

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: MUDLARKING  
Caroline Rothrock, Master of Fine Arts, 2022

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*Mudlarking* is a novel-in-progress about realities and fantasies of queerness in the 1960s. Its two young protagonists, who have immigrated to London from unstable homes in Ireland and Virginia, seek to craft a new home for themselves out of things discarded by larger society, in a place at the fringe of reality and myth. They are “mudlarks” in both a literal and metaphorical sense, picking through refuse along the River Thames for long-lost things that can be made to glitter. Danger comes in the form of the insistent press of respectable conformity, and comfort in fluid transformation, remaking, and crafting a sanctuary out of a once-haunted space. The novel draws from conventions of Irish and Welsh folklore, as well as invented mythology, to emphasize the possibility of impossible transformations.

*Mudlarking* is accompanied by three earlier stories that have informed its construction and themes in various ways. In *A Lonely Death*, the narrator has a conversation with the long-dead corpse of a stranger, while *The Cunning Doll* situates a familiar fairy tale in the swamps of Louisiana, and posits that the heroine and the witch are more similar than either would like to believe. *Pink Moment* is an ode to the color pink in all its forms, but also to the ways that we use color and place to tell fantasies of our own lives. All of these narratives are concerned with the intersection between historical and fantastical landscapes, as well as the unlikely connections that inform our concept of belonging.

MUDLARKING

by

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*A Lonely Death*

The first thing you say to me, in a whisper dried to dust, is always *This isn't how I thought it would be.*

*No, I say. I suppose it isn't. It's a hard thing for us to imagine. I meet a lot of people like you, and that's what they all tell me. No one ever thinks it will be like this.*

*Too big for us to imagine?*

*No, too little. It's such a little, little thing, in the end.*

You are lying on the carpet in a stain of yourself, a windfall apple with the skin gone loose around it, the core shrunk to a wrinkled little heart. Knobs of bone push through your terrycloth robe, and beetles scatter at my footsteps. You are already well on your way to dirt.

Soon I'll have to seal up the carpet and take it away, along with the rest of your things, the Dala horses and porcelain maidens on the television stand, the vast chintz sofa your husband had to saw in half and nail together again so it would go through the door. But there's no hurry — we have time to talk. You've been lying here for two months now. Your cat Jordgubbe died a year before, so he wasn't even around to pick the flesh from your bones and cry for the neighbors when there was nothing left to eat.

*Are you...?* you can't quite ask, fixing your gaze — those eyes like spoonfuls of black currant jam — on my white plastic suit and white mask and white gloves. You're thinking (and not daring to think) that perhaps I'm a glimpse of something better to come.

I shake my head, sorry. That's one thing I'll never stop being sorry for. *No, I'm not. I'm here to clean up.*

After eleven years in this profession, I can speak to you as plainly as I would speak to one of my own. Learning the language of the dead is a matter of practice and patience, like learning English or French. I'm not such an unusual sort, not an angel or a psychopomp, not caught between one world and another as you like to assume. I'm not a necrophiliac. I'm thirty-six years old, and as wary of approaching middle age as anyone else. I have a boyfriend called Oskar and a girlfriend called Marta and two cunning white mice called Pipi and Truffles, since I'm allergic to dogs. I lived as a child and someday I will not-live as you do, gone with no way back. That's a secret you and I share: there is no veil to cross.

Death was so little you missed it when it came. There were no treatments or needles, no family visits. You simply started dreaming, and fell so deeply into the dream you couldn't come out.

*What did you dream about?* I ask as I begin to work, unrolling the plastic I'll use to wrap you up. I'm always fascinated by last dreams, and I know it can be a comfort for you to tell them. To have someone really listen, the way they listened when you were a child at the breakfast table, talking about a leopard in the sky as big as your house, the spun-sugar flavor of the clouds. No one has listened to you like that for a long time.

*I dreamed about the lake in Södermanland, you say, far-off. If only you could shut your eyes to recall it better. I'd shut them for you, but I'm worried they might burst at my touch. Spring, quite green, the water getting high with rain. All of my brothers were there. All five brothers and me. We wore the matching sweaters our mother knit for us, since it was still cool out. She knit us new sweaters every year, you see, and this was in 1942. She loved us very much. She loved us unusually much and it didn't matter, still we're all...*

*What happened at the lake?*

*In the very early morning, we rowed two little boats to the place along the tributary where the egrets nested. We used to see them every year. We would tie our boats to the bank and be so quiet and still. I was always spellbound watching them, high-stepping through the water with their white feathers lifting and falling and the babies all gathered behind in a trail. But they were already gone that year, those big nests empty and blowing apart. Just old droppings on the trees, so many droppings it was like snow.*

*I didn't know they had egrets in Södermanland. Who would have thought?*

*They did, once. But I don't believe they do anymore. We caught frogs that day instead. Things have to go on, I guess.*

There are brown stalks of irises on your coffee table, the petals crisped and fallen. The water has long since dried up, leaving a yellowy scum at the bottom of the vase. I believe you must have stopped filling it while you were still alive. Beneath the flowers, you've made shaky notes on Post-Its, lists of groceries and other things you must remember, like what to tell your grown children or nearly-grown grandchildren should they call. Their early crayon drawings are plastered to the stinking refrigerator, with magnets shaped like fruit.

Karl and Knutt, the twins, live in the United States and must be doing well for themselves. Your granddaughter Mina still lives in Stockholm, but she's so awfully busy these days. When she was younger, you told her stories about trolls and held her soft pink hand curled in your palm, thinking it was like a seashell you had found, that it would never change shape. Together, with your fingertips joined, you traced the yellow flowers on the bathroom wallpaper. If she still recalls her mormor when she sees that common yellow pattern, she would never think to tell you. People never think to tell one another the things it would really matter to know.

I scrape at your legs where they've begun to join with the fibers of the carpet. The flesh where it's gone stringy makes me think of roots. That smell I once thought unearthly evil is now almost soft, with a note of jasmine — the soft stink of a completed human life.

We're silent for a while, long enough for me to do your arms as well, and begin to ease you into your clear plastic shroud. I'm gentler with you than I am with my friends' babies, even though I know there's no one to see what happens to you now. The sun comes in pink through the windows, and catches inside the row of colored apothecary bottles set upon your windowsill, making them into a pane of stained glass. The pills strewn across your night table look like little chips of unmelting ice. I wonder what they're for, if perhaps it would have helped you to take them.

*My assistants will be here soon, I inform you. They're going to help me carry you out. Then we'll go through your things and give them to your family. I'm sure they'll be glad to have them.*

It's funny to handle the things people collect, the fragments of their worlds they've chosen to keep and make into repeating patterns. So often a collection is accumulated more by chance or compulsion than deliberate consideration. Our lives are made up of accidents. Damaged furniture. Plastic bags and sheets of twist ties. Unlabeled tapes. The strangest collection I ever saw was in the house of a pilot who made trips to India, and brought back dozens and dozens of jars containing glazed and always-sleeping snakes.

Sometimes relatives want to keep the possessions of the lonely dead, but more often it falls to me to dispose of them. The smell of the bodies, real or imagined, is almost impossible to lift. When I was a child, I hated to throw away uneaten food; afraid, somehow, that it would feel

sad and neglected in the garbage heap. Now I throw away photographs, pressed flowers, stolen library books, ashes, and, of course, the forgotten bones.

There's a peach satin dress hung carefully on the door of your wardrobe, a fussy thing forty years out of style, which your husband bought for you in Vienna. You tell me you always wanted Mina to have it. I smile and tell you I'll give it to her, but I don't mention the wrinkled look I can already imagine on her face.

You laugh, a bubble of gaseous air parting your lips. *She wouldn't wear it anyway. I know my family doesn't want my things. They would be glad once, but not anymore.*

When I imagine your family, I can't help but imagine the flock of little blond boys rowing a boat on that green spring morning, to see the egrets that have vanished into a residue of droppings and broken nests.

It's too difficult to tell you this. Instead, peering out the window, I say, *Your garden is looking beautiful. I can see you did a lot of work in it.*

*Please tell me what it looks like.*

I do. The cucumber vines are blooming yellow. There's a cascade of flowers like bells, flowers like birds, flowers like frogs, flowers like the faces of little blond boys. I tell you about every kind of flower you could imagine, all hazy in the susurrus of bees.

There's a crunch of gravel, and I look to the driveway to see the van that will carry you off. I rise from where I've been crouching beside you, alert to the creaking bones in my knees. I draw the zipper over your face. The brown silhouette of your body, the blood and bile and excrement, lingers on the floor, a shadow of something that's long gone away.

*Is anyone coming to take me to Heaven?* you ask. Now so distant, and muffled by the plastic covering, I can just barely hear you.

*Maybe not Heaven, I say. But we are going to take you somewhere quiet and green.*

*Pink Moment*

*i.*

In front of our house in Georgia there was a fig tree, and every year it bore exactly one thousand figs. I should know — it was my job to keep track of them. *How many are we up to today?* my mother would yell out the front door, and I would holler from my place in the branches, *Eight hundred and fifty eight!* and we would know that the summer was more than halfway done.

Our figs were Portuguese figs, their outsides more brown than purple, and when you broke off the stems milky sap slid out and beaded the skin. On the inside they were a rich, nectarous pink. This is the pink by which I measure all other pinks, so I would like for you to see it first. It's a singular color. And, as I told my sister when we were children, it was *mine*.

All pinks were mine, like the number three was mine, and any roses that happened to bloom on the scratchy little bush in our backyard. I was possessive like that, but I didn't mean any harm by it. I just didn't know how not to hold onto things tightly, to soothe myself by rubbing them threadbare with my thumb.

I went to school like a handful of colorless mist. No one bothered about me very much, but I have the sense that I unsettled other children when I got close. Too quiet, too lost. I couldn't seem to figure out how to speak to them the way they spoke to one another.

I have never formed complete memories of emotions, only images. So I couldn't tell you how it felt, to be a handful of mist. But I can say that when you're walking through the world unseen, you do what you can to slip into colors, numbers, animals — to hitch yourself to things that are visible, things that belong.

I spent a lot of time flipping through my father's book of paint samples, pretending I was Purple Smoke or Lakewood, trying them on. If I were this color, or this one, here is how people would look at me.

*You can't be a color,* said my sister (who devoted a lot of energy to pretending she was a frog), *It's not even alive.*

I said, *Maybe you can't. But just watch me.*

When I was eight years old, I would curl up in the branches of that fig tree with the blackbirds and wasps, and eat and eat until I turned myself pink from the inside out. I've never particularly liked the taste of figs, but I like the feel of their color in my mouth so much it makes up for it.

*ii.*

The figs were the first, but it wasn't just them. Other pinks: October evenings, peppermint-striped camellias with their edges turning brown, the dress I insisted on wearing to my grandmother's funeral, a snowball with condensed milk you get on a hundred degree afternoon.

Once I even had a pink cat. Probably not in the sense you're imagining — she had black fur with a locket of white on her chest, harvest moon eyes — but if you held her in your arms you'd know right away that she *felt* pink. Like a warm fruit. Sometimes color works in ways we don't have to see to understand.

When this cat turned up beneath the fig tree one summer evening, she was small enough to fit in the cupped palms of my hands. There was a glue of pulp smeared all over her tail and hindquarters from the figs that were rotting on the ground. She was very sticky. Even in the first

photograph I have of her, ostensibly cleaned up with a raspberry satin ribbon tied around her neck, she looks sticky. My mother hmm'd and said she didn't know if a cat like that would ever learn to keep itself clean.

*Where did you come from?* my sister asked the pink cat.

*No telling*, my mother answered, assuming the cat could not speak for itself.

Presumptuous. *A feral mom, I guess, or one of the neighbors' cats. We'll have to ask around.*

My father flicked the kitten's ear and she looked at him in an expression of tiny outrage.

*Cats work in mysterious ways.*

I kept quiet about what I thought. If I told you that before she was a cat she was a fig on this fig tree, you probably wouldn't believe me either. Then again, maybe you're knowledgeable about cats. Maybe you've loved a cat before too, so you know how easily they can slip between colors, shapes. Think of all the black cats that appear in stories, the Jellicle cats from *Old Possum's*, or Tom Tildrum and his procession of feline coffin bearers. Wherever there is a cat, impossible changes are bound to happen.

As I saw it, this tiny kitten had ripened along with the last harvest of August figs and fallen to the ground. There, she peeled off her fig skin, shook out her puff of black-pink fur, and meowed for someone to come notice her. And so we did.

The fig tree seems to support my theory: that year there were only nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine figs. (Though, I concede now, it's possible I might have missed one.)

*iii.*

There's an artist my father likes who paints nothing but blue dogs. Their coats are what you might call cobalt (though blues are not my area of expertise), and with their absurd color they're both clownish and haunting. They appear where you least expect them: sitting in the middle of crowded ballrooms or in the branches of live oaks, yellow-eyed, half-hiding behind curtains of Spanish moss. They always look like they're about to tell you something sad. Sometimes there are beautiful ladies in the paintings, but it's never about them — they might as well not have faces, beautiful or otherwise. It's about the color of the dogs.

The artist's first model was, in fact, a little white dog with black ears, and when she died she was replaced by a brindle dog, yet both of them were blued in a ceremony of paint.

When asked that inevitable question, *Why blue dogs?*, the artist said it's because he has a blue heart instead of a red one. It beats blue. What can any artist do but paint their own heart?

This is all to say that I don't see why I shouldn't write about pink cats.

#### iv.

Pink and blue make up perhaps the earliest color dichotomy we learn. So when I said the figs were my first pink, I suppose that wasn't quite true. Our first pinks are developed in infancy, or even before that, in the pink of the womb. The universal pink. At its most elemental, pink is a dilution of milk with blood.

We have more expectations of pink than practically any other color. If you were raised a certain way, you look at pink and see the rubber Polly Pocket clothes you chewed as a child and pink razors and lipsticks and the sticky Pepto Bismol color of a kindergarten name tag. It's tricky, allowing pink to just be pink and nothing else.

I don't think I had a girlhood, exactly. I had — a time in my life where I had dolls and things, a whole flock of them, but I'm not sure what that means besides that I was lonely and found comfort in giving life to non-living entities, making them do whatever I thought they should. I'm not sure what a girlhood is, even now. Is it a color or is it playing a part you don't like in a game of house?

I do know that when people look at me, twentysomething years old, I am not the pink they expect. Less girl and more worn-out velvet or cat fur in the sun. The way my cat wore a figskin — that's how I wore a girlskin. I've slipped into dozens of pink skins throughout the years, most of them ill-fitting in one way or another, but in the nice way that keeps you free to stretch your legs out fully and roll your joints and breathe.

My mother used to say pink was awful on me, made the olive undertones in my skin look wan. She'd suggest maroon or royal blue. Asking for a pink dress instead always felt like a little concession to ugliness. What could be more and less feminine than that?

When I was ten, I chose a dress with a shell-pink sash for my grandmother's funeral. My grandmother, a church organist who believed in the stained-glass-window colors of sounds, understood pink as few do — I knew she wouldn't have minded.

When I was twelve, I wore a white tea-length dress to cotillion, with a big red corsage pinned to my breast. The red and white together made pink, that's how I see the moment in memory. All the girls were wearing the same thing, their white dresses turning pink from the carnations, doves with one patch plucked bare.

When I was eighteen, a girl I liked very much gave me a pink dress she said didn't suit her anymore. It was Moschino, tattered lace hem, too expensive. Not long after that, little by

little, she stopped showing up at school and then vanished from sight altogether, preserved only in a remnant of a color she didn't like.

There are dozens of pinks like this, though I've since shed most of them. But sometimes I dream they're all in a space together, the old pinks, hanging on racks in the middle of nothing. I handle each dress carefully, shake them out one by one so the wrinkles fall away. In my absence, the satin sash of the funeral dress has become blood and milk ribboning and spilling onto the floor; the Moschino dress is made out of pale smooth rose petals.

My cat is there, because wherever strange things happen the cat is in attendance. She sits at my feet and plays with the heaps of trailing fabric. She hides herself in the folds of the dresses and when she comes out she looks like me — that is to say, she and I look like a color, the same shade of pink. I couldn't describe it, because they say we only *think* we see color in our dreams. But my cat sits neatly, curls her tail around herself, and reflects me back to myself in one slow blink.

v.

A pink moment: my cat lay in the two-o'clock sun. She was bright as a pink ember in her concentrated stillness, and her fur was almost too hot to touch. The light filtered through her thin pink ears and illuminated the web of veins inside them, and there was something untouchably soft about this, leaflike. When you looked carefully, figs were etched with sun-veins, too.

*Ripening?* I asked the cat, and she raised her head to look at me, yawned, and put it down again. The breath moving through her flanks brought color into the afternoon.

I lay down beside her and tried to do the same thing. It isn't easy, being as still as a cat in the sun. Your thoughts get itchy. I suppose I was thinking about any number of things that didn't matter a bit, museum exhibits or people at school or where to go for dinner that night.

But then I felt the heat sink into my fingertips and turn them the same translucent, veined pink as the cat's ears. I did not dare to open my eyes, but I'm sure now that was how they looked. The sun through my closed eyelids was a brown-pink, and then the thoughts stopped itching, stopped being thoughts at all and unraveled into little filaments of light.

If anyone says you cannot become a color, I'd say to them they should lie down beside a cat in the pink afternoon sun and simply wait.

*vi.*

New Orleans is my favorite city because there are more pink houses there than anywhere else. They glitter against the deep, amphibious greens of moss and magnolia trees. Sometimes in the summer it's so humid that I find myself pretending I'm underwater, in an underwater city made up of pastel-drawing houses. Cats whisper through the streets instead of fish, and tiptoe after you like lost children.

Once, while I was walking with my sister in Bywater — and I suppose we were fifteen or so, too old for magic — we were followed by a black cat who I almost mistook for our own cat. Of course, our cat was miles and miles away in Atlanta, but who's to say all black cats aren't manifestations of the same creature?

We knew that the cat was following us the same way we knew our shadows were following us. But when I turned around she vanished into the courtyard garden of a pink house across the street. You could tell right away that no one lived there. The windows were shattered

or boarded with graffitied plywood, and moisture had seeped through and stained the rose-pink paint. But the wrought-iron courtyard gate was more beautiful than almost any I'd seen, even in this city of beautiful gates. It was molded with lilies and dragonflies and little curls of ivy, and I could hear a fountain running somewhere in the greenery beyond. Oleanders and fragrant azaleas were in bloom.

*Did you see where that cat went?* my sister asked me and I shook my head.

*I don't think we should go after her, though,* I said. *I've got a feeling about this place. Not bad, exactly, but like it's not somewhere we're supposed to be.*

We went on our way without looking back.

