone, all alone*. I could not claw my way out of the horror of it. I screamed for my mother on the first day; sobbed for her on the second; and on the third, the day of her funeral, sat numbly in an armchair with my eyes pulsing hellfire red—that is, until my aunt Patience arrived. Being forbidden to attend Mamma's funeral felt as if I were spitting on her grave, and questions swarmed through my pate like worms through an apple.

What will they do with me now that she has gone? Assurances that I would always reside at Highgate House now seemed reliable as quicksand.

How did my mother come to die at all? She had taken a sudden bad turn, according to Agatha; Aunt Patience muttered of fits.

Why should I not see her put in the ground? Both agreed I should not be present, but neither would explain the reason.

I fell to my knees, tearing at my aunt's stiff black skirts.

"Don't bury Mamma without me there," I begged. "However much you might have hated her, hate me still, please don't do this. I won't survive it."

"Have you *no* control over your passions?" Aunt Patience's toad-like face was ashen. "I ask for your own sake, you unprincipled animal. You will come to a bad end if—"

"I don't *care* what end I come to, only let me—"

"That is a monstrous thing to say," she cried, and then slapped me across the cheek.

Falling sideways, gasping, I clutched at the place where my skin throbbed and my teeth rang. Her slap was painful, but her visible disgust far worse.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, reaching for her wrist with my other hand. "Please, just—"

My aunt recoiled, striding towards the hall. "The situation is a hard one, Jane, but what you ask is impossible. Try to calm yourself. God sends comfort to the meek and the chaste, whilst the passionate inflict agonies upon themselves."

Aunt Patience stopped—hand splayed on her broad belly, eyes frozen into hailstones.

"You are very like her, are you not," she whispered. "The bitter fruit of a poisonous tree."

The front door clicked shut.

Grief until then had bound me in spider's silk and drained me

with her pinchers. Afterwards, however, I wanted to inflict exquisite agonies upon Aunt Patience; and had I been informed that a few weeks later, I would serve her the deepest cut imaginable, I am not certain that I would not have smiled.

Morbidity has always been a close companion of mine. Hours were spent meditating on my lost kitten and all the ways it could have (must have) died because of my inflamed temper. My late father was the source of infinite questions—was my slender, sloping nose like his since it was not like my mother's? After Mamma died, however, I thought of nothing save her lonesomeness under the earth; and when I did think of her in paradise, I next thought, *but they'll never allow me into heaven, and so I still will never see her again.*

There are doubtless worse hobbies than meditating upon your dead mother, but nobody has ever suggested one to me.

Agatha knelt with me in the garret a week after the funeral, because I wanted to go through my mother's trunk. For seven days, life had been a sickening seesaw between fear that calamity would befall me and the desire calamity would take me already and have done with it. Now I wanted to touch Mamma's gowns and her gloves and her letters, as if I might combine them in a spell to summon her; even today, if witchcraft existed by means of toadstools and tinker's thumbs to bring her back, I should do so in an instant.

"Well, 'ere we are," Agatha said in her broad rasp as she drew out an iron key.

Our servant, Agatha, who trudged about with wisps of blond hair falling in her squinting eyes, spoke entirely in platitudes. She was my sole comfort throughout that hellish week; hot broth mixed with sherry and soothing pats on the cheek are greatly cheering, even to juvenile she-devils.

The lock clicked open and I surged to plunder the trunk's con-

tents. We had a pair of tapers, but the light was dim and ghostly, and when my seeking fingers struck lace, I hardly knew what I held.

"Ah, what 'ave we 'ere?" Agatha rumbled from my right.

"Mamma's summer parasol," I recognised as I lifted it.

"Aye, Miss Jane, and what a parasol."

There was no refuting this, so I drew out more relics—cracked men's reading spectacles, a turquoise carryall. We went on until I was so sated with untrimmed hats and books of pressed flowers that I scarce noted I held a pair of empty laudanum bottles.

Agatha placidly took them away. "Now, Miss Jane, them's in the past, them is, over and emptied, so you just put 'em clean out o' yer mind."

I supposed Agatha meant Mamma was no longer ill, so I nodded. Diving into the trunk once more, I emerged with a lock of nut-brown hair very like mine woven into a small lovers' knot and pressed under silver-framed glass. I had seen it before, when it sat on Mamma's mantelpiece, but it had long since vanished.

"This was my father's. Were they married long before he died, Agatha?"

"Not as long as yer mum would've liked, poor dear."

"Cousin Edwin told me she was no better than a parasite," I whispered.

"Now, Miss Jane," Agatha growled kindly, "there's sorts as you can trust to speak plain, and there's sorts as will say whatsoever suits. And if those two kinds o' folks were only obvious, wi' signs or marks o' Cain or the like, a heap o' trouble would be saved."

A worm of guilt stirred in my gut. I had lied to her that very morning, when I said I would take buttered porridge and then dumped it by the pond so as not to worry her.

Lying has always come as easy for me as breathing.

"Did my father prefer living at the cottage too?"

"Bless you, he never lived 'ere after marrying yer mum. They met

in Paris where Mr. Steele dun banking—I figure he preferred being wheresoever she was."

My head fell upon her burly shoulder. Agatha smelt of lye and the mutton she had been stewing, and just when I was too exhausted to contemplate getting my weakened legs under me and leaving the darkening garret, I pulled something I had never seen before from the trunk.

It was a letter—one in my mother's elegant Parisian script with its bold downstrokes like a battle standard being planted. It read:

Rue M——,
2nd Arrondissement,

SUNDAY

Dear Mr. Sneeves,

Pardon, s'il vous plait, *for my writing in haste, but I can hardly shift a muscle for the grief now oppressing me: my J—— has expired finally. The doctors could do nothing, and I am desolate. Doubtless your legal efforts upon my behalf and that of my daughter have been heroic, but in the absence of my husband, I must confirm our complete readiness for relocation to Highgate House.* Si ce n'est pas indiscret, *as my beloved J—— was ever a faithful client of yours, I request an immediate audience, for every second may prove invaluable. And please return this letter with your reply, as I live in horror our plans will be anticipated by those who would prevent us.*

Veuillez agréer mes salutations empressées,
Mrs. Anne-Laure Steele

At first I had imagined that the letter was two pages, but it was kept together with the reply in a crabbed male English hand:

Rue du R——,
1st Arrondissement,

SUNDAY

Chère Mme. S——,

My most heartfelt condolences upon behalf of the firm. Mr. S—— was a highly valued patron of Sneeves, Swansea, and Turner. I await your arrival and assure you that the documents have already been drawn up to the late lamented Mr. S——'s satisfaction.

Humbly,
Cyrus Sneeves, Esq.

I could only understand that these documents referred to my eventual ownership of Highgate House; puzzled, I passed them to Agatha, who carefully folded both letters together again and returned them to the trunk.

"Well, that weren't what I'd been expecting." Agatha's squinting eyes narrowed further.

"My mother wrote that when my father died?"

"A wise hen always sees her chicks are looked after. Now, there's pickled 'erring and toast to be had. Your mother's things seem to 'earten you, and this trunk will be 'ere tomorrow, and the day after that."

Agatha was again strictly correct, but mistaken in her accidental assumption that *I* would be present.

"Did you ever meet my father, Agatha?" I questioned as she shut the trunk and heaved herself upright.

"Why, bless your 'eart, Miss Steele, what a question." Agatha tsked fondly and trudged downstairs.

Infants own memories, perhaps, but by the time I was nine, hazy visions of Jonathan Steele were locked away like mementoes in a safe to which I knew not the combination. The bread crumbs I had gathered into his portrait scarce made a crust, let alone a meal.

Your father was un homme magnifique*, and his eyes were the brown of sweet chocolate just as yours are, and he never stopped thinking of ways to make us safe,* from my mother.

'E was as good a man as any, and no worse than some, from Agatha.

Don't speak of him, for God's sake, from Aunt Patience.

Now I knew he was a banker in Paris with an English solicitor friend my mother trusted; I imagined Jonathan Steele a positive hero of finance with sweeping moustaches, who had rescued my mother from penury with a flourish of his fancifully enormous pen.

"How did he meet Mamma?" I called from the top of the creaking garret stairs.

"You'll use up all your chatter and be clean out o' words, and then 'owever shall we pass the time, Miss Jane?" Agatha chided, beckoning.

I wondered over the unsettling notion of words running dry. My footsteps as I followed her made no more sound than the virtuous dead, fast asleep beneath their coverlets of stone.

Slowly, I recovered my appetite—and concurrently, my keen interest in rebellion.

My aunt Patience thought girls ought to be decorative. Indeed, Jane Eyre tucks herself away in a curtained alcove at the beginning of her saga, and thus at least attempts docility.

I was not a fictional orphan but a real one, however. Waking in the full blaze of the May afternoons, I would eat nothing save brown

bread and butter for lunch, and the steaming milk soup Agatha made with sweet almonds, eggs, and cinnamon for my tea. My ugly—dare I say French—opinion of Aunt Patience kept her away temporarily, and the rest of the time I spoke low nonsense to the horses or slunk through the woods where the marsh grasses swooned into the embrace of the pond. In the stables, I could allow the stink of manure and clean sweat to calm me as I brushed my last remaining confidants; but in the forest, my musings turned darkly fantastical.

I will set fire to the main house, and then they will be sorry they made Mamma unhappy.

I will run away to Paris, where I will be awake only when the stars shine through the window and the boulevards are empty.

I will find my mother's grave and live there off of dew and nectar.

True peace did not visit me; but at times, an edgy calm like falling asleep after a nightmare descended when I lost myself in melancholy.

At times, I suspected I was not alone.

As the days passed, my sense of being watched increased. Agatha let me alone apart from unlocking Mamma's trunk every evening and packing satchels of apples for me to carry to the stables; she would never spy on me, I felt certain. The gardener was a wizened old thing, and the grooms paid me as little mind as did the servants at the main house. Patience Barbary thought the out of doors a treacherous bridge meant to convey her from one civilised structure to another.

Still I caught glimpses of another creature there in the trees, one with round eyes and a predator's hungry stare; but by the time I understood that I was the prey, my fate had already been sealed.

THREE

I was a precocious actress in her eyes: she sincerely looked on me as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity.

Invitations to the main house were rebuffed in the rudest manner I could think of: silence. Even adults who are frightened of children come to their senses sooner or later, however, and in early June, I opened a missive demanding I appear before Mrs. Patience Barbary at five o'clock for tea. When I entered the drawing room, I discovered that three people awaited me instead of two.

Aunt Patience presided over the ivory-and-green-striped settee, an expression of foregone success staining her froggish mouth. The fact that her full widow's weeds looked no different after my mother's death (how could they have?) made me long to slit wounds in the taffeta. Edwin, lips already faintly dusted with sugar from the lemon cakes, offered me a polite smile.

In that instant, I knew—as I think I had suspected—that Edwin had been the one spying upon me.

"Jane, this is Mr. Vesalius Munt of Lowan Bridge School. Mr. Munt, this is my niece, Jane."

Doubtless the reader has heard cautionary reports of marble-eyed patriarchs who run schools for profit and, shall we say, misrep-

resent their amenities? You are partly prepared for what is to come, then. Mr. Munt was clad head to toe in black; his forehead was high, his sable boots neatly polished, and his mien sober. Here Mr. Munt's superficial resemblance to fiction ended.

First, he seemed highly intelligent. He watched those around him closely; this was not a man who ignored the way I settled as far as I could from my aunt, nor who would remark upon it until the observation suited his interests.

Second, Mr. Vesalius Munt was handsome. He was aged somewhere between forty and fifty, but the map of his face—from thoughtful wrinkles to clear grey eyes to slender chin—suggested naturally benevolent inclinations and announced his regret at his self-imposed sternness of character.

Third, he was a tyrant, which returns us to the more familiar literary archetypes. He was a great whopping unrepentant tyrant, and he *enjoyed* the vocation, its artistry—I could see it in his perfectly disarranged black hair and his humbly clasped hands. I thought, with a squirming stomach, that here was a man who would set a snake over hot coals simply to watch it writhe.

"Miss Jane Steele," he greeted me. "You have been orphaned within the month, I am sorry to hear. God's ways are inscrutable, but trust in Him nevertheless brings light to the darkest of valleys."

My aunt primly tucked her chin within her neck. "She is a clever enough girl, only mannerless and stubborn, Mr. Munt. Her intelligence needs moulding into humility and her character into an orderly Christian one."

"Then I won't remind you of my mother any longer?" I hissed.

Aunt Patience whipped out a glint of lacquered wood and began fanning herself with black lace. She wanted *something* between us, even if a scrap of cobwebby cloth.

Mr. Munt's gaze flickered between us like stage swords, all shine and speed and subtle games. "Your aunt has informed me that your

mother was . . . troubled," he said with tremendous care. "It is not unusual for the children of lunatics to—"

"Mamma was *not* a lunatic!" I cried, aghast.

"No *indeed*," seconded Edwin in a fawning manner which sickened me.

"Her constitution was delicate." My aunt sounded like the teeth were being pried from her head. "Artists are often highly strung."

"Art is a curse," Vesalius Munt agreed, shifting on the hard cane chair. "An infection eating away at godly reserves of abnegation, chastity, and meekness. Show me a contented artist, Mrs. Barbary, and I will show you a dabbler—a pretender, a drudge. True artists belong to a miserable race. Jane, they tell me that your passions are strange ones, and your upbringing . . . eccentric. I run a school, you see, and your aunt thinks you would make an excellent pupil there."

The word *school* provoked the first sensation other than dull misery I had felt since before I could recall. Mamma had been at boarding school as a girl, in the south of France. On holidays they walked to the glimmering seashore, where pebbles clattered under their slippers and the sea spray chased them shrieking with laughter back to the dunes. She learnt both dancing and painting there.

Going to school already seemed adventurous, but my fingers tingled when I realised it would also be imitative of my mother.

Remembering our cottage, however, I was swiftly anchored back to Highgate House; how could I leave everything familiar when I was already so lost? Fear leached the happy nerves away.

Additionally, I was an artful little liar, and what befell artful little liars at school?

"I should rather not go," I whispered.

Aunt Patience snapped her fan.

"To send me away with a stranger—"

"Mr. Munt will make you useful, as orphaned children must—"

"Don't banish me," I pleaded, standing.

"The matter is settled."

"It is not either!" I shouted in most unchildlike fashion.

Aunt Patience thrust her heaving bosom forward. "You horrid puppet, only listen to reason for once. You *must* find a vocation, or—"

"I own Highgate House!" I cried. "Mamma told me so. You're only saying this to me because you *hated her.*"

"I am saying this to you because you must become productive. And if you knew how good I was to your mother after all the suffering she caused, you would drop to your knees and beg my forgiveness."

Is that what I must do, then? My lips were quivering, my guts knotted. *Humiliate myself so I might keep what belongs to me?*

"Is flattery what you're after?" I hissed. "But of course, that's why you loathed poor Mamma so—she was exquisite, and you were never flattered a day in your life."

Sulphurous silence spread throughout the parlour. Mr. Munt studied me so intently he made my neck prickle, and Cousin Edwin gazed in a horrified stupour, his breaths straining his waistcoat buttons. Aunt Patience only smiled, a smile like a gate slamming closed and locking.

"I didn't mean that," I choked out. "Truly. But I want to remain here with . . . with everything I have left of her."

"As well you should. Mummy, you can't send her away!" Edwin protested. "Jane is my only playmate."

Aunt Patience said, in much too babying a tone for a lad of thirteen, "There now, my sweet, soon your tutor will have taught you all he knows and you yourself will go to school and find splendid new companions."

"No," Edwin moaned, burying his face in his hands. "No, I will miss her, you *can't.* It isn't *fair.*"

"Quite touching to see such devotion in young relations." Mr.

Munt's stately wrinkles creased approvingly, and he brushed imaginary dust from the knee of his trouser. "It gives me every hope that Jane is indeed redeemable, to have inspired such affection."

Finding none of these observations complimentary and growing steadily more unnerved by Vesalius Munt, whose silvery eyes seemed coins at the bottom of a too-deep pool, I edged towards the door.

"Where do you think you are going, my dear little girl?" Mr. Munt asked, kindness seeping from his tone like blood from a gash.

"I cannot stay for tea." A noose was tightening round my throat.

"Now, Jane," Mr. Munt purred, rising. "You are only proving your dear aunt's point by acting so irrationally. Come here, allow me to examine you, determine your strengths, and perhaps we shall yet find a place for you at Lowan Bridge School."

I was off like a hare; my aunt looked after me in unfeigned alarm, and Edwin gave a small wail.

Mr. Munt, I saw as I glanced behind, meditated on me with his dashing black head cocked: the look of a man who has spied a hill and vowed to crest it, for no reason other than to see what lies upon the other side.

When I returned to Highgate House many years thereafter, I viewed the ravine again, and felt as distant from it as a child does looking at a terrible cave in a picture book. Thus I can describe it as my twenty-four-year-old self perfectly rationally. Our cottage stood at the edge of the woods, with the sweet brown duck pond lying to the west of us. If one passed the pond, the forest which bordered our property gave way to a ridge and thence to a sharp declivity like a small crevasse populated by violet monkshood and sharp wild grasses.

I felt Mr. Munt's eyes searing the back of my skull long after my escape was accomplished, so I repaired to the woods.

My curls stuck to my brow when I reached the trees, glued by

means of animal fear to my skin, and I smeared them back. We had pinned two braids like a crown atop my head, but several strands had bolted and I must have looked a malicious dryad there, surrounded by leaf and bracken. Light slanted through the branches as if it possessed physical weight that evening, making prison bars of shadows and penitents' benches of fallen trees. Wandering, I calmed myself.

I should not go to Lowan Bridge with Mr. Munt.

I need not go to Lowan Bridge with Mr. Munt.

I will *not go to Lowan Bridge with Mr. Munt.*

"Are you hurt, Jane?"

Too frightened to shriek, I spun about with my hand clapped over my mouth. Cousin Edwin stood ten feet away from me, a cautious grin pasted over his face, the sort people who are terrible with horses (as I am not) think will calm skittish beasts.

"What do you mean?" I gasped.

Edwin came no closer, but pointed his index finger. His dull hair was half lit and half hid in the shade of a crooked branch; he seemed a stitched-together creature from a puppet pageant, the sort in which spouses are beaten within an inch of their lives.

"You're bleeding." He began to walk again.

Looking down, I saw that I had scratched my arm upon a bramble without noticing. A trace of blood wept from the shallow gouge.

"Here," Cousin Edwin said when he had reached me.

He breathed harder as he wound his handkerchief over my arm: round and round, binding the cut, forehead beetling in concentration. Edwin smelled of lemon cake and the faintly *old* aroma he always carried, as if he had been born in a bed of camphor and cheese rinds.

"I won't let them," he announced. "I hate that she thought to send you to school. I am the *man* of this house, and you shall stay here with us, Jane. Don't be afraid."

I watched him tie off the cloth—like a bandage, yes, and like a silken slave's cuff, and like the collar at the end of a leash.

"I'm not afraid."

Edwin glanced up, pale green eyes glowing. "You *were* afraid—of that horrid Mr. Munt. You needn't be. He won't take you away from us."

Edwin plucked a leaf from my hair and placed the memento in his trouser pocket—a habit I had never liked, but never thought quite so pitiful.

"Did you forgive me?" He rocked on his heels. "About the secrets game—we've hardly spoken since. I was only repeating something rude I heard Cook say. Your mother was too beautiful to avoid cruel gossip, don't you think? Shake hands?"

Edwin's pudgy hand thrust before my face. I shook; for an idiot, he was clever to perceive that complimenting my late mother would work miracles.

Instead of letting go my hand, he pulled me closer.

"Do you want to know what my favourite secret is?" he breathed into the space between my eyes.

I swallowed. If I said no, he would rage, pout, fume for days, so I angled my head. He put his rosy mouth to my ear.

"The time in the trap when I *showed* you, and you never screamed. You're every bit as bad as I am. You liked it."

He drew back fractionally. His grip tightened, and whilst I searched for words to tell him that no, opening his trousers had not been a bond between us and that screaming clearly ought to have occurred to me, he chewed his underlip until it was scarlet.

Then he grinned brightly.

"You're not screaming now either."

"Let go of my arm," I ordered.

The breeze sent kindly fingertips through our hair, jays calling from their shadowy canopies, and now I *was* frightened—mortally—

of the woods which were leaf curtained and the birds which could not help me with whatever strange sort of trouble this was.

Edwin did not let go. "Let's start a new game."

"Stop it, I tell you. What game?" I demanded.

"I want to know what the inside of your mouth tastes like." Cousin Edwin leant down.

I struck him as hard as I could across the face, and he was startled enough to let go, and I had not known until then what it meant to *run*.

The light shone brighter, and the wind picked up, and I had just burst through the trees in the direction of civilisation when Edwin caught me. We both tumbled to the ground and I swiped at him, shouting his name and *stop* and he laughed easily and pinned my wrists to the earth at the top of the ravine where the twigs pricked my back and the sky seemed a great billowing, purpling tent above the looming forest.

His lips met my neck; his tongue shoved at my mouth. I kicked and *kicked,* limbs transforming into weapons even as my heart churned pure black fear through my veins. Edwin pinned me with his weight and he had transformed too now, hard where he ground against my thigh, red where my fist had stung his cheek, and *My body isn't working, nothing is working*, I thought, so I used something else.

"I'll tell this time," I spat as I struggled. "I'll tell *everyone.*"

His piggish look of glee dimmed. "No, you won't. You're a knowing little jezebel just like your mother, Mummy always tells me so."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you like it."

"I'll tell her we *both* like it," I lied coldly, falling limp. "Then she'll send me away forever. Get *off.*"

Edwin retreated—biting his mouth, straightening his clothing. When he took in my bedraggled state, he grew agitated, reaching into thin air as I brushed myself off with unsteady fingers.

"It was only a game," he offered. "I never meant to—I would never hurt you. I'm sorry, Jane."

My wrists were bruised, my back scraped, my sleeve torn, my heart unbroken but dirtied, as if he had pulled it through the mud. Walking a few paces away, Edwin retrieved something from the ground. It was his pocket handkerchief, which had fallen from my arm, and he passed it back to me as if giving girls pocket handkerchiefs could atone for any offence under the sun.

"Jane, will you be my friend again?"

Rage poured from scalp to sole at this request.

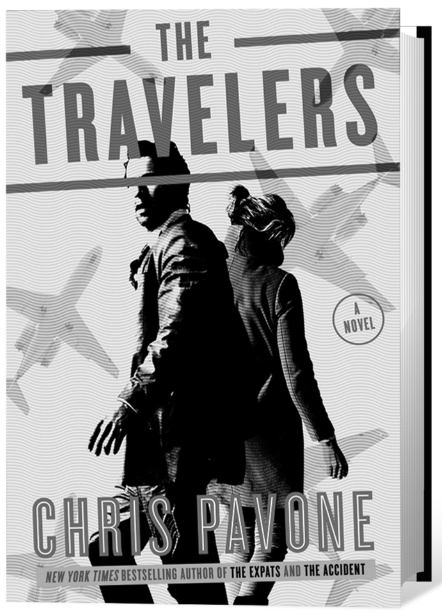
"We were never friends," I lied, and—preparing to run once more—I shoved his chest as hard as I could.

The rock he staggered back upon was loose under his footing; it set off a tiny slide into the ravine, a hushed skidding of granite and dead bracken. That accidents happen is a universal principle—and perhaps the only universal principle worth mentioning, for it governs an enormous percentage of our daily lives.

That my entire being, every last ounce of *me*, had been put into that violent push, however, is undeniable.

When I peered over the top of the short decline and met Edwin's eyes as he sucked in his last breaths with a broken spine and a look of pure disappointment, I did nothing to aid or comfort him.

I walked away.



Perfect for readers of Daniel Silva, Alan Furst and Michael Connelly.

Will Rhodes has made a terrible mistake. A woman has appeared at the door of his Argentine hotel room, a woman who isn't his wife and who, until this moment, has been a harmless flirtation. Harmless flirtations are part of his job. But these flirtations have never showed up at his hotel room with a gun, threatening his life.

Will is a travel writer—a wine aficionado and international food expert for *Travelers* magazine. And he loves this job. Though he's wondered why he sometimes has to deliver bulky sealed packages to consulates all over the world, or why he occasionally has to use a fake name. Now those shadowy errands and white lies have come back to haunt him. Clearly Will's job is not everything he thought it was.

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First Edition

PROLOGUE

MENDOZA, ARGENTINA

The door flies open. Bright light floods into the dark room, framing the silhouette of a large man who stands there, unmoving.

"What?" Will demands, raising himself onto his elbows, squinting into the harsh light. "What's going on?"

The man doesn't answer.

"What do you want?"

The man remains in the doorway, saying nothing, a mute looming hulk. He surveys the hotel room, the disheveled bed, discarded clothing, burned-down candles, wine bottle and glasses.

"¿Qué quieres?" Will tries.

Will had been lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, worrying. But not about this, not about an intruder. Now Will's mind is flooding with competing scenarios and their different levels of emergency: drunk hotel guest, confused night porter, hotel security, jealous boyfriend, burglar, murderer.

Will's panic is rising, and his eyes flicker toward escape, the French doors that he opened just a few minutes ago, doors facing the vineyard that falls away from the hacienda, with the snowcapped peaks of the Andes in the distance, under the big fat moon. He pulls himself to a sitting position, uncomfortably aware of his bare chest. "Who are you?" he asks assertively, trying to project confidence. "Why are you here?"

The man nods, takes a step forward, and pulls the door closed behind him.

The room falls into the semidarkness of flickering candlelight and the bright blue LED glow of the clock, 2:50 A.M. Will's eyes readjust while his heart races, his breath coming quick and shallow, fight or flight, or both. His imagination hops around the room, trying out different items as weapons, swinging the standing lamp, breaking the wine bottle. A

fireplace tool—the poker—would be the best, but that's on the far side of the room, on the other side of this trespasser, this indistinct peril.

"No," the man breaks his silence. "Why are *you* here?"

The man's hand finds a switch, a soft click and a harsh transformation, Will's pupils contracting a sliver of a second too slowly. In the light, Will realizes that he has seen this man before. He can't remember where, or when exactly, but it was sometime recent. This discovery feels more like a defeat than a victory, as if he has found out that he lost something.

"Who are *you*, Will Rhodes?"

The man's English doesn't have any trace of an accent, Argentine or otherwise. This is a big beefy American who's continuing to walk toward the bed, toward Will, slowly, menacing. It takes a while; it's a large room, luxuriously decorated and extravagantly linened, with superfluous furniture and wine-country knickknacks and signifiers of the Pampas—mounted horns, a cowhide rug. It's a room designed to remind well-off guests of where they are, and why they're here, when they could be anywhere. Will has stayed in many different versions of this room, all over the world, always on someone else's tab.

"Are you robbing me?" Will inventories the valuables he might lose here, and it doesn't amount to much.

"Kidnapping?" No one except the most ill-informed amateur would take the tremendous risk of kidnapping for the paltry rewards that could be traded for Will Rhodes. This guy doesn't look like an ill-informed amateur.

The intruder finally arrives at the bedside, and reaches into his jacket. Will scoots away from whatever potential threat is being withdrawn from this man's pocket, in the middle of the night, halfway across the globe from his home, from his wife, his life.

If Will had any doubts earlier, he doesn't anymore: he's now positive he made a terrible mistake tonight. The whole thing seemed too easy, too perfect. He'd been an idiot.

"Look," the man says, extending his arm, holding something, a little flick of the wrist—here, take this—and the smartphone falls into Will's palm. He glances at the screen, a still image, an indecipherable blur of faint light amid darkness, unrecognizable forms in an unidentifiable location.

"What's this?"

"Hit Play."

Will touches the touchscreen, and video-navigation buttons appear, the recently invented language we all now know. He hits the triangle.

A video begins to play: a naked woman straddling a man, her hips pistoning up and down, like an out-of-control oil derrick, a dangerous situation. Will watches for two seconds, just enough to figure out who it is in the poor-quality video, low light, an oblique angle, garbled audio. He touches his fingertip to the square button. The image is now frozen, the woman's back arched, head thrown back, mouth open in ecstasy. Apparent ecstasy.

Of course.

Will isn't entirely surprised that something bad is happening. But this particular end seems to be an excess of bad, disproportionate bad, unfair bad. Or maybe not. Maybe this—whatever this turns out to be—is exactly the appropriate level of bad.

His mind runs through a handful of options before he makes a decision that's by necessity hasty. He considers trying to get on more clothes—"Hey, how about you let me get dressed?"—but clothed, he might look like a threat; wearing only pajama bottoms, he's a victim, sympathetic to the guard he hopes to encounter. This new hotel takes security seriously, peace of mind for their intended mega-rich clientele, with round-the-clock rent-a-cops and a close relationship with the police.

Will extends his arm to return the phone, rolling his body toward the bedside.

Here we go.

When the man reaches to collect his device, Will hurls it across the room.

