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I

If every man is guilty of all the good he did not do, as Voltaire suggested, then I have spent a lifetime convincing myself that I am innocent of all the bad. It has been a convenient way to endure decades of self-imposed exile from the past, to see myself as a victim of historical amnesia, acquitted from complicity, and exonerated from blame.

My final story begins and ends, however, with something as trivial as a box cutter. Mine had broken a few days earlier and, finding it a useful tool to keep in a kitchen drawer, I paid a visit to my local hardware shop to purchase a new one. Upon my return, a letter was waiting for me from an estate agent, a similar one delivered to every resident of Winterville Court, politely informing each of us that the flat below my own was being put up for sale. The previous occupant, Mr Richardson, had lived in Flat One for some thirty years but died shortly before Christmas, leaving the dwelling empty. His daughter, a speech therapist, resided in New York and, to the best of my knowledge, had no plans to return to London, so I had made my peace with the fact that it would not be long before I was forced to interact with a stranger in the lobby, perhaps even having to feign an interest in his or her life or be required to divulge small details about my own.

Mr Richardson and I had enjoyed the perfect neighbourly relationship in that we had not exchanged a single word since 2008. In the early years of his residence, we'd been on good terms and he had

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occasionally come upstairs for a game of chess with my late husband, Edgar, but somehow, he and I had never moved past the formalities. He always addressed me as ‘Mrs Fernsby’ while I referred to him as ‘Mr Richardson’. The last time I set foot in his flat had been four months after Edgar’s death, when he invited me for supper and, having accepted the invitation, I found myself on the receiving end of an amorous advance, which I declined. He took the rejection badly and we became as near to strangers as two people who coexist within a single building can be.

My Mayfair residence is listed as a flat but that is a little like describing Windsor Castle as the Queen’s weekend bolthole. Each apartment in our building – there are five in total, one on the ground floor, then two on both floors above – is spread across fifteen hundred square feet of prime London real estate, each with three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, and views over Hyde Park that value them, I am reliably informed, at somewhere between £2 million and £3 million pounds apiece. Edgar came into a substantial amount of money a few years after we married, an unexpected bequest from a spinster aunt, and while he would have preferred to move to a more peaceful area outside Central London, I had done some research of my own and was determined not only to live in Mayfair but to reside in this particular building, should it ever prove possible. Financially, this had seemed unlikely but then, one day, like a *deus ex machina*, Aunt Belinda passed away and everything changed. I’d always planned on explaining to Edgar the reason why I was so desperate to live here, but somehow never did, and I rather regret that now.

My husband was very fond of children but I agreed only to one, giving birth to our son, Caden, in 1961. In recent years, as the property has increased in value, Caden has encouraged me to sell and purchase something smaller in a less expensive part of town, but I suspect this is because he worries that I might live to be a hundred

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and he is keen to receive a portion of his inheritance while he is still young enough to enjoy it. He is thrice married and now engaged for a fourth time; I have given up on acquainting myself with the women in his life. I find that as soon as one gets to know them, they are despatched, a new model is installed, and one has to take the time to learn their idiosyncrasies, as one might with a new washing machine or television set. As a child, he treated his friends with similar ruthlessness. We speak regularly on the telephone, and he visits me for supper every two weeks, but we have a complicated relationship, damaged in part by my year-long absence from his life when he was nine years old. The truth is, I am simply not comfortable around children and I find small boys particularly difficult.

My concern about my new neighbour was not that he or she might cause unnecessary noise – these flats are very well insulated and, even with a few weak spots here and there, I had grown accustomed over the years to the various peculiar sounds that rose up through Mr Richardson’s ceiling – but I resented the fact that my ordered world might be upset. I hoped for someone who had no interest in knowing anything about the woman who lived above them. An elderly invalid, perhaps, who rarely left the house and was visited each morning by a home-help. A young professional who disappeared on Friday afternoons to her weekend home and returned late on Sundays, spending the rest of her time at the office or the gym. A rumour spread through the building that a well-known pop musician whose career had peaked in the 1980s had looked at it as a potential retirement home but, happily, nothing came of that.

My curtains twitched whenever the estate agent pulled up outside, escorting a client in to inspect the flat, and I made notes about each potential neighbour. There was a very promising husband and wife in their early seventies, softly spoken, who held each other’s hands and asked whether pets were permitted in the building – I was listening on the stairwell – and seemed disappointed when told they

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were not. A homosexual couple in their thirties who, judging by the distressed condition of their clothing and their general unkempt air, must have been fabulously wealthy, but who declared that the 'space' was probably a little small for them and they couldn't relate to its 'narrative'. A young woman with plain features who gave no clue as to her intentions, other than to remark that someone named Steven would adore the high ceilings. Naturally, I hoped for the gays – they make good neighbours and there's little chance of them procreating – but they proved to be the least interested.

