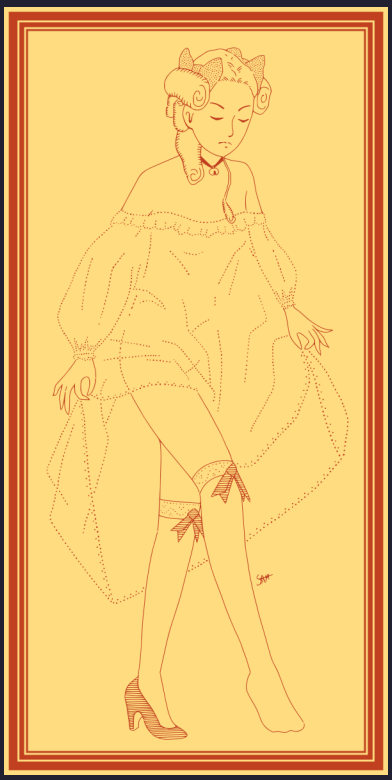
Sam Lewis

The Bell



& Other Stories

THE BELL & OTHER STORIES

by Sam Lewis

For all the sapphists
who lived before their time

THE BELL

THE RINGING OF THE BELL was—I think—to Elodie, a most exquisitely delicate sound, pleasing to the ear and with a peculiar ability to stir feelings in her heart and elsewhere. It was fastened to her neck by a thin ribbon of silk and rested against the smooth skin of her neck, a silver bauble which chimed whenever she moved. When she had first proposed it to me, it seemed preposterous, but she was insistent, and I could find no argument to dissuade her from its use—it had become one of her neuroses, and I knew not to invest too much of my time in exploring the fractal geometry of her reasoning in favour of these special fixations.

St. Petersburg was where I was engaged in her service as a courtesan for the first time, and her apartment there provided an excellent view of the Neva, and of the spires of the fortress of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. The river was beginning to freeze over as winter approached, to be hidden by a thick blanket of snow-covered ice, and the frost now firmly set in overnight and persisted throughout the day, even indoors. It was as far from the sunbaked stone of Malta as the young woman could hope to travel without leaving Europe altogether, and I think she found a strange comfort in the remote melancholy of it all. She was lonely, certainly, but the loneliness must have been easier to bear in a place

where even the pontoon bridges themselves withdrew to the granite embankments for safety.

I was the other balm that made her isolation bearable. I did not come cheaply, but she had taken to me immediately and was loath to leave my side. It was expected that I spend my time living alongside her, and that she might call upon me whenever a mood took hold of her. The bell, then, was in service of this arrangement, its ringing an invitation, a provocation, a very particular summons she expected me not to refuse. It was a childish notion, but Elodie must have found it appealing to strip the declaration of her desire of its pretence—its possibility of being misunderstood—all in the service of a singular clarity of purpose.

It rang now, clear and bright.

"Rather insistent, today, aren't we?" I said to her without looking up from my books. It was the third time today, and we had not yet taken lunch.

"It is cold, Auntie," she offered by way of explanation.

She used her affectionate name for me. This, apparently, was all she was willing to put forward, with the expectation that the mere ringing of the bell would suffice to communicate the remainder of her needs.

I remembered what she had told me of her education in Vienna, of her youthful infatuation with her governess and the liberation she had felt by indulging in music, dance, and fashion. Like a plant growing towards the sun, she had

begun to explore the possibilities granted to her by the continent, with little regard for the constraints or expectations of her noble family. That window, then, had been sealed shut by her sudden recall to Malta and the subsequent passing of her father. Other indignities had amassed to squander her potential, but it wasn't until the departure of Susanna, her maidservant and only remaining confidante, that she finally felt she had no recourse but to leave, or perish. I was glad she was under my auspices now.

I turned to see her draped dramatically over her chaise lounge, one hand still lounging by her neck—where she had just finished fastening the bell—the other tracing patterns on the upholstery with lithe fingers.

I said to her, amused, "You don't think that contrivance somewhat theatrical?"

"Not any more so than what I should like to do otherwise," she replied. "No, I rather think it *less* dramatic than a monologue outlining the particulars of my desire."

She rang the bell again with a light tap of her finger.

"There, you see, don't you? Now you are aware of what I want, with as little fuss as is possible. No, it is everything *else* that is theatre: love, life, disappointment . . . all theatre."

I closed my journal and laid down my pen with a sigh, all too aware that I would soon have to attend to my patron's needs in full.

"I thought you liked the theatre," I said.

"I like the *opera,"* she clarified, punctuating her reply with another ring of the bell to indicate her impatience.

"My apologies."

I rose from my chair and approached the chaise, whereupon she eagerly sat up straight and arranged her hair and gown in anticipation of my arrival. Truly, she needed no bell to tell me what she wanted, for it was written all over her face. No woman of my experience could mistake the look in her eye or the blush in her cheeks for anything else but pure lust. She did not simply want me—she *needed* me—she was, indeed, singularly dependent on me, so openly reliant that it must have hurt her pride to admit it even to herself.

I wasted no time in putting a hand to her neck and tucking my thumb under the bell, eliciting a soft ringing and a quickening of her pulse.

"My word, you are eager," I observed.

She tilted her head back in response, her rich brown eyes locked onto mine from beneath her lashes, her lips parted. I leaned down and placed a kiss there, on those soft petals, and tightened my grip around the ribbon and its little bell. She threw her own arms up and over my shoulders, pulled herself closer as her hands tangled into my hair and grasped at the back of my neck. I loosened my grip on her ribbon, pushed up her petticoats and wrapped my free hand around her bottom, and lifted her easily into my embrace—where I

placed a steadying palm on her back. I felt her arms tighten around me as she broke from the kiss and let out an involuntary gasp of delight. She was small and light, easily cradled, but never so easily satisfied. I took possession of her lips again, and she reciprocated, unchastened and hungry, all the while tugging painfully on a handful of my hair.

I broke away only to whisper against her neck, "You are incorrigible, Little Flower. Why did you even bother getting dressed after last time?"

This provoked a flurry of kisses from my little patron, and a squeezing of her legs around my waist. I nipped at her neck in retaliation, then carried her away from the parlour and into her well-appointed bedchamber, all the while enduring her affectionate kisses and sweet caresses. When we arrived at her bedside, and with some difficulty owing to her reluctance to let go of my hair, I laid her down on the silks and looked her over—she was flushed pink, with wide eyes and her stockinged legs asunder, petticoats bundled almost to her hips, and with her empty hands languishing above the mattress on propped elbows.

I raised my own skirts enough to plant a knee on the bed, and she shifted slightly in expectation, which in turn aroused another delicate ring of the bell around her neck, but I no longer needed an invitation as I climbed towards her; she was provocation enough.

"Come, Little Flower, let us see if I cannot warm you up," I said to her as I straddled her body.

I reached out to brush the back of my hand against her cheek, to feel the softness of her skin. I saw her eyelids flutter and close at my touch, and heard her breathing become shallow and rapid as she gently clutched at my arm. I found her leg beneath me and ran a hand up it, past the stocking and its ribbon and onto the bare skin of her thigh, where I could feel a faint tightness in her muscles before she quietly pressed closer. She tightened her grip on my other arm, pulling my hand away from her face until it rested against her chest, treating my body only as an instrument to be articulated in service of her satisfaction. As I settled above her, with one hand upon her heaving breast and the other buried deep in the fabric of her petticoats, I could feel the heat inside her body building along with her passion.

The gasp Elodie let out when I finally touched her gave me no small amount of pleasure myself, and I softened and smiled down at her. She seemed to sense me looking at her, though her eyes were closed, and she threw out her hands to cover my face and shield herself from knowing who—and what—I was. I gently pressed my lips against her palms until she allowed her arms to fall away onto the pillows beneath her head.

"Susanna," she whispered to me.

