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The Converted: A Novel

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by

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"Nothing here is natural: everything is transformed, violently changed, from the earth and man himself, to the very light and air. But in default of a wholesome and noble beauty, there is life, teeming and grandiose."

—— Hippolyte Taine

I dreamed of my mother, Gregor thought upon waking. To an extent——the dream was more a nightmare, and his mother had died in childbirth. He'd never met her, never seen her face or heard her voice, the apparition might have looked nothing like her and his grasp on its appearance decomposed as he woke, but none of that mattered. He knew she was his mother. It had felt so real. Most of them did, those dreams, where it was impossible for Gregor to distinguish the lived from the imagined, a lost border with cartography in constant revision.

The nightmare, in a way, was a terror of the times: in his father's study, Gregor opens the curtain to brighten the room, let the day inside, or what little day has found London through the smoke of high towers. His mother strikes a pose, one hand at her chin, the other against a drawing table. The pose, Gregor would realize years later, was the very same as in a Wilhelm Bendz painting, some interior scene, windows bared to the light just as they were in the dream. Where or when he'd glimpsed the painting, he couldn't recall, but Gregor sits, in this hallucination, and glances into the camera lucida positioned above his sketch paper to begin his work.

A house of mirrors in miniature scale, this is a tool of accuracy, exactitude, truth superimposed on possibility. When Gregor looks into the lens he expects to find an image of his mother reflected against the paper beneath it, to view them simultaneously, their independence made one by optics, another of those blurred distinctions (this time, however, between science and magic). The projection is a drawing aid, live anatomy, an

image of his model that he can trace on his paper without adjusting his eyes from either. He has come to prefer working this way, reducing his movement and mistakes, shedding the fashion and frivolity from his art. But his first glimpse through the device shrouds what it should reveal——his mother isn't there. Gregor jerks his head from the camera lucida and finds her in the room still, pose maintained. He looks into the lens again and despite the undeniable visibility of the table, the wall behind him, even the shadow she casts, the figure of his mother is missing.

Gregor woke at dawn but already the Strand crawled as its denizens resigned themselves to the light. From the portico he saw drunkards loitering outside darkened taverns, prostitutes pocketing their earnings in alleyways and consorting among themselves. A pair of watchmen inspected the whole routine with a comfortable kind of boredom: at least the neighborhood wasn't dangerous. Noisy, yes——but no highway in perpetual revision, no place constantly creating the meaning of its name, ever exhausted its potential. Some men demolished mansions and built tenements; others supplanted brothels with bookstores. A passerby couldn't admire a new brick pavement without stepping into a pothole. The past was never far from the future. No matter, Gregor knew. A city is as close to permanent as we'll ever get. London will outlast us in one form or another.

The Strand could wait. He wanted only to find his father and describe his dream. Nightmares were common for Gregor, but one of such lingering authenticity struck him as important. "F-f-father," he'd start.

"Another?" Erasmus would ask when his panicked child approached him. "Go on, give it mouth." He might have pitied the boy, really; what more banal a source of

meaning could his son exhume than a dream? As if revelation came naturally, without honest labor. When Gregor was older, he would regret how insistently he'd described them to his family, at such length and in such detail, as if they represented his own greatest, most insurmountable mysteries. "Keep some writing in your breast at all times," his father insisted and, true to his word, Erasmus Fleming always kept a volume of literature in the front pouch of any coat he ever wore. Think beyond yourself, he seemed to warn his son.

The door to the master bedroom was open, just barely, but his father was absent. He wondered for a moment if he were still asleep and would wake again to another morning above the Strand——or maybe, could it be, to another life entirely, a prospect that alarmed Gregor until he considered that it might be a life in which he was already a master painter, his pictures indistinguishable from the scenes they depicted, no longer dependant on formal education and its legions of vague, stilted instructors; or a life in which London wasn't his limit and neither was his imagination, he could see for himself the Orient, Arabia, even America, wherever he desired; in which he suffered no stutter, s-s-spoke without coals burning in his mouth like young Moses of Egypt, and his schoolmates never taunted him; in which his mother had delivered him without exchanging her life for his and father wasn't so keen on locking himself inside the study at odd, unpredictable hours——

Eureka: for all Gregor knew, his father had spent the entire night inside his study, seated when he wasn't pacing about, a fire burning patiently, even as his colleagues were out celebrating the death of the emperor of, what was it, Gregor struggled to remember, Saint Helena, was it, that little island, and what was his name, short man, they had always

called him a tyrant, though Gregor had to wonder how one man could all but conquer the world without ever leaving an island.

As Gregor crept down the hallway he caught the attention of watchful ancestors. The eyes in those portraits seemed to follow him on his way to the study where his father would have to cease his secret meditations as Gregor explained the dream. At the door he felt coldness under his bare feet. Liquid was pooling in the hallway, viscous, black, stained what it covered, it was ink, Gregor realized, that spread about the floor beneath him, looked like a living thing, a growing mirror. He stepped out of the ink, tried his best to avoid its touch as the tips of his trembling toes danced a path into his father's study.

But Erasmus couldn't placate his son. Slumped over his desk, head heavy and inert beside the overturned inkwell, Gregor's father had lost all resemblance to the man who only the night prior had put him to bed. He wasn't Erasmus anymore; he was flesh, random, unraveling, what a mind without memory might have looked like. Jamais vu: nothing had prepared Gregor for the sight of death——not Rembrandt, not Caravaggio, not Goya. No canvas, he'd understand later, when the shock passed, could have accounted for the truth, what it felt like to touch his soulless skin, stiff hands, cold spit clung to pallid lips. On the chance he could find any familiarity in the form before him, Gregor lifted the head up from the desk, both hands set carefully against his father's cheekbones, but this was folly, the eyes were white, the lips curled back, Erasmus looked more like the boney horse-mounted trump of the tarot than any man he'd ever been. Gregor felt dizzy and dropped the head——his father's final movement, danse macabre, however brief——which struck the desk like a stone, loud enough to startle. A gust of air impelled by the blow of Erasmus's head drove a sheet of paper from its orderly pile,

fluttering in the air until it too settled back onto the desk, unable to escape underneath the weight of that room. Gregor sympathized. Once the leaf was still, though, his attention drifted to the papers. There were hundreds of sheets, maybe thousands, some fresh, others long tattered and bent, stacked neatly atop the desk like a barrier around his father, guarding him through the end, shelter from his own finality and whatever had come to collect him.

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Drawing from an admittedly limited knowledge of the natural sciences——specifically, the notion that the visible world was in a cruel and continual process of crashing into itself——Wilkie Collins tried to explain that the entire structure would shatter and combust with everyone inside, an unknowing imprecation of the hot summer sun. “All that glass,” he said, “three hundred thousand panes, it’s in the science, my good man. Glass expands in the heat. Be rational, won’t you?” He hadn’t expected to discuss the Exhibition or even to see Charles——a famous face, he was never allowed to forget, but Wilkie was still forming his own opinion of the man as they ambled into the park. “Take a look around,” he persisted. The British Isles couldn’t hold another cove. The smoke of London was backed up in the sky, swaddled and confused in the mass of itself, unable to leave the earth or disperse. “We’ll destroy ourselves before any of the wonders or inventions inside those innumerable courts ever see use in England,” all the while Charles shook his head, “but perhaps it’s best we’ve obscured the vision of God from this grand new impropriety. I think we’d pay, otherwise.”

"I'm going inside the Megalosaurus," Charles declared, "and let it devour me whole!"

Wilkie had only known Charles for a few months but still was taken aback by how easily, how unexpectedly, the writer tossed around his enthusiasm for the Exhibition. "There's no satisfying you," he muttered.

"Down with all kings but King Ludd?" Charles grinned for both of them——the conversation had been more harmonious before they'd found the grasses of Hyde Park.

Wilkie paused. "I knew you were going to say that." A deep breath. He countered with another platitude. "There's no future like the past."

"Say what you will," Charles said, "but I'm glad that I've got the opportunity to see this with my own eyes. It's progress. A whole celebration of it." He rubbed his chin. "There's no denying the excess in its presentation, truly. But it's not the same excess that we're used to in this country. The whole world is in there. No English pride, unless that's all you've come looking for."

Though he'd agreed gladly to this hour-long walk from Tavistock House after eating breakfast with Charles and Kate Dickens——poached eggs on toast with tea for all three of them——Wilkie was hoping to avoid the great glass hall, commissioned by royalty; conceived by an architect of greenhouses, curiously enough; built to its entirety by a team of workmen in strange, enthusiastic solidarity as though guided by mutual vision to the monument's completion. Maybe it would stay out of sight. "It'll be a Crystal Prison," he assured, "or a Crystal Tomb, better yet, before it's a Palace."

Charles frowned, "Poppy tea will leave you haggard and slow, Wilkie, like it's done to the slums," and wondered if the rumors were true that Wilkie Collins was

contending with a burgeoning fancy for opium. Charles drew a handkerchief and dried his face. He hadn't meant to be so combative. "You're too wise for such fear."

"And you're so sharp, are you?" Wilkie stopped. "You think you've found something worthwhile here."

"No party except mankind."

"You're the real exhibition, Boz. You and everyone who's flocked to and fro the Crystal Palace. And what's worse is how you encourage the whole thing. They tell me, I say, I hear you gave a ticket to every man on your *Daily News*."

He chuckled. "Only a bachelor such as yourself would overlook the joys of lineage. I have nine children to remind me of that."

"And this new chapman of yours? Another free ticket for him?"

Charles recalled the man he'd promised to meet at the entrance to the Exhibition. "Henry Chambers. He should be here already." He checked his pocket watch. "Henry will be writing the *Daily News* article on the Exhibition. Augustus Sala's handling the *Household Words* essay. Two different perspectives on the matter, strong reporters, both of them…." The arched, tunnel-shaped roof of Crystal Palace appeared over the treetops, gleaming in the sunlight, impossibly huge, surrounded by thousands. But there would be an even greater crowd tomorrow when ticket prices fell to five shillings. No matter for Charles; he once spent a month in New York City, as he liked to remind his friends, and no city was more ecstatic in its congestion, more persistent in its misery, rich and poor separated more by reputation than space. He had loved it.

Horses trotted past. The breeze carried a cooling mist from the fountain beside them. Wilkie wouldn't budge. He threw his arms to his hips. "This may be where you go

on without me." A thin smile, lips sealed, spectacles slipping down the bridge of his sweaty nose to its chickpea tip. When he and Charles and Kate had eaten their breakfast that morning beside the window, looking out into the square, Wilkie had the suspicion that it would all disappear, and soon. The children born that day would grow up in a far different London than he had——and not just different, he reasoned, but diluted. Look at us, he had pondered, so intent on replacing ourselves and everything we've built that we've forgotten how to leave even a trace of ourselves behind, to remember that we ever mattered. No monuments will speak for us. Tavistock House will vanish, our books rounded up to make room for new ones, our pages written over with the words of the rising. We are the palimpsest people, settled in the palimpsest city.

"Now what will you do if you won't come inside and see the future with your own eyes?" Charles asked him.

The smile progressed to a laugh. "Well, I suppose I'll have to resign myself to speculation." He wandered off, slipped past a moving carriage tailed by street sweepers. "I hope you won't hold my judgments against me. Or against my ghost."

"My dear Wilkie," Charles shouted after him, "I always consent to an argument."

For every English eye, rich and poor, cultured and sheltered, the halls of the Exhibition boasted the perfection of society. Never could the gods of dead mythology have predicted mankind's ability to seize the world made for it——not the hubris of stormy Olympus, nor the impassioned idols of the Dark Continent, nor all the waltzing limbs of the Brahman avatars. Their influence had withered; a true kingdom ruled when it forgot its borders, laughed off its geographic precinct as the stuff of illusion. Possibility was measured in miles, traversed by the English uniform. The seas and soil that once laid

claim on their flesh became the platforms of their power. The sun would never set on a world that knew it was round. Immortality couldn't have been far.

Charles knew some Londoners who collected things, trivial things like wine cork or bullet shells or exotic flowers. Other men collected lovers. Charles' father had simply collected debt. In the Crystal Palace, Queen Victoria had collected the modern world under the banner of the British Empire.

And none who sought her shores, by power opprest,

Have failed to find there, Freedom, Peace, and Rest.

Well, a bit of stretch, at best, Charles knew, what with the usual Company policy: you can't bring everyone to British shores, so bring the British shores to them. But for once, he swore, the government's focus on the territory beyond its island didn't earn his suspicion. No land on earth went unrepresented. Tribal skin shook the hands of the English classes. Ottomans wandered the halls with distinction. Yankees were especially prominent. Even the Chinese emperor had sent his messengers. Whoever came brought art and innovation——the canon of human achievement, for a short while, encased in glass.

"Mister Dickens!" came a voice from the crowd. "Over here!"

Charles was amused to find that the man who weaved towards him through the crowd carried his bowler in his hands as though it were some sartorial mismeasure, the crown of workers among so many tall, black top hats, until he felt the sweat slipping from his hairline and understood. Wilkie wasn't wrong about everything: the halls boiled under all that glass. Charles removed his hat and wiped his brow. "Good morning, Henry. Hot one, do you think?"

"Apologies for my absence at the door," Henry started. "I have a tendency to wander when I'm not at full attention——" He'd have gone on but grimaced, and Charles realized that Henry had stopped to castigate himself for admitting a habit of inattention to a new employer. Good thinking, Henry.

"No matter, no matter," said Charles; O upholder of public spirit, save your worries and apologies, "We'd be nothing without our imaginations."

Well before Henry had learned that Dickens was in the business of printing news, *The Old Curiosity Shop* was among his favorite written works. He'd even scoured the graveyard behind the church in Tong for little Nell's tomb on the prospect that the author had referenced a genuine burial, though he found nothing but a pack of curious Yankees drawn to the village by a similar vision. Henry knew as well as any reader that the story was fiction, of course, but its craft had delivered something authentic, life recorded, all but tangible. He could think of no finer ambition.

They came to a crowd gathered around a white marble statue. Nude and beautiful as Venus, her wrists locked in chains, hand hung over her hidden flower, she was a sale to lust. Charles and Henry found Samson Merryweather among her admirers. "She could have at least been decently draped," the lawyer said, inches from her stone derriere and unsurprised to read that the sculptor was an American.

"Drapes would have been indecent," said Charles. "Blame the Turks."

Samson thumbed the buttons of his shining silk vest, a crimson pattern, roses at night. "I should like to," he offered. "Constantinople has its hands all over this poor girl as it does the lands of our Holy Places. The Old City. Bethlehem, too. No peace for our Lord, it would seem. Or for his most devout." He pointed to the cross set against the

layers of marble that stood for the woman's cloth covering——virtue through indignity, her faith upheld despite her earthly outcome.

"Their real power has faded," Henry said. "The Orient will be someone else's duty soon enough."

"Speaking of which," Samson went on, "I'm not so charmed that Russia's gotten involved, either. None of those Byzantine Christians are real Christians. The Czar's as bloodthirsty as any Muslim, and desperate, too.

"He'd love all that land," said Charles.

"Of course," said Samson, "with the Black Sea in tow. The Czar's country, or whatever you'd call that frozen place, is stagnant."

"Stagnant, you say?" Henry asked.

"You need evidence? Any of our Russian guests might have come to the Exhibition with a single display of their own, but no, instead they're typically isolated, dreaming about conquests and all such things."

"Who isn't?" Charles broke in.

"Pardon?"

Henry cleared his throat. "Mister Dickens is correct. The policy of world affairs, to be frank. Who hasn't at least a passing bid over the Ottoman territories? I'm sure you've heard that France has elected another Napoleon."

"Quite," said Samson. "I thought it an omen, myself."

No single body left the congregation around the statue without immediate replacement, the faces exchanged but the numbers never in decline. "Let's hope not," Henry said. "A war over a dying empire will solve nothing."

"So they want the Holy Land, too? Well. For the longest time I was sure that the French were a bunch of reeking atheists. Now I see they've found their religion." Samson rapped his cane against the floor. "If you want the world," he said, "start with God."

"I'm no ally of emperors," Charles said, "but I'll hear no ill of the French——"

One voice rose above the others. A man tossed his top hat and frock coat aside, jumped atop the same pedestal that supported the saintly nude and threw his hands over her rigid breasts. The expression on his face, jaw slackened, eyeballs dancing, confirmed what other visitors had merely wondered: were they perfect? A guard rushed out from the crowd. He grabbed the man by the trousers and tore him from the stone, hurling them both to the ground. The guard shot to his feet and dragged the miscreant away, who laughed and licked his lips. Ecstasy immersed him. He cried, "Love without fear, life without care!"

The crowd murmured in embarrassment. Samson frowned and rattled his teeth. "An Englishman, too…"

As he roamed the glass halls with Charles, Henry scarcely lifted his nose from his notebook, his handwriting sloppy and readable only to him. He made a note of the section they'd entered: Philosophical Instruments. Charles, in conversation with an American, finally called Henry to attention.

The American sported thin, round eyeglasses through which he surveyed the Exhibition, not any particular sight but the whole eternal dimension, amused by the futility of any attempt to absorb its scale. His hair would have sprung wildly in all directions without pomade. His long moustache and goatee were pointed and pepper-gray. The wrinkled suit he wore was an earthy brown, as if dusted and colored by the

frontiers he'd undoubtedly crossed. There was no mistaking the nation he spoke for. "Exchange a word or two with Mister Brady," and with that, and a pat on the shoulder, Charles Dickens disappeared into a pageant of black suits.

Faces in frames surrounded Brady, each portrait proudly on a stand. Visitors observed them from a distance, not up close, not studying for subtleties or details as they would with paintings in a museum. "Ever been photographed?" Brady stood beside a wooden box that was varnished but unpainted. A short metal tube jutted from one side. Henry mistook the contraption, at first, for an accordion, given the folded bellows in the middle of the box.

"I haven't," Henry professed.

"Shy of the camera?" He opened a panel on the box and looked inside, eyes narrowed. "Really ought to. I'd do it myself, while you're here and all, but I'm expecting Victor Hugo to show up for a picture any moment now."

"It's very popular?"

"Oh yes," said Brady. "The great instantaneous process."

Henry had seen plenty of photographs before, though he was among the few of his friends and colleagues who still had never had his portrait made. "How does the apparatus work?"

Brady brushed a thumb along his lips. "Well, let's think about light," a where-to-begin look about his face. "Have you ever come home from a hot summer day, just like this one, to find that your nose or the back of your neck has tanned? Your skin is sensitive to the light. With enough exposure the change becomes visible. Certain chemicals will burn, like those in your skin. Parchment turns yellow. The like. What the

camera takes advantage of is precisely this. So we photographers spread our plates with a solution, a good, thick gelatin, which reacts to light in a matter of seconds. I've used a few different kinds——guncotton, most recently. I've used plenty of different surfaces, too. Started out with copper daguerreotypes, but they're so darn heavy. These here are paper. I've used glass, too."

"Glass plates?" Henry asked.

"Like any of the ones that make up this building."

"You mean to say we're standing inside a giant camera?"

"Hardly," said Brady. "If I applied my collodion to these walls, they'd dry too quick, or the glass would burn and blacken. Too much exposure——there's such a thing. No, before we want any amount of light to reach the plate, we do our work in the dark. When the solution's prepared and spread evenly we open the door to the camera and secure the plate in the dark slide. Closed, the apparatus lets no light in until the cover is removed, and whatever you see through the lens, the camera sees as well. It's our harness. And the light goes to work." He waved to the portrait beside him. "The light went to work on President Jackson, here, and didn't miss a thing. Brow lines, wrinkles, the roundness of his lips. You can even see the texture of his jacket. You can tell how it would feel to the touch. And his eyes? My favorite part. The moisture. Age. No stately flattery, no glory. Nothing like a commissioned painting. Free from calculation. He's an old man and the camera doesn't lie." Mister Brady savored his words. "It's an exact copy of a genuine sight, as visible as it would be in person to you and me." He smiled, looked Henry up and down. "Well, you seem so interested, and since Mister Hugo's holding me up, why don't I take your picture? No charge."

Henry nodded slowly, eyes darting, felt he was somehow being tested. He sat in the chair as Brady positioned a mechanical arm behind Henry's neck——to ensure that no movement would blur the exposure——and slid a blank plate already wet with nitrate into its holder. The lens of Brady's box stared intent, excited, scrutinized every detail, no matter how trivial or inconspicuous, presented by its newest sitter. There was a fury to it that Henry hadn't expected, impassioned, addicted to the light and the creations that came with it.

The photograph of the American president loomed over him. He almost expected the man to move. "Andrew Jackson has passed on, aye?"

Brady nodded. "Just months after he sat for me."

"What did he think of the picture?"

Brady rubbed his sunburned neck and sighed. "He hated it."

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On the walk from her door to the handsome cab, twenty steps accomplished in succession with those of her parents, Sophia Charlotte Weir felt the cold pinch her shoulders. On any other occasion she would have voiced her grievances to her mother, whose unfailing sympathy could answer in kind——for what was winter but, through shorter and starker days, the mourning of Demeter in want of her daughter? Though tonight Sophia had conspired against herself: she wore an evening dress, a light muslin gown, pale blue and bought with matching gloves, that revealed forthright the broadness of her shoulders. Winnie didn't understand the selection of this attire, not only ill-fit for

the season but overly proud to emphasize the muscular and unfeminine build of her daughter's shoulders.

Complain though Sophia might, those bitter months beyond the harvest were even less kind to her father. William Weir tried to conceal his murky wheeze, the sick man secreted within him, but in the wintertime it was impossible to silence: a third-party in dialogue, a constant wordless interjection. Sophia was surprised to hear her father, after stepping into their carriage with a sodden groan, wonder aloud whether this would be his final attendance to a birthday party for Gregor Fleming, an occasion he didn't much care for but felt compelled to attend anyway. Even stranger was the lack of privacy this physical malignancy afforded her father. When they entered the ballroom, their fellow guests, some familiar to Sophia, others unknown, expressed their encouragement for William's health with a demeanor too careful, too dignified, as if they had taken it upon themselves to reconcile the man with his slipping mortality. But Gregor Fleming had no simple pity in him. He stood before the musicians as they tuned their instruments and announced that, as a testament to William's luck, he had already written the invitations to next year's ball with the unambiguous inclusion of the newspaperman's name. Gregor drained his glass of champagne and let the trumpets cull dancers to the floor. The declaration had embarrassed Sophia, not for its excessively public assertion of her father's fading vigor but rather because it had so charmingly and attractively evaded the possibility, and the reality, of death——for William Weir, for any and all of them.

Sophia's mother leaned in. "Well-intentioned," she admitted, "but I think him a womanizer and a pig." Gregor's charms couldn't impress her. Winnie's distrust for the tactics of courtship sponsored her scowl towards any courtier——no matter how

practiced in Castiglione's nonchalance the hopeful might be. Sprezzatura, in its resilience against visible effort, made casual the masteries of the world but for Winnie was just another revered Renaissance idea that robbed people of their humanity even as it professed its expression——shouldn't a man sweat through his labor, stumble as he learned, let his education mark him as a smooth face wrinkles over time? It was the work for love and not love itself to which Winnie had always directed her children. Gregor Fleming's own particular brand of insouciance, relegated as it was to his two most favored categories of women and words, left Winnie accordingly aloof; and indeed the scores of women whose names had transiently attached to his during the decades of the author's life seemed to appear from nowhere, the strength of his communication undeniable but frustratingly ungraspable, the origin of his urges altogether unclear. The same, she realized, could be said of his novels. How could a man as brash as he, immersed in a life of wealth and whim, craft such subtle details of the human mind?

Inevitably, though, a mother's influence waned: for Sophia, there was an allure in the stare that Gregor sustained towards her strong, naked shoulders. A decidedly lifelong bachelor like him seeing in her the potential for physicality was, despite the element of addiction in his endeavors, not without eroticism. Gregor's quiet lust was obvious and though it started in disembodiment, in her twin enjoinments, it soon encapsulated her entirely. She grinned, justified: the dress she'd insisted on was more than its own end of fashion, of exhibition. It didn't wear her. It had made Gregor curious about the being beneath. There would never be love between them, Sophia knew. There wouldn't even be sex——she'd never let him have and dispose of her as he had countless women——but there was acknowledgement, honest and instinctual, and one day that might bind them.

Gregor saw only so far ahead. “I wouldn’t forgo a glance at the rest of her,” he told Henry as they watched her merge with the crowded quadrille. “Truth be told, I’d green her gown, too, and have her punch me in the stomach,” Gregor bared his teeth, “just to see how well she could hurt me.”

Henry, though, hadn’t come to his mentor’s forty-eighth birthday celebration for women; he’d arrived asking for Charles, and Gregor disappointed him as curtly as possible: “Our friend Dickens is sealed away in Tavistock House, obsessing over his latest book.”

Charles’ attention to *The Daily News* had long-since waned; come to think of it, Henry grasped, the last time he’d shown any concern for the newspaper was in Hyde Park, three years ago, ensuring that all staff members had a ticket to the Exhibition. But Charles was more outgoing, then; and now the ballroom couldn’t hold his interest, either. Henry pressed for further details. Gregor barely wrenched his gaze from Sophia. “He told me it was a novel,” he explained derisively, “*for these times*. I suppose we’ll know what that means when Boz is good and ready.”

Whatever the mocking in Gregor’s voice, whatever the disrespect towards his contemporary, it was uttered without further explication, and he restored his attention to the lady ahead. Henry might not have noticed Sophia on his own prerogative but, ever wise to the experiences of his teacher, he sensed Gregor’s hunger, his imagination, and through him understood the arousal. It wasn’t competition; he was learning by example. Henry cleared his throat. “Might you introduce us?”

Gregor raised an eyebrow. “I will,” he said, intrigued, his pupil usually somewhat undemonstrative, “but with a dare: you’ll ask her for a dance, and you have to promise

me, when the two of you are dancing, you'll sneak a kiss on her shoulder, so soft in its touch that she'll spend the rest of the evening wondering if it had ever actually happened at all. Like a dream, Henry." Gregor smacked a palm against Henry's buttock. The wallop resounded. Henry tightened, always taken aback by those abruptly physical intrusions and the pleasure that his mentor took in them.

He wouldn't be complicit in Gregor's bargain, nor in any proposed by the carefree Casanova, but to ensure an introduction he immediately agreed, "Yes, yes, all right, whatever you say," hands defensively in the air, and was led onto the floor to meet her as the musicians prepared another score. He felt clumsy on his feet, his stomach heavy. But Gregor had once told him that no one on earth was ever condemned to muster a command of romance unaccompanied——not when art would educate without discrimination. And, really, from whom else did Henry learn passion than Shakespeare; who else trained him to discern true beauty than Rubens and his *Paris*; why consider any other ideals of the human body than those forged from marble by the old Hellenists? Longing, adoration unconsummated, he first understood in Abelard and Eloise, Petrarch and Laura. Even the devotion of Cervantes' mad hidalgo, while frenzied, had touched his heart, for love, like Quixote, was without rational boundaries. Rely on their instruction, Gregor had said, for they have taught you your own feelings and taught you never to be ashamed of them. Or, when in utter doubt, just look to me, think of me…

"Miss Sophia," Gregor began, a conductor tuning his orchestra. "It is my great pleasure to introduce a dear friend. This is Henry Chambers, my protégé in letters." Look at them, they're, dare I think it, almost like a young man's, isn't that just exhilarating——

She curtsied. Her low voice, subdued, was a river running underground. “I’m happy to make your acquaintance.”

Properly, chin up: “Would you honor me with your hand?”

“Certainly.” She put her fan away. “And if it’s not too much trouble, the rest of me may come with it.”

Gregor cackled, slapped his hands together and walked off to mind the pair from afar. Henry was no admirable dancer and managed only as convincingly as Sophia maintained her cheer for the duration of their waltz. But as they moved across the floor, surrounded by dozens of other pairs, Henry imagined how his teacher might have danced, and the more he believed himself this other, the easier the whole process became——not just easier, but more sincere, as well. Holding her, he understood what he was supposed to feel, the energy of their touch, the beauty made whole by her qualities, her distinctions, that short span in which this stranger became a lover in his mind. The music ceased and the partners bowed, her focus mostly removed from his. They broke. Sophia received a kiss on the cheek from William Weir. Henry wondered for a moment why the new editor of *The Daily News*, his immediate superior, had graced the lady so, before recognizing the ineptitude of his incredulity——she was his daughter. Very un-writerly of you, Henry mused, to not have crafted this turn of events yourself.

Gregor sneered after the waltz. “Without a doubt, you’ve left her shoulder dry,” he chastised, but the dampness of that desire would only have evaporated. With the ball over and the guests dispersed, their first acquaintanceship was nullified, and Henry knew it would be indecent to approach her afterwards brandishing its memory. How like fantasies these ballroom gatherings made themselves, Henry thought, frustrated. But their

introduction had been real, he assured himself during his carriage ride home; it wasn't a dream and, unlike those fragile, somnial fancies that shatter in realization of the waking world, was not forgotten.

•

The office of *The Daily News* stood atop its printing press and the noise of the machinery underneath was as jarring a stimulant as Henry needed in the early morning. He finished proofreading the last article for the day's edition——"Astronomer Royal George Biddell Airy to Weigh the Earth in South Shields"——and set to work drafting his own article.

England was at war, but Henry wouldn't have stayed with a newspaper that forced him to support it. His piece on the matter would be free of patrioteering——this wasn't *our* war, Henry reminded himself, though it well could have been, what with all those Ottoman lands awaiting seizure. Falling short of past glories, weren't they; ill, diseased, the sick man of the Russian Czar's aside to our dear Ambassador Seymour who must have jumped and spilled his drink upon hearing such an unabashed desire for territory. Nicholas's dribble over the Ottomans' soon-to-be former domain could have grown oases from the sand. Annex Turkey, and Jerusalem would come with it, was the understanding.

But the Czar didn't suffer this compulsion towards empire alone. Louis-Napoleon sniffed the air, too, and smelled more than just Paris; he perceived a dawn for his Christianity, the real Christians, the right Christians, and dusk for both the Orthodox and the Muslims——heretics all. *The Times* had branded him a butcher and a robber. But it

was obvious to Henry that this new emperor thought more of himself: Napoleon III didn't just think he was the return of his beloved uncle to France; he believed himself to be the heir to the Crusades, or the newest chanson de geste of old Charles the Great reincarnated——made a little more sense, then, that a grueling two years ago he had sent a battleship named *Charlemagne* into the crystal-blue Dardanelles to scare the Turks, violate treaty lines, and call the Black Sea his own. It must have worked: only months later the Holy Land was under French control. *Vive l'Empereur* meant resurrection, this time, of the old imperial nostalgia——

"Henry!"

The room surrounded him again. "Mister Weir, yes, I, indeed. Hello."

William Weir peered over the writer's shoulder. He had strained his voice calling so loudly; a wet cough preceded his words. "Fashionable morning, I think, assuming it hasn't flown you by. What are you working on?"

His papers were cragged with lead markings. The pencil in Henry's hand must have taken on a life of its own when he wasn't looking. "Tomorrow's article on strife in the Crimean Peninsula," he said. "A critique of the Queen's decision to join the French and fight over the Ottoman lands. Even if it does keep Czar Nicholas at bay."

"Of course," William acknowledged with clear endorsement. Writing an article, for newspapermen, was an act of nobility and deserved a lordly contemplation. "Let the *Morning Chronicle* take the side of war."

Glad as he was, Henry was bewildered by his editor's unbroken approval. William, after knowing Henry for a matter of months, had one day dubbed Henry "a worldly fellow." Those were the words, spoken aloud at a dinner with Mister Dickens

present; but he doubted them, sometimes, particularly when he met sailors or merchants or soldiers, actual travelers. Henry had never left Britain; he was still young, sure, but what was he waiting for, what was experience without experience? John Keats was his very same age when he fell from consumption, bled dry and consumed, warm days finally ceased, gone to join the ghosts of Rome and wander endlessly up and down the stairs of the Trinità dei Monti, lost to the foreign tongue, chills from the piazza beneath, the cutting mists. Dead young, but read and remembered, an honor he might not have earned had he locked himself inside London his whole life. All these years, and still Henry had never toured beyond England's foggy shores, they loomed around him, drew closer every year, would inevitably mummify him. He thought of a story he'd started to write but had left unfinished, a tale set a century ago in Italy. The lapse in time elicited enough uncertainties in him; he knew he needed to see the world if he was ever to put it into words.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mister Weir?"

"If I may ask," William nodded, "do you plan to stay with the newspaper?"

"That's correct, sir."

"Dickens or no Dickens?"

"That's the plan, yes."

Wind through the window. William spread the casements further. London's aroma was stronger in the heat. "You know this isn't an easy trade," he said. "And I don't mean writing on the whole. Our friend, Gregor Fleming, he has it easy. Don't let him tell you anything else." William caught himself. "And don't believe everything he tells you, either. Fiction writers invent. We preserve. Sometimes what we must preserve is

precisely what we'd just as soon forget. I do think dear Mister Dickens is in the midst of melancholy, to be perfectly honest. I couldn't say if it's because of this dreadful war in the East or some matter all the more personal——"

"I tell you truly and from no remorseful nature," Henry implored, "there is gratification enough for me."

His editor bore a smile after a short hesitation but even then it didn't reach its fullest peaks; it was too carefully considered. "Good. That's good to know, indeed. Now, I see you're busy, and I mean no vexation by any of this. But there's one further matter I'd like to discuss."

Henry swallowed. "Of course, sir."

"At Gregor's ball," he said, "his birthday. How should I——well. Did you share a dance with my daughter?"

Mutual lust, a dare. Thoughts, fantasies, provocations, out of mind until now. No need to worry, Henry… "I did, I must confess——"

William opened his hands. "Don't you fret, it was a happy sight for me. She rarely takes advantage of the social life that's blessed us. Now, there will be much to elaborate on over time, but for the moment I'll do without procedure and speak at a gallop. Like you, I intend to stay with the journal. It's brought me a small success that I dare not risk away. What wealth I've earned I wish to put towards the continuation of this newspaper. But I'd never forget I have a family to provide for. My daughters have already wed to men in other businesses——except for my youngest. So I beseech you, my dear boy. How would you like, under law, to become a part of my family? Help me keep my

finances within the journal and my kin at the same time, no sacrifice to either, and none to you but a test of your dedication."

None of Henry's past relations had ever led to an engagement. "Ah, quite, of course, it's all so sensible, isn't it," Henry said, pins pushing into his flesh——marriage to another as a bargain, a trade determined in an instant, in a conversation. Was this the romance that he'd waited his entire life to find? "What of Sophia's thoughts on the matter?"

"None, yet," said William, "and I'm afraid she doesn't always trust my judgment about potential suitors. Or about much else. The last man I introduced for such a purpose ended up a disappointment. A real magsman. You'd do me kind to find another means of introduction to my daughter. I don't know if there's anyone in particular that you might consider."

Henry pictured the man, his straight English nose, whiskers running along the jawline. Mischief colored his face. "Gregor," he said.

•

The tavern was a tranquil place when Henry stepped inside. Billiard balls clattered faintly from an adjacent room. The aroma of beef roasted in the oven almost overpowered the tobacco. Any solitary customers read newspapers and tried to forget the lateness of their wakeful hours. He found Gregor at a table close to the bar, already immersed in conversation with a man that Henry didn't recognize. The Jew was bald, his beard gray and neatly trimmed, he wore a buttoned-up black coat over a white cotton

shirt. “Come, join us,” Gregor insisted, his hand beckoning violently, he must have been drinking for some time by then.

“How do you do?” Henry greeted the stranger as he sat.

Gregor finished a glass of ale. “Henry, this is Melamed, a new acquaintance of mine.”

“A pleasure,” said Melamed with a nod.

“Melamed’s come all the way from Stamford Hill!” Gregor grinned.

The Jew rolled his eyes, more amused than annoyed. “Finsbury, actually.”

Gregor chuckled, patted the Jew on the shoulder. “Don’t be flustered, Melamed. I’m all for the mixing of peoples. Makes life more interesting. But I understand why the Jews congregate. Why anyone does. It’s good to be close to your God. I envy that. I’m not much close to any.”

Melamed’s shuffling hands endeavored to guide his wavering voice. “We have——it’s never a question——faith is a negligible thing, at times,” his tongue finally landed, “but we come around when we need to. It isn’t a matter of convincing.”

“True,” Gregor said. “But I still say, I do, if there’s anything that might have convinced me——if I’d been alive in the days of Jesus, that might have done it. If I could have seen his miracles for myself. That might have made the difference in my soul.”

“There were miracles before Jesus,” said Melamed.

“But never of such kindness. Yahweh——”

“Ah, please, Gregor——”

“Yahweh thinks in rules. He’s a planner. An architect. And an architect’s design requires the toil of the multitudes. When the project is done, perhaps it will speak well of

its maker. But Jesus was a performer. He holds your attention the entire time. Selfless were his acts."

Melamed shook his head, thought carefully before speaking but his hands were moving again, they summoned his words sooner than they were ready. "Well——you're not——you're mistaken——that's akin to saying that your brother gave you life while ignoring the father who begat the both of you."

Gregor scraped his empty mug around the tabletop. He licked his lips, eyes vivacious. "My father?"

Silence around the table. Melamed looked to Henry, who looked away. "Of course," said the Jew, "your father. We've all had one."

Gregor grunted with contempt. "Let me tell you something about fathers." He raised his glass, signaling the bartender for a refill. "They're as negligible as faith."

"Father is law!"

"Father is the speaker of law but at times the mouth's a reeking hole."

"Oh, Gregor."

"You object?"

"Naturally."

"Speak your mind."

Melamed crossed his arms. "I'd rather speak with my mouth, unless the odor offends you so."

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Need we? How about a penny for another glass of ale."

"That'll cost you more than a penny's worth."

"Bollocks, what's a penny worth, these days?"

"A penny's worth," Henry said, "no more or less."

"As I thought," Melamed scratched his chin. "Currency's law, as our fathers have ordained."

"And look what good it's done us."

"You realize, you wouldn't be here were it not for a ready father."

"That doesn't exempt him from judgment, nor bind me to reverence." Gregor arched forward. "Let me clarify: Jesus never knew his father."

"Wouldn't a Christian say that Jesus was his *own* father?"

"Never you mind the metaphysics. Jesus was a man on earth, at one point. God was up above, silent and calculating. Sometimes he listened. But Jesus grew up under a mother's care, and he went on to feed the hungry, heal the sick, raise the dead. And Yahweh? God the Father? He had no mother, not that we know of, and what did he do for the world but punish his creations, command the slaughter of children, burn cities to the ground?"

Melamed leaned back. "I'm sure your mother was a lovely woman, Gregor."

"I wouldn't know."

"Though I'm more curious to meet this father of yours."

"You're not likely to."

The Jew smiled. "Perhaps I already have." Melamed stood, pushed in his chair. "Gentlemen, I must take my leave. I've children to put to bed."

Gregor smirked. "Do you always cut a fine evening short for the sake of your lot?"

Melamed folded his hands. “They’re the reason I wake.” He left the tavern with an amicable wave.

“Do you think you offended him?” Henry asked.

“I doubt it,” Gregor said, his gaze distant. “What’s a little friendly banter, anyhow?”

“Quite.”

Gregor snapped his fingers to catch the bartender’s attention. “One for my friend, as well!” The bartender delivered two new glasses of ale to the table. Gregor took a sip. “Well, did you bring another manuscript for me to read?”

“I’ve started another story,” Henry said, bringing the glass to his lips, “but I’m afraid I haven’t lately had the concentration. My mind has been occupied with——well, with other things.”

“This new story,” he started, couldn’t be coaxed into pursuing the trail Henry had left him, “who is the storyteller? The voice. Who is your Werther?”

“A wine merchant,” Henry said. “The story is set in Rome, in ancient times. The man is called Marcus. He has an encounter with Octavian, who’s still only a child.”

“How sensational,” Gregor exclaimed. “But you don’t fully understand. What I’d like to know, what I’m asking, is who: whose thoughts are guiding the narration?”

Henry took another sip of ale, answered carefully. “He is me, of course. The wine merchant, in these pages, is the bearer of my mind.”

Satisfaction settled Gregor’s face. He leaned back. What ease this brought Henry was soon countered by distress. Expectation, intermission, audience nervous through the quiet, everyone in place: Gregor began to laugh. “And then every man who reads your

work will know it was you, and remember you, and remember nothing that they actually read. And you'll be very pleased, I imagine."

"Come again?"

"You may find beauty in style, and in the composition of your own persona in prose, but not in ideas," he said.

"Gregor, if you don't mind, I was hoping to ask you about the miss——"

"You doubt the ability of your reader to comprehend the beauty inherent."

"Yes, well, that's all well and good but——"

"Wouldn't it be so very dreadful if all your future admirers pointed to you in the streets and blabbered to each other, 'Oh, look, there goes Marcus the Roman wine merchant, passionate old stallion, he's a regular 'round these parts, aye?'" He raised his finger for another drink. "I think it would be very dreadful indeed." The barkeep was prompt. "What a wonder it would be, how absorbing and enriching for the mind, to craft a story that your dear reader could examine like fact, like history itself. And who writers history, my good man?"

"I couldn't say, Gregor."

The coins that Gregor removed from his pocket fell into a neat order on the table. "No one bloody writes it, Henry. It writes itself."

Henry shook his head. "What good does that do for a novel?"

"You prove to your reader that you've recorded life as it was, saved it from burial by time-moves-on, and he will never forget it. Then your work is as immortal as Herodotus. It'll survive you and I. My latest novel, and it's close to publication, quite close, it's a tome of details, observations, careful words, the world in action, Henry, free

from the authority of my voice. My judgments are absent, almost entirely. You wouldn't think it any different from real life. And, as in life, these pages are slow to turn, they linger on the uncomfortable, my friend, quite miserable, really."

Henry felt shame for his imagination, he grew worried about showing Gregor the first chapters of his latest fiction, felt the urge to race home and replace his words, destroy entire passages.

"It's not quite the writing of your peers, is it? No, England is, they're all wallowing in the gothic, the atmosphere, thrill of creation, it's a little savage to me, anyway. Like every passing thunderstorm belongs to their gloomy minds, well, let me tell you, most times it rains, I'm out on a jolly day and it's damned poor timing."

"Charles Dickens is writing about the real world," Henry pressed.

Gregor wiped his nose on a napkin, inspected his fluids before crumpling the cloth on the table. "Dickens is burdened by ideology. His characters are metaphors. Everything must stand for something. He can't help himself and so he makes a point. He writes about the real world but by no means according to it."

"We need writers who can devote themselves to London's ills. Charles is——"

"He's a sentimentalist. Breathes ideals instead of air. It doesn't make for good fiction, Henry. I'd be so bold as to say that the man should have considered politics over anything else." Another sip of ale. "And on that subject, how fares his *Daily News?*"

"The newspaper," Henry recollected. "Charles has had little to do with the newspaper for quite some time."

"So you've said."

"William Weir is our latest editor."

In search of the name, Gregor drew his finger along the counter, made a map of his memories; a smile, and the expedition was complete. “Of course, the father of our ballroom Sophia Charlotte. She’s been slow to leave your dreams, has she?”

On the other side of the tavern, a voice cried, “Come on, lip us a chant, already!” A group of men raised their drinks, poor folk. One of them stood atop the table as they took a collective breath:

“I said my fine youth, I fear you’re astray,

Prithee now tell me, what brought you this way?

It’s a damsel I wanted, whose heart I did win,

In my bonny blue jacket that I was dressed in!”

But none of them could remember the rest of the verses. “You’re corned, you rampers!” the voice told them. Sheepishly, they sat down again, searched their mugs for drops to sting their tongues anew.

Henry finished his ale, the stuff had lost its taste by then but his gullet swore revolt. “I shouldn’t mind the chance to exchange words with her again,” he confessed.

“And what business have I in any affairs that take you beyond the page?” Though he had plenty——it was Gregor and no one else who had taken Henry to the ladybirds, the brothels, on the first time he’d even offered to let Henry watch him to ensure the best possible instruction. They’d gone together numerous times but for Henry the encounters were rushed, remote, suggested something more immersive and unguarded. “Tell me,” Gregor went on, “what particular interest have you got in her?”

“I found her quite charming,” said Henry.

“She certainly is,” Gregor agreed. “She could be yours, no question.”

Henry shook his head, took another drink. “How do you win a woman’s heart? When you have the chance and she’s before you, what is this moment when she opens herself to you? I can’t imagine it works like that.”

“You think we fall in love before we’re even aware of it?”

“That could be.”

“Sophia,” Gregor said. “Divine.”

“Pardon?”

Gregor wiped his upper lip. “When I went to Italy, what, two years ago, I saw an interesting work of art. A Bellini painting called *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria*. Do you know this work?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Mark, as the title would suggest, orates the knowledge of Christ to a crowd of Muslims in Alexandria. It’s beautiful. Colored like the desert. When you see it, you can taste the sand in your mouth.”

“An Italian mind,” Henry nodded, “possessed by the exoticism of Egypt.”

“Not quite,” Gregor smiled. “Bellini did a curious thing when he painted Alexandria. The city is fashioned with limestone, like the pyramids, indeed——but it doesn’t look like any Alexandria that I’ve been to.”

“You went to Alexandria?”