And then, after a few weeks, the estate agent no longer brought anyone to visit, the listing vanished from the Internet and I guessed that a deal had been struck. Whether I liked it or not, I would one day wake to find a removals van parked outside and someone, or a collection of someones, inserting a key into the front door and taking up residence beneath me.

Oh, how I dreaded it!

2

Mother and I escaped Germany in early 1946, only a few months after the war ended, travelling by train from what was left of Berlin to what was left of Paris. Fifteen years old and knowing little of life, I was still coming to terms with the fact that the Axis had been defeated. Father had spoken with such confidence of the genetic superiority of our race and of the Führer's incomparable skills as a military strategist that victory had always seemed assured. And yet, somehow, we had lost.

The journey of almost seven hundred miles across the continent did little to encourage optimism for the future. The cities we passed through were marked by the destruction of recent years while the faces of the people I saw in the stations and carriages were not cheered by the end of the war but scarred by its effects. There was a sense of exhaustion everywhere, a growing realization that Europe could not return to how it had been in 1938 but needed to be rebuilt entirely, as did the spirits of its inhabitants.

The city of my birth had been almost entirely reduced to rubble now, its spoils divided between four of our conquerors. For our protection, we remained hidden in the basements of those few true believers whose homes were still standing until we could be provided with the false papers that would ensure our safe removal from Germany. Our passports now bore the surname of Guéymard, the pronunciation of which I practised repeatedly in order to ensure that I sounded as authentic as possible, but while Mother

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was now to be called Nathalie – my grandmother’s name – I remained Gretel.

Every day, fresh details of what had taken place at the camps came to light and Father’s name was becoming a byword for criminality of the most heinous nature. While no one suggested that we were as culpable as him, Mother believed that it would spell disaster for us to reveal ourselves to the authorities. I agreed for, like her, I was frightened, although it shocked me to think that anyone could consider me complicit in the atrocities. It’s true that, since my tenth birthday, I had been a member of the Jungmädelsbund, but so had every other young girl in Germany. It was mandatory, after all, just like being part of the Deutsches Jungvolk was compulsory for ten-year-old boys. But I had been far less interested in studying the ideology of the Party than in taking part in the regular sporting activities with my friends. And when we arrived at that other place, I had only gone beyond the fence once, on that single day that Father had brought me into the camp to observe his work. I tried to tell myself that I had been a bystander, nothing more, and that my conscience was clear, but already I was beginning to question my own involvement in the events I had witnessed.

As our train entered France, however, I grew worried that our accents might give us away. Surely, I reasoned, the recently liberated citizens of Paris, shamed by their prompt capitulation in 1940, would react aggressively towards anyone who spoke as we did? My concern was proven correct when, despite demonstrating that we had more than enough money for a lengthy stay, we were refused rooms at five separate boarding houses; it was only when a woman in Place Vendôme took pity on us and shared the address of a nearby lodging where, she said, the landlady asked no questions that we found somewhere to live. Had it not been for her, we might have ended up the wealthiest indigents on the streets.

The room we rented was on the eastern part of Île de la Cité and

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in those early days I preferred to remain close to home, confining myself to walking the short distance from Pont de Sully to Pont Neuf and back again in endless loops, anxious about venturing across bridges into unknown terrain. Sometimes I thought of my brother, who had longed to be an explorer, and of how much he would have enjoyed deciphering those unfamiliar streets, but, at such moments, I was always quick to dismiss his memory.

Mother and I had been living on the Île for two months before I summoned the courage to make my way to le Jardin du Luxembourg, where an abundance of greenery made me feel as if I had stumbled upon Paradise. Such a contrast, I thought, to when we had arrived at that other place and been struck by its barren, desolate nature. Here, one inhaled the perfume of life; there, one choked on the stench of death. I wandered as if in a daze from the Palais to the Medici fountain, and from there towards the pool, only turning away when I saw a coterie of small boys placing wooden boats in the water, the light breeze taking their vessels across to their playmates on the other side. Their laughter and excited conversation provided an upsetting music after the muted distress with which I had become familiar and I struggled to understand how a single continent could play host to such extremes of beauty and ugliness.

