

Red Apples
By Catherine Cole Rogers

A soft knock on the apartment door sounded like the person knocking wore gloves.

A muffled thud-thud-thud.

When she heard that knock, Mary understood her soul would never know the promise of rebirth. The soft thuds caused her lips to stretch into a feral smirk, her eyes gleamed fiercely and unblinking, and her heart fluttered before sinking. She heard it again.

Thud-thud-thud.

The sound made her mother burst into tears. Her father crossed the apartment floor, his footsteps squeaking on the loose nails in the wooden planks, and opened the door. Her helpless mother bent down to hug her. She murmured, “Sorry,” and held Mary close. “Sorry, sorry.” Mary counted the triple sorrys as her mother kissed her cheek. She noticed that her mother’s nose was red and chapped, and her hair was limp. She searched her mother’s pale face for an explanation, but the reason eluded her; it was unfathomable. Mary looked up into her father’s face, where she found a mask of cold bravery. They helped her with her little coat while her father’s student, Kjell, waited outside the door. They told her to go with him.

Kjell carried her suitcase with his mittened hands. He made her walk to Vienna’s West Train Station. Mary was used to riding in a fiacre. Her family boarded the train before anyone else, too. They always traveled first class. Mary started to walk to the front of the line, but Kjell stopped her by pulling the collar of her coat.

“You must wait your turn.”

His German had an unusual lilt. He gripped her shoulder firmly to prevent her from moving. He made her stand in line behind everyone else. Mary was feeling cold. Her coat, although pretty, was not very warm. She attempted again, but Kjell stopped her once more. Mary stomped her foot in frustration. Kjell leaned down and said patiently,

“You need to be patient.”

“We always go first. “

“When it’s our turn.”

“We go first!”

“Not today.”

“Always!”

“No, not always.”

“It’s because of you.”

“Excuse me?”

“We are the special, and you are not.”

“Special to whom?”

Kjell had whispered this, and Mary disliked his tone. She didn’t like this oaf of a man. "Oaf" was also a term her mother would have used for him. Mary then noticed that the people ahead had to stop to show their papers. However, she wasn’t quite sure why this made her nervous. She shivered and began to jump up and down. Flailing her arms wide, she hugged herself, just as she had seen her father do when he was cold. She started to rock back and forth, but Kjell stopped her. He held her shoulders firmly in his big mittened hands, preventing her from moving. Mary had no choice; she had to endure the cold and her anxiety. They waited silently, slowly creeping forward as Mary thought of baby steps. When it was their turn, Kjell showed the man at the table their passports and tickets. The soldier briskly took them, turning the papers repeatedly while examining the documents closely. Kjell picked Mary up and held her in his arms. His blond head rested on his short neck, his body resembling a slender cylinder. The soldier in the gray uniform looked at the 7-year-old.

“This yours?”

“My sister’s.”

“France?”

Kjell’s head bobbed up and down. “Then to Norway.”

The gray one offered a thin smile. He stamped the papers and returned them to Kjell.

“That was the final one.”

Kjell carried Mary around the table and across the platform to the train. He set her down, and she climbed the cold stairs. When she reached the top, she experienced a triumphant moment, for it wasn’t Mary who boarded the train last, but the oaf.

Kjell threw her little suitcase up onto the rack above her head. He stuffed it between a hatbox and other suitcases, placing someone else’s bag on top. After that, he ordered her to sit on the rumpled seat and sat down beside her. Mary gazed out the train’s windows as the morning

began to show signs of light. She noticed the grey-whiskered man sitting across from her smelled of whiskey and cigars. Beside him sat a woman with long red fingernails and a teenage girl, whom Mary decided must be the woman's daughter. The girl wore leather gloves, a dark coat, and black boots. Another man in a tweed suit sat beside them. Near the door, besides Kjell, sat a boy, but Mary couldn't see his face. His clothes were ash-colored, and Mary wondered if he was a chimney sweep. Everyone seemed grim, reserved, and lost in their thoughts, so Mary peered out the window at the tracks below. The dark morning swirled with fog, and the train seemed to be breathing. Mary closed her eyes to listen. It wasn't unpleasant. When she opened them, the man who smelled of whiskey and cigars leaned across and whispered something into the ear of the oaf. She heard Kjell say,

"What about him?"

"The boy? Too young, they'll want you."

The man in tweed nodded his head. "I have a bum leg; they won't want me."

"They'll put you to work for the cause."

"They've been raiding the trains."

"I'm too old," the whiskey man said.

Kjell's face turned a grayish hue as he gazed at both men. He said to Mary,

"My wife... My wife will meet you at the station. Stay on the train until you reach France. Here."

He pulled her ticket, passport, several sticks of chewing gum, and a few francs from his pockets, stuffed them into Mary's coat pockets, and placed a small orange on her lap.

"Be good, and remember the only thing you know is your name is Mary, and your mother's name is Christine. You have no past and no other parents."

To the whiskey man, he said,

"Make sure she gets off in Mulhouse. My wife, her name is Hava."

Then the oaf was gone. Mary heard his shoes tapping lightly and quickly as he ran down the narrow train corridor. She listened until she could no longer hear them. A moment later, the train's whistle blew, and it lurched forward, slowly chugging out of the station.

As it picked up speed, the city's buildings gave way to fields and pastures. The hum of the train's engine warmed her. She had always liked the clacking sound of a train on its tracks. She made her way to the lavatory and back, ate the orange, but turned up her nose at the gum. It

was wintergreen; Mary preferred cinnamon. Finally, she lay down with her coat tucked under her head. The train rocked gently. She hummed little songs to herself and pretended she was a princess on her way to her kingdom. The sky brightened outside the window, revealing a blue expanse. She imagined the other passengers were her servants, there to protect her. This thought reassured her, and Mary fell asleep.

When Mary awoke, the train stood still and breathed heavily. Mary could hear the stomping of boots. She watched the boy cringe as more soldiers boarded the train. She could hear them threatening the passengers and ordering them to stay seated. The soldiers scolded, screamed, and yelled more orders. A soldier thrust his gun into their compartment. The gray-uniform took a quick inventory and ordered the boy and the man in tweed to rise and exit. Both complied, with the tweed-suited man hobbling into the corridor. The boy stumbled after him.

