“THE SPIRITUALIST & HER DISCOVERY” AND OTHER QUEER HISTORICAL FICTION

By

Zach Schultz

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of

Zach Schultz presented on December 2, 2020

_______________________________________________
Allyson Loomis, Chair

________________________________________________
Jon Loomis

_________________________________________________
Dr. Christopher Jorgenson

APPROVED: ______________________________________

Dean of Graduate Studies
“The Spiritualist & Her Discovery” and Other Queer Historical Fiction

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Zachary John Schultz

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Under the Supervision of Allyson Loomis

My creative thesis explores queerness, uncertainty, and growth in a collection of three short stories. Each protagonist faces a central conflict that is not queerness itself but in which queerness and queer people are part of significant solutions.

Inspired by my parents’ hometown of Bloomer, Wisconsin, “Ginger Cookies” centers on Edith Ann, a straight woman in 1961 whose husband and young sons are away on a hunting trip, contends with her unmet need to feel connected to her capable, loving, and confident queer sister.

“The Spiritualist & Her Discovery” centers on a queer man in the 1920s confronting his queerness as a married father while on the trail of a long-absent spiritualist sister.

“Les Saules Morts” came about through an exploration of Thatcher-era anti-queerness in the United Kingdom as well as my recollections of my grandparents and of my mother’s work in a nursing home throughout my childhood.
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INTRODUCTION

As a fiction writer, I am interested in queer and minority stories that highlight the humanity of individuals and groups, both within themselves and within relationships. I hope to produce “stories with big, beating hearts” (McQuiston) that bring into focus marginalized realities. Generally, my stories center around generational and familial conflicts. I am unafraid of setting stories in the past no matter how contemporary my themes may seem, and I strive to be honest about and gentle with issues of mental health in my work.

While structurally and stylistically my writing is pretty traditional, I experiment in terms of content. Like Margaret Atwood, I write in a fairly formal style but remain persistently subversive in terms of characters, situations, and themes. This gives my work its own texture: a classical style but with friction between form and content that creates sparks.

My thematic and stylistic areas of interest arose from my pansexuality, my fatherhood, my relationship with my parents and my brothers, my other interpersonal relationships, my experiences with clinical anxiety and depression and with therapy, and my core belief that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I felt gaslit by my parents and their evangelically dogmatic religious and political views regarding gender, sexuality, race, class—the whole shebang. As an adult I’ve been repeatedly confronted with a dual truth: my parents are stifled individuals, harmful in their ideology and actions, and they have demonstrated continued growth and effort.

My parents made of my childhood a bizarre potion of both poisons and balms, dangers and supports. Theirs was unconditional love without unconditional acceptance, to paraphrase Andrew Solomon’s “Love, No Matter What.” I shielded my own queerness from myself and
the world until my late twenties because I grew up steeped in an endless religious and cultural
demonization of people like me, and in my adulthood I witnessed an uneasy balance of love
and repulsion on my parents’ part. After my brother Sam came out to my parents as gay
partway through college, they first told him they would always love him no matter what before
initiating an onslaught of emailed bible verses and warnings of the fires of hell.

I became a parent near the end of my first year of college; I had turned 19 ten days
before my daughter Ava was born. Before I told my parents that I was going to be a father, I
called my brother Sam and half-jokingly asked if he’d mind coming out to them first to lessen
the weight of my revelation; he unsurprisingly declined. But my parents—in their own way—
accepted the reality of my situation, and that was good enough.

Then, a decade later, my younger child—my precious then-eight-year-old Skyler—
invited me and his mom into his truth as a transgender boy in September of 2019, and the
initial conversations with my parents about this brought on the sternest ultimatum I’ve had to
put forth: either my parents would agree to accept him as he was and make a good-faith effort
to use his name and pronouns or I would not allow him to spend time with them unsupervised.
They worried that he had been taught to be transgender at school or that he was mentally ill
or both, and it took a good deal of patience on my end to go through researched information
and resources with them so they could at least understand the validity of Skyler’s identity. We
talked about facts that really seemed to hit home for them: that 41% of transgender children
attempt suicide at some point in their lives and that trans kids who are subjected to the
insidious pseudoscientific evils of conversion therapy are four times more likely to attempt
suicide than the broader transgender population (which already sees high attempt rates). I
emphasized that my reasoning for this ultimatum was not only to protect Skyler’s emotional
wellbeing but his life, and they have really, really tried and continue to try to support him by
acknowledging his identity and using his pronouns.

Over the summer I asked my parents for something I had wanted for some time but
hadn’t felt comfortable putting forth; I wanted them to make an effort to ask me about my
magnificently good and kind sweetheart (a Black gender-nonconforming person). I said I felt
like there’s no interest unless I bring them up first and that even then my parents’ interest feels
perfunctory; I pointed out my sense that they would probably react very supportively if I were
dating a cisgender woman with the same qualities Glenn has. I emphasized that I was feeling
hurt that there seemed to be conditions for my parents accepting my healthy relationship and
that I want Glenn to feel the same caring and acceptance I feel from their out-of-state parents
whom I haven’t even met yet. While my parents reacted very defensively initially, ultimately
they stepped up and acted like the parents they are supposed to be, inviting Glenn and me
over for dinner at their house and showing the graciousness and caring I needed of them.

My parents are pretty good at being loving; through their eventual and sustained
responses to Skyler’s gender and my relationship with Glenn, I see them visibly trying to do
the needed work to also be accepting. They have surprised me, and I would never have
imagined this from the people who raised me in a church that had no interest in LGBTQ+
folks beyond disparaging and threatening them.

This is the tender and uncertain place I write from and about: People who are neither
all good nor all bad; people who know they need to grow and who make some effort in that
direction and sometimes fail or cannot get there. I have no purity test for them because the
point is the possibility of growth and moments of genuine humanity. Sometimes I want to
write inward with a character who does not seem particularly redeemable but who ultimately
shows possibilities because I have seen it in my life: ignorance and bigotry somehow coexisting with efforts to understand and love.

My mom worked as an RN in a nursing home throughout nearly my entire childhood, and her compassion toward the elderly struck me then and also inspired “Les Saules Morts” in which a particular care home in 1980s Britain shows the effects of a callous Thatcher government dismantling the public good for private gain and their obsession with punishing homosexuality even with few legal avenues to do so. I wanted also to highlight the complexity and value of elderly folks without falling into tropes, and I hope I have achieved that. The protagonist, Maud, isn’t exactly sympathetic as she applies labels and judgements on her fellow residents of the care home, but she is also struggling with memory loss and confusion. Ultimately she does rediscover some of her best traits and along with her roommate makes a dent against a Thatcher-aligned plan to disrupt the lives of queer folks.

Respecting the emotional complexities I’ve observed in my life, I’m interested in working against literary tropes that attempt to explore topics like these but in limited or harmful ways. Thus, I enjoy writing about queer characters in situations in which their queerness is not the central problem of the story. In “Ginger Cookies,” for example, I write about Edith Ann, a woman living in the early 1960s whose husband and young sons are away on a hunting trip. She decides to visit her sister and her sister’s longtime girlfriend who live in the same town as Edith Ann but whom she rarely sees. In this story, my guiding conflict wasn’t attached to the lesbian couple but to the straight married Edith Ann who struggles both internally and externally: she holds only a small awareness of her own subservience to her husband’s views but recognizes the communicatively dysfunctional truth of her marriage, and she has come to see her toxic relationship with her parents (her abusive, controlling father and silent, willfully ignorant mother) but does not yet know how to act on this knowledge. She
strikes me as someone who sees herself as a drained and grey silhouette in place of what should be a full person. She feels guilty and weak, and she has enough self-awareness to know, on a foundational level, that for her own emotional survival (if nothing else) she needs to invest in the sisterhood she so deeply values. Still, she does not know, practically, how to keep her parents and husband from preventing her from attending to that need. “The Spiritualist & Her Discovery” centers on a queer man in the 1920s confronting his sexuality as a married father while on the trail of a sister he believed abandoned him with their abusive father years before and in the course of the story comes to learn that the reason she left was that her involuntary statements of precognition threatened to “out” him, that she left to protect him and his secret as she thought him too young to leave home. This revelation helps him begin to revisit his hesitancy in so many areas of his life.

I wanted “Ginger Cookies” to be set distinctly in midcentury small-town America (in my mind it’s set in Bloomer, Wisconsin, where both my parents grew up), and, in writing the characters, I intentionally personified the worst of patriarchal gender stereotypes in the people of Edith Ann’s parents: the strong, unemotional (except for his rage) father and the silent, accommodating mother. By setting them up in this way, I wanted to highlight how no one else in this story fits those descriptions. Edith Ann’s husband Marshall is an attentive and patient father who demonstrates love for his wife while also taking for granted the outsized agency he holds in their relationship. Edith Ann herself—while certainly limiting herself to what she’s been taught her role as a wife should be—subverts expectation by occasionally visiting her sister, despite fearing that Marshall still considers her sister’s queerness to be “unnatural.” She even notes to herself the revulsion she felt years before when Marshall rejected her sister immediately on finding out she was a lesbian. She notes to herself that she had already accepted his marriage proposal and did not want to disappoint. That she refuses to address this (and
many other questions) with him speaks both to her mistrust of herself and her husband as well as her underlying perceptions of the world in which she lives.

I wanted this story to feature queer characters who are not only surviving but are living their lives in ways that feel meaningful and successful to them. Edith Ann’s sister, Frances, and her partner, Joan, run their own farm and have a warm, happy home that Edith Ann both longs for and resents. Frances and Joan display a comfortable and capable belonging in their space, qualities Edith Ann has clearly never found in her own adult context, outside her relationship with Frances. I wanted to write Frances and Joan as living openly and happily as lesbians in this particular setting as part of a consistent aim of mine as a writer: to work against common tropes and to highlight that the complexities I’m exploring have always existed. My own parents, for instance, growing up in the 1950s and ‘60s had very little awareness of people who weren’t like them—especially people who subverted norms of gender and sexuality—but that doesn’t mean that such people never existed or thrived.

In bringing my explorations of these complexities to the time/space continuum in my writing, I’m able to celebrate those identities in ways that feel triumphant to their existence through the lens of historical fiction, consciously forgoing stories of tragedy and loss and pain for nonconformist folks in favor of stories in which they can find ways to build for themselves dignified and authentic lives.
SHE WAVED AS Marshall backed the station wagon out of the driveway. The walls of rain kept her sons and husband from her view, and the car became a dim mirage, and Edith Ann worried about their long drive. The two younger boys hadn’t been much farther north than New Auburn before and could be beastly impatient, but Marshall had said he was sure they were all old enough now to tackle a seven-hour ride to Nipigon.

This was his first year taking any of the boys. Before this, he would drive the seven hours by himself with his two rifles and some traps and a sealed cooler of Edith Ann’s sandwiches, but Ontario had ended the bounty system for bears just this year, and Marshall had said he would go for the newly-announced game hunt for the sport alone even if it was not bringing in any money this year.