The intruder spins to watch the phone's flight—*crack*—while Will springs up, heaves his body into this man, knocking him over, landing atop him, pajama'd legs astride the guy's bulky torso, a punch to the face, and another, blood pouring from his nose.

Will hops up, barely feeling the engagement of his muscles, his bloodstream flooded with survival-preservation hormones. He flies through the parted curtains. He's out on the moonlit lawn, barefoot and shirtless, sprinting through the cool dewy grass toward the glowing lights of the

sprawling main house, toward the security guards and their weapons and their hotline to the *federales*, who at the very least will detain the intruder while Will has a chance to make a call or two, and now Will is feeling almost confident, halfway across—

The fist comes out of nowhere. Will stumbles backward a step before losing his feet entirely, his rear falling down and his feet flying up, and he thinks he can see a woman—*the* woman—standing over him, her arm finishing its follow-through of a right hook, just before the back of Will's head slams into the ground, and everything goes black.

1

FIVE WEEKS EARLIER
NEW YORK CITY

A man is running along the sidewalk of a quiet leafy Brooklyn street, panting, sweat beaded on his face, quarter to six in the morning. He's wearing jeans, a dirty tee shirt, dingy white sneakers. This man is not exercising; he's working. He reaches into a canvas sling, cocks his arm, and tosses a newspaper, which flies across a fence, over a yard, landing on a townhouse stoop, skittering to a stop against the front door. A perfect toss.

In the street beside him, a battered old station wagon crawls at three miles per hour, the car's tailgate held partly open by a couple of jerry-rigged bungee cords. It's his sister behind the wheel of the Chevy, which they bought from a junkyard in Willets Point owned by another guy from Campeche. There are a lot of Mexicans in New York City, but not too many from the west-coast Yucatán city. Four hundred dollars was a good deal, a favor, a chit to be returned at some indefinite point, for some unspecified price.

The sling is empty. The man jogs into the street, and hauls a pile of papers from the way-back. He returns to the sidewalk, to the house with scaffolding over the portico, and a piece of plywood covering a parlor-floor window, and a stack of lumber plus a couple of sawhorses dominating the small front yard, whose sole greenery is a rosebush that's at least half-dead.

He tosses the newspaper, but this time his aim isn't perfect—he's been throwing papers for an hour—and he knocks over a contractor's plastic bucket, from which an empty beer bottle clatters onto the stone stoop before falling to the top step, crash, into pieces.

"Mierda."

The man jogs to the stoop, rights the bucket, picks up the broken glass,

sharp shards, lethal weapons, like what his cousin Alonso used to warn off that *coño*, that *narcotraficante* who was grabby with Estellita at the bar under the expressway. Violence has always been a part of Alonso's life; sometimes it's been one of his job responsibilities. For some people violence is woven into their fabric, like the bright blood-red thread that his grandmother would weave into the turquoise and indigo serapes on her loom that was tied to the lime tree in the backyard, before that type of work relocated to more picturesque villages within easier reach of the *turistas*, who paid a premium to travel dusty roads into tiny hamlets to buy their ethnic handicrafts directly from the barefoot sources.

The man runs out to the car, deposits the broken glass in the trunk, then back to the sidewalk, tossing another paper, racing to make up for lost time. You waste ten seconds here, twenty there, and by the end of the route you're a half-hour behind, and customers are angry—standing out there in bathrobes, hands on hips, looking around to see if neighbors got their papers—and you don't get your ten-dollar tips at Christmas, and you can't pay the rent, and next thing you know, you're begging that *coño* for a job as a lookout, just another *ilegal* on the corner, hiding from the NYPD and the DEA and the INS, until one night you get gut-shot for sixty dollars and a couple grams of *llelo*.

He tosses another paper.

The noise of the breaking bottle wakes Will Rhodes before he wants to be awake, in the middle of a dream, a good one. He reaches in the direction of his wife, her arm bare and soft and warm and peach-fuzzy, the thin silk of her nightie smooth and cool, the strap easily pushed aside, exposing her freckled shoulder, the hollow at the base of her neck, the rise of her . . .

Her nothing. Chloe isn't there.

Will's hand is resting on the old linen sheet that bears someone else's monogram, some long-dead Dutch merchant, a soft stack that Will purchased cheaply at a sparse flea market along a stagnant canal in Delft, refitted by an eccentric seamstress in Red Hook who repurposes odd-shaped old fabrics into the standardized dimensions of contemporary mattresses and pillows and mass-production dining tables. Will wrote an

article about it, just a couple hundred words, for an alternative weekly. He writes an article about everything.

Chloe's note is scrawled on a Post-it, stuck on her pillow:

Early meeting, went to office. Have good trip. —C

No *love*. No *miss you*. No-nonsense nothing.

Will had gotten out of the karaoke bar before falling into the clutches of that wine rep, back-seam stockings and hot pink bra straps, a propensity for leaning forward precipitously. She was waiting to pounce when he returned to the table after his heartfelt "Fake Plastic Trees," a restrained bow to the applause of his dozen inebriated companions, whose clapping seemed louder and more genuine than the measured clapping of the thousand pairs of hands that had congratulated Will hours earlier, in the ballroom, when he'd won an award.

"You look great in a tuxedo," she'd said, her hand suddenly on his thigh.

"Everybody looks great in a tuxedo," Will countered. "That's the point. Good night!"

But it was two in the morning when he got home, earliest. Maybe closer to three. He remembers fumbling with his keys. In the hall, he kicked off his patent-leather shoes, so he wouldn't clomp loudly up the wood stairs in leather soles. He thinks he stumbled—yes, he can feel a bruise on his shin. Then he probably stood in their door-less doorway, swaying, catching a glimpse of Chloe's uncovered thigh, eggshell satin in the streetlight . . .

She hates it when Will comes home in the middle of the night wearing inebriated sexual arousal like a game-day athletic uniform, sweaty and stained and reeking of physical exertion. So he probably stripped—yes, there's his tuxedo, half on the chair, bow tie on the floor—and passed out, snoring like a freight train, stinking like a saloon.

Will shades his eyes against the sunlight pouring through the large uncurtained six-over-six windows, with bubbles and chips and scratches and whorls in the glass, original to the house, 1884. Built back when there were no telephones, no laptops or Internet, no cars or airplanes or atomic bombs or world wars. But way back then, before his great-grandparents

were born, these same glass panes were here, in these windows, in Will and Chloe's new old house.

He hears noise from downstairs. Was that the front door closing?

"Chloe?" he calls out, croaky.

Then footsteps on the creaky stairs, but no answer. He clears his throat. "Chlo?"

The floorboards in the hall groan, the noise getting nearer, a bit creepy—

"Forgot my wallet," Chloe says. She looks across the room at the big battered bureau, locates the offending item, then turns to her husband. "You feeling okay?"

He understands the accusation. "Sorry I was so late. Did I wake you?"

Chloe doesn't answer.

"In fact I was getting ready to come home when . . ."

Chloe folds her arms across her chest. She doesn't want to hear this story. She simply wants him to come home earlier, having had less to drink; their time home together doesn't overlap all that much. But staying out till all hours is his job—it's not optional, it's not indulgent, it's required. And Chloe knows it. She too has done this job.

Plus Will doesn't think it's fair that once again Chloe left home before he awoke, depositing another loveless note on the pillow, on another day when he's flying.

Nevertheless, he knows he needs to defend himself, and to apologize. "I'm sorry. But you know how much I love karaoke." He pulls the sheet aside, pats the bed. "Why don't you come over here? Let me make it up to you."

"I have a meeting."

Chloe's new office is in a part of the city filled with government bureaucracies, law firms, jury duty. Will ran into her one lunchtime—he was leaving a building-department fiasco, she was picking up a sandwich. They were both surprised to see each other, both flustered, as if they'd been caught at something. But it was only the interruption of the expectation of privacy.

"Plus I'll be ovulating in, like, six days. So save it up, sailor."

"But in six days I'll still be in France."

"I thought you were back Friday."

"Malcolm extended the trip."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot to tell you."

"Well that's shitty. There goes another month, wasted."

Wasted isn't exactly what Will would call the month. "Sorry."

"So you keep saying." She shakes her head. "Look, I have to go."

Chloe walks to the bed. The mattress is on the floor, no frame, no box spring. Will has a mental image of the perfect frame, but he hasn't yet been able to find it, and he'd rather have nothing than the wrong thing. Which is why the house is filled with doorways without doors, doors without doorknobs, sinks without faucets, bare bulbs without fixtures; to Will, all of these no-measures are preferable to half-measures.

This is one of the things that drives Chloe crazy about the renovation project, about her husband in general. She doesn't care if everything is perfect; she merely wants it to be good enough. And this is exactly why Will doesn't let her handle any of it. He knows that she will settle, will make compromises that he wouldn't. Not just about the house.

She bends down, gives him a closed-mouth kiss. Will reaches for her arm.

"Really, I'm running late," she says, but with little conviction—almost none—and a blush, a suppressed smile. "I gotta go." But there's no resistance in her arm, she's not trying to pull away, and she allows herself to fall forward, into bed, onto her husband.

Will sprawls amid the sheets while Chloe rearranges her hair, and replaces earrings, reties her scarf, all these tasks executed distractedly but deftly, the small competencies of being a woman, skills unknowable to him. The only thing men learn is how to shave.

"I love watching you," he says, making an effort.

"*Mmm*," she mutters, not wondering what the hell he's talking about.

Everybody says that the second year of marriage is the hardest. But their second year was fine, they were young and they were fun, both being paid to travel the world, not worrying about much. That year was terrific.

It's their fourth year that has been a drag. The year began when they moved into this decrepit house, a so-called investment property that

Chloe's father had left in his will, three apartments occupied by below-market and often deadbeat tenants, encumbered by serious code violations, impeded by unfindable electrical and plumbing plans—every conceivable problem, plus a few inconceivable ones.

The work on the house sputtered after demolition, then stalled completely due to the unsurprising problem of running out of money: everything has been wildly more expensive than expected. That is, more than Will expected; Chloe expected exactly what transpired.

So flooring is uninstalled, plumbing not entirely working, kitchen unfinished and windows unrepaired and blow-in insulation un-blown-in. Half of the second floor and all of the third are uninhabitable. The renovation is an unmitigated disaster, and they are broke, and Chloe is amassing a stockpile of resentment about Will's refusals to make the compromises that would allow this project to be finished.

Plus, after a year of what is now called "trying" on a regular basis—a militaristically regimented schedule—Chloe is still not pregnant. Will now understands that ovulation tests and calendars are the opposite of erotic aids.

When Chloe isn't busy penciling in slots for results-oriented, missionary-position intercourse, she has become increasingly moody. And most of her moods are some variation of bad: there's hostile bad and surly bad and resentful bad and today's, distracted bad.

"What do you think this is about?" she asks. "The extended trip?"

Will shrugs, but she can't see it, because she's not looking his way. "Malcolm hasn't fully explained yet." He doesn't want to tell Chloe anything specific until he has concrete details—what exactly the new assignment will be, any additional money, more frequent travel.

"How is Malcolm, anyway?"

As part of the big shake-up at *Travelers* a year ago, Will was hired despite Chloe's objections—both of them shouldn't work at the same struggling company in the same dying industry. So she quit. She left the full-time staff and took the title of contributing editor, shared with a few dozen people, some with only tenuous connections to the magazine accompanied by token paychecks, but still conferring a legitimacy—names on masthead, business cards in wallets—that could be leveraged while hunting for other opportunities.

Hunting for Other Opportunities: good job title for magazine writers.

Chloe came to her decision rationally, plotting out a pros-and-cons list. She is the methodical pragmatist in the couple; Will is the irrational emotional idealistic one.

"I think the takeover is stressing Malcolm out," Will says. "The negotiations are ending, both sides are doing due diligence. He seems to have a lot of presentations, reports, meetings."

"Is he worried for his job?"

"Not that he'll admit—you know how Malcolm is—but he has to be, right?"

Chloe grunts an assent; she knows more about Malcolm's office persona than Will does. Those two worked together a long time, and it was a difficult transition when Malcolm eventually became her boss. They both claimed that her departure was 100 percent amicable, but Will had his doubts. The closed-door I-quit meeting seemed to last a long time.

They also both claimed they'd never had a thing—no flirtation, no fling, no late-night make-out session in Mallorca or Malaysia. Will had doubts about that too.

"Okay then," she says, leaning down for another kiss, this one more generous than their previous good-bye. "Have a good trip."

People can spend hours packing for a weeklong overseas trip. They stand in their closets, desultorily flipping through hangers. They rummage through medicine cabinets, searching for the travel-sized toothpaste. They scour every drawer, box, and shelf for electrical adapters. They might have some of the foreign currency lying around somewhere, maybe in the desk . . . ? They double- and triple-check that their passports are in their pockets.

It's been a long time since Will was one of those amateurs. He collects his bright-blue roll-aboard—easy to describe to a bellhop, or to spot in a lost-and-found. It would also be easy to ID on a baggage carousel, but that will never happen. Will doesn't check luggage.

He mechanically fills the bag with piles from dresser drawers, the same exact items he packed for his previous trip, each in its preordained position in the bag's quadrants, which are delineated by rolled-up boxer

shorts and socks. It takes Will five minutes to pack, long-zip short-zip upright on the floor, the satisfying clunk of rubberized wheels on bare parquet.

He walks into his office. One bookshelf is lined with shoeboxes labeled in a meticulous hand: W. EUROPE, E. EUROPE, AFRICA & MIDEAST, ASIA & AUSTRALIA, LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN, USA. From W. EUROPE Will chooses a small stack of euros from among other clipped-together clumps of paper money, and a packet of Paris Metro tickets, and a burgundy-covered street-map booklet. He grabs a plug adapter, refits his computer charger with the long cylindrical prongs, ready to be inserted into exotic European outlets.

Last but not least, his passport, thick with the extra pages from the State Department, filled with stamps and visas, exit and entry, coming and going. It's the rare immigration officer who fails to comment on the peripatetic paperwork. Will has been detained before, and no doubt will be again.

Will stands in the doorway, looking around, worried that he's forgetting something, what . . . ?

He remembers. Opens a drawer, and removes a box clad in wrapping paper and bound in silk ribbon, just small enough to fit into his jacket pocket, just large enough to be uncomfortable there.

Will clambers down the long flight of rickety stairs to the parlor floor, and out the front door. He picks up the newspaper, descends more dangerous steps, and exits their postage-stamp yard, where a surprisingly undead rose vine clings to the iron fence, a handful of perfect red blooms.

He sets off toward the subway, dragging his bag, just as he's done every few weeks for a decade.

The bag rolls over the remains of a single rose that seems to have met a violent end, petals strewn, stem broken. Will glances at the little red mess, wondering what could have happened, and when, why someone would murder one of his flowers right here in front of the house. He can't help but wonder if it was Chloe who did this.

Will has been increasingly worried that his bride is slipping away, that theirs may become another marriage that succumbs to financial pressures and work travel and the looming specter of infertility. Worried that love is

not always enough, or not permanent enough. Worried that all the non-fun parts will eclipse the fun parts.

Will bends over, looks closer. This decimated flower is not a rose, not from his yard, nothing to do with him. It's someone else's dead carnation, someone else's crime of passion.

Maybe he's worried about all the wrong things.

2

NEW YORK CITY

The door's plaque reads simply EDITOR, no name plate, as if the human being in there is interchangeable with the ones who came before, and the ones who will come after. An office that's occupied by a job, not by a person. There have been only four of them in the magazine's seventy-year history.

"Come!"

Malcolm Somers is sitting in his big executive chair behind his big executive desk, across from Gabriella Rivera, her profile framed by the floor-to-ceiling window onto Avenue of the Americas. Nothing is visible outside except other office buildings, up and down the avenue, thousands of windows into other lives, suits and ties, computers and coat racks, ergonomic chairs and solar-screen blinds and pressed-wood L-shaped desks exuding formaldehyde, and not even the barest glimpse of sky above nor street below, which can be seen only with face pressed against the glass, something no one except a child would do. Malcolm's kids do it.

Gabriella doesn't turn to see who's entering. She remains sitting perfectly still with her perfect legs crossed, one low heel dangling from the aloft foot, a sleek elegant figure, like an ad for something, a product, Sexy Professional Woman Sitting in Stylish Chair™. An ad for the product that is herself.

"Sorry to interrupt," Will says. "I've got a flight . . ."

Will stands in the doorway of the big room, waiting for permission to enter, for Malcolm to dismiss Gabriella.

"Gabs?" Malcolm asks.

The deputy editor waits a punitive beat before she nods. She stands and smooths her skirt, a garment that straddles the line of decency, depending on point of view. Most men would say it's just the right amount of tight and short; most women would disagree.

Gabriella turns, gives Will that dazzling smile. But beneath the veneer of those white teeth, those plush pillows of lips, Will can see the resentment at her interrupted meeting, maybe more. Will senses something in the air here, between these two. And not for the first time.

"Sorry," Will reiterates, apologizing to another woman who doesn't want to hear it.

She shrugs, not his fault, something else at play. "Have a good trip. France, is it? How long?"

"A week."

Gabriella cocks her head, considering something. "We should have a drink soon," she says, though Will doesn't think that's what she'd been considering. "It's been a while." On her way past, she squeezes Will's arm, and he feels a jolt from the strong current of sexual energy that flows from this woman.

Malcolm calls after her, "The door, please?"

She shuts it from the far side, perhaps a little too firmly, but still perfectly deniable, not a slam.

Malcolm's suit jacket is hanging on a wooden valet, his sleeves are rolled at the cuff. As always, the top button of his shirt is undone, the knot of his necktie loosened, like he just finished a long hard day, having a glass of scotch, neat. He looks exhausted, bags under his eyes, a hollowness to his cheeks. He's usually an extra-healthy-looking specimen, a natural athlete who spends his weekends outdoors, on boats and grass and sand, with little children and golf clubs, with the wholesome perks of his position.

But not now. Now he looks like crap.

"How are things, Rhodes?" Malcolm asks. "Sorry I couldn't stay for the after-party last night. Who was there? Did that hot wine rep of yours come along?"

"Come on, man, stop saying things like that. You know someday somebody is going to overhear you, and get me in a whole lot of trouble."

Malcolm holds up his hands, mea culpa, a smirk that's the tell that his baiting is mostly—or partially—an act. Malcolm is playing a role, a trope, a fictional misogynist, a guy's-guy buddy. Just as he plays the role of hypercritical boss and mercurial editor-in-chief, the role of lustful middle-

aged married man, one role after another that he inhabits with patent detachment. Malcolm is so consistently ironic about so much that he's even ironic about his irony, which makes it tough to know what Malcolm truly feels about anything.

"And the Luxembourg trip? You went to a formal thing at the—what was it?—palace? Castle? How was that?"

"Deadly. Though I did get to shake hands with the grand duke. The party was at his palace, a sprawling pile in the middle of the city. Diplomats and bankers and a smattering of Eurotrash nobility and, probably, no shortage of spies in black ties."

Malcolm stares at Will, one corner of his mouth curled, not quite committing to a smile. "So tell me, Rhodes"—he says, shifting gears—"are you *ever* going to turn in that sidebar on the Swiss Alps? How long does it take to write three hundred words? You think that just because you're not hideous to look at, you can get away with—"

"Not true."

"—anything, but if we have to hold the issue—"

"*Stop!* I'll finish today."

Malcolm stands, stretches, walks around his desk. His limp is always most pronounced when he's been sitting awhile. After two hours in a theater or airplane seat, he hobbles like an arthritic old man. But not on the tennis court.

"I just need to cross my i's and dot my t's. I'll hit Send before liftoff. And it's five hundred words, not three hundred, you ignorant bastard."

Malcolm plops into an armchair, next to the coffee table. "Listen, sit down, will you? I want to talk about that new column I mentioned. It is indeed for you. Congratulations, Rhodes, you're moving up in the world."

"I'm honored."

"Try to restrain your enthusiasm. It'll be called 'Americans Abroad,' and it'll be about—wait for it—Americans, who are living where?"

"I'll go out on a limb: *abroad*?"

"That's the sort of sharpness I expect from you East Coast media-elite types."

"I'm from Minnesota."

"With your Ivy League liberal-arts degrees."

“I majored in journalism at Northwestern. But didn’t you go to school somewhere in the Northeast? Athletic uniforms a color called *crimson*?”

“It’ll be the whole expat experience, Rhodes, the communities, the lifestyle. Why’d they move there? How’d they choose the locale? Did they integrate into the local culture, or not? We’ll explore the reality behind the fantasy. But without digging too deep, without unearthing all the ugly sad lonely crap down there. You know . . .” Malcolm gestures in the vague direction of ugly sad lonely crap, which as it happens is toward Times Square.

Will is not sure that he understands. “What’s the point, Malcolm? What’s this about?”

“What’s it ever about?” Malcolm extends his hand, opens it, explanation self-evident, voilà. “Escapist fantasy. Aspirational lifestyle. Ad sales. It’s a pay bump, Rhodes, five K per annum. Plus feature bylines with big contributor-page photos guaranteed for four issues per year. That is, if you can deliver the four pieces, you lazy shiftless piece of shit.”

Will turns this idea over in his mind. It’s not exactly the career advancement he was hoping for, which is an elusive concept to begin with. Will doesn’t have any concrete vision more rational than a movie deal for an article he hasn’t written, a contract for a book he hasn’t conceived.

He’d like to imagine he’ll get what he deserves. He wants to believe that this is how the world—or at least his world, upper-middle-class, college-educated, white-collar white-people America—works: meritocracy. This is the promise.

But what does Will Rhodes merit? Does he have the right to be envious of what he doesn’t have? Resentful? Or should he be extremely grateful for what he does have?

Will is on the cusp of the collapse of his idealism, alternating hope and despair day by day, sometimes minute by minute, wondering if his life can still turn out to be perfect. Like being twelve years old, toggling back and forth between little kid and teenager, crushes on girls but also clutching a teddy bear in the middle of the night.

Malcolm is on no such cusp. A decade separates the two men, and somewhere in there is the point at which idealism gave way to pragmatism, completely and irrevocably. Will doesn’t know how this is supposed to happen, or when. Is it getting married? Having kids? Is it when one

parent dies, or both? Is it turning thirty, or forty, fifty? What's the thing that happens that makes people think: it's time to grow up, face reality, get my act together?

Whatever it is, it hasn't yet happened to Will. So he finds himself constantly disappointed in the world, in its failures to live up to his ideals.

"What are we looking for, Mal? Anything different?"

"We're *always* looking for something different, Rhodes, you know that. Different, in the same precise goddamned way. Plus, you know what this assignment means?"

Will shakes his head.

"Rampant opportunities. There are a lot of expat housewives out there. Bored, hot, *horny* expat housewives. A target-rich environment."

"Give me a break."

Malcolm smiles. "Start putting together notes. That's why we booked you for a few more days in southwest France. The Paris bureau has contacts for you."

"Really?"

"What? You have a problem with drinking wine in the South of France?"

"No, it's just that I've been going through the archives, and we've run dozens of full-length articles—no exaggeration, *dozens*—about southern France."

"The archives? You're shitting me. Why?"

"What can I tell you? I take my job seriously."

"And I appreciate it. But the *archives*? I don't even know where we *keep* the archives."

"Down on twenty-eight. Across from corporate accounting."

"You'll recall that I didn't ask."

"But I bet you're gratified I told you. You're welcome."

Malcolm mugs a dubious look.

"For a long time," Will continues, "there was a France piece every third issue or so. I think Jonathan overharvested that crop."

They let the ex-editor's name hang in the air. Jonathan Mongeleach was loved around here, the center of every party, women swirling around him along with lurid rumors, many of them about his extramarital love life, his acrimonious divorce, his varied vices.

Jonathan was missed. On the other hand, it was when Jonathan disappeared—truly disappeared, didn't come to work one day, no one ever saw or heard from him again—that Malcolm got promoted to the corner office, at first temporarily, then provisionally, then permanently. Which is when Malcolm hired Will. "I'll be honest," Malcolm had said, "I need an ally. A wingman, aide-de-camp, consigliere, and tennis partner. The list of qualified applicants is one. You up for it, Rhodes?"

They'd both gained something by Jonathan's departure, and they couldn't pretend otherwise. Will had gotten a more senior job at a more prestigious company. But Malcolm had gained far more: it's a huge jump to become editor of a major magazine, with car and driver, clothing allowance, an expense account that for all practical purposes is unlimited. And all this on top of the gorgeous wife and the adorable children, the beautiful apartment and the summer house, the everything. Malcolm already had everything, then he got more.

During the first days of Jonathan's disappearance, the assumption was that he'd been murdered. There were plenty of people who admired Jonathan, but also a few who loathed him. As time dragged on and no body was found, suspicion shifted toward the possibility that Jonathan had chosen to disappear himself. There were allegations of gambling debts and bankruptcy, a vindictive ex-wife and a predatory IRS. There was talk of suicide, and fake suicide, of a life insurance policy that named his estranged daughter as beneficiary. But so far, nothing concrete had been proven, and not much disproven.

Everyone moved on, these two men into these two chairs.

"Maybe he decided to go to France," Will says, "and never come back."

"Yes, maybe. But wherever Jonathan is, he certainly doesn't want to be found. If he's even alive."

"You think he's not?"

"That's possible. We all knew he was a strange guy, and he was definitely a cunning guy—a brilliant guy—and it looks like he was into some strange shit, some of it maybe dangerous. So who knows?" Malcolm opens a drawer, removes a padded envelope. "Speaking of France, this is for Inez. Drop it off whenever."

Will glances down, another hand-delivery to someone in a different country, a red PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL stamp.

A year ago, when Malcolm first handed him such an envelope, Will asked what it was.

"You see that stamp there?" Malcolm responded. "*Personal and confidential,* addressed to someone who's not you?"

"Yeah."

"That means it's *personal* and it's *confidential*, for someone who's *not you*."

"Gotcha."

"You remember the Sony hack, Rhodes? The Office of Personnel Management? JPMorgan Chase? *Snowden?* Digital information—digital communications—are as insecure as ever. So around here, we do things the old-fashioned way." Malcolm tapped the envelope. "We send each other shitloads of paper."

Since then Will had received plenty of these envelopes to tote overseas, as well as more than a few for himself: personnel memos and payroll forms and health-insurance paperwork and workplace-law notices and legal waivers.

"Listen, I need to jump on a call, so go." Malcolm makes the shooing motion. "Get the fuck out."

Will stands, strides across the big office, reaches for the doorknob.

"And hey, Rhodes?"

Will turns back.

"Let's be careful out there."

FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA

The room is the size of a basketball court but with the ceiling height of a coat closet, low and claustrophobic, fluorescent-lit and gray-carpeted, flimsy upholstered chest-high dividers separating the cubicles, nearly a hundred workspaces in here, all with laminate desktops and gooseneck lamps and plastic-and-mesh chairs on casters that glide across the pieces of hardened rubber that sit on the floor to make it easy to roll around, but no more than a foot or two in any direction, because these are small cubicles.

Every cheap desktop has a computer with a twenty-three-inch monitor. Every low-end plastic chair has an occupant. There are no vacancies, nor is there space to hire more personnel, even though more would be welcome—this is a round-the-clock operation with three shifts every day including weekends and holidays, never a moment when it's acceptable for the lights to be out.

The demographic is primarily South Asian, male, mid-twenties to late thirties, earning from eleven to nineteen dollars per hour. On the higher end, in a cubicle identical to all the others, Raji notices an incoming alert pop up, one of a dozen that he receives daily about the travel details of any of the fifteen hundred individuals on his segment of the watch list.

Raji copies the information into the relevant windows at the prompts:

U.S. passport number: 11331968
Flight: 19 JFK to CDG
Ticket category: B11
Seat: 12A
Alert code: 4

He hits Post, then returns his attention to his bag of barbecue potato chips.

NEW YORK CITY

"*My* man," Reggie says, wearing the same ear-to-ear grin as ever. Will has never seen the old guy in a bad mood, and Reggie has been working curbside check-in for decades.

"Where you off to this time, 007?" Reggie likes to kid that Will isn't a writer, he's a spy; that his magazine byline is just a cover. Over the years, Reggie hasn't been the only person to have made this tongue-in-cheek accusation.

"It's France this time, Reggie."

"Ooh-la-la." The two men bump fists.

Will reaches into his pocket, removes the gift-wrapped box. "For Aisha. It's a few of those chocolates she loves."

“Oh, you shouldn’t have.”

“Happy to. Plus, I got them for free!” He didn’t. “How’s she doing this week?”

“Better, thank you.”

Will nods. “Please tell her happy birthday for me.”

“I will, Mr. Bond.” Reggie winks. “You have a good trip.”

Will doesn’t understand how someone with such a crappy job can enjoy it so much, or can pretend so convincingly. But then again, there’s a lot about normal forty-hour-per-week jobs that Will doesn’t understand. He has barely ever had one.