“When it was still recovering from Napoleon. I was a much younger man. It was my first time leaving Europe, and, I’ll admit, the place awakened many passions in me. Pleasure,” he traced his fingertip around Henry’s hand, “is an indiscriminate force in such splendid creatures.”

Henry pulled his hand away, kept it on his lap, restless. “I see.”

“But Bellini was a Venetian, proud of it, and he fashioned his Alexandria after Saint Mark’s Square. The palace in the center of the painting is merely the basilica, the Chiesa d’Oro. Even the shape of the city is a Renaissance angle, not unlike *The School of Athens*. Apparently, he didn’t think he needed to see Alexandria to reproduce it. He made it his, instead——a romantic notion, if there ever was one. But the painting’s old, hundreds of years old, and now that Alexandria’s a fortunate place again and more of us have actually seen it, Bellini’s vision, I think, has been repudiated. Pointless. But knowing that doesn’t hinder our romance.”

“But that basilica,” Henry said, “the one in Venice, in Saint Mark’s Square, isn’t it based on——?”

“The Sancta Sophia. Venice must have seen a little of itself in Constantinople. A city isn’t so different from a man. We fashion ourselves after others, too. We borrow. We’re amalgams. We’re capable of making great change. Of making things ours that never were. So my question to you is, do you see a little of yourself in your Sophia?”

Henry felt slow and incapable, his retort too young to forge into words, too raw, he was drunk now, his elbow missed its landing on the counter and he almost slipped from his seat. Gregor gladly interrupted Henry’s lack of response and as he did Henry watched the man’s mouth move, there was always a grin on that face, the same grin that urged him into a dance with Sophia at the ballroom, that opened in a kind of hunger for life’s offerings that Henry couldn’t help but admire, and Gregor was his mentor, after all, surely if he could learn to write like him then he could desire like him, as well. He had wanted this woman, imagined intimacy. Weren’t love and instinct identical qualities?

When Henry returned, Gregor was jabbing his arm with an open tin of snuff. “Distance, Henry. Do this with a sense of distance. Step away from what you think you know about yourself.” Gregor leaned back, inhaled deeply through his nose. “A little objectivity will help.”

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Of the view shared by the trio of pet bluebirds encaged in the Weirs’ household and their confusion before the pattern of human motion that occurred day after day with only minor alterations to speak of, Henry was entirely ignorant, too tense to imagine what those observers thought of him every time he entered the parlor to take the same careful seat across the lady. The bluebirds, unsated by bursts of restricted flight and agitated by the stillness of the room around them, fixated on any marginal movement they could find——namely, Henry’s restless left foot, or his fingers scraping against the felt of the bowler hat he clutched against his navel.

Henry blamed the bulk of his anxiety on Sophia’s chaperone, her mother, present for any and all meetings, whether inside the Weirs’ house or out strolling among other Londoners. But despite Winnie’s reservations over this man who’d begun his courtship after dancing with her daughter——suspicions encapsulated in the corners of her mouth, which tugged her lips like gravity and seemed to battle some perpetually unpleasant taste behind them——Henry was polite and regarded her graciously in conversation.

Gregor initiated only the first official meeting between Henry and Sophia in the lady’s house before leaving for a long-postponed sojourn to Vienna. The rest, as he said,

was no longer in his hands, though he insisted rather optimistically that he wouldn't be gone long enough to miss any potential congratulations. Henry wished Gregor were still there, in charge of the discourse, maybe he could have coaxed some laughter out of her mother, lured watchful father out of the doorway, persuaded Sophia herself to pay Henry more attention than she did her half-moon fan, which the rapid pivots of her wrist rendered an amorphous blur. There was no greater ordeal than the interviews before the Weir family, where he strained out words to justify his presence.

Henry learned early on that Sophia was an illustrator for children's books. Her father had gotten her the job but she never took it for granted, not when she could earn her own money and enjoy her work. She acknowledged an aspiration to draw satirical cartoons for *Punch*. William nodded in approval. "The journalism business would benefit from a lady's touch," he deduced, "and a lady's wit."

The agreement made between Henry and Sophia's father was never addressed. Henry was careful not to look to the man too often but there were times when he couldn't help it, he had to leave his eyes somewhere given Sophia's tendency to stare just slightly above him, as though imagining the sky beyond her ceiling. Her bluebirds might have empathized, but Henry fidgeted, became so accustomed to the indirection of her gaze that if they ever locked eyes he immediately looked elsewhere, to his bowler, perhaps, or to the carpet, or towards her bared, broad shoulders.

After a night out to the opera——where King Artaxerxes sang of intrigue and assassination in the Persian palace not just in the English tongue but from the flesh of a woman, as well, in travesti for lack of a fashionable or willing castrato——William voiced his esteem for the suitor. He spoke pointedly of Henry's manners and his aptitude

as a writer when he knew his daughter could hear him. Sophia, in spite of her father's apparently newfound inclinations, had little to say on their carriage ride back home that didn't concern the performance. Fan open wide in her lap, she asserted her admiration for Lady Esther Cockburn's King of Persia, the grace, the authority, the royal garb, above all else the credence of her transformation. "Perfect," was how she finally put it, "the Lady was perfect." Henry didn't understand, he thought the range of the singer just within adequacy——to say nothing of the bosom that divulged her true sexuality, or the English lyrics that thwarted the stage's Persian pretension. Why ever it was that she admired the woman king was beyond him, but it didn't matter, not really, he had agreed to gain her trust, her affection, maybe the costumes had something to do with it, whatever.

Though Sophia came to recognize the benefits of Henry's visits and their walks around London——at least they broke the monotony of home, working from home, Winnie and William——she could barely tolerate the preparation that preceded them. Winnie oversaw the dress selection, the hair and makeup changes, the jewelry and gold, but Sophia was never comfortable, her skin irritated and aware of intrusion. A glimpse in the mirror of her decorated body, contrived for romance, revealed a face attached to a foreign body, or furniture, and poor Henry, she really pitied him, was there anything he enjoyed about these visits and their restrictions, did he feign pleasure at her manufacture, wasn't there more he wanted to see than layers of concealment, blood-red lips, another gaudy dress?

Their engagement, then, came as some relief, meant an end to the ceaseless attendance of her mother and father——replaced by that of Henry Chambers, sure, but he was stuck with her, now, too. Maybe, she hoped, he would finally relax and reveal the

affection he stifled in her parents' company——such a gentle man, she noticed, humble and soft to the touch, though Sophia didn't lie when describing him to her sisters and her friends: Henry was attractive in the same way that children's faces anticipated maturity, handsomeness. One day it would all settle, his skin and muscles and bone, one day he would be in control, but he wasn't now, not yet.

Until then, he would stiffen when she took his hand, flinch when she touched his waist. It made sense, she found as their engagement went on, that he had proposed marriage in a letter, a beautiful letter, but a careful one. She pictured the crumpled parchment piling around his feet through some feverish late night alone, imagined John Donne, lover of God and God's image, open on his desk, Alexander Pope or the Song of Songs guiding his quill. The obvious effort, veil though it was, excited her as great fiction could and earned Henry the kiss she eased onto his lips one evening inside their carriage, on their way back from another opera, she put her hand over her mouth when it was done, he paled before his cheeks and forehead blushed, he appeared a living, breathing Cross of Saint George, England approaching foreign shores. The exposure she'd compelled, no letters for Henry to hide behind, made her smile as she drifted to sleep, it made her laugh, too, but still she felt a fondness grow following the kiss. They had been truly, honestly together. There had been unity.

On the first of August, William arranged to spend the rest of the summer with his wife and daughter in Peterborough. Henry's reception of the news was ambiguous, his face unchanged before and after Sophia explained that she would be gone through the month. "Will you miss me?" he asked.

"I will miss…" she started, "I will miss…"

She couldn't say for sure but was happy to consider the possibility while on the way to her country house. Unlike in previous summers, when the trip north necessitated an endless, uncomfortable carriage ride, the Weirs hurried from London along the new Northern Railway on a steam-sputtering locomotive so fast as to seem in awe of its own creation. Her father beamed during the first stretch of the journey. "It's moments like these when I feel we're closer to the future than ever before," he said.

What nonsense, Sophia thought. She left their private cabin to roam the hallway of the rumbling car. Her mother protested, "Oh, stay with us, Sophia!" cried Winnie, but William, "Hush up!" shoved his hand over her mouth as if scolding an incapable child, Sophia bit her lip and Winnie acquiesced, returned to her fan and her silence. Sophia would have done the same to her father if she knew it could actually shut him up.

"Going to find some tea," was her excuse. If only someone, a stranger, would stumble into their cabin and see her father filling Winnie's mouth with his fist, William wouldn't be so quick to berate her with someone looking, would he? That's the only way to confront yourself, Sophia knew——with someone else looking. This in mind, she spent her excursion opening the doors of other passengers' cabins, savored the shock of intrusion that alerted their faces even as she feigned contrition. Someday it would be them pretending, she reasoned, we are swifter, our spaces more crowded, everyone in pursuit of the same destinations. The permanent passengers would have to solve this conundrum for themselves, how to fake looks of surprise when their privacy was lost, their anonymity cast aside, all of them made into one naked identity too large to be concealed. Being alone has always been a choice, she considered; perhaps no longer. *Someone* had to warn them.

A young, uniformed serviceman, assistant to the engine driver, sat counting tickets in the last cabin at the end of the corridor. He stood, “Can I help you, miss?” and removed his cap.

“Just exploring,” Sophia replied.

He scratched his head, shrugged, “Well, not much to see here, but you’re welcome in, if you’d like.” Sophia closed the cabin door and studied the room, for some reason thought of Henry as she looked at the serviceman. At her will, the rails disappeared, the countryside was replaced by cobblestones and rowhouses, and Sophia realized that this was the first time she’d been close to a man since kissing Henry. What she felt then, she felt again——the serviceman, like Henry, wasn’t under her father’s control. Amazing, she thought, how life calls attention to itself. She stepped closer and put her hand to his astonished face. Her thumb grazed the cleft in his chin, gentle. She waited an expression like Henry’s, the one he uncovered when she leaned in to kiss him in their carriage, skin made stone from anticipation but everything beneath it trembling. The serviceman was stoic. She drew his face closer and before his lips tensed Sophia took them in hers, he was less careful than Henry, more saliva swirled with his tongue, he tasted like cabbage, she pulled away to look at him and at that he unbuckled his belt, slid his pants down, they clung desperately to the bottom of his buttocks, Sophia had never seen a pair of trousers look so abandoned by the man they dressed. She laughed, at that and at the sight of his member sprung suddenly, stiff and still wobbling from its abrupt ejection, frank as the leisure of Eden, “What?” he asked, and after tugging the hem of her skirt she exited the cramped cabin, left the man dumbstruck and clutching his cod like a child swaddles marbles.

For Sophia, the holiday was a detour; she was too restless, on the brink of a new life in another home, to sit idly in colorless country fields watching cowslips flower from manure. “To paint more,” said her father. “I packed your watercolors.” He had indeed, Sophia found once she opened her luggage. Good for the mind and your practice, he always told her, to draw from life, record the world as it was, and she adhered, she made copy after copy of the country’s natural sights, gave her father every canvas she produced, sunsets stretched to red and violet, rays churning as they died, lone amber light resilient along the horizon, and he exclaimed, “Oh, Sophia, your talent, the hues as they become each other, as though part of the same heavenly plan!”

But the joke was on him: what she offered her father were lies. The sunsets of Peterborough were simple and dreary, fool’s gold——then again, Sophia reasoned, if he believed them, hadn’t she done her job? Either way, vibrant or not, there was nothing marvelous or inspiring in watching the sun forsake heaven for the earth. At its highest, it was blinding, indiscernible, and Sophia had to feel its warmth or trust the clarity of day to know that outlying fire was even there. It helped her understand how God worked, present in signs and sensations but somehow indistinct. Descent, by comparison, was boring, and should her fiancé never suggest in their approaching union that she paint the same dull dusk that her father deemed so rousing and swallowed whole, Sophia was sure she could love him forever.

Henry wasn’t entirely absent from her month in the country. If there was one thing that Sophia should have expected from Henry at a distance, it was a good word, or many, rather, sealed in envelopes and addressed to her. Every time a letter arrived she would read to the end and start over as though the paper would wrinkle and disintegrate if

she stopped, if his words lost their recipient. The words sat with her long afterward, during her bath at night or lying awake in bed, and once all the pieces, the choices, made sense as a whole Sophia realized just how many lines Henry devoted to her description. Every week, she was afforded some further elucidation on the tenderness of her skin; the curves of her neck and shoulders and their envy by all the vast mountains of earth; the ardor in her eyes, their tacit desire, alternately they bore the sweetness of angels or the depths of the sea. But Sophia wasn't so easily convinced. She knew that Henry's doting canonization was his alone, certainly not how the rest of the world distinguished her, would treat her through age, sickness, financial woes, the dangers of childbirth, inexplicable sadness; not to mention that, in the end, the embellishments told her very little about her fiancé. So what she liked best in the letters were the traces of his character, the promises——love beyond youth, joy through every season, he was a provider, a protector——that life would never let him keep no matter how earnestly he believed in them.

Sophia didn't know it, and never would, but for Henry, these were among the happiest times of their betrothal. When she returned, he saw nothing less than the woman who'd inspired his words——his imagination, he felt sure, hadn't led him so far only to deceive him. He and Sophia married on a chilly November morning——no one had expected good weather——under the pitched stone tiles of the Weirs' family church. They faced each other before a collection of quiet clergy, family and friends seated smiling in pews, and one chattering Gregor Fleming back from the Austrian capital with another novel drafted and a newfound snobbery for classical music. "Believe you me," he started, plum pudding breath, "Vienna may love a good technician like Jakob Don't, but I

think the city aches for another foreigner like Paganini, and who wouldn't?" which almost nobody understood or could respond to accordingly.

Henry spent much of the wedding breakfast watching William, who rarely looked back and, when he did, only did so with the sort of contemplation better suited for a funeral procession. While everyone else ate, Henry rearranged his meal with his fork. Gregor took his arm and whispered, "Do you think this patriarch is finding it difficult to leave her in the hands of another?"

No matter: he was Sophia's husband and she was his wife, and they had a honeymoon to themselves. But if anyone could illuminate the shadows of his superior and now father-in-law, it was Gregor; that in mind, Henry made the carriage stop by the writer's house on the Strand before London was behind him. Throat cleared, back straight, hair adjusted in the reflection of a window, Henry knocked on his friend's door. Gregor stampeded to answer, flung the door open. "What is it, what do you want!"

A fist clenched Henry's heart.

"Damn you, speak already!"

"I, Gregor, I wanted to, ah, say goodbye, I'm, since, seeing as how——"

"I'm busy! Can't you see I'm busy!" he shouted, arms waving like a bird of prey.

Henry peeked around Gregor's figure. The hall was in complete disarray, chests and drawers wide open, clothes, notebooks, other valuables scattered about like battlefield debris, valley of the shadow of death. "What's the matter?"

Gregor face reddened. Through gritted teeth, "I'm looking for something very important, Henry, something I fear I may have lost."

"What is it?"

He stamped his boot. A painting fell off the wall behind him. “That’s none of your concern! But if I can’t find it or if someone else’s got it I’m utterly——” but Henry’s face could sink like that of a scolded schoolboy, it was rare that Gregor ever lost his temper, now, damn him, the guilt… “I’m sorry, Henry. I do apologize. Please, chin up, the floor’s not talking yet.”

Henry swallowed. He suppressed William’s name. “I only wished to bid you farewell for the time being,” he said. “I’m leaving with Sophia.”

Gregor’s arms relaxed. One of them settled around Henry’s shoulder. “That’s good,” Gregor told him, “that’s very good. I’m very proud of you.” Side-by-side, they stared into the littered room. “Now tell me, my good man: are you consummated?”

“Goodness, no,” aghast.

A tin of snuff had spilled from an end table. Gregor took a pinch from the carpet. “Well, don’t know what you’re waiting for, and if you don’t get to it already I might just have to go ahead and mount you myself——”

Henry smiled, feigned a chuckle before taking on the quiet apprehension of a man sunk in quicksand, probably wanted to get out of there just as much. Without having moved a step, he seemed closer to the door.

“Yes, yes,” Gregor succumbed, “to Bermondsey with me.”

Henry left before he’d found any lasting opportunity to contemplate William’s sullen disposition. But with any luck their honeymoon would give him enough time to adjust to a household missing its last daughter. Unlike father, however, oldest sister Elizabeth could barely restrain her excitement. On the morning they left London, she

sealed a note and tucked it atop the clothes in Sophia's luggage. Sophia, searching for a scarf, found it after the carriage was loaded. The final lines read:

> *Now remember, take as much pleasure as is in your power. Thusly I should hope your new husband is properly trained, and brave before the sight of foreign flowers. No John Ruskins come near a sister of mine!*
>
> *Thine,*
>
> *Elizabeth May*

The vacation began on the British coast and would end in Paris. They tried to make love almost immediately after finding their inn on the coast, the removal of their clothing a somewhat precarious process, flirtation between fear and laughter, as she tore his buttons, he stepped on and ripped her skirt, they tripped over each other while shedding their layers of attire and landed on a still unmade bed. She untied her corset herself; Henry, arms at a metronomic tremble, couldn't manage its parade of knots. As they lay naked together for the first time, less in each other's arms than they were concentrated on each other's open planes, Henry quietly repeated, "I hope I never forget this," a romantic antiquity that Sophia might have laughed at had she not realized that her husband was speaking for himself and not of her, that he actually feared the day when his memory would fail him and he would no longer recollect the unguarded flesh, the locks of auburn hair let down, so much of her new to him at that moment. She watched him move down her body, savoring all the details, the hidden freckles, the timid blue veins, her small, soft breasts, but what he seemed to scrutinize most curiously was the patch of dark hair between her legs that he dabbed with his fingertips as if more than anything else before him it proved the reality, and the unfamiliarity, of their intimacy that night. He

was so preoccupied with this investigation that he didn't even notice the shivers of her waist or the sudden breaths she took when he inadvertently breached the curls of hair and grazed her skin. By the time he was beside her again he had lost all hardness. They stood up and dressed the bed but fell asleep unclothed beside one another.

Sophia woke to the gradual rise and fall of her husband's penis, some subtle insurgence against the privacy of his dreams. Henry's eyelids shuddered, fought the light that pierced the window blinds, he shook his head in grieving doubt and wouldn't rouse enough to welcome the morning so she took the undulating appendage in her palm, stroked the pliant skin and saw him stir. After a murmured groan he opened his eyes, foggy and discolored but clearing as the seconds passed, she shifted on top of him, directed him, even if he was just half-awake it seemed ready and able to do the rest of the work for him, found its passage, and as she felt his hands tighten around her ribs Sophia was sure that Henry knew where he was and what he was doing, that he had emerged from sleep as Orpheus from the underworld to lose his dreams to the waking world and recognize her to whom he had returned. When they finished, they watched the blood paint a lightning-bolt path down Henry's member and drip onto the sheets below them. She pinched his chest. He was silent for a long time.

Four days later, when Henry and Sophia left the inn to cross the Channel by boat, a desk clerk ran after them, shoes untied, out the front door to hand them a just-delivered note. It was addressed to Sophia in the fine, faint script of her oldest sister. She waited until they were on the boat to open the envelope and, Elizabeth's prior words in mind, studied the letter with discretion. Fewer words this time, more succinct:

Did he bring you to orgasm? Hope you're back by Christmas.

Yours,

Elizabeth May

She folded the paper and took Henry's hand.

In Paris, at least, she didn't have to catch her husband off-guard. He initiated their first French liaison, on the contrary, his erection at the sight of her undressing, back turned, the clue he needed to pull her towards him, onto the bed, to her happy surprise. While making love, Sophia looked down to where they met and, couldn't help it, it wasn't even that hard to imagine that the phallus belonged to her, that she thrust and he received——"Be still," she said between breaths and when he complied the illusion was truer——not that she wanted secretly to be in his place, in his body instead of her own, but precisely because there was little telling them apart in those moments. She hoped he felt the same agreement, that they had harmonized, were completed, negated, one androgynous whole, their comfort and relief materialized, the room around them faded, as if they had been that way long before, when the earth was still a possibility, life a whisper, and the only real composers were the aeons. "Henry," she confessed, arms around him, "I must, sometimes I don't, exactly, *feel* like a lady…"

He tensed in her grip, rolled around to stare at her through the sweat-soaked hair that curtained his eyes. "Of course you're a lady," Henry hummed against disbelief. "Don't get hysterical."

She didn't know why she thought he would respond appreciatively, no longer sure that what she had disclosed wasn't vulgar or wrong. She ached to find another folded note, patient on the floor amid their scattered clothes, waiting to be plucked from its

place. She settled for a blank shred of parchment on which she imagined her sister's scrawl,

What's he mean, don't get hysterical?

E.

then crumpled her would-be letter into a ball and tossed it back to the floor where it began with little reluctance to unfold, paper flower picked, dead though in vengeful bloom, a soul of its own relieving the tears and creases, ghost at work.

"What was that?" asked Henry.

"Nothing, love."

The curtains of their hotel windows spread to welcome the wind before wrinkling in languor once again, and as Henry sat up in bed he spoke his Christian name aloud. "Henry." He wondered how the French might pronounce it; maybe with the emphasis shifted from the first syllable to the second, Hen-*ree*, and how like ennui this new moniker suddenly sounded. When Henry was a boy, his mother called him Hen-Hen, and for their mutual delight he would hobble like a chicken, flap his arms like flightless wings and pretend to lay an egg. He felt relieved, then, not to have been born of a lady of Paris. The characteristics implied by *her* pronunciation were a little grim.

Henry left the inn alone, culled from the door by candelabra that flickered in and out of existence, dark, light, dark, light, faster than his blinking eyes, then finally gone. Night without dissuasion, no fighting it. Boulevard Montmartre was really two different places, Henry swore, one alive and calm under the grace of God, the other cold and merciless after sundown, sprawl contorted by shadows and stranded with itself. With any hope, a passerby might chance a conversation. The French had been kind to him and

Sophia. No wonder: since the full terrible onset of the war, an English accent meant a lordly presence, a friend. There was hardly a Queen's soldier who hadn't sailed along the parapets of the rocky Crimea or pried gnarled Russian hands from the lands claimed by the new Napoleon, and the gratitude in Paris was unmistakable. Henry accepted it with reticence; this was a strange city, for so long a site of preservation, crumbling memories, old glories, the echo of an emperor in his chambers——until now, of course, given that plans to reconstruct the capital were underway, Haussman the Destroyer, Baron by self-proclamation, modern architect amid the medieval. His work would inevitably be done and there would be nothing more to add. We are, obedient though the revolutions of the world may be, reaching for a height, a highest, and though close at hand, certainly in England, up would eventually give way to down. As for Paris? The new city would replace the past and then become the past, fresh ruins in the grip of further preservation, unending, no going back.

Old or new, English or French, it didn't matter: under the bare black curve of the sky, Henry was as any other shape. What a horrible feeling. He probably didn't look human. No one else did, those unknown passers-by. We are moving sculptures, he thought, we've shattered our glass encasements and left the museums to roam this old city one last time. Henry shivered. There was now, and there was then…

•

Heavyset Samson Merrywether took up most of the stairwell's enclosure, his bones so dense and waist so round that he was said to sink in seawater. True to myth, he

had spent the morning treading water with a breathless urgency that might have provoked his fellow swimmers to their morning's mirth had anyone else actually occupied the beach. It was March, and Samson's notions of refreshment were peculiar. But it was also said that he no longer spent time in public waters uncovered, the expansions of middle age long weighed upon both body and mind, but since he feared the cramped, contaminated bathing machines far too much to change from suit to swimming stripes inside them, the cold seasons offered the only time of year when he could bathe in unhindered comfort. Samson was known around his Westminster neighborhood to be somewhat erratic concerning germs and grime and, in addition to the changing quarters, avoided close contact with most non-English peoples.

"If I may," Samson spoke, stopping to breathe as they climbed the stairs, "was this introduction Mister Dickens' idea?"

"No," his companion said, "this one's mine."

"You should know, if the talk is true, he's supposedly something of a dipsomaniac."

"You don't say?"

Samson nodded. "Spends a rather large sum on drink. Too often seen carrying bottles home. Very private. Bit of a squanderer, too, I hear. I have to wonder if he's hiding any Jewry of one sort or another. That last name, to me…"

The door to the studio was unlocked, Samson found, and swung open quietly, but the thin wooden floor betrayed him. Another man——pastier, less portly, clean-shaven where Samson was exceedingly bearded——turned around. He hesitated, as if guilty of

unspoken crimes, and glowered at Samson. “You’re early,” the photographer said. “And whose sniffer’s sticking out behind you?”

Shielded by the girth of his guide, the other man was invisible except for the nose that appeared to protrude from Samson’s upper arm. William circumvented his companion with a broad step.

“Ah——Mister Weir, then. Good to meet you.” The photographer’s voice, nasal, melismatic of the sewers, induced shudders in his guests. “You’re still early.”

“You haven’t heard,” inquired William, hands folded, “that Czar Nicholas has passed on? London’s afoot. Pneumonia’s never been so well-admired, I’m afraid.”

The photographer might have been deliberating a smart response in his silence but, regardless, he planted his head under a black cloth to look through his camera and, “I haven’t got the patience for politics,” came his muffled answer.

“A tedious sport it is,” Samson mediated, “but the sport of thinking gentlemen, I believe.” The room on the highest floor of Sixty-Four Regent Street was a single open story save for one door off to the side, closed deliberately, where blank plates were sensitized with nitrate and, once exposed, hung over with mercury and water to reveal its captive sight——a curious process, such trial and error in its achievement.

Samson turned his attention to the point of this camera’s fixation. Posed on a risen platform were three girls dressed scarcely in white rags, thin and tarnished with spots of dust and dirt. Their heads were locked tightly in place with clamps, corroded metal crescents placed behind them, invisible to the camera’s final jurisdiction. None of them, Samson estimated, could have been older than ten or eleven——tender years, those. They sat on some mock-up of an archaic church altar, wood painted to exude the texture of

stone, a dull copper crucifix behind them, two red curtains hung from either side of the set. One shilling for each young girl waited atop a table adjacent to the camera. As he stood over the girls, Samson happened an inadvertent glance down their loose-fitted costumes and felt immediately enraged. He tried to fight the thought but, by all things decent, those little girls' nipples, so easily revealed then, should have been safer from the world until the time came when they belonged to ladies. Was there no one to look after these poor creatures? Did anyone know they were here?

"And what's the Czar got to do with me?" the photographer asked, unmindful of Samson's inspections as he scrubbed his lens with a greasy cloth. He almost tripped over an open bottle of gin on his way around the camera——"Bollocks!" he croaked——but his breath, Samson couldn't help but notice, was free of that drink's fine, bitter aroma.

"It means," William stepped closer, "that the Crimea's just become a little safer. However many Russian nobblers are left by now must be suffering a terrible blow to the spirits. I think you'll be rightly safe in your travels."

"I go when I'm good and ready," the photographer sneered. "Six months is a long time to be out of England."

William lit a pipe. "We, *ahem*, do have an arrangement, you're aware."

"Well then it's a burning shame you didn't send that newspaper chap of yours after Roger Fenton. He's official, you know. Prince Albert himself appointed him to photograph the war and I'll wager he's all the way to Constantinople by now. Maybe even the military camp at Balaclava." The photographer stood up straight, stretched his arms. He seemed confident, or at least relaxed, as if relieved of a pressing burden.

"You're lucky you found me before I left. I'd give Fenton three more months before he's done. So if you'd like to catch him while he's still on the job——"

"Don't be flat with me," William pointed with his pipe. "I've had about enough of your gum."

The photographer reclined on the altar set, which shook and groaned as he landed, and threw an arm around one of the girls, crucifix perched above them. "Roger Fenton may be supported by royalty for this one occasion," he said, "but I work on my own time, and with ready brass. My benefactor's provided very generously for the continuation of my efforts, here and abroad."

"Yes, and on that note, if I could finally get his name——"

"Don't think so," the photographer shook his head. "His request. Not up to me, Mister Weir. But trust that I'll be financed for a good long while."

Insult and befuddlement crossed well-traveled paths on William's face. "Mind, I'm entrusting him, and you, with a servant of mine. Isn't there anything you can tell me about the man?"

"He's wealthy, obvious enough. And I suppose he likes to see things."

"As for your assistant——"

"Ain't got one. I've never used an assistant."

William closed his eyes, paused, shook his head. "Then I suppose Lord Raglan will find one for you. I'll ask him soon. He's a busy man, what with an entire army to run."

Samson sat on a stepstool, rubbed his brow. The girls looked inattentive and disoriented. "Your subjects, my good man…"

Peering at his inquisitor, the photographer narrowed his eyes and his grip on the girl constricted. “The chavies? Don’t worry about them. Part of my ongoing Magdalen series. Look the part, don’t they? Found them in the rookery, I did. Miserable lot. But don’t think I’ve done them wrong. They’re about used to being fallen women.”

One of the young girls interrupted with a sneeze. Dust and spit mingled in a fleeting whirl. Samson leaned forward, hands propped on his knees. “Bless you, dearie.” She and the others avoided his concern.

Samson had seen photography studios before. Most had plenty of windows, if not entire ceilings made of glass, places of pioneering work, of enlightenment, like that grand Crystal Palace of Hyde Park. But this room? Seemed an ill fit for the machinations of light and the like. The walls, broken only by two meager portholes, were yellowed and peeling, built from rotten apples or something similar. Yes, he could use a good swim right about now, cleansing as could be, dive in and surface and watch the shimmering frost of winter melt into droplets on his arms. “It’s awfully stuffy in here.”

“I like to stay concentrated,” asserted the photographer. He puffed out his chest as he went on. “That’s the funny thing about this job of mine. I’m an artist and a scientist,” a statement which baffled Samson Merrywether, who had always thought art the release of human imagination, born into the physical world through means and materials, and science the translation of earth’s natural laws into sensory details comprehensible to men, the dialogue between made and Maker——one invention, then, the other discovery; one generated by talent, the other by capacity for knowledge; both equally worthy of esteem; and neither of which, Samson swore, at all resembled photography, which amounted to little more than an act of copy-making. Art and science were efforts that required

training, practice, a lifetime's devotion and a particularity of mind. Photography was, in addition to the relative simplicity of its mechanics, so inexpensive to perform, the costs of picture-taking so modest, that even the poor and foolish could do it, the thoughtless and unambitious, scum of the slums, could seize the hobby and go on reproducing every sorry sight, including themselves, without ever truly laying claim to creation. Samson expected he'd spend more time reading the eventual *Daily News* report penned on the photographer's work than studying the very images themselves. At least there would be some sense of interpretation within the words of William's journalist.

"All right, then, get yourselves out of here, you chits!" The photographer waved his arms and the girls shot up and snatched their payment from the table on the tips of their toes. They gathered their clothing from a pile on the floor, stripped out of their filthy white rags and absconded from the studio. "So when shall I meet this reporter, hmm? I ought to get to know him a bit before our boat leaves for the Crimea. Once we're there I imagine we'll be spending a lot of time together in the same dark, little room. Like twins in the womb, we'll be!"

"Oh, he's a brick of a man," offered Samson. "Fine writer."

William had nothing to say until he checked his pocket watch. "He should be here any moment, now. Slight tendency for lateness aside. But he'll certainly be curious as to the purpose of our meeting."

"Wait a tick." The photographer adjusted the thick fabric that covered his plates. "You mean to tell me our boy don't know yet that he'll be going away?"

Halfway down the spiral steps, the three young models stopped to dress, first by themselves, then under the shadow of the ascending man who found them there. The girls

looked up. The dark circles around their eyes were damp. Fresh tears spilled down their cheek and dripped onto the floor below them. One of them flinched when his hand, gentle and unafraid, touched her shoulder.

"Why do you cry?" asked Henry Chambers.

•

There were some offenses better left unpublicized. Gregor knew the difference between a joke with someone dear and pure insult; and knew when he took his father's portrait down from the dining room wall in order to hang a new one in its place that he would never mention the exchange to any visitors. His father would simply disappear from the household, covertly, unspoken, the new man in his place as if he'd been there all along. Maybe, just maybe, it was a little crass, but Erasmus Fleming's dusty old painted visage simply couldn't contend with this find from the wine cellar under Vienna's Maria am Gestade, the church that Gregor, upon his return to London, had called home on another Strand. The attendants of the church offered no guess as to when the painting had arrived and were fairly certain that whoever did was long dead. And despite his own (aborted) years of artistic study, Gregor wasn't sure from where the piece might have originated, could never reach a logical conclusion——whether it was an Austrian original, a German import, or brought over by ship during the Bonaparte occupation in the early years of the century.

Come to think of it, those same options were all possible for the figure in the frame, a tall man, visible from crown to waist, dressed in a tan suit from an era that

escaped obvious classification. His head was shaped like a celery stalk, long and narrow until his black, curling hair made a bushy peak of leaves. Eyes focused and mouth in mid-articulation, he reclined in a chair set against a brilliant copper background and with his thumb and forefinger appeared to pull an invisible string from the clutches of his other hand, demonstrating some action or idea to enrich his inscrutable conversation. Gregor began one night, merely to break the silence of a listless visit from his cousins, to speak for the man, at first giving voice only to the words uttered but unrecorded at the time of the composition. But then he found himself describing an entire history——or histories, since Gregor mustered new variants every time he had company. The most frequent visitors had listened to dozens of orated life-stories, some plausible (he was a wealthy sailor from Munich who crashed while sailing the Danube, and only his portrait ever washed ashore), some not so much (he was a time traveler from the year 2440 sent back to behold Mercier's Paris).

The last afternoon tea: Earl Grey, and steam was still fluttering from the cups when Henry arrived. They sat in Gregor's parlor and held a conversation wherein Gregor played the painter, Henry the mysterious figure. Most of the visit was spent like this——they spoke little of Henry's impending departure for the Orient, the sidelines of the war against Russia. Gregor might have asked but he reconciled his inability to broach the subject with Henry's own failure to voice his fears. When Gregor's painter proposed to Henry's model that the two enlist and head off to fight on foreign soil, the game stuttered, Gregor unsure how or whether to continue.

"I had to tell Sophia myself," Henry confessed.

"And there wasn't much she could do about it, was there?" Gregor said.

"Not in the least."

"It would have been easier," Gregor went on, "had this excursion not come so soon into your marriage."

"Naturally——but this, so sudden." Henry sighed. "Please don't misunderstand: I'm glad to be thought of for an assignment such as this. But to punish her? Our marriage?" He shook his head. "I don't know what to think."

"How did she react?"

"First she said she understood. But she was angry and couldn't hide it completely. A moment later, she was asking me refuse her father."

"You didn't?"

"And stand against him? William, if he so desires, could determine a great deal about my future. With the newspaper. With Sophia."

Finally, their unfinished tea cool, Gregor leaned forward, elbows on the dinner table. "If you're truly concerned with William Weir, I think I know who might provide some insight. He's quite perceptive. It would be against your better judgment to pass on him. In fact, I've already told him that you'll stop by his door tonight." Gregor slid a calling card across the table to Henry's place. "Keeps late hours, wouldn't you know, so give it a little while."

At eleven o'clock, Henry fixed a kiss on the round, smooth shoulder exposed from Sophia's nightgown and left her sleeping side to find the Brewer Street door of Wilkie Collins. He'd met Wilkie once, briefly, he recalled as he rang the bell, at a lecture with Charles Dickens in company. "I hope you appreciate his fiction as you do mine," Charles had said upon their introduction, "but we're hardly likeminded——save our

mutual affinity for acting. We both think we're rather good at it. And both undoubtedly delusional, of course!"

The Wilkie Collins who had laughed at that remark, head thrown upwards, glasses almost sprung from the bridge of his nose, wasn't just younger by a few years but healthier, straighter in the backbone than the hunching, gout-stricken figure who answered the door that night, peering for some recognition of the man before him until he nodded and slapped his hands together. "Of course, of course, come right in," Wilkie entreated.

The inside of his home, upon first sight, looked neat, well-organized, comfortable enough, until Henry placed his hand atop a dresser and scattered clumps of dust into the air. Most of the interior, any surface, any decoration, wore a layer of dust. The whole place must have gone for ages without even the most rudimentary cleaning. He sneezed, stirred more dirt from dormancy, and took his seat across an empty, soot-caked fireplace. The book at his feet, *Memoirs of a Picture*, bound inexpensively without a cover, had the name William Collins printed on its first page.

"Your work?" Henry asked.

Wilkie smiled. "Find the date." In faded type, 1805. "There've been William Collinses in my family for as long as I can remember. My father, for instance. The writer of that volume was my grandfather." He took the book from Henry and scanned its pages. "I'm considering writing a short work of my own based on this. Thievery in the art world." Wilkie dropped the book and found a frock coat.

"Ah, I was hoping we might, Gregor told me that you——"

"Would you mind if we discussed this on the way?"

Henry stood, fingers dancing and entwined. Sure, it was warmer out, all of London's trees in dignified and long-awaited bloom, but still, "To be honest, I thought I smelled rain on my way over."

"I insist, Henry." Wilkie dragged his cane in circles along the floor.

"Well, yes, I suppose, should be all right, I think…"

They wandered out onto the sidewalk, backtracked a short block to Regent Street and took its curve into the pitch of night, subtle and enshrouded by mist, where awake becomes sleepless, London inside-out, splayed shameless, grotesque anatomy helpless and revealed. These weren't new boundaries for Henry, but the sun was down and everything was turned. *It's not the same city*, he swore, Boulevard Montmartre came to mind, Sophia would have told him he'd lost his wits over such a thought but, then again, she never did understand how some truths fell victim to others. Locked in step with Wilkie, apprehensive, he marched further towards London's living core, the endless, taciturn exhalation of the Thames nearing his ears, free of the merchants and steamships that came by daylight; though not so blue, lately, was it, all that smoke seduced by clouds to join in rain upon the earth, it spelled something murky for the waterways, something obscure.

Wilkie turned a corner onto Cockspur. Henry followed. "Then if I hear correctly," Wilkie, out of nowhere, "your newspaper has sent you off to cover the war?"

Henry found it distressing that, after a full year of drafting testimonials against the escalating hostilities and against England's involvement, William Weir had enthusiastically assigned him to its military center, where pride and greed made violence real. "Aye, sir," Henry said, "or, not exactly. I won't be writing much about the

war——that is to say, opposed to it, which is what I'd like to do. There's a man going over there to make photographic plates. I'll be writing about his work."

"Yes," whispered Wilkie. "Gregor's told me about him."

"Then he's told you of my suspicions?"

"Certainly. Seems your father-in-law is all too glad to see you depart for a couple of seasons."

Henry nodded. "It does seem that way."

A pair of drunks stumbled past. One of them brushed Henry, stunk as if the glass had missed his mouth and drink had drenched his outfit. Their behavior went unnoticed by the Peeler who instead stood underneath a doorway, nudging a pile of rags with his heavy boots, the soles of the government. The clothing sprung hands, black-tipped fingernails, then a mop of filthy hair and the head that wore it. The tramp avoided the judgment of the blue-coated authority, law stern against the bedless, and moved along probably to some other doorway where he might reach another few minutes' sleep before repeating the whole weary process.

"If you're worried about what this man thinks of you, deep down, beneath the courtesy he upholds in his daughter's honor," Wilkie kicked a stone into the street, which skipped until it was lodged in a heap of horse manure, "then consider your relationship with him. Who are you?"

Henry brushed the side of his coat where the drunk had grazed. "I'm a writer for his journal. And I'm the man who's married his daughter."

"The latter seems the more pressing foundation, I'd wager," Wilkie said. "So it's lovely, what have you, that he's decided you'd do fine representing his newspaper

overseas. But the honor's clap-trap once you realize that he's got you out of his life, out of his daughter's life, for, how much, I should think, a productive six or seven months or so? It's possible that he's come to regret letting her go. That's what Gregor thinks. But mayhap it's more a matter of who he's left her with. William Weir isn't quite who you thought he was, is he? He may have come to feel the same regarding you, Henry. Of course, I haven't met him, he's his own ghost to me, but Gregor's said that you agreed to marry over finances?"

Something scraped at Henry from the inside, started in his heart and plummeted to his stomach. "It's true, yes."

"Well. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Footsteps rustled behind them, weightless, air upon the pavement. A young boy, missing a shirt, barber's cat, raised a finger. Henry and Wilkie stopped in accordance. The boy lifted his arms and fell forward, caught the cobblestones with his hands and balanced himself on his head, cap in place, for a few strong seconds before landing back on his browned, bare feet. He waited. Wilkie clutched his cane. Henry jittered a penny from his pocket and dropped it into the boy's cupped, fidgeting palms. He ran off. Henry followed Wilkie onto the Strand, his feet beginning to ache.

"When you came back from your honeymoon with his daughter——"

"Sophia."

"——With, ah, Sophia, yes, did you, was she with child?"

Henry scratched the stubble on his cheeks. "No."

The pupils of a short cabman who leaned against his vacant carriage, hands on his belt, followed Henry on the chance that an extra two-pence might find his pockets. No

such luck. Moldy bread for him, again. He shifted his sights to a pair of prostitutes walking arm-in-arm across the street, hair frazzled, probably just commencing their night among the sleepless.

"Imagine Queen Victoria walking these very same streets," Wilkie said, beaming. "Just imagine her. Skulking, holding up her binocles to watch the vagrants. Mooring around with them. How wonderfully absurd."

Off the Strand, they found another curving road. Wych Street. They passed the Kingsway branch, kept to its crescent moon of cobblestones. Candlelight was sparse. Mongrels tore through trash. In the distance, the bells of St. Dunstan-in-the-West tolled for midnight, though briefly, almost anticlimactically so——not even God would stay for long. A gang of Irishmen chattered ardently beside the entrance to an alleyway, prowlers, probably, dressed decently enough for Henry to wonder whether they had to roam lowest London or merely chose to. They smoked cigars reduced to butts. Maybe they'd found them in the gutters. Maybe they'd stolen them from patricians on the spree who were too intoxicated to fend the crooks off.

"You know, Henry, my roots are Irish," Wilkie avowed. "That grandfather of mine, the writer of that book you saw? Irish-born. The English think they're all vagrants. Most curious, the English classes. It seems that the worst offense to them is birth into something other. You never choose your own highs and lows, now, do you? It's about whom you're born to, or where, under what circumstances. There must be thousands of children, all ruined, destitute, with nothing to inherit, any of them. For no good reason. Other than that this country of ours doesn't know what to do with so many damned people."

Finally Wilkie halted. Henry was unfamiliar with this district, but the name on the awning that loomed over him, hung below a three-peaked roof and cracked windows, brought to mind a story he'd heard while still a child and more effortlessly scared:

They cut his throat from ear to ear

His head they battered in.

His name was Mr. William Weare —

He lived in Lyons Inn.

Different William, of course, but Henry couldn't wrench from his mind the thought of Sophia's father attacked, bloodied up by gamblers and abandoned on some dirty, dishonorable floor, a soul without rest, footsteps through the night. Henry would have been happy to move along but, "Here we are," Wilkie declared.

Without any salutations for the elderly man keeping vigil over the atrium, they made their way down a flight of rotting stairs that scorned their descent, threatened to break under their boots, and into a basement room where smoke clung to the ceiling like mud, a thick pestilence. Henry's nose stung. All the factories of London couldn't have produced its terrible effluence. The room had no bar, comprised mostly of tables, some empty, others taken by men inhaling from long, dark pipes, the source of the smoke and the nauseatingly rich odor emitted with it. A few of these men reclined on the floor, ragged, hollow, exhausted, including a couple of Chinese and a lone Yankee. Wilkie put his hands to his hips and led Henry to a table in the back of the den occupied only by a white-haired fellow dressed in a sullen gray suit that beckoned his burial, he may have been young but looked aged beyond his veritable years, wrinkled, decomposing from within. Wilkie sat across from him and pushed out another chair for Henry. Henry sat,

hands folded in his lap, didn't risk touching the table. Balls of tar, little black pearls, surrounded the smoker's pipe in worship. One of them moved——one of them was not like the others: a cockroach, not a narcotic; a native, not an import. Wilkie flicked the insect from the table. A candle, close to burning out, provided a thankful scrap of illumination; then again, Henry wasn't sure how much more he wanted to see.

"Baudelaire's addiction of choice." Sly Wilkie took the pipe, breathed the opium deeply and spoke in plumes, as a dragon might. "Not a word to Boz, if you please. And don't think any less of me. Sometimes the doctor's laudanum wears off in its ability to relieve my bones. This is simply a spice, without which the meal would likely suffer." He reclined, his skin pale.

The unknown fellow's chuckle, hoarse and strained, extinguished the candle. He removed a small matchbox from his coat and relit the wick. "Yer pal new to'm spiritual pleasures?"

Wilkie took a swig from a flask. "Do partake, Henry."

"Thank you, but I'd sooner not."

"Well, in any case, I'd like you to meet a friend. Mortimer Bell, professor of history at Cambridge. Assuming they haven't given you the boot, lad! He quite deserves it, I say."

Another chuckle. He coughed smoke. "They'll try and try again but I'm too damned useful a courtier to'm cast aside.

"A little sprezzatura goes a long way," Wilkie said. "Just might save your career, you old brute."

