

The Pig

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PART I — THE NEW GOVERNESS

PART II — LONDON

PART III — BACK TO THE CASTLE

PART IV — AN OCEAN WHITE

PART I

THE NEW GOVERNESS

O

The ocean is softer and whiter than ever.

All I can see is miles and miles of white, masses of it.

Unless I swim up and poke out into that impossibly blue atmosphere never defiled by one cloud. Impossibly blue, impossibly unendingly blue, a sweet marine breeze kissing my titan's body in that infinite semi-sphere of azure.

But other than that, as I plunge again, all I see is the white, and all I feel is the feather caress of the ocean against my tentacles. I also can see them indeed—these contorting appendages that come out of me and move about me as I swim, undulating and whipping, disgusting as I am disgusting, frantic in their ocean dance as if they had a life of their own.

And no matter how hard I swim, how big I grow, how strong I breathe, I'm choking again in this mass of infinite possibility. And I feel the call of it, the need for it. The pain, the shame. I need it.

I must soon have it again.

1

For an abrupt instant, the old castle appeared to Viola as an improbable place. Although she was in the habit of beginning every day here, in this same morning-room at the warmest tip of the east wing, in this precise moment something went suddenly awry, and the slanting light streaming through the windows made her room look like a distorted new chamber. 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 people depicted in all those paintings were glowering 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 that 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, sofas, glowering portraits, violently peaked windows, shafts of slanting light, 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. Its 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 li—

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 nineteen 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?

She observed her friend again—yes, Maggie was Maggie, and now there was no doubt about it. “I don’t know what has happened,” Viola said, applying the handkerchief to her temples, which still throbbed some. “A headache, I think. Everything looked distorted and spun.”

Maggie reached to feel her brow. “No, no 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 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 crowned by an atrociously thin moustache, although exquisitely dressed in a tight green coat. He held, open towards them, 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, any remaining murk of oddity abandoning for good the morning-room.

"Yes, it has passed," Viola 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 am 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 rather dull blue dress. "It would look pretty on you. Blue and auburn hair always go well."

"That one is very 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 flaunting."

"Is it truly?" Viola asked, now in a tone of open jest, for 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 noticed her confusion, for she exclaimed, “Why, you haven’t heard about Nina?”

“Why, no.”

“So 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, my dear. So much has passed 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 suddenly up, his pointy moustaches 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 thick 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 that 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 was applying his fingertips at the curve of his moustaches. Viola 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.”

“Oh no, and do they have any clues as to their whereabouts?”

“What? They’ve been found already!”

“Husband and wife?”

“No, they hadn’t married yet. They caught them lodging in Whitechapel. In such an alley you couldn’t fathom. 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. Because that house was filled with men.”

“Good Lord! But now 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 arms. “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. I 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 very quickly, 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 and had to pull up her shawl. How fragile was this world of theirs, she thought, stifling a shiver; for young girls like them, these sheltered lives they led, this safety...all this security was but 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, what a charming little hat.”

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 wearing 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 alien; strangers’ voices coming from strangers’ faces (“*Viola! Are you well, well, well...*” “*Milady! Shall I call your, your, your...*”). The blurring haze rushed back into her mind. Nausea seized her anew, an intense wave of it, one that even made her gag a couple of times. 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 and cheek, catching in his thin 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 spasms that unleashed these acrid waves of greens and browns.

At length, she managed to stumble away from the ruined table—the shrieks of the splattered tailor resounding 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.

2

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 by itself. 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 complete 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 fully 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's always a pleasure to help you. As it is to see your tailor's marvels. Even if one cannot afford such things, just looking at them is a thrill."

"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 in it 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 schemes, from schemes 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 jolted towards the voice with a guilty wince, even though they were doing nothing wrong. A door opened and a face darted out. A wan face, almost like an apparition's. It was the twins' new governess, Madame Dubois. "Oh! It is you, Lady Viola," the woman said, taking her entire black-habited figure out into the corridor. She was so stiff and long that she loomed over them as if they had become children again. "Do pardon me, miladies. 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 the sibilant 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 taken you for them, miladies. Good day." And waiting for no reply, she retreated into the schoolroom, shutting the door in their faces.

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! Have you seen what I have?"

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

“Not only do I think you are right, but I’d also even claim that, in your letters, you fell quite short. 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 yell at us. She’s sly like that, always seeking chances to vex indirectly.”

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

“I’m so glad you think thus, my dear. I was afraid you wouldn’t see what I see and that, like Papa, you too would take me for 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 call 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, looking inquisitively at her and then at Maggie.

"Well," Maggie replied, "the woman is rather curt, Lord Walter. 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? She is so, 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, most miraculous of all, she's managed to tame the twins."

Papa was utterly 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 before... Yes, he had clearly made an effort in deference to Maggie.

“But do 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.”

Indeed, Papa was truly making an effort today for her friend. However, after this, the rest of the talking was almost exclusively done by Maggie and her. 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 again to the far-off place. 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.

And 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, something hateful, came to ruin their day.

After their ride, the two friends were walking back home. They had 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. And 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 bag. 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 your cousins at Auntie’s, but you wanted to come with the grown-ups—well, now you behave like a grown-up boy!”

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 nineteen. The year? 1839. She was the eldest daughter of the eighth Marquess. Her name—Lady Viola Bramford.”



3

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 wane.

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 the 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; it might well have 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 aplenty 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, negotiating a swell of white chalk in the middle of their grassy path, "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, you think she could possibly have done it herself?"

“I would expect much mischief from that witch,” replied Maggie, “but 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 up there in the leftmost one “—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 packets filled with bread. 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...

And, 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 said 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 her, 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 for—

“It was here, was it not?” Maggie asked, and by surprise 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 this 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 her lips.

“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 now—you are dying to see him again and know if he's still as handsome and as foppish and as—”

“I'm not! 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. 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 any haste, stopping to gather honeysuckle from the hedgerows, Maggie still teasing, still trying to make her confess how in love she was with her cousin, and her 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 black against the twilit 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 in which 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 in her heart; 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 slumber. Yet, when she was about to sink into sleep, 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.

