The Beating of Wings: A Novel

Throwing ‘Other’ Voices: The Paratextual Ventriloquism of Esther Inglis (1571-1624)

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Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Edinburgh

2018
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed:

Samantha Bruce-Benjamin
Abstract

‘by the help of wings mead of pennes and wax’

Esther Inglis, 1620

The Beating of Wings is a polyphonic novel comprised of multiple interior monologues, inspired by the historical development of the fairy tale as a literary genre. Characters are based upon key writers within this movement: Charles Perrault, Rabbi Nachman, Flora Annie Steel, and J M Barrie; as well as associated figures, including the Franco-Scottish miniaturist and calligrapher, Esther Inglis, the Duchess of Polignac, and Edwina Mountbatten.

The subject of this vocal fugue is an ostensibly authorless fairy tale, The Golden Tree and the Moth, handwritten in a seventeenth-century miniature manuscript. Within an omniscient frame modelled after the ancient Indian collection of fables, the Panchatantra (circa 200 B.C.), a succession of first-person narrators chronicle the passage of the fairy tale through time, via the ‘beating wings’ of its woven narrative threads, back to its source. As each narrator ventriloquises the voice of a previous owner, the matryoshka doll narratives engage concurrently with questions of adaptation and appropriation, narratology, paratext, the Barthesian concept of the ‘death of the author’, and literary ventriloquism. Ultimately, the novel aspires to culminate in a fictional rebirth of a defining voice, founded upon gynocritical theory and the silencing of women within the patriarchal canon during the early modern period. This origin of the tale that was neither ‘already written’, nor ‘already read’, is borne of Esther Inglis (1571-1624).

My critical essay considers specific theoretical influences of the novel: predominantly literary ventriloquism, as well as Inglis’s corpus. A marginalised figure in the context of early modern women’s writing, prior to recent academic enquiry Inglis was dismissed as a skilled copyist, whose manuscripts were notable only for her virtuoso calligraphic replication of religious verse in miniature. To this discussion, I introduce Gérard Genette’s concept of
paratext as a viable means of interpretation. I argue that this strand of literary analysis is imperative to our understanding of how Inglis sought to materialise an authentic authorial voice through the paratextual space of her manuscripts, mobilising the trope of literary ventriloquism to facilitate her complex construction as a literary icon. By applying Genette’s taxonomy, I suggest that Inglis emerges as an incisive, progressive, and ingenious publisher and author, who successfully manifested Her word upon the patriarchal page during an era when women writers were silenced or forced to write anonymously.
Lay Summary

The Beating of Wings is a polyphonic novel comprised of multiple interior monologues, inspired by the historical development of the fairy tale as a literary genre. The four central characters are based upon key writers within this movement, including Charles Perrault, Rabbi Nachman, Flora Annie Steel, and J M Barrie, as well as the lives of the seventeenth-century miniaturist and calligrapher, Esther Inglis, the Duchess of Polignac, and Edwina Mountbatten. The subject of this vocal fugue is an ostensibly ‘originless’ fairy tale, The Golden Tree and the Moth, contained within a miniature manuscript, allegedly written by Inglis. Modelled after the Indian Panchatantra (circa 200 B.C.), the first acknowledged book of fables, the novel engages with the concepts of literary osmosis and ventriloquism, adaptation and appropriation, as well as Barthesian and gynocritical theory.

Operating within an omniscient, matryoshka doll framework, The Beating of Wings chronicles the passage of the fairy tale through time and voices as it makes its way, via the ‘beating wings’ of its woven narrative threads, back to its source. From the final night of British rule in India, to 1920s Antibes, to the court of Versailles during the reign of Marie Antoinette, to seventeenth-century Leith, each narrator ventriloquises the voice of a previous owner, subsequently reimagining their experience. This aspect of the narrative provides an intriguing parallel to the role I undertake as author and creator of these characters. Specifically, whether when the author ‘throws voices’ with regard to an historical figure, it is a betrayal, the unavoidably ‘hostile act’ Julie Sanders has disputed. Or if, as Bruce Woodcock has argued, it is less ventriloquism than ‘a performative act of habitation, occupation’, designed to offer a reinvented voice to the marginalised and the overlooked.

My critical essay reflects upon the theoretical influences of the novel, as well as considering the legacy of Esther Inglis (1571-1624). In the context of early modern women’s writing and prior to recent academic enquiry, Inglis has been largely dismissed as a skilled copyist of religious verse whose tiny manuscripts were notable only for her virtuoso
calligraphy and artwork in miniature. As a means of redress, I consider Gérard Genette’s concept of paratext as a viable means of interpreting her corpus. Genette defines the paratext as those elements of a book that provide a frame for the main text, including covers, title pages, frontispieces, prefaces, dedications, illustrations, epigraphs, end pages, author interviews, genre considerations, and formatting. By applying his taxonomy, I explore the ways in which Inglis mobilised the paratexts of her manuscripts and engaged in acts of literary ventriloquism in order to manifest an original authorial voice.
Acknowledgements

The act of thanking someone assumes a variety of tones, from the cursory to the effusive. I believe in simple thanks conveyed meaningfully as words by which to live. So, please allow me to be clear: I am profoundly grateful to Dr Michelle Keown, Dr Janet Morgan, and Iain Sutherland, who all went above and beyond the call of duty on my behalf. I would not have earned my PhD had it not been for these three compassionate, diligent, and deeply intelligent people, who ensured my success. Such kindness is rare and I am eternally indebted.

I also thank sincerely Dr Robert Alan Jamieson, Dr Alan Gillis, and Dr Jane McKie for their guidance and support.
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The Beating of Wings

Samantha Bruce-Benjamin
Preface

The Wharton Encyclopaedia of Folklore, Fables, and Fairy Tales, Third Edition

The Golden Tree

Andrew Shepherd

The Golden Tree and the Moth

Author Unknown

The Golden Tree is the first fairy tale ever to have achieved international notoriety. In 1922, the celebrated Edwardian author, Andrew Shepherd (1890-1975), was accused of plagiarising the contents of a seventeenth-century manuscript allegedly discovered in his desk. It was claimed that the manuscript – a miniature barely the size of one and a half postage stamps – contained a fable, entitled The Golden Tree and the Moth (circa 1615), from which his beloved children’s novel, The Golden Tree and Other Fairy Tales (1911), had been copied. The landmark trial and Shepherd’s subsequent conviction effectively established contemporary copyright laws in the United Kingdom.

From its origin and history to its impact upon Shepherd’s career and children’s literature, the mystery of the miniature remains a subject of intense fascination to literary scholars. Once thought to be an elaborate hoax akin to Kit Williams’s Masquerade of 1979 or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s endorsement of the Cottingley Fairies in 1919, its existence was finally proven when it was bequeathed anonymously to the British Library in 1992.

Distinguished predominantly by its curiosity value, the miniature measures 50.8 by 50.8 millimetres. Bound in a green velvet cover, embroidered in a dazzling array of coloured threads, seed pearls and garnets in the shape of a golden tree, and attached to a gold chain, suggesting it was worn as a necklace, it is impossible to study its contents without a magnifying glass. The interior, however, is significantly damaged. While book historians suggest the miniature may once have contained up to 300 pages, only twenty-
three remain, most of which are ripped, yet reveal exquisite excerpts of an array of
calligraphic hands and artwork of butterflies, suns, and trees. Beyond the title page, which
reads simply, *The Golden Tree and the Moth*, what ensues is a letter of sorts by the author to
an unidentified recipient.

Deemed the ultimate quest narrative, the miniature was initially thought a creation
of the ‘Water Poet’, John Taylor (1578-1653), whose Thumb Bible of 1614 was the first of
its kind in England. Yet, in 1995, feminist and poststructuralist critic Jane Tomlinson
convincingly established the now accepted hypothesis that it is the work of a woman.¹ A
suggestion upheld by the arresting couplet of portraits painted onto the two pages left intact.
One is a painting of a young blond man, cupped in a golden tree, and executed in striking
golds and primary colours.² By almost grotesque comparison, the face of the portrait on the
right-hand page – of the alleged author – has been erased, leaving a hole in the parchment.

The individual, however, does appear to be a woman,³ wearing a white ruff, a black
conical hat upon a head of flame red hair, and, perhaps most intriguingly, a pair of white
wings. Before her is a desk, where she holds a plumed pen above a book, upon which a
quasi-epigraph is inscribed: ‘There is a story that I want my life to tell’.

What that story may have been proves similarly compelling considering the
miniature’s notable – if controversial – history of ownership: an extraordinary roster of
exalted figures, beginning with Marie Antoinette’s closest friend, Yolande Martine de
Polastron, the Duchess of Lerrison (1749-93). The most fabled beauty of Versailles, she
died at forty-four, having been exiled to Switzerland before the French Revolution. Yet, in
that year, she wrote in pencil on the inside back cover, ‘I was the Moth. Yolande, Mistress

¹ See Tomlinson, *The Essential Drift of the Feminine Hand: Domestic Art and Female Authorship in
Seventeenth-Century Britain*. Tomlinson cites the detailed embroidery of the cover, extensive
artwork, and vast array of calligraphic hands, including *lettera mancina* or mirror writing, *lettre
pattée* with triangular serifs, and the trembling line known as *lettera rognosa*, as evidence of female
authorship, during a period when women’s creative expression was confined to such domestic arts.
² This perhaps indicates the author was affluent, considering the high cost of such materials. For a
discussion of the material culture of seventeenth-century manuscripts, see Ziegler, ‘Hand-Ma[i]de
Books’.
³ Given the Elizabethan practice of cross-dressing, the sex of the sitter cannot be verified. See North.
of the Children, Switzerland, 1793’. Seemingly a reference to the text, experts in material culture have established the handwriting as her own, but a line has been scored through her name. Frustratingly, nothing more is known of her ownership.

The same cannot be said of its arguably most notorious ‘owner’, Andrew Shepherd. A literary cynosure of the Edwardian age, philanthropist, and favourite of Queen Mary, his fall from grace sent shockwaves around the country and, it was asserted, shattered the innocence of children everywhere.

In 1922, Shepherd sued Fleet Street for defamation of character, after they published the sensational claim by the minor poet and Soho rent-boy, Thomas Wolcotte (1900-27), – a fixture of his extravagant parties in Hyde Park – that Shepherd had plagiarised The Golden Tree and Other Fairy Tales from the seventeenth-century miniature. The decision to sue destroyed Shepherd’s career when Wolcotte offered allegations of homosexuality into the evidence as proof of the author’s clandestine nature. What rendered the case exceptional, however, is that the miniature upon which the accusation hinged did not appear to exist: whether destroyed, hidden, or lost, Shepherd allowed himself to be tried, quite literally, for the stuff of fiction: an act that continues to perplex scholars, as Wolcotte was the sole witness to his ‘discovery’ of the miniature and searches of Shepherd’s home by Scotland Yard yielded no evidence.

Yet, Shepherd would not have his reputation impugned. His defence vehemently maintained the established belief that The Golden Tree was inspired in 1910 by the then three-year-old, Lady Julia Iris Ashley Gloucester, (later Countess Michener of Burma, the last Vicereine of India, 1907-47), who had lost her nanny in Hyde Park and was found by Shepherd hiding under an oak tree. To calm her, Shepherd had invented the fairy tale. As a reward for their daughter’s safe return, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester became patrons to Shepherd, who subsequently rose to international fame with The Golden Tree and his renowned ‘Man of News’ society column, from his lowly beginnings as an obituary writer.
Upon the tragic deaths of Julia’s father and mother in quick succession, Shepherd became her legal guardian when she was ten: the two glittering fixtures of the London literary circuit.  

Described as the most glamorous trial of the century, Shepherd’s innocence seemed assured until a series of damaging events altered public opinion. Principally, the controversy generated when Julia, then fifteen and key witness for the defence, suddenly disappeared. After a massive year-long search, during which the case was suspended, she was found in Germany but would not reveal the reason for her departure, with many speculating that Shepherd himself had sent her away to prevent her from testifying under oath.

Julia’s heartbreaking testimony, however, divided society when she refused to condemn Shepherd in the wake of Wolcotte’s explicit confessions. Moreover, Shepherd’s duplicity was further questioned when it emerged that he was raised in a Leith Workhouse, after his prostitute mother died when he was eight. Shepherd had always claimed to be the orphaned son of a country banker from Clackmannan, which he immortalised in his bestselling memoir, Tales of Ochil (1918).

The die of public opinion was, therefore, cast and Shepherd was convicted – for the crime of homosexuality, as no proof of plagiarism was established –, his name removed from all further editions of his works, until a new inquest in 1985 exonerated him under revised copyright laws: a reversion aided by the fact that the miniature essentially did not exist until 1992, so its ‘influence’ could not be assessed.

Shepherd served five years in Reading Gaol, but died a pauper in 1975, living in exile in India. Having been denied any royalties, he had survived on charitable donations

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4 For Shepherd’s perspective, see his open letter of 1922 entitled ‘Always Believe’, in which he declared, ‘I am the Golden Tree and Julia is the Moth. The story is the spark I got from her’.

5 The roll call of authors called to testify for Shepherd included T S Eliot and W H Auden, but not A A Milne, who famously refused.

6 For months leading up to the trial, hundreds of people dressed as moths and golden trees lined the Mall in protest over Shepherd’s mistreatment. Even Fleet Street begged him to drop the case after he donated millions of pounds to the East End Children’s Home, which still bears his name.
from Julia, who remained devoted. In their obituary, *The Times* declared his conviction an
abominable and archaic persecution of homosexuality, although Shepherd never publicly
revealed his sexual proclivities. The newspaper further attracted widespread publicity by
publishing Shepherd’s last diary entry:

‘I am not afraid to die. Nor will I be interred beneath this earth. I will stand as tall
as a golden tree, and there I shall find him again. For I have long heard the beating of his
wings in my soul calling to me in my sorrow, and I have waited too many years to answer
that call’.

Many now believe Shepherd referred to Toby Argyle-Mapp (1903-?), the son of a
housekeeper at Julia Gloucester’s family seat. The true nature of their relationship and
Argyle-Mapp’s fate has generated countless scholarly articles and biographies; his existence
discovered in Shepherd’s letters and diaries, only upon his death. What is known is that, as
with Julia, Shepherd assumed legal guardianship over Argyle-Mapp in 1915, paying for his
education and allowing him to summer with Julia in their townhouse in Hyde Park. After
1922, Argyle-Mapp is not mentioned again: yet, Shepherd’s all-consuming love for the
young man is entirely evident in his papers. Whether it was reciprocated is unclear.

The last possible owner of the miniature was Shepherd’s infamous ‘Moth’ of *The
Golden Tree*, Julia, who fell to her death from a window of the Viceregal Lodge in Simla at
a party held to commemorate the eve of Partition. In a fascinating postscript, Julia’s final
words appeared to mimic the epigraph of the ‘woman’s’ portrait: ‘There is a story that I
want my life to tell’. Moreover, Julia wore a similar charm on a gold chain for her official
portrait as Vicereine, just visible beneath her open-necked dress, which might infer she had
kept it to protect Shepherd’s reputation.

Given that the documentation pertaining to her death was – perhaps conveniently –
lost in the unrest after Partition, she may have been misquoted. Furthermore, as the case
was originally investigated as a murder/suicide involving Julia’s unidentified lover, it has
been claimed that George Henry Charles Francis ‘Harry’, Ist Earl Michener of Burma, KG, GCB, OM, GCSI, GCIE, GCVO, DSO, PC, FRS, the last Viceroy (1890-1965), essentially whitewashed the investigation to avert such allegations and to avoid dredging up Julia’s past with Shepherd. Ultimately, the British authorities concluded that she had suffered a tragic, undetermined, accident.

*The Golden Tree* enjoyed a renaissance in popularity in the 1960s with the advent of poststructuralist criticism, when revisionist approaches to Shepherd’s craft sought to re-examine his contribution to children’s literature, particularly in light of the Roland Barthes essay, ‘The Death of the Author’. While there can be no denying the inherent Edwardian sentiment of Shepherd’s fairy tale, it has continued to beguile children and adults of all ages, having sold forty million copies in twenty-seven languages over the last one hundred years, and inspired fifteen stage adaptations, as well as the Disney cartoon, narrated by Grace Kelly and James Stewart, which won the 1957 Oscar for Best Film.

As *The Golden Tree* is the most famous of the contemporary fairy tales, it assumes precedence in this anthology. In addition, however, we have elected to publish, for the first time, the transcript of the miniature as a means of contrast, given its illustrious, if elusive, past.

*The Golden Tree*

Andrew Shepherd

_In the Golden Tree, where the butterflies come to rest, there was one that he loved above all others_.
‘by the help of wings mead of pennes and wax’

Esther Inglis, 1620
The Beating of Wings
PART I

JULIA,

THE VICEREINE
SIMLA, 1947

It would later be recalled, by those who were left behind and inclined to remember, that the Vicereine fell to her death just before the first chime of midnight.

‘There is a story that I want my life to tell,’ she had announced, turning her head slightly towards the audience from where she stood, dwarfed by the massive Tudor window that offered a landscape view of the six hills of Simla.

Her fellow guests in attendance that evening at the Viceregal Lodge all heard her say this. Of this they were certain. Yet, many were too preoccupied with the sudden announcement of the train crash that had killed thousands en route to Simla, to understand why their Vicereine had walked towards that unlatched window: the window that had catastrophically flown open when she placed her hand against it.

It was the 17th of August, 1947; the final night of British rule in India. At the request of the Viceroy and Vicereine, the now redundant British governmental officials, international ambassadors and various ragtag cohorts of authors and actors, misfits and derelicts – including the degenerate children’s author, Andrew Shepherd – to whom they had taken a shine, had gathered in their cherished summer capital of Simla to bid farewell to an old way of life.

Or such was the pretence. In truth, they had gathered for one last story: For the Vicereine’s storytelling hour at the Lodge was a fabled affair; one that nobody ever wished to be denied. Especially not considering that this last might very well conclude a saga that had captivated her audience for decades.

The imposing baronial Viceregal Lodge, built on Simla’s seventh hill, had served as the site of some of the most important moments in the history of British India, as well as its most memorable parties. In the previous century, a former Viceroy, Lord Lytton, desperate to escape the searing Delhi heat, had bulldozed Simla’s forests of pine and rhododendron
trees to create a temperate retreat, reminiscent of the English countryside. And for eighty Imperial summers, British India’s upper crust, the Simla Set, had played along, revelling deceitfully along the one and a half mile ridge between the hills of Jakhoo and Prospect. Yet, none could possibly have foreseen on arriving at the house they knew so well, how tragic British India’s final moment would be. Least of all the departing Deputy Inspector General of the Imperial Police, the guest to whom it fell in the immediate aftermath, to make sense of the Vicereine’s death.

‘Right, now, no-one must leave this room. Stay exactly where you are,’ he cried out over his shoulder, after racing to the window from which she had fallen in the palatial State Reception Room, fashioned after Versailles.

‘How bad is it,’ asked the Secretary of State, arriving at his side: ‘Good God, no,’ he wretched, turning quickly away, and slumping back against the sill. ‘Good God Almighty,’ he said, grasping in his breast pocket for a handkerchief and holding it to his lips.

At the Secretary’s reaction, a scream sounded through the room, releasing the guests from their frozen states. Since the Vicereine’s announcement, nobody had moved. Had anyone entered from outside, they may have suspected everyone was playing a parlour game of musical statues. The Secretary’s reaction, however, was akin to the click of the fingers or the start of the music that would free them from their immobile states. But what a sinister music it was.

Guests everywhere, ignoring the Deputy, ran to the doors to escape, while still more surged towards the wall of windows to see what had happened.

‘She’s been impaled!’ the Countess of Sandwich wailed, ‘On the fence.’

‘Let me see,’ insisted the most beautiful young deb of the season, Lady Amelia, almost too eagerly, forcing her aside from the window and promptly reeling back over the
Louis XVI chair where the Vicereine always sat to tell her stories, shrieking as if she had been manhandled by a ghost.

‘I should never have looked,’ she gasped to her husband, who came to bundle her up in her pink satin and diamonds. ‘It was her eyes, wide open,’ she babbled hysterically, as he carried her off.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She must have pivoted in mid-air as she fell,’ she said, pawing at his chest as she tried to convey the horror. ‘I looked out the window, and it was like she was … a pinned butterfly, gazing up, her white dress spread out around her. Except it was covered in blood,’ she remembered, burrowing her head into his chest and collapsing into convulsive sobs.

The room descended into frenzy. A cigar dropped from fright set fire to a portion of the sixty-foot-long Aubusson rug, filling the high-ceilings with smoke and fuelling the panic, before being hastily extinguished with bottles of champagne. Priceless rococo tables were upturned as women tore their silk gowns, pushing through the crowd to find a loved one, or anyone else they knew, to latch onto. Young men and women raced to the bar, to down what drinks they could find to steady their nerves, while old female friends of the Vicereine, slumped down into chairs and wept. Time moved on for everyone in that room. That is, except for her husband, the Viceroy, who stood motionless at the far side of the window, fixated on his wife’s favourite chair. And, of course, the diminutive, diminished figure of Andrew Shepherd, who had not moved from his ritual spot in the middle of the far wall, where he would listen to the Vicereine’s stories.

‘Stand back,’ commanded the Deputy, swatting guests back from the window. ‘James!’ he said to the doubled over Secretary. ‘Help me,’ he pleaded irritably. ‘Call the station and get every member of staff down here. And nobody, I repeat, nobody, move!’ he shouted out pointlessly, as if to stop the music again and return them to immobility.
Mostly everyone ignored him, unable or else unwilling to pay homage to their fallen Vicereine, a collective response that perhaps caused more suspicion than was warranted. For this was the reason the Deputy found himself investigating what seemed incontrovertibly a suicide as a murder. Or so he said.

The truth was that, like most men, the Deputy had always seemed helplessly in love with the Vicereine. Inexorably saddened not only at the senseless passing of the years but at his impending retirement, he couldn’t bear to accept that she had killed herself. And so he dismissed everything that may have confirmed this, succeeding in turning the ensuing investigation into an absolute farce.

Hours passed in that eminent room where Maharajas and Kings had once dined. Forbidden to speak and illuminated only by the dwindling candlelight the Vicereine favoured for her parties, the guests were shepherded into single lines facing the windows, at a distance – or so the Deputy dictated – of an arms span apart. It was hardly the portrait of an Empire anyone wanted to commemorate when a photographer from the newspaper sneaked in through a back door to snap away at them before being strong-armed out. What a sight they were to behold the next day, emblazoned across the front page of some Indian rag, beneath the triumphal headline, ‘The Fallen Empire’: most resolutely tipsy and dishevelled in their black tie and gowns, holding up their arms to the glare of the flashing bulbs, or else captured in black and ghostly white shock; mascara and rouge running down the women’s faces due to the appalling heat.

Yet, as the hours meandered on, a perception began to percolate amongst those hostages of the investigation. Namely, that the Deputy had taken leave of his senses. For it became entirely apparent that he was never quite looking in the right direction at what was evident, and so the answers he sought eluded him. But then love will do that to a man, however married he might be. It will blind him to the truth of his inadequacies. For while the Vicereine may have luxuriated in the admiring glances of such men, like Cleopatra in
milk, her heart had only ever belonged to one other. A truth that seemed lost on the Deputy as he reviewed the facts in that room; to which her would-be murderers were made privy.

‘She’s only forty,’ he kept repeating to himself, his brylcreemed hair falling loosely over his brow as he stared down at her, ’so beautiful …Might she have tripped?’ he demanded of his lieutenants. ‘I’ll need a list of those who were standing near her.’

‘But Sir,’ one responded, ‘wasn’t she by herself? Hadn’t she just told a story?’

‘Don’t countermand me, boy!’ the Deputy hissed, bristling with a lacklustre fury that quickly lagged under the weight of his sorrow. ‘I want every guest interviewed. Someone must know something. Besides, an awful lot happened here tonight,’ he informed the young lieutenant, glancing too obviously towards the expressionless Viceroy and inviting everyone to turn to the pale, ephemeral woman in an ill-fitting red ball-gown seated beneath the Vicereine’s portrait on a yellow silk chaise: a woman called Severine.

Finally realising that he had said too much, the Deputy caught the Viceroy’s eye and swiftly instructed his minions to march everyone in single file to the garden, where they were placed into a cordoned off area. There they milled listlessly beside the Jacaranda trees the Vicereine had once loved, and where she would often be found, on those afternoons when she was not at the Mashobra cottage, telling stories with Andrew Shepherd. Just as the orange light of an Indian dawn began to seep into the sky, one by one, the guests were summoned to the Viceroy’s library to be interviewed by the Deputy. Most were excused immediately, far too drunk to make any sense, while still more were subjected less to an interrogation than to a rapturous outpouring of affection and grief for the Vicereine, united in their belief that someone so incomparable could not have taken her own life.

And so the Deputy fastened on the one detail of the evening to which he could cling as proof that the Vicereine had suffered some inexplicable accident or else, a far darker fate:

‘What’ he asked of each and every soul, ‘was the story that the Vicereine wanted her life to tell?’
Most, however, were as perplexed and intrigued as he at the Vicereine’s parting words, and could make no sense of what they meant. Regardless, the Deputy could not shake the notion that somehow this was the clue that would explain the mystery in the Vicereine’s favour, returning to the question over and over again. He even went so far as to broach this delicate subject with his wife, from whom he had done a poor job of concealing his infatuation, much to her humiliation.

His perfectionist wife, however, was in no mood to entertain any talk of the Vicereine, having been forced to sit all night in their Bentley, surrounded by armed guards, in the sweltering heat: a situation made even more intolerable as her grey hair had frizzed to high heaven, and her pink cheeks had assumed a crimson hue, despite her manic attempts to powder them into submission.

‘Well? Can we leave yet?’ she asked, craning her head out of the window as the Deputy approached over the driveway.

‘Yes, soon,’ he replied absently, placing both hands on the sill beside his wife in the driver’s seat. ‘But I’m missing something ...what do you think she meant before she died?’

‘How on earth do I know!’ she said, tugging at the neck of her gown to reveal a rash of fresh mosquito bites: ‘I thought she was about to start another of her stories, as if sitting for hour upon hour through the first one hadn’t been tedious enough. Won’t you accept the obvious? She killed herself. End of story. And if you want my opinion, which I know you don’t, it was because of de Lerrison. Her behaviour with him this past summer has been – Well,’ she guffawed, correcting herself, ‘her behaviour with him for twenty bloody years has been outrageous! You saw the way she was carrying on with him at the party: practically unhinged! He was never going to leave that wife, despite what she believed. Men never do, despite their pretty promises,’ she continued, shooting him a meaningful glance.

His wife’s plainspoken words concerning the French Ambassador, Alexandre de Lerisson, appeared to touch a nerve with the Deputy. For, sucking in his cheeks, he bowed
his head and began to scuff his foot petulantly off the gravel. But the scandal surrounding the Vicereine’s lover of decades standing might have had something to do with her death. Their renewed affair, after a prolonged period of absence, had been the sole talk of the season, each detail holding the Simla Set rapt in the corridors of power in Delhi and the clubs they frequented to occupy their time.

‘She didn’t exactly keep the best company either,’ his wife continued. ‘That deviant Shepherd we’ve had to tolerate, manacled to her side everywhere she went. And what that says about Harry, I’ve no idea! A jailbird, no less; his treatment of that Wolcotte boy was intolerable; I mean, he raised your precious Vicereine, it’s no wonder she’s a wanton hussy – she practically grew up in a brothel, even if it was in Hyde Park – and Shepherd didn’t even write The Golden Tree. The children were utterly devastated at the time. Jacinta sobbed for a week, and that was when Nanny had the chicken pox. I didn’t get a wink of sleep. So he deserved everything he got! And, so did she. I mean, have you forgotten how she defended him in the face of such appalling evidence …’

‘Well, as for the Vicereine’s death I won’t accept that,’ the Deputy blustered, ignoring her insults. ‘The facts don’t point to it and you, Helen, don’t know that to be true. Sh-’

‘She. Killed. Herself,’ his wife screamed in frustration, placing a calming hand to her over-heated brow and inhaling deeply.

‘But why?’ the Deputy despaired, incapable of besmirching the Vicereine’s enchanting memory. ‘It doesn’t make sense. She had just finished telling us that captivating story of la Duchesse, which I shan’t forget, and then we went back to our conversations and there was the terrible announcement about the train crash. The next thing I knew, a silence suddenly fell over the room, and I turned to watch her at the window. Then she said –’

‘Well, we know what she said! Everyone heard her!’
‘But what was the story she was going to tell?’ the Deputy cried in exasperation, ‘I mean we’d had the storytelling hour. And if she was going to tell us another story, why on earth would she kill herself? Perhaps – ’

‘Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps!’ his wife exclaimed. ‘That’s all I’ve heard for the past nine hours while I’ve been trapped in this godforsaken car. Perhaps, dearest,’ she said, scratching dementedly at her savaged neck, ‘the room fell silent because we were too polite to ignore her as our hostess. Perhaps, everyone thought she was about to lead us in the national anthem. She did have such an entrancing voice, as you were so fond of pointing out to anyone within earshot. And now, perhaps you can tell me how you know that. Because I have never once in all the time I’ve known her heard her sing,’ she concluded, furiously rolling up the window as if she wanted to try and catch the Deputy’s fingers in it. Suitably cowed, the Deputy took a hasty step back onto the grass where, noting the distraught figure of Severine de Lerisson, he hurried quickly away, as cowards do: especially those with secrets of their own.

Of course, that should have been that, but some stories don’t die, not even when wives insist they must. And the Deputy had rather had his fill of wives, in general, that evening, which is why Severine became the one guest not to be interviewed. She was to have followed the Viceroy, who followed her husband. But the Deputy would not confront her.

This should come as no surprise. For the Deputy already knew what she had to say and could not bring himself to listen to her version of events. And, indeed, in those days Severine was largely derided as someone of great insignificance. After all, her only claim to difference was that she was the wife of the Vicereine’s lover.

But as everyone left without telling her, so she was left alone with the Viceroy.
There is a strange clarity that descends in the wake of a tragedy. As if the power of omniscience is conferred upon those who have truly loved the one lost; the bereaved see every expression, every movement, understanding exactly what it means. Severine was no stranger to tragedy and so the details of those moments, when her nemesis’s loss was not quite palpable, were seared upon her memory. For she would return to every one over the years, all as elusive as fireflies, changing and shifting shape, as the story of the Vicereine’s life and death would become the very reason she drew breath.

She walked up to the library almost in a trance, narrowly avoiding breaking her neck as her shoes continuously tripped up against her far too long hem, to find the door ajar and a partial view of the Viceroy sitting at his desk, the blinds drawn against the already oppressive early morning heat. Approaching the threshold, Severine stopped dead at the unmistakable sound of a man’s voice. Gathering up her skirt and tiptoeing quickly to hide against the wall, she watched through the cracked door as the Viceroy ushered the man in question closer and, in the process, metamorphosed before her.

As a couple, Their Excellencies had been world leaders of style as much as politics, but as the clock ticked loudly on the mantel such laurels withered upon the Viceroy. No more the champion of any sporting match, his lithe, lean frame suddenly sagged in the middle. Perhaps it was the light, but his sandy hair seemed flecked with white, not gold, casting an aged shadow over his once boyish face; his eyes no longer kind, crystalline and blue, but cloudy, too ruinously sad into which to gaze. He reminded Severine of a child who had lost something cherished. And, of course, the Viceroy had.

Later, Severine would ask herself if he failed deliberately to shut the library door to allow for a spectator such as she. After all, later Severine and the Viceroy would become almost as close as man and wife. Except this was a question she failed to pose, from fear of many things other than losing his friendship. For his decision offered a partial view of the walnut-panelled room where he had spent so many blissful evenings with the man who
joined him, chatting deep into the night on the Chesterfield in front of the fire. As such, the
sight confirmed an unrelenting rumour about quite how well the two men knew one another.
And in what fashion.

Severine watched as Andrew Shepherd, leaning his cane against the side of his
chair, settled gingerly at the expansive desk, haphazardly strewn with the Viceroy’s sporting
treasures – the trophies and tennis rackets, the yacht replicas – and his most prized
possession, the Lalique framed photograph of the Vicereine by Cecil Beaton turned not
towards the Viceroy’s seat, but the visitor’s chair.

‘So very beautiful,’ Andrew remarked, contemplating the Vicereine’s image in half-
profile, her hands clasped, as if in prayer, against the chest of her tulle ballgown, her
beloved little black and white dappled dachshund, Mignonette, on her lap. Shaking his head,
the Viceroy drew a deep, impotent breath, which seemed to come up short.

For over twenty years, Andrew and the Viceroy had forged a highly public –not to
mention highly unlikely friendship – under the unwavering attention of Society; one it
perceived with deep suspicion. Because, why not, frankly? Ostensibly – although
unconfirmed – the two had become acquainted during Andrew’s trial. The Viceroy – or
rather Harry, as he was then; a cousin of the Prince of Wales and friend of the Vicereine’s
Aunt, who had practically disowned her – had stepped in to care for the young Julia, as she
was then.

Society, however, had been scandalised by the union, as she was sixteen and he
seventeen years older. Not to mention her fulsome support of Andrew, whose alleged night-
time prowling of homosexual toilets were luridly detailed each day before her in the High
Court, from which she refused to stay away. That is, after she had been dragged back to
England from Germany, where she had inexplicably fled, to testify in Shepherd’s defence.
This she did passionately despite the cost to herself. Indeed her reputation had been almost
irrevocably destroyed when, on the day of his conviction, she had cried out on the steps of
the court, ‘He was an innocent. That’s how he could write *The Golden Tree*. And I was the Moth.’

Only Harry, carrying her off as she sobbed prompted a pang of nostalgia in the hearts of the public and allowed for a stay of execution. For she was just like a little girl, reminding those old Edwardians, seated in the court of opinion, of how she had first appeared to them: as a tiny thing, nude as the day she was born, and all of three, sitting on Andrew Shepherd’s knee on Margate Sands, underneath *The Times*’s heraldic headline, ‘The Little Duchess and her Butterflies’. And so the world had been introduced to the inspiration for Andrew Shepherd’s children’s classic, *The Golden Tree*; a fairy tale so popular it counted four Royal Princesses, the future King, not to mention Lloyd George, as amongst its greatest fans. Why, there was even a version in Swahili.

Indeed, on Andrew’s twenty-eighth birthday, when she was eleven, Julia had stood on a cocktail table at The Ritz wearing a pair of white wings and recited it, to his delight and sadness, as he wept like a baby: a fact that nobody thought to scrutinise until much later. At the time, they were far too distracted by the presence of the Prince of Wales and his new married mistress, the tableware heiress Freda Dudley Ward, who it was alleged very much enjoyed being ‘served’ from all sides, not just the left.

The Viceroy placed a hand to his lips. Severine worried that the Deputy had upset him too terribly with his tactless display during the investigation. For the Viceroy had loved his wife madly, initially refusing to believe any of the scurrilous rumours that so many had brought to his attention during their marriage, before being forced to concede them when she refused to come to heel; allowing her free rein, provided she remained by his side.

Andrew began to say something but thought better of it as the Viceroy considered him carefully, his expression hardening, by degree.
‘I will not speak of my wife again after today,’ he said, turning the photograph proprietarily towards himself, ‘but I will tell you what I believe, Andrew, partly to ensure that this is the last time we meet. I had hoped to keep some remnant of her to myself. After all, so many shared her with me,’ he added, desolately.

‘What can you mean, Harry, the last time we —’ Andrew interrupted, jerking cagily in his seat and grasping for his cane before it fell to the floor.

‘What I mean is that our lives were an open book,’ he continued, oblivious to Andrew’s concern. ‘We lived on display. Yet, there were things I knew about her that no-one else did. Not even you, her ‘Creator’: things that belonged to me.

‘The truth is that she chose to die,’ Harry said, his voice breaking as he clasped her photograph against his chest like a missal. ‘Heartbreak led her to that window to escape an inalienable fact; the best of her life was past. Her India no longer existed because the men in that room, with my approval, gave it away one afternoon while she sat, oblivious, underneath the maidenhair trees.

‘It was the one crime of which I was guilty as her husband, not being able to deny India independence from Britain: the one wish I was unable to grant. But, her death has granted forgiveness; the forgiveness she would not have been able to offer me had her innocently expectant eyes ever met my own again, after the chimes of midnight confirmed the fact of my betrayal.

‘This is what I would have believed. But for this …’ he said coldly, reaching into his breast pocket.

Unable to thwart her curiosity, Severine inched closer to the door. The Viceroy held something small in his right hand, which seemed to glint in the meagre light cast by the table lamp.

‘I discovered this around Julia’s neck when she was lying in state. I was granted a moment alone with her. It’s the miniature you were accused of plagiarising,’ said the
Viceroy. “There is a story that I want my life to tell.” Until I found this, my wife’s words served as the conclusion of a fiction she had begun, only for me, when we first met. I was inclined to interpret them as a parting gift borne of immense compassion on her part; to regard every detail of the deliberate path she trod towards her death as intensely meaningful; carefully orchestrated to console me in my grief. The most poignant of which was her choice to kill herself just before the first stroke of midnight.’

He looked back to Andrew, but everything vital had been robbed from the Viceroy, as if the blood had frozen in his veins. ‘In that last moment, I imagined her as a character in one of the fairy tales she loved, suspended in a moment of grace: the glass slippers of Fortune still glinting on her feet, the magical life she had created safe at her back. No,’ he said, his face contorting, ‘not for my wife to have to acknowledge the death of all she had loved; she spared me that. She chose to die, before the chimes of the clock could transform her once more into something ordinary, a tourist in a foreign land.

‘This is the end to her story I wanted to believe. But I was wrong. My wife was a liar. She was always your creation. “There is a story I want my life to tell”, is the first thing written on this tiny, stupid page,’ he said, angrily. ‘She was speaking to you, wasn’t she?’

The Viceroy said nothing more. He merely sat there, clutching her photograph, soundless tears streaking his face, as Andrew hung his head over his cane.

Momentarily, Andrew’s hands flew to his face, like a struck animal, when ‘Here,’ the Viceroy screamed, throwing the miniature at him. ‘Keep it. I defended you, Andrew, but how could I trust you again? Julia was complicit. You’ve kept this from me for over twenty years. So what else did she lie about? Was it true about her and Toby? That he interfered with her when she was fifteen, your darling ward who hasn’t been seen again? Good God man.’

‘Harry no,’ Andrew cried, as he scrambled like a beggar after scattered pennies to retrieve the miniature, when a sudden smash gave Severine such a fright she clasped a hand
over her mouth and Andrew, in his shock, dropped the tiny book to the floor. From his hunched posture, he didn’t want to, but turned to the sight of the carnage, regardless. There, he saw Harry, his back to him, weeping. His hand was covered in blood, cut by the shards of glass from his wife’s photograph, which he had shattered, mercilessly, against the wall.

Andrew rushed to hold him, but despite the hostility he had displayed, the Viceroy did not pull away. Instead, he wept in Andrew’s arms like a man reunited with someone very dear after years of absence, his cheek pressed against his. While at their feet, the Vicereine gazed up from the destroyed Lalique frame covered in blood, smiling as if the guardian of Andrew’s choice: forgiving him every trespass once more.

‘Julia,’ Andrew whispered, and finally allowed himself to be overcome.

Severine watched until the end. As it was to be the last time the Viceroy and Andrew saw one another, later she felt highly privileged – and not a little superior – to have observed such a telling scene. But then as a historian, Severine couldn’t quite relinquish her propensity to document. She had literally stood on the threshold of history as it played itself out; the Empire had fallen as had the Vicereine; every detail of the party had been afforded to her and so she could chronicle with conviction, which ultimately she did in her many books on British India. Yet, the colour of the Vicereine’s dress, the number of servants in the Viceregal Palace, the time the Simla train crashed killing thousands, all of it was, in truth, by the by. For there was only one fact of any import to her that evening: something she never wrote down.

In his sorrow, Andrew Shepherd left behind the miniature.
THE MAN OF NEWS

The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1973

We begin, as we always begin, with a memory:

‘The day you first saw the Vicereine. It was in Hyde Park, wasn’t it?’ he asks. ‘And what was it you said, again? I forget.’

‘I said, “I am a Man of News,”’ I reply. ‘“I have told the stories that come to matter. May I tell one to you?”’

‘Yes,’ he smiles, settling into the comfort of the chair on the lawn, here at the Retreat in Mashobra, where the Vicereine loved the man they called de Lerisson that summer of her perfect happiness. ‘That was when she was three. When she was Julia,’ he adds eagerly, a touch duplicitously, knowing it will engage my interest, ‘before she became the Vicereine. And she wore silver ribbons in her hair.’

‘That’s right,’ I say, and allow the silence to fall as I seat myself at his side.

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Of all the people closest to me who I loved, I am almost the last one left. That this should be the case strikes me as entirely unjust. But then whenever those we have loved most recede from view, sometimes without even a goodbye, the heart cries foul. So I forgive his manipulation. Besides, I am accustomed to this game: it is the one constant of our lives here, in this extraordinary exile. Stories, that is. Or rather the only one that matters to him: of The Golden Tree and of Julia, whom we loved.

I sit and wait, beside the bed of marigolds where he rests; disinclined to move, to shift; to follow only where he leads.

‘I don’t suppose you’d tell it to me again, for old time’s sake. I travelled a long way, as you know,’ he says, reaching for my arm with the gentle grace of which I am so fond.
Too long, I think, this beautiful blond boy in his pale linen suit who once had the world at his feet. His eyes are closed, so I permit myself the luxury of gazing upon him, without impediment. Time has altered the radiance. There is no escaping this fact; he is worn now around his golden edges, and far too old for a story. But the child, as they say, is the father to the man, and that is what I choose to remember; the light of that child I adored; his innocence, his bright eyes that hoped and hoped and hoped.

‘You can’t expect me to fall for that old canard,’ I tease. ‘You came back here years ago, dear boy.’

‘True, but I’m forgetful,’ he parries, with weary charm, understanding that I, too, am playing a game, covetous as ever of his approval, his reassurance.

‘But I’m so old. Surely you must be growing tired of my rendition. Besides, the world no longer stills to listen, how could I possibly entertain one so young?’

He sighs affably and plays along; ‘But, Andrew, nobody could tell it better than you. That’s why the people bought your books in droves. Why they come here to this day, to India, all this way from London, just to listen to your stories.’

I thrill to his words, even as I acknowledge their irrelevance. I want to reach for him, to smooth his hair, to take his little face in my hands. Such is the desire I harbour that I force myself to conceal: the desire for his forgiveness, upon which I feast.

‘But all it was, was the spark I got from you, from Julia,’ I say, resting my hand on his, something he accepts without rancour. ‘A debt I cannot repay.’

Yet, I leave these last unspoken.

‘Please. One more time,’ he says, placing his hat over the perfect bones of his weathered face. ‘Then I’ll never ask again.’

Oh but you will, I think.

And I will let you.
‘Very well then,’ I say, settling my half-moon glasses on my nose, those I wore for my portrait in The National Gallery; the one they burned after the words were daubed on it. ‘But where to start this morning?’

There can be, of course, only one beginning as I study the prize I clutch in my gnarled and twisted fingers, which used to flex with ease. If one’s hands are the truest indication of social rank, then I have not left my origins: I who was once too unbearably poor for most people to contemplate. I might as well have worked as a navvy for they possess no refinement, no fluid lines; they are the hands of an Edinburgh Leith tenement orphan, over-used and almost defunct. They tremble with palsy, the words I write misshapen scratches upon a page where once they were an elegant sea.

I used to care about such things, but no longer. For in them is contained the most exquisite jewel that I have ever owned: the miniature glistens in my hand, bound in green velvet and adorned with rubies, emeralds, and seed pearls to resemble a golden tree. And within are the pages so tiny a magnifying glass can barely decipher them. But I need no guide as to their peerless markings. They are the landscape of my soul.

I clasp my hand over it as if I am cocooning a butterfly; one that I refuse to fly free. For this is where it began; with this story I told the little girl who grew up to become the Vicereine; one that would become my greatest legacy and my greatest regret.

I don’t know whether to condemn or commend Julia, as we knew her, for peering deep within me and finding something of worth. All I know is that she ruined me.

‘“In the Golden Tree, where the butterflies come to rest, there was one he loved above all others ...”’ I recite.

‘“Again, again!”’ he says, sleepily. ‘That’s what she said. She clapped her hands and said, “Again, again!” when you finished the story. Julia. In Hyde Park. Such a long time ago.’
'Over sixty years,' I reply, as we sit in the grounds of her decaying cottage, nestled high on the hill of Mashobra.

It is so far from where I was born, this tiny town on the India-Tibet road, surrounded by the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, forests of pine trees stretching for miles down sheer drops in every direction. But the more treasured for it. For here with my boy beneath her favourite oak tree, the banks of rhododendrons, balsam and wildflowers vividly in bloom around the periphery of the lawn, it is as if she lives.

Julia, my Julia, lingers in every facet of the garden she lovingly carved out of her 300 acres, in this place where the sun only offers warmth. She flits before me in the crystalline view up the garden steps to the cottage. She moves through the hall of her perfect replica of a Georgian manse, the windows set in matchless symmetry on either side of the door left open for me to follow. And there, past the roses in bloom over its Palladian arch, I find a clear view to the back of the house and the mountains, and the tremulous shadow of an enduring memory: Julia in a pale chiffon tea dress, leaning against the balcony pillar to smoke a cigarette before dinner, “A view of the world from God’s eyes, not even you could have imagined this, Andrew,” she would say, whenever I joined her there to talk of the past, of Toby, to grasp what happiness we could from the wreckage.

But there are no coolies left to tend us, no punkah wallahs grinding the great Palmyra fans overhead, no tigers pacing the lawn in proprietorial circles to protect their mistress, no promise of a party this evening beyond the French doors. Only fragments of visions, clouded by time; Julia in her picture hat, waiting at the gate for de Lerisson to appear at the end of the rickshaw path; Julia on her chintz-covered sofa by the fire, twirling her pearls as she told him the things they would do; Julia, watching Mignonette run over an endless lawn; Julia, at forty, flowers in her hair, turning to me with that heartbreaking smile, as if to beg me to reach out a rescuing arm and save her: an arm I kept manacled to my side.
It is now, as always, that I allow her voice to speak, somewhere deep within.

‘Again, again!’ she cries. ‘Again, again!’ beseeching me to return only to the beginning. As if I alone possess the power to cancel out her end.

I cannot deny her. All that we are is a story, left behind for someone to tell. And indeed who but I could tell it better: I who was once the darling of Princesses and Kings; I who had a statue erected in my honour in a London square in Kensington they smashed to smithereens; I who once held the key to immortality and taught the children to believe.

So on this late autumnal day in India, with the marigolds in full bloom, I return to her life with my boy, despite what it will cost me. It looms larger and larger over us, this tale, casting us into shadow against the grandeur of things too rare to be lost, but which surely were.

As I have said, I am a Man of News. I have told the stories that have come to matter.

I tell this story for my friend: my pal.

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It has been said there are only two plots in all of literature: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. It strikes me that this history contains variations on both themes: the difference being that my most important visitor was no stranger and I was an entirely unwilling passenger on the journey upon which I was dragged. Yet, there is something about lives left unfinished that consume more tender souls: a longing for an ending, whereas the wiser amongst us are content to allow for the open-ended-ness of ignorance. So I suppose it was inevitable that they would come to me – various friends and former paramours, journalists and biographers – after Julia bequeathed the Mashobra cottage, the old Retreat, to me in her will: each of them seeking answers, as if I could offer some final insight that might bring them everlasting peace.
Why – how – did she die? they would beg. Did she trip or did someone push her through the window? You were so close; you must have seen something? What really happened? Because you cannot believe that she killed herself? And, please, did she reveal anything in her letters, the diaries she kept here: the ones she left to you...?

I have always been privy to confidences, sometimes from the most exalted of persons. There is a curious irony in recognising that my ears have burned since I was a young man of twenty – first as a journalist, then as an author, and finally as a dissolute homosexual, when everything came full circle and the twain met … As a Man of News, the confidences I ferreted out frequently exposed what was better left hidden, whereas in my second role, such confidences were intended only to immortalise the teller under the auspices of modesty, so they could become an influence in one of my books; and in my third, I received my punishment and realised why that wise monkey held his hands fast to his ears.

This was partly why Julia’s devastated successors sought me out, after she entrusted me with her artefacts – as a final apologia, or out of a desire that her story should not die? I cannot say for certain. Her survivors came to consider me the last clue, the stone left unturned, and what they hoped lay beneath that stone weren’t fearful insects startled and scurrying, but answers, truths. For, crucially, they perceived that her legacy somehow belonged only to me. And in this they were correct: after all, we had borne one another.

I didn’t reveal what I knew. I simply relived the regrets of my visitors with them, as they would confide every detail; an exhaustive account of that last evening at Simla, of everything they did and thought and said. And, of course, most of them are dead, those who loved Julia. No more does the garden gate open to admit strangers parched for answers, which is something of a relief as the burden of keeping her secrets ultimately weighed too heavily, and the cost too high to carry.
You see, what everyone at Simla, including Harry, failed to realise was that Julia neither chose to die because she had gone mad from grief over the loss of India or else a disastrous love affair, nor because she had suffered a terrible, if inexplicable, accident. I believe that nothing had seemed clearer to her, as she watched out over that Indian night, waiting ever on for a sign.

No, what ended Julia’s life was the whisper. The whisper that no-one heard, uttered as it was, just as she announced, ‘There is a story that I want my life to tell:’ the whisper that placed an invisible hand on her back and pushed her forward to an unanticipated end.

This was the truth I had never divulged, not even when grown men wept at my feet. That is, not until Severine.

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She came to me on a Tuesday. It was mid-morning, some eight years ago, when a flock of birds disturbed my reading by revolting en masse from the oak tree under which I sat. They had been startled, I soon discovered, when I looked over to find her lingering by the gate, her hand tentatively resting on the lever, apparently unsure whether to stay or go.

As distinctive as ever, with her blunt cut white bobbed hair and eyes of the palest, most disconcerting, blue, she was impossible to ignore. But no more the mismatched and misshapen garments of her past that had prompted such derision from the chorus of Simla ladies. No, she was altered, soignée, for the first time since I had known her. She wore a brilliant red dress, an Indian blood red, offset by heavy gold bracelets that chimed like the toll of a penitential clock on her wrists as she moved over the lawn to greet me. Had she befriended some Maharaja, I speculated? Was he responsible for this metamorphosis, or had he merely taken pity on her? Whatever the cause, she appeared before me re-written.

I often wonder at my surprise that Severine had finally found me. It strikes me now as inevitable that she should have come to the cottage: after all, ties had once bound us so tightly I still own the scars. And although I immediately wished her gone, Severine’s
presence awoke simultaneously an unwelcome curiosity in me, which I found difficult to set aside.

I suspected her to be on some sort of pilgrimage into the past: she must have been in her early sixties by then and I seventy-five. Something to do with the death of the Viceroy, who had been assassinated by terrorists earlier in the year: after Julia’s death, Severine had become his closest confidante, much to the consternation of the Simla Set who had returned with them to Britain after the fall of India. I, however, had merely considered their union predictable.

Arriving at my chair, Severine cast me into deliberate shadow; ‘Andrew,’ she said, and as she stood there waiting, I found I could not speak, intoxicated by her fragrance, by the memory it evoked. Jasmine, the scent Julia had always favoured.

‘I —’ she began, hesitatingly. ‘I should like to discuss something with you. I should like to ask for your help.’

I immediately noted her tone, which struck a discordant note when contrasted with my memories. Where had the harsh edges of Severine disappeared; the disappointed, worn out scowls that had made her appear so much older? ‘I wouldn’t have recognised you,’ I replied, dismissively. ‘My, how you’ve changed.’

Severine accepted my barb with resined weariness, shifting her weight from foot to foot as if her shoes were pinching, her shoulders slightly hunched. I intuited then that her altered personae was relatively new, she was not yet comfortable in this character’s skin. For, instantaneously, as if the clock had chimed midnight and her elegant clothes were divested, she stood before me, a blue-stocking waif in a ridiculous outfit, the anomaly of the fashionable Simla Set: the ‘whatever-does-he-see-in-her’ wife.

‘I’m a historian now. Well, you know I’ve always had an interest in history. I’m working at the Viceregal Lodge, as a guide,’ she remarked, expelling a bewildered gasp at the irony of her situation. ‘Guiding tourists through the remnants of the Empire, such as it
is,’ she shrugged, uneasily pulling her red shawl tighter around her. ‘The Indian authorities
don’t take care of anything….

‘Look, I’m sure,’ she continued, her bracelets jangling as her hand flew to her hair
to keep it in place, ‘it must seem unfathomable that I would come back here: to you. But I
had to. When I heard you were living here. I had to. May we go in?’ she asked anxiously,
turning towards the house as if my assent was a fait accompli.

I glanced up the lawn to this divine cottage, almost as if I expected to see Julia
waving to me from the steps, Mignonette at her feet. I felt the familiar sorrow that she was
gone, nothing more than a memory to be recreated when I could bear. And it would still be
cool inside, I thought, almost too cool, I liked the heat. Severine, however, did not seem to
enjoy the sun, exposing her and, by association, the artifice of her outfit to me so glaringly.
Yet, with nigling unease, I recognised that I would not deny her as I reached for my cane;
this reunion seemed somehow necessary. And so I followed.

It occurred to me that I was like a rat of the Pied Piper being led towards a
drowning, as I stumbled up the steps into the house, for she offered no steadying arm to help
me. But then I almost laughed involuntarily at the association, the idea that Severine could
ever so beguile: the idea that Severine could ever be trusted with the care and happiness of
children.

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‘So this is where it went,’ she said, as I opened the French door for her to enter
Julia’s drawing room.

I extended a hand against the doorframe for support, annoyed at myself for not
having guessed the reason for her visit; too preoccupied with Julia’s ghost. Of course,
Severine’s come to trap – to defame – me, knowing she will be believed, I thought,
appraising her; to reclaim the gilded treasures I stole from the Viceregal Lodge under the
auspices of heritage, all of Julia’s hallowed possessions they would have destroyed after Partition.

I moved slowly towards the fireplace, as much from the crippling arthritis that had blighted me as a latent fear of Severine’s vaguely feral aspect.

‘It’s probably best you’ve got this here,’ she commented lightly, glancing around at the de Gournay silk papered walls depicting Indian landscapes in sepia and gold, the deep pink rose chintz of the Chesterfield sofa and brilliant Chinese yellow of the fireside bergères, the fuchsia and gold flowers of the Sèvres porcelain vases that dotted tables here and there, the Orrefors chandelier suspended in the centre of the room.

‘It’s not as if there’s an Indian National Trust and so the antiques you loved at the Lodge, Andrew, the detritus of our bygone era, have aged without interference. Although, I’ve tried to prevent any further damage. I’ve had them string golden ropes around the furniture and paintings as cordons.’

‘That’s a bit hypocritical, isn’t it?’ I countered, unable to credit her with safeguarding what she helped to destroy.

Severine returned my gaze levelly, and I almost detected a glint of defiance, but instead, she apologised. ‘Most of it’s damaged anyway. I’m glad you took some of it, but wear cotton gloves when handling any of this; neglect is less dangerous than inexpert treatment. No oils to clean, ever,’ she concluded with a deferential nod that almost softened into a smile, were it not for what captured her attention: the official portrait of Julia as Vicereine over the fireplace, which had once owned pride of place in the State Reception Room at the Lodge. The very one Severine had sat beneath the night Julia died, intent on her every move.

It was situated on the far wall, where daylight did not fall, and in this way my Julia was protected, although I loathed keeping her in the shadows. Yet, Severine delayed meeting Julia’s eyes, busying herself with other objects, almost lovingly, before finally
conceding her presence. I might have been amused were it not so preposterous that either woman could hold any regard for the other. Regardless, I vaguely admired Severine’s humility in confronting Julia’s image. It was quite unprecedented, the small smile that Severine wore, offset by an almost imperceptible bow of her head. One might have thought it kind. But then I suppose she had nothing left to envy her.

‘Where did he used to sit?’ she announced suddenly: ‘When he came to visit? Show me, please.’

And so de Lerrison arrived between us once more. The shared history we could not escape. Sensing it would be a misstep on my behalf were I to hesitate, ‘Here,’ I said, indicating the duchesse brisée by the fire.

‘Then if you wouldn’t mind, Andrew,’ she stated, as if I would obey her unquestioningly, Severine ushered me into it with a sweeping hand gesture, as if she was taking me through a guided tour of all that once was. ‘I need you to sit there.’

Her dictates began to rankle. ‘Why Severine? What purpose does this serve?’

‘I want to talk about the night she died,’ Severine said, the words flying forth on a volley of self-conscious energy. ‘About what happened,’ she continued, walking briskly towards the large-paned bay window where I had placed Julia’s storytelling chair. One of her bird-like hands, brittle and long-fingered, the skin scaled like wings, rested on its arm as she gazed out to the gardens.

The chair had been a gift from Louis XVI to an ambassador centuries earlier, upholstered in duck egg blue silk and adorned by a carved wooden ribbon at its top. It was where Julia always sat to tell her stories during those summer nights at the Lodge, twirling her priceless strand of seventy-four evenly shaped pearls in her hand as she mesmerised us. I tensed as Severine traced the ribbon with the tip of her finger, like tracing the lips of a child, one she was not sure whether to adore or admonish. But it was like watching through
a distorted mirror: I had witnessed such an action before. Yet, why she would seek to replicate it unnerved me.

‘You see, I’ve been searching for you, Andrew, longing these years to finally be asked what I know and how I know it about the night she died. You recall the Deputy failed to interview me,’ she said with ill-concealed disgust, pulling herself up tall. ‘The Deputy with his private school, patrician cruelty, still believing himself to the handsomest head-boy, callously disregarding girls who aren’t worthy of his time. Girls like I was …’

I remarked immediately her choice of the word, ‘was’.

‘His official account was surprisingly lyrical: how did it go again,’ she mused, turning around. ‘Oh, that’s right,’ she said, and began to recite:

“As no clues materialised in the aftermath of the Vicereine’s death, with a leaden heart I am forced to conclude that we cannot understand how she died. Though perhaps this is an appropriate conclusion for a woman who lived most of her life as an incarnation in a book, be it fiction or history: one indelibly inscribed by someone else’s hand as my own inscribes her end. I attach here, therefore, my official conclusion, in itself a most haunting epigraph:

“On the final night of British rule, the incomparable last Vicereine of India went mad and her beguiling opening sentence to a story she was never to tell, regrettably meant nothing at all…. 

‘Evidently, he imagined himself Dickens …’ Severine scoffed. ‘Not that he was allowed to publish that. Harry made sure of it. No, the official public account merely said she suffered an undetermined accident. But that wasn’t the whole truth, was it, Andrew?’ Severine concluded quietly, almost anxiously, clasping her hands under her chin.

‘Wasn’t it Severine?’

‘No, no,’ she protested, her expression assuming a vacancy as if she were peering back into another time and place.
Severine had always required careful handling when she was younger, although not an obvious woman, either in personality or presence. In fact, very few bothered with her beyond pleasantries. Infuriatingly cryptic, she often left sentences unfinished, rarely involving herself with the diplomatic duties of a wife. Nor was she proficient at playing the role, even when it was required. No-one had ever been able to fathom the union between the elegant French diplomat and his almost child-like wife. For everything about Severine reeked of a lack of development: her near-skeletal limbs, the pale eyes which stared up at people from behind a blunt cut fringe, curiously repellent in their unblinking, impenetrable, vastness.

By the time she came to me, Severine had changed, but only up to a point. At best, I sensed that she was a blank better left unfilled. And so I thought to draw an end to our meeting: the notion of rewarding her in Julia’s last site of peace, wholly distasteful. Worse, I was beginning to feel vaguely imprisoned. And I feared I was far too old to fight her off.

‘I’m not sure there’s anything to be gained from reliving that dreadful night. Besides,’ and here, I felt my temper rise as she leaned on Julia’s chair, which creaked painfully under her weight, ‘you coming here is despicable, given the past.’

‘No, please,’ she protested in horror. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, raising forestalling hands to placate me. ‘I haven’t come to cause trouble. I want to ask for forgiveness: it’s so important, you see, because I need something from you. Something only you can give,’ she continued, moving forward but thinking better of it as I recoiled from her. ‘I need you to tell me a story.’

The room fell silent then. For not even I could avoid the poignancy of such a request: nor how much it must have cost Severine to make it.

‘My husband is senile, Andrew,’ she began to sob, burrowing her head into her red shawl and inviting another disturbing memory. ‘And all he can remember is her,’ she said, raising her head and looking at the portrait.
Even in the darkness of that portion of the room, it was possible to make out Julia’s tiara glinting winningly upon her fair curls, her pale skin and refined bone structure made only more arresting by the shadows that fell over her; and the brilliant blue sash of her silk ball gown, draped winsomely over her shoulder, fetchingly offset – and I can imagine how she thought this herself when she pinned it on – by a spectacular brooch of rubies and emeralds that could only have been the gift of a King.

So Julia had kept him in death, if not life. To the victor, the spoils, I thought. Yet, the realisation brought me no joy.

‘What was the story going to be?’ Severine pleaded. ‘What Julia said before she died, “There is a story that I want my life to tell:” I need to be able to tell him. You see, every day he asks me for that story. Me,’ she despaired. ‘He doesn’t know who I am. It’s as if we never met.’

Her arm holding the shawl fell listlessly to her side, almost in renewed defeat. ‘Can you imagine that after everything she stole from me I’ve been left the custodian of her memory? Of the woman he loved best. Each day, he tells me about their years together and that perfect last summer here in this enchanted house,’ she said, taking it in from floor to ceiling as if she wanted to burn it down. ‘He remembers every detail, every conversation, every moment up to her last words. And then: nothing. Only his endless anguish that he can’t hear the story she promised to him. And I cannot help him.

‘There’s my answer,’ Severine said, pointing to Julia. ‘But how to make her tell me; how to make her speak, Andrew?’

‘I don’t understand what you want.’

‘How can I live,’ she said, locking her hollow, ravenous eyes onto mine, ‘when he is still in love with her memory?’

‘But she died.’

‘He doesn’t remember that.’
‘You don’t tell him?’

Severine shook her head fiercely.

And so Julia is immortal, I thought.

What a pitiful creature Severine was, standing stooped over that chair. And yet she could not bring herself to break her husband’s heart, even though he had betrayed her in every thought, word, and deed for as long as they had been married.

‘Each story Julia told was about my husband, or me by association,’ she said, softly. ‘I used to read her letters to him; he would hide them in the wardrobe, in the breast pocket of his best suit. That’s how I always knew what was going to happen next, like a serpent’s treasure hunt where every discovery led to a poison that destroyed another part of our marriage. She had told him to choose that last night, once and for all: “My Beauty” or “My children” – that was the choice he was constantly torn between: which way to turn, Love or Duty? And he was to give her the answer, “My Beauty” or “My children”, after she finished her story. Julia was so specific about this. But as she didn’t finish it, I can’t know whom he was going to choose: her or me.

‘You were closest to her,’ Severine asserted, almost accusatorily. ‘You know what that story was going to be. It would have determined my future then. And it still can: if he was going to leave me, I can let him go: I have some years left, I could be happy, maybe. And if he wasn’t, then maybe I can ease his suffering; and we can share a companionship without her shadow at our backs.’

‘Wouldn’t you wish to forget the pain they caused you?’

‘Peace. I. Just. Want. Peace. I have nothing left: he’s gone, off with her in his mind, in his heart. And my children, my lost children …’ she said, before smothering the words with her hand.

Almost I had fallen for her ploy, but her words jolted me back to reality: of the disappearance of the two eldest children, Nico and Angelica, shortly before Partition.
Twins, in their early twenties, they were helping in the refugee camps; it was thought they had got caught up in one of the many riots.

‘Don’t you dare,’ I said, rising in my seat unable to quell the anger that had cost me every ounce of happiness, ‘never mention those children’s names. Or I will kill you with my bare hands. My God,’ I exclaimed, furious at myself for having entertained her. ‘You will stop at nothing, even this elaborate ruse. So I’m to believe you’re heartbroken? You were always so good at tricks to get what you want, but you cannot imagine – even if I did know – that I would tell you, not after what you did to Julia. Besides, you say you’re a stranger to him. So you’re asking me for the story so you can pretend to be her, and keep him that way: by a trick. But I won’t allow it, Severine. Not again.’

Severine cowered over the chair, which was almost pleasing until I experienced the familiar remorse that I could hold such power over another.

‘Sometimes I think that I too might go mad,’ she said quietly, ‘but I can’t live with this ignorance. And so I beg of you. Surely – Andrew,’ she said, opening the clasp of her handbag with a loud snap like a gunshot, shattering any blithe assumption I had kindled about controlling the day, ‘you would take pity on me, after everything …’ she said, reaching into her bag for something and stepping closer.

And there, she unfurled her clasped fingers to reveal that tiny ancient miniature, attached to a gold chain.

“*When I heard the beating of wings in my soul*”,’ she recited. ‘So haunting, the story …’

In my memory, I saw Julia standing at the enormous Tudor window of the Lodge, her back to the audience listening to her every word; the six hills of Simla aflame in the distance, the sound of the clock chiming the first tolls of midnight. I saw her hand reach towards the horizon, as her words twisted themselves around my heart and suffocated the
last of my hope, my happiness … ‘There is a story that I want my life to tell….’ But then I stopped myself.

‘Did you steal it from her corpse?’ I asked, dryly. ‘I thought Harry had buried it with her.’

‘I suppose that all thieves believe everyone steals,’ Severine replied.

‘So you’ve come to bribe me for the truth.’

‘Everything is perception,’ Severine considered. ‘I read in The Times there’s to be a major reappraisal of your work; Random House is re-issuing your backlist with your name reinstated as author. Hurrah,’ she cried flatly. ‘But not if I make this book public. Your legacy will once more be cast into doubt because obviously this book does exist. And I will tell them about its provenance.’

In my dismay, I did not at first notice where Severine had moved: into Julia’s storytelling chair.

And there she sat regally, as if she were its rightful monarch.

Already too late to protest, it was then, of course, that I heard her: Julia, whispering ever on of things past and indelible.

_The words, Andrew: the words will surely ruin us._

_Say no more,_ I begged of her, as I studied Severine’s diminished form, made more angular and misshapen in Julia’s delicate chair.

‘So Andrew,’ she said, fastening the gold chain of the miniature around her neck, ‘shall we talk of Simla?’

I have told myself many times that the road before me did not fork; there was only one path to follow. I had intended to die with Julia’s secrets, but abiding by Severine’s request seemed the only way I could protect her: with that thing least favoured by authors of fiction, the truth. And so I stood up and walked to the desk, and from its drawer retrieved a thick envelope.
‘What’s that?’ Severine demanded.

‘Her last letter to your husband: he gave it to me after Julia died. I assume you weren’t aware of that?’

‘No.’ Severine replied, uneasily. ‘But I want you to tell me the story. Like you used to.’

‘I think it better that Julia tells you what you desire to learn. But, Severine,’ I said, returning to my seat, the very image of the Man of News I once was, pince-nez fastened to my nose, the papers in my hand, ‘if I read this to you, the words cannot be unsaid. So you need to decide if you are truly ready – not to hear them, but – to survive them.’

Severine appeared to age before me, her breath faltering, as she deliberated over what to do. Until she let out a brief sob and looked to Julia as if for guidance. Severine wore the same expression she used to while Julia was alive. And in her eyes glistened the famine, the drought, the dryness of her quest for truth; of all the things Julia knew about Severine and her husband’s life that Severine did not.

Momentarily, Severine nodded; her entire body convulsed as if to stave off a blow, the effort it took her to accede seemingly Herculean.

So bidden, I focused on the page and gave my Julia breath to speak, beginning the story upon which Severine insisted:

‘“I am alone now, my darling, at the cottage in Mashobra. Here where I wait for you, and write of things last.

“A shadow of the day remains: not too dark for candles yet, but soon. On the veranda, I watch as the heavy white light ebbs from the Himalayas, and the pale pinkness of sunset drifts overhead in clouds as if heaven is a field and winged messengers are the ploughs; my Sobranie cigarette smokes in the ashtray; in my chignon a marigold is pinned just-so; at my back, there is the cool of the wicker chair and beyond it, the small life of this house diminishing; the elongating notes of Elgar slowing down on the gramophone; the
consoling swish, swish, swish of Aarush in his robes moving through empty rooms; the slow tip-tap-tip-tap of Mignonette’s old little feet as she comes to sit at my side, where once they were a joyous rat-tat-tat.

“‘I should be in Simla, preparing for the party, but I want to follow the house to its close; to disappear into the shadows, to linger like a whisper on the lawn of all we once shared and for which I hoped. To tell myself that time has no currency; I will yet hear the chink of the gate and know that every promise has been kept. And the sound of your footsteps down the corridor will grow nearer to where I wait, and I will look up and see your lovely face, and you will say,

‘‘My Beauty.’ ”

“‘And this long-fought war will be won.

‘‘For only with you have I heard the beating of wings in my soul; a music that cannot be unheard; and in it the endless rhythmic hope that this time will be different; you will choose me.

‘‘But you have not come. So, as ever, I am left only to imagine you.

‘‘Later, the world will read of the hours I spent in this house: some tall upstanding history book, bound in smart blue leather and gilt embossed letters, will decree with unimpeachable authority – for the author will be an old Etonian, with a double First from Cambridge, and may even have fox-trotted with me once at The Savoy – of all I said and did on this day of the Transfer, of the decisions and revisions and the tears I cried, the dress I wore (Patou, shoes by Tetreau, hat by Reboux), the hands I shook. And the world will know me again by the words, by the pictures crafted of a stranger’s hand. They will know that I was the last Vicereine of India.

‘‘Isn’t that the problem, though, with words and pictures?

‘‘The secrets they keep.
“For before I was the Vicereine, I was Julia. And that who is who I have always been, in my heart for you.

“I have lingered on a margin of your life: the shadows for me, not the sun. We have written more than we have ever seen one another; I have spoken more to your ghost at my side, than the fact. I have spent more hours longing than owning, but not once have I doubted that wherever you are, it is the same for you. We exist within each other. And so in this way, I have told myself, we have never been lost.

“But now I have stilled to this. Each minute a blessing I cherish. No more the restless to-and-fro of official visits, no more camps, no more crisscrossing war zones in camouflage fatigues, no more Mother Ganges, no more Simla summer retreat, no more waiting outside doors while men decided destinies, no more 140 degrees in the shade, no more freezing in furs in air conditioning in the Viceregal Palace in Delhi, no more orphaned babies to be offered the last touch of a mother in my arms, no more proud descents down marble staircases to greet Rajahs and Maharajas and Kings, no more to sign my name 600 times in six hours, all gone. The hours have moved on and decreed how we will be remembered. Save for this.

“I have walked the lawns and said goodbye to every flower; I have released my animals, one by one back to the land I protected them from and watched them disappear over the horizon. I have overseen the packing of my memories into innocuous brown boxes, piled high around me, which may or may not survive the next voyage. Every treasured artefact of my life has been erased from view. Everything I have loved; but for the tiny book that defined who you and I would always be to one another: the golden noose around my neck. The one Andrew fastened there and pulled tight.

“It lies open on the table before me at the tiny portraits: hers and his. And I regard her with eyes cleansed by sorrow, the faceless, nameless woman with red hair, a pair of
white wings upon her back; the sentence that has compelled me: ‘There is a story that I want my life to tell.’ And I find I understand it, at last.

“For what have we been but moths, she and I? Our only sustenance tears.

Perhaps I’ve been drawn to her because I’ve existed as a story. What have I been but a procession of characters paraded before the world, written for me by others; Andrew, the Viceroy, the newspaper, the histories. All those paper doll dresses they have held up to make of me a Little Duchess, the Richest Heiress, a Divine Debutante, the Wife of the Best Friend of the Once King of England, the World’s Best Dressed Woman (even in Deauville, imagine!), the Adulteress, the Countess, and finally Her Excellency, the Vicereine. The costumes that today lie crumpled in the bottom of a wastebasket: no longer of use. For soon I will cease to exist. Soon, someone else will pace these rooms and listen to the traces of words we trail in our wake, as the memory of you and I and Mignonette and the children wander away over the tall grass amidst the orange blossom and Himalayan Balsam: characters in a story that was told here once, of which no-one knew, but was all the kinder for it.

“This has been the way of my life. From the beginning when Andrew brought me into being with the article in The Times, to where I write this to you at the end.

“I am not afraid of saying goodbye to you, though: I’ve said it so many times. And each has possessed a strange reward: I think because I have not raised a hand in farewell imagining that I won’t see you again: that is, until today when I forced my eyes to close.

“You see, India has given me many loves, but I realise they were not mine.

“I stood on the steps this morning with Mignonette as my servants left: ‘Chullo! Chullo! Go on. Be quick!’ Aarush admonished, ferrying them on. The little ones wanted to linger on the lawn, until the ayahs smoothed their hair or hugged one or two with resigned affection and carried them off. Borne aloft in their arms still the children smiled and waved at me, not understanding the sorrow of the corner they would turn, of how it will be when
we can no longer see one another. And all I could do was think them so lucky in their innocence, as I waved and waved until they cindered before me into the sun and I could look no more.

“I have watched you cinder, my love, every evening when you left me to walk the rickshaw path to your other house, the one I could not enter. The pretty pale blue door at which I would be told, if I dared to knock:

‘Durwauza-bund: you cannot come in. The mistress won’t receive a visitor.’

‘And at that durwaun’s back, through the half-closing door, sometimes you would come out to the hall and let me see it; the vow to which you were bound. On those days when I had to accept that you had not burned alive after you left, nor turned to dust: you were as real as I. Except you were cloistered within and I was locked out on the doorstep in my new tea dress and starched white gloves, with my hat just-so and the tortoiseshell handle of the favourite bag you gave me, clutched to my chest in supplication. To be my very best self for you, for those children I saw you hug so tightly, in a way that made me flee back into the heat and dust, careless of who witnessed my grief. Those children you could not forsake. Those I could not ask you to.

‘Never again will I stand on your doorstep, nor sit here and savour the sublime anticipation that soon there will be an hour for us; a fragment of time to be protected, immortalised, cherished. All I know is that there is a story I want my life to tell. For me, it has been you. I would have it no other way.

‘But tell me, my love, what is the story that will survive us now we have arrived at the end?

‘For twenty-five years, I have waited for your answer: the one you could not give me.

‘The one for which I continue to wait, in this house that sits empty, like something lovely from a dream.
“Yet, after today, if anyone were to knock on the door, they would be told only one thing:

“‘Durwauza-bund: You cannot come in.

“‘The Mistress won’t receive a visitor.’

“And there is a curious irony in that, isn’t there, my darling, for haven’t the words always been everything between us...?”

Transfixed, Severine listened, like a child. I ought to have known she could not resist one of Julia’s stories, not even when somebody else told it in her place. And it was remarkable, but as I spoke, it was almost as if Julia’s portrait had come alive again, smiling serenely down on the ordinary from high.

Like a moth to a butterfly.

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We shared an uncommon history, Severine and I, but now that I had begun, I could not turn back. So I read on:

“I have been thinking these past days of the dance lessons ...”
I have been thinking these past days of the dance lessons, even though I mustn’t. Of course, you remember. A haven, that room in which we danced. And always on a Sunday afternoon, a choice of yours I once thought romantic, reverential, until I learned it was the day Severine visited her relatives in a farther town whose name I didn’t care to learn.

But that disappointment, that truth, as with all others, came later.

In the beginning – in 1927 in Cap d’Antibes – when for you there was no alternative to me, we waltzed, you and I. I can recall perfectly the arcade of Palladian glass doors, thrown open to let the late heat in, arching the length of the room; the sound of the crickets beginning to sing; and the smell of the pine trees haphazardly growing in nooks and crevices, down the sheer cliff drop to the Baie des Anges, below.

And I in thin chiffon or crêpe-de-chine, beneath which I wore nothing; the ruby ring on my right pinkie finger resting on your shoulder, like a bullet wound: a gift from the man I’d married first. And the sound of the Blue Train’s horn, decanting American millionaires, Vogue models, and racing car drivers into the port; a reminder that these hours were fleeting, ambiguous between us; for they would end with no promise other than ‘Soon’.

Indeed, soon it would be dinner at the Chateau de la Garoupe, or the Casino or the Sporting Club, with the Pulitzers, the Mainwarings, or the Duchess of Peneranda. And I would wear a petunia silk dress embroidered with crystals when the other women were in black. And I would understand exactly what to say and when. And I would charm Chaplin, our guest, and he would offer me another part in his film. And Harry would be in raptures, the luckiest man alive, and dance with me all night. And I the perfectionist would match every step, my head and feet aching, but keeping it hidden. My life, a non-stop fancy dress party where I dressed up as other people to offer an entirely calculated impression at which no-one guessed. And, at some point in the evening, you would contrive to meet me in a
darkened corridor or pull me into you as if I’d stumbled at the bar, and whisper, ‘You are a
bird of paradise amongst sparrows.’ And I would hope and hope and hope anew.

But before that, there was this: a haven from the eyes, from the words: a box they
couldn’t open.

It is all there, my love, as I look back; the facts of the dance with you; the turns, the
pivots, your elegantly arched back like a toreador, leaning me this way and that. But it is not
this, not the steps, the artistry, the spectacle, that I adore, just the peace. I am here again,
near again, soon I shall hear you say my name and close my eyes and pretend that fateful
sentence is unfinished: we are who we could have been, but for Severine. It’s as if I am
there with you for the first time. Yet, not even I, such a fantasist, can prolong the charade.
Because I cannot drown out the voices of those who were there with us: the innocent voices
that said, Papa: but never Mama, only la Petite Duchesse.

‘Papa, the story!’ they would cry, Nico and Angelica, ‘The story you promised from
la Petite Duchesse!’

‘Ah, yes, the story,’ you would say, my invitation to begin: to tell them The Golden
Tree, which I had inspired when I was as young as they; when I was a Little Duchess. The
name they called me in French; the one I preferred to Julia, to Lady Michener; the name I
had before I grew up.

‘Always,’ I would say, as you waltzed me to where they sat, waiting. ‘“In the
Golden Tree, where the butterflies come to rest, there was one that he loved above all
others.”’

And as I told the story, you would hold out your arms to Angelica, rushing in
excitement to take my place, and I would hold out mine to Nico. ‘Now you, chérie,’ you
would instruct, bowing charmingly. And then Angelica would place her tiny feet on yours,
and Nico would place his on mine, so we could teach them the steps to dances you would
dance at some other hour: Severine waltzing in my place. And I didn’t tell you, how much I
longed to kiss Angelica and Nico only once. But I couldn’t.

They were forbidden to me to love.

I dared not trespass there.

This is all I have desired. Just once more, may I rest my head upon your shoulder in
a ballroom in Cap d’Antibes to the sound of the children’s laughter? May I see that late light
of a Mediterranean afternoon, the tops of the olive trees swaying in a heat peculiar to the
region, and the brilliant white crystalline sea, illuminated in mythology beyond the marble
balustrades of the balcony. Just a light dance, please my darling, a consoling reunion, of
being happy in a way I couldn’t be again after Antibes when we taught those precious souls
to dance on our feet and told them stories. So little to ask, but it will not be.

Everything I desired was found during those Sundays; when Nico and Angelica
were five, and my daughter with Harry, Emmy, was three. But Emmy wasn’t interested in
dancing, or trying on my silk shoes, or having her face patted with my powder puff, entirely
unlike Angelica who adored it. So she would play with her doll, despite how I cajoled her.
She probably thought it another of my acts, of pretending to dote, the one mote of affection
I remembered my mother bestowing upon me. My mother who died in the garden, beside
the river, surrounded by roses, drinking special milk from Friesian cows: my mother who I
longed to kiss only once. But I couldn’t. She was off somewhere with an Austrian Prince,
you see. So Andrew put me to bed in her place. Besides, I wasn’t ever pretending; as only
you can comprehend.

But people expect so much of dances, don’t they? People are so quick to judge
them. Perhaps Emmy sensed they can be ruined in an instant, so why bother? Yet, for those
who love the ceremony, there can be no alternative. After all, as you once explained to a
Dowager during the cocktail hour at the du Cap, before it was entirely inappropriate for me
to be seen with you, ‘Why, at fourteen Julia danced in the corps at the Royal Ballet as the
Little Moth for her friend, Prince Bertie. So who better to teach *les enfants*? And with your black hair, which was once so blond, and your aquamarine eyes, and your elegant suit and impeccable manners and *Why ever not, chérie?* refrain, who could possibly refuse you; a toreador to the last, dancing this way and that to avoid ruin.

You live, don’t you, and the past reveals itself: the moments that will mean so much later? And so today, as I write, there is the swoop and glide, the pirouette down to the depths of memory, the relief of a voice sounding somewhere far beyond us, in the depths of the memory where we dwell. We waltz deeper, further, you and I, back to the beginnings of stories and experiences and the things that have led us to this point. To you, when you were de Lerrison, to me when I was *la Petite Duchesse*, to the sea, to the beautiful children who danced with us.

But I know this is the last dance with you. And how it will end.

With a death.

But tell me, my love; will there be a golden tree in heaven?
The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

‘”You are a bird of paradise amongst sparrows”,’ Severine repeated, as I escaped Julia’s words momentarily. I had not reckoned on the sorrow of her memory and laid the pages down, for I could barely hold them. ‘How exquisite. But then she was. I always thought her like a Persian nightingale; a bulbul singing so sweetly that the world was entranced. And how to compete with that?’ she added with grudging deference. ‘No, it’s hardly any surprise he loved her: besides, aren’t all men searching for someone to tell them a better story of themselves than their wives? Scheherazades who haven’t been disappointed by them make infinitely more compelling narrators.’

Severine seemed almost conciliatory.

‘Shall I continue, or would you prefer me to stop?’