One afternoon, taking shelter from the sun on a bench near the boulodrome, I found myself consumed by both grief and guilt, and with tears falling down my face. A handsome boy, perhaps two years my senior, approached wearing a concerned expression to ask what was wrong. I looked up and felt a stirring of desire, a longing for him to put his arms around me or allow me to rest my head upon his shoulder, but when I spoke I fell into old speech patterns, my German accent overpowering my French, and he took a step back, staring at me with undisguised contempt, before summoning all the anger he felt towards my kind and spitting violently in my face before marching away. Strangely, his actions did not diminish my hunger

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for his touch but increased it. Wiping my cheeks dry, I ran after him, grabbed him by the arm and invited him to take me into the trees, telling him that he could do whatever he wanted with me in the secluded space.

‘You can hurt me if you like,’ I whispered, closing my eyes, thinking that he might slap me hard, drive his fist into my stomach, break my nose.

‘Why would you want that?’ he asked, his tone betraying an innocence that belied his beauty.

‘So I’ll know that I’m alive.’

He seemed both aroused and repulsed and looked around to see whether anyone was watching before glancing towards the copse that I had indicated. Licking his lips, he observed the swell of my breasts, but when I took him by the hand my touch insulted him and he pulled away, calling me a whore, *une putain*, and broke into a run as he disappeared out on to rue Guynemer.

When the weather was good I wandered the streets from early morning, only returning to our lodgings when Mother would already be too drunk to ask how I had passed my time. The elegance that had defined her earlier life was beginning to fall away now but she was still a handsome woman and I wondered whether she might search for a new husband, someone who could take care of us, but it did not seem that she wanted companionship or love, preferring to be left alone with her thoughts as she made her way from bar to bar. She was a quiet drunk. She sat in darkened corners nursing bottles of wine, scratching at invisible marks upon wooden tabletops while making sure never to cause a scene that might see her exiled to the street. Once, our paths crossed as the sun disappeared over the Bois de Boulogne and she approached me unsteadily before taking my arm and asking me the time. She didn’t appear to realize that it was her own daughter she was addressing. When I answered, she smiled in relief – it was growing dark, but the bars would remain open for

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hours yet – and she continued in the direction of the bright, seductive lights that dotted the Île. If I vanished entirely, I wondered, would she forget that I had ever existed?

We shared a bed and I hated waking next to her, inhaling the stench of sleep-infused liquor that poisoned her breath. On opening her eyes, she would sit up in a moment of confusion, but then the memories would return and her eyes would close as she tried to ease her way back into oblivion. When she finally accepted the indecency of the daylight and dragged herself out from beneath the sheets, she would give herself a rudimentary wash in the sink before pulling on a dress and making her way outside, happy to repeat every moment of the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that.

She kept our money and valuables in an old satchel at the back of the wardrobe, and I watched as our small fortune began to diminish. Relatively speaking, we were comfortable – the true believers had seen to that – but Mother refused to invest more in our accommodation, shaking her head whenever I suggested that we rent a little flat of our own in one of the cheaper parts of the city. It seemed that she had a simple plan for her life now, to drink away the nightmares, and as long as she had a bed to sleep in and a bottle to empty, nothing else mattered. What a far cry this was from the woman in whose embrace I had spent my early years, the glamorous society wife who had performed like a film star, sporting the latest hairstyles and dressing in the finest gowns.

Those two women could not have been more different, and each would have despised the other.

3

Every Tuesday morning, I cross the hallway to visit my neighbour Heidi Hargrave, the occupant of Flat Three. Heidi will turn sixty-nine towards the end of the year, her birthday falling on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, a rather ironic date as she never knew her biological parents and was adopted immediately after coming into the world. Heidi is the only resident of Winterville Court to have spent her entire life here, having been brought to Mayfair directly from the maternity ward and grown up with Hyde Park as her playground. She fell pregnant when she was a teenager and never married, inheriting her adoptive parents' estate when they passed away.

Despite being my junior by some twenty three years, she is far less agile, both in body and mind. For three decades, she took part in the London Marathon but was forced to stop running when she developed a severe case of plantar fasciitis in her left heel, an affliction for which she has to wear night splints and receive regular steroid injections in her foot. It proved a terrible blow for such an active woman and I wonder whether this contributed to the gradual decline in her mental faculties, for she was once a person of great vitality, a highly respected ophthalmologist, but now she tends to wander in conversation. Her condition is not quite as severe as dementia or Alzheimer's, thankfully; it's more that she grows a little hazy from time to time, losing track of what we're talking about, mixing up names and places, or changing the subject so abruptly that one struggles to keep up.

