



Hamish Hamilton

# Upfronts



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# NOONDAY

Pat Barker



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## TWO

Closing the front door quietly behind her, Elinor took a moment to absorb the silence.

Facing her, directly opposite the front door, where nobody could possibly miss it, was a portrait of her brother, Toby, in uniform. It had been painted, from photographs, several years after his death and was frankly not very good. Everybody else seemed to like it, or at least tolerate it, but Elinor thought it was a complete travesty. *Item: one standard-issue gallant young officer, Grim Reaper for the use of.* There was nothing of Toby there at all. Nigel Featherstone was the artist: and he was very well regarded; you saw his portraits of judges, masters of colleges, politicians and generals everywhere, but she'd never liked his work. Her own portrait of Toby was stronger—not good, she didn't claim that—but certainly better than this.

She resented not having been asked to paint this family portrait: his own sister, after all. And every visit to her sister's house began with her standing in front of it. When he was alive, Toby's presence had been the only thing that made weekends with the rest of her family bearable.

Now, this portrait—that blank, lifeless face—was a reminder that she was going to have to face them alone.

She caught the creak of a leather armchair from the open door on her left. *Oh, well, better get it over with.* She went into the room and found Tim, her brother-in-law, sitting by the open window. As soon as he saw her he stood up and let his newspaper slide, sighing, to the floor.

“Elinor.” He pecked her proffered cheek. “Too early for a whisky?” Evidently it wasn’t: there was a half-empty glass by his side. She opened her mouth to refuse but he’d already started to pour. “How was the train?”

“Crowded. Late.”

“Aren’t they all?”

When she’d first met Tim he might’ve been a neutered tomcat for all the interest he aroused in her. She’d thought him a nonentity, perhaps influenced in that—as in so much else—by Toby, who hadn’t liked Tim, or perhaps hadn’t found much in him to either like or dislike. And yet Tim had gone on to be a successful man; powerful, even. Something in Whitehall, in the War Office. Which was strange, because he’d never actually seen active service. It had never been clear to her what precisely Tim did, though when she expressed her bewilderment to Paul he’d laughed and said: “Do you really not know?”

She took a sip of whisky. “I saw some soldiers in the lane.”

“Yes, they’re building gun emplacements on the river.”

“Just over there?”

He shrugged. “It’s the obvious place.”

How easily they’d all come to accept it: searchlights over the church at night, blacked-out houses, the never-ending *pop-pop* of guns on the marshes . . . Such an inconsequential sound: almost like a child’s toy.

The whisky was starting to fizz along her veins. Perhaps it hadn't been such a bad idea after all. "Where's Rachel?"

"Upstairs with your mother. Who's asleep, I think."

"I don't suppose Mrs. Murchison's around?"

"Why, do you particularly want to speak to her?"

"More thinking of avoiding her, actually."

He looked at his watch. "She generally takes a break about now. I expect she's in her room."

But she wasn't. She was crossing the hall with a firm, flat-footed step, her shoes making minuscule squeaks on the tiles. "Ah, Miss Brooke, I thought it must be you."

Always that barely perceptible emphasis on the "Miss." To be fair, she had some reason to be confused. Elinor and Paul had lived together for almost six years before they finally married, very quietly, in Madrid. None of Elinor's family had been invited to the wedding and she'd continued to use her own name professionally—and also, to some extent, socially—ever since. Clearly, Mrs. Murchison suspected she was not, in any proper sense, married at all.

"Will you be wanting tea?"

"I'll see what my sister says."

Elinor picked up her case and carried it upstairs to the spare room. This should have been Mrs. Murchison's job, but really the less she had to do with that woman the better. Queuing in the post office once, she'd heard Mrs. Murchison whisper to the woman beside her: "She's a Miss, you know." Elinor knew exactly what she meant. *Miss*-take. *Missed* out. Even, perhaps, *miss*-carriage? No, she was being paranoid: Mrs. Murchison couldn't possibly have known about that. Of course



there'd always be people like her, people who regarded childless women as hardly women at all. "Fibroids"—Mr. O'Brien had announced a few years ago when Elinor's periods had gone haywire—"are the tears of a disappointed womb." Obnoxious little Irish leprechaun, twinkling at her over his steepled fingertips. She'd just gaped at him and then, unable to control herself, burst out laughing.

In the spare room she dumped her suitcase on the bed; she'd unpack later. Quickly, she splashed her face and hands, examined herself in the glass, noting pallor, noting tiredness, but not minding too much, not today at any rate. Through the open window she heard Mrs. Murchison calling Kenny in to get washed in time for dinner.

Kenny had a lot to do with Elinor's dislike of Mrs. Murchison. Given the task of dealing with his nits, she'd simply shaved his head, without apparently finding it necessary to consult anybody else first. Elinor had gone into the kitchen the morning after he arrived and found him standing there, orange hair lying in coils around his feet. Thin, hollow-eyed, the strange, white, subtle egg shape of his head—he'd looked like a child in the ruins of Guernica or Wieluń. She'd completely lost her temper; she was angrier than she'd been for years. Rachel came running, then Mother, who was still, only a year ago, well enough to come downstairs. "Elinor." Mother laid a cool hand on her arm. "This isn't your house. And that isn't your child." Which was, undeniably, true. Not her house, not her child, not her responsibility.

Outside, in the garden, Mrs. Murchison was still calling: "Kenny? Kenny?"

Well, she could call till she was blue in the face; he wouldn't come in for her.

A murmur of voices drifted across the landing from her mother's room: so she must be awake. It couldn't be put off any longer, though even now Elinor stood outside the door for a full minute, taking slow, deliberate, deep breaths, before she pushed it open and went in.

A fug of illness rose to meet her: aging flesh in hot sheets, camphor poultices that did no good at all, a smell of faeces and disinfectant from the commode in the far corner. Rachel was sitting on the other side of the bed, her back to the window, her face in shadow. Mother's nightdress was open at the front: you could see her collarbone jutting out and the hollows in her throat. Her chest moved, not merely with every breath, but with every heartbeat. Looking at her, Elinor could almost believe she saw the dark, struggling muscle labouring away inside its cage of bone. Mother's eyes were closed, but as Elinor approached the bed, the lids flickered open, though not completely. They stopped halfway, as if already weighted down by pennies. "Oh, Elinor." Her voice was slurred. "It's you."

*Wrong person.* "Hello, Mother." She bent and kissed the hollow cheek.

She was about to sit down, but then she saw Rachel mouthing at her. "Outside."

Elinor slipped quietly out on to the landing and a few seconds later Rachel joined her. The sisters kissed, Rachel's dry lips barely making contact with Elinor's cheek. They'd never been close. Toby, the middle child, had come between them in every sense. Looking back on her early childhood, Elinor realized that even then she and Rachel had been rivals for Toby; and Elinor had won. An empty victory, it seemed, so many years after his death.

"Has the doctor been?" she asked.

“This morning, yes. He comes every morning.”

“What does he say?”

“You mean how long has she got? No, of course he didn’t say. They never do, do they? I don’t think they know. She’ll hang on till Alex gets back—and then I think it might be very quick.”

“When’s he coming?”

“He’s hoping they’ll let him out tomorrow. But it depends on the consultant, of course.”

Mother had always used her grandson, Alex, as a substitute for Toby. Was “used” a bit harsh? No, she didn’t think so.

“I expect you’d like some tea?” Rachel said.

“Well, yes, but hadn’t one of us better sit with her?”

“No, it’s all right, I’ll get Nurse Wiggins. Oh, you don’t know about her, do you? She’s our new addition.” A fractional hesitation. “Very competent.”

“You don’t like her.”

“We-ell, you know . . .” Rachel gave a theatrical shudder. “She *hovers*.”

“You need the help, you’re worn out.”

“Wasn’t my idea, it was Tim’s.”

“Well, good for him.”

Rachel glanced back into their mother’s bedroom. “Ah, she’s nodded off again; I thought she might. I’ll just nip up and get the Wiggins.”

Tim had retreated to his study, so Elinor went into the drawing room to wait for Rachel. The farmhouse, which had been shabby, even dilapidated, when Rachel first fell in love with it, was now beautifully furnished. Oriental rugs, antique furniture—good paintings too. Nothing of hers, though. She had three in the Tate; none here.

Rachel came in carrying a tray, which she put down on a small table near the window. Out of the corner of her eye, Elinor noticed Kenny scaling along the wall, trying to avoid being seen from the kitchen window. “I see Kenny’s still here?”

“Oh, don’t talk to me about Kenny; I’m beginning to think he’s a fixture. His mother was supposed to come and get him last Saturday. Poor little devil was sitting at the end of the drive all day. Suitcase packed, everything—and she didn’t show up. And he never says anything, you know, never cries.” She pulled a face. “Just wets the bed.”

“He’s still doing that?”

“Every night. I mean, I know you don’t like Mrs. Murchison, but really, the extra work . . .” She hesitated. “I don’t suppose you could go and see her, could you? His mother?”

*Not your house. Not your child.*

“I’m actually quite busy at the moment.”

“Busy?”

“Painting.”

“Oh, yes. Painting.”

That was only just not a sneer. The silence gathered. Elinor reminded herself of how tired Rachel must be, how disproportionately the burden of their mother’s illness fell on her. “You know, if you liked, you could have an early night; I’ll sit with her.”

“No, there’s no need. Nurse Wiggins does the nights.”

*So why am I here?*

“Would you mind if I phoned Paul tonight?”

“Phone him now if you like.”

“No, he’ll be working, I’ll leave it till after dinner.”

“How is he?”

“A bit up and down. Kenny was disappointed he hadn’t come. I think I’m a very poor substitute.”

“Now that is something you could do. Make sure he turns up for dinner washed and reasonably tidy. He won’t do anything for Mrs. Murchison and I just don’t have the time.”

*Kenny.* Somehow, whenever she was here, the responsibility for making Kenny behave got passed on to her. Still, it was the least she could do. So after Rachel had gone back upstairs, Elinor went into the garden, first to the sycamore tree and then into the kitchen garden where he’d built himself a den behind the shed. No luck there either. The night nursery was the next most likely place.

As she climbed the stairs, Elinor was remembering her first sight of Kenny, almost a year ago, the day the children arrived. A busload of them, carrying suitcases, paper parcels and gas masks, with luggage labels fastened to their clothes.

She and Rachel had arrived late at the church hall. It was rather like a jumble sale, all the good stuff disappearing fast, except that here the stuff was children. Pretty little blonde-haired girls were popular and not always with the obvious people. You could see why the Misses Richards might want one, but Michael Ryan, who’d lived alone at Church Farm ever since his parents died and seemed barely able to look after himself, let alone a child, why was he so keen? Big, strapping lads, strong enough for farm work, they were snapped up. Older girls went quickly too. A twelve-year-old, provided she was clean and tidy—and not too slow on the uptake—was virtually a free housemaid. And then there were the children nobody wanted: families of four or five brothers and sisters.

They'd have to be split up, of course. In fact, it was happening already. Some of the smaller children were wide-eyed with shock and grief.

Then she saw him. Pale, thin, his face slum-white, disfigured by freckles, orange hair, coppery-brown eyes. His trousers were too short, his sleeves too: he had unusually knobby wrist bones. And a rather long, thin neck. For some reason, that made him seem vulnerable, like an unfledged bird, though closer to—she'd begun to walk towards him now—she revised her impression. Yes, he looked like a chick, but the chick of some predatory bird: an eagle or a falcon. Not an attractive child, but even so, he should've been picked by now—he was the right age for farm work.

And then she saw the lice. She'd never seen anybody with a head that lousy. His hair was moving. Made desperate by their overcrowded conditions, lice had started taking short cuts across his forehead. She was about to speak to him—though she had no idea what to say—when Rachel came up behind her.

“They want me to take three. *Three*. How on earth am I supposed to manage three?”

“What about him?”

Rachel peered at the boy. She was short-sighted and too vain to wear glasses. “Well, at least there's only one of him . . . Yes, all right, I'll see what she says.”