‘La Petite Duchesse. I had no idea my children called her that,’ she said, tugging on a handkerchief hidden in her sleeve as a sob caught in her throat. ‘Already I learn something. So I was right to come,’ she continued, brushing black tears from her cheeks, as her mascara came away from her lashes. ‘The Duchess of Lerrison ...Julia’s final story at Simla: of the Duchess who was the Mistress of the Children at Versailles. “I was the Moth”, that’s what it says on the last page of this miniature,’ she said, wrapping her hand around it at her neck. ‘But, of course, you know that! Yolande de Lerrison was Marie Antoinette’s best friend: the Duchess of Lerrison. And that’s the name written beneath it, which somebody scored through: Julia, or you?’ she hazarded, regaining her composure. I made no reply.

‘I think she did save the best story for last,’ Severine said, her addled mind trying to make sense of the manifold strands of their shared history. ‘It is – now that I understand this – cripplingly sad in context: in everything it had to do with her and my husband:'
unforgettable, really. Until today, I had often wondered what was the point of her story. But that was part of her message to him, wasn’t it? In order that he could choose: “My Beauty” or “My children”.

“Regarde, the Duc d’Orsay has a new wife.”

‘That was the first line of the story, when Julia spoke as la Duchesse, the Duchess who wrote her name in this miniature. Nobody was any the wiser, except you, except me, but I didn’t understand the connection she was trying to forge then….’ Her voice trailed off as it crystallised for her, ‘and “Again, again!’ the children always cry.” That was the last line.’

With that, Severine exhaled a hollow gasp and buried her head in her shawl once more to weep.

But not before she commanded: ‘Read on.’

“I remember,” I obliged her, “writing to my mother …”
I remember, before she died, writing to my mother when I was three. After I was lost and Andrew found me:

Mummy, please don’t be cross, but I can’t find Nanny or my ribbon and now I’m a Moth. I’m waiting for you at the Palm Court beside the Golden Tree. But don’t worry: I’m drinking cups of tears, so everyone is rather jolly.

But I didn’t write it. That was Andrew in The Ritz, where we had tea, and made up the story of me, while we waited for someone to find us. When two policemen did arrive enquiring after the Little Duchess, much to my astonishment I asked, Andrew, ‘How?’ ‘Magic,’ he said. And, of course, that was when he didn’t know I was a Little Duchess. Just a lost girl in a park he rescued. Or at least that’s what it said in The Times. And the world believed us.

I have the article, yellowing and watermarked in my hand: the only thing, besides the miniature, which I will keep. ‘The Little Duchess and her Butterflies’, these are the words that created me as I perched beneath them on Andrew’s knee, one Sunday on Margate Sands. And like the most precious newborn, someone – Nanny probably – had wrapped my little nude self in a towel and handed me to the man I would adore as my true Father, who from the very first, held fast; an implicit promise not to let go.

Although he did. Although I made him.

Would anyone think her me now? This small self, beaming a broad smile – baby teeth still intact – at whoever is taking the shot. Andrew knows who it is, I can tell from his expression – he’s sharing a joke, probably one of his own – but he loves the photographer on the other side of that lens. It’s the way he leans back in the striped deckchair, his arm wrapped around my tubby middle, a Panama on his fair head, to protect his Scottish redness. Whoever is watching us, he wants to please.
Such a lovely moment to reconsider: my hair full of pale golden curls, the colour it never was again, dulling with each birthday. And my plump face with the nose *Tatler* would one day declare oh so retroussé that singular night of my youth at Mrs Vanderbilt’s ball at Claridges, before Andrew was jailed. I look at her and my instinct cries, couldn’t you just love her, the tiny soul, how could you want to hurt someone so innocent?

Ironic, isn’t it, that I should own such a thought: I, who have acted as no mother, as mine was no mother to me.

But, I had no choice. The desire was there, but I could not show it, hidden deep within me. And so my sorrow has been relentless.

It occurs to me that ours is a story of lost children. Yet, whether I was found by the world in Andrew’s arms at the age of three, I can’t decide. If I existed before that article, I don’t recall, and if I have since, it is only through you that I choose to remember myself, who has understood me best. But just the other day, I dared myself to ask Andrew, although we try to avoid the past: before we met, who was I? It seemed important suddenly, you see, to know.

He kicked at the orange blossoms on the ground of the Palace garden and I thought he might not answer because it was all so sad to go back there. But he did; he said, ‘You were the most exquisite raindrop in a lily.’ And I reached for his hand and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed because I realised that it had been years since I asked him for a story. It reminded me of when we first met, when I also sobbed and then I stopped because I was enchanted.

But then stories can do that, can’t they: stop the tears. Or start them. Well, Andrew’s at least.

Later, nobody wanted to hear again about how *The Golden Tree* came to be. Or of bright and gentle Andrew in Hyde Park, who sat me on his lap, and asked, ‘Who are you?’ And ‘Duch- uss,’ I said, because I couldn’t pronounce my name, Julia, and because I
thought I was a Duchess, like my mother, which, of course, I wasn’t until the press picked up on my endearing mistake and christened me the ‘Little Duchess’. I was soaking wet and hiding under an oak tree because I had lost my silver ribbon and ran off from Nanny to find it; the one Andrew discovered hanging by a thread on the back of my coat, which he pretended was a moth in a tall oak tree shimmering in the light, the Golden Tree. And then we talked about my other lost ribbons and where they were now that I couldn’t find them. We sat for what seemed like hours as he told me tales of their different personalities, and how they loved the Golden Tree. But there was one he loved above all others. And that was me, the perfect little Moth. And I was the Moth because I was crying so much and drinking up my tears as they fell down my cheeks into my mouth. Yet, as I was doing such a good job of it, Andrew said I could only be deliriously happy because the sadness in the tears was gone, which seems entirely logical when you’re three.

That was when the policemen found us: not in The Ritz, like he said, but drenched beneath a tree in Hyde Park. Andrew was so poor, you see, they wouldn’t have let him in. But I left the story as it was, always. I kept that secret.

As I kept the others.

It seems I began my life on the front page, as I will doubtless end it, but I won’t hold that testament in my hands, nor see the arms that carry me home, which is somehow a relief. For I have lived my life imagined: sometimes willingly, when the pain has become too great. And I have suffered ferocious pain, as you know; the countless illnesses – acedia, torpors of frustration and disappointment caused by idleness, purging, nerves, anaemia; my body wrecked, from my liver to my stomach to my teeth to my feet – the endless confinements, and retreats to sunnier climes in every corner of the world: ostensibly to cure me; but really to distract me from myself.

But, of course, it was this image in The Times that decided my fate: after Tom Wolcotte and the book and the trial and the loss of Toby, whose name I could not utter
publicly again. How I would be perceived forever on when I was mentioned; far beyond moths and Duchesses and little girls lost in Hyde Park. And all because of that moment when the shutter clicked down on me – on Andrew – on Margate Sands.

Until today, I could not confront her. Like the portrait of the woman in the miniature, I erased my face from this page in my mind, so that I could not trace a likeness. My heart breaks as I reconsider the photo and hear the words that ruined us: for what they said during the trial about my love for Andrew, for the pedantic scholars with their perverted minds who fixated on my nudity and asked – in contempt and unease – if Andrew’s arm wraps around me in control or devotion: if the fact of my presence condemns or commends him? Was I the seraphim babe who clambered up on his lap by choice or did he reach first for me? What really went on in that house in Hyde Park with the lavender and the lilies and the Blue Pavilion?

All the damnable words that can make a story of anything … Yet, what no-one has ever remarked is that Andrew is dressed in a three-piece suit on a blisteringly hot day on the beach. Later, after I guilelessly led him through our ways, he would be indistinguishable from crown Princes, but then he did not belong; whatever the invitation, he had misinterpreted it. And I knew this; children don’t miss a trick, you know.

So look again and find the truth:

Andrew held me fast to hide his shame; that he had no idea how to dress; his sleeve was frayed, his shirt missing a button.

I was the angel who sat complicit on her Creator’s knee, who wouldn’t allow the world to laugh and call him a fool.

I took the fall for him.

I remember I was burning in the sun, but I pretended not to be.

The first mask I held up to my face.
THE MAN OF NEWS

The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

‘Very little about them eluded me,’ Severine said, lighting another cigarette. ‘Nearly every element of their affair was written down for me to read, like a curiously compelling horror story. I was forever reading in between the lines of who I imagined her to be, lingering over sentences that seemed to glisten like an oasis in the desert if ever she implied they were tiring of one another. Not that they did, although I prayed for it at that last party. It was the end, wasn’t it? Why not for them?’ She shrugged helplessly. ‘And the white dress,’ she said, almost to herself. ‘How could I forget her in that dress …’

The party, I thought, surveying her wearily, as her recollection dragged me once more back into its midst, like a cloth dropped over a cage to silence a singing bird. Powerless to resist, I allowed its memories to unfold around me, as if I were watching a fresco painted on an aged wall come to life. There were the endless servants – up to one per person, graded by caste and function – hurrying hither and yon; united in an immaculately orchestrated performance founded on formality and repetition in their cool, thin shoes designed to tip-toe soundlessly around their Queen, their Vicereine. There, from every angle, was the pavonine refinement of the guests, the muted colours of shapes, the undulating concertina-like movements of figures melding in and out; a dazzling cortege of cause and effect, substance and style, beauty and fortune; and choices that would determine destinies.

Like most tragedies, it had started innocuously. In timeworn fashion, Julia had greeted her guests at the foot of the staircase, spiralling up three floors in the grand hall, before leading us past the gothic carved pillars and dark teak panelling of the gallery into the welcoming brightness of the State Reception Room.
‘Such happy memories here. Of course, I know,’ she said, furrowing her brow charmingly in apology, ‘that the summer season ended in July, but I couldn’t think of anywhere more perfect for such a swansong, given that tomorrow we have to relinquish the Lodge to India. I thought it might be easier for us if we could pretend, one last time, that our India still exists. Not like a story somebody made up once, which is all it is now,’ she concluded winsomely, extending her arm like a ballerina mid-curtsey in awed surveillance of that extraordinary room.

In that palace of the thickest walls; in those vast rooms, where such was the seamless running of the house, no direct order needed to be addressed to a servant; where every movement, choice of dress, hour of dining, every need was choreographed to perfection; not a soul gathered discerned any hint of judgment as Julia offered her motivation for selecting Simla. Rather the gracious yet make-do matter-of-factness particular to diplomatic wives who-move-and-make-do all their lives, governed by the whims of Empires. She had raised it to an art form.

I had flinched reflexively as we arrived at the ornate gilded doors. Through force of habit, scanning the room and detecting the eyes that were keen and darting, concentrated on Julia and her white dress, which was the colour of Indian mourning, and the accolades pinned to her chest; the Conspicuous Service Medal, the Grand Cross of the Order of St John, and the Order of the Crown of India enshrouded in rubies, pearls, diamonds, and turquoise. Not to mention that diamond tiara; the one the Viceroy had commissioned to anoint her Vicereine, which she had tossed into a shoebox on returning home, as if it were a laurel of thorns.

Rueful brows raised, an impregnable hush had fallen over the proceedings, as the last stragglers of an Empire fell expectantly into the shadow of her wake; a grateful shelter from the stifling ninety-degree heat. For what on earth could she be mourning: the death of India as they had experienced it under the Raj, or something other? The latter a tantalising
notion, which appeared then momentarily possible in the hunched shape of Severine
standing as close as her husband could tolerate, in the receiving line weaving sinuously
down the hall before me.

As ever, there were the whispers that trailed me mercilessly – liar, cheat, thief,
pansy, blackmailer, son of a whore, disgrace, jailbird, pervert, keep a safe distance – voices
momentarily drowned by the Deputy’s voluble toadying, to which I gratefully turned.

‘But the Viceroy and Vicereine have behaved imp-ec-cably during the negotiations
for the Transfer. I mean to say, at His Majesty’s behest, they’ve offered vo-ci-fer-ous public
support for an independent India. The Viceroy pushed himself almost to a breakdown in
partitioning the country, rushing through the Transfer while wrestling with Jinnah over
Pakistan and appeasing the princely states….And the Vicereine,’ he rhapsodised, much to
his wife’s displeasure who pursed her lips and inhaled deeply while focusing sternly on her
grey Mary-Jane shoes with a sensible heel, ‘has com-plete-ly shared in his burden, tire-less-
ly visiting refugees with Nehru. What more could we have asked,’ he concluded
rhetorically, beaming proudly down the line at Julia, who gazed at him in tender
appreciation. A reaction that caused the Deputy to flush bright pink and prompted his wife
to demand sharply of a passing waiter, ‘Yes, I think I will have that Gin.’

I smiled involuntarily at the memory.

‘The white dress …’ Severine repeated at the cottage, returning me from my
thoughts. ‘I remember it vividly, waiting to be received by her, pulling myself up taller as if
I could tower morally over Julia. Pointless, though, everything about her screamed of glory;
she must have been six foot in those heels, sylphlike; such impeccable posture, the way she
cought the light in her white dress, encrusted with those delicate crystals, like ice-cold
teardrops flowing the length of her body.

‘And the jasmine perfume: her signature. My husband was smothered in it as we
waited in the line. You were behind me,’ she said. ‘That’s when I knew he’d been here, in
Mashobra. I reached for his hand, desperate for him to acknowledge me, for any sign that I mattered: especially that night. But then he said, “Severine, I need to get my cigarettes,” and brushed my hand away. And I knew then that I could cling and cling and still he would find a way to be free of me.

‘Do you remember I asked him if he’d come here to say goodbye?’ Severine asked, unable to conceal her bitterness. ‘You must have. Oh how the heads turned at that. “How nice of you,” I said to him. “I wish you’d told me: I would have gone too. But the children.”’

Severine’s eyes flashed, as she savoured her victory anew; the weight of words that spoke only of duty, of commitment, which had continuously denied her husband his greatest love.

I owned no inclination to listen to her account; Severine’s voice cloyed, but the shroud was held fast over my cage and I had no option but to retreat into its dark crevices, mired in the claustrophobia of her adaptation.

‘That world of secret ritual here at the Mashobra cottage,’ she said, almost as if she couldn’t believe she was finally inside. For then as now, Severine was little more than an interloper loitering at the gate of the idyll where Julia wore jasmine perfume for her lover, and he would pick marigolds for her; this haven where Severine’s husband would promise Julia that his wife meant nothing to him, and Julia would always believe him.

‘I never stopped hoping he’d tire of her, even after twenty-five years,’ Severine said, without a hint of irony. ‘But that night any hope I’d kindled that it was over between them shattered. Because Julia turned and I saw then that there were …’ And here Severine could not go on.

‘There were marigolds in her hair,’ I concluded for her.
She nodded leadenly, accepting my shiv: ‘A storyteller to the end, Andrew. Although I do hope you’ll be as helpful with the other untold chapters. Might we have a drink,’ she asked, abruptly. ‘Do you have a bar?’

I gestured to the cabinet at my left and Severine paced towards it, too quickly. She used to be teetotal, I thought, placing a protective hand over Julia’s letter. Severine poured herself a whiskey. ‘Ice? I could call for my boy,’ I offered. She shook her head, no, as she self-consciously knocked back her drink, only to replenish her glass with another.

She leaned back against the wall, ‘I couldn’t avoid our history or the role I had to play. It struck me I might go mad, for what was I to my husband but a diminished circumstance: a wife. And the vile chorus carping on; “The story; the story, when will the story begin?” “Soon,” Julia promised them,’ Severine mimicked her mincingly, as she held her glass to her lips. ‘And the way she looked at him, that lingering look everyone noticed that caused the rumour to ripple back down the line at what exactly the story might be; the one that would determine my future. For at its end, a choice: “My Beauty” or “My children.”

‘It was intolerable,’ she said, quietly. ‘At that moment, the party loomed ahead of me, as if I was floating down the River Styx, and Julia was Cerberus at the gate.’

Severine turned to me then, like a tortured creature that had just been kicked across a room: the agony, the plea, in her expression humiliatingly evident. It took one to know one, but she found no empathy in me: I would not give her the answer she sought yet.

‘I got here first. Very few are aware of that. You,’ Severine said, pointedly, her entire demeanour changing as she strutted ramrod straight back to her chair, as if obeying a summons. ‘I was borne up to Simla on a jhampan sedan as a child, across the Razorback Ridge – which was treacherous – hundreds of coolies carrying our family possessions to our summer home on their backs; Daddy’s favourite armchair, Mummy’s costumes for her amateur dramatics at the Gaiety Theatre, all the crockery and dried preserves; anything they
thought they might need for those eight heavenly months away from the Hot Season in Delhi before the Rains. It was the happiest summer I’ve had.

‘It’s funny, but leading up to Julia’s party, I could almost place myself there, a child again, filled with hope at what might come. But maybe it only seemed happy because we hadn’t met then.’

I felt an unruly prick of conscience upon imagining Severine as a child, one that as quickly disappeared when she said, ‘That was the first summer you joined us, wasn’t it Andrew. I was four. Mummy said you were a friend of Daddy’s. Oh what fine stories you told my brother and me,’ she said. ‘Although you spoke so funny then: not like you do now,’ she sighed, drawing on the butt of the cigarette she had left to smoulder in the ashtray and exhaling a languorous plume of smoke. ‘I like to think we cured you of that.’

She giggled behind her hand, ‘“Ma pal,”’ she articulated loudly, flattening her voice, and trying to affect the low baritone of an Edinburgh Leith-er. ‘“He’s ma pal.”’

That’s what you used to say about Daddy. Or “Da”, as you called him. We thought it hilarious. Couldn’t understand what on earth! Although Nanny gave us such a ticking off for laughing.’

‘I’m glad I provided you with some amusement.’ I had anticipated the path her memory would tread. Yet, her glancing blow wearied, rather than hurt me. Regardless, the closed doors of my past blew open in one malicious gust.

‘So long ago,’ she said, ignoring me, ‘that summer you spent with us. Long before they built the railway with its endless tunnels, long before my husband sneaked out to meet Julia at this cottage of marigolds and jasmine perfume, but not that long before you stole the first of many stories from us, in your funny voice. From my brother Tom and I. When I was Severine Wolcotte. Oh but how thoughtless of me,’ she tutted, tossing the last dregs of ash into the tray at her side with three sharp taps of her finger. ‘I’m sure it’s a name you never want to hear again.’
How omnipotent she thought herself in that chair, dictating histories; the usurper usurped, usurping once more. And I had no-one to blame but myself: I had invited her in.

‘Sandhurst, wasn’t it, where you met? When you were an Officer Cadet, and he was a Captain? He took you under his wing. And how did you repay him? “He’s ma pal.”’ She smirked contemptuously.

Through those doors that were once held fast, a new voice sang; ‘He’s ma pal,’ said my mother in her singsong voice, with her flaxen hair, and her cornflower blue eyes. My beauty condemned to be born to a fallen world, where there were no pals, only men who visit docks from distant places, after the merciless sea cured them of any humanity. And the first thing they do, is search out the kind, the innocent, the hopeful. The lonely girls who misinterpret their smiles for friendship, who sit on damp walls after, with a bottle in their hand and no joy left, and sing ‘He’s ma pal’ for all to hear and mock.

‘I think it’s time for truth, Severine,’ I said finally. ‘I was no Officer Cadet. Someone from my background – a workhouse – would not have been considered.’

Severine leaned forward, the miniature falling loose from beneath her blouse on its chain.

‘Your father –’

‘Yes,’ Severine interrupted, keenly, ‘he had you enrolled, didn’t he? Gave you the chance of a better life. You know how I idolised him.’

I nodded, ‘Not quite. I was going to say that your Father found me in Sandhurst …’

Perhaps it was my tone, but Severine’s expression assumed its familiar vacancy as I finished my confession.

‘ …in the usual way.’

Severine swallowed hard and tossed her head back to loosen her fringe from her forehead, as if shaking off the words.

She looked out to the lawn.
‘What else does Julia say?’ she asked, with a flick of her wrist to the letter in my hands, which had once held her father so close.
SIMLA, 1947

Just as books – such as the miniature Severine came to own – can belong to multiple owners, so to any story of ownership, there is a prelude. With everything that followed governed by everything that came before: the reason why Severine would sob wretchedly eighteen years after the Vicereine’s death before a remorseless Andrew Shepherd, the miniature a bartering point between them; why the last Vicereine of India’s final instinct was to protect the miniature she wore as a necklace with a hand to her chest, when she plunged to her death; why in 1793 the Duchess inscribed then scored through her name on the final page of the miniature; and who – and to what purpose – obscured the red-haired woman’s face upon the first. Beneath the words, the pictures, the parchment palimpsests are the answers: each one a reward for those who gaze at books and imagine they understand the reason for their creation.

So to this book – to the story of Severine and Andrew, of the Vicereine and Alexandre de Lerrison – some history must be added. For often we cannot see ourselves as others do: we live our lives in the round, not simply by the words, but by those spoken by others about us.

This is why they must be watched from without as well as from within.

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The Viceregal Lodge

Simla, 1947

Lady Amelia was bored but very becoming, which seemed to compensate for something of which she was entirely unsure. But then she was never especially steady on her feet, not in company, having inherited a tendency towards doubting herself from boarding school. As a regrettable offshoot of being constantly criticised for being far too
pretty, and worse far too nice, she had emerged very much a swan, but one who preferred not to mate with anyone, least of all the sisterhood, and God forbid for life.

Hence her preference for solitude, for hiding in a corner while her dear husband, the one person she did rather like, caroused with his boyfriends. Sometimes the ploy worked, but on this evening in India, the fact that she was of interest was glaring. The group of ladies conglomering beside her window seat were significantly older but entirely intrigued. One might even say mesmerised. It was the way they gawped at her, quizzically yet admiringly, as if at a portrait; determined to elicit some meaning from within her exquisite facade.

Her husband Lord knows where, the twenty-year-old Lady Amelia, the most beautiful deb to grace the London scene, had affected any manner of distraction to avoid them: cigarettes, fluff, motes of dust, a fascination with the carpet and the points on her shoes, but none of it had worked. Being something of a celebrity, the young Lady was inured to such fascination, but she sensed this was a lair from which escape might not be easy; these grinning women with discomfiting large bared teeth, hungry for her attention, loitering ever closer until they loomed in a semi-circle around her, casting Lady Amelia into darkness.

As everyone knew everyone, however, and especially everyone knew her hideously formidable mother-in-law, the Dowager Countess of Shrewsbury, Lady Amelia had no choice but to play along, even though she would sooner have slaughtered her darling Jack Russell puppy. And so she enquired sweetly, ‘May I help?’

A woman with pillar box red hair affected an astonished, if genial, hand to the ear at the young woman’s sally, ‘Yes, dear, did you say something?’

Oh God save me, thought Lady Amelia, trying not to falter under the weight of propriety and dignified attention she must uphold. ‘I said, is there anything you need? You were staring at me.’
‘Was I?’ gasped the Pillar Box theatrically, a hand flying to her bosom as if she had been accused of a crime of passion. Yet, momentarily, her expression softened and a winsome draught wafted over her deeply lined face, ‘I must apologise. It’s just that it’s quite astonishing, the similarity … ’ And with that, the group of women gestured to the Vicereine’s portrait on the opposite wall.

‘You look Just. Like. Her,’ she enthused. ‘And we’re positively ancient, so we remember everything. Your dress! The pale pink concoction, the same as the one she wore the night she met Harry: at The Ritz: New Year’s Eve, 1922.’

Lady Amelia didn’t like to be uncharitable but the Vicereine seemed a tad cadaverous to her eye, hideously thin and not exactly what one would call warm. That said, she had heard countless men, including her husband, wax lyrical over her charms. Indeed, when she had once put the question of the Vicereine’s enduring appeal to her Aunt, she had bewilderingly mumbled something about the Orient, pursed her lips together and said no more, so Lady Amelia remained none the wiser: and now this?

‘Thank you,’ she replied. ‘Isn’t she a marvel? Especially with those lepers.’

The Ladies clucked affectionately, the word ‘Bless’ unspoken between them. A word so often applied to Lady Amelia.

‘Yes, she was enchanting. Just like you, that New Year. But an abysmally unhappy life,’ the Pillar Box avowed, casting doleful eyes down to her champagne glass. ‘First, the scandal with Andrew Shepherd, and what went on there when she was a child,’ she grimaced, pointing to a diminutive, balding man standing alone by the ornamental doors, and then Harry,’ she sighed, raising a rueful eyebrow. ‘And then, that one,’ she concluded, pointing to a white-blonde haired woman in an astonishingly inappropriate dress, waiting in the receiving line.

Lady Amelia shuddered involuntarily. For the woman appeared to be looking directly at her. She had been privy to such an expression on a woman’s face before: empty,
as if her soul had been chased away. It was in that dreadful asylum where they had taken her Mummy, after the thing with the jockey had to be hushed up.

She was only six and had visited with her father. Whatever had they done, she thought, to her lovely Mummy, as they sat with her in the cavernous drawing-room, surrounded by other people; some who screamed, some who sobbed, and some who fixated straight ahead. That vile place, which smelled and where they destroyed her laughing, lovely Mummy who always hugged her, always wore a bright floral dress and poked her head around the nursery door in the morning and ran with her down the lawn to the stables.

‘And my darling, you can fly,’ she would cry, bundling up Lady Amelia still in her nightdress, and holding her over her head, her infant arms outstretched. It was her favourite game, to pretend to be the star of Andrew Shepherd’s fairy tale, which was read to her every bedtime. And so Lady Amelia was the Moth and Mummy was the Golden Tree.

‘Of course, you must have heard bits of the story,’ insinuated the Pillar Box’s cohort, an impeccably swathed denizen of the cocktail hour.

‘Yes,’ replied Lady Amelia absently. ‘I was the Moth.’

The Ladies burst into smiles. ‘What a captivating creature you are,’ commented the Impeccable One.

And what big teeth you have, thought Lady Amelia considering the Pillar Box. She didn’t like this storytelling group anymore. And she certainly didn’t like the blonde woman in the receiving line. But her initial instinct was correct: she could not escape. For pulling up chairs, the Ladies encircled her, glancing furtively at one another until the Pillar Box announced:

‘No, the story of de Lerisson and the Vicereine. Somebody as beautiful as you should know it.’

‘But why?’
‘So that history doesn’t repeat itself, my dear,’ said the Pillar Box, turning ceremonially to the door and observing – with discernible disapproval – de Lerisson kiss the Vicereine’s hand.

‘Now, you see, to start at the beginning, they met in Antibes …’

Lady Amelia suddenly felt very cold and small as the Pillar Box embarked upon her tale. It was then that Andrew Shepherd smiled at her from across the room. In awe, she thought of her Mummy, lost somewhere for she had never seen her again, and prayed with all her might to be running over the lawn, held high in the air. Somehow, she felt Mr Shepherd – who seemed so warm and gentle – understood this, and she felt an involuntary instinct to stretch out her arms to him: *Rescue me*, her sole plea. But he turned away. So all that was left to Lady Amelia were the eyes of the women.

And they were not kind.

‘It was 1927,’ the Pillar Box gabbed, ‘and it all started with *that* dress …’

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Gathered on the quay at Antibes, awaiting the arrival of the future Viceroy and Vicereine, – Lord and Lady Michener – the topic of conversation amongst the waiting diplomats and British delegates had not changed in the four years since Harry had married Julia.

‘Such a queer choice of wife,’ they observed, on sighting the steam-liner coming into view. ‘And whatever does she think she’s doing wearing a dress like that on a day like this? It’s a Monday.’

‘I mean it’s not as if she’s that beautiful, despite what they say. The jewels and the makeup have helped, but not as far as one might have hoped,’ said a High Commissioner’s Wife, offering up her two-penneth. ‘But at least she’s one of us. It would have been too much had he plucked her from a chorus line. Not that anybody would have blamed him considering how much time he spent hobnobbing with the Prince of Wales.’
‘She doesn’t look very happy, does she?’ commented the Chancellor’s Wife, teetering on her tiptoes as the boat moved closer into view. ‘Most ungrateful, if you ask me: I’ve heard that he’s given her forty-seven dresses and 1,000,000 pounds worth of jewellery. All I got was a list of demands and a honeymoon in Torquay.’

‘Hush money,’ interceded the High Commissioner’s Wife, sucking in her cheeks disapprovingly.

‘But for what?’ chimed in the Pillar Box, stumbling backwards as she lost her balance and deliberately falling into a terribly good-looking French man behind her, who ignored her in that way terribly good-looking French men do when confronted with British women of un certain age who have not tended themselves well.

‘Oh, do you not know? I suppose it’s only an open secret to those of us in the inner circle,’ the High Commissioner’s Wife remarked proprietorially, ‘but seemingly she’s frigid. One child after four years? And we know how dear Harry loved the ladies before he married. I was told she caught him in the act with some friend of hers. And a terrible fight ensued where he accidentally swatted her one and caused that scar on her right wrist, the one she always covers up with some priceless bauble – bought by him as appeasement, no doubt. Apparently, she was desperate to get out of the marriage, almost from the honeymoon, and fastened on this as the perfect excuse to blackmail him – and refuse him sexual favours into the bargain. It would have destroyed his career, had she made his peccadilloes public knowledge. So that’s why he pays her to keep quiet. So far, she has. And – added bonus - it gets her out of the old binky-bonky …’

A roar went up as Julia and Harry began to wave at the assembled crowd. But what was unusual on this afternoon was that the Occitans also joined in the chorus of praise. For it was not the custom at Antibes for the villagers to gather on the quay to welcome the steam-liner arriving from England, the first port they would stay in to acclimatise to the heat, before travelling onto India. In 1927, such arrivals were commonplace during the
winter months and quietly resented by those forced to serve the arriving visitors.

Regardless, a vast throng of people began to assemble on the dock that afternoon, ostensibly to greet the Countess, clearly visible on the balcony as the boat sailed closer into view: the woman the Occitans would christen l’Anglaise.

And so from a debased Little Duchess, Julia was born anew …
THE VICEREINE

I think there should only ever have been a beginning between us: the promise of a story, not the story itself. For what is love but a story: something to reflect upon in the grey hours, when the day no longer unfurls into a world, merely inhabits a familiar room. I think of the terrible price we have paid: the past we have concealed, the lies, the masks we have held up to our faces, pretending not to be. And we have been so many different people throughout our lives: you and I. We have metamorphosed before those who thought they knew us, until we have become unrecognisable, even to ourselves.

Twenty years ago on the dock at Cap d’Antibes, when you found me, I was twenty, not yet a Vicereine, but a Lady nonetheless. No more the tainted Little Duchess or the Moth with the soiled wings, but married to the Prince of Wales’s cousin; the naval hero dispatched to India to serve an apprenticeship at the Viceroy’s knee, to one day become the Burra Sahib of the Ruling Class. How dazzling to think of such things today, how ungrateful I was. For I was in despair at the thought: my one wish was that there would be stories there in India, in the Mediterranean we would cross: those that did not include my husband.

I stood at Harry’s side on the deck of the steam-liner, the port of Antibes expanding before us from a speck to an encroaching fact. Another town, another costume, another character to be played, beginning with ‘Mother’, as I gingerly clutched a finger of my baby daughter’s hand.

At Antibes there would be a confectionery, of this I was certain: ‘If you are good, I shall take you,’ I said: a hastily arrived at promise to ingratiate myself to the child I hardly knew. Three years had passed but the thread that had unspooled from my heart on Emmy’s birth had not strengthened into anything less fragile, while Nanny’s arms too readily outstretched to remove her burden from my own.
It was safer, I thought, not to grow closer. By choice – to survive – my arms remained empty. Although I had professed the usual delight upon Emmy’s birth – ‘A divine baby daughter. What bliss!’ I had telegraphed Harry, at sea – it was eighteen months before I could call Emmy by her name, and not ‘the baby’: eighteen months before I could allow myself to lunch with her four times a year in the nursery, when Nanny was not there. ‘My God, a cat’s a better mother than her,’ the servants crowed. But I was incapable of anything more. After Germany, after Andrew, I couldn’t love again; in private, I was inconsolable: in public, the Richest Heiress, the flighty life and soul.

There would be no Nanny now. This decision had been made in London. By Harry and his mother: a volleying stab of a final effort to make me care in ways both appropriate and traditional. I had received the news, delivered in one of those opulent London parlours, without the anticipated apprehension. I had sat impassively as their eyes, searching my expression for signs of a relapse, had flickered with hope like freshly stoked embers when I offered no resistance. I waited to be excused, trying to recall what it once was to hope. That had ended the day Emmy was born: on the day I was branded eternally as the mother of Harry’s child: an irrevocable legacy. I couldn’t even muster the energy to care about feeling so bloody. I felt empty. No, all I could think of that afternoon, a darkly lit mother, in a darkly lit room, was that there would be sunlight in Antibes: brilliant light. Not the white ether that seemed unable, or unwilling, to penetrate the dense lace panelled windows of wealthy townhouses on Hyde Park: where no-one could see in, and no-one could see out.

And I was right, for the sun was different in Antibes, which offered a tentative relief. Clean and crystalline, it illuminated the windows of the pastel pink and blue and yellow houses, which peppered the hills on the horizon, winking in knowing welcome, as hordes of men and women poured from every corner into the port.

‘Why are they cheering?’ I asked, gesturing to the crowd.
‘For you,’ my husband enthused, in the manner that always made me suck in my breath with shame at how little I felt for him.

‘Hmm,’ I replied, smiling wanly, with appropriate modesty, tilting my hat to obscure my face. But Harry caught it regardless, the glint in my eye: the knowledge that I was thrilled by the attention. Already, the jealousy felled him.

Because of my marriage, the public had reimagined me after Andrew’s trial. From the Little Duchess dressed in miniature adult's dresses and coats, chauffeured to literary galas in motor cars with colossal goggle lamps, and luscious oak panels, my clothes now fitted, but my car seats were lined with mink and I lived in a penthouse on Park Lane, designed by Lutyens, whose top resembled a ship and the lift took twelve seconds from bottom to seventh. There was not a dress I didn’t own first, a fashion I didn’t dictate, a film star who didn’t want to be me or marry me: nor was I ever alone; my life a hectic whirl: a Royal wedding, a Hollywood honeymoon, a world tour, Cowes, Wimbledon, Claridges, the Kit-Kat Club. I stood at the summit of society in London, Paris, Deauville, New York and Beverly Hills. There was nothing I had been denied.

But the air is so thin at the top. You can’t breathe. So the best choice is to fall willingly, before you’re pushed. And I had been, with all the words that had followed my marriage … Of my private hours, of film stars and NY playboys, negro jazz pianists from Louisiana, of illegal abortions, of cuckoldry, and in my circles, of the husband who cold-shouldered his wife on the front page, sent to a separate bedroom, because – they said – of Andrew, who had ruined me.

The truth was more prosaic: Harry adored me beyond reason, the only woman beyond his mother to inspire such emotion. Enraptured, kindly, and thoroughly uneasy at the parallel, he punished me for his sexual confusion, preferring only to look. Which freed me not to.

Not that I touched. But where would be the story in that?
Harry’s reaction on the boat, therefore, was irrelevant. What mattered was the dress in which I stood tall like a column, its dramatic Empire lines in monochromatic black and white, which would be photographed and copied from Paris to LA: a suit of armour to protect me – no more a ‘naked child’ in a man’s lap – from the people awaiting us.

It was a picture-perfect September afternoon, and the warmth of the sun and the cool of the sea combined into the most delicious breeze. I could see the business of the square, the bright tablecloths of the cafés, the thin, narrow streets running off up the steep hills, and longed to disembark, to lose myself in their winding alleys. For where might they lead and who might await me at their end? Almost involuntarily, I anticipated a future. For somehow I sensed that I was arriving not to be rewritten, but reborn: perceived through a different lens.

As the cheering grew louder, however, I realised Harry was mistaken. For it was not me, nor my dress that the Occitans had gathered to see, it was something far rarer. And I wonder if the Gods planned it this way? Because I suspect, as I look back, that he was the one waiting for me, not you: the young man who suddenly emerged from the throng, running towards the edge of the dock and the vast sea beyond.

I would have picked him out of any crowd, whether he was its witting star or not. I had seen boys like him at the centre of so many rooms; so young, too young, he couldn’t even have been my age, and by far the most beautiful of them all. Already I knew that they had feasted on him, his elegance was entirely contrived; the impeccably tailored summer suit, the expensive sunglasses, which fell free from his thick blonde hair as he pushed his way through the people. He had not been born to this.

Someone had created him.

‘I think it’s time for us to go inside,’ Harry said, placing his hand on my own as it rested on the balcony barrier, gripping it so tightly my knuckles had turned white.
The boy’s arms were outstretched as he ran. He must be a dancer, I thought. Such was the effort and commitment in his every step, his grace as he leapt through the crowd. It was as if he was putting on a performance, this succession of look-at-what-I-can-do-jetés for some invisible audience, whose approval he no longer needed. And it was then I heard it; a distant cry so familiar, it was almost as if it had emanated from myself; an agonising moan too soft to reach its quarry, a plea silenced by the cheering. Someone was calling a name.

‘Julia! Julia!’ Harry insisted under his breath, a tacit admonishment not to cause a scene and do as I was told. His urgency conveyed that something bad was about to happen. Something he didn’t want me to see.

But I had to see.

He had dressed in a hurry, the boy, before he fled. From the bed of whoever was going to harm him, or already had. His turquoise shirt was unbuttoned, revealing his tanned if vaguely underdeveloped naked body beneath and the Italian leather shoes, custom-made, were doubtless still kicked underneath that bed, for his feet were bare. But the boy was not afraid; there was something ahead of him, for which he was reaching.

The steam-liner seemed to propel itself faster, too fast, towards the port, and so the words grew closer, until suddenly another voice sounded: ‘Arête! Arête! Stop! Stop!’ A yell so piercing it hurt my ears. In the sea-like squall of people, I watched a tangle of disembodied arms scramble to catch the boy, pulling at his clothes, as he deftly sidestepped this way and that; the sleeve of his suit jacket ripped from its shoulder and clutched to the breast of a tearful woman. Yet, he refused to be halted in his pursuit. The cries grew deafening, as if the mob believed such voiced air would lasso him back to them, to where he might be safe. But he was serene as he raced towards the water, and more serene still every time someone sounded the clarion call that remained tantalisingly out of my earshot.
Frantically, sensing the imminent danger, the crowd took up the chant, for he was known to them, and the word denied to me became clear:

‘Vin-cent, Vin-cent,’ they cried.

‘Vincent,’ I whispered.

Almost, I pitied them. For I had already guessed at the boy’s secret and admired it: like all the stories of Victors before him, he would not be saved.

He was like a gazelle as he leapt forward, his body convulsed not in despair but passion. Our eyes did not meet, nor had they any need, for they shared the same desire, the same preference for an ending: why for the first time in years I felt such kinship with another soul:

I understood that desire perfectly when the boy threw himself against the side of the boat as it anchored, swinging to port, knowing that it would crush him when it invariably swung starboard.

He had been reaching for me, to pull me under with him. Somewhere I would have gladly followed.

But I had not reached.

At the blood-curdling shrieks from the dock, I felt the jarring wrench of my husband’s arms as he spun me around: ‘Pourquoi, pourquoi, le prince des gitans. Why, why, the gipsy prince . . .’

‘Don’t turn around. Whatever you do,’ Harry said, burrowing my head into his shoulder. And there he held tight, unaware that I was suffocating: something I almost relished. Until I saw you.

If I have learned anything of worth, my darling, it is this; if all we are ever given in life is to die in the arms of the one we love the most, then that is enough. A truth that dawned as I acknowledged you: for I had not chosen Harry, and you stopped me from
making that mistake when I saw you reflected in the steam-liner window to which I had been turned.

I almost thought I was hallucinating: for it couldn’t be, it was not possible:

You looked just like someone I once knew.

And I thought that I must be dying and my mind was playing tricks. For your hair was dark, not blonde, and you walked with a slight limp, your shoulders tensing in pain. You were sun-weathered in your navy suit, so French, and there were the children, whose hands you held, a blond boy and girl, one on either side of you, who could barely have been five. I noticed the flags and red carpet on the dock, the tricolor sash you wore and realised you were part of the Town committee come to welcome us.

I tried to break free then from Harry, struggling wildly in his arms as I watched the crowd part reverentially for Vincent to be pulled from the sea. But her screams stopped me momentarily; the screams of that woman who rushed forward to cradle Vincent’s battered body. I couldn’t make out her face, but something in her inspired terror for the children started crying and you turned anxiously to find someone to take them.

‘Let me go, Harry. Harry, let me go,’ I begged, finding a pocket of air in which to breathe, but he wouldn’t, clutching me to him even tighter. I could see the back of the woman as she showered Vincent’s bloody head with kisses, sobbing so loudly the ghost of the Emperor Tiberius might have heard her in Capri: Tiberius who had thrown his lovers from the cliff after he tired of them, as I suspected someone had tired of this boy. And I sensed then from those howling sobs that Vincent had taken his own life to punish someone: he had died for love so that he could not be forgotten.

I watched you stand back respectfully from this dark ceremony, as if obeying a command. Harry held faster, oblivious to what was transpiring as I watched on at your reflection in the porthole window; the many things that would cause such torment later: the
departure of my heart for one; and my hand that had let go of Emmy’s, as I had reached
instinctively for you, possessed by a compulsion I have never forsaken.

The scene changed before me, as if time had not passed, and I was a child again;
there was the garden and the Blue Pavilion, and a French door opening into the warm
evening of London, and there the roses and the lilies and the freesia blooming over the
borders, and there was my special pink silk organza dress, kept for best, which fell to my
ankles and there was darling Andrew in his dark suit, turning to me with that smile, for my
happiness was complete: ‘Julia, Julia,’ he called to me, ‘Toby has come back, and he has
such things to tell us.’

Toby has come back, I thought.

I had always prayed for his return, after he disappeared. I had no idea whether he
was alive or dead. Yet, something of the day had returned Toby to me, when the boy –
Vincent – died. And I realised that we had arrived only to mourn him, as I had mourned
Toby for years; another beautiful lost boy.

That is, until Harry learned that I had let go of Emmy’s hand.

She was nowhere to be seen.

And all around it started, in the way it does when these tragedies occur. There was
the frenzy, the chaos, the imminent sorrow to be overcome; the hours ahead of bearing,
stoicism, hushed tones and horrifying first thoughts upon waking; and Harry barking orders,
and the crew pouring out of the seams of the ship, swarming around me. I kept losing sight
of you, save for fragments of scenes, like someone standing in the way of a picture screen:
you gathering up the children from the woman who had taken them, and running with one in
either arm deeper into the people of the square; and the woman who had cradled the boy,
who just disappeared.

All gone.
I gasped for air and staggered forward to the barrier. I thought to throw myself over. But I accepted the price I had to pay. Instead, I sank to my knees, locked once more behind the bars of public scrutiny, and allowed the day to do with me as it would.

‘Toby,’ I whispered.

The crowd watched rapt.

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I felt the hard slaps across my face, my lifeless body resuscitated, my knees unable to support my weight as I was propped upright and hustled down the gangplank, my hat torn from my head, along with the pins in my hair, my scalp smarting in pain.

But what of it: the boy was dead, Emmy was missing. Sorrow was relentless.

It was as if I was once more standing at the edge of the vast expanse of green lawn in Hyde Park on that spring afternoon Andrew found me. The port of Antibes that had beckoned with such promise revealed its teeth as my eyes rested on the plinth of the old guillotine that stood in the centre of the square. I had arrived only to be executed.

I feared I would faint again. All I could see were things that weren’t there; lives unravelling, judges and juries and condemnation. I had lived already what would happen. The outcome was secured. This would be a different article in The Times. No future Viceroy’s arms would bundle me up and erase my past this time. No twinkly-eyed author would make me the star of his fairy tale.

Harry propelled me towards the car.

‘We’ll find her, Sir. She won’t have gone far,’ a member of the delegation called in our wake.

‘Let’s get you to the hotel,’ Harry whispered, desperately trying to sound compassionate, but failing. This was too much. After everything he had tried to do for me, this was really too much.

Besides, it was all about him now and how he could save the day.
But I already knew it couldn’t be saved.

It was impossible to hear for the noise as I arrived at the idling car: like a circle of hell, such screaming, surrounding the pool of blood in the centre of the square where the woman had cradled Vincent. The one you had obeyed, without remonstrance, as if you were afraid. Maybe it was the fact of her memory – where was she now, I thought, searching the landscape in panic – or the blood, but I began to feel queasy until nausea overwhelmed me and I fell to my knees, while Harry was negotiating something with the driver. So at first he didn’t notice, but that was when I found you again, your back to me, a bit further off. My eyesight was always cloudy, though, because I was too vain to wear glasses and bleary from the heat; I couldn’t be sure anymore what was real and what was not.

The people were dispersing and the butcher approached to throw water over the blood that spoke of the previous carnage. ‘Arete,’ you reproached, raising a forestalling hand, to the man’s confusion. You hurried towards him and stood over the puddle. And I almost felt as if I, too, were considering your reflection in that mirror of this new world, for you kept metamorphosing before me.

You lowered your head into your hands. I remembered Vincent running to his death, my conviction that he had died for love. Yet, not for her, the woman: she had simply claimed him. There were women like that in the world, I knew. And I had met boys like Vincent in Andrew’s house. The kindest were invariably the first to fall. But your sorrow; what did it mean? For whom did you repent?

‘Dear God, Julia,’ Harry exclaimed, noticing my crouched posture and pulling me up. ‘People are watching!’ he said, hustling me into the backseat. ‘What kind of mother are you. How could you have let go of her little hand?’ He barked some order at the driver and slammed the door so hard, the man spun round and glared at me. I was closest, after all.
The car sped off and I left you there. I had no idea if I would see you again. And I had to: to confirm something, even if it was only a memory. I began to weep uncontrollably: my head bowed as I soaked my hands with tears that fell through my fingers and stained my dress.

‘They will find her,’ the driver tried to console me. ‘Your husband is upset, I think. I am sure you are a wonderful mother.’

I couldn’t respond. I only sobbed harder.

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At the Hotel du Cap, I waited, a mess of nerves, for any news. Every moment, stewards and staff at the hotel ran in and out of my room with updates, or no updates. *We are searching everywhere. We will find her, we are certain. Please accept our sincerest apologies, what a regrettable first impression of Antibes.* I was so famous; even when I made a hideous mistake, the world thought to apologise.

I could scarcely register them. My fingers clutched at the lace of my sleeves in my palm reflexively. *Just leave me alone. Just leave me,* I prayed, as I threw open the doors to the balcony and took a deep breath, as if I was coming up for air. There stood the sea. Flat, calm, an assurance that I had not seen its like before, nor would I again. It was just there, I reassured myself, collapsing into a seat, mindless of the sun that scorched my pale skin until it tingled.

I am forever lost, abandoned, I realised. First in the rain under an oak tree, and now in a summer room, turning emptily to watch the men leave, and considering its whitewashed walls, the heavy white embroidered linens piled high and lustrously thick over the silk mattress, the gilt-edged tables, and escritoires filled with stationery intended to incite envy in anyone who received one of its leafs: *Such fun, the sea warm, the village character a delight, dinner at sunset with the Comte de ...* But those were not the sentences I would
inscribe. No, I would have to say: My daughter has vanished in a strange country because I let go of her hand. So I could reach for a man.

I glimpsed my reflection in the mirrored wardrobe door next to the French doors and recoiled. It was as if I had been beaten by a mob; my dress was creased and filthy around the hem, my hat in tatters, my hair pulled every which way. I loathed my image: I always had, that ludicrous drooped concave posture I affected as one of the World’s Most Beautiful Women; none of it was real, all of it an affectation: who to be; lively, engaged, dutiful, diligent, methodical, neat, polite, a roster of moods. And never, ever, did I give a faultless performance.

You see, there was a story that I wanted my life to tell, but I didn’t fit the mould anymore of who I longed to be: that person had existed for one year when I lived in Germany. That perfect yet devastating time when the allegations and stories came out in the Press about Andrew’s past, which my absence seemed to confirm. For the little Moth had forsaken the Golden Tree. And where had I gone and with whom? And, more importantly, why had I gone?

I destroyed Andrew, but I couldn’t have been happier to be away: to be free. Then, as that afternoon, my selfishness had led only to tragedy.

A knock at the door caused me to start. Harry, I thought morosely. Oh God, I can’t bear it. I can’t bear to know …Though maybe it was the maid, I consoled myself, as I trod forebodingly, towards it. Grief might spare me a while longer; offer a sliver of mercy. I’d forgotten how maids continuously disrupted afternoon naps on the Continent, wanting to tidy up rooms and finish their shifts early.

But it wasn’t the maid.

It was you.

And, for a moment, that sliver of mercy appeared: for everything was as it should be and my world diminished peacefully to a world of two.
Perhaps, it was because you had found me, but I felt momentarily returned to a beginning where no harm lurked. The cacophony of voices that dictated my daily course of behaviour – to sit, to stand, to speak, to hold my silence, to smile, to parry, to love my husband and child – were snuffed as your presence cancelled out their very details. I did not question anything, for a conviction seized me that everything had fundamentally changed: my marriage could not survive your arrival, its memory willingly cast adrift from my consciousness like wedding confetti blown into the path of a bonfire.

Always you have been familiar yet a stranger to me; I have known you for centuries yet possess no insight into your mind; you are two people, hers and mine simultaneously, forever a step behind yet ahead. And, always, as if an hour has passed or a lifetime you happen to me again as if for the first time: that afternoon, I wanted to open no other door and find anyone but you, even as I disintegrated at what you could tell me; facts that would ensure any future happiness was impossible.

I realised that you stood with a gendarme under the whitewashed frame, at your back the pale blue damask of the silk-papered halls, an immediate balm on the overheated foreheads of travellers who stepped gratefully within their confines. I felt my heart race: where was Harry and what did he know? ‘I had to come to see you myself: I am from the Mayor’s office, his junior consul, Alexandre de Lerrison,’ you said insistently, stepping forwards to block the gendarme’s view. ‘We’ve found her, your daughter. It will be fine now, I promise. She fell asleep in a dinghy. She’s downstairs with your …’

I let out a moan as I placed my hands over your mouth to silence you, to stop you saying my husband’s name; as if I could make him disappear, my knees buckling as tears poured down my cheeks. ‘Oh thank God for you, thank God for you,’ I said. You caught me as I fell into your arms – arms that seemed to rescue, to which I clung. I sobbed hysterically, overwhelmed by all that had happened, undone by the twist of fate that had brought you to my room; the state in which you had discovered me. ‘Leave us, won’t you,’ I heard you say
to the gendarme. ‘Guard the end of the corridor. Don’t let anyone else through until I tell you. Watch out for the Press.’

You moved me back, deeper into the room, and turned the key in the lock: Don’t ever open it, I wanted to say. But I couldn’t. I almost collapsed again; what a failure I was, a wreck of a woman. I felt such joy that my daughter was unharmed, and at the same time an unassailable sense of loss; of fear at what next, of how I would be judged: of how it would be with you. You have always mattered to me in a way no-one else ever has.

You held my hand as I struggled to speak: a consoling and unflinching presence. There were the questions that pressed against my lips; things I couldn’t understand: ‘But,’ I stammered, ‘the boy, who died. Her, the woman …the children …where …where is Harry … does he know you’re here?’ Yet, thinking of him upset me more.

You listened patiently and let me cry. Until, finally, you took my chin in your hands and turned my face up to yours. ‘I have no right to say this, but I could kill him: I saw him earlier with you. By the car.’

I caught my breath as I noted in infinitesimal detail everything about you that I have never failed to love; the kindness, the warmth, a man brave enough to bully the bullies, while outside I heard the afternoon continue; the clatter of teacups and plates below on the veranda, the high pitched calls of the garcons calling to one another as the chatter reached a crescendo – of me, no doubt, of my many transgressions. But you had witnessed the truth and pitied me: the only person who had, or who cared to. I couldn’t deny that I had behaved deplorably since my marriage, gadding about shamelessly with any number of men who took a shine to me, in plain sight: anything to be away from Harry, to forget my childhood. But no-one had asked why, or understood. Until you. And, somehow, I felt forgiven.

From the first, you were the opposite of the cruelty I had suffered; what you represented to me was new: a place unknown and unmarred by experience. A place where there would be no danger of confronting foul memories, of visiting cherished relics of the
past and remembering happier days on a day infinitely less happy, such as I had endured with Harry.

I felt like a character in one of Andrew’s books again. It was as if Fate dared me not to hesitate on the threshold where you waited. I had to cross over into this unknown country, to disappear down the rabbit hole to a world unimagined, unlived: a world where I could begin again.

There were the things you confided: of the boy who died, the woman, the children; of who you were and what it meant that you had come to me, stayed with me; the words that rewarded and stung in equal measure. Especially Severine; even now her name sluices through me like burning ice. I minimise the pain then as today; it is too easy to be undone by it. Nor can I afford her that victory.

But, of course, I would surely be ruined anew if I strayed any further from the harsh facts of my reality with you: it would be better to let you leave. Yet, when every sentence was said that had to be said, and I thought you might, I gripped your arm to keep you.

‘But I can’t leave you,’ you said. ‘You shouldn’t be alone.’

And at the sound of your voice, a burden was lifted from me, like a veil from a bride. I remember little else as your lips touched mine, save for the sensation of the miniature pressing into the hollow of my neck: as if you had branded its secret history onto my body; a story only you could read.

Clear and crystalline, the sun beat on relentlessly outside my window.

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Yes, my love, a foot placed on a dock. This is how things begin and end: a future promised, and a past recalled. But what of the foot suspended in mid-fall? The silk talon of the heel millimetres from arrival or departure, from hope or regret: what of the heart that undulates rhythmically like the sea that supports the boat: what of the choice to be made that I must make now? Of whether I will allow the boat to crush me or live on with you instead.
You have not come. I cannot wait any longer for your answer. And as I walk
through the corridor of my empty house, to Aarush, to the car, to the party beyond and what
I must confront, I am convinced of one thing:

There should only ever have been a beginning between us.
The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

At the cottage, Severine swallowed hard, and I thought she might wretch, as she pressed a handkerchief to her lips.

Momentarily, she reared up, ‘The party, let’s go to back to the party. I can’t listen to her anymore. Besides, you’re the fabled storyteller. She’s just a pretender. I often wondered why on earth she bothered. I mean her vignettes were passably entertaining, but she wasn’t in your league. Besides, there’s something else: it’s imperative I understand,’ Severine continued, looking up at the portrait, as if expecting to meet Julia again. ‘When she greeted us at the door, you at my back …’

I did not envy what awaited her at the conclusion of my story, considering her reaction to the facts already revealed. It was almost a comfort to retreat to when Julia’s jasmine perfume still lingered in the State Reception Room, away from Severine’s desperation. Moreover, the moment to which she alluded, when Julia and her lover were briefly reunited, was perhaps the most notorious, if poignant, of their entire affair.

The party had diminished without fanfare to a gathering of two. It struck me that every light had dimmed, save for where they stood: our attendance, upon which its success had once crucially hinged, no longer relevant as both found the prize they sought amidst the crowd. Utterly reckless in their regard, Julia and he cared nothing for anyone else – for Severine, for the Viceroy, for me as I watched on. It was as if they imagined themselves hidden in a private room somewhere: a place where they could revel in the freedom of being themselves. Their every action – Julia’s fingers resting proprietarily on the breast of his suit, his hand reaching for the back of her head to draw her into an embrace – seemed suffused with relief that they no longer needed to pretend.
It was like they were creating a future moment, after the dust had settled on what they had done: after the gossip columns had chronicled their spousal abandonment and subsequent blissfully happy marriage: all those newspapers already consigned to the bottom of neatly tied stacks somewhere in a grander house the two would later share, preserved only to entice a fire to burn.

But some stories, as I understood well, are impervious to fire.

I will never forget the dignity with which Julia turned to greet Severine. Brava, my little Moth, I commended her, as the whispers began to percolate more loudly of her flagrant behaviour, punctuated by the Deputy’s on-going quarrel behind me:

‘My dear Helen, you’re quite mistaken, the famine and subsequent rioting that broke out forced the Viceroy’s hand. He had seven months, to end over 300 years of British rule and liberate 400 million Indians. The Vicereine completely accepted this,” he exhaled heavily, as if labouring under the momentous task himself. “She didn’t accuse him of incompetence at all.’

‘I said “impotence”, you idiot. Besides, total balderdash,’ his wife snapped, flapping her hand zealously in the face of the petrified servant to fan faster. ‘The Vicereine’s spitting chips that she’s got to leave him,’ she objected, too loudly, prodding her finger towards Julia’s lover. ‘No more cosy tête-à-tête’s in Mashobra, while Harry toils away.’

Julia glanced over in alarm as Severine turned to consider the unlikely ally of the Deputy’s Wife: ‘I, for one, applaud Julia’s choice to invite us here, Helen, ‘ I interceded swiftly, ‘the former Ruling Class. What are we but remnants of an idyllic Imperial life? It’s as if we are little children all, waiting for a fairy tale from her that the truth isn’t true, there will be a happy ending: the Empire is still intact.’

Of course, I recognised my mistake almost as soon as I sought to protect Julia: for the Deputy placed a hand to his brow, his wife stepped back in disgust, and I braced myself for her rebuke. Don’t laugh at those who scantily tolerate you, for at the slightest opportunity
they will condemn you again. I had been readmitted to the Society over which I had once presided because of Julia, but only the margins of that Society tolerated me now; ‘Oh forgive me,’ she spat, ‘the Oracle hath spake. And who would know better than this bastion of morality, who spent five years in jail for sodo—’

‘Helen!’ cried Julia, causing a tremor of unease to buck back through the eavesdropping guests, who were invited to acknowledge my disgrace anew.

I swayed slightly and placed a hand to the wall, as Julia whispered something I couldn’t make out; I looked across to a passel of elderly butterflies, their wings quite faded, fluttering around a young girl so exquisite, it was as if she was emerging from a chrysalis. She had smiled at me earlier, as only the innocent can: Lady Amelia. Her mother had once been a very close friend, before her confinement. But then it was a room filled with people who, in so many different ways, had all once been very close friends.

That time seemed an eternity away for Julia, once as exquisite, as full of promise as Lady Amelia; Julia, who had inspired every sentence I’d ever written. She was ill again, the nervous torpor evident in her thinness, a slight gauntness in her cheeks, the dark circles under her eyes expertly concealed with make-up. But soon it would begin to tell: for she was growing older: without reward.

Something she had said the previous afternoon came back to me; ‘To think, my life only really began at the cottage; the one place where I’ve been able to speak freely of our past, of Toby.’ She had drawn down her white-rimmed sunglasses to conceal her tears, the orange blossom raining over her, as if she was lying in state on a funeral pyre. Toby; that name to which not a soul responded: Toby.

I sensed Severine start to impinge upon the space in which Julia stood and felt the familiar protective rage ignite, compounded by the blow the Deputy’s Wife had just meted out.

Blindly, I stepped forward, so that Severine was forced out of the way.
The violence of the gesture was lost on no-one.

Good, I thought, as the whispers began again in earnest.

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‘…when you stepped in between us and elbowed me aside. Julia said something,’

Severine said, as I refocused on her at the cottage, “I’ve put them—” and you stopped her from finishing the sentence. Why?’

I shrugged. ‘I was trying to prevent a scene. That was when you crossed over to the Viceroy, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ she said, a smirk hidden in the corner of her mouth.

‘After you bowed to Julia and your husband.’

‘Yes,’ she repeated, but the smirk had disappeared.
Lady Amelia was no longer bored and feasibly even more becoming, as the women, Impeccable and otherwise, regaled her with the history of the Vicereine’s illicit romance with de Lerrison. Who knew? she considered, tilting her matchless head to one side to study the Vicereine’s image on the opposite wall. But she was reprieved from thinking too hard about anything at all, when the Pillar Box exclaimed, ‘Good bloody God, she’s practically on top of him.’

Over the rims of their cocktail glasses, the Ladies honed in on Julia and de Lerrison at the ornate gilded doors. Not to mention Severine who, at that moment, staggered backwards, turning over on her ankle, as Andrew Shepherd stepped purposefully forward, pushing her aside: a determined move that made Julia flinch reflexively, holding up her arm as if to block a blow.

‘And what do we make of that?’ said the Pillar Box, a horrified hush descending as Severine bowed her head and retreated backwards a few steps, paying a cynical homage to the two lovers. Sidestepping those guests who sought to engage her, Severine made her way over to the Viceroy, her head held high against the salacious comments pinballing off the walls.

‘So what happ—’ said Lady Amelia.

‘SSSShhhhhh,’ hissed the Pillar Box, craning her neck to hear. ‘Severine’s about to say something.’

With notable deference – perhaps, even fondness – the Viceroy kissed Severine’s hand, before standing up and offering a forlorn smile as she clasped her hand over his. Some perceived a certain schoolgirl coyness in her acknowledgement of the Viceroy, while others thought her entitled, but Severine appeared about to speak when she was distracted by something at his back.
The Ladies held their breath: but what was it, and what next?

Much to their disappointment, nothing: for Severine abruptly left his side and crossed over to the yellow silk chaise beneath the Vicereine’s portrait, and an audible sigh of disgruntlement ballooned up to the ceiling.

‘I can’t speak for any of you, but d’you not find the Vicereine diminished by it all?’ pondered the Pillar Box, in her too tight dress and garish blue eyeshadow. ‘I mean all this time, and ...nothing,’ she shrugged emphatically, turning up her palms to the heavens. ‘Rien.’

‘What do you mean? Smaller?’ replied the ever-harried Chancellor’s Wife, not quite listening to her friend and keeping a close eye on her five children gambolling riotously over the Viceroy’s Palace gardens, through the windows. ‘She does hunch her shoulders a bit, but it might just be the shoulder pads. She wears them quite high up.’

‘Not the best choice for such a short neck,’ meowed the Pillar Box, seizing on any opportunity to rubbish her, an observation that was interrupted by the high-pitched shriek of her cohort.

‘Rupert, put your sister down!’ demanded the Chancellor’s Wife of her ten-year-old, dangling his two-year-old sister, Marina, upside down by the ankles. ‘She’s just had ice-cream, she’ll be sick over you!’ An admonishment that prompted Rupert to wretch and drop the toddler on her head, forcing her mother to caterwaul to their ayah to bring the child upstairs. *Boarding school*, mouthed the Pillar Box to Lady Amelia, wrinkling her nose in disdain and reaching for her sherbert.

‘You do realise we’ve been talking about this for twenty years,’ the Chancellor’s Wife ventured apologetically to the young Lady Amelia, although not wanting to put her friend out of sorts by changing her favourite subject.

‘Indeed, and it’s all been so marvellously entertaining – notably that shooting weekend in Scotland, remember that one? But nothing,’ repeated the Pillar Box, shrugging
with Sarah Bernhardt theatricality this time, and making a poor show of checking her wanton lust for another woman’s husband, as she appraised the Viceroy standing by the fire in full military regalia. ‘So what was the bloody point of it? I mean to say everyone had to pick sides: Severine or Julia. Harry or de Lerisson. Our lives have been totally factionalised over this. And they had every opportunity to sod off with each other and …nothing! It beggars belief.’

The Impeccable One rolled her eyes at the Chancellor’s Wife, and thought to change the subject, ‘What were you going to say, dear’ she asked, turning back to the divine Lady Amelia.

‘I was just wondering what happened in Antibes after the Vicereine arrived,’ she mused, looking younger and more innocent by the minute, but ever so obviously ravenous for more.

‘You tell her,’ said the Pillar Box, winking distractedly to the Impeccable One. ‘I’m going to try and find out what the Vicereine said at the door.’

‘Well, after that poor boy died,’ the Impeccable One recalled, as the Pillar Box pushed off through the guests and the Chancellor’s Wife dangled out the window to check on her brood, ‘there was the kiss and the teacup …

‘And what a kiss, what a teacup …’

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After the catastrophe in the port, all the talk at the du Cap was of Julia and the disaster that had befallen her child: Emmy, who was – if they were honest, rather perfunctorily – found hiding in a dinghy on the steam-liner and returned to the hotel by the man they called Alexandre de Lerisson. As some sort of junior consul in the Mayor of Antibes’s office, the Mayor who was visiting Paris on official business at the time, de Lerison had arrived in his place to welcome Lord and Lady Michener with his two
children, Nico and Angelica, but, of course, such plans had been thrown into disarray with the gipsy boy’s suicide.

The chorus was diverted, however, from the details of the horrific event, by a beside-himself Harry offering de Lerrison the moon for returning Emmy safely to him. And that was when, according to a dear friend of the Ladies, who had overheard *everything*, de Lerrison had refused Harry’s offer of joining him for ice-cream with Emmy on the veranda after he gave Julia the phenomenal news, and had asked if he could convey it to his wife instead. Something Harry had courteously – indeed, ecstatically – allowed. Besides, de Lerrison had felt it his responsibility, given the Mayor’s absence. And Harry had nodded and agreed, clutching Emmy to him and paying no attention whatsoever, such was his joy and relief. And so de Lerrison was free to proceed to Julia’s hotel room.

A fateful choice, the chorus decreed.

Were it not for the shattered teacup, dropped from the trembling hand of a Dowager, Julia and de Lerisson may have savoured that beginning between them for weeks, if not years. Yet, from the first, Julia displayed a naïve, almost fatalistic, lack of caution in her immediate and unprepossessing desire. And what caused the tremor of discontent to reverberate just loud enough for Harry to notice as he sat with their daughter, three floors below his wife’s room, was the sight of her first kiss upon de Lerisson’s lips. A kiss that was reflected in the mirrored wardrobe door of her bedroom, which a gust of wind had blown open: a pointillist vision of Julia pinned into a corner with a strange man in a strange town, his navy suit smothering her frame: an indiscretion she allowed without resistance in that enviable dress sullied for all to witness.

‘Is that a flag flapping?’ queried someone incredibly bossy but very beautiful in brilliant red lipstick. ‘Or an umbrella? How very annoying,’ she said, scanning the vista of the marble stone balcony overlooking the Mediterranean, infuriated to be torn away from the scene playing out in Julia’s bedroom.
She paused, however, on sighting the consoling familiarity of La Garoupe lighthouse watching over the Baie des Anges, her mood perceptibly softening as the insinuations regarding the unfolding scandal oscillated wildly around her. For the Baie had that effect.

‘But I thought Julia was frigid …’ ‘Clearly, he’s melted something in her then …’ ‘Do you think Harry can see her?’ ‘No, it’s out of his line of vision …’ ‘Thank God her daughter’s back to her. I mean it’s not on, is it? Church and State for pity’s sake …’

Captivated by the view, the Beauty slumped slightly in her lounge chair, entirely at odds with her habitual poise. Suddenly, it was too tedious, this endless gossip, this obsession with others. And Julia’s only young, she rationalised, swatting a mosquito irritably. And married to that, a nice but inconsequential man, far too sedate, far too old for her. How insipid, how needy he’ll become. So what of it? What of love discovered on a Monday afternoon in this paradise? She scowled at how she had started it, by pointing up to Julia’s room and inviting everyone else to witness her folly not moments earlier.

And hadn’t she known that pleasure once? Hadn’t she been the one for whom rooms of suitors had parted in rapturous welcome like the Red Sea when she had come out; graced the covers of Tatler and Country Life and Town and Country in her pearls and diamonds; had her pick of that bountiful feast where all of it was hers for the taking? And now she was a mother of four, and a Marchioness in Norfolk, with a house in Antibes and gilt-edged invitations beckoning her here and there, delivered on a silver salver at breakfast, no function complete without her, the unofficial judge and jury of the social elite. Yet, none of it fulfilled her.

I’ve probably already messed it up for Julia, she thought, forbidding herself from the conversation. And why shouldn’t she know what it is to be held in another man’s arms and renewed after years of disappointment as the wife of an inconsequential but well-meaning man? I was.
Once upon a time, the Beauty had fallen as hard as Julia. And how obligingly she had submerged into her lover’s devoted attention after the realities of the marital bed and childbirth had altered her; after that girlish surge of sunniness she used to experience of a morning had resignedly evolved into an overcast acceptance that each day brought more of the same, no surprise would puncture the monotone.

Such a glorious summer, can it be four years now? she reflected, chasing away its last memory – the afternoon when she had swallowed a bottle of pills on her balcony overlooking the *Baie*, after her lover had ended their affair. *La Garoupe* had witnessed everything, as it would now. It had stood tall, and without judgement, as the Beauty slipped into that dream-like state she craved, with not a thought for her children or her husband, the reality of her loss excruciating.

But she had been saved, so should she not save Julia? And almost the Beauty did. She got up to run to Julia’s room in full view of the chorus who knew every last detail about her, risking what would be said, the old wounds it would reopen for her family, when the unexpected sound of a slow hand clap caused her to stop dead and turn in search of its perpetrator. And there, at the top of the steps leading up from the gardens smothered in bougainvillea, stood a pale blonde woman, her mismatched outfit ludicrously unsuited to the environs or the heat.

‘Oh bloody hell fire, it’s Severine,’ exclaimed the Chancellor’s Wife. ‘What in the world has she been doing; her hair’s dripping wet and is that….Dear God,’ she continued, placing a hand over her mouth in dismay, ‘is that blood down the side of her skirt. Or is it dye from that ugly red woollen jumper?’ she said, scrutinising Severine’s – was it cashmere? Who could tell? – misshapen garment.

‘Honestly, that woman is something else. And do you know, I always get the impression she thinks she looks tremendous. Do you think she’s seen him,’ the friend asked,
glancing back to Julia’s bedroom. But the wind had blown the mirrored door shut, so they could not tell. ‘And why is Severine clapping her hands?’

Presently, a group of women from another table rushed over to her, replete with towels and fussing ministrations; not that they had any time for Severine, but somebody had to be seen to do something: she was an official’s wife, after all. Severine accepted their presence emotionlessly, as they towelled off her sodden clothes and tactfully draped another towel around her soiled skirt. Two of the older women exchanged embarrassed grimaces, surely it couldn’t be what they thought it was. Surely Severine, however eccentric, would not disgrace herself by not taking care of … Well, of what one never spoke?

‘I think the dye has run off your sweater, my dear,’ one of the women inferred, trying to elicit a response, but Severine did not reply, and quite aghast at having their suspicions very possibly confirmed, they hurried her off inside to the bathroom.

Too tedious, thought the Beauty, nothing ever changes. And thinking better of her protective instincts and remembering that nobody had bothered to show her such kindness, she sat back down with her friends. She must forget, she told herself; for it was all about to start again, and some memories were too painful to relive: particularly the summer that had ruined her life, shrouding every minute that followed in depression. But the Beauty was interrupted from her thoughts again by a most incongruous voice, as the figure of a gentleman with a cane emerged from the hotel.

‘Over here,’ called Harry, jumping up spryly from his table and waving. ‘Here! Over here! Julia doesn’t know you’re coming. I wanted it to be a surprise, but first, there’s somebody I would like greatly for you to meet. Another little lost girl!’ And turning to Emmy, seated obediently at the table with the remnants of her ice cream, Harry presented her to the new guest, much to the collective incredulity of everyone assembled.

‘It can’t be,’ the Dowager exclaimed. ‘Why, he’s positively ravaged. Do you think they beat him? No, it’s definitely him,’ she assured her companions, holding up her
lorgnettes to her nose. ‘I’d know those bright blue eyes anywhere. If one didn’t know better,’ she said, disapprovingly, ‘one might think them innocent. ‘Why’s he here? I always thought it best Julia was rid of him.‘

‘He must have been released early,’ whispered the Beauty’s friend, ‘didn't he get fifteen years? What can Harry be thinking? Well, seemingly all is forgiven now,’ she concluded in bewilderment as Harry and Andrew embraced one another. ‘We aren’t expected to acknowledge him, are we?’

‘No, I’ve not spoken to him in years,’ replied the Beauty absently, thinking not of Andrew Shepherd but her old lover. And, to the confusion of her friends, she pulled down her sunglasses and looked back to the sea.

Suddenly, the Pillar Box came running out of the hotel, bursting with some news.

‘The boy who died in the port today. Well, it’s the most ghastly thing. Seemingly, he was running from a crime. He was a rent boy. He’d just murdered the man who picked him up off the street!’

‘Good lord, how awful,’ the Ladies carolled in unison.

‘Mmmm,’ agreed the Pillar Box, her jaw falling open as she noticed Harry’s table.

‘Is that—?’

‘Yes,’ nodded the Ladies.

And their brows furrowed as links were tentatively made, and conclusions arrived at in horror.

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Not a word of Julia’s indiscretion was mentioned to her, and so she was unaware of what had been witnessed. In fact, many of the women appeared kinder to her. Some even secretly admired Julia, while reviling her baser instincts. Yet, very few could bring themselves to like her. For what would be the fun in that? No, Julia emerged as a compelling, if dangerous, pastime. What was she, they speculated, but a demonised fairytale
character all grown up: one who should be greeted with two parts empathy for her past burdens, and one part suspicion. For hadn’t she loved Andrew Shepherd, quite more than anything?

But, more often than not, she was included. After all, she had married a relation so close as to hold the hem of the Royal robe. Not to mention, if she was so brave as to dangle her sordid reputation on such a public washing line, she had to know she could do so without fear of reprisal. What then might she do to them then, if similarly inclined to brave scandal? Julia evidently thought herself impervious to harm. And so she was kept close enough for comfort, but no more. But also, the women had the ideal excuse for maintaining a polite distance: Andrew. Julia would not go anywhere without him at her side. That is, except for a Sunday.

Shortly after their infamous first meeting, Julia’s dance lessons with de Lerrison in the Hotel du Cap’s ballroom began. Why Harry allowed it nobody could possibly guess, but that he must have been aggrieved, despite being very foolish and clearly not much of a man, fostered his new identity as a pitifully sad individual: one who must always be shown attentive compassion.

For his part, the future Viceroy offered no indication – from the sighting of his wife in another man’s arms to when she fell from the window of the Viceregal Lodge at Simla – that he suspected Julia of being anything other than his first and fabled love, arrived at very late and the more precious for it. For, in truth, Harry considered de Lerrisson of no more consequence than a man who could tell a pretty story, failing to understand that was all Julia sought: someone who could tell her a better story of herself than he.

A lesson Andrew Shepherd had taught her well.

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As for the Man of News, Andrew, after his first visit to the du Cap, he disappeared: a fact the chorus found utterly bizarre, in tandem with Harry’s apparent decision to invite him, everyone in bits over how to fathom his involvement.

The men, for their part, gathered at yacht clubs and hotel bars, maintained an almost dignified silence over the elephant in the room; Harry’s sexual proclivities: for why on earth would an avowed homosexual be top of Harry’s guest list otherwise? And indeed, they mumbled in mitigating elliptical sentences – an old Etonian Morse code where the truth lurked somewhere beneath an aristocratically unstressed diphthong – boarding school, the Royal Navy, the company of old boys, rugby dinners, etcetera and that, things the women don’t need to know …One for the road? And therein they would down a quick snifter or two and return to a fulsome debate over bowline knots and fenders, and how tight is too tight, unburdened of any further speculation.

For the women, Andrew provided sufficient conversational fodder to last the winter, with the prospect of more whenever Julia’s Creator might appear. Not to mention what would happen when he met with his beloved first inspiration again. Yet, the venom attendant to their gossip was noticeably more muted when the subject arose. Sentences, which began rapidly, firing out attacks; ‘Of course, Harry should keep them apart …’ would evolve into elongated, twisting, insinuations of sympathy, ‘but is it a crime …at the end of the day …to love someone?’ ‘Granted, it is a sin in the eyes of the Church,’ a random Witness for the Defence would protest, forestalling hands aloft to stave off a verbal blow, ‘but haven’t we all known a few. And he did write such charming fairy tales. Amelia and Charlie and Jack adored them as children. I still do … “In the Golden Tree, where the butterflies come to rest …” And so the eyes would mist, and nostalgia would mollify the women, increasing exponentially with the late afternoon cocktails, to the point where every sin was forgiven pre-siesta. Only for a complete volte face by dinner, when the women
would curse the waiters for the far too stiff drinks that afternoon, which had clouded their
better instincts. And so the game of judge and jury would begin again….

‘It’s all down to Harry. Anything to please Julia. She never gave up on Shepherd. But he cannot imagine we’ll include him,’ they said, fizzing at the social predicament.

‘We’ve no choice,’ deduced the magnanimous, ‘the Commander has spoken. Which begs the question of what in the name of God we’re to talk to him about? Flogging with a cat o’ nine tails? The inspiration for his sodding fairy tales? And what in the world happened in that enchanted house in Hyde Park? It really is too shocking.’

‘I wouldn’t bother,’ murmured the more malicious. ‘You’re overlooking something utterly fundamental. He must have something on her. It’s blackmail. And we know how Harry would do anything to protect Julia. Long and short of it is Shepherd is pure evil and we’ve got to make do. But mind, Julia is the one who’s going to get it in the neck first!’

And thus having arrived at the most tantalising of hypotheses, they hunkered down to observe Julia more closely than ever before; every expression, sigh, and word.

But much to their irritation, when it came to Andrew, she was a book fastened by a lock, the location of the key unknown.

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Twenty years later at Simla, Lady Amelia peered as closely as they at the now Vicereine.

‘What story do you think she’s going to tell tonight?’ she asked.

‘Who knows?’ the Impeccable One replied.

‘I wonder if she ever knew the story in that tiny book. You know, the one from Andrew Shepherd’s trial, the miniature or whatever it was …’ Lady Amelia remarked; an insight that prompted the Impeccable One – formerly the Beauty of the veranda in Antibes. For what is left to Beauties when beauty fades, other than to be impeccable? – to cast a reappraising eye in her direction.
THE VICEREINE

After you came to me at the du Cap, we dined at Mrs Pulitzer’s villa, everyone in silk and summer ermine, whole families from grandmothers to new-borns gathered around gilt cocktail tables overlooking the boats illuminated on the Mediterranean. ‘Who needs a party planner when you’ve got this?’ she trilled in her very American fashion, prompting certain Brits to pout at one another over their filet mignon. ‘Wait ‘til I tell Serena Lyons,’ she added humorously, invoking the most legendary hostess of the Hamptons. ‘She’ll die. Ha!’ And the Brits tittered politely as the Yanks guffawed.

Serena Lyons wasn’t warm, she was cold, but I’d liked her anyway. She owned the type of frigidity that only comes from having experienced uncommon sorrow. I’d known immediately as soon as her hand touched mine; it grasped for nothing, an obligatory touch; it had lost the hand it sought. And she had let me lie down upstairs when my head hurt too badly, whereas Mrs Pulitzer preferred to keep me on display, like a bird that was stupid enough to fly into a cage.

This was why we were seated at the centre table; for couldn’t I always be counted on to amuse, whether at my expense or others? Yet, for once, I was privy to more than them. Nobody had any idea of what had passed between us that afternoon; the first shred of privacy I’d enjoyed since I was three. And the day, for once, had been lovely; it had rescued, not denied: I felt a forgotten calm, a re-piecing of myself as if I were a mess of jigsaw puzzle pieces spilt on the floor that people had trampled into the parquet. I hadn’t exercised violently, but napped soundly after you left: I trusted completely in you, although others would certainly have questioned my judgement. With Harry, I could barely stand up: his presence a constant pressure.

We must have been a hundred and fifty guests, although I felt present yet absent at the same time. I listened to Emmy babble but didn’t join in. I was wearing a floral chiffon
crystal encrusted dress, with silver stockings and matching silver kid shoes. They reminded me of ones I’d owned as a child. It was the buckle. Now they were back in fashion.

Andrew had buckled my shoe in Hyde Park; a protective instinct that made me trust him, while we waited under the tree in the rain. And it came to me how important it was to have someone love you like that. I felt almost gay to be so rewarded: offset by the shame that I had offered my daughter no such affection. But then, for so long, before you came to me, I couldn’t feel a thing.

I leaned forward impetuously: ‘Emmy, darling,’ I interrupted her and Harry, who looked at me in part-fear, part-amazement. ‘Do you know what this all reminds Mummy of? The day I was a Moth at The Ritz.’ Concerned, Harry carefully put down his champagne glass, but I smiled with such warmth that he was disarmed. He was a good man deep down; one I might not stay with, not anymore, so why not be nice? I told myself. He was so handsome, well-meaning; it wasn’t his fault I couldn’t love him after …Well, after.

And hadn’t he given me so much, my fingers heavy with the rings he had brought from anywhere I asked. The possessions I had thought meaningless, which presently incited a gratitude I genuinely regretted not having shown. But then isn’t it so easy to be one’s very best self on the last day of the holiday, when you know that soon you will go home?

‘Yes, Emmy, I was a Moth once,’ I said, animatedly. ‘I was in a book, The Golden Tree, and the story …Well, I’ll tell it to you …’

At my back, I heard a fork clatter to a plate and someone say, ‘Did she just say The Golden Tree’” But I ignored their spite. This was for Emmy, the love I could now give because of what you had awoken in me: it felt right to try again; the future somehow seemed to promise something different.

“‘Dearest Ones – this was from the preface, Emmy,’ I giggled conspiratorially, drawing a ceremonial breath – ‘as I write this to you, it is afternoon in The Ritz. If you have never been to The Ritz in the afternoon, you absolutely must come. Mention my name
and Mercutio, the Maitre d’ will ensure you’re given three lumps of sugar, not two. Except for my precious little Moth, fluttering her wings beside me. No, Julia gets as many lumps as she wants. So long as she does not get jam on her wings.”"

‘Oh, darling, I forgot,’ I laughed, in embarrassment, ‘Mummy is Julia. The Moth is Mummy! Anyway …

“‘Moths are always happy because their nectar is made of teardrops. And so everyone they know is happy too because they drink up all their tears whenever they are sad. Some wise owl or a Swabi told them this many years ago in India, they forgot which one; but it was definitely India because that’s where stories began. Don’t ask me why, they just did. But anyway moths are the most darling little things to have around and they love the light, so their souls are never dark. Dark souls belong to the shadows of naughty children, who lurk in wardrobes and make holes in Daddy’s cashmere jumpers, for which moths get the blame. We don’t like the shadows of naughty children much: for they rarely like their mothers, which is the silliest thing in the world because even when mothers aren’t there, they are always in love with their children.”’