The next day, however, I was still thinking about the garden and the lost black cat. I began to wish we'd followed her, just to see where she was so certain it was right to go. I told my sister about it, and she said she'd been half driven crazy thinking the same thing.

But when we set out to find the house again, there was no cat to guide us, and it made sense why. We found that the house and the courtyard had been buried by azaleas and oleanders overnight — utterly consumed by pink. Cannibalized.

Pink isn't always a gentle color.

*vii.*

The figs began to ripen in early July, and by late August we gave up picking them. They rotted beneath the tree and perfumed the whole garden with an odor of jam and warm alcohol. Bees and wasps swarmed the fermenting fruit. Sometimes we would hear them flying *plink* into the living room windows, or find them lying belly-up, drunk to death, in the sticky brown pulp beneath the tree.

One evening, a pair of fawns got into the fermented figs. You should have seen them stumbling around our blue front lawn, looking at the moon like they were about to walk right up to it, the way you'd climb a staircase. The moon, the round yellow street lamps. That is how I know animals think about beautiful things, too.

The figs we kept went into preserves. My mother would cook them for three hours with cinnamon and some other spices, seal them up in canning jars, and give them to the neighbors on Christmas Eve. To my knowledge, no one liked Mom's preserves except for us, but we were insistent about making gifts of them. We pressed jars into tentative hands like blessings in exchange for dry, equally unwanted cookies or pralines. Southerners are like that about their goodwill.

*viii.*

Some people say the Fruit of Knowledge was really a fig. Of course, there are also people who say it was a pomegranate, or a big red psychoactive mushroom with white spots. But, in my opinion, a pomegranate is too hard to take a good bite out of, and as for mushrooms — the less said the better. If I were God I would wipe them out of existence with my big toe and put something less wretched down here to keep the soil clean.

So suppose Eve bites into a fig (womblike, soft) instead of an apple. She holds the pink in her mouth. Swallows. Then, with that single bite glowing inside of her belly, she listens as Adam fixes the animals with names, then watches as they begin to grow old and die. These things they named with words they made up themselves — they have to watch them die. Why do death and knowledge go together?

Pink is the color closest to birth, so I like to think it's close to death, too. A brown-pink, the edges tinted with rot.

ix.

The day my cat died, I bought a lamp at an antique store in Washington, where I was meant to be living but had not yet secured an apartment. A moment of instability that made the loss of the cat open up even bigger inside of me.

But I loved that lamp, still do — shade printed with sun-faded flowers in purple and white, and a wobbly marble base, very modish, thirty dollars on account of it having a tilt that won't quite straighten. Gives it character. Things should have a little ugliness.

I was sniffing back tears when I paid the shopkeeper and told her what a terrific lamp it was, how glad I was to get it. I was glad. I've always needed to store loss in vessels, shrines. I had an idea that this lamp would sit beside my pink seashell vase.

*The shade looks pink when it's on*, the shopkeeper said, as she was wrapping it up, her bracelets clicking together. *I love that about these old lamps. It seems like the light sort of turns everything pink around them.*

*Turns everything pink*, I said, trying to smile. I could have told her a few things about turning pink, and she might've understood. I could have told her about the cat or the figs. Or how there's a technique of cultivating rhubarb by candlelight in caves, to make it pinker from lack of chlorophyll. It grows so quickly you can actually hear it, fuschia crackling up the bleached stalks like lightning in the dark.

I said instead, *That's cool. I'd like to live in pink.*

The shopkeeper handed me my wrapped-up lamp, and the calico cat sleeping on her countertop raised its head, yawned, and turned over. *Yeah, me too.*

## *The Cunning Doll*

She came to me in a little boat with no lantern, the white of her dress burning a hole in the night. Alligator gars, their scales hard and ancient as fossil-bone, knocked against the underbelly of her canoe. She held it level, stubborn girl. But I watched her passage through the gars' muddy eyes, and listened to the telling of the wind, and I knew (I always know) that she was afraid.

Her fear woke that old hunger asleep in my gut. When she tied her boat and climbed the ladder to my door, the hunger lurched up, loosened my jaws — but I gathered it into a smile of welcome. Child-eater. Iron-tooth haunt. Folks will say anything about a poor old woman who lives alone in the dark.

I am, understand, the same witch no matter where the stories set me down. My face is differently hideous in different tongues (sometimes I've got a nose long enough to perch a bird, eyes like an owl's — or now, in swamp country, like a gator's, double-lidded, burning orange in their shriveled pits), but the hush of my knife dragged over the grind is the same wherever you seek me out. The girls are the same, too. Sixteen-seventeen, ripening into their adult intricacies, a mother not long dead of fever or consumption and a stepmother who's flung them away from home. They're always too hungry for their own good. They want more than the world has given them, so they come to me to get their fill.

“What's your name, girl?” I asked this one as she passed between my roots and bones and shadows, a hand lifted to make out the black shapes hanging low from the rafters. Her dress was a city dress, trimmed with lace and discolored by sweat, and her face was soft-shining and sensitive as robinsong — though not without shrewdness, not even then — over the unbuttoned

collar. The floor made no sound beneath her feet. There was only the suck and mutter of the sour water below, and the rattle of the house as it breathed and shifted on its heron legs.

“It’s Lissy,” the girl told me, her great dark eyes darting to me and away again, unable to bear a long look. The candlelight pricked in them like little yellow stars. “I’ve come to beg a favor, Ma. Please.”

Of course I listened. I always listen. I sat her down at my table, where red candles and white candles shed their wax like blood and bird droppings, and brought her gumbo from my depthless pot. Some stories insist I have no kindness in me, but I always feed these skinny things before I hear them out. For Lissy I dredged up a taste of every good kind of meat, forbidden meat, the golden fat of child-thighs thick enough to skim like a cream from the surface. (I age the meat slowly, on the bone, crusted with salt to shrivel the molds that creep over everything in this dampness. Thigh could be slivered, Coca-Cola breaded, and fried in a skillet, but patience has its rewards.)

Lissy’s immense hunger pushed against her fear. She slurped from the bowl like a teat, and I knew she savored. She must have known what it was, but she savored anyway. There was promise in the way she ate.

(x)

She had come all the way from a cathouse in Bywater to meet me, carrying her secret in her belly like the swallowed pit of a fruit. It was still such a little thing, this secret — planted there by a traveling musician who had given her five dollars for her time.

Oh, let it be said that this Mr. Beausoleil was handsome, with a tailored linen suit and a froth of milky hair, a steel guitar in a new leather case. Said he was on his way east to Memphis,

hoping to make his name in the music halls thereabouts. A luminous smoke perfumed his skin like a half-lost dream; our poor girl was spellbound by it. She smiled at him with a real want, not the manufactured flattery she used on her other johns. He was the sort of man you felt you could follow like the dawn, into a better life.

*Aren't you just delightful?* the stranger said in his musical voice, undressing at the foot of the bed, his shadow undressing on the peeling scarlet wallpaper behind him. *I've been looking for a girl just exactly like you.*

When he removed his fine suit, he seemed almost to change form, his body becoming broader and redder now there was only skin to look at. His touch was hot on Lissy's back. She glanced down and saw that his feet were deformed, the toes fused together and cloven down the middle as though split by a knife.

At this detail, I stopped Lissy in her telling, incredulous, to ask her if she did not know then what he was. And she did, oh yes she did. She knew all the stories. But it wouldn't have mattered. When that man was moving over her, it wouldn't have mattered if the stinking black bowels of hell had come bulging from his pretty mouth.

He fucked her like it was a ritual, like the turning of days and nights. He rose and crested and darkened and fell, extinguished. And when it was complete, he left the money beneath the pink heart-shaped ashtray on Lissy's night table, and fixed his hat in the mirror, giving her a smile like a wink in the glass. She lay atop the sheets, sweating and trembling. With a strange drugged longing, she watched him go.

In the coming days, Lissy would be unable to work. Unable to sleep. There was a pain the size of an egg in her belly. When she stood naked before her wardrobe mirror, her body looked

just as it always had, but still the feeling shaped in her that she knew exactly what was wrong. It hung there like a last spoiling apple, suspended in the dark.

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There are doctors in New Orleans who can throw away an unborn baby as well as any witch, and more cheaply besides. I told Lissy so. But that wasn't what she wanted, not quite.

"You want to keep it?" I asked, intrigued. I smoothed my fingertip over the lines on her palm, counting the past lives and past sins, sins crossing sins, etched halfway up the thumb. My own sins are long overgrown. A moss covers my hands, furring the cypress knobs of knuckle and vein, the flat of my palm. Nature is indifferent to what's wicked and what's good.

Lissy shook her head and met my eyes for the first time without shirking. "No, not keep it, not exactly. That is, I would like to change it into something else."

I admit I was struck. I wheezed with laughter, and the candle smoke trembled in the still air, as much mine as the breath in my body. "Oh, so you think you know how magic works already! Nothing lost and nothing gained. A thing to a thing, even as you please. What is it you want growing in your belly instead, girl — a cat, a snake?"

Lissy's fine brown hands went to her abdomen and gathered there in the linen of her dress. She was quiet, quite still, preparing her wish. I could see it in her mouth, on her tongue, glowing like a firefly through the thin skin of her cheeks: this forbidden want of hers. A want must be strongly felt if it is to attract any magic to it.

"No, ma'am," she said at last, so soft at first you could scarcely hear her. "None of those things. And I surely don't want a baby either. But you know as well as I do this isn't really a

baby growing inside me. It's some kind of strong magic, I can feel it. Like a fruit rotting. And you know if I see a doctor I'll just have to go back to that old whorehouse and start the whole thing over again, and I don't want that, Ma, I just —" and here I saw flickering through the undercurrents of her voice a hundred abstracted wants, both simple and luxurious: books to read and a courtyard garden fragrant with magnolias, nice parties in the evenings, a mother she had already lost forever, a curse upon her cruel stepmother and upon every man who had left his fingerprints over her breasts. Things that, in my own now warped and distant girlhood, I might have wanted for myself. "I just want as much life as everybody else."

The smoke had stilled, and the candleflames righted themselves. The room settled in pensive yellow light.

"So," I said to her. "What you really want is to take out that strong magic growing inside you and give it a form you can keep for yourself. A charm for a good life."

I sat back and thought about it a moment, the desire blooming inside this girl, like one of those white orchids that flourishes deep, deep in the bayou, where the sun doesn't dare touch. It was a desire rooted as much in hatred as in want, for this girl truly *hated*, with a passionate justice. She treated her hurts daily, but still I could see a bruise as big and dark as a jewel at her throat. If she kept on living the way she lived, it would be no time at all before she hadn't a tooth in her head or anything but the ragged spiteful dream of being young. I thought about it, seeing the yet-unwoven threads of this poor life laid out before me. And here is the deal I made her.

"All right, child," I said. "Here is what you'll do. I want you to make yourself a doll — just a doll, out of rag and bone and whatever else you think suits it. A little girl doll. You can do that, can't you? You make this doll just as I say, and sew it up with a special red thread, and once you're finished you won't have to worry about that baby anymore."

She didn't accept witches' deals so readily as some of the others. She gazed at me with a glimmer of the crow-sharp cunning I had observed in her eye before. Her hands still lay upon her belly, spread long.

"And what's this doll going to do for me?" she dared to murmur.

Again I laughed.

"Patience," I replied, rocking back in my chair, smiling so my face was a mask of crackled mud. "Morning is wiser than evening, my girl. I have a nice warm bed in the loft made up just for you. Go on now, eat up your meat. Tomorrow you'll have work to begin."

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I gave Lissy six nights to do it, and swore that if she could not complete the task by dawn on the seventh day I would make a fine supper out of her. There would be morsels of kidney for the garfish, slender fingers for the altar, a new soul to sustain the fires in my lamps. I could already smell the simmering hot bones. In the meantime, Lissy would stay on with me and do what was needed to keep house, for I am an old, old woman and can't easily manage all the cooking and cleaning and gathering alone.

She was thorough about her chores, determined to do each new thing better than the thing preceding it. Send her after witch's butter and she would scrape three fungal jellies, of varying clarity and color, from the roots of three different trees. Tell her to bring you an unholy secret, and she would comb it directly from the Spanish moss, where it had been whispered in the dead of night by an adulterer or a con, and seal it up in a wax-lid jar. I only had to teach her once. She listened brightly, then carried out the task alone.

When given her own preference, Lissy was a solitary creature. But she kept good company with my house — crooned to it, laid a hand on its long scaled leg when it was spooked by the rising waters in an afternoon storm. You mightn't believe it, but that old house stood still for her. I had built it with wildness in its bones, a primordial creature's heart beating deep beneath the floorboards, an always-hungry belly for a stove; in all its three hundred years, it never had been tame for anyone before.

“I am tempted to say life here suits you,” I remarked once, as Lissy came up the ladder with her arms full of mosses gathered for the flesh of her doll. She carefully turned her eyes away and shrugged, but I caught the deepening of dimples beside her mouth.

Each evening, I would stop Lissy's work, and she would sweep the floors and light the lamps on my fence posts and I would wash her in my clawfoot tub. Her belly was rounding just perceptibly, the pain in it growing larger, breaking open like an egg. I gave her a chew of herbs and sweet gum to ease it. Let the stories show I do have kindness, I do know a magic for good.

“Your fence is made of bone,” Lissy whispered on the second day, as I ran a cake of lye soap over her wet back. She did not sound horrified, only wondering. She rolled one of her braids between her forefinger and thumb, a thinking habit of hers. “Carved and polished bone. And the lamps are skulls with the features smoothed away. Were they girls like me?”

I smiled, only a little nasty — truly only well-meaning. “Nothing around here goes to waste.”

And I meant it. The cloth for the doll's body was linen cut from Lissy's own dress, its hair coils shorn from her braids and tied with lace. For the doll's jewelry, she sewed gleaming beads of tooth and bone picked from the cinders in my fireplace.

Come nightfall, when Lissy was plumped and sweetened from her bath, I sharpened my knife and opened a cut in her belly. Out slipped three pearls of blood, which I spun by magic into a fine red thread for the next day's stitching.

"Magic must have veins to travel," I explained to Lissy. "This thread will make your doll's veins. And magic must be as personal as the hand that works it. Else it won't be magic at all."

"And I suppose that's how I'll know when it's finished," Lissy said, more to herself than to me. "It will either be magic or it won't be, and that's that."

"You're learning," I said. And she was. Like none of the others, she was coming to understand.

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She played the fiddle after we ate. Low tender songs like lullabies, as the noise of the frogs swelled all around the bayou, and the nightblooming flowers woke on their vines. I suppose she had smuggled it in the prow of her boat; it had no case and only half its strings. Still, that girl could play the fiddle like nothing I ever heard — better, one might say, than the devil himself. Enchantment enough to rouse the dead in their graves and the birds in their trees, and to put old witches to sleep.

"My mama taught me before she died," Lissy said. "She played like sunshine. So warm and sweet."

Her lips moved over the music, but she never did sing. Instead she commanded the world to sing for her. In a single hum of ecstasy, it obliged. I can't say when I last knew a peace like

those hours. I can't remember another time when the biting hunger in me has been quelled and I have felt full.

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On the sixth day, the doll was born.

It was past nightfall when Lissy put in the last red stitch at the corner of its mouth. She dropped her needle with finality, and the moment it left her hand, she cried out, burning. Her body shuddered and drew into itself, for once ugly, all sinew and shriek.

I stood over Lissy and watched the convulsions as the thing inside her shriveled up like an apple core in the sun. A plague of blue flies swarmed at the windows. There was an odor of rotting fruit. Somewhere a forgotten child turned to bones in his cradle, and a wind swept the dust of his soul away to me.

Lissy endured. She had no choice but to endure. She bit down and bore it.

But it ceased as quickly as it had begun, in a matter of minutes, and by that time the doll was tingling with life. Not the sort of life that gave it breath, but still the sort that any sensitive person could see for themselves, gleaming in the black depths of its bead eyes. They had become *animal*, bright with cleverness. It was a beautiful thing. Lissy sat looking at the rag-and-bone doll cradled in her hands for a long time. There were big tears darkening her own eyes, but she held them in place. Motherhood is a frightening thing.

“There you have it,” I said, crouched beside her, my woody hand upon her back. “A cunning doll, with a life inside it, your own blood. A vessel for the magic. It will whisper secrets to you. It will work with all the strength you have worked for me.”

Lissy had stuffed it with Spanish moss as I advised her, into which she had whispered her own secrets, left to soak milky-soft in moonlight the night before. It was a beautiful thing, and it would bring her a charmed life back in New Orleans. Anything she wished to know, the cunning little doll would tell her. Any task it could complete.

“And you will let me go now, just like that?” Lissy said.

“That was the deal we made, now wasn’t it?”

The gnawing in me would like nothing better than to taste her marrow then and there, but I was bound to let her go. So I must, and so I did. That night she rowed away from me, into the gloaming waters of the bayou, with one of my bony lanterns glowing from her prow. The world all around her gave up a hum. Beneath the light of her lantern, the black water turned pale as milk.

I could have gone after her, rowing my tub with my long teeth gnashing, but I am a patient witch. In all the stories I am prepared to wait for my own.

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I suppose the doll did bring Lissy a charmed life, eventually. A soft life no doubt, for when she returned to me later she wasn’t the skinny girl I’d fed on lard cakes and delicate fingers, so ravenous it looked as though she thought she’d never eat again. She wore a dress of white chiffon cut in the new fashion, and her hair was cropped neat. A noose of pearls was drawn tight about her throat, and the doll nestled like a little child in the crook of her arm, looking contented and sleek. Through the wind, I heard it said that Lissy had killed a man in Bywater and

married another in the Garden District. I heard tell that she had a boy and girl of her own, doughy simple children, and a courtyard fragrant with magnolia trees.

And yet she came back, just as I knew she would. She belonged to the soft brown darkness here from the moment she crossed the threshold into my home. She was mine. She was a part of me. I knew she would not leave until the mosses had crept over her hands and turned them into strange workings of the landscape, her breath into candle smoke, her name falling away until the only thing the stories remembered to call her was *witch*.

But for tonight, she was still Lissy. She took a gleaming fiddle from its case and played it slow and sweet.

*Prologue*

*(October 1969)*

Toward the end of October, when the river lies flat against the mud and time-smoothed trinkets protrude through its surface, the Eel Pie Hotel vanishes at last.

It's a clean vanishing, and it happens all at once, without warning or fanfare. A parlor trick. A meager magic. The fire that takes the Hotel is as small as a candle flame in the bigness of the dark. It's impossible to tell where it starts — the suites upstairs or the sooty kitchens or the dark crater in the earth where the ballroom floor used to be — but it's a matter of minutes before the whole enormous place is lit up, and that's the miracle of it. Every window with its glass intact gleams with ghosts, their shadows cast in stark relief by the glow of the flames. The reflection spreads out over the shallow river so there are two burning Hotels, one above the water and one inside of it.

