

# Letters from Anne

## MORNING

He had said that he loved her. They were eating breakfast, chomping crispy bacon and fat sausages and mounds of scrambled eggs. The world was just waking up. Newspapers were being opened, screaming about falling prices and rising temperatures and whatever strike was coming next. Who *was* it this time? The cabbies? So soon? And he had been saying something absently, his hand on his coffee, his eyes fixed on the paper. What was it? Oh! It was about the factory. She remembered perfectly now. He had been complaining about Mr. Trane. What a right *hassle* that man was! It was a wonder that he still had a job. After all, he *ought* to have been fired years ago! And then, of course, there had been dinner last night. What *had* been the matter? The roast had been stringy. The peas had been cold. Could she please speak to Mrs. Watson? After all, when Peter came to visit—

“Is Peter coming to visit?”

What? Had he not mentioned it? Well, certainly! Peter was coming to see them. She must remember Peter! They had done crew together at Leeds. What an amiable fellow! They said that he had a mill now. Or was it a shoe factory? Well, it was *one* of the two. In any case, they would have to do something nice. Maybe a dinner party? Could she arrange that? Nothing too fancy, of course. Perhaps just some friends and a nice bottle of wine. She was so good at that sort of thing. So practical! Other wives would moan and groan and complain that they had too little time. But Anne would simply do it. It was one of the reasons that he loved her. And perhaps—

“What?”

He looked up, one finger holding his place on the paper. Peter was coming to visit. He had called just last—

“After that.”

Well, he was saying that she was so practical. While *most* wives—

“*After* that.”

He stopped. Then he frowned. “But you *know* that I love you!” Henry said to her, the frown growing deeper.

Did she? He had never said it.

So what? It was obvious. The only question *was* would they invite Mrs. Jencks? She was really *such* a bore. But she had been so upset about the last time, the last party that they had thrown, and she *had* been a help with St. Agnes. Without her recommendation, in fact, Emily never would have gotten in. Not to mention that Lydia might come with her. And Peter would *so* enjoy meeting Lydia!

Anne nodded. Peter would love Lydia. Lydia would love Peter. No one loved Mr. Trane. Why were the cabbies striking again? People had work to do and places to go. Why not just shut up and drive? All at once, she felt a sense of calm. Like an accused criminal, anxiously huddled on a courtroom bench, she had been anticipating this moment. And now that it had happened, the verdict delivered, she knew suddenly that this was it. Love.

She had always wondered what it would feel like. Would it be a floating sensation? Butterflies in the stomach? Sweat? Lust? Passion? And the answer was, well, bacon. Love was bacon and eggs and toast that was slightly burnt. It was reading the newspaper and talking about Mrs. Jencks. Oh! What a bore! Did they *have* to invite her? It was raspberry jam and hot coffee and maple syrup. It was the rattle of silver forks and glass dishware. It was breakfast. Forget moonlight and dancing and walks under silvery stars! Love was breakfast. Love was tea.

Anne opened her eyes. The time was eight thirty-five. She had been doing something just now. What was it? Oh! Of course. She had been writing a letter. She deftly withdrew a piece of paper and a pen. In a moment, the room was filled with the distinctive aroma of wet ink. What day was it? Thursday? Friday already? How time flew! It would soon be Monday. The week would disappear. And then it would be the weekend again. And Peter.

*Did* she remember Peter? She had a vague recollection of a man with white teeth and a smug smile. His hair dangled rakishly across his forehead. His cheeks were extraordinarily fat. *Was* that Peter? Or was that someone else? Maybe someone at the factory. Thomas Miller? The accountant? The vile Mr. Trane? In any case, Henry was right. They *had* to do *something* for him! Why not a dinner party? It was practical. It was proper. It was easy enough to arrange. Yes, it was quite decided. She would speak to Mrs. Watson today. Really, there were so many things to be discussed! There was the menu and the stringy roast and the cold peas and the choice of wine. And—

Something was bothering her. It was something important. It was a vague feeling that clawed through her, swirling down her spine. But *what*? Not the dinner. Not Peter. Not Emily. No, Emily was doing much better. Just yesterday, Mrs. Harrington had said that her geography was greatly improved. Not Henry. *Certainly* not Henry. After all, he had said that he loved her. And why would *that* bother her? So there had to be something else.

Her gaze slowly returned to the letters and invitations and requests, now lying limply on her desk. She looked closer. There was an invitation to a ball. There was an update from Jeanne Hammonds. Make that Jeanne *Richards* now! Jeanne was a schoolmate from ages and ages ago. She now lived in New York. How exotic! And there, nestled near the bottom, was a letter from—

Frank. For a moment, just a moment, her hand stilled. The clock ticked. Outside, a car rumbled past. Yes, she remembered now. Frank wanted to see her. There it was, sitting on her desk, the little letter with his handwriting. One line, scribbled on the creamy page, stuffed into a plain envelope. No return address.

She began writing again. Fool! *Fool!* What could he be thinking? After fifteen years! What did he expect? She shook her head slightly, her gaze rising to the wall. Old Lady Wadsworth stared back, somber in her velvet and brocade, painted with the somber tones that all such paintings were. No light. No air. No color. No light.

At just that moment, she heard a football. Yes, of course. That would be Henry, just leaving for the factory. Dressed for work, he was now leaving the bedroom and entering the hallway. Near the entrance, he was donning his jacket and hat, growing closer and closer each second. In but a moment, he would be gone. The city and the day and the sweltering heat would have swallowed him up, drawing him into the world that he had made his own.

All the same, when he reached the parlor, he paused. Anne frowned. Why would he do that? What could he possibly have to say? Then she remembered. They had had a row. They had fought about, well, something. Was it Peter? Was it Mrs. Watson? Was it the factory? She nodded. Yes, that was it. They had quarreled about the factory. While they ate, they had quarreled about the factory. And now he was hesitating at the door. He was checking his watch. How long would it take if he stopped? A minute? Two? Ten? An hour? Would she remain obstinate? Or would she subside quickly? Would she see reason? After all, she had to know that he was right. She had to see that she was being completely unreasonable. So unlike her! So unlike Anne!

“You’re a woman. You can’t understand these things.”

“What things? Compassion?”

“Business.”

“Are they always different?”

“Usually.”

“But why?”

“Because they are.”

“But why?”

“Because they *have* to be.”

“But *why?*”

“Because compassion is weakness.”

“Is it?”

“If it weakens the company.”

“And to keep Mr. Redding—” A pause. “That would weaken the company? Would it?”

“Yes.”

“But where will he go?”

“How do I know?”

“Don’t you care?”

“Of course.”

“Then why don’t you know?”

“Because it’s not my business!”

“Then what is it?”

“Compassion.”

In her mind, the conversation faded. Silence hung. Then she heard another footfall. The hallway door opened and closed. And just like that, he was really gone.

Anne sighed slightly, glancing at the clock. Eight forty-five. Maybe he was right. Women *were* difficult. They felt too much and thought too little. But were men so much better? Were they? What had Frank been thinking? To send a letter now? *Now?* After fifteen years? She fidgeted impatiently. And was compassion so illogical?

“In business?”

In anything.

“Yes.”

But why? If everything is connected—

“Why would everything be connected?”

Because Einstein said so. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

“You’re talking nonsense.”

Was she?

“Einstein was a physicist. What did he know about business?”

Enough to become a wealthy man.

“And a crazy one.”

Is there a difference?

“Of course.”

What?

“One has money and power and intelligence. And the other has—”

Compassion?

It was nonsense. All of it. How had it even begun? Because of an old man who had stooped shoulders and sunken cheeks and a cold that never seemed to disappear? Anne sighed. That was *exactly* how it had begun. They had quarreled because the economy was falling and Mr. Redding—when he coughed, there was a hollow sound—had to be fired. She shook her head. She hated that cough. It was the noise of autumn leaves and gray pavement, cold, hard and hollow. It spoke of another world.

Anne stood up restlessly. The day was growing warm. She walked to the window, staring at the busy street outside. Belleview Boulevard was beautiful in June, the trees laced with delicate leaves and flowers white and pink. The grass was fresh. The sky was blue. Girls were a blend of cupcake dresses and silk ribbons. People smiled more now. They showed their teeth and laughed aloud. And when they passed little Johnny—

She frowned. *Was* his name Johnny? The boy selling flowers? He was there every morning and evening. And he had the most *beautiful* roses! Their stems were long and delicate. Their petals were like velvet. They bled summer and damp earth. Anne shook her head. Yes, when the cupcake ladies and dandies passed little George, they smiled and bought bouquets. They piled the blossoms into their arms, letting the smell sweet drench their clothing and skin. That was June.

It would be a terrible idea. There could be no question about it. What had he been thinking? Just imagine it. They would sit stiffly at a crowded café, fidgeting with the napkins and menus. He would be thinner and scruffier and darker. His hair would be shorter. His skin would be tanned from the Indian sun. She would just be old.

“They say that you’re married.”

“I am.” Saying this, she would study her menu, deciding between French onion soup and a salad. As she did so, he would be looking at her, eyes blue and piercing like always. She remembered those eyes.

“His name?”

“Henry.” The soup would be better—

“Not Henry Wadsworth?”

“The same.” Then again, they were having chowder that night. The salad would be more practical. Too much dairy was bad.

“The businessman?”

“Is there another?”

“I just can’t believe it.”

“And why is that?”

“You’re not the type.”

“What type is that?”

“The type to marry Henry Wadsworth.”

She would sigh. Definitely the salad. “You don’t know that.”

“Don’t I?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

A shrug. “As you say.”

The waitress would arrive. "Are you ready?"

Frank would glance at her. "Another moment?"

The waitress would nod. As she walked away, he would look at his menu. "Any recommendations?"

"The caviar is impeccable."

He would laugh. She would frown. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"You."

"Why am I funny?"

"You just are."

A sigh.

"This place is beautiful. You've chosen well."

She would nod. "I come here often."

"Do you?"

"Mostly for lunch."

"How nice."

"It is."

"What do you talk about?"

"When?"

"When you're here."

"With my friends?"

"Sure."

"Whatever we want."

"Society?"

"Sometimes."

"Acquaintances?"

"Sometimes."

"Art? Music? Literature?"

"Yes."

"Which?"

"All of them."

"Some friends."

"They are."

"And what about your lovers?" Frank would ask. "What do *they* have to say?"

"My—" A pause. "I don't have any lovers."

“Don’t you?”

“No!”

“Pity.”

“Why?”

And he would just smile, lips full and pink like always. She remembered those lips. “Well?” It was to break the silence. She hardly cared what he said. “Have you decided yet?”

“On my food?”

“Yes.”

“I’m having the salmon. Is it a good choice?”

“Superb.”

“Good. You know, Sweden has excellent salmon. So does Denmark.”

“You went to Denmark?” There it was, the little catch in her voice.

“I did.”

“When?”

“Several times. Five years ago. Two years ago. Last Christmas.”

“Is there a base there?”

“Yes.”

“I never knew.”

Another pause. Then the waitress would return. “Are you ready?”

Frank would smile apologetically. “I’m so sorry. One more moment?”

“What!” Anne would say, watching the waitress leave. “You said that you were ready!”

A shrug. “You can’t be too sure.”

“Then *get* sure.” She would glance at her watch. “I’ve only got an hour.”

“Until what?”

“A meeting.”

“About what?”

“A ball.”

“Am I invited?”

“Silly question.”

“*Am* I?”

“No.”

“Too bad. I dance well.” A pause. “Then again, you remember that.”

A pause. Around them, Café Hampstead carried on.

“She’s coming back.”

“Who is?”

“The waitress.”

“So?”

“So you’d better hurry.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve already chosen.”

“*Have* you?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“The salmon. You know, I probably *will* get it.”

“*Probably?*”

“You can’t be too sure.”

Another sigh. Longer this time. Now Frank closed his menu, eyes only on her. “Well?” His voice was easy, calm.

“Well *what?*”

“Tell me about him.”

“Who?”

“Henry.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything.”

“He’s kind.”

“Ahhhhhh.”

“And handsome and polite and generous.”

“What! All of *that?* In one man?”

“Don’t make fun.”

“I’m not.”

“He takes care of me.”

“Good. I was worried about that.”

A pause. “Were you?”

“No. You could always kick my ass. *You* should be worried about *me*.”

A smile.

A smile in return.

“Anne?”

“What?”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

“*Are* you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you *really?*”

“Yes.”

“Look at me.”

“I am.”

“In my eyes.”

“I *am*.”

“You look beautiful.”

“What?”

“I’m just saying.”

“Don’t.”

“You don’t want me to?”

“No.”

“You used to.”

“Things change.”

“Do they?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough.”

“Then you’ve forgotten?”

“Forgotten *what*?”

“Everything.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“Then what *do* you know?”

Another pause. A rattling of forks and knives. Muted chatter at the surrounding tables. Then, softly—“That you left.”

“Because I had to.”

“But you left.”

“Because you made me.”

“But you *left!*”

“And I came back.”

“After fifteen years!”

“Yes.”

“Fifteen years!”

“So?”

“That’s a long time.”

“You should have waited.”

“Fifteen years?”

“Why not?”

“You never wrote!”

“So?”

“You never called!”

“So?”

“*What did you expect?*”

“That you’d wait.”

“Fifteen years?”

“Forever.”

The sun would turn a corner, starting its descent. She would shake her head. “I have to go.”

“We haven’t ordered.”

“I don’t care.”

“Alright then. Go.”

“I will.”

“Well?”

“I need my scarf. The waitress has it.”

Silence.

“Admit it.”

“What?”

“That you don’t love him.”

“It’s not true.”

“It is.”

“It’s not.”

“But I *know* it.”

“How?”

“Your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“Your ears.”

“My *ears?*”

“Your neck.”

“Good heavens! What could my *neck* possibly tell you?”

“Quite a lot.”

“Like *what?*”

“You wear perfume.”

“Most women do.”

“*Expensive* perfume.”

“Your point?”

“It smells like white magnolia.”

At that moment, the waitress would return. “Are you ready?”

Frank would nod. “We are. There’s been a change of plans. I believe that the lady needs—”

“Soup.”

“What?”

Another inhale. Another exhale. “French onion soup.”

In reply, Frank would smile. “I’ll have the same.”

Anne blinked. Fourteen minutes had passed. It was now eight fifty-nine. Henry would just be reaching the factory. Roland Fines would be taking his coat and handing him the daily post. Had he seen Mr. Redding yet? Mr. Williams? Mr. Burg? Of course not. It was barely nine o’clock. Henry would wait until the afternoon to, well, tell them. After all, it was the practical thing to do. It was the *efficient* thing to do. By four o’clock, the men would have worked all day. No productivity lost. Yes, she was sure now. At four o’clock, it would happen.

Closing her eyes, Anne returned to her desk. But as she did so, a noise made her stop.

“Flowers! Flowers for sale!”

Without a second thought, she grabbed her purse, raced for the door, flew outside. The June sunshine engulfed her. For a moment, she was no longer thirty-three. She was no longer Anne Wadsworth. She was eighteen.

And in love.

In but a moment, she was back. She walked quietly into the parlor, depositing the creamy blossoms into a vase. Then she grabbed her pen and sat down. Despite the morning light, the faint brown on her cheeks and nose, she was pale. She was ghostly pale. Even so, when she wrote, her hand was firm. Two minutes later, the letter was done. She signed it, sealed it, licked a stamp and placed it on the corner. Then she rang a little bell that sat on her desk.

“Toby?”

The boy, appearing almost instantly, bowed slightly. “Ma’am?”

“Could you see that this makes today’s post?”

“Yessim.”

He took the letter and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Anne said.

Toby paused.

“On second thought—”

“Yes?”

“It’s just around the block. Could you take it yourself?”

The boy fidgeted. “Well, I’ve got the kitchens to finish—”

“That’s fine. You can take it later.”

“It might not be till tonight.” He looked at her cautiously. “Is that okay?”

“What time?” Anne asked.

“Eight o’clock.”

Eleven hours. “That’s fine.”

“Yessim.” And he left.

Alone again, Anne stared at the empty room. She had meant to do something. What was it? Oh! The dinner for Peter. Yes, of course. Dear Peter with the smug smile and the fat cheeks and the white teeth. She *did* remember him now! She *had* had the right person! Thomas Miller was someone else, someone younger, skinnier, drabber. She had met him just once.

Anne nodded to herself, hand on the pen, gaze on blank paper. She knew exactly what to do. She would get up and talk to Mrs. Watson. Then she would have lunch at the café. *Then—*

Her gaze wandered to the flowers. *Then—*

Henry had said that he loved her. She had heard him. He had said it aloud. The only question was—

Had it happened yet? Had Mr. Redding been fired? Of course not. No, Henry would wait. She had already decided that. But what if she were wrong? What if Henry decided *not* to wait? What if—

Fifteen years! What did he expect? What *could* he expect?

“I expected you to wait.”

What did it matter to her? What did it *really* matter to her? She barely knew Mr. Redding. She just knew that his cough was hollow, cold, wet. It made her shudder. And Henry had been right about the peas. They *had* been cold. How had she not noticed? It was obvious.

“You *know* that I love you.”

Did she? Well, she did now. After all, he had said it. He had it aloud. And now the white flowers were perfuming the room. The smell snaked everywhere, settling thickly on the sofa and chairs. They would need more water soon. She would tell Mrs. Watson to do it. She just had to remember.:

“*Then you’ve forgotten?*”

“*Forgotten what?*”

“*Everything.*”

“*I don’t know.*”

“*You don’t know?*”

“*No.*”

“*Then what do you know?*”

She blinked. Jamie. The boy selling flowers was named Jamie. What else? She knew what love was. It was bacon and scrambled eggs and toast. What *else*? She knew that Mrs. Jencks was a bore. Oh! Such a *terrible* bore! She knew that—

She had never been to Denmark. But what did they eat there? Burnt toast? Caviar? Cold peas? French onion soup?

She closed her eyes, feeling a gentle breeze across her cheek. On the mantle, the clock ticked. It was nine twenty-one. It was nine twenty-one and—

He was late. *Where* were the *damn* cabs? He had ducked into the florist, filled with a sudden inspiration. He would buy Anne flowers. *That* was the answer. He would buy a heaping bouquet of something fantastic and fantastically delicate. What? Roses perhaps? Lovers *always* bought roses. They filled plays and books and films and poems. Time and again, anywhere and everywhere, they were the universal symbol of romance. Maybe red ones would be good? A heaping bouquet of red roses? But no! That was so flashy! So loud! So trite! Anne would simply hate that. Yellow would be much better. Or perhaps a gentle shade of pink. Or white! Yes! White was classy and refined. It was, well, practical.

But when Henry ducked inside, stooping slightly to accommodate his height, the store was packed with patrons. Was *everyone* buying flowers today? Young lovers and married couples were sniffing displays of delphiniums and marigolds. Wives were shopping for their mantles, gossiping about upcoming suppers and bygone parties. Nearby, surreptitiously checking their six, husbands were shopping for their wives. So many people! So many flowers! Everywhere! He had wanted to be fast. He had had it all planned out. He would buy the flowers and quickly retrace his steps, striding boldly into the parlor. Anne, still seated at her desk, would look up, her expression surprised and pleased.

“For me?”

Of course.

“But you never buy me flowers.”

I did today.

“I can see that.”

And just like that, all would be forgiven and forgotten. What had the quarrel been about? Did it matter? Why would it?

“Are we still doing dinner with my mother?”

Of course.

“What time again?”

Seven.

“I’ll tell Mrs. Watson.”

Good. But when you speak to her, just remember—

“The peas.”

Yes. And—

“The roast.”

Yes. And then—

“Peter.”

Next weekend.

“Friday?”

Saturday.

“Seven o’clock?”

Eight. But nothing too fancy. Just a few friends and a bottle of a wine. After all, it’s just Peter. He doesn’t need much.

“Of course.” She would nod then, understanding instantly, a dark curl tumbling across her forehead.

I have to go.

She would nod. “I know.”

But before I do—

“What?”

I—

“What?”

I love you.

For a second, just a second, she would look at him. She would look at him, really seeing him, her eyes staring into his. And then, in a heartbeat, she would smile, her face shining like the roses. “I know.”

Really, how could she *not* know? Was it not obvious? They lived together and slept together and ate together and attended parties together. They discussed politics and art and society. Was that not love? They shared a table and a sofa and a child and a bathroom and meals and news and views and memories. Was that not love? How could she not know?

In a moment, he would be gone. He would grab his cap and coat and briefcase. He would kiss her and open the door. He would hail a cab, saying the address with practiced ease. A few moments later, he would arrive at work. And then, so simply, everything would be right. His mind would be tranquil. She would know that he loved her.

But here and now, the florist was a teeming jungle. Flowers were everywhere, bulging like ugly cancers, and nothing was right. He was suddenly confused. Daisies? Daffodils? Lilac? Lilies? Oleander? The names were strange and unfamiliar, mocking him mercilessly from plastic placards. Where was Shakespeare now? Where was the easy poetry and long walks and storybook romance?

Even when he saw them, squatting behind a display of purple tulips, he remained unsure. Would they be right? Was white good enough? Was it too plain? Would pink be better? Or *would* red be good? As he stood there, the commotion mounted. The line grew longer. The young lovers and wives and

husbands gathered more and more blossoms, stuffing them into grotesque bouquets that made his head pound. How did they do it? How did they decipher the foreign words, moving thoughtlessly between damp buckets and earthenware pots? Chrysanthemum.

Peony.

Petunia.

Azalea.

So many flowers, so little time! He was no good at this. What was a hollyhock?

He glanced at his watch again, protectively shielding it from view. A moment later, he started. What? Already? Impossible! Impatiently, he turned around, brushing by a beaming housewife. The flowers could wait. They *had* to wait. And really, it would be better this way. Just before they sat down for dinner, he would take her aside, brilliant flowers hidden behind his back.

For you.

“For me?” Anne would ask, gently taking the blossoms, folding them into her arms. When she smelled them, they would smell like sunshine.

Who else?

After all, who *else* loved her so? Who *else* gave her dresses and cars and lectures? Who else guided and engaged her? Expanded her mind and her horizons? Was that not love?

He darted quickly onto the street, raising his hand to hail a cab. But damn it, where *were* they? *Where* were the *damn* cabs? And then, quite suddenly, he remembered. Had Anne not said something about a strike? Oh! Those fools! Those bloody *fools!* People had *work* to do! Did they not realize that? He started to walk, feeling the sun rise higher and higher and higher overhead, beating hotly against his chest. Boooooom! It was half past nine. Tick! Tick! Tick! Those *fools!* And then, quite suddenly, he was there.

“Sir!”

Barely glancing at Roland, Henry impatiently strode into his office, dumping his briefcase onto an empty chair.

“Sir!” Roland cried again, anxiously scrambling to grab a fallen paper.

“What is it?” Henry snapped, slamming his briefcase shut. He *hated* being late!

“There’s a man.”

“What man?”

“A man here to see you.”

Clearly! “Who?”

“Inspector Thomas.”

Who was that? “Is he from Whitehall? Here about child labor? That sort of thing?” Damn fools! He had *work* to do! He had no time for this.

“No.” Roland was shaking his head, red hair glinting dully. “Not from Whitehall.”

“Then where?”

“The union.”

“The union!”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“You promised to see him.”

“I did no such thing!”

“Yessir.”

Henry sighed. “*Did I?*”

“Yessir.”

“When?”

“Last month.”

“But *why?*”

“To avoid a strike.”

Another sigh. “Very well then.” There was a short pause. “But let him wait a bit.”

“Yessir.”

“What else do you have?”

Roland consulted a notebook. “Mr. Biggerton called.”

“Oh! *Did he?*” The day was looking up!

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Just a moment ago.”

“I’ll call him back.”

“What time?”

“Near lunch.”

Roland shook his head. “Not possible.”

“Why not?”

“You have plans.”

“What plans?”

“Mrs. Harrington.”

“Who is Mrs. Harrington?”

“The headmistress from St. Agnes.”

“Oh!” Of course! “About Elizabeth.”

Roland nodded mechanically. “Must be.”

He nodded back. “So after lunch.”

“Yessir.”

“What else?”

Another glance down. “Well, the market fell.”

“Saw that.”

“And the cabbies are striking.”

“I *know* that.” He had walked a damn mile.

“And the temperatures are rising. They even say that—”

“Jesus!” Henry snapped. “I can read a damn newspaper. I said what *else?*”

Roland took a deep breath. “Mr. Trane is here.”

“Hang it! What does the fool want *now?*”

“To go over the list.”

“What list?”

Roland paused, his cheeks filling with color. “*The* list.”

Henry frowned. Then he sighed. “So you mean—”

“The people who are being cut.”

“Let go.”

“Yessir.”

Henry slumped back. “Very well then. Send him in.”

“But what about Inspector Thomas?”

“Say that something came up.”

“But he came from Essex!”

“Then buy him a damn coffee.” With that, Henry reached into his wallet. “Here.” He nodded at Roland. “Take this.”

For a moment, Roland looked blank. Then he nodded. “Yessir.”

“Well?” Henry asked impatiently. “Is that everything?”

“Not quite.”

“Make it quick.”

“Could I take lunch today?”

“What do you mean?”

“Could I have an hour? Maybe near noon? One o’clock?”

“Don’t you always?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You said not to.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It wastes time.”

Henry considered this. “So it does.”

Roland said nothing.

Henry sighed. “Why today?”

“I have plans.”

“Doing what?”

“Having lunch.”

“I guessed that.”

“An old friend is here.”

“Who?”

“His name is Frank.”

“Frank *who?*”

“Frank Griswold.”

“Frank Griswold! You know Frank Griswold?”

“Yessir.”

“How?”

“School.”

“I had no idea.”

“It was years ago.”

“I see.” For a moment, just a moment, Henry paused. Then he sighed. “Fine then.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Take lunch. See Frank. Buy Inspector Thomas a damned coffee.”

“What kind?”

“Do they have any with arsenic?”

Roland blinked. “Sir?”

Henry sighed. “Send in Mr. Trane.”

A few moments later, Mr. Trane entered the room. Henry frowned. There was something strange about him. Perhaps it was his hair, oily tendrils that snaked across his forehead. Perhaps it was his eyes, dark and beady, and bushy brows. Perhaps it was that he always smelled like fish. But for some reason, the man was somehow nauseating. Henry leaned away. “Make this fast.”

Mr. Trane nodded and glanced at his list. “Gerard Perkins.” Pause. “Max Calkwell.” Pause. “Leroy Wright.” Pause. “Brian Grain.” Pause. “Brad Hendricks.” Pause. “Ryan Port.”

“How many are there?” Henry interrupted, glancing at his watch.

The answer was immediate. “Thirteen.”

“That’s a lot.”

“It’s what you said.”

“I know that.” Sigh. “Keep going.”

“George Redding.” Pause. “Jerome Redding and Kris Williams from Section C. Davis Parker and Glenn Rice from the Hole. Eric Payne and Alexander Medfield from the Deck.”

“Did Mr. Tilney make this list? The foreman?”

“He did.”

“Then it’s fine.”

There was a short silence. “Do you think so?” Mr. Trane asked carefully.

“Do *you?*”

There was another silence.

“What?”

“It’s George Redding.” Saying this, Mr. Trane stared at his hands, calluses and all.

“What *about* George Redding?”

“He’s got that cough.”

Henry shuddered. He knew that cough. They *all* knew that cough. “So?”

“He’s—”

“What?”

“He’s not doing so well.”

“So?”

“Him *and* Jerome?” Mr. Trane asked. “At once?”

“Who’s Jerome?”

“George’s son.”

“How old?”

“Eighteen.”

“Eighteen!” Henry said. “That’s young.”

“Not these days.”

Henry leaned back, crossing his ankles. “Mr. Tilney made the list.”

“Yessir.”

“And he knows best.”

“Yessir.”

“We really can’t make any exceptions.”

“Nossir.” Pause. “Except maybe this *once—*”

Just then, there came a knock.

“Come in.”

Roland stepped inside.

“What is it?” Henry asked.

“It’s Mr. Biggerton again. He says that it’s urgent.”

Henry nodded. "I'll take it."

So Mr. Trane stood up. His cheeks, Henry saw, were very pale like milk. They were *always* pale. And those eyes! He really *did* look like a fish. "And Jerome Redding?" Mr. Trane asked, pausing near the door.

"He goes."

"Of course."

The door closed. As it did so, Henry shuddered. A *truly* detestable man! If only *he* were on that list! With a sigh, he reached for the telephone.

"Hello? Jeremy?"

"Henry!" Mr. Biggerton cried.

Owner of a shipping company, Mr. Biggerton was a big client of Wadsworth Steel, not to mention a boyhood friend. Their relationship went back years, decades even. As young lads, they had golfed and fished and chased women together. They had drunk ale and sung ballads and tripped on imaginary stairs. That, of course, had been years and years before Anne.

Quite suddenly, his mind stilled. What would she say now? He knew perfectly. When he tried to explain, she would never understand.

"What would you rather? That I let it fail because of *them*? A few deadweights?"

"Maybe."

"And what would *that* do? What about the *rest* of the workers? When the factory closes, where will *they* go?" Why would she not see?

"Where will Mr. Redding go?"

"It's not my business! It's not—"

"Business. You've made that clear."

But *had* he? Then why was it so hard to understand? Factories were places for work. They were places for sweat and labor and the smell of smelting iron. They had no room for inefficiency. They had no room for charity. It was—

It was illogical.

"But why?"

Because it is!

"In business?"

In anything.

"But *why*? If everything is connected—"

Why would everything be connected?

"Because Einstein said so. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. And—"

Mr. Biggerton was still speaking. The price of wood was rising. Or no, maybe that was caulking. Or were the workers striking? No, no more strikes. The cabbies were enough. What a nuisance! What a

bloody nuisance! Why not just shut up and drive? What were they thinking? What was Mr. Trane thinking? To question him? So openly? Why was it always the same thing? No matter how many times he said something—

The peas were *still* cold. Mrs. Watson never listened. Even if Anne *did* say something about it, what would it change? Would the peas be warmer? Would the toast be less burnt? Did he *want* it less burnt? But when Peter was here—

The call ended. Henry closed his eyes. The clock ticked. The wind blew. The sun shone. And Henry suddenly decided that—

Pink. Pink was perfect. Yes, could there be any doubt? What had he been thinking? He would buy a bouquet of pink roses. And just before dinner, he would hand them to her, to Anne, his wife.

For you.

“For me?” Anne would say, the flowers to her chest, breathing them in, breathing *him* in.

Who else?

She would smile again, and it would light her face, just like it always did. It was one of the reasons that he loved her. Really, the only question was—

“Do you have a light?”

Mr. Tilney, the foreman, shook his head. “Quit years ago.”

Mr. Trane sighed. “Figures.”

Mr. Tilney shuffled a few feet to his right, making room against the balustrade. They were standing on the roof of the factory, overlooking the squat buildings and markets and thoroughfares of London. Although it was early, the roads were packed with people and trucks, teetering down the block. An old woman scolded her children, illustrating the dangers of thieves and escaped convicts with colorful language. A baker yelled about his shipment of flour, complaining that some had been opened. Were they fools? How could they deliver faulty goods? A young woman wandered between the men. A bit of cabbage was stuck to her back.

“Have you seen the new order?” Mr. Trane asked.

Mr. Tilney nodded. “Yeah. Those pens will be a bloody nightmare.”

“They’re not pens. They’re cockpits.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“How?”

“I looked it up.”

“Looked *what* up?”

“Rusty Farrows.”

“Rusty—”

“He placed the order.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I was curious.”

“But *why?*”

“The man has eight convictions.”

“So?”

“Eight convictions for cockfighting.”

“So?”

“We should do something!”

“What?”

“Anything.”

“Why?”

“It’s disgusting!”

“It’s business.”

“It’s bloody *cockfighting.*”

“That’s *his* business.”

“Would you say that to Hitler? To Eichmann?”

“What?”

“If they wanted barbed wire—”

“That’s totally different.”

“And you knew what it was for—”

“Apples and oranges.”

“Would you do it? Would it just be *business?*”

Mr. Tilney sighed. “You think too much.”

“I can’t help it.” Mr. Trane looked away. On the street, the young woman was zigzagging slightly. Was she drunk? At this time of day? What time of day *was* it? Ten forty-five. How had *that* happened? Where had the day gone? It would be noon soon. Then it would be three o’clock. And then it would be time to call the men aside—

“How many are there?”

“Thirteen.”

“That’s a lot.”

“You said to—”

“I know what I said. Keep going.”

And—

Mr. Trane sighed. He needed a bloody cigarette.

“What about guns?”

Mr. Tilney glanced at him. “What *about* guns?”

“If a hoodlum ordered a shipment of guns—”

“We don’t make guns.”

“Imagine that we did.”

“But we *don’t*.”

“Would you do it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because hoodlums *kill* people.”

“So do cars.”

“That’s different.”

“Why? I drive.”

“Have you killed anyone?”

“No.” Pause. “But I might’ve *made* cars that did.”

“It’s still different.”

“What about syphilis?”

“What *about* syphilis?”

“It kills people.”

“So? You didn’t *cause* it. You didn’t *let it happen*.”

Mr. Tilney snorted. “That’s what *you* think.”

Mr. Trane sighed. “Then you’d sell the guns.”

“It’s business.”

“But what if you *didn’t*?”

“Someone else would.”

“But what if *no one* did? How could you fight without guns?”

“You’d have potato wars. Snowball fights. I don’t bloody know.”

Mr. Trane shook his head. “You *couldn’t*. That’s the point. You can’t fight without guns. There wouldn’t *be* any fighting.”

“You’re in the wrong business. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“And what business is that?”

“Business.”

Mr. Trane looked away. As he did so, he winced. His neck hurt. Why was that? Then he remembered. Too much time on the telephone. The order for the shipyard had taken *ages*. Jeremy Biggerton could outtalk a fire alarm—and that was on a *bad* day.

There was a noise. A moment later, Roland appeared on the roof.

“I’m not here.” His face was white.

Mr. Trane glanced at Mr. Tilney. The foreman shrugged. “Then where *are* you?” Mr. Trane asked.

“Downstairs.”

“Doing what?”

“Having coffee.”

“With—”

“Inspector Thomas.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It is.”

“Why? Bad coffee?”

“No.”

“Bad conversation?”

“No.”

“Bad *breath*?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“He just keeps—*talking* to me.”

Mr. Trane and Mr. Tilney frowned. Then Mr. Tilney asked gently—“Roland?”

“What?”

“Aren’t you having a conversation?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that the *point* of a conversation? He talks. Then you talk. Repeat.”

“But what do I *say*?” Roland moaned.

“What does he ask?”

“Everything. About wages and holidays and overtime—”

“Overtime?” Mr. Trane said sardonically, jamming an unlit cigarette—he would take what he could get—into his mouth. “What’s that?”

Roland panicked. “I don’t know! That’s the problem!” He sighed. “What were *you* talking about?”

“Cockfighting. Guns. Syphilis.”

“Really? That’s so cool!”

Mr. Trane grimaced. Mr. Tilney smiled. “I *knew* that I liked you.”

Roland brightened. “Really?”

At that moment, they heard a muffled shout. “*Rowwwwww-land!*”

Roland started. “Shit! Is that for me?”

The sound came again—“*Rowwwwww-land!*”

“I don’t know. Take a wild guess.”

Roland sighed. “I’d better go.”

As he turned away, however, Mr. Trane stepped forward.

“Hey! Wait a second.”

“What?”

“Do you have a light?”

The boy shook his head. “No chance. I quit *ages* ago.”

“*Ages* ago? You’re nineteen.”

“Almost thirty.”

“Whatever.”

“Can I go?”

“Scram.”

In a moment, Roland was gone. Mr. Trane looked at the city. There was commotion everywhere. Nearby factories puffed smoke into the air. Shoppers haggled for deals. Children ran and screamed. Standing on the roof, however, the cries were distant. The smokestacks were silent. The negotiations were mute. It seemed, in fact, that the throng of buyers and sellers and stealers and criers was *pantomiming* reality. At any moment, the people would stop and laugh and smile. Everything was but a joke! A grand joke. A joke for *your* entertainment. And now that you were satiated—now that you had fully enjoyed the show, they would discard their costumes. The cabbies would return to work. The economy would revive. The weather would cool. Had you been fooled? Had you *really*? How marvelous! They would laugh delightfully. And in Eighteen Pickwick Street—the illustrious home of Wadsworth Steelworks—Mr. Wadsworth would destroy the list.

“What? You thought that I was *serious*?” What an idea! How *could* he be?

So Mr. Redding and Mr. Williams and Mr. Burg would go home happy. They would smile at their wives. They would eat their dinners. They would play with their children. They would read the evening news, rejoicing that the strike had been diverted—maybe they would catch a cab to the show tonight. What was on? Was it Shakespeare? What a genius he was!

*The world is but a stage. All men are merely players.* What a concept!

After the show, they would return home and fall asleep. When they awoke, the sun would be sprinkling roses in the East. They would eat their breakfasts—porridge and eggs again—and head to

work. They would stride into the factory, bidding everyone a good morning. And it *would* be. The sun would be shining. The sky would be clear. It would be the *best* of mornings.

At the moment, however, the play continued. The silent spinners spun. The brash bargainers bargained. And in the heady swirl of costumes and props and actors and actresses, the young woman passed unnoticed. She was a ship in the night. No one saw her. No one heard her. No one looked her way. And no one stopped to say that she had cabbage on her back. It was just a little piece—in a heartbeat, *someone* could have brushed it away. Who? It mattered little. *Someone* could have done it.

Mr. Trane squinted at the horizon. It was the color of water. It was gray and blue and hazy. It was melting.

*You think too much.*

No shit.

He turned away. He *really* needed a cigarette. “I mentioned George Redding.” His voice was flat.

“What did the bossman say?”

“What do you think?”

“I told you not to.”

“I know.”

“One of these days—”

“What?”

“You know.”

“Know *what*? That he’ll fire me?”

“He could.”

“He can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The men like me. The customers trust me. He can’t *afford* to.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“Because he hates me. If he *could* have—”

“He can do whatever he wants.”

Mr. Trane closed his eyes. That was what Mrs. Trane always said. It would be afternoon. She would be taking off her scrubs. And she would say tiredly—“One of these days.”

He would shrug. Maybe.

“Do you want it to?” Mrs. Trane would ask sharply.

No. He had paused. But if it had to happen—

“Why does it have to happen?”

He was just saying.

She would sigh. “You’re still waiting for it.”

Looking for what?

“That blaze of glory.”

No. Not anymore. That time was gone.

He blinked. If Mr. Wadsworth could have fired him—“He *would* have.”

Mr. Tilney shook his head. “You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Even so—”

“What?”

The foreman sighed. “Just forget it.”

Mr. Trane nodded. Mr. Tilney had never gotten it. Wadsworth Steelworks was his. If he left—

“It’ll be a blaze of glory.”

The clock ticked. Ten fifty-six. Ten fifty-seven. The girl had stopped again. She was staring at a bunch of bananas. He frowned. She was staring at a bunch of bananas—and she was *talking* to it.

“Who is that?”

“Who?”

“That girl over there.”

“Which one?”

“Blonde hair. Blue dress. There’s some cabbage on her back.”

“Do you mean Margot?”

Mr. Trane blinked. “Do you *know* her?”

Mr. Tilney shrugged. “I know *of* her. She’s related to someone—one of the workers.”

“Who?”

“I forget.”

“Do they live nearby?”

“Apparently.”

“Tell me—”

“What?”

“Is she—” His throat felt hot.

“Is she crazy?”

“Yes.”

“She’s talking to raw fruit.”

“I can see that.”

“What do you *think?*”<sup>j</sup>

“I was just wondering.”

“Why? Why do you want to know?”

“No reason.”

“Are you sweet on her? She’s not that pretty.”

“Margot?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve got a wife.”

“So? When did *that* ever stop anyone?”

“It stopped me.”

“How noble.” There was a silence. Then Mr. Tilney added—“There’s something *ethereal* about her.” He paused. “And not in a good way.”

Mr. Trane was silent. Then he cleared his throat. “I was just thinking.”

“What?”

“It’s about the cabbage.”

“You were thinking about cabbage?”

“What if that were *me*?”

“That’s silly.”

“Why?”

“It won’t be.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not crazy.”

“Really?”

“Do you talk to fruit?”

“Not yet.”

“That’s a start.”

Mr. Trane nodded and turned away. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. “We’d better get back.”

“Sure.”

Silence fell. The sun grew even hotter. The clock ticked again. Ten fifty-nine.

“She’ll be okay.” Mr. Tilney spoke softly.

“Who?”

“Margot.”

“So?”

“You were thinking about her.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Fine.” Mr. Tilney paused. “Then you were thinking about the cabbage. I *know* you.”

Mr. Trane said nothing. His comrade sighed. “You think too much. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“I can’t help it.”

“I know.”

She knew that Mr. Pussycat was lonely. He had told her. After the mouse had run away, he had no one to play with.

“You can play with me.”

The pussycat nodded. He curled around her feet, meowing loudly—plaintively. She cooed. Fridays were hard. They were always hard. And there was never enough milk. Even when they had porridge, spooning mounds of thick oats and chopped cinnamon and bloated raisins into wooden bowls, there was *never* enough milk.

“But I shall give you some.”

The pussycat nodded again. “Meow.”

It would be just a little. But what did *he* care? He was small. How much milk could he drink?

When she looked up, people were shouting about something. It was flour. The baker had ordered flour—flour for biscuits and cakes and pasties and Danishes and little turnovers with apple filling—and some of the bags were opened. Margot bit her lip, feeling the tears start. Now there would *never* be any cakes. The turnovers and cakes and pasties were over—done—finished! A few feet away, there was a mother and two boys. She was holding them. She was scolding them. No chocolates for them—they were bad! Bad boys. Watch the cars. Mind the gentleman with the umbrella. No chocolates for them!

Margot felt the tears come faster. No chocolates *and* no biscuits? Was there any beauty left? No chocolates for them. No biscuits for her. No milk for Mr. Pussycat.

“Meow.”

“I know.” And it was Friday.

She turned away. The gentleman was coming closer. He looked angry. And he was still carrying the umbrella—

Margot stopped. How strange! How *very* strange! Could that be right? He was carrying a large umbrella—

“Taxi! Taxi!”

Purple stripes and plaid. He carried it firmly and determinedly, threading the shops and shoppers—

“Taxi! Taxi!”

But there was no rain. And if there was no rain—

“*Where* are the *damn* cabs?”