Rachel went off to speak to the billeting officer, Miss Beatrice Marsh, who regularly made a mess of the church flower-arranging roster. They seemed to be having an extremely animated discussion. The boy showed no interest in the outcome. His gas-mask case was on a long string: Elinor noticed a sore patch on the side of his knee

where the case had chafed against the skin. He had placed a battered brown suitcase between his legs and was gripping it tight, so at least he'd have something, a change of clothes, a favourite toy. But he'd lost his luggage label.

“Which school are you with?”

He shook his head.

*You did it on purpose*, she thought. *You threw it away*. Not that there was anything sinister in that. There were many reasons why a child might choose to slip off the end of one school crocodile and attach himself to a different one entirely. A teacher he didn't like, a gang of bigger boys bullying in the playground . . . Whatever the reason, he'd arrived in the village with no name, no history. Something about that appealed to Elinor. Bundled up, parcelled off . . . and in the middle of it all, the chaos, the confusion, he'd taken off his label and thrown it away.

Only of course it couldn't go on like that. He had to give Rachel his name, his address, because he wanted his mother to be able to find him. He wanted her a good deal more than she appeared to want him.

Elinor tapped on the nursery door. Kenny was playing with his toy soldiers—Alex's, originally, now his—hundreds of tiny grey and khaki figures spread across a vast battlefield, many of them lying on their backs, already wounded or killed. He looked up from the game, but didn't smile or speak.

“It's dinner time. Have you washed your hands?”

He shook his head.

“Well, will you go and do it now, please?”

Still silent, he got up and left. Now and then it was brought home to her that Kenny hardly spoke—except, oddly enough, to Paul. And

in the past year he'd scarcely grown at all. She looked round the chaotic room, decided to leave the toy soldiers undisturbed, but knelt to close the dolls' house.

Officially, Kenny despised the house and the dolls—wouldn't have been seen dead playing with them—and yet whenever she came into the room the dolls were in different positions and the furniture had been rearranged. She both loved and hated this house, which had once been hers. Her eighth-birthday present. She could still remember the mixture of delight and uneasiness she'd felt when the wrapping paper fell away and she saw that the dolls weren't just ordinary dolls: they were Father and Mother and Rachel and Toby and her. And the toy house was an exact copy of the house they lived in, right down to the piano in the drawing room and the pattern of wallpaper on the bedroom walls. It had always had pride of place in her bedroom, but she hadn't played with it much. She picked up the Toby doll, held it between her thumb and forefinger, and felt a pang of grief so intense it squeezed her heart. She remained kneeling there, on the cold lino, waiting for the pain to pass, then laid the little figure on its bed.

Rachel came in. "Ken—" She stopped when she saw Elinor. "Still playing with dolls?"

"I never did, if you remember."

"No, you didn't, did you? You were always out with Toby. I think I played with that more than you did."

Elinor went on putting the dolls to bed. One moment, she was looking through a tiny window, the next, she saw her own face peering in: huge, piggy nostrils, open-pored, grotesque. Then, immediately, she was back in the nursery, looking down at the last doll in her hand: Mother.



“Are you all right?” Rachel asked. “Fine.”

“Only you’ve gone quite pale.”

“No, I’m fine.” She fastened the front of the house and stood up. “Kenny’s getting washed; at least I think he is. What about Mother, is she awake?”

“No, and anyway the Wiggins is there. Come on, I need a drink.”

As they were going downstairs the telephone in the hall started to ring, and Rachel went to answer it. When she came into the drawing room a few minutes later, she was glowing with excitement. “That was Alex; he’s coming home tomorrow. I’ll go and tell Tim.”

Left alone, Elinor thought: *Yes, good news.* But she couldn’t stop thinking about her mother lying upstairs, dying, but clinging on to life so she could see Alex again, one last time. This was what they’d all been waiting for: Alex’s arrival; the end.

### THREE

Alex arrived the following afternoon, straight out of hospital with the smell of it still on his skin. Elinor witnessed his meeting with his father. Tim stuck out his hand and then, realizing too late that Alex was unable to take it, blushed from the neck up and let the hand drop. She sensed a great tension in Alex: something coiled up hard and tight. His face softened when Rachel came into the room, but otherwise he seemed merely impatient, anxious to get this visit over and move on.

Thinking he would like time alone with his parents, Elinor fetched a drawing pad from her room and went into the garden. She sat under the birch tree, her back pressed hard against its scaly bark, staring up through the branches at yet another flawlessly blue sky. The aeroplanes were active today, little, glinting, silver minnows darting here and there. Earlier, she'd started trying to draw a cabbage and it was sitting on a low stone wall, waiting for her, yellower and flabbier than she remembered. She gazed at it without enthusiasm, then forced herself to begin. *Draw something every single day*, Professor Tonks used to say. *Doesn't matter what it is: just draw.*

All the upstairs windows were open. Behind that one on the far left her mother lay dying, attended, at the moment, by Nurse Wiggins, a great, galumphing, raw-boned creature with a jolly, professional laugh and downy, peach-perfect skin. Her laugh, so obviously designed to keep fear and pain at bay, grated on Elinor. And yes, she did *hover*. But she was good at her job, you had to give her that, though her presence added to the tension in the house. Rachel, in particular, seemed to find it difficult to relax.

Elinor held the drawing at arm's length. Not good. Cabbages are shocking if you get them right, especially those thick-veined outer leaves: positively scrotal. Only she couldn't draw them like that, not here, surrounded by her family. She was unconsciously censoring herself, and it wasn't just what she drew, either. It was what she let herself see. This was one of the reasons she'd left home early, and refused, even after Toby's death, to go back. Her mother needed care and company: it had been obvious to everybody that Elinor, the then unmarried daughter, should stay at home and provide it.

Obvious to everybody except Elinor, who'd refused, and gone on refusing. It was Rachel, in the end, who'd found their mother a cottage within walking distance of her own home.

*The caterpillar on the leaf*

*Repeats to thee thy mother's grief.*

What the hell was that about? It was true, though. She'd have liked to do the drawing that would be the equivalent of those lines.

Voices from an upstairs window: Rachel and Alex. She'd be taking him up to his room. Elinor looked at the brown lawn, the wilting shrubs and flowers; everything seemed to be suspended. Was that the war? Possibly. Even the roses, this summer, looked as if they were expecting to be bombed. But no, it was more than that: closer. *She* was waiting: for something to happen or, more likely, for something to be said; but though Mother's thick, white tongue came out at intervals to moisten her cracked lips she stayed silent, drifting in and out of sleep.

Elinor glanced up, caught by some movement other than the ceaseless circling of aeroplanes in the sky, and there was Alex, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, coming towards her over the lawn. "Aunt Elinor, I thought I'd find you here."

Flattering as always, implying he'd been looking especially for her. Alex was a devil with women, though his affairs never lasted long. It was the chase that interested Alex; the girls, once caught, quickly bored him. He bent down to kiss her, briefly cutting off the light.

Elinor was extremely fond of Alex, but wary of him too. He was tall, broad-shouldered and, despite his convalescent state, exuded virility. Beside him, she felt like a spindle-shanked elderly virgin, while knowing of course that she was nothing of the sort, but perhaps that's what middle age does to you? Makes you—women, perhaps, particularly—vulnerable to the perceptions other people have of you? She thought Alex might see her like that. He flirted with her rather as he might have done with a schoolgirl too young to be considered a possible conquest.

He sat cross-legged on the grass beside her, squinting through

his spread fingers at the sky. More and more planes, great clusters of them, like midges over a stagnant pond.

“Been busy all day,” she said.

“Yes, it’s certainly hotting up. No raids though?”

“Not here. There was one near the coast, Rachel says, a few days ago. Thirteen people killed.”

He was looking at the window of his grandmother’s room. “Strange, isn’t it, how private life just goes on? People get married, have babies. *Die*. And all the time . . .”

“I find I alternate,” she said. “You know, I’ll have days when I think about nothing except the war and how terrible it is and are we going to be invaded . . . and then suddenly, for no reason—nothing’s changed—it all disappears. And I think: Well, we’re still here. We’re still the same people we’ve always been.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”

Something in his voice made her turn to look at him. She saw lines around his eyes and mouth that hadn’t been there before. Suddenly, he did actually look like Toby; Toby as he’d been when he’d first come home on leave. So much had been made of Alex’s resemblance to Toby, especially by her mother, but also by Rachel, that Elinor had always resisted seeing it. Alex was different, she told herself: brash, coarser. But now she saw how alike they really were, and it stopped her breath.

“How’s the, er . . . ?” *Wound*, she meant.

He held out his arm. Suntanned skin, the tan fading a little now, after the long weeks in hospital. A dusting of blond hairs. “Not a lot to see, really. I got it in the elbow. The funny bone. Oh my God it was hilarious—and apparently there’s some damage to the nerves.” His

fingers were curled over, the tips almost touching the palm. “I haven’t got a lot of sensation here. Or here.”

“So you’re out of it, then?”

“Not if I can help it.” He was flexing his hand as he spoke.

“Though I don’t know what I can do.”

“Is it painful?”

“Can be.”

Voices floated over the lawn towards them. Somewhere in the house a door opened and closed.

“Have you been in to see her?”

“Not yet. The nurse is in there doing something so I thought I’d leave it a bit. God, it’s hot.”

“I think I know where there’s some lemonade.”

And that, Elinor thought, crossing the lawn, was an appropriately maiden-auntish thing to say.

Outside the kitchen door, she paused to listen, but Mrs. Murchison was having her post-lunch break, so she opened the door and walked in. A porcelain sink, with two buckets underneath, a range that had to be black-leaded every morning, and a long table, scarred with overlapping rings where hot plates and saucepans had been put down. Above the table, a rack with bunches of dried herbs, ready for the winter, though at the moment there were still masses of thyme, parsley, sage, rosemary and bay in the kitchen garden—and hundreds of bees feasting on them.

The pantry opened off the kitchen. The lemonade jug sat on the top shelf underneath the one tiny window, its muslin cover weighed down by blue beads. She picked up the jug and two glasses and returned to Alex.

“Auntie Elinor, you’re an angel.”

This was going from bad to worse: auntie, now. He got up and dragged a small iron table closer. They were in deep shade: the shadow of a branch fell across Elinor’s bare ankle so sharply it suggested amputation. The lemonade was cloudy, but relatively cold and sweet. Almost immediately wasps started hovering, drawn away from the easy pickings of windfall apples in the long grass of the orchard.

Elinor didn’t feel like talking and evidently Alex felt the same, but there was no awkwardness in their silence. It was born of heat and exhaustion, and, on his side, recent illness and possibly pain. He kept batting wasps away. “Don’t,” she said. “It only makes them worse.” *Why couldn’t men leave things alone?* After a while she left him to it, leaned back against the tree and closed her eyes.

There were so many insect sounds—the hum of bees, the whirring of gnats, the petulant buzz of wasps—that at first she didn’t notice one particular drone growing louder. A shadow swept across her closed lids. Opening her eyes, she saw a huge plane above the house, black, or at least it looked black against the sun. “Is it one of ours?” she asked. She knew it wasn’t—the German crosses on its wings were very clear—only her brain refused to accept what her eyes saw. The plane banked steeply; at first she thought it was going away, but it circled and came back again, this time much lower. She got up to run to the house, but Alex caught her arm. “No.” He pulled her back into the shadow of the tree. “Better not cross the lawn.” She felt sick. There was a popping sound, curiously unimpressive, like a child bursting paper bags or balloons. Alex dragged her to the ground, face down, and lay on top of her. “Don’t clench your teeth.” *What?* Pale faces appeared at the kitchen door. “Stay there!” Alex shouted, waving them back. He knew about this, they didn’t, so

automatically they obeyed. The plane veered away in the direction of the coast, falling, always falling, until it dipped below the level of a hill. The pressure on the back of her neck eased. She saw a ladybird, an inch away from her eyes, on the top of a grass stalk, waving its front legs, as if it didn't understand why the stalk had come to an end and there was only air. Now more planes were circling overhead—two? Three? She was afraid to look. “Ours,” Alex said, letting go of her arm. She saw red marks where his fingers had been. *That'll bruise.* Slowly, she began to breathe more deeply, to direct weak, foolish smiles at the faces in the kitchen doorway: Rachel, Tim, Mrs. Murchison, Joan Wiggins. Everybody must've rushed down when they heard the engine directly overhead. Beyond the hill, a column of black smoke was rising. The British planes circled, then banked steeply and headed towards London. Alex helped her to her feet and she wobbled on boneless legs into the house.