You'd been walking through the neighborhood earlier that day, past the boarding house where you used to live and the tea parlour and up as far as June's old flat and the cemetery, drawn by the changing season or by some foreknowledge into the familiar pattern of your life as it was before. The air smelled like burning leaves, baked dry, not the way you were used to the Thames smelling. They'd drained this stretch of the river through the lock only a few days ago.

The Hotel was standing when you saw it that afternoon. You looked at it from the far bank with a cigarette in your mouth and your hands buried in the deep pockets of your plaid skirt and thought about going over there to dance. It had been a long time. You took a picture, and you suppose it was the very last picture of the Eel Pie Hotel anyone would ever take.

Afterwards, they'll try to say who did it and why, which strikes you as a depressingly rational position to take on the matter. But it's true that places don't just light up all on their own, even real firetraps like the Eel Pie Hotel. There might still have been kids living over there, scattered remains of a cultish family, like rats scurrying their secret trails through the Hotel bedrooms. Mentions of it will appear in newspapers for a few days, and then, when there aren't any answers, run the interest dry.

It's all the same to you; asking the Eel Pie Hotel to make sense has never worked for anyone. It's gone because it wants to be gone. The passage is shut, and June won't be coming back through it. You couldn't begin to say how you feel, and there isn't really anyone you can talk to about it, not anymore, except maybe Archie, still endlessly circling the Island on his eel-strung boat. He put his river-worn hand up at you in a gesture of ambiguous solidarity when he saw you that day on the bank.

You used to leave things on your side of the bridge, sometimes. You guess they'd be called offerings, but you don't think of them like that — they're just things you thought June might like. Nothing valuable. The little heap of junk is mostly still there when you walk by. She'd like a carved bone bead shaped like a butterfly. She'd like an old catgut violin string.

Once, you almost left the Bakelite comb with the carving of the swan, though at the last minute you dashed back for it and pressed it to your lips before slipping it into your bag beside your camera. Stupid. Sentimental. It wasn't like you expected anything to happen one way or the other. But the thing about knowing someone, you think, is that ordinary things start to haunt you with a little bit of them, and go on haunting you for a long time, so that getting rid of them feels like getting rid of a touch, a kiss.

After the Hotel is gone, a few days later, you take a long bike ride to that part of the city again.

And, in the morning, there are children in the mud, stomping their wellington boots so the water floods in the top and soaks their feet. Some of them are wearing Halloween masks made of plastic or papier-mache. A parade of sprites and devils, they pull treasures out of the river. The find of the day is the face of a doll they do not know is from the age of Queen Elizabeth I. You wonder if they can feel in their hands a little of the texture of time. But they only know what they find is beautiful. They might play games with it, in the shadow of a place that isn't there anymore, and that's all.

*Chapter One*

*(April 1965)*

The first thing Nell had to eat was a rhubarb tart, in a shop with greasy white-tiled walls and a vat of eels frothing behind the counter. She had chosen the tart thoughtfully. She knew that when you run away it is usually towards something you recognize, something that will bring you back home. So, as protection against this impulse, she chose for her first meal something she'd never eaten before.

"That rhubarb was grown with nothing but the light of a candle," the woman at the counter said, sensing a foreigner's receptivity in Nell. "Just one candle, in a dark clay jar. That's why it's pink and sweet — can't grow green in the dark."

The pieces of rhubarb were slick like they'd been grown not in a jar but underwater, and had an aluminum undertaste, though the woman told Nell they came fresh from York. Nell's teeth were stained pink. And, when she stepped out of the pie shop and onto the street, the color lingered and bled into the city around her till she couldn't see it any other way.

Pink was all wrong for London, Nell knew that much — should have been brown, gray, maybe a blot of red here and there. But Nell's mind had a funny way with colors. It was as though the world were a wet painting someone had dragged a hand across, blurring everything together, colors into tastes into memories into sounds. *This one's eyes work about as well as a busted kaleidoscope*, Nell's brother used to say whenever she brought it up, as though it wasn't absolutely wonderful to see bright things where there weren't any. Nell's London that first night was lurid, chromatic beyond belief, and as she stood on the damp sidewalk with the neon pub

signs and cinema signs and sex signs glazing her raincoat, she knew she'd had good luck to end up here. Other girls in her position couldn't say the same.

Soon enough, there would be other girls to measure her luck against. That first unsleeping night, Nell stayed in a hostel, with one hand wrapped tight around the handle of her suitcase. But soon she'd found a room at Mrs. Fink's boarding house for young ladies, which stood in a row of sagging brick buildings that had only just been spared by the Blitz and bore their scars with the resignation of a huddle of unattractive sisters who knew they wouldn't ever marry. There were a lot of stairs and not many windows. But Nell had a good window because she had good luck; her bedroom was on the garrett level, front-facing, and had a narrow view of the river a few blocks away.

"Don't expect things to be easier for you because you're an American, Miss Hartford," Mrs. Fink said when she unlocked the bedroom door with an all-purpose key. "You'll follow the same rules as everyone else."

These rules were hand-scrawled on a sheet of heavy paper, which Mrs. Fink presented to Nell with a deep and significant sniff. Supper would be laid out at six in the evening and put away at seven-thirty. No other meals would be provided. There were no laundry facilities, though each girl's laundry must be done at the end of the week before room inspection (didn't want filth piling up and *breeding* things, Mrs. Fink added meaningfully). No loud music, no cigarette smoking or God forbid anything else. No dogs, cats, birds, or male company whatsoever, under penalty of eviction. Mrs. Fink lived on the first floor, through the kitchen, so if you violated any conditions there would be no use hiding it; she'd know right away.

"Above all — this is a clean and quiet house, understand, for clean and quiet girls. If you live by one rule in your time here, make it that one, and you'll do just fine."

Nell glanced down at the list, feeling only precariously clean and quiet, then bobbed her head and creased her eyebrows in a way she knew made her look serious. It was a face she'd practiced for her mother's sake. You'd be able to get into any room in the place with that key, Nell thought, with a pleasant flicker of distrust. Mrs. Fink was a clipped little woman with a sturdy jaw and wires of silver in her hair, a long-time widow judging by the pictures of a uniformed husband that lined the stairwell, and there wasn't any reason not to trust her. But Nell didn't all the same. Perhaps, in some secret place, it was what she wanted in a landlady. It was more like a film if they didn't like each other right away.

"Where are the others?" Nell asked. Slowly she had realized that the house was as silent as an old house could be, even though there were supposed to be five girls living there, or that's what the advertisement had said. The garden in the back had plastic beds for sunbathing, and she imagined a string of pale sticky bodies laid out side by side, gossiping and turning pink beneath the watery sun.

Mrs. Fink raised her eyebrows. "At work, dear. They've all got good positions, and I expect the same of you, once you're settled. You'll meet them when they come home for supper tonight."

And, with nothing more to offer, Mrs. Fink loped down the stairs, leaving the empty room and the set of rules all to Nell and no one else in sight.

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The first thing Nell did was unhook the stiff lace curtains and shove them under her bed so she could see out the pigeon-streaked window without anything floating around the corners of

her eyes. She hated, really hated, a messy view. Later she'd get the window open and clean it. But just now she sat on the bed, which was narrow and flat, with one shoe on and the other off, plucking the callouses on her toes and studying the brown sliver of Thames. (Would it always be brown, or would it change for her as she got to know it better?) She was thinking — not for the first time — of how she'd gotten here, and whether it was, after all, a place she wanted to be.

Nell's position was not so extraordinary, not really. She was eighteen years old and her mother had decided she couldn't live at home anymore. That wasn't such a bad thing. Many girls her age didn't live at home. Several of Nell's friends had gotten married, their lives — once so solid and *known* — disappearing little by little into white clouds of tulle and baby powder, and Nell was lucky, she told herself, she'd been excused from that path. No, hers was a different kind of leaving, more of a slipping away. There was very little she'd been able to take with her; though she had a passport, she had no other papers, and only the money she'd filched from her father's combination safe. That was the only part of the situation, she admitted to herself, that maybe wasn't so ordinary. If there's one object in a tableau that isn't like everything else, is the whole thing automatically tainted, strange?

But Nell was determined not to think about it from that angle. The memory of the — the *thing* she'd done was sacred to her, sustaining itself as a flicker even after her mother had battered her cheeks, her ears, in an attempt to snuff it out. She dreamed of it often, both asleep and awake, in the weeks since it had happened. The coolness and soft-slime of Laura's lips underwater, in the quarry pool where they'd thought no one could see them, the pink swelling of cunt. The bright spell her own mouth could work. She wanted to work it always, couldn't think of letting such a beautiful thing just sit there in the dark.

Nell wanted things she shouldn't want. That was why she'd come to London, to cultivate desire like a rare flower far from the stones her mother might use to crush it flat. Fashion magazines had promised a life of glossy disobedience, and music growled and shrieked. She *wanted*. The trouble was, she didn't have a name for that deeply-believed-in *something* yet, or know even if she'd recognize it in front of her when it turned up. Whatever it was she wanted, she had never before seen its face.

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The time that day seemed to pass strangely, and Nell remembered all the hours she'd lost in travel. So this was what they called jet-lag. She'd never traveled this far before, much less on an airplane. At some point, she gave into the heaviness; she fell into a doze on the bed, slumped against the window.

When she woke, the evening was coming in; it was more gray than the blue hour of promise and enchantment that she'd loved back home in Virginia. She squinted, trying to coax more colors from the sky and the buildings on the horizon, but couldn't. She gave up and picked up the clock on the bedside table. Six-thirty-three. Her heart caught with the realization that she'd missed half her first supper at the boarding house.

She tripped down all those stairs and was out of breath by the time she made it to the kitchen, had to smooth herself before going through the door.

Peas and potatoes and beef stew, all gray in color and feeling, were laid out in mismatched dishes on the table. And five girls were arranged, in a larger circle, around the food.

Their eyes turned to Nell like a single eye, with Mrs. Fink the black sucking pupil at the center of it.

If any of them knew her secret just from looking at her, they didn't give a sign. Nell had half-hoped it might be something recognizable to another of her kind, whatever *kind* that was (she knew there were more of them, and that they might be anywhere, according to her mother, but she couldn't name them, couldn't pick them out herself). There might be a little difference in her eyes, her hands, her lips. But the other girls didn't seem to know any better than she did. They passed her the bread with a coolly smiling gaze, and called her Eleanor after hearing Mrs. Fink do it. They were all wearing the trim blouses of typists and receptionists, and suddenly Nell felt wrinkled in her blue jeans and knotted button-down.

*What made you come here, Eleanor?* they chorused. *What do you plan to do now?*

"It's Nell," Nell said, smiling firmly so they would accept it. "And I plan to be a photographer for some magazine or other. I have a portfolio, so I expect it won't be too hard to get a position. Maybe I'll sell photographs to different magazines, I haven't decided yet. I'm here because my brother is dead. Or —" she suddenly faltered in the half-lie, "I expect he is by now, anyway. Beth, darling, could you hand me the potatoes? It's the travel I guess, but I'm famished tonight."

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Another one of Mrs. Fink's rules (this one unwritten but enforced with a glance) was that after supper the girls would help clean up. There was a hired cook, a hunched and muttering old woman from Lithuania, but no other staff. All together, at seven-thirty, the girls picked up their

plates and retreated to the kitchen. The kettle sang on the stove and someone put on the radio and the old water for the flowers on the table was dumped out and refilled. It was almost a family atmosphere, it was so busy and warm, with the window open to let a little of the damp April night inside, just enough to tease.

Now the girls began to take on individual traits. Beth was nervous and wore a librarian's glasses, big and round, that made her eyes into little blue pricks of light in an otherwise chalky face. Esther had yellow hair as fine as spidersilk and some sort of accent — still English, Nell thought, but probably country — that made the other girls giggle from time to time. Even Esther smiled and blushed indulgently at that. Nell didn't see much of herself in them yet, but the potential for friendship was comforting. The feeling of being out-of-place faded a little. Maybe this was somewhere she could belong for a while after all.

Nell was running the water in the sink when something white swirled up from the drain like a wisp of smoke. It wasn't a potato peeling or anything else she could easily identify, and it floated there in the greasy water for a moment before she reached in to pluck it out.

"A feather," Nell said in puzzlement. It was long, much longer than an ordinary bird's, and stringy from the water. But there still couldn't be any mistaking what it was.

Marianne crowded over Nell's shoulder to look.

"Hm. There are mice in the kitchen," she told Nell. "I think sometimes they bring in feathers and hair and things from outside to make nests."

Nell twirled the feather between her fingers. "Nests in the sink? Even for a mouse that's a little silly."

Marianne shrugged. Her mouth was a pricked-red abstraction of lipstick, and her dark hair was immaculately curled. It reminded Nell of a fine textile, something crafted, sewn into

place. The way she smiled at Nell was magnanimous, as though she was extending an allegiance to her. “They’re silly creatures. Pop up in plain sight from time to time. Just the other day I’d left some biscuits on the counter and when I came to close the tin I put my hand directly on something *furry* sitting on the lid. I thought something had gone moldy until it *moved*. I screamed and it ran behind the hob and I couldn’t get it out.”

The conversation turned away from the feather and fully onto the mice and the probable network of tunnels behind the stove, connecting this house to all the others in the row. Mice in the pipes, mice in the floor. Nell almost threw the feather out with the scraps from dinner, but instead she dried it on the dish towel and tucked it into the pocket of her jeans.

Then she turned the tap back on and stared down into the blackness of the drain. It mesmerized her. Just beyond where she could see, the soft gray bodies of mice were curled in nests of white feathers and hair and rancid food, rotting and dreaming their deaths away like passengers on a doomed ship. She imagined what it was like to be a mouse making a home of scraps, the only home you were welcome to, only to have it all washed away when someone decided to clean a spoon.

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“Promising stuff,” said Mr. Clive Morrison, the man who owned the studio, resting a hand on Nell’s knee for emphasis. In his other hand he held the tattered envelope of photographs she’d taken back home, mainly anonymous people overlaid with flowers or trees or strange colors, and the few Polaroids she’d taken so far in London. He handled them delicately, she noted, to avoid getting fingerprints on the edges. People rarely touched her work like that. “I

think you've got something, my dear, I really do. The composition of the umbrellas from above is quite good — you make them *more* than just umbrellas, more like a symbol of the conformity of our streets as seen through an outsider's eyes."

"Thank you," Nell said. Mr. Morrison smiled and the hand rubbed a quick circle, but did not retreat. His breath smelled like coffee on the surface, but also a little like a rotten tooth; silver fillings showed brightly in his mouth. During the war, in the jungles, Nell's brother's teeth had rotted. Last she'd seen him, he'd had a mouthful of bright silver stench. "I have my own camera. It's not a bad one, really, so I wouldn't have to trouble you with equipment. I could start as soon as tomorrow."

Mr. Morrison laughed, and gave Nell's photographs back to her. "Eager. Rent to make, I suppose? How long have you been in London?"

It had been a week, maybe a little more, and in that time Nell had begun to make out the shape and pattern of what her life here might be. She was combing through job postings and going to interviews, of course. But much of her free time she spent walking, playing a game with herself where if she saw or imagined a thing of a particular color (it might be red one day and yellow the next) she had to walk in that direction, letting it guide her like a string and willing herself to go blind to everything else.

Going through the narrow stone streets was like going through tunnels. Her navigation by this method was often good and sure, but on occasion she'd been led down fish-scented alleys with vomit in the gutters, or into the clutches of a gang of mud-drenched children brandishing what looked like garden slugs impaled on sticks.

That was alright, she told herself firmly; nothing could disgust her, now she'd decided to make this city her own. It would be like feeling disgust at your own body. And she discovered

beautiful things, too. One day, she glanced down a side street and saw a little boy in a velvet sailor suit holding six blue parrots on his outstretched arms. She snapped a picture. The parrots were gray in the photograph, not blue, but there was enough blue in the idea of them to sustain the color anyway.

Nell kept her camera (a Pentax on a flaking leather strap, a present from her father four Christmases ago) around her neck no matter what she was wearing, and ate through film like it didn't cost her five meals a canister. Pictures of red buses, overflowing florists' windows, umbrellas clustered together for miles like a vast flock of blackbirds, men's tweedy backs. Tourist stuff. A wink off the city's surface. Nothing very original or very good, looking back, but it didn't matter then. She had to reach out and catch hold of *something*.

"Listen, Nell," Mr. Morrison turned to face her entirely, "I've got a lot of photographers on staff right now, really all I need. But how would you like to model for us?"

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She could have modeled, too, if it wasn't for a horseback riding accident she'd suffered on her cousin's estate as a child. She'd always been good with horses, so it surprised no one more than Nell herself when Nutmeg set a hoof into her back and kicked her unconscious in a field of purple clover. Nell was left with an 'S' shape pounded into her spine and an inability to sit still, particularly in stiff positions, for more than twenty minutes at a time. It didn't hurt much these days, she assured Mr. Morrison cheerfully, but it made her restless. She lifted her blouse and traced for him the exaggerated curve of bone beneath the band of her brassiere. He didn't ask her to model again.

That was, more or less, how she found herself working in the developing room.

It was likely not what Mrs. Fink would call a “good clean job,” but the pay was alright and there was enough variation in the work that she wouldn’t get bored. Sometimes, because she was the only girl on staff besides a middle-aged woman who worked reception, they would assign her additional *feminine* tasks. Most important among these was readying the models in the morning, a gossipy process that involved nylon robes and Melba toasts with cottage cheese.

The models’ bodies always startled her. Or — the way they wore their bodies startled her. It was so impersonal, like they were moving around inside of statues, heavy and still and tall. Even without her injury, she could never have been mistaken for one of these women for long, not really. Sometimes she would look at them and look at herself and actually feel all her insides moving and bloating and churning up ugliness. The ugliness came not with horror but with something like relief; she was relieved she did not have to make herself into a static figure of grace.

In the afternoons, Nell developed that morning’s photographs.

She liked the darkroom. Entering felt like slipping underwater; there was a constant trickling sound from the chemical baths, and the light was red like the light from some deep volcanic vent. By her third day she was measuring out the powders and liquids herself, and running a full basin of water in the sink to stop the developing process at just the right moment. Her keen eyes were of very good use here.

And work in the darkroom had another virtue: if Nell was quiet about it, she could sneak a roll or two of her own film in for development when there was no one around to see. It probably wasn’t strictly against any rules, so long as she wasn’t distracted while she was supposed to be working, but she still felt odd doing it. So she was cautious. Meticulous. When

she hung the negatives up to dry, she was careful to take them down, satisfactory or not, by the time she left.