Then what was it *for*? Clouds? But there *were* no clouds. Birds? But there *were* no birds. They had flown away. In the misty light of morning, they had squawked down sleeping streets and alleyways. They had landed on piles of newspapers, hopping from foot to foot and cawing the news. The economy was slipping! Temperatures were rising! The cabbies were going on strike! Margot frowned. Who *were* the cabbies? Were they lonely? Did *they* want milk? Would she have enough? Oh! It was terrible! She would *never* have what she needed! She had promised Mr. Pussycat—she had *promised* him! But when the porridge was finished, there would be nothing left. It would be over—done—finished! No milk for

you! No milk and no chocolates! No chocolates and no clouds! No clouds and no biscuits! No biscuits and no birds! No birds and no mouse—

Because the mouse had run away. The mouse had run away—and now Mr. Pussycat was lonely. He had *told* her so. He had no one to play with.

“You can play with me.”

But today was Friday.

Margot stared at the umbrella. She loved the umbrella. The colors were beautiful—streaks of yellow sunshine and chunks of vivid plum. And—even better! There was a hole in it. Although it was the size of a pencil tip, she saw it immediately. She laughed. A hole in an umbrella—what a thought! She loved the feeling of rain and snow and cool mist. How clever! How very clever! Now everything could tumble through. But would the gentleman feel the same? Standing on the sidewalk, angrily yelling at the cars, he was wearing a suit with a blue undershirt. He *was* a suit with a blue undershirt. And suits with blue undershirts *never* wanted to get wet. They avoided the rain and snow and the cold. They forgot that it felt good. How sad! How very sad! They wore jackets and carried umbrellas—

*Even* when there was no rain. But why? Margot frowned. What was it *for*? Purple stripes and plaid and yellow sun and purple plum—it was beautiful and cool and graceful. But what was it *for*? There was no rain. There were no clouds. Sunlight? But why hide the sunlight? Sunlight felt good. It was soft and slippery and warm. It felt like butter—a puddle of melting butter. The girl smiled. She *liked* butter. Her mother used it to cook. It melted into the porridge, tasting salty and sweet and vaguely tinny. She *even* liked it more than milk.

“Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Mr. Pussycat would hear.

She watched the man with the umbrella. He was coming closer. He ducked and wove and cursed. He was late. He was angry and he was late. Was he angry *because* he was late? Or was he late because he was angry? Or was he angry because he had an umbrella and *there was no rain*? She started to cry. The tears were hot and salty, stinging her cheeks and chin. They splashed onto her dress wetly, leaving splotches of darker blue. No more chocolates. No more milk. No more biscuits. Was there any beauty left? No. How *could* there be? The umbrella had destroyed everything.

The world was spinning. Faces and eyes and ears and lips and buttons and collars and shoes whirled around relentlessly. She was growing dizzy. The ground heaved. Noises and smells and flavors and feelings pounded across her—make it stop! Make it stop! She covered her ears, hunching—crouching—cuddling against a wall. Where *was* everyone? She had lost them. Mr. Pussycat and the baker and the bags of the flour—

They were gone!

The mother and her sons and the chocolates—

They were gone!

Jamie—

He was gone! But *where*? Where was he? He had been here. He had said to wait. What had she done? Had she left him? No! But there had been Mr. Pussycat. He had needed milk. He had been lonely—lonely because the mouse had gone away. And so she had said—

“You can play with me.”

And now Jamie was gone. She would find him—she would! She dove into the crowd. She dove into the faces and eyes and ears and lips and buttons and collars and shoes, forging a path forward. She had to *focus*. She had to *listen*. She could almost hear it. Where *were* they? Jamie and the baker and the mother and Mr. Pussycat. Where had they gone? She could almost hear them—

There was a crash. Light! Pain! Noise! Dust! Feet! The world! Upside down! The people! Are you okay? Are you okay? Dust! In her mouth! A sense of calm. Where was everyone? Are you okay? Are you okay? And she looked up. There was the gentleman with the umbrella. Are you okay? Are you okay?

She cried out. The umbrella had purple stripes and plaid—long streaks of yellow sunshine and chunks of vivid plum. He was leaning closer and closer. His eyebrows were bushy and black. His nose had a little bump. His face had lines. His eyelashes were long. There was a mole on his cheek. One eye was slightly darker than the other. How strange! How very strange. He came closer. She was sweating. She cowered away. His suit frightened her. His umbrella frightened her. He would try to cover her—to *capture* her. She had to run away! But how *could* she? Her legs were jelly. She was unable to move. Someone help! The world was upside down!

“Sod it! Can someone help her? I haven’t *time* for this!”

And the gentleman with the umbrella was gone. Margot sat perfectly still. She was alone. Was she really alone? She opened her eyes cautiously. Are you okay? Are you okay? She was. She looked up. Faces and eyes and ears and lips and buttons and collars and shoes greeted her. But where was Jamie? Where were *his* eyes and ears and lips and buttons? Did he *have* any buttons? He had a bag of flowers. He had a bag of roses and lilies and tulips and hyacinths and daffodils and magnolias and big carnations. Was that enough? If you had those things—beautiful and bewitching bouquets of brilliant blossoms! Flowers of air and wind and sun and falling rain! Fluffier than the freshest snow! *Beautiful!* If you had them—

If you *loved* them—

If you held them close and *smelled*—

Did they smell like honey? Like honey and sunshine and cool mist? Like tomorrow? Like forever? Like everything that was and would be?

If you savored them—

Did you really *need* buttons? But what about Jamie? Where had he gone? Was he hiding? Are you okay? Are you okay? The people were asking. The faces and eyes and ears and lips and buttons and collars and shoes were asking. You had a nasty fall. So they said. So they said. He was going too quickly.

Who was?

The gentleman with the umbrella.

Was he?

Yes. And here! Of all places! In a crowded market! What was he thinking? He should have seen you.

Yes.

Are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay?

Yes. She was. She would be. She just needed—

A banana. They were sitting on a table. She stood up slowly. She approached them. And there they were! How beautiful! How soft! How ripe! She wanted to touch them. She wanted to feel the smooth texture. How big and bright and fresh! Just like the sun!

“Will you buy those?”

The bananas? Buy the bananas? But why? How? Buy a banana! What a thought! Could you? Could you buy something that yellow and soft and sweet and warm? You had to earn it! You had to *earn* the bananas! And had she? The tears came back. She backed away. No! She had earned nothing. She had been too scared. She had felt too much and thought too little. She had felt *everything*.

“That’s your problem.”

It was. She felt too much. She felt *everything*.

“Meow.”

She looked down. There he was! Mr. Pussycat had returned. He had found her. She held him tightly, stroking his ears and forehead and furry neck. “Meow.”

She nodded. “I know.”

She knew that he was lonely. He was lonely because the mouse had run away. But what about *her*? Why was *she* lonely? Was it because of Jamie? No. Was it because of the bananas? Buy a banana! What an idea! But no. It was because of the umbrella. If it captured her—

No more sunlight.

If it captured her—

No more rain and snow and cool mist.

If it captured her—

No! She would never let it! The only question was—

Had he known? Had he known all along? Had he sat and looked at the world and known that there would *be* no rain? Had he known that he would be late? Had he known that he would be angry? And what about the butter? Had he known that sunlight felt like butter—a puddle of melting butter? No. He had *never* known that. She was sure. And so he had taken his umbrella—

And he had ruined everything. Fridays were hard. They were always hard. But now the secret was out. In the misty light of morning, a flock of birds had cawed the news. The economy was slipping—

Temperatures were rising—

The cabbies were striking—

And there was no more beauty.

But there *was* a tin of sucking candy. Mrs. Harrington frowned. How embarrassing! She was having a man for tea and cakes—and there were no cakes! They were gone. Had *she* eaten them? Likely not. She hated cakes. It had *probably* been one of the girls. They were always coming by, demanding a chit for a new dress—permission to visit home—help with geography—advice on Fiona Callins. It seemed that Fiona was bullying again. The younger girls were distraught. Parents were grumbling.

*Something* had to be done. But *what*? They could give Fiona a different room. But would that solve it? No. It would encourage her. She would become even brasher. And now Emily was falling under her spell—

Mrs. Harrington shook herself. Sucking candy it was. When there were no cakes, you did what you could—and at the moment, that was sucking candy. She glanced at the clock. It was eleven twenty-nine. One minute to go. She quickly surveyed the room. Lace doilies. Teak furniture. Delicate sofas and chairs. Glass vases of lilies and chrysanthemums. An empty fireplace. Framed pictures. A few paintings on the walls. Fairly oozing respectability and neatness and propriety, the room perfectly befitted the headmistress of St. Agnes. Every cushion was fluffed. Every bud was opened. Every detail was right—

Save one. One of the paintings was *wrong*. The brushstrokes were too loud. The colors were too vivid. The tone was too defiant. The energy was too manic. In truth, Mrs. Harrington knew that it ought to go. *Everyone* said so—teachers and governors and administrators. After all, she was representing St. Agnes! They had a reputation! An image! Mrs. Harrington always agreed. The painting *should* go. Nevertheless, it never quite did. It remained on the wall, beaming anger and defiance and flaming orange into the pastel room. The truth was that Mrs. Harrington loved that painting. And for that reason, no protests could dislodge it—no complaints—no admonitions. As long as *she* stayed, the *painting* stayed. And so the matter was decided.

Mrs. Harrington stirred. Eleven-thirty one. Had she done everything? The water was boiled. The candies were out. Sucking candies! What a joke! Having a man for tea and cakes—and no cakes! No matter. It would have to do. She sat back. The armchair molded perfectly to her body, bearing the soft indentations and creases of years and years of use. She *always* sat here. When she spoke to irate parents, she offered them tea—

From this chair.

When she interviewed prospective students, she asked them gentle questions—

From this chair.

When she talked to stuffy overseers and government officials, she answered their questions—

From this chair.

The interviews were her favorite! They mostly blended together. The girls were shy and reserved, quaking in snowy mounds of lacy petticoats. Their answers were short and soft. Their hair was tied into long plates. Each child was a mystery—a challenge! Could she take this—this formless blob of silk and starch—and turn it into a woman? A beautiful and elegant and refined member of the English aristocracy? A good wife and mother? Yes! Her answer was *usually* yes. And she generally succeeded admirably. The dark staircases and somber hallways of St. Agnes worked a magic of its own—there was, in truth, very little for *Mrs. Harrington* to do. The young girls learned geography and ate pudding and wrote diaries and met husbands and grew up. Society groaned to accommodate a new entrant. Some of the girls, however, posed more of a challenge than others. From the outset, they showed a deep resistance to the pomp and ritual of the boarding school. They sneered at the teak furniture and lace doilies and framed pictures and knickknacks. Oh! What obstinacy they showed! What pursed lips! What blind intransigence! *These* were the interviews that Mrs. Harrington remembered most. And there was one that stood out particularly—

“What is your name?”

“Anne.”

“And how old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“Eleven! You look much older!”

Silence.

“Well! Tell me about yourself. What subjects do you like? Reading? Arithmetic? Geography?”

*Still* the girl remained silent. Her mother shifted uncomfortably. “Anne!”

The girl stirred. “None.”

“*Anne!*”

Mrs. Harrington quieted them. So the girl had spirit.

“Well then. What *do* you like? There must be *something*. If you don’t like reading and arithmetic and geography and schoolwork—”

“Painting.”

“What?”

The girl stared at the table. It contained two objects—a lace doily and a bowl of fruit. In the bowl of fruit, there were two apples and a ripe banana. Anne stared at all of it. “I like to paint.”

“Painting! That’s unique. What do you like to paint?”

“Everything.”

“*Anne!*”

The girl remained obstinate. “Everything!”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “We’ve got some lovely studios here. Some of our pupils are *quite* accomplished. You’ll fit right in.”

Anne said nothing.

“And what do you like besides painting?”

“Nothing.”

Mrs. Harrington frowned. “Come now. There must be *something!*”

Anne stared at the ripe banana. Her lips tightened. “Nothing.”

Her mother sighed. “We can’t interest her in *anything* else! School—reading—play—nothing! She just wants to paint.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Anne fired. “What’s so wrong with that? I don’t need school. I don’t need geography. And I don’t need St. Agnes!”

“Anne! *Don’t talk that way!* A good wife must never—”

“I don’t want to be a wife!”

“*Anne!*”

Anne turned to Mrs. Harrington. Her eyes were blazing. “You can keep your geography. You can keep your dorms and books and accomplished pupils. I don’t want it! I don’t want *any* of it! *I just want to paint!*”

Mrs. Harrington looked at the girl. She was panting slightly. Her eyes blazed a brilliant blue, projecting hard darts of ferocious energy. Her fists were clenched. Her hair—a long mass of ebony curls—had escaped its bun and broken free. Mrs. Harrington stood up.

Mrs. Henderson panicked. “What? Is the interview over? We *must* apologize for her. She’s not usually like this!”

“Of course.” Mrs. Harrington smiled serenely. “Well! It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“No! *Please!* Could we try tomorrow? Or Monday? Or the week after that? I *promise* that she’ll be better!”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ve seen enough.”

“Please—”

“But I *will* need her transcript.”

Mrs. Henderson froze. “What?”

“We require transcripts from all of our pupils. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Then you’re saying that—”

“She starts on Monday.”

Mrs. Henderson nearly wept. “Thank you! *Thank* you!”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. Then she looked at Anne. “Do you have anything to say?” Her voice was quiet.

There was a moment of silence. Anne stared at the table. She stared at Mrs. Harrington. Then she sighed and said calmly—“Can I have a banana?”

Mrs. Harrington smiled. “Yes.”

Anne took one. As she turned to leave, however, Mrs. Harrington had a parting warning—“The world won’t make it easy for you.”

Glancing at the old woman, presently wearing a gray shift and subdued lipstick and a touch of rouge, Anne snorted contemptuously. *What would you know?* Her eyes blazed.

Mrs. Harrington smiled sadly. *More than you would think.*

“You may go now.”

And so the interview ended.

The clock ticked. Eleven thirty-four. He was late. To be sure, four minutes was nothing—but for Mr. Wadsworth? It was an age. He was never late. He *prided* himself on it. But maybe the strike had held him up—

There was a knock at the door. “One moment!” An instant later—“Mr. Wadsworth!”

“Mrs. Harrington! I apologize. I had forgotten about the cabs—”

“It’s nothing. Only a few minutes.”

“But I hate to be late—”

“You mustn’t think about it. Everyone is running behind now. Strange! It appears that our city *runs* on cabs. And until *this* happened, not a soul knew!”

“It’s terrible. Don’t they know that people work? That they have places to be? Things to do? It’s terrible. Well! What a lovely place!”

Mrs. Harrington smiled. “I just redecorated. Isn’t it nice? Do sit down. I’ve made tea.”

Mr. Wadsworth sank into an armchair, leaving his things—a briefcase and an umbrella—near the door. As he did so, his sleeve rode up. For an instant, Mrs. Harrington glimpsed the shirt beneath. There was nothing special about it. The material was blue cotton. The bottom buttons were tightly buttoned—

She frowned. There was something about the buttons—

“The pictures are lovely. Were they gifts?”

“Mostly. One was from the Claybourne family. They are *quite* the collectors.”

“Are they?”

“Very much so. Mr. Claybourne runs a museum.”

“Is it nearby? I’m always looking for a good museum.”

“Not at all. New York!”

“New York? And they send their children *here*? To St. Agnes?”

“They do.”

“How strange!”

“Not entirely. Mrs. Claybourne was a pupil here.”

“Ahhhhh.”

“Yes. And you know how mothers are! She simply *insisted* that little Rosie come.”

“Naturally. Anne was just the same.”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “Would you like milk and sugar?”

“Just sugar. Too much dairy is bad.”

“Of course.” She cheerfully stowed the pitcher of milk, leaving the sugar—a squat pot of brown crystals—on the table. When he took one spoonful, she did the same. They stirred. The sugar settled. They sipped.

“And are there other Americans?”

“Not at the moment. But we *will* be getting one more.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Her mother is coming today.”

“What! All the way from America?”

“Yes.”

“And did *she* go here?”

“Of course. She graduated nearly—” Mrs. Harrington stopped suddenly. “Silly me! You *must* know her! It is Jeanne Hammonds. Or should I say Jeanne *Richards* now.”

Mr. Wadsworth frowned. “Jeanne Richards? Never met her.”

“Are you *sure*? She knew Anne quite well—they were great friends!”

“Is that so? Perhaps it rings *some* bell. I shall ask Anne about it.”

“Do! And how *is* Anne?”

“Oh!” Mr. Wadsworth said. “You know.”

Mrs. Harrington waited politely. “No. Not—precisely.” The tea was still hot. She carefully set it down, placing it delicately on the saucer. As she did so, some of the liquid splashed out. She wiped it away.

“She’s fine. Busy—as usual. Doesn’t she write?”

“Of course. But what does a letter say? Practically nothing! I never trust them.”

“Really? I like letters. They’re quite—neat. Practical.” Mr. Wadsworth paused. “And *especially* letters from Anne. You know what they say—”

“Do I?” Mrs. Harrington asked mildly.

“Anne writes the most *beautiful* letters.”

“Oh! Certainly. I would never imply otherwise. I simply meant that letters can be so—*detached*. You get information. You get facts. But where are the *feelings*?”

Mr. Wadsworth frowned. “Perhaps where they *should* be—in diaries and romances. Letters are about *communicating* things. *Concrete* things.”

“Like balls? Marriages? Bits of news?”

“Sure.”

“Updates? Impending visits?”

“You get the idea.”

“And feelings—”

“Can be *inferred*.”

“Can they?”

“Sure.”

“How?”

“By what the writer is *doing*.”

“Things like—”

“Throwing parties. Having dinners. Taking vacations. Getting *married*.”

“Ahhhhhh. Because those things would imply—”

“Happiness. Satisfaction. Contentment.” He paused. “Don’t you agree?”

Mrs. Harrington smiled. “Naturally. Would you care for a candy?”

“What kind?”

“A sucking candy.”

“Are there any cakes?”

“I must apologize. They’re completely gone.”

“Unfortunate!”

“It is. The girls devoured them. They always find *some* excuse to come here—it is usually a terribly *inventive* one—and they leave with a pocketful!”

“Imagine that!”

“And the candy—”

“I simply couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Bad for the teeth.”

“Of course.” And so the sucking candies were removed.

Mr. Wadsworth shifted. He sighed. The clock ticked. At long last, feeling unequal to the complacent silence, he blurted—“Start with the worst.”

“What?”

“Let’s call a spade a spade. It must be *something* bad. So? What is it? Tell me. What has Emily done now? Has she stolen something?”

“What? No!”

“Has she snuck away?”

“No!”

“He she disobeyed orders? Been intransigent? Failed a class? Skipped church? You *know* that I can’t stand that!”

“Nothing of the sort!”

“So what *is* it? There’s no need to sugarcoat it. There’s got to be *some* reason that I’m here.”

Mrs. Harrington carefully reached for the sugar. She added another lump. “I’m just a bit worried about her.”

“Is that all?” Mr. Wadsworth asked.

“Yes. There’s a girl named Fiona Callins—”

“A girl!”

“Yes.”

“I was expecting a boy.”

“It’s not *that* kind of worried.” Mrs. Harrington paused. “She’s only twelve.”

Mr. Wadsworth nodded. “True. But she *is* growing so quickly! I am sure that she ages *five* years for every *one* of ours! So? Who is Miss Callins?”

“She’s a lovely girl. She’s intelligent and quite charming—and her parents are just *wonderful*. They own a chain of drugstores—”

“Do they?”

“Yes. And they’re so sociable!”

“But—”

“*But* Fiona has some problems with bullying.”

“Bullying! Schoolyard bullying? With kicking and punches and bloody noses?”

“Not *that* kind of bullying.”

Mr. Wadsworth frowned. “What other kind *is* there?”

“The more subtle type.”

“Explain.”

“Fiona—leads people. She makes them *do* things.”

“What sort of things?”

“Sit at a certain table. Wear a certain color. Walk a certain way.”

“How? Does she use force? Threats?”

“Not quite. She primarily relies on—scarves.”

“What? Did you say—”

“And dresses.”

“Come now! Is this a joke?”

Mrs. Harrington paused briefly. How could she explain? Perhaps a man could never understand. In the world of women, however, silks and scarves and luggage and jewelry could be the deadliest

weapons of all. Did you see her gown? Her gown for the winter formal? The one with the brocade and silk trim? Did you get to try it? No? Oh! What a pity! Unlucky you! Were you invited to the Christmas dinner—the annual bash at the Callins mansion? No? Oh! Unlucky you! She twisted the girls up and around and sideways and back. A favor from *her*—a word of praise from *her*—was the highest honor. Did she like you? Did she dislike you? Could you sit with her? Not today. Would she look at you? Would she talk to you? Would she be your *friend*?

“She uses things—treats and fancy dinners and visits home—to acquire friends. Even the *older* girls follow her. And then—” Mrs. Harrington paused. “Then she *toys* with them. She withdraws her favor. She starts rumors—”

Mr. Wadsworth fidgeted impatiently. “Can’t you *do* something about it?”

“It’s a—difficult situation. She never breaks any rules. Can you reprimand someone for not *smiling* at someone? Or not *sitting* with someone? But these things—any of them—are enough to give a girl hysterics!” Mrs. Harrington paused. “Oh! The tears that are shed!”

Mr. Wadsworth leaned forward. His tea was momentarily forgotten. “And Emily—is she being bullied?”

“Not quite.”

He sat back. “Then what on Earth am I—”

“She’s helping.”

A pause. “What?”

“Emily is starting to follow Fiona. And—it worries me. It worries *all* of us. We thought that maybe—maybe you could have a chat.”

Mr. Wadsworth blinked. “Me! Talk to *her*? But what would I say?”

“She just needs some guidance. A little reminding about—what really matters. Right and wrong. Acceptable and unacceptable behavior.”

“Isn’t that what *you’re* for?”

“To a point. But *after* that point—”

“What?”

“That’s what *families* are for. Maybe if *you* were to say something—”

“But I couldn’t possibly! I wouldn’t know *what!*”

“Then—”

“Maybe Anne.” Mr. Wadsworth sounded strained. His patience was wearing thin. “Maybe *she* could help.”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “Of course. Would you mention it to her?”

“I’ll do it tonight.

“Excellent.”

Mr. Wadsworth rose. As he did so, the sleeve of his jacket—the black jacket with the expensive material—rode up again. Mrs. Harrington blinked. She was *certain* of it. There was something about the buttons—

“How is business? Is July a good month for steel?”

But what was so special about *buttons*?

“Most certainly. We’ve had two orders just today—one for a shipyard and one for some pens.”

“What kind of pens?”

“They’re for keeping dogs.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s for the Farrow family. They’re quite into that sort of thing.”

“Is that so? The name *does* sound familiar.” Mrs. Harrington paused. “Wait a moment. Wasn’t Rusty Farrow—”

“Two orders *already!* And it’s not even *noon!*”

To be specific, it was eleven fifty-five. In just a few moments, morning would become—

Frank. Frank had *never* buttoned those buttons. Mrs. Harrington blinked. *That* was the mystery!

“My hands need to breathe.”

She had been incredulous. “What? That’s ridiculous!”

But he had smiled so disarmingly. “Don’t *yours?*”

“Of course not!”

“But if I button those buttons—”

“What? Will your hands *suffocate?*”

“Perhaps.” And the boy had grinned, flopping onto the sofa.

Mrs. Harrington had been aghast. What nerve! Did he think that he owned *this* parlor? He was lucky that he could *see* Anne! She *should* say no. A ragamuffin like him! At St. Agnes! Asking to see *Anne Bradshaw!* What a thought!

But Frank cared little. “Did you paint those?”

“What?”

“Those pictures.”

“Which ones?”

“Over the fireplace.” Without bothering to look, Mrs. Harrington knew the images that he meant. One was of a jungle. It was a blend of vibrant yellows and whirlpool blues and emerald greens. Another was a plate of dead and dying apples. It was a poignant mélange of tragic browns and midnight blacks and faded reds. The third was a white magnolia.

“No.”

“Who did?”

“A student.”

“Really? They’re quite good. The color is exquisite. The detail!”

Grudgingly—“Do you think so?”

“Can there be any doubt? Just look at the brushstrokes! The beautiful use of paint! *The color!*”

Mrs. Harrington stared at him. He was *sweating*. He was sweating gobs of passion and life and sparkle. For a moment, she was speechless. Who *was* he? What did he believe? And how did he believe *so much?* With a jolt, she remembered the nun. It had been years and years and years ago. All the same, she remembered the conversation perfectly. She remembered the flickering candles of the church—

“I’ve never been religious.” She was sitting on a pew. Her hands were clasped.

The nun nodded. “Go on.”

But Mrs. Harrington—at that time, her name was Pauline Stanton—choked up. How could she explain? She had *wanted* to be—

*She just had so many questions!*

She had *tried* to be—

*She just had so many questions!*

The nun nodded. “Go on.”

“I *wanted* to be devout—”

“Yes.”

“I wanted to be strong—

“Yes.”

*“I just had so many questions!”*

The nun smiled gently. “My child.”

“Mother.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.” She looked up, feeling the tears start. She was weak! Compassion was her downfall. It was *always* her downfall. She was weak!

“Do you believe?”

“In *what*?” Pauline asked.

“That’s not the question. *Do you believe?*”

Pauline paused. The candles burned lower. Then said she said—“Yes.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes.”

The nun smiled. “Good.”

Pauline frowned. “What? Is that all?”

The nun shrugged. “What more can I ask? It is not *what* you believe that matters—I’ll leave that between you and God. It’s *whether* you believe. *That* is what makes the difference.” She paused. “*That* is what *really* matters.”

In the years to come, Mrs. Harrington would remember that often. When she met people, she would ask herself—“Does he believe? Does she?” While parents talked and chatted and introduced their children, she would play detective. She would seek clues and answers—“Does he believe? Does she?”

With Frank, however, she never had to ask. He believed in *everything*. It was clear. Yesterday and tomorrow and the day after that—

Sunshine and flowers and grass and trees and open sky—

Streets and buildings and houses and pots of tea and winding gardens and wooden gates—

Books and clouds and music and fresh earth and warm honey and chocolate cake and the sweet smell of cigars—

Paintings of white magnolias—

Happiness and temerity and love—

He believed in *everything*. Mrs. Harrington blinked. Frank was saying something. What was it about? The paintings. He was talking about the paintings.

“They have flair. They have vision. They have the passion of a Picasso and the colors of an impressionist—and the detail of a commissioned portrait!”

Mrs. Harrington smiled. She never *meant* to. It just *happened*. The boy had a charm. He had chocolate eyes and smooth skin and white teeth and a brown complexion. His best clothing was made of cheap tweed. He had never owned a suit. But standing in the elegant parlor of velvet and suede and teak, sweating gobs of passion and life and sparkle over *everything*, he was a king.

“Did *you* ever paint?” Frank asked.

Mrs. Harrington stirred slightly. “A long time ago.” Her voice was quiet.

“Tell me about it.”

And they talked more. She was sucked in. He looked at the furniture and the books and the paintings. He *really* looked at them. He *looked* at them and he *knew* them. He *believed* in them. He believed in *everything*. And slowly but surely—

She believed in *him*.

“Who painted them?”

“What?”

“Those pictures.”

“Which ones?”

She knew.

“*The* pictures!”

“Don’t you know?”

Frank frowned. “You said that it was a student—”

“It was.”

“But I barely *know* any students! I just know—”

At that moment, there was a fluttering of footsteps. The door opened—

And there stood Anne.

“Am I late?”

“Late?” Frank repeated dazedly. “How *could* you be? For you—”

Mrs. Harrington waited. Anne waited. Time stood still.

“I would wait forever.”

Anne smiled. “Charmer! Enough of that. Let’s go!”

And they ran outside. Feeling dazed and enchanted and confused, Mrs. Harrington almost forgot her warnings—“Don’t be too late. Don’t leave the grounds. Remember tea at four o’clock!”

“Of course!”

An hour later, it started to rain. Mrs. Harrington waited anxiously, staring at the sodden grounds. Where had they gone? Four o’clock came and went. The tea grew cold. At long last, Frank and Anne returned. They were dripping wet.

“*Anne!* Where *were* you?”

“Oh!” Anne cried carelessly. “Am I late?”

The other girls giggled. Mrs. Harrington clapped her hands. “Tea is over! Everyone—back to your rooms and change.”

Frank left quickly. When Anne turned to go, however, Mrs. Harrington stopped her. “In my study.”

Anne went. When they were alone, Mrs. Harrington looked at her. “Well?”

“We were walking outside. When it started to rain, we ran to the gazebo. We were hoping that it’d lighten up.”

Mrs. Harrington looked at her. There were leaves and bits of gravel in her hair. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were sparkling. She was—Anne. Mrs. Harrington turned away. “You’d better get changed for supper.”

Anne blinked. “What? Is that all?”

Mrs. Harrington took a seat, raising a fountain pen. “Dress is formal tonight. Don’t forget.”

After the girl had exited, Mrs. Harrington sat still. She stared at the wallpaper—stripes of soft pink and gold. She stared at the lace doilies. She stared at the picture above her desk—a portrait of an old headmistress. She should have said something. She should have *done* something. Winifred Hughes certainly thought so. But then—

What did Winifred know? Did she know about the nun? Did she know about Picasso? Did she know about sunshine and flowers and grass and trees and open sky—

Streets and buildings and houses and pots of tea and winding gardens and wooden gates—

Books and clouds and music and fresh earth and warm honey and chocolate cake and the sweet smell of cigars—

White magnolias and happiness and temerity and *love*? Did she know about those things? Had she ever asked? Had she ever cared? *Had she ever believed?* The answer was—

No. And so Mrs. Harrington removed her portrait. She dethroned the old headmistress, stuffing the thin lips and tight bun and bulging pearls into a dusty closet. In its place, she hung a picture of a sunset. It was the view from the backyard of St. Agnes, depicting the landscaped gardens and stone gazebo and ornamental lake. The colors were vivid and striking and too loud. It clashed violently with the staid pastels and somber wood of the room—

But Mrs. Harrington kept it. And when Anne saw it, she nodded. “Nice picture.”

“Talented painter.”

Anne grinned. “That’s for sure.”

“And what about the other paintings?”

Mrs. Harrington jumped. Mr. Wadsworth. Her study. Fiona Callins. Emily. The present quickly rushed back. Tea. Clocks. Cabbies. Sucking candies. Sucking candies! My word! What a joke! Having a man for tea and cakes—and no cakes! No matter.

“You said that *some* of them were gifts. What about the others?”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “It’s a mix. Some are portraits of old headmistresses. Others are the work of students.”

“Are they? Which ones?”

She told him.

“I had no idea!”

“Yes.”

“Your students are very talented!”

“Yes.” Mrs. Harrington paused. “Did you know that Anne painted?”

“Is that right? She never mentions it.”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “She stopped years ago.”

“Naturally.”

“Naturally?” Mrs. Harrington repeated delicately. “What does that mean?”

Mr. Wadsworth shrugged. “Nothing much. Just—painting is quite wonderful for a young girl. It shows a certain—vitality. Spirit. But really! It would *hardly* suit a married woman. You *must* agree!”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “Of course.” Too much milk was bad—

Anne wrote the most *beautiful* letters—

Sucking candies were bad for the teeth—

“Of course.” In truth, there was just one question—“Why do you have an umbrella?”

“Have you heard the forecast? It might rain later.”

“Really?” Mrs. Harrington asked mildly, glancing at the clear skies. “Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“How very—practical of you.”

“I like to be prepared.”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. She looked at him. She looked at the umbrella. She hesitated. Should she mention it? Should she not? “It has a hole.”

“What?”

“Your umbrella. It—has a hole.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Near the bottom.”

Mr. Wadsworth looked. “Oh! How terrible! I hadn’t noticed.” And without a thought, he threw it away.

Mrs. Harrington blinked. “You could probably fix it.”

“It’d old anyway.”

Perhaps. “But the colors are beautiful.” Well? They *were*—streaks of yellow sunshine and chunks of vivid plum. They were *beautiful*.

“But it has a *hole*.”

“I see.”

“Well? Is there anything else?” Mr. Wadsworth asked politely.

Mrs. Harrington fidgeted. Should she mention it? Should she not? What would she say? What would *he* say?

“Frank Griswold is back.”

No reaction. “So I’ve heard. Why do you mention it?”

Because—

Because he had known Anne deeply—known that she loved chocolate cake and saag paneer and odd numbers. Because he had understood that she hated stockings. How could her feet *breathe*? Because had had said that Picasso painted passionately. Because he never buttoned the bottom button. Because they had had two years—two years of kisses and debates and dancing and moonlight and magic and strolls under silvery stars. Because he had *loved* her—

And because *Anne* had loved *him*.

“No reason.” She smiled. “That seems to be everything. Unless—do *you* have anything?”

“I believe not.”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. She had already *known* that.

A doff of the cap. “Good afternoon!”

A curtsy. “Good afternoon!”

And he was gone. For a moment, Mrs. Harrington stood still. Then she slowly sat down. Creased and wrinkled from years of use, the armchair molded perfectly to her hips and thighs and back. After all, she *always* sat here. When she spoke to irate parents, she offered them tea—

From this chair.

When she interviewed prospective students, she asked them gentle questions—

From this chair.

When she talked to stuffy overseers and government officials, she answered their questions—

From this chair.

And when Anne had desperately needed advice, she had offered it—

From this chair.

“What do you think?” Anne had asked.

“It’s a very nice letter.”

“He writes beautiful letters.”

“Yes.”

Pause. “But what should I *say*?”

“I don’t know. What do you believe?”

“I think that—”

“That’s not what I asked. I *asked* what you *believed*.”

A longer silence. Then—“I believe that I’m tired.”

“Is that so?”

Quietly—“Yes.”

“So it is.”

A few moments later, Anne had replied to Henry. A year later, man and woman were married. At the wedding, there were hundred roses. They drowned the place. They made it hard to breathe.

Mrs. Harrington shook herself. But did *that* matter? That was *then*. This was *now*. And now—

The cakes were gone. And when the cakes were gone—

You did what you could.

Even so, when Mr. Wadsworth had left—

When the dark halls and spiraling staircases and musty silence of St. Agnes had closed behind him—

Mrs. Harrington quietly made another pot of tea. And *this* time, she added milk.

“Are you *sure* about that?”

Jeanne laughed. “Sure? Why be *sure*? I’m positive. Pooosssssitive.” She grinned and whirled around. Oh! The tall ceilings! The dark wood! The polished floors! How it all came back!

“Jeanne!”

Hot chocolate! Pink sunsets! The gazebo! *St. Agnes!*

“*Jeanne!*”

And Maggie. *Always* Maggie! Oh! What a drag! What a terrible *drag!* Did she ever *smile?*

“What?” Jeanne cried merrily. The ceiling had patches of stained glass—big splotches of orange and red and brown and faded yellow. If you just spun *fast* enough—

“Could you *stop* that? Someone will—”

“What? *What* will *someone* do?”

It almost resembled a kaleidoscope! How she *loved* kaleidoscopes! She remembered the time that—

“*Someone* will see your panties!”

The twirling stopped immediately. “No!” Jeanne was aghast. “Are you *sure?*”

Miss Maggie stiffened. “I’m *positive.*”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“So did *you?*”

“Almost!”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“What color were they?”

“What?”

Jeanne frowned thoughtfully. “Well, I just can’t seem to remember. Were they the *red* ones? Or were they the *white* ones? Or were they the pink silk? I just *love* those!” And before Miss Maggie—a little lady with gray hair and prim lips and wire spectacles—could react, Jeanne pitched her skirt up. “Oh! Silly me! They’re *green.* Green panties! How *could* I forget?”

Miss Maggie scowled. Jeanne laughed. “You’re too fun!” A moment later, however, her laughter died abruptly. With a little sigh, she sank onto a chair and withdrew a cigarette. As she did so, the porter shifted slightly. She smiled. He blushed. Miss Maggie looked away.

“Shit.”

“Language!” Miss Maggie hissed loudly. “You’re in a *school!*”

Jeanne sighed. “Well? What am I to do? My lighter’s dead.” She looked at the porter. “Oy! You!”

The porter glanced at her.

“Could you come here?”

He looked uncertainly at the entryway. Although the lobby was empty, the door could open at any time—

“It’ll just be a moment. I *promise*.”

And so the porter came. Jeanne smiled gently. In the background, she could hear the rise and fall of voices—

“*Might I see a science classroom?*”

“*Yes! Of course. I’ve already spoken to Mr. Tremble. He’d be delighted to show you around.*”

“*And perhaps the art and music rooms—*”

“*Is your daughter artistic? I had no idea! Millie will be so delighted! We’ll have to visit her straightaway. And Mr. Lanningham should be in the music building—*”

Jeanne smiled softly. “Do you have a light?”

The porter frowned. “Ma’am—”

“Please! My name is Jeanne.”

“This is a school. You can’t smoke here.”

“Oh! Is *that* all? Come now. I *went* here. Wouldn’t I *know* about that?”

“Still.” The porter was unmoved. “Smoking’s not allowed.”

Jeanne smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Ed.”

“Ed! What a *fine* name! And how long have you been here? A year? Two? Certainly less than fifteen! *That* I *do* know! I would’ve *remembered* you. My goodness! Fifteen years! That seems like foreeeeeever. I must be a *dinosaur*! Almost twenty-nine—”

From a nearby bench—“Thirty-three.”

“And I’m turning *gray*! I’m an old maid!”

From a nearby bench—“You’re *married*.”

“Old and gray and a maid! *Fifteen years*! It’s unthinkable. Just a moment ago, I was here. I was eating mushy peas and doing prep and—” A laugh. “Who am I kidding? I was *never* doing that! But I *was* an expert at *some* things. Smuggling cigarettes—” Tucking packages of Camels into her handbag—

“*Not like that!*”

“*Then how?*”

“*Like this. I’ll show you!*”

“Pilfering jars of jam—” Picking the locks of musty cupboards and storage cabinets—

“*Which one is it?*”

“*That one.*”

“*But it’s locked!*”

“*That’s the point. If it’s not locked—*”

“*It’s not worth opening. I know that! But Anne—*”

“*Shhhhh. There! It’s done.*”

“Sneaking out—” Peering dubiously at the dark flowerbeds below—

“*Should we really?*”

"Don't be a ninny."

"But it's so dark—"

"It's nighttime."

"But it's dark—"

"That's the point."

"What's the point?"

"Nighttime never waits."

"Oh! How it comes back! Did you know that daffodils make the softest landing? There was a lovely cluster directly underneath my window. Anne discovered it first. *I* was a bit afraid. After all, my window was *so* high up! And it was *so* dark outside! But Anne said that we just *had* to try it. Nighttime never waits! So she calmly climbed up and threw herself—" Jeanne stopped. "Strange! How vivid it all is! I remember the daffodils so well." They smelled of spring and earth and sunshine. "The window!" It creaked when you opened it. She remembered that. She remembered the cold sweat and trepidation. She remembered—"Anne! Do you know Anne? No. How *could* you? You just *got* here. How long has it been? A few weeks? A month? How long will you stay? Watch out for the older girls. They're just *desperate* to try their—wares. Is that the word? I always forget. They have the *oddest* expressions nowadays! And a handsome porter like you—" Jeanne smiled. "Well, you're prime for the picking! They'll be all *over* you." She laughed. "Not that *I* would know. I never tried *anything* like that. I was a little angel!"

"Harrumph!"

Jeanne frowned slightly. "Would you *stop* that?"

Miss Maggie scowled. "I'm just saying—"

"Don't." Turning to the porter, Jeanne smiled broadly. "Where was I? Oh! So maybe I had a *few* vices. But so *what*? I was young! And you're only young once. Isn't that so? Don't you agree? Do you have a light?"

Ed blinked. Before he could respond, however, the door opened. "Jeanne!"

"Mrs. Harrington!"

And Jeanne rushed forward. For a moment, the women hugged. Then Jeanne whirled around.

"Maggie! *Do* be a dear. Could you bring my suitcase to the Equinox? They should be expecting us. I'll be there in a jiffy."

Miss Maggie hesitated. "I'm not supposed to—"

"Maggie! *Darling!* I'll just be with Mrs. Harrington. What trouble can I *possibly* get in?" Do be a dear and run along! You're being *terribly* vexing."

For a moment, Miss Maggie equivocated. "Mr. Richards said—" Then she surrendered. Nodding at the porter, she said gruffly—"I'll need some help."

Ed glanced at Mrs. Harrington. The older woman nodded. "That's fine. And when you return, could you find Mrs. Calloway? She's showing Mr. Pickwick around. Please let her know that I'll be in my study later. I'd just *love* to speak with him."

Ed nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"Betsy Lionel is visiting tomorrow. Her luggage should arrive this afternoon."

Ed nodded again. "I'll see to it."

Mrs. Harrington beamed. "Thank you!" Then she turned to Jeanne. "Do come inside! We have much to catch up on."

Jeanne obliged smilingly. "But of course!" A moment later, she walked into the elegant study and—

*Everything was exactly the same!* Oh! How delightful! How *terribly* delightful! There were the lace doilies and the portraits of the headmistresses and the stiff sofas and the empty fireplace and the porcelain figurine of the surprised kitten and the bowl of fruit. How comforting! How divinely comforting! And on the wall—

"You've kept her picture!"

"Why wouldn't I?" Mrs. Harrington asked mildly, removing the teakettle. "Would you like some tea?"

Jeanne folded onto a sofa "How very *English* of you!" Her voice was teasing.

"I *am* English."

"Oh! I know *that!*"

"Would you like milk? Sugar?"

"Very much so!"

"Which one?"

"Don't make me *choose!*"

Mrs. Harrington suppressed a smile, adding two teaspoonfuls of sugar and a splash of milk. "You haven't changed a bit. Do you know that?"

"Why *would* I?" Jeanne replied airily, accepting a teacup and a saucer. Even the *china* was nostalgic! She *remembered* this china! "After all, the *old* me was *such* fun!" She smiled. "The tea is delicious. I *missed* this! I missed our chats."

Mrs. Harrington raised an eyebrow. "Our *chats?*"

"Well! In between the *shouting* bits—"

"And the threats of expulsion—"

"We did have some *lovely* conversations! Don't you agree?" Jeanne frowned. "You simply *must* tell me! When I came in, I saw someone leaving. It was a tall fellow with a pointy chin and a rather—*constipated* air. All bristles! All business! All lines! Who *was* that? That wasn't—"

"Henry Wadsworth."

"I knew it! Why was *he* here?"

"Emily attends St. Agnes. You must have known."

"Oh! Of course! Was the girl in trouble? Good for her! Just like Anne!"

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Harrington asked mildly.

"Don't *you?*"

"Not entirely."

"Why not?"

Mrs. Harrington hesitated. "They're just—different people. That's all."

"But *how?*"

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Come now!”

“I really can’t discuss it.”

“Why not?”

“She’s a *pupil*.”

“And I’m her aunt.”

“Are you?”

“Of a sort.” Jeanne smiled. “The tea is excellent. Have I mentioned that?”