“Jerry right enough.” Tim gave a little cough, reclaiming status from his son. Then, abruptly, he turned on Rachel, his face contorted with anger. “What on earth possessed you?”

Elinor realized Rachel must've tried to run across the lawn to get to her son. Tim sounded so angry, but Alex was angry too: both of them, angry with the women because they hadn't been able to protect them. But then, gradually, everybody started to calm down. Mrs. Murchison put the kettle on for tea. “Oh, I think we can do better than that,” Tim said, and went to fetch the whisky.

Mrs. Murchison turned to Nurse Wiggins. “You'll have a cup, Joan?”

“No, I'll be getting back.”

In the turmoil of the last few minutes, the dying woman had been completely forgotten. Only now, conscience-stricken, Rachel remembered and ran upstairs.



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Helen Oyeyemi



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## DROWNINGS

This happened and it didn't happen:

A man threw a key into a fire. Yes, there are people who do such things. This one was trying to cure a fever. He probably wouldn't have done it if he'd had his head on straight, but it's not easy to think clearly when rent is due and there isn't enough money to pay it, and one who relies on you falls ill for want of nourishment but you have to leave him to walk around looking for work to do. Then even when you find some there still isn't enough money for both food and shelter, and the worry never stops for a moment. Somehow it would be easier to go home to the one who relies on you if they greeted you with anger, or even disappointment. But returning to someone who has made their own feeble but noticeable attempts to make the place a little nicer while you were gone, someone who only says "Oh, never mind" and speaks of tomorrow as they turn their trusting gaze upon you . . . it was really too much, as if tomorrow was up to him, or any of us . . .

THERE'S THAT DIFFICULTY with delirium too: you see it raging in another person's eyes and then it flickers out. That's the most dangerous

moment; it's impossible to see something that's so swiftly and suddenly swallowed you whole. Arkady's debts were so numerous that when he found himself being beaten up by strangers he no longer bothered to ask who they were or why they were hitting him—he just assumed it was something to do with his repayments. Instead of putting up much of a fight he concentrated on limiting damage to his internal organs. A friend of a friend of his knew a woman who bought people's organs in advance of their death. This woman bought your organs and then made your death relatively nice for you, an accident when you least expected it, a surprise release from life. Once that was taken care of she paid the agreed sum in full, cash in the hands of a person of your choice. Arkady felt his heart and lungs throughout the day—they felt hardy enough, so he had a Plan Z. Why go straight to Z, though?

THROWING THE KEY into the fire was the first step of this man's fever-born plan. The second step involved the kidnapping of a girl he had seen around. He felt no ill will toward this girl, and this was in itself unusual, since his desperation had begun to direct him to linger on the street wishing misfortune upon everyone he saw. That lady's maid hurrying out of the jeweler's shop—he wished she would lose some item of great value to her mistress, so that he might find it and sell it. Yes, let the lady's maid face every punishment for her carelessness, he wouldn't spare a single thought for her. As he passed the grand café on his city's main boulevard he wished a dapper waiter carrying a breakfast tray would slip and fall so that he could retrieve the trampled bread rolls. And how would it be if this time the waiter had slipped and fallen one time too many and was dismissed? *Even better—then I can replace him.*

THE GIRL HE planned to kidnap happened to be a tyrant's daughter. Hardly anybody disliked her; she was tall and vague . . . exceedingly vague. Her tendency toward the impersonal led to conversations that ended with both parties walking away thinking "Well, that didn't go very well." If you mentioned that you weren't having the best day she might tell you about certain trees that drank from clouds when they couldn't find enough moisture in the ground beneath them. She was known as Eirini the Second or Eirini the Fair, since she had a flair for the judicious distribution of cake, praise, blame, and other sources of strife. In terms of facial features she didn't really look like anybody else in her family. In fact she resembled a man her mother had secretly loved for years, a man her mother had never so much as spoken to until the day the tyrant decided to have his wife Eirini the First stoned for adultery. He did give her a chance, one chance. He asked her to explain why his eyesight kept telling him that his daughter was in fact the child of another man, but the woman only answered that there was no explanation.

THE MAN EIRINI the First loved heard about the resemblance between himself and the child and came down to the palace to try to stop the execution. He swore to the tyrant that he and Eirini the First were as good as strangers, but the tyrant waved him away and signaled his executioners to prepare themselves, at which point the man Eirini the Fair resembled ran into the center of the amphitheatre where Eirini the First stood alone with her arms forming a meager shield for her face and chest. The man Eirini the Fair resembled stood before her with his back to the executioners and the tyrant and told her to look at him, just

to keep looking only at him, and that it would be all right. It seemed he intended to protect her from the stones until he couldn't anymore. This was intolerable to the tyrant; he could not allow these two to exit together. There was also a sense of having just witnessed the first words they'd ever said to each other. The tyrant feared a man who had no qualms about involving himself in a matter such as this, so instead of going ahead with the execution he had his wife returned to the palace.

AS FOR THE MAN Eirini resembled, he asked to see the child just once—he'd never been more curious about anybody in his life, he said—but his request was denied and the tyrant had him drowned, as had been the case with all other enemies of the tyrant's state. All any citizen had to say was "The last king was better," and somehow or other Eirini's father got to hear of it and then you were drowned in the gray marshlands deep in the heart of the country, far from even the most remote farmhouse. The air was noxious where the drowned were. The water took their bones and muscle tissue but bubbles of skin rose from the depths, none of them frail, some ready for flight, brazen leather balloons. Houses throughout the country stood empty because the tyrant had eliminated their inhabitants; the swamp of bone and weights and plasma also had house keys mixed into it, since many had been drowned fully clothed along with the contents of their pockets. Eirini the Fair was aware of the keys. She visited the marshlands as often as she dared, crossing narrow stone bridges with a lantern in her hand. She went there to thank the man she resembled for what he had done, but he couldn't be separated from the rest of the drowned; Eirini the Fair swung her lantern around her in a circle and when her tears met the water they told their own

meaning as they flowed from eye socket to eye socket.

Among those the tyrant hadn't had drowned yet there was a great eagerness to be rid of him, and Arkady knew that if he went through with his plan to kidnap the tyrant's daughter he would not be without support. The tyrant had started off as an ordinary king, no better or worse than any other, until it had occurred to him to test the extent of his power. And once he found out how much power he really had, he took steps to maintain it. A ration system was in place, not because resources were scarce or because it was necessary to conserve them, but because the tyrant wished to covertly observe the black market and see what exchanges people were willing and able to make. Not just goods, but time . . . How much time could his subjects bear to spend queuing for butter? What about medicine? This was the sort of thing that made life for his subjects harder than life was for citizens of neighboring countries.

EIRINI THE FAIR was sure that her father was detested. He was a man who only laughed when he was about to give some command that was going to cause widespread panic. She didn't doubt that if anybody saw a way to annoy her father by harming her, they might well do it. But she was well guarded, and it escaped her notice that she was being intensely observed by the kind of person who would melt a key.

THE TYRANT HAD orphaned him, had had Arkady's mother and father drowned in the middle of the night, so that the boy woke up in an empty house wondering why nobody was there to give him breakfast.

Young Arkady prepared his own breakfast that day and continued to do so until there was no more food, and then he went out onto the street and stayed there, leaving the front door open in case anybody else had a use for his family home.

Two companions crossed his path—the first was Giacomo, the one who came to depend upon him. Arkady had happened to overhear a grocer trying to make Giacomo pay three times the going rate for a bar of soap. “I know this soap looks just like all the rest, but it’ll actually get you thrice as clean . . .” Giacomo was cheerfully scraping coins together when Arkady intervened, inquiring whether the grocer was enjoying his existence as a piece of garbage, whether it was a way of life the grocer felt he could recommend. Giacomo was not a person who knew what a lie was or why anybody would tell one; his mind worked at a different speed than usual. Not slower, exactly, but it did take him a long time to learn some things, especially practicalities regarding people. Light felt like levitation to Giacomo, and darkness was like damnation. How had he lived so long without being torn apart by one or the other? He was so troublesome, taking things that then had to be paid for, paying for things that shouldn’t have cost anything; he taught Arkady patience, looking at him with wonder and saying: “Arkady is good.” It was Giacomo who was good. His ability to give the benefit of the doubt never faltered. The swindlers didn’t mean it, the jeerers didn’t mean it, and those who would stamp on a child’s hand to make her let go of a banknote she had been given, those people didn’t mean it either.

Their other companion was a vizsla puppy, now a deep gold-colored dog, who began to follow Arkady and Giacomo one day and would not be shooed away, no matter how fierce an expression Arkady



assumed. Since Giacomo's alphabet and numerical coordination were unique to him, it was rare for him to be gainfully employed, so the dog merely represented an additional mouth for Arkady to feed. But the vizsla's persistence and tail-wagging served him well, as did his way of behaving as if he had once been a gentleman and might yet regain that state. The vizsla waited for Giacomo and Arkady to help themselves to portions of whatever meals they were able to get before he took his own share, though sometimes Giacomo pressed the dog to begin, in which case he took the smallest portion and not a bite more. Giacomo named him Leporello. On occasions of his own choosing Leporello turned backflips and earned coins from passersby. And yet he couldn't be persuaded to perform on demand; no, he would give looks that asked Arkady to perceive the distinction between artist and mere entertainer.

THE THREE OF them settled in a building at the edge of the city. The view from the building's windows was an unexpectedly nice one, covering miles and miles of marshland so that the mass of drowned flesh looked like water, just muddy water, if not wholly pure then becoming so as it teemed toward the ocean.

ONE DAY WHILE ARKADY was out working one of his three jobs Giacomo came home from a long walk, stopped on the wrong floor of their building, and accidentally opened the door to a flat that wasn't the one he shared with Arkady and Leporello. The tenant wasn't at home, so Giacomo could have seen or taken anything he wished. But what he sought was a view from a new window, and

that was all he took. Ten minutes looking out to sea. And he soon discovered that the same key opened every door in the building; their landlord counted on it not occurring to any of the tenants to try opening doors other than their own. When Giacomo told Arkady of his discovery, Arkady was all for having their locks changed. They could be murdered in their beds! They could be robbed at any time! It was bad enough that they lived under the rule of a tyrant who was slowly but surely squeezing the life out of everybody, but now their neighbors could get at them too . . .

Giacomo just laughed and pulled Arkady into one of the flats that stood empty between tenants on a floor higher than theirs; Leporello came too, and barked at the moonlight as it washed over their faces. Their fellow tenants continued to identify their doorways with care, and were too busy and too tired to go anywhere but home.

HAVING SECURED Giacomo's assurance that he'd be very, very careful with these trespasses of his, and Leporello's assurance that he'd help Giacomo keep his word, Arkady's worries were lessened for a time. One of his jobs was assisting the tyrant's physician, who did not choose to be known by her true name—or perhaps was yet to discover it—and went by the nickname Lokum. Like the confection she left traces of herself about anybody she came into contact with—sweetness, fragrance. “Ah, so you have been with her . . .”

Lokum kept the tyrant in perfect health, and perfectly lovesick too. Like the tyrant's wife, Lokum had no lovers: anybody who seemed likely to win her favor was immediately drowned. Arkady swept and mopped Lokum's chambers, and he fetched and carried covered baskets

for her, and he also acted as her test subject—this was his favorite job because all he was required to do was sit on a stool and eat different colored pieces of lokum that the physician had treated with various concoctions. He was also required to describe in detail what he felt happening in his body a few minutes after the consumption of each cube, and some of the morsels broke his cells wide open and made it all but impossible to find words and say them, though for the most part accurate description was no great task for him, and it paid more than his other two decidedly more mundane jobs. “Open your mouth,” she’d say, and then she placed a scented cube on his tongue. He’d warned himself not to behave like everybody else who came within ten paces of her, but once as the lokum melted away he found himself murmuring to her: *I remember a dawn when my heart / got tied in a lock of your hair.* Her usual response was flat dismissal—she all but pointed to the door and said, “Please handle your feelings over there,” but this time she took one end of the scarf she wore and wrapped it around his neck, drawing him closer and closer until her face was just a blur. “Listen, listen,” she said. “People have been drowned for saying much less.”