“I wasn’t sure we needed that money anyway, Marshall,” she had said. “The ledger—”

“Edie, the ledger’s fine. I’m glad you keep it, but I know our accounts. It’s nice to have something tucked away for Christmas for the boys. This year we’ll just have to figure it a little differently. I’ll see if I can’t give myself a raise.” They had both chuckled at that. She forced hers a bit, but she thought his sounded genuine. She was glad for that. He was a happy man, and he loved their children, and she couldn’t see any reason why she shouldn’t be delighted he was taking them hunting even if Walter and Ronnie were just seven and Warren had only ever been deer hunting—and only twice at that. The boys loved time with their father.

She did not know how long she had been standing at the picture window, looking out at the rain. At least the weather and the red leaves still on the old sugar maple in the front yard
shielded her from Mrs. Gullickson who, unless she had died since yesterday, was certain to be sitting in her rocking chair in her house across the street spying on her neighbors.

Edith Ann busied herself in the kitchen. Marshall and the boys had hardly finished their breakfast before loading up the station wagon and setting out, and she had hardly been halfway through their dishes when they had left. She reached into the sink water and held Marshall’s favorite plate, one from his grandmother, one that didn’t match any of the others. His quirks and unfathomable interests had fascinated her when they met in high school. They had known each other before then, of course, but she hadn’t really given him any mind until he had made an ass of himself in front of the entire school, standing up and bellowing out an imitation of an annoying classmate at an end-of-year assembly. That had gotten her attention, and a few dates (and some necking) had gotten her heart.

When she had finished drying the dishes, she thought she might visit her sister.

Edith Ann put on her rain bonnet and grabbed her umbrella. She and Marshall just had the one car, and almost an hour’s walk stood between her and Frances’s house on the other side of town.

The dogs were the first to greet her long before she reached the front door. Their barking startled her at first; she was not used to it. She and Marshall had no pets—he found animals intrusive, inconvenient—and she had not seen the dogs or Frances since last year when she had had to bribe the boys with sweets to not tell their father they had come to visit while he was away hunting.

When she had neared a little closer to the house, Edith Ann heard a loud squeal (presumably from her sister), and the door swung open and she was charged by first the baying
bluetick coonhounds and then by Frances. (Edith Ann noted that her sister hadn’t even bothered to cover her hair, but it probably wouldn’t have helped anyway because Frances’s hair always looked like a rat’s nest whether the rain had gotten at it or not.) Great splashes of mud flew up behind the trio as tore down the hill toward her.

“Oh my goodness!” she said as the dogs leapt at her, their wet tongues reaching her neck, while Frances wrapped her arms around her.

“Edith Ann, you could have called! I was about to head out for groceries!” she said.


Frances and Joan had kept the old farmhouse sturdy and in good repair, and Edith Ann had always felt relieved about that because when they’d bought it, the place was a dump. She didn’t know how they had managed to restore it or whatever it was they had done. It was passable now even with what her sister considered a sense of taste splashed throughout.

Frances took her umbrella and hair bonnet and hanged them on the coat rack to dry. “Joan, are you in yet?” she called. There was no answer. “Joan’s been out checking on the chickens. Their coop roof leaked last time it rained. Not sure if the new one’s good enough. Please, sit.”

“I think I’ll make us some coffee,” Edith Ann said.

“Jeez, get off your feet for a minute. We can talk. Joan’ll make us coffee when she gets in.”

Edith Ann raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Joan’s coffee. I think I’ll make my own.”

Frances laughed. “Suit yourself. Coffee’s in the cupboard by the fridge now.”

As she set to brewing the coffee, the dogs anxiously whining at her feet, Edith Ann gritted her teeth at her sister’s long-standing obsessive need to reorganize her surroundings every few
months. Nothing was ever where it had been. Everything felt new. It drove her batty with worry. When they were children, Edith Ann had tried gluing Frances’s furniture to the floor of their shared room once and had been belted by their father for it. The floor wasn’t even ruined, but she’d learned a fast appreciation for tolerating Frances’s peculiarities.

She noticed a cookie tin on the counter and pecked inside. Ginger cookies. She kept herself from grabbing one and shoving it into her mouth. “Frances? Did you use butter or margarine for these ginger cookies?”

“Butter,” Frances said from the other room. The dogs clattered out of the kitchen, presumably to follow Frances’s voice. “Freshly churned, too.” Churning their own butter like pioneers. Typical.

Even considering the unflattering figure butter might give her, Edith Ann took a bite of a cookie. Warm gooey sugary spice (and everything nice, she thought wryly) filled her senses, and she was surprised that she shuddered. She had not had a cookie in some time. She baked them twice a week for the boys and for Marshall, but she prided herself in keeping far from temptation. She didn’t know if Marshall would like a fuller-figured woman, and she didn’t intend to find out.

“These are real good,” she said and heard Frances laugh.

“Thanks. I’ve still got a knack for it.”

She didn’t know why Frances needed the knack. It was just her and Joan whereas she had four mouths to feed not including her own. Baking was a chore and a challenge for her, and sometimes Marshall and the boys—try as they might to hide it—had to pretend to like her goods.

The coffee was brewing in the coffee pot (old and black, she noted, and hideously boring; her own coffee pot at home was mint-green and new) as she dried her hands, and out of the
kitchen window she saw Joan heading back from the chicken coop. The rain had let up enough that she could see Joan carrying something crumpled. As she drew nearer, Edith Ann saw it was a chicken or what was left of a chicken. She felt a little faint.

She grabbed another ginger cookie and joined Frances in the living room. It looked different than last time, but it was cozy. A fire crackled merrily in the fireplace. “Well, the coffee’s started. Would you ask Joan to not bring whatever-it-is-she’s-carrying in here? I don’t want to see it.”

Frances looked puzzled. She got up and left the room. Edith Ann sat down on the couch, feeling the warmth of the fire reach her legs and hands. She heard the back door swing open (without a creak, she perceived; her own back door had creaked for months and Marshall still hadn’t fixed it and Lord knows she couldn’t fix it herself) and muffled voices and the excited barking of the dogs. She heard what sounded like Joan saying something loudly and the back door shut again, and Frances came back into the room and settled into a chair.

“She’s putting it in the garage for now. Had to let the dogs go with,” Frances said. “Must have been a fox. The fencing around the coop’s torn through a bit.” Edith Ann shuddered again, and Frances said, “The roof’s solid though, so at least the chickens won’t drown.” Frances smirked, but her levity didn’t help.

“Let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

“More pleasant than safe roofs?”

“Frances, that’s not funny.”

Frances shrugged and sat back in her chair. “How are the boys?”

“They’re good. Full of energy. The other day we were at the folks’ and Walter came zooming out of the cornfield and ran smack into Marshall and they both fell down. I thought he’d be angry, but Marshall just laughed and laughed until Ronnie came out of the cornfield.
Ronnie’d been chasing him with a rusty buck knife he’d found out there. Well, Marshall gave him hell for that, said he could’ve hurt somebody. Pop wanted to wallop Ronnie, but Marshall said, no, the boy’ll learn with words.”

Frances whistled and raised her eyebrows. “How did that go over?”

Edith Ann frowned. “You know Pop,” she said. Her dad had walked right past Marshall and grabbed Ronnie’s ear and taken him to the shed like Marshall wasn’t even there, like he wasn’t a man who could discipline his own son in his own way, and Marshall hadn’t said anything. Just watched them go. Ronnie came back a few minutes later red-faced with tears streaked across his face, and then Marshall had led them all to the car and they left without saying goodbye. Her mom hadn’t said anything, of course; she’d just gone back into the house the second Marshall had said he didn’t want Pop to hit his son.

She didn’t say any of this to Frances.

She jumped a bit when she felt Frances’s hand on hers; she’d joined her on the sofa. “Edie—” Frances began, but then the back door swung open and she heard Joan’s footsteps and the dogs’ claws on the floorboards.

“Helluva chicken,” Joan said. “Scratched some of the little shit’s fur out before she died. Went down fightin’. I’ll bury ‘er when the rain lets up. Maybe tomorra’. Wrapped ‘er up in a tarp, closed the garage. Fox can’t get through those walls.”

Joan was pretty. Far prettier than her, Edith Ann thought, and far prettier than Frances. She didn’t need rouge to have rosy cheeks. Her hair had natural chocolate-brown curls. Her nose was small and upturned like a button. She had breasts for days, and here she was wasting them on another woman. Edith Ann felt terrified of Joan, and she didn’t really know why.
“Sure nice to see ya there, Edith Ann. Been a spell,” Joan said. She had a homely way of talking that apparently most people from Michigan had that Edith Ann found both endearing and revolting. She didn’t know how Frances could stand it.

“Joan,” Frances said, “Edith Ann’s made us coffee. Would you…”

Joan nodded. “Sure,” she said, and left the room.

One of the dogs set its head on Edith Ann’s lap and looked up at her with giant marshmallow eyes until she petted it.

“Edie,” Frances said, “he’s not a good man.”

“No,” Edith Ann agreed. “He’s not.”

“Your boys are lucky, you know. Your Marshall’s not like that, though, right? From everything you’ve said, he’s gentle and kind and—”

“You don’t know him!” Edith Ann didn’t know why she was upset, but she knew she was. The dogs hurried from the room, and she regretted scaring them away. “You’ve barely met Marshall,” she said more quietly. “You don’t know anything about my family.”

Frances’s face held pity and sadness. Edith Ann couldn’t stand it.

“Marshall doesn’t like me mentioning you,” Edith Ann said. “Clears his throat whenever I include you in my prayers.” She could hear her own voice rising and feel the anger flushing her face, and she didn’t know if it was at Frances or at Marshall. “I have one goddamn sister. One.” She was whimpering now and felt pathetic.

She really didn’t know where Marshall’s vitriol came from. He was a good man. He was such a good, gentle father. Patient with the boys. Provided for them. And he was a good husband. Kind to her. Generous with the finances. Not too insistent at night. When they were going to get married and she wanted Frances to be her maid of honor, though, Marshall was firm. He’d met Frances a few times by then, and he’d always been pleasant enough. But since
they’d been married, he’d never allowed her to come to the house. Like she was a disease he wouldn’t let infect him. She didn’t understand it. A sinner Frances may be, but all people were anyway, and she was Edith Ann’s sister.

Joan was back with the coffee. Edith Ann wiped her face with her sleeve as Joan set the tray down on the end table and held out a cup for her. She took it and felt its warmth on her hands as she cradled it like a small rabbit.

“Thank you,” she said. Joan nodded.

They sat in silence for a bit. Edith Ann wished the coffee were not so hot; at least then they’d be able to pretend to be occupied with sipping it. The dogs wandered back into the room and curled up on the rug in front of the fire.