I stopped speaking when I noticed Harry’s sombre expression and the table beside us glaring at me in disapproval. ‘What?’ I whispered to Harry, which was when Emmy piped up, ‘But Mummy, I know this story, the funny man told me when you were sleeping. When will he come back, Daddy?’

And, of course, it had stopped. Life, really: at the realisation Andrew had returned: Andrew who had created me to the point where I didn’t do anything unless he wrote it first—that is, until Germany when I decided to craft my destiny alone: the one I was trapped within.

I acted like I hadn’t heard a word and returned my attention to the only appropriate thing: propriety. The pudding served to my left by an unspeakably handsome waiter, who I made sure Harry saw me thank teasingly as retribution.
The conversation resumed at the table of disapproval, and I paused momentarily, poised over my sorbet, the gilt spoon suspended above the glistening, tart mound and waited for the sob that surged up in me to abate, as Emmy’s revelation crystallised and what it would mean. I cleaved to the minutiae of my suddenly striated existence; the diamond cuff on my wrist, the pale silk of my pleated skirt visible around the perimeter of the white linen napkin, the left edge I clenched in my hand, crumpled into a ball, my fifteen carat emerald engagement ring a napkin crown upon it.

My heart began to race. All I craved was a cancellation of fact and reality, just my silk skirt and diamond cuff and to dip the spoon back into the lemon sorbet in the silver-footed dessert cup, the white lilies casting their fragrance over the table as I did so: and never to have heard the words.

_It’s always the words_, I thought.

I willed myself not to faint. Not again. For I felt myself diminishing: shrinking to the size of my daughter, even smaller, perhaps. The scraping of plates, the chinking of fine crystal, the pacing of seamlessly orchestrated paths well worn by waiters, the conversation of the guests, coalesced symphonically, louder and louder, until it reached a deafening crescendo and crashed over me. A wave of nausea and tiredness surged up, and I felt myself sway as I struggled to stay afloat of oblivion.

It was too much; too much of all of this, even the sound of Andrew’s name. And the grief, the endless grief … What had Harry done?

I could hear him talking to Emmy, the words indecipherable. Are you placating her, as you do me, lying to her, cajoling her into your point of view? Regaining some of my faculties, I bucked at the notion. I didn’t want to hear excuses anymore. Especially not my husband’s: excuses ruin people, I wanted to scream, haven’t you learned anything? My head felt leaden to the point where I struggled to hold it up, although I knew I must. Because
Harry would be watching in that conciliatory, impeccable way of his, at a loss to fathom what had just happened, but knowing my reaction would determine all.

I envisaged a scene from a history book, of an executioner holding up the severed head of an aristocratic woman in France to the delight of a braying mob. That’s what my next expression would convey: a death mask that would secure my legacy as happy, sad, cruel, kind: tortured? Because something in me had died the minute I heard Andrew’s name. The minute Harry had invaded the unblemished territory, unimagined by Andrew, which I had trod that afternoon with you.

I hated Harry. You had no right, I thought. Not to this. Always, he tested me. And always I failed. Only for my happiness, he protested, but I suspected otherwise. I placed the spoon back in the dish and raised my head. There was nothing else for it but to show him: I had no idea what my husband would read in my reaction, nor my daughter, who was far too busy with her colouring book. But I felt ruined, regardless.

I looked directly at him and was promptly sick all over my plate.

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First the blood on Severine’s skirt and now this! I heard the surrounding women fussing, aghast at the calamity at our table. I had slipped to the floor in a half-faint, and the chorus had fluttered into high gear, to conceal the scene and pretend it had not happened. As if, I thought. Harry propped me up and patted my face to bring me, his ridiculous wife, round. I could hear the arch baritone of The Dowager talking to him. Naturally, she had come to his rescue, offering to look after Emmy, despite her lack of interest in children of all kinds. And so Harry was freed to drive me back to the hotel.

I fell against the wall in the hall as he jangled the room keys and fitted them into the lock. Anyone would think me drunk, I thought. An impulse seized me, and I reached for Harry’s arm, as he turned the key.

‘You didn't answer her question, darling. Is the funny little man coming back?’
Harry considered me impassively before removing my hand from his arm.

‘He’s staying in Èze. At la Chevre d’Or.’

The door opened, and he allowed me to pass into my dark room, the stars and lights of the harbour visible beyond the windows. I sat down on the edge of the bed, relieved to be able to turn my back on Harry.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said. ‘I’ll take you. He’s longing to see you.’

I made no reply, only glanced at my husband’s shadow as he pulled the door closed, cloistering me into the black.

I reached for the miniature around my neck.

““In the Golden Tree where the butterflies come to rest, there was one that he loved above all others . . .””

And a first tear fell down my cheek as I remembered Andrew.

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I chose a white lace, drop-waisted dress, the same pair of silver shoes, and my favourite white-rimmed sunglasses for my involuntary reunion with Andrew. I had thought better of gloves, even though I would have to touch his hand. Or would he hug me, I asked myself, unsure whether I could? Harry had said he was so thin. I was certain I would break down if he wasn’t the same.

Half of me relished the confinement of the hotel; the other would have walked into the sea and drowned on that September morning; to die in the light and the water, to submerge into the cool, clear current. So I loitered on the balcony. It was as if the sea was beckoning; oblivion seemed such a delicious relief compared to what I faced. A reality confirmed when Harry suddenly walked in – he must have kept the key, I thought, as I turned tetchily, Harry synonymous with intrusion – and heard him announce, ‘The car is ready, my darling. Let’s go now before it gets too hot. We can have an early lunch,’ he said kindly, extending his arm.
My God, he was so good-looking. Immaculate in white linen: the golden skin, the symmetry of his thin face, the bright blue eyes. But none of it registered: I didn’t ever dislike Harry. He simply wasn’t you. And he tried so hard. Usually, to no avail. Sometimes, we were rather jolly, but that was as gracious as I could be. For there was also that other side: the tyrannical side. Yet, what husband wouldn’t persecute a wife who didn’t love him? I could tell that he was grimly determined to see me through this; as if I was child down whose throat he must force medicine. At least, he was trying to be a comfort, though, understanding how difficult this would be for me, and I grasped onto the small relief his effort offered that it all might be all right: everything had been done, so I didn’t have to think. An emotion that was superseded by a habitual dread, when Harry reverted to his other self, his expression growing more serious, ‘If you’re able, that is.’

I grabbed my mother of pearl beaded purse from the dressing table, flinching from him as I walked down the hall to the waiting car outside: a gleaming Bugatti, the top down. Where did he get this, I thought? My mood lifted slightly. I had loved fast cars since Bobby Casa Maury, the famous racing car driver, took me out in his Hispano on the la Moyenne Corniche.

‘I thought you’d like it,’ Harry smiled confidently, striding over to open the passenger seat door, ‘but I’m afraid it’s borrowed.’

I shrugged as if to say, it doesn’t matter, how good of you to make an effort, as I settled into the plush leather seat, making sure the backs of my bare legs didn’t touch the leather already burning from the sun. It might be all right, I thought.

‘From de Lerrison,’ Harry said, slamming the door – too loudly or just loud enough, I puzzled, my stomach lurching as the anxiety my husband ritually inspired returned to smother me. ‘He didn’t mind at all my borrowing it,’ Harry concluded, as he got into the driver’s seat, tapped me on the knee with his sunglasses, and put them on before starting the engine.
We roared off, too fast. Speed no longer thrilled me. It seemed only to propel me towards a reckoning.

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Harry drove the death defying turns of la Moyenne Corniche with subtle sadism; his expression benign but his jaw locked. I studied his profile peripherally, clenching my bag in my lap with two fists, like a tiny pugilist, dwarfed by my Commander husband and the enormity of the situation I faced.

Andrew. Andrew in a hotel room: Andrew, waiting to see me: Andrew, who had not responded once in five years to any of my letters to Reading Gaol. I reached self-consciously beneath the lace fold of my blouse and felt for the miniature: still there. As ever, the relief flooded me. To lose it would have been unimaginable; I constantly laboured under its reward and burden: The miniature was at once representative of a noose, and simultaneously of a talisman of pure devotion. It spoke of a sacrifice so momentous it dwarfed and tormented me in equal measure.

Neither Harry nor I had uttered a word since the first roar of the engine. He’ll be getting annoyed, I thought, feeling my constant pressure to perform. Yet, just then the sign for Èze-sur-Mer appeared. We were almost there now. No time, thank goodness, for words beyond fripperies. I could skim the surface of my marriage for at least another afternoon, that way I could get through. I looked out to the horizon in relief, at least the car journey was nearly done. The sun, was there ever such a sun as this, I marvelled, how glorious everything was in the light. And it reminded me of those old joyful days that stopped after Andrew.

I tried not to look back anymore, but it suddenly seemed a place of refuge. In my mind, I walked the path to the townhouse in Hyde Park, the lavender and morning glory and freesia spilling over the borders, a spring morning, and letting go of Nanny’s hand, to run to Andrew with his pipe. Dusty Andrew, who needed looking after, with his thin red hair and
his kind, blue, sad eyes, and his smile that acknowledged me for all I could be: there, the
delight of Toby at his back, a hurrah that here I had arrived to play and would not leave until
sunset. And how there would be cakes and drinks forbidden on any other day than special
and stories, the only story: of who we were. And, always, I was the Moth, and Andrew was
the Golden Tree …

“In the Golden Tree, where the butterflies come to rest, there was one that he loved
above all others. Every day he exulted when she arrived to perch on the highest of his
golden limbs. And there she would offer him a view of the world from God’s eyes, tales of
the lands to which she had flown. How the lonely Golden Tree loved his life because of the
beautiful butterfly. For anything he could not see beyond where he grew by the port, she
told him of.”

But then I felt the hammer blow of Harry’s body slam me against the passenger
door. And all I could see was a day by the Blue Pavilion with Toby, and all I could hear was
Andrew …

“Yet, quite without warning his favourite companion disappeared and did not
return. The Golden Tree, being one of those proud trees you usually find in Austria where
they are very, very proud, forever standing upright to attention and repressing their deeper
feelings, was so heartbroken he did not speak of her for years. Until one day, at last unable
to bear the absence of his favourite confidante any longer, he asked of the others, ‘Where
did she go?’”

I punctured the silence with a harrowing scream. Harry had left it too late to make
the sharp turn, and the back wheel of the car skidded off the road, the car careening right
and left as Harry struggled to regain control. He couldn’t. But it was all right; Andrew was
there, buckling my shoe in Hyde Park beneath an Oak tree while it poured, telling me stories
of ribbons …
“‘Lost,’ a Black Hairstreak replied tartly, ‘in Ceylon. No doubt trapped in a cage and left to die.’

‘What rot,’ remonstrated a Cryptic Wood White, ‘she sailed away on the hull of a schooner with a Dutch sailor, and he didn’t bring her back. So full of empty promises, the Dutch,’ she decreed. ‘Or maybe they’re not. Maybe I’m only saying that. Maybe I meant a jar of sugar.’

‘How you do run on,’ said an Adonis Blue in exasperation, ‘you’re all wrong, she got wet and then she drowned. Now, let’s talk about me.’

How cruel they were, those butterflies. In truth, they had no idea what butterfly the Golden Tree meant, but they certainly couldn’t have him prefer her to them, so they told spiteful lies.”

The right side wheels skidded off the road, and the car abruptly tipped to the side where I sat. There was no barrier, only the sheer drop of the cliff. Once, twice, three times, four, I was crushed, pushed back against the door as Harry used all his strength to try and correct the wheel and bring us back onto the road. And I knew then that I was dying and these were my last breaths, and these words in my head, the Last Rites …

“So it was, that the heart of the Golden Tree broke and a terrible splintering took root at his base. All of the gold began to disappear from his arms and when the butterflies came to rest on them, they snapped off and turned to dust.

Terrified, the butterflies spent months flying all over the world, vast clouds of colour roaming hither and yon, searching for a new place where they could be safe. The Golden Tree had been their one place of refuge. He had protected them from the nets of the trappers, who were so in awe of him they dared not ever approach, fearing he might wrap them in his limbs and toss them into the sea.”
I was thrown to the right again and nearly went over the top: I screamed your name over and over, my hand gripping the door handle in terror as Harry finally corrected the car. We ground to a halt in the middle of the road, as I sobbed and sobbed and tried to get out.

“But now the trappers were not frightened anymore.”

‘No,’ Harry shouted, reaching across and dragging me back down. ‘We have to drive on: someone could crash into us.’

‘I won’t do it. You can’t make me,’ I screamed, finally unravelling like the harpy he understood me to be with all the pent-up anxiety and now trauma as I railed against him. ‘Why have you done this? Why not leave it be. I could have met him somewhere quiet, not in front of everyone. Why must everyone always see? You’re vile … I hate you. I hate you. You know I never lov—’ I ranted on and on, battering my fists against him, anywhere I could hit, until Harry smacked me hard across the face, with the back of his hand.

“Many more months passed and the Golden Tree grew sicker and sicker. Sometimes, the old butterflies who remembered him when he was beautiful would visit. Yet, he never spoke to them and because they were uppity and did not wish to be seen with such an ugly thing they would fly off, insulted to be ignored. That is, until one day when a new-born butterfly arrived. Summoning up the courage with all her might, for she was just a tiny thing, she dared to ask why he was silent.

‘Because I am dying,’ he replied.”

I was so accustomed to the pain that I barely flinched, as Harry reared back and fell over the steering wheel, gripping it with both hands. He exhaled ragged breaths, furious with himself, ashamed, tormented, and beaten, as he tried to regain some semblance of control, convinced I had stolen it from him on purpose. For didn’t I always, according to him? I couldn’t react again, because a second blow, if he was forced to one, would leave a mark. But it was all right, really, I could go back to hating him with justification, knowing I owed him no consideration. In this aspect of our marriage, Harry rarely failed me. Besides,
as he frequently justified, this is what the doctors had advised: there was no medicine for hysteria, save violence.

He couldn’t look at me, but experience had taught me that we would carry on as if nothing had happened. He smoothed his hair, and started the engine. But I couldn’t settle: I struggled to regain control of my breathing, my thoughts, myself. I needed to get out of the car. I worried momentarily that we might have another accident for we weren’t even there yet. I willed myself to look right and acknowledge the sheer 10,000-foot drop down which we might have plummeted. Somehow, I felt better. There, once more, the depths of the sea below seemed somehow to promise sanctuary.

“Oh, but she was so sad, the Little Butterfly, who had heard stories from the others of how magnificent the Golden Tree had once been. And with a sniffle here and a slight sob there, they sat together in silence until finally, she asked of him,

‘But, dear Golden Tree, why are you dying?’

And the Golden Tree replied, ‘I am dying because without my favourite butterfly, I can no longer see.

Now I am blind, how will I find her?’”

Such solace was short-lived. For dying was not an option; and had I not been rescued? The familiar tension festered between us: Harry’s silence seemed more loaded than before, its main characteristic a familiar ominous benignity. I almost wondered whether he had done it to scare me because this mistake with the car was trifling compared to the perils at sea he had navigated during the War, and mistakes were something Harry could not countenance. He was such a skilled driver, sailor, yachtsman, horseman, after all. How many times had he effortlessly fixed any manner of sporting mishaps, even conversational ones? It occurred to me that the paralysing fright his supposed carelessness had warranted might as well have been a very harsh slap. I didn’t have to force one out of him. He must know about you then, I reckoned. But now I was still alive, I found it very difficult to care.
Besides, my greatest punishment lay ahead, at la Chevre d’Or where Andrew was waiting for me.

"‘What did she look like?’ the Little Butterfly asked.

‘She was the rarest of the butterflies,’ the Golden Tree exclaimed, ‘her wings were purest white. There was not a hint of colour like the rest of you. In her simplicity, I thought her the most perfect of all.’"

We parked the car at the bottom of the ramparts and walked the steep, cobbled stoned incline to Èze. I felt as if were ascending somewhere, far beyond myself, to a place where I didn’t need to bother with reality. For I realised that here I was, once more, a character in someone else’s story; Andrew had asked for me, so I must go: to know what would happen next. I would have trusted no-one else with my secret of you: he would know what to do. And it was his story of me, The Golden Tree, which led me forward, as if beckoning me back to the past.

Harry reached for my hand, a tacit command I obeyed. For what would be the point in refusing? And, of course, he hadn’t meant it, had he, and of course I’d brought it on myself, hadn’t I? He led me through the medieval gates to the narrow, winding streets of the town, of turrets and high walls and local shops miraculously appearing out of holes in the yellow stone. It was a cloistered world, where I felt mercifully locked away. I fell in love with it immediately. I wanted to stay there: to walk the steep ascending roads to the sky each day, to hide within the ramparts over which nobody could peek.

We climbed higher, the sky and the sea fusing as we arrived at a balcony carved into the stone face upon which Èze stood: ‘A view of the world from God’s sight,’ Harry smiled, quoting from The Golden Tree and resuming his avuncular kindliness, pointing ahead to the most incomparable vision of the Mediterranean. I winced. I was there when Andrew had first written the sentence, and I found myself wishing that you had brought me here, that you had said that to me. Besides Harry had misquoted it.
We retraced our steps downhill when a wooden door precipitously opened onto the street and I heard my name – how had they known I was outside? But Harry’s smile gave away that the joke was on me, he had called ahead. So, of course, this was not magic, not a fairy tale, but a planned meeting by my husband with the man whose conviction had almost destroyed me; a penance I endured, for I had gone off with 'Toby', we had run away to Germany, the only thing Andrew had ever forbidden: I was not allowed to love him as I did.

Wherever I have journeyed in my mind, I have returned to this afternoon: to the precise moment when the old wooden door opened and admitted the view of a veranda smothered in fuchsia bougainvillea, to the Mediterranean beyond and surrounding cliffs shrouded in sun-filled mist and mythology, the statue of a golden goat standing on the wall; a secret garden whose beauty could only have been created by a God. I have recalled l’exquise douleur that I would not experience such a moment again, for it could only happen once. I will remember him always amidst such beauty: Andrew, poor, heartbroken, Andrew.

“The Little Butterfly took some time to consider what he had said.

‘You said she was white,’ she inquired, her mind puzzling over who he could mean.

‘Yes,’ the Golden Tree replied, ‘pure white, like the snow.’

‘Oh, but you silly thing,’ exclaimed the Little Butterfly after several moments had passed. ‘She wasn’t a butterfly. She was a moth!’

He faltered to his feet, clutching his cane, his once impeccable suit hanging shapelessly from his emaciated figure, turning his face up to where I stood at the top of the steps. The eyes remained heartbroken but his smile was as kind as ever, I discerned, as I began my descent to meet him, as if in a trance. I became peripherally aware of burgeoning whispers, and more people at the tables than I had at first registered. The corners of the yellow and white striped tablecloths fluttered on either side of the narrow path of the terrace, offset by the brilliant blue of the sea it overlooked. Waiters sidestepped as I moved forward, unconscious of the faces, for I would surely know a few. I deliberately deafened
myself to the comments that floated around me, willing myself to catch neither a drib nor a drab.

“How do you expect me to know where a moth could be? They all look the same, unlike us,” she sneered. The Little Butterfly was appalled that someone as venerable as the Golden Tree could make such a mistake. She was just preparing to fly off and tell her siblings of his stupidity when he began to cry.

‘I will never find her,’ he wept. ‘So, I will go on dying.’”

I hadn’t counted on the love that consumed me at the sight of the man who I cherished as my true father. It struck me as silly, foolish, to have dreaded this joy of being reunited with a time and place forever synonymous with happiness in my mind: my childhood. Before babies and husbands and wedding nights, when all there had been was hope. And make believe. The way life should be lived, I thought, as I arrived before my maker.

“The Little Butterfly had not yet learned that she would only live four days, so she was still young and innocent and full of hope. How sorry she felt for the Golden Tree as he mourned the Moth he loved. We must always be grateful that the cruel were off in Las Ramblas, laughing at yellow finches in cages whose wings would not soar through the sky again, for it allowed the Little Butterfly the opportunity to think in peace. It was quite difficult for her as she hadn’t even heard of a times table let alone philosophy, but finally, she announced, with a diffident nod of her pretty head, after some very, very, very careful consideration, ‘You know, Golden Tree, moths are attracted to light. So if you could shine again in all of your splendour, maybe she would find you.’

‘How will I do that?’ he asked.

‘Think of her, as if she was beside you,’ the Little Butterfly replied. ‘Then maybe you will be happy and golden once more.’”
And then I was there. Like a little girl who had been scrubbed and primped into perfection, my hair smoothed by fussing nannies and hems tugged to flatten the creases of my skirt, I presented myself before him and privately begged for approval. I wanted not to have changed. To be all that he remembered. But Andrew said nothing. Instead, he raised his hand to reach for me.

“It seemed an impossible feat for the Golden Tree. He had destroyed himself with loneliness and grief. Yet, the more he thought on the advice of the Little Butterfly, he understood that she might be right. After his Moth had vanished, he could not bear to remember her. With each day when he tried to forget, more gold had left his limbs.”

I hesitated, the action seemed loaded and could be interpreted many different ways. Suddenly I was acutely aware of the other visitors watching us. Of course, we had been recognised instantly. My eyes filled with tears and I felt myself crumble. What could I give him now to equal his loss? And all of it my fault, for leaving him, but I had had no alternative – not that I could have told him why: my mind raced. I could not let Andrew down. Everything depended on my next move: I thought again of the executioner holding the woman’s severed head aloft. How only the butchery had satisfied the mob. And so I made my choice.

“There was only one thing to do. The Golden Tree mustered all his strength, for he had been so unhappy, and remembered the soft and sweet words his little Moth used to whisper of far-off lands he would never see; the love he felt when he saw her appear on the horizon; the beating of wings he heard in his soul whenever she was near. It was an exquisite happiness because he had no thought whether she would return or not. But he found he was happier again remembering than forgetting what it was to be humble in the face of a perfect soul.”
My hands reached for my skirt, and lifting it slightly, as if about to affect a curtsey, I instead fell to my knees. A fall that hurt so terribly I had to bite my lip to prevent myself from crying out in pain: my head bowed before him, I whispered, ‘Forgive me.’

But Andrew did not move nor speak. And when I looked back up to him, after too long a time, my eyes were once more dry.

The chorus, however, was horrified.

And Harry disgraced.
SIMLA, 1947

Lady Amelia and the Impeccable One looked up to find the Pillar Box hurtling towards them in a guilty half-canter.

‘I have it on good authority that Andrew stepped in between Severine and Julia because Severine called her,’ she disclosed breathlessly, pausing to place a steadying hand on the chair beside her, ‘the “C” word.’

Well.

The Chancellor’s Wife – now reunited with her youngest, Marina, whimpering on her lap after being dumped on the ground by her brother – clamped her hands fast over the infant’s ears and prompted another wail of torment, the Impeccable One raised a judicious eyebrow as if to say ‘If the cap fits …’ and Lady Amelia was simply perplexed.

Attempting to extrapolate a Eureka, the Pillar Box smiled determinedly at her, ‘You know, my dear, the word that must never, in a million years, ever be spoken. Ever.’

Lady Amelia sat up brightly, as if she was the first to raise her hand in class for the teacher, ‘Like the love that dare not speak its name?’

‘No, no,’ the Pillar Box said and leaned in closer. ‘See You Next Tuesday,’ she whispered.

‘What for? Are we having tea? In England? I don’t think we’ll be there by then,’ Lady Amelia replied in bemusement.

The Impeccable One smiled at the loveliness that was Lady Amelia, a vision in that pale pink dress with her golden hair and poppet nose, and inhaled knowingly.

‘You know, she’d be entirely within her rights, if she did say it,’ commented the Pillar Box. ‘Yet, why nobody castigates de Lerrison is beyond me. He’s the one that’s played them off against each other endlessly. And poor, poor Harry,’ she commiserated, standing on her tiptoes to try and catch sight of him.
Marina wriggling like a demon possessed, the Chancellor’s Wife was trying to listen, truly she was. Alas, she had been subject to the same conversation ad nauseum almost since Julia’s affair had begun in Antibes. And it wasn’t as if the Pillar Box had any chance with Harry. To be fair, he had once been partnered with her for a hasty Strip the Willow B.S. – Before Simpson – at Balmoral, but although his softly moisturised hand had slipped from hers lickety-split, the Pillar Box had managed to cling onto a manicured finger through sheer force of will and blind ambition. Indeed, there wasn’t a man alive who the Pillar Box did not believe was salivating over her in private, but Harry … Now, Harry she actually liked. So, she had committed herself to the longest waiting game in history.

In truth, the Chancellor’s Wife didn’t know what she thought anymore. Maybe he would have been better off with her friend, though she couldn’t say for sure. She was the first to admit that she possessed no real powers of intuition; life was life and things just happened; all of these hidden layers of meaning in people and situations, she couldn’t fathom. Keep it simple, says I, she thought, cringing at the blistering headaches the Pillar Box’s mental machinations had caused. Moreover, the Chancellor’s Wife was so different from her, fond of floral dresses and a pinny, baking cakes for fundraisers, and revelling in her five children stampeding through the house pretending to be cowboys and fairies and refusing, always, to go to bed. She suppressed a chuckle at the thought. Naughty children were so delicious, after all. So much better than those smug, butter-wouldn’t-melt types who torture cats the minute the adults aren’t looking, she considered as she found herself gazing at Lady Amelia.

‘But everybody adores de Lerrison!’ exclaimed the young Lady.

‘Indeed, my little one, but that doesn’t mean he’s not cruel. Do you think Severine wants to dress like that?’ the Impeccable One swiftly corrected her. ‘Haven’t you wondered if she doesn’t do it to please him?’
‘But he can’t stand her! That’s what I’ve heard. And besides, it’s so apparent!’

‘Of course, you may be right. I’m a lot older than you, so I perhaps perceive things slightly differently. *Chacun à son goût,*’ the Impeccable One replied, with a withering glare to Severine.

‘Speaking of taste, I can’t believe the Vicereine was sick at Mrs Pulitzer’s!’ Lady Amelia said, reflecting upon what the Impeccable One had just relayed.

‘Yes, poor soul,’ the Impeccable One mooed, ‘the Vicereine was awfully young and hadn’t developed a tolerance. Will you have another, dear?’ she asked, tapping the rim of Lady Amelia’s empty champagne flute: her third at the last count.

Lady Amelia pulled a face. ‘I’m not sure I like it. I much prefer Pol Roger. Veuve is a bit, blurgh.’

‘Pol Roger?’

‘Yes, you can only get it in France. It’s named after Uncle Winston. I had it when I was about thirteen. In Antibes.’

‘Ah, so you know whereof we speak,’ rejoined the Impeccable One.

‘Yes,’ countered Lady Amelia in a tone many might have misinterpreted as haughty. When, in fact, she was preoccupied, remembering drinking Pol at thirteen with a far too handsome man who was far too old for her.

The Impeccable One lit a cigarette, and the women fell silent until Lady Amelia began to fidget.

‘I suppose you want to know what happened next,’ purred the Impeccable One.

Lady Amelia leaned slightly to her left and cast a sidelong glance. The Impeccable One reminded her a bit of her Mummy, and so she nodded.

For the first time in ages, she was having the most brilliant fun.

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‘Who does she think he is? A king?’ remarked someone far too loudly at la Chevre d’Or. ‘Or a Pope?’

In disgust, Harry turned to the woman, whom he recognised as the Marchioness of Grosvenor.

‘Well,’ she hazarded, outraged, ‘don’t you dare pull a face at me. Bringing,’ and here she paused to brandish a bejewelled index finger blindly in Andrew’s direction, ‘that here.’ She picked up her Martini, the contents of which sloshed hazardless close to the brim and splattered her skirt. ‘And your wife on her knees as if she expects him to anoint her. It’s the dizzy limit. There I’ve said it. Nobody else has got the gumption, but I’m saying. It,’ she vented at Harry, looking as overheated as the Pomeranian on her lap. ‘This is not the game to play. I knew your mother. She would turn in her grave!’ And furiously wiping the splodges on her white skirt and simultaneously sucking back the contents of the too full glass almost in one inhalation, the Marchioness slammed her glass back onto the table, threw down her napkin, stood up and stalked out, banging into the backs of several diners en route.

‘Now steady on,’ exclaimed a gourmand, degusting spoonful upon spoonful of bouillabaisse – the rouille a speciality of the house and absolutely orgasmic in consistency – and who found half of it over his white shirt as the Marchioness stormed past. Yet, he elected to say no more when she turned a face as furious as a Medusa to him, muttering something about watching her step. Instead, he turned to the commotion and saw Julia on her knees before an ancient Andrew Shepherd, who was staring directly at him, as Harry tried to pick Julia up off the ground. Oh, he thought, wincing at the poignancy of the scene, acknowledging the man almost deferentially – some might have said, defiantly – and quickly returning to what was left of his soup.

‘She could do better than that husband,’ he commented darkly to his ‘wife’, a lifelong family friend who had spared his blushes – and possible incarceration – by
marrying him and his Baronetcy when his late night proclivities had proven too much for his family to stomach. Now, three children later – *Don’t ask any questions*, his father had counselled his uncomprehending mother, who elected to drink heavily from then on suspecting her frightful daughter-in-law was doubtless ‘mating’ with the head butler – and jocularity and grudging affection com mingled as a hallmark of their every exchange.

‘Who else would have had her?’ replied his wife. A realist not a fantasist as she pointed out to anyone within earshot, she was dazzlingly attractive. Somewhat too attractive as, once upon a time, her romantic history would have rivalled Mata Hari’s.

‘Me,’ the Gourmand replied dryly, tearing up a baguette and sniffing it in raptures, before dunking it back into the bowl.

‘Bastard,’ hissed his wife. And the two burst out laughing. ‘But I know what you mean,’ she said amenably, reclining back in her chair to consider Julia. ‘I believe now it was that Toby’s disappearance – you know the son of the housekeeper at Julia’s estate who Andrew was friendly with – that did her in; they mentioned him during the trial. Nothing much was made of his connection to Andrew, but, in fact, I learned of him years earlier.

‘It was quite the scandal at Benenden when little sis was coming up with Julia that Julia was madly in love with that boy. And Andrew was totally against it: life-endingly so: Julia threatening to throw herself off the roof in protest kind of stuff. Not that anybody met Toby. He wasn’t one of us,’ she continued, reaching for her drink, ‘but she was only fifteen and he I think eighteen? Regardless …there was something iffy about it even then. And of course, Wolcotte and his accusations put the kibosh on any chance she had – *if* Toby’s truly whom she wanted. Because, of course, I’ve not heard of him again. Disappeared off the face of the earth.’

‘Quite,’ replied her husband, spooning more *rouille* into his soup, thoughtfully.

‘You don’t talk of Andrew,’ said his wife lightly, regarding him appraisingly. ‘Not much to say.’
'Mmm,' she insinuated, 'but you were part of his inner circle, did you ever meet Toby?'

Not for the first time, she marvelled at how handsome her husband was. So tall and masculine, the gorgeous sandy red hair she adored. And a sailor. How she loved a sailor; so misty eyed and romantic. He spoke to her like a dream. So, of course, he would have to prefer men, she guffawed privately. But it was a nice existence, all things considered. And she hadn’t been cast out from society, which her association with his father may well have precipitated. Such an ingenious idea: marry my son, and you’ll both be spared. It’s always the most ruthless who win, she conceded, looking back to Julia, still on the floor, and pitying her anew.

‘Do you think Andrew did it?’ she asked, overlooking her previous question – for now – and forking a scallop from his bowl. ‘Plagiarised that tiny book, like they said.’

‘No chance,’ her husband replied unhesitatingly. ‘You have no idea of his talent. When he’d have his parties, someone would give him the first line of a story – and it might be anything – and Andrew would hold us spellbound from start to finish. Never wrote the stories down. You’ve no concept of the beauty of his words that are …’ and here he shook his head in resigned amazement, ‘gone, disappeared into the ether. I can only remember fractions of sentences, but they were mesmeric. He had – he has,’ he corrected himself, hailing the waiter for some more wine, ‘an unequalled gift. Although God knows what stories he’d tell now. And,’ he continued keenly, keeping an eye on the waiter, ‘I think he was essentially asexual. I didn’t see any indication he preferred men or that women excited him. He loved Julia, but as a father loves a child. And she was essentially an orphan; Julia’s mother, as you know, didn’t bother with her, after her father died and she remarried that Prince. She was negligent, even for our sort. From what I understood of Toby, he was looked after financially by Andrew.’
His wife’s ears pricked up at the mention of Toby: ‘It’s no wonder that Julia grew so close to Andrew,’ she conceded, crossing her leg. ‘I mean, he took her everywhere: the little star of his book. Not very seemly, but tell me,’ she said, slicing another sliver of Brie from the cheese plate, ‘didn’t Shepherd do something queer with Toby’s mother? Didn’t they say that at the trial: something incredible about her deathbed?’

For years his wife had tried to no avail to make the Gourmand speak of Andrew and the mysterious Toby. She didn’t think to question what had unfastened his resolve, only that something had. She waited tentatively to see if her husband would take the sliver of Brie her sallies invited— and then he did.

‘From what I understood, she was a beauty. As you said, the housekeeper at Julia’s family seat … Definitely not as beautiful as you,’ he digressed swiftly, recognising his wife’s ire was up, unwilling to concede the field. ‘That’s where Andrew met her. You know he was very thick with Julia’s father for a good four or five years before he died. God, what a hideous thing,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘His face was blown off in the war. He’d been there a month. At least, he didn’t live much longer after that though. A mercy. Anyway,’ he said, returning to Toby’s mother, ‘yes, I think Andrew did try to marry the mother – no idea what happened to Toby’s father – but it wasn’t the usual love match. No, no, nothing like that,’ he clarified quickly, noting the shift in his wife’s mood. It was something to live it, another to say it … ‘It was when she was dying and for Andrew to have legal guardianship, easier than adopting Toby or something. But we didn’t know Toby. I met him once. He was at a party; seemed pretty decent, can’t recall what we talked about. Andrew, however, totally adored him. I could see that. Much like with Julia. ‘Course, it was all misinterpreted in the wake of the trial: that fucking Wolcotte. Absolutely despised him: a poet, my eye. He never penned so much as Haiku.’

‘Where did Tom Wolcotte come from?’ asked his wife, feasting upon her husband’s sudden candour.
‘Who knows? Official story was that he knew Andrew from India; army family or something and Andrew met them before he got famous. Andrew was always very hazy about his youth. I think he was in the Army too. But none of us knew Wolcotte and we were all old Etonians or Harrovians, Westminsters … Wherever Andrew picked him up, he should have left him there. Filth,’ he said, placing down his cutlery, suddenly no longer hungry. ‘I don’t know where he got that miniature, if the blasted thing exists,’ he continued, ‘but I don’t believe for a second that Andrew copied it. Maybe, he heard the story somewhere and elaborated upon it. Maybe. But he was too talented to steal. Besides, it was only for Julia that he took the case to trial. He would not have it that she was to be denied the right of having inspired him. I’ve not seen anyone love a child the way he loved her.’

‘And that’s when Wolcotte suggested he was a poof,’ said his wife, immediately clapping her hand over mouth at her faux pas. Her husband, however, lobbed a piece of baguette at her and laughed. She was a good sort. He often thought his father a lucky man. The things we get up to, he thought, glancing back to Shepherd and realising, with a prick of pleasure, that there was pudding yet to come.

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‘For Christ’s sake,’ mumbled Harry, beside himself that he had caused this.

‘Those damn literary types, so dramatic,’ scoffed a diner.

‘Indeed,’ replied her companion. ‘And she’s clearly as cuckoo as the rumours suggest …’

Harry tried to ignore the scandalised murmurs. ‘I thought we were finished with these histrionics,’ he remonstrated with Julia under his breath, preparing to propel her at a naval clip towards the exit, and forgetting to say goodbye to Andrew. He had dealt with Julia in such a mood before, when she would do something utterly unmentionable then try to harm herself: it was something to do with becoming a mother, or so the doctors alleged. He wasn’t inclined to pry too deeply into the affairs of women. Harry considered it sensible
only to pay for the best care. But, of course, they had to leave. There were far too many sharp implements lying about.

The immediate consensus of the ever-watchful chorus was that it had all gone horribly wrong for poor, upright, well-meaning Harry. ‘One wouldn’t expect someone so handsome to be so kind, now would one?’ empathised someone else, appraising Harry and his elegant form as he suffered the ignominy of having to practically drag his wife’s limp body because she refused to stand up. ‘And he could have had anybody. Why he chose a character from a children’s book beggars belief. But he’s stuck with her now.’

Harry simply couldn’t call the anonymous woman to task. His sole focus was on rescuing Julia once more from herself. He refused the help of the waiters, apologising profusely to everyone in sight, but few of the chorus could fail to overhear his desperate, muttered entreaties to Julia, while attempting to remain implacably calm. ‘Julia, please,’ he coaxed. ‘Please my darling. I’m so sorry: we should not have come. I thought it would help you to see him again. What can I do for you? Anything, I will give you anything. Just. Please. Stand. Up!’ Until at his wits end due to the heat and how improbably heavy his wife had become, he implored, ‘If nothing else, think of Emmy. Haven’t you caused her enough harm?’

And then it happened, a scene that would prove indelible. Metamorphosis. Or at least this was the word on the tip of everyone’s tongue when they later discussed Julia’s reaction to whatever Harry had said, maddeningly out of earshot. For momentarily, Julia righted herself, smoothed her hair, smiled brightly like the prettiest doll ever created and turned with the most charming apology to the crowd. It was like Harry had pulled a string in her back, Julia having been programmed to say precisely the right thing at precisely the right moment. And so she did:

‘Sorry, so terribly sorry. I’m afraid I’m a little bit wobbly from the heat.’ Julia let out a soft laugh and the men perceptibly softened. She was extremely pretty, after all. And
who knew what went on behind closed doors with Harry, thought some who had served under him during the War. Great leaders were often great bullies in private. That is, until she added, ‘Be kind to my dearest friend, won’t you? Won’t one of you invite him to lunch?’

At Julia’s outrageous request, the negotiated peace ended. Harry almost thought he heard an exultant cry, as he was confronted with a host of thin-lipped, disapproving glares from her fellow sisters. The jury had condemned his wife anew. And what was worse, she had asked for it. That is, all except for the Beauty, secreted in a corner underneath a wide-brimmed picture hat to protect the last vestiges of her flawless face from the sun.

Unrivalled beauty only ever invites unrivalled disgrace, she thought, and not for the first time. But there was nothing she could do, which instead made it worse. And so, she broke a cardinal rule and beckoned to the waiter for a gimlet. Only the relief alcohol promised could blot out the torment Julia had elicited. For she felt for her with an intensity not even her children enjoyed. Already she could foresee her fate. The story never changed, not for someone who stood so far out from the crowd. As she once had. The Beauty downed the gimlet and reapplied her brilliant red lipstick. What now, she thought with dread?

Andrew could not watch. So he had seated himself with his back to the crowd. To hide, of course: he willed her to say no more. The poor girl, what he had done to her. To damage her like this, it had not been his intention. How he had longed for this reunion, just like when she was four and he would meet her in Hyde Park with her Nanny, and sometimes her mother, the star-struck Duchess; the vision of Julia in pretty, flouncy dresses running across the lawns to be held high in the air by him and anointed a Moth anew and he the Golden Tree. There could be no doubt, however, as Andrew finally turned and drank in her painfully thin frame standing at the far end of the veranda, that she could no longer fly, he had clipped her wings; his fairy tale had not granted her immortality but paralysed her on the precipice of death. Her once luminous star had dimmed.
He winced at her kindness, to which he had no right. Andrew had forfeited that moment he had chosen to challenge Wolcotte, to unwittingly drag Julia’s name through the mud. All he could do was stand to her attention, to honour her request of the diners, knowing he would be refused. He could see she was fighting back tears. Defiantly, she stood there, sharing in his humiliation, no doubt as aware as he that no-one would come to his rescue. But then, a voice called out: ‘Over here. Won’t you join me, Mr Shepherd?’

And Julia and Andrew turned to see the Beauty beckon him over.

‘I think we’ll stay,’ said Julia to Harry, walking slowly to the table, transfixed by the warm smile of the lady who had rescued them. Yet, she hung back as the men settled themselves, watched intently by the Beauty.

‘Why don’t you go and wash up, my little one,’ she said to Julia.

And standing up, she wrapped an arm around Julia’s waist and walked her into the hotel, directing her to a door, which she pushed her through.

Julia found herself back on the street, a crisp handful of bills in her hand.

She was suddenly free.

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‘I am leaving for the day, Monsieur de Lerrison,’ announced the Mayor’s secretary.

He did not immediately acknowledge her, until realising his mistake, he waved hastily as she turned. His mind was too full of other things.

Julia’s image was seared upon his mind. But such things did not — could not — matter to him. Or so he insisted as he dropped his Mont Blanc fountain pen onto the blotter and leaned back in his chair in the Mairie. The perspiration clung to his back and the fan rattled beside him, casting out only warm air. Pointless, he thought, but the heat was part of his existence, and he had no hankering for winter. So he tried to enjoy the stifling late September afternoon. For winter was a prison when the summer visitors departed, and there was nowhere for him to escape except this grey office, no lively afternoon sojourns with
engaged visitors, just more of the same. The same shopkeepers, councillors, civil servants, waiters: the same duties, the same disappointments, the same wife.

It was nearly four, hours until he finished, but all he wanted was to go and find Julia. What had she suffered after Andrew’s disgrace, for she was so fragile, uncertain of her place in society, self-consciously reconsidering everything she said, glancing, continually glancing around as if she was terrified: he imagined holding her as he had in her hotel bedroom, and for the first time experienced enormous guilt that to do such a thing would be so wrong: for he would have to let go eventually.

His mood darkened, as Julia grew impossible. How he wanted her, and for far more than a dalliance; he wanted to sit beside her, and understand everything, to come home to her at the end of a long day, to drive her around in his Bugatti and decide where to dine. He wanted her just to be there, whenever he looked up. But already the fact of her was destroying the world he had created; the paper walls of a temporary life; for that was what it was. It was as if those walls had blown down and were now replaced with a vast landscape, one where the sight of her was consolation for his many trials. It would be so much easier if I could forget I ever saw her, he accepted, but he could not wish her gone.

He watched a stray dog chase an elegantly dressed woman, making small leaps at her side. He recognised her as one of his favourites: Mignonette; a black and white dappled, miniature dachshund: she lived behind the milliners. Madame Couteau preferred cats, but he had sweet-talked her into allowing the poor soul to shelter there. He had a particular affinity for the stray dogs – being something of a stray himself, loping on the outskirts of conversations, rarely completely stepping in – feeding them at the back door of the Mairie, despite the complaints of his fellow staff: ‘So unhygienic,’ ‘they might bite,’ ‘they should be in the pound’.

Little Mignonette rushed faster beside the lady, growing more excited, and he thought she would stop and pick her up, rescue her even and wouldn’t that be kind. It was
the way she clutched at her husband’s arm, as if beseeching him. But at the sound of the woman’s sudden shriek, the fancy was quashed. His arms reached through the grilles of the open window, as if to catch and crush the miniscule figure of her husband, who lashed out at Mignonette and sent her spiralling across the square, her sharp howl ricocheting off the surrounding buildings.

‘Attend!’ he shouted at the man, who looked up angrily and dismissed him. Waiters rushed to the outskirts of the cafe, one of whom retrieved Mignonette, as the man raged, ‘Now, this is bally well not on. My wife almost got bit.’ Yet, he was embarrassed, his cheeks were bright red, as a commotion erupted in the square, townspeople surrounding them and signalling to de Lerrison, as someone official who would know what to do. ‘Moment,’ he called as he rushed from the building to join them, taking Mignonette from a waiter as he soothed her whimpers.

‘You must forgive us,’ he said, affecting his familiar weary magnanimity, a quizzically perplexed amusement, as if everyone had gone mad and he was vaguely tickled by it and, of course, would smooth all ruffled feathers, ‘you are on holiday, yes?’ They nodded, sensing somehow that control could only be restored with his consent. ‘It’s always so difficult to be abroad, I find. New customs, practices. Our strays are very much part of our life in Antibes, little gipsies. I can understand the fear. Please, I hope you enjoy the rest of your time here.’

The husband accepted his apology grudgingly and steered his wife victoriously towards an empty table in the café. The waiter stood back and waited for de Lerrison’s cue. As they settled into their seats, and the crowd dispersed, Mignonette was given to the butcher for a treat of a sausage and de Lerrison ambled back across the square congenially to the couple. At their table, he held out his hand to the husband, ‘No hard feelings, of course, but I think perhaps you should find another destination. We do not beat our creatures here,’ he concluded purposefully, his eyes flitting to the woman’s wrist, which
bore the fresh marks of a bruise that could only have been caused by a Chinese burn: one she hastily concealed under her napkin.

He reached into his breast pocket for a cigarette and surveyed the holidaymakers scurrying off. Momentarily, Mignonette scampered back to him, the butcher’s sausage in her mouth. ‘I would take you home, you know I would,’ he said to her, reaching down to pat her head, ‘but my wife does not like dogs.’

Not for the first time, he regretted Severine bitterly. And it was then, as if the Gods agreed, that she came into view on the other side of the square: Julia; too eagerly approaching him, everyone could see that, too pleased that she had found him. Instinctively, he felt himself wanting to protect her from this audience who were mentally undressing her and assessing her intent. He walked to meet her and kissed her on both cheeks, lingering slightly over each one, but not so long as to cause suspicion, and he found he adored the cool of her cheek, and wanted to return there almost immediately, to rest his head and say to her, ‘Take me away with you.’ But he couldn’t do that. It would not be honourable.

Mignonette jumped up, and he watched as Julia crouched down and let the dog kiss her face, falling onto her backside and laughing. ‘Oh but she is too precious,’ she exclaimed. ‘Is she yours?’

‘Alas, no, she is a stray.’

‘No!’ said Julia, nuzzling her face into the dog’s neck. ‘Then can I keep her, please?’

He winced at the relative carelessness of Julia in her stunning dress, sitting on the dirty ground; Julia the protectress of what he did not have the courage to save; what Severine refused to allow into her home. But I suppose it takes a lost soul to look after another, he realised. How they must have enjoyed destroying you, he thought, as Julia lavished the dog with affection: an affection for which he would have given anything to share.
‘I think she would like that very much.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter what you say anyway. How could I leave her,’ Julia replied teasingly. ‘And does she have a name?’

‘It’s Mignonette,’ he said. ‘It was the Duchesse de Lerrison’s nickname: She was Marie Antoinette’s best friend and the Mistress of the Children at Versailles. I christened her because she looks after all the orphaned puppies around here, after their mothers have gone. So, you see, it’s meant to be.’

There were tears in Julia’s eyes as he spoke. Always, she would cry for those blighted by fate, for those who were abandoned. And not for the first time when he looked at her, de Lerrison thanked God that out of such inhumanity he could be so blessed with Julia. His habitual perplexed amusement returned as he drank her in: knowing that he would never be worthy of her but wanting, for the first time in years, to try.
Harry would be beside himself. I envisaged him coming undone searching every crevice of Èze, his debonair summer suit showing signs of perspiration around the neck and arms as he tried to remain implacable. Yet, doubtless cursing my name with each breath as his concern gave way to irritation then despair as he raced to logical points of destination. And how everyone would rally round: anything to help Harry resolve another of my foolish escapades. But I didn’t care.

I just wanted you.

After the woman pushed me out onto the street from the restaurant, I’d made a run for it down the cobblestones to the gates. My confidence had gathered pace with my footsteps. It was as if I was divesting myself of my history, my marriage, as I neared the exit; I could be anyone, nobody knew me here. It didn’t occur to me that in my silk dress and silver shoes, I was as distinct from the French peasants with their baskets and black clothes as it was humanly possible. Yet, they were kind to me, or else indifferent. Nothing made me feel out of place.

With the money I had been given, I negotiated a lift in a horse and trap down the steep hill from Èze village to the nearest train station at Nice: somehow the harrowing journey, navigating the tight twisting turns of la Moyenne Corniche, the sheer drop to the sea below, seemed thrilling this time. For I was on my way towards a destination that seemed indefinably correct. Nor would I be disappointed: I sensed you would be waiting.

The Blue Train stopped near the port of Antibes, and I walked towards it from there. It was around four, so the shops were closed, and a handful of people milled about. I turned to the Mairie, which stood centre stage in the square, and noted the pulled shutters. And then I saw you, outside a café at the front.
You were standing with a dachshund in your arms, facing the *Baie des Anges* as if you were studying it like a map. But then you were always possessed by an avid wanderlust. How quickly you tired of things, but not of me. This new love was different. I was different. Already, I had undone something vital in you. The unrest you felt no longer excited but dismayed you. Peace could only be found in my presence. Whenever you were alone, you felt that something was missing.

The things I knew from the first…. 

I no longer cared what I looked like. You wouldn’t mind. Not like Harry. Nor would you require any effort from me; not in the way I constantly compensated for Harry; his difficult moods, his silences, feeling them to be something I had triggered. And, of course, nobody could blame him given the scenes I usually caused. But had he not truly caused the scene? And wasn’t this the way between us; what people didn’t realise is that in order to fall one must be pushed. Harry was a master at concealing those allegedly loving shoves.

But you would not demand such things. You accepted me entirely for who I was, or was pretending to be – Vicereine, Lady, Duchess, didn’t matter. And in return, if I faltered and tried to say sorry, ‘No,’ you would say, ‘You must never apologise to me for a single thing. You have shown me more loyalty than I have any right to ask.’

I came running towards you across the square and stumbled and fell onto my back at your feet, after you offered me that incomparable gift. It wasn’t the first or the last, but I have loved her as you were forbidden to: my precious Mignonette, who I accepted like a child from your arms. Once again we understood one another.

I told you about Andrew and my scandalous escape: how my marriage would be in tatters, but I so needed to see you – I had to come; all of which you accepted without judgement. ‘Thank you,’ you said.
You took me to the ballroom at the du Cap: to the arching Palladian windows and the view. I slipped my hand into yours, and rested my head on your shoulder. I almost felt as if I was a girl again, sitting on the grass in Andrew’s house: locked away together, where no harm could befall us.

‘My Beauty,’ you said, not to me, but to the sea.

‘Oh,’ I said, crumbling at the memory. ‘Toby,’ I whispered.

‘No, Julia,’ you insisted sternly, turning to place your hand over my mouth. ‘You can’t ever say my name. We have to be careful.’

But I wanted to say it and I did, over and over: ‘Toby, Toby, Toby, Toby,’ I wept as I slumped down onto the window seat, revealing the secret I had kept since I first glimpsed you from the steam-liner, since you came to my room and confirmed that I was right: you had found me, although you now had to pretend to be someone else: de Lerrison, the new identity you had assumed after I was taken from you in Germany, when I was two months shy of sixteen.

You sat beside me: ‘This is what I feared when I learned of your visit: I thought maybe I should go away until you left. But the idea of not seeing you, this extraordinary coincidence that you should even have come to Antibes, where I’ve made this home; I thought, no I must: even if just to see you from a distance. Someone had given you back to me: although you’re married now, although I am …’ You shook your head in frustration, and I could see the roots of your blond hair at your temple beneath the dye; a vestige of who you once were before you had to become this. ‘Five years since I lost you. What I’ve had to do to get through this, Julia, but not once have I stopped loving you.’

I had had no choice but to return to England after Scotland Yard discovered me in Germany; for I was a minor when I ran off with you. You would have been arrested and charged had I told anyone the reason why we left: the disgrace unparalleled. I had carried on with my life not knowing where you were – if you were alive or well – if you thought of
me, if you even cared for me. Yet, I accepted it as my punishment, for were it not for
Andrew’s trial – had I not been the key witness – none of it would have happened.

And now both of us were condemned to a prison where we could not be ourselves:
not even in private, lest someone overheard. Nor could I even call you Toby, only this
assumed name: Alexandre, which I’ve always despised. For Alexandre de Lerrison is
married to Severine: Toby is mine. And I still believe myself the victor – despite all the
facts, the time lost, the regrets – because Toby is real. He is you.

But wasn’t I naïve that afternoon in my white dress and silver shoes, cradling a
puppy in my lap, and wasn’t there time left for everything to change? So, of course, I
dismissed you; of course, I went deaf to what you were truly telling me; you had already
made your decision. I see that now.

So, ‘What do you mean? We can be happy. We can leave together. There’s nothing
to keep us here if we don’t want to stay. It’s meant to be,’ I said, reaching for you.

And, somewhere, I think that other Beauty sat under a beach umbrella and winced
at the sun, as if a chime had been struck in her heart of a previous time and place on a
similar afternoon: of the bartering pleas we make at the feet of men who are married to
others; who will surely stay exactly where they are.

This is when I learned that words can sound the death knell on your dreams, when
you said:

‘But, Julia, the children.’

When you said, your despair clearly evident, unable to look at me, your head that
was once so blond bowed low: ‘My children.’

And all I could think, as my dreams shattered around me, was how could you say
such a thing to me, how could you?

By then Toby, I had forgiven you so much.

I had not thought there would be so much more to forgive.
In that moment, you were almost unrecognisable from the boy I once worshipped.
The Mashobra Cottage, 1965

‘…almost unrecognisable from the boy I once worshipped,’ I read.

I let Julia’s letter fall against my chest. Severine didn’t appear to notice. For more minutes than I could count only our rising and falling breath was audible, and the slight yet perceptible sound of Severine’s low sobs.

‘Sobering to think that despite forty years of marriage I’ve been a mere bystander to my husband’s heart,’ she said, brushing a piece of lint from her skirt as if she was shooing away a rodent. ‘To a love I was forced to watch deepen with every anniversary.’

I almost thought she might leave. She seemed very tired, and vaguely dismissive, disinterested even; her hunger was diminished.

‘God,’ she half-laughed, in sarcastic disbelief, ‘why such a love. Why not the brief flame of passion that burns out after a few months, something that could be, if not forgiven, then overlooked? Why did it have to be …oh, I don’t know, absolute for them? So that each day I had to suffer the knowledge that even though my husband stayed with me, he was not there. Constantly off in his imagination with her, or in this cottage, this haven I could not enter.

‘Each morning, I would lie beside him in our bed, and wait for him to wake, praying that this dream of her had died in the night. And when he did, I couldn’t fail to register his disappointment that here I was, here I remained to ruin another of his days, to deny him who he most desired. And oh how busy, busy he would be, fussing with his watch, his hair, his clothes, anything to avoid me. And there I would be left, under the covers of our marital bed, grateful for any regard he might offer, wishing it were more but basically knowing that it was out of pity for our children he occupied a room in our house.'
'And yet,’ she said, ‘you feel nothing for me. No remorse, no empathy. Every last one of you wanted me out the picture, so he could be with her. To have something beautiful to watch, such a lovely story.’

‘But wasn’t the story better because of you,’ I asked. ‘Because in that way we could mourn all they were denied?’

‘Damn you,’ she said, exhaling each word in jagged staccato wheezes, ‘just because you could not imagine me, doesn’t mean I had no right to be with him. Surely you must know what it is like to be overlooked? How many backs have turned on you, dear Andrew?’

‘I prefer the shadows now,’ I countered ambivalently, refusing to rise to her bait. ‘For I have seen no good come to those who bask in the light of suns. The more visible you are, the higher the price. Toby and Julia certainly did.’

It was the first time I had spoken his name to Severine – Toby – and it seemed a betrayal of Julia: for he belonged to her alone. Very few had known Toby despite my fame, it was Julia who had commanded the pages, as my inspiration. Nor had we been photographed together. And, as the son of a housekeeper, nobody was interested, anyway. So, when I learned from Julia in Antibes of Toby’s return, of his extraordinary masquerade, I was overjoyed that he was alive but I confess also to sorrow and awe; I thought him lucky to be so unremarked that he could affect an alternate identity as seamlessly. And sorrow that he had been raised on make-believe: the one difference being that those tales I told him as a child had a happy ending, not the nightmare he was trapped within because of his marriage. Yet, I vowed always to protect Toby and Julia.

‘Were it not for me …’ Severine began.

‘Were it not for you, they would have been together.’

‘Andrew, she was damaged goods. Fifteen and in Germany living with an eighteen-year-old man of possibly dubious sexual practices – if the accounts of what went on in your house were to be believed.’
‘You’re depraved,’ I said. ‘Toby loved her. He still does.’

‘Well, he can’t have her,’ she cried.

I threw my glasses onto the table between us in temper, the tea cold in the delicate china cups that my remaining servant had served with reluctant politesse. I focused on the fuchsia ribbons adorning the cups and the tiny gold flowers painted around the rim and remembered Julia perched on her chair where Severine sat. Julia in her doll’s house, in love with every enchanted object, her excitement unlike any I had witnessed, and all because soon he would appear on the lawn. Soon, Toby would choose her for an hour. And for that she was so grateful, which rarely failed to move me whenever I considered how little she asked, and how little she received.

They had fled from England, for reasons I could not comprehend at the onset of my trial. My misery was relentless, in their absence, in my ignorance. Perhaps, this was part of my motive to proceed with the case against the broadsheets; to prove that not all things are sullied, tainted by impurity: to finally to erase the stain of the Wolcottes from my history: as far I was able.

Severine’s brother, Tom, had not been my lover, but my blackmailer – he had come to one of my parties with an acquaintance. And with a story, no less: of his barbaric upbringing at his father’s hands: one, of course, in which I could share having been subject to similar mistreatment. And now, he and his sister, Severine, were orphaned, impoverished: would I help, would I? Was I not an orphan once too: but now so rich?

‘He’s ma pal …’ my mother’s voice sang. But I refused Tom and unwittingly prompted him to orchestrate a revenge, which culminated in Severine’s marriage to Toby.

‘It wasn’t always as difficult between Toby and me, though. That’s why I fought so hard to stay married,’ Severine said, proudly. ‘In Germany, after Julia returned to England, he needed me. When we first met in London, I’d sensed a kinship, after I came with Tom from India following the death of our parents, about six months before Julia and Toby ran
off. I was his age; we related to one another. But there was all the trouble, the trial, Tom turning against me, and without warning, I had nobody: no family, so Toby became my friend – he could be nothing more at the time – but there was something between us, I defy anyone to deny it. I know he felt it too. And I,’ she insisted, ‘was the one who helped he and Julia leave England: you wouldn’t. I arranged for him to be billeted to Germany, through an old army friend of my father’s. I said Toby was my husband. That’s why I had to follow them …’

‘Enough,’ I shouted, steeling myself against her. ‘That’s enough! You came with your brother to destroy me in 1921, and by so doing, you destroyed Julia and Toby. You deprived them of every happiness, every possibility. And you deprived me of their devotion. I cannot know what truly happened during those months when Tom exposed me in the papers and you, somehow, inveigled your way into their sympathies; did you plead abandonment? What did you tell them of me; what chord did you attempt to strike in your fashion? But don’t answer. It worked, whatever it was. Julia and Toby believed you, and that I have to accept; it is far worse than any prison sentence to know that the two people I loved so dearly forsook me, at your behest …’

Severine made to speak, but I cut her off. ‘We are none of us perfect; we’ve all failed one another,’ I said sombrely, ‘but Toby made a fatal error in confiding in you. For it meant he was destined to live according to your edicts, despite how he tried to break free. By the time I arrived in Antibes, there was precious little to salvage from the wreckage of Julia and Toby, except for the words they shared when they could.

‘Those words for which you have come to me now.’

Severine started in her chair, understanding from my tone that they may remain unspoken. Yet, somehow, she seemed to occupy the entire room, with only a small corner for myself. Repulsed, broken anew, I thought to retreat into it a while; for what did I owe her anyway?
My thoughts returned inconveniently to Tom. Although Julia had not referred to Severine’s brother, his ghost haunted her account of Antibes. For on the afternoon Julia arrived there, his fate was also decided: a grotesque murder, which passed relatively unacknowledged by the Antibes Set because they had no idea who the victim truly was. Not the Tom Wolcotte who had destroyed the reputation of a distinguished author: instead, some Thomas without a surname, hiding in penury down a backstreet on the outskirts of Antibes, amidst the washing lines and blocked sewers and mothers who let their children play unattended in the rubbish of the streets. This was where Tom had fled after my trial, after each door of society was barred to him. And this I knew because even after everything he continued to write to me.

The boy who had run to his death on the dock, Vincent, had been his lover. There is always a Vincent in any port, feral beauties who minx and purr and rub up, then scratch to death those who deify them. Vincent, I suppose was different, in that his guilt consumed him afterwards.

So unlike Tom.

I had relished Severine’s mute torment, for she had been unable to openly mourn her brother. Nobody knew they were related, which later both helped and hindered her. On the one hand, she was not tainted by his association with me; on the other, she lived a life of suppression. Severine was condemned to never speak of him honestly or purely, part of the dreadful pact she’d made to marry Toby.

‘You would have done anything to be rid of Julia, wouldn’t you?’ I said.

‘Yes, I wanted her gone, desperately so. Especially at the party,’ Severine said. ‘I felt as if there was a magnetic force between Harry and I that only strengthened this impulse. Unspoken and unacknowledged, but palpable. We’re in this together, that’s what I thought, after Julia had so blatantly cuckolded us at the door. I was almost pleased,’ she said conspiratorially, as if she was celebrating a triumph with a trusted confidante. ‘You’ve no
idea how I longed for Harry to see me as I was – how much more than her: to see my husband as he was, too, a romantic fool forever loitering on the precipice of a promise to Julia that he couldn’t quite bring himself to fulfil.

‘I had always prayed Harry would invite me into his orbit, share his unhappiness, and have done with them. I wanted him to defend me as he defended her: who had I on my side?’ she demanded. ‘Despite how highly I prized my intellect, my skill as a mother and wife, nobody else did. As the years wore on, I became a will-less blank, unreadable, an afterthought in my husband’s life. I was “oh her”, or “yes, you’re de Lerisson’s wife, I don’t believe we’ve met”, when, in fact, we’d met a million times. You see, only someone as powerful as the Viceroy could have ended their affair. My causing a scene would have been pointless. But he never said anything. I mean,’ she exclaimed, ‘he could have derailed my husband’s career with one whisper in the right ear, but he let him be, which curiously made me feel worthless. When, frankly, I should have been indebted. It was only later that I learned he chose not to make an example of my husband for my sake. Or so he told me. After we became close.’

I didn’t marvel at the fiction she had created, as anyone might. She was so manipulative, even as a child. I alone knew how hard Severine had worked to come to Harry’s attention during Julia’s affair with her husband, and for what purpose. Her lip curled with pride at the memory. There’s my Severine, I thought, emerging from behind the soignée façade. How she must hate that outfit. Having to dress like everyone else. For what everyone had failed to realise about Severine in her youth, is that she dressed unusually and wore no make up, not because she had no idea about fashion, but because she felt her beauty was such that she had no need.

‘You remember how besotted Julia was with my husband at that door? God, the humiliation: I’m sure they imagined themselves heroic, but to me she was like a covetous little girl saying “Come and play with me, not her.” Such petty malice. I certainly hadn’t
come so far and been through so much to react and be gossiped about as a screaming
harridan of a wife levelling prosaic accusations better left to some Hollywood star in a
matinee.

‘No, I kept my tongue and went to Harry. Besides, I’d not been able to glean back a
morsel of my husband’s affection by criticising Julia. All I’d managed to do is keep him,
knowing that every time he looked at me, he wished I was her.’

‘But that exchange with the Viceroy – with Harry,’ I qualified. ‘The way he clasped
your hand …seemed intimate. Did I miss something back then, was another story at play?’

Severine considered me warily, like a child being tricked out of giving back a
favourite toy. ‘When he took my hand in front of everyone, I almost burst with joy. It was
the only time I’d been shown any respect. And I would have stayed with him longer, but I
decided not to spoil that exquisite moment; to safeguard my victory. So I walked towards
my chosen refuge: the empty chaise placed on the far wall where I could see everything and
where everyone could see me. I had no impulse to hide. I wasn’t ashamed or embarrassed. I
remained Severine de Lerrison, someone of great importance in my husband’s life. That’s
why I sat where my husband could see me, where he could be reminded that I was still here.
Because Andrew, and this is crucial,’ she said, leaning forward, ‘at that point he may have
loved your darling Julia, but he hadn’t found the courage to discard me yet, only to hurt
me.’

‘Was that the only reason?’ I asked, as a cloud passed over the sun outside,
plunging the room into half-shadow.

Severine held my gaze from behind her long fringe, her chosen veil. ‘I settled on the
edge of the chaise and regarded my husband, intent on his every move. There’s nothing to
fear, I thought calmly. There’s just time here, and all it will do is pass, oblivious to the
detritus, the tragedies, the delights it leaves in its wake …Oblivious to what I will have to
do now, to survive.’
'To survive, Severine?'

‘That’s when I reached into my pocket and felt for something,’ she said, ‘But I experienced no enervating rush of excitement in what I found: just the assurance that a single object could change an entire landscape, could alter time and history.

‘What I hold in my hand might change, I thought, this love affair to a tragedy, or put someone out of their misery, or cause a terrible fright. It might do anything.

‘And, as I sat there, Andrew,’ she continued, unblinkingly, ‘I scrutinised Julia, getting ready to tell her silly tale, and I grew convinced of something: storytellers hold no dominion. Storytellers tell stories that others can revise, reinterpret or misinterpret, augment with later details. And that was my only pleasure: the notion of what would happen next: the story that the party would tell; one I could dictate; an ending Julia could never have foreseen because I imagined it before she did.’

‘And what was in your pocket was the gun.’

‘Yes,’ Severine said. ‘I remember you looked at me. I couldn’t make out your expression. It was odd. I assumed you hated me.’

‘Not at all, Severine. In fact, I admired you.’

‘You admired me?’

‘We all have our stories to tell, Severine,’ I said. ‘But you couldn’t see what I could.’

‘And what could you see, Andrew?’

‘Everything,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she nodded hesitatingly, as if considering whether to ask me something and thinking better of it.

‘And, of course,’ I added. ‘It was the Viceroy who gave you that gun.’

I looked back to Julia’s letter, without waiting for a response.
THE VICEREINE

*My children, my children.*

The words will ruin you.

After I left you in the ballroom, I had sobbed myself to sleep, Mignonette my one comfort, but the tears seemed wasteful. You couldn’t take back what you’d said: the savagery of it. Deep into the night, I tormented myself with memories of Germany, and I tried to hate you.

But I failed.

It has always been you, from the first to the last.

The journalist and the photographer found me on the *Wilhelmstrasse* in Berlin; I had gone to the corner shop for supper; an ordinary woman in an ordinary dress; rushing out the door of our tiny flat above the bookshop. Not a soul knew me.

I’ve never told you, but I was thinking of you walking down that street: of the moment before I left. You had been standing at the huge paned window in the kitchen and I had lingered outside the door to watch; you were in your uniform, one hand in your pocket and the light from the lamp outside was on your beautiful golden, sandy hair I adored; and I remember thinking that you were simply your lovely, lonely, not-quite-sure-of-yourself-self, like me; and what solace we found in each other. You had this hideous patch on your jumper – I couldn’t sew! Still can’t – and you were in deep thought – and you know I’m teasing you – and you were probably thinking of some history book about military things; or how to fix something; you liked what you liked, simple things, and that was fine by me. And I knew that if I disturbed you, you wouldn’t mind, you would turn and say *Ulia*, and I could come to that place in your shoulder where I fitted, and find the peace you always gave me.

But I let you be; I left you to your dreams. You should have them. Besides, I was forever disturbing you. And I can’t articulate it, but I understood that was love. And I had
all the days left for you to turn at the window and say *Ulia*, all the days to find that place of perfect peace in you. So I sneaked out the front door into that freezing darkness: I was going to try to make *Stollen*, can you imagine; and we had no money, only what jewels I could hock and my coat was so thin, summer ermine, and I was chilled to the bone, but it didn’t matter. I can picture perfectly that enchanted street and the snow and the shop windows lit up early for Christmas, and I thought, Christmas with you, my favourite time of the year. What a benevolent God to give me this.

And then I heard you call my name: *Julia!* You were standing at the door of our flat, downstairs, in your slippers, so you couldn’t run out into the snow. You were waving at me, and I ran back, slipping all over the place. I fell over and hurt my wrist, and you picked me up and tut tut tutted and said, ‘I’ve had to leave the front door open, you silly thing. I got the fright of my life when you were gone. I thought you’d left me! Never leave without telling me,’ you said, hugging me close, and I was so small, and you were so tall and wide and it was all more than I could ever have hoped.

But I was also freezing and I did have to make *Stollen*, so I scurried off to the crossing, and you called to me again, ‘you know I’ll find you!’ And I turned back and felt so sad; for there was that particular expression of yours; as if I was already lost and you were remembering me: like something lovely from a dream.

That was when the flash went off in my face and the photographer accosted me. Then the journalist said, ‘Julia, Julia Gloucester?’ and there were his insistent questions – and the crowd gathering and pointing on the other side of the street – and the Scotland Yard officers, demanding of you, ‘Your name, please, sir?’

And you went ashen, but you replied so quickly, ‘de Lerrison. Alexandre de Lerisson.’

And I said as quickly, ‘I don’t know him.’

Because I didn’t anymore: I couldn’t.
And I thought; I will die if they take me away; if there is an hour when I am not lost and loved in you. And then they did.

For I was Andrew Shepherd’s ward, not of legal age: too young to be anywhere but at his side.

‘Can you confirm your identity,’ they asked me, as the flash kept popping.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I am the Moth.’

And I looked back to the door, but you weren’t there anymore.

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The seeds of our stories are sewn everywhere aren’t they, my love? This is why I have invented my last for this evening.

For, at its end, I will reveal what I could not in Germany, in the snow.

You will understand its significance, and it will grieve you.

Because everyone will know it is about you.

About those Sundays when we danced with the children in Cap d’Antibes.
‘Let’s pray it ends before midnight,’ the Pillar Box muttered, as Andrew Shepherd passed the Ladies. ‘I adore the Vicereine, but she does run on with these stories. That one about Kathmandu and the rabbit nearly finished me off. Three hours!’

‘I think it was a hare. One of her “symbolic ones”,’ fretted the Chancellor’s Wife, who did so hate to be unkind. ‘Because that’s when we deduced she was meeting de Lerisson at the Viceregal Retreat, the house she described in it was identical. She’s got some nerve to do it in front of the Viceroy and Severine though. Every week. Not that she’s malicious, but it does make you wonder …’

‘Well, if you consider sleeping with another woman’s husband and two-timing Harry in plain sight, kind,’ conceded the Pillar Box, with a harrumph to Lady Amelia. ‘Heart of gold, indeed! But that aside, while she can be the most tremendous wit, absolutely hilarious, at her worst, she’s a gasbag and if I’m not back by nightfall, the servants will have robbed me of house and home. D’you know I caught Syed, our Sais, rifling through my husband’s smalls the other morning?’

‘Never!’ replied the Chancellor’s wife.

‘Surely they’d be huge on him,’ joked the Pillar Box, who imagined herself something of a wag. ‘But doesn’t that prove a point? Countless years begging us to return their country in its native state, and all they ever wanted was to get into our men’s knickers.’

The Ladies dissolved into hysterics, although at not with the Pillar Box. All of them well aware that her husband hadn’t been near her since 1923.

Andrew had moved to the bar, after the set-to with Severine, where the Viceroy had seated himself at a cocktail table beside the Vicereine’s storytelling chair.

‘Women,’ Harry mused aloud, nursing his drink. ‘Such vipers: I don’t know how Julia stands them …’
He shooed away a waiter approaching to clear the empty bloody Mary glasses peppering the table. It was a trick of his, to keep count of his excess. Ostensibly, this was so Harry could know when to stop. But, really, he had no intention of stopping. Not this evening.

There was no mistaking Harry’s affection for the old storyteller as he joined him. Yet, Andrew was struck anew by the terrible sadness that seemed to haunt him, not that he would have broached the subject, for its cause was Julia. Harry tipped back his glass to drain the dregs of his cocktail, the ice battering his lips, which he wiped irritably with his hand.

‘Forgive me. I’m afraid there’s been another fight. Over her dress, would you believe? I preferred the blue,’ he explained helplessly. ‘The one she wore for her final photograph as Vicereine. Not the correct thing to say, as I learned to my cost.’

‘When will the photograph be made public?’

‘Tomorrow morning. But she hates it.’

By then she may be gone, Andrew realised, but ‘I’m sure it’s beautiful,’ he offered, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

‘This is partly why I’ve refused to play host,’ Harry said. ‘She’s not speaking to me. Naturally, I wanted to avoid causing any discomfort for our guests.’ He frowned, ‘I suppose it’s the same for everyone who’ve been married as long as us, after we retreated to the separate corners of our marriage. We constantly seem to talk at cross-purposes,’ he said, looking to Andrew in a plea for clemency.

Regardless of Harry’s candour, Andrew did not rise to the bait. There had been a time for confidences once, but it had passed. No, Harry was merely very drunk, and Andrew one of those people such drunks find at a bar, onto whom they latch: nobody of any real import, an ear, someone to whom to disclose secrets, alcohol releasing the brake off their better instincts: someone they will invariably forget, thinking better of remembering them as
they wake up to the shame of their debauchery. All of this Andrew knew and understood: for it had happened before.

‘I’d do anything to make her happy,’ Harry said, as his wife laughed charmingly with her lover somewhere behind him, which he observed in the blackening windows.

In truth, Harry wanted to watch her, as he used to when they were first married. Although it was not the same, what they had briefly shared, sometimes he glimpsed a shadow of it through the diffidence and resentment Julia harboured against him. It might be little more than a movement, a swish of her hand, an expression about to alight upon her face, but it would return him there, to a comfort long forfeited.

He still derived some ancient delight in remembering the intoxicating possibility of their early romance, although it wouldn’t do, he knew, to dream of things that would not be. Nothing would happen between them after their guests left. His wife would not turn at the foot of the staircase and invite him to her room, nor display a hint of tenderness. And, in this, he was no different from anyone else. Plenty of others were unhappy and neglected in their marriages. Resignedly, he contemplated his wife’s blonde hair curling elegantly around her ears, and tried to think better of his whims, his senseless desires. But it was no use. For, as ever, despite the years of ambivalence and all of the dead things between them, she occurred to him again, as if they had only just met.

So drunk he couldn’t distinguish between what he thought and what he said, Harry turned on Andrew:

‘Who would have looked after her, when you were jailed, but me? I did as you asked, Andrew. But she didn’t care one jot: I thought it might have been because of that boy: Toby. Not that I met him, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask whether the rumours were true that she had gone to Germany with him. Yet, I always suspected there was someone else for her, someone she could not forsake,’ he said, bitterly. ‘She was living alone at your house. During your trial, the rumours about her childhood in your care made her a pariah:'
the poor girl was so distraught, she couldn’t move. So, that’s why I did what I did that first New Year’s Eve,’ he said, hanging his head. ‘But I conned her, you know I did.’

Andrew did not respond.

Perhaps, it was masochism that spurred Julia to agree to Harry’s request: the recklessness that later defined her, but she had decided to go to The Ritz to see in the New Year. And to this end, he had spirited her off, a frivolous confection of pink tulle, her mother’s bandeau with a diamond flight of swallows, too big for her delicate head and a bag that did not match. Yet, this is where it had started, her new incarnation from Toby’s love to someone else’s; events of which Andrew learned only later, during those afternoons when he and Julia would reminisce about the many things that were and were not to be.

‘There is a story that I want my life to tell,’ she had confessed to Harry, leaning with tipsy charm over the table, a mess of champagne glasses and paper streamers; the last two stragglers at the party for he did not want the night to end and had allowed her to drink far too much. ‘Let me tell it with you,’ he had replied, overcome by an impetuosity he had not previously possessed.

She was so young, about to turn sixteen the very next day – whereas Harry was seventeen years older – and as yet unskilled at deceiving people to spare their feelings, but he could hardly fail to detect the quick breath she had drawn, before responding. Her wide, impressionable blue eyes had scanned his face in surprise, her cherubic features tensing apprehensively, as if trying – and too quickly failing – to fit him into her future.

A better man would have let her alone, but the prospect of some stories proves too compelling. And so, Harry had immediately presented Julia with another option, before she had time to deny him: ‘In my story, you would be the Queen.’

At the sound of his prophecy, the champagne glass Julia held to her lips, slipped from her fingers. ‘I would be the Queen,’ she had repeated, as the glass shattered on the table between them. Neither had sprung back in alarm. Instead, they had reached
instinctively to hold the other’s hand across the shards of glass. They were married two weeks later.

Their union had augured so much for Harry, but disenchantment had set in for Julia immediately, as if her marriage was a house that she had grown too big to fit into. Underlying their every marital exchange was a suggestion of escape from its origin. ‘When will we move abroad?’ she would beg. ‘Will it be soon, how many months?’ Julia clearly imagined that fleeing from the site of her hastily arranged marriage might allow her to reinstate something of the better story that she wanted her life to tell. Or, as the less charitable observed, to repent in leisure. Whatever the motive, Julia had appeared to draw a line through Harry’s character from the start, considering him singularly unworthy of development.

‘So India,’ Harry sighed. ‘I’ve been thinking why I ever accepted this post: some desperate instinct told me, Here. You must come here. What do you think, Andrew?’ he asked, slumping back carelessly in his chair, and sizing him up. ‘Was it because it was so far that it appealed? Or was it because I thought everything could begin again for us, like something from one of your books. And it might have, mightn’t it?’ he continued, contemplatively. ‘Had de Lerrison not got here first …’

Andrew thought he might break down, but instead, Harry clicked his fingers, barked ‘Waiter!’ And pointing to his empty glass, held up two fingers to indicate that Andrew should be served too.

‘I don’t expect any sympathy though,’ Harry said. ‘Men who can’t keep such pleasing and enviable wives amused are invariably to blame.’

Andrew had become an expert at reading men’s behaviour, especially manipulative men, and thought that Harry’s maudlin mood could be in danger of turning nastier: an instinct that was confirmed when Harry shrugged off the consoling hand Andrew had placed on his shoulder.
‘They’ve even suggested I’m a bastard behind closed doors. I’m not,’ he insisted.

‘But everyone’s too enamoured of this romantic fantasy of my wife and the handsome diplomat to bother about me: the hapless fool, who can’t keep his wife happy.

‘But I’ll tell you this; I don’t envy them much,’ he said, swirling the melting ice around his new tumbler. ‘Say she leaves me for him. What would that victory amount to, hmmm? A liar being rewarded with another liar, that’s all.’

Andrew watched him drain the glass and reach for his. ‘At least, they’ve finally found the courage to show their true colours,’ he snorted caustically, before draining his fresh glass, beckoning again to the waiter for a refill.

‘Do you think that’s sensible, dear boy?’ Andrew murmured.

‘Yes, I rather do,’ Harry snapped, gripping his glass in his fist. ‘I can’t damn well help it, though. Regardless of what Julia does, I find myself wanting to catch her before she falls, to save her all over again.’

And isn’t that the problem with being rescued, Andrew thought, the debt you owe the saviour.

‘How unkind I was,’ Harry acknowledged. ‘I locked her into a life she was too young to lead. But then, the old invariably kill hope in the young, by telling them what happens next. I thought that I was a performing a mercy, to save her from disappointment, when, in fact, it was a crime. She should have learned from the mistakes I stopped her from making, about how flawed her judgement always was. And remains.

‘Do you know how de Lerrison managed to steal her from me? He told her a better story of herself than I could. It’s all in the telling, you know,’ the Viceroy said, standing up and shuffling over to Julia’s storytelling chair. ‘In the voice that carries the story. But that,’ he said ominously, tracing the shape with his finger of the delicately carved wooden ribbon that adorned the top of the seat back, ‘is something I can never allow ...’
Wearily, Harry raised his glass to Severine on the yellow chaise, her white blonde hair charged with static electricity, a shock of a halo, against her garish red gown.

But she refused to meet his gaze.

‘Queer woman,’ Andrew observed.

‘Mmm, rude,’ agreed Harry. ‘But perhaps it’s because of you. The two of you share quite a history. Or so I’m told.

‘But, don’t you worry my old friend, my lips are sealed. And so are yours,’ he said, leaning over and placing a finger on Andrew’s mouth.

‘I know what Julia’s planning,’ he said in a low voice. ‘The deus ex machina of the piece; what she’s going to announce to everyone,’ he said, holding Andrew’s gaze. ‘But,’ he said, reassuming his jovial demeanour, as if a flick had been switched, ‘let her have her story … it’s not much to ask. Besides, she is the great love of my life. How can I deny her?’

Andrew detected something then: it was an imperceptible hardening of Harry’s expression that refuted his conviction. For, in that instant, he looked very much like a man who hated his wife.

Andrew gingerly rose to his feet and bid Harry good evening. He made his way through the people, getting caught in the mass of bodies in the centre of the room, the gossip endlessly of the Vicereine and de Lerrison. And he prayed with every fibre that soon Julia would be somewhere far, far away from India, and happy.

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Alone on her chaise, Severine had already left the party behind. In her mind, she had travelled somewhere far beyond it, bored by its prosaic machinations: the rituals of greeting, the forced hilarity, the awareness that, always, there would be those who joined in and those who did not. So banal, she thought. The only thing that changes is the colour of the dresses. No, Severine escaped the inquisitive stares of the guests by willing them to
disappear. Before her, their figures blurred, becoming an undistinguished throng of misshapen body parts, moving gracelessly back and forth.

Yet, this escape, this pause, was necessary. She needed to dissociate from reality, to lose herself once more in her mind – the one place that had ever offered her any sanctuary, any recompense – to confront what she must to do.

And from there, with grim satisfaction, she observed what everyone else missed, as they fulfilled their expected roles.

Death was lurking in the corners of the room in which Julia’s guests revelled.

