

Emily of Wolkeld
Part One: In Seasons of Thy Absence
by Patricia Lumsden

Ad Montes Oculos Levavi

. . . I have lifted up mine eyes unto the hills

Emily Catherine Susanna Florence Jane Margaret Whitmore wanted to put on a dress for the cold, sleeting Cumbrian spring morning, though it had to be something loose, something a person could work in. She had been thinking of the portrait of her great-great-grandmother up in damp, dark, unheated Wolkeld Hall: Lady Jane Whitmore, Countess of Wolkeld, serene in her sleek silk dress. “I am a woman, I am feminine, and that is something special in the universe,” Emily imagined her saying. No room in the lodge for all those larger-than-life paintings.

Feminine, but capable. One of her long frock dresses might cover the big neoprene mucking boots she had brought from America. But no, none were quite that long. The modern floral-icon pattern would still be visible. Nothing bold, nothing different—no colourful Wellingtons this morning.

She laid out a dark-olive, nubby woollen dress on the bed, then her soft Swedish woollen tights and a silk polo neck top. From under the bed came her old hiking boots, to which she began applying waterproofing grease. Why go out in the sleet and rain? She simply would. She was nineteen years old and knew nothing of sheep, but she would go out.

She set aside the boots and grease and went over to the window. Embedded deep in the stone wall, the casement window offered a view of North Hill and its ancient wood in the dim dawn light. No green yet on the stocky oak and beech, the dark outline of abandoned Wolkeld Hall just visible through the universe of black branches.

Things crossing, things in parallel. Some meandering, some moving quickly forward. Much holding back. Here was a place subtler, more persistent

than America where she had lived for the past seven years. Here was life again, like a cat left behind, and upon returning, found old, stiff, and slow, but still alive.

To step back from the hectic outside world. To play one's part on an obscure day in such a remote corner. "Lambs and ewes," she whispered. To go down to the *inbye* lambing pens, the tracts of various shapes and sizes separated by dry stone walls ringing tiny Wolkeld village. Or to make the long hike up to the *fells*, the high, treeless slopes launching skyward beyond North Hill where each ewe was *hefted* or bonded to her particular slope. She sighed and smirked. At either place she would only be an observer—though ready to help. So too her father, Stanley Whitmore, the Thirteenth Earl of Wolkeld. Despite having grown up here, he knew even less about sheep than she.

The sheep and their Cumbrians, an age-old partnership. Together since the Norsemen brought the hardy Herdwick breed to the high and lonely Lake District. Wolkeld sheep farmers Thomas Sulley and Todd Wilson carried two lifetimes of experience up to the slopes and down to the lambing pens. And those young back-to-the-landers seemed quite eager from what she had heard. And the soft-spoken veterinary couple doing internships out of Penrith. They all spoke Northern. Polite as they were, the flow always seemed broken whenever they had to include her or her father.

Emily was twelve when her father moved the family to Manhattan, Kansas, to take a professorship in the finance department of Kansas State University. Lord Stanley Whitmore: the laissez-faire capitalist, the Thatcherite who believed so much in America. Such a vast and wonderful laboratory were the former colonies for all that he held to be true.

Lady Catherine, however, saw nothing in the hot, dry Midwestern plains but an alien land. In public Emily's cultured, artistic mother played the upbeat English noble lady, but in private she was wrecked. The isolation and then rumours of affairs drove her to an all but catatonic depression.

Emily remained her mother's daughter. In those supposedly formative teen years she never acquired an accent, nor, seemingly, anything American. A

small band of nerd kids had included the exotic girl in their circle, but her one true friend was Annette von der Surwitz, an exchange student from the Harz Mountains region of Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, who had come to Manhattan during her junior year. By an amazing coincidence Annette was also a peer. Also amazing, her father, Baron-*Freiherr* Herbert von der Surwitz, had reacquired the family's old estate in the former East Germany and was managing it as a modern version of an old-fashioned farming *Landgut*. The two young peers were soul mates—and still were. Emily smiled. Annette would be coming from Germany the next day for a visit.

The sleet changed to rain and the window became slightly more transparent. She could just see her breath in the grey light. Start a fire and write a letter? No, get dressed and go down to the kitchen. The day always began in the ancient hall-house's cavernous rustic kitchen.

Her mother did not survive Kansas. The official cause of death was lymphoma. Lady Catherine had refused all treatment, even pain medication. A rush of intense, hot emotion as Emily thought of her mother's suffering. Her father had hurt her mother gravely. He had taken the sensitive, intelligent, genteel woman from the things she loved and tried to brow-beat her into accepting a place, a life she could not abide.

Sleet, and again the window became more opaque than translucent. A tear, though in that moment a revelation: She suddenly realised how brilliant her mother had been, how brilliant it was to simply be hurt and not turn injury into anger and retribution. "Brilliant, Mother, brilliant," she whispered, her tearing eyes wide with amazement.

Oh so true. Men storming around with anger and vehemence, and surely nothing good ever comes of it. Instabilities, long reverberating, set loose in the world by men turning fear and hurt into rage and aggression.

Emily could hear her father cursing at her mother, calling her useless and pathetic, ordering her to eat because she had lost so much weight. She could see her delicate mother taking the abuse stoically. Yes, to be hurt and nothing more was somehow brilliant. She knew this with sudden certainty and clarity. Women like her mother guided the universe with their suffering. She whispered

“brilliant” over and over until her father’s voice hissing “pathetic” over and over faded away.

To everyone’s surprise Stanley Whitmore immediately fell to blaming pesticides, herbicides, the analogue hormones supposedly in the Kansas environment. He suddenly wanted to return home with his dying wife.

But then came Andrea Kliever, the Mennonite hospice chaplain. In the final weeks of Lady Catherine’s life, Andrea, with power and certitude, reconciled husband, wife, and daughter into a loving family again. And after the death, she remained an integral part of their lives. She and Emily met weekly for grief counselling, later including Stanley as well. Indeed, fate seemed to weave them together, and they did not resist.

The repentant Stanley Whitmore was also too late for reconciliation with his father: Lord Henry Whitmore had died just a fortnight before his daughter-in-law.

The new Earl of Wolkeld seemed desperate to make up all the years overnight. He pestered Sulley and Wilson, pumping them for information, trying to stamp a role for himself out of his ancestral ground. Emily likewise wanted something to do, some role to play.

Annette seemed to have stability. She led the life of a young German noblewoman, dutifully following her father and mother to concerts, banquets, and events; then playing the farmer’s daughter: working in the fields and gardens, running their raw-milk dairy operation. But they were German, and Germans always seemed so logical.

Sleet to rain again. Crystalline water to fluid. Emily felt the cold and draped her shawl over her shoulders. What was out there? Cumbria and its rugged landscape was out there. A Cumbrian spring was necessarily wet and chill, while spring in Kansas was more a warning of the intolerably hot summer on its way. So strange to escape the sweltering heat into artificially cooled spaces. For aeons her people had done just the opposite: escaped cold into heated spaces.

College? She had taken an International Baccalaureate track at her Manhattan high school, but no, just be here for a time. Stay low and quiet.

Allow the stillness, the coolness of spring to pass and the inevitable warmth of summer to grow.

Her father was now the earl, but her grandmother, Lady Susanna Whitmore, retained control of most of the properties. Unusual, done mainly to keep the full inheritance tax from coming due all at once. The new earl wanted to take an active role, but Gran had a tin ear for most of his ideas. She was wary of the son who had stormed off to America after being so fiercely, so bitingly critical. In those days he insisted they give up the whole landed gentry “farce.” He had wanted them to sell off the properties, easily worth many millions of pounds.

It was true that hardly any profitable small-scale agriculture remained in the region. The Cumbrian sheep market was dependent upon government subsidies, only kept up, as many said, as a tourist attraction. Cumbria’s main industry was tourism, while its small-scale local farming had long since been eclipsed by large-scale modern agriculture and the global commodities markets. Nevertheless, Stanley Whitmore had the manorial bit in his teeth and wanted to run hard.

Stanley with eight middle names, who had scoffed at manorial, was now a believer and would bend anyone’s ear with how genial the whole thing had been all along—simply put, the best long-term management strategy for the limited available resources. And what about market-rewarded innovation and efficiency? What about global trade and economies of scale? What about one miraculous technology revolution after another? “Rubbish,” he now said, “a cheat, a dodge, all of it predicated upon stealing resources from future generations.” When anyone asked him what had happened to his conservatism, he would insist he was now a true conservative. The man who once could not trumpet progress loudly enough had reinvented himself as a fundamentalist High Tory, a Luddite monarchist.

Emily listened closely to the rain on the window. Below the patter of rain reigned silence, the old sort. Not just the chance lack of sound, narrowly localised in a normally noisy world, rather, a deep, dominant, timeless creature

stretching for unknown miles in all directions. She stood absolutely still and quiet in the dim light afforded by the two-foot-diagonal window. She breathed in deep, took a step back, swept her gaze across the rough, uneven, lime plaster walls—then exhaled slow and deliberate.

Compared to their suburban Kansas Neo-eclectic “McMansion” slapped together from tree-farm pine, Chinese plasterboard, and vinyl siding, the stone and oak hall house, supposedly started during the reign of Edward VI, seemed the mass of a small planet. She felt at peace in this old place, an entirely new feeling after so many sad and stressful years. Among the books and papers on the old wooden table that served as her desk was her Emily Brontë. Although morning and not night, she struggled through *Stars* by the dim light.

Ah! why, because the dazzling sun
Restored our earth to joy
Have you departed, every one,
And left a desert sky?

All through the night, your glorious eyes
Were gazing down in mine,
And with a full heart;’ thankful sighs
I blessed that watch divine!

I was at peace, and drank your beams
As they were life to me
And revelled in my changeful dreams
Like petrel on the sea.

Thought followed thought, star followed star
Through boundless regions on,
While one sweet influence, near and far,
Thrilled through and proved us one.

Why did the morning dawn to break
So great, so pure a spell,
And scorch with fire the tranquil cheek
Where your cool radiance fell?

Blood-red he rose, and arrow-straight
His fierce beams struck my brow:
The soul of Nature sprang elate,
But mine sank sad and low!

My lids closed down, yet through their veil
I saw him blazing still;
And steep in gold the misty dale
And flash upon the hill.

I turned me to the pillow then
To call back Night, and see
Your worlds of solemn light, again
Throb with my heart and me!

It would not do the pillow glowed
And glowed both roof and floor,
And birds sang loudly in the wood,
And fresh winds shook the door.

The curtains waved, the wakened flies
Were murmuring round my room,
Imprisoned there, till I should rise
And give them leave to roam.

O Stars and Dreams and Gentle Night;
O Night and Stars return!

And hide me from the hostile light
That does not warm, but burn

That drains the blood of suffering men;
Drinks tears, instead of dew:
Let me sleep through his blinding reign,
And only wake with you!

Very little risk of burning on this morn, she mused.

She remembered discussing this poem with Annette during a fateful conversation one Sunday afternoon almost three years ago. A warm wave of admiration came over her just thinking of her dear friend. In her sadness and loneliness, Annette had befriended and comforted her. She had introduced her properly to Romantic Era poetry, to its Dark Romantic core.

No fear of darkness, Annette argued. The myriad stars would have us aware of a greater universe, a greater power, while the day is dominated by the one single, overbearing star. “The night stars invite long sight, while the sun presses down and blinds any who would look up.” On that anxious and unhappy day, Emily experienced a true breakthrough. Just remembering the sudden joy of her Romanticism epiphany gave her a giddy feeling. Tomorrow she will be here!

During their short year together, she and Annette had poured over the works of many Romantic poets, but Emily’s favourite had to be Emily Brontë . . . poems that read like psalms to nature, to human pain and anguish, to a determined young female will, honest and forthright. She could not begin to fathom her suffering and death. Their tiny Haworth village lay less than one hundred miles away, but seemed so distant in the fourth dimension of time.

Emily Brontë had known hardly more than Haworth in her short life, and yet she expressed in her poems great subtlety and sublimity, emanating from, steeped in the wild nature of the primitive Yorkshire land. E.B. was E.W.’s hero.

She went back to the window, set the book in the stone well, and read *Stars* again. How nutritionally deficit was her body on the day she wrote it? How cold was the room? How hopeless were her suppressed needs? How fraught was her life? Subdued things, things concurrent and parallel swirling all around supported well those lines, all glowing once more inside a young reader's heart and mind so many years later. A grace, indeed, she thought.

She put on the silk polo neck, thick woollen socks, the Swedish woollens, the dress, her blue-and-white Icelandic cardigan, the old boots. Gran and Mrs. Colby, the cook, would still be in the kitchen. They would know what her Saul-to-Paul father was up to.

On the face of it, all had become tourism of some sort or another—their ancestral conservation village, Wolkeld, inhabited mainly by well-off strangers, at least half foreign from the U.S., Canada, Australia, Germany, Russia, Japan. The Sulleys and the Wilsons, nearing retirement, their children grown and moved away, were the only full-time traditional herding families left in tiny Wolkeld. The manor's properties below North Hill were rented out to tourists; eight tenant cottages of various sizes, once considered too lowly and primitive, now classed-up and expensive.

Sad, *unnatural* how the tourists seemed not to matter, these supposedly fellow humans. Some of the semi-permanent made an effort to be more permanent, to put down roots; but Cumbria measured belonging in generations, centuries even, not just a few seasons. Relationships were precious, timeless; commitment to place, to land absolute. Yes, tourists came from somewhere real enough, places serious, grim, and harsh perhaps, places where they had risen to the top and hamstered away enough to afford a piece of rustic Cumbrian bucolic theatre. Mostly middle-age and older, so many with blinkered urban eyes and hard-set mouths. To be sure, they were a shadowy migratory species.

The "lodge," as they called it, stood at the foot of North Hill and its meniscus-shaped seventy-acre wood. Wolkeld Hall, however, had not seen permanent inhabitants since the nineteen-forties. Stanley, however, was keen to

re-inhabit. What he once sarcastically dismissed as “early Bauhaus” was indeed plain and boxy, like an old factory put together from rough, now smut- and lichen-encrusted limestone blocks, sprinkled with neo-Gothic details seemingly as an afterthought, the whole affair hidden behind a forbidding old forest. Gran was not interested, “I’m too old for camping trips.” But something had to be done for the listed historic building. Lady Susanna had retained most of the properties—as much as possible to shield her only son from the entire inheritance tax. However, he had to take Wolkeld Hall, its surrounding properties, and Wolkeld Wood, making him liable for almost three million pounds in taxes.

To walk that quarter-mile cobblestone lane, to explore the wilded grounds and the musty old mansion was like stepping into some surreal period film. Indeed, it had been so strange to watch films of her homeland whilst in Kansas, knowing she was a part of that world and would eventually return. She and Annette would watch period film after period film, Annette so fond of complaining about the director’s, the screenwriter’s modernist anachronisms. At first, her German bluntness was somewhere between droll and annoying, but eventually Emily learned to enjoy the German national sport of *meckern*, or serious, high-stakes complaining.

Slowly some true daylight, though disproportionately little entering the room; the rain had changed to a light but insistent drizzle. She could not take her eyes off the hill. After so many years a tad smaller than she remembered, but for a young adult all the more compelling, *ominous* for it. When her father had announced the previous Christmas to her and Andrea that he would relocate to England in the spring, she felt a strange but guarded relief. At last! At last, after seven hard, bitter years of estrangement from family and land! It would be both a new life in a new place, as well as a resumption of her old life in her old home.

All those weekends and summers in Wolkeld. London, where her father had been an investment banker, her mother a publisher, and she a student at the French immersion Lycée, was a distant second. As a child, the Sulleys and Wilsons had been the jolliest aunts and uncles, their children, their nieces and

nephews like big cousins. Now the cousins were off somewhere, the aunts and uncles shy and quiet around her. Yes, they were showing respect in the age-old fashion—possible, too, they were nervous and cautious due to her father's erratic behaviour. She would just have to take the initiative if she wanted them back as aunts and uncles.

Not yet, nothing just yet. Another Brontë. She sat down at the table, lit the curious three-candle camper's lantern she had brought from America, adjusted the shiny metal rectangular sheet behind it to reflect as much light as possible onto her desk, and began reading from her old leather-bound copy of Brontëan poetry Anne's *A Reminiscence*:

YES, thou art gone! and never more
Thy sunny smile shall gladden me;
But I may pass the old church door,
And pace the floor that covers thee.

May stand upon the cold, damp stone,
And think that, frozen, lies below
The lightest heart that I have known,
The kindest I shall ever know.

Yet, though I cannot see thee more,
'Tis still a comfort to have seen;
And though thy transient life is o'er,
'Tis sweet to think that thou hast been;

To think a soul so near divine,
Within a form so angel fair,
United to a heart like thine,
Has gladdened once our humble sphere.

No doubt she meant one of her older sisters, Maria or Elizabeth, they

having died from deprivations at their infamous boarding school for poor vicars' daughters. But Emily was reminded of her mother, who, likewise, had died from deprivations and was now interred in the parish graveyard. Another tear.

More light through the window. In less than two months, at the peak of the Cumbrian summer, dawn would come at four-thirty a.m.! Kansas to Cumbria: The ninety-degree longitudinal change was a great thing, but the seventeen-degree latitudinal change would take getting used to as well. She stared at the tongues of flame of the beeswax candles. She blew each one out and closed the book. The white, heavy, beeswax-perfumed smoke from the wicks took over the room.

She rose and went to the window once more, resting her elbows on the hard, bumpy plaster of the window well. Craning her neck, she could just see a small patch of blue sky. The wind had increased, whipping the branches of Wolkeld Wood about. Bits of the dark manor flashed in and out of sight.

Gazing intently at the hall, she mused again over all the British television and film she had consumed: the popular *Downton Abbey* and the many period films. She had tried to balance staring with reading, but the screen versions were so alluring, *addictive*. She felt great affinity to Jane Campion's *Bright Star* of 2009 and the 2011 Cary Fukunaga *Jane Eyre*. They were a new sort of British period depiction. Rather than inviting the modern viewer to feel superior, they drew one in as an equal to the characters. And yet their modern artistic license would have confused if not shocked any audience from those times. Of this Annette was grimly certain.

Fantasy was another amazing offering of modern Britain: Rowling, Tolkien, Neil Gaiman, Susanna Clarke's overwhelming *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. Post-World War Two British fantasy writers dominated book sales worldwide. And yet from her colonial vantage point, these books made her home seem less real, more magical, her people like fairies, elves, and hobbits.

Nothing but real-world England now—a relief after those long, confusing years of build-up—although now she sensed keenly another topic she and Annette often discussed, namely, the tension between Old World *stasis*

and New World *dynamism*. America, Americans were about progress, change, dynamism. And yet what chance had the old ways even here? Emily's father, now preaching his imaginary *Retropia*, was making a pest of himself, Gran and the local farmers duly guarded and non-committal.

Whither this mad modern rush? Whither dynamic America? Except in the oldest places, the typical American town or city felt only slightly more permanent than gypsy wagon encampments or refugee settlements of tents and makeshift sheds. She had never really unpacked.

The New World did have some of the Old World left. For their first Halloween, she and her mother visited her mother's old friend, Chris Coolidge, in Boston. They had known Chris from her time as an art broker, journalist, and publisher living in London. Christina June Coolidge was witty and irreverent, always digging in with her pithy remarks. . . . Again, a wave of emotion as she remembered her mother in better times, happy and laughing.

Chris's townhouse in the Beacon Hill quarter had been like an Old World oasis in the middle of all the new and strange. For Halloween they hit the streets of colonial Salem to witness a sort of Halloween *Carnival*. The Americans had definitely expanded Halloween beyond what it was back in Scotland and Ireland. According to Chris, America's Halloween was second only to Christmas commercially—apparently a significant measurement.

They also visited Chris' horse farm in New Hampshire. Again, parts of the countryside looked and felt like the Old World, and yet always with such tasteless intrusions, as if no one could ever say "Stop! Don't do that!" to someone making ugliness. Chris quipped about the need for real estate *re*-developers. The highlight, as Emily now believed, was their trip up north to the White Mountains. Here was something quite unique to America, namely, wilds—the grand, expansive, seemingly untouched New World wilderness. Yes, the American wilderness felt powerful and mysterious to a girl from England.

Remaining at the window, she gazed on at Wolkeld Hall through the trees. She let her concentration slip and her eyes glaze. She listened after that strange compartment in her mind from which bits and pieces of scenes played beyond her comprehension, where shadows of thoughts never quite became

clear thoughts. Occasionally, something would sneak out, something she could turn into a poem. . . .

Since Kansas, since puberty, she would occasionally find herself slipping into some further space beyond that secret compartment. Similarly, she could only sense, partially comprehend this expansive, twilight region, fleeting, but long dominating her heart and mind. At first she considered such flights just intense day-dreaming, but over time they became less imagined, more a definite communion with a distinctly separate realm. It was a dusky world, steeped in sublime melancholic loneliness, though typically large and panoramic. At first she found it all worrisome—not the supposed religious transport of light and ecstasy. And yet she believed good was speaking, not something evil, not some lurking mental illness. She wished it to be something of her soul's true home, perhaps some distant view of Cumbria—at least that was the place she always mapped it to, yearned for immediately thereafter.

The first definite experience was at a freshman class party held by one of her American friends, Mary Schrag, at her parents' Flint Hills ranch. She remembered wandering up to the second floor of the old limestone house—ostensibly to escape the people—and being drawn into a north-facing bedroom. The entire ranch was like a museum to the Schrags' nineteenth-century ancestors, hardly anything modern to be seen, and in that room everything was indeed antique. She recalled feeling a powerful *déjà vu* sensation, like some remembrance of the room on a past winter day of profound snowy isolation and loneliness. Later that night—after deciding it had not been just a strong, fanciful impression—she wrote in her journal: *A strange world opened beckoning me to take in its sublimity for as long as I wanted. Fretful but curious.*

It was in her freshman high school year that her mother had begun to deteriorate, and the confused, frightened girl often found refuge on this mysterious plane. Sadness and anxiety would fade as the magic came on like a new and glittering facet of a gem turned slightly on its own. At first the reveries roughly overlapped reality. But two years later on a hike in the Konza Prairie Reserve just outside of Manhattan, she experienced an episode that could only

be called a true blackout. She was with Mary, Annette, and another American friend, the tall, waifish Irene Neufeld—who so mysteriously seemed to be a fellow traveller: Emily recalled coming out of the vision and glancing over at the *knowingly* grinning, but, as was her habit, maddeningly Sphinx-like Irene. Annette also seemed to notice, and fell in close beside her new friend for the remainder of the hike.

The next day Emily and Annette attended church together at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in Manhattan, and afterwards they sat outside the mock-Anglo-Saxon stone church in the garden grove under giant elm trees. Emily shared a poem she had written the previous evening. She considered it a shallow saucer in which to carry a tiny fraction of the mood, the impressions left by her vision. . . .

Dark burgundy roses, cobalt irises
Delivered for the night's performance,
To the theatre in the hollow, *le théâtre de le vallon*.
City-bound now, the hollow once a fairy circle,
Long since fairy dream haunted.

Look down from the sacred grove, now the square.
Recall the one attendance as a child:
Visions of darker, older nights since.

Escape to the countryside;
Great sunlight to dispel dark fairy-rumour.
Though pale blue sky but tissue, the thinnest canopy.
Indigo lace swirling, grey clouds and fog billowing.
Incessant winds to lift and shred the canopy
Till starless void revealed. . .

. . . evening, and the chill wind rising up
The cobblestone *ruelle* from the hollow.

On this night of nights
Dark purple clouds stripe a moon large and orange,
Now just above *le théâtre de le vallon*.

Annette said nothing but stared ahead, her jaw tensed, her lips narrowed. She suddenly grabbed her old German school satchel, took out a small pocket book of Emily Brontë poems, but then proceeded to recite *Stars* from memory.

Emily opened her eyes to see Annette once more digging through her satchel, finally pulling out a thick, squarish hardback book. She opened it to a bookmarked page and began reading Anna Letitia Barbauld's long and unrelenting *A Summer Evening's Meditation*:

'Tis past! The sultry tyrant of the south
Has spent his short-liv'd rage; more grateful hours
Move silent on; the skies no more repel
The dazzled sight, but with mild maiden beams
Of temper'd lustre, court the cherish'd eye
To wander o'er their sphere; where hung aloft
Dian's bright crescent, like a silver bow
New strung in heaven, lifts high its beamy horns
Impatient for the night, and seems to push
Her brother down the sky. Fair Venus shines
E'en in the eye of day; with sweetest beam
Propitious shines, and shakes a trembling flood
Of soften'd radiance from her dewy locks.
The shadows spread apace; while meeken'd Eve
Her cheek yet warm with blushes, slow retires
Thro' the Hesperian gardens of the west,
And shuts the gates of day. 'Tis now the hour
When Contemplation, from her sunless haunts,
The cool damp grotto, or the lonely depth
Of unpierc'd woods, where wrapt in solid shade

She mused away the gaudy hours of noon,
And fed on thoughts unripen'd by the sun,
Moves forward; and with radiant finger points
To yon blue concave swell'd by breath divine,
Where, one by one, the living eyes of heaven
Awake, quick kindling o'er the face of ether
One boundless blaze; ten thousand trembling fires,
And dancing lustres, where th' unsteady eye
Restless, and dazzled wanders unconfin'd
O'er all this field of glories: spacious field;
And worthy of the Master: he, whose hand
With hieroglyphics elder than the Nile,
Inscrib'd the mystic tablet; hung on high
To public gaze, and said, adore, O man!
The finger of thy God. From what pure wells
Of milky light, what soft o'erflowing urn,
Are all these lamps so fill'd? these friendly lamps,
For ever streaming o'er the azure deep
To point our path, and light us to our home.
How soft they slide along their lucid spheres!
And silent as the foot of time, fulfil
Their destin'd courses: Nature's self is hush'd,
And, but a scatter'd leaf, which rustles thro'
The thick-wove foliage, not a sound is heard
To break the midnight air; tho' the rais'd ear,
Intensely listening, drinks in every breath.
How deep the silence yet how loud the praise!
But are they silent all? or is there not
A tongue in every star that talks with man,
And woos him to be wise; nor woos in vain:
This dead of midnight is the noon of thought,
And wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars.

At this still hour the self-collected soul
Turns inward, and beholds a stranger there
Of high descent, and more than mortal rank;
An embryo God; a spark of fire divine,
Which must burn on for ages, when the sun,
(Fair transitory creature of a day!)
Has clos'd his golden eye, and wrap'd in shades
Forgets his wonted journey thro' the east.

Ye citadels of light, and seats of Gods!
Perhaps my future home, from whence the soul
Revolving periods past, may oft look back
With recollected tenderness, on all
The various busy scenes she left below,
Its deep laid projects and its strange events,
As on some fond and doting tale that sooth'd
Her infant hours; O be it lawful now
To tread the hallow'd circle of your courts,
And with mute wonder and delighted awe
Approach your burning confines. Seiz'd in thought
On fancy's wild and roving wing I sail,
From the green borders of the peopled earth,
And the pale moon, her duteous fair attendant;
From solitary Mars; from the vast orb
Of Jupiter, whose huge gigantic bulk
Dances in ether like the lightest leaf;
To the dim verge, the suburbs of the system,
Where cheerless Saturn 'midst his wat'ry moons
Girt with a lucid zone, in gloomy pomp,
Sits like an exil'd monarch: fearless thence
I launch into the trackless deeps of space,
Where, burning round, ten thousand suns appear,

Of elder beam; which ask no leave to shine
Of our terrestrial star, nor borrow light
From the proud regent of our scanty day;
Sons of the morning, first-born of creation,
And only less than Him who marks their track,
And guides their fiery wheels. Here must I stop,
Or is there aught beyond? What hand unseen
Impels me onward thro' the glowing orbs
Of habitable nature, far remote,
To the dread confines of eternal night,
To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,
The deserts of creation, wide and wild;
Where embryo systems and unkindled suns
Sleep in the tomb of chaos? fancy droops,
And thought astonish'd stops her bold career.
But oh thou mighty mind! whose powerful word
Said, thus let all things be, and thus they were,
Where shall I seek thy presence? how unblam'd
Invoke thy dread persecution?
Have the broad eye-lids of the morn beheld thee?
Or does the beamy shoulder of Orion
Support thy throne? O look with pity down
On erring guilty man; not in thy names
Of terror clad; not with those thunders arm'd
That conscious Sinai felt, when fear appal'd
The scatter'd tribes; thou hast a gentler voice,
That whispers comfort to the swelling heart,
Abash'd, yet longing to behold her Maker.

But now my soul unus'd to stretch her powers
In flight so daring, drops her weary wing,
And seeks again the known accustom'd spot,

Drest up with sun, and shade, and lawns, and streams,
A mansion fair and spacious for its guest,
And full replete with wonders. Let me here
Content and grateful, wait th' appointed time
And ripen for the skies: the hour will come
When all these splendours bursting on my sight
Shall stand unveil'd, and to my ravish'd sense
Unlock the glories of the world unknown.

Emily was entranced, transported—not just by the poem, but by her new friend's perfect accent, her sonorous diction, her overwhelming sincerity and intensity. After a long pause they took up each other's gaze. "Many poets mention this Barbauld piece as an inspiration," said Annette at last in a quiet, serious tone, her face grave and unsmiling. "It's my *Rosskur* for the modern world. I read this to myself every now and then to re-centre."

"Indeed," replied a glowing Emily, rocking slowly back and forth.

They once more searched one another's eyes until Annette reached for another book, opened it to a marked spot and began to read from the German poet-philosopher Friedrich von Hardenberg or Novalis, his *Hymns to the Night*:

Night? What holdest thou under thy mantle, that with hidden power affects my soul? Precious balm drips from thy hand out of its bundle of poppies. Thou upliftest the heavy-laden wings of the soul. Darkly and inexpressibly are we moved—joy-startled, I see a grave face that, tender and worshipful, inclines toward me, and, amid manifold entangled locks, reveals the youthful loveliness of the Mother. How poor and childish a thing seems to me now the Light—how joyous and welcome the departure of the day—because the Night turns away from thee thy servants, you now strew in the gulfs of space those flashing globes, to proclaim thy omnipotence—thy return—in seasons of thy absence.

"Somehow they combined what I call the Dark Muse with their

Christian beliefs,” said Annette softly, but haltingly.

“Yes, one would think they’re incompatible,” said Emily in an ironic tone meant to be supportive.

Annette looked out across the garden—fearfully, wondered Emily?— as if waiting for something, someone to appear. In an almost harried, if not embarrassed tone she finally replied, “I suppose they are, technically, yes.”

“It was such a completely different social and intellectual landscape back then,” offered Emily, searching Annette’s hardened face and tensed jaw. The situation was unmistakably raw and tense. “Annette, what is it? You seem sad, perhaps.”

Annette shot Emily an anxious look, then stared down. “Oh yes,” she said matter-of-factly, nodding-jerking her head up and down. “A completely different take on life.”

Silence as they gazed out at the garden. Finally, Annette spoke, again haltingly and full of emotion: “I—I’ve had this exact conversation before—and it was the end of a friendship.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean to say I lost a dear friend when I tried to relate my *penchant* for the Dark Muse to her. She equated dark with morbid, with evil—and there was no convincing her otherwise.”

Emily moved closer and took Annette’s hand. “Dear girl, this is all too wonderful for words. Thank you so very much for sharing these beautiful poems. I feel honoured that you’ve trusted me. Believe me, I’m all for the Dark Muse, as you call it!”

Annette began to cry, and Emily moved quickly to her side, took her hand, and put her arm around her shoulder. Once her sobs had subsided, Annette told the story of her best friend, a *Gräfin* from Bavaria and a devout Catholic, who had adamantly rejected Annette’s advocacy of Dark Romantic and the Dark Muse.

In just those few minutes Annette had lifted her out of a pit of despair and onto a high plateau, though clearly at great personal cost. “Oh good lord, I just couldn’t get her to understand!” Annette exclaimed, tears streaming. “And

the more I tried, the more she pulled away aghast, repulsed, *terrified*, even.”

Emily cried, too—partly for Annette’s suffering, but also in joyous reaction to their shared language: Emily wanted to tell her what a great relief it was to simply speak proper English with someone. For her part, Annette had learned *Oxford* English, as the Germans sometimes called British English, since the fifth grade. And what Emily heard on that day was such a lovely sounding language. Yes, American English was a foreign language.

Anna Elisabeth Franziska Adolphine Wilhelmine Louise Maria *Freiin* von der Surwitz had stubbornly avoided anything but nineteenth-century English literature and poetry, learning countless passages and poems by heart until her elocution had become nineteenth-century erudite and dignified, her accent all but perfect. This was in stark contrast to her classmates who trained their ears and tongues by watching endless hours of American television and films. And so it was no wonder she sounded as though she had stepped out of a period film.

“There’s only nature, really,” said Emily without thinking it. They looked into each other’s eyes and Emily could now feel a great wave of warmth. She smiled and looked up into the sky. “Yes, I do believe this life only makes sense with nature’s beauty.”

“*They* knew that back then,” said Annette, motioning with her head. “And even when life was a terrible struggle, they kept on trusting God and seeking the sublime—which is always there as grace.”

“Yes, it is,” whispered Emily. But then she burst out laughing.

“What do you find so humorous?” asked Annette, dread and fear quickly returning to her face.

Emily squeezed Annette’s hand reassuringly. She squinted and bit her lip. “It’s—it’s just how you speak, dear girl. You sound so—so dignified and erudite. I suppose I’m not used to that.” She squeezed Annette’s hand again and looked admiringly into her eyes. “I’m so happy we’ve finally had a chance to talk.”

“Yes, this is wonderful—at last,” whispered Annette, a tentative smile breaking her pained frown.

“How are you adjusting?”

Annette gave a soft, embarrassed laugh. “Well enough, I suppose. I must say, I don’t really know how to get on with the Americans. You?”

“I’m all at sea! My father has been trying for years to Americanise Mother and I.”

“Whatever for?” replied Annette, now pulling a stricken face.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Emily in a resigned voice, waving her free hand. “But back to what you were saying, no, we just can’t fathom their minds today. We’ve lost the sublime.”

A small sigh came from *Freiin* Annette as she looked up and blinked. “We can only scavenge what they’ve left us. And pray.” But then she sat up with a bounce. “Now, let me read you what Keats had to say about beauty!” And she read from *Endymion*:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o’er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
’Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,

Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

Again, Emily was deeply impressed. "Beauty, yes, beauty," she murmured. "We mustn't let it go."

"Nature—nature was the common thread," said Annette, leaning forward. "They spent so much time outdoors basking in this nature worship rapture."

"Yes, and then they turned it into poetry."

"In which we may revel today."

Soft laughter.

"I remember my mother and one of her friends talking about this," replied Emily. She searched her mind for some of the threads Chris and her mother had pursued. And then something completely non-intellectual struck her and she had to laugh: "Oh, Annette, I played endlessly outdoors—whenever we were in Cumbria! They practically had to tie me to a chair to feed me meals. We lived in London—dreary old—but Mother and I always found an excuse to go up to Cumbria and be with my grandparents—weekends, holidays, summer. When I was younger I thought if I could just be wild and feral enough they might give up on me and let me stay!"

Annette laughed and clapped her hands. "Oh, the same with us! My brother and I would barely come in to sleep. My parents worried we were going feral.

"And the Harz! You just have to see the Harz, dear girl! We'd have the most magical adventures in those forests."

Again laughter and then silence as they gazed out into their wild childhoods.

"But consider this," continued Annette, "back then, indoors was never

all that *in*-doors. The buildings were so simple and basic. One never felt as separated as we do now in these modern buildings.”

“Annette, you must come and see our old lodge. It’s positively ancient. Hundreds of years old. I always felt like a little creature safe in my little creature den. But here”—she let her shoulders and head fall in consternation—“it’s like being sealed up in a *science project*. I feel like I’m living in a space colony. It’s so closed in and cut off!”

“Same with my host family,” said Annette ruefully. “I know exactly what you mean. Back home I could be inside and, really, I never felt all that separated from outside . . . I don’t know how to describe it better.”

The young noblewomen laughed and then were quiet, finally glancing at one another, eyes again moist. “Oh, Annette, thank you so much,” said Emily beseechingly.

“And now you’re saddened by something.”

“I am,” said Emily in a choked voice, tears welling up.

“I shan’t pry.”

“My mother has cancer.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” At that she took Emily’s hand in both of hers.

“Thank you for your concern,” whispered Emily, tears falling.

“Do you pray?”

“Not enough, not nearly enough.”

“I read from the Bible nearly every day. Shall we read together sometime?”

“Yes, let’s.”

After the Konza Prairie incident, Emily had wondered if, in fact, Irene had known—or whether her odd look had been just a coincidence. Annette mentioned only that she had noticed her stumble for a few steps, looking pale and out of sorts. Again, there was no telling how long she had been blacked-out. However, she remembered upon returning the raw feeling of vulnerability, and how Irene had made it spike, while Annette had made it subside.

She finally had to admit that Irene—whatever her level of awareness had

been—did not mean her ill. No, the tall, beautiful, graceful, guileless, sexless, child-like, near-mute Irene Neufeld had not been teasing or mocking her, nor was she some sort of psychic stalker. Irene was beyond malice or spite or subterfuge of any sort. She had the distant look of an elf princess dropped into the mortals' world, a Jane Eyre, had she truly been the elf Rochester accused Jane of being. Emily herself was a Jane Eyre who wondered and wondered about the people around her, wondering about their alien social-psychology, wanting so often to hide from everything, everyone.

Emily and her core group of misfits—Mary, Irene and her twin brother Peter—instinctively avoided Midwestern American teen society. It troubled Emily greatly how her friends seemed to accept this second-class citizenship as the natural order of things. With certainty and honesty the earl's daughter rejected any sort of lower caste designation and kept her chin high, despite the social-psychological pressure and at times outright intimidation weighing down on her.

Besides Irene's Jane-as-elfmaiden, Mary was a Virginia Woolf—emotionally cold, aloof, demonstratively walled-off against the opposite sex. Peter Neufeld was just as quiet and enigmatic and physically statuesque as his twin sister, though brooding and intense, an emotional black hole. Emily wondered what they would have been like were they not so stigmatised and marginalized by the pervasive low-brow subculture. Despite being bright and gifted, they all seemed in the thrall of inferiority complexes. She hoped they might someday free themselves and take their rightful places amongst the best and brightest.

Another large and baffling American female subgroup for Emily were the Annie Oakleys and Calamity Janes, the rough-and-ready cowgirl tomboys whose leading trait was a clear lack of femininity. She saw the most extreme cases in high school girls' sports, but in varying degrees up and down the American female spectrum. Mary and Irene certainly borrowed from the Annie-Calamity fashion palate.

Nor could Emily fathom American intellectualism, better, the lack thereof. The purpose of school, namely academics, seemed to have few takers

—just nerds like her. And even within the nerd subpopulation any real eagerness for or pride in learning seemed absent. This made anything resembling intellectual discussion brief, cramped, tightly circumscribed. Hanging out with her friends, Emily often waited in vain for anything of interest to be said. She had gravitated to her little partisan group due to their obvious intellectual qualifications, as well as obscurity, but even amongst those supposedly bright kids communication was strangely self-conscious bursty-telegraphish—as if the walls had ears, as if modern America weren't a free society after all.

But in rare moments the glacier would move. Mary could be counted on for anything to do with feminism. Once, she had started a near riot during their Senior-year English class. The topic was women in literature, arts, and film. She insisted the American media in general was no real platform for women, rather, overwhelmingly a place for immature and not very bright men to go *hog-wild*—as she put it. Emily remembered laughter, hoots of support and protest, and applause.

And then there was the senior graduation party at her parents' ranch where a tipsy Mary began shouting at her father over something supposedly sexist he had said. Mary's progressive, "liberation theology" Mennonite parents—Doctors Royce Schrag and Bekah Kaufman-Schrag were mortified, their normally serene faces wearing noticeably pained expressions.

Mary May Schrag. Emily could never find the slightest scrap of gentleness or femininity in the girl who went about her young life so fiercely, her wiry frame underneath the most unfeminine of hipster cowgirl clothing. Emily did like her art, a fuzzier sort of Odilon Redon with moody haze from her Waldorf School days. It was obvious she had talent. Over the years, Emily had patiently waited to begin a friendship with the very bright, promising young woman, but that would have required warmth and trust the emotionally anorexic Mary could not sustain.

While everyone around her went merrily about their American high school business, Emily remembered being in an almost constant state of cluelessness, interrupted by moments of shock and repulsion. She found

herself amongst American teens who, confronted with an English earl's daughter, ran the spectrum of reactions from baffled through intimidated, out to openly disdainful and teasing. For her part, she did the exact wrong thing by not wading cheerily into her new situation like a very modern PR professional; instead, remaining distant and reserved, holding on to an innate dignity, thereby earning the label *stuck-up*.

For seven long years she managed a heavy load of bad feeling about her life and her environment. But through it all, she clung to the example of her mother's dignity and unique femininity, something her father could never chip or dent, despite his cruel behaviour. She came to cherish the courage she found coming to the fore in her mother as she slipped into terminal illness. And yet the stark reality of such virtue being so seemingly irrelevant and so trampled under by her supposedly noble father burdened her greatly. Her mother had steadfastly refused to follow her husband as he went about trying to reinvent himself as a Midwestern American, and he greatly resented her for it.

"Enough," she whispered through gritted teeth, and she willed her mind to stop brooding over Kansas. But in the vacuum came a pang of vague, unidentifiable anxiousness . . . though *not* followed by fear. She had learned through her struggles to forbid fear. Good. Very good. Gradually, peace returned.

So far the cool, mostly rainy spring had been a low-keyed getting reacquainted time. Soon enough it would be summer and the best part of the Lake District National Park's annual tourist mob would be traipsing about. Wolkeld was a popular destination, and that meant traipsers would take their hiking rights here, there, everywhere. Her father promised the devil, but Gran and the estate had long accommodated strangers and their inability to see, read, obey any sign containing the word *private*.

The bright sun of summer: too familiar was the light, too forward was the heat, as Emily's given namesake had known. Of course a Lake District summer was unpredictable. Someone said the Cumbrian spring never quite surrenders the seasonal keys to summer, always hanging around, ready to take

over with a cool, damp wind, even the stray bit of sleet up on the highest fells. Since climate change, the English summer had become pushy, rude, apt to pull odd, disturbing pranks: days hot and dry or endlessly rainy. The North was supposed to be wet and soft. Mosses were its carpets; wherever the emerald-green moss grew, all was good. Now, however, it was sudden bouts of heat, broken by stationary wet weather pattern bringing constant rain and floods.

Not summer yet, still spring, and the fits and starts toward summer disguised whatever was sick with the world's climate. Spring was lambing season for the ancient Herdwick breed.

Lady Emily wolfed down a big bowl of Mrs. Colby's Scottish oatmeal porridge, gulped down the remaining lukewarm tea in the pot, grabbed her waterproof jacket, her old Swiss rucksack, and took off for the village, the uncomfortable feeling of tardiness buzzing in her head. She hardly noticed the land around her, the great grey sky above, the hoary old tree-and-hedge-lined lane as she all but ran the near-mile.

She found neither her father nor Thomas nor Todd at their inbye pens; instead, strange people she did not know wrangling the bleating sheep. She did finally track down the veterinary interns Simon and Sally Bissell, as well as a dreadlocked young man who went by his surname, Haggitt. They reported the others had gone to Penrith to speak with some official. Oh, about what? Testing. Oh, very well.

Smiles.

Deflated, the trio not relaxing their smiles or offering anything else, she hiked back into the village. There on the main street, she found herself going into the relatively new bookshop-café, a place she was trying to avoid. Why? Too touristy. Built into a former *ironmongery*, it tried to come off as long-established and other-century when it was not. She also wanted to avoid the proprietress, a tall, thin, middle-aged American woman. Hopefully her son, three years her senior, was not around either, no doubt still at his American school, MIT, as she recalled. She was nice enough, very wealthy, but Emily was not up for cheeriness or any accounting of herself just then.

Great fortune: The owner was nowhere in sight, just two young women,

a local and an Eastern European guest worker, behind the counter. She glanced through the classics section, pulling one old leather-bound tome down and opening it to where the ribbon had been left:

The dead neither see nor hear; they are closed. No light shines in them; no speech sounds in them. And yet, even they participate in the cosmos. The extinguished ones also belong to the continuum of lighting and extinguishing that is the common cosmos. The dead touch upon the living sleeping, who in turn touch upon the living waking.

She searched the text before the passage and found Heraclitus mentioned and assumed the quote was his.

She ordered a latte and took a small table by the window. She sipped her coffee and copied the passage into her journal. She tried to write down what she had dreamt the night before, something about going up to Wolkeld Hall and seeing acres of lilies and daffodils in full bloom and a blue sky above with fluffy white clouds racing by . . . although the dream-hall itself was a ruin and seemed, paradoxically, of no interest or importance. Had her dead ancestors brought her that scene?

She had an odd thought about dreams: A dream is like a smaller, more abstract consciousness happening inside our normal consciousness—at night, no less. But why would our normal consciousness need this second, seemingly lesser, far more abstract consciousness setting up shop when we sleep, she wondered? Dreaming, she had read, is the mind's housecleaning, even a sort of nightly psychic bowel movement. And yet a dream always left her with a distinct feeling or “taste” in the morning—even if she could not piece together the plot or remember any scenes. Her dreams and her visions were often enough seamless.

She finished her coffee and returned the book to its shelf. A rush of relief twined around her caffeine high once finally back out on the windy cobblestone street. She stopped in the bakery and bought two fresh loaves of bread. Full of spirit, she paced out of the village, attacking the hill towards

home on the winding lane, never its whole length wide enough for two cars, in a few spots barely wide enough for one—all of it, to be sure, smaller, shorter, closer than she remembered.

She carefully noted her surroundings—not having done so on the way down now vexed her. She inhaled the brisk air deeply and watched for the sun as it jumped in and out of tumbling grey-and-white clouds. The small but swift Wolkeld River ran close by, eventually rushing under the ancient arched stone bridge and out into the dusky green meadow where she remembered romping as a child. Afterwards began the yew and beech hedges proper, through which she caught the occasional glimpse of an ancient stone cottage or barn. Midway began an oak copse dissected by the lane, its arching limbs like a vaulted ceiling above. Next came the barren orchard, in retirement hosting alder, hawthorn, birch, and berry brambles as well. Finally, the view opened out upon upward-sloping grasslands, veined and spotted with heather, alder, and birch, criss-crossed by low drystone walls, they, in varying states of repair, seeming more random-geologic than man-made. . . . So wonderful, she now realised to the fullest, this humble yet glorious stretch from village to lodge.

Being Lake District National Park meant very little modern should confront the eye. Since the early nineteen-fifties, the government maintained a neurotic-obsessive guard against what was euphemistically called progress. To be sure, Beatrix Potter, the Park's main instigator, would have noticed nothing anachronistic had she been alongside Emily that morning.

She passed by alder and willow brakes dotting the wilder grass, bracken, and heather upland, at last arriving at the semi-wild mossy oak park marking the start of their estate proper. Here the way levelled off, affording a spectacular view back south to the village and across to the dark green Jorhead massif looming up on the vast southern horizon. She stopped and beheld the picture-postcard scene view for a moment, her heart soaring at the Wordsworthian sublimity of it all.

Just a few feet inside the trees was a small stone bridge arched over a swift, narrow feeder beck. She lingered on the bridge, staring down into the clear water as it wound through the large, moss-covered rocks on its way

westward. The cloud and sun drama was darkly mirrored in one small pool made by three big boulders forming a skewed, broad-based triangle. She remembered how as a child she would play all day in this stream, wading, splashing about in that same pool. Once again, it all looked decidedly smaller and more humble than she remembered. Still, a good, warm feeling grew in her chest and a most peaceful mood came over her. Staring down unblinking, transfixed by the water, she savoured the etherealness of the present moment dancing with her memories. Flowing water mesmerising was surely a keen pleasure, however simple and humble.

She noticed movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see her father coming down the way from the lodge. "Hey there, lovely!" called the Earl of Wolkeld, waving.

"Where were you?" she asked, smiling, but with a hint of consternation in her voice. He bounded awkwardly the last few steps up onto the bridge in his black Wellingtons and joined her looking down into the swirl.

"Where was I? Where were *you*?"

"I was told you went into Penrith."

"Yes, yes, the government," he exclaimed, waving a hand impatiently. "They watch us like vultures! Always afraid something bad is about to happen. And it's always some clueless bureaucrat nobody's ever seen before. Do you know what a bureaucrat is?"

"Tell me, please."

"A bureaucrat is somebody who insists on bending a logical discussion heading for a positive conclusion into an illogical argument resulting in a state of paralysis and confusion."

Emily smiled.

"Normal people have a natural abhorrence of confusion and mayhem. But not a bureaucrat. He positively revels in them. Can never get enough!"

"I didn't know you'd be up so early," said Emily.

"Ha! Much to do. Much to do."

"I wanted to help, but I only found the Bissells and a helper in the village."

“My dear, just go up the mountain, down to the pens. You don’t need anybody’s permission.”

“Yes, yes,” said Emily wistfully.

“The two-leggeds and four-leggeds need to get a proper look at you, the new lady of the land.”

“Yes, I shall,” she said in a half-whisper, blood rushing to her cheeks. *Lady of the land* had an odd, almost jarring ring to it.

The water splashed noisily and seemed to hold both humans in its spell. Finally, Stanley Whitmore spoke in a lower, almost conspiratorial tone, “Well, aren’t you going to start in on me?”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Oh, whether I’m happy, or how I feel. You know, start prodding my state of mind, my *sanity*.” At the last word, he pointed at his temple with his index finger.

Emily laughed nervously, “It didn’t occur to me.”

“Good, very good. I can trust you. Everyone else seems to be watching me . . . like the government watches the sheep.”

She eyed him sharply for a time—and then he her. They silently called it a draw and smiled at one another. “No, Father, no prying.”

“And how is Lady Emily doing—if I’m not prying?”

She smiled and raised her eyebrows ironically. “I’m good, thank you.” She said this as lightly as she could. It was a normal enough question, but it surprised her, somewhat unpleasantly.

The rushing water again asserted itself in their conversation gap.

“Probably the biggest question,” began Lord Whitmore again, but then hesitating a second or two, “is whether you feel at home.”

“I do, I do. It’s just getting *back* used to it and all.”

“Yes, I know. I’m feeling much better, believe it or not. But”—he sighed loudly—“to have kept you away all those years. Then back we came with a casket.”

She eyed him once again askance.

“That chapter’s over,” he continued softly, “and if any place can give us

peace, it's here.”

“Yes, Father.”

The rushing water.

“Emily, I do think we're doing the right thing here.”

She again looked at him directly, but with calm, gentle eyes. “Yes, of course.”

“No, no, I mean it.”

“Of course, Father,” she repeated, laughing nervously.

“Shall I tell you why?” he exclaimed followed by two quick sidelong glances.

She laughed less nervously. “I'm dying to hear.”

He straightened to his full six-four, clapped his hands, and began: “All right then, here it is.” He paused dramatically, but then as an aside said, “You'd never guess. Not in a million years. Not in a *million* years could you guess why I'm finally sure we're doing the right thing here at Wolkeld—”

“Well then tell me!”

“Ready?”

“Yes!”

“The hippies,” he whispered, mock-conspiratorially.

“What?!” Emily barked.

“You know, the hippies. Those kids with the tangled hair.”

“Dreadlocks you mean?”

“Yes, whatever they're called.”

“You're right, I never would have guessed.”

“I mean the fact they've come to us.”

“Father, you're not making any sense.”

“Yes I am. Of course I am.”

“Then explain yourself.”

“My dear, they're looking for something. That's obvious, isn't it? They're looking for something simpler, more basic. And that's what I'm doing. I'm doing something that can be explained in a simple sentence.”

Emily thought for a moment. “Like ‘Hello, I'm a shepherd,’ or ‘I'm a

farmer.”

“Precisely.”

Rushing water.

“*Investment* banker is one word too many?” said Emily, laughing.

“Oh, all right then,” exclaimed Lord Whitmore, waving his hand, “but I mean something with a solid tradition. Those kids are following their genes. They’re doing what their ancestors did.”

A gust of wind.

“But we can’t really do what ours did,” said Emily slowly, cautiously. “There’d be a constitutional crisis. We’d be arrested.”

Her father laughed parallel to her comment and quickly added, “Nevertheless, we’re all following a deeper instinct.” He clapped his hands and looked up at the sky. “I mean to do a version of it.”

Water gurgling. Another gust.

“They’ve taken over the old Crowder place,” said Lord Whitmore almost conspiratorially. “Your grandmother won’t like that.”

“She wants it fixed up and rented out, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, indeed. It would bring in a packet as a rental. It’s a proper farm. But then who have we to replace the Wilsons and the Sulleys when they retire? These kids have come at exactly the right time.”

“Do you think you can rely on them?”

“Eventually, yes, eventually,” replied Lord Whitmore after an uneasy pause.

“There’s no one local?”

“Good lord, there’s no money in it!” said Lord Whitmore with mock annoyance.

“But you will pay them, won’t you?”

“It’ll have to be a sub-contractor arrangement. Just a pittance, really. Otherwise, the government would make a mess of it.”

Water. Less wind.

“They can stay in the Crowder place. That’s certain?”

The earl shrugged. “They can grow a garden. We can put some livestock

on it. They seem to be sure of themselves. They'll get the hang of it."