The regular men, men without uniforms, began to fill the narrow passageway of the train. Mary felt herself shrink; she wanted to become invisible. Everyone seemed angry. Many of the regular men began shouting. They were arguing. Mary watched as one of the soldiers in the corridor raised his rifle and,

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Mary strained to see the hole in the train's ceiling, but it was located in the passageway. She observed the uniform swinging his rifle from side to side, aiming it at everyone. Mary felt a pressure near her neck as the daughter placed her gloved hand on Mary's shoulder and held her finger over her mouth, signaling Mary to be quiet. Mary watched as the other woman rose silently. She moved quietly and closed the compartment door with her long fingernails. Both women sat down again, wrapping their arms around each other. Mary heard the whiskey man emit an anguished sigh and saw the soldiers take the tweed suit, the ash boy, and all the others. Several long minutes passed, then even more before the train lurched forward. Mary felt safer with her head on her coat, so she lay down again. She listened to the train on the tracks: clack-clack-clack, and gradually fell into a fitful sleep.

When she awoke, she felt thirsty, so she tottered through the narrow corridor to get a drink of water. She heard a shout from a man, and then the train began to slow. Mary wrinkled her nose at the pungent odor of coal, which reminded her of the smell of dead rats. After getting

her drink of water, she was making her way back when the train came to a stop. The porters were shouting.

“Gare de Mulhouse!”

She was ordered off the train, and her little suitcase was left behind. Mary stepped out into the chilly late afternoon sun. She trailed the crowd of people heading to the terminal. She had just entered when she heard,

“Little girl!”

Mary looked up and saw the whiskey man waving her coat. He handed it to her with a grin, and then he was gone. The air was filled with the sounds of the terminal. Mary took a deep breath of the air. The air smelled of oil, wool, and varnish. It occurred to the little seven-year-old that it also smelled of loneliness and fear. She wondered if any women in the train station were looking for her. Instead, the people bustled or rushed by her. The men carried large packages and suitcases, while the women pushed strollers and held other children’s hands. Everyone seemed eager to flee. No one appeared to notice her.

Mary felt faint, so she sat on a wooden bench in the ticket room, watching as people swarmed by her. She heard the train whistle blow and listened to her tummy rumble. She wished her parents would show up, materialize out of thin air, and give her something to eat. She longed for a book to read or something to write on—anything to distract her from her lonely thoughts and empty stomach. She wondered how her friend Fani was, as she hadn’t seen Fani in a long time. She watched a beetle wander across the floor. An old woman nearly stepped on it with her heel, making the beetle freeze. Then the porter, with her, almost squashed it with his shoe. Mary felt her heart pound, and she held her breath until the little insect finally scrambled forward and disappeared into a crack.

Mary sat on the bench, realizing she was angry with her parents for giving her to Kjell. She noticed the sign above the ticket window that read "Gare de Mulhouse – Ville."

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

Mary looked up. A crusty-looking gentleman was peering down at her. He carried a loaf of bread. His fine coat was torn, and his soft hands had scabs. His eyes flashed with anger. Mary didn’t know what he had said, so she said nothing. Instead, she reached for the bread. He tore off a piece in a frenzied manner and threw it at her. It landed in her lap.

“Le monde est devenu fou,” he muttered. “Entierement fou.”

His arm waved the rest of the loaf until it seemed to float in the air. The crowd enveloped him and carried the loaf away. She saw him again as he tumbled out of a side door and into the night. She curled up on the wooden bench, ate the bread slowly, and then drifted into an uncomfortable doze filled with nightmares and wakefulness. The night passed.

The next morning, she stayed in the ticket room, which was warm, drinking water from the lavatory and accepting whatever a stranger might offer her. The train station was open twenty-four hours a day. There were long stretches of hushed silence, with only the occasional stranger passing by. Then a train whistle would blow, and suddenly, people rushed into the station in a frantic surge. Mary would hear conversations shouted (often in a language she did not understand). She observed parents bending down to pick up their crying children. The crowd, with suitcases, packages, and strollers, often collided as they tried to navigate around one another. And then, like a river, they all flowed out of the station. Each time it emptied, Mary found herself left behind and alone.

Mary felt smaller and smaller as the days passed. When the station was crowded, she pretended she was a princess, her kingdom under siege, with people bustling about trying to save her. She knew the people hardly noticed her, so she imagined they acted that way to avoid drawing attention to her. In this way, they protected her. But it was challenging to act like a princess under such circumstances. Mary noticed an empty cobweb in the corner of the ceiling near the side door. There were scrape marks on the tile where the lavatory door opened and closed. Carvings adorned her bench. They were jagged and crudely made. She could make out a J, a U, an I, and an F, though it was difficult because a slash ran from the top of the J to the bottom of the F.

On the fourth day, Kjell showed up.

“Thank God!”

He hugged her so tightly that Mary had to push him away. He took hold of her wrist and pulled her off the bench.

“Where’s your suitcase?”

He walked quickly. Mary’s little legs pumped as hard as they could. She fainted once, but Kjell lifted her with one smooth sweep of his arm. She understood his sing-song German when he said,

“You need food.”

He hurried her down a long hallway and then down a flight of stairs. They descended into the basement of the train station and navigated several narrow passageways. Kjell then stopped abruptly and muttered something into a small window. The woman in the window muttered something while Mary slid to the floor.

“What color was it?” Kjell asked Mary.

Mary rubbed her wrist.

To the woman in the window, Kjell extended his arms and flipped both hands, mimicking the dimensions of Mary’s suitcase. “C’est about this taille..., taille!”

Mary watched as the woman’s nose disappeared into her office. Kjell paced, cursed, and paced some more. Mary remained on the floor, and Kjell allowed her to stay there. Time passed. The nose reappeared; a few words were exchanged, but nothing else came through the window. Mary noticed Kjell wince; his head dropped forward. She waited. He sighed deeply as he carefully bent down to pick her up. He carried her in his arms all the way out of the train station and onto the city streets. He held her in his arms until the tram arrived and set her on a seat beside a window. He sat down next to her. The ride was cold and unpleasant.