“I believe so.”

“Good. Well! If we can’t talk about Emily—”

“Tell me about Greta.”

“Greta! Darling Greta! Of course. She *is* a treat! She is bright and pretty and so gay! You’ll love her.”

“Will I?”

“Her hobby is drawing. She loves horses. When we go to the country, she just *dies*. She is *so* excited!”

“Is she studious?”

“Very much so! Much more than *I* ever was! I never had the patience for books. But Greta—Greta is a little worm! She burrows into stacks of Dickens and Thorough. It’s positively alarming!”

“And she’s a friendly child?”

“A social butterfly! She could grace any circle. She’ll make friends in *no* time!” Jeanne paused. “Do you think that *Emily* will befriend her? Oh! How droll that would be!”

Mrs. Harrington shifted slightly. “Yes.” Deadpan—“Very droll.”

Jeanne frowned. “There it is again! There’s something about Emily.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“I’m not! I can tell that there’s *something*—”

“The transcript arrived yesterday. Did you know that?”

Jeanne blinked. How strange! There was *clearly* something wrong! So why not *say* so? Why not admit it and come clean? What was Mrs. Harrington about?

“Good! I was worried about that.”

“Yes. All of the paperwork has come in—transcript and exam scores and letters of recommendation.” Mrs. Harrington paused. “You realize that a personal visit *wasn’t* compulsory—”

“What was that?” Jeanne asked distractedly. The feeling was growing. It was gnawing relentlessly at her insides. Something *was* wrong. Something was *horribly* wrong. The only question was—

“You didn’t need to come.”

“To be sure! I *knew* that. This interview was just an excuse!”

“An excuse to—”

What? It was more than Emily. It was more than the constipated man. It was more than Miss Maggie. It was more than the tea. It was something darker and denser and deeper. It was—

“To *see* everyone! It’s been so long. So *very* long! I *missed* you. I *missed* England!”

It was a stain!

“Are you *sure* about that?”

“What do you mean?”

Yes! There it was! There was a stain on the lace doily. It was brown and withered and crusty and—horrible. It was small—

But it was a *stain!*

Mrs. Harrington shrugged. “You have a certain—look.”

“What *sort* of look?”

“A look that says you’re hiding something.”

Why had she never noticed it? Was it new? It *had* to be new. *But why was it there?* Had Mrs. Harrington seen it? Had Ed? Had Maggie? But Maggie had never come here! Had George? But George was miles away! Miles and miles and miles away! “Me! *Hiding* something? But *what?* You forget that I’m a married woman! I’m *boring* now.”

Mrs. Harrington laughed. “You! Boring! I doubt *that*. You haven’t a boring hair on your head!”

Yes—

Maybe—

But the stain was *growing!* It was growing bigger and bigger and bigger. It was contaminating the table and chairs and porcelain figurine and bowl of fruit. It was dirtying—

Everything! It was polluting—

Everything! It was a *stain!*

“Let’s go outside!”

Jeanne was starting to sweat. Oh! To escape! To escape the stern headmistresses and empty fireplace—

Mrs. Harrington frowned. “Right *now?*”

“Why not?”

To escape the staid chairs and table and piles of books—

How she *hated* them! All of them! Had it *always* been so?

“But we haven’t finished our tea!”

“Tea shmee! We’ve had *enough* tea! We need *sunshine!*”

Yes! That was it! If she just had sunshine—

“But—”

“I beg of you!”

*Then* she would laugh!

“Well—”

*Then* she would smile!

“Please!”

*Then* she would be happy!

“I suppose that we *could*.”

Jeanne leapt up. The world was spinning. The portraits of the headmistresses—

The cups of tea—  
The bowl of fruit—

They whizzed violently by. The outcome seemed to resemble a kaleidoscope. Oh! How she *loved* kaleidoscopes! She remembered the time that—

“Watch your step.” They were walking outside. The world was growing brighter. And then—

Sunshine! The spinning stopped. Jeanne laughed delightedly. Oh! What joy! What rapture! The flowers were rows of bursting fireworks. The walkways sparkled. The fountains tinkled. There was color! There was light! There was joy! There was—

“You’ve hardly mentioned George.”

Jeanne blinked. As they started to walk, the gravel crunched underneath her feet. It made a rustling noise. “George? Oh! *George*. George is George. George is *always* George. Books and accounts and board meetings. What *is* a board meeting? I *still* haven’t a clue!”

“And New York—”

“New York is simply *divine*! You really *must* visit. Fifth Avenue! Broadway! Central Park on a Sunday afternoon!” Jeanne tilted her head slightly. The sunlight was delicious, having the sweet heat and smooth consistency of melting honey. From the South, a warm wind blew.

Mrs. Harrington smiled at her. “It sounds lovely.”

“It is! There’s *always* something to do!”

“And George—”

“What about George?”

“Well! I just wonder—”

“What?”

“How does he find the time? Business and Broadway and board meetings. It *is* quite a lot!”

“Oh! Don’t be silly. George *never* goes to Broadway. Really! The man wouldn’t know a good musical from a can of tomato sauce!”

Mrs. Harrington frowned. At the end of the walkway, they took a smaller path. It wound lazily through a bed of marigolds and roses. Tiny bricks separated the walkway from the flowers. “Is that so? Does that—”

“What?”

Mrs. Harrington hesitated. “Does that ever make you—”

“*Don’t* say lonely!” Jeanne cried quickly, grinding to a halt.

Her companion blinked. “Why not?”

“Because it’s absurd! New York is *filled* with interesting people. I am *never* short of company.”

“I see. And George—”

“What?”

“Does he *mind*?”

“Mind! Mind *what*? That I have friends? Oh! What *quant* ideas you have!”

Mrs. Harrington stared at her. When she spoke, her voice was soft. “Are they?”

“Of course! George *knows* me. He *understands* me. He has boardrooms—”

“You have Broadway.”

“Precisely! That’s how marriage *works*.”

For a moment, there was silence. Then Mrs. Harrington sighed. “Yes.” Pause. “I suppose so.” A dozen yards away, a man and a woman stepped onto the landscaped grounds.

“Who is that?” Jeanne asked instantly.

“The woman is Mrs. Calloway. She does admissions.”

“Of course! I remember her. We spoke about Greta.”

“And the man is Mr. Pickwick.”

“Is he a prospective parent?”

“He is.”

Jeanne nodded. Another breeze was blowing. This time, however, it had a faint chill. Gone was the scent of lavender and rosehip and honey. In its place, there something older and colder—the icy solitude of a distant tundra. The glacial chill of the North. The nagging feeling that—

“Would you like to sit?” Mrs. Harrington asked.

Jeanne nodded. There was something wrong. She sat down. It was happening again. Although she tried to ignore it, *there was something wrong*—

“Jeanne—”

“What?”

“You should probably know—”

“What should I know?”

“It’s about Frank.”

“Frank Griswold! Now *there* is a name from the past!”

There was something *terribly* wrong.

“Yes.”

But what? And *where*? On the stone bench? On the walkway? In the gazebo? In the pond? “What about him? What has he done now?”

“He’s come back.”

“Is that so?” Jeanne looked closely at the walkway and shrugs and ground. She was starting to sweat. In a moment, tiny droplets dotted her neck and back. Oh! How vile! How venial! Where *was* it? *What* was it? She *had* to find it. She had to! Who could help her? Who knew? Mrs. Harrington? She was too old. Maggie? Oh! What a drag! What a terrible drag! Ed? But he had to watch out. A handsome butler like him! He was prime for the picking! Frank? Mrs. Harrington said that he was back! She said so. Anne? But Anne was gone. She was *long* gone. She had closed the window. No more nighttime! No more daffodils below! Mrs. Calloway? Who *was* she? Mr. Pickwick? What a funny name! George? Darling George! But even *he* was gone. He was miles and miles and miles away.

Mrs. Harrington frowned. “You’re not surprised.”

“What? Oh! But I *am* surprised! I am *quite* surprised.” The sweat was growing worse. Her head was pounding. She desperately needed a cigarette. But—

No smoking here! No smoking at St. Agnes. And now—

She took a deep breath. Time was running out.

“You’re *not*.”

“Why *wouldn't* I be?”

Mrs. Harrington stared at her hard. “You tell me.” Her voice was quiet. “What do you know about this?”

Nothing! She knew that she had looked *everywhere*. *She had looked under the bridge. She had looked under her skirt—*

Green panties today! How funny! *She had looked outside—*

Colors! Light! Flowers! Fireworks! Rows of bursting fireworks! *She had looked in the garden—*

Marigolds and roses everywhere! *She had looked—*

“But there’s nothing to tell!”

No! That was it! *There was something about the marigolds and roses! They were the problem.*

“I don’t believe you.”

They were the problem because they had a weed. Yes! There! There it was! It was underneath the rosebush. It was small and green and limp. Oh! How vile! How venial! A weed!

The wind grew even colder. The sunlight dimmed. There was dust. All traces of honey and lavender and sunlight were gone. The flowers drooped. Time was running out! She twisted anxiously. She needed a cigarette. Why was her lighter broken? Why had that happened? She looked at her companion—

“Mrs. Harrington!” Her voice sounded loud.

“What?”

The world was spinning again. “I have a confession!” Daffodils made the softest landing. Was that her confession? No. It was something else. She tried to remember.

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “I thought that you might.” Pause. “Go on.”

“It’s about Frank.”

Mrs. Harrington blinked. “Frank!”

“Yes!”

“*You* have a confession about *Frank*?”

“Yes! Yes!” Her head was bobbing oddly. “He—he came to New York.”

“What! To New York!”

“Yes!”

“But *why*?”

“To see me.”

“To see *you!*”

“Perhaps it was wrong—”

The spinning was growing faster. Flowers and benches and bridges and trees and sunlight whizzed by. It resembled something.

“But Daniel arranged it all—”

“Who is Daniel?”

“And he had come so far—”

“Had he?”

“Yes.” Pause. “From India.”

“From India!”

“And he had so much to say!”

“About—”

A kaleidoscope! Flowers and benches and bridges and trees and sunlight resembled a kaleidoscope. Oh! How she loved kaleidoscopes! She remembered the time that—

“Everything! You wouldn’t *believe* the adventures that he’s had! The places that he’s been! The things that he’s seen!”

“So he’s travelled everywhere?”

“*Yes!* Everywhere! France and India and China and Argentina and Spain. He’s seen everything that there is to see. I’m *sure* of it!”

The time that *what?* She had forgotten! There had been *something* about a kaleidoscope. There had been *something* that she should remember.

“And Anne—”

“He still loves her.”

She *had* to remember! She simply *had* to! Maybe if she just went outside—

“Still! After *fifteen years!*”

“Did you *doubt* it?”

A pause. Then—“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

If she left the garden—

“Did he want anything?”

“Just advice.”

If she left St. Agnes—

“About—”

“Anne.”

“And—”

“Whether he should come back.”

“To England!”

“To her.”

*Then* it would come back.

“What did you say?”

“I said what I could. I said that she was married—”

“Yes.”

“That she was *happily* married—”

“Yes.”

*Then* she would laugh.

“That she had a daughter—”

“Yes.”

“A *beautiful* daughter—”

“Yes.”

*Then* she would be happy.

“I said that it had been *years*—”

“Yes.”

“Fifteen of them!”

“Yes.”

“And after all of that—”

“Go on.”

“I said that he should.”

*Then* she would remember about the kaleidoscope!

“Jeanne!”

The bell rang. She jumped up. She was late!

“I must go!”

“Where?”

“To lunch!”

“Where?”

“I must go!”

“But *where*?”

Did it matter? The world was spinning so quickly. She leapt up. She bid a hasty goodbye. She raced inside. The tall ceilings! The dark wood! The polished floors! How cool they felt and looked! Then she was opening the door. She was spilling onto the street. She had left St. Agnes. Finally! *Finally!* She had stepped outside. And—

She remembered. Cars whirred past. Horns blared. Sellers called. Sunlight shone. And—

She remembered. The kaleidoscope had belonged to Anne. When they were younger, they had shared a room. There had been two beds and two dressers and two vases of flowers and two chairs and one table and one mirror. The kaleidoscope had sat on the table. Anne never mentioned it. She never talked about it—

“It was a gift from my father.” That was all.

Nevertheless, she used it often. When sleep refused to come, she would walk to the table. She would kneel beside it. Her shoulders would slump. Her hair would tumble free. Her nightdress would shine a luminescent white. There was something eerie about the scene—something poised and poignant and beatific. In the elegant curve of her neck and arms and hands, patiently turning the dial around and around and around, Anne exuded a sense of sadness and maturity that was far, far beyond her years.

“Anne.”

No response.

“Anne!”

When the girl looked up, her face would be hard—distant. In the amalgamation of milky moonlight and slanting shadows, efficiently filling the small bedroom, her eyes would flash strangely.

“Why are you up?”

“Why are *you*?”

Anne would say nothing, slowly unfolding from the floor. “It doesn’t matter. Go to sleep.”

And Jeanne would try. She would lie on the stiff bed, focusing intently on the black ceiling and the billowing curtains and the faint rustling of sheets. Sleep, however, was an infrequent houseguest those nights. On those nights, Anne cried. She did it silently, keeping under the blankets and biting her fist. Lying in the next bed, Jeanne would listen. She never asked what was wrong—

Anne never told her. In the morning, Anne would be slightly tired. Her face would be red from scrubbing. Other than that, however, there was nothing different about her.

“Are you ready for breakfast?”

Jeanne would nod. “Sure.”

And they would leave. Behind them, the kaleidoscope would remain subdued. Its time had come. It was forgotten now. It was ignored. And it would *remain* ignored until—well, next time.

On the day that Anne replied to Henry, she had used the kaleidoscope. Jeanne remembered that. What she remembered more, however, was the week after. They were visiting Mr. Whitcomb. As an attorney, he managed the Wadsworth estate—his job was to oversee legal matters and the transfer of goods and funds. While Mr. Whitcomb and Anne talked, Jeanne wandered amongst the books and files and knickknacks. The place was cluttered and dark, smelling of must and mold and cigars. Jeanne had a bad feeling. The bad feeling had started a few months ago—recently, however, it had been growing worse. Dust was settling on her. It was starting to cloud the sunshine. It was making the world blurry and vague—

“So wipe it away.”

That was what Anne had said, pausing her pen. She was writing invitations. Her hand was smooth and firm. She wrote such *beautiful* letters!

“But I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s on my *insides*.”

Anne had frowned, pursing her lips. She did that often now. She had no *time* for this. Why was Jeanne troubling her so? The wedding was so soon. There was so much to *do*—

Jeanne sighed. “Forget it.” She looked away.

While Mr. Whitcomb and Anne talked, discussing the details of the nuptials, Jeanne wandered amongst the bookshelves. She skimmed the spines of thick books that had never—and *would* never—be read, watching the dust slither and settle oddly. When she stepped away, her fingers had turned ashen and gray. She shuddered. Why were the windows closed? Where was the sunshine? Oh! To escape—

And then she saw the kaleidoscope. It was tucked into a corner, squatting behind a stack of unread files. She cried out. “Look!”

Mr. Whitcomb and Anne turned around. Anne frowned. “What is it?”

“A kaleidoscope!”

For a moment, the dust lifted. Maybe everything would be okay—

Mr. Whitcomb had a kaleidoscope—

Mr. Whitcomb blinked. “Oh! I had forgotten about that.” He walked nearer, smiling kindly at Jeanne. “Do you like kaleidoscopes?”

Jeanne glanced at Anne. “Sometimes.” Pause. “Anne has one.”

Mr. Whitcomb beamed. “*Do* you?”

Anne nodded. “I do. It was a gift from—”

“They’re rather silly things. I always thought so! But they are quite fun. They bring back so *many* memories.”

Anne nodded again. “They do. When I was young, my father used to say that—”

“Some people make too much of them. They say that the images mean something. That they can tell the future.” Mr. Whitcomb laughed. “What a silly idea! I’m sure that *you’d* never say that!”

Anne stilled. For a moment, Jeanne was sure that she would respond. She would dump her furs and velvets and shawl onto the floor, telling Mr. Whitcomb—

“Of course not.”

Jeanne blinked. She looked at Anne. She looked at Mr. Whitcomb. She looked at the kaleidoscope. There was dust on the top. She nodded. It made perfect sense. She looked away.

On the way home, Anne and Jeanne spoke little. As they crossed Tenpenny lane, however, Jeanne finally asked—“What did he say?”

“Who?”

“Your father. You—never finished your sentence. What did *he* think that kaleidoscopes meant?”

For a moment, Anne was silent. There was just the jolting of the car—the glowing lights of the Tenpenny bakery—the laughter of a child, chasing a football into the street—the murmur of the radio. Then Jeanne heard—“Whatever you want them to.”

Jeanne frowned. “So he *didn’t* believe that they told the future?” She shrugged. “I was almost sure that—”

Anne interrupted. “Yes.” Pause. “He *did* believe that.”

“But—”

Anne looked at her. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. “That was the point.”

Before she left, the movers came. As they packed and carted and hauled, Anne gave orders. Jeanne sat quietly on her bed, picking at the quilt. All around her, dresses and muffs and scarves disappeared. And then—

“What about the kaleidoscope?”

Anne stopped. For just a moment, she appeared to hesitate. Jeanne listened closely. Her heart pounded. And then she heard—“Toss it.”

Jeanne blinked. When the moon rose, Anne slipped under the sheets—

For the last time. She loosened her hair—

For the last time. She said goodnight—

For the last time. And Jeanne said—

“You can’t do this.”

“Why not?”

Because of the daffodils. Because she had known that they made the softest landing. Because she had jumped first. Because she had said the nighttime never waited—

“Because you can’t.”

Anne shook her head. “Goodnight.”

Jeanne had tried to speak. She had tried to say something—anything. When she opened her mouth, however, it filled with dust. She was falling—

And there was nothing beneath her. The kaleidoscope was gone. The jam was gone. The daffodils were gone. There was only—

Darkness.

All at once, she was at the Equinox. She was racing upstairs. She was opening the door.

“I’m late!”

Miss Maggie looked up. “For *what?*”

“I told you! I’m having lunch!”

“You never mentioned it.”

“Lunch and a play! Lunch and a play! I *said* that! Oh! I must go! I’m *late!*”

Miss Maggie stood up. “Where? And who are you meeting? Jeanne?” A frown. “Jeanne! You can’t just—”

But Jeanne was gone. She was running downstairs. She was dashing outside. What a question! Who was she meeting? Who *else* but—

“Anne.”

Mr. Pickwick frowned. “Who is Anne?”

Millie paused slightly, tucking a strand of hair—a smooth blend of red and burnt blonde—behind her ear. “An old student.” Her voice was firm and smooth, reverberating gently around the studio. It was a spacious room, containing long tables and easels and old newspapers and unfinished paintings and enormous windows. Pools of white sunlight cascaded onto the walls and floor and cluttered desks and doorways. Little pockets of dust leapt into the air.

Mr. Pickwick squatted down, squinting at the bold lines and brilliant colors and fat gobs of paint. Anne had loved texture. Unlike her peers, working tirelessly—almost obsessively—to eliminate the tiniest brushstroke, she had eschewed the smooth finish and flawless blending of old masters and portraitists. When she had painted, she had left chunks of acrylic on the canvas—chunks that became a multidimensional map of mountains and valleys and plains and caves and stormy seas. When she had painted, she had left chunks of *herself* on the canvas. Millie remembered that well. In her landscapes and seascapes and dreamscapes, there were strands of hair and bits of dust and eyelashes and pebbles and—

“Probably spit.” So Maryanne Haywood had sneered, tossing her hair—a shimmering river of blonde.

Her friends had nodded. “Probably.”

Across the room, Anne had smiled. Wearing the loose smock and red kerchief that she always wore, she was surveying a new addition to her collection—a painting of Scheherazade. It was partially a portrait and partially a fairytale. In the foreground, the famed storyteller dominated the page. Her bangles and high cheekbones and liquid eyes skewered the viewer. In the background, however, the Arabian legends came to life. Magic lamps and genies and flying carpets and tigers and princesses and chasms filled the air. “When I feel like it.” She smiled again.

Maryanne frowned. “That’s disgusting.”

“That’s art.”

The frown deepened. “Art is meant to be enriching and enlightening.” Pause. “Not unhygienic.”

“Really?” Anne inquired mildly. “I was wondering about that.” And she returned to work.

Maryanne fidgeted. “My papa says that—”

Anne sighed slightly, pausing again. “What does your papa say?”

“He says that your paintings are landfills.” The words sounded hot and rushed. Maryanne was turning red. “A true artist should—”

“Make every painting unique.”

Maryanne blinked. “That’s not what he said.”

“So? It’s what *I* say.” And without another word, she discarded her brushes—a bouquet of wooden flowers, bleeding artificial color onto the floor—and she walked away. As she passed the easel that Maryanne was using, she nodded at the mélange of grapes and apples and pears and prunes. “Congratulations.” She smiled sweetly. “It resembles every *other* painting that you’ve ever done. How—consistent.”

Standing a few yards away, Millie had said nothing. By that point, everyone had known about Maryanne and Anne. Maryanne Haywood had a technical expertise and dedication that was unmatched. Her colors were accurate. Her proportions were correct. Her shadows were flawless. Anne was crazy. Her brushes were overloaded and oversized. Her palette contained hair and dust and eyelashes and stones and *who knew what else*. Maryanne had a future. Her pieces could fill salons and parlors. She could complete portraits of people and houses and gardens. Anne was going nowhere. Who would want fantastical depictions of Arabian legends and psychedelic flowers and imaginary worlds? Her paintings *were* landfills—they were landfills of tangible and intangible refuse. They were dumps of organic waste and inorganic particulates and raw emotion. All of the students and teachers and staff had known this. They had known that Maryanne Haywood was a technical genius—

They had known that Anne was crazy—

They had known that Maryanne had a future and a career—

And they had known that Anne was better.

“Yes.” Mr. Pickwick was nodding. “The movement is good. There is a certain frenzy to it—a certain energy.” He paused. “And the color—”

Millie smiled. “Color was her trademark.”

“I can believe it.”

There was a brief silence. Then Millie heard—“Are these *all* hers?”

She nodded. At the back of the studio, there were over a dozen canvases. Most were turned to the wall, disdaining the sunshine and dust and musty air. Some, however, caught the afternoon light.

Mr. Pickwick frowned. “But there are so many! Why not take them?”

Millie shrugged. “She didn’t need them.”

“So why not sell them?”

Another shrug. “Who would buy?”

There was a moment of silence. Mr. Pickwick stared at another painting—this one depicted a young washerwoman. Her gaze was sad and soulful. Her mouth was the shape of a heart. “I feel that there’s a story here.” As he said this, his eyes twinkled.

“What—about the painting?”

“No.” Pause. “About Anne.”

Unable to help it, Millie smiled back. Although he looked perfectly ordinary, combining thin features and brown hair and hazel eyes, there was something different about Mr. Pickwick—something that was hard to place. “In my experience, *everyone* has a story.” Glancing at the empty tables, she made a vague gesture with her hand. “Would you care to sit? I’d offer tea—”

“Oh! *God* no!”

She frowned. What on Earth? Then a wry smile pulled her lips. “How many has it been? How many cups?”

“Five.”

“Let me guess. One from Mrs. Calloway—”

“One from Mr. Lanningham—”

“One from Mrs. Harrington—”

“And *two* from Mr. Tremble.”

Millie laughed openly, sinking onto a stool. As she did so, caramel sunlight melted onto her skin. She sighed. It felt good—deliciously good. Had it *always* felt this good? Or had it grown on her? Over the years, many things had. As some things had become harder—

Getting up and hailing cabs and reading small print—

And some things had become *impossible*—

Singing and sprinting and dancing and falling in love—

She had come to appreciate *other* things more. They were generally small things—soft carpets and sunlight and cabinets that she could reach. But they were *something*. They were the consolation prize. Leave beaches and wind and love to the young. *She* would be satisfied with sunshine.

Glancing at Mr. Pickwick, she flashed a sly smile. “The hazards of arranged visits!”

Mr. Pickwick smiled back. “There are many.”

“Is that so?”

“Sure.” Using his hand, he ticked them off. “Narrow staircases and hallways, potentially causing sprained ankles and claustrophobia. Sore throat from constant talking. *Embarrassment* from constant talking. Excessive consumption of cakes and biscuits, eventually leading to obesity and potentially death. Excessive consumption of tea and coffee. Excessive use of the loo *because of* the excessive consumption of tea and coffee. Embarrassment from the excessive use of the loo, generally during the most important and *dignified* meetings—”

“All *because of* the excessive consumption of tea and coffee!”

“And that is to name a few.”

Millie laughed outright. “Well! That *is* quite a lot! Are there no perks?”

“There are a few.”

“Name *them!*”

Continuing to look at her, Mr. Pickwick just smiled. Millie shifted. With the windows closed, the air was stifling. Why had she worn black? Black in July! She was mad. She had heard that the temperatures were rising—

“Apparently Heather is quite the artist.”

The newspaper had said so.

“She is. But she paints quite *differently*.”

“Differently than—”

“Anne.”

Oh! Why had she not *listened*?

“Most people do. How so?”

“Her style is more subdued. There is less color—fewer fireworks.”

“To be expected.”

“Is it? I suppose.”

“But I’ve heard that she sketches beautifully—”

“She does!”

“In fact, Mrs. Harrington was hoping that—”

There was a knock at the door. A moment later, Louisa Harrows entered the room. Seeing them, the girl gave a yelp.

“Oh! Didn’t see you! *So* sorry!”

Millie glanced at the clock. “Gracious! Is it already midday?” Glancing at Mr. Pickwick, she added—“Louisa cleans the studio every Friday. I completely forgot.”

“I’m a bit early. I can come back!” Bobbing a quick curtsy, the scullery maid turned to leave. As she did so, some of her hair—an unkempt mane of rich chestnut—escaped her cap. Tumbling onto her arms and shoulders and back, the thick curls were a dark slash against her dress—

A contrast of melting chocolate and cornflower blue—

A bizarre blend of glossy ringlets and stiff cotton, straining under a silken ribbon—

Millie froze. Her fingers itched. How she longed for a brush!

“Would you mind terribly?”

“No! Not at all!”

“Would thirty minutes be okay?”

Louisa nodded vigorously. As she did so, another lock of hair sprang free. The silken ribbon quavered slightly. It was a beautiful red—the red of a summer rose. Millie fidgeted. The itching was growing worse.

“Yes.” Another bob. “Of course.” And she was gone. Millie blinked. Then she turned to Mr. Pickwick. “I’m sorry. Where were we?”

“Mrs. Harrington—”

“Mrs. Harrington was hoping that she’d pursue art. The GCSE course is a great place to start.”

“Do you choose GCSEs so soon?”

“No. But with some students, you know from the moment that they arrive—”

“You’re getting a new one.”

Millie had frowned. Mrs. Harrington was standing on the landing. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun. Her expression was thoughtful.

“Am I?” Millie had asked mildly. “A new *what?*”

“Student.” Mrs. Harrington frowned agitatedly. “I just met her. I was coming to find you.”

Millie blinked. What was going on? There was something clearly—“What’s wrong with her?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“You’re shaking.”

“Nonsense! She just—”

“What?”

“She just seems familiar. That’s all.”

“Meaning—”

“Meaning that she reminds me of—of *someone.*”

“Who?” Millie asked dazedly. What *was* going on? Something surreal was happening—something that had never happened before. Mrs. Harrington was a businesswoman. She was a portrait of composure and decorum, infrequently given to hesitation. At the moment, however, she was betraying an agitation that broke the mold. In the checkered lighting of the stairwell—

Against the dark wood of the railing—

In the silence of early afternoon—

*She was about to say something.* So Millie listened. After all, *everyone* had a story.

“Who?” Millie inquired again.

“Myself.”

“What! You never said that you painted.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then—”

“I wanted to.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Mrs. Harrington stared at the floor. As she did so, the sunlight grew a little longer. The contrast between light and darks grew unbearably tempting. The sad eyes and tight bun and pale skin and rouge and pearls and black sweater—

The medley of textures and colors and shapes—

And then it was over. The clouds cleared. Mrs. Harrington blinked. “I grew up.” Her voice was clipped. “I met Mr. Harrington. I became a teacher.” She glanced at her watch. “Heavens! It’s nearly four o’clock. I really must run. But *do* look for her!”

And she was gone. Millie *did* look for her. At the very least, she was curious. When she saw her, however, she was disappointed.

“What happened?” Mrs. Harrington asked apprehensively, pouring a third cup of tea. It was afternoon. The curtains of the parlor were closed, obscuring a sky of English gray. The clock ticked quietly on the mantle.

“She never touched a brush.”

The headmistress frowned, settling into an armchair. “What do you mean?”

“She refused to paint. She refused to sketch.”

“So what did she do?”

“Nothing. She just—sat there.”

The scene repeated itself. Some teachers used punishments would have forced her. They would have used punishments and threats to gain results—

“But art is different.”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. Two weeks had passed. At the moment, the art studio—the lofty blend of oak and glass that filled the St. Agnes attic—was filled with pupils. As usual, young Anne was sitting alone. Glancing at her, a few girls giggled. Anne barely looked at them.

“Is she—okay?” Millie asked quietly.

“She’s just adjusting.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. When the bell rang, however, she stayed behind. In the silence that followed, she sat on a small stool. Her face looked tired—underneath the rouge and powder, she was growing old. Millie shivered. She was afraid of growing old. She was afraid of what she would lose—

Sprinting and dancing and falling in love—

Painting—

Itching—

Believing! Millie froze. How clear it was! She would sit down, striving to capture some splash of teasing sunlight—

Some turn of the neck—

Some shade of a summer rose—

And the image would refuse to come. After all, if you were unable to sprint—

How could you dance? And if you were unable to dance—

How could you love? And if you were unable to love—

How could you paint? The world reeled. Millie steadied herself, staring at the airy studio and the empty tables. She waited. By the time that the spinning stopped, she was decided. She would stop before then. She would lock the paintbrushes and canvases and palettes away, tossing the key into a dusty drawer. And in so doing—

In laying them down—

She would never grow old.

“What’s her story?” Millie asked.

Mrs. Harrington frowned. “What do you mean?”

“In my experience, *everyone* has a story. Tell me about Anne.”

“I know very little. She’s an only child. She was close to her father—a businessman named William Bradshaw. He died three years ago.”

“Poor thing!”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “The girl hasn’t been the same since. Her mother tried everything—everything that she could think of. But the child kept getting worse. She wouldn’t do anything. She just wanted to paint.”

“And now not even *that*.”

“When Mrs. Bradshaw remarried, Anne became too much to handle. I doubt that Mr. Henderson was pleased. And so—”

“She came here.”

“Exactly.” For a moment, they were silent. The clock ticked. At long last, Mrs. Harrington asked—“Can we do anything?”

“You can’t force these things.”

“I know. Even so—”

“It will come.”

“Will it?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“But *when*?”

“When she’s ready.”

“And *what*?”

Quietly—“I have no idea.” A pause. “But we’re going to find out.”

So they did. A few weeks later, Millie forgot to lock the studio. By the time that she remembered, it was nearly midnight. Cursing herself softly, she grabbed a sweater and headed upstairs. Fool! What would be next? Her head? Her shoulders? She rounded a corner angrily. She opened the door—

And there stood Anne. Under the glow of the incandescent lights, gleaming from fixtures—long rectangles of gray glass—that desperately needed a wash, the girl looked frail. Her skin was ghostly pale. Her clothing was loose. She was wandering around, examining the unfinished paintings and wooden easels. For a moment, Millie just watched her. Then she nodded quietly and tiptoed away.

That was a Tuesday night. On Wednesday night, she left a set of paints—a set of watercolors—on one of the tables. On Thursday morning, nothing had changed. On Thursday evening, she left a set of oils. On Friday morning, nothing had changed. On Friday evening, however, she left a set of acrylics—and on Saturday morning, she found that one of the canvases had been used. At long last, Anne had begun to paint.

A few weeks later, Anne had a finished piece. On a Monday morning, she came to the studio early. She handed the painting to Millie. “What do you think?”

“You certainly like color.”

“Yes.” A short silence fell. Then Anne demanded—“Well?”

“What?”

“What do you *think*?”

“What do *you* think?”

Anne frowned. She studied the painting, squinting intently at the uneven colors and vibrant shapes. Then she said—“I think that I need more paint.”

Millie smiled. “You read my mind.”

And so the years passed. There were hot days. There were cold days. There was white. There was black. There was red. There was flaming orange. There was never a boring day. Other girls liked moderation and order—clean palettes and smooth canvases and small brushes and soft pastels. Anne liked extremes. She liked chaos. She liked fire.

“And what about you? What do *you* like?”

Millie blinked. They were standing outside. A soft rain was beginning to fall, drenching the air with a breath of fresh lilac and hyacinth. “I like flowers.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

Millie nodded.

“Which one is it?”

“Whatever I’m looking at.”

“What are you looking at now?”

“Do you see that?” Millie pointed to a squat tree, abutting the stone gazebo.

Anne nodded. “It’s beautiful. Does it have a name?”

“Of course.”

“What is it?”

“Magnolia.”

“Magnolia.” Anne smiled. “I like it.”

A few weeks later, the painting was done.

“I’d like you to help her.”

“What?”

Mr. Pickwick leaned forward. “Heather has a great deal of potential—”

“But—”

“But it takes more than that.”

Millie nodded. “That’s true.” She paused. “It’s wonderful that you’re so supportive. Most parents frown on art.”

“I suppose that it’s her mother’s doing.”

“Is that right? Is Mrs. Pickwick a fan of the arts?”

“She was.”

Millie paused. “Does that mean—”

“Mrs. Pickwick passed away.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It happened years ago. Heather was still young.”

“And did she hope that Heather would paint?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then—”

“My wife was a wise woman.”

“So?”

“She wanted Heather to do whatever *Heather* wanted to do.”

When he smiled, Millie smiled back. “And what about the new Mrs. Pickwick? Does she feel the same?”

Mr. Pickwick shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Why not?”

“There isn’t one.”

Millie looked away. The sunlight was growing stronger. Sunshine in England! A miracle. She had to open a window soon. Perhaps Louisa could help. Although seemingly skittish, the girl was surprisingly—“I don’t want to misguide you. If art is something that you care about—”

“Which it is—”

“Then you may want a different teacher.”

“Why?”

“I’m really not that good.”

“You were good enough for Anne.”

“That was different. *Anne never needed me*. I just—gave her space.”

“Sometimes that’s enough.”

Millie shifted. Maybe *two* windows should be opened.

Mr. Pickwick smiled. “And what about you? Do you paint?”

“I used to.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I don’t know. I grew too old.”

“You’re not that old.”

“I’m old enough.”

“But don’t you miss it?”

“What?” Sprinting? Dancing? Singing? Screaming? The room was beginning to boil.

“Painting.”

“I don’t know.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why not?”

She had heard that the temperatures were rising. The newspaper had said so. Oh! Why had she not *listened*?

“It’s—complicated.”

“How so?”

“Maybe there are times—” She stopped. “Maybe there are times that I see things—” Sad eyes and a tight bun and pale skin and rouge and pearls and a black sweater—

A contrast of melting chocolate and cornflower blue—

A strange mixture of glossy curls and stiff cotton—

A silken ribbon—

“What sort of things?”

“Things that I want to paint.”

“So why don’t you?”

“Because I teach now. Because—” She would fail. Because she would sit down, striving to capture some splash of teasing sunlight—

Some turn of the neck—

Some shade of a summer rose—

And the image would refuse to come. Her eyes would be watery and weak. Her hands would be thin and frail. Her passion would be gone.

Her passion would be gone!

“So?” Mr. Pickwick asked gently. “You can still try.”

Millie looked at him. There *was* something different about him—something that was hard to place. And out of nowhere, doubt set in. What if—

What *if*—

*What if*—

Mr. Pickwick stood up. “What’s that one?”

She followed his gaze. He was looking at one of the discarded canvases—one that was significantly larger than the rest. She shook her head. “I don’t usually show that one.”

“Why not?”

“Because—”

But she was too late. At that moment, he turned the canvas over and—

“She won’t eat.”

Millie had frowned. Mrs. Harrington was pacing back and forth.

“She won’t drink. She won’t speak. She won’t let anyone in.”

“What about Jeanne?”

“Not even her.”

“How long has it been?”

“He left yesterday—”

“And not a bite to eat?”

“Nothing!”

“We could force the door—”

Mrs. Harrington sighed heavily, sinking onto a stair. “This is deeper than that.” Her voice was quiet. “Even if we did—” She shrugged. “What next?”

Millie nodded. A few moments passed. Then—

“Where are you going?” Mrs. Harrington asked.

“I have an idea.”

When she returned, she was carrying a canvas and a box of paints. “Is this the one?” She nodded at one of the rooms.

“Yes.”

She knocked. No answer.

“Anne! It’s me.” Pause. “Millie.”

*Still* no answer.

“I’ve left a canvas on the ground and a set of paints. Take them now. Take them later. Don’t take them at all.” She shrugged. “The choice is yours.”

Then she glanced at Mrs. Harrington. A moment later, they left.

When they returned, the paints were gone. For some reason, however, the canvas remained. Millie looked closer. A tiny note was stuck to it. It said—

“Bigger.” Mrs. Harrington frowned slightly, dropping the scrap of paper. “What does *that* mean?”

Millie grinned. “She wants a bigger canvas.” *That* she could do.

For two weeks, Anne remained locked away. At sunup and sundown, she and Jeanne and Mrs. Harrington left plates of food and thin tubes of paint. When they returned, the tray would be empty. The paints would be gone.

At the end of two weeks, Anne finally opened the door. She was a wreck. Her hair was unwashed and snarled. Her clothes were wrinkled. She smelled. Her eyes were bloodshot. When she tried to speak, her voice was hoarse.

“What was that?” Mrs. Harrington asked urgently. The girl was swaying slightly.

“There’s no more—” Her voice died again.

“What? What are you trying to say?”

“There’s no more color.”

With those words, she indicated the room behind her. It was strewn with tubes of paint—empty tubes of paint and discarded caps.

Millie stepped forward. “We can get you more.” Her voice was low and urgent.

Listen—

Please! But Anne seemed not to hear. She slumped tiredly onto her bed, resting heavily on the sweaty sheets and blankets. And from that day forward—

“What happened to her?”

“Nothing.”

“What does that mean?”

“She grew up. She got married. She had a child.”

“Does she still paint?”

“No.” From that day forward, she never painted again. How *could* she? There was no more color.

“That’s a shame.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She was good.”

“Do you think so?”

Mr. Pickwick nodded. He looked at the painting again. Then he said softly—“You asked a question before.”

“I’m sure that I asked many.”

“It was about these canvases.” He gestured at the lot. “You asked who would buy them.”

“I remember that.”

“The answer is *me*.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’ll buy *all* of them.” With a glance at the oversized canvas—“*Especially* that one.”

“That’s a wonderful offer—”

“Name a price.”

“I *can*’t.”

“Why not?”

“They’re not for sale.”

“Why not?”

For a moment, Millie studied him. Then she sighed. “Wait here.” With those words, she walked to a wooden cupboard and unlocked it. When she came back, she held a thin envelope. Her name was on the front.

“What’s this?” Mr. Pickwick asked.

“Open it.”

He did. For a moment, he read.

“What do you think?” Millie asked quietly.

“I think that she writes beautiful letters.”

“So she does.” With a sigh, Millie replaced the letter. “Now you understand. It’s not my decision to make.”

“Will she change her mind?”

“Who knows? But until she does—” A shrug. “They stay here.”

Mr. Pickwick nodded. In the silence, he seemed to be counting.

“Sixteen.”

Millie blinked. “What was that?”

“You have sixteen paintings.”

“So?”

“She did twenty. Where are the rest?”

“Mrs. Harrington has three.”

“Who has the last?”

“You wouldn’t know him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“He’s not your kind.”

“And what kind is that?”

“A gentleman.”

“And what is he?”

“He made cars.”

“Like—”

“In a factory.”

“That’s not so bad.”

“No.” Pause. “But gentlemen don’t make cars. They drive them.”

“And what about now?”

“What *about* now?”

“Does he still make cars?”

“He sails.”

“What?”

“Ships.”

“What kind of ships?”

“The military kind.”

“So he joined the navy?”

“That’s right.”

“I see.” Another silence. Then—“You said that he wasn’t *my* kind—”

“I did.”

“But what about her?”

“What *about* her?”

“Was he *her* kind?”

When Millie smiled, there was a trace of sadness. “He used to be.”

“I thought so.” In the quiet that followed, the clock ticked. Mr. Pickwick glanced at it. One thirty-five. “I suppose that I should go.” His voice sounded oddly—

Was that reluctance? Millie nodded. “I suppose so.”

“But before I do—” He withdrew a business card.

“What’s this?” Millie asked.

“If Anne ever wants to talk.”

“That’s very kind of you. I’ll tell her.”

“Good.” Then he withdrew a *second* card.

Millie frowned. “What’s *this*?”

Mr. Pickwick grinned. “If *you* ever want to talk.”

She stared at him. Then he took a pen and wrote something down. “What’s that?”

“There’s a concert tonight.”

“Where?”

“St. Barnaby’s. The singer’s supposed to be quite good. If you’re interested—” He shrugged. Then with a final smile, he left.

For a long time, Millie stood perfectly still. The sunlight felt good on her cheek—

Deliciously good—

But she wanted more. All at once, she wanted more than sunlight and soft carpet and cabinets that she could reach. She wanted to sing—

She wanted to sprint—

She wanted to dance. And so she walked to the supply closet, quietly removing a battered palette and a set of paints. After all, *everyone* had a story. Some were about pleasure. Some were about pain. Some were about sunshine. Some were about rain. Some were tragedies. Some were fairytales. And *some* were about—

“Freedom.”

“What?”

“It’s *all* about freedom.” Louisa paused. “That’s the whole point. The book says—”

“Would you hold *still*? I’m trying to *do* something.”

Louisa tried to obey, focusing intently on the wall. She smelled meatloaf. In the kitchens, she *always* smelled meatloaf—meatloaf and cooked peas. It permeated the walls and floors and tiled ceiling. It slithered between pots and pans and heaping platters of fruit and bread. It leapt into bowls of soup and sausage and cooked cabbage. It made Katya cross—

“We just *had* pancakes.”

“So?”

“So we need something new.”

“But we haven’t *got* anything new.”

“I don’t care. I’ll make cake.”

“But Sandra wants pancakes—”

It made Chessie cantankerous—

“What! Another platter of cheese! *How much cheese can a girl eat?*”

“It’s not for *her*. She’s having a party.”

“*How many parties can a girl have?*”

“This is Fiona.”

“So?”

“What do you *think?*”

“Relax! I was *borrowing* it.”

It made Bethany dubious—

“Taste it. It’s not quite right.”