The type of death she knew by heart.
THE MAN OF NEWS

The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

An owl flew down and settled on the windowsill. Severine regarded it uneasily:

‘That’s a bad omen in Hinduism; their calls echo the God of Death.’
‘Perhaps it’s come for me,’ I said, wryly.

Severine was disturbed by its presence. ‘Something isn’t right,’ she said. ‘What I thought was true is changing as I sit here with you. With her,’ she said, nodding to Julia. ‘I,’ she prevaricated, confused, ‘want to listen to your account of the party now. The moments before Julia sat down in this chair: that’s when everything happened. I don’t want to relive it,’ she insisted, turning her head to the paned window, the pale light of a Mashobra late afternoon illuminating her haggard face, the lines that sluiced through it as violently as any tears she had cried. ‘You know what my husband was thinking, those thoughts he confided. And what other people saw. How it appeared to them. If I listen to it like one of your stories, then maybe I can pretend it happened to someone else …’

‘It is true that he did confide in me,’ I considered, ‘as did others.’

The hunger returned to her expression, ‘So, how would you tell it?’

The clock ticked loudly on the mantel. At first I didn’t recognise the sound, taken aback at Severine’s request. For an infinitesimal moment, I mistook it for the sound of Julia’s beating heart. As if she lived.

I felt a current of something between Severine and I: not quite a vortex, but an area in which we could co-exist.

‘Tell me what you saw,’ she demanded again. ‘Tell me how you saw me.’

Could I do this to myself, even after so many years? Could I cope with Severine’s madness, her incomprehension when I revealed the truth? Beneath her blouse, the miniature glinted against her neck; a seemingly benign temptress leading me back to the past,
following the strands of its history in a quest for its origin; how it had come to touch the
lives of everyone who came near. And the voices it contained, beneath each palimpsestic
page: the Duchess of Lerrison, the faceless woman, me, but none more poignant than that of
Julia. And then it occurred; why on earth should Severine be spared?

So I consented to her strange request; the laurels a niggling weight upon my brow, those she had breathed frost upon to wither.

‘In that room,’ I said, ‘as the silence prevailed for the storytelling hour, your husband felt imprisoned both as retribution and as reward. He screwed his eyes tightly shut, to avoid the sight that Harry would impose upon his fragile conscience whenever he cared to recall him, after: the mental image of an elderly man, who would be left alone because of him. It struck him something larger was happening on that stage, as the candles began to be lit, one by one; a sign for everyone that Julia’s promise was about to be fulfilled. As quiet as the most obedient children, her guests descended like the ashes of brilliantly coloured fireworks onto the floor or plush upholstered cushions, the vibrant colours of the ladies’ ball-gowns blurring into a vivid tableau as they gathered around her chair and waited for Julia to occupy it.

‘At your husband’s side, Julia said something that he registered with a shallow inhalation of breath: a look of concern flitted across his face, which he effortlessly turned into one of curiosity, as Julia finally broke away to walk to her chair. Indeed, no-one would ever forget the ambiguous last glance that passed between them: not only for its poignancy, but in what her guests imagined it foretold. For their eyes would never meet again in that life.

‘And there were the many things, of course, to which the guests were privy that Julia would never learn. She did not see his hand involuntarily reach for her as she left him, a winsome shadow trailing in her wake; nor witness his longing.’

Severine shifted uncomfortably.
‘He leaned back against the wall,’ I continued, ‘turning to you then in half-profile, unwilling to confront you head-on. At one end of the room, where the candlelight barely reached, was his past, in the darkening form of you, his wife, defiant in your red dress. On the other, was his future: Julia, perfectly depicted by the golden light.

‘It was as if he was rooted to the spot. He felt anxious as he noted the doors being pulled shut by a servant. Some instinct told him that he should flee, to retreat alone into the scented night and wait for everything to be over. But it was absurd, for where would be the nobility in that. He was no shirker. Nor could he avoid the role he had to play.

‘The shadows, however, began to accost him; there were too many memories for him there. Too many reminders of his many failings: the increasingly dominant shades seemed evidence of his guilt, and yet their edges were tinged with gold; a golden hue that framed Julia in the window, as if she were an enchanted character, a princess lost in a wood, waiting to be rescued. And so possessed of the inherent weakness of dreamers, he resolved to focus on the bright edges of those shadows, their glistening linings, because the story was about to begin. And if there was one thing he could not resist, it was Julia and her stories.

‘You remember, of course, Severine, that we assumed our customary positions as we waited for her to speak. Vantage points that would unexpectedly determine her fate: you beneath her portrait on the yellow chaise with a clear shot to Julia’s chair. I, a short distance to her left, a little man without friends watching ever on; your husband leaning with his arms folded and head lowered against the curved wall; Harry behind Julia’s right shoulder at the window.

‘On each of Julia’s wrists, lustrous gold and green and aquamarine bracelets sparkled, as she waited for the chatter of her guests to diminish. She clasped her elegant hand around the miniature under her open collar to hide the fact that it was shaking uncontrollably. She was teetering upon a familiar precipice once more, the ritual gaping chasm below her widening with the fatality of her missteps, her deceit, what she had
revealed that evening. And the familiar creeping tendrils of disappointment reached up and wrapped around her neck at everything she expected from her lover and everything he didn’t give: the everything, she knew, that would depend on the story she was about to tell.

‘Harry could not look at Julia, although he appeared to. His gaze, however, was focused on a middle distance over her bejewelled head, far into the night, where, through the darkness, he found all for which he yearned. There was oblivion there, which seemed to soothe, to offer a comfort his wife was about to deny him. Yet, not even he, so inured now to her callousness, could avoid her, as he heard the unmistakable chime of her voice, like the soft tinkle of fairy bells, as she began:

““Regarde, the Duc d’Orsay has a new wife …””

‘And me,’ Severine interrupted. ‘Tell me what you saw of me.’

‘A collective “aah” emanated from the guests,’ I said, ‘as I turned to you just in time for your mask to slip. I had never before witnessed such sorrow as you lowered your head into your hands. Your head of yellow hair, which seemed, due to the fact that you had not removed your hands from the pockets of your red silk dress as you raised them to your face, to be submerging in a pool of blood. Yet, as soon as the image presented itself to me, it disappeared, as a breeze blew out the candle beside you, and you were involuntarily consumed by the darkness.’

At the cottage, it was still light. Severine sat before me as clear as day.

““Regarde, the Duc d’Orsay has a new wife …”” she said. ‘You learn so much about people from the stories they tell. Can you remember it?’

‘Yes.’

And I looked to my Julia then, and the story continued on.
PART II

THE DUCHESS OF LERRISON
The room rumbled at Julia’s opening line:

‘**Regarde, the Duc d’Orsay has a new wife.**’

‘Fabulous,’ exclaimed the Chancellor’s Wife. ‘This will be so much better than the one about the rabbit!’

‘I cannot imagine where she’s going with it,’ raved the Pillar Box, ‘but I’ve got a feeling she’s saved the best for last. And have you ever seen a man more in love with a woman than that one,’ she said of de Lerisson. ‘He’s positively in raptures. Lucky bitch,’ she said, stuffing a chocolate date into her mouth. ‘But, shhh … I don’t want to miss a minute of this,’ she whispered, tapping her seatmate’s arm and turning expectantly to the Vicereine, whose hand was still held flat over the tiny locket around her neck.

Lady Amelia did not obey the Pillar Box’s command to pay attention to the Vicereine, for she found her image disturbing: it reminded her of when her Daddy had strangled her Mummy in the dining room: because of the thing with the jockey. And why on earth would the Vicereine want to choke herself? Involuntarily, if a little fearfully, she glanced over to de Lerrison.

‘The story begins,’ Julia declared, ‘in Switzerland, in 1793. It is about Marie Antoinette’s best friend, the Duchess, who was also called the Mistress of the Children.’

‘Oh gracious me: she *is* going to go there,’ said the Pillar Box under her breath, as her friends flushed slightly crimson of cheek, for the Duchess’s title, the Mistress of the Children, was somewhat familiar to them.

And Lady Amelia presumed, perhaps too, to de Lerrison. For he appeared broken as he hung his head. I wonder if he’s heard it before, she thought.
“Regarde,” Julia said, the lilting rise and fall of her voice settling like a balm over her audience, “the Duc d’Orsay has a new wife,” observed the Comtesse from behind her Japonais fan ...”
THE DUCHESS OF LERRISON

Switzerland, 1793

‘Regarde, the Duc d’Orsay has a new wife,’ observed the Comtesse from behind her Japonais fan …’

I, Gabrielle Yolande, Duchesse de Lerrison, was so very young when the Comtesse made her pronouncement, all of seventeen. And, of course, this was many years ago, at Versailles. Il était une fois. Once upon a time, where old Fairies like the Comtesse reigned supreme in the Hall of Mirrors, and their judgements on any fresh additions, like new wives, were considered sacrosanct. Still, the memory has lingered with me.

I was as fresh from the convent as I would ever be on the evening in 1766 when the doors first opened to admit me to that pale Empire. And there, beneath the spectacular candlelit chandeliers that hung as far as the eye could see, I had performed a somewhat faltering curtsey before King Louis the Beloved, much to my mother’s chagrin: a lack of savoir-faire that had led to me being manacled to her side next to the Comtesse, where I could cause no further embarrassment.

Except for the heat of the Hall stifling with the smell of pomatum the women used to powder their wigs, it was hardly a punishment, however, for someone as inexperienced as I was then. For the Bal de Bleu was the most celebrated social event of the season, and I was a child at the feast.

In awe and amusement, I watched as the ancien régime flitted decorously before the floor to ceiling mirrors lining the wall, while at their backs the undulating sea of Palladian windows stood to deferential attention, overlooking the inimitable symmetry of the gardens and fountains beyond. In intrigue and greed, I listened to the whispers and innuendos swirling around me, as Boucher and Rococo’s painted angels and Gods waged Versailles’ favourite game of love and war above my head. But none piqued my interest more than the Comtesse’s seemingly innocuous observation about the Duc d’Orsay’s new wife. An
observation I was certain would not go unremarked. For while the lesser mortals of the court fawned and preened as they circled the seats that would determine their order of precedence, like a game of musical chairs, the Comtesse was already firmly established in situ one chair removed from the King: a position she had held for over half a century, a reward for her so very giving nature.

Of course, there could be no more influential spot than where the King and his ear reclined on his throne and there, seated and standing in degrees of diminishing importance after the Comtesse, were the rest of the original Fairies: the Marquise de Montrachet, the Duchesse de Languedoc, and my mother, the Princesse de Couteau, presiding over the court like Cerberus at the gate: a phalanx who turned in unison to consider the young Persephone at the Comtesse’s implicit instruction, as if answering a call to arms. And in this, they were very sensible. For were it not for the Comtesse, they would never have been born.

Although I was inexperienced, I was not innocent to the game of guile that had garnered the Comtesse and Maman their coveted seats. I had been a child perpetually loitering at the lock, ever covetous of understanding the secrets and passions of those cloistered within, and so I had come to learn their stories off by heart: stories that focused always on how to be one dark trick from disgrace, and, more importantly, how to love illicitly without being caught. None of them had mastered this skill more brilliantly than the Comtesse, who in her youth had been widely commended for her, shall we say, distinctly kittenish charms. And to this end had so memorably marked her territory in the then fifteen-year-old King’s boudoir during a hunting weekend in 1725 that he had promised her anything her heart desired. And her request? Why, nothing less than eternal youth.

Such were the Comtesse’s unrivalled powers of persuasion that the King, freshly assured of his omnipotence considering how long she had kept him awake, had acceded to her whim. He had introduced her to the aspiring writer, Charles Perrault, whose erstwhile nib had found inspiration so swiftly forthcoming at her pretty little paws that he had
immortalised her as Puss in Boots. And so eternal youth, of a sort, was conferred, along with the conviction that fairy tales really could come true.

But the Comtesse’s anointment was only the beginning. Soon, all of the leading ladies of the court were begging Perrault to tap them with his magic wand and afford them starring roles in his fairy tales. To his credit, he was more than equal to the task, entering into a prodigious period of creativity and transforming Versailles into the Empire de Féeries, the Empire of the Fairies, with the King presiding over them as a benevolent Bluebeard. And in that matinal world of only the most forgiving light, the Marquise de Montrachet, not one to sleep in the same bed twice, became Sleeping Beauty; the Duchesse de Languedoc, an insipid blonde with a persecution complex, Cinderella; and Maman, a passionate horticulturist and rampantly keen friend to diminutive gardeners, the Princess Who Slept Upon a Pea.

By virtue of their celebrity, Maman and her fellow Fairies had never ceased to believe in their superiority to time and fate. They were the immortals, after all, and they wielded their power with impunity. From that point on, any story that began at Versailles ended only with the moral they decreed, with happy ever afters reserved exclusively for themselves. And as love was the only story that mattered, what torment they brought down upon unsuspecting heads that turned from their charms. For savagery was as ingrained in them as in the executioner’s grip.

Reality is rarely the province of youth, but any cursory glance in the direction of the Fairies disproved their superiority to time – and to me – by that evening, which was markedly true of the Comtesse. For, while the King may have granted her immortality, he could not rescue her from age. And she was very old by then. Old and utterly ridiculous, trussed up in the latest fashion of my belles-amies, some sixty years younger than she.

I was new to the Hall and as yet unpractised in the art of effectuating perpetual ennui. So I could not help but marvel at the Comtesse’s visage, as she considered the Duc’s
dew-soaked eighteen-year-old bride trotting along on her husband’s arm. Her face was powdered into corpse-like submission, her cheeks daubed with the bright scarlet red rings Casanova had once observed inspired ‘amorous fury’ in the eyes, but nothing could disguise the smallpox scars, and black lines ploughed into her brow and cheeks, despite the fervent ministrations of her lady’s maid with the powder puff.

_Quelle folle vache coquette._ What a silly coquettish moo, I thought, as I watched the Comtesse incline her head, with great care, to peer more closely at the new Duchesse. Her head that was so heavy with the four-tiered wig that was oh-so _de rigueur_, her wig toppled forward. And as it did, the door of the golden cage adorning its peak, in which a bird of paradise was nestling, flew open and allowed the exquisite creature its freedom.

A collective gasp emanated at my side as the original Fairies turned in horror from the Comtesse’s faux-pas. But I, for one, was mesmerised at the spectacle unfolding before us. It was the most exciting thing that had happened to me in years. For reasons I could not fathom until today, I thrilled as I watched the bird swoop and glide around the room, revelling in its liberty. The room that suddenly reverberated with the shrill squawking of the _ancien régime_, for whom confinement was a fact they did not seek to question: a gilded cage from which they desired no escape.

‘Shoo it away,’ the Sleeping Beauty cried, flapping her arms wildly and causing plumes of powder from her wig to cascade around her, embalming her in grey dust.

‘No, kill it,’ shrieked Cinderella, as the bird flew perilously close, its sharp beak mere inches from her nose.

The Comtesse, however, did not appear alarmed, rather ever so slightly bemused as she surveyed the mirthful scene she had caused; her smile spreading deeper across her ravaged face as her liberated pet paused to rest on a tall candelabra stand placed beside the Duc d’Orsay’s new wife. And there it perched as serenely as the Duc’s bride, its gaze fixed on the Comtesse, as if in a trance. Yet, with each beat of its red and golden wings, I began
to discern a clear sheen of malice glinting in his mistress’s faded blue eyes, until they were pools of mirth. Oh, little bird, I wondered, what trick do you have up your wings?

It was a trick that revealed itself before I could even blink. For, presently, a rapid succession of white and brown splats stained every inch of the Duchesse d’Orsay as the bird relieved itself over her head; from her golden hair to her flawless skin to the gleaming white breast of her gown, down to the delicate arches of her tiny, precious feet.

A moment of stunned silence fell over us before the Hall was plunged into chaos. Courtiers and servants ran this way and that to try to trap the bird, while the ancien régime clambered to their feet in hysterics. Marquis and Marquises, Ducs and Duchesses, Princes and Princesses, all fled to the four corners of the room, their fans held aloft as battle shields to deflect a similar fate from soiling their rarefied skin. Like a gladiatorial den, spectators at they knew not what, everyone fixated on the new Duchesse, discarded at the centre of the Hall, her wretched reflection visible in every mirror that surrounded her.

Only the Comtesse and I had not moved from our seats, my attention held fast by a suspicion. One that was confirmed when the Comtesse suddenly cleared her throat and the Duchesse raised her heartbroken eyes to the mirror on the wall before her, to find the figure of the Comtesse at her back, watching intently. It was then that the most curious alchemy occurred. For in the reflection of the mirror, flecked with gold leaf and so tarnished it was as if it were dusty on the inside, anyone might have thought the Comtesse my age, with skin as flawless as Christ’s soul. While the Duchesse, stained with filth, her body cowering under the weight of her shame, looked as though she had aged sixty years. And this the Comtesse knew as she smirked triumphantly at the Duchesse in that carefully selected mirror, the one that declared her fairest.

All the Duchesse could do was watch as the Comtesse slowly raised her Japonais fan, as if to hide from the young girl’s unconscionable disgrace; watch and accept an incontrovertible yet devastating fact: she was ruined. Versailles had baptised the Duchesse
d’Orsay in its fashion, with the help of a little bird: an emissary of revenge for someone impeccably skilled in the art of social inclusion and exclusion: the Comtesse d’Orsay. The Comtesse, who had once been as innocent a bride to the Duc as the present Duchesse; the Comtesse, who had been discarded by him at the first sign of age as quickly as one might brush a flea from one’s sleeve. And the new Duchesses’s baptismal name? Gardez l’eau.

I cannot remember the Duchesse’s proper name. It was probably something as lovely as she was: Clotilde or Lucette. Not that it matters anymore. As I’ve said, it was so long ago and nobody called her anything else afterwards, not even I. Not even after she went mad later and drowned herself in the Mirror fountain, the one surrounded by sculptures of dragons; a fact I once considered ironic, but that now fills me with remorse. Yet, there can be no greater sadness for me today than to acknowledge how little I learned on that fateful evening, and how similar I am to those Fairies I used to mock. For I realise that this is how stories always began at Versailles, as a fragrant dictum from the old to the young. Lest ye forget we came first, the recurring moral of each tale. And the story of the Duchesse and the Comtesse was as old as time itself: nearly every wife had been spurned, and if the rejection did not kill them, then they lived on to ruin it for their successors. As I have lived on.

We used to giggle, my friends and I at those ancient women, decaying under their gowns, trying to flit around us, as if they believed they owned wings. We used to howl with laughter, whenever they beckoned over some cherubic, albeit penniless, young Prince or Duc, and forced them to worship at their altar. Those petrified boys who would flounce around, blowing air kisses, trying desperately not to touch them, as if the Fairies were moths ready to devour their silken skin.

We were young, as I’ve said, so perhaps we be might be forgiven our callousness. And we were naïve, which was far more dangerous a sin: for we didn’t stop to ask
ourselves, why? Why had they chosen to believe in fairy tales, long after they had ended, long after life had taught them that there is no such thing? What did they have to gain?

I was to learn the answer when the tiny book arrived at Versailles, one that contained the greatest fairy tale of all. It was a gift for the most formidable competition the ancien régime would ever know; la petite Autrichienne, as they disparagingly called her, the child who one day become our Queen. My dear and beloved, Antoinette, who has broken my heart in ways I cannot count.

And all because of that damnable book she cherished, the one she wore as a locket around her neck, from the beginning in the Hall of Mirrors to the end where she bid me farewell from the courtyard of the Petit Trianon, never to see me again. The one I would have given anything to own – and now do. The reason why I am exiled here in Switzerland and no longer her favourite at Versailles.

We learn so much at our mother’s bosoms. Even when our golden heads are cradled there not with love, but resentment, we learn. And we always remember those lessons, despite our protestations at how little resemblance we bear to the women who gave us life.

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On the evening that Antoinette first appeared in the Hall of Mirrors, the smelling salts were passed around with abandon. It was even later suggested that the sharp intake of horror at her sartorial choice could be heard as far as England. And her crime? Yellow.

All of fourteen, she was dressed head-to-toe in vivid yellow silk, a colour that had not been seen at Versailles since 1732. Such an appalling choice: or so everyone agreed. For the fashion then tended towards the palest blues and pinks and ivories, hues of the most forgiving delicateness. The truth, however, was that yellow had fallen out of favour because it matched the colour of the ladies’ teeth. And now that the youthful future Queen had established its validity anew, the women would have no choice but to follow suit, or risk causing potentially mortal offence.
Of course, they should have been grateful to her. First and foremost because yellow made their fangs look much less obvious. Yet, most were inclined to perceive the new trend as a *demi-tasse* half-empty. For yellow also had the regrettable effect of making them all appear jaundiced. And for this and so many other reasons, I tumbled into love with Antoinette.

It had been four years since my induction into the Hall and precious little had changed, especially the pantomime of new wives being trotted around like show ponies for the spurious predilection of the Fairies. We had lost the Comtesse to the eternal *Heureux Pour Toujours* club in the sky whose members I imagined must have expired anew to witness her hideous cadaver slinking up to St Peter’s Gate, and *Maman* had assumed occupancy of her chair; a Pyrrhic victory once it emerged that the King had gone a little *fou* and given up his throne to Pompadour’s monkey, who liked to screech periodically in dear *Maman’s* ear.

And I? Well, I was nearly twenty-one and had metamorphosed into a young favourite at the feast, who had married so very well, and who loved so very rewardingly on the side. Yet, still, I had to pay obeisant homage to the ancient Fairies, which only added to my frustration that evening as they griped ever on. For I had, shall we say, far more pressing concerns than a yellow dress; those that beckoned magisterially to me with a meaningful flourish, as I watched the coattail of my new lover disappear behind a hidden door.

‘As we suspected, a dinky Austrian dumpling. Let us pray she doesn’t become as *énormement* as her mother,’ murmured the Princesse de Lamballe, unfurling her fan with a light flick of her wrist, a deliberate taper with which to ignite the fire of speculation.

‘A lost cause,’ *Maman* sighed, raising her own to obscure her face. ‘She’s Austrian. As soon as the first child is born, she will swell to the size of her country.’
‘Let us hope you mean the country of her birth, and not of her marriage. We’ll be squashed against the walls, if she becomes the size of France,’ retorted the Princesse de Lamballe, contorting her thin lips into an expression of revulsion.

‘Indeed, my dear,’ replied Maman ‘men might like a shape, but they certainly don’t want to be smothered alive by a blancmange.’

And the Japonais fans fluttered manically as the women stifled their spasms of mirth.

I inhaled deeply to quell my irritation, and thought better of my third macaron, tossing it back onto the Sèvres plate beside me. La pauvre, I thought, reconsidering Antoinette, the angel stumbling enigmatically between the clouds of the mirrors, not yet assured of her footing, and treading, if the rabid glares were anything to go by, on all the wrong carbuncled feet.

‘And what is that on her head?’ I heard Maman protest. ‘Not even a crow would nest in it.’

Oh, such venom those women practised and preached in the Hall. I had long since vowed never to emulate them. I wouldn’t hate other women for being younger or prettier. I would be a friend to everyone. And because of this, everyone would be a friend to me. As I have said, I was so young, so perhaps I might be forgiven now my optimism, my disingenuousness. For I was then and remained the greatest beauty Versailles had ever seen. And, worse, each time my famous violet eyes glanced in a mirror, I knew it. If I paid a compliment to anyone else, it was borne of the certainty that I was cut from the cloth of les intouchables. And being kind is so very easy when there is nothing to envy anyone, although that awareness was lost on me then.

The one thing for which I do credit Maman is that she taught me the art of adultery. And, more importantly, which lovers to choose: I could not have selected a better man for the task during that time, although I was already pregnant with my third child by the Duc.
Not to mention legitimately so, which was something of a feat at court. Yet, I prided myself on the keenest of insights, and I had understood something rudimental early on in my marriage: mainly, when it comes to the bedroom, to the victor the spoils. And so the libidinous old porpoise’s every wish was my command.

In truth, there was only ever one lover who made an impression; the one I was at such pains to meet. If only I had known then that he was somehow joined to me in a way that no other man would be; the type of love who happens just once. Such a pair we were, coming of age together, confiding our every dream. My heart still sings whenever I open a door and imagine him waiting for me, turning back in the pale white light of Versailles with his warm smile, his bright blue eyes; those forgiving arms outstretched to hold me perfectly so … But no, he occurred to me only later. And with him, so much more.

At the time, I had so many admirers that I considered him my reward for all of that endless huffing and puffing and the feeling I frequently had to endure of being suffocated alive by my husband’s massive girth. But then I suppose there is something about those men who actually marry us that rarely ceases to bore. So when I heard the erstwhile shrieking of dear Maman’s simian friend, I seized upon the opportunity to take a refreshing turn about the gardens.

Oh, to be that girl again, with her violet eyes and tumbling dark hair, in her ravishing dress, with her unblemished heart running out into that cool night to meet a boy as wonderful as he. I remember the dew-soaked spring dusk caressing my toes through my silk slippers as I ventured out onto the gravel. How I was filled with garrulous joy, all of the stories I had for him; the excitement that our time had come.

I was never so young again, I think now: the greatness ahead of me, or so I assumed: happiness, fulfilment, endless love. And all because of him: what he promised, what he gave me. How have I not spent my life at his side? For even then, something in me wanted always to be running down a hall or opening a door to find him there, laughing at
me in that way he had where nothing I did was wrong, and all of it was to be cherished. Yet, isn’t that the problem with hope? What is it but a dream, a fancy, poised to die in the face of reality, as mine did? For this is where it began. All the things I cannot change.

It was the first time my favourite disappointed me because he was not waiting in our usual spot. He was nowhere to be seen. And there amidst the beauties of the ancients – the elaborately bordered gardens with the statues of Aphrodite, Venus, Diana, and Echo at their cores – I found that I missed him, a new emotion for me. I almost thought to cry as the minutes grew longer and every excuse I made for him evolved into a more disturbing truth: namely, that if a man doesn’t come to you; then he is no longer interested. I had seen it happen too often. And I was growing older, soon to be the mother of three. Perhaps he had tired of me; perhaps those dusty mirrors were tricking me as they had the Comtesse and what I thought I saw was not real.

But let us not forget that this was Versailles. So momentarily I was reprieved from all such nonsensical self-reflection, when the Dauphin’s brother took me completely by surprise and I was taught a truly valuable lesson about Nature: namely, saplings into mighty oaks may well grow, but why wait? It was a lesson that was imparted with alacrity by the dashing, very mature, Comte de Broglie, with whom I was to enjoy a series of similarly enlightening, alfresco exchanges. And with that the memory of my other lover’s juvenile flower buds was swept from my mind and my senses were infused instead with the intoxicating perfume of a Bourbon bouquet.

And, of course, that was the evening our friendship began, when I came across a trembling Antoinette as she fled the ballroom, having just concluded my first very vigorous debate with the Comte behind a garden jardinière. All such pleasures I immediately forgot, when Antoinette ran headlong into me, staring up at me like a startled fawn about to be shot in a field.
‘What a fabulous dress,’ I smiled at her, and meant it, although it was nothing of
the sort. Perhaps it was the ‘please’ in her eyes that impelled me to lie, or the way she
clutched at my hand like a little girl who had lost her mother. For the sensation of her hand
– wet with tears she had wiped away – melted something in me.

‘They despise me,’ she wept. ‘The Princesse de Lamballe called me a frump and
someone else said that I speak French like a peasant. And they hate my outfit! What am I to
do?’

Somehow, my children’s tears had failed to move me in the way in which
Antoinette’s did. Perhaps, that was because I rarely saw them or because I cared for their
father so very little and observed too many of his tiresome traits in them. Regardless, my
heart splintered into pieces as Antoinette stood there, with her shoulders slumped, and pretty
blonde head of curls bowed, coughing up rivers of sobs.

Before that moment, I had not truly considered love as a means to any end. At
Versailles, love was a game in which we indulged, our appetites rarely sated. Yet, it struck
me then that it was something more elemental, more than whispered promises that did not
come true, or secret assignations that sometimes lasted only as long as it takes to fasten a
button on one’s shoe. Who else, I wondered, would love such a pathetic little creature, if I
did not? From the old-fashioned lace adorning her sleeves and hems to her shapeless frock,
there was nobody there to care for her, and, frankly, her new husband wasn’t exactly cut out
for such comforts.

‘But it’s so unusual, so very à la mode. And such a divine necklace,’ I added,
almost involuntarily. ‘Is it a locket?’ I asked, peering closer.

There around her slender neck glistened the jewel more beautiful than I had ever
before seen, or have since, which on closer inspection appeared to be a tiny book. Bound in
green velvet, the cover sparkled with seed pearls and emeralds and rubies and golden thread
shaped into a cypher on the front, so minute that I could not at first determine what it was, until I realised that it was a golden tree.

‘It’s mine,’ Antoinette replied, wrapping her fingers around it protectively and smiling so sweetly I could not trespass further. ‘It was a gift.’

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask, *From whom?* But something prevented me from acting on this impulse. Something in the way she spoke that I understood, but from where I could not fathom.

I have always been fond of curiosities, unusual trinkets and miniatures, those I used to collect to dangle from gold bracelets on my wrists; those one has to spend time contemplating, which offer no easy reward. Antoinette struck me as the type of curiosity I might spend an eternity considering. Not simply because she was foreign, her manners and clothing speaking of an incomprehensibly old-fashioned court, but because of the goodness I sensed in her from the first: her innocence and guileless need for a friendship without cost.

I was six years older so I took her under my wing. And so I became her treasured favourite, and she the child of my heart.
THE MAN OF NEWS

The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

By degree, Severine had become cadaverous, diminishing with each segment of the story, until I could scarcely see her. The room had grown so dark, after all. Had she been so wizened upon arrival in the garden? Evidently not, but something was distinctly changing in her.

“…the child of my heart.” I listened to the dying fall of my voice as the room was plunged suddenly into pitch-blackness, when the last of the sunlight was obliterated behind a dark, storm-filled cloud outside. Within seconds, we heard the steady staccato drill of torrential rain increase to a deafening hammering on the roof that sporadically lapsed into silence.

I laid the pages of Julia’s letter down on the table beside me and placed the tips of my fingers against their leaves to be sure they were secured. But this is not the whole truth. It was as if they breathed, as if they possessed Julia’s soul.

‘Nobody ever understood it, did they?’ Severine’s voice spoke through the black. ‘Why Julia chose my husband? The Emperor’s New Clothes myth,’ she continued, ‘the greatest act of storytelling undertaken, a testament to Julia’s skill. Nobody would have looked twice had she not singled him out. There was nothing about him that was exceptional, not his looks or his career, or even his personality. Yet, somehow, he metamorphosed at her side, until he became all. Only strangers regarding photographs later would have aligned with my view. Yet, Julia’s society followed her suit: he was so handsome, so wonderful: who wouldn’t be lucky to be near him?

‘Had he tired of her, there would have been a stampede to our door,’ Severine remarked dully.
The rain drummed harder on the roof and Severine must have stood up to close the window, as the noise abated. Perhaps, the rain was soaking the chair. I found myself grateful for her gesture. But then, I reminded myself, she was a curator, a historian, it was only a duty of care she displayed. Not love, not need.

‘Well, was he as desirable?’ I asked. ‘After her death?’

I confess that I longed to hear the answer. I found myself holding my breath, desirous only that I should be rewarded for my suspicion.

‘He never looked at another woman again after she died. He could hardly bring himself to look at our youngest daughter, Lawrie. Especially not after Nico and Angelica went missing. I realised then,’ she said, forcing herself to elaborate, ‘that those who truly love are oblivious to the rest of the world beyond the object of their desire. I think he would rather have gone blind the moment Julia left him so that he was unable to search a room, or a train platform, or a street looking for her or anyone like her, when he forgot. And as his dementia worsened, he would forget that she was not coming back: until he forgot that she died entirely. So, Julia was forever somehow ahead of him, around a corner, behind a door. Not gone. Just missing. An absence.

‘Metamorphosis,’ she acknowledged, with knowing sadness. ‘That’s what the story of the Duchess is about. People becoming other people: characters in other people’s stories. Just like Julia metamorphosed into the many different characters of her life. Just as my husband did too.’ She sighed, ‘What secrets we have kept Andrew. All the secrets, all the time, of who we really are. But which story to finish first, The Duchess or Julia’s? You choose.’

We knew the ending to both, but I chose anyway.

I returned to Julia.
SIMLA, 1947

‘I do prefer it when she’s funny,’ gushed the Pillar Box. ‘Honestly, she’s a hoot and a half when she puts her mind to it. Although I can’t believe how blatant she’s being: I mean to say the Duchess of Lerrison. *His* name!! Good grief. *And* it’s so obviously about Antibes. That reference to oh-what-was-it-again?’ She furrowed her brow and clucked three times, to the consternation of a Maharaja in front of her, who threw himself onto the floor; for she had unwittingly signalled that a lion was about to pounce. ‘Ah, the drowning in the mirror fountain, yes. That boy drowned, remember, in the port, in 1927 in Antibes....And what’s Severine making of this; I say, the humiliation.’ the Pillar Box said, turning slyly to ogle her on the yellow chaise.

‘You haven’t finished telling me what happened after the dog,’ Lady Amelia whispered to the Impeccable One.

‘Silence,’ the Pillar Box remonstrated, disapprovingly.

But the Impeccable One rather suspected she could guess the next chapter of the Vicereine’s tale. And besides, she felt slightly maternal towards the young girl: bloody awful that thing with her mother and the jockey …Cocking an ear towards the Vicereine, who was philosophising momentarily about Rousseau, she thought it safe to stop listening: it was all too Levin and the cornfields for her liking, when all she really wanted was a bit of Vronsky.

‘Well,’ she replied to Lady Amelia, who perked up a trifle too greedily, ‘I know de Lerrison extremely well, and he was madly in love with her. He wasn’t like that with anyone else, then or since.’

‘Really?’ said Lady Amelia, a little flatly.

‘Really,’ confirmed the Impeccable One.

‘How so?’
‘Well …’

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It was a love that evolved through a series of choreographed moments. Or so the chorus pontificated: the dance lessons, the early morning guided tours along the coast to visit brilliantly painted churches, the ceremonial lunches on the white beaches of the Cote d’Azur with visiting delegates, while Harry toiled in a swelteringly hot Embassy. Rarely a day passed without Julia being spotted in de Lerisson’s prized Bugatti, which he had won in a bet in Monte Carlo from the Duke of Northumberland – for how could he have afforded such a thing otherwise? – speeding along la Moyenne Corniche. The two off to some enviable lunch destination, one of de Lerisson’s charming boltholes carved into a cliff face, or hidden behind a derelict village street, where he mingled with the locals like the God he was, revered but at one with them. It was all very familiar. The chorus had witnessed de Lerisson in action before over the past few summers. Yet, not even their covetous eyes could fail to detect that this time was different; something in de Lerisson was shifting, altering.

Gone was the insouciance, the weary charm of someone well versed in platitudes, despite his relative youth: a man who knew how to please women of all backgrounds. And, in return, when to affect boredom or displeasure to elicit their feverish attention, frightened they were losing their grip on his affections. In his crisp white open-necked shirt, a navy suit jacket slung over his arm, his black hair falling boyishly over his eyes, he seemed like a new person in Julia’s company. But that was too prosaic, everyone agreed. No, something elemental was also going on, a bond was being established between the two: as if the two had returned to a beginning, unsullied by any of the later details of their lives, existing in a pocket of time when anything was possible.

Is this what unnerved de Lerisson, the chorus speculated? For, it did not go unnoticed that his confidence diminished in Julia’s company, returning only after he had
secured her approval. He would watch her, as if she perplexed him; Julia in one of her white cotton day dresses and dainty shoes, chattering on or laughing or simply being still. And while he delighted in her every move, such delight seemed to trouble him. On occasion, he seemed happier than ever before and, almost immediately, plunged into a despair that could only be ameliorated by petulant cruelty on his part.

So, he would be slightly late to pick her up, to make her anxious, or forget to send a note before bedtime and, at such times, the old de Lerisson would re-emerge. Lithe, elegant, he would place a hand on the small of Julia’s back to guide her through a crowd or lead her to his car, reassured that whatever ailed him was only passing. But such victories grew fewer and fewer. For, more and more, Julia arrested his attention until there was no time for anything else. Indeed, after Julia – and many would be the hours spent without her – de Lerisson could no longer be alone. Solitude meant only that she wasn’t there.

For her part, Julia was nonplussed by the quiet scandal unfolding around them. If anything, she appeared defiant as she watched her old way of life die. The future she was moving towards seemed to fulfil her completely and so she thought little of the past, save that it had led her to its rightful point. But then Julia was never cautious. She could not see what was so transparent to others: de Lerisson had done this before.

Were it not for the kiss nobody would have questioned him as a chaperone for Julia. He was the Mayor’s representative, after all, and Harry busy. Nor was it as if de Lerisson could rely on Severine to perform her allotted wifely role of sightseeing with visitors, considering her state of mind. No, given his shackles, de Lerisson had chivalrously squired most of the British wives around Antibes and its environs over the previous two years of his service. And for his troubles, he had been repaid: memories the vast majority still mulled over before they fell asleep. Such a charming young gentleman, they reminisced winsomely. The only difference was that with them he had been discreet, not straying beyond the
boundaries of propriety, whereas with Julia he appeared irresponsible. So the question on everyone’s lips was, why now? Why Julia?

Eventually, the chorus decided that all would-be womanisers fall eventually for the least likely of temptresses. And Julia, while very beautiful, but so naïve, was not a likely suspect, given her state of mind. There had been a panoply of Julia’s for de Lerisson, daughters of the Empire passing a week or two en route to somewhere hotter, any one of them could have claimed him. Finally, however, they conceded a simple truth. His life with Severine was a misery. Julia was everything she was not. So their divine de Lerrison loved her best, because she reminded him of everything he had missed and everything he might yet be.

And the most significant proof of this, they concluded, was so obviously his decision to introduce Julia to his children. Hence those Sunday dance lessons.

In effect, he was introducing them to their new mother.

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‘See,’ the Impeccable One advised Lady Amelia. ‘For everyone, there’s just one person. Now, listen to the rest of the Vicereine’s story. You might learn something.’
THE DUCHESS OF LERRISON

It was rumoured that Antoinette found the tiny book hidden beneath her bed pillow when she arrived at Versailles, although how she came to own it matters so very little now. What did matter was what transpired three years later: the introduction between my darling girl and the divine Comte Fersen at the Opéra de Paris; the renowned Swedish war hero who had returned triumphant from some conquered field of Empire, looking more handsome than even I recalled.

How could I forget that occasion? Considering it precipitated my greatest happiness and most lasting regret. And how lucky that Fersen should have appeared then in the Royal Box, just as rumours of the non-consummation of Antoinette’s marriage to Louis had borne such spiteful – audible – fruit. For his arrival beneficently distracted the chorus, as men and women alike suddenly lost interest in their Queen’s lack of fecundity, instead clamouring to compete to the death for his heart. And the curious thing about Fersen – quite unlike the rest of us – was that he actually possessed one.

And I? Well, there I was, trapped anew with dear Maman, her fellow Fairies, and, God help me, Monsieur Perrault, in a box diagonally across from the Royals on the mezzanine. But for once, I didn’t mind. You see, I had in recent weeks ascended to a higher plane, aided by my new-found love of Enlightenment philosophy and this delightful potion called snuff that one inhaled periodically from behind a handmade lace sleeve. Deliriously numbed to their drivel, I was adrift in a reverie of the sublime orchestrations of Rameau’s Castor et Pollux and the devotion of my lover upon whom I gazed enraptured in the Royal Box.

As I have said, to the victor the spoils. Quite unexpectedly, my little alfresco assignation with the Comte de Broglie, had bloomed into a grand passion. All of twenty-four, I had metamorphosed into a Royal Mistress and – quite literally – garnered myself the
best seat in the house. Our affair, however, was not without peril. For all Royal Mistresses teeter on a tightrope of ruin: one misstep and only the convent beckons. Yet, not even an exorcism could have purged me of my lust, which suited my mercurial personality to a tee; the subterfuge, the illicit meetings, the forced periods of absence, the endless love notes buoying me on waves of incomparable highs and lows. I yearned for Broglie with an agonising, suffocating passion as he considered me intently from his wife’s side, directly behind where Antoinette and Fersen were in the process of acquainting themselves for the first time.

Of course, I should have been paying more attention. For one, the snuff made me blind to certain truths. And two, my sleeve had been crafted no doubt, by some poor, malnourished counterpart dreaming of a different life she had heard about once, in a muddy village somewhere we could not possibly travel for fear of ruining our silken shoes. Someone who would later charge on that Opéra, intent on our destruction, and chop from our wrists the bejewelled hands within such sleeves, because she could not own them herself. All such things I could not foresee nor care about, for I was approaching the zenith of my happiness. That moment to which we forever look back and say, ‘There, that was it.’

But weren’t we all growing up, mes belles amies et moi, I thought, considering my friends dotted ici and là-bas. Like lambs and calves struggling to find a footing, we had arrived to carve new fashion trails of embroidered corsets, sky high wigs, and masquerade masks, all the while blowing kisses, fluttering fans, batting our eyelashes and expounding upon our cherished ideals of Beauty and Love.

A sharp rap on the back of my chair from the Marquise de Montrachet’s fan, however, jolted me back me to a somewhat dismal reality.

‘Tshhh,’ she commanded. ‘Regarde.’

Presently, an a-ha could be heard emanating from the boxes surrounding the Royals, one that gathered force as it was expelled around the room. An a-ha, I deduced,
which was inspired by the necklace Antoinette wore around her neck: the miniature she fingered distractedly as she chatted with Fersen, unable to resist his easy, ruinous smile.

I had not noticed it when we were dressing together. And I had spent an age that afternoon helping Antoinette to find the perfect outfit, which had assumed paramount importance. After much debate, we had settled upon a crisp, black, crinoline confection, embroidered with one thousand rubies upon the breast, her white hair piled as high as a snowdrift, and twenty-seven carats worth of diamonds clasped around her neck. By the end of our troubles, she was transformed: as soignée as the day is long, looking at least five years older. And, curiously, I had almost thought cruel, forbidding, as I considered her reflection in the cloudy mirrors.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that her new look, while striking, detracted from her deliciously plump, pink skin and soft, blue eyes. That her prettiness was in her simplicity, and not in her aspiration to be something she was not: a beauty. For her chin was too weak and her nose too long. But then, I chastised myself; little girls do so love to dress up. And I also suspected that she was trying to look like me, so what was the harm? And you are, after all, only eighteen once. Oh, such love I harboured for Antoinette as I clucked affectionately at our reflections, indulging in her fantasy as I stood behind her; a full head taller and a hand span thinner.

Yet, as I watched her delight in Fersen’s attention, bowing her little head and casting up her eyes at him, just as she had with me the first time we met, I wondered if she had been expecting him? Was this why all the fuss? Of course, I had told her about Fersen. But then he was wildly famous, the most eligible bachelor at any court in Europe. I had not thought that such a fact might interest her … And how very odd, I further considered, my binoculars raised to my perfect retroussé nose, that she should wear the miniature, as it did not go with the outfit. In fact, it clashed horribly.
Nobody had seen it since her presentation in the Hall of Mirrors. But, on slimmer, more inconsequential evidence, wars had been started. Moreover, from the whispers surrounding me, the ancien régime including dear Maman, believed that their venerable, mischievous friend, Perrault, had devised the tiny book as a ploy to unite the two new lovers: Antoinette and Fersen. That it was he who had first hidden it underneath her bed pillow.

‘But, you are too awful, what do you mean, you won’t tell us the story! But you must. It would be too devilish of you not to!’ caterwauled the Princesse de Lamballe in front of me, snatching my binoculars to observe Antoinette’s every move.

‘Desolé, my dear Princesse,’ replied Perrault, turning to her full on in his seat, while fondling the knee of her cherubic sixteen-year-old son with an outstretched arm behind him, blocked from her view. ‘The story is to be read by the future Queen alone and, after she has, all will be revealed.’

The Princesse clapped her hands in malevolent glee. ‘Oh, you are monstrous, but magnificent too. What a thrilling new game, to guess what you have written and see if the little Autrichienne falls under your spell. But, won’t you give me a hint?’ she babbled, like a baby, mooing her lips, oblivious to his ministrations with her son.

‘Let’s say it is a cautionary tale. For it is no ordinary fairy story. Quite unlike my others, for which you served as such fertile inspiration. No, it is a talisman of love. You see, Princesse,’ Perrault continued, leaning in closer, ‘the story has a secret power and those who read it will fall under the same spell of love the story upholds. But whether the love story ends well or badly, I cannot say,’ Perrault smiled, raising her decrepit hand, which she had concealed in lace gloves, to kiss it, and lowering it back down to his lap.

The Princesse affected a whimper of displeasure and pouted at herself in the meretricious mirror of his black eyes; a reflection that so evidently pleased her she forgot his slight, ‘You darling fiend, it will be the best yet, I can already tell. And won’t it be
delicious to see how it turns out? For the stupid little fool, Antoinette, is clearly dancing with ruin.’ And with that, she placed her parched lips upon his neck and feasted upon it like the poisoned apple it was, for she fell into a coma that night never to wake up.

I still marvel at Perrault’s deceit. As much as I marvel at how desire, however disingenuous, can make old ladies believe the most flagrant of fallacies – namely that it is never too late for romance. I did not believe for an instant that Perrault was the real author of the miniature. It was far too exceptional: I had not seen a jewel like it before at court. Yet, everyone was so suspicious at Versailles, they believed Perrault and it wasn’t long before the rumour spread like wildfire. No, I remained convinced that whoever sent the locket was not one of us. But what intrigued me more was whether Antoinette knew the sender’s identity and, if true, why would she not tell me?

So, naturally, my curiosity was ignited. After all, I lived for love. As I have said, there was nothing I had ever desired that was denied to me. Nor had I been prone to envy before I laid eyes again on that necklace. Yet, as it glinted so enticingly against Antoinette’s swan-like neck, I was seized by an overwhelming impulse to grab it and uncover its secret for myself, to read the story it contained. Such a dangerous impulse: for as I had been counselled from the breast, you may steal whatever you choose from whomever you choose, but not from the Royal hand that feeds you.

Antoinette and I had become the truest of friends, confiding everything in one another. And her unaffected adoration had opened a door inside my mind to allow for genuine feeling. Where she began, and I ended, I could no longer tell: I would do anything for her. Of course, as was Versailles’ wont, we weren’t allowed to enjoy any of this: our every smile, exchange, and meeting was ritually tried and executed at the Fairies altar of gossip.

But what is the fun of love without cost? To know that it had aroused such envy, somehow added more to our delightful friendship. And so we went out of our way to
scandalise them, relishing in our power. But it was purely for show. For each night, regardless of where else I might creep and into whose arms, it was mine in which Antoinette fell asleep. ‘Promise me, you will never betray me,’ she would plead. ‘Never,’ I would vow, placing my hand upon her matchless heart, tears brimming in Antoinette’s eyes at the thought. And, always, I meant it.

Not everyone keeps their promises though. This I learned at the very moment when the Comte de Broglie’s wife first remarked his naked regard for me, and Fersen simultaneously kissed Antoinette’s hand. Two distinct events that regardless tipped all the reversi discs from the gaming table: it was a kiss that prompted Antoinette to jolt as if somebody had ignited something in her, and my lover to turn – too quickly – to placate the wife he professed to despise.

I had a premonition then, of the end. It was almost as if the sans culottes had arrived early to storm the Opéra, to crush us underfoot, or drag us into the streets and do as they wished, deaf to our screams for mercy. The scene was metamorphosing before my eyes, revealing what was real, not what I believed, and I was assailed suddenly by a fearsome protectiveness and something truly insidious: jealousy.

But a sharp prod in my side distracted me and I screamed out loud as a cloud of snuff ballooned up from where I had buried it in the cleavage of my dress, causing me to choke on vapours of dust.

‘Chérie, you are making it far too obvious!’ Maman hissed, and I realised she had proffered the finger.

‘That was you!’ I protested between hacking coughs, seething with indignant pain, as Broglie’s wife grew more animated, gesturing across at me and demanding an explanation, which he appeared at pains to provide.

‘Everyone can see you despise her. You’re giving the whole game away,’ Maman muttered pointedly. ‘Didn’t I teach you anything?’
It began then, the ripple of laughter from my closest seatmates. Frantically, I tried to fan away the billowing dust. For I had teetered on the tightrope: I quailed at what on earth Broglie must think? Mistresses were only warranted when they were the envy of everyone else. And if I looked like a clown, my only view would be the convent grilles and not him.

I looked desperately to Antoinette for mercy, but she had disappeared. The snuff was everywhere and I wheezed and puffed, shrouded in grey dust. From box to box, the audience began to watch and point at me in increments. I turned to flee, even as Maman tugged on my arm to stay put. And then the room fell precipitously silent and I thought I might die, for I could no longer breathe. I trembled as I waited for the voice of Broglie’s wife to ring out and banish me: I could almost feel the blade of the guillotine against the back of my neck.

But I was to be spared. At least, for a time: for it was not I who had captured such interest, but Antoinette on the stage below, where she had unexpectedly appeared. And there, ‘May I? Please,’ she said so softly, we had to strain to catch the words, ‘may I perform for you. It is something I have been practising.’ And with that she picked up a stage prop, a broom, and announced, louder this time, ‘Imagine me a little shepherdess.’

Oh, my little shepherdess, I remember you ... And I cannot stop the tears as I see you down there on the stage, with your soft curls and your flawless soul, rescuing me from ruin. Nor can I drown out the snickers and groans of the chorus. Yet, make no mistake – for all their cruel jibes about Antoinette, they were fascinated by the spectacle. And in the watching, they forgot about my faux-pas: the blade of the guillotine now glistened above Antoinette’s head instead.

*Tristes Apprets*, that was the aria she sang more sweetly than Philomela to Procrne. Antoinette had not yet suffered like that ancient goddess, but I hope she is a nightingale now, like her. I hope she sings and sings wherever she is, in that place where I can no longer hear her. Even today, in this barren exile, I can almost catch those dulcet notes, and recall
the conflicting emotions of heartbreak at all I had lost and thanks for all she had given me as I listened to Antoinette. For I did lose that night: I learned a truth when I heard the second sharp rap of a fan, and Maman commanding me to ‘Regarde’ anew.

There he sat, my Broglie who could do no wrong, with his arm around the wife to whom he claimed never to speak; never to touch; the one who bored him to tears; the one he apparently cared far more about pleasing than I. No, I have not forgotten the lesson Maman imparted to me then: not just about the lies men tell, but about the dual function of fans. You see, they don’t just hide the mirth of the malicious, but the sorrow of Mistresses consigned to the rubbish heap: those who are forced to watch as they cease to exist in their lover’s heart, as I did.

I heard a loud tut, as Maman perfunctorily pushed down my hand holding the fan. ‘Don’t you dare, mon amour,’ she said, as Antoinette sang on, ‘blotches all over your cheeks will not win him back. Not even Pompadour could pull off the look of pox. Hold your head up, the great beauty you are. And listen to me, or I’ll poke you again.’

That was enough to drag me back from the brink as my rib still throbbed like a virgin prick.

‘My darling child, whom I cradled at my bosom with such love, in forbidden romances such as this, there is always, hélas, another “her”,’ she sighed, glancing resignedly in the direction of the Comtesse de Broglie. ‘Women like that are born to stand eternally in the way of true happiness. You had best get used to it. Mark my words, men such as he never leave them,’ she said, sucking in her cheeks with ill-concealed distaste.

‘You see, chérie, to keep a beauty like you requires an effort. Whereas, that one requires none because Broglie is so arrogant as to believe his wife owes him for choosing her. There is a grave danger in your kind of beauty: for women hate you and men are frightened of you. If you’re not very careful, isolation will become the constant of your
days, and you will be pitifully beholden to anyone who shows the slightest kindness. And nobody is kind, despite how innocuous their costume.’

‘But –’ I protested violently, angry tears brimming.

‘Darling,’ Maman reprimanded me in frustration, fastening my arm in a vice-like grip. ‘Before you make a fool of yourself, remember this. Save yourself and forget about love. Focus only on \textit{plaisir}. It lasts longer, trust me.’

Her outburst uncharacteristically bothered me, for she had not spoken as candidly before. Yet, before I could probe any deeper, Maman directed her attention to the Fairies, fixated on some tiff going on below.

I bit my lip to stop myself from dissolving into sobs. I simply couldn’t stand the thought of losing Broglie. And it was all Antoinette’s fault, I fretted, as she curtseyed to rapturous applause: for changing me so, for softening me. I had not set out to love Broglie, but I did. Behind closed doors, I gave of my true self, not the coquettish favourite everyone viciously ridiculed. And, in return, he made me feel valuable, rare. But then, I realise now that the kindest lovers are invariably the cruellest. For they take their love away with such grace as they refute all they allowed you to believe and leave you with nothing – ‘\textit{but my darling, I never lied to you once, I always had a wife; I always had children. No, I never lied even as I said I would marry you and have your children, and live happily ever after, my head in your lap. You are quite mistaken if you thought otherwise...}’

It was then that the \textit{sou} dropped, however, that the Fairies had orchestrated our separation. From the corner of my eye, I caught dear Maman’s slight nod to the Comtesse de Broglie, as if to say; \textit{you’re so very welcome}. Why, the beasts had cooked the whole thing up to humiliate me – poke and all – no doubt as revenge for my closeness to Antoinette. And who was the \textit{quelle folle vache coquette} now! I cursed under my breath that I had almost believed Maman cared. Her counsel had not been offered out of maternal regard, but reverence for her political position at court.
Given such humiliation, it all became too much; Antoinette receiving encore after encore, Broglie kissing his sated wife’s cheek; the knowledge that the crisis had surely been averted, thanks to Maman; the Comtesse’s victorious smirk at me. Well, I would show them, I resolved, and, in a fury, I made to storm out of the box. But then Antoinette suddenly stumbled on her high heels and nearly toppled into the orchestra pit due to the weight of her wig. La pauvre had not learned how to balance it. ‘Tut,’ I frowned, my heart melting in the same instance as it broke.

It’s funny how nobility always seems to occur in the wake of a failed liaison dangereuse, especially for a woman. Even when we have spurned a member of the sisterhood in order to love, we resolve to protect another as penitence, as we soak our pillows with tears, which is why I changed my mind about leaving and decided to stay to look after Antoinette.

Yet, nobody loves without hope of reward. And I was no exception, for I received one just as the lights for the Third Act dimmed and the voices were ascending towards heaven. The snuff dulling my less diplomatic instincts, I felt a hand clasp mine and the sensation of a piece of paper in my palm, but I could not turn to the messenger for fear of arousing suspicion. All I know is that love conquers all, even when it’s not yours to keep, and sometimes God rescues us from the precipice of disappointment, if only for a night.

I unfolded the note beneath my fan and beheld the words:

Seulement toi, ma chérie. Toujours.

Only you, my darling. Always.

And I filled from head to toe with boundless joy.

Until I noticed something.

There was an initial in the lower right corner, but it was not a ‘B’ for Broglie. Had he not sent it? I looked across at him in confusion, yet he avoided my gaze. I felt very little, however, as the Comtesse proprietorially rested her head on her husband’s shoulder; a
gesture he accepted without rancour, nuzzling his face into her hair. For he seemed so very shabby: his deferral to her, aware he was on display; the constipated way he pursed his lips and refocused on the stage pretending to be happy, when all he had been was caught. You see, quite unlike most women, I’ve never considered cruelty an aphrodisiac: or, indeed, an appetiser. And so I was set free.

I blew a mental kiss to my divine Antoinette, who had returned to her box. She did not notice me though, mesmerised as she was by Fersen, who momentarily left to reclaim his seat below in the orchestra. In fact, she was entirely unconscious of her environment – careless, in fact – as she screwed her eyes tightly shut and moved her lips imperceptibly, clutching the miniature around her neck as if her life depended upon it. I had no doubt that she was wishing for something. Yet, for what, I could not say. But then I was beginning to realise that there was so much about my Antoinette of which I was ignorant. I’ll get to the bottom of that, tomorrow, I decided. I looked again at the note in my lap, and my eyes traced the shape of my new admirer’s initial. I felt a rescuing surge of excitement as a name occurred to match it, but I hastily quashed the inkling. Oh, but I didn’t dare hope. No, it wasn’t possible. Yet, who else could it be who was present…?

I concealed the note in my fist and glanced over at Maman, who batted an eyelash and mouthed, ‘plaisir.’ Ignoring her, I inhaled a pinch of snuff from behind my sleeve and instead allowed the spiralling giddiness to suffuse me. Yet, as my senses dulled and my imagination soared, I found that there was indeed much to recommend plaisir. And for the first time in my adulthood, it struck me that perhaps dear Maman had a point, after all …
After the ballroom, when you said, ‘My children,’ I didn’t expect to see you again.

It was a Tuesday morning, not even twenty-four hours since we’d last met. But then you never could stay away, could you? Once more at my bedroom door, in your pale pink shirt, open at the neck, not elegant – that was Harry –, you were a comfort. And as upset as I. This I discerned from your hunched posture and crumpled clothes – the same as yesterday. Like me, you hadn’t slept, and the fact offered some solace. You winced at the black lines of mascara scarring my pale pink cheeks, knowing you had caused such misery. I was such a little girl, really, wasn’t I, too innocent to be mistreated?

But you had.

So, the promise of a trip to Vence, high in the hills: a drib you could offer, a crumb from the table. For you could not give me up. Something in you praying for a miracle, a change that would alter our realities, bring us together, even as you despised your weakness. All you had to do was act, choose. You were going to that early morning, I realise now; I’ve lived through other moments when you’ve stood on the brink of finally acting, your future too empty without me: my role always to stand steadfastly before you, promising only welcome.

At the door, you wiped my cheeks with both thumbs, a heaviness in your every movement. ‘A Moth to the end,’ I said, ‘drinking all the tears.’ Your hand reached for my cheek – what would you say? If you had come back, surely you had something to say …‘Wash your face and brush your curls,’ you said, ‘then come down to the car.’ But not, ‘Think of something funny,’ to make me smile again: what you used to say when I was young and upset.

Because it wasn’t funny anymore, my darling, was it? It was unimaginable.

‘I’ll be waiting for you downstairs.’
And it was on the tip of my tongue to say, ‘Why? What’s the point: Severine will not let you go.’

But then I forced myself to acknowledge your sorrow, the circumstances of our history, its mitigating facts, the role I had played, and, as ever, I wanted only to save you. Yet, you hesitated, concerned for me and feeling you should do something, probably. I emerged from the bathroom, having washed my face, to find you standing at my dressing table, distracting yourself with something I’d left on it. Somnolent, as if I was walking in a dream, for what would – what could – happen next? I sat down on the silk stool and reached for my mother of pearl hairbrush. Your presence made me feel curiously self-conscious: sadness had compelled me to pull down a familiar guard.

‘For some reason, this handle, especially here in this setting, makes me think of a mermaid,’ I said listlessly, preoccupied. ‘It’s made of an oyster shell. I think I saw a picture of a mermaid in an oyster shell, once.’

‘Julia, it was The Mermaid and The Swallow,’ you said. ‘The picture in that book. Andrew and I called you into his study to give it to you as a surprise. And he lifted up the transparent page of tissue over the heavy parchment, and we both said, ‘You! She looks just like you!’

‘A picture in a book; a figment of someone’s imagination,’ I said, dropping the brush and burrowing my face in my hands.

‘Please don’t Julia. Please,’ you said, coming to embrace me, my head resting against your stomach. ‘There’s nothing I can do. Nothing. I refuse to promise you something I can’t give. I won’t. Because I know you, you’ll run off with all your dreams and make all your plans. And I can’t bear to know we won’t lead that life. I can’t deal with anything besides what is happening now. We were separated by chance; you married Harry, you had Emmy; I married Severine. I have to stay for the children. She can’t be left with them. I got myself into this, I have to see it through.’
I coughed up choked, harrowing sobs. There was no chance for us then. If you said it, then there was none. For you never lied to me. There was only this, this dreadful love unrealised: scenes happening in another house, with different people in our places: for you, Severine. For me, Harry. And I would dine at The Ritz, with Maharajas and Kings, and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. would whisper the truth in my ear about Greta Garbo. And you, you would go to your club, or out on a friend’s boat, stop in the café on the way home for too much wine, and spend simple Christmases with Severine and the children and read all about me.

‘But we could leave here, we could take them and go,’ I insisted. ‘Please, please, think this through. Andrew could help—’

‘Julia,’ you said, crouching down to face me and gripping both my hands. ‘Think of what would happen to him, if we did. He would have no-one.

‘Let’s just have the day, shall we?’

So what else could I do?

You stood up and began to brush my curls, smoothing them down into a bob shaped like a duck’s tail at the back. And with each stroke, I settled until I was transformed before the mirror into whom I had always wanted to be: part of you, how you imagined me. Nothing was all right, nor ever would be, but for that moment you had soothed me in your gentle way, with the simplest – yet most unusual – of gestures: for you had created me in your image.

And so disarmed, I was filled once more with inconvenient hope.
I find now that the days run into one. All is a ritual that must be attended to, and withstood. But then was very different, especially at the Petit Trianon, the house in the fairytale village within Versailles that Louis built for his Queen. And whenever Antoinette faltered in her role, he would send us there; bidding us to forget and to be whomever we chose to be in that perfect place, where all that existed was hope.

There in that haven, we re-imagined ourselves ordinary to escape the sorcery of Versailles. For the years had begun to pass, quicker and quicker, and we had been transformed into things we were not. Of course, it was so very uncalled for, as although it had taken pauvre Louis eight years to discover that he possessed the ‘key’ to Antoinette’s ‘lock’, Antoinette had borne the Dauphine and then the Dauphin: what more could Versailles want? Yet, not a thing my darling girl did was right. Alas, it came with the terroir, but invariably it all caught up: the devastation of malice that is unwarranted. For, by its very nature, Antoinette’s was a life comprised of rumours too intoxicating not to repeat.

How dismal to recall the interminable scandales: the affair of the necklace slander, the ‘let them eat cake’ debacle, and the two of us accused of sapphism and profligate spendthrift-ery – in my defence, I did warn her about all those shoes –, not to mention rampant orgies that would have had Dionysus begging for a rest. Naturally, the Fairies gleefully attributed Antoinette’s run of bad luck to the miniature and considered themselves triumphant. In fact, such was their conviction that even dear old Perrault came out of retirement and had a victory lap with each.

It was partly my fault: I was so enjoying keeping Antoinette to myself, but I finally realised that I had to let Antoinette go. And how marvellous that I did. For the Dauphine and Dauphin were the two most enchanting children I have ever encountered, and their childhood – grâce à Antoinette –, as tiny golden souls, the most glorious by far. So there is
very little to regret; a fact that offers me some small comfort as I regard their pictures on the
desk before me and trace their rosebud lips with my fingertip. Just as I used to on those
sunlit days at the Trianon, when Antoinette and I were both so young.

And I? Well, by then I was thirty-three, and the mother of five. The latter two of
whom my husband had diplomatically turned a blind eye, given his corpulence and
pragmatic acceptance that if he could no longer find it, what chance had I? Not to mention –
owing to that mortifying bankruptcy scandal with my predecessor – the guardian angel of
Antoinette’s children’s hearts. For I had ascended to dizzying social heights far beyond
being a Royal Mistress: having been anointed none other than the Governess of the Children
of France!

I told les petits enfants stories, you see. On my lap, at my feet, held fast in my arms,
they listened to epic tales of princesses in towers, and fairies and frogs and princes, and how
to slay the Wicked Queens. Well, it wasn’t exactly difficult: I had been raised by one, and at
Versailles you rarely had to look very far to find another as inspiration …Yet, the real
deliciousness of it was that, like the fairy tales upon which I had been raised, my stories
were also based on the most prominent of the nobility …along with the many secrets about
them I had learned while manacled to Maman’s side.

Not even the Valkyries, dying in battle, could have matched dear Maman’s wailing
once she guessed this, but her hands were tied. For my friendship with Antoinette had
garnered her laurels so gilded even Icarus would have been dazzled. Indeed, without my
support, Maman would have been bankrupted long before as the cost of living at court was
ruinous and we were not wealthy by those standards.

Oh, how Maman hated having to defer to me. For whenever I reminded her of my
worth, she would invariably snipe; ‘What the family lacks in gold, we make up for in
beauty.’ To which I would smugly rejoin – as I had not forgiven her the Comtesse de
Broglie –, ‘Well, I certainly do.’ And with that, she would retreat anew into the Cimmerian
isolation of her salon – the curtains always drawn to hide her wrinkles from her paid suitors –, as I flounced out in a hat, smothered in fresh cut flowers, to gad unblemished in the noonday sun.

I did not reveal the inspiration for my stories, though. And, of course, I sanitised them for the innocent ears of our babes. Sometimes, I thought to stop; after all, I was being so beastly to dear Maman, but ‘Encore, encore! Again, again!’ Antoinette would cry at each story’s end, encouraging her babies to applaud when we would sit together in the afternoons. For ‘Encore, encore! Again, again!’ the children always cry, when they hear a story they love. And the Dauphin, new child of my heart, with his big blue eyes and fair hair. How I adored him: for no-one loved my stories more than he: those in which he could hear no malice, only bliss. He would sit on my lap, his favourite coverlet clutched to his chin and thrill to the magic of make-believe, as only children do; stories where he was the handsome little prince and no harm could befall him because he was so good, so victorious, so able to defeat dragons in a world where everyone lived happily ever after; in a way that we rarely do in life.

How I had become such a gifted storyteller was a mystery even to me. It certainly wasn’t a talent I had inherited from the man who the pernicious rumours suggested was my real father – Perrault! No, I prefer to think it was perhaps because when I was not trading in fairy tales; gossip was my forte. Anything to protect my darling Antoinette from the things they said about us. And under the light of my fabled violet eyes, our young friends basked, as I told tales – of the tallest variety – about whoever had scorned my Antoinette and watched them all believe.

Of course, I should have realised that I was playing with fire. For my new role as Governess came with an unprecedented thirteen rooms at Versailles, the most sublime cottage in the Hameau de la Reine at the Petit Trianon, and the total enmity of the elder statesmen of the court. Thanks to my disdain for the Fairies, I had long occupied a
precarious margin at Versailles, but now even a puddle would have room to spare for my supporters in the hierarchy. In truth, the court was scandalised by my appointment.

‘But she’s far too young for such an honour,’ they protested. ‘And borne of an ignoble family, now virtually penniless!’ ‘And dare we speak of the suspiciously ‘intimate’ terms she is on with the Austrian Queen, who plots treason against us at every opportunity? Why, they even sleep in the same bed…!’

And so they prattled on. Yet, when one is so reviled, there is no choice other than to make a run for it. Grâce à Antoinette, I did. Just like the first night I met her, I took her plump little hand, smoothed away her tears and promised her all would be well. In this, I did not lie. For our summers at the Petit Trianon would bring us closer than even God allowed. And only Death could part.

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Life is a masquerade, is it not? Never did fantasy blend more intoxicatingly with reality than at the Petit Trianon. For in the adjoining village of the Hameau, designed to perfection by Antoinette, idyllic country life was emulated to a tee. I doubt even Boucher or Greuze could have painted so bucolic a scene. When I recall it, as I so often do now, I can feel the light breeze at my back as the pictures of my memories unfurl before me like an endless summer morning; there is the watermill and the soft sound of the turning water splashing into the river, the music pavilion, the dairy where the cows mumble in low exchanges; the dovecotes where pristine white birds coo in rhythmic harmony and the outstanding architecture of temples consecrated to love and friendship where Antoinette and I feasted on passion; the sky is always blue, the wildflowers bloom along the banks of the cobblestoned paths; the rustic houses are lined up in somnolent grace overlooking their vegetable gardens and orchards; the sun just hot enough to allow for a stroll; the chatter is of the butcher and the baker and the candlestick maker; and the eggs are fresh and the milk
sweet; and the children point at the horses in the field, and cry ‘neigh’ as we stretch out on
the grass and talk ever on of our dreams.

Upon this pastoral stage, we could be whoever we wanted to be, exactly as Louis
decreed. And so I became the milkmaid. And Antoinette? Why, the little shepherdess, of
course.

Nobody was allowed in without first being subject to the severest scrutiny, the price
of admission to join the faith. For love was our religion. And in the beginning was the Word
and the Word was More. There was not a day that was not flawless, a sky that was not clear,
nor a field of meadow wildflowers or a bank of Oriental flowers not perennially in fullest
bloom. All of life’s plaisir was there for the taking. And take it we did, casting off our
sartorial splendour and dressing in white muslin, offset by blue silk bows around the waist,
and straw hats festooned with meadow flowers we picked from the borders running
alongside the paths we ambled along, arm in arm, a couple of country wives stopping to
chat with the shopkeepers and merchants as our children tugged at our skirt hems and ran
free.

And once, we watched in wonder when Montgolfier launched his first hot air
balloon, and Antoinette exclaimed: ‘A view of the world from God’s eye,’ as he soared up,
up into the clouds and flew far, far away. And once, in a meadow filled with daisies, we
amused our children by twirling around like spinning tops and falling vanquished and
breathless at their tiny feet. And plumes of pollen ballooned over us as we lay there, and the
laughter of nos enfants rained over me as more precious than anything my ears had heard.
And once, on a cherished afternoon, I pushed the Dauphin’s exquisite pram with the gold
and pink and blue porcelain handle that Sèvres had designed especially for him. And
Antoinette rested her jewelled fingers on my hand as we smiled down at him, and wished
him all the joy in the world.

And once.
It was a world where Antoinette’s singing would enchant the angels in the open-air theatre; where we discussed our dreams and philosophies surrounded by baby lambs in the spring sunshine too beautiful to grow old, and the metronomic hum of bees marked each minute as it passed. Yet, most importantly, it was the world where we would hear the sound of Count Fersen’s horse’s hooves as he arrived each morning to visit, appearing in Antoinette’s dressing room with one solitary, yet profoundly touching, word; chérie.

And there she would tell him stories of what she wanted her life to be: of simplicity, of amour, of the Trianon; the life Antoinette would have led had she not been born to be Queen, but Count Fersen’s chérie.

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Yet, none of it was real. Not the butcher or the baker or the candlestick maker. Not the eggs or the sweet milk or the flowers in full bloom. For when one died, a new one was planted, and the shopkeepers were paid locals who performed their roles for our sakes; and the lambs were cleaned each morning so our fingers would not be sullied, and the filth of the farms was swept away each night as we slept; and I fancy now that if I had looked behind the façade of those rustic houses, I would have seen that they were merely fronts, propped up by wood at the back. And our simple muslin dresses, ‘la chemise à la Reine’, proved by far the most damaging fallacy; for no shepherdess wore white of the finest muslin they couldn’t afford to wash. So we were despised anew by the People, as well as the Lyon silk makers who lost their jobs. For anything Antoinette wore became the height of fashion. And heavy silk court gowns were so 1782, after all.

No, now that we are gone, I do not dare to imagine what has become of the Petit Trianon and the meadow flowers and the shops and the lambs. Now that I no longer saunter, one of my daughter’s tiny hands in mine, up her cobbled path, to find Antoinette waiting at the door. Now that I, her favourite, no longer see her clasp her hands together in delight, the
little Dauphin rushing towards me, with the welcome she didn’t change from the first summer of the Petit Trianon until the last,

‘My dearest friend, the day begins!’

But then I barely exist now, too. Although, there once was a time when no room was complete without my presence. No party considered a success unless I graced it. And I think of all my rustling silk crinolines, the daintily embroidered shoes I wore once and then discarded, the silver récamiers upon which I reclined, the glittering baubles of Empire upon my wrists, and I pity that girl. I pity what I know she became and despise all those who went before me who didn’t warn against it. For I would have drowned myself at the end of that last summer had I known I would not own such happiness again.

Yet, I hold no Japonais fan up to my face to obscure my pain. I let the world see me as I am. For only in this way can I find the punishment I seek in the eyes that revile my age and loss of beauty, who perceive me as nothing more than a shadow against the wall.

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It was 1788 when the seeds of our ruin were sewn. And I? Well, I was thirty-eight, and my last child had almost killed me. And Broglie? Oh yes, I had taken him back in as all spurned mistresses – engaged in a fight no longer for their lover’s heart, but to triumph over a wife – always do. Well, he had finally so thoroughly exhausted me with his excuses and lies that I could not bring myself to say his name and the author of the secret love note at the Opéra …well, that was the bitterest rub by far: for he was more forbidden to me than Broglie. Despite his beautiful letters, filled with desperate yearning, upon which we could not act.

I had to give him up, you see, for Antoinette’s sake.

There was no-one truer than Antoinette: her unfailing devotion, regardless of the hideous criticism levelled at her for helping me financially. How then could I possibly refuse when she asked me to devote myself only to her? And if I had garnered any lesson
from Maman’s maternal neglect, it was that in return for love, loyalty is the only reward that matters. For disappointment is by far the worst penalty life metes out. To watch a lover’s petals wither, to understand that they act only out of self-interest, that they take you for a fool, that it is all about their needs and wants and desires at a time only of their choosing that suits them best, that their caprices dictated your very fate … As I’ve said, their names turn to dust in your mouth where once they were the most delectable morsel.

Maman thought me the ultimate folle vache coquette and commanded me to run off screaming with my mystery admirer, but since when did I pay her any mind? Besides, confining myself to Antoinette wasn’t such a hardship in the beginning. In fact, I was grateful for the rest.

But time ticks on, doesn’t it.

After a good few years, it occurred to me that I had signed away the end of my youth to her. I was still sought after, but there’s something about used beauty that is akin to spoiled milk; every time I glanced in the mirror, my image curdled. For, if my years – and the experience of Broglie – had taught me anything: I was lacking in something. And that other lover – well, there are only so many times you can be told, ‘Soon …’ before you demand ‘When?’ And any answer that doesn’t contain a date isn’t worth acknowledging; despite the many facts and individuals who you know are watching from the wings.

It wasn’t his fault; he was merely in love with a woman teetering on a twofold precipice of mortality – the loss of my looks and the reality that each day the People wrote lists of our names, demanding to chop what was left of it from our necks: I was number three, just behind Antoinette and Louis. Time was running out everywhere, and so I punished my dearest love because I couldn’t have him. And I judged him by the standards of the weak, none of which he was.

Then, I consoled myself with the only person for whom I cared: Antoinette. And so we lived happily (enough) ever after at the Trianon. Like the most indulgent mother, I
overlooked her flaws, forgave her occasional petulance, cooed only the sweetest platitudes.

Before her, nobody had needed me so much. And, of course, with Antoinette came the Dauphin, who I threatened always to steal: my most precious little boy. Each afternoon, he napped in my arms, his fair head heavy against my heart, his warm breath a balmy upon my skin, and I felt somehow complete.

Yet, Antoinette, I learned, could be secretive: for there was something she kept to herself: a fact I used to find amusing in the same way I adore covetous children who hold their toys close with impish smiles. It depends on the light, though, doesn’t it; how mothers perceive the smiles of their progeny: mischievous or manipulative; meretricious or malicious?

It was the book, of course. The miniature Antoinette wore on a gold chain: the one everyone at Versailles had observed and questioned since first sighting it. It had become a matter of record that Perrault had written it, and there was some mischief afoot with the fairy tale: it could be unlucky if interpreted by the wrong person or shown to someone else or some such nonsense. I forget: the myth changed so frequently. Even so, I worried for her. Increasingly so, after the People began to rise up and inched closer. That was when I became convinced those dreaded Fairies should be stopped once and for all: for I had not forgotten my induction into the Hall of Mirrors and the Duc d’Orsay’s June bride. How they had orchestrated her ruin.

Although Antoinette now shared her bed with Fersen when he was in France, our night-time ritual remained the same: it was still me who cradled Antoinette to sleep, be it early in the evening or at the break of dawn when she would summon me; Fersen forbidden to stay the whole night. And, always, she waited for me before removing the locket and placing it in the drawer in her bedside table, turning the key in the lock, then handing it to her maid.

‘Antoinette –,’ I would sometimes start, on witnessing her practice.
‘No,’ she would interrupt, knowing what I was about to ask, her defiant expression belying the softness of her tone as she decreed, ‘it’s mine.’

‘But, my darling, won’t you tell me who gave it to you, at long last?’

Yet, my little shepherdess would never answer; she would merely snuggle her face into the pillow, turning her head to open one eye with a coquettish smile.

‘Tut,’ I would remonstrate, ‘you are trop méchante,’ tapping her on the head with my fan. ‘But tell me, is it a fairy tale in the miniature?’

And here she would roll over onto her back, yawn theatrically, stretch her arms high over her head and say, ‘I know nothing … Now, you tell me a story.’

So that would be that. Regardless of how tired I was, I would tell her stories all the livelong night and far into the morning, if that’s what Antoinette’s heart desired. In those days, I overlooked entirely the cost to my own.

And for so long, I trespassed no further. That is until it became necessary that I learn the contents of her miniature.

This is why I invented the game one evening at the Petit Trianon, where we dined outside in a makeshift tent of white silk curtains, with wildflowers pinned in our hair: an evening when Fersen and the Comte de Broglie – well, he didn’t go away. I just stopped playing with him…. – and our other favourites had galloped the miles to the Petit Trianon to meet us.

It was the same game I had watched Maman and her cabal of moths engage in with Perrault. Of who could come up with the best fairy tale? I challenged everyone present to a duel of wits to see who would be crowned victor. And by so doing I set the butterflies free. What I failed to realise is that I also killed something far rarer.

I look back now to Antoinette’s innocently expectant face at the head of the table, and I mourn for her. For the destruction I wrought with my words: to myself and to her; the sinister path that game would lead me down.
And all because of a simple truth: she had tired of me and found a new friend, the Princesse de Lamballe.

But when this took place, I was not young anymore, so there was nothing for which to hope.

I had watched my first husband trot his new bride around like a show pony. It had been years since my favourite had penned a single world. And two of my children were dead.

As I’ve said, isn’t disappointment the cruelest blow of all …
THE VICEREINE

‘I have duties at home.’

How many times did you say that to me, my love? How many times did I forgive you? Months had passed and we had returned to where we should be: together. Not that you would promise me anything: you were always so moral about that: ‘My children, my children….’

Until that afternoon in the Hotel du Vence, high in the hills overlooking Antibes, where we hid for stolen hours.

‘Julia, get dressed,’ you admonished me playfully. ‘I must get back.’

‘Duties at home’, the unspoken excuse hung between us. I clutched the silk sheets of the bed to my chest and sat up. Wrapping it tighter around me, I rolled kittenishly over to where you sat on the edge of the bed, now half-dressed and searching around for your shoes.

Something approaching courage surged up in me. I would ask, yes I would. Ask you to stay. It had been fine for a time, you leaving me. Ecstatic over our reunion, I had conceded every choice you had to make, after I was taken from you: I even understood them, up to a point. But when nothing was promised, nothing was changed, darker thoughts began to prey, whenever I heard you say: ‘Duties at home:’ your cue to leave me.

‘Such a charming head,’ you smiled, stroking my hair as I rested it in your lap, your mood sobering at the prospect of what you detected, as I dared myself to say it. Then did:

‘But won’t you stay? Wouldn’t you like to stay with me?’ I asked, reaching up and wrapping my arms around your neck to pull you closer. And it was then it happened, as it routinely did; the moment you appeared to dread. The disappointment I prayed you would spare me: for always you had to say, ‘No.

‘My children….’

And all the loveliness of the day was spent.
You screwed your eyes tightly shut to guard against my sadness, and I said, as I always did, ‘I’m so sorry, Toby, how bad of me to pressure you so. I know you can’t stay.’

And how you faltered at my selflessness, my kindness, didn’t it make it worse for you? For I never asked you for anything, did I, just the fact of your presence, when you could. Beyond one afternoon, when you made me cry, I had never shouted or screamed or subjected you to anything unpleasant. But, I also sensed you hated me as much as you loved me for asking the question: because the truth was you hated to leave. Each time you did, you were drained of something vital: my only revenge.

‘You must never apologise to me for anything,’ you said.

As you always said.

Reluctantly, I sat up and searched around the bed for my slip: the orderliness of dressing a respite from your rejection. You didn’t turn to watch, a gentlemanly affectation that touched me. Not that I would have minded anymore. Things were so different with you. I sometimes felt that no time had passed and here we were, two very young people having the time of our lives: as if the fact of your presence cancelled out our past.

But then I would remember.

‘My children’.

Despite my cheer – for wasn’t I always bright and bonny during those hours? –, you could sense my disappointment as you buttoned your shirt. And the keen guilt that dogged your steps when you were without me resurfaced, and you had time on your hands to consider your actions.

I bit my lip to stop myself from crying. Your mantra rarely failed to destroy me when you uttered it: a reminder not of how much I was worth, but how little. And at other times, during my more anxious hours, a convenient excuse to be rid of me. Looking at you, however, at the sadness that overcame you before we parted, I couldn’t help but believe
you, given what we knew about Severine. And so I smiled again to absolve you of any blame.

I wouldn’t ruin our time together today, I resolved, by asking for anything more than you could give. I remember fastening the diamante buckle on my shoe and placing my cloche hat over my curls, all set to leave, but I found I couldn’t. I just couldn’t take it anymore. I fell into you and clung there. ‘Come now, you’ll be late,’ you cajoled, and took my hand to lead me out the room and down the stairs.

I lingered there, but I would not ask the question. Besides, if you had to ask, it was invariably not worth it and logically something the other person didn’t want to give, or else they would have. And, bewilderingly, I thought by being unutterably proper, we could stave off any reprisal from Fate or Circumstance.

I felt so sorry for you as you walked disconsolately down the stairs ahead. But then I mourned my own loss as I acknowledged the emptiness of the days ahead.