In the terminal, Will examines himself in a mirror, surrounded by all this corporate signage, Kimberly-Clark and American Standard, Rubbermaid and Purell, a barrage of brands. He himself is a brand too, Will Rhodes, Travel Writer, with his little suede notebook, his canvas sport jacket over oxford shirt and knit tie, twill pants, rubber-soled brogues, sturdy comfortable clothes that won’t wrinkle or crease or collect lint or stains, none that’ll look any worse for wear after twenty hours hanging off his lanky frame, flying across the ocean.

After takeoff he washes down his sleeping pill with a whiskey. He reclines his seat, inserts the ear plugs, and stretches the mask over his eyes, a well-rehearsed routine. Almost immediately, he falls into an innocent sleep.

Will doesn’t know how long he’s been out—ten minutes? three hours?—when a loud rumble wakes him, the shuddering of the 747, the vibration traveling up his thighs and tailbone through his spine.

He pushes down his mask, unplugs his ears. Turns to the man-child next to him, a thirty-year-old wearing high-topped sneakers and a backward baseball cap who’d been preoccupied with a lollipop and a video game when Will last looked.

“What’s happening?” Will asks.

The guy looks ashen, eyes wide, mouth agape. Shakes his head.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please ensure that your seatbelts are *securely* fastened, and all trays are in their upright position.”

These are the same words Will has heard hundreds of times before. Sit

back relax and enjoy the flight. We know you have your choice of carriers. Our first priority is your safety. We'd like to extend a special welcome. We have reached cruising altitude and the captain has turned off the fasten-seatbelt sign . . .

A flight attendant hurries past, gripping each seatback tightly as she passes, banging her knee into the frontmost armrest, pausing to gather her balance and her wits before launching herself across the open purchase-less space to a jump seat, which she falls onto, buckles herself in, pulling the straps tight, taking a deep breath.

Oxygen masks fall from their overhead doors, and an audible wave of panic ripples down the fuselage. Will places the mask over his face, and tries as instructed to breathe normally, pinned under gathering terror to the soft leather of seat 12A.

The plane plummets.

People start to scream.

NEW YORK CITY

Malcolm walks the perimeter of the thirtieth floor, looking for any last stragglers who might interrupt him. Everyone still here is too junior, and none would have the nerve to barge in on the chief at seven-thirty, except the food editor, the guy everyone calls Veal Parmesan. Veal never seems to leave. But he also never visits Malcolm.

Malcolm closes his door, turns the knob to lock it. He takes a few steps along the wall that's decorated with framed *Travelers* covers, decades' worth of the magazine's best work, like a museum exhibit for the people who traipse through this office regularly.

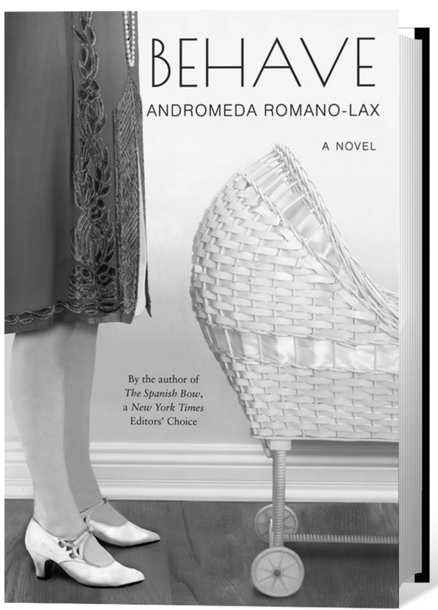
He squats in the corner of the bookshelves, pushes aside a handful of old guidebooks, reaches his hand past the books, all the way to the back wall. He locates a button by touch, and presses it.

For a few decades, this was the only security mechanism. But during a wave of paranoia in the post-Nixon seventies, the new editor-in-chief Jonathan Mongeleach was convinced to add a second level of security. In the eighties this analog lock was replaced by an electronic device, then over the past two decades by ever more sophisticated digital models, with

increasing frequency of upgrades, as strongly advised by the consultants and developers who never fail to push each year's advance as an exponential technological leap, last year's security laughably outdated this year. Or so claimed by the people who profit from the technology, with no practical way for any of its consumers to assess the claim, least of all Malcolm. What a racket.

So now this mechanical button is merely a secondary system. Malcolm activates the primary system via a hidden panel at chest height, behind a big thick reference book, using his thumbprint and the input of a long access code.

With a nearly silent click, the entire section of bookcase is released. The wall swivels open a couple of inches of its own accord, on sturdy brass hinges; this is a heavy section of wall, hundreds of pounds. Malcolm pulls it open wide enough to walk through. Then he closes the door behind him, and disappears into the wall.



Perfect for readers of Paula McLain and Melanie Benjamin.

In 1920, when she graduated from Vassar College with a degree in psychology, Rosalie Rayner took a coveted position at the Johns Hopkins research lab to assist charismatic John B. Watson, the man who pioneered behaviorist psychology. Together, Watson and Rayner conducted experiments on hundreds of babies to prove behaviorist principles of nurture over nature. One such experiment was the incredibly controversial "Little Albert" study, which which they fear-conditioned an infant. Watson and Rayner also embarked on a scandalous affair that cost them both their jobs. The Watsons' parenting book, Psychological Care of Infant and Child, which emphasized emotional detachment, was a bestseller and affected the upbringings of generations of American children—but Rosalie, now a mother herself, had to confront its tenets personally.

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BEHAVE

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ROMANO-LAX

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Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.

—John Watson, *Behaviorism*, 1930

O brave new world, / That has such people in't!

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1,
quoted in the 1919 *Vassarion*, the Vassar College yearbook

I can almost hear you exclaiming: "Why, yes, it is worth while to study human behavior in this way, but the study of behavior is not the whole of psychology. It leaves out too much. Don't I have sensations, perceptions, conceptions? Do I not forget things and remember things, imagine things, have visual images and auditory images of things I once have seen and heard? Can I not see and hear things that I have never seen or heard in nature? Can I not be attentive or inattentive? Can I not will to do a thing or will not to do it, as the case may be? Do not certain things arouse pleasure in me, and others displeasure? Behaviorism is trying to rob us of everything we have believed in since earliest childhood."

Having been brought up on introspective psychology, as most of you have, these questions are perfectly natural and you will find it hard to formulate your psychological life in terms of behaviorism. Behaviorism is new wine and it will not go into old bottles; therefore I am going to try to make new bottles out of you.

—John Watson, *Behaviorism*, 1930

PART I

LITTLE ALBERT

1935

WHIP-POOR-WILL FARM, CONNECTICUT

"Why are you doing this?" John asks, coming home to the farm from Manhattan, finding me out of bed, at the corner desk, typing in my nightgown at 8 P.M., the boys already asleep and my dinner, a bowl of chicken soup, ignored at my elbow. Prescription for dysentery: hydrate relentlessly. And I'm trying. But it becomes tiresome, all these bowls of broth and cups of sugar water, and the inevitable visceral responses that become more painful, day and night. The stomach, regardless of what any other organ has to say, does not want nutrition. The stomach and the bowels and all those layers of unstriped, smooth muscle with their associated glands (how John loves to talk of those invisible places and their powerful relationships to our visible physical behaviors) want only to be left alone.

"Doing what?" I say, tugging out the paper, turning it over, neatening the edges of a growing pile.

"Working so hard when you're supposed to be recuperating."

I shield the paper with my forearm, like a teenage girl hiding her diary. We have been married close to fifteen years now, we have survived scandal, infidelities, and depressions (his, mine, the nation's), and mostly I feel we know each other as well as anyone can. And still, every human seems to remain to every other a mystery—despite John's strenuous disavowal of all things intangible.

It is the one thing any human can truly own: her private thoughts. But what do you do when you're married to a man who says "thought," as we generally refer to it, and the mind, and consciousness, and especially the soul, don't exist?

John runs a hand through his hair—now silver but as thick as when we

first met. He remains as handsome to me now as when he was forty, and I was—well—half that age. I can smell the city on him. The stale cigarette funk of the train car, but also cologne, kept in his desk drawer, reapplied before leaving the Graybar Building. And the drink—bourbon, invariably—he stopped to have with a fellow ad man or behavior consultant. Even when he—*we*—worked in the lab with babies, he made it a point not to smell of sour milk. There are opportunities to be missed if you don't send out the right stimuli.

"Who's it for?" he asks finally, gesturing to the overturned pile.

He means which popular magazine. *Cosmopolitan? Parents?* John has written for most of them. I've had my own luck a couple of times. But this pile of fifty pages I've managed to accumulate in a week isn't meant for any magazine.

When I don't answer, he fidgets with his cuff links. A gift from Stanley, when John made VP. And still, he misses the days when he earned a fraction of what he earns now, but commanded the respect of real scientists and scholars, instead of salesmen and radio announcers.

"I heard you asked Ray to bring down some old Johns Hopkins boxes from the attic," he says. "I've always said I should get rid of all that stuff up there."

"Not the lab files, surely."

He starts to nod grudgingly, then shakes his head. "What's important is already published. I can't see the point in keeping every scrap of paper."

"I suppose that's true."

"And no one's ever going to have a need for my private papers, or yours. Burn it all."

"Burn it *all*," I repeat, making him smile. Haven't I heard him say that a hundred times? And he'll do it someday, I know he will, regardless of my own thoughts about posterity, or my own occasional desires to look back and see what we did, whether we're remembering things correctly, why our very own publications offer one version here and another slightly different one there, whether there are facts I overlooked in my youthful desire to be his indispensable assistant.

“When you’re dead, you’re all dead,” he says.

“No proof to the contrary.”

He’s relieved by my pretense of agreeability, and yet he can see past it. Perhaps he knows me better than I know myself. John has always maintained that we are unable to observe our own behaviors, which is why others’ behaviors are so much easier to predict and control. Which is always an “out” of sorts, if one chooses to take it. He certainly did.

“What *were* you looking for, Rar?”

I’m looking, I suppose, for how it all started: our love, his most important theories, our biggest contributions, our biggest mistakes. And at the same time, I find myself looking away, making excuses, as if I were too immature and impressionable to have known any better.

The most difficult part, you would think, is realizing that the person you idealized, whom you regarded as infallible, was imperfect all along. Instead, the hardest part is stopping to wonder what was so imperfect or unfinished within oneself as to impede comprehension of the obvious. There wouldn’t be any experts telling us all what to do if we thought for ourselves, if we held our ground and asked the right questions. That’s the most important thing a scientist can do, isn’t it? Ask the right questions?

It’s tricky for any woman to sort out her feelings, but most of all when her husband is a national expert on feelings, especially the unconditioned ones we are born with, which create the foundation for everything else. John always said there are only three: fear, rage, and love, the latter really only a reaction to erotic stimulation. The first and perhaps most powerful—fear—was the one that obsessed him, and the one we worked on together in the early years, by kindling small newspaper fires in front of babies, by letting our tender subjects touch candle flames, by sending rats scurrying across their laps, and rabbits, monkeys, and dogs jumping and lunging all over the place. (None of which frightened most infants, which was the point.) Only two things seem to stimulate an unconditioned fear response: sudden loud noises, or a sudden loss of stability. Having the rug pulled out from under you, in other words. Which is how I’m feeling now.

Don't blame him, I remind myself. He was more honest, even in his errors and duplicities, than any man I have ever known.

I'm not making sense of it yet.

There is one remembered image (John doesn't believe in mental images at all, but I can't find a better term) that refuses to leave me. It has always been playing on some forbidden film screen of my mind, but it has flashed with a particular insistency during the last two weeks of fevers and gastric distress.

The windowless psychological testing room is warm, as we wait for our camera man to return and to record the footage that will advance—so Dr. Watson hopes—the immature field of psychology. The first thousand feet of film alone costs $450, a considerable expenditure in 1919. Our nine-month-old subject—"Albert B."—is being remarkably stoic about all the fuss. His round head, bald except for a few flossy, sweat-dampened strands, swivels slowly in the direction of the closed door, though his eyes remain unfocused, lids heavy. A thin line of drool runs from his slick, ruby lips to the top of his velvet-smooth chest. As he tires, his chest settles closer to mine, so that I can feel his heat, and his heartbeat, through my blouse.

Dr. Watson's face turns toward mine. *What do you think?*

What I want at that moment is simply to avoid seeming incompetent, to avoid falling out of this swift-moving roadster in which I've managed, with great luck, to gain a seat. Drawing on everything I know as a budding scientist, I try to sound merely clinical.

"He seems . . . healthy."

"Yes," Dr. Watson says, inhaling deeply. He seems relieved. It is one of the few times I have witnessed him betraying any doubt. It is one of the first times he has seemed to need me. *Good.*

The little monkey, of the organ grinder's type, is penned up, outside the door. As is the dog. Somewhere there is a rabbit, too—it shows up on the film, later—but I can't recall where it's kept. (I don't trust myself, in other words. But that has always been part of the problem.)

In a corner basket, a rat scuffles, and next to it, in a large brown bag, a confined pigeon tries to lift its wings, making the bag shudder and jump. I

pull Albert closer, muffling my racing pulse against his soft chest: pride, relief, adult desire, and an infant's vulnerability all mixed together in that moment which I can feel in my memory as damp heat in a small room thrumming, waiting. Later, he will be in tears, shuddering and terrified. Not from pain—we never hurt them physically, of course. (Does that make it all right? Would I be asking if it did?) For now, our uncomplaining subject releases a bubbling sigh and settles ever deeper, drowsy and trusting, in my arms.

Was Albert healthy? Was he normal? They are not the only questions—not by a long shot.

Perhaps none of the questions would even matter, except for what followed: years upon years of consequences for one silly, poorly executed experiment I'd much rather forget, no chance to temper or improve upon it and—no, I am understating things already, I am being a coward, it is bigger than all that—no chance to turn back a tide that washed a great many of us out to sea. If everything had stayed in the lab, it would be different. The lab was only where it started, I realize now.

One thunderclap of truth.

And now I am like one of those hundreds of babies we studied: grip loosening, falling with a pure and unconditioned panic, through the air.

CHAPTER 1

But I need to start before I ever knew John, and well before motherhood, if only to prove to myself that I rose to challenges and coped with larger-than-life personalities before. I need to remember that I did have an earlier life, and my own ideas, too.Vassar College, 1916.

The Vassar Brothers Labs.

Outside: that glorious musty smell of leaves starting to dry and color, shrivel and drop. Scarlet and amber brightening our world of brick and stone, skies fresh and blue overhead. September, that most hopeful month. Some people prefer May—lilies and hyacinths, white gloves and pearls—but I've always preferred autumn, the season of rededication, when one

experiences that same thrill in the breast that one gets walking into a vast library with its smells of old pages and oiled banisters. All those books still to be read. All those centuries of knowledge. Feeling humbled within the context of all that intelligence—but at the same time, elevated. Made part of something larger.

Inside the labs: standing at attention in front of a microscope, paired with my dear friend Mary, waiting for our professor to enter the room—Margaret Floy Washburn, the first woman in the entire country to receive a PhD in psychology, from Cornell, four years before I was born. The author of a textbook, *The Animal Mind*, written just around the time I was first learning to read.

Mary was also a sophomore, but older than me, because I'd entered Vassar early. We'd missed crossing paths for most of freshman year—each lurkers in our ways, with noses in our books. But then we'd finally noticed each other—I recall the first time I saw her stiff corona of curls bouncing as she strode with an enviable sense of determination through Main—and I'd found someone with whom I could discuss Wilhelm Wundt and John Dewey all the way back to Rousseau and Locke, from whose work on education Mary paraphrased the very first day we met: "We are like chameleons; we take our hue and the color of our moral character, from those who are around us." Being always a chameleon of sorts and one who took pride in picking the right creature to emulate, I determined that she would be my study and lab partner, whenever possible.

On this particular morning in September, across the Atlantic, scores of French and German men (no one we knew) were probably off dying at the Battle of the Somme, while we girls rubbed tired eyes and rebraided loose hair, expecting class to begin. Mary, too restless to wait, was fixing an unlabeled slide under the microscope clip.

"What do you see?"

"It looks like a blob." She wrinkled her nose, turning the dials.

"An amoeba," I corrected her—though of course, she knew as much, and was only being flip. "I was just reading a paper about the periodic appearance and disappearance of the gastric vacuole . . ."

"Are you sure we're in the right class?" she interrupted without looking up from the eyepiece. "Because I didn't sign up for zoology. I thought we were here to study the complexities of the human mind."

The room, already hushed—girls in drab cardigans and ankle-length skirts, whispering in twos and threes—had become uniformly silent, but Mary was too engrossed in her slide to notice. Loudly, she said, "Our teacher may be one of Cavell's 'thousand most important men in science,' but perhaps she's mixed us up with some other class. How long are we going to have to wait, anyway?"

From the doorway across the room, through which she had entered on low-heeled, sensible black shoes, Miss Washburn answered. "You don't have to wait at all. You may be dismissed now, if you'd prefer."

A long pause, allowing us to behold her: firm helmet of wavy hair, just starting to silver, with a tiny, darker knot at the nape; deep lines around her mouth formed by years of rigorous concentration. "Name?"

"Cover. Mary Cover."

"And you're partnered with . . . ?"

I took a half step away from the microscope, chin up. "Rosalie Rayner."

"Rayner. Good." Miss Washburn took her time looking over the registration sheet in her hand. "Rayner, you don't have an objection to studying animals, do you?"

"No, Miss Washburn."

"Not even amoebas?"

"No, not at all."

"Do you think an amoeba has a mind?"

The back of my knees softened into jelly. "I'm sorry, Miss Washburn, but I don't know."

Miss Washburn pulled out a high stool and settled herself onto it, legs crossed at the ankle. A delicate chain of swinging black beads shifted against her broad chest and then settled, as we watched, listened, and faintly perspired.

"Don't be sorry, Miss Rayner. You don't know. *We* don't precisely know. Not knowing is a perfectly appropriate place to start. Sometimes

it's even the right place to end."

Another pause, the tinkling of water in the plumbing, running in another lab over our heads. The distant, purring jet of a Bunsen burner. A faint sniff of some sulfurous chemical. I loved those sounds and smells. Even in my embarrassed concern for Mary, and for myself, I couldn't be anything but deliriously happy at that moment.

"Go ahead, everyone," Miss Washburn said. "Take your seats."

We did, and I could feel Mary holding her breath next to me, waiting to discover whether she had been merely warned or actually expelled from the class. But Miss Washburn was not interested in making things clear. Mary's cheeks held onto their red flush for most of that first hour. Turning the focus knob, her hand shook.

We would have to wait most of a week until Mary got back a graded lab report to know she hadn't been banished. But in a way that was slower to reveal itself, she had. For two more years we both progressed well in our studies, each of us optimistic if uncertain about our futures, each of us distinctly skewed toward the sciences. And yet at the beginning of senior year, when Miss Washburn invited a select group of senior students to enroll in her Special Projects in Psychology seminar, Mary wasn't invited. When Mary, intent on protesting, interrupted Miss Washburn on the way to one of her classes, Miss Washburn explained: "You weren't satisfied with the lab you took with me before. I don't imagine you'll be satisfied with this class either."

We were both shocked. Mary was one of the best psychology students at Vassar.

Mary thought that a private meeting in Washburn's office might offer a better climate for persuasion, and I offered to tag along, waiting on a plump, tapestry-covered bench in the hall outside faculty offices. From my seat on the bench, I worked at deciphering a German publication of new lectures by Freud—*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*—missing every third or fourth word, and swung my shoes against the floor, softly tapping out the rhythm of a popular tune while I absentmindedly played with the charm bracelet on my left wrist. My mother had given me

the bracelet, and Mary had given me my favorite charm, the little magnifying glass, symbolizing my love for science (evidently, no beaker- or brain-shaped charms were commonly available).

As soon as I saw Mary emerge and walk right past me, I knew things had gone badly.

"Don't say it," she said, intent on moving as quickly as possible away from the source of her humiliation, her pointed chin with its faint cleft just starting to tremble.

"Oh, Mary," I said, struggling to catch up. "You'll be fine."

I took her arm so we could walk down the dark hall, past the sconce-lighted portraits and old windows. The wavy leaded glass of each window blurred the view of rust-colored trees outside. "You're our best and brightest. You'll be fine."

"How will I possibly be fine if I can't even rise to the top within our own little college? Three years of paying my dues and I'm being *excluded*."

"There will be a portrait of you hanging in the labs someday. 'Mary Cover,' our next famous psychologist."

"I don't want to be famous. That has nothing to do with it." Mary hurried our pace. Joined at the elbow, we bobbed out of sync, heels clicking and squeaking against the scuffed wooden floors. "I want to contribute. I want to understand. I'd just like to work with humans—if that's not so much to ask—instead of worms and rats and color-blind fish."

"It was just . . . rotten luck. You rubbed her the wrong way. Calling her one of Cavell's 'most important men,' and all."

Mary snickered. "Your fault, for telling me about that."

I was the one who read every journal announcement, every newsletter, every history of the newer "scientific psychology," from James and Hall to Titchener and Angell.

"Yes, my fault," I said, feeling the happiness well up inside me, glad that Mary wasn't feeling demolished at that moment.

"Self-righteous bat," Mary said.

How old was Washburn really? Early forties. She seemed ancient to us both.

"Cave-dwelling crone."

"Half-blind hermaphrodite."

"Don't worry," I said, buoyed by the snicker in Mary's voice. "We'll fix it."

"I admire your optimism, Rosalie," Mary said with faux formality, giving my elbow a grateful squeeze. She dropped into a huskier whisper, the sound of so many afternoon library conversations, so many sleepy picnics in the shade of ancient campus trees. "But don't hold your breath."

Mary was the type of woman Vassar was intended to produce, the type who wouldn't just run off and get married but would actually *do something*. She was needed. Goodness, we were all needed—and more than that, committed to making the world a better place.

In Europe, the Great War dragged on. Society, government, and even religion seemed to offer few solutions to problems of an incomprehensible scale. And yet, still, my fellow students and I retained our idealism, an unspoken sense that whatever was dismantled or destroyed, something else newer and better would rise up to take its place. Scientists urged us to believe that with the help of new education methods and a commitment to societal improvements, reforming man's worst habits was more than possible, it was *inevitable*. Look how much our own suffragette mothers had done to reform the world ahead of us, as they liked to remind us when we showed any sign of forgetting their labors and sacrifices.

Mary Cover's mother was more committed than my own. I was glad that my mother didn't distribute pins and handbills when she came to visit, but of course, we all wanted the same thing: equality of opportunity. And weren't we practically there already? A few more states to be persuaded, a few more legal details to be pinned down, but the battle had been won. Hadn't it?

We were meant to exceed our mothers' ambitions. We were meant to walk down that cleared path into a new American century of progress and enlightenment. Relying on experimental science, not phrenology or philosophy or voodoo, we would understand what made people tick. We would understand—in addition to how to mix a Manhattan and dance the fox-trot—how to make people healthier, happier, better in character and

in conduct from the very start.

The day after Mary's snub by Miss Washburn, I walked past our teacher's house on Professors' Row. I had to circle back twice before mustering the courage to step up to the front door. I lifted and dropped the tarnished brass knocker: no reply.

To one side, a single struggling rosebush hunched, defeated, against the wall, next to a window I could just see into, pricking my hip on the branches as I angled in closer for a better view. The curtains, faded from years of sunlight to the point of near transparency, had been left parted. Inside, I could make out a small wooden desk of Quaker-like simplicity with stacks of papers, a typewriter, and a plain chair, with a white sweater folded neatly over the back. Also on the desk: one small and spidery green plant doing only a little better than the rosebush, pushed into a drinking glass full of tangled roots and brown water. No rugs or tapestries, no framed photographs or paintings, no side tables with crystal decanters, no other decoration in this monastic cottage. An answer to my question: How does a single, educated woman live?

When the curtain shifted, I startled and nearly fell into the rosebush again, but it was only a long-haired Persian cat that had leaped onto the sill, eyeing me skeptically through the glass, as if sensing with feline intuition my presumptions about Miss Washburn's choices and sacrifices. For why, at the age of nineteen, was I interested in practically any other person, except as an embodiment of who I should, or might, become?

I hadn't told Mary I planned to make any of these visits. Mary was pretending she'd forgotten about the matter. But I had my speech planned.

The next day, when Miss Washburn opened her faculty office door, I blurted, "I would like you to consider admitting Mary Cover into your class."

"Come in, come in. I *have* considered. You presume I haven't?"

"And?"

Miss Washburn invited me in and served us both Earl Grey tea on a small round table flanked by two peach-colored wing chairs. I took one sip of mine, but I made so much clatter setting the cup back on its saucer

that I resolved not to sip again until the very end, and then to finish it off in one gulp. Miss Washburn took her time with her own cup, sipping and smiling, comfortable with the silence.

This room, at least, had more to occupy my gaze than her house would have had—proof of which place she considered her true home. There, across from me on the wall, were single and group portraits of men—the first-generation psychologists, clutching their cigars. There was G. Stanley Hall at Clark University, presiding over a group that included prestigious visitors from Europe: Freud and Carl Jung. There, in a separate portrait—and was his influence already fading?—was the father of American psychology, William James. Below a set of dark and piercing eyes, the bottom of his face was entirely hidden under a bushy mustache and square-cut beard. He looked grumpy and unapproachable, but from my own readings I knew that he'd actually helped one of the very first non-degreed women psychologists by allowing her to sit in on his class at Harvard, even when the other men boycotted in response.

That was the world from which Miss Washburn had herself emerged: victorious, fully degreed, recognized. Why was she making things so hard for another woman student?

"Rosalie," Miss Washburn said at last, setting down her cup. "There's no shortage of competent seniors eager to fill those seats. Mary wasn't the only person who was told she'll have to choose another psychology class. And I'm not arrogant enough to think I'm the only professor with whom she'd benefit."

Damn the clatter. I drained my cup of tea. "But she's an excellent student. If Mary can't be in the class," I said, setting down my cup firmly, "then I withdraw."

Miss Washburn finally looked surprised, at least for a moment, until her startled expression softened into a rueful smile.

"You plan to withdraw," she said.

"Yes." I settled my hands atop the folds of my wool-skirted lap. "That's correct."

"No," she said.

“Pardon me?”

“No,” she said again.

She stood and went to the window, looked out—there it all was, the world that had been her refuge for years. The world that had also been mine—*almost* enough. But no: not enough. Not at all. I felt the scratchy tingle of it, like some rash or fever just coming on. As a wide-eyed freshman, I’d been excited just to board the train to New York City, followed by the Empire line farther north, to Poughkeepsie. Away from my parents: Could there have been any greater excitement than that? Only in my fourth year was I starting to feel in want of something more than collegial, single-sex refuge. Only now was I pining for the invigoration of other places, other people, and perhaps moments like this: an opportunity to take sides, to sometimes go too far.

Miss Washburn returned to stand behind her chair. “Rosalie, you’re a careful student. I don’t mean timid. You’re thoughtful and objective. You’re deeply committed, with good habits and a solid work ethic, but you don’t overreach. We need that.”

Careful. Thoughtful. Solid. Was that the only impression I made?

She continued, “Psychology in our decade is like a three-year-old. It’s at the runabout stage. It’s growing by leaps and bounds, but it’s also making messes—or it will be. It’s separating itself from everything that came before, and it’s still deciding who its friends will be, just as you’re evidently deciding who *your* friends must be.” She smiled. How amusing I was to her, with my narrow loyalties and small concerns. “Does that make sense?”

I nodded, but only to be polite. Never mind about friendship: evidently she knew nothing about that. Better to focus on academics. To her, the field of psychology might have seemed new and on shaky ground, but to me, it was old: thirty years, at least. James had called it not a science, “just a hope of a science,” but enough with caution and modesty. Why this constant fear of everything new when the very point of science was to invite the new into our lives: the bubbling-over of beakers, the occasional shattering of glass?

“Do you get along with your parents?” Miss Washburn asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Any younger siblings?"

"No," I said, confused about what she was implying. I had an older sister, Evelyn. We were seven years apart and not close.

"I see."

But that *I see* bothered me. I was surprised to hear that kind of fainting-couch questioning coming from her, a scientist dedicated to objective laboratory techniques.

A secretary knocked and opened the door a crack. Miss Whitehall, a teacher of classics in her eighties, needed Miss Washburn to pop down the hall, just for a moment. She smiled apologetically. "Perhaps you could refill our tea."

I took our cups over and, alone in the room, found my eye wandering again, from the photos on the wall to the papers on the desk—was there something there about Mary, or anything that could help my cause?—and then to a piece of pale lavender stationery next to the typewriter, the letter half written. It was addressed to a female friend (fine, so she had *one*) in New York State. They were corresponding, evidently, about Emerson. Miss Washburn was saying that she could take a little Emerson—*as medicine, but not as regular food*—and about introspection in general, and about life. *The great thing is to look out for opportunities to help in little ways, and let the rest go*. And further down the page: *I am a very ordinary individual. There was a time when I feebly attempted to be other than ordinary, but I missed so much of wholesome fun and good fellowship that I was glad to give up the attempt.*

Resigned to being "ordinary." Well, that was another mark against her.