“It tastes fine.”

“But it *doesn’t*. There’s something *wrong* with it.”

“It’s carrot soup! How *else* should it taste?”

“It wants salt.”

“So add salt.”

“But what do *you* think?”

“It’s *fine!*”

And it made Fields furious—

“Why the *hell* does it smell like meatloaf?”

“Did you *make* meatloaf?”

“No!”

Louisa smiled. When he was angry, Fields turned bright red. He had a face that resembled a bag of onions—red and bulbous and disconcertingly pungent. “The book says that freedom is about space. It’s about the space to do things.”

“What sort of things?” Jody asked. Her voice sounded garbled. Louisa guessed that she was biting pins—whenever she did hair, her mouth became a repository of metal clips and combs barrettes.

“Whatever you want! That’s the point. That’s what freedom’s all about.”

“*What’s* freedom all about?” Katya wanted to know.

Jody sighed. “Don’t ask. Jerome’s given her some book—”

“Not *some* book—*the* book!”

Louisa could *feel* the eye roll. “Pardon me. He’s given her *the* book.”

“And what book is that?”

“It’s a book about liberty—”

“Liberty!” That was Fields. Seated at a cramped desk, he had been poring over a stack of books and notebooks and inscrutable ledgers. At the moment, however, he was looking up. His face wore a slight frown. “What does *Jerome Redding* know about liberty?”

“Who *is* Jerome Redding?” Bethany asked.

Glancing at her, Louisa reddened. “No one.”

Jody smiled. “The flavor of the month.”

“He is *not!*”

“Ahhhhh.” Bethany nodded. As she did so, her hair—a bob of shining gray—gave a gentle jiggle. “So that explains the ribbons.”

“What do you mean?” Louisa demanded.

Bethany smiled lightly, reducing the burner to a simmer. “Whenever you wear ribbons, there’s *always* a boy involved. What—did you think that we wouldn’t notice?”

The blush grew worse. When you were raised at a boarding school, accustomed to the sights and sounds and smells of bustling dormitories and crowded corridors, there were no secrets. Even so—

“So what *is* liberty?” Chessie asked. As she spoke, she was removing pieces of fruit and cheese from the refrigerator. Rounds of brie and yellow cheddar and white cheddar and Swiss joined bunches of grapes and green melons and strawberries. Spanish fruits met the dairies of central England and Scotland, creating a multinational blend of purple and yellow and snowy white.

“It’s the right to do whatever you want—”

“*Whatever* you want? What about kill people?”

“*Unless* it hurts other people.”

“What about this conversation?” Jody grouched. “*It’s* hurting *me*.” And to Louisa—“Would you be *still?*”

Louisa frowned. “But it’s not *really*. It’s not *really* hurting you.”

“*What’s* not?”

“This conversation.”

“How do you know?”

“Because words can’t *actually* hurt anyone.”

“Even cursing?” Chessie asked.

“Even Petey singing?” Katya chimed in.

At that, Petey looked up. Louisa blinked. She had forgotten about him. He was sitting in the corner, shucking a bag of peas. His eyes had the scared look that they always did. His skin was a landscape of blossoming pimples.

“Hey!”

She shook her head. “That’s different. Maybe it’s not *nice*—”

“*Hey!*”

“But it’s not *hurting* you.”

“Are you sure about that?” Katya asked mildly.

“Yes.”

“Have you ever *heard* Petey sing?”

Chessie restrained a smile. “She has a point.”

“But it’s *still* just *words*.”

Fields nodded. “As Friedrich Hayek said—”

“I couldn’t find any coriander. Will garam masala do?”

With those words, Stuart entered the room and dumped a bag—a sack of brown paper—on the table. He was a tall man, sporting a black moustache and graying hair and eyes that danced wickedly. His face was one that she knew well. It was one that she had *always* known—it had sung lullabies and demystified mathematics and told tales of ghosts and goblins. It had hidden treasures on Easter Sunday, turning the clues into word problems and algebra equations. At a boarding school, *everyone* became a scholar—cooks and maids and janitors and porters. Chessie studied French. Bethany recited Shakespeare. Stuart read history. Even Ed was catching on.

Bethany glanced inside dubiously. “They’re completely different.”

“I know. But it’s what they *had*.”

Fields coughed. “*As Friedrich Hayek said—*”

“Oh God! Not *this* again!” Jody lamented. A moment later, Louisa felt a hard poke. “This is *your* fault.”

“Ouch! *What’s* my fault?”

“Just *think* about it.” Fields was getting warmed up. “If everyone just let everyone *else* alone—”

Jody sighed. “He’s getting that *look*. And when he gets that *look*—”

“We’d be fine. Forget stupid laws about cigarettes and beer and prostitution—”

“He doesn’t *stop*.”

“*Let people do what they want! Let them say what they want. Let them believe what they want. That’s what freedom is.*”

“He used to be a teacher. Did you know that?”

“Really?” Louisa asked curiously. “What did he teach?”

“Philosophy.”

Fields frowned. “It was economics.”

Jody shrugged. “Same idea.” To Louisa—“Can I have another clip?”

“What kind?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The frown grew deeper. “Not *really*. They’re actually—”

“So why are you *here*?” Louisa cut in. “What happened?”

There was a long pause. Then he shrugged. “I like bread.” Another pause. “But about Hayek—”

Leaving the soup to simmer, Bethany sank onto a stool and sighed resignedly. “What did Hayek say?”

“He said that society is about preserving freedom. And the greatest threat to freedom is the concentration of power. So the job of government—”

“This *hurts!*” Jody lamented.

“Shush!” Chessie chided her. “I want to hear this!”

“The job of government is to *leave people alone*. It’s to make sure that *nobody is harming anybody else*—that nobody is *breaking the rules*. ”

Chessie frowned. “Is that all?”

Fields nodded. “What more *could* it do? If the job of society is to preserve freedom—”

“But *is* it?” Bethany asked mildly.

“What *else* could it be?”

“I don’t know. What about making people happy?”

“But wouldn’t *freedom* make people happy?” Stuart asked. He was donning an apron and a cap. The sight was vaguely comical—his torso turned the garment into a childlike toy. He played into it, however, theatrically tying the thin straps into a bow. Glancing at Louisa, he smiled. She smiled back.

“*Would* it?” Bethany asked.

Would it? *Should* it? Louisa leaned back, resting heavily against Jody and the wooden chair. Her head had a feeling of weightlessness. There was a gate that divided St. Agnes from the world. It was small and small and wooden and covered with initials and engraved messages—

TB is a prick. AB ♥s FG. JMC does drugs.

Who was AB? Who was FG? Who was JMC? *Did* she do drugs? Or even drugs? *Would she ever know*? Did it matter? *Should* it? The gate had never been a barrier to *her*. She had passed through it freely, running errands and posting letters and buying boxes of grain and porridge. The pupils had envied her.

“You can go anywhere.”

“You needn’t worry about prep.”

“You’re so *lucky*. ”

She had nodded. They were right. She *could* go anywhere. She *could* do anything. She could wear trousers and talk freely and curse and take midnight strolls. She never mentioned that there was a ditch on the other side of the wall—a ditch that usually filled with rainwater and sometimes scum. What did that matter? If they wanted to imagine more—

Let them. And so she had nodded at the ermine muffs and silken slippers and freshwater pearls. She had nodded her head—

And she had opened the gate.

“What do *you* think?” Stuart asked her.

She shrugged. “Sometimes.” And *sometimes*—

“The comb.”

“What?”

“I need the comb!”

Across the table, Bethany grabbed a mixing bowl. “And if you had to choose—”

“I’d choose freedom.” So said Fields.

“I’m not so sure.” So said Bethany.

“Have you seen the red potatoes?” So said Stuart.

Bethany pointed. “They’re right here.”

And he started to chop.

“Do you remember Anne?” Chessie asked suddenly. Turning to Bethany—“*You* would.”

Bethany nodded. “Of course. Why?”

“She had the queerest ideas. She said that we were all connected—”

“I remember that.”

“So?” Fields demanded. “What does *that* have to do with anything?”

Chessie shrugged. “I don’t know. I never quite understood her. Then again—”

“What?”

“Perhaps freedom is about *more* than being left alone—more than the right to say what you want and believe what you want and travel.”

“But what *else* could it be?”

“Having enough.” A pause. “Not being afraid.”

“But that’s got nothing to do with it!” Fields protested.

“*Doesn’t* it? If you haven’t got any holidays—”

“That’s not *my* problem.”

“What good is being able to travel? If you haven’t got anything to say—”

“*Still* not my problem!”

“What good is the right to speak freely? If you can’t take advantage of it—”

“For crying out loud! *Would you hold still?*”

“I’m sorry!” Louisa cried.

Jody sighed.

“*What good is freedom?*” Chessie finished.

A few feet away, Katya nodded—Katya of the thin nose and pale skin and Russian eyes and lullabies that had no words. “She’s right.” The batter was growing thick. She stirred it heavily. “A choice between eating and traveling—”

“Is still a choice.”

Katya shrugged. “Maybe.” Another stir. A splash of milk. “But it’s not freedom.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s what you had to do.” A pinch of salt.

“And—”

“And freedom isn’t necessity.”

“So what *is* it?”

Another shrug. “Doing something because you *want* to do it. Because you *freely chose* to do it.” A touch of vanilla. “*Not because someone told you to*. Not because it was the only option.”

Louisa frowned. The pot of soup was boiling again. In a moment, Bethany lowered the heat. As she did so, she glanced outside. It was becoming a beautiful day. A summer sun illuminated a panorama of sidewalks and trees and passerby.

“You’re mad!” Fields cried. “If that’s what freedom is—”

“*Who’s mad?*” Sandra asked breezily, bustling into the room. “Are the ovens warm? Is the flour out? We haven’t much time. Oh! Salmon! You’re all red. Have you been arguing again? You *know* what I said. You’ve *got* to stop that! *Who’s mad?*”

Fields looked at Sandra. There she was—a bustle of red cotton and starched socks and rosy cheeks and calloused hands and a little wart that *never went away*. Fields looked at Sandra—

And for just a moment, he forgot to frown. Then he looked away, grabbing an open ledger and a pen. “No one’s *mad*.” His tone was oddly sheepish. “It’s just that—”

“Oh! I’m sure that I don’t care. There isn’t time for that. What’s the soup today? Carrot? Cabbage?”

“Carrot.” Bethany frowned slightly, unbending from the stool. As she did so, her joints creaked slightly—by watching her, Louisa could feel them creak. How many years had it been? How many times had Louisa seen her stand? How many times since—

“Should we keep her? She hasn’t got a penny.” So Sandra had asked.

How many times since—“Yes.” A nod of the head. “Why *wouldn’t* we?”

For Bethany Winters, it had never been a question. And so Louisa had stayed.

“But it doesn’t taste quite right. I’m *sure* of it.”

Sandra nodded. “Add a bit of ginger. That always helps. Well now! Carrot soup. How about a lovely brown bread? Wouldn’t that be nice?” And donning an apron, she walked to the table and grabbed a bag of flour. In a heartbeat, it covered the counter. “Well! Don’t mind me. Go on then! What were you talking about?”

Bethany smiled. “Everything. Freedom. Potatoes—”

“Freedom! Potatoes! What an odd pair! I can think of much more to say about *one* than the *other*. *That’s* for sure! Oh! That reminds me.” Turning to Fields—“Salmon? *Darling!* Have you seen the peaches that we put aside? The ones that needed to ripen? They ought to be ready now. I was thinking that we could do some custard. Peach custard! Wouldn’t that be nice? After all, the girls just *had* pancakes. They’ve had so *many* of them. I’m afraid that they’ll turn *into* the things soon! Of course, it’s probably too late—” A glance at Katya.

“It’s not.”

“Are you sure?”

A nod of the dark hair and pale skin and thin lips—thin lips that were always humming. It was never a *song*. There were never *words* attached to the haunting melodies—melodies of sun and sky and

fields and the Russian winter. And yet—“*Quite* sure. I didn’t many any pancakes.” Pause. “I just *couldn’t*.”

“Is that right? Bless you! So what *did* you make?”

“Cake.”

“Cake! *Cake!* That will be perfect! We simply *must* find those peaches. Cake and peaches! What a treat!” She poured a bit of yeast and warm water into a bowl. It hissed faintly. “Now then! We were saying something. What was it? Oh! Of course. Freedom! Do tell me. What did you have to say about *that?*”

“I was saying that Jerome gave—”

“*Jerome?* Do you mean *Jerome Redding?*”

Jody prodded Louisa. “Go on then.”

Turning a stunning shade of scarlet—“Yes.”

“Well then! *Jerome Redding!* Are you sweethearts?”

Louisa squirmed. When you were raised at a boarding school, there were *never* any secrets.

“Is that right! How long?”

“A few weeks.”

“A few weeks! My word!”

“Do you know Jerome?” Louisa asked cautiously.

“Not a whit! But I know his mother. She’s quite a woman! *Quite* a woman!”

“Is she?” Louisa asked faintly. “That’s—good to know.”

Jody snickered. Louisa scowled.

“Shut up.”

The snickering grew worse. “How’s Jerome looking *now?*”

Louisa scowled. “I don’t know. How’s *Ed?*”

Jody shut up.

Sandra grabbed a bit of flour and sugar and salt, dumping the lot into a wooden bowl. “I’m *so* sorry. What were you were saying?”

Bethany shrugged. “Nothing much. We were just talking about freedom. Fields thought that—”

“Oh! Don’t mind what Fields thinks! He’s read more books than he should have. I want to know what *you* think.” She looked at Petey. “Well?”

The boy started. “What? *Me?*”

“Why not? You must have *some* opinion. Every fool’s got an opinion. Not to say that *you’re* a fool. Quite on the contrary! You’re a bright boy. That’s what *I’ve* always said.” All at once, she paused. Her nose quivered, vaguely resembling a rapacious rabbit. Louisa inwardly groaned. This was looking bad. “Now *there’s* an idea!”

“*What* is?” Louisa asked cautiously.

“Why don’t you date Petey? I don’t believe that we never thought of it! After all, what’s Jerome got that Petey hasn’t?”

Louisa squirmed. Just behind her, Jody was practically choking. The sniggering was actually becoming *palpable*. Before Louisa could speak, however, the indomitable Sandra steamed on.

“Nevermind! You needn’t answer that. I *won’t* get involved. I simply *won’t!* After all, I just *hate* meddlers. But really! *Think* about it! Petey’s such a *nice* boy! And Mrs. McIntyre is *such* a treat!”

Louisa blinked. Mrs. McIntyre was the human equivalent of a snow avalanche. Small mammals fled at her approach. Sandra, however, continued blithely.

“Now then. Where were we? Oh! Yes. *Petey!*”

The boy squared to her, vaguely resembling a soldier before a charge. “Yes?”

“What do *you* think about freedom?”

The boy swallowed. “I wouldn’t know ma’am. I dunno know much about freedom.” As he said this, his gaze remained fixed on the wall. His chin wavered slightly. Louisa felt a surge of pity.

“And why is that?” Sandra demanded.

Stuart sighed. “Come now! Would you leave the boy alone? This isn’t an interrogation.” Glancing at Louisa, his eyes twinkled. “Or *is* it? Did I miss something?”

Louisa grinned back. “Not as far as *I* know.”

Sandra clucked. “It’s just a question!”

And Petey said—“I’ve got a mother.”

The others laughed. Bethany smiled gently. “Who knows? He may have a point. I suppose that we’re *all* born into things—families and homes and countries. You can’t really ignore that. And if that’s the case—”

“Are we *ever* free?” Chessie concluded. As she said this, she put the platter of cheese away. It was done. Another party was ready to be had. How many parties could a girl *have*?

Sandra frowned. “Well! That’s a bit much for *me*. But it *does* remind me—” She paused. “It reminds me of someone—”

“I need another ribbon.”

“What color?” Louisa asked.

“What color do you want?”

Louisa grabbed a red ribbon. Jody took it. And a few feet away, Bethany said—“Anne.” Her voice was calm. With the soup finished, she had started a pot of oil. There would be chips that night—chips and brown bread and carrot soup and peas and beef.

“Yes! *That’s it!* Anne. Oh! How long it’s been! How *is* Anne? I wonder! She never visits anymore. But she said such *strange* things!” A glance at Fields. “You would have liked her. She was quite into philosophy and books and all that. She had a saying. She said that—” There was a pause. “She used to say that—”

“We’re all connected.”

“Yes! That’s it! She used to say that we’re all connected. I never quite understood it. Did *you?*”

Bethany shrugged. “Not really. But—”

“Did *you?*” She was looking at Chessie.

Chessie shrugged. “Not exactly. Then again—”

“Who *is* Anne?” Louisa broke in.

“Who is Anne!” Sandra repeated. “*Who is Anne!* What a question! She was a pupil here.”

“So?” There were many pupils at St. Agnes. They wore ermine muffs and silken slippers and freshwater pearls. They giggled on stone benches, dishing the latest news and broken secrets. They slipped under archways, plotting daring escapes that few would ever do. They carved initials and messages and slogans into the wooden gate—

TB is a prick. AB ♥s FG. JMC does drugs.

Who *was* AB? Who *was* FG? Who *was* JMC? Did it matter? Did it matter that Katya *only sang melodies*—

Melodies of sun and sky and fields and the Russian winter—

But melodies that had no words? *Lullabies* with no words? Did it matter that there was a ditch on the other side of the wall—a ditch that usually filled with rainwater and sometimes scum? Did it matter that Mrs. McIntyre was a human avalanche? That Sandra had a wart? That Jody has asked Ed to see her flat—and that he had said yes? *Every night this week*? Did it matter that Louisa had never known her father? That her mother had died years ago? After all—

“Anne was *different* than the others.”

“How so?”

“In *every* way! When she arrived, she didn’t have anyone. She said that the other girls were—” A frown. “*What* did she say again? Bland. That’s it! Bland. That, of course, was before Jeanne. Oh! *There’s* a name that brings back memories! Do you remember the day that she arrived? Anne was sitting here, finishing a plate of food—I believe that it was lamb. How do I remember that? I have no idea. But I’m *sure* that it was lamb. Well! Melanie Edwards came in, complaining about the new girl—”

Louisa blinked. As she listened, the scene came alive.

“*You won’t believe what I found.*”

“Melanie had just been doing the wash load and—”

“*She’s got colored panties.*”

“Who’s got colored panties?”

“*Jeanne.*” Pause. “*The new girl.*”

“*Colored panties! But why? Why on Earth would you want colored panties?*”

“That’s what *I* asked. But Anne? What did *she* ask?”

“*What color?*”

“Melanie didn’t know. All colors! Green and red and blue and purple. Anne nodded. She put down her fork, wiping away a bit of grease. She was always so *good* about that. Never one to forget the small things! And she said—”

“*I should like to meet this Jeanne.*”

“And *I* said—”

“*Not until that food’s done!*”

“But she never *did* finish that lamb. She got this restless air. And after a bit, she up and left.”

“Did she go to find Jeanne?”

“How should *I* know?” Sandra asked indifferently. “She *shouldn’t* have. It was hours past bedtime! But I suppose that she must’ve. By the next day, they were two peas in a pod!” She paused briefly, catching her breath. Her cheeks had developed a rosy flush. “But all of *that* was *after*. It was

*long* after. When she *first* got here, she hardly did *anything*. She didn't sleep. She didn't eat. Poor soul! She probably thought that they'd send her home. She was quite a stubborn thing! But at the end of the day, she was still *human*. And when humans don't eat, they get powerfully hungry!"

"So is that what led her here?" Louisa asked.

Sandra nodded. "That's right! We quite felt for her. The poor soul was starving to death! So what I did I? I fixed some bread and cheese and vegetable stew and beans. And when she was done with that, I fixed some more! *Lord* could that girl eat! You'd never know it. She was skinner than a rail. But she could match the best of 'em!" A glance at Stuart—"Even you!"

Stuart bowed. "I won't deny it."

"When she was done eating, we got to talking. I said that she ought to run back. What would her mammy say about this? Fraternizing with the cooks! Eating in the kitchen! *Anne Bradshaw!* But what did Anne do? She laughed. She leaned back, putting her legs—she was wearing a pair of blue pajamas—on the table. And she said that I shouldn't be silly. After all, we were all connected. And if we were all connected—" All at once, Sandra gave a yelp. "What! Are there no more raisins? *Have we run out?*"

Salmon looked up, wearing a gray frown. "I shouldn't *think* so. Did you check the pantry?"

"I didn't." Sandra glanced up. "Would someone be kind enough—"

Petey jumped up. "I will!" Even the *pimples* quavered with eagerness.

Sandra beamed. "What a prince! Could you check the pantry for raisins? I really can't make soda bread without them!"

"Do you care what kind?"

"I'm not fussed. Whatever there is!"

Petey nodded and disappeared.

"What a *nice* boy!" With a glance at Louisa—"Now if I were thirty year younger—"

Fields coughed.

"Oh! Don't you cough at me! I'm just *saying*."

And glancing at Fields, she smiled. She smiled—

And she touched his cheek. It was the tiniest of gestures. And yet—

*Somehow—*

It said so much.

"*He used to be a teacher. Did you know that?*"

"*Really? What did he teach?*"

"*Philosophy.*"

"*It was economics.*"

"*Same idea.*"

"*So why are you here? What happened?*"

A long pause. "*I like bread.*"

Louisa grinned. She had never known her father. Her mother had died years ago. Chessie and Bethany and Sandra and Stuart—*they* had raised her. *They* had taught her. *They* had made scavenger hunts and banana custard and geography lessons that she would always remember. To be sure, there were some things that she had never known—

Her father and the secret to carrot soup and where Jody hid her diary—  
And there were some things that she never *would* know—  
The shape of tomorrow and whether freedom more important than happiness—  
But not love. *That* she *did* know about. Love was touching a face that resembled a bag of onions.  
It was resigning a teaching job—an *economics* job—to do kitchen finances. Love was forgetting to frown. Love was a set of initials, decorating the slats of a wooden gate. Love was realizing that some melodies *needed* no words.

“I wonder what happened to her. I *do*. I really *do*.”

“Who?” Bethany asked.

“Anne. Who *else*?”

“She grew up. She got married. She’s Anne Wadsworth now.”

“Oh! She’ll always be Anne Bradshaw to me!”

Louisa started. “Did you say *Wadsworth*? Like Wadsworth Steel?”

“Is there any *other*? But what happened to Frank? He was such a nice boy! Do you remember the time that—”

“But that’s where—” She froze. The other shoe dropped. “Is there any chance that—”

But the loquacious Sandra Fields—goddess of brown bread and queen of the exclamation point—was still speaking. “And I *do* wonder that meant! That expression of hers. She was always saying it! What do you think?” She looked at Louisa. “Well? Do *you* understand what it means?”

Louisa paused. Then she smiled. “Not really.” A pause. “But I’m starting to.” And so saying, she grabbed a bucket and stood.

“Where are you doing?” Chessie asked instantly.

“I’ve got another room.”

“But you’re usually done by now.”

Louisa shrugged. “Millie had company, so I had to wait.”

“Millie had company! *Millie* had *company*! Who *was* it?”

“I don’t know. A man.”

“A man!” Sandra ejaculated. “Well! What *kind* of man?”

Louisa gave a slow grin. “From what I saw, one that she didn’t mind.”

Chessie nodded firmly, dumping a load of potatoes into the fryer. “It’s about time.”

“Francesca Drake!” Sandra chided her.

“What? It’s true.”

Still smiling slightly, she walked to the sink. Bethany was standing there, methodically drying her hands and staring outside. “Would you mind if I—” Louisa started to ask, gesturing at a discarded rag. Before she could finish, however, something caught her eye. At that moment, a woman was hurrying past. Her skin was pale. Her hair was a midnight black. Her dress was a soft blue. For some reason, Bethany was staring at her intently. As she did so, her hands stilled. Her forehead smoothed. Her lips set.

“Who’s that?” Louisa asked curiously. How strange! What could *possibly* make Bethany—  
And then realization hit. Before Bethany said a word, Louisa knew.

“That’s Anne.”

## AFTERNOON

Café Hampstead was beginning to buzz. Ladies and gentleman waited patiently at the door, peeping inside to see when—if *ever*—their turn would come. Waiters and waitresses bustled past, carrying trays of steaming soups and leafy salads and baskets of hot rolls. At the table to her right, Anne heard—

“Could you pass the bread?”

“Which kind?”

“I don’t mind. Regular is fine.”

“But what *do* you think?”

“About *what?*”

An exasperated sigh. “Mark!”

“What?”

“Have you been listening at *all?*”

“Of *course.*” A pause. “Is the butter over there? I could have *sworn—*”

She passed the butter. A flashbulb of sights and sounds followed. There was a clattering of a knife. There was a slow and methodical smearing of whitish paste. There was a messy explosion of brown crumbs. There was a satisfied sigh. And then—“*Now* will you hear me out?”

Her husband frowned slightly, taking a bite of the buttered roll. “But I *have* been.” He chewed. Another crumb fell onto the table. “You want to know about the house.”

“Yes.” Her voice was calm and collected. Beneath the table, however, her foot was starting to tap.

The frown grew deeper. “I don’t know. The economy *is* getting worse. It’s all over the news. And we really never use the place—”

“But Mark—”

Anne turned away, examining the menu. She had memorized it years ago—the soups and salads and quiches never changed. Even so, she stared intently at the curly script and tiny dots that led to prices. The prices were reasonable here—that was what Henry always said. And the food had a wholesome taste, combining satisfying flavors and hearty substance. *Everyone* liked Café Hampstead. What was *not* to like? Good food. Cozy atmosphere. Bathrooms with marble sinks. Cloth napkins that had patterns of—

“Anne? Is that *you?*”

“Jeanne!”

“*Darling!*”

Anne leapt up. There was a flash of black silk and delicate perfume and small pearls and skinny arms. *Such* skinny arms! Was she eating? But Jeanne had *always* been thin. Sandra had thrown fits about it.

“Do you see that? She barely eats! A bit about the edges. No potatoes! No cheese! Just that damned broccoli.”

Lying in bed, Jeanne had been unconcerned. “So? I *like* broccoli.”

Across the room, Anne had frowned. “Sandra won’t believe that.”

A snort. “What do *I* care what *Sandra* thinks?”

“Plenty of reasons.”

“Like *what?*”

“She cooks for you.”

“And—”

“She’s a person.”

“*And—*”

“Do *want* to eat spit?”

A sigh. “Fine then. *You* figure something out.” Pause. “You always do.”

And so Anne had.

“Is it *really* against her religion?” Sandra had asked skeptically. She was baking a batch of scones. Anne was sitting at the wooden counter, scavenging raisins from a bowl. The kitchen bustled around them. Chessie was making a banana custard. Bethany was singing an Irish folksong.

“But I thought that she was Catholic.”

“It’s one of the smaller sects.”

Chessie grunted. “Humph! I’d imagine so!”

“And why is that?” Anne wanted to know.

“Well, for *one* thing—” The woman paused briefly, emptying a pint of cream into her bowl. A moment later, a cup of sugar followed.

“*What?*” Anne persisted.

“Natural selection.”

“You look fabulous!” Anne cried lightly, smiling at her friend. The buzz of the café continued, creating a steady hum.

Jeanne laughed. “And *you!* Gracious! You must drive Henry *mad* with jealousy!”

“And why is that?” Anne asked calmly, taking a seat again. Across the table, Jeanne did the same.

“Come now. Don’t play dumb! You’re a knockout. You’ve *always* been one. Heavens! Just imagine what Frank would—”

“Are you ready for drinks?”

Anne blinked. A young waiter was standing beside them. He was slender, combining thin features and inky hair. His eyes were a deep blue. She nodded. “I was thinking a soft drink.” To Jeanne—“Does that seem like a good idea? Perhaps two—”

“A soft drink!” Jeanne echoed. “A *soft* drink! How terribly quaint!”

Anne frowned. “So you *don’t* want one?”

“I simply *couldn’t*. It’s really a matter of principle.”

“But it doesn’t have to be unhealthy. We could just get iced teas or—”

“Iced teas!” Jeanne laughed again. “Gracious! How much you’ve changed!”

Anne shifted. Before she could respond, however, Jeanne turned to the waiter and asked—“What whites do you have? Pinot Grigio? Cabernet Sauvignon?”

“Both. But if I may recommend one—”

“*Please* do!”

“I’d take the Pinot.”

Jeanne smiled. “Then the Pinot it is.”

Anne started slightly. “Wine? *Now*? Are you sure about that?”

Sweetly—“Why not?”

“It’s barely afternoon!”

“And when did *that* ever stop anyone?”

The waiter nodded. Then he turned to Anne—“And for you?”

“Just water.” Her voice was firm.

Another nod. “Very good.” And he disappeared. As he did so, Anne heaved a sigh. It had been a long morning. There had been the conversation with Mrs. Watson. How vexing it had been! She *hated* those conversations. To tell Mrs. Watson—dear Esmeralda Watson—that the peas were constantly cold! The woman had been distraught. What could she do? Mr. Wadsworth was always late! *What could she do?*

And then there was Peter. Just a week to organize a party! It was so little time! But it was silly to complain. After all, it was simply a matter of organization. And she was good at that—tremendously good. It was one of the reasons that—

“Well! How *are* you? How *is* everything?” Jeanne demanded lightly, loosening her scarf.

“Good!” Annie replied instantly. “Why *wouldn’t* everything be good?” The house was clean. Dinner tonight was sorted—seven at Café Hampstead. Mr. and Mrs. Henderson to join. Vacation was sorted. They were planning a vacation to Wales. “Emily’s doing much better. She’s at St. Agnes now.”

“Oh!” Jeanne cried impatiently. “I know about *that*. Mrs. Harrington told me.” With a devilish grin—“I want the good stuff.”

“And what would *that* be?”

“How’s Henry?”

“Henry is—Henry. His factory is doing well. Perhaps there have been *some* redundancies. But considering what the economy is like—”

“Oh! The economy! *Do* be serious. What do *I* care about *that*?”

“Maybe I’m misunderstanding. What exactly *are* you asking?”

“How’s the sex?”

“What? What does *that* mean?”

Jeanne frowned. “That’s a bad sign.”

Anne fidgeted slightly, feeling the blush start. Had Jeanne *always* been like this? “It’s fine. Why *wouldn’t* it be fine?” The house was clean. Dinner was sorted. They were planning a vacation to Wales. Peter was coming to visit. She had just started a new book. It was a volume of—

“How often is it?”

“Jeanne!”

“What?”

“You can’t ask that!”

Her friend winced. “Is it that bad?” She smiled sadly. “Darling!” And with a touching tenderness—“Do you climax?”

“*What?*”

“Come now! Do I really have to explain?”

“No! But—” Anne felt her cheeks burning. Really! How terribly inappropriate! What if someone *heard?*

“Perhaps you could talk to him. It’s often just a matter of miscommunication. If he just asks you—”

What? What could he say? How could she bring it up?

Over a cup of tea—“So I was thinking—”

What?

“It’s about this evening.”

Go on.

“Do you think that we could we try something—new?”

How so?

“Well—”

And he would listen. He would carefully lower his book, marking his place—he was nearing the finish—with his thumb. He would nod gravely at the timorous words and suggestions. They *could* try that. He would be *happy* to. But tomorrow would be terribly busy. Some new orders were coming in. He really needed an early night.

“Oh! Of course! But maybe tomorrow—”

Tomorrow! But tomorrow was Tuesday.

“And—”

And that settled it. They *never* copulated on a Tuesday.

Jeanne was still talking. “All that he has to say is—

“Are you ready?”

“*What?*” Anne yelled.

Jeanne smiled. “Precisely.”

The waiter was instantly apologetic. “I’m so sorry. Did I startle you? Do you need more time?”

Anne recovered herself. Her heart was pounding. “No! I mean—” She paused momentarily. Heaven help her! “*I’m* ready. But Jeanne—” Why was it so *hot* in here? “Jeanne hasn’t even opened the menu—” So damned hot! “So she might need another—”

“Oh! What does *that* matter?” Jeanne dismissed the idea. “I don’t need a menu to know what *I* want.” Her smile was pure honey.

The boy squirmed. “So you *are* ready?”

Anne nodded. “I’ll take the soup and salad.”

“What kind of dressing?”

“Vinaigrette.”

“Excellent.” And turning to Jeanne—“What about you?”

“Could I have another glass of wine?”

“Is that all?”

Another smile. “For the moment.”

“Very well.” And taking the menus, the terrified waiter walked away. Jeanne watched him go.

“That’s quite a behind!”

Anne frowned slightly, pointedly ignoring the remark. “Why aren’t you having lunch?”

“What? Oh! But I *am*. It’s a *liquid lunch*.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Is it *really*?” Seeing the frown increase, Jeanne sighed. “Oh! Would you *lighten up*? I’m just too *excited* to eat.”

“Excited about *what*?”

“Seeing you!” Jeanne cried. “What *else*?”

Anne looked at her. She really *was* the same girl. Her hair was slightly darker. Her arms were slightly thinner. Her face was slightly longer. But she still had that sparkle—the mischievous sparkle that she had *always* had.

“Do you remember the night that we met?” Anne asked suddenly.

Jeanne smiled. “How could I forget?”

It had been after bedtime. Leaving Sandra and Chessie and the bustling kitchens behind, Anne had quietly threaded the stone hallways. She had sauntered into the sprawling garden, inhaling the flowers and milky moonlight and dusty pathways. Which room was it? She surveyed the yellow lamplights, casting buttery squares on the flowerbeds below. She counted the numbers. Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. And then she started to climb. The vines became handholds. The stones became steps. And *then*—

A shriek. “Who the bloody hell are—”

Anne instantly raised a finger. “Do you *want* to get caught?”

Jeanne quieted. A pile of suitcases surrounded her, spilling skirts and dresses and—sure enough—colored underpants onto the floor.

“Who *are* you?”

“A friend.”

“But what’s your *name*?”

“Anne Bradshaw.”

Jeanne looked at her. Then she nodded. “I’m Jeanne.”

“I know.”

Another silence fell—one of curiosity and measurement and mutual assessment. At long last, Jeanne asked—“How *did* you get in here?”

Anne grinned. “The same way that we’re about to get out.”

“*What?*”

A few moments later, they were outside. Their hands and legs were stained with crushed flowers—yellow petals and green stems and flecks of cakey pollen. The world smelled of spring and earth and sunshine. Jeanne breathed it in. Then she said—

“Daffodils made the softest landing.”

Anne blinked. Returning to the present, she said quietly—“I know.” And she broke into a smile. “*It is you.*”

Jeanne smiled back. “It took you long enough!”

Anne laughed. “It’s just hard to believe.”

“I was starting to think that you’d died.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come now! I know Anne Bradshaw. And Anne Bradshaw is no fish!”

At that moment, the waiter returned. He was carrying the soup and salad and glass of Pinot.

Jeanne watched him closely. “Thanks a million.” Her voice was a purr.

The waiter bowed embarrassedly, turning a faint shade of scarlet. Then he backed away. As he left, Anne shook her head. “You’re wicked.”

Jeanne shrugged. “Why? I’m just having some fun.”

“The poor thing’s barely twenty! He still has acne.”

“So? He’s cute.”

Anne laughed. “How did I *ever* doubt that it was you?”

“Oh! There are plenty of explanations.” She ticked them off. “Loss of eyesight. Temporary insanity. Amnesia.”

Anne grinned. “Fair enough. I deserved that.”

Jeanne shrugged. “Maybe not. Things have changed.”

Anne nodded. So they had. Taking a bite of soup, she let the ambient conversations swell around her.

“But I grew up there! It was my home.”

The husband nodded. “Yes. It *was* your home. That’s the point. Really! You must be reasonable about this. We never use the place.” A clink of glassware. “Is there more water? I’m parched.”

She handed him the jug. “But Kent is where I met you. It’s where we fell in love. Doesn’t that mean *anything?*”

“There’s no ice left. Do you see that? It’s all melted.”

“*Are you listening?*”

Anne stilled. Jeanne frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“What? No.” With a forced smile—“So how’s George?”

“He’s fine.”

“And what about Greta?”

“Greta? Darling Greta is *wonderful!* She’s starting at St. Agnes soon. She’s terribly excited!”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. She’s just desperate to meet everyone.” Jeanne paused. “Especially Emily.”

“Really?”

Anne bit into a fat tomato. The juice dripped onto her chin. She wiped it away.

“How *is* Emily?” Jeanne inquired mildly.

“I told you. She’s fine. Her grades are improving—”

“I don’t mean her *grades*. I mean *her*.”

“I’m not following.”

“Is there something wrong with her?” Jeanne asked flatly, lowering her wineglass. There was a bit of lipstick on the rim.

“Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did someone say something?”

“No! It’s just—a feeling.”

Coldly—“Emily is a wonderful girl.”

“And—”

“And she’s my daughter.”

“And—”

“And that’s all.”

Jeanne looked at her intently. Then she nodded. “I see.”

Anne shifted. The book looked good—the book that she had just started. It was a volume of poetry. Although it was too early to be *sure*, it seemed that Millie had chosen well.

“*Millie!*” Henry had exclaimed on the day that the book had arrived. “*Millie* gave you that? But that makes no sense.”

“Why not?” Anne asked calmly. She was sitting on the floor, carefully unwrapping a pile of Christmas gifts. A roaring fire heated the room.

“Why would an *art* teacher give you a volume of *poetry*?”

Because poetry was the *next best thing*. It was crazy and chaotic and had no rules. It defied logic and conventionality and reality. It rambled and roamed and revealed. It was—

“Painting with words.” So Millie had always said. Poetry was painting with vowels and consonants and commas. Poetry was *truth*. “Try it. You’ll see.” So Millie had said softly, handing Anne a collection of Spanish verse. And Anne had. She had read *that* book. She had read the next. And *nineteen years later*, sitting beside the blazing fire, she knew what Millie was trying to say. She shrugged. “I don’t know.” And she put the book away.

Over the years, it had gathered dust. Huddling between geographies and dramas and textbooks, the volume of delicate poetry had sat unused and unread. A few hours ago, however, a sudden inspiration had seized her. Shortly after Toby had scampered away, taking the morning post and leaving a heavy silence, she had walked to the bookshelf. She had found the forgotten book. And gently wiping the cover, she had started to read.

“So?”

She blinked. Jeanne was speaking. “What?” Anne asked mildly, taking a sip of water.

“Have you even *considered* an affair?”

She choked. Water sprayed everywhere.

“Really!” Jeanne chided. “*Do* be calm! I’m just *asking*.”

Anne frowned morosely, wiping her chin and shirt. “Don’t.”

“Why not? Come now! You’re Anne Bradshaw. When have *you* ever been a prude?”

Anne sighed. “But I’m *not* Anne Bradshaw anymore. I’m Anne Wadsworth.”

“So? That makes you *married*.” A pause. “Not *circumcised*. And really! You’d have *no* trouble finding a partner. Any man would simply *die* to have you. For example, the poor—”

The waiter appeared. “Will you take dessert?”

Jeanne smiled. “Oh! I couldn’t. I simply haven’t the room!” A glance at Anne—“But perhaps my *friend*—”

“Not just now.”

The waiter nodded. Then he smiled shyly. “But just in case—” He left the menu behind.

Jeanne grinned. “See!”

“What?”

“He’s a goner.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s *into* you.”

“He’s a kid.”

“He’s legal.”

“He was being friendly.”

“Good heavens! He’s practically been *drooling*. I’ve been flirting horribly—”

“No kidding.”

“And he *still* keeps looking at you!”

“You’re imagining things.”

Jeanne shrugged. “Have it your way.” She fidgeted slightly, seeming to grow—all in the course of a moment—years older. With an abrupt sigh, she dug into her bag. “Do you have a lighter?”

“No luck. I quit years ago.”

“Did you?” Jeanne asked distractedly, rummaging through tubs of makeup and pens and little candies. “Good for you.”

“I had to.”

“Why?”

“Henry hates it.”

“So does George. But when did *that* ever—” She stopped suddenly, flourishing a book of matches. “I *knew* that I had some!” And a moment later, she lit up. A moment after *that*, the fog seemed to blow away. Her sparkle returned.

“Have you seen Mrs. Harrington?” Jeanne asked lightly.

“Not recently. Why?”

“Oh! No reason really. She just seems rather—off.”

“Does she?”

“Yes.”

“How do you mean?”

“She’s not *happy*.”

“But why *not*?”

“Do you need a reason?”

“I suppose not. But—”

“I just feel bad for her. That’s all.”

“But why?”

“You *must* remember what happened.”

“Humor me.”

“Well! She just had so many *dreams*! She wanted to sing and write and dance and act. She apparently was *quite* the phenom! And they say that she had some man—”

Anne stared at the table. Everything was taken care of. The house was clean. Dinner was sorted. They were planning a vacation to Wales. Emily would surely complain about it. After all, they *always* went to Wales. But it was so convenient! The drive was reasonable. They had a cottage to rent. They knew the neighbors.

“But she had to leave him. They say that her parents made her. So she became a teacher and married a fool—”

“You can’t say that.”

“But he *was*! Did you ever meet him?”

“Once.”

“Exactly. That’s because he left her. He absconded with a pupil. Good heavens! A *pupil*! How horrid is that?”

Should they invite anyone? Cottages were better with guests. They could invite Mrs. Jencks and Lydia. But Mrs. Jencks was *such* a bore—

“And just to think—”

Such a *horrible* bore!

“She could’ve had love.”

Anne said nothing. Jeanne frowned. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She took a deep breath. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course!”

“Are you happy with George?”

“What a silly question!”

“*Are* you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you *really*?”

“Why *not*? New York is simply *divine*.”

“But George—”

“What about him?”

“Do you love him?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

Jeanne looked at her—hard. Then she said simply—“Because he’s there.”

“Is that—is that really a reason?”

Jeanne shrugged. “There are all kinds of love.” A short silence fell. Then Jeanne smiled. “Now *my* turn.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can I ask *you* something?”

“I suppose.”

“*What really happened in the gazebo?*”

A pause. Then—“Nothing.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course.” Nothing had happened—nothing at all. She stared at the table. And besides—

Even if something *had* happened—

So what? It was what had happened *afterward* that *really* mattered. The moment that she had said—“Take it. It’s yours.”

Frank had frowned. Was she joking? How *could* he? How could he take something so bright and bold and colorful? She had to be mistaken.

“No.” A shake of the head. “I want you to have it.”

But there was so much color!

“It’s just paint.”

And what if something happened to it? It would be destroyed. The beautiful lines and texture and movement—the white magnolia that dominated the canvas—would be destroyed.

“So?” She shrugged. “There’s always more.” After all—“The color’s not in the painting.” Pause. “The color’s in *me*. And this way—” She stopped. All around them, the parlor was eerily dark. St. Agnes was fast asleep. She tried again. “This way—”

What?