“Ya know,” Joan said (Edith Ann did not look up), “I’ve gotten used to puttin’ up with other people’s shit. People I don’t know. People I don’t care about. People I’ve had to decide not to care about. My mom almost got me a lobotomy when I was in senior high. ‘Too weird. Unnatural.’” Joan snorted and took a sip of coffee, cringing when she did. Must still be too hot. “But ya know what I know now? People can’t own you.”

Edith Ann said nothing. She felt powerless, like someone asleep. Or maybe catatonic, seeing but unable to move or speak. Silence could be its own prison, but now it felt like freedom. She wanted to hear Joan.

Joan looked Edith Ann right in the eyes, and she couldn’t look away. “People. Can’t. Own. You,” she said, pounding out each word as if with a mallet. “My folks raised chickens for the eggs and the meat. I didn’t like that. So now I just raise them for the eggs. My own way. A way that works for me. Doesn’t mean it’s better or worse.” Joan sighed heavily and slapped her hands against her knees. “I’m gonna go get the horses fed,” she said as she rose.

“Joan,” Edith Ann said after a moment.
Joan turned around. “Yeah?”

She gave her a little half-smile. “Thank you.”

Joan smiled, came over to her, squatted down, and wrapped her arms around her. “Sure, kiddo. Sometimes people are shit. Doesn’t mean you have to be.” She ruffled Edith Ann’s hair as though she were a child and left the room, and Edith Ann was surprised to find she didn’t even mind.

Edith Ann and Frances talked for a long time about nothing. Nothing important, anyway, but it felt good. After a while, she stood up and hugged her sister. They held each other for what felt like an age, and Frances sent her off with a brown paper bag full of ginger cookies. The dogs panted happily when she petted them before heading out, and as she walked home, she realized the way back didn’t seem as long.

EDITH ANN AND Marshall unloaded the station wagon together when it returned the next day. Today the sun was bright and warm, and only a few clouds played slowly across the sky. The trip had gone well, Marshall told her. He’d decided against doing the bear hunt with the boys. They hadn’t even gotten all the way to the Canadian border but had stopped just before in Grand Portage. They’d gone to the new Grand Portage National Monument, hiking for a few hours from Lake Superior to the Pigeon River before staying the night in a motel.

The boys must have been starving because by the time Edith Ann and Marshall had finished unloading and came back into the house, the boys were busily scooping up what was left of the ginger cookies from the plate Edith Ann had set out.

“Jeepers, mom,” Warren said, “these are soooooo good!”
She smiled at him and held his gaze and said, “Your Aunt Frances made them.” Warren’s eyes grew wide, and he squinted at her before looking to her husband. “Marshall,” she said, and she did not know quite what to say next.

He looked confused. He said nothing, just stared at her.

She felt her heart bang against her ribs, her breaths growing shallow as she felt her lungs constricting into tight desperate balloons, and the light coming in the windows dimmed and all but vanished, shadows stretching through each room, and Edith thought for a moment her heart might be giving out, but it must have been a cloud passing over the sun because a moment later the darkness gave way once again to dust-speckled streams of sunlight.

The empty cookie plate was abandoned, and the children had left the room. Edith heard a childish laugh from somewhere upstairs that was joined by another boy’s short squeal of glee. Probably Ronnie and Walter.

She took a deep breath. “Marshall,” she said, “I would like to have Frances and Joan for cards on Thursday night.”

He remained silent, looking bewildered, but Edith fought against the impulse to retreat. “And I also intend to have them for Thanksgiving this year. Yes?” She hoped she looked self-assured.

After a moment, Marshall said, “But your parents...”

She pushed her chin up slightly and felt a tear on her cheek. “I don’t think I’ll invite my parents this year.”

Marshall cocked his head but stood where he was. Uncertainty gripped her for a moment; she thought he might refuse, and she wondered what she would do then, but instead he sighed and shrugged and gave her a very small sort of grin. “Okay, Edie,” he said.
Edith Ann didn’t even mind mussing up her makeup as she wiped her tear away with her arm. “Okay,” she said.
THE SPIRITUALIST & HER DISCOVERY

“BRUCE, STOP. STOP the car, please, Bruce. Bruce!” Maybe he had been trying to find a safe place to do so, but when I shouted, my driver slammed on the brakes at the corner of Post Avenue and 207th Street. I’d been on my way to the hospital for my shift that morning. There were a few angry honks and shouts from outside as Bruce came around and opened my door. I hardly noticed the rain, and almost in reverence, I made my way to the poster plastered on a wall.

Before me was a wet, peeling advertisement for a performing spiritualist apparently with engagements across the city. “Born aboard a steamer ship in the midst of a most terrible hurricane! Precognition from an early age! Prognosticator of events great and small! Communicator with all persons living and dead!” Despite the lofty proclamations, Madame Genevieve LaTraut (it said so on the poster at any rate; I recognized her instantly her as Lillian Prior) seemed, in the advertisement, to be a retiring young woman.

Another woman’s name—a name which I did not recognize—featured marginally on the poster: “Madame LaTraut appears under the gracious benefaction of Mrs. Agatha Hughes-Holloway.” A business manager? A producer? I did not know.

Two things were painted clumsily (but with grammatical soundness) across the advertisement. They read, WOMEN BELONG AT HOME and REPENT TO GOD OR LOSE YOUR SOUL. I was certain this advertisement had been defaced by the same person because while there admittedly may be one fellow bright enough to write either message correctly, there certainly couldn’t be two. What a mug.

I regarded the likeness of the spiritualist again. Madame LaTraut was no stranger to me, nor was I to her. Indeed, Lillian Prior (I suspected only I and this Mrs. Hughes-Holloway
were the only ones in New York to know her true name) was my elder sister, and her preternatural inclinations had been known to me since childhood.

As a boy I had witnessed many strange occurrences through my sister: she had told me why my cat was sick (pregnancy) and why the dog was dull, quiet, and leaden (early stages of rabies)—after hearing this from my sister, Father shot the dog out in the woods while I was away at school. Lilly was schooled at home by our mother. I heard from Father and my school friends that “something” about her had simply terrified the other children and even the schoolmaster.

At home, Lilly was a very particular sort of companion to me. We played no games, indulged in no joking or horseplay. Lilly was quite fond of reading, though, and she helped me learn my letters even when I was very small. I remember her running her hand slowly through my hair as she read and later recited Robert Burns or Emily Dickinson or some such poet. I did not share her interest in poetry, but I do not believe she saw it as a strike against me. She was tender, and she liked me in her own way, as she esteemed no others that I knew of. Her world seemed to contain a great glass: on one side, Lilly, and on the other, everyone else.

Her “something” was always present, though she did not seem to control it. She was not omniscient. It would hit any time of day and for any slight reason. A missing marble of mine—gone for days or weeks even—would be discovered not physically but by Lilly, her eyes closed and her eyelids fluttering madly, grasping my hand and muttering, “It’s in the pantry by the door.” A thought I gave to our recently deceased Grandfather Edwin would produce a muted outburst from my sister at the dinner table: “Grandpapa’s still annoyed you kicked him outside church in front of everyone after the service when you were seven, Mother.”
All of us were a bit disturbed by her but none more than Father. He disliked his
daughter and her strangeness with a fierce potency. He was prone to depart a room without a
word upon her entering it. She troubled him through no fault of her own, I think, but he
avoided her in a different way than he avoided me.

I recall a time at which Lilly conveyed to him a message from Mother shortly after she
died. The effect on my father was remarkable: as she told him what Mother said, his eyes took
on a stranger, wilder look than his normal drunkenness evinced in him.

After Mother’s unfortunate passing—it has been many years now—he took to liquor
as a balm. I wonder now if he began drinking when she was first afflicted with the leukemia
and I simply didn’t notice, or if he had always been a drinker. In any case, his dependence
worsened once the end had come for her.

Some short time after our mother’s death when I was sixteen, Lilly left. Vanished.
Went away without notice and with no indication of her intentions. With Father in his stupors,
it was left to me to inquire after her, but no one—not friends (of which she had only a few—
I believe from church and only out of pity for her), acquaintances, relations—had heard from
her nor knew where she might have gone. While Lily was odd and confided in nobody, I loved
her very deeply.

After Lilly’s disappearance, I made as many telephone inquiries to police stations and
used some of the inheritance left me by Mother to put out missing persons notices in the
major New York papers and even some in Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Los
Angeles—any highly populous city I could think of. Based on what I knew of her abilities I
imagined Lilly would ply her trade as a spiritualist, which had recently begun to grip the
imagination of many urban dwellers, but I received nothing for my efforts. Not a whisper, not
even a few crackpot replies.
To be fair, I had found it challenging in investigating her possible whereabouts to describe my sister in any distinguishing way. Lilly had not much to distinguish her: she had straight, dull hair that she would not wear up; had a penchant for wearing simple, plain-colored, patternless dresses; had quite a bored look on her face at all times and a vacant look in her eyes; and possessed a voice not so much quiet and shy as it was droning and unimportant-seeming. I regret to say that I thought very little of her until I was much older even though I had known and been moved by her manner of reaching into another world and bringing back—Ideas? Knowledge? I confess I do not know how to describe what she accomplished, only that it was remarkable.

It was on that street corner, on that poster, that I saw her for the first time in many years. The likeness was quite good: it captured her features—her empty eyes, her mousy hair, her nearly vacant expression—but in this illustration her head was wrapped in a thick, bejeweled, startlingly ugly turban which seemed unlike anything my sister would ever agree to wear.

I was thirty and three years then, and that would have made her forty or so—unmarried, living God knows where in the city, and thoroughly disconnected from me and all relations as far as I was aware. I had not seen her in some fifteen years.

But I still did not know then why she had vanished or why she had failed to contact me at any point in all these long years. I hardly knew how to feel myself about this—about her being here in New York, about her leaving me alone with Father, about her not sending even a brief note to let me know she was well. Observing her at this performance might give me time to consider if I had any interest in a reunion of any kind.

The poster listed a date of two nights hence, Friday, and the location of The Town Hall. The venue seemed fitting for an event put on by two women as it had been built only a
year prior as a meeting place to promote women’s suffrage. I remembered something in the newspaper from around the time it opened that a speaker had been dragged off the stage by police for educating about contraception, and I felt reluctant because of both the controversy of the venue itself and my uncertainty about whether or not I even wanted to see my sister. Then again, it would be an easy enough drive from my home in Inwood. My last surgery on that day was in the early afternoon, and I had no evening plans I could recall.

AFTER MAKING MY rounds at the hospital that evening, with the upcoming performance of my sister still two days away, I instructed my driver, Bruce, to stop by the Beekman Street Hospital—a towering monstrosity of brick and stone that I would be loath to work at—so that I might visit my father’s room. His doctor was out for the night, but one of his primary nurses was present. There had been no change, she said, which surprised me not at all. She left me alone to visit him in his quiet, stale room.