"Will Gran come round?" she asked at last.

"Your grandfather would've worked something out."

"I suppose so," said Emily softly out to the beck. She then smiled. "Do they call you *Lord* Whitmore?"

"I don't recall," drawled the Earl of Wolkeld in an ironic tone.

They both returned their attention to the flowing water. Pronounced gurgling. A burst of sunlight.

Emily spoke: "There aren't the *downstairs* sort any more."

"Never were here on the fells. And there needn't be."

"Very well," said Emily, wearing a wry grin. "Just so that's been sorted out."

"But you are *Lady* Whitmore," said Lord Whitmore in a mood-changing upbeat tone.

"Gran's *Lady* Whitmore. I'm just something blown in from America."

Lord Stanley eyed his daughter keenly, then exclaimed, "Come on, let's get inside. Colby has an old-fashioned *pease pudding* waiting for us—God help us. I told her I want *traditional* food, but it's been coming on rather severe of late."

"I got bread in the village." She showed him the loaves inside her Swiss military surplus rucksack.

"Very nice, but ask next time. Colby can be touchy about her baking. She's had some sort of row with the bakery."

Emily felt pulled a bit tighter to her father. One brief conversation had seemingly cleared the air, which in the past month had grown steadily foggier—and yet the sudden clarity was a tad overwhelming. He was habitually cheery-airy-breezy to go along with his early-middle-age dashingness. Speaking so calmly and seriously was *totally* (as they constantly said in Kansas) out of character for him, she thought.

She spent the afternoon writing letters—steel nib pen, ink, rag stationary—to her Manhattan classmates, to Chris, as well as Andrea, who always wrote

her promptly back. Mary would soon be starting a summer internship at Cranbrook in Michigan.

She also practised her recorder for a good hour—a nice wooden alto Annette had got her two Christmases ago—just in case Annette wanted to play. Back in Kansas they had become YouTube addicts, listening for hours at a time to the oddest Baroque, Mediaeval, obscure Euro-folk—nothing they could share with their American classmates, however. No longer, though. Since arriving last month she had not opened her laptop, nor been online, nor had she wanted a mobile. Not Annette either, who, in a recent letter, insisted she would henceforth hear and play live music only. She also said she was living in the old *Landgut*, as she called their ancestral castle. As Emily remembered from her one visit, it had been used by the local agriculture collective during the GDR years as a barn, machine shop, general storage and dump. The structure was basically sound and dry, but the damage from the decades of rough treatment, as well as the sub-code electrical wiring and plumbing, made improvements long, drawn-out, and expensive.

Dinner that night was Mrs. Colby's mutton stew originating from one of the community's own Herdwick flock. Strong and gamy didn't quite describe the taste for the up until recently vegan Emily. She had decided to put away her karmic-positive diet upon coming home. Going *localvore* was somehow good karma in a Northern English way. Of course Lord Tolstoy was still right when he had insisted there would always be battlefields as long as there were slaughterhouses. Meat was indeed bad, *bad* karma. How could enslaving and killing animals be good? Emily did not have the answer. Her father, however, was so pleased by his daughter finally being sensible about food.

As usual, she made a special effort to be passive and *quietish*. Define quietish. To her it meant not appearing intentionally silent—God forbid sullen—but at the same time not in any way coming to dominate the discussion or demand attention in any way. Take part, yes—in a quiet, even tone. Be in any way needy or insistent, no. This was one behaviour she did pick up in America. It just seemed easier that way—as if any social situation was an ordeal to get through.

Her father held to his earlier lower key as well. Normally, he ran down the list of his activities that day in an energetic tone, all but forcing any upcoming estate business throughout the meal. Tonight he was . . . calmer, less *epic*, seeming to want to coax conversation out of the womenfolk.

When Emily mentioned she had been to the bookshop-café, Gran asked with a knowing smile if the “proprietress” had been there.

“Just help.”

“No son?” said Lord Stanley, wearing a smirk.

“I didn’t see any of them,” replied Emily in an even, aloof tone.

“For your information, Stanley, he already has a girlfriend,” said Gran in a hardly-masked ironic tone. “She’s a fashion model. From the Baltic. As tall as the boy. They came to visit his mother for Easter.”

“Outstanding,” mumbled the earl.

“We’re best of friends, Judith Franke and I,” Gran said with more irony.

“Will he be back?” Lord Stanley asked his daughter.

When Gran did not reply, Emily, with a touch of annoyance in her voice, said, “I’ve not heard.”

“Hmm, a model or a peer,” said her father, still smirking. “What a tough decision this poor Franke woman has.”

“Oh, would you two leave off!” exclaimed Emily.

Gran and her son laughed.

“Pity we don’t have coming-outs for young ladies any longer,” said the earl. “We wouldn’t have to wait around for rich foreigners.”

“I’d never go,” replied Emily, staring at her plate.

“Didn’t Blair outlaw them?” said the earl.

“Don’t be silly,” said Gran. “There’s still the Season. It was just the Queen who stopped receiving *débutantes*,”—she gazed up into space—“oh, I can’t remember what year. Upset my aunts terribly.”

“Really? I thought he’d shut down the lot when he got rid of the House of Lords.” Then in a strained, nasal voice, “*And you shall no longer breed, either. So stop it! This instance!* Good old Tony. He always knew what was best for us.”

Gran laughed, Emily did not. She felt uncomfortable at her father trying

to be comedic. They exchanged glances—and she perceived that he perceived that she wasn't happy. Good.

Back in her room, candles lit, fire going in the small stove in the ancient fireplace nook, she was again in that wonderful peace lingering from her outdoor romping. Amazing was her new, mellower father. Except for his ribbing, he had gone along rather smoothly, not herding topics and humans like on a cattle drive. Amazing that he had not dragged out his latest burning idea of bringing the old mill in the village back into operation. As Gran had learned, somebody on his recent trip had lit up his combustive imagination with that particular idea. She, however, wanted to go ahead with an investor's plan to convert it into a restaurant.

“Will you go back to fancy suits and trading stocks when you run out of money?” she asked upon hearing his opposition to yet another perfectly sensible money-making plan.

Emily remembered how her father had given Gran the oddest look. . . .

But now a poem. She opened her Christina Rossetti to *The First Spring Day*:

I wonder if the sap is stirring yet,
If wintry birds are dreaming of a mate,
If frozen snowdrops feel as yet the sun
And crocus fires are kindling one by one:
Sing, robin, sing;
I still am sore in doubt concerning Spring.

I wonder if the springtide of this year
Will bring another Spring both lost and dear;
If heart and spirit will find out their Spring,
Or if the world alone will bud and sing:
Sing, hope, to me;
Sweet notes, my hope, soft notes for memory.

The sap will surely quicken soon or late,
The tardiest bird will twitter to a mate;
So Spring must dawn again with warmth and bloom,
Or in this world, or in the world to come:
Sing, voice of Spring,
Till I too blossom and rejoice and sing.

She sighed a good sigh. “I’ve been made stupid by life,” she thought or spoke. “Christina makes me a bit smarter again.”

She marvelled at how much she loved the nineteenth century. She marvelled at how it had turned her life around—thanks to Annette’s introduction. And she coming tomorrow!

Annette was almost two inches taller than Emily’s five-eight; lithe-athletic from her farm work, Harz Mountains jaunts, and dressage training. Her face was oval, her light blonde hair long, thin, and light-flaxen with the odd dark streak; her blue eyes were heavily-lidded and wide-set, nose small and unobtrusive, mouth wide but lips thin. She was handsome in a non-contemporary way. Her expression was usually blank, unemotional, serious, leaving most to classify her as aloof and severe.

Emily felt an upwelling of admiration and pride as she spotted her on a bus stop bench before the train station. Despite Annette’s modern dress, despite the vulgarity of a McDonald’s in the background, the scene lent itself to some classic portrait painting—the subject dominating an incidental background. The flesh-and-blood Annette wore her ancient Fjällräven anorak open showing her equally old, nearing felt Icelandic sweater. Around her neck was a plush scarf of dark wine maroon. Below were maroon slacks and then her old, scuffed Birkenstock Londons.

Her response to seeing Emily was a glad smile that only just left her serious aura, and yet her blue eyes sparkled as she rose to her feet slowly and dramatically. “*O du liebe Emily!*” she spoke-whispered. They embraced, tears of

joy falling between them. They had not seen each other since Emily's visit to Germany the past Christmas.

Emily loaded her rucksack into the back seat of Gran's ancient black Citroën DS and away they sped out of Penrith westward and upward towards Wolkeld.

Emily's German was very good thanks to Annette's tutelage starting back in Kansas, but also due to her natural gift with languages. She already spoke fluent French, thanks to her mother speaking only French to her during her early childhood, as well as at her Lycée in London. She spoke German with Annette for most of the trip home, but during the last mile of the ride to the lodge, Annette insisted on English. "I must warm up before I meet your family!" she said.

"Oh, don't be silly, Annette! Your English is better than ours."

"If that were only true."

"*Teure Dame*, it's my German that's hopeless. The needier gets the practice, you know."

Laughter.

Dinner was ready when they arrived. Normally on a Friday night everyone picked through leftovers or made themselves sandwiches, Mrs. Colby being off. But on this occasion Gran had prepared a pork apple and cider stew with cheddar dumplings, Lord Stanley providing a large smoked salmon hors d'oeuvre plate and a dry rosé. They ate around the ancient wooden trestle table in the big kitchen with its low ceiling and exposed mortise-and-tenon beams. Four candles provided the only light besides the dying fire in the wide, low-slung kitchen fireplace.

All Whitmores were eager to hear about Annette and the von der Surwitzes. She was finishing the last year at her *Gymnasium* and would be taking her finals later that summer. She had considered becoming a vet—among many other things. After a thorough accounting of her family and all their doings, she insisted that any and all Whitmores were welcome, in fact, expected for a visit, and that any time could be arranged.

Back in Kansas, Emily had known Annette to be a reserved and

contemplative person around others, although at times direct, even blunt, cutting right to the heart of the matter in her measured, controlled manner. She rarely indulged in sarcasm, although irony came and went with a smile. She was an intense listener, and her responses were calm and well thought-out, her sense of propriety and decorum like as from another age. She was, simply put, the most thoughtful, serious, and intelligent person Emily had ever known.

And yet German bluntness and directness could surprise a young Englishwoman. There was the Christmas holiday in Germany and their trip to Bottrop at the invitation of Baron von der Surwitz's younger brother, a vice president at Bayer Chemical. During the Christmas Eve dinner, Baroness Sibylle, Annette's mother, got into a serious row with Brother-in-law Arnold over Bayer's supposed polluting of the Rhine river. The baroness was highly agitated and minced no words of a detailed, expert environmental damage report, finally citing five Bible passages, Heine, and Wagner in the river's defence. Fair enough as genocide or orphanage arson trials go, but rather intense for a proper holiday banquet in formal dress. Emily's German was stretched to the limit trying to follow the rigidly civil, nonetheless quite heated argument, the frightfulness of shouted German spiking her adrenaline. Later, both sides apologized profusely to her for the disturbance—but then wanted to know who had won.

Emily glowed with happiness and pride at the sight of *Freiin* Annette so instantly at ease with her family. She sat tall and erect, looking like a German queen in the soft candlelight. Gran, sitting at one end of the table gave Emily a knowing smile at one interlude. She had noticed the mysterious regality of the young woman as well.

They arose the next morning late and eventually made it down to the kitchen for Mrs. Colby's porridge. They also sampled the honey Annette had brought on their toast—a heather honey from their neighbouring heath. Awake and fortified, they set off for the village on foot. The weather was low-cloudy, the wind fitful, the air damp and chill.

“*Sell* your milk? To the public?” said Emily. “You can do that?”

“We just applied for a commercial license.”

“Was that what we had during my visit?”

“It was indeed. We’ve been drinking it for years.”

“I wonder how long there will be sheep here,” said Emily in a wistful voice. “The government subsidizes so much of it. And they watch us every step of the way.”

“I suppose it’s easier in Germany. We’ve got a fairly good market for *heritage* products. Father is always eager to expand.”

Silence—almost awkward if they hadn’t been such good friends.

“My father’s been in an odd mood of late. I expected him to pump you for information.”

“I’d be more than pleased to share what—”

“No, no,” cut in Emily, “he needs no encouragement.” She sighed. “He’s unsettled, to put it mildly. He’s casting about for a role.”

“You say he wants to be a farmer. Fine, all you do is get up *very* early in the morning and pitch in.”

“That’s very well and good,” said Emily with a laugh, “but he has no experience—along with the most romantic ideas about the whole process. There just isn’t farming as he keeps talking about it these days.”

A strong, sustained breeze swept over the bracken and heath landscape, and the young women walked along without speaking for a time. Annette smiled as she looked out at the Jorhead, the top half of which was obscured by clouds. They passed the odd clumps of alder and birch, all slightly shivering in the wind. The mood of the land was subdued and melancholic, and yet the cheeriness of the young noblewomen made everything magical to them. Emily looked all about, then up into the rolling sky wide-eyed, shaking her fists. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here,” she said at last.

“I’m so happy to be here,” Annette taking Emily’s hand in both of hers and squeezing it.

They remained silent as they stepped along quickly.

Annette finally spoke: “We’ve been in farming for three generations now. You recall, my parents and grandparents had the farm in Lower Saxony near

Wolfenbüttel. That was before I was born.”

“I’m glad we stopped on our way to your aunt and uncle last Christmas.”

“Schöningen is a quiet, humble little corner.”

“*Schöööningen*,” said Emily, with an exaggerated pronunciation of the O-umlaut.

Laughter.

“Yes, the Elm Forest,” said Annette. “It’s nothing spectacular compared to the Harz, but I suppose that’s why I love it. Never a crowd. Not a soul in December.”

“I remember. Misty. That place, *Leben*-something, the little ghost town with the castle ruins?”

“Yes, Langeleben. And the Elmsburg ruins, too. An odd little corner, to be sure,” said Annette softly. She paused, then continued, “You or I—I can’t remember who—quoted Dickinson’s *A Certain Slant of Winter Light*.”

“Oh! *When it comes the landscape listens—*” Emily felt water coming to her eyes.

“*And shadows hold their breath—*” continued Annette.

And then in ragged unison: “*And when it goes, ‘tis like the distance on the look of death.*”

“This place!” Annette suddenly exclaimed. Gazing up into the sky, she skipped ahead a pace or two, lifting her arms high, pirouetting, then letting them fall hard to her sides with a clap.

Emily laughed gleefully at her friend’s unusual spirit, both young peers with eyes moist with emotion as they beheld each other.

They remained silent for a good ten minutes as they floated through the rewilded orchard, Annette studying every nook and cranny. Only knowing it had once been an orchard would have kept the casual visitor from thinking it had always been a fairy forest with its strangely twisted, stunted trees and tangles of wiry grasses and thorn bushes.

Annette finally spoke: “So, to what I was saying, we had little trouble with the transition, logistically at least. My parents were already farmers. They knew what needed to be done, and they just pitched in and sorted it out.”

Emily gave a short, sarcastic laugh. “We certainly do *not* know what we’re doing.”

“But we’ve had a much harder time winning over the locals. You don’t have that problem. They’re not hostile towards you, are they?”

“No, not at all.”

“Good. That’s a blessing in these times.”

“I remember your father tried to explain to me the *Junkerland in Bauernhand* thing.”

“Yes, the Prussian Junker nobility weren’t all that popular. Hard on their tenants. So many of them career soldiers for generations. Complicit in both wars.”

“Didn’t you have that great-uncle in the army?”

“Oh yes,” laughed Annette, albeit nervously. “My father’s great-uncle, Otto. You remember us talking about him?”

“He seemed like quite a character, although I don’t think I was catching all of it.”

Annette sighed. “One can’t have been a proper war hero in that war, not as a German. German soldiers didn’t receive medals after the war.”

“I suppose not,” replied Emily in a subdued tone.

They had just entered the oak collar, the wind making the many tons of limbs above them roll in waves. They instinctively remained quiet, soaking up the moodiness of the place. Then came the section of old yew and beech hedges, finally the river closing in on their right side. Emily was delighted by how clearly enamoured of the lane Annette was, her eyes constantly wide and bright. “Oh, my dear Emily, this is a lovely place!”

Silence and wonder.

“So, tell me about *Onkel Otto*,” said Emily finally.

Annette laughed nervously and shot her friend a glance. “Really?”

“Of course!”

“Only where to begin?”

They had stopped on the ancient stone bridge, leaning over the short wall, looking down at the swiftly flowing water. The Wolkeld River seemed a

larger version of their own brook, much broader, but just as clear, just as swift and wild at that location.

“You were talking about his service in the Army, and that’s where I got lost.”

“Oh yes, he was a captain, and he led his men into a battle outside of Leningrad. They were supposed to fight through some huge number of Russians and disrupt their artillery. Most of them were killed, but Uncle Otto and a few others escaped and fled into Karelia.”

“Finland?” asked Emily.

“It used to be. Supposedly, he had suffered a serious bullet wound, and an old Karelian healer-crone saved his life.”

“Incredible.”

“And so the mysterious Karelians, deep in their mysterious forests, helped him make it to friendly Finnish hands, then home.”

“He sounds like quite a man.”

“Yes, but like I said, no one considered them war heroes. He was doing his duty, I suppose.”

“As were most of them.”

“And so here I am in a new century wondering what to think, what to do about it.”

“Crazy, isn’t it? For so many years we were so close. Anything admired by one was admired by the other.”

“Yes, yes,” said Annette in a soft whisper. “And then we set about killing each other like mad dogs.”

“Such a terrible irony.” Emily hummed-sighed.

The young women glanced at one another, both wearing concern on their faces. Despite being the height of the day, the light seemed at its weakest yet. The clouds were the logical reason, even deeper and heavier than when they had left the lodge, though still no rain. And so the moment seemed ominous, as if the past sins and anguish of their two great peoples had suddenly gathered around them.

“Men—men are far more reactive,” said Annette. “They lash out much

quicker than women. They have no patience, no tolerance for suffering. They're oblivious to consequences."

"What makes you say that?" said Emily surprised and smiling.

"Oh, just how we went so war-crazy. Women can be just as warmongering as men, but certainly not the Second World War. That was an all-male affair."

"It's been on my mind of late as well—impatient men, how they overreact," said Emily. "I've thought about my mother and how she suffered," she said just above a whisper.

"I'm so sorry for you," replied Annette softly, a look of concern on her face.

"Life goes on."

"She was always so gracious and kind to me. I always felt in the presence of a saint."

They linked arms and started off again, gliding down the gentle arch of the bridge.

"Oh, what are we to do about suffering?" said Annette in a resigned, windy tone. "Clearly, humans were not designed for it."

"No, indeed, we are not."

"I can't imagine your mother raising her voice in anger," said Annette.

"It never happened," replied Emily, looking over at her friend. "No, she never stooped to shouting or fighting, she simply bore it—to the end."

"Such a brave woman."

"I see that clearly now." Emily patted Annette's arm vigorously. "Sometimes suffering is the best and bravest thing to do. I can't tell you how I know, I just do."

"But it is a cruel paradox," said Annette.

"How so?" said Emily in a gentle, inquiring voice.

"A wrong can be committed—and nothing corrects it."

"Yes, I see that," said Emily after a moment of contemplation. "And the world moves on as if nothing's happened."

"Like a Kansas tornado doing all sorts of damage and killing people—

and the very next day the sun comes up and the birds are singing and, well. . .”

“Mockery,” said Emily. “It’s a sort of a mockery, isn’t it though? Of the victims, I mean.”

Annette gave her friend a serious glance, but said nothing.

“Oh, forgive me, girl,” said Emily. “I’m sounding like a pagan—as if there’s no God.”

Soft laughter.

The hooked-together women walked on in silence. They rounded a slight bend, and, just past the last ragged hedge of ancient evergreen yew, the village came into full view.

“How are things now?” said Annette.

“Good. Things are good. Like I said, Father just yesterday seemed to be unwinding a bit.”

The river was tight on their right side, even broader now, but still very swift and clear. There on the northern edge of town it made a contribution to a mill race, a channel lined with stone, covered in fine emerald moss just above waterline, and then in algae and thicker, darker water mosses below. Colonies of tiny black freshwater mussels clung to the submerged green. This led to the old mill, a hulking, three-story stone structure, long since out of use. The road thereafter became a proper cobblestone street lined with stone and plaster terraced houses on both sides, the vernacular architecture for that spot on the planet.

“Our road used to be important,” said Emily, glancing back. “Now it’s us on it mostly. They don’t come to us as much as we to them.”

“They can’t avoid us. We’re the old *Schloss* just off the main square. And we took on the church just across from us.”

“What are you going to do with the castle’s inner courtyard?”

“We want to convert all that into gardens, fruit trees. It was for grand ceremonies and the like. None of that these days.”

“Do you mean to keep the fountain?”

“It’s there still, but it doesn’t work. Too expensive to fix.”

“I can imagine.”

They had come to the only slightly broader main street, which was lined with shops and businesses, some obviously for tourists, others simpler small-town businesses. They passed a closed tea shop on the right. As Emily recalled, it kept irregular, limited hours in the off-season.

“Ready for human contact of the American sort?” said Emily in a conspiratorially hushed voice.

“How do you mean?” replied Annette, laughing.

“The bookshop. The owner is American. She might be there.”

“Very well. Ready.”

“You see,” began Emily in an ironically proper tone, “I am very much *Lady* Emily to her.”

“I wouldn’t suppose a German is on her radar. Nobody knew what to make of me back in Kansas.”

“In any case, chin up, *Obren steif!*”

Laughter.

The shop was again sparsely peopled. But just as they stepped up to the café counter, Mrs. Judith Franke burst out of her rear office and all but sprinted up to them. She was tall and thin, intense green eyes, concrete smile, dark hair cut in a long pageboy. She wore a chartreuse-green skirt, matching silk blouse, and low-hanging pearl necklace.

True to her billing, she greeted Emily somewhere between cheerily and gravely. Emily introduced Annette—leaving off any title—and, as she suspected, Judith Franke was courteous, but quick to return her laser attention to Emily. “I’m so sorry I missed you before.”

“Oh, no trouble, Mrs. Franke.”

“Please call me Judith.”

“Right. Judith.” Emily felt truly intimidated by Judith Franke’s monstrous smile.

“Now, Emily, dear, I want to know if that son of mine has written you. If not, I’ll get after him. Someone told me you’re anti-Internet and write only letters these days. Quite a daring thing to do!”

“That’s true, ah, no Internet, but I’ve not heard from him. He’ll be here

soon enough this summer, won't he?"

"Yes, of course, he's coming later next month. He finishes his semester at MIT and then he'll see his father on Long Island. Certainly before June, I expect him here."

"Well, yes, lovely then. I'll be looking forward," said Emily as enthusiastically as she dared.

The intense cheeriness of the older woman seemed to glitch like a circuit interruption. "Well, let me know if you need anything. Be seeing you later!" At that she abruptly turned and left.

They stepped up to the counter and were greeted by a local young woman from the sound of her accent.

"Let me get you a latte or something," said Emily. "They have espressos."

"Oh, I'd rather just tea," said Annette somewhat sheepishly.

"Good,"—and then to the young woman—"We'll have a pot of tea, Assam. And could we have a couple of scones and some jam, too?"

The centuries-old building occupied a north-east street corner. Exposed beams, mottled plaster, creaky wooden floor. For English country standards it was expansive; however, the bookshelves—tall, heterogeneous, and numerous—effectively broke up the space into smaller cave-like enclaves. Emily and Annette took a small table in the far corner overlooking the main and side streets.

"About the tea," began Annette, looking demure as Emily filled her cup, "I was visiting friends on Rügen—they're all tea-drinking snobs up there—and I'm afraid they've brainwashed me into thinking coffee is bad. 'Oh, but to drink tea it is to drink liquefied flowers!'" She was staring off into space, pouting contemplatively.

"You know our history with tea, don't you?" said Emily.

"You mean the Opium Wars."

"Yes, now there's a tornado, then the sunny morning, and us completely oblivious."

"Right."

They attended to their scones and tea.

“The proprietress was talking about a son?” said Annette, eyebrows raised.

Emily’s brow furrowed. “That would be handsome Stephan. I’ve been told he’s with an Estonian fashion model. He’s got an enormous beard like they’re all wearing over there.”

“Beard? What about his beard?” said Annette, smiling inquisitively.

Emily sighed and looked out on the street. “Sorry, sorry. I have my list of pet peeves about America. I should think you have a completely different list.”

“Perhaps we should merge our lists.”

Laughter.

“Kansas,” said Annette with a heavy tone and a blank stare.

“Kansas,” repeated Emily just as heavily, looking just as blankly.

“So, do we talk about it?”

Emily sighed demonstratively. “Let’s get it over with.”

Laughter.

“It’s still breathtaking to me how fiercely crude they could be,” said Annette.

“With such a burning hatred of culture.”

Silence.

“Do you hear from Mary or any of the others? Peter? Irene?” added Annette.

“Once a little card from Irene, nothing from Peter, twice from Mary,” replied Emily. “I’m afraid I’ve become a pariah since insisting on snail-mail.”

“What’s Mary doing?”

“Mary May’s at Hamilton College in New York. She’ll be in an art school in Michigan this summer. Cranbrook.”

“Well then, I should write her—if she’s answering your letters,” said Annette business-laconic.

“I’ll give you her address. She came down a notch or two that last year.”

“I recall a very intense, self-absorbed young woman. I wonder if she’d

even remember me,” said Annette.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” said Emily, and then patting the edge of the table, “this *wood* will never forget you!”

“We did have that horrible argument about music.” Annette looked glumly into her tea cup.

Emily gave a wistful sigh-hum for the memory.

“Do you remember that outdoor music festival they took us to—*Win-* something?” said Annette.

“How can I forget? Beastly hot. I’m afraid I couldn’t fathom the music.”

“Neither could I,” added Annette, shrugging.

They paused to play scenes of the Winfield, Kansas, Walnut Valley Festival in their heads.

“*Bluegrass*,” stated Annette, again in a flat, resigned tone, staring off towards Kansas.

“Yes. They love it, though. They’d play it to Mozart if he ever returned.”

“Maybe we’re just snobs,” said Annette in a tone of mock-resignation.

“Oh, that we are,” said Emily with an ironic grimace. “Necks positively aching for throwing our noses both night and day.”

They gave each other a smirk and were quiet for a time, taking bites and sips. Emily continued: “But then Irene and Peter took us to hear that folk singer in Lawrence. Remember?”

“Oh, yes. Meg—Meg something. Yes, yes, she was a pleasant surprise. She had that American mystique.”

“Yes, a mystique.”

More scones and tea.

“Oh!” exclaimed Annette. “So I did tell you in my last letter I went to the Wave Goth Treffen in Leipzig.” She sat up grinning, her eyes big.

“Yes!” replied Emily, smirking ironically. “That surprised me just a bit.”

“With Robert and some of his friends from school. For the Victorian Picnic mainly. But I did get to see the Russian group.”

“The Russian group?”

“Yes, yes, remember? They put Rilke’s *Schlaflied* to music—and the John

Donne poem.”

“Wait, wait—” said Emily, trying to remember the poem’s title. “*Witchcraft* something.”

“*Witchcraft By a Picture*,” completed Annette. “An unbelievable poem, really.”

“Goth. Really. Explain yourself, girl.”

Laughter.

“I can’t and I shan’t.” Annette gazed off into the shop, her face resolute—her nose in the air.

Emily giggled, wrinkled her nose, and shook her head. “I’m finding it hard to imagine you as a Goth. What exactly did you wear?”

“Oh, nineteenth-century funerary. Nothing you wouldn’t wear. Got it there.”

Annette said this so matter-of-factly that Emily had to laugh. Annette finally joined her.

“No black lipstick, nail polish then?”

“I thought about it, but no. Robert did, though.”

Laughter.

“I must say, the picnic was grand. Hundreds of people out in a big park with their old-fashioned picnic baskets, drinking champagne, eating finger food. Our little ensemble performed.”

“Now that you describe it, I wish I’d been there,” said Emily, smiling warmly.

“I’m glad I did it. Probably won’t again,” Annette said airily.

Laughter, Emily in part at how English her friend sounded, *acted*. They beheld one another warmly for a moment. Emily broke the silence: “Annette, dear, you’ve always shown up just when I needed you.”

“It’s good you’re settling in.” Annette stared intently out the large multiple-paned window. “And this is a good home, from what I’m getting of it.”

“I am. It is.”

Scone bites and tea sips.

“So what’s going on with your family? Robert’s still at the Mozarteum in Salzburg?”

“Yes, he’s doing well, I suppose. He’s wanted to be a composer or a conductor. But then he talks of just being in music pedagogy. The boy can’t decide. He plays so many instruments—none at a profession level, I’m afraid.”

“And your parents are doing well?”

“Nothing much to add to what I said last night.”

“You were talking about a watchtower trumpeter last night. That sounds like fun. I can’t understand why the town wouldn’t want it.”

Annette grunted-laughed. “Like I said, some people are trying to block it. They don’t want someone playing a horn up in the church tower—even once in a while.”

“But I don’t see how that—”

“Oh, they’re just being contrary,” Annette cut in. “We make a move, they want to block it. It’s too strange for them. Believe it or not, there were grumblings when my parents renovated the church.”

“That’s a shame.”

“We also tried to have gas lights installed around the square—and they blocked that as well.”

“Why, then?”

“Oh, some nonsense about needing a certain *Kerzenstärke*—sorry, I don’t know the English, candlepower?—over a certain area for safety reasons. Utter bunk. We got the idea because there’d been a blackout—and we looked up and could see the stars! Wouldn’t it be nice to see more of the stars? we said, but to no avail.”

Laughter, grim.

“I’m afraid we’re not very popular. Father says we’re no closer to the locals than the first days back in ninety-two. The East Germans have no great respect for peers. I suppose they’re so afraid we’re trying to drag them back into the past.” She gave Emily a wide-eyed smirk.

“You’re just farmers running a farm. Surely that’s not so alarming.”

“Yes, but they see the fine people in formal wear come to hear *Lieder* and

Baroque ensembles and it makes them suspicious all over again. It doesn't matter that everyone's invited, no charge. Father calls it *reverse snobbery*."

"That's ridiculous."

"You don't have that to deal with here in England."

"I suppose we're respected enough. Mind you, this is Cumbria, traditionally very independent. My grandfather was well-liked. He was quite charitable—*too*, as my father used to say. He always advocated for the farmers." She paused and shook her head. "But I notice a certain distance when I talk to them." Emily looked down into her tea cup, then out the window. "I suppose you have the same language barrier as we do here."

"How so?"

"Your High German versus the local dialect?"

"Oh yes, true enough," replied Annette. "But dialects are dying out in Germany. A shame, really."

Emily frowned in contemplation. "I liked hearing the American accents."

"Yes, I suppose they were interesting," said Annette half-heartedly. "Although I'd really heard enough of *like* in every sentence ten times. *Like* we went there, and, *like*, everything was so, *like*, cool, and, *like*, I could, *like*, really, totally, *like*, you just had to, *like*, be there, *like*. . . . Aaagh!"

Laughter. Tea and scones.

Emily continued: "You suggested substituting *for this* or *as if* for *like*?"

"From Milton's *Samson Agonistes*: For this *did the angel twice descend*? For this *ordained thy nurture holy, as of a plant, select and sacred*? For this *do you incessantly use like*?"

Suppressed giggles, then contemplative silence.

"Oh, everything was just so confusing in America," said Emily.

"Or something," said Annette, squaring her shoulders. "I would say Americans are just as clever as we, but wandering, lost, *sans culture*."

"Where then is there culture?"

"It's heading downhill here as well. The winds everywhere are blowing hard."

"But it still *feels* right here," replied Emily in a slightly pleading voice, "my

land, your farm, what your family's doing. Hard wind makes trees grow stronger."

They locked eyes.

"But trees won't grow very straight or tall in hard wind," replied Annette, smirking.

This stung Emily a tad, although she knew Germans, knee-jerk, always placed truth over tact.

They finished their tea and wandered the labyrinth of aisles, gravitating finally to the poetry section. The books were a mix of old and new: some antiques, some crisp and crackling from the press. Emily had found a crumbling old leather-bound copy of Shelly here. She thought of sending it to a book binder to have it redone.

"Speaking of Rilke," said Emily, showing Annette a slick new paperback publication.

"Translation?" said Annette in a flat tone.

"Seems so." She opened it and saw that it was a dual-language edition. "No, German, too."

"I can't take much Rilke."

"Right," said Emily ominously. She was not disappointed in Annette, rather, she recalled how back in Kansas their friends might rave about Rilke and Cummings and Frost and other hazily impressionistic to pointlessly obscurant modernist poets—but would not give the Romantics a chance.

Back out on the street the greyness of the day seemed to have deepened, and yet the women's spirits soared. As before, they locked arms and started back up the empty street. "Annette," began Emily. "Do you remember the first day we met?"

"How could I ever forget! Mr. Donahue's English class. The German almost getting tossed out for fighting with the teacher."

"I wanted to genuflect before you and kiss your feet!" exclaimed Emily. "I must say, I knew you were unique the minute I laid eyes on you."

"I had been told there was an English peer in the class. I suppose I was out to impress."

The young women laughed and tugged at each other's interlocked arms.

"Oh God, Donahue's class!" said Annette. "Those wretched poems he made us read!" She waved her free hand in dismissal.

"From the *New Yorker*, you mean?" asked Emily.

"Yes, yes, and he had us read them aloud and lead a discussion."

"You had that really dreadful one," said Emily, pulling a sour face.

"I could barely get through it—such drivel! And then I told you all exactly what I thought of it. Big mistake."

"All I remember was a man dreamt he met Jesus, and Jesus offered him cookies or something ludicrous!" said Emily.

"Ridiculous. But I shouldn't have made such a to-do over it. Epic blunder."

"It wasn't your fault, girl. From then on he wouldn't leave you alone. He kept baiting you, trying to catch you out."

"Yes, well, I suppose it's funny now."

"The whole time I thought I was dreaming—that anyone would dare to speak up."

"Even with you there, I wasn't feeling very brave," said Annette in a rueful tone. "But it was just such an effrontery!"

"What a *complete* ass that man was! The way he patronized!"

"I should have shown more breeding," added Annette quickly.

"Really? You were a seventeen-year-old exchange student and he was a grown man! Mary finally went to the principal. Do you remember?"

"Yes," mumbled Annette.

"I would have been in tears had he treated me that way."

They relived the scenes in their minds.

"But then he did relent a bit," said Annette. "He let me bring in my own selections. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember you read Siddel, Elizabeth Siddel's *Lord May I Come?*"

"Yes, Siddel. *How is it in the unknown land? Do the dead wander hand in hand?*"

"Lovely. And you talked about her and showed some of her art."

"*God, give me trust in thee,*" Annette continued. "But they all rolled their

eyes and sneered at my mentioning God in a reverent way.”

“Then right after he read that thing from—”

“Oh!” Annette broke in, “the worst piece of trash! Probably the most vile thing I’ve ever heard. I told myself never to forget his name—but now I have. Ed something—Sanders, perhaps?”

“In any case, it was quite obvious which was poetry and which was tosh. And—and you don’t think some of the class supported you?”

“Nooo! Are you kidding? They were too *flipped out* over the teacher, no less, reading such a filthy thing.”

“A few of the smarter ones knew,” insisted Emily.

“I disagree. Remember, though?”

“Not the point, girl! The point was, I’d found a real comrade. You were there for me—in my darkest hour.”

“As you me,” said Annette softly. “Providence.”

“*Die Fügung Gottes.*”

“But isn’t that what we peers do for one another?” said Annette in a soft but serious voice. “We bolster one another. We’ve done it for centuries.”

“I’ve never known what to do in return for Annette *Freiin* von der Surwitz.”

“Oh, God, grant me the wit to tell someday you what you’ve already done!”

Laughter. Tugging of arms.

“We’ve learned each other’s languages—you perfectly,” said Emily. “You are remarkable, you know.”

“Thank you. Your German is quite good as well. You have a feel for languages.”

“I spoke French with Mother—only French in Kansas. Father resented it.”

They were silent as they walked along. Emily felt a rush of emotion, as if she must burst into tears, but it passed. “We survived the madhouse,” she said as she shut her eyes tightly and shook her head. “You saved me in a very dark time.”

Silence, except for the wind.

“*Klapsmühle*,” said Annette at last.

The irony of having just passed the old mill was not lost on them and they both laughed. They walked on in silence to the soft musical roll of the fast-flowing race. The cobblestone had turned back to gravelly scraps of ancient tarmac and the grade steepened a few more degrees.

“Annette, dear, do you remember Emily Brontë’s *Shall Earth No More Inspire Thee?*”

“Yes, yes,” said Annette, laughing softly, “Let me see . . . *Thy mind is ever moving in regions dark to thee; Recall its useless roving—come back and dwell with me . . .* as Earth says to the human.”

Emily continued: “*Then let my winds caress thee; Thy comrade let me be—Since nought beside can bless thee, Return and dwell with me.* And here I am!” At that she unhitched her arm and twirled around, her arms raised beseechingly to the sky.

Annette laughed for Emily’s joy, and they walked on in silence for a time. Finally Annette continued: “I gained so much from you. So much came into focus when I met you.”

“As I you. All the poems you had me memorise, girl!”

“As did our ancestors!” replied Annette defensively. “Memorising Bible verses, Latin, hymns, poems—that’s all they did back then.”

Emily mused for a moment and then asked, “You’re not using the Internet?”

“No! I’m in the *Schloss* now. No electricity in my room. I heat with a little wood stove. I’ve thrown myself into Latin, by candlelight. It feels—timeless.”

“And that’s all that’s been restored? Nothing since my visit?”

“Oh no, nothing. After all these years there’s still only the one wing.” Annette sucked her teeth. “And it might be the only one, the way we’re going. We’ve had some quotes—and, well, we simply don’t have the funds. Farming always has first claim to any spare income.”

“Brilliant—no electricity.”

“The kitchen has an old-fashioned phone. You’re free to call me. Mind, I might never hear it ring.”

“No, really, that’s simply brilliant, girl,” said Emily. “Keep it that way.”

“Internet *detox*, and I’m happy to say I’m doing quite fine. School’s winding down, so I can avoid it there as well.”

Silence as they walked crossed the river.

Emily spoke: “Oh, gosh! In Kansas all I seemed to do was stare at screens day and night.”

“Didn’t we both.”

“But I’m home now, and I’m living my life, and I don’t need it any longer. I don’t need *any* of it!” At that Emily pushed out and swept back with her hands to the sky.

“The same with me,” said Annette resolutely. “I don’t need the little dopamine rushes—or whatever that is going on inside my head.”

Emily gave a short, rueful laugh. “We thought we were staying in touch with things back in the Old World.”

“Unnaturally,” said Annette. “We were *unnaturally* connected to those *things*—*things* delivered as media.”

“The Internet made me feel like I wasn’t a human on this planet . . . as if I had died and was drifting about—grabbing after life with ghost hands.”

“All because we wouldn’t, we *daren’t* face the real world around us.”

Emily gave a humming moan of agreement. “I was adrift.” But then she looked up and laughed, waving her hand at the sky. “I don’t need anything from out there!”

“Neither do I,” added Annette, laughing along.

“We’ve got home, we’ve got family, and—and nineteenth-century poetry!” The last part Emily shouted to the sky.

Laughter.

“Trick question: Do you still have all your Hildegard recordings?” asked Emily.

“Somewhere,” replied Annette sharply. “Oh, you’re not tricking me, girl! All right then, I’d gladly go see a Hildegard von Bingen concert, but I shan’t hear her *digitally* again. *C’est tout dans le passé.*”

Emily laughed softly. Warmth and glee carried her along, her feet almost

off the ground. But then a quietude came over her and she spoke slow and deliberate: “I must insist: This is the Old World. This is *our* world. This is home. This is family. This is history. This is the culture and the place I belong to. And I have the basics of life. I have what I need to—” She paused for a moment, continuing in an even softer, more deliberate voice, “to *thrive*, I should say. Yes, I have what I need to thrive. I’d say my life is finally stabilising, yes.”

Annette gave a quick, hard growl. “Well, I’ll say it again, it’s not that simple for me. All right, true enough, I don’t feel as beleaguered here as I did in America. But I’m not as hopeful as you. I harbour no illusions about Mother Europe.”

“Please tell me why,” said Emily with concern and a tinge of frustration in her voice.

“Simple enough: Germany is a modern democracy. It’s pattered *slavishly* on America. And as Father says, there’s an unlimited amount of swine in that. We’ll run out of pearls *long* before they run out of swine, he says.”

Laughter.

“Then it’s noblesse oblige to the bitter end!” exclaimed Emily wanting to buoy the mood.

“*Resurgam!*” replied Annette, shaking her fist.

Laughter.

“Remember Miss Miller?” said Emily.

“The librarian, right?” replied Annette in a sombre voice.

“Yes. Oh, do you remember our big conversation about *Downton Abbey*, and she gave us her theory on why all the British period films are so popular in America?”

Annette laughed. “How educated Americans see Britain as a place where intelligent, sensitive people *still have a fighting chance*.”

Laughter.

“We can laugh,” said Emily, “but why then is *Downton Abbey* so popular in America? It’s clearly about aristocrats, not just the wealthy.”

“Yes, which, by default, makes it about monarchism—although. . . .” Annette paused for a moment, then continued, “Do you remember that scene

at one of the weddings—can't remember which—where all the villagers are cheering, tepidly, waving their little paper Grantham flags?"

"Just barely," replied Emily.

"That summed it all up for me. Pathetic, really. Somehow, it struck me as pathetic."

Emily hummed-sighed. "I suppose so. Really, the whole thing of *them* imagining *us*—poorly."

"As if we're to understand the nobility as only ostentatiousness."

"Isn't it, though?" replied Emily in an ironic tone.

Laughter.

Annette spoke: "Oh, and remember in the film, at the end when Anna—Anna the *servant*, mind you!—talks Lady Mary into not giving up and selling Downton Abbey? Doesn't that strike you as preposterous!"

"A little."

"Alas, a servant lectures an earl's daughter on the importance of manorial Downton for the community." Annette made an unvoiced laugh. "Yes, Lady Mary Crawley, who couldn't answer any questions about her home or her history when they let the public in on a tour. Just a little weak, I'd say," murmured Annette.

"What can we expect? It's not like they teach the blessings of the manorial system in schools any longer."

"The writers certainly didn't know what to say about it." Annette suddenly laughed brightly. "All right then, very simple! Does it occur to anyone that Downton, Yorkshire, is simply beautiful and idyllic, that a person, be they high-born or low-born, has a decent life, a role in a functioning whole that makes some modicum of sense? Doesn't anyone get that?"

"At best it seemed a very obfuscated point," said Emily wistfully.

Annette counted off with her fingers: "The low-born in quaint little tenant cottages—now going for a quarter-million pounds; the middle-born in finer homes going for a million pounds; and the Crawleys, of course, in the castle—basically priceless."

"And the town and countryside simply an Arcadian dream! Flower

gardens everywhere.

“Indeed, everything our ancestors touched is now treated like a holy shrine” Annette clapped her hands. “Oh, and—and what system created such loveliness, then carefully, *lovingly* maintained it for centuries, all of it now being clamoured after by the masses?”

“You silly goose!” exclaimed Emily ironically. “You can’t mean the manorial system!”

Laughter, merry.

“But just to be fair,” said Annette, “let’s admit that it broke down at some point, say, when the peasants all started crowding into the cities for some awful reason. So all those long-evolved rural ways, the careful maintenance of land, of resources, broke down when the awful reason appeared. What could that have been?”

“Madam, I think you mean industrialism.”

“I suppose it was! So do we blame the manorial way for not being up to a task for which it was never designed? Or do we blame the satanic mills? Mind you, neither capitalism nor socialism nor fascism have since managed industrialised societies very well for very long.”

“I suppose they still like their chances.”

“Considerable help from the media at keeping them numb to it all,” added Annette.

Emily, getting into the spirit, looked over at her friend rolling her eyes. “But girl, you just can’t be against industrialism!” she exclaimed child-petulant. “And see how well the Scandinavians are doing?”

“Oh, yes, they always bring up the Nordic *Übermenschen*. Someday we’ll just have to get around to learning and copying exactly what they’re doing, then all the world will be saved, won’t it just.”

Laughter.

“*Hygge* lessons,” said Emily matter-of-factly.

Laughter.

Annette continued even more energetically. “What does humanity really have to show for such a monstrous increase in resource consumption? I would

say. . . .”

Silence. Emily waited for more, but when nothing came she looked over at her friend. For her part, Annette remained silent and German-inscrutable, brow knitted, lips pursed. “Oh, oh, oh, let’s just leave it before we run off mad tearing our hair out!” cried Annette at last, laughing short and grim. “Where were we—Doris? Was that her first name?”

“Yes, yes, Doris, dear Doris.” Emily sighed-hummed, then continued: “I remember she once said to me, You English have this big Englishness about you, but there’s no longer a world to express it in.”

Short acknowledgement laughter from Annette and again silence, only disturbed by the wind whispering through the branches of the ancient yew and beech.

“It seems harder and harder to express any sort of real humanness,” said Annette in a soft tone. She then stopped and said, “Would you ever go back there?”

Emily stopped. It occurred to her that they had been holding to a pace just short of a run. They held each other’s gaze and caught their breath. “To America?”

“Yes.”

“To see Mary or Irene if they invited us. Andrea Kliewer definitely; that woman worked a miracle with us. Or, yes, to see Doris. She retired last year, by the way.”

“Oh, really.”

They began walking again, albeit at a slower pace.

“What about your host family?”

“No,” replied Annette in a flat tone. “We never really *connected*, as they say. They were always deer-in-the-headlights around me.”

Emily laughed, and Annette joined in.

“Well, it’s true! The woman was a colleague of my mother’s at Brown; that’s why I came to Manhattan. They were both professors. But he was—*whatever* he was. I can’t describe how dull that man was. If Rex Mottram wasn’t a real person, then Ted wasn’t a real Rex.”

Laughter.

“They never said much beyond the weather or who they’d seen somewhere. Or shopping. . . .”

“Yes!” cried Emily. “Shopping, shopping, shopping! The way all the girls would pour over their shopping trips!”

Laughter.

“Really though, don’t you think we have a chance here?” continued Emily. “I think we do. And the world can just be as *fiercely* crude and *déclassé* as it wants to be.”

“Where else, then? Where else but here?”

Silence as they walked on, the grade now demanding an effort just short of a trudge. They swung their arms freely as they laboured uphill.

“We can’t stop them,” said Annette waving to the distance, “but then they’ve been good enough to ignore us and leave us alone. We’re irrelevant, *completely* irrelevant. I suppose that gives us a small niche to work with. We must give ourselves satisfied in our little corners.”

“As these funny little ornaments hanging on the older corners of the Old World.”

“Not hopeless?”

“Never!” exclaimed Emily, with a shake of her fist.

“Contra mundum?”

“Contra mundum!”

But at that moment a blast of wind came down the way, and the greyness of the day seemed to reintroduce itself. The road had narrowed still more, as they found themselves once again in the long tunnel of large oaks with their massive overarching limbs. Annette spoke: “Perhaps we should just let the martyr thing go. It doesn’t seem very dignified to take such keen pleasure in running down the poor world.”

“I suppose you’re right,” replied Emily, sighing. “Shall we talk about the good things we found in Kansas?”

“Let’s. You go first.”

“No, dearest, you.”

Laughter.

“Our weekly outings to the Konza Prairie,” said Emily.

“True, I always looked forward to those walks,” said Annette, soberly. “And you had your wonderful reveries.”

“Hardly! Frightening, is more like it.”

They fell silent again as the wind gusts made the branches above dance ominously.

At last Emily spoke: “The good was heartening enough when we found it.”

“True.” Annette nodded and sucked her teeth. “It doesn’t lend itself to words . . .”

“Even to that big German brain of yours?”

“Yes, well, I suppose it was good for my brain to be confronted with just such a *challenging* situation. After all that, Germany is rather predictable.”

“Anything else positive you’d like to say, *Meine Freifrau* von der Surwitz?” said Emily in an upbeat tone.

“About Kansas? Oh, it was nice to be around people doing normal, everyday, non-tourist things. That was a welcome change. I suppose you’ve got your hands full here,” said Annette, glancing over at her friend.

“Tourists?”

“Yes.”

“Gran says this lane can get quite crowded in the summer—signs or no. She says they come right up to the house, peer into the windows. Last year someone even opened the door and walked in. Can you believe it? I suppose it’s not very clear what’s public and what’s private in a conservation area.”

Annette grunted-laughed. “Our little corner can get rather crowded. We try to be nice. I suppose it’s just too easy these days. They do their scheming *online*, then they pile into their motorised ships and set sail to where the foxes once upon a time said good night. Tourism is . . .” But she did not complete her thought.

Emily waited and then finally said, “Tourism is unnatural. It is, though.”

“Ultimately, yes. But back to Kansas.”

“Yes, back to Kansas. I don’t want to be so critical of the place. Cynicism doesn’t get me anywhere.”

“Oh, I know,” said Annette, sweeping ahead with her hands. “I lose my balance when I even sort of head that way. I can feel it weakening me. And I think we’ve indulged just a bit here, don’t you think?”

“Exactly what I mean. We just have to pray for our friends over there, that they’ll fare well.”

“They will,” said Annette. “Irene was a perfect example of that American mystique.”

“She was, indeed. A sort of a mystic, wasn’t she, though.”

“*Gleichmut, Gelassenheit*,” said Annette. “Unearthly quiet. The look of another world. As were you, my dear, with that old English soul of yours.”

Emily gave a short laugh. “What? Me? More like clinical depression. I had my tragedies to contend with. I was a wretched freak.”

Annette gave her friend a concerned look, but said nothing.

Rain, sporadic but vigorous, suddenly began to strike them at a near-horizontal angle. Both humans looked up and around as if they’d been shouted at by someone.

Emily continued: “I’m sure it makes some sort of sense over there, but I was all at sea from start to finish.”

“And here we are now with a different set of challenges,” said Annette, pointing to the ground.

“True.”

The rain seemed to lessen but the wind increased.

Emily spoke: “I was thinking of Dickens the other day.”

“Ah yes, remember our big argument?”

“Oh, it wasn’t about that.”

Annette gave a loud sigh. “I’m still not a fan. Huge depressing *nihilist* slogs, and then, oh look, a happy ending bolted on the end.”

“But there’s a big difference between him and—do you remember that dreadful Camus thing Donahue made us read? It wasn’t any better in French.”

“Just more depressing.”

“No, the difference is Dickens means to *indict* England, not destroy it. In the end England holds up. I don’t want to condemn my homeland, no, I want to try harder. England calls to me, the reader.”

“Agreed,” replied Annette resolutely. “I suppose a real place won’t necessarily be a fairy tale, but it will, as you say, call.”

“I can’t say I feel particularly welcome here, but I feel a dedication to this place.”

“Emily, dear,” said the taller woman, gazing over at her friend with wide eyes until she returned the stare, “I felt so guilty abandoning you, but I was so very glad to leave Kansas.”

“No, none of that, girl. After Mother’s death we managed to turn things around. It was a miracle, Mother’s final gift.”

“Such a lovely woman.”

“Thank you. Oh, and I visited Chris again, by myself, just before we came back.”

“Never saw that part of the country. Ha! My host family dragged me along on their holiday out West. Tell me about New England.”

“Well, it certainly has more in common with here than Kansas. Bits and pieces of the older still around.”

Silence as they walked on.

“No, I could feel something in America,” continued Emily, “something *bright*.”

“The nature, the land, you mean?”

“Yes, the land. It felt—*bright*, mostly.”

“And this,”—Annette looked up and all around—“feels old, *dark*.”

“Yes, exactly. Very much so.”

“I know what you’re saying. We visited Colorado, and I could feel something powerful, but, as you say, bright. Everything—everything was *spectacular*. Everything was *big* and *exciting*.” Annette waved her hands to indicate freneticism. “Home feels older—and that’s better for me. The Harz Mountains are dark. If it’s not a bright, sunny day—which are usually rare—the mood hits you hard. That’s how it is with me.”

“Cumbria too. It’s a very lovely dark. Like right now.”

“We’ve drifted back to Europe again.”

“Sorry,” said Emily with a laugh.

“Right. So I wanted to say I would meet Americans who *impressed* me, for lack of a better word. I don’t know what it was about them, but they had a *présence*, that American mystique, whatever it was. Old souls like you, dear.”

“Well, there’s the America coming from the media twenty-four-seven, and then there are these very dear people not like any of that, off in their strange, secret corners here and there. Old souls, indeed.”

“But still, I’m not some von Humboldt who can trek about indefinitely spying out all these corners. I could never call it home,” said Annette solemnly.

“Oh, say, do you remember the English artist John Grimshaw?”

“Didn’t you show me one of your mother’s books of his works? The moody twilight scenes. A bit like Friedrich and Oehme, as I recall.”

“Sometimes New England could be that way—only with that New England wild mixed in. Chris knew about it. She was a very insightful person, I must say. She was rabid for the *Hudson River School*. Took us to museums to see all her favourites.”

“Not familiar. Tell me about it.”

“*Hudson River School* was a Romantic Era style of landscapes. Mainly of the New York wilds. Oh, and I’ll never forget this one painting: A huge canvas with a broad view of a forest valley, huge, monstrous, dark clouds above. All the forest was dark and grey and foreboding—except for a small patch in the middle where the clouds had let in a ray of light. And right there, right where the sun hit was the most gorgeous greens and purples and yellows and oranges. It pulled me in. Oh, I get goosebumps just thinking about it.”