His apartment smelled of fried onions. Cat hair was everywhere and seemed to cling to everything. She looked around for the animal but did not find it. Kjell tossed off his coat and made tea, handing Mary a steaming cup. He returned to the kitchen, and soon fragrant smells filled the room. He entered the bedroom and emerged with a pillow and blankets, transforming the couch into a bed. Then, he had her sit at the dining table, placing a plate piled high with potatoes, butter, and onions in front of her. He offered her a tall glass of warm milk. Kjell disappeared into the bedroom again, reappearing with a comb, socks, and a shirt. Mary discovered a tin of sardines in a kitchen drawer, and Kjell opened it, allowing her to eat them. She found the remainder of a box of store-bought macarons in a side drawer, and Kjell let her eat them all. She finished the rest of Kjell’s tea. He helped her out of her little dress and into a large, clean shirt. He removed her shoes and dirty socks and quietly slid a pair of clean, oversized socks onto her feet. He suggested she go to the bathroom while he waited outside the door, reminding her to wash her hands. After sprinkling them with baking soda, he instructed her to brush her teeth with her finger. Kjell took a cross with beads from around his neck and placed it over her head until it rested on the nightshirt’s chest. Finally, he allowed her to climb wearily

onto the couch and into the folds of the blankets. Though it took some time, she eventually fell asleep. He must have waited until she did because she never heard his footsteps retreating into his bedroom.

Kjell left her in the morning and did not return until late at night. A small routine soon developed. In the morning, he'd leave biscuits on the table, and she'd warm up the old tea he'd left in the pot. Mary spent her days playing with a doll that Kjell had fashioned for her. She looked at the magazines she found in the apartment. She began an elaborate game of princess. Every morning, she held court with her doll and other important dignitaries. The magazines helped; one featured photos of movie stars, while the other showcased high fashion. The small flat became her chamber. Sometimes, it transformed into a prison tower, where she was held against her will. She passed her days in an altered universe, where she felt safe—a place she completely controlled.

When Kjell reappeared in the evening, he would make them dinner. Afterwards, she would wrap herself in a corner of the flat with a wool blanket and wait until he went to bed. There were nights when Mary could hear Kjell sobbing softly. His sounds emitted to her love and bitterness, chance and despair. His edgy anguish unnerved her. On those nights, she would hold her hands tightly over her ears. On those nights, Mary did not feel regal. On those nights, Mary hated the oaf. On those nights, there was something about him that she found deadly, like a bullet.

Mary recalled the night when Kjell left the apartment door wide open. A jaundiced light illuminated the rundown hallway, and the cold night air swirled into the flat. Huddled in her blanket, Mary pulled one end over her head until only her face peeked out.

She watched as Kjell and their neighbor spoke in the hallway. She called their neighbor, Carrot Man, because he had knocked on the flat door one morning. When Mary opened it, he snapped a carrot in half and gave her the larger half. Mary remembered a sore that stained his swollen upper lip, but he winked at her and told her to be good.

She watched as Kjell flicked his cigarette to the ground and bit his thumbnail. Carrot ran his hand down his chin, fidgeting with his reddish beard. His wispy hair lay flat on his ears. The sore on his lip was gone. She heard him say,

“Too bad about Norway.”

“They are still resisting.”

“Maybe she made it.”

Kjell’s lower lip quivered ever so slightly before he spoke,

“I doubt it...”

“Too bad she’s not here for the girl.”

Mary watched as Carrot’s blackened nails slid over his elbow and back down his slender wrist. Kjell coughed several times before stamping his foot on the cigarette. He wiped his nose with his sleeve. After a moment of silence, he said with a sob,

That sad little brat is not what she would have wanted.”

Kjell ground the cigarette out with his shoe, twisting it with his toe. “My wife was too good; she was too trusting; she was too... lovely...”

Mary shivered and pulled the blanket tighter around her head. She quietly climbed onto the couch, curled into a ball, and faced the wall. She waited for Kjell to come in and close the door. Then she closed her eyes. Her dreams included dark, windy dungeons and whizzing bullets that pierced large, billowing silk veils. The veils were white and tore easily, leaving large gaping holes. It was the warning sirens that woke her. The high whine of the Ju-87 Stuka bombers frightened her and made her turn too quickly, causing her to fall off the couch.

She crawled toward his bedroom, but Kjell picked her off the floor. He flung her out of the apartment with orders to go next door. Mary saw the gun in his hand. She hesitated. He waved it toward the carrot man’s flat, then disappeared down the hallway. She heard him skip down a flight of stairs. Shivering in the nightshirt, Mary tried the knob of the adjoining flat, but it was locked. She pounded her small fists on the door, but Carrot did not answer.

There were sounds of guns popping, grenades exploding, and men shouting. She wrinkled her nose against the acrid smoke as it mixed with the cold air in the hallway. She heard heavy boots on the stairs, so she started running in the opposite direction. She ran until she reached the end of the hall, where she discovered an elevator. As she pushed the unfamiliar door aside, she tripped over something small and heavy with her bare feet. At first, she thought it was a grain sack and wondered why someone would have left it there. She pulled the folding wrought iron doors shut and stood against the back wall of the cold compartment. The jaundiced light from the hallway illuminated the small space. She realized it wasn’t grain.

The dead baby lay awkwardly on the floor; its head twisted at an unnatural angle. The child's remains appeared to lack bones. It seemed to have died elsewhere and been placed in the elevator. Its lips were black.

Mary withdrew as far from the body as she could. She remained completely still. Her thoughts faded into emptiness. Her eyes registered nothing. She felt no sensations. She was reduced to nothing.

A deep, shuddering explosion rattled her insides, reminding her that she was alive. The whole building vibrated and shook as it slid off its foundation. Mary heard horrific cracking sounds. Windows splintered. The lights went out. The elevator floor leaned precariously to one side, causing Mary to feel vertigo. Smoke and dust filled the small space. Mary covered her mouth and nose with the neck of her shirt. Slowly, she realized that if she counted the seconds, she could make them last longer. As the dust settled and the smoke cleared, Mary shivered and counted.

"One-two-three-four..."

She counted as the high whine of the Luftwaffe blasted the outside world clean of life. Mary stopped counting after the bombing ceased. An extended period of silence followed. Mary did not recall falling asleep. A German soldier found her.

He pushed aside the elevator door and poked his head inside. Without a word, he used rubble collected from the hallway to prop the doors open methodically. Once the doors were secured, he gently said,

"Little girl? It will be okay."