Grey wallpaper, white sheets, and my father: both grey and white, too. His occasionally opened his eyes, but even then he did not seem to have any awareness of anything whatsoever. This had ceased tounsettle me long ago.

I had brought with me two boxes of Cracker Jacks, which when I was a boy did not come with toys but now did. At Father’s bedside I opened both boxes and placed a baseball card in his hand, pressing his fingers gently against it so it would not fall, and kept the Toonerville trolley for myself. Often, alone with surgical plans or a complex diagnosis in my mind, striving to find solutions, I would occupy my hands with something tangible and let my thoughts run. The trolley had little tin wheels and a little flat tin man to wind the crank. I could
let the motor do the work, but I pictured myself running it back and forth on my desk, the squeak of tin and the scratch of the wheels on the wood pushing my mind to find answers.

Father held the baseball card limply in his hand, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. “Dad, you got Ty Cobb,” I said as I began eating from my box. The words made no impact on my father, who had done nothing in the way of communicating in quite some time. In fact, and I say this now with very little regret, my daughter never met my father. Marion, named after my mother, was born after my father had taken ill. Father’s hepatic encephalopathy, which I was told by his doctors was a comatose state induced by his liver disease and failure, should have killed him off within a year of its onset, but Marion was now three, and Father had been both alive and dead to the world for nearly five. In the last half decade he had been far better company than he had ever been prior (and a far better grandfather than he surely would have been), and while it still pained me to be in a room with him, it was far more peaceful than it had once been. Besides, I felt on some level that I did not merit an avoidance of punishment, and this was only a very small sort of that.

I looked at Ty Cobb’s grim expression above the loose grip of Father’s hand, and I thought of Marion, of her enjoyment at going to Polo Grounds to watch the Yankees. She had little idea of how the game was played, of course, but she giggled with delight whenever the crowd roared. When she had been a babe, how she cried and shrieked at their cheering! But the noise became familiar and amusing to her as she grew older.

As I often did when sitting with Father, I talked about Marion, about Marion’s mother (my wife) Vera, about my work in medicine. Of course, Father almost certainly had no capacity to understand me, but thinking of Vera put me in mind of my sister and the business I had yet to decide on.
I bade farewell to Father. I gave him a pat on his forehead and left the tin trolley on the nightstand next to his uneaten box of Cracker Jacks.

ON RETURNING TO my car, I made the mistake of telling Bruce that I might attend the Friday performance so that he might plan for the drive and avoid any disagreement with his schedule. Some evenings, Bruce seemed curiously unavailable if called on at the last minute, so it was often best to tell him ahead of time. Sometimes, however, this opened up more conversation than I wanted. When he was interested in something, Bruce was worse than a chattering housewife. This time, it was my upcoming visit to see “that spiritualist lady” that excited him.

“Ya know, I hearda this lady. My gal, Margie, she an’ her sister gone an’ seen her a while ago when she played, performed, whatever ya call it, at a colored theater. Wouldn’t shut up about it! Said it was really somethin’.” Bruce had a way of gesturing with both hands when he talked, driving be damned.

“Bruce, the car.”

“Sure, boss. Right, so this LaTraut, Madame LaTraut, I guess she doesn’t even come out right away. Her lady manager comes out, and she’s a witch too! Does ectoplasm or somethin’. I couldn’t really understand it the way Margie was puttin’ it, but I guess I’d pay money to see that kinda crazy shit—sorry, boss—crazy stuff. I mean, even if it’s phony, it’s still interestin’, right?”

I shrugged and watched the rain hit the window next to me until I noticed we were heading the wrong direction.

“Actually, could we go to the Bronx, Bruce? I’ve got a poker game with Neri Annenburg and the guys.”
“Sure thing, boss.” His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. “A friendly game?”

“A friendly game,” I nodded.

SAFELY IN THE apartment of Neri, my friend and fellow ex-soldier, I drew the blinds and slumped onto the sofa, and he sat down close beside me and put his arm around my shoulders. He held two glasses of scotch and handed me one. I don’t know how he’d been managing to get scotch since the prohibition had started, and I figured it best if I did not find out. I hadn’t told him where I got my booze from. The glassware I had given him last Christmas, and he had laughed and said it was the first Christmas present he’d ever been given. It had been our first Christmas together, and I hadn’t even considered that of course he wouldn’t observe Christmas. To me it was a secular celebration. My family, as far as I knew, had not been religious in at least several generations. Neri, though I don’t think he generally went to synagogue or observed the Sabbath (I had spent enough Saturdays in his company to know), was at least mildly observant. At Hanukkah he’d put the menorah in the living room window of his third-floor apartment. He’d spend Passover with his parents in Yonkers, and he’d visit and let them take him to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

My family didn’t gather for anything. I tended only to visit Father when life felt a bit more acutely painful than usual. He was helpless and unhelpful (though he’d always been unhelpful), but he was there. Still, between him and a sister I no longer knew and hadn’t seen in years, I would take my sister any day.

“What is it, Will?” he asked. I emerged from my thoughts and took the proffered glass.

I smiled weakly and said, “I was thinking of you.”

Neri frowned.
“Fine. I was half-thinking about you, half-thinking about something else.” I sighed and looked at my glass. “Neri, might I have some ice?”

He hesitated but got up and went to the kitchen. I took the opportunity to move to an armchair. I could see his disappointment when he returned. He plopped two small pieces of ice into my glass and returned to the sofa.

“In truth, I was also thinking about my sister. I saw her today. At least, a poster of her.” I ran a finger under one of my eyes, and Neri was kind enough to look away and pretend not to notice. “It’s been a few years.”

“I know,” he said. “Where was this?”

“On my way to work. I made Bruce stop the car so I could read it. She’s working as a medium. Doing a show or demonstration or some such business on Friday.”

Neri reached out a hand and laid it on my knee. “Are you going?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. What’s the point?”

Neri put the palm of his other hand against my cheek. “You deserve answers. You deserve at least to ask your questions, don’t you?”

It seemed like a ridiculous question. “I don’t know why I would.”

“Will,” he said, “you’ve said countless times it hurt you more than your mother’s death when Lillian left you. You’re a lovely and good man. Don’t you deserve to know why she left? To make peace with whatever it was that happened?”

I shrugged, and I felt annoyed.

“If I come along, will you go?” Neri asked. “Will you talk to her?”

I paused. I didn’t know what to say.
Neri smiled softly. “Let’s do it together, okay?”

I nodded.

A FEW HOURS later, I took a cab back to Inwood. The house lay quiet, the dark wood paneling streaked with shadows and moonlight, though a gentle orange burned from the doorway of the study down the hall. Marion was surely in bed already, and as she tended to of an evening, Vera was reading.

Hildegard, our old German maid who had, in fact, been my nanny when I was a boy after my mother’s death, usually left after cleaning up dinner, so I hung my hat and coat and made my way down the hall. I came into the study quietly. She was reading a Katherine Mansfield short story collection. I stood behind her chair and quickly put my hands over her eyes and said in a gruff voice, “Guess who.”

Vera shrieked and slapped me away, dropping her book on her lap and laughing. “Will, you beast!” I smiled and moved around her, taking a seat near her in my usual chair. “Will you sit with me tonight?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m afraid not. I’m playing poker in a bit. How was Marion?”

Vera looked away from me and back to the closed book on her lap. “Well, she got into the flour and made a white nightmare of the kitchen. I had to take care of it and keep Hildegard from helping. You know her joints.”

“Has she been taking her tablets?”

“I think so. I try to remind her. She’s stubborn.”

“Always has been,” I said. “She broke her elbow once when I was young, and she hardly let up in her work. And she had quite the task keeping up with me.”
“Yes, speaking of keeping up with you, are your poker skills improving at all? How’s Neri?” Her eyes held more than her words did.

“Well enough… Do you know I saw the damnedest thing after work today?” She raised an eyebrow and regarded me. “Lillian’s in town.”

She raised her other eyebrow. “Lillian? Your sister?”

“The very same. She’s a medium. A spiritualist. I don’t know quite what to call her.”

“Did you see her?” Vera asked.

“Only on a poster,” I said. “Her face surrounded by gaudy exotics. Advertising her services or performances or what have you.”

Vera reached out a hand to me. I took it. “What will you do?”

“She has an appearance at a large venue Friday. I’ll go see her and decide afterward if I want to meet with her.”

“Can I join you?” she asked, looking intently at me.

I considered this. Vera was a support, a kindness to me in a cold world. But no. I did not. “No, that’s all right,” I said.

She released my hand. “Very well.” She looked back to her book again. “What do you want from her anyway? What will you say? I mean, you were alone with your father after she—”

“Yes, I was.”

“Are you still angry?”

“For what? She escaped.” I sighed. “She did what she had to do.”

“I don’t know why you even still visit that man. It hurts you every time even if you don’t say it.”

“That’s not the point. Besides, he’s not a monster, Vera.”
She rolled her eyes, and I crossed my arms and crossed my legs and watched her read.

**Friday. Two Surgeries.** A consultation. A meeting. Three appointments. And finally, the end of my shift. I had considered sending Bruce to get Neri and we could dine together before going to The Town Hall, but I settled on dining at home. I did not like spending so many waking hours—particularly leisure time—away from my Marion.

On the drive there, I asked after Bruce’s family.

“Oh, they’re getting’ on all right. Little Bruce Junior’s not so little these days. He’s gonna be graduating college in a couple’a months. Whaddya think a’ that?”

“Jesus Christ!” I said with a chuckle. “I’d have sworn I was at his christening only last year.” Bruce had been driving for me since before the war.

“Nope, he’s twenty-one goddamn years old. I was a pain in the butt at that age, but not Brucie.” He looked at me in the rearview mirror. “Tells us he wants to be a doctor.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say. Bruce was about as New York Italian as one could get and had married a Black woman, Margie, and they had had four children together. Before that moment, I don’t believe I had ever considered the challenges their children would face when they came of age. “Is he going to stay at Howard for that?”

“Aw, the kid wants to be back in the city. Misses his mom and brothers and sister. Maybe even his Pops! He was hopin’ for somethin’ different.”

I spoke carefully. “That’s not going to be easy for him.”

“I know. We was thinkin’—you know, Margie an’ me—that maybe you could—”

“Of course. I’ll do whatever I can. Maybe New York Medical—”
“Ya know, that’s exactly what we was thinkin’. They’ve even had woman doctors! Black woman doctors!”

“Ed Putney’s on the board of trustees. I know him pretty well. He’d be sympathetic, I think. How’s college been for Brucie?”

“Top a’ his class. Smartest kid in the family. On my side of the family, anyway, I’ll tell ya that. Margie’s sharp as a whip too. Dumbest thing she ever did was marry me,” he said with a laugh. “So the smarts of it aren’t the problem. But anythin’ you can do, boss, you know Margie an’ I would appreciate it.”

