

The Pig

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Part I

The New Governess

1

For a moment, the castle looked improbable. It was her custom to begin every day in this same morning-room at the tip of the east wing, yet the slanting light streaming through the windows in this precise instant made the room suddenly appear like a distorted new place. The vaulted ceiling hung absurdly high above her head, and the windows, tall and peaked as a chapel's, felt unnatural in a family's residence. Even the portraits on the walls seemed wrong. Or perhaps the wrong was in her, for the old characters depicted in those paintings glowered down at her as if they'd found her guilty of some primal crime.

No matter where she looked, everything around her appeared so alien, so unlikely, that a vertigo struck her and sent the room spinning.

Fighting a wave of nausea, she gripped the arms of her chair with all her might in an effort to rein in the racing room, but the dance around her only quickened—armchairs and sofas and glowering portraits and shafts of slanting light and violently peaked windows, all spun faster and faster until they fused into one single blur. And then her skull hurt as if it'd cracked, hurt so much she saw sparks of blinding white. And soon she didn't know anything anymore. Who she was, where she was, or why she even was at all.

Then a voice called.

“Viola, are you well?”

It was a woman’s voice.

“Viola!” the voice insisted, and a hand grasped her shoulder, shook it.

The abrupt jolt restored her vision, and to her relief, the world had stopped spinning. The distortion had gone too; the morning-room and all of its furnishings stood as crisp and banal as they had stood every day of her life.

Oh—and the woman who had just called was here too, sitting right by her side in fact. Come to think of it...this young lady...brown hair unassumingly worn, charming toothy grin, same age as her, or not much older than twenty in any case...this girl looked very much like her friend Maggie. Yes, she had to be. Who but Maggie could it possibly be?

“Good gracious, Viola, don’t gawk at me like that!” the girl cried.

Viola rushed to avert her eyes and groped her dress pocket for a handkerchief, to try and do anything normal and stop acting this embarrassingly odd.

Maggie went on: “I know I’m not very pretty to watch, but still, am I as unsightly as to elicit such horrified looks?”

“Oh, silly!” Viola laughed, and it came out like effortless, natural laughter, though inside she wasn’t laughing at all; what on blessed earth had just happened to her? What a strange seizure that had been. She observed her friend again—yes, Maggie was Maggie, and now there was no doubt of it. “I don’t know what’s happened,” Viola said, applying the handkerchief to her temples, which still throbbed some. “A headache, I think. Everything looked distorted.”

Maggie reached to feel her brow. “You don’t seem to have a fever. Is it better now?”

“I think so.” Viola closed her eyes, and to regain full composure, took a deep breath. Her nostrils filled with the dense scent of the castle. The familiar smell—slightly stale,

though not out of want of cleanliness but due to the sheer antiquity of the castle's furnishings—instantly rooted her back in reality.

She reopened her eyes and this time noticed that another person was also sitting with them. It was an effete man, with a pursing lip and an atrocious moustache, although exquisitely dressed. In his thin-wristed hands, he held open a book with coloured plates of garments. This man...this must be her tailor.

Yes, now the last bits of haze vanished from her mind, and every thought hurried back to its rightful place—this man was Mr Blair the tailor, indeed; and he had expressly come to Castle Oving to take her order of clothes for the next season. That's why they were all three sitting here. And with this, every last memory resurfaced in her mind as limpid as ever, and any remaining murk of oddity abandoned the morning-room.

"Yes, it has passed," she said to Maggie and the tailor. "I'm well." She fanned herself with the handkerchief, sighed relief and smiled so as not to worry dear Maggie anymore. "Truly, it was nothing. A little faintness only. I'm fine now."

Thus, they resumed their going through the clothes in Mr Blair's catalogue. Yes, it had been just that, *a little faintness only*. Nothing to worry about, was there? Viola focused on the dresses again. She was already set on five, but still needed to select many more.

"This one?" Maggie suggested, pointing at a dull blue dress. "It would look pretty on you. Blue and auburn hair always go well."

"That one is good indeed," Viola said. "But what about *this* one?" she asked in an innocent voice while pointing at the illustration of an outrageous ball gown.

"*That one?*" cried Maggie. "You must have lost your senses! And even less in that ruby red. So peacocky."

"Is it?" Viola asked, now in a tone of open jest; she knew the dress to be completely inappropriate.

Maggie leaned to her with an arch smile. “In that dress,” she whispered, “they wouldn’t even receive you at Nina Barrymore’s house.”

Viola gave a small giggle, although in truth she didn’t know what she was giggling at. And Maggie must have noticed her confusion, for she exclaimed, “Why, you haven’t heard about Nina?”

“What? No.”

“You don’t know *the* news of the summer?”

“How should I know if you never wrote of it? This castle is at the end of the world. Nobody brings any news here anymore.”

“You are right. Forgive me, dear. So much has happened in London this summer that this one slipped. But I did tell you about Nina and that gentleman Mr Williams, did I not?”

“That, you did. Don’t tell me they...”

“Yes!”

“No! They...”

“Yes, they *eloped!*”

At the utterance of this last word, the very air of the room seemed to curdle, and the tailor, who until now had been busy laying out the swatches that went with each dress, glanced up, his curly moustache twitching.

Viola kicked Maggie under the table and said, “Would you excuse us a moment, Mr Blair? I need one minute of fresh air. Admiring so many fine dresses in so short a time is making me rather dizzy—Maggie, will you walk me to the window?”

Although she’d said it as an excuse, when Viola rose from her chair, she did in fact feel the return of nausea. This time, however, the spell ended almost instantly and she could walk with Maggie to the farthest window in the morning-room. September was mild this year and they had the windows open. Outside, the crows sat gargoyle-like on their habitual nooks

in the battlements, and the kindly wind drifting into the room came punctuated with an occasional caw. The wind also brought the distant rolls of barley in harvest, and the ivy that grew around the window was morning-wet and gave a wholesome, earthy smell. Viola breathed in and every last trace of her dizziness washed away.

Now they were out of earshot, Maggie resumed her story. “Yes, they ran away, my word, they did. The scandal!”