Even when she wore latex gloves and washed her hands after swirling them through the chemical baths, her skin had a fizzing feeling by the end of the day. More and more often she caught herself itching at her palms. But Nell loved the red light like she loved the models: they were both unnatural. They looked like they came from another world.

When Nell looked back later, at the end of that long and euphoric and unnatural summer, she thought maybe it only made sense that a model guided her into it. She wouldn't have stumbled into the Eel Pie Hotel on her own. It wasn't more than five blocks from the boarding house, but its glamor was too remote. No, it was Splendid who took her hand and covered her eyes and brought her there. Splendid, by virtue of her unearthliness, her remote inhabitation of her body, could cross veils naturally; Nell could not, she could only look behind them.

(x)

Names in those days were easy: she was called Splendid because she was. She had determined it for herself.

Her skin was satiny brown, and her eyes were such a pale brown they were almost copper, the color of the planet Jupiter, swirling with atmospheric storms. Their intensity was balanced by her nervous-smiling mouth and large girlish front teeth. That was part of her charm in photographs, making you think she was nervous when she was really designing the whole thing. Her body, from her fingertips to the ends of her curls, controlled the camera's gaze.

Nell had first seen her standing at the center of a cluster of photographers, in a lurex mermaid dress. At first it was silver, and then when she turned it was green. A trick of the light. She'd come from Morocco, Nell remembered — that's what the men in the studio said, like they were surprised to find that was a place someone could be from.

Nell was walking among the photographers, silently handing out little cups of black coffee, when she'd first felt Splendid's Jupiter-eyes on her. They were assessing, though for what Nell couldn't begin to imagine. She wondered all afternoon.

Then, at last, as Nell was helping her out of her lurex costume, Splendid whispered, "I like your earrings."

Nell could feel her face reddening with embarrassed delight. They were ordinary earrings, ones she'd brought with her, except they weren't clip-ons. She'd pierced her ears herself when she was fifteen, in a show of boldness that had gotten her lashed.

On hearing this, Splendid gave Nell a feline smile and said nothing more. Until, just before closing, in that precious slip of time Nell had for her own art, she followed Nell into the darkroom. Nell was up to her wrists in developing chemicals, and when the door opened in a slash of light, likely ruining the film, she threw up her hands in a shower of glittering poison. "God *damn* it!" she exclaimed, then realized who it was. Splendid came into the room like a red shadow in the blackness.

"You're not supposed to be in here," Nell said, though instinctively she was pleased Splendid was. Pleased to see her. Pleased at the change, at whatever sparkle she'd given off. Splendid couldn't have been less like the girls at the boarding house if she had been specially designed for it.

Splendid laughed. “And you’re not supposed to be developing your own pictures.” She swept over to the line of drying negatives and studied them in the weak red light. The boy with the parrots on his arm was there, an enlargement, as was an image of an old old woman with roses growing all around her, the folds of their petals as wrinkled as her face. “I had an idea you were good, and I was right. You’ve got quite an eye.”

“You think so?”

Splendid hummed. “I’ve never been able to take pictures. Can do lots of other things artistically, sewing and beadwork and sitting quite still to pose. But I’ve always thought photography takes an ability to see the art in the world as it is, not to change it, that I just haven’t got.”

“I suppose it does. I’ve always sort of — seen colors in things, shapes, that aren’t there for anyone else until I capture them on film.”

“If that’s true, you aren’t doing yourself any favors fetching coffee in a place like this.”

Nell shook droplets of developing chemicals from her fingertips. “It’s somewhere to start. If I learn the trade here, I’ll be more self-sustaining later.” That was what she’d been telling herself every day; it came easy, rehearsed.

The darkness was moist and alert all around, alert with the focus of Splendid’s eyes on the photographs. Her eyes were no longer amber but pink in the dim light, rhubarb-stained, sweet. Nell felt the attention as keenly as if it had been on her own face.

“Listen, Nell,” Splendid said, “artist to artist, I know a place I think you’ll like. It’s — a club, sort of. Lots of interesting people. I’d like someone with an eye like yours, and a camera, to look at it.

## *Chapter Two*

The Eel Pie Hotel was not beautiful. It should have been beautiful — a hundred-twenty years ago, some architect had taken a lot of care in shaping it in the image of a great French estate, all glass and stone — but it was not. The failure showed in the too-wide porches, the hunched roof, the ugly formality of the white pillars out front. So many of its features had been softened by the steady dripping of time, smudged by the oils and dusts of all the hands that had gone into making it what it was, but its ugliness was original. The ivy that swept across it from the west, green glitterings from a thousand shattered bottles, did a lot for its face just by hiding it.

The Eel Pie Hotel sat all alone on a little island in the Thames, and it was not beautiful, but it didn't need to be: it was sublime. A state of sublimity. In marshlands, gasses released by decay form spots of pink or yellow light over the water, lures for travelers, and, by night, with blazing windows, the Eel Pie Hotel was like that. Something bright across the river, drawing you irresistibly toward it.

You could only reach this grotesque palace by footbridge. On summer nights, a parade of girls in minis and boys in suede trousers crossed the river to its doors. The Eel Pie Hotel was where you went if you were a no-good kid, restless and smart-dressed and looking for a bit of real sin — and, more than that, looking for sanctuary, for reassurance of the possibility of color and sound.

Like a child, Nell held Splendid's hand as they joined the procession on the bridge. It was so narrow you had to move one by one, but Splendid stretched her arm, slippery in an opera-length glove, behind her so Nell could keep hold.

A man met them where the footbridge gave way to heel-stamped mud and moss. He was older than most of the crowd, but not as old as his rough-woven fisherman's clothing and matted beard would suggest. Age on him seemed a deliberate affectation, a goblin mask. As they approached, Splendid whispered that he lived on a boat that circled the Island, catching eels and making his keep from turning out kids' pockets.

"Evening, Archie," Splendid greeted him.

Archie smiled at Splendid, then at Nell. There was pleasant interest in the expression, which made her warm to him — she couldn't help it, she always liked people who liked her.

"And a fine evening to you, ladies. It'll be ten pence and a drop of virgin blood, tonight."

Splendid smiled indulgently, her front teeth catching her lip, and from her clutch produced a little book with a cover made of pale green cardboard and something printed on it in gold paint. Archie gave the book a once over. Then it was stamped and snapped shut, satisfactory. A ten pence piece clinked into a jar.

"She doesn't have one." Splendid nodded her head at Nell. "But she's a friend of mine, an artist. I think June will want to meet her."

Being introduced as an artist made Nell grow a little bigger in spite of herself. That's right — she was, and they needed her kind here.

Archie grunted, assessed with algae-colored eyes that seemed capable of drawing correct judgments on anything in the world, and brought a crisp green book and a pen out from a box behind him. "*June's artists*, June's court of poor grime-picking mudlarks. You just remember what's what in there, alright, miss? It can get tricky."

The little book was made up to look like a passport. *Eelpiland*, the gold lettering on the cover read. Inside, there was a line for a signature and a few pages for ink stamps, and a little

*oath: In the name of Pan, Prince of Trads, the bearer of this passport is hereby granted permission to engage in practices of jiving and generally cutting a rug.* It wasn't much at all, and it didn't make sense to Nell why this place needed such an eccentricity when they already had a doorman and a cover.

She signed it and paid ten pence for Archie's stamp. It felt like nothing. Her soul, as far as she knew, stayed where it was. Pan, Prince of Trads, did not reach down her throat to grab it; no drops of virgin blood were exchanged. Archie smiled at her again, knowingly, and swept the two of them through the doors.

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"Who's June?" Nell asked — might have asked — but the question tore apart into seeds of meaningless sound — a vowel here, a consonant there — and blew away in all directions. It was gone from her mind just as quickly as her mouth, once she saw the room.

At first she thought it must be a kind of courtyard, that they had passed through a doorway but were still outside, because the ceiling was a salt-flecked sky of the deepest green-blue. But the stars were glass and gold leaf, and a chandelier swayed overhead. The beauty of that sky was puzzling, hidden behind such an ugly face.

It was deafeningly loud inside; disoriented, Nell's first thought was that all the noise was why the chandelier was moving. But then she got on the dancefloor and felt it, a wave that shook the walls and lifted skirts in a flurry of pink and ochre and Biba green.

*Where are we, in London on Earth or somewhere else?* Nell thought. And, more strangely, *Who are we? Who do we mean to be, coming to this place? I signed my passport Nell Hartford — is it true?*

Pressing her lips against Nell's ear, Splendid told her.

The Eel Pie Hotel wasn't really a hotel, not anymore, and hadn't been for a long time. Thirty years ago it was a ragtime club, twenty years before that an orchestra hall. And, even before that, Eel Pie Island (that was what it was really called) had been a peacocked retreat and courting ground for one of Shakespeare's old kings. Someday in the future, maybe distant or maybe very close, it would be something else. It was forever changing its shape.

But just now, on a fine May night in 1965, the Yardbirds were beginning their set on a stage draped in its original velvet. A sprung maple dancefloor had been installed in the ballroom to lighten waltzes, and, to the pulse of the Yardbirds' guitar, it throbbed like a great heart beneath the crowd's feet. Everything trembled, the crystals on the chandeliers all clattering together. Dancing here was flying, leaving the world, and really it was all you could do to keep upright — stop a moment and you'd be rippled off your feet when the crowd descended.

Nell had never been to a big party before, but this was how she'd imagined it. Drinks came around, cups of cider and Eel Pie Punch, which looked like melted bar soap, pink and foamy, and plates of blotchy wilted lettuce and cocktail sausages. (They had to serve some kind of food with their alcohol, Splendid said, or the city would come down on them. Nell imagined there were a lot of other things the city might come down on them for, but she kept that to herself.)

Nell took a cider, and spilled a third of it before she got it to her mouth. It tasted like artificial stars.

Being with Splendid made Nell feel important. She obviously had some sort of sway here. A dress of pink chiffon with a bodice iced in rhinestones made her breasts flat and small as a fashion illustration's, and her neck terrifically long. She caught on the currents of laughter like she had been designed for it, putting Nell in mind of waterbirds who hung gracefully on surfaces you expected them to sink right through. Her arms went up and her hips shimmied like a signal and her eyes flashed with cleverness, seemed to say *follow me*, to promise mischief and grandeur. And, every so often, she would turn and gleam especially at Nell, like they were together on things, in the know, a little better than all these other gleaming people.

Nell, in a matching set of yellow daisies and low-heeled Mary Janes, felt distinctly that she had worn the wrong thing. But, next to Splendid, it didn't matter. She felt full of boldness and laughter. *Who are we here? Who do we mean to be, coming to this place?*

The people here all seemed to know who they were, or not to care otherwise: they'd found whatever they'd been seeking. Nell wondered if it was the same thing she was after. The girls, if they could be broadly classified, were impressionistic, a quick-stroked blur of pastels that could not be made to sit still and wait. They lifted their arms in the air and sweated freely. Many of the boys were more languid, with cherubic hair curling around their jaws.

Around midnight, there was a commotion: a boy had jammed his leg clean through a rotten floorboard, and pulled it up laughing, amazed at the blood. "Watch out, the fucking place's going to pieces!" he howled. Blood sprayed over the floor as he swung his leg, and the crowd didn't step back but surged forward like they were going to pull him apart.

Images like these hung before Nell like fruit, ripe and nearly browning, in every direction she looked. The Eel Pie Hotel offered them up to her for nothing. She took them in her camera hands, felt their weight and roundness with her eyes, her mouth, gulped down their juices, grew

sticky and bloated with them. When she lowered her lens she found she'd lost track of Splendid. It didn't matter; it was meant to happen, everything was meant to happen. At last she had her fill, and more than that, too much. The colors blurred together, at first a fantasia, then a roiling frothing brown.

(x)

The figure in white restored her vision.

It was like a navigating star, cold and piercing, or the light of a fish at the very bottom of the ocean. It was a — a girl, Nell decided, though very tall. (And maybe “girl” was a wish more than anything; Nell had never looked at someone before, done an arithmetic of clothing and features, and been unable to *tell*.) The figure swept across the front of the stage, vanished for a moment, reappeared by the French doors, then melted up the stairs and out of sight.

With perfect certainty, Nell knew this was something she was supposed to see tonight. Maybe even what Splendid had brought her here for. She couldn't lose it.

She tried to part the crowd. She sank her elbow into someone's ribs, yelped as she was shoved back two steps and gained three. It wasn't that the girl in white was moving quickly; in fact she was moving so slowly that the party surging around her seemed like it was on another plane of existence. There was no reason it should've been so hard to keep up. It was like trying to follow someone in a dream.

At last, Nell made it up the stairs, glimpsing hallways lit by sconces and closed bedroom doors, and by some miracle onto the balcony overlooking the Hotel's overgrown croquet grounds.

“I’m sorry,” Nell said, panting. She added, with a useless gesture, “I just saw you and — I hope it’s alright that I’m here, too.”

The stranger looked up. She was sitting with her legs (trousers, she wore satin trousers) over the edge of the balcony like she’d been there for an hour instead of an instant, smoking a cigarette. Her face was not inquisitive. It was like she’d been waiting for Nell and was pleased she’d finally come.

She was the only person that evening whose picture Nell asked permission to take.

Nell framed her in profile, with smoke softening her features, making what she could of the impossible light. This girl was no model, even though she had that same remoteness Splendid wore so well. She was much too *herself*. A good model has to be able to be something else, has to know which angles transform. But if you wanted a portrait that was a still-life, a lily that was growing between dark green leaves and didn’t shift when an insect touched it, and that lily was a girl, sort of — you couldn’t do better than this.

Nell’s embarrassment came back when she’d eaten through half a roll of film.

She fumbled her thank-yous, almost curtseyed. But the girl in white stopped her before she could leave.

“There might be a favor you could do for me now,” she said, and extended something in the palm of her hand. It gleamed, a thread of silver, a long stitch in the skin. “If you’d like.”

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On the balcony of the Eel Pie Hotel, Nell pierced the girl’s ears with a needle, and kissed her as a pearl of blood slipped down her neck and sank into the white lace collar of her blouse.

She worked her own earrings through the new piercings. *You need to leave something in them to keep them open*, she explained. *This is a wound you don't want to heal*. There was some kind of lacquer in the girl's hair, sweet and fungal like wet autumn leaves, and beneath that — a drop of rose perfume.

Earlier, when Nell had asked the girl's name, she'd been given a secretive smile for an answer. But now Nell asked again, right up against her lips, and she said it was June Sellar. Nell's breath caught in her throat and came out a laugh. So this was Splendid's June.

It didn't feel romantic the way Nell expected a kiss to feel romantic; it didn't feel like kissing Laura back in Virginia. Instead of romance — and more surprising — the kiss brimmed over with a deep and seductive sense of belonging. It was like being given not an open rose but a bud and trusted to care for it. Ever since Nell had come to London, to the boarding house, she'd felt more odd-shaped than ever, but here was a promise that she'd be alright. A gesture of understanding passed from one stranger to another, soft and full like something you could fold up in your hands and tuck away for when the world had turned its crueler side.

There was a swell of sound from the ballroom below, and now June was retreating, untouched. She dabbed the blood on her neck and stared at it for a moment, opened a compact to inspect the earrings, then lit two cigarettes and passed one to Nell.

Of course Nell took it. Didn't think about telling her she hadn't really smoked before.

"It's a lovely thing you've done," June said in a whispery voice, warmer than Nell expected. She had to lean forward to hear her over the crowd downstairs. Her accent wasn't English, though Nell couldn't quite place it anywhere else. Wales, maybe. Ireland. Somewhere green. "People don't often give me things just out of kindness, you know. I promise I won't forget it. I'm sorry to have asked, but I couldn't seem to do it myself."

*They look divine on you*, Nell wanted to say. She wanted to reach forward to adjust an earring with her fingertip. *Better on you than me — you have such a face.*

Nell had never met anyone with a face like June's, a confusion of lean angles and fine, almost fragile features and a complexion like mother-of-pearl. She couldn't be more than eighteen or nineteen, no older than Nell, but something about her seemed ancient. She reminded Nell of an old queen. The earrings were just brass and Bakelite, not worth a quid, but it was like they'd been changed into real jewels, peridots set off by June's lipstick and kohl and froth of yellowy-red curls.

Nell waved away the thanks with a too-casual hand. "It's no trouble, really, I'm old hat. I did it a few times back at school. But how'd you know to ask me?"

"Splendid is a friend of mine. She told me you could."

"Splendid told you about me?" Nell was flattered.

June nodded and opened her mouth, but instead of speaking released a halo of smoke towards the starless sky. For a second it hovered there, perfect. Then the wind stretched it thin, a ribbon trailing up and up and fraying into the clouds.

Nell tried to hold her cigarette elegantly, as June did, to mimic her measured breath, but the smoke curled up in her chest and burned. She was suddenly ashamed of herself for not having learned this sooner. She really must've looked like a kid.

"Well," Nell said, trying for dryness that came out as a cough, "I'm glad I don't just look like the kind of person who goes around piercing ears."

Then she caught sight of something red glittering below the cropped hem of June's trousers. It was blood, it must've been: seeds fallen from the piercings. Nell made some sort of alarmed noise, and told June to watch her trousers, not to stain them, she hadn't realized —

But June laughed politely. And, through that simple spell, the blood became a circle of tiny red beads clasped around her ankle. “It’s alright, it’s jewelry. Not very pretty, I know. But look — your earrings balance it out.”

June turned her head, and they did, a glimmering distraction in the weak light. (When Nell glanced again, still curious, June’s ankles were tucked, the red beads hidden. In a moment Nell had forgotten about them altogether. It was the sort of thing you only thought about when it was in sight.)

Nell sucked on her cigarette and cleared her throat, wanting to explain herself. “I’m really *not* the kind of person who just pierces ears, you know, and I don’t kiss strange women either. I think this place is making me do strange things. It makes me feel like I’m in a dream, where you just do things without thinking about what’s right or what makes sense.”

June fixed her with an opaque, milky blue gaze, assessing. “You understand it, then.”

“Understand what? Dreams?”

June took her time finding her words. It was something Nell would get used to, but at first it made her fidgety. “The Eel Pie Hotel. You’re an artist, you know that sometimes there are veils you see past that other people can’t. And behind the veils there are lovely, exceptional things, carried there by currents of magic, and you would like to live among them all the time. This is a place behind a veil.”

Nell laughed a little, but it came out broken. “I’m not sure I do know. I haven’t had somewhere I’m actually *supposed* to be living for a long time. A home, I mean.”