“I’ll get in touch with Ed and get back to you.” He’d probably at least consider it. And who could say? Maybe Bruce’s son would even get in.

MARION GURGLED HAPPILY with her applesauce and her roast of lamb (cut into tiny little pieces) smeared across her face and her dress and her plate and all of the dining room table she could reach. She hadn’t touched her broccoli. If my mother had been alive, she would have chided us for being so lenient with her, but a messy child is still a child.

“Mommy make a mess!” Marion squealed as she flung a fistful of applesauce and lamb across the table at Vera.

The projectile slop hit Vera on the chest with a splurch. Vera gave Marion a scowl, set down her napkin as she stood up, and left the room.

“Mari,” I said, “you ruined Mommy’s dress. Now she has to go change.”

Marion’s eyes grew huge, her lower lip wobbled, and she started to cry.

“Hildegard!” I called.
While Hilde attended to my daughter, I set down my fork and knife and rose from my chair. I left my food untouched.

Vera met me by the entryway. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like me with you?” she asked. “Hilde can stay with Marion until we’re back.”

“No,” I said, thinking of Neri. He and Vera didn’t dislike each other so much as mistrust each other, and knowing the unspoken tides of my heart, I could blame neither of them.

“I know this is going to be terribly difficult for you.”

“Perhaps.”

“So no?”

“No,” I said.

Marion, holding Hilde’s hand, came out of the dining room. Most of the mess had been cleaned off her face and dress. I knelt and gave her a squeeze and a kiss.

“Have a wonderful night, little butterfly.” I cradled her pudgy, now-clean cheek in my hand.

“Papa,” she said with a smile, and she clung to my leg as I stood back up. “Papa, you stay!”

Hilde pried Marion away. I patted Marion’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze before rising to put on my hat and coat. Then I went out to Bruce in the waiting car.

In line at The Town Hall, Neri and I stood trapped behind an aged couple, the man in a suit that looked far too expensive to be reasonable and the woman in something that my grandmother—had she been older and wealthier than she was—might have worn to my
mother’s funeral in 1905. I stood as far behind them as possible. Neri, on the other hand, who
had the fault of being overly polite in nearly all situations, had struck up an easy conversation
with them.

“Really? All that time?” Neri was asking.

“Oh, yes,” the woman said. “I think she’s only been doing these big venues for maybe
a year or so. But she’s been working with Aggie—Mrs. Hughes-Holloway, you know—for
years; Aggie really is something. And this LaTraut woman! Incredible. Why, she was one of
the first séances we went to when we came to the City. Our son, you know. Edgar and I moved
to be closer to him and the grandchildren. He’s at a bank!”

“That’s very nice,” Neri said. “Banking is a good job in a time like this. Economy’s
picking back up. Loans on the rise.”

“Such a nice young man,” the woman said quietly to her husband who had been gazing
off awkwardly. The husband and I gave each other commiserating looks.

Neri said, “So she hasn’t just done these performances?”

“Oh, no! She doesn’t just do these. She’s got one or two nights a week booked for
smaller stuff—drawing room séances at Aggie’s. Aggie keeps her busy.”

Hearing this, I supposed they had become something of a team, Madame LaTraut and
Mrs. Hughes-Holloway: one the medium, one the carnival barker and business manager.

“But,” the woman said conspiratorially, “besides the private séance, you can schedule
an appointment with Madame LaTraut through Mrs. Hughes-Holloway. It’s a beautiful house.
Aggie brought her family money with her when she married Mr. Hughes-Holloway.”

Edgar, the husband, chimed in for the first time. “He’s an interesting duck. Great
ambition. Very little fortune of his own. I’ve absolutely no idea what he does with his time.”
Finally, we reached the ticket counter, and when we purchased tickets after Edgar and Mrs. Edgar, I discreetly asked the ticket boy to give us seats far away from them.

When we were seated, Neri briefly—very briefly—patted my leg. “You’ll be all right,” he said. Soon enough the lights went down, and a spotlight illuminated a soft woman dressed in a violently plum dress bedecked with feathers and jewels walking out in front of the curtain to a microphone stand. She had an enthusiastic step, and even from the balcony I could see her massive grin.

“Well, well, well,” she boomed into the microphone. “What a treat! What a treat is in store for all of you!” She clapped her hands together, then spread her arms wide, beaming all the while. “I am your host this evening, Mrs. Agatha Hughes-Holloway, and though I can boast no great spiritualist skills of my own, tonight, ladies and gentlemen, the mysterious mistress of the unknown, the great Madame LaTraut herself, will perform for you such feats of vision, such demonstrations of her skill, that you will be left with no doubt—no doubt whatsoever!—that we not only can sense the supernatural world but that we can speak with it!”

Mrs. Hughes-Holloway went on like this, selling the impending appearance of Madame LaTraut for some long while, interrupted from time to time by applause from an eager crowd.

“Please join me,” she said at last, “in warmly welcoming a great sage, the one and only Madame Genevieve LaTraut!”

The crowd erupted, and Mrs. Hughes-Holloway stepped to the side, joining us in applause as the lights in the theater came to life and the curtains were pulled up. I began to see the spiritualist appear inch by inch from her feet upward as the light escaped from under the rising curtain. She sat in a simple wooden chair in the center of the stage, a small round table in front of her on which she rested her hands. The light finally reached her face, and the spiritualist was suddenly fully in command of all of us, her eyes focused nowhere in particular.
Despite her makeup and turban, this was unmistakably my sister. Her face possessed sparse wrinkles now and the locks of hair that escaped her headwrap were more grey than mousy brown, but I had no doubt this was Lilly. Her early greying echoed that of my Father who used to frequently complain that he had lost all color in his hair by the end of his twenties.

Our host moved to sit beside Lilly at the small table in one of several matching small chairs. She drew forth a match and lit a candle in the center of the table.

“Now,” said Mrs. Hughes-Holloway in her booming, gravelly voice that sounded much more like a medium than my sister ever had in my memory, “we must give Madame LaTraut a moment to reach into the ether and draw forth from it what she can. In a few moments, she will choose several of you to join us on this very stage for a séance. Please, join hands with whomever you can and wait in patience.” She took one of Lilly’s hands, and I hesitated before taking Neri’s. The woman to my other side coughed several times before I realized she expected me to take her hand as well. I rolled my eyes and, before taking her hand, dug a candy out of my jacket pocket, unwrapped it one-handed (I had learned to do this as quietly as possible when I was child and avoiding angering my not-to-be-disturbed father), and popped it into my mouth. I took satisfaction in the look of slight disgust on her face.

“Ah,” Mrs. Hughes-Holloway said, “now we shall see.”

The audience was silent. We all considered my sister expectantly. She looked up seemingly at each of us in turn and took no particular notice when she glanced at and then past me. It had been some time, I admit, and it’s true that I had taken on a beard in the years since our last meeting, but was I so changed that my own sister would not see me for what I was? Lilly certainly seemed the same: Strange. Vacant. Plain.

But something would happen here, I knew, and I heard no breath in the massive space of the hall as we watched her close her eyes.
In this state we remained for several long minutes, hardly daring to move, both my palms growing sweaty in the joining of my neighbors’ hands. I was nearly to the point of wrestling my hands free and crying, “Enough!” when Lilly—Madame LaTraut—flung both her hands wide and called softly to our host. Mrs. Hughes-Holloway, looking quite taken aback, leaned in closely to listen. There followed a very quiet exchange in which my sister’s expression changed not at all while Mrs. Hughes-Holloway appeared increasingly confused, but after a minute or so of this conversation, Mrs. Hughes-Holloway stood and addressed us.

“Madame LaTraut… She says there is only one of you we need.” She was clearly disgruntled. She leaned back down to Lilly, who raised her hand and pointed it straight at me. I rose in shock, ready to run, and heard the people around me gasp. Lilly spoke to Mrs. Hughes-Holloway, who said loudly, “Not you, sir. The other man. The gentleman next to you.”

*Neri?* I wondered silently.

“Neri?” echoed Mrs. Hughes-Holloway, as though she held my thoughts on her tongue.

He looked at me with wide eyes, pushed himself up from his seat, patted my arm, and headed to the stairs to make his way to the main floor and to the stage. I stood for several more moments until he disappeared on the stairs, until the woman next to me tugged on my sleeve. “Sit down,” she said in a harsh whisper. I did, but I made a point of loudly wrinkling the candies in my pocket as I did so.

I watched Neri make his way down an aisle to the stage, taking some small wooden steps up to it. Mrs. Hughes-Holloway, rather than seating Neri at the table, took him to the microphone front and center. “Young man,” she said, “would you kindly tell us your name?”

“Neri?” He hesitated. “Neri Annenburg?”
“Is that a question?” she asked jovially. The audience laughed.

“No. No, that’s my name,” he said.

“Mr. Annenburg, have you ever attended a séance before?”

“No,” he said.

“Have you ever had an encounter with the supernatural?” she asked. “Any palm reading? Tea leaves? Experience with a phantasmic apparition?”

“No, none,” he said.

“Nothing at all?”

He stammered for a moment. “I was in the war. I watched men die, I suppose.” I heard hushed gasps ripple throughout the crowd.

“A veteran,” Mrs. Hughes-Holloway said quietly. “Thank you. Your service to our country… So many—” she stopped a moment, and I felt I was seeing the real Mrs. Agatha Hughes-Holloway for just an instant, “—so many of our boys did not come home. I—”

Neri, so easily empathetic, reached a hand to her, but Mrs. Hughes-Holloway brushed it away as if to shake off reality and resume her affectations. “Well, Mr. Annenburg, I expect you’re in for quite a treat this evening, especially as a first-timer! I do believe you’re the first audience member to have been summoned up alone! Please, sit.” She motioned him into another chair at the table next to Lilly. “Now the three of us will join hands. Come, now, Mr. Annenburg, she won’t bite.”

The crowd laughed, the tension broken for them. I felt all my muscles stiff and tense.

The three of them—Mrs. Hughes-Holloway, Lilly, and Neri—joined hands together (Neri and Mrs. Hughes-Holloway having to stretch a fair distance to touch). Our host instructed Neri to close his eyes, and the three of them sat there for several moments before Lilly threw her head backward and shook violently. I (along with a few others) started forward,
but Mrs. Hughes-Holloway warned us to stay seated, and I sat back reluctantly, concerned. My sister made no move for some time, but eventually drew her head to its right place again and opened her eyes.

“AH, LITTLE WILL,” she said. We were sitting together at the table on The Town Hall stage. Mrs. Hughes-Holloway had quite disappeared, along with my Neri. I looked into the auditorium: empty.

Save for myself and Lillian, there was not a soul in the place.

“Lilly, what is this?” I asked.

My sister reached out and took both my hands in her own. She seemed truly herself, self-possessed and content. “We can talk freely here. I knew you were here since you were outside, but of course that was no time to talk. But now… Well, in one sense, I am still on this stage with your… with Agatha and your Mr. Annenburg.”