“That’s terrible,” Viola said. “Poor Nina.”

“Poor? Believe me, she kept playing with fire from the moment she set foot in London. At every gathering she managed to make tongues wag. I’ve never seen a person with such fondness for anything wearing trousers. Had it been up to her, she would have danced with the footmen. Until she met Mr Williams, of course.”

“Then she started to behave?”

“Rather than *behave* I’d say she started to *concentrate*. After they met, Nina only had eyes for him. And yet he didn’t look half as captivated by her.”

Viola glanced towards the tailor, who waited for them at the table, but for now the man looked entertained enough; he had produced a pocket looking-glass and with a complacent smile applied his fingertips at the curve of his moustaches. She turned back to Maggie. “But they ran away to marry, didn’t they?”

“Now it’s clear that deep down *he* never did. He was just dabbling. You know, Nina is not entirely of his station—regardless, the point is that before they ran away she behaved as if they were engaged. And it wouldn’t surprise me if he had let her believe they were. Then, one morning, the maid goes into Nina’s chamber and her bed is perfectly made, not even slept in. Not a trace of her there or anywhere else in the house.”

“Do they have any clues as to their whereabouts?”

“What? They’ve been found already!”

“Married?”

“No, they hadn’t yet. They caught them lodging in Whitechapel. On such a street. And the rooms they hired, goodness gracious. They say Nina looked a true woman of *the world*. That ruby gown in the catalogue? The dress of a vicar’s wife next to what she was wearing. Certainly Nina’s father could have killed Mr Williams in the heat of the moment. But he was stopped by the gentleman’s friends, who were all gathered there at cards.”

“But they’ll make him marry Nina, yes?”

“That was thought...*at first*. Look, almost two months have passed and no one’s made any announcements...”

Viola hugged her own elbows. “If they don’t marry—oh dear—Nina will be as well as dead.”

“Of course. Who’d receive her now?”

At the other end of the morning-room, the tailor cleared his throat conspicuously.

“We shall continue later,” Viola said, and walking back to the table, called: “I’m so much better now, Mr Blair. Just needed to stand up. Now my full attention is back on your wonderful garments.”

Upon the table, the catalogue still lay open to the immodest ruby gown. On impulse, Viola turned the page herself, as if removing from her sight an object of ill omen. A draught from the cold innards of the castle had sneaked into the room through some crack and suddenly she felt it chilling the nape of her neck. She pulled up her shawl. How fragile was this world of theirs, she thought, stifling a shiver; for young girls like her, these sheltered lives they led, this safety...all this security was an illusion. Their magnificent palaces of crystal were in fact so brittle. It was just a matter of making a small error, of tripping on a step, and the treacherous glass would gladly shatter in a symphony of shards.

“Let us see what else we’ve got here...” she said over the new page. “Oh, look, this other gown is also rather pretty, don’t you find?”

Two hours later the selection was made. The tailor’s face glowed with satisfaction, his moustache twitching again (apparently, all of Mr Blair’s emotions rippled as moustache twitchings). Viola had ordered eighteen of the man’s finest dresses. Papa had told her that for this, her very first season before the world, she could spend as much as she saw fit. “You’ll be the prettiest girl coming into town this year, but it doesn’t hurt if your clothes are on a par with your beauty,” he had said, always the flatterer. But she knew better than to listen to Papa; to him, she was invariably the prettiest, most charming, most accomplished girl wherever she went.

Contemplating the hundreds of different colours, textures and shapes had intoxicated her and, as Mr Blair jotted down the tailoring to be made to each garment on her list, Viola saw herself in them already, gliding across twinkling ballrooms peopled with the most alluring characters who danced and danced to an unending tune. Then, perhaps triggered by her imagining those dances in such a vivid way, the morning-room began to revolve again, and once more the voices of Maggie and Mr Blair travelled far-away to sound small and queer, strangers’ voices coming from strangers’ faces (“*Viola! Are you well, well, well...*” “*Milady! Shall I call your, your, your...*”). The distorting haze rushed back into her mind. Nausea seized her anew, an intense wave of it, one that even made her gag once, twice. And just when she realised what was about to happen, it did, and a warm sour torrent shot up her throat. It gushed irrepressibly from her mouth and travelled through the air, splattering Mr Blair’s exquisite attire, his left ear, his left cheek, catching in his coiled moustache and splashing on the catalogue, and her dress-list too, and all over the table, the small swatches

carried away like miniature rafts—oh Lord, there was no stopping the gagging that unleashed these acrid waves of greens and browns.

At length, she managed to stumble away from the ruined table—the hysterical shrieks of the splattered tailor behind her, the last remains of filth still gurgling out of her throat. She sought the distant windows. Air. She needed air or she'd collapse. However, before her third stride towards them, she was on the floor, unconscious in a pool of foul colours.

§

The doctor insisted that nothing was to be feared. What had she been served for dinner last night? *There* was the culprit. Without even a fever or any other worrying symptoms, this colic would pass on its own. The only care needed: to have just rice broth for meals and to drink plenty of lukewarm water.

There remained one small problem, though, Viola objected: what sort of colic was this which could fill one's head with such an aberrant haze?

Doctor Spencer dismissed her question with a wave, an *Oh, but that's normal, my dear lady*, and a genially condescending look from the top of his spectacles. However, she didn't find any normality whatsoever in colic that could make her own house appear a grotesque place and cause her people to look and sound like utter strangers.

At least Doctor Spencer was right about one thing: her ailment went away quickly. The next day Viola awoke with slight nausea, but far less, and except for limiting herself to

eating the bland broth, she could carry on with a normal life and again roam free with Maggie about the castle. Three days later, on Monday, she was completely recovered.

The incident, however, hadn't yet faded from their conversations, and that morning of Monday, as the two friends passed from the Great Hall into the gallery, Viola was saying to Maggie: "...and thank goodness you were here to remake my dress-list with Mr Blair after his *bath*."