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On this particular morning, I found her studying some old photograph albums and hoped that I would not be forced to look through them with her. I keep no such scrapbooks myself and have never quite seen the point of littering one's home with family portraits. In fact, I have only two on display, a silver-framed image of Edgar and me from our wedding day and a picture of Caden upon his graduation from university. I don't display these for sentimental reasons, I should add, but because it is expected of me.

That said, on a shelf in my wardrobe, hidden towards the back, sits an antique Seugnot jewellery box that I purchased from a market stall in Montparnasse in 1946, constructed from fruitwood, trimmed in polished brass, with a mounted escutcheon on the front and a working key. Inside, I keep a single photograph and, although I haven't dared to look at it for more than seventy-five years, I believe I can recall its contents. I am twelve years old, my eyes are directed towards the photographer, and I'm doing my best to appear coquettish, for it is Kurt standing behind the lens, his finger on the shutter, his gaze focused entirely on me as I try not to betray my passion for him. He stands erect in his uniform, his slim, muscular frame, blond hair and pale blue eyes overwhelming me. I sense his cautious interest and am desperate to build upon it.

'Do you see this man, Gretel?' asked Heidi, pointing to a picture of an intelligent-looking fellow standing on a beach with his hands on his hips and a woodstock pipe hanging from his mouth. 'His name was Billy Sprat. He was a dancer and a Russian spy.'

'Is that so?' I said, pouring the tea and wondering whether this story might be one of her fancies – perhaps she'd been watching an old James Bond movie the night before and her mind was filled with espionage – although judging from the era of the photograph it was possible that she was telling the truth. There seem to have been rather a lot of Russian spies lurking around England back then.

'Billy was a friend of my father's and he got caught selling secrets

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to the KGB,' she added breathlessly. 'The security services were about to arrest him, but he found out that his cover had been blown and fled to Moscow. Terribly exciting, don't you think?'

'Oh yes,' I agreed. 'Very.'

'They should have insisted that he come back to face the courts. There's nothing more provoking than the guilty escaping justice.'

I said nothing, glancing across at the carriage clock that stood atop her mantelpiece and the small porcelain figurines next to it that she numbered among her treasures.

'Did you ever have any sympathies with the Russians?' she asked, taking a sip from her cup. 'During the 1960s, I thought they might be on to something with their share and share alike philosophy. But once they started pointing nuclear bombs in our direction I rather lost interest. No one needs another war, do they?'

'I stay out of politics,' I told her, buttering two warm scones and passing hers across. 'I've seen what it does to people.'

'But, of course, you were alive back then, weren't you?' she asked.

'The sixties?' I said. 'Yes. But so were you, Heidi.'

'No, I meant before that. The war. The . . . what do you call it?'

'The Second World War,' I said.

'That's right.'

'Yes,' I told her. We'd had this conversation before, many times, but I had rarely gone into any great detail about my past and, when I had, it had mostly been the stuff of fiction. 'But I was just a girl then.'

Heidi put down the album before turning to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

'Any news from downstairs?' she asked, and I shook my head. This was one of those moments when I was glad that she liked to cast one topic aside in favour of another.

'Not yet,' I said, putting a napkin to my mouth to wipe away some crumbs. 'All quiet on the southern front.'

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‘You don’t think it will be darkies, do you?’ she asked, and I frowned. One of the more distressing aspects of Heidi’s increasingly muddled mind has been her tendency to employ phrases that are, quite rightly, no longer considered appropriate and that she would never, in her prime, have used. I suspect it’s the language of her younger days staking its claim on the parts of her brain that are slowly dissolving. It’s strange; she can tell me exhaustive stories about her childhood, but ask her what happened last Wednesday between six and nine o’clock and the fog descends.

‘It could be anyone, I suppose,’ I replied. ‘We won’t know until they show up.’

‘There was a lovely chap who lived down there for many years,’ she said, her face lighting up now. ‘A historian. He lectured at the University of London.’

‘No, Heidi, that was Edgar. My husband,’ I told her. ‘He lived with me across the hall.’

‘That’s right,’ she said, winking at me, as if we shared a secret. ‘You have it now. Edgar was such a gentleman. Always turned out so well. I don’t believe I ever saw him without a shirt and tie.’

I smiled. It was true that Edgar had taken particular care in his appearance and, even on holidays, had not liked to ‘dress down’, as they say. He wore a pencil moustache and there were those who said he looked a bit like Ronald Colman. The comparison was not unjustified.