June touched her hand, and it might’ve been pity or solidarity or the granting of a wish. “It’s much easier for people like us to live behind veils. We can be safe and ourselves and not always looked-at.”

“People like us?”

June’s mouth tilted. She spoke in implications, but her meaning was clear enough, and for a moment Nell thought she would be kissed again, to prove a point. “You must’ve noticed we aren’t the usual thing.”

Nell thought of the kiss, and then she thought of Laura, and the thought made her look over the balcony where June’s high-heeled shoes thumped against the crumbling molding. They were candy red and worn ragged — tramp shoes, Nell’s mother would have called them — and probably two sizes too small.

“I suppose we aren’t,” Nell said, and as soon as she said it she knew it was true. It filled her up, that truth, until she couldn’t think of anything else. Not the boarding house, not the money she’d stolen, not the letters to her brother she couldn’t write.

The Thames was a band of yellow fog in the night, and a wan gibbous moon showed faintly on its surface. It was cool spring, but Nell felt what warmth there was like the press of another heartbeat against hers. A stickiness between her thighs, dampening the satin lining of her dress.

*People like us*, she repeated to herself, and shivered a little at the sound of it.

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They had gotten through another cigarette each and paused to listen to the last blooming sitar riff of “Heart Full of Soul” when June asked Nell if she might show her a secret.

“About you?”

June clicked her tongue, prim. “About the Hotel. Poor form to tell your own secrets, don’t you think?”

Nell leaned against June’s bone-and-lace shoulder, and the sharp body softened a little to accommodate hers. “I don’t think it’s poor form. Every secret you tell is about you, one way or another. But go on, honey, don’t keep me in suspense.”

By the time they’d risen and gone downstairs, the concert was over, though the ballroom still echoed with voices and the warm, animal fog of sex and hash and unwashed bodies. It rolled through the air in humid waves. The chandeliers in that vast starry sky had an irregular flicker now, thanks to the pulse of the dance floor, and the effect was almost like summer lightning on the lengths of exposed skin. Sparks catching in their hair, their fingertips. Sudden illumination, then a darkening just as quick.

Nell took June’s hand so she wouldn’t lose her. She had a feeling that June was only permanent on the balcony, away from everyone else. That now she’d vanish if Nell let her out of her sight.

“Come on, dance with me,” Nell said, raising her voice over the crowd. She never thought she’d have the courage to ask a girl to dance, but again that dreamlike freedom came over her. Someone had put Sam Cooke’s last record on, and even its tinny sound was urgent, immediate, after the distance of the music upstairs.

June consented (as she always would) and Nell twirled her underneath her arm — too tall, teased hair brushing her elbow — and swung her out laughing. She had an earthy, snorting laugh. Nell expected her to cover it, but she didn’t. Like that, everything ancient and uncanny about her melted away for a moment, and they were just kids. The world was big around them, and they were losing their footing as the sprung floor rocked beneath their heels.

Then June dipped Nell back, and Nell caught herself with a dancing step.

It looked sure enough, but the technique was off, her foot was misplaced. She wobbled. And, in that lapse, Nell saw all of her cotillion lessons, the cloud of girls in sweat-stained white dresses, each with a single red flower pinned to her breast. Like doves plucked bare and bloody in only one patch. She was in Virginia again, fourteen years old, eating strawberry trifle with the correct spoon. She was letting Bobby McCoy kiss her white satin glove. Her back newly shattered, she was being drilled again and again on that treacherous waltzing dip. *The left foot catches the body*, her instructor snapped, *so the hips don't protrude like that. You are a vulgar girl. Incorrect. Incorrectible. Wrong.*

It was only a moment before June pulled her in, stabilized her. But it was a longer moment before Nell had forgotten her old shame, and the shock of locating it in herself here. Her back throbbed. Incorrectible — perhaps she was. Perhaps it didn't matter, perhaps it did.

Either way she was in flight, half on the dance floor and half in the artificial sky, and for a wonderful, terrible moment, she couldn't imagine she'd ever come down again.

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When June extended a hand to lead Nell away, she took it. It was like the cigarette; she didn't even think about refusing. Like a rat to a river, she would have drowned herself that night if June had only asked.

Together they slipped through the crowd, out the ballroom doors, out into the ragged darkness of the overgrown croquet grounds. Houseboats roosted along the banks of the Thames, though all you could see of them was their string lights, like will-o'-the-wisps hanging in the fog.

Laughter rose from invisible parties on the decks, offshoots of the larger party at the Eel Pie Hotel. Nell kept an eye on June's back, luminous in the white lace blouse. She was getting better at following.

June paused just once — not to see if Nell was keeping up, but to take off her red high-heeled shoes, which she cradled in one hand as she walked. Even in the dark, Nell noticed June's feet looked misshapen, the toes twisted on top of one another and bent at funny angles like splintered wood. It leant a slight totter to her otherwise flowing stride.

This kind of wildness shouldn't have been possible in the middle of London. There were animals here, flickering at the edge of sight, and the kind of silence you associated with standing alone in the middle of the woods. It was a vast and wild chamber of silence. Still, though, Nell had the feeling they were walking a worn path. She didn't care where it led. Away from her old life, that much she knew for sure. Away from the boarding house, away from America. The ground was all white, and Nell had the peculiar sensation that she was walking through the sky, abstracted to a yellow dress and outspread arms, a constellation of herself fixed above the Eel Pie Hotel. She took her shoes off and dug her toes into the muddy grass to reassure herself that she wouldn't fall.

"It's not far," June said, her soft voice softened further by the fog.

A rabbit crossed in front of them, light as a spirit, and disappeared into a thicket of dew-glazed gorse.

Nell almost missed the secret when they got to it. She couldn't have said what she expected, but it wasn't this: a grand piano wallowing along the riverbank, painted by lichen and so thickly brambled it seemed almost more a natural fact of the landscape than the strange human imposition it was. The gilding was dark with age, the wood bloated with water. It was hardly an

instrument at all anymore. The bench was lying on its side a little ways away, tiny mushrooms emerging through the faded chartreuse velvet.

Awed, Nell nearly laughed. Didn't know what else to do with herself. "So this is your secret?"

It unfolded, in June's fairy tale telling, like this:

Once upon a time, when it was new, the piano stood in the ballroom of the Eel Pie Hotel. It was a showy thing, with a great fuss of latticework and gilding, and not much of a sound. Custom built. People admired it because (June's tone turned snobbish) they could always be counted on to admire ugly expensive ordinary things. The piano played many waltzes and floated many ladies into rich husbands' arms.

And then the Hotel became an orchestra hall, then a jazz club, and somewhere in all that shape-changing the piano changed its shape too.

There was a new pianist, a handsome young man, and the Hotel's owner fell in love with him. The two men would meet on the Island by moonlight and give each other the type of lily that blooms only at night, when the rest of the world couldn't watch. But, when the affair became a liability for business, the owner ended it. So the pianist and some friends of his hauled the expensive piano out to the bridge (Nell couldn't imagine how, it looked like it weighed as much as a ship) and tipped it over the edge. The river worked its alchemy, and when it had finished, it returned the piano to Eel Pie Island's shores.

"I found it last spring," June said. "Nowhere special. Just lying along the riverbank, as you please, invisible for ten years or more. I don't know if you believe in enchanted objects, but the least I can say is that it had become beautiful. Remarkable. Like a bit of something washed up from a shipwreck, sinking into the mosses and rot."

She looked at Nell, almost teasing, but her eyes were full of strangeness. “It’s funny, isn’t it, how things sometimes become more themselves when they are lost?”

Nell reached out to touch the piano and was surprised, almost, when it didn’t crumble to dust beneath her fingertips. No veneer peeled back to reveal an unspoiled face beneath. It was solid through and through. Its transformation held up.

“Can you play it?” she asked. Didn’t know if it was a challenge to the story or a wish for it to be true.

June’s hands glittered on the keys: a clutch of rings, slipping up and down her skinny fingers, catching moonlight. (Only later would Nell remember there wasn’t enough moon that night to be caught, and wonder how her costume jewelry got to be so bright.)

Over her shoulder, she offered Nell a smile. “Understand, it isn’t exactly in-tune.”

Then the hands lowered, and she plucked out a string of sour, wheezing notes, and Nell swore even the Thames stopped gurgling to listen, charmed into stillness like a snake.

It was more *sound* than music, full of the mud of the riverbank and the gilding of the ballroom at once, and something stranger than both those things besides. It wasn’t a pretty sound; it made the hair on Nell’s arms prickle. But the gaunt imperfection took her breath away. It hovered at the edge of familiarity, just close enough you could tell it was nothing like what it was supposed to be. Distant enough to make you long for it, to work its way into your dreams.

Once the melody was set, June embellished it with a warbling, untrained, hypnotic singing voice, a nursery hum about dying lovers and flowers that swallowed you whole.

Nell didn’t remember the last time she’d really believed in magic. There were enough bright things in the world as it was, and enough darkneses, without grasping at the ones that might not exist. But she believed in it now — it was strung through the music, cunningly, neat

stitches linking note to note. She thought again of the silver needle, the single stitch she'd made in each of June's ears. All of a sudden it seemed like an invisible thread had been pulled tight through her own flesh, too.

Some wants are easy, painless. You can snatch them up and feel nothing more complicated than satisfaction. But some things you want until you actually see them and have stepped close enough to feel their breath on your face.

Now, in the darkness, Nell stood before her greatest want, stared into its eyes, and discovered that it looked rotten — like a rotten piano. She was being lured into a fall-apart world, an island slipping little by little into the river slime. It would be full of people like June, who were awfully, visibly different and had to shape their homes out of mud and broken things. Nothing in Nell's life before had prepared her to look at what she wanted in its beautiful and monstrous reality, the way she had not been prepared to look at her brother's half-gone arm and yellowed teeth. *Incorrect. Incorrectible. Wrong.*

The terror she felt now and the terror she'd felt that day at brother's bedside were almost the same.

Nell almost turned and ran, stumbling, shoes in hand, back across the bridge and through the veil and into the safety of her little room at the boarding house. Almost.

But she didn't — couldn't. The magic was still working on her. Instead, she gave herself up, helplessly, to dancing. There was a movie she'd seen a long time ago about a ballerina who put on red shoes and couldn't stop dancing until she died, and she'd never understood the compulsion before now. The briars that grew wild on the Island clutched at her like the music, scratching her legs raw through her stockings. Pomegranate seeds of blood spilled down to her

ankles, and more rabbits zigzagged through the underbrush. They looked like they were dancing, too.

As June played, she tipped her head back and grinned up at the sky, strange and almost wild, then quieted it to a gracious ruby smile before turning to Nell.

“Better than dreaming, isn’t it?” she said.

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Sometime while she and June were in that space between things, the night guttered down to its wick. It was near dawn, and above the Hotel the sky was coming up pink. Exhausted kids passed over the bridge, pulled back into London, to bedsit flats and parents’ homes and damp gray lives. You could trace their paths in the sequins they shed.

“Like falling stars,” Nell murmured to no one at all.

She didn’t really feel a part of them even as she joined their procession. She had crossed the first time with Splendid, but she returned alone. She’d left June folded over the piano, having played herself to exhaustion, her coppery hair coming loose from its updo and beginning to frizz in the heat.

Nell’s camera was around her neck, but she didn’t particularly want to see the outcome of the photographs. Her feet hurt. Her back was worse. And in her throat there was a growing hum, an echo of June’s music that had lost its way, but she was afraid of letting it out.

On the London side of the bridge, Nell made the mistake of looking back.

Two naked bodies, boy and boy, flew across the lawn and plunged into the Thames like they wanted to drown together.

### *Chapter Three*

Nell woke with music in her head.

Not just the next day, but the day after that, and every day for the rest of the week. At first it felt as though piano notes were slipping around inside of her like drops of mercury, beading bright silver in the canals of her ears, then shivering down to her fingertips, her toes. Soon, though, the loose notes solidified into mercury-silver stitches. They snaked down her veins and embroidered patterns around the grooves of her brain. She couldn't rip them out; trying only tightened them.

It had been a long time since she'd believed in magic, and what surprised her most of all was how much it hurt.

The season was changing. Purple flowers unfolded from the moss overnight, tucked themselves between ancient stones. The oily puddles on the asphalt never quite dried, since the mornings were fogged and a new rain came each afternoon. These were light, sly rains that made you think you didn't really need boots and a rain bonnet until your hair was slick and your leather shoes were all warped out of shape by the damp. The air was the texture of cool skin. It was nothing at all like summers Nell knew, all billowing heat and ripening blackberries, bullfrogs singing at the window.

Sometimes she wanted to go home.

With her face buried in her pillow in the too-cool night, she cursed herself for not pretending a little while longer that she belonged there.

Sometimes she thought of fairy stories, how when you crossed over to another world you could never really go back the way you came.

(These were the moments the music was clearest, right beside her, inside of her, so sharp and so bright Nell could've screamed. The stitches stretched tight to keep her where she was. Once, she swore she heard a note pop under the tension, saw it flash just behind her eyes. A trick of the light.)

But, just as she couldn't return to Virginia, she couldn't return to the Eel Pie Hotel. It was strange, impossible to describe — but she knew if she went back she'd be completing a bargain she wasn't sure she wanted to make. It wasn't for her soul, exactly, but maybe for her love. If she allowed herself to fall in love with the Eel Pie Hotel, with the part of herself that could live there, she would never be able to live anywhere else. She would never know a kind of love that wasn't perverse. The boarding house, halfway between past and future, held her in place.

And she really did try to settle there, to like where she found herself. She went shopping, and saw the clock and the palace by train, and took photographs of people looking at paintings in the museum. When she opened the door to her room at Mrs. Fink's, her own smell rose up to greet her, mingled with the smell of the menthol cigarettes she'd started buying; Christmas-tissue crumples of her pantyhose were gathered in the corners, until room-inspection day when they'd be swept under the bed.

Last weekend, she'd gone to a market with Marianne and bought a miniature flowering tree, whose leaves were made of jade-colored glass and whose flowers were made of yellow stones. Marianne coaxed her into buying it because it was so little and darling and Nell's room didn't have anything on the mantelpiece. Well — now it did. The tree would need no nurturing, no sunlight or water or clean air. It had cost two pounds and some change, and even though Nell didn't fully understand English money yet, she knew that was pretty expensive. Pretty real. That had to count for something, didn't it?

Who needed magic? Who needed veils?

But still she heard the piano, and that haunting, haunted voice.

Mrs. Fink told Nell to put up her curtains again. Didn't want the sun getting in and bleaching out the wallpaper. This made Nell so mad she couldn't speak, so she just nodded until Mrs. Fink went away, holding onto her quiet cleanliness like a knife jammed into the hem of a dress. They were such awful curtains. It was such awful wallpaper, the flowers beige as puke, not even an interesting crack or stain, dullness surpassing vulgarity, and Nell thought of being in that safe little room for a whole year, more than that, and couldn't breathe.

In Nell's life before, Peter had always been there when she'd felt so alone she thought she'd die of it, like an animal in a forgotten trap. No hands were as large or as kind as his when he pet her hair. They'd always looked more like twins than just brother and sister, with the same apple cheeks and almost-green eyes — same height, even — except that Peter's hands were so kind. She wondered if the doctors had been able to salvage them. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to ask, to know for sure whether he was alive or dead or still somewhere in between.

She took the little red envelope from her trinket drawer, and shook out the address inside. It was written on the back of a Law Office of Hartford & Wolfe business card, in her father's hand. She hadn't thought of her father's hand for a while, the extreme slash of the 'T's. She hadn't thought of the number of her brother's hospital room.

(The piano trilled icily in her head and illuminated the backs of her eyes with a bloom of green.)

*Dear Peter,* she wrote on stationary borrowed from Esther, then stopped for an hour or more. When she came back, she wrote it all in a single breath.

*I hope you'll forgive me for not writing sooner, it's just that it's hard to explain what's been going on. I can tell you I'm in London (me, London, I know — just like the magazines we used to look at) and am safe living in a boarding house. It's all girls here, and I think we're getting to be friends. We eat marmalade for what they call tea. They deliver a bottle of milk to the doorstep every day. I can see the river Thames out my bedroom window, and in the middle of it a little island and — she scratched out this sentence, and doodled a snake through it for good measure.*

*Listen, Peter, what do you do to make yourself feel at home when you're away in a different world for a long long time? How did you do it in the jungles? Did anyplace ever start to feel like yours, even just your cot? I ask because it was all going well and then I met someone very strange and now everything feels unsettled, wrong like a carnival mirror. This girl played a song on the piano that I haven't gotten out of my mind since, not in an ordinary way, I mean it when I tell you it's not just like a song stuck in my head, but more like a ghost, a trance, something. I swear I can feel the music like stitches in my brain.*

*I know how that all sounds, but I have to tell someone. You're the only person I've ever wanted to tell. I love you and I hope to god I see you again and I really hope they've sewed your arm up okay. Don't let Mom & Dad know I've written. I wish I could tell you all about why I left so you wouldn't hear it from our mother, and someday I will. But for now keep this just between us, alright?*

*Yours, Nell.*

*This damned music, it wasn't even any good.*

Nell laid down her pen and got up from her writing chair. She yanked down the lace curtains and opened the window and threw them flapping into the night. The wind caught and

tumbled them, making their descent impossibly slow, like they'd be there forever floating in time. Then she crouched in bed, a watchful animal in a poplin nightdress, looking out at the lights across the river. They shivered and doubled in reflection. Somewhere along the banks, a grand piano was rotting. Backward people kissed one another. A girl was creeping through the mud, looking for fragments of a lost past to claim.

Not so far away, in her own bed, Nell was waiting for the Eel Pie Hotel to see her and call out so loudly she'd have no choice but to call back.

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The garden behind the boarding house was aimless, dandelion-thatched and thickly mossed, only incidentally green. It backed up to a disused privy that had been swallowed by sweet-smelling honeysuckle inside and out. Honeysuckle vines snaked around the toilet, the flowers peering down into its black pit. That was an image Nell liked; it gave her a pleasant thrill of disgust.

The residents of the boarding house were having a haircut party. It was the first really warm day, the first day you could say was delightful without even a trace of wishfulness. And it was quiet, too — Nell could hardly hear the piano over the golden hum of bees.

Magazines were spread on the ground, weighted down at their corners by war-ragged bricks. Each open page showed a girl's head made sculptural with a beehive or bangs, ratted up high and sleeked back down again. Blondes, brunettes, redheads, all white, all shining-teeth, all empty. If you turned to a page that corresponded with the picture's number, you'd find instructions for the cut.

Beth had brought a couple of kitchen chairs out into the garden, and they were taking turns sitting in them, or standing behind and holding the shears. It would've been like playing salon as a kid, except for the wisps of hair drifting by on sunbeams and reminding you, thrillingly, that what you were doing was an act of real alteration.