The two girls burst out laughing. Maggie had dubbed the incident Mr Blair's *bath*, and whenever one of them uttered that word, no matter the context, they just couldn't help themselves. When their laughter subsided, Maggie said, "It is I who was truly lost last year before you came to my rescue and helped put my list together. That's what friends are meant for. Besides, it's a pleasure to see your tailor's marvels. Even if one cannot afford such things, just looking at them is a treat."

"Tush! Don't exaggerate. Your dressmaker has no reason to envy Mr Blair."

Maggie smiled at this. "You and your false modesty!" she said, giving Viola a reproving tap on the forehead. "We're friends and thus I don't mind admitting it." Here, she mimicked a limp and held out a cupped hand. "Next to yours," she said in a tremulous, pleading voice, "my family is but a bunch of beggars in the queue of St John's Hospital."

Viola laughed again. "Silly! The things you say!" But her friend was speaking the truth. Even though Maggie's parents were significantly wealthy, the Bramfords existed in an entirely different sphere, one in which money doesn't even need to be considered. In fact, Viola never thought about it, save in moments like this when Maggie or someone else would make a remark. All that mattered to her was that Maggie had always been her dearest friend. In fact, if it weren't for Maggie's stays at the castle, how tedious her existence would be. She adored the twins, but they were so young they served her almost better as sons than as brothers and companions.

When Maggie was here, the castle stopped being too large and the days, for once, turned short. Walking with their arms about each other's waists as they were now, they could spend hours and hours traversing the endless succession of rooms that made up the castle. Together, they even explored the abandoned chambers at the end of the west wing that Viola never dared to enter when alone. And later, in the gardens and the vast park, they shifted so easily from jests to confidences, from confidences to projects, from projects to outright fantasies; or they laughed and laughed at Maggie's latest antics.

"Out there! Cut that babbling!"

The shout had come from inside one of the rooms that opened into the gallery. Before the two girls could even react, the voice, female and foreign, came out again: "We are trying to study in here—silence!"

The two friends turned to where the voice came from, and did so with a guilty flinch, even though they were doing no wrong.

"Oh! It's you, milady," said the owner of the voice, who had just stuck her white, ghost-like face out of the schoolroom door. It was the twins' new governess, Madame Dubois. "Do pardon me, miladies," the woman said, her entire black-habited figure now out in the corridor, so stiff and long that she loomed over them as if they were children again. "I shouted because I thought I was hearing the voices of the maids." And that last *s of maids* trailed for a second or two between the woman's teeth, as if she wanted to leave a trace of the word in the air. "They spend the whole day out here, pretending themselves busy cleaning the glass panes. But all they do is make noise and babble and not let anyone teach or learn. How they cackle, those lost souls! I'm dreadfully sorry to have confused you with them, miladies. Good day." And waiting for no reply, she retreated into the schoolroom, firmly shutting the door.

Maggie turned to Viola, her mouth agape. "Can—can you believe this?"

“I have the honour,” Viola said, offering with her palm the closed schoolroom door, “of introducing you to my brothers’ new governess: Madame Dubois.”

“What insolence! My word, did you see what I saw?”

“Ha, I’ve been seeing it for two months, my dear. Didn’t I tell you? Ah, what a relief. I am not mad. Finally somebody thinks I am right.”

“Not only do I think you are right, I’d even claim that, in your letters, you fell quite short indeed. The actual thing is much worse than its description!”

“Isn’t she? And I’m certain she hasn’t confused us with the maids. It’s been only a pretext to shout at us. She’s sly like that, always seeking chances to attack indirectly.”

“She’s compared us to *babbling parlourmaids!*”

“I’m so glad you think this way, dear. I was afraid you wouldn’t see what I see and that, like Papa, you too would think me a fantasist.”

“Quite the opposite,” Maggie cried. “She is—she is a true harpy, a witch! And how very elongated and colourless. A candle in a frock. She’s given me a shiver.”

“Shh! Lower your voice!” Viola said, rushing her friend along the gallery. Who knew, Viola had thought suddenly, Madame might be standing on the other side of the door listening.

Farther down the glass-panelled corridor, Viola considered it safe to resume. “There’s something about her, Maggie. Ever since I first met her I’ve sensed it. Something amiss, something deeply flawed. Though I can’t quite put my finger on what exactly. Besides, she is so untoward. Look how she’s walked back into the room. She finds me with a lady she doesn’t know—at the very least she should have waited to be introduced, don’t you agree?”

“I can only be glad she left so swiftly,” Maggie said. “The less we see of that pale creature, the better. And what an atrocious accent. She may be a governess, but pray, can somebody appoint a governess for her too and teach her how English is spoken?” Maggie

stretched her neck and lifted her nose in the air. *“I thought it wazz the babblingue maidzz. Oh, mon Dieu! The ole day babblingue and cacklingue. We are tryingue to study inside ear!”*

“Stop it, you shall kill me, pray, stop!” Viola said, choking with laughter.

And laughing and holding each other’s waists, they went out of the gallery, just as the gong for luncheon resounded through the cavernous halls of the castle.

§

“Maggie also finds the new governess strange, Papa.”

Viola’s father looked up from his plate. Once more, Viola noticed, he had been distracted in its contemplation. Or rather in the contemplation of something beyond his plate. Something very far and unseizable upon which his eyes glazed so often these days. Beyond plates, beyond walls, beyond people; that longing gaze occurred too often lately.

“Strange?” Papa said, glancing at her and then at Maggie.

“Well...the woman’s rather curt, Lord Walter,” Maggie replied. “If you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Of course I don’t mind, my dear,” Papa said with a kind smile, if also a tired one.

“Curt? Yes, she is, I suppose. She’s French after all. But she’s such an excellent instructress.”

“She didn’t even wait for me to introduce Maggie,” Viola said.

Papa didn’t seem interested in this last comment. “And so cultured,” he went on. “We don’t produce that kind of governess in England, no. Very well-read. Even scholarly, I’d say. I’ve certainly made an excellent appointment. And the twins are at last behaving.”