"History's ain't a career, Wilkie. Don't need saving. It's impervious to harm." Mortimer Bell offered the pipe to Henry. "No? Hmm. Don't worry 'bout nothing, we're good in lavender down 'ere. Won't you please, have y'ever, my good, ah, what's his blinking——?"

"Henry's his name," Wilkie added. "He's a writer. And in a few days he'll be on the trail of a photographer. Going to write a hell of a report on sun-pictures."

Mortimer either laughed or hacked, Henry couldn't tell. "Then your nobby camera-man'll take fotergruffs of the pages of your article and the whole bloody cycle's done." He stamped the table with his hand. "Now do I get his name or ought I just go 'head and pick 'un?"

"Adramelech," said Henry.

"Adrah-moloch?"

"Aloysius Overton Adramelech."

Smoke rings. "Never'erd o' him. To where's it you'll foller jolly Aloysius?"

Wilkie took the pipe, ready to inhale before he offered it to Henry one more time. It glimmered in the last of the candlelight, started to smell a little sweeter, well, he'd be gone for months, what could it hurt, just once, Wilkie looked happy enough. He took the pipe and breathed in the opium, still burning, and felt the smoke invade his lungs, rush his veins, his breathing slowed, a great calm blanketed him from the dankness of their den, from the undirected sorrow of William Weir, from, no, he couldn't help it, from the touch of dear Sophia, she began to disappear and he was terribly glad for it.

He bit his lip. The pain hastened him to reality. "We're leaving for the English encampments in the Crimea."

Rubbing his chin, Wilkie permitted the terrain into his imagination, desert roads strewn with cannonballs, ships along the coast, white cloth tents and restless horses. “That’s a hellish place as of late. Utmost care, Henry, it’s all-over-red from morning to evening, I’d wager.”

Henry felt a tangle touch his head. He shuddered, removed the spiders’ silk from his hair, found it tough to scrape from his fingernails. Finally he balled the stuff up and flicked it from his table to the join that similarly deposed cockroach somewhere on the floor. He looked around. Cobwebs traversed the walls, sullen and wilted, shapeless, territory long abandoned; the den had brought a plague to their spiders, the owners of old, and those who hadn’t chosen exile suffocated in the fumes. Dried carcasses of flies and crickets were left ensnared in the silk, autumn leaves in refusal of their fall, dead never buried, spirits in unrest.

Mortimer learned forward. “Say, Crimea, huh? Well if I don’t, aye, that’s a, Crimea’s the land of the Ottoman, ain’t it——I tell you, right now we might sit ‘ere and babble, what rare birds, them children of Ishmael, a pack of dreamers, they are, infidels, let me tell you, these people got a will, they learned it from that prophet o’ thems, might’ve never built a city of their own but get it in your cannisters, boys, they sure learned how to take ‘em, they’ve had it in ‘em ever since Yathrib, first bloodline, skip ahead a few hundred years and there, there again, they took Jerusalem while all us good Christians were squabblin’ ‘mongst ourselves, no diplomacy, mind you, no ambassadors or politics or silly ceremonies like we got now, they took, damn it, did we miss our opportunity or what, the streets where Christ walked, I say, the gardens where he prayed and the hill where he passed, that’s a bigger story than political borders could ever

account for and they bloody well knew it, but we Christians, what we're holding onto, do you know how difficult it is, how much we take for granted that there was a living, breathing Christ, he ate and drank in the Holy Land, he bled on its soil, he healed the sick and the lepers with witnesses to attest his deeds, he shit there, took his first little thumb-long shit in Bethlehem, yes sir, imagine a time when you could waltz into the Son of God's latrine, take a waft of that air, smell the droppings of his bowels, fresh left, still warm, that's the holy shit, boys, and it's swimming under the Holy Land, the earthly remains of God, the defecations of Christ, we missed it, we were born in the shadow of his achievements and if we can have the Land of Milk and Honey than we got the proof of his existence, because we doubt, you and you and I doubt, can't bloody help it 'cause that's the core of our faith, not the rules or regulations, not the laws of the vicars or King Henry's lust, no, it's the belief in something beyond the world we touch, that's the reward, and no 'un else can tell you what it feels like, Josephus was right, we Christians are a tribe, and we've made it almost two thousand years without the sight of our savior to guide us, to this day we ain't despaired, and I'll be damned if these Mohammedans, bloody devious, they might be allied with the French now, but remember that it was only a few years ago when the Ottoman lands were promised to the Czar, it took a bloody warship to convince 'em otherwise, and sure, now the Russians're stuck losing every battle and their navy's depleted and that idiot Menshikov's lost his rank, but if anything happens, if there's any chance that the tides turn again we'll be short an Ottoman promise, yes sir, they're worse than the Jews, if that's possible, they're worse 'cause they refused the truth of Christ long after it appeared, long before they had any dogma written down, and they refuse it now, and once our Lord returns they'll rue their blasphemies,

they'll claw the dirt and break their fingernails, that they ever refused, that they ever spoiled the goodness of marriage, those polygamists, sharing their women like harlots, aborting their children, and I wonder, I wonder if they cut their cocks like 'em Jews do, what's their covenant with Allah, I wonder, what's the Mohammedan's member like, what's its size, the amount of hair, must be a tangled black forest 'neath those robes, likely fertile, too, they fornicate like wild apes, appetite like the jungle negro, their sexual dances, and if the cities to the east are anything like those ramshackle huts of the Dark Continent then maybe they just got some progress ahead of 'em, transmutation, as Lamarck would say, their savage features will temper, their skin will whiten, they're destined for it, like all animals, they're headed for humanity, the peak of life on earth, everything else is underneath, that's what God intended when he created this whole damned place, us and the stars, and these Mohammedans might well make it if they don't butcher each other first, or if we don't put 'em out of their misery before then, but for now, I just don't know, they got scales, yes they do, they're a tough people and they'd win this war if it weren't the Russians fighting on their behalf, at war for the keys to the church of the virgin birth, but for the new Czar it's just power, he would raze Nazareth to ruins and torch the Church o' the Nativity if it meant a final victory, all his people, all those Russian pilgrims protected in their journeys to Nazareth by the Ottomans, they'll have nothing, because the whole plan is economic, it's about access to waters and bigger colonies and trade routes and a wide open road to the riches of India, as for the Mohammedans, well, I'd tell you, go watch 'em get slaughtered, see 'em smote as they might rightly deserve it, but whatever happens, they'll outlast this, because if you think the end of the Ottoman Empire is the end of these Mohammedans, you're in for a

surprise, boys, ‘cause they got a God closer to ‘em than Christ, and that’s enough to keep someone going through the worst our worst days got to offer…” But oh, what have we here, Mortimer’s voice has become a swarm of bats in the caves below them, hair grows and head shrivels, his eyeballs have shot out of his skull and landed on the table, Wilkie shrugs, well, you know, why not, plucks one from its place and pops it in his mouth like a fresh-picked grape, Henry would do the same but his arms have turned to sludge, they’re melting from his shoulders, lost all feeling, he leans back and sucks the smoke back into his lungs, black rushes in, the dust from the floor, grime from the walls, Wilkie Collins and Mortimer Bell and the Chinamen and the Applejack, they all disappear, the roof reveals the clouds reveal the night sky reveals the black impenetrable heavens, he begins to wonder what may lie beyond, what could possibly lie beyond the void, but, oh, well, home for the last, head to port, ship and stern, off we go, land vanished over the horizon, toil of the harshest western seas, goodbye, London…

II. Deathless Song

"Altogether it was a scene of disorder and profanation, which it is impossible to describe."

—— Richard Curzon-Howe

Henry and Aloysius spent their sole night in Malta in a brothel, at the photographer's insistence. The two established themselves in opposite rooms that faced each other across a narrow candlelit hallway, Aloysius's door shut, Henry's wide open so he might witness the cavalcade that crossed in mounting numbers as the night wore on. To the bemusement of the near-blind matron of the bordello and the men of the *Giphantia*, Henry took no mistress in that house of senses, of temporary company, his thoughts instead with Sophia and his body overwhelmed with the inertia of two weary weeks at sea, the endless azure of Pisces above and below. Aloysius suffered no dissuasion; he called for women as soon as he'd found his lodgings but was soon at odds with the matron, who was suspicious of both men——Henry for his abstinence, the photographer for his ostensible frustration with every woman who entered his quarters. One after the next, Aloysius sent them back, left them dumbstruck in the corridor only moments after they had shown themselves, and as the customer continued to reject their companionship the matron grew riled and exasperated, whispered to the women with increasing indignation. And these were no frail creatures; they were full, the lot of them, nourished, wealthy curves, heavy breasts, long curling hair, with all the experience their vocations had instilled, touch their instrument, lust a discipline as ancient as the stars. And refuse he did——it went on like that, and Henry was asleep before he could learn what agreement satisfactory to Aloysius was finally attained, if any.

Henry dreamed of the Mediterranean, where that night his ship undulated with the tide, waiting for its crew along the mouth of the rocky harbor. The *Giphantia* had been kind to him, to a degree: he and Aloysius were treated to pork and potatoes with Captain Grumbach on most evenings of their voyage, an honor, however, that perturbed the seamen, accustomed as they were to their superior's solitude. Worse yet was the discovery that Henry and Aloysius had eaten the bulk of the crew's fresh fruit in the early days of their journey; and that, even after the crates were found empty, the two landlubbers could be seen devouring round, red apples in plain sight of the working men, sitting dumbly on the deck as they ground the sweet fruit into pulp behind their tightly sealed lips. A modicum of revenge was theirs when Henry fell sick as they crossed the Bay of Biscay——some of the men cheered as he keeled over the *Giphantia*'s stern and lost one meal after the next to the scavengers of the sea.

His nausea persisted until the Herculean Pillars that guided the crew into the Mediterranean were behind them, and the days grew calmer, the winds gentler in those waters shared by every country they bordered. To pass the time and to leave no moment unremembered, Henry recorded the events of the expedition in a leather journal, one of several in which he would draft notes for his report on the photographer. But Aloysius spent much of the voyage looking bored, as if he had no equipment to prepare or protect from damage. In dry, warm Málaga, he purchased three mules to drive the wagon that would serve as his mobile darkroom once he and Henry disembarked at Balaclava. One of the mules, sickly, wasting from inanition, was found dead the next morning, a feast for gnats. Four sailors rubbed vinegar underneath their noses and threw the stiff animal overboard.

Later, as the limestone mosques of Tunis studied the *Giphantia*'s eastward progress and the respite of Malta was still a day away, Aloysius requested that the Captain order his crew to paint the wagon white. The color, he explained, would better quell the malevolence of the Crimean sun. They complied, bitterly. The task took up the entire morning. What ill will they had divided between Henry and Aloysius was abruptly consigned in its entirety to the photographer, who was pelted with soap, struck by the barrelman's falling rope, shown a rusty blade or two by passing sailors. By the time Aloysius had stormed off the *Giphantia* and onto Malta's sunny harbor, the rumor that Roger Fenton had been received last March as English royalty by the governor of Gibraltar——a rumor initially overheard in a conversation between Captain Grumbach and mildly-muffed Aloysius——was spread eagerly among the crew and eventually relayed in terribly inflated form back to the photographer. Through the crew's subtle escalations, Roger Fenton, ever one step ahead with a lens all the sharper, became Aloysius Overton Adramelech's born rival as mysteriously as gulls align atop the foremast when no land's in sight.

So far from the teeming streets of London, Henry could scarcely believe the world was round. He tried to maintain his faith in the return of all things: ships sail from shore to shore, rain rejoins the sea, everybody journeys home after days of distance——fate is sealed and fate is lived——but as he thought about this Henry only grew afraid of the day when he would come inexorably to know his death. Why can't we merely just be born? he wrote, sitting upright on his bed in Malta's oasis before he shut his eyes in the dark of the bordello. When the next morning good *Giphantia* left that island port to navigate the broken Cyclades of the Aegean, Henry understood that he had left his journal behind,

forgotten in the brothel bedroom where graced his repose, and his days at sea were thusly lost.

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As the *Giphantia* bobbed in the water outside the entrance to Balaclava's harbor, the crew passed among themselves a telescope through which they discerned the silhouettes and pit fires of the English encampments. Henry and Aloysius spotted a rowboat approaching slowly starboard through the thick twilight fog. They told Captain Grumbach, who handed his tobacco pipe to the helmsman and ordered a rope thrown to their visitor. The young man abandoned his rowboat and climbed onto the deck of the *Giphantia*, his suit brown and dry like desert sand, and introduced himself as Andrew "Aha" Erlebnis, the wagon driver and camera assistant assigned by the naval office——he was his man, could be depended on for anything, wouldn't dare let them down. Henry noted the arrival of this third party in a new journal. With any luck, Andrew "Aha" would enliven the rapport between Henry and the subject of his article, their relationship cordial but cold whenever Henry wasn't probing Aloysius as to the mechanics of his craft. (The photographer, on the other hand, had no questions about the writer's work, and Henry didn't press for the exchange——there was something impassable about that chubby face of his, hairless and smooth as a newborn's, that denied all intrusion).

Andrew "Aha" asked the pair how the capital city had treated them. Henry and Aloysius shot each other baffled looks. Andrew "Aha" shook his head and explained that

any pilgrims of England and France were granted free admission to the Sancta Sophia so long as they removed their boots and left their hats on, and that Roger Fenton himself had done just that last March and with relative ease wound up in the company of Lord Stratford, England's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Aloysius turned red and the veins along his temples throbbed. Henry confessed that the *Giphantia* had merely sailed through the Bosphorus underneath the glimmering minarets of the Muslims without stopping to enter the city. Andrew "Aha" sat down on the deck and crossed his legs. He breathed for a long while before returning to those around him. "Ghalat. A true mistake. You really should have seen it," he said.

"Why's that?" Aloysius asked, arms at his rotund hips.

Last sunlight shivered in the newest night. A steamship came to rest beside the *Giphantia*. Andrew "Aha" resigned himself. "Kostantiniyye's my home, for better or worse; and if it's like any other city on this earth, it's not long from transformation. Yes sir, I think it's about to change, forever."

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The last supper to which the Captain of the *Giphantia* treated Henry before the journalist disembarked for the peninsula was a banquet of duck and barley soup. Andrew "Aha" was invited to eat, as was Aloysius, but the photographer never appeared.

Andrew "Aha" agreed without any hesitation to an informal interview of sorts with Henry and spoke at length with the journalist about his life, relating with a remarkable if somewhat distanced ease even the most tragic details of the past.

Entranced, Henry transcribed the entire tale. The Captain's attention, however, was elsewhere. He spent much of the meal fixated on the door to his quarters as if he expected it might open at any moment and reveal an intruder. "He's likely in that little room o' his," Captain Grumbach mused. "Got my wonders o' what he doin' in there so long." Henry was silent. Andrew "Aha", unbothered by the interruption, laughed and tugged an end of his sultan's moustache.

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Andrew "Aha" Erlebnis was the fourth son of parents destitute and unknown to their children. He remembered nothing before the orphanage.

His oldest brother Karl could just barely remember Berlin, its fountains and pale skies, the great columned gate in the center of the city, but most of it floated in haze. The faces of mother and father were more distinct to him, as were their first few days, the six of them together, in Istanbul. But he rarely spoke of their parents. Why burden his brothers, Karl rationalized, with that horrible story, father tying mother to the bed and setting both of them ablaze? Such a grisly act made little sense to him and likely never would. Nor could he remember why his family had traveled there to begin with, what business had brought them to the Orient——let alone why father had lost his mind only a month after their arrival.

But whatever other, more cheerful fables he did know drowned with him on a chilly swim in the Sarayburnu. Andrew "Aha" was the only one of his quartet who refused to dive into the water after sneaking out of the orphanage in the middle of the

night——instead he stood shivering atop the flat red roof from which the others had jumped——and could never decide if he should have felt more or less guilt than his siblings had. On one hand, his presence in the water might have prevented Karl's disappearance, the vacuum of sound that replaced his final gasps; on the other, he too might have fallen victim to the current's cruel revenge against the incursion of those unwanted boys.

Next-oldest Franz caught a cold from the very same waters and died in his sleep less than a week later. That made Joseph, skinny and wide-eyed, the sole protector of little Andrew "Aha", a job he wasn't much good at save for an ability to soothe his brother's tears by making shadow puppets against the gray stone walls of their dormitory. Talking hounds, magic carpets, tiny boats sailing everlastingly from the Ottoman city——they visited his bedside after sundown, during his last throes of consciousness. But Joseph always fell asleep first and Andrew "Aha", as the bitter drops of the Sarayburnu returned to sting his eyes, wished every night that his brother's creations would linger on the walls, burned or imprinted, for as long as there was candlelight to shine them into sight. The morning finally came when Joseph failed to rouse from his bed and Andrew "Aha" comprised the last of his known family. "Géchmish ola," offered the matrons, one after the next. May it be past and forgotten. They left him enraged. For Andrew "Aha", every morning felt like a recurrence of Joseph's loss; every morning was the first in which his brother didn't wake along with him. All he had were memories, and to forget those would have been to let his siblings die all over again.

A year passed. Andrew "Aha" was kicking around a ball with another orphan when the boy, older——as old as Karl would have been——asked him if he could keep a

secret from the younger children, not that it concerned anything they shouldn't be made aware of but rather because the boy was still comprehending the matter for himself. Andrew "Aha" nodded and was led into the study shared by the keepers of the orphanage. The older boy had been in the room only the day before to be scolded for stealing from the kitchen and had seen something in there he could hardly believe. "Magic," Andrew "Aha" whispered when he saw an image hung behind the desk that encased the little bodies of all four siblings——flat as paper but not a drawing of any kind——grouped among the other children of the orphanage, many of whom, like his brothers, were long dead. What Andrew "Aha" realized only then was just how different were Karl, Franz, and Joseph in this print; how wrongly had he remembered the faces of his closest family, faces he'd kept safe like fragile pets within his mind, faces that spoke to him in dreams easily broken by the noise of the dormitory or the commotion of the street outside. He felt careless and angry with himself, mostly because he had believed, really believed, that through him the lives of those departed would walk, breathe, their hearts continue to beat, but what good was he, Andrew "Aha" rebuked, if he couldn't even remember what they looked like?

Andrew "Aha" had no recollection of the day when the picture-taker had come to seal the children into that eternity. The older boy imparted some vague reminiscence of the man with the apparatus——it was nothing more than a box——who apparently had asked every child to huddle together and hold absolutely still for a long, silent minute. Andrew "Aha" opened the frame from the wall and read the back of the paper where in faint Arabic script was written the name Mehmed and an address in central Istanbul. He tore off that fragment of the photograph——memory, it seemed, would no longer

suffice——and took a slice of bread from the kitchen. That same afternoon he left the orphanage to find this magnificent Mehmed and learn the secret of the apparatus.

Over the next decade, Andrew "Aha" was the subject of dozens, maybe hundreds, of photographs, enough so that the preparation of the plates or paper became an integral prophecy heralding the camera's revelation. That was how Mehmed saw it——he'd learned a godly power——and was happy to share his knowledge with a young boy who came without judgments or fears of blasphemy. When Andrew "Aha" showed him the image of his brothers, Mehmed took the boy in and familiarized him with the scripture: a patent written by an Englishman named H. Fox Talbot that a merchant had translated into Turkish and given Mehmed as a novelty.

Zealous as Mehmed was about his practice, Andrew "Aha" learned more than how to operate cameras, mix chemical solutions, and create positives; he learned how to read, as well, how to respect himself despite his poverty or the absence of his lineage. There were greater purposes worth serving than the reputation of a name. Even Muhammad, Mehmed reminded his pupil, was an orphan.

While Mehmed eventually relinquished his expensive hobby to earn an easier fortune with his merchant friends, Andrew "Aha" followed the magic. On Mehmed's generous recommendation, he found work assisting two more picture-takers. One was a Welshman, a former chemist on a three-year-long photographic mission in Istanbul, who taught Andrew "Aha" how to speak proper English. The other was an Ottoman, like Mehmed, a painter of miniatures who had accepted bittersweetly the irrelevance of his practice. With them, Andrew "Aha" began creating his own sun-pictures. First, he tried to imitate their styles, the subjects they chose, the lighting and equipment they preferred, but

he eventually realized that no photographer——whether scientist or artist or utter novice——could create a print precisely identical to another. Just as a single second of time was different from one before it, he realized, the world was a place of constant metamorphosis. Photographs made them visible, those seconds and their subtle transferals.

When the war started, Andrew "Aha" was twenty-three years old and again looking for work, running out of money, helpless to find any Turks with cameras. As the battleships of foreign nations circled the city, guns posed, he forced himself to accept that the ownership of the empire, and of his home, would soon change hands; and if France got everything it wanted and Istanbul became anything like those cities of the west, then smoke was bound for the arc of the blue sky above. Not far from the Bosphorus, he came across an English post called the Office of the Royal Geographic Society and introduced himself as a ready, able assistant for any voyaging European photographers.

On the day before he received orders to leave Istanbul for the English lines at Balaclava, orders whose potential for danger he could only speculate, Andrew "Aha" returned to the orphanage that sat along the coast of the Sarayburnu——it was as it ever was, the same aged matrons and dirt-caked youths——and bought the image of his brothers from the office of the orphan keepers for the cost of a single silver akche.

It was in this way that Andrew "Aha" Erlebnis found a weapon against death.

•

How unlike the rich Mediterranean was this black harbor of Balaclava into which Henry Chambers stared, not the wine-dark of Homer but a graveyard for rotted, wasted barley and the bloated bodies of horses and oxen. No wonder cholera had spread so quickly——everything, even the water supply, seemed contaminated. Houses built by the military lined the waterway, caught between the harbor's putrefaction and the inland encampments where slept through hunger, heat, and distant gunfire the soldiers of the Queen. Henry walked beside Andrew "Aha", who drove the photographic wagon to the tired, irregular rhythm of hooves against the dirt. Aloysius was busy securing tents for his party at the English headquarters. The cost wasn't cheap, the photographer explained before he left, but, lucky for them, he spent on a benefactor's money, and with any luck the three of them would be on their backs before midnight.

As for the coming weeks? Hills and horizon lines, hungry horses, soil parched, white tents like eggs in Crimea's nest, the march of English uniforms, the silence of turbaned Croat workmen and their incomplete railway, swords tangled in the grass, artillery scattered along dirt roads in such a way that it's hard to know whether or not they've already been fired. They would rest and recuperate in Balaclava; soon enough, though, Henry and Aloysius would follow a regiment north through the valleys and up to the English divisions surrounding Sebastopol. From a distance they would photograph the offense and, luck willing, perhaps a Russian or two, however loyal to the new czar and the outcome of his conflict.

Along the side of the harbor sat scores of men, limbs splayed, heads bandaged and bloody, piled together so crudely that Henry wondered for a moment if they comprised a heap of corpses. But these officers moaned and cried, still breathing, awaiting steamships

to transport them to the hospitals at Scutari where the few nurses on staff would treat their wounds, fevers, dysentery, cholera, or at the very least ease the pain before the end. Discolored, they clung to life, to limbs they would lose and to each other, a mass of running humors and waste, and Henry thought himself the pilgrim through this early circle: the worst, he feared, was yet to come.

The embers of a lone campfire glowed in the distance. Andrew "Aha" stared at the light ahead, never blinked, his brow straight and mouth shut. One of his wooden wheels surmounted a shard of rock half-buried in the road before striking the ground. The wagon creaked, a couple of boxes rattled around but nothing fell out of sort, certainly not the darkroom that comprised the van——what did Andrew "Aha" carry but empty space?——and his stare remained firm.

Henry opened his journal as he walked and tried to describe Andrew "Aha" on his skittering wagon, a man who had never known his bloodline, had only ever heard of the glories of European civilization, and was given, or gave himself, the solitary job of representing the goodness of his home before the suspicions of his race. That stare was fortitude in the wake of doubt, faith that perhaps his assistance in recording history with these two peculiar Englishmen was in some small way a stand against Europe, the transformation he had alluded to onboard the *Giphantia*.

Though what could never fully escape him, Henry imagined, was the awareness that after this war, whatever the outcome, wherever the victory, he might have no home to go back to——no familiar home, at least, as certainly as his home wouldn't have itself to go back to, either. The other white men, the delegates, the soldiers and sailors, must have appeared to him as missionaries seeking converts when they found Istanbul, armed

and in uniform. But Andrew "Aha" would drive the camera, prepare its plates, care for the fragile photographic negatives for as long as the wagon would last on the Crimean terrain, and when its wheels split and the mules collapsed he'd carry the apparatus on his back for the rest of the way if it meant that he had done everything he could have done to save the past——leave everyone else to worry about the future. There was once an Istanbul that I knew, he could say in his withering years, there was once Balaclava, there was once Sebastopol, they were cities of the East and not the West, of Allah and not the Christ, and I have proof.

His fingertips gathered blackness from the ink. Henry reviewed the writing once and then again, wanted to corroborate his perspective with the assistant. Perhaps another day. These were only notes for the article. For now, they felt true. He felt in control.

His next few hours brought restless sleep, crusted eyes, a backbone sore as if he'd slept on the stones beneath his mattress. He woke to sunrise with an erection——Sophia, sweat, knots of hair, silk sheets, familiar dust, but they dissolved like blood in water and he wished he were dreaming again. When Henry finally stood, he felt dizzy and set his arm against a bale of hay outside his tent. He'd fallen asleep wearing his jacket and in the pocket still was his journal. He grazed the leather cover with his fingernails.

As Henry opened the book and scanned his pages, Andrew "Aha" sat crouched beside a fire, cleaning one of the camera's glass lenses with a brown rag. Eyes narrow, neck at a curve, he watched Henry as if the Englishman were dancing alone, like a dreamer, or a lunatic, in any case looked terribly self-absorbed, but finally Andrew "Aha" caught himself and stuck his hand in the air and waved to him. "Jivil jivil," the assistant said, and tweeted like a bird.

•

Aloysius dragged one of the crates from the back of his wagon and opened it to reveal a dozen carefully packaged glass plates, each separated by folded cloth——"Only the finest quality, my benefactor has only ever supplied me with the very best," he explained——with the confidence of a man unconditionally proud of unremarkable children. Andrew "Aha" offered no response save a long sigh. He tugged his moustache but the little pain of this propensity couldn't distract him from the annoyance swelling in him. Whoever had supplied Aloysius with his tools for this excursion——whoever it was, indeed——was oblivious to the most general, sensible experience with the elements. Crimea's landscape was jagged and hazardous to fragile materials. Why bother hauling glass all this way? Albumen paper was the future of the form, Andrew "Aha" believed, and London was privileged enough that it could exhaust the supply of eggs needed to make it. Aloysius didn't know or didn't care, but either way this couldn't have been the decision of an experienced photographer.

Andrew "Aha" looked around the wide, empty valley for anyone who might corroborate his common sense——these same soldiers, after all, had spent weeks with Roger Fenton, a real professional, by most accounts——but the only soul in sight who wasn't on the move or too busy to bother was the Postmaster General, a gaunt, shadowed young man named Thomas Angell. Immediately, Angell found a duty for himself to avoid the tension materializing between photographer and assistant. He mounted a white horse dappled with mud and trotted towards headquarters to greet Henry Chambers.

Angell scratched the greasy, untamed whiskers that gnarled like branches from his jaw and removed a tattered envelope from his breast pocket. “The post office is a receptacle,” he said, “it’s getting tough to sort out the letters to the infantrymen. There’s mismanagement all around and not a damned thing I can do about it. But I recognized your name when this came in.” Henry caught the letter. “Want to hear something strange?” Angell asked. Henry nodded. “I received an order instructing me not to hand out any letters addressed to the photography party. Strange, isn’t it? But don’t worry, being far from home is a trial, so if anything comes your way, you’ll be the first to know.”

The envelope was sealed with a wax whose laurel-encircled “F” was identifiable enough that a pang of London struck him as he ran his finger across the red emblem’s embossment. Old friend, my teacher, my better…

•

Dear Henry,

How exciting should it be to witness a war in all of its immediacy. I hope that you are safe and provided for. My thoughts lie with you, and my curiosity with your report. I can only wonder what you have achieved so far. As for myself, I am, to be sure, hard at work again.

I think you can have no idea of the kind of book I am writing. In my other books I was slovenly; in this I am trying to be impeccable to follow a geometrically straight line. No lyricism, no comments, the author’s personality

absent. It was make dreary reading; it will contain atrocious things of misery and sordidness.

I am in a completely different world now, that of attentive observation of the dullest details. My eyes are fixed on the spores of mildew growing on the soul. It is a long way from there to the mythological and theological pyrotechnics of my first novel. And just as the subject is different, so do I write in an entirely different manner. In my book I do not want there to be a single movement, or a single reflection of the author.

Passion does not make poetry, and the more personal you are, the more feeble you will be. What strikes me as beautiful is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments, which would have practically no subject, or at least one in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible. But I am hampered by my propensity for metaphor, which definitely dominates me too much. I am devoured by comparisons as one is by lice, and I spend all my time squashing them; my sentences swarm with them. Relief comes from a deep view, from penetration, from the objective. For exterior reality must enter into us, almost make us cry out with it, if we are to reproduce it well.

I do not believe (unlike you, dear Henry) that there is anything good to be done with the character of the ideal Artist. It would be a monster. Art is not made for the depiction of exceptions, then too I feel an absolute abhorrence about putting anything of my feelings down on paper. I believe, even, that a novelist does not have the right to express his opinion on anything whatsoever. Art ought, moreover, to rise above personal feelings and nervous susceptibilities! It is time

to give it the precision of the physical sciences, by means of a pitiless method! Nonetheless for me the major difficulty continues to be style, form, the indefinable Beautiful resulting from the conception itself; this is the splendour of Truth, as Plato said.

You are fortunate, then, in your opportunity to study the form I perhaps should have learned for myself, in its inception. Go, I encourage you, and absorb this perfection of art, which does what we through such labour can only attempt, and may your writing be all the better for it.

Ever yours,

G.F.

P.S. —— I have not heard the most promising gab around town in regards to our Mr. Adramalech. Do make sure he is altogether kind.

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With a terse snap of his fingers, kind Aloysius Overton Adramalech ordered his assistant to re-polish the brand new A. Ross lenses he had packed for the Crimean excursion before their first day of photography could rightly commence, a process that Andrew "Aha" accomplished slowly and with the utmost precision, sitting under the shade of his tent. Any man, Henry thought while peering over the assistant's shoulder, needs eyes worth his brain. The apparatus was no different. Andrew "Aha" took loving care of its lenses. They were its focus. The camera had only to breathe, it seemed, to finally prove its sight identical to that of the sharpest mind.

"More of that 'graphing, looks like?" conjectured Captain Thomas Wilkinson, the black-bearded stalwart of the Ninth Foot, a regiment whose uniforms were said to have been dyed with the blood of Sikhs a decade ago in the Punjab kingdoms. "Say, I heard just yesterday there'd be another camera in Balaclava. Pleased to meet."

Andrew "Aha" wrapped the cleaning rag around his knuckles. "Care to be the subject of our inaugural shot, biradér?"

"Ah," Wilkinson retreated, "me, I already sat for Roger Fenton, just last spring. On my horse, I might add. And in a scorching heat, it was." But the captain backed into the waiting mass of Aloysius, a globe of sunburned flesh, didn't take long, now, did it, the skin of his nose so keen on peeling. Wilkinson studied the hindrance: overall this guest of the encampments had just the face for one of those Yankee medicine shows he'd heard about from time to time, vendors of potions and elixirs, a fight against gross biology, but one would be wise never to buy miracles from the sort who needed them most glaringly of all.

"Shuffle off, why don't you," spat the photographer, for whom the name Roger Fenton deserved the cane of a good, stringent sister. Redden the arms of all the little boys and girls who cry its four short syllables in any form of admiration, redden their rumps if need be, he'd damn well do it himself if he had to——

Captain Wilkinson seized Aloysius's thick arm. "Unless, of course, you'd like to make me a portrait," he said. "I've family who might like one, you see."

Despite the atypical indifference of Andrew "Aha" and his grudging agreement to fashion a rudimentary set from a stool and some spare gray blankets, portraiture was in order. Aloysius stood his camera under a lone tree beside the easternmost lodgings of the

soldiers' camp, "Good enough, aye?" as Andrew "Aha" and the pair of mules parked the darkroom a few yards behind their vantage. Henry crouched beside the wagon. Wilkinson drummed his fingers in his lap, sat otherwise still. An inquisitive few emerged from their white-cone tents to witness this wordless work——strange, wasn't it, for not a fortnight had passed since Roger Fenton bid Balaclava's temporary inhabitants a fond farewell, boarded one last vessel and sailed from Cossack Bay with the negatives he'd promised propagandist Prince Albert. None of the soldiers thought Fenton a liar by any means but when they heard that the royal family was planning to use his photographs to exhibit the comfort and contentment of all bodies overseas, and mollify the restless objections of England's conscience towards the unpopular and endless campaign in Crimea, they felt like drawings in a picture-book.

Hundreds of them had died in the fight to secure Balaclava——and how many more were crippled, amputated, infected, or, perhaps worse, taken captive by the Russians, never to be found, their bodies desecrated and unburied? Fenton had done little, if anything, to tell *that* story, the real story, the one the soldiers knew best. So the question in their minds once they spotted newfangled Aloysius beneath that bare perennial was whether he was a government man, as well; or merely some private party with the funds sufficient to roam Crimea at his leisure until the conditions finally repelled him; or whether he was an artist of some kind who'd found a novel interpretation of the year-long siege against Sebastopol, a perspective all his own, attentive to the soldiers' sacrifices but heavy with ulterior motive.

By the war's end, the soldiers came to wonder, would more photographers have inspected the sorry town of Balaclava than surgeons or nurses?——a shame, since

cholera, disinclined to flee a self-perpetuated feast like that filthy encampment, remained undetectable to the scrutiny of the cameras. Fenton was well-liked among the officers and dined with them frequently but there was no one so revered as a lady with a lamp, one who might warm their sick and injured through the coldest gale while Fenton and Aloysius froze their misery in time. *Her* apparatus offered light in the pitch of night; photographers were content to purloin. They whispered among themselves, the regulars in red, and as he prepared his shot Aloysius could sense their council even if he couldn't hear the words. He slowed his process, grew sloppy, knocked with his width the camera from its stand and scrambled to return it to its place, aimed at patient Captain Wilkinson.

"What do you think of the angle?" Aloysius shouted to Andrew "Aha" locked behind the darkroom door.

The muffled, hurried response: "Can't see it myself, but a tree means branches, and branches mean shadows, lots, I'm afraid." But as soon as Andrew "Aha" surfaced from his alchemy of illumination, he spilled over a jutted root, scraped skin from his palms and shattered the glass plate he'd prepared with that honey-thick glaze so sensitive to the sun. Mouth agape, he waited for a helping hand, an apology, spiritual contrition, a sympathetic swear word, anything from Aloysius before he stood, but nothing came from the photographer and Andrew "Aha" rose anyway and stomped back into the confines of the darkroom.

Aloysius pressed a nostril shut with his forefinger and through the other blew a glimmering marble of mucus that bestrew the ground like the droppings from some bitter, lonesome bird above. He cleared his throat. "The arsehole of the world."

The next glass plate made it as far as the camera's open door, was slid into place, too, but still Crimea simmered under the jurisdiction of a god contested, a young one, at that: Muhammad's master still had the patience and creativity to enforce discipline with the earth's materials. Jehovah, long ago, had turned nature against Pharaoh's Egypt; but even gods grew old, grew tired of their tricks, fought less and less their supersession by novel entities. And so Allah, uninhibited, cast a stinging shower of dust upon the two men and into the aperture, and grit coated their vulnerable solution.

"Sound advice, if I may," Wilkinson chimed, a Socratic digit thrust into the air though unaware of the hemlock it summoned, "for Roger Fenton took care to paint his paper in a hotel room before he found our fair Balaclava."

Henry waited. Aloysius, in seconds, turned crimson again, and Henry knew that when Aloysius clenched his pudgy fists, dug dirty nails deep into his swelling flesh and drew a rivulet of blood, the photographer had only hurt himself.

No longer the subject of history, Wilkinson stood and brushed the dust from his bottom. "Settle, everyone. Your process needs an incentive. If you let me, I'll show you something beautiful."

Aloysius climbed onto the wagon's roof and sat cross-legged as Andrew "Aha" whipped the mules. Henry and Captain Wilkinson walked beside the vehicle. The four of them traversed the camp in silence until they spotted the harbor in the distance, white tents jutting like mushrooms from the soil beside it. Wilkinson's finger struck the air once more and brought the caravan to a halt atop a low, grassy peak. "This is Guard's Hill," he said. Directly across from them, on the other side of the harbor, were the crumbling turrets of an abandoned castle. Higher hills flanked either side, spilled

downward as if heralding the manmade structure. “And that fort yonder was built by the Genoese,” the captain told them, his voice ephemeral as the wind carried it away. “God knows when. The Genoese don’t much exist anymore. But they left us quite a sight, lads. We all saw it when we disembarked. But it was Roger Fenton who put it in a frame for us, I suppose. The way those valleys decline. He said the fort was the center and the harbor was a puddle at its feet. None of us would have seen it that way. It was just a part of the horizon. No different.”

“You could say,” Andrew “Aha” chimed in, “that he discovered it.”

Wilkinson smiled. Most of the other officers sneered at the sight of the pale Ottoman, they all thought he was a Muslim, treacherous, but Wilkinson was beginning to appreciate the young man’s eloquence——a kind that few of his fellow Englishmen, the captain admitted, could donate to good conversation. “Discovered it, or very nearly,” he said. “Fenton certainly found something in it.”

“A thing,” Henry mused. Staring at the geography of the castle and its adjoining landscape, he felt as though he too had just discovered it, that until then it was another shadow in the mass of earth that surrounded them. But now, separated, it was found, tangible where once it would have floated through their fingers like a translucent London fog.

With a heaving breath Aloysius vaulted from the top of the wagon and retrieved his camera stand. In the darkroom, Andrew “Aha” prepared another plate with collodion, slid it into the apparatus and brought the ready contraption back outside to the photographer, who fixed it on the stand and directed its lens towards the castle in the distance——in the center, as Wilkinson had suggested. Aloysius squinted, peered

through the camera and, satisfied, not a human body in view, opened the shutter to flood the glass with light. When the exposure was enough, Andrew "Aha" took the camera back into the darkroom, set the glass over burning mercury and washed it in clean, clear water. He waited as it dried, picked up the fragile plate and brought it to his waiting company. Aloysius took the negative and held it up before them, beside the sight itself. There it was, the castle, the hills around it, the harbor beneath, just as it appeared in life, but bordered, now, defined, something they could touch and carry wherever they traveled next. Never mind that Roger Fenton had taken a nearly identical shot only months prior——at that moment, as Henry, Aloysius, and Andrew "Aha" looked at their print, they knew the world belonged to them.

Captain Wilkinson was beaming. The scene before him, those three pioneers, was worth a photograph of its own, he thought. He offered to lead them back to headquarters, where they could share dinner and rest their soles. Henry and Andrew "Aha" accepted; Aloysius asked for some time alone. The others complied, hungrier than they were perplexed, and left him by himself on Guard's Hill.

Aloysius closed his eyes. The darkness relieved him. A breeze cooled the sweat on his brow. When he opened his eyes, he noticed something he had missed before, not in the landscape but, like the castle in the distance, artificial: a pair of boots, brown leather, military-grade, standing upright on the other side of the hill, alone and abrupt. Aloysius approached them and, slowly, extending into the unknown, reached for the boots as if he expected to graze the limbs that filled them. There was nothing to be found. He looked around to see if any soldiers had seen him. There were none. With no time to waste, Aloysius lifted the leather boots and flung them down into the valley, where they tumbled

and separated before getting lost in a tangle of dry brush amid the faint and faraway rustle of their disturbance.

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Long untouched but stricken with shudders of Edigu the Mongol, Saint Vladimir, Petronas Kamateros, Istämi, the Huns, Emperor Valentinian, haunted even by rumors of that fabled son of Atreus whose right hand hewed the towers of Troy themselves, were those ancient stone ruins of fallen Chersonesos, no more than a few shoreline miles from Sebastopol proper. Their shudders resonated in the lowest laid brick, the overgrown grasses, the skeleton of a basilica, that work-of-wonder bell forged from military metals. For onlookers, it was merely the myth of old violence; for the wreck of this colony, it was memory, the air disturbed by the beating of wartime's wings.

That was as far north into the peninsula as Captain Wilkinson had ever ridden, a day's journey made for the sole purpose of letting British hands toll a Russian bell over the Black Sea. No henchmen of the czar were in sight when they maneuvered through the scattered excavations towards the bell. Upon his return to Balaclava, Wilkinson learned from a général de brigade by the name of de Paladines that a handful of French officers had spoken of stealing the bell as a gift for Their Lady of Paris and an affront to the Orthodox invaders. Wilkinson snorted at the pettiness of the gesture——vengeance never made for sound tactics. How emblematic of the French, in the spirit of their surrogate Napoleon: always looking back. And the Russians, looking obsessively to themselves, pondering the perfection of their society, would be too oblivious to notice the theft until

the bell was already gone. Only the English, Wilkinson reminded himself, could be trusted to look ahead.

As Wilkinson expressed to Henry the pride of the moment he and his men tolled the bell, he folded his hands, swung them back and forth as the bell might have shook, then broke them apart and widened the space between to match the swell of those deep reverberations until his span could stretch no further. “And that,” the captain said, “is the future in the making.” His arms fell.

Crouched by a campfire with the captain, journal open in his lap and a dozen swigs of brandy closer to a good night’s sleep, Henry understood the comfort of the camera. It put the light above, elusive in its breadth, vaguest of all substances, finally under control. Drawn from the heavens, narrowed along its path towards the apparatus lens, the light was given shape and texture, a conversion into physical material, on the surface of the photograph. If now even light, the last remaining sign that divinity once plotted the earth, was compliant to the will of man, then surely anything could be. The age of unknowns was over; Henry closed his journal. What a wonderful thing.

Andrew “Aha” found the pair and their intoxicants at midnight, Wilkinson stretching his fingers to his toes, Henry all but asleep. “Would you help him to his tent?” Andrew “Aha” solicited the captain, who was happy to help but forgot the writer’s notebook as he hoisted Henry from his place beside the dwindling embers. Hidden from the world by a thin flap of leather, the contents of Henry’s journal struck Andrew “Aha” as restricted to anyone but their author, too particular for outsiders. Eventually, the journal might find itself in the quaint possession of some future Chambers or lost in a library amid other weathered volumes——in either case, it would be a relic, valued for its

accumulation of years and a miraculous survival beyond the long-passed epoch of its employment.

He opened the notebook. Though he'd grown accustomed to speaking English, Andrew "Aha" was mostly unfamiliar with the language in its written form. From what he could tell, this unfinished report concerned their trip to Guard's Hill and the image they had captured. But Andrew "Aha" didn't need to know how to read English to understand that the words Henry had crossed out with frenetic black stabs of his pen, slashes into the paper, were in the eyes of the writer inadequate to tell the story. At the bottom of this incomplete page was a crude sketch of the view from Guard's Hill, the old Genoese castle and its rolling borders.

Wilkinson returned to the campfire.

"He forgot this," said Andrew "Aha". "Kérém ét."

The captain took the journal. "He asked me a question before he passed out."

"What was your answer?"

"I had none."

"What did he ask you?"

Wilkinson folded his hands. "He asked, 'Who sent me here?'"

Andrew "Aha" nodded, trembled in the night.

"Do you know who assigned you and your photographer to this wretched place?" asked Wilkinson.

Andrew "Aha" shrugged. Hung low overhead, the moon threatened upon the snap of its celestial strings to plummet from the sky and demolish the English encampment.

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"At——the——ready, chum!"

Major Bosch MacGilavey noticed that after Aloysius shouted into his assistant's tent, he ran back to the camera stand as if he'd commence a contest with some unseen opponent. A crowd of English soldiers, Croats, and zouaves astray from their French headquarters gathered around Aloysius and his subject impatiently and without much interest.

Finally the assistant emerged from his quarters, tightening the wrappings of his headscarf, and stepped atop an unopened crate of ammunition. "Haydé! This is our first photograph of a living soul in the Crimea," Andrew "Aha" explained as he rolled the sleeves of his white shirt up to his elbows, "and the project that Mister Adramalech and I are embarking on this day will have its witnesses until life on this earth has come to an end. This is how the sons of the sons of your sons will remember you," he roared, "ancestors they shall never know in flesh or company! They shall see in you their smiles, their noses and jaws, the lines of the faces they will wear with pride and wisdom and security, on every passing day, knowing full well they came from you before them!"

The soldiers snickered among themselves. This pale, blonde man in his turban, standing high above them with his fists in the air, mucking English with his Oriental accent, his bad poetry——amazing, mused MacGilavey, seems the Ottoman lands will drive even the whitest man to the brink of insanity.

Andrew "Aha" waited for the laughter to hush. Now, his prophecy announced, came the stipulations: "Mister Adramalech will do his work around the camp and

alongside your battlegrounds and, whether you are on or off duty, you're not to acknowledge the presence of the camera. We wish to capture nothing less than real life, as it is to you and me. As such, there will be no portraits taken for the duration of our stay here."