Arkady could make no retort to that. She was only telling the truth. He thought that was the end of the matter, but as he was leaving she told him not to come back. She said jealousy lent people uncanny powers of detection, and that it was better not to be so close within the tyrant’s reach if he wanted to go on living. He protested—without the wages she paid him, he, Giacomo, and Leporello could hardly keep afloat—but she shook her head and motioned to him to be quiet, mouthed *For your own good*, scattered a trayful of lokum on the floor, shouted “That’s enough clumsiness from you” loudly enough for the guards just outside

the door to hear, and sent him on his way, flinging the tray after him to complete the dismissal scene.

He didn't like that, of course, Lokum's taking it upon herself to decide what was for his own good. He could drown if he wanted to. In the weeks that followed that unfillable gap in his funds drowned him anyway—unpaid bills and nobody willing to employ him without speaking to Lokum, who refused to show him any favor. Giacomo and Leporello spoke less and stared out of the windows more. Arkady knew that they weren't getting enough to eat but Giacomo wasn't the sort to complain and Leporello dared not. Giacomo's fever didn't take hold until Arkady missed three rent payments in a row and the trio were evicted from the building with the views that Giacomo was so fond of. Arkady was able to find them a room, a small one with a small grate for cooking. It was a basement room, and Giacomo seemed crushed by the floors above them. He wouldn't go out. He asked where the door was and searched the walls with his hands. Leporello led him to the door of the room but he said, "That's not it," and stayed in the corner with his hands reverently wrapped around a relic, the key to their previous flat: "The key to where we really live, Arkady . . ." How Arkady hated to hear him talk like that.

GIACOMO AND LEPORELLO had stolen the key between them, Leporello putting on a full acrobatic display and then standing on his back legs to proffer a genteel paw to the landlord while Giacomo made a getaway with the key. In his head Giacomo pieced together all those views of the same expanse. Sometimes he tried to describe the whole of what he saw to Arkady, but his fever made a nonsense of it all. Arkady took the

key from Giacomo to put an end to his ramblings, and he threw the key into the fire to put an end to the longing that raged through his body and vexed his brain. “This is where we really live, Giacomo, here in a basement with a door you say you cannot find.”

THEN ARKADY TURNED his back on Leporello’s growling and Giacomo’s sobs as he tried to snatch the key back from the grate. He fell asleep with the intention of kidnapping Eirini the Fair in the morning. The palace watchwords hadn’t changed; he had checked. He would be glib and swift and resolute and have the girl at his mercy before she or anyone grasped the situation. He would demand that the tyrant take his damn foot off the nation’s neck and let everybody breathe. Money too, he’d ask for a lot of that. Enough for medicine and wholesome meat broth and a proper bed and all the sea breeze his friends could wish for.

HE DREAMED OF the key writhing in the fire, and he dreamed of faces coughing out smoke amidst the flames, each face opening up into another like the petals of a many-layered sunflower, and he was woken by police officers. They shone light into his eyes and pummeled him and ordered him to confess now while they were still being nice. Confess to what? The officers laughed at his confusion. Confess to what, he was asking, when the building he’d been evicted from had burned to the ground overnight and he’d been the one who’d set the fire. Almost half the inhabitants had been out working their night jobs, but everybody else had been at home, and there were nine who hadn’t escaped in time. So there were nine deaths on his head. Arkady maintained that he’d set no fire, that

he hadn't killed anybody, but he knew that he'd been full to the brim with ill will and still was, and he thought of the burning key and he wasn't sure . . . he believed he would have remembered going out to the edge of the city, and yet he wasn't sure . . . he asked who had seen him set the fire, but nobody would tell him. Giacomo and Leporello were so quiet that Arkady feared the worst, but when he got a chance to look at them he saw that one of the policemen had somehow got a muzzle and leash on Leporello and was making gestures that indicated all would be well as long as Giacomo stayed where he was. After a few more denials from Arkady his friends were removed from the room: Giacomo asked why and was told that his friend had killed people and wouldn't admit it, so he was going to have to be talked to until he admitted it. At this Giacomo turned to Arkady and asked: "But how could Arkady do this, when he is so good?" Arkady forgot that his words could be taken as a confession, and asked his friend to understand that he hadn't meant to do it. *I didn't mean it. I didn't know*—Giacomo nodded at those words and said: "Yes, I understand." Satisfied with Arkady's self-incrimination, the officer holding Leporello allowed the dog to stand on his hind legs and pat Arkady's cheek and then his own face; he repeated this a few times as a way of reassuring Arkady that he would be by Giacomo's side until the truth came out. Leporello seemed confident that the truth would come out very soon, and Arkady remembered the Vizsla puppy he'd tried to drive away and was glad he'd failed at that.

THOUGH ARKADY BROKE down and confessed after being shown photographs of the five men and four women who'd died in the fire, his confession was never entirely satisfactory. He got the timing and

exact location of the fire he'd set wrong, and his statement had to be supplemented with information from his former landlord, who identified him as the culprit before a jury, pointing at Arkady as he described the clothing the police had found him wearing the morning they arrested him. The inconsistencies in Arkady's account troubled the authorities enough to imprison him in a cell reserved for "the craziest bastards," the ones who had no inkling of what deeds they might be capable of doing until they suddenly did them.

ARKADY'S MEALS WERE brought to him, and his cell had an adjoining washroom that he kept clean himself. He no longer had to do long strings of mental arithmetic, shaving figures off the allowance for food as he went along—after a few days his mind cleared, he stopped imagining that Giacomo and Leporello were staring mournfully from the neighboring cell, and he could have been happy if he hadn't been facing imprisonment for deaths he dearly wished he could be sure he hadn't caused. His cell was impregnable, wound round with a complex system of triggers and alarms. Unless the main lock was opened with the key that had been made for it he couldn't come out of that cell alive.

THE TYRANT HELD the key to Arkady's cell, and liked to visit him in there and taunt him with weather reports. He hadn't been interested in the crimes of the other crazy bastards who'd once inhabited this cell, so they'd been drowned. But as somebody who had by his own admission dispatched people and then gone straight to sleep afterward, Arkady was the only other person within reach that the tyrant felt

he had a meaningful connection with. Arkady barely acknowledged his questions, but unwittingly gained the affections of the guards by asking a variant of the question “Shouldn’t you be staying here in this cell with me, you piece of shit?” each time the tyrant said his farewells for the day. As per tyrannical command the guards withheld Arkady’s meals as punishment for his impudence, but they didn’t starve him as long they could have. One night Arkady even heard one of the guards express doubt about his guilt. The guard began to talk about buildings with doors that could all be opened with the same key. He’d heard something about those keys, he said, but the other guard didn’t let him finish. “When are you going to stop telling old wives’ tales, that’s what I want to know . . . anyway no landlord would run his place that way.”

LOKUM AGREED TO marry the tyrant on the condition that there would be no more drownings, and he sent Eirini the First and Eirini the Fair across the border and into a neighboring country so that he could begin his new life free of their awkward presence. After a long absence, the tyrant appeared before Arkady to tell him this news, and to inform him that he’d lost the key to Arkady’s cell. The key couldn’t be recut either, since he’d had the only man with the requisite expertise drowned a few years back. Lokum had a point about the drownings being counter-productive, the tyrant realized. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Maybe it’ll turn up again one of these days. But if you think about it you were going to be here for life anyhow.”

“No problem,” Arkady said. And since it was looking as if this was the last time the tyrant was going to visit him, he added casually: “Give my regards to Lokum.”



The tyrant looked over at the prison guards, to check whether they had seen and heard what he'd just seen and heard. "Did he just lick his lips?" he asked, in shock. The guards claimed they couldn't confirm this, as they'd been scanning the surrounding area for possible threats.

HMMM . . . SPRING the lock so that the cell kills him," the tyrant ordered as he left. The guards unanimously decided to sleep on this order; it wasn't unheard of for the tyrant to rethink his decisions. The following day the tyrant still hadn't sent word, so the guards decided to sleep on it another night, and another, until they were able to admit to themselves and to each other that they just weren't going to follow orders this time. Their first step toward rebellion, finding out that disobedience didn't immediately bring about the end of the world . . . the prison guards cautiously went into dialogue with their counterparts at the palace and at border crossings, and a quiet, steady exodus began.

THE NEIGHBORING countries welcomed the escapees, and with them the opportunity to remove the tyrant's power at the same time as playing a prank on him by helping to empty out his territory. If the tyrant noticed that the streets were quieter than usual, he simply said to himself: "Huh, I suppose I really did have a lot of these people drowned, didn't I . . ." It probably wouldn't have helped him one way or the other to notice that as the living people left, the marshland stretched out farther and farther, slowly pulling houses and cinemas, greengrocers, restaurants and concert halls down into the water. If you looked down into the swamps (which he never did) it was possible to see people untangling

their limbs and hair, courteously handing each other body parts and keys, resuming residence in their homes, working out what crops they might raise and which forms of energy they could harness.

MEANWHILE THE TYRANT was congratulating himself for having dealt with Arkady. He had disliked the way Lokum had begged for Arkady's life, and cared even less for her expression upon being told her pleas came too late. He didn't think they'd had a love affair (that lanky pyromaniac could only dream of being worthy of Lokum's attention), but Lokum's behavior was too similar to that of the man Eirini the First loved. What was wrong with these people?

THE TYRANT SET Lokum alight on their wedding day. Thanks to Arkady, fire had risen to the top of his list of elimination methods. He forced her to walk to the end of the longest bridge spanning the marshlands, and he drenched her in petrol and struck a flame. He'd given no real thought to decreasing his own flammability, so the event was referred to as an attempted murder-suicide. "Attempted" because when he tried to run away, the burning woman ran after him shouting that she'd just that moment discovered something very interesting; he couldn't kill her, he could never kill her . . . she took him in her arms and fed him to the fire he'd started. There was still quite a lot of him left when he jumped into the swamp, but the drowned held grudges and heaved him out onto land again, where he lay roasting to death while his bride strolled back toward the city peeling blackened patches of wedding dress off her as she went. She put on some other clothes and took food to the prison

where Arkady sat alone contemplating the large heap of questionable publications the guards had left him on their departure. Before Arkady could thank Lokum for the food (and, he hoped, her company) she said, “Wait a minute,” and ran off again, returning an hour later with his two friends. Leporello shook Arkady’s hand and Giacomo licked his face; this was a joke they’d vowed they’d make the next time they saw Arkady, and they thought it rather a good one. Arkady called out his thanks to Lokum, but she had no intention of staying this time either: “We’ve got to get you out of there,” she said, and left again.

“It’s autumn, isn’t it?” Arkady asked Giacomo. He’d seen that Giacomo’s shoes and Leporello’s feet were soaking wet too, but he wanted to finish eating before he asked about that.

“Yes! How did you know?”

“I don’t know. Could you bring me some leaves? Just a handful . . .”

Giacomo brought armfuls of multi-colored leaves, and Leporello rushed through them like a blizzard so that the richest reds and browns flew in through the prison bars.

“Giacomo?”

“Yes, Arkady?”

“Is it right for me to escape this place? Those people where we used to live—”

“There was a fire and they couldn’t get out. They would have got out if they could, but they couldn’t, and that’s what killed them. If you can escape then you should.”

“But am I to blame?”

Giacomo didn’t say yes or no, but attempted to balance a leaf on the tip of Leporello’s nose.

WHAT ABOUT EIRINI the Fair? For months she'd been living quite happily in a big city where most of the people she met were just as vague as she was, if not more so. She ran a small and cozy drinking establishment and passed her days exchanging little known facts with customers in between attending to the finer details of business management. Her mother had drowned soon after their arrival in the new city: this might have been an accident, but Eirini thought not. The river Danube ran through her new city of residence, and her mother had often said that if she could drown in any river in the world she wished for it to be the Danube, a liquid road that would take her body to the Carpathians and onward until it met the Iskar as it crossed the Balkan mountains, washing her and washing her until she lost all scent of the life she'd lived. Then let the Iskar take her to lie on beds of tiny white flowers in old, old glades, high up on the slopes. Or if she stayed with the Danube, let it draw her along miles and miles of canals to collect pine needles in the Black Forest. As many as her lap could hold . . .