Mary understood and tried to nod, but her head felt disconnected from her body.

"I will take out the little bundle."

He picked up the baby and took it out of the elevator.

He then entered and picked her up. Mary hadn't liked that his hands had touched the baby. She cringed as he lifted her into his arms. The German's eyes were very kind. Mary realized he was glad she was alive. He carried her down the stairwell, carefully navigating what remained of the building and into the morning sunshine. The rosary necklace bounced against her little chest. The German noticed it and smiled. The strength of the German's arms and his cheerful smile calmed her. She felt safe for a moment, and then he whispered,

"I will take you to the nuns."

Mary did not want to go to the nuns; she wanted to stay with him. The German asked her name, but Mary was unable to speak. She tried, the word Mary forming in her mind, but it seemed stuck somewhere in her throat and wouldn't come out. Soon, several German soldiers surrounded them. They wanted to look at the little girl. Her handsome soldier said happily,

“Look what I found.”

Mary stared at the men, flinching as they poked their dirty fingers into her sides. The men laughed at her, and Mary could not understand why. One soldier asked why she was frowning, which confused her further. She put her arm around her soldier's neck, clinging to him but unsuccessfully. She felt distraught when he left her at Saint-Jean Baptiste Convent.

“Qu'est-ce qu'une douce chose?”

“Quel grands yeux bruns.”

“Donc, petit.”

Mary had no idea what they were saying. She sat in a large tub while the two nuns bathed her. The younger nun had a chin that was too long for her face, and her dark eyes were set too close together. The other nun was older, with green eyes and a pink complexion. Although deeply lined, her eyes betrayed a gentle kindness, and Mary felt warmed by her presence.

“Quelle jolie princesse.”

Mary understood the word "princess." She smiled gratefully as the old nun dried her with a lavender towel and gently pulled a freshly ironed wool dress over Mary's head. The nun carefully helped Mary with the arms of the dress. Mary wiggled because the dress was itchy. A pair of soft pantaloons was pulled over Mary's small bottom. Then the elder spoke to the younger.

“Apportez-lui la pomme de terre, du chou et de la crème.”

The young nun left. The older one gave Mary a book. She waited patiently until the girl opened it. Mary dutifully turned the pages and paused when she reached a picture. The older one smiled. The image depicted a garden, where a snake hung from a branch of a red apple tree.

Then, in a flurry of activity, the young nun returned with a bowl filled with potatoes, cabbage, and fresh cream. The older nun cut Mary a large slice of bread, which the young one smothered with butter. The two nuns laughed and joked with each other as Mary devoured her meal. They frequently paused their chatter to smile and nod at her, pleased with her appetite.

“Eat.” The old nun said in English.

“Esth good?”

Mary smiled, and the young nun laughed. Her laughter had a lilt that reminded Mary of a sparrow. She decided that both were very qualified and kind servants. Mary ate and ate some more. She consumed so much that she felt a tightness in her belly. Then she fell asleep. She didn’t remember being carried to bed.

She awoke in the middle of the night, frightened by a dream of exploding blue babies with black lips. She lay in the dark and counted the seconds. The dress itched. She did not remember falling asleep, but a nun she had not met in the morning ordered her out of her warm bed.

She had to wash her face and hands and wear a new, itchy dress. Then she was led to a room with high ceilings, stained-glass windows, and an altar. The nun was stern and made her sit on the hard wooden pews. She unnecessarily placed her finger to her lips in a gesture for Mary to remain quiet. The nun instructed her to put her palms together and keep them there. As Mary watched more nuns enter the room, she realized the whole place must be full of them. The women prayed, sang a few songs, prayed some more, and swept past Mary in their dark skirts with great speed. Mary figured they must have chores to do.

In the afternoon, she sat with the green-eyed nun, who had brought a large basket of yarn and needles. Mary studied the old nun’s upper lip, where a light brown mustache grew. The mustache curled whenever the nun smiled. The old nun’s mustache curled, and then she said in English,

“For you.”

She began to knit. Mary remembered that her mother had hired a woman to knit doilies, small, delicate circles of Austrian lace for placing under vases or teacups. Mary recalled that her mother didn’t like one of the small circles and had made the woman redo it. Mary’s itchy dress transformed into one of lace, and the church turned into a palace. The palace smelled of incense and candle wax, filled with fine things like carpets and a large piano. One of her servants brought in biscuits and tea.

“Voici votre thé.”

Mary devoured all the biscuits and drank all the tea. The elderly woman was pleased with her appetite. Mary then curled up next to her servant and fell fast asleep. The delightful day passed.

That night, the young nun fed her potatoes and milk. The old one bathed her. This time, she was put into a new soft nightgown. Mary listened to the nuns recite prayers, and the younger nun carried her to bed. The book was placed on her bed, and the nun was pleased when Mary opened it. In English, she said,

“Is a French Bible. You like?”

Mary nodded, though she couldn’t read the words. She spotted the garden picture and pointed to the apple on the tree. The agreeable nun said,

“C’est la Genèse de la bonne fille.”

Mary felt the praise, and it felt good. She was helped into bed as the nun gently ran her hand over Mary’s forehead, her smile radiating kindness. Mary lay back on the soft pillow and fell asleep instantly. It was Kjell who woke her the next morning.

“Mary?”

He held her small coat in his hand as he told the nuns of Saint Jean-Baptiste Convent in broken French that he was an engineer from Norway. He had been working in Austria but was now trying to return home. His sister and her husband, both Catholics, had died. Mary had no family but him. The nuns argued with Kjell about allowing the little girl to stay with them. Kjell said he’d promised to protect Mary, a promise he wouldn’t break. Reluctantly, the nuns of Saint Jean-Baptiste Convent let him take her.

As they wound their way through the city, Kjell explained that he would get them to England and hopefully Sweden. He told her in his sing-song German that he was uncertain if Sweden would let them in, but he had a plan if they did not. Kjell pulled on Mary’s little hand, making her arm ache. He hurried her along, causing her to trip over her feet. Mary was tired and angry, and she hated Kjell. She tried to break free from his grip, to sit down on the pavement, to stop. Kjell picked her up and carried her until they reached the Gare de Mulhouse–Ville again. He stopped at the ticket window and set her down. When he reached into his pocket for money, Mary bolted.

“Hey!”