I heard a distant droning as an echo in the void, and I knew it was Neri’s voice. I would recognize it anywhere, but he was so far away I could not make out what he was saying and still could not see him.

Lillian spoke again. “But you and I, we are here together too. In private.”

“How? That’s nonsense. Absolute nonsense!” I had not expected my anger. I had not expected its swift and boundless rise. “You can’t just take me from my seat and plop me up here with you and empty the theater and tell me it’s just us and that’s true but it’s also true that Neri and this madam! are here too! You can’t just say all this to me! You don’t even know me!”

“William, I wanted us to—”
“You left me! You left me with Father.” I felt my eyes burning against my sudden tears.

“You left me,” I said, my voice soft and hoarse.

I heard her speak again, but it was not here, not to me. It was the same kind of remote echo as Neri’s voice had been but clearer now. I heard Away-Lilly say, *You did not cause his death, and he knows this. He knows also that you brought his letter to his brother, that you kept your promise and brought comfort to a grieving family. He says thank you.*

The Here-Lilly took on one of her soft, small smiles and lifted a hand to my face to rest against my cheek. “William. I did not want to hurt you. I am sorry I hurt you. I left because I wanted to spare you pain.”

I couldn’t tell how much sound would even come out between my sobs, but I said, “But Lilly, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“Will, you know—well, obviously you know—some of how my mind works. I don’t always understand what I am doing, and especially when I was younger, I had so little control. I would see things, know things all of a sudden, and worse, I would say things, even if I did not intend to. Some short time before Mother died, before I left, I came to know something. I hadn’t tried to, but I knew. I knew how you were. Who you thought was beautiful. The kind of person you loved in your heart. ‘The love that dare not speak its name.’

“I knew, and I knew a time might come when I said something when I was in a state. And I knew our father. When Mother died, I knew I had to protect you from him. From myself saying something I had no control over. You couldn’t leave yet, you weren’t ready for the world, but I could. To keep him from knowing, to keep you safe from what he would do if he knew. And I could think of nothing else to do to achieve that but for me to leave.”

Again the voice of Away-Lilly came through. *Many choices were not granted to you, but this one you made regardless. Even in the chaos of war, no innocents died at your hand, Mr. Annenburg.*
Her face—the face of Here-Lilly—was drawn and serene. She still held my hands in one of hers, her other still at my face.

“My little Will. My little brother. You were a kind, darling boy who wouldn’t shoot squirrels with Father, who would even leave birdseed in the woods for the birds who wouldn’t venture close to a house. And even in this great war that claimed so much you fought alongside your Neri you were horrified with each shot you fired.

“I have known your good heart forever, and as a child I saw it nowhere else. Classmates at school, children at church. I didn’t see that kindness in anyone. That gentleness of spirit. No, not everyone was like Father, but I knew no one I could trust to accept who you were. Even those who weren’t monsters.

“So I left. I did not want to shed light on something you had to keep hidden. I felt now that I knew I had a responsibility to keep it hidden too. I did not want to talk to you about it; I didn’t know if you could even admit it to yourself. I left to spare you. I left because I love you.”

My tears ran onto her hand, but still she held it against my face.

“So VERY BRAVE. Such heroism from our Mr. Annenburg!” I found myself back in my seat in the balcony, between the angry shrew and Neri’s empty seat, and Mrs. Hughes-Holloway was declaiming to the crowd. “And such thanks from our departed soldiers. Such appreciation for the deeds of heroes!”

The crowd roared in applause around me. I looked down to the stage, regarding Lilly. She turned her head toward me, and we made eye contact. I inclined my head slightly, and she nodded back with a small grin.
In that moment I had no inkling of how any of my hopes might come about, but I saw ahead of me the possibility of finding happiness.
IT WAS THE worst place in the world, and she was certain the NHS had known this when they shoved her in here. Maud Roberts had thought this every day of the past seven years. She could have been elsewhere—with one of her nephews or nieces, perhaps—but no, she was here and that was that.

*It smells,* she thought. She sat leaning forward in her rocking chair by the window (closed, on account of the temperature), rubbing lotion on her hands and staring fixedly at a robin in the copse across the lane, and one of the nurses—it must have been the head nurse, Mrs. Roseberry, judging by the heavy *click click click* of those bulky heeled monstrosities she wore—walked past the door to the corridor with enough vigor to send in a waft of *Eau de Waterside Care Home.* And with Mrs. Roseberry’s clicking gale past the door, an odor not entirely unlike her own grandparents (god, to think of them now when they had been dead these seventy years)—but more like if her grandparents’ frail skin had been soaked in formaldehyde and topped off with a sprinkling of bleach—smushed its way into Maud’s senses.

*She* didn’t smell like that. No no, Maud was sure she smelled of the lilac water she splashed on her neck each morning. She smelled of the cotton lotion she rubbed between her hands to soothe their dryness. She smelled of the candle she had stolen from a nurse’s birthday gift bag and only brought into view and lit deep into the night as flames of any sort were “strictly prohibited on any premises of the Waterside Care Home, The Willows Retirement Communities Ltd., or its affiliate companies.” Fascists.

She would have smelled also of nail polish. For all her adult life, she had daily removed the previous day’s polish and repainted each nail with care and precision, minding the outfit she had planned for the day. She *would* have smelled also of nail polish because she had given
up trying to paint her nails only the previous month. She had found increasing difficulty in keeping a steady hand, and while she had put a full effort into overcoming the trembling of her hands, she had decided to not risk anyone’s noticing how clumsy she had become.

On the morning Maud had arrived seven years ago to the boxy, sterile, bureaucratic monstrosity that was Waterside, there had been a roommate: another old lady, older than she, all wispy white hair and hanging flesh. She didn’t quite remember the name of her old roommate (Mrs. Something-something, she settled for) who had died while they’d been giving Maud a tour of the rest of the care home. That hadn’t inspired much confidence. Maud had not been given another roommate in all the succeeding time, which suited her just fine. But even with the walls and the long grey corridors between them, the other residents were like specters she could not escape. Here they always were, intruding on her solitude even as she tried to grasp at some sense of coziness in the evasive robin outside.

This should not have to be her life.

But on this morning—this morning on which she sat at her window, watching the robin in the trees beyond, growing frustrated with the smell of the old and infirm—her life shifted.

“Oh, Miss Roberts, what a little treat for you this morning, dear.”

Oh god. Mrs. Roseberry. What an imbecile.

“We’ve finally a roommate for you,” said Roseberry. “Mrs. Saxon, you’ll be joining Maud Roberts here in room 410. Miss Roberts, this is Helen Saxon.” Roseberry stood behind a wheelchair in which perched a worryingly thin woman. The woman’s hair had a shine, yes, but leaving it grey did nothing for her complexion, which was pale and sickly-looking. She wore purple joggers and a grey sweatshirt with cardinals and berries on it. Tacky. But worst of
all were the unwelcome development’s fingernails: robin’s egg blue, beautifully painted and perfectly neat.

After this once-over, Maud turned back around, saying, “No, thank you.”

“Oh, come, Miss Roberts, this’ll be a right little boost for you in this long winter! Now, Mrs. Saxon, we’ll get you all settled in over here. The schedule, as you can see, says that every Monday…”

As Roseberry droned, Maud progressively curled her upper lip. She stared fixedly back at the thicket, but the robin was nowhere to be seen. She pretended to see it anyway, imagining it flitting from branch to branch, swooping down for a seed every now and again, anything to block out this horrific intrusion.

Eventually, Roseberry finished with Helen and reminded Maud that the doctor was waiting to see her for her check-up.

IN HER GRANDPARENTS’ time, the last resort for an older person would have been the workhouse. Well, that or die in the streets. Maud snorted at this thought, which did little to warm her any further to her present situation. These days old age was supposed to be different. But Waterside was private now, and it showed: what money that came in wasn’t going to expanded care for the residents, that was for certain. Waterside had been built with public funds in the ‘50s when her brother, Alfred, had been an alderman for Grantham. Now Alfred’s daughter (and her niece), Maggie Thatcher (née Roberts), was selling off public property to for-profits for shillings to the pound. No, that wasn’t right any longer. “Pence to the pound,” the phrase must be now; someone had the bright idea to rid England of its shillings some ten years prior.)
“The Willows” (probably a rats’ nest of thundering businessmen) had made quite a show of using this economic advantage to “increase services for the elderly and vulnerable,” but she couldn’t see any change they had made that wasn’t worse. Like the rest of Grantham, Waterside hid its crumbling core well enough: under a veneer of paint and tacky décor. On the telly, Niece Maggie said that Waterside—the first NHS institution to be privatized in this new era—showed “the tremendous power of how private companies and the public interest can work as one.” Ugh. She hadn’t been a prat as a child (not in Maud’s recollection, at any rate), but she’d certainly become one since.

Maud would never have come to Grantham at all had it not been for Alfred. But his wife Beatrice had been born here, and he had made a lot of fuss about becoming a “man of the town” when he made Grantham his home too. In Maud’s mind, becoming a “man of the town” made her brother sound like he was going to make a career out of tomcatting, but she never told him this. Then when Beatrice died in ’60, Maud had begrudgingly left Ringstead (and her own darling Violet whose own family had been threatening to disown her), moved into Alfred’s neighborhood, and helped him with the loss. But five years seemed to do the trick: by ’65, he was married again, this time to Cecily, an absolute cow. Probably from Guernsey. And five years hence, another trick: he died.

So here Maud was: 92 years old, all her siblings dead, living in a modern eyesore that had draughts and plumbing like a castle (but with none of the charm) sitting smack dab in the middle of Grantham (Grantham! Eugh!), and the only person she knew from the outside was Cecily the cow, who lived in room 1066 and who really wasn’t all that old at 77 but apparently couldn’t care for herself. Absolutely batty, that one. A cow-bat, perhaps. Maybe they would make a serial about it: The Great Cow-Bat. Maud snorted aloud at the thought.
Late that night, uncomfortably aware of the new senile stranger lying somewhere else in the room in the dark, Maud shifted herself up in bed to go to the water closet. Through her open curtains, she could only just make out the trees across the lane, dull and hazy in the fog and moonlight. She thought she saw a swift shadow passing through the woods; Maud shivered and turned away.

She wasn’t going to use the W.C. in her room and risk having to try to end a conversation with a woken-up Mrs. Something, so she cracked open the door of her room and shuffled carefully into the hall.

Strictly speaking, nighttime adventures out of your room was against the rules, but the rules had done bollocks—all for her, and she shuffled—one hand on the loose, shaking railing against the wall—down toward a communal bathroom that was guaranteed to be vacant at this hour.