She was, then, in her own world, perhaps back at home in Malta and a girl again. There was no numbing frost there, no great blanket of ice and snow, and the heat was not my heat, but merely the afternoon sun and the tenderness of Susanna's touch. She was young and unsullied by circumstance, with a future ahead of her and a past that had only made her promises. There was no silver bell there, either, for in this private world of hers she had a voice with which to speak of her desires openly and without prejudice.

I looked her over once more—her round and rosy cheeks, her chestnut curls set on a bed of silk, the ribbons and bows and lace she had dressed herself in after our last dalliance; I knew that none of it was for me—but it was alright, really quite alright, because I was for her. I lowered myself onto her, and Susanna kissed her.

DOLCEZZA

I WANT MY FRIEND to come home. I want that very much. We used to play together, she and I, in the garden. I remember the way she smiled at me when we played games with each other, and I remember the sound of her laughter when she caught me. She would always catch me, even when I did my very best to hide or run away. She would always find me and seize my wrist, and I would always scream and then laugh. It's been a year now, but she hasn't come to catch me, even though I do my very best to hide away from everyone and everything.

I asked when I could see her again. They said she had gone away to be educated in a place called Vienna. I don't understand why she has to be educated so far away when I am to learn my trade here, but I suppose it must be the difference between little ladies and people like me. I don't quite know why she needs to be educated at all—she is smarter than I am and wittier than anyone else I know by far. She knows her manners and her prayers and her letters. I wonder if perhaps she can come home sooner if she already knows everything they try to teach her.

I loved the feeling of her hair, and the way it would fall over my hands when we sat on her bed and she asked me to help her dress. It was silky and smooth and the colour of chocolate. It was warm, too, when I put my hands under her

hair and ran it through my fingers. She loved to feel my hands in her hair, and to be admired and complimented, so I told her of her many good qualities and she would smile at me and laugh when I ran out of all the words I knew to praise her with. Sometimes, she would even let me wear her lace, and I would feel so very special when she looked at me.

She told me that one day—when she was older—we would be married, and that we would live in a big house together where we could play in the garden whenever we wanted and not just when we were allowed. I am curious if she meant what she said, not about marriage, because, of course, it's impossible for two girls to get married to one another, and I'm not a lady besides—but I'm curious whether she honestly cared so much for me that she should want to live with me when we were older. It is a funny thing, but now that she is gone, I realise that I believed her—I believed we would always be together no matter what, and sometimes, I even believed her about the marriage, too.

Elodie always got what she wanted—that's what I remember most. There is nowhere she could not go, nothing she could not have, no rule she could not break, and no one she could not be with if she chose. She would make up her mind and that was that—she would not be argued with. I saw her parents argue with her, but she would always scream and cry until she got her way. I saw her sister, too, try to reason with her, but she would ball up her fists and stamp

her feet. That's why I hope she wants to come home and be my friend again, to play in the garden again, to let down her hair again and tell me how she would like it arranged—because if she wants it, then it will happen. I want her to learn everything she needs to know and then come home and find and catch me, just as she always did. I never was as strong as she was, and I never fought so hard to have anything as she did, but I think that if I were to fight for anything, it would be her.

* * *

WILL MY MISTRESS still remember me? She was so young when she left that I suppose she might have forgotten who I am. When she returns some years from now, with Vienna at her back and as a young lady with young lady's concerns, the frivolities of childhood might be so far removed that she doesn't even remember that we were friends. What chance is there that she might remember a maid named Susanna? And, if she does remember, will she think of the games we played—and of the ideas and dreams we had—fondly, or with scorn?

Perhaps I shall have to remember these things for her. I'll remind her that of all the flowers in the garden, she is most like the rose, because she is beautiful and well regarded despite her thorns, and smells nice besides. I'll show her the

dresses that she used to wear—I have folded and kept them safe—and remind her which of them were her favourites, and which of them she thought were too tight and did not suit her. I don't think she'll have forgotten her favourite drinking chocolate, but I can certainly serve it just the way she used to take it—she might think fondly of me in return.

She will be much older when she sees me again, almost a young woman. I wonder if she will be taller than me when she comes home, or if she will still look up at me with the same wide brown eyes full of curiosity and secret ideas. Is it too much to ask that she might still want to hold my hand and walk with me? She always used to hold my hand. Hers was always warm and her grip was tight, like she never wanted to let me go. If she doesn't remember, then I shall have to hold on to that memory myself.

There are secrets that she told only me, secret fancies that were not to be shared with anyone, and certainly not with her sister. Some of the secrets were surprising, and some of them were strange and made no sense. I told her I would keep those secrets, and I have. I've never told anyone. I won't remind her of those secrets because I think she must have forgotten about them, and it would only make her embarrassed to hear them repeated, but I'll remember them just the same because she trusted me to keep them.

How different will she be? She'll have seen a great deal more of the world than I could ever hope to—she'll be well

educated, well spoken, with grace and manners and a worldliness all her own. More beautiful, too, with prettier dresses and finer hair and accessories. Even so, I hope she doesn't change too much. I hope she still smiles the same way, and still stokes the same fires that drove her many tantrums.

I'll be very different when she sees me again. I'm changing every day, growing taller and learning my trade well. I'll be busy about the house, quiet and rarely seen, but always at her beck and call. I intend to take my duties seriously—there won't be time for childish games anymore—but I'll listen for her laughter all the same. I won't call her Elodie, it isn't proper—she will be Mistress or Sinjorina, but I do hope more than anything that she'll recognise my voice.

* * *

THE SINJORINA WILL BE RETURNING to the estate soon, and I find myself in such a state of agitation that I can scarcely articulate my feelings and concerns. It should be a joyous occasion to see her again after so many years, but the circumstances of her coming home can hardly be ignored—the Master of the house is gravely ill, and his sickness has cast a pall over every occasion as of late. Even so, I find myself animated by the prospect of welcoming the Sinjorina home.

What, in my heart, has felt like a dreadful weight all these long years is finally beginning to lift. I ask myself—is it wrong to feel happy about seeing her again? I cannot think so, or else why should she come home at all? Her homecoming is certainly to raise the spirits of her father, and so I will take my own measure of that relief in good proportion and in good faith.

I have doubled my efforts to ensure the house is in good order for her arrival, paying close attention to the amenities of her bedchamber, with which I am the most familiar of the staff. She will want for nothing, so as to leave her free to tend to her father and her affairs with no worries other than what cannot be allayed. She will have new clothes brought back from Vienna, and I will be there to take them and launder them, and to lay them out for her the very next day. Her other belongings, too, I will take into my care. I understand—from listening to her sister's gossip—that she brings with her a clavichord of excellent make. I am not familiar with fine instruments, but I will glad convey it to a space of honour I have arranged where she may play it.

I am also prepared to offer my commiserations and support should she choose to ask for it. It is not my place to make the suggestion, but I can make it understood. In troubled times, there is much comfort to be found in familiar things, and I will be familiar to her, I am sure. If she wants to talk to me, then I will listen. If she wants to hold

my hand, then I will extend it to her. If she wants to embrace me and cry into my shoulder, I will open my arms.

I have thought for a long time about her being returned to the estate by land and by sea. Many nights I have cried thinking about her, or felt an unaccountable warmth in my heart from imagining her smile and her laugh. I remember when she would rest her head in my lap and I would brush her hair. All these thoughts and feelings have been with me for a long time as I anticipated the day she would finally come home, but I never imagined that such a day would come about as the consequence of a tragic illness. I almost feel guilty for wanting her so badly.

She does not deserve such a cruel thing—she was bright and curious and frightfully witty. Such a beautiful little girl, who looked up to me and loved me. She loved her family, too, and to think what she must be feeling as the limestone cliffs of Malta come into view on the horizon—it breaks my heart.

THE MIRROR

THE RINGING OF THE BELL had—to my dissatisfaction—utterly failed to provoke in Auntie the desired effect. It had been my idea, of course, to fasten the little silver bauble to my neck with a silk ribbon, with the ultimate goal being to lift from my shoulders the burden of initiating all of our intimacy. I thought—naïvely, as it turned out—that her reluctance to make advances on me stemmed from an inability to discern my moods, so I contrived a mechanism to make at least one of them quite plain. She had tried to dissuade me, calling it unnecessary and a childish indulgence, but I persisted in spite of her protestations, thinking myself quite shrewd.