Thinking of her mother's words, Eirini the Fair had journeyed farther up the river and given the ashes into its care. Arrivals from her father's territory frequented her bar and freely cursed the tyrant's name as they told tales that intrigued her. If what these people were saying was true, then the tyrant's drownings had come to an end. It was said that her father's territory was mostly underwater now, that there was no king, no flag, and no soldiers, that there were only cities of the drowned, who looked as if they were having a good time down there. Eirini the Fair heard that one of the only pieces of land yet to be submerged was notable for having a large prison on it. The man who told Eirini this paused for a moment before asking if he could buy her a drink, and

she left an even longer pause before accepting. He was handsome but the scent of his cologne was one she very strongly associated with loan sharks. Even so, can't loan sharks also be caring boyfriends, or at the very least great in bed?

“Hi, excuse me, sorry for interrupting,” a glamorous newcomer said, as she took a seat at the bar beside the probable loan shark. “Can we talk in private?”

ALL LOKUM WANTED to know was what Eirini the Fair had taken with her when she'd left the palace. Eirini had neither the time nor the inclination to provide a list of articles to her father's plaything. But Lokum rephrased her question to ask if Eirini had taken anything of her father's while leaving the palace, and then Eirini remembered the key. Just a metal shape on his dressing table, bigger than most keys she'd seen, but still small enough to pocket while she bade her father farewell and hoped she'd managed to inconvenience him one last time.

JUST BEFORE SHE and Lokum reached the prison gates, Eirini the Fair looked over the side of their boat and saw that her mother had found her way to the drowned city that now surrounded the building. She wasn't alone; there was a man with her, the one Eirini the Fair had never met but wanted to. They both waved, and Eirini the First held up a finger and then wistfully rocked an invisible baby, motions easily interpretable as an appeal for grandchildren. “Lovely,” Eirini the Fair murmured, drawing her head back into the boat and pretending she hadn't seen that last bit.

MYSTERIOUS  
FRAGRANCE OF THE  
YELLOW MOUNTAINS

Yasuko Thanh



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## ONE

Killing a man is easy. Life is fragile, for one. And the world is poisonous, for two. How poisonous? Cobras, mushrooms, stonefish, apple seeds. Consider the datura plant. *Datura stramonium*. White flowers the shape of a trumpet and the size of a human heart. The seeds, crushed with a mortar and pestle, are easily processed. Thieves and prostitutes favour its killing properties. Georges-Minh has seen the results in his practice and he has such a flower blooming in his courtyard.

Five men plotted in a circle. Five men, none of them yet thirty. Five men, cross-legged on Georges-Minh's bed, which took up half the room, no mattress in the Chinese style, carved from the rarest red wood, Georges-Minh's command centre, where he ate, slept, played cards, and officiated the meetings he held at his house twice a month.

"Mysterious Scent of the Mountains," said Khieu, who owned an inn with his wife and spent his spare time painting poetry onto the inside of rice-paper sun hats. *Had it not been for winter, / the falling snow / might have been cherry blossoms*. One day he would close the inn and just sell the hats whose words could be read only when they were raised to the rays of the sun.



His suit was the same type of linen as Georges-Minh's except that Georges-Minh's was ironed. His knees sloped, and the collar of his white shirt, where it met the dark line of his stubble, was wrinkled like the rings of a pineapple tree. Smaller than Georges-Minh's, his thin mouth appeared somewhat lecherous. His powdered hair smelled like jasmine.

He sat to Georges-Minh's right, so close their knees touched. Georges-Minh stared at his best friend's thick betel-nut-coloured hands rolling a cigarette as he shielded the tobacco from the wind of a small oscillating fan, wondering why he hadn't spoken of his wife in so many months.

"No, no, no. I still like Fighting Dragon," said Trinh Van Phuc, the musician of the group, in an accent that sounded like he was chopping vegetables. Rumour was he'd been married, though he never talked about his wife.

"Or, like I said before," Khieu said, staring straight at Georges-Minh, "we can make a poison." He looked at the back of his hand, examined his nails.

Georges-Minh's cheeks grew hot. "How's your brood, Khieu?" Georges-Minh asked nervously, trying to change the subject.

"Don't know." Khieu lowered his gaze, picked up his hand of cards.

"Mysterious Scent of the ... *whatever* is too ... too ..." Phuc waved his teacup, trying to catch the right word.

"Don't know?"

"Haven't seen Mai in months," Khieu said sheepishly.

"Perfume sounds like something from a song," Phuc said. "We're a revolutionary group—not *minstrels*."

"Perfumes are transcendent," the third man, a horticulturalist, said.

The fellows called him Bao, though at his shop he responded with equal ease to Bao or Victor or Mr. Le.

“Not even the kids?” Georges-Minh said. Mostly they kept their private affairs private. Still, the revelation shocked him because Khieu had been married to his wife, Mai, for seven years; they had three children together.

“These things happen,” Phuc said and shrugged.

How did they happen? Like a storm that washed your memory of a family the way a rain washed a road in a sudden burst? Or did they happen the way a thief with a bludgeon attacked a family, leaving death in his wake? He imagined Mai running the inn alone, looked down at his cards as if it was his hand that troubled him.

“How many soldiers can there be?”

“Thirty or forty?”

“I heard fifty,” said Khieu.

“You’re both wrong. The exact number is eighty.”

“Do you know nothing? They number over two hundred!”

“We will drive out the French bandits.”

“We will restore Vietnam.”

“We will create a democratic republic.”

“No, a monarchy.”

Their hearts were in the right places, these members of the MFYM, Mysterious Fragrance of the Yellow Mountains, who didn’t yet have a name, perhaps because most of their meetings were spent drinking and playing cards. They discussed lofty ideals. Drank. Outlined what a free and democratic Vietnam would look like. Drank. Compared international political systems. Drank. Cited historical precedents. Cursed the French.

Each man held some playing cards and a glass of mulberry wine. They were teacups, not wine glasses, and none of them matched, but Georges-Minh wanted people to believe he didn't care about such trifling details. He could have afforded matching wine glasses, but only shallow men cared about such worldly things.

"If we can't agree, let's move on," suggested Bao, who raised moonflowers and other exotic flora for an exclusive clientele.

Le Bao Victor's father was the junior minister of the Annamese cabinet of Cochin China. As a child Bao had travelled with his father to the Dutch East Indies and France, when his father had still thought he might follow in his footsteps and enter the cabinet himself. But the junior minister's power was in name alone. Had the family any jurisdiction at all, perhaps only the alleys knew it. The jackfruit trees. The sewers and opium dens. Delinquents with slingshots. Women at the market. Shoeshine boys.

The Les flaunted their material wealth as if in spite. Tennis lessons for the children. Rowing. Elocution. Music appreciation.

Bao's wife, Mimi, married him not because she wanted a better life. Not only because. But if she'd known a few rooms next to a flower shop awaited her? He turned his back on politics two years after their marriage. Began wearing a bicycle chain for a belt. Fell in love with orchids, chrysanthemums, bellflowers, hibiscus. After reuniting with his elementary-school mates Georges-Minh and Khieu in a bar.

"Let's talk about what we're actually here for," Bao said, "as our esteemed colleague Khieu suggested when he brought up a rather interesting idea. Why don't we talk about that?"

Khieu and Georges-Minh had been best friends since grade school,

when they'd run loose around Saigon's back alleys, climbing trees and scaring cats.

Khieu, whose family lived in one of the many shacks built over the river, hated the sellout, the collaboration of his family with the enemy that included his Christian name, Henri, but he stopped short of hating the urchins who called to him across the alleyways of Cholon—"Hon-riiii, Hon-riiii, give us a tien, give us your school tie"—who worshipped anything French, giving themselves French nicknames for fun.

"Chosen well, a good name helps define a group's beliefs, bestows desired traits," Georges-Minh said, because Khieu was the kind of person who as a child had given away his pencils and schoolbooks to those same urchins, and now sat with a cracked teacup of wine in his hand goading him. Even as a child Khieu had cared about things. Georges-Minh couldn't have cared less. Georges-Minh was too busy lusting after a new mechanical boat or model train. Khieu, who'd had nothing, had ideals, and hadn't even wanted his French name. Georges-Minh shrugged. "Look at all the fuss and divination that goes into choosing a child's name." He would go to as much trouble when he named his son. When he had a son. When he found a woman. When he got married. Which he would. Any day now.

"Not a *monarchy*, a republic," Khieu said. "Haven't you read Rousseau?"

"They should die like dogs."

"They should die like a snake under a rickshaw driver's wheels."

"They should die a bad death. Not a 'death in the house and home' but a 'death in the street.'"

"They should die like an iguana in the mouth of a hungry dog, swelling at head and tail until they burst under the pressure of his powerful jaws."

“Poison the lieutenant colonel of the garrison with *gan cong mak coc*, liver of a peacock, bile of a frog.”

“No. People should use a beautiful woman to kill a king.”

“Yes, love them to death.”

“You’re suggesting a strategy?”

“Poison doesn’t always kill. Did you hear about the guy who was dying? Of cancer. So he took liver and bile and the poison started to cure his cancer.”

“Actually?”

“Actually.”

“They can die like a lover in the arms of a woman,” Khieu said. “I don’t care. So long as they die.”

Making a poison strong enough to kill a man is easy. Remove the seeds from the stamen. Crush with a mortar and pestle until the dry seeds stop crackling. The powder is now so fine as to be invisible and weightless. Season chicken, shrimp, or buffalo with the dust. Steeped in fish sauce, the poison is tasteless.

Because he was a little drunk, Georges-Minh fell against Khieu. He righted himself and dabbed with his thumb at the spilled wine on the wooden bed slat. “I don’t mind talking about the group name some more. A thing becomes its name and vice versa. Can you imagine a militant group with the word ‘bananas’ in its moniker?”

“Bananas is definitely out.”

“I second.”

“Third.”

“Obviously.”

“This is absurd.”

“What was that name you said? Mysterious perfume ...”

“Mysterious smell.”

“Fragrance.”

“No, it was mysterious scent, but I like perfume better.”

“Me too.”

“Perfume then,” said Chang. Chang was an ethnic Chinese, born in Cholon, a court translator and lover of books. “But mysterious is the important part, because it’s how we must remain. Elusive. Who said elusive? As in impossible to catch. By soldiers, police, any and all enemies.”

“Well, perfumes are important, too,” said Bao, who would have said such a thing. “And sweet, right, because *that’s* what we want to be. But the *transcendence*. That’s the part that’s important. When something becomes a perfume it *transcends* its lot as a fragrance to become something else. See?”

“Maybe you’re not that much of a blockhead,” said Chang, the translator with the thick and beautiful lips. “Sweet as a flower that rises in the spring. In the spring there’s hope. Especially in the north.”

“Where at present,” said Georges-Minh, striking a serious face, “the news is one in three women are now prostitutes because of the regime. Did you know they’re starving in Tonkin? Picking individual grains of fallen rice from between stones with their fingers. Eating farm animals dead of disease.”

The men sympathized with silent nods.

“Invisible as a fragrance,” Chang continued. “Invisible as hope, invisible as a guerrilla fighter. Mountains, of course, are a symbol of strength. Where were we then, mountains?”

“Don’t forget, prayers are invisible, too,” Phuc said, chain-smoking. *The rich ate, the poor smoked.*

“True,” said Georges-Minh.

“Like the fart I just let out?” Phuc said.

“God, Phuc. Will you ever grow up?” Bao said.

Khieu took a sip of his wine, then drained the cup, avoiding the chip on the rim. After lighting a cigarette he said, “If we’re not going to move on to the poison until after we choose a name then I say let’s add ‘yellow’—Mysterious Perfume of the Yellow Mountains. Makes us sound more poetic.”

Was Khieu playing it straight with the group? Yellow? Georges-Minh couldn’t tell much about the man these days. Khieu had always dreamed of travelling to distant places, Africa, Borneo, and Antarctica, and carried maps with him wherever he went. Then one day he’d thrown them in the river. He had recently started growing his hair long again, like some of the Hindu holy men in the marketplace. He had discarded his topknot and traditional turban in favour of clipped hair long ago, but now he no longer kept it sleek, no longer washed it. He wore his hair unkempt and ran around the marketplace pushing a broom or borrowing rickshaws that didn’t belong to him. This, in itself, wasn’t completely new. But he’d changed since the hauling of those French contraptions of horror into the square, the guillotines.