‘Please,’ I called after you, ‘won’t you come away with me, bring the children with us? They might love me, or they could learn. Toby, I beg of you. Don’t make me go back there again. Don’t make me go through another night of this. Severine can’t hurt us any more than she has. Please. If you love me, won’t you give me the chance to try with the children? Can’t I meet them? I could bring Emmy: we could see, or at least try? We knew each other first; we shouldn’t have to hide who we are. It’s barbaric. I’ve never asked for anything, but I’m begging you to offer me some hope. You can’t go on denying me, when you don’t leave me be: I know it’s all you want too. Please let me meet them. Then I’ll not ask for anything more.’

You were at the bottom of the stairs and stepped forward to look out the entrance, to scan the immediate horizon to see if anyone had heard, but there was nobody outside. Almost I hated you for that, but you were free to give me your answer.

‘My Beauty,’ you said.
I ran down the stairs and smothered your face with kisses, wet with the tears you could not hide. ‘Please,’ I whispered.

‘I’ll come to you on Sunday,’ you said. ‘To the ballroom, with them as you ask. It’s time; it’s the right thing to do. For you.’

You were late home because you would not leave. The day was nearly over, but the sun still bright when we finally walked outside, hand in hand: your hand that I dropped as soon as the light reminded me once more that our world of two must not be seen.

But this time, you wouldn’t allow it; you reclaimed my hand and walked defiantly to the car.

And so the dance lessons began, and with them, everything for which I had prayed.

That is until the chorus discovered our trysts and anointed me anew:

As the Mistress of your children.
Lady Amelia was truly beginning to irritate the Pillar Box. This she knew and rather cheekily enjoyed. Besides, she hadn’t asked the Ladies to join her. And the Duchess of Lerrison story was nowhere near as compelling as the Vicereine’s.

‘But why’ she asked the Impeccable One, ‘did he not divorce that horrendous Severine. Or she him? I mean, why would you want to keep a man obsessed with somebody else. Not to mention her,’ she said, pointing to the Vicereine, who was looking lovelier and lovelier in the golden light: or, at least for someone of her age.

‘You won’t have learned yet, my dear. But you will. Society denies certain women everything. Imagine. It is fine for Julia to be stunning and important but not to be married to someone perfect. And that’s the only thing that makes all this rigmarole worth it: who you love. Who loves you: Julia understands that. That’s why Severine is such a horrendous woman. She imagines herself more. And he’s a fool. An imbecile. But,’ she stopped herself. ‘Severine put on a jolly good show of being totally incapable of living without him. And he did suffer. That was never in doubt.’

‘What did she do? Of course, I’ve heard things, but …’

‘Well, we shared their Nanny in Antibes, and she said …’

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After Julia was dropped a safe distance from the hotel the day de Lerrison promised to bring her the children, he returned to his house. The sound of children fighting was the first sound to greet him. The drawing room was in chaos. Papers strewn across the floor, a vase shattered in a puddle of water, lilies trampled into the silk rug, and everywhere coal dust; on Nico and Angelica, on the pale silk couch, up the ivory silk papered walls.

‘Where’s your mother?’ he asked, and immediately swallowed the word, remembering Julia. But again he shouted over the noise, and his son and daughter came to a
standstill. Normally, they would have run to embrace him, but not today. Today, they already knew, would be difficult.

‘Asleep on the floor in the kitchen, Daddy,’ Angelica replied.

Julia was gone, and he felt as if he were confronted with a staircase down to a very dark cellar. His children suddenly thought their father lost before them, as he turned to the kitchen, his footsteps leaden, his strength diminishing with each step. ‘Stay here,’ he counselled them lightly, trying to muster some jollity. ‘Mummy is just being silly to nap in the kitchen,’ he winked at Nico, who threw himself around his feet and whose hands he had to prise free.

He entered the kitchen and saw the woman who was his wife on the floor. He felt pity as he kneeled down to pick her up, her limp body a dead weight in his arms. He felt guilt and remorse, not because he wanted to, but because he must.

Her head of white-blonde hair fell into his lap, and he accepted his penance: the stark contrast between this spectre in his lap and the comfort of Julia, whose wide eyes had gazed up at him in perfect comprehension of his soul. He missed her unbearably all the time.

‘My children,’ he chastised himself, as he waited for Severine to come to. But it was no good. He could not forget: all he could see in his mind, in his heart, was Julia. And all he longed for was the silence that surrounded her, the peace.

The sky darkened outside the kitchen window, and he heard the night Nanny arrive, and exclaim at the chaos in the drawing room. He must attend to this, he knew, and prepared to rally. He carried Severine to their bedroom and placed her on the bed. Turning to the mirror, he straightened his shirt and smoothed his hair, without seeing himself. He couldn’t look.
And so his day drew to a close, as it usually did, with the conviction that he had begun it far more of a man than he had ended it. He walked to the drawing room, burst through the door like a clown, threw open his arms, and cried, ‘My children.’

As always, they came running, but even as he clutched them to him, he was left with the discomfiting realisation that theirs were not the arms for which he longed. They weren’t enough. Julia had ruined that for him too.

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Lady Amelia looked slightly perturbed. Even considering what had happened to her Mummy, she never truly believed that beautiful people might be disappointed. She glanced over to de Lerrison standing against the wall. He didn’t seem cruel, rather kindly: a bit unsure of himself, in fact. And the Vicereine simply looked fragile. How awful that all she has is false, thought Lady Amelia. Everyone is pretending to be somebody else: husband, wife, or lover. It’s all a façade built around unhappy people who wish themselves elsewhere.

Suddenly feeling very alone, Lady Amelia didn’t want to hear anymore about the Vicereine. Just a charming story instead. She folded her arms protectively and settled down to pay attention: a fact that did not escape the ever-attentive gaze of the Impeccable One.
To be the unwelcomed third, where once I was the only one that mattered. I could not have felt the blow more keenly. Oh, those half smiles, their discomfort that I had arrived, the conversation stopping in mid-sentence, knowing I was its subject by their embarrassed glances: the afternoons or mornings passed in ‘mmms’ and ‘I supposes’, until I was insulted enough to leave; their sighs of relief buoying me on an invidious breeze. And those outings in which I was no longer included; to arrive at the Trianon to see them ambling along, arm in arm, pushing Antoinette’s newborn fille de France in her pram, engaged in a uniquely intimate tête-à-tête. And what had I done to inspire such treatment? I had no idea, save that I had wasted my best years on Antoinette, who had proven in her selfishness and nonchalance to be by far the most ruthless love of all.

And then Maman died.

So it began. I was summoned back to Versailles, four horses galloping thunderously towards my apocalypse. Her mercenary heart had given out on learning that she was on la liste de Madame Guillotine, the list of nobles to be beheaded by the People.

Of course, I didn’t believe a word of it initially. I had arrived in a fit of pique, from the Trianon, convinced it was another of Maman’s ruses. She had grown tediously manipulative in her old age. Nor could I stand another lecture on Antoinette.

The curtains drawn, the heat stifling, there Maman sat in a bergère chair, like a hideous wraith. And as bitter.

‘Mirror, mirror on the wall,’ she said.

‘Oh, what are you wittering on about?’

‘Is this why you ignore me, because you don’t want to accept that one day you will be me: sooner than you think?’
I sighed irritably. Sparring with Maman used to be one of my utmost pleasures, but I had lost the stomach for it.

‘And now I too am sentenced to death because of your petite Autrichienne.’

‘What rot. You’ll outlive me.’

Without warning, Maman vomited bright red blood down her pale green silk dress, with the gold lace sleeves. Even in old age, as much as I denigrated her, she had remained impossibly elegant. Yet, of the many regrets I kindle, what saddens me most is how she spent her final years in the twilight; examining her reflection only with a candle in the mirror, trying to find the best angle for when one of her penniless young gigolos were lured in. Until there were no angles left, and no gigolo would come, paid or not.

I accepted then that Maman would die: and with me, no less. And there is something about the last grains of sand as they fall that forces a lifetime of dormant emotions to the surface, as we race against time to confide everything we should have. But she had never liked me. So what was there to say?

The maids arrived, and I waited outside in the hall, dreading what would ensue and wishing to be out and free. As disquieting as recent times had been with Antoinette, at least we were inured from such ugliness at the Trianon: news of the troubles filtering in solely through petty minded servants, who were summarily dismissed. But just as I was daring myself to tiptoe away, the door to Maman’s chamber swung open.

Involuntarily, I held my breath as I stepped over the threshold, expecting to be consumed by pomade and lavender sickly to the nostrils, but instead, the shutters had been thrown wide open, and a fresh breeze filled the room. And there was Maman on the highest of mattresses, dressed in cream silk and propped up against bountiful pillows, surrounded by pale embroidered curtains, her hair as golden as when I was a child. She hadn’t aged so very badly at all; the darkness had cast unflattering shadows over her skin that vanished in the light, and I saw her, not as if anew, but as she was at the Bal de Bleu when I was
inducted into in the Hall of Mirrors. No wonder Perrault had been so inspired: she was enchanting; her eyes were as blue as the Asiatique.

‘My Beauty,’ she said.

‘Oh Maman,’ I sobbed.

‘Too late, hélas, ma petite,’ she lamented. ‘I was too busy looking in the mirror to truly care for you, and when I came to my senses, you were too busy looking in yours. But you are still the fairest of them all.’

‘Il était une fois. Once upon a time,’ I wept.

‘Oui, je comprends; a woman is beautiful only when she is loved: not by endless admirers, but by the only one. And you did love only one, didn’t you? The one who used to write to you?’

I sobbed harder, despite my astonishment that Maman could possibly know. But it was Versailles, there were no secrets – who had I been trying to fool? It occurred to me then that maybe others had guessed too.

‘Je regrette ma fille, what I did to you, although I tried to make amends. I did try.’

‘But what do you mean?’ I asked, raising my head.

‘I worried for you, although you won’t believe me. But then you always thought you knew best: your insolence, your superiority, your unrivalled beauty that eclipsed mine, it all contributed to my choice. I had so much experience to impart: to rescue you from the mistakes I had made at court, but never did you need me. How deeply I resented you for that. You see, when romance ends, and the suitors dry up, the only thing left is your children …

‘From the first, I could tell he was different for you. So unusual: the ones we desire most are not the ones we keep. But you had a chance. So very rare, what you had found: a man who would not fail you, who you held in the highest regard. Yet, I was growing old – the age you are now – so perhaps you will understand. It wasn’t difficult to dislike you then
– I was jealous, I admit. Your lack of respect hurt me deeply, reinforced my irrelevance. This is why I thought to teach you a lesson about the precariousness of love. Because how could you possibly be given everything I had been denied. And if you did end up heureux pour toujours with your soul mate, how insufferable would you be.’

I could have left, but that morning I had become number two on la liste, past Louis, even though Antoinette no longer favoured me. My image in the public consciousness was indelibly inscribed. So what else was there to lose: I stayed with Maman for one last story.

‘You remember how you hurried out after your favourite from the Hall of Mirrors, shortly before you became ‘acquainted’ with the Comte de Broglie? But he wasn’t there in the garden; was he, where you thought you would meet? Because I had asked him earlier, you see, to meet me in one of the private rooms. I slipped out after you and paused a moment to observe your image illuminated in the garden beyond, surrounded by statues of women far inferior. Then I hid behind one of the mirrored doors where he was politely waiting.’

‘But why?’

‘I had a gift for him. To give to you.’

The curtains ballooned up then as a strong, perfumed gust filled the room, which almost made me forget Maman was dying. Yet, this fact became irrefutable as they deflated, for I experienced that same haunting premonition, which had fallen over me at the Opéra: of the end of all that was lovely: a shattering of a blithe assumption, which had once sustained me.

‘It was the miniature, the tiny book, attached to a gold chain.’

‘That’s impossible,’ I guffawed, almost relieved. ‘You are hallucinating, surely. Antoinette found it under her pillow.’

‘No,’ Maman averred, waving her finger to underscore her conviction, ‘the book was meant for you, and he was to give it to you.’
‘Fersen,’ I said, speaking the name of my secret love. Fersen, who had written to me endlessly, even though he was bound to the Queen, who adored him: Fersen, who I had forbidden myself to go near for Antoinette’s sake: Fersen, who I had loved more than life itself.

‘Perrault didn’t write the miniature. That was made up. Well, he was superb at it – if little else,’ Maman conceded ruefully. ‘In actual fact, it belonged to the Comtesse d’Orsay: of course, you recall …the original Puss in Boots. With the bird nesting in her wig that destroyed her successor the night of the Bal de Bleu?’ Maman continued, contritely. ‘The Fairies and I thought to pretend it was some special love token, that once offered, would unite true lovers forever, or some such folly. In truth, there were so many jewels at Versailles; it wasn’t exactly significant. It merely facilitated our plan, although the story was so very memorable. Only I read it; I spent hours translating it: so dark; so tragic; and all about that incomparable golden tree …’ Maman’s voice trailed off.

‘But I don’t understand,’ I interrupted. ‘I would have adored it as a gift.’

‘I will turn my face from you now,’ Maman announced. ‘I would like to feel the sun on it for these last hours. And I cannot look into your violet eyes and see what I have done to you.

‘It was all a game: the miniature and our arranged meeting a tactic to delay Fersen. I thought better of it almost immediately: he was touched so deeply by my approval, and my offer to help you divorce your ghastly husband: such a gentleman. He went dashing out to find you before I could stop him. And I did try, when I realised how wrong I had been, I did try—’ She raised her handkerchief to her mouth as a cough constricted her breathing. I thought she might die then and I could remain ignorant as to what happened next, but no.

‘And I was with the Comte de Broglie,’ I said, a reckoning dawning. ‘Because I felt rejected and was shallow and careless. And Fersen witnessed this, didn’t he?’
‘Yes,’ she said grimly. ‘While I was with Fersen, the other Fairies encouraged Broglie to follow you. He had made no secret of his admiration. Not that you noticed because nobody existed for you but Fersen. Yes, it played out perfectly. Except, of course, for l’Autrichienne …’

At the memory of Antoinette, I began to cry; that little fawn of a girl, with her big blue eyes, coughing up rivers of sobs at how vile the Fairies had been to her: child of my heart who no longer wanted me.

‘You see, chérie,’ said Maman, ‘I deeply regretted my role, when I saw where separating you from Fersen led – your friendship with Antoinette, the scandals, the damage, the demands for your head – but it was too late to change anything that night. I was still in the hidden room, peeking out from behind the door when Fersen stormed past, devastated. And that was when he bumped into her: your little shepherdess.’

‘My little shepherdess,’ I repeated, hollowly.

‘It wasn’t his fault. You must accept this. What choice did he have but to accede to the future Queen? And she was sobbing.

‘All he did was console her, but he was so very handsome and by the time he had finished the child was infatuated,’ she tutted impotently.

‘And the miniature?’ I almost couldn’t bring myself to ask.

‘She saw the chain dangling from his hand and asked what it was,’ Maman replied.

‘And he said?’

‘He said, “Something that was meant for someone else.” And then she asked, “Who?”’ And he pointed to you as you appeared before the glass garden doors at the far end of the hall,’ she said, sadly, ‘and the Autrichienne’s eyes widened with awe as she asked, “Her? But she has everything.” Well, he could hardly contain his humiliation, that poor young man, so, ‘Why don’t you keep it,’ he said chivalrously, although he wasn’t quick
enough: I saw the tears he blinked back. And with that, he kissed her hand and left the miniature in it as he departed.

And then Antoinette saw you and –’

‘“It’s mine,” she said,’ I replied.

‘Yes, she took what was yours.’

‘The Fairies were ghastly, but in my defence I understood her from day one: one of those women as plain as flour who covet, who manipulate the sympathies of great beauties to learn everything about them so they can snatch it away. I watched you sacrifice everything for her, including Fersen, and yet she held her tongue.

‘So, I ask chérie again, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”’

Often people have very distorted views of their reflections; they perceive things that are not there. And never is it more true than when one woman steals from the heart of another, as she did with you.

‘After Fersen gave her that miniature and she threw herself at him, he had to succumb. Yet, every time she glanced in those cloudy mirrors, she thought herself superior to you. For, she had won. What you didn’t grasp is that she only ever wanted to be you.

And now she is.’

The inimitable symmetry of the gardens was brilliantly illumined beyond as I felt a kindness and tenderness suffuse that room. Yet, how I longed for Maman’s confession to be another trick; it was too perfect a day to learn something so foul.

‘Maman, forgive me; how can I trust you?’

She reached for my hand and placed something cold and thin in my palm, ‘I don’t blame you for doubting me. But allow me to say this: I was the Princess Who Slept Upon A Pea and you, my darling: you are the Beauty.’

She smiled then, a smile that haunts me because she chose that moment to die. But, she left a gift in my hand: a copy of the key to Antoinette’s bedside table. One I used.
And there I discovered the story that was intended only for me.
On the day you took me to see the white horses run free, there had been seven Sundays, seven dance lessons. And in them, I discovered everything that was missing. When one is not judged – as you have not judged me, and forgiven, as you have forgiven me too – you are free to love without impediment. For there is no fear that you will cause any harm. I think too, Andrew’s return; his acceptance of you, of me: his refusal to allow me to blame myself had released me from relentless guilt. Perhaps, this is why I wanted to see those white horses. I felt a kinship. As if I believed then that freedom was synonymous with our future, with the children: to give it all up, to go somewhere new, to live the life we had once started together, which was stolen by others.

We had slipped back into that perfect companionship of our childhood, where nothing needed to be explained. We were happy and lucky. And why not? Difficult conversations could be had: with Harry, with Severine. Was that not all to which they amounted: thank you for the years: I know you will be upset, but won’t you please let me go. I will not ask for a thing ... And I was independently wealthy. I didn’t care about my fame; I would go anywhere, do anything; even divest myself of my identity as you had: anything to be with you, wherever you chose to take me.

And so the white horses.

You arrived in my room on a Sunday at dawn, found a jacket from the wardrobe and placed it around my shoulders. I remember thinking you so brave; understanding that you would not risk being seen with me if you did not intend to honour our plans. And I relished in your courage, because that was how I interpreted it.

It was 5:00 a.m.: I was still wearing my silk nightdress. But you told me to come as I was. My feet searched under the dressing table for my kitten heeled slippers, as I delighted in the game you proposed: to sneak out in the dawn to where the white horses run free. Just
like when we used to run out into Andrew’s garden in Hyde Park, to sit under the oak tree until he called us into breakfast: for I would be late to school.

And this we did. I clutched your hand with my right hand and the neck of my jacket, fastened like a cape around my neck, with my left, as we rushed down the hall to the lift and through the grand marble lobby to where your car sat idling. You had left on the engine. A fact that strikes me differently now: then I was so enamoured of the romance of our trip that I overlooked how else that idling car might be perceived; as symbolic of your constant desire to be away; forever poised to leave me.

It was a white beach, a beach so white it was blinding, in the Camargue: sandy marshlands to the West of Antibes. I kicked off my slippers and left them behind on the sand as you led me to the water’s edge, the smell of salt and violets unique to the region borne on the gentle breeze. I had forgotten my hat, so my skin tingled from the combination of salt air and sun.

‘I’m going to burn,’ I said.

You laughed in concern, ‘You already have. Your nose is pink. It will peel, so it’s a good job it’s perfect.’

With Harry, I would have reacted in horror at such news, not that he would have delivered it so kindly. I felt the wet sand beneath my feet and took your hand. With you it was not the same: your presence resolved everything in me that was undone. It was the way you looked at me, charmed always, unravelling helplessly at my idiosyncrasies, the impetuosity of my statements, one of my little gasps that would presage some news I had forgotten to tell, or else a mischievous grin in which you would share, the two of us somehow joined: your acceptance afforded me the power to project, even when I shouldn’t.

A flock of flamingos flew overhead, the sky a confection of pale pink and light blue. The light silk of my nightdress was deliciously cool against my skin, a sporadic burst of cold air gusting around me off the waves that crashed before us.
'It’s as if no time has passed. I like that,’ you said, as if the knowledge confirmed something, which consoled and helped you.

‘Always,’ I replied.

And then there was no need to say anything more because that was all I required: erasure of the facts of absence, loss, the fact of other people: simply this new space, where the beginning and the present joined: the fight almost at an end.

‘I’m going to tell Se—’ you began, but a crowd assembling at the other end of the beach distracted you. ‘What, darling,’ I asked, for the end of that sentence promised everything; it was one you hadn’t attempted before. But you stepped away from me, holding a hand above your eyes and squinting in the direction of the children and adults streaming forward around two white stallions, a fuschia floral cross held aloft. I heard the sound of cheering, but – like the day in the port – couldn’t quite make out the words.

‘What are they saying,’ I asked.

‘Vive Saint Sara. It’s their saint, Sara-la-Kali, Black Sara, the Black Madonna. The Vatican does not recognise her: she’s the patron saint of gipsies.’

‘Is that who they are?’ I asked, stepping behind your shoulder to observe the scene. The people seemed to surge forward in lunges, like a black sea, and I felt afraid. ‘But what are they doing?’

You held a hand out to your right, a protective barrier to prevent me from moving forward: ‘Celebrating. It’s the Gitan Pilgrimage. There’s no reason to be frightened, although they can seem intimidating. They can cure or bless you in an instant …’ Your voice trailed off as you watched the scene. Yet, you seemed wary, your tone concerned.

‘There’s a legend, you see, Sara accompanied St Marie-Jacobe and St Marie Salome when they arrived here from Palestine in the 16th century and this pilgrimage they make is their opportunity to come together and celebrate their faith. That’s all. And, of course, the
gipsies know how to enjoy themselves. Listen,’ you turned with a smile, and I felt relief.

Whatever danger I had sensed in your reserve had passed.

The sound of Flamenco was struck up by various guitarists walking en masse with the crowd and the horses towards the sea: ‘Are they going in?’ I asked, startled.

‘Yes, the horsemen will ride in with Black Sara held high above them. But they take another girl too, a young gipsy child, chosen to represent Sara. They walk with her into the water and then bring her back. There,’ you said, as a little girl was borne aloft on the crowd and propelled towards the waves.

Something began to make sense as I watched the procession. It was the colour of their skin, a beautiful milky coffee Mediterranean colour and their eyes of the palest, whitest blue.

‘The Saint Sara’s of the gypsies,’ you explained, ‘were the mothers of Jesus’s disciples. No-one knows who Sara-al-Kali is: some say she was Mary’s real mother, not St Anne. But she is worshipped, kept in the dark in a crypt all year, and brought out and dressed in the finery they offer her. And then brought here to the sea.’

‘The boy on the dock,’ I said impetuously. ‘He was part of this, wasn’t he: a gipsy. He looked like these people.’

You didn’t reply, however, but ran forward as if a ghost had jumped on your grave:

‘Oh God, oh my God. No! Wait here, don’t move,’ you said, running off down the beach, falling in the heavy sand that kept tripping you as you lunged forward.

And in horror, I realised what had prompted such a reaction: it was the child borne aloft on the sedan. The tormented child that was sobbing, calling out for her Daddy, surrounded by swarms of people: the child reaching for the arms of a father she could not find: you.

It was Angelica.
I began to race towards her too, but stopped dead, remembering your instruction. And I never disobeyed you: my entire happiness depended upon your approval. I remember being overcome by the same relentless grief I had felt on the boat when Emmy went missing; when Andrew was convicted; when I had to leave you in Germany. As if a portent of that grief I saw her then: Severine, a black shawl over her head, standing impassively on the shore, deaf to Angelica’s screams for mercy. For Angelica couldn’t swim.

You ran into the waves, and tried to claw your way through the people; who kept pushing you back; you couldn’t get close enough. And all the while Angelica was growing more frantic; a lost child held high by the hands of strangers. Frozen to the spot, I kept looking back to Severine: do something, you evil woman, I wanted to scream, but I was condemned to silence. Who else was there, who might see? What could I do anyway? I hated myself. I had never hated myself more.

My heart lurched as I watched Angelica be dragged off the sedan; ‘No,’ I cried, but then I saw you: pushing your way back through to the shore, soaked to the skin, and Angelica too, but she was safe in your arms. I fell on the sand and was immediately overcome not with relief, but with a terrible awareness: you would not bring Angelica to me. I could not claim her, despite how I longed to love the child and Nico too. I would be left there alone on the beach, abandoned.

And as this realisation dawned, and the familiar emptiness returned to consume me, I noticed Severine draw closer, her expression unreadable as she acknowledged my presence on my knees, before pulling her shawl tighter and walking away.

She had done this on purpose: had known where we would be: she had chosen Angelica as the sacrifice. And I thought to myself, if there is a God, he will spare me now. For what kind of God does this?

What kind of God would keep me from my children?

Nico and Angelica.
The twins I bore in Germany with you; the reason why we left England.

The children I had to leave behind with you, to save you from being arrested, who I had to pretend were not mine.

_My_ children.

Whom I couldn’t hug or kiss; whom I could barely acknowledge.

That is, except for those Sundays, when I danced with them.
Maman died two weeks before the last party at the Trianon: a party that started with a masquerade and, for me, a plan. It was my thirty-ninth birthday, and I had cast a backward glance at my years and realised that for several of them I’d been drenched in bird filth standing in the centre of Antoinette’s room, her reflection as distorted as the Comtesse’s at my back. And now somebody was going to pay for that.

It was around 9:00 p.m., when I stood up from the table where we had conglomerated and took myself off for a walk. At my back, the party raged on under the white silk tent. The snuff and the champagne and the macarons and the lobster and fireflies and the diamonds, oh it was all as louche and decadent as can be: a last hurrah, for the next day Versailles and duty beckoned and, if the rumours were anything to go by, the guillotine.

So carpe diem and all that: for tomorrow we die.

Of course, we were far too old to be conducting ourselves as adolescents, but we did. And what of it? Every day, every single day, there was la liste de Madame Guillotine; the threats, the accounts of what happens when the sans culottes come for you. Was it any wonder we went wild: what of it and why not our mantras as we ran free smothered in the scent of bluebells from the fields? For tomorrow we die, we intoned, shrieking with laughter. As if making a joke would turn it into a horrible delusion, one from which we could wake in our silk beds, dainty teacups painted pink and blue and gold held under our noses by pretty little maids.

I held my upturned champagne glass by its stem as I la Marelle’d over the gravel – having lost my shoes goodness knows where and the stones stabbing my soles – in pursuit of a refuge: a path I had planned and purposefully followed. And my black hair that shone like silk tumbled down my back, as it came loose from its pins, for I didn’t wear a wig, and
the heat caressed me, and my diamonds weighed heavily from my ears and wrists; the burden of riches I bore from my many lovers.

I found him on the grass, beside the walled garden: a sleeping prince. Just then, I felt dear Maman’s presence stir beside me and finally understood what all those fairy tales had been about. Why, nothing more than love and the desire to keep it forever and to always be young and beautiful. How they got twisted, tainted, marked with morality: those interpretations came later, after the disappointments. No, all of the tales, I realised, were founded upon a primeval wish: to go back, to begin again. As I did when I crouched down beside my beloved Fersen amidst the fields of bluebells in full bloom.

I did not move, for fear the spell might be broken: I almost couldn’t believe that I was alone with him, nor how easy it had been to effect. I had deployed the same ruse as Maman: I had sent a note from Antoinette’s Lady of the Bedchamber, who wrote most of her correspondence – and her handwriting was atrocious, so it was very easy to copy –, asking him to meet Antoinette there at 8.45 p.m.. As the party started at noon, I knew everybody would be napping or else drunk senseless by then. Never had Fersen and I been able to even smile at one another, regardless of his letters …my love, my darling, cherished favourite of my soul, how I yearn for you, to speak the words I am forbidden …And I had upheld my vow for fifteen years, but no longer.

For tomorrow we die.

It was the moment when the evening turns to dusk and in the late heat the sky turns a haunting blue-grey: the hour that augurs promise of what the night might bring. I revelled in the gift of such solitude: to adore him as I wished, without fear or rancour. I tentatively reached to smooth his hair from his brow but snatched it back as my heart chastised me: Antoinette …For I remained her friend, even if she had betrayed me. But just when I might have changed everything and left, Fersen decreed my fate: he brought my hand back to cup his face. I can still feel the sandstone-wall against which he stood up and pushed me, those
arms I remembered so well holding me perfectly so; his gentle touch, that warm smile. And that unforgettable kiss.

The billowing tendril clouds of wisteria climbing the wall cushioned my collapse as my feet slipped out from under me and I pulled him down with me, his face so close to mine that I could count the delicate symmetrical lines engraved upon his lips. It was then that I uttered the words I had kept cloistered within: the only truth I have ever spoken, ‘It has always been you.’

At the sound of my voice, he pulled back and reached for my mask. And the masquerade came to an end when I was revealed to him. He leaned in closer then, and I saw the truth; it had always been me.

But then I heard Antoinette call out:

‘Yolande, but wherever have you gone? We must have your story. It’s your turn.’

And so the spell was broken.

Had I foreseen our next Act, would I have answered Antoinette’s call as willingly? Yet, I did. I gathered up my silk skirts and ran over the lawn to where she waited, turning back only once. But Fersen was gone. He had slipped away across the dew-soaked grass, his footprints an invisible path to the future for which I longed and would not glimpse again. I looked up at the clock inlaid into the wall of the Trianon, and saw I hadn’t been gone five minutes. And that was when the sou dropped as I arrived, breathless and supplicant at her table. Oh, I had thought myself so clever, but Antoinette knew where I had been: and she had brought down the guillotine on my heart. Because she could.

I felt nauseous as I assumed my seat at the opposite end of the table and discerned Antoinette’s cultivated expression of innocence. How I despised her. I remembered Antoinette’s little plump hand wrapping around the locket at her neck, and how proudly she would decree, ‘It’s mine;’ I recalled us both standing in front of the mirror when I dressed
her for the Opéra, and her triumphant smirk after I had transformed her into the image of myself, so that she could love Fersen in my place …

But to the victor the spoils, n’est-ce pas?

‘The Queen awoke to find she would die that morning …’ I announced.

The Princesse de Lamballe cried out as Fersen joined us. ‘Mais, non,’ she exclaimed. ‘What are you doing?’ she demanded of me.

Antoinette reached for her hand to quiet her.

‘I am doing exactly as the Queen commands: I have been asked to devise a story for this competition. This is my story.’

Brazenly, I sat there, waiting for Antoinette’s signal to continue, or stop.

A gust of wind stirred the tablecloth, and plumes of sugar billowed up, the pastel coloured macarons piled high toppled, and the sound of birds singing filled the sky. Soon, it would storm.

Antoinette might have been an angel sitting there, her hand placed protectively over the miniature against her breast.

‘Continue, ma chérie,’ she said.

And so I did.

Sparing her nothing.
PART III

ESTHER
THE VICEREINE

I don’t know if you realise, but the plot of Andrew’s stories was always the same: somebody went off on an adventure, to right some wrong, or because they were curious. And the adventure was exhilarating and frightening and such fun, and, after it was over and everyone was safely home, there were so many memories to relive. But I used to think, what about the people at home who are left behind? How do they carry on during these adventures? Because nobody tells them they’re going. How do they exist, knowing they love someone but can’t see them; what were their days like, waiting for them to return, wondering if they ever will? How did they breathe not knowing whether they’re well or ill or sad or called their name because they couldn’t find their way back? It would be torture, I used to think, such unimaginable confusion and loss: to believe that their lives were carrying on somewhere, just not with you.

This is why I used to tell myself you were off on an adventure, my love: with Nico and Angelica. I used to make myself remember you, and the light through the window in the kitchen on the Wilhelmstrasse, the way it was in that tiny flat we loved, with a stick or two of furniture in it, the only place we could afford after we left London. You were doing dishes. Imagine! And your hair I adored wasn’t brushed, and you were so tall and big, so full of what made you, you, so special and funny, as you leaned over the sink, and our babies were howling and the stove exploded with the kettle I’d left on it, and I looked ridiculous in that apron, with my mother’s tiara with the bandeau of diamond swallows – the one far too big for my head, which you refused to allow me to sell – that you’d plopped on it as a joke. And the window I remember was huge, and there was dust all over the floor, because we didn’t even have a broom, and I wasn’t even sixteen but somehow much older, and never apprehensive: safe. Because I was with you, and I fitted perfectly into your shoulder when you hugged me; when I burst into tears because it was all going appallingly
wrong, and how could it ever be right, and the blonde heads of our babies were rolling around in their makeshift crib, and you gave me that hug, because you hated it when I cried; and then you said that thing only you could say, 'Don’t cry, think of something funny. Go on, think of something funny.'

You weren’t glib or unfeeling, you just understood; life is so sad, full of difficulties and disappointment, you can’t get past it, but think of something lovely, think of something funny; smile, you’re loved, you know. And it was like I was a little girl again; think of a balloon bursting behind the Dowager, or Andrew falling off his chair because he had too much sherry; or great Grandmama mishearing everything. Think of hiding around corners while adults searched high and low through the house; think of the time I made you laugh after you had sipped your blackberry juice and you sprayed it over the man from The Evening Standard: think of when we dressed as ghosts in white sheets and haunted the gardens during Andrew’s opening night party for The Golden Tree – wooh, wooh – and that drunk old man collapsed in shock when we appeared at the window; think of it all, the wonderful times we have shared that stay fixed forever. Think of them always because life is so sad, full of sorrow, and one day I will have to fly away and leave you. We all will.

Sometimes, I prayed you were dead, so that I could find you: in heaven, or as a ghost at my side, a shadow on the wall. Anything, but alive somewhere, and not with me: sitting in a chair, in a room, existing with someone else, speaking to our children, forbidden to say my name.

It’s hard to describe joy; what it means when someone touches your soul. That the journey has ended and here you are; nothing needs to be said, all is accepted. I think now that’s what we are truly waiting for: to see that figure at the end of the road, a hand aloft in welcome; here you are. Here you stay. Die in my arms to the beating of wings; my soul that is yours.
From the first, in London, I knew Severine was in love with you. Even though I was inexperienced, it was the way she looked at me when you were looking elsewhere. I’m older now: I’ve seen it a million times: that appraising look jealous women give to other women, the way they sidle up as friends, but only to pinpoint weakness and use it against them, to steal what they’ve got.

I’ve never trusted kindness again. Not after her. Nor will I forgive myself for believing Severine’s stories of Tom and Andrew in India, when she was a child. But then what they wrote about Andrew in the papers seemed to confirm what she confided, and Tom’s accusations; and how my Andrew wouldn’t refute anything; he locked himself away; and how angry he was with you and me when he walked into my room one night and found us there, his terrifying anger. Like a different person, one I didn’t know; he didn’t even sound the same. He wouldn’t look at me. And every night, while we stayed in that once enchanting house in Hyde Park, we heard him sob and sob and sob. Then in the morning, that dark mood, the mood that tormented me … but now you are spoiled, tarnished; what can I do for you anymore … Toby you had no right to touch her, to sully her … Men will ruin you, Julia. Beauties can be ruined in an instant …

One person can alter fifty destinies: but only, I have learned, if those fifty play along. I will live with the guilt of trusting Severine, even though it was you she initially approached. You who first gave credence to her claims … I should have trusted to my instinct, for I always knew Andrew didn’t copy The Golden Tree from anyone; I created it with him, I was there. Yet, I was relatively sheltered, insecure, so in awe of you and she was older, assured in many ways and almost as equally pitiful, destitute; how could I imagine that she could rewrite a history and a future? The one person who could have helped us was Andrew, but we had broken his heart. And moreover, you didn’t question that Severine was destitute without Tom; nor did you dismiss her claims about Andrew’s role in their family, after her father helped him in the army. So Andrew metamorphosed into someone we no
longer recognised: for he wasn’t who he said he was, he had lied about everything – so

Severine helped us to go to Berlin and, in return, we helped her by not leaving her behind.

And that is why I count one instant of perfect joy as mine: in the kitchen on the

_Wilhelmstrasse_, with two blonde darlings and a tiara too big for my head and me in your

arms, knowing I would die there; thanking God that I would die there.

It was just before the police found me. Before they pinned my wings and stamped

me underfoot.

Every time I think of it, I look up to the sky, and imagine you and Nico and

Angelica flying away to another adventure: and so you are not lost, you are somewhere I

can follow.

But it’s no use: I am invisible to them, my exquisite children.

And so Severine has lived on in my place.
THE DUCHESS OF LERRISON

At the Trianon, the fireflies ebbed and burned as I carried on with my creation, like the great storyteller I was …

‘So the Queen,’ I said, acceding anew to Antoinette’s command, ‘well, she awoke to find she would die that morning. Now, this news she accepted without reaction, despite the goading efforts of her gaolers to elicit one. No, it was only in private, once her captors at Les Invalides departed, hurling unrepeatable slander about her that the Queen permitted herself to weep. La pauvre wept soundlessly, yet each mute sob convulsed her slight body, drawn from a depth the People would have been stunned to know she possessed.

‘Oh, but what would await her beyond the dank and barren walls of her cell outside, she worried, as she perched on the edge of her bed, unable to stand up? Nearly all her belles-amies had trodden the path to the guillotine, but of the details, she had no concept – those kept first from her by Louis and, later, by the conscience-stricken young girls, Children of the Revolution, who had been sent to attend to her toilette. Girls, whose bloodthirsty convictions about privilege and equality had faltered as soon as the Queen had turned her eyes, as wide and trusting as a fawn’s, upon them, and they saw that they were loved.

‘But on this last day, two new girls of the People’s Bedchamber arrived to assist her. It was so very awful though, because the sweet, kind Queen, gave them no trouble: a fact that astonished and dismayed them, considering how they revelled in tales of her spite and extravagance: all the clothes and jewels and luxury they could not own. But they found it impossible to envy her, as she was stripped of her former life’s finery, and they realised she was as thin as a blade of grass in the meadow at the Trianon. Their quiet, accepting Queen, who asked only:

‘May I keep my Bible, please?’
‘Startled, the girls had scurried off to consult their leaders – those barbarians, who took hours to consent, prolonging the Queen’s agony: a capricious act not lost on the two fourteen-year-olds, whose lives were similarly dictated by such men. This was why, on arriving back at her cell, they tried to shield the Queen from the perverted gaolers, leering through the bars, as they dressed her in a muslin smock, and placed a bonnet upon her head to hide the fact that her head had been brutally sheared; yes, all her pretty blonde curls that had once been shaped into a ship when the King of England visited Versailles – and pinned with the finest silk flags, embroidered by hand – now stamped into the filthy floor along with the rats and their excrement. And as the girls hastened through the Queen’s toilette, both found themselves desperately trying not to weep. For the Queen graciously thanked them for every act they performed, although each one led her closer to her last breath.

‘But the Queen felt no fear at the sound of the heavy footsteps approaching her cell. Nor when they threw her like a ragbag onto a cart and drove her through the screaming mob to the Place de la Concorde, over the bridge not even an animal would cross due to the stench of blood, where the executioner awaited.

No, she was serene as an angel, as she ascended the wooden steps towards the scaffold. Because she willed her mind to travel no further than one minute. And so she was blessedly ignorant of what would come next beyond the stark fact that she would live no more.’

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A sudden clatter on the table at the Trianon almost scared me to death.

‘You cannot tell this story. Are you mad?’ railed the Princess de Lamballe, banging her fists on the table. ‘Ma Reine, make her stop. I cannot listen. It is atrocious. Sacrilege!!’

‘Not another word,’ Antoinette castigated her, standing up. ‘I want to hear the story. Everyone is to listen. No-one must leave.’
She stood there for a moment surveying her guests at the table, warningly.

Antoinette was not to be disobeyed.

Without waiting for her command, I continued.

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‘The reason’ I said, my gaze fixed on Antoinette, ‘the Queen felt such peace was the Bible she clasped to her chest. You see, concealed within it was a secret, in a small section near the middle, where hollowed out pages formed a square. It was a glittering remnant of Versailles, the lone possession that had meant anything to her. And at that moment, as she knelt down before the executioner’s block, the Queen found herself following her memories back to when she came to own it, as if she was there once more.

‘It was such a tiny book – a miniature, like a charm on a bracelet. Perhaps this is why, the Queen thought, its original owner lost it. It would be very easy. For nobody at Versailles could fathom where it might have come from, when she had first worn it in the Hall of Mirrors, attached to a gold chain around her swan-like neck.

‘Yet, the Queen was proprietorial and never allowed anyone else to see it. Each night she set herself the task of deciphering each tiny page, barely the size of a macaron, with the help of a specially commissioned magnifying glass, encrusted with Indian yellow diamonds that also hung from a chain around her neck. And, to the Queen’s delight and awe, with each page a new revelation emerged that touched her flawless soul.

‘The miniature was almost as pristine as when it was written in 1607, in a place called Lislebourg near Edinburgh in Scotland, and executed in English, which only added to the mystery of who its creator, Esther Langlois, might be. For there she was, emblazoned across the back of the intricately embroidered cover, in bold primary colours of blue and red and gold, staring out at her, whenever the Queen allowed. Well, not to be honest, quite staring. That would have been impossible, for somebody had erased Esther’s face.
‘It was no matter, for the Queen thought this faceless lady quite beautiful regardless, with her vivid red-hair, piled high on her head. How the Queen loved red hair. Indeed, this is what first piqued her interest, for the Queen could be flighty, and had tired by then of brunettes … and, almost, the Queen thought that she could imagine Esther’s face; a lovely face with a small smile, she considered, content with her assumption. And, then too were all the intricately painted borders in the tiny book, the minute words written on each line, each in a different style of calligraphy; such a gift to write so artistically, the Queen thought. But oh, how old-fashioned Esther’s clothes were in the portrait, the Queen would often frown, with that big ruff around her neck, the pointed hat, and the black dress. Dire, fretted the Queen in her duck-egg blue silk, with pink embroidered flowers blooming up her sleeves. How she longed to take Esther under her wing and give her something pretty to wear. For somehow she felt as if she knew her, this Esther: as if she shared the same soul.

‘“Qui-est vous? Who are you?” the Queen would ask, every time she opened the tiny book to Esther’s portrait.

For the Queen could not resist her.

‘There were few facts she could glean beyond the title that looked almost carved onto the page: The Golden Tree and the Moth. And was Esther French or English, considering her name? Then a further mystery was revealed when the Queen discovered that the story contained within the book was one Esther had dedicated to her lover, who the Queen suspected was the golden man in the portrait, facing Esther’s, which sat cupped in a golden tree.

‘Oh, but perhaps it was a fake, another ruse designed to condemn me, she considered; maybe by the court toadies, who loathed her for being Austrian? Rumours she had gleaned by listening to the whispers that travelled around the Hall of Mirrors. Or maybe it was the Fairies, although the Queen had read all of the fairy tales from when Versailles was the Empire. How she had lamented arriving too late to join in their creation, for malice
had superseded it as a pastime at court. No, despite her paltry education, she understood this story by Esther Langlois bore no resemblance to anything that had been created at Versailles by those former beauties and noble wits, those princesses and peas, sleeping beauties and pusses in boots. It was the words written on page upon page, a letter of sorts from Esther: this is what convinced the Queen the miniature was genuine: those words she reflected upon each night before sleep when her favourite was not there. For only someone who loved deeply could ever have written them: they were felt not imitated, from the depths of one’s soul. Or so the Queen surmised, for she too had known such love. Such words.

‘And it was these words that echoed in her mind as she placed her golden head on the block in the Place de la Concorde ...

_of The Golden Tree and the Moth, Writtin by me,

_Esther, as my last Goodbye ...

Yes, the Queen heard every line of that incomparable tale, like the siren call of an angel summoning her to her rest …An angel called Esther:

_after you are gone, my love, I will tell myself these things
I will say he is not dead, but sleeping
On a pair of white moth’s wings
O’er fields where mercy dwells, they will bear you to your rest
And there reborn a tree so golden, the larks will cease to sing,
The butterflies will stop to marvel, the day will dawn in grace
In reverence to who you are
To all you have meant to me.

I will think you swaying in the breeze
Upon God’s highest hill
So farewell, farewell my golden love
As I watch your dreams take flight
I pray that you will die in the night
To the sound of the beating of wings

Philippe,

_I am near to you again; ’tho you will never know this
My eyes as blind to you as yours were once to me
My wings, they beat a last confession
Somewhere in my heart, my love, you are swaying in the breeze

We have only the words between us
Those my tottering right hand labours like the bee to trace
Yet my pen is no longer golden
And I no more its matchless mistress
I scratch like a rat upon the page

Condemned to this dark cell
I bite the wooden spoon to stop my screams
One by one the plinths were to the fingers of my left hand fastened
A warning lest I disobey them
My body an atlas of wounds bound with rags
For I am broke near entire now
By the brutal hands of men

Through the prison wall that separates us
I cannot reach for you nor speak
Tho I can hear you breathing in your sleep
I can hear you dreaming upon your golden head
They will come for me by morning
My illumination the candle
Cinderling the minutes
As this tiny world I live burns to ash
And on this parchment before me, they say, 'confess your sins
To spare your life' 

But what strength I have left is yours to own
No bloody confession shall soil this page
This rude candle will illumine only
This story I finish for you, my love
This story I have writ these weeks when we have been parted
As my last goodbye

In this book so small it could fit only a fairy’s palm
That I have kept hid against my heart, fastened around my neck on a golden chain
I have crafted the story that, so brief, was all to us
Of golden trees and butterflies
And here too I lay bare the truth of me
Sparing myself nothing
For you to take where you will go now
That Heaven, where I cannot follow

For charity we met on a Tuesday
I, the most exquisite writer in this realm
Once esteemed by Kings and Queens
Fallen out of favour
Now my husband’s beggar
Sent to beseech a bastard’s pity
The pity of your own Father

It was the hour of waste
Gardy-loo echoing across the cobblestones of our walled fortress in Lislebourg
The sliver of moon waning as meagre and melancholic
As my spirit
The wind howled across the port
My head bowed and hooded, I need not lift it
No-one would see my face

Amidst the tea, tobacco, spices, cloth, coiled ropes, slaughtered remnants of fish
Alone and unremarked, I stood at the edge of the dock
At my back, the lifeless siren call of the prostitutes sang on
Live, Survive, Endure in their dark corners
Around me Russian and Eastern sailors scattered greedily into them,
Like rats chased from ships, their one desire dry flesh beneath their claws

I was forty-three, grown old,
The years had fashioned my face into someone unrecognisable
How I envied those women their wings
Faded butterflies
And I nothing more than a moth
My colours bled from me

As a girl, newly married
To my husband, Bartholomew, the minister so revered,
The man who preached forgiveness, hope, repentance
I had stood once on that dock and contemplated a wilder fate
Of praise and beauty, love and warmth
My mother’s talent that became mine, to create
Tiny illuminated books of God’s word, of grace
His butterflies, flying free
Borne on wings of gratitude
For the gift He gave to me

And so I was known for a time
As His winged Messenger
Privileged to offer such gifts up to the laps of Kings
A talent so rare
Destroyed by the whims of men
For I bartered my inheritance at Bartholomew’s behest
My tiny books merely a ploy to permit smuggled messages to foreign courts
Until Bartholomew fell out of favour
And punished me for it

Now I am a delicately stitched lie
No noblewoman
I a whore be
‘Tho I have painted my portrait in my books
With small smiles and glittering jewels
In the image of the Virgin Queen
Ceruse white cheeks, beeswax red lips, Tudor red-gold hair
De l’éternel le bien, de moi ou rien
From God the good, from me nothing
My pen has proclaimed

And they have taken me at my word
Lords and Ladies, noble souls
Concealing me anew
My portrait held down fast, locked again in cabinets
Regarded as a trinket amidst grander jewels
As I have been locked into this cell
A so-called Lady amidst the robbers, the murderers, the vanquish’d
Were it not for you, I would be relieved
For nobody will look at me again nor remark my difference
After tomorrow when I hang
Happily

Upon this cover, I have laced the stitches of a golden tree
Glass beads fastened on its branches; blue, red, amber
I have tapped the velvet fabric with my fingertips to prevent a blister
Each stitch echoes the words we shared and will not speak again
You will die tomorrow for the words
That have ruined us

I came to your father, the Bookbinder, on the night we met,
The shop was dark, save for the meagre moon outside
Above my head the thin light illuminated the ceiling copied from the Book of Ghent
I used to visit to trace the shapes of the bees, insects, flowers
Before I was so degraded, your father had admired my skill
But that had ended long before

So imperceptibly, rudely, routinely, had each day followed on from the last
We a decent, penniless family
Of husband, wife, five children
‘Beg from callous men,’ Bartholomew demanded of me
‘Beg for materials to craft books that no-one will want or pay for
But, mind, you will hang for adultery if you are caught’

So I lay in your father, the Bookbinder’s, bed
The colour seeping from me every time my body was exposed to his eye
His serpentine frame upon me
His face turned away as if imagining someone else in my place
And for this, he gave me ink
The ink that smears this page with my shame

In the shop, I sensed a presence and started, grateful for the dark
Your father would not see my scarred cheek
Each time I was sent to beg from him, I arrived lesser
A smashed portrait, my face obscured
A cheek broken, a lip split, a jaw undone
And when beauty is punished, men feel entitled to inflict more

You spoke then to me, in French
And I heard the colours and intonations of a lost country
Of my birth
And there I remembered endless fields of wildflowers, the lime tree bathed in gold
I looked up and felt the pictures over my head come to life
As if woken from an endless sleep
Had not we been Huguenots driven from our beds by burning torches
Who might I have become,
In what warm fields might I have slept?

Yet the old should be spared the presence of the young
And I you,
The sudden futile yearning in my breast that I had not lived
There might be some small joy to come, if only to be near
I moved closer to the curtain behind which you hid
Nerves leech my strength, for I knew not who else lurked there
Only that I must be close

I stepped forward and found you
A terrified creature, hunched in a corner; your arms outstretched to deflect a blow
But your face
I remember the tender delicacy of your white skin, your golden hair not dimmed by stains of death,
I stood and traced your outline in my mind as I do now upon the page
Yet, the stroke of my pen falters and falls short
Your colours are too bright; your beauty cannot be contained

Someone had blinded you
Your eyes swelled shut, lips bruised with blood, the purple black marks of fists upon your chest and arms
The jagged scars etched into your boy’s hands with a knife
And so, as I have learned, the world is cruel, and so the world is merciful.
For you would not see me
I could be any age
Any one
New

But I should have fled
Allowed the rain to reopen my wounds, my shame, for all to judge
Instead I said, ‘I am Esther,’
‘Do not be afraid. I have not come to hurt you.’
The first lie I ever told you.
And I can barely raise my pen to continue, but I must
If only to hear your voice again in my memory before they take me

I almost felt young
No pages had yet turned
You did not know who I was or had become
No hand had scrawled across a page of my life words indelible
I knew but one truth as my hood fell back and I stood before you as my real self
Had I met you when I was young, I would have loved you
I would have loved and been lost in you

The world collapsed at my back to a blank horizon
It was but a moment
The reality of the past, the promise of a future
Somehow irrelevant and relevant
Two people in a room
A chance to change a destiny
Somehow, I knew, we were joined for eternity by the discovery of the other
And I needed to be joined
For the minutes were fleeting

Before you, I expected nothing of the day, beyond its beginning, middle and end
I lived and that was all
Did I trap you or you me with the bargain we brokered then?
Was it cruel of you to toy with the affections of a woman such as I?
The harsh facts of my age and face cancelled out
When you said, ‘There is a story that I want my life to tell,’
And I held fast to your despair and said, ‘let me tell it with you.’

Our wounds were the map we navigated to find one another
For we came to one another severed
I placed my hands upon your shoulders
Your head fell forward and I traced the jagged river of a scar on your neck
‘Who did this?’ I asked
‘My father,’ you said.
I believed you. He had made the same mark on me.

‘And where is he now?’
‘William, your father
Poor boy’
‘Gone,’ you said
‘I killed him’
And as your long elegant arm wrapped tighter around my waist,
I imagined your father’s flaccid body powerless to claw back his life
And I was glad

‘They will hang me, if I am caught.
Help me,’ you wept
Your need unlaced the strings of my resolve, like a corset falling to the floor of a bedchamber
I travelled worlds in my mind, history accumulated between us, as if we had not just met
And I fell to my knees beside you

I thought then to flee with you
To run out into the night as your guide
Words could not save us, I understood
They would only condemn us
But, my children
My children, I thought
God had not dimmed the pain of every blow Bartholomew delivered
That I blocked to spare them

Bartholomew’s hands around my neck, and I then thrown to the floor
To his feet, the gleaming shoes, the bright buckles
And my worn black boots, the dirty petticoat that concealed this truth from others
My husband’s eyes as lovely and as lethal as the snow staring down at me
How easy to slip upon their beneficence
His face had never aged
Like a cruel child; the son of a Minister who killed his wife
I thought that love could save him
But if I could not save him, then how could I save you I asked myself
And my children, my children, the angels wept
How could I help you who I did not know, who said he had killed a man
For you might kill me too
Why had you inspired me to pay such a price?

I considered you
Your face balanced precariously between youth and age, so fragile
You would wither, like me
Not built to last
And I thought to escape
For I should not have come
I should not have touched your virgin skin with my aged hands

I ran to the door
But the wind blew me back; a vicious blast,
Dust and filth sprayed into my wounds,
The silks and vellums were scattered from the shelves
And for one brief instant, amidst the butterflies and insects and flowers above my head
It was as if the wings of moths beat wildly
I pray you hear them now in your soul
If He exists
Then I am a Godless woman
The reason why you are condemned to hang tomorrow
Because I stayed
Not out of pity, but for myself
My eyes had not witnessed beauty in years
From the first, I feasted on you

You were the bastard child of William
Come from France, your mother dead
So your father had railed at you the night before
For he was fresh dead
He had beaten you, like me, where he worked, where he drank
Each blow that of a disappointed man
Pushed you out the door, bludgeoned your head and as you lunged at him
So he had fallen into the port
Drowned; his screams still echoing in your ears

Your price, your eyes
For the day ended in them with his blows
Your shelter, a shop as dark as dusk
The candle I dared not hold a taper to lest they find you
You asked for my name
Esther Langlois, I said
I used always my family name, Bartholomew would not allow me his
And that is how I met you
As a virgin, untouched
Reborn for you
‘I have not told another soul,’ you said
‘Then why do you tell me?’
‘I feel as if I can see you’
‘What do you need?’
‘To escape’
You spoke the words of a child
I should not have cradled you, but I did
On the floor
Your golden head heavy from the pain
In my lap

I prayed you would die in my arms
I think now that if God gives us nothing else
We should die in the arms of those we have loved best
And I loved you from the first
Although I should not have dared
And I almost thought you might love me back
If I sold myself to you as I had to other men
But this time, not with my body, with words
With deceit

‘Who are you,’ you asked
‘I am a writer,’ I said. ‘I make books. Tiny books, adorned with jewels that sit in the cabinets of Queens.’
How easy to fool the young who have not lived …
‘If you could make for me a book, I could leave in the night.
I could sell it. As you are famous,’ you said
‘And there is a story that I want my life to tell
‘All I cannot see
You could write that for me to take’
But you could not leave, you could not see
Poor boy
The materials piled high around me
Those for which I had bartered my body
Now free to me

I had not thought when I arrived that you would be so perfect
I had not reckoned on a soul mate in the dust
Had you been ugly, like William, your father
What I had done would have proven easy
I, who had betrayed you before we even met

I could have choked you as you lay there
Before they came
But instead I kept you
For I knew that once you were gone
My life was spent
You arrived as the last drop of my happiness from a rude spoon
And I the moth who feasted on the tear

Upon your tender cheek I dared to place my hand
A warren of old burns upon its back
My head hung heavy as my heart
How I prayed you would die in the night
I looked to the black window
I could not see out
I had known no greater sorrow at that moment
When I honoured your request

I told you of the world as it should have been for someone as beautiful as you

‘There is a tree,’ I said
‘A golden tree, in the centre of the square
And the butterflies rest on him
They tell him stories of the lands where they have flown
For he cannot see
And so they are his eyes’

‘So, I was not wrong,’ you smiled
‘I was right to come here, to ask this of you’
And I thought you would sleep but you listened on
‘But there is one he loves best,’ I said
‘One very different
Her wings are purest white
And he can hear them beating in his soul wherever she journeys
‘A moth,’ you said
‘They feast on tears
How merciful to bear the suffering of others’

I told you what I saw through your eyes, as I imagined them to be
And, even now, I can think of no greater privilege to have looked through them for however brief a time
I told you of the women, dressed in beautiful colours and silks, like butterflies
But the women wore no colour
And there was a sapling too weak to grow, a struggling waif in the centre of the square
The only truth was that briefly I believed it all too, every word that left my mouth
And of the tree that shimmered in gold
That my soul flew towards
My wings beating in the night

It is a story we did not finish
So I inscribe each page
With these truthful words
I who once loved you
However briefly
Let you go now
I write for you the truth of me
That I killed your father as I will now kill you

It was I who pushed him in the water of the dock for beating you
Not you
And I watched you stagger into the shop
But I could not sleep, nor think of anything else
I worried about you, I wept for you
And I came because I loved you from the first
From the first blow I witnessed
You were part of me

This is why I stayed that last night
To talk of moths and golden trees
A life imagined
More beautiful than the one lived
And when they did find us, as I knew they would
My husband, those judges
I could not save you
As I wished, the reason why I had come back
To spare someone who had not lived
Such noble sentiments
That died in the face of reality

For I am a weak woman
And I was confronted with death, with punishment
‘My children,’ I cried
When my husband accused me of adultery with you
But no, you are so wrong, I pleaded with them as they dragged us apart
I had witnessed you kill your father
I was your captive
It was not my choice to stay with you
I said
I lied
And now, Philippe, you will die because of me

In this dark place they have brought me, this prison cell
I have confessed upon the parchment this lie
As penance, I have crafted this book in the days and hours since they took you
My pockets heavy with the goods I stole as you slept
You did not betray me as I did you
When they asked about me
You said only ‘She drank my tears’

But I a devil be
And these past weeks I have accepted my fate
I cannot pardon myself for my sins
My life is meaningless without your golden grace
So if you must die, then I must too
For adultery

Do not forgive me
But die in the night, so I will not witness you hang tomorrow, before I do
In the square where the tiny sapling grows
Let me dream of you
Let me think of you a golden tree where the butterflies rest
I cannot watch them fell you

But I am happy for one thing
The kiss I placed upon your brow
My dry lips upon your tender skin
I could have been young again
Endless field of lavender might have stretched for miles beyond my window
No pages of my life might yet have turned
No glass had spilled water over a page of my story, to render the words indecipherable

I draw our portraits last
There is a story that I want my life to tell
I write beneath mine
As upon my back I paint a pair of wings
I shape the letters beneath, despite the pain
I can still hear the echo of your voice breathe life into each and every one
You who I paint in a golden tree
More golden than the sun
And there you will have a view of the world from God’s eyes
But I cannot lie to you in heaven
So I erase my face
Know me only as you imagined me
Spare me nothing

When I hang
I will be crushed underfoot, a meaningless object
No-one will miss
I will die with this book against my heart
My penance is that others will find it and know me by my words
These words I write last

I was the Moth

***

I heard a choked sob as I concluded Esther’s story at the Trianon. The guests began to stir, although no-one spoke. ‘But I am not finished,’ I announced, downing the last of my champagne and leaning forward:

‘How the Queen loved the story of Esther,’ I said, meaningfully, angrily, building to my ultimate revelation. ‘The romance of it – perhaps felt more acutely as she was enjoying a grande passion with Count Fersen at the time – captured her imagination entirely: oh, to die for love. As I will now die, thought the Queen as the crowd surrounding the guillotine chanted saloppe.’

And here I met Antoinette’s gaze, but her expression was a portrait of ambivalence.
‘These are the thoughts that soothed the Queen,’ I said, more intent now than ever on revenge, ‘as she waited patiently, her head resting on the block, amidst the bloodthirsty spectators. So far from that idyllic village of the Trianon, of lambs and flowers and blue and pink Sèvres china, where she would pour tea and fresh cream from the dairy into priceless teacups for her friends. That lovely world of fairy tales and dreams, where the good prevailed and the beautiful slept soundly, and brilliantly coloured hot air balloons looked down on the earth below, with a view from God’s eyes.

‘And somehow the Queen felt as if she was looking upon herself from on high as the executioner demanded her last words – her crude muslin dress, soiled with filth, spread out all around her and her shorn head hanging over the block –, for her soul had already departed. So it was as if she listened with the angels to her last words:

“‘I was the Moth.’

‘And as the guillotine came down on her neck, and the crowd speculated that the Queen was mad and, of course, a whore, the Queen remembered Esther Langlois who had suffered as greatly as she. Esther, who had erased her own face from the page of her story in her sorrow, just as the Queen was erased from the story of Versailles, to be replaced with the image of who the People thought she was. But it was no matter for the Queen had never truly lived there at the Palace, not in her heart. No, her true happiness had been the Trianon, where she was as ordinary as they. And borne on that fact, the Queen did not feel the blade’s touch, because she was far away somewhere, flying over the meadow flowers, while her children played with the lambs, and the Mistress of the Children, the Duchesse de Lerrison, spun in circles on the lawn to fall dizzily on the grass, and where Count Fersen had loved only her.

‘Had she lived, perhaps the Queen might have realised that most of the things we value are destroyed in the end. And had she been watching over herself when the book tumbled from the pocket inside the Bible she had clutched to her chest, she may have then
reconciled herself to its fate, accepting that all things shift and alter with time, and this was
simply the book’s time to change. For the book lay serenely on the ground untainted by the
blood of the Queen’s body. Not even the executioner reaching for the Queen’s severed head
and tramping carelessly towards it in his heavy boots could threaten its silk and golden
threads, its vellum pages, its universe of colour. For something in it was destined to survive,
to allow its story to continue, to find another mind that would love it as she once had.

‘It was then that a miracle occurred. For seconds before the executioner’s tread
would have ground it into the dirt, an urchin child held in his mother’s arms at the front of
the mob was so amazed by its sparkling brightness that he snatched for it, and rescued it
from destruction.

‘“Mama, mama,” he gurgled, thrusting the book against her chest, the first and only
toy he would ever possess. For the briefest of instances, his mother, as impoverished and
deprived of joy as he, almost allowed him to keep it, transfixed by its rare beauty and
realising that something so rare must have belonged to the Queen. But poverty had denied
her any choice in life other than to claw what sustenance she could from the discarded waste
of the rich. And what use is hope, she reasoned. I have nothing and my son will surely
follow my other three children into an early grave. So grabbing it from him, she gripped it
tightly in her fist for safekeeping. No, better not to hope, she thought resentfully, despite her
son’s cries of despair as she stuffed it into her pocket. Besides, he won’t be crying when the
sale of this feeds him tonight.

‘Blithely, she went back to cheering the Queen’s death. But her son wept on, for he
would live to grow old, in as abject poverty as she. The difference between them is that he
was haunted by a memory: of the sparkling miniature that seemed to beckon him towards
something more than his lot. And somehow, too, whenever he told the story to the children
he knew as he grew older, although the details had grown hazy, he remained convinced that
amidst that cannibalistic crowd, in thrall to the sight of the Queen’s severed head, he alone
had wept for her: for the promise of a future that had tumbled from her Bible, almost as if she had chosen him.

‘For “Encore, encore! Again, again!” the children always cry, when they hear a story they love.’

***

Antoinette’s guests sat stupefied, reeling in disgust.

‘To the victor, the spoils,’ I said, raising my empty glass.

I would be executed: of this there was no doubt.

But what of it? In truth, I had already been decapitated.

Besides, whether the monarch did it or the sans culottes; my destiny was assured.

Even in this exile, I can still hear Antoinette’s sobs at my dark tale: but her tears that evening had lost the power to move me. For with each strangled, wrenching cough, all I could think was ‘but I did as you asked, my Queen. I told you a story: the one you stole from me …’

I doubt Maman could have been more proud as I stood up from the table amidst that scandalised hush, where I heard the words that could have been, for me:

...I think of you every minute of every hour, your violet eyes, your summer soul. I pine for you, I dream of you, I hold you fast against my heart. My love, my perfect love, always with me ...

I permitted myself one last look to Fersen, my greatest love, acknowledging what had prompted such misery in Antoinette’s heart, far beyond the story.

To the victor the spoils.

His face was covered in my violet lipstick: a colour Antoinette had never worn, preferring to leave them bare.

You see, she had never considered herself to need any.

**
She didn’t sleep in my arms again. At the time, I cared very little for the latter fact. But, of course, I did. I was distracted, though, by the pamphlets declaring me the devil incarnate, a Sapphic temptress who had practised tribaldry with the Queen; all of this printed in bold letters for my children to read, which proved my final undoing. For there’s something about death that makes written legacies matter: especially those pages impervious to time and decay. I couldn’t raise my head for the shame.

I longed for the end, as I do now, with the passion I used to reserve for lovers. I wasn’t being dramatic: I merely succumbed to the inevitable realisation at which all great beauties arrive. When you cease to exist, when eyes no longer remark you, where once they worshipped, what point is there in living?

I had proof of this conviction. For Fersen had made no attempt to contact me. Indeed, after the first hour on the night I told my story at the Trianon, when I retired to the bed I used to share with Antoinette, I gave up. For his only response was to find me, wherever I was and say, *It has always been you.*

I did not need to ask myself why? I had learned the answer long before: I was lacking in something. I had been second to the Queen, second to a wife, foolish enough to parade my peccadilloes in public and that was that.

No, the only one who came for me was Antoinette.
THE VICEREINE

A few hours, here or there with my children: this is all I asked. But Severine possessed no compassion. After the Camargue – an act that had figured as a caution to you about the harm that could befall Nico and Angelica, if you chose to be with me – Severine had issued her ultimatum in Antibes: she would expose us if we left, tell the world the truth about our bastard children, about Andrew: the same ploy she had used to become your wife after I was taken back to London from Germany to testify at Andrew’s trial that awful Christmas, even though you begged her not to, to let you go. For you were intent on coming to me, whether you would be arrested, or not: yet, Severine had convinced you, ‘You cannot do that to your children. They did not ask to be born. If you marry me, they will become legitimate, we can change your name, we can move. Somewhere nobody knows us …’

In Antibes, neither of us cared for our reputations, but Nico and Angelica would be tainted if we ignored Severine’s edict, and my face was internationally recognised. There was nowhere we could hide. Severine had purposefully offered us the freedom to explore our past together, to allow our unique bond to deepen. Then, as retribution, she had played her trump card, aware of the agony such a separation would precipitate. After the Camargue, I had no choice but to stop seeing you. The alternative, to meet in secret, forbidden publicly to one another, I couldn’t do, despite how you pleaded; ‘Please, Julia; please, my darling, you could stay close; don’t leave us. Maybe we can find another way? My Beauty …’ Yet, I could not risk our children.

For me, it was intolerable, nightmarish; for in Severine’s version of our story; she was their mother, and I little more than a bystander. I had been given six months. Six months of my perfect babies, who learned to dance on our feet and listened to the only story I could tell: of golden trees and moths. It was all I was destined to give. Such was the death sentence Severine dictated: without you, without them, I had to die inside, to become once
more a paper cut out; a projection on the cover of a newspaper; to feel nothing, to exist solely from one moment to the next.

In Antibes, we met to say goodbye on the beach. And I watched it slip away, our future, like a piece of paper taken up by a gust of wind upon which was scribbled something important, a final request or a crucial promise; lost now, along with any hope or consolation the words had promised. Yet, what remained constant was the love between us. I felt your despair, the worry of what was now for you a relentless burden: to have known something so true, to see the fork in the road, but not to move. How cruel is life, I thought. ‘But at least you can be with our children,’ I consoled you. Your head was bowed over the table, your hand placed on top of my own, as if you had deliberately concealed my emerald wedding ring. Ruined, I thought. And they say that women are the most emotional.

I could see that you were becoming someone else, in order to go on: the private you; the one lesser, ill-accomplished, forever striving but not succeeding, snickered about behind envious hands, then trampled on by the ruthless for being too compassionate, too kind: my Toby. My Toby was disintegrating by necessity. After me no-one would accept you in the same way. So you would retreat soon into yourself, forced to assume once more the mask of a proper French man, to speak to me as if we were strangers, to lose me again.

But first there was this truth, so rarely glimpsed or given. The umbrellas dotting the beach in even rows down to the sea flapped blue and white against the skyline, a sudden gust of wind interrupting the beach boys with their rakes as they turned their heads to stop the sand from spraying up into their faces. The curtain was falling on a dream, the sky spoke of autumn, death. And do the Gods love or do they pity us, I thought, looking out into the semi-circular bay surrounded by jagged cliffs, an opening in its centre to the Mediterranean. We are so dwarfed by this landscape, against these fates, how did we think to triumph? But I don’t have to look. I don’t have to give the Gods that, I resolved, closing my eyes. This doesn’t have to be the last time I ever see Toby; that can be yesterday.
And I have already survived yesterday and lived on.

I felt your hand pull away and heard the screech of the chair against the stone floor as you stood up. I turned my face up to the sky, and willed myself to stay blind. Not to see, not to see again.

‘Please give me this,’ I said, ‘I can’t watch you leave. Just go. So that when I open my eyes, nothing has changed. I won’t have to remember you making a choice that does not take me with you. You own every part of me; my heart, my every thought, it is your arms I will long for when I die; but just disappear now, as if I have turned the page of a book and find that somebody has forgotten to write you onto the next. Like the day on the Wilhelmstrasse, when I turned back, and you weren’t there; as if a slide had slipped over the old scene and you never were. You see, in this way, you haven’t let me down. You are as good and kind as always. I have had to give up everything I’ve ever loved, please don’t let Severine take this from me too.’

You kissed me on my forehead, and I reached for you. For a split second I prayed that something might change; perhaps Severine would die, maybe Harry would, who knew what might be around a corner … We stayed there like that, everything unspoken but acknowledged. The waiting staff knew better than to trespass, sensing the privacy of the scene, of the departure. And then you swiftly pulled back, almost regimentally, and I was alone once more.

I felt a sudden wave of relief; it hadn’t been so terrible. Perhaps, it wouldn’t hurt as dreadfully as I feared; a dull ache, an awareness that I had granted you and my children a better future by allowing Severine to keep you. But then in the still late afternoon, I heard you calling for me from far away, and I understood that I would yearn for that call all the days of my life:

‘My Beauty,’ you said.

And I opened my eyes, accepting that God at least had shown me one mercy:
You were gone.
We said goodbye, Antoinette and I, in the hallway at the Trianon, as we wept in one other’s arms. I owned no remorse for the tit-for-tat blow I had dealt. I fancied she might even admire my ruthlessness; after all, Antoinette had been my inadvertent teacher. No, considering what had passed, our parting seemed suitably noble, with nothing required of either of us than recognition of our old friendship: a friendship that never really was.

I was to be smuggled out dressed as a maid and flee to Switzerland, where salvation would await: if I made it that far, of course. There was no guarantee. The carriage was ordered, Antoinette clasped my hand tightly, and I heard the sound of the wheels on the gravel and welcomed the cold, dank night beyond the pale grey door, behind which such joy had once reigned, eager to be gone.

It was over, that benevolent dream; time to fasten the lock on the miniature. Yet, as I have learned not all voices die in the night; despite how we shutter our ears, our hands pressed fast against them lest some strain of what is lost filter through to remind us of the past we have forsaken. No, some haunt us and whisper on:

I looked up and saw the little angel, my Dauphin, in his sailor suit appear at the top of the staircase.

‘Encore, encore!’ he cried, as he used to at the end of my stories. ‘Again, again!’

And the sorrow of his voice felled me like Esther’s Golden Tree. For it came to me then that the unrivalled fairy tale of the Trianon would continue safely on without me; there would be another Mistress of the Children. And my Dauphin, who I cradled on my lap when I was young and beautiful and full of promise, would forget me. For that is what children do:

After they stop believing.
As the carriage pulled away, I looked back in the dusk. There she stood, the original child of my heart: my divine Antoinette, all grown up. Yet, her figure was consumed amidst the shadows as we hurtled towards different destinies, East and West; as if she was retreating behind the clouds of one of those dusty mirrors in the Hall: until she almost ceased to be, an invidious metamorphosis.

No, all I could see was my little shepherdess’s small white hand held aloft in farewell, and that miniature glistening unrepentantly on around her neck.

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I think now of the fairy tales. Now that I am no longer the Duchesse de Lerrison, but Madame Erlanger, the new identity I assumed on arriving in Switzerland. Now that I no longer wake to the gilt and rococo swags adorning my bedroom, the fuchsia pink and turquoise silks covering my body as I slept; nor rush to Antoinette’s side, to discuss the revels of the previous evening and to plan and conceive of more. Now that I wake to a view of snow-capped mountains, instead of the immaculate symmetry of the endless lawns and fountains and imported lime trees of Versailles.

Yes, I think of them all – Puss in Boots, Cinderella, The Princess and the Pea. I think of the old ladies, venerated for an instant by a charming man who indulged in make-believe. And I understand what I could not as a young girl. For I am nearly their age and increasingly sit alone in farther corners of dimmer rooms, where the only light I find is in this pool of memory into which I dive like Calypso: a memory of pale Empires, and rare moths, and, always, Il était une fois … Once upon a time …

There is a story that I want my life to tell. I was not prone to sentiment in my youth. I was far too vain. How could I comprehend the poignancy of what I was given in that idyll into which I was born, cradled in a golden crib? How could I know what it is to wake to a barren day, devoid of pleasure, where every minute serves as a reminder of how far I am from what I once held dear: and why do we only learn such crucial truths after it is too late?
We age, we go on; we try to forget all that causes us pain. Yet, it is impossible. For there are the stories that linger on in our breasts: those that tell of what once was, and will not be again. The words we will not hear, the promises we can no longer make.

Yes, I think now of those promises and how much I long to keep them.

***

I was to see Fersen again: here in Switzerland, just last month, in November. It has been one year since the massacres in Paris. What bittersweet pleasure to discover his letter on the mat, for I had not received one since before those summers at the Trianon. And there I stood in the hall – for I can afford no maids – and read his request: to come to me, at last.

To speak of Antoinette, to tell me of what they had done to her.

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On the morning of his arrival, I contemplated my reflection in the mirror, and was almost convinced that I was her again: that young woman with the violet eyes who smelled of bluebells and had been so wronged, the evening I lured him from Antoinette. It was something in my expression, a hint of anticipation; a fundamental faith that things would end well. For such pain, we would be rewarded. Why else would Fersen travel so far otherwise?

I grew convinced of this. For Fersen was as divine and solicitous as ever, his warmth and gentleness as overpowering to me then as before: Please, something in me cried, each time he looked at me. Let it begin now.

I wept, of course, at the news he brought, of our old belles-amies about whom we shared our memories late into the night. For, even from so far away, I could not escape their barbaric fates. The tragedies that if I had only foreseen when I was young would have altered every single thing I did. So foolish isn’t it, what preoccupies our time when we haven’t fathomed it will end, one day. Why we envy anyone, given what I’ve learned, is a mystery.
I was grateful that I heard the stories from his soft lips. God blessed me with that as, one by one, the lives of my friends were stolen anew. How brave Fersen was and how unjust that he should have to be my messenger. A penance I shared by permitting myself l’exquise douleur of pretending we were all once more sitting around the table underneath the silk tent at the Trianon. And to each lost friend, as Fersen told me what had befallen them, I watched as they left the table and said goodbye.

Goodbye Princesse de Lamballe, and your devoted soul; who followed Antoinette to Paris and prayed for her every day; whose house the sans culottes stormed; who they raped and dragged into the street to tear limb from limb; and whose severed head they hoisted on a pole outside Antoinette’s cell at Les Invalides, to let her know that she would be next. May God bless and keep you. Goodbye.

Goodbye to you, my Bröglie, and your duplicitous heart: who they burned alive with his treasured horses, while his children watched. Goodbye to those children who they drowned, one by one. Goodbye to the wife I betrayed, the Comtesse. The Comtesse who survived: to kill herself.

Goodbye to my first husband from your June Bride; who staggered out of the windowless cell where he had lived for four years, drowning in his own filth, into that midsummer morning to find they had lied; he was not free, the Revolution had not ended; the scaffold stood in wait for him at the centre of the soulless mob, the blood of the wife who replaced me pooling on the ground at his feet as they kicked her body aside to make room for his own. Goodbye my old Duke, and thank you for my children.

And I cannot say it, please God tell me this is not true and stop me …

But goodbye my beautiful little boy, my Dauphin, in his lovely sailor suit for whom I twirled in fields and fell at his baby feet; who laughed and slept and breathed warm breath, and who I held against my heart; who I loved as my own and for whom I told story after story of heureux pour toujours, of endless hope. I hope he thought of them; I hope those
stories consoled him when the beasts took him from Antoinette and locked him a tower, and forced him to drink alcohol every night at six-years-old. The monsters who turned that exquisite innocent into an idiot, until he died at ten, which finally ended the appalling sexual abuse he had endured.

My darling boy, my golden child, I pray there are fairy tales where you are now; I pray in your soul you can hear the beating of my wings, who loved you so, who loves you forever more.

Farewell to you all, my beloveds. And may God forgive me.

This is what remains: the knowledge that all the things that mattered so much would have mattered so very little. Had I only known.

But there was still something left for me to learn.

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In the aftermath of his confessions, we derived a strange comfort, Fersen and I. And in the face of such atrocities, to what else could we cling?

Beside the fire, I experienced this intense impulse to smother his face with kisses, to acknowledge and avow to anything he might demand: for he had come back and this was all I could care about.

So I did. I threw myself at Fersen’s feet and pulled myself up against his chest and kissed him endlessly without drawing breath until I thought I might suffocate from passion. And as I drew back to search his face for any sign that he held me in the same regard, I discovered it again, the answer I craved. It was there in his eyes; that shone only for me and immediately disintegrated into pools of tears as I rested my head against his chest. It was enough. He didn’t need to say a word: I understood this. It was all enough.

Yet, as I returned to my chair, I noticed something. I thought suddenly of the Comtesse d’Orsay, how young she had appeared in Versailles’ dusty mirror compared to the young Duchesse, covered in bird filth: a mental image that ended the brief sliver of ecstasy I
had wrested from Fersen. For I realised he had not been looking at me, but the picture of Antoinette hanging on the wall behind me.

‘You still love her?’ I asked, as I broke down. ‘Please, don’t tell me that. Please,’ I begged. ‘Can’t we console one another? We could pretend to be young again. That miniature was intended for me. Maman told me. Please.’

‘Antoinette died because of what I felt for you,’ he said, staring into the middle distance, his voice strangely dissociated as if it had happened to someone else.

‘We fought,’ he said, ‘on the road to Montmedy to meet the leaders of the counter-revolution when I tried to help her and Louis and the children escape. We fought about your lipstick: nobody else wore that colour. That’s why we were delayed, and the Revolutionaries were able to apprehend us and arrest them in Varennes. I could not save her: I watched her die because I loved you more. And she knew that.’

‘What kind of God does this?’ I protested, but I could not countenance any more sorrow: I was not of my right mind; I craved only hope. ‘She was so divine, so young. My darling, Antoinette … But please,’ I sobbed, crawling over to wrap myself around his legs, ‘what else is there for us? Can’t we love one another and mourn her together? All those years, my darling, all those letters. The miniature you were to give to me, and she took it. We can’t change the past, but after everything you wrote, won’t you stay?’

He looked at me, in agonised curiosity; ‘What letters?’

‘Why, the letters you wrote to me in secret.’ In dismay, I scrambled to make sense of his ignorance, ‘the one in the Opéra, that first night you met Antoinette. You always signed them ‘A.’ ‘A’ for Axel, your name.’

Fersen sat back in his seat. His mind had made a connection, but he considered me seriously; I feared that I might have been too inconsiderate with my outburst. What were we both but raw wounds, filled daily with salt? I almost told him to forget what I’d said, but then:
“A” for Antoinette. At the Opéra she asked me to pass you a note, without you knowing, while she sneaked onto the stage. It was from her to you.’

All the things we think we know. All the things we miss.

Child of my heart: who loved me more than I could imagine.

On my knees, I looked up to her portrait, to her guileless innocence, the unbridled joy of her smile each time we met; I, her favourite, her sister. And of course it made sense then; what had motivated her. Not malice, but desire. Who she thought she was by loving Fersen: me. And in her every letter, she confided the forbidden love she harboured. Fersen was as close as she could dare approach; she imagined herself in his place, not mine. So she could love me, as she desired.

*Maman* must have seen him in the box behind me and miscounted four of her elegant fingers to arrive not at *quatre*, but at *cinq*. And I grieved unutterably for the story she had believed, the Princess Who Slept Upon a Pea.

‘But I haven’t finished yet …’ he said.

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I wouldn’t have asked, but he told me anyway. How the moment my lips touched his he knew I was not Antoinette, but the woman he loved most, who had broken his heart with the Comte de Broglie at the behest of the Fairies.

I had returned to his embrace, the two of us on the floor in front of the fire, and oh how I prayed. In spite of myself, you know how I prayed that finally, finally …Could there be a way? But if I have come by any wisdom, it is that we cannot wholly assume the souls we wish to covet, despite our yearning. And Fate decreed this when he said,

‘You know, you were the only one she saved.’

I nodded as the tears coursed down my cheeks, understanding; the Gods had spoken now: we would leave this life with honour. The time for us had passed.

But maybe in Heaven, I told myself.
He kissed my hand, bent over it as if he would not let go. I reached to smooth his golden hair, as I used to as a girl in the perfect grey light of Versailles, and for just one exquisite moment more, I thought of bluebells.

Nothing more needed to be said.

And so we left it at that.

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Sometimes, I look out to the garden and the withered tree in this place where it is always winter, and think of the story by Esther, such as it was: of *The Golden Tree and the Moth*. And I wonder, as ever, at the minds of those who can transform the depravity of the world with words. I look at her in her pair of white wings, and I understand something elemental: we are both moths. At such times, I can almost believe again in hope; I can make the tree appear golden, and adorn it with butterflies, the souls of my lost friends. And I can imagine a sunlit day and a cool breeze, and the children at my feet and the stories I have for them beneath its golden branches.

For a moment, I can believe. But it is no use. For I am condemned to see what is: my ageing face in a mirror, ploughed with lines of regret so deep I almost want to fall into them and hide forever from my sins. And, besides, there is no-one to listen to my stories. My children are dead and my friends too. I tell them only for myself.