‘I tried to kiss him once, you know,’ she continued, glancing towards the window and, by the way she said it, I knew that she’d forgotten to whom she was speaking. ‘He was years older than me, of course, but I didn’t care. He wasn’t interested, though. Brushed me off. Told me that he was devoted to his wife.’

‘Is that so?’ I said quietly, trying to imagine the scenario. I was not surprised that Edgar had never bothered to reveal this minor scandal to me.

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‘He let me down very gently and I was grateful for that. It was shameless behaviour on my part.’

‘Has Oberon been to see you this week?’ I asked. My turn to change the subject now. Oberon is Heidi’s grandson, about thirty, good-looking but cursed with a ridiculous name. (Heidi’s daughter, who tragically passed away from cancer a few years ago, had a passion for Shakespeare.) He works nearby – he’s something high up in Selfridges, I believe – and is kind to his grandmother, although I find him rather irritating in that whenever I’m in his company he addresses me in the loudest voice imaginable, enunciating every syllable, as if he assumes that I must be deaf. And I am not deaf. In fact, there is almost nothing wrong with me at all, which is both surprising and disquieting, considering my advanced years.

‘He’s calling in tomorrow evening,’ she replied. ‘With his girlfriend. He says he has news.’

‘Perhaps they’re getting married,’ I suggested, and she nodded.

‘Perhaps,’ she agreed. ‘I hope so. It’s time he settled down. Like your Caden.’

I raised an eyebrow. Caden has settled down so often that he must be among the most relaxed men in England, but I chose not to bother her with my son’s rather careless approach to commitment.

‘When you hear, you will let me know, won’t you?’ she asked, leaning forward, and I allowed my mind to scurry back through the conversation, wondering where she might have set up a temporary camp.

‘When I hear what, dear?’ I asked.

‘About the new neighbours. We could throw them a party.’

‘I don’t think they’d like that.’

‘Or at least bake them a cake.’

‘That might be more appropriate.’

‘What about Jews?’ she asked after a long pause. ‘There was a time when buildings like this wouldn’t accept Jews. I don’t mind,

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myself. I'm open to all sorts. I've always found them a very friendly people, if I'm honest. Surprisingly cheerful, considering all they've been through.'

I said nothing and, when her eyes closed soon afterwards, I took the cup from her hands, washed the used crockery in the sink and departed, placing a soft kiss upon her forehead before closing the door behind me. In the hallway, I glanced down the staircase to the flat below. It remained, for now, as silent as the grave.

4

The man's name was Rémy Toussaint and he wore a patch emblazoned with the Tricolour over his right eye, having lost that particular organ when a bomb he was planting exploded too soon. Despite his disfigurement, he was handsome, in a cruel way, with thick black hair and a sneer that masqueraded as a smile. He was younger than Mother by some eight years and could have had his pick of women, but he chose her and, for the first time since my brother's death, she seemed open to life's possibilities, curtailing her drinking and taking care with her appearance. She would sit by the grainy mirror in our room running a brush through her hair, and once suggested that this new romance was God's way of showing her that He did not hold her responsible for any crimes that had been committed in that other place. I, however, was less convinced.

'What you must understand about M. Toussaint,' she told me, pronouncing his surname with such precision that she might have been interviewing for membership of the Académie Française, 'is that he is a person of great refinement. His ancestral line is strewn with vicomtes and marquises, although, of course, as a committed *égalitariste*, he scorns such titles. He plays piano and sings, has read most of the important works of literature and, last summer, displayed some of his paintings at an exhibition in Montmartre.'

'So what does he want from you?' I asked.

'He doesn't "want" anything, Gretel,' she replied, irritated by my tone. 'He's fallen in love with me. Is that so difficult for you to

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believe? French men have always preferred women of a certain age to callow ingénues. They have the sense to value experience and wisdom. You mustn't be jealous; twenty years from now, you'll be grateful that this is the case.'

She turned back to the mirror and, from my vantage point on the bed, I wondered whether this was true. Men, it seemed to me, valued attractiveness above all other things. And while Mother had always been a great beauty, she had lost much of her vibrancy since the end of the war. Her hair was less lustrous than it had once been, with flashes of grey intruding among the black like uninvited guests; tiny veins, too, had begun to peep forth across her cheeks like freckles, the result of her devotion to wine. Her eyes, however, remained compelling, a striking shade of Savoy blue that captivated anyone who sat across from her. It was not impossible that a man could still be enamoured of her, I accepted. She was right, however, that I was envious. If a love affair was to play out, then I wanted to be at the heart of it.

'Is he rich?' I asked.