The nurse’s station was unmanned, as usual at night. Legally, there was supposed to be someone here ‘round the clock, but apparently Waterside could save a whole lot of money for The Willows if they sent the nurses home and left the night watchman ready to barrel toward the nearest telephone if an emergency came up. She knew right where he’d be: asleep in the lounge, a stout in one hand and the new wireless television control in his other. Maud wouldn’t have to worry about waking him up; he slept like the dead.

But a few minutes later, as she was washing her hands before heading back to her room, she did have to worry about the watchman awakening: down the hall, someone had begun screaming.
Miss Roberts, I appreciate your reluctance, but I can assure you that The Willows will do everything in our power to ensure the safety and well-being of our residents. I simply wish to know what all you saw last night.” This man she’d never seen before. And yet here he was, Mrs. Roseberry sitting next to him, apparently setting up a new Spanish Inquisition in the care home. Mrs. Roseberry looked furious. This man looked like absolutely nothing at all, as though sawdust filled out his suit and black leather gloves and that someone had stretched skin across a balloon in the semblance of a face. He’d said his name, but Maud didn’t remember it. He represented The Willows, that’s all she knew.

They were in the director’s office, the director being away on a fishing trip in Inverness. Maud had noted that generally he was on some sort of excursion to Inverness every time that pretty little nurse, Miss Whatsername, went home to visit her mum in Upper Swell. “Upper Swell” didn’t seem like a fitting name for whatever it was Miss Whatsername and the director had going on. Perhaps it would be more suitable if Miss Whatsername’s mum lived in “Lower Limp”; after all, the director was a wheezing, covetous bastard no matter what his classical physique might imply.

“Miss Roberts,” Mrs. Roseberry broke in, her voice carrying a small tremble, “I am willing to overlook that you left your room unsanctioned during prohibited hours, but we’re only going to do that if you cooperate with Mr. Williams.”

Ah. Mr. Williams was the man’s name. She’d make a point to forget that.

The man continued. “Miss Roberts, this is a very serious incident. We need your recollection of last night as much as anything. We’d rather not involve the police in this; I’m sure the cherished residents of The Willows doesn’t desire that kind of scrutiny. We’re confident we can handle this ourselves.”

Maud flared her nostrils. “Oh, that’s very reassuring, Mr. Willows. I’m so—”
The man cleared his throat. “It’s Mr. Williams.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “And it’s rude to interrupt, Mr. Willows. I shall now resume my thought with the expectation that you shall behave yourself in a manner befitting an adult. I’m so pleased to hear you think you can handle this yourself. Perhaps while you’re attending to this, you can see that the entire facility is in compliance with NHS codes and regulations? I can give you a few suggestions. Unless it would be too expensive for you to follow the law, Mr. Willows.”

“Stop that!” Mrs. Roseberry said. “Stop that at once. You oughtn’t talk to us that way. Can’t you see we’re trying to help you, you dotty old—” She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyebrows stretching toward her receding hairline.

Maud grinned, but not as much as she might have. She’d managed to provoke this smarmy goat, and she treasured the rarity of it.

“Nurse, please leave us.” Mr. Willows’s face had grown grim. Mrs. Roseberry—tears threatening her eyeliner, Maud observed with some glee—stood shakily and left, closing the door behind her.

Mr. Willows now sat alone behind the director’s desk—a sprawling slab of cheap particleboard glued together and covered with sheets of comically-fake plastic wood. The man rose out of his chair, placed his hands on the desk, and leaned toward her, and as he did so, Maud looked him in the eye for the first time. She sat as far back in her chair as she could.

“Miss Roberts,” he said, and he left her name hanging, like a dressed stag from a tree.

It took a few seconds for her to clear her throat and say, “Yes?”

His expression changed not at all as he said, “Last night, someone left your new roommate bruised and bleeding in your room. The nurses say you told them you had been in
the… that you had been out of your room for about ten minutes when the screaming started. Is this so?”

Maud didn’t say anything. This man had seemingly grown enormous before her.

“Miss Roberts, do you have any family?”

She shook her head as much as she could; she was transfixed by this man’s rage.

“No, of course not. Not a woman like you. Miss Roberts, if you do not speak, The Willows will not be responsible for your care any longer… Do you understand what I am saying?”

Maud shivered and felt a sudden fleck of moisture on her cheek. “Yes.”

Mr. Willows’s voice hardened. Each of his next words fell on its own, hard and heavy like stones, before the next one came out. “Now tell me.”

And Maud did. About the thunking run of the night watchman past the water closet, about her own terrified walk back to her room, about coming through the door to see the night watchman holding his torch over Mrs. Saxon, illuminating her gasping for air, her bleeding mouth, her nightgown pulled down beneath her breasts and up past her knees, her bruised arms and legs. About remembering feeling as though she were falling asleep and then drifting downward. About being woken up by the watchman, who demanded she tell him what had happened. About Mrs. Roseberry and a couple other nurses along with Dr. Arzt from his nearby practice coming a few minutes later, one of them examining her for concussion or broken bones from the fall while the rest swarmed around Mrs. Saxon. About overhearing the corridor conversation between the night watchman and the nurses and the doctor to not under any circumstances call the police. About the sleepless night. About the uneaten breakfast. About—
“Enough,” the man said. “What you have or have not eaten is of no concern to The Willows.” He sat down again in his chair, and Maud felt that she been holding her breath for an age. She exhaled. “Mr. Yearsley told us you were already in the room when he arrived. You say he was already in the room when you returned. Which is it?”

Maud didn’t know what to say. She only knew what she’d heard and saw. Why would Mr. Yearsley say she was already in the room?

She saw the man regarding her. “Fine,” he said. “Moving on. What do you know of your roommate?”

“Just the name.” She resisted her sudden impulse to say, “sir.” She wouldn’t give him that. She wasn’t a schoolgirl. “Mrs. Saxon. She only just arrived.”

“Yes, but in your conversations, in your womanly chit-chat, what has she said so far?”

“We… We haven’t spoken, sir.” Well, fuck-all. Out it had come anyway. Bugger.

The man sneered. “You haven’t spoken.”

“No.”

He sighed and looked at the ceiling. “Well, what do you make of her then?”

“Pardon me?”

“What’s your impression of her?”

“Well, she’s old,” Maud said.

He laughed an empty laugh. “You’re old,” he said, locking eyes with her and losing the mirthless smile. “You’re all old.” His condescension seemed to please him. “But once, Mrs. Saxon was quite the figure in Grantham. Her husband was the mayor for a time before the war. Before his service. But the Nazis killed him. He was a spy.”

Maud flinched and checked his face for a sign that he knew more; he was impassive.
“Mrs. Saxon didn’t know this. Still doesn’t, I don’t think. Thinks he was shot down over Algeria.” Mr. Willows cocked his head and bored into her eyes. “But you and I know differently.” She gasped despite herself. “Yes, Miss Roberts, you and I know quite a lot.”

Maud stiffened, erecting her posture in her chair and settling into a role she hadn’t needed in a long time. “Mr. Williams,” she said, emphasizing his surname, “during the war I worked for a radio factory. We all did our part. Well, presumably not you. You’re not more than… sixty?”

He frowned. “I’m forty-two.”

_Ah, it has at least some fragility_, she thought. “Which means you were not yet born when the war ended. But tell me, Mr. Williams, what exactly is your role for The Willows Retirement Communities Limited?”

“This is not about me, Miss Roberts. What do you know of the man who did _not_ die over Algeria?”

“Oh, Mr. Williams, I would assume that nearly every man who has ever been granted the gift of existence did _not_ die over Algeria.”

“Coy doesn’t suit you nearly as well as you think,” he said, but he seemed far less sure of himself now. Then again, what kind of man tries to bully an old woman and takes such joy in it? A knob-headed tosser, that’s what kind.

“Oh, I think coy suits me just about as well as I need it to.” She paused and then asked, “What do you want?”

Some several seconds passed as he regarded her before he said, “Nothing. As it turns out, you’re useless. I should have known.” Mr. Willows leaned back. “You’re dismissed. Leave.”
On her way back to her room, Maud wished it hadn’t taken her quite so long to get up out of her chair. But she hadn’t had to ask for his help. A small blessing.

In ROOM 410 she found Mrs. Saxon sitting, much like she herself had been yesterday, in a chair by the window. Not Maud’s chair, thank goodness. This was a chair the care home staff had dragged in yesterday. A nice solid English oak rocker comfortably cushioned in a deep blue. Maud thought the roommate might be sleeping; the rocker wasn’t moving. But when she went and sat in her own chair adjacent, Maud noticed Mrs. Saxon looking out into the trees, her hands folded on top of a quilted blanket draped down over her lap. Mrs. Saxon looked terrible: she had less of a black eye and more of a mostly-purple face with small patches of white. Both her eyes were open, though, and that was something.

“Something in the trees,” Mrs. Saxon said. Maud worried it was whatever shadow she thought she had glimpsed out there last night, but Mrs. Saxon squinted and continued. “A bird of some kind. Can’t make it out. Never did learn the difference in songs.”

Maud said, “It’s a robin. It’s there most every day.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Saxon said. “A robin. Thank you. At least there’s one pair of eyes in the room.”

I suppose, Maud thought. “I’m Maud.”

“Maud,” Mrs. Saxon echoed. “I’m Helen Elloway-Saxon.”

Elloway. Maud felt her breath stop, felt her heartbeat slow, felt her eyes go wide, felt her mouth open. “Elloway?”

“My maiden name. Well, and still a part of my surname. I just go by Helen.”

“Helen Elloway,” Maud said.
Mrs. Saxon frowned and asked, “Are you quite well?”

“You’re Helen Elloway?”

Mrs. Saxon regarded Maud cautiously. “Do you know who I am now, Maud?”

She felt all this and willed herself to take a breath. When she found she couldn’t, she willed herself again, and this time, Maud breathed and said, “But Roseberry said your name was Helen Saxon.”

“Yes, I took the surname of a very close friend who was killed in the war. Elspeth Saxon.”

A terror replaced Maud’s now-dissipating confusion as she realized she had forgotten about two of the most important people she had ever met. At Bletchley back in the war, she had worked alongside them both: Elspeth Saxon and Helen Elloway. Elspeth and Helen had been together the way a man and woman might be married, and while not legally her wife, Helen was Elspeth’s wife nonetheless and vice versa. In ’42 shortly after Eisenhower and the Allies had retaken Algeria, Elspeth and all her research vanished. A report eventually came in that was mostly unsubstantiated but listed her cause of death as “severe and prolonged injuries.” Torture.

“I’m sorry,” Maud said.

“For what?”

“I… Well, I remember you now.”

Helen sighed. “I am a bit relieved.”

“Helen, you knew me the whole time?”

“Yes, since I was brought into the room yesterday, and I saw that you didn’t know me.”

“You didn’t say anything. Why didn’t you say anything to me?”
“I’ve worked in geriatric research since the war, and I know it can be dangerous to push in on lost memories, and I wasn’t sure if you’d—.”