Murmured groans startled even the wind. "Roger Fenton took portraits!" exclaimed a soldier in the crowd. Aloysius winced.

"What're we got to send our kins back home?" MacGilavey demanded on behalf of the officers watching him and the posture he sustained.

Andrew "Aha" licked his lips, grated his yellow teeth to warn MacGilavey from dissenting before his gathering again. He wouldn't forget his face, he swore. "These wet-plates are more than trinkets to amuse your loved ones while you're gone. No sir: they're evidence."

The soldiers exchanged glances. They had better things to do than listen to the declarations of a man without a country. "It's an insult," said MacGilavey as many of his fellow officers left the scene and ordered the Croats back to work. Wilkinson stayed to watch. His steady gaze ahead kept a few soldiers from Ninth Regiment quietly in their places behind him.

Aloysius shifted uncomfortably, shot Henry a frown, but the journalist, fed from the passion of the pulpit, at war with forgetfulness, was too busy transcribing the assistant's words to notice the affront, the arrogance, that Andrew "Aha" had demonstrated towards his employer in front of all those onlookers. Before Aloysius could raise an objection, the assistant had already stepped down from his crate and disappeared into the darkroom before Aloysius. "Well," the photographer sighed as he adjusted his

camera stand, better to solve this disagreement later than make any problems public, “sit plenty still, Major MacGilavey.”

MacGilavey reclined against a wooden hut, the metal bowl he clutched hot but unable to arrest the steam rushing from its beef stew. He swirled his spoon uneasily. Not ten minutes ago had the photographer’s assistant approached him and requested that he stay exactly where he was and avoid scratching any itch or moving his eyes or standing for orders from his superiors. Lacking any other reaction, he froze for Andrew “Aha” and was thereupon complimented on the striking aesthetic of his posture, the grit about his military countenance, the rough-and-tumble of the scene he had built around himself, foot on a rotted log, paltry rations in hand——he was making the best of it all, wasn’t he, in this tough time. “Yes sir,” alleged Andrew “Aha” as he carried the camera out of the wagon, “a sight like this was made to be remembered.”

Aloysius leaned forward and muttered, “Bloody hell, I swear——” and snatched the camera from his assistant. The crack was sharp and scornful, the jolt too severe for glass. Aloysius stared at the apparatus. “I don’t believe it——”

“Tékrar.” Again. Andrew “Aha” reclaimed the camera and replaced the broken plate, brushing flecks of glass from his shirt as he left the darkroom for the second time. He set it safely on the stand. After another assessment through the lens, Aloysius pulled the cord and exposed the plate.

Henry peeked through the camera for himself and found Major MacGilavey in full, head to toe, the wall of the hut behind him. He trusted that what he saw, more or less, would wind up in the negative’s frame. But what did he see? he asked silently. A man, wooden faced, dressed in an English uniform, holding a bowl of soup, like any man

he had ever seen, with features he knew to be eyes, lips, a nose, a dark brown beard. Beneath his character? What any man possessed: the acceptance of his own existence, the will to survive, a search for pleasantries in his passing moments, a yearning for home, maybe a little hunger, too. That, anyway, was what Henry wrote about the photographed man. But all that he wanted to record, to give his readers the clearest sense of what he saw that day, was there in the photograph, axiomatic, free of his verbal intermediaries. Even worse, Henry feared, was the prospect that his words were wrong, that the camera saw Bosch MacGilavey in an entirely different way——correctly, impartially. Was the major a man or a shape, the bearer of a mind or the reflection of light? There was only one truth, Henry told himself. There was only ever a single answer.

"Aférin!" cried Andrew "Aha", arms raised. Well done, indeed. "You may eat."

MacGilavey began to slurp his soup, mouth to the bowl's brim, his small spoon insufficient to sate his hunger quickly enough. Henry shut his eyes, heard the soldier from the dark, heard thick liquid rush the man's gullet and a sigh of relief. Sometimes it was easier just to listen.

•

"And that, chaps, is a win of the whist by small slam."

"You're gammy is what you are, Captain Wilkinson, 'cause I counted a good eleven tricks!"

"Dander not——was a full twelve, O High Chancellor Adramalech, and that indeed a small slam makes. Care to corroborate, 'Aha'?"

"Yes sir: we beat that pair, fair and square. Win of the whist. Stay up to snuff, boss."

"You little——"

"Don't kick up a shine, now, dear President Adramalech. That's three victories for us. You and Henry've lost the rubber, I say. Had your chance. You owe us the rhino when it's all good and polished up!"

"Henry, give me a——tell these chits they haven't got——"

"Come, come, good Steward Adramalech! Didn't your father teach you cards?"

"He taught me a-many thing, but cards was no priority."

"I think if fewer fathers taught their children cards then we'd have fewer gamblers afoot in London."

"Quite the spoilsport, Henry."

"Writer's right! My old governor hadn't the patience for games."

"Too genteel, Aloysius? Man of morals?"

"Not likely. Strict, more like it. Ran a cotton mill in Derby. Worked all hours with his little chavies. Myself among them, of course. I remember him railing against the Acts of '19, and all his chavies under nine years couldn't labor anymore. I was eight by then. But he kept me working, he did. A dozen bloody hours a day. Still not sure how he got me to stay in that mill."

"Persuasive or simply heartless?"

"Zalim, élbét té."

"The man could wile flounders out of the firth, to be sure."

"Marvelous."

"He was an important man, back in Derby, with that cotton mill of his. Children grew up fast working for him. I say, I can't much see chavies as chavies. Just little lords and ladies. I'm always amazed when I find children that look their age in London. Not whipped and worked to death. But still delicate, like little chavies should be."

"Truly, I like to think my children be children. And will be still, once I'm home again."

"Now, Captain——"

"Why so sullen, 'Aha'?"

"To think that children in your England grow old so fast. I have no——sometimes I doubt I'm older than a newborn babe."

"Captain Wilkinson, would you——"

"Had I a mother and father to teach me what it's like to grow into age——"

"Would you pass the brandy, Captain? Or do Henry and I owe you that, as well?"

"No, no, keep the brandy for the afternoon. I won't neither take your tin if it's bitter to the tongue. In fact, I shall take my leave instead. Duty calls, gentlemen. I'm to go and scout the hills between our camp and Sebastopol. Make sure it's clear of Russians before another company embarks."

"And will you be leading us up to the city? My report might benefit from a change of scenery."

"I think it's to be me, Henry. And quite soon. Assuming I'm not stuck on the latrine with that blasted infection. Well. A good game; and a pleasure, 'Aha'."

"Eôylé ya, I'd say so. Khoshja qalíñ!"

"Pardon?"

"I merely wished him well, Henry. Yes sir: there goes a fine Englishman."

"Forgive me for saying, but, in my years, I've never heard so strange a dialect."

"Ha! It's a rascal's tongue, is what it is——"

"Keôr olasija."

"Oh, damn it, boy, stay where you are, I meant no offense by it."

"Well. At least you know my anger."

"I'm not as stupid as I look, 'Aha'. Don't need your words to hear you."

"I think if you wanted to hear him, you'd learn his language."

"I hear him plenty."

"Bosh boshouna."

"And blah-blah yourself. Another bumper of brandy for me. Oh, I'll be on the ran-tan soon enough."

"Were we all such children."

"Tékrar, Henry?"

"I say, were we all such children, should we all talk in such gibberish, base our understanding of each other on tone and inflection, we'd rid ourselves of phrase."

"And would that be so evil a trade, Henry?"

"It's how we come to communicate. It's how I learned intimacy. I have always believed my intimacy best represented by phrase."

"That depends."

"On what?"

"What is the intimacy we are relating?"

"It could be anything. Whatever we want to understand from each other."

"A truth."

"Possibly."

"You say there are truths outside our own making."

"I think them inherent."

"For instance?"

"There's a sun beyond our sky. It rises in the east and sets in the west."

"You are so sure of this."

"Would you chits settled down and have a drink with me——"

"I am. It's a law of nature."

"It's all perspective."

"Science."

"For the purposes of furthering this discussion, I'll concede to your statement; despite the fact that the sun remains in place and it is we who rise and set."

"Very well."

"You call it sunrise in the east, sunset in the west. Where I am from? Maghrîb, méshriq."

"I'm glad to know that. Now I've the words to use."

"Don't be hasty."

"But our terms embody the same ideas, 'Aha'."

"But now you're lost with them. You think our words all the same. Fine. But then, to recognize the truth of the sunrise and sunset, maghrîb and méshriq, all our terms must account for it. If you are to understand me, and I am to understand you, and we are both to designate the actions of our star, neither of our terms can be wrong."

"We chose our words. They can't be wrong. They are what we make of them."

"Hasty, again, Henry. Wait a moment. You take the words you've received for granted. A fatal error, in any case. Please: you say sunrise and witness the climb of the star over the horizon. I say maghrîb and witness the same. But, as I said, your word misrepresents the actions of the sun. There is no rise to its movement. Your term is untrue. Mine might be, all the same. But if we are to cross our linguistic impediments and understand each other, and together recognize the natural work of our star, then, yes sir, we have a problem."

"How so?"

"Your perspective is mistaken. Mine, let's just say, is not. In our collective comprehension, yours must be true and mine must be true. But your term is not. And so we have failed to reach truth that we can share about this matter of the sun."

"So you say."

"The same would be the case if my term were wrong and yours correct. We would fail to reach our truth. Of course, I would argue that both our terms have failed the truth; and to an equal extent the truth has gone unrecognized again. Only when our terms align will we finally succeed. But it is in my belief that our words preclude the truth. They make it impossible, Henry."

"I understand you."

"Are you boys seeing those boots?"

"Then are you converted? Have I converted you in so little time?"

"No; in fact, I'll elaborate. The function through which you speak is nothing novel to me. I've read my logic. George Boole beat you by just a couple of years."

"Another Englishmen?"

"Indeed. I brought a book of his in my luggage."

"I say, whose boots are those by that fence yonder?"

"How typical of the English to claim sovereignty over ideas."

"He published the book and so the credit is his."

"Like they're watching us…"

"Go on, then."

"He explains the same as you did——that to reach a truth represented by two different terms, both must be true. One or the other is simply not good enough. Sunrise and maghrîb must both relay the actions of our star."

"Lovely."

"Would you boys shut your mouths and look at these boots?"

"But he also explains that, on occasion, you can, in fact, reach such a truth with one or the other; that if just one term is correct, and let's say, this time, that it's sunrise, then the truth has been found."

"Not collectively, however. With my word, I'd have no access to the reality of the sun's workings. Not with my inferior term."

"Then you should learn mine."

"I shouldn't have to."

"Why do you think some authors are beloved to me over others? Why do I emulate one and not another?"

"Because it speaks to your tastes."

"No, 'Aha', I'm proud to say I'm always learning."

"Charming."

"I don't see them anymore. Those boots. I swear they were, ah, I shouldn't trust myself with inebriates. Brandy or beer would get me drunk! But brandy *and* beer will get me drunker!"

"You might be interested to know that George Boole outlined another function for us truth-seekers, 'Aha'. And this might tickle you even more-so."

"I hope I'm prepared."

"Boole writes that the truth can only be found through one term. One perspective, as you will. With neither term, there is no truth. As before. But with both terms, the truth is negated. We need opposites, sometimes. We need the dichotomy. And the truth emerges."

"Ha! I'll beat both of you in this debate with my apparatus! The truth before our very eyes."

"That, Aloysius, is where I'll have to agree with you."

"And you, Henry? Any interest in the image, objectivity and all?"

"Well, I might return to my love with a picture of myself, as a keepsake. But I'm a little uneasy by this abandonment of our words. It all seems too simple."

"Simple gets straight to the bloody point, lad! And I should be thrilled to add you to my work! A long and distinguished body of work it is!"

"Have you written your love, Henry?"

"Just before our card game, I meant to. And I tried. But, this place, these weeks from home, I want her to know, I do, how it felt for me here, and I've had some trouble figuring out how."

"And what's the name of this love of yours?"

"Sophia is the name. Sophia Charlotte."

"Ballyhoo! Your love, aye? Love's a passing thing, and before you know it, they've grown past you."

"Do you wish to see her?"

"Of course I do."

"But do you remember her?"

"I——don't be absurd, Andrew."

"You would know if you had brought a portrait of her with you. You would know just how far with you your memories could take her."

"Aye, you should've brought enough for all of us, lad!"

"Sous! Yîqîl! A bumper of brandy too many!"

"Why, I'd love another bumper of brandy, now that you mention it——"

"Can't you see that our poor Henry is going to lose his love to the nothingness?"

"To the nothingness?"

"Yes sir: to the void. He will un-find her from this earth."

"Me, I'll do no——I would never want to——"

"If only you could help it."

"Well, mayhap you should have had her picture taken, Henry. All the beautiful girls should be in pictures, I say. Why let them go? Why let those beautiful little things go from you? Why let the beautiful girls go? They surely won't be beautiful forever."

"Nothing is here forever, it's true. That's why Aloysius and I do what we do——"

"——The beautiful little boys and girls, all out there, somewhere, feeble and alone…"

"——That's why we take pictures, Henry."

"You do the writing, chap, and I'll take pictures."

"I'll write or you'll take pictures."

•

Andrew "Aha" agreed to help photograph Henry only so long as Aloysius adhered to the rules established: no portrait, no pose, no preparation. Henry would be caught at some apparently arbitrary point during the day and, like any of the soldiers, asked to remain motionless until the exposure was complete. When Andrew "Aha" finally found the shot he'd been looking for——Henry crouched over a pool of ink that he spilled while trying to write amongst the tombstones of Cathcart's Hill——he shouted for the photographer. Aloysius appeared, driving the wagon. He set up the camera and sat on a tombstone as he squinted through his lens. Henry's back began aching. "Sharp," flattered Aloysius.

"Remember," Andrew "Aha" said, a finger running along his dry lips, "keep everything where it is. Don't even move your eyes. Once she's seen this, your love will know the days you spent here as well as you do."

Maybe it was better that way, Henry thought. If, upon his return, Sophia was embittered by his failure to send any letters from Crimea, he could always offer the photograph as a gift. The image would be hers to keep and, during any of Henry's future

absences from their home, might provide her with a sense of comfort or communion. Some form of her husband, at least, would be present, their union unbroken. Not a substitution, but a fragment of the whole. And photographs could just be the start——when the cameras improved, they might capture him moving or talking, he could determine what would appear on these shifting plates, Sophia would possess only the finest record of her husband, know him by his fetish. Henry hoped he would live to see that day——he didn't want to presume but it seemed probable, given how quickly the camera had come about——but for now, at least, the photograph would suffice.

Andrew "Aha" reminded him one last time not to move. But it would have been improper, Henry decided, if Sophia's gaze went returned. Before Aloysius pulled the camera's cord, Henry adjusted his eyes and looked directly into the lens.

"Not terrible," mulled Andrew "Aha" when he held the positive up to the journalist. "But you cheated. You made yourself aware of the camera. Or, shall I say, you made the camera aware of you." He exhaled loudly through his nose. "We historians must always cover our tracks."

Aloysius cleared his throat. "Will make a fine gift for the little lady, nonetheless," came his voice from behind the darkroom door.

To Henry's surprise, the sight of his face in the photograph was nothing like his reflection in a mirror or in still waters. In either of those, he could see the control he had over himself. When he wanted his eyebrows to rise and fall, they did. He could alter the size of his mouth or harden his chin or adjust his hair. He blinked at his own command. He was malleable, then, nothing fixed in place, which meant there were innumerable ways that other people might see him. But, looking at his image, he felt the desire for the

first time to change his face, to rearrange it; he saw an ugliness he'd never encountered before. Perhaps, he pondered, the figure within this frame was the truer version of himself——his soul, like the light that begat its revelation, converted into material that was free of his consciousness, liberated from his control, and more apart from that mass of shadows and ambiguities that was called the world than ever before. He opened his notebook, wanted to tell some kind of story——his thoughts during the exposure, the pain of his clumsy posture, anything——that might add to the image but stopped when he realized he was trying to turn himself into a character in a story. How gluttonous and manipulative was his authorship; how eternally unsated.

Henry covered the positive in brown paper and folded it tightly around the plate. *To G.F.*, he wrote on the wrapping, realized only after he marked the paper that he had meant all along to address the photograph to Sophia and not to Gregor. But he slid the package into the back of the wagon, regardless, while Aloysius organized his equipment. He thought little of the mistake——Aloysius could make a copy of the image at any time and with minimal effort, had simply to capture the light again and Henry would come with it, a certainty.

When Aloysius jumped out of the wagon, a small piece of paper fluttered from his coat to the ground. "No, Henry. Don't worry, I'll get it, Henry, stop," he fumed as Henry recovered the paper——a photograph. Henry was surprised. Aloysius had never mentioned family or friends or anyone in his company that would have accounted for the gaunt young girl in frame, stripped save for the slip that was lowered to her waist, unable to look the camera in its eye.

"Give it here, Henry, give it, already."

Henry recognized the floor and the curtains in the photograph as those of Aloysius's studio on Regent Street. "Family of yours?" he tried, his throat straining out a murmur.

"Yes, yes, now hand it over." Aloysius snatched the picture and slid it into a trouser pocket. He walked off without another word, heart racing, hands sweating——no one had ever seen *those* pictures of his——until, gaze to the ground, he bumped into an English officer, a mustachioed man with sunken, unfocused eyes who reeled over and vomited hot, clear choler onto the photographer's shoes.

•

"Is there a word for it?" asked Andrew "Aha" as he tossed a pebble into the harbor. The ripples he made were short-lived and he dropped the rest of his handful back onto the hard soil where he'd gathered them. "Surprise without surprise?"

"I don't think so," Henry said.

"But you suspected something not quite, let's say, becoming in him."

"I don't know. I should have known. I should have seen it in his features. He's just the type, thinking about him now. For something maleficent, I mean."

Behind them, a pair of soldiers limped into the hospital, a squat, beige-walled rectangle in shambles and surrounded by a crowd of identical structures.

"We'd be right not to trouble the military men with this information," said Andrew "Aha".

"Are you certain?"

"They have concerns aplenty," he answered. "But Aloysius? *He* can know that we know. An advantage, I'd wager."

"An advantage over what?"

Andrew "Aha" dipped his fingers into the harbor to wash off the dirt. They came up dripping brown sludge. He sighed and shook them dry. "He's been difficult to work with. Mehmed wouldn't have had the patience for him and neither do I. But I think he's going to be a little more compliant if he knows what's good for him."

"This is his assignment, 'Aha'."

"And he doesn't get another chance at it if spoils this one. My home, Henry——it won't ever be the same again. I have to do my part. There's too much at stake. Too much we might lose forever unless someone records it properly, what happened here. I don't trust him to do it right. I don't trust him with his camera. And I'd certainly never trust him if I had children, either."

Henry shook his head. "When I return to London, I'm going to tell my father-in-law."

"When you're back in London, yes sir, a fine idea."

"He can get away with his wretchedness here," Henry went on, thought back to the three young girls he had encountered in the stairwell on that first day he had met Aloysius, last March, "but not back home. He probably collects those children off the street and no one notices it."

"You'll ruin him."

"If I could be there tomorrow, I would."

"You miss your city."

Henry looked far off, where a morning haze enveloped the harbor's furthest waters. "Don't you miss yours?"

"I'm saying goodbye to mine, remember?" Andrew "Aha" began walking towards the galley set up beside the hospital. "You should do the same."

•

For all the gunshots that Major MacGilavey heard while on patrol, day and night, the chattering teeth of Sebastopol under siege, not a single Russian slug had struck his camp in months. Good riddance: they had lost the zeal for surprise and knew, probably better than their new czar himself knew, that the war was almost over. Their few resources were pooled entirely around Sebastopol's moribund defense measures. That made the English camp, as heavily armed and overpopulated as ever, about the safest place on the peninsula, excusing the cholera outbreak. MacGilavey emptied the charred flakes of tobacco from his pipe and jettisoned one last lungful of smoke. He didn't even know whether his rifle was loaded, come to think of it. He only pulled the trigger or checked its cartridge anymore for target practice; and, to no soldier's surprise, blowing holes in heavy sacks of sand had lost its appeal after the first few aimless days. Soon his regiment would leave to join the frontlines around Sebastopol——though not soon enough, MacGilavey decided. He was too sharp a shot to be waiting around without orders. Alone on the edge of Balaclava, he rested his head on his horse's mane, shut his eyes, and allowed himself a few minutes of sleep underneath the placid, violet dusk. Tell me I'm in my mother's arms again…

In this particular, peculiar dream MacGilavey was looking up at a man embracing a barrel full of water. The man, he somehow knew, was his own grown and bearded son——never mind that the major had left for the Crimean peninsula weeks before his minor was born and hence had never actually glimpsed little Billy MacGilavey. In the dream, MacGilavey was immobile as in death but still breathing, lying face-up in an open grave. Above him on the cemetery grasses, this man, his mysteriously matured progeny, tipped the barrel that he clutched and poured its contents into the freshly dug hole to bury the body within. "I'm not ready," MacGilavey cried as he sputtered liquid from his nose. Soil fell in soggy clumps from the walls of his grave and his drowning began.

But the water-bearer would need another opportunity to rid himself of his antecedent——the earth-scraping footsteps of Andrew "Aha" infected his delicate, defenseless dreams and straightened his spine. At the sight of this turbaned figure, a walking shadow with eyes aglow, MacGilavey startled and dropped his rifle. The blast was deafening. Gunpowder's unmistakable scent drifted into his nostrils. The images from his dream fluttered away like feathers loose from a fleeting bird.

"God damn it! What in blazes!" he screamed, palms flat against his temples. Who knew? Loaded after all. He deserved a medal for that one. But Andrew "Aha" held his place, leaned forward and furrowed his brow and frowned, pried but said nothing.

MacGilavey groaned. It was bad enough that Andrew "Aha" was roaming uninhibited around Balaclava and distracting every working soldier he encountered, but that goddamn Captain Wilkinson, to add to the farce, pranced about speaking so highly of the cameraman's assistant that nobody dared beat the white Ottoman to a pulp, as he

deserved by now. “You know something? You’re a regular menace, snooping around our lines like that! Someone could’ve been killed!”

Andrew “Aha” looked bewildered. He raised an eyebrow, licked his lips, opened his hands to the major. “There’s no one here.”

MacGilavey assessed his perimeter. What about you and me, nincompoop? But there was no use. “Okay, then,” he murmured and trotted off atop his horse. He checked the valley’s stern every few seconds while riding away. Andrew “Aha” still hadn’t moved by the time his figure disappeared from view.

A late supper of beans and greasy fried fish sat poorly with MacGilavey, whose hairline dripped with sweat, hands clamming up. He felt a bubble of gas expand inside his stomach. It tumbled about as he walked back towards his tent, threatened to burst from its own pressure and deflate the man. The stress was abnormal, MacGilavey realized, especially amid the coddling this near-peacetime had rewarded him with. Hands on his gut, MacGilavey stopped to lean against a fencepost; he bent over, knees buckling, let a hiss of gas slip from his rear, unleashed into the clear night air like a miniscule mad-dog. He coughed to conceal the whimper that followed.

Soldiers passed with mugs of ale in hand. Captain Wilkinson stood over a crowded campfire and played his fastest fiddle to a cheering assembly. Lord Raglan rode on by, nose up, white hat wide-brimmed, even his steed pranced proudly, “’Allo, sir, how do you do——” MacGilavey mustered but, oh, bad timing: he grinded his teeth, stamped his foot, waited until the commander of the English forces had passed sufficiently, go, hurry, get on already, then——ah, this one was more the tearing of thick paper than his last unassuming escapee; but still not enough relief, he winced, that bubble more

engorged than ever. He was worried the next one might prove the Vesuvius of his bowels, his fellow Britons, the Croats, any wandering Frenchmen, they'd all be incinerated, ash sculptures, forever to reek of his terrible fumes. MacGilavey groaned and rubbed his trouser legs, dreaded the breach of his rancorous meal. They'd think he was stricken with that diarrhetic infection like everyone else in Balaclava.

A sharp whistle caught his attention. He jerked his head.

"Aloysius!" beckoned Andrew "Aha" once he removed his fingers from his lips and planted the camera stand a few feet from the major. "Haydé!"

The photographer hustled over to the fence post with his camera and joined it to the stand. He muttered bitterly to himself.

"What——you! What's the meaning of this!" Major MacGilavey bellowed, terse, puckering farts undercutting his objection all the while.

"Make no motions, however slight or frivolous, if you please," Andrew "Aha" commanded.

Surely they weren't going to make a record of this unseemly spectacle. MacGilavey was aghast. "Now's not the bloody time——!"

"I'll be the judge of that, thanks very much," the assistant said as he framed the major with his angled thumbs and forefingers.

"Well, then I simply refuse!" MacGilavey exclaimed and took the first few steps away from the camera.

Andrew "Aha" apprehended MacGilavey's shoulder. "Are you so eager to be forgotten? You think what you've done in this life is enough? Enough to ensure that you're remembered? What if you die tomorrow, Major MacGilavey?"

Aloysius pulled the camera's cord. MacGilavey froze, as if the exposure couldn't be stopped once it was begun, and imagined the stunned, shamefaced expression that the photograph had captured. Would all future generations know him irrevocably as the man who spent his tour of Crimea passing gas? Possibly——that's what Andrew "Aha" seemed to want, anyway. How lasting a blight on Englishmen in general, he an officer of the Queen's ranks idle and breaking wind on foreign soil. God forbid, it would become some overarching symbol of English discourtesy in the worldwide scope of things and he'd be to blame, all for one night whose discomfort was more personal than emblematic; but the matter was out of his hands. Their journalist, more a proselyte to the camera as the month wore on, didn't soothe his unease: "I doubt it was anything personal," Henry offered the major before following Aloysius and Andrew "Aha" back to their wagon.

And if MacGilavey found anything at all suspicious about the journalist from London, it wasn't his soft-spoken, often voiceless deportment or his predisposition to drift aimlessly through the camp, but rather in the lack of writing he accomplished at Balaclava. When MacGilavey spied on their photographic excursions, often hiding behind tents or sandbags——why run the risk of being the white Muslim's subject for a third time, and he *was* a Muslim, wasn't he, the turncoat?——he always spotted Henry without his notebooks though at nothing less than full attention to Andrew "Aha". Aloysius, on the other hand, had nothing to say or contribute while his assistant directed him——picking the shots, angling the camera, advising the subjects without any input from the owner of the camera. He set up his apparatus with the air of a man who had bigger and better things to accomplish but was too overburdened to do so. He didn't even

drink; he only ever squatted in the shade of tents or artillery, round face resting on his knuckles, while the other two went to work.

One morning, Aloysius let himself be photographed by Andrew "Aha" and Henry——the former established the camera while the latter pulled the cord——and couldn't have cared less, dragging his fingertips in the dirt, spine sunk, as they took his picture. "Now," the assistant said as he led Henry into the darkroom, "you're converted." All quite lovely for them, and why not let those two roam wide-eyed through the whole vast and bountiful world together if that's what they desired, but Aloysius, at this last exchange, stood abruptly, determined for his tent. MacGilavey waited a few minutes after Aloysius had withdrawn behind the white cloth, wondered whether he should go inside and share grievances with the man or just give the fellow his time alone. He decided finally to go inside the tent, they could make light of the whole event, enjoy a laugh, perhaps some tobacco, too, but when he walked inside, voice boisterous and genial as if they shared the opening scene on a theatre stage, he found Aloysius in the corner, back turned, hand thrust down his trousers as if in some feverish search for spare coin. When the photographer heard MacGilavey he wrenched this busier of arms up and out, grew crimson in the face and neck, teeth bared, shoved something, a document, maybe, or a photograph, into his coat, and MacGilavey hurried from the tent and left the man to himself.

The next day brought an unforeseen simplicity: under the cloudless blue sky, without any faint gunfire to regard, MacGilavey sat under a tree with a Croat named Josip and traded tobaccos. The leaves that the workman smoked, that all the Croats smoked as they hammered away at Balaclava's new railway, were easier on the throat and smelled

sweeter than his own. MacGilavey couldn't speak much with Josip, who would still have probably preferred to sit and hum, eyelids wilted, legs crossed, even if they had shared a dialect. MacGilavey didn't mind, given that hour's peace, but when Andrew "Aha" appeared, tense in the shoulders and wide of step, MacGilavey suddenly wished he were busy, could fend off the photographer's assistant through some minimal diversion of attention. "Any trains due around camp, old fellow?" he uttered politely but to no visible response from Josip, lucky him to be stuck with a Croat, they all seemed, at their best, a little dumb, and insane at their very worst. Desperate, MacGilavey stared upwards to appear preoccupied by something, anything: clouds, stars, angels, none of which the clarity above could provide him.

Though Andrew "Aha" never *was* drawn by eye contact, MacGilavey recalled, if his method for taking pictures had proven anything. "Have you seen the apparatus?" The question was rushed, like he'd been asking it once a minute, verbatim, since waking.

"Pardon me?" MacGilavey said listlessly.

Andrew "Aha" gritted his teeth. "The camera. Or are you dumb to my work around here?"

"Proudly so," MacGilavey grinned, blew smoke, "the less I know about the goings-on today, the better, I say," and tried his best to hum along with Josip despite the Croat's angular, ungraspable melody.

"Keôr baghirdî——" Andrew "Aha" trudged off, arms stiff at his sides, hands tightened into fists.

MacGilavey had, in fact, spotted Aloysius with the camera, which the photographer concealed behind the camp's hospital before making separate trips back to

his tent for a chair, a curtain, and a hammer. He and the wagon were well-hidden and it was the dozen men that eventually formed a restless line by the hospital, rather than the camera itself, that drew the attention of Andrew "Aha" to Aloysius's makeshift portrait set. "You!" the assistant shouted, knocking officers, all men taller and more muscular than he, out of his way. At the front of the line, he found Aloysius. The photographer stood across a zouave who sat on his hands, his shapeless red trousers billowing like a lady's skirt. The zouave tried to reason with the intruder in French. Andrew "Aha" lurched against the wind, against the zouave's insistent voice, and wrenched him from his seat before tearing the curtain from the hospital's wooden outer wall and ravaging the set that Aloysius had devised.

But the decimation of the photographer's quaint construction——the wicker boxes, the dirty fabrics, the rusted metal seat, a short belt of ammunition more decorative than intimidating——earned him the soldier's sympathies. His toil had seemed earnest and heartfelt, far from all the rules and stuffy theatrics of his assistant; and who was the Ottoman, anyway, to tell that nice Englishman how to work his own machinery? The soldiers, a bulk-boned lot, turned towards Andrew "Aha" as one but Aloysius raised a quelling palm, waited patiently for this convulsion's end with the camera pressed against his belly.

Andrew "Aha" stamped his feet. "He's deranged, you idiots!" The soldiers looked but weren't listening. Andrew "Aha" stuck a finger in the photographer's face. "Not again! You hear? Or I'll tell them, I swear." Aloysius had only to chuckle behind his fastened lips to send his assistant off in the other direction while the waiting officers rebuilt the backdrop for their portraits.

The sky starless again, dark as coal, heaven hidden, MacGilavey lay closer to his campfire, stretched out on his back, his fingers teasing the flames. He felt a tug at his waist. It was Josip. The Croat pulled MacGilavey up and led him to a gathering of officers, four men huddled outside a tent. “Look here,” whispered Captain Vam. He extended his hands to MacGilavey, palms up so that the major thought at once of the Christ sculpture that stood over the pulpit of his church in Lewisham. But Captain Vam bore no wounds——only an adder, gray with a ridged trail of black along its spine.

“What’re you doing with that little brute?” MacGilavey’s query was hushed and fearful.

Captain Vam grinned, “We found it yonder way,” and pointed to a row of bushes in the distance. “A gift for our friend Mahound.”

The adder was peaceful in his hands, slithered slowly in circles. MacGilavey, Josip, and the other three officers peered into the tent and watched as Captain Vam, after presenting an impish smile, dropped the adder into bed with the sleeping figure and hurried away on the tips of his toes. Andrew “Aha” stirred, groaned, took a breath and upon the chatter of the viper flung himself from slumber into the cold air, he screamed, tripped over his feet and took the tent down with him. Draped in white cloth and flailing wildly, Andrew “Aha” resembled a corpse wrestling back to life from the awful, terrifying stillness of the underworld. MacGilavey and the officers cackled. “Traitor!” one of them shouted through their roaring. They ran away before he managed to disentangle himself from the tent and crush the snake’s head with the heel of his boot. Only Josip stayed behind; he lifted the limp, mangled creature tightly between his thumb and forefinger and tossed it into a nearby campfire.

MacGilavey might have slept well that night——he felt no guilt regarding the incident with the white Muslim——were it not for the footsteps outside his tent. Soles brushed the pebbled dirt, a familiar sound, undoubtedly it was Andrew "Aha" pacing out there, MacGilavey realized. Did he know of his involvement with the adder? The thing was harmless, not a poisonous species. He couldn't say the same about Andrew "Aha", who'd brought his own personal plague upon the English quarters. MacGilavey searched for his knife. It lay on the other side of the tent. He bit his lip, resigned, reaching for it would have made too much noise, though he prayed that Andrew "Aha" didn't brandish a blade of his own.

Now, where was Henry Chambers? The journalist seemed to be the only man who could temper the passions of that wicked Muslim. MacGilavey felt the hard, rocky earth under his back. His skin was beginning to bruise. Lord, he thought, maybe we should have let the Russians take this land for themselves, its mountains and Muslims and mosques, those frightening rooms of ungodly ritual, encircled by lances that all but dripped with the right red blood of good Christians.

The major couldn't find anyone from the photography party until midday. Aloysius, gut curling out of his unbuttoned shirt, kneeled on the ground beside his wagon. Glimmers caught MacGilavey's eye. At first he wondered if Aloysius had discovered clean water underground but as he stepped closer he saw broken glass, much of it burned black——the shards of photographic negatives. MacGilavey bent over and peered into the pile. The faces of men he recognized, flat, disembodied, were scattered before him. "The little shit," Aloysius said, "he smashed my plates, the little shit! Just the

ones *I* took!" MacGilavey felt shamelessly relieved: Andrew "Aha" must have blamed Aloysius for the adder's attack.

About a dozen feet from the scattered shards, Aloysius noticed only then, were those brown leather boots, spying on him, still without a body to fill them. He waved his arms over the openings——nothing. He clenched his teeth. Andrew "Aha" was probably responsible for them, too, Aloysius deduced, had been taunting his employer all along. To think, Aloysius had been so civil in providing the man a job. Soon, Queen willing, Europe would be running the Ottoman cities; then Andrew "Aha" Erlebnis would see just how much patience white men——*real* white men, not the converted, like him——reserved for his ilk.

Aloysius thundered from his spoiled work. He found Andrew "Aha" sitting on the train tracks beside Henry. The two stared at a piece of paper. Andrew "Aha" directed Henry through it, spoke as if reciting a page of instructions, but whatever they were doing, Aloysius didn't care. "God damn you!" he cried as he hurried to a sprint. Stealing his camera like that, destroying his work, threatening to tell every soldier at Balaclava about the picture of the girl——the bastard was going to pay.

Henry backed away. Andrew "Aha" dropped his document, stood and stiffened his body but Aloysius's weight overpowered him and the photographer tackled his assistant to the ground as they shouted and swore. They landed on the metal rails but the pain was no excuse to stop the beatings. Some of the English officers and Croats cheered and applauded; only the railway officials, white-jacketed and brandishing canes, demanded an end to the brawl, though their intervention meant nothing to the combatants. Andrew "Aha" pushed his aggressor off and lunged for his neck, tossed

himself around more than he did Aloysius, wound up on the ground again but he didn't need strength alone, he had fingernails, he had teeth, and they bore into the man's hairless, exposed leg. Aloysius threw his head up and screamed when his skin was pierced, he seized his assistant's hair and tore two greasy black clumps from his scalp, Andrew "Aha" threw a punch, nose and knuckles alike were bleeding.

But what MacGilavey saw next was far stranger than the scuffle. It was preceded by sound, a distant rumble that at first resembled artillery, vague weapons at work, but as it drew nearer MacGilavey feared that the Flood had come again to wash them all away——what more fitting a time, really? Though smoke ascended the horizon, not water, followed by the source of its dispersion, a train car burning from the inside and roaring along the railway, unmanned, uncontrolled. Where it had come from, MacGilavey couldn't fathom; though where it was going, the major had a better idea. In a matter of seconds, the train car would run out of track.

The Englishmen and Croats had already retreated. A few of them were screaming for Aloysius and Andrew "Aha" to break their entanglement and cast themselves from the tracks but they couldn't win their attention. Henry thrust forward to grab them while he still could but MacGilavey had his arms around the journalist's waist before he could take a second step. Henry resisted, "No, damn you!" but MacGilavey held firm, brought the man to the ground to keep from dashing in front of the swift machine, reckless and amok, wild and without manipulation, more a blur as it approached, the fastest thing that the major, that any of the onlookers in the camp that morning, had ever seen.

A violent shriek suggested the last, loosest few feet of metal rail. Aloysius and Andrew "Aha", clutching each other's tattered bodies, finally sensed the engine's

approach and hurled themselves backwards. The train car spilled from the railway's unfinished end and skidded atop the soil, razed any tents, ravaged any opposing wooden fortifications, in its wake before the stones that obtruded from the ground turned the monolith over on its side. When it finally slowed to a stop, dust filled the air as far as MacGilavey could see. He wasn't the first of the officers to start coughing up Balaclava's undone grit but once the sordid stuff filled his lungs he balked and joined their hacking, unhappy chorus. Henry was caught in the throes of a spasm, too, and MacGilavey remembered that he'd been crushing the poor fellow the entire time.

Before the dust was clear, MacGilavey sought out the photographer and the assistant. They were barely on their feet, covered more than anyone else in the color of that stinging loam. Aloysius wiped his eyes, wheezed, mined the dust from his ears with his fingers. He looked unreasonably calm, especially when he sat down on a stray cannonball to stretch his arms and legs and clutch the sorest parts of his flesh. Andrew "Aha" had lost all composure, flung himself back to the scene of the crash and began searching the tracks. "Where is it!" he bellowed, hands clawing through his hair, "Where did it go!"

Henry and MacGilavey staggered over to the frantic young man. "What do you mean?" the major asked, still breathless.

"No! This can't——it can't! I can't!" He scrambled through the metal and the rocks and the loosened soil but found nothing so he ran to the overturned train car, searching its difficult shape, even tried to lift the gigantic thing. "I can't! I can't lose them!" cried Andrew "Aha".

"Wait!" Captain Wilkinson appeared, hoisted himself atop the train car. His uniform was clean of dust; he had missed the crash but the noise had stolen him from his quarters. In Crimea and in his tour of Kabul before then, Wlkinson had grown accustomed to the sound of manmade metals striking the earth in vicious return. But this had been deafening even at a distance. He removed his cap. Hair clung to his sweaty forehead. "Tell me, lad! What are you looking for? What is it you think you can find here?"

MacGilavey stamped his foot——again with the captain's protection. Any sensible Englishman who'd met Andrew "Aha" would have left him there without hesitation. This accident——a very real disaster, unbelievable as it was——had almost killed scores of the Queen's bravest and yet Wilkinson preferred to waste his energy on that maniacal Muslim. Still, MacGilavey couldn't help but recall the paper that Andrew "Aha" was holding before his fight with the photographer, the paper that he and Henry were fixed on.

Andrew "Aha" collapsed into Wilkinson's arms. He began to weep. Sudden tears joined the blood and dust that mottled his face, his pale complexion confused with crude, raw darkness. "Karl——Franz——Joseph! Joseph! No sir! No sir!"

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Once, after slicing a knuckle on a leaf of parchment, Henry had a wound that wouldn't seal, a cut atop a patch of skin incapable of lying still. He'd never fully understood the ceaselessness of hands until this miniscule cut reopened and stung and

brimmed with crimson upon the slightest motion, impervious to the mercy of Sophia's lips. He thought many times that the cut had closed but realized he'd only disregarded its pain.

While the railway officials gathered to figure out a means of moving their downed locomotive, the vehicle still fulminating smoke, stubborn and prostrate before them, Henry changed into fresh clothing. But a string-thin streak of blood descended his sleeve, still wet and spreading, and he found that his knuckle, the very same that had splayed in London months before, was torn anew. Somewhere in him, he knew, pressing a thumb over the incision, was the ability to forget what was manifest, unambiguous. He had done it before. Pain came from within and like a gloomy thought could be unheeded. He needed to lie to himself. But this took time.

Notebook in hand, Henry watched Aloysius expose a fresh glass plate to the wreck of the train car and wondered whether he would have been better off just taking a picture of the picture-taker than trying to describe his actions. And the vehicle: what a marvel. He envied the photograph——it spoke the language of the ruins where Henry's had to adapt to them.

He turned away from the train car. "Were any soldiers hurt?" he asked, pen ready for transcription.

Captain Wilkinson stood beside Aloysius, surveying the accident. "No, thankfully," said Wilkinson, shaking his head. "No one was in the tents when it flew off the tracks. We were lucky. This could have been a lot worse." He put a palm to the metal——still hot. "First thing tomorrow, we'll send the engineers up north and find out

how this blasted thing came our way. It's a shame I won't be here to find out. I'd much like to know."

Aloysius pulled the camera's cord. "You mean to say this won't delay our trip to Sebastopol?"

"I'm still resolved," Wilkinson pronounced, "to ride with you fellows up to the city. It's about ten miles north. But make no mistake, I think it my duty to you, considering that your stay here has been less than fortunate, so far."

Aloysius snorted. Wilkinson's brow twitched. The photographer had better be grateful, the captain thought. He was starting to get funny looks from the generals here at Balaclava, from Lord Raglan, even from other men of the Ninth Foot, over the attention he was paying the photographer's project, namely that troublesome assistant of his… "Any sign of 'Aha'?" he asked.

"No," the photographer spat, "and I suppose I'll be driving the wagon myself."

"Maybe it'll put some hair on your knuckles." Wilkinson slapped the man's back. "We leave on the morrow's midday," he said as he strolled off to speak with Lord Raglan and the railway officials.

Henry packed a small suitcase: a change of clothing, his stationery, a few books, his unfinished letter to Sophia. He left the photograph of his face, still wrapped and addressed to Gregor, behind in his tent, leaning against the mattress. That would be his reward for finishing the assignment in Crimea——to take himself home; to take more of himself home than he had arrived with.

Before embarking, Wilkinson gathered his favorite men from the Ninth and requested one last photograph in Balaclava. Aloysius arranged them in two rows——ten

men kneeling, eleven standing, he counted, with Wilkinson in the center. Aloysius dragged the camera backwards until every officer was in frame. “None of your mugs’ll look outstanding at a distance like this,” the photographer warned them. “Not that they get much help on their own.” The officers erupted in cheers. “Hold still, damn it!”

Aloysius exposed the plate and promised each of them copies of the photograph upon his return from Sebastopol. Not perfect, he knew, not the sharpest of shots, but after he looked up from the apparatus the men applauded and thanked him, some even shook his hand, and he felt oddly proud to have delighted them; and if that was all his art, his science, had achieved in Crimea, reduced as it was to a meager crop since Andrew “Aha” destroyed most of the plates, then perhaps it had been worth the trouble. The sensation was new to him: offering without taking. “Well done,” whispered a voice from behind, deep and parched. Aloysius turned and found no one. It must have been one of the soldiers, and although he couldn’t place the voice to any of them in particular, he accepted the compliment graciously, one among all the others.

“Don’t trouble yourself with your vanquished plates,” Wilkinson reassured him once they had set out on horseback the on following morning, sun barely over the horizon. “Photographers haven’t had the best of luck in these conditions. I heard of a Romanian named Szathmari who was making pictures of a campaign in Oltenitza, west of here, maybe two years ago. The Ottomans almost blew *his* van to smithereens! They thought that darkroom was, I suppose, a heavy artillery of some sort. Then there was Nicklin, poor fellow. His ship sank right outside Balaclava harbor, and he with it. Lost his life to a terrible storm. Why, even Roger Fenton broke a few bones here, got sick with

cholera, too. Not to mention, he lost a few photographs of his own, what with the climate and all. But *only* a few. He was careful to keep them safe."

Aloysius hesitated. His mules slowed as though aware of the apprehension, and the wagon came to a creaking halt. "What are you saying?"

Wilkinson matched his pace. "I might say you folk are cursed, by the looks of it!" But Aloysius wasn't laughing. They stared at each other as the rest of their party passed. "There's nothing to fear, Aloysius."

The photographer jerked his feet about in the stirrups, rode in circles. "I'm telling you, something is unsavory here! There's something going on that I can't see and it's beginning to nark, it is! Don't you see? The Romanian's van. That shipwreck. The railway, just yesterday. Those god-forsaken boots!"

"Boots, good man——?"

"And I've had just about enough of it!" Aloysius strode forward, skin flushed as usual.

MacGilavey rode mostly at the rear, trailing the darkroom. He'd have done anything, shot his own foot, deserted the military, to avoid any further association with the camera, but Wilkinson had approached him with a handsome, golden handful in exchange for his company——MacGilavey rarely missed his rifle's target, however far the distance, and Wilkinson knew it. They would be safer with him in tow.