I refilled the cups hurriedly, hearing footsteps coming back down the hall.

"It was only about her cat," Miss Washburn said as she entered, smiling. "I'm watching Felix for her this weekend."

Turning serious, she continued. "Rosalie, you're worried about a friend. But I'm worrying about something larger: a set of ideas that will greatly influence society. The young women who graduate Vassar and go on to advanced degrees will soon enough become my own colleagues. Someday,

they'll be the women who challenge my own work. That's as it should be."

So she was open to change, but only change so slow we might not see it or feel it, or arrive at a new shore anytime soon. Change at the regal pace of an ocean liner. I'd made a trip, with my mother, in an ocean liner once. Three weeks of boredom and nausea, sitting on deck chairs, playing whist.

There was a knock at the door—another student, with an appointment.

"I'll see you in class," Miss Washburn said, reaching out to shake my hand, soft fingers—loose skin over bone—gently enclosing mine. I did not wish to be so gentle in return.

"Thank you for your time," I said. "Yes, I'll see you in Abnormal."

She cocked her head. "But you were signed up for Special Topics as well. You're doubling up this semester. I thought we'd understood each other."

"I'm off to see the registrar next," I said, pulling away. "It's so hard to fit everything in. I do the same thing at Thanksgiving dinners, loading up my plate with more than I can possibly digest. That's childish, don't you think? Better to make firm choices. But thank you for the tea."

CHAPTER 2

Of course, I rushed directly to the dorms, cheeks flushed with adventure, as if I'd just turned down a date with the most sought-after boy at a school dance. I couldn't wait to tell Mary. By dropping Special Topics, I'd be sacrificing the chance to be one of the seniors with whom Washburn co-wrote and published scientific papers—the real things, in actual journals. And if Washburn turned me away from Abnormal Psych because I'd withdrawn from Special Topics? She wouldn't, as it turned out. But at the time, I was willing to accept that additional consequence.

Yet when I arrived in the corner suite Mary shared with four girls, Mary was in the middle of entertaining some other friends: Cynthia and Strikey, the three of them sprawled out on the oriental carpet, with a phonograph

warbling. In more than three years at Vassar, I'd heard a rude remark about my heritage only once, from Strikey's mouth. Regarding how to handle those sorts of comments, my father and my uncle, the senator, preferred optimistic stoicism. Only my mother seemed to think a biting response was appropriate. But then again, she would have been the first to call me home from Vassar if I'd been having any real trouble getting along, so I had to make sure never to let on that it was a challenge breaking into some social circles, even more so when you were darkly complected, quiet by default, a touch too book-smart, and young.

The phonograph was playing dance songs and the girls had pinned up their hair in back, to make it look bobbed from the front, and had rolled their skirts at the waist to pull the hems up to their knees.

"Mary," I shouted. "Something happened. Stop the music."

She wagged a finger at me and stood up to dance, and her two friends laughed all that much louder, jumping up to join her, grasping their knees and knocking them together in time with the song. Strikey had a charm bracelet much like my own, and as she danced, it jangled at her wrist.

Their giggles gave them away. I picked up Mary's teacup. Only a half inch of clear liquid remained, but it was potent.

"Tea time," Mary crooned. "Have some!" Her glasses slid crookedly across her pert nose.

I always maintained that, despite her own protestations, Mary was pretty, but there were certain facts that couldn't be denied. Her eyeglasses were big and black-rimmed. Her hair tended to spread out into a brittle, electrified mass, creating a second, round frame for her otherwise small features. Late at night, in her humorously droning voice, she had praised my blue eyes, my silky (as she called it) dark hair, and my narrow ankles. I had always told her that none of it mattered. Neither of us wore makeup—not even powder. Neither of us cared, in fact, about whatever traits supposedly made a woman more attractive to the opposite sex.

But she had an indefinable charisma. She was revealing it now, dancing and slurring her speech, more glamorous and exotic in her honest,

frizzy-haired dishevelment than some girls would be in perfect dresses, with fox stoles around their necks. She knew what she wanted and said what she thought, at the very least.

"What's in the cups?" I shouted over the phonograph. "British or American?"

British was our code name for gin. American was our name for rum. I didn't particularly enjoy drinking—yet—and the penalty for being discovered was steep, but we never let that worry us.

"See for yourself!" Strikey shrieked.

"But Mary, I need to talk to you!" I called out.

"Later," she said, and grabbed Strikey's hands, the two of them kicking and twisting. At the edge of the rug, they tripped and went down in a heap, with Strikey in Mary's lap. Strikey grabbed for her ankle, as if it had been sprained, but she was still grinning like an idiot.

When the song ended, I said too loudly, "I went to see Washburn."

"You didn't," Mary replied.

"I told her I'd withdraw if she didn't change her mind."

Mary turned to me, her eyes half crossed over the top of her glasses. Even though she'd unlinked hands with Strikey, she was still leaning over, shoulders slouched, waist widened by the padding of the rolled-up, hitched-up skirt, a skinny ape who has stumbled into a cache of fermented fruit.

"No need to talk to that witch on my behalf."

"I already said I did."

"I'd already talked to her twice. That was *my* battle to fight, Rosalie."

But what kind of person didn't want company in battle? If I wasn't getting any thanks for the attempt, I certainly wasn't going to get any credit for the result—which, it was occurring to me now, had not been in anyone's favor, just as Mary would have predicted.

"You're just convincing Washburn that I'm a moron," Mary said, holding out her cup for Cynthia to refill. "And if she decides to drop *you* from Special Topics, just for pestering her when you shouldn't, then *you're* the moron."

She wasn't getting the point. I hadn't risked being dropped from the

class. I'd *chosen* to drop the class. For the sake of friendship. For *her*. Mary didn't even seem to need confirmation that my attempt had been futile. And now I realized this about her: she wasn't the best about holding her tongue, but she was always quick to accept the consequences and move on. She didn't need special favors or even recognition. Unlike many girls, she was impervious to pressure to sign up for the glee club, for theater productions, for the yearbook committee—and we'd had that in common, the lack of interest in being joiners.

I knew the several ways in which I didn't perfectly fit the Vassar mold. But Mary's set-apartness was different, not preordained by race, culture, or religion. You couldn't find her picture hardly at all in the yearbook, just as you couldn't find mine. She didn't need to be fawned upon by any one professor. She seemed to have an allergy to being a protégée. Whether or not she would ever need a devoted mentor or a fervent lover (I imagined she'd remain a bachelorette forever) Mary seemed to be proving at this moment that she didn't need *me*. Or rather, she didn't need any of her friends to pass a loyalty test. But I *did* want to pass that test. I didn't mind a spot of trouble if it was trouble that could be shared. I didn't need to be part of any Vassar daisy chain, but I still appreciated being attached to something or someone.

"Mary," I said. "I need to talk to you."

"And I," she said, holding her cup at an angle, "need to finish this, before Jo gets back."

Jo was the one roommate who disapproved of "dancing teas" altogether, and was likely to complain if she stumbled into the middle of a party.

"Couldn't we just be alone for a minute?" I beseeched Mary.

She responded, "Couldn't we *not* be alone for this once?"

My insides shrank, and with them, the last three years accordioned as well: a series of conversations and study sessions and lab-partner pairings that had meant too much to me, and nothing to anyone else.

"You're a pal, Rosalie. Just maybe stop trying so hard," Mary said in a softer voice, noting my crestfallen expression.

Oblivious, Cynthia slid a new record out of a burgundy-colored sleeve.

"Everyone. You've gotta hear this." The record started up, with its lyrics about a soldier who'd been shot somewhere in France, and didn't want to get well, because he was so besotted with the woman caring for him. "Early ev'ry morning, night and noon, / The cutest little girlie comes and feeds me with a spoon . . ."

I wanted to grab Mary's arm and roll our eyes together at the stupidity of any college girls who could believe that being wounded in the trenches, probably shell-shocked and near death from some terrible infection, could be a giddy pleasure. But Mary refused to share my contempt. She sat on the floor, her lap occupied by Strikey's scarf-wrapped ankle, while Strikey reached out to paw at her own minor injury, drawing attention to her jangling little bracelet, from which hung a tiny magnifying glass.

I felt my stomach drop. The room was already warm, but now my face flamed with a heat so sudden and fierce it made my eyes water, while everyone else continued with their fun, singing and laughing. Mary had given her the charm, identical to mine. Strikey was *terrible* at science. How dare she wear it?

I was only another friend. Nothing special. And I'd judged Miss Washburn for her desire to be ordinary? I was ordinary, too. We were all sickeningly ordinary.

I could walk out, and no one would follow. Or I could stay—with a vengeance.

"Fill me a cup, Cynthia," I said, and proceeded to drink three cups of gin in all, choking back the astringent fumes, willing to prove I was as carefree as Cynthia, as silly as Strikey, as sensible and independent as Mary—if all those things could possibly go together. As if I could be someone more interesting by being everything to everyone. Lord knows I had many more years to keep trying.

I was the one who kept restarting the phonograph. I was the one who learned the lyrics of the chorus so that I could sing alongside the stupid soldier, "Early ev'ry morning, night and noon . . ." I was the one who remembered two dirty jokes that I had been told, in confidence, by my sister Evelyn, and I told them in turn to Strikey and Cynthia, who shrieked

and groaned and laughed in pleased disbelief, which only proved they'd thought me incapable of being raunchy, a misunderstanding I was only too eager to disprove.

I was the one who, when Jo came home and opened the door, appalled at the noise and the suspicious vapors in the room, took the blame for the party, as if I'd started it rather than stumbled into it, and who talked Cynthia and Strikey into prancing outside, our skirts rolled scandalously high, while Mary—tired of me, or just tired—stayed behind. I was the one who vomited into the bushes outside the library building, and beamed, lying on my side, when Strikey patted my hair and pulled me up to a feeble stand: "I didn't know your kind drank."

"What kind is that?"

When she didn't answer, I filled in: "The dizzy kind. Strikey, help me. I can't stop everything from turning."

I was not the praying type, and perhaps I made my final spontaneous address to Adonai at that moment. *Stop spinning. Please stop. Oh, God, but look at those stars.* How those stars would keep spinning, all night long.

"You're skirt's a mess," Strikey said, after I crumpled on the lawn a second time. "But you're all right, Rar. You're all right."

Mary probably had no idea what had come between us. I had wanted a deep, passionate, risky, all-encompassing friendship. Sacrifice and loyalty—or nothing. So fine: nothing it was.

We occasionally still shared a table at the library, cramming for exams next to the soberly beautiful stained-glass windows. We even sat side-by-side once, during a winter sleigh ride when everyone else was talking about their upcoming New Year's plans—shopping for scarves and gloves, and going ice skating with a friendly batch of New England boys. Instead we compared notes on graduate schools for psychology, but in a formal, awkward way, as if we'd only just met and had not, seven months earlier, reclined together on the campus lawn, staring up at the starry sky, trying to picture our glowing futures, as if written between the constellations.

Never would I have guessed how similar our interests would remain,

and how her life for years would always be the example of what *my* life might have been, professionally but also personally, if not for certain choices and—to be plain about it—if not for certain mistakes. I would begin to feel, only later, that we had been two saplings planted in the same field, and I had grown helter-skelter, too anxious for the sun maybe, or too sporadically watered, heavy with fruit at one moment and rotted the next, and then swarming with wasps, while she had grown slowly and more judiciously in a half-sunny, half-shady spot, taking her time, focusing on what mattered, neither overtended nor entirely ignored, maturing into something true and strong. A torturous metaphor, but poetry was not my subject of choice at Vassar.

But I must give Mary the credit for telling me about the John Watson lecture at the New School, in New York, at the start of 1919. It was just like Mary to seek out a psychology lecture outside Vassar's walls, for which she wouldn't even be awarded credit. It was also just like her not to seek a personal introduction to Watson that evening in January when we entered the lecture hall, crowded with Columbia and New School students familiar with Watson's 1913 Behaviorist Manifesto. Mary simply wasn't the flirting type and he—with his dark forelock and just-beginning-to-silver temples, his rakish smile, and his European-tailored clothes—was already encircled by students of both genders seeking his attention.

It was a Friday evening, and our own Miss Washburn was there, too, on one of her occasional forays outside of Poughkeepsie. When I stopped by her seat on the way to my own, she reached for my hand and said with a smile, "The youngest president of the Psychological Association, did you know that? He's made a name for himself. Listen well, Rosalie, but water it down by half."

I thought of the day I'd spied into her windows, and of the pale spider plant with the knotted roots, forced into the murky water in a dirty juice glass on her desk. I thought of the evening ahead, and what would follow: the gentle chatter, the crustless sandwiches and tables of punch. I wanted more than a half glass of cheap punch. I yearned for something purer—no,

something downright stronger, and not just a drink. I wanted a torrential downpour, raining onto my head. I wanted to tip back my chin, close my eyes, and open up my mouth, drops pounding and splashing, soaking my throat, my dress, my skin.

As a speaker approached the stage to introduce the special guest, I hurried away to my own seat, several places away from Mary's. Then Dr. John B. Watson took the stage, patting his hair as he climbed the steps, smiling with faux modesty. He took off his wire-rimmed glasses to wipe them, which only drew our attention to his thick, dark eyebrows and soulful eyes, substantially deeper and larger without lenses in the way. Even from a distance, he struck me as both arrogant and vulnerable—a potent combination for a girl my age, whose romantic, inarticulate ideas were a mess of yearnings for both subordination and dutiful mothering.

I must have been distracted, my own thoughts spinning in circles or jumping from one loose association to the next, while he explained some of his main tenets—that we had no business wondering about abstract things like consciousness, that there was no such thing as a mind. If only *my* mind hadn't been so overstimulated at that moment, I might have heard and digested his opening words even better. As he talked, he kept the glasses hooked for several minutes between two fingers, until suddenly, he pushed them back onto his face and reached for something hidden beneath the lectern.

"Catch," he said, throwing a dingy softball toward the front row of seats. A girl—thick waisted, blonde head of curls—threw her hands up in alarm. The ball bounced and rolled between several rows, got kicked by someone trying in vain to retrieve it, and emerged in a row near the back, where a line of standing-room-only students had assembled.

"A negative early experience, I'm guessing," the visiting lecturer said good-naturedly. "Let's try that again."

Another toss, and another girl in the front lunged forward, elbows between her skirts, and still managed to butterfinger it. When the ball was returned to him, Dr. Watson took off his glasses and puzzled over the ball as if it had betrayed him.

"I've given this same demonstration at colleges up and down the coast, and it's never failed me before." He lifted one finger off the ball to scratch at his temple. "Then again, there were more men in those audiences. We seem to have an unusual number of women present." He pressed his lips together in a self-mocking smile. "Last time, then. Catch!"

Dr. Watson looked toward the far right corner of the room, the farthest front-row chair, where I was sitting, and in slow-moving pantomime, lobbed the gentlest possible underhand toss. I rose a few inches out of my seat, held my breath, and barely caught the ball between my wrists before scooping it inward, toward my heart. The room erupted in applause.

"What were you thinking?" he said to the first girl who had dropped the ball, and who even now couldn't organize her words into coherence.

"Never mind," he said, skipping the second girl and zeroing in on me. "What were *you* thinking?"

I was still tensed up, on the edge of my seat. "I was thinking I'd better not make a fool of myself."

"Really? All those subverbalized words, lodging in your larynx?"

My larynx? Well it's true, my throat felt tight. Is that where they had lodged? Wherever they'd gotten formed, and wherever they'd gotten stuck, yes—all those thoughts, and other things besides. He'd given us plenty of time to think and daydream since the moment he'd entered the room.

"I was thinking," I said, playing along, "*Don't drop it!*"

"Yes, well, we upset the demonstration, with those multiple attempts and significant delays. Usually, I do it just once, and the element of surprise is essential. I'm wagering that if the ball were coming toward you the first time, you might not have subverbalized at all, isn't that right?"

What did it cost me to agree? "Yes, that's probably right."

"No need for any introspective process. Just an action," he insisted. "Just protect yourself—if you're the first girl, and maybe had a ball smack you in the face as a child. A conditioned response, in other words." Everyone laughed at this, rubbernecking to see if the attention had made the girl turn red.

"And if you'd never had such a fearful incident," Dr. Watson continued,

"you'd be responding in another conditioned and more complicated way, without even realizing you were moving. You'd be preparing to—why must we call it a thought?—preparing to simply . . . *catch*."

The entire room was nodding, lips ready to repeat the word: *catch*. As he wanted it. But most of the young women gathered were just as ready to say, "Dinner at eight? Certainly." Or, "of course I'll dance with you." Or, "No, I don't have a ride, actually." Or any of a dozen other ready-made replies to this handsome and gregarious professor.

"No one asks a baseball player what he thinks every time a ball comes to him, as a way of understanding what follows in the game. No one posts his musings on a scoreboard, and no one should. Why should we care what you're thinking—*if* you're even thinking, whatever that means, and I propose that it means far less than you've been taught. I would suggest that our century's emphasis on thought and mind is as irrelevant as previous centuries' emphasis on the soul. We are interested in behavior. We are interested in what's observable, what's measurable, what's malleable. We are interested in what can be predicted, and what can be controlled. That's where our focus needs to be, if we intend to live in a saner world."

A saner world! So he was offering both the excitement of revolution and redemption from chaos, both change and security, upheaval and peace. Potent concepts, just a month after the armistice.

A college boy in a too-tight argyle sweater stood up from a seat in the back and called out a question. "But Dr. Watson, what are your positions on the structuralism of Wundt and Titchener versus the functionalism of James? And what about psychoanalysis?"

In one breathless expulsion, the student had managed to name three pioneers and three theories. The college boy glanced left and right, clearly proud of his performance, and sat down to receive his answer.

His seat was still squeaking when Dr. Watson replied, "Did you hear anything I've said so far? Are you a student of psychology, young man, or a student of philosophy? Every method you've just named is focused on one thing: introspection."

"But Wundt was an experimentalist," the student had the audacity to

call back, although in a less certain voice.

Dr. Watson shook his head. His knowing smirk seemed to take in all the rest of us, granting us the benefit of the doubt. *We* weren't stupid enough to defend Wundt. (Until an hour ago, I'd considered Wundt brilliant, but I would never admit as much now.)

"You can't *perform* experiments involving introspection. You can only perform experiments involving behavior. Mental processes, whether the *what* and the *where* of structuralism or the *how* and the *why* of functionalism, do not concern us. What concerns us, and moreover, what we can study, is what the human animal actually does."

Dr. Watson gripped the podium more tightly, voice rising as he railed at us for our own benefit.

"The human animal retracts a finger from the fire. He lashes out in a rage. If he is a lazy medicine man intent on enslaving the rest of his tribe with superstition, he dances around the fire and tells tales about a frightening God. Whatever his views on religion, he eats and sleeps and copulates. He draws architectural plans and builds skyscrapers. From simple to complex, yet all structured of observable actions. Are these not interesting enough behaviors for you?"

No answer, now, from the college boy in the tight sweater.

"Let's forget about our game of catch, then, and forget with even less regret about the last thirty to forty years of introspective dead-ends," Dr. Watson continued to our roomful of fresh faces. "Let's talk about a range of unconditioned responses, and then we'll address the subject of conditioned ones." And Dr. Watson began to review for us the story of Pavlov, the bell, and the salivating dog, and why, again, these things would make no sense at all unless we dismissed nearly all other approaches as outright hokum—*Listen well,* Washburn had said, *and water it down by half*—and we'd have to start all over and look only to what could be observed directly, and experimented upon, and thereby proven.

At the bottom of the stairs leading to the postlecture reception hall, Miss Washburn introduced us. Dr. Watson's forehead was gleaming; the act of

overturning his predecessors' theories had been tiring. Working a finger under his high, tight collar, he explained that he was looking for a graduate student.

Mary was nearby, and she had already whispered a single comment in my ear: "Focus on what's observable. That's good sense." So quickly had she boiled down the parts that would be relevant to her, letting the rest blow away: his showmanship, his appearance, his claims to hold the future of humanity in his hands. And now she stood silently at my elbow: unassuming, staring at him through her thick, round lenses. I could feel the weight of her attention, the heavy outline of her personality. She would not pander, and if I'd been her closest friend that day, I might not have felt the need to pander either. But I wasn't her friend anymore. Colleagues, we'd be, and nothing more, after graduation. The mild loneliness I'd been feeling for months was, on this day, freedom: ejected from Mary's orbit, I could more easily respond to the magnetism of someone else's.

"There you are," Watson said, smiling as he turned, recognizing me as the girl who had managed to hold on to the tossed ball. "So why can't we come up with a roomful of women who can catch properly?"

"It's only because they didn't practice when they were younger," I said. "It's just something you learn, given half a chance."

"You must have had brothers."

"No."

"Then . . . ?"

"I guess I wanted to catch the ball badly enough. To help you with your demonstration, I mean."

"You like to help," he said.

"If the person is worth helping."

He stared at me openly, without guile. I had to hope against all hope that I looked more confident than I felt.

I said, "I should admit that I do have a father willing to play toss with his daughters."

"Good man. And what does he do for a living?"

"Real estate."

"Interested in planning and building the future."

"Yes, I suppose."

"And you? What do you think about the future?"

"That it will be much better than the past. It has to be."

He smiled again, and I felt as if I was passing successfully through a maze, choosing between turns, vaguely aware of some rewarding scent in the air, happy simply to avoid a dead end.

"And what do you imagine we do in a lab full of babies?"

With Miss Washburn, *I don't know* had often been the right, honest, admirable, and cautious answer, but with this man, I could tell that phrase would never, ever do.

My slight pause gave him an excuse to jump in. "Babies won't tell you their dreams, of course. Nor will they submit to hypnosis."

I plunged ahead, expanding on the ideas he'd just explained to us in the second half of the lecture. "I imagine you're looking at the senses: vision, hearing. You're seeing what develops, when and how. Issues of perception. Maybe left-hand or right-hand primacy."

When he frowned slightly, I backed up. "But in the lecture, you mentioned you haven't observed as much handedness as one might expect. It's one of those so-called innate qualities that perhaps isn't so innate after all. Perhaps almost nothing is innate."

Better, his tentative smile seemed to say.

"Maybe language?" I continued. "But I suppose that comes later, and anyway, self-reported thoughts or words of any kind actually lead us astray in a way that behaviors don't—which explains why Wundt and James aren't sufficient. So I imagine you're recording reactions to the simplest possible stimuli."

"What's a simple reaction?" he asked.

"Blinking."

"In response to?"

"Light, an approaching object, pain."

"And how about a more complex reaction—say, the turning of a man's head to follow a desirable woman as she passes?"

"It's merely a conditioned response, or I guess I should say, a complex and integrated set of responses."

I made no mention of where, as he had explained to us in the lecture, these responses led next: how mere visual stimuli, the simple sighting of a woman's bonnet, could initiate the building pressure of a liquid, male semen—the cause of most romantic entanglements, he'd said, easily reversed once the pressure has been released. All a bit much to spell out with Miss Washburn still looking on.

"It's the stuff of poetry," he teased.

"And the stuff of science."

"Which one tells us more?"

"I think we both know the answer to that, Dr. Watson. I don't blame the ancient poets, if that's what you mean."

"How about the modern ones?"

"I suppose they're wasting their time. But once a year, a little Valentine's poetry doesn't seem out of place. If they take one day and we scientists get the other 364, the human race still has a chance."

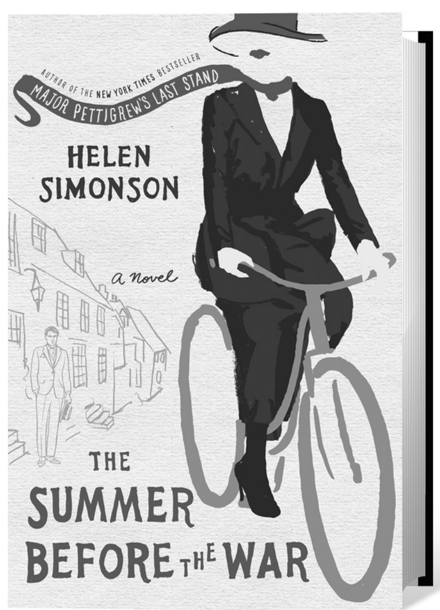
"You're assuming the scientist works more than five days a week."

"Is there a reason he shouldn't?"

He stopped me. "What's your name again?"

"Rosalie Rayner."

"And when do you graduate?"



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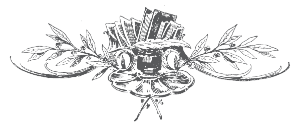


It was in the first place, after the strangest fashion, a sense of the extraordinary way in which the most benign conditions of light and air, of sky and sea, the most beautiful English summer conceivable, mixed themselves with all the violence of action and passion. . . . Never were desperate doings so blandly lighted up as by the two unforgettable months that I was to spend so much of in looking over from the old rampart of a little high-perched Sussex town at the bright blue streak of the Channel.

Henry James, "Within the Rim"

CHAPTER ONE

THE TOWN OF RYE rose from the flat marshes like an island, its tumbled pyramid of red-tiled roofs glowing in the slanting evening light. The high Sussex bluffs were a massive, unbroken line of shadow from east to west, the fields breathed out the heat of the day, and the sea was a sheet of hammered pewter. Standing at the tall French windows, Hugh Grange held his breath in a vain attempt to suspend the moment in time as he used to do when he was a little boy, in this same, slightly shabby drawing room, and the lighting of the lamps had been the signal for his aunt to send him to bed. He smiled now to think of how long and late those summer evenings had run and how he had always complained bitterly until he was allowed to stay up well beyond bedtime. Small boys, he now knew, were inveterate fraudsters and begged, pleaded, and cajoled for added rights and treats with innocent eyes and black hearts.

The three boys his aunt had asked him to tutor this summer had relieved him of half a sovereign and most of his books before he realized that they neither were as hungry as their sighs proposed nor had any interest in *Ivanhoe* except for what it might bring when flogged to the man with the secondhand bookstall in the town market. He held no grudge. Instead he admired their ferret wits and held

some small dream that his brief teaching and example might turn sharpness into some intellectual curiosity by the time the grammar school began again.

The door to the drawing room was opened with a robust hand, and Hugh's cousin, Daniel, stood back with a mock bow to allow their Aunt Agatha to pass into the room. "Aunt Agatha says there isn't going to be a war," said Daniel, coming in behind her, laughing. "And so of course there won't be. They would never dream of defying her." Aunt Agatha tried to look severe but only managed to cross her eyes and almost stumbled into a side table due to the sudden blurring of her vision.

"That isn't what I said at all," she said, trying to secure her long embroidered scarf, an effort as futile as resting a flat kite on a round boulder, thought Hugh, as the scarf immediately began to slide sideways again. Aunt Agatha was still a handsome woman at forty-five, but she was inclined to stoutness and had very few sharp planes on which to drape her clothing. Tonight's dinner dress, in slippery chiffon, possessed a deep, sloppy neckline and long Oriental sleeves. Hugh hoped it would maintain its dignity through dinner, for his aunt liked to embellish her conversation with expansive gestures.

"What does Uncle John say?" asked Hugh, stepping to a tray of decanters to pour his aunt her usual glass of Madeira. "No chance he's coming down tomorrow?" He had hoped to ask his uncle's opinion on a smaller but no less important subject. After years devoted to his medical studies, Hugh found himself not only on the point of becoming primary assistant surgeon to Sir Alex Ramsey, one of England's leading general surgeons, but also quite possibly in love with his surgeon's very pretty daughter, Lucy. He had held rather aloof from Lucy the past year, perhaps to prove to himself, and others, that his affection for her was not connected to any hopes of advancement. This had only made him a favorite of hers among the various students and younger doctors who flocked around her father, but it was not until this summer, when she and her father left for an extended lecture tour in the Italian Lakes, that he had felt a pleasurable misery in her absence. He found he missed her dancing eyes, the

toss of her pale hair as she laughed at some dry comment he made; he even missed the little spectacles she wore to copy her father's case files or reply to his voluminous correspondence. She was fresh from the schoolroom and sometimes distracted by all the pleasures London offered bright young people, but she was devoted to her father and would make, thought Hugh, an exceptional wife for a rising young surgeon. He wished to discuss, with some urgency, whether he might be in a position to contemplate matrimony.

Uncle John was a sensible man and through the years had always seemed swiftly to understand whatever difficulty Hugh stammered out and would help talk the matter over until Hugh was convinced he had resolved some intractable problem all on his own. Hugh was no longer a small boy and now understood some of his uncle's wisdom to be the result of diplomatic training, but he knew his uncle's affection to be genuine. His own parents' parting words, as they left for a long-awaited year of travel, had been to apply to Uncle John in any case of need.

"Your uncle says they are all working feverishly to smooth things over, before everyone's summer holiday," said his aunt. "He tells me nothing, of course, but the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary spent much of the day closeted with the King." Uncle John was a senior official in the Foreign Office, and the usually sleepy summer precincts of Whitehall had been crammed with busy civil servants, politicians, and generals since the Archduke's assassination in Sarajevo. "Anyway he telephoned to say he met the schoolteacher and transferred her to Charing Cross to catch the last train, so she'll be getting in after dinner. We'll give her a late supper."