Papa was wrong about that woman. But at least he was talking. And he had come to table punctual and freshly shaved for once, looking as handsome as in the good times. He'd clearly made an effort in deference to Maggie.

"But tell us," Papa addressed Maggie, "how are you finding London now that you spend so much time there? I hear your good father has had enough of our modest county and is now set on conquering the metropolis. Is it true he's using some of those diabolical engines of steam? You must tell us everything."

Yes, Papa was truly making an effort today for her friend. However, after this, the rest of the talking was almost exclusively done by Maggie. Papa nodded as he listened, and smiled civilly, sometimes even laughed, and he would add a word or two to what was said. But he wouldn't entirely throw himself into the exchange, and at times his eyes travelled to that far-off place again. Would he ever fully recover? At least in his glass today there was only clear water. That was another important step. That was how one achieved things: one step at a time.

In any case, there was no need to help Maggie in conversation; she alone could speak for the three of them if need be. *It may be a babble, as Madame's called it, Viola thought as she listened to her friend, but it's a marvellous babble that fills this home with mirth. Maggie, God bless you, what good you do in Castle Oving!*

There was every reason for that afternoon to be as pleasant as the morning had been, as pleasant as any time with Maggie in the castle was. But something unexpected, hateful, came to ruin their day.

After their ride, the two friends walked back home. They headed towards the castle's eastern portal, as this was the most convenient way into the house when coming from the stables. Viola saw it first, right after they'd turned the corner—above the portal, spread all across the wall, there it was. She shrieked.

Maggie jumped in alarm and began to ask, “Viola, what's the—?” But then Maggie too saw what she'd seen, and didn't need to finish her question. All over the eastern façade, the stones making up the castle's wall were defiled with three dreadfully big red letters; red as if they'd been written in blood, as large in height as the two girls were tall.

The defacement looked even louder for it had been inflicted in tense, jagged strokes, and was so fresh that streaks of its bold redness were still trickling down as if the pale wall bled. It screamed a short but spiteful word: **PIG**.



“Jacob!” Mum hisses under her breath. “Get on your feet and give me my phone!”

But I won’t move, I’m tired, I’m so comfy here.

“On your feet! Now,” Mum orders again. And she’s giving me *the look*. So I get up and put the phone back into her purse. There’s nothing else to be done when there’s *the look*.

But I’m tired, so tired. And bored. This place is bad. I thought it wouldn’t be, but every few steps down this corridor we’ve got to stop and stand for ages, and Mum won’t let me play with anything.

As for Dad, he seems very interested in listening to what that old lady in the orange jacket has to say. But at least when I grab for his hand, he lets me hang and swing from it back and forth. And Mum doesn’t complain about this little swinging either.

The orange-jacket lady finishes talking and we all walk behind her again down the long corridor, never-ending glass panes to one side, millions of doors and paintings and weapons to the other. Dad’s hand is strong and big, and if I squeeze it, he squeezes back. Okay, maybe this castle is not that bad, but I’m so tired of standing. If only we could just sit down a little...

“Mum, Dad, I’m tired,” I start over. “Can’t stand up any longer, I’m tiiiiired, can I sit there?” I know they’ll say no, but I just have to try.

Mum sighs, and this time, she crouches down to my level, the way she does when she wants me to get a point. “The chairs in this castle are not for sitting. You know that. Besides, the group can’t wait for us.”

“But I don’t like this place!”

“*Speak quietly, will you?* We told you to stay with the twins and your cousins at Auntie’s, but you wanted to come with the grown-ups—well, now you behave like a grown-up boy, all right?”

I’m about to open my mouth to say something they won’t listen to, but then Dad, crouching down to us too, says, “Here,” and he turns to offer his back—he’s giving me a piggy ride!

Dad is the best. From up here, I can see everything and not get tired. I can cling to his hair and he won’t complain—it’s soft and curly. His scalp is warm and smells of shampoo. I can see the tops of all the other people’s heads, too, because he’s so tall. And the hanging weapons I can see from up close. And now nobody’s looking, I can touch a sword—it doesn’t cut and it’s cold. It’s so good up here. Plus, now that I’m behaving, we are all happy. Mum’s happy, too. She looks up and winks at me and sends me a kiss through the air and I send her two and she sends me five or more.

Everyone stops walking again. The orange-jacket lady points at one of the pictures.

“This painting,” she begins, and everyone turns to it, “is the first in a series of portraits of the family we’ll be seeing today.”

In the painting, there’s a red-haired woman. She’s so beautiful. She’s even more beautiful than my mum, than my teacher. She’s the most beautiful woman ever. And her green dress is so huge it takes up almost all the space inside the picture, like she’s swimming in green fabric.

“At the time this portrait was commissioned,” the woman says, “our fair lady here was twenty. The year? 1839. She was the eldest daughter of the eighth Marquess. Her name—Lady Viola Bramford.”



2

It was blood, after all. Pig blood. This was one of the few facts unveiled by the investigation that started in the house immediately after Viola and Maggie's discovery of the defacement. Papa had flown into a terrible fury (and thank goodness there hadn't been liquor in him that day). He'd bellowed at Mr Twig to at once question every servant, to search every inch of their rooms, and to not let anybody be until at least one of them had seen or heard, had accused or confessed.

It had been in vain.

Although the inquiry was carried out as ruthlessly as if it were murder that had taken place, nothing was resolved. All servants' chambers, clothes, hands had been scoured; none was found to be red-stained. One after another, those making up the household were interrogated; none could provide any intelligence.

The only relevant finding had been made in the evening of that same day, but one mile north, on the castle's farm. The swine had been seen strangely clustered around something in their sty, something that they had started to feast on. Clubbing his way through them, the swineherd had found, lying in the mud, the half-eaten carcass of one of the animals. Half-eaten *and* blood-drained, for whoever had killed the pig had also taken its blood.

On the morrow, the apprentice gardener had found a bucket and a brush tossed behind the azalea he was pruning in the eastern garden, both tools soiled with the blood paint. And that was all that had been revealed before the passing of days made the inquiring impetus fizzle out.