Two other officers, both privates, took either side of the wagon. In this arrangement, Henry noticed, the soldiers looked like they were protecting treasure from bandits. As they rode on, the ground became greener, the trees less dry and brittle and growing closer together than those in lonely Balaclava. The air was clearer outside the

camp's borders without the blight of rotting food or mismanaged sewers. Henry noticed how accustomed to the smell of Balaclava's tainted air he'd become.

A sneeze. "Bless you," answered Captain Wilkinson. Silence followed——no thank you, no courtesy in return for his. He looked roundabout for the noisemaker and realized how muffled and distant the sneeze had sounded. "Who was that?"

"Pardon?" MacGilavey replied.

Wilkinson raised his reins and stopped his horse. "Which one of you sneezed?"

"Just now? Not I."

Henry and the soldiers all denied the offense. Aloysius dismounted, crouched low on the ground, eventually brought his stomach to the earth, looked in all directions. No brown leather boots, this time.

Wilkinson sighed. "What in blazes——"

Another sneeze, its origin clear. Aloysius threw open the darkroom doors and in the back, in the shadows, was Andrew "Aha" lying on his side. "You!" Aloysius started, "You couldn't just stay where you——!" and tossed the man out of the wagon and onto the dry grass.

Wilkinson grabbed his arm before he could deliver the first blow. "Not again! Not again, by all things right!"

Aloysius relaxed his agitated arms and took a loud breath, more exasperated than angry. "What are you *doing* here?"

Andrew "Aha" stood and brushed himself off. He straightened his back, dignity in check despite the guillotine blade dangling overhead. "I wanted to make amends. To apologize."

Henry was disappointed to have left Balaclava without the assistant. Andrew "Aha", though younger than Henry, was a teacher to him. But Henry knew that Andrew "Aha" wasn't there to simply reclaim a job. That he could find again in Istanbul. He was there so he wouldn't be forgotten. There was no truer death, Henry understood, like the faces of those three brothers that already faded from his memory without the picture to counsel him.

"Walk back to camp. 'Aha'," Aloysius said softly, "while there's still light."

Andrew "Aha" opened his hands. "Please. I mistook my place. Let me prepare your plates again. Let me drive the wagon."

"I'll give you both my mules if need be, and drag my wagon rest of the way to Sebastopol. Now please leave us."

"You can't trust this Muslim," MacGilavey said.

"I'm not a Muslim."

"I don't care," Aloysius exclaimed. "I don't care if you're a Sikh bastard on a bed of nails or Christ come again. Do as I say and go back to camp. You've no grounds to argue."

"I'm sorry, Aloysius. For being so stubborn."

"Monomaniacal."

"For everything."

"I wish I could forget I'd ever met you," MacGilavey butted in.

"Why would you want to work for me again, after everything?"

The assistant's feet kneaded the soil. It was too rocky to submit and he left no prints. "I don't want to be remembered this way. Please, let me try to remedy this."

"I refuse," Aloysius grumbled.

Henry didn't expect sympathy from Aloysius. But why should the photographer be allowed to hide *his* mistakes while Andrew "Aha" was punished? That picture, the naked girl——he didn't get to stand as an arbiter of justice and conceal his wrongdoings. "Let him come with us." Henry said.

"This isn't your decision," MacGilavey said.

"Let him come back, Aloysius."

"He's caused enough trouble," the photographer said.

Henry swallowed. "I could cause far more."

"He's already——" Aloysius's mouth hung open. "Pardon?"

"'Aha' and I could say something that we've left unsaid."

"What's he mean?" MacGilavey asked the photographer.

"You wouldn't dare."

"I could make words out of your secrets," he said.

MacGilavey rubbed his eyebrows. "The man's demented."

"I can define you right now, Aloysius. I can tell you what you are and everyone will know."

"Henry, you don't go any further with this talk——"

"No doubts. Nothing uncertain."

Andrew "Aha" waited anxiously. Aloysius raised a finger but lost his speech.

"What's he mean?" Wilkinson asked.

"Don't——don't you say a word."

"Then let 'Aha' come with us to Sebastopol. He'll ready your glass. And we'll go no further with this talk."

Aloysius huffed, hushed, waited for a moment before loosing one mule from the wagon and hopping on its back. Andrew "Aha", without any further word from the photographer, climbed onto the wagon and whipped the remaining mule. They rode in silence for miles, further from the sea, into the empty valleys flat and void of anything manmade. Henry felt no guilt for threatening Aloysius——he still thought him a criminal awaiting trial——but wondered if he should have. The photographer hadn't buried his misdeeds by complying with Henry's demands; yet Henry rode on beside Aloysius as if he'd never glimpsed that poor girl in the photograph. London, he promised himself——in London he would make up for this. The miles leading towards Sebastopol, on the other hand, hid nothing. Without the trees and rocky peaks, he thought, he would have seen even more. The grass could disappear along with the soil and the furthest layers of rock beneath; the blue sky would billow apart and the stars would dim; finally he would be surrounded by nothing but bare, blank canvas. It sounded so peaceful.

Just before twilight, the seven riders heard gunshots. Not the distant echoes of the siege against Sebastopol——closer than that, each bullet an immediate pop that rang over the thunder of hurried hooves. They passed a shallow trench abandoned of officers but strewn with supplies, shell casings, even footprints, before ascending the adjacent hill and scanning the valley below. An English cavalry, reduced to about twenty men, had just begun its charge against a line of Russians. "Keep your distance," warned Wilkinson. He peered through a spyglass. The line dispersed as the English drew closer but each Russian fired a final round before repositioning. Men and horses cracked against the earth.

"There we go!" Aloysius cried. "A little action for us!" He jumped from the wagon and retrieved his camera, already loaded with glass, from the darkroom.

"Aloysius," started Andrew "Aha", "you're not going to get much with all that motion; no sir."

"Not now, not now," Aloysius licked his lips.

MacGilavey rode up to Captain Wilkinson, rifle slung over his shoulder. "We ought to join them, Captain," he said. "We've four fighting men. That might be enough to make a difference down there."

"Major——"

"On my signal."

Wilkinson held his place. "We cannot."

"Our boys——"

"We stay put."

The other two officers approached, waiting for orders. MacGilavey's horse buckled. "I outrank you, Captain——"

"And at present we're not a fighting unit. We're an escort. This is a caravan. It wouldn't make sense."

MacGilavey leaned forward. Henry was sure the major was going to kick his heels and sprint into the fray.

"Under any other circumstances, I'd agree with you," placated Wilkinson. "I'd be the first. But our duty is to them." He gestured to the three civilians, Henry speechless, Aloysius busy at work, Andrew "Aha" strangely comfortable.

"Don't worry about us," the assistant smiled. "The dead make for better photographs than the living."

Aloysius hastened to his vantage point a few feet ahead. "You may get your way at the rate they're scuffling down there."

Metal against metal, swords unsheathed, last cries. Henry glared disapprovingly at Aloysius but the photographer was fixed on the charge. He had no respect for death, Henry realized; nor did his assistant who, as Aloysius said, always appeared to get his way. Good heavens, if his should one day be the only lens through which future generations might understand the years before their own, they would see *his* world, *his* version of reality. Andrew "Aha" Erlebnis, author of the past. That was what he seemed to want, anyway, like any dreamer Henry had ever met——including himself. So maybe the dead *were* his ideal subjects: he didn't even need to request their serenity before the apparatus. Was this the man Henry had fought to bring to Sebastopol? He felt nothing but shame as the gawking assistant counted the dead.

"I could order us in this very moment," MacGilavey said.

"We ride back to the trench," Wilkinson decided, "and make camp for the night." He turned his horse around and trotted from the hilltop, away from the skirmish, to make his judgment known.

MacGilavey caught up to the captain's side. "I'll have you know, you're going to be discharged when we return to Balaclava. Maybe thrown in prison if I can manage it."

"You accepted my bribe to begin with," Wilkinson said. "That would take some explaining, don't you think?"

MacGilavey spat. "You think that'll matter in headquarters?"

"We shall see."

"You've lost your mind over these louts. That Muslim," he shouted. "What's your stock in him?"

"He needs my protection. Chiefly from cutthroats like you."

"He needs an asylum."

They rode separately to the trench, the wagon trailing closer to Captain Wilkinson than MacGilavey. That evening at the trench, Andrew "Aha" found a book of matches and built a small fire, which he reasoned would die during their sleep but would suffice until then. He squatted and leaned in to warm his hands. Aloysius, meanwhile, developed the negative he had made of the battle. "Well I'll be," mouth curling, "this is certainly something." Henry looked over the photographer's shoulder and, in the glass frame, saw the grassy field, the skyline, the clods of dirt kicked up by the soldiers of either side; but the soldiers and horses were missing.

"I told you," Andrew "Aha" said, holding his nose to keep the smoke out, "they were moving too quickly."

MacGilavey gnawed at stale bread. "Shouldn't you have known that already? Or am I risking my neck for a complete idiot?"

Aloysius frowned. "You never know for sure what the bloody thing can handle."

At some point late into the night the gunfire ceased. The group wasted no time the next morning and set out after feeding their horses. Passing over the hill's apex, they saw the remains of the skirmish: a plane littered with corpses, dead horses, still-loaded rifles. "Looks like each party had a few survivors," Wilkinson said as he searched the aftermath. "The English probably retreated to Balaclava. It's a shame they missed our fire."

"And the Russians?" asked Aloysius.

The captain smelled the air. "Likely up ahead. And if they're still on foot, we may come upon them yet."

Andrew "Aha" dismounted without permission from any of the officers. Aloysius followed and investigated the valley while he waited for his assistant to load the camera. There was plenty of light, the ground spared of shadows. He only needed to find the most engaging sight. Scratching his smooth chin, he settled on a westward focus: at the forefront, an Englishman flat upon his stomach and bleeding from the ears, one open eyelid divulging the dullness of his sight, the consequences of a noble sacrifice; a pair of horses, legs jutting skyward, in the middle; four indistinct Russian forms in the blurry background. As the details emerged in scorched black on the glass, hung over hot, effervescent mercury, Henry shuddered. Through the burning of those light-responsive chemicals, the corpses on view looked somehow grimmer, the stillness of their remnants only intensified. This wasn't death displayed before him; it was another death within death. He left the darkroom.

Aloysius relaxed considerably when the door was shut, mostly avoided looking at Henry, that leech, sucking him dry, his private thoughts. Andrew "Aha" shrugged. He began spreading nitrate solution on a new batch of plates, determined to help Aloysius regain his productivity, when the photographer called him over.

"Take a look at this, would you?" Aloysius handed his assistant a glass negative, one of the few left intact in the wagon.

Andrew "Aha" studied the line-up of officers and, when he spotted Wilkinson among them, nodded and answered, "The Ninth Foot. Uproarious bunch."

Aloysius shifted his weight, grew fretful. “Count them for me. The men.”

Andrew “Aha” placed his fingertip on the leftmost man and whispered the numbers as he dragged it across the plate. “Twenty-three it is. Why do you ask?”

“See, I could have sworn I counted twenty-one before I took that picture.”

“Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-one, aye.”

The assistant studied the picture again. “I see nothing wrong with your results.”

Aloysius grabbed the negative. On each end of the group, peering from behind the officers, he spotted two men he didn’t recognize, concealed beneath the waistline by other bodies. He couldn’t tell whether he knew their faces: beards unkempt, hair chopped unevenly, no shirts or coats, and, look at that, barefoot, both of them. “There are two men here I don’t recognize.”

“They’re probably Croats,” guessed Andrew “Aha”, uninterested.

“I don’t remember any Croats. I’d have remembered a pair of Croats!” He was at it again, toying with his mind, just like Henry but more exquisitely versed in this surreptitious sorcery. How did Andrew “Aha” do it, convince everyone that he knew what was true and what wasn’t? He was dangerous with his devious way about wisdom, stealing Aloysius’s secrets, turning Henry against him, that was his fault, no question, people believed him much too easily——

The assistant chuckled and headed for the door. “I wouldn’t be troubled, if I were you. The beautiful thing,” palm resting on the apparatus, “is that you couldn’t take a picture of something if it weren’t there, now could you?” He drummed his fingers for a moment before leaving Aloysius alone in the darkroom.

As they pursued the north, the seven riders listened for the foreign chatter of those missing Russians. They spent hours in silence. Birds circled overhead. One landed, stole a worm from the soil and flew off with the creature wriggling in its beak. MacGilavey wanted to shoot the bird. He knew he only needed one bullet. The sun was hot but not blinding. He raised his rifle, not to pull the trigger but to show his intentions to the other officers——maybe they would smile and concur and share an understanding in that silence——when the bird burst into a pall of feathers and dropped from the sky. MacGilavey inspected his rifle. No smoke. The horses were reluctant to move forward.

"Calm, calm, everyone," said Wilkinson. "That was an English gun, by the sound of it."

Ten minutes ahead, they spotted Captain Vam leaning on his rifle like a prospector at work. He stood outside a circle of red-garbed men, their horses parked and drinking from a puddle. Another horse, removed from the others and lacking a harness, stood unthinkingly beside the officers. Hither called the captain's finger.

Aloysius and Andrew "Aha" stayed on the wagon. Only Wilkinson dismounted, hand on the hilt of his sword. "What's your business out here?"

Captain Vam craned his neck. "Our business? What a way to greet your fellow Christians! Especially in this godforsaken land. We're a flock astray from our shepherd, aren't we?"

As though on command, Vam's officers spread their circle wider and revealed the hunching man within: a Turk, likely a Muslim.

"Who've you got there, Captain Vam?" Wilkinson demanded.

Captain Vam ambled over to Muslim, grabbed him by the collar and threw him from the circle. The Muslim stumbled but held his footing. “We caught him heading back to the garrisons in Sebastopol proper. He’s spying for the Russians, the little bogey.”

Aloysius raised his eyebrows, teeth showing, tongue moving around in his mouth.

Captain Vam turned to the captive. “Isn’t that right, Mahound?” He bashed the butt of his rifle into the Muslim’s gut. The man spilled over, struggled to suck a breath of air. “Now,” Captain Vam went on, “where were we?”

One of his officers raised a canteen. “Have you confessed your sins? Do you trust in Christ at present?” He poured the canteen over the unharnessed horse’s head. “Hope so, ‘cause, as you have it, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we rescue you with the muddy running stew of the Crimea; ‘cause you’re going to need it out here!” The officers laughed. “’Cause if he don’t help you, nobody will!” The animal twitched and stamped a hoof.

Andrew “Aha” leaned over and whispered to Henry. “It’s a horse,” he said. “They’re baptizing a horse.”

The captive Muslim grunted and sneered at the men. He swore at them in the Ottoman patois. Even as the soldiers laughed he muttered on.

“What’s he saying?” Henry asked Andrew “Aha”.

The assistant was worried, he winced and offered Henry a polite translation but the actual words were something harsher, a bit of offense towards the men who’d arrested him, not so much against them as against their relatives, as in, you’re from a lesser stock, you know that, and so, well, you’d be wise to keep them in check every now and then, as in, go pick your mothers and sisters up off the streets, you sons of whores. Andrew “Aha”

elucidated none of the Muslim's familial slurs. The Englishmen certainly didn't understand their captive's curse as he shook the last drops of water from their canteen over the horse, so why make them any angrier, Andrew "Aha" decided. And, although he could have, he also resolved not to speak with the man in Turkish and gain Captain Vam's suspicions. His mules had little interest in the Lord.

"We're taking him back to Balaclava," Captain Vam stated proudly, "and if we're lucky, Lord Raglan will let us shoot him with a whole crowd looking on." Captain Vam ordered the Muslim held down and returned the wetness to its dispatcher's face.

"Have you seen any Russians?" Wilkinson solicited the soldiers. "There may be a handful running about, possibly headed up north. We're hoping we might avoid stumbling in their way."

"Not a Russian soul in sight," answered Captain Vam, his eyes on the Muslim all the while. "But they're marauding somewhere, you can bet on it." The captive was finally reduced to silence, holding himself as one of the officers refilled his canteen in the puddle to enact further salvation.

Aloysius was tempted to alert Captain Vam about Andrew "Aha". It might have worked——he could have gestured or whispered as he passed, Vam could take the hint and tie the assistant's hands to captive Muslim's and they'd both be bound for the firing squad——but if Andrew "Aha" caught on, God forbid, he'd start talking, spilling those secrets again. It was too risky. "Should we get a picture of this?" Aloysius asked his assistant, earnest and incautious.

"No," said Andrew "Aha", "let's get moving," and drove the mules onward, and as the wagon passed Captain Vam and the laughing English officers, Aloysius waved

cheerfully goodbye, wondering if he had missed his last chance to silence the threats of his assistant. As the caravan passed, Henry glanced back at Captain Vam, who pointed to Andrew "Aha" and whispered to his officers before they all began chuckling.

Daylight persisted. Dusk was still hours away. Wilkinson assured them that they would reach some form of English fortification before nightfall. Nonetheless, Henry was tense as he rode, had to remind himself to relax his burning shoulders every few minutes. "Breathe," whispered Wilkinson beside him. He was like a wise, helpful tree from a children's book, Henry decided. An old, talking tree.

To the extent that his fate was measurable in the paces by which he advanced toward Sebastopol——into the hazy north toward secrets over the hills, the way froward and strange——Henry thought it a looming, dangerous certainty, his destination a surer thing with those miles of open plain behind. Once elusive in its breadth, vague in motive, fate now rained from its ungraspable place above, drawn by gravity, culled from the heavens and narrowed as it took the shape of the city that awaited him, granted its texture of wood and stone. Sebastopol would erase all unknowns.

MacGilavey brushed a fly from his face, flicked another from his horse's mane. A tingle imbued his nose and he sneezed into his lap, wiping moisture from the corners of his mouth. Wilkinson, at the vanguard, rotated his head. "God bless——"

A far-off blast: Captain Wilkinson went entirely limp after a final feverish gasp; didn't fall from his horse, his feet settled in the stirrups; but simply dropped his arms and leaned back, jaw hung as though about to demonstrate a great, wide yawn for his companions. Redness streamed from the hole at the base of his neck. His horse whinnied and trotted aimlessly.

MacGilavey and the two officers jumped from their saddles, rifles ready. “Hide!” the major shouted, and Aloysius and Andrew “Aha” ran from their seats and took cover behind the wagon. Henry scurried their way, squatted beside them. MacGilavey darted over to Wilkinson’s horse and found the spyglass in the captain’s trouser pocket, searched the land ahead for any alterations in the solid earth, any shifts in the light. He could have easily scanned past them, mistook them for boulders in the valley ahead. Then, out of the grainy, translucent sirocco blowing by, MacGilavey spotted four kneeling Russian uniforms. He crouched low and took his first shot. One of them fell backwards. The other three scrambled forward, their charge incited. “Here we go, boys,” MacGilavey said, screwing on his bayonet and, without looking over his shoulder, “Get inside the wagon!”

They huddled together in the blackness of that room, their sight shaded and unaided by the screaming and explosions of gunpowder that breached the wooden walls. Fear was a lonesome hiding place; Henry thought of Sophia for the first time since having his photograph taken in the graveyard, wanted her arms around him, her broad shoulders to kiss. The parts of his companions that pressed against him in the dark——hot and contracted tight, awkwardly encroaching——made his separation from her only more obvious. He squeezed his sweaty fists shut. The incision on his knuckle was damp, the scab reopened, he could feel the blood surfacing. To breathe and to breathe her in would never again be separable forces, he affirmed, if only I could make it so, I would let it be. Henry gasped before shutting his mouth. Andrew “Aha” was silent. Aloysius breathed the loudest but even he was quiet once he realized that the gunfire had ended and the last remaining noise was wind against their wagon.

Andrew “Aha” opened the door and led the way. Henry and Aloysius turned away from the light, painful as any cut, when they stepped outside. The bodies that had fallen around them looked as if they’d already lain there for days, accumulating dust and decomposing, their rifles no longer loaded weapons at war but antiques. Wilkinson’s horse had strayed a few yards off with its lifeless master, muzzle grazing the earth in search of food or water. MacGilavey sat on a rock beside the wagon, clutching a leg that dripped his sanguine stock, trousers stained and murky.

Andrew “Aha” scampered towards him. The officer jerked away from the assistant’s hands, refused his aid. Henry and Aloysius had to help him stand. Both of his legs quivered erratically until they could lean him against his horse.

Aloysius looked back at the English bodies. “They got your men. Bloody czarists. Good thing you picked them off.”

MacGilavey moaned as Andrew “Aha” held a rag against his wound. “The Russians fell fast. So did my men. Bloody hell, it happened so quickly.” He found his reins. “Get me on my horse.”

Gnashing his teeth amid flashes of pain and the rupture of his limb, MacGilavey was boosted back on his saddle. “What’re you going to do?” Aloysius asked. “What about us?”

“I must ride back to Balaclava. I’ll make it fast——this won’t be the end of me, but I can’t get there in time if I’m leading your wagon the whole way. So I promise I’ll send a squadron of men back here to pick you boys up.” He exhaled gravely. “But for now, I’m afraid, I can only take one of you.”

Wordless, the trio stared up at MacGilavey.

"Henry," eyes on the journalist, the major's order clear.

Henry looked left and right. "I can't leave them. It wouldn't be right."

MacGilavey shook his head. "Fine," he exclaimed, already kicking his horse. "No shilly-shally from me. Stay safe. You'll find some water a few paces west. Just don't forget where you've left the wagon if you go refill. Which you should. Summer's unkind here. But I pledge my word, we'll come back for you." As he rode off he turned his head one last time. "And don't forget those boots, if they're yours indeed."

Aloysius glanced where the major had gestured——brown leather boots, one of them fallen over, the other upright on its sole, encircled by the slightest of shadows. Henry and Andrew "Aha" draped blankets over the dead officers and walked off holding their canteens. Aloysius's mouth was parched but he didn't follow them. He stayed beside the wagon and, tucking a hand between his legs, a pit rooted in his stomach, hell all but clamoring for him, he started to listen.

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"You have a lot of secrets," the voice said, grainy and parched, "don't you?"

Aloysius shifted uncomfortably. Proof, finally. "Everybody is allowed their privacy."

"But you," the voice said, "you're something special."

"Unsavory," said another voice, higher pitched, airier.

"You think you're impervious," the voice said.

"Invisible."

Aloysius looked west. Henry and Andrew "Aha" were small specks nearly camouflaged with the earth. They bent over, sliding their canteens around a pool, and took long, gratifying gulps, but Aloysius forgot his thirst. "What am I to do?"

"You must accept some terrible things about yourself," the other voice said.

Aloysius ran his hands through his hair. Lights clung to the corners of his vision but dissipated every time he tried to center on them. "I know who I am."

"You give yourself far too much credit."

"Your machine," the first voice said, "is an abomination."

"No more hiding. No more illusions."

"You're an illusion!" Aloysius jabbed at empty space.

"You've fooled yourself if you think you can get out of this one."

"I can take care of myself," urged the photographer, thumb jabbing at his heart.

"You've given yourself away with that machine. You create the positive."

The voice waited. "You've never taken the via negativa, have you? Let me tell you. It's simple but it's vast. It's a road that travels on and on."

"How do you find what must be found without looking?" asked the other voice.

"Neti neti," the voice added, as if spoken through his widest smile.

"Neti neti," avowed the other voice.

III. Lucid and Obscure

"This is the fifth trip I've made today and I haven't been anywhere yet!"

—— Groucho Marx

Big Smoke, Big Smoke left in rank dominion, Big Smoke saved from old damnation, perpetually imperfect, new remains, clockwork through fever and malady. Some day ahead, its towers might pierce the firmament itself, which in the Book had always seemed unbreakable, a one-way route, and if He chose to use it the matter was settled. For now that bargain was kept; but for how much longer, no one could say for sure. Even the writing on Belshaz'zar's palace wall——the Mene, Mene, Tekel, Uphar'sin that Daniel spoke into prophecy, hard sentences dissolved of doubt——had foretold events that came to pass that very night, only hours after the passage had intruded on the royal feast to be read aloud. No Judean prophet, to say nothing of the magicians, the astrologers, the Chalde'ans, the soothsayers, had seen forward enough in time to predict London, *this* London. By now only the worms were still unaware, writhing underneath the streets, the sewers, the cobblestones, the earliest surviving foundations, in pathways through the dark, that color, that kingdom, in which nothing was ever liable to change.

Sophia spent the last days of June in her home appointing as many acquaintances——some lifelong friends, other near-strangers——to help her fill the day and avoid returning to the house of the elder Weirs. The last time she'd spoken with her father, William had asked if Henry was thoughtful enough to write to her from Crimea. He hadn't, she confessed tersely before dragging the tines of her fork along her teeth, tasted more the stainless steel than the sliver of roasted duck it had delivered. Her father's

eyes glowed with displeasure. He cleared his throat and continued cutting his dinner. Sophia was tempted to follow with her own analysis of his question's particular phrasing but she saved the scorn, ate in silence. When her mother protested——Winnie, in earnest, had come to like Henry——and proffered her faith in the endurance of Henry's love, his longing to return, how could he not, so sweet a lady that awaited him, William shut her up, pressed a palm in her face, "Enough of that, I said!" Sophia gritted her teeth.

Over that summer she held out some hope that her husband's letters would appear, though the pleasure of his words would have only complemented the knowledge that he was still alive, unharmed, safe. That was all she wanted from him, all the proof she could have asked for. They didn't have to be long or romantic or filled with promises like his others, during their engagement. They could have been blank, save for his signature. It really didn't matter to her.

But she had received nothing since his departure last May. Every morning she woke to worries, implacable fears, and, most surprising, jealousies over her husband's months in other company, not with women, of course, not in the military camps, but men fired her resentment all the same. Her dreams were assailed with images of Henry dead, Henry lost in barren land, Henry kissing men and women with unrecognizable faces and ethereal features. Somehow she knew they hadn't stolen her husband, these figures painted with the vague colors of her nocturnal palette; Henry, rather, had stolen away from his wife, willingly. She wanted to shake him every time but the scenes played out before her like theater, she the audience, captive and helpless to change them.

Some mornings, before the fog dissipated, she wandered the harbors, the shipyards, counted the ghosts of uniformed men as they disembarked from ghost ships,

contended, relaxed, and she would think to herself, how frivolous were their precipitate ends, how little had their sacrifices meant——to return home and not ever be able to talk or touch again, to feel or become excited again, it was difficult for Sophia to imagine anyone ready to gamble that away. With any luck, her husband was too smart to waste the world that wanted him, awaited him on the other side of the continent.

The only other address that might have received a letter from Henry during the last few months, she assumed, was Gregor's. She was at his door on the Strand by half-past noon. He answered with an unshaven, blemished face, shadows circling his eyes. "Without an invitation? Extremely rude." But he was smiling.

"Would you invite me in, Mister Fleming." It wasn't a question.

He leaned against the door frame. "I'm to assume that you didn't merely come here to give yourself a break from drawing enchantments for children? And signing your pay over to your husband?"

Sophia held her ground.

"Or, conversely," he went on, "maybe it shouldn't surprise me if you're inching away from married life. What little one you've had, I might say."

"There's no mightn't anything with you, Gregor."

"Ha! Well. Do make yourself at home, m'lady."

He led her into his parlor, which Henry had once described to his wife as rich with ornament and artwork, the collection of a long-learned man. But the room she saw was sparsely arranged——only a single shelf of books, a piano, and the painting that had replaced his father's portrait disguised the bare white walls———brightened only by the scarlet pattern of the carpet. She wondered if he'd been selling off his possessions and

wondered why. A round table stood in the center of the room, a chair on either side, with a third closer to the fireplace. Sophia took the furthest one.

"You look wretched," she said.

"I thought you'd notice." Gregor poured two glasses of brandy, elbows on the table. "I've run into a little trouble, as of late. Very much a personal matter which is, unfortunately, somewhat likely to become, shall I say, a public property."

Fan twirling in her left hand, Sophia, unblinking, "Finances? A legal issue?"

"No. Not quite," Gregor said, "at least, not yet, it hasn't come to that just yet. Let's call it a creative injustice."

"I don't understand."

"Nor should you, it's not womanly business; not like the kind you've come here to discuss, undoubtedly." He passed her one of the glasses. "That means, go on, already. Or shall I feign interest?"

"Your temperament is growing offensive," Sophia said. "I think I'd rather——"

"Speak, Sophia," a flat hand cut the air and lingered firm and still after he'd spoken. "Time is precious to me."

She sipped the brandy. With her glass up to her nose, she noticed how strongly Gregor reeked of the alcohol, a betrayal of his steady pace and posture. "I wanted to know if you've heard anything from Henry, anything at all, since he left for that faraway place. A letter, perhaps."

Gregor reclined. "Henry, so far, I've not heard a thing from. I sent him a letter weeks ago. Never heard back. Not worried, though. I like to think he's on a great adventure, the boy, feeling something real, too delighted and distracted to think of home.

I certainly hope no great harm has come to him." He sniffed his drink. "Missing him, are you?"

"Of course," Sophia said, as earnestly as she could.

"I can't imagine why," Gregor shook his head. "I feel relieved of a great strain every time he goes away. All the questions. The weaknesses. I used to find them charming. Now they're simply pathetic. Like he's barely a part of this world."

"Gregor——"

"On occasion, I like to touch him, tell him something crude, just to get a reaction out of him. But he becomes frightened. He severs himself. He can't figure a response, to me or anything else. Sometimes, I can't believe it, I think he may actually be insane, or at least capable of it. We all have the same doubts as he. But Henry? He's so easily overwhelmed."

"Not everyone is as lucky as you, Gregor, with your money, your writing, your beliefs, all of them settled. Of course you'd find comfort in so narrow a life——"

"I'm——it's not what you'd think——"

"Some people have to search their whole lives to be as content with themselves."

Gregor paused, emptied his glass, licked the roof of his mouth. "Then you agree he's a lost heart, in every which way. Someone who needs to be found. We've both been appointed that duty, it seems." He grinned. "You're more like me than you are him."

"That's hard to imagine." She looked into him resentfully.

"When I was boy," he went on, "I suffered from a terrible stutter. Just terrible. I was a pest. My father didn't know what to do with me."

"You've made yourself perfectly clear to me——"

"That's right, exactly right, and I did this on my own, rid myself of that malady. I found a way to operate through this bloody goddamned world of ours. I matured. Sometimes that involves hiding yourself. Sometimes that involves telling a lie or two."

"Then if you've made a life of lies and hiding, you'll be found out before you know it."

"Is that so?"

"A man's real character is easy to behold."

"What if I lied and wanted to be found out? That it was all my doing?"

"You'll have your way."

"We're so like each other, Sophia."

"As I said, I can't imagine——"

"I hate London, sometimes. You know that? It's been one long story. It's made me into something I'm not."

"Anything you say or do, Gregor, that's what you are, as far as they can see. Take a little responsibility for your actions. Even if they're misdeeds."

"My actions?" he whispered, starting to slur.

Gregor stood. Sophia shot up, spilled her glass onto the carpet. Gregor barely noticed, approaching slowly. Calm, she retreated but had little room between her and the wall behind her.

"Henry and I gossiped about your naked body when we first saw you," he said. "Did you know that? That we spoke together about having you? Did you know that I made him want to fuck you?"

"You——you're a savage, and this——I won't stand for this and neither will Henry——"

"Oh, bollocks. I'm saying I had you first. I could have. I can."

Sophia's back landed against the wall with a thump, her heartbeat hurried.

"I've wanted you for some time."

"You're Henry's friend——"

"Henry's gone."

"Even if he was, you'd still be a devil."

Gregor leaned in. She struck his chest, felt her palm smack something solid and flat. Gregor smiled and removed a book, thin of pages but held in the firm leather cover of an important tome, from his breast pocket. "My father used to tell me, he'd order me, keep a book in my coat, always. As if he wanted me to consider the dreams of others before my own. That mine weren't enough. And I listened, Sophia, I listened for a long time."

His arms straddled her head, palms against the wall. "Let's get out of this city. Together. We could go away without saying a word. Not to Henry. Not to your father. No more reputations. Think of it. No rules or etiquette."

"You're well without those already."

"You don't belong in a place like this. You know too much. You want more than a woman gets here. I sympathize. And I'm willing to help. We could be ourselves."

"I've been myself for quite a while."

"Oh yes?" He grinned again.

"I've had plenty of practice."

"That tongue of yours——"

"——Is none of your concern."

She gasped when she felt him press against her, hard, forward, he slid a hand down to her waist, wrapped it around and squeezed her, pulled her towards him, towards it. She threw her knuckles against him, not aiming or analyzing, they bounced off his chest, finally she raised a knee into his stomach, the blow made him keel over, gasping for air, and she grabbed the projection at his crotch, stiff and goading his trousers, and wrung it like the neck of a treacherous bird. He screamed airlessly, his legs quivered, he collapsed and held himself as Sophia ran from the parlor. At the end of the hallway, she looked back, only for a second, and saw Gregor on his side, head down, clutching the ground as if it were all he had left, part of something greater, and would comfort him for as long as he lay there.

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Under the hot, unforgiving sun, Henry and Andrew "Aha" drank from their canteens, resolute to swallow as much as they were sweating. Not twenty minutes had passed since Major MacGilavey had hurried off and left them at the wagon. They watched Aloysius pacing back in forth in the distance, talking but to no one in particular. Andrew "Aha" tightened the folds of his turban, leafing through one of Henry's books. "This is the man you were telling me about before? The logician?" Andrew "Aha" rubbed his fingers over the hard-cloth black cover. "An interesting document," the assistant said, as if he needed to remind Henry, and began reading aloud:

"*The premises are: —*

1. *Every being must either have come into existence out of nothing, or it must have been produced by some external cause, or it must be self-existent.*
2. *No being has come into existence out of nothing.*
3. *The unchangeable and independent Being has not been produced by an external cause.*

For the symbolic expression of the above, let us assume,

x = Beings which have arisen out of nothing.

y = Beings which have been produced by an external cause.

z = Beings which are self-existent.

w = The unchangeable and independent Being."

He returned his attention to the black binding, a shining diamond in the center surrounded by impressions of leaves and flowers.

Henry wasn't listening. He hadn't been able to look away from the bodies. He sat still, expecting another burst of bullets, regretted not riding back to Balaclava with MacGilavey. Wilkinson's horse strode by lazily, the captain frozen atop the animal. The horse bent over and tugged some dry grass out of the ground. "We must do something about him," Henry said. Andrew "Aha" nodded, unimpressed, and together they hoisted the captain's body down and laid him on his back in the shadow of the wagon. His eyelids were halfway open. "The poor man," Henry said. "No one deserves this. This is exactly what I wrote against, back in London."

"A good Englishman," Andrew "Aha" said.

"I keep hoping he'll stir and start a conversation with us."

"I can assure you he won't. He's well passed."

"He almost has that look about him," Henry said, "when you've just woken up and you're getting used to everything again."

"Except he isn't moving," Andrew "Aha" explained. "I can't see it. Maybe if you're imagining things."

Wind blew the grass around them. The two mules bobbed their heads. Light shifted with the clouds. The earth was breathing——Wilkinson was the motionless exception. "Maybe," Henry stood, pointed to the darkroom. "Would you load the camera for me?"

"Henry?"

"I have an idea."

"What's that?"

Henry bent over, leaned Wilkinson's back against the wagon, arranged the hands in his lap. "I'm going to tell a lie."

Arms at his hips, Andrew "Aha" sneered. "The camera doesn't lie."

Henry stood up straight, thought of Gregor but the image was transitory. "I think you've been wrong about that."

"It's impossible, Henry!"

"That's all it does." He removed his journal from a pocket inside his jacket. "It's no better than this," and tossed it aside.

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I've never been so sure of anything."

"You're a novice."

"Load the camera. Please."

Andrew "Aha" shook his head, muttered in Turkish as he went inside the darkroom and loaded the camera with glass. Henry took the picture himself and captured captain's entire profile, missing only the feet of his outstretched legs. He and Andrew "Aha" watched the plate as it developed over steaming mercury.

"He looks alive to me," Henry said as he made a circle with his thumb and forefinger around Wilkinson's head. "His open eyes."

"Not a chance."

"You don't know that he's gone. You can't tell."

"I certainly can." Eyes widened, incredulous, indignant.

"It's because you already know he's gone. But imagine showing this to someone. His friends back in Balaclava. Or, good heavens, his family."

Andrew "Aha" licked his lips, wiggled his fingers, rubbed his forehead, more exasperated than Henry had ever seen him. "You missed the feet. You didn't photograph the feet. If you had, you'd see it. No sir, there's nothing that looks quite so dead as a pair of dead feet sticking up out of a dead body."

"Be sensitive, 'Aha'. We knew that man."

"You're the one using him as an experiment."

"I'm only trying to show——"

"And he's dead, he's meat now!" Andrew "Aha" left the darkroom. Henry followed him. "Hopefully his family has a daguerreotype of him back home. That'll preserve him. It's preserving him right now," he lifted the captain's limp hand and dropped it, "from this. From this being all that's left of him. Rot. So why photograph

this? Why make a composition out of decomposition? It's against the very nature of my work——oh, yes sir."

"Your work! This whole operation," Henry waved his arms, "is a denial of death! Nothing in these photographs is real! They can't keep us here any longer than we've already got!"

"That's exactly what they do!"

"I believed you, you know——I really did, for a little while, but now I know you're a fraud, you're a desperate fraud and you'll die someday, too, just like me!"

"And when I do, it'll barely matter, Henry. I've been photographed so many times. So many people have me. Yes, I'll die. When it happens, it'll shut my eyes, stop my heart, stop my lungs. But that isn't death, not anymore, now that we've exceeded it. Now that we're more."

"These? Your pictures? That isn't you in them."

"Then am I dead? Am I already dead?

"You're delusional, is what you are."

"Go on," he shouted, smacked the camera still waiting on its stand in front of Wilkinson's body. "Go ahead and look through that lens and you try to tell me that I'm already gone."

Henry turned around. Surrounding him, the barren valley, unfamiliar, alien. He marched until the assistant's voice was a whisper, sat on a stone and closed his eyes——no pictures, no words; no Andrew "Aha", no Gregor, their arrogant faces fading. He felt more alone than ever before.

•

A summer of peace for William Weir would have made absconding to the countryside redundant. London was a restful place regardless of the war in the Orient. Hale and renewed, his old wheeze had subsided. But Sophia was unusually quiet during dinner that night, and pale, too, in her complexion. He might have inquired——might have——and certainly Winnie would already have beaten him to it had the somberness of their guests not trumped his daughter's. Any visit from Charles and Kate, whose increasingly sporadic appearances outside of Tavistock House entailed vacations from seclusion, earned the full attention of their hosts. William only hoped that Sophia could stand to avoid interrogating Charles on the dangers of sending newspaper journalists into war——Lord knew she had the audacity to interrupt and accuse in such a way, though he'd reminded his daughter time and again that *The Daily News* was a Dickensian production in heritage only; that by now it was *his* newspaper and, yes, proudly international in its range; and that fussing before a great writer would likely earn her little more than a caricaturized identity in one of his future works. Fiction writers could be snide like that, he figured, and no Weir, so long as he could make sure of it, would wind up a mockery in some arrogant cad's literary sputum.

But he couldn't ignore Sophia when Charles conceded that, despite the hardships he posed his characters, his latest story would end with a marriage, "Only on the grounds," he explained, "that my hero knows it's sometimes preferable to keep one's mouth shut than gain through the hurt one causes in others." Charles and Kate left happy and full, somewhat drunk, promised a handful of visits and invitations before the year's

end and the cold shut him inside to draft again. Winnie went upstairs for a bath. William waved goodbye to the Dickenses from his stoop, knew Sophia was waiting for him in the dining room. He returned, didn't sit, downed the coagulating dregs of his wine.

She didn't know where to begin. Curious as she was about Gregor's unnamed troubles and ready to damn him in her father's eyes, the less she revealed about her uninvited visits to other men's homes, Sophia inferred, the better. She could still feel the tip of Gregor's cock pushing against her, just below her navel, greedy and misguided. It made her want to scream——she would have broken it twice if she could have, but whatever muck the man was in, he would sink without her further contribution. There was still Henry. William had brushed the subject off enough. She remembered, now that he'd resumed his patriarchy, free from Henry, how stubborn he could be. "Father."

"Of course, my dear."

"Father," she murmured, tears channeling behind her face.

"Anything, Sophia."

"If I'm to put my concerns to rest, I would like the address of military headquarters in Balaclava so that I may write my husband."

William sat and toyed with a fork. "Sophia, has your time apart from Henry given you any time to think about your future?"

"My future is with him. His is with me."

"But, shall I say, now that you're back home, with me, where you grew up, don't you see, don't you remember what it means to have someone who can take care of you? A provider? A protector?"

"This isn't your place."

"Henry has so much growing to do."

"Please, father."

William shook his head. "Why do you stand up for him? What have you gained from him?"

She uttered syllables before coming upon silence. How to make him understand? What does a father know, so set in his ways; what more could a man who has made flesh and blood from his own have to wonder about the world? It's a cheat, this birthing of children, just a measure of control, a cycle, a false solution to the mysteries of our material, she chided, the laws of our cosmos. She had never felt so thankful that Henry's seed was, up to then, fruitless, that neither of them had fallen into that blind pride, the overvalue of creation, and forgotten their real curiosity. That was the difference between Henry and the men she had turned away before, all those self-assured courtiers, those society men her father had flaunted in spite of her mother's distrust. Henry had never finished prodding at the skein that delineated his life; he was always tugging it, always searching for its fissures, testing it, and she trusted that one day, together, if she gave him some time, they might actually pull the whole thing down. Realizing that her father could be wrong, was wrong, tore another rend in that worldly morass.

"My dear——"

"What is it I'm supposed to gain, exactly?" She stood from the dining table. "Do you look for nothing but gains from everyone you meet?"

"He's a boy. He's terrified. I don't know what you see. I really don't. Maybe you need him because he isn't me. Because he's not the man of your childhood. He's offered

you something new——for the moment. But whatever you have with him, it can't be love. You only think it is."

"Father——"

"If it really was, you'd have something to say in his defense. You always have something to say, Sophia. It's one of the things I love most about you."

"Then if you love me, you'll help me reach him."

"Did you ever? Reach him, I mean. Can anyone reach him? Or is he a dark room disguised as a man, made of walls and empty on this inside?"

"You needn't be cruel."

"Oh, I need be. I'm serious——do you find him normal? This is no jest, and I shall not be silent any longer. I'm worried. For him, for you.

"There's nothing to worry about."

"Do you find he's like other people? When I first came onboard the newspaper, Henry had been writing for it for three years, and I thought, oh, good, a fine enough fellow. So we talked politics; we talked writing; he did his duties and spoke well in our home. But once the introductions were out of the way, Sophia, I looked for the soul in him and couldn't find it."

"God gives all of us a soul," she said.

"Your faith is stronger than mine."

"That's no secret."

"You're a stronger person than I. You've got the patience for faith. And yet I'm sure you'd be just as strong without it. And you'll still be strong without that man."

"With Henry, I felt more like myself than ever before. I felt truer."

Her father took small steps until he was under the doorway, half of his body leaning out. “Then maybe it could have been anyone. I could have brought you anyone. I should have brought you anyone else.”

“You didn’t *bring* me him.”

“Well, just a minute, Sophia——after all, part of why this is so hard for me is because I know how much responsibility I must take for this. This situation that I’m——that you’re in.”

“I could have always said no to him.”

“Sophia, I asked him to court you. It was my request to begin with.”

She sat again, elbows on the table, head in her hands. She hated the sensations that came next, the chills on her skin, the weight of her heart, her body trapped with itself. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I wanted you to trust him. I did. But now that you do, I want anything but.”

This could wait. Henry still had to come home. “Tell me how I can find him.”

William sighed. “I don’t know how to reach the photographer he’s writing about. Sincerely, I don’t. That was part of the agreement. This man, Adramalech, he answers only to one person. A financial backer, or something of the like. Someone I’ve never met, who’s blocked all mail to the photographer. As I said, I know few of the details. But I’d imagine that your way is through him.”

“Then where is he?”

“I asked and was never told. But if there’s any information to be found, it’s in the photographer’s studio. Sixty-four Regent Street. Top floor.”

“What should I look for?”

"An address, a calling card, anything of the sort."

She swept past him——

"Sophia!"

——Angled only her head to hear him.

"I don't want you going alone."

She sighed. "You're not coming with me. Not after this."

"Then a friend of mine will suffice."

Sophia disappeared up the stairs. It was liberating, that feeling of moving up, when the city was more below her than above.

•

"Where is the apparatus?" the voice demanded.

Aloysius paced back and forth. "Inside the wagon."

"You have to destroy it," the other voice told him.

"This is my work," said Aloysius.

"You have to burn down the wagon," the voice said, "erase it."

"This is 'Aha''s fault! This is all his fault! He did this! Sorcery!"

"He doesn't have to make it out of here," said the other voice.

"Just don't hurt Henry, he's still good, you have to promise you won't hurt him——"

"But he knows about you, too," the voice said. "He knows what you've done. Who you are."

"He can see it," the other voice added.

"Are photographs made with light or darkness?" the voice asked him. "Made out of light, yet forged in shade. And what is light but the absence of darkness?"

"And what is darkness but the absence of light?" the other voice pronounced.

"So which is it?" the voice asked him. "What is our world made of? Darkness or light? Which needs which to reveal itself first?"