“I’ll have to investigate,” said Annette.

“Annette? My dearest Annette? Is it a crime to want just *this*—this old place?” Emily gestured to the land around her.

“No, my dearest Emily, certainly not.”

“Knowing we might never be able to fully express our humanness—I my Englishness, you your *Germanity*—anywhere in this modern world?”

Annette laughed. “Yes, Germanity! They really are trying to kill off Englishness and Germanity. Sometimes they even say so openly. Unlimited swine.”

“And we’ll probably not stop them.”

“For a start, stay clear of the Internet. That’s my plan,” replied Annette in an even tone. “That’s really hit home of late. Computers are what separate us. Not space, computers. Nature *conducts* my spirit, computers run it through circuits and wires until it’s nearly dead.”

“No worries here,” said Emily soberly, and then smiling and looking all around her, studying the verges, “This is quite wonderful. Clouds, rain, or no.”

Annette glanced over at her host, smiling, but offered nothing further. They walked on in silence, the wind gusts now driving more rain.

A sort of verbal intercourse protocol had evolved between the two young peers allowing for quick reaction to any shift in mood or temperament. They meant a conversation to be an art piece whereby both shared the brush—in stark contrast to the noisy, insistent parallel hammering that passed for contemporary conversation. Annette remained silent, sensing with Emily’s weather non sequitur a need for a change or break.

More so Emily worried about their tendency to talk a subject to death—or what seemed to her the inability to get to the root of a thing with words. She preferred garnishing moods, feelings, impressions with choice insights, while Annette’s tendency was to lay siege to a subject with exhaustive depth-and-breadth recursive intellectual analysis. Annette, who with German efficiency, had trained herself to turn on a sixpence, waited patiently for Emily to speak.

“Say, girl,” said Emily at last, “do you remember Jane Eyre describing her road between the village and Rochester’s estate?”

“With my IQ I should,” said Annette, giving her friend an inquiring look. Laughter.

Emily continued: “Let’s find that passage tonight. I’m getting the most marvellous ‘Jane on her lane’ feeling right now. There’s her description of the land around the Rivers’ house and the surrounding moorland, as well. I’ve got it bookmarked. If anyone were to ask *me* what Dark Romantic is about, what

I'm about, I'd read them that passage.”

Annette gave a sharp laugh.

“What then?” said Emily, smiling expectantly.

“Our undying faith in the human race.”

“How so?”

“Oh, that we might someday find people who would sit and listen to us read them *Jane Eyre*. Did anyone in Kansas strike you as such a person?”

“We tried. They said it was too dreary.”

“*Too dreary!* Good lord!”

“Yes, what's *dreary* to them is *dreamy* to us!” said Emily in a dramatic stage whisper.

Laughter.

Annette continued: “Do you remember that one film version of *Jane Eyre*? The one with Mia Wasikowska and Michael Fassbender?”

“We only watched it a dozen times!” exclaimed Emily skipping for a couple of steps, then waiting for Annette to catch up.

“Do you remember Rochester accusing her of being a fairy, but then she says his land is not wild and savage enough for the fairies? It's compacted in the film, but it's in the book as well.”

Emily thought for a moment. “Yes, yes. Isn't it odd how we're still on about fairies? I suppose we shouldn't go looking too closely for fairies and gingerbread houses.”

“Lest we find them,” said Annette with mock grimness.

“Indeed, lest we find them.” Emily clucked her tongue. “So odd how just that one off-hand remark sets the whole mood. It's as if we are surely in the mystical fairy world, but this will be a story about the mortals inside their tiny little Christian tent.”

Silence as they walked along, both women wide-eyed.

“But our lands are not *wild* enough—” began Emily in a dramatic voice.

“—nor *savage* enough any longer,” completed Annette. “And the tent has become an ugly little patched thing, and lands ravaged and left for dead.”

The young women fell silent again, and the lane's tiny but wild sounds

flooded into their senses.

“We call ourselves Christian,” said Emily at last.

“Yes, yes, while talking of pagan fairies and such.” Annette breathed in deep and exhaled like a big sigh. “Technically, I suppose they don’t belong together—but there they are all the same. I consider myself Christian. It’s just on a different shelf.”

“Clever, yes, more than just one shelf,” replied Emily with a wistful tone. “Let’s have *three* shelves, shall we? One for Christianity, one for the fairies, one for the Dark Muse.”

“But let’s not tell anyone!” stage-whispered Annette.

Laughter, and as more and more rain began to follow the wind, and they quickened their pace.

After the evening meal, during which they heard more stories about the von der Surwitzes and all their difficulties with the locals, the three women—Lord Stanley was visiting friends—gathered in the relatively small but lofty main hall. So far “women’s night” had been merry. They brought along the wine.

“What was Annette saying about a poem of yours?” said grandmother to granddaughter, a twinkle in her eye. “My Emily is a poet!”

“Yes, yes, Emily has something to read,” said Annette wearing a coy expression.

“Then let’s hear it!” said Gran enthusiastically.

Emily glared long and hard at her best friend—who finally burst out laughing.

“Oh all right then,” said Emily in a mock-annoyed tone.

“Read the one you sent me last month.”

“Oh, no! Please!”

“Yes! Yes, *yes*,” pleaded Annette, shaking her hands with anxiousness and impatience.

“All right then.” She picked up her journal from the coffee table and paged over to *The Fifth Room*. She wiggled, cleared her throat dramatically, and

began in a quiet, even voice:

Curtains fall on stormy dreams,
Now stands her ghost at the foot of my bed.
Moonlight through rattling windows shining,
I duly follow.

As a child I was told of her beauty and grace.
The merest six-and-twenty years,
Her life measured short.

The first room, onto the second, then the third,
On through the fourth—narrow, darkest yet—
Corridor to the fifth.
This night she stands by letters and diary kept
In her flowing copperplate hand.

Gladness expressed so tenderly,
Melancholy resolutely noted too,
In flowing but faded copperplate hand.
“Oh, how I cherish this day,”
“Oh, but I thank my Lord,”
Over and over in the diary
Open on the cherry-wood desk.
Fifth room, iciest of all,
Lit by silvery moon, now, to see her. . .

. . . on a high seaside dune
Charged moment by moment
By the pulsing blue æther far above
Glinting on her dress of dark silk.
One high-buttoned black boot showing,

Hair swept under a wide-brimmed hat,
Bouquet of wild flowers in her lap.
She in her deepest nature:
Face pale and calm, eyes shining and keen,
Gazing o'er the roiling blue-black sea. . . .

Along the leaf-strewn cobblestone ice pellets bounce,
Sped violently off the cold, dark Atlantic.
Called out of my dreams so early,
Tasked with prolonging a life
With methods yet painful and crude,
I face the chill, grey morning
For to gather the blood and gore
Of another night's dream overture.

My shoulders fall.
The pellets do not thaw.
The chill cannot come out,
Nor the sick pain in my heart.
Oft the sin of envy: I her grave.
Nightly stations beside her—grace.
Lost on the dimly waking hour—hope.

Emily looked up and gave the audience a self-conscious smirk.

Gran stirred at last and exclaimed, "Oh my!" Her hand covered her mouth, her eyes large. Gran's daytime costume was lady-gardener, but her evening attire that night was a smart dark-blue skirt, blouse, and vest, which rustled with any sudden arm movements. "Wolkeld hasn't heard that sort of thing since your great-great-grandmother, Lady Jane, held salon up the hill."

"What was your motivation?" asked Annette in a calm voice.

"It's not about Mother," replied Emily. "It was something I got from my last trip to New England, a few strange bits growing in me ever since."

Gran shifted in her chair. “But my dear, even our Victorian ancestors would have flinched at that ending. A tad grim, is it not?”

Emily wore a pained expression. “If you insist.”

“No, dear, I’m very impressed. I’m fascinated by the woman you describe,” said Gran. “Where did you find her?”

Emily seemed not to hear the question, instead, staring at the fire. Finally she spoke: “She embodies qualities that simply do not come out any longer.”

“Perhaps I agree,” said Gran. “We don’t live in a time that sees or acknowledges these aspects of womanhood. *She in her deepest nature*, indeed!”

The group laughed softly.

“But dear, all the Stygian gloom,” continued Gran softly but resolutely. “I’m afraid it spoils this evening’s—what’s that Danish word you two were saying?—hooga?”

“*Hygge*, Gran,” said Emily with the proper pronunciation, then grinning, cocking her head, “Would you like me to light another candle? Bring you fuzzy pastel blanket?”

“Please forgive me for being raised in well-lit times,” replied Gran, a lilt of pride in her voice.

Emily grabbed her glass, took a big swig of wine, and put the glass down almost too forcefully. She raised up her journal and exclaimed, “All right then, I’ll burn it in the fire. Or we can wait for a full moon and bury it behind Wolkeld Hall.”

“Oh, none of that!” exclaimed Gran. “We’ve don’t need any of that again.”

“Whatever do you mean?” replied Emily.

“Never you mind.”

Laughter, albeit confused.

Emily looked-glared over at Annette for support. A smiling Annette, however, only gave her a diagonal nod, eyebrows raised. “Help me, Annette!” implored Emily through clenched teeth. “She’s trying to revoke my Dark Romantic license!”

Gran laughed, while the tall German woman sat up in her chair, took a

gulp of wine, set the glass down forcefully as well, inhaled deeply, and spoke in her most articulate-pedantic voice: “Emily’s poem *wallows* in darkness and death. It does *not* idealize them. Emily is wallowing in, not idealizing darkness and death.”

Laughter, merry, Emily at seeing her friend slightly tipsy and—*funny*.

“So you think they were really for it back then?” said Gran, looking at Emily, then Annette. “It’s not just a melodramatic gimmick?”

“Oh, I’m quite certain they meant what they said,” answered Annette, serious again.

Emily added, “Death was a *relentless* fact of life.”

“Oh, indeed it was,” said Gran. “They died and died, and died some more. *Media vita in morte sumus*.”

“Translation?” said Emily to Annette.

“In the midst of life, we are in death,” replied Annette.

“No guaranteed fourscore years like we all expect today,” continued Gran. “That’s for certain.” She took a drink of wine. “Often enough they weren’t given fourscore *minutes*. Infant mortality was appallingly high; mothers dying in childbirth as well.”

Silence as the fire in the broad hearth popped and fizzed.

“What about that era appeals to you, Emily, dear?” said Gran at last fidgeting in her seat. “Here we are almost two centuries beyond that time.”

“I don’t really have an answer,” said Emily. She and Annette traded glances. “It’s just a place I need to be.” She paused before continuing. “There was a balance, I suppose. Death was more real—so, perhaps, life was more real.”

“How could we know?” said Annette, and glancing over at Emily, “We don’t face the hardships they did.”

“Yes, yes,” mumbled Emily, studying the other two, then gazing into the fire.

“I can give you an example,” said Annette, sitting up. “The poet Novalis, his real name was Friedrich von Hardenberg. His mother lost *ten* of her eleven children during her lifetime, including Friedrich. He was just twenty-eight when

he died of tuberculosis.”

Murmurs.

Gran cleared her throat and spoke: “All I know is that many of the ladies of my grandmother’s and especially of my great-grandmother’s generation were purveyors of Dark Romantic, what they’re calling Goth today. My mother’s generation was the first to give it a rest.”

“What about the men?” asked Annette.

“Far less,” said Gran, waving a hand in dismissal. “It was out of fashion by the time I was born. That would be right around the time the Lake District became a national park.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, anyway, we were talking about Emily’s rather *triste* poem, weren’t we?”

“Yes, and you were after my artistic licence,” said Emily, smirking. “You needn’t worry about me, Gran. I’m not being morbid. And it’s not about Mother.”

The two women locked eyes “Very well,” said Gran, nodding slowly, “I can’t say I understood Dark Romantic, but it’s made a lasting impression. It never seems to go away.” She then laughed and clasped her hands in her lap. “Indescribable, really, how they’d whip up the mists and call in the ghosts. And what you just read, my dear, came *directly* from their world. They would have adored you! They would have hoisted you up on their shoulders and paraded you around the graveyard!”

Laughter.

“So you understand I’m not being morbid,” said Emily.

“Morbid?” repeated Gran, pulling a face.

Annette spoke: “Life back then floated on a sea of death—with very little clearance. It could lap over the sides at any time. We can’t fully understand that today.”

“Oh yes indeed,” said Gran. “Kept you sober and humble, it did. They kept their Bibles close to hand. God-fearing, they were, deeply concerned about their worthiness in the eyes of God.”

“They cherished so many things we take for granted today,” added Emily.

“Oh, to hear my aunties talk about it,” said Gran, waving her hand. The older woman paused and looked out across the room, smiling. “It’s taken me all these years to just get an inkling of what they were saying. I couldn’t really imagine what they were on about back when I was young. My generation was very—I should say we thought ourselves very chic, very modern. We were dismissive of the older folk. Yours, my dears, is turning out much more level-headed than we were.”

“Thank you, Gran,” whispered Emily dryly.

The group entered a contemplative silence. Once again, the fire’s sounds seemed hypnotic. At last Gran spoke: “My grandmother once told me that by the time I was her age, there would be nothing left of her world or culture. Perhaps it still survives here and there, just barely. *O quam cito transit gloria mundi.*”

“There’s Gran showing off her Roedean education again,” said Emily. “I seem to be the only one sans Latin.”

“How quickly the glory of the world passes away,” said Annette solemnly.

Smiles shared all around.

Emily spoke: “My inspiration was an old lithograph I saw in an antique shop in Boston: a lady sitting on a high dune overlooking the sea. I almost bought it, but she seemed to be saying, ‘Leave me, I’m for someone else, but don’t forget me.’”

“Got another poem?” asked Gran with an earnest face. “Something cheerier?”

“No more of mine.”

“Anything,” replied Gran.

“All right then. I’ve got my Rossetti here.” At that she picked up her hefty *Penguin Complete Rossetti* from the coffee table and opened it to one of many bookmarked pages. “Yes, this is called *A Hope Carol*. It’s an advent poem, but I think it’s appropriate.”

“Oh, lovely,” said Gran. “My grandmother always read her to me.”

Emily cleared her throat and began:

A night was near, a day was near;
Between a day and night
I heard sweet voices calling clear,
Calling me:
I heard a whirr of wing on wing,
But could not see the sight;
I long to see my birds that sing,—
I long to see.

Below the stars, beyond the moon,
Between the night and day,
I heard a rising falling tune
Calling me:
I long to see the pipes and strings
Whereon such minstrels play;
I long to see each face that sings,—
I long to see.

To-day or may be not to-day,
To-night or not to-night;
All voices that command or pray,
Calling me,
Shall kindle in my soul such fire,
And in my eyes such light,
That I shall see that heart's desire
I long to see.

The audience silently digested the words. Annette finally spoke: "Quite lovely. Full of yearning for a higher plane."

"Read that last line again, dear," said Gran.

"*That I shall see that heart's desire I long to see,*" recited Emily.

Gran continued: “We don’t speak openly of such things any more. But we speak quite openly of the most ghastly things, things that would burn the ears off my poor grandmother’s head.”

Short, sharp laughter.

“Rossetti was a devout Christian,” said Annette.

“Indeed,” replied Gran. “As were most people back then.” She sighed, letting her shoulders fall. “And look what’s become of that.”

The two younger women glanced at one another. Annette spoke: “I consider myself a Christian. We attend church.”

“Good for you, young lady,” said Gran. “As do I.” She then eyed Emily, frowning. “I’d like to roust this one out of her pagan bed on Sunday.”

“Oh, I would come, but—”

“But what?” cut in Gran, with real or mock consternation.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Emily, sighing loudly in frustration. “I don’t really know. I want something—smaller, simpler.”

“Smaller, humbler than the village church?” exclaimed Gran.

“Well, yes, actually,” said Emily, pouting.

“What kind of church do you want, dear?”

“All right, I’ll tell you.” Emily sat up and folded her arms across her chest. “I want a *small* church in the country. And I want a more serious pastor.”

“And our church isn’t *country* enough?” shot back Gran. “It’s a listed historic building. It’s freezing in the winter!”

Laughter.

Gran continued: “And Vicar Morley isn’t serious enough?”

“No,” replied Emily resolutely, “no, they are not. Neither nor.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Gran. “You’re being too critical, young lady.”

“Gran, I don’t want a nice young vicar. I don’t want a *tourist* church.”

“You want a fundamentalist church? My, my, you were in the Colonies too long.”

“No! I simply want someone not so—”

“You think he’s weak tea,” interrupted Gran. “And the congregation is too transient,” she followed in a weary voice.

Emily tightened her crossed arms and squirmed on the sofa. “I’m not accusing anyone of anything. I simply want a bit more shepherd and a little less —”

“Handshakes and back-slaps and happy-clappy and dazed, grinning strangers every Sunday,” completed Gran knowingly.

“Yes, perhaps.”

Annette spoke: “It’s no different with us. Most of our Sunday worshippers are tourists. We’re glad to have anyone in the pews. But you can’t build a congregation when you’re catering to site-seers just there for the show. We’re in the former East Germany where there isn’t much left of Christianity.”

“So you don’t think the modern church is for you,” said Gran to her granddaughter.

“It’s all fine and good,” continued Emily, shrugging her shoulders jerkily. “I’m simply saying it doesn’t ask anything of me. I can just float about where I will, do whatever I want.”

“I know what you’re saying, I know what you mean,” said Gran, followed by a small chuckle. “They’re so worried about driving folks off that they’ve watered it down to almost nothing. They won’t tug on the leash lest it break. That’s no way to run a church.”

“You want more spiritual leadership, more certitude,” said Annette.

“Perhaps.”

“But you’re not a submissive person,” continued Annette.

“No, not submissive,” Emily replied, “but perhaps ready to receive.” She frowned in frustration and wrung her hands. “From any god, from any church, I only want the strength to go the peaceful path. My mother”—Emily’s throat clenched—“went to her grave following the peaceful, forgiving path. I admire her sacrifice greatly. She brought a higher spirit into our lives. I need to follow, I need to honour her example somehow.” Tears began to fall down her cheeks, while her gaze remained high.

“There, there, dear child,” whispered Gran, sitting forward, then getting up and joining her granddaughter on the couch. She put her arm around her granddaughter’s shoulder and followed her gaze out across the room. Annette,

too, joined them on the couch. She took Emily's hand and stroked it, crying as well.

"Catherine was a brave lass, indeed," said Gran. "A brave lass."

"Sorry if things got a bit emotional last night," said Emily. "I blame the wine."

Emily and Annette were on the narrow, oak-lined lane to Wolkeld Hall. The morning was again overcast, the air cool with the occasional blast from the north-west. The stray raindrops came straight down from the mossy spanning branches.

"Please don't apologize. You were brilliant."

"Oh, I shouldn't have dominated the conversation with all my woes."

"You don't refute what you said, do you?"

"No, no, of course not." Emily groaned and shook her hands in frustration. "I know it sounds mad, but I *want* that life."

"What life?"

"Jane Eyre's! At least the one she had with the Rivers family." Emily stopped and looked up into the oak limbs. "I know I didn't explain very well, but that was the life, the church I was imagining."

Annette jumped a pace ahead, wheeled around, and, shaking her index finger admonishingly, exclaimed, "Well, you can't have it."

Emily laughed hard and long at her friend's petulant theatrics.

"What?!" exclaimed Annette, joining in the laughter. "Is it my accent?"

"No, Annette, no. It's just how you said that."

Emily straightened up, took a breath, and began walking again. Annette fell in beside her. "No, really, imagine being a school teacher back then in that village. Earning a pittance. Living in a stone cottage. All around is a Yorkshire semi-wilderness. And nowhere on the planet is anything even vaguely modern, nothing that could save a person from an infected—*toe*."

"Harsh," said Annette. "harsh, but thrilling for it. And as we suspect, the harshness, the *real* boundaries elicited the beauty."

"Would you go back if you could? If there were a time machine, would

you go back?”

The tall German threw her head back and forced her chest out. After a big inhale-exhale, she said, “I’d go back. I would.”

“Even if it meant an early death?”

“Because I’m a baron’s daughter, and I would have a definite place.”

“And you don’t have a place here?”

Just then a wind burst gave them a shower from the branches above. Emily glanced over at her friend, wondering if she had pushed too hard. Annette finally spoke: “My true self would be growing in proper soil. And my death . . . I would trust my death, came it early.”

They were silent for a few paces. Emily was moved by the gravity of her friend’s statement.

“But we can’t go back,” countered Emily finally, “like you just said.”

They both remained silent. The wind died down.

They came upon a large branch lying in the middle of the way. Without speaking, Emily took one end, Annette the other, and they carried off to the side. They rubbed their hands clean and fell in alongside one another, silent, each waiting for the other to speak. Emily spoke at last: “Annette, I’m sorry I brought this whole thing up—”

“But there it is,” Annette interjected. “Our whole problem. We’re falling into cynicism. We’re talking ourselves into reclusion. We are simply not in this world properly, not properly committed to it.”

“And meanwhile, it rages on all around us.”

“Indeed.”

“You are, though! You’re part of a family that knows what they’re doing.”

Annette sighed loudly. “I suppose it looks that way. But it’s not that simple. It’s like being a criminal that’s been released from prison. He may be free, presumably paid for his mistakes, supposedly safe again. But no one wants to look him in the eye. That’s how it is back home. We’re not *just* from the capitalist West, we’re from the aristocratic past as well. We’re *everything* the Communists, everything the modern world says is bad and evil.”

“It will take time and patience.” Emily paused and then continued: “Daft, isn’t it?”

“Yes. What? Who, me?”

Emily laughed and patted her friend’s arm. “Our dilemma, of course. You’re relentlessly brilliant.”

Self-conscious laughter.

Emily ordered her thoughts before speaking again: “It’s just so daft to wish—to wish to be in some other time. I can’t imagine how vulnerable and exposed I’d feel were I to go back. Would our idealism evaporate—and leave us in—”

“Utter and complete terror?” cut in Annette, wearing an ironic face.

“*Mir wäre Himmelangst?*” said Emily, testing a German phrase she had recently learned.

“*Himmelangst ohne Unterlass*, indeed. It wouldn’t be a game, that’s for certain. We couldn’t check in and out whenever anything went wrong. And yes, just a small wound could turn into an amputation—or worse. They didn’t even know what germs were until Koch and Pasteur.”

“We do. We know so much now. But then why do we have such doubts about modern life? Why are we so desperately looking for alternatives?” Emily shook her hands and rubbed them together. “Are we being childish, irrational?”

Annette suddenly laughed. “Do you remember that Brecht I once quoted you?”

“Ah, maybe? Bertholt Brecht?”

“Yes, where the man is waiting on the side of the road for his tire to be fixed?”

“Oh yes,” exclaimed Emily. “He doesn’t like where he came from and he doesn’t like where he’s going . . . so why is he so impatient for his tire to be fixed?”

Laughter.

Emily continued: “I feel I must reach out to the past. It’s my lifeline. Exactly why that is, I don’t really know.”

“Maybe noblesse oblige is more a form of *Mortui viventes obligant*.”

“I’m afraid my autodidact Latin is failing me again. Translation, if you please.”

“The dead obligate the living.”

“Right,” exclaimed Emily, “but the modern human rebels against obligations, especially to the past.” She shook her hands in frustration. “Everything is rushing so fast! So tell me where we’re going? No one can say. No one!”

“They see the past as the graveyard of our mistakes—at least that’s the modern attitude,” said Annette. “So by that logic, today is the least mistaken time ever!”

Laughter, bright but rueful.

“And what of all the sweetness and loveliness of the past?” said Emily. “Their true beauty gets buried deeper and deeper—and that somehow makes us more unmistakable. What a delusional state!”

“What a collectively psychotic, egomaniac state,” spoke-whispered Annette. “And you and I desperately rush about gathering up all the babies they’ve thrown out with the bathwaters.”

Emily’s mind was suddenly pulled into a house by the sea in bright moonlight, a chalk-white Carpenter Gothic surrounded by ragged, overgrown grasses. Taking up an inordinately large amount of the foreground was a broad, low cherry tree in the last stage of blooming. This was, in fact, a small Naïve oil painting she had brought back from America.

She first saw the painting behind the sales counter of a used bookshop in Manhattan’s *Aggieville* the previous summer. It spoke to her, pulling her into a brief, gentle vision-space. She asked the manager about the piece—to which he promptly asked if she wanted it—free. Surprised, she said yes, and he gave it to her on the spot, along with contact information for the artist. She contacted the woman and was enthusiastically invited to her house.

The artist turned out to be a middle-aged woman of Norman-French Canadian descent, frail with advanced multiple sclerosis, angelic-childlike in her frailty. The similarity in physical condition and the passing resemblance to her late mother at first shocked her, but the woman’s holy aura of patient suffering

overcame any misgivings. They enjoyed speaking French, Thérèse's mother tongue . . . although Thérèse's caregiver nurse always seemed to hover. At the end the second visit, the caregiver took her aside and explained that Thérèse was too frail and Emily's visits were proving to be too taxing. Emily's heart went out to her unlikely new friend, but she understood and agreed not to come again.

What had stuck Emily was the woman's innate affinity for the Dark Muse. All of the paintings and watercolours she had shown Emily contained a melancholic element, sometimes amateurish, but often enough depicting a strange and magical naïf expressive genius—as did “Gothic by the Sea,” as she came to call the painting. Later, the bookshop owner explained how Thérèse wanted the first person who expressed interest to have it. He was not openly disdainful, but it was obvious he saw only an amateur in Thérèse, pitiable in her illness, thus, his willingness to display her work.

“Off somewhere?” asked Annette with a hint of concern in her voice.

Emily put away her thoughts and smiled. “I was just thinking of a baby I might have rescued.”

They had come over a rise and out of the mossy, shadowy forest to stand before Wolkeld Hall's high, ornate Victorian wrought iron gates. The manor at this distance did resemble a boxy old factory, its smut-blackened limestone blocks piled up into a structure with no apparent order to their shape or size. The accents, the window framing seemed futile and overdone in their Gothic heaviness. At least a dozen chimneys, dark and slender, stuck up from the flat roof like pegs stuck randomly into a board. Around the base grew stunted yew and holly, thick and shaggy, creating a dark-green felt-like collar.

The young women instinctively paused and allowed the eeriness of the silence to wash over them. The spell was broken when a pair of rooks sitting on the nearest chimney croaked mournfully at the human trespassers. They flew off continuing to call out in their raspy dialect nature's universal disapproval of humans.

Once inside the gates, narrow brick paths struck out to the left and right of the cobblestone lane every ten yards. Emily remembered from her

childhood play how they formed the grid pattern of what were once garden blocks. Now only brambles, saplings, and weed-choked, wilded perennials filled the geometry, their roots buckling, if not in places completely rolling up the brick edges. The women made one quick circuit of a section on the left—surprising a fox around one corner—then continued up the mossy, mouldy, wavy lane to the steps of the front door.

The main entrance at the top of the dark-grey granite stairs was modest in size, but well detailed: The frame was built from chiselled convex blocks, smaller and of a lighter hue than the rest of the house stone. Left and right hung stained-glass lanterns held by very solemn robed and helmeted guards, each sheltered by a corbelled half-cylinder turret. The carved oak doors reminded of cathedral doors with wrought iron door knockers and door handles. Directly above the lintel was a bas-relief arch of large fitted pieces, and across this was a darkened copper plate on which the Latin phrase *Ad Montes Oculos Levavi* was etched.

The visitors had spoken barely above a whisper since entering the gates. Emily's large skeleton key unlocked the door with a loud, peace-shattering clank. She pushed hard on the right door, which swung open with a booming, echoing groan on its old hinges.

They ventured a few steps into the large and expansive main entrance hall and halted, peering into the gloom, as if housebreakers on the lookout for some ghost butler. The dead-still air inside seemed even colder and damper than that outside and the smell of mildew was unmistakable. Ranging above was the thirty-foot vaulted ceiling from which four large crystal chandeliers hung. Against the right wall was a wide set of stairs climbing to a three-sided gallery.

Emily looked down and noticed what seemed like a discolouring film coating the herringbone-patterned wood floor. They took a few more tentative steps, but she could feel the sandpaper texture of some gritty residue.

“Let's go up and I'll show you the library,” said Emily in a soft voice, which echoed ominously throughout the great space.

The stairs were decked with beautiful dark-burgundy oriental runners;

but to Emily's dismay, each step made a soft crunching sound under foot. She bent forward and ran her hand along the rug. It felt hard and stiff, as if it had been wet and improperly dried. Inspecting a baluster, she saw signs of water damage. Odd, she thought. It was as if the stairs had once been a waterfall.

More shocking was the state of the gallery library. In many places the ceiling showed obvious signs of water damage, if not outright dripping dampness. The half-measure of plastic sheets draped over the bookcases hinted at a reaction rather than proper preventative measures. To be sure, the sight of hundreds of old leather-bound tomes piled up on the floor, too many swollen and warped, told the tale. Depressing too were the portraits—Lady Jane on the north wall—barely recognisable behind translucent sheets of plastic. Emily went over to the giant oil of her great-great-gran and lifted the plastic for Annette to see. Annette made a quick curtsy.

Every room they visited on the second floor showed water damage across ceiling and walls. Canvas and plastic tarpaulins had been thrown over the furnishings, most of which showed water spots and other signs of having been wet. More than not, the discoloured carpets crunched under foot.

Annette's forlorn face indicated her sympathy. "Ours was dry enough—our roof was good. But so much damage from all the rough use. It's at least a hundred years older—if not more. When was this built?"

"Completed in the early eighteen-hundreds. There was something smaller here before, as I understand."

"We've finished a large chamber room—my little room too. Now we're putting the kitchen in working order. That much has taken all my life. I expect another wing will take the rest of my life," said Annette in a sad tone.

"Well, I've heard them talking—*arguing* about it, I should say. It sounds as if it would take far more money than we have. Gran says the roof will cost a fortune—it's lead and copper. Then another fortune to repair all the water damage. Then another to replace all the outdated lead-cased wiring. Another for plumbing. Another for new furnishings. And even if we just use just the fireplaces and stoves, we'll have to refurbish all the chimneys."

"Sounds like millions of pounds."

Emily laughed ruefully. “When he’s in his manic state, he talks about doing it all, taking out loans. But Gran pulls him down to earth quickly enough.”

“Yes, well, ours won’t cost nearly as much, because it never was this—*palatial*.” Annette closed her eyes, spread out her arms.

Outside again, a drizzly rain had begun. They braced themselves and started off down the lane. The eerie heaviness had passed, and a soft, quiet mood of vague relief had settled upon them. They walked along in silence until the manor’s gate was well behind them. Emily suddenly laughed. “Did you know we have a couple of volunteer helpers?”

“Really?” Annette laughed.

“Yes, yes. Father thinks they’re some sort of *genetic memory* movement. He insists they’re being *instinctual* in coming to us. Really. I doubt they’d fathom our minds, though.”

“Nobody shares our noblesse oblige,” said Annette in a somewhat forlorn tone. “Nor should they have to, I suppose,” she completed even more grimly.

“They’re some manner of idealists, no doubt about that. You’re right, though. We couldn’t expect them to fathom our noblesse oblige.”

“Well, who knows? They might just surprise,” said Annette.

“Why don’t we go see them and find out? This is your last day. Let’s keep it interesting, shall we?”

“Really? You mean to just show up?”

“Yes I do. Someone needs to have proper contact with them—from the lodge. They have some sort of arrangement with the local farmers, Sulley and Wilson, but what it is I’d like to find out.”

“Ask them first, shouldn’t you?”

“Or not.” Emily paused. “No, no, I want to meet them. Today.”

“Very well. I’m with you.”

“Right. Now I am curious.”

“We’ll just go up to their window and shout in, ‘Who’s your favourite

poet?” said Annette.

Laughter.

Emily continued: “I’m told there were more of them before. We’re down to just one couple.”

Annette’s next steps were more like stomps and she shook her clenched fists in anger and frustration. “Oh Emily, is poetry enough to carry us through?”

“Through modern life, you mean?”

“Yes!”

“Perhaps not. But in any case, I need it,” she replied in a small but resolute voice.

“Yes, as I do,” said Annette with the same resolution.

“Oh, hi there!” said the tall young woman with an American accent who had answered the door of the rubble stone cottage. Her head barely cleared the threshold frame of the weathered wooden door.

Emily and Annette introduced themselves, and the woman introduced herself as Alice. She was a handsome, robust young woman, square-jawed, with straight dark hair parted on the side. Her eyes were a soft, light brown. There was a definite *présence* about her, a simpatico as well. She wore a fluffy shawl over a long sweater, woollen tights, thick ankle-warmers, and felted house slippers. She was soon joined by the tall, lanky young man known by his surname, Haggitt. He wore a dark-brown poncho-cloak, woollen trousers, and Wellingtons. His face was long and thin. His eyes were dark, deep-set, and intense. In the dim light his hair appeared dun, cascading from his head in many long, felted cables. Emily was taken aback for a second as a darkness seemed to rush out at her. “I don’t want to take up too much of your time,” she said, recovering, “but I thought I’d come by and say hello.”

The modern-day crofter-tenants enthusiastically showed their guests into the single-room space, most of which was like one big kitchen-dining room. Everything was clean and tidy—and notably sparse: The small living space featured a sooty inglenook fireplace; otherwise, the large old wooden table and

antique chairs in the kitchen were the only furnishings. In the centre of the flagstone floor was an oval-shaped braided rug, possibly of local wool. A ladder led up to a loft space which took up the forward half of the house. Emily's eye was drawn to the wall opposite the entrance on which hung a set of faded lithographs of plant and flower taxonomy.

Emily nodded to Annette. "So, Annette is visiting me from Germany."

The hosts shook Annette's hand.

"And she's a peer, too, what?" said Haggitt.

"Yes," replied Emily, "we met in Kansas."

The visitors glanced at each other smiling.

Haggitt continued: "So let's figure out proper addressing. Should I say *milady*, old-fashioned-like?"

"Aha!" said Emily, "the moment of truth is upon us!"

Laughter filled the small space.

Alice offered the guests chairs at the table on which a large beeswax candle burned, casting a modest yellow light to dispel the interior gloom.

"We're fine with being old-fashioned proper and all," said Haggitt, as he slouched more than sat in the stick-backed chair. "We wouldn't be here if we weren't." He smiled at Emily, but his unblinking eyes seemed to bore into her.

Emily experienced a huge upwelling of self-consciousness, which seemed to need venting through some act of self-deprecation; however, she let it pass and continued smiling peacefully. "Shall we then?" she said calmly if not firmly. Her pulse slowed and a warm feeling spread out in her chest, finally reaching her face.

"Right then, *milady*," said Haggitt. He suddenly rocked forward in his chair and planted his elbows on the table, but then just as suddenly leaned back again into his previous posture "I don't mind a bit, really. It might seem odd these days, but we'd be calling a boss at work *ma'am* or *sir* just the same."

Nervous laughter.

"I do appreciate your effort," said Emily as lightly as she could. "That's partly why we're here today, to get your opinions on a few matters."

"Right you are then," said Haggitt. "Let's put on the kettle."

At that both Alice and Haggitt popped out of their chairs and rushed to the sink. The tension seemed to break, their hosts' body language now fluid and natural.

To the side of the ancient porcelain sink was a small hand-pump Haggitt used to fill a copper kettle. Alice dug the previous tea leaves out of a large teapot, then rinsed the pot. Haggitt set the kettle on the massive wood-burning oven-stove and made sure the fire was still adequate in the box. The visitors took in this impromptu North England tea ceremony silently.

"So," began Emily after the hosts had returned to their chairs, "tell us about yourself. From where do you hail?" her gaze settled on Haggitt.

Haggitt smiled knowingly. "Maybe you don't recognize me, but Tom Sulley's me uncle. Anna, me mum, would be his sister."

"I didn't know that! But then I haven't really had a proper chat with him since I've arrived."

"I'm from Canada," said Alice, laughing shyly, "as you can probably hear from my accent."

Soft laughter.

"We met in British Columbia," added Haggitt. "We were"—they simultaneously looked over at each other, smiling big—"activists, let's call it." At that the couple laughed, although with a rueful, knowing undertone.

"More like troublemakers," exclaimed Alice, to which they both laughed again.

"Very interesting," said Emily. "And your uncle has you helping out?"

"Yes, we're starting to," said Alice. "We got here the in March. Still getting set up."

"Oh, that recent. I didn't realize. I thought you'd been here longer."

"Been here a lot, actually." Again, Haggitt wore a wry smile. "You might not remember me, but I remember you."

Again, Emily felt uneasy under his direct gaze. "Well, perhaps," she began. "If you're a nephew I must have seen you. I called him Uncle Thomas, as well. I played with their younger children." Emily's brow furrowed as she tried to remember, and then she laughed. "Oh yes!" Her hands flew to her

mouth. “You’re Timmy! Of course you’re Timmy! So why are you Haggitt now, may I ask?”

Haggitt wore a pained expression, his shoulders bouncing. “*Timmy* sounds a bit twee, don’t it?”

“Then Haggitt it is,” said Emily. “So you don’t want to be Timmy, and I must now call Uncle Thomas and Auntie Jodie *Mr.* and *Mrs.* Sulley.”

Laughter, and then an awkward silence. Emily finally said, “What has Uncle, I mean, *Mr.* Sulley told you about me while I was away?”

“He’s filled us in.” But then Haggitt bowed his head and studied his hands.

“Well, then you probably know of my mother passing in America.”

“Yes, we heard about Lady Catherine,” he said solemnly, looking up again.

“I remember the card from the Sulleys. And I must thank him for the photograph. Were you in it?”

“That I was. And you and your mum were, too.”

“Yes, yes. Those were happy times.”

“I think we’re only four years apart, us.”

“Well, I’m glad we’re clearing all this up. And it’s good to see you again—ah, Haggitt.” Then turning to Alice, “So, tell me about yourself, Alice.”

“Okay,” replied Alice in a soft, controlled voice. “I grew up in Winnipeg. My maiden name is Peters. My family came over from Russia right after World War Two.”

“But you’re ethnic German, correct?” asked Annette.

“We are,” she replied, nodding vigorously.

“I know about the Volga Germans,” continued Annette. “My grandparents had a *Wolgadentsche* family helping on our old farm. They eventually migrated to Canada as well.”

“So you’re not Russian?” Emily asked Alice.

“No, we’re German,” answered Alice, beaming.

“Germans who *settled* in Russia,” said Annette.

“Originally from Hesse, and we spoke a Hessian dialect,” said Alice.

“Do you speak any dialect?” asked Emily.

“No, I’m afraid it’s dying out,” said Alice. “My grandparents could speak it, but we never learned it. I speak some *Hochdeutsch*. I was in an immersion school in Winnipeg, *aber, wissen Sie, ich habe so gut wie keine Gelegenheit es zu üben.*”

“*Wir können ja duzen,*” said Emily.

“*Gut, gut.*”

Soft laughter, then silence, awkward. Emily realised she would be driving the discussion, that these would-be crofters were deferring to her. “So, I’ve heard you want to be in agriculture.”

The hosts laughed loudly, and Emily regretted her phrasing.

“That we are!” exclaimed Haggitt at last. I mean to learn as much as I can from my uncle and Todd, er, Mr. Wilson.”

“I’m just curious about your status. My father seemed not to know exactly. Everything seems—informal.”

The host glanced quickly at each other. Haggitt spoke: “Yes, milady, it’s all sixes and sevens for sure. The others got turfed. I expect we’re sort of on probation. We’re to be *subcontractors*. We’re supposed to fill out some paperwork—tax stuff—but we haven’t seen wages yet.”

“Oh my! So how are you getting on?”

He shifted in his chair before replying. “Right, well, we’ve got some savings. Alice’s parents help. And we take a meal sometimes with me aunt and uncle. But we’re keen on getting set up here”—he looked around at the cottage space—“being proper farmers and all.”

“Has anyone said what your duties will be?”

The couple again looked at one another wearing ironic smirks. “No,” said Haggitt, “not exactly. We’ll be helping out where we can and all. They’ve brought down the sheep now and we’ve been helping with the sorting and such.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m curious. I’m trying to figure out where I fit in as well, and I certainly don’t want to encroach.”

“No worries there,” replied Haggitt, waving his hands in dismissal.

“But you’d like to do more or less what your uncle does, eventually,

correct?”

Haggitt gave a sharp laugh and glanced over at Alice. “I’m happy to hear this question *directly stated*, and I’d like to answer it.” He rubbed his nose, leaned forward, and continued: “Nothing’s really been said—definite, that is. I suppose everyone wants to see how we do, whether we’ll keep at it and all. But yes, I could see myself doing what Uncle and Mr. Wilson do some day, say, five, ten years on when they’ll be needing to retire.”

“Well, I must apologise for the confusion. It seems a bit odd that no one has sat down with you and sorted things out properly.”

Again, the couple glanced at one another, their smiles, however, strained. Haggitt continued: “It’s more my fault. Truth is, we came on our own. They weren’t really expecting us. But no one’s asked us to leave, so we’ll stay until somebody does.” He shrugged demonstratively, and the company laughed softly.

“I see,” said Emily evenly, but then added a smile. “They put you here in the Crowder cottage. You’re not squatting?”—which she softened with an ironic smile.

The hosts laughed nervously. “Yes and no,” replied Haggitt. “So I asked your father one day if we could use the place—and he seemed to indicate it was all right. This seems a proper bothy, something for people like us.” He grinned and shrugged his shoulders again, his eyes looking about the cottage interior. “It seemed to have our names on it.”

Alice stood and began pouring the tea. Silence. Haggitt jumped up—startlingly quickly—and tended to the fire. Emily discreetly shot a glance at Annette. The picture had suddenly become much clearer. She could just see her father in his scatter-brained, self-absorbed way acting maddeningly cryptic and non-committal towards these young people. And, in turn, she could imagine Uncle Thomas not pressing him on the matter, not sure what the new lord was really on about, or whether Gran was in agreement. Sixes and sevens, indeed.

This confusion also indicated her father had not quite emerged from his “theory” stage. During the previous month, he had been on a “fact-finding tour” of small-scale agriculture, visiting “gentlemen farmers” in Yorkshire,

Shropshire, and, just the previous week, Roger Scruton on his Wiltshire farm. That on top of reading books and watching videos, such as the BBC historical series on farming in the nineteenth and early twentieth century periods. And yet his comments about the “hippies” meant he did expect them to be involved—at least theoretically.

Emily took a sip of tea, put down her mug slowly, and tried to order her thoughts. “As you may know, my father, the Earl of Wolkeld, wants to *revive* some of the old ways. Are you okay with stepping back into the past a bit? I’m saying you won’t get much modern agriculture training here.”

“He wants things to be *manorial*, the way he was telling it,” said Haggitt in a low, even tone. His gaze was again direct, his voice, however, calm and even.

Emily smiled, but instinctively knew not to drop his gaze. “Yes, that’s—ah, the plan. Are you all right with that?”

Haggitt leaned back slightly and replied, “I’ll be straight with you, Lady Emily. As long as I see you and your family up there”—he pointed out the window—“pulling your weight, we’ll be down here pulling ours. But if you think you need to play the toff—like on the telly and such—let’s just say we’ll be disappointed. Not to be disrespectful, you understand.” His voice was at its softest yet, but there was a tinge of menace in it as well.

“No, I want to be honest as well,” said Emily, deflecting the steel in his manner. “I’m glad to hear what you really want. It’s good we’re talking about it.”

Haggitt shifted back into an open body language, but without smiling. “Yes, *milady*, I know you’ve got two hats to wear, sheep and farming and such, and you’ve got to see to the, yeah, well, to the aristocrat stuff. But if you give us the feeling we’re not on the same side pulling for the land—and by that I mean being respectful, thankful for what she provides—we’ll be *saddened*, let’s say, and we’ll probably have to move on.” With that he again attempted to bore into her with his sharp eyes, leaning forward, his hands on his thighs, his lanky arms hoop-like.

“I understand that perfectly,” said Emily, matching his soft, exact voice.

Haggitt finally looked over at Alice, and she looked back at him—fretful.

Annette and Alice traded glances as well.

Haggitt continued, but in an almost pleading tone: “Think about it, milady. We’ll be dependent on you—for our lives. We’ll be the poorest of the poor. But we don’t mind as long as we can do things the traditional way. We *want* to trust you. We know the money-grubbers, and we *don’t* trust them. That’s why we’re here.”

These last words were spoken with emotion, vulnerability. Emily sensed a breakthrough and took a deep breath and then smiled broadly. To be sure, this was a jarring reintroduction to her old playmate. She recalled something she’d read in an old Gothic novel about conversations being either *smooth* or *ragged*, that *ragged* discussions were to be avoided at all costs. Ironically, this was both. “That’s very good to hear, Haggitt. I’ll try not to let you down. But I must admit, it is odd to find such willing souls like you these days.”

“Milady, this is who we are, who we *really* are.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m *from* this place. I grew up just outside of Penrith and came here all my childhood. And I’ve seen the American way, the *modern* way”—the couple shot each other a quick glance, smirking—“and let’s just say we don’t care for it.”

“I’m curious,” spoke up Annette, “why do you say that? Can you explain it better?”

Haggitt’s intense gaze fell on Annette, then to Emily, then back to Annette. “I’ll give you an example.” He blinked and looked out the small kitchen window before riveting Annette again. “Image you’re an actor, a *real* actor, a Shakespeare actor. If you’re a Shakespeare actor, you want to be the best *Shakespeare* actor you can be. It’s not about you, it’s about Shakespeare, and you always know that. You’re living up to something, but you’re not going past it.

“But in America, it’s the actor what’s important. He’s the big attraction, and the films are built around selling him. That’s the main difference. In our world, it’s about old traditions and playing our roles. In America, it’s about the individual, and him getting bigger and bigger. Do you understand what I’m

saying?”

“Yes,” said both Emily and Annette, grinning broadly, glancing over at one another. “I believe I do,” said Emily.

“Very well, miladies,” said Haggitt, nodding-bowing his head.

“Curious,” said Emily, “we see it similarly.” She and Annette again traded glances. “So what did you do in Canada, if may ask?”

Haggitt and Alice laughed in unison and bid the other to answer. Alice responded: “We were environmental activists. We were trying to save some of the rain forests.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Emily.

“But it didn’t go so well,” drawled Alice dramatically.

“Had to give it up,” added Haggitt, rolling his eyes.

“May I ask why?” said Emily.

“Let’s just say we think we can do more good here than there,” replied Haggitt.

“We got arrested,” said Alice, suddenly grim. “They treated us like terrorists, threatened us with long jail sentences. I even had trouble coming into the this country. We’re legally married, but we had trouble at the airport last month. They detained us for hours. Separated us, asked the same questions over and over. Wouldn’t let us call anyone. Searched our stuff . . . didn’t get all of it back.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Emily.

“We don’t have any great love for the modern world,” said Haggitt, looking askance at the visitors.

Emily’s opinion of the young couple had grown, despite the animal side shifting so quickly between hot and cold. The pattern she noticed was Alice strong but calm, while Haggitt was clearly mercurial.

“We’re Terry Pratchett fans,” said Alice, suddenly cheery. “Have you read his Tiffany Aching books?”

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with them,” said Emily, surprised by the sudden change of subject.

“Go on, love,” said Haggitt to his wife, “you tell the ladies.”

“Okay,” said Alice. “So, yeah, it has something to do with why we’re doing this.”

“Yes it does,” said Haggitt with enthusiasm, “a whole lot to do with it.”

“You mean being here at Wolkeld?” said Emily.

“Yes, right,” said Alice. “So Tiffany Aching is a teen witch. I know that sounds bad, but it’s a very good story. It’s set in some mediaeval time. So there’s the peasants, the baron, and the witches—”

“*Good* witches doing medicine and staying up with the sick and dead and all,” interjected Haggitt.

Alice, nodding vigorously, continued: “So, basically, there’s an understanding—between the groups, I mean. Each group does their part. And nobody acts like they’re better than the others—because they all *know* they’re better than the others.”

Alice and Haggitt laughed, followed by the guests.

“The peasants know they do all the work and have the most common sense,” continued Alice.

More laughter, the visitors joining in immediately.

“The witches know they have magic and are needed to do medicine and keep the mystical side good. And the baron and his family know they’re high-born and educated and such. But they all need each other, that’s what’s important. nobody acts superior—or if they do, they try not to show it, I guess. Everybody’s super-courteous, and, well, yeah, everyone has their role to play.”

“Main thing is it’s an old classic story that doesn’t change,” added Haggitt. “And nobody’s trying to take advantage of the situation.”

“Makes perfect sense. I’ll have to read it,” said Emily.

“Are you Tolkien fans?” asked Annette.

The couple laughed in unison. “Just the biggest fans ever,” said Haggitt.

“Very well,” said Emily, smiling broadly, “very well, indeed.”

At that, Haggitt jumped up and retrieved a notebook from the drawer of a small desk. He pawed through the tattered pages until he found what he wanted. He cleared his throat and read: “*That nature would hold her wards to the same rules but man should always find exception.* That’s a quote I found somewhere.”

“Quite nice,” murmured Emily as she and Annette traded glances.

“Your woods’s magical, you know,” said Haggitt, again, suddenly edgy, with a strange glint in his eye.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Emily, again feeling the darkness rush in.

“Oh, indeed it is,” he drawled, looking down his nose at her.

It was an early overcast twilight as they headed back east through Wolkeld Wood. The wind was intermittent and the damp air carried a sharp chill. The young women were anxious to get back indoors again.

“You did fine,” said Annette.

Surprised, Emily gave her friend a quick glance. “How do you mean?”

“You were warm, gracious, and just a fraction cool and aloof.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to be.”

“But that’s the role, isn’t it? You heard what they said. We’re all playing roles here.”

“Right, right, roles in some fantasy novel.” Emily hummed-groaned. “I do remember Timmy—Haggitt. I remember him being very shy and quiet, always so happy to come here and wander about and play with us. It’s a bit of a shock to see all that gone.”

“I don’t like him,” said Annette.

“Well, for a second when we first came in, it seemed like Haggitt and I were suddenly a million miles away, standing facing one another. But then I was back.”

“That sounds weird.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Silence.

“What do you think of Alice?” asked Annette at last.

“She seems like a nice person. Why? What’s your impression?”

Annette laughed, but with a self-conscious lilt. “She’s exactly the *schwarzbraun* type, for certain.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s an old thing from back home. *Schwarzbraun* means her hair. But

it's also a type. It means she's simple, honest, direct, earthy."

"Yes," replied Emily, "I can see that."

"I'd be seen as the *spröde belle* type."

"You're saying she's earthy and straightforward, and you're nervous and uptight," said Emily with a laugh.

"That's it," answered Annette, laughing along.

"German class distinctions."

Annette gave a knowing hum. "Oh yes, we still have a class system. Unspoken, perhaps. It comes out in odd ways. You'll hear someone say, 'Doesn't she look like a peasant?'"

"I'm sure that happens here."

"And I'll receive deference—or disdain—when I least expect it. People hear the *von*, and they act like it still means everything it ever did . . . but then for some just the opposite, that I'm the lesser for it, that I owe something for past sins."

"Well, here things are a bit easier, I suppose. After all, we still have a queen."

Annette growled. "In any case, we're on a shrinking iceberg drifting south."

"That we are," said Emily wistfully. She paused before asking the next question. "Again, how seriously are we to take our peerage? Our new friends want us to play our roles."

Annette sensed unease in Emily's voice and looked over at her quizzically. "That very question was indeed just presented to us."

"We certainly went beyond normal employer-employee relations," replied Emily.

"Oh, girl, what just took place would be unimaginable back home."

Emily suddenly laughed brightly. "But isn't it odd how we get any respect or recognition at all?"

"I suppose so," said Annette, laughing. "They haven't killed us outright like they did in the Soviet Union." She laughed and swung her arms. "Maybe they're keeping us around for a rainy day. Some day soon they'll trot us out and

say, 'You're back in charge again! Get cracking!'"

Laughter, and then the young peers were quiet for a few steps. Finally, Emily said, "We may internalise noblesse oblige. That's all very well and good. But I can't say I know how to *externalise* it—in *this* era." She pointed at the ground with her finger.

"Nor do I," said Annette in a soft, earnest tone. "I say yes to my title, and no, I don't know which way to go with it. But you did well with our new friends, I must say."

"Perhaps," said Emily plaintively.

"No, that Haggitt put things on edge, and you handled it perfectly."

"You noticed that?"

"Oh, I see an agenda with him. Definitely."

"He seems eager enough—loyal even."

"To what? To whom? You? Your father? Or to something of his own imagining?"

"Yes, yes, I know what you're saying."

"We'll see, I suppose."

"Yes," said Emily plaintively, "we'll see."

They walked on in silence. Just then the other-worldly howl of a fox came down from the deep forest north of the narrow lane. The weak, short twilight was all but spent, the shadows joining up into full darkness. The young women quickened their pace again.

"Don't we always circle around this issue every time we meet?" said Emily.

"What we're supposed to be doing as peers?"

"Yes. Dearest Annette, you go tomorrow, and when do I see you again?"

"Anytime you want. I'm through at the end of June, but I don't think I have much left to do till then. If these exams have gone well, they tell me I won't need to do orals. Your turn to come to me!"

"Fine. We'll write."

"Wait for mine first so we don't get crossed up, all right?"

"Good," replied Emily.