She rushed out of the station without looking back.

“No!”

Mary heard Kjell’s footsteps tapping behind her. She quickened her pace.

“Stop!”

Mary could feel the pumping of her legs and heart. She ran along a row of stores and darted into a shop. It smelled of bread. She glanced to her left and kept low, making her way around a table made like a wheel and piled high with bread, cheese, and wine. She could feel Kjell’s anger as he breathlessly entered the store. Mary crept around another low table as the owners shouted at Kjell to stop. She entered the back room, where two men with long wooden paddles were placing bread into several huge ovens. She heard Kjell yell,

“Jeune Fille! Jeune Fille!”

Once more, she moved to her left, staying low and maneuvering around a few large tables, passing a sizable mixer, and lunging for the back door propped open with a brick.

Mary spilled into an alley. She scooted along, walking confidently over the cobblestones. She stumbled upon a bridge and crossed it. On the other side was a small park with trees. Mary wanted to return to the Saint Jean-Baptiste Convent, but didn’t know how to get there. She walked through the park until she reached a row of houses. She knew she could not enter any of them, so she turned and went back into the park.

Mary sat beneath a tree. After a few minutes, she wrapped her arms around her legs, and even though she felt cold, she remained there. Bushes surrounded the tree, making her feel concealed. Eventually, she left the park only after realizing she had lost Kjell and was hungry. She wandered through the streets. Occasionally, a passerby would glance at her, but no one offered any help. She drifted through a neighborhood of houses and tall fences, then into a district of buildings with apartments above and shops below. She walked until she found herself in front of a theater in the Haut-Rhin. Mary remembered the beautiful theaters in Vienna where she had seen shows with her father and mother.

Mary could see the lobby from where she stood. It featured red carpets and gold accents on the walls. She noticed an unattractive woman in a torn bathrobe staring out the window, watching her. The woman took a set of keys from her robe and vanished from sight. Mary waited to see if she would reappear. Instead, a side door opened, and the woman motioned for Mary to enter. The little girl’s stomach rumbled. Mary walked on her tiptoes to avoid the sound of her

footsteps, sensing danger in them. She lowered her head to escape the unpleasant woman's gaze and quietly entered the theater. The woman snorted and locked the door behind her.

Her gray hair was tied in a bun, and her toenail polish was chipped. Beneath the polish, the nails were yellow. She smelled of fried fish. There was something ring-like about her. Mary thought she might have worked in a circus. They left the red carpet behind as Mary followed her into the theater. A set of keys soon unlocked an interior door, and they entered a large room off the lobby. She could hear the woman's bare feet slapping against the floor as she crossed the tiles. A silk tapestry hung on the west wall. The scene depicted an orchard of trees at sunset. It was spring. Threaded blossoms sewn into the fabric seemed to dance in the breeze, while others had settled on the ground. It was stunning. Mary gazed at it.

The woman gave a sharp laugh and said in English.

"They's apples."

Mary understood but didn't like the woman's tone.

"The marquis who donated it was an apple-squire. He bought it in Hungary." The woman laughed wickedly, and Mary noticed she was missing a few lower teeth.

"You speak? Vous parlez? Sie sprechen?"

Mary said nothing.

The circus woman's churlish eyes betrayed her craftiness. Mary wasn't surprised when a hidden door appeared behind the silk. Beyond the door was a stairwell. Together, the two descended into the theatre's lower parts.

Beneath the theater lay a network of secret passageways and several apartments. They passed multiple empty rooms before reaching a closed door. The circus woman unlocked it with the keys she kept around her wrist. As the door swung open, Mary saw a tall woman.

She stood in the middle of the room. A powerful force seemed to emanate from and swirl around the imposing woman. She wore purple eye shadow, and her ruby lips pouted sensually. As Mary stepped further into the flat, the circus woman said,

"Look what scratched at the side door."

Mary then noticed another much younger woman. This woman lay on a cot in the corner by an electric heater. Her skin was pale, and her hazel eyes were ghostly.

Madame took stock of Mary. Her gaze traveled from the top of Mary's curly hair to the tips of her double-strap shoes.

"Bon Jour, pretty little thing. What is your name?"

Mary tried to speak, but all that came out was a slight cough.

"That's Madame, and that's Billie. I'm Candy." The circus woman said as she sat down on a settee and lit a cigarette. Madame asked first in German and then in French,

"Wie heißen Sie? Comment vous appelez-vous?"

Mary blinked her eyes at Madame. She tried again, but her name would not form in her mouth. Madame's purple smile was not unkind. She said in English,

"No need, little one. It's alright. Let's call you... Kitten, no Kitty. We'll call you Kitty for now, alright?"

Mary nodded. Candy held the cigarette up for Madame.

"Is it a fair exchange?"

"Qui."

Madame accepted the cigarette offered by the circus woman and inhaled deeply. She paused for a moment to savor the taste in her mouth, the sensation in her throat and nose, the relief it provided, and, finally, she blew the smoke through her nostrils and watched it float upward, forming blue curls in the empty air.

Billie began to cough, and as she did, blood spilled from her mouth. She used a gray rag as a handkerchief to wipe it away. She continued to cough. Madame walked to the dark corner and patted the sick girl's shoulder. Billie tried to stop coughing but was unsuccessful. Madame, poised with the cigarette between her fingers, proceeded to spell out the conditions, and Mary understood that she was to stay and help with Billie.

"You will work hard, no?"

Mary nodded.

"Always ensure the water has come to a full boil, then add the soap. Use the tub, yes?" Madame pointed to a porcelain bowl. "Wash the sheets first, then any other clothes. Billy's rags are next, and the last thing to wash is the chamber pots. Use one of the rags. The dirty water goes in the drain, here." Madame pointed her finger at a sink in the small kitchen off the main room.

"Now make us tea. What is the water to do?"

"Boil?" Mary whispered in English.

“Tres bon.”

When the tea was ready, Madame poured it into two chipped China cups, and the two women drank in silence. From a corner of the ceiling, Mary heard a short buzzing noise. Madame glanced at it. She poured tea into two more cups and told Mary to fetch a little sugar to add. “Give one to Billie, and you may have the other. Not too much sugar, mind you. We will return.” The two women rose.