Georges-Minh hated the French—he could say those words. But could he write someone’s name in poison? Georges-Minh didn’t know if he could kill a man. Maybe one man. But could he poison a whole garrison? *Poison*. Khieu’s earlier words hung in the air along with his cigarette smoke, waiting for Georges-Minh’s response.

The truth was, ever since that day as a schoolboy, when Khieu with his one green eye that emphasized his craziness had stood nearly naked

in the marketplace in Cholon, Georges-Minh had admired him because he was everything Georges-Minh was incapable of being by nature, lacking the inner rigour. Or thought he had admired him because at least he stood for something. A few years later, as a teenager, when Khieu stole a driver's rickshaw one afternoon and pretended he was a coolie, returning the rickshaw and all his earnings to the rightful owner that evening, Georges-Minh had wanted to be him. Khieu, who had a neck as solid as an ironwood tree, was strong. Even now, as an adult, when he returned to Cholon and swept the streets with a broom or collected garbage with his hands, barefoot as a peasant—for the love of work or to prove a political point, Georges-Minh wasn't exactly sure—everyone knew him by name. Now Khieu was looking at him and Georges-Minh could feel whatever small admiration he'd built up for himself in Khieu's eyes over the years slipping away by degrees like a small village down a waterlogged hillside during the monsoon rains. Khieu, looking again with that provocation in his eyes Georges-Minh decided was his friend's way of mocking him, for being weaker than him, teasing him for his reluctance to get involved. Provoking him into being more than the wimp he always was. Taking a stand.

Khieu still enjoyed mathematics, detective novels, astronomy, searching with his telescope for alien life in the skies, but another part of him had evolved into something Georges-Minh no longer recognized after hearing men screech nationalist slogans, watching the blade fall, heads tumbling into baskets. The heads were collected and mounted onto spikes as warnings to others. Punishments were distributed to Vietnamese who tried to remove the heads too soon. Even as he sat there now, with Khieu waiting for his response—would he or would he



not make a poison to kill the soldiers stationed at the French garrison of Saigon?—he knew he was disappointing his friend. And his country by extension.

He was the natural choice. The doctor of the group. Private doctor to the lieutenant colonel of the garrison.

Georges-Minh looked out the window. Subterfuge. An irrational ploy. Smile and no one will bother you. Look away and what you don't want to see turns invisible. Gazing at the river that flowed out back. Now the shade of a ball bearing. Now the shade of dirty cotton. Now the shade of belly button lint. He could pretend the river was something fleeting. A minnow, a swordfish, a dragon. Then the dreaded thing happened. It must. It had to.

“Yes, of course. He could make the poison.”

“Naturally, he's a doctor,” Bao said, scratching his eyes. His lids were swollen again. Last night, he'd gotten drunk and sat with the cuttings, singing to them. “March to victory, sway, sway.” Using the wine bottle as a door knocker, he'd tried to wake Mimi. She, angry as usual, had refused to join him in the room where he nurtured the rooted plants, encouraging them to grow.

Who knew this was something he'd be good at? If sore eyes was the price? He stumbled to each pot, ensured the proper mix of soil versus food. His own blend of which he was proud. Sang to them, while Mimi hollered he would wake the dead.

“What do you say?” Phuc said.

“Georges-Minh?”

“Aren't you listening?” Phuc said.

“He's drunk.”

“Could you or couldn’t you?”

“Daydreaming.”

“No, I was paying attention. Poison.”

“Well?”

“There are many ways to poison a man.”

Georges-Minh stared into Khieu’s one green eye. Mulberry wine made all the fish in the near dark leap out of the river and hover over the water. They spun and danced and galloped through the air, a synchronized ripple, the way the water puppets shimmer and perform boisterous art over Saigon River currents.

GEORGES-MINH HEARD a knocking before bed. At night the street may be filled with wandering spirits, common marauders looking for what they could steal—a bicycle, a garden rake. When Georges-Minh had kept chickens and pups for a short time, he’d woken up one morning to find all his pullets removed from the henhouse and his puppies placed inside. The pullets were running loose all over the yard—the ones who hadn’t been picked off by foxes. The door to the henhouse had been locked (he still had the key), so it couldn’t have been neighbourhood kids. It was the ghosts, for the third or fourth time; they liked the Thao Dien neighbourhood, and why not? They rambled around in packs, like hoboes, carrying off what they could find, then abandoning it along the way. Since the northern famine decades ago, which caused the migration of peasants and a million dead by the side of the road, too many men and women had gone without good deaths in their homes. How could a soul go to heaven without the proper send-off: the ritual words, the money burned, offerings of clothing and shoes? Even the government admitted the problem was getting out of

hand. Add more recent deaths and ghosts were popping up everywhere; once five or six ghosts startled Georges-Minh by rising from the ground at a crossroads and nearly crashing his car. Georges-Minh locked his shutters at night because the cockiest ghosts would crawl across his rear garden and come into his house through his kitchen.

The worst scare he'd ever had was accosting a confused prisoner with a mutilated body and a flicking tongue one night he'd been too drunk to shut up the house properly. The spirit, similar in appearance to Mau Ma, the seductive Water Spirit who sometimes appeared as a woman, with bare chest and long hair, and summoned people to their deaths, was licking the mangoes Georges-Minh had lined up on the counter for breakfast. A girl Georges-Minh had known in school had seen this spirit and lived in the care of her mother to this day, catatonic as the afternoon she'd beheld her at the lake.

Georges-Minh wanted nothing to do with ghosts. Spirits. Necromancers. Geomancers. Pyromancers. Palmists. Astrologers. The mythology of people who believed their Monkey God had been shit from the bowels of a rock. Whose emperors ate immortal peaches. Who made clay dolls and channelled into them the souls of the dead.

The French had stirred his mind like a great hand stirs the clouds, infused it with strange notions, and Georges-Minh's clarity became the occupation of Western medicine. Embracing all that was European meant denying his father's Purple Emperor Fortune book, his spirit lens, shameful keepsakes, now dusty on his office shelf.

The knock persisted.

Georges-Minh opened the door a crack to find a dishevelled man with a goat tethered to his arm.

“I can’t remember a thing and I don’t know how I got here,” the man said. “You’re a doctor, right? I read your sign.”

He looked so pathetic that Georges-Minh led him to his home office even though he was already wearing his pyjamas.

Georges-Minh sat him down on the examination table and got him to remove his shirt. “Have you been smoking opium?”

“I don’t know. I feel like my head’s going to break open and a thousand ants are going to come spilling out.”

The man’s eyes were clear, not red. His skin, however, was covered with fine black marks as from a pepper shaker. Georges-Minh conducted a quick exam of his nose and throat before asking the man to lie down.

Georges-Minh wiped his own forehead with his forearm. Whether it was the heat of his office or a contagious illness the man had brought into his house, Georges-Minh didn’t know. He thought he felt a little queasy but maybe the earlier conversation about poisons had given him a nervous stomach. Maybe he’d merely had too many glasses of mulberry wine. His head spun.

The man, lying on the examination table, clenched Georges-Minh’s hand. “I itch, I want to tear off my skin. What’s inside wants out. I’m burning inside.”

“Like indigestion?”

His eyes were panicked. “I have a monster inside me.”

In old-fashioned spirit possessions, a priest beat the patient with a mulberry stick. If that didn’t remove the spirit, the priest put a spell on the spirit, to divine what it needed. If the spirit was lonely, the priest provided friends, however many, made of papier mâché, built on bamboo frames. Hungry, the best food would be provided. While still

under the spell, the spirit would be forced to sign a piece of paper. In this manner, the spirit was contractually obligated, having had its needs met, to exit the body.

The patient sat up. “Don’t you see?” Yanked the hand he held toward him. “Or do you see?”

“I’m going to have to ask you to let go.” Georges-Minh pried the man’s fingers off him.

“I see a monster inside you.”

“Calm down, please.”

“If you try to push them down and bury them they’ll only get angry and crawl back out. These monsters are like hungry ghosts that way: the country is full of them. Invisible monsters living inside people, only the people don’t know it, or they do and try to ignore it. They come out most easily when you’re sleeping, or when you forget yourself for a moment. That’s why drinking is so dangerous. Don’t you see? Conquerors want you to do that. Drink. Do opium.”

“Let me give you a sedative.”

The man kept fighting him. His fever, whatever illness was causing it, made his delirium peak to the point where Georges-Minh was beginning to feel truly afraid.

“No sedative!” the man shouted. “Listen to me. The Chinese wanted a nation of addicts. How much of yourself can you hide before you no longer recognize your reflection? It’s in the opium. I’m trying to tell you. Warn you. They’re coming for you too. The monster’s already inside you. It’s happening now. The country will die in its sleep. Lulled by false promises.”

“Everything will be fine, I promise.”

“You tell yourself lies, covered by more lies, and then more lies till you forget what part is the truth. That’s how the oppressor has always taken over the oppressed. They put the country to sleep. Please don’t put me to sleep.”

When the man was safely asleep Georges-Minh sighed deeply, then he sat in his chair and looked at himself in the mirror.

The man had mentioned opium. He shook his head. How could he know?

He would contact Infectious Disease Control in the morning and they would chat about the usual things, lack of resources, lack of infrastructure, lack of hygiene among the peasants and working class.

It was the third man he’d seen in as many days like him, and all three had yet to regain their memory. As with the others, he wondered if it might be some kind of new rice paddy fever.

He was filled with a deep sense of unease.

# THE GOLD EATERS

Ronald Wright



HAMISH HAMILTON

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## ONE

He is first on the beach, as he loves to be, alone in the foredawn light where the dunes fall down to the flump of the sea and the rippled foam gleams dimly at its edge. Only pelicans are there, dark shapes along the tideline gazing seaward, hunched against the morning chill, awaiting light enough to show the glint of fish. The breeze wafting listlessly ashore is salty on his lips. Later the sun will give it strength as the desert warms, drawing it onto the land.

The boy is happy with thoughts of an easy paddle to deep water, filled nets, a freshening wind to bring him home by noon. He walks to the boats—fifty slender shapes, sharp prows in the air, flat sterns on the dry sand—a row of fangs against the sky. Today, for the first time ever, one of them is *his*.

A few weeks ago his grandfather told him to gather tall reeds from the irrigation canals. “That boat of your father’s is sitting too low,” he said. “Rot at the heart. I can smell it. I doubt she’ll last till he gets back. Whenever *that* may be.” The old man spat gloomily onto a pile of sweepings in the sunbaked yard. “For now, you’re the man of this

house. You're big enough to need a boat of your own. Bring me the makings and I'll build it. New britches, new boat—that's what I say." He smiled and gave a little sniff, a sudden uptake of breath, his sign he was done speaking. The boy ran to a canal right away, coming back in a sweat with the first of many loads, spreading them in the sun. Every day he watched his grandfather's old hands stook and trim and bind the dry reeds into a sturdy, unsinkable craft.

It is there, waiting for him, its pale new body standing out from others in the gloom. As he grasps it by the waist and lifts—so light!—he breathes in sun and earth. Smells of the land not the sea. How long will it take, he wonders, to become a sea-thing of salt and fish.

The dawn begins to show behind the highland wall beyond the desert, silhouetting the dark rim of the lower range and blushing the snowfields far above. He turns his back to the light, takes off his clothes—a plain cotton shirt and the new breechclout—grown-up wear to go with his grown-up name. Waman. Like his grandfather. It still sounds too big for him, a name he must learn to make his own. He folds the breechclout carefully, smoothing the soft white fabric, admiring the even weave and elegant design—bands of blue cormorants and red fishes along each border—done by his mother's hands. Sometimes he saw his cousin Tika take a turn. A deft weaver too. He thinks of her slender fingers working the mysteries of the loom.