“But promise you’ll visit me,” said Annette in almost a whisper.
“Promise me you will.”

“Oh, I shall.”

The dread of her dearest friend leaving was partly the fear of the intense emptiness that would invariably follow . . . which it certainly did. And yet the emotional and intellectual flogging they gave one another at every meeting could be exhausting, necessitating long downtimes. Now came the days, the weeks of contemplating all that had been so hastily unearthed and scattered before them.

After tearful farewells at the Penrith station, she came back to the lodge, packed a lunch, and kept moving all through the rest of the day, wandering the high windy fells to the north-west. She observed sheep farmers driving the last of their sheep out of their *hefts*, their specific grazing ranges, down to the lambing pens. She did not recognise anyone, however, and she knew to stay clear of the complex, highly coordinated round-up.

The next day she ghosted about the trails and lanes nearer the village, going in and out of Wolkeld Wood in the afternoon. Surrounding the village were cottages, fields, copses, all criss-crossed with lonely, as yet mostly deserted lanes and paths. A fog that had arrived after Annette’s departure still hung heavy on the lower elevations, seemingly more dense in the ancient forest. Dampness, coolness, stillness. Emily wore her wool frock, and on top she tried the Loden wool cape she had bought in Germany the previous Christmas. Her expensive technical rain shell was guaranteed dryness, but she wanted to face the elements like someone from the nineteenth century would have, and besides, it just looked and felt good.

The following day she hung out at the bookshop-café, which did have a name: *Franke Books* or just *Franke’s*. The proprietress was not there, a relief as she did not need attention. She was confused and upset after hearing the news from Gran that her father had taken off for London in the early hours. She felt slighted that he never told her of his comings and goings, only Gran. But Gran insisted she had been told only that morning. He was driving his BMW SUV

and had packed for a long stay. Business, pleasure? Apparently business. Gran said he was talking with an investment firm. About what? A job. Why? Because expenses are greater than he thought. . . .

She received a card from Annette on the fourth day. The front picture depicted a section of Philipp Otto Runge's *Genien*: mesmerised cherubs hovering around a mysterious point of light. Included was a long letter, along with a *Scherenschnitt* or paper cutting art of a currant branch that she said was after Runge's original. Their agreement was for each person to write in their mother tongue. Emily was proud that she had not needed to look up one single word.

Annette reported their church was putting the *Türmer*, the watchtower trumpeter, on hold. She also said another peer family had visited them, including a son, who was just a year older. He was nice looking, but a crashing bore and a hopeless *Spießler*, a word Emily already knew from its frequent use by Annette to mean clueless and tedious philistine. She complained about the whole “breeding” overtones of their encounter, the unspoken pressure to seriously consider each other for a peer match. Her parents, whom she always praised as enlightened on the subject, swore they meant nothing by it. And yet, according to Annette, this Hans-Dieter fellow had dropped enough hints as to require her to become almost rude—or as she put it, a very *unwirsche Freiin*. Otherwise, the animals were all good, including her horse, although it had shown its displeasure of her absence by biting her finger as she offered it a carrot on the first day back. She also mentioned her brother had been in attendance—and had actually hit it off with the visiting family's daughter, Marta. She and Robert, along with Marta and a third, younger brother, had given a recorder concert on their final evening together. The weather had been unseasonably sunny and warm. . . .

The first thing Emily did upon returning home that evening was to start a letter to Annette. At dinner she delicately extracted more details from her grandmother about her father's mission to London. Apparently, he was to receive a full partnership in a prestigious investment firm, including a large

bonus. And yes, this was mainly about the renovation of Wolkelde Hall.

Dearest Annette,

As I write this I don't know whether to be angry and start smashing things or to simply fall into Uppgivenesshetsyndrom and remain in bed for the rest of my days. Are you seated? If not, sit. Father has apparently decided to chuck the whole gentleman-farmer idea and crawl back into the business world. He's run off to London—in the dead of night, without so much as a goodbye. Return date unknown. Gran apparently didn't oppose, rationalising he was a disaster as farmer, but had always looked smart in a suit. The main reason, of course, is to raise funds for the hall. Even as a derelict Gran says we would have to spend buckets of money to improve it, something to do with National Trust or Park rules. It's classified as Grade Something, which means loads of pressure to “bring it back online,” no doubt as yet another money-making theme park for the Downton Abbey tourists. So there it is: A fortune must be raised. Ad astra per aspera, indeed.

I know I shouldn't read so much into this, but I can't help but be in anguish. Now I must wonder all alone how far he will sink back into his old persona. What is to become of the whole “manorial revival” we had all hoped for? What can I tell Alice and Haggitt? They won't be pleased. Maybe Uncle Thomas and Gran can sort something out for them.

Seriously, don't worry about me. I only mean to inform. I'm probably overreacting, i.e., Germans aren't the only ones who “verzeissen” all their problems. Good luck with school. I'll close with a poem that popped out of one really solid Jane-on-her-lane walk:

*Dark purple sky, early Spring evening descends.
Flashing orange sparks, feathery white ash, glowing blue coals.
Lay down to fall into deep slumber
Under the oak beside the cold dark brook.*

*Wake to blowing rain.
Gray and keen, the Spring morn.*

Low rolling clouds ragged before the front.

Twisted pear trees of the forgotten orchard.

Wet overgrown grasses, brambles

Hide rotting worm-hole fruit.

Forth along the lonely home-lane

Crooked and narrow, rent deep into the land.

Barely sight ahead, none past thicket border of

Gnarled hedge, leaning oak, ancient yew.

As the darkening sky falls

At the end of the day,

To know what is ahead

By what was along the way.

Et in Arcadia ego. Greatest love and affection, your Emily

Emily wanted answers to the big question—whether this meant the end of their Arcadian plans—but something told her not to ask, not yet. If I'm confused, Gran can't be any less, she reasoned. Better to starve a need, a want, to leave a burning question unanswered in a time like this. What would Annette do? No, no phone calls.

What would her namesake Emily Brontë do? After all, they had managed their wayward brother. So, why not go and ask her? Of course! A trip to Haworth! Two hard, sharp laughs: one for how splendid the idea was, second at the sheer amazement that she had never, not once ever, been there before. . .

. . . where she would finally meet Emily Brontë . . . though no hope of a pleasant chat with a charming nineteenth-century bon vivant, more, rather, a tense stand-off with an emotionally troubled, physically done-in wretch. *Scrawny* was a fitting Americanism she had heard in Kansas. Yes, E.B. would charge along her moorland path with E.W. struggling to keep up. At last E.W.

would grab E.B.'s *scrawny* arm, turn her around, grab both of her cold, bony hands in her strong, warm ones—and what? What could she say, what could she do in that moment? Hug her? Not hardly. E.B. would not understand the whole modern hugging custom. To embrace a fellow human simply wasn't done frivolously back then.

Back then. There was a harshness to Brontean life, to Brontean *love* back then. Nothing came from wish or whim, rather, from great patience and long suffering. Only after long abstinence, denial, and outright suffering might affinities, passions wending about intertwine—but always at great risk of opprobrium quickly closing back in. In any age, place, the grey interpersonal spaces were mysterious frontiers, entered on tip-toes, with every guard up, mindful of every convention, ready in a split second to flee, that a nerve had been struck, mores, conventions offended.

In March, just before leaving America, Chris had taken her to Northampton, Massachusetts, to her alma mater, Smith College, where she gave a talk, then to Amherst, to the home-now-museum of Emily Dickinson. She shuddered at the memory, mostly with glee, but also at how ethereal it had been. After so much emotional turmoil in Kansas, Chris' New England seemed like a half-way house before the return to England.

Throughout her stay she experienced strong, confusing, *exhilarating* bursts of emotion in the oddest locations. Something downright dream-mystical had gripped her during the Dickinson visit. The museum was officially closed that day, and yet they were allowed entry to the old house, to the very room of the poetess' decades-long seclusion. As she later found out, Chris had arranged for a special private visit. What a dear she was!

But there was no wishing, no planning a vision; she could not go to Haworth expecting transport to the dark realms. She recalled Annette's comments about the Wave Goth Treffen in her previous letter, to be sure, the subtlety of the Dark Muse could never be scheduled to a place and time. She had despaired over the clueless tourist aspect of the throngs, how so many with whom she had spoken seemed to possess only the vaguest notion of the Dark Muse, and, otherwise, acted more interested in appearing offensive and

behaving rebellious-chaotic.

Oh, what is muse? she wondered. She recalled reading the Brontës' poetry to Irene, Peter, Mary and her family while on a Thanksgiving retreat to the Schrag's ranch. The glorious *No Coward Soul is Mine* elicited polite, but clearly patronizing smiles. Irene's reaction was particularly galling. The tall, angular ingénue gave it her daft little smile, then fell immediately back into one of her space-outs. Peter was worse, showing obvious annoyance. Irene's twin brother, with his anxious self-absorption, "wasn't into poetry." Alas. Perhaps not knowing a place's full history, the people's trials and trauma, kept outsiders like her from a full understanding. No, the rhythm of a place could not be picked up without deep and long personal involvement with its people and history. Something had put them off "stilted, flowery, *old-fashioned* poetry." What could it have been? Apparently, all the world is *not* a stage. For if it were, the scripts, going back generations, could be found, all the lines of all the parts for all the previous acts could be read, the plot puzzled out.

Emily of Wolkeld closed her eyes and took deep breaths, exhaling slowly and forcefully. Script or no, the modern world seemed no longer to respect history. Missing was the concept of *doom*, how mistakes in the past might grow, snowball as time goes on. To modernists, lines were breakable, fresh starts not just possible, but desirable, prescribed, expected, accepted. Her instincts told her just the opposite, that no reset button could be spliced in per whim.

She had come to hate the New Age phrase "live in the moment," which was like graffiti written on every wall. Her gut told her there can be no escaping the *doom* of one's past, that she must weave as best she could her life from strands stretching back into history, that her hands were just the latest on the needles.

Remembering something Annette said had started her thinking of doom. In a letter, she had said we cannot be separate from the time-locked weavings of our ancestors, that we may only carry over the threads from the past and "weave down" any mistakes in our lives as best we can. . . . Emily had to smile at Annette's inventive German term *herunterweben*; Germans made a sport of inventing new words. And it was only from this "weaving down" that we may

come to a sense of fulfilment and completion, although with the inevitable melancholy of fated imperfection, ours, as well as from the past. . . . And with that tiny bit of something resolved, she put pen to paper:

In Remembrance

*And from bygone generations I have surely more than blood.
The loom, its weave stretching into the past, holds me fast.
And try though I may, little hope there is in finding out,
Capturing this force, this Muse of our souls and blood.
For no sooner is some design of
Art, music, letters woven than opens
A far greater twilight space echoing the past.
Alas, that these modern conceits must all fail us;
For the Muse ranges far above, behind, and beyond. . .
From the heart, to the eternal sea, sky, forest,
And everywhere and forever between. . .
Subtle to mystical to rapturous.*

*Yea, the tarried songbird whose stiffening wings
In late November portend death's evening arrival,
Life's requisite warmth finally dissipated,
Her vast blue space now dark above,
The mysterious frontiers setting up,
The shadowy boundary closing round her. . . .*

*That we humans may touch, stroke the dark velvet curtains
Long before we slip between the gaps.
Death would have all such anticipation quiet—
All suppositions and assurances flashing then dark,
All expectations rattling, echoing lastly towards stillness.
Death would leave friends to carry on in remembrance,*

*That those, gathered by, must as best they can
Face the dark waves and reach out beyond sadness and despair . . .*

. . . as it always has been—and shall be again, once we are finally beyond this falsely detoured modern age! Sign. Fold both letter and muse lines together. Address and affix stamp. Wax seal. Done. Feeling better now . . . until her mother's face—perhaps from the Christmas card—came to her mind's eye. Yes, she thought, Mother would pity me for this turn of events. But there could be no comfort from the thought of her mother lying much too soon in the ground. “Cold in the ground.” She spoke the words aloud. Time was cheating her: It had not weakened her grief—and “modern conceits,” poetry and such were only the thinnest coverings.

And what of Heraclitus' dead touching upon the living sleeping, who, in turn, touch upon the living waking? What of the living touching the living? She pushed out a hard sigh. It seemed so little good and pure transpires between the living nowadays. Not to wonder the Victorian séances begging the counsel of the dead, they at last good, wise, purified. And our own purest inner thoughts? Why are they so rarely shared these days? If humanity survives these times, they will look back on this age and wonder just what the bloody hell was wrong with us.

But living, breathing Annette would be very happy to hear about a trip to Haworth. Annette! Gad! No more heavy letters until the poor girl's school year is over once and for all!

The motor of Gran's black 1967 Citroën DS, *la déesse noir* as it was known, hummed reassuring, the handling eerily floating-smooth. For decades their mechanic in Carlyle, Dennis Gleason, had kept that most French of vehicles in perfect condition as a labour of love, often enough not billing them for work, all for the privilege of showing it at classic car events around the country. Emily had needed a lesson to learn how to shift and brake, as well as controlling the suspension settings.

Everything on that morning was in French butter as she sailed down M6,

the sky above ragged cloudy, although a reassuring glaucous-blue in her southern direction. The temperature was surprisingly warm, even slightly summer-humid. The elevation was steadily decreasing, but still hilly. At a very lonely roundabout she turned on to A65, continuing south-east into the rolling North Yorkshire countryside.

This was her first serious motor trip as a driver since coming home, and the narrow lanes, as well as the whole new experience of driving on the left side, kept her nerves on edge. To be sure, English roads were tight compared to the wide, broad highways of Kansas. Here the verges were barely a yard or two off, with potentially death-dealing trees almost touchable from the window. A modern Kansas highway's verges extended at least ten yards back to a property fence, not atypically, wide ditches on both sides, and never a tree in any of that. American "interstate" highways were even more land profligate, a typical interstate *width*—lanes, verges, and reservation—the *length* of a football pitch. She recalled with amusement the large mowing tractors that kept all of that real estate lawn-neat. How many millions of idle acres does America have in its roadways, she wondered? But then America's fetish for vast kept lawns was unique in the world.

She never let her gaze wander off for very long, much as she wanted to; but her peripheral vision and the quick glance did tell her generally good things . . . not something she could say about a drive through the American countryside. Especially in Kansas, the landscape was routinely spoiled by tasteless billboards, ugly buildings, abandoned, decaying commercial and industrial sites, and, of course, the seemingly endless sprawl of bland, monotone suburbs, along with all the "big-box" stores and chains that served them. In just those seven-odd years she had noticed the relentless expansion of suburbs, and now *ex-urbs*, taking over more and more of the countryside—rolling out in all directions from every population node across the starkly picturesque but apparently champion-less Flint Hills. It was so nice to not see any of that mess here. Her only complaint, however, was the amount of time she spent down in gorges of hedge vegetation, not able to see out across the land properly.

She had borrowed Gran's mobile and kept Maps running; however, with the insistent ghost woman, or as Gran called her, Miss Moneypenny, barking directions muted. The map often showed areas of dark green hugging the road. No doubt this meant protected land of some sort. She mused over the difference between protected land in Britain and America. The American concept nearly always meant little or no human occupation or activity, that is, completely wild land, while here it typically meant humans and land together in a much more complex relationship.

She recalled a conversation with Gran about her great-grandfather, the Eleventh Earl of Wolkeld, Charles Whitmore, and how he had fought hard to maintain the centuries-, if not millennia-old farming traditions of the Lake District when the national park was being created. Apparently, some had wanted the American model, even suggesting a core of the land should be depopulated and allowed to return to its prehistoric wilderness state. Total protection or no, it was a relief to sail along mile after mile and not see anything shocking, disturbing, so obviously ugly that any normal person would wonder what sort of degenerates would create, allow such ugliness. The English motorway wended through countryside and villages as narrow-economical as possible, as a guest, not a master of the land—at least relative to what she had seen in America.

She also noted the Yorkshire villages were mainly a simple vernacular rubble stone architecture. This was really no different than Cumbria, although Cumbrian structures seemed older and rougher, more often than not wearing bright-white lime.

She was now on A629, a proper four-laner, but still the landscape hardly matched her media-formed expectations, the hills, for one, being smallish and often enough wooded. Where had all those films supposedly set in Yorkshire been made? She was heading due south now and just entering a place called Keighley. Certainly nothing period-filmy here, she thought. After a few minutes of twisting and turning, she arrived at Haworth.

Maps declared the trip done in the middle of one Bridgehouse Lane. She parked the car near a restaurant and set out on foot up the pavement alongside

a lush, green park. The street began to angle sharply to the north, and, across and off to the left, she saw a narrow cobblestone way climbing directly uphill. This hinted at just the sort of English village charm a tourist would want. She crossed over and, indeed, found Main Street, where touristy Haworth commenced.

She continued up the narrow gauntlet of quaint tourist shops, along with platoons of tourists, until she arrived at what seemed like the centre square. There she found a tiny post office, an historic old pub, and, on the south shoulder, Saint Michael and All Angels Church. A few more paces and she was at another old pub. Beside it was Church Lane leading off left to the Brontë Museum, as a sign indicated.

She was hungry and considered the pub. A placard on side of the tawny stone building advertised Brontë Beers: one for Charlotte, one for Emily, one for Branwell, and one for Anne. The sheer commercialism made her freeze like a stalked rabbit. She read the bill of fare: good hardy English food, indeed. Her stomach growled. But wasn't that an organic grocer just the way she had come?

Not heeding the little voice telling her to turn back, she went inside the pub—to be hit with a wall of raucous voices and loud Celtic music on the audio system. It was noon and the place was full, and from the look and feel, not one local soul in the place. She glanced demurely about—no one took notice of her—then up to see written on a wooden beam a Jane Eyre quote: *I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.* Indeed. She turned and left immediately, water welling in her eyes. Haworth: literature tourism at its cloying, appropriating worst.

She stepped back out on to narrow Church Street and started west, but then had to quickly pin herself against a building not to be trampled by a great shaggy-footed horse pulling an open carriage rounding the sharp turn. The driver, a stocky, red-faced man dressed in Victorian garb, grinned and tipped his bowler—apologetically, mockingly? Coming out at last to the side of Saint Michael, she paused before a wooded park. Here she could see a corner of the infamous graveyard where, back in the day, improperly buried bodies had poisoned the local water wells, thus, fetching all the more corpses in a viscous

feedback loop. She had an urge to go down and inspect the graves, but again she stopped. She pulled her E.B. out of her rucksack and paged to *Start Not Upon the Minster Wall*, noting the last stanza:

What though our path be o'er the dead
They slumber soundly in the tomb
And why should mortals fear to tread
The pathway to their future home?

No, no, one does not tread the pathway to one's future home on a sunny day in a place overrun with gawking, nattering tourists. Any contemplation of the grave must be in a quiet, reverent setting. But there they were by the score, the so-called living, milling between the graves, loud and brazen as they could be. Was reverence in any of their hearts? Was a prayer on any of their lips?

So far, so very bad. A rush of disdain, anger even, came so swiftly that her cheeks flushed and her eyes again brimmed with water. What could tourists know of her Brontës? At her mind's feet appeared Plato's observation that the lessers have no "vibrant patterns" in their souls. But were they any less legitimate, less worthy Haworth visitors than she? Indeed, less. How so? . . . and there her thoughts broke down. A small shame began to grow in her chest, followed by more of the vague feeling of despair. She overcompensated by smiling and nodding to a young tourist couple coming the other way. The woman, surprised, nodded back, but with a condescending expression betraying her amusement at such droll, provincial social behaviour.

She could see the parsonage-museum directly ahead. However, she stopped, turned around, and headed back towards Main Street again. No good visiting the Brontë's hallowed home on an empty, growling stomach. Almost running, she rounded the corner and headed briskly down Main to *Haworth Wholefoods*.

The shop was English village tight and dense, nothing like the expansive retail spaces she had known in America. But that meant warm and cosy, a sort of English *hygge*. She was greeted by a statuesque young woman of Nordic

heritage standing behind the counter. Ah yes, ready-made vegan pasties. Smallish, she gathered up three, along with a bottle of kombucha, and drifted back to the counter . . . where again she basked in the glow of the kind, handsome young woman's smile as she tallied up the perfect food. And yet neither started a conversation. Prejudicial perhaps, but Emily could not imagine such an obviously modern New Age person being a Brontë fan or any sort of nostalgia turnip like herself. Something besides Dark Romanticism had brought this elven maiden robed in her pastel fairy silks to Haworth. But enough cynicism and disdain! Surely such a light-being could sense negative energy. She quickly exited and merged out into tourist foot traffic again.

She unwrapped one of the rice-tofu pasties and took a bite. Strong curry and ginger lit up her mouth and sinuses; sweat beaded on her face. In Kansas this would have been part of the fun, the uniqueness; however, on this day, in the bosom of her homeland, such aggressive, exotic spiciness was alien and off-putting. She landed on a Church Street bench and opened the kombucha bottle, quickly taking a drink. It too seemed sharp and aggressive, half of it jumping up her nostrils and making her choke. She slowed down and worked through the pasties, chewing carefully, trying to space out the spice burn. Veganism, karma-correct as it might be, now seemed like a cliché holdover from America's invented lifestyles mill. But was the Brontë-beer pub any better? Was the jolly old pub fare in this day and age any less contrived and cliché? Aaagh! She wanted to scream! Not a full hour in Haworth and she had been completely knocked off stride. But then what did she expect? How could a modern Haworth not be a scripted, self-conscious, self-promoting theme park? Deep in her heart glowed a pilgrim's reverence for the Brontës, and just the sight of these day-trippers ticking off their tourist's bucket list angered her greatly. Alas, she was a hopeless toff snob, and that's all there was to it. . . .

She finished the pasties and then a small chocolate bar she had from home, but another crooked gulp of kombucha threw her into a violent coughing fit. A passing middle-aged couple stared, their expressions sympathetic, but also disapproving for whatever youthful indiscretion had caused such a disturbance in their theme park. She felt embarrassment, then

consternation, then back to the day's general disdain. Her stomach was nouvelle-cuisine-full, even glowing from its foreign, exotic contents. Next to her on the bench lay a small pile of furry ginger slices.

She wondered anew what Emily Brontë would have thought had she walked by at that moment. Modern Emily would have stared beseechingly at classic Emily—and no doubt classic Emily would have been duly affronted.

“Miss, are you going out to the falls this day? May I come along? I do not wish to be alone,” she might call after her hero.

Fitting the heaviness of the air, the blankness of the thinly clouded, washed-out blue sky above, classic Emily would flatly reply, “Yes, I am going, but I can suffer no strange company on such an oppressive day.”

Modern Emily had to smile at her broad thoughts. Oh why had she not come with Annette? To sit on this very bench and *meckern* in German with Annette would have been heavenly, she thought. Her shoulders sagged and she sighed. The horse and cart suddenly reappeared, now hauling a sporty young couple in matching football jerseys. Both faces exuded an intense earnestness and sincerity, both sets of deep-set eyes staring ahead. She pulled in her feet just in case.

A memory of America suddenly came—of a late autumn bicycle trip she had made with Annette, Mary, and Irene on Missouri's Katy Trail. She leaned back and stared up. . . .

For all its blare and bustle, America could surprise with such lonely, forgotten places as that converted train bed now bicycle trail alongside the Missouri River. The cyclists had started out from the tiny river hamlet of Rocheport, Missouri, a very deserted spot in the centre of the state. Yellowed limestone river bluffs towered above the broad, malevolent-looking river, while the bordering woods made an especially hard-bitten impression. To be sure, such thick, twisted trunks and branches, with its understory of dense thorny brambles, spoke of an intense struggle for life in that otherwise temperate environment. Every bole stood strangled by thick vines: the three-leafed poison ivy, but also the five-leafed, grape-like Virginia creeper, on that particular weekend showing off its bright, distinctive autumnal reds.

Cool and calm as the cobalt-blue sky was, it could not restrain the border copses below from inserting heavy melancholic overtones, especially in the cavernous vaulted spaces created by their overarching branches. The dense woodiness of those copses, their foliage all but down, seemed like a built-up scarring and scabbing on the land. A feeling of emptiness pervaded—even a hint of malice. For the whole trip eastward to Hermann, Missouri, they saw only one other biking party.

Undiscovered? Forgotten? New World nowhere-ness always made a stark impression upon her. It was as if the trail had crept in out of nowhere—and had completely slipped the notice of busy, brash America. Indeed, she remembered how the all-female group felt unsettled, exposed. Nothing specific brought them to verbalizing these feelings (until the car ride back home); nonetheless, the place controlled its transient occupiers' spirits and emotions.

They stayed at Irene's aunt and uncle, Jake and Elizabeth Neufeld, in their nineteenth-century brick Italianate farmhouse just west of Hermann, Missouri. They and their five children—three girls and two boys: Rachael, Ruth, Rebecca, Simon and Mark—were followers of a plain-dressing, conservative Mennonite sect. To be sure, the Missouri Neufelds were uniquely calm and quiet, the most anti-stereotypical Americans Emily had met to date.

After a day as the Missouri Neufelds' guest, she could better understand the tall, soft-featured, near-mute Irene. It was clearly something genetic with these Dutch-Northern German Mennonites. Rachael, almost a twin of Irene, was fifteen and had the calm, serene bearing of a young princess. She recalled how slow and intentional their meal conversations were, how carefully meted out their softly spoken words seemed. She and social justice warrior Mary had the common sense not to interfere.

Enchantingly authentic-original was the Italianate. The ceilings were at least twelve feet high. All the floors were hardwood, each scarred and marked in its own strange Kandinskian geometric pattern. The completely bare walls (their sect followed a very strict interpretation of "graven images") showed the most intricate networks of cracks and bruises in the greyish-cream plaster—a faux marble of sorts. Emily could not stop staring at the walls. It was as if elite

European plaster restorers had balanced classic and modern on a knife edge—masterfully leaving no trace of such intent.

The original sash windows were tall and narrow with upper and lower panes of wavy-translucent glass. The transom windows over the doors were a medicine-bottle blue glass. Heating was by wood stoves, a huge wood-burning stove in the kitchen for cooking. Electric lights and a refrigerator were their only noticeable concessions to modernity. Having once visited Florence, Italy, with her mother, Emily felt as if she had walked into a surreal, dreamlike, anti-Florentine *casa*. It was bygone American life as *in situ* as it could be.

She sighed loudly, pulled her journal out of her rucksack and put her Mont Blanc Meisterstück (a graduation gift from Chris) to work:

1. Dear 21st-century Haworth: The desolate, forlorn, gloomy, misty, pallid, lonely, bleak, melancholic Dark Romantic the Brontës once distilled from their tiny Haworth and windswept Yorkshire semi-wilderness cannot be packaged and sold, not to E.W. at least. Your intentionality is antithetical to the subtleties that once moved pastor's daughters to write such grand works. . . .

2. . . . or I am jealous and don't want to share. . . .

The great irony of her Missouri trip welling up so clear and strong just then struck her as more than just droll. As she sat on a bench in the very place where her heroes had turned their lonesome solitude and seclusion into vast sublimities, a sudden and visceral wave of disappointment struck her. Her whole body ached as if suddenly overcome by a fever. She felt chilled, exposed in spite of the warm, humid air. It was all she could do to not burst into tears. She took deep breaths and forced herself to her feet. A few more breaths and she was off west again at a fast pace.

She was definitely not in the mood to share the Parsonage Museum with anyone; anger kept her moving past it and its milling tourists westward. She eventually reached Cemetery Road, which took her into a rising valley flanked

by low-slung, entirely treeless hills.

The strangely severe pain of disappointment had passed, the open space an almost instant cure, or at least distraction. She smiled and took deep, relaxed breaths, marvelling at the the land, the sky above—but then she frowned, pouted even. No doubt spoiled on the Lake District’s highlands, the real Yorkshire seemed too modest, too low. But no, no! Films, *films* had no right to tell her what this should be. How preposterous! *This* was the real Haworth moor. And if it wasn’t *windswept-moorish* enough, too bad! She laughed at her silliness, but then another negative thought sprang up in her mind. Oh what was her crazy father doing, she wondered? “Get out!” she shouted aloud, followed by a long, low growl—and he, along with her Yorkshire ingratitude, were finally gone. She quickened her pace, now concerned by the sight of dark clouds coming directly from the north-west.

Then she spotted it: heather, real heather! It covered almost the entire slope to her left. Not so much of it on that last stretch to Wolkeld Wood (and supposedly planted, not native), but here, *here* it was proper lush and thick, though a mottled brown and green, not in bloom yet. Out came her E.B. and to *The Sun Has Set*:

. . . In all the lonely landscape round
I see no sight and hear no sound
Except the wind that far away
Comes sighing o’er the heathy sea

But again the tinge of irony and disappointment, there being no such blessed solitude on this modern Haworth moor: straggles of tourists ahead and behind her. And although they were distant enough, their chirpy voices seeming Doppler distorted, they nonetheless polluted her senses.

Cemetery Road ended at an intersection with a proper two-lane road, which, apparently, led down to a reservoir, of all things. Crossing, she saw the trail sign to “Brontë Falls” pointing up a single-lane way of loose stone and broken tarmac. This became a rocky path less than a mile later.

Indeed, any increase in nature and remoteness had always been a tonic for her. Expectation slowly grew again as the heather held for whole stretches like thick sea foam floating along beside her on the slopes. She stepped off the trail to touch the wiry growth, and in that moment Elation touched her. *Look up*, said Elation, and she did, directly up into the vast sky above. Had she been subconsciously saving this? In any case, she seemed to be lifted off the ground . . . or the loss of her peripheral sight of the ground had been enough to bring on a brief instance of weightlessness. She stumbled on a rock.

The blue of this sky was not like any blue she had seen in Kansas—a place, after all, with no shortage of sky. She decided to call it Yorkshire Blue. But dark clouds in great long trains were coming on fast from the north-west, and the breeze suddenly rose to powerful gusts, racing confused in many directions. Rapid was the change! In just a few minutes the monstrous clouds had become a dark and menacing blackness, frighteningly low and directly overhead. This was Yorkshire Black.

She recalled her *Le théâtre de le vallon*: the sky, the clouds only gauze, the pulsing winds rending it apart to reveal—what then? Annette had once used a truly magical German expression: *Eigengrau*, roughly translated, “self-grey,” or that singular not-really-darkness one sees behind closed eyelids. No, the void behind the tattered gauze should not be the astronomical blackness of outer space, rather, the indescribable, strangely glowing-vibrating, yet sightless *Eigengrau*. Just then she was buffeted by a strong blast of wind. She increased her pace, her heart and mind empty and free. Coming over a rise, she encountered a large group of Asians making a noisy, excited scurry back to Haworth. She put her head down and strode on, determined to get to the falls.

She finally arrived at the so-called Brontë Bridge, a stone slab across the South Dean Beck, to find another large convention of Asians, this one going through photography rituals. Asians. What was it about the Brontës they liked so much? Annette had once postulated that all peoples of the northern latitudes know and appreciate the Dark Muse.

She drifted over to the falls—clear cascading water set back into the side of the shaggy hill. But then she realised she was staring straight at a man, a

non-Asian to be sure, wrapped in a blanket, fast asleep in the thick grass beside the water.

She edged closer to him and intentionally away from the tourists. For some strange reason he was her responsibility. In any case, the Asians avoided that corner of the site, none even glancing over at her. No doubt they had noticed this spectacle of a sleeping man in the wilds and assumed he was a derelict or a drunk. A large thunderclap sent them off, leaving her and the stranger alone. Just as she squatted down to wake him, she felt and saw big drops of rain.

“Sir? Hello, sir?” she exclaimed loudly. “It’s starting to rain, sir.”

The man’s eyes fluttered open and he popped into a sitting position, staring ahead wide-eyed. This seemed to her a purposefully comical exaggeration and she laughed. He, however, gave her a look of intense confusion, which had the immediate effect of quieting her.

She sized him up to be at least three inches taller than her five-eight and well-built. His youngish face was handsome and soft, his nose hawk-beaked, his eyes a light brown, brown too his hair, longish with a gradual wave. However, it was his dress under the black woollen cloak (not a blanket after all) that was most interesting: nineteenth-century black frock and trousers, a white, high-collar shirt, a wrapped white cravat around his neck. He rubbed his eyes and face, put on his black, floppy-brimmed hat, pulled the large black leather satchel which had served as a pillow to his side, and rose smoothly to his full height. But then like a soldier he snapped to attention and bowed low. “Madam!” he proclaimed like a Shakespearean actor, “I shall withdraw straight away if you require solitude. Shall I?”

“No, no,” Emily muttered, somewhere between bedazzled and amused, her curiosity outweighing any fear of the man.

“Well then, gracious and patient lady,” he exclaimed almost breathlessly, standing ramrod straight, “I shall introduce myself by telling you by what name you should address me, namely, John *ap* Harry. I am a baron’s son. However, due to my infirmity, I shall not reveal my true name, my true identity at this time, as that would bring a degree of embarrassment upon my family.”

“Very well,” said Emily, suppressing a laugh. “I’m Emily, Emily Whitmore.”—was out of her mouth before she could stop it. “Ah, are you from here?”

“This is, in fact, my first trip north of my Herefordshire, Miss Whitmore. On other occasions I’ve travelled south, but mostly west into Wales. And I must say, my family and I are often at odds. Truth be told, I should not have wandered so far. And though I have sufficient funds”—he pulled a large fold of pound notes out of his coat’s inside pocket—“I must be wary of those who might report me as a vagrant. The local sheriff has surely identified me, and so I mean to leg it over to the next village. I’m told Burnley is the next place to the west.”

“Are you an actor of some sort?”

He didn’t smile, but only bowed his head and stared at his feet contritely.

She felt the momentum rapidly falling off. “So you’re not an actor, ah, Mr. John ap Harry?”

He smiled shyly and glancing up said, “Nothing of the sort, Miss Whitmore.”

“Very well, Mr. *ap* Harry.” She smiled, amused, *relieved* to be amused, glad as well to find a fellow human so obviously not a bucket-list day-tripper. “But can you tell me why are you in this sort of dress?”

At first he looked at her confused-askance, but then laughed, “Oh, this? Yes, well, I’m compelled by my ailment to escape the complications of modern life. And I do so in every possible way. For you see, all the many complications of these times overwhelm a person, and various brain fevers are the result. Mine is particularly debilitating.”

Emily struggled hard not to laugh. To have gone all day and not seen one remotely common soul, then finally to find this particular one sent straight over from central casting—she could not help but grin. “I see. A wise choice, no doubt.”

The drops of rain were rapidly becoming a deluge. The wind attacked hard and the clouds roared with thunder. John ap Harry wrapped himself in his cape and Emily got her waterproof shell out of her rucksack and put it on.

“So, may I call you John?” she shouted above the natural percussive noise.

“Certainly, Miss Whitmore.”

“And please call me Emily.”

“Very well, Miss Whitmore—Miss Emily.”

Emily laughed in mock frustration, but did not correct him. “So, Lord John, I suggest you don’t attempt Burnley. We should return to Haworth—ah, *straightaway*.”

John ap Harry struggled with this idea, brow knitted, his broad mouth in a pout—as if told by a theatre director to look very obviously perplexed. He finally bowed low and said in a voice just audible above the deluge, “Let us be on our way.” But then he paused, took what looked like a bottle of prescription medicine out of his coat pocket, carefully chivvied out a large white tablet, placed it in his teeth, bent over the stream and scooped out handfuls of water to drink. At last he gave Emily a nod and motioned for her to lead the way.

They ran as much of the way as their legs and lungs would manage, but the worst of the storm was much faster, passing over them, leaving at last only drizzle from the low, formless clouds. They slowed to a fast walk and eventually reached the abandoned village square just as a patch of blue and sunlight appeared above. The storm had freshened and cooled the air. The wind was noticeably chillier. For some reason it now seemed natural to go into the old pub. John held the door open for Miss Emily, bowing.

Inside, the atmosphere much was more inviting than her last visit—the crowds were gone and the sound system played the BBC relatively softly. “Got caught out in it?” exclaimed a portly man with jet-black hair and a big bushy black beard from behind the bar. Grinning broadly, he added, “Set yourselves at the stove, why don’t you. Just through there.” He pointed into a corridor on the other side of the main room. “Would you like something hot to drink, a coffee or tea? Mulled wine, cider?”

“Oh, yes, I’ll have a cider,” replied Emily.

“Tea, if you please,” said John in a breathlessly gracious voice.

“Place the chairs to suit,” he said, obviously bemused by at least one of his guests.

Alone in the small side room, they pulled two dark-brown leather cosy chairs away from their small table and pushed them close to the wood-burning stove. Very welcome heat poured off the black modern stove, recessed into a niche that no doubt had once been a fireplace. The pub had obviously been recently renovated, the new mood, however, awkwardly hanging between modern and old, not doing either justice.

The heavy-set man returned with a mug for John and Emily each. “So this is how it stands” he began, “my cook’s stepped out, but I can heat up some beef barley soup and fry you some eggs if you’d like. I can show you the menu, but like I say, the cook’s off for a while.”

The guests agreed to the soup and eggs, and the man left, beaming with his publican’s sense of worth.

After a few sips of their hot drinks, it was obvious both were feeling shy. Emily finally took the initiative and spoke: “So, you’ve come on foot?”

John seemed wakened from a trance and snapped dramatically into full attention. “I’m sorry, Miss Emily, you’re certainly due a bit more of my story, and you shall have it!”

Emily laughed nervously. “I am curious.”

“Where to begin is the only question.” Painfully gracious John ap Harry said this in a distant, almost sad voice. He sat up even more erect, but kept his eyes riveted on the blurred flames in the stove’s blackened window. He let out a short laugh and continued: “I was sleeping at that spot because that is *literally* where I’d fallen. Good lord! I’ve been up for days, wandering straight through.”

Emily remained silent, looking over the rim of her mug.

“You see, I’m susceptible to schizophrenia. Set me off in an entirely new direction this time. Never before have I gone so far north. But I took one of my ‘horse pills’ last night—another, as you saw, at the falls just now—and I’m come back down to earth. Does all this shock you?”

Emily and John’s hesitant eyes locked, but she felt nothing aggressive or malicious in his gaze.

“I’m fascinated, I have to admit,” she said.

Soft laughter.

Emily had to marvel at how at ease she felt sitting before the fire, next to this nineteenth-century re-enactor. It was as if she had been searching all day for something but had found its far more interesting substitute.

“I do mean what I said before,” continued John with a wry smile, “about the complications, complexity and all.”

“Yes, yes, please explain.”

“I shall, but you must understand, it’s not my idea. I got it from this brilliant Canadian chap. He believes all modern mental illness comes from the insuperable complexities of modern life. Yes. All of these things, these situations beyond our control building up and up—and it seems nothing can ever be sorted out. And that’s when a person’s *predilections*, or *susceptibilities* come to the fore. Like a balloon being overfilled with air, until some slight imperfection on the surface gives way.”

“Interesting.”

“Oh, they argue over me.” He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “They can’t decide whether I’m bipolar or schizophrenic. Lately, I’m on anti-seizure pills. Horrid, horrid things! It’s as if a steel band is squeezing my brain. I hate them, but”—and then he sighed with his whole body—“I need to come in and tidy up a bit. I must apologise, I’m a bit smelly and greasy right now.”

“You’re saying you’ve been wandering *on foot* these past days?” asked Emily in a quiet tone.

“I’m not sure. Some of it for certain. For certain the police are on the lookout for me. My family is looking for me. I’m no doubt a missing person.”

“Shouldn’t you just report in? They must be worried.”

He made a pained expression. “Oh, and have to answer to them?” He again waved his hand. “Anything modern is the very last thing for someone like me right now.”

“I see,” drawled Emily. And she did half-understand. She realised in just those short minutes that John was not so very far from her on the scale of “modern-beleaguered,” that she too might fancy wearing nineteenth-century garb and moving on foot through the land.

They fell silent, sipping their beverages and staring at the flames.

Soon, the proprietor reappeared carrying a tray with soup, eggs, and a basket of toast. He sat it down on the small round table and carefully dragged the table in front of the stove between them. They thanked him and then helped themselves to the food.

“Can you explain a little more about your dress?” said Emily, smiling, trying to not sound in the least disapproving. “I might just try it myself.”

“Oh, by all means, do so, Miss Emily,” he mumbled through rapid chewing. “But to explain why this helps—hmm.” He chewed and thought, and then suddenly exclaimed, “I retreat like a mouse running under a bush. And there I remain until whatever frightened me has passed. There, does that make sense?”

“And something frightened you, overwhelmed you?”

“I would say this time it was more an enchantment than a fright. You see, I fell into a trance walking in the snow. Those millions of falling flakes seemed to get shinier and glitterier—until I was, yes, transported to another plane. I walked all that night in the snow. Then I set off northwards—like the Andersen fairy tale.”

“The Snow Queen?”

He glanced over at her and smiled. “Indeed, and I like Kai with a sliver of madness caught in my eye.” He then wiggled his nose and cast his eyes around the room. “No, no, I mustn’t always blame the modern age, although I could never imagine myself thriving in these times. No idea whatsoever how to do that.”

“Nor I,” Emily said softly.

“Confusing times. Especially if one is a baron’s son.”

“Yes, you mentioned that before.”

“Yes, indeed, that I am,” he replied laconically.

“And I’m an earl’s daughter.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” replied Emily demurely.

“Jolly brilliant!”

Laughter.

“So what brings an earl’s daughter to Haworth, if I may ask?”

“Oh, a pilgrimage, I suppose,” she said in a flat voice.

“Yes, I’m a Brontean as well.”

“What’s your favourite?” she said more energetically.

“Oh, I love every bit of them. I love how—” But just then voices floated in from the main room and John ap Harry jumped out of his chair. Crouching, he rubbed his face with his hands and stared wide-eyed at Emily. “I’ve got to go!” he stage-whispered. “The sheriff!” At that he grabbed his cloak and satchel and bounded for the back of the pub. But then he stopped and wheeled around. “Did you drive?”

“Yes,” said Emily, rising from her chair.

“Where are you parked?”

“Ah, ah, just below the big park, by a restaurant, *Lindesfarne*, I believe—”

John ap Harry smiled, nodded, and dashed off down the narrow hallway. Emily heard the back door open and then shut just as a nondescript middle-age couple entered the room. Confused, she studied the couple. They too were drenched and, initially at least, seemed to be heading for her and the stove. Her confused staring, however, seemed to ward them off. Embarrassed at this unintended effect, she invited them to take her place and set off for the front of the pub.

As she entered the main room, the proprietor called to her from the bar, “Will you be wanting anything else, Miss?” He spoke in an almost sing-songy way, smiling knowingly.

“Oh, no, I’ll pay now.”

“Not necessary,” he replied in a pat tone.

“How so?”

“Your friend just paid.” He said this in a low, conspiratorial tone, then chuckled softly.

“Yes, but I just saw him leave out the—” started Emily.

“—and he’s just come round and settled with me.” The rotund man was now grinning ear-to-ear.

“I see. Very well then.”

John ap Harry was sitting on the tarmac, leaning against the low stone wall of the park. “This old beast?” he said, pointing at the DS, grinning broadly.

She involuntarily started, but then smiled. And why not? He was supposedly a peer with whom she might actually have something in common. And to shake things up a bit? Here was the perfect solution, a perfect counterweight to her father’s craziness. But was he carrying a weapon?

“Gran, this is, ah, John . . . ap . . . Harry. We met in Haworth today. John’s a Brontë fan, and he’s made a *proper* pilgrimage: He walked all the way from Herefordshire—in his, ah, special attire.”

“Hello, Mr. Harry,” sang-spoke Lady Susanna in a cool, soft, guarded voice. She offered her hand, albeit in slow motion.

“So very glad to meet you, madam!” gushed John, taking and then shaking Gran’s hand too vigorously.

When the senior Whitmore got her hand back it immediately flew up to defend her throat. “Well, this is a surprise!” she said struggling to maintain her composure. “Could we invite you to supper?”

“Yes, well, I—I should find the local inn, really.”

“Nonsense,” said Gran smoothly, regaining her matronly dominance, “nonsense.”

Emily shot her grandmother a beseeching look; however, Gran stared back with a severe look.

John ap Harry consumed the ham-and-bean soup placed before him just as rapidly as he had the pub food. He tore chunks of the brown bread, throwing them in his mouth and chewing like a starved man. Gran and Emily pretended not to notice. But then John ap Harry noticed their discreet noticing and, swallowing hard, said, “Good lord, I’ve completely forgotten my manners! I’m ravenous, you see, and, well, I—”

“Nothing wrong with a good appetite, young man,” cut in Gran. “So tell me, Mr. ap Harry, where is your family?”

The guest froze and looked up at Gran with big eyes. “Yes, well, madam, I’d prefer not to say. You see, I really shouldn’t be so far out.” He punctuated this with a short, embarrassed laugh.

“Oh?”

“No, I should be at home helping and such.”

“In Herefordshire.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Well, I know the name *ap Harry* comes from long ago. It makes me wonder what you and your family might be called nowadays.”

“Madam, I do not wish to involve my family in my doings. As I say, I should not be so far away at this time.”

“But you’re a grown man.”

“That I am; however, my family would not approve.”

“That’s unfortunate at your age,” she replied in a hardly-veiled sarcastic tone.

John ap Harry sat up straight in his chair, placed his napkin on the table, and in a calm, even tone said, “Madam, madam, I’m clearly a nuisance. Just point me to the nearest inn, and I’ll be on my way.”

Grandmother and granddaughter traded hard glances. But from Emily’s blank, wide-eyed expression, Gran knew she was asking her to show compliance—which only confused and annoyed her even more.

Like a cat Emily had brought home a mouse—to what end? She wasn’t a cat that played with mice. No, but she would bring home a stray. “Well, John—may I call you John?” said Gran.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“We need to figure this out, John. I’m afraid I must insist that we contact your family.”

John ap Harry gave a quick choke-cough and sat up at attention again. “I should take my leave, madam.” At that he rose from the table, bowed deeply, and headed for the door.

“We’re a good mile from the village,” said Gran, also standing. “We can give you a lift.”

“No, not necessary,” replied the guest in a soft but hollow voice. “I’ll find my way down your lane.”

“Now just a minute, John, let’s be reasonable adults,” said Gran in an insistent tone. She came around the table and stepped in front of her guest. “Your family’s worried to death about you. Let me call them. I’ll say you’re here at our invitation and that all is well. Wouldn’t that be the best thing to do?”

Lady Susanna Whitmore’s commanding as well as motherly presence was slowly bending John ap Harry to her will. He glanced up to meet her eyes once, twice, and on the third time he smiled shyly and nodded.

The lodge’s only phone, an ancient GPO model, was on a stand beside the main entrance. Gran led John out of the kitchen and to the door. She picked up the receiver and stared the young man down until he gave her the number. After many rings, a male voice on the other end reported “Westnor Castle. . . .”

A wide-eyed, grinning, Gran returned to the kitchen with the Honourable James Ingals-Conthurst, an oak-bottomed peer, as substantiated by Westnor’s agent, one Mr. Caleb Rees. Baron and Lady Ingals-Conthurst were out for the evening, but Mr. Rees said he would pass on the news that the heir was safe in Cumbria and the guest of an earl.

According to Rees, the heir went on a “march” every now and then, and it was nothing to be alarmed about, although he admitted to being surprised by the distance this time. As for care and maintenance, he said only to keep him on his pills, and to ring again if he became a nuisance and was no longer welcome. “He’s harmless. Put him to work, Lady Whitmore! He’s a good worker. It’s better to see him work than hear him talk. He talks the most outlandish rubbish when he gets started. And send any bills to my attention.” He then gave a simple address. Gran gave him their address and number as well. Rees promised to send along some of James’ “unique” clothing.

Back in the kitchen, the company took their seats again. Gran spoke: “Well now, should we call you John or James?”

“James,” said their guest with downcast eyes. His posture and demeanour was that of a shy schoolboy called into the headmaster’s office.

“Mr. Rees told me you’ve had other—rambles?”

“Yes, yes,” mumbled James, wearing a guilty smile, eyes still downcast.

“How often?”

James looked up and smiled sheepishly. “Oh, every now and then.” He looked down again.

“May I ask how old you are, James?”

His head jerked up and he quickly replied, “I’m twenty-seven as of last January.” Again he found a spot on the table to observe.

“I see,” said Gran. “Do you have a profession?”

Once again his full attention snapped to his questioner, and with wide eyes he exclaimed, “Not a real one. I studied maths in college. Of late I help in the stables. Oh, and we have sheep. We have Ryelands and some crosses. I know my way around them. Things were late this spring, the lambing, that is. We all pitch in—the team and I. And I’ve done a fair amount of building. That’s probably what I’m best at.” He stared ahead again, hands in his lap, hunched over in a humble pose.

“Very well, then,” said Gran softly. She shot Emily a glance, and Emily now gave her an ironic smirk. “Do you intend to return to Herefordshire soon?”

“I’d rather not,” said James slow and deliberately. “I’ll just find accommodations somewhere and, yes, take a short holiday! I’ve never seen this part of the world before. A good deal higher than home!”

At that the party laughed softly, albeit nervously.

“I’m sure we can put you up somewhere.

“Oh, I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“None at all!” barked Gran, clapping and rubbing her hands together. “We can find a place for you. I’ll ring Thomas straight away.” At that she got up and headed for the front of the house again.

“Have you had enough to eat?” said Emily.

“Oh, I’m stuffed!” replied James.

The guest spent the night in the lodge’s guest room. The next morning,

after a late but solid brunch of eggs, ham, toast, and coffee, he and Emily set off down the lane for the village.

The weather was much cooler than the previous day's relative warmth and humidity. The swiftly crossing clouds afforded prolonged spells of blue sky and bright light. It had rained briefly but heavily during the night and the lane was still wet, puddles here and there. The millions of water droplets refracted like jewels in the stray beams of sunlight. The fresh, cool air was electric.

To Emily's surprise, the upland stretch was showing the first budding of spring. The pervasive periwinkle tights on the verges were showing soft-blue flowers. She noticed, too, daffodils coming up, hardy survivors from a bygone era when the lane had seen proper care. She was amazed at how only one warm day could make the plant life move their sap so quickly.

James remained silent. They were at least ten minutes underway, side-by-side, but not a peep had been uttered between them. Emily searched her mind for a topic, but could not budge the heavy mental block. She finally gave up and decided not to speak. But after another few minutes of pretending to be keenly observing the surroundings, the interpersonal silence became unbearable, as well as not very hostess-like. "How long would you like to stay? You're more than welcome to stay as long as you like."

"However long I stay, I insist on paying my way," he replied in a soft, gently insistent voice.

"Nonsense."

Silence, then finally broken by James: "I've never been so far north, and I'm truly enchanted by this place. It feels like parts of Wales."

"You do quite a bit of travelling on foot?"

He gave a short, embarrassed laugh. "Yes, true enough."

Silence.

"I'm still curious how trekking will lessen the—the complexities you spoke of."

"I wasn't making much sense yesterday, was I?" Again James spoke in his animated, all most breathless way, but then seemed to shove the silence barrier between them again. Her glance showed that he was frowning, his brow

knitted. “I need to get away,” he finally said. “Westnor is just too oppressive. I can feel the walls closing in around me.” After a nervous laugh he added, “I suppose I can’t say it any better without unpacking the whole trunk for hours on end, and that would surely bore you to tears.”

“I’m afraid life as a peer is full of complexities.”

“Yes, and I admit I’m not always up to the mark.”

Another awkward silence set in. Again, she searched her mind for a way to restart the conversation. Only a complete change of topic would not seem like prying. Nothing for it: “So what about Westnor makes it so unbearable for you?”

James gave a sharp laugh and a quick incredulous glance over at his interrogator. For a moment she was certain she had gone too far and he would refuse to answer, but then he said, “As I say, this will take hours, days!”

“Begin, then!”

Laughter, albeit nervous.

“Very well then. Basically, it’s all the hubbub. My parents are all for being a great tourist attraction. And I have no wish to be, nor any talent as an entertainer. Trying to stay clear of all that rubbish is a real challenge.”

She glanced over to once again see him again frowning, intently studying the way in front of him. Curiously, his latest voice had lost the stilted breathlessness from before. “I sympathise, but you’ll see more tourists here. You’ve come to the Lake District. We get literally millions every year. Mind you, they’ve come to see the lands, not us.”

“Really?”

“They look straight through us, as if we weren’t even there.”

He gave a short laugh. “No getting away from it then, is there?”

“I would like us to be more traditional—like an old-fashioned manor,” she said in a wistful voice. “But not for anyone’s entertainment.”

“That’s brilliant—truly,” he replied upbeat. “We do a fair bit of farming—but it’s all part of the show, I’m afraid.” He made a shuddering sound.

Emily fell silent, although she was now more at ease. They had made a breakthrough. They had stepped into that grey male-female interpersonal zone

—and had begun a minuet. To be sure, James was gracious to a fault, maintaining utter and complete decorum. And, strangely enough, in just those recent minutes, he had dropped the shy, boyish persona. She was not used to such other-century manners, and, for that matter, she was not used to being alone with men her age, either—and she found she liked the combination very much.

Whenever she went out in public—especially in America—she had the habit of bracing herself for curtness, passive-aggressive rudeness, disaffected poses; but with James she could luxuriate in his old-fashioned gentlemanliness. Annette certainly shone in her exacting German version, but it wasn't *English* decorum—and Annette was female.