Madame and Candy then disappeared down the hallway while Mary waited on the settee. Billie coughed quietly and then fell silent. Mary listened to the young girl’s wheezing breath. She watched as Billie sighed, gagged, and shifted from a pale green to a sweaty red. Billie hunched forward, continuing to cough repeatedly. One by one, the sick girl used the clean rags from her bed, discarding the bloody ones on the floor. Finally, Billie’s coughing subsided, and her face lost its scarlet hue, slowly returning to a pale green. Exhausted, she lay back on her pillow. Mary rose and found the sugar, adding it to the two cups of tea. The sick girl glanced at Mary briefly before closing her eyes and falling into a fitful sleep. Mary sipped her tea and watched the girl’s chest rise and fall. Her wheezing included short pauses and lengthy exhalations. Mary counted the pauses as one second and the exhalations as two.

Madame returned with an elegant box. She entered the kitchen and returned with a knife, a plate, and a fork. Inside the box was a white cake with chocolate icing. She heaped a large slice onto the plate and handed it to Mary. Mary devoured it, so Madame gave her another slice. Mary eyed Billie’s sweetened tea and helped herself to it. Madame then made stew and biscuits. Billie woke up. Madame offered Mary several biscuits and a large bowl of stew. The stew contained lamb, and Mary ate it slowly, savoring every bite. While Mary ate, Madame sat beside the sick girl and gently spooned broth into Billie’s mouth.

Mary spent the next two weeks in the flat washing everything. Madame kept her busy. She cleaned Madame’s belongings and then the circus woman’s items. She washed and washed. She learned how to iron. Madame was not unkind; the buzzer would ring, and she would vanish for a while, but she always returned. She often assisted Mary with the washing and ironing. Madame would demonstrate to Mary how to fold sheets so things lay flat. She ensured Mary had enough to eat. Madame also watched over Billie. She would cradle the sick girl’s head and let her sip from a new teacup. Madame would help her to the bathroom. The older woman would not

sleep until Billie was warm and comfortable. The sick girl would pat Madame's hand, and Madame would murmur soft, lovely French words to her.

Mary never saw the light of day. She remained below the ground. Mary did not know how many days had passed. She must have been with Madame for several months when Billie died.

Madame didn't apply makeup that morning. She didn't wear her wig. For the first time, Mary noticed her red hair was gray at the roots. The frail young woman had been unresponsive all morning, and Madame thought a bath might revive her. She took off Billie's nightgown.

"Hand me a clean rag and get another chemise, bottom drawer, over there. You will find, no?"

"Qui."

Mary tossed the dirty gown into the hamper. She knelt by the bottom drawer of the dresser when she heard Madame say to Billie,

"Ah, so you have gone on. Bon pour vous." She leaned over Billie, kissed her forehead lightly, and told Mary, "Ma Belle, I need a clean sheet. You remember where those are stored, no?"

Mary shoved the bottom drawer closed and opened the next one up. She pulled out a white sheet and took it to Madame. Mary returned to the dresser and found a clean nightgown.

"Oh, that will not do. I have a special one. It has white lace under the serviettes, my dear, bottom drawer."

Mary bent down again and opened the bottom drawer. She lifted the towels and, beneath them, found the gown. The ripped lace had yellowed, and a long wine stain ran down its center. Mary stood with it folded in her arms while Madame washed Billie. She carefully soaped and rinsed the girl's frail limbs, then patted them dry. Madame took the gown from Mary and gently began putting it on Billie. She gathered it and pulled it over the dead girl's head. Then, each shoulder, elbow, and wrist was laced with care. Madame smoothed out the wrinkles and wiped the dry red spittle from the corners of Billie's mouth. Mary laid out the sheet as Madame picked up the little body and gently carried it to the settee. Madame artfully laid Billie down and arranged her limp brown curls around her face. She folded the sheet around the body, being mindful to place the dead girl's hands carefully over her heart in repose. Mary tiptoed around the

body all day. She found it hard to sleep that night. A man came the next day and took the body away.

He had a rat-like chin and a blasted quality about him, as if he were constantly exploding inside. He stuffed the emerald ring Madame had given him into his dirty pocket while Mary huddled near the dresser. Without a word, he secured the small corpse with a rope and then picked it up. Madame held the door open, and he scurried out with a slight nod. Afterward, Madame made tea. She took out two cups and filled them, and for the first time, Mary was allowed to join her.

As the months passed, Mary quickly grew taller. She would try on Madame's high heels and wear various hats. Madame didn't mind when Mary played with her lipstick or tried to apply purple eyeshadow. Mary's world seemed to be suspended in shadows. The theater's basement was warm and dark. During this time, she rarely felt like a princess but felt safe. The world above and outside didn't exist. Madame also noticed the beaded cross around her neck and told her about the rosary. So, Mary prayed to Mary. She thanked Mary for Madame.

The circus woman often joined them for tea and cards. Mary quickly learned that Madame did not call her Candy; instead, she called her Mildred. One afternoon, the circus woman brought a small brick of cheese. Madame brewed tea and sliced a tomato, the cheese, and the leftover bread she had made the night before. She then divided the food into equal portions and ensured Mary received an extra slice of cheese.

Mary had also learned that everything had a false value, including the buttons the women bet on. Two brown buttons were worth one white or black button. One black or white button plus two brown buttons equaled a red, brass, or blue button. The glass button resembled a diamond and held the highest value. One needed four red, brass, or blue buttons to equal it. Madame had won the glass button over a month ago, and the circus woman wanted it back.

While they ate, Mary shuffled a deck of cards.

"Ante up," she commanded. The two women tossed in a few brown buttons.

Mary skillfully dealt five cards to Madame and five to Mildred.

The circus woman tossed in a brass button.

Madame tossed in a blue one, saying, "I call."

Mildred tossed in one brass button and one black button. "I'll raise you."

“Bien...” Madame carefully selected one red button and one black button, placing them in the pile on the low table. The two women examined each other.

“How many do you want?” Mary wiped her face with her hand, brushing bread crumbs onto the floor.

“Three.” Mildred placed three of her cards face down on the table.

“One,” Madame said.

Mary dealt three more cards to Mildred and one to Madame.

Mildred tossed in a button. “I bet a red.”

“I call.” Madame tossed a brass button.

Mildred tossed in another red button and two white ones. “I’ll raise you.”