“If you ever leave—”

*Leave!* Leave *her*? How could he? What a thought!

“You’ll have something to remind you that—”

What?

“To remember that—”

*What?*

That as long as grass grew—

As suns set—

As rivers ran—

As teachers taught—

As lovers loved—

As dancers danced—  
As dreamers dreamed—  
As long as *forever* truly meant *forever*—  
As long as *tonight* truly meant *tonight*—  
As long as he had that painting—

She would love him. Could there be anything simpler than that?

She opened her eyes. Jeanne smiled. “That’s what I thought.”

Anne frowned. Her head was spinning. There was something bothering her. Something—something important. But what? Not Café Hampstead. After all, *everyone* liked Café Hampstead. Not Wales. They always *vacationed* there. The drive was reasonable. They had a cottage. Not Henry. *Certainly* not Henry. After all, he had said that he loved her. And why would *that* bother her?

“Would you please settle down? People are starting to stare.”

“Are they? *Are they?* Let them! They can be witnesses!”

“*Witnesses? Witnesses to what?*”

“If you sell that house—”

“*Would you keep your voice down?*”

“I’m going with it! Is that clear? *Is that clear?* I’ll move there tomorrow. I’ll lock myself in!”

“*Really!* You’re making *such* a scene!”

“I don’t care! *I’m not leaving Kent!*”

“Kent!” Jeanne exclaimed. “Anne! Did you hear that?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really—”

“*Did you hear me? I won’t! I won’t! I won’t!*”

“I could *swear* that Kent is where she took you.”

“Who? When?” The room was spinning again. Whatever was bothering her—

“Don’t you remember? Your *mother*. It just after she discovered Frank. You went home for the weekend and—”

“I need the loo.”

Jeanne shrugged. “Take your time.”

She went. Chairs and tables became stalls and sinks. In a moment, she had reached the bathroom. She was staring into the mirror. The faucet was running. It had been a long morning. There had been the conversation with Mrs. Watson. How vexing it had been! There had been the invitations and letters and errands for Peter. Just a week to plan a party! It was so little time! There had been soup and salad and ice water. There had been eggs. There had been bacon. But *more than anything*—

There had been poetry. With *Frank*, there had *always* been poetry.

“My kingdom for a kiss.”

She had laughed. Sunlight carpeted the hillside, imbuing the grass and shrubs and flowers—little bells of burbling silver—with a rosy hue. “You’re easily satisfied!”

Frank shrugged. “The choice is yours.”

And so she crossed the meadow. The grasses caressed her ankles and calves and thighs, clinging ferociously—valiantly—to her dress. He watched her. His eyes were the blue of the sky. She reached onto tiptoes and—

“Ahhhhh.”

She smiled. Then she opened her hand.

“What?” Frank asked dazedly.

“The keys.” Her voice was firm.

“But of course!” And he folded an imaginary keychain—it was made of the thickest iron—into her palm. She darted away.

“What a fool! What a *fool* you are! To give away this—all *this*—for a kiss!” She gestured expansively at the sprawling meadow.

Frank shrugged. “Who said that it wasn’t worth it?”

“Like I said—” She smiled. “*Easily satisfied.*”

“And besides—”

“What?”

“You should probably know—”

“*What?*”

“Before I left, I poisoned the wells.”

“You didn’t!”

Calmly—“Well? What did you *expect*? I might be easily satisfied—” Another shrug. “But I’m no *fool.*”

Emitting an incredulous shriek, she chased after him. He ran away, winding nimbly across the meadow. She followed. When they finally collapsed, tumbling into the sundrenched brambles, Anne sighed.

“Is it time to go back?”

“Probably.”

Neither moved. Reality surely existed. Like a bad dream, forever waking the terrified infant, it remained an undercurrent to the caresses and whispers—so sweet and soft and hopeful—that filled their days. But it was subdued. It was quiet. It remained locked away, lacking the imagination and passion to escape—to break the bonds that poetry had erected. After all, what *could* it do? What could reality—a ticking clock—do against a love that had no time?

Anne nodded. There had certainly been poetry. There had been Chaucer and Yeats and Plath and Poe and Shakespeare *until*—

The book had slammed. The sound echoed loudly, filling the stilted salon. They were sitting at home. She had been reading a volume of Pablo Neruda. The mountains and vineyards of Chile still filled her eyes and nose. Her mother was sewing. The maid—young Mandy Brown—sat beside her, patiently holding a skein of thread.

“You won’t be going back.” The words were calm—emotionless. She made another stitch. Was it even?

Anne frowned. “What do you mean?” In her lap, the book felt heavy. It was old and leather and worn. A silk ribbon marked the page that she had been on. The poem had been called *Amor*—Love.

“We’re going to Kent.”

“To *Kent*? I don’t understand. I have class tomorrow.” She had a test on African geography. Nairobi was the capital of Kenya. Kampala was the capital of Uganda.

“I’ll speak to Mrs. Harrington. She’ll send your work.”

“But it doesn’t make sense. Surely we could just wait—”

“I know about him.”

Anne froze. *What?* The air left the room. Her body slowly grew numb. And perched on her knees, the book started to shake. She knew what it was: the poems were fighting to be free. She could *hear* them. She could hear the dewy words and Spanish syllables—

*Mujer—*

*Woman—*

“Everything.” *Yo hubiera sido tu hijo—*

*I would have been your son—*

Her mother never looked at her. She was stitching a needlepoint. Her movements were fluid and firm. “It’s a disgrace. It’s an embarrassment.” Her head emphasized the words, dipping and bobbed emphatically. “We’ll leave immediately.” *Por beberte la leche de los senos—*

*To drink the milk of your bosom—*

Anne felt the panic grow. “I must tell Jeanne. She’ll miss me. If I can just have a pen and—” *Por mirarte y sentirte a mi lado—*

*To look at you and feel you at my side—*

“No.” The needles flew. The head shook. “There will be no letters.”

Not this time.

Bile rose. It threatened to choke her. The book shook harder. “But you can’t—” *En la risa de oro—*

*In the golden laughter—*

*Y la voz de cristal—*

*And the crystal voice—*

“You should pack.” *Por sentirte en mis venas como—*

*To feel you in my veins like—*

What? What came next? She had no idea. She had never finished the poem.

“When are we leaving?” Her voice was strangely calm.

“In an hour.”

“An hour! But that’s—that’s impossible!”

“Impossible? Impossible?” The thin hands moved faster. They had become a blur of red thread and silver needles. “Will *you* speak about impossible? To *me*? Imagine!” Now the fingers were a frenzied whirlpool—the beating wings of a baby hummingbird. “*Imagine what Mr. Henderson thought!* Imagine what everyone would think! And *you* speak about *impossible*? To *me*?” No. “You will pack now.”

Anne looked at her. She looked at the velvet sleeves and smooth skin and smooth hands and glossy hair—

And she knew that she would never see Nairobi. She would never see Kampala. The poetry was done. And at that moment, the book fell silent. The silk ribbon dropped to the floor.

She eventually finished the poem. Attending a recital of music and poetry, a young woman—a loveless scrap of silk and starched petticoats—warbled the sensual poem. In broken Spanish, hopelessly flattening the rolling Rs and underemphasizing the elongated vowels, she announced that he would feel her—

*Como dios en los rios.*

*Like God in the rivers.*

Adult Anne had applauded. She had applauded politely, tapping her hands—so neatly encased in silk gloves—together. But the words meant nothing to her. The magic was gone. On the way home, Henry had yawned. The music had been good. Perhaps the harpist had been a little flat—

Had he?

But the cellist had been excellent. And the conductor! To spin those winds and strings together! How *beautiful!* The last symphony had been simply superb.

It certainly had.

As for the poetry—

What of the poetry?

Oh! It had been *alright*. But he had never taken much to poetry! Such rambling! Such wandering! Why not say what you *mean?*

What if you *meant* to ramble?

And to read a poem in *Spanish!* What was the use of *that?* This was England! Speak *English!* Heavens!

Anne had nodded. She quite agreed. To read a poem in Spanish! It was absurd.

But perhaps that was just *him*. After all, he had no affinity for poetry. He never had!

And leaning against the leather seat, quietly staring at the snowy city—it was two weeks before Christmas—Anne had nodded again. Nor did she.

Someone opened the bathroom door. Anne started. Taking a deep breath, she splashed water onto her face. Then she dried her hands and left.

In the corridor, a man instantly approached her. He was handsome—although the clothing was plain, his eyes had a certain gleam. The blonde hair caught the light. He started to say something—

“Oh! So sorry. I thought that you were someone else.” He turned away, seeming somewhat embarrassed. Then he returned to waiting. With a shrug, Anne returned to Jeanne.

“I have something to tell you.”

Gleefully—“You *are* having an affair!” The cigarette was done. Its carcass darkened the ashtray.

“What? No!”

“Oh.” A shrug. “Too bad. Well then? What is it?”

“It’s about Frank.”

“Frank!”

“Yes.”

“What about him?”

“He’s back.”

“Oh! *That.*” Jeanne nodded. “I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“But *how?*”

“He came with me.”

“What! *Frank?*”

“Yes.”

“*Frank came with you?*”

“Yes.”

“From *New York?*”

“Yes. And what a tiresome journey it was! Two weeks at sea! I was bored to tears.”

“But—” Despite the air, the room was growing hot again. “I don’t understand.”

“Come now! You *must* have known. Frank and I—”

“*What?*”

“We’re a couple now.”

The world tipped. Busboys and waiters and diners swirled gently together. “What?”

Anne looked at Jeanne. Jeanne looked at Anne. A moment passed. It lasted an eternity. Then Jeanne laughed. “Oh! *Sweetie!* Did you actually believe me? Don’t be a fool! Frank loves *you!* He’d never even *look* at me. In fact, the only reason that he even *came* to New York—”

“So he *did* go to New York.”

“Yes. But only because he *had* to.”

“Why?”

“To get advice.”

“About *what?*”

“You.”

“Me!”

“Who *else?*”

“Then you and Frank—”

“Heavens no!”

Anne nodded. And the world continued to turn.

“How did he find you?”

“It can’t have been hard. New York can be frightfully small! Daniel arranged it all.”

“Who’s Daniel?”

“Who? Oh! I can barely remember. It was so long ago.” She glanced at her watch. “Is it already two o’clock? I really must fly!”

“*But what did he say?*”

“I couldn’t possibly tell you *that!* I’d bungle everything. You know that I’m bad with poetry!”

“But—”

“Better to let *him* explain everything.”

“But—”

“How much is it? Ten pounds? Fifteen? Twenty?” She dropped twenty onto the table. “I’m so *terribly* late!”

Anne frowned. “Late for *what*?”

“An engagement.”

“But won’t you tell me *anything*? What is he looking for? Why did he come? *What does he want*?”

Jeanne laughed. “Come now! Is that really a question? He wants what he’s *always* wanted. You.”

And she was gone. Dinner tomorrow night?

Of course.

Of course.

Anne sat back. The waiter reappeared. “Will there be anything else?”

“No. I—” And then she stopped. “*Yes*. There will be.” And she ordered a dessert.

When she was done, the waiter smiled. “An excellent choice.”

She smiled back. “What’s your name?”

“Ronnie.”

She nodded. “My name is Anne.”

“Would you like cream on that?”

“Absolutely.” So he left.

The café was still buzzing. Diners talked and laughed. Servers bustled by. The husband gave in.

“Okay.” He sounded weary.

His wife frowned. “What?”

“If it’s that big a deal—”

“*It is*.”

“We’ll keep it. I don’t know *how*. Lord knows about the economy! But if you’re going to make that much of a fuss—”

Timidly—“So you *won’t* sell it?”

“Not anymore.”

Anne smiled. A moment later, Ronnie returned. “Thank you.”

“Should I bring the check?”

“Please.”

The first bite was pure decadence—a moist wedge of chocolate bliss. The second was even better. She closed her eyes. And when she did, she heard—

“But I’m sure that it was two o’clock!”

“It’s two o’clock now.”

“It’s ten past.”

“We’re running a bit over.”

“But I’ve only got forty minutes!”

“Roland!” That was a different voice. “Don’t be a bloody fool. A few minutes won’t matter.”

Anne started. From the lobby, she could hear the two gentlemen perfectly. She swallowed.

“Easy for you to say! You don’t know my boss.”

The rest of the conversation was muffled. For moment, she did absolutely nothing. Then she calmly signaled to the waiter.

“Are there people waiting?” Anne asked calmly.

Ronnie shrugged. “Don’t worry about that. Take your time.”

“I’m just wondering.”

“We have more reservations. But I *really* wouldn’t—”

“Send my apologies.”

“What?”

“I can hear two gentleman. They seem—upset about the wait. Are they next?”

“They might be. But it’s hardly a—”

“*Please* send my apologies. Say that I’ll be just a moment.”

“There’s really no need! We’re not making you—”

“Could you *please*?”

The boy looked at her. A moment passed. Then he nodded. “Very well.” He disappeared.

She waited. One. Two. Three. And—“There’s a response.”

“Is there?”

“Yes. The gentleman said that it was fine. For you—”

Ronnie hesitated. Anne waited. The world turned.

“For *you*—”

*Still* he hesitated. *Still* she waited. *Still* the world turned.

“He would wait forever.”

Anne nodded. Then she quietly stood up. “Is there another exit?”

“It’s just back there.” Ronnie frowned. “Is everything alright? I get the feeling that—”

But before he could finish, she had grabbed her things—bag and hat and gloves and scarf—and fled. She threaded the waiters and waitresses and busboys and diners and hosts and hostesses. She ducked into the lobby. She squirreled between anxious ladies and gentlemen and children—

“Is our table ready?”

“How much longer?”

“I haven’t much time.”

“Mommy! I have to weeeeeeeeeee!”

She reached the crowded entryway. She stepped outside. She risked a final glance. There was a space between two heads—a couple with pasty skin and matching frowns. And for just a moment—

There he was. She saw him. And then—

She was gone.

Frank stood perfectly still, letting Café Hampstead spin about him. He had seen her. For a moment, she had been before him—ebony hair and ivory skin and emerald eyes and ruby lips that longed to smile. For a moment, he had seen her. Anne—

Beautiful Anne—

*His* Anne. For a moment, she had been there. And for a moment—

The ghost of a moment—

His heart had stopped.

“Frank? *Frank?*”

“Why do you love me?” Anne had asked him. It was early fall. The air had a bite. Leaves carpeted the ground.

“Because I saw you.”

“But how do you *know?*”

“Because whenever I see you—”

Whenever he glimpsed that neck and nose and turn of the head—

“I forget to breathe.”

“*Frank!* Are you coming?”

He blinked. “Yeah.” And he walked into the restaurant.

“Cripes! It’s good to see you!” Roland exclaimed.

Frank nodded. The boy had grown up. The gangly mélange of acne and oversized trousers had developed into a man.

“Twenty years! Jesus!”

Frank smiled. “You look older.”

“*I* do? What about *you?* You’re fucking ancient! What is it now? Thirty? Thirty-one?”

“Almost thirty-four.”

“Jesus!”

They sat down. The café was buzzing madly, bursting with chatter and jokes and vacuous laughter. Frank shrugged. “It’s not so bad.” He paused. “Except when it rains.”

“Why? What happens then?”

“The arthritis is a real bitch.”

Roland laughed. “So how’s the navy?”

“I wouldn’t know. I quit.”

“Did you! I had no idea. What the hell do you do now?”

He shrugged. “Still figuring that out.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Do you mean London?”

“Yeah.”

“Among other reasons.”

Roland frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Can I get you something?” Ronnie asked suddenly, appearing beside them. “Perhaps you’d like a—Roland!”

“Ronnie!”

Roland leapt up. “What the hell are *you* doing here?”

“What do you mean? I work here!”

“*Do* you? At *this* place?” He gestured at the linen tablecloths and sparkling silverware and tuxedos.

“You knew that!”

“Not at all. I could’ve *sworn* that—” He stopped. “Hell! What am I saying? It doesn’t matter now. Good to *see* you! Is tonight still on?”

“It had *better* be. I’ve already bought the gin.”

“How much?”

“Three bottles.”

“Three bottles! But there’ll be five of us.”

Ronnie grinned. “Don’t worry. I’ve got some vodka stored away.”

Roland grinned back. “Meet Frank!”

To Frank—“Good to meet you.”

They shook hands. Ronnie had a good grip—firm and cool and confident.

“Would you believe it?” Roland asked. “It’s been seventeen years. Seventeen years!”

“So you went to school together?”

Frank nodded. “That’s right.”

“Where about?”

“Northampton.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

Ronnie nodded. “Yeah.” Then he glanced at Frank. “Seventeen years! Cripes! But I’d swear that you haven’t aged a day!” He paused. “Except for that scar. How’d you get that blighter?”

“Roland!” Ronnie chided.

“What? I’m just *asking*.”

Frank smiled. “It’s a long story.”

“Well—” Roland glanced at his watch. “We’ve got thirty-four minutes.”

Ronnie nodded firmly. “Then you need drinks. What can I get you?”

“Do you have beer?”

“This is England.”

“So?”

“What do you *think*?”

“I don’t know. You’re wearing a fucking tie. For all *I* know—”

“We have beer.”

“Good.” He nodded. “We’ll take two.”

So Ronnie left. Roland grinned broadly. “Jesus!”

“What?”

“Seventeen years!”

With a laugh—“It’s been a while.”

“Well? What have you been doing?”

“Nothing special.”

“Come now! Tell me *something*.”

Frank blinked. An image jumped to mind. It was a thin man, frowning over a pair of glasses—slender spectacles with wire rims. He sat at a cluttered desk. It was gray outside.

“Tell me about yourself.”

Frank stared straight ahead. What was there to say?

The man tried again. “Who *are* you?”

Frank nodded. He could start with that. “My name is Frank Griswold.”

Roland sat forward. “You left after GCSEs.”

“That’s right.”

“Where did you go? What did you do?”

“I came to London.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah.”

“And—” Roland prompted.

“I got a job.”

“What type of job?”

Frank blinked again. His voice has been gentle. Although a fierce competitor, Mr. Horace E. Henderson had always manifested a mild—some would say damagingly so—disposition.

“What do you do again?”

“I make shoes.”

“Is that right? What type of shoes?”

“All types. It’s a factory. I just—do my part.”

Mr. Henderson nodded. There was a short pause. Then came—“You know the reason that you’re here.”

Silence.

“We’re not being unreasonable. We’re just doing what’s best.”

“Then don’t do anything.”

“We’ll give you whatever you want.”

But he just wanted one thing—the same thing that he had *always* wanted.

“If it’s a job—”

“I have a job.”

“If it’s money—”

“I don’t want money.”

“And would your parents feel the same?” The voice was losing its friendliness. “Come now! These chances don’t come often. And for a boy from Northampton—”

Quietly—“My parents are dead.”

“Is that so?” The man paused slightly. “I’m—sorry for you.” And he *was*. Frank could see it. His eyes said that he was sorry about *everything*.

Frank shrugged. "It was years ago."

Mr. Henderson nodded. "What about an office? Rumor has it that you've got naval aspirations."

Frank shook his head. "This isn't going to work."

"Come now! Even *Anne* told me so. Let's just say that I could—grease the wheels a bit." Spreading his hands—"What do you say?"

Frank stared at him. Was this really happening? Shaking his head, he said coldly—"If you'll excuse me."

"But we're not done."

"With *all due respect*—" His voice became still colder. "I think that we are."

Mr. Henderson looked up. His eyes were very light—a pale shade of gray. They were large behind his spectacles. "So that's it." His voice was quiet. "That's how it is."

"Yeah. That's how it is."

"Very well then." With a sigh, he stood up. As he did so, however, he opened a drawer and withdrew an envelope. "But before you go—" Holding out the letter—"You might want to see this."

"What is it?"

The older man shrugged. "Maybe nothing. But if you won't listen to *me*—"

"What?"

Another shrug. "Just read the letter."

Frank looked at it. If there had been no doubt—

If he had just been *sure*—

If there had been no uncertainty—

No doubt—

No hesitation—

If she had never said—"It's not working."

"What's not?"

"This."

"Why not?"

"It's not enough."

"But I love you."

"*It's not enough.*"

If it had been *anything but fall*—

Perhaps he would have walked away. But it was October. Leaves carpeted the ground. The trees were growing bare. The days were growing short. *Time* was growing short. And so he took the letter.

"How long did it last?" Roland asked.

Frank shook himself. "How long did *what* last?"

"How long did you make shoes?"

"Two years."

"And then—"

"I joined the navy."

“That’s brilliant! I *knew* that you were a naval man. It was what you always wanted. Cripes! You must have been *everywhere!*”

“Not *everywhere.*” He smiled. “But I’ve seen some things.”

“What about Greece? Have you been there?”

“Athens.”

“Athens! That’s bloody amazing! Did you see the Coliseum?”

“That’s Rome.”

“Whatever.”

Frank grinned.

“And what about Africa?” Roland demanded. “You haven’t been to Africa!”

“Cape Town for six months. Johannesburg for two. Then we sailed to Kenya—”

“Kenya!”

“Yeah. We were mostly on the coast. But I got to see a bit of Nairobi. My mate had a friend that—”

“*Nairobi!* Is that the capital?”

“Yeah.”

“What a hoot! Why the hell did you quit?”

“No reason. I just—wanted to move on.”

“But why *here?*”

“Why not?”

“London is shit. Go to New York.”

“I’ve been.”

“Have you!”

“Twice.”

“Twice! Jesus! Was it for the navy?”

“Once.” A pause. “And once it was personal.”

“Oh!” Roland grinned. “I see. What was her name?”

Frank shook his head. “Not like that.”

“Come on! We’re boys.”

“That’s the truth.”

“You’re no fun.”

“What about *you?* What happened after I left?”

“Oh! Not much. I got a job at a foundry. I was there for three years.”

“How was it?”

“Could’ve been worse.”

“So what happened?”

“I got bored.”

“And so—”

“I went for a wander.”

“Where to?”

“All sorts of places. I made it to Manchester. Edinborough. Glasgow. I saw Gloucester and Liverpool and Birmingham.”

“Liverpool.” Frank paused. “Didn’t the Beatles come from there?”

“Same city. Different decade.”

“Right. So then what?”

“Then I came here.”

“And what do you do now?”

“Shit.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m an assistant.”

“To—”

“The devil.”

“Is he that bad?”

“Worse.”

“What’s his name?”

“He’s the headman. His name is Henry—”

“Your beers.” Ronnie placed two mugs onto the table. “Have you decided yet?”

“What’s fastest?” Roland asked.

“Probably a burger.”

“I’ll take that.”

Ronnie nodded. To Frank—“And what about you?”

“I’ll have the same.”

“And what about *you*?” Roland asked.

Ronnie frowned. “What about me?”

“Have a drink. It’s on me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m *working*.”

“Come on! They’ll never notice.”

“Yeah.” Ronnie laughed. “Sure.” With a smile—“I’ll be right back.”

“How did you choose this place?” Roland asked mildly, glancing at the tall ceilings and windows and tablecloths and potted plants.

“You’re not a fan.”

“I don’t *mind*. It’s just—not my scene.”

Frank nodded. “Me neither.”

“So why are we here?”

“It’s a good location.”

“So is the pub.”

“My friend needed to be here. And since he’s from New York—”

“A friend from New York! *Here!*”

“Yes.”

“But who?”

“You wouldn’t know him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Daniel.”

“And how do you know him?”

“He was on my boat.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“So he was a sailor?”

“For a time.”

“And what about now?”

“He does theater.” Frank paused. “The business side.”

“Is he American?”

“A transplant.”

“Why did he come here?”

“Do mean Café Hampstead?”

“Sure.”

“To meet someone. And since he didn’t know where it was, this just seemed easier.”

Roland nodded. “I see.” He took a sip of beer. A moustache of froth—creamy and white—decorated his face. “When you were in the navy—”

Frank waited.

“Did you see combat?”

“A bit.”

“What was it like?”

“Hell.”

“Does that explain the scar?”

“No.” Pause. “It doesn’t.”

“So where *is* it from?”

“Nothing dramatic.”

“*What?*”

“There was a fire.”

“Where?”

“In New York.”

“*Where?*”

“Where I was staying.”

“Did you start it?”

“No. It was a neighbor.” Another pause. “Something about a hairdryer and an electrical socket.”

“Is that right?”

“So they say. My theory involves a book of matches and a Carl Sandburg effigy.”

“Was she a piro?”

“Not really. She just really hated Sandburg.”

“Why? What’s to hate about Sandburg?”

“Go figure.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Just me.”

“Then it could’ve been worse.”

“Yeah.” Frank paused. “Thank God for Daniel.”

“Why?”

“He was with me. We were cooking dinner.”

“Are you *sure* that you didn’t start it?”

“Perhaps you don’t remember my cooking.”

“That’s just the thing. I *do*.”

“Dinner was cold cheese and beer. And—” He took a moment to consider. “There *may* have been sardines from a can. But I can’t quite remember.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“That was a good night.”

“So what did Daniel do?”

“He dragged me out.”

“Good man.”

Frank nodded. “The best.”

“Your burgers.”

Roland blinked. “That was fast!”

Ronnie grinned. “Let’s say that I rushed them.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’re not yours.”

“What?”

“I nicked a different order.”

“You didn’t! *Why?*”

Another grin. “Because I’ve met your boss.” And he disappeared.

They ate. The juice dripped down their chins. Frank wiped it away. “This is good.”

Roland nodded. “It should be.”

“Why?”

“Have you seen the price?”

“Don’t worry about that.” He took another bite. “It’s on me.”

Roland whistled. “Look at you! What happened? Did you find buried treasure?”

Frank shrugged. “The navy treated me well.”

“I heard. Enlistees don’t usually become officers. Isn’t that right?”

“It’s rare.”

“What was it again?”

“What?”

“That you became.”

“Captain.”

“Captain! That’s brilliant. Did you have a boat?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you swing *that*?”

“It just happened.”

“Still impressive. And *why* did you leave again?”

“I don’t know. It was just time.” Another moment passed. Then he stood up. “Is there a bathroom here?”

Roland nodded. His hamburger was quickly vanishing. “Around the corner.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He threaded the restaurant. When he reached the lobby, he looked quietly left and right. Every back that was turned—

Every peal of laughter—

Every lock of black hair—

He searched for her. But then he had left the lobby. He had reached the corridor. He had entered the bathroom—the spacious sanctum of marble sinks and mirrors and towels. And still Anne was nowhere to be seen.

He leaned against the sink. In a moment, the faucet was running. Beads of icy water doused his fingers and wrists. They bubbled onto his arms. They cooled his face. He leaned over the basin, tightly closing his eyes. When he opened them, he saw—

The room was dingy. There was a narrow bed. There was a porcelain washstand. There were thin blankets and flat pillows. There was a wooden stool.

“What the fuck! That’s not regulation.”

Frank looked up, using a towel to dry his face. A month had passed. Memories of Mr. Henderson and the cluttered study and the wire spectacles were growing stale—remote. The leaves had fallen completely. Winter had arrived.

“What’s not?”

The man pointed. Sitting on the floor, squatting defiantly between the bed and the wall, there was a square canvas. It had the image of a white magnolia.

Frank frowned. “Who are you?”

“Daniel.” The man was wearing sunglasses. His hair was a dirty blonde. A rucksack fell onto the floor. “Your roommate.”

Frank nodded. “Then let’s make something clear. I mind *my* business. You mind *yours*.”

Daniel shrugged. “Whatever you want. Let’s just see what Captain Wallace says.”

But Captain Wallace never saw it. His underling beat him to it. “What the fuck is that?” Jimmy Johnson demanded.

“You’re allowed small pictures. The guidelines say so.”

“Yeah. *Small* pictures.” He frowned. “That thing is the size of a fucking house.” He held out a small bag. “Make it fit.”

Frank looked at the bag. He looked at the painting. Someone snickered. Then he said calmly—“Does anyone have a knife?”

The fragments completely filled his bag. Catching sight of it, Daniel shook his head. “You won’t have room for your shit.”

Frank shrugged. Then he dumped some socks and underpants onto the bed. “Then the *shit* can go.” And he tossed the objects away.

Daniel blinked. “Jesus Christ!”

“What?”

“You’re a nutter.”

“So?” Frank demanded.

Daniel broke into a grin. “This is going to be fun.”

By the time that the day was over, his limbs were stiff. The rocking of the waves—the gentle undulations of wood on water—had seeped into his hips and thighs and bloodstream. He walked tiredly to his bed. He undressed. And then he saw—

“What are these?”

A pair of socks and underwear lay on his pillow.

Daniel shrugged. “A bit of selfishness.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is going to be a long trip.”

“And—”

“And I’ve got a nose.”

Frank grinned. “Fair enough.” He took the socks.

When he received two months of leave, he knew exactly where to go. By that time, Daniel had left the Royal Navy. He had moved to the Big Apple, taking his savings—a grand total of a hundred pounds—and Broadway dreams.

“So you want to act?”

“Not quite.”

Daniel promoted plays. He matched producers to backers. He greased the wheels of minor and major productions. He *made things happen*. And when Frank came to visit, he found a gorgeous apartment that overlooked Gramercy Park.

“How the hell did you get this place?”

Daniel smiled. “I know people who *know* people. Do you like it?”

They were making dinner. The beers were chilling. Frank was wrestling with the can of sardines. A summer breeze blew through the window. “Do you remember where I grew up?”

“You’ve mentioned it.”

Frank nodded. “We never had a garden.”

Daniel waited. “So?”

“So she always wanted one.”

“*Who* did?”

“My mother. Whenever we passed a public garden, she’d slow up. She’d start blathering about sun and shade and rain and delphiniums. She’d even steal cuttings—branches of random flowers and shrubs and vines. She’d use old cans to store them—cans of soup and peas and coffee. They’d sit on our windowsill for months. They’d turn the water a murky brown. The leaves would eventually wither. But she wouldn’t get rid of them—not for months and months and months.”

“Why didn’t she plant them?”

“We never had a yard. She always thought that we might. She was sure that this year—this year would be it. But—” With a grunt, the lid of the sardines came off. “It never quite was. And so she took more cuttings. More storms came. They knocked the cans over. When she found them afterward, she’d pick them up. She’d throw them away. And then she’d get more. After all—” Dumping the sardines onto a plate, he opened the refrigerator for the beer and cheese. “There were always more cans.”

Daniel watched him closely. The sounds of the street were a comforting blend of muted conversations and distant traffic. July had sprung.

“I always wanted to buy a house for her.” His voice was quiet. “One that had room for a garden and plants and flowerpots—*real* flowerpots. It was this dream of mine. I’d graduate school. I’d join the navy. I’d see the world—*all* of it. Europe. Asia. Africa. *Everything*. And when I got back—” He stopped. “When I got back, I’d buy the house.”

“So did you?”

“She died two weeks before graduation.”

Daniel winced. “I’m sorry.”

Frank shrugged. “Shit happens.” He nodded at the smorgasbord. “Do you want to eat here?”

“What are the options?”

“Well—”

At that moment, the alarm sounded. Daniel frowned. “What the fuck is that?”

“How would I know?”

It grew louder. The light started to flash. Frank sighed. “Well then.”

“What?”

“That answers *that* question.”

“Which one?”

“The one about where we’re eating.”

Daniel grinned. “I guess so.” And grabbing the beer and cheese and sardines, they walked outside. The neighbors were already gathering below, grumpily debating the cause of the alarm. Had Mrs. McMannon burned something again? Was her cat to blame? Had *it* triggered the alarm? The thing was a bloody nuisance. It seemed to get *everywhere*.

“Maybe she burned a cake again.”

“Maybe it was a lasagna. Do you remember last time?”

“Maybe it was the cat.”

With a sigh—“Too much to hope for.”

The speculations grew. They started to fidget. Would the damn thing just *stop*? They had programs to finish. The washing was almost done. The Mets were nearly—

And then a strange smell wafted through the air. They sniffed it. Daniel glanced at Frank.

“Is that *smoke*?”

The world stilled. *Fuck*.

“Is this thing *real*?”

The smoke was growing thicker. People started to protest. What the hell? What the hell was going on? They stepped back. Cursing began. And Frank—

“*What the hell are you doing?*”

He was already at the door. He was running up the stairs. Smoke filled his nostrils. He raced to his bedroom. The smell was growing worse. He wrenched open the closet and—

Shit! Where was it? Sirens wailed. The firemen were coming. The smoke grew thicker. The alarm was an incessant whine. He rifled through drawers and chests and cupboards. *Where was it?* And still the smoke grew worse—

There was a creaking noise—

There was a groaning—

The ceiling gave a shudder—

And then he found it. He was holding it. He staggered from the room. He dove into the hallway—

The stairs were engulfed in smoke. He started down. The air was too dense to breathe. Heaviness filled his lungs. There was another groaning. There was a crash. And then—

Something hit his head. There was a ringing sensation. He started to fall—

The smoke grew thicker—

It was filling his lungs—

And arms encircled him. They dragged him outside. And then—

“*What the hell were you doing?*”

“*Are you fucking crazy?*”

There was a cool sensation. Someone was blotting his forehead. He stirred slightly. The painting pressed into his thigh. He held it closer.

“Hold still.”

He held. Daniel sighed. “You dumb fuck.” Another dab. “You dumb *fuck*.”

“Could I get by?”

Frank blinked. He was blocking the door. Taking a deep breath, he dried his hands and left.

At the table, Roland and Ronnie were arguing.

“But just this once—”

“No exceptions.”

“But it’s just Jody—”

“*No women allowed.*”

Frank grinned. “What’s the problem?”

“Ed wants to bring a bird to poker.”

“Not to play.” Ronnie shifted. “She’d just *watch*.”

“That’s even worse.”

“But we’ll be short! Ryan can’t make it. Apparently he’s got some concert. Jerome’s out. Sam—

”

“Where’s Jerome?”

“He’s got a date.”

“Really? *Who*?”

“Louisa again.”

“Louisa! She was *ages* ago. Are they still together?”

“Three weeks.”

“Like I said. *Ages*.”

Looking at Frank—“What about you?”

“What?”

“Can you come?”

Roland blinked. “That’s right! You must come! We’re having a poker night. It’s nothing fancy—some boys and vodka and cigars.” Roland paused. “And *apparently* Jody Whitehead.” Glancing at Ronnie—“Are you *sure* about this?”

Frank restrained a smile. “Sounds perfect.” He paused. “Just not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“But—”

Ronnie rolled his eyes. “Leave him be!”

Roland sighed. “Fine.”

The bill was soon settled.

“So I’ll see you later?” Ronnie asked Roland.

“Seven thirty.”

Ronnie nodded. To Frank—“Good to meet you.”

“Good to meet you.”

And they left. “Where’s the factory?” Frank asked. London was *always* busy. There were ladies and gentleman and shoppers and workers. A few boys dashed across the street. Cars honked. Another boy sold flowers.

“Get your flowers here!”

“What kind do you have?” Frank asked.

“All kinds.” Roses and daisies and poppies and chrysanthemums and—

“What about white magnolias?”

“Yeah.” They even had those.

A woman ducked into a clothing store. Her lips were set thinly. She was cross. Two girls giggled madly at a private joke—a younger version of Anne and Jeanne. Their dresses matched. Was that a St. Agnes uniform? One girl wandered vacantly through the crowd. Was that a bit of cabbage on her back? But wherever he looked—

However hard he scanned the crowd—

Anne was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you looking for something?” Roland asked.

“What?” Another woman appeared and disappeared. She was carrying a basket of fresh bread. *Still* no Anne. “No.” He blinked. “So where’s the factory?”

“Not far from here.”

“I’ll walk you back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why not?”

Roland smiled. “Good man.”

The parade of humanity continued. Men. Women. Boys. Girls. Friends. Lovers. Never Anne. And then—

They had reached the factory. A man was smoking outside.

“He was looking for you.”

“Who was?”

“Who do you think?”

Roland looked scared. “But I’m not late!”

“Two minutes.”

“Two minutes! That’s nothing!”

The man laughed. “Right.”

Frank looked up. The building had a brick façade. High windows towered overhead. Most were empty. But in *one*—

“Is that someone reading?”

“Where?” Roland asked.

“In that window.”

The smoker shrugged. “It’s probably Jerome. The kid reads everything. I swear that he’d read the *telephone directory* if you—”

“*Roland!*”

Roland jumped. “Sir!”

A tall man stepped forward. His lips and body frowned. “You’re late.”

The smoker glanced at Roland. “Good luck.” And he left.

Roland swallowed. “Two minutes.”

“Where *were* you?”

“Having lunch. You said that—”

Impatiently—“Forget what I said. Inspector Thomas is back. He says that—” He stopped suddenly. “Who’s this?”

Roland jumped again. “Oh! This is Frank. Do you remember? He’s the friend that I—”

Coldly—“I remember.” He looked at Frank. Frank looked at him. A moment passed. And then he said—“Henry Wadsworth.” And he extended a hand.

Frank looked at him. Then he took it. “Frank Griswold.”

“I know.”

Another moment ticked by. The sun dipped slightly. A cold wind blew. Autumn was coming. The leaves were starting to fall. Then again—

“They’re always falling.”

“What do you mean?” Frank had asked. It was late afternoon. Hyde Park was a wash of crimson and liquid gold—crimson leaves and golden sunlight. She wore a sweater. It was one of his—an oversized monstrosity of red knit and wooden buttons. The sleeves covered her hands.

“From the very beginning—”

From the moments that buds appeared—

From the moment that the tight wads unfurled—

From the moment that light green became dark green—

And dark green became yellow—

And yellow became orange—

“They’re starting to fall.” Anne looked at him. Her eyes were big—big and green like emeralds. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“Maybe.” But that was never good enough for him. And so he kissed her. The wind blew gently. A note of winter suffused the gust. Leaves churned against their ankles. After a moment, she pulled back. And looked at him hard. She studied the tanned skin and dark hair and blue eyes. And then she said—“Do you love me?”

He said—“More than you can imagine.”

She said—“But how do you *know*?”

And he said—“Because whenever I see you—”

Whenever he glimpsed that neck and nose and turn of the head—

“I forget to breathe.”

Henry withdrew his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” The words were curt.

Frank nodded. “And you.”

And then Henry Wadsworth turned away. With a glance at Roland, they disappeared inside.

For a moment, Frank stood perfectly still. A truck honked. A child wailed. The sun started to sink. From the North, a wind blew. To some, it smelled of leaves and trees and soggy snows to come. But to *Frank*—

It smelled like summer. With a smile, he took a last glance at the factory. He took a deep breath. And then—

Then he did the only thing that he could.

He turned the page. As he did so, he frowned slightly. They were sticking again. He *hated* that. No matter how careful he was—

“Jerome!”

He started. “What?”

“Break’s over.”

He nodded. Page eighty-nine. Chapter five. Paragraph four. With another nod, he carefully closed the book.

Mr. Tilney shook his head. “Don’t you ever get sick of them?”

“What?”

“All those damn books.”

Jerome grinned. “How? They’re all different.”

Mr. Tilney shrugged. “I dunno. It just seems weird. Now—” His voice adopted a misty edge. “When *I* was your age—”

“And when was *that*?” Roger Davies asked sarcastically, appearing beside them. “Were cars around yet?”

“What about electricity?” Morton Hamil wanted to know.

Rodney Breakview was less kind. “Let’s start with the basics. Had we invented *fire*?”

The grizzled foreman scowled. “Ha-ha.” Another scowl. “*Back to work.*”

Jerome grinned. As he returned to his station, Roger fell into lockstep. “So what’s on this week? Is it still the Mill book?”

Jerome shook his head. “Naw. I finished that ages ago.”

“Did you?”

“It was short.”

Roger laughed. “Dude!”

“What?”

“You’re a beast.”

“Hey!” Jeff Jeffreys piped up. “Leave Socrates alone! After all, when he’s a rich and famous philosopher—”

Roger frowned. “Do philosophers *get* rich and famous? It’s more like famous and *dead.*”

Jeff considered this. “You might have a point. Maybe what I *should* say is—”

“Shuddup!” Jerome growled. “*All of you.*”

Jeff and Roger laughed. Then they returned to work.

The routine was familiar. Having spent four years at Wadsworth Steel, Jerome knew the sights and sounds and smells intimately. He knew the scent of hot iron and heat and metal. He knew the ringing of steel—the heavy thud of giant bellows—the grunts of workers. He knew the sight of straining muscles and flashing sparks and plastic goggles. He knew the way that Morton laughed—an effusion of bleats and burbles that vaguely reminisced an anguished hyena. He knew that Leroy Akeman had tattooed a purple tiger on his ass.

“Are you kidding me?” Rodney had asked flatly. “Why the *hell* would you get that?”

Leroy shrugged. “I like tigers.”

“But why *purple*?”

“I like purple.”

He knew that Jeff Jeffreys secretly loved Frank Sinatra. He knew that Rodney never let a point drop.

“I *get* that. I *do*. But just because I like pickles and ice cream—”

“I thought that you hated pickles.”

“I’m making a point. *Supposing* that I liked pickles and ice cream—”

“Why don’t you choose something else? Why *suppose*?”

“Because it doesn’t—” Rodney stopped. “Okay. Just because I like stewed tomatoes and ice cream—”

“Oh! I *love* stewed tomatoes.”

“*Doesn’t mean that I want them together.*”

“Really? Why not?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why *don’t* you want them together?”

“Because that’s disgusting!”

“Is it?”

“Yes!”

“Oh.” Leroy shrugged. “It sounds good to me.”

Rodney scowled. “*Jesus!*”

He knew that his father had been the best worker at the factory. Of course, that had been before the cough. Now the cough was what people noticed—*all* that people noticed. He knew that—

“It’s past three.”

Jerome nodded. He finished at four. Friday was the best day of the week. It usually passed quickly, overflowing with weekend plans and banter and jibes about his reading.

“So what *are* you reading?”

“Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.”

“*What?*”

“It’s by Kant.”

“*Who?*”

“It’s good.” Pause. “Trust me.”

Friday was the day that he left early. It was the day that he got paid. It was the day that he would walk to the bank, counting his steps—it was three hundred and eighty-seven—and carefully clutching the paper envelope. His knuckles would be white around it.

“You can never be too careful.” That was what his mother said. She would be wearing a red apron. Her lips would be pursed. “There are plenty of people out there who’ll rob you blind! Do you hear me?”

He heard her.

“Rob you *blind!*”

And she would nod emphatically. As she did so, she would turn to the stove. A hissing noise said that her soup—it smelled of salt and cream and boiled veggies and butter—was starting to boil.

“What is it tonight?”

“Cabbage soup.”

He would groan. “But we *always* have that. It’s—”

“*My favorite.*” So Mr. Redding would say firmly, shooting Jerome a reproving glance. *Hush up!*

He would sigh. "Right."

Mrs. Redding would turn to her husband. "Do you know where the cabbage soup will be *excellent*?"