"At such a late hour, wouldn't it be kinder to deliver her to her rooms in town and maybe have Cook send down something cold?" said Daniel, ignoring Hugh's proffered dry sherry and pouring a glass of Uncle John's best whisky. "I'm sure she'll be horribly fagged and not up to a room full of people in evening dress." He tried to keep a neutral face, but Hugh detected a slight moue of distaste at the thought of entertaining the new schoolteacher his aunt had found. Since graduating from Balliol in June, Daniel had spent the

first few weeks of the summer in Italy as the guest of an aristocratic college chum, and had developed a sense of social superiority that Hugh was dying to see Aunt Agatha knock out of his silly head. Instead Agatha had been patient, saying, "Oh, let him have his taste of the high life. Don't you think his heart will be broken soon enough? When Daniel goes into the Foreign Office this autumn, as your Uncle John has taken such pains to arrange, I'm sure his friend will drop him in an instant. Let him have his hour of glamour."

Hugh was of the opinion that Daniel should be made to understand his place, but he loved his Aunt Agatha and he thought any continued argument might lead her to think he resented Daniel being her favorite. Daniel's mother, Agatha's sister, had died when Daniel was only five, and his father was a strange, distant sort of man. Daniel had been sent to boarding school a month after his mother's death, and Agatha had been his refuge in the Christmas and summer holidays. Hugh had always been torn about Christmas. He spent it at home in London with his parents, who loved him and made a great fuss of him. He would have preferred if they could have all gone down to Sussex to Agatha's house together, but his mother, who was Uncle John's sister, liked to be among her friends in town, and his father did not like to be away from the bank too long at Christmas. Hugh had been happy in the midst of piles of striped wrapping paper, huge mysterious boxes, and the dishes of sweets and fruits set all around their Kensington villa. But sometimes, when he was sent to bed and the music from his parents' guests drifted up to his room, he would lie in bed and peer out the window over the dark rooftops and try to see all the way to Sussex, where no doubt Aunt Agatha was tucking Daniel in with one of her wild stories of giants and elves who lived in caves under the Sussex Downs and whose parties could be mistaken sometimes as thunder.

"Don't be silly, Daniel. Miss Nash will stay here this evening," said Aunt Agatha, bending to switch on the electric lamp by the flowered couch. She sat down and stretched out her feet, which were encased in Oriental slippers embroidered, rather strangely, with lobsters. "I had to fight to bring the full weight of the School Board to

bear on the governors to hire a woman. I mean to get a good look at her and make sure she understands what's to be done."

The local grammar school was one of his aunt's many social causes. She believed in education for all and seemed to expect great leaders of men to emerge from the grubby-kneed group of farmers' and merchants' boys who crowded the new red-brick school building out beyond the railway tracks.

"You mean you want her to get a good look at you," said Hugh. "I'm sure she'll be suitably cowed."

"I'm with the governors," said Daniel. "It takes a man to keep a mob of schoolboys in line."

"Nonsense," said Agatha. "Besides, you can't just drum up teachers these days. Our last Latin master, Mr. Puddlecombe, was only here a year and then he had the nerve to tell us he was off to try his luck with a cousin in Canada."

"Well, school had almost broken up for the summer, Auntie," said Hugh.

"Which made it all the more impossible," said Agatha. "We were fortunate that your Uncle John spoke to Lord Marbely and that Lady Marbely had been looking for a position for this young woman. She is a niece apparently, and the Marbelys highly recommended her; though I did get a hint that maybe they had an ulterior motive for getting her out of Gloucestershire."

"Do they have a son?" asked Daniel. "That's usually the story."

"Oh no, Lady Marbely took pains to assure me she's quite plain," said Aunt Agatha. "I may be progressive, but I would never hire a pretty teacher."

"We'd better eat dinner soon," said Hugh, consulting the battered pocket watch that had been his grandfather's and that his parents were always begging to replace with something more modern. The dinner gong rang just as he spoke.

"Yes, I'd like to digest properly before this paragon descends upon us," said Daniel, downing the rest of his glass in a swallow. "I assume I have to be introduced and can't just hide in my room?"

"Would you go with Smith to pick her up, Hugh?" said Agatha.

"Two of you would probably overwhelm the poor girl, and obviously I can't trust Daniel not to sneer at her."

"What if Hugh falls in love with her?" asked Daniel. Hugh was tempted to retort that his affections were already engaged, but his matrimonial intentions were too important to be subjected to Daniel's disrespectful teasing, and so he merely gave his cousin a look of scorn. "After all," added Daniel, "Hugh is so terribly plain himself."

Beatrice Nash was quite sure she had a large smut of soot on her nose, but she did not want to take out her pocket mirror again in case doing so roused the inebriated young man opposite her to further flights of compliment. She had checked her face soon after leaving Charing Cross, and he had taken the tiny gold mirror as some recognized signal of coy flirtation. Her book had been further cause for conversation, though he did not seem to recognize the Trollope name and then confessed he had no use for reading. He had even proffered the use of his small bag for her feet, and she had tucked her ankles hard back under the seat, fearing that he might whip off her shoes.

She had scolded him severely when they changed trains in Kent and he followed her into her chosen compartment. He had backed away, laughing, but the train had already started. Now they were stuck together in a compartment without access to a corridor. He was sunk into the appearance of a petulant doze, and she sat rigid, her back straight against the prickly fabric of the bench, trying not to breathe in the stench of stale liquor or feel the insolent proximity of his outstretched legs in pressed white flannels and shiny, buckled brown shoes.

She kept her face turned to the window and let the image of wet, green fields run freely across her eyes until the sheep, grass, and sky blurred into painted streaks. She wished now she had not refused the Marbelys' offer to send a servant to accompany her. She had been tormented by Ada Marbely's long discussion of what conveyance might be available to reach the station and who might be spared. She

had been made to understand that her transfer was a very, very large inconvenience and that of course they could not offer to send her in the car, or send anyone from the permanent household staff. She had hidden her humiliation behind a firm claim of independence. She reminded them that she had traveled widely with her father, from the American West to the Kasbahs of Morocco and the lesser-known classical sites of southern Italy, and was perfectly capable of seeing herself and one trunk to Sussex, by farm cart if needed. She had been adamant and now understood that she had only herself to blame for being exposed to the indignities of traveling alone. She managed a small smile at her own stubbornness.

"All women can be pretty when they smile," said the man. She whipped her face around to glare at him, but his eyes appeared to be still closed, and his face, round and sweating, remained sunk on its thick neck, wrapped in a greasy yellow cravat. He scratched at his shirtfront and yawned without covering his mouth, as if she didn't exist.

It was the cheapest kind of rebuke, to call a woman ugly, but one to which small boys and grown men seemed equally quick to stoop when feeling challenged. While she had always playfully dismissed her father's insistence on calling her his beauty, she believed she had a pleasant, regular face and took pride in a certain strength about the chin and a straight posture. That such an insult was a lie never seemed to reduce its effectiveness, and she could only bite her lip not to give him the satisfaction of a response.

The train slowed in a great hissing fog of steam, and she felt a flood of relief to hear the stationmaster calling, "Rye. Rye station." She jumped up to take down her bag, lowered the window, heedless of the threat of flying cinders, and had her hand on the outside door-knob ready to open it at the earliest moment.

"Now the stars align," said the young man, coming to press her towards the door, his bag against her leg. She almost wept to feel him breathing on her neck. "If you're staying in the area you must allow me to call on you."

She opened the door and stepped from the carriage, nearly falling

to the platform as the train gave a last lurch. She hit her left ankle with her bag and felt at least one hairpin come away from the side of her head. Not caring for her appearance or the pain, she fled towards the baggage car to retrieve her trunk and ran right into a man standing enveloped in the steam. She could not prevent a cry of fear as he grasped her elbow to stop them both from falling.

"Are you all right?" asked the man. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Let go of me," she said, and she could hear her voice fierce with suppressed rage.

The man, a young man, stepped back, raising his hands in submission. "I meant no offense, miss," he said. "I'm terribly sorry."

"I saw her first, Grange," said the man from the train.

"Please leave me alone," said Beatrice, holding her hand to her face. She was suddenly too exhausted to fight anymore. Her rage drained away, and she could feel her limbs tremble as if the light breeze were a winter squall.

"Wheaton, you're an ugly drunk," said the young man in a voice so calm he might have been talking about the weather. "Can't you tell a respectable young woman from one of your floozies? Behave yourself."

"Didn't think you were much for the ladies, Grange," said Wheaton with a sly chuckle. "Or is that just your pretty cousin, Daniel?"

"Don't be a bully, Wheaton," the young man replied. "Go home before I'm obliged to make you go. No doubt you'll pound me into the ground, but you'll ruin those perfectly good clothes doing it."

"I'm going; expected home for the fatted calf by my sobbing mother," said Wheaton, unruffled by the veiled threat of physical harm. "You can have the schoolteacher." He staggered away, and Beatrice felt her face flush.

"Are you Miss Nash?" asked the young man. She looked at him but could not trust herself to speak. "I'm Hugh Grange. My aunt, Agatha Kent, sent me to meet you."

"I think I need to sit down," she said. She could tell the young man had kind gray eyes, but she saw nothing else as the whole station began to slowly spin. "Please don't allow me to faint."

"Here's a bench," he said, and she felt his hand tugging urgently at her elbow. She sank down. "Good. Hang your head below your knees and breathe," he added, and she felt her head pushed down towards the dusty bricks of the platform. She breathed deep, slow breaths, and relief came as a light sweat on her forehead.

"Sorry. Ridiculous of me."

"Not at all." She could see only a pair of country boots, well oiled but creased and scuffed with age. "I'm sorry Wheaton upset you."

"He did no such thing. I just—I should have eaten more lunch, that's all. I usually eat very well when I travel."

"It's important to keep up one's strength," he said, and though she could not detect any note of sarcasm, she felt the anger she had held in all day return. She shivered again, and the young man, his fingers on the pulse in her left wrist, added, "Shall I go ask the stationmaster for some water, or do you think you can make it out to the car? We really should get you to my aunt Agatha's right away."

"I'm perfectly all right," she said, standing up slowly. "I must see to my trunk and bicycle."

"Smith will arrange to fetch them later from the stationmaster," he said. "Let me carry your bag."

Beatrice hesitated, but there was no hint of condescension in the young man's tone, and his blunt face showed worry in a single vertical crease between the eyes. He was trying to treat her well. She understood that not just in the past couple of hours, but in the past few months, she had lost some trust in how people would treat her. She blinked her eyes and handed him her bag without a word. He took it and hefted its unexpected weight.

"Sorry," she said. "I packed too many books as always."

"That's quite all right," he said as he took her arm and steered her out through a side gate. "Though I hate to think how heavy the trunk must be. Maybe I'll ask the stationmaster to telephone for a cart and save the car from breaking an axle."

On the ride up the hill away from town, the young woman kept her face averted and her gaze fixed on the passing hedges and cottages. Hugh contemplated the curve of her long neck with the thick

brown hair loosely bunched at the nape. She must have been tired, and yet she did not have the rounded slump of permanent defeat that seemed to Hugh to be the hallmark of the schoolteachers he had known. Even his professors at Oxford, many of them secure in family and finances, had seemed to bow over time as if under the perpetual onslaught of student ignorance. The woman's summer traveling coat was made of thick, supple linen that seemed of some quality, and her trim jacket and skirt were fashionably narrow, though unadorned. He judged her to be almost his own age; perhaps twenty-two or -three to his august twenty-four. While she was not a tremulous girl fresh from the schoolroom, she was far from the dull spinster he had been expecting. He acknowledged a flicker of interest best investigated and fanned by conversation.

"I apologize again for poor Wheaton," he said. "He's perfectly gentlemanly around women when he's sober, but when he drinks he sort of launches himself at any female in the vicinity."

"Don't apologize," she said. "Obviously it was my fault then for occupying a railway carriage in which he wished to ride?"

Hugh found himself flushing under her stare. "Not what I meant at all," he said. "But men like Wheaton . . ."

"Are there different kinds then?" she asked.

"Different kinds?"

"Of men? Only the majority seem prone to some similar lapse of manners under the influence of alcohol." She pressed her lips together, and Hugh began to wonder how to get himself out of the conversation.

"Do you wish me to apologize on behalf of us all?" he asked, quietly.

"I would prefer you did not apologize for anyone else," she said. "My father always says that if we were as quick to own our own faults as we are to apologize for those of others, society might truly advance."

"I'd say he's right, but woefully optimistic," said Hugh. "Very religious man, is he?" He had a vision of a purse-lipped temperance type with thin fingers tapping the cover of a Bible.

The girl gave what could only be described as a snort of laughter and then covered her mouth with her gloved hand and seemed to struggle with her emotions.

"Sorry," said Hugh, unable to bite back the word.

"Thank you," she said at last. A smile transformed her face and set her brown eyes alight. "He died a year ago, and I didn't think it would be possible to laugh about him again."

"Not religious then," said Hugh.

"No," she said. "Not exactly. But I do hope you won't repeat it to your aunt. I'm sure schoolteachers are expected to have irreproachable parents."

"I'm sure they are," he said. "Have you studied their other attributes?"

She gave him a doubtful look.

"I assure you I'm completely qualified," she said. "But I've been told I have to work harder to cultivate an appropriate attitude of grateful subordination."

"Lucky for you, my aunt has taken such a stand with the school governors that she would be loath to tell them her candidate was unsuitable," he said as they drew up on the broad gravel forecourt of his aunt's comfortable villa. He meant it in fun, but he noticed the young woman looked worried as Smith opened her door. As she preceded him in to meet Aunt Agatha, he wondered if he should also have mentioned to her that she was in no way as plain as his aunt would have preferred.

CHAPTER TWO

Beatrice liked the house right away. While its design conjured a medieval hall bred with a couple of thatched cottages, its large, commodious rooms, electric lights, and bright floors spoke of commerce and energy, not a household turning into stone under the geologic pressure of its own lineage. Lady Marbely had moved with the slow drag of a woman waiting her interment in the family crypt, her life and home dusty with protocol and made reclusive by walls of superiority. Beatrice did not know how Agatha Kent and her husband really stood in the world, but she did not think they were likely to pounce on all the flaws in her bloodline before the soup was on the dinner table.

"You must be Beatrice and you must be hungry," said a plump woman in a slippery Oriental gown, coming out of the open glass doors leading to a living room with many lamps. She was of that certain age when the bloom of youth must give way to strength of character, but her face was handsome in its intelligent eyes and commanding smile, and her hair retained a youthful spring as it threatened to escape from its carefully pinned rolls. "I'm Agatha Kent, and this is my nephew Daniel Bookham."

"How do you do," he said without even a conventional trace of interest.

Though she had chosen to put the romantic notions of the schoolgirl behind her, Beatrice was not yet immune to a handsome face. With carefully disheveled brown hair falling into blue eyes, the sharpest of jawlines, and an almost downy moustache, Daniel Bookham was a very striking young man. Though she told herself that he was absurd in his carelessly tied cravat and generally bohemian affect, she was forced to squash a brief disappointment that he was younger than her.

"And you've already met my other nephew, Hugh Grange," added Agatha. Beatrice turned and reconsidered him in the bright light of the front hall. He was taller than Daniel, by a head, and plain in a way that might be considered handsome when not compared directly to the almost classical form of his younger cousin. As his aunt dispensed him to see to the luggage and called for the maid to show her to her room, Beatrice decided it would be prudent to keep her eyes firmly in Hugh Grange's direction.

It was probably the third-best guest room, thought Beatrice, small and furnished with a narrow oak bed and a simple writing desk, but pleasantly decorated with blue striped wallpaper and flowery chintz curtains. A lace-skirted sink, with running water, occupied one corner, and a large window stood open to the night and the fragrance of the garden. In the distance, a shimmer of silver indicated the moonlit sea. Across the hall, the maid had proudly displayed a bathroom containing an enormous tub with a frightening array of brass taps and an ornate mahogany throne, the raised seat of which revealed an indoor water closet. A carved mahogany tank set high on the wall and a long brass chain gave it an almost ecclesiastical air.

"I know how to operate it, thank you," said Beatrice, forestalling the maid's instructions.

"There's no other guests in this wing," said the maid. "So you'll have it to yourself."

"Are the gentlemen not staying?" asked Beatrice.

"They like to stay in their old rooms on the top floor," said the

maid. “Can’t imagine how Master Hugh manages to sleep in that little bed of his, scrunched up like a hedgehog I expect, but he won’t hear of moving, and Master Daniel tried the green room at the front for a while, but Master Hugh teased him something dreadful and Mrs. Kent wouldn’t let him smoke cigars because the curtains were all new, so he was pretty soon off upstairs again.” Her voice softened as she hurried on, and Beatrice thought better of the young men for inspiring such affection.

She remembered her father and the fierce loyalty he had commanded in the many servants who had looked after the two of them. How sweet, and yet how bitter the many partings. How many times had she been pillowed against the bosom of a sobbing housekeeper who had stroked her hair and begged her to write? Once they had taken a maid with them, to Italy, and the maid had been almost prostrate with grief at letting them down, but found it impossible to accustom herself to foreign parts. Beatrice could summon, too easily, the cold railway platform, the tearstained face of the maid in the train window, and herself, a thin child, controlling a wave of shivers and resolving to keep the next maid at more of a distance. Each kind servant—and they were all employed by her father for their kindness rather than for any great skills in cleaning or cooking, it seemed—was held a little more distant than the last, until she could look now at Agatha Kent’s maid with a completely dispassionate appraisal.

The breathless girl was struggling to remain haughty. No doubt the servants all knew Beatrice was a schoolteacher, and it was a funny thing about those in service, thought Beatrice, that they could be as rude as revolutionaries to those just above them while remaining unconditionally loyal to their masters. The girl was clearly friendly at heart, a stout worker, and had a local accent that probably made her suffer the condescension of others. Beatrice gave her a broad smile.

“Thank you for being so kind, Jenny,” she said.

“I’ll fetch you some supper up right away,” said the girl. She smiled back, and no trace of haughtiness remained.

Coming downstairs in a fresh blouse and a shawl, Beatrice met Daniel crossing the entrance hall.

"Ah, wait here one minute and I'll ask Aunt Agatha where she wants you," he said, disappearing through the living room doors.

Beatrice paused on the bottom stair, gripping the banister until her wrist ached. She murmured, very fast, "Humiliation is the sport of the petty," an admonition of her father's that she had found all too useful this past year.

"Shall I put the schoolteacher in the small study?" she heard Daniel ask.

"Oh, heavens no, there's no fire in there and it's distinctly chilly after dark. Ask her to come in here."

Daniel appeared in the doorway, a frown marring his classical features, and waved at her. "In here, miss. Don't be shy, we're very informal."

"I assure you I was not raised to be shy," said Beatrice, her voice sharp. "A country living room holds no terrors for me."

"Do you hear that, Aunt?" said Daniel. "Not everyone is terrified of you."

"I should hope not," said Agatha, reclining in one corner of an overstuffed sofa. "Why, I am the mildest mannered of women and I get on with everyone."

Hugh, sitting in a wing chair by the fireplace, seemed to choke on his own laughter and took a swig from his glass as he got to his feet.

"See, even Hugh will tell you my aunt is a most formidable woman." Daniel smiled at Beatrice, but she was now immune to his charms, inoculated by his casual arrogance.

"You boys are very rude," said Agatha. "Why don't you offer Miss Nash a drink, Daniel? Do come and sit by me, Miss Nash."

"Nothing for me, thank you," said Beatrice, who would have loved a small glass of port but knew better than to ask. It had taken several weeks for Lady Marbely to stop commenting on how unusual it was for a lady to be so knowledgeable about port and how

sad it was that she had had no mother to counteract her father's more unusual ideas about what was suitable.

"Did you have enough to eat?" asked Agatha. "I can ring for some fruit."

"No thank you, the supper was lovely, and my room is very comfortable. It is so nice of you to have me."

"Well, I think it's important that we get to know each other, preferably before the rest of the town. We have important work to do, Miss Nash, and it is vital that you and I understand each other completely."

"I think that's our signal to leave," said Daniel. "Hugh and I will go have that game of billiards now."

"Hugh must talk to you about the tutoring," said Agatha, as the young men left the room.

"Tutoring?"

"Some local boys, protégés of mine. I told him you were looking for some private tutoring over the summer, and he was very pleased to pass them on to you. Nothing too taxing is involved—just a little help in the more advanced Latin."

"I should be honored," said Beatrice. "I tutored the three daughters of a professor at our California university, and it was fascinating to watch how Latin blossomed among such a small and eager group."

"I'm not sure the boys are such blossoms," said Agatha, giving her a doubtful look. "Hugh agrees they are bright boys, and one in particular may prove our efforts worthwhile, but they are somewhat rowdy and defiant."

"Sometimes the hardest challenges are most deserving of our efforts," said Beatrice. "I am very grateful to you and the school for giving me the opportunity."

"Yes, well, we must make sure the school governors have no grounds to cause you trouble." She hesitated, and Beatrice watched her struggle to go on.

“They did not want to employ me,” said Beatrice. She did not ask it as a question.

“Well, not exactly,” said Agatha. “But they will come around as long as you succeed.” She paused. “I am one of only two women on the Board of Governors, you know. I am in a very delicate position, in which I must temper my impatience for reform and choose my battles with care. We have women teachers, of course, to teach appropriate subjects. But in this case, we had some difficulty in finding a suitable replacement for the head Latin master, who left us so abruptly, and your qualifications so exceeded the usual applicant that I—well, I did all within my power to push your consideration.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, you are not quite what I expected,” she added. She did not elaborate, and Beatrice, under the pressure of the silence, tried to breathe in a slow way that might suppress any flush in her cheeks.

“I assure you my university and teaching certificates are quite in order,” she said finally.

“Your qualifications, and Lady Marbely’s description of your wide travels and experience, suggested someone older,” said Agatha.

“I put away the fripperies of girlhood some years ago,” said Beatrice. “I have served as my father’s secretary and constant companion for many years. But more to the point, I do not have the luxury of waiting around to mature like a cheese.” She smiled to soften the rebuke. “I do not intend to marry, Mrs. Kent, and now that my father is gone I must earn my bread. Surely you would not deny me the work for which I have studied and trained?”

“I would not,” said Agatha. “But let’s not mention any such awkward necessity. I think we should rely on your connection to the Marbelys, and to the suggestion of teaching as service rather than profession, to carry the day.”

“As you wish,” said Beatrice, trying to keep the dryness out of her tone as she wondered how to ask about her wages and accommodations if she was not allowed to appear in need of either.

"Of course, I was older than you when I married my husband," said Agatha. She did not phrase it as a question, and so Beatrice, who was tired of people feeling free to interrogate her on her determination to live free of a husband, bit her lip and did not answer. Agatha gave a sigh and continued. "The world is changing, Miss Nash, but very slowly. I hope that through the work I do, and the work you will do, we may further the causes of intelligence and merit and move our nation forward."

"Mrs. Kent, am I to suppose that you support the cause of women?" said Beatrice.

"Good heavens, no!" said Agatha. "Such hysteria in the streets is impossibly damaging. It is only through such sober activities as school boards and good works, done under the guidance of our most respected and educated gentlemen, that we will prove our worth in the eyes of God and our fellow man. Don't you agree, Miss Nash?"

Beatrice was not at all sure she did agree. She rather thought she might like to vote and to have been admitted to a university degree at Oxford, her father's alma mater. Even the most educated of gentlemen seemed disinclined to remedy such injustices to women without being confronted. She was not sure that Agatha Kent was in earnest either. The face, under an arched eyebrow, was inscrutable.

"I only know that I want to teach something other than elementary school," she said. "I want to teach and study and write, as my father did, and to have my efforts treated no less seriously just because I am a woman."

Agatha sighed. "You are an educated person and can be of use to the country, but women like us need to demonstrate our worth, rather than demonstrating in the streets. Besides," she added, "we don't need all the housemaids declaring their independence and running off to join the music hall, do we?"

"Who would boil the tea?" said Beatrice, before she could stop herself.

"You must know, Miss Nash, that you and I will be under severe scrutiny these next few months. I must be blunt in saying that I expect you not only to demonstrate your own superior merit and irre-

proachable respectability but to protect my reputation too. I have spent many years, in a quiet way, establishing a position from where I can do important work in this town, but I am not without enemies."

"I see," said Beatrice.

"I don't think you do," said Agatha. "I have never pushed for something as outrageous as hiring a woman to teach Latin, and I am personally responsible for you. Should you and I fail in this task, many other projects may come undone." Beatrice saw a moment of weariness in the kind face. "I have put all my eggs in your basket, Miss Nash. Do I make myself clear?"

Beatrice was curious to feel a tiny sense of purpose flowering. It was different from the purpose—the stubborn fury—with which she had pursued her escape from the Marbelys. She had not been needed by anyone for many months. Now Agatha Kent appeared to need her, and Beatrice felt an echo of the same feeling of determination that her father's plans always inspired.

"I will not let you down, Mrs. Kent," she said.

"See that you don't," said Agatha with a warm smile. She rose to her feet and held out both hands. It was gracefully done, but Beatrice recognized that she was being dismissed.

"Good night, Mrs. Kent."

"And just one more thing, Miss Nash," said Agatha, as Beatrice moved towards the hall. "I would not be public about any yearnings to write. It would be an absolute disaster for a lady in your position to earn a reputation as a bohemian."

In the billiard room, Daniel busied himself over the selection of a cue as if he had not been familiar with Uncle John's four old cues since both he and Hugh were in short trousers.

"I do wish Aunt Aggie would stop taking on projects," he said, sighting along the length of the ebony and rosewood one picked up by Uncle John in Morocco. He began to chalk its India rubber tip, and Hugh, as usual, was left to turn up the lamps and rack the balls.

"I think her interest in education might be considered a cause," said Hugh, enjoying the smooth, dull click of red ball against yellow as he arranged them in a triangle.

"The school governors, yes," said Daniel. "But then it was the urchins she foisted on you."

"Alarmed about the rise of the working man, are you?" said Hugh.

"Not at all," said Daniel. "It's absurd to think any of them will even make it to factory clerk. It's just that she risks making herself look foolish."

"And those around her . . ."

"I'm only thinking of Uncle John," said Daniel. "And now, championing a woman to be Latin master at the grammar school? It's just outlandish."

"I believe the other candidates were quite lacking in skill," said Hugh.

"I imagine one only needs the rudimentaries," said Daniel. "The profession is mostly about having a good strong arm to wield the cane."

"I think Miss Nash believes it will be a pleasure to share Caesar and Virgil with the young," said Hugh.

Daniel gave a loud snort, and his face, dropping its unpleasant curl of the lip, broke into a grin. Hugh sighed with relief. It usually took Daniel some time to relax into life in Rye. As a young boy he had always seemed to arrive with a scowl, shoulders hunched under some imagined weight, eyes as wary as those of a kicked dog. Hugh, older by two years, would pretend not to notice and busy himself with a book or with helping the gardener pick lettuce for the kitchen, impatient for his younger cousin to shed his outside shell and get back to leading them in crimes and adventures around the woods and town.

It was Daniel who planned the midnight orchard raids, the fishing expeditions, the hikes to the seashore. It was Daniel who could charm the cook into stuffing his satchel with pork pies and hard-boiled eggs, or persuade the milkman to let them ride on his cart into

town. Hugh would have liked to be as fearless as Daniel, as filled with ideas and plans, but he was sharply aware that he was endowed with responsibility and a conscience that understood all the potential pitfalls of Daniel's wilder plans. At least that was what Aunt Agatha told him when Daniel got them lost overnight in Higgins wood; when Daniel broke his arm falling off a tightrope they had strung up to practice for a circus career; when they brought home a sick, three-legged piglet and tried to keep it in an orange crate in the nursery and it deposited dung all over the rug—and frightened Cook with its squealing, rolling escape down the back stairs.

"You are the responsible one."

"You are the oldest."

"Daniel doesn't have a mother to tell him these things." This last admonition seemed slightly unfair to Hugh. It was hardly his fault that he had a mother still living. They both had fathers, though Hugh's father was admittedly a much jollier man than Daniel's. Besides, he was sure plenty of other people, from Aunt Agatha to the Sunday School teacher who clicked his ceramic teeth when he shouted at unruly boys, were available to communicate basic morals to his cousin.

While it seemed unfair to Hugh that he should always be spoken to as if he had been the one to suggest spying on the Gypsies down on the marsh, or borrowing the neighbor's donkey to re-create an expedition to Bethlehem, he kept his tongue. Even at a young age, Hugh understood that, for reasons that were not explained to him, allowances were made for Daniel's wildness as well as his scowling arrivals.