Madame silently added another brass button, one white button, and two brown buttons. Mildred laid out her cards. She had a jack of hearts, a jack of diamonds, the three of spades, and the three of clubs. Madame, however, had three kings. Madame smiled at Mary as she gathered the buttons into the small bowl she kept on the table.

Madame won the next three matches.

“Would you care for some more, Candy?” Mary held the teapot politely.

Mildred fingered her remaining buttons and smiled unpleasantly. Madame bent over and slipped a cigarette from its hiding place in her stocking. She broke it in two and held one half before the circus woman. Mildred swiftly plucked it from Madame’s hand and stuck it between her dirty teeth. Mary struck a match and held the flame for her. Mildred sucked deeply and puffed out smoke in a great cloud. Madame took the match from Mary and daintily placed the flame on the tip of her half-cigarette. When Madame exhaled, the smoke escaped in a thin blue line, curling upward to settle on the small flat’s ceiling. Mary followed it with her eyes before looking at the two women.

“Ante up.”

Madame tossed in two brown buttons, and Mildred did the same. Mary shuffled and dealt the cards.

Madame tossed in a button. “I bet a blue.”

Mildred picked up two brass buttons from her small pile and tossed them in. “I’ll raise you.”

Madame tossed in a blue button and a red button. “I’ll raise you.”

“I call.” Mildred placed her last brass button into the betting pot. “Give me two.”

Mary slid the two cards, face down, across the table to Mildred.

She gazed at Madame.

“One...” Madame said quietly. Mary did as she was told.

Mildred rose to her feet.

“That little demon is helping you!”

The words burst from Mildred, spraying spit across the small table. Mary considered wiping it off, but held back.

“Are you? Are you?!”

Mary shrugged her shoulders while Mildred raised her arm as if to hit her. Instead, Mildred slapped the card from Madame’s hand. Madame and Mary watched it fly through the air and land on the settee.

“You’re cheating!”

Madame took another long drag from her cigarette, the smoke curling around her slender fingers. “Don’t be absurd.”

Mildred swiftly grabbed the knife that Madame had used to prepare their lunch. Her feet were spread wide, and she wielded the knife with expertise. Mary watched as it formed a snaky figure eight in the air. She stood up and considered biting the circus woman’s arm or throwing herself in front of Madame, but then Mildred pointed her knife at Mary.

“I’ll slice you in two! Cheat! Whore! Slut!”

Madame never moved; instead, she glanced at Mary and said,

“Deal...”

Mary felt herself shaking as she dutifully dealt a card to Madame to replace the one on the settee. She placed it face down on the table. Mildred continued to wield her knife at Mary until Madame wrapped one arm around the girl and gently pushed her until she stood behind her.

Outranked, Mildred glared at both of them while fidgeting with the knife, appearing to ponder her options. Then, with a suicidal motion, she pointed the knife at her chest and, with a swift flick of the blade, she cut the thread on the four buttons that held her bodice together.

With a piercing laugh, she tossed the greasy blue baubles—bits of thread still dangling from them—into the betting pot. Madame quietly reached into her bowl and took out the glass button. Mary peered over her shoulder at the purple woman’s cards. She had two jacks and two

nines. Madame laid them down on the table face up. The circus woman's wrinkled breasts shook in their dirty bra as she giggled. Mildred won with three eights and two aces. She snatched up the buttons and smashed the butt of her cigarette into the plate that held Mary's food. Without a word, she opened the flat door, grunting as she left. Mary could hear her slippers scrape the floor and the jingle of keys. The sound echoed down the theater's underground hallway.

"Well, that was much ado about nothing," Madame told Mary.

Mary wanted to wrap her arms around Madame, but Madame started to laugh. Her laugh differed from Mildred's; it was not evil but sharp. Madame's laugh sounded like metal bars, locks clicking into place, and clocks ticking. It reminded Mary of coffins, broken glass, dirt, and ash. Her laugh felt life-ending. Mary wanted to cover her ears but realized it would only make things worse, so she offered to make tea instead.

The next morning, Madame opened the makeup box and applied blush to her cheeks and eyeshadow to her eyelids.

"Stick out your lower lip," she said to the girl.

Mary complied, and Madame dabbed a bit of lipstick on her. A couple of bumps had appeared on Mary's chest. Madame pulled a small bra from a drawer and helped the girl into it. She then gave her one of Billie's dresses to wear. Madame then slipped into a red silk dress and topped it off with a black wig. It was short and curly—a bob, Madame explained to Mary. Together, they ascended the stairs to the theater lobby. Mary was allowed to run around and look out the windows onto the street. The trees outside drooped wearily, and the street shimmered with heat. She found she had no desire to go outside. To entertain her, Madame played music on the piano. Mary hummed along and danced on her tiptoes, which made the purple woman laugh. Her laughter was light and airy this time, making Mary feel special and loved. As summer turned into early autumn, Madame allowed Mary to accompany her upstairs in the late afternoon. Often, Madame greeted a man at the door.

"Salut. Puis-je prendre votre manteau et votre chapeau?"

Madame would take the man's coat and hat, and then they would vanish for a while. Sometimes Mildred would drift by with another man in tow. The circus woman would unlock a door and go up to the rooms above the theater. Mary had no idea what was up there, nor did she ever ask.

Instead, she wandered into the theatre to play on the empty stage or entered the light booth to turn the house lights on and off. She banged on the keys of the grand piano in the lobby. It was a wonderful and exciting place, and Mary loved it. One day, Madame showed her where the costumes were stored, and Mary played dress-up princess until Madame came to collect her. During this time, Mary noticed that the trees outside and across the street had turned gold and orange. Soon, frost appeared on the glass windowpanes, and the leaves on the trees drifted to the ground. Winter came. One morning, when Mary looked out, she saw snow filling the streets and involuntarily shivered. That's when Madame started to introduce her to some of the men.

"This is Kitty. Isn't she a beauty?"

"Why yes, soon to be the most lovely; Allo^."

The plump man pumped her hand, appearing both delighted and aghast to meet her. After he released it, Mary rubbed her wrist. To Madame, he said,

"She has violet eyes."

Madame smiled at him as Mildred arrived, and after a few more pleasantries, the circus woman led him away.

"Hell-low..."