I had come to St. Petersburg seeking a great city of culture and sophistication, the heart of Catherine's reign, richly rendered in the neoclassical style and buttressed by empire. It was all this, yes, and the powdered snow in winter was beautiful, too, but it was cold, and the frontier of war marched ever closer. The trouble with society, as I had discovered, was that of moving within the right circles. I had neither the connections nor the wherewithal to make myself known as someone of significance, which, in this part of the world, I was most assuredly not. To keep warm, I could only bundle myself up in furs and not in the arms of good company. Until, of course, I met Auntie.

She was much older than I, and had a peculiar sort of attitude reminiscent of a doting aunt, thus my affectionate name for her, a woman of the New World who called herself American, something I found amusing and novel. Beautiful and dark, always wearing the latest fashions, and with good manners besides—she could have fooled anyone into thinking she was a lady. I rather think I fell for her immediately, and I was fortunate enough to have means of retaining her in my apartment overlooking the Neva. Auntie was a courtesan of the highest order, and I was fortunate enough to be in her care.

I have no shame in admitting that she indulged me, none whatsoever. She was wonderful. In fact, her acquiescence to my fancies was so complete that one might wonder what purpose the bell could possibly serve in such an agreeable arrangement. This, then, was the point—she would do whatever I asked of her, but never anything of her own accord. Like a mirror, my own actions would be reflected in her, but it was only surface-level. I desired her, but I did not know if she desired *me,* and I desperately *wanted* to be desired. The bell was therefore a signal that I was in the appropriate mood, and she was invited to do with me as she pleased.

So, I fastened the bell around my neck and rang it loud and clear with my fingertip.

"Insistent today, aren't we?" said Auntie from her writing desk.

This was the counterpoint—her attitude towards the bell, though never favourable, had soured. What should have been a delightful game between the two of us had begun to invite this mockery.

"I am quite cold, Auntie," I said to her.

I was reluctant to say even this much—she should not need a reason to sit beside me, nor to throw her arm around my shoulders and hold me close. I should not have to ask, much less beg.

I had always been desired in my youth—the Fräulein in Vienna had spoiled me with music and clothing during my time in school. She was a pretty thing, and so taken by my charms that she dedicated herself to promoting my health in every regard. I remember she would always hold my hand for fear of losing me! At home in Malta there had been Susanna, my faithful maidservant and closest confidante. *She* knew my moods better than anyone and was utterly devoted to me, affectionate and careful in equal measure. What I would give to have her by my side again . . . I thought when she left my service that I might perish. I very nearly did.

Auntie turned away from her reading to look at me and said, "Don't you think that little decoration somewhat theatrical?"

Such an impudent thing to say—she was calling me false!

"Not any more so than what I should have to do otherwise," I countered. "No, I rather think it *less* theatrical than some tiresome monologue on the particulars of my desire."

I tapped the bell again.

"There, you see, don't you? As clear an indication of my mood as one could ask for. No, it is everything else that is theatre—all the pretentious declarations of love, professions on the meaning of life, the self-pitying laments . . . all of it theatre."

Auntie put down her pen and sighed dramatically at me.

"You *like* the theatre," she said.

"I like the *opera,"* I corrected her. "Feelings should be put into song, not soliloquy."

"My apologies."

Auntie stood up from the writing desk, finally! and approached the chaise where I was waiting for her. I sat up and tucked away some loose curls of hair. For all her fussing about my use of the bell, there were no half measures in her movements when she did accede to my summons. She was a woman of experience and effortless grace, and I remembered all at once what made her so attractive. I needed this—the warmth, the sensuality, the utter devotion. If she was a mirror, then I was Narcissus, and I was not ashamed of it.

She pressed a finger against my forehead and forced my head back until I was looking directly up at her, then wrapped her other hand around my neck and pressed a thumb against my bell—silencing it. My heart raced in excitement.

"My word, you are desperate," she said.

I swallowed any words I might have said in reply as she fell upon me and pressed her lips against mine, tightening her grip on my throat. I threw my arms up and over her shoulders, pulling myself closer to her as I tangled my hands in her long, dark hair. She finally let her hand fall away so I could break away from the kiss and breathe. I felt her pushing my petticoats up so she could reach beneath me and lift me off the chaise. I tightened my grip around her shoulders and clutched at her waist with my legs to stop from falling. Fortunately, she had the same idea and secured me with an arm around my back. I always enjoyed it when she carried me like this—it was a familiar sensation, and it made me feel young again. Another kiss, and I responded in kind, my hands buried in the warmth of her hair.

"You are incorrigible, Little Flower," she said between kisses planted on my neck. "Why did you even bother getting dressed after last time?"

She knew well enough why I did it—because I *liked* the way I looked in my finery, and I enjoyed her hands working

on my bodice—so instead of speaking, I only kissed her and held her tight.

She wasted no time in carrying me away from the parlour and to my bedchamber, and though she seemed to have some difficulty in setting me down gently—I nearly fell!—she finally laid me to rest against the silk bedclothes. I looked up at her, and saw her enigmatic brown eyes cast down across her perfectly sculpted nose. Her painted lips and rosy cheeks seemed to mark her as the ideal woman, and, for now, she was entirely my own.

She raised her skirts enough to plant a knee on the bed. I shifted slightly to make room for her, causing the bell around my neck to ring. It was another invitation, and this time she crawled towards it.

"Come, Little Flower," she said as she climbed on top of me, "let us see if I cannot warm you up."

The back of her hand brushed my cheek, light as a feather. It was bliss. I closed my eyes and took hold of her arm, I felt the jewellery around her wrist—a present.

"Just so," I whispered.

I felt her other hand slide up my leg, past my stocking and onto the bare skin of my thigh. I tensed—that was not quite right, and I tried to close my legs fractionally. I tightened my grip on her arm and moved it away from my face and to my chest.

"Here," I instructed.

Her hand encompassed my soft breast, and her fingertips teased the borders of my décolletage. With my eyes closed, I imagined who else might settle above me like this, with a hand over my heart. I pictured the pretty Fräulein taking advantage of me after a fruitful evening's practice at the pianoforte, her practiced decorum giving way to passion . . . Then, my mind turned to Susanna, as it always did, and conjured the familiar image of her face looking down at me. She was not much older in my imagination—still the same young woman who had cared for me in my youth, with her caring eyes and decorous smile—

A finger slipped between my legs and touched me, not Susanna's finger, nor the Fräulein's. I drew in my breath—it was all wrong! I threw up my arms to protect myself from the intrusion. I found Auntie's face and pressed my hands against it.

"I want Susanna," I told her.

I massaged her face back into the vision I wanted, feeling her expression soften beneath my fingers. Her nose was rounder now, her eyebrows sadder. She kissed my palms, and it felt like something Susanna might have done. I relaxed and let my hands fall away onto the pillows.

I was back in my room again, at the old family estate in Malta. Susanna had snuck away to spend time with me, as she often did. She had been showing me her needlepoint, that little hobby of hers, but I had stolen her away to my bed

to hold her. I think it must have been about noon—I could feel the sun's warmth as we lay together. I told her that she was beautiful and kind, and that I was sorry she had to go. I said that I loved her, that I could not imagine a life without her. I nearly cried, but she only smiled and told me that I was being silly—she was not going away. She said she would finish the rose sampler tomorrow afternoon, and then we would take a stroll in the garden. A warmth spread through my chest as I thought of our future together, and I suddenly felt that everything was going to be quite alright. Susanna leaned down, and she kissed me.

WONNE

I AWOKE IN THE LIGHT of a new day, enveloped in silken sheets and with my hair undone and falling over me. I was warm, despite the weather, and I wrapped myself with my arms to fully enjoy the heat of my own body. I thought about last night and what I had done with Auntie, and I felt good about it—we had been together for some months now, but last night was the first time I kept my eyes open and called her by her name. We had been intimate, she with me, and I with her.