"Are you ghosts?" Aloysius pleaded. "Sprits? The dead?"

"Hardly," the voice snorted, "we're just as much a part of this world as you are."

"Real? Are you real?"

"Real, or what, fake?"

"How narrow-minded," chastised the other voice.

"Real and fake, huh?"

"Living or dead?"

"It takes a loathsome pride to think so simply."

"And if somebody saw you, what do you think they would see? A man, like any other?"

"I am."

"You're scum," said the voice, "and you know what you've done."

"Do you want to join the others?" the other voice said.

"They were punished and you'll be no different."

The other voice drew closer. "Your machine," he said, "Once everyone sees your face through it, scorched on that glass, they'll know it, too. You won't be able to protect yourself."

"It doesn't lie," the voice agreed. "It'll give you away without a thought."

"Imagine," the other voice said, "a world without secrets."

"Could you live in a world without secrets?"

"It sees far too much."

The boots stood beside Aloysius. He peered down, found a hammer propped inside one of the legs.

"Who," the photographer started, "who are you?"

After a long silence: "We are the pins under your skin."

"We are the reasons behind a smile."

"We are the pleas of little children."

"We are the sadness in your eyes."

•

Gregor had little to say as he and the whore undressed on opposite sides of the room, though she could smell the liquor in his breath. She recognized his face. He'd been to the brothel before, never with her, but enough so that his reputation was not unknown among them all——a laughing man, flirtatious, indulgent with touching and squeezing, occasionally somewhat gentle, told stories of travels around the world that were likely made up. Though now she had her doubts about what she'd been told on her way into their chambers.

When both of them were naked he put a hand against the side of her ribs and urged her onto the bed, kept her on her hands and knees. She felt the hair at his crotch

graze her from behind as he rubbed, taking breaths through his teeth as though in discomfort. She waited, lowered her head onto the mattress, he was still soft and when she tried to turn around he locked his grip on the back of her neck and held her in place. He ignored her offers to assist, to procure, he continued sliding against her, she curved her neck out of his clutch so he took her by the hair, a bouquet of long blonde strands and cheap perfume, he pulled her backward, towards him, when she tried to turn and look at him he jerked her hair, ignored her muted wince. “Are you going to pull my hair all night or get to it, already?” He tugged again, finally he was ready but as the blood filled his member the pain returned, wormwood, no less, he thrust into her anyway, her buttocks slapped his stomach, he dug his fingers into them and struck, flesh pink, palm prints, her knees were getting irritated, he never came, “Slut,” he said, shoved the back of her head, left money on the end table and dressed and left without another word.

He went home and washed himself, pissed blood in jagged barbs, lay on his sofa with an open book, though the letters were blurry and the story couldn’t hold his attention. The knocking from outside came late, about an hour late, to be precise, but he wasn’t going to complain, not to him. He opened the door: Wilkie Collins’ arms outstretched, hands enclosed over something small and precious. Already the aroma was drifting into the hallway.

“Hocus pocus,” Wilkie said.

•

Henry must have fallen asleep. His neck was sore and he realized that he couldn't remember the preceding moments, what his last thoughts had been. He smelled smoke and stood, dizzy and faltering, saw a thick gray mass billowing from the wagon. Andrew "Aha" lay ahead, sprawled on his back. He must have dozed off, too, but as Henry drew closer he saw red liquid trickling from the assistant's ears, put his hand to the man's head and felt his hair, wet with blood. "Aloysius!" he called and tried to move Andrew "Aha", grabbed his hand, searched for his heartbeat but couldn't find the rhythm. Surely something had gone wrong, what had happened, what mistake had been made——?

The photographer fell out from behind the wagon. He scrambled to his feet and saw Henry and Andrew "Aha". "No!" he shouted, tried to contain his shaking self, "Don't worry, they won't hurt you! They promised! I made them promise!"

Henry felt a surge of heat as fire burst from the roof of the wagon. "Who? Aloysius, what happened," he screamed, "what have you done?"

Aloysius stepped backwards from the wagon, tripped over the bodies of the English officers and landed on his rump. "Me? I didn't do anything!"

"What happened to 'Aha'?" Henry screamed.

"None of this was my doing, you have to understand!"

"Tell me what's going on!"

"I——I saw their footprints! They came for us!"

"He isn't moving," frantic, Henry listened for breathing, heard none.

"Henry," Aloysius seized his arm, "you have to help me. You have to get in there and save my camera!"

"Are you mad!"

"No one else can help me, Henry! I need you——!"

"Forget the camera!"

"Henry, please! If any Russians find us here it'll be our only proof that we're not soldiers! They'll kill us, Henry!"

"What about——"

"There's nothing you can do for him," Aloysius said, "he hasn't a chance!"

Henry rubbed his eyes, the stinging of smoke, the frailty of his lungs, "This is impossible——"

"Says who!" Aloysius yelled back. "Henry, help me while you still can!"

Henry didn't know why, maybe it was the photographer's urgency, maybe his fears over roaming Russians made sense, but he ran into the burning wagon where unused glass plates were exploding around him, chemicals bubbled and fumed and reeked, the heat scalded his hands and face. He found the camera collapsed in shambles of wood and glass, it looked like it had been smashed, and he tried to lift the bloody hammer left beside it but the handle singed his palm and he would have screamed if he weren't coughing so much. As he turned to leave, the darkroom door closed from the outside, he pounded the blackening wood with his fists and called Aloysius's name, felt lightheaded, couldn't stand for much longer but he beat the door, flakes of charred material spilling with every blow until it split and he could force his body through the fracture. His shirt tore, his chest caught splinters, scratched raw, he flung himself onto the ground and though his hands had turned scarlet and stung he beat out the fire that ignited his trouser legs and threw off his shoes before they melted onto his feet, he ran barefoot from the crumbling wagon over sharp fragments of stone.

He found Wilkinson's body still propped against the burning wagon and dragged the dead man away, laid him next to Andrew "Aha". The two other English officers lay where he'd left them, rigid and enshrouded. Aloysius was gone; so were the mules. If he had fled then he was well over the horizon. Henry hacked up smoke and collapsed, and darkness and light took the place of darkness and light.

•

Sophia dreamed she was a child, barely able to walk, playing naked by a riverside. Her parents sat in the distance, silhouetted underneath the sun, and what features she could distinguish were unlike those of her mother and father in life. But she knew who they were.

They sat with friends of theirs, or people who Sophia understood to be their friends, another married couple with a child of their own. Their little boy was also bare as he splashed in the calmest, shallowest waters of the riverbank. Sophia slipped and tumbled in the water. That will not do, she thought and, in the little boy's body, extending a little boy's hand, helped her fallen self to her feet.

•

Only two of Aloysius's photographs made it out of Crimea. The first was his picture of the train wreck in Balaclava, that mechanical mess run aground, smoke and steam filling the upper half of the frame. The original negative was never found but the

earliest dated copy of the photograph appeared on a postcard in 1923, mailed to an address in Chicago, Illinois. On the back, a handwritten message read:

Murray,

Had a lovely time at the last reunion. Maybe we'll get together for a drink some time… well, that'll be the day!

Your Cousin,

Ernest

•

The second surviving photograph was Henry's portrait at the graves of Cathcart's Hill. The negative was recovered from his untouched tent in Balaclava after the war's end, its brown wrapping cut and peered into before it was sent to Roger Fenton's studio in London. Fenton couldn't remember taking the picture or the identity of the man staring into the lens but he certainly remembered using his camera at Cathcart's Hill. The portrait remained with his collection after he gave up the practice.

Fenton, like the gallery owners, the historians, and the critics who studied the collection after his death in 1869, was sure enough that the addressee whose initials were written on the wrapping——*To G.F.*——was in fact Grace Fenton, his wife and recipient of roughly twenty letters written and mailed home during their four months apart. Anyone who believed this was sure to pose the inevitable question——why Fenton would have favored a photograph of an anonymous young man sitting among tombstones as a gift to his beloved——but asked the question only insofar as it lacked the

expectation of an answer, and so could be asked solemnly, enigmatically, as if the point existed in the asking.

•

Heavyset Samson Merryweather took up more of the stairwell's enclosure than he had on his last visit to the Regent Street studio. His waist grazed the walls as he walked, several steps behind William Weir's daughter, the girl who wouldn't be delayed. She said little on their carriage ride over, as if not speaking, or speaking tersely and superficially when she had to speak at all, would hasten their arrival. But that was fine for him, Samson shrugged. William had advised him not to ask too many questions, he'd get nowhere with her, she was absolutely impossible.

"Hold up a moment, darling," Samson said through hyperventilation. She climbed on without him, only turned around when she tried to open the door and found it locked. "Of course, of course." Samson approached the door and tugged the lock. "No one has to know this was us," he smiled and, with a great lunge, heaved the side of his arm into the door. Nothing. He tried again. A crack. A third landing broke the lock and drove the door open.

Samson stumbled into the studio. He was surprised to find the room largely as he'd last seen it——a seedy fellow like Adramalech was sure to have at least a *few* secrets locked away when no visitors were expected; for all Samson knew, a pile of corpses, cauldrons full of boiling flesh, handwritten recipes for cooking human meat scattered about the floor. He opened the two circular windows and smelled the fresh air

that drifted in. An unfortunate few found their way into such a room. Hopefully he wouldn't be there for long.

"This man needs a maid," Sophia said.

Samson rested on the set that Aloysius had left up, a simple white plaster wall atop a platform. A pair of tiny shoes had been neglected on the stage. He picked them up, examined them, dropped them onto the floor. "I myself would feel a little better if I knew there weren't any ladies coming in and out of here. Even if it's just the help."

"That's a silly thing to say."

"Did you ever meet this man?"

Sophia shook her head.

"What exactly are you looking for, dearie?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

Samson sighed.

"I'll know when I see it."

"Can I be of help?"

"Look through his papers. His mail. Anything that might point to the source of his money."

She said nothing more. Samson stood, threw his arms up and began sifting through whatever documents he could find, some left in piles on the floor, others stored on the few surfaces the studio had to offer. Sophia headed for the door on the far wall, the room within the room. She opened it slowly and stole a glance at the darkness inside. She opened it further and the room's opacity diminished, the walls exposed. There were plenty of papers inside this workstation, along with bottles of chemicals, solutions, spare

equipment. She sorted through envelopes, packages, notes of any kind, worried all her effort would be futile——where would a piece of paper really begin to answer the questions she had?

Impatient, she knocked over a stack of envelopes. Money fell over her feet. She picked up the envelope that the notes had spilled from——that they continued to spill from as she raised it——and found the letter inside, a small leaf of high-quality parchment. The handwriting was illegible, too faint and careless to read, the words run together and crooked on their lines as if the writer had tried every so often to realign himself but couldn't help falling off balance again. In place of a signature were two weakly scribbled x's. The return address on the front of the envelope, however, was clear: the Meridian House, a residence in Greenwich.

Sophia nudged the door wide open. "Samson, I think I've found——"

Light flooded the chamber. Sophia caught its white reflection in all the glass and copper that surrounded her. Photographic plates lined the walls of the workstation and it was nothing if not their uniformity that prevented Sophia from overlooking them and leaving the room to find Samson. All the photographs around her showed people in the center——young boys or girls, one or two in each frame, in front of mostly plain backdrops. The girls were undressed, some of them entirely naked, others pulling down their clothing or exposing arms, legs, bellies, each of them a stain upon the glass, permanent, undeniable. Make no mistake: whatever the ambiguities of other photographs, whatever the uncertainties they provoked, these girls unequivocally spoke the same morbid chant as their pictures were taken: "Adar-Moloch, Adar-Moloch," they whispered of the man who avoid casting the slightest shadow over their bodies.

•

America provided sanctuary only in the anonymity of the slums. Aloysius hadn't chosen Mulberry Street, its crime and litter and decay, or even New York City itself; but when he stowed away on the steamship waiting in Balaclava's harbor——on which, under a fake name, he managed an inconsistent performance as an incorrectly assigned deckhand——he joined the crew unaware that the ship would travel south along Africa's eastern coast before curling around the stormy Cape of Good Hope, crossing over to the Americas and heading towards old New Amsterdam. Aloysius was astonished to realize that he wouldn't miss England——he didn't even rue the loss of his rooms, his studio, the benefactor's money, any opportunity to say goodbye to his homeland. A fresh start seemed reasonable, and any distance he could find from the voices, those invisible men, was calmly, reasonably preferable. Night after night, as the waters raged against his vessel and he cleaned up the chaos of the deck under the captain's bellowed orders, Aloysius found that he could smile again.

In New York City, he lived among immigrants in tenement housing——the closest he could come to feeling like he was back on the other side of the Atlantic was among the Irish——and drank the days away in black-and-tan bars. He felt hidden, safe; the protection of a dark room became his closest friend. He spoke to few. He could discern little meaning or intelligence worth plumbing for through the thick accents of the Africans, the Algerians, the Chinese. But they were tolerable enough, he found. If he ever truly hated anyone as a group, it was the Italians, who struck him as born

criminals——liars, thieves, rapists, hoarders of garbage; wholly, stunningly unable to acquire even the most basic ability to read, whether in English or in their native dialect; and who looked old and decrepit from childhood on.

For the first few months, maybe the entire year, Aloysius thought often of the camera. His mind dwelled on the many places he'd visited and how every time he returned to London with a new batch of photographs he was instructed to leave them in that house in Greenwich with the butlers and maids and cooks who never acknowledged his questions or assessed at the photographs he brought. Mysteries aside, those had been good times, traveling on someone else's money. He thought of Crimea, too, wondered what ever became of that journalist fellow, felt genuine remorse for what had happened to his assistant. On his worst days he wondered how far the invisible men could have been from finding him again. Not that they had any reason to——he'd given it up; he could do no more harm with his tools. Every so often, he found one in the window of a shop or in the hands of a roaming photographer, and with enough time he could have saved up the money to buy another camera of his own, some paper negative, too. But Aloysius knew that if touched one again, saw through its lens, invariably he'd go looking for, it would point him towards, they'd be waiting and helpless, and the urges wouldn't be controlled…

Eventually, though, those memories fell into fog. Good, strong English gin became the staple of his diet. Before America, he had rarely taken pleasure, or pain, in alcohol; though he found that the more he drank, the more uncertain the names he once knew became, and his recollection of how to use a camera, mix chemicals and prepare plates eluded him. He didn't care. Let it go, he thought, let it all go.

There might have been a point, as the years passed, when Aloysius had completely forgotten he'd ever held a camera, until the bartender at his closest black-and-tan told him one night about the man who'd begun prowling the neighborhood with exploding lights.

•

"He skulks around avenues like these," the bartender said, cleaning a mug, "with a pack of miscreants just like him. They have cartridges of powder that fire off like a revolver. Catch you in the dark. They approach quietly, look for shadows to do their work in, like fireflies. By the time they scamper off, you're already blinded. Want to know what's worse, Andrew?"

"Tell me," he begged, hunched forward, clawing at his own palms.

"The bastard's a cop reporter. That's what I heard. Makes me think he's running around collecting evidence on us. I ain't done nothing wrong!"

"Evidence," he whispered, leaning back. He shook off a recollection of his assistant sailing towards him for the first time in a little rowboat, in the harbor outside that military town, whatever it was called. Aloysius asked nothing more of the bartender, nodded and nursed his gin, finally left the bar feeling naked, or as though he'd eaten fruit and swallowed all the indigestible cores. His hair was thin and white by then, the former smoothness of his flesh lost in wrinkles and veins and hanging jowls. His teeth were rotten away but he was scared to go to a dentist and, besides, only had so much money to throw away on unnecessary pain. He felt cold.

Over the next few days, he fell into a melancholy that he didn't fully understand. Every morning that he woke, he fought to fall asleep again——dreams were so peaceful and secluded——and when he couldn't, he lay in bed for hours, refused to take his first footsteps, fill his empty stomach, or wet his dry mouth. He imagined tossing himself out the windows of his tenement house, the pain it pledged, the bones he would break. Knives became perilous——he couldn't cut his food without considering the sharpness of the blade, the urge to drive it inside some soft part of himself. He wanted strangers in the street to beat him without pity or explanation, fantasized about what he could do to make them turn on him: knock their hats off, swear malevolently, trip them as they treaded the sidewalks. People were shot in the streets of the Five Points all the time, freed, forgiven by God; where was his mercy? How long should he have to wait?

Aloysius wasn't even sure of the year, anymore. '87, '88? So many people he'd met since his arrival in New York City had already died. Bar patrons, fellow tenants, neighborhood faces suddenly absent from the usual streets and stairwells. He was an old man, now, he realized, older than he ever thought he would live to be. Every man his age that he knew in London was probably long buried, and the children he had known, grown up…

And ruined, as it happened. What had he wanted to save them from but ruin, changes, stains from the smoke of London, hours of toil in factories, the clipping of cherubic wings? Too quickly were the lights in their eyes extinguished, their wildness blunted and soft skin calloused. The waste of that youth was the real crime, Aloysius knew——he had done nothing but admire what others disposed of. His photography was a gift; it only proved what he'd long believed, that time slowed to a stop when they were

close, close enough to touch, that all those children really wanted was to stay young forever. In hiding from the new camera and the flashing lights of those demons running rampant through New York City, he recalled what he hadn't thought of in years: those children had been shelter, the grip of small hands, kisses along the curves between the neck and shoulder. They were scents, too, each one distinct and indescribable, and even if he had kept any of the pictures of those children, managed somehow to rescue them from the studio he'd abandoned all those years ago, they wouldn't have been endowed with their many aromas. For all their offerings, the pictures would never help him breath in the body of someone he'd loved, someone stolen from him by distance, by age, by fear, the newness of being adored. So many times he gave them the opportunity to escape the devouring urban mouth and just be children, be treasured for their childhood. And when they struggled, when they resisted, shed unfortunate little tears that tasted of salt when Aloysius kissed them from their cheeks, he was gentle, or at he least he tried to be. It's time that's failed *me*, Aloysius thought, not the other way around.

He followed a small Algerian boy into a black-and-tan on Anthony Street that he'd never visited before. The boy wore dark overalls, white sleeves rolled up to the elbows, his trousers frayed and torn at the cuffs. Carrying a bucket and balancing a long mop like a tightrope walker, like that Great Farini crossing the Niagara Falls, the boy waddled under the legs of the men and women breezing by, maneuvered through their dense moving forest and passed into the doorway of the bar.

Aloysius followed, lingered in the gloom outside a stretch of candlelight. Even with his untamed tufts of black hair, the Algerian boy was still dwarfed by the scummy bartender who directed him, jabbing and pointing with a stern forefinger, occasionally

raising his voice to a stringent bark that had no impact among the disinterested drunks. An Italian, he was sure of it. The boy took his bucket and walked past a portrait of Grover Cleveland——drawn over with ink, devil horns and spirals over the eyes——and into a long and narrow room off to the side of the bar, at the end of which was a spigot that he could only reach by standing on a trembling stool. Water spilled into the bucket, filled it halfway. He stepped perilously from the stool, soaked a soiled brush, and returned to the bar to scrub the floor. The knees of his trousers darkened with wet murk. Aloysius imagined that the stains were blood, brought to the surface of his skin by this unwarranted toil, pain exchanged for pennies, poor thing. Aloysius rubbed his chin, ran a fingernail along the sides of his mouth.

The water was soon filthy. The boy carried the bucket back down the corridor to the spigot at the end of the long room, stepped atop the stool, dumped the muddy liquid down the drain and refilled the metal encasement. It took him all of two minutes before he was on the floor of the bar again, face in the grime, spilled brew, boot-prints. Not a lot of time, Aloysius told himself, but just enough to slip into the room unnoticed and start some friendly chatter.

The Algerian boy wiped his hands on his overalls, stretched his curling spine and yawned. I'm sure you could use a nap, Aloysius thought. You could lay your head in my lap and shut your eyes and sleep, you wouldn't have to make a sound but I'd be happy to listen to anything you'd like to say——

A patron of the bar tripped over the bucket. Gray water flowed out onto the wooden floor. The patron walked away without another thought, "——Some fuckin' common sense, all right?" the bartender shouted to no audible rejoinder. He shook his

head. “Get moving, already,” he spat at the Algerian boy. The boy, mouth agape, leaped up with his empty bucket and hurried into the narrow room, back to the spigot. Aloysius stuck his hands in his coat pockets, head lowered, and followed him into the corridor, seen by no one but the desecrated president on the wall. Once more, the boy was on his rickety stool. Aloysius licked his lips. There was too much weight on the boy’s modest shoulders. The sound of water rushing through the pipes covered any other noise. A hand left its pocket, fingers crooked, they slid up the nape of the boy’s neck.

The flash went off like a gunshot. Balaclava, Aloysius thought, but then he realized it was now, not then, he spun around and saw the man standing in the doorway with the camera——silhouette and smoke, a white moustache, spectacles under his high forehead——the demon he’d been warned about. He wore a long coat. His feet filled a pair of brown leather boots. There they are, Aloysius thought, they’ve found me, after all.

Another man behind him ignited the blast of light, split-second but enough to expose the darkness of that corridor, the shame of a secret in hiding from the sun, the clutch of Aloysius’s hand around the neck of the little boy beneath him.

•

Vultures pecked at the bodies sprawled around the crumbling ashtray that the wagon had become. Henry groaned as he leaned up and scared the closest ones away, into closer competition with their hungry kind. Disgusted as he was, a small part of Henry sympathized: he felt emptiness seizing handfuls of his stomach. His tongue tasted of soot. He spat, immediately regretted it, his mouth an arid pit. He needed to find

something to eat. His first step towards the wagon was a failure: his knee buckled and he fell. He drew himself up immediately, almost gracefully, and reached the old darkroom but found nothing of use. He felt dizzy; his skull had turned to metal in his sleep and he'd sneezed its skin off. His teeth were dancing in his mouth, restless and angry. Henry kneeled beside Wilkinson's body and slipped his fingers into the soldier's coat pockets, searched his satchel. He would have taken the stalest bread. "Get out of there, would you?" the corpse fussed, indignant. Henry rubbed his temples, knew he had reached the beyond, finally, beyond the void, not so impenetrable after all, it seemed. He touched the earth; it depressed and wobbled like thin rubber above an endless hollow. The bodies on the ground bobbed along with it. Irritated, just hoping to enjoy a meal, the vultures shook their heads and chattered among themselves. "How obnoxious," one of them said. Henry's hands went numb and began to disappear. He was worried he might vomit. Every footprint he left in the ground sprouted another Henry, and after standing around with nothing much to do they inevitably walked off to lead their own separate lives. He wondered if someone had made him up, too, long ago, or perhaps far into the future, when everything was forgotten and ideas like him were assembled and disposed of without the slightest care. If anyone he knew *was* real, he envied them——all the rest was literature.

•

Over four or five glasses of brandy, Samson Merryweather offered what he believed to be a clever allusion to Pandora's Box as he discussed the camera with the

constable. Photographers, like antiquity's first woman, he explained, have unleashed mischief and sorrow upon the world——evil things. The camera was nothing more than Europe's Box. Every civilization has had one, he argued, and each has failed to leave it unopened.

The constable was drunk. He didn't understand. He was happy to arrest this unscrupulous Adramalech fellow once the photographer was back from the Orient. But what was Samson trying to tell him? he asked himself, elbow propped on the table, forehead resting heavy in his hand. The constable had twice before sat for a portrait. Was he struck with any conspicuous evils on either occasion? He didn't think so, but, let's say he was, who would've been able to tell? And was anything at all actually let out of the camera? If what the operators had told him were true then it seemed like light was getting *into* the camera——that didn't sound so bad. What was the harm that Samson was trying to relate? Did he think more men like Adramalech would be tempted into lewdness? Just what was unleashed, the constable wondered, that wasn't already there? Nothing new under the sun, as Ecclesiastes said.

•

The first knocks on his door came just before noon. Gregor was ready——the boxes of his father's manuscripts waited on the parlor table——but hesitated to get up and answer. He thought about burning the papers, but even that wouldn't stop the investigation, the journalists at his door wouldn't shrug and turn away. Emptying a glass of brandy, he chose instead to savor this last moment of being the man he had made, the

man crafted over so many years. What a shame, he thought, another work of art thrown into the fire. As late as three hundred years ago, the Church was still burning any Bibles they found published in the wrong language. Some treasures, like the Book, were united from fragments; Gregor figured he couldn't have been much different. It shouldn't have mattered that the words he used were once someone else's——written with another hand, that is. After he opened his door, he knew, he would be reduced simply to the man he was: a dark chamber, a frightened heart.

•

The Meridian House sat atop an immaculate hill, the grass evenly cut and somehow greener than nature's own. Two domed towers broke from the mansion at each end of its flat roof. The pattern of its red and white brick outer walls became sharper once Sophia left her carriage to ascend the stone path up to the mansion's gate, a short, entirely unthreatening row of iron that angled in and out from white pillars. Sophia took one last look at her carriage before stepping through the unlocked gate. Poor Samson Merryweather was probably still waiting for her outside his home in Westminster, sitting on his front steps and watching people walk him by; he hadn't exactly deserved the deceit or the waste of a good morning, but Sophia didn't need a chaperone, either, regardless of her father's contention. Perhaps Samson might better understand her position now that he too had been manipulated by the will of another.

If she had already exchanged her last words with William Weir, Sophia wouldn't have cared. What scared her, though, was how easily her anger with him had transferred

to her husband——wasn't Henry complicit in his departure to the East; couldn't he have refused the job? She hoped bitterly that, wherever he was, he was thinking only of home, wrestling through the night without her, and that his failure to mail her any letters was a problem of bureaucracy or logistics and not indifference. Then, like watching an insect skirt helplessly towards a fatal waterline, she sensed her own thoughts stray from rationality: Henry was going to come back only to abandon her for a life of adventure, he was going to show up holding the hand of a dark-skinned wife, beautiful and bearing all the knowledge of the world beyond London. Good Lord, she wanted to shake herself.

Sophia halted upon the sound of squealing hinges. She looked ahead. The front door was still closed. Something must have opened on the side of the house, she assumed, and held her breath when a man wearing a black overcoat appeared on the lawn. He looked about her father's age, with pepper-colored hair, a sharply cleft chin, and sideburns running to the corners of his mouth. He walked stiffly into a carriage of his own and headed in the other direction, towards the Thames, never spotted her standing at the gate. Once she felt sure enough that the man wasn't coming back, Sophia stepped lightly onto the stoop and rang the doorbell. A minute passed and she rang again. No one answered. She dug her feet into the pavement, wondered if the man who had just left was the very benefactor she had set out to find, if she had let him go, and who could say when he'd be back again, maybe he was taking a long holiday on the other side of the globe, maybe never to return——

There I go again, she thought, and breathed deep. She could have accosted the man but would have come off as imbalanced, perhaps completely deranged, regardless of her polite approach, her ladylike demeanor. Excuse me, kind sir, but I believe you

arranged with my selfish father to send a journalist thousands of miles away with your photographer. That journalist happens to be my husband, and I'm very worried about his safety and suspicious about the survival of our marriage. Please put me in touch with him at once. Oh, well, of course, right away, since you're asking, and all, m'lady. Now, with the snap of my fingers, he shall reappear instantaneously on his magic carpet, a little weather-beaten but none the worse for wear.

She turned the knob quietly——though every metallic squeak was somehow louder as she tried to pacify its rotation——and let the door float a few degrees into the atrium. The hallway revealed was warm, well-furnished, kempt. At its furthest end, an old man, bald except for a few white strands that looked more like light than hair, sat hunched in a chair, his eyes flat and barely open——a butler, judging by the tails on his coat and the bowtie at his neck, but not one that Sophia could picture managing such an extensive estate. He finally caught notice of the front door's advance, stood slowly with a cane and, legs quivering as he walked, approached the visitor.

"Can I help you, dear?" His voice was a slow struggle over stony earth.

Sophia wasn't sure how to reply. She couldn't simply demand an audience with the owner of the Meridian House. She had to be there on business. "Photographs," she said softly.

The butler looked off to the walls as if they might elaborate her curt, nervous response until a glow of remembrance lit his face. "Of course. You must have been sent here by Mister Adramalech?"

"It is so."

"Very good."

They stood there in silence for what felt like a long time. The tick-tock of a grandfather clock counted the seconds.

"Might I come in?"

"Please," the butler said, and presented the house with a measured, open palm as if a veil were about to fall and reveal a prize. "Did Mister Adramalech tell you where to leave the sun-pictures? I do hope he is well."

"He is."

"And enjoying his time abroad, I presume."

"He is."

"Though, I must admit, he gives me the shivers."

Sophia bit her lip. "I understand."

The butler returned to his seat at the end of the hallway. "You just missed the Astronomer Royal, I'm afraid."

"I see."

"He's gone off to Flamsteed House to do his work."

"Of course."

"Gazing at the stars, to be sure."

"Would you happen to know when he is due to return?"

The butler's tender face reinforced itself as he contemplated the question. "I would like to say that he'll be back by nightfall; but he tends to see things in the dark that most of us cannot."

"That's very lucky."

"He's a marvelous man, indeed."

"Well." She swallowed. "Give him my warmest wishes."

The butler seemed pleased. He smiled, "Ah!" as if surprised, and nodded. After that, he drifted off with his thoughts and seemed no longer to notice her presence. Sophia walked delicately, didn't touch or offset anything she found, like the telescope that waited by an open window, angled up towards the heavens. Outside the window, a gardener trimmed the hedges that lined the property with a pair of noisy shears. Sophia moved on before she could be spotted and peeked into the kitchen. A cook was preparing a meal. A maid was busy dusting the bookshelves of a library, humming to herself. Sophia looked into the open doorway of a study and saw another servant sitting at a desk, sliding primly stacked paper money into envelopes matching to the one she found in the photographer's studio. Surely checks would suffice, Sophia mused. But the servant went on without any apparent confusion. They all did: everyone in the Meridian House seemed to go about his or her business inconspicuously——strange, as though some unseen presence in the mansion should have forbade their untroubled acceptance of the tasks at hand.

When she found the first hall of photographs, Sophia was initially reminded of the darkroom in the studio, every inch of its walls lined with pictures. But, completely unfurnished, the hall she stepped inside was far larger than any darkroom's cramped and cluttered workspace. Images on glass, paper, and copper daguerreotypes covered the walls from floor to ceiling, displayed every possible sight that she could imagine: open landscapes, city streets, houses and gardens, interiors, faces, arms and legs, unclothed bodies, animals both domesticated and exotic, alive and dead. Every plate was labeled with the details. Walking around the room, Sophia found the sandstone relics of Egypt,

African savannahs, swords and suits of armor from the Dark Ages, floating masses of ice in the northernmost oceans. She saw the closest apparition of the moon she had ever seen, its cracks and craters exonerated from the obfuscation of earthly distance. Right next to it was a pair of conjoined twins smiling straight into the lens. The next photograph showed a man and a woman; her legs were open, he was hard and holding the base of his member as he entered her. Next to that was a human heart sitting on a scale. Two hundred and ninety grams, the scale said. Sophia felt a tremor in her chest.

She crossed into another empty hall. From a distance, it seemed identical to the one she had left——rows of framed photographic positives covering the entire wall space——but each image was unique, elicited different energies into the space around her. She noticed then that not all the pictures bore the signature of Aloysius Overton Adramalech. The hundreds of works hung in these rooms had been composed, she counted, by at least five different photographers.

The third and fourth halls were similar in their immaculate arrangements. She took her time crossing through, all but forgot that she was a trespasser in the house. It was hard to look away, really——the lack of classification among the pictures was at once wondrous and frustrating. One photograph belied any expectations over what Sophia might find in the next. She thought of Genesis and the formless void before the beginning, imagined what God must have felt every time he forged something new——a star, a seed, a morning, a man——from the chaos of inception: joy in witnessing shapes fight the darkness; a sense of prideful possession; but lastly the enduring hunch that any possession was provisional, that already there were other forces at work——ones he'd

never anticipated or intended to make——consigning new meaning or purpose upon his creations.

The fifth hall brought the greatest surprise. Unlike the random arrangement of images she had seen in the previous rooms, this one presented a completely panoramic view of a city street, the photographs like mosaic tiles, arranged to depict a larger vision. The photographer must have taken a photograph, stepped to the side, and taken another, repeated this process hundreds of times, to achieve this effect. Sophia didn't recognize the location but a note in the doorway explained that the photographs portrayed the Place de l'Étoile, a sprawl of streets issuing from the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The monument itself was unseen——it was as if the four walls accounted for the Arc's own gaze, she realized, each one providing a view north, south, east, or west. The project was still in the making. The avenues that extended out from the Arc were incomplete, as was the sky——cloudy in some photographs and clear in others——that covered the hall's ceiling. The white-painted wood of the mansion's interior was revealed where streets would finish, branches would extend from trees, buildings would stand and columns would touch the earth that supported them. There was more to come.

She couldn't fathom the difficulty of this undertaking, the painstaking precision it necessitated. Some of the photographs abided Parisians who had stood still long enough to be captured by the camera. Perhaps more would join them, and people who had never met, lived no mutual days, would share the same street; or perhaps this photographer's work would never end and he would revise these visions of the Place de l'Étoile as it changed over the years——and Paris *would*. London certainly had. The process would be endless; though Sophia wondered if there might be a single spot in this scene——a

window, maybe, or a doorway, or a few miles of horizon——that would remain unaffected through the passing of time, interchangeable with the future's designs. She smiled at the possibility.

Beyond this hall extended more empty rooms. The walls of the sixth held only a few photographs. But Sophia instead chose the path of a purple carpet cut down a narrow corridor, into a sparsely furnished lounge——just a fireplace, a table and two chairs. The staircase hugging the furthest wall struck Sophia as perfectly ordinary until she realized that its steps continued up to the room's ceiling without meeting any landing, any entrance or exit, led to no conceivable room on the other side. There was, however, a door built into the side of the staircase. She wondered what kind of man this Astronomer Royal was, what secrets he locked away in lightless chambers, the corpses of old lovers, house of Bluebeard or some legendary butcher. All normality was a presumption, Sophia knew; and all endeavors through it the breach of a chamber's looming door.

She turned the knob and pulled. Immediately the rotation went stiff, clutched by a hand from the other side, tense and unyielding. Sophia pulled harder. The door flapped an inch or two before slamming shut. "Who's there?" asked the man behind the door.

Sophia stepped back.

"Who's there?" he asked again as he turned a lock.

She swallowed. "My name is Mrs. Chambers, and I need to speak with you."

A hesitation. Movement. "Why are you here?" Muted by the wall in front of him, his voice was frail, thin, high-pitched, somewhat nasal, as if he were pulling his cheeks and holding his nostrils shut.

"You can help me find my husband," Sophia said.

A protracted sigh. “I am in no way responsible for the conditions of the outside world. Or for what happens to them.”

“Them?”

“Any of you. I don’t care.”

“Whoever you are,” though somehow she already knew he was Adramalech’s benefactor, “please: my husband was sent out with one of your photographers. To the fighting in the Orient.”

“It must be very dangerous out there,” he said. “It’s a dangerous business. No one’s ever argued that away.”

Sophia put her palm against the door. “I was told that you’re the only one who has the means of contacting Mister Adramalech.”

“That may be.”

“Then, please, I beg of you. Let me send him a letter, so that word may reach my husband. So that I can see no harm has come to him.”

Silence. “This husband,” the man started, “do you love him?”

“Of course I do.”

“And you need him?”

“I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t.”

The man laughed resentfully. “You’ve never known real need.”

“You have no idea what——”

“Get out!” A cane bashed against the door. “Get out of this house before I call upon a guard to force you.”

“Sir,” she implored, “all I need is a letter. That’s all I ask.”

"I do not like to repeat myself," the man said, "and I will not feed your gruesome desires."

She ran a hand through her hair. "What are you doing behind this door? Why are you hiding underneath the stairs? Come out and speak with me in a civilized manner at once!"

"In my home I am ordered neither by guests nor by women."

Sophia backed away. "Then I will return with an attorney, and the law will grant me what I want. And perhaps next time I shall break open this door and look you in the eye."

"You have no grounds with an attorney. I've violated no laws. Quite the opposite of you, trespassing on my private property."

She stepped out of the lounge. "This is not a finished matter."

As she left, crossing through the halls of photographs, she heard him shouting after her. "Most things go unfinished, you'll find! Now, off with you, you hear me? 'Allo? Do you hear me? 'Allo? Are you still there, I said!"

•

There was nothing strange to de Paladines about the smell of burning——not anymore. The général de brigade had known the stench of entire cities in flames, the irreversible permeation of ash into his lungs, so the sight of a smoking, deformed pile of wood and wheels in the valley below failed to caution his approach. He and his men trailed on and when de Paladines spotted the bodies slumped around the blackened

wagon he ordered a pair of scouts to ride ahead and investigate. The two scouts caught sight of something that de Paladines and the scores of men above couldn't see, a shadow of some kind. When it began to move, De Paladines realized that the shape was a man covered in soot, sitting on an empty crate, black and nearly blended into the scorched heap behind him. "Ill est vivant!" one of the scouts shouted.

De Paladines rode to the wreckage alone. This lone survivor sat with his head buried in his hands, took no visible breaths. He didn't seem to notice the French soldiers, or didn't care. De Paladines kept his backbone rigid. "Qué est ut homme?" he asked the silent man.

"Il est l'anglais," the other scout said.

"Militaire?" asked de Paladines.

"Je ne sais pas."

De Paladines leaned over, shook a half-empty canteen. "Avez-vous besoin d'eau?" But the man wouldn't respond. De Paladines wiped his brow. He couldn't leave the man, not in the state he was in. He unfolded a map of the peninsula. There was likely an English fortification close by. Perhaps the man came from the camp at Balaclava. De Paladines waved the map in front of the man's head but his attention was elusive. He was certainly insane, de Paladines decided, otherwise he would have seized the map, pointed out his origin or destination, endlessly grateful for the pictures it presented. Maps were beautiful. They were universal and unmistakable. De Paladines even savored the crinkling of the parchment in between his fingers, as any sensible fellow would. But this man could not be bothered. "D'ou venez-vous?" asked the général de brigade. "Balaclava?"

The man raised his head. Tears cut clean paths through the soot that coated his face. “I saw it,” he said.

“Excusez-moi?”

“For a little while,” the man went on, “I saw through it. For real.”

“Parlez-vous français?”

“I had it. Just for a moment.” He laughed, met the gaze of de Paladines for the first time. “I suppose nothing else quite matters anymore, now, does it?”

De Paladines’s officers were silent and wide-eyed. They were getting nervous. Something was amiss in this babbling young man. “Quel est votre nom?”

Nothing. The man put his head in his hands again. De Paladines sighed. He would have to send an officer or two to escort the man back to Balaclava. It was the best he could do under the circumstances. He would be rash to redirect more than a few of his soldiers for this stranger’s sake, due as they were without delay for the French garrisons outside Sebastopol——there was still a war to win——though, had he the time and relief from orders, de Paladines would have brought the man into Balaclava himself, if only for answers. There was no such thing as a mystery more interesting than its solution, he’d found. He no longer had the patience for passing obscurities. He was too old, and ambiguity was a pursuit of the young.

IV. The Prime Meridian

"You and I are just swinging doors."

—— Shunryu Suzuki

Henry had been back in London for two weeks when he found Gregor's name in *The Daily News* and read about the inspection into his writing. Until that morning, he'd heard nothing of the matter or even once asked after his mentor; nor had he so much as glanced on a newspaper. But the pages were waiting on a table in his sitting room and, after calling for Sophia, he relinquished himself to them. Scanning the newspaper, he came to a sketch of a face and stared for a long while before the lines merged into that of Gregor Fleming, lauded author and man-about-town who had allegedly stolen his deceased father's collection of unpublished manuscripts and printed them as his own over an unfinished course of three decades.

Henry read on. The first suspicions arose when Miss Frances Hathaway, a former colleague of the late Erasmus Fleming, found her name, as well as those of her father and mother, used in one of Gregor's novels for a set of minor characters. Miss Hathaway had lost contact with Erasmus Fleming after the birth of his son but never forgot his refusal to show her, or anyone, the writing he did by night. He'd always found his own work boring, she recalled, and too unimaginative to stand with what he considered real literature. When she became aware that Gregor had grown up to be an author, she thought it a fitting, even vicarious conclusion to his father's abruptly ended life and gladly read every word he published. Tempted though she was, Miss Hathaway never sought him out; her relation to his father——ended well before Erasmus had met Gregor's mother——would have been unknown to him. For that same reason, she believed,

Gregor would have never learned her name, let alone her parents'. Miss Hathaway didn't construe any wrongdoing but nonetheless found the situation impossible to explain; spent long nights wrestling with the possibilities of fate, coincidence, past lives, magick ritual, communication from the dead; but none of them seemed likely, so she wrote his publishers a letter explaining her curiosity.

The correlation of fact and fiction was quite charming, the publishers replied, positively enchanting, in fact, and let *The Times* run a brief, good-humored article on the subject. From then on, more of London's forgotten elders came forward with similar stories of chance encounters with themselves in Gregor's work. His publishers grew nervous and grave. Gregor maintained silence. Unable to reach him, *The Times* initiated a full investigation. The public confession came only six days before Henry's steamship docked in England.

Sophia found him reading the article in their sitting room. She unfolded her hands and rested them on his shoulders. "Do you want to talk about this?" He exhaled quietly. "Do you want to see him?"

"I'm fine," he said, a hand on hers. "I think I'd like to go for a walk."

"A walk would be lovely."

"Quite," he said, "ah, well, would you stay and prepare some tea?" He stood without meeting her eyes. "I won't be long."

She fought the urge to grab his arm or pull his ear. "Come back soon," she said.

London's streets were more crowded than he'd remembered. Balaclava, and the valleys that surrounded it, *moved* differently, he thought. Slower, unhurried, a breathing whole——by no means a place of peace, but one wherein every inhabitant shared its

distance. Here in London, the people shared nothing. They made money worried it had almost been someone else's, spent it out of fear that others could spend it faster. Anything in their way——potholes, carriages, vendors' stands, other people——became objects of infatuated disgust. Impatience was an addiction. Any space left on the sidewalk was merely untaken, waiting for the steps hurried enough to claim it. One didn't think, walking through London; one was absorbed.

Henry stepped onto a steam locomotive and joined ten other passengers. The bus shook and sputtered to a start. For a moment, its speed, a prompt pace that surpassed the passers-by, put Henry at ease. He looked around. Silent and indifferent, some checking pocket watches or rapping top hats against their knees, the passengers all pretended to be alone on their ride through the city. When he looked for long enough at the woman on the other side of the aisle, her eyes began darting rapidly, couldn't settle on anything, her shoulders became uneven and finally she tilted her head and flared her nostrils, incredulous, as if water boiled in her brain. Henry wanted to jump off. Suddenly the locomotive was a sluggish hulk, couldn't have moved fast enough to satisfy him, he gripped its handrails as if the bus would discern his urgency, his above all the others', relate to him and his needs and accelerate accordingly. But the locomotive was fair, a rational machine. Henry felt as reverent as he was frustrated but couldn't focus either feeling on anything in particular.

It wasn't the notion that Gregor's entire life was some graceful fraud that made Henry so angry, that put scenes in his head of confronting, screaming, hurting him, tearing his books apart. Rather, it was the brazenness with which Gregor had swept up and shaped the lives of others with his willful lies. The Gregor he had known didn't

exist——never had——and, by extension, anything he had taught amounted to a sham, as well. Henry's trust in him was all part of a ploy——and for what? Success without work? Henry didn't understand.

"Everything I learned from him," he started.

Sophia set the table and slid her husband his cup of tea. "Gregor was still a friend to you for a long time."

"Based on a falsehood," he said. "I was his tool."

"Then keep what was good about him," she sat beside Henry, "and don't regret anything. If you regret, you'll only be punishing yourself."

Henry twirled his teacup but never took a sip. Something was missing in his expression. "He has to know what he's done."

"Gregor's in enough trouble as it stands. Let the city handle him. He isn't your duty."

"He has to know what he's done to me."

"Let it go," Sophia begged. "You never have to see him again. You have so much more than what he could ever offer you."

"I'll go tomorrow, before noon."

Sophia folded her hands. "If I can't stop you," she said, "then at least I should, I suppose, I should tell you, before he does, if he does."

He let go of the teacup. "What? Tell me what?"

She stood and emptied the kettle into the sink. "While you were gone. Gregor——he approached me."

"What do you mean?"

"He *approached* me." Sophia raised her eyebrows. "It was not wanted."

Henry's stomach turned. He searched his mind for words against Gregor but paused, realized that any words of his, at that moment, should be for her.

"Were you hurt?"

"No," she said.

He took her in his arms, felt her back, slid his hands down her arms to her elbows, his body and muscles more rigid than hers.

Gregor was more than a common thief, Henry fumed. If he truly wanted possession over everything that wasn't his then his compulsion would never be satisfied, he could take until he exhausted the world's supply and still need more, clouds concealing the emptiness inside him——there was no one really alive in there.