Hugh had heard his aunt and uncle discuss quietly, on several occasions, Daniel's austere boarding school, Aunt Agatha wanting to speak to Daniel's father and Uncle John urging her not to interfere. Hugh had never thought the school to be the problem, since Daniel seemed to arrive equally morose whenever he came from a visit to his father's London house. As they grew up, Daniel gradually replaced his brooding with a distant air of cynical composure. He became more popular at school, and Hugh had the distinct impression that

his cousin had studied the art of society much harder than mathematics or Greek. At Oxford he seemed to have become quite sought-after by multiple sets, and Hugh had seen less of him in London or Sussex as Daniel accepted invitations to visit country houses, to accompany families to foreign capitals, or to go tramping in the Dolomites or some such rustic area.

"Speaking of Virgil, how was Florence?" asked Hugh.

"For the most part, filled with a crush of English and American matrons all doing their best to squash centuries of history and art into the usual routines of some provincial summer watering hole," said Daniel. "No more than an hour and a half in the Uffizi because of course there is a luncheon at noon and then it is too warm in the early afternoon to visit churches and tea is at four. And they are all campaigning to show off their gaggle of daughters and so the evenings are all dinners and parties." He took aim at the phalanx of balls and sent them scattering smartly across the billiard table's green surface. "They worked very hard to make Italy no more exotic than the middle of Surrey."

"How did you stand it?" asked Hugh.

"I developed a recurring summer cold," said Daniel, "so that several whole days were supposedly passed in my room. Soon as the coast was clear, my friend Craigmore and I would sneak off and spend the day in the city by ourselves."

"Craigmore shares your affinity for poetry?" asked Hugh.

"Oh, God no," said Daniel. "He is a rather brutish artist and an athlete of the worst kind. But he is a great walker, and we tramped the whole city and up into the hills. I was in charge of taking in the beauty and the art, and telling him what to record in his travel journal, and he taught me how to kill the opposition at tennis."

"You don't usually have much patience with philistines," said Hugh, gripped by a small jealousy that his cousin had so easily traded their summer companionship for another. "But then I believe he has a title?" he added.

"Ouch!" said Daniel. "You don't usually go in for such blows of sarcasm."

"Sorry," said Hugh.

"But you can always be counted upon to apologize." Daniel jabbed his cue and sank a red ball firmly into a corner pocket. Hugh felt his face flush at the suggestion that his good manners were a kind of weakness. At least they were sincere. He had heard Daniel make many pretty apologies that were all charm and no substance.

"I'm sorry, Hugh, that was unpardonably spiteful." Hugh searched his cousin's face for irony but found none this time. "He is Viscount Craigmore, Lord North's son," continued Daniel. "In some romantic fit his mother named him Lancelot, so he always goes by Craigmore, even to his closest friends."

"I quite see his point," said Hugh.

"He and I intend to go to Paris this autumn to write and paint. We're talking about starting up a journal that might combine poetry and illustration."

"How on earth would you get your father to support such a jaunt?" said Hugh. "I thought you kept your poetry pretty well hidden from him."

"I keep many things hidden from him," said Daniel. "In this case I'll tell him that Craigmore's father has invited me to stay with them in Paris. Father won't mind me playing the gentleman—especially if I mention that Craigmore has a highly marriageable younger sister."

"Daniel, don't tell me you're in love?" said Hugh. Hope flickered, for if Daniel was in love, he might broach the subject of his own romantic hopes without fear of being mercilessly teased.

"Good heavens, no," said Daniel. "She's a poor, pale squab of a thing and she smells like tapioca—but Craigmore feels his father can be persuaded that a few months in Paris, with extra funds for the maintenance of a suitable mistress, is just the gilding a British gentleman needs before settling down to his responsibilities."

"So poetry will be the mistress?" asked Hugh, as he missed a corner shot and stubbed his cue into the baize. "Would she not be better served by your telling the truth?"

"Good God, no," said Daniel. "Lord North doesn't like me much. I think he's suspicious of people who read."

"Well, Craigmore's father may deserve to be fooled, but good luck fooling Aunt Agatha," said Hugh. "She has expectations that you will now follow Uncle John into the civil service this year."

"I just have to convince her that I will have regrets for the rest of my life if I fail to grasp this opportunity now," said Daniel.

"Surely one can write poetry and pursue a responsible career," said Hugh.

"Perhaps surgery can be a Sunday hobby, but I assure you poetry is life and death for me, Hugh," said Daniel. "I simply must write, just as you must apparently peer into people's bleeding bodies on the operating table and pickle chicken heads in Aunt Agatha's largest jam jars."

"No need to mention the jars. I put them back in the pantry before Cook notices."

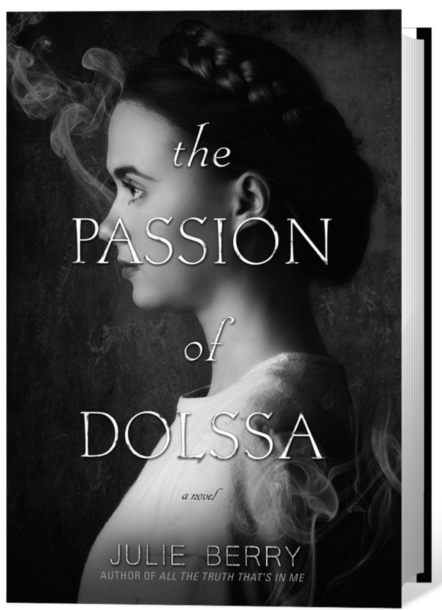
"No need to mention Paris," said Daniel. "The new schoolteacher should distract Aunt Agatha. We should take up the poor girl, Hugh, and make sure Aunt Agatha continues to shelter her under her matronly wing."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," said Hugh. "Miss Nash is no tapioca pudding."

"She did have the unfortunate air of a bluestocking," said Daniel. "You'll have to engage her in scholarly debate, Hugh. But if all else fails, I can always write her a sonnet."

"A sonnet?" said Hugh.

"No woman can resist having her name rhymed with a flower in iambic pentameter," said Daniel.



Perfect for readers of **Wolf Hall** *and* **The Red Tent.**

Dolssa, a young gentlewoman with uncanny gifts, is on the run from an obsessed friar determined to burn her as a heretic for the passion she refuses to tame.

Botille is a wily and charismatic peasant, a matchmaker running a tavern with her two sisters in a tiny seaside town.

The year is 1251; the place, Provensa, what we now call Provence, France—a land still reeling from the bloody crusades waged there by the Catholic Church and its northern French armies.

When the matchmaker finds the mystic near death by a riverside, Botille takes Dolssa in and discovers the girl's extraordinary healing power. But as the vengeful Friar Lucien hunts down his heretic, the two girls find themselves putting an entire village at the mercy of murderers.

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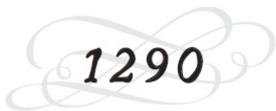


FRIAR ARNAUT D'AVINHONET

The Convent of the Jacobins, Tolosa

I must write this account, and when I have finished, I will burn it.

Mine is the historian's task, to record the events of the last century, showing God's mighty hand in ridding these southern lands between the Garona and the Ròse rivers of the heresy of the Albigensians.

I am asked to show future generations how God's justice was carried out by the crusade against these so called "good men" (*bons omes*), "good women" (*bonas femnas*) and "friends of God" (*amicx de Dieu*), and how the inquisitions that followed, wrought by my brother Dominicans, finished God's holy work. The collected records of more than half a century of inquisitorial toil are

mine to examine: transcripts, testimonies, and confessions from a generation now all but extinct.

When searching out a history, sifting through a thousand facts and ten thousand lives, one often uncovers pieces that do not fit. The prudent choice is to cast those details aside, like chaff into the fire. The story must be understandable. The moral should be clear.

Perhaps I am not a prudent man. I found pieces that haunted me, voices echoing from parchment leaves that would not let me sleep at night. I could find no rest until I searched out the truth, studied what I could learn about those involved, and found a way, with, I pride myself, a minimum of invention, to make the pieces fit. If only for me.

There are those who would say this record casts doubt upon the righteousness of the Church's work. Which is why this book, written for my private satisfaction, must not outlive me.

I myself have never been an inquisitor. I was, I confess, not cut out for it. But I was a patient laborer in the fields of knowledge, and so to Tolosa's archives I was sent after my university studies in París. Here I have spent nearly thirty years.

It was in the days when Count Raimon's daughter Joana still ruled as Comtessa de Tolosa, before Provensa came under the rule of the king of Fransa, and when I, myself, was new to this vocation, that the bishop of Tolosa, himself a former inquisitor of renown, came home to the Convent of the Jacobins to spend his final days.

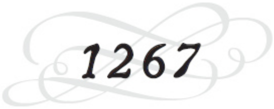
It happened that I served in the hospice one evening. The ailing bishop began to speak to me. He seemed impelled to tell his

tale. He confessed to a secret doubt that had plagued him throughout his life—unease over whether he had done God's will in one particular case. I reassured him with all my heart that he had done his best to serve the Lord. He thanked me with tears. In the morning, he was gone.

Some months after, I found papers belonging to a priest in a seacoast *vila*, a priest known for composing sacred songs of great beauty. The papers made it clear he was not their author. A woman had written them, and with them, a curious and troubling account of her own spiritual journey. Names and places in the woman's account reminded me of the old bishop's testimony. And so I wondered.

Later still, a lengthy narrative from a friar in Barçalona fell into my hands, painstakingly recorded. The pieces of my mystery at last began to fit. I puzzled over its connecting threads. Finally, and perhaps, rashly, I decided to stitch the pieces together, however clumsily, and record it. The gaps and errors in the sewing are my own; of its overall completeness, however, I feel certain. These voices from the past had arisen like ghosts demanding to be heard.

This, I will confess, is one of the secret thrills of my historical work. But listening too closely to those voices, in these times in which I live, may also be its most terrible danger.



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BOTILLE

I swear to tell the full and exact truth about myself and others, living and dead. Why keep secrets? There's no one it would help. The dead are all I have to talk about, anyway. What harm can there be in telling their stories now? They are safe, beyond reach.

There was a time when my name was Botille, when I lived with my sisters and our old Jobau. We lived by our wits, and great buckets of nerve, and anything—*anything*—we could steal, or sell.

Like most in Provensa, we'd seen hunger and illness. We'd grown up in Carcassona, a city broken by the crusaders before we were born. But what was yesterday's war to little girls? We'd lost

our mother. That was all we had room for. She left each of us her love, her reputation, two sisters, and Jobau. And one silver crucifix to share.

We begged for our dinner and stole washing from peasants to clothe little Sazia. We huddled together to keep warm at night. Jobau's drinking and his temper harried us from town to town at the hands of the *bayles*. We were wanderers, survivors, always searching for a home.

We thrived upon it. Greedy little urchins, foolhardy little thieves.

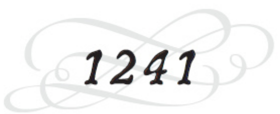
Now I see we were magic, my sisters and I. We laughed at ourselves, at Jobau and the world. Nobody's ever made me laugh like my cynical little Sazia could. You wouldn't think it to know her now. We gave Plazensa, the eldest, fits of rage with our cheek.

Life was sweet, though I doubt we realized how much. Home was each other. Not walls, but the adventure of the search to find them.

Our wanderings led us to a small seaside town called Bajas, and there, among vintners and fishermen, we saw an opening and decided to seek a home. We washed our faces and combed our hair and tried to make something more of ourselves. We swore we'd give up thieving. We'd grown old enough to know it was safer to be inside the law, and the arms of the *vila*, than out of them. We took over an old derelict tavern and dared to run it.

Plazensa's brewing, our scrubbing, Sazia's fortune-telling, and my hustle brought customers in. We began to feel that we might belong, and others counted us among their neighbors and friends. Finally and forever, I believed, we could be safe.

Then I met Dolssa.



DOLSSA

The summons came from Dominus Roger, him who'd baptized me and taught me to reverence the body and blood. Our own parish priest came to lead me to the cloister of the abbey church of Sant Sarnin, the great cathedral of Tolosa. The inquisitors wished to speak with me.

My mother turned pale. She pulled me into her chamber under pretense of wrapping a scarf around me.

"Daughter, hear me quickly," she said. "Answer as little as possible. Don't upset them. Say nothing about your preaching, and certainly nothing about your beloved."

I would have none of this. Who were they, that I should fear them?

"Speak only as you are," was her warning. "A modest and true Christian maiden. Be humble. Be still."

"But Mamà," I said, "Why would I be otherwise?"

"My darling," she pleaded. "You don't fear them, but you should. Inquisitors have made Count Raimon send hundreds of heretics to the fires. Their verdicts—not even he dares resist them. Not anymore." She rested her forehead against mine. Anguish poured off her. "You were too young to know all that happened during the war years, and even since. Your papà and I shielded you from it as best we could."

I was aghast. "What has that to do with me, Mamà? I'm no heretic! Is that what you believe of me?"

"Hush!" Mamà glanced at the door. "Of course you're not. You know how I feel. But you *are* different. You are . . ." She hesitated. "Your words give you authority. You have believers. This is something the inquisitors can't ignore."

"My beloved does not fear them, nor keep silence," I told her.

The waiting priest tapped at the door. We both felt caught. Mamà's whisper became an urgent breath in my ear. "Youth makes you bold. Love makes you trusting. But it is madness to provoke these inquisitors. They will not like what you say about your love. Not when you're so young, and a girl."

I waited for her to finish. There was no point in vexing her. But she knew she had lost.

"God knows I will stand by you, come what may." Her grip upon my arms was tight. "For my sake, guard your tongue to guard your life, my daughter."

THE TESTIMONY OF LUCIEN'S WITNESSES

I: Dolssa de Stigata, the Accused

The Cloister of the Abbey Church of Sant Sarnin, Tolosa

ou wish to speak with me, Friar Lucien? Prior Pons? My priest said you wished to ask me questions.

I have seen you, Friar, in the street. You pass by our house often.

Tell me, what it is like to live in a convent? To take holy vows along with others? I've often wondered.

My mother prayed and planned for me to enter the cloister. The thought was sweet, in a way. But my beloved told me my path was different. Silence does not serve his purpose for my life. He asks me to tell others about our love.

All right. You shall ask the questions, and I will answer.

Oc, I reject all heresy and false belief, and cling to the true Catholic faith.

Oc, I swear to tell the full and exact truth about myself and others, living or dead.

Non, I have never seen a heretic. I do not know any of the *bons omes* nor *bonas femnas* that are called heretics. I have lived a very sheltered life in my parents' home. *Non*, I have never listened to their preaching, nor helped them, nor fed them, nor carried gifts for them. How could I? I rarely even leave my house, Friar.

I am eighteen years old.

My name, as you well know, is Dolssa de Stigata. My father was Senhor Gerald de Stigata. He was a knight. He died five years ago last spring. My mother is Na Pitrella Braida de Stigata. I live with her and our few servants in my father's ancestral home here in Tolosa.

I, preach?

In my home, *oc*. I have shared my thoughts with relatives and friends on a few occasions.

That is where you heard me? Through a window. You saw me.

I preach that my beloved Christ is the ardent lover of all souls. That he stands beckoning to all God's children, to come taste of his goodness. To be one with him, as he is one with me.

Why do I preach this? Good friar-preacher, you who wear the mantle of Blessed Dominic the Preacher, I could ask the same of you!

Oc. In this room, questions are yours to ask.

I preach because my beloved calls me to. My one desire is to shine his love into the world.

What?

Oh!

Oc, since you ask, I'm laughing. How can I not? You wondered, how do I know the devil hasn't tricked me? I can only answer, if it is the devil who teaches people to trust in the love of Jhesus, then what, I wonder, should we call men of the cloth like you?

Far less impertinent, good friar, than you calling my beloved a devil. Remember who my beloved is.

Plainly, friar, I am a *femna*, and yet I speak. I do as my beloved urges me to do. Who shall forbid what my beloved commands?

Oc, Sant Paul said it was a shame for women to speak in church, but I do not speak in church. I worship in church, and I speak in my own home, as a Christian woman is free to do.

But *oc*, you guess rightly. If my beloved bid me to speak in church, I would do it. My beloved is greater than Sant Paul. Surely, you would not argue that an apostle's words are greater than the Lord's? The apostles didn't listen to Santa Maria Magdalena, either, though she was right when she told them she had seen her Lord risen from the tomb.

You accuse me of heresy.

Oc, I am listening. I'll give you my answer.

I can no more retract or deny what I have said about my beloved than I could choose to stop breathing. Against my will, breath would flow into my lungs; against your will, speech will flow from them also. If you seek to silence me, I will only cry more

urgently. My beloved's praise will not go unsung, not so long as I have breath.

Oc, I know who you are. I know what you claim you can do to me.

How can I fear you with my beloved beside me? His arm is mightier than all flesh, and I know he will protect me.

BOTILLE

struga picked, of course, the worst time possible to tell me.

We wore our hair dandled up in rags to keep it off our hot necks, allowing the sun to burn our sweaty skin. Our oldest, flimsiest skirts we had pulled snug between our legs and pinned to our backs. There we were, thigh-deep in juice, stomping, squashing, mashing the cool, slimy grapes under our heels and deliciously through our toes, while the harvesters clapped and laughed and sang to Focho de Capa's *fidel*. It was a party. A frolic. And a bit of an exhibition. Astruga's thighs—purple, even—were nothing to be ashamed of, and as for mine, skin was skin, wasn't it? The sky was blue, the air was hot, the sea breeze stirring our little *vila* of Bajas

was playful, and the splashing new wine was sweet on my lips, its perfume rich enough to knock me over and drown me happily in the old winepress.

And that was when Astruga told me she was pregnant.

Not in so many words, of course.

"Look at the buffoons." Sweat rolled in rivers off her wine-red cheeks. Jacme and Andrio had linked their beefy, sun-tanned arms and were now swinging each other in idiotic loops, bawling out their song, while the other men slapped themselves and howled, and the married women shrieked with laughter. Jacme and Andrio were great laughers, those two.

"They're a pair, all right," I said. My thighs ached from all the stomping, but the music compelled us onward. I'd waited years for my turn in the press. I wasn't about to flag now.

Astruga showed no signs of slowing. She leaped like a salmon through her sea of sticky wine. Always a restless one, Astruga. "I need one."

Maire Maria! She needed a man. Today, not tomorrow. I sighed. Harvest frolics were known for this. All those *tozẹts* with their lusty eyes upon her, her buoyant chest bouncing practically into her eyeballs, and her skirts tucked up and pinned over her bottom . . . Of course she would feel herself in a mood to pick one of these young men, like a grape off the vine, and crush him against the roof of her mouth.

Across Na Pieret di Fabri's neat vineyards, chestnut trees blazed with fall color, while dark, narrow cypress pines stood

sentinel. Past the trees was the village proper, Bajas, crowning its round hilltop like a bald man's hat, and beyond it, the brilliant blue lagoon of the sea, my sea, that cradled and fed tiny Bajas, and connected her to the entire world.

Paradise had stiff competition in our corner of Creation.

Jacme chose that moment to scoop a handful of pulpy juice out of the vat and pour it down his throat. Purple dribbles bled into his stubbly beard. He winked at us, and old Na Pieret de Fabri, whose vineyards these were, whacked him harmlessly with her hat.

I looked at all our sweaty purple *tozẹts*. Great overgrown boys they were, though I supposed I must call them men. "After we're done, you can take your pick of *omes*."

"Botille," Astruga said, her smile still as bright, "I need to speak with you."

I lowered my weary leg and caught my breath. I knew what those words meant.

Astruga capered like a baby goat, kicking up her heels and splashing wine into the open, leering mouths of the *tozẹts* dancing around the vat. And now I knew why, why she'd bribed Ramunda, whose turn in the winepress it ought to have been, to give her this chance to bounce and spin in her purple skin for all Bajas to see. She needed a husband, and fast. Perhaps, she had reasoned, if she played today well, she could find herself one.

Or I could. For that was my job in Bajas. Most *tozas* helped the family business of catching fish or harvesting salt. Some spun

wool or silk; others wove baskets, or helped their papàs and mamàs fashion clay pots. Countless others grew vegetables and tied and trimmed grapevines.

But I, I caught suitors, harvested bridegrooms, wove dowries, fashioned courtships, grew families, and tied and trimmed the unruly passions of our hot-blooded young people into acceptable marriages. I brought them all to Dominus Bernard's altar in the end. Only sometimes, as now, with a baby on the way, I did not have the luxury of time to plot and plan.

I watched Astruga's eyes linger on Jacme's broad face.

"Jacme?" I whispered.

She shrugged. "He'll do."

I danced a little closer to her. "Is it he?"

She looked away, and shook her head.

I danced in a circle around her. If she wanted my help, she'd best not turn her eyes away from me. "Who is the father?"

She turned the other way, like a naughty little *toza* who won't confess to stealing the honey.

"Tell me," I pressed. "I have ways of making the father marry you." And I did. My sisters and I—we had ways all our own.

The high flush in Astruga's cheeks cooled. "Not this time, Bo-tille."

Ah. He was married already, then. Well, no matter; Astruga was young and fresh. Weren't all the *tozęts* adoring her even now? This would be easy for me.

"Are you working on another match right now?"

“Maybe.”

“If you marry off that cow Sapdalina before me, I swear, I’ll claw her eyes out.”

It *was* Sapdalina’s troth I was working on, and while I wouldn’t call her a cow, per se, she was a challenging case. At least she wasn’t pregnant.

“That would hardly be fair to Sapdalina,” I observed.

Her angry face fell. “Oh, please, Botille. I’ll do anything. You’ve got to help me.”

Astruga’s skirt came unpinned and sank into the wine. She squealed and snatched it up, then thrust the soiled cloth into her mouth to suck out the blood-dark juice. Just then the church bells rang, and she let the skirt fall once more.

I looked toward the village, with its white stone walls, its rising houses ready to teeter and topple one another, and the brown square bell tower of the church of Sant Martin.

She’d shown me what, if I hadn’t had a head full of wine and fiddle tunes, my instincts should have smelled before Astruga had even spoken a word. The fruit growing in her vineyard was planted by a handsome rake, a delightful talker, a charmer if ever there was one, and the source of all my best clients. I owed him, really. Already a growing list of roly-poly babies had him as the *papà* they would never know.

Dominus Bernard, Bajas’s priest at the church of Sant Martin.

“*Acabansa*! Finished!”

Focho de Capa, self-proclaimed lord of the revels, scooped a ladle of syrupy juice from the vat and drank it with a great flourish. *“Bon an!”* A good year, good for the grapes.

We climbed out of the vat. Itier pulled us each out by the wrist onto the platform next to the press and planted wine-stained kisses on our cheeks. We climbed down the ladder. Astruga let herself be seized about the waist by frizzle-headed Itier and led off to the table that had been set up, overflowing with bread, cheese, salmon, and roasted vegetables. I lingered behind to wipe a bit of the juice off my arms with a rag Na Pieret di Fabri handed me.

Widow Pieret’s eyes were still as blue as *la mar*, though her face was brown as carved chestnut and creased with as many deep grooves. Her husband, related to the lords of Bajas, had been a vintner, but his death, five years back, left Na Pieret to manage his great vineyards alone. It had been a terrible blow. Still, Na Pieret, who had never been weakened by childbearing, had borne up under the burden admirably. But today, though she smiled, she seemed tired.

“What is it, *ma maire*?” I genuflected, a courtesy owed to a great lady of advanced years, but then I rose and kissed her cheek. All old women were “my mother,” but Na Pieret was someone I could almost wish were my mother.

“Ack! You are covered in *viṇ*.” She patted my cheek. “Smart Botille. Not a thing happens in this village but what you have a hand in it, is there?”

"Oh, pah." I unraveled the damp rags from around my hair. "I won't take the blame for everything."

Na Pieret leaned against the handle of her cane. I noticed her head quiver slightly. "I need your help, Botille." She spoke quietly. "I can't run the vineyards anymore."

I saw how much it hurt her to speak these words, though she said them simply and without self-pity.

"But your hired help, surely. They do the work for you, *non*?" I looked over to the feast table, where half a dozen of her hands lounged, stuffing their faces. "Are they lazy? Do they steal from you? Sazia and Plazensa and I can put a stop to that. We'll teach them a lesson—"

"No, no." Na Pieret squinted her eyes against the rays of the setting sun. "They are only as lazy as any other laborers ever were. No, they are kind to me."

"Then what is it?"

"I need a strong back, and eyes I can trust. I need someone who cares about the grapes like they are his own. But you know I have no children to entrust them to."

The wine on my skin had dried to a slimy, sticky sheen, and I began to itch. Hot breezes from the south did nothing to help.

"My mother had two daughters," Na Pieret went on. "My younger sister died last winter, leaving her two sons orphans, seven leagues from here, in San Cucufati."

"Oh?"

She nodded. "I want you to bring them to me. I will give

them the farm, and they shall become my sons."

Seven leagues? I pictured myself traveling seven long leagues with two quarrelsome little *eṇfans* in tow. What did she think I was, a nursemaid?

"How old are they?"

Na Pieret pursed her lips. "They were sturdy, useful children when I met them last," she said, "thirteen years ago."

I smiled, and looked over at Astruga, busy stuffing a piece of bread into Itier's mouth. "Is either of them married?"

"Botille!" Na Pieret laughed. "You haven't become one of the desperate *tozas* yourself, have you?"

"*Non*, Na Pieret." I took her by the elbow and steered her toward the table. "But there are always plenty of them about, and now I have two more husbands to offer them."

Na Pieret tapped my forehead with her swollen knuckles. "Only see to it you don't marry off my new sons to any of the silly *tozas*."

I shoved a half-drunk Andrio aside to make room on the bench for Widow Pieret to sit. "That, *ma maire*," I said, "is a promise I doubt I can keep."

DOLSSA

I was a young girl when my beloved first appeared to me. Just a girl of no consequence, the child of pious parents who were much older than most. Mamà used to say I was her miracle *eṇfan*, the fruit of prayer, just as the prophet Samuel had been. I was happy in my home, and much loved.

Mamà dreamed for me the heaven of the cloister. Nothing would have made her happier than to see me take a nun's vows. Papà, however, envisioned the joy of family. He wanted grandchildren, and a legacy for his home and name. Poor, gentle Papà would not live long enough to see such a dream. He died not long after my visions first began. I don't know how I would have endured the loss, were it not for my beloved's secret visits.

We mourned Papà many days. Kinsmen and neighbors came to grieve with us, and condole with my widowed mother. Already they began to speak of me, in whispered voices, as a holy maiden, because I went so often to church. They cupped my cheeks in their hands and spoke blessings upon me. Some were faces I knew, but most, I didn't. It took me by surprise, seeing so many people claiming Papà's friendship and commemorating his life. Where were they during that life? Why didn't I know them? Of course, I'd only known him in his later years. He'd lived a full life before I came along.

I knew Papà had gone to God. But I would miss him so.

"See how she does not cry," a cousin of Mamà's whispered to her sister. "She's serene as an angel."

I was only shy.

"*Oc*, see the pious sweetness of her gaze," said the sister. "Like one of the blessed saints."

I watched my mother, wishing she'd stop talking to all these family strangers.

There was a man there, tall and grim. He spoke to my mother in a low voice. I went to her side and slipped my hand in hers.

"Bound for the church," my mother was saying. "It's out of the question."

The man's eyes examined my face. "She is very young."

I inched back behind Mamà.

"She will be a nun," my maire said firmly. "It is already settled."

The tall man tipped his hat to my mother. "My sorrow for your loss."

I didn't understand then what he must have been asking. I only knew that I would never be a nun. A bride of Christ, *oc*, but the cloister could never enclose all my love. It was too vast, too deep for such walls, such silence, such seclusion.

I left my maire's side and went and lit a candle for Papà. How I would miss his step in the hall, and his laugh at dinner. I was thirteen, and now Mamà and I were left alone.

Not long after *mon paire* died, the fires began. What once were sweet visions now burned in my soul, in my brain, in my blood. My beloved, pouring his presence over me, consumed me with his love. I couldn't sleep. I could scarcely eat.

Mamà thought I mourned Papà. It was easy enough to let her think that.

The world grew dull to me. Tolosa, the vibrant pink city, the *trobadors'* own rose of Europe, became dismal, tired, and brown. My will to remain in it grew slack.

My beloved was my great romance, and—impossible miracle!—I was his. He caught me up on wings of light, and showed me the realms of his creation, the glittering gemstones paving his heaven. He left my body weak and spent, my spirit gorged with honey.

There are no words for this. Like the flesh, like a prison cell,

so, too, are words confining, narrow, chafing, stupid things, incapable of expressing one particle of what I felt, what I feel, when I see my beloved's face, when he takes me in his arms.

There is only music. Only light.

And no one may take it from me.

I told no one what was happening to me. My beloved was the most private secret of my soul.

Mamà began to speak of the abbey for me, and I refused to go. We quarreled bitterly, and grew cold with each other. At length she relented, with a heavy heart, and began to speak cautiously of me marrying. If I would not fulfill her dreams for me, I supposed, she was willing to concede that Papà's hopes had been honorable. There was a kinsman, she said. A goodly man, well respected. He had asked Papà about me once, and Papà had been pleased. In a panic I told her my heart was already taken. At this she became sick with worry that I had sinned. So, at my beloved's urging, I told her the truth about us.