"Do we *care*?" Jerome would mutter.

"Where?" Mr. Redding would ask.

A smile. "Ireland."

A smile back. "That's right."

"Sandra says that she knows the perfect cottage. It's not too expensive."

"We'll take a look."

"And she even said that—"

There would be a cough. The conversation would pause slightly. Jerome would stare at the table. It had dents in it—dents that were decades old. And for a moment, he would stop thinking about cabbage soup.

"*And she even said that—*"

And so the chatter would resume. It was easier that way—easier for everyone.

He blinked. The bank always had a line. "Friday's the busiest day of the week." The teller had said that once. Her nametag had read Mandy Brown. "It *would* be. After all, it's the day that everyone gets paid." Then she had smiled. "So how close *are* you?"

"To *what*?"

"You must be saving for *something*. You come every week."

"That's right."

"So? What is it for?"

"University."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah."

"Good for you."

"Thanks."

"So when will you go?"

"When there's enough."

Another smile. "You're all set."

Friday was the day that Mr. Redding bought flowers.

"Let me guess. Could it be—roses?" Mrs. Redding would ask.

He would smile. "You know me well."

Mrs. Redding would pretend to roll her eyes. "Really! A little imagination might be nice!"

But she would still take them. A tiny smile would light her face. When it fell into the cabbage soup, it tasted like salt.

Friday was the day that Jamie and Harry sold flowers.

"You take the wharf."

"You take market."

"*Don't be late for school!*" Mrs. Redding would call. "You can sell them *later*."

But they would skip school that day. Mrs. Redding would never know. And Jerome—  
Jerome would say nothing. The one time that he had tried—“You’ll fall behind.”  
Jamie had just scowled. “Mind yer own business. You did the same.”  
“But I *didn’t*.”

How could he explain it? To *him*, schooldays had been precious—those mornings of algebra and trigonometry and Plath and Poe and geography and history and biology. The hours had flown from eight o’clock to two. He would savor them. Copying sums into secondhand notebooks—notebooks that had little tears and wrinkled pages, he would try desperately to freeze time. For some reason, however, it never worked. Two o’clock would always come. And then he would hear—

“Can you play today? We’re a man down.”

Miles Stanton would be holding a football. Jerome would look at it longingly, fastening his knapsack. But shaking his head, he would say—“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Work.”

Miles would nod. “Right.” And they would part. Miles would go to the park, kicking leaves and rocks and the grimy football. Their friends would follow him. Jerome would go to the factory. His walk was always silent.

Friday was the day that Margot went out. Her eyes would be big with wonder. The faces and places and streets and stalls were always new to her. No matter how often she saw them—

No matter how often a stand passed by—

How often a person waved—

They were always deliciously knew.

“Stay close to me.”

Jamie would usually take her. He was more responsible than Harry. He always had been. “Don’t let go.”

His voice would be stern. Margot would nod. Her mind, however, would be on the ground. It would be on the sky. It would be on the nearby pussycat.

“Meow!” Margot would shout happily.

“Meow!” Mr. Pussycat would reply.

Friday was the day that shows opened. It was the day that lovers dated. It was the day that dancers danced. It was the day that travelers travelled. It was the day that he had *once* played poker—

“Can you bring the cigars?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“It should be good tonight. Ed’s coming. Ronnie will be there. Sammy should make it.”

“Great.”

And the day that he *now* saw Louisa.

She was queen of the dusk. It filled her eyes. It settled on her shoulders. “Is that you?” Her voice would be soft. She would be sitting on the steps. Her dress would be pink.

He would smile. “Yeah.” Taking a step closer—“It’s me.”

She would laugh. “*Baby!*” And then she would fly into his arms. The ribbons would catch the fading light. “Where *were* you?”

“I had to run home. Mama said that Harry—”

But he would never finish. Grabbing him impatiently, Louisa would press her lips to his. “No matter about that.”

And all at once, the rest of Friday would be forgotten.

“I read your book.”

“Which one?”

“The one about liberty.”

He would smile. “They’re *all* about liberty.”

“Live and let live. You know—” She would gesticulate impatiently. “You don’t bother me. I don’t bother you. You don’t kill *me*. I don’t kill *you*.”

Jerome would grin. “They call that negative liberty—the right to be let alone.”

Louisa would nod. “Fields had the strangest ideas about it! Shall I tell you? I *will*.” And she would.

He would listen. And then he would say—“But he’s wrong. *Mill* was wrong. That’s only *one* type of freedom.”

“That’s what Chessie said.”

“Freedom’s *also* about being able to *do* things. It’s about positive liberty.”

“What do you mean?”

“Freedom to be educated. Freedom to have a roof. Freedom *to*.”

“But why is that *my* responsibility? Why should *I* be responsible for *you* being educated?”

“Is that what Fields said?”

She would nod.

He would shrug. “Because we’re all British. We’re all human. We’ll all *connected*.”

Louisa would smile. “Is that what your dad says?”

He would smile back. “Guilty as charged.” His did was always saying that. If everyone was connected—

“Don’t say that.”

Jerome blinked. Rodney and Leroy were arguing.

“What? It’s true. There will be some.”

“Not unless it’s necessary.”

“Why?” Rodney demanded drily. “What’s Henry going to do? Come on! Do you actually think that he gives a shit?”

Jerome frowned. “What are they talking about?”

Roger said—“Redundancies.”

Leroy said—“I’m just *saying*.”

Jerome said nothing. He was still thinking about Louisa. She would be wearing ribbons—ribbons of waterfall silk. She would smell like sunshine. He inhaled deeply.

“I saw him the other day.”

Jerome blinked. Morton was talking now.

“Who?” Leroy asked.

“Henry.”

“Did you?”

Morton nodded. “Yeah. He was with some girl.”

“How old?”

“Sixteen.” With a snicker—“If even.”

“Must’ve been his daughter.”

Another snicker. “Who *knows*?”

“Naw.” Leroy shook his head. “He wouldn’t cheat.”

“Why not?”

“Have you seen his wife?”

Laughter followed. Then Jeff rumbled—“I met her once.”

“Who?”

“His wife.” Pause. “Her name’s Anne.”

“Did you?” Morton and Rodney and Leroy were surprised. “How?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Abridge it.”

“She gave a speech.”

“And—”

“I was there.”

They waited. Then Leroy said patiently—“That was a bit too abridged.”

Jeff shrugged. “It was years ago. I was working for a shoe company then.”

“Which one?”

“Pimlico Shoes. We were about to have a meeting with the central management—the last meeting before going on strike.”

“And—”

“Some guys were distributing flyers outside. They were just trying to raise awareness.”

“*And—*”

“She took one.”

Morton was nonplussed. “That’s not much of a story.”

“That’s just the beginning. She and my friend got to talking—”

“What! Why was Mrs. Wadsworth talking to a *union rep*?”

“She wasn’t Mrs. Wadsworth then.”

“Good point. What happened next?”

Jeff shrugged. “One thing seemed to lead another. She got curious. And so—”

“What?”

“She came to the meeting.”

“You’re kidding!”

“I’m not.”

“Well!” Morton whistled. “Mrs. Wadsworth at a union meeting! That’s a hell of a story! A *hell* of a story!”

“That’s just the beginning.”

“*What?*”

“The meeting started normally. The union guys made their case. Pimlico Shoes made theirs. And *then—*”

“What?”

“Anne stood up.”

“What did she say?”

“I don’t remember exactly. It was something about shoes—about how everyone was wearing the same shoes.”

“And—”

“That meant something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Something about how—how we’re all connected. If we all wear the same shoes—” He paused. “If we all walk the same streets—”

Eat the same food—

Dream the same dreams—

Fear the same fears—

Love the same loves—

“Don’t we have some responsibility?” Jerome asked quietly. The group turned to him.

“What?” Morton demanded.

“I *said—*” And he repeated—“Don’t we have some responsibility?”

“For *what?*”

“Everything.” A shrug. “Each other.”

With a suspicious frown—“Is that from Kant?”

“Nope.” Not this time.

“Then *who?*”

With a grin—“My dad.”

“Well?” Rodney demanded impatiently. The story had been getting good. “What happened next? What did she do?”

Jeff shrugged. “Nothing really. She left after the speech. She was scared that someone would find out. She left and—” Another shrug. “That was that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I never saw her again.”

Morton whistled. “Hell!”

“What?”

“Nothing really. Just—hell!”

Jerome nodded. Things were slowly falling into pace. If everyone was connected—

If every action had an equal and opposite reaction—

“Mr. Wadsworth wants to see you.”

He blinked. A runner stood beside him. His name was Willie Harrison.

“When?” Jerome wanted to know.

“Four o’clock.”

“What time is it now?”

“Three forty-five.”

He nodded. Then he glanced at Mr. Tilney. The foreman looked away. “You’d better go.”

He slowly lowered his goggles. “What’s this about?” Jerome asked softly.

The foreman shook his head. “I don’t know.”

But he did. Jerome knew that he knew. And Mr. Tilney knew that Jerome knew that he knew. And so he said—“Take your things.” He paused. “Your shift’s about to end anyway.”

Jerome did. He took his coat and hat and bag. He climbed the stairs. Then he started to wait. A moment passed. Another. Another. He thought about Louisa. He thought about the ribbons and pink dress and pink smile. He thought about Anne.

“If we’re all connected—”

He thought about his father. He thought about Leroy Akeman and the purple tiger.

“Why the *hell* would you get that?”

“I like tigers.”

“But why *purple*?”

“I like purple.”

He thought about Jeff Jeffreys and Mandy Brown and Kant. Kant said that freedom was autonomy. You own yourself. You own your decisions. Freedom is choosing freely. Even so—

He opened his book. Page eighty-nine. Chapter five. Paragraph four. *Even so*—

Had he ever sat here? What would Kant say to Mr. Wadsworth? What would he say to Jerome? Here? *Now*?

*Was this freedom?*

Maybe that next chapter held the answer—the elusive answer that Mill and Locke and Bentham had overlooked. So he started to read. The clock ticked. Murmurings filled the space behind the door. Bellowing and thumping noises echoed downstairs. They were painfully familiar. He knew the sights and sounds and smells intimately. He knew the scent of hot iron and heat and metal. He knew the ringing of steel—the heavy thud of giant bellows—the grunts of workers. He knew the sight of straining muscles and flashing sparks and plastic goggles. He knew the way that Morton laughed—an effusion of bleats and burbles that vaguely reminisced an anguished hyena. But—

He *also* knew that the chapter was over. Page ninety-one. Chapter *six*. And so he closed the book. He looked at the door. The murmuring was growing louder. It was growing louder and louder and—

Henry was growing agitated. “This is madness! It’s *theft!*”

Thomas Miller nodded. It had taken four years to become an accountant. His coursework had included math and statistics and economics and numeracy. And after all of that—"You'll just have to sign here."

"But just *think* about it. I work hard for this money. *I earn every penny*. And then they just take it! It's like—like slavery!"

After all of those tests and problems and lectures and sleepless nights—"Yessir." He nudged the paper. "But you still need to—"

Henry frowned. "You're not *listening*."

After all of that anxiety and sweat and stress—

"Just *think* about it."

He had made it here. Just—fabulous. "Yessir." He shifted slightly, rearranging his briefcase. It was one of *those* days. "What am I thinking about?"

"Who really owns you?"

"What?"

"*Who owns you?*"

"Nobody." He paused. "Sir."

"*Wrong.*"

What? "I'm not sure that I—"

"*You own you!*" Henry cried exultantly.

"Ahhhhh." Thomas nodded. "Very clever."

But Henry was beyond placation. "But don't you get what that *means*? If you own yourself—"

With a sigh—"Yessir."

"Then *you own everything about you*. You own your *life*. You own your *freedom*. You own the fruits of your labor. So if someone takes those fruits away—"

He frowned. "Do you mean wages?"

"*If someone uses force to steal that money away—*"

"Because we don't *make* fruits." Pause. "We make *steel*."

"*Then you're being made to work for nothing!* You're doing work involuntarily! Now then! *Is that not slavery?*"

Thomas nodded obediently. "Yessir." It really *was* one of those days. And just to think—

"You're just *saying* that. *Think* about it. Am I not right?"

He could have been anything.

"I hear that teaching is nice. Good vacations. Good hours." His father had given a curt nod. "Mrs. Lanningham is quite happy at St. Agnes."

Thomas had sighed. "Dad—"

"What about journalism?" Mrs. Miller had volunteered. "The traveling would be lovely!"

"But I hate writing."

"Then be a *photojournalist*. Be a doctor. Be an aromatherapist. Be—"

“Be a Viking!!” Pippa Miller screeched. Everyone glanced at her. At the moment, she was using potatoes to build a small warship. A stuffed animal was skewered on a pole. A doll was tied to the mast. Mr. Miller frowned. “We never should’ve bought that book.”

Mrs. Miller nodded. “No kidding.” But then she returned to Thomas. “Really! Just do something *interesting!*”

“But accounting *is* interesting.”

Mr. and Mrs. Miller had been unimpressed. “Really?”

“Yes! It *is*.” There was something compelling about the clean numbers and straight columns and lines. How could he explain it? In a world of confusion and blind chaos—

A world of war and poverty and hatred and antipathy—

There was a certain beauty to balanced ledgers and numbers that added up. Around Henry, however, nothing was so simple. The calculations *never* seemed to come out right. And so the yearly ordeal became a battlefield. “Yessir.” The words were automatic. Just keep on trucking. Just keep on— “But why is it for nothing?”

Damn it! Why did he *do* that?

Henry blinked. “What?”

But now it was too late. The damage had been done. With a sense of impending doom—“Why do you say that you’re working for *nothing?*”

“Because the government is taking your money! It’s taking the *fruits* of your—”

“Right.” He nodded. “I *get* that. But why do you say that you’re not receiving *anything?*”

“Because you’re *not!*”

“But what about schools?”

“I went to private school.”

“What about roads?”

“Come now! I don’t drive on *every* road. So why should I—”

“But your food does.” Thomas felt his energy rising. Caution fell to the wayside. “The food that you eat is carried on those roads. If you didn’t have them—”

“But that’s beside the point! The *point* is that *I should get to choose*. Let me pay for roads voluntarily! *Don’t take my money by force!*”

“But *is* it by force?”

Henry frowned. “Have you ever crossed the IRS?”

“I *worked* for the IRS.”

“Then you know!”

“Taxes are decided by parliament.”

“So?”

“So you vote for parliament.”

“Oh! *That* argument. Be reasonable! How many votes do I have? Just one!”

Thomas frowned. “Yes.” He paused. “That’s how democracies work.”

“But what good is *one vote* against society? All that you’re *really* saying is that I’m a slave to everyone! If *they* want to tax my money away—”

There was a knock at the door. Roland peeped inside. "Jerome is here."

Henry frowned. "Come now! Can't you see that I'm a bit—" He paused. "Oh! Is it four o'clock?"

"Three forty-five."

"Very well." With a glance at Thomas—"We can finish this later."

"Yessir." He scrambled to retrieve the papers. "Very good."

"But Thomas—"

He paused at the door.

"*Think* about it." He tapped his head. "You'll see. It's up here."

Thomas tried not to shudder. "Yessir."

And then he left. Maybe Pippa had been right. "Maybe I *should've* been a Viking."

"*What* was that?" Jerome asked.

Thomas sighed. "Nothing." With a sigh—"Good luck."

"Thanks."

"I'll need it."

Mandy frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Mr. Milton said that he's coming back. I'll need some bigger bills."

Mandy nodded. "I'll ask Marcy." She asked Marcy. "Do you have any hundreds?"

Marcy did. Mandy returned to her window. "Hi there! Sorry about that."

The customer was understanding. And so the transaction was concluded. There was a momentary break. Then—"Hi there!" And the process started anew.

Fridays were always busy. They were an endless stream of deposits and withdrawals and checks to be cashed. Today, however, was worse than most. Laura agreed.

"It's a bloody zoo."

Sandra nodded halfheartedly, glancing at the clock. Three forty-seven.

"What time are you off?" Laura asked.

"I'm closing out."

"So you're here until six?"

"That's right."

Between a break in customers—"What are your plans after?"

"Come now! Don't you remember?"

Laura frowned. "What am I meant to remember?" She racked her brain. Then she blinked. "Oh! I completely forgot. What time does it start again?"

"Seven thirty."

"And what are you doing *after* that?"

"I don't know. Freddie's picking me up."

"What for?"

"Not sure." She shrugged. And to the customer—"Hi there!"

Another deposit was made. Another check was cashed. Then Laura asked—"How *is* Freddie?"

“He’s fine.”

“Still no ring.”

Another shrug. “What’s the rush?” Even so, she glanced at her hand. A ring would look damn good. With a sigh—“When do *you* leave?”

“Four thirty.”

“What time is it now?”

“Three forty-five.”

“Right.” Mandy nodded. The next customer came. She was a lady of some importance, carrying a Karen Millen bag and a designer pocketbook. Her hair was a steely silver. Her voice was clipped.

“I’d like to cash a check.”

“Sure thing.” Mandy barely glanced at her. “What’s your name?”

“Henderson. Eleanor J. Henderson.”

Mandy froze. For a moment, her fingers were suspended over the keys.

“That’s H-E-N-”

“Yes.” She blinked. “Sorry.” Perhaps if she kept looking down—

“*Mandy?*”

She looked up. “Mrs. Henderson!” A bright smile. “What a surprise!”

H-E-N-D-E-R-S-O-N. Find.

“Yes.” Pause. “That it is.”

A host of names popped up. Henderson, Daniel P. Henderson, Jeanine H. Henderson, Eleanor J. Mandy clicked.

“How long have you been here?”

“Where?”

“First Capital.”

“Oh! Not too long. A few years.”

“A few years! That’s quite a while.”

Mandy shrugged.

*Eleanor J. Henderson*

*4 Crestview Drive*

*South Kensington*

*London*

She entered the amount. “I’m afraid that we’re out of fifties. Would twenties be okay?”

“Oh! Certainly. I usually don’t bother with this. But it seems that the bank closed during lunch. I had no idea that you closed for lunch! And since I have a dinner tonight—” Mrs. Henderson paused. “Have you been to Café Hampstead? It’s just lovely. I’m meeting Anne there—Anne and her husband.”

“Is that right?” Mandy asked mildly. Send. The computer whirred. Then she asked calmly—“So how is Anne?”

“Oh! Anne is just lovely! Married now. But you *must* ’ve known that.”

“I had no idea.”

“Really? Well! It was *ages* ago now. But Henry is divine. Simply divine!”

Handsome. Polite. Aristocratic. Rich. Mandy nodded mechanically. “Is that right?”

“Of course.”

“Wonderful.” The whirring stopped. The drawer popped open. She quickly withdrew the desired bills. Mrs. Henderson watched. The silence stretched on. Then she said brightly—“Well! *Do* say congratulations.” She slipped the bills underneath the glass.

“I will.” And with a final look—

She was gone. Mandy closed her eyes.

“Who was *that*?” Laura demanded.

“An old boss.”

“Did something happen between you?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling.”

Mandy shrugged. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“So something did!”

“It’s a long story.”

Laura glanced at the clock. “I never took my four o’clock.”

Mandy glanced at the queue. She glanced at the other tellers. “Can you handle them?”

Marcy nodded. “Go.”

They were soon outside. The hot sun baked down. Mandy closed her eyes. It had been a long day. There had been queue after queue after queue. But now it was almost over. It was almost time to leave—go home—get changed—walked to St. Eustache. It was almost time to—

“Well?”

She opened her eyes.

Laura was staring at her expectantly. She said—“Come now! Don’t make me beg.”

And so Mandy said—“It all started at Kent.”

“They ought to do something about this.”

Anne said nothing, pressing against the car door. Her mother sighed.

“You mustn’t sulk.”

To the window—“I’m not.”

“You are.”

Anne shrugged. In a way, she had wanted this. She had said that she did—

“*Where is this going?*”

“*Why does it matter?*”

“*Because I’m a woman! I’m not a girl. Don’t you get that?*”

It had been afternoon. The sunlight had been soft and golden, cascading thickly onto the fallen leaves and dried grass. Hyde Park had been a paradise of crimson and orange and gold.

“I get that I love you. I get that *you* love *me*. What else is there?”

“Houses! Rent! *Reality!* Not everything is moonlight and dancing and magnolias.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s more than that!”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

A silence had fallen. Some children were playing tag nearby. Their shouts were light and jubilant. Anne closed her eyes. “Where is this going? Where are *we* going?”

“Wherever we want.”

“That’s not good enough.”

Quietly—“That’s all I have.”

Even quieter—“I know.”

The children continued to play. As they played, however, their game—a haphazard snowball of chases and captures—drew them further and further away. The sounds slowly grew muted. Even the birds grew silent.

“Do you want me to go?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Anne—”

“Maybe it wasn’t meant to be.”

“*Anne—*”

“I can’t live like this. I just—”

“*Anne!* Listen to me!”

“I’m sorry. I just—can’t.”

And so she had left. She had left Hyde Park. She had left the falling leaves. She had left Frank. And—

“It’s simply terrible!”

Anne blinked. And now she was here. Now the North had become the South. Now the bleak moors had faded into rolling hills and pastures. Now London had become Kent.

“Yeah.” She glanced at her mother. “It is.” Then she turned away again. Her thoughts became soft.

They had done dinner out. The halls of St. Agnes had faded into Il Risotto restaurant.

“Anne! How lovely you look!” Mrs. Henderson had cried.

Anne had nodded stiffly. Her mother loved the sedate pearls—a perfect blend of classy and young. “Where’s Mr. Henderson?”

“He’s—”

“So sorry to be late! Work ran over.”

Her mother accepted the kiss that her husband offered. Anne watched. It was a routine gesture—a dry peck that evinced little emotion. His lips barely touched her cheek.

“Was there a problem?” Mrs. Henderson asked mildly.

“Oh! Nothing drastic. The taxes just needed doing. It’s always a process!”

Mrs. Henderson nodded. It was always a process.

“I’m *terribly* sorry.”

And that was the truth. He *was* sorry. The rules of decorum said that a good husband should never be late. It was suspicious. It was rude. And Mr. Henderson *always* played by the rules.

“It’s not a problem.” That was *also* the truth. A good wife never complained.

“Have you ordered yet?”

Mrs. Henderson exclaimed—“Of course not!”

Mr. Henderson replied—“I’m *so* sorry to be late! You know that I simply hate it.”

Mrs. Henderson said—“It’s really not a problem! You mustn’t think of it.”

And Anne watched. She saw the measured movements. She saw the soft smiles and timely laughs and complacent nods. What she *failed* to see, however, was the passion.

“Do you love him?”

Anne could imagine the conversation perfectly. Her mother would frown. “Who?”

“Mr. Henderson.”

“Silly child!”

“*Do* you?” Anne would persist.

Her mother would sigh. “Is this about your father?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But it *is*. It’s *always* about him.”

It was *never* about him. But Anne would bite her tongue. “*Do* you?”

“I’m happy. I’ve moved on. What more do you want?”

*I want you to say that you love him.* “Do you remember Spain?”

“Do *I* remember Spain?”

It had been early August. Eager to try something slightly *different*, her father had tried to rent a Spanish villa. As it turned out, however, his Spanish had been a bit—wanting. What was meant to be a spacious villa had proved to be a smelly *barn*.

“This is a nightmare!” Mrs. Bradshaw had wailed.

Mr. Bradshaw had laughed and laughed. “That teaches *me* a lesson.”

For a moment, Mrs. Bradshaw had remained horrified. After a time, however, the disgust had abated. His laughter had been too loud—too infectious. They had *all* started to laugh.

“But what will we *do*?” Mrs. Bradshaw had demanded.

Her husband had shrugged. “To start with—”

“What?”

“We’ll milk some cows.” And he had grinned. “Here.” Handing her a pail—“You try.”

A moment later, Anne had raced off. Forget cows. Forget pigs. Forget villas and horses and barns. There were fireflies to catch! As she left, however, she had heard the muffled words—“Do you know what? I always *wanted* to marry a milkmaid.”

And she had heard her mother laugh. “Stop it!”

“What more do you want?” Mrs. Henderson would repeat.

Anne would shake herself. *I want you to forgive him. Forgive the debts. Forgive the lawyers and contracts and unending headaches. Forgive the will that said what we should have known—*

“There’s nothing left.”

“That can’t be right.”

“It *is*.”

But the words would remain stuck. They would remain stuck because she lacked the courage. They would remain stuck because she knew what her mother would say—

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just *can’t*.”

She could forgive Spain. She could forgive the misunderstanding about the barn. She could forgive the dress that hay and dirt and fresh milk had ruined. But she could never forgive *him*.

And so Anne would say—“I don’t know.”

And her mother would nod. “Neither do I.”

When she had returned to St. Agnes, he had been there. His skin had been pale. The night had been dark.

“How long have you been here?” Anne had asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter.” *For you, I would wait forever.*

Anne nodded. Despite her jacket, it was cold. Frank removed his coat. “Take this.”

She did. The thin fabric was surprisingly warm. She said—“I’m scared.”

He said—“I know.”

And they just stood there. There was little more *to* say. Even so—

She tried. “Let’s go to Spain.”

Frank smiled. “Sure.”

“And Denmark. I’ve always to go there.”

“Whatever you want.”

“What about Kenya?”

“Sounds good.”

“The capital is Nairobi.” She paused. “I’m studying it.”

Another smile. “Mrs. Harrington teaches you well.”

Anne nodded. “I’ll paint a picture of it.”

“What?”

“The desert.”

He grinned. “I can already see it. Purple elephants and green giraffes and pink monkeys against a yellow sky—”

“Hey!”

She punched him. He laughed. “It’ll be beautiful.” And to prove his point, he kissed her. She kissed him back.

That—all of that—was before. It was before Mr. Henderson had seen them. It was before the book had slammed. But she had still known. She had known that they never would go to Kenya. That picture never would be painted. The clock was ticking. And now—

Now they had reached Kent. Although the day was warm, the manor was cool and dark. While her mother oversaw the unloading, efficiently directing Mandy and Carlotta about, she wandered to her room. She crawled into her bed, feeling the cool sheets and bedspread. She was soon asleep.

A few hours later, there was a knock at her door.

“Anne? *Anne?* It’s dinner.”

She stared at the high ceiling and windows and mahogany wardrobe. “I’m not hungry.”

A sigh. “If you must.”

And her mother left. That night, however, Anne crept downstairs. Raiding the refrigerator, she shoveled plates of potatoes and vegetables and cheese into her mouth.

“Don’t eat so fast. You’ll make yourself sick.”

Anne nearly dropped her plate. “Christ! You *scared* me!”

Mandy shrugged. “So? You scared me first. I thought that you were gonna choke yerself.”

Anne grinned. She carefully lowered the plate. A moment passed. Another. Then she slowly and deliberately took a bite. “Is that better?”

“Much.”

She laughed. “Good.”

She had spoken to Mandy little. It was easy to overlook the scullery maids—the shadowy figures that surrounded her mother. Tonight, however, the plate of jacket potatoes and carrots had broken a barrier. They talked. And while the clock diffidently compartmentalized the night, they became friends.

Her days developed a pattern. There was reading. There was riding. There were essays from Mrs. Harrington. There were dinners with Mandy. Never, however, were there any letters. However much she tried—

To Mandy—“Couldn’t you—”

A shake of the head. “I’m sorry.” A scared look. “I can’t.”

To the postman—“Please. Won’t you just—”

“I can’t take that.”

“Why not?”

“Been told not to.”

“But—”

And he was gone.

And even to the plumber—“Please!”

The man looked at the letter. “What on Earth is this?”

“It’s—”

“*Anne!*”

And Anne knew that the jig was up.

“Give it here.”

She gave it. Mrs. Henderson opened it.

“What!” Anne started. “You can’t—”

But Mrs. Henderson never read it. She had no desire to. She simply tore the paper—a piece of creamy letterhead—into a dozen pieces. They snowed into the trashcan. Anne watched.

“Now then!” Her mother spoke crisply. “Are there any books that I should order? I was just making a list.”

Anne said nothing.

“What about Virginia Woolf? She has a lovely style.”

Anne still said nothing.

“Or what about—”

“How long will we be here?”

“However long it takes.” And without missing a beat—“What about Hemingway? He does wonderful dialogue. Perhaps we could get some of his.”

And that had been that. There would be no letters.

One week dragged into the next. Days became nights. Nights became more days. The walks grew longer. The books were devoured. She *did* like Virginia Woolf. And Hemingway *did* do excellent dialogue. Then one day—

“It’s nearly dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“We have company coming.”

Anne paused. “But you said that there would *be* no—”

“The Wadsworths are an exception.”

“Why?”

“You’ll need to change.”

“*Why?*”

“I was thinking the yellow dress. It matches your complexion.”

“But why? Who cares about—”

“Henry is with them.”

Anne grew cold. “Henry—”

“Wadsworth.”

“I guessed.”

“The pearls would match. And you know that I love those.” She smiled. “A perfect blend of classy and young.”

Anne stood up abruptly. “I’m not doing this.” And she fled.

That night, however, she did attend dinner. She wore the yellow dress. She wore the pearls. She pretended to eat.

“How quiet she is!” Mrs. Wadsworth exclaimed. “What a perfect lady!” Thinking that only Mrs. Henderson could hear—“I do hate girls that chatter so! How terribly bothersome!”

Mrs. Henderson smiled demurely. “I quite agree.”

When the guests had left, silence reigned again. Anne stole to the kitchen. She leaned against the counter, staring dully at the world outside. Clouds covered the autumn sky. It was beginning to rain. All at once, there was a noise behind her.

“Mandy?” Anne asked dully. “Is that you?”

There was an affirmative noise. Anne turned around. Mandy was squirming to and fro.

“What is it?” Anne demanded.

The squirming grew worse. And Mandy said—“I have something for you.”

“What?”

And then she withdrew a white envelope. Her gaze was scared. Her eyes said shhhhhh. Anne looked at the familiar handwriting. She turned it over and over. “How did you—”

“Just open it.”

So she did. It was from Jeanne. Never prone to flourishes—

“What a terrible bother they are! Just say what you mean!”

She had neglected to add a date—a salutation—a greeting. She had included what mattered—*all* that mattered.

*He’s leaving.*

—*Jeanne*

Anne stared at the flimsy paper. She turned it over and over and over again. Then she threw it away.

“When you were growing up—” She paused. Her voice was oddly hoarse.

“What?” Mandy asked.

Anne tried again. “What did you want to be?”

The answer was immediate. “A singer.”

“Really?” Anne glanced at her. “What kind of music?”

“Any.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I suppose that I never had the chance.”

“But if someone gave you that chance—”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. *If someone gave you that chance—*”

Mandy waited.

“Would you take it?”

“I’d hope so.”

“Would you fight for it?”

“I’d hope so.”

Anne nodded. Another silence fell. Then Mandy asked softly—“What about you?”

“What?”

“What did *you* want to be?”

“Loved.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

Mandy nodded.

Anne stared at the darkness outside. The rain was growing harder. It shook the trees. She took a deep breath. “Could I ask you something else?”

“What?”

“You know the Ford that my mother drives—”

A nod.

“The one that’s parked outside—”

Another nod.

“Where does she keep the keys?”

“She doesn’t.” There was a long pause. “I do.”

Anne turned to look at her. Mandy looked back. Then she withdrew a ring of silver keys.

“Are you sure about this?” Anne asked quietly. Her gaze was intense.

Mandy smiled. But to Anne—

Beautiful Anne—

She simply said—“Find him.”

“Mrs. Wadsworth? *Mrs. Wadsworth?*”

Anne blinked. The store was churning about her. Young girls were being fitted for robes. Young mothers were alternating platitudes with reprimands. Shopkeepers—frazzled bundles of steady hands and metal pins—were trying to keep the peace.

“I’m here for a fitting. I’ve got a four o’clock.”

“Yes.” The shopkeeper nodded. “We can see you now.”

Anne nodded. Then she gathered her things. It had been a long day. There had been breakfast—scrambled eggs and bacon and toast that was slightly burnt. There had been letters to send—

“Could you take it yourself?”

“I’ve got the kitchens to finish—”

“That’s fine. You can take it later.”

“It might not be until tonight.”

“What time?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“That’s fine.”

There had been the conversation with Mrs. Watson. How vexing it had been! To tell Mrs. Watson—dear Esmeralda Watson—that the peas were constantly cold! There had been errands to run. There had been the lunch with Jeanne—

“Anne? Is that *you?*”

“Jeanne!”

“*Darling!*”

And now there was the fitting. She had plenty of time. Dinner was ages away.

“It will only take a few minutes.” So the tailor had said. She could easily be fitted and be home for tea. The only question was—

Had it happened yet? Had Mr. Redding been fired? Did it matter? After all—

“Right this way.”

There was so much to do. There was the matter of the peas. It simply *had* to stop. There was the party for Peter. Heavens! Was it really a week away? A week was *so* little time! But it was silly to complain. It was simply a matter of organization. And she was good at that—tremendously good. She

could easily bring it together. She could finalize the menu and invitations and invitees quickly. She could make the night everything that Henry wanted and more. The only question was—

The only question *was*—

“What did *she* want?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did she *want* to find him? When Mandy handed her the keys—”

“Oh! *That*. How should *I* know?” Jeanne demanded. “I wasn’t there.”

“But you wrote that letter! Surely you—”

“Really! You *are* being tiresome. What does it matter now? It was years ago.”

“It matters because I need to know.”

Jeanne sighed. “Yes.”

“What?”

“She wanted to find him.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She drove from Kent to London.” Jeanne paused. “In two hours.”

“Two hours! But that drive has to be at *least*—” Her companion stopped. “Oh.”

“Exactly.”

“Had she ever driven?”

“Come now! Anne Bradshaw was a lady of society.”

“Meaning—”

“She *was* driven.”

“Ahhhh.” He nodded. Then a frown creased his face. “She must’ve been scared to death.”

Jeanne was noncommittal. “Perhaps. But you must remember the circumstances.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Let’s say that she had—other things to think about.” Things like—

Jeanne leaned forward slightly. The store was humming with expectant patrons, eagerly examining cases of rings and bracelets and delicate necklaces. Two girls were mulling smugly over a gaudy pendant. An older woman stood nearby. She was wearing a gray dress and pursed lips. Other shoppers milled about aimlessly.

A tray of necklaces sat immediately before her. There were dozens of them—silver and gold and emerald and amber and ruby.

“Well?”

“Well *what*?” Jeanne asked distractedly. And to the shopkeeper—“Can I see that one?”

He nodded. “Certainly.” Then he carefully unlocked the case.

“Did she make it? Did she make it to London?”

Jeanne shrugged. “Eventually.” After two hours of driving—

Two hours of darkness and rain and blaring music and empty roads—

White knuckles and wide eyes and stiff arms and a stiffer expression—

*Come back to me.*

She had come screeching into the long driveway. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we’ll find him.”

Jeanne blinked. “Thank you.” The necklace felt cool and light and slippery. To her companion she said—“Do me a favor. Clasp this.”

He did. His fingers were gentle against her skin. She closed her eyes. And when she did—

Time rolled back. “Anne! *Anne!*”

The girl raced into the drenched city. Her dress was soaked. Her hair was tangled. Her feet were silent against the pavement.

“Anne!”

But Anne was gone. She was dodging cars and passerby and storefronts and steps.

“*Anne!*”

She ran on. Eleven p.m. became midnight—

Midnight became one—

One became two—

And still they went. She pounded on his door. His roommate opened it.

“What?” He blew smoke at them. Drunken conversation filled the backroom. He had been playing poker.

“Is Frank here?” Anne demanded.

A shake of the head. A squint. “He left hours ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“How should I know?”

“Is he coming back?”

“No.” Another shake of the head. “Frank is *gone.*”

She fled again.

“*Anne!*”

She clattered down the stairs. She burst through the door. She dashed into the humming city. And *still* the night coursed on. *Still* the clock ticked.

She stopped at every corner—“Have you seen him?”

A scared look. “*Who?*”

“Frank!”

She ducked into every pub—“Is he here?”

A shake of the head. “Sorry.”

She bombarded every passerby—“You must know *something.*”

To every man—

To every woman—

To the *world*—“Please!”

*Come back to me.*

Whatever happens tomorrow—

Whatever the future brings—

Just let *tonight* be *tonight*.

But now night was becoming day. The rain was lightening. London was preparing to wake. Two had become three. Three had become four. Four was quickly becoming five. They spilled onto the dock.

“Have you seen Frank?” Anne demanded.

“What does he look like?”

“Tall. Slender.” Hair of eternal night—

Eyes of pouring rain—

Lips that longed to contact hers—

A heart that knew her name—

A hand that fit hers perfectly—

A body that fit *her* perfectly—

A love that made everything—

Simply everything—

Fade away. “Have you seen him?” Anne asked again.

The man shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Anne nodded. Her face fell. She turned away. But then someone *else* said—“Wait a minute. Do you mean Frank *Griswold*?”

And the sun rose. “Have *you* seen him?” Anne demanded.

“Sure. He enlisted a few weeks ago. We had a beer. Lovely chap!”

“Where is he?”

“He leaves today.”

“What time?”

“Five o’clock.”

“Where?”

“The far pier.” A frown. “But you’ll never—”

He was talking to empty space. Anne was gone. She was racing through sailors and fisherman and merchants. She was discarding shoes—hairband—anything that would weigh her down. She was barging past people—ducking around them—running under them. Carts nearly hit her. Cars screeched to a halt. And then—

She was there. She was standing on the dock. And there was the ship—

A hundred yards at sea.

“Anne!” Jeanne screamed. “*No!*” She grabbed her friend. “*You can’t do that!*”

But Anne had never meant to jump. She was simply leaning over the pier.

“You! What’s your name? Can you do something for me?”

A young boy looked up. His motorboat rocked slightly. “Yessim!”

“Give me your notebook and pen.”

He did. It was an order for more tackle. Anne used it to write a letter. It was the shortest letter—the truest letter—that she would ever write. The boy watched her curiously. And then came—“Do you see that boat?” Anne demanded.

“Yessim.”

“Can you follow it?”

“Ma’am!”

“Get this to Frank Griswold.”

“But *ma’am!*”

“*Follow it!*”

And so he did. Anne watched him go. She watched the enormous vessel slide away. She watched the motorboat chase after it. She felt the clock tick. She saw the sun break the horizon—saw a puddle of pink swirl into the sea. She saw tonight become tomorrow. And then—

She saw him return. “Did he get the letter?” Anne demanded.

There was an uncomfortable squirm. “Yessim.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean?” Anne asked softly.

The boy squirmed again. “He didn’t say anything. He just—tossed it away.” Not meeting her eyes—“I’m sorry.”

Anne was shaking her head. “That’s not possible. I—I don’t understand. That’s just not possible.”

But it was. And so Jeanne took her arm. “Come on.” Gently tugging her away—“It’s time to go home.”

St. Agnes usually had quiet mornings—mornings of deep slumber and shallow breathing until the alarm clock went. That day, however, everyone was awake early. The dormitory was lined with twittering and squirming girls. Their skinny arms and flannel pajamas made a veritable sea of skin and cotton sheep and fuzzy slippers.

“What’s going on?” Jeanne demanded. “What on Earth are you—”

She never finished. At that moment, Anne reached the door to her room. For some reason, it was slightly ajar. The girl frowned. She gently pushed it open. The hallway held its breath. The girls leaned forward. Jeanne leaned forward. Time stilled. And then—

“Oh! *Anne!*”

The room was filled with white magnolias. They lined every surface—bed and dresser and chair and windowsill and floor. They perfumed the room with a velvety scent—a smell of moonshine and dancing and endless night.

A few of the girls followed them inside. “He was here. He waited until the last possible moment.”

Jeanne closed her eyes.

“But then he had to go. And so—”

There was a strangled sound. Jeanne instantly opened her eyes. She glanced at Anne. “What? What is it?”

The girl was sitting on her bed. She seemed to be holding something—something small and brown and cubic.

“*What is it?*”

Her friend said nothing. She simply opened the box. She withdrew the golden ring. She stared at it. And then she started to cry.

“Baby!” Jeanne crooned. “*Baby!*”

She raced forward. But Anne said—“Leave me.”

“Anne!”

“*Leave me!*”

And so Jeanne left. She left Anne and the golden ring and the white magnolias. And after that—

“Well? *What?*”

Jeanne blinked. Her companion was waiting expectantly. She shrugged. “She locked the door for two weeks. And then it was over.”

“What do you mean?”

“She opened the door. She went on living.”

“But without Frank.”

“Yeah.” A nod. “Without Frank.”

The shopkeeper appeared beside them. “Would you like a mirror?”

Jeanne smiled. “Please!” A moment later, she glimpsed her reflection. The amber necklace had a beautiful shine and cut. The pendant hung just beneath her collarbone.

“Why didn’t he respond?”

He had never responded to any of her letters. Anne had written for two years. Envelope after envelope after envelope had been addressed to naval base after naval base after naval base. And never had she received a reply. Jeanne knew what Frank would say.

“Letters are so—dry. So cold. So—*practical.*”

“And—” Anne would prompt.

“Our love was never practical.”

But *that* time—“He never got it.”

“I don’t understand. Did the boy lie?”

“Not precisely. He just found the wrong Frank.” The poor boy had loyally and painstakingly delivered the letter to Frank Gray—a balding man with halitosis and a snaggletooth. Private Gray had snorted impatiently and torn it up. Who the hell was Anne? It was years later that the truth emerged.

Her companion whistled. “Christ!”

Jeanne nodded. Then she shook herself and smiled brightly. “Come now! Enough of this. Let’s to the *important* things.”

Her companion smiled back. “What would those be?”

“To start with—” She tilted her head slightly. “What do you think of this necklace?”

He looked at it. His gaze was contemplative. Then he leaned over and whispered something in her ear. She blushed. Then she turned to the shopkeeper and said firmly—“We’ll take it.”

The shopkeeper nodded. “Very good.”

All around them, the shop continued to buzz. The smug girls were examining a different necklace.

“My papa simply *hates* Cartier.” So said the fat girl. “He says that they don’t know *anything* about making jewelry.”

Her friend nodded. “I agree. I *completely* agree.”

Jeanne glanced at her friend. “Do you hear that? What little monsters!”

The older woman seemed to agree. She said sharply to the smaller girl—“Does your mother know that you’re here?”

The smaller girl frowned. “How is that *your* business?” Her tone was haughty. “I can go where I please.”

The woman was unfazed. “Her orders were clear. Nothing new until Christmas.”

The girl scowled. “Really! Don’t get your panties in a bunch. We’re not here for *me*. We’re here for Fiona.” She paused. “God knows that *my* parents aren’t that generous.”

The older woman started to reply. Before she could, however, the shopkeeper returned. “Are you Mrs. Watson?”