I rolled over and clutched at my pillow—I saw her, by the bed, and I smiled. It was good to have her so near to me, and so attuned to my needs. She was sitting in a gilt armchair and sketching with graphite in a small notebook. I took in a breath and propped myself up on my elbow.

"What are you drawing?" I asked her.

"You," she replied.

She had given her answer, and I took it with a great deal of satisfaction. With a decorous sigh, I fell back onto the pillow and gazed at her from beneath my heavy eyelids.

"Auntie," I said to her, "I find your presence especially agreeable this morning. I daresay almost as much as last night."

She raised her eyebrow at my remark.

"That is high praise, indeed, but I find it hard to believe. How can it be so when all I do is sit and draw you?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "It simply *is* so—I cannot be mistaken for recognising it."

Auntie seemed amused and returned her focus to her sketch. I cast off my sheets and felt the cool morning air caress the skin under my thin chemise. I laid a hand on my hip and wagged my fingers.

"So that you might see me better," I explained.

"I have seen quite enough of you," she said with a laugh. "Enough that my hand already knows your curves without reference. O, but I don't mind."

I pouted playfully, then rolled onto my back and kicked out a leg to further taste the cold. It was all so charmingly typical of an idle morning, and I could not recollect the last time I had felt so completely at ease.

"I didn't know that you were an artist, Auntie," I said.

"Certainly I am," she said. "I have to be very creative in my line of work, as you well know. What you meant to say is that you did not know that I could *draw."*

I conceded the point by keeping my mouth shut.

"I had quite a penchant for it in my youth," she continued, "but I rarely draw these days, unless a particularly compelling subject presents itself—or herself."

That I had been the inspiration for such a renaissance filled my heart with joy. I was becoming more animated now, and I raised myself from my repose.

"May I see your drawing, Auntie?"

"Certainly, Little Flower," she replied.

After only a few more moments of sketching she stood up from her chair and leaned over the bed, turning the notebook so that I could see the page she had been working on. My own likeness, though still incomplete, was rendered in exquisite detail in black and white. I saw myself as she must have seen me only a few minutes ago—peacefully sleeping in the morning light.

"My posture is hardly composed," I said of the drawing.

"It's how you were lounging."

"My eyes are closed."

"You were asleep."

"I've never seen myself with my eyes closed."

"How could you expect to do so?"

She withdrew the notebook and returned to her armchair, whereupon she resumed sketching. I fell back onto the bed and began to play with my hair.

"It is a funny thing, to see oneself in a picture," I remarked. "I've had my portrait taken once before, did you know? Yours is far less flattering."

"My apologies," she said.

I shook my head against my pillow. "No, you must keep your apologies, Auntie—you have depicted me as I am, and as I cannot see myself. I will treasure it."

"It's not for you," she said pointedly. "It's for me."

I laughed, and I smiled, and I was profoundly happy.

* * *

I HELD IN MY HAND a book of German poetry as I took my breakfast. Auntie is one of the few people I knew who would not criticise this particular breach of table manners—she knew that I had an insatiable appetite for literature and was content to let me indulge in my vice. German was not my first language, of course, but I had been schooled in it and spoke it well enough. These days, however, my opportunities to practice the Teutonic tongue were limited to short practice conversations with Auntie, a rare field where I held the advantage over her.

"Auntie," I said to her now, "this piece is so tragically romantic, I simply must share it with you."

"Don't speak with your mouth full," she replied.

Evidently, there were still some table manners she was reluctant to give up on. I dutifully swallowed my mouthful and pressed a napkin to my lips.

"Apologies, Auntie, but when you hear it, you will understand why I could not wait to quote it for you."

She laid down her utensils and furnished for me a kindly expression, causing my heart to flutter.

"Mach weiter," she encouraged.

I smiled and held out the book in front of me.

"Ach, du warst in abgelebten Zeiten, meine Schwester oder meine Frau," I quoted.

Auntie laughed, and said, "Goodness, Little Flower, that is quite the confession! Your sister or your wife . . . are you quite sure you want to say such a thing to me?"

I blushed furiously, and hid my face behind the pages of my book. "But I am only reading Goethe's words to Charlotte," I said.

"You are not Goethe, and I am not Charlotte, but you still chose to speak those words to me," she said with a smile.

"You are teasing me."

"I am."

She returned to her meal, plainly amused by her own wit. In the silence that followed, I worked my way through another mouthful while reviewing the poem. I suppose I must have chosen the provocative line on purpose, but the rest of the poem was redolent of sweetly bitter remembrances.

"To tell the truth," I said, "the work nearly brings me to tears, Auntie. It is such a sad thing."

Her eyes found mine and held them gently.

"Forgive me for saying so," she said, "but you seem to be in too good of a mood this morning for tears to find you. You are content in a way I have scarcely seen—perhaps you should hold on to that feeling for a while longer, Little Flower?"

It was true, I realised, and she was right to say so. I had rarely felt so good upon waking as I had this morning—something I can, no doubt, attribute, at least in part, to our close attachment the previous evening. I resolved to retain my good disposition, so I snapped the book shut and laid it on the table beside my plate.

"Tell me something silly," I said.

"Something silly?"

She considered my request for only a moment before laying down her utensils once more.

"Very well," she said. "When I was younger, and entertaining at a salon in France, a gentleman, full of wine and having taken leave of his manners, had his attention attracted to the stiffness of my bodice, and, after viewing it for some little time before summoning the courage to speak to me, asked—How do your patrons contrive to penetrate through all that *breast-work,* Mademoiselle? . . . I said to him, O, but you are confused, Monsieur—they make their approaches here at the other end."

I burst out laughing at the absurdity of Auntie's anecdote, so perfectly delivered with her signature charm

and good wit. “You are a riot, Auntie,” I said. “Did that really happen?”

“On my word, it did,” she replied.

* * *

NOW WE SAT TOGETHER in each other’s arms, two women buried amidst the heap of our own voluminous petticoats. At my request, she was busy attending to my hair with her hands and a silver comb, taking out the knots and taming my curls. I held onto her tightly with both arms and laid my head against the warmth of her breast. The sound of her heartbeat, as well as the steady rhythm of her breathing, drew me into a state of such calm as I had not experienced for many years—not since my youth. I expected that I might fall asleep at any moment, but I endeavoured to stay awake so that I might enjoy the embrace for as long as I could.

“Auntie?” I whispered.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Am I your favourite client?”

Her fingers did not stop stroking my hair, but I could feel the slightest tension in her movements as she considered my question.

“You are,” she said, “certainly the most memorable.”

This was not the answer I was looking for, but I was in such a good mood that I did not object to her phrasing as I

might have done otherwise. She resumed her delicate work of arranging my hair just so as we settled into silence again.

"I sometimes wonder if you would not like me so much if I were not paying you," I said after a short while.

These words stopped her, and she positioned herself to see my face. She put a finger to my cheek.

"Did you buy your wit and charm with money?" she asked, "or did you bring those qualities with you? There is always one way to know for sure, if you are brave enough to chance it."

I swallowed. Her brown eyes searched mine, and, for just a moment, she might have seen the conviction she was looking for, but it quickly faded. I was not brave enough, yet, to attempt what she was asking of me, though I was closer now than I ever had been. When my eyes flicked away, she knew the measure of my heart. I felt her hands stir and return to the curls in my hair—the work was not done.

I recalled Malta, my youth, and Susanna's touch. She had touched me in the same way, loved my hair with the same attention. I shivered as her fingertips met my temples. I almost closed my eyes—I was ready to drift off.

"Auntie?"

"Yes, *meine Süße?*"

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

"I thought you said it was cold outdoors?"

"I am . . . quite warm."

ROSEBUD, OR "THE LITTLE YEARS"

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG WOMAN who ought to be of little and twenty years old—Elodie Testaferrata, the daughter of a Maltese nobleman and a Frenchwoman. A young lady whose privileged upbringing was overcome in time by misfortune and regret, but who will, in a moment, imagine another life in which her wealth is still measured in possibilities. She had exchanged the languid warmth of Malta for the brisk chill of St. Petersburg, and now she proposes to exchange the twilight of her youth for a second chance.