She believed me. Relief made it easy for her to believe. Her maternal pride thrilled to think of me as being touched by divine grace. The next evening, she brought a cousin over to hear my tale. I wasn't happy, but I was glad enough to have the anger between us abated that I told my story anyway.

The next evening, Mamà brought another friend, and her cousin brought two others.

I was troubled, so asked my love for guidance. He asked me if I would, for his sake, tell many about the loving kindness he'd lavished upon me. Within a week our house was full to overflowing. I found myself, against every instinct—for I would far rather have remained in my room, in the solitude where my beloved could find me—speaking to houses full of listeners, night after night.

I began to venture out of doors more, not to preach, but merely to taste the world, see the city bloom in high summer. I smelled fresh breezes blow across the winding Garona River, and watched larks flit about the porticos of Our Lady de la Daurada.

But I also saw a city still bruised and bleeding from years of crushing war. I saw souls darkened by loss and bitterness in the crusades. I saw faith destroyed after the brutality we'd endured in its name. And then I understood why my beloved had sent me.

So I opened my mouth to teach the only lesson I knew. Of love everlasting, of mercy reaching beyond the prison walls of death, of the glory that awaits us when we die.

What a feeling it was, after a lifetime lived in my parents' house, to be part of the world and make a difference in it. To do something, however small. To speak, and be heard, if only in my own home. I thought I would speak in the city squares, but Mamà forbade it. "You do not dare do such a thing," she said. "This city is full of inquisitors, combing through the people for hidden heresies. To preach on the street is to arouse their alarm."

It didn't matter. People came. People sat outside and listened under windows. Just so, I later learned, did one eager young in-

quisitor and his elderly companion sit and listen. I didn't know it at the time.

I preached almost daily. One day, I remember, I saw the tall man who had come to our home when Papà died. He sat and listened to me speak. His face was so grave, he frightened me. Afterward, while the other guests mingled and broke bread, he approached and thanked me for my holy message. He offered me a pair of apricots. They sat so temptingly soft in his hand—did he know I couldn't resist apricots?—but I said no. A storm cloud moved across his eyes. He bowed and walked away.

Not long after, Friar Lucien de Saint-Honore began to preach in the square closest to our home. His voice was musical, but his accent was French and northern. He had keen dark eyes that missed no detail. Were he not a tonsured friar, he might have been a comely man.

Day after day he returned, raising his voice of warning. I could hear him from the upper window where I sat. We must flee the treacherous heresy, he said, that entwined itself around our way of life—the false beliefs that slithered through the grasses of our fair Provensa, with false teachers leading people away from the true faith and toward unholy rituals and vows. Lucifer's enticements, he warned, were no less beguiling today than those he'd planted in the Garden. The heretics, those false teachers of no authority, were serpents, and we ignorant Tolosans were Eve, deadly fruit poised and resting upon our lips.

Upon *my* lips.

In our Father's house, I told the believers, there is never alarm, but only gladness, love, and peace.

Not long after that, the interrogations began.

BOTILLE

I made my first match when I was thirteen, but it was so easy, I don't know if I should even claim credit for it. Make no mistake, I charged a fee. I never let qualms get in the way when money is involved.

We had only just moved to Bajas, my sisters and Jobau and I, and taken over the derelict tavern on the skirts of town, near the water but not too near, for Plazensa required an ale cellar. The villagers still looked at us with some suspicion. We weren't local. We spoke Oc, but our accents were different. We came from the city of Carcassona, and we weren't a fishing family. And then there was Jobau. Mamà had charged us to look after him, keep him out of the way, and keep him from provoking others. Plazensa grew skilled at fermenting just about anything, and we followed Mamà's orders by keeping Jobau drunk.

The fishwives especially distrusted Plazensa, who at sixteen stood tall and buxom, with the thickest head of long black curls this side of the Pyrenees. I didn't attract much notice, but Sazia did. At nine, she wore trousers like a boy and wandered up to villagers offering to tell their fortunes for a penny. She made people wonder. They wondered all the more when Sazia's predictions about where the fisherman would net the greatest haul proved right again and again.

Plazensa said we should call the tavern the Three Skylarks. Sazia suggested the Three Pigeons, and it stuck. "After all," said Sazia, "you might bake a pigeon into a pie, but never a skylark." All that summer as we patched and painted the tavern, and Plazensa scolded me for not doing enough to help, I watched out the window as the goat-cheese man's daughter, Lisette, sat in her parents' back garden, uphill from us, eating plums and stitching something in her little cloth book. To this day I can't think of her without picturing her sticky mouth and stained embroidery. I wasn't the only one watching her. A goosenecked young *ome*, Martin de Boroc, spied on her daily through the shrubs that divided her gardens from ours. How she never saw him says much about her great stupidity, but as I say, matchmaking is nothing more than paying attention.

Martin de Boroc's father died at the end of that summer, leaving him his fishing boat, ensuring Martin would starve neither himself nor any future wife to death. So finally, one day, when I could no longer bear the suspense of wondering whether he would,

for the love of Santa Sara, show his face to Lisette through the trees, I knocked on Lisette's parents' door.

Paul Crestian, Lisette's papà, kept his flocks of goats in an enclosure that stretched behind both of our homes. He stored his cheeses in his damp cellar. It is a fattening occupation, tasting every batch of creamy cheese to make sure it is just so. He answered the door and frowned at me over his round belly. "*Oc*?" he said. "You are the new girl from next door? The plain one, with the pretty older sister and the little duck of a younger sister."

I bowed. "That is right. Do you want to see your daughter married?"

Paul Crestian made the sign of the cross, then glared at me. "Why are you asking?" His brows lowered. "If your old *paire* thinks he can wed Lisette, he can think again."

I worked hard not to laugh. "No," I said. "Jobau doesn't want to marry your daughter. But Martin de Boroc does. Do you have a dowry for Lisette?"

"What kind of a father do you think I . . ." His eyes bulged at me. "Why am I telling a little *toza* my affairs? Off with you!"

"Martin de Boroc will make a fine living now that he has his father's boat," I said.

"Fish," growled the shopkeeper. "They're a slippery business."

"I will negotiate the marriage," I said, "for ten silver shillings, and a leg of *moton*."

"Ten silver shillings!" roared Paul Crestian. "I don't need help from a little—"

“Don’t forget the *moton*.” I ran to the waterfront.

The tide had come in, and Martin de Boroc had just finished mooring his boat. He carried a net of fish slung over his shoulder. Most had given up the struggle, but one still flopped desperately against the cords.

“Martin,” I said, “do you want a wife?”

His mouth hung open. “Not one your age!” He tried to push past me.

I planted my palm against his chest. “What would you think,” I said, “of Lisette, the goat-cheese man’s daughter?”

He went limp. So did the fish.

“What would I think of Lisette?” he whispered. His eyes grew cloudy, like a fish’s once it’s been dead a few days. “Maire Maria!”

I wondered what he saw in that sticky face, but it was no concern of mine. “For ten shillings, and a pair of fat red *mujọl* fish, I will speak to Paul Crestian for you, and tell him he should be thankful to you if you were to ask for his daughter’s hand.”

He gulped. “Ten silver shillings?”

I held out my hand. “Payable in advance. If Lisette has a dowry, you owe me ten more.”

He shifted his dead fish to his other shoulder. “I haven’t got ten shillings on me.”

“I’ll follow you home.”

I instructed Martin to present himself at Paul Crestian’s home the following evening, bathed and brushed, then went home with his ten shillings jingling in my pocket, and a gleaming red *mujọl*

clutched in each hand. The first fish, I gave to Plazensa, who eyed it hungrily and ordered Sazia to find more fallen wood for the fire. The second, I took next door to the shopkeeper. Mimi, my housecat, followed me, mewling at my dangling prize.

"Martin de Boroc sends his regards, and your dinner," I told Paul Crestian. "He plans to come visit tomorrow evening to discuss Lisette's dowry. Make it a generous one, for a handsome, promising bachelor like Martin de Boroc can have his pick of wives."

"To discuss Lisette's dowry!" sputtered that girl's father. "I've not given my consent. Why should I give my only daughter to a bony fish man?"

Mimi lunged toward the fish. The goat-cheese man snatched it high out of reach. "Daughter," he cried, "can you cook well enough to get married? Prepare me this *mujọl* ."

Lisette wandered into view, sucking on a plum. She wrinkled her nose at the fish but took it away dutifully. That night I smelled roast fish coming from both of our ovens, though Lisette's house had a slightly different aroma. I think she stuffed her fish with plums.

The next afternoon, I snuck a jug of Plazensa's special ale out of our cool cistern and carried it over to Paul Crestian. "A present," I said, "from our cellars, bought specially for you by Martin de Boroc. He's a generous soul, isn't he?"

The shopkeeper uncorked the jug and sniffed it. Its rich, malty scent filled the room. He took a foamy sip and tried to protest, then took another sip. Bajas was strictly a wine town, but Plazensa and her ale would soon change all that.

That evening I spied Martin de Boroc walking stiffly toward Lisette's house. He'd attempted to smarten up his appearance. Lisette's papà, I knew, would have finished Plazensa's ale by now, and if it could lift Jobau out of the doldrums, it could soften up the cheese man.

Half an hour later we heard loud laughter from the Crestians' *maisoṇ*. Plazensa looked up from caning the twine seat of a broken chair. "What's going on over there?"

Martin de Boroc burst through the tavern door and poured ten shillings into my lap. Plazensa stared at him. Mimi rubbed against his ankles. Even with a bath, he still smelled of fish.

"What was that for?" my sister cried, when he'd left.

"Couldn't say." I then pulled the first ten pieces Martin had given me from my pocket and presented them to Plazensa.

"What are you doing?" my sister cried. "Robbing the church? Stealing from merchants?"

"Such a suspicious nature," I tutted. "Martin de Boroc paid me of his own free will."

A smiling Paul Crestian sailed in and presented me with coins and a leg of *moton*. He planted a wet kiss on Plazensa's ruddy cheek, patted my head, and twirled out the door.

Plazensa leveled a pointing finger at me. "You've put a hex on the village men," she said. "You've bewitched them into paying us for no reason. Teach me! Tell me how you did it!"

"I did nothing of the kind," I said. "Pass me more twine. If we're ever going to open this tavern, we can't sit here gossiping."

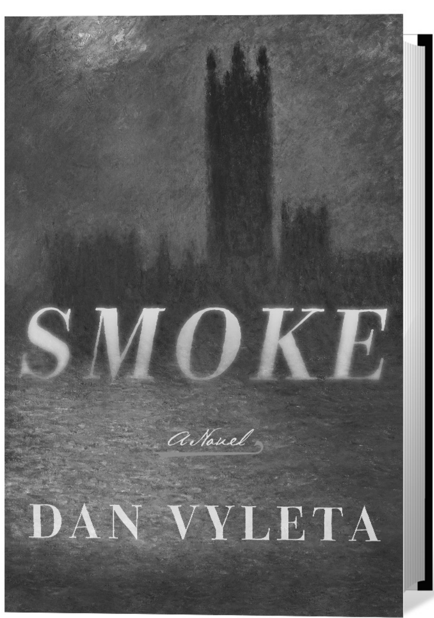
“Who’s next?” Plazensa wondered aloud, peering out the window. “Any other people coming to fling money or meat at you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

But half an hour later the door opened, and in came Azimar de Carlipac, the shipbuilder, jingling a little sack of coins.

“Which of you is Botille?” he demanded. “I’ve got a daughter who’s due for a husband.”

And so my career began. Along with Plazensa’s enterprises, it fed my family. It kept me busy and needed by the entire village. To be needed is one way to be safe. The other is to have money. Given time, I’d have both. We’d uprooted and moved enough, we three plus Jobau. We’d found a new town every time he lost his head and his temper, or our petty thefts were found out. No more wandering. I would build a safe home for us, here in Bajas, with reputation and money to spare, one bashful bridegroom and one blushing bride at a time.



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PART TWO

THE MANOR

The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubb! he laughs! See yonder Chilian! He snorts to think of it. Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot, Starbuck! . . . (*Aside*) Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion.

HERMAN MELVILLE, *MOBY DICK* (1851).

LESSONS

They take a late morning train. Thomas calculates they should get there well before nightfall, but they have to change twice and miss their connection at Rugby. The station is dreary and empty, the waiting room a row of wooden benches clustered around an oven without heat. A conductor tells them there will be a train within the hour, but three o'clock passes, then four, then five, before he reappears, buttoned up tight and smelling of Smoke and brandy, informing them there has been a delay.

It is eight by the time they board the train and they are frozen through. In their compartment a stack of blankets sits folded on the luggage rack. They fetch them down and wrap themselves in the plain brown wool which appears clean but gives off a bitter, funky smell, as of soiled sawdust.

Thomas and Charlie have spoken little in the past hour. The long day of waiting has exhausted their conversation and they are both busy with their hunger, have shared the last sandwich and the last apple not an hour after pulling out of Oxford, taking turns, bite for bite, each making sure he did not get the last. It left them nibbling at scraps in the end, laughing, passing the wretched piece of apple core back and forth, until Thomas swallowed it, seeds, stem and all, and nearly choked himself with laughter. Now, their silence sits with them in the compartment while, outside, high winds batter the train.

"You hungry?" Charlie asks at one point, his own stomach growling in the dark.

"No," Thomas lies. "You?"

"No."

"Tired?"

"Not a bit."

"Same here."

ф

They both startle awake as the train comes to a stop. Mechanically they shake off the blankets and fetch their luggage down only to realize it isn't yet their station. It is hard to say how much time has passed. Darkness presses in on them, seems confirmed rather than relieved by a single gas flame shivering in its glass cage on the station platform. The wind is like a living thing, searching their windows for purchase, pushing fingers, tongues in through the cracks.

As his eyes adjust, Thomas comes to realise that the platform is not as deserted as he had assumed. A group of men, women, and children huddle against the wall at the far side of the building, downwind from the storm. There may be as many as a dozen of them; have formed a circle, their faces focused on the centre. When the train starts up again, they draw level. It is too dark to read any features, but their gestures and stance speak of a violent excitement, clenched fists and wide-open mouths, the feet planted wide apart. At the centre of their man-made ring, two figures are wrestling, one atop the other, the upper stripped to his waist. They pass too quickly to say whether it is two men or a man and a woman; whether they are fighting, or engaged in something yet more intimate. The whole group is steaming with a misty Smoke, snatched off their bodies by the storm and blown down-country where it will plaster a barn, a house, a shade tree with their wind-borne sin.

Then they are gone.

Charlie and Thomas go on looking out the window long after they have passed the group, though now, coated by country dark, the pane has turned into a rain-streaked mirror.

"Peddlars?" Charlie asks at last. "Circus people? Irishmen?"

Thomas shakes his head.

"Who knows."

The words are laced with a familiar flavour; the mirror shows a shadow darting from his mouth.

"A group like that," Charlie goes on, "they infect each other over and over. Like a tiny, travelling London." He sighs. "I wish we could find a way to save them."

"Save them? Whatever for? Leave them in their filth. They deserve it. Isn't that the point of Smoke?"

The words come out wrong, hard and flat and ugly. Charlie looks at him

in shock. Afraid that Thomas means them, aware of the smell that's filling the compartment. For a moment, Thomas searches for a phrase that will explain. But you cannot unsay the said. And how do you account for the yearning, distinct in his chest, to go back and join the men and women in their circle, find out what it was that those two figures did, half-naked on the freezing brick of the station platform?

"We better get there soon," he says, wrapping himself into the blanket, and leaving Charlie to worry for his, Thomas's, soul.

ϕ

It must be past ten when they arrive at their destination. It is hard to be sure. The station clock is not working; Thomas has no watch, and Charlie quickly realises that he has forgotten to wind his. Baron Naylor's coachman welcomes them on the platform. He is tall, bearded, half-frozen and nervous; stands muffled into a greatcoat, insists on carrying their luggage, then sets it down again after a dozen steps.

"It's too late now to harness the horses," he explains, both in accusation and apology. "You were expected at three. Even then, the light would have been bad. It's quite a ways you see."

"Then we'll stay the night," Charlie suggests reasonably.

The man nods, bends for their luggage, hesitates.

"There is no Inn."

"And the waiting room?"

"Locked."

"Then where will we—?"

The man sighs, picks up the suitcases again, leads them down the platform steps and across the station yard. Here, the horse stables form two shabby rows, shielded from view of the travelling public by a high brick wall. No street lamp lights their footing here, and as they make their way down the alley in near-darkness, Charlie becomes eerily aware of the animal eyes looking down at him across the stable gates, his ears alert to the shifting of hoofs and the sudden shakes of horses' heads; the exhalations of hot air; the smacking of lips and meaty tongues. When a horse bares its teeth not a foot from his ear, they catch the little light there is: crooked, yellow teeth like stubby fingers, sticking out of colourless gums. Startled, Charlie stops. Thomas bumps into him, swears, then places a hand on his shoulder.

“Spooky, eh?”

“Just lost my footing,” says Charlie, thinking that this is what it must feel like to have a brother. An older one, willing to stick up for you in times of danger.

They arrive at a door that the coachman wedges open with some difficulty. Inside, the scene is lit by a single tallow candle. The room is tiny, smells of hay and horse. Three men sit propped up against the wall, smoking cheap little pipes; two others are stretched on the freezing ground under shabby blankets, resting, sleeping, or dead, it is impossible to say. Nobody speaks: not to welcome them, not to communicate with one another.

“The coachmen sleep here,” Baron Naylor’s man informs them. “I’m not supposed to– That is, gentlemen don’t usually come here.” He sets down their luggage on the little floor space there is, unwraps his scarf to free a throat marked by an old burn scar. “But I don’t know where else—”

“It’ll do,” Charlie says, and Thomas sits down wordlessly, then spreads his coat out underneath him. The room is so small that once Charlie has joined him, they lie wedged between the prostrate men and the smokers. Charlie’s face rests not an inch from the hand of a stranger. It is a large hand, with a tattoo in the wedge of skin between thumb and index finger, and knuckles blackened by either dirt or Soot. The tattoo is some sort of picture. Charlie cannot make it out until the hand spreads itself upon the wooden floorboards like an animal seeking purchase for a leap. A mermaid, bare-chested, smiling.

“We will freeze to death,” Thomas whispers next to him, only half joking, and closes the gap between their backs so their spines can pool their bony warmth.

They lie like that for half the night, strangers coughing around them, a mermaid dancing on dirty skin, her breasts shrivelling, expanding, winking with every twitch of the coachman’s mighty hand.

By dawn, the boys are so stiff, they have to support one another as they limp into the coach. They crawl onto padded benches, and drift into a state more stupor than sleep.

ф

The coach ride has the texture of a dream: a half-dozen impressions sewn together with no reference to time. They set off in twilight, amongst undulating hills; pit towers and smokestacks dotting the horizon. The sounds

of travel seem to reach them through their skins as much as their ears; clot together into lumps of noise they are too tired to unpick: the churning of the muddy wheels, the crack of the coachman's whip, the frightened whinny of the horse when it slips in a puddle. Once, Thomas wakes to see the ruin of a windmill studded with tiny birds: the sun at its back and the coach riding through its mile-long shadow. Then, the moments miles apart but adjacent in his consciousness, separated only by the closing of his eyes, they arrive. The coach halts before the long flank of a stone building painted dark by rain. A butler runs out, umbrella in hand, and escorts them the ten steps from coach to side door, gravel crunching under their feet.

"Delighted to see you have arrived, Mr Argyle, Mr Cooper. You will be hungry, I presume? If you'll follow me to the breakfast room."

At the mention of breakfast, Charlie's stomach growls like an ill-used pet.

ф

They sit at breakfast. The room is large and formal, the tablecloth starched; the chairs high-backed and stiff; the cutlery elegant silver. The table seats ten, but the boys are the only ones in attendance; perch shabbily—their clothes rumpled, their hair unkempt, their hands all too hastily washed—afraid they'll stain the upholstery. The butler has left them. A door to their left admits kitchen smells but has not yet produced any food; cold heavy rain running down the glass veranda doors.

Then a serving girl arrives. She may be twenty or twenty-two; casts a glance at them from large, gentle eyes, before kneeling down in front of the fireplace and setting to lighting it. She strikes a match, holds it to a scrap of newspaper already crumpled amongst the coals, repeats the action; cowers down, still on her knees, her chin now almost touching the floor, to blow into the hearth. The boys—dazed, blurry-eyed, travel-weary—feel they have no choice but to stare at her. At her bottom, to be precise. In this position, stuck in the air with most of the skirt's fabric trapped under her knees, it is most awfully round. When a stomach growls (Thomas's? Charlie's again?) it sounds pleading, forlorn. And still the girl kneels, blowing at coals.

"I believe the fire is quite lit."

They did not hear her enter. Thomas and Charlie move as one: reflec-

tions in a mirror. Both heads swivel; both faces fill with blood. Charlie's blush is the darker. A redhead, he is, copper-skinned. To those of his complexion, nature is not kind. It's like a different type of Smoke, marking a different type of sin. There is no chance at all that the lady does not notice.

For she is a lady, though she is no older than they. Not tall, but holding herself as to appear it, her long, plain dress cut almost like a habit. A small face: pale, rigid, self-possessed and cold.

And pretty.

Her lips are naturally very red.

"Come here, please," she says, not at them, but past them, at the cowering form of the servant.

The girl obeys with haste but no enthusiasm, her large eyes on Thomas, then the floor. Her blouse is tight over her chest, the skirt rides up a little where it has caught at the swell of her hips.

"It appears your clothes have shrunk in the wash."

The young lady's voice is neither cruel, nor loud, nor yet commanding. Notes of patient sadness underlie it; humility forced into action against its will. Next to the serving girl's large, florid frame, she appears dainty, almost fragile.

An elf, Charlie thinks.

Thomas thinks: a nun.

"It would be better if you returned to scullery duties for the moment. Until you learn to be a little less obtrusive."

"But Lady Naylor promised me—"

"Until the New Year."

"But she said I could—"

"Spring, then. You are excused now."

There is a sequence to what follows. The Smoke comes first, a sudden little plume that rises from the servant girl's chest and leaves a smudge in the starched cotton. Then tears start running, clear and silent, from deer eyes to chin. A sob follows, starts in the depth of her and shakes her frame. Next she flees, all grace forgotten, the sound of her flat shoes travelling through the closing door.

"My apologies. Miss Livia Naylor. Mr Argyle, I presume? And Mr Cooper. How do you do? We were expecting you last night. It is, of course, long past our breakfast time. Never mind, here comes the food. Sit. I shall keep you company."

ф

They sit and eat under her scrutiny. Her gaze is all the more disconcerting for being patient, judicious, meek. Charlie finds it turns the toast to ashes in his mouth, and the tea to bilge water. A well-brought up boy, he forces himself to make conversation.

"Thank you for welcoming us so kindly, Miss Naylor. Will your father—the Baron—will he be joining us this morning?"

But the girl gives him no help.

"I am instructed to tell you he is unwell."

"That's too bad. Your mother then?"

"She has ridden out."

Charlie feels rebuffed but is not ready yet to admit defeat. He adds with an increasing air of desperation: "I assume you're home from school. Just like us. Not that we are at home, of course. But all the same– "

She waits attentively, patiently for him to finish, but he no longer knows where he is going, is hiding behind his cup of tea, appalled at the noise he makes when he tries to take a quiet sip.

Thomas rescues him.

"You are not a head girl, by any chance?" he asks, his mouth full, a dangerous note to his question. "Back at your school?"

She meets his eyes calmly.

"I have that good fortune. How did you guess?"

They cannot help themselves. Both boys start to giggle, furtively at first, then, their frames shaking, with blushing abandon, while she watches on, calm and meek and disapproving, until their hysteria dries out along with their appetites, and the butler reappears to see them to their room.

ф

"We'll have an early dinner at five."

These were Livia's parting words. The only thing of substance that the butler added to their stock of information was the location of the bathroom, right across from the room in which they have been housed, and the exhortation that they "May feel more comfortable once they have had a moment to refresh themselves," which Charlie takes to mean they stink. The room is prettily but sparsely furnished. It holds two beds, a press and a little desk and chair. They remain on the ground floor; a large veranda

door grants access to the gardens. The clock shows a quarter to eleven. When Charlie returns at eleven twenty from his bath, he finds Thomas at the open veranda door, watching a pheasant striding up and down the garden path. He leans out, into the pouring rain, and Charlie hears him count the windows along their wing of the house. He breaks off after three dozen, turns, his hair wet and the face streaming with rain.

"Is your house like this, Charlie?" He points for some reason at the marching pheasant who is on yet another of his rounds.

Charlie thinks about it.

"You mean this big, with gardens like that? Yes, I suppose it is. Grander, even." He shrugs. "How about yours?"

"More like that."

It takes Charlie a moment to see the garden shed through the sheets of rain, standing with its back to the dark tree-line beyond.

"Do you miss it? Home?"

Thomas eyes turn hard.

"No." He gathers up a dressing gown and towel. "My turn for a bath."

ϕ

Their afternoon passes turgidly. Five seems an eternity away. The rain continues unabated, making exploration of the garden impossible. When they step into the corridor instead, they find most of the doors closed, the house all but abandoned. It seems rude to climb stairs and look around in earnest, and after running into the hard stare of the butler at what appears to be the stairwell down to the servants' quarters, they retreat, watch the clock move in painfully slow spasms. At three thirty they change into their formal attire. It is only now they realize they have forgotten to hang their clothes or ask someone to press them, and their shirts and jackets look hopelessly rumpled. Thomas's dinner jacket is not only cut according to some long-abandoned fashion but appears to have been attacked by moths. The cloth underneath the left arm is all but worn away. This leads him to walk around awkwardly, pressing one elbow into his own flank so as to hide the bald spot. When the clock hand finally twitches onto five, their nerves are exhausted with boredom. At three minutes past, the fear takes hold that nobody will come to collect them.

"We could ring for a servant," Charlie suggests.

"*She* might come. Tell us off."

"*She* doesn't seem the type to answer bells. Maybe the other girl will come."

"The one with the big—?"

Thomas is stopped short by a knock on the door.

"Dinner," says the voice of the butler. "Lady Naylor is waiting."

ф

Lady Naylor is resplendent in a floor-length evening gown of velvet and silk. She gets up from a chair when they enter, shakes their hands, gives Thomas an odd searching look. Charlie does not know how to gauge his friend's reaction: a thoughtfulness comes over Thomas that is not quite recognition. He takes his seat at the large, formal dinner table with a frown on his brow. Charlie sits across, separated by four feet of starched damask. Rows of cutlery five-deep flank their china plates.

"I trust you had a pleasant journey."

The boys look at each other. Both remember the coachman's waiting room with its unheated floor; the anxious look of their driver as he explained there was no Inn.

"Very pleasant," the say, almost in unison.

"I am pleased."

Miss Naylor enters. She is wearing the same nunnish dress she wore at the breakfast table, though she has added a string of pearls. The boys rise, somewhat clumsily, dropping napkins, until she has taken her seat across from her mother. Right away a servant appears carrying a terrine of soup.

"Please," Lady Naylor says, after a perfunctory prayer, "begin. We don't stand on formality here." The smile she flashes highlights the absurdity of the claim. Her daughter scowls and spoons the soup with such noiseless precision that Charlie, sitting next to her, feels like a pig at the trough.

"I trust your parents are well, Mr Cooper."

"Very well, thank you."

"It is generous of them, to share you with us, in this festive season."

Charlie blushes. "Not at all."

"Livia, you forgot to mention to me what a perfectly charming young gentleman Mr Cooper is. And Mr Argyle, too, of course." She flashes another smile, subtle and naughty. "Her report, I must tell you, was rather libellous."

"Mother! I really must insist that you don't lie." A flush of colour has entered the girl's cheek.

"See how we live here," her mother appeals to her guests. "Under the heavy thumb of a prude."

ф

Dinner is interminable. The soup is followed by jellied tongue, followed by duck in red wine sauce; then roast pork and parsnip; plum pudding; cheese; and coffee. For all Lady Naylor's charm, she is unable to draw more than a half dozen words out of her guests. Even her daughter refuses to be drawn into extended skirmishes. She checks herself at several points and accepts her mother's barbs with the patience of the martyr. Charlie watches them all very closely: Thomas, awkward in his moth-eaten jacket, eating little, chewing over some thought; Livia, thin, pretty, embarrassed by and for her mother; and Lady Naylor, a well-kept woman of forty, her hair piled high above her mobile, made-up face, the thin lips thickened by a rich hue of lipstick. She is speaking to him, Charlie, mostly; seems less interested in Thomas. Only now and again her eyes steal over to him, an odd sort of question in her gaze. It busies Charlie so much, this gaze, he too nearly forgets to eat.

At last the final plate is cleared away. Lady Naylor stands. Charlie and Thomas quickly scramble to their feet.