Maud waved a hand to cut her off but brought it down sheepishly. “I don’t know that I remember how to be kind anymore, but I’m aware enough to know you deserve kindness.”

Helen laughed. “Maud, I’ve never taken offense at you and don’t intend to start now. You’re full of fire and always have been.”

It was a comfort to hear that. Had I forgotten that I’ve always been this way? Maud thought.

“How, I might be losing my mind, but can you tell me what happened last night?”

Helen began rocking gently. “You know, I thought it so odd that the man didn’t ask me. The man from the company. The nurse asked me last night, and I told her I must have fallen out of bed, but this morning, that man talked to me for an hour, I mean, and he never asked about last night.”

“Mr. Willows? Williams, I mean?”

“That’s the one. A cold man, I thought.”

“What did he ask about?”

“Oh, he asked how I was feeling and if he could do anything and if I’d sign here and there. I couldn’t read it, naturally, but I signed. ‘For your sake and the company’s,’ he said. And he asked about my family, and if I had any children who might want to visit to see I’m all right. And he asked about Elspeth too. By name, and all of a sudden.”

Maud looked to the thicket, catching the robin flitting about in the branches. She tried to sound genial. “An odd man. Did he say why he was interested?”

Helen snorted. “I’m sure it’s because we were a couple. He didn’t say as much, but this government is obsessed with homosexuals. She’s your second cousin once removed or something?”
“Thatcher? Yes. She’s my brother’s daughter.” Maud reached over and patted Helen’s hand, “But I haven’t any family left now. Not truly. Maggie couldn’t be considered family to me by anyone. Haven’t spoken to her in years.”

“Then we’re the same,” Helen said. “Elspeth was the last person I thought of as family.”

“She used to write you, didn’t she?” Maud asked. “I’m trying to remember. I seem to recall that she’d write to you, even though you lived in the same flat.”

“Yes, she sent letters to our own home. I’d open them in front of her.”

“It sounds very romantic, I must say.”

“Oh, she was quite a writer. Always had been. Wrote me lovely verse. ‘Just for you,’ she always said. ‘Keep it secret, just for you.’” Helen’s smile was deep and true.

“It sounds sublime.”

“Oh, it was. I memorized every word. Not of every letter; that would have been too much. But every poem. Every single one of Elspeth’s poems.”

A thought occurred to Maud that troubled her. “Helen, why did you come to Waterside?”

“Oh, it wasn’t my decision at all,” Helen said. “The care home I’d been in said it had to do with the selling. That some company had bought us, and there would be some changes. But with this privatization, I didn’t think I’d have to leave. I mean, I’d been in that home for ten years. And sudden-like, here comes this order that I’m moving to a different facility, and here I am.”

“When was this?”

“They only told me the day before last. And yesterday I came here, and last night happened, and… And here we are today.”
My god, Maud thought. They’re trying to root them out. Even though there’s nothing illegal here.

The afternoon found Maud walking the corridor once again. She had wheeled Helen to the cafeteria for lunch, and they had chatted genially about their lives and commiserated together over the poor quality of the pudding and laughed about little things. And all the while, they’d been communicating in an old but still-familiar code, contemplating this last challenge: how to discover what had led to Elspeth Saxon’s death. Maud was putting on such a show of being in good spirits that Cecily had stopped by their table to ask Maud if she was feeling quite all right, and Maud felt so exhilarated by the prospect of doing something that felt useful that she invited Cecily to sit and eat with them. By the time they had finished lunch, Maud thought she had it pretty well sorted. She’d said goodbye to Cecily and wheeled Helen to their room; there, Maud asked her about Elspeth’s final letter.

“It was the finest thing I think she’d ever written,” Helen said. “In French, too, because she was decoding messages from operatives in Algeria at the time. Yes, I memorized it once she disappeared. ‘Les saules morts. Tirer chaque membre dans nos members. Saisir notre sang. Tirer notre foi en ficelles. Un par un.’ After the poem she wrote much about how difficult it would be for her to be away from me.”

“That’s it? Word for word?” Maud asked.

Helen blinked and nodded. “I’d never forget it.”

Now, Maud walked carefully along, hand on the railing, toward the director’s office. She assumed Mr. Williams would be there still, and if he wasn’t, she felt sure he’d return.

When she arrived and knocked at the door, there was no answer. She was about to try the knob and go in anyway when she heard him.
“Miss Roberts.” His voice came from right behind her. Had she been able to, she would have spun. As it was, she gasped and craned her neck. “Please, allow me to get the door.” She felt his hand pass her waist too slowly and too closely before he grabbed the handle and opened the door. “You will go first,” he said, and she did.

“Mr. Williams,” she said, “I was hoping you hadn’t yet left.”

“No,” he said. “I won’t leave until I’m finished.” He raised an eyebrow. “And I’m not finished.”

He sat in the director’s chair again, and she sat in her chair from this morning.

“What a happy little reunion,” he said. “I knew after our pleasant conversation this morning you wouldn’t stay away for long, Miss Roberts.” His smile was a gash across his face. She thought again of a sawdust-man.

“Yes, I’m sure, Mr. Williams. Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything,” he said. His tone dripped with a sensual mocking.

“Mr. Williams, are you familiar with the final letter Helen received from Elspeth Saxon when we all worked at Bletchley? You know, when we worked in espionage?”

The stupefied expression on Mr. Williams’s blanched face made fully worthwhile her own confirmation of what he undoubtedly had already known all along: her role in the War.

“I am willing to accept that you are, at the very least, familiar with the second-to-last message from Elspeth. But there was one final letter after that which arrived after poor Elspeth went missing.”

Mr. Williams seemed to compose himself. “Why do you care?”

“Oh, I’ll be happy to get to that,” said Maud, “but I really must impress upon you the importance of this fact: that was only the second-to-last message. Before her… disappearance, Elspeth must have gotten out one last poem. I think you have, at last, made a fatal mistake.”
“Mistake?” Mr. Williams’s face was red.

Maud pushed herself up, bracing her hands on the arms of her chair, and leaned forward. “Me.”

Mr. Williams snorted. “You’re nothing.”

“Not nothing, Mr. Williams. As I’m sure you know, I’m quite trained in some fairly mundane aspects of spycraft. Now, granted, I’m very, very rusty and admittedly quite aged, but it seems you rather overlooked what one little old lady can do for her countrymen.”

“Countrymen,” Mr. Williams sneered. “If only it had been men that captured your interest. And that of Helen.”

“You tried to have her killed!”

Mr. Williams laughed. “Do you even know what happened last night?”

“I know someone tried to kill Helen. I know The Willows moved her here to Waterside to provide that opportunity. I know you fear her for who she is. I know you destroyed the last of Elspeth’s research but failed to discover that a final message had made it to Helen. I know you miscalculated when you thought she was powerless against you.”

“Ah, but you see, Miss Roberts,” he said, his eyes lighting up, “you come so close to the mark and veer so thoroughly far away.” He spoke with a certainty that took her aback. “You believe we tried to kill Helen Saxon last night?”

“I haven’t a clue about the killer, I’ll grant you that, but I know he did so at your bidding. Or at least The Willows’s bidding. To keep Helen and me from understanding what exactly it is your company does.”

“I’ve got to tell you, Miss Roberts, your brain has turned to mush. Why would we care enough to kill a dyke? All we have to do is confirm and publicize. Society will take care of the rest. We know what we’re doing; we’ve been doing this for a long time.”
Maud stared at him, unbelieving. He wanted to force Helen’s sexuality into the open to shame her, to ruin whatever remained of her life. Elspeth’s final message wasn’t a hidden code about The Willows being a dangerous conspiracy against England. No, it was a warning to Helen. Elspeth must have known she would be taken, that The Willows was trying to unmask the private love lives of Britons they considered “undesirable.”

“So when suddenly your lovely niece Thatcher unwittingly gave us a chance to move Helen Saxon, and you had been without a roommate for so many years, we thought this was the perfect opportunity to… Well, to listen in and find what we could find.”

“What?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re both dykes, even if you’re out of practice. But at this point it isn’t worth any more effort. We have what we need for Helen, but here you are with me without having divulged anything about your precious long-gone Violet. So we’ll settle for her and let you alone.”

Maud trembled. “I’ve already called Maggie,” she said.

“No. You haven’t.” He didn’t seem concerned. He rose from his seat and came around the desk to crouch beside her. “And it wouldn’t matter if you had. Our business also happens to be the business of her government. They’re thinking about camps, you know. Camps for the degenerates. Like you.” He shrugged. “I don’t think it really matters. It seems redundant given our work. In a camp or a care home or a flat or a pub? Any way you cut it, you people will have been exposed for the vermin you are, and you’ll have to live with it.”

A voice broke in behind them. “Oh, I don’t think that will happen.”

Maud craned her neck and saw a deeply-blushing Mrs. Roseberry standing behind a wheelchair in the doorway, and in the wheelchair: Helen.
Helen smiled. “I’m afraid, Mr. Williams, that I have ample evidence of your liaisons with Nurse Roseberry here, evidence neither of your spouses would be particularly pleased with you about. Nurse Roseberry doesn’t seem to think so anyway.”

Mr. Williams gulped and rose to stand. “Then we’ll go through your room and retrieve it.”

Helen chuckled. “Oh, Mr. Williams,” she said, wagging a finger at him, “you really are quite a moron.” She sat in her chair, smiling and saying nothing more. Maud knew Helen was waiting for him to take the bait.

He scoffed. “A moron. Not likely.” When Helen still said nothing, he grew red-faced and asked, “What do you mean?”

“We were at Bletchley, you stupid man. I cannot see all that well, but I hear wonderfully. And the recordings I made of you and sweet Nurse Roseberry earlier today—” (Helen reached a hand up to where Mrs. Roseberry grasped the handles of the wheelchair, white-knuckled.) “—are already out of this building and on their way to a friend who knows what to do with them. Or at least knows what to do with them if anything untoward emerges about me or about my dear friend Maud, even if it’s just in Waterside.”

Mr. Williams blanched at that. “You’re bluffing.”

Helen reached under the blanket on her lap and pulled out a tape player. “No, not at all. I made copies. Here’s one of them,” she said cheerily. She fumbled for the play button but found it after a moment.

“Sweet Jesus!” Maud said as they were treated to the almost-musical but certainly-comical screeches of someone trying to imitate the throes of delight as a deep grunting underpinned them.
“There’s no way to prove that’s us,” Mr. Williams said, but the noises from the tape player suddenly broke into speech: *Oh, f*uck me harder, Bill! and *I’m gonna fill you up, you dumb bitch.*

and *Yes! Yes! Thank you, Bill! and I’m far better than Mr. Roseberry, aren’t I, Yvette?*

Mr. Williams crumpled, bracing himself against the arm of Maud’s chair.

Maud regarded him with a wide smile and forcefully patted his hand on the chair. “Not bad for a couple of degenerates, eh?” she asked.