'He dresses well,' she replied. 'And eats at good restaurants. He carries a Fayet walking stick with his family crest on the collar. So yes, I assume that he is a man of some means.'

'And what did he do during the war?'

She ignored this – it was as if I had not spoken at all – and walked towards the wardrobe, from which she removed a red silk dress, one that Father had given her as a gift on the night he told us that we would be leaving Germany. She put it on now and, where it had once clung to her body, accentuating her every curve, it was no longer quite so flattering.

'It needs a belt,' she said, examining herself in the glass. She rummaged through the drawers and found one whose colour contrasted well with the scarlet.

'And when will I meet him?' I asked, glancing out of the window

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at the people walking along the street below. Across from our lodgings was a haberdashery shop and there was a boy who worked inside, not much older than me, who had caught my attention. I often watched him as he went about his business. Like Kurt, he had blond hair, but his fell across his forehead and he seemed to be always stumbling over things, like a clumsy child, which endeared him to me. He was no dancer, but he was beautiful.

‘When he extends the invitation,’ said Mother.

‘But he knows that you have a daughter?’

‘I’ve mentioned it.’

‘Have you told him my age?’

She hesitated. ‘And why would that matter to him, Gretel?’ she asked, frowning. ‘As it happens, he has a daughter of his own. Much younger than you, of course. Only four years old. She lives with her mother in Angoulême.’

‘He’s married, then?’

‘The girl is illegitimate. But, naturally, as a man of honour, he provides for her.’

‘Well, perhaps I could join you some evening,’ I suggested as she sprayed some perfume on her neck and wrists. This last bottle of Guerlain Shalimar had been given to her by Grandmother some seven years earlier on her birthday and it was now perilously close to empty. The scent brought me back to our farewell party in Berlin, when victory had appeared inevitable and the Reich seemed destined to survive for a thousand years. I saw my brother standing by the bannister, observing the officers and their wives as they gathered in the reception rooms, both of us mesmerized by the uniforms and gowns that swept through the hallway in an orgy of colour. Had that really been a mere four years earlier? It felt like so many lifetimes ago, and the two hundred weeks that separated that moment from this were sticky with blood.

‘I think not,’ she replied, examining herself one last time in the

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mirror before leaving the room, ready for whatever adventures her night might bring.

I looked out of the window again and watched as M. Vannier, the haberdasher, stepped outside on to the pavement. A car had pulled up and the chauffeur opened the boot while the boy I liked appeared through the doorway carrying several boxes, each one perched perilously atop the next. Needless to say, he slipped as he negotiated the pavement and one of the boxes fell, followed quickly by the others. Fortunately, it was a dry evening so no damage was done, but M. Vannier reproached him anyway, swatting him about the head, and the boy put a hand to his ear to soothe the sting. Perhaps sensing that he was being observed, he glanced up and noticed me, then blushed scarlet and did a swift about-turn, making his way back into the shop just as Mother stepped over one of the fallen parcels and disappeared down a side street.

5

I make great use of the Mayfair library on South Audley Street, a pleasant ten-minute walk from my flat, where I have been a borrower for many years. Edgar was a passionate reader and while many of his books still sit on the shelves of what was once his office but is now a guest room, his tastes and mine differed considerably. A historian by day, my husband preferred contemporary fiction for his leisure hours but, in general, I prefer non-fiction and it is to these titles that I return time and again as I wander the stacks. I avoid anything to do with the period of my childhood but am fascinated by the Greeks and the Romans. I have a peculiar interest in the autobiographies of astronauts, finding the desire to escape the planet, and the ability to see it through, both eccentric and commendable. I'm not as voracious a reader as Edgar was, but it's a character trait that Father, an equally committed bibliophile, instilled in both his children.

My brother, of course, loved to read about explorers, insisting that he would be one himself someday. Once, I overheard him talking to Pavel, one of the waiters in that other place, about our Berlin home and how he and his friends could spend hours exploring the enormous attic filled with the bric-a-brac of many years, the dark, labyrinthine basement, and the floors that had been designed to make the most of the architect's passion for inscrutable nooks and crannies. Pavel was probably not interested in any of this, but my brother rambled along with his usual disregard.

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‘Can’t you do some exploring here?’ asked Pavel, keeping his voice low, for Kurt was polishing his boots outside in the sunshine and had expressly forbidden him to speak to either of us. *You wouldn’t converse with a rat, would you?* Kurt had asked me, and I, in my desire to please him, had burst out laughing and praised his humour.

‘I’m not allowed,’ replied my brother sadly.