—Grace Clara Foster, 1801

I WANTED TO BECOME a child again. This was my primary concern as I reclined on the chaise to begin another session of what Auntie had taken to calling the "conversation cure." She expected to put my troubles to bed as though they were restless children—with merely a story and a lullaby—and, to my endless consternation, it often worked. The topic today was happiness, or my lack of it, and, as I let my head sink into the cushions and gazed up at the ceiling, I could think of nothing else but how carefree my days had been when I was a child.

"You are rarely happy, then?" Auntie began.

"Very rarely, and what happiness I do find is tarnished and soon slips away. O, I have been happy with you, Auntie,

have no doubt about that, but it is a happiness laid to rest on a bed of anxieties—it cannot stand for long without being disturbed."

Auntie sat across from me in her gilt armchair. I had long since become accustomed to being under observation from that particular chair. Without a word passing between us, it had become the seat of authority in my apartment, from which I was to be surveilled and studied, and was now wholly reserved for her use in that capacity. It followed her from room to room according to her whims, which in turn followed my meandering lifestyle. When I dared to sit in it myself, I felt small and out of place.

"To what do you attribute this feeling of anxiety, Little Flower?"

My mind turned at once to that central concern of mine, and I said as much, "My age, Auntie. I feel that I am fighting a losing battle—any good that comes into my life is met at once by some new ill. Whereas I was once a child and could see a future for myself as vast as the ocean, with prospects and a household for myself that would equal any of my rivals, I now feel that my horizon has drawn much closer."

"You expect to die?"

The bluntness of the question shocked me, enough that I had to stop and consider it carefully before giving my honest answer. My thumbs worried the palms of my hands.

"Sometimes I fancy that I already have, that my time has come to an end, and I now persist in some dreadful purgatory. I only know that I am still alive because my regrets are vivid enough to stir my heart."

"Tell me about your regrets."

"You should know them well enough by now. As I grow older, the missed opportunities only multiply and become more keenly felt, while the obligations and expectations do likewise. How could I mourn my father when the spectre of marriage loomed so large? and how could I tell Susanna how I truly felt through our veil of propriety? There is so little time to be a girl before becoming a woman, and we have so little faculty to appreciate that time before it is gone."

"What would you propose as an alternative?"

"To be a child again. If it were so, Auntie, and I knew what I know now, I would enjoy my carefree days with a renewed gratitude, and I would use my wits to adequately prepare for the rigours of growing up. I might even have the sense to run away with Susanna before it is too late."

"This is what you want?"

"I suppose so, but it does not matter, does it? Such things are not possible."

"What makes you say that?"

I was startled, and I turned my head away from the ceiling to look at Auntie. She looked back at me with perfect poise, as though she had said nothing strange at all. Her

countenance, as always, gave up nothing that she did not wish it to.

"It is obvious, is it not?" I said.

"Is it?"

I pushed myself into a sitting position, and her eyes followed me up. I stared at her in disbelief as I spoke, "It is the way the world works, Auntie. We are young, then we age, then we die. There is no going back—it is not possible. I have never seen it."

"You believe you have seen everything that is possible?"

I laughed. "Of course not, but I believe *someone* would have seen such a thing, had it ever happened."

"Would they?"

"Certainly."

"What would they have seen?"

I had opened my mouth to answer when the implication of her words fully collided with me and I was stunned into silence. What *would* someone see? If it were possible for someone to go back to their childhood, with all their wits intact, what would be the proof? I turned the question over in my mind and came to the only logical conclusion, so far as I could reason it—merely a preternaturally precocious child. I felt my hairs stand on end.

"You . . . know of such things, Auntie?" I ventured.

She rose from her chair, and the shadows appeared to bend towards her, as though congregating ahead of some

profound ceremony. She moved to the side table and poured herself a measure of brandy.

"Do I know of magic? . . . Yes, I do," she said as she turned to face me, the glass cupped in her palm, "and I do not mean the tricks one sees at parties."

Slowly, I rose from the chaise and approached her. My hands went to the sheer, flowing fabric of her evening dress. I rested my palms gently on her stomach, lowered my head and said, "Auntie, would I remember you? You are the one saving grace of my adult life."

She wrapped her left arm around me and pressed a reassuring hand against my back.

"Yes," she said, "you would remember me."

"I have no reservations, then. I ask—would you do this for me? Would you give me a second chance at childhood?"

"Is that what you want?"

"I have said as much . . . Yes. It is what I want."

She pressed a kiss to the top of my head, then released me. "Then I shall make arrangements. You will need a doll."

I stepped back from her and looked up to see her face. I half expected to see a look of resignation or disappointment, but she only smiled serenely at me.

"A doll?" I repeated.

"A symbol of childhood," she explained. "A charm, without which the magic will have no effect at all. You have one?"

"I do. I took her with me when I left home."

Auntie nodded sagely and took a sip of her drink. "Then we may begin tonight," she said. "Although I must caution you—magic is an unpredictable thing, quite unpredictable. I have some experience, but I am by no means an expert, so I ask you for the third time—are you certain that this is what you want?"

I balled up my fists and sucked in a deep breath, my mind made up.

"Yes. It is."

* * *

I LAY IN MY BED with my doll tucked under my pillow as Auntie had instructed me. I was buried under the heavy blankets with my hands by my sides, peering up at the dark ceiling, with only the sound of my breathing to keep me company—Auntie was waiting outside my bedchamber, standing guard against any interruptions. I glanced to my side and trained my eyes on the lone flickering candle that was the only source of light in the room. After its image had impressed itself onto my vision, I looked down the length of my bed at the shadows that danced a strange dance on the far wall. The flame's dark twin followed my gaze and spun alongside the shadows as I blinked.

Childhood. The word was on my lips as I felt my eyelids grow heavy with sleep. What would it be like, I wondered, when I awoke to find myself reborn by Auntie's magic and in accordance with my wishes. It would not hurt, I reasoned —all the hurt I had ever felt had come later, and there is not enough room in a small body to feel it. I closed my eyes and tried to slow my rapidly beating heart. My last thought before the change, was, of course, an image of Susanna—young, warm, and waiting.

A heat began to surge through my body as the change began, beginning in my extremities and spreading from my fingertips and toes throughout my limbs and across my skin and face. It presaged a tingling and numbness that followed in its wake and overwhelmed my senses. The silence in the room began to echo and multiply, while my vision swirled and was overcome with shimmering lights. I opened my mouth to fill my lungs with air, but it was only the same sensation of numbness that poured inside and ran down my throat.

I soon felt my arms and legs shifting in place. My lithe fingers shortened, weakened, became soft and useless as I lost my grip on the sheets. The calluses on my fingertips, proof of years of needlework, melted away without any fuss. I cast aside any sense of poise and dignity as I kicked at the bed with my feet, trying to keep my head from slipping off the pillow, all while my shortening frame threatened to pull

me under the covers. I could feel the strength of my muscles, toned from years of dance, fading away as I struggled. Even the blanket seemed to grow twice as heavy as I diminished into the bedclothes.

There was a pain in my jaw, strong enough that my hands flew at once towards my face to massage it, only they did not reach quite as far as I expected them to. The soft, clumsy hands that I could still scarcely feel, situated on the ends of too-short arms, only flailed uselessly upon my chastened chest as my body rearranged itself in fits and starts, never in synchronicity with itself and without any sense of reason. When I finally made sense of my limbs enough to feel my jaw with a tiny hand, I found only round and puffy flesh with no texture—the lines etched into my skin from years of frowning and laughing had vanished without a trace, and the worried complexion of seventeen long summers had been stripped away.

If I cried tears, I did not feel them roll down my cheeks. I could only feel the stinging in the corners of my eyes. I very nearly cried out in terror—no, I'm certain that I did—when I felt bone grinding against bone. Auntie was just beyond the threshold and would come if she heard me cry out, so the door must have opened, but, before I could see her enter, a mess of hair fell across my face and I was plunged into total darkness.