I have nothing left of Antoinette’s, beyond the pram: the one the *sans culottes* left to rust in the pond at the Petit Trianon. Fersen brought it to me when he visited, along with this miniature I wear around my neck, which Antoinette asked him to return: ‘It was never mine,’ she told him, on the morning of her death, when she was granted one last visitor. And she chose him.

‘Ask Yolande to safeguard it. I loved it so. And the Dauphin, of course. You must take him to her, wherever she is, once this Revolution is over. I am to die to spare his life. It is my privilege, but I cannot say goodbye to him. This is why I did not choose my son as my
last visitor. Of course, you understand,’ she had added, lowering her head to weep over
Fersen’s gentle hands.

   Child of my heart, this I have done for you. I have treasured this book, too, locking
it into a drawer every night. And I have protected the Dauphin from harm, or what is left of
his precious soul to me: the little Sèvres pram. For he died one week after you.

   Each day, I walk it around the garden, as if you are once more at my side, just as we
used to when he was a babe. I walk blind, which is to say I keep my eyes closed. For there
is nothing here that speaks of Versailles and to look is to accept this hideous truth.
Sometimes, there is enough of a warm breeze and the scent of bluebells to lull me into
thinking I am still there, still young, and if I can bear it, I allow myself to stare down at the
gold and pink and blue Sèvres porcelain handle of the pram. For it is there that sometimes I
think I see it, the glint of your girlish hand, smothered in jewels, as you reach to caress my
own. And we smile down into the pram at the sleeping boy, and we wish him all of the joy
in the world.
‘...we wish him all the joy in the world.’

And, with that, the Vicereine released her hand from the miniature around her neck and bowed her head.

‘Oh dear, dear,’ blubbered the Pillar Box. ‘Oh, I won’t sleep a wink. That was so sad, too sad: especially for a farewell party. I mean to say.’ And then she burst into sobs anew.

In the dwindling candlelight, the Impeccable One found herself confronted by her reflection in a dusty mirror, and nearly collapsed in despair: for she looked so old. Yet, upon turning from her image, she was confronted by a perhaps more unforgiving mirror as she noticed the Deputy: the momentous love from whose loss in Antibes she had not recovered, and nearly collapsed again. The Deputy sensed that she was watching, as did his seething wife. But then the Impeccable One was always somehow in his peripheral vision: his first thought and his last wherever he might roam. And this, despite his fawning over the Vicereine, his wife understood too. Her one consolation was that the Impeccable One was no longer a Beauty. Save, that is, for in her husband’s mind, where she remained incomparable.

In spite of herself, the Impeccable One ached for him to acknowledge her. But, of course, he could not. And aren’t we all Duchess of Lerrison’s in the end, she conceded regretfully, as she resumed her impeccable bearing and prepared, once more, to make do and get through …

Well, maybe not all, she reconsidered, regarding Lady Amelia. For the little one’s eyes remained dry.

There is something about obliviousness, especially a hardness that derives from a lack of empathy, which detracts exponentially from a pretty face. At least pretend, thought the Impeccable One. But no, Lady Amelia’s refined jaw was set against mourning the
Duchess of Lerrison – or the Vicereine, who had not moved, the six hills of Simla lost in the
tblack beyond her.

‘There’s something you should know,’ the Impeccable One remarked, stopping
Lady Amelia from leaving. And particularly stopping her from leaving to go and speak to
whom she suspected she was going to speak.

‘I saw them once – I haven’t breathed a word of this before – Julia and de Lerrison,
on one of those Sundays, when they used to have the “dance lessons”,’ she smiled. ‘In the
ballroom at the du Cap. They’d not closed the door properly, and I peeked in. His children
were there, and her daughter, although she was playing with a doll. But something struck
me immediately: his children just adored the Vicereine.

‘The poppets were wrapped around her feet, absolutely in awe, because while Julia
is beautiful, back then she was also very, very pretty too. And that is rare; her face used to
light up like a Christmas tree whenever de Lerrison appeared. And I thought, you're a good
soul, especially if children love you like that because children have great instinct for people.
And I felt so sorry for her because of the rumours, all the time. Just nastiness. And him,’ she
reflected warmly, ‘settled, worth something; at peace: well, he had someone to live for. It all
made sense when she appeared. You see, although de Lerrison looked the part – this was
back when he dyed his hair black. It’s so much nicer, blond,’ she quibbled. ‘I don’t know
why he changed it. Perhaps a touch vain … anyway, he didn’t fit in. Not quite. The others
used to laugh, actually; he was a bit of a joke. Were it not for Julia, he would have
amounted to nothing in the diplomatic corps. It’s not that he was lacking; far from it; nice,
lovely, capable probably of far more than he’s achieved, but not taken seriously. You see,
he wished the best for people: he amused them, then they moved off to those who were
more useful. De Lerrison had no killer instinct.

‘That’s why, you see: Julia didn’t fit in either despite her raiment, so in each other
they found a haven, which proved to be everything for them. And I can tell you this, he was
not the same man after Antibes. But then so few are after something like that,’ she said, despondently.

‘But I want to tell you about the rest of that afternoon,’ she continued purposefully to Lady Amelia, who seemed, of a sudden, rather imperious. ‘I listened outside the ballroom because Julia was telling them “her” story – of The Golden Tree –, and I stayed until the end because I was absolutely entranced. Every sentence was a song, in her adaptation. I was convinced then that it was total lies about Andrew in the papers: that story belonged to her; she lived it, felt it, there could be no doubt. How bloody the world is, I thought, and particularly because then I saw his children jump up and down and cry ‘Again, again!’ and her face, oh,’ the Impeccable One, placed a hand over her mouth as if she might cry, ‘her pretty, little face. She was so touched, and de Lerrison – well,’ she shook her head, ““My Beauty,” that’s what he said. “My Beauty.””

Lady Amelia inched to her left slightly and wondered how much the Impeccable One had had to drink. What it was to do with her, she had no idea.

The Impeccable One grew sombre, and sat up tall. ‘But then I went downstairs and found Severine sitting in the courtyard, her neck craned back, staring up. With those eyes,’ she shuddered. ‘She couldn’t see into the ballroom – it was a few floors up – but she just waited there, watching …what she imagined. And I was literally ashamed of myself. I mean, they were Severine’s children Julia was dancing with – and Julia had everything. The whole scene I had witnessed metamorphosed and I had a completely different perspective. Not that my sympathy for Julia and de Lerrison diminished, but I realised that no decent man could leave those children. Nor did Julia have any claim to them because she shared such an extraordinary love with de Lerrison. Oh, it was all too unseemly,’ she despaired.

‘But, anyway, my point is: Severine has haunted me; that I had no compassion for her. To have to listen to your children laughing with the woman your husband is betraying you with. It taught me a valuable lesson about judgement.’
‘Is that what you wanted to tell me?’ queried Lady Amelia, making finally to leave.

‘Well, I’ll leave it to you to decide,’ announced the Impeccable One. And with a very sharp tug pulled the young girl back down beside her on the banquette. ‘It didn’t all end in Antibes. There was one more meeting to come. In Scotland, at the estate of my dearest friend, the Chatelaine …’

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It was just another baronial hall, just another imposing walnut-panelled room, offset by an orange and black sky encroaching menacingly upon the floor to ceiling windows. Everywhere Julia turned was taxidermy and dust and oil paintings that looked sticky to the touch even after hundreds of years. Faded Regency yellow walls and fraying upholstered Chesterfields co-existed in demoralised decay, while rows of dark blue and green leather bound books loomed in proprietorial knowledge over her.

And does anyone even wonder when they look at these faces, she thought staring up at the portraits, how they lived or who they were? Or do they inspire nothing more than a jolt of anxiety that here is a work of art I should know, but don’t, so how to keep the conversation flowing with the Chatelaine?

A wave of nausea forced her to close her eyes and breathe in deeply, the fog of four gins, three Ports and a too light lunch of venison and petit pois descending. Oh God, why did I drink so much, she scolded herself, the beginnings of a blistering migraine percolating. Really, I ought to know better. I hope I didn’t look a fool, she thought, as flashes of the lunch came back to torment her with doubt. But no, I’d had such a splendid time, she reflected. And hadn’t the men all loved me? Hadn’t they?

Julia’s mood darkened in her solitude. Where was Harry? She needed him to reassure her that she had behaved perfectly. He could be such a kind liar when he wanted. At others, he was pitiless. Yet, she would know either way from his reaction. I was only having fun, she rationalised. That’s what you’re supposed to do at these things, isn’t it? She
bit hard on her lip, unable to quell the nagging doubt that something had been damaged irrevocably by her conduct that morning.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the darkened window and recoiled, as ever, from the vision. Suddenly the feathers on her trilby seemed so ridiculously, so self-consciously out of place that she cowered a little under the weight of her inadequacies. And her dress, which had seemed so stylish, chicly tweedy that morning looked like a circus costume. But then I am a clown, she considered, wincing at a spasm of pain in her arm.

She couldn’t shoot. She didn’t even how to load the gun, or when to say ‘pull’ or prevent it from dislocating her shoulder with the powerful ricochet, as it had today. So, here she was, deposited alone in the house, too ridiculous to join in because she was so easily wounded. And all because she’d drank too much at lunch and then insisted on shooting, basking in the attention of the other wives’ husbands.

‘Look at you, like a little, wounded starling,’ said the Chatelaine, poking her head around the door and mooing her lips in affected sympathy, before too keenly turning her attention to the scullery maid’s missive from Cook about the vichyssoise. Julia was always such hard work, and now she had gone and got injured. It was too overwhelming for one morning. ‘With everything I have to do,’ she groused under her breath, loud enough for Julia to hear, hurriedly fleeing the site of her guest’s confinement, tossing mindless platitudes in her wake about resting up and a weak attempt at a joke she thought better of at the last minute: drink through it!

But what does she expect, the Chatelaine considered, assuaging her guilt at leaving Julia there alone; the fun is outdoors, not in, so it can’t be helped if I have to go. It was such a nuisance to have to dash back with her to ring for the doctor, in the first place. And there was the dinner to be arranged, ‘So what am I to do,’ the Chatelaine whispered to the maid, shrugging helplessly. ‘Maybe you could suggest Solitaire if she seems too restless?’ she hazarded with a theatrical grimace, pinning an heirloom diamond brooch onto her Barbour
and jumping into the Packard to remind the keeper that the men must be home by seven, or the beef would spoil.

A starling! Julia fumed. But, of course, she would call me that. Not a dove or a bird of paradise, which would probably have chased her cares away, had the Chatelaine been so kind. Yet, Julia had blotted her copybook one time too many by showing up too showily dressed for the Old Guard’s preference, and had suffered the consequences. Smiles switched on and as quickly off in her presence. But then, it was hardly surprising, justified her detractors. Not after Antibes …

Julia had dressed as perfunctorily as she could for the weekend. Her sole concession to originality had been the bright turquoise silk scarf tied just-so, à la Parisienne, tucked into her hunting jacket and, of course, the hat, plumèd with a fan of peacock feathers. Harry, however, had been aghast at her choice. ‘You can’t wear that!’ he had admonished her, after his wife emerged from their bedroom for breakfast. ‘I mean, honestly, why you must goad them is beyond me.’

Julia had felt her heart palpitate in shameful pulses at his comment, as it often did when dealing with him, whom she had let down terribly. The shadow of the exchange had haunted her. Yet, his concern for her wellbeing, which she had intuited from his statement, was quickly snuffed when he appeared in the room. He was noticeably out of breath, having jogged back from some undisclosed drop-off point, feeling he must, given what had transpired. Smoothing a stray curl from his forehead, he arrived before Julia, his tanned skin damp with perspiration, and frowned at her condition. Again, Julia found herself softening in the face of his concern, ready to punish herself over her many wifely failings, when his apologetic yet peevish tone snapped her out of her torpor.

‘Sometimes, you must concede the field,’ he said, frustrated. ‘All that carrying on this morning and now look where you are. The Chatelaine has enough to do.’
A-ha, she thought, her eyes heavy with contemptuous disappointment: the ‘It’s not them, it’s you’ accusation, that old stand-by. I thought Harry had tired of it … And, at that moment, any residual guilt over her long-standing adoration for another man diminished under the hammer blow of her husband’s disregard and Julia was vindicated once more.

‘Forgive me, Harry. I forgot that it’s only you who is allowed to star,’ she replied, slicing down through the words with her enviably symmetrical teeth.

‘My darling, on occasion, I really rather hate you,’ he said, before marching off down the corridor.

The Chancellor’s Wife, arriving in the hall, took a step back to avoid a near-collision.

‘I do apologise,’ he said, despairingly. ‘Julia and I –’ he began, but the Chancellor’s Wife placed a consoling hand on his arm and nodded in commiseration, as if there was no need for him to continue. Stupendous, another fight, she thought, repressing the glee from her expression.

‘Now, what on earth has caused the impasse this time,’ clucked the Chancellor’s Wife, maternally. ‘And where is the darling girl?’

‘The library.’

‘That’s precisely where the Chatelaine told me to go. The men will be back soon, and we’re to have a drink before dinner. The arrangements got turned upside down with the accident and the arrival of some new guests … So, Harry, would you be so kind?’ she asked, extending a mid-winter of her years arm to him, her wedding ring encased in a dress-size too big cushion of fat. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea where Charles has got to, and I do so hate to enter a room alone. I’ve no idea how I’ll cope if he ever leaves me a widow. Besides, we must try and cheer Julia up before dinner. We can’t have her sulking all evening. I’ve still not recovered from that lunch in Èze,’ she remarked, rolling her eyes half-humorously, half in conspiratorial empathy. ‘Besides, I’m sure it’s just another tempest in a teacup.’
The Chancellor’s Wife beamed triumphantly as Harry smiled sorrowfully and gratefully kissed her hand. His message implicit but clearly understood; Julia is such bloody hard work, help me. And, as ever, whenever she misbehaved in full view of the diplomatic chorus, and The Chancellor’s wife insinuated herself into Harry’s presence to commiserate, she allowed herself to savour the victory of knowing that had he not been such a fool, he could have married her and how much better off would he be: an insight she kept from her dearest friend, the Pillar Box.

Julia could already guess at what had transpired on witnessing Harry re-enter the library, this time on the Chancellor’s Wife’s arm. Such a circumstance was nothing new: an old paramour of her husband’s seeking to be re-invited into the fold of his affections, despite their age, or how little they had cared for themselves thanks to a greater predilection for the outdoors and the cocktail hour. This was something Harry had allowed without resistance during the last two years, to punish her after Antibes, and because he could. 

*Have him*, Julia wanted to rail as she lunged at her cigarette box, forgetting momentarily about her shoulder, and crying out in pain. *Take him and put me out of my misery.* How she longed for such a turn in events, when she could be free and blameless for what she most wanted to do: commit herself entirely to another man. But then, she would be forced to remind herself, a man who offered no guarantees, who left me … It would never happen, however. And this Julia had accepted with every solicitous move on her husband’s behalf to continue to please her, long after her disappointment had settled into acute disgruntlement, to the point where she couldn’t even share the same room. For it was evident to even her worst detractors, that Harry still wanted her, despite his occasional barbs. Nor did he make a secret of his fervent conviction that she belonged to him and no-one else because he had been clever enough to marry her first.

No cigarette to ameliorate her irritation, compounded by the tremendous pain in her shoulder, prompted furious tears to bristle. Those Julia had regrettably no time to brush
away as the Chatelaine unexpectedly flurried back into the room, as if she was the only sight she wished to see now, and trilled, ‘Look who has arrived, dear Julia. You’ll have someone to talk to! Oh, but I didn’t see you,’ she hurrahed to the Chancellor’s Wife and Harry. ‘Super!’ she continued. ‘Tea is so much more fun with a gang.’ And with that, she turned ceremonially to invite in their newest addition.

Julia knew without being told that this guest was the final injury she would sustain that day, far worse than any dislocated shoulder. She could tell from the merry way the Chatelaine beckoned to whoever lingered in the hall, outside. The Chatelaine was too proud, too garrulous, too far removed from her affected ‘so much to do’ personality not to warrant suspicion. So when her eyes met the unreadable gaze of Severine being led by the hand towards her, Julia felt very little. That is save for one thought: he must be here too. And for him, she would endure as much punishment as God cared to mete out.

‘Severine,’ Julia murmured politely, ‘I would stand, but I’m afraid I’m incapable.’ She nodded to her arm and caught the Chatelaine’s eye in recognition of how easily two could play at her favourite game of malice, and made no attempt to blink back the tears sparkling in her own.

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After several moments of deliberate silence, relished by the Chatelaine, and dutifully suffered by Julia, Severine cleared her throat. An action that prompted a flurry of activity from the Chatelaine, snapped out of her Peeping Tom reverie by her newest guest’s tacit admonishment. Possessed of no greater intellectual substance than that of guile, as a smokescreen for her rudeness, the Chatelaine made a comical display of ringing bells and tut-tutting about the dwindling fire, while casting blame upon every single last one of the servants for not following the commands she had failed in the first place to give out. Yet, presently, calm was restored when the tea arrived, and this being Scotland, Dundee cake was sliced into slivers and sugars carefully calculated and deposited into teacups.
'Two, please,' Julia asked sweetly, prompting a reproachful glance from the Chatelaine who was something of a stickler about greed. First husbands, and now sugar, she thought, sucking in her cheeks.

'For the shock,' Julia elaborated apologetically, with sufficient emphasis placed on the 'shock' for the Chatelaine to question whether she was referring to her shoulder or the fact of Severine’s presence.

Julia remained unreadable as the Chatelaine perfunctorily dropped two sugar cubes into her cup and then was forced to suffer the humiliation of actually standing up from the table to bring it to her, as Julia could not reach. Having enjoyed a bonanza of such difficult afternoons, Julia was inured to such awkwardness. At the very start of her marriage, Harry had paraded her around like a show pony at endless diplomatic functions, where she had been pointedly overlooked as irrelevant by the more envious of her husband’s friends and colleagues. Sometimes entire evenings had passed without a single question being levelled in her direction, something that struck Julia in the first instance as curious, but in the latter as wantonly unkind. ‘So distinctly classless,’ she would tearfully protest to an oblivious Harry in the aftermath, who had enjoyed such a pleasant evening as the centre of attention. He could not see what came to be glaringly transparent to Julia: people exalted him only to diminish his wife. And he let them.

Despite her refusal to depart the site of what could feasibly become something very nasty, very quickly, Julia had not once glanced at Severine’s face. Instead, she had focused her attention on Severine’s chin to avoid meeting her eyes. Something Severine noticed. For she had been ostracised due to different reasons in her life, but had had the good sense to pay attention to her excluders to try to understand why.

It’s always the same with these women, thought Severine, stirring her tea and considering Julia, meditatively; all arrogance, all surface, no real bravery. If I were to confront her, she’d either snarl or start to cry. And if a man were present, I would invariably
lose. I sometimes think that the only courage these women possess is when a weak man props them up from behind. A man like my husband who is such a willing scaffold and who would collapse under the disgraceful weight of my presence were I to confront him. Perhaps, that’s why they’re drawn to one another. Neither is the type to catch you when you fall. They sidestep whatever has shattered, walk gingerly around its perimeter, then scurry off in the hope that someone else will take the blame for them. Good people like the Viceroy and I.

The Chatelaine had begun to suspect that the meeting she had arranged between the two women, which had so titillated her at the prospect of the gossip she could glean, was, in fact, entirely futile. Neither seemed inclined to say a word, perhaps subtly punishing her for being so cack-handed. Yet, there was something in that room, immediately evident upon Severine’s arrival, which weighed on her, filling her with foreboding at the notion of saying even the most innocuous word. The entire tinderbox could blow, the Chatelaine realised, counting to forty-five every time she took a sip of tea, to try to end this insanity she had started with a modicum of decorum. And if that happens, what will become of dinner? The seating plan won’t stand a feud. Nor would the beef, already overcooked. It would have been much better if they could have met after dinner, as she had planned. But how on earth was I to know they would come early, she asked herself? So, it’s not my fault at all, the Chatelaine rationalised, forgetting all about counting to forty-five and spilling the remainder of her tea forgetfully down her chin.

While her embarrassment excused the Chatelaine to go to the laundry room to clean her blouse, it also meant that she was forced to bid Severine join her. For it had suddenly dawned that the Chatelaine’s husband would decidedly have a few words to say should he ever discover that his little pet Julia had been left alone with that maddening bitch, Severine, as he called her, for the afternoon. And the Chatelaine was on dangerously thin ice after flirting with one beagle breeder too many in her preparation for the January hunt.
Later, after Julia died, it would strike the Chatelaine that the seeds of her demise were sewn during that brief meeting. Not that she had let herself down in any way, nor had Julia appeared anything other than equal to Severine, but it was almost as if the Chatelaine had allowed a witch into an enchanted kingdom of how she imagined Julia’s life to be, even down to being deliberately ignored. It had all seemed so much more straightforward before Severine arrived for reasons she could never fathom. And because of this, the Chatelaine perhaps mourned Julia more than anyone else when she learned of her death.

After all, the Chatelaine told herself, of what was Julia guilty but love, as she blotted with her hankie the first of many tears at how little there usually was to go round. She would imagine her sitting on the Chesterfield in that beautiful outfit, which seemed to encapsulate that period of the Chatelaine’s life perfectly when she remembered it. She had been contented then, capable. Preparing endless dinners and driving around the glorious estate picking up their friends from the shoot, staying up late into the night and delighting in her growing children, who ran out into the fields each morning while she discussed the plans for the day with Cook. A charmed life, she had been so lucky to lead.

‘Like a little, wounded bird,’ she would say when anyone asked, ‘but the most exquisite bird. And, you know, Julia never really did anything to anyone, but people can be so judgemental, can’t they?’ the Chatelaine would conclude, sighing deeply, and excusing herself from everything as she recalled the one sentence Severine had uttered that day to Julia, which had dictated the Chatelaine’s later loyalties, after Julia’s death:

‘What an extraordinary necklace.’

The Chatelaine had watched as Julia’s hand flew to her neck, to cover a tiny locket, like a little girl protecting herself against an impending blow from someone who was terrifyingly powerful.
THE VICEREINE

I’ll never know why she did it: in Scotland with the Chatelaine. She could have exposed us both when she drew attention to the miniature at my neck. And poor Andrew, what it would have meant for him, if the book were ever found. Yet, nothing further happened, as you appeared then in the library to cheers of congratulation for your bag of 185 partridges.

In a rare moment of kindness, the Chatelaine confided afterwards that my reaction had unnerved her. For I had suddenly seemed very small, very wounded, she said. Tortured, in fact. She had discerned no love in me for you.

In this, she was not mistaken. It had been two years since Antibes, despite your daily letters that went unanswered. The mind plays tricks, you see. And I could not forgive you. Life was brutal, and I had spoken to too many people – servants and so on, people I could trust. Not that I could tell them the whole story – and I’d heard lesser things of you: namely, one criticism I could not avoid: you had made a choice and it was not me. You could have fought Severine, turned the tables, threatened to expose her; but then the perception of others rewrites everything if we allow it, and so those darker thoughts had preyed: of your marriage; of all the things I could not know about you and her, my children; of what went on in those twilit hours that I could not control. I couldn’t forgive you either for returning me to Harry, who you had given cause to punish me, even if it was just for rumours.

So I had ignored you, like a child, despite your anguished smile. Despite the fact that I could see you had fallen to pieces, as I suspected you would, worn now, – somebody who drank slightly too much – carelessly hoping nobody would notice. Yet, with the men back from the shoot there was no opportunity to speak, and the arrival of the doctor had offered a merciful reprieve, fussing over me and blocking you from view.
I find solace in my reaction, as I look back: it had taken you two years to find an alternative, to realise your loss: two years in which my children were denied to me, so my behaviour was justified. I had thought to die inside, but I had nurtured a rage, instead. And, you see, my love, I was also assured that my reaction wouldn’t alter anything between us. For something elemental was confirmed: you had come back: so you had to want to; and how then could I condemn you, given the stakes?

I did not react just yet. And all around the watchful women talked on, *Did you see the way she greeted de Lerrison? How infantile, considering he pulled every string in the book to be posted here: For. Her. Sake. No less! What does she expect, they carped. She’s got no right to ask for anything else. He’s married. Full Stop. So’s she, lest we forget. And, if you steal from others, you get the crumbs from the table, not a feast. Mistresses should always be starving: it’s a wife’s only revenge, inventing excuses to occupy his time so that he can’t spend any time with her.*

But I do have a right, I thought, catching snippets of the gossip as the doctor tended to me: because I loved you then and now, far more than life.

‘It’s hard to fault someone so nice, but he is such a weak man,’ commented the Dowager, standing with the Chatelaine. ‘He’s trying to be so awful that Severine has no choice but to leave and save him the trouble. Silly fool. And hark at her,’ she nodded at Severine. ‘She doesn’t care a whit. All he’s done is given her cause. Now everyone thinks de Lerrison’s at fault. Not to mention Julia, who if she does win him now probably thinks less of him, given the carry-on: what price victory? And *that* is why you shouldn’t count Severine out,’ she concluded, glancing at me to make sure I heard.

No, Severine no longer wanted you. You had told me this in your letters. But she would keep you, regardless. There could be no other outcome. I remember how she smoothed the folds of her ochre and purple skirt and demurely accepted the Chatelaine’s incontrovertibly loud pronouncement that the ladies must dress. ‘God knows what she’ll be
wearing,’ someone snickered. With a suitably indignant glare in the direction of the speaker, Severine had turned to you standing by a chair alone. Your eyes had not left me once, even as the doctor partially obscured your view: the despair in them evident, as you watched me intently for a sign that you mattered. But I had to dress for dinner, so there was no time to speak.

In my room, I barely registered the pain as the doctor swiftly popped my shoulder back in, for it was a part of my life. All it meant was that I could use one of my brightly coloured Hermes scarves as a sling. And it did look so fetching against my green silk biased cut dress, all those oranges and blues and yellows. So different, so Mediterranean: I thought of Antibes and remembered dancing with you in the ballroom, and the swoop and glide of the memory momentarily chastened me. Or perhaps it was the sedative upon which the doctor had insisted. Yet, an effect had taken hold and my anger diminished; for you were here now, which is when I realised – how could I not have realised! – that you must have something to say. How had I not understood what your arrival meant: you would never have come back to leave me: nor offer me my children to take them away again. Not somebody as kind as you. My anger had distorted my judgement, I suddenly felt a pang of terror that I had made some fatal misstep earlier, so I hurried to finish dressing, desperate to be near you; filled with apprehensive joy about what might begin between us.

But what of Severine and Harry, I thought as I rushed down the hall to the drawing-room. Oh, they’ll be all right, they’ve taken so much anyway. It’s time to let the past go, I told myself. That is, until I almost walked straight into Severine standing behind the drawing-room door, who made a point of stepping back obeisantly out of my way: her look of complete contempt exonerating me from civility – or certainty – of any kind.

In the men’s company, the conversation revolved around me, who they considered the loveliest thing they had ever seen, while I sat there fretting over my every choice, my every word when spoken to, filled with anxiety. And all because of Severine, watching me
from a seat by the fire. I tried to ignore her, but I could feel her assessing my every move. There was nothing for it than to drink and flirt – I told myself you would understand why, even as I worried you would not, Severine’s behaviour was giving such credence to the rumours. Might there even be a scene? And what then for you and I? She could still expose us, and what would you do? As ever, despite my endless doubts and frustration, I could still imagine no future without you. Everything depended upon your choice: the reason why you had come, which remained unspoken.

The smoke from the cigars rose and fell in undulating exhalations of breath, high and low, as I waited for a sign. Might you leave Severine? Surely this was why you had come, knowing I would be there. Indeed, as the evening wore on and you calculatedly ignored Severine as if she was invisible, which everyone noted, and made no secret of your regard for me, I was convinced: you had come here, to this dusty chattel of heritage, to be locked into such a room. And this I knew as you finally appeared before me, kissed me on both cheeks and whispered, ‘My Beauty.’

In full view of the chorus, you had claimed me.

And then a hurrah went up. My goodness, I thought, they’re cheering for us. How extraordinary and what to do: why Harry is here and Severine. I clung to you, to that place of peace in you, where I had always been loved and lost, as if all had been revealed. I felt like a bride after the final vow had been exchanged and my veil had been lifted. The masquerade was over, I didn’t care a whit for what people would say: I simply needed you. I could not spend another hour with Harry. This you would forbid anyway. After all, you were here with me, with everything that signified.

But hadn’t I misread it all? Of course, I was mistaken. Of course, I was, wasn’t I, darling? For at that moment, the Chatelaine announced: ‘Three cheers for Severine and de Lerrison. A new baby on the way, how delicious!’
The pain I felt eclipsed everything. But I didn’t let go. I couldn’t. I remember turning my face up to yours, as if I might kiss you, clinging on to the lapels of your jacket, which you allowed without resistance.

And all I could think, my love, was that despite your grace in the scuffed up, well-worn folds of your hunting jacket, you looked so much less a lover, so much less the Toby of my dreams.

No, all I could see was a man who had just shot all of the birds from the sky.
The Impeccable One stood up and stretched languidly. The Pillar Box was drunk as a doorpost and teetered precariously on her heels, and the Chancellor’s Wife was cleaning up another of her brood, with a hanky dipped into champagne, while her two-year-old, Marina, slept at her feet. The Ladies had lost interest in the story now, primarily because nothing had happened. Why the hell had the Vicereine dragged them there, if not to reveal the ending, they grumbled? Nor could anyone be bothered to deconstruct the story of the Duchess; it was quite pleasant but what of it.

But then Lady Amelia piped up, ‘So she must be guilty.’

‘Who,’ chorused the Ladies.

‘The Vicereine: or at least Andrew Shepherd,’ she corrected herself. ‘That was what the trial hinged on, wasn’t it? The tiny book, the miniature. And the Vicereine’s story is all about it, so she must have seen it. And if she’s seen it, then maybe he did copy the story, like they said, and she’s kept – well, do you think he gave it to her. Or maybe it was hers first?’ she speculated wildly, thrilling to her theory. ‘And’ the bit about the Duchess of Lerrison, because that man who testified – who died,’ and here she shuddered. ‘Well, he said she wrote her name in the back of the miniature: the Duchess of Lerrison. She said, “I was the Moth”.’

‘But they never found it, dear,’ retorted the Pillar Box, perplexed. ‘And how on earth do you know this?’

‘Well, The Golden Tree was Mummy’s favourite story, so I used to read to her all those books and biographies that were written after Mr Shepherd’s trial about, you know, the mystery surrounding the whole thing.’

A silence fell over the Ladies. Poor little lamb. Bloody dreadful that thing with the jockey.
‘What else?’ enquired the Impeccable One.

‘Can you give me a moment, please?’ begged Lady Amelia, bobbing up and down and peering over the tops of heads. ‘There’s something I’ve got to do first.’ And utterly relishing the twist in their collective story, Lady Amelia pranced across the room to her quarry, confident that only she could finish it.

To the victor the spoils, she thought.

Yet, Lady Amelia was waylaid in her pursuit by an announcement, when a young lieutenant from the Imperial Police hurried into the room towards the Viceroy.

The distraction caused heads to turn, including Julia’s, as the young lieutenant handed the Viceroy a telegram.

‘What is it?’ the Vicereine asked, for she had not moved from her chair. Something nobody had remarked.

‘I’m afraid – everyone, everyone –’ the Viceroy announced, holding up his hands, ‘I have an announcement. There’s been an explosion – on the train from Delhi to Simla. It happened fifty miles from here. They believe it to be a terrorist attack. The train seemingly blew up and fell thousands of feet down the Razorback Ridge. I regret,’ and here he paused to steady himself. ‘I’ve been informed there are no survivors.’

‘How do you know, Viceroy? Surely it’s too soon to tell?’ interrupted a Maharaja.

The Viceroy considered the man vacantly, until with excruciating deliberation, he elaborated, ‘Because if anyone has survived the blast, no rescue team can reach them.’

Of course, those gathered hadn’t needed to take the train, nor was anyone coming to visit given they were departing after Partition to England. So, it was simply very, very sad. Naturally, they would surely know a servant or two whose families may have been affected, but the Simla Set had been mercifully reprieved, like the chosen people they were.

‘Let us have a prayer,’ announced the Archbishop.
As if to honour their luck, all heads bowed immediately. That is, except for Lady Amelia and the Vicereine.

She was almost as green as a meadow full of lambs, but Lady Amelia was convinced that the Vicereine’s soul had been chased away with that announcement.

For she looked the mirror image of her Mummy.

After that bloody awful thing with the jockey.
The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

“So we arrive at the end, Andrew,” Severine lit a cigarette, picked a strand of hair that had fallen over her face and fastened it back into her hairstyle. She smiled appraisingly, as if the keeper of a confidence that would surely do me no good were I to learn it. “I can see this will be difficult: a negotiation to the bitter end. Just tell me: ‘My Beauty,’ or ‘My children.’ What was his choice?”

“I don’t know how she recovered after Scotland,” I said. “Or, for that matter, your husband. He was almost unrecognisable when he arrived in India.”

“How I pity you, Andrew,” Severine said. “You still only acknowledge Julia’s adaptation of our history, don’t you? That your darling Toby had no choice other than to stay with me.”

“He married you because you blackmailed him. You threatened to expose them with the children; it was for their sakes that he and Julia stayed apart!”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It wasn’t my fault. The police found her in Germany and they took her back to protect you! It was you who separated them: you knew they had gone off together. And that your Toby would be arrested if they found her. I played no part other than caring for the children. And he married me, didn’t he?”

“You are depraved; she was fifteen. I had no idea they had children. I would never have harmed them. I would have left Julia alone had I known,” I replied, vehemently. “And you cannot possibly believe he ever loved you. You pretended to be a friend to them, seemingly appalled at how your brother had dragged my name through the mud but you always planned to take Toby from her. And all for a story. ‘

“Lawrie,” she shouted, citing her third child as proof of her husband’s regard.

“A moment of need,” I sneered. “Men have them.”
She squared up to me in disgust. ‘Or is it that you can’t bear to think Toby, one of your “creations”, might do anything you could not imagine? Do you genuinely believe he was always faithful to her; that we shared nothing? We had to exist, side by side; we had to discuss children, keep them happy. We had to have a marriage. You’re living in a fantasy – one of your fairy tales – if you think otherwise.’

‘Oh, am I being too cruel?’ I demanded. ‘Do you think you should be exempt from punishment? When you kept her from her children? Julia wasn’t like you; she was so sensitive, fragile, such a kind soul. After Antibes, she retreated within herself; she couldn’t feel anymore; I defy anyone to, given what had happened. And then Scotland and I think she gave up, went through the motions. And that is almost a blessing, because I know she wished for that.’

‘Stop it,’ Severine shrieked, leaping up from her chair, her fists clenched rigidly by her side. ‘I don’t care about her. And I can’t take this cat and mouse act. Tell me, just tell me,’ she railed. ‘What was his choice?’ Just—’

I thought Severine might smash up the entire room. She was like a feral creature trapped in a cage. And, of course, unhinged. She always had been: to be capable of living with that kind of a secret. But I was not about to allow her to leave without her being wholly repaid, as far as I could.

‘You asked for a story,’ I said. ‘So, here is your story. Let me tell you everything you don’t know, so there is no doubt. The truth is that Julia told stories about Toby; she imagined their life together because she couldn’t live it with him. And the story she told on the last night of British rule was for him.’

‘Yes,’ Severine said, her face bright red with fury. ‘And at its end a choice, what she demanded of him in her letter: “My Beauty” or “My children”.’

‘It’s a little bit more than that, Severine,’ I countered. ‘We’ve kept so many secrets you and I. But I think we can be honest now. I would expect you – a historian – to know
that the room, the State Reception Room at Simla, was fashioned after the whispering
gallery at Gol Gumpaz in Bijapur. You can hear the whispers of anyone standing near the
walls. They travel around the room. It’s because it’s shaped like a hemisphere, with the
cavernous glass domed roof. I think the Viceroy who built it based it on the Great
Exhibition dome, or else the idea itself on St. Paul’s Cathedral. In any event, I’m not sure
anyone else was aware of it. Julia, no, or she would have turned it into a story. Not Toby
either, nor the Viceroy. I learned about it on reading one of the histories of the Lodge as a
child: something in your father’s library. I didn’t discuss it though.

‘What do whispers have to do with anything?’

‘It was a whisper that killed Julia; a whisper that forced her out of the window.’

Words, words will ruin us, I thought. I heard Julia’s words again; for they would
not die, growing louder and louder and with each sentence, cancelling out my history;
scoring out every line and rewriting them as they had to be rewritten.

‘Let me finish reading the letter, and you will understand,’ I said.
THE VICEREINE

At Mashobra, the light was blinding as I looked out over the edge of the lawn. It reminded me of the beach at the Camargue and the white horses that had run free: ‘I’m going to tell Se—’

I still don’t know what you intended to say.

It was May last year, as I sat on the lawn, when I realised that I had spent twenty of them turning over the same phrases, the same excuses, the same declarations of love to try and destroy mine for you because it could not be. But I would not have gone without it. The reality is unthinkable: to not be hoping you were ahead of me somewhere: or, this past summer, waiting for your key in the lock: to not receive a letter in the late afternoon, confirming everything for which I prayed. All except the crucial line you’ve never written: I’ve left her.

The blazing heat didn’t touch me. I was accustomed now to India, to the weight of the heat on my body. In a way, it reminded me of you. As if somehow you were with me, although we hadn’t seen one another in seventeen years, since Scotland. Since the news that had nearly killed me and all that followed, when I was in and out of sanatoriums, spas, and Swiss rest homes; to cure my purging, the neurasthenia, the crippling migraines, but not my sorrow. There was no cure for that.

It was mid-afternoon, and I glimpsed a shadow between the beams of sunlight cast from behind a rain cloud. I squinted and held my hand up to shield the glare, but I could not make out who it was, only that it was a man. Mignonette suddenly ran from my side, and I thought she was about to attack this visitor, but instead, she grew more excited, jumping up on the stranger, who picked her up and carried her back the rest of the way to me.

I was not alarmed, although he was trespassing. Why had the sentry guard let him through, I thought, as I noted his blond hair and deeply lined face. An old face that seemed
too old because it was young underneath. He’s spent far too much time in the sun, I thought. I noticed that his clothes were similarly sun-starched, bleached patches visible on his jacket. But I was not inclined to sound an alarm, for there was something about him that was kind. He seemed to augur safety.

And then my cloudy eyes focused and all became apparent, as if I was absorbing through my pores a peace too long denied. My every care and concern fell away; there wasn’t anything wrong with me anymore. Nor was there anything to prove, to second-guess:

You had come back to me.
The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

‘So many have visited me here, Severine,’ I said, interrupting Julia’s final words.

‘You are not unique in what you demand. Everyone seeking answers about how or why Julia died, the truth of her relationship with your husband. And I have learned the story of their last summer from those who were left behind, who wished me to know the details. So I could turn it into a story, I don’t know,’ I speculated. ‘I was a Man of News, a society columnist who poked gentle fun – never so silly as to bite the hands that fed – and then, of course, I had the great honour of creating the story of The Golden Tree with Julia. And if I own any remorse now – and I do – it’s that your brother, Tom, allowed the world to taint its innocence and steal faith from the two children who meant the most me; who restored my faith in humanity, and gave me a reason to believe in decency.

‘You are correct, I didn’t care for you and your brother – I thought you as cruel as your father. Your father who picked me up off the street and passed me around his friends, like a parcel. Not that I realised that then,’ I added quickly, as I heard Severine exclaim.

‘No, then I didn’t understand. “He’s ma pal”, I used to say.

‘That’s what my mother used to say, with the men she took upstairs or down alleys while I waited on Shore Place in Leith, with the sailors and the ships and women who were kind and women who were not. And sometimes my mother came back bleeding, and sometimes she came back crying, and sometimes she seemed moved, touched. And sometimes I watched those men kick her into the street. But she would call out: “It’s all right Andrew, dinnae fret. He’s ma pal. It’s all right, he’s ma pal.”

‘My memory spares me nothing; I remember every detail of my mother; of her beauty and how she stopped being beautiful, piece by piece. I remember her desperate eyes that begged me not to see, but couldn’t close them. When I was five, when I was six, when I
was seven, and they threw her into the streets down which she scurried with them, telling me to “Bide there, son, bide there. Dinnae follow”; a creature of no importance. And the act she had to put on when the dice turned up a one and not a six, and she got a vicious man; the things she always said so that I wouldn’t believe the world could be so remorseless. How she just let them hit her, never fighting back, saying, “It’s all right, Andrew: it’s just a game.”

‘Pain is factual, I’ve found, to those who have suffered the savagery of such loss. There’s no need for ornament – cruelty cannot be coloured kind, nor should words commemorate it as anything other than what it is – so I don’t mince mine to you, Severine,’ I said. ‘My mother wasn’t beautiful at the end: someone had kicked out most of her teeth one night. “But it’s all right, he’s ma pal,” you see. And, of course, she drank. And when you drink, Severine, and you’re poor, and you’ve got no money, no home, it doesn’t matter how pretty you used to be, or how Fate dealt you terrible cards – my father a kind man, who was lost at sea; respectable but gone. No, you learn something: the Bible teaches that the compassionate pick you up at times of need, that God carries you. But the truth is that most people stand over that battered body of a girl and kick it again because everybody else did too. They abuse the beaten because they can.

‘She always hugged me, my mother, and she smelled of Gin and cheap scent, and her hair was flaxen and her eyes as blue as cornflowers. And she would say to me, “See me, when I wis young, I wis beautiful.” And she was twenty-two and she wasn’t anymore. Because she drank all day, drank while she held my hand. And then she died. But not in her sleep. I heard her beg for her life,’ I said, my hand holding Julia’s letter falling heavily to my lap.

‘I didn’t understand as a boy, I believed her game: so when your father found me, Severine, and did the same … well, “He’s ma pal … He’s ma pal” … It’s all right, I told
myself, as they did what they did. How could I a poorhouse child expect anything other? I knew no different.

‘It was only later when I found Julia in Hyde Park that I realised you can impose new stories over old ones; her father, Charles, was a very different man: a genuinely gentle man. Flaxen hair, cornflower blue eyes; like my mother. “It’s all right, Andrew,” he would say, “you’re safe now.”

‘And when I said, “you’re ma pal,” he understood, and replied, “Yes, I am your pal, your friend.” And he returned something to me then: how fine my mother’s words were, how I should not be ashamed, even as he taught me a different way of speaking, of being, of loving.

‘Before I return to the end of Julia’s letter, it’s important you hear part of her story from me – as I would tell it – exactly as you requested. I will fill in the insights of others because to learn them has moved me unutterably: especially Toby’s; what I heard from him directly; when, as I told you before, he came to me the day after Julia’s death, with her letter. He spoke to me of their reunion here at the cottage, the previous year.’

Severine and I could no longer see one another, the candles were unlit and the room almost pitch black. Yet, somehow, this seemed appropriate. I had no desire to consider or commemorate her face. The words had become all between us, and I allowed them to fall where they may.

‘Always,’ I said, ‘Toby had imagined himself walking towards her: ever since the nightmare of their separation. The impetus for him had begun as a child, to walk and not stop, when Toby would be left with me, after his mother’s death. The bedroom, brightly and freshly painted, to welcome him into a new home – our house on Hyde Park that I had bought with the royalties of The Golden Tree – had cloyed his nostrils, assailed his senses, and so he had jumped from his bed in his blue pyjamas and walked down the stairs and out
the door, unbeknownst to me, the wee soul. And walked and walked. To be out, to peer through other windows en route to nowhere and pretend that none of it had happened.

‘He hadn’t heard Julia’s father, Charles, screaming in pain every hour of every day, nor glimpsed that burned and disfigured face, that melting face, the brilliant red seeping patches of skin visible all over his once golden head. He had not lived in that hushed house, where his mother’s breathing was shallow, where she paused outside the upstairs bedroom to steel herself before entering to find a spectre in the spare room. “And he was so handsome,” she would weep in the kitchen. “What kind of God does this?”

‘Charles was hideously disfigured in the war, and his wife, the Duchess, not cut out for such things, so she stayed in London. I didn’t judge her; like me, what had befallen her was unimaginable; the difference being, she was born into a silk cot and I onto a wooden floor. This was why Charles was brought to live at the housekeeper’s cottage. That, and because Toby’s mother, Lucy – who was that housekeeper – was someone to whom he was, shall we say, very close: although, Charles, of course, was also very close to me.

‘Over those months, Lucy and I formed a unique bond. She was Scottish, and although I was pretending in those days to be the son of a Clackmannan banker, her accent took me home; to a recurring memory of a particular walk with my mother to a field of golden corn, where we had laid down and looked at the sky. Nothing more than that but Lucy, like that memory, brought a similar comfort; for she did not condemn me when I grieved as helplessly for Charles as she. And she was a devoted nurse: selfless, despite the horror. When she looked at him, she saw only his soul.

‘Julia, however, was ignorant of her father’s condition: I made sure of that, so she was kept in the main house. But Toby, Toby had to stay ...and I couldn’t keep him away from Charles’s bedroom all the time. He’d sneak in somehow. Yet, he wasn’t afraid. Somehow, he knew Charles was still in there, although he’d not heard of “a soul”. He learned of that with me; when I would read The Golden Tree to Charles, which seemed to
console him and remains the greatest reward of my career; the solace he derived from my
words.

‘You see, his mind was there, although he didn’t ask for a mirror. We tried to keep
it from him, the severity of his wounds, but he had perhaps gleaned that as no-one could
fully consider him for any length of time, it was best not to.

‘Like Julia’s story, Severine, the “child of my heart” was Toby. I know that might
surprise you: Julia would be the obvious choice, and I hate even to draw a distinction; but
Toby and Charles somehow reminded me of the bond with my mother; how Toby saw past
the scars when everyone else recoiled. Even as a child he possessed compassion that went
very deep, far deeper than most; and he was like an angel, such a kind boy; all his please
and thank yous and quiet sweetness; he would sleep beside Charles; we’d find him curled up
with his favourite blanket. He’d always been fond of Charles, who doted on him after
Toby’s father died when he was two, taking him on shoots and hunts and teaching him
things a boy should know.

‘I grew to love Toby so dearly that I used to pray God would shower him with
blessings. I’ve not found his like again. So I know I was not mistaken in this. But he was an
inquisitive child and Lucy and I couldn’t keep the truth from him. And the reason I tell you
is because what happened then determined Toby’s future with Julia, far more than your
involvement.

‘It all started when Lucy began to fade, after Charles died in the night. She would
weep each day over their wooden kitchen table, whenever Toby ran in to see her. “But he
was so handsome. What kind of God does this…?” Lucy would say, over and over, in the
cottage. And Toby couldn’t understand it because he believed in fairy tales, those I’d taught
him, and so his mother’s relinquishment of life made no sense. Toby would watch her
slowly ascending the staircase, her spirit dulling over time until she barely breathed, barely
registered anything in her immediate environment. She would sit in the parlour, because it
was spring when she died, and the cherry blossom tapped against the French doors, and the
pale light seemed warmer with each hour and Toby knew that, soon, he could play outside.
And the lilacs and the morning glory, and the birds singing, he thought surely – at eleven –
that his mother would smile soon. And she was so pretty with her auburn hair and her
brown eyes, the soft tendrils of curls coming loose over her brow, and the high necked
white broderie anglaise blouses, and the keychain she wore around her waist that clinked
lightly like fairy bells when she walked. Or so I told him.

‘He knew that I very much admired his mother. Maybe even loved her. I used to
blush and look quickly away when she appeared. “He proposed, but she said no,” he
overheard some of the kitchen staff saying, “What a fool. Think how much better off she’d
be. Even if he is a– ” and here Toby had been discovered in his hiding place underneath the
kitchen table and was roundly and unceremoniously smacked hard on the bottom and sent to
his room without elevenses. So he never learned what I was. Not until much later.

‘After Lucy killed herself, and Toby came briefly to stay with me before boarding
school, we had found him, the first night he walked off from my house, asleep on a
neighbour’s doorstep. Yet, it came to be a habit. Knightsbridge at night wasn’t particularly
enlivening, it was just dark, the pale walls of the houses sitting benignly, expertly kept
gardens growing out of view waiting to surprise the owner in the dawn. No, it was simply
pregnant with some possibility that he might turn a corner and find something he had lost.
For that is how he felt, after his mother died. That he had forgotten something. Not her, but
a fragment, a word, something indefinable that once made him feel complete and now made
him want to search. This search went on for years, despite how frequently I admonished that
gorgeous child about the dangers he faced.

‘It was only with Julia, when I became her legal guardian, that Toby stopped
walking in the night when he spent his holidays with us. For that was when he realised that
if he left the house, she would not be protected. So he stayed: to watch over her, to listen to her stories. And there he found all the words that were missing.

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‘It is important you know this, Severine,’ I continued, ‘this minor piece of our shared history because of the day Toby returned to Julia at Mashobra. Allow me to begin, for you, and then Julia will finish our story.’

Severine stayed silent, but she was there. I could hear her breathing.

‘At the kitchen window,’ I said, ‘Aarush watched his mistress fall to her knees on the lawn before the man, who knelt down with her and took her golden head in his hands to kiss her forehead. The sky was the palest pink he had ever seen and beyond the window orange and yellow marigolds bloomed, banks of lavender swayed in fragrant spikes, and the oak trees stood still momentarily, as if in reverence to this homecoming. For Aarush was certain his Vicereine had been waiting for this moment. He knew too that he would never be able to describe the expressions, the desire, the joy, the relief, the tenderness of what he witnessed. Simply, that it was love. And the realisation moved him unutterably, for he sensed it would be brief.

‘It was spring, an evening that in its aspect could not speak of anything else. It was the hour of Aarush’s break, the fact of his moment’s rest at the window, the few staff his Vicereine kept moving lethargically as they prepared a light supper. Fish with milk and thyme, Aarush thought from the fragrance in the room; something to be served in the back dining room where his Vicereine could watch over the Himalayan mountains beyond, the light of evening illuminating her at the head of the solitary table. His white tunic was cool against his chest as a warm breeze blew inside the room upsetting some papers on the counter, but no-one reacted, and he was glad of the calm.

‘His mistress’s sobs became audible, but Aarush did not worry for her. The man’s head rested on top of her own as he clutched her to his chest. Neither stirred, yet their
stillness evoked the statue of *Les amants* in Venice, Aarush had seen in one of the Vicereine’s books: a sinuous twisting of limbs, each ligament and muscle spoke of an agony, a renting of souls; it spoke of imminent separation, not of a coming together.

‘At the window, Aarush bowed in reverence, with the trees. He was inarticulate, he knew, but such sorrow he felt should be honoured. For all he could see were two broken hearts at the end of a very long journey.

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‘And now Julia will tell you the rest, Severine,’ I said, and read on to the end.
THE VICEREINE

You did not smell the same, your hard, protruding shoulder bone was unfamiliar, but it was you into whom I collapsed, my beloved Toby, as we fell to the grass. I accepted you anew, and melded my form into your body, knowing I no longer fitted but grateful, despite our history, for another chance to cling. You had always been so gentle, so quiet, and in you, my head against your heart, there was the silence of a kind soul; a rarity I had cherished, even after you were gone. And since we had parted, of all the people I had met, the memory of you had never failed to move me, to know that I had been so loved. I had grown wiser and understood that men and women in the night have needs, even if they feel nothing else. I had borne Emmy with Harry, when I knew you were alive somewhere; how could I judge you for the same? Even though it wasn’t the same, what you had done to me …But I had to stop myself. There are some people we are born to forgive, as I have forgiven you: as I did that day.

‘Will you tell me everything?’ I asked, drawing back to consider you.

I was aware that I had aged; metamorphosed into the older woman you held. Years had passed and it showed, grief had stolen my beauty, even though I tried to stay the same, to live in that pocket of memory when I was fifteen, and you eighteen, then Antibes, then that day in Scotland at twenty-two. We had been so young together, hadn’t we? I don’t think we even realised how young. But perhaps that was why we had been able to hope when there was no hope and, more importantly, to forgive one another. And so it was with aged eyes that you acknowledged me, for you had changed almost beyond recognition: something that mattered, for I think both of us knew, my darling, that we could not begin again. This was the end; our past was present: the circle complete.

The time ahead assumed a vast significance, for there was everything to say.

‘Nico and Angelica?’ I asked.
‘They’re here,’ you said. ‘Lovely, like you.’

‘And are they happy, Toby? That’s all I care about.’

‘I did my best, Julia. I’m not sure it was good enough.’

‘Then I know they are. If they have been with you, they are lucky.’

‘But I’m not who you think I am,’ you said, and I could see from your tiredness that you hadn’t slept; your skin was sallow, your movements an effort. ‘I’ve kept things from you; important things; about Andrew, who he was to me.’

You have meant more to me than anyone, but I almost prayed for you to leave then. There was no need for confessions; it was too late anyway. But, as ever, I could not deny you.

‘Julia, I was the one who told Tom about the miniature in Andrew’s desk,’ you said. ‘What happened in the past was my fault – what happened to you, to me, to Andrew.’

‘No, no,’ I insisted, as I took your face in my hands. ‘You’re tired, not thinking straight. It was Wolcotte. He concocted the story about Andrew because he was jealous, vindictive. Why would you, my love? Andrew loved you like a father. He gave you everything.’

‘I know. But I didn’t deserve such love. Julia,’ you said, taking my hands from your face and placing them back in my lap. ‘I kept a secret for Andrew. And when he tried to keep us apart, I told Tom Wolcotte about the miniature. To punish Andrew, because he had let us down so badly.’

I felt the miniature’s weight against my neck: you had no idea Andrew had given it to me, the day he was sent down to Reading Gaol: I had not discussed it again, not even with him. Nor had he asked for it back.

‘I was wrong,’ you said, ‘and I’ve served my time. You think I haven’t, but I only wanted to be with you, and we have barely shared a moment.’
You sat back on the grass, beside me; no more now, I thought, no more. I wanted simply to sit with you in silence; for our past to be done with; we couldn’t change it anyway. Yet, in spite of myself, I asked: ‘What was the secret?’

‘I think, I don’t know, but I pray his reasons were compassionate,’ you said, quietly. ‘I don’t believe Andrew to be a monster. I think it was an act of compassion. I’m not sure what he and your father shared: it could have been love. But, remember, I saw your father; no man could live with such disfigurement. Nobody would look at him; he couldn’t have walked outside again.’

It’s always the words, I thought. But I didn’t move. Grand gestures had rarely served me. Yet, something was about to alter, to eradicate a truth perhaps; a scene would change and with it some meagre sustenance would vanish. I tried to quash the memory of my father: another sorrow locked away.

‘Your father didn’t die in his sleep; Andrew suffocated him. I heard his cries. They were muffled, as if something was placed over his face: he said, “Andrew, Andrew, my friend.”’ I was standing outside the bedroom. I had gone to my mother’s room, but she wasn’t there. And I could hear him because hers was next to your father’s. Andrew saw me when he came out the room, but he never said anything. He just put me to bed.’

My head fell onto your shoulder, ‘I don’t expect you to forgive me, Julia. I know how you adore him and not once did I witness an ounce of cruelty in him, which is why I was so comfortable with him as a boy. But there were things I came to learn: I was older, so I was privy to more: Andrew was weak when it came to certain types of men, and there were many men, young men, at his parties. So Tom … Tom, who I loathed: the minute Andrew let him in I sensed we were in trouble. He was too good-looking for one, too indiscriminate in his tastes; Tom knew he could be malicious and get away with it: he was so lusted after, you see. I thought Andrew was playing with fire.
‘I don’t know what Andrew felt he owed him, but there was something untoward going on, to do with Tom’s father, which he was holding over Andrew’s head. And, this was when Andrew wouldn’t let us be together: don’t you remember all the fights: how adamant he was: you are my children. It’s not right, he would say? And I would think, no I’m not your son; it was as if he had written this story with us in it, and overlooked the truth; his refusal made no sense.

‘So one night at one of Andrew’s parties, Tom was drunk and told me this fantastic story of how Andrew had stolen this miniature, this fable called *The Golden Tree* from his family, from him and his sister, Severine, when he was a boy. And, of course, I defended Andrew. I went to warn him to be careful, but the conversation turned to you, and I ended up begging him to let me marry you when you turned sixteen. I was going to tell him you were pregnant, but it all went wrong: he refused, threatening to cut us off, so we would be penniless. He was so angry; I didn’t know him, Julia: he became a different person, even his accent changed.

‘And then, in my rage, I began to reconsider the past; I was eleven when your father died, I didn’t fully realise how wrong Andrew maybe was: to assume control over someone’s life: the way I felt he was doing with us. Yet, it seemed to make sense suddenly, what I had actually heard – “Andrew, Andrew, my friend:” a plea, not a thanks. I was convinced something awful had happened. I mean, I had been so loyal; I had kept that secret. I had loved Andrew, but he seemed to favour scum like Tom over me: so what then did that make him?

‘That’s why I told Tom about the miniature. I had no idea what was in it: but I showed him where Andrew kept it in his desk. I’d seen it a few times when I’d played in there as a boy; I didn’t think anything of it until Tom described it and it matched … And then I made Tom leave the study. I don’t know what I thought would happen: nothing good, but I couldn’t have imagined what that singular act would cause. It was just a story, and yet
it destroyed us. It’s haunted me. And I couldn’t rid myself of Tom; when we moved to
Antibes, he was there,’ you said.

_We_, I thought. The words ...

‘Antibes,’ I said, remembering. ‘The boy, Vincent; the one who killed Tom; do you
know what happened?’

‘Severine used to take in strays; boys like that: to protect them, she said,’ and I
flinched because I could not hear anything good about her. ‘She had no illusions about
Tom.’

‘She was the woman in the square, cradling Vincent in her lap, wasn’t she?’

In my mind’s eye, I watched you obey her command when she told you to stand
back that day, my children in your arms. And I thought of your child together and how
inconvenient the facts of our lives are when all we desire is to imagine the best: to believe
the lies of lovers.

‘I didn’t ask her for the story. I wasn’t interested.’

‘Severine knows about Andrew and my father, doesn’t she?’ I said. ‘She held this
secret over you too, didn’t she?’

But you didn’t answer me.

All those twilit hours you shared, I thought. All those whispered confidences.

‘Don’t say any more, Toby, I understand.’

‘After they took you in Berlin. I didn’t kn—’ you began.

‘No more.’

I laced my fingers through yours on the grass. In the pale sunlight, our flaws
momentarily blurred; we might have been young again, unburdened. Except that time had
moved on and taken us with it.

‘De Lerrison,’ I said finally. ‘Do you remember on the _Wilhelmstrasse_, the police
asked for your name, and you said de Lerrison?’
‘Yes.’

‘And did it never seem odd to you that I didn’t react at all. Never asked you why you chose that name, later?’

‘No.’

‘My darling,’ I said, sadly, ‘The name you chose for your new identity was from the miniature: what the Duchess of Lerrison inscribed on the inside back cover. Andrew showed me the miniature, too, when I was about ten. And I couldn’t read any of the words because they were so tiny, but he read out the name of the Duchess of Lerrison on the back page. “I was the Moth,” he said. And I exclaimed, “just like in our story.” “That’s right,” he smiled.

“But our story is a little different.” I didn’t think anything more of it until Tom’s revelations; I believed Andrew. Yet, when you said de Lerrison in Berlin, I guessed that you had seen it too. But you should not have worried about telling me this: I have made my peace.’

‘Peace with what?’

‘With the fact that Andrew is a liar.’ I wiped away a tear. ‘He tells stories.’

And I kissed you.

‘But we’re all telling stories, Toby; we’re all liars: ask someone to tell what they imagine of us and every version will be different. And I won’t believe anything bad of Andrew: he was so beautiful, as beautiful to me as you. And his words were exquisite; they have travelled with me everywhere.

‘No,’ I said, smoothing your lovely hair, blond again, just as I remembered it as a girl, ‘I think there is nothing left to forgive between us anymore.’

‘There is,’ you said. ‘I want you to meet them, Julia: Nico and Angelica. They remember you, the dance lessons. I always spoke of you; I didn’t allow Severine to cancel out your memory too. You’ll be so proud of them; who they’ve become; they’re like you,
helping with the war effort, with the camps here; trying to get food in. I told them that I
would speak to you about meeting with them. I’d like to bring them here … ’

No, it wasn’t enough.

But, sometimes, the words reward you.

I thought back to their little makeshift crib, my babies, and the snow outside the
window; and you, before you had ever failed me.

For a moment, you looked just like him again, my Toby.

‘Bring them on Sunday,’ I said.

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And so began our summer of perfect happiness: to be known, this is how I felt: you
who had known me first and best. It was as if all of the rough edges caused by time, the
furrows and divots in the road that had stalled us now ran smooth. We might almost have
been married, the cottage our home. To come together like this, after such absence, was
more than I could have expected. And I, so much more than a girl, a Vicereine; no more a
flighty fashion plate, but somebody who tended to the lost, the displaced, the wounded; the
world knew my name but understood me to be altered.

Nothing fulfilled me more than being of service, studying the facts of every inch of
terrain, the geography, the agriculture, the political backdrop, the Red Cross observations,
there was so much to do, to learn. I frequently moved from city to city, town to town,
sometimes four or five in a day. I cradled starving children in my lap and felt such
responsibility for them. Not that I would take them, for I could not have children depend on
me; not even Nico and Angelica, who I have been so fortunate to spend time with this past
year, because of you. As with Emmy, I have shared a polite distance, but my love for them
burns through me; cinders me. Yet, I can’t find the words, my darling, they seem so futile: I
don’t dare allow the bond, lest it breaks; although I can relate as profoundly, or tend as
selflessly to any stranger in the street, to you, who still offers me absolutely nothing.
How could I have admitted this, though, when you were so overjoyed to bring me Nico and Angelica; how could I confess that I can be no mother, no wife; that I have been too damaged and atone with charity. That in working tirelessly, walking miles and rarely sleeping, turning over incessant facts and figures in my brain, sending endless correspondence, all I desire is oblivion. For I have been undone by emotion: the immeasurable passion I own for you; a passion locked in a vault for so long, that is now no longer unarticulated, spoken to a ghost, but amounts to words. It’s always the words with me.

But you will not judge me for this, for what are we but poor souls? These blissful afternoons on the lawn, the jacaranda trees spiralling in the breeze, your hand in mine as lions pace the borders of our sanctuary; we have marvelled at this brief miracle; how we could have been given more. But I think now that as our memories were falling around us, we have been, in some ways, relinquishing something precious piece by piece, preparing for it to burn to ash. I have felt this especially to be true as we approached Partition; for what can happen next. There remains the fact of Severine, of our children: no guarantee of any future. Those questions will come tonight. And with them will come answers.

Perhaps this is why our last summer has become everything. ‘Like a fairy tale,’ you said, one afternoon, as we sat under the oak tree, the scent of the flowers and the heavy Indian sky – grey, your favourite, like the sky over the sea before a storm in the height of summer; an excuse to retreat inside – a balm over us, cocooning us behind a screen where we could be free, and hope.

I have treasured these afternoons, where we have made peace with the delays, the recriminations, the changes of mind and heart. I have loved to watch you wake beside me on the lawn, in the late afternoon, to find I had placed a silk cover over your legs, removed your glasses, extinguished your cigarette; cared for you as your wife, the mother of your children. And, almost, I have believed it to be true.
But the reality would occur to me, however, that nothing has changed: all of the things I would give anything to tell you, the places I have journeyed alone, what we’ve done with other people, subsumed by the weight of circumstance, of a situation. *What God forces such a choice?* You have asked me, with uncomprehending regret, as I smile one of my innocently expectant smiles. We have not spoken of our future, I know better than to ask: I have always believed you were taking care of it, making your plans that out of respect I don’t press from you; your private reaches upon which I dared not intrude for fear of disappointment, but I have hoped. And I know that it is this aspect of my personality, which has plagued your steps as you have left me each night. For you have never turned back. I have imagined you walking the road in the darkness, reminding yourself of one fact – *My children* – whenever the desire has overwhelmed you to turn back.

I want you to know that I have been happy enough. Happy with less, I have consoled myself, these special days with you on the lawn, a routine of lull and ritual. It has never been me; the astonishing magnitude of my life; even the Viceregal Palace, too much for someone as insignificant. Only giants can thrive there, or people who imagine themselves as monumental. People like Harry. I think of the wives, how they would murder for my role, believing themselves equal to it. And I, too, once thrilled to the prospect of such a stage, in my youth and vanity. But what of it; here at the end.

After what I’ve witnessed, the poverty, the random inhumanity of people, life snuffed out in an instant, people who do not imagine a future, who don’t know what a future is. Why then, should anyone be surprised that I wanted to disappear into this simplicity, this nothingness. Not to think, not to project, not to need, not to want. Just to allow for instances of joy: the only joy I have ever craved: you.

It will so upset you to think that I have expected nothing. Part of your innate anxiety, the snag in the armament of your personality, is that you have forever been waiting for me to ask the question I dare not, *When?* Forever waiting for the moment when we
would once more separate, when your only response could be, ‘I don’t know.’ We can blame others, but it is this void in your mind, this inability to decide one way or another that has prevented you from surrendering to me completely. Always, you have thought of Severine and faltered in the face of what she represents. And so you have denied me all of the things that make life meaningful, and yet I have remained indebted to you.

Please do not think that I blame you. I have done everything to myself. Nor ever question my devotion. I cannot guess what choice you will make. Maybe we will part again and I will console myself with how right I was not to grow closer to Nico and Angelica, in case they disappear again. You see, my darling, I can only love them as I long to – and Emmy too – if you choose me.

Not even Severine, though, can deny me their presence tonight at the party. And I acknowledge that victory with pride. They may have already telegrammed, Nico and Angelica: apparently, there was a problem with the plane. Harry would have arranged another, but I didn’t want them to have to wait, and I also didn’t want to bother him. So, I had our delegates put them on the train from Delhi this morning. They’ll arrive in Simla by nine.

My darling, I am at the Viceregal Lodge now. Mignonette is asleep beside me, guardian of my inconvenient heart, and I have no thought as to what the night will bring, except that I will see you, a fact that fills me with joy. Yet, I realise that we may not meet again after you make your decision. So I feel I must leave you something with this letter.

You won’t know, but there is a line in the miniature that reads, *There is a story that I want my life to tell*. As I have said, for me it has been you. Yet, there is something else for you to take where you will go now: with or without me. I have loved you first and always, I have forgiven you my children: and with what I write next, there is nothing I have hidden; you have all of me.

When I think of you, this is the story I tell:
I have watched you while you were sleeping; the beauty of all I remembered in you, the slim desire that something in your expression might speak to me of the old Toby, the kind face, the sparks of whimsy that danced in you, the gifts the Gods had given you. And sometimes you have opened your eyes and loved me instantly, and I have found it again: and in my heart, I have heard the dying music of Andrew’s words:

For many days and nights, the Golden Tree devoted himself only to the memory of his beloved Moth. It no longer mattered that she might never return to him, for with each day that he remembered her with joy, he felt his strength returning. He realised that she lived on in his heart, if not in life, and with this knowledge, as if a miracle had been granted from the Gods, the limbs of the Golden Tree began to shimmer in gold again.

At such moments, I am young. I hear my name called across the lawn on an early Spring afternoon, the adults by the Blue Pavilion and the impatiens and the lilies of the valley and magnolias everywhere; ‘Come to us, my Beauty,’ Andrew’s voice calls to me, in his impeccable dark suit, his kind blue eyes drinking me in. ‘Toby is here, and he has such things to tell!’

Now that he was beautiful again, soon all of the butterflies returned to him, but the Golden Tree no longer cared. He was away in his mind, over the fields of lavender in France or perching on the King’s shoulder in the Royal court, his soul mate by his side, listening to her stories. And one evening, as the sky grew ever blacker, the Golden Tree realised that he had never shone brighter. For something in him had accepted that God had given him the greatest gift of all: memory. And so he could see again, everything he loved. He felt such gratitude that he might have died happily, but it was then the Golden Tree heard her; he heard the beating of her wings in his soul.

I walk towards you, and I can feel the grass beneath my special silk shoes, those Andrew bought for me. I walk as if in a bridal procession to where you sit, with the delight of your expression mattering in a way nothing else ever will.
And the Golden Tree looked and he saw, far off on the horizon, the immaculate white of her wings, magnificent in the moonlight.

And settling myself beside you on a warm evening, I listen to a story of where you have been, of what you have dreamt, of all you hope you might be. And, across the table, Andrew smiles his heartbroken smile and cheers us on. And there are no words, only love. And I end the story in my heart, where it should end:

Beloved, the Golden Tree cried, you have come back to me.
The Mashobra Cottage, Simla, 1965

I laid down the letter.

‘What does she mean, the train?’ asked Severine, as a portion of the garden was partially illumined by my servant lighting the lanterns outside. ‘No,’ cried Severine, piercing the dusk with a harrowing scream. ‘Oh God, no. Not that train. The children were on the train that crashed in Simla. My children: tell me it isn’t true. Please God, no, that’s why they weren’t found. I didn’t know. I didn’t know …’

She threw her head back and wailed as if her life was meaningless. I had hated her for forty years. For everything she had denied Julia and Toby. All for the love of children she had professed to protect yet helped to kill.

‘Did you know at the party when they announced the crash?’ begged Severine.

I envisaged my darling Julia, dwarfed by the windows at the Viceregal Lodge, the glass slippers of Fortune glinting on her feet, her back to the room, marigolds in her hair, “There is a story I want my life to tell.” The way she turned back to me with that heartbreaking smile: keeping my secret, the secret of the miniature, to the last.

‘Yes, but not until after I read Julia’s letter. Toby didn’t receive it until the following day: Julia gave it to a servant to run over to his Club, before the party started. But he didn’t show up at the Club at six, as he normally did.’

‘He was with me,’ Severine said. ‘I was ill.’

It was the last piece of the mystery I had not understood – that and the gun. But what Severine and the Viceroy had intended no longer intrigued me: she hadn’t pulled the trigger, but Julia had been felled, regardless.

I have often mourned those few seconds, after Harry announced the accident, although I can claim no insight into Julia’s mind. I presume to know, I project; I place
words in her mouth, assuming the fatal sorrow of her one choice to act out, to make a
decision not dictated by someone else’s pen. To stand in front of her society, and her dearest
love, knowing she had killed her own children by putting them on the train from Delhi,
instead of asking Harry to fly them.

‘But if he didn’t receive the letter, then he couldn’t have known what happened
until later. He never told me. Why would he never tell me? I have lived in misery, searching
everywhere for them, Nico and Angelica,’ Severine sobbed. ‘It doesn’t make any sense; you
said the whisper. You said the whisper killed her.’

Only her ashen face became visible in the darkness of the room, as if she was
disembodied. The light of the outdoor lanterns cast shadows over her angular bone-
structure, to the point where she resembled something misshapen, unreal.

We tell stories, those of us who are left behind: we who have been privileged to
hear the beating of wings in our souls. We tell stories for friends who beg in the night to die
— Andrew. Andrew, my friend — as I did for Julia’s father, Charles. We tell stories that others
can revise, reinterpret or misinterpret, augment with subsequent details. And all our lives
are nothing more than a fiction, a tissue of things previously written, scored out, then
reinstated, which somehow finds a form, which sometimes find receptive hearts who cleave
to it as if it was the answer they had sought, and not found. For we are always looking for
someone else to speak for us: someone who can say what we mean far better than we ever
could. And that is what we live for; to find a receptive heart for whom our words make
perfect sense, who render the story of who we are meaningful, complete.

For Julia, her story had belonged to Toby; and for Severine, my words were to be
the Last Rite.

“*My Beauty*” or “*My children*”, that’s the answer you have demanded of me,
thinking I know. And the whisper contained that answer.’
‘What do you mean?’ Her pale eyes scavenged for my figure through the darkness, like a hunted creature seeking sanctuary; her very existence hung in the balance as mine once had. And all because of a word: one word to ruin or redeem her.

‘You said,’ I replied, ‘once Julia finished her story, Toby was to give his answer: “My Beauty” or “My children”. And he did.

‘The evening would end soon,’ I said, quietly. ‘The guests, too drunk and hot to care any longer, had started to mill listlessly around the periphery of the room; eyes darting too obviously at their companions, in desperate search of a ‘we must be going’ reprieve. Not that Julia noticed: she was fixated on the black window to which she had turned, after Harry had announced the tragedy.

‘The man they knew as de Lerisson could no longer see past her; mesmerised by her silhouette against the night. Julia had metamorphosed for him again into an incarnation of perfection that he could not forsake. The story of the Duchess, how deeply it had moved him; her insight into his heart; the torment of his marriage to you; how much those Sundays in Antibes had meant; Julia’s dance lessons with the children. And her forgiveness: he was crippled with remorse at how he had mistreated her. Always, he had conducted a battle of resistance: My children, he would remind himself whenever he wavered in the face of all that Julia promised. But time had diminished nothing, only intensified his regret, his awareness that he did not really live. For life could only be found in her.

‘And it could continue, this life, he knew, with Julia. Another town, another promise, another renewed period of delirious happiness before he might hesitate too long, or strike the wincing note of disappointment between them that could impel another break. All he had to do was speak the words that were impossible for Julia to refute and absolved him of blame: my children.

‘But their children, Nico and Angelica, were grown: twenty-five. Just Lawrie left at home, now seventeen. The cruelest rub was that he had, in the first instance, stayed for the
sake of his children with Julia and with each concession to their well-being, another tie had bound him; for they knew only him, only you, and how to sever those ties? Their security was still the most important thing. And you, Severine, had never changed; you still held the truth over his head; you would destroy the children – and him – if he said a word. All these endless years, he thought, and not a thing has changed.

‘He sighed heavily, and leaned back against the wall. Suddenly, he was acutely aware that his ritual refrain, once uttered so stoically, so nobly, sounded weak, hollow. And for the first time, he delighted in and despised of the burden of his children. I should have been braver, he thought, looking to Julia, unable to quell his regret at Fate’s manoeuvrings.

‘Yet, there could be no alternative to Julia anymore, this he understood: someone who had asked nothing of him, unwavering in her devotion, who had sacrificed so much. And how many times does that happen in a life, he reflected. I’ve skimmed through it, he thought. There’s not one page of my history with Severine to which I would turn back.

‘Standing taller, annoyed at himself for hunching, he assumed something of his old military bearing. He looked back to you, on the chaise beneath Julia’s portrait and was struck by the irony of the juxtaposed image. He was bookended in that room, a fact that struck him as fatalistic yet prophetic; the position of the two women of his life signified one word to him: choose. And there to his right, in your diminished form was his past. And there, to his left, Julia illuminated in her white dress against the night, his future. If only he could reach.

‘What was that other life that once figured so largely as to expel the mere thought of happiness with Julia? he asked himself. Figures in a column, keys that fitted doors he had no wish to enter, conversations over suppers he could scarcely taste. This is what he had chosen over that instinct, that exquisite connection. Years and years, the taste like dust in his mouth at everything he had missed. But …

‘My children, he reminded himself.
‘He thought of the Mashobra cottage, of the flowers Julia would gather in bundles and baskets, strewn around the house, and Julia in her picture hat turning back to call “Til tomorrow then, my darling. ’Til tomorrow”, bunches of phlox and bougainvillea clutched to her chest, her evening’s work to arrange them after he had left. Because, always, he would. And “Of course, you must go” he heard her say as assurance when the guilt would weigh too keenly upon him. “The children, my love.”

‘Such selflessness, such compassion, he mourned, remembering her little face that lit up when she smiled at him, and the knowledge that with her he was beloved and forever would be, even though each day he stole a little more of Julia by leaving, by allowing her to believe that he had a right to decide between her and you, Severine. But then that is what we do, he considered, reflecting upon why he had stayed with you. We align ourselves with the cruel because in that way we cannot be disappointed. But all has been disappointment without Julia.

‘In his mind, he walked the path to the cottage, along the rickshaw path, the banks of wildflowers a wall of colour on either side of him, the blossoms of the Viceroy’s orchards just in view as he approached. Here was his happiness, the road to her, how he would imagine Julia waiting for him; as a shadow, flickering sylphlike against the pale blue wall of the entrance; a romantic illusion that would become tangible as he walked through the gate and embarked upon the tiny path, a reward to which he had no right. By degree, the shadow would manifest into the image of her opening the front door to greet him, like a dream restored from an endless sleep that had robbed him of his youth and hope. And he would be forgiven once more.

‘On that last evening in Simla, he realised that whether in fact or the fiction of his fantasies, all he had ever done was walk the rickshaw path to where Julia lived. A house that was the perfect shelter for her fragile bones, somewhere he could think of her as contented, instead of remembering the sorrow he had caused. For inherent within him, despite his
adoration, his worship of her every facet, was the desire to destroy Julia’s power over him so that he could always live without her: because, always, he had to.

*My children ...My Beauty*, he thought, such was the war that had raged for his conscience from the first moment in Antibes. But then, as if a veil had been rent from his eyes, the answer of what he must do became clear to him. For Julia announced,

“"There is a story that I want my life to tell."

“"My –" he said, looking at her reflection in the window. But the second word of his choice was delivered to the rarefied form of the most celebrated debutante of the season, Lady Amelia, who at that moment appeared before him.

‘ As, I have said, Severine; what killed the Vicereine was the whisper. I was standing against the wall, a little way down from your husband, when he whispered it …

““Children,” I said through the darkness: a disembodied voice, God-like in its omniscience, which decided Severine’s fate. ‘He said, “My children.”

‘Now, isn’t that the answer you wanted to hear?’

I heard an agonising cry from Severine’s side of the room, but when I turned on the lamp beside me, she was gone. I own no insight into what that singular word meant to her, after what I revealed. She has not returned here, to me. Or to visit Toby, whose care she bequeathed following her visit to the cottage. Toby: child of my heart, with whom I sit each day, to tell him the story for which he asks: of Julia, who we loved.

I have no idea how Severine’s story will end or whether it is indeed over. I know only that she was right about storytellers: they own no dominion. No sooner than the line is written than somebody else reinterprets it, which is how it should be. And I suppose that I should thank her, but I cannot find it in myself to do so.

I am grateful only that she did not ask for Julia’s letter.

I think it might have disappointed her as, in truth, it could only be read by me.
Toby had confided its contents in the days after Julia’s death when I consoled him in his grief. But he never gave it to me. The papers I clutched in my hand that afternoon were blank.

I spoke Julia’s story from memory.

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The Mashobra Cottage, 1973

The sun begins to set over the lawn and the marigolds, here at the cottage where Toby and I sit. Soon, we will go inside, and our dreams will beckon – dreams of things done and undone; facts that may torment or deny, haunt or betray: a life of the mind over which I have no control, the province of another God.

But first, there is this: a place of peace, of sanctuary, of remembered joys. We sit in the exact spot beneath the oak tree where Julia looked up to see Toby had finally found the road home to her, to keep the promise he once made in the snow on the Wilhelmstrasse.

I was not present, but I relive those moments of homecoming with her: I hear the chink of the gate, a gentle clarion call for her to stir from the lull of her late afternoon crib, where she was cradled in sorrow and pity; I see my Toby at the end of the lawn, the child at my knee grown older, his many trials evident in his dogged steps, in his endless need to be with her. I imagine Julia, in one of her pale pink chiffon dresses, the priceless strand of seventy-four flawless pearls her only adornment, as she sits up in her chair and scrutinises the horizon. I know the ecstasy, the tumble of rewards that envelop her when she realises who it is: I know the hope that eradicates the anguish of the past as Mignonette stirs and runs in wild excitement over that endless lawn. I know the dreams with which Julia walks, as the life of this house is infused once more with possibility: all the things now to be, to come. And as she arrives in front of Toby, there are the words that will go unarticulated; their past is present, every wrong is righted, he has never disappointed her. There is only one truth: he has come back. And she is loved.
'But that’s not the end of the story, Andrew, is it?’ Toby says, disturbing my thoughts. ‘Please, just one last time, then I’ll not ask again. “There is a story that I want my life to tell.” You told Severine I said, “my children”: but that’s not what I said when I looked to Julia by the window.’

‘No,’ I confess. Yet, I wait a moment more before continuing, to delay confronting Severine’s ghost.

She remains an anomalous spectre in my life: I will never truly understand why she acted as she did; perhaps, by clinging to Toby she felt as if a wrong had been righted by my replacing her with Julia as a child: for it was from Severine that I first heard of The Golden Tree and the Moth; it was in her nursery that I sat, when she opened up her hand at four-years-old and said, ‘See. It’s mine.’

I had no idea what its family significance was, but I felt that a child so spoiled should not own something as rare. And when I began to read it to her, to Tom; when I found myself overcome by the words of Esther, her pitiless existence, her remorse; when I read to them ‘I pray you will die in the night to the sound of the beating of wings,’ understanding fully such a wish, as I had prayed for my mother, they laughed. ‘There’s no such thing as golden trees. How stupid,’ Severine said. ‘Then may I keep it?’ I asked. ‘No. It’s mine, not yours,’ she snapped, snatching back that exquisite creation; how carelessly she shoved it into her desk drawer, turning the key in the lock, unperturbed about damaging its pages. And it came to me then that she had no right to such a legacy; especially one that I suspected, for as long as she lived, Severine would never understand.

‘No, Toby,’ I agree. ‘I didn’t tell Severine what you really said. It would have been too cruel. Whatever else we know or don’t know about her, she did look after your children. And she claimed to care for them.’
But on this subject, Toby will not be drawn and I know better than to trespass further. All he has ever upheld is, ‘I could not leave them.’ And we have left everything else unsaid.