A less happy thought clouds his mind: Is Tika becoming so accomplished that her weaving might take her away? They are almost the same age, he older by six months. Since he now has his manly name, she will soon be grown enough to follow the womanly arts at a House of the Chosen in some distant city, to weave and sing and brew

for the Empire, for its temples, its lords. Not long ago they spoke of this. “Why not?” she said. “I don’t want to stay in this village forever. I want to see the cities, the highlands, the jungle. Don’t you? And”—her voice faltered and the exuberance drained from her face—“and I want to see where I lived before. Before I came here. That will be hard, I know, but one day I must.”

Waman asked her how she could go there, go anywhere, if she became cloistered with the Chosen women. “Oh, they let you out now and then,” Tika said brightly, recovering her spirit, as if she’d looked into it. “And if I were to do well there, and tend my looks”—she cocked her head, running a finger along the edge of her jaw—“I might marry a great man.”

An old man, more like, Waman answered tartly, burning with jealousy and a sense of his youth, his rustic simplicity.

He sighs, leaving the clothes under a stone. He carries boat, paddle, and net down to the ocean, wet sand spreading his toes.

Besides a gourd of drinking water and a small bag of toasted corn which Mother and Tika give him every morning, for this special day he has brought a small pot of his grandfather’s beer. Filling his mouth with the yeasty drink (he is still too young to like it, though he wants to) he purses his lips, spraying boat, sea, and the first bulge of sun rousing from its sleep under the earth.

Father Sun, Mother Sea, he says aloud, may this be a good day. The first of many. Let it be so.

One by one the pelicans take flight.

THE NEW CRAFT rides lively and high between his legs, cresting the swells, tossing its prow, gliding into the troughs. Like a dolphin. Or

like Drum, the big old dog he used to ride over the fields when he was little, named for the taut hide on her back, her deep bark. A good name for a boat.

Far out to sea he fastens the paddle and lets himself drift, casting the net, watching it sink, hauling it in, casting, scarcely feeling the sun on his chest and the chill of the deep around his feet. The fishing is good, though he has to drive off gulls who swoop in with fierce cries whenever he stows a catch in the keep-net under the boat. At mid-morning he stops to chew some corn and drink from the gourd. His mind lifts from sea to land. The sun is nosing into a thin overcast that builds above the desert at this time of year, robbing the sands of contrast. The mountains seem to have drawn back, mere suggestions of bulk behind a dusty scrim. Up there somewhere is his father, toiling in the thin air and hard light of the highlands. Making the Emperor's roads, perhaps, or building houses in the Emperor's great cities of stone. Or fighting in his wars on the northern edge of the World.

That is the worst, the fighting.

The boy looks at the water again and becomes aware of his smooth brown legs astride the neatly woven reeds, salt drying on his thighs, shiny black whiskers sprouting above his cock. He is changing, becoming a man. Fighting is a manly thing. But these wars are not our wars, his father used to say. What need do we have of roads and empires? Here we have the sea and good earth, the green valley to grow corn for food and beer, cotton for cloth and nets. We travel by sea. We eat from the sea. And when we eat from the fields it is the fish buried with the seed that makes the land bear. We are blessed. Never forget that. And never forget the mountains. Like the sea, the mountains give water and life.

Though at a price. For the highland lords come down and meddle in our lives. They hold the strings of the World.

His mother, Chaska, would laugh at such talk whenever she heard it. “Come, now, Mallki. I’m a highlander myself. It didn’t seem to bother you too much when we were younger.” And she’d wink at the boy and the girl. And Grandfather would smile and give his little snort.

Something out on the horizon. One, two, three . . . seven sails. Two pairs and three alone. Five ships, then: three small and two big freighters with twin masts. All hull-down, showing only the rig, their deckhouses hidden by the curve of the seaworld. Heading north to lands beyond the Empire? Or following the current until they stand westward twenty days to the Tortoise Islands?

The sight always stirs him. This is what he will do as soon as he’s old enough. He will go to sea, where there are no emperors, no wars. Where he can become a man, and a man can become what he may. Soon.

The sun is still high when he carries his boat up the beach, sets it on end, and heads home with a full net over his shoulder. The path winds between dunes and rocky hillocks; soon the valley is below him, the crops a startling green under the arid hills, fields fanning out from the river between silver threads of channelled water. In thanks for a good day’s work, Waman adds a stone to the cairn that marks the highest point on his way. The town comes into view—Little River, the only place he knows—its flat-roofed houses the hue of the desert from which they are made, brightened by red and yellow awnings over doors and patios, by striped blankets draped on washing lines, and some by a band of ochre paint where the walls rise above the rooftops. Here and there are seated figures of women in white shifts, weaving at back-strap

looms tied to posts or fruit trees. The wind brings children's voices, bird and animal cries. The family dog—one of old Drum's puppies—runs to greet him, sniffing the swollen net. Tika gets up from her work, clasps his shoulders and congratulates him on the haul. The neighbours' little ones are playing outside, chasing ducks in the narrow canal that runs along the street. His mother puts steamed corn and soup with avocado before him, leaving him to eat on the bench below the awning while she and Tika sort the fish into those they will cook, those they will salt, and small bony ones to set aside with the offal for feeding the land.

Having eaten, he lies down on the cushioned bench and drowns until the heat relents. He feels too tired to go to the little schoolroom on the square, where a teacher gives lessons in the Empire's general language, in counting, and in the related art of the quipu, by which numbers and words are tied on strings. Waman finds the system hard to grasp; so far he has learnt the knots for one to a hundred and his own name, nothing more. Today his mother does not press him. She seems weary herself, overcome by a sadness that settles on her sometimes. For the first time, he has seen a white hair in her braid, and spidery lines beneath her eyes. The girl's face, though, is clear and lovely. Tika catches him staring and frowns, fluttering a hand as one does at a bee. Waman looks away. He is shy and dares not look that way at other girls. But why should Tika mind?

She came to Little River not long after his eighth birthday. There was a postal runner, announcing an urgent message with a trumpet blast. There was also a woman, older than his mother, a Chosen lady of importance, who came to the door leading Tika by the hand. Surely the runner must have come before the lady, weeks before? Yet in his

memory it's as if they arrived together on that day. The terrible news, his mother wailing and pounding the wall, crying for her lost sister; and the silent, bruised survivor, the thin, shrinking child—like a little fish herself. He had never met his cousin or her parents. They had lived far away, more than a month's journey over many high mountains, somewhere in a province called Huanuco. There had also been another child, a younger brother. Tika seldom speaks of them, even now, and when she does she becomes tearful and withdrawn. Later Waman's mother told him how Tika came to be here, speaking in whispers after she'd regained composure by busying herself with the poor girl's care. The Earth had stirred in her sleep one night, Chaska said, burying people in their homes, drowning others in a flood of ice and clay that swept down from a mountain lake with a roar that could be heard in the next province. She called it a *pachakuti*—a word new to him—an earthquake, a catastrophe, the world turned upside down. The Empire's men came quickly in teams with llama trains and spades and crowbars. They set up tents, kitchens, and they dug and dug. One corner of Tika's house had not fallen, and there in freezing mud they found her, blue and barely alive. "That's how Tika was born to us," Chaska concluded, "pulled like a baby from the womb of Mother Earth."

An odd way to put it, Waman thought, but his mother has always had a way with words. And he recalls that she'd lost a baby girl of her own a year or two before, stillborn and unnamed, a small mummy wrapped and taken to the Town of the Dead in the desert beyond the fields.

He watches his mother and his cousin talking softly as they sort and clean the catch. Never has Tika seemed so dear to him, so lovely. There is grace in her upright back and the deft movement of her fingers

as she slits and guts a fish. He will marry her. They will be together always. After all, she's a cousin not a sister (though often she seems like one). Only an emperor can take a sister for a wife. But anyone may wed a cousin.

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THE BOY'S FATHER, Mallki, comes home, unharmed yet changed. He will not be called up again for five years, having paid his work-tax to the Empire. And he has been honoured, made some kind of officer while away, in charge of a hundred men, with a hint that he may become the village leader when the incumbent retires. The family is also rewarded with bolts of cloth and bags of grain from government warehouses. Mallki is full of new tales—of fellowship, foreign ways, fighting for the Empire. And a new loyalty towards the Emperor, an awed affection that the boy mistrusts. “Why do you like the Emperor now,” Waman asks, “when you didn't before? He's a haughty, meddling highlander. I've heard you say so. Those very words.”

A shadow darkens Father's face. His hand whips out—the surprise worse than the blow. His father never used to hit him. Not like that, for something so small.

“I come home after a few months and find you a man, eh?” Mallki says. “Grown-up britches and all. A man's mouth too. Don't forget, *Master* Waman, that you're half highlander yourself. Your mother lived in the highlands until the Empire settled her family here on the coast when she was little. The Empire's language was her own.”

Mallki falls silent, eyes on his son, scowling, but Waman can tell he regrets losing control. Then:



“I’ve brought you something. From the mountains.” His father opens the plain cotton bag that hangs from his shoulder and takes out another, this one of wool and brightly coloured. “Open it.” Inside Waman finds a small, slim-necked gourd with a rubber stopper and some dried leaves wrapped in a square vicuña cloth. Coca and lime. A man’s gift! The boy grins happily and throws his arms around his father.

“Let’s sit over there under the tree,” Mallki says. “Let’s chew.”

He shows his son how to lay out the leaves on the cloth, how to pick five of the best and fan them out in his hand. He does the same himself. He then takes all ten leaves, lifts his face to the sunlight filtering through the pepper tree, and blows over them gently. Adding lime from the bottle, he makes up two small quids. They chew without speaking for a while. Waman feels a numbness in his cheek, a warmth flowing into his chest, an inner power.

“I’m not sure I understood the Empire until now,” his father says at last. “And of course I’d never met the Emperor himself. People like us seldom do. You’re right that I used to grumble. The Empire makes demands. We must work for it, till its fields, pay taxes with our time, even risk our lives, as I’ve been obliged to do. The World is changing fast. When your granddad was born—in this house, just as I was—there was no Empire. Not down here. In those days we had our own kings and queens. They lived by the sea, as we do. They spoke our language. Everyone in Little River spoke only Tallan. There was no Quechua here then, except a little for trade.”

Waman has heard much of this before. He is bursting with thoughts of his own. Brilliant thoughts. He wants to cut in, to answer, to argue. What is his father’s point? But, grateful for the fine woollen bag, for

the honour of being allowed to chew, he holds his tongue by listening to voices in the street and the sounds of the yard, wind in the branches above them, the *cuy-cuy* of guinea pigs scuffling for scraps.

“The Empire,” his father goes on, the coca making him talkative, “we have to do things for it, but in return the Empire does things for us. It builds new canals, new fields, new roads. When we have a bad harvest, the Empire feeds us from its granaries. If there’s an emergency, it sends help. Your cousin Tika, for example—Tika lives with us because the Empire rescued her and found her next of kin.”

“But the Emperor makes war all the time,” Waman says, unable to keep quiet any longer. His father stops chewing, stares fixedly. As a llama does when about to spit in your eye.

“Not all the time, Waman. Many provinces joined of their own free will. Some in fear of the Empire’s might, to be sure. But others welcomed an end to their own squabbles. I did see some fighting in Quito Province, yet only to secure the northern border. Mostly we were building roads and bridges. The Emperor has announced that these wars will be the end of war. The boundary is now fixed at the Blue River; the World is big enough.”

Mallki chews on thoughtfully for a while. He wipes a little leafy spittle from his lip and moves the quid to his cheek, where it makes a small bulge. “Some doubt it. But I believe the Emperor meant what he said. Ask anyone in the highlands what they think of him and they’ll tell you he’s a good king. Open-handed with everybody, great and small—as those who hold power should always be. And affable. Twice while I was there he threw a big feast and drank with his troops. He could outdrink any of us—yet we never saw him drunk. His enemies fear him with good

reason. But he's a great friend to the weak. He opened the storehouses to the wounded and the widows—on both sides—after our victories.”

Waman thinks: *our* victories?