* * *

WHEN I CAME TO, I was being held in Auntie's arms, my head resting on her shoulder. She held me like a mother does her child, and my first instinct—which was to writhe and struggle—was suppressed enough by her comfort that I only kicked my legs once or twice before settling. She made soothing noises and rocked me gently, and my body responded as though observing some sacrosanct rite from time immemorial. I was mollified, and all the fear quit my heart. My hands—they were so small!—clutched at her clothing and refused to let go. I pressed my new face into the crook of her neck and muttered, in a callow voice, *"Zietta."*

After some coaxing, Auntie had me upright and on the floor, holding up the hem of my preposterously oversized chemise to keep me from tripping. I was set before a mirror, where I could study the changes her magic had wrought. Everything, now, was in harmony with everything else and sized appropriately for my new age, which I estimated at some five or six years. My face was round and cherubic, with wide, innocent eyes and rosy cheeks free of any blemishes. I looked at my arms, thin and delicate and appointed with soft fingers suiting to reaching and grabbing rather than letting go. My scars were gone. I looked at my legs, shrouded in waves of sheer white fabric, and I saw that while they

would no longer do for dancing a waltz, they were smooth and full of a youthful energy I had not known in years.

Turning my attention back to the mirror, I saw that my hair had fallen out of its coiffure and into natural curls that framed my face. The painted prettiness I had manufactured and maintained for so long had given way to a natural beauty that belonged only to me. I smiled, and I beheld a vision of childhood loveliness in my reflection that I had never been able to appreciate before.

I looked up at Auntie's image in the mirror. "It worked!" I exclaimed to her. "I'm little, so very little!"

I turned and wrapped my arms around her leg, and she put a comforting hand against the back of my head.

"Little, perhaps, but not small in my eyes," she replied.

My initial excitement precipitated a number of exploratory forays into my new form, each designed to validate the success of Auntie's magic in different ways. Much to her consternation, I immediately insisted on climbing out of my oversized clothing and stumbling about the apartment in a state of undress. Walking was no longer suitable—the rooms were simply too large—and there was no longer any point in observing the proper decorum of a lady's gait, so I ran everywhere as fast as my little legs could carry me. I fell frequently, but falling no longer slowed me down and did not hurt. I climbed onto the furniture and tested my weight by jumping on the upholstery, and when

Auntie tried to take hold of me, I slipped out of her arms and ran under the table to hide, laughing and giggling all the while. When she flushed me out from my hiding place, I ran towards my bed chamber, only to find that I was too short to reach the doorknob, and Auntie cornered and seized me, eliciting a loud squeal and yet another round of giggles.

"Put me down!" I cried with delight.

I squirmed, twisted, and kicked in her arms, calling upon a reserve of youthful strength that surprised even me, but she persisted in holding me, and I eventually relented and permitted her to place me gently on the chaise.

"This is exceedingly fun," I said to her.

Her expression at that moment could have levelled mountains. "For you, perhaps," she said, "but did I leave you your wits to mock me?"

I immediately felt regret and attempted a curtsey, only to fall onto my hands and knees—I laughed again, felt a second wash of shame, then composed myself as I pushed myself upright.

"Scusa."

"I shall have to find you new clothes."

"You do not approve?" I teased, holding out my arms.

"Certainly not." She gathered up a winter blanket from the back of her armchair and wrapped it around my shoulders. "To be honest, I am surprised that you are not too cold," she added.

This comment was enough to rouse some curiosity about my present situation, something I had neglected to consider in all my excitement.

"Auntie," I said, "we are still in St. Petersburg, yes? My *body* has changed, but I have not returned to my home in Malta."

She did not seem perturbed by my observation.

"Of course," she replied. "You asked for a second chance at childhood. Your second chance is here."

"Then my family, my friends . . . ?"

"Nothing has changed but you, my dear child. Such things are beyond even my power. Are you displeased?"

Was I? I wrapped the blanket around myself a little tighter. It was comfortable.

"No."

"Then I have no cause to be displeased either."

Auntie reached forward to help me adjust the blanket. I was, only now, feeling the bite of the cold, and I sought to find warmth by kissing her—I reached up to touch her cheek, leaned forward, and she withdrew at once.

"Do not," she said firmly. "There are some things that children must not do."

* * *

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I was dressed in a fresh set of clothes—a girl's cotton frock and fur tippet, both tailored to fit my new form. Auntie had spared no expense in outfitting me with fine fabrics and good fashion, no doubt to dampen any objections that might disincline me from wearing my new outfit.

She was still concerned that my youthful energy might presage a collision with the furniture, and she cautioned me throughout the day about my propensity to run rather than walk. I would heed her for but a few minutes before resuming my ill behaviour.

The day passed in a curious fashion—first with experiments into childlike play and fantasy, which seemed to no longer hold the joy I could still faintly remember from my first childhood. I reasoned that this deficiency must be the unfortunate effect of having full possession of my wits. Whereas my doll had once been the centrepiece of all manner of fantastic stories in my youth, she was now only a nostalgic comfort, just as she had been for all the years since I left home. The faculties of adulthood, I concluded, were incompatible with the boundless imagination of a child. I laid the doll on my bed and turned my attention to other games.

I tried dancing, and it was fun for a time, though my legs could not keep up with me. I spun and I twirled and I fell

again and again, but the falls never hurt, and I took some little pleasure in that until the novelty wore off.

Auntie suggested that I sit and play my beloved clavichord. I attempted to do so, but my fingers were too small and clumsy to reproduce any of the works of Herr Mozart that I had memorised, and my adult sensibilities only saw the flaws in any attempt at innocent improvisation which might otherwise occupy a child. I soon tired of the discordant melodies which I was reduced to performing.

"No matter," I told her. "I already spent *one* childhood practicing—there is no need for another. I remember the notes well enough, and I will grow into mastering the instrument once more."

She accepted my argument without question, which I took to mean that it was sound.

"Then, will you read me some poetry?" she said.

I turned up my nose at the suggestion. "It is not very childlike, is it?" I said in reply.

"Perhaps not, but it might occupy you until you discover a way to spend your time," she said, "and you do take pleasure in reading."

It was true, though the rebellious part of my nature, ungoverned by adult temperament, refused to admit defeat without first kicking my legs and forcing a dramatic sigh from my lungs.

"Very well, fetch me my book. I believe you know where I left it."

She did, and as she went to retrieve it, I climbed down off the bench, intending to make my way to the lounge, when I found myself distracted by the gilt armchair. I stood before it, contemplating it with a new perspective, when I was suddenly swept off my feet by two arms under my own and lifted into the air. Auntie spun me around and placed me squarely in her lap as she took her usual place in the armchair, the book clutched in one of her hands. For some reason I cannot fathom, the swiftness and confidence of her little dance made me blush. I was, now, seated in her chair, albeit on her terms, with my favourite book of poetry unfolding before me. I attempted to master myself.

"Do you have a preference?" she said, flipping through the pages.

"No," I replied, "any verse will do."

She turned to a page of her own choosing and held it steady for me to read. I tried not to think about the way she was holding me, or the way I would like to be held, and focused my eyes on the words. The words! I knew their shapes, I knew their meanings, and yet I could not connect the two.

"It is foreign," I said, furrowing my brow.

"German," said Auntie.

Strange, I knew German, yet I could not read what was before me. I pulled the book, and Auntie's hands, closer.

"What is the matter, dear?"

"I cannot read it," I said, frustrated.

"How many languages did you read as a child?"

Frustrated, I brushed aside her question in favour of my own. "Did you not preserve my wits as I asked?"

"Have you lost any?" she replied. "As I see it, you have them all at your disposal—you know well enough what languages you are lacking, whereas a child does not."

I pushed myself off her lap and stumbled onto the floor. As I rose to my feet, I lifted my eyes to meet her gaze.

"Yet I can still *speak* well enough," I observed.

"You can."