‘And you’re obedient to such a rule?’ Pavel asked, a tired resignation in his tone. ‘Maybe you’re afraid of what you’ll discover if you look beyond the fence.’

‘I’m not afraid of anything,’ my brother insisted, sitting up in outrage.

‘You should be.’

A long silence followed, and I watched as my brother made his way back upstairs to his bedroom, considering these remarks. From the morning of our arrival, Mother and Father had been adamant that he was to stay close to home. They should have guessed that he wouldn’t listen. Little boys seldom do.

Returning from the library on this particular morning, however, with a recently published biography of Marie Antoinette under my arm, I noticed an unfamiliar car parked outside Winterville Court and stared at it uneasily. There are only a handful of parking spots available on the street, each one so expensive that no one ever bothers. Residents have parking tags for a nearby garage and only a fool, a millionaire, or both, would drive into London these days. Entering the lobby, I paused outside Flat One and pressed my ear to the door. I could hear movement from inside but no voices.

I tapped gently on the woodwork, that strange conflict of wanting to be heard but not wishing to disturb, and when the door was opened I found myself standing face to face with a young woman, perhaps thirty-five at most, dressed in what one might call an eclectic outfit, with a pink streak running through her platinum-blond hair. I have to say, I rather admired her *élan*.

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‘Hello,’ she said, her expression open, and I mirrored it, extending my hand.

‘Gretel Fernsby,’ I said. ‘Your upstairs neighbour. You’re getting ready to move in, I see.’

‘Oh no,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I’m just the interior designer. I’m here to measure the space.’

That word again. The ‘space’. Could we no longer call things what they were? It seemed to me that language was being torn asunder these days, with the most basic words being discarded as offensive. Perhaps ‘flat’ was considered too bourgeois now. Or too proletariat. Really, it seemed that the safest thing was not to speak. In which case, perhaps the world had not changed very much at all.

‘Alison Small,’ she added, introducing herself. ‘Small Interiors.’

‘A pleasure,’ I said, interrogating my emotions to discover whether or not I was disappointed by this. I’m a quick judge of character, she seemed a pleasant enough sort and I felt that I would have been perfectly content to have her living beneath me. Her outfits alone would have kept me entertained. ‘I suppose you’re measuring for curtains and sofas and what have you?’

‘That’s right,’ she said, stepping back into the flat and ushering me inside. ‘Come in if you like.’

I thanked her and entered. I daresay she wouldn’t have invited just anyone in, but people inherently trust the elderly. How dangerous could I be, after all? Still, it felt strange to be in Mr Richardson’s home now that all his effects had been taken away. As it was an exact copy of my own flat upstairs, I had an unsettling vision of what mine would look like when I was gone and everything that I owned, every small possession that I had accumulated over the years as proof of my existence, was consigned to a skip or an Oxfam shop, from the painting Edgar bought me as a wedding gift to the silicone

spatula I used in my frying pan. Caden, I knew, would have the flat on the market before rigor mortis had even set in.

‘Have you lived upstairs long?’ asked Miss Small, and I nodded, surprised by how our voices echoed when there was no upholstery or furniture to dampen the volume.

‘More than sixty years,’ I replied.

‘Lucky you!’ she declared. ‘I’d give my left arm to live in this part of London.’

‘Might I ask . . .?’ I paused for a moment, unsure how much she would be willing to divulge. ‘Your client. Or clients. They’ll be moving in soon?’

‘Yes, quite soon, I’m told,’ she said, pointing an electronic device at one of the walls. It shot a red dot towards the paintwork and she glanced at its screen. I have no idea what the red dot signified or what information it revealed but, judging by how her forehead creased, it seemed of great importance. ‘So my team and I will have to get our skates on. Fortunately, I know exactly what they like. I’ve worked with them before.’

‘“Them”,’ I said, grabbing on to the word as a drowning man might seize hold of a buoy. ‘A couple, then?’

She hesitated. Her lipstick, I noticed, was rather thick. It made a smacking sound when she pressed her lips together.

‘I probably shouldn’t say, Mrs Fernsby,’ she said. ‘Client confidentiality and all that.’

‘Oh, I’m sure they wouldn’t mind,’ I replied, trying my best not to sound like the local busybody. ‘They will, after all, be living directly beneath me.’

‘Still. I know how much they value their privacy. As I say, they’ll be here soon enough and you’ll have a chance to meet them then.’

I nodded, disappointed.

‘I know it’s nerve-racking,’ she continued, recognizing my

anxiety. 'New neighbours to contend with when you've lived in a building for so long. The previous occupant was here for many years too, I believe?'