Now and then a bird would dip down from the yew tree in the corner of the garden and snag a curl for her nest. (Nell thought of the mice again, marching that big white feather up with them through the pipes, then shooed them out of her head.)

“But it’s too funny isn’t it?” Marianne was saying. “Maybe a little sinister, but funny. The way he keeps after her with those awful poems and then vanishes for two weeks on account of his ‘melancholy.’ And then comes back to court her with a big ridiculous bunch of bananas or — or — what was it, Esther?”

“Three pineapples,” Esther said, flushed with embarrassment and delight at being the subject of such an engaging drama. Her nearly white hair rippled with feeling, and Beth, in charge of cutting it, grabbed the sides of her head to hold her still. “But really it’s not a bit funny, he’s driving me out of my mind.”

Marianne’s cherry-red mouth formed a sympathetic *O*. “Pineapples! Honestly, has he even *met* you? If you told me you’d been writing letters to each other and hadn’t even seen each other’s faces I’d believe it.”

“Tell him he’d better bring you a sweet little dog next time, if he plans on coming back. And those poems he writes —” Beth lost the quotation in peals of laughter. Nell laughed too. She’d been doing a lot of laughing without knowing why. It wasn’t that she didn’t like gossip; she could be as fierce a gossip as anyone, partly because she didn’t want the gossip turned on

her. But, in the garden, she'd begun to feel far away. It was like she was watching a mirage of the other girls wavering in the heat.

Marianne's hair was in Nell's hands, and it was heavy and dark and lustrous. She didn't want to stop combing it. Nell's own hair was not as dark, and on a bright day that made it appear not as light; Marianne's hair held the sun in it. It was really wonderful. Nell liked that she could see wonderful things about other girls without feeling the need to see things in herself that were better. If she had virtues, that was one of them. She tried to think of her other virtues, but didn't get very far — she'd begun thinking of a flower that could symbolize her instead. The ones that looked like large daisies or small sunflowers, maybe, or the poppies coming up red by the garden wall.

Marianne said to Esther, "Please don't take this the wrong way, darling, but I don't think you could ever keep him. That sort can never make up his mind, always just wants to move on to the next thing."

Nell picked up the shears and studied the picture Marianne had chosen. Bits of hair fell, at first only the slightest trim, an evening-out, just as Marianne wanted it. Marianne knew her hair was too lovely to mess with.

Flowers, thought Nell. Ophelia clutching flowers. The afternoon Nell visited the Tate, in her quest to make herself belong in the city, she'd seen a painting of Ophelia clutching flowers as she drowned. There was something about the lightness of her red hair in the river and the heaviness of her embroidered dress (was it only white in Nell's imagination?) that made Nell love her, feel tender towards her gentle knowing face. The river was taking her exactly where she was supposed to be. It didn't make Nell sorry, it made her want. When the guard wasn't looking, she'd touched the painting with the back of her hand.

In the garden, she combed through Marianne's hair again, shaking the trimmings loose. Maybe Marianne knew she was dreaming, because her voice was a little too loud when she asked, "How about you, Nell? Anyone caught your eye?"

Distantly, the piano began to play through the bees, forming notes of music from their abstract buzzing. Much closer, Nell looked at the hair in her hand and saw a glint of red. "No one I'll see again."

"But now I'm intrigued! Tell us about your handsome stranger."

Nell swallowed and smiled and made a careful cut. "It's nothing, really. Just someone I happened to see at a party. But — he was very beautiful. A musician. He wore white lace."

Laughter. Nell should've anticipated it. She raised her chin and bore it as passively as she could. "You do have odd tastes," Beth said.

Marianne's hand reached up and blindly found Nell's on the shears. Her fingers were cool and damp. "But we shouldn't make fun. There is a type who likes white lace, you know, and if that's our darling Nell..." It hung in the unsaid space whether they would welcome her or cast her out. The attention on her was hard, piercing. They knew, all of them, that if they pressed only a little harder they could make Nell bleed.

But then Esther giggled. "Nell's odd sometimes," she said.

"Very odd."

And then they dropped it. It was forgotten. The conversation shifted to Marianne's latest date, how his eyes twinkled and his hair was really more ash blond than sandy and he wanted to get ahead in his job at the bank.

There was no reason for Nell to do what she did, not really, except that a chord on the piano in her head happened to chime just right. It was like a signal. Perhaps it made her flinch.

Nell combed through Marianne's hair one last time, feeling light as anything, Ophelia suspended. Then she took the shears and sliced at a brutal diagonal, watching the sheet of hair fall away as her lace curtain had fallen out the window a week before. She didn't know why she'd done it. It should have been impossible behavior for anyone but a very small child. But, for a moment, all Nell wanted to do was make Marianne feel as wrong as she did.

The garden went still. Esther covered her popped-open mouth. The scissors clattered brightly to the stones, two notes as the blades swished past each other and then nothing.

The dark and lustrous hair shimmered away, gone, beyond healing. Birds swept down to claim it.

Nell's hand had slipped, a bee had landed on it, she'd never — it was an accident — of course they understood...

She apologized again and again, tearfully, and, through a collective effort, they neatened the hair into an only sort-of-neat bob. Marianne wasn't quite crying, but maybe it would've been better if she was. Dry-eyed, she was brave.

But, no matter how Marianne bore it, the damage was done. It was ugly. It was queer. Nell went indoors, shunned and satisfied and terrified of herself.

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When you have done an awful thing, there is no cure like hot water. Nothing else will get it out of you. There weren't many of her mother's words Nell thought of in any practical sense, but she remembered these, and the rough scrubbing that accompanied them. They'd never been a consumingly religious family, but her mother believed in sin.

Nell locked the door of the white-tiled third floor bathroom and ran the bath hot, a suffocation of steam. With relief, she watched her reflection in the bathroom mirror vanish little by little. In the absence of bubble bath, she poured a dollop of Herbal Essence shampoo into the tub, which produced a meager foam. The surface of the water was bare and white as the dirty tile floor a few minutes after she got in.

Mildew made a snowflake design on the crown moldings. Fingers drummed a quick arpeggio on piano keys along her naked spine.

It made her want to tear more curtains, more hair.

She soaked until she was clean and her fingers had gotten too wrinkly to dig into her thighs, then returned to her room. Directly below her, Marianne was no doubt writing in her meticulous journal exactly what an awful bitch Nell was. Good. Perhaps that was what she wanted to be. There was a comfort in feeling wounded, even if it was you who did the wounding to start with.

She dropped her towel and was halfway through plucking her eyebrows at the bureau when she caught sight of it in the mirror.

There was something in her bed.

There was something trembling underneath the sheets printed with brown and yellow flowers, underneath her quilt. It was about the size of a small child, but its body was no kind of shape that made sense. It stretched out bony ridges of something — legs, wings, a reptile frill? — and made a rough, birdlike scratching sound somewhere in its throat, like something was caught there. It must be in the throat. She didn't know what else could make a kind of noise so raw you could feel it ache in you. The quilt was heavy; it bore down, and the shape in the bed folded beneath it.

When Nell was a little younger, she had a reputation for bravery. If there was a spider to be touched, she'd touch it, then blow it from her fingertip into her brother's face (he was always gentle for a boy, never did the same to her, maybe because he knew she'd only laugh at him). Once, she'd stuck a handful of leeches all over her arms and legs. She wandered long after she was supposed to be indoors; she kissed girls under the green surfaces of lakes. On the balconies of crumbling hotels. The thing that makes you brave as a child is always there, Nell told herself decisively. It's inside you like a root, like a worm. It takes more than this to kill it.

This was what Nell did: she wrapped her towel around her chest with as much calm as she could manage, then she took a deep breath and walked firmly to the bed, making her bare footsteps loud on the creaking floor. The thing in the bed didn't move toward her, but the bedding rustled around it and then went still, as though it were sitting up and looking at her through the layers of fabric. Nell could feel its eyes. She lifted up first the quilt and then the sheet.

And — there was nothing there. A stark white pool of moonlight collected in the dip where the springs sagged and her body would lie, and a little red spot on the sheets. It might have been menstrual blood, residue from a cut. But when she touched it with a fingertip she saw it was a glass bead. That was all. Nothing moving, no sound except her own breath, which she was busy making long and slow. (She had let spiders spin webs from her fingertips; she had run away halfway across the world by herself. She could breathe through anything.)

Nell picked up the piece of glass in the bed. It was tiny and irregular, like a red flea, but as heavy as a coin. It startled her to hold something so small and so heavy in her hand. It was cold from lying in the pool of moonlight — or Nell imagined moonlight to be cold.

All of a sudden she remembered the beads she'd thought were blood around June's ankle.

*It's funny, isn't it, how things sometimes become more themselves when they are lost?*

After putting the bead in the ring dish on her bedside table, Nell opened the window and looked out, not sure what she was looking for (the thing in the bed flapping across the sky?), then shut and locked it, and did the same with the door.

She took the sheets off her bed just in case, and slept that night on the bare mattress with her bath towel over her for a cover. She dreamed of a dark green place. A moss-covered wood, or a river, or a field, she couldn't tell, and every time she looked around her it was a little different. She might've even been underground. It didn't matter, she was just trying to get to... There was something stuck in her throat. Ticklish. Like a hair, but bigger. Feeling like she was about to choke, she woke up before she could pull it out.

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In the morning, she saw the little jade-glass tree she'd bought had tumbled from her mantle and lay in sparkling expensive pieces on the floor.

This was the call she'd been waiting for, wasn't it? Half longing, half dreading. The Eel Pie Hotel had lifted its head and shrieked.

## Chapter Four

The river was brown and bright. It wasn't bright like little rivers, which tumbled and held the sun, but the fog that sat evenly on the brown surface glowed with its own opally light.

Earlier, Nell had wondered if it would change for her; now she saw it had.

When Nell left home that morning, the white feather from the sink and the bead of glass from the bed were in her jacket pocket, wrapped in her best handkerchief. She didn't know yet whether they were protective talismans or parasites (*could* objects be parasites? it seemed likely to her now); either way, she didn't want to lose track of them. Without her thinking or willing it, her hand kept going to check them. They still felt like two half-dreams, the way June had felt once they had left the balcony, as though she could disappear at any time. All her life, Nell had worried about things disappearing when she wasn't looking. It was something to do with why she took photographs, she supposed. So she could keep more things in her eyes.

(Just before Nell left home that morning, she took a photograph of the garden: the honeysuckles, the bird's nest forming from tufts of human hair. She did not know if she would be back in the same shape.)

She lowered herself down the slick green ladder from street level to the riverbank and let her leather work shoes sink into the mud. Christ, there was a lot of mud. The bank had looked more solid from above.

It was Splendid who had told her where to find June.

*The Thames is a tidal river*, Splendid had explained to Nell as they worked to get her together for a shoot. Daffodils, some of them more real than others, and a daffodil-yellow tiered dress. *It's big and intelligent enough to respond to the moon, so you've got to respect its wishes.*

*Find the point of lowest tide on Eel Pie Island, or just across the bridge on this side of things, and look for June there. You'll want a tidal chart for that. But on a foggy morning she's sure to turn up. She always does.*

The instructions were so peculiar and so particular Nell didn't have any choice but to accept them with a nod. She straightened a silk flower on Splendid's shoulder. All she could think of to ask was, *What's she doing there?*

*It's called 'mudlarking,'* Splendid replied, fluffing her curls and gleaming to distraction. It was calculated, like she wasn't sure how much to give away, making it clear that Nell's quest was second to the intricacies of June's privacy. *She looks for old things that wash up, that's all. That's what Archie calls the whole lot of us at the Hotel. Mudlarks. Always looking for something more than what we've got.*

*Things that wash up like that piano,* Nell did not say. The connection was suddenly obvious, something slotting into place. Two excited notes played themselves inside her head.

But the memory of it felt too private to her, especially to bring up in the daylit studio, with its ordinary quality of light, dusty and dim, and photographers and assistants setting up all around them with their brusque voices and steps. If Splendid shared a similar memory, Nell didn't want to know. She wanted it to be her little moment with June, compact enough to hold, though as soon as she acknowledged the thought it became childish. A toy that belonged in her hands and no one else's. Well — let it be like that. If she wanted to, she could be selfish.

The bridge to Eel Pie Island arced before her like another silver thread, stitching the city to this floating scrap of birdsong and trees. Houseboats were tucked like sleeping waterbirds in the Island's crevices, and discolored swans and ducks bobbed against them. What was it that the woman at the pie shop had said — the river was so thick with sludge even the eels were dying

out? Perhaps keeping to the surface as the birds did made it more habitable. But, then, if there were no good fish, no plants, what did they find to eat?

Nell put her foot on the bridge and stopped. The Eel Pie Hotel stared silently and longingly back at her.

It was a stranger by daylight. Buildings like this were bound to be, Nell guessed — strange without the pounding of music, people spilling over balcony railings and kissing. Still, she was struck by how bare it was. She saw for the first time the streaks of green damp that ran down the brick face, the blind broken windows. There was a quietness that made it feel like a different place entirely, like it could become something it wasn't when enough people willed it to, and shrank back into its own form as soon as the will sustaining it disappeared. It spooked her.

She'd search this side of the river first, she decided.

The mud was thin, silty, nothing like the reddish clay she was used to. Without her noticing, bits of grit worked their way over the tops of her shoes and into the crevices between her toes. Mudlarking made her think of a species of bird, brown, with a long thin beak for picking, or a frog that buried itself in mud for the winter and occasionally emitted a bubbling peep of steam. She didn't understand why anyone — especially someone as done-up as June — would do this for a good time.

For fifteen minutes she banged her toes on rocks and sank in blind mists. Soggy cattails trailed in the waters, breaking apart at their seams to let out clouds of mold-white fluff. Maybe the tide wasn't the certain thing Splendid had made it out to be. Maybe it was a joke Splendid and June were both in on, an elaborate misdirection to keep everyone out of their secrets. Maybe

Nell had failed, somehow, in her night at the Eel Pie Hotel, and was being led somewhere to be punished for it. She wished she'd worn different shoes.

But, as soon as this succession of thoughts passed through her head and stirred up sufficient feelings of betrayal, she came to a stretch of river — no bigger than a city block or two — that felt different. It was the smell, she decided. She closed her eyes to see it better. The best Nell could describe it was the scent of olive green, the growth of many hundreds of years of green things over hundreds of years of dead things. It was a deeply nourished smell, suffocatingly fertile. Some kind of womb, Nell thought bizarrely. A womb of green instead of red.

(x)

That was where Nell found her — at the heart of the smell.

At first Nell didn't know how she recognized her. Just as the Eel Pie Hotel was another creature by day, June, once so vastly tall and sparkling, could have been an old woman gathering cobwebs in the morning light. She was hunched, picking at the shore, swathed in a white sweater several sizes too big and a pair of sensible corduroy trousers tucked into wellington boots. On her elbow was a very dirty picnic basket, a bird's nest of wicker and plaid. What gave June away, named her, was her quality of movement, like each gesture and footfall was being scripted from a time far in the future; she turned slowly, as though she'd already anticipated being found.

Nell's breath caught in her throat before she could shape it into a call. The sun glanced right through her. What if she didn't want to see June after all?

But it was too late. June greeted her lightly, expectantly, as though they spoke on the stinking mud-crust of river every day, crushed willow-leaves together, told secrets, all of it, and the familiarity of her voice relieved and unnerved Nell in equal measure.

“Splendid said I’d find you here. Look, I’ve got to ask you something — about the piano.” And then Nell stopped, realizing as she spoke that she’d never folded her feeling of hypnotism into any kind of question that made sense. It *seemed* to be about the piano. But really it was just as much the thing shrieking and shivering in her bed, the feather in the sink, what she’d done to Marianne, the blooming-rose kiss. She felt how lonely she had been, how lost. *I’m back*, she wanted to say, helplessly. *You did it, you called for me after I tried so hard not to hear it. Now please take me in.*

“The piano?” June repeated. She still wore the earrings, though her left ear was swollen up hot red. Nell wondered if she was cleaning them; it occurred to her she’d forgotten to mention that.

“It’s stuck in my head. I can’t seem to get it out.”

June smiled vaguely. “How strange. Whenever there’s a song haunting me, I don’t sleep a bit.”

The smile irritated Nell, emboldened her. “That’s not the only strange thing. Two nights ago there was something in my bed, a — I don’t know what it was. I took a bath and it was there when I came back, and then it was gone when I lifted the sheets to have a look. I swear I’m not imagining it. The shape, this long neck, was so real. And the sound it made, like it was coughing something up.”

“And you think it has something to do with me.”

Nell reached into her pocket and unfolded her handkerchief with fumbling fingers, then stuck the red glass bead in June's face, close enough she'd be sure to recognize it.

"This is yours, isn't it?"

June said nothing in response.

Nell gave a frustrated laugh. "I was happy before, you know. I could've been. And now I just feel strange."

The wind sent June's red curls roiling, the ones that weren't pinned back, but her face was so still and cold. Her nose looked especially sharp, and Nell realized she wore no makeup. She looked younger and older at once. "I played the piano, and I am sorry if that distressed you. But I didn't put something in your bed to haunt it. That came on its own."

"Why did it come to me?"

"Probably because you invited it."

For a moment, June looked so strange that Nell was afraid of her. She didn't deny it was a haunting, that thing in the bed. She'd said it like she really knew, could see right through Nell and count off her sins one by one if she wanted to, as neatly as Nell had sliced off Marianne's hair. Nell felt icy and ill in the summer morning.

Then June softened. Her face apologized for its coldness. "But you're right, I knew about the piano. I wanted you to like it and come back. If you can wait a moment, I'll give you something to unstitch it."

(x)

June knelt in the mud, and it squelched like a fistful of blackberries around her rubber boots. Nell looked on with bruised fascination. It should've been embarrassing; watching June glittering in the mud should've been like watching someone beautiful shit. But, rather than a shameful gesture, it was whole, it completed her. It was as though this was the place she had been born and was always meant to return to. That was it, the dead green smell of the river — what Nell had mistaken for a lacquer or henna dye in June's hair when they'd kissed.

After nearly ten quiet minutes of looking, June drew something out of the mud between two fingers, her nails tastefully manicured, soft-pointed like the ends of almonds and painted mauve. Another London-pink. She rinsed it clean in the water.

“Put out your hand,” she said.

Bizarrely, Nell expected another feather. The memory of pulling a feather from the greasy sink came back to her as she watched the longish thing emerge, white crusted an unnameable color of decay. But it was harder than that, hard and brittle and light.

“It's made of bone,” Nell breathed. She'd never held anything made of bone before, but she knew it with certainty.