However, though castle life regained normality and the blood was cleaned off the wall to the last speck, the questions did linger in the air. Why would somebody write that word on their wall? Was the insult directed at the family? No, in that case, they would have written *PIGS*, not *PIG*—wouldn't they? Perhaps, then, it was aimed at Papa as master of the house. Who knew, it might have just been one of the tenants frustrated over the rise in his land's rent.

Still, the *how* remained more baffling than the *why*. In the middle of the day, in an area of the house generally so busy with servants toing and froing, nobody had witnessed the act. Moreover, the wall hadn't even been defaced on its lower portion, but *above* the portal, which must certainly have required a ladder or some other prop. And, the painted letters being as big as a person, the mischief could never have been the business of less than fifteen minutes. Fifteen long minutes, yet nobody had seen anything.

“Who knows, perhaps it was meant for Madame, and not Papa,” said Viola. It was now Friday afternoon, the fourth day after the defacement, and the two girls were strolling down the castle's park on their way to the Willowspoon Lake.

“At any rate,” Maggie said, “it's most suspicious that this should have happened precisely after the arrival of the new governess. I don't know if the insult was directed at her or not, but that she might have something to do with it wouldn't surprise me in the least.”

“Oh dear, do you think she could possibly have done it herself?”

“I would expect much mischief from that witch,” replied Maggie, “but no, I don’t think she’d risk her situation by doing something so reckless. No, should there be a connection, I don’t think *that* would be it.”

“I suppose so. Too reckless. Still—” Viola looked back, up the stretch they’d just descended; only the two highest towers of the castle could still be seen poking from behind the park ascent; the chamber that had been assigned to Madame was in one of them “—still, I don’t trust her. And I don’t know why Papa didn’t have Mr Twig question her, too, like everyone else in service. Everybody’s been treating her so deferentially since she arrived...”

Thus, mulling over the defacement mystery, the two girls reached the lake. They had come to see the gorgeous swans that dwelled in these waters, and for them they carried small bags filled with bread crust. Viola was jittery inside and she knew why. It wasn’t because of the blood letters anymore; it was due to her cousins’ arrival tomorrow. Five years had passed already, and still she felt this tingle under her skin whenever she remembered. By these waters...behind that lodge...

At the lake’s edge, with all the swans gathered around them to fish up the bread, Maggie must have suddenly realised, for she started teasing her. “Viola, Viola...” her friend began in a mischievous tone, “I now understand this idea of yours to come here. You didn’t want to see the swans—you only wanted to reminisce on that famous day here by the lake, didn’t you, little imp?”

She denied it. But it was impossible to hide anything from Maggie, who went on, “Confess, confess. Look at you, but you blush!”

How embarrassing! She was transparent to Maggie, even now that they couldn’t spend as much time with one another. In fact, lately they saw so little of each other that she was even starting to miss moments like this in which Maggie mocked her.

But now, at last, they had long weeks ahead to be together. And this deferral of cold weather was more than welcome, a temperature still propitious for placid strolls, perfect for tomorrow, for the arrival of her cousins: her dear Octavia and...Balthazar!

Because she and her cousin Balthazar would walk again through the castle's park, and again he would take her arm in his. Perhaps not at the beginning, as there would naturally be some shyness after so many years, but they would soon regain the old familiarity. And during one of those intimate conversations, she would confide to him the event of the PIG defacement, and together they would ponder on it at length, and, over seeking a possible explanation and a likely culprit, they would bond further, as plotters always do. What a shame that her cousins were to stay only for two days. She hoped it would be enough to retrieve the closeness they'd all had as children.

"It was here, was it not?" Maggie asked, and pushed her against the wall of the lake's lodge. There, trying to kiss her, Maggie put on a deep voice and declaimed: "Kiss me, my love. Kiss me under the moon and stars!"

It was here, yes. No farther than five feet from this very spot, against this same wall. Only, there had been no moon or stars that day, for the falling sun still poked out of its horizon bed, spilling an orange light over all things. Oh yes, every detail was engraved in her mind: she and Balthazar had reached the lake's lodge when Maggie and Octavia were still far behind. It was then that Balthazar had touched the bare side of her neck with his large hand, when he had lowered his head, very slowly, towards hers, and when he had softly pressed his lips against hers—

"Get off, get off!" Viola said, returning to the present.

But her friend had managed to breach the barrier of her hands and planted a kiss on her mouth. The two laughed, and Maggie said, "Confess—you are dying to see him again and know if he's still as pretty and as foppish and as—"

“Me? No! What ideas you have.”

“Liar!”

Of course she was lying. She couldn't stop thinking of him, and even more now that his arrival was so close, a matter of hours.

§

They stayed at the Willowspoon Lake until it was nearly dusk. On their way back home, they made the most of the last remnants of light and walked the long park ascent without haste, stopping to gather honeysuckle from the hedges, Maggie still teasing, still trying to make her confess how in love she was with her cousin, and she dismissing it.

At last they reached the top of the park. Here, the castle came abruptly into view, looming tall before them, its succession of sharp battlements cut dark against the twilight sky. Through its pointed windows, an amber glow showed that the servants had already lit the myriad candelabra in the halls. In contrast, almost all light had abandoned the sky. Only a few sunrays still escaped from behind the valley hills, scattering their dying colours on long, thin clouds like claw scratches and making the young night exist as a fantastic red and purple thing. Viola's stomach tingled—if only the sky could be as magical tomorrow for Balthazar and her.

The gallery was also lit now, and behind its wall of glass panes Viola suddenly spotted, outlined very clearly, the sombre figure of the governess. Just the silhouette, though—impossible to tell if she looked towards them or faced the inside of the house. But a

chill down her spine made Viola feel that Madame was indeed watching, spying on them from her high vantage point. How long had the governess been there? Was she looking for them?

Presently, the two little forms of her brothers appeared in the gallery too, coming out of the schoolroom. Then, the silhouette of the governess leaned towards them and, by the way the woman bent, Viola could tell that the governess had after all been standing with her back to the glass and not peering into the park.