The woman nodded. “I am.”

“Good. The pearls are ready.”

“Could you fix the clasp?”

“It wasn’t hard. Just the tip was dented.”

“Excellent. Mrs. Wadsworth will be *so* pleased.”

Jeanne started. “Mrs. Wadsworth!” Had she heard that right?

The shopkeeper nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

“Should I put it on the account?”

“Please.”

The two girls continued to ogle the merchandise. They pointed at various rings and bracelets and necklaces. They looked around impatiently. Then the smaller girl stepped behind the counter and—

“Miss Wadsworth! *Please!*”

Jeanne started. “Did he say Miss Wadsworth?”

The girl sneered. “What?” Her voice had a bellicose strain. “We want to try that necklace.”

“Then I’ll get it for you.” Disapprovingly—“You *know* that you can’t go back there.”

“But we want it *now*.”

“Heavens!” Jeanne cried. “But it just can’t be!”

Her companion frowned. “*What* can’t be?”

“That girl cannot be Emily Wadsworth!”

Mildly—“Why not?”

“Come now! Just look at her! She’s so—” What was the word? “So—” It was on the tip of her tongue! “Drab!” Yes! That was it! “She’s so *drab*.”

Emily whirled around suddenly. “*What did you just say?*”

Jeanne glanced at her eagerly. “Are you really Emily Wadsworth?”

Coldly—“What’s it to you?”

“So you *are!* Oh! Heavens! What a way to meet!” She extended her hand. “I’m Jeanne! Jeanne Richardson.”

Emily looked at the hand. Then she looked at Jeanne. "I've never heard the name."

Jeanne let the hand fall. Then she said calmly—"I rather doubt that."

"Why?"

"For one thing—" With a sweet smile—"You're named after me." Emily froze. Jeanne nodded. "Jeanne Emily Hammonds Richardson." A laugh. "Heavens! How silly it sounds! What a mouthful! But dear Anne was *so* adamant about it!" An impatient shake of the head. "But that was years ago. *Do* let's be civil! Who's your friend? Come now! Introduce me!"

Emily blinked. But Fiona stepped forward first. "Fiona Callins." She extended a hand.

"Jeanne Richardson." Jeanne took it. They shook.

Then Fiona said calmly—"My daddy owns this block."

"What was that?"

"Have you heard of Callins drugstores?"

Politely—"Yes."

"We own them. So—" With a shrug—"I'm just saying. We own this part of town."

"Do you?" Jeanne asked mildly.

"Yes."

"Everything from the drugstore to the—" She strove to remember. "The Laundro-rama."

"Yes."

Jeanne nodded. "That *is* rather impressive."

Smugly—"Yes."

Jeanne stared at her. Then she burst into laughter. "Oh! Heavens! You're really too much!"

Fiona stiffened. Her cheeks turned a blossoming pink. Then she glanced imperiously at Emily. "Come on." Her voice was a sneer. "I think that we've had enough of *this* place. We can take our business *elsewhere*."

Emily nodded vigorously. "Absolutely. I *completely* agree."

Jeanne watched them. How sad! How terribly sad! She almost had pity on the poor dears.

"Oh! Fiona!" *Almost*.

The girl paused. "What?"

"Before you go—" She smiled sweetly. "I'd just like to return the favor."

"*What* favor?"

"Well! Now that I've been welcomed on *your* block—" An expansive shrug. "Fair is fair! You must be welcomed to visit *mine*."

Fiona frowned. "And which block would *that* be?"

"Oh!" Jeanne cried dismissively. "It's in America. One of the silly islands south of Connecticut!"

"Which island?"

"Manhattan."

"*Are you saying that you own Manhattan?*"

"Oh! Heavens no! I'm saying that we own a *block*."

"Which block?"

Sweetly—"It's called Wall Street."

Fiona stared at her. Then she turned away. To Emily—"Let's go."

And they went. Jeanne sighed deeply. "Perhaps that *might* have gone better."

Her companion snorted. "You think!"

"Well! It was just so sudden! I'm not sure *what* I expected—" Had she expected anything? "But it certainly wasn't that! She was just so—so drab!"

Her companion suppressed a smile. "I believe that you mentioned that." He paused. "To her face."

"Well! It's *true!*"

"She's not *that* ugly."

"Oh! I suppose not. And she was certainly better than the goat!"

"*What?*"

"Come now! You must have noticed. Miss Callins was simply a fright!"

"Do you think so?"

"I *know* so! The long face! The dull eyes! The lank hair! The overall effect was quite shocking. The poor creature rather resembled a depressed goat. And does that sound attractive to *you*?" Without waiting for an answer—"But it wasn't her *looks* that I really minded. It was her *expression*. So much contempt! So much arrogance! And that *temper!*" An incredulous shake of the head. "I'd swear that she was having flashes."

Her companion nearly choked. "Flashes."

"*Hot* flashes."

"Are you sure about that? She seems a bit—young for that."

"Ahhhh." Jeanne nodded. "But you forget."

"*What?*"

"Goats mature faster."

Her companion blinked. "Yes." He coughed. "There is that."

Jeanne nodded firmly. "And that takes us right back!"

"*Does* it?"

"Certainly! Don't you see? Emily is just like Fiona. It's not her *looks* that are the problem. There's just no—no sparkle! And *besides*—" A sidelong glance. "Have you seen Anne? Now *Anne* is a knockout!"

Drily—"Let's say that I've heard."

Jeanne grinned. Mrs. Watson cleared her throat. "Emily has always taken after Henry." She paused. Then she added—"In more ways than one."

Jeanne nodded. "Now that explains a lot!" And the pieces slowly came together. She smiled at the older woman. "I don't believe that we've met! I'm Jeanne."

"So I heard. My name is Esmeralda Watson." She paused. "I work for Mrs. Wadsworth."

"Is that right? Well now! How wonderful! Are you the housekeeper?"

Mrs. Watson nodded.

"How lovely!" She smiled. "So you must know everything!"

"What do you mean?"

“You know! Her likes and dislikes.” Jeanne grinned. “Her secrets.”

“*What* secrets?” Mrs. Watson countered. “Mrs. Wadsworth *has* no secrets.”

Jeanne laughed. “Silly thing! *Everyone* has secrets.” She paused. “And *especially* Anne Bradshaw!”

“But you forget.”

“What?”

“She’s not Anne Bradshaw anymore.”

“Are you sure about that?” Jeanne asked mildly.

“Well! I should know!”

With a sly smile—“But maybe that’s her secret.”

The shopkeeper carefully placed the amber necklace into a box. Her companion withdrew his wallet.

“Will you pay by check?”

“Cash.”

The shopkeeper nodded. “Very good.” The transaction was quickly done.

To Jeanne—“Are you ready?”

She nodded. “But I must quickly run to the loo. Should we meet outside?”

“That’s fine.”

She raced off. And behind her—

“Mrs. Watson!”

“Mrs. Wadsworth!”

Anne smiled. “I was just getting fitted.”

Mrs. Watson nodded. “I was getting the pearls.”

“Oh! Were they fixed?”

“Perfectly.”

“Excellent!”

“And you’ll never guess who *else* was there.”

“Where?”

“At the shop.”

“Who?”

“Emily.”

“Emily! Is that right?”

“She was with Fiona.”

Anne sighed. Fiona Callins was bad news. The girl had a vile temper. And there was something about her appearance that was oddly—disconcerting. Long face. Dull eyes. Pale skin. The overall effect was rather shocking. It reminded Anne of a—

“Jeanne was there!”

“What! Do you mean Jeanne Richards?”

“I do. In fact—” Glancing at a blonde gentleman—“I believe that she’s coming right out.”

The gentleman nodded. “That’s right. She just ran to the loo.”

Anne blinked. “Do you know Jeanne?”

“I do.”

“Then I do apologize. I don’t believe that we’ve—” It was the man from Café Hampstead! She was sure of it! Hair of burnished blonde—

Sparkling eyes—

Weathered skin—

It was him! How strange!

“What was that?”

“I don’t believe that we’ve met.” She shook herself. “Anne Wadsworth.”

He took the extended hand. “Daniel Enkes.” His grip was firm—firm and steady. But that name! The name rang a bell. But *why?* Where? *How?* “Did Jeanne met Emily?” The question sounded loud.

Mrs. Watson glanced at Daniel. Then she shifted slightly. “You could say that.” The words sounded careful.

Oh God. “What does that mean?” Anne demanded.

Mrs. Watson said—“Nothing.”

Daniel said—“You know Jeanne.”

She said—“Yes. And—”

“She occasionally lacks a certain—subtlety.”

A snort. “You don’t say.” She waited.

“I believe that she compared Fiona to a menopausal goat.”

There was a short pause. Then Anne said calmly—“Well! That seems a bit unfair.”

Daniel shrugged. “Probably. But her justification was that—”

“I meant to the goat.”

Mrs. Watson was stricken. “Mrs. Wadsworth!”

But Daniel cracked up. She smiled. A bit of summer sunlight hit her cheek. It felt good—deliciously good. And for just a moment—

Just a moment—

She opened her eyes. She looked at Daniel. And she said—“Perhaps this is a long shot. But is there any chance that—”

Donnnnnng.

“What?”

But Anne was frozen. “Is there any chance that—”

Donnnnnng. A shiver raced through her.

“Are you okay?” That was Daniel.

“Mrs. Wadsworth!” That was Mrs. Watson. But their voices were oddly distant. She took a deep breath. “I have to go.”

Mrs. Watson blinked. “But Jeanne is just inside. Surely you want—”

“I’m sorry. I really have to go! So much to do! Dinner and mother and Peter—” To Daniel—“It was wonderful to meet you! I’m so sorry to run. I just—” And she dashed off. She dove into the crowd. Her hair and dress and arms and legs were quickly lost to view. And—

Donnnnnnng.

The clock continued to strike. Four o’clock. Four hours until Toby delivered the letters —the letters that she had written. She could clearly remember the quiet parlor. She could remember the ink. She could remember the wooden desk and chair. She could remember Toby.

“What time?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“That’s fine.”

Four o’clock. Three hours until dinner. Her mother would be coming. She would have to look smart. What should she wear? Yellow? Pink? Red? Gray? Something with pearls. Her mother loved the pearls.

“A perfect blend of classy and young.” So she had said. And Henry—

“Those are beautiful pearls.” He had said that. He had thought that they were for *him*. While she had picked at French bread and buttered beans and soup, he had simpered at her. While her mother and Mrs. Wadsworth had talked about who knew what—

“How quiet she is! I do hate girls that chatter so! How terribly bothersome!”

“I quite agree.”

He had tried to engage her about Proust and cricket and the stocks.

“Do you follow the stocks?”

She had stared at him. *You fool.*

He had thought that they were for him—the pearls. The dress. Everything. He had assumed it. After all, it was obvious. He was Mr. Wadsworth. She was the future Mrs. Wadsworth. The only question was—

The only question *was*—

She dashed through the crowd. Men and women streamed by. She went faster and faster. She started to sweat. Maybe if she just outran it—

Maybe if she just kept running—

Donnnnnnng. She froze again. No sounds followed. The clock was done. It was finally four o’clock. And across town—

Henry said—“Close the door.”

Jerome closed the door. As the boy approached, Henry frowned slightly. Although he had made an effort, dampening his hair with water, he had a scruffy appearance. His hair was a mop of brown curls. His nose was thin and bookish.

“Have a seat! Have a seat!” Henry indicated the empty chair. “It’s good to see you!”

Jerome sat down. “Yessir.” Stiffly—“It’s good to see you.”

Henry leaned back. “Let’s chat for a moment. No need to rush things! Business is business—” Business was *always* business. It was taxes and orders and endless meetings. It was sweat and labor and

the smell of smelting iron. “But you can still be human about it.” He had always prided himself on that. Some bosses were just concerned with numbers and statistics. But not *him*. He knew that business was *also* about relationships. “Tell me about yourself!”

Jerome blinked. “What would you like to know?”

“Where are you from? What’s your family like? Have you got any siblings?”

“I’m from East London. I’ve got a mum and a dad and two brothers and a sister. The brothers are younger. Their names are Jamie and Harry. My sister is named Margot. But she—”

How could Anne say that he lacked compassion? How could she imply that he was unfeeling? Just look at him! Look at *this!* He cared deeply. Was it not obvious? Some bosses used their workers. When they looked at ordinary boilermen and assistants and machinists, they saw an impenetrable jumble of names and figures. But not him. When *he* looked at his workers, he saw *people*. He got to *know* them. He cared. How could she say that he was insensitive? How wrong could she be?

Jerome had fallen silent. Henry nodded vaguely. “Yes.” Another nod. “Very good.”

The boy stilled. Then he asked—“*What’s* very good?”

“What you were just saying.”

“About my sister.”

“Yes.”

There was a brief pause. Then—“Are you sure?”

Henry frowned. “Of course. Why *wouldn’t* I be?” Really! What *was* he about?

“But *how?*” Jerome inquired.

“What do you mean? How *what?*”

“How is it good that my sister has a degenerative disease?”

Henry froze. “Well! It’s good that she’s doing better now.”

“But she’s not. She’s doing worse. And my dad—”

“Would you like a biscuit?” Henry asked. They had been a present from Mr. Biggerton. There was a whole assortment of them—chocolate and butter and toffee and vanilla cream. “I recommend the toffee.”

“Which are they?” Jerome asked politely.

“The tan ones.”

Jerome squinted at the tin. “There aren’t any.”

Henry shifted impatiently. “Then choose another.”

The boy delicately selected a chocolate biscuit. Henry nodded with satisfaction. He hated the chocolate. “Now then! Where were we?”

“We were talking about my family.”

“*Were* we? Oh! Of course. Well! I’m quite happy that you shared. I really feel that I know you now.” He smiled. “Now there’s something that I want to discuss. The thing is—”

There was a knock at the door. Roland peeped inside. “Sir!”

Henry frowned. “I’m busy. What is it?”

Roland looked nervous. “I’m sorry. But there’s someone here for you.”

“I’m having a meeting.” Really!

“I understand that.” The slender assistant was starting to sweat. “But he said that you’d want to know.”

“Who is it?” Henry snapped.

“His name is Peter.”

“What!” He jumped up. Peter! Here! *Now!* Good heavens! “Well then! You should have said so!” Could it really be? “Go on then! Send him in!”

Roland glanced pointedly at Jerome. “Yessir. But—*now?*”

Henry blinked. “No. Not *now.*” He paused. “Say that I’ll be just a moment.”

Roland nodded. “Very good.” And he closed the door.

Henry looked at Jerome. “Well then! Where were we? Oh! Yes. The thing is—” He waited. No interruption came. “We have to let you go.”

Jerome stared at him. “What was that?”

Henry nodded. “I’m terribly sorry. I am. But my hands are quite tied!” He shuffled some papers on his desk. Well now! This changed everything. Forget the party next weekend. They would have to improvise. What were they doing tonight? Oh! The dinner with the Hendersons. Well! Peter could just come to that! He would just *love* the Hendersons!

“I don’t—I don’t understand. What have I done?”

“Oh! It’s not *you!* You haven’t done a thing! It’s just this economy. That’s how the market is. It’s nothing personal.”

Jerome sat back. “It’s nothing personal.” He sounded dazed.

“Of course not! You’re a fine boy. I’m sure that you’ll find another job.”

“But *where?*”

“Where?” Henry repeated. “Where? How would *I* know? Wherever you want!” He glanced at the clock. Perhaps he could leave a bit early. Perhaps they could have a bit of a walkabout. They could see the major sights—Hyde Park and the wharf and the Tower of London and London Bridge. After all—“Don’t you see? That’s the great thing about Britain. Think about the freedom that you have! You can go anywhere! You can do anything! *I* won’t tell you where to go. Only *you* can decide that!”

Jerome blinked. “But—where *can* I go? It’s a recession. Who’s hiring during a recession?”

“What? What was that? Come now! That’s for *you* to decide! It’s *your* right to go wherever *you* please! It’s not my business where you go! That’d just be—fascism! After all, why should *I* dictate how *you* should live *your* life? And why should *anyone* tell *me* how to live mine? How *I* should run *my* factory? What wages I should set? What benefits I should give? *What right has the government to infringe on that?* Workers have the right to work where they please! Let *them* decide to work somewhere! Let *them* decide to accept the terms that are offered! Let them choose! Don’t you see? That’s what it’s all about!”

Jerome blinked. Cautiously—“*What* is it all about?”

“*Freedom!* Is it not obvious? It’s freedom of choice! It’s a matter of—of civil liberties! Freedom of speech! Freedom of religion! *Freedom to work where you please!* It’s all the same. Don’t you see? And that’s what we have. That’s what makes Britain great!” He looked at his watch. “Well! We really must finish up.”

Jerome stared at him. “What about my dad?” His voice sounded thick. “Is he—”

Henry shifted. “That’s really a different matter—wholly different! You can’t be worried about that. It’s nothing personal. It’s just the economy! This is what the market does.”

“But about my father—”

“You’ll have to sign this.”

Jerome blinked. “What is this?”

Henry shoved the paper forward. “Oh! Nothing really. It’s just about your paycheck. You’ve got to sign for it. Since it’s the last one—”

“What do you mean?” Jerome demanded quickly. “What about severance pay?”

Henry frowned. “Well! Really! You must be reasonable.”

Through gritted teeth—“I *am* being reasonable. And I *reasonably* want to know about—”

“But you must remember the contract!” Henry cried. Really! The boy was growing quite tiresome.

Jeremy paused. “I *do* remember the contract.”

“Then you must recall the extraordinary circumstances clause! Any worker is entitled to severance pay—”

“Yes.”

“*Unless extraordinary circumstances apply.* Well now! Do you hear that? Extraordinary circumstances! And that’s exactly what these are!”

Jerome frowned. “I don’t remember that. Just where was that—”

“You must understand that it’s for the greater good. There’s a company to think about! Hundreds of workers! If we make an exception now—”

“Show me that clause.”

Henry frowned. “I really haven’t the time for that!” A glance at his watch. “It must be clear that I’ve much to do! This place doesn’t run itself.”

“No.” Caustically—“Mr. Trane runs it.”

“What?” Henry snapped. “What was that? Come now! Let’s keep this amicable. I’m sure that you don’t want any nastiness! And remember that one word from me to—”

“You can’t be serious!” Jerome exploded. “Are you threatening to blackball me?”

“Certainly not! Did you hear me say that? I was simply making a point. Let’s keep this civil! I’m just doing my job. I’m following the contract.” He tapped the thick stack of papers. “It’s not my fault if—”

There was a knock at the door. Roland ducked inside.

“*What?*” Henry growled. “Whatever it is—”

Roland shook his head. His pallor was oddly pale. “The message isn’t for you.” With a glance at the bookish boy—“It’s for Jerome.”

Henry frowned. “What do you mean? What could you possibly have—”

Jerome rose. “What’s going on?”

Roland swallowed. “I think that you’d better come.”

“Why? What happened?” His voice had developed a panicked edge. “What the hell happened.

There was a momentary pause. Then Roland said—“It’s your father.”  
“What about my father?”  
“He’s collapsed.”

## EVENING

The ground was freezing cold. The wall was even colder. Dirt filled her shoes. Misty shadows filled her eyes. And in her arms—

“Shhhhhhh.”

“Meow.”

“I know.” Fridays were *always* hard.

Margot held Mr. Pussycat close. His fur warmed her neck and chest and arms. She could feel the rapid beating of his heart.

“Meow.”

“I know.”

She knew that the day was growing older. It was growing longer. The sunlight was growing weaker. She knew that the alleyway was filled with darkness—darkness and creeping shadows. There was a dumpster nearby. The trash radiated a scent of old compost and fish and spoiled cheese. Tears pricked her eyes. How had it happened? Why had it happened? Why had the cheese gone bad? *Why had nobody done anything?* And now—

Evening had come. The sunlight was disappearing. She loved night—loved the dark blue and ghostly gray and pinpricks of stars. She loved the feeling of cool wind and dusk. But—

There were no stars here. The buildings blocked them. They covered them. They hid them away. But *why?* Why would anyone want to hide the stars? Houses—apartments—cars—umbrellas—roofs—doors—cities—

What good were they? What purpose did they serve? *Why would anyone want to hide the stars?*

She huddled against the wall. There were people. There was a mother and daughter. They were hanging washing on a line. The line was made of thin tweed. The washing was a mix of shirts and trousers and colorful skirts. She liked the skirts best—a manmade bouquet of stripes and flowers and patterns and swirls. How pretty they were! How colorful! How bright!

“Meow!”

They were singing. The women were singing. It was a song about—

She frowned. It was a song about—

The wind blew. The wind blew the shirts and trousers and colorful skirts. It rattled the tin cans that lined their doorstep—cans of corn and peas and carrots and soup. Why so many cans? How much corn could you eat? The wind blew harder. It blew away the sunshine. It blew away their song. And then—

“Meow!”

What was that? Was that rain? A droplet hit her head. Then there was another. Another. Another. The wind blew harder. The cans rattled more.

“Come on then! Git it down!”

The laundry was disappearing now. Shirts and trousers and colorful skirts leapt into the wicker hamper. They fled inside. The women cursed the breeze. They cursed the rain. They cursed the newsmen.

“Damn reporters! Do they ever get it right?” And then—

Slam! Bang! The door closed. They were gone. Margot hugged herself. Slam! She was alone again. No more chocolate. No more milk. No more biscuits. No more stars. And if there were no stars—

If they were hidden away—

If they were *gone*—

*Could there be any beauty left?*

“Meow!”

“I know.”

The wind blew harder. A can rolled onto the pavement. It rolled across twigs and leaves and bits of trash. It was racing—running—sprinting—tearing away. She watched it. A shiver raced through her. And then—

There it was! She understood. She was a fool! A fool! A fool! She leapt up. She followed the can. *She* was racing—running—sprinting—tearing away.

“Meow!”

“Come on!” Was he following? There was no time to lose! The storm was starting! The rain was falling! And where was she? Trapped between buildings! Drowning in shadows! Waiting! Waiting! *Waiting!* What had she been thinking? The wind rose. Why hide? Why crawl? Why drown? Why wait? What was she waiting *for*?

The excitement grew. It boiled. It broiled. It warmed. It enlightened. It electrified. Houses—apartments—cars—umbrellas—roofs—doors—cities—

They could be overcome! If she just went—

Just ran—

Just spun—

Just escaped—

Just felt the rain and snow and cool mist—

If she simply saw the stars—

“What?” Mama had asked. Always that question! When she was trembling at the cry of a siren—

“What?” When she was afraid to fall asleep—

“What?” When the world became too loud and cold and dry—

When she huddling underneath her covers—

“Time for bed! Shhhhhhhhh.”

When she was huddling underneath the stairs—

“Baby! It’s okay. Come out!”

When she was breathing on the roof—

What air! What sweet air! Hints of honey and lilac! Morning! Come up! Can you smell it? Can you taste it? Day!

“Come down now! You’ll hurt yourself. Come down!”

When the ground turned upside down—

When the snows came—

When they melted—

When the day came—

When it melted—

When the night came—

When it ran away—

“What?” Always that question! “What?” But now she knew. To live! To love! To sing! That was life! To run! To spin! To feel the rain! *To feel!* The only question was—

The only question *was*—

Where was Jamie? He had been here. He had said to wait. What had she done? Had she left him? No! But there had been Mr. Pussycat. He had needed milk. He had been lonely—lonely because the mouse had gone away. And so she had said—

“You can play with me.”

And now the can was rolling faster. She followed. The buildings were so tall! So dark! Would she ever make it? *Would she ever feel the rain?* The alleyway slid by. Doors slid by. Steps slid by. Trashcans and rubbish and rocks and abandoned flyers came and went. Would she ever make it? Would it ever end? And then—

Cars whizzed by. She stopped abruptly. London! Life! People! Rain! She looked upward. She saw the grays skies and clouds and black dots of rain. She laughed. There! To live! To love! To sing! To run! To spin! She understood. And so she started to spin. She spun around and around and around. Mr. Pussycat watched. Strangers frowned. Umbrellas opened. Cars chugged. And the can—

What about the can? It rolled on and on and on. It fell into the street—

Clank! Underneath a truck—

Whizz! Past a Sedan—

Whurr! Between a Volvo and an Oldsmobile—

Thwap! And then—

Crunch! The twisting of a heel.

“What was that?” Mr. Tilney asked.

Mr. Trane shrugged. “Some piece of processed crap.”

Mr. Tilney nodded. “Nice.”

Mr. Trane extinguished his cigarette. “Have you spoken to him?”

“Who?”

“Henry.”

“About—”

Mr. Trane nodded.

A shake of the head. “No. But he said four o’clock. And you know that he hates—”

*“Air! Give him air!”*

Mr. Trane frowned. “What the hell is that?”

*“Did you hear me? Back away! Give him air!”*

Their gazes met. Then Mr. Trane said—“Bloody hell!” And they raced inside.

It was just starting to rain. Raindrops splashed against the windows. Gray clouds gave the factory an eerie glow. There was a semicircle of gaping men. And in the middle—

*“Dad! Say something!”*

There was Jerome. Mr. Trane blinked. “What happened? What’s going on?”

Roger Davies said—“He collapsed.”

“I can see that! What happened?”

“He was near the furnace—”

Mr. Trane froze. “What? What do you mean? Why was he there?”

“He was loading it. Mr. Simpson put him on—”

*“Johnny!”*

Johnny Simpson had a hunted look. “I didn’t know.”

“Bullshit!”

“Mr. Wadsworth said that we needed it done! And with Rob and Danny missing—”

“Mr. Wadsworth isn’t the foreman!”

“Someone had to do it!”

“Did Mr. Tilney say to?”

*“Someone had to do it!”*

“Not George!”

“I didn’t know!”

*“Bullshit!”*

Mr. Redding was sitting up.

“Call an ambulance!” Rodney Breakview yelled. He was sitting beside Jerome. “Call an ambulance!”

Hoarsely—“I don’t need an ambulance.”

“Then call a taxi!”

Jeff Jeffreys said—“There are no taxis.”

“Why not?”

“They’re on strike.”

“Fucking cabbies!”

Jerome slowly rose. His father leaned against him. “Let’s go home.” The voice was a whisper. “We’ll walk.”

Mr. Trane blinked. “Can somebody get their things? They need—”

But their things had been fetched. Mr. Trane quietly approached them.

“You’ll be okay.” He was looking at George. “You’ll be okay. And tomorrow—”

Tonelessly—“There is no tomorrow.”

Mr. Trane missed a beat. “What?”

Jerome was concentrating on the ground. His muscles were straining. “We got the axe.”

*Shit!* For a moment—

Just a moment—

He had forgotten. “I’m sorry.” The words had a rough edge. He swallowed. “But you’re gonna be fine. I know it. You just—”

“That’s crap!” Jerome whispered fiercely. “You don’t know shit!” His neck had corded up. Sweat drenched his collar. “Extraordinary circumstances? *Extraordinary circumstances?* My ass! I read the fucking contract. Don’t you get it? I read it!”

Mr. Trane stared at him. What?

“That clause doesn’t exist!”

*What* clause? “What the hell are you—”

But then Jerome had been swept away. He had left the factory. He was going home.

“Come now!” Mr. Tilney roared. “Back to work! Everyone!”

But not Mr. Trane. He stayed perfectly still. The men milled around him.

“Are you okay?” Mr. Tilney asked quietly.

He said nothing. Then—“Where’s Henry?”

“I don’t know. Roland said something about an old friend.”

Mr. Trane nodded. Then he turned away. The door was still open. A bit of rain blew through, spattering gently—wetly—against his hand and arm. London was quickly becoming a mess. The streets were turning into thick rivers of chocolate mud. The chocolate mud was becoming sludge. And through the endless sludge—

“Damn it!”

“What?”

“It’s Inspector Thomas.”

“So?”

“He can’t know about this!” With a panicked glance—“You’ve got to do something!”

“What?”

“Say something! Say that—” He paused. “Say that—”

But Mr. Trane had turned away. “Don’t worry.” His voice was oddly flat. “I know exactly what to say.” And he stepped outside.

“Sir!”

Inspector Thomas ground to a halt. “I was just coming inside. I believe that—”

“Why don’t you wait a moment? I was hoping that we might—chat.”

“Do you mean—here?” The man frowned. “But it’s raining. Why don’t we just—”

“What about coffee?”

“What?”

“There’s a bakery nearby. I’ll buy you a cup.”

Inspector Thomas frowned. Then he said drily—“I’ve had my fill of coffee.”

Softly—“Then come for the company.”

There was a moment of surprised silence. Then came—"Lead the way." And Mr. Trane smiled.

It was rather strange. He had seldom thought about rain. It was simply a fact of life—a byproduct of condensation and temperamental clouds. At the moment, however, it was more than that. At the moment, he could feel it—really feel it. And strangely enough—

Crazily enough—

Nothing had ever felt so good.

But would it last? That was the question. That was *always* the question. Mrs. Harrington stepped back, staring intently at the enormous picture. For a moment, it appeared to hold. She held her breath. One. Two. Three. Then it slipped again, settling at a raucous angle. She sighed. Hanging pictures was a talent that she wholly lacked. In this, it joined a surfeit of useful activities—from jumpstarting cars to cooking a decent soufflé—that had perennially perplexed her. The logical conclusion would be to wait. After all, what was worse than a crooked picture? Hardly anything! It bespoke negligence and a hideous want of attention. And yet—

Its time had come. So Millie had said earlier. It had been just after lunch. The tea had barely boiled when—

Rap. Rap. Rap. She had frozen. Was that a knock? "Who is it?"

It was Millie. She had a question.

Mrs. Harrington had quickly opened the door. "Is something the matter?"

No! Not at all! Was this a bad time?

Mrs. Harrington frowned. The art teacher was holding something. It was something large and—"Is that a painting?"

A nod.

"Is that—" She looked closer. "But that *can't* be—"

Another nod. It was. It was *the* painting. "Why do you have that?" Mrs. Harrington had asked quietly.

Silence.

"*Why?*"

Because its time had come.

"What do you mean?" But she knew. After years of sitting neglected—

Years of facing the wall—

Gathering dust—

Gathering mothballs—

Growing old—

The painting simply needed to be hung. It had a story to tell.

"I thought that we decided against it." Her voice was quiet.

Millie nodded. They had.

"It is rather—intense."

Yes. It was.

"The governors would certainly object."

It was true.

“People might not—understand.”

They might not. Even so—

“What?”

Its time had come.

With a sigh—“Why now?”

Why not?

So she had taken the painting. Millie had left. She had closed the wooden door. As she did so, a sea of memories flooded back. She remembered the day that Anne had locked herself away. She remembered the paints and canvas that Millie had brought her. She remembered the moment that Anne had opened the door. She remembered the smell of paint and sweat and dead flowers.

“Anne! What is it? What are you trying to say?”

“There’s no more color.”

Urgently—“We can get you more.”

A shake of the head. “There’s no more color.”

They had taken the painting after that. Millie had stored it away. And Anne—Anne had left her room. She had showered. She had combed her hair. She had studied geography and history and Latin. She had eaten and slept and *lived*. And when Henry came to visit—

When he arrived with tickets to an opera—

“Do you like opera?”

She had gone with him. She had stepped into his coach. They had driven away. And that had been that.

Mrs. Harrington blinked. It was five thirty-five. Sandra and Fields would arrive soon. They were heading to the concert together. The soloist was supposed to be quite excellent. Did she have everything? Purse. Coat. Hat. Keys. She was good to go. Her gaze returned to the painting.

“What is it?” So she had asked Millie.

With a shrug—“I don’t know.”

“Is that a castle?”

“I think.”

“Is that a witch?”

“It might be.”

“Is that a—pumpkin?”

“It *was* a pumpkin.”

“What is now?”

“Squash.”

“Ha-ha.” Mrs. Harrington leaned closer. “My God!”

“What?”

“It’s like a—a fairytale gone bad.”

Millie nodded. That was exactly what it was. It was a mixture of every fairytale that Disney had thought to touch—Cinderella and Snow White and Sleeping Beauty and all of the rest. And yet—

They were wrong. They were all wrong. The colors were too bright. The eyes were too big. The teeth were too long. The sky was too—too orange. The pumpkin carriage had become a feast for rabid rats. Seeds and stringy entrails and pumpkin flesh blanketed the ground. Sleeping Beauty had been impaled on her spindle, spilling blood and hair and silk onto the ground. In the background, her godmothers—a giggling gaggle of comely ladies—played poker with Maleficent. Snow White had been baked into an apple pie. While her prince tried to find her, vainly combing the sea of melted sugar and cinnamon, her stepmother smiled and stirred. Beauty had shunned the Beast. Her face was a twisted mask of disgust. Whilst her lover begged and pleaded eloquently, pushing a magic rose at her feet, she held him callously at bay and admired her reflection. The mirror was made of solid gold. Aladdin had tried to find the magic lamp. As he had flown, however, his carpet had come unraveled. Fearing the lava that covered the floor, he had desperately reached for a protruding ledge—a book that jutted from the wall. The book bucked beneath his grasp. Inky letters careened into the magma below. His efforts, however, had been futile. As he sought to find purchase, Jasmine—sweet Jasmine—industriously pried his fingers free.

Mrs. Harrington sighed. The governors would surely disapprove. The painting was a nightmare—a nightmare of what *should* have been a dream. And yet—

Maybe Millie was right. Maybe its time *had* come. Maybe it was a story that needed to be told. After all, some fairytales fall apart. Others never come together. And others—

Others just—

“Tell me again.” So Mrs. Herbert had said. She was concerned about Vanessa Herbert. “Tell me that she’ll be fine.”

Mrs. Harrington had. Vanessa Herbert would mature into a beautiful lady. And so *she* had.

“Tell me again.” So Mrs. Lewis had said. She was concerned about Rachel Lewis. “Tell me that she’ll do well.”

Mrs. Harrington had. Rachel Lewis would do marvelously well. And so *she* had. Over the years, she had seen generations pass by. She had seen girls become women and women become mothers and mothers become—old. She had seen good ones and bad ones and fat ones and thin ones and short ones and tall ones and more. But not once—

Not one time—

There was a knock at the door. “Come in!”

Emily entered. “You wanted to see me.” Her tone was belligerent.

*Had* she? Oh! Yes. “That’s right. I wanted to see that you were back.”

With frown—“I’m back.”

She smiled. “I can see that.”

“Can I go?”

“Not quite.” She gestured at an empty chair. “Sit. Talk.”

Emily sat. She said nothing.

“Well?” Mrs. Harrington asked gently. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Do you mean the necklace?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“The salesman was being a jerk.”

She frowned. “Don’t use that language.”

“What? He *was*.” She looked around impatiently. She surveyed the teak furniture and lace doilies and framed pictures and knickknacks. Then her gaze rested on a certain picture. She started. “Whoa!”

“What?”

She pointed. “What’s that?”

Mrs. Harrington smiled. “It’s my newest.” She paused. “Do you like it?”

“It’s horrible.”

The smile broadened. “I know.”

“Who did that?” Emily asked. She was transfixed.

“Her name was Anne.”

Emily glanced at her. “You don’t mean—” She stopped. “Not *my* Anne.”

For a moment, Mrs. Harrington looked at her. Then she shook her head. “No. Not *your* Anne.”

Emily nodded. “Good.” She fidgeted slightly. Her eyes continued to rove the room. An empty fireplace. Framed pictures. An old kaleidoscope with—

Emily stopped. “Is that yours?” She was instantly on her feet.

“It is now.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It once belonged to someone else. It now belongs to me.”

“Who?” Emily asked curiously. “What happened?”

“Her name was Anne.”

“What! Is it the same Anne?” She nodded at the picture.

Mrs. Harrington smiled. “It is.”

“And what happened? Did she give it to you?”

“Not quite. She was throwing it away.”

“Really? *Why?*” Another glance at the precious object. “It looks valuable.”

“It is.”

Emily glanced at her. There was a moment of silence. Then she blurted—“She sounds interesting.”

“Who?”

“This Anne.”

Mrs. Harrington smiled. “That she is.”

“Do you think that—” The girl stopped. “Maybe another day—” She stopped again.

Mrs. Harrington nodded politely. “Go on.”

“Could you tell me about her?”

Mrs. Harrington looked at her. Then she smiled. “Certainly.” And she stood. “You’re dismissed.” Emily ran away.

A long silence followed. The clock ticked. It was five forty-three. Over the years, she had seen generations pass by. She had seen girls become women and women become mothers and mothers become—old. She had seen good ones and bad ones and fat ones and thin ones and short ones and tall ones and more. But not once—

*Not one time* had she seen a girl beyond help—a girl beyond hope. How did she do it? How did she turn brats into ladies? How did she turn wild children into mature adults? The answer was simple. She believed.

To be sure, some fairytales fall apart. Others never coalesce. But *others*—

Others just *change*. She had never had the storybook romance. She never would. That time had come—and before it had come, it had gone. But—she had St. Agnes. She had hundreds of pupils—good ones and bad ones and fat ones and thin ones and short ones and tall ones and more. To be sure, some of the girls posed more of a challenge than others. Then again, that was what she loved.

She had never had the storybook romance. She had had dozens of them. She had had St. Agnes. And at the end of the day—

After everything that had happened and would happen—

She still believed. Mr. Redding looked at his wife. Red hair. Pink skin. Stubby nails and calluses. Somehow—

After everything—

“I just spoke to Mrs. Baker. The fares are low now. It’s a good time to buy tickets.”

He just looked at her. Then he said—“Sure.”

She said—“Do you need another blanket? I’ll be right back.” She came right back.

“Thank you.”

“Your cup is empty.”

“It’s nearly full.”

“I’ll get another.” She came right back.

Mr. Redding smiled. Calmly—“Is there anything else?”

Minerva Redding looked around. Wooden floor. Rickety bed. Heap of tattered blankets. A washbasin. Hot towels. Cold compresses. Closed window. Glasses of tea and water and nondescript medicine.

“Yes.” She nodded firmly. “You need another blanket.”

“I have nine.”

“It doesn’t matter. You need another.” She turned to the door. “I’ll be right back.” As she stepped forward, however, there was a thump on the stairs. A moment later, Jerome burst into the room.

“I’ve got the pills. The doctor said that—” The boy paused. “What the hell? Why is this place a furnace?”

Mrs. Redding frowned. “He’s sick.”

“So? He’s not a cactus.”

The frown grew. “Move aside.”

“Why?”

"I'm getting another blanket."

"Another blanket! *Mom!* It's July. He's going to suffocate!"

"Heat's good. I know these things."

"But you—"

Mr. Redding said—"Let her go."

Jerome sighed. "Fine." He moved aside.

"How are you?"

Jerome blinked. "How am *I?*"

"That's what I asked."

"I'm fine." Jerome fidgeted. "How are *you?*"

He nodded. "Better. I just—" There was a familiar feeling—a sharp stabbing through the ribs and chest. A fit of coughing ensued. When it was over, he lay back.

And Jerome said—"There was something that I wanted to ask you."

"Go on then." He was staring at the window. The rain had grown harder. It was pounding the thick glass.

"Before you went to Wadsworth Steelworks—"

How long ago had that been? Decades. Eons. Lifetimes.

"Where did you work?"

"I made shoes."

"I know that. But what was the name of the company?"

"Pimlico Shoes."

Jerome smiled. "I thought so."

"Why?" He glanced at his son.

"Some men were talking today. Did you ever meet someone called—"

Minerva reentered the room. "I've got the blankets."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought that you were getting *one.*"

"I was." She shrugged. "Three's better." To Jerome—"Shove it."

He shoved.

Mr. Redding looked at Minerva. Her eyes were the soft brown of fresh earth. He had always loved that about her. He told her. "You have beautiful eyes."

She slapped him lightly. "Hush up! They're nothing new!"

"They don't have to be."

"Do you need more tea? I've got some lovely chamomile."

He changed the subject. Speaking softly—"How much was the bill?"

The ministrations paused. He looked at her. "How much?"

"Don't you worry. We'll handle it."

Even softer—"How much was it?"

"We'll handle it."

Jerome stood up. He walked closer. "Do you need help? I've got some put aside. Just let me know what—"

*“Don’t you dare!”*

“Dad! I’m telling you. I can help.”

Firmly—“This isn’t your business.”

Jerome looked at them. He looked at his mother. He looked at his father. Then he nodded.

“Right.” And he walked downstairs.

Mr. Redding sighed. “So how bad is it?”

“Bad.”

“How bad?”

“Five hundred pounds.”

*“What?”*

“Don’t worry. We’ll make ends meet.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. We just—will.”

“But it’s not about that. It’s about the rent.” He paused. “The water. The electricity. The loans from last Christmas.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her voice had developed a mulish quality. “We’ll make it happen. Are you warm enough? Are you *too* warm?”

“I’m fine.” Looking around—“Where’s Margot?”

“She’s with Jamie.”

“Are they still gone?”

“Yes.”

“What about Harry?”

“He’s here. Do you want to see him?”

A shake of the head. “No. Just—” He stopped. “Yes.” Slowly—“*I do.*”

His wife nodded and left. A few moments passed. Then came—“Daddy? *Daddy!*”

He smiled. “Aren’t you looking big today!”

Harry grinned. “I’m even bigger than Jamie!”

“Are you?”

“Uh-huh!”

He smiled. Then he said—“I’ve got a question. Have you got any flowers left?”

“Nope! Sold ’em all!”

“Did you? Good boy.” He reached into his pocket. “Could you do daddy a favor?”

The boy waited.

“Take this.” He held out a tuppence. “Buy a bouquet of roses.”

“Do you want them *now?*” Harry asked doubtfully.

“Yes.”

“What color?”

“Red. And Harry—”

The boy paused at the door.

“When you come back—” He grinned. “Be sneaky about it.”

The boy grinned back. “Aye aye!” And he disappeared.

Mr. Redding glanced at his watch. It was five fifty-three. At five fifty-nine, Harry Redding was back. At six o’clock, Mrs. Redding reentered the room.

“I just did laundry. We’ve got at least four more—” She stopped dead. “What are those?” Her voice was a whisper. Her lips were slightly parted. She had beautiful lips. Had he told her that?

“They’re for you.”

“But where did they come from?”

He smiled. “Magic.”

“But *why*?”

“Because it’s Friday.”

“So?”

“So I *always* buy you flowers on Friday.”

Mrs. Redding stared at him. Then she dropped her blankets. She walked slowly to his beside. She gently touched his hand. He held her fingers. He felt the calluses and soft flesh. How beautiful they were! Had he told her that?

There was a moment. Then she said—“Do you know where they have beautiful roses?”

“Where?”

“Ireland.”

He nodded. Then he lay against the pillow and closed his eyes. Softly—“Tell me about them.”