They climbed into bed before sundown, laid beside one another propped up on their elbows. As her fingers traversed his chest she asked him questions about the Orient, the soldiers he had met, if there had been any news of the photographer who had left Henry for dead. He answered with few details, had no contact with anyone he'd known in the expedition. Thinking of the walls of the Meridian House, she asked him about the photographs he had seen, by what process any person or place was deemed worthy of a picture. "I didn't find them worth much, in the end," Henry ultimately said of the photographs and reiterated as her questions persisted. Maybe now wasn't the time for memories, she conceded. She slid her fingers down towards his clothed crotch and felt him stir, he craned his neck, brought his body against hers, her warmth. Being alone is a choice, she thought as she urged him in. He didn't miss a movement but his eyes were elsewhere, "Look at me," she whispered, waiting for him to lose himself, but she feared

that his only commitment to her in that moment was to remind himself that, at least, he had something Gregor did not.

Sophia woke repeatedly throughout the night as her husband crawled in and out of bed, first changing positions, groaning, before sitting up and pacing about the room. Her shoulders ached, arms and legs cold, the sweetness of dreams withheld by Henry's restlessness. She felt hungry and sick. She prayed that what she'd heard about his condition had been false or at least exaggerated: that when the French army found him stranded and alone he had lost his mind, barely responsive, had to be led like a dog back to the English camp; and that onboard his steamship, while watching Balaclava harbor disappear from sight, he became raving mad, tried to convince the crew that none of them actually existed, left them no other option but to tie his wrists and feet and feed him by hand; he screamed "Aha!" over an over again without explanation, as if a thought had come that was too vile to share; and that he grew calmer only with the rocking of the sea, finally a sane man again upon his first footsteps on the English shoreline.

She watched Henry's silhouette before sleep took her once more. Some people were capable of horrible things, Sophia knew, and some only believed they were.

•

On that old, flat portico where he'd passed so many mornings of his childhood, safe on its peak but against his father's wishes still, Gregor watched a peddler try to pull a stubborn horse from its place. The animal, whether lazy, spiteful, or simply unaware, would move none of its densely bundled bulk. When the first drops of rain dotted the

ground, the peddler donned a frayed cloth pith helmet. It was important to remember, Gregor thought, that the sky is free from empathy, from symbols and irony and justice and all such devices. The peddler put his hands to his hips, rubbed his palms together, and, legs stiff, pulled with such force that his heels began to slide. Gregor would have laughed; would have, but wasn't in the mood.

He planted a foot through the wide window and hoisted himself inside. The few steps that took him to his study, once his father's, was a far shorter trail than it had seemed when he was a boy. His shoes left tracks of water on the floor. In seconds, the fragmentary outlines of his boot soles recomposed into puddles, whole again, little round mirrors. Gregor stopped and looked back. Goosebumps grew on his arms. He caught the scent of his childhood. He shook it off and opened the door in front of him. The study was empty.

Gregor coughed into his fist. He'd straddled the line for long enough; he knew it was time to choose. To accept falling entirely to either side, to reconcile a life undivided, would have seemed impossible only a month ago. Perhaps along the carriage ride to his estate in Blackheath he would feel some relief that he'd been caught. He could only hope. It was easier to believe that he'd only been delaying the inevitable, and at some point he would have either relinquished his act for good or forgotten he'd ever told a lie——to others, to himself——and disappeared within it. Then again, if the plutonists were right and below the streets, below the rock, was fire churning, molten materials constantly reforming the earth's surface at too gradual a pace for the common witness, then even Creation wasn't finished, or wasn't ever begun in the first place, nothing was intransient, and in a few years time Gregor might have changed himself once more, told a different

story, inhabited another man, no longer Gregor the writer, nor Gregor the painter before that, certainly not Gregor the child before *that*, who knows what the next one might have been. So long as he was destined to lose the smoothness of his face, the color and thickness of his hair, his steadiness of step——so long as he was doomed to conversion, not just in life but in death where underground in his mahogany box he'd be eaten and used and deposited, no trace left of the man that the matter had made——who had the authority to keep him or tell him he was a finished endeavor? Why stop him? He wasn't finished yet——he was a convert born and ready.

Knuckles against his door: Wilkie Collins, he knew, both grateful and dismayed——this would be the last of it, no question, he'd tell Wilkie before they even sat down to smoke and, once done, they would part forever. Gregor was already sorting out his luggage. He sighed. It was for the best.

He hurried downstairs, down the hallway, coughed several times before opening the door. "Goodness," as if his ghost…

A pale face, wordless.

"I——please, come in, come in," Gregor said, wiped a dripping nose with his forefinger.

Henry nodded and did as he was told.

"I'm glad to see you." Gregor's eyes danced. He folded his hands. "Are you well?"

"It seems so," Henry said, his voice a murmur.

Gregor smiled, coughed and shut his lips again. "Won't you sit with me?"

Henry nodded again. "That would be fine."

They walked into the parlor and took opposite seats across Gregor's round, marble table. He almost offered Henry a drink but thought better of it, listened to the air, and broke the silence with a wet sniffling. "I suppose you've heard about my troubles."

"Troubles," Henry said, looking past Gregor's face. "If I should agree for but a moment that you're a victim of some kind, then yes. Your troubles. I've heard about them."

"I deserve whatever's coming——"

"I think so, too."

The air was a shivaree of tickling fingers that prodded Gregor's ribs, his armpits, the back of his neck, reaching for his groin. He tried to brush them off. "I also deserve whatever you've come to say to me."

"That's good," offered Henry.

"I think I'm being fair."

Henry dragged his palms around the marble tabletop, smeared oil in streaks about its glossy surface. "There is no atoning."

"Ah," Gregor said. "Quite." Further hacking from his lungs. Henry watched without comment.

"My wife, Gregor."

"I was overzealous. I thought I could run from all of this."

"It was a great offense to her. And a betrayal."

"Sophia handled the matter with grace. I hope one day she'll forgive me where you will not. She'll realize she understands me more than she now knows."

"There's no understanding you."

"Perhaps not."

"There's no understanding why."

"Why?"

"You didn't just teach me how to write, Gregor. You taught me that everything I could want or feel was all just waiting to be found. That I could write my way there. Then with the godforsaken camera. You spoke of them like they were keys to happiness. To who I am. But, these real things, they aren't there. It was all a fraud. Easy talk."

"Henry——"

"So where does that leave me? With a life built on your fraud?"

Gregor shook his head. "You don't need me. You're free, Henry. L'Homme et Citoyen. The world is yours. Take it."

"Illusions."

"Pardon?"

"Illusions, Gregor."

Gregor opened his mouth to speak, couldn't find the words. He winced. "Can't you just live your life?"

The slam against the marble tabletop rang throughout the house. Henry removed his hand from the revolver immediately after it struck, as if the metal were burning hot. "Nothing really lives," he said, "so nothing really dies. But I'm happy to remove you from whatever this may be."

Gregor looked the revolver for a long time. "You're not going to shoot me."

"Don't be sure of anything." Silence. "You don't think I will?"

"No," Gregor whispered.

"It wouldn't be right to let you go. Because I'd always fear you still believe your lies."

"I know I'm a liar, Henry."

"You want everything."

"Not anymore."

"You wanted my wife."

"Sophia will be——"

"And you're a mandrake."

"A what?"

"You're a bugger of men. A sodomite."

Gregor searched for an answer in Henry's hardened face. "I'm not a bugger."

"Yes, you are."

"Henry——"

"——Everything and everyone until you've possessed it all."

"You've misunderstood me."

Henry lifted the revolver and pointed the muzzle straight ahead, his grip sweaty, unsteady.

The alarm went off in Gregor's head. His lips quivered, eyes widened, the blood fled his face. "W-w-w——" In disbelief, he threw a hand over his mouth, pulled his lips.

"Someone has to put a stop to this."

"W-w-wait just a m-m-m-moment——"

"What would you like to say before I pull the trigger?"

"N-n-n-n——"

"Well?"

"P-p-p-pl——"

"Go on," his voice resounded off the walls, "give it mouth!"

"P-p-p-please d-d-don't——"

"I'm glad you know I'm serious about this.

"N-n-no——"

"It's loaded."

"This m-m-must——"

"The bullet's ready——"

"Henry!"

"——Sitting in a chamber."

The blast pushed Gregor backwards in his chair. The wood snapped when he hit the floor. Its back must have broken his fall, but that didn't matter, Henry knew. Scorched flakes of his coat fluttered in the air, fell gently and joined him. Timidly, Henry set the revolver down, it might have gone off again, for all he knew. He rubbed his ears, closed and opened them, they rang like a confluence of crickets at midnight. Once the smell of gunpowder eluded him, he peered over the table and saw Gregor lying motionless, jaw hung open, arms splayed as if a wild movement had been suddenly, permanently interrupted. Mucus dribbled from his nose, though no blood, none that Henry could see. He couldn't remember if Gregor had screamed when the lead struck——the only sound his memory afforded was the explosion.

Henry left Gregor on the floor and walked over to a row of bottles. Vessels of gin, brandy, wine, all nearly drained, mostly spit, by then. But they weren't enough of a

distraction, Henry reached for his hair and pulled, “Lord God,” he started, his eyes welling with tears.

A whimper from behind: Henry spun around, expected to find the devil come to collect his due. Another whimper and then a grunt. Gregor hauled a heavy arm. He squinted his eyes and opened them slowly, returned. He reached into the breast pocket of his coat——the bullet hole danced as he moved the fabric from the inside——and pulled out a book bound in thick, hard cloth. Gregor took a gasp of air. Color tinted his face again. Henry leaned over. Above the burnt black entry point was a single word, intact save for streaks of char, the lick of fire. *Purgatorio*.

Henry ran to the window and threw open the casements. “Police!” he shouted, hands cupped around his mouth. “Police!”

•

She didn’t know it at the time but as Sophia crossed the lawn and approached the mansion, she weaved through and around the meridian without ever treading more than a single straight step on the line that was said to divide the world in two.

•

“He was taken away that same day and they put him in a lock-up. I tried to visit as much as I could. He was remorseful, but resigned. He asked for my forgiveness. Said that I never deserved this madness. I went to the assize at Old Bailey with my father. Having

him there was horrible, especially when they announced the four-year sentence. Regardless of what Henry did to Gregor, my father decided long ago that he deserved this. He wouldn't let me say goodbye. Henry was put in a cell in the Bedford gaol. I went home and wept with my sisters. They've been kind. But my friends have been avoiding me. They must think me to be in the same delirium that took Henry."

"What about Gregor?" asked the voice from the other side of the door.

Sophia swallowed. "He did his best. He urged the jury to be sympathetic. That he wasn't angry and didn't even want Henry put away. I think he managed to stop the judge from adding hard labor to the sentence. But the imprisonment stood."

"And now?"

"He's in separation. It's been a month. In a little room. My God, the last thing he needs."

"Will you visit?"

"In another two months, I'm allowed."

"Don't tell Mister Weir."

"I plan not to. But from then on, they will be sparse. I asked the constable if I could bring him any meals, but we're not allowed."

"One murderer in London is as any other, to a court."

"He's not a murderer. He made a mistake."

The body in the stairwell shifted around. "Why do you defend him?"

"He's my husband."

"And you'll wait?"

"Excuse me?"

"You mean to wait for the end of his imprisonment? Then he'll return home, and all will be as you dream it?"

She put her head in her hands, afraid she might cry. The life she had led before Henry's voyage to the war in Crimea, before Gregor had assailed her, felt lived by an entirely different person. It was the first time, she realized, that she ever felt so split from her own self, unrecognizable from an earlier Sophia. "I cannot say."

She had made this second carriage ride to Greenwich to apologize——that was the reason she acknowledged, but it was curiosity that drew her back, as well, to the secret behind the door. This time, no butlers or gardeners caught her entrance, no Astronomer Royal, whoever *that* was, in sight. The Meridian House was deserted, and she became suspicious as she passed through the photograph halls again that the man underneath the stairs wouldn't actually be there. Maybe she had imagined him. It all seemed so strange. But he was there as though he'd never left.

Thoughts of Henry, cold and starving within walls of stone. "We had so much further to go, he and I."

"And what would that have been?" he snapped. "You wanted him to come back to England for what reason? So he could spread your legs and fill you up with children? A pack of little Henrys for you to slave over? Is that really what you want out of your life, Sophia?"

"I wondered when your goodwill would run out."

"You're afraid to find out what being alone is really like."

She stared at the door. No light from inside his room crept out onto the floor beneath it. He was in the dark. "Then tell me."

He had nothing to say. Finally, he filled the quiet. “I will admit, it’s a pity about your husband,” he offered. “But sometimes we have no choice but to close periods of our lives when the hurt is no longer useful.”

“How can I believe that?” she said. “This isn’t theater. The end of an act. This will leave its marks on me, even if I can find some sort of happiness again. Even if I forget him and love again. This has rearranged the course of who I am. Who I was to be.”

He was silent.

“I have this thought, sometimes,” Sophia continued, “a fear, actually, that God never determined the course of my life. Maybe he never has, for any of us. That there are a thousand different ways my life could have gone, and I’ll never know what those are. And that every decision that I make, or anything that happens to me, sheds these possibilities, one after the next. I couldn’t imagine any of us would have souls if that were true.”

“With or without God, everything we do changes us.”

“Interesting words from a man who hides in a closet.”

“Doing can be dangerous for those like me.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“I’ve had to give up a lot to survive in this world.”

She rested her hand on the doorknob. “Let me see you. Come out of your room.”

“There’s no use in it.”

“Please. Let me.”

“It is easier this way. I’m happier this way.”

“One or the other, but I don’t think both of those are true for you.”

"Don't distort my words," his voice tensed.

"I'm sorry," Sophia said. There had to be some way to reach him. She looked at her hands. "Aren't you curious to know what I look like?"

He started syllables that he couldn't finish. Finally, he calmed himself. "Why don't you come back with a portrait? You can leave it with my butler."

"Will that really satisfy you?"

"Or you could leave now and not come back again." His cane tapped against the floor.

"You wouldn't like that."

"It would be easier——"

"Though you wouldn't be happier." She paused. "I can't imagine you entertain guests very often."

The air hung, waited upon his words for a push. "I'll admit," he said, "I was glad to hear your voice again."

"Well," she smiled, "you have been more welcoming this time than the last."

"I'm aware."

"What is your name?" she asked abruptly.

"Edward," he said, just as quickly, his voice higher, lighter, as though released of a measurable burden. "Edward Neville Airy."

"I'm pleased to meet you. To the extent that I've actually met you."

He breathed deeply. "If you are so inclined, you may visit again this coming Saturday."

"I shall." She waited. "Here?"

"No," he said, "I will receive you at the door."

•

The visiting quarters were empty when the guard led Gregor in. He had expected to find Henry there already, waiting——they both had. "*Cham*-bers, Hen-*ry*!" the guard shouted.

Gregor sat, folded his hands on the table. Two of its legs must have been shorter than the others, and it bounced tediously between positions. He moved it back and forth, listen to its wooden creak. When he stopped he could hear the noises in the distance, in the belly of the prison. It sounded like dozens of men were snorting and spitting together. Footsteps echoed within stone corridors. Doors were opened and shut. An occasional screams.

Henry entered with another guard behind him, his hands bound in chattering shackles. Gregor shot up. "Stay seated, please," ordered the guard who'd brought Henry.

Gregor sat again. "Any privacy?" he inquired.

"Afraid not." Henry was much thinner. His cheeks had become concavities and the bones protruded. His hair was greasy and uneven.

"Quite," Gregor said. He unbuttoned and spread his white shirt to reveal the bruise on his breast, blue and purple blended around a crimson core. "Isn't it something?"

Henry's eyes sunk. "I suppose it is."

"Tell me," buttoning up his shirt, "are they treating you well in here?"

"I don't know if this means much," Henry started, "but they say I don't much look like a criminal."

"Of course not," grinned Gregor.

"How is Sophia?"

"I haven't seen her since the sentence. I don't imagine I will. Rightfully so. But from what I hear, she is well. And worried. She'd like to visit."

"I see."

"You've passed three months, behaved well. You've earned it."

"Perhaps she should avoid this place."

"Her heart's with you, Henry."

"Just, not yet. Not until I'm ready."

"Whatever you say," Gregor shook his head, "I know she wants very badly to look upon you again. Her father is pressing Parliament to allow a divorce and from what I hear he's spending a fortune on it. No sanctity in him, is there?"

"He'll tarnish her name."

"I doubt he has the authority to win such a request. She's yours; you have the jurisdiction. He'd have to paint you as an adulterer of some kind and even then Sophia would have to corroborate it. But if she can wait, I'm working as hard as I can to reduce your sentence. To get you out of here. I'll fight forever. As long as forever takes me."

"I want to. But remember——"

"Believe you me, they have no idea what's coming."

"Gregor," a quieting palm raised, "I pulled the trigger on you."

He pointed a finger, “You tried!” and tugged at the shirt. “But I’ve my father to thank for the obstruction.”

The mention of him carried clouds into the room. “Erasmus.”

“So he was.”

“Erasmus, the writer.” It was a fact, not a threat.

“Indeed.”

“He was rather gifted.”

“I thought so, myself.”

“Enough to steal his work?”

“At least the world has it.”

“Gregor——”

“What does the name on the spine really matter? The people who’ve read it——the people who really treasure it——treasure it because they’ve gained something for themselves. *In* themselves. Not because they think its author needs his glory.”

“You’re a fake,” Henry said. “It’s that simple.”

“Fake, or what, real? How narrow-minded.”

“Still you try to justify this to me.”

Gregor rubbed the back of his neck. “Or perhaps to myself.” Henry probably hadn’t spoken to anyone besides the prison guards since reaching Bedford. Hopefully the chaplain would offer some extra time to this frail, timorous new arrival. Someone needed to take care of him. “Do you remember when we first met?” Gregor asked.

Henry looked beyond Gregor. “I do,” he said. “You were drunk.”

“Absolutely drunk.”

"1846, I think. I stepped into Twinings and there you were, though you weren't drinking tea like everybody else. You weren't sitting, either. In the midst of a tirade against Baudelaire, you were. Tearing up his *Salon*, shouting about how no one but you had the courage to see absolute beauty. I was shocked," Henry smiled. "I never forgot it."

"Yes," Gregor said. "Baudelaire was just a critic back then."

"A few of the customers stood up and left. But most of them were laughing and applauding. You took me by the arm when I got close enough. I'd only wanted a cup of Earl Grey."

"There was more, yes?"

"I was still working on the *Morning Herald* back then. I was there to write about Elizabeth Twinings."

"She drew flowers, didn't she?"

"Something of the sort."

"But you never caught her attention."

"You caught it first."

"So I took you by the arm——"

"And stole the journal from my hands. You looked for only seconds before you started reading aloud. I'd taken some notes about the outside of the building. Just little details. Trifles. You shouted them to your party."

"They laughed."

"And asked you, 'Well, then, is that art, Gregor?'"

"And what did I say?"

"You said, 'No, it's better than art. It's necessary.'"

One of the prisons guards yawned loudly. The other stood straight but titled his head backwards, resting it against the stone wall behind him, his eyelids shut.

"I suppose those lines aren't so clear anymore," Gregor said.

"Lines?" Henry murmured. "They were never there to begin with. I think we invented them."

"Henry, what happened to you out there, in Crimea?"

He waited. "I don't know for sure, but I don't think I've come back."

"Henry——"

"Not entirely. But I have to believe——I have to believe that a part of me is still out there, wandering."

"You'll feel right again when this is all over."

"I hope so."

"And it will be, soon."

"I'd like that," his voice choked and unsteady.

Gregor reached across the table to take his hands but Henry flinched and the shackles jingled before he remembered the warmth, the joy, of Gregor's touch in those moments when solitude was there to tempt him.

•

Sophia was stepping out of her carriage when the door to the Meridian House opened and the old butler emerged looking through a spyglass. He stood there as she approached, the wrinkles of his face crumpling over any discernable expression he might

have held when he saw her. He turned around in the doorway and spoke to somebody behind him, then faced her. “Won’t you please come in?” He stepped out of the way.

Edward leaned on a cane, wore a loose white shirt with a black necktie that dangled from a round, frilled collar, the kind sported by children. He was as short as one, Sophia noticed, not much taller than five feet. His bowed legs couldn’t have had much weight to support but they trembled underneath him, threatened to slip out from his hips. A large, bulbous cranium narrowed at the chin, and his eyes bulged. Before Edward even spoke, she was worried for him.

He raised a hand, fingers spread wide. “Don’t be frightened,” he implored. “This won’t frighten you for long. Stay, if you would.”

“It would be quite unreasonable, by now, for me to run off,” she said, “wouldn’t it?”

Edward and his butler exchanged smiles. “It pleases me to hear that,” he said.

“It pleases me as well, if I might add,” the butler chimed in as he walked back to seat at the end of the hallway. “I’ve always recommended fresh air.”

“A walk?” asked Sophia.

“If you would,” Edward said. “Though I must warn you, I’ve a measured pace.”

Though he wore a child’s attire, his slow, careful steps, reliant on his cane, reminded Sophia of her grandfather——Winnie’s father, a man who panicked over his mortality as he took his steps, when there was air between the earth and his soles. He had died when Sophia was only ten, but even at that age she pitied him, wanted some way to help her grandfather find his courage. When he sat for too long, she took his hand——she needed both of hers to grapple with just one of his——and urged him to

walk with her, nowhere in particular, hoping the old man would salvage his trust in himself.

Edward led her around the side of the house, through a lush, winding garden that attempted to fool Sophia into thinking it was truly wild, colored with a rainbow's array of flora, lined with hedges and hanging branches and shrubs that were deliberately, meticulously overgrown. She couldn't be deceived.

"My condition," Edward started, "is a rare one, to my knowledge. I've never met anyone else who's suffered as I have. I only read about the doctors and the names they give it. It's been named many things." He stopped, licked the roof of his mouth, prepared his tongue. "Osteopsathyrosis idiopathica," he drawled as slowly as possible, "is the one I've tried to remember. A Frenchman devised it. But the words aren't French. Sometimes I greatly obsess over what to call it. I like saying that one. It makes me think of Aristotle. I do hope I've said it right for you."

"What does it mean?" she asked.

He curled his fingers into a limp, quivering fist. "My bones are as fragile as glass. Or limestone. You can tear limestone with your hands, you know, when it's brittle enough. Or, at least, *you* could. I'd be afraid to."

"For your whole life?"

"Yes, I was born with it. My bones were broken the moment I was delivered. I was a wretched sight. My father told me——this was a particularly dreary day for him——that after I was born he thought of taking me to the garden, to this garden, and sinking me in the fountain."

"Oh, Edward."

"It was understandable for numerous reasons. My condition was unsettling enough. I had many injuries in my childhood. The room under the stairs was his idea. He had to take very special care of me. But my mother was another problem. My father's wife is Mrs. Smith. He proposed marriage to her thirty-one years ago. I'm twenty-eight. Mrs. Smith is not my mother."

"Does she know about you?"

"Naturally," Edward said. "But I'm a secret kept between the two of them and our servants."

"And your mother?"

"His mistress. She came from prosperity. From London. But you can't hide the swelling for long. My father's career was flourishing. He was a professor at Cambridge when he heard I was to come. But he never had the wealth that she did. He begged her not to cause a scandal. To leave London. He commissioned this manor, she gave birth to me in it. She was horrified when she saw me. But she was prepared to stay and raise me. If only——as it happened, my father told her I hadn't a full year to live. Why put herself through the tragedy, he argued. He convinced her to rejoin society and leave me to the servants. I had all the care and money and provisions I would need until my end. So she left, against her better judgment. He wrote to her, some time later, to let her know I'd passed."

"Surely you could get her name out of your father?"

"I've tried. He'll never tell. Too much of a risk to his status, he says."

"Then your servants? They must have known her."

"He replaced them after my mother was gone."

"Terrible man," Sophia said.

"A burdened one," answered Edward.

"I must have seen him," she went on, "last summer, when I came here for the first time. The Astronomer Royal?"

"He studies the stars," Edward said. "He's worked in observatories for decades, some of them in Greenwich. Checks in from time to time to make sure all's well. I hope he didn't see you."

"He didn't."

"He's discouraged visitors in the past. Or my taking leave. So I've spent most of my life here. Very lonely. I like to walk around the property. Most of my time I spend in my bedroom or in the study. When my condition's weak, or when I'm afraid, I take solace in the room under the stairs. Sometimes I'm in there for days in a row, and Theobold, my butler, will bring my meals. It's safer that way. I'm so breakable. Fear comes easily."

"You can't let it deter you so."

"I don't enjoy it. I do what I must. But I've grown quite close to my servants. They've raised me far more than my father did. Theobald, he's very dear to me, very patient with me. The kindest man I know. One of the only men I know. But still the kindest."

"No one should be so alone."

He ignored her interjection. "Though when I was eight, my father earned his post and moved into Flamsteed House, not far from here. He does most of his work there. The

Royal Observatory. It was a fortunate change for both of us. He visits more often. He even named the manor, a few years ago. It lies right on the line."

"The line?"

"The longitude, the one that splits the earth in two, west opposite the east. He determined its position. The line points to my house. I like to think that I'll never be lost to him as long as he can follow the line to find me. Remarkable, really. If you followed it down even further than that, you'd walk through Spain, through the Gold Coast in Africa, down to the ice at the bottom of it all."

"That sounds silly."

Edward scrunched his brow. "Why?"

"It's imaginary."

"I don't understand."

"Wherever you stand, you could stop and look west and then turn and look east. You could follow any line to the ice. The world's round, Edward. It doesn't make sense."

"It makes sense if you desire sense."

An amused exhalation escaped her nose. "Men are so stubborn. They never know what they're looking for but they always think they've found it."

"Oh, yes? Is that what all you're vast experience has taught you?" he snapped, reminded Sophia how readily brusque he was underneath his frailty. "Married to one man for a few months?"

"I stand by my beliefs. And I know enough to know that a little room in the dark under the stairs couldn't possibly have taught you much."

"My condition! Your Goddamned mouth! Preying on the weak!"

"Your father didn't put you there."

"He didn't dissuade me."

"You chose it yourself."

"I've had enough accidents for a thousand lives! Enough broken bones!"

"And you've earned all my compassion but you must admit you've no way of determining that I know any less than you."

His cane quivered under his grip and he pointed with his forefinger. "I've done everything I could. Everything. I've read, I've listened, I've seen all the same sights that you have. Probably more than you ever will."

"Your photographs."

"The world."

"Those rooms."

"They've provided me with things I would have had to imagine. Things I could never have imagined."

"You'll never be satisfied if you replace the real world with such an artifice. Not truly."

"It *is* the real world."

"It's merely what you've deemed worthy of hanging on a wall."

"This is beyond you."

"I don't want to argue with you, Edward."

"Then it's best we stay in disagreement."

"But this project of yours——"

"It took many photographers and years of labor. But I paid them well for their expenses. Every one of them."

"Mister Adramalech."

"He was one of them, yes."

"He abused the money you provided him."

"So I've read."

"A constable came and took all the photographs from his studio and had them burned."

"For the better."

"It's a pity they haven't caught him yet. I worry they'll forget about him before they do."

"Such is the fate of many."

"You're rather comfortable with this mess."

"Whatever Aloysius did, it has nothing to do with the assignments I gave him."

"It was your money that kept him busy."

"I gave him the same funds that I gave the others."

"Then I lost my husband because you were too afraid to step outside."

"If you learn anything from me, I hope it's how to wait patiently."

"He may be imprisoned for a long time."

"So visit him, and tell him what you learn from me."

"He's refused me twice over."

"Well, if you love him, then you'll deny his wishes and see him regardless of his shame."

"I know."

"You should give it another try," he said.

"I intend to."

"He may change his mind soon."

"Yes."

"It's a thorny matter, being seen. I would know."

"May I confess something horrible?"

"You may."

"Something that makes me hate myself?"

"Anything."

She ran a finger under her eye. "I've found——it would not be——I'm not proud of this, Edward. I want to let him go."

"And here I thought you were too afraid."

"Maybe my father was right, and I never loved him, not really——I wanted something for myself I'd never had before. I was trapped in my father's home. I thought he was the answer for me. And that I was his. He seemed so unformed, so good."

"If you wanted to escape, you should have only ever relied on yourself."

"Like you?"

"As I said, I've managed."

"I found out, last summer, that my father asked Henry to court me. It was his idea. I felt, I don't know, lied to. Henry said he fell in love me the first time we danced. I found it hard to believe. It had been so brief. I barely remembered it myself, until he told me. But I think I wanted to believe that *he* believed it. That was enough, back then."

"And what if he did believe it? That he fell for you?"

"Then I'm angry still. He was used by my father and knew it, and lied to himself, willingly, before he lied to me."

"There are worse ways to live."

"I think we differ on the way we live."

"We may, indeed."

"I didn't want a pawn of my father. I wanted——I thought, together, we'd be more."

"More what?"

"I don't know——just more. What two people have that they can't have when they're alone."

"Being a lover," he said softly, his voice looking far away.

Sophia was struck with the forwardness of his remark. "That's part of it. But there's more."

"Such as?"

Thoughts, she realized, never materialized the same way that pearls form inside their shells. "I'm having trouble finding the words."

He smirked. "Oh, well. Don't blame yourself."

"Myself," Sophia whispered as if reading a riddle.

"I think we like to imagine that we'll have actual moments when life's mysteries are answered, and we can lean back and feel proud and cry, 'Aha!' up to heaven, and realize our enigmas are solved."

"I suppose so."

"You thought that was Henry, didn't you?"

"I wish he could have been."

Edward was staring at his shoes when he heard the snap. She had plucked a purple stem of larkspurs from the brush and held it high like a little torch. Edward didn't want to interrupt her as she picked more out of the garden, didn't want to disappoint her. But he was also nervous she would ruin the patch if he let her continue tearing out its flowers. He didn't know what to say.

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The convict photographer was a neat, sharply dressed young man who seemed to simper every time he exposed another sheet of paper to one of Bedford gaol's crooked faces, foes of God and country. Henry wondered why. Perhaps it was because the photographer thought himself the only free man not confined in one way or another to the corridors of the gaol, unlike the convicts and the guards; in which case, the simper was directed at them. Just as likely, the photographer was engrossed with the abundance of better, more beauteous sights his camera had and would continue to capture; in which case, the simper was directed at himself. It was also possible, Henry knew, that the photographer regarded each individual face that he saw through his lens as nothing less than a born criminal, composed by destiny with short foreheads, thick lips, swollen noses, unruly beard growth; in which case, the simper was directed at their progenitors, near-savages dumb to the defects they had passed on like contaminants. Henry, waiting in a line that stretched out of the sick-room and into the damp central corridor, wondered if he

was the only one who noticed the photographer's peculiar expression. He looked around. Most of the other prisoners hung their heads low or stiffened their necks pridefully or picked inattentively at holes in their identically tattered brown waistcoats, either way paid little attention to their surroundings. A slouching janitor mopped up their footprints in no particular hurry.

"This is you, you hear?" the photographer said as he gazed at Henry through the frame of the apparatus. Henry twisted his lips, pitied the photographer and the load of equipment he hauled around for such disdainful work, his fallible proof. When the light had taken Henry, a guard shoved him out into the corridor and led him upstairs back into his cell, a wooden enclosure no more than six feet long, four feet wide, with a single window for fresh air. He climbed into his hammock, waited for them to close the door, and found relief——outside his cell, being shuffled around by guards or grouped in with the other inmates in the chapel, he couldn't deny that he was a prisoner, a wrongdoer in the eyes of the Queen. But when they left him alone, he was an abstraction, a man behind a door, and Henry Chambers, he hoped, was forgotten.

The convict photographer departed before sundown. A few guards helped him carry his belongings outside the prison walls but left him to the rest of the work. Henry watched him through the bars of his window. The guards waved goodbye as he hauled an armload of equipment up a hill of dead grass, towards the road where his horse and carriage waited. A few steps further and he faded into the white fog that embalmed Bedford.

Henry never received visits from the schoolmistresses. He could already read and write, unlike most of the other inmates, who savored their minutes with the instructors,

awaited them in the same way they imagined hot meals that weren't Bedford's barley soup or oatmeal gruel. Even the prisoners who didn't care about letters or thought only of murdering the old women at least appreciated the change of pace. Not Henry——he envied none of them, doubted he would gain anything inside the gaol. All he wanted was to count the days until it was time to take himself home; and to take less of himself home than he had arrived with. He had even rejected the governor's offer of a small supply of ink and parchment. He wouldn't have known what to do with it other than record his thought in the gaol, but there was nothing he could imagine wanting to preserve or revisit after his release.

Briefly he contemplated accepting the governor's stationery and writing some statement about his life——not an autobiography, specifically, but rather his own thoughts about himself if only as a testament to his existence. He wondered when it would have been appropriate to ask for the ink and parchment. Perhaps on Monday, the most boring day of the week; or perhaps on Sunday, instead of going to mass; but definitely not on Friday, when God created man, since, the more Henry thought about it, His struck him as something of an empty gesture. But Henry became obsessive about choosing the day. He realized that every day would initiate the writing, and thus his record of his life, in its own singular way. If he started it tomorrow, it would read differently than if he started on the day after that or if he had started yesterday. Then which would be the truest tract of Henry Chambers? None of them, he determined, and before the prospect could drive him insane he sat on his hands and resolved not to ask for any stationery from the governor.

At night, staring at the ceiling, Henry's thoughts strayed to Crimea. He remembered it as being cold but understood that the cold came from his cell, that he'd sweated more in Balaclava than in any other place and was tricked by the room around him into thinking that its damp, stony chill was the only way the world had ever felt. He said, "Man is a victim," surprised at his own volume but convinced enough to speak aloud and suffer the obnoxious noise that the guard made in rapping his fist against the door. Henry was silent after that. He'd said all he needed to.

But no matter how easily the guards could shut Henry up, the valleys of the Orient fell upon Bedford after every sunset. Unable to sleep, he felt helplessness. He covered his face with a blanket to hide from Captain Wilkinson's dead body, the prying and impatient de Paladines, the rocky steps, hungry birds, fire and smoke, afraid that if he looked to his window he'd find them watching through the glass, panting fog against the pane, gunfire in the distance, death not so much a possibility as a precondition, and Andrew "Aha" standing over the harbor, there he was, his days awaiting closure in cruel secrecy, he didn't know it but he'd deserved a warning, no less, hopefully those last moments waiting on the road outside Sebastopol were happy, his canteen full and thirst quenched, géchmish ola, as the Ottomans said.

Rest impossible in his thorny nights, Henry often slept through Bedford's Sunday mass, forehead slumped against the pew in front of him, he felt the imprint of wood and the dribble of drool when he woke, apologized under his breath and to no one in particular as the dull drone of the chaplain endured. When he did manage to stay awake during the sermons, Henry caught occasional words or phrases——a tempestuous wind, the violence of the waves, barbarians and a venomous beast, vengeance, bloody

flux——but any greater story the chaplain might have told from that pulpit was lost on him. The chapel was indistinguishable from the rest of the gaol, built into its side with identical red brick——no more a godly place than the corner of his cell where the chamber pot sat. Though most of the other inmates seemed attentive enough, a few even mouthing along with the words as the chaplain pronounced them.

The only other person in the room who shared his tendency to drift off, Henry noticed as he surveyed the audience, was a guard named Peabody, a lanky man with a stiff, red moustache and burdensome eyelids. One Sunday, in another nodding somnolence against the back wall of the chapel, Peabody's unmindful head fell heavier than usual and the guard had to catch himself from plummeting forward by slamming a boot heel against the stone floor. Every head in the chapel turned to look at him before the echoes had faded. He stood upright and wriggled his upper lip. Henry laughed brazenly, the only noise in the room. Peabody's eyes focused out of their confusion and glared at Henry. The chaplain cleared his throat and continued. "With all confidence," he read, "no man forbidding him."

That evening, Henry heard commotion below his cell, the gaol's ground level busy as doors were opened and guards grunted. They were dragging something heavy along the floor when the governor's voice, embellished by the ever-present jingling of his keychain, interrupted their work, "Lift, you imbeciles!" and Henry detected nothing more save the wind that faltered against Bedford's brick, scared of the dark, running for refuge.

Henry had forgotten about the night's clamor until one day, weeks later, he and a score of other men were on a march to the exercise yard——one guard at the front, a second at the rear, each prisoner holding a knot in the same long, taut rope——when a

scream caught their attention. “Stop!” the rear guard shouted as he raced after the blurred form of an inmate heading for an open door, arms and legs free to their natural span. Some of the prisoners around Henry began to cheer but another pair of guards joined the fray and silenced any vocal men with their clubs before running after the fleeing inmate. They caught him, beat him, his knees buckled and they beat him further as he lay sprawled and thrashing on the ground.

Metal keys rattled about: the governor emerged, his gait confident and precise, and stood over the attempted escapee. “Tried to run, did he?”

“Yes, sir,” replied a breathless Peabody. “Back to his cell, then?”

“No,” the governor said. “Let’s try the solitary.” He stared down at the inmate at his feet. “How’s it to you if you christen a new method of ours?”

The inmate could say nothing as he clutched his bruising flesh.

“That’s what I thought,” the governor said. “He’d be delighted!”

Peabody and another guard lifted the man under his arms and dragged him towards the storeroom at the end of the corridor. Henry, loitering and craning his neck as the line began to march again, thought for a moment that the guards were going to lock the inmate inside the storeroom, which wouldn’t have made much sense considering the bounty of food and makeshift weapons stocked behind its door. But when Peabody opened it, Henry’s sight fell immediately on the black box that sat between bales of wheat straw, a cube just large enough——or small enough, Henry corrected himself——to contain a single man and only if that man sat crouched with his legs held against his chest. Peabody lifted the box’s lid and helped the other guard hoist the inmate inside. His joints crumpled loosely, still too delirious from his beating to notice what was

happening, but Henry was sure he caught a glimpse of terror in the man's eyes just before the lid sealed him inside. Peabody fastened a lock, left the storeroom with the other guard, and shut the door behind them.

The following Sunday, during mass, Henry, head low as he spoke, asked if anyone knew what had become of the inmate. Most of them didn't and Henry was sure the box had devoured the man, digested his bones, until a thick-bearded prisoner sitting behind him mentioned that the governor had ordered the box opened and emptied after three full days of confinement had passed and that the inmate, a debtor named Barrows, was last seen in the sick-room being fed by hand. "Likely not to try his run-awaying again," the prisoner concluded before leaning back in his pew.

Over the next few days, Henry spent most of the time in his cell sitting on his floor and brushing loose pebbles and specks of dirt into the corners. He used to stand and stare out the window but ever since he saw the box in the storeroom he found that he'd lost interest in looking outside. Sometimes Andrew "Aha" took his place at the window, still bleeding from the scalp. "I feel sorry for you," he told Henry, who only shrugged in response.

A guard opened his door one morning. "The lady's here to visit," the guard informed him. Henry lied in his hammock, twirling a loose thread of the cloth around his fingers. "Shall I tell her no again?" Henry nodded and shut his eyes. "Breakfast in a moment," said the guard before leaving Henry alone.

Sophia could try to visit all she wanted but, knowing her father, their marriage was over even if William Weir never managed to impose an official divorce. Henry had made himself a part of Gregor's scandal when he pulled the trigger on him, and London

was unlikely to forget——William would have no association with a reprobate like him and neither would any daughter of his. He considered the possibility that Sophia could still see him in secret until he remembered how young the two of them were, how long they would have to sustain a ruse like that regardless of whatever passion was left by the time of his release. Better that she knew the Henry she'd married, he admitted, not the Henry who was riddled with shame in a gaol.

How had he wound up in Bedford? The shooting, of course, but it didn't help that he'd been whisked off to the Orient to lose his sense of things, came back convinced that the world was nothing more than a place in which mankind had cornered itself, a trap of its own creation. It was impossible to feel anything for a world like that. Why didn't anyone else see it like he did? Sometimes he wanted to scream at them, not just the people of London but the architects of new Paris and the czars of modern Petersburg and every eager colonial flocking to Bombay, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Istanbul——good Lord, Constantinople, could Andrew "Aha" really have gone back once Europe was through with it?——though when Henry imagined their empty heads turning to hear him screaming so loud he saw them with their paints and pens, their journals, their cameras, museums exulting death, trains so swift that they couldn't build the railways fast enough. Does anyone else, he wondered, struggle to sleep as I do?

On another walk to the exercise yard, a convict from Henry's corridor——an incessantly amused man sent to Bedford for stealing dogs from the carriages of rich London ladies——butted his forehead into Henry's back. "Look at the swag I nicked!" he snickered, showed Henry a tart red apple tucked in his palms. He rolled it in and out of his sleeves. "Pretty good, ain't it?"

"Nice find," Henry offered as his eyes darted about. No one else was looking.

"Take it. You want it, don't you?" pressed the thief.

"No, you know, I'd rather——" but the thief tossed the apple and Henry caught it out of reflex, thinking they'd both be in trouble if the guards saw a piece of pilfered fruit spill out from between their place in line.

"Take it, it's yours," the thief chuckled. "You ain't a welsher, are you? You ain't some stinking welsher, huh?"

Peabody stormed up to their place in the middle of the line. "All right," brandishing his club, "who's yammering over here!"

"Not I!" the thief implored, clutching his length of rope.

"What about you——Chambers, is it?"

"No sir," Henry said, forgot the guard and pictured Andrew "Aha" polishing a camera lens outside his tent, squinting in the sunlight.

Peabody glanced at Henry's hands. "What's that you got, Chambers?"

Henry was stunned to see the apple in his hands. "No!" he started, "Wait, it wasn't me!"

"Where'd you get that?" The guard took a step forward.

"It wasn't me!" Henry shook his hands at the thief. "It was him!"

"Hands on the rope!" Peabody raised his club.

The thief was laughing. "I saw him nick it before we left, I did."

Peabody sighed. "When'll you people bloody learn——out of the line, Chambers, you're coming with me." He grabbed Henry by the forearm, gave him a good push, grabbed his forearm again and led him back inside the gaol. Henry could still hear the

thief cackling as he resumed his march into the exercise yard, virtuous before the guards, untroubled by the devil in his heart.

"I swear it wasn't me!" Henry begged.

"Hold your tongue, won't you?" Peabody found the governor leaving his office, briefcase in hand, and rapped the wall with his club. "Caught this little unfortunate with some stolen fruit."

"Well," the governor perked, "how very convenient. I was just looking to try the solitary again." He patted the guard's shoulder and left them both. Peabody led Henry to the storeroom and opened the door. The black box sat before them. This wasn't punishment; it was a blood sacrifice. "Adar-Moloch, Adar-Moloch," whispered the naked children hanging from the walls.

Peabody shivered. "In you go."

The governor only gave him a full twenty-four hours, unlike the runaway from before, but he figured it was discipline enough for such a meek and undemanding specimen. His shoulders scuffed against either side of the box, knees planted higher than his chin, neck at an angle under the lid. His bottom was the first to hurt, bruising against the wood. Crouched and stiff in his unmovable posture, Henry felt scared and sick and lightheaded for the first few hours, tried to breath but the air was thin and the walls of the box built a coffin around him. His muscles throbbed, bones in a rage, but halfway through his detention he forgot the pain as pain and as he opened and closed his eyes inside the darkness and found no difference between those states, between seeing and seeing nothing, a sense of comfort came over him, like a blanket thrown over him in bed or many people he loved asleep and warm against his body. Before sundown on the next

day Peabody and the governor lifted the lid——that was the worst moment of the entire confinement, when light flooded the box and shapes formed out of the blinding brightness. They said nothing. Peabody and another guard carried him on a stretcher to his cell and Henry slept on the floor until dawn.

When he woke he pissed an acrid yellow stream into his chamber pot and stretched his aching legs. He tried to relax but sensed he was being watched, he wasn't sure by who but it could have been the governor through a hole in the wall or the janitor camouflaged in the corridor or even William Weir listening in. Some food will settle my mind, he thought, but after breakfast his mood was the same, he felt uncomfortable in his cell and couldn't lie still in his hammock.

A bluebird landed on his window ledge, could have fit through the iron bars if it had wanted to. That's it, Henry realized, shooing the bluebird away, it was his window that they were watching through——not that there was anyone watching now or at any time before. But there *could* have been. Pointing at him, gawking, yes, that's Henry Chambers in there, dismissed from his newspaper, attempted murder, marriage in shambles, we know all about him.

It was well before midday, the sun directly across from him when he stood. It cast his shadow on the wall behind him. Henry spotted it, moved his arms and legs, even danced a little, the syzygy unbreakable. As he stirred his shadow he found that he couldn't stop, every time he stood still for long enough he became afraid it wouldn't resume moving with him, it would be stuck there, imprinted forever, and he began to feel like his cell was really a large camera, the wall its plate, the window its lens, the outside world one poised, prying photographer. No, he shook his head, it wouldn't do.

In the few hours he slept that night he dreamed he was inside the box. It was sealed shut, it was dark, but seeing and seeing nothing were the same and he knew it wasn't just any darkness he was stooped within, it was the box in the storeroom, without a doubt, exactly as he remembered until water began leaking through the cracks in the lid. He grew alarmed. The water was warm. He had an erection in the dream, probably in real life, too, and stuck his hand down his trousers and wrapped it around his shaft but remarkably that didn't stop the intrusion of water, not that he was sure why he thought it would to begin with, but soon the flood was halfway up the box, he was taking deeper and deeper breaths until he was all but sucking the wood above him for any air it might have possessed. The deluge rose up to his ears, past his eyes, finally filled the entire box, where had it come from, his head was pounding without oxygen. In desperation Henry took a gasping breath and at once relieved the frenzy in his skull. Bubbles shot out of his nose when he exhaled. He could breath underwater. He took another deep, rewarding lungful of air. Had men come out of the sea, he wondered, long ago?