There she was, walking down her Jane Lane with a male peer, one dressed period to boot, and she could almost feel her womanliness growing, as if this man were some sort of trainer coaxing her femininity out—all by simply being a gentleman. She marvelled at how uplifting ladylike and gentlemanly behaviour could be and how well a man and woman practising such behaviour complemented one another. His honesty, forthrightness, graciousness, and, now suddenly, his *masculinity* were nothing short of thrilling.

Just then a droll thought crossed her mind, that they were actors in a period film, doing, perhaps, a rehearsal. The director had asked them to walk down the lane and extemporise a period conversation to the best of their ability. But of course he had cast them so well, and the mood was so lovely, the setting so perfect that they did not need to strain in the least to “get into character.”

Again, her mind jumped—to memories of Annette and her playing film critics, pouring over period films. A film was never just watched, rather, scenes were stopped and replayed for critique and commentary, or even to look up a scene in the original text for authenticity.

With a small giggle she broke off her daydreaming. James immediately glanced over at her. “Oh, sorry,” she muttered.

James laughed and said, “Whatever for, Miss Emily?”

“For my absence.”

“You’re quite here with me, you know. No escape.” This he said with a confident, gibing lilt.

“No, I’ve just returned.”

“From where, I may I ask?”

“I don’t really know. From the past?”

“Yes, we always seem to be going back to get something we’ve left there.”

Emily laughed. “Or perhaps just to see if it’s still where we left it.”

“Indeed. And if it’s in any better condition than the last time we niggled over it.”

Soft laughter.

“Tell me, then,” said James in an insistent voice.

“Tell you what?”

“Then don’t.”

She swatted at him playfully, and he dodged too late.

“Steady!”

“No, I’m just thinking of a friend and all the things we got up to.” She then proceeded to tell James about Annette.

“My, my,” he said finally, “I’d love to meet her—if, for nothing else, to cut through some of the prejudices about them.”

“What, Germans?” Emily’s voice sounded perturbed—which she immediately regretted.

“Mind you, I’ve never met one, nor been over there,” said James in soft, apologetic tone of voice.

“I’ve only known Annette and her family,” she said quietly, self-conscious of having been cross.

Silence, now slightly awkward.

At last, James said, “We are a contemplative, introverted race, we English. We did ourselves great harm puffing ourselves up into imperialists. It took two world wars, but Germany whittled us down to size, and we were considerate enough to return the favour. We can both get back to being our true selves now.”

Emily did not reply immediately as amazed as she was. Eventually, she said, "I'm enjoying our walk and this conversation."

"As am I," James added quickly.

"It's good to be home. I'm proud to show you my home. And yes, I suppose one must be in a *contemplative* state to really see it, to really know it."

"Oh, this is quite grand." He looked up into the sky, then out across the visible slice of the valley and the highlands to the south.

Silence—again awkward, but now a soft, shy awkward, she thought. Another prick of shame came and went for getting defensive over Germans. But again she was glad to simply speak in a civil, intelligent, gracious way with another human being—one English soul to another.

"Well, James, what would you like to talk about?"

He laughed self-consciously and said, "Oh, football, race cars—the usual."

"Really?"

"Just kidding!"

Laughter.

"No, really, did you start telling me on the drive how you got to Haworth?"

"Oh, did I say something? I don't recall. I hope I didn't snore. I don't believe I'd slept in days."

Emily laughed. "No, you didn't snore. But you're not sure how you got there?"

"Not at all. Quite a mystery."

"When I first spotted you, it was as if you were on the other side of a curtain. I wasn't sure you were real."

"Ha! My dress does have the oddest effect on people. It amuses some. But others find me a tedious bore—my family for one."

"Not I."

He raised his hand as if to say something, but remained mute. At last he said, "Yes, well, as far as what to talk about, I'm really no good at modern conversation. Sometimes it takes me forever to find my way into a discussion."

I'm dreadfully frustrated trying to be clever and all—at least when we're all imitating the telly and films. I suppose I take things too literally.”

“I don't watch television,” said Emily.

“Rather gruesome fare, I'd say. Of course I'm not seeing *real* murders and mayhem, but a part of my brain seems not to know this, and I'm terribly upset. I read somewhere that the logical side tells you it's just a story, but it's overriding a deeper part that believes it all to be real.”

“I suppose that's why it comes across as so compelling.”

“Yes, all that fiendishly realistic violence and murder. Horrible!”

“I certainly don't need that going on in *any* part of my brain,” she said. “Depression—I'm very susceptible.”

“Oh, please don't say depression.”

“Why, then?”

“I've come to really despise that word,” he replied in a pained tone.

“What would you have me say?” replied Emily in her kindest voice.

“*Sad*. I am at times *sad*.” He paused, then added, “Yes, well, it just sounds so much more honest and organic—as if something is actually the cause.”

Just as with Annette, they had created a safe, comfortable bubble in which to criticise their own century. But then she pulled up at the realisation that, despite the lovely time they were having, he was some manner of damaged, a psychological fugitive of this age. He was just as gracious and kindly as Arthur Clennam from *Little Dorrit*, or perhaps a Tom Pinch from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, another of her favourites, and yet he—as well as she—were captives of a modern world that would seem to not have a place for such people. But in that moment another side of her rallied, and she resolved to help him in any way possible, hopeless or even inappropriate as it may become. A new feeling of confidence surged and she asked pointedly, “Tell me, though, James, what do you hope to accomplish—by dressing like this, by speaking properly, by wandering? I simply must know.”

“Why, because I don't want to deal with it all back home,” he answered somewhat defensively and yet patiently.

“But specifically to strike out on foot in your—*attire*.” She glanced over

at him. “Are you particularly enamoured of the era? Or are you more generally dialling back in time?”

They walked along in silence for a few seconds. And then a broad, knowing smile came to his face, “Lady Emily, you’re a genius!”

“As are you, dear sir, for noticing.”

Laughter.

“Lady Emily, I’ve been to *all* the witchdoctors and not a one of them has *ever* been interested in finding out anything about me other than in which abnormal pigeonhole to shove me.”

“Really.”

“Not a single one!” he replied. “They all see my wandering as the thing needs curing—certainly not *explored*.”

“The wandering, the clothes.”

“Yes! Actually, come to think of it, one did ask. But when I gave him my reasons, he went all whingeing and dismissive. They see me as emotionally arrested—immature, to put it bluntly. I’m just a little boy who wants to stow away on a ship because he saw a pirate film.”

“How absolutely dreadful.”

“Isn’t it though. No, really, Emily, they always want to steer me towards something they’ve cooked up. Then we start beating the bushes—for childhood trauma, Freud’s mummy-daddy humbug, or whatever else they please. Do you know what it’s like speaking with a Freudian?”

“Dreadful, no doubt,” replied Emily, suppressing a laugh, not sure if he was trying to be funny or not. “James, I hope I’m not upsetting you. I don’t mean to pry.”

“Oh, but *they* do. That is, they don’t—they don’t ever ask me about *me*, no, they simply must see everything I do as—as a manifestation of emotional immaturity.”

“What a nightmare.”

“Indeed. And so here’s what I say about psychology: The modern world is a lost ship—evermore people jumping overboard. And the psychologists circle the ship in their little dinghies, pulling us out of the water, drying us off,

shoving us back on board. They don't care about the ship being lost. They just want you back on board, *chop-chop*."

Emily laughed, but then said in a low voice, "We're all semi-wild at heart"—and then sotto voce—"don't know why I said that."

James laughed merrily and Emily followed. "No, Emily, this is simply marvellous!" he exclaimed, laughing even harder.

"What have I done?"

"You're bloody marvellous because you're the first person I can really tell. There is indeed a very simple—wonderful, actually—reason why I'm trekking—in costume. Indeed, I'm copying an Anglican vicar who wanted to be like Saint Francis, wandering and begging and all. The story really got my imagination going. He began living as a medieval itinerant monk right in his own parish, in his own county. Truly brilliant!"

"I can't say I've heard of him."

"I don't recall the name, either; I will in a minute. But he showed me a very effective way we might all escape the sordid modern. Only we have to truly mean it, *and* we must leave off with as much technology as possible—even when it gets damned uncomfortable. The Rubicon must be crossed—and not recrossed."

Emily was silent. James, however, became nervous at her lack of response. "Oh, Lady Emily, I didn't mean to overwhelm you. I'm always overwhelming people. It is my worst fault."

"James, just wait, I'm thinking," she replied calmly and gently.

"Very well, very well." He chuckled at his apparent overreaction.

A more comfortable silence.

"Have you ever discussed this with your parents?" she asked at last.

"Good lord, no! They're completely hostile."

"Really."

"Oh, Emily, you can't believe how they've *monetised* everything! It's positively crackers! In whatever fiendish way one might imagine milking money out of the tourists, they're all in it. Completely given themselves over to marketing, they have. Speaking tours, picture books, promotional this,

promotional that. They've just had a film documentary made. No intrusion is too great. I'm surprised they haven't put one of those webcams in their bedroom."

Laughter.

"The worst of it is they expect me to join in and—"

"But nothing doing," cut in Emily.

"Oh, not bloody likely!"

Laughter.

"No doubt you're a complete mystery to them. You said you studied maths?"

"Yes, yes," he replied in a forlorn tone. "One escape tunnel that collapsed, I'm afraid."

"Mathematics seems very—technical," said Emily cautiously.

"Oh, not really. Pure mathematics is fairly timeless, like an endlessly flowing river one dips one's cup into. That's the best thing about it, really. To be at Cambridge and simply study, far from the madding madding . . . it was quite blissful, really." But then James glanced over at her with a pained expression.

Emily looked back wearing as kindly an expression as she could. "Well, I'm afraid we're in the same boat. My father has just gone to London to be an investment banker—again. He wanted to be a farmer, to do things traditional. We just got back from America earlier this spring. We've been there for seven years. He came back all excited to be a gentleman farmer. But now he's chucked it again."

"Where were you in America?"

At that Emily gave him a quick history. Glancing over now and again, she noticed his deep concentration, then deep concern when she told of her mother. Again, she marvelled at the change—in him, in herself. By the time they'd reached the village, James had gone from a potentially troublesome oddball to newest best friend—all of it along her semi-wild lane.

She risked Franke's—the tiny tea shop was still dark—and ran smack into the proprietress who must have been waiting at the door. (Did she employ lookouts, hidden surveillance cameras?) She insisted on being called *Judy*. Later

Emily couldn't recall how, but *Judy* Franke pried out of her that James was a baron's son. Again, the encounter ended with her signature abrupt departure. James looked over at her in amazement, to which Emily nodded and smiled reassuringly.

She carried their loaded tea tray to same small corner window table as she and Annette had taken days ago. But as they sat down, the deep moodiness of the scene suddenly gripped Emily. The cobblestone front street was deserted in what seemed a strangely hollow, empty, all but ominous way, and the side street seemed to lead back into a waking dream—all while the light flashed on and off jarringly from the ever-changing cloud cover. To be sure, the town was eerily deserted. As they attended to their tea, Emily suddenly had the odd sensation of the little corner detaching itself from reality and riding the similarly detached cobblestone street corner up into some—*Eigenraum* was the only thing that came to mind.

James' voice pulled her back. "I was completely oblivious to literature, poetry and the like," he said, picking up their last thread as they had waited for their order to be filled.

"Yes?" she said, embarrassed, hoping her unplanned absence hadn't been too obvious.

"Completely. But one day I pulled Browning off a shelf, opened him—and I recognized myself in the lines, or, better, I recognised my mind." He spoke in the softest voice she had heard from him. It was a low, mature, indescribably grand voice. She followed his warm brown eyes following his spoon stirring his tea.

"Really? How so?" said Emily, struggling under the spells of the moment.

"Well, this gets a bit complicated, but one of my *psychics* believes I'm not full-on schizophrenic, but a lesser sort. At least I don't seem to have any of the typical characteristics of a happy, normal schizophrenic."

She laughed at his choice of words. "I wasn't aware of the differences." But she was *fully* aware of this new, calm, *manly* James.

"No, apparently it's a *spectrum* thing. Supposedly, I shouldn't be needing

to—how should I say?—take flight.”

“I understand.” Emily couldn’t believe the transition in James. He was no longer boyish, but manly—in his posture, in his air. Nor was speaking in his shy, breathless, wide-eyed manner. She had to grin. She was thrilled.

And then something else happened: The slight wind in her mind stirred and spread out to the rest of her body. She knew she was feeling attraction, but this physical reaction immediately bowed before the greater interpersonal spiritual space, a place where they were, yes, dancing a minuet.

She recalled hearing about Native American spirituality, specifically, that every creature, every plant had a spirit representative. She believed this about humans, too, that souls must speak to souls, that true love was something in a higher space, that real love was initiated by the successful commingling souls. Souls first, then bodies. . . .

“But what happened this last time? You were—”

“Oh, yes, true enough,” he broke in, albeit gently. “I’d been sleeping poorly. Then I got all worked up over some nonsense. Then I took a walk out in the snow—and I just lost myself in the moment. I supposed I came unmoored from all the pushing and pulling around me, and I simply took off into the beauty of the snowfall. I wanted to walk in the beauty of it all and never stop.” He looked up at her with calm eyes and gave a quick ironic smile, raising his eyebrows. Once more, a physical surge, which, again, dutifully parked itself on their spirit plane.

“So what about Browning? What did you see in him?” she asked with kindness and sincerity.

He changed his posture, wiggled his nose—in a delightful way to her—and studied something over on the narrow side lane before answering: “Oh, I see it everywhere—in good poetry, at least. So amazing to have a poem awaken in your mind something that isn’t well-formed, but hides a bit and portends of things much deeper and mysterious. Am I making sense?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, I’ve come to crave it.”

“As do I.”

“And another thing. I honestly believe it’s helped me with my troubles. The witchdoctors, especially the Freudians, are all about rooting out the childish in us. But I now believe our emotional health is linked to our poetic-artistic depth, our ability to absorb the beauty of nature.”

“Very well said, sir.” At that she grabbed her backpack and pulled out her leather-bound journal. She rapidly paged through the front until she found the Keats’ quote from the film *Bright Star*. She read aloud, *A poem needs understanding through the senses. The point of diving in a lake is not immediately to swim to the shore; it’s to be in the lake, to luxuriate in the sensation of water. You do not work the lake out. It is an experience beyond thought. Poetry soothes and emboldens the soul to accept mystery.*”

James only smiled knowingly. He had been looking down, but then he looked over at her and their eyes met and locked. But she had to look away, as electricity surged through her. “Have—have you seen the film *Bright Star*?” she asked, struggling for control.

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t.”

Again, the voice! smoother, calmer, and deeper than before! “It’s about Keats. There’s a scene with that bit.”

“Quite lovely. Did Keats actually say it? I know how these films create their own version of things.”

“This time I don’t care. It’s luscious.” She hummed and shifted in her chair. “It comes after Fanny Brawne says something like, *I still don’t know how to work out a poem.*”

“Yes, yes, I suppose we mustn’t *work out* a poem, as if it were a maths problem.”

“It’s the most magical thing when I read a poem and it moves me,” said Emily.

“Yes, very true. Ironic, though.”

“How so?”

“Oh, just that we probably didn’t know we were lacking something before we gained the poem’s lovely bit of magic. We’re like miners, the poets having spread precious gems about. And then there it is, a dazzling gem, and

you it's discoverer."

She sighed, but then made it a proper laugh. "I didn't know much about the Romantic Era until Annette exposed me. Now, well, I don't know how I could survive without it."

"I suppose we're of the class who can't indulge ourselves like the others. We should fear obliviousness, and we should always seek out higher things."

"I agree. But I must say I've not heard of many mathematicians being poetry fans."

Soft, warm laughter, as they glanced more steadily at each other, she grown less afraid of electric shocks.

"No, you're quite right," he said sighing, "the whole C.P. Snow thing. Well, perhaps I'm not *really* a mathematician. I did well enough at it, finished my degree and all, but I knew I didn't have the concentration or the endurance to make a proper career of it. Sometimes I'd amaze my professors with an insight. But just as often, they'd be amazed at my thickness over the simplest things. Towards the end, my mind was running off in all directions. I'd have a hundred things going on in my head besides what I was supposed to be learning. They tried all the attention-deficit poisons on me. All for naught. Had a rather nasty time with Adderall." He seemed to be watching the side street expectantly, his eye following a scrap of paper bouncing along onto the main street as if it were a grave portent.

Emily sipped her tea, not wanting to press him. She settled into a marvelling contentedness and resolved to leave off fretting about some other day's John ap Harry entirely. She breathed in and out, intentionally and slow, basking in the feelings, the emotions, the current running between them. There was something *arrived* about the moment—from even just a few minutes ago.

But then James convulsed with a shudder. He muttered something in a low, almost menacing tone, now glaring out the window. Emily was jarred out of her peace and sat up.

"Sorry?" was out of her mouth before she could stop it. She could almost physically feel a chill descending.

He laughed in an animated, almost overconfident way, again, so

completely unlike the previous day's boyish persona. "This world, dear Emily! These times!" He glared forward into space, his jaw muscle tense. "It's such a awful mess out there!" he half-whispered through gritted teeth. "*It's not human.*"

"Yes," she muttered—and then she left. . . .

Some mysterious wave had just come crashing down. It was as if their already partially detached corner had suddenly broke off completely and was being washed out into a dark sea. She felt tense as well as limp—in any case, not in full control of her body. Fear was strangely absent, *irrelevant*, kept out of sight, up on a shelf, out of reach. Whispers, sounds buzzed in her ears, heard but incomprehensible. She stifled a groan as she was carried through the rapid stages of vision formation. She had entered some spirit plane.

James seemed to know where she was and sat in quiet attendance. He smiled very warmly when Emily's attention opened up again—seconds, minutes later? He seemed to follow an apparently secret code of conduct not to openly acknowledge or discuss such things. He only raised his eyebrows and smiled as a signal of his awareness.

She was back. The swoon, the trance had passed, and her new guide was right beside her. Then oddly enough she caught his body odour, surprisingly pleasant in its naturalness, mixed with perhaps wood smoke. Had he huddled round a fire on his trek up to Haworth? Somehow his presence *and* his scent worked symbiotically. *Kiss me, please*—was a fleeting thought—which again took its place before their spiritual temple. James seemed to notice this process and smiled. "Do you keep it up every day?" he asked, his eyes on the journal open before her.

"My journal? Yes," she mumbled.

"Got a publisher?"

"Heavens, no!" she replied, finally back into herself.

"Give me a sample of something. I'm dying to hear the *real* Lady Emily."

"Well!" she exclaimed theatrically. But then a seriousness entered her heart. Yes, she thought, take the next step and be brave about it: Read him one of your poems.

James leaned forward, elbows on thighs. He clasped his hands as in

prayer, giving his best mimic of contriteness. She glanced over at him, once, twice with a giggle. He looked on in mock seriousness. She laughed. He laughed.

“All right then, you shall hear one of my poems. . .”

Bluest stained glass—
Silver shield by kneeling knight.
Above the grey stone chapel
Bluest sky deep and lonely—
Above moorland lonelier still.

Sun long set,
Candles guttered,
Chill evening descended,
Empty blue to starry black.
Knight in glass,
Heaven above moorland.

She looked up to meet his eyes. “Very lovely, very lovely, indeed,” he said in a soft, sober tone.

“I must warn you, I’m very poor at explaining what I’ve written. More like I’m a reptile mother—I lay my eggs and leave them to fend for themselves.”

“We’ll see this egg hatched.”

Laughter.

“I suppose we all want that day, that place you describe,” he continued, and then turned his gaze to the side street.

They simultaneously glanced at one another, then away.

“Really, though, as if the place, the experience is beyond faith. But that sounds pagan.”

“Annette and I discussed this once.”

“And what did you conclude?”

“We were talking about the Brothers Grimm and how they seemed to be reopening the pagan fairy forests.”

“And did they?”

“Well, Annette dropped one of her bombs. She said Christianity is European the same way tea is English—they are but they aren’t.”

James laughed heartily. Then he seemed to listen for something. At last he smiled and said, “Your setting was moors. I’m very fond of moors.”

“Yes.”

“I once heard that most of our moorlands were originally forests—pre-Bronze Age, that it.”

“Really.”

“Yes, a biologist chap said that. Once they were cut, they didn’t come back. So when we see a moor, we’re seeing a ghost landscape. We’ve forced land from one existence to another.”

“Do you think we oppress the English landscape?”

“Oh, greatly,” he said holding up both hands. “By our sheer numbers.”

“But does she oppress us back?”

No, she simply shuns us . . . and we haven’t the wit to realise what we’ve lost, fools that we are.”

Silence.

“All I know is that I belong here,” said Emily at last.

“Fair enough, but why?” He sat back in his chair, head cocked.

“Because I have no desire to be anywhere else,” she replied, holding her hands out and open.

“You know, I once met a tree in a city park that told me his dream was to run with the wild tree packs in Canada. I told him I would help him, but he wouldn’t come. Said he was afraid of crossing streets. All the cars terrified him.”

Laughter.

Emily spoke: “Trees have roots. We should *follow* their example.”

Soft laughter as they glanced at one another.

“And if I came here to stay, I suppose I’d be a traitor to *my* land, my

Herefordshire,” said James deliberately in his soft, melodious baritone. “But perhaps I could find a good pagan druid who knows a way around that.”

“Could you, though?”

“Ah, these mountains! But beauty isn’t everything.”

“No?” retorted Emily, smirking, raising an eyebrow.

“No, not really. Now, Herefordshire, she’s the steady, durable sort. She’ll be right where I left her. Won’t fuss over a dalliance. And she’s got pretty Welsh sisters all around her to remind me what good stock she is. Doesn’t mind me looking over at them, either.”

Laughter.

He continued in a more grim tone: “I’m not alone. Two brothers and a sister below me. They all for the circus.” His face was suddenly dark, but then he sat up and smiled. “Good, at least I’ve made you laugh. Multiple times, I believe. That seems to be the number *two* requirement of a man after being a good provider.”

Laughter.

“Seriously, though, what completely opposite skills!” exclaimed James with animation. “What if I were an executioner? What sort of humour could I possibly come up with after lopping off heads?”

Laughter.

“Would you like to hear my theory?” said Emily.

“Of the death penalty?”

“No, silly! Of why women like men that make them laugh.”

“By all means,” James replied with a welcoming hand gesture.

“It speaks to his mental stability. He goes out into the dangerous world to earn a living—and a woman wants to see he can come back out of the rain and laugh it off.”

“And not drag his funk into her pretty little nest. I can see that. Go on.” He wore an exaggeratedly serious face.

Laughter.

“That’s all there is to it, really.”

He rocked back in his chair and waved his hands in dismissal. “Well, I’ve

never understood courtship rituals. They're going on all around me, I'm told, and I'm completely oblivious."

Emily sighed. "Why can't a man and a woman converse honestly?"

"Simple: Because people are deathly afraid of honest conversation."

"The art of conversation is dying."

"In my case, it always seems some codependence demon takes over."

"Yes, and then you're acting out some role that's not really you. Oh, I know all about that."

"Indeed."

"But James, aren't you more yourself now?"

"Oh, that I am," he said in his smooth, manly voice.

"So then your *costume* trekking lets the real you out."

"I would say so, yes. Mind you, sometimes when I'm on the road it's bloody uncomfortable—being cold and wet and tired and all. But it can be a joy. I have these lovely moments of true freedom. I'm so completely free, so free of any codependence."

"And you can't bring any of that back home?"

"Hardly. Westnor is like a codependence spider's web—my parents, their sycophant Rees, and all the minions they have running about. It's one big poisonous environment that I can never seem to manage."

"You need to get away from there."

"No doubt. But I have this dread, this—"

"Of what?" she broke in.

"Of relenting! I'm the heir. In my own way I love the place, the land. But that's not good enough for my parents. You just said you could never separate yourself from Wolkeld."

"Probably not."

"Obviously. But when I return, I—my *real* self—has nothing to connect to—anything, anyone. I'm one against an army. I gravitated to the locals and manual labour to get away from them—but often enough that's no good, either."

"You sound like a type-cast actor."

“Oh yes—yes, I once read something about the *Jim Crow* times in the American South. Supposedly, they did a study where highly educated blacks raised elsewhere—Europe or where else—would speak to southern whites. And supposedly, the whites literally could not understand them until they spoke the ignorant-sounding, fawning black dialect. It could be the most flawless English, but the white southerner did not deign understand. And they say it wasn’t just attitudinal, but a real mental block. *What’s that, boy?* And the fellow would have to rephrase everything into the dumbed-down dialect to communicate. Damnedest thing, really.”

“And that’s your situation?”

“A version, yes. But—but Emily, dearest Emily, this whole conversation has become so one-sided. I don’t mean to burden you with my—issues.” And then just above a whisper, he asked, “Shall we walk a bit more? I’m not doing so well in this corner.”

Outside the wind had picked up and sporadic rain fell during the clouded phases. Emily, however, seemed fully porous, as if wind and rain went right through her. Love, she mused. She wanted to touch him, to hold his hand.

They followed the main street out of the village, finally turning onto a small lane following the river out to the west of town. This led over the river and into sloping drystone-fenced fields. Eventually, they came to a low copse, the left lined with ancient coppiced willow and hazel, the river, flat and broad, holding on their right. At some point they were holding hands, and just before the copse ended, just after a group of starlings in the nearby trees had noisily taken flight, they fell into one another’s arms and kissed.

Her body and mind were united in one glowing unit. There was nothing to say and nothing to think but to float alongside her new love, their arms around each other’s waists. She luxuriated in his scent, and regretted she had little to give back to him.

There would not be another kiss—at least for the foreseeable future—after all, so much had yet to be arranged in both the spiritual and earthly planes for the two thread sources to begin twining together as one.

The changing sky above now favoured more cloud bringing a steady

misting rain. The land all around them was on the tipping point of spring green—in general, a “not yet” time.

They retraced their steps, now intent on heading back up to the lodge. Everything seemed different, alive, exciting as they re-entered the village. The early twilight had arrived and people now milled about the street. Did they know, had they heard the lady of the land was in love? Sound the trumpets! Throw a feast! No, these were strangers, tourists who didn’t know them from Adam and Eve.

Just past the bakery they heard a raw, angry voice from behind them calling out, “Hey there! Wait!” They both turned around and Emily’s heart sank: Haggitt was loping towards them, an especially grim expression on his already grim face.

When he had caught up he seemed abnormally winded, but bolt upright and glaring intensely at Emily. Despite the initial shock, she remained calm. “What is it, Haggitt?” she said in an even tone. James had stepped forward, taking Emily’s forearm and elbow.

“What is it?!” he bellowed in a loud voice that echoed up and down the narrow cobblestone street. “I’ll tell you what *it* is! My uncle just turned Alice and me out of the cottage. Says it’s for this—this bloke.” He glanced at James, but turned his glare back on Emily.

“Haggitt, there has to be some mistake,” began Emily as calmly as she could. “James is staying with us at the lodge, and he’s just visiting us.”

Haggitt was now visibly shaking. “Not what I was told!” His voice was strangely high-pitched, his fists balled, his stance ready to attack.

“Sir, listen to me!” exclaimed James in his commanding baritone, “I’ll have no part in turning you out of your home! I’ll see this right.”

It was as if Haggitt had not really seen James until that moment. He leaned back and raked his eyes up and down the nineteenth-century figure, his mouth in an exaggerated frown.

A tense stand-off ensued. At last Emily said in her most earnest voice, “Haggitt, don’t do anything. Just go—go and I’ll go sort this out with my grandmother. She can’t have meant to you thrown out. I’m sure of it.”

“You remember what I told you?” he growled menacingly. “We’ll do our part if you do yours?”

“Yes, yes, for God’s sake!” shouted Emily, stepping forward. “So let me sort it out! Haggitt, please!”

The tall man-boy blinked violently, took a deep breath, snapped his head to the side, and in a flash took off running back down the street.

“Are you all right?” asked James beseechingly. He stood before her and carefully placed his hands on her shoulders. They embraced, James cradling her head on his shoulder. Emily trembled in his arms.

When they separated again, James exclaimed, “What in God’s name was that about?!” Emily proceeded to describe her one and only encounter with Haggitt and Alice. “Very well, but he seemed intent on violence.”

They turned back north and walked swiftly up the street, James with his arm around Emily’s shoulder, her arm around his waist.

“What was he on about—*remember what I told you?*”

“We met last week and talked about his role here as a farmer. It was tense that first time as well. I had support, though. Annette was with me. She’s related to Prussian generals, you know.”

Nervous laughter.

“I don’t wish the fellow ill, but, really, that was quite beyond the pale.” He glanced back to the south as he hurried Emily along.

“Yes, I know,” replied Gran in a low, serious voice. She had met the couple at the door and Emily had tried to tell her of their encounter with Haggitt, tearing up, finally. “Thomas just called. And then I had to call the authorities in Penrith to keep Timmy from being arrested. Somebody reported your confrontation.” This she said in a serious, low tone to Emily, avoiding eye-contact with James. “Come in the kitchen, dear.” Her protective body language told James that he was to stay outside.

“I want James with me,” insisted Emily. “I want him to hear whatever you have to say. He’s obviously involved.”

The dowager now fixed their visitor in her hard gaze. “All right then. I

had some other matters to discuss, but I suppose it doesn't matter."

"Oh, by all means, I'll stay out here," said James, peering into the main hall.

"No, James, I want you with me," said Emily, stepping over to stand shoulder-to-shoulder beside him, their arms reaching around one another.

The young pair looked lovingly into each other's eyes—and it was obvious to Gran that they now shared something. "Very well, then," she said in a slow, suspicious drawl.

In the kitchen Mrs. Colby was bustling about preparing the evening meal. Her occasional worried glance betrayed her knowledge of the state of affairs. The three peers took seats in the high-backed Windsor chairs just as Colby swept over. "Should I be leaving, ma'am?"

"Oh, no, the more the merrier!" Gran replied in a fatalistic tone.

"Very well, ma'am."

Gran again fixed her eyes on James, then Emily. "Like I said, Thomas gave me the gist of it—just in time."

"Yes," mumbled Emily, finally looking up and meeting her grandmother's eyes. She had an impulse to jump to Haggitt's defence, but she waited, guessing her grandmother had another side to the story.

"I wish you girls hadn't gone to see him. He wasn't supposed to be in the Crowder place."

"But I thought—"

"Yes," interrupted Gran, "I know what that son of mine said. But, Emily, dear, we need to clear that up as well."

"How do you mean?"

"Your father's not a farmer, nor will he ever be."

"Yes, yes," whispered Emily, eyes downcast.

"We own places, like the Crowder cottage. But the Sulleys and the Wilsons—as well as the Prices and the Baileys and the rest of the farming folk round here—have long-term contracts and agreements, and often enough outright ownership of lands and properties—which means *they* do the farming, independent of us Whitmores."

“But didn’t you and Grandfather—”

“Yes, yes, Hank and I did farm; we were in sheep through my father. That’s when Stanley was a boy. But when you were growing up in London, the last of it was turned over to the Sulleys and the Wilsons and the others. Your father doesn’t seem to understand the state of things.”

“So he can’t really hire Timmy and Alice or let them have the cottage. That’s what you’re saying.”

“That is *exactly* what I’m saying. It is ours, or I should say mine—your father doesn’t own anything outright but Wolkeld Hall—and Thomas and Jodie are investors. We mean to refurbish it, and they’ll manage it as a rental.”

“So Timmy was squatting.”

“Oh, that he was! He had nobody’s permission—and quite a few hints not to push his luck.”

“But it wasn’t being used. And they want to be farmers—at least that’s what we’ve talked about.”

Gran inhaled sharply. She dropped her head and folded her arms across her chest. Lady Susanna wasn’t a small woman; big-boned might have been an objective description. Her daily uniform was sturdy gaberdine gardening slacks, her short Wellingtons, a pastel knit top, and a her favourite multi-pocketed waxed cotton drill vest. She was an avid gardener of both flowers and produce; she could perform basic maintenance on her old military-style 1981 Land Rover Defender; and she could talk any part of sheep farming with the locals. Strangers had to be told she was a peer.

Lady Susanna Whitmore née Vernon had grown up on a working manorial estate in Derbyshire. It was on one of her frequent trips up to Cumbria with her father buying ewes that she had met Henry Whitmore. They were both practical, working peers who only begrudgingly put down their work to be aristocrats. She and Henry eventually took over her father’s breeding and brokering business, finally shifting over to the management of their properties, with only the occasional sheep business. She was well-known and respected by the locals who appreciated her folksy, matriarchal style.

Lady Susanna watched Emily until she again looked up. “Timmy’s a bad

penny. Got a temper, as you've seen. He's been giving his aunt and uncle fits for weeks now. He knew *not* to move in to the Crowder's—and he did anyway. We've been able to clear out his deadbeat friends—it was do a bunk or see a prison for a couple of them. Very unpleasant. But Timmy's family, and we've not wanted to call the authorities on him.”

“I see,” mumbled Emily.

“Yes, and he's been in trouble with the law, in Canada, as I hear. He's burnt all his bridges with family. And this being a very tight-knit community . . . and him not really trying to understand the way things work . . . well, that's where it stands, I'm afraid. He's come a cropper all right, and he's no one to blame but himself.”

Emily and James glanced at one another.

“Gran, I don't mean to argue, but why now? I saw the place, and you can't mean to rent it out in its current state.”

“We'll start renovations soon. And I telephoned Mr. Rees at Westnor again. We've agreed to have James stay there and help with the work, in exchange for room and board and some compensation. Mr. Rees says James is just the man, knows about the older buildings.”

“With all due respect, madam, I wish someone had talked to me first,” exclaimed James in his commanding, sonorous voice. Gran seemed taken aback, and Emily had to smile, realising she hadn't been updated on James' current state of mental health. “Really, madam, Rees shouldn't have been so—”

“It's all right, young man,” said Gran, cutting in. “This is a situation that's needed attention for quite a while now. Your presence is entirely beside the fact. Of course, you're free to refuse the offer.”

Emily and James looked at one another, this time holding one another's gaze. Without realising it, they had also reached out and taken the other's hand. “Lady Whitmore,” said James, “This poor chap thinks I'm the cause of his eviction. That's *not* how I want things.”

“Where will they stay?” asked Emily quickly, wanting to break up their staring contest.

“With his aunt and uncle till some other arrangements can be made,”

said Gran evenly, finally looking over at her granddaughter. “We’ll talk more about this tomorrow. We’ve had enough excitement for today.”

“Yes, yes,” said Emily in a forlorn voice.

The meal was at first quiet and sombre, but eventually Gran fell into all but openly interrogating James—in a patronizing, talking-down tone. It started innocently with Gran playing the relations game. As it turned out, she had met his father’s mother somewhere and might have been distantly related to a great-aunt. But then her questions began driving hard at his past life. For his part, James remained his new, robust self, again gracious to a fault, as he did not notice or pretended not to notice the harshness of the interrogation. His enthusiasm was tinged with modesty and self-effacement when she drew him out on his varied occupations; Between glares at her grandmother, Emily smiled at James as he mixed pride and humility in perfect doses describing his work with local preservation craftsmen. As they learned, he was part of a regional timber-framing post-and-beam restoration team keeping the craft alive.

“One of our finest efforts was building a cruck-frame barn from scratch based on a very old Worcestershire barn. That’s where I hang my hat.” He smiled broadly, head held high.

Emily knew it would take time to win over Gran. . . .

“We need to talk,” said Gran who was waiting for her at the door.

Emily had just returned from taking James to the Penrith station. She still glowed from their two parting kisses. The first kiss came when they got to the platform, the second when they broke their tight embrace after the final whistle had blown. “Contra mundum?” “Contra mundum.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, we do,” she replied, upping the severity ante.

All the trip back she told herself to expect Gran to attack, even forbid, but she promised herself not to rush to the barricades. The former was a certainty, while the latter would be tricky.

As it was, she dreamed her way through the interrogation. To “How can you know you’re in love?” and, “You’ve no experience with men,” she could

only say that love should never be a function of experience. Gran kept after her, but she remained placid-unflappable. In fact, she felt more like Gran's equal than ever before. She felt like a woman, no longer like a teenage girl. Gran began to see that and finally relented. "I suppose you'll be wanting to meet his family."

"Yes, tomorrow. That's what we decided. I'll take the train if you can't spare the car."

"Oh my! Why so soon?"

"He needs my support. His people are simply beastly to him."

"So you'll just show up, swords flashing, canons roaring, and—"

"I'll 'show up' and he and I will answer the exact kinds of questions you just asked me."

Their eyes locked, and after what seemed to Emily a very long time, Gran slowly smiled. "Very well, then. I'll call them, figure out some way to explain your visit."

"Thank you, Gran, thank you very much."

Silence. Awkward, painful.

"Dear," began Gran in a tired voice, "I've never criticised your mother, but when I tried to advise her on how to handle your father, she wouldn't have any of it."

Emily was at first dumbstruck. "How—how do you mean?" she finally muttered.

The older woman looked beyond her granddaughter. "And we were all against him going to America. Oh, that we were! But your mother insisted he needed indulging; otherwise, he'd always grumble, always blame her. They were already estranged.

"Dear, your father needs a firm hand, but your mother didn't manage. We even wanted her to leave him, for you and her to come back, but she still refused, even when she started failing—physically. She insisted on being a martyr. I can't say she was my first choice—because I knew she couldn't handle him—but I loved her as a daughter. I don't want you going off on any martyrdoms for this character. *He's not all there.*" To this last point, she tapped

her temple with her index finger.

“Were they ever in love?” came out of Emily’s mouth before she could stop it.

“Love? Oh, at the start they seemed starry-eyed. Your mother was a lovely young woman. She was a city girl, bona fide. And your father had no truck with what your grandfather and I were doing here in the wilderness. I can’t blame him. We really never had much to show for all our time and effort.

“No, dear, your father and mother were from completely different corners. She was a highly cultured, highly educated lady. Her people were art patrons, on museum boards and such. He thought she would be his ticket out of Wolkeld. But your father’s no man of culture. Alienated them rather quickly, he did.”

Having never heard her grandmother speak about her mother, she desperately wanted to hear more. And yet she instinctively knew not to push.

Gran continued: “You favour your mother, you do. She had such a—a purity in her pursuits. She had a magnetic personality. And it saddens me—it saddens me greatly knowing my own son destroyed such a creature.”

Gran stared out into the room again, her face blank. A tear finally trickled down her cheek, and she wiped it quickly. She smiled at her granddaughter, who smiled back. They clasped each other’s hands. “He’s coming back next Friday, so you’ll need to be back before then.”

“Very well then,” said Emily.

“He’s bringing a ‘very good friend,’ as he calls her.”

“What? Who?”

“Her name is also Catherine, Catherine Deruthyn. Wealthy family, some part of her is peerage, I’m told. She’s been through two husbands since your father first dated her older sister back in college.” Gran rolled her eyes.

“Oh, really.”

Dearest Annette,

I am a beachcomber on a night-tide shore. Above me is a close, starry dome—now joined by

a new twinkling gem, lowest, nearest: my love newly flown up. Though around me formless void, no fear, no woe, only needs glance up at my twinkling star. Though I pick through the flotsam of ghost shipwrecks, those sailed out of that sweetest past era; such are these salt-bleached tokens lovingly pressed into the sand, now glinting brighter for a new star's ray. Habit this stooped labour? Dare I stand and face my star? I needn't turn. Let the starlight on my back suffice. Though this dark place always has been Death's long gaze cast, I stop and clasp my hands in voiceless, wordless and yet sincerest prayer, so quick to settle me, and for a time I am indeed settled.

If love has inspired so much poetry, why am I sitting here lyric-less? I can only think of night and all those fragments from long ago. Habit, I suppose. Though love does make me strangely sanguine towards Death. Your Novalis was inspired by Death to praise the night:

*Wears not everything
That inspires us
The colour of the Night?
She sustains thee mother-like,
And to her thou owest
All thy glory.*

The new cut rose: Briefly wondrous beautiful, thereafter dried and desiccated, lost forever its initial beauty and fragrance. Once affording a glimpse of perfection, thereafter only reminiscent thereof. Beauty some illusion or madness? Moreover its eclipse, its growing shadow over our relentless doom, our march to the grave. And though I live in this momentary brilliance of love, I still search my night shore; for until now I have only known of beauty's haunting rumour, of love's delicate trace, those slightest quickenings of things necessarily rare and distant. In this moment I may have love's bliss, but I know I will cherish with a larger, more mature heart the memory thereof, bliss properly encased in life's long tranquil shadows as the true and lasting blessing.

There, again! So ironic that I anticipate love's bloom faded—and muse like an old spinster of its memory! Am I frightened by love? I don't mean to be a fatalist. James and his love

may take me where they will; but within me is the brief wholeness fresh in this moment's centre, inevitably to fade out to time's surrounding horizon. As with all things sublime, a surprising crystallisation, only to dissolve back into grey solution.

I gave you a quick rundown of what happened in my last letter. I hope it made sense; I was rushing to prepare for the drive. And drive I did—thanks, as Gran says, to the Beech Cuts, i.e., when they gutted the British rail system, i.i.e.e., it would have taken forever per train, ergo, I got the car. Yes, we drove in Kansas, but that was a walk in the park compared to these roads! I hate what the automobile has done to us, the next worst consumer technology after the Internet.

It's now four days later and I've returned from Westnor, having met his family. I told you their relations were strained and how they've commercialised their properties—to James' great sadness and mental stress. For example, on that first night we ate dinner in the kitchen, indeed, cosy enough. But that was because the castle's main dining room had been rented to a party of Americans who had paid some exorbitant amount to play cravate noire Downton Abbey din-dins, waited on by servants and all! Though in such bizarre circumstances it was much easier for James to explain how things would be from then on. Believe me when I say I had been nervous! But in the end his parents were like lap-cats—all bullies being cowards underneath, as they say. To be sure, something about seeing us together changed them. They were happy for us!

I wouldn't be troubling you so close to your orals, but as you said before, the written portion went so well. Take your time responding. Can't wait to visit you. Would James be welcome? He wants to see Germany, meet Germans to, and I quote, "reduce prejudices."

Greatest love and affection, your Emily

"Sorry about the paddy the other day," mumbled Haggitt, looking down at his entwined fingers.

Upon returning from Herefordshire, she had phoned the Sulleys and spoken to Haggitt, requesting a meeting. They agreed to meet for tea at

Franke's.

Despite what Gran had said, she still felt responsibility, having made a promise to do something on his behalf. Whatever her role would be in her new old home, she would be a *responsible* person, not someone who bent with the breezes. At least that was the plan.

The decision to meet Haggitt was also the answer to a *What Would Annette Do?* question. She recalled what Annette had said when the topic of criminality and rehabilitation had come up in their psychology class, namely, that any sort of rehabilitation was based not necessarily on forgiveness as much as upon some innate human desire to resist determinism and give a second chance to an offender. Huh, huh, huh? most of the class, *including the teacher*, mumbled—and not in a puzzled way, but in a petty, censoring way.

Emily recalled how Annette had drawn cynical laughter and derision when she postulated a super-deterministic alien race whereby their police simply executed on the spot any sort of law-breaker they caught. It was just another example of the genius of the exchange student who had fully understood the concept, while the students—including the teacher—had not. Of course we humans would not do such a thing, but this is precisely because we are not knee-jerk determinists, Annette argued. She insisted humans are natural gamblers, defying the odds, gambling on each other all the time. Huh, huh, huh? America: the land of brain-shamers.

Emily did not want to dismiss Haggitt as if he were a broken machine. This was noblesse oblige territory for her. Haggitt had wanted to play some version of the manorial game—as did she—and she would not simply fade into the background and leave him stranded. Modern life was already backgroundish enough.

The weather was blustery, driving a fine, horizontal drizzle. They took a small window table north of the door and for a few moments both stared out at the lashing mist on the window panes as they took off their wet wraps.

“Whatever possessed you to shout at me?” said Emily, filling first his, then her cup from the pot of tea.

Haggitt glanced around, obviously struggling for an answer, as well as

with his pride. He gave his questioner a crooked smile, then staring out the window said, “We’re both being fools, Lady Em. We’re both looking for a fairy tale, aren’t we?” He then turned to stare at her.

Emily stared back hard. “I’m here with you today, Haggitt, because I thought you wanted to be a farmer.”

He gave her a sarcastic guffaw and fixed his eyes on the window again. She sighed demonstratively and proceeded to tell him what she had gleaned from Gran; about the state of Wolkeld farming;, about her father’s flip-flop. “Bloody hell,” he whispered under his breath. “So, what does her Ladyship mean to do about all this?”

Silence. Emily hadn’t realised he was referring to her. Finally cottoning on, she said, “The situation is fluid.”

“Bloody hell!” he snapped back full of sarcasm.

Silence. She was beginning to think it had been a mistake to meet him when he spoke up: “Do you realise what you and I are doing to this planet?”

“Living as best we can?”

He tssked her and drove on in a low, intense voice: “We’re stealing *tons* of resources and energy we haven’t done a thing to earn, not one jot to deserve.”

“Still concerned about the planet when your own problems loom?”

“You’re damn straight I am—begging milady’s pardon.”

Emily smiled at the window and shook her head. He was surely tedious, but like their first meeting, his spirit impressed her. She had expected rough going, and so she dug in. “Where is Alice? I invited her as well.”

“Caught a lurgy.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Silence, strained.

“So tell me, Haggitt, what’s been her opinion of these developments?”

He shot her a sideways glance. “She’s a game lass.”

No doubt she was, thought Emily, but how to explain to a radical firebrand like Haggitt that most wives want to see a date on the calendar when some form of stability will commence, if not when they can start building a nest and having babies. She decided to stall for time: “Tell me in your own

words how the trouble started. What happened to these other people I keep hearing about?”

Again his askance look turned into a staring contest—which Emily refused to lose. Eventually, he looked away and sighed loudly. “Like I told you before, they got ploughed.”

Barely three seconds were off the clock and it was again Emily’s move. This was indeed a chess match—that much she had expected—a match with someone who had the habit of flipping the board when the game wasn’t going his way.

She wondered at his inability to bear criticism or disagreement, his tendency to lash out angrily on a hair trigger. No doubt he had his favourite world-savers, men and women who had made great names for themselves as all-out firebrand radicals. Nevertheless, she saw it as her main task to bring him round to some sort of workable compromise.

“What were they like, these friends of yours?”

At first he pretended not to hear. He took a sip of his tea and adjusted his chair in preparation for a long watch of the street.

“Haggitt, I would like to hear something about them.” She included a bit of steel in her voice.

“They were my friends. A bloody good lot they were, Chris, Fred, Laura, Karen.”

“But what—”

“They were camping in your woods,” cut in Haggitt, speaking in an intense whisper, “and your granny called the cops on ’em, that’s what!”

“I see,” she said in a soft voice. “But isn’t that against the park rules?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“Well, I’ll speak to her—”

“Needn’t. They’re long gone.”

“Very well then, they’re gone and you’re still here,” retorted Emily.

“We were holding ceremonies. That’s all,” added Haggitt. His tone was sardonic, but then he went into a lengthy description of what they were doing and why. “Nobody here knows a fig about nature beliefs. In Canada I was the

first white person *ever* invited into the sweat lodge of the First Nation people we knew. You can't possibly understand how much they've suffered because of us."

"Would you like to hear what I believe?"

Silence. Haggitt was put on the spot to actually listen to something someone else had to say. Begrudgingly, impatiently, he replied, "Yeah, yeah, go on." Emily had to laugh at his rudeness—which he seemed to find amusing, also laughing. "No, go on, *milady*, I'm listening."

Amazingly, he was smiling, although, again, intent on watching the street. Pretending not to notice, she proceeded to read a quote from *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* she had copied down in her journal:

There is nothing else in magic but the wild thought of the bird as it casts itself into the void. There is no creature upon the earth with such potential for magic. Even the least of them may fly straight out of this world and come by chance to the Other Lands. Where does the wind come from that blows upon your face, that fans the pages of your book? Where the harum-scarum magic of small wild creatures meets the magic of Man, where the language of the wind and the rain and the trees can be understood, there we will find the Raven King.

"Lovely," he said in a tone with too much sarcasm. She watched him—until he looked back at her. "Yeah, we read it. So what do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I suppose. I just thought you'd relate, is all."

"Fine, I do. That's pretty much what we were on about, the Raven King, the Johannites, and all. And it goes along with what the First Nation people are doing. Do you want to know what a medicine man told me about magic?"

"What did he say?"

"Oh, just that he'd gone to see a *Harry Potter* film and he started laughing so hard he had to leave." Haggitt guffawed.

"Really? Why then?"

"Because only nature has real magic. But white people can't see it, since it never looks and acts like our science and technology. We can't own and control real magic. That's what I learned from those people. Changed my life,

they did.”

“Haggitt, I want to help you.”

“That’s very good of you,” he said, surprisingly, in a tired, resigned voice.

“What will you and Alice do now?”

He cast a sharp eye at her and refolded his arms over his chest, seemingly refusing to answer.

“Haggitt, are we through?” she said with impatience in her voice.

He sighed and muttered, “I don’t really know.”

“What?”

“What we’re to do, me and Alice. She’s pregnant.”

“Oh, I see.” She felt the colour drain from her face.

“All we can do is go on the dole.”

“And what about Canada? You were married there, weren’t you?”

“Where I nearly got lagged.”

“How so?”

“Felony trespassing, vandalism, and obstruction—which was a plea bargain down from *terrorism* charges.”

“How so?”

“We were trying to block a logging operation in British Columbia. We dragged branches and rubbish in the road to stop the trucks. That’s terrorism these days.”

“Well, I’d call it protesting.”

“Not how they saw it. We were arrested rough and charged with terrorist acts.”

“You had to leave Canada?”

“Oh yes! Deported I was.”

Silence. Haggitt took a big gulp of his tea.

Finally Emily spoke: “So, Haggitt, we still have the same issue, and that is, how to keep your wish to stay here alive? You still want to stay, don’t you?”

“Aye, that I would,” he said dryly.

“Can you make peace with your family?”

At first he seemed to glare, but after a quick inhale-exhale he said, “I can

try.”

“Can I come visit you and Alice?”

“Anytime you please, *milady*,” he said with a broad grin—or sneer.

“Let me also say this, Haggitt, you should just call me Emily if you can’t use courtesy titles properly.”

He looked at her askance, smirking with raised eyebrows.

They left Franke’s together. She offered her hand, and he took it and gave it a sharp snap. He then turned abruptly and loped off down the street, his poncho-cape flapping in the wind and drizzle. She turned and headed up the street towards home, but after a few steps, the weight of the matter seemed to fall directly upon her all at once, almost physically staggering her. She was exhausted, emotionally drained by the experience.

She trudged on in a daze past the mill with its quickly flowing race on her left. Here the unimpeded wind blew the fine drizzle directly into her face. She jerked at the hood on her jacket, bringing it up and over her head—but then thought better, throwing it back again. The fine droplets soon coated her face, causing her to blink. It was a pleasantly cool, gently misting spring rain, and this seemingly small thing lifted her mood to a great height. She was alone again with the spring-emergent land and happy to imbibe its deep, rich presence. She turned in a circle, eyes in and out of focus. Everywhere, seemingly, was the subtle but profound spirit of burgeoning spring green.

This unexpected joy buoyed her up Jane Lane. At first she tried to formulate what she would say to Gran, but soon enough Jane Lane diverted her attention fully to its sweet delights. For nearly every day for almost two months she had communed with this almost-mile, it awakening in her subtly nuanced impressions and emotions every time. And now it seemed to speak even deeper as the pulsing rain sprayed her face.

She floated through the dense hedges, coming at last to the oak collar copse where even less wind was able to enter. The drizzly rain collected on mossy branches of the vaulted archway, growing to full raindrop size, then falling upon her as would normal, unimpeded rain, albeit slow and deliberate. She kept her hood down and allowed her head become progressively wetter

and wetter, the cool, pure water trickling down the back of her neck.

She halted before a crooked line of daffodils growing energetically on a mossy curb-like rise. None were quite in bloom, though seeming all the more vibrant and succulent for it. She squatted down and caressed the squeaky green buds still tightly bundling their pale yellow blooms. She resisted an urge to pick a handful: That they might refuse to bloom—even if placed in one of Gran’s magic vases—was simply too great of a risk. Stillborn blooms? The thought brought a sharp note of dread to her heart. She stood again and beheld the wind wandering amongst the copse’s fresh green understory growth like hands mussing up hair. She studied the patterns, the textures, the shades of everything up, down, around, and could only marvel in silence at the great subtlety of her personal path-tunnel. Everything man-made, everything indoors seemed in comparison a mean, simple box, lacking *Seligkeit*. Yes, perfect, she thought, the catch-all German word for bliss, happiness, salvation, beatitude, rapture all at once.

Coming to where the shaggy old orchards rolled out on either side, she revelled in the sight of the gusty winds swirling round the long grasses grown up between the stunted, barren trees. Wherever the berry brambles and competing birch and willow weren’t, there billowed the slender, tall grasses coming back to life, the dull browns tinged throughout with the new soft green.

For its part the open final quarter-mile lay deep in muted colours, including the dark heather, green and grey, snapping stiffly in the wind and spray. No, not until late summer would the purple of the tiny bell-shaped blooms appear across this upland. *Seligkeit*, indeed.

She recalled how as a child she would simply stop and stare out into the branches, up into the sky, completely empty-headed for what seemed to her hours. Here was the fairy kingdom where a child never falters. No trance or vision this time, simply her *selige Kindheit* come to take her hand.

“Your father will be back tomorrow—late, I expect,” said Gran in a matter-of-fact tone. “He’s bringing *Catherine*,” she added with a sarcastic lilt.