It was wrong, somehow, though I struggled to articulate precisely why. I had lost some ability to read, but not to hear and understand or speak. Was there a contradiction? It felt like there must be, but I could not find it. I felt a sudden wave of panic. Which languages did I command?

"How much is gone?" I asked.

"It will all come back to you in time," said Auntie as she reached out to stroke my hair. "You will grow into it once more."

The touch calmed me down, and I was momentarily appeased, though I now knew I was missing things. I had holes in my mind, into which some of my knowledge had

slipped, but if I did not search, I would not stumble across them. I knew that I needed a distraction, something carefree and joyous I could occupy myself with. I wanted Auntie's touch, but she would not have me, not as I was, but what else was there?

"Where is Susanna?"

As soon as the words left my lips, I saw Auntie stiffen almost imperceptibly. She did not speak.

I touched a hand to my temple, where I expected to feel a scar. There was nothing. The skin was smooth. I still had the memory, I could still feel the rush of pain, those tears that had stung my cheeks so long ago, Susanna's soft voice and gentle hands as she cared for me until my mother arrived, yet the evidence was gone, wiped clean, and I would not grow into it. The memory would fade, and the scar would not be there to remind me. Another wave of panic crashed over me.

"I must go back."

"Then your wits have not left you," Auntie replied.

She rose from her chair and pulled me into an embrace. I cast myself into her arms with abandon and felt no shame in crying. I could hear myself, and I sounded just like every scared child there had ever been.

Auntie hushed me and whispered into my ear, "You might have forgotten, for a time, who you ought to be, Little Rosebud, but I will never forget. Go to sleep now, my child, and you will awaken as yourself."

She took me, lifted me, raised me, and carried me.

It took a long time, but my tears eventually subsided. Now returned to my bed and undressed, I was enveloped once more in my blankets. As I closed my eyes, I saw another image of Susanna, but she was older this time and no longer waiting. She had known me, and I, her.

THE CLOCKWORK CHILD

LET US BEAR WITNESS to the inexorable young Elodie Testaferrata, who now stands on the precipice of motherhood, embarking on a journey that women have traversed since time immemorial. Yet, she does so in a strange fashion hitherto unimaginable, having commissioned an automaton of fantastic complexity to be her only daughter.

—Grace Clara Foster, 1802

THE CHILD'S PAINTED BISQUE FACE stared back at her as she gazed into its glass eyes with a discerning expression, looking perhaps for where the soul might reside within, if the child was possessed of one. She had arranged it on the chaise and was seated on the floor before it, where she could examine it closely without towering over it, for it was only marginally taller than a typical doll, with proportions matching that of a small girl of only a few years. She reached out to touch the child's cheek and brush its fair hair, which was all natural and styled in fashionable cascading ringlets.

The child had been manufactured in London by a team of well-regarded Swiss clockmakers and according to the pattern of their most successful design, with additional stipulations regarding its appearance and disposition having been agreed upon through correspondence in advance of its manufacture. The whole endeavour, including the journey

the child had taken by sea to get here, had been undertaken at great expense, leaving us with very little money to satisfy our own daily needs. Nevertheless, it had been her wish to have something resembling a child, and I did not intend to contradict her in such a personal matter.

"I shall call her Francesca," she said.

"It is certainly a work of considerable genius. At once a marvel of both art and science. You are lucky to have it."

"She is very beautiful," my young charge corrected me, "and she was *born,* not *worked.* You must take care when you speak, Auntie."

I inclined my head and placed my hand on my heart. "Apologies," I said.

Thenceforth I referred to the child as Francesca, and treated her as the young lady's own child as much as was possible, given the circumstances of her birth.

Elodie was now adjusting Francesca's attire. No expense had been spared in the dressmaking either, and her clothes were as fashionable as anything in my own wardrobe.

"You have not animated her."

My observation failed to provoke any discomfiture in her, and she blithely continued examining the buttons on Francesca's little spencer as if I had not said anything at all.

"I think you ought to animate her," I pressed.

"She is resting," came her short reply.

"Children rarely rest at the behest of their mothers."

This elicited an exasperated eye-roll.

"You *test* me, Auntie."

"Have I ever done anything less?"

"Very well," she said, moving to fetch Francesca's key. "I shall animate her at once, but let it be to your disadvantage as well as mine."

"Take 'care' not to let her hear you say such things."

She flashed me a withering look, and I allowed myself the indignity of teasing her with an affectionate smile.

She soon retrieved the key from where it had been secured in the drawer of her small writing desk, and returned to where Francesca sat in perfect stillness and silence on the chaise. With careful movements and the utmost care, she pulled down Francesca's spencer and undid the button fastening on the back of the child's dress to reveal a small keyhole.

She adjusted her grip on Francesca—not out of necessity, I could see, but out of concern for the child's comfort. She inserted the key and turned it—once, twice, thrice—growing all the more alert as the sound of clicking gears and tensioning springs emerged from Francesca's small frame. I, too, held my breath in anticipation, and quietly retreated into the shadows so as not to intrude on the moment.

At long last she approached the final turn, her hand trembling as her strength failed against the mechanism's refusal to turn any further. She took heed and withdrew the

key, and we both watched in awe as Francesca came to life for the first time.

It was merely a twitch at first, as the gears engaged and the clockwork heart began to tick rhythmically in Francesca's chest. Then, her arms relaxed from their stiff, doll-like posture into a more relaxed imitation of a child's curious movements. Her head turned as well, as if to scan the room to find something to fixate on. She looked this way and that, but did not have to search for very long.

Elodie spoke, *"Merħba fid-dinja, Francesca. Benvenuta, piccolina!* My daughter."

Francesca's head immediately turned towards the source of the sound, then tilted to the side curiously as Elodie's face, the face of her mother, came into view for the first time. At this sight, her glass eyes blinked and narrowed, her neck craned, and then her arms and legs began to animate in an apparent effort to turn herself around, which Elodie accommodated by lifting Francesca and placing the child in her lap, face-to-face.

I can hardly begin to describe the profundity and intimacy of the subsequent physical dialogue between mother and daughter, and I will not diminish it in an effort to do so. Suffice to say that the form and function of the child was, at that moment, so perfectly inimitable and true to life that no one could have questioned the feelings that little Francesca's tenderness, artificial though it was, had

aroused in her mother when their fingers met for the first time. I had seen Elodie weep before, many times, but never so freely as this, and never of joy.

* * *

As the world turned on its axis, so too did the gears in Francesca's heart, and also the state of affairs between her and her mother. Elodie spent much of the first day playing with Francesca and cradling her, insensible to her other surroundings. I fed her lunch and lit candles for her in the evening, but she did not register me, so preoccupied with the novelty of her new role as Francesca's guardian. She adjusted the child's dress and brushed her hair, over and over, and sang old Maltese nursery rhymes to her—which I could not understand—when she became animated.

Francesca reacted to all this affection as any child might, turning her head to follow Elodie's face when it came into view, reaching out to touch her and grasp her, and even undergoing bouts of agitation, which were soothed, in time, by rocking her. A notable exception was her silence, which was perfect and unyielding, beyond the light ticking of her clockwork heart and gears—Francesca had no voice, could not cry, and would never learn to speak.

As evening approached, the energy stored in Francesca's springs was depleted by the day's activities, and a new set of

mechanisms engaged to simulate the inception of tiredness in the child's little body. Elodie held Francesca as her limbs went still and her eyes closed for the first time.

"She is asleep?" I asked, and Elodie nodded.

"Auntie, there are *some* imperfections," she said as she laid Francesca to rest in a makeshift cradle she had prepared in her bed chamber.

"The painter had a steady hand, to be sure, but her lips have not been applied evenly. They are at an incline, relative to the sculpt."

Her fingers lingered on the child's face, lightly tracing over the area of concern.

"It bothers you?"

"It does; I paid a substantial sum for Francesca, and my expenditure should be reflected in the craftsmanship."

"This is but one of many imperfections?"