So she did. She talked about the roses. She talked about the fiddles and potatoes and Guinness. She talked about the cottage that they would rent. And for a moment—

Just a moment—

He really saw it. He saw Ireland. He saw tomorrow. Like Minerva, he *believed*. Then—

There was a screeching of breaks. Frank ducked under a striped awning. A few motorcars zoomed by. He waited for them calmly, squeezing a bit of moisture—thimblefuls of captured rain—from his cap. Then he saw an opportunity and dashed across the street.

The hotel was refreshingly warm. He walked directly to the counter. “Has there been any mail?”

The receptionist barely glanced at him. “What’s the name?”

“Frank Griswold.”

A shake of the head. “I’m sorry. But there’s a coatroom for wet coats and umbrellas. If you’d like to leave something—”

Her words were drowned out. Before she could finish, Frank was outside again. He was standing on the wharf, gazing at the quiet harbor. Raindrops splashed ceaselessly against his arms—neck—face—the glassy water. He watched steely boats move in and out. He watched a fisherman approach the gvlo dock, hauling a sodden net of whitefish. He watched them—all of them. And he thought about *her*.

He had been standing restlessly near the exit. The strike was inevitable. Everyone knew it—the union and Pimlico Shoes and workers and spokesman and disgruntled managers. The speeches developed a routine—a withering sameness. The union made its case. The management responded. The union made another protest. The management responded. But then—

But *then*—

“You’re wearing the same shoes.”

A ripple shot through the room. He looked up. What the hell? A girl had stood up. She was temporarily blocked from view. Even so—

“How can you say those things?”

He heard her voice. It held a certain anger—edge—fire—passion. He scrambled for a closer look.

“How can you do those things? After all, if we all wear the same shoes—”

“Pardon me!” He dodged through the crowd.

“If we all walk the same streets—”

“Excuse me!”

“Eat the same food—”

“So sorry!”

“Dream the same dreams—

*Watch it!*”

“Beg your pardon!”

“Fear the same fears and love the same loves—”

A woman frowned at him. He ran on.

“Then we must have some responsibility.” She paused. “We must! Whether my neighbor has enough to eat—”

That was her responsibility.

“Whether my friend has a roof and bedding—”

That was her responsibility.

“Whether my countrymen have the freedom to follow their dreams—”

To grow—

To compete—

To thrive—

“I am responsible.”

But *why*? The room listened. It waited.

“Because we’re all connected.” The words rang across them. Quiet—“Because we’re wearing the same shoes.”

Frank passed a pillar. And then—

All at once—

There she was. Ebony hair. Ivory skin. Emerald eyes. Ruby lips that longed to smile. Her eyes were scanning the crowd. Her voice was pouring across them. Every word made her stronger—bolder—braver. She looked at the workers and spokesmen and disgruntled managers. She looked at the empty cups and folding chairs and dusty stage. And then she spotted him. For a moment, their eyes met. And for a moment—

The ghost of a moment—

His heart stopped. Then she moved on.

if—  
“I love you.” It was after the meeting. She was rushing away. What if someone saw her? What

“I love you.” He said it again.

She slowed. “Who are you?”

So the angel spoke to him! “Does it matter?” Frank asked calmly.

“Are you mad?”

“Absolutely.” A smile. “Mad for you.”

“You don’t know me!”

“I don’t need to.”

“But that’s just—”

“What?”

“Irrational! Impractical! Impossible!” She glanced at the doorway. She had to go.

He nodded. “Good.”

“What?”

“Now you understand.”

She stared at him. Then she demanded—“How do you know?”

“How do I know *what*?”

“How do you know that you love me?”

He shrugged. “That’s easy.”

“*Why*?”

“Because I saw you.”

“But how do you *know*?”

“Because whenever I see you—”

She waited.

“I forget to breathe.”

She looked at him. “And what about me? How would *I* know?”

“That’s even easier.”

“What?”

He smiled. “When you see me—”

*When you hear me—*

*When you touch me—*

*When you think about me—*

“Do you get butterflies?”

She touched her stomach. He smiled again. “Here.” He gave her a scrap of paper.

“What is it?”

“The only letter that I’ll ever write.”

“But what *is* it?”

“The last lines of a poem.”

“Did you write it?”

“No.”

“Who did?”

“Pablo Neruda.”

“What’s it about?”

“Love.”

“What’s it called?”

“Love.”

“Do you think about anything else?”

“I can.”

“Do you?”

“Should I?”

“I don’t know.”

He smiled. “Read the poem.”

She took it. Then she asked calmly—“Is there anything else?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there anything that you’d like to know?”

“Yes. Just one question.” And so he asked her—

“What’s your name?”

“Leopold Trane.”

Inspector Thomas hesitated. “Are you sure that you want to do this?” His voice was quiet.

Mr. Trane looked at him. Then he said—“T-R-A-N-E.”

Inspector Thomas nodded. “Very well. Let’s begin.”

“Did you really tell him?” Jeanne had asked. It was Saturday afternoon. Classes had finished. They were sitting outside.

Anne nodded. “I had to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Jeanne grinned. “Admit it!”

“What?”

“You had butterflies.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to. I know.”

Anne rolled her eyes. After a moment, however, she dug into her pocket. “Have you heard the poem?”

With a sigh—“Only a thousand times.”

“Too bad. You’re hearing it again.”

And so Jeanne did.

*Morir y todavía—*

To die and still—

*Amarte más—*

To love you more—

*Y todavía —*

And still—

*Amarte más—*

To love you more—

*Y más—*

And more.

She frowned. “It seems rather morbid.”

“Shut up. It’s pretty.”

“It’s creepy.”

“It’s romantic.”

“So was Dracula.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“I’m being careful.”

Anne sighed. “Fine. But don’t start rubbing garlic on him. When you meet him—”

“What! Did you just say *when*?”

Anne was stricken. “I said *if*. Don’t imagine things!”

“So you’re seeing him!” Jeanne shrieked.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You’re impossible.”

“You’re in love!”

“I don’t know him!”

“Does that matter?”

“Be reasonable.”

“Must I?” Jeanne demanded. “*Must* I?”

Anne looked at Jeanne. Then she smiled. “No.”

Jeanne laughed. “Good. I’m quite terrible at that.”

A brief silence fell. Anne looked at the poem. Jeanne absorbed the sunlight. Her eyes drifted closed. Another moment passed. Then she heard—“Fine.”

With her eyes still closed—“What?”

“You win.”

“That’s nice.” She glanced at Anne. “What do I win?”

“Maybe it’s slightly creepy.”

Jeanne grinned. “Finally.”

Maggie frowned. “You didn’t mention that.”

Jeanne blinked. “What? What was that? Don’t be silly! I certainly did.”

“You didn’t.”

“Of course. I told you ages ago.” She searched for her purse. Where was it? Oh! There. She grabbed it. “Then I’ll just—”

“What time will you be back?”

“Heavens! Whenever it finishes! How should I know?”

She turned to the door. And Maggie said—“He called for you.”

She paused. “What? Who did?”

“Mr. Richards.”

She turned around. “Is that right? What did he say?”

“Not much. He was just checking in.”

Jeanne nodded. “That’s—good.”

She started to leave again. But then came—“If he calls back—”

She waited. The clock ticked. Six fifteen.

“What should I say?” Maggie asked.

*Say the truth.* Jeanne blinked. “Tell him—” She paused. “Tell him that I love him.” The words were oddly quiet.

Maggie looked at her. Hard. Then she said—“I’ll do that.”

And so Jeanne opened the door.

It closed with a bang. Mandy jumped. “Gracious! What was that?”

Maryanne shrugged. “Nothing. Big Joe was in a rush.”

“To do *what*? Invade the Balkans?”

“Check the speakers.”

“Right.” She returned to the mirror. She was running terribly late. Although she had meant to leave work early, there had been a rush at six o’clock. And just when she had thought that she could leave—

*“There you are!”*

She froze. Mr. Gables was standing just behind her. She winced.

*“Where have you been?”*

“Work ran late.”

“We’re about to start!”

“I’m almost ready.”

“You’re wearing a polyester vest.”

“Yes.”

“It has a nametag.”

“Yes.”

“The nametag says that—” Mr. Gables squinted. “First Capital appreciates my support.” His voice was caustic. “How—touching.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t even use First Capital.”

“That’s a shame. We’re offering some great—”

*“If you’re not ready in five minutes—”*

“I know! I know! I know!” She protectively raised a tin of blush. “Four minutes! I swear!”

Mr. Gables growled and stalked off. Mandy sighed. She had been ready to leave. Her things had been packed. The door had just been locked. She had been about to go when—

“Why might you need two thousand pounds?”

“What do you mean?”

“Pretend that you had a savings account. You’d been saving for months and months.”

“I’d never do that.”

“I know. You’re pretending.”

“Right.” Maryanne nodded. Then she frowned. “Can we pretend something nicer? What about saying that—”

“What might make you empty it suddenly?” Mandy continued blithely.

Maryanne shrugged. “Tons of things.” She ticked them off. “A sale at Fortnum and Mason. Tickets to see Ronhaldo play. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. But some kid today—”

“Three minutes!”

Mandy started. “Damn it!” She grabbed her mascara.

Maryanne sighed. “Let me help.”

Mandy frantically removed the vest. “How much time do I have?”

“According to Mr. Gables—”

*“Two minutes!”*

“According to clock—” She glanced at her watch. “Thirty minutes.”

Mandy nodded. The vest was quickly off. She worked on her pants.

“Maybe he had enough.”

“Who?”

“That kid today.”

Mandy shook her head. “But he didn’t. We’d already spoken about it. He’d said that he had a few months left.”

“Then maybe his plans changed.”

Mandy nodded. “I guess so.” Even so—

“One minute!”

“It seems rather sad. I don’t know. After three years of saving—”

“Are you Mandy Brown?”

Mandy blinked. A teenage girl was standing beside her. She was chewing gum. “I am. Why?”

“Someone sent this for you.”

“Who? What?”

“I don’t know. He just said to find Mandy Brown.” The girl looked around. “Are you singing tonight?” Her eyes were wide. “This is so cool!”

*“No visitors backstage!”*

The girl was quickly shooed away. Mandy frowned at the letter.

“What is it?” Maryanne demanded instantly. A small crowd had formed. The performers smelled like perfume and lipstick and pure excitement.

“Who’s it from?”

“Go on then. Open it!”

So Mandy did. It said—

“What?” Bethany demanded impatiently. “What does it say?”

Louisa scanned the letter quickly. Then her face fell. “Oh.”

Chessie and Bethany exchanged a glance. Stuart scowled. “I’ll kill him.”

Sandra made a clucking noise. “Now! If you’d just dated Petey—”

“It’s not his fault.” Louisa put down the letter. “It’s his father.”

Sandra froze. “What? What about his father?”

“He had an attack today.”

“An attack! An attack of—” Sandra paused again. Then she turned briskly to the oven. “Well then! That settles it.”

“What?” Katya asked cautiously.

“This pie is going to George Redding.” She nodded firmly. “We’ll take it straightaway.”

Fields glanced at his watch. “Right now! But we haven’t time. It’s already six thirty!”

“This will just take a minute.”

“But we’re meeting Mrs. Harrington. We’re walking together. This really—”

*“Minerva Redding has been a friend for years! Do you hear me? Years! And I will not let her down now! We will take this pie. And tomorrow—”* Angrily waving a wooden spoon—“We will take another pie! *And what will we do on Sunday?*”

“Can we take something besides pie?” Katya asked worriedly. “Pie is good. But you can have too much pie.”

*“We will take another pie!”* She glanced at Katya. Then she added grudgingly—“And maybe some soup.”

Katya nodded. “Soup is good. They’ll like soup.”

Fields frowned. “I understand all of that. I do. But you—”

Louisa found her voice. She said—“I agree.”

“What?” Sandra demanded. She was brandishing the spoon again.

Louisa said louder—“I agree. Take the pie.” She paused. Then she said—“That’s what friendship is about.” When someone falls—

You catch them. When someone needs a hand—

You give it. No questions asked. After all—“It’s what being *human’s* all about.” She stood up suddenly. “I’ve got to go.”

“Where?” Jody asked bewilderedly.

“Have you seen my bag?”

“You can come to poker.”

“It was here somewhere.”

“I’m sure that Ed and Roland won’t mind. And—”

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve got go.”

“But why?”

Because it felt right. No book had told her to. She just felt it. She felt it like—

*Como Dios en los rios.*

Like God in the rivers.

Mrs. Henderson blinked. She had been cleaning the bookshelf, tossing unused novels and textbooks into a wooden carton. And then—

*Por sentirte en mis venas como Dios en los rios.*

One book had fallen open. It was old and leather and worn—something that Anne must have left behind. She had picked it up quickly. Simply look at the dust! It was clear that nobody read it. It would have to join the others in—

*Mujer!*

The book was speaking to her. She blinked.

*Yo hubiera sido tu hijo—*

I would have been your son—

“Do you read Spanish?” Carlotta asked.

Mrs. Henderson jumped. She slammed the book closed. “No. Not a word.”

Carlotta frowned. “Really? Then why were you—”

“Is everything ready? Is the car here?”

“It is.”

“Did you reach Mr. Henderson?”

“I did.”

“Am I picking him up?”

“Yes.”

“What about Henry? Did he confirm?”

“His assistant did. The reservation is for seven.”

“Good.” Then she said shortly—“You’re dismissed.”

Carlotta nodded and left. Mrs. Henderson heard the door close. She heard the latch catch. A moment passed. And then—

*Morir y todavía—*

To die and still—

*Amarte más—*

To love you more—

*Y todavía —*

And still—

*Amarte más—*

To love you more—

*Y más.*

And more.

She looked up. An odd sweat had started. The car honked outside. She was running late! She hated to be late! And yet—

*Mujer!* The book was talking to her. She closed it hurriedly. But still—

*Yo hubiera sido tu hijo—*

I would have been your son—

*Yo hubiera sido tu hijo—*

I would have been your son—

*Yo hubiera sido tu hijo—*

I would have been your son—

The words echoed and reechoed. The sweat grew worse. “I’m coming!” She looked around the room. She looked at the stiff sofas and embroidered throws. So much needlepoint! So many years! She looked at the framed photographs—aunts and uncles and vacation houses. Bath! Why did they always go to Bath? She looked at everything. She looked again. Sofa! Bookcase! Chair! Desk! Shelves! Cushions! She tried to focus. She tried to breathe. But—

What was good it? She looked at the world. She looked at the window. She looked at the pounding rain. But she was thinking about—

Anne raced into the pharmacy. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” She pushed forward. Armed with a veritable trousseau of shopping bags, the journey had some difficulties. After a moment, however, she reached the counter. “Is the prescription ready?” What time was it? Six thirty! Heavens! Could that be right?

“What’s the name?”

“Henry Wadsworth. That’s W-A-D-”

“What! Are you Mrs. Wadsworth?”

Anne blinked. A wizened woman stood beside her. “And you would be—”

“Maggie.” The woman extended a hand. “Maggie Davidson.”

Who? What? She racked her brain.

“I work for Jeanne Richards. I was just grabbing a prescription for her.”

“Oh! Is that right?” Anne smiled. “Well! It’s a pleasure to meet you! I just hope you don’t mind that I’m in a terrible—”

“I’m surprised that you’re not there.”

“Where?” Anne asked distractedly. To the pharmacist—“Is this it?” Was there just a bag? She had been expecting more. Nevertheless—

“At the show.”

“At what—” She froze. Then she slowly glanced at Maggie. The woman was looking at her intently.

“Jeanne said that you were seeing a show tonight. Could she have been—mistaken?”

Sights and sounds and images crunched together. Blonde hair. Sparkling eyes. Weathered skin.  
Standing in the corridor—

“Oh! So sorry. I thought that you were someone else.”

Standing on the street—

“Do you know Jeanne?”

“I do.”

“Then I do apologize. I don’t believe that we’ve met.”

“Anne Wadsworth.”

“Daniel Enkes.”

She took a deep breath. Then she said—“No. No mistake.” Glancing at the clock—“I was about to head over.”

“Is that so?” Maggie asked calmly.

“Of course.” Anne glanced outside. How odd! A young girl was standing on the sidewalk. And despite the rain—

Despite the pedestrians—

Despite the cars zooming by—

She was spinning around and around and around. How very strange!

“Which show was it? I know that Jeanne mentioned it.” Maggie laughed. “Who knows what I’ll be forgetting next!”

“Don’t mention it! We’ll be seeing—” She paused. Should someone do something? Was anyone watching her?

“You’re all set.”

She blinked. To the pharmacist—“Thank you.” To Maggie—“We’re seeing Wicked.”

Maggie gazed at her. Then she nodded grudgingly. “That’s right. I remember now. But perhaps you—”

“I’m sorry! I really have to fly! But the play is just about to—”

And she was gone. She threw open the door. Her bags were a parade behind her. She was late! Six thirty! And dinner at seven fifteen! Would she ever make it? Where had the day gone? Letters and lunch and—

“Taxi!” Damn it! There were no taxis. They had gone on strike. No matter! She would walk. She started across the pavement. She could certainly make it. She had plenty of time. She had plenty of time until—

“Could you take it yourself?”

“I’ve got the kitchens to finish—”

“That’s fine. You can take it later.”

“It might not be until tonight.”

“What time?”

“Eight o’clock.”

She blinked. The world was starting to spin. What about Mr. Redding? Had he been fired? She was sure that he had. It was after four o'clock. The day had ended. Evening had begun. The only question was—

Was compassion always illogical?

“In business?”

In anything.

“Yes.”

But why? If everything is connected—

“Why would everything be connected?”

Because Frank was back. He wanted to see her. What a fool! What was he thinking? After fifteen years!

Her footsteps slowed. Frank. Henry. Emily. Wadsworth Steelworks. Mr. Redding. Had it happened yet? Toby. Jeanne. Maggie. Sights and sounds faces started to spin. Millie. Chessie. St. Agnes. Mrs. Harrington. Fiona. What a horrible child! The prescriptions. The dress. Dinner. Peter! The spinning was growing worse. It was growing faster and faster and faster—

And faster and faster and faster! Margot laughed. Rain! Sweet! Warm! Beautiful rain! Black dots! Falling down! Faster and faster and faster! Could there be anything better? Could there be anything simpler? To live! To love! To sing! To run! *To spin!*

The wind was cool. It slapped against her. She was alone. She was free. She was—

A car whizzed past. Someone gasped.

“*What is she doing?*”

“*Good heavens! Can someone do something? She might just—*”

There was another whizzing noise. She felt a bump. She had left the sidewalk. She felt pavement. The air was growing longer.

“*Get back!*”

Who? Who should get back? Not her! She had just escaped! Forget houses and apartments and cars and umbrellas and roofs and doors. She had—

“MARGOT!”

Thud. They landed on the sidewalk. Anne blinked. Her bags had gone everywhere. She immediately turned to the girl. “Are you okay?”

The girl appeared to be dazed. Her lip had been cut. But other than that—

“She’s okay.” Anne closed her eyes. A crowd had gathered around them. Voices drifted wetly through the evening air and falling rain.

“Did you see that?”

“She could’ve been killed!”

“How did she do that? She just grabbed the kid from—”

Anne slowly sat up. Someone helped her. And she heard—

“Margot! *Don’t you ever do that again!* Where did you go? *I’ve been looking for you!* You can’t just—just disappear like that!”

The girl frowned. “But Mr. Pussycat—” She stopped. “He needed someone to play with.” She sounded confused.

“I don’t care if—”

“Shhhhh.” Anne glanced reprovingly at the boy. He silenced. Then she turned to Margot. “That’s fine. But pussycats shouldn’t play near the road.” She paused. “It’s dangerous.”

The girl nodded. That seemed to make sense.

Anne glanced at the boy. “Does she belong to you?”

A nod. His cheeks were stained with tears. Hoarsely—“She’s my sister.”

“Good. Let’s get her home.”

“But your bags—” He glanced at the ruined parcels.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s just—let’s get her home.”

Harry described it again. Mrs. Redding realized that she was crying. “My baby!” She rocked Margot close. “My baby!”

Harry was red and miserable. “I thought that she was there.” He said it over and over. “I never meant to—” He stopped. “I never thought that—”

Mrs. Redding nodded. “I know.” She touched his head. “Go wash up.”

He did. Then she turned to the woman. “How can I ever thank you? I—” She paused. The world was still spinning slightly. “I’m so sorry. What was your name again?”

The woman smiled. “Anne.”

“Anne! What a lovely name!”

Anne laughed. “It’ll do.”

“Can I get you anything?” What did she have? She could hardly remember. “Perhaps a cup of tea. Or maybe—”

“Could I talk to you?”

Anne was instantly forgotten. Her heart leapt. The doctor had just reemerged. “Yes. How—” She stopped. His expression was gentle. She closed her eyes.

He glanced at Anne. Then he said—“Is there anywhere more—private?”

She said—“How long?”

He said—“You can’t be sure.”

She said—“How long?”

He said—“I’ll be back later.”

She nodded. He left. The door closed behind him. There was a moment of silence. Then she turned to Anne. “I’m so sorry. Let me just—”

But Anne shook her head. “Let me.” She quietly walked to the sink. She filled the kettle. Then she set it on the stove. Mrs. Redding watched. Her cheeks felt strangely—hot.

“I’m so sorry.” Heavens! After everything that Anne had done! She had to do *something* for her! But *what?*

“Who is it?”

“My husband.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.”

She looked at the table. A dozen brochures were spread across it. There were brochures for Dublin and Galway and Limerick and Shannon. She closed her eyes. Harry and Jamie were bickering again. What was it now? Probably a pair of trousers. Their voices drifted clearly through the thin wall.

“Those are mine!”

“Are not! They’re mine!”

“You can wear ’em tomorrow!”

“I don’t want them tomorrow!”

“They’re mine!”

Margot had found a pussycat. They were crouched on the rug. Mr. Pussycat was licking its hindquarters. He said—“Meow!”

Margot clapped and replied happily—“Meow!”

Mrs. Redding smiled. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

“What are those brochures for?” Anne asked again.

“Oh! They’re for Ireland.”

Anne smiled. “I can see that. Are you going there?”

“We plan to.”

“When?”

“Next summer.”

“Who?”

“Everyone. My husband and Jerome and Harry and—” She saw that Anne had stilled. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Just—” She stopped. “Do you really think that—” She stopped again.

“Say the rest.” Her voice was deadly quiet. On the wall, the clock ticked.

But Anne had fallen silent. She poured the tea. A moment passed. The rain drummed down. Then Anne said quietly—“Tell me about him.”

“Who?”

“Your husband.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you have to say.”

“That’s not much.”

“Then tell me about Ireland.”

Mrs. Redding stared at her. How strange! There was something—something about this woman. The back was ramrod straight. The hair was smooth and styled. She wore pearls. And yet—

There was something about that smile. It was a smile that illuminated her face. It was a smile that melded green eyes and red lips and a multicolored promise—a promise to listen.

“You have a beautiful smile.” The words tumbled out. She blushed.

Anne laughed. "It'll do."

Mrs. Redding nodded. Then she started to speak. And all the while—

The rain poured down. Mrs. Harrington watched it. There was a knock.

"Who is it?"

"It's Sandra. Are you ready? It seems that—"

Mrs. Harrington opened the door. "Wonderful. Let me just grab my coat."

"Do you know Minerva Redding?" Sandra asked. "She's a lovely woman. Lovely! It seems that her husband is ill. I've got a pie to deliver. Would you mind? It's not much. But you know that those things can help!"

"It's not a problem."

"Would you know that we go way back! Years and years! I knew Minerva before I came here. She was working at the Tenpenny Bakery. Do you know that place? You must! It's near here. Well! There was one customer that came every morning and afternoon. He always ordered the same thing—a Cornish pasty and cup of coffee. And once a week—" Sandra smiled. "He would bring her a rose. He never said anything. The poor thing was shy than a deer! He would just leave the rose and walk away. Well! This continued for months. Months and months and months! Then he finally got the courage to say something."

"What did he say?"

"That he had never really liked Cornish pasties."

"What did *she* say?"

"That she had never really liked roses!" Sandra laughed. "What a strange way to meet! But you can imagine what happened next. They were married a month later!"

Mrs. Harrington smiled. "That is terribly sweet." She glanced at the clock. "Well now! Would you look at that? It's already six thirty. We had really best be going. Especially if we're going to make a stop—"

"Oh! This won't take a moment! You'll see. I'll just—" Sandra froze. "Lord have mercy!" She crossed herself. "What's that?" She took a step closer. "It's—it's horrible! But—it's a beautiful kind of horrible." With a little laugh—"Heavens! Anne always *was* a strange one!"

Mrs. Harrington nodded. "Your eye is good."

"Well now! I make no pretenses. I couldn't tell a Monet from a cheeseboard! But an Anne Bradshaw—" She paused. "That's something different. I can always pick *those* out! And at the end of the day—" She grinned. "Well! I'd probably prefer them anyway!"

Mrs. Harrington smiled. "I'm sure that Anne would appreciate the thought." She glanced uneasily at the clock. "But now we *really* ought to be—"

"Did she name it?"

Stifling a sigh—"What?"

"The painting."

"I'm not sure. I never actually asked."

"I like pictures that have names. It tells a story. Do you know what I mean?"

“Certainly.”

“What would *you* name it?”

Mrs. Harrington blinked. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Think about it now.”

“I suppose—” She stopped. “Letters from Anne.”

Sandra nodded. “That’s a good name. I like that name.”

“Excellent.” A short pause ensued. Then Mrs. Harrington asked mildly—“Could we—do you think that we go now?”

“Oh! Of course. I was waiting for you!”

Mrs. Harrington nodded. “Naturally.” She pulled open the door and stepped aside. “After you.”

“No. After *you!*” And so they stepped into the hallway. Their footsteps echoed on the tiles. The heavy door was opened. And then—

It was still raining. The droplets pounded against the glass. Mrs. Redding had just finished.

Anne smiled. “That was beautiful. But really! Where could you go from there?” Everything must be unromantic after that.”

Mrs. Redding shook her head. “Far from it! He buys roses every Friday.”

“Do you still dislike them?” Anne asked teasingly.

“Of course.”

Anne nodded at a nearby vase. “Did he buy you those?”

“He did.”

“They look fresh.”

“They’re from today.”

Anne paused. “But how—” She stopped. Then she smiled. “Fine.”

“What?”

“You win. Maybe you still have *some* romance.”

Mrs. Redding laughed. Then her gaze wandered to the brochures. She sighed. “You think that I’m crazy.”

Anne frowned. “I didn’t say that.”

“But I must be! To plan a vacation for July. *Next* July! It’s madness.”

“No.” Anne shook her head firmly. “It’s *not*.”

“So what is it?” Mrs. Redding whispered. If not madness—

“It’s—”

“Love.”

“Do you think about anything else?”

“I can.”

“Do you?”

“Should I?”

“I don’t know.”

Frank closed his eyes. The rain was starting to lessen. He retraced his footsteps to the hotel.

“Has anything come?”

The receptionist glanced at him. “Do you mean mail?”

He nodded.

“No. Nothing new.”

He nodded again. Then he walked away and he wondered—

“What is it?”

“The only letter that I’ll ever write.”

“But what *is* it?”

“The last lines of a poem.”

“Did you write it?”

“No.”

“Who did?”

“Pablo Neruda.”

“What’s it about?”

“Love.”

“What’s it called?”

*Amor.*

Love.

Mrs. Henderson closed the book. The jolting of the car was making her sick. Even so, the words were burned into her mind.

*Morir y todavía—*

To die and still—

*Amarte más—*

To love you more—

*Y todavía —*

And still—

*Amarte más—*

To love you more—

*Y más—*

And more.

She closed her eyes. They were approaching downtown London. She should get ready. Mr. Henderson would soon be here! And yet—

She could almost hear something. What? Something inside of her. It almost sound like—

“Miss!”

Anne blinked. The boys had washed up. As they rushed out—

“Miss! Do you remember me?”

She laughed. It was Jamie! “Of course! You’re Jamie.”

Jamie beamed. "And you're the flower lady!"

Minerva blinked. "Flowers! That's just it!" She glanced at her children. "Do you have any flowers left? *Do* you? Come now! One of you must!"

Harry nodded. "I have some."

"What kind?"

He ran off.

"That's very kind of you." Her voice was vague. The world was blurring together again. She knew about love. She knew all about it. She had met it. She had touched. She had felt it—

*Como Dios en los rios.*

Like God in the rivers.

The only question was—

The only question *was*—

"What about me? How would *I* know?"

"That's even easier."

"What?"

He smiled. "When you see me—"

*When you hear me—*

*When you touch me—*

*When you think about me—*

"Do you get butterflies?"

"Well?" Mrs. Redding demanded impatiently. "Don't be slow! What do you have left?"

Harry said—"I just have one."

Mrs. Redding asked—"Which one?"

"It's a—"

It was bacon. It was bacon and eggs and toast that was slightly burnt. It was reading the newspaper and talking about Mrs. Jencks. That was love. That was love! That was love! Love was knowing the shape of today. It was knowing the contours of tomorrow. Love was raspberry jam and hot coffee and maple syrup. Love was the rattle of silver forks and glass dishware. Love was—

Love was—

"White magnolia."

She opened her eyes. "What did you just say?"

Harry blinked. "You—you asked about my flowers. And so I said—"

Love was white magnolia. Love was white magnolia. Love was white magnolia. The words whirled through her head.

Harry said—"There's just one left."

Mrs. Redding said—"Will you take it?"

Margot said—"Do you want some milk?"

And Anne said—"I have to go." She took the blossom. She raced for the door. Margot was sitting beside it. She was feeding Mr. Pussycat.

"Mr. Pussycat likes milk!" Margot cried.

Anne laughed and cried and nodded. "I know. Of course! Everyone likes milk." And then an inspiration seized her. "Here." She shoved the blossom at the young girl. And then—

There was a knock. "Sandra!"

"Minerva!"

There was an affair of hugging and crying and welcoming. Mrs. Harrington carefully looked at the entryway. It was made of solid oak—sturdy. Nice.

"I just have a moment! We're terribly late!"

"But you must come in!"

"For a moment!"

They went in. Mrs. Harrington surveyed the small house. Although it was humble, it was neatly kept and orderly.

"You'll never guess what happened!"

So Mrs. Redding told them. Mrs. Harrington glanced up. "Did you say that Anne was here?"

"She was! Just a moment ago. But then she ran off. I have no idea why! It was rather strange."

"That is strange." Sandra nodded.

Fields agreed. It was strange. Did Mrs. Harrington think that it was strange?

Mrs. Harrington was looking at a young girl. She was playing near the door. "Who's that?"

"Who? Oh! That's Margot. She's—"

"Who gave you that?" Mrs. Harrington asked softly.

The girl blinked at her. Then she touched the flower behind her ear.

Mrs. Redding hovered nervously. "She might not remember. She's not so good with—"

"Anne." Margot smiled. "Anne!"

Mrs. Harrington nodded and straightened up. "I have some idea."

"What?"

The others were confused. Mrs. Harrington smiled. "You were wondering where she went."

Who?

"Anne."

And—

"I have an idea."

But the waiter had no idea at all! It was a simple request. He wanted the glass properly chilled with lemon. What was so difficult to understand? Really! He sighed.

"Then I'll take the wine."

The waiter nodded. "Very good." And he turned to Peter—"What about you?"

"Pilsner!" Peter boomed.

Henry smiled. "You really haven't changed at all!" Really! How strange! To see Peter now! After so many years! And when Anne got here—

"When is Anne coming?"

"Seven."

“What time is it now?”

“Show time.”

Mandy took a deep breath. She glanced at Maryanne. Maryanne gave the thumbs up. Then she stepped onstage.

The light was dazzling. It filled her eyes and ears and mouth. How strange! Why had he sent that note? Look for him! But of course! She was always looking for him. She had always *been* looking for him. She scanned the audience and—

There he was. He saw her. He smiled. She smiled back. *Here we go.* She walked to the microphone. She let the music begin. She let the notes fill her head. And then she did what did best—

“That girl can sing!” So Sandra said.

Mrs. Harrington nodded. Then she raised her finger. The girl was good. What was her name again? Was it

“Pardon me!”

She blinked. Was that Millie? What a surprise! She had had no idea that—

“Excuse me.”

She had a date. Mrs. Harrington squinted. Who *was* that? Could that really be—

“Mr. Pickwick!”

The man froze. “Mrs. Harrington!”

Millie turned the color of tomato sauce. “Pauline!”

Mrs. Harrington restrained a smile. “Good to see you.” And she returned to the music. That girl certainly could sing! She sang with her body. She sang with her heart. At that moment—

She was queen of the dusk. It filled her eyes. It settled on her shoulders. “Is that you?” Her voice was soft. She was sitting on the steps. Her dress was be pink.

Jerome nodded tiredly. “Yeah.” Taking a step closer—“It’s me.”

“*Baby!*” She flew into his arms. Her weight pressed against him. “Where have you been?”

“I had an errand to run.”

“Where?”

“First Capital.”

She looked at him. He looked at her. Then burst out—“No! You can’t do that!”

He looked away. “I had no choice.”

“*But that was your dream!*”

He sank onto the sidewalk. The rain had stopped. The sky had turned a shimmering yellow. And he said—“It’s okay.”

“But it’s not!”

“It is.” And slowly he took her hand. “We’ll make new dreams.”

“But what about the old ones?” Mrs. Watson demanded.

Toby Watson fidgeted. "They get wet."

"Toby! Shoes don't grow on trees."

The boy fidgeted again. "Sorry."

She sighed. "Well! Go wash your hands. Supper's ready."

He shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I have another chore."

"I thought that you were done!"

"It's a letter."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got a letter to deliver!"

"A letter to deliver! Where to?"

"The wharf."

"Why didn't she use the mail?"

"I dunno."

Mrs. Watson sighed. "Very well then. I'll keep the food warm. Just don't be—"

Late! She was terribly late. Anne paused at an intersection. Her legs were aching. Her side hurt from the fall. But—

There was a break in traffic. She set off. She had no time to rest! She had no time to dither! She was—

"You're late." Mrs. Trane frowned. "Supper's getting cold."

Mr. Trane nodded tiredly. "I'm sorry. I had—something to take care of."

Mrs. Trane nodded. "It's fine. But Monday—"

"There won't be a Monday."

Mrs. Trane froze. "What?"

Mr. Trane looked at her. Then he said again—"There won't be a Monday."

Mrs. Trane slowly sat down. "What did you do?" Her voice was calm.

"What I had to do."

She looked at him. He looked at her. Then she stood up again. She grabbed the telephone. "What are you doing?" Mr. Trane asked.

"Getting an extra shift."

He glanced at the discarded scrubs and white sneakers. It would be a nightshift. Extra shifts always were.

"I'll make you breakfast."

She nodded. And while the telephone dialed, she asked quietly—"Was there a blaze of glory?"

And Mr. Trane smiled. "Yeah. There was."

The only question was—

"Is there any mail?"

“Not yet.” The receptionist sighed. “Mr. Griswold—”  
But Mr. Griswold was gone.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “The whole pack is gone.”

Jeanne sighed. “I hate that.” She threw the unlit cigarette onto the bed. Jesus!

“Do you want me to buy another?”

“No.” Irritably—“It’s fine.”

He opened his arms. Gently—“Come here.”

But she stayed put. She looked at the neat bed and wooden nightstand and telephone directory and silent television. And she sighed. Tiredly—“Close the blinds.”

“Is there something—”

“Close the blinds.”

So Daniel did.

The car gave a lurch. Mrs. Henderson touched the door for support.

“Are we there?”

The driver nodded. A moment later, Mr. Henderson stepped into the car.

“How was your day?”

“Fine! Fine.” He shrugged. “Taxes. Nothing new.”

She nodded. Then she asked—“Are you working this weekend?”

“I’m not sure. There was—” He caught her gaze. “I can get out of it. What’s going on?”

“Can we go away somewhere?”

“When?”

“Now.”

“What about dinner?”

“Send a note.”

“But *where*? Wales would be booked.”

She shook her head. “Not Wales.”

“Bath would be—”

“Not Bath either.”

“So *where*?”

“I was thinking Spain.”

He looked at her. A short silence fell. The car hummed along. Then Mr. Henderson yelled to the driver—“Ernie! Turn this around.”

“Yessir.” Ernie signed with his blinker. “Where am I going?”

Mr. Henderson grinned. “Heathrow.”

She grinned back. And—

The audience burst into applause. Mandy straightened. Her cheeks were bright pink. She quickly scanned the audience. There was Laura! There was Marlene! There was Ryan! There was—  
She stilled. What was Ryan doing? He was walking forward. He was holding something—

Ed sighed. “Finally!”

Roland nodded morosely. “Good. Can we go now?” He was still bitter about being here. Why did Ryan need a damn audience to propose? Why not do it privately?

“Ryan wanted us to be here.”

“I remember.” He looked around. “Where’s Ronnie?”

“Still at work.”

Roland sighed. “Lucky bastard.”

“What?” Nothing.

He watched Ryan and Mandy. Then he glanced at his watch. “Okay. And now we were here. But it’s been a hell of a day and *I really need some damn poker!*”

Ed glanced at him. He glanced at Ryan. Ryan flashed thumbs up. Then he nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Henry glanced at his watch. Where was she? “She’s never late.”

“Maybe there was traffic.”

“She’s walking.”

Peter sighed. “I don’t know. Do you want more wine?”

Henry shook his head. Maybe he should have said more. But what? Maybe he should have said that he loved her. But he had! When? That day. That morning! She was so practical. So practical! It was one of the reasons that he loved her—

What were the others? There were plenty. There were dozens. There were hundreds! And yet—

He would buy her flowers. Yes! And if he did that—

If came home with a big bouquet of something sparkling and nice—

Everything would be okay. The dinner suddenly mattered not at all. He wanted to find her. He needed to remember why—

“There’s a message for you.”

He blinked. “Is it from Mrs. Wadsworth?”

The waiter shook his head. “No. It’s from Mrs. Henderson.” He paused. “But Mrs. Wadsworth was here earlier.”

“Was she?”

“Yes. I remember it well. She sat just over there and ordered the soup and salad.”

He nodded. “That sounds like her.”

The waiter grinned. “And then the chocolate cake.”

Henry blinked. “What! Then it can’t have been her.”

“I’m sure of it.”

“But she never—” He stopped. An odd feeling came over him. And for the first time—

The very first time—

He started to doubt. She loved him. He was sure of it. And she knew that he loved her. But—

He had said that he loved her. They were eating breakfast. The world was just waking up. Newspapers were being opened. The coffee was fresh and hot. What had he been saying? It must have been—

“Do you get butterflies?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you see me—”

*When you hear me—*

*When you touch me—*

*When you think about me—*

“Do you get butterflies?”

Anne blinked. The clock ticked. Seven fifty-five. She walked it. She felt every step. She felt the cool breeze. She felt the thunder of cars and buses. She felt it like—

God in the rivers. Frank stared at the quiet harbor. The rain had turned into a golden dusk. A boy was approaching. He was carrying a letter. Frank stood perfectly still. He stopped. His heart stopped. The world stopped. And the clock said—

Seven fifty-six. Henry was starting to sweat. No Mrs. Henderson. No Mr. Henderson. No Anne. He glanced at his watch again. Seven fifty-seven. And then—

Jeanne opened the blinds. She looked at the city below. She looked at the buildings and roads and parks and bridges.

“Are you okay?”

She shrank away. Where was the light? It was gone. The rain had stopped ages ago. And yet—

Where was the sun? She shivered. It was cold. When had it grown so cold? Where had the sun gone?

She sank into the chair. The world was starting to spin. She needed a cigarette—badly. Daniel took her hands.

“You’re cold.” His voice was soft.

She said nothing. He was distant. She was further—and every second brought her further. Her gaze returned to the window. Where was the sun? *That* was what she needed. *That* was what would make her happy. She was sure of it. If she just—had—sunshine—

She picked up the telephone. She dialed a familiar number. There was a pause.

Daniel said—“Who are you calling?”

A voice said—“Hello?”

Jeanne said—“Baby. It’s me.”

The voice said—“Is everything okay?”

Jeanne closed her eyes. And the voice added—“It’s okay. I’m here.”  
She nodded. The spinning stopped. There really were all kinds of love.

“Are you Mr. Wimple?”

A tall man was just leaving the adjoining house. “I am. Why?”

“I have a letter for you. It’s from Mrs. Wadsworth.”

“Good heavens! Why is it arriving now?”

“It was urgent. There’s somebody coming to visit. I think that his name is—I”

“Peter!” Mr. Wimple was reading the note. “Gracious! It’s been years!”

The boy nodded. Then he walked away. Frank unfroze.

“Oy! You!”

The boy turned around. “What?”

“Do you—do you have any other letters?”

The boy shook his head mutely.

“Are you—sure?”

“Yessir. I’m sure.”

Frank nodded. Then he said—“Thank you.” And he turned away. He walked into the hotel. He walked to his room. And—

The door clicked shut. Mr. Redding smiled. “Well then! Who’s next?”

Harry leapt up. “I am!”

He smiled. The boy fit perfectly underneath his arm. “Now then! Where were we?”

Harry eagerly pointed to the page. Mr. Redding nodded. “And when Mr. Icklesb y—”

Margot made a gurgling noise. He instantly stopped. “What was that?”

“Come on!” Jamie said impatiently. “Just finish it!”

Even Jerome and Louisa agreed. “It’s almost done.”

But Mr. Redding shook his head. However odd it seemed—

However counterintuitive—

However improbable—

He often found that Margot said things best. Where others hemmed and hawed and dallied with grammar and formalities—

Where others were confined by decorum and reserve and reality—

Margot just spoke. She said the obvious. And right now—

“What was that? What did you say?”

She was pointing. She was pointing at the window. He slowly followed her gaze. He looked past his wife and sons and Louisa and the vase of roses and brochures for Ireland. He looked at the blue sky beyond. He asked again—“What do you see?”

And Margot said—

Eight o'clock. There was a knock at the door. Frank was sitting on the bed. His bag was unopened. An old painting of a flower—it was too battered and bruised to see what it was—lay discarded in the bin. His bed was untouched. The hotel was perfectly silent when—

The knock came again. He stood up. Every footstep was an avalanche. Every heartbeat was a drum. Every second lasted forever.

*For you, I would wait forever.*

He slowly walked to the door. And—

Eight o'clock. The waiter arrived. "I have a letter for you."

Henry frowned. "Who is it from?"

"I don't know. It just came."

The frown grew. "Give it here." He grabbed the letter. He glanced at the handwriting. And—

Frank asked—"Who is it?"

Peter asked—"Who is it from?"

A voice said—"It's me."

And Henry said—"Anne."

"What does it say?" Peter asked impatiently.

"I don't know."

"Open it."

So he did. He opened the letter.

Frank opened the door. And when he did—

"Sunshine."

Mr. Redding smiled. "*Beautiful.*"

Margot smiled back. "I know."

THE END