A jolt of pain, then the realisation that Gran obviously meant someone

else. “I see,”—was all Emily could think to say to it.

“Also, I talked with Thomas.”

She looked sharply at her grandmother, but waited for her to continue.

“There’s a new addition to the family on the way.”

“Yes, Haggitt told me.”

Silence.

“You met Timmy today.”

“Yes.”

Silence. Supper was goulash stew, a cheese plate, and Mrs. Colby’s hearty but sticky-doughy buns. The candles were not lit, rather, a naked compact fluorescent bulb hanging over the long, dull-grey stainless-steel sink threw its weak light out into the low-ceilinged room. Even so, the natural *hygge* of the space could not be lessened; the soft silvery shimmer creating its own odd charm.

“Dear, you must understand the Sulleys aren’t wealthy people.”

“I know.”

“They’ve bought a share of the Crowder place. It’s to be a big part of their retirement income when the time comes.”

“Do you want Timmy and Alice with a baby on the way to simply move on?”

Gran straightened in her chair and spoke: “We can get them set up somewhere. Perhaps Penrith.”

“Seriously? You know this?”

“We can try.”

“Public housing on short notice?”

“We’ll manage something.”

“But it would be stressful. And they’d be unhappy. And there would be an open wound in the family. And who is to replace the Sulleys when they retire?”

Gran looked sharply at her granddaughter then away, but did not speak.

The two women ate in silence. Emily regretted her aggression, and wondered how she might get the conversation restarted. But as she stared at

one of the buns, she was suddenly reminded of a school trip she, Annette and their history class had made to an historic Kansas grist mill.

The mill had been built by the first settlers in the 1850's and was still operational, grinding many different types of grains, including wheat, buckwheat, corn, rye, and spelt with the original stone wheels. She remembered how proud the miller was as he spoke at length of the history, as well as technical aspects of water-powered stone grinding.

But as the others had begun to stare into their mobiles and wander off through the mortise-and-tenon timber frame building, the effusive man opined to his remaining attentive audience—Emily and Annette—over the mill's future. According to him, his superiors were not very interested in keeping the mill running, wanting to shift the considerable upkeep monies to other outdoor recreation-oriented projects. According to him, the demographics of American tourism were shifting away from historical tourism and toward outdoor recreation, as well as *hedonist* tourism, by which he meant fancy resorts aiming to spoil the visitor. “. . . Las Vegas, Disney World, that sort of thing.”

When he discovered his audience was English and German, he recited a long list of grist mills in both lands he had visited as an officer of the American Society for the Preservation of Old Mills. She and Annette bought two-pound sacks of freshly-ground cornmeal. . . .

“You don't see the Sulleys being replaced when they retire,” breaking the silence.

“Dear, as I said the other day, we have no management relationships with the farmers. And as far as Timmy's concerned, if Thomas—and especially the other farmers—don't want him around, then he'll have to move on. The farming community has its own ways of dealing with things.

“Dear, it's all hanging by a thread up here. The sheep are only in demand for their meat, and that's tenuous—just the restaurants and markets catering to the urban connoisseurs. And a fickle lot, they are. Timmy and his gang caused quite a ruckus here, you know. The valley can't afford negative publicity. To put it plainly, they want him to chuff off.”

“It's up to Thomas—and the other farmers.”

“To some degree, yes, if he wants to be a farmer.”

“Well then, I shall have a talk with them. Who are these people besides Thomas and Jodie, and Todd and Jenny? What do Timmy’s parents say?”

“Clive and Anna? Oh no, he’s burnt that bridge down to ashes.”

“Right. . .” She sighed loudly.

“Emily, dear, some of the others round here were new just like Timmy and Alice. They came here full of idealistic notions as well. The difference was they showed a sight more maturity and discretion. One of our best farming families, the Dobbses, came here as hippies in the seventies. Middle-class kids from Kent, they were. It worked out for them because they didn’t try to tell the natives their business. And your grandfather and I were certainly dreamers in our own way. Do you remember that picture of us, Henry with his long hair and beard?”

“Yes,” said Emily softly, smiling at the memory.

“There’s a few like that here in the area, and, right or not, they’ll be even harder on Timmy than the older families.”

“Yes,” muttered Emily.

“You have to understand, dear, this place is a very tight-knit community, and our ways aren’t to be trifled with. I’m guessing your father’s already burnt through most of our reputation. Like I said, he never understood the situation, always acting as if he were lord and master from some past age. They played along—mainly as a courtesy to me—but we were all embarrassed for him. You don’t want to be tarred with that brush.”

Emily nibbled untasting on a piece of Wigmore cheese. Oh, how embarrassing, she thought. She had suspected her father was just spinning his wheels, and, by default, she too. But then she noticed how Gran was staring at her. She met her eyes and said, “I won’t be.”

“Dear, we’re oversized as an earldom in these parts. Like your grandfather used to say, we’re still trying to live down the Norman invasion.”

“Yes, Gran.”

“Timmy doesn’t come in here any longer.” said Thomas flatly in answer

to Emily's inquiry of why Haggitt hadn't come. His jaw was set hard.

Emily had telephoned the Sulleys the night before and they agreed to meet for lunch the next day at the Wolkeld Arms, the local pub. She had not been in the place since returning, partly because she was a single woman, partly because she was the earl's daughter. The WA was very old-fashioned, rustic, rumoured to date back to when the first family sire established Wolkeld village in the sixteenth century.

It was a busy noon, full of locals, as well as people she guessed were tourists due to their clothing, as well as their bright, expectant "We're on holiday!" expressions. The party had found a cosy booth by the front window.

"Why, then?" she asked, upbeat, smiling, but dreading the answer.

"Oh, he tried to start a fight with someone," replied Thomas in a lower tone of voice. "You see, there's only one opinion, never somebody else's."

"Oh," said Emily half-smiling.

"He got a bad break in Canada, that's for sure. 'Twas only some sticks across a road, I'm told. Mischief-making, just a typical weekend in Brixton—and they going on like it was nine-eleven all over again. But none of that's an excuse for him storming around in a mardy all the time. We're all heart-sick over him."

"I feel a bit responsible. I went to see them, and I—I suppose I encouraged him."

"You didn't know the whole story, dear," said Jodie.

The waitress had just come and proceeded to set three pints of reddish ale in front of them. Emily was intimidated by the size of her glass and how serious its contents looked. The waitress then took their orders: the daily special was a mutton pie, which they all ordered. She was glad to no longer be vegan, as launching into a tedious investigation of the bill of fare for possible vegan combinations would have been an unwanted distraction.

"Cheers," said Thomas and Jodie.

"Cheers," answered Emily, albeit sheepishly.

Thomas and Jodie took nice, big drinks. Emily tried to follow suit.

"He's put us all in a hard place, Timmy has," continued Thomas after

putting his glass down.

“We want to help, but he’s always one to argue over this and that,” said Jodie. She took another big sip of her ale, set it down quickly, and continued, “Oh, enough about Timmy, how are you doing Emily, dear? We haven’t spoken proper since you’ve come back.”

“Quite well, actually,” replied Emily, smiling warmly. “I’m home. I’m truly home.” She held her hands in her lap and leaned forward, shoulders down and relaxed. She could feel her cheeks blushing. Indeed, she felt once more the warm embrace of her home.

“It was so much fun when you were coming up here,” said Jodie in an emotional voice, her eyes moist. “We’re so glad to have you back.”

“So how are your children doing?” countered Emily quickly.

“Oh, quite well,” replied Jodie, beaming. “Beth’s in Leeds at a brand-new neonatal station. She’s got enough experience now to be an advanced nurse practitioner, and that’s a nice pay rise. Loves her work, she says. Her Robert’s been trying to get more schooling so’s he can advance at his bank. Jimmy’s still over in Whitehaven. His garage is doing quite well. Betsy’s still a farmer’s wife; her Nigel’s still farming. They’re over in Edenhall.”

“We’re grandparents five times over!” said Thomas proudly.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” said Emily, smiling broadly.

“They all baby-sat you, you know,” said Jodie. “I don’t think you’d remember Lizzibeth, though. She was already off to college when you were a toddler. ”

“Oh, I remember all right. I had the best childhood one could imagine.” She smiled and looked off to the side, recalling her sitters.

“Lady Susanna doing well?” said Jodie.

“Yes, yes.”

“She’s a hardy one for sure. Best gardens in the valley.”

Silence. They all took sips of beer, each wondering what should happen next. The bustle and noise was just at the level of innervating. She glanced about, feeling good about the genuine oldness of the place. But then she mused about why she liked this pub, but had balked at the Haworth pub,

supposedly just as old and authentic. It had to be her local prejudice.

In the middle of a fretful weather forecast from Thomas, the waitress came with their food. Emily, who was beginning to feel the effects of the half glass she had consumed, was glad to have something for her stomach besides strong English ale.

A real pie lay steaming before her. Although the crust seemed a bit greasy, what was inside was hearty and filling. Now the beer tasted good. She couldn't help but notice Thomas eyeing her hearty appetite. No doubt he had heard she was a vegetarian. She swallowed a mouthful and restarted the conversation: "So how has farming been while I was away?"

The Sulleys glanced at one another and chuckled. "Could always be better," said Thomas.

"Tell me then," said Emily upbeat, grinning.

"Oh, the older I get the less patience I have for being a zoo animal—"

"—that watches the other zoo animals, the sheep," completed Jodie. "That's our way of describing it."

Emily laughed at the image this created in her mind. "For the tourists, you mean?"

"Oh, aye," said Thomas. "You've got to have the patience of Job these days."

"And the government these days," said Jodie. "The latest thing they're on about is *carbon storage*. Now, what on earth does that mean, a normal person might ask?"

"I'm not familiar, either," said Emily.

"It means they'll be wanting more forests and less farming," exclaimed Jodie. "That's what it means."

"They'd like woods where's sheep and pastures," said Thomas. "They've always complained about the water quality, the run-off from our fields."

"And not native trees, no, it's more of those Christmas tree farms," continued Jodie. "What grows faster, they say."

"Then there's the farmers who want more beef cattle," added Thomas, waving his hand.

“But there the environmentalists are on *our* side, because they don’t want cattle on account of *their* carbon footprint,” said Jodie, waving her hand. “We go round and round!”

“This land and these Herdwick sheep have been together . . . for over a thousand of years,” said Thomas. “The Park was supposed to honour that fact, not worry us to death.”

“We’re too old to worry about carbon or beef cattle,” said Jodie, shaking her head.

“They’re not serious about forests, are they?” said Emily.

“Who can say? Politicians talk such rubbish these days,” replied the stocky, ginger-haired woman. “The tiny little bit of carbon extra trees would remove in England is nothing compared to places like India where they’re burning coal like mad. We’re going out of our way to be green and all, whilst the rest of the world does what it jolly well pleases!”

“I suppose so,” said Emily.

The party was silent as they ate.

“Oh, it’s just talk for now,” continued Thomas. “But it’s just like them to come up with such nonsense. On the one hand, they want us around for the zoo. We get this and that payment, mind. But then they take as well, and in the end we’re barely making a living. It’s down to just us and the Wilsons farming full-time hereabouts.”

He and Jodie gave one another looks. Emily realised, however, time was slipping away and she needed to get Haggitt and Alice’s case back on the table. “So what does Timmy say to all this? I imagine he’s on your side,” she said as cheerily as she could.

“Oh, he’s his own side!” exclaimed Thomas.

Emily grinned to be encouraging. “What might that be?”

The couple laughed in unison. “Nothing too strange,” began Thomas, “just that we should all go back to Viking times, wearing sheepskins and digging out holes in the fells for shelter.”

The Sulleys laughed.

“Reading tea leaves and chicken bones, and listening for what the ravens

are squawking about,” added Jodie. “Can’t say I’m too interested at my age. Set in my ways, I suppose.”

Again, the couple laughed heartily, Emily lightly and late.

“When I saw it, the Crowder cottage seemed very primitive.”

“Oh, aye, it is primitive like back then, all right. Cooking in an inglenook’s a real trick,” said Jodie.

“It’s got the stove in the kitchen, dear, remember?” said Thomas to his wife. But then he turned to Emily and with big eyes whispered, “They were pinching wood off your property for burning.”

“Against the rules?” she whispered back.

“Oh, aye!” said Thomas. “Police finally came in. Almost came to blows, we’re told.”

Silence. Thomas continued, however, in a more serious tone: “The farm incomes round here are pitiful. We can laugh about Timmy’s notions and all, but really, if you’re not for living *very* poor, you cannot make a go of it here just as a farmer.

“Think what a new family would have to pay for a farm: at the very least a quarter-million! They’d never come close to paying off that size of mortgage just farming. They’d have to go to a city and find jobs. Then what’s the point?”

Just then Emily remembered Annette mentioning a holiday she and her family had taken in Austria. The family had stayed at an alpine farm high up in the Alps, a real working farm managed by the on-site farmer family. “Now tell me,” said Emily, sitting up, “do you mean to renovate the cottage, have it like my grandmother’s cottages?”

“Oh, aye,” said Jodie. “We’ll have a seventy-five percent stake in Crowder.”

“But you mean to bring it up to modern standards like hers.”

The couple laughed. “That we do,” said Thomas. “Tourists want running hot water, indoor bathroom, dependable heat and such.”

“What if it were a working farm, and the tourists were guests? A sort of farmer’s bed-and-breakfast?”

“What? All of them in that tiny space?” exclaimed Jodie, leaning back,

eyes wide.

Emily felt her chest tightening. She knew she was in thin ice. “No, the tourists would be in the cottage, and the farmer would be in, say, an outbuilding or even off-site. But it would be a full working farm with animals and garden and such.”

Thomas did not make eye-contact with her, rather, he looked down, attending to his food. He glanced over at Jodie, who glanced back, likewise avoiding Emily’s eyes. Her heart sank. She knew she’d gone too far and had ruined everything, burning through her social capital with her dear old friends.

“You’re still trying to find a place for Timmy and Alice,” said Thomas at last, looking directly at her. “That’s very kind of you, Emily, dear, it truly is.”

“Yes, I guess I do mean that,” said Emily softly, full of sincerity. “I feel responsible in part.”

“It’d be a right serious gamble,” said Thomas. And then he looked directly at Emily. “But what about the winter months?”

“Timmy’s not the host type,” said Jodie, frowning. “Although Alice would be quite good at it, I expect,” she added. “Yes, I’ve heard of farmer B-and-Bs. And it’s a pretty little place down in that dip, and the old trees all round.”

Again, the couple glanced quickly at one another.

“Gran said James—my friend James from Herefordshire, that is—might help with the stonework.”

“Aye, it’s an old one, all right. Needs someone who knows their old structures, it does. It would cost as much to renovate it as to knock it down and build something completely new, we’re told. But if this lad can help . . . well, that was one idea.”

Emily was still amazed by how James’ name had got in the mix. But if the cost of renovations were truly so high, that explained why it had gone unoccupied for so long. Still, the negotiations seemed to balance on a knife edge. Was putting James in the cottage somehow back on the table? “Wasn’t there a barn on the property?”

“Aye, an old barn, but it probably needs more work than the cottage. It’s

stone as well.”

“I wonder if it could be made for someone to live in?”

“I suppose it could,” said Thomas, “although I doubt it’d be approved without being reclassified as a proper dwelling. Lots of rules and regulations on that sort of thing.” He made a face like he had bitten into a lemon.

“I’m only trying to make this work for Timmy and Alice.”

Jodie took a bite. She swallowed and shook her head. “I know you are. Hearing she’s expecting has changed things. Timmy’s gone quieter, that’s for sure. You talked some sense into him, you know.”

They attended to their food, and the sounds of the pub rushed back in. The merry society all around them seemed jolting after such a serious discussion.

“We better not have another rainy summer,” said Thomas, upbeat. “Had to buy hay last winter. Park helped on that. Not sure the money will be there again.”

“Is this due to global warming?” said Emily.

“That’s what they keep saying,” said Thomas. “A wet pattern stalls over us, and it just won’t stop raining! But I don’t like it that others get to spew out the carbon while we’re on the straight and narrow. And turning English farmland into Christmas tree farms won’t fix it. We can’t eat trees.”

They parted in a heightened mood, though in Emily’s case this was due in large part to her newness to strong English ale. Indeed, she felt flushed—and inexplicably vulnerable. But then it occurred to her why: The WA was on a diagonal across the narrow main street from Franke’s. She turned immediately and set off back to the west along the side street bordering both the pub and the bookshop. After a few paces, it became a narrow country lane bordered by drystone-fenced meadows. The sky above was overcast, although the clouds were high and did not threaten rain. The temperate was definitely cooler than short sleeves would allow, though the wind was minimal.

As she walked along, thoughts of James came to her lighter-than-usual mind. She took a big gulp of air as the image of them kissing at the train station suddenly appeared. As then, she experienced the definite flush of sexual

arousal. She had to stop and laugh to the sky, because she now knew why so many babies had been conceived whilst their parents were tipsy. Oh yes, she thought, I've only one beer in me and . . . and . . . and. She skipped a few yards, then jumped like a fawn. "Lovely," she murmured.

The meadows eventually ended and a rougher, wilder, unfenced territory began. Here were patches of the colour-mute heather, although elsewhere the green-up was definitely in full swing. Not quite a mile later the lane bowed to the south and a small beck joined its right flank. The spot seemed quite flat, while all around, like the sides of a shallow bowl, the landscape rose rather steeply.

After perhaps a mile the lane came to a conifer forest, no doubt the kind of "Christmas tree farm" Jodie had meant, although these particular trees, spruce and pine, seemed mature and tall. Odd, but she could not remember this forest. It seemed plenty wild and primeval, not some tree farm where the exact same tree had been planted like row crops in a field as she had once seen in America. Still, nothing compared to her Wolkeld Wood, an original Atlantic oakwood, protected and doted over by scientists and foresters. Exactly what had Haggitt and his friends done in there, she wondered?

The beck stayed along the lane, although growing swifter as the grade increased. The light was subdued across a forest floor covered mainly in ferns and mosses. Many of the tree were an arm's embrace around—or larger—all covered with moss and lichen. The wind, hardly noticeable before, sounded like a strange orchestra as the air sang on its journey through the millions of needles and branches.

Soon she came to a fork in the road. The way to the left headed directly up the side of the hill, while the way to the right bent back to the north. She went right and was soon confronted with the beck crossing a low spot of the lane, that is, no bridge. Could she make it across without getting her feet wet? As she drew near, she saw a set of stepping stones like a row of giant's teeth spaced across the stream's width. Cars would have to roll through, but pedestrians could hop across on the protruding flat molars.

Halfway across, she stopped and dipped her hand into the swift flow,

which met the intrusion by slamming ice-cold water molecules against her skin. But just then she heard the windy whine of a car coming from behind her at a high speed. Before she could move, a late-model silver Mercedes sedan had hit the water and splashed her thoroughly. And just as it passed she saw the faces of two young men sneering at her from the windows.

A panic gripped her. She suddenly realised how alone and vulnerable she was. And to her horror the car came to a sudden halt on the other side of the stream. Her heart began to thump wildly in her chest when the front driver's window lowered and a young man shouted "Serves you right, stupid cunt!" after which she heard the other passengers laughing raucously. A beer bottle flew out in her general direction, accompanied by the sound of a loud raspberry and more raucous laughter. The bottle spun as it skidded down to the stream's edge, blowing out its contents in a spray of foam. "Have a beer, cunt!" The vehicle sped off, tires throwing dirt and gravel.

It had all happened so quickly that she had not memorised the plate number. And yet searching her memory for a second or two she did recall the L just after the GB insignia, meaning a London memory code. Silver, late-model Mercedes with a London plate would certainly be enough.

"Move!" she whispered through gritted teeth. She was definitely in fight-or-flight mode, the hair on the back of her neck standing, her limbs shaking. But where? Off to hide in the forest in case they came back? Backward or forward on the lane? Yes, hiding in the forest seemed the best way to avoid them if they were just now talking themselves into something truly diabolical.

In an instant she was across the stream and heading off to the right into the forest. If they did come back—there being at least three of them—they might guess her plan and set off looking for her. No, indeed, the forest was *not* a good place to be caught by a pack of young men. She halted and listened. Nonetheless, the lane was probably no safer, being so deserted. Out on the road they might grab her and drag her into their vehicle. Total darkness wouldn't be for hours, but the light was already noticeably dimmer than when she had left the pub.

Her tiny bit of inebriation was a distant memory now, every cell of her

body in a state of high alert. She set off into the forest at a dead run, aiming for what she hoped was the north-east. Being in a ravine, she had to work to get to the higher ground, but her adrenaline made it seem like a downhill run.

Some two hundred yards later she finally stopped. She got behind a tree and squatted down, peering round at the direction from which she had just come. Silence. She tried her best to quiet her breathing, straining to hear. One minute, two minutes, five minutes went by. Her heart and lungs were just getting back to normal when she heard voices from just behind. Her skin prickled and her heart raced anew. She crawled back around the giant spruce and tried to make herself as flat as possible.

Multiple male voices. Definitely male and many of them. But they were normal-toned and—friendly-sounding. Crawling forward to a large downed branch, she looked out and saw one, two, three, and then many people, both young men *and* women, all apparently doing something purposeful, if not project-like, nearly all carrying tablet computers.

She decided to reveal herself and rose slowly to her feet. “Oh, hello!” called a young man some twenty yards away.

Soon the whole group had seen her and a senior-looking man came over. He was dressed outdoor-technical with hiking boots, hiking knickers, and a rain shell. He was middle-aged with a soft, intelligent-looking face. “Hello, Miss,” he said with a friendly but inquiring lilt, but his smile flattened when he noticed Emily’s expression. “Are you lost, Miss?”

Emily inhaled quickly and replied, “Ahh, yes, yes, I believe I am.” She tried to laugh, but only a strange squeaking sound came out.

“Where did you just come from?”

By now at least six of his younger colleges—all roughly Emily’s age, all friendly and wholesome looking enough—had joined him. Emily felt self-conscious. She attempted to smooth down her hair with her fingers; however, she could tell from their stares they had noticed how dishevelled she looked. Just then she noticed her right side was dirty. She brushed off the forest duff, recalling how, yes, she had taken at least one tumble. “Ah, from the village, Wolkeld,” she said, although her voice was strangely high-pitched.

Now a middle-age woman appeared, also dressed outdoor-technical. She immediately came up to Emily and peered into her face. “Ted, she’s in shock,” she whispered to the senior man, then to Emily: “What’s your name, dear?”

“Emily.”

“Emily, where do you live?” said the woman. Her tone was plain and direct and slightly loud, like an adult speaking to a lost and frightened child.

“Wolkeld. Just up from Wolkeld.”

“Very well, Emily, I’ll drive you home.” She then turned to a younger female, “Madeline, will you come with us?”

“Yes, Professor,” said a petite young woman with long, dark blond hair.

“Emily, I’m Nancy, Professor Nancy Walford. We’re from the University of Cumbria, the School of Forestry.”

The two women now stood to either side of Emily. Professor Walford took her forearm and led her over to a forest track slightly wider than a trail. “Our car is just on a bit,” she said in her motherly tone.

Emily was completely disoriented and looked all about, which no doubt made her seem all the more disturbed. Eventually, they came to a proper forest road and then to an SUV with University of Cumbria markings. Professor Walford helped her into the front passenger seat. The two women then climbed in, Professor Walford in the driver’s seat, and they started off.

A few minutes later they emerged from the forest and continued north-east on a narrow lane. Emily studied the landscape, finally guessing they were about two miles or so south-west of Wolkeld. Once they crossed the Wolkeld River, she knew where she was: less than a mile from the village. “Emily, dear, would you like to tell me what happened?” inquired Professor Walford.

Emily wrung her hands, then squeezed the straps of her rucksack on the floor between her legs. “I went out into the woods—and—and I guess I got lost and panicked.”

“Why did you go out into the forest, dear?”

Emily gave a short, embarrassed laugh and said, “Oh, well, ahh, I got splashed by a car as I was crossing the stream, and—”

“Who was in the car?” Professor Walford snapped.

At first Emily did not respond. She glanced over at older woman, then back to the road. Finally she replied, "Some young people."

"Men?"

"Yes."

"Did they threaten you?"

Again, Emily hesitated, but finally said, "They were very rude."

"With sexual language?"

"Yes," said Emily, biting a knuckle.

"Did they stop and get out?"

"No, they stopped and then—"

"And then you *ran*, correct?"

"Well, I feel quite foolish now," whispered Emily.

"No, dear, you did what thought best after being sexually harassed on a lonely road."

"Oh, I wouldn't say they *sexually* harassed me."

"Yes, Emily, that's sexual harassment to use crude, sexual language. When men behave in any fashion that can be construed as threatening, it's criminal—especially this situation you've just described. Did you get their registration number?"

"I—I believe it was a London number; the first letter was an L."

"And the make of the car?"

"Well, I'm fairly sure it was a Mercedes, a newer sedan."

"Colour?"

"Silverish, I think."

"Did you get that, Madeline?" Professor Walford said to her student.

"Yes, ma'am, silver Mercedes, London," said the Northern-sounding young woman in the rear.

Emily turned and could see the young woman dialling a number on her mobile. "Oh, who are you calling?"

"The police, ma'am," said Madeline.

"Oh, please don't."

"Are you sure?" said Professor Walford.

“Yes, yes. They’ll just deny it all.”

“How many were there?”

“At least three.”

“This should be reported, Emily,” said Nancy Walford in a soft but firm voice.

“I’d rather it didn’t. I’m Emily Whitmore. My family—”

“Oh yes, yes, I know the name,” cut in Professor Walford, glancing over with wide-eyes. “You’re the Earl of Wolkeld’s daughter?”

“Yes,” replied Emily.

“We’ve been to your oak forest many times.” She reached over and patted Emily’s arm. “All the more reason to report this. I’ll want to talk with Lady Susanna when we get there.”

Silence. Emily could see the village up ahead, from that distance and angle, a compact mix of bare and whitewashed stone buildings. For some reason the sight struck her as droll. “Oh, there we are!” she exclaimed—but immediately felt silly, thinking she sounded like a schoolchild.

“I know the way to your house,” said Nancy.

The drive up Jane Lane was painful for Emily. She could barely keep from crying. What a bizarre turn things had taken! But now what to do? It was as if gunmen had shot at her and then run off into the night. They had missed—or weren’t aiming at her at all—but then people cannot be allowed to shoot off guns in the open, right?

Being a peer complicated things. Was it sexual assault, sexual harassment—or was she just a prudish toff overreacting, she wondered? Had she been a man, none of this would have been an issue. Nor would it have been an issue had James been along. Would she have panicked had they simply shouted out something innocuous like “Sorry, luv!”—and kept driving? Again, probably not.

“Professor, I really think I’ve overreacted. I’m better now.”

“No, dear,” shot back the older woman. “Emily, when we first saw you, I thought for certain you’d been physically assaulted. I’ve seen it before.”

“But I simply worked myself up into a—”

“*Please* don’t make excuses for male oppression. Were you not sexually demeaned? Were you not alone and feared for your safety?”

Emily sighed. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Then you should not rationalise their behaviour. It’s typical to want to move on, smooth things over. Even in the most awful cases, women want everything swept under the carpet. We see ourselves as the cause, the catalyst of male aggression. I realise this is a borderline situation; but you have to admit things could have taken a very ugly turn.”

“I shouldn’t have been out walking on—”

“Good lord, Emily!” broke in Nancy Walford once again. “You’re the Earl of Wolkeld’s daughter. This is your home. Were this another era, this would quite literally be *your* valley!”

“And let me just say,” spoke up Madeline from the rear, “in another age, these pigs would be in your dungeon . . . ahh, do you have a dungeon, ma’am?”

Laughter, but just then Emily remembered that her father and his new “friend” would be arriving that night. A shudder went through her. “Ladies, I really need you to respect my wishes. I agree with all you’ve said, but I’m really full-up with other problems at this moment.”

“Very well, dear, but I must have a word with Lady Susanna,” said Professor Walford.

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

It was almost dark when they pulled up in front of the lodge. Emily’s heart sank when she saw her father’s dark BMW SUV parked in front of the old carriage house. “Oh no,” she whispered.

Nancy Walford brought the vehicle to a quick stop, threw the transmission into park, and jumped out of the vehicle quickly and decisively, obviously not waiting for Emily to invite her in. She strode quickly up to the old oak door and banged the door knocker several times. Emily was at her side by then. They traded sharp looks and waited.

Emily felt like a schoolgirl who had been expelled from school and taken home by some stern school official. She wanted to simply go inside and—and

what?—leave Professor Walford outside? Or invite her in? Too rude the former, not at all in the mood for the latter.

After what seemed an eternity, Gran answered, her eyes big with surprise at the sight before her. “Well hello, Nancy. What brings—” But then she noticed Emily. “Emily! There you are! Your father’s back, dear. We’re about to have dinner.”

“Lady Susanna, may I have a word in private?”

“Well, I suppose so.” At that she slipped out into the twilight and closed the heavy door behind her. “We have company tonight.”

“I won’t take up much of your time, but. . .” —and then she gave a compact version of Emily’s unfortunate encounter.

“Dear, are you all right?!” exclaimed Gran, taking Emily’s hands.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“I’ve urged her to contact the authorities,” said Nancy Walford.

“Yes, I see, I see,” replied Gran, obviously stalling for time, unsure how to proceed.

“But if I do report this,” began Emily, “then they will try to catch them. And if they do, then I’ll have to formally make a complaint against them—and—and they’ll simply deny everything.”

While Emily was speaking, Nancy Walford was becoming visibly agitated. “Yes, but then these men will feel free to behave like this again—if not worse. As you’ve admitted, Emily, this could have turned out much worse. We were in the general vicinity, and we might have heard you. But many women when they’re assaulted go into shock and don’t cry out for help.”

Time seemed to stand still. “Emily,” said Gran at last, “why don’t you go in and freshen up.”

Emily nodded and squeezed past her into the house.

“I’m very sorry to drop this in your lap, Lady Susanna,” said Nancy Walford in an almost pleading tone, “but we really can’t allow this to go—“ At that moment the door swung open and Stanley Whitmore stepped out.

“Oh, here you are, Mother!” he said in a merry tone. Seeing the stranger, he started. “Oh, hello there. And who are you?”

“This is Professor Nancy Walford,” answered his mother. “She’s given Emily a lift home. Do you remember her and her students when they came to see our wood?”

“I’m afraid I missed you. Stanley, Stanley Whitmore,” he exclaimed with enthusiasm, offering his hand.

Another tense, pregnant pause after their handshake. “Ahhh, well, Professor, I’d invite you in, but we’re entertaining here tonight.”

“No, no, I’ve just brought your daughter home, and—” At that she paused looking at Lady Whitmore.

“And it seems Emily had a run-in with some ruffians in a car,” completed Gran.

“Really!” cried Stanley.

“She wasn’t hurt, but she had quite a scare,” added Nancy Walford, who then proceeded to recite the details.

“Good lord! Well then, we’ll call the authorities straight away!” he exclaimed in a booming voice. “Now, the car, give me the details.”

Madeline had joined them and gave him the description. He immediately wheeled around and went back inside.

“Please come in,” said Gran, now noticing Madeline. “And you are?”

“Madeline Forbes, ma’am. I’m a graduate student.” At that Gran offered her hand, which she took and shook.

They all came into the vestibule area to see the earl on the telephone. “I see, I see,” he said into the receiver while looking blankly at the three women. “Well, you’ll keep us posted . . . yes, thank you then . . . no, no, we’re very grateful . . . bye then.” At that he hung up, and, clasping and rubbing his hands together, said, “It seems the police are already on to our joy riders. The car was stolen and was just recovered outside of Windermere. The officer said they believe they know who they are. They’ve raised quite a ruckus in the past twenty-four hours. We can come into the station on Monday and give a statement.”

Just then the phone rang. Stanley went over and answered. “Oh, hello . . . oh, I see . . . good! . . . yes . . . indeed . . . yes . . . very well then. So, we might

come by on Monday . . . yes, thank you. Good bye.” At that he hung up and gave a sharp laugh. “They’ve been caught down in Windermere being a nuisance in a pub. Emily will have to get in line to make her complaint.”

“Very well then, so we should be leaving,” said Professor Walford.

“Thank you so very much for your help,” exclaimed the earl.

At that the two visitors took their leave.

“Stanley, what’s all the excitement?” drawled a contralto voice from the hall entrance. An attractive, thirty-something blonde emerged into the concourse and took a dramatic stance. She was wearing a silver-grey silk top, black skirt, and high black boots with stiletto heels. One hand was on her hip, the other holding out a glass of wine straight out like a compass. Her expression was wide-eyed ironic. Stanley Whitmore rushed over to her and explained the situation, throughout which the new woman made piercing laughing sounds.

Just as they were about to leave the vestibule, Emily came down the stairs. She was now wearing a dark green kilt, matching knee socks, polo neck knit top, and corduroy vest. Upon seeing the guest she felt an instantaneous chill, as if she had just stepped under an icy waterfall. Eyes locked, she and the older woman glided towards one another and shook hands.

“And this must be Emily,” drawled Catherine Deruthyn, wearing a condescending pout.

“Hello, Miss Deruthyn,” said Emily in a quiet, even tone, maintaining her poise. She was her mother’s daughter, indeed, gracious in the face of any and all existential terror and agony.

Again, the eerie high-pitched laugh erupted from the guest. “Oh, call me Catherine!” replied the taller woman, waving her free hand.

“My mother’s name was Catherine,” replied Emily in an measured, exacting tone of voice, smiling calmly. “I’d prefer not to call you by that name. May I know your middle name?”

Catherine made her trilling laugh sound, again waving her hand with a dismissive gesture, but glancing over at the earl. “Well, then call me CJ. That’s what everyone at Benenden called me.”

Emily smiled and said in an upbeat voice, “What does the J stand for, if I may ask?”

Again the guest gave a short, yet even more piercing laugh, “Jocelyn, dear.”

“Very well, I’ll call you Jocelyn—if you have no objections.”

Jocelyn trilled again but with less air. She stared at Emily, then over at Stanley Whitmore who stood tight by her side wearing an I-told-you-so ironic smirk. Gran moved up beside Emily—and there they stood, like principals and seconds in a spatially-tight duel.

Emily did not feel brave or afraid; she did not feel anything at all. It was as if she were floating on another plane, this time, however, one with the secondary effect of keeping her cool and invincible. Gran, placing her hand on her shoulder, suggested they all move to the main hall, effectively breaking the spell.

Stanley and Jocelyn sat on the main sofa next to each other in limp postures, loosely holding hands. After a few brief notes about London and their drive up, Jocelyn, in her lazy, feigning boredom tone said, “Back to the Hall, Daddy’s going to loan us the money to get started.”

“We’ve had a lucky break on the roof,” chimed in Stanley, preferring a slight course correction to the topic. “That’s good oak in the rafters and beams—all the way down to the slats—and it’s stood the water quite well. Of course the plaster will have to be completely redone. We’ll have to scare up some specialists if we want all the decorative moulding back.” He chuckled at the floor. “Damnedest thing, though: Gothic exterior with a Greek interior. Not sure what they were thinking. Why didn’t they just do the facade classical as well? That was the going style at the time.”

“How much is the loan?” Gran asked Jocelyn point-blank, non-blinking.

She did her trilling laugh and gave a dismissive wave. “Oh, I don’t recall. What was it, darling?”

“Quite enough, actually,” said Stanley, looking found-out, then down, shaking his head. “We’ll get the roof put in order and then some. After that we’ll have to see.”

The words “loan” packed a hard punch. And as the conversation proceeded, her father and the woman continued tumbling down the slope of taste, propriety, and manners. Finally, mercifully, Mrs. Colby came in and announced dinner.

Everything about Jocelyn grated on Emily’s nerves: her voice, her gestures throughout the meal, the way she seemed to sway towards her father and giggle like a schoolgirl at anything he said. But none of that was as bad as the manner in which she would occasionally glare at her and her grandmother. Was she drunk? The conversation was all theirs, Emily and Gran barely saying anything more than “Oh, really,” and “Oh, how nice,” with increasingly painful smiles plastered to their faces as they described their whirlwind love affair. At some point Emily drifted off in thought, as left out as she felt.

At some point her father nonchalantly mentioned that he and the new woman were *already* wed—in a civil service earlier that week. But for Emily this failed to add much to the overall shock and terror. “Oh, congratulations,” she mouthed unvoiced in unison. Apparently, Gran already knew. A church wedding was to take place at the Carlisle Cathedral on the last Saturday of June.

Back in her room, Emily’s mind swam from all the strangeness of the day. The forest panic was now a distant second in shocking power, pushed way to the back by the crude, all but pornographic vibe Jocelyn and her father had put off. Had her father introduced the woman as a porn star, she would not have blinked, so crude and lowbrow was this supposedly upper-class woman’s aura. It was quite obvious she and Gran were on the same page, but now it seemed that page seemed to have been torn out of the book.

Emily reviewed her own behaviour—from the first second of their meeting to the final good night—and concluded she had done the best she could have under the circumstances. Besides the desperately honest request not to use the name Catherine, she had been a picture of graciousness. She had smiled at all the appropriate times, deigning to play along through the awkward, unseemly there-are-other-people-in-the-room! marriage theatre. And yet she had to pity her hapless father. No, his wasn’t the joy of a newly-wed, rather, a

dogged suppression of guilt, a stumbling attempt to keep up with whatever his new wife was saying. Emily remembered the American phrase *in your face*. To be sure, the woman had trotted out quite an aggressive in-your-face demonstration that night—and it was her face she was mainly in.

An empty feeling settled in her heart and mind. Alas, what does a wild animal feel when a predator moves in and takes her babies, her mate? How long does her outrage and anger last beyond the initial confrontation? Does she plot revenge? Emily was still too surprised, too overwhelmed to process anger and malice, her mind pushed too far out of its normal state to formulate any coherent thoughts or plans.

She lay in bed trying to read from her Emily Brontë, fearing she could not sleep. She was both exhausted and on high alert equally. This small dilemma did not last long, however, as some survival instinct came to fore as she dropped the book dead-asleep.

It was May and daybreak came very early. Luckily, she made it a good hour past dawn's earliest light, although she sat up suddenly from a very strange dream . . . of an expansive submerged garden, a sort of a wetland swamp of exotic flowering aquatic plants encircling some manor or castle. She tried to recall what the manor looked like, but she could only see the barest outlines of a ruin. More important were the encircling water gardens. She then remembered what had jarred her from sleep: a flock of insistent little sandpiper-dotterels darting to and fro through the reeds and water lilies. Like in so many of her dreams, the oddness balanced on a knife edge between fascinating and disturbing.

In the kitchen she found Gran, as well as Mrs. Colby, who served her a bowl of Scottish oatmeal porridge.

“Do we know how long we'll have our *guest*?” said Emily to her grandmother in a low tone, who was reading her newspaper and drinking her coffee as she did every morning.

“What's that, dear?” she replied, apparently not catching the question. “Oh, how long the earl and *Lady* Whitmore will be here?”

Emily smiled at Gran's little humour. "Yes, how long?"

"That I can't say. Hope the weather warms up. I'd like some tomatoes this season. Last year was a disaster."

Odd how Gran wasn't making eye-contact. But then it dawned on her that maybe she suspected Mrs. Colby, Anne Colby, their cook for as long as she could remember, of spying. She did recall how Gran had once complained about her gossiping. All right then, leave it for now, she thought.

She had a mind to go up to the fells. They would be empty, the last of the Herdwicks all down, safe and sound. It had been a late year, as she had been told, and they wouldn't be going back up for at least another week or so. There was that lovely spot with the small waterfall. No, no, just go into the village, haunt Franke's, maybe dare another walk—directly south to see the Jorhead. The troll joy-riders had been dealt with, and the Shire was surely safe again. Oh, but her trip to Germany could not come quick enough!

She set off down Jane Lane, the sky again cloudy, the weather cooler. She felt much better, having slept well enough, the big mug of coffee waking her up proper. The wind was almost chill, and she zipped up her rain shell, stowing her cable sweater from Maine in her rucksack just in case. She wasn't exactly impatient for warmer, sunnier weather, but at some point it would be nice to wear less bulkier items.

Everything seemed frozen in time; the upland heather had not changed from its dark greens and dull grey-browns, nor had the lane's various bordering kingdoms, with all their buds, sprouts, shoots, and sundry soft green foliage in the nascent stage she had left them. So too her mind picked up the same thread from before, her childhood reveries of the wonders in all of nature's myriad detail. What Haggitt had said about nature brimming with magic now seemed whispered by hidden, spying fairy queen courtiers. Was it the caffeine talking, or did she feel herself flying right up to the border of her own visionlands just then? In any case, being under the spells of the fairies warmed her heart. So lovely it was, like a special key in a special lock, opening a special door.

And so it was in this surprisingly settled but glowing mood, with strange and subtle magical undercurrents, that she entered Franke's to find herself face-

to-face with Judith and her son Stephan and his girlfriend, one very tall and beautiful Marit, as she was introduced.

Word had somehow reached Judith about her father's new bride and their visit. Nevertheless, the older woman was eclipsed by the statuesque young pair who pulled and pulled some more, finally detaching her, spiriting her away, heading south down the cobblestones. They were, in answer to Emily's inquiry, heading for the Jorhead, where, according to Stephan, a special way led to a "secret place" where only "cool people" could come.

"Sorry about Mother," said Stephan. "She's a gossipmonger pain-in-the-ass. I can imagine she's been giving you hell."

"Oh, not really," said Emily tactfully.

"She's turning into an eccentric old bat. She's not getting laid, and her hormones are eating her brain."

The party laughed, Emily less-heartedly.

Despite the lingering cool and cloudy weather, the town was definitely coming to life with tourists. Emily could recognise tourists by how their eyes seemed to wander all around, eagerly drinking in every detail—all whilst playing the you-don't-exist game with any proximate fellow human. Not so the locals, who, wearing their everyday faces, rarely passed by without seeking out her eye and giving a nod or greeting. A few head bobs came their way that morning, along with a few furtive glances at the strangely exotic threesome.

Stephan bore a passing resemblance to a young Gregory Peck, including standing just over six-foot-two. He was brash confidence and easy charm personified. Marit, too, had a relaxed, confident bearing. She was tall, angular, and of stunningly soft, doll-like Northern European beauty. Emily mused on whether these were in fact Otherland courtiers to whom she had been handed off just as she left the Kingdom of Jane's Lane.

"We flew in from New York the day before yesterday," said Stephan, settling the point.

"Your mother says you visited your father."

"Yeah, Long Island."

"So what do you study?"

“Computer Science and Philosophy.” He then glanced over at Emily to register her reaction.

“That sounds—interesting,” replied Emily, smiling back at him.

“Yeah, why not? That’s what they’re supposed to be.”

“From such different ends of the spectrum.”

“Something like that.”

“Marit, I understand you’re a model?”

“*Was* a model,” she answered with a laugh. “I’m going to be a designer now. I’m starting an internship at Rodarte this summer.”

“What’s Rodarte?”

“Rodarte is a fashion house. It’s in Los Angeles.”

“She’s tired of being in the freak show,” Stephan said to Emily, “so she’s signing up to help run it.”

Laughter.

“True enough,” said Marit.

Silence—partly because Emily had nothing to say about her own life. She was simply living, or, lately, enduring. “I’ve not decided what I’ll do,” she threw out into the conversation gap. “I thought I might be involved with farming and the estate—what my father thought he’d be doing—but that’s probably no longer an option.”

“Because he’s gone off to London,” said Stephan.

“Yes, he’s back in his old profession, banking.”

“At a London investment firm.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s not what you want.”

She smiled and said, “Well, we have to renovate the manor, Wolkeld Hall. It’s in a terrible state. Taxes to pay as well.”

“Yeah, I knew all that, thanks to my mother,” he said in a humorously exaggerated way.

“She already knew my father had remarried?”

“That she did!” he replied with verve.

“*I* didn’t know till last night.”

Laughter, sardonic on Stephan's part. They had just followed the main street over the Wolkeld River, and were coming up to the first inbyes. Some of the curious ewes and their lambs trotted up to the drystone walls to have a better look. Directly south, in plain view, lay the Jorhead, broad and high, a belt of mixed conifer and deciduous forest like a thick collar around its base. A feeling of apprehension ran through her at the sight of forests, no doubt the eastern continuation of where she had been the previous day. And yet she was with two of the most relaxed, confident people she had ever met, allowing her to let go a bit and smile. A day really did make a huge difference. . . .

Emily wanted to just drift along quietly with these exotic people; however, her breeding wouldn't allow it. She was the earl's daughter, after all, and as such felt obliged to hostess duties. "So, tell me what you want to eventually do with computers and philosophy." It sounded stilted, but it was the best she could manage.

Stephan gave a short, surprised laugh. "Try to stay in academia. I'm not all that excited about the real world of computers right at this moment."

"Why not, if I may ask?"

Again, he laughed, almost sarcastically. "I guess I'm not all that interested in jumping into the AI rat race."

"Artificial intelligence. What can you tell a complete novice about it?"

"Do you *really* want to know?" replied Stephan in a windy, all but pained voice.

Emily had to laugh, which prompted her new friends to follow suit. "Oh, so you're on holidays and don't want to talk about work."

"Something like that."

"I suppose I'm just trying to make conversation."

"Don't," he replied curtly. But at that moment he lifted his arms and jumped up and down like a happy child. He and Marit then began a sort of lover's pushing and wrestling, stumbling clumsily along on their long legs. Emily laughed at their little theatre. She wished James were along.

"So you, Emily, had a run-in last night with some asshole tourists," exclaimed Stephan as he and Marit continued their shoulder-to-shoulder

jostling. “Let’s tell our worst vacation experiences. Who’s first? Marit, you first?”

“Sure,” said Marit, “I was just thinking about it this morning.”

“Very well,” proclaimed Stephan, “The lovely Marit Alver has the stage.”

“All right, good,” she began in her accented English, “When I was a little girl we were on a trip, and I needed to pee really badly, and my father wouldn’t stop the car. Mother said there was no place to pee, and it was raining hard anyway.

“So eventually we got to a place that had restrooms and I was able to pee. It seemed like I peed and peed and peed—for a half an hour it seemed like. It was so wonderful to finally empty my bladder that I remember jumping—*skipping* back to the car, and I totally forgot about my parents being so mean to me and not stopping sooner.”

“Cool!” said Stephan, laughing. “You never told me that.”

“No?”

“Hell no!”

“Well, now it’s my life philosophy,” said Marit matter-of-factly.

“Cool!” exclaimed Stephan. They were now stumbling along with arms intertwined around each other. “Tell us more about your pee-pee philosophy, Maggie, dear.”

Laughter.

“I just pee and then I’m happy again,” said Marit, waving a free hand.

“Do you need to pee now?” asked Stephan.

“Not yet.”

“How is it your philosophy?” asked Emily, grinning.

“Thank you for asking. Okay, so when I got started in modelling, I had a very stressful situation where these stupid people were cheating and harassing me. And when I finally got out of that mess and I found my Berlin agency, I was so relieved and happy that I totally forgot about them and how stupid they were. Karin, my new manager, wanted me to make a complaint to Interpol, but I didn’t. She understood and let it go. So yes, life is like when your bladder is filling and filling—sometimes getting really painful—then the big relief when

you can finally empty it.

“But if you keep being angry about the people that didn’t let you pee, you’ll just get lost in the past. You can’t really do anything about the past, anything good, I don’t think. You just make shit worse when you try to go back.”

“Interesting,” said Emily.

“Anyway, that’s what I believe,” said Marit. “Bad situations happen, then they just slip off into the past, and you can’t really go back and get much justice. So don’t let wood be on your shoulder—what’s that phrase?” Marit asked Stephan.

“What are you trying to say?” he said.

“There’s something you say about a piece of wood on your shoulder?”

“A *chip* on your shoulder. Don’t have a chip on your shoulder,” he replied in a patronising tone.

“Yeah, don’t let stuff from the past sit on your shoulder.”

Emily was transfixed by her speech, in part due to her cute, vaguely German accent.

“Does anybody want to know my philosophy?” asked Stephan.

“Sure,” said Emily.

“The secret to life is letting everything go, everything flow, but then in that *rarest* of moments slowly, gently closing your hand around something—that wants you to.”

Laughter as he made an evil face and began stalking Marit with claw-like hands. She defended herself aggressively, and a new round of wrestling-while-walking began.

“I even wrote a little poem about it,” he continued after getting Marit to squeal and growl and slap at him alarmingly hard. “Want to hear it?” he said, looking over at a wide-eyed Emily.

“Sure, sure,” she exclaimed nervously.

He broke free of Marit, ran ahead, turned about, and looked up into the sky with arms held out hoop-like. “If you love yourself, then let yourself go. But if your self doesn’t come back—send a postcard.”

Laughter. They had come to a T in the road and Stephan confidently strode on to the right continuing west. Marit's arms were now wrapped around his long torso, her head driven into his shoulder.

Emily could not help but be amused, bolstered even, by the playful pair. And yes, letting the past stay in the past seemed apropos.

"Surfing big waves in Hawaii and trying not to panic when you can't get up for air," said Stephan after nearly falling with his legs tangled in Marit's. "That's my vacation horror story." More tussling with Marit. "So how's that workin' out for you?" he exclaimed to Marit in a loud, grossly exaggerated American heartland accent, wearing a big expression on his face, all while trying to get past Marit's slapping hands to tickle her.

"Fucking great, man! Saved my fuckin' life!" replied Marit in an equally stilted American twang.

"Gunna be all right, then?" retorted Stephan, looking for openings, and then to Emily: "I saved her, you know. She'd fallen in with some mentally anaerobic urban hipsters."

"Bullshit," retorted Marit.

Stephan laughed and continued to Emily, "She was dating this hipster, and—"

"Why do you always call him a hipster?!" interrupted Marit, swinging and slapping at him.

"Okay, so this is New York, Greenwich Village. Check. And he's wearing a *Future Farmers of America* jacket. Check. And smoking Lucky Strikes. Check. And drinking Grain Belt Beer. Check. And talking Breitbart crap at his really *dangerous* biker bar that wasn't at all because nobody except loser hipsters like him was there "

"*Night Train*," added Marit. "Cool place."

"Who could forget?"

"You both had huge beards," piped up Marit, and then to Emily: "I made him shave his off before we came over. Got tired of kissing a man with a big furry animal living on his face."

"*Smitty*. Oh, and who was the guy that ate the raw buffalo meat?"

“That was Trace,” said Marit, laughing.

“Oh, yeah. *Trace*. Direct from Montana. Loser’s best friend. Wore a cowboy hat and a beat-up shearling coat and always seemed to have a ziplock bag of raw buffalo and elk liver. Yep! Raw elk liver and beer! Yum!”

“You’re so full of shit,” replied Marit matter-of-factly.

“Most models have terrible taste in men,” said Stephan, eyeing Marit askance.

Just then came the sound of a vehicle approaching from behind. They turned to see a police car, white with yellow-and-blue rectangular graphics on the side. It slowed and stopped next to them. The passenger, a young policewoman, lowered the window and in a Northern accent said, “Might either of you ladies be Emily—she frowned and looked back at a laptop computer mounted between her and the policeman driver—Whitmore?”

“Yes, I’m Emily.”

“Ma’am, you reported an incident last night. Would you like to come in and make a statement?”

“Is that necessary?”

“It’s entirely up to you.”

“What will happen if I don’t?”

The officers traded glances, and the male officer half-shouted through the passenger window, “We have suspects who match your description, and they’ve been charged with other offences. If you’d like to keep your name out of this, we’d understand, ma’am.”

Silence, except for the low purr of the police car’s engine. “It sounds as though you won’t need my complaint, then?” said Emily.

“Entirely your decision, ma’am,” said the male officer. “The initial report is public record, and the prosecutor might include that information in the case, but your name will be kept private.”

“I’ll not make a complaint, then,” said Emily, resolutely.

“Very, well, ma’am,” said the female officer with a small smile and a raised eyebrow. She then took the computer from its stand and showed Emily a map of the area to the south-west of Wolkeld. “Is this where the incident took

place?” She was pointing to the intersection of the lane and stream within a green area.

“Yes, I believe so.”

She then slid the view to the north with her finger. “And this is approximately where you found the forestry students?”

“Yes.”

“Right then. We just need to take a few photos of the area. Thank you for your time. Good day to you.”

At that the car drove away. Emily gave her new friends a sheepish look. Stephan inhaled and exhaled, staring in an exaggeratedly oafish way at her. Emily gave them a rough version of the incident. “What would you have done?” she asked, mainly of Marit. “Would you have reported it?”

Marit sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “My family tells stories of the Soviet era in Estonia. It’s just my opinion, but there’s nothing to be gained by running around waving some old bill to be paid. The person who owes you is usually lost in the past.

“Yeah, sure, I could have gone to Interpol. The same thing: Authorities came and wanted me to make a statement, make charges.”

“You didn’t?”

“No.”

“Marit, you don’t have to answer, but do you believe in God? Do you think God will intervene?”

She laughed softly. “Not really. But I do believe in karma. When somebody hurts somebody, his karma sinks and the other person’s rises.”

“But you’re into the MeToo movement,” interjected Stephan, now in a serious tone of voice. “You think all male pigs need to die.”

“All right, yes, but unless they really need me, I’d rather just move on.”

“It is our choice—ultimately,” said Emily.

“I should tell you a story,” said Marit. “It’s something one of my uncles told me. He had a friend who was a journalist. He said his friend was at a—release interview? She looked at Stephan for help. “You know, when they decide whether to let a prisoner out early?”