WEEKS LATER, IN the cool time of mists and sea fog, when grass greens the desert like mould, a line of stakes appears across the sands. Then come imperial workers, teams of men who dress and speak strangely—in several different tongues. Waman knows only Tallan and Quechua. Now he hears languages for which he has no name. The workers build a bridge across the river, a great hammock of thick cables slung between stone piers. Through the dunes they cut a highway—with flagstones, walls, and a canal beside it—stringing the small valley like an emerald onto the great coast road, which it's said will link all the seaports in the World. The road brings new sights, new sounds: the clicking toes of llama trains, the slap of many sandals on pavement, laughter and beery singing from a barracks outside the town.

A time of fullness. The mountain snowmelt is heavy, the fields are well watered, the river runs fast under the hanging bridge. Now it is his father who takes the new boat to sea and comes back laden with fish. Waman is sent to school most days and given humbler tasks: weeding, clearing ditches, feeding ducks and llamas, scaring birds from the young corn with his sling. As if he were still a boy. But his voice is cracked and deepening. He's had enough of children's work.

His daydreams follow the ships on the horizon. Above all he misses the sea.

“Why won't you let me take the boat out?” he asks his father one day, as he has many times. “No more of that!” Mallki snaps. “Do as you're told.”

Waman sees that mood on his father again, the mood brought home from the wars. He opens his mouth. Says nothing.

“If you’re such a man, Waman, you’d better speak up like one. Out with it.”

“Granddad made that boat for me.”

“I’ll hear no *me* in this family!”

Next morning, while the house is still asleep, Waman packs water and food in his woollen bag as if heading to the fields. Tika comes into the kitchen to light the fire, gathering dry stalks from under a bench, scattering the guinea pigs who live there. He worries their squeaks will wake his parents before he can talk to her alone. Tika knows of his daydreams—the dreams of many a youth. She has her own dream of becoming a Chosen. And she has ears. Waman is sure she will help, or at least understand. Crouching beside her as she tends the flame, whispering his news, he fails to see the flare of anger in her eyes.

“You can’t mean it.”

“I do. I must.”

“When?”

“Today. Say nothing. Not until I’m well away. You’re clever, you’ll know what to do. And what not to.”

She is on him like a watchdog. He is knocked on his back, stunned by the strength of her blow. She holds him down, his wrists locked in her wiry hands, her long hair tenting his head. No, she hisses. No! The words are loud in his ear though her voice is low, her nose touching his, her tears running into his eyes, mingling with tears of his own. He bites her chin, frees one hand as she rears, tries to push her off. His hand connects with the softness under her shawl. He

pinches hard. She hits him in the eye and pins his hand again. But still she has not yelled.

Her face, warm and salty, is against his. She strokes his nose with hers. She draws his lower lip into her mouth. She lets his lip go and kisses him firmly, spreading his mouth. The way he has heard that grown women kiss their men. “You can’t go,” she says. “Stay longer. Then we can plan things. We can go together.” Still astride him, she sits up and pulls her shift over her head. He sees her small breasts in the firelight, her upturned nipples, the deep blush from his pinch.

Often he has thought of this, longed for it, pictured how this moment might be. But he finds to his dismay that desire has left him like a tide. He is trembling, a strange fear stranding him on the earthen floor, a voice in his head saying he is unworthy and this is all too much, too soon. His mind is a welter, his face hot, pulse quaking in his ears. He must go, and think, be alone.

“I will come back for you,” he whispers. “We’ll be together. But not now. Now I must get away.”

She releases him, wipes her mouth. “You’re mad.”

They listen to the house. It is still, except for snores. Mother, Father, Grandfather were drinking beer up on the roof last night. She stands, pulls on her shift and a shawl. “All right,” she whispers. “You’ve got what you want.”

“What?”

“I want you gone. We’ll see how you do out there.” She scoops a guinea pig off the floor and wrings its neck. He hears the crack, a small, sad sound.

“This hurts,” she says.

Waman says nothing, burning with shame.

“Oh, I don’t mean you,” she adds. “You can’t hurt me. It just hurts each time I take one of these little lives.”

She presses the warm furred body and a bag of toasted corn into his hands. “We can’t have you getting hungry and slinking home tomorrow like a dog.”

NOW WAMAN IS glad of the Emperor’s new road. He had pondered taking the boat—which he still regards as his—and paddling north till he reached the big port where the ships come and go. Three days with luck, maybe four. But that would make him a thief. Even if he wasn’t caught and jailed by the authorities, his father and mother would never forgive him.

He moves quickly as the morning lightens, at a trot on the stone flags. He pushes hard, as if wanting to wear himself out, test himself, make himself stronger. Older. How can he turn back now? He must go on, and to sea, if only for a month or two.

Twice he hears running feet, but they belong to postmen who streak by in their checkered uniforms without a glance, intent on handing their messages to the next relay.

His mind runs over what happened in the kitchen, and what did not. To keep going takes all the will he can muster. If Tika had not shamed him—*dared* him—with her parting words, he might turn back. But then there’d also be Grandfather Waman to face, a bold man who went to sea in much the same way when he himself was young. And who has given him his name. The boy fortifies himself by recalling the elder Waman’s tales of twenty-day voyages west over deep water,

with no sight of land until the Tortoise Islands, where he caught the giant in whose shell he brews his beer. And onward many more days, to the place called the Fire Islands where the Sea People live, those who skim the waves like flying fish in boats with tall sails and twin hulls of hollowed trees. And the long coastal runs up north to the hotlands where the desert ends and a thick jungle runs down to the surf—a land of wild beasts and cannibals. And yet further to other kingdoms with wooden towns on stilts, strange people eager to trade.

Anywhere. I will go anywhere.

THE ROAD LEAVES the sea and cuts through low hills, taking the shortest way to Tumbes, northernmost port of the Empire. He rests that afternoon in a gully shaded by tall cactus and a carob tree. Others have just been there; he is able to breathe life into the embers of their campfire and grill the guinea pig before it spoils. A sad meal, the last he will receive from Tika in . . . how long? *I want you gone.*

On the second day the country begins to change, scattered bushes thickening into dry woods in the folds of the hills. That night, he sleeps by the roadside in a cutting, glad of retaining walls between himself and the trackless bush. The darkness is alive with cries of foxes, monkeys, parrots, owls, and other things he doesn't know and tries not to imagine. Once or twice he stirs at the quick feet and breath of an imperial runner, but they never stop between relays. There are no other travellers, no fires in the night, nothing but the new highway and the woods. He has never felt so alone.

On the third day the road drops down from the foothills to rejoin the desert. He sees a wide river, fields and canals spread like green

wings over the tawny land. The sea beyond. And a great town on a rise, buildings blazing in the sun.

WAMAN HAS NEVER seen a city before, nor such a throng: farmers and fishermen in plain cotton like those at home; lofty officials of the Empire with checkered tunics and gold earpools; lords or wealthy traders in multicoloured cloaks and turbans; splendid ladies in long gowns, hair braided and studded with gems. He is dismayed by the human din, not the drowsy murmur of a village but a flurry of cries and tongues—his own, spoken here with a slight accent, others he has never heard, and the crisp mountain speech of the Empire, which all must learn or at least understand.

It is about midday. The boy passes fruit and vegetable stalls shaded by awnings, and an inn where people are drinking beer and palm wine. The place is smoky with cooking. Smells of seared meat, steamed maize, and spices torment him—he finished all but a handful of his corn at first light and has nothing to give for a meal. Nor is it a weekend, when the Empire lays on a public feast in every town.

He goes on towards the centre, which he must cross to reach the docks. At home he would be greeted by passersby, but here no one pays any mind to a fisherboy. Parts of the town are old and plain, of mud brick and poured adobe like Little River, but around the square are newer, grander buildings. One, filling a whole block, is startling—its façade painted with whales, birds, conches, and swordfish, in red and black on ochre walls. Uniformed sentries stand outside, and Waman guesses this must be the famed hall of the city's Governor: a great lady, he has heard.

A few townsfolk are sitting drowsily in the middle of the square, on the edge of a low dais with a trickling fountain. He joins them to take



a drink and eat the last of his grain. His eyes roam over the city sights, particularly a strange and even larger building opposite the painted palace. He strolls by for a closer look on his way out. This must be a temple of the Empire, for its roof is steeply pitched—not flat like the others—and trimmed with sheets of gold. The doorway, twice his height, is made of smooth masonry, the work so massive and precise it looks impossible, as if stone blocks had magically been rendered soft as clay and pressed together in a perfect fit. A crimson curtain hides the mysteries beyond the threshold. In the heat, his hunger, his light-headedness, the boy feels a little of his father's awe for the highland emperors who can build such things—who long ago, when Grandfather was young, swept down from their city in the clouds to rule the World.

It's a tiring walk to the docks, longer than expected, though Waman is cheered by the familiar sight of fishing craft upended along the shore. There is little business at this hour. Most people are indoors or under trees and shelters, resting after lunch.

Three big ships are tied at a jetty that bends into deep water. Men and women are working by the furthest, stowing freight briskly as if aiming to catch the tide. Delicious smells of pineapple, coconut, sweet potato, peppers, and jerked meat waft from the ship's stores, contending with the burnt sharpness of pitch from timbers and ropes. Bales of cotton and wool are being slung aboard and fastened on deck beneath oiled tarpaulins. In charge is a burly man wearing nothing but a white cloth tied up around his loins, a red turban on his head, and a tattooed band of pelicans marching in faded blue across his chest. He is bent over a tangle of rigging, sweating heavily, cursing to himself.

“Are you the owner?” Waman asks.

“Owner? If it’s the owners you want, you won’t find them here. They’re fifteen days south, and that’s the way I like it.”

“But this is your ship?”

“I’m her skipper. And I’m busy.”

“Do you need men?”

“Men, maybe. Boys, no.”

“I can paddle, steer, and fish. I’m strong . . . I’ve sailed to the Tortoise Islands.”

“How so?” The captain looks the boy up and down for the first time.

“With my grandfather.”

“Why aren’t you sailing with him now, then? What’s his name? Has he got one? I know every skipper from here to Chincha.” Seeing that his lie is about to unravel, Waman glances aside, to where several ships are moored abreast in the channel. The serpents-and-rainbow flag of the Empire hangs limply from each masthead. Soldiers are dozing against a deckhouse.

“The Emperor took his ship. For the wars. But not him—he’s too old.”

The captain looks up from his work again, a sly grin on his face.

“I’ll say one thing for you, boy. You’re quick-witted. Get loading there. We’ll see what kind of worker you are.”

“I ask nothing. Only food.”

A single cough of mirth from the tattooed chest.

“Food is all you’ll get.”

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AT THE DOCK, in Tumbes, the ship had seemed huge—thirty paces in length, eight in beam, made of giant balsa logs cunningly notched

and lashed, with a raised deck of slatted timber and a long split-cane deckhouse between the masts. But alone on the heaving vastness of the sea, the craft has shrunk in Waman's eyes to a floating cage. They are twenty-three on board: ten crew, himself, and a dozen traders, men and women who between them have more than thirty tons of cargo. At first the boy is entrusted only with tending the cook fire, fishing on calm days, tightening lashings over the freight whenever seas are high. But he is quick to learn the ship's ways—how to spread and reef a sail, how to raise and lower the centreboards that make her tack into the wind.

THEY ARE ELEVEN days out, in a region where twice a year the noonday sun stands straight overhead, when the lookout spies another sail. A ship is approaching from the north, running before the wind as if homeward bound to the Empire. The merchants get angry with the captain: he should have told them others had sailed this way already. Their goods will fetch less. The choicest products of the hotlands—the best gems, chocolate, conches, corals—will have been snapped up. The captain glares at them, makes no reply. He climbs the foremast and stays aloft at the crosstree for a long time, staring, gripping the perch with his knees, roofing his eyes with both hands.

“Rigged like us,” he says, upon regaining the deck. “But I don't recognize that ship.” He stands by the foremast, arms folded, waiting. When all the traders have gathered and calmed themselves, he speaks with the air of someone who knows more than he will say.

“That ship isn't one of ours—though it's rigged like ours. It looks as big as we are. It is sailing swiftly. There's a strange emblem on the sail. You should worry less about your prices and more about your skins.”

They are far out on the open sea, the white cusp of a mountain the only trace of the World in sight. He orders the crew to fall off and make for land.

The strange ship matches the change of course. It will catch them. The captain knows this. As the vessel draws near he sees it is indeed the new thing he has heard about from other seafarers, the thing he dreads.