'Not really,' I told her. 'He only moved in in 1992.'

She laughed; I didn't know why.

'Well, rest assured, you'll have no difficulty with my clients. They're a very . . .' She paused, searching for the right words. 'How shall I put this? They're . . . Are you interested in the French Revolution, then?'

I stared at her, baffled by the non-sequitur. My expression must have betrayed my confusion because she nodded towards the book that I was carrying.

'Marie Antoinette,' she explained.

'Oh yes,' I said with a shrug. 'Powerful men and women have always fascinated me. I'm interested in how they wield power, whether they use it for good or for evil, and how it changes them when they do.'

She seemed a little embarrassed. Perhaps this was a more detailed reply than she had expected. Lifting her contraption again, she pointed it at the wall that looked out on to the road and another red dot appeared in the window frame, doing whatever those red dots did. I wondered whether, if I outstayed my welcome, she might point the device at me.

'Well, I'd better get back to it,' she said, dismissing me now, and I nodded and turned away, making my way back towards the door. Before leaving, however, I tried once more.

'Just one last question,' I said, hopeful that she might set my mind at rest on this issue at least. 'Your clients. They don't have any children, do they?'

She appeared uncomfortable. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Fernsby,' she said, and my heart sank as I waved goodbye before returning upstairs. It was only as I was brewing a pot of tea a few minutes later that I

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realized I couldn't actually be sure what her answer had meant. Was she sorry because she had been unable to answer my question, sorry because yes, there was a child on the horizon, or sorry because no, there wasn't, and an old dear like me might have been looking forward to a little youthful energy around the place? It was impossible to know.

6

On a sunny morning, as the light dappled through the leafy trees of the Île, I made my way across the Pont Marie towards the place des Vosges, where I occasionally sat with a book to observe the wealthier Parisians as they strolled past in their finery. I rather admired their shameless hypocrisy, this gaggle of erstwhile grandees who professed a belief in *égalité* but used clothes and jewellery to express their innate *supériorité*.

The war had proved a great leveller for the French, but there was a sense that the lower orders had done more to hijack the efforts of the Vichy government than the higher, and so a time of accountability had begun. A single word – *collaborator* – now incited the same levels of terror in the populace as another – *aristocrat* – had done a century and a half earlier. Witnessing the anxiety on the faces of the rich, I imagined it resembled the expressions on their ancestors' faces when the Estates General was summoned. Now, of course, it was the *épuration légale* that brought such people to the dock, leading either to executions or the lesser sentence of *dégradation nationale*.

It was at moments like this, left alone with my thoughts, that I struggled most with the complicated nature of my conscience. It had been three years since my brother died, and six months since my father was hanged, and I missed them both in different ways. My brother's loss was one I could scarcely allow myself to consider but my father's remained on my mind every day. I was slowly beginning to understand what he had been a part of – what we had been a part

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of – and the inhumanity of his actions contrasted so sharply with the man I thought I had known that they might as well have been two different people. I told myself that none of it had been my fault, that I had been just a child, but there was that small part of my brain that asked me, if I was entirely innocent, then why was I living under an assumed name?

As I watched, a man of substantial frame approached from the other side of the fountain and, when he drew closer, I recognized Mother's paramour, M. Toussaint. I turned away, hoping that he would not stop to talk to me. We had not yet been introduced – I had seen him only through the windows of the bars where he and Mother sat drinking – and I felt no great desire to make his acquaintance. But here he was, stopping before me now and removing his hat as he offered a graceful bow. His foolishness irritated me. Was he so vain as to imagine himself a modern-day Musketeer and I a distraught maiden on the road to Versailles?

'Do I have the honour of addressing Mlle Gretel Guéymard?' he asked, and I looked up, the syllables of our fabricated surname still novel to my ears.

'You do,' I said. 'And you are M. Toussaint, are you not?'

He smiled, and I could see why a woman might fall so quickly into his arms. His face was unlined, his cheeks smooth, but a thin moustache that crept across his upper lip afforded him an air of mischief, accentuating the thickness of unnaturally red lips. His one uncovered eye was of a piercing blue and I wondered whether it would be pleasurable or unnerving to have it trained upon me. And yet, despite being of an age where my head was turned by the dozens of beautiful youths who passed me on the street every day, I found something disconcerting in M. Toussaint's gaze. He was handsome, certainly, but in a reversal of the myth, I saw him as Medusa and me as Perseus, guessing that it would be perilous for me to dwell on his countenance too long.

'Your mother has spoken of me, then?' he said.

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