"Thorpe will see you back to your room," she announces. She gestures behind them. Thorpe, the butler, proves to be already in the room, having appeared from God knows where. His face is the perfect façade of lifelong service: so devoid of expression that one must assume his total indifference towards all matters grave and light. Certainly towards the comfort of guests.

"Please let him know if you require anything else."

Lady Naylor shakes both of their hands again, again holding Thomas's eyes for the fraction of a moment, then takes her daughter's arm and walks away.

"Good night," Charlie calls after them, too late to elicit an answer.

"This way, if you please."

The butler escorts them like a jailer. Back in the room, Thorpe hands over custody to the great clock whose ornate hands will keep measure of their sentence. It is barely seven o'clock. Dinner is finished, they have been sent back to their room.

It feels worse than school.

ϕ

"What do you make of them, then?"

Charlie thinks about his answer. Why not? They have time to spare.

"The mother is all perfume and charm. And the daughter . . ."

"Tar soap and prayer books!"

They laugh but there is no mirth to it. The room already feels small to them, the two beds narrow and far too soft. They have opened the veranda doors and sit there freezing, facing the rain-dark night. Letting the wind in.

Just to feel alive.

"Did you recognise her?" Charlie asks, getting up and inspecting the bookshelf. There is an incomplete encyclopaedia, Volumes Aa to Pe; a Bible; a chess game in a wooden box; playing cards; dust. "Lady Naylor, I mean. You looked like you might have."

Thomas begins to shake his head, then shrugs.

"I'm not sure."

"A distant memory? From childhood?"

"No, it's not that. Something else." He searches for it, pulls a face at not being able to put his finger on the feeling. "She reminds me of someone. Her face, her bearing. Someone at school, I think."

"One of the teachers?"

"Perhaps."

They sit for a while, get up, open the door on the draughty silence of the corridor; close it again, step out onto the veranda, get wet. No sound travels through the night. They have been abandoned even by the peripatetic pheasant. Whatever lights may be burning within the house are blocked by curtains and blinds.

Thomas closes the veranda door at last, flops on to the bed.

"It's not how I imagined it. Coming here. I thought there'd be, I don't know. Some sort of confrontation. Another dentist's chair. Or maybe the opposite. My uncle explaining the world to us. Confiding secrets." He pulls a face at his own naiveté. "Some kind of adventure in any case. But it looks like he has some other plan in mind. They'll bore us to death."

"Perhaps we are to serve as bad examples to his daughter." Charlie rouses himself from their gloom, walks back over to the bookshelf. "Chess then? Or draughts?"

But Thomas is too disconsolate to answer.

ϕ

He wakes not an hour after they've gone to bed. It's not a dream that wakes Thomas, but a thought. He knows where he knows her from.

Lady Naylor.

He leaves the room in his nightshirt. His clothes are piled onto the chair, and there is a dressing gown hanging off a hook somewhere, but he does not want to wake Charlie by rummaging around.

The corridor carpet is soft under Thomas's feet. He asks himself what it is he is searching for. Proof, he supposes; something that will turn conviction into fact. It isn't clear what can furnish such proof. All the same: staying in the room, staring wide-awake into the darkness, alone with his thought—it is impossible. He walks slowly, shivering. After a while he realises it is not from the cold.

The house isn't totally dark. Here and there some embers are smouldering in fireplaces. In the dining room, a gas lamp has been left burning, turned very low. In the kitchen, a shimmer of light has fought its way up from the cellar, the servants' quarters, and carries along with it the soft, high giggle of one of the girls. He stops for a moment, savouring it: tiles underfoot now, vivid with cold.

Out in the front hall, Thomas locates the great spiral staircase. Its bannister is a sweeping black curve, reassuring to his touch. Upstairs he finds another light, brighter than the others: it draws a tidy white line underneath a door. He stands in front of it and listens; raises a fist to knock, then stops himself and turns the handle. He might be walking into Livia's bedroom; into a toilet busy with an occupant. But to knock and don the role of supplicant (for what is a knock, if not an invitation to be turned away?) is not palatable to him. Not now. The taste of his Smoke is so bitter in his mouth, he does not need to look down his nightshirt to know he is showing.

The room is a lady's study, large and well appointed. It has no occupant but its owner is disclosed by the patterned wallpaper of purple and gold, too playful to be a man's, too opulent to be the daughter's. The desk confirms it, ornate rosewood inlaid with other, lighter woods. A letter opener catches Thomas's eye, the brass blade shaped like a dagger, and heavy enough to serve as a weapon. He picks it up, sits down, insolent now, his eyes on the wall with its two dozen paintings, hung close together, crowding the wall. Sits looking at them, unseeing; Smoke rising like a mist in front of his face.

It isn't long before the door opens and its owner enters the room. Lady Naylor appears unsurprised to find him there.

“Thomas! I am glad you are enjoying my art.”

His voice finds a timbre he recognises as his father’s, gravel rasping under heavy boots. It’s years since he has heard it, and never in himself.

“I was looking for your cutthroat, Milady. And your fake whiskers. I was lying awake, trying to fathom what you did with the dead woman’s Soot.”

“Ah. So you did recognise me.” Lady Naylor is wearing a silk dressing gown; its rich colour sets off her dark hair. She looks at him intently, then drops into a chair on the far side of the desk; smooths the fabric over her thighs. “Did you know already at dinner?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. But it was hard to believe.”

She laughs: it’s a brief laugh, almost a cough, but there is genuine humour to it all the same.

“Well, I’m relieved,” she goes on. “A boy who wears such a perfect mask of composure—no, I confess I did not like the thought.” She shakes her head, still laughing, with her eyes now rather than her voice. “And I was so very sure you knew right away. You see, I recognised you at once. Under the rostrum. You looked just as you did when you were a child. The same eyes, the same cast of the chin. Belligerent. And the face you made! Frightful! I was sure you would start screaming my name and accuse me in front of the whole mob. But then you didn’t tell anyone. Not even at school. I had you watched, you understand, worried that you’d be sullying my name. It cost me some sleep. In the end I decided to invite you here and have it out in the open.”

Thomas does not trust himself to respond. He sees her again, in men’s clothing, the hair hidden underneath a cap. The face dirty, looking boyish in its feminine grace, but also old. He flinches when she gets up and draws to the wall.

“I trust you have been admiring my paintings. Fascinating, are they not?”

He shrugs, trying to fathom her, the letter opener clutched so tight it is hurting his hand.

“You don’t think so. Well, look again. Trust me, Thomas, you have never seen any pictures like these before. Tell me: what do pictures usually show?”

Her voice is oddly soothing. It slows his heart. He answers sullenly; rises, gauges the distance between them.

“All sorts of things. Landscapes. People.”

“Describe them to me. The pictures you know from school, for instance.”

“There are only a handful. The headmaster has a few, in his study. A hunting scene, I think. Gentlemen to horse. And a coastline. Sun and water.”

“And these?”

Almost against his will he steps forward, to where picture frame hangs next to picture frame, nearly hiding the wall.

“People. Street scenes. Commoners.” It dawns on him. “The city. But—”

“Yes: *but*. There is no Smoke.”

Thomas looks again from picture to picture. Some of them look very old. There is a market scene, people haggling over wares, a young child stealing an apple while his brother looks on. Next to it, a village square, some sort of carnival, people dancing, drinking, rolling in the dirt. Another picture shows a soldier, studded with arrows. His tormentors surround him, faces full of hate. In yet another picture, frameless, the paint thick upon a panel of wood, Jesus hangs from his cross in between two others. Thomas has seen the scene before, in a stained glass window of his old parish church. Golgotha. There—most vivid on clear winter mornings when the slanting sun pours warmth into the glass—dark plumes rise from the shoulders of the two thieves and their cheeks are marked with two black boils of Smoke. Here they hang as sinless as the Saviour in their midst.

“How can that be?” he asks, his eyes darting amongst pictures. He flinches when Lady Naylor steps next to him.

But he does not run away.

“There are only two explanations, aren’t there? The first is that it is a matter of artistic license. Fantasy pictures. Outlaw artists, dreaming about a different world, hiding the Smoke. Such pictures exist and I have a few in my collection. But none are hung here.

“The truth is that all pictures used to be like this. Until a certain year. It’s hard to pinpoint exactly, but I make it 1625 or 1626. No Smoke. In not a single painting. Showing rapes, tortures, war and execution.

“Then comes a period without pictures. Thirty, forty years, and not a single brush stroke anywhere in Europe. Perhaps nobody felt moved to paint. Or they have all been destroyed, as so many of the older ones have.

“And then, after a whole generation of silence, we finally get pictures again. Nature scenes. Creeks, mountains, storm-tossed seas. It takes another generation before anyone paints people. Gentlemen, gentlewomen—not a commoner in sight. Unless it’s a religious motif. A martyr boiled in a pot: lily white in dun water. The men firing the pot are black as a boot, the air

dark with their filth." She smiles. "Like the air in here, I suppose. Do you mind if I open the window?"

She turns her back, slowly, deliberately, as though to taunt him who is still holding the blunt blade of a toy dagger. It's when he raises it to place it back onto the desk he realises his fingers are numb. He has squeezed the life out of them. She waits, patiently, for his tongue to catch up with his feelings; like a nurse leading a sick man, waiting for him to place his foot.

"You're saying there was a time before Smoke," he manages at last. "But it's impossible. All the history books—"

"Were written later. By schoolmasters. University dons. Ask my husband. He wrote books like that himself."

"But everyone would know. They'd remember, surely. People would tell their children, and they in turn would pass it on. You can't forget something like this."

"Can't you? Not even if every painting was destroyed and every book burned? If there was not a shred of evidence to support old people's stories? If you were taught that it's a sin to speak the truth—and burned at the stake if you did? Almost three hundred years, Thomas: it's a long time. A very long time. But you are right. Some people *do* know. On the continent, mostly. They weren't as thorough there. There are a few universities with some well-guarded collections. Even a monastery, in Germany, where—"

"The Bible," Thomas interrupts her, his voice over-loud, almost shouting. "Smoke is mentioned in the Bible. It's everywhere. Old Testament, New Testament. Every chapter and verse. And the Bible was written in– you know. The dawn of time."

"So it was. The dawn of time. Do you remember where Smoke is mentioned for the first time?"

"Genesis," he answers without hesitation. "The Fall of Adam and Eve."

"Yes - Genesis 3,7. How does it go?"

Thomas quotes: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and shame filled them, and the air grew thick with Smoke. And so they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons, and the aprons turned black with their Soot."

"Very good! I did not know you were such a scholar. Your mother taught you, I suppose. A feisty woman, a reformer. But pious." Lady Naylor walks

over to a glass-encased shelf. She opens it, waves him closer. "I have a few Bibles here. Go on, pick one. Read me the passage."

Thomas does as he is bidden, pulls a small, brittle book down, opens it to Genesis.

"It's in Latin. *'Et aperti sunt oculi amborum: cumque cognovissent se esse nudos, consuerunt folia ficus, et fecerunt sibi perizomata.'* "

"Translate then. You have Latin in school, don't you? At least I hope so. I'm paying your fees."

He stares at the words. His voice is halting, his brain numb with what isn't there. "And opened were the eyes of both of them. And when they realized that they were naked, they joined leaves and made for themselves clothes." He leafs back, to the book's beginning, almost tearing the pages. The cover print incorporates a number in Roman numerals. MDLXII.

1562.

Thomas looks up, tears in his eyes.

"They changed it, the bastards."

"Yes, they did."

"And everything—everything!—is a lie."

"Yes."

She pries the book out of his hands, lays it back on the shelf, then stands facing him, at an arm's length, reading his face. He waits until the tears have rolled down his face, wet his lips; tastes it, his sadness, finds it tinged with Soot.

"Does your daughter know all this?"

Lady Naylor's face grows hard. It's the first time since she's entered that he sees it amongst her features: that other face, the person who scraped fresh Soot off a woman's corpse.

"I told Livia a long time ago. She says it is heresy, and my research an abomination." She laughs, draws her dressing gown tight around her body, looks scrawny for a moment, diminished, old. "My daughter tells me that if the old books were burned then there was a good reason. That no plague comes amongst us unless God has sent it, and no dog rips out a badger's throat without God holding the end of the leash." Lady Naylor pauses, calms herself. "But she has not reported me yet."

She walks over to the desk, sits down, straightens papers.

"My daughter," she declares abruptly, "lives like she is a china doll. Holding very still. Listening into herself, stiffly, stuck in one posture. She's waiting. Waiting for something to break, you see, and reveal a secret reservoir

of Smoke: an impurity, deep in herself, that will mark her as a sinner. You saw how she was at dinner. She tried to laugh, once or twice. But she isn't sure how. And whether it's allowed." Lady Naylor waves a hand, as though to dispel the thought like a bad smell. "Enough about Livia. She's made her own bed. How about you? What will you do, now that you know?"

Thomas feels his heart pound in his chest. The enormity of it all comes crashing down on him, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He searches for something simple, some corner of it he can understand.

"What did you do in London, Lady Naylor? What is it for, that woman's Soot?"

"Experiments."

"You are looking for a cure. For Smoke."

"Yes."

"How?"

She laughs. "How? That's a very long story. Too much for one night."

Panic grabs Thomas. Panic that he will wake, and it will all have been a dream. "But you will tell me, won't you? Everything!"

"As much as I can. But not now. I need my sleep." She looks in his face, finds a plea written there. "One more question then. Something quick."

Thomas chews his cheek, afraid to waste his question, like those people in fairy tales who part with their wishes like fools. Then he knows.

"Sweets," he says. "Beasley & Son. We ate some but nothing happened. What are they? How do they work?"

ф

Then Charlie wakes from pleasant dreams in the early hours of the morning it is still quite dark outside. It takes him some minutes to realise he is alone. No sound issues from Thomas's bed. Curious, he rolls off the mattress, tiptoes forward in the dark until his shin bumps into the other bed. He feels the pillow and finds it quite cold. As he stands, pondering this fact, a light passes the door. It slides through the crack like an inverted shadow, licks a yard of floorboard, and is gone.

By the time Charlie has stepped out into the hallway, the light is seven or eight steps ahead. The figure that holds it is moving briskly. It blocks the bulk of the glow and hence is visible only in outline, a darkness traced in hues of gold. Fittingly enough, this halo is most radiant around the head.

Charlie recognises her by her hair. As his eyes adjust, Livia gains solid-

ity, transforms from lamp-sketched apparition into a more corporeal sort of ghost. If the previous day her dress was plain it is now austere: an apron worn over an ankle-length smock, both garments startlingly white. Her hair is honey-thick by gaslight. From her hand swings a porcelain jug.

Charlie follows her without hesitation and has taken three steps before even being conscious of his decision. He does so neither furtively, nor wilfully announcing his presence, but simply follows, his nightshirt fluttering as he rushes to keep step.

She leads him to stairs: the main stairwell first, then—a long corridor later, lined with portraits, vases, animal heads—a narrower flight that leads them to a barren corridor under a slanting ceiling. The attic. It isn't clear to Charlie whether Livia has noticed his pursuit. She has not slowed or turned but when she stops before a door ten steps ahead, it appears to him that she is tarrying just long enough to make sure he won't mistake it for another. Then she disappears inside. A sound greets her, an animal braying, and slows Charlie's step.

It is the sound of a beast in pain.

The room beyond the open door is dark, despite the gas lamp. At first Charlie thinks the walls are painted black. But when his hand brushes one side, the black smears and crumbles and leaves his fingers dark with Soot. The room is large and furnished only with some chairs, a table and dresser, and a large, iron-framed bed. On the bed lies a figure, manacled at wrist and ankles with wide leather straps. Again the strange braying sounds and fills the room. Charlie's skin puckers when he realises it issues from this man, his arms and legs tugging at the leather binds.

"He gets agitated in the mornings."

Livia's voice is calm, matter of fact. She stands at the table between bed and window, pours water into a wash basin. Already her apron is stained with Soot. When she bends down to run a wetted wash cloth over the man's forehead, he cries again and his body exhales a dark-green burp of Smoke. Slack-mouthed, leering, he wears a mask rather than a face. Whatever features he might call his own are cancelled out by his condition.

"Mother thinks we must keep it a secret," Livia goes on, still in the same nonchalant tone. Her eyes are on her work. All the same Charlie has the sensation of being closely watched by her, his every move registered, analysed, judged. "But I say we must accept Providence humbly, without shame."

It is only now, as she says it, that Charlie understands.

"Baron Naylor," it tumbles out of him. And is followed, with an alacrity that clearly pleases her, for Livia's eyes light up within her small, finely-drawn face: "How can I help?"

"We must wash and feed him."

It proves an awkward, difficult procedure, in part because it necessitates the removal of the leather restraints. Baron Naylor fights them. He is not a young man, perhaps as much as twenty years older than his wife (though it is possible, too, that his illness has aged him, for he is thin and dishevelled, and his molars are dark within his mouth, there at the back where they are hard to clean). For all that he is as strong as an ox and the presence of a stranger appears to upset him. No sooner have they freed his right hand than he snakes it around Charlie's wrist. Again the Baron brays and thick, viscous Smoke crawls out of his skin and works its way up Charlie's arm. A moment later it is in his nose, his lungs. He begins to struggle with the man, begins to loathe him; disgust floods Charlie and when the madman's hand reaches up, searching for his throat, Charlie slaps it away with coarse brutality. It is only then, spitting out his anger, that Charlie realises he, too, is smoking.

Shame cuts through him, winds him, stoppers his Smoke. He backs away, to the wall, where the man's infection does not reach; stands panting, pressing his back into the wall like a burglar caught red-handed; looks over at Livia and hangs his head.

"I can't do it. I'm not strong enough."

Livia returns his look. Her hands remain upon her father's body, she is buried to her elbows in the old man's Smoke, but her head turns and he can see how difficult it is for her, how magnificent her self-control. Her own Smoke is minimal, fine white wisps that escape her lips and colour them grey. It is as though she's been spoon-fed ashes. Her gown is white, Charlie realises, because she wishes to test herself. Nothing must be hidden. It makes him marvel at her: a feeling not unlike fear. She, for her part, does not hide her disappointment in him; lets go of her father's limbs and reaches over to the table where she finds a tin box and throws it over to Charlie with a quick, disdainful flick.

"Here. Mother uses them when she is up here. Take one."

Charlie opens the tin and finds a dozen sweets inside. Clear, knuckle-sized, stamped with the familiar symbol: B&S underneath a three-pronged crown. He fishes one out, shakes his head.

“What do I do? I’ve tried one before but nothing happened. All it did was taste of soap.”

She does not turn with her answer.

“Put one in your mouth. Don’t chew it. It’ll pull the Smoke out of your breath and blood, and bind it, long before you show. Before it can infest your mind.”

Charlie does as instructed, then gingerly, not quite trusting himself, steps up to the bed. Livia has her hands full: her father is fighting her every movement, is spitting, biting, kicking. But this time Charlie’s blood remains cool and his mind clear, almost detached. He takes hold of Baron Naylor’s arms and pins them very gently, speaks to him in low soothing words, much as one would speak to a frightened pet or an infant; takes the cloth off Livia and cleans his face, his neck and ears. Within minutes the old man calms down, becomes pliable and almost childlike, his features composed. The face that emerges is not unlike Livia’s, fine-boned, heart-shaped and noble, if old.

“What now?” Charlie asks.

“We need to take off his nightshirt, wash his legs and—the rest of him.”

Livia blushes, points to her father’s midriff. It alerts Charlie to the whole sadness of a situation in which a mother and a daughter have become nurses to their husband and father.

“I will do it,” he says. “You take a rest.”

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Washing a man’s legs and body proves surprisingly simple once Charlie gets past the simple fact of his nudity. It is, in the end, rather like cleaning yourself. Baron Naylor is so calm now, he even lets Charlie shave him, very slowly and carefully, until five or so years of premature age have been scraped off his chin. Afterwards, the Baron dressed in fresh clothes, his bedsheets changed, Charlie joins Livia by the window. Dawn is breaking, the lawn still grey with shadow, the nearby wood a black square framed by lighter fields.

“Can you see a woman out there, walking out of the woods?” Livia asks in a whisper, then carries on, not expecting an answer. “The servants, the old ones, they have a story about a woman wandering the woods. Lost, they say, living on the edge of them, half in darkness, half in light. They say she is father’s lost soul. His sanity.” She smiles sadly at the window pane. “But I’ve never seen her, not in a thousand mornings of looking.”

She turns to Charlie then, studies him, frankly and systematically.

"You are shocked, aren't you? Shocked and disgusted. I can see it here." She points to where his eyebrows have knitted over the bridge of his nose.

Charlie is silent for a moment, gauging her expression. He knows it is important to give an honest answer.

"No, I am not," he says at last. "I have been thinking. It came to me just now, looking out the window with you. This is what Smoke is, isn't it? Smoke is madness. It's as simple as that."

When she answers, there is a catch of excitement in her voice. It is as though Charlie has just spelled out a long-cherished thought.

"Plato writes that evil is having a disordered soul."

She is about to go on, but breaks off instead. She does not trust him yet.

"We never read any Plato," Charlie tells her. "We only learned his dates."

Livia chews her lip.

"Father has his books downstairs, in the library. In Greek. He translated some of them. When he was a Professor, at Cambridge. I found his notes."

Livia looks over at the man in his bed, shackled again, placid and vacant. Her eyes fall on the razor on the little table. Charlie has washed and wiped it, and left it open to dry. She walks over, folds it, weighs it in her hands.

"You shaved him," she says suddenly, as though she has only just discovered the fact. In her head it's connected somehow, to Plato, and madness, and sin. He does not quite fathom how. "You have good hands, Charlie Cooper."

He masks his embarrassment by shaking his head.

"Only because of this," he says, picking the candy from out under his tongue. It has diminished in size and turned dark, almost black and looks, for all the world, like a rotten tooth.

She stares at it in distaste.

"Throw it. It won't hold any more Smoke."

He nods, closes his fist on the candy.

"Where do you have it from?"

"Mother. The government produces it, or rather there's a special factory that has a government contract. It used to be that it was a big secret. Only very few people were issued them, people in certain positions. Churchmen, for one. Government officials."

"Teachers."

"Yes. For emergencies; and to ward off infection when they are dealing with common folk. But Mother says that this is changing. Beasley & Son sold the monopoly, and the new owners, they are selling sweets, secretly of

course, to whoever can pay. A black market. Mother says they even sell to commoners. Soon, I suppose, greengrocers will sell it, along with tea and soap."

Charlie whistles. It sounds brighter than he means it to. "Or along with their liquorice and nuts! But this is good, isn't it? It means people can fight their Smoke. Suppress it."

She grows angry, fierce, her eyebrows knotting.

"It's a sin, is what it is. A crime."

She stares at him as though she holds him guilty too. In his fist the spent sweet lies sticky against his skin.

"I better go."

Livia does not stop him. All she says, as he walks through the door, is: "Merry Christmas."

He turns.

"Already? I lost track of time."

"Christmas Eve at any rate. Mother grew up abroad. She keeps to Continental traditions. We'll have a formal dinner, followed by carols at the tree."

"I have no present for you."

"It isn't expected."

Her voice, when she says it, is cold and distant. It is as though the morning never happened.

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"Smoke is madness," Charlie repeats to himself on the way down the stairs. "That's why she is how she is. She is her father's daughter. He lost his reason. So she is afraid."

The thought is still with him when he enters the guest room and finds Thomas straddling the threshold of the open veranda door, looking gaunt and sickly in the early morning light. Rain has soaked one sleeve of his nightshirt and glued it to his arm.

Charlie closes the door behind himself before he speaks.

"I know what sweets are. And I understand Smoke."

Thomas looks over, water streaming down his face.

"I know more than that, Charlie.. I've read the Bible."

They sit down on the floor shoulder to shoulder, and explain.

LIVIA

We spend Christmas with our guests. Mother, in keeping with the customs of her family, serves carp in black plum sauce and buttered potatoes. She roundly ignores my objection that dressing fish with fruit turns a dish that should at least remind us of a fast into something sweet and gluttonous. We have guests, she says, we can eat convent food when they are gone. The evening is further spoilt when Lizzy, the kitchen maid, is caught attempting to steal a present from under the tree. It is I who have the misfortune to catch her. The silly goose of a girl gets tangled in a crude lie, then immediately bursts into Smoke. Mother has little choice but to dismiss her, and we all watch as she runs off, her thick shoes making a racket on the floor and her skirt riding very indecently up the back of her calves.

Despite this, a certain solemnity prevails throughout the holiday. I am delighted to discover that Mr Cooper—Charlie, as he insists I must call him—has a lovely voice for carols. He is a well-mannered, even charming guest. On the morning of Christmas he surprises me by waiting outside my father's room when I arrive. He does not explain, but blushes rather becomingly, takes the jug and the wash cloth out of my hands and sets to helping me. I like him for that blush. He insists on not taking a sweet this time and humbly steps outside when the Smoke overwhelms him, until he has reclaimed his calm. Father has taken a shine to him and can be heard humming a nonsense melody as we leave. Mr Cooper falls in with it and starts skipping down the corridor like a fool.

Mr Argyle is a different matter. He humiliates me. There is something to his gaze, something forceful and insolent and searching that makes me aware of the plainness of my dress and hair-style, the scuffed old shoes I

wear around the house. It is not that I wish to appear prettier for him—God knows I would rather be spared his stares—and yet I have found myself donning the odd piece of jewellery for dinner and have slipped into the silk gown Mother gave me for my birthday, just to put him in his place. Not that I see much of this dark cousin of mine. Mr Argyle spends his afternoons shut up with mother who is filling him with her theories. It is hard to tell whether or not he believes her: she, too, is subject to his gaze. Its force is such that it leaves his own face inscrutable. He must be a most unpopular boy at school.

However, perhaps I should be grateful for his presence. It helps me guard against complacency. Each evening I sit down after my prayers and examine my feelings. The visitors—Charlie Cooper; his presence at my father's bedside—have enriched my life and I find myself, for once, content. But I am pleased to report that there is no joy in me when I rise in the morning to attend to my work. Joy is not a sin. But it is always better to act from duty. What one does from inclination one may do thoughtlessly. Inclination is fickle. More than that: it may lead you astray. One day, you might find yourself smoking, thinking you are doing good.

Mother says that I am obsessed; that far from dismissing Smoke, I have made it my idol. Indeed I am grateful for the Smoke. It tells us when we err. Imagine a world in which we err and nobody notices. Not even oneself. Until one goes to seed by increments and slides into the madness of villainy. Smoke eats our reason with a charcoal spoon. We measure our humanity against its darkness. It is good it leaves a mark.

On the second day of Christmas, Mother sits up late with our guests, lecturing on history. *The day the Smoke came.* She has sent the servants to bed. Her heresy is not for them.

Smoke, I remind her, comes from God.

So, she says, does cancer.

There is a lesson, I say, in cancer, too, and Mr Argyle glares at me with such an intensity of anger that it makes me want to quit the room. I had forgotten his mother succumbed to that disease. Once again it is Mr Cooper who saves the evening by suggesting a game of whist. During the game, he draws out Mother into telling stories from her time in Paris and Vienna. It is years since I have heard a laugh and, against my better judgement, I am happy.

For five whole days we are content in this manner, from Christmas Eve to the Feast of the Holy Innocents. I mark each day with a candle in the

chapel. Five candles, each a foot-long, wrist-thick, burning at the altar of the Virgin. Then my half-brother arrives. He comes on horseback, unannounced, his manservant in tow, and the next thing we know the whole house seems to be thick with him, his voice, his boisterous laughter, the chink of his spurs. He came to warn us about marauding Gypsies, he says. He brags and skulks and monopolises Mother.

I wish he had sent a letter instead.

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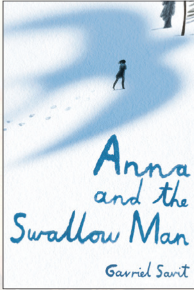

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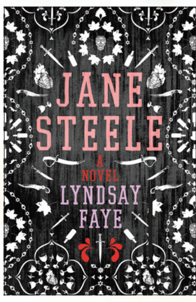

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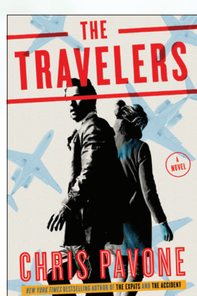

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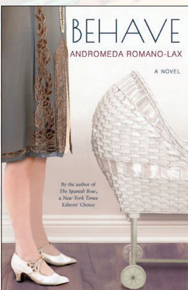

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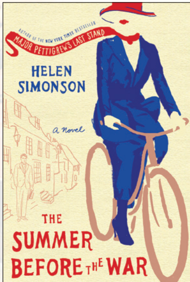

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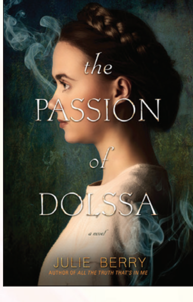

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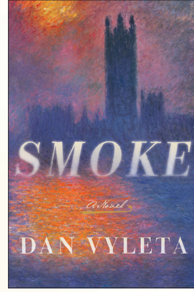

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