“Ah, maybe a parole hearing?” answered Stephan in a patronising tone.

“Yes, at a *parole* hearing, and the prison officials asked the man whether he was sorry for what he had done. I guess he had murdered someone or done something really bad. But the man said he didn’t think about that since he was so busy dealing with what society, what the prison had done to *him*.”

Emily smiled, looking down at the road, then over to Stephan, who gave Marit another condemning smirk.

“I know it’s not a great example,” continued Marit, “but I always think about that.”

“So what would you have done?” asked Emily.

“About the prisoner?”

“Yes.”

“Well, as my uncle said, if you show the officials you’re sorry, you may get out early.”

Stephan spoke in an impatient tone: “I think what the criminal was saying was, Hey, I did something bad to the victim, but now you’re doing something bad to me, which makes two wrongs. Get it?”

They began walking again. A chilly wind was blowing, but they had just turned off the road to a smaller lane leading south into the forest. Tall conifers instantly stilled the wind, turning it into their distinct whisper music.

“So maybe you can’t *make* someone feel sorry for what they’ve done,” he continued when no one had responded. He sighed impatiently.

The lane was steep and narrow, and the group walked along shoulder-to-shoulder. This was, in fact, a continuation of the same forest Emily had been in yesterday. What a difference a day makes, she thought once again.

They walked along in a heavy silence until Stephan remarked in a forced cheery tone about the weather being so chill in May.

“It can be like this well into summer, never getting above, ah, seventy degrees,” said Emily.

“That’s about twenty in Celsius?” said Marit.

“I’m still used to Fahrenheit,” said Emily with a laugh.

“Does it ever get hot here?” asked Marit.

“Oh, yes, but it can stay cool and rain for days at a time. We’re on the same latitude as Northern Labrador.”

“Hey, do you swim?” asked Stephan, once again with a hint of impatience.

The women laughed.

“No, really,” he continued, “some famous interviewer said he liked to just throw that out whenever a conversation was getting dull or going somewhere stupid.”

“Yes, is the short answer,” said Emily, eyeing Stephan askance.

“Good,” shot back Stephan. “Next question: Do you like jazz music?”

“Ah, not especially.”

“I thought so. Why not? I do. How can we be friends if you don’t like what I like?”

He had said this in such a flat, matter-of-fact tone that Emily had to laugh. However, she was beginning to tire of his confrontational, insult-comedian style.

“Do you know what Helen Keller said about jazz?” said Marit.

“So what did Helen Keller say?” replied Stephan condescendingly, but then he snorted, “No way! She was deaf and blind!”

“Right, yes, but she had this trick where she could feel vibrations from a phonograph or radio with a stick. She pressed one end of the stick against the radio and the other against a certain bone on her face or neck or somewhere. I saw that on a documentary.”

“And with just that she decided she didn’t like jazz. Wow. That’s really profound.”

Stephan had said this in his most sarcastic tone yet. Both Emily and Marit eyed Stephen warily.

“She said it sounded—or felt—like a noisy, clanking factory,” stated Marit, holding her ground.

“Oh, fine,” said Stephan with a rushing sigh. “So what music does Your Ladyship like?”

“Stephan!” yelled an outraged Marit. She once again pounced.

Emily had to step out of the way as the two tussled about. “Are you really interested?” she said with indignation. She considered bowing out of the invitation.

“Yes,” he muttered through clenched teeth, on the defence from Marit’s attack.

“All right then, mainly classical, older things, Baroque, medieval.”

The tussle finally ended and they resumed their march.

“Oh, I see,” said Stephan, in a mock-affronted tone. “Why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why? It’s fucking boring to me!” His tone was unmistakably harsh-impatient, once again rushing up to the edge of her patience. Marit feigned another attack, but he showed combat readiness and she instead glared and scowled.

“What am I supposed to say to that?”

“Don’t answer!” said Marit.

“Fuck yes!” bellowed Stephen. “Just answer.”

“Well, all right. Perhaps because it’s not trying to overwhelm me. It’s beautiful in recognisable ways. It’s not rushing at me. *I* have to go to *it*.”

Stephen guffawed loudly and waved his hand dismissively. “What’s wrong with being overwhelmed? I love being blown away by music. What kind of a fool doesn’t want to be blown away?”

“Stephan!” exclaimed Marit, a balled fist held under his nose. “Really, leave her alone!”

“No, no,” laughed Emily, “I’m not so fragile.” She laughed under her breath. “Have you ever heard of Hildegard von Bingen?”

“Can’t say I have,” replied Stephan pulling a clownish face. “Was she a princess like you or something?”

Marit rushed her beau and slugged him on the arm. “Ouch!” he cried, jumping back, pouting.

“She was a countess,” continued Emily in an even tone, “and she was an abbess and a composer in the eleven-hundreds in Germany. She said music should not disturb the soul. She said of her own music that it must *float like a*

feather on the breath of God, and, so yes, that's what I think music should do."

"What a crock! I've paid good money to have my soul absolutely shredded by some of jazz's greats. You should try it!"

"Well, I . . ."

Emily felt confused and exasperated as she watched Stephan and Marit resume their wrestling match—and no longer did it seem so playful. She thought of simply begging off and leaving. But just then she caught movement out of the corner of her eye: Emerging from a bend up ahead was a late-model Land Rover, a middle-aged couple its passengers. "Hello! Someone's coming!" Emily stage-whispered to the combatants.

They seemed to ignore her, but did manage to drift to the verge. Then as the Land Rover approached, Stephan stopped fighting and shook his fist in mock menace at the car. The couple only grinned and waved back.

As soon as they were by, he blew up his cheeks, trying to keep from breaking out into laughter.

"You're being awfully silly, Stephan," said Emily.

"Yeah, well. . ." he replied in a fatigued tone. "I know them, that's all. Now, where were we?"

"I've forgotten."

"Good. For the better," he said with a wave of his hand. "My ulterior motive all along has been to entertain you and get your mind off your troubles. So, yeah, Emily, chill out, be at peace."

"Really?" muttered Emily, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "Now why on earth should my troubles as you say be your concern?"

"Mother-dearest says you've had a rough patch. I'm supposed to bring you to our place for lunch."

"Yes, and how does she know about my 'rough patch?'"

"Oh, she has her ways of knowing."

"I can well imagine," said Emily, although she could only think of one person who could have known: one Anne Colby, their "trusted" cook.

They walked along in silence for a while. Emily noticed that Stephen and Marit never walked quite normally, rather, in a lanky, long-strided strut of sorts.

“So your mom’s dead,” blurted out Stephen.

“Yes,” muttered Emily. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Yeah, well, my parents are divorced. It’s like they’re half-dead.”

“I’m sorry” said Emily as tactfully as she could.

“They’ve been half-dead, half-alive for years now.”

Silence.

“Do you have siblings?” asked Emily, not really sure why other than an attempt at a normal conversation.

“Twin sisters. Just a year older. I’m the baby of the family.”

“And what does your father do?”

“Father’s a full-time know-it-all big-mouth now.” He said this in such a matter-of-fact tone that Emily had to laugh. “Yeah, really. Made a pile of money, and nothing gives you the right to run your big fat mouth more than being a rich bastard—at least in America.”

“I see,” said Emily too soft to be heard.

Stephan seemed to study the tall fir trees all around them for a moment. “Dad’s witty and charming—for a right-wing dip-shit.”

Awkward silence.

Stephan continued: “Never *ever* knows when to shut up. Drove my mother crazy. She’s strictly the ‘practical side of life.’ Makes you wonder how people so completely different could ever hook up. One dull, the other obnoxious.” He then squinted in an oafish way at Marit. “Hormones, I guess.”

“Really, Stephen,” admonished Marit.

“We hear the new woman is *vile*,” said Stephan, ignoring her.

Emily had to stop in her tracks and laugh for the sheer shock of it.

“Mother-dearest shared that before you came, *implo*ring us to help you.”

“Really now, how *does* she know?!”

“I won’t tell you,” said Stephan, wrinkling his nose, sneering. “But I think you’ll soon figure it out soon enough.”

They had come to a clearing in the forest, which seemed to be the lane’s terminus. To the west a rambling, other-century farmhouse rose up from a sprawling English garden. “Home!” he cried, throwing his hand to the sky.

Emily, pleasantly surprised, laughed nervously. “This is your home?”

“Indeed it is!” At that he opened the low wooden gate between a row of thick privet hedges and waved with exaggerated impatience for her to follow.

Emily walked slowly up the wide flagstone way behind Stephan and Marit, looking all around her. The largely winter-dormant garden was under what might seem to the casual observer to be limited human direction. The house itself was a cream lime, mostly hidden by ivy and various trestles. The slate roof was high-pitched with four pronounced gables in a row. All in all, it was roughly the size of the lodge, but far closer to a classic English country domicile.

“The previous owners had a B-and-B here,” said Stephan. “Went broke. Got nailed on taxes. Mother picked it up for a song.”

Stephan climbed up the low brick stairs to the heavy wooden door. He lifted the wrought iron latch and pushed open the door with both hands. Once Emily was inside, door closed behind her, the shadowy vestibule spoke welcomingly to her: A bright rag runner stretched out on the sealed brick floor, a polished burr-grained wooden bench stood against the door’s wall below a deeply recessed window of amber rondel glass in lead panes. A small wooden table on the opposite wall held an arrangement of daffodils and fern fronds in a large crystal vase. And there above the table hung a dark-hued painting of a moon shining over a shepherd and his sheep on a hill. Stephan noticed her eyes fixed on the picture. “An original Palmer.”

“Samuel Palmer?” said Emily, grinning.

“Yeah,” mumbled Stephan. “Not my cup of tea, but I’m told its worth a lot.”

“No doubt.”

“He did a few versions of this scene. This isn’t the most popular one. It’s in a museum somewhere.”

Emily could not take her eyes off the painting. The light wasn’t the best, but that only deepened the subtle mystery of the surreal stylized elements.

“Oh, there you are!” exclaimed a stout, middle-aged woman appearing at the room’s low threshold. “Food’s almost ready. You mind eating in the

kitchen?”

“That’s fine, Grace,” replied Stephan. But after she had turned and left, he eyed Emily wearing a grin. “Do you know Grace?”

“I—I’m not sure,” said Emily.

“Grace would be Anne’s sister, Anne Colby? *Your* cook?”

“Oh! I see,” said Emily, but once Stephan’s gaze had turned away, she scowled and shook her head. Marit gave her a commiserating smirk.

Grace Colby served a hearty vegetable-beef stew, along with bread that was exactly like her sister’s coarse country brown bread. For dessert, she had baked an apple pie. Emily found the kitchen as rustic as their own, but, unlike theirs, outfitted with every modern appliance and accoutrement imaginable, including designer track lighting.

After lunch her host gave her the grand tour. Neat as a pin, the whole place looked ready for a ladies’ magazine photo shoot. Scores of other-century oils, etchings, and lithographs crowded every wall. Although he knew practically none of the artists, he was able to point out furniture pieces from Chippendale and Sheraton. “Mother considers herself an art expert. Pretty dull-ass stuff, huh?”

“I suppose so,” lied Emily. In reality, Judith Franke’s taste in art redeemed her greatly in Emily’s eyes.

“This is supposed to be her *Howard’s End* and she’s Emma Thompson. Get it?”

“Yes, I see,” murmured Emily.

As it turned out, the couple who had driven by were the gardeners, Sam and Diane, thus, the tour of the garden was limited to what Stephan could say, which was not much, he also having no affinity for gardens. The labyrinthine hedges, shrubs, and ornamental trees formed a semi-circle around the front and sides of the house. Behind the house extended a small park of old fruit trees, hawthorn, rowan, and leathery-barked beeches. Emily was delighted by the ground cover: bluebells, wild irises, and even more daffodils, some just beginning to bloom. A brick path looped through this half-forest, half-orchard. Scattered along the way were classic sculptures, an elaborate sundial, and sturdy

oaken benches. They stopped and sat on a long backless bench, Emily sitting between her guests.

Stephan spoke: "Mother's a good soul, once you get to know her—which very few have the patience to do."

Laughter, mainly Marit.

"She's a rabid Anglophile, English on both sides. That's why she's so gaga over you and your family."

"Really," said Emily, "where are her people from?"

"Lincolnshire? I heard somebody was a wealthy slave trader. That explains her horrible curse."

"What about your father's side?" said Emily, not wanting to pursue whether he was joking or not.

"Not Jewish," said Stephan bluntly.

At that he laughed uproariously. Emily could feel her cheeks reddening.

"So we say *Frank*, and everybody says, 'Oh, like Anne Frank.' But it's a regular German name, and it means somebody that's Frankish Bavarian. Father's ancestors were supposedly Catholic aristocrats that pissed off Bismarck. I don't know what we were called before. Don't really care. Mother knows."

"Oh, I see."

"I'm half-German," offered Marit. "My mother is Baltic German. Her ancestors were Hanseatic League merchants in Tallinn. Von Sippendorff. Aristocrats originally. Tell us about your family, Emily."

"Yes, well, my father's side has been here going back to Edward VI in the early sixteenth century. I don't know much about what they did other than foreign commerce and diplomacy mainly. They weren't here a lot, as I've been told. I know my great-grandfather was born in India.

"My mother was from London. Her father was a baron. My grandparents on that side are dead now, but their children, my aunt and uncles, are active in the arts."

"So do you take this whole aristocracy thing serious?" asked Stephan abruptly.

“Stephan!” shouted Marit.

Emily laughed gamely at the shock of his renewed bluntness.

He shrugged his shoulders in half-apology. “Just asking. Don’t have to answer. As an American, I have no idea what any of it really means. It’s like you’re important and all—buuuut not so much any more? Do you *feel* important?”

“Aaagh!” bellowed Marit, shaking her fists.

“No, I’ll answer,” said Emily to Marit. Then turning to Stephan, “I believe it’s important for me to maintain some form of nobility in my life, yes.”

“Define being noble to me. I’m a dumb American.” This was said in a clearly confrontational, *in-your-face* tone of voice.

“Stephan!” growled Marit in an angry tone, “your mother would kick your ass if she heard this!”

Stephan frowned at Marit, held up his index finger to his lips, and whispered, “Let her answer,” then to Emily: “If you want, you’re free to say, ‘You wouldn’t understand,’ and the dumb-ass American will drop it.”

“No, I’ll try to answer,” said Emily in a soft voice, although her pulse was racing. “We don’t—”

“On second thought,” broke in Stephan, “fuck it! I don’t care!” At that he jumped to his feet, exhaled loudly, turned to face Emily, bowed deeply, and then set off back towards the house. “Marit can drive you home,” he shouted back over his shoulder.

Marit stood and shrieked, “Asshole!” at her retreating boyfriend, her eyes narrow, her lips hard and frowning. She looked back at Emily and, reaching down and touching Emily’s hand, said, “I’m just—I’m so sorry! I’m so fucking sorry about this!” She growled at the sky and shook her fists.

They instinctively waited a few minutes, then returned to the front of the house. Across the lane was an ancient barn. Marit excused herself and went in, emerging soon behind the wheel of another late-model Land Rover, all but a twin of the model she had seen the gardeners driving. Emily climbed into the passenger seat, and, even before the door had closed, Marit floored the gas peddle powering the vehicle forward with a great lurch. She drove down the

narrow forest lane at a rapid clip. “Oh my god! What a shithead! Aaaagh!” she screamed, slamming her hands on the steering wheel.

“I’ve obviously caused a problem,” replied Emily, her pulse still rapid.

“All right, all right, you need to know why that happened. Yeah, right. So his mother would like nothing better, *nothing* better in the *world* than for you and her darling boy to be together. She would literally float up into heaven during your wedding.”

Emily laughed nervously. “Well, I’m—”

“No, you don’t have to say anything!” cut in Marit. “It’s all bullshit.”

Emily gave another embarrassed laugh.

Silence until they reached the narrow road and turned east. “I’m leaving the day after tomorrow for Los Angeles,” said Marit with obvious resignation in her voice.

“Oh, to start your internship?”

“Yes. Also because I need to get the hell away from Stephan. I am *so* tired of his codependence bullshit with his mother. He’s what you call a *jähzorniges Muttersöhnchen* in German—which I can’t really translate into English.”

“You speak German?”

“Yes, I grew up speaking Estonian, English, and German.”

“That’s quite amazing.”

“We travelled a lot to America. I stayed summers with my mother’s people, my cousins and everybody on the North Sea just west of Hamburg.”

“I speak some German, but I’m not familiar with *jähzornig*. Something to do with angry?”

“All right, it literally means *suddenly raging*, a mamma’s boy that thinks he’s really cute and funny, but then all the sudden goes ape-shit on you.”

“I’m not really offended. I’ve had plenty of strange behaviour thrown my way.”

“But never here, right?”

“No, when I was in Kansas, actually. They certainly didn’t know what to make of me, either.”

“So get this: I’m *half*-aristocrat, okay? My mother’s family are Baltic German peers: von Sittendorff. My father is Estonian, and he’s a wealthy businessman. We’re well-off, okay? And I’m a fucking runway model on top of all that. But Judith—dear Judith once referred to me as an Eastern European sex-worker!”

“That’s not very nice.”

“No, it’s time to move on. Stephan and I are through. He talks about how bad his father is, but he’s *exactly* like his father. One minute he’s charming and the next he’s a totally obnoxious shithead. He needs to grow the fuck up!”

Silence.

“So what did his father do?” said Emily, wanting to lighten the mood.

“His father? Oh, something with computers. He got rich on stocks, then richer investing. Venture capital crap.”

“You’ve met him?”

“Oh yes. Michael’s just an older version of Stephan.”

“I see.”

“I’m through with Americans.”

Emily laughed. “But you’re going to Los Angeles.”

“Yeah, that sounds crazy, and I’m really looking forward to it. The Mulleavy sisters, the Rodarte founders, are good people. They’re total nerds. You don’t always know what they’re talking about, but, yeah, you eventually catch on.

“So, no, you’re right, I’m not through with Americans. But I’ve *really* had it with the Franke family. I don’t need their shit.”

“You seemed like you were having fun just—”

“Oh, sure,” cut in Marit. “But the way he disses people, the way he dissed you just now was the limit for me. Fuck that shit! He’s cute and fun, then he’s suddenly psycho. Like I say, he needs to grow up!”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You lifted my spirits. I was rather out of sorts.”

“That was the plan. Judith had just talked with your grandmother, and they’d apparently decided to have you hang with us until your father was gone.”

“Really. I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, the cooks, the Colbys have been keeping her informed.”

“Indeed,” said Emily in a whisper.

“Like I’m saying, Judith really doesn’t like me being around,” said Marit in a distant voice. “I’m fucking everything up for her.”

“Well, I’m not interested in her help, per se, but I must say I was very impressed with her art collection. And that’s a very lovely house.”

“Yeah, true enough.” Marit sighed. “She wants to be connected to the Old World, but she doesn’t know how. She’s like a big, clumsy dog that’s come to the woods and wants to run with the wolves again. But she doesn’t have a clue about what’s going on.”

“Yes, I can sort of understand,” mumbled Emily, thinking of her own situation.

“You know, you could be a model,” said Marit, glancing over at her passenger.

“What? Oh no, you’re kidding.”

“No I’m not.”

“But I’m not—”

“Maybe not for some gigs,” interrupted Marit, “but you’ve got this exotic, other-world look they love, *and* you’re a peer, which is ready-made celebrity. You just ooze class and dignity.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” said Emily, blushing.

“I’m not!”

“You’re just saying that to cheer me up.”

“No, I’m saying it to get ten thousand Euros. If my agency likes you enough to do a proper shoot, I’ll get ten thousand for the referral. I’d give it to you.”

“You don’t need the money?”

“No, I’m loaded. But it’s worth a shot. I’d be a laugh. You could come with me. I’m stopping in Berlin first.”

“Well, I don’t know. I do need to figure out what I want to do in the long term. I realise more than ever I don’t seem to have a direction.”

“I’m just saying you could get out of the country for a while.”

“Actually, I have a friend in Germany, and I’ll be visiting her in late June.”

“And in the meantime? Will you be all right here?”

“Oh, I’ll muddle through somehow.”

Emily regretted not having a mobile device. “Say, do you have a phone?”

“Sure,” said Marit, and promptly pulled hers out of her down vest pocket and handed it over to her passenger.

Emily dialled the lodge’s number and waited nervously. On the fifth tone Gran picked up: “Wolkeld Lodge,” sounded her reassuring voice.

“Yes, Gran, it’s me. Is the coast clear?”

“Ahhh,” stammered her grandmother, “not yet. Maybe in an hour or two—or three?” she said in a dropped voice.

“All right. Good-bye, then.”

“Yes, good-bye, dear,” said Gran in a soft, if not pained tone.

Marit looked over questioningly at Emily. “Should I take you home?”

“Well, actually, no. Perhaps just drop me off in the village.”

“Say, let’s take a drive, then I’ll take you home.”

“Really, you’ve time?”

“Not doing anything today—except avoiding Americans.”

“That would be nice. Where did you have in mind?”

“I’m a coastal girl. It’s too claustrophobic here.” The tall, angular young woman shrugged her shoulders jerkily. “Let’s go out to the ocean, shall we?”

“Yes, very well then. It’s not too much bother, is it?”

“Nooo! Like I’m saying, I grew up on the sea, and I really need some ocean right about now.”

For an Englishwoman the Nordic-Germanic blond-haired, blue-eyed type could be a bit stark and unrelenting. English beauty was a softer thing altogether—at least Emily found it so. Marit, however, was strikingly, *commandingly* beautiful in a way all her own. Her hair was silk-like platinum, her grey eyes sharp but peaceful. Her jaw was square, cheekbones high, and her nose was small and sharp. In short, she had that mysterious elven quality of the modern runway model. And yet she seemed to upend her natural mystique by

being so honest, direct, and outspoken. She was German-blunt, world-savvy, tomboyish perhaps, but not in the American quasi-cowgirl way.

“Tell me about your home,” Emily said after a long pause.

“Estonia or Germany?”

Emily laughed. “Either? Both?”

“Good, Estonia first. I grew up just east of Tallinn on the Baltic coast. And yeah, we did summers in Germany. The von Sittendorffs are just outside of Cuxhaven, right on the North Sea. I’ve spent my whole childhood looking out at the sea.”

“Oh, that would be nice.”

“Definitely. But I have to say the Baltic and the North Seas are *completely* different beasts.”

“Really? How so?”

“Oh, well, the Baltic is very calm. It’s actually pretty shallow. It has no tides to speak of. Barely salt water in places. North Sea has *huge* tides and can get very wild and stormy. I remember my grandmother reading Theodor Storm’s *Der Schimmelreiter* to us. Yeah, German grandparents don’t mind scaring the shit out of their little grandchildren,” She laughed softly.

“I’m not familiar.”

“*Schimmelreiter* means something like ‘white horse rider.’ He was a marine engineer who wanted to try new dike designs and claim new land for farming. But then a storm washes away his dikes, and his wife and daughter are swept away too. He loses it and charges at the sea on his white horse and gets swept away with them. At the end of the story the townspeople believe his ghost is still on the dike. Anyway, it’s a creepy story when you’re just a little kid.”

“I grew up with *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*.”

“Oh, me too!”

“They can be scary enough when you’re just a child.”

“No shit. I know a kid back in Estonia who’s an arachnophobe because of that giant spider in *Lord of the Rings*.”

Just then Bassenthwaite Lake appeared on their right as they continued north on A66. Above, the clouds seemed like one huge, dark, wrinkled blanket.

The water was iron-grey, with choppy waves seeming to go nowhere but up and down vigorously.

“It’s a gloomy day, huh?” said Marit to restart the conversation.

“Yes.”

“I don’t mind. I’m liking the mood on a grey day. I can think things through better.”

“Same with me,” said Emily.

“I guess you naturally turn inward when the sun isn’t out pushing everything along.”

“Well put.”

And then a comfortable pause.

Marit continued: “When it’s bright and sunny, it feels like you’re not allowed to say anything negative. You’re just supposed to be happy and go out and find other happy people and go do happy things. Happy, happy, happy!”

Laughter.

“Yeah, so why am I going to Los Angeles, I wonder?” Marit laughed to herself. “I guess I’ll survive. It’ll be good. I know it will.”

“I wish you success. I’ve never seen the American West Coast.”

“My father’s business took him to the States practically every month. Yeah, we went there all the time. Los Angeles is *not* like its reputation. But it’s a very strange place for a European, for sure. It’s like landing on Mars.”

A relaxed silence set in as they both took in the landscape. The hills had flattened and the countryside was distinctively not Lake District . . . though sheep were still in abundance in the fields, and spring seemed slightly further along with more evidence of foliage on the trees and green in the grass.

At some point they had left the National Park, although no sign indicated this fact. Emily had noticed how British roadways were very sparse with signs, and, of course, no billboards, which was a relief after her time in America where they were ubiquitous.

They eventually crossed the Cocker River—Marit had set up her mobile on a dashboard stand showing Maps—which was definitely outside the park’s green territory. At a roundabout they stayed with A66 and continued on

towards Workington and Whitehaven. At a second roundabout, they continued on A66, which, according to the map, was sending them in a bow towards the coast. The mountains were behind them, the land just barely hilly. Now the River Derwent came up alongside the road. In general, the view remained pastoral.

They came to a third roundabout and took the A595 heading south. Still no sight of big water, although Emily noticed a glint in Marit's eye. "Aha!" she cried. "Windmills!"

Off to their right they could see modern wind turbines, all facing to the west. But these came and went from view, as the two-lane road was mostly lined with view-blocking hedges and dense woodland. Eventually, they emerged and a panoramic view opened to a rolling, soft grey-green land sprinkled over with white wind turbines and sheep, Holstein cows as well.

"We have tons of wind turbines around Cuxhaven. I'm not really sure I like them. Not exactly the cute, little wooden things, are they?"

"I'm not a fan," said Emily. "But they're supposedly green energy, and we're not to complain."

"Maybe we should anyway."

Laughter.

At the fourth roundabout, they continued on A595, passing two bizarre pyramid-shaped modern buildings. Low clouds with a corrugated grain ran east-west. Another roundabout came and the mobile app kept them on A595, which soon became a proper four-laner. Even an interior bumpkin Emily could sense the sea was near, the clouds seeming to put off a certain coastal vibe, but where was it?

"So you're from Cumbria," said Marit as a question or a statement.

"What? Oh, yes," replied Emily, laughing, shaken from a reverie.

"I really can't decide between Germany and Estonia. My soul is floating between the two. I could just quit and settle down. A model friend of mine did just that. She's a naturopath in Ireland now.

"Yeah, I have money, but I don't want to quit working. I feel I need to keep going. Fashion is like a big family and people are welcoming me into

design with open arms. I want to stay connected somehow.”

Emily gave a half-laugh. “I have no idea where I’m going or what I’m doing. I thought I did, but apparently that’s all over.”

“But you seem like a very solid person. You’ll figure something out.”

“Thank you for your encouragement. I guess I do know where my soul resides, and it is here.” And then she had to smile as Burns’ *My Heart’s In the Highlands* flashed through her mind, another gem from Annette.

“That ‘lost soul floating between’ thing came from a sci-fi novel I read, by the way. Somebody had flown from the States to London, and she said her soul was still over the North Atlantic. That’s a cool way to look at it, I think. Souls can’t move at modern speeds.”

“Do you read science fiction?”

“Not really. Stephan wanted me to read some—to ‘catch up.’ So considerate of him.”

Laughter.

“He also wanted me to become a Buddhist—like him.” Smirking, Marit shot Emily a quick glance.

“He’s Buddhist?”

“What do you think?”

“Hard to imagine him as a Buddhist monk.”

“One of his big heroes is Steve Jobs. Jobs was supposedly a Buddhist.”

“He was with Apple, right?”

“Yes, and he was loud and rude and abusive. But he still called himself a Buddhist.”

“Rather odd.” Emily laughed softly.

“We want to be what we can’t be. Like my dad. His first degree was in math. I’ve always been envious.”

Silence.

Emily spoke: “Perhaps Jobs knew deep down he wasn’t being very nice, and some part of him regretted it.”

“Have you ever seen the movie *Untergang* about Hitler’s last days in Berlin?”

“No.”

“Another thing Stephan forced on me. It’s based on Trautl Junge’s memoirs. She was Hitler’s secretary. Supposedly Eva Braun and Trautl were talking about Hitler, and Trautl said, ‘You know, he’s really a nice man.’ And then Eva said, ‘When he’s not being *der Führer*.’ That’s Stephan and his father. Buddhists, but only in their off hours.”

Laughter.

Marit continued: “So Hitler was an artist, and a vegetarian, and he loved animals and children. And one of the first things he did when he got power was to ban animal experimentation. Again, I know all this because Stephan and his dad are Hitler-obsessed. So the question is, why did he have this other *Führer* side?”

“We’ll never know. Why does any man do what he does?” Emily’s shoulders drooped.

“Yeah, right. They get so caught up in their bullshit, and it totally overwhelms whatever is good about them.”

Silence.

“But I might say women often *facilitate* the, well, yes, *bad stuff*,” said Emily. “Maybe they—”

“Oh, yeah! Of course they do!” broke in Marit, and continuing in a mock-breathless voice, “Oh, oh! He’s dynamic, he’s so exciting to be around! Gotta have that man!”

Laughter.

“Yes, I suppose that’s what I mean.”

“No, Emily, women lose their true natures around men.”

“How do you mean?”

“We live in a male-dominated world, and everything we do is some crazy adaptation to their ways and the shit they’re always pulling. We wind up imitating them. We try to follow male logic, and it only makes us twisted and crazy.”

Silence.

Marit glanced over at her passenger and said, “Am I talking too much?”

Would you rather just be quiet?”

“No! This is fascinating. I’m just trying to think of something intelligent to add.”

“Sure.”

“So what is your father like?”

Marit did not answer at once. She breathed in deep and exhaled slowly. “He’s a good guy. We’re close, I’d say. The last time we were together he talked about regret. My parents just got divorced, and I think he was doing some serious regretting. He said regret can eat you alive. He’s a classical fan. Liszt is one of his favourites. He once said that Liszt was a very sad man in later life. Yeah, that was a very amazing conversation. He told me to live my life as I see fit, but be careful not to, as he put it, ‘pile up too much stuff that will later turn into regret.’”

Emily wanted to respond, to not have Marit’s personal sharing meet stony silence. She remembered reading something about Liszt . . . but, no, she would mention this later when she had it more to hand. “I can’t say I’m close to my father. He’s not exactly the contemplative sort.”

“Mine is—too much so. I don’t think he’s really cut out for the business world. I hope he leaves it soon. But he’s just so damned good at what he does. Massive IQ, that man.”

“Oh, I wanted to say something about Liszt.”

“Go ahead.”

“It’s just something I remember reading by chance about him. It was a comment the mother of one of his students said about his playing. She said strong expression is sometimes followed by tiredness or sadness, a sort of coldness comes in—because that’s how nature works. . . . I always found that mysteriously beautiful.”

“Yeah, interesting,” said Marit softly. “I mean, we have to use words, our voices, or musical instruments or paint or whatever to express ourselves, and it doesn’t always come out like we really want it to. And yeah, we feel like we failed, like it wasn’t really what we meant.”

Silence, awkward for Emily, because that wasn’t quite what she had

meant. However, she remained quiet and did not correct, not wanting to seem pedantic.

Marit spoke: “Stephan doesn’t have any patience. He hammers and hammers on points. And when you’re talking, he’ll interrupt you like he’s a movie director correcting some child actor.”

Despite the width of the interstate-like four-lane carriageway, A595 kept them mostly down low, not able to see the land. But then after another roundabout, the way opened up and, finally, there it was, a view of the sea off to the right. Soon they came to Whitehaven; however, the road skirted the town widely to the west. The bucolic finally returned, but they could no longer see the ocean.

Eventually, they came to a village named Mirehouse, and Marit turned west onto Mirehouse Road. After a series of smaller roads, they found themselves moving through what looked like just another drystone-fenced pastureland. The map, however, indicated protected land and gave it a name: *St. Bees Head*. The road ended at a squat lighthouse at the edge of the cliff. Next to the small tower was a single-story building, both painted in a bright titanium white. From here a wide vista opened up, an endless, expansive sky above, the silver-grey Irish Sea continuing westward to the horizon. Emily looked all around, but could see no other visitors.

They got out and began following a wide concrete pavement running the short distance to the cliff. It terminated directly at the cliff edge. To the right was another small, white building, which Marit’s app said was a foghorn.

“If you’d like, we can walk along the cliff, north or south,” said Marit, pointing at the foot paths running near the cliff’s edge. “If we go south, we’ll come to Flenswick Bay and we can get down to the beach.

“Very well, let’s,” said Emily, trying to sound upbeat.

But as they set out, Marit in the lead, Emily suddenly had a dark thought about her guide: How could she be with a man she did not love? How could she sleep with him, of all things? Following this disturbing thought was the unwelcome memory of a trick that had been played on her back in Kansas. Somebody using a hacked email account had sent her and some of her female

classmates scores of pornographic animated gifs. The culprit was never found.

She fought the association and, just in time, had a smile on her face when Marit glanced back at her.

Yes, of course some day she would be with a man, and yes, they would do some version of what she saw in those hideous five-second films. But she would be in love with that man. And some commitment such as marriage would have been set up as a framework for that love. Then it wouldn't seem like a crude, ugly animal act, rather, a wonderful, joyous sacrament from God. . . . "We're not sex toys for you men to sexually relieve yourself on whenever you please!" shouted a voice in her head. . . . Mary had said that. . . .

"You okay?" said Marit.

Emily looked up to see Marit looking back at her wearing a concerned expression. "Yes, I'm fine," she muttered, pasting the smile back on her face.

They seemed to know to walk single-file along the trail and give each other space. At times the path was just a few yards from a sheer drop.

And what about women who consented to sex just to keep the man interested in, happy with them, Emily wondered? Self-loathing hidden to keep the man from feeling inadequate or rejected. Such a cruel cycle: The woman not really wanting sexual contact, but the man insistent, feeling he must keep pressing the issue in order to reach some "breakthrough."

She could not imagine Stephan going along with "not now" for very long. But then how had they even—? Emily groaned in disgust. He no doubt wooed her, turned on his charm, his sparkle, made her feel special, loved even. He played the game.

And then came a terrible thought: Was James just a good wooer? Was he leading her on? No, no, no! Leave off the paranoia, she admonished herself.

They hiked in silence, and it seemed best so. Gradually, her mind shifted outward to the expansive sky and water. A subtle mood of anticipation came upon her. It was as if she would soon meet the master of this powerful seascape realm. The feeling was indeed oceanic. She took big gulps of the fresh, sharp air and attempted to come to terms with the overwhelming openness of the place.

They eventually reached a small beck racing down a narrow but steep gorge to the sea. The path turned right and followed along, eventually leading them down into a cove. Here the cliff face was much lower than at their start, and a stretch of pebbly beach continued south for some hundred yards. Like the whole scene so far, they had the entire location to themselves.

Marit immediately ran out to the waves where she stood stock-still, her arms limp at her sides, her gaze fixed on the horizon. Emily followed, hesitantly, looking up into the sky, then out to sea. But when she looked up again, she immediately felt disoriented, followed quickly by a wave of vertigo. She steadied herself by looking back at the cliff face, and the voices of the wind and water enticed her to once again look up and out. The fear and vertigo ebbed, and she felt comforted, steadied even, by the brisk wind on her face. She drifted beside Marit, who glanced over smiling, but remained silent, staring once again out at the sea.

Emily felt infinitesimally small and insignificant as her mind struggled to process what her senses were delivering. Her hair blew around her face, and she didn't try to push it aside. This same feeling of loneliness, lack of purpose, and insignificance had once struck her at Chris's farm as she had watched bees—possibly nature's most purposed, self-absorbed creature—buzzing around the beds of flowers and tea rose bushes.

She had once discussed insignificance with Annette, who promptly dug out a book by the Romantic poet Karoline von Günderrode's writings and read her poem *Wandel und Treue*, an argument of sorts between the feminine character Violet, who demands constancy, loyalty, and fidelity, and the masculine Narcissus who would seek out the perfect pleasure, then drop it to seek another.

Life, she posited, is a constant tension between fidelity and stability, and the wandering of the heart, the instinctual search for beauty. And yet sometimes, said Annette, there simply is no place—not with Violet, not with Narcissus. Then we are truly alone in the universe. Then faith in God is all we have left, faith that a resolution to our purpose and significance lies in His higher realms.

Although the endless expanse of sky was variegated greys, far out she could just perceive stripes of pale light playing on shimmering waves. The sea did evoke smallness, insignificance perhaps, but then offered something indescribable as well. It was not the clarity, the luxurious feeling of being in a garden surrounded by flowers, G nderrode’s “drooping nectar chalices,” rather, a wild and expansive feeling that sat in her chest and made her skin tingle. This was even wilder and broader than standing atop the highest fells and seeing into Scotland. Indeed, one might float along the vastness of the cosmic platform in no mind, no self.

“They never stung me—” Emily said unknowingly aloud.

Marit was beside Emily and took her hand and kissed it. She leaned over and kissed the top of her head, then kissed her hand again and held it in both of hers. They locked arms and walked back in silence.

That night she wrote a poem to summarize her thoughts and feelings—which, try as she may, still contained the existential bleakness of an endless universe:

Be the village, fields, wilds all round
A body’s home,
Then to leave home, fields, wilds:
The soul to quit body and place,
Whither, it knows not.
Let homes, surroundings, places go on,
For I hold Death’s hand
And we gaze into the darkness;
For dark is the universe—
Universe never any place,
No place ever again home.

It was late when she awoke. She had stayed up late the night before writing letters and working on the poem. By the time she went downstairs it was already nearing noon. Gran came in and sat down conspicuously heavily at

the kitchen table as Emily was finishing her porridge. The women traded smiles. “We went to the coast yesterday. St. Bees,” said Emily to break the confusing heaviness.

“St. Bees. I remember the story,” replied Gran, in a cheerless voice. “She was an Irish princess running away from Vikings. That was before women’s rights.”

Laughter, albeit short and half-hearted.

“Yes, we spoke with a tourist who—” But Emily could no longer ignore Gran’s serious demeanour. “Gran, what’s wrong?”

“Dear, we need to talk about something.”

“My behaviour with Catherine, right?”

“No,” said Gran, with a small chuckle, “no, dear, it’s not that. It has to do with some of your father’s plans.”

“Very well. What sort of plans?”

“About Wolkeld Hall.” She took a deep breath and continued: “Well, dear, it seems they mean to pave the lane from the village up to here and then the lane from here up to the hall.”

“Really. I suppose the potholes are getting a bit out of hand.”

“Dear, they mean to put in a proper road. They’ll need to get heavy equipment, a crane and such, up to the hall. And that means they’ll need to take out the bordering vegetation to do that.”

Emily felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. “What? No! They can’t do that! Why?”

“It can’t be helped, dear.”

Emily rose from the table, staring ahead. Lady Susanna reached for her hand, but she backed away.

“Oh, Emily, it will grow back. They promise to plant all sorts of—”

“No!” Emily turned and ran out of the kitchen. She raced up to her room and threw herself on her bed. She cried softly, as though no one should hear. An hour later she stopped crying and simply stared ahead unseeing.

She sat up with a start. It was dark. She had slept the day away. She

rubbed her face vigorously with her hands, and, without thinking, reached for her stainless steel water bottle on the night table. Odd, she thought, that she could make out the dulled shine of the bottle. After a big drink, she noticed a strange, ethereal glow coming in through her small window. She got up and went over to see outside. Leaning into the deep well, she could see the ancient wood lit by the soft white light of the full moon. She could make out the beginning of the lane leading up to the manor house, twin giant oaks with massively large limbs parallel to the ground serving as a natural gateway. A shudder ran through her at the thought of a swath wide enough in that natural corridor for a huge crane to pass through. Tears—now even more bitter than before—came to her eyes.

As long as she could remember, there had been talk of improving the lane from the village to the lodge. It was true that her father's SUV, let alone a serious delivery van, faced a tight squeeze in many spots. And no, short of airlifting the equipment in, there was no other way. In a daze she drifted over to her writing table and, as a solemn ritual, lit the three candles of her lantern. She sat down and began a letter to Annette. . . .

Dearest Annette,

Got your letter the other day, and I'm very happy for you that your exams have gone so well and that you're exempt from orals. Happy to hear about your upcoming dressage adventure in Aachen, too.

Unfortunately, I have some bad news. Please grab onto something solid: My father has remarried—on the sly, without telling me! A proper church wedding is to come I'm told, although I shan't be there. Gran, as much as I love her, is like a mother cat who never taught her kitten to deal properly with rodents. And now a big she-rat has caught him. The woman is, in one word, vile. Her background is money and some sort of connection to peerage. Apparently, she is the younger sister of an old girlfriend of my father's, of all things. On our first encounter the other night I thought she was simple-minded or just drunk. But when they spoke of renovating Wolkeld Hall, she kept throwing sly looks my way, as if taunting me.

This, however, isn't the bad part. The horrible part is they will need to destroy all the border vegetation on Jane Lane and pave it, that in order to get all the heavy equipment up! I've been crying all day—and even now it's all I can do not to soak this page.

Yes, I shall come visit you, but only for a weekend due to all this upheaval. You'd prefer after Aachen? No, I probably won't bring James. I'm thinking that might be a bit awkward for us just now. And on that subject, something bizarre just happened to me that I'll tell you about when I visit.

Greatest love and affection, your Emily

“I can't believe the Park would allow this,” moaned Emily. She had come down and rummaged a few leftovers from the refrigerator. Lady Susanna had heard her and come in. Emily put a pan of milk on the stove for a chocolate. She checked the box and found it dying down.

“Here, let me do that,” said Gran, who promptly came over and began attending to the fire.

“Why are they allowing this?” wailed Emily in a pleading tone, dipping her shoulders and shaking her fists. “Aaagh! Why?!”

At first Gran said nothing. But then she sighed and muttered, “Dear, there's really no other way.”

“But—but Wolkeld Wood is surely protected, and—and I expect the lower lane is as well.”

“There's nothing special about the lower stretch, they've told us, and the upper is—”

“No matter!” cut in Emily. “This is exactly what Beatrix Potter wanted to preserve! And all the people coming her and thinking the Park preserves things *exactly* like our lane!”

“I know, I know you have your memories.”

“And it's all just for him and—and that *woman* to go up there and play *Downton Abbey*.” She motioned with her free hand to the north.

“Now, dear, that's *not* how it is.”

“What then? How else is it?”

“I mean they won’t live there, at least not permanently.”

“What? Well then, why are they doing, for God’s sake?”

“It’s an arrangement with the National Trust. It’ll be open for visitors, for events and such.”

Emily was speechless. “No. . .” she finally muttered under her breath.

Gran found a place on the table to study. “We simply must. Otherwise, the taxes, the repairs would run us all into the workhouse.”

“Taxes.”

“Oh, yes! Close to three million pounds. And that’s just the start.”

“Waived if we go along.”

“We have no choice. Even if your father paid the taxes, he’d still be forced to renovate it.”

“And there’s no one to help us.”

“You can talk with our solicitor. He’s been at this for almost a decade now. Or—or you can call your father. I’m sure he wants to talk to you.”

Emily let out a sharp, sarcastic laugh. “What would I have to say to him? He obviously doesn’t care what *I* think. He’s does all this behind my back.”

“Oh dear Emily, we’ve known for a long time it would have to be something like this. Even when your father was giving us fits, we all knew he’d inherit one day. He knew the taxes and the renovations would come to enormous sums. He made a lot of noise back then, but banking was his attempt to prepare for this day. In his own way, he’s made a valiant effort to correct our mistakes.”

“What? What do you mean, ‘correct our mistakes?’”

“I mean your grandfather and I really didn’t address these problems as we should’ve.” The older woman sighed. “You could say we stuck our heads in the sand.”

“What? No you didn’t.”

“Dear, we never came close to sorting this out. We dodged all the legal actions trying to force improvements. And when your grandfather died I took on as much ownership as possible—so your father wouldn’t have all at once the

entire estate counted on his inheritance bill. But we couldn't hide the Hall forever. Now we're facing two huge bills: the tax *and* the renovations on the Hall."

"The Hall *has* to be renovated? Really? We're being forced to do this?"

Gran sighed and shook her head. "Technically, it's our property. But it is a listed building. And that means, yes, we can be obligated to make improvements." She got up and brought the milk over to the table, pouring it into Emily's cup.

"By whom? By the National Trust?"

"Yes, well, we've managed to have the full tax bill 'set aside' for the time being in lieu of making the improvements—and opening it up to the public. It's not normally how business is done, but without this deal we might've lost control of the Hall."

Emily stared down at her plate and forced herself to finish her sandwich and drink her chocolate. She looked over at Gran, at first imperiously, but then she checked herself, blinking back tears, returning her gaze to her plate. She sensed Gran wasn't being completely forthcoming. Something else was going on.

"Emily dear, your father tried. But he just couldn't come up with enough money. It could have been as much as *ten million pounds*, the full tax bill and the renovations."

"And nothing can be done to save our lanes?"

"It's out of our hands. This has all been cobbled together on a wing and a prayer, and—"

"We dare not interfere lest it all fall apart again," completed Emily.

Emily returned to her room and began writing in her journal:

There is a small, twisted tree trying to grow on a spot it cannot really thrive. Its odd little buds and leaves are withered by a constant cold gale.

Ultimately, we are only the keepers of memories. Real things cannot be held onto, cannot be secured against the ravages of time and change.

*I feel as though I am riding on the edge, the cusp of something huge and monstrous.
Not a very nice ride.*

“Hello?” said the low, cool female voice. It sounded as clear as if the call had been local.

“Hello, Chris? This is Emily, Emily Whitmore.” Unfortunately, she could hear a muffled echo of her own voice.

“Emily! It’s so good to hear from you!” said Christina Coolidge. “And thank you so much for your wonderful letters. I just got one last Friday. I’m so sorry I haven’t been keeping up. You’re calling to complain, right?”

Laughter on both sides of the Atlantic.

“Oh no, not at all.”

“Well, thank you for your kind indulgence. I never seem to find the time these days. We just had a huge auction . . . but I’ll tell you about that later. How have you been, dear?”

“Yes, well, things could be better. But I’ve called to ask your advice.”

“Anything, dear, anything at all.”

“I’ve decided I want to go to college in the U.S., if it could be arranged.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Yes, by all means come here first. *Mi casa es tu casa.*”

“Are you sure?”

“Dear, I’m your godmother!” replied Christina. “Do you know what you want to study?”

“Art history.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Your mother would be so proud.”

“Yes, I’ll carry the torch, so to speak.”

“This is so wonderful! I’ll make some inquiries for you. Right off the top of my head, Tufts and Penn and—oh, oh, we can talk about it when you get here.”

“Yes, very well.”

“So when would you like to come? I’ve got a fairly full schedule, but almost everything’s right here in Boston. Just a few short trips to New York. . .”

There was nothing for her to do but wait. June came in and remained cool and clammy, clouds and fog more than sun. A strange mood, hard and bitter, had settled over both land and human. She could not bear to linger, so she trekked, often the entire day. Her face was hard and closed to any tourists, they beginning to swarm despite the weather. She no longer felt like the peer hostess, no longer maintained the light, gracious spirit ready with a quick, measured, dignified greeting or short chat. Rather, she purposefully avoided fellow walkers, or, when they were unavoidable, played the you-don't-exist game. No hostess was she.

Cheerless and perfunctory were her meals. Gran would have news from London, but she would only stare ahead—even further out than when she only half-listened to whatever else was the topic. Loneliness bit hard. Before, she could just push the solitary down into her lonely basket, assured that something nice would soon come along and lift her high again, after which she would look and, voilà, the basket had been magically emptied! No longer. Her lonely basket was bulging painfully.

The lane was strangely silent in her mind and heart as well. She drifted down and back on a daily basis—but everything seemed to lay there silent. Just two days before her departure to Germany, on a particularly clammy, foggy morning, she found herself sobbing bitterly by the wilded orchards. Just a few yards past, she went off into a carr of ancient alder and birch and sought out a place on the moss-covered ground to lay down. She had no mind of getting wet, dirty, or crawled upon by insects.

A bitter smile came to her face. Sadness is a curious self-absorbed *aloofness*, she thought as she studied the tiny, spiky moss clumps at eye level. Distracting was the rich and spicy scents of the timeless humus. She ran her hand over the moss, eventually lovingly.

A Beatrix Potter story came to mind, of all things, *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*. Proportions: In the end Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle was only a small hedgehog, not a real washerwoman. And Lucie's problems were just a child's little concerns of lost *handkins* and a pinafore.

She lifted herself up on her elbow, aware of a vision beginning to form. Scenes of wandering the surrounding woods and hillsides as a child with her mother came flooding in. She remembered the time she had lifted up a layer of leaves and found small grubs underneath, each curled up in a perfect little hollowed-out depression in the black mould. She had tried to redo their leaf roof, but her mother urged her first to smell the leaves, the ground. It had smelt tangy-spicy cold-humid, but clean and strangely edible—though not by her, a human girl. Her mother then explained the cycle of rotting and growing going on all around. She remembered how awestruck she had been at learning of the great symphony of life roaring on and on all around her, all but silently. She remembered her mother looking deep and lovingly into her eyes as she held the leaves to her nose.

She jumped up, brushed herself off, and quickly stepped back onto the lane—why so urgently, she did not know. But then she heard an extended creak and then a sudden loud snap. She wheeled around to see a large branch falling from an ancient birch, crashing onto the place where she had just lain. Although at a safe distance, she jumped back gasping. But as the adrenalin subsided, she slipped out of the world. . . .

She approached the branch and cautiously shifted it about. She got down on her hands and knees and stroked the feathery light-olive lichen hanging from the scarred white bark. She picked at the rotting wood disgorged by the shattering force of hitting the ground. Great networks of white mycelia threaded through the wet, near-sawdust wood mass, chunks coated in an iridescent blue fungus. She stood and sniffed all around at the lingering scent-echo of the event.

Once further down the lane she felt the world gently shift back into place. “*Merci, mère.*”

It was late morning when Emily arrived at the Wernigerode train station. A beaming Annette greeted her and their tight embrace quickly produced tears.

“*Na, Mädchen?*” said Annette finally.

Emily had no answer—because there wasn’t one. *Well, girl?* was a quick,

punchy, German rhetorical question-statement of affirmation and felicitation upon meeting a female friend.

They stored Emily's rucksack in Annette's old Mercedes diesel and took off on foot towards the centre of town arm-in-arm, heads often touching. Emily insisted on German, which she had been practising by reading out loud from German books and magazines—especially her *Oxford Book of German Verse*—but also by memorising various phrases, as well as lines of poetry and songs.

They eventually found their way to the old town, made obvious by the predominance of medieval half-timbered *Fachwerk* architecture, as well as the narrow cobblestone streets. For lunch they stopped in a small folksy, traditional-themed restaurant, including plenty of references to the Harz's centuries-old reputation as a witches' destination, specifically the infamous *Walpurgisnacht* gathering on the Harz's highest point, the *Brocken*, every first of May. The menu was the German version of pub fare, again, no possible vegetarianism, and so Emily ate classic German-heavy, as did Annette. Their beverages were half litres of the local dark ale. Annette obliged her guest's request to speak German, and as she poured out her update, Emily knew she was getting the real, unfiltered Annette, which, along with the strong beer, was quite the bracing tonic for someone with flagging spirits.

Full, if not bloated, they wandered around the heart of the old town, mainly the pedestrians-only *Fußgängerzone*. This included the main square with its distinctive double-peaked medieval town hall. Annette noted that the city had suffered minimal damage during the war. This was due primarily to a *Wehrmacht* colonel, Gustav Petri, who, towards the end of the war, had disobeyed orders to resist the oncoming American troops. Instead, he surrendered, and thereby avoided an artillery bombardment and much suffering and death. "He's the extremely rare sort of war hero we recognise—someone who disobeyed."

"He was decorated then?"

"No, he was executed by the SS and buried in an unmarked grave somewhere further up in the Harz."

They headed for the Wernigerode Castle, a strange admixture of an authentic medieval “base-castle” bolted together with a nineteenth-century fantasy palace. Any expert would have immediately spotted the architectural schizophrenia, but for everyone else, including Emily, it was simply amalgamated “other-century.” Coincidentally, this was also the state of James’ home Westnor, which was more imagination and fantasy medieval than real and authentic. With German exactitude, Annette pointed out the nineteenth-century parts versus the truly old medieval. Emily found it telling how even two hundred years ago the medieval age had become a point of fanciful nostalgia.

A few kilometres to the north-west lay the tiny village of Trübach butting up against the distinctive coniferous forest of the Harz, although according to Annette the actual National Park boundary wasn’t for another kilometre or so further west. Again, medieval *Fachwerk* was the town’s vernacular architecture. According to Annette, the GDR era had inadvertently preserved the old architecture in this region, not out of any sense of respect, rather, due to a paucity of initiative and building resources. As a result, the former East Germany had been a hotchpotch of regrettable new and rundown old.

As Emily had seen so far, all seemed geared for, catering to Harz tourism. Her host had not been kidding when she said her corner was a mini-mob-scene. This was only the start of the summer and the unseasonably hot, dry, sunny weather had driven hoards of people up to the relative coolness of the low-slung, geologically ancient German *Mittelgebirge* and their shady forests.