I wonder, of course, as Julia did about those twilit hours Toby shared with Severine; and almost as if I own the evidence I seek about their truth, I look to the miniature in my hands. It is not the same as I remember; it has evolved into something else entirely; a patchwork of a story, traces of another hand upon its pages, a work unfinished for a new pen to fill in the empty spaces, to finish its sentences. I found it on the lawn the day after Severine’s visit; the clasp of the necklace was broken, and most of its unique pages, had been ripped or torn out. I cannot know who did this; sometimes, I have wondered if Julia wanted to erase any trace to the story I subsequently wrote so that, if found, I would not be accused anew. But I cannot imagine such a thing of her. And if I cannot imagine it, then, thankfully, it cannot be.

So, all that is left is this:

‘You remember,’ I say, ‘just before Julia announced, “There is a story…” Lady Amelia walked up to you. She was the most celebrated debutante of the season?’

‘I don’t remember what she looked like,’ Toby replied. ‘Because that was when I looked at Julia’s reflection in the mirror and made my choice. Say it for me, Andrew,’ he smiles, ‘like you did when we were children.’ The smile does not leave his face, but as I look to him, he and I both acknowledge the sadness of that smile: for he is not a child anymore.

‘I’ll tell you on the way in,’ I say, standing up and holding out my hand to him. And in the fading light, we walk to the house where, illuminated in the last patch of sunlight we see, clearly visible against the wall of the parlour, Julia’s portrait, as if to welcome us home.

The larks rise now from the fields of wildflowers at our side, and plumes of golden pollen are blown into the pale sky, a morse code of their own story, and there is a thought
with which I console myself: we, those of us who are left behind, we who hear the beating of wings in our souls, we view the world with ancient eyes; eyes that see the dying trees, neglected and forlorn, invisible to the butterflies, and understand that only love will make them golden. I have been so loved. By the exquisite moths who have come my way and drunk my endless tears. For I can think of no other reason for how I came to shine.

As I have said, each day I follow the same ritual. I look up to the house and I give to Toby the ending of Julia’s story: the words that she lived to learn, but not to understand. What Toby truly said as he watched her at the window; the whisper that travelled along the wall to where she stood in the State Reception Room. I speak them to the enveloping night, to the past, to the arc of heaven where she dwells:

‘You said, “My Beauty,”’ I reply.

‘I said, “My Beauty,”’ he nods, ‘and she is.’

I allow them to linger in the air as we move to the house, his arm in mine. Because of course, I say no more; his mind is gone, save for the place where Julia dwells. And here I derive an incomparable solace; in knowing that Julia was loved and gladly lost in Toby, for the brief time afforded them, in life as she is in death; not, of course, that I tell him she is gone. For if the words aren’t spoken, then they cannot be. And so my Julia is immortal; she exists ahead of us at the end of the long road home we all walk.

It is now, as ever, I feel it: a last reward, to which I have no right. I am struck suddenly by the sensation of a beating of wings deep within me and, although it is impossible, I surrender myself to the knowledge that Julia understands and approves somehow, my decision to spare him the truth.

For what Julia saw was Toby’s reflection in the window, as he appeared to lean towards Lady Amelia: an image that was reversed as she looked. So when Julia heard Toby whisper, ‘My Beauty,’ she thought he said it to Lady Amelia, not to her. And she fell to her death because there was absolutely nothing left for which to live.
‘She wore silver ribbons in her hair, that day in Hyde Park, didn’t she Andrew?’

When she was three, when she was Julia,’ Toby says, as we climb the steps to the front door. ‘And what was it you said to her again, I forget?’

‘I said, “I am a Man of News. I have told the stories that come to matter. May I tell one to you?”’

‘That’s right. And you told her the story of The Golden Tree:

““In the Golden Tree, where the butterflies come to rest, there was one that he loved above all others...”’

‘Finish it for me, please, Andrew. Please.’

And, of course, I do:

‘Why did you leave me, my darling? asked the Golden Tree.

‘The Moth began to cry. Because I was so plain and ordinary, compared to the butterflies. I thought you would tire of me when you realised. So I tried to be like them, flying to where they travelled, visiting the places they knew. But one day, I was trapped in a net and put into a dark room in Bavaria where there was no light. And that was where I learned that in the dark, their wings were just like mine.

‘I thought of you every night, of your golden limbs, of your branches of light, and longed for you. Often, when I thought I was dying, I would imagine finding you again, and the hope spurred such warmth within me that my heart kept beating. And then, one day, the door opened by mistake and I flew out with one desire: to find and never leave you.

‘The Golden Tree cried tears of such joy at the words of his cherished Moth. The two, reunited once more, talked for hours until they fell asleep, the Moth cradled in the golden arms of her truest love.

‘When morning came, they slept on and so did not hear the axes that struck the base of the Golden Tree. How ugly he had grown, the people in the port carped, for they could not see his beauty. While the Golden Tree had grown well in his mind with memories of his
Moth, to the rest of the world he remained the same twisted and gnarled oak that took up all the room in the square: a neglected and forlorn tree for which they had no use. Only his soul was golden, you see: his soul where the little Moth lived.

‘Yet, the Moth felt no pain as she was trampled under the foot of the man who felled the Golden Tree. For she had already left this world: her life complete because she had found the one person who could see the splendour in her and offer only love.

‘It has been said that, sometimes, on a summer’s evening a strange light emanates from the square where the Golden Tree once loved so deeply. Those who have witnessed it have been awed by its tender grace and fallen under its spell themselves. It is a light that speaks to the soul and becomes a story for others to tell; of what it is to love even in the darkness, to hope even in despair, to remain steadfast to one’s soul mate long after they have left.

‘It is a story most people never understand but, for those who do, it is the light that guides them towards everlasting joy: the sound of the beating of wings in their souls.’

We arrive at the house and pause at the door, ‘So beautiful, so sad,’ Toby says.

‘And the Golden Tree loved the Moth. And the Moth was Julia.’

‘That’s right,’ I say, clasping my hand over his arm. ‘Her wings were the purest white.’

The night falls and takes us with it, and we speak ever on of stories.

These stories I tell for my friend: for my pal.

For My Beauty.
Throwing ‘Other’ Voices: The Paratextual Ventriloquism of Esther Inglis (1571-1624)

Introduction

The illuminated miniature manuscripts of Franco-Scottish calligrapher, Esther Inglis (1571-1624), circulated widely throughout Continental Royal courts during her lifetime, most notably those of Elizabeth I and James VI and I. A self-described ‘Amazon Lady’ (Ce Livre, 1624. ‘Catalogue’ no. 54)¹ and mistress of over forty calligraphic hands who ritually included a self-portrait in her ornate frontispieces often indistinguishable from printed texts, she was allegedly commended by James VI and I as ‘the maist exquisit and perfyte wreater within this Realme’.² Yet, while Inglis originated every facet of her manuscripts with her own hand, prior to recent academic enquiry she has largely been denied any claim to originality. Perceived as a virtuoso copyist of devotional tracts, her corpus was prized chiefly by antiquarians, amongst them David Laing and Dorothy Jackson Judd, only for its ‘undeniable charm’ (Judd 1):

¹ The first complete catalogue of Inglis’s work was previously the 1990 ‘Calligraphic Manuscripts of Esther Inglis (1571-1624): A Catalogue’ by A H Scott-Elliott and Elspeth Yeo. This remains the most exhaustively detailed compilation of her work, which I will hereafter refer to as the ‘Catalogue’, appending the pertinent manuscript numbers. However, Lady Getty updated Inglis’s bibliography for the Roxburgh Club in 2012, to include several further manuscripts discovered since the publication of the ‘Catalogue’. While I will rely predominantly upon the Scott-Elliott and Yeo ‘Catalogue’, when citing these later manuscript additions, I will refer to the Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450-1700 (CELM), which is now the most comprehensive bibliography of Inglis’s corpus, and append the appropriate abbreviated title.

² This quote is excerpted from an unsigned and undated warrant from James VI and I appointing Inglis’s husband, Bartholomew Kello, ‘Clerk of All Passports’. According to Scott-Elliott and Yeo, the document is now lost (13). It was previously kept in Laing’s volume at The University of Edinburgh Library, but has been missing since 1935. See Laing’s note in ‘Specimens’ and ‘Catalogue’ no. 5.
She has no claims to original genius, but as a calligraphist, she is well entitled to a first place among artists of a secondary class, who have devoted themselves to miniature painting and illumination. (Laing 309)

The advent, however, of an exhaustive catalogue of Inglis’s extant manuscripts and writing samples in 1990 by A H Scott-Elliot and Elspeth Yeo, has compelled scholars to reassess her contribution to early modern women’s writing. In an attempt to demystify the enigma she presents in her conflicting roles of Creator and copyist, this evolving discussion has incorporated various theoretical vantage points, as well as an array of historicist contexts, including feminine domestic arts of the English Renaissance, scribal publication, anthropological gifts of prestation, Elizabethan politics, Christian Humanism, and seventeenth-century transnational communities of women writers. My thesis will endeavour to add a new dimension to this diverse field, by considering Gérard Genette’s concept of paratext as a viable means of interpretation, which he defines as those elements of a book that provide a frame for the main text, including covers, title pages, frontispieces, prefaces, dedications, illustrations, epigraphs, end pages, author interviews, genre considerations, and formatting.

I will argue that this strand of literary analysis is imperative to our understanding of how Inglis sought to materialise an authentic authorial voice through the paratextual space of her manuscripts, mobilising the trope of literary ventriloquism to facilitate her complex construction as a literary icon. By applying Genette’s taxonomy and specifically his division of the paratext into two distinct zones of peritext (the liminal space of the book, bound by prefatory and end materials) and epitext (influences outwith the book such as diaries, correspondence, and letters), I will suggest that Inglis, through predominantly peritextual

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3 While critics, amongst them Frye and Ziegler, refer to Inglis’s manuscripts as ‘books’, I prefer to focus attention on their handmade aspect and to distinguish them from printed matter. As Inglis presided over every facet of her manuscripts and created each element – including binding, embroidery, calligraphy, and illustration – with her own hand, the term ‘manuscript’ (derived from the late sixteenth century Latin ‘manuscriptus’; manu ‘by hand’ and scriptus ‘written’), seems most appropriate to this discussion and will be deployed throughout.
exploration, emerges as far more than a skilled textual copyist, rather an incisive, progressive, and ingenious publisher and author; one who successfully manifested Her word upon the patriarchal page amidst a turbulent publishing climate, by negotiating the tension between the elitist manuscript culture of aristocratic coterie circles and the burgeoning printing press, with its potential for mass-dissemination.

I will assert that Inglis successfully established what Georgianna Ziegler describes as her ‘author-ity’ (‘More’ 35) as a writer by manipulating her paratexts and engaging in ventriloquistic praxis from her covers to frontispieces to self-portraits to dedicatory letters, which I shall analyse in turn. Following Bruce Woodcock, I define ventriloquism as ‘a performative act of habitation, occupation’ (142) designed to offer a voice to the marginalised and overlooked, in this instance the silenced female ‘Other’ of early modern women’s writing. In the context of Inglis’s corpus, I also define ventriloquism as scribal, referring literally to the act of copying, and follow Genette’s definition of paratextual furniture as ‘utterances that, varying greatly in scope, nonetheless share the linguistic status of the text …all the paratexts I consider will themselves be of a textual, or at least verbal kind: titles, prefaces, interviews’ (8). In short, voices.

To this end, I suggest that Inglis scribally vivified components of printed books and manuscripts, both textual and what Genette terms ‘iconic’, or illustrative, by copying them as a frame for the scripture she replicated in the main body of the text. Yet, by inscribing the pages with her own hand, her self-described ‘main feminine’ (Livret, 1592. ‘Catalogue’ no. 4) (‘feminine hand’; my trans.), she appropriated and adapted such components to suit her purpose, manipulating them to facilitate her intricate construction as a literary figure. My thesis explores how such ventriloquism, or ‘throwing’ paratextual voices, enabled Inglis to assume control as Creator of her manuscripts and to articulate a vibrant and wholly original message for subsequent scholars of her craft. Namely, that in the beginning of early modern women’s writing was the Word, and the Word was with Esther.
Inglis’s Corpus

‘sum labours of my pen and pensill’

\textit{Octonaires}, 1609 (‘Catalogue’ no. 13)

As Susan Frye asserts in ‘Materializing Authorship in Esther Inglis’s Books’,

Inglis’s preliminary appeal resides in the miniature aspect of her illuminated manuscripts,

the profusion of calligraphic scripts she mastered and deployed, as well as the artwork she

included. Of the sixty-one manuscripts by Inglis that have survived,\(^4\) most are small enough

to be held in one’s palm, the smallest measuring barely 47 by 31 mm (\textit{Verbum}

\textit{Sempiternum}, 1615. ‘Catalogue’ no. 46). Each jewel-like manuscript is bound in either gilt-

tooled leather, velvet or silk, their covers often meticulously embroidered with a striking

array of gold, silver, and coloured threads, sometimes offset by semi-precious gems and

seed pearls. The contents of Inglis’s manuscripts prove similarly exceptional for the vividly

illuminated paratextual elements that preface the staggering range of calligraphic hands, often

executed in letters barely one millimetre high, which comprise the main texts.

The vast majority of Inglis’s manuscripts are presentation copies of Protestant

texts,\(^5\) created to elicit patronage from Royalty and nobility. As such, their contents are

\(^4\)The \textit{Psalmes of David}, written by me Esther Inglis, an. Dom. 1612. Folger MS.a.665, is the most

recent addition to Inglis’s extant works. Acquired by the Folger Shakespeare Library in November

2016 from a private collection, the newly discovered manuscript is elaborately embroidered,

measures 76 by 50 mm, and was dedicated to Prince Henry. For a fuller discussion, see Ziegler,

‘Princely’. As a point of clarity, however, Ziegler states that the discovery of \textit{Psalmes} (not cited on

CELM) brings the total count of Inglis’s manuscripts to sixty-three. This does not appear to be

accurate. In 1990, Scott-Elliott and Yeo collated fifty-five manuscripts, and three items of miscellany

in their ‘Catalogue’. Since then, six further manuscripts have been found (CELM *InE 16, 18, 21, 44,

46 and \textit{Psalmes}). The CELM archive, however, erroneously counts a self-portrait as a manuscript

(CELM *InE 32), which they describe as having been excerpted by Ziegler from ‘Catalogue’ no. 8.

They also do not appear to cite ‘Catalogue’ no. 43 as part of their archive. Therefore, it would be

appear accurate, based on these inconsistencies, to suggest that there are currently sixty-one extant

manuscripts by Inglis, including the new \textit{Psalmes}, and three items of miscellany.

\(^5\) With the exception of four, possibly five, extant manuscripts – and exempting her surviving

handwriting copybooks – all of Inglis’s manuscripts are presentation copies of Protestant texts. The

exceptions are her debut creation, which lacks a dedicatee, \textit{Livret}, 1586 (‘Catalogue’ no. 1); \textit{Octonaries}, 1607 (‘Catalogue’ no. 33), dedicated to her landlord, William Iefferai; \textit{Verbum}

\textit{Sempiternum}, 1615 (‘Catalogue’ no. 46), dedicated to her son, Samuel Kello; and her final

manuscript lacking a dedicatee, which Scott-Elliot and Yeo speculate may have been intended for

Prince Charles, given that the cover design mimicked her other manuscripts created for Royal

patrons, \textit{The Booke of the Psalmes[s] of David}, 1624 (‘Catalogue’, no. 53). Similarly, Scott-Elliot and
divided into two distinct components, comprised of prefatory, or paratextual, materials which serve to introduce the main text. Beyond the cover, upon opening a manuscript by Inglis, the image of the author herself is generally the first paratextual sight to greet a reader, preceding her elaborately detailed title pages and lengthy dedicatory letters to patrons. Her self-portraits, executed in pen or bold coloured paints made from ground jewels, ritually portray her seated at her desk, surrounded by writing implements, and dressed in a ruff, with a conical hat placed upon her flame-red hair. Frequently included beneath her image are accompanying mottos, some of which Inglis originated herself, from the triumphal ‘SPERO VINCO VIVO (‘I hope, I triumph, I live’) of her youth, to the more poignant ‘son dernier adieu’ (‘her last goodbye’)⁶ of her later years. Inglis also often included laudatory verses on her talent by celebrated male calligraphers or noble patrons of the period. She was also highly accomplished at copying pages of printed books in exact detail, such as title pages, miniaturising them in manuscript form.

The main textual body of her manuscripts is entirely lacking in original content. Rather, they are calligraphic copies of religious psalms or poems, notable for their engraved, inked or illuminated borders of flowers, birds and insects, which surround the text. As a source for her self-described ‘guift’ books, Inglis drew heavily on the Bible, particularly from the Psalms and Proverbs. Each manuscript contains a variety of calligraphic styles including Roman, italic, English text hand, chancery, lettera mancina or mirror writing, lettre pattée with triangular serifs, and the trembling line known as lettera rognosa.

Yeo also find evidence in Inglis’s dedicatory letter to the Justice General of Scotland that she offered Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste, 1602 (‘Catalogue’ no. 19) in return for the resolution of a litigation. Examples of her presentation copies, however, are extensive. Some notable examples include Le Livre des Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 7), dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I; A New Yeers Guift for the Right Honorable and Vertuous Lord my Lord Sidnay, 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 21); and A Book of the Armes of England, 1609 (‘Catalogue’ no. 37), dedicated to Prince Henry.

⁶ Inglis included this titular fragment four times, which Scott-Elliot and Yeo suggest infers that she was suffering from an unspecified illness (13). It appears from 1616-17, first in Les six vingts, 1615 (‘Catalogue’ no. 45).
Moreover, each page displays Inglis’s mastery of the hands that would have been available to her in books on the art of writing, executed to a minute scale.

In 2012, Lady Victoria Getty commissioned a new catalogue of Inglis’s manuscripts by Nicolas Barker, updating the ‘Catalogue’, to include several further manuscripts that have been discovered since 1990, extolling her as ‘a courageous and inventive woman and pioneer in the book arts’ (xi), and requesting that her work be regarded within a wider remit, beyond Scottish historians and rare book specialists. While over the past two years, Inglis has begun to garner a reputation as an unrivalled calligraphist and artist on various contemporary websites, she remains a peripheral figure in the context of academic enquiry, with fewer than ten essays seeking to critically assess her contribution to early modern women’s writing. The reason for this is based principally upon the paucity of biographical details that have emerged since her death in 1624.

In addition, and more troublingly, beyond the paratextual elements of Inglis’s manuscripts, she cannot ostensibly lay claim to originality as a writer. With the possible exception of *Discours de la Foy*, 1591 (‘Catalogue’ no. 3), as well as various attributed and unattributed verses, Inglis’s corpus is notable predominantly for her skill in copying from religious texts in diverse calligraphic hands. To judge her manuscripts in this context, she may be described as a copyist-calligrapher, part of a scribal tradition – the act of copying books and documents by hand – originated by monks in early manuscript culture, who also created illumined handwritten copies of religious texts.

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7 Ziegler suggests that Inglis would have been acquainted with the handwriting manual, *The Subtle Art (Arte Subtilissima)*, 1550 by Juan de Yciar. For a fuller discussion of such influences by Ziegler, see ‘Hand-Ma[j]de’ 76.

8 See Chowdhury who cites Inglis as ‘one of the finest calligraphers to have worked in England and Scotland during the early modern period’, and Clement who compares Inglis’s self-portraits to the current vogue for ‘selfie’ self-fashioning across social media platforms.

9 See Scott-Elliot and Yeo (15) for a discussion of Inglis’s involvement in *Discours*, these verses may have been written by her father, Nicholas Langlois. For original verse to the Countess of Bedford, see *Une Estreine* 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 22). See also Letter of Esther Inglis to James VI and I, on behalf of her son: National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS. 33.1.6, Vol.20, no. 11. One of the rare epitextual artefacts linked to Inglis’s corpus, in this letter Inglis petitions James VI and I’s assistance in finding a fellowship for her son, Samuel Kello, at Cambridge or Oxford.
From 1990, however, a handful of scholars have attempted to look beyond the perceived lack of original material provided by Inglis, instead applying an array of literary hermeneutics to her craft in an attempt to categorise her. While the aforementioned criticism invariably focuses on the prefatory elements of Inglis’s manuscripts, frequently analysing her dedicatory letters, mottos, and self-portraits within historical and theoretical frameworks, I would now like to explore further Gérard Genette’s 1987 concept of paratext as a means of interpreting Inglis’s work.

Paratext

In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette defines the paratext as those elements that accompany the main text of any printed book, comprised of title and end pages, introductions, prefaces, dedications, epigraphs, covers, genre considerations, formatting, interviews, reviews, diaries, and correspondence. Genette asserts that these elements serve as a threshold of interpretation, a frame that colours and controls one’s reading of the entire text. Given that such paratextual materials are usually not supplied by the author, but rather by the publisher, Genette considers how these introductory components can alter and inform – both negatively and positively – a reader’s approach to the main text:

> …the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers, and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an “undefined zone” between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text), an
edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.” (1-2)

To consider the paratexts of Inglis’s calligraphic manuscripts as a ‘threshold of interpretation’ seems a particularly meaningful approach to her craft, considering that her authorial voice is largely absent from the main textual body because of her role as a copyist.

Genette divides the paratextual sphere into two separate entities: the peritextual space and the epitextual space. Genette’s paradigm identifies the prefatorial space, which he deems peritextual, as essentially typographical in nature, a spatial category, incorporating format, covers, title pages, prefaces, typesetting, printing, inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, notes, dedicatory letters, and author portraits. The epitextual space refers to those influences outwith the book itself, including author interviews, reviews, historical tracts, diaries, private conversations, and written correspondence. In short, anything not materially attached to the book, although certain elements such as reviews or prefaces by others can subsequently be added to the peritext.

Within the peritextual space, what Genette classifies as the outermost peritext and the anthumous peritext will prove most pertinent to my argument. To briefly outline each, the outermost peritext refers to the cover, title page, and their appendages, as well as the book’s material construction in terms of selection of format, page, typeface, and so forth: the anthumous peritext alludes to the official message of the title, original preface, and the ad-plate, in addition to comments signed and authorised by the author, which I will suggest for Inglis included dedicatory letters. All of these elements form part of the public paratext, in that they are public addresses directed to readers, critics or booksellers. As such they are official messages sanctioned by the author/publisher, in this instance Inglis. These are the terms I will employ throughout the subsequent discussion in order to direct focus to the peritext where Inglis most frequently played with ventriloquism, as it was the only space
available to her as an early modern woman writer where she could develop an original authorial voice.

It should be clarified, however, that save for two documents – Inglis’s previously cited 1620 letter on behalf of her son to James VI and I, and the now lost document proclaiming Kello ‘Clerk of All Passports’ – essentially no epitextual testimony of Inglis’s corpus exists, especially in the form of reviews (if we exempt laudatory verses), diaries or more extensive correspondence. As such, these extant epitextual letters form part of Genette’s private paratext, literally a private message not intended for public consumption. Evidently, historical context is epitextual in nature, which I concede, and Genette takes care to establish that ‘every context, in principle, serves as a paratext’ (8). Yet, somewhat contradictorily he also simultaneously sounds the caveat that

one of the methodological hazards attendant on the subject as multiform and tentacular as the paratext …is the imperialist temptation to annex to this subject everything that comes within its reach or seems possibly to pertain to it….Inasmuch as the paratext is a transitional zone between text and beyond-text, one must resist the temptation to enlarge this zone by whittling away in both directions. However indeterminable its boundaries, the paratext retains at its center a distinctive and undisputed territory where its “properties” are clearly manifest and which is constituted jointly by the types of elements I have explored in this book, plus some others. Outside of that, we will be wary of rashly proclaiming that “all is paratext.” (my emphasis) (407)

Such a grey area, articulated by Genette, while verdant territory, unfortunately far exceeds the scope of this essay. As a consequence, while I will necessarily incorporate epitextual historical context where appropriate, my focus will be confined mainly to the peritext as the most relevant means of assessing Inglis’s authorial construction, with one exception: laudatory verses, which I will assert are forerunners of contemporary reviews in
terms of legitimising and promoting an author’s work, similar to contemporary ‘blurbs’ on covers and backplates. In this context, they are epitextual, constituting what Genette alludes to as semiofficial allographic epitext: occasions when the author is written or discussed by a third party. Yet, such discussions often occur with the involvement of the author as third parties articulate what the author cannot, similar to a peritextual preface praising the author: a zone that lies outside the author’s declared responsibility. This is a paratextual tool Inglis frequently implemented as part of her legitimising praxis, as I will examine. First, I shall consider how Inglis mobilised the paratext to suit her authorial agenda.

Inglis did not consider herself to be a mere copyist-calligrapher. A self-described writer, she served as both author and publisher of her texts, controlling all aspects of their production, her paratexts frequently drawing attention to her role in their creation. On numerous occasions Inglis asserts her authorial author-ity in her titles, firmly establishing that the contents of her manuscripts are the work of her own hand: ‘De la main d’Esther Anglois françoise’, (Les Proverbes, 1600. ‘Catalogue’ no. 16), ‘of the hand writing and limming of mee Esther Inglis’ (A New Yeers Guift, 1606. ‘Catalogue’ no. 21), and ‘Escrít et illuminée par moy Esther Inglis’ (Cinquante Octonaires, 1607. ‘Catalogue’ no. 27).

Moreover, given the scant biographical facts that exist, her entirely self-created paratexts – and, by this, I am alluding to Inglis’s embroidered covers, author portraits, illuminated borders and frontispieces, dedications, title pages, mottos, and, most pertinently, her authorial name, which she altered several times throughout her lifetime – arguably present the only credible means of assessing Inglis’s intent with regard to her work.

Following Frye who suggests that Inglis used her prefaces to articulate an authorial voice, and Sarah Gwyneth Ross’s deft exploration of Inglis’s prefatory materials to demonstrate how she controlled all aspects of the publication of her manuscripts, drawing attention to her ‘agility in shifting personae’ (168), I intend to assert that Inglis can indeed lay claim to originality in the paratexts of her manuscripts. I shall discuss how Inglis
skilfully and deftly manipulated them to manifest an authorial female voice, in an age when women writers were either silenced or were forced to publish anonymously. To achieve this end, I will explore the techniques Inglis employed to suggest the possibility that she was, in fact, less a skilled copyist, who simply transcribed religious texts rote-like onto the manuscript page, than a skilled literary ventriloquist: an early modern woman writer capable of reading the political and cultural landscape of her time, particularly with regard to the role of women within society, and ventriloquising it accordingly in her paratexts – and, perhaps more daringly, in the main textual body. By so doing, I will attempt to establish that Inglis was able to present a persona acceptable to the patriarchy in order to obtain patronage, while simultaneously – albeit surreptitiously – establishing her own identity as a woman writer.

**Literary Ventriloquism**

I would like to define here my use of the word ‘ventriloquist’ within this remit. In the twentieth century, ventriloquism has emerged as a strand of literary analysis, which may be defined as ‘the expression of one’s views and attitudes through another; especially such expression by a writer through a fictional character or literary persona’ (‘Ventriloquism’, def. 2). Elaborating upon this definition, Woodcock suggests that literary ventriloquism can also be described as ‘a performatve act of habitation, occupation’ (142), designed to offer a reinvented voice to the marginalised and the overlooked. Similarly, John Hodgson defines literary ventriloquism as ‘the voice of an absence’ (par. 5), in which an author speaks for a chosen subject, often a silenced historical figure, ventriloquising or ‘throwing’ that voice so that it may be heard.

As an early modern woman writer, Inglis, along with her peers, was denied a voice in literature that was expressive of her experience, thoughts or creativity. Frye notes that
few women, with the exception of Isabella Whitney, Elizabeth I and Mary Sidney Herbert, were published in print prior to the seventeenth century ‘due to a society in which acceptable women’s creative endeavors involved the collaborative work called copying, whether in their embroidery from emblem books or printed patterns, drawing, calligraphy or translation’ (‘Materializing’ 487).

Further compounding the issue for women writers seeking to create an authentic authorial voice was seventeenth-century male authors’ predilection for ventriloquising the female voice in their novels and poems. Yet, the effect was not to empower women by speaking for their marginalised figures, but to disempower them. Elizabeth Harvey contests that this practice of gender-crossing by men in Renaissance literature, of appropriating the female voice (which she terms ‘transvestite ventriloquism’), reflected and contributed to ‘a larger cultural silencing of women (deauthenticating and contaminating the female voice)’ (12). An additional impediment facing women writers in creating a language that spoke to their shared experience was that ‘since authorship was gendered masculine in this period, any woman’s publication could be read as an act of ventriloquism (and some were), as a woman imitating a man’ (North 220). As such, given the constraints placed upon female authorship and publication, women writers were predominantly gagged, their muffled, infrequent attempts at literary articulation, relatively inaudible.

As a discussion of her paratexts will highlight, Inglis paid close attention to the ideological tenor of her time, particularly with regard to ventriloquism. Working within the approved domestic arts of copying and calligraphy in the main textual body, Inglis was

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10 Isabella Whitney (born 1545?; fl. 1566–1573) was arguably the first female poet and professional woman writer of secular poetry in England, author of *The Copy of a Letter* (1567) and *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573), amongst other works; Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) authored several tracts, comprised mainly of translations with modifications, including *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul: A Prose Translation from the French of a Poem by Queen Margaret of Navarre, Made in 1544 by the Princess (Afterwards Queen) Elizabeth, and Queen Elizabeth’s Englishings of Boethius, De consolatione philosophiae, A.D. 1593; Plutarch, De Curiositate; Horace, De arte poética (Part) A.D. 1598: Edited from the Unique Manuscript, Partly in the Queen’s Hand, in the Public Record Office, London;* Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), was Sir Philip Sidney’s sister, muse, poet and subsequent editor of his works, including *Defence of Poesy* (c. 1580-81) and *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (c. 1585).
careful to ostensibly conform to seventeenth-century patriarchal notions of female authorship. Frye notes that writing by hand was considered suitable employment for women of this era given that the patriarchy regarded calligraphy as copying. Moreover, as female calligraphers were copying the works of men, rather than originating thought to be published in the public domain, the activity was deemed non-threatening (479). Yet, such conformity evidently denied Inglis the possibility of manifesting original content. In this context, ventriloquism appeared to serve no purpose for Inglis, an element of her texts I will briefly consider when I assess the extent – indeed, intent – of Inglis’s agency when transcribing religious tracts in the main textual body of her manuscripts, as part of what I define as her scribal ventriloquistic praxis. By contrast, however, the paratext proved far more verdant territory.

**Throwing Paratextual Voices**

Paratexts do two things besides impart a certain amount of information about the text and its history: (1) they open a dialogue with the “main text” and (2) they attach the figure and voice of [the author] to the “main text.”

(Fox 104)

Inglis’s paratexts, which Genette upholds is ‘always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial’ (8), enabled her not only to ‘speak’ to her audience, but, more crucially, enabled her to allow the paratexts to speak for her as a woman writer in the process of establishing her identity. To clarify, within a book, each page ‘speaks’ to the reader from an authorial/publisher perspective. Thus, each page possesses a ‘voice’. As Genette asserts, ‘all the paratexts I consider will themselves be of a textual, or at least verbal, kind: titles, prefaces, interviews, all of them utterances that, varying greatly in scope nonetheless share the linguistic status of the text’ (7). Following Barthes, books are comprised of a ‘tissue of citations’ (4), or else voices, which by literary osmosis are absorbed into the text, along with
the author’s voice. Thus each author is a ventriloquist of sorts, consciously or unconsciously throwing the voices of others and assembling them within the structure of the text. The paratexts, particularly the peritext, of her manuscripts offered Inglis the scope to ingeniously construct a literary persona that was at once acceptable to the patriarchy and her patrons, but that also slyly furthered her publishing agenda. Through her paratexts, Inglis discovered the means to circumvent the difficulties she encountered as a woman writer by appropriating the very ventriloquistic practice male authors employed to silence women, specifically to subvert it and allow her own voice to be heard.

Undoubtedly, Inglis’s ‘voice’ could not come into being and be recognised without patriarchal validation, but by presenting such paratextual ‘utterances’ as dedicatory letters, written in praise of her by male patrons, for example, within the peritextual space; by transcribing patriarchal words into print with her own hand, she effectively ventriloquised such male voices scribally, by the act of copying their words onto the page. To this end, she assumed ownership by re-fashioning and presenting such utterances through her unique female authorial perspective. In her self-appointed role of publisher, Inglis mobilised a cross-section of ventriloquised voices – both male and normatively feminine – to herald her achievements and thus sanction her emergence onto the authorial landscape.

My thesis will disassemble the various paratexual components of Inglis’s manuscripts and analyse each in turn with regard to Genette’s theory. I shall endeavour to establish that Inglis assumed – and sometimes shared – ‘author-ity’ within the peritextual space, stamping it with her imprimatur through consistent acts of literary ventriloquism; a ventriloquism that opened a dialogue with the main text of her work, per Fox; a text from which she requisitely erased her identity in the main body by the act of copying psalms to conform to a normatively feminine role. By so doing and mobilising her paratexts as her ventriloquist’s dummy, which I define below, Inglis surreptitiously asserted her right to own the psalms she subsequently copied by opening a dialogue with them. To this end, she
assumed control of her works in their entirety, structuring the ventriloquised voices of her texts according to her discretion.

Through a close analysis of Inglis’s peritextual imprimatur, consisting of her varying self-portraits, alterations in name, mottos, frontispieces, dedicatory letters, mottoes, and epigraphs, which shifted shape from manuscript to manuscript, I shall suggest that Inglis emerges as an elusive, even somewhat deceptive Creator. By examining what Genette defines as the illocutionary force of the paratextual message, how each page speaks to the reader as determined by the author/publisher Inglis, I will analyse her ‘message’ across her corpus, taking into consideration Genette’s taxonomy of factual, intentional/interpretative, or commanding/performative messages.\(^\text{11}\) By so doing, I will argue that while Inglis ‘fastened’ herself upon the peritextual page, her shape did not remain constant from text to text. In nearly every manuscript, an element of surprise existed, refuting assumptions about her craft and destabilising the territory upon which she wrote. Yet, what will become incontrovertible is that Inglis ‘silenced’ the multiplicity of voices that contributed to the pre-text. By assuming all roles of the publication process, Inglis distilled such polyvocality to one voice: her own.

Genette’s Pre-Text

I will also consider Genette’s fascinating analysis of authorial pre-textual practices, and his contention that ‘the paratextual function of the pre-text consists of offering a more or less organized tour of the “workshop,” uncovering the ways and means by which the text has become what it is’ (263). While Genette does not specifically focus on manuscript production, rather printed and published paratexts, his insight is especially intriguing in

\(^\text{11}\) Genette’s exhaustive taxonomy defines such ‘messages’ according to the following criteria: factual i.e. authorial name or date of publication; intentional/interpretative i.e. the message of preface, or choice of genre; commanding/performative i.e. offering advice or instruction to the reader with regard to dedications, epigraphs or inscriptions (75).
relation to Inglis and the inherent tension of the era in which she was writing, between manuscript and print culture.

Genette asserts that pre-texts are what the author intended to be left behind, not published, although he concedes that some authors pass them along with intent, willing to tell the reading public about how the author wrote the book. Genette’s polemic essentially – and in my opinion, redundantly – rechristens the concept of ‘avant-texte’, originated by genetic critics\(^{12}\) (an evolution of manuscript studies), which signalled a departure from assessing authorial intent within the synchronic structure of a final, published Text, the so-called definite terminal state of the work. Rather, genetic criticism’s approach is diachronic, inclusive of the ‘critical gathering’ (Deppman et al. 21) of authorial drafts, memorandum, notes, sketches, proofs, manuscripts, and correspondence that contribute to the final published Text, i.e. the entire creative process, the avant-texte. Genetic critics assert that these materials – as they reveal a textual journey – are crucial to our final understanding of the creative process, of which genetic criticism is essentially a study. As a literary movement, it pursues an immaterial object (a process) through analysis of the material traces left by that process. Genetic critics are in essence, ‘textual agents’ who study an expanding archive in order to assess how they are written and read.

In this context, manuscript production, in that it is fluid, or ‘unlocked’, and open to revision, is essentially a self-reflective practice, conveying a message to the reader about authorial craft and its process. It is diachronic, concerned with iteration as meaningful variation, substitution, and evolution. For the purposes of analysing Inglis’s corpus, genetic criticism dovetails neatly into Genette’s concept of paratext. Indeed, what is of significant interest to the ensuing discussion of Inglis’s paratexts, is the editorial pre-textual revision that took place within her manuscript framework: a legacy Inglis allowed to be made public. I am referring to the numerous occasions when Inglis made calligraphic mistakes, left

\(^{12}\) The concept was originated by Jean Bellemín-Nöel in *Le Texte et l’Avant-Texte*, 1972. For further discussion, see Hay 36-69 and de Biasi 17-28.
sentences unfinished, or scored through her choices and altered sentences: the smudged portraits, or pasted on portraits over a previous effort; torn pages and paper glued to the backs of such pages to repair and reconstitute in full, while displaying a ‘torn’ writing fragment; material iterations across manuscripts from frontispieces, to self-portraits, to laudatory verses in her honour. For genetic criticism is inherently concerned with contrast, from words – the supplanting of one to replace with another from manuscript to manuscript, and how such an alteration impacts meaning – to more substantive narrative choices.

Yet, for the contemporary scholar, it is specifically Inglis’s pre-textual praxis that I suggest singles her out for commendation as an early modern woman writer. Within the peritextual space, in particular, she engaged in highly self-reflective pre-textual acts and experiments in discussion with herself as Creator, as she arranged the paratextual furniture of title, portrait, dedicatory letter, etc, to create a voice. In this sense, she made a private act public and left behind a compelling legacy of how she as an early modern writer essentially discovered and formulated, that voice, through both textual and iconic (Genette’s classification of illustrative) elements. Here, I align myself closely with Seth Lerer’s contention that Renaissance paratexts are, in essence, ‘errata sheets for the contemporary reader, narrativizing the story of errors to offer a personal history of detection and correction’ (51).

In leaving behind her final ‘published’ works, in that Inglis sanctioned their publication as publisher, yet in permitting the mistakes she made to be visible to subsequent readers, Inglis essentially presented what genetic critics deem the avant-texte. Quite literally, the reader is confronted with the palimpsestic territory of her creative process, the entire dossier as far as it can be collated, almost in its entirety, rendered exclusively upon

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13 On numerous occasions, Inglis corrected her portraits and frontispieces by pasting a piece of paper over an existing choice. Moreover, she frequently made errors of spelling and compilation, cutting pieces from pages and repairing them with new paper. For examples, see the frontispiece (f.1v.) of *Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste*, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 10); the author portrait (f. 1v.) of *Octonaries*, 1600 (‘Catalogue’ no. 12); the painted over name and replaced recipient (f. 1r.) of *Les Proverbes du Roy Salomon*, 1601 (‘Catalogue’ no. 16).
the page. For, despite its superficial beauty, Inglis’s corpus was inherently flawed – she frequently made spelling mistakes, for example. Moreover, in *Livret*, 1586 (‘Catalogue’ no.1), a subsequent reader notes on the flyleaf that ‘The Latin of her Psalms is (I believe) of her own making, for it is neither Buchanan’s nor any other of those that have paraphrased the Psalms’, thus offering the tantalising hypothesis that Inglis was agent in all manner of similar creative licenses, as I shall explore.  

Her decision to present such flaws, however, denotes a pragmatic honesty for the reader as Inglis realised herself as author upon the page, revealing her agency throughout. This is precisely the kind of destabilising honesty valued by genetic critics, who are less concerned with the texts at all than the writing process that engenders them, in itself a subversion of the published Text’s final hold.

Conversely, as the pressed manuscript page was synonymous with a fallen woman during the early modern period, which I will also discuss more fully, Inglis’s decision to present herself as flawed or fallen, perhaps similarly figured as a directional message designed to deflect to her reader any subsequent criticism of her bold choices as a woman writer. Indeed, Inglis experimented wildly with the textual and iconic composition of her manuscripts by frequently replicating the printed page thus denying editing, yet presenting what appeared to be a permeable format (i.e. the manuscript), both ‘locking’ and ‘unlocking’ her manuscripts to the reader. As Marie Maclean asserts with regard to ‘speech-act’ theory:

> The paratexts involve a series of first order illocutionary acts in which the author, the editor, or the prefaces are frequently using direct performatives. They are informing, persuading, advising, or indeed exhorting and commanding the reader. (274)

Consequently, by examining how Inglis manifested her authorial voice self-consciously ‘in the raw’, arguably through analysis of the peritextual *avant-texte*, the

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14 George Buchanan (1506-1582) was a Scottish historian and humanist scholar. He was considered the greatest living Latin scholar in sixteenth century Europe.
illocutionary force of her messages will resonate from manuscript to manuscript, in terms of contrast, choice, and effect.

To this end, I will suggest that Inglis’s paratexts served as her metaphorical ‘ventriloquist’s dummy’, placed in her authorial lap; a literary device which granted Inglis as author/Creator/ventriloquist the freedom to experiment with and to ‘throw’ other voices, distinct from her own, both masculine and normatively feminine. From replicating the patriarchal printed page and mimicking the triumphal male voice, extolling her talent, ‘no more have I payned myself many yearis to burie the talent God has geven me in oblivion’ (Quotations, 1605. ‘Catalogue’ no. 2); to those occasions where Inglis assumes the meek and obeisant voice of the virtuous female as evidenced by her needlepoint and calligraphy, and adopted a more plaintive tone, ‘I have (right Worshipfull) decored this work with my pen and pensill in the best soirt I could for your said, esteming it my dewtie’ (Argumenta, 1607. ‘Catalogue’ no. 28); each instance will serve to underscore her ongoing attempt to realise her own unique authorial voice.

My thesis, therefore, will unfold the ways in which Inglis appropriated and inventively ventriloquised patriarchal literary practices in her paratexts with regard to scribal publication, her deft manipulation of gendered humility tropes, and the topos of modesty in her dedications, as well as her use of epigraphy and author portraits. Elaborating upon these areas, I will examine the tonal shifts and various identities she assumes in her letters to patrons and acute awareness of the feasibly gendered expectations of her intended patrons, depending on her audience. I will also consider her covers, choice of mottos, authorial name, inclusion of testimonials, and appropriation and textual ventriloquisation of the printed page. Through this process of paratextual and ventriloquistic manipulation, I will assert that Inglis simultaneously – albeit surreptitiously – destabilised established seventeenth-century perceptions of female authorship, to allow her overlooked and marginalised voice, the voice of the silenced female Other, to be heard. Whereas male
authors used ventriloquism to silence women, Inglis mobilised the trope to empower herself as a woman writer.

Ultimately, as I shall endeavour to prove, by determinedly inserting herself as author/Creator into the paratexts of her manuscripts, Inglis indeed emerges as the ‘Amazon lady’ she described herself as: a stunningly inventive, ambitious, brave, dexterous, and pioneering contributor to early modern women’s writing. In essence, Inglis stands meaningfully on the threshold of her manuscripts as a conduit to subsequent feminist interpretation, presenting the image of a woman writing both within and without of her time.

I

‘by the help of wings meade of pennes and wax’

Esther Inglis, letter to James VI and I, 1620

I will first briefly examine the epitextual context of Inglis’s corpus by recounting her biographical history, in tandem with a historicist exploration of print and manuscript culture during the early modern period, the foundation from which Inglis crafted, constructed, and ultimately presented her manuscripts. As will become apparent, these cultural markers that determined Inglis’s output, including her familial environment, proved crucial to her authorial process, the peritextual components of which I will then proceed to analyse with regard to a selection of her works, predominantly those housed at The University of Edinburgh Library, The National Library of Scotland, The New York Public Library and The Pierpont Morgan Library, NY.

For the purposes of clarification, I have divided Inglis’s corpus into three periods: early (1586-1606), middle (1606-1615), and late (1616-1624).

15 See f.n. 9.
Biography

As I have previously stated, there are few facts available to the contemporary scholar pertaining to Inglis’s life. Those that have emerged were culled from extant letters and parish records, as well as Laing’s notes, which Scott-Elliot and Yeo mined for the ‘Catalogue’. Despite their scarcity, such verifiable biographical details frequently offer an edifying perspective on certain aspects of Inglis’s history, particularly her upbringing where her parents, both of them teachers, schooled her in calligraphy: a Christian Humanist education that I suggest foregrounded her fashioning of an authorial identity. In addition, her marriage to Bartholomew Kello, and alleged ties to the court of James VI and I, will prove similarly pertinent to the ensuing discussion of her paratexts. Specifically, in terms of how Inglis sought to position herself within a literary marketplace in the process of extreme flux, as scriveners made the – at times, volatile – transition from private aristocratic coterie manuscript publication to widespread and public print publication.

One of three children, Inglis was born in 1571 to Nicholas Langlois and Marie Presot in France, although Scott-Elliot and Yeo have raised the possibility that her family were not originally French, rather part of a round of immigrants to France who moved there in the sixteenth century and earlier. This supposition is based upon the fact that Esther anglicised her family surname to ‘Inglis’ sometime around 1602, having previously called herself Esther Anglois, Françoise, in her manuscripts predating this year.16 This anglicised version of her maiden name was the nom de plume she adopted for the rest of her career, despite her marriage to Bartholomew Kello, although she was referred to by her married name in the accounts of Prince Henry in 1609 and 1612.

Around 1569, her family moved to London to escape the persecution of the Huguenots, which resulted in the Massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572. Circa 1574, they settled in Edinburgh and evidently struggled to establish a professional foothold, enduring

16 See Octonaries, 1600 (‘Catalogue’ no. 12).
straitened circumstances and receiving assistance as people of lesser means from 1578-1580. Subsequently, Inglis’s father was employed as Master of the French School, a position he held until his death in 1611, after which his successors received a yearly pension from James VI and I of 100 pounds per year. At the French School, he was described as teaching French and writing to his pupils, ‘forming of their handis to a perfyte schap of lettir’. It is also assumed that Inglis’s mother, Marie Presot, a calligrapher, educated her daughter in calligraphy. A page of Presot’s calligraphy has survived, displaying several hands, and is housed at the Newberry Library.

In 1596, Inglis married a clerk in Holy Orders, Bartholomew Kello, who remains a somewhat shadowy figure in her biography. The son of a Presbyterian minister, John Kello, Bartholomew is remarkable for being the son of a man who was hanged. In 1570, members of John Kello’s congregation discovered his crime after he had beseeched them to visit his sickly wife, whereupon they found that he had murdered her. In his defence, John Kello claimed to have been hearing voices and suffering hallucinations, but he was duly convicted and sentenced to death ten days later. For reasons unknown, Bartholomew was to receive a grant from James VI and I that enabled him to continue his education at The University of St Andrews.

Little is known of Bartholomew Kello, but it has been suggested by Bracher, Frye, and Ziegler that he was employed as a courier by James VI and I both at home and abroad, conveying secret messages to foreign courts. In 1601, one of Inglis’s manuscripts, *Les Proverbes*, 1601 (‘Catalogue’ no. 16), allegedly served as the conduit for a concealed message to Vicomte de Rohan, to whom the manuscript was dedicated, from the King. As if to support this claim of Kello working as a spy in His Majesty’s service, there is an unsigned warrant dated 1596, seemingly written by James VI and I, which appointed Kello ‘Clerk of All Passports’, and referred to Inglis as ‘the maist exquisite and perfyte writer

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17 *Registrum Secreti Sigilli*, VIII, no. 591.
within this Realme’. Bracher, Frye, and Ziegler have suggested, however, that Kello, or else Inglis, wrote the warrant in the King’s name, in anticipation of his Royal signature. The warrant was perhaps intended as something of a plea for the King to appoint Kello to a court station, although James VI and I did not sign the document. These sensationalistic claims serve little purpose other than to establish that Inglis occupied a peripheral position in Royal courts, but had access to them nonetheless; an important aspect of her authorial positioning, as I will consider later in her dedicatory letters.

In 1607, however, Kello was inducted Rector of Willingale Spain in Essex, holding the benefice until 1614. Yet, in 1620, after he was appointed Rector of Spexhall in Suffolk by James VI and I, his son, Samuel Kello, succeeded him in the post a mere ten months later. This was perhaps as a result of the petition Esther Inglis wrote to James VI and I asking him to find employment for Samuel, an intriguing request given that her husband effectively lost his job as a consequence. Inglis bore six children to Bartholomew, two of whom died in 1614, of causes unknown.

Around 1615, Inglis may have suffered an illness, as she began to include the phrase ‘son dernier adieu’ – ‘her last goodbye’ – in her titles when she was living in London. By August of that year, she had returned to Lislebourg (Leith in Edinburgh), where she lived a further nine years, dying in August 1624 at the age of fifty-three. It has been speculated by Dorothy Jackson Judd, amongst others, that Inglis was Henry, Prince of Wales’s nurse, but

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18 See f.n.2.
19 Another rare piece of epitext, for a fuller discussion of this hypothesis, see Bracher 132-143. See also, Ziegler, ‘More’ 23, and Frye, ‘Materializing’ 471-2, who question whether either Inglis or her husband wrote the document in an attempt to secure Kello’s position at court, and were desirous of the King’s signature. Inglis’s name is erased four times from the document, and Kello’s added in its place, thus suggesting that Inglis originated it.
20 See f.n.9.
Scott-Elliot and Yeo have subsequently refuted this supposition. Inglis did occupy a marginal position at the courts of Elizabeth I, James VI and I, Anne of Denmark, and Prince Henry, and employment by the Royal Household would certainly have served her purpose in appealing for patronage, but no such connection is referenced in her paratexts. What is irrefutable is that Kello and Inglis were not wealthy. Inglis died in debt and Kello was barely clear of it at the time of his death. Scott-Elliot and Yeo hypothesise that what they deem Inglis’s ‘grovelling’ dedicatory letters were, in fact, an appeal for patronage, and, as a consequence, not commissioned by her recipients. In addition, they suggest that in 1602 Inglis may have been involved in litigation, and presented a manuscript to the Justice-General of Scotland as a means of remedying the suit in her favour.

**Humanist Education**

While most of the details surrounding Inglis’s life are subject to conjecture – and, on occasion, spurious sensationalism that undermine her credibility and contribution as an early modern woman writer – what does emerge from her biography is that she was highly educated, raised within a family of intellectuals. As Ross comprehensively discusses in ‘Esther Inglis: Linguist, Calligrapher, Miniaturist, and Christian Humanist’, her parents educated her in the Christian Humanist tradition, which inculcated secular values founded upon the study of Ancient Greek and Latin literature and philosophy, yet were consistent with Christian pedagogy. Inglis was subject, therefore, to a form of advanced homeschooling within what Ross deems a household academy, based upon a long-standing tradition in France that became increasingly popular in Europe during this time, the

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21 See f.n.6.
22 See ‘Catalogue’ 14. In none of the extant dedications to James VI and I, Prince Charles or Prince Henry does Inglis reference being his nurse or being of service in the Royal Household. If she had occupied this position, it would have strengthened her claim on Royal generosity. Inglis did receive various payments from Prince Henry in 1612, but Scott-Elliot and Yeo suggest this was remuneration for the manuscripts she offered to him in that year.
23 See f.n.5.
domestic enclave serving ‘as a source of education and positive publicity for ambitious women intellectuals’ (163).

Such education first becomes evident during Inglis’s teenage years, when she worked as a writing mistress in the school where her father was employed as master, a role that I suggest served as an apprenticeship for her future role as editor and publisher of her texts. To clarify, within a publishing construct the respective functions of editor and publisher are inherently academic in scope, predicated upon critical, evaluative, analytical, and research based skills, contingent upon an understanding of the theoretical framework within which an author is creating in order to best guide him/her. Similarly, as a teacher and guide of the art of writing/calligraphy, if not original creation, Inglis would have been skilled, indeed schooled, in similar evaluative, critical, and research oriented practices to best instruct her students: skills she could subsequently apply to her career as a scrivener. That she was encouraged to do so by her father is evidenced by the fact of her position within his academy, that she was further encouraged to embark upon an authorial career becomes apparent when she writes in 1586, ‘Both parents having bidden me, a daughter has written, breaking the tedium of exile with her pen’ (Livret, 1586. ‘Catalogue’ no. 1). It is to be presumed that Inglis was referring to being exiled from her native domicile, France.

Although, as Frye attests, for most Humanist-educated Europeans at the turn of the seventeenth century, writing properly meant living a moral life (‘Materializing’ 470), the fact that Inglis was encouraged by her family to publish such works proves compelling. At odds with the Renaissance ideal of a chaste, silent, obedient, and pious woman, occupied solely with the ‘safe’ domestic arts of needlepoint, embroidery, and calligraphy, Inglis was seemingly urged to permeate such ‘silence’ with words inscribed upon a page. Words, as I shall explore, which were initially sanctioned by her father; a testament to his ambition for his daughter and, I further suggest, a familial audacity that flew in the face of the prevailing ideal of a woman/mother/daughter as, arguably, mute and incarcerated within a household.
In short, Langlois figures as an early modern stage-parent thrusting his daughter into the limelight, a centre-stage role Inglis was entirely happy to accept.  

Like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, Inglis was permitted to fly by her father, and one would assume by her teacher mother, with ‘the help of wings meade of penne and waxe’. Yet, as a consequence of her education and familial guidance, Inglis displayed a clear-sightedness and astute insight into the cultural factors conditioning her entrance into the world of publishing, hewing to the tried and true of religious psalms rather than inventing original material for her works, such as poetry, in the main textual body. Throughout her career, Inglis was careful to operate within the sanctioned perimeters of the Protestant faith in which she was raised, claiming in one of her dedicatory letters to Elizabeth I that her writing amounted to ‘a portrait of the Christian religion’ (my trans.)

Consequently, I would assert that from her inception as an author, Inglis was encouraged to invent a suitable literary persona within her paratexts as a means to attract patronage. I reiterate my observation that Inglis’s paratexts served a metaphorical ventriloquist’s dummy, a literary device that enabled her to experiment with polyvocality, ventriloquising or ‘throwing the voices’ prevalent within her environment in order that her work find an audience; both masculine: ‘I tane the boldnes to present you’; and normatively feminine, ‘the work of a woman of one, desyrous to serve and honour’ (Quotations, 1605. ‘Catalogue’ no. 2), as well as her scribal ventriloquist-like practice of copying pages from patriarchal printed books, reproducing them with her ‘main feminine’.

It is of crucial significance to note that in embarking upon a publishing career, Inglis was flying in the face of culturally sanctioned feminine endeavour. In the first instance as Creator, i.e. her debut Livret, 1586 (‘Catalogue’ no.1), Inglis effaced her

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24 It is not known why Nicholas Langlois was so keen to promote his daughter, or indeed to encourage her in a writing career. For a fuller discussion of his influence and the Christian Humanist educational paradigm, see Ross 160-167.
25 See f.n 9.
26 For original text, ‘après avoir tiré le pourtraict de la Religion Christienne ’, see Discours, 1591 (‘Catalogue’ no. 3).
impudence by taking care to assume the voice of a humble, modest, and God-fearing daughter in her ‘portrait of the Christian religion’, replicating tracts from the Christian faith into her texts, rather than original content. Through this ventriloquisitic praxis – at odds with her appropriating the normatively masculine role of Creator/publisher – she concealed her ambition and deflected attention from the control she exerted over all of her creations as sole publisher; a subtle suggestiveness that permeated the paratextual space of her manuscripts, the antithesis of the normatively feminine role she appeared to present. By so doing, Inglis justified her creativity, and indeed creations, as she embarked upon the treacherous, gendered territory of manuscript production in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century: ‘Inglis fashioned her books within the implicit connections between her Protestant upbringing, her well-trained hand, and the dozens of “hands,” or styles, of handwriting that she had learned’ (Frye, Pens 104).

Yet, as an early modern woman writer, Inglis faced significant obstacles in terms of validating and presenting her voice. Fashioning an authorial identity for a woman was relatively virgin territory and virtually untrammeled given that authorship was solely the province of aristocratic men. As Ross comments:

> Fashioning an image for public consumption presented a new set of challenges. Intellectuals of both sexes had to navigate the complex system of rhetorical positioning early in their careers – finding ways to garner attention and admiration, while ingratiating themselves and attempting to forestall criticism. Women faced the additional difficulty of calibrating the “domestic” and “academic” elements of their personae. (168)

This problem was effectively remedied for Inglis by her father, as within the Christian Humanist tradition fathers often served as educators and promoters of their
daughters until they married, whereupon their husbands, also part of an educated elite, would support their wives’ careers.\(^{27}\)

Certainly, Inglis had connections to elite patronage networks through her father as an employee of James VI and I. Moreover, in three of Inglis’s early works – *Livret*, 1586 (‘Catalogue’ no. 1), *Discours de la Foy*, 1591 (‘Catalogue’ no. 3), and *Livret traitant de la Grandeur de Dieu*, 1592 (‘Catalogue’ no. 4) – Langlois added laudatory verses to his daughter’s manuscripts, praising her skill; an inclusion, which Ross argues, was tactical on both father and daughter’s part, pointing out that the boldest female authors of Inglis’s era used this technique, amongst them Lucrezia Marinella.\(^{28}\)

All aspirants to the literary elite in early modern Europe faced the challenge of establishing authorial credibility. For women, however, the need to satisfy conventions of feminine propriety complicated the process. Tutors brought women intellectual validation. Association with a learned father or husband served the same end, but also signalled that women writers were “good family women” as they stepped beyond the parameters of normative female activity in their careers. (167)

The importance of the paratext here becomes evident, as Ross further asserts, ‘Prefatory encomia, a common feature of learned publication, set authors within their intellectual milieu’ (167). These testimonials were always located in the same prefatory or peritextual space, and, as Lisa Jardine contends, ‘printed testimonials from established figures gave

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\(^{27}\) Examples of women writers educated within similar Humanist enclaves with whom Inglis may have been acquainted were Christine de Pizan (1365-1431); Margaret Roper (1505-1540), daughter of Sir Thomas More, who was schooled in classics alongside her brother; Isabella Andreidni (1562-1604), an Italian actress and writer; as well as the English poets and translators, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), Aemelia Lanyer (1569-1645), and Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1651/3).

\(^{28}\) Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653) was an Italian poet, author and advocate of women’s rights. Her titles include *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men* (1600) and numerous books of poetry.
credibility to writers who lacked diplomas or degrees’ (21). Although Jardine’s discussion focuses on men, the same technique served early modern women intellectuals, who lacked access to institutional validation. Following this precedent, Inglis similarly deployed this peritextual space to sanction her creativity with the inclusion of her father’s voice.

Arguably, therefore, the peritext proved indispensable for Inglis in terms of self-fashioning, as it was the only textual area available to her in which to construct an authorial identity through such epitextual testimonials as her father offered, as well as such peritextual components as self-portraits, dedicatory letters, and frontispieces, etc. While I accept the importance of this space for Inglis in allowing for the inclusion of laudatory verses from her father and male intellectuals that sanctioned her creativity, what critics such as Ross fail to reference explicitly is the possibility that Langlois was, in fact, first introducing his daughter to a salient reality facing her as a woman writer: in effect, her voice would stay ‘silent’ in the public realm unless first validated by the father.

Indeed, inclusion of a male validatory voice was a tactic Inglis continued to employ throughout her early career, incorporating into subsequent manuscripts commendatory verses from Andrew Melville, Principal of The University of Glasgow, a Humanist and central figure of the Scottish Renaissance; Robert Rollock, Principal of The University of St Andrew’s; and John Johnston, a Professor at St Andrew’s University, who along with Melville formed a community of letters in which both figured as the leading lights of their era. Similarly, Inglis included in her peritexts verses and commendations in Latin by her husband, Bartholomew, which Ross similarly claims was a common strategy amongst women intellectuals; “‘domestic’ self-fashioning performed crucial cultural work for ambitious women in early modern Europe’ (168).

Ross upholds that Inglis’s role as a wife was equally important to the literary persona she was in the process of developing. This insight, however, is credible only up to a

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29 For a fuller discussion of how Inglis and her female peers adapted this technique in their works, see Ross.
point. While Inglis relied heavily upon the inclusion of male testimonials in her early career, by 1605 she frequently began to dispense with such validatory male voices. In 1606, Inglis embarked upon virgin territory by dedicating original verses to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, which she referenced in her dedicatory letter. This act signalled a further departure from her previous patriarchal author-isational praxis. Like any aspiring author struggling to find a footing in a glutted publishing landscape, Inglis initially manipulated the semiofficial allographic epitext to legitimise her introduction to noble patrons as an early modern woman writer, but only as a platform to subsequently showcase her voice. By taking the semiofficial allographic epitext (i.e. their verses), part of the private paratext, and making it part of the anthumous peritext and public paratext, Inglis established a literary foothold. Furthermore, by subsequently discarding such creative sanction, once she had garnered a foothold in her ‘marketplace’, she effectively cleansed the page of patriarchal interference; the act itself a bold move to present herself as a woman writing without influence. In effect, Inglis deployed such patriarchal verses to serve as advance ‘P.R.’.

The inclusion of male testimonials certainly establishes Inglis’s comprehension of the tenor of her era, and the paratextual ‘tools’ she would require in terms of furthering her authorial agenda. Yet, I argue that by so doing she did not blithely follow a Christian Humanist paradigm favoured by other ambitious female intellectuals throughout Europe, rather subverted that paradigm to her own end. For in constructing her manuscripts by hand and acting as sole publisher of her texts from design to layout to binding, Inglis could again experiment with ventriloquism and ultimately wrest control of her work from the patriarchal influences that controlled and dictated publication practices during this era. In the context of scribal ventriloquism, she did not permit the hands of her father, Melville, Johnston or Rollock to inscribe the pages of her peritexts, rather Inglis acted for them in the act of

30 Only twenty-one of Inglis’s sixty-one (see f.n. 4) extant manuscripts contained such verses, although intriguingly, she reintroduced verses by Melville, Rollock, and Johnston in her last three manuscripts. See ‘Catalogue’ numbers 53-55.
translation/inscription onto the manuscript. This allows for the possibility that Inglis may have altered their words, or else coloured them according to her predilections. It also invites the possibility that she, in fact, wrote such verses herself, as I will subsequently explore in more detail when I discuss her dedicatory letters.

The fact of her awareness of how such a tactic could serve her purpose at a time when virtually no women were writing for public commendation, speaks to Inglis’s visionary instincts. Inglis was perhaps prescient in realising that as fiercely as she wanted to assert her voice as a woman, its first manifestation requisitely could only emerge as a ventriloquised version of the patriarchal voice, given that she was one of the first women to embark upon a publishing career. In this sense, she destabilised the male/female binary prevalent within manuscript and print culture, which I shall duly examine, and assumed both male and female characteristics in her writing.

Moreover, the fact of her inclusion of such testimonials was initially necessary, but also subsequently manipulative on Inglis’s part and depended upon the recipient of the manuscript, to whom she was appealing for patronage. Indeed, they only proved necessary when they suited her purpose. Yet, by experimenting with literary ventriloquism, and ‘throwing’ patriarchal voices, Inglis also effectively took a step towards silencing that patriarchal voice – at least scribally – colouring it with her feminine timbre; an experiment she was to continue throughout her career. While she would always carefully adhere to prevailing patriarchal views of women and effectively ‘parrot’ them within her paratexts and especially dedicatory letters, Inglis would also sophisticatedly undermine them, in her attempt to authenticate her emerging voice.

**Early Modern Manuscript and Print Culture**

A further factor that significantly influenced Inglis’s manipulation of the peritextual space is that she came of age during a period of increased social tension between a
burgeoning print and prevailing manuscript culture. Although William Caxton had invented
an English printing press at Westminster in 1476, and published hundreds of meticulously
printed editions of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Malory’s *Le Mort d’Arthur*, amongst
others, print publication did not emerge as a viable, affordable, or popular alternative to
manuscript culture until the latter half of the sixteenth century. From 1558 to the 1580s, a
handful of English printers began to cut their own type and produce their own paper, with
printed titles doubling during this period. From its inception, however, print was stigmatised
as common and vulgar and deemed essentially ‘low-born’ given its potential for mass
production.

As Wendy Wall lucidly argues in *The Imprint of Gender*, ‘to be a Man in Print’ (21)
was to embark upon precarious territory, electing to leave behind a healthy, private coterie
manuscript culture favoured by the aristocracy for a burgeoning print industry accessible to
all-comers. The old academic adage of ‘publish or perish’ has resonance for the climate in
which Inglis developed her craft, publishing as she was during a period of widespread
anxiety about authorship, publication and its perception within the class structure.

In the late sixteenth century, manuscript writing, especially in the context of love
and romantic poetry, was considered an act of social determinism, or else a bid for gentility.
As Wall asserts, ‘writing private poetry was …an act of social classification’ (13), limited
predominantly to aristocratic men or the upwardly mobile within such restricted, elite
 confines as coterie circles at court. Manuscript exchange was essentially genteel, and
manuscripts inherently ‘alterable’, given that they were subject to editorial revision as they
were passed from hand to hand and collectively produced within such circles, deriving
power and credence from their place at court and universities: ‘Coterie texts …behaved as
fluid “events” staged within circuits of social obligation and receipt’ (10). Wall further
elucidates that many aristocratic men, including Sir Philip Sidney, refused to be published
and become ‘a Man in Print’, as a consequence of ‘a system that protected social capital
through staged poetic rivalry among men’ (14), with regard to manuscript culture. In short, manuscript production was a private matter, made public only in the most exalted circles.

Albeit occupying a different social milieu, theatrical texts functioned upon similar socially determinant criteria, as they were collaboratively produced and subject to editorial intervention from various participants. Due to the limited nature of publication – as scripts only needed to be created for the actors, not the audience – they could not be mass-produced and travel beyond such creative environments, thus conferring a similar elitism as aristocratic coterie manuscripts. Therefore, within manuscript culture, both poetic and dramatic texts were perceived as ‘open’: they were fluid, malleable, alterable, and receptive to contributions from sources other than the author. In fact, the very essence of such texts was that they were collaboratively produced. As such, they figured as products of the rhetorical grandstanding prevalent within noble or creative circles, emblematic of the exalted status and intellect of the many ‘voices’ that contributed to them.

Furthermore, during the Renaissance, because of these collaborative and revisionary practices the role of the author/publisher was not fixed, as I shall explore further below. The marginal white space of any manuscript page served as an open invitation to a reader to scribble comments or suggestions and thus, following Barthes, abandon the creation to its essential drift; the entire textual corpus was, as I have previously cited, a literal ‘tissue of citations’, a chorus of voices, rather than one singular. More importantly, the limited production of such manuscripts protected the social hierarchy in which they were produced, functioning as arguably inherently elitist texts in that they were created and flourished only within exclusive circles.

In stark contrast, print culture was deemed vulgar as it was linked to commerce and consequently possessed significantly less social authority due to the potential for mass production. Moreover, printed texts were perceived by the aristocracy as ‘closed’, and therefore unalterable, denying a poetics of exchange; meaning was fixed, immutable, and
unrevisable. Print also raised the spectre of the collapse of social difference, wherein lowborn professional writers might ascend to the ranks of the aristocracy, due to the widespread dissemination of printed texts, rendering the boundary between the classes more fluid. As Wall asserts, ‘circulation of texts created anxieties and benefits that tapped into vast cultural problems’ (13). Yet, for those who did elect to print it becomes clear that the “stigma of print” at the end of the century was curiously produced as much by the rhetoric of printed texts themselves as by the fact that texts were actually withheld from the press. The bizarre apologies, justifications, and dedications of the early modern printed text certainly indicate that publishing writers did indeed face a difficult problem: the fact that culturally sanctioned verse was “unauthored” while authored published works were socially “unauthorized”. (17)

Print, therefore, provided socially unauthorised ground upon which new modes of authorship could be established, a verdant environment with which to experiment for Inglis. For much like aristocratic men contemplating the public perils of the printing press, Inglis faced a similar problem of rhetorical positioning in terms of fashioning an authorial identity and establishing credibility as an early modern woman writer, albeit within manuscript culture.

**The Role of the Author in the Early Modern Period**

Having thus established the cultural publishing climate within which Inglis came of authorial age, it will also prove beneficial to consider in greater detail how the role of author was perceived during the Renaissance/early modern period to understand the ways in which Inglis adapted it for her purpose: in short, what constituted an author?

In his seminal essay, ‘What Is An Author?’, Michel Foucault discussed the concept of the ‘author-function’, to describe the cultural control that a known author’s name exerts
over a body of literature (Bouchard and Simon 11). Contemporary critics have questioned whether Renaissance/early modern authorship was less individualised than it is today, making the singular author’s name less relevant due to the inherently collaborative nature of manuscript production, which often incorporated ‘acts of translation and compilation as new authors and editors added material to subsequent editions’ (Wall 11).31

In advance of Barthesian logic that effectively killed the author, privileging the reader as ultimate interpreter of any given text, Renaissance manuscript authors might similarly be perceived as relatively absent, lacking in importance and fundamentally changeable, or else prone to metamorphoses due to the collaborative nature of manuscript production. If in Renaissance/early modern culture the position of author was not ‘fixed’, rather open to revision and amendment by other authorial ‘voices’, or hands (the Latin ‘manu’ of ‘manuscript’), contributing to the text – albeit a text presented under a singular name, despite such collaborative efforts – then each text became polyvocal, a chorus of such voices: Barthes’ ‘tissue of citations’, which by literary osmosis entered into the text. Essentially, authors were not yet fully constructed.

Renaissance/early modern authors prized admission of other ‘voices’ in terms of laudatory verses, etc, in order to validate the text; an inclusion that effectively exalted the influence of the reader and subsequent reviser and diminished the power of the author; the author nothing without an audience. Wall alludes to this as

a gesture of deferral to the reader [that] expresses the medieval and coterie practice whereby readers were authorized to edit the poems they read, to scribble answers in the blank white space of the page, and even to alter the poems themselves….Seldom bound with published books, individual poems behaved as textually permeable forms, editorially open to amendment, dialogue and conversation. (34)

31 For examples, see Wall 23-111.
The author, therefore, was dependent upon and subject to influence and, more importantly, open. In short, the author did not presume to dictate meaning in Renaissance/early modern manuscript culture. The author was humble, allowing for the possibility of revision: the author did not own the last word and each manuscript, therefore, became a palimpsest. In this sense, Renaissance/early modern manuscripts could be perceived as precursors to ‘workshopped’ texts in contemporary Creative Writing classes.

Conversely, however, print exempted the author from influence over his/her text, allowing authorial intent to remain in perpetuity by fixing the ‘last word’ of the author through the printing press. As Wall expounds, ‘While type did not necessarily confer fixity on its more widely distributed and multiply reproduced objects, it began to be interpreted, even as early as the Renaissance, as an art necessarily concerned with stabilization’ (58). Wall also elaborates that ‘public writing [was] a totalizing force that swallows polyvocality and difference into uniformity’ (342). Arguably, within Renaissance/early modern print culture, the author was perceived as God. As a consequence, elite aristocratic networks were forbidden from participating in and revising any given printed text, either tempering or dictating its subsequent influence. Print by its very nature it defied endless collaboration; print could not be abandoned to its essential drift.

This fact is especially pertinent to Inglis’s corpus. For in replicating print culture in her frontispieces, painstakingly copying printed pages so that they were indistinguishable from an actual printed page, Inglis may be construed as attempting to ‘fix’ her peritextual voice within aristocratic patronage circles, to render it immutable and unrevisable: to display only her own polyvocality from title page to author portrait, etc, as exemplified by Her creative praxis, and control thereof, as she experimented with the ‘voices’ of each peritextual component, informed by the materials at her disposal and her desire to create an

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32 Inglis included several replications of printed frontispieces in her manuscripts, by the Genevan printers, Antoine Reboul and Francois Perrin, from La Bible (Geneva, 1588), De Gli Automati (Venice, 1589), published by Girolamo Porro, and Exemplaria sive formularum scripturae ornationis xxxvi (Aachen, 1591) by Jacob Houthusius, amongst others.
original work. In this act, she displayed verisimilitude and courage, not to mention an astute awareness of the problems confronting her as an early modern women writer in assuming ownership over the patriarchal quill by acting as sole Creator. By being careful to toe the line of acceptable feminine creative endeavour, she deftly manipulated the manuscript and print culture of her age to embark upon new territory for a woman, parading it under the noses of aristocratic men and seeking to be rewarded for such daring with patronage and praise. It is in this instance, as I will exemplify in many others, that Inglis began to fully embody her fashioned self-image as an ‘Amazon lady’; bold, fearless, clear-sighted, and nobody’s fool.

Given the historical epitext to Inglis’s corpus, her decision to engage in the socially genteel practice of manuscript production is therefore telling. By selecting the aristocratic confines of the coterie circle in which to circulate her wares, she was able to surreptitiously present a recognisable literary artefact under threat of extinction – the manuscript – and thus tap into the patriarchy’s anxieties about social unease and the shifting publishing landscape in order to exploit them to her advantage. As a consequence of such participation, she appeared to carefully and modestly uphold the patriarchal infrastructure of manuscript culture, whilst simultaneously subtly infiltrating its male-only confines. Moreover, in aligning herself with the hegemony, she displayed an astute understanding of the previously cited adage, ‘publish or perish’: publication of any variety, which flew in the face of sanctioned feminine creativity, was indeed perilous for a woman, and especially for one on the fringes of court life. From the outset, Inglis did not set out to bite the ruling hand that might feed her, rather she played to their fears to further her cause.

Inglis manipulated the cultural zeitgeist to emerge quite literally as a skilled copyist, par excellence. This is evidenced by her ingenious decision to act as sole publisher of her texts; texts she proudly promoted in her dedicatory letters as ‘the work of a woman of one’ (Quotations, 1599. ‘Catalogue’ no. 3). By carefully adhering to the normatively feminine
role of calligrapher/copyist, replicating psalms for moral edification, Inglis was able to present her covert agenda: the presentation of her voice. Furthermore, in her choice of subject matter and by appropriating the role of the printing press, acting autonomously as publisher/editor/copyeditor/printer/author, and ‘fixing’ her words onto the page, she thus defied collaboration and effectively prohibited revision by the patriarchy.

She achieved this specifically by crafting exquisite ‘guift’ books and presenting herself as a mere copyist, dabbling in normatively feminine – and therefore culturally sanctioned – creativity. In this way, Inglis exempted herself from male coterie manuscript circles founded upon rhetorical sparring and revision to establish superiority, and carved her own path, protecting her texts from patriarchal interference in the process. Her manuscripts further defied any form of collaboration because they were copies of the ultimate text, the Bible, the word of God; a text no Renaissance/early modern man would conceive of revising. In this way, Inglis ingeniously allowed for her voice, presented primarily in the peritext, to slip by unnoticed into the male courtly and literary realm.

In addition, contra collaborative manuscript practices, Inglis ‘closed’ the textual corpus to the possibility of patriarchal interference and revision by replicating in exacting detail the pages of printed texts, including frontispieces, capitals, ornamental borders and title pages. By mimicking, or rather, ventriloquising the ‘voice’ of such printed pages – an example of Genette’s ‘illocutionary message’ – Inglis used the peritextual space as a place of subtle suggestion to assert her authorial agenda. As a ‘threshold of interpretation’ that subsequently governs the ensuing text, per Genette, Inglis deftly mobilised the peritext to promote herself to her noble patrons as a ‘woman in print’. In this sense, she presented herself as fixed, immutable, and unalterable. For by playing upon the aristocracy’s anxieties about the inalterability of the printed page, by replicating such pages to present herself, the white space of Inglis’s margins implicitly forbade the addition of editorial marginalia by others.
There are, however, additional considerations to Inglis’s choice to 1) participate in the distinctly aristocratic act of manuscript exchange and 2) to incorporate into her peritexts elements of printed texts, which speak to her foresight. By so doing, she straddled two marketplaces – aristocratic and common – with a foot in both camps. In her decision, which I will subsequently consider with regard to specific publications, to effectively ‘fuse’ together two competing cultures – manuscript and print – on one page, ventriloquising aspects of print publication within the more socially respectable confines of manuscript culture, Inglis emerges as more than tentatively audacious, attempting to establish herself within court circles. Given such a decision, Inglis appeared to have more far-reaching goals: a fact further compounded by her sex. For, if aristocratic men of the period were refusing to publish in print, or else were so doing anonymously, and were disdainful of such a public act, Inglis blatantly experimented with the possibility of emerging publicly in print as a woman, presenting a new way of interacting with that culture by replicating printed pages in her manuscripts and presenting her name and, often, portrait within such frontispieces. In this sense, Inglis’s ambition sparkles upon the page, her desire for a wider readership beyond coterie circles perhaps explicit in such publishing choices.

In this, the first of many decisions that would distinguish Inglis as ahead of her time in terms of early modern women’s writing, she made a powerful and meaningful point: Inglis adopted print and aristocratic manuscript culture, entirely the province of men, and tacitly manipulated both to present her emerging voice: yet, she was careful to conform to conventional notions of feminine propriety by achieving such a feat by the mere ‘domestic’ act of copying. This choice in itself, as I shall argue, figured as a subtle ploy designed by Inglis to promote herself without trespassing too far beyond the realms of propriety for a female scrivener. By so doing, such an act acknowledged her as a developing early modern woman writer possessed of stunningly inventive and mindful instincts. As Frye asserts:
The most significant aspect of her books lies in the relation between their existence as handmade objects and the ways that she uses their objectivity to represent her subjectivity as a woman author by appropriating both the conventions of presentation manuscripts and of print culture. Every material feature of Inglis’ books asserts her project, to assemble and publish exquisite textual objects whose value resides in the tension between manuscript and print cultures, the hand and the machines. In creating a place for herself between these cultures….Inglis connected the writing woman to desired political and social affiliations, negotiated in part by and for her family at the same time that her books materialized an authorial self.

(Pens 103)

Having established the epitextual context of Inglis’s corpus, I will now discuss the paratextual furniture of title page, frontispiece, mottos, self-portraits, dedicatory letters, and laudatory verses that Inglis assembled within the peritextual space, beginning with the first paratextual sight to meet the reader: her covers.
II

‘I have adorned this little book with a purty coloured cote for yrslf so I trust you
will accept of it’

*Argumenta*, 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 26)

‘your Highnesse cabinet’

Letter to James VI and I, 1620

**Inglis’s Covers**

The ‘door’ of Genette’s ‘threshold to understanding’ borne by the paratext, is self-evidently the cover, which forms part of his material paratext as well as the outermost peritext, and offers Inglis’s first iconic (i.e. illustrative) message to the reader before entering into her textual corpus. It is also, I suggest, not simply iconic but illocutionary in its force, in that it imparts a piece of sheer information to Inglis’s addressee about her intention as Creator/publisher as to how her work should be interpreted, as I will subsequently examine. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of Inglis’s backlist, perhaps on a more superficial level, is the dress enclosing and surrounding the text; the embroidered covers, the illustrative showmanship of her title pages, frontispieces, and self-portraits; the ornamental capitals and illuminated pages; the elaborate borders surrounding the vast array of dazzling calligraphic hands, made all the more unique and exceptional due to their miniaturised format. To this end, therefore, a crucial element of Inglis’s texts is comprised of the iconic paratext, something Genette largely dismisses from his polemic.

Genette refers to ‘the immense continent’ (406) of illustrations and acknowledges their value as authorial commentary

which sometimes has great force …not only when he (the author: my note)
provides the illustrations himself or commissions them in precise detail, but

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33 See f.n.9.
also, and more indirectly, each time he accepts their presence…. To examine this subject in its full scope, one would need not only the historical information I don’t have but also a technical and iconological skill (think of the illustrations and frontispieces of the classical period) I will never have. Clearly that study exceeds the means of the plain “literary person.” (406)

While I concede Genette’s point, his lack of consideration of the iconic elements of manuscripts, and particularly early modern manuscripts, which by their scribal nature, draw close attention to the act of compilation, revision, and alteration evident upon the page, proves irksome in the context of Inglis’s covers and artwork. Arguably, such palimpsestic acts on the author’s behalf subsequently define an early modern manuscript and its paratext, especially when evidence of the ‘work’, of marginalia, revisions, flaws in illustrations, or in Inglis’s case, occasions whereby she cuts and pastes a new author portrait to cover over an error or improve upon a choice, are made evident to the reader. As I have suggested, Inglis’s texts – the ‘dossier’ of choices, revisions and errors visible upon the page – constitutes the closest example of an avant-texte for the contemporary scholar, especially considering the lack of epitextual evidence attesting to Inglis’s creative process. Moreover, Inglis was very much aware of the imperfect nature of her work, begging the forgiveness of one prospective patron for her manuscript’s imperfections, and asking not to be rejected as a consequence of them.34 Yet, I assert that such imperfections form an important part of the peritextual space, particularly with regard to Inglis’s iconic elements and as a means of assessing her ongoing attempts at self-realisation as an author upon the page.

In Renaissance Paratexts, Helen Smith and Louise Wilson cogently refute what they deem Genette’s restrictive definitions, and declare that ‘even the physical body of the book is paratextual’ (1), citing Jerome McGann’s contention that Genette’s emphasis on

34 See Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste, 1602 (‘Catalogue’ no. 19). In the dedicatory letter, Inglis states ‘vous l’envoye par la petitesse l’offrande, ne la rejeter pour ses imperfections’, ‘I send you this little offering and ask that you not reject it for its imperfections’ (my trans.).
poetics is cauterising since ‘text are embodied phenomena, and the body of the text is not exclusively linguistic’ (2). Similarly, Hester Lees-Jeffries has tackled the lack of iconic examination in Paratexts and reads Renaissance illustrations as nodal points that draw in and direct the reader, shaping their approach to the surrounding text. Her polemic indicates that illustrations do have a number of paratextual functions, which Genette failed to examine, an important point with which I concur when considering Inglis’s implementation of the iconic as a paratextual tool.  