“Deer bone, I think, from six or eight hundred years ago. They're not an uncommon find. Some people who used to live here made these whistles to sing to their dead. It will work because it's from the same land as the piano. An enchantment is an exchange.”

The whistle in Nell's hand was as long as two finger joints. There were carvings on the rounded side, in the shapes of little faces with open mouths where music would come out. Like a row of little phantoms, sitting one on top of the other.

“Blow on it,” June instructed, and Nell did, producing only a thin wail. “It won't take much.”

At the high clear sound of the whistle, the song in Nell's head began to loosen itself. Embroidered patterns frayed apart into threads, she could see the workings of it behind her eyelids and feel the tingling in her fingertips. And at last the threads blew away, and there was peace in the silence. The morning was colored more softly, less shimmering and more real.

Nell looked at the whistle with wonder, and rolled it in her hand.

"The tide will be good for another hour," June said. "Would you like to help me collect?"

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It was useless to ask what they were looking for and expect a straight answer. Nell guessed the answer might change with each gentle wave that sifted a fresh tumbling of glass and oil-gummed china onto the shore. June said to pick things of value, but then would lift a phantom doll arm from the foam with the care and reverence of a mother touching the hand of her own baby. Perfect junk.

Gradually, though, Nell's eyes began to adjust: she began to see what mattered and what didn't. And, honestly, it was such a simple trick she was embarrassed for not having recognized it sooner. The things that mattered were the things that had mattered to someone else long ago. Things that had been in homes long since sunk into the earth and forgotten, except for these little whistles, or bone-bottles, or saints, or dolls. Things that held traces of love in their cracks.

Most gifts the river brought were badly damaged. Nell needed June to tell her what these objects were — they were as foreign as stones from other planets — but as soon as she knew, she got the hang of describing them. Each one was a story that could be told.

Nell told June all about how long it had taken a grandfather to carve this one-winged angel for his grandchild, who was young ten lifetimes ago. June told her how much a wife had loved this perfume-capsule ring — she'd flung it into the gutter the day her husband died, and had regretted it ever since. Now that they'd found it, two hundred years later, maybe she'd sense it in spirit and stop regretting its loss. Mudlarking was important work.

The mist burned off. In back gardens lining the riverbanks, clean sheets furled and unfurled in the breeze. It was perfect summer, rank and sweet, frogged and dragonflied, almost home.

Another trick Nell learned: It was easier to find the right things, loved things, when you thought of things you had loved yourself. One loved thing called out to another. So that's what she and June talked about. Their memories of the past and hopes for the future tangled up together in an easy exchange. This was how Nell began to learn truths about June, not just veils and china trinkets. June loved to eat raw oysters and still harbored vague dreams of becoming a concert pianist. She'd had a pair of pet rabbits when she was a child, white-and-black with pink, happy, twitching noses, called Flossie and Tea. Flossie was killed by a dog and Tea died of a broken heart not long after. June had detested dogs ever since. She loved helpless things, and she hated powerful things that killed them. (*What about helpless dogs*, Nell thought, but decided that wasn't a discussion she wanted to have.)

Nell was proud it was she and not June who came up with the find of the day: a whole little cottage made of porcelain, painted white and brown and barely chipped, with a hollow inside for placing a candle so the smoke would rise from the chimney. That held them up for five minutes as June studied it. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, and she was perfectly quiet. Her attention was a perfect thing.

It might've held her for longer, too, if the man had not come into the moment and shattered it.

(x)

He parked his silver coupe along the banks and hoisted himself down the ladder, and at first Nell thought he must be some kind of authority coming to tell them off for trespassing. This fear would seem silly a moment later, but it made her grip June's arm and tell her they'd better get the hell out of there fast.

June seemed incapable of moving quickly. She just squinted nocturnally at this man framed by the sun and then set down her basket. Despite her care, it clattered, all those treasured things jostling against one another for space. Nell thought of the little house and hoped it was alright.

"June, lovely white June," the man said, and he didn't hesitate, didn't even give June the chance to wipe her scavenging hand clean before kissing it. So he wasn't confused. Just — a bad fit for the riverbanks, worse than Nell. His shoes, for one thing, were the leather shoes of a businessman who got them polished every day.

"What have you brought for me this morning?" he asked. And then, pausing, he saw Nell for the first time. "A new one of your friends?"

So June had no choice but to introduce them. The man's name was Mr. Midir, and, as was all but outright said, he belonged there along the banks more than she or June ever could. His freshly pressed suit, the very thing that made him out of place, meant he could do whatever he

liked on this stretch of river and Island because it was *his*. If you looked all the way back a hundred years (he said this like it was nothing, a sum of mere minutes and chance) you'd arrive at his great-great-grandfather's name.

Some Prince of Trads. It was strange to think that anyone could *own* the Eel Pie Hotel, especially a person like Mr. Midir, who didn't look like he'd ever jived or cut a rug. He looked strapping and tanned and possibly allergic to darkness and dust. He had an oily little mustache, the kind Nell always found contemptible on a man. There was one interesting thing about him: his left eye was blind and blue, glazed by a cataract; the other was nothing-brown, as nothing as the eye of a fish.

The way June gazed at him and his silver hair and his foolish little mustache made Nell want to pull the fish eye out.

But — and this felt very good — June did not let him look inside the picnic basket.

“Now darling,” she said, suddenly fluting and full of words, her rough accent veering towards an off imitation of some old film star's, “this is all filthy. If you looked now you wouldn't want any of it, you would say I'd brought you nothing but rubbish. Let's go back to the Hotel and I'll wash up and then show you the collection. I've found a few of those typeset keys you were after, the Doves Press, and some coins — pre-Elizabethan, I think, though you'll be able to tell for sure. They're exactly what we've been looking for. You'll like them very much.”

(No, he would not be able to tell for sure about the coins, Nell thought, prickling. Not as well as June.)

Long dimples appeared in Mr. Midir's cheeks when he smiled. “But we couldn't leave your friend. Nell, was it?”

“Eleanor,” said Nell.

“We couldn’t leave Eleanor here all alone. Why don’t you come back to the Hotel with us? June will clean up and I’ll give you a real tour. It’s quite different when it’s not being shaken to pieces by a guitar.”

The tide by then was coming in, leaving the three of them pressed together on a thin, shifting strip of earth. The mudlarking was over; the garbage was garbage again, no doubt exactly as Mr. Midir saw it, and the water was carrying it away. Nell bit her lip and shook her head. “I better get to work. I’m very late.”

“Another time then,” said Mr. Midir.

“Yes — tomorrow,” said June. “Promise me we’ll see each other tomorrow, Eleanor? At the Hotel?”

They were retreating already, the two of them together, crossing the bridge. Nell hadn’t given an answer. But June was the kind of person who valued promises on principle, she’d made that clear the first night on the balcony. So Nell kept hers.

She went back.

## Chapter Five

The Eel Pie Hotel, just after eight. Nell had come early; the sky was barely darkening, and the clouds were backlit with orange, turning them cloud-shaped, neat as paper cutouts. The stage was set but the band hadn't yet taken it, the velvet curtains drawn back in a blue flytrap mouth. Someone had patched the broken floorboard since the last time Nell had visited, but poorly — the new board was a different color from the rest of the ballroom floor, and a little bit too short. Too something, anyway. You could see the cracks, and the drops of blood flung on the boards around it, just faintly. *The fucking place's going to pieces*, the boy had crowed when he was lifted out of the floor, but it could have been water damage if you didn't know better.

No one tried to stop Nell from going upstairs. She couldn't tell if that was because she was a friend of June's — could they be called friends? — or simple neglect, the Hotel having not quite woken up for the night. She told herself it didn't matter, as long as she got to wherever it was she should or shouldn't be.

“Stick out your tongue,” a boy loitering on the second floor landing told her, his round face a pumpkin grin. Nell hesitated, then did. You've got to open yourself to serendipity like this. She received a scrap of paper half the size of her fingernail, with a black clover printed on it.

“For luck?”

“For safe travels.”

It melted in her mouth, leaving nothing but a faint whiff of bitterness, like an orange when you've bitten too close to the skin.

(x)

The upstairs rooms she had only glimpsed that first night were open to her now. The sconces along the hallway, each an upturned tulip made of glass, brightened as Nell passed them by. *Welcome*.

It was the wallpaper, though, that made her stop and look. Downstairs, it was plastered over with concert posters and pages ripped from dirty magazines. You had to strain to see the original pattern underneath. But here, in the upper rooms, there were no tattered tits and lipsticked mouths, only flowers, and they were *living*. Furled petals sighed and spread open; vines climbed towards the crown molding then ran along it. Real flowers might have trembled in the currents of air, but these were undisturbed by anything but their own internal movements.

Nell couldn't say how long she watched them, only that it was until Splendid's voice came yawning sweetly down the hall. "There you are, Nell! June said you'd promised to come and you *have*. Come sit with us."

The room at the end of the hall resembled nothing so much as a jewelry box, spilling over with beads and glass and lined with velvet all around. Even from the ceiling trinkets dangled. They had to be keeping the mudlarking things somewhere, it made sense, but it was almost as dazzling as looking at the sun to see it all in one place. Nell spied the little painted cottage she'd found in the river the other day, clean on the windowsill. The room was stuffy and smoky, but not old-smelling, not half-rotten like a place its age should have been without people taking care of it.

There was no real furniture besides a very large mirror — though you could see a faint outline where a bed had once stood against the wall — but satin pillows were strewn over the floor, and on them a group of kids sat getting ready for the night. Some of them Nell

remembered glimpsing in her first visit to the Hotel, laughing and dancing with Splendid, and some of them were new to her. They seemed to have nothing in common except for a vague aura of social otherness. Queerness. Altogether, they looked like a queer aristocracy, installed in a court of silk and glass.

Fat boy with the lightning-touched hair and blue eyes was Frankie. Girl with white-blonde hair sleeked into a ducktail was Laurel. And then there was Splendid sitting radiantly between them, and another girl in green, and a Black boy with features like an oil painting blurred by an excess of turquoise eyeshadow and coral lipstick.

They'd all stuck their tongues out. They looked like they were in the middle of a shared dream.

"Sit with us!" they said, in mismatched and harmonious voices. "You can stay here, you know, if you like."

Nell could, couldn't she? Now that she was one of them. Now that she'd given into what she'd wanted all along and come back. Nell settled onto a pink feather cushion and took her shoes off when she was told.

"The wallpaper up here, it's..." Nell grasped but couldn't arrive at anything worth saying.

"Night-blooming?" Frankie supplied the word, but as soon as he did Nell realized the idea already existed in the recesses of her mind. Her neighbors back in Virginia had planted moonflowers over their shared fence, to seal it up in green. The big white blossoms opened up at twilight and withered almost into nothing during the day. She remembered, too, that story June had told her, about the lovers who exchanged nightblooming lilies on the bridge, and had destroyed the Hotel's piano with their doomed affair.

"You're all friends of June's, aren't you?" Nell said.

The boy with the eyeshadow seeped smoke and cast his jewel-like glance to Nell.

“Mudlarks, darling. June collected us, as she’s collecting you.”

“Oh, you make it sound so cryptic!” Laurel said. Her voice was thick and husky-warm, neither boy nor girl, reminding Nell of a drink of bourbon she’d only swallowed once. “We’re here because we’re looking for home, same as you. The world hasn’t been particularly kind, and this place is. June says she intends for us to keep it.”

Keep it? Did they not have it already? Nell could not imagine it being any more thoroughly theirs.

She craned her neck and licked her dry lips and glanced into all the glittering corners.

“Where is June?”

“Don’t worry about her, love. She’s having a fine evening. She’ll be back with us soon enough. Now let’s have a look at your face...”

Nell could not tell how much time slipped by in that smoky dark room, if it was hours or moments, if she’d always been here in the soft clutches of *people like her*. They fogged her with powder and made a fantastic sculpture out of her hair. She let herself be arranged. Here, too, there were ideas of how to look, how to act, but they were so bright. And funny — until she looked in the mirror Nell didn’t notice that someone had stuck a little green flower in her hair. She looked like a thing found and toyed with. She watched the wallpaper bloom with the same feeling of understanding June had given to her in their blooming kiss.

Where was June? When Nell asked this again, the girl in green laughed so hard a dollop of drool landed on her satin skirt.

“I’m going,” Nell said to no one in particular. She barely remembered to put on her shoes.

(x)

She only wanted to find June.

But the hallways were changing shape as fast as she could move, windows and doors unpeeling from the wallpaper. And something funny was happening with the air in these upper corridors — Nell felt like she was walking through veil after veil of cobwebs. She couldn't see them ahead of her, and when she put her hand up to swipe them away there was nothing there. Nothing clinging in her hair, even. But every few steps there would be a touch like a whisper on her face, and she'd know she crossed another veil.

It was all down to that little piece of paper she'd swallowed on the stairs, she was sure of it. It must've been that no one but her could feel the veils, and her mind had made them up to turn her back from wherever she was going. It could've been there were people all around and she only thought she was alone.

And that goddamn *fucking* piano was back, if she heard another note —

One of the veils, when Nell dashed through it, was as heavy as parting drapes, and she found herself peering into another hotel room.

This one looked nothing like the room she'd met the mudlarks in earlier. It was gilded, fresh, with a bed heaped in white linens and thick red carpet to muffle her steps. A serving tray with empty cups and a cream pitcher and a half-plucked bunch of grapes sat near the bed. Everything was shining like it had been dipped in the afternoon sun. The skins of the grapes were translucent.

Mr. Midir knelt beside the bed and June sat on it with one leg over his shoulders and her hand in his hair. She wore a lilac dressing gown and his hand was lost underneath it. Whatever he was doing was jerking, rough. It looked like he was killing something.

“Eleanor!” Mr. Midir called breathlessly, and gave her a handsome smile. His eyes, the left fogged mold-blue with cataracts, found hers. “I had a feeling you’d turn up again.”

At the sound June made, Nell’s stomach and heart and no doubt all her other organs drew up tight together. She willed June to look at her, so that she could make sense of it, say it was all a game. But June’s head lolled backwards. It was like watching something spill and not being able to do anything about it.

Mr. Midir said, “Jealousy doesn’t flatter you, love.”

“I’m not,” Nell said, small and sticking, but she didn’t know what she was.

“Good. Come here, then, there’s a good girl.” Now he was kissing June’s belly through the satin gown, her thigh. His mouth left glistening paths of saliva on her skin.

“Leave her be,” said June, quiet and imperious, acknowledging Nell for the first time.

But Mr. Midir only laughed, like it was all in good fun. He got to his feet and drew closer to Nell, then turned crisply towards the bed and picked up the cream pitcher from the serving tray. And, now moving with teasing slowness, he drizzled the cream over June’s head.

June’s nostrils flared and her body stiffened, but her face was otherwise the same, neither happy nor unhappy. Remote, even when Mr. Midir lifted one of her milk-sodden curls and sucked it into his mouth.

“She isn’t *yours*, you see?” he said to either of them, both. “It’s better you understand.”

Often Nell would wish she had knocked the cream from his hands. She isn’t yours either, she wished she had said. She wished she had vomited there on the carpet. It would have been

better, at least, to ruin something in the perfect golden room. But it was all too grotesque. At that moment, she was afraid that if she was tested, on love or jealousy or desire, she might fail.

She turned and stumbled back the way she came, her footsteps matching the resounding echo of Midir's laughter. The veil swished back into place and it was nothing, just a black window. She was alone in the hall. She only wanted to find June.

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Lukewarm tea, that was the first thing Nell became aware of. Someone was feeding her tea by the spoonful, black and sweet, no milk. Her head felt like it was full of water, eddying round and round, but the tea was the best she'd had in England. She'd thought she hated tea.

The Hotel doorman — Archie, Nell remembered his name after only a moment of straining — was kneeling next to her, the whiskers on his face turned oily and even more like riverweed by candlelight. In a matronly little gesture he raised another spoonful of tea from a cafe-issue cup to Nell's lips.

At first she thought she must still be inside the Hotel, in a damp cellar. (The couch she was lying on had obviously gotten very damp at least once in its life and retained the smell.) Then she saw the eels. They were dangling from the ceiling, some whole and some with their skins peeled back to expose slippery muscle, their long bodies dancing. Merrily they jiggled and spun, hardly even dead.

This was Archie's boat, tethered to the bank of Eel Pie Island. Splendid had pointed it out the first night Nell had come; Nell had immediately wanted to see what it was like inside, what evidence there was of strange travels, but couldn't possibly ask. Well — now she knew. Archie

set the teacup on a kitchen table whose surface was almost entirely coated in candle wax, years of it, and gave Nell a hard, assessing look.

“You’re Nell Hartford,” he announced.

She was taken aback. Somehow she hadn’t expected her own name. “You remembered me.”

“I remember everyone who signs their name,” Archie replied, “and all the doors they’ve gone through. You were standing on the bridge, don’t you know? Not trying to get across to the other side or go back the way you came, just standing right in the middle, asleep on your feet. Harry and I brought you in here, thought we’d ease you down.”

Nell remembered, now, running from the glazed, eternal afternoon of the Hotel room into the darkness of the croquet grounds. She glanced to the window: dawn was poking through the holes in a lace curtain. She’d come into a different world. “Thank you,” she said. “You were right about that place, you know. It does get tricky.”

She sat up in the mildewed cushions, and Archie squeezed into the space leftover. “You’ve got to keep an eye on it. That’s what I do. You kids are lucky I keep an eye.”

“Is that what Mr. Midir does, too?”

This was a name Nell was not supposed to know, she could tell from the way Archie quit rubbing his knees and just looked at them. After a moment, Archie said, “He owns the Island and everything on it, if that’s what you mean. So — sure, he looks in. But he’s just waiting to smooth out the tricks, turn it into something respectable. Another resort, like it used to be. Apartments, who the bloody hell knows.”

“Is June helping him?”

At that, Archie laughed, and it made Nell feel so much less damp and cold that she found a laugh inside of herself, too. “Short answer is, June is helping June. Longwise, it’s more like an exchange. There’s economics involved, and more than a little alchemy. June digs in the river — *Mr. Midir’s river*, mind you — to bring up little treasures, but doesn’t ever pass them off the way she says she will. Mr. Midir gets cheap little nothings disguised as somethings, and June keeps the jewels.”

“And Mr. Midir lets June and all the rest of us stick around so long as he thinks he’s getting treasures.”

“It’s not a forever spell, but it’s a good one. For now it works.”

At that moment another man, until then a pillowy shadow, turned over in the corner-bed with a resounding snore. “Christ, Harry,” Archie grunted in the fondest way imaginable. “Can’t you tell the girl is having a revelation?”