For a moment, Viola had imagined she was being pierced again by the woman's bleak eyes, just like that day they'd first met in the drawing-room... Yet she was not. Curious.

§

That night, Viola pulled up her blanket until her head was almost buried inside and closed her eyes with a sweet thrill; she pictured the next day with Maggie and her cousins in the maze of the western garden. Inside, they would all be confused by the many twists and would end up scattering from each other. But she and Balthazar would get lost together, and in the nook of one of the many corridors, leaning her against the hedge wall, he would put his lips on hers again. Viola dwelled on this image and didn't let it go, that it would be the last thing in her mind as she drifted off to sleep. Yet, when she was about to sink into slumber, Balthazar's handsome countenance and the sweet faces of Octavia and Maggie competed with the image of a half-eaten pig in a sty, and she tossed and turned for hours before she could sleep.

3

The egg Florentine came on top of a large slice of toast, and Viola busied herself trimming the edges of bread that stuck out. Always the same, nerves killed her appetite. In her letter, her cousin Octavia said they would arrive this evening and that a friend of her brother's, a Mr Fitzroy, would be coming with them. It was only ten in the morning. Still plenty of hours left; she needn't be so nervous, at least not just yet.

She looked past her egg and across the long empty table. Just her in the breakfast-room...and Tim the footman. Standing beside the sideboard, bolt upright and silent, the young man may as well have been another piece of the room's furniture.

Maggie was oversleeping today. If her friend wasn't down soon, she'd go out alone, without waiting for her. Waiting was obnoxious.

She lifted her hand and Tim strode over to refill her cup with coffee. As he approached, she held her eyes steady on the pastoral painting that hung on the wall before her, trying to focus on the rolling hills that served as background to a shepherd-child and his fluffy lamb. But as soon as the footman had filled her cup and turned away, Viola shifted her gaze to him. She had a few seconds to observe him before he was back at the sideboard.

What was it with her lately? She couldn't help staring. This wasn't like her; this was wrong. But the young man's legs filled those azure breeches so tightly, and the tail of his coat was so notably lifted by the strong behind that hid underneath. It was as if so much body were stuffed into that uniform that the livery seams could burst any instant. This staring was sinful, and yet for the past few days—since the day of *Mr Blair's Bath* in fact, because these shameful urges had started after that day, hadn't they?—this sight had been attracting her irrepressibly. Why?

Tim arrived back at his post, once more a motionless statue, a Greek one; his nose a straight continuation of the assured brow, his chin and jaw embossed and patrician, and his locks curling about his face in waves of bronze. Would Balthazar also be this beautiful now?

At last Maggie came. Viola noticed the small start her friend couldn't repress upon walking in and finding the dazzling footman standing there. Maggie took a seat by her side and whispered, "I see your father's hired a new prince—I mean, a new footman."

Thank goodness, she wasn't the only one shocked by the servant's beauty, Viola thought. "He's not new," she said. "Don't you remember that workshop boy, Tim?"

"*This* is that little blond boy? No! Tell me, what on earth does your father feed to the servants?"

"See what a change? One year ago he had his spurt of growth and now..."

"Impressive. Should somebody dress him in fine clothes and release him into a ballroom, he might conquer any young duchess."

"That's why Papa took him into the house. He's downstairs, though. But they bring him up as second footman whenever we have special callers."

Maggie rose from her chair. "Well, I think I'll have to see what's on the sideboard today." And, with a wink, she added, "Perhaps I'll even have some culinary questions that I'll be forced to ask our prince-lackey."

“Don’t you dare!” Viola exhorted under her breath, but it was trying to stop the unstoppable.

Unlike her, Maggie had a healthy appetite this morning. And every time she went to the sideboard to help herself to food, she’d have a question for the footman of such absurdity that the lad soon started to turn red, realising that they were making sport of him. (“Boy, do these apples come from a tree or from a bush? Oh, how silly of me, there’s no such thing as bush apples—or is there?” ...“Boy, does this marmalade have sugar in it? And the honey, do you think they’ve put sugar in it, too?”) How embarrassed he looked, stammering his replies to Maggie’s questions. From her chair, she tried to stop Maggie with scolding looks while covering her mouth so as not to laugh out loud.

All the while, she found her own eye drifting towards the footman’s uniform, towards *those* places in his uniform—again! It was shameful, and the fact that he was a servant surely made the whole thing an even greater sin. What was this? Only a few days ago, she would have never looked there. Whatever had changed her?

§

After breakfast, still laughing at how Maggie had turned the footman’s face crimson, they went into the garden. Eventually, they came close to the gate that led to the village, but since they were bareheaded, they decided to keep walking along the inner side of the wall, descended the ha-ha, and reached the park. There, they wandered through the meadows that

stretched along the road to London. After half an hour of idle chatter, Viola could no longer feign disinterest and brought up the subject of Balthazar. How would he be? Very changed?

“At two-and-twenty,” replied Maggie, “your cousin can only be more improved than at seventeen. Especially coming from the excellent stock of your paternal side.” And switching to her jester face: “But don’t be such an egoist—always only thinking but of yourself. What about your old Maggie? What you should be wondering is whether that friend he’s bringing with him will be handsome, too. Do consider that I’ve been spoilt in London this summer, and now I’m used to enjoying the jolly society of men all the time.”

“Miss Dalton, please!” said Viola, affecting the outraged dowager. But though she followed Maggie’s jest, she couldn’t help feeling her friend was overplaying her interest in gentlemen. It was quite unlike Maggie—generally so candid and straightforward—and yet, lately, a note of artificiality came across every time her friend spoke about gentlemen.

“Yes,” Maggie went on, “I hope his friend is at least half as good as your prince-footman!”

“Pray, stop, Miss Dalton,” Viola said, still in character. “You are breaching all known rules of propriety!”

But when Maggie laughed at this, her expression of hilarity turned suddenly into one of surprise. Maggie pointed to the road. “Why, we are to satisfy our curiosity earlier than we thought.”

Viola turned; a six-horse carriage preceded by outriders rushed towards Oving. It was still a speck in the distance, but the vermilion of the House of Southbourne stood out crisply against the green Downs. Her cousins had arrived.