Given how heavily Inglis relied upon illustration and the ‘dress’ of her texts, the question becomes, how do such iconic elements shape an approach to her craft during the early modern period and for what purpose? By consistently including such elements, Inglis seemingly possessed a keen awareness of their paratextual capacity to convey her message as a materialising author. It is how she, herself, as Creator/author first becomes visible to the reader, most obviously in her self-portraits. Yet, I suggest that through her inventive and intricately embroidered covers (notable examples include those created for Elizabeth I, Prince Henry IV, and Prince Charles), Inglis first engaged in ventriloquistic practice, throwing the voice of the virtuous female, and opened up the immediate ensuing peritext as a ‘safe zone’ for her reader to enter. She was a ‘woman in print’, without doubt, and covertly seeking to assert her right to ‘write’, but she was also conforming to the normatively feminine practice of needlepoint and embroidery, thus allaying such gendered societal concerns about women writers. With this highly prescient, slightly manipulative, if dexterous choice, the illocutionary force of her message to the reader—either male or female—was clear as to how they should interpret her intent: as Creator/publisher, whether by needle or pen, stitch or word, Inglis was a woman leaving her mark. At the portal to understanding, Inglis’s needlepoint covers ventriloquised the voice of the virtuous female,

35 For a fuller discussion of Renaissance illustrations, see Lees-Jeffries 185-204.
36 For examples of Inglis’s elaborate and intricately embroidered covers see Le Livre des Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 7), a dazzling example; A Book of the Armes of England, 1609 (‘Catalogue’ no. 37); Les Quatrain des Guy de Faur, 1615 (‘Catalogue’ no. 41).
disarming the unwitting reader as they entered into the private, distinctly gendered, realm of
the manuscript’s interior life, where she again shifted shape: a metamorphosis that will
become increasingly apparent in her self-portraits.

Ross elaborates upon the distinction during the early modern period between
‘feminine needlework’, and ‘masculine Humanist writing’, observing, ‘A familiar topos in
women’s writing and writing about women involved the connection between the needle and
the pen – often mutually exclusive, but sometimes mutually reinforcing’ (169). Indeed,
Inglis frequently sought to display her ‘feminine’ needlework on the cover, while also
including a self-portrait in which she wields a pen, which once more displayed her acute
awareness of the tenor of her era, conforming to female stereotypes, while boldly subverting
them.

In ‘The Needle and the Pen: Needlework and the Appropriation of Printed Texts’,
Jones and Stallybrass similarly examine the tension during the early modern period between
the two modalities for women seeking to write, suggesting that women stitched themselves
into public visibility with the domestic art of needlepoint. In essence, ‘the needle could be a
pen’ (144), as the rise of print culture provided pattern books for women, encouraging
virtuous femininity by the craft, and exhorting women to display their textile work within
the home. This originated what Jones and Stallybrass define as a ‘visual vocabulary’ (144),
the needle and the pen synonymous in terms of creating a narrative for women where they
engaged with one other and the outer world. Originally the province of aristocratic women,
who could afford the fine silk threads for embroidery, printed pattern books promised
middle-class women the possibility of upward mobility if they practised the craft. By the act
of virtuous needlepoint, seventeenth century women stitched themselves into public
visibility, even more so by sewing their names into their work and identifying themselves
for posterity:
Any clear distinction between public and private, inner and outer spaces, was undone in material ways by English needlewomen. Whatever repressive and isolating effects stitchery as a disciplinary apparatus might have been intended to produce, women used it to connect to one another within domestic settings and to connect with the outer world. (148)

It might also be suggested that needlepoint and the rise of print culture reflected the further disintegration of the social hierarchy as previously evidenced by the tension between manuscript and print culture. To this end, it also speaks to the blurring of gendered binaries. Print was opening doors once held fast by the elite, inadvertently empowering the lower classes, and the most disenfranchised class – women – to speak, be it through needlepoint or calligraphy; opportunities Inglis availed herself of and put to good use. The Renaissance practice of ventriloquistic cross-dressing, 37 Harvey’s ‘transvestite ventriloquism’, is exemplified in these decisions, whereby women sought to speak as men, i.e. to send a public illocutionary message through the domestic arts of calligraphy and embroidery; trying on the role and the patriarchal ‘dress’ of the author for size by ‘writing’ within these remits, while ostensibly conforming to feminine ideals.

To offer a point of clarification, authors in print were male, the Word was God’s, and therefore gendered male; writing from every perspective, making visible the Word, was essentially perceived as a masculine endeavour. In this sense, Inglis’s predilection to ventriloquise the voices of her era and society conceivably formed part of a more significant cultural movement, whereby normatively masculine and feminine roles, in certain contexts, were becoming fluid, permeable, and malleable: society as a whole was trying on the dress of the Other, both literally and figuratively, be it matriarchal or patriarchal. Before embarking upon the strictly masculine territory of print within the pages of her creations, Inglis was careful to ventriloquise the safe, and unassuming voice of feminine virtuousness

37 See Harvey.
with her covers, before shedding the robe, once behind the door, to reveal a distinctly hermaphroditic textual corpus. Indeed, the metaphor of the hermaphrodite was prevalent at the time; it was one that Sir Edward Denny applied to Lady Mary Wroth when she published *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* (1621) and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621), reviling it as a ‘monstrous hermaphrodite’ (Wall 337); the female entering into the male textual corpus to create something misshapen, disfigured, and ill-conceived.

Conversely, however, Inglis’s covers – beyond their beautifully compositied designs – also spoke to her awareness of the importance of cover art to beguile a reader, and possibly, to sell a book. As originator, designer, and publisher, Inglis assumed author-ity over every facet of her creations, from binding to embroidery, embossing, limning, writing, composition, printing, engraving, and even bookselling. It is important, as Frye et al. have highlighted, that Inglis was a ‘writer for hire’ throughout her life, ever desirous of, and dependent upon, patronage to fund her work and support her family. The vast majority of her manuscripts were created for noblemen or exalted figures at court and begged for some form of remuneration, often failing to garner such patronage. Given the tension between manuscript and print culture, Inglis perhaps recognised that the only means of expression available to her as an early modern writer was becoming more unique and, therefore, prized by virtue of print culture’s ascent. To this end, she self-fashioned herself as rare, exclusive, and empathetic to the endangered aristocracy in her crafting of presentation books.

In *Women, Writing and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, Mary Burke acknowledges that Inglis was cognisant of how she intended her creations to be perceived, catering obsessively to the interests of her dedicatees. Scott-Elliot and Yeo observe that the most elaborate of Inglis’s cover designs were intended for members of the Royal Family and prominent members of the nobility, constituting over thirty covers of her extant manuscripts (for her remaining corpus, Inglis fabricated covers of leather, often gold-

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38 For a fuller discussion of Inglis’s New Year gift books, specifically the act of prestation to the nobility – a gift in return for remuneration –, see Klein.
tooled). It is almost impossible to translate into words the artistry of Inglis’s designs, which are breath-taking in their scope, execution, and design. Scholars have observed that they are near professional quality, fashioned of silk or velvet, fastened with silk ties, and embroidered in gold, silver or silk threads depicting floral, religious, and ornamental designs from leeks to roses to medallions, coats of arms, phoenixes, and leaping fish.

Inglis was aware of the value of her manuscripts to patrons, and frequently bid them to display her ‘guifts’ in their ‘cabinets’, not unlike modern day curios, which is where objects of beauty and value were placed in the seventeenth century: to Elizabeth I in 1599, she offered the hope that her ‘little present, written by my own hand, from a foreign land, would be able to have a place in your cabinet’ (my trans.); to William Douglas, Earl of Morton in 1607, she prayed that her little book ‘shall have sum hid corner in your Lo: cabinet’; in a letter to James VI and I on behalf of her son, Samuel Kello, she requested to be retired to ‘your Highnesse cabinet’. 39

Patricia Furmerton evolves this insight, noting that miniatures tended to be presented as love tokens, which were traditionally kept in the closet or bedchamber, the most private room in the house, ‘Inglis’s …jewel-like miniature books …ask receptors to treat a presentation manuscript aimed at soliciting patronage as one would an intimate gift’ (Frye, ‘Materializing’ 483). Tjan-Bakker, however, counters this claim by observing that Inglis perceived her work as a collector’s item for learned men, to be displayed in a gentleman’s cabinet of curiosities, which unhelpfully overlooks the occasions when Inglis asked women, such as Elizabeth I, to similarly display her work.

To this discussion, I would add that by asking for her works to be displayed, Inglis was in effect negotiating ‘front of house’ promotion, akin to a contemporary publishing house paying booksellers to feature an author’s work prominently on tables and in windows.

39 For original French, see ‘petit present, escrit de ma main, au pais estranger, pourra obtenir place en quelque coing retir de vostre cabinet’, Le Livre des Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 7); the second quote is from Argumenta, 1607 (‘Catalogue’ no. 32); for the third, see f.n 9.
to garner maximum visibility and correlative sales. Her tone, however, when she addressed the aforementioned patrons also speaks to her ventriloquisitic praxis: to Elizabeth I, she asked for her work to assume a place in her cabinet; to the Earl of Morton to be hidden away in some corner of said cabinet; and to James VI and I, to be retired. The Amazon spirit of her egalitarian request to Elizabeth I is counterpointed by her normatively feminine, submissive, perhaps plaintive, pleas to her male patrons. Yet, the illocutionary force of the message is the same to all three: display me.

Inglis’s requests also assumed a further function. For, by alluding to the miniature size of her creations, she deftly drew attention to its paratextual value in terms of format. This constitutes part of Genette’s material paratext and is an important tool in further assessing Inglis’s agency and intent as an author in miniature, arguably part of the cover’s illocutionary message to the reader. As I have previously stated, manuscripts – and especially miniatures – became more highly valued as they became increasingly rare. In 1614, the first unabridged miniature Thumb Bible in England (38.1 x 25.4 mm) was produced by the ‘Water Poet’, John Taylor (1575-1653), and was widely lauded. Inglis was acquainted with Taylor’s work, expressly citing him as a source for her *Verbum Sempiternum* (‘Catalogue’ no. 46) one year later in 1615, which she dedicated to her son, Samuel Kello. This manuscript, Inglis’s smallest recorded work, is exceptional for its size, 47.7 by 31.4 mm; almost, but not quite, Taylor’s equal. Here, as part of Inglis’s complex strategy of self-authorisation, she appeared careful not to place herself on commensurate footing with Taylor, but instead subtly deferred to his superiority. While clearly citing some form of kinship, her manuscript could be construed one of two ways; an almost petulant ‘look at me’ plea for recognition – equating her talent as proximate to Taylor’s – albeit one she shrewdly dedicated to her son, not a public figure; or else, a canny, manipulative move: Inglis had previously created miniatures long before the Thumb Bible’s emergence on the
literary map. Yet, she was denied similar laurels for her accomplishment. By ostensibly copying Taylor’s effort, I suggest that she ventriloquised a normatively feminine act to underscore her lack of a threat to the patriarchy, her positioning statement clear; she is not equal.

This hypothesis aside, Inglis frequently alluded to the format and size of her creations in many of her dedications, but to different ends depending on her recipient. On occasion, she adopted a meek and servile tone when addressing prospective male and female patrons, ‘this little booklet [‘petit LIVRET’] written by my hand in a little volume to be more easily carried’; to Anthony Bacon, a ‘small little book …this small work of my pen and pencil’; while to Prince Henry, she extolled piously the value of the miniature as more easily carried, to be placed in his pocket and allow him to reflect upon its religious content. I shall discuss Inglis’s dedicatory letters separately, but her propensity to draw attention to the ‘shrunken’, miniaturised format of her corpus is again demonstrative of her ventriloquistic praxis, throwing the meek and subservient voice of the obeisant female, or God-fearing handmaid, to her patrons while simultaneously enticing them to acknowledge her ‘small’ tokens. Small they might be, but the illocutionary force of the fact of their size cannot be unheard; for Inglis is their Creator.

I also reiterate that Inglis was playing to the general anxiety surrounding authorship and the shift from manuscript to print culture, of emerging in print (or her replication of print) and its inherent threat to the social order. Indeed, Wall notes that women were directed not to publish, to remain safely within their homes as private beings, ‘in a world in which privilege was attached to coterie circulation and published words were associated with promiscuity, the female writer could become a “fallen” woman in a double sense:

40 As early as 1592, Inglis created a 90 x 130 mm manuscript, Livret (‘Catalogue’ no. 4); this was followed in 1599 by one measuring 94 x 62 mm, Les C.L. Pseaumes de David, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 8); and, again, in 1599, measuring 43 x 61 mm, Quatrains du Sieur de Pybrac (‘Catalogue’ no. 11). For a fuller discussion of early modern epitome culture – the abridgement of texts and their concurrent ‘shrinkage’ in size by Taylor and others – see Wheatley.
41 For first quote, see Les C.L. Pseaumes de David, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 8); for the second, see Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 10); and for the third, see f.n.5.
branded as a harlot or a member of the nonelite’ (281). Hence, while Inglis took care to intimately sanction her works to male patrons as ‘private’, asking to be sequestered in a cabinet, playing to the ideal of the modest and chaste woman, she also surreptitiously asked to be publicly displayed beside their bed in such cabinets; be it to her male patron or whoever else might chance upon her: the ‘doubleness’ of her voice is at once meek yet if wanton, conforming to the patriarchal stereotype of ‘woman’. This is another instance of her gendered ventriloquistic praxis in that Inglis leaves no stone unturned in her bid for patronage from male nobles, playing to their perceptions of women.

Wall further states that women were tropes necessary to the process of writing, the image against which male desire constructed genres, the ‘Other’ from whom ‘authors’ (coded masculine) differentiated themselves. So, how, therefore could women claim any authority on venturing into print, or writing in general? As an early modern woman writer, Inglis exemplified the difficult and transgressive foray into print women faced, and the need to submit to intricate forms of negotiation and compromise in order to be heard.

In many ways, Inglis’s outermost peritext/public paratexts in which she alludes to the miniature format of her manuscripts prefigures their later cultural value as esteemed books; ‘Pocket’ books since the twentieth century have traditionally been classic novels, albeit sold cheaply to a mass audience and significantly smaller than hardcovers. Inglis lacked an expansive printing press to distribute her work, but her creative intent is analogous in that she recognised its cultural value both in miniaturised and manuscript form. Similarly, she shrunk her agency as a woman writer to bypass scrutiny. Her covers and format effectively ventriloquise the seventeenth-century ideal of the ‘good housewife’, displaying literally ‘diminished’ virtuosity as a means to be publically displayed and commended. In this way, she could cause no offence.

Conversely, as an early modern woman writer, Inglis was denied any means of publicity beyond such cabinets, which is why her work had to conform to normatively
feminine praxis to secure access into the inner sanctum of aristocratic households with their possibility of patronage. While Inglis’s ventriloquistic agency to men is undeniable, she was also similarly ventriloquising the voices of aristocratic women from whom she sought patronage, emulating their interests and asking to be accepted despite her lowlier birth. Indeed, Inglis dedicated two volumes to Elizabeth I, whose commendation she actively solicited along with her husband, as well as to Susanna, Lady Herbert, amongst others.42

In ‘Your Humble Handmaid: Elizabethan Gifts of Needlework’, Lisa Klein examines the practice of prestation in Elizabeth I’s court; an anthropological term denoting gift-giving, offerings that are ‘in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous but are in fact obligatory and interested (Haviland)’ (463). Klein articulates that needlework figured prominently in inventories of gifts to the Queen, as women used these material objects to solidify social relations, and to promote their self-interests, ‘Women were adept at using their status as handmaids, together with the signifying potential of their handmade embroideries, in ways that were empowering as well as expressive’ (462). Inglis adopted this practice with varying degrees of success as she was not always rewarded for her efforts, but I suggest that her intent was less in the exchange of needlework as it was in establishing a network of powerful patrons. As I shall elucidate below, Inglis fostered only a limited sense of community with other women, so her ventriloquistic praxis in this context is relatively minor.

As a closing statement on Inglis’s covers, I align myself with Frye’s assertion that Inglis’s assembly of written and visual texts, glittering with small seed pearls and gold and silver embroidery on the outside, with miniature inked drawings, colored drawings or limnings inside accompanying her

42 Inglis dedicated only five, possibly six, manuscripts of her extant corpus to female prospective patrons. For manuscripts dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I, see Discours, 1591 (‘Catalogue’ no. 3) and Le Livre des Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 7.); for Susanna, Lady Herbert, see Quotations, 1605 (‘Catalogue’ no. 2); for Lady Erskine, see A New Yeeres Guift, 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 23); for Catherine de Bourbon, see Les Proverbes, 1601 (‘Catalogue’ no. 18), although her name is pasted over with that of Chevalier Thomas and his wife, suggesting Catherine never received this; for the Princess de Rohan, see Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste, 1601 (‘Catalogue’ no. 17).
calligraphic texts, present themselves as miniatures meant to be treasured as jewels, books whose elaborate form qualifies them for patronage by resembling courtly gifts. As a publishing author in her own particular sense, Inglis capitalized on the tension between manuscript and print conventions, between the more private roles expected of women and the more public roles allowed for men, and between the presentation book and the courtly gift. (‘Materializing’ 484)

Yet, in her choice to ventriloquise the matriarchal voice, the normative virtuous female ‘Other’, with her covers, Inglis also ensured that embarking upon the territory of her textual corpus, contained within such glittering boards, proved a distinctly less normatively feminine affair. Indeed, it was entirely – self-consciously – gendered; a binary that becomes evident in Inglis’s self-portraits, as she asked the reader to direct their focus to her as Creator.

III

‘Mee Esther Inglis’

_A New Yeers Guift_, 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 21)

**Inglis’s Self-Portraits**

Perhaps the most significant paratextual element with which Inglis experimented, beyond her dedicatory letters, were her self-portraits, her inclusion of which in the manuscript peritext may be considered a foreshadowing of the contemporary author photograph, a further example of Genette’s iconic paratext. As Ross suggests, scribal publication allowed Inglis to control every aspect of her image, and her use of the frontispiece portrait indicates her desire to mimic a common feature of the printed works of European intellectuals. Following Erasmus, who employed portraits as a tool to forge his authorial identity as a ‘man of letters’, both sexes of literary society followed suit. The
published writings of women writers, including Pizan, Fedele, Cereta, and Adreidini, also displayed the author’s portrait. As Frye asserts:

Consciously, or unconsciously, in the tradition of those continental artists who used their self-portraits to emphasize their cultivated attainments in addition to painting and drawing – [Inglis] claims the same kind of well-rounded education as Anne Clifford’s Great Picture, Catherina van Hemessen’s Self-Portrait at the Spinet (1548), Sofonisba Anguissola’s Self-Portrait at the Spinet with a Friend (1563), Lavinia Fontana’s Self-Portrait at the Spinet (1579)…. Inglis does not possess the painterly technique and sophistication of these more eminent artists, but she is eager to place in circulation a complex representation of her identity as writer, artist, and woman. (Pens 108)

Inglis did not always include a self-image, but Scott-Elliot and Yeo have collated no less than twenty-four variations of Inglis’s self-portraits, either in pen or watercolour, which they subsequently classified into Types 1-4, broadly following a chronological order. True to her ‘public face’ as a mere copyist, Inglis’s self-portraits took their lead from one produced of her in 1595 by an unknown and unaccredited artist, now displayed in The Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and commissioned upon her marriage to Bartholomew Kello.

In this unattributed portrait, executed in rich reds, golds, and blacks, Inglis is depicted from the waist up, facing half-left, clasping a miniature red and gold book in her hands, which are clearly prominent. She strikes a delicate figure, almost submerged by her

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43 The art historian, Duncan Macmillan, calls Inglis the first artist to paint a self-portrait. It is unclear whether he means in her manuscripts – in which case, he is mistaken (see Frye, Pens 108) – or the portrait hanging in The Scottish National Portrait Gallery, which TSNPG denotes as created by an ‘unattributed artist’. Regardless, Inglis first emerges iconically in her manuscripts in Livre des Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no.7). She subsequently appears in twenty-six variations (see f.n.44).

44 Since 1990, two more self-portrait types can be added. First, in Octonaires, 1607 (CELM *InE 18), and latterly, in The Psalmes of David, 1612, acquired by the Folger in 2016 (not yet catalogued). Both self-portraits are in colour and correspond to Types 2-4 of the Scott-Elliot and Yeo system of classification.
large white ruff, black conical hat, and black dress, embroidered in white and black on the
smock. A small gold and red ring is evident upon the index finger of her right hand, and she
wears a gold band on her right thumb, which may have been her wedding ring, following
the fashion of Renaissance women. In the top left of the picture is inscribed ‘Anno Domini’,
although the artist has left too little space for the ‘Anno’ and the ‘o’ sits over the ‘Ann’. An
intertwined thistle and fleur-de-lys in red and gold sits below this writing, and on the right
hand side of the portrait, the year 1595 is painted in gold.

What is most striking about the portrait, however, is that it would appear
calligraphic writing has been etched upon Inglis’s pale, white throat: sharp, black, jagged,
the style almost Cyrillic, the effect is of razor-sharp marks across the mid-part of Inglis’s
neck. Almost illegible, although undeniably elegant, no scholar to date has referenced this
enigma. In the context of Inglis’s continual ‘tinkering’ with her authorial peritextual image,
which follows on from this first portrait, it seems significant that she elected not to replicate
this detail in her various self-portraits. The effect of the writing upon her neck is
discomfiting for the viewer, as if her throat has been slit by the artist in some fashion; Inglis
sits mute, sternly gazing out at the reader. It is almost as if Inglis has been ‘branded’
against her will; the image she presents, passive, unable to retaliate; she must sit and be
drawn/inscribed according to someone else’s edicts.

The fact that such a visual ‘inscription’ – borne, we might assume, of the
perennially male artist and his gaze as no evidence exists to suggest Inglis painted this
portrait herself – never appears in any of Inglis’s subsequent adaptations of this image, also
has particular resonance when one considers the body of a text, the textual corpus, as a
feminine space. Wall fascinatingly suggests a gendered territory of book production, with
regard to both manuscript and print, during the Renaissance/early modern period in
England. With the inception of the masculinised printing press and the attendant animosity
and suspicion displayed towards it by the aristocracy, courtly rhetoric sought to depict
printed books as something sexual and lascivious. The printing press was conceptualised as inherently masculine, akin to a reproductive organ, made up of sexualised parts to perform virtual copulative acts: letters were perceived to have feet, shoulders, face, and a body (de Grazia 109). Furthermore, playing upon the Renaissance slang ‘to presse’, meaning to de-flower a woman of her virginity, printed pages were referred to as ‘pressed’, i.e. literally pressed by the print press (7). Therefore, the blank page became feminised, representative of a woman during sexual intercourse:

Published texts are thus already gendered: The printed page is always a fallen woman because it is, by definition, highly public and common. Inglis took control of masculinized type and feminized page alike, developing the iconography of her authorized subjectivity through self-portraits that feature herself holding a pen and writing as well as in her emblems of the pen. Through these drawings she claims both letter and page as a different kind of feminist territory – not weighed upon or pressed, but moral, readable, and bold. (Frye, ‘Materializing’ 480)

To return to the unattributed portrait of Inglis in 1595, within a visual remit the handwriting clearly evident upon her throat– handwriting she erased from her subsequent appropriation and adaptation of the image for her manuscripts – figures as an iconic ‘voice’, albeit one borne of a male gaze, that of her husband who commissioned the portrait and possibly of the artist, if he was male, which is entirely feasible given the paucity of female painters during the early modern period. In this depiction, Inglis is technically defaced by the patriarch, the white space of her naked throat perhaps a metaphorical precursor for the white space of her manuscripts, the area she would prohibit the patriarchy from writing within, as I have previously asserted, by scribally ventriloquising ‘fixed’ printed pages.

In defining herself as a woman writer, Inglis could not escape the gendered confines of book production, but she could ventriloquise the voice of the masculine gaze and erase
such ‘branding’ from her image whenever she copied this image in her texts. By so doing, Inglis presented herself as virginal and unblemished by the patriarchy, by erasing the taint of the masculine voyeur from her body; the literal illustrative body she presents upon the feminised ‘pressed’ corpus of the page. In this way, she once more wrested control of her emerging identity from the patriarchy and ventriloquised the gendered voices of print and manuscript production within her frontispieces, colouring and adapting them according to her volition:

In Inglis’ books the feminized page becomes infused with her Amazonian spirit. Her dedications, self-portraits, and her emblems celebrating both her pen and her skill assert her awareness that she challenged normative conceptions of the feminine and further suggest that she enjoyed her self-conceived role. (Frye, *Pens* 114)

Further to Frye’s insight, I would assert that Inglis’s insertion of her physical presence in portrait-form into the peritext also firmly established her attempt to ‘own’ the peritextual space, asserting her right to authorship at Genette’s ‘portal to understanding’. Inglis inscribed herself as an iconic cynosure, which assumed dominion over the ensuing textual corpus. By so doing, Inglis refused to be overlooked and figured as a gatekeeper to subsequent interpretation of the text. Similarly, Ross has suggested that Inglis claimed ownership of her texts, in particular, by the insertion of her portrait where she holds a pen, citing the connection between ‘feminine needlework’ and the ‘masculine Humanist’ pen as a familiar topos in early modern women’s writing, one which Inglis repeatedly upheld in her ongoing attempt to assert her ‘author-ity’ (‘More’ 35) as Creator/publisher/printer/author.

As I have stated previously, Scott-Eliot and Yeo divide Inglis’s self-portraits into four types. Taking the unattributed 1595 portrait as a guide, I will now briefly outline each of the four variations of Inglis’s self-portrait, underscoring how she sought to recapture her image from the patriarchal quill/paintbrush, and re-draw it as she fashioned her authorial
identity: yet, with characteristic prescience, Inglis varied such self-depictions according to her recipients.

Nearly all of Inglis subsequent self-portraits, most of which were executed in pen, but sometimes in watercolour, took care to soften this first, somewhat harsh manifestation of her presence. Frequently, she wears a mysterious, almost Mona Lisa-esque, smile that intrigues as much as it appears to warmly welcome a reader into her textual corpus. Type 1 of the portraits (‘Catalogue’ numbers 7-10, 16-19), dating from 1599-1602, constitutes a highly ornamental pen drawing of Inglis, placed within an oval, offset by elaborate bunches of fruit and architectural scrolls. Beneath this, in a rectangular frame, Inglis has included laudatory verses by the poet and patron, Andrew Melville. Inglis faces half-left, wearing a conical hat, flowing veil, and flat collar. A ball and bead border surrounds the frontispiece. Visually, the portrait and its frame are almost indistinguishable from a printed page. As I have highlighted, by implementing this impermeable, printed framework, Inglis essentially ‘closed’ it to the reader: the patriarchal quill could not defile her by adding marginalia or alteration. Moreover, while Inglis as a Creator/author construct, in keeping with the Renaissance concept of author, is keenly under revision in such depictions – a work in progress – I suggest by her hand alone, as evidenced by her subsequent portrait variants.

In Type 1, however, (and to a lesser degree Type 4), she not only fixed herself upon the page in a print-like depiction, but asserted blatanty the right to revise herself and the textual corpus only by her own hand: a self-author-ising dictate that is deftly exemplified by her holding a pen and presenting herself in the act of writing. Upon the page of the book, open on her desk, is the motto, ‘De l’éternel le bien: De moi, le mal ou rien’, (‘From the eternal (comes) goodness; from me, either bad or nothing’; my trans.); a motto I will examine in more detail below.

The effect of her self-portrait is, following Wall, monumentalising. Referring to a printed collection of poems by Samuel Daniels published in 1604, Wall observes that the
textual function of the frontispiece author portrait is
natural in that it represents him in a pose common for individuals sitting for
private portraits, but artificial in that this portrait is double framed to
highlight the mythic and pictorial quality of the representation. The
attached motto and laudatory verse only make the reader more aware of the
monumentalizing effect of this framing…The figure of the author, now
more than a name or merely a personal portrait, functions as an
interpretative focal point for the reader…. [Daniel’s title page suggests] that
the writer’s claim to importance lies in his placement within the
transcendent sphere of poetry and literary history rather than through his
social status. (82)

Wall’s insight reinforces Lees-Jeffries’ contention about the iconic paratext functioning as
directional nodal points for the reader, to draw them into the surrounding text and shape
their response to it. Indeed, as Inglis’s frontispieces attest, in terms of self-presentation she
deployed the same monumentalising depiction as her male counterparts did of themselves.
Here, Inglis’s ventriloquistic praxis is incontrovertible: by presenting herself within such
ornately detailed, classical frontispieces painstakingly rendered and copied from printed
books, she effectively ventriloquised the patriarchal voice, inscribing it upon Her page, and
altering it to suit, mainly by adapting the portrait from the typical male author icon to one of
a woman. 45 Yet, Inglis’s agency went far beyond mere copying: by such ventriloquism, she
is observed to tentatively, surreptitiously, dabble in colouring that ‘thrown’ voice in her
multifaceted construction of authorial identity.

Consider the title page of Le Livre de Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 7), which is
a copy of the title page of Hero of Alexandria’s De gli Automati (Venice, 1589). In this
manuscript dedicated to Elizabeth I, Inglis altered key details, adapting and appropriating

45 See f.n. 32.
the image to cater to her patron and to underscore her agency as Creator/author. It could be asserted that by such alteration Inglis hypocritically ‘violated’ a printed image, in the same way that she attempted to deny the patriarch so doing by emulating such ‘closed’ printed pages in her manuscripts. This is to overlook her design; through ventriloquism, Inglis threw the voice of the title page – Genette’s paratextual utterance – assuming ownership as she re-inscribed it with her ‘main feminine’, and subsequently altered it. By literary osmosis certain particles of the previous form assumed a similar shape, but their fashioning, arrangement, and inclusion, belong to Inglis’s design as Creator. Hence the leek of the Venetian printed version becomes a Tudor rose, the shield at its foot reads ‘A Lislebourg en Ecosse 1599’ in place of ‘In Venetia, Appresso Girolamo Porro: 1589’. Yet, the size of the two title pages between the printed book and Inglis’s are identical; Inglis took care to establish herself as equal to the printer’s rendition. In essence, I suggest that by fixing herself into a replication of print and presiding over the ensuing text, by closing the page to alterability save by her own hand and asserting her right to edit/write/create by brandishing a pen, or paintbrush, Inglis secured dominion: her creation – if not inspiration – is entirely her own.

What is astonishing, however, is the audacity of Inglis’s choice, as Type 1 of her self-portraits proliferates in her early career, appearing first in Livre de Pseaumes, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 7) dedicated to Elizabeth I. It is perhaps redundant to speculate on Inglis’s youth or ambition, but considering the treacherous landscape upon which she embarked, the bold association of herself with distinguished male authors is notable. Particularly, in considering how this depiction of herself might be received by such patrons. Is this perhaps why Inglis softened the monumentalising, totalising, inherently masculine spectacle (as authors were coded male) of Type 1 in Type 2 of the portraits (‘Catalogue’ numbers 24, 25, 27 and 29), executed between 1606-7, where she began to experiment with colour? Here, her self-portrait is painted – not drawn – against a blue background, with an oval wreath,
from which project architectural scrolls, bows, and fruit. Beneath the wreath is a dog, two birds, and a squirrel. Dressed entirely in black, including her low-crowned hat but exempting her white ruff, Inglis is seated at a desk, facing half-right, writing, but this time the page is blank. Gone is the elaborate ornamentation and dazzlingly precise printed replication of the Type 1 portrait. This portrait contains broader, blurred strokes, and there is a sense of regression to the style; the image presented is infinitely softer than that of Type 1.

Moreover, due to the relative imprecision of the portrait and border, Inglis appears to lose command of the page; she is its centrepiece, admittedly, but the blank page of the book before her on the desk further diminishes her claim to ‘own’ it. Even the pen she brandishes seems less tightly clasped, not resting on the book, but to its right as if she might inscribe the table instead, somehow denied access to the paper before her. It is tempting to ask if Inglis was being careful not to appear God-like in this variant, by ventriloquising His Word with Her hand, altering it to suit her agenda as she did in Type 1, or by being pictured having written an unattributed biblical motto on the page before her, inviting the possibility that it may be her invention. The overall message conveyed in Type 2 is one of uncertainty and emptiness: a crisis of faith in her iconic presentation. Most notably, the blank page no longer contains evidence of her ‘inscription’: the directional iconic paratextual image fails now to inform any accompanying text on the page before her, as it no longer exists.

When contrasted with Type 1, Inglis appears to have arrived at an impasse of positioning in Type 2; electing if not to erase her written words then to be met by the reader not writing at all; her pen limp, the page before her clean. While she has appropriated and adapted the form of Type 1, Inglis has also altered its effect. In this variant, Inglis no longer identifies with the monumental totalising force of the male frontispiece, instead the less defined, ambiguous space of the fallen feminine pressed page, upon which Inglis appears to conform to a normatively female presence, no longer ventriloquising the masculine, indeed no longer speaking. In essence, she is unreadable: moreover, she cannot be read as she no
longer inscribes the page. Inglis appears to deny herself the right to write before an audience, perhaps attesting to the volatility surrounding the concept of privacy in Renaissance life. Yet, I assert that this variation is a sleight of hand, for once more Inglis dabbled in the Renaissance practice of transvestism to present herself; a coded masculine author, dressed as a woman (male authors such as Sidney et al. had all played with similar devices).\textsuperscript{46} Her humility is a trick, however, another act of manipulation to further her cause, deflecting reader attention away from a literal fact: while she does not depict herself writing, Inglis has, in fact, ‘written’ and inscribed every aspect of the surrounding page and ensuing text.

Type 3 of the portraits (‘Catalogue’ numbers 13, 27, 39 and 42), executed between 1607 and 1615, takes care to diminish her authorial agency still further. Also painted on a blue backdrop, the portrait does not deviate significantly from its predecessors in concept; Inglis again faces half-right, dressed in black, wearing a white ruff, and tall black hat, although, for the first time, Inglis conceals her hands, which had previously figured prominently. This variant is by far the most disconcerting of the four portrait types. With only head and shoulders evident in a small oval, and her name, ‘Esther’ to the left and ‘Inglis’ to the right, Inglis in simplified form appears even more cauterised than in Type 2. She does not smile, instead she looks concerned, almost an afterthought in her own Creation; the illocutionary force of the iconic message is that she could be easily overlooked. Gone is the triumphal heraldry of her desk, book, pen, clothing, ornamental borders, and laudatory verses; she no longer announces her cause with conviction; she appears to hide within the page: she no longer writes.

It is important to note that the portraits follow a roughly chronological order, with Type 3 emblematic of her later career, around the early to late 1610s. Indeed, to delve into the iconic life of Inglis’s corpus is to be met with enigmas as beguiling as her smile. An

\textsuperscript{46} See Carver.
interesting example of this perception of ‘regression’ in terms of trumpeting her right to ‘write’, is evidenced in *Octonaries*, 1609, (‘Catalogue’ no. 13), housed at The New York Public Library. For amidst the beautiful gold and coloured illuminated pages, one finds this variant of her self-portrait (or rather of Types 2-3) set in a small oval, against a brilliant blue backdrop (f. 2v.). On one side of the oval is written ‘Esther’, on the other, ‘Inglis’. Inglis wears a black dress, an Elizabethan high-crowned hat, and a white ruff. Yet, beneath her yellow hair (the colour of the dye may have faded; my note), her face is obscured: it has been smudged out. Meanwhile, the recto (f. 3.) – the mirror that reflects this faceless woman – declares her ‘the onely Paragon and Matcheles Mistresse of the golden pen, Esther Inglis’, in a sonnet signed by S G D.

Here begins another enigma, for this verse appears in *Octonaries*, 1607, (‘Catalogue’ no. 33) signed G D, and a version in French appears in *Les Pseaumes de David*, 1612, (‘Catalogue’ no. 39) signed Velde, which I will examine more fully when I discuss her semiofficial allographic prefaces. Yet, in the context of Inglis’s iconic image in *Octonaries*, 1609, it is useful to reconsider Lees-Jeffries’ insight regarding the coalescing of the iconic and the textual. In this paratext, the iconic – or, rather, what is missing from the portrait; Inglis’s face – compels the reader towards the textual frame surrounding it, in terms of the ensuing verse; in this way the image governs the text and informs it as the reader looks to the verse to understand the portrait; the verse inscribed by Inglis.

The content of the verse celebrates Inglis as a woman, contrasting the vanity of men, who ‘gieue wings unto to their names, to flie aboue the skyse…. /defyring nothing, but to eterniz their name’, against the glory of Inglis’s sex, described as a ‘mirakill to men’, asking whether Inglis does not achieve immortal fame and praise by her unmatched Pen, without having to resort to such vainglorious measures:

\begin{quote}
But Thou glore of thy sexe, and mirakill to men
Dost purchesse to thy self, Immortel prayse and fame
\end{quote}
By draughts inimitable, of thy unmatched Pen?

Is this why Inglis’s face is obscured, to underscore this point? She is not vainglorious, or self-promoting, like men: she is literally ‘missing’ from the portrait. The words in praise of her, however, – words she copied, or scribally ventriloquised, with her own hand – speak for themselves: she is a writer. It is perhaps too speculative to ask whether Inglis blurred her image, and to what purpose. Such a hypothesis far exceeds the scope of this essay, but Octonaries, 1609, attests to the vast array of ventriloquistic experiments with which Inglis engaged across her work, specifically in this instance, in terms of the iconic and textual as paratextual utterances. Whether by choice, design or vandalism, Inglis’s image hides within this peritextual space: Inglis is iconically unknowable, unlocatable beyond her name in this creation. In this example, the textual and iconic coalesce to inform the other where she ventriloquised a variant of two previous portrait types (the iconic) and a verse in praise of her work (the textual), its signatory unidentified beyond initials, initials that changed in subsequent manuscripts when she ventriloquised it again, re-inscribing it upon the page, appropriating it to her own end. For who can determine without a source how it read originally? Or who wrote it? Here, the act of copying, of such scribal ventriloquism, in terms of textual and iconic paratextual utterances, renders the work uniquely hers.

Thus the conundrum of Inglis’s work prevails. She eludes categorisation at every turn, but what is evident is that she masterfully threw voices from verso to recto, playing with the idea of creation, with intent and interpretation; the illocutionary force of these pages an assertion of Inglis’s awareness of her subjectivity as an author, and how to obscure it in order to please/placate and praise those who could be of use to her.

Yet, in Type 4 of the portraits (‘Catalogue’ numbers 12, 53-55), Inglis metamorphosed anew: she returned to pen drawings, this time copying and expanding upon the portrait of Georgette de Montenay (1540-81) she included in Ce Livre contenant
cinquante Emblemes Chrestiens, 1624 (‘Catalogue’ no. 54). In essence, Type 4 is a variant of Type 1, minus the ornamental and elaborate border. Executed first in 1600, then exclusively for the last three manuscripts before her death, Inglis depicted herself upon a stippled oval background, in half-length, facing half-left. Inglis’s decision to select de Montenay, a French author of a volume of Christian emblems, which Inglis copied in 1624, speaks perhaps to a strategy. In the latter stages of her career, she used this portrait variant when reaching out to male nobility, including Prince Henry, a rare instance when Inglis claimed a kinship with other female writers As Catherine was pious and Christian, however, Inglis’s choice once again played to the normatively feminine role expected of her as a writer.

In this more expansive image of Inglis, holding a pen and writing at her desk, Scott-Elliot and Yeo describe her arms as being ‘akimbo’ (18) as she writes, which suggests a freedom or expansiveness otherwise lacking from her previous portraits. This is perhaps an exaggeration. Certainly, Inglis appears less rigidly constrained; there is an element of theatricality to her lighter pose. Whereas in prior variants, her arms are either clasped rigidly before her or else placed upon the desk as she writes, it is interesting to venture why Inglis dispensed with this iconic depiction as a young woman in 1602, only to return to the relative relaxedness of the portrait in the last year of her life. Did Inglis feel somehow liberated creatively, although the constrictive Elizabethan garb of ruff, black dress, and wide-brimmed, low-crowned hat, seems to belie such freedom? She appears more unbridled – almost as if gesticulating –, brandishing her pen with dynamic poise and intent, as opposed to the otherwise passive and modest earlier depictions where she appears in service to the text. In this instance, Inglis is in control. Her prevailing motto written on the page on the desk – ‘De l’Eternel le bien’ – is secondary to her image, presiding over the page as Creator.

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47 De Montenay’s portrait by Inglis, however, is dated 1622.
Of the remaining portraits chronicled by Scott-Elliot and Yeo (‘Catalogue’ numbers 13, 17, 41 and 50), which appeared sporadically between 1609 and 1617, all are small images of Inglis’s head and shoulders, painted in colour. Scott-Elliot and Yeo speculate that Inglis may have cut them down from Types 2 and 3, of which they appear to be variants. Since their 1990 ‘Catalogue’, subsequent additions to Inglis’s extant corpus include Octonaires, 1607 (CELM *InE 18), and latterly, The Psalms of David, 1612, acquired by the Folger Shakespeare Library in 2016 (not currently catalogued). The self-portraits in each are in colour and appear to be variants of Type 2 and 3.

What is of interest throughout Inglis’s corpus is that her concept of ‘self’ is frequently under revision. As an embodied perception of the writer, following Wall, Inglis or, rather her portrait, is emblematic as Creator of her texts, but her self-portraits have an iconic function as an interpretative focal point for the reader. To elaborate upon this theory, Genette’s paradigm defines the iconic as a paratextual construction of the author and, as I have previously stated, critics such as Stallybrass, Maclean and Lees-Jeffries convincingly argue that they have not yet developed ways to properly conceptualise the inter-relations of paratextual illustration – Genette’s ‘immense continent’ – and text during the early modern period: an area of complexity and possibility that proves especially valuable to this discussion of Inglis’s self-portraits.

Stallybrass’s contention that numerous visual paratexts of both early print and manuscript culture reveal authorship as a form of ‘ascription’; something that is written rather than a figure who writes, given that the model of a Renaissance/early modern author was ‘under construction’ and therefore not fully established, is important when evaluating Inglis iconic paratexts. For ascription also pertains to attribution or ownership, so one might argue that by ascribing herself as a visual, or else illustrative, paratext into her texts, Inglis once again assumed ownership over her works. It is an ownership that speaks to the image

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48 ‘Catalogue’ no. 13 is a variant between Type 3 and 4, although I consider the self-portrait to hue closer to Type 3, which is why I have elected to cite it twice.
she presented in many of her self-portraits: that of an inviolable replica of a printed portrait, given the way in which she styled the frame of the portrait as a direct copy of a printed work in Types 1 and 4. More importantly, in Types 1, 2, and 4 she presented a visual paratext of a woman holding a pen, therefore a woman who writes: in short, ‘Mee Esther Inglis’:

Inglis’ juxtaposition of a title page in ink made to replicate a printed title page followed by an “engraved” self-portrait, together with various commendatory verses of the author, reveals her using the visual effects of print culture to announce her own form of authorship. Inglis’s title page and accompanying self-portrait and verses in praise of her pen forced the recipients of her manuscripts to acknowledge their source. (Frye, ‘Materializing’ 480)

Through her scribal ventriloquism and appropriation and adaptation of the iconic frontispiece with self-portrait, Inglis shrewdly permitted herself a voice, a paratextual iconic utterance, even as she depicted herself mute. Yet, Inglis’s voice as Creator grows increasingly audible within the textual content of her accompanying mottos, which I shall now explore.

IV

**SPERO VINCO VIVO**  
**FIDES NON FESTINAT**

*HOPE I TRIUMPH I LIVE*  
*FAITH NOT HASTE*

*Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste, 1599* (‘Catalogue’ no.10)

**Inglis’s Mottos**

Inglis frequently included mottos with her frontispiece portraits, either inscribed upon the page before her on the desk, or else situated above or below her image. An equally important paratextual tool in interpreting Inglis’s diverse strategies of author-isation, I argue that Inglis’s mottos provide the literal textual voice, which speaks for her muted iconic portraits. Although Inglis was not prolific in creating inventive mottos, those that do exist
seek to reinforce her right to wield the pen. From ‘De l’éternel le bien: De moi, le mal ou rien’, (From the eternal (comes) goodness; from me, either bad or nothing) to ‘NIL PENNA SED USUS’ (not the pen but the skill), to ‘SPERO VINCO VIVO’ (I hope, I triumph, I live), to ‘Vive la Plume’ (long live the pen), each triumphal assertion is inherently performative, the illocutionary force of Inglis’s message a statement of Her fact: Inglis writes and, lest there be any doubt, she is holding the instrument.

In essence, Inglis validated the iconic peritext (i.e. her portrait) with the textual, using her mottos to redirect attention to herself, not as an anomaly, but as Creator. In one iconic representation, the image of two golden pens with a wreath intertwining them and a crown above accompanies her motto, ‘NIL PENNA SED USUS’. Tjan-Bakker speculates that Inglis copied this pen motif from Jacob Houthusius (‘Antverpianus’), Exemplaris sive forumulae scripturae oratoris xxvi (1591), which was a favourite symbol of calligraphers (61). Yet, once again, by copying and shrinking its agency, Inglis scribally ventriloquised an iconic masculine symbol and refashioned it for her cause, with an accompanying reinforcing textual message – ‘not the pen but the skill’ – that draws attention to her agency, as referenced by her self-portrait where she holds a pen. As Ross elaborates, however,

Inglis applied it to indicate far more than her status as a masterful scribe. She employed this motto first in her debut volume (1586) as the final line of a poem emphasizing not skill, but purpose: “Painters have depicted men’s limbs with color/But pens can paint men’s words in different way./Nil penna sed usus.” From the outset then, Inglis used her pen to serve the Word, specifically as it spoke of the pious benefits of erudition and the necessity of putting that erudition in motion by transmitting texts, ideas and inspiration. (176)

It is interesting that Inglis’s father first originated ‘NIL PENNA SED USUS’ in his dedicatory verse esteeming his daughter in Inglis’s first documented work, Livret, 1586.
The fact that Inglis appropriated it acknowledges his contribution, yet re-inscribes it textually to validate her self-depiction, her right as a woman to own the manuscript page. Similarly, Frye reflects that Inglis’s motto ‘De l’éternel le bien: De moi, le mal ou rien’ does not so much efface her agency as it claims her central relation to God (478). That Inglis was undoubtedly claiming a central relation to – if not the role of – God in her portraits and mottos seems evident. Her decision, however, does not explain the relative effusive and carefree aspect of ‘Vive la plume’ or ‘SPERO VINCO VIVO’, all of which speak to an illocutionary audacity. Ross’s contention that Inglis used her pen to serve the Word is true up to a point, but her mottos are not exclusively pious maxims, but frequently exhortations of her pen and herself as its ‘Matcheles Mistress’ (‘Catalogue’ numbers 13, 33, and 39); arguably the pen served Herself as she wielded it to illustrate an iconic and textual identity.

Moreover, I suggest that Inglis’s decision to depict herself holding a pen is entirely calculated in all but one of her portrait types. Michael Neil notes that

> The hand is the symbolic guarantor of individual difference, privacy, and possession against the mechanical usurpations of print…the very act of writing indeed may seem to involve an uncanny mimesis; for…scripture routinely represents ‘the hand of God’ as the instrument of divine power.

(qtd. in Ziegler, ‘Hand-Ma[i]de’ 76)

An observation with which Ziegler concurs, elaborating that ‘as an artist Inglis is a lesser God, a handmaid of the Lord, as she styles herself, creating hand made books that contain the mark of her own identity as well as the word of God through her (‘Hand-Ma[i]de’ 77).

As her only means of publicity, Inglis exhausted the white space of the peritext with self-portraits, critical praise, and commendation, essentially unseating God and perhaps fuelled by her self-described Amazon spirit. By so doing, and by transcribing His word into her texts in the main body, she usurped and ventriloquised the Creator’s voice and claimed
ownership of His words, negating polyvocality. As I have previously suggested, no reader of the work can be in doubt that Inglis through both the iconic and the textual wrested control and assumed author-ity over Her creation, and is the only voice that speaks. This is especially evidenced by a consideration of the peritextual \textit{avant-texte} of \textit{Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste}, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no.10). Here, Inglis scored through her motto, ‘SPERO VINCO VIVO’, (I hope, I triumph, I live), to replace it with ‘FIDES NON FESTINAT’ (faith not haste). By allowing this textual alteration to remain on the page, she drew attention to the fact of her agency as a writer: she literally rewrote, or reinscribed, the motto and showed that she did so by scoring out the previous alternative; in itself an inscriptive action that established, then reinforced, her role as Creator.

At the threshold of interpretation, Inglis frequently inscribed, coloured, and performed, directing the reader’s perception to her authorial command over her creation. By such praxis, she presented a dazzling, ingenious and inventive \textit{en garde} to her public, daring them to criticise her. For by ventriloquising the role of publisher and Creator, by assuming responsibility for every facet of her texts, by replicating religious scripture in the main textual body, Inglis ceased to be a handmaid of the Lord. By appropriating and ventriloquising the Word of God in her manuscripts, by inscribing it with her hand, adapting it to her authorial will, God is reborn before the reader as a woman called Esther. The first evidence of this is precisely manifested through her self-portraits where she inscribed mottos upon a page, or else appended them to her image. And these mottos sought to reinforce her right to the pen, the pen that subsequently inscribed Inglis’s most original addition to her texts: her name.
V

What’s in a Name?

Inglish’s Titles

In Paratexts, Genette considers the way in which the presence of an author’s name ‘onymity’, or lack thereof, ‘anonymity’, impinges on our reading of the text:

The author’s name fulfils a contractual function whose importance varies greatly depending on genre: slight or non-existent in fiction, it is much greater in all kinds of referential writing, where the credibility of the testimony, or of its transmission, rests largely on the identity of the witness or the person reporting it. Thus we see very few pseudonyms or anonyms among authors of historical or documentary works, and this is all the more true when the witness himself plays a part in the narrative. (78-9)

Furthermore, Philippe Lejeune contends that the author’s name is a form of signature, a formal assertion of responsibility for the text, which guarantees that the work is his, an insight upon which Karen ni Mheallaigh elaborates:

The more well-known the author becomes, the more meaning his assignation acquires: to claim that a particular work is by Homer, or Herodotus, or Plato then means something more than Homer, Herodotus or Plato produced it; it assigns to these works a unique quality that can be understood only with reference to works by Homer, Herodotus or Plato …

This association becomes increasingly complex, the more texts are associated with any given author’s name, as the author’s name then designates each individual work as representative of a class or type (see Foucault 1979, 147). The more well known an author is, the more defined the expectations which the reader will have of the text. It follows then, that

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49 See Lejeune 196-200.
any alteration to the authorial name will affect the reader’s expectations as well (my emphasis). And if onymity can affect particular readerly expectations, then the citation of another author’s name – a feature which I call ‘metonymity’ – can be used to elicit different types of responses from the reader as well. (83)

To consider Inglis’s name, however, is to navigate intriguing, if ever ingenious, terrain. As any cursory glance at Inglis’s bibliography upholds, Inglis’s name is inherently titular in design and effect, synonymous with her title pages. In all bar two of her extant works, 50 her name is inextricable from the title that precedes it as the ensuing cross-section of examples attest; Livret contenant diverses sortes de lettres, Escrit a Lislebourg par Esther Langlois (my emphasis), Françoise. 1586 (‘Catalogue’ no. 1); Octonaries upon the vanities and inconstancie of the world. Writin and lymd be Esther Inglis (my emphasis), the first of Januar, 1609. [1600] (‘Catalogue’ no. 13); A Book of the Armes of England doone by me Esther Inglis (my emphasis), Ianuar the first 1609 (‘Catalogue’ no. 37).

Title pages first originated between 1475-80 and constituted an author’s only means of publicity/advertising, demanding ‘that the reader acknowledge the writer as a presence when mentally cataloging the text’ (Wall 87). Following Genette, Inglis’s titles constitute not simply a paratextual element but are an example of his ‘complex whole’ (55), buried in the ‘paratextual jumble’ (64) of appendages, (i.e. author name, date of publication, publisher, etc), forming part of the factual paratext. 51

In his discussion of titology, Genette contends that the titular situation of communication comprises a message, a sender and an addressee, the responsibility for

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50 See A Treatise of the preparation to the Holy Supper of our only Saviour and redeemer Jes’ Christ. Proper for all those who would worthily approach to the Holy Table of our Lord. Moreover a dialogue containd the principal poyns which they wold communicat should knowe, and understand. Translated out of French in Inglishe for the benefite of all who truly love the Lord Jesus. By Bartholomew Kello Person of Willingale Spayne in the Countye, of Essex … (‘Catalogue’ no. 34); and a transcription for Sir David Murray of Gorthy Inglis undertook for Kello, in Vincula Unionis sive scita Britannicae id est De Unione insulae Britannicae nicae tractatus secundus. Per Davidem Humium Theagrium. [1605] (‘Catalogue’ no. 20), which is unsigned but attributed to her by Laing.

51 An official localised peritextual element, which is part of the anthhumous peritext.
which is always held by the author and publisher. Titles also have a function, be they subjectal (for example, *Madame Bovary*) or objectal, referring to the text itself (for example, *Poèmes Saturniens*). Titles that indicate the subject are thematic, the others formal or generic. So what therefore is Inglis’s titular message as sender (Creator) to her addressee? I would like to suggest that by presenting her name as a titular element of her title pages, they are both subjectal and objectal. For example, *Les Pseaumes de David. Escrit par Esther Inglis le xv de Sept : 1612* (‘Catalogue’ no. 39), is something of a synopsis title. Albeit reductive compared to her other more elaborate designs, it still figures as a complex whole, confirming that the titular object is *Les Pseaumes de David*, but the subject is *Esther Inglis*. Inglis here demanded that the reader accept her titular name as the true subject of the manuscript; one that is, in essence, a paratextual narrative about her in the act of creation; the creation of Herself— the female Other— as God/author.

Titles such as *Cinquante Octonaires sur la vanite [sic] et inconstance du monde. Dediez a monseigneur le Prince, pour ses estrennes, de l’an, 1607. Escrit et illuminé par moy Esther Inglis* (‘Catalogue’ no. 27); *Historiae memorabiles Genesis, per Estheram Inglis Gallam. Edinburgi, anno 1600. Untraced* (‘Catalogue’ no. 14); *The Psalms of David, written by me, Esther Inglis at Willingale Spain, the 1st of January 1612* (‘Catalogue’ no. 38), all emphatically declared Inglis as the titular subject in which she literally claimed to have written herself the *Psalms or Octonaires or Historiae*, herself; ‘escrit et illumine par moy Esther Inglis’, ‘per Esthershram Inglis Gallam’, ‘written by me, Esther Inglis’.

Moreover, Inglis’s authorship is transnational as she reinforced her right to wield the pen, and established author-ity in a variety of different languages, including Latin, French, Ancient Greek, and English. This further validates my contention that by ventriloquising the Word of God in her psalms and scriptural selections, Inglis appropriated

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52 See for example *Ce livre contenant cinquante Emblemes Chrestiens premiierement inventez par la noble damoiselle Georgette de Montenay en France, forts plaisants & delectables a lire & voir lesquels sont, a present, escrits, tirez et tracez, par la main et plume de moy Esther Inglis l’an de mon aage cinquante et trois. A Lislebourgh en Ecosse, l’an 1624* (‘Catalogue’ no. 54).
and reinscribed them as Her own Word, adapting and presenting them according to her will and even language. Similarly, this decision refutes the notion of Inglis as a self-styled handmaid to the Lord, in service to his Word, as suggested by Frye and Ross. Rather Inglis is a veritable **handmade** construction of an early modern woman author; a paratextual **bricolage** from her covers to her formats, title pages, name, and calligraphic art. Every aspect of the construction of her manuscripts was controlled by her and spoke to her agenda, confirming her identity as Creator/God.

Title pages are perhaps most significant in the context of Inglis peritextual self-fashioning because they presented the only space where Inglis could articulate something truly original and unique to her writing: her very name. In the context of manuscript and emerging print culture, Wall contests that as well as emphasizing and rescripting the role of the author, these title pages were significant because they framed coterie poems within elaborately wrought pictorial woodcuts and borders. Because these borders seal the linguistic signs on the page and demarcate more rigidly the boundaries of the poetic material, they produce a more finished and ‘closed’ artefact, insulated from the readerly alteration invited by manuscript exchange. (78)

As I have discussed, Inglis’s elaborate frontispieces and ornamental frames designed to replicate a printed book ‘closed’ the peritextual space to editorial interference. By so doing – and especially pertinent to this discussion of her title page and *nom de plume* – Inglis alone could revise herself as subject by altering and adapting her name. This was yet another performative act she presented frequently throughout her career, affording herself star billing as she subtly manipulated perceptions about emerging as a ‘woman in print’: an especially intriguing choice given Lejeune’s assertion about the significance of altering an established authorial name, and its effect upon a readership’s perceptions.
Inglis’s choice to claim literal ownership of her text by including her name titularly correlates with Wall’s observation that the author’s printed name allows the author to be presented as a personalized and particularized emblem that intervenes in the reading process, if for no other reason that the book offers more information about the writing subject … with title pages highlighting the gradual but active constitution of the author as a more powerful cultural sign, revealing the way in which authorship itself is reimagined in relationship to genre and mythology. (78-9)

This is an apposite insight into Inglis’s intent concerning the ongoing revision of her nom de plume. As Ross underscores, an image starts with a name and as part of the paratextual dress of her creations, Inglis tried on many for size throughout her lifetime.

During her early period (1586-1606), Inglis modestly asserted her right to authorship. Signatures varied from the discreet ‘par Esther Langlois’ to the factual, ‘escrit par Esther Langlois’ to the bolder, God/Creator-like signature, ‘de la main d’Esther Anglois’, invoking a Biblical reference to the hand of God. Inglis here cleaved to the factual truth of her name, by retaining her French surname or an approximation thereof. As if to reassert her national identity, on occasion she added ‘françoise’, or ‘fille françoise’, or ‘de Dieppe’, after her name as a signatory post-script. Inglis deployed this device until 1600, when in Octonaries (‘Catalogue’ no. 12), she first declared herself Esther Inglis, Anglois, françoise, dropping the ‘l’ of ‘Langlois’ to create a Franco-Anglo hybrid of her surname that sought to reassert her French heritage, while honouring the country of domicile; her name in this instance assumed a transnational identity. Yet, from 1606 until her death, Inglis emphatically established her British identity, signing herself Esther Inglis, deviating from this signature only once when she wrote in Latin or Greek, translating ‘Inglis’ accordingly.

In this context, a portrait emerges of Inglis as an author in search of her identity, which
evolved throughout her life until becoming ‘fixed’ by the time of her death. From a self-styled young French girl ‘de Dieppe’, Inglis relinquished her titular heritage in progressions, until re-birthing herself as a British author, an elder statesman of calligraphy and miniatures, with her last manuscript, *The Booke of Psalme[s] of Davide in prose written be Esther Inglis in the fiftie thre yeere of hir age at Edenbrough the V. March. [1]624* (‘Catalogue’ no. 53). Here Inglis unequivocally asserted her right to own the ‘prose’ of her textual corpus, citing *The Booke of Psalme[s] of Davide* as her own work.

To return to her middle period (1606-1615), however, Inglis’s signatures began to oscillate between her established modesty and a triumphal, proud assertion of her various skills, on occasion bordering on pomposity. Factual and in terms of style, synopsis-like, Inglis revealed more of herself within Genette’s complex whole, drawing attention throughout to her active construction and control of the iconic and textual elements of her manuscript: ‘of the handwriting and limming of mee, Esther Inglis’; ‘escrit et illuminé par moy Esther Inglis’. In each, with the insertion of ‘me/mee’ Inglis deliberately demanded that the reader focus upon her as the rightful author/Creator of the pages, while boldly co-opting the word of God to her own advantage. It is during this period that Inglis also first began to write in Latin and English, which may be construed as another attempt to showcase her breadth of learning and knowledge, the pages of her paratexts a stage upon which she ‘performed’ for her audience, ventriloquising the learned voices of the literary patriarchy and asking to be acknowledged as an equal.53

In her late period (1616-1624), however, all such fearless experimentation diminished and an arguably survivalist tone emerged, perhaps offset by a degree of manipulation. Circa 1616, Inglis began to include the signature, ‘Escrts par Esther Inglis pour son dernier adieu’, (‘written by Esther Inglis as her last goodbye’; my trans.;

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53 For examples see *Argumenta singulorum caputum Evangelii Matthaei Apostoli, per tetrasticha manu Estherae Inglis exarata Londini xxvi Ianuarii, 1607* (‘Catalogue’ no. 32); and *Argumenta singulorum caputum Geneseos per Tetrastic. Manu Estherae Inglis Exarata Londini 1608* (‘Catalogue’ no. 35).
‘Catalogue’ numbers 48 and 50). No evidence exists beyond Inglis’s performative statement that she was, in fact, suffering from an illness, but she included this signature twice from 1616-17. If she was ill, it is tempting to interpret Inglis’s seemingly mournful tone as a rallying cry to call attention to her work before her inevitable demise. Indeed it is crucial to reiterate that Inglis was a writer-for-hire throughout her life, wholly dependent upon patronage. As Frye contends, her title pages and self-portraits, while displaying her agency, also figure as a bill for services rendered (‘Materializing’ 480). It is also feasible that Inglis was cognisant of another area within which early modern women writers were legitimising their forays into print and was emulating the voice of female pioneered deathbed narratives.54

As Inglis only sporadically enjoyed financial reward throughout her career, and her manuscripts were offered for the sole purpose of securing patronage, her tone may also be construed as manipulative, as a sly form of begging for her patron to take pity on her work and on herself, especially considering that she did not actually die until nine years later. In effect, she ventriloquised the plaintive, dying voice of the ‘Other’, in this instance, the fecund, fallen woman, to promote her writing.

Yet, in the last year of her life, 1624, Inglis seemed to contradict this impulse by overtly drawing attention to her age, ‘written be Esther Inglis in the fiftie thre yeere of hir age’ (The Booke of the Psalme[s] of David, 1624. ‘Catalogue’ no. 53). Moreover, in her penultimate work, for the first time in her career, Inglis claimed ownership of every element of its creation; ‘escrits, tirez, et tracez, par la main et plume de moy Esther Inglis, l’an de mon aage cinquante et trois’ (Ce Livre, 1624. ‘Catalogue’ no. 54) (‘written, drawn, and traced by the hand and the pen of me, Esther Inglis, in my fifty-third year’; my trans.). This is the most striking assertion Inglis ever made in a titular signature. Her tone seems

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54 See Wall 293 for a discussion of these narratives, where mothers dispensed advice to their unborn progeny (aware that they might die in childbirth) as a means of sanctioning their right to publish/print, invoking a gestational metaphor as they ‘birthed’ their text: a textual legacy to be bequeathed.
triumphalist, survivalist, proud, as if she truly has inhabited the ‘spirit of ane Amazon lady’ for the first time. Gone is the self-effacing modesty she deployed in her early years, to be replaced with a script Inglis may well have imagined as her epitaph. For a writer who played with the peritextual space throughout her life in order to establish a voice, it is as if Inglis believed her hand and pen were inscribing herself into immortality on the written page. Here was her epitaph: ‘escrits, tirez, et tracez, par la main et plume de moy, Esther Inglis’. Once more, Inglis silenced all other paratextual voices so that only her own could be heard.

VI

‘Madame, that one unknowne to your Ladyship has emboldened herselfve to salut you with a grew grapes of hir collection, I hope your Ladyship shall not altogether mislyk therof: nather trust I yea shal esteem me impudent or that I have transcendit the limites of shamefastnes (wherewith our sexe is commonly adorned) in presenting this small work of my pen and pensil to a Lady with whom I have had no familiarity for altho yea have perchance neither seen nor hard of me…’

_A New Yeeres Guift_, 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 23)

‘The Bee draweth noght (most noble and vertuous Ladie) huny from the fragrant herbis of the garding for hir self: nor more have I payned myself many yearis to burie the talent God has given me in oblivion… it is the work of a woman of one… this littil thing …’

Dedication to Susanna, Lady Herbert, _Quotations_, 1605 (‘Catalogue’ no. 2)

Inglis’s Dedicatory Letters

As I have outlined, Inglis’s manuscripts were intended for patrons alone. Subsequently, they spoke to a need to impress, flatter, and secure commendation to support and fund her family and career. To achieve this objective, Inglis frequently employed
dedicatory letters. Forming part of the public paratext, Genette deems the dedication highly performatve in nature, a public act that the reader is called upon to witness:

an act of demonstration, ostentation, exhibition; it proclaims a relationship, whether intellectual or personal, actual or symbolic, and this proclamation is always at the service of the work as a reason for elevating the work’s standing or as a theme for commentary. (134)

Inglis’s use of the dedication spoke to her awareness of high epistolary tradition, the gendered humility trope, and the topos of modesty as a means to assert her right to publication and subsequent patronage. I will first articulate, however, why Inglis’s lengthy disquisitions on her writing, art, pen, and desire for recognition from noble patrons occupy a compelling middle ground between dedications extolling the virtues of her dedicatees, and prefaces intended to underscore how her work should be interpreted: namely, ‘as the work of a woman of one’.

Referencing manuscript culture, Genette acknowledges that the chief function of the preface is to ensure the text was read properly, according to the author’s edicts. Then as now, the preface provides direction for interpreting the book, figuring as an author’s statement of intent. I suggest that the contradiction between Inglis’s ostensibly dedicatory requests for patronage and their tendency to provide prefatorial commentary on her work constitutes what Genette defines as an ‘elusive preface’ (235). Namely, a preface that quite literally pretends not to be, an essay about something else, which in Inglis’s case is a dedicatory letter that instead provides a commentary on her work, her pen, her career, and how the ‘guif’ of her manuscript should be interpreted, displayed, and recompensed.

Inglis often included semiofficial allographic prefaces, sonnets, and laudatory verses penned by third parties, to further validate her textual and iconic praxis in lieu of a dedication, including verses to the recipient and herself by the same authors. Following Genette, the semiofficial allographic preface expresses what the writer, through a sense of
propriety cannot, which I have discussed previously. They can also be fictive allographic prefaces, namely an invention: an insight that might prove especially pertinent to Inglis with regard to such endorsements, as I shall examine: particularly, contributors who sometimes subtly changed identity as Inglis replicated the verses from text to text.

Inglis’s list of prospective patrons constituted a roll call of the most famous nobles in the country, including Elizabeth I, Prince Maurice of Nassau, Prince Henry, Sir David Murry (Prince Henry’s long-time companion and Gentleman of the Bedchamber), and Catherine de Bourbon (sister of Henry IV). As Inglis’s occupied a peripheral position on the margins of court life, her ambition was clearly evident in her selection. Yet, while Inglis took pains to ventriloquise normatively feminine voices in order to ingratiate herself through her covers, she also displayed an occasional curious self-assurance towards her addressees in her dedicatory letters. As Frye observes:

Her dedications, self-portraits, and her emblems celebrating both her pen and her skill assert her awareness that she challenged normative conceptions of the feminine and further suggest that she enjoyed her self-conceived role. (‘Materializing’ 487)

Once more, I suggest that Inglis ventriloquised both feminine and patriarchal voices as a means of self-realisation and self-promotion, but, as I shall underscore, it was in her appropriation of the patriarchal voice that she appears to find her illocutionary footing; unequivocal, triumphal, unwavering in her self-belief. Moreover, it is here in the textual corpus that Inglis first created inarguably ‘original’ prose, our only insight into her ‘voice’, beyond the iconic and calligraphic. By deploying her paratexts like a ventriloquist’s dummy, a threshold to understanding comprised of iconic and textual utterances, Inglis deftly – and scribally – ‘threw’ both masculine and feminine voices, which shall be evidenced in the continual ‘doubleness’ of her dedications. For whenever Inglis conformed to the normatively feminine, she took care to calibrate it by ventriloquising the masculine,
be it iconically, figuratively or literally; there is a continual push-pull tension to her ongoing attempt at self-realisation that compels the writing and produces what I suggest is a significant and readable voice, when considered in the context of ventriloquism.

Ross, Frye, Ziegler, and Goldberg all concede Inglis’s deft manipulation of her dedicatory letters, noting her use of the gendered humility trope and the modesty topos in her references to being a ‘simple lady’, calling attention to her ‘small little book’, the ‘small work of my pen and pencil’, alluding to having ‘transcendit the limites of shamefastnes’ by displaying a ‘hardiesse plus que feminine’ (‘a more than feminine audacity’: my trans.), in even daring to write as a woman. Yet, as justification for such ‘shamesfastnes’, Inglis often shrewdly included semiofficial allographic prefaces in the form of verses and sonnets in praise of her written by learned men of letters. As Frye upholds:

Because the dedicatory verses praising her ‘hand’, her ‘fancy’, and the fame of her ‘golden pen’ come largely from men in important education positions in Scotland, they seem external to Inglis’s own attempts to authorize herself. But because Inglis herself copied them over and over into the introductory pages of her books, they must also be seen as part of her strategy for self-authorization. (‘Materializing’ 481)

This justificatory ‘offsetting’ also speaks to the doubleness of Inglis’s ventriloquistic gamesmanship; she speaks ostensibly as a woman by virtue of her sex, but by replicating by hand the voice of the patriarch, she essentially ventriloquises it, manipulating it according to her discretion. In the vast majority of Inglis’s texts, there is never a normatively feminine voice without a masculine validatory voice as a counterpoint.

I have previously discussed the sonnets and verses lauding her pen by her father, Melville, and Rollock, amongst others, which sought to legitimate her foray into writing.

55 For excerpted quotes, see dedicatory letters in Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste, 1602 (‘Catalogue’ no. 19); A New Yeeres Guift, 1606 (‘Catalogue’ no. 23); Les Quatrains du Sr. de Pybraic, 1607 (‘Catalogue’ no. 31).
There is one inclusion, however, that warrants wider exploration and supports my assertion. Namely, the previously cited verse, praising her ‘unmatched Pen’ and extolling her as ‘the onely Paragon and Matcheles Mistresse of the golden pen, Esther Inglis’, which first appeared in 1607 signed G D, then in 1609 as S G D, and once more in 1612, this time signed ‘Velde’ (‘Catalogue’ numbers 13, 33, and 39). The author has never been identified, although as a skilled copyist, and expert ventriloquist, it is feasible to suggest that Inglis may have written the verse, strategically and sribally ventriloquising the voice of the patriarch in a fictive allographic preface to validate her emergence as an early modern woman writer. Indeed, as Inglis’s manuscripts were not mass produced, unlike print, their value and appeal deriving from their rarity, this tactic could be a stunning example of her stealth, and a step into the realm of fiction, as it is indisputable that Velde as a signatory differs significantly from S G D or G D. Yet, who could question or draw attention to this anomaly beyond subsequent historians considering her corpus in its entirety? Perhaps more significantly, Scott-Elliot and Yeo note in their ‘Catalogue’ instances where Inglis altered the phrasing of verses dedicated to her, suggesting that she may have written them herself. While this is mere supposition, the fact of her agency, of her alteration of the allegedly patriarchal word, speaks to her original involvement and desire to inscribe the page with ‘la main feminine’. If it should become established that Inglis did indeed create these original verses, then the discussion surrounding her contribution to early modern women’s literature will significantly expand. As such, very few scholars have referenced the fact that Inglis did originate verse in a handful of titles, to Elizabeth I and to Lucy Harrington, Countess of Bedford. She also, in her previously referenced letter to James VI and I on her son’s behalf, wrote a verse comparing her son to Daedalus. Either Inglis was not a comfortable or natural poet, or else such a tactic did not serve her purpose, given their rarity in her corpus.

56 For examples, see alterations to the verse ‘Priere a Dieu’, written in praise of Inglis by Melville and Johnston in Les Proverbes de Salomon, 1599 (‘Catalogue’ no. 9). Scott-Elliot and Yeo suggest Inglis may have written the verses herself; similarly, Inglis replaces Taylor’s verse epistles to Queen Anne, Prince Charles, and the Reader in the printed edition of his Thumb Bible with verse epistles to Samuel Kello, signed E I, in Verbum, 1615 (‘Catalogue’ no. 46).
Octonaries, 1609 (‘Catalogue’ no. 13), however, dedicated to Lord Peter, perfectly exhibits the ventriloquistic ‘doubleness’ of what one can discern of Inglis’s original authorial voice in her dedications. Consider her meek request on the first recto (f. 2.) that

I haue presumed altho unacquainted with your Ho: to prepare and dedicat this work to prefent you with. Trusting your Ho: will accept of it with als good will as I haue done it for your faike, and let it haue fum secreet corner in your Ho: cabinet, and fo much the rather becaufe it is the handy work of a woman, who befeeches God to graunt you many good years, in health, honour, and prosperitie, and who fhall allwaufe remaine as one, Most ready to ferue and honnour your, Lo:

Then consider the following recto (f. 3.), which displays the previously cited sonnet extolling her as a ‘Matcheles Mistresse of the golden pen’. The first recto (f. 2.) subscribes to the normatively feminine gendered humility trope, while the following recto (f. 3.) heralds her as superior to men. Moreover, the sonnet placed on the second recto (f. 3.), debatably the first paratextual sight to greet the reader upon turning the page, further underscores her agenda. Thus a balance is conferred, a careful authorial calibration by Inglis to play to her gallery while asserting her right to the pen. In addition, by shrinking her agency, by producing miniatures, begging that it have ‘fum secreet corner in your Ho; cabinet’, Inglis ingeniously crafted a non-threatening persona. In essence, she humbly asked to be overlooked, secreted away, but in Lord Peter’s acquisition, considering her manipulation of the paratext, she would garner the continued right to the pen.

It is interesting to note that this dedication forms part of the previously discussed paratext, where Inglis’s face is obscured in her self-portrait. To reflect upon that iconic depiction here, by reassessing her request to ‘let it haue fum secreet corner in your Ho; cabinet’, might also suggest Inglis is asking to be hidden away in a different sense; her face obscured deliberately to underscore this point; she will not be seen lest it bring him
embarrassment? Her tone, while obeisant, is also suggestively persuasive, the notion of a shared secret between an unknown woman bartering for patronage and an esteemed Lord, almost illicit. Was Inglis perhaps also playing to a normatively female role by throwing the voice of a prostitute, or else of a pressed page, a fallen woman, someone prepared to sell her body, i.e. the textual corpus, to allow the patriarch to deface, discard or dismiss it, offering herself up to his mercy? To this end, for remuneration, she will hide away in his cabinet – a possible euphemism, for in 1600 the etymology of ‘cabinet’ also denoted a sense of a ‘private room’ – and never bring him any disgrace, as if to suggest that by her writing she might so affect him. Yet, to turn the page is not to see her, she literally hides within the oval of her portrait on the verso (f. 2v.), while the facing recto’s (f. 3.) words proudly proclaim her ‘Matcheles Mistress of the golden pen’ ‘Esther Inglis’. Hence, once more, she presented herself as meek, submissive, a handmaiden to the patriarch.

It is important to note that Inglis did not always employ such tactics. Yet, I suggest there was always some form of doubleness, of ventriloquism at play in her dedications, be they textual, iconic or allographic. Moreover, I concede Frye’s contention that in her dedicatory letters Inglis took advantage of her era’s flexible conception of authorship, thoughtfully producing objects that work to bridge the social distance between herself and her appointed patrons, allowing her to place the rare book that she has created in their hands, so that she may receive the money due her for having paid enough attention to convention to create a recognizable book and for having ignored convention enough to be the woman who authored and published it. (‘Materializing’ 485)

There can be no doubt that Inglis produced her works in the hopes of being paid, although I would add that Inglis displayed far more than simply shrewd judgment in order to receive a fee. This is clearly evidenced when she assumed an audacious tone in her letters, distinctly
at odds with the meek and subservient personae she on occasion affected. As Ross attests, Inglis made good use of the humility trope, but she certainly did not shy away from trumpeting her right to the pen, nor in staking a claim to a place amongst the patriarchal learned elite.

*Le Livre des Pseaumes, 1599* (‘Catalogue’ no. 7), has been widely discussed as it is a text notable for being dedicated to Elizabeth I and for which Bartholomew Kello issued a subsequent plea for remuneration: a plea that Queen Elizabeth ignored by donating the manuscript to Christ Church, Oxford. Hypotheses abound, but for the purpose of this polemic nearly every page of the peritext celebrates women and writing and asserts Inglis’s ventriloquistic praxis and right to wield the pen. As I have previously asserted, the ornamental frontispiece is a copy of Hero of Alexandria’s *De gli Automati* (Venice, 1589), where Inglis replaced the shield at the foot of the design from ‘In Venetia Appresso Girolamo Porro: 1589) to ‘A Lislebourg en Ecosse 1599’, deftly ventriloquising the patriarchal voice of the publisher/printing press and stamping it with her own imprimatur; literally, the hand and voice of a woman.

Similarly, she drew attention to this design by replicating Elizabeth I’s arms within an elaborate cartouche, displaying two female figures holding a book and a pair of scales. Here the doubleness of Inglis’s voice is vividly evidenced; the balance the perfect icon for the dextrous calibration of male and female literary praxis she transmuted through her hand. Her motto ‘De l’eternel le bien’, once more invoked her supplication to God, while ventriloquising His voice onto the page through Her pen; the semiofficial allographic preface in the form of Melville and Johnston’s laudatory verses carefully legitimated her writing, even as she placed herself on equal footing with Elizabeth I by including two similar laudatory verses to the Queen by Melville and Rollock. Yet, as if having perhaps too

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57 See Frye, ‘Materializing’, for the fullest appraisal of this biographical episode.
flagrantly ‘transcendit the limites of shamefastnes’, Inglis then included a letter ostensibly from her husband, Kello, which proclaimed

> It may pleas your Majestie the booke of psalms wreaten by my wife in French and in divers soiritis of Carectaris adornit everie way so far as wes possible to ane simple woman…I could noght bot greatlie reioise, and so will the wreater therof when shoe sall heir your Majestie to have taiken ony small pleasour or delyt in hir handywork …

It is a matter of conjecture whether Kello actually wrote this letter, but the entire peritextual corpus, from iconic to textual, once more speaks to Inglis’s gendered ventriloquistic realisation as an early modern women writer.

After 1599, Inglis’s dispensed with her husband’s validatory voice, perhaps because it failed to secure her patronage. As I explored earlier, Inglis did not take her husband’s name, instead anglicising that of her father. This is an interesting point as, throughout her career, while ventriloquising female voices in her dedicatory letters, Inglis failed to claim particular affinity with the sisterhood, never citing her role as a wife, mother or daughter in any text. It is widely acknowledged\(^{58}\) that Inglis did not seek to position herself within a community of women writers, nor did she seek sanction to write from such roles, unlike Aemilia Lanyer, for example. Indeed, in stark contrast to her relatively servile tone to male patrons, Inglis’s addresses to women are sometimes significantly more confident. Aside from Elizabeth I, Inglis’s roll call of powerful female patrons included Lucy, Countess of Bedford, Susannah, Lady Herbert, and other members of the Sidney circle. Yet, to Susanna, Lady Herbert, Inglis announced, ‘no more have I payned myself many yearis to burie the talent God has geven me in oblivion’, early in her letter, proudly asserting that ‘it is the work of a woman of one’. To which she adds, ‘this littil thing’, before signing her name in bold capitals. Once more the push-pull tension of Inglis’s doubled voice is in evidence: bold

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\(^{58}\) For a fuller discussion of Inglis’s limited sense of community with other female writers, see Frye, ‘Materializing’.
but humble, her rhetorical positioning brilliantly calibrating the masculine with the feminine to realise her authorial voice.

As a final point in considering Inglis’s manipulation of the modesty topos, gendered humility trope, and intrinsic awareness of the era within which she was writing, this dedication to Prince Charles perhaps attests most pertinently to Inglis’s subtle manipulation, when she wrote that ‘remembring your Hignesse douce and sweet inclination I recovered againe the Spirit of ane Amazon lady’, Ce Livre, 1624 (‘Catalogue’ no.54). Even as Inglis brandished the pen, she acknowledged that without the patriarch she would remain silent. Even as she purred and praised, Inglis asserted her right to write, identifying not with the mere sisterhood, not with Amazon women warriors in the plural, but as a singular Amazon lady. This is meaningful not as a needless tautology, but as a deft assertion of who Inglis considered herself to be as an author. Thus she subtly articulated her true intent, as evidenced throughout her textual corpus: to write, to create, to speak for herself as ‘a woman of one’.

VII
‘the lively heart and hand of hir who formed it’

A Book of the Armes of England, 1609 (‘Catalogue’ no.37)

Conclusion

Enigmatic/bold, tentative/fearless, submissive/audacious, obeisant/proud, traditional/visionary, flawed/skilled, copyist/originator, Esther Inglis’s literary personae, as evidenced by her self-realisation within the paratexts of her manuscripts, is a study of the compelling emergence of an early modern woman writer’s voice, replete with its inherent dualities. By mobilising the trope of literary ventriloquism, Inglis engaged throughout her works with the cultural zeitgeist, with literary transvestitism, the silencing of the female voice in literature, and the tension between emerging print and prevailing manuscript
culture, in order to articulate her own subjectivity as an author. By stepping outside the borders of sanctioned feminine creativity and navigating the treacherous terrain of publication to become a ‘woman in print’, she experimented with both normatively feminine and masculine voices as a means to position herself within the marketplace of aristocratic manuscript exchange and subsequently be acknowledged as a writer. By scribbally copying, or rather, following Genette, replicating the ‘voice’ of the printed page, the ‘utterance’, Inglis ventriloquised paratextual elements such as frontispieces and semiofficial allographic verse from third parties as part of a strategy of self-author-isation. Moreover, in leaving behind her avant-texte, Inglis also permitted subsequent readers access to the dossier of her construction as a literary icon, by drawing attention to the errata sheet upon which she explored her potential as an author; the manuscript page. By so doing, and continuously reminding the reader of her agency throughout the creative process, particularly in reference to peritextual markers, Inglis assumed control over her creations, emerging as Creator. A fact entirely evidenced by the last ‘word’ Inglis inscribed upon the back cover of her final work in 1624, its illocutionary force undeniable: the iconic image of an embroidered phoenix rising in flames, the symbol of rebirth. From the ashes of an authorial legacy established by the patriarchy, Inglis rebirthed herself as Creator, the last iconic word of her corpus, Her own.
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