The sudden warmth of it all, the rocking boat and the joyously quivering eels and the secrets given so easily, the relief at finding that June was perhaps not so happy being a treasure as she had looked, made Nell hang onto Archie’s hand like the hand of a grandfather. It was warm and smooth like mud, and it tightened on her fingers so they sank deep into it. She held tight.

For a moment what she’d seen with Mr. Midir was only a dream, an effect of the paper, and June was very good, magical, the untainted shape of love.

## *Chapter Six*

Nights at the Eel Pie Hotel twinkled by well into the middle of summer. Nell opened her Eelpiland passport one day — really looked at it for the first time since she'd signed it — and saw an entire page filled with Archie's stamps. They were shaped like stars, many-pointed and citrus-green, blurring together in constellations. She recognized they ought to mark memories, but could hardly recall the nights themselves, only a sense of what they might have been.

She learned her life by photographs. A dozen pairs of colored satin shoes were preserved in an amber of film. Faces she'd forgotten laughed, happy. Nell laughed, happy, too. She had never been so aware of her self-ness and how like all these other selves it was.

One photograph: midsummer, a bonfire lit on the Island, lapping perilously at the edge of the green grass, the Eel Pie Hotel's spare frame kindling in the background. Over the fire, girls were in flight. Comets of many-colored chiffon. They jumped for love and for luck. The boys didn't have the same ambition, or else it wasn't dramatic enough to catch on film.

In another picture, the chandeliers were full of hothouse orchids, flourishing in the green-starry sky. They'd been strung there by day, no one knew by whom, and it became a contest to pull them down and give them to your sweetheart. The remaining orchids were ragged scraps by dawn, having been grasped and missed with a desperation approaching fever.

Then there was the night the Stones played, the Faces, the Who, and too many more wonderful nothing-names to count.

June hadn't appeared in any photographs since that first night on the balcony. In fact, she scarcely appeared at all. More often, her presence was felt in whispers around the ballroom, thin rumors about running away to France or a record contract she'd signed. Of course none of it was

true. Splendid cleared that up. She was just — not there. Dissolved like mist and summoned only by chance, only from a distance, a figure hunched along the river until you called out to get her attention. When she turned, she would be someone else.

(All of Nell's dreams were of green places. When she woke at the boarding house, she could no longer tell whether she was moving toward her want or being swallowed by it.)

It went on like this for two weeks, until the swan.

(x)

These paths along the river were becoming comfortable. Nell knew how it looked, a young lady walking home alone in the early morning, but lately she'd been feeling as sure and safe as a cat. The river, she discovered, was a thing you could learn. Its smells, its sounds, its people, what grew where along the banks.

That morning took her to Shepherd's Crossing. She'd decided on a long route home, to walk off her tiredness and see a little of the sunrise. The Crossing was an ancient stone path winding under a series of frail stone bridges, and the light there was colder, tinted green from the moss that grew over the walls.

Nell was talking to herself, half aloud, picking at the loose sequins on her bodice. Fog slunk in from the river around her feet. It looked like it should have been cushioning, but Nell could feel a corn, or something hard, developing on her little toe.

That was when she saw it, there on the path beneath the bridge. It was an all-white, rough-looking thing. At first she thought it was a rubbish bag, or a sheet wrapped around

something sinister. But when she got closer her eyes made sense of it: the ghostly shape became a swan.

It lay with its neck fully extended, like a singer reaching for a note; its feathers were dirty in the lapping green water. And Nell had heard somewhere, hadn't she, that a swan sang just once in its life, right before it died? Maybe this one hadn't finished. She nudged it with the toe of her shoe, almost expecting a last sad aria to pop out of its beak.

An aria or — a red glass bead.

She would have said she'd never seen a swan before, except for a taxidermied one at an uncle's wedding in Louisville. She'd been a little girl then, and the size and ferocity of the bird astounded her, as the squalor of this one astounded her now. The first swan stood at the center of a table aflame with glossy oranges and pomegranates, wings spread from one end of the tablecloth to the other. Its feathers were arranged with a decorator's hand, as though they were ornaments rather than instruments made for a particular kind of survival, to repel water and catch the wind. It was meant to be looked at and nothing else.

A blue dragonfly lighted amid the insects crawling over the dead swan's back, then went away so quickly it was like a flicker in time. A moment later, it landed on Nell's bare forearm. Spreading the touch. Her skin squirmed a little beneath it, but not enough to keep her from leaning in.

With dreadful certainty, Nell knew it was a swan she'd seen in her bed last month, underneath the sheets. The sound of it, the long neck. But this was a real thing, lying dead at her feet, and that other thing was — was *supposed* to be — a flicker of unreality in the boarding house's stable world. So another veil had been crossed.

“What did I do to invite you?” she whispered. The swan looked back at her and its eye might as well have been glass.

Her mother hated it when she touched animals, especially dead ones. The breeze she felt on her neck was her mother’s breath; her mother’s voice was in her ear. *Leave that bird alone. Perfect way to catch a disease.* Half out of curiosity and half out of spite, Nell laid her hand on the swan’s cold breast and ruffled the nap of the feathers. They were coarse, not luxurious the way she might’ve imagined. Of course, as soon as she touched them she recognized the texture: there was one of these feathers in her room at the boarding house, in her bedside table drawer.

The body wasn’t bloody or broken. It didn’t look especially diseased. It was just — a dead animal. That was all.

Would the river eventually carry it away? Did the tide even rise up this far? Would some bum pluck it and gut it and eat like a king?

But Nell had already decided she couldn’t just leave it like this. It had been her guide, sort of. Or, at the very least, it had been a shadow in her thoughts for weeks.

Along the banks, tall wildflowers were blooming, almost to waist-height. Nell gathered them, and assigned meanings to the ones she did not know: clumps of something like baby’s breath for innocence, these little ones that might be bluebells for farewell. They were probably weeds. She had to walk a block or more to pick enough.

When she’d put together a disorderly bouquet, stems hanging ragged with nothing to cut them, she arranged the flowers around the dead swan. Willow branches made a bed of silvery-green, and she tucked her flowers in between the leaves and twigs. The blossoms were scentless but the swan was not. Insects scurried through the feathers, but there wasn’t much Nell could do about that.

She stood and wiped her hands on her chiffon party dress before realizing what she was doing.

“Well, I hope I’ve helped you get where you’re going,” she said to the swan.

There was one last part of the ceremony: she took a photograph (it would appear between a picture of a laughing girl in fur and a spilled cocktail on her roll of film) to see it off.

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The rest of the day didn’t seem strange at all. Looking back, Nell wondered if it might’ve been and she’d just missed it, if there had been other signs that something was beginning to go wrong while she was at work, or window shopping, or waving hello to Archie going by on his boat. Was there always a little slipping before a disaster, and you miss it because you’re looking the other way?

It was hot in her bedroom, the dreamy hour of two-in-the-morning, and Nell couldn’t sleep. She’d gotten so used to a nocturnal life that when she tried to go to bed any time before one o’clock her body protested. She looked at the interesting crack in the ceiling and began to imagine a photo exhibition that focused on ceiling cracks. Each picture would be the ceiling in a different sleepless place. Her childhood bedroom. A tornado cellar, listening to the tearing wind. She felt sure it had potential. She yawned and slid a hand to her lower back and rubbed the snakey line of it. All those dancing shoes weren’t doing her any good.

And then, at that in-between hour, just as Nell was beginning to doze, June appeared.

She didn’t say anything to announce herself. The door opened and she slipped, a shadow, into the room. Even in the high summer heat, her form was shapeless in a men’s tuxedo jacket.

June had never come to her before. Nell had always been the one seeking, the one wanting to be seen. For June to want her now was strange, a tear in the fabric of Nell's life at the boarding house, and, in some little place in her subconscious, Nell had the sense to be alarmed. A bad smell wafted into the room when June opened the door. Not the drowsy river-musk that always seemed to be in June's hair, on her skin. This was salty, bodily — blood and piss.

“June?” Nell called out, but her voice didn't seem to go anywhere. Maybe she only thought she'd said anything. Maybe she wasn't making any sound at all. “What's wrong?”

She swung her feet out of bed and clicked on the lamp. Goosebumps prickled underneath her flowered nightdress.

Ophelia hadn't gotten out of the river in that painting Nell saw at the Tate. She would float there forever, the water so still and so dark, all seasons of flowers blooming at once in her hands. Her body would always be fresh and pretty, almost dead and almost not. (Men seemed to think that was the prettiest state a girl could be in.) But if Ophelia *had* gotten out, if she'd stood up in the water and waded, coughing, onto the banks, her dress too heavy to walk gracefully, she might've looked the way June did now. June's hair was matted to her skull. That was another flaw in the artistic imagination: unlike Ophelia's, it was darkened so you couldn't see any of the gold or red.

“Hey — shh, honey, don't cry,” Nell said, because it was all she could think of. But June wasn't crying, not really, at least not in any way Nell could make sense of. She was simply breathing very hard. Her entire body swayed with breath.

When Nell wrestled open the tuxedo jacket to see what was wrong, a shower of glass fell out. Every kind of glass, old, new, painted, all colors, sharp. Depression hobnail and Victorian porcelain. Shattered vases. Halved perfume bottles. Ceramic shards of ancient plates. After a

moment, Nell recognized them — these were the treasures they'd found mudlarking, smashed to a thousand pieces. Futilely, June clutched them to her body. The littlest shards flung loose and glittered on the floor in a dust of broken magic. Longer ones were embedded in June's arms and legs until, with trembling fingers, Nell plucked them out (or tried to, anyway — she couldn't get a good enough grip, and may have driven a few pieces deeper into the wet mess of flesh). The cuts were shallow enough, but turned the chartreuse satin of June's dress brown with blood.

At first Nell did not understand why June had come to her and not Splendid or any of the others. But then she remembered the needle, the swan in her bed, and, taken altogether as a pattern, it made a kind of sense. Nell would have to remember that about herself, that she invited things like this.

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There was only one lightbulb in the bathroom, and it cast the clawfoot bathtub and toilet pull chain and tile in an oily yellow glow. Nell had always hated this bathroom at night. It made her think of a crater of light scooped out of solid darkness, waiting for a hand to fill it up again. Mirrors on opposite walls cast reflections back and forth at each other, here a fragment of June's hair, there a shadow of a wing. A disjointed chatter of images, many things repeated, but some new, strange, chimeric.

Nell ran the bath in a clamor of pipes. Then she took a steady breath and tried to unzip June's dress.

If you had asked her how to hurt June before, she would say she didn't know. June seemed unhurt. She seemed to know everything that could happen, and that might make someone sad, yes, but not afraid, not hurt. Her bones were too sharp, her eyes too opaque.

But when Nell asked her if Mr. Midir had done it, the answer showed in her face, and Nell thought, *Oh, that's how to hurt.*

Undressing June was like undressing a doll, easy and hard at the same time, struggling with a body that didn't help or resist. The back zipper of her dress was jammed a few inches below the neckline, having been pulled up in a hurry. Nell yanked at it. Threads split.

When the zipper broke, it broke June's daze, too. Nell had never seen her move so quickly. She shot out of the ruined dress, got into the bath without removing her underwear, and sank down so desperately the water sloshed over the edge of the tub and puddled on the floor. Nell could see her own face in it, just a little, panting. The water in the tub was already turning pink.

There was so much glass. Even in the dim light you could see it. Nell picked it from June's back, from her hair, and still there was so much. Later she would have to fish it from the bath so no one else would cut themselves lying down.

Nell didn't know how to ask it, but the question hung between them: *What happened?*

June's scratched-up knees were drawn to her chest, and she rested her arms on them and looked at Nell perched there on the edge of the bath.

"Have you ever known a rich man," June said, so raw Nell was afraid there might be glass in her throat, too, "who is obsessed with knowing and counting everything that he owns? Well — imagine you have."

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Imagine a man who owns a river.

Imagine a man of noble birth (if there is such a thing today), with a wife and graying hair and a son nearly your age, who thinks he is unhappy. Imagine one day he sees you in his river and he thinks he loves you, because he thinks he loves all the bits of interesting porcelain and bone that wash up along his shores.

You are a whore, you explain to him, and there have been many men in your life with fancies of love. At fifteen, when you were an ugly thing in an ill-fitting dress, it was flattering. Now it's something you accept the way a horse accepts flies. What is more interesting to you is the comfort you can give a man. Sometimes a man will ask you to paint his face the way you do your own, to smooth with powder and lipstick the lines formed by years of discontent, and he will kiss your hand (only your hand!) with black tears spilling down his cheeks. In those moments you feel really valuable, and kinder than the eye of God.

But this rich man is so committed to his idea of love that he offers you a bargain: if you would like to stay in the river, on his land, you may. If you'd like to haunt the ruins of an old Hotel for a little while, so be it. He will give you a charming flat in the city to dry off in, and buy you a shiny little piano if that's what you'd like. In return, you will multiply his treasured objects, be treasured yourself. He's a collector. You'd be a fine curiosity to show off along his pipe stems and ancient silver coins.

You are a creature of bargains and promises, so you know to make them only when they'll bind the other party more tightly than they'll bind you. In this one, you see a way to get at what you're really after. That is — a home. Not a flat in the city where all the decorations are

bought to match and you'll go to sleep feeling like a rare necklace taken off for the night. A real home, a place where your strangeness will be comfortable, not concealed, and where other people like you will be safe to rest and love each other, too. This is the potential you see in the rotting Eel Pie Hotel, an outcast itself. And, if you're slow and careful with your magic, you think you can take it.

You accept.

The bargain is sealed with a thread of red beads. (The red beads are rowanberries, the thread spidersilk. It's an old binding magic, older, even, than iron.)

For a while it's easy. It goes the way it should, and you like the game of it, the way this rich man will refill your cup if you politely nudge it towards him. In your flat in Soho, where fan palms swish darkly in the corners and the wallpaper has the texture of velvet, he talks to you about Iron Age history and his son's Cambridge applications as you stroke the frost of hair on the back of his hand.

One day he talks to you about his plans for the Eel Pie Hotel. It's his, after all, there's nothing stopping him from turning it into a swank respectable place again. Chasing out all the riffraff. Taking out that gaudy ceiling and papering over the walls. Within a year he could really make something of it. Six months, even. Plans are already taking shape.

The red beads, which are knotted around your ankle, seem to tighten around your throat.

Why not leave it the way it is? He owns so much, why not be kind?

At that, he laughs. I'm already kinder to you and your lot than is proper, he says. Don't push it.

Anger is not an emotion that comes naturally to you, and you don't like the way it makes you clumsy. Grasping. Impulsively, you reach for a new bargain: if you and the rest of *your lot*

can make a home of the Eel Pie Hotel in one night, a proper home, using only what you find on the Island, you can stay. It's worthless as it is, he'll hardly have lost anything. If you can't, he'll have your whole heart, and he can bind it as tight as he wants.

Imagine the way his breathing goes sharp, then still. In hearing it, you know you've misstepped. He sees now, nakedly, what it is you really want — and he hates it. He's greedy, he wants everything that could be his, even the things he doesn't like.

Imagine the crush of glass, the treasures you brought him like a handful of shattering stars. Anger makes us hurt ourselves, too.

Imagine he presses you flat against the bed.

Imagine he presses you flat against the bed of shattered glass.

Imagine he dredges you like an animal in the river. *This is what you wanted, isn't it?* he says, you can hear him distantly above the surface. *A home? This is where you came from, this is where you'll return.*

You cannot move, but you feel like you are changing into a dozen things, one after the other, feathered, scaled, crying, hollow as wood. Through it all he holds you fast and you can do nothing but look at your nails clawing the current as uselessly as they'd clawed the bedspread.

You've lived all your life in water — your parents told you that you flopped out of the acidic darkness of a peat bog and settled into your cradle all mud and swamplight like you belonged there. But you're a creature of amphibious edges, not depths. You've never known how to swim.

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Flies collected on the bathroom light, and Nell found herself focusing on them so she wouldn't feel so sick. She imagined them in her mouth and fought the urge to open it. Sometime while June had been piecing the event together for her, she'd sat down on the wet tile floor, and her nightgown was soaked through and very cold.

"That isn't all," June said, and then was quiet for a long time, so quiet Nell was afraid she might not finish the thought. At last, she said, "It frightens men — people — sometimes, to be with me. They're ashamed. They don't know what it means about them."

Perhaps it was a question with some obvious answer, but Nell didn't see it, so she asked anyway. "Why would they be ashamed?"

There was something almost amused in the look June gave her. She pondered Nell with a smile and sad eyes like Nell was very fascinating.

This whole time, June had kept her body hidden. Nell wasn't prepared for it when she came up to the surface of the water and unfurled onto her back. It was deliberate, almost theatrical. She wanted Nell to see her. It was a test: what am I, what are you? Her breasts were small and uneven, that was what Nell noticed first, and then the outline of a penis not hidden by the nylon underwear and the etchings of reddish pubic hair. June hung there like a flower in the water, eyes closed, inviting Nell to look and not wanting to see Nell's face.

Nell could see her own face in the mirror across the bathroom, the stupid open mouth. She was glad June had her eyes shut.

After a small eternity, June submerged herself fully and became, just for a moment, a swan, then broke the surface a girl, breathless.

Carefully, she asked, "What do you see?"

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There were at least a dozen things Nell could have done, and she wasn't sure any of them would have been right. She could have left June lying in the tub with all that glass and those stories and run back to her room. She could have made a fuss. Woken Mrs. Fink, or any of the girls asleep in the house. There were *rules* about male company. She could have said she'd been deceived.

But what Nell had seen in the dirty water was a person she loved, not deceiving, but trusting her to look.

Maybe that was what Mr. Midir saw too, and he had done this awful thing because of it. Or maybe he'd done this awful thing simply because he could. Maybe he collected things for the thrill of breaking them. Nell didn't know and didn't want to ask. She wanted to chase him from the room.

So, in the end, what she did was this: she brought June her own bath towel, her own nightgown, and turned her back as June dried and dressed, slow again, drops of pink weeping all over everything. (When Nell said they had to do something about the cuts, June waved her away. She did not want to think about them again tonight.)

In the narrow bed they lay together like halves of something, wrapped in linens Nell hadn't washed for a month. Tremors ran through Nell's body, aftershocks, the smaller peals of thunder that linger behind a storm. Behind half-lidded eyes, June was as still as death.

What is *girl*? Nell thought, as June breathed against her. For Nell *girl* had never been something you could decide. But now she glimpsed it briefly as one of June's mudlarking finds,

smooth and pink, something you could salvage and take from what you liked, cast off entirely or make your own.

Maybe home was the same way.

June would be there in the morning. A dove piped from the eaves and the sky was light-tinted and — maybe it was selfish for Nell to think — but maybe not all the world was broken things. Or maybe it was, and that would be alright too.