Hot, hot weather, too hot, was gripping the continent. July had not even arrived and the sun that did not warm but burn stood high in the sky over the nearly four-thousand-foot *Brocken*, its bald, flattened top just visible through a tree gap to the west. The Harz reminded Emily of her Lake District, except for one major difference: The Harz was covered by forests, expansive forests the Brothers Grimm would have thought untouched, unchanged had they returned from the grave. The sight created excitement and expectation in Emily’s heart.

In many ways the von der Surwitz’s lodge house was similar to her own,

being a mighty *Fachwerk* beast begun in the seventeenth century. It stood two-stories high, topped by a steep, gabled roof tiled with the typical German terracotta tile-shingles. The exterior timbers were painted dark falu red, while the *Gefach*, the compartments between the timbers, wore a sand-textured white *Putz* or lime. Around the house were flower gardens in full bloom—bright annuals, but mainly the wild, less flamboyant native perennials. German tastes in gardens were quite similar to English tastes, those being random and natural over geometric and domestic, Emily concluded. Just to the east of the house ran a mill race, and on its opposite side grew a dense wall of spruce trees. In fact, almost all three sides of the house were forested. The fourth side, buffered by the garden, faced the modest cobblestone town square.

Emily's spirits had taken a full one-eighty since the morning, and it was on such a high note that she met Annette's parents. As the *Freiherr* Herbert and *Freifrau* Sibylle entered the house, the baroness called out loudly to Annette, asking her to come and help with a load of hay they had just procured. "Come show Goerz where to put the hay!" But when they saw Emily, they cried out and rushed over and heartily shook her hand, Germans, as Emily knew, being serious handshakers.

"No, no, Anni, I'll go," said the tall, dark, angular Baron Herbert. "You stay here with our guest." But in the end, all four went out to deal with the trailer carrying the three big wheels of hay. The farmer, one Lutz Goerz, was driving a huge American pickup, the sight and smell of which brought back memories of Kansas and the Schrags' hobby ranch for Emily.

Baron Herbert ran ahead on the cobblestone lane over to the old *Schloss*, which, as Emily knew from her first visit, was a seventeenth-century finished rubble stone structure built like a squared collar around a large inner courtyard. The truck and trailer headed through the high arched gateway, Baron Herbert ahead, the three women fast-marching behind.

Still amazing for Emily was how at least two adjoining wings of the palace's four wings were some manner of barn or storage. In fact, the truck backed the trailer into a large, crudely finished opening in the side of the eastern wing, a great sliding wooden slab its only door. Upon entry, she found a

cavernous hollowed out space, most of the two floors having been removed, only the ancient mortice-and-tenon timber supports left in place. Over half the plaster was missing from the walls, showing the umber rubble stone walls underneath. Once the hay was properly unloaded, the von der Surwitz parents returned to the lodge, while Annette gave Emily a tour of the rest of the *Schloss*.

Like her own hall, the von der Surwitz's ancestral manor was in a poor state. But unlike hers, the damage was not water, rather, rough treatment from decades of use as an East German agriculture cooperative's barn and storage. It was indeed strange to see so much space so completely empty, the walls badly scarred and discoloured, many of the high, narrow windows boarded over, the sills, the moulding broken, holes in the ceilings, many of the doors either in rough shape or missing entirely, the tangles of electrical wiring, most of which hung loosely from the walls, obviously unusable.

They eventually made their way to a section used for horse stables, and there Annette introduced Emily to her smoky-black Trakehner mare named Purzel. "Say, doesn't *purzeln* mean to fall or tumble?" asked Emily, laughing.

"Yes, as a filly she was very clumsy—all legs. It's a good-luck name—counter-intuitively."

Annette checked her water and feed, then encouraging Emily to pet her and feed her carrots. The next stop was the dairy. "I'm a little late today," she said wearing an exaggerated expression of dread.

The dairy section of the barn was another rough palace-to-barn conversion with the first-floor ceiling removed and milking stations and other dairy equipment taking up the smooth, clean, concrete floor.

Soon, a young female farm hand, Käthe as Annette addressed her, appeared, followed by seventeen German Red Pied cows. Together they led each cow into its station and clamped the neck loop tight. Hay and a feed mix were spread out into their troughs, then Surge-style milking canisters hung from straps on each cow's back directly underneath the udder.

"Anything new? Lulu's mastitis down?" asked Annette.

"Almost. I'll give her the full treatment," replied the tall, powerfully-built,

blond-haired, blue-eyed young woman with a sunny smile. “We need to keep her standing and not let her lie down until she’s good and closed up. That’s probably where it came from.”

Annette apologised and introduced her to Emily. “This is Käthe Kreßlinger, *Diplom* ag sciences. She’s helping us transition to organic methods. She helped us get certified for raw milk.”

Emily and tall young woman shook hands, German-heartily style.

“And she’s got very strong legs from jumping through all those bureaucratic hurdles,” said a voice from behind them. They turned to see Baroness Sibylle entering the barn.

While the baron was open and friendly, the baroness was a tall, strikingly intense Nordic specimen. Emily saw more of the mother than the father in Annette.

Without further ado, the two von der Surwitzes and Käthe swung into milking mode: cleaning and dipping the udders in the iodine solution, attaching the suction tubes called *inflations*, eventually pouring the freshly-pumped milk from the individual Surge canisters into the large stainless-steel vessels, which finally got emptied into a large circular cooling and stirring vat. Lulu’s mastitis-tainted milk was dutifully poured into a small trough near the door, visited immediately by a barnyard cat and her kittens.

With the milking done, Käthe led the cows out of the barn, while Annette and her mother washed and hosed down the equipment and the milking parlour’s floor. The cleaning took just as much time as the milking. Emily helped with scrubbing and hosing the floor.

“We must keep a very low bacteria count or the authorities shut us down,” said the senior *Freiin*. “But it’s worth the extra effort. The quality and taste of raw milk is so superior to pasteurised, homogenised milk. We think we’re seeing a real movement building for raw dairy. When we’re in the house, I’ll have you taste store-bought butter, then ours.”

Annette was nodding in agreement. “You’ll wonder how anyone could eat such bland, tasteless stuff after *real* butter.” Then to her mother: “What are we doing for supper?”

“Your father’s been to the butcher shop, and we still have plenty of potato and cucumber salad from the other night.” Then to Emily: “You don’t mind a cold supper?”

Laughing, Emily assured them she did not.

As dinner wasn’t for another hour, Annette continued the tour, showing Emily the cavernous kitchen space, which, as she learned, had been used for cheese processing during the East German collective days. It was now in the middle of renovations, including rebuilding the original fireplace.

Across the hall and down a few paces, Annette pushed open two very tall, ornate doors to reveal an expansive, high-ceilinged chamber room—fully restored with a polished parquet floor, smooth plaster walls with decorative moulding, many oversized other-century paintings in gilded frames, two large candle chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and two marble fireplaces on either end. Four tall sash windows gave a view of the inner court. The contrast between the rest of the palace and this renovated space was breathtaking for Emily, “Oh, this is so lovely!” she exclaimed.

“We have performances and dances and get-togethers and such here. Father jokes we should lead everyone in from the square blindfolded.”

After a quick walk-around, they exited and continued down the hall, finally stopping at a scarred but solid-looking plank door on the outward-facing side of the hall. Annette opened it to show a small, proportionally deep and narrow room.

At first glance the tight space reminded Emily of a cloister cell: a large bookshelf filled with books taking up almost all of the wall opposite a single bed, a small wood-burning stove, a stand-alone wardrobe or *Schrank*, and a simple wooden table and chair on the window wall. Three of the walls had been newly plastered white, while the window wall was exposed bare rubble stone. Below, the floor was red brick covered in colourful rag rugs. Annette’s only decoration indulgence was an eclectic constellation of prints and paintings placed around the tall, deeply recessed window. Emily recognised reproductions of Rossetti’s *Annunciation*, Stokes’ *St. Elizabeth spinning wool for the poor*, mini-portraits of Droste-Hülshoff, Tieck, and Novalis, a constellation of small

wooden Eastern Orthodox icons, and a small photograph of a nun. “Who is that, if I may ask?” asked Emily.

“Yes, that would be Marie-Elisabeth *Gräfin* zu Stolberg-Stolberg. She was a countess and Benedictine nun who worked for relief causes in various places around the world.”

Emily studied the small picture of the handsome, bespectacled woman in a plain brown habit smiling relaxed and serene. An obvious simpatico flowed out of the photo. “Where is she now?”

“I believe she passed away in 2012,” said Annette in a soft voice. “I have no idea when that picture was taken.”

“But you didn’t know her?”

“Not personally, but we know the Stolberg family. We’re related to them. We were originally from further east; a Stolberg prince brought us here in the late seventeenth century.” Annette was silent for a moment, then continued: “I’m not sure why I have her picture. I suppose I should make inquiries into her full story.”

Annette sat down at her desk, and with a sheepish smile offered Emily a seat on her bed. “Sorry, it’s a bit Spartan. I’m like an old nun over here.” Emily watched Annette until their eyes met again, whereupon Annette demonstratively sighed. “I won’t deny the idea has crossed my mind to join a convent or at least become an oblate.”

Emily was slightly surprised by this unforced admission and laughed nervously. “Really? Aren’t we a bit young?”

“Yes, yes,” said Annette wearily, “but that whole thing with *Hans-Dieter* and all.” She stared down at the floor, her hands folded in her lap. “It was a bit of a shock.”

“Being trotted around the paddock like a mare and stallion to sniff each other?”

“Gad, yes.” Annette sighed again loudly. “I don’t know. It was easier in the old days.”

“Marriage?”

“That too. I meant going to a convent. Faith was stronger back then.”

Emily shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose things weren’t so overt, what with all these constant reminders of one’s—*sexual deprivations*.”

“Yes,” drawled Annette in a low tone. “Now celibacy is seen as some sort of mental aberration.”

Emily sighed-hummed. “I’m pretty sure I want a family.”

“As do I. And I’m not without a libido.”

“Nor am I.”

Laughter.

“I have thoughts that come upon me suddenly; but I just don’t dwell on them. I know this sounds odd, *strange*, but I feel it’s my duty to stay above it all—for the time being, at least.”

“Oh, I’m with you on that. I suppress my urges. I suppose it’s slightly easier knowing it’s a part of our noblesse oblige to not just follow urges where they may lead.”

“I pray, and it eventually passes,” said Annette, wearing a smirk.

“I have an old hymnal. I read the lyrics. Sometimes I sing.” But then Emily laughed at a sudden recollection.

“What?” asked Annette, laughing along in anticipation.

“Well, as long as we’re on the subject, back in Kansas—yes, back in Kansas I had a very, shall we say, *involved* dream. And when I woke up I was so frightened that I turned on every light in the room and read the Bible and my hymnal until dawn.”

Laughter followed by a thoughtful silence. Annette continued: “Yes, back in Kansas. . . . Back in Kansas I heard girls *bragging* about losing their virginity.”

“So did I,” said Emily in a forlorn tone.

“Like a burden they just had to be rid of.” Annette wrinkled her nose and shook her hands. “So bizarre!” she exclaimed. “Some of them bragged about seducing older men. Hideous!”

Emily sucked her teeth. “Well, you know, you’re supposed to shop around.”

“Sad,” half-whispered Annette. “Mine is a distinctly minority opinion, but I believe the human female is not designed physically or emotionally to

‘shop around.’”

“Do you think young men are really any different?”

“No, I suppose not,” replied Annette.

“But really, isn’t it just as bad if not worse here?”

“Oh, it is. Europe has gone completely amoral.”

“You don’t have to answer, but has anyone ever—?”

“You mean tried to be romantic? No, no, not that I can recall,” said Annette, almost wistfully. “Mine is a very practised stern and aloof.”

Laughter.

“No! Wait!” exclaimed Annette, clasping her hands together and pulling a face. “At the Wave-Goth there was this very dandy Goth—he called himself *Gloom Raiser*—who just thought the world of me.”

“Really, now!”

“He was a bit of an Anthony Blanche, though. I believe he told us he was from Ireland. He hung around our little Mozarteum gathering the whole time.”

Laughter.

“But no,” said Annette, again with a slight air of regret, “We’re not at liberty to just charge into romance. Not possible.” She gestured to the world with a quick head turn.

“Abstinence.” Emily shrugged and rubbed her hands together. “It may be a strain in my weaker moments, but I know I can carry it off better than any sort of random promiscuity.”

Annette, nodding, laughing. “As I.” She then sat forward in her chair. “Do you know much about my namesake, Annette von Droste zu Hülshoff?”

“No, but I’ve read the poems you showed me. Pretty dense going for an illiterate foreigner.”

Laughter. Annette waving her hand in dismissal.

“Well, she supposedly fell in love with a commoner, a lawyer. But her aunt disapproved and hatched a plot to break them up. She got another peer to pay court, and, supposedly, Annette didn’t properly rebuff him. The aunt started the rumour that she was flirting with *two* suitors—which back then was

enough to ruin her reputation and any chance of marriage. She never married and lived a reclusive life until her death at fifty-five.”

“Harsh.”

“Yes, but it shows you just how serious life was back then.”

Silence. Annette finally spoke: “We have some higher purpose. They don’t.” She waved her hand to the window.

“Remember Lady Cordelia from *Brideshead?*”

“We saw that together. Yes, perhaps I’ll try to be an oblate relief worker like her,” said Annette in a soft but earnest tone of voice.

“You would formally pledge to some group?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out at some point. There are non-Catholic oblates. There’s a nearby convent they might soon open for Protestant oblates.”

“Would you ever consider a non-peer for a spouse?”

Annette drew breath quickly and exhaled strongly. “I suppose all this boils down to *der Mensch denkt und der Gott lenkt*. If God wanted me to, I supposed I would. But only under His direction would I consider it.”

“How will you know?”

“If God wants me to?”

“Yes, I’m not being contrary, I just want to hear your opinion.”

“Well,” Annette pursed her lips and twisted her nose. “I’m sure what God wants is a perfect union of the spiritual. It would feel right in my heart.”

That’s what might be happening with James and I, Emily wanted to say, but instead she frowned and studied her hands. “So, back to Cordelia,” she began again, “I must say I really liked her in the end.” She then laughed self-consciously. “I suppose we should read the book and not just rely on a film version.”

“Oh, I read it. Nothing significantly different. I do remember the line, *No one is ever holy without suffering.*” This she repeated in English.

Emily gave a sigh-hum. “It seems we need suffering to purge ourselves of foolishness.”

Annette laughed. “Exactly. Rather foolproof, isn’t it? No one debilitated with suffering can be foolish and frivolous.”

Silence.

Annette continued: "But Cordelia as my model is the question at hand."

"Well, she probably faced herself in the mirror one day and repeated Corinthians about putting away childish things."

"As we all must," said Annette softly.

"As I must."

"Emily, dear, you are *not* childish."

"I disagree. I've been a complete mug."

"No! I don't see it, I simply don't. You have very high ideals."

"Illusions. There needs to be a separation of illusions and selfishness from true ideals."

"And leaving your home will accomplish this? In your letter you lamented bitterly the situation with your lovely lane. I do not see that as illusion. Wild lanes like yours are exactly what Beatrix Potter wanted, are they not? They're part of what the people come to experience."

"Yes, yes, I know, I know! That's what I keep telling myself!" exclaimed Emily in an exasperated voice. "But I simply cannot imagine how my life would continue at Wolkeld. My father has made his choice, and, like every time before, my wishes weren't considered. This Jocelyn creature wants me gone. I'm the ghost's issue." She then laughed sardonically. "There's one too many Lady Whitmores at Wolkeld."

Silence until Annette suddenly clapped her hands and laughed brightly. "Say, do you remember that one class where they interviewed us about being aristocrats, oh, and that one kid said"—Annette continued in a deep-pitched American English—"Who you trying to impress with this royalty bull—? Remember that?"

Emily was slightly vexed that Annette had changed the topic so abruptly, but she played along. "Yes, yes. Social science. What a cheery moment. And of course the fellow who asked you if you could yodel."

"How romantic."

Laughter.

"And you want to go back to that country?" continued Annette.

Emily laughed without joy and said plaintively, "I know, but I'll be in the most civilised parts. Boston and thereabouts are just as civilised as anything I might find in this modern Europe."

"But what about James?"

"By far the hardest part!"

"I'm sorry. That was an impertinent question."

"Oh, no, you're asking the central question. It's just that I can't wait around for our long-distance relationship to grow. I no longer have that luxury."

"Have you spoken with him?"

"We've exchanged about ten letters. I'm working on a new letter. We're both putting as much of our souls down on paper as we can for the other to read."

Laughter.

"What if he does something crazy-romantic like chases you over there and lives like a homeless person on your street and sings under your window and follows you everywhere? Do you remember *My Fair Lady*?"

Emily laughed. "Oh, yes. Well then, I would be swept off my feet and we would marry and live happily ever after! All right?"

"Fine. Now, what's his address. I need to tell him what you just said."

"Don't you dare!"

Laughter.

"*I don't grieve for the impossible*," said Emily glumly. "Remember who said that?"

"Yes, Tom Pinch in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, although it is not in the book, just the film," replied Annette, wearing a smirk.

"Although I'm sure he did grieve for Mary. Mightily."

"How could he not?"

"It must have been a miracle that your estate was still available," said Emily.

Back at the lodge, they were gathered around a large corner table with

booth-like seats in the rustic kitchen, everyone helping themselves. To Emily it seemed there was enough food on the table to feed the whole town: seven types of cold-cuts and meat spreads, as many cheeses, various pickled vegetables, the promised potato and creamed cucumber salads, various beverages (Emily chose a non-alcoholic malt beer), a half-dozen sorts of breads including big flat wheels of unleavened Scandinavian rye bread-cracker, and all manner of delicacy condiments.

Baron Herbert finished a bite and waved his hand dismissively. “Not really. Actually, there are still quite a few estates here in the former East Germany just rotting away. Can’t find buyers for them. They would cost too much to renovate, or they’re too far off the beaten track.”

“How are your renovations coming?”

“*Very* slowly. That’s all we can afford. Our brave daughter is living over there now. We’ll finish that wing first—after how many decades of being here?”

Laughter.

“And you’re doing well with your farming?”

“Well enough. And that’s only because the market for organic *heritage* goods is holding up. The urban connoisseur will pay for our products; otherwise, this would be impossible. We’re not the only peers doing this. We know a peer in Schleswig-Holstein who is running a very successful biodynamic farm—including raw milk. We’ve been in contact.”

“My grandparents were in sheep,” said Emily. “The meat goes to the big cities as well.”

Baroness Sibylle spoke: “Annette says your father wanted to go into farming, but that you’re facing large expenses and he’s gone back to banking.”

“Yes, and I’m afraid it’s become quite a distraction.”

“Annette has told us about your problems. That’s a pity. So he’s taking rather drastic steps to keep the manor house.”

“I suppose that’s one way of seeing it,” said Emily, looking away.

The baroness reached out and took Emily’s forearm. “Emily, please understand you are more than welcome here. In fact it would be an honour for you to come and stay with us for as long as you want.”

“By all means, dear girl,” chimed in the *Freiherr*, “we can always use another worker hereabouts. *Both* of my children will be at school soon enough.” He shot Annette a quick smirk. “Do you think you could milk cows like you saw today?”

Laughter.

“We’re not joking!” exclaimed the baroness. “Germans never joke, you know.”

Laughter.

“Perhaps I will someday. But for now I think I should get a degree, find a profession,” said Emily in a hollow tone.

“Well, our offer stands if you should change your mind.”

“Very well.”

Emily beamed with happiness. It felt good to be wanted.

“By the way, your German is excellent. You have very good pronunciation as well.”

“Thank you,” said Emily, almost blushing. “I have to admit, the grammar makes me very nervous. The better I get, the more embarrassing the mistakes are.”

“Oh, just keep at it. Mistakes are the only way to learn.”

The von der Surwitzes prattled on about farm business while Emily marvelled at how well she understood them—much better than her last visit. It was exiting to be in a foreign land and negotiating its language as well as she was. Finally, the baron pushed back from the table and studied each of the women in turn. “So if everyone’s had enough to eat, why don’t we remove to the front room? I’ll get that bottle of *Kräuterlikör* I bought today.”

The front saloon was a miniature version of a German country manor main hall. The fireplace wall was covered top to bottom with hunting trophies and taxidermy big and small, including rows and rows of mounted deer skull and antlers reaching up to the high ceiling. Crowding the other three walls were classic oil paintings and framed lithographs of every size, including portraits of past ancestors. The baron strode in wearing a grin, in his hands a grey, wire-stoppered ceramic bottle identified by a paper label with simple Fraktur

lettering. He distributed small crystal snifters, then poured a few centimetres of the dark liqueur into each glass. The von der Surwitz women had claimed the big settee directly in front of the fire, while Emily had found an antique bergère with light blue brocade upholstery just off of the fireplace. “Now, a little background information,” said the baron once he had claimed the matching bergère across from Emily. “This is from a nearby shop that specializes in herbs. It’s said to be inspired by—or stolen from—the *Elixir Végétal* of the Grande Chartreuse monastery in France. They tell me it contains over one hundred medicinal-tonic herbs, all native to the Harz region—although they could have stopped at fifty and I wouldn’t have known the difference. *Also, prosit!*”

Laughter, and the company all downed their medicine. Emily had to wince at the sharp flowery-grassy-rooty-leafy-barky taste.

“So, where were we?” asked the baron.

“Mother was about to explain her *Peasant Visits the City* theory to Emily,” said Annette.

“Annette credits you all the time,” said Emily as she put her glass down on the nearby coffee table and sank back deeper into her bergère. The liqueur glowed all down her throat, gradually spreading out in her stomach.

The baroness bowed her head in acknowledgement, smiling. “Well, it’s very simple. The peasant goes to the city—and is oppressed by the coldness, the ugliness all around him. He goes to the museum—and can’t understand the strange things he sees on the walls.”

“What he sees is called modernism,” said the baron in a resigned tone of voice. “It came in with the Industrial Revolution—or what Carlyle simply called *Machine*.”

“This is where we are today,” continued the baroness. “The common man no longer follows or trusts his betters. The urban Intelligentsia has gone off in directions he cannot understand, cannot follow.”

“And by the end of the nineteenth-century Romanticism was dead,” added Annette, “the inglorious *fin de siècle*.”

The baroness shrugged. “Modernism started as social commentary. It

was supposed to reflect the exploitation of the workers, the destruction of nature, the alienation and isolation of the people, the insanity brought on by industrialisation going on everywhere.”

“But at some point it seemed to assert, even *promote* degeneration in a Schadenfreude way,” said the baron.

“Especially after the First World War,” added Lady Sibylle. “Post-war art became aggressively absurdist and disturbing—openly obscene, even.

“Try to imagine aliens from another planet visiting us in medieval times and seeing nothing but religious icons, then coming after the First World War and seeing Weimar Germany’s so-called *Neue Sachlichkeit*, New Objectivity. Quite a shock that would be.”

At that she rose and left the room. When she returned, she was carrying a large coffee table art book. She sat back down and opened it in her lap to a bookmarked page at the beginning. “Let me quote you one of Weimar’s most *celebrated* artists, Georg Grosz.” She cleared her throat and read:

My drawings expressed my despair, hate, and disillusionment. I drew drunkards; puking men; men with clenched fists cursing at the moon. I drew a man, face filled with fright, washing blood from his hands. I drew lonely little men fleeing madly through empty streets. I drew a cross-section of a tenement house: through one window could be seen a man attacking his wife; through another, two people making love; from a third hung a suicide with body covered by swarming flies. I drew soldiers without noses; war cripples with crustacean-like steel arms; two medical soldiers putting a violent infantryman into a strait-jacket made of a horse blanket. I drew a skeleton dressed as a recruit being examined for military duty. I also wrote poetry.

Grim murmurs as she held up the book and paged through a few of his most grotesque and disturbing pieces.

“Now, I ask you,” said Lady Sibylle, “how does this help? How does the depiction of such chaos help?”

Three sets of blue eyes were on Emily. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “I wouldn’t connect it with any sort of good.”

“He claims to be a reporter of the mayhem, but isn’t he a sort of normaliser?” asked the baron.

Annette spoke: “They might argue that he wanted to shock us—like when those nearby townspeople were forced to see the Buchenwald concentration camp. The hideousness of it all was supposed to shock them into remorse and guilt about what had been going on in their backyards.”

“Shock, yes, but certainly not to admiration,” said her father. “No one saw the SS as artists, did they? So why must I go see Georg Grosz and *admire* his work? What good can come of building snob-appeal out of such ghastly imagery? No, no, my dear, they hold receptions at these exhibits. The smart set drink wine and eat hors d’oeuvres and make pleasant small-talk. Did they serve wine and hors d’oeuvres when they showed them Buchenwald?”

Rueful laughter.

Baroness Sibylle sighed and nodded. “The Intelligentsia and their absurdism. As if flippant, devil-may-care absurdism were a moral stance. No, we accept in a perverse way what Grosz shows us. Absurdism. Fatalism. Nihilism. Then with our collective moral immune system compromised comes *anomie*—the lack of any moral guidance whatsoever.”

“I’m sure Grosz would have blamed the Kaiser,” said Annette dolefully. “Everyone blamed Kaiser Wilhelm for starting the war.”

Both of Annette’s parents laughed grimly. “As if!” exclaimed the baroness. “The First World War was a proletariat war through and through. Europe was seething with social and labor unrest. Communists, nihilist-anarchists stalked the Continent preaching revolt and seeking targets. The Sarajevo assassination was one of many. Do you remember the *Sissi* films with Romy Schneider and Karlheinz Böhm?”

“I know, I know,” muttered Annette, “they were very sugar-coated.”

“Well, the real Sissi, Empress Elizabeth of Austria, got a sharpened file stuck in her heart by an anarchist. He later said he chose her that day because he couldn’t find another royal he was hunting. No, the world was coming

unglued, and the monarchies had long since been eclipsed by the industrialists. What they did as figureheads was merely in reaction to the chaos boiling under the surface. Wilhelm foolishly tried to build some heroic narrative around the whole tragedy. Yes, he certainly gambled our nobility away. That much I'll admit."

"But everybody believes monarchism and war-mongering and imperialism go hand-in-hand," said Annette.

The baroness laughed grimly and in a heavy voice said, "Oh, for the days before Bismarck."

"Before Napoleon and the mediatisation, you mean," added the baron in a languid tone. "There wasn't one imperialist bone in any German nobleman's body at the start of the nineteenth century. Well, maybe in a Prussian or two."

Laughter.

"No one can see anything good back then," said Annette. "Conventional wisdom says the common man suffered more under us than under the industrialists."

"Yes, democracy," mused the baron. "And what does democracy do for a living?"

"Capitalism," answered Annette in a grim tone.

"And what monarch has ever oppressed the people, the land worse than capitalism?" continued the baron.

Silence.

The baron turned to Emily and said, "As you see, we try to keep an open mind."

Laughter.

Emily glowed with excitement as she processed all that had just been said. Ironically, she found Big Topic German easier to understand than much of daily, off-hand, conversational German, mainly due to all of the cognates of German and English, as well as the lack of idioms.

"More like *vox clamantis in deserto*," said Lady Sibylle.

Murmurs of agreement.

"As I understand, you have a PhD in history," said Emily.

“And one in philosophy,” added Annette.

“That’s quite remarkable,” said Emily.

Remarkable too was how much mother and daughter were alike in style and intellectual prowess. She marvelled at how the baroness had gone to America and earned *two* PhDs at a prestigious university in a language not her own. She could not even imagine being an exchange student at Annette’s *Gymnasium*.

Lady Sibylle continued: “I was very fortunate to have a good *Doktorvater* at Brown who let me explore things from this odd angle of mine.”

“Tell Emily your *legend space* theory, dear,” said the baron to his wife.

“Oh, must I? I’ve dominated the discussion for too long already, and I’ve nearly brought everyone to tears.”

Laughter.

“Might as well keep going,” said the baron. “I don’t think we’ll get to our flower garden at the church tonight.”

Laughter.

“Tell her, Mother,” pleaded Annette ironically, “She’s going off to New World, you know. She must be properly brainwashed with our anti-democratic ideas.”

Laughter.

“No, really, tell her your theory,” continued Annette.

“Really?”

“Yes!” cried Annette.

“I’d like to hear it,” said Emily, grinning.

“Very well, then. It’s very simple, actually. A *legend space* is a place of myths and legends outside of linear time.

“So when we hear of the loaves and fishes in Matthew, we can imagine ourselves there, we relive it—handing out napkins, perhaps. Or during the Catholic mass, we’re at the end of the table at the Last Supper. In the Arthurian legend space, we’re at the round table as knights errant for the king. And when one of the knights has the vision of the Holy Grail, it’s a legend inside a legend. The purpose of legends is to bring us into that original event space-

time.

“But now we take legend spaces for granted, we’ve lost track of them in these modern *dynamic* times. Anyway, this is my interpretation of what the Romanian historian Mircea Eliade was saying.”

Annette, still anxious, spoke up: “I think this is amazing because it’s basically the same thing our friend—Hagrid?” Annette glanced over at Emily for help.

“Haggitt,” corrected Emily. “You mean Haggitt’s theory of the Shakespearian versus the Hollywood actor.”

“Exactly!” exclaimed Annette. “It didn’t strike me right away, but later I made the connection. He came up with the essence of my mother’s theory on his own.”

“So let me guess,” said Lady Sibylle, “the Shakespearian actor recreates the *Shakespearian* legend space, which is *stasis*, and the Hollywood actor is, well, not in service to anything or anyone but himself, that is, *dynamism*.”

Nods and murmurs of approval.

“An amazing coincidence, isn’t it?” said Annette, and then to Emily, “So how are he and his wife doing?”

“They’re facing some difficulties,” replied Emily. “They’ve got a child on the way, and they’ve had to leave the cottage.” She went on with more details, outlining to Annette’s parents their fantasy-book-based affinity to the manorial system.

“Very interesting,” said Baron Herbert. “Maybe they’d like to come work for us?”

Emily and Annette traded rueful glances. Baron Herbert noticing this quickly added, “Perhaps not. But seriously, we don’t have any takers for manorial monarchism around here. It’s all strictly business, conducted at arm’s length, no handshakes or gentlemen’s agreements, payment up front.”

“After all these years,” said Annette with a heavy sigh.

“But this lad knows from instinct about legend space,” continued Baron Herbert, nodding and smiling. “He’s figured out he wants to be in a legend space.”

“He wants something more substantial,” said the baroness. “He wants authenticity. That’s a basic human drive.”

“It’s a start at least,” said Annette.

The baroness continued: “Modern society has had a long drink of materialism—and it’s like drinking saltwater. It does not satisfy. We crave something more substantial, grounded . . . the honest, the clear-headed among us, that is.”

“Can we find it?” said Emily.

“I don’t know,” replied the baroness, shaking her head slowly. “All of what I am and believe is based on God. An insidious modern egomania is the fate of the non-believer. That’s why I’d doubt a person following some fantasy book could find this path.”

“We also need a connection to nature,” added Annette. “God’s creation is a sacred gift.”

Murmurs of agreement, then silence. Baron Herbert refilled the glasses with liqueur. “To the sacred gift,” he proposed.

“To the sacred gift,” replied the women. Emily was prepared this second time and relished the taste and the glow.

“This is a bit off the topic,” began the baroness again, “but recently I met an old *Gymnasium* teacher of mine. Back in the day, she was severe and even hateful towards me. But when I ran into her last month, she seemed quite glad to see me and tried to come across as a friend.”

“What did you do?” asked Annette, laughing.

Her mother drew breath slowly and shook her head. “I just played along. And later I thanked God—for the test. He’s very real to me in those moments.”

“Brava,” said Annette. “You tried to turn over a new leaf with her.”

“Well, God would have preferred I forgave her outright, but I suppose smiling and playing along was good enough for now.”

“Forgiveness defies human logic,” said Baron Herbert. “Forgiveness is renewal.”

“Exactly. God was laying an opportunity at my feet to transcend,” replied the baroness.

“And you took it,” said Annette in a soft voice.

The baroness paused and weighed her response. “If I had been spiteful and vengeful, I would remain a lower, meaner version of myself.”

“But she didn’t actually apologise for her previous behaviour,” said Annette.

“No, she did not,” said her mother in a flat voice. “But these times are so devilishly egomaniacal, as I said. No one apologises these days. It’s a lost art.”

“But she did offer an olive branch of sorts,” said Baron Herbert.”

“True,” replied Lady Sibylle. “And I took it as graciously as I could.” She paused, then continued, “I often worry that I’m only capable of theory, that my ideas are hollow and barren. But God brings me to His plane—and there I make true progress.”

Silence.

“My, how we wander!” exclaimed the baron.

Laughter, then silence.

Annette spoke: “Still, whenever we philosophise like this, I have to wonder how does this help us? Does it help ground us? Or do we just get worked up and frustrated. Hollow and barren, indeed.”

“I’d say I’m grounded,” said the baron. “Cow dung on my clothing and dirt under my fingernails—something about farm work keeps me plenty grounded.”

Laughter.

“So we work like peasants, then perhaps we might magically become lords again,” said Annette.

Laughter.

The baron leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and said, “Dear people, I seriously doubt any of them are watching us doing their old jobs and saying ‘You know, that looks like fun. Maybe I’d like to try that again.’”

Laughter.

“But through it all, we must maintain our nobility,” countered Annette in a soft but serious tone.

“Yes, we must,” replied both of her parents solemnly.

A strange tingling was spreading throughout Emily's face and torso. She had never before heard peers openly discussing their peerage like this. In England it was certainly the elephant in the middle of the room—but never to her recollection had the topic come up for open discussion.

The baron smiled broadly at Emily and said, "Well, young lady, have we overwhelmed you with all our crazy ideas?"

"Of course not," said Emily in a quiet tone. "I still very much envy you here."

The von der Surwitzes all laughed brightly, which surprised Emily.

"And why should you envy us?" said the baroness, recovering quickly to serious.

"That you've been able to pursue this much of the traditional manorial life. That you can discuss these things honestly and openly amongst yourselves."

Again, Emily's hosts laughed, albeit more gently.

"Pardon us," said the baron. "At best we're seen as nostalgia nuts, at worst as dangerous, delusional reactionaries. No, Lady Emily, there is no sympathy, no *buy-in*, as you say in English, for our monarchist spinnings. We have to keep a rather low profile, truth be told. In fact, certain speech can be construed as anti-democratic and can get you arrested."

"We envy *you*," added Annette. "The English still have some respect for their peers. Here in Germany we're—yes, as my father just said."

"With you, they still sort of like your smell," added the baron. "And now all the period films about the English aristocracy. To your advantage, a tiny bit, perhaps."

"Oh, they're all just fluff," countered Emily. "Annette can tell you that."

"That I have," added Annette.

Laughter, then a thoughtful silence.

"Let me tell you a story that should throw some light on our situation," began the baron again. "I heard this from a West German chap who dated an East German girl right after the Wall came down. One night they were talking about what they would like to improve about themselves. The young man said

he wanted to improve his character and be a more honourable person. But the *Ossi* girl looked at him aghast—and that was the end of their relationship! Why? Because all her life she had been taught that *fascists* talk that way, fascists talk of honour and duty and character and such.”

“It’s not just the East Germans, it’s what *everyone* has been taught to think,” added Annette.

“Believe me, Lady Emily, we’re quite alone here,” said the baroness.

“But what do we have to offer them?” said Emily. Finding Annette’s eye, she continued, “Annette and I have Romantic Era poetry. But I can’t imagine what we might say or do beyond aesthetics in such a complex world.”

At first, the host family seemed stumped, if not stunned, but then Baron Herbert clapped his hands and said, “Let’s start with your poetry tick. Explain to them your enchantment. Then we might explain to them why they are so disenchanted. Yes, *dis*-enchanted.

“The people need a legend space with the possibility of the supernatural, where the Holy Spirit and God’s grace might start to flow again. The people cannot stand much more of an existence devoid of any sort of enchantment.” At that, he turned to his wife. “Please, Sibylle dear, explain why there must be the sacred and magical. You do it much better.”

The baroness smiled. She folded her arms over her chest and looked up into the rafters of the high ceiling. Looking back down, she eyed each of the party in turn and began: “First, I would try to make it clear to people that we cannot coexist with machines. We are in a very nervous cooperation with machines—quite literally *co-operation*. Our human values and rhythms have been overshadowed by machine procedures.”

Annette spoke up: “You say the *means* have looped back onto themselves and have become the *end*.”

“Oh yes, all these machines and their ordering, their accounting and maintenance have become an end in themselves. These are the demands of machines, machines that will not, *cannot* rise above the material plane—except in completely false imitations of humanity. So yes, the *human* is being squeezed out. All the while, we yearn for the original time of the legends. We were built

for Eden, Avalon, Arcadia. No counterfeit materialism construct will ever satisfy our longing to return.”

The baron pointed to his head, then his heart. “That’s how we’re wired.”

When it was finally over two hours later, Emily was exhausted, but proud of herself for keeping up in German. That night her dreams were very intense, but completely unfathomable. . . .

Emily and Annette rose early the next morning and ate big bowls of *Müsli* made from home-grown oats, fresh berries and fruit, and their own raw milk yogurt. As before, Annette insisted on tea, a “Frisian” blend of Darjeeling, Assam, and Ceylon. She then proceeded to carry out a curious tea ceremony: First, a chunk of rock sugar was placed in the cup, then tea was poured up to the halfway mark, then a dollop of cream was added, finally the cup was filled with more tea. But *no stirring*, supposedly in order to taste plain tea, then creamy tea, at last the sugary tea. Annette said her Rügen friends had learned this odd procedure in East Frisia, which has the highest per capita consumption of tea in Europe, greater, supposedly, than England.

They had planned to hike south and west up to the Brocken, the Harz’s highest point. As Annette explained once again, the Brocken, or sometimes called *Blocksberg*, became associated with witches in the late medieval years when Europe began indiscriminate persecution of women suspected of heresy and witchcraft. Slowly, a fable took form of witches flocking to the Brocken every April thirtieth, the eve of St. Walpurga’s Day. Goethe cemented this *Walpurgisnacht* association for modern readers by including a wild account in his most famous play *Faust*. Emily knew about the Brocken from reading the German children’s book *Die kleine Hexe*, or, *The Little Witch* by Otto Preußler as part of her German training. The Harz and Brocken were also at the centre of an influential work by Germany’s most celebrated poet, Heinrich Heine, who in his *Harz Travels* said:

The mountain somehow appears so Germanic stoical, so understanding,

so tolerant, just because it affords a view so high and wide and clear. And should such mountain open its giant eyes, it may well see more than we, who like dwarfs just trample on it, staring from stupid eyes.

The real place and its unique physical phenomena had always invited superstition. For one, its flat, bald, alpine summit lay above the treeline, offering sudden transport from a temperate German forest to climes naturally seen much farther north. This was due to the “higher altitude is higher latitude” climate phenomenon. As a result the very top possessed its own microclimate, visited by extreme weather, including high winds, as well as fog: On average, the peak was obscured by fog for over three hundred days a year. And in certain foggy conditions, a curious optical illusion might occur whereby the horizontal rays of the setting sun pierce the fog and throw ghostly shadows on the eastern fog bank, sometimes with spooky light refractions and halo phenomena.

Annette knew the paths by heart, and once underway, she attacked the climb through the old forest with energetic certitude. Emily, fit from her fells jaunts, kept up, although sweating profusely due to the abnormal heat.

“I’m not going too fast, am I?” inquired Annette during a pause by a brook as they drank from their water bottles.

“No, it’s fine. I’m in good shape, but I’m not used to this heat.”

“Let’s stay hydrated.”

“Did we bring enough water?”

“If not, I’ve drunk from some of the streams. Never had a problem.”

“Yes,” said Emily, smiling, “so have I back home.”

“This one comes from a spring high up on the mountain.”

Emily stretched out on a large boulder by the flowing water and stuck her hand in the water. It was reassuringly cold. “Is this potable, do you think?”

“It should be,” replied Annette. “I’ve drunk from it.”

Annette came over and filled her stainless steel water bottle and took a big drink. Emily did the same.

“You’re in tremendous shape,” said Emily, gazing up the path.

“I don’t do any sort fitness routine. I just walk and work.”

“You get up at five for the milking, then off to school where you break all academic records, then back home for more farm work.”

Laughter.

“Yes, but that’s over. Now I have to decide whether or not to go to college. I’ve applied already.”

“Do you still want to be a veterinary?”

“Possibly. Or a doctor. Or just stay on the farm. Or be an oblate—if not a nun.” She then made a comically ironic face.

Laughter.

“Yes,” said Emily, “I have to decide as well. But I mean to go home and think it over again.”

Just then a family of two adults and two young teenagers came down the trail. They cheerily greeted the resting young women and continued on.

“Not to go to America?”

“I’m thinking not. Or maybe just for a visit.”

The friends looked at each other, smiling. “This is my half-way point to the top,” said Annette at last. “We’ve got another hour or so hard slog.”

They shouldered their backpacks and set off up the trail.

The Harz forests were mostly tall and mature, and even in such bright sunlight retained a dark Old World mood. However, Emily could spot the telltale signs of modern forestry management. She thought about her trip with Chris and her mother to Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, and their day hike to the top of Mount Washington from the Mount Washington Hotel. The New Hampshire landscape felt unmistakably wild and empty, the seemingly endless woodlands of birch, maple, and hemlock giving way to rocky alpine heights with expansive vistas showing no sign of civilization in any direction.

As they approached the flattened top, the spruce became shorter, scrubbier, eventually more and more sparsely scattered in a boulder-strewn grassland. And as she rounded a corner Emily was confronted with the sight of a tall red-and-white communications tower among a complex of buildings. The tallest building was an eight-story structure that reminded her of an airport

control tower, complete with a radar dome on top. A nearby four-story building with a similar dome looked like a mosque. Most of the buildings wore a dull military-industrial grey. The hikers halted and stared blankly.

Annette eventually spoke: “Yes, quite a shock. This was a top-secret military site during the Cold War, and it still has that feel, I’m afraid.”

They hesitated on the path. Emily could see scores of tourists milling around the complex, apparently not as disturbed by the cold industrial personality of the place as they were. She recalled seeing the tower from afar, but somehow disassociating it from the Brocken peak itself. . . .

“Let’s just go over there and eat our lunch.” Annette pointed to grassy depression surrounded by a horseshoe of short, wind-bent spruce trees.

“Yes, fine.”

They found a spot in the shade and dug into their backpacks. Annette and her mother had prepared a lunch of sandwiches and fruit. She had also brought along a big bottle of mineral water, which she opened and passed to Emily. They seemed to instinctively avoid conversation, rather, focusing on eating.

Once on their feet again, they avoided the centre of complex; instead, circling around the western shoulder, then coming back to their path.

It took just over an hour to reach once again their previous stopping point deep in the cool stillness of the tall trees beside the flowing brook. An odd tension hung in the air, which seemed to puzzle both women. They glanced at one another in unison, and had to laugh.

“I shan’t forget this trip soon,” said Emily as she took a biscuit from a package Annette had opened and placed on the large, flat boulder.

“It’s been too short,” said Annette. “I wanted to take you over to see Oberwiederstedt, the von Hardenberg castle. It’s less than an hour away.”

“Well, girl, if I stay any longer, I’d be tempted to simply move in here and forget my troubles at home.”

“I suppose you must see to things.” Annette looked off into the coursing water for a time, but then smiled, throwing her hands up and letting them fall heavily in her lap. “A short visit means everything I do with you is all

the more significant.”

“And I’m so glad to be here. I’m immensely happier now than when I first arrived.”

“And I’m the better for being with you. Sometimes we go far afield with our discussions, especially when I only have my parents to talk with. You’re centring and grounding.”

Silence.

“I should tell you something that happened to me recently if you think I’m so centred and grounded.”

“What?”

Emily sighed loudly, shifting on her rock perch. “Well, when I was with Stephan and Marit, Marit and I went on a hike later just by ourselves.”

“Yes, you mentioned their visit in your letter.”

“Yes, well, I had some sort of—experience.” Emily stopped and looked out across the forest struggling to find the words. “Something as I was gazing out at the sea.”

Annette sat quietly, wearing a serene smile. “Like in Kansas?” she finally said in a quiet voice.

“Perhaps. I can’t really say. But it was the most profound feeling. Your references to Keats and Byron and Günderröde came to mind.”

“Beauty as transcendence?”

“Yes, this tremendous feeling of, well, grace, wonderment. Marit picked up on it and came over and held my hand. Quite a wonderful experience, really. I’ll never forget it.”

Silence as Annette studied her friend intently, remaining, however, inscrutable. Emily shrugged and met Annette’s gaze.

Annette suddenly laughed. “Say!” she exclaimed, rising from her stone, “you stand up!”—she glided over to Emily, took her hands, and pulled her to her feet—“and I’ll kneel before you as if this were some solemn ceremony, a coronation, perhaps.”

“Oh don’t be silly!” cried Emily. She pulled her hands free, but remained standing.

“No, really, girl! You are a noblewoman—a visionary one at that—and I will acknowledge your nobility, plain and simple!” At that she knelt down on one knee directly in front of Emily and bowed her head.

After a few seconds, she looked up and gracefully rose to stand ramrod straight before her friend. “I duly acknowledge you as my liege lady, Lady Emily Whitmore!” She sat down again on the rock, and motioned for Emily to sit back down on hers. “Now, why did I do that?”

“Because you had some of the mushrooms for lunch?” Emily quickly looked around to see if she could spot any of the fly agaric mushrooms which were just beginning to appear across the forest floor.

Laughter.

“No, because I wanted to honour you with a little formal ceremony.”

“Very well,” said Emily. She laughed softly. “Wonderful, then.”

“No, really, you’re very deep water, girl. People want to be near your glow.”

“That’s not how—”

“Not a peep!” cut in Annette, shaking her index finger above her head, frowning and glaring with mock ferocity. Emily let her shoulders drop, frowning back in consternation, and Annette laughed all but gleefully. “No, girl, you’ve never had a *subject* kneel before you, have you?”

Emily groaned with impatience and pitched forward. “Of course not! Don’t be silly! There are no *subjects* any longer.”

“Our ancestors had subjects bowing, kneeling before them all the time. And so I ask myself, how did that make them feel?”

“It makes me feel incredibly awkward!”

“I suspect it made them feel *humble*—not necessarily before their subjects, but before God . . . at least the good ones.”

“All right, true enough. Were that to happen to me on a daily basis, I would be reminded of my station and my responsibilities. I would be rendered humble *and* try to find a higher power to help me with it. Yes, true enough.”

“You sum it up nicely. And that, Emily of Wolkeld, is why we *subjects* keep you around.”

Laughter and then silence except for the excited flow of the stream.

“We painted a rather lurid picture of the world last night,” said Emily dolefully. “Do we really know a better way?”

Annette leaned back, propping herself up with her hands. “If I’m going off to a convent, I suppose the answer is no, *I* don’t. But that’s what a lot of us did to take a break.”

“I wonder about Mary sometimes,” added Emily. “In many ways she was noble.”

Annette shrugged. “I suppose she’s from the American version of a patrician family.” She suddenly laughed. “Say, do you remember the time she reported that boy for supposedly hitting on Irene? ‘Unwanted male attention.’”

“Yes,” drawled Emily, wearing a half-smile. “Isn’t that a bit like when the commoner wasn’t allowed to address us, only to respond when spoken to?”

“Exactly my point.”

Laughter.

“Your plan to be an oblate and to farm could be combined, could it not?”

Annette sucked her teeth. “Perhaps. I want to really delve into Latin as well. Why not all of it? Or—or I become a doctor and try to make money for the farm.”

“Have you discussed any of this with your parents?”

“Yes—and no. I have their support no matter what I do.”

Emily’s heart skipped a beat when she realised she no longer really had parents. Her mother was dead and the she-rat had enslaved and lobotomised her father.

Annette laughed ruefully. “But I do wonder sometimes if being so opinionated and outspoken is haughty of me.”

“Dear Annette,” said Emily softly, “you most certainly are not haughty. And you have every right to be opinionated and outspoken.”

“But I do worry about it. I’ve thought of becoming an oblate to work on my humility. I pray for guidance, something I very much believe in.”

“What sort of guidance?”

“To finding a path as a noblewoman, of course.”

“Yes, of course. Again, you’re brilliant, you’re proactive. And what am I doing? I’m passively allowing things to happen to me, wondering why I’m so poor and abused.”

“And then you come here needing rest and support, and all we do is harangue you. We don’t mean to, girl. We’re too intense. You saw my parents last night. They always have to get down to brass tacks—regardless of the social situation. We’re a pariah around other peers, you know. That’s why I doubt I’ll ever find anybody.”

“Nonsense. No, you’re all simply brilliant. I bask in your brilliance. Somebody else will soon enough.”

Silence, for at least a minute. Emily had expected Annette to counter, but, instead, she seemed again to be transfixed by the shimmering pool just below the small falls. Finally, the tall *Freiin* looked up and smiled, her eyes perhaps moist. “So, when the day is done, tasks completed, and mundane thoughts have run their course, there we are in our minds, alone in the Universe. Whither the mind? What’s a mind to do?”

“I don’t know,” replied Emily wistfully.

“Do I go down the science rabbit hole? That’s what I’d be doing in medicine. They’d put me in research. I would never *practice* medicine.”

“Rabbit holes. . .” mused Emily.

“Yes, yes,” she retorted with mock frustration. “Girl, I will graduate from my Gymnasium as the most accomplished student they’ve ever had. I took nearly every science course, the full language curriculum too, and got only the best marks. That’s never been done before at *Gymnasium Gottfried August Bürger*. But you, dear girl, have a depth that I can only imagine. I need to find *depth*—after so much breadth. I long for depth, and I merely suffer through the rest. Now do you understand why Marit kissed your hand and I just knelt before you?”

Emily sat next to the window and looked out blankly as the train slowly gained speed out of the Weringerode station. She savoured the physical

impression of Annette's firm hug, her tears she would let dry in place on her face.

She laughed over a building sob. Was the poor girl serious about attaching herself to a convent or going off to some refugee camp à la the fictional Lady Cordelia Flyte? Was the idealistic side of her powerful mind overpowering the common sense side?

Their last topic had been Annette's recent trip to Frankfurt on the Oder for the funeral of a great-uncle—she had already forgotten the long *von* and *zu* hyphenated name. She had to giggle at how her *Freiin* had complained about the whole tasteless affair in her comically pouty, petulant way. The giggle became a laugh, although with a tear leaking out. Apparently, this “New Age ninny” of a Great-aunt had tried to “lighten the mood” in ways Annette had found repugnant and distasteful. The final insult had been the colour of the hearse: pink, of all things! The only thing she could think of to say was, Would he have wanted a pink hearse? Annette had bowed her head and said yes. Another giggle outbreak. At times Annette could be a parody of herself. Such were the nervous conversations right before momentous partings.

By the time her train reached Hanover she had finished a short commemorative poem entitled *A Grandniece to Her Great-aunt At Her Great-uncle's Funeral*:

For you see, dear Auntie,
the Day is all supposes,
the Night but only a few.
Night subtle and receding,
beyond Day's great to-do.
Lost on the Day,
I wait for deepest Night,
for Darkness and I
must decline clamant Light.

She placed the cap on her Meisterstück and returned it and her journal

to her rucksack. The sun was falling below the skyline in the west. Now to the dining car, she thought. A *Sauerbraten* and a good pilsner to wash it down would do just fine.

She stood beside a glittering river. A bright, wide valley stretched out before her with high alpine mountains on either side. Out to the horizon the valley was a bright sunny morning. However, the snowy mountaintops on either side of the valley lay in eternal night under stars, while between, evergreen forests slumbered in permanent twilight.

She walked into a great hall with an oversized bloody hare in her arms. She was in shock at having killed it, her eyes wide and blank. An equally shocked, wide-eyed servant girl came and took the hare from her.

Emily awoke to bright light coming through her window. She sat up and stared out in amazement. The dream had been so vivid, though no time to think about it or write it down. She had arranged to meet Haggitt and she would be late unless she hurried. She jumped out of bed, threw on her clothes, and ran down to the kitchen. No one. Seeing nothing handy to eat, she continued on out the front door. She shouldered her rucksack and took off down the lane at a ragged pace, her limbs stiff and sluggish, her head swimming.

Since returning the week before, the weather had been cool, windy, and rainy. But finally there had been back-to-back days of sunshine and warmth. The air was electric, the warm wind sighing in the branches of the woodland park, their foliage finally out. An inordinate number of birds seemed to be in every tree singing joyously.

Just after the bridge, her eye was arrested by a sea of wild flowers blooming underneath the widely-spaced oaks: anemones, ramsons, forget-me-nots, bluebells, and wild daffodils. She stopped and gaped in awe. She searched her memory, but could not remember this sight from her childhood.

At the edge of the estate she slowed down, taking in the scene of the Jorhead, as well as the billowing clouds racing over the western shoulder of the

hill back to the right. Ranks of pale yellow daffodils danced in the gentle breeze along the lane. So many flowers! Lines from an Annette's last letter came to mind: *Not sow, not reap, not gather into barns, not spin, no brooding on the morrow . . . we are so great when we truly consider the lilies of the valley.*

Haggitt was sitting on the wall of the mill race. When he saw Emily, he jumped to his feet and moved quickly towards her. Their eyes locked and they shook hands—each gripping hard.

“Haggitt, will you help me save my lane? It's sacred to me.”

“Yes, milady,” he said calmly and quietly, bowing his head.

“Very well,” she said.

Haggitt raised his head, but his eyes were soft and moist.