“They are so early!” Viola cried. “Quick, let us get back to the castle. Look at us!”

They couldn’t meet like this. She felt her face, moist from the stroll; her hair, all wind-ruffled. They looked like farm girls.

“Calm down. You look beautiful.” Maggie laughed. “All these nerves! Thank goodness you don’t like your cousin anymore—only imagine if you did! In any case, this side of the park is so bare, we wouldn’t reach the castle without them catching sight of us first. So let us just wait here by the road and greet them now. Look, the stroll brought a colour to your cheeks that suits you much. Here, let me fix that hair.”

A few minutes later, the carriage stopped next to them. Would they mention Mama? Viola wished they wouldn’t. It was selfish, but she didn’t want anything to sadden their reunion.

The carriage door opened and, from the inside, Octavia’s voice called, “Viola! Maggie!” A plump young woman, even rounder than when they were children, but also prettier, with fair pink skin and carrot-red hair, jumped out of the carriage and lunged at them, letting out shrieks of joy that the two girls quelled with all sorts of hugs and kisses.

The next figure to emerge from the vehicle was that of a fine young gentleman, but one who was also chubbier than he had been in the past, and this despite the fact that Balthazar, unlike his sister, had never been pudgy in childhood or adolescence. He alighted with a buoyant smile, his cheeks full like bread rolls. With age, his muted auburn hair had grown redder instead of darkening; his eyes—perhaps somewhat similar...But, in general, how different he was! A large bucket of iced disappointment spilled all over Viola.

And then, the last passenger came into the light. But...the true Balthazar! How foolish of her! How could she have mistaken him for his friend? *This* was her Balthazar, almost identical to the one in her memories, only much larger, as if someone had pulled his original face and body from many sides at once. But unmistakable. But different. Strange. Perhaps handsomer? His hair had indeed darkened almost fully, only echoes of redness remaining where the sun brought out its shine. His wide dark-green eyes scanned the group as he dashingly let himself down from the carriage step; now his gaze meeting hers; now a smile—

what a smile! Yet the bright grin vanished from his face when his eyes stopped to her right...upon Maggie.

“Cousin Viola, what a joy!” he said as he arrived by her side, the smile back on his lips. He took her hands and, with his happy gaze on her, lifted her arms away from her body as if seeking to apprehend her new physical appearance. “How well I see you, dear cousin!”

Next he turned to Maggie, and once more he was changed. With a formal nod, he only uttered a terse, “Miss Dalton”.

Miss Dalton? What was this calling Maggie “Miss Dalton”? What’d happened to the plain old “Maggie”? And that silly bow? Where had her cousin learned these old-fashioned ways? With Maggie, their manner had always been familiar, as if she were just another cousin.

Balthazar introduced them to his companion, Mr Fitzroy, the chipper, fleshy man who had descended first from the carriage. He bounded forward and genially greeted them both. Then, the three travellers insisted that Maggie and Viola ought to accompany them to the castle in the carriage.

The cabin was immense and plush, padded in sumptuous scarlet upholstery, everything in proportion to the great fortune of her uncle, the Duke of Southbourne. It was only a ten-minute ride, but it was enough for Viola to appraise this new Balthazar who sat in front of her. He was a rather faithful version of her cousin from five years ago, but rougher, as if a sculptor had reproduced an old bust using a harder stone, resulting in fewer curves and more edges. At first the change struck her a little, but his new appearance grew on her by the minute, and soon she knew that this Balthazar pleased her even more than the one she’d cherished all these years.

As they rode along, Mr Fitzroy described with much gesturing the “nastiest, filthiest, meanest shack in all of England”, which according to him was the title deserved by the inn

where they'd spent the night on their way to Oving. He had mischievous, smiling eyes, which he laid, as he went about his story, on one of them after another with steady familiarity, as if he had known her and Maggie all his life.

At one point, Balthazar looked out the carriage window and his face took on a certain angle that disoriented her. For an instant, she'd thought herself before Papa. That slanted position in conjunction with the outside light streaming onto his face had made him identical to the picture that hung in the blue room, the one in which a younger Papa was depicted leaning on a windowsill. They truly were so similar...But that wasn't something to be concerned about, was it?

§

At the castle, she and Maggie let the others go up to their rooms to freshen up, and two hours later they all gathered again in the dining-room antechamber. Although they still didn't eat with the adults, the twins were brought in by Madame to greet their cousins. Last time the twins had seen Balthazar and Octavia, they were so little that to the question "Do you remember us?" they both replied with a very final "No" that made everyone in the room laugh.

Balthazar crouched by the two toddlers. "So you've forgotten your old cousin Balthazar?" he said, and at once he lifted them both off the floor. "You don't remember how I took you up in the air like this when you weighed less than a pair of cabbages—well now you weigh like two fat pumpkins, you!" And with this, he made the twins spin on his arms

making the children cry with joy. Viola noticed how Madame's lip curled with censure and instantly she felt her heart warm even more towards her cousin. For a moment, by the carriage, he had seemed somewhat changed, aloof, perhaps because of the odd way in which he'd greeted Maggie. But being this loving with the twins in front of Mr Fitzroy and Madame proved he was the same old Balthazar.

Wriggling upon Balthazar's arm, Porter said, "You're very strong, cousin Balthazar. Have you come to help us hunt the pig?"

Viola's heart skipped a beat—*the pig?*—whoever had told the children about the defacement?

"Hunt a pig, huh? Well, why not?" Balthazar laughed. "What pig is that?"

"There's a pig in the castle," James said.

"I see..." Balthazar raised an eyebrow at Viola. "So a pig in the castle..."

"Inventing stories," Viola hastened to say, "these children's favourite pastime!" She wanted to tell Balthazar about the defacement, but this surely wasn't the place. Not in front of Mr Fitzroy; that'd be unseemly. "Don't listen to them. They are redoubtable fabulists these two. Worse than you were at their age."

"It's not stories," Porter complained. "We've heard it. We've heard the pig!"