To the governor, Henry was an ideal inmate. He was obedient, never protested his punishment. So if the stolen apple had come as a surprise, his dash down the corridor was utterly dumbfounding——he wasn't even on Bedford's ground level when he tried to flee, and he must have known that the doors on both ends were locked, as usual. How far did he think he was going to get? None of the other prisoners even cheered as they ordinarily did when one of their own gambled with freedom. They were just as confused. Outraged, even——Henry, to attempt his escape, had needed to kick one of them to the ground, an Ethiopian who lay writhing, grasping his testicles, still breathless when the governor appeared at the scene. What a needless smear on the young man's standing, the

governor lamented. Back to solitary; another twenty-four hours should give him some time to reflect.

Henry only needed an hour before the pain of his posture receded. He was famished, too, would have eaten anything, a rat, a maggot, the bluebird from his window, if he found it in the box. He breathed slowly, steadily, counted each one, imagined drawing the air through his nose, down his throat and into his ballooning lungs. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he had no questions weighing on his mind. Peace. Clarity. He even forgot his hunger. He was disheartened when the lid was flung open and Peabody's face appeared above. It wasn't enough. He needed more.

The next day, Peabody led Henry and one other prisoner to the baths. He handed each man half a bar of soap. The water was warm and ready. "Strip," Peabody said. The other prisoner did as he was told. Henry was rubbing his hands together. They were shaking. "Strip, Chambers," Peabody pointed. Henry slapped the guard in the back of the head. His helmet tumbled into the water. "Bloody hell, are you mad!" he grabbed Henry by the collar and wrenched him close, huffed onion-breath into his face. Peabody stared for a long while, nostrils flared, before bending over to pluck his hat from the bathwater. Henry stuck his leg in front of front of Peabody's knees and shoved the guard's back. Peabody spilled forward over Henry's leg, splashing into the water. "You fucking snot!" He was soaked. The other prisoner almost burst into laughter before he gasped and threw a hand over his mouth.

Henry's limbs were undaunted by their crooked position in the box, though the gash on the side of his head distracted him for much of the first day. By the second, it hadn't stopped bleeding and the bruise was still spreading, but Henry managed to forget

it was there. He was relieved to be back. Leave the outside world to its chaos, he thought. I don't need any of it. I have myself, finally.

When Peabody deposited him into the box and locked the storeroom he was fuming, certain that he would be hard-pressed to stop himself from clubbing Henry the moment he lifted the lid and saw that blank face of his again. He belonged in an asylum, Peabody speculated, not Bedford. And if that was the case, then the lunatic probably wasn't capable of controlling his behavior. His rage had revised itself into pity when he extended his arm to Henry, whose eyelids sealed, resisted the shower of new light like an infant roused from sleep, dragged from the warmth of his womb.

But any sympathy he mustered for the troubled Henry Chambers was lost when the guard tried to make amends with the prisoner. On another walk around the exercise yard, Peabody found Henry and tugged his section of rope. He waved an unopened letter in the prisoner's face. "Normally the governor has to inspect letters from friends or family," Peabody murmured, "but I thought your spirits could use a lift." The last thing Peabody wanted was a rivalry and he expected the matter was solved when Henry took the envelope warily and looked at it with a glow of gratitude, as if some great favor or opportunity had come his way.

Henry lifted his hand as high as he could. "Look, everyone!" He fanned the envelope. "Our guard has broken the rules and passed me a letter!"

The prisoners turned to stare, many of them dropped their rope as the other guards flaunted their clubs and ordered them back in place. When they began to chatter, Peabody gnashed his teeth. "Quiet, you lot!" He glared at Henry, who tore the envelope into shreds and tossed them aside. Peabody growled, one of his fists took Henry by the collar while

the other broke his nose in two blows——the first of which was for him, beleaguered and embarrassed, only trying to do his job; the other for the woman good enough to write this wicked scum a letter.

The prisoners' tongues were free, dangerous as an armed rebellion. "Mouths shut!" shouted another guard, who took Peabody aside once the prisoners were hushed and marching again. "Got some explaining to do?"

Peabody's knuckles swelled as the governor scolded him privately in his office. He tried to defend his motives, but favors, the governor contended, would cure no ills in men like these. Peabody would receive a cut in his pay, and Henry a three-day detention in the box——penalties for each of them. The guard stormed out in a rage. Henry, tranquil and complacent, was escorted into the storeroom by another guard.

He was out again by Thursday. That Sunday, the governor mentioned to Peabody that Henry had asked to be excused from mass. "Good," Peabody said. "Leave him in the storeroom, why don't we?" But the governor wouldn't allow it: no exceptions, especially not for someone who had earned four visits to solitary confinement within a single month. He needed the words of God more than anyone.

As he entered the chapel, steady in his place in line, Henry found the chaplain standing under the doorway. The chaplain took Henry's arm, his expression grave. "Don't hate your Father," he implored. Henry wriggled to shift his arm out of the old man's grip, grateful when the line moved onward. "Your Heavenly Father!" the chaplain called.

The pews were cold that morning, couldn't deny the winter. "Heaven and earth," Henry muttered as he took his seat. He hoped the chaplain's drone would at least lull him

into sleep but the old man kept looking at Henry every time he glanced up from his Bible. Other prisoners caught notice of this, peered at him every so often. He shuddered in his place, enclosed by all those other bodies, and turned around. Peabody, no surprise, was asleep against the back wall, sitting on a stool, head bobbing, dreams agreeable. His moustache needed a trim, Henry could tell. The guard's upper lip twitched involuntarily, tickled by the spiny, overgrown hairs curling into it.

Henry shot up. Before anyone could stop him, he cupped his hands around his mouth so everyone would hear, "Looks like God can't reach everyone!" he yelled, facing Peabody. The chaplain rubbed his eyes. The other prisoners howled with laughter. Peabody stumbled to his feet as if freezing water had shocked him awake. He shouted for order. Nobody would listen. They were too pleased by his humiliation. They were imitating him, snoring and then startling awake. Chambers, again——the man was disturbed, no question, intent on his incomprehensible vendetta. He was inciting violent men. They would riot, soon enough, and there would be no stopping them once they learned to fight with laughter.

Three more days in the storeroom, ordered the governor, and if Henry caused any more problems after this round of confinement, then more serious measures would be taken. But he didn't specify what, Peabody seethed, and without a doubt it wouldn't be enough unless they dragged him outside and shot him.

Peabody showed up to Bedford the next morning unusually early, the sky caught in a dull shine, with an apple in hand and a straight razor in his pocket. He whistled on his way through the gate. The corridor on the first floor was empty. Most of the prisoners were still asleep. He unfolded the straight razor, stuck the blade between his foot and the

hard stone floor, and bent the file-thin metal with as much force as he could marshal. The blade snapped. The noise reverberated loudly down the corridor. He picked the jagged shard up from the floor and, cautiously, taking care not to slash his fingers, slid the razor deeply through the apple's taut red skin. The entry mark, a narrow brown line, was barely noticeable, a flaw like any other. It would do. He tossed the apple up and caught it confidently in his palm.

Henry was awake when Peabody lifted the lid, skin ghostly white, face unshaven, lips dry, shadows circling his eyes and threatening to bury them. "Is it time to leave already?" he asked weakly.

"No," the guard said, "but I brought you something," and handed Henry the apple. "You must be hungry."

"Thank you," Henry said. He took a bite. His teeth broke the skin, pulling fruit from the core, juice dripping down his chin. "I forget, sometimes."

"Naturally," Peabody said, toes fidgeting. "My gift to you."

Henry nodded, chewed and swallowed painfully, his throat parched, without looking anywhere in particular.

"Today is Easter Sunday," Peabody said.

Henry smelled the apple. "That's interesting."

"Most people are ending their fasts."

He licked up some of the juice that polished its skin. "I see."

"As should you," the guard whispered.

Henry gnawed another chunk off the apple.

"When were you born?" Peabody asked.

Henry said nothing.

"Are you enjoying your time in the dark?" he asked.

"Oh," Henry said, glancing at the canyon his teeth had carved, the ridges in the fruit, "very much so, thanks."

Peabody waited, his temples pulsating. Henry took another bite, chewed gladly. "What do you like to think about when you're in here?"

"I try not to do much of that," Henry said.

"Things that don't think," Peabody grumbled.

"Pardon?" Another bite, the apple a white moon with all those craters.

"I say, you've been a regular pest, you know that?"

Henry shrugged, his voice croaked but didn't produce any words.

"You've certainly proven yourself, these past few days."

He didn't respond.

"Judgment is an eternal procedure. Not just a stint in the corrections house."

Henry put his teeth against the apple. Peabody could hear them sink through the fruit, fluid stirred and seeping out the punctures. He stopped. "I think I'm full, now."

"Is that so?" Peabody blushed. His heart pounded.

"I've had enough," Henry said. "I'd like to be alone, now."

Peabody bit his lip. "Have a little faith in things," he said. "I'm here. The apple's here. So are you. Enjoy yourself." He exhaled unsteadily, his breathing cut by knives. "I gave it to you. Take another bite."

Henry shook his head. "I'd rather not." He glanced at the apple. It didn't matter what was given him, or what he gave. There were so many choices to make in life.

Hadn't he made enough? It certainly felt that way. "Then again," he said, raising the apple to his mouth, "what's one more?"

•

Staring into the void, recognition eluded him. It was hard for Edward to believe he had spent so much time in the room underneath the stairs. Once, he had been young and reckless with his frailty, every step a menace to his father and demanding his confinement——though even when he had grown older and more careful, he couldn't relinquish its sanctuary. "Careful," Edward said, "keep the camera still."

Sophia's hands were steady as she gripped the cord, her head under the cloth. The door to the room was open. A modicum of light revealed its margins and the one object within, a stool with a padded seat. "I think it's ready."

"Is what you see in focus?"

"Yes." She paused. "I don't know."

"Pull the cord," he said. She did. "I can almost picture it now," Edward went on. "The photograph. It's going to look rather strange."

"Why do you say that?" asked Sophia, removing her head from the cloth to face him.

"It'll be exceptionally flat. The wall, the door open and flat against it. A big black mass in the center, with no depth or vanishing point. No sense of the hall leading up to it. Tedious."

"Perhaps that's appropriate."

He lifted the camera from its stand. “Perhaps.”

When Edward emerged with the paper positive, he led Sophia into the sixth hall where a sly, smiling Theobald stood with the frame resting against his legs and a twinkle in his eye. “Has madam enjoyed the Meridian House?” he asked.

“Very much,” Sophia said. Theobald hung the image of the room beneath a photograph——taken by Aloysius——of a Berber woman standing in front of a white stone wall, one hand against her headdress, the other palm-open to the lens. The Berber held Edward’s attention as Sophia and Theobald stood back from the wall to look at the new addition. “You were right,” remarked Sophia. “It’s hard to tell what this is a picture of. It’s too flat.”

“Theobald?”

“Quite dreary, if I may, sir,” Theobald said.

“What ever did you do to pass the time in there?” asked Sophia.

“I had my thoughts,” Edward said.

“Your thoughts. What did you think about?”

“The photographs. Being in these places. With these people.”

“These are very beautiful,” she agreed, “but not for the reasons that you think. They should do more than teach you that something exists outside your home.”

“They were all I had.”

“Surely you want more.”

He leaned into the wall, back turned. With a start, Theobald raised his shoulders and wrapped his arms around Edward, wincing as he prepared to support the delicate man. “If you’ve had enough for today, sir——” he strained.

"I'm fine," Edward said, and regained his footing. "I thought about my mother, Sophia."

In the garden outside the manor, Edward sat on a stone bench, hunched over with his legs crossed to hide their curvature. He folded his hands in his lap.

"Would you straighten your back?" Sophia asked under the cloth of the camera.

Edward flirted with a smile. "I'll warn you, you'd be fighting a fruitless battle to ask that of me."

She stood waiting by the unfinished wall of photographs when he handed her the positive. He scrunched his nose at his picture. "What's the matter?" asked Sophia. She looked over his shoulder. Shadows from the foliage hid the distortions of his face. Circled by handsome shade, his eyes seemed deeper set than they were in life.

"Interesting," he answered, "it doesn't quite look like me."

"Yet it endears me to you." Sophia took his arm. "It's beyond explaining, but it does. What does it make *you* feel?"

His face sunk in disappointment when he glanced back at the paper print, as if, unexpectedly, it didn't amount to what it should have. Sophia wished she could have warned him, long ago, that it might have been wiser to look to his photographs for what they couldn't show him.

Theobald entered the hall carrying tea on a tray. "Have we concluded our visit, Miss Sophia? It's the Resurrection Day, wouldn't you know."

"No," Edward spoke for her. "There's one more photograph I'd like to take."

His bedroom was plain and undecorated, comfortable in patterns of yellow, tan, light brown. She sat on the bed, her knees touching, and watched him load the dark slide.

The lens watched her all the while, and she wanted to believe that the skill of its sight was a well-established ploy and really it was struggling to comprehend her. But she didn't know for sure.

"Is this all right?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, a quiver in his throat.

"Are you going to put me on the wall, with the others?" she asked. She bunched up the flounces of her skirt and revealed her legs.

"The wall," he said, swallowing, "if it's no bother to you, Sophia." The camera was loaded. He adjusted the angle to see her entire frame. "Would you lie on your side?"

"You're still hiding," she said. "You're out of that room but you're still hiding."

"I would just like to have your picture."

She thought for a long while before removing her bracelets and untying a few of the knots along her back. She slipped one of her shoulders, broad and firm, out from her cotton chemisette and dragged the satin down her arm. He took a step back and when she continued to tug the bands of her dress he raised his hands and left his bedroom for the stairs. His feet hurried down the steps——silence, weight and gravity, a thump against the floor. Edward gasped. Sophia ran to the stairs.

Theobald shook his head gravely as the doctor set the bone and wrapped a bandage around Edward's arm. "It's been a long time," the butler said. "I thought we were past such needless tomfoolery." Sophia's ears burned, she bit her lip, would have left for good if it weren't so rude, what had she been thinking, being so obstinate, forcing this cripple, this shell, into danger beyond his will? She couldn't figure where she'd taken upon herself the duty of trying to push every man she met, and if Edward was just

another Henry, she decided, then he was better off left alone than in the morass of her care.

Head hung, she trailed Theobald and the doctor as they led a silent Edward upstairs and laid him in bed. She stayed with him long after they'd left, sitting up and watching his ribcage rise and fall. He didn't sleep, his eyes open and glassy, and she rubbed her hand along his arm.

"Where would you go, if you could be anywhere?"

He sighed and took her hand. She lay against him. He felt so frail. He turned onto his side and faced her——a glimmer in eyes, the recognition of something utterly new, something he had never felt before.

•

Below a gray opacity, the necropolis was forgotten. Bodies crowded the churchyard cemeteries, tangled and sinking deeper into the soggy earth, more bodies buried above them. There simply wasn't time, most Londoners would have argued, for the dead. And who could blame them? No proper goodbye would be pertinent for long. The spleen ached and called and, when they answered, it satisfied. After long enough, it would begin to resemble clarity.

Sophia fought her craving through the entire morning before realizing that she had no good enough reason to resist. At the closest teahouse, she ordered the mille-feuille with an indifferent tone, as if she only had curiosity to satisfy, though her waiter couldn't have brought the cream slice quickly enough and when it was finally at her place she was

tempted to pick it up with her hands and sink her teeth through the sweet vanilla icing and into the layers of pastry, each one brittle and insignificant on its own but, piled together, they found texture, hearty to the bite. She ate politely, chewed with her lips sealed, even shot a look of displeasure towards the novelty before her when really she was primed to gasp with delight and would have if alone. The dessert was gone within a minute, a few flake-thin crumbs scattered on her plate to mock her ravenous ambition, and she ate those, too, sliding a fingertip along the porcelain to collect them and lick them off. She didn't care who saw——no one did, anyway, save a little dark-skinned boy who peered at her from the other side of the teahouse as his mother, father, and an assortment of relatives chattered in Turkish.

After a moment, however, Sophia felt ill, unsettled, the pastry deceptively light and simple and now sitting irritably her stomach. For the rest of the day, she felt as though the desert alone had control over her body. She woke the next morning with a headache and threw up in her sink. Rubbing her temple, she thought, Well, that's what you get for self-indulgence, isn't it? She spent the day languid in her sitting room, couldn't muster the energy to walk outside or work on her illustrations. She only left the sitting room to urinate. Sick again the next morning, Sophia wondered if the cream slice at the teahouse had actually been spoiled and in her craving she had ignored its sour taste. But as she pictured the mille-feuille she only wanted another. By the end of the week, the headaches were regular and her back and breasts were sore. Nausea found her in the mornings. Sophia put her hand to her navel. Was it possible?

She hadn't expected she and Edward to make love that Sunday, but an instinct had caught hold of him. It was brief, his emission almost immediate, but confusing

responses roiled within her as it happened, she was proud of Edward but surprised, took him in but couldn't look his way for long, he was beautiful and hideous at the same time and when she knew he was asleep, curled up in himself, she left the bedroom to roam the hallways upstairs, feeling like everything belonged and that nothing was as it should have been. The next morning, he stood proudly upright, as much as his indomitable slouch would allow, and told her that he was leaving to find his mother. He rode off in a carriage with Theobald, ready to demand her whereabouts from the Astronomer Royal, who would, for the time being, have to forgo the stars and return to the place where consequences couldn't be measured fractal movements or light-years, but breathed, needed, waited in un-heavenly bodies for their own collisions, in their own empty space.

Sophia hid the news from her father for as long as she could but another August in Peterborough was a troubling test. She tried to spend the vacation in solitude with her watercolors, though the more she hid from William, the further her father intruded, his suspicions amorphous but astute. Winnie was silent around her daughter, offered a look whenever possible that comforted Sophia, seemed to say, When you're ready, my love, and only then. But William glared during every dinner, asked her where she'd been spending her time, with whom she associated now that Henry was gone. She evaded every question, though by the end of their stay in the country the bump was hard and round, unmistakable. William seized her wrist and lifted her dress and saw it for himself. His first reaction was to throw a glass vase across the dining room. It smashed against the wall and Winnie screamed, screamed his name, begged him to stop, she was their daughter——

"Who did this!" he shouted. "Who did this to you!"

She told him through tears and a faltering voice that she didn't know, she hadn't been with a man since Henry was locked away in Bedford and only went out to see her sisters.

"For God's sake, hide your shame," William said, handing her a blanket as they boarded the train back to London. He was silent, head down in a newspaper, and only once when he caught his daughter's dampened eyes he muttered, "You're ruined," and resigned himself to the crackling pages. Winnie held Sophia's hand through the entire trip.

Back home, she found a letter from Edward waiting in her mailbox. He wrote her from the Avenue d'Iéna in Paris——not far from the Arc de Triomphe——where his mother lived. After a moment of shock, first at Edward's appearance and then at the explanation he read from a piece of paper, she embraced him. They spent many hours navigating the Place de l'Étoile together, which, described by Edward, was either exactly like the photographs or nothing like them, possibly both at once but assuredly not neither. Next year, they planned to head south for Spain, cross over to Morocco, and follow the coast of the Mediterranean until they found Jerusalem. He urged Sophia to join them——if she couldn't, he would understand, and would send her photographs whenever possible, but regardless of her choice she should write him back and tell him whether life in London was tolerable.

Sophia was reading a map of the Mediterranean——simple on that scale, but any journey she took would be far less precise——when she caught herself: how did I get here, she had to ask, planning escape routes at the behest of a damaged man I barely know? But with the child growing inside her, she knew she couldn't dismiss Edward's

proposal outright. Her father, standing in her doorway on a gray afternoon and buttoned up in an old, stiff frock coat, devised the only other option. “Half a year in Peterborough,” he demanded, “or they’ll say you’re a nymphomaniac and have you put in an asylum and stick you with leeches.”

“Father——”

“When the child is delivered, it will be given to an orphanage, and this will never be spoken of.”

“You can’t force me.”

William put a coarse palm over her mouth. “Winn——Sophia, be reasonable. There’s no other way out. This will disgrace you.”

“London may shun me as it pleases.”

“You’re no lady I raised.”

“Indeed.”

He shook his head, “We leave next week. I’ll find you here when I’m ready,” and departed without another word.

She didn’t have the money to travel to Paris. Even if she did, she would have been afraid to trek such a distance in her condition. But the baby wasn’t William’s and couldn’t be born in his presence——she would never see it again once it was in his grip——though the matter of its belonging was murky even without her father’s threats. Edward, free of cares or apprehensions, was off on an adventure and oblivious to her sacrifice. He knew nothing of the child. Then it’s mine alone, Sophia thought. That night she stood at her vanity, looking into the mirror at the belly that was no longer her own. The baby kicked. It felt like a muscle had been startled. She belonged to *it*. Something

was inhabiting her, she understood, feeding from her, and the pregnancy became more than sensory, sickness, distensions——it was knowledge that couldn't be voiced, not yet, not by her.

Her father knocked on her door sooner than expected. It was only Saturday. He must have been in a frantic rush to stow her away in the country, as if London was growing more suspicious by the hour. Jaw firm, she answered.

Winnie was draped in the night. Rain drizzled behind her. She carried herself differently, a weight on her posture she left unconcealed and uncorrected without William by her side. "Sophia," she said, and hugged her daughter, pressing against the bump. "I've brought you enough money for a train ticket and whatever provisions you should need."

Sophia hesitated to respond, afraid she would undo the words, the most delicate breath would push them and the air that carried them out the door, into the rain where they would soak, plunge, circle the depressions in the road. It occurred to her that her mother was a woman she barely knew, had never known, until then. Where had she been, all this time? Silent under the watch of her husband and her father before him, one of their hands over her mouth at every opportunity. Sophia could have used risks like these long ago and not just in private. Winnie could have used them, too, and now, realizing that her mother was capable of taking them, Sophia felt wrong leaving her behind, it was unfair to waste her now, with this honesty acknowledged. This should have been an escape for both of them. But what was too late for one could still benefit another. Is that motherhood, she wondered, at its core?

"Just don't tell me where," her mother explained. "Not until later, once everything is settled."

"When is that?"

"You'll know when the time is right," her voice choking and wet.

"Are you certain?"

"As long as I don't know, he won't have any way of finding out."

Though she needed a destination before she could conceal one, the answer came to her with unnerving celerity. If anyone knew how to hide a life, it was he, dormant in a lonely house in Blackheath. She wrote and didn't wait for a response. He owed her this if nothing else.

Gregor met her at the railway station, leaning against his carriage with his arms crossed. He kissed her hand and took her luggage and on their ride to the estate he explained solemnly, with no mockery or callous asides, that she would be protected, the child delivered safely with a midwife at her disposal, Sophia could sleep soundly in Blackheath for as many nights as she needed before deciding her next arrangements. They never spoke of Henry. Gregor noticed. Imagine that——to never speak a name again; to leave it lingering, formless, in chaos.

His house was a stately Georgian cube of red brick, black casements and roofing, and a white door heralded by a quartet of ionic columns and a cracked stone pathway. His property, a flat pasture surrounding the house, stood on the north side of the heath, opposite the more densely built village and shopping district. Once in a while, under the unjudging watch of birds and high-flying kites, he crossed the park to play golf at the Royal Club under an assumed name, but Gregor rarely received visitors in his home or

dined out in company. He kept mostly to himself, whether inside his walls or walking around the pasture. In an earlier era, before the house existed, the land might have been an archetypal haunt for highway robbers idling in the intervals between coach sightings on the old Roman roads. But the railway and the tolls had scared them off to London and the shelter of its throng, space became a neurosis for anyone with a secret, and Blackheath's tranquility was only ever interrupted by the rare explosive snap of fireworks detonating over the park.

They avoided each other for the first few days. Sophia spent much of her time working with her oil paints, mostly made shapes, lines, cloudy figments. She slept on a soft mattress and silk sheets. She was too comfortable; he was too polite. Meals were punctual and prepared by an unseen chef, and a maid discreetly tidied her bedroom every time she left the house to explore the village to the south. None of this helped instill the reality of her situation——her exile from home, the imminent life she carried, all of it seemed like a grand joke played at her expense, shadows behind a curtain——until Gregor, one morning and apropos of nothing, apologized for forcing himself on her while Henry was in Crimea. "I was angry," he said, slicing an orange in half, "and very confused, and you're worth more than that."

From then on, Gregor was candid about his life before and after the investigation into his father's manuscripts——his inheritance, as Gregor put it, the one vestige of denial that Sophia still detected in him. He was bored in Blackheath. He laughed far less but couldn't remember what he'd found so amusing in London. Golf, a bland and repetitive game, passed only so much of the time. His opium cravings were slight but recurrent; he knew he was better of without it. He dreamed often, he confessed, about

scenes of reconciliation with his father, though if given the opportunity in life he doubted he would have taken it, he had too much pride, his father had been worth burying well before Gregor found his pages, he still believed he'd committed no momentous injustice in publishing his father's books——"They never belonged to him, and never to me," he said, "they belong to the world, and that's how it shall be"——though out of curiosity he tried writing fiction of his own but found he didn't have the patience to plot beyond the induction of his characters, who, Gregor noticed, were all reconfigurations from Dickens, Gaskell, Trollope, Currer Bell, authors he never liked and only read to disparage and prove his wit among London's elite. At Blackheath he found himself drawn to classical works, the dramas and myths he'd read in his youth, and showed Sophia a collection of Seneca of which he was especially fond. "'Whome'er thou shalt see wretched,'" he read aloud, "'know him man,'" with a grin of awe, admiration, Gregor nearly incredulous to find familiar thoughts like those in ancient works. "They're here now, among us, no different."

Sophia told him about the benefactor from Greenwich. The initial shock on Gregor's face relaxed as she went on——nothing anymore could sound abnormal enough——and expressed her desire to travel to Paris after the baby was born.

"For him?" he asked.

She put her hand on her belly. "No. So that this child has a father."

Gregor winced. "If you insist."

As the leaves in Blackheath fell and autumn grew colder, Gregor couldn't deny that he and Sophia had actually become friends——not companions out of desperation or necessity but actual friends who cared for one another and valued their time together.

While Gregor had spent little time in the company of women since leaving London, he found that the desire he once felt for Sophia was gone. Even her shoulders failed to intrigue him. He masturbated frequently, as much out of boredom as actual longing, though never with her in mind, which only further confirmed his belief that the man who had once coveted her was an earlier Gregor, like the London writer or the stuttering young boy. This *new* Gregor had a different purpose: he was her ark through the flood, wiser and devoted, he was above urges and vices and all that biology, he could be needed without needing, he was the best one yet, all this he explained this to Sophia one evening over wine, as earnestly as possible.

"That's nice." She looked worried, drained her glass. If anything hadn't changed, it was that volatility of his, and it had scared her once before.

The fourth day of January brought the first snowfall of the new year. Sophia was in the kitchen making herself tea when porcelain shattered, echoed. Gregor hurried downstairs when she began to moan, found the puddle of water reflecting light in the sitting room and eased her onto a sofa. "I broke my cup," she said, her lungs airless, and pointed to the shards on the kitchen floor. Gregor put his palm on her forehead.

They sat there as they waited for the midwife, a short, plump older woman who arrived with a full satchel and a chair with a seat shaped like a crescent moon. The midwife put an arm around Sophia's back and walked her up to the bathroom. Gregor followed, sweating, interweaving his wriggling fingers. Sophia moaned louder, pressing against the back of the seat, her contractions more frequent. In a soothing, uninflected voice, the midwife commanded Gregor to fetch a pail of warm water.

"B-b-boiled?" he asked.

"Warm will do," the midwife said.

When he returned with the bucket Sophia's legs were spread, each foot propped on a separate stool, the midwife kneeling between them. She pressed her hands into Sophia's abdomen. Gregor stood behind her. The moaning sounded more painful. The midwife soaked a cloth in the water and wiped the blood leaking from Sophia. Candles lit the bathroom, the light flickering, tentative, uncertain. Sophia screamed, threw out a hand and found Gregor's, he held it in both of his and breathed heavily through his nose, jaw firm, mouth shut.

After an hour had passed the midwife produced a brown bottle from her satchel, opened the cap and wet a rag with streaks of clear fluid. "Chloroform," she said, "à la reine." She held it up to Sophia's mouth, Sophia jerked away at first, "Breathe in," and she did, her eyelids wilted, her moans diminished to a steady sighing only to surge minutes later. "You're opening," the midwife encouraged. Sophia threw her head back, panting, eyelids sealed. "It's time to push with all your strength."

Sophia shook her head, "It's too much," she wailed, "it's too much," Gregor squeezing her hand and the moment passed, she clenched her teeth and pushed, growling with all the wild in her, the midwife offered more chloroform and she breathed into the rag, the labor slowed but when Sophia began to scream again she strained, "More," but the midwife put the bottle back in her satchel and clutched Sophia's legs.

"You have to finish this," she said. "Just a little further."

Sophia took a deep breath, huffing and soaked in sweat, she pressed on, she shook, blood dripping through the chair onto the floor beneath her.

"It's going to be a miracle," the midwife exclaimed.

Gregor's rigid jaw broke into a giggle. The epithet took him aback, hyperbolic but he couldn't deny its legitimacy, didn't know why or how, but he knew——*that* was evidence, real evidence, it didn't sit within a frame or on a turning page, it was the beating of his heart, his laughing fear. For a moment he had to fight the idea that the child was his, he felt greedy, he simply couldn't help himself, but he entertained the thought that maybe it *would* be, Sophia could stay in Blackheath and they'd raise it together. The child would need him: Gregor the father——Gregor the son no more.

He peered over Sophia's shoulders, the midwife at work on her knees, wetting her hands and positioning them around the opening. At first he saw ebullience recast the midwife's face, the light of life, the baby's head must have begun emerging, "Here it comes," she said, concentrating, finding a careful grip on the infant's crown, "and an arm, too!" But as the delivery went on and more of the baby slipped from its mother's womb, the midwife's expression inverted, the smile a falling frown, brow contorted, "Push," she urged through it all, withheld her shock, Gregor's hands were wet, he needed to know but was terrified to move, as if anything he did suddenly or wrong might botch the labor.

Sophia gasped and panted. The baby was free. Gregor saw the white cord spill with a rush of fluid. The midwife laid the crying infant on a towel, Gregor couldn't see him——her?——but the midwife soaked another cloth and he knew she was cleaning off the residue of the womb. Sophia was all but asleep, speaking silently to herself, couldn't acknowledge the baby's arrival. The midwife cut the cord with a pair of scissors. It lay in a loop like abandoned rope. She picked the baby up in its towel and placed it in the bathtub, found another bucket and held it under the opening of the seat as Sophia

delivered the placenta, it splattered into the pail and Gregor startled, “The child,” his voice low but anxious, “what of the child?”

“Not now,” the midwife said as she washed between Sophia’s legs with another fresh wet rag, her expression hardened, eyes fearful. When Sophia was clean the midwife stood, “Help me,” she implored as if Gregor should have known, and together they carried Sophia out of the bathroom and lay her on her bed, atop the quilt, “Stay with her,” ordered the midwife as she absconded to the shrieking newborn in the bathtub. Sophia drifted into sleep. He was alone with her.

The white dunes outside were melting. Water slid from itself and pooled in spots along Gregor’s land. Inside, the house was chilly. Gregor draped a blanket over Sophia. Finally the midwife returned, drying her hands on a towel. “I think you should come see.”

She led him into his bedroom. The baby’s shifting silhouette lay on a pillow on Gregor’s bed. It was on its back, still naked, little arms making little fists and writhing in the air. Something wasn’t quite right about its shape but he couldn’t tell what. “A boy or a girl?” he asked.

The midwife folded her hands. “Please just see for yourself.”

He stood over the infant and threw a hand over his mouth. Not quite Janus, who looked opposite into the past and the future——sitting atop a smooth, wide chest, the two heads of this child both faced forward, each neck straddling either side of the heart below.

The midwife took Gregor’s arm. “Look closer,” she said and held a candle beside the child’s feet. Gregor checked between its legs. At the crotch, the folds of her labia;

above it dangled his minuscule penis; proud parents Hermes and Aphrodite nowhere to be found.

"This is a travesty," Gregor said.

The midwife held herself. They agreed to show Sophia her child as soon as she woke, which they hoped wouldn't be until tomorrow, but after half an hour she was calling for Gregor. "I'm here, Sophia," in his bedroom doorway.

"How is he? She?"

"Would you like to hold…?"

She waited. "Please."

"There's been some complication," Gregor said.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't bring myself to tell you, Sophia."

Exhausted but alert, she sat upright. "Is he well? Tell me he's well——"

"The midwife is coming now," he said.

She entered the bedroom with the baby wrapped in a blanket in her arms. She stood over Sophia, hesitated, unwrapped the blanket to reveal its two sleeping heads. Sophia gasped, "No," she whispered but took the child nonetheless, cradled it, both heads woke and cried, Sophia hushed them as she bobbed the body up and down.

"What are we to do!" the midwife lamented. Sophia was silent.

Before sundown, she fed the child. Each mouth took a nipple. Did it have one stomach or two? Gregor wondered as he watched. He could barely look at the horror she held, though Sophia was remarkably calm as they drank from her——despite her inexperience, the lack of any precedent in her life for this moment, she remained assured,

unalarmed through their hunger. He dismissed the midwife, who left wanting only to forget.

The two heads cried all throughout their first night on earth, wretched and pained. Gregor woke with every squeal, wrestled in his bed knowing that this monstrosity was in his home, unnatural, polluting the air with its sickness, and that Sophia was beside them the entire time, hushing them, loving as though dumb to their deformation. Gregor was exhausted the next day, so was Sophia but she held her composure and kept the child in her sight at all times, her hands busy with tears and spit, feces and urine. He kept his distance, smiled without comment as she sang to them, bobbing its body in her arms, both heads found her voice, four eyes found her moving lips, and Gregor put his hand to his heart, overcome not by memory but by its absence, he longed for his mother at that moment, he had never known her voice, her touch, her scent, he had to sit down in another room and weep silently as Sophia sang to the child in her arms. Forget his stutter, the shooting, the disclosure of his plagiarism——the true injustice of his life was his mother's ghost. She would have been a blessing.

Before she bathed that night Sophia asked him to watch the infant. "Sophia," Gregor started, "we need to discuss this."

"Discuss what?" She wasn't oblivious. Her words were curt and tense.

"It's condition."

She closed her eyes. "The child is perfect," and left for the bathroom.

He threw his hands up, squeezed them into fists. The baby was watching him. Gregor realized how alien his histrionic motion must have looked to its gaze. His arms fell to his sides and he stared back at the infant. He sat beside it and extended a

forefinger, which was seized in its tiny right hand. The left arm tried to reach for his finger as well but was too short and flailed in frustration, and the head that controlled it began to whimper. The other head started to cry with it even as it preserved its grip on Gregor's finger. Gregor shivered and backed away. He wanted to take each head and pull them apart, find their seam and split them in two. How could Sophia be so comfortable with this abomination? Why had it been allowed to live beyond the womb? He couldn't even call it a boy or a girl, healthy or sick, one or a pair of twins. The infant eluded him. This wasn't the life he'd been promised.

He slept uneasily that night, again through the child's constant calling. It was five in the morning when he crawled out of bed and stepped softly into Sophia's room. The infant slept beside her. Quietly, carefully, he scooped it up in his arms.

Sophia stirred. "What are you doing?" she asked through a veil of dreams.

"I'm taking it for a walk," he said, couldn't look her in the eye.

She exhaled——the sound of paper tearing——and hung her head, hair dangling free. "It's early. And it's very cold outside."

"I won't be long."

"Be careful," she propped herself up on an arm, "Please be careful."

"I know," he said tersely.

"Be careful," she said one last time as he carried the baby from its mother, into the shadows.

Pale morning light ascended the horizon. As the infant woke in his arms, Gregor found a puddle made by runoff from the snow. He found a twig and plunged it in. The puddle was at least a foot deep. It would be enough. Gregor took a breath, as though on

behalf of the child, and held it under the surface until its thrashing limbs went limp and the water was still.

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Queen Victoria died on January 22, 1901 of a bleeding brain in her house on the Isle of Wright. She was a widow then, and nearly blind. Her son, the Prince of Wales and future king, was by her side when she finally passed.

At lunchtime the next day, Gregor's cook informed him of her death, grave and soft-spoken and looking off into an imperceptible distance. "I heard it on the telegraph," he said.

"The telegraph?" Gregor's voice was a grumbling croak. His thin white hair was neatly combed. His hands and face were spotted with brown blemishes. He was ninety-four years old.

"Indeed," the cook said. "A wireless message. An Italian delivered the news from the Isle of Wright all the way to Cornwall."

"By mail?" Gregor asked.

The cook trickled a spoonful of beef stew into Gregor's open mouth. "Not mail." He removed the spoon and stirred the cooling meal. "Electrical signals. A wondrous thing."

Gregor didn't understand. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Well," the cook conceded, "perhaps the telegraph doesn't matter so much. But Queen Victoria is no more."

"No more…"

The cook readied another spoonful. "It happened just yesterday."

Gregor sat back in his chair. He wondered if he was going to cry, or if the world would cease its rotation, or if the sky would open up and announce the rapture. Anything was possible. But he resolved to be dead before he learned the answer. He'd gone on living long enough. He decided he was going kill himself.

Gregor sent the cook away. "Go," he said. "Be free."

"Master?"

"Your services are no longer required. Please——you can do anything, now."

As his cook gathered his belongings and left the house in bewilderment, Gregor went to his pantry to look for a rope. He found four feet of braided hemp on a shelf and took it upstairs to his bedroom. Standing on a wobbling chair, his legs quivering not out of fear but the weakness of age, he removed a ceiling lamp from its fixture and looped the rope around the mount. A tug: some flecks of paint fell from the ceiling but the fixture seemed strong enough. He tied a simple noose and stuck his head through, the fibers scratching his face. When he looked down at the chair, ready to kick it out from under himself, he noticed the outfit in which his nurse had dressed him that morning——gray trousers, pointed calf-high boots, a white cotton shirt, a black tie knotted and pinned to his collar——and decided it was too nondescript for Gregor the dead man, Gregor the corpse, whereupon any further conversion was out of his hands, the duty of nature itself.

He stepped down from the chair and opened his wardrobe: over-padded black and brown frock coats made of musty wool; gray or checkered trousers; white cravats; wide neckties; top hats, some of them comically tall——a little color here and there but all of

it stale, faded, smelling of age. He needed to be wearing a new suit for when they, his staff, neighbors, whoever, found him.

He took his cane and an overcoat and set out across the park. He shivered but walked unbothered by the chill or the aching in his bones. Once, he planted his foot in a puddle of water formed by melted snow. He jerked it out and stared for a moment. Sophia, he remembered, but the child was gone and the lady had fled to Paris when he told her. Fury and grief waged war in her parlance; she collapsed when he returned without the infant, had barely devised a coherent response to the murder by the time she abandoned Blackheath with a single suitcase, probably to find that man from the Meridian House, the father, the other freak she managed affection for. She left most of her clothing and possessions behind in Gregor's estate and he ordered his maid to dispose of them the following week, which he promptly regretted, but it was too late, and he never saw her again. His greatest loss, he realized, but there was an imperative distinction between natural and unnatural life, and he wouldn't——couldn't——have made any decision other than the one he did.

In Blackheath village he found a tailor's shop. A pair of suits, one black and one white, were advertised in the storefront. Gregor stepped inside and cleared his throat to catch the attention of the tailor, a bearded man with a wide smile and enormous teeth. "Yes sir!" he approached with a hustle, "How may I be of service today?"

Gregor ran his dry tongue along the roof of his mouth. "I'd like a new suit, if you'd be so kind. Fancy, but nothing too formal. The highest fashion only."

"Of course, sir." The tailor unraveled his measuring line and went to work on Gregor's frame. Gregor looked around. Customers either browsed quietly or sat waiting

for their garments. “My,” the tailor said with a chuckle. “You haven’t bought anything new to wear in, well, quite some time, have you?”

“I’m afraid not,” Gregor replied.

“Very well,” the tailor said. “Something fresh on order, shall we?”

The tailor fitted him in a tan three-piece suit. Gregor felt silly wearing only one color but, he supposed, such was the year’s style. The square-shaped Norfolk jacket covered no further than his buttocks and was adorned with a patch pocket on either breast. The vest was of a matching shade and the white shirt underneath struck him as unusually bright, its collar high and stiff and enclosing almost the entirety of his neck. The bowtie, a checkered black and brown, looked so small as to be inconsequential. The suit, he finally noticed, was subtly pinstriped, and its trousers weren’t pleated in the front but on the inside and outside of his legs. His new shoes were cut around the ankles and bore grosgrain ribbon.

The tailor topped the outfit off with a white homburg hat. Gregor balked. “They’re quite popular,” the tailor defended, eyebrows raised amiably, and fitted the felt hat on Gregor’s head. He turned a mirror towards his customer. Gregor made an indefinable sound. “Are you satisfied, sir?” asked the tailor, hands folded primly, after a brief hesitation.

“I suppose it’s as well as I’ll do for the occasion,” Gregor said.

The tailor nodded, visibly relieved, and handed over the bill of sale and a brown box containing his old suit. “If I may ask, what is the occasion?”

Gregor folded and pocketed the bill while staring at his reflection. “I’m going to kill myself today.”

The tailor looked around his shop. Gradually, customers were turning to look at the old man. Silence overtook the room.

Gregor broke his gaze from the mirror. “I’m going to kill myself. End my life. You hear? I’ve had enough.”

“My good man——”

“And this world has had enough of me!”

The customers chattered among themselves, whispered in disbelief, a few stood up and left in disgust. “Someone call a policeman!” one of them said.

“Would you please control yourself!” the tailor stamped. “My patrons——”

“You’ll find me hanging in my house!” he spun around, addressed his worried audience, “And you can all come see! I’ll be a museum for you! A relic!” The tailor wiped his brow and extended a quelling arm. Gregor shoved it aside. “And if you still want more, you’ll find me in the black forest with Pietro della Vigna by my side! Tear my roots all you want——at least I’ll have forever there!”

“That’s it, out!” the tailor bellowed. “Out of my shop, right now! Show yourself out and don’t you dare come back!”

Gregor left grinning proudly but fell sullen as he crossed the park. No matter; he was ready. Conceivably, his death would earn an announcement over the telegraph, whose invisible signals would carry him where his corpse could not. Bodies were so slow, he mused as he studied his steps along the grass.

The rope was still slung through the light fixture in his bedroom. He stood atop the chair and straightened his homburg hat, grazed his fingertips through the cleft that ran along the center of the crown, wanted to pull it apart, thought of Sophia’s child again.

He decided to speak some last words aloud. “It’s time,” he uttered, only to be confused as to what he’d actually meant. He took a last breath and stepped off the seat. A raining gust of paint and plaster: the rope wrenched the fixture from the ceiling and Gregor’s feet buckled when he landed, his knees absorbed the fall and his forehead struck the hardwood floor. The fixture clanked beside him. He moaned, seized his skull, pain seared hot and cold, tears escaped his eyes. His neck burned. He lay there for an hour, barely changing his position.

When he finally tried to stand he was cautious, his ankles ached though nothing felt broken, the fall was only a couple of feet but his body was in agony. He had never thought of himself as frail until that moment.

Gregor looked up at the fissure in his ceiling, ripped open by his weight, a black void revealed——they must have been everywhere, he thought, clandestine, waiting for exposure, the rush of light. Through the shadows he could just barely perceive the unpainted peak of the roof above his bedroom.

He touched his forehead, winced. The bone was bruised. Perhaps another day would be his day to die. Who could say when? It was impossible to tell, and expectations could be treacherous. Drowsy and despondent, he wondered what lay ahead.

Flecks of plaster littered his suit. He supposed he didn’t need it anymore. He removed the bill of sale from his pocket. Hopefully the tailor’s shop was still open for business. He collected the box that held his old suit, carried it under one arm, and left his house.

Crossing the park yet again, he felt ashamed, as if every passerby could read the failure on his face. He tried not to look. They went about their afternoons and forgot him.

Once more, he located the tailor's shop. Gregor stood still and from a distance saw through the glass panes of the storefront. The shop looked empty. The same tailor, the bearded man, was tidying the two suits displayed in the window. Clutching the bill of sale, Gregor swallowed bravely and stepped forward but halted when he locked eyes with the tailor.

The tailor's jaw plunged before sealing shut. He recognized Gregor instantly, that troublemaker dressed in tan wool and pinstripes, a raving old fool. He looked terrified; then, as the tailor focused his eyes, he discerned the mess of plaster that spoiled the new suit, the bent and misshapen homburg hat, the bruise on the old man's forehead, the crimson burn encircling his neck. Resolute, the tailor shook his head, muttered to himself, Gregor couldn't hear him but the movements of his mouth were unmistakably bitter. The tailor grabbed a white sign laced with string and hung it from a nail over the other side of the glass. It swung back and forth before coming to rest as the tailor locked the front door and disappeared into the back of the shop.

Gregor approached the window, every step slow and sore. He leaned forward, his eyesight blurry, and squinted to read the sign, two words printed in black: No Returns.