As Elodie rose from the cradle, there was an air of contemplation about her, as though she was searching for the right words to describe her reservations about Francesca's manufacture.

"When I sing to her," she began, slowly, "she always reacts in precisely the same way—with a slight tilt of her head." Elodie touched her own temple with a finger and mimicked the child's tilting head. "I do not believe she recognises the difference between songs; they are all the same to her."

"You expected greater comprehension?"

She considered my response before speaking, "No, not as such; I knew there would be limitations. O, perhaps I am overthinking things—I am exhausted, after all."

She collapsed onto her bed and lazily raised the back of her hand to me.

"Come, Madam Foster, you would not say no to calming the nerves of a young mother, I trust?"

I took her hand and kissed it. "Only if she ran out of money," I said. "Then, I might consider it."

She donned a mock expression of hurt. "How unromantic, to speak in such transactional terms. Have you no affection for me after so many years together?"

I kissed the length of her arm. "There should be no question of my affection for you," I murmured, "merely one of our income. You have expensive tastes, Signorina, Francesca and I are proof of that."

"True, true." She rolled over to make room for me. "But I want to see it."

"As you wish."

I admit that no small part of me had missed her attention throughout the day—had even felt jealous of Francesca—and was greatly relieved by the pleasant sighs she made, now, as I climbed into her bed and showed her the extent of my affection.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING I awoke to find her already risen and engaged in diversions with Francesca, singing new songs and carrying the child about the apartment on her hip. She was pointing out items of furniture and naming them, as though Francesca might come to learn their appellations, or even repeat them after sufficient exposure. She could do no such thing, of course, and as I took breakfast, Elodie approached me with a list of additional imperfections in Francesca's design she wished to bring to my attention.

"She cannot grasp things, Auntie, unless they are held in front of her *just so,"* she was saying, "and the discrepancy between her intentions and her movements is most pronounced in the articulation of her right arm."

"You mean to say she is left-handed?"

I caught a look of shock on her face before she composed herself and replied, "Certainly not! What I am describing is merely a misalignment in her gears. It may even be fixable."

"Now you purport to know the intricacies of her design, of every gear interlocking with every other. You believe you know how to alter them?"

"I *know* I specified no such defects in my letter!"

I rose from my chair. "You are being absurd, my dear."

"Won't you even look at the mechanism, Auntie? If something has come loose . . ."

"I am not a doctor, or a clockmaker."

She slammed her hand on the table, rattling the cutlery, and raised her voice, "She is defective!"

Francesca, who was seated nearby, turned to face the two of us and tilted her head, her glass eyes blinking. I stood fast.

"No child is defective, dear. Not even you."

"Me?" She was taken aback. "We are not talking about *me,* we are talking about Francesca."

She marched over to Francesca's seat and lifted the child into a one-armed embrace. "If you insist on your ignorance, Auntie, then I have no further need of your advice."

With that, she strode away from the dining table to indulge in her examination of Francesca's alleged defects.

For the remainder of the day, she steadfastly refused to speak to me except on practical matters, and even then it was with reluctance. I watched as she tested Francesca's reflexes, rolling a ball to the child across the floor and chiding her if she failed to catch it in time, over and over. Francesca, for her part, looked content to play and did nothing more than tilt her head when Elodie spoke brusquely to her.

As evening fell, I saw her fixating on the child's lack of dexterity once again. They were seated on the floor together, and she would hold out her hand for Francesca to grasp, then sweep it to one side until the poor child was unable to reach for it with any success. I saw her perform this

experiment many times, her frustration growing as she pressured Francesca to make another attempt.

"Here, Francesca," she would say. "My hand is here."

Francesca would reach out with her tiny arm, miss, and Elodie would sing out, "No! Try again."

I approached her from behind and crouched down.

"The sun has set, dear. I think you ought to let her rest."

"What does it matter what you think?"

"Have I fallen so far, in your eyes?"

She tested Francesca's reach again, and the child missed, again. I saw that Elodie was now pulling her hand away, and that Francesca could have no hope of reaching her.

"When I run out of money, you'll leave me," she said.

"You believe that?"

She was silent, until Francesca's fingers closed around empty air again.

"No!" she cried, and raised her hand—

I caught it.

We sat there, the three of us, in perfect silence, my hand clasped around Elodie's wrist, holding her back. In that frozen moment, she must have understood the line she had almost crossed. A sideways glance, and I saw the tears on her cheeks. She slipped out of my grasp and ran from the room.

Francesca was still—the energy stored in her springs having run out for the day.

* * *

WHEN I FOUND Elodie in her chamber, the sewing needle was already at her wrist. She looked up at me from where she was sitting on the floor, beside Francesca's empty cradle, with her poor brown eyes full of tears.

"We have discussed this behaviour before," I told her.

"And yet," she replied.

I moved to her and wrapped my arms around her. "Speak to me," I said.

"Merda. I almost hit her, Auntie. I'm a wretch."

"Almost, but you didn't."

"Only because you stopped me."

"And why do you suppose I'm here?"

"Because I pay you. Ah, but my money is already gone, didn't you know? and you will leave me soon enough."

As she spoke, I pulled her closer to my heart and rubbed her shoulders. She was trembling as she buried herself in my embrace, tucking her head into the crook of my arm and trying to wrench some comfort from a firm grasp of my gown. I was reminded how little she was—she felt like a child in my arms—though she was filled with larger sorrows.

She began to weep freely then, spilling the old, familiar tears, and only raised her voice again after a long spell of sobbing had finally subsided. The words she chose next filled me with a familiar, nameless dread.

"How does one know when it's time to give up?"

I squeezed her ever so slightly. "You are too young for such thoughts, Little Flower."

"Too young to care for Francesca, too young for you."

"No, no, that is not true." I buried a hand in her hair and held fast. "My attachment to you has only grown stronger, Little Flower, and I certainly have no intention of leaving you. I never did, and I have long since held no interest in your money.

"As for Francesca—she was born of your love, and of your desire to be loved in turn. If you look at her, you will see that she does indeed love you unconditionally, in her own way; observe the manner in which she tilts her head—at your voice, and yours alone. Hers is a mechanism of fantastic complication, with hundreds of individual gears and springs all precisely tuned and working together in perfect harmony and with precise tolerances. She cannot be altered any more than you and I can, but why seek to alter her? She is your daughter, and she reaches for you."

"I don't deserve you, Auntie, and I don't deserve her."

"That is not how love works."

I saw that she had allowed the needle to fall harmlessly to the floor, so I found her hand and laced my fingers with hers.

"You deserve to be loved because you were born," I said, "and you were right to correct me—Francesca is no mere automaton, nor a *work.*"

She pulled her head back and looked at me. "I said such horrible things about her."

"So go . . . go back to her. Lay down your preconceptions and see for yourself who she is."

We rose, together, assisting one another to stand, and we made our way back into the parlour where Francesca awaited us, still frozen, with her tiny fingers reaching for an absent hand. I felt Elodie tense at my side.

"Go," I encouraged.

She did—she made her way from my side to find the child's key, then went to sit with her. I watched from the threshold as she inserted the key and turned it again and again. When she came at last to the final turn, Francesca's gears sprang to life again with their now familiar ticking, and her right arm suddenly snapped forward. She could not speak, could not laugh or affect any smile other than what was painted on her bisque face, but I imagined it was joy that animated her kicking legs and blinking eyes when she finally caught her mother's hand.

* * *

FROM THAT MOMENT ON, I sensed a change in Elodie. Whenever she sang or read to Francesca, she was no longer bothered by the way the child tilted her head and listened, and when she dusted those round and pink cheeks with a handkerchief, she no longer lingered on any imperfections in the paint. She did make alterations, but only to adorn her daughter's gown and hair with sprigs of heather and other flowers picked during their frequent walks. She recited poems and explained their meaning, content merely to share her time and knowledge without any expectations of being understood. She even taught Francesca how to pour tea, hastily moving her cup into place whenever the child threatened to miss.

In time, she came to love Francesca just as Francesca had always loved her, just as I had, just as Susanna had—unconditionally.