This time it was Madame who hurried forward and took the twins from Balthazar. A bit too abruptly in fact, Viola noted. "That will do, little lords," Madame said. "You've bothered your cousin enough for now." And shepherding the two children out of the room, added, "After their luncheon they grow wayward, Lord Balthazar, but what they truly are is sleepy—there, wave your cousins good-bye for now, I shall take you to them again before dinner."

As the governess and the twins left the anteroom, Papa walked in. He came visibly overjoyed by his nephew and niece's arrival; he'd always regarded them almost as his own

children. To him, they did mention Mama at once. “Oh, dear Uncle, we want to repeat in person, on behalf of the whole family, what was so many times said by post: we are so bereft, so much. Our aunt was so good...” And before they knew it, Octavia’s eyes filled and Papa couldn’t utter a reply, his own eyes shining. Maggie, with admirable quickness, went over to the dining-room door and marvelled at the “fantastic table arrangement, with all these beautiful hydrangeas!” This allowed all of them to escape the awkwardness of the moment, and the whole party walked into the dining-room.

A few minutes into the meal, everyone chattered and laughed in their best spirits again. Viola tried not to think of the pig for a while (although, who had told the twins about it? Surely one of the nurses. Those women gossiped in front of the children like they were deaf and dumb) and focused on the celebration. It was amusing to see around her such a collection of redheads and half-redheads, all together at one single table; it might as well have been a Viking banquet. Even Papa was taking an active part in the merriment and looked genuinely joyous for once. He wouldn’t stop asking questions of Balthazar, whom he had by his side.

Oh good Lord, seeing them both here, side by side, Papa and Balthazar. Now that her cousin was a man...how terribly alike they were! A tiny, litanic whisper, one almost impossible to hear, one that she didn’t want to hear, kept stubbornly uttering: *Too much, too much, too much.*

§

After the meal, the young people decided to go out for a tour of the grounds. First, they'd visit the new rose garden that Mama had completed a little time before she'd left them forever and which now was almost fully grown and in its September bloom. However, as they were leaving the house, Viola asked the others to excuse her for a minute, that she should rejoin them presently, that she'd forgotten to give instructions to the housekeeper for dinner.

She had lied. As soon as her companions were out, she ran upstairs to the nursery. Whatever that nonsense about the twins and the pig was about, she was to find at once.

Nurse Bess was sitting with the twins in the nursery and Viola dismissed her. The children were already up from their nap and squatted on the carpet, busy among heaps of wooden bricks. After the nurse had left, Viola closed the door and asked her brothers who had told them about the pig.

"Nobody," Porter said easily, without looking up from the brick bridge he was erecting. "We've heard it grunt."

"Porter!" Viola said. "Don't repeat that nonsense."

"It's not nonsense—it's truth."

"Porter! Stop! And look at me when I speak to you!"

James jumped in from his side of the carpet, "It's truth, it's truth, sister, we've heard it."

Viola turned to James. "Why, you too? Don't you know what the cat does with the tongues of little children who lie?"

"*But it's not a lie!*" Porter's bridge collapsed with his shout, and the child turned from the bricks, stood up, and tiny as he was, looked at his sister with eyes of ardent reproach.

"We've heard it. Both of us. We're not lying."

Indeed the child appeared candid. Viola reflected for a moment, then said calmly, “Where, then? Tell me, where have you heard it?”

“Here.”

“And when was that?”

“At night. When we are in bed. When the candle is gone. On the other side of the door. The pig. Making his piggy sound.”

Viola felt a chill run through her. But she smothered it and made the effort to smile. “See?” she said. “In bed—it’s dreams. Bad dreams.” She reached for the two children and pressed their soft little hands gently, as if to reassure them. “Somebody’s telling you stories and you’ve dreamt about them. Who’s told you stories? Who’s spoken of a pig with you? Which nurse was it? Or was it Madame?”

But the twins were adamant. Nobody had told them anything. They had dreamt nothing. Once and again they insisted they’d heard a pig’s grunt. At night. Several nights. And Viola had to leave the nursery without managing to extract from them any other version of the facts, her heart overcast by the disquieting sensation that, somehow, they were telling the truth, or at least they were convinced they were.



The lights of this room are too white, and now everybody's outside I can hear them buzz. Two of the men in green enter from the corridor. They are talking.

"...a lorry, yes. The two little darlings. Off they went with the whole rear of the car. It was instant."

"A self-drive?"

"What'd you think?"

"My god, they keep saying they're safer and then..."

"A delivery one, yeah. A real mess. They found her in the remains of the car, in the middle of all the parcels that had spilled out. A sea of parcels. But the bulk of the lorry and the remains of the two—you know—were all down in the gully. Imagine the state of—"

"Shhh! Behind..."

This last thing, one of the two men in green says under his breath, but still I can hear it. Like I heard everything they've said before they noticed I'm also in the waiting room.

But it's all the same because I already knew. Dad's told me they are in heaven, my dear little twins. Forever (this he hasn't told me, but people go to heaven forever). But it's all right, I'll be strong. Like I've promised Dad. He said that we have to be strong for Mum, that she needs us now to be strong so she can get better.

The only thing that worries me is that Dad's not keeping his word. He's crying in the corridor with Uncle, and Dad *never* cries. That's because the twins are in heaven and he can't see them anymore. I know that.

'Specially because Dad before today always said there's no heaven. He said that to annoy Mum and they argued, but at the end they laughed, and he gave her a kiss.

But that's rubbish. If there's no heaven, where would the twins go?

All the same, Dad misses them already and cries.

And I too am gonna miss my two little frogs, but I'll be strong for Mum so that she can get well and come out of the room with the glass window where they won't let me in. They say I can't go inside, also so that she can get better.

So I'll be strong and also I won't go in the room with the window (I'll just touch the door) and Mum will get well. Auntie has also promised this. That Mum will get well. And Uncle's promised, too. So many people can't be wrong, can they? Yes, we'll all do all the right things and Mum will get well soon and will come out of the room and me and her and Dad will be happy again.