The man stood halfway in the doorway, slyly placing his fingers on Mary's arm. His face resembled a razor blade—if a blade could possess eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth. He appeared sharp all over and silver-gray as well. He looked at Madame, his words rising and falling with a cutting sound.

"Je vais la prendre maintenant. Pourquoi attendre?"

Madame said quietly, nearly inaudibly, "Bientôt."

She gently steered the jagged man away and disappeared with him, much to Mary's relief. Others were taciturn, limply took her hand, and never met her eyes. Mary found all the men rude, confusing, and even repulsive. She tried to explain this to Madame.

"Don't you worry, it will be okay, no?"

The purple woman's eyes were kind, yet Mary felt she was concealing something. She even questioned whether Madame had deliberately chosen not to understand.

The older woman let Mary look at any book or magazine in the flat or the theater. Many of them featured nudity. Mary did not like looking at those; instead, she preferred manuscripts without pictures. Madame explained that these were play scripts or musical scores.

She encouraged Mary to sing, telling her to breathe from her diaphragm and lift her soft palate, widening the back of her mouth. When no men came to the door, Mary practiced singing while Madame played the piano. The purple woman taught her to read the French words under the musical notes. She gave Mary ballroom dance lessons. Together, they danced the Waltz, the Tango, and the Fox Trot on the theater's stage, Madame's elegant voice resembling a spider's web spinning out the instructions. Madame taught her how to hold a cigarette. She taught Mary the fine art of small talk and how to converse, putting other people at ease.

"Are you comfortable? Say it like this. Êtes-vous à l'aise?"

"Would you like to play cards? Voulez-vous jouer aux cartes?"

Mary dutifully recited the French phrases, and Madame was very pleased. To further the girl's card expertise, Madame taught Mary to shuffle the deck like a gambler.

"Vous êtes un joueur!"

In addition to Poker, Mary learned the basics of Bezique and Belote. Although Mary felt uneasy with this training, she had grown to love Madame unconditionally and tried to set these feelings aside.

One day, while alone in the theater, Mary was deeply immersed in her altered universe. She had set up a ladder on the stage, found a black dress, a black eye patch, and a fake sword. She'd climbed halfway up the ladder to become a pirate princess ready to sail away from an evil ogre, but it occurred to her that she hadn't seen the circus woman for a while. At least once a day, Mildred would materialize out of nowhere to make some snide remark to Mary. The girl paused during play and tried to remember the last time she'd seen Mildred. Was it yesterday or the day before?

That night, Madame stabbed the potatoes. She overboiled them, something she never did. She dropped her fork on the floor and forgot the butter.

The next day, the purple woman announced she had an errand to run. She neglected to apply makeup. Over her grey dress, she wore a grey wool coat. She donned brown boots that laced up around her ankles and tied a faded blue scarf around her head.

"Where are you going?"

"Ah, my pretty one, not to worry, I have made you a whole pot of tea. Eat the leftover sausage before it goes bad. There are a few biscuits, too. Help yourself. I'll return soon, no?"

She departed. Mary listened to her light footsteps as she hurried down the hallway.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap...

The girl listened until there was silence. Madame never came back.

Her spider-like loss left a hole in Mary's heart. After a few days, Mary conserved what little food remained. During the day, she ascended to the theater lobby to wait for Madame. She would hide behind the lobby's gold counter when men approached the door. Sometimes they pounded on the door, but she never let them in. At night, she descended the stairs to the flat. She finished the cabbage and all the carrots. Then, using the flour and canned milk, she made biscuits. When that was gone, she slowly finished the rest of the potatoes. She looked in the other flats for food. Mildred had left a jar of sauerkraut, a can of Spam, and three mealy potatoes. Mary slowly ate those. When the food ran out, she resorted to eating Madame's makeup, starting with her lipstick and then the rouge. She drank water to feel full, but that feeling did not last long. There was no more food. It took a little longer, but soon there was no more tea. Mary spent her days and nights wondering whether she should leave the theater and, if so, where she should go. This was a choice Mary seemed unable to make. The men haunted her. Her parents haunted her. The dead baby haunted her. It giggled its great and ominous truth. Death lay outside the theater as well as within.

Then one evening, Mary had gotten down and pressed her tummy against the floor of Madame's flat. She tucked her elbows in, pressing her arms against her sides. She did this to reduce the pain in her stomach. Her head, however, pounded with a headache. She thought her limbs felt more bony than they had the day before and wondered how the soldiers would find her. If any flesh remained, would the soldiers debone her? Would they take a knife to skin, blade to muscle, would they peel away all traces of her? Would she become mere calcium to be ground into bone meal? Would they spread her in a garden with the bulbs when autumn appeared? What color and what type of flower would she become? Mary was thinking of her favorite, the white narcissus, when she heard the buzzer ring in the upper corner of the ceiling. She ignored it. It buzzed again. She waited. It buzzed for a third time. Mary got up. It buzzed a fourth time.

"Go away."

It buzzed again.

"I can't help you."

The buzzer was persistent.

Buzzzzzz... Buzzzzzz... Buzzzzzz... Buzzzzzz...

“Madame?”

Mary raced out of the flat, dashed down the hallway, and bolted up the stairs. She pushed the tapestry aside and crossed the floor. She could hear her bare feet patter quickly and lightly over the tiles until she flung herself into the lobby and looked at the windows. Outside, Kjell stared back at her. He raised his right arm and shook her small suitcase in the air. Mary felt dizzy. She paused for a moment and swallowed several times. As she crossed the dark lobby to the door, she took deep breaths to steady herself. She struggled to find the right key. Finally, Mary let the oaf in.

“So, it is you.” His German retained its Scandinavian lilt.

“Yes,” Mary said breathlessly.

Kjell stomped his boots on the carpet. He carried the scent of dried sweat and the chilly outside air. A wool cap covered his shaved head.

“It’s warm in here.”

It took a moment for Mary to grasp what Kjell meant. She had never considered the theater’s source of heat.

“You have my suitcase.”

Kjell laughed bitterly at this remark.

“You’ve grown taller.”

Mary didn’t know what to say, so instead she asked:

“May I have it?”

“You’ll need a wrench. I bet you don’t know what that is.”

Kjell brushed past her and headed for the stage, with Mary following closely behind. He located the tool in the light booth, tossed the suitcase onto the floor, and pried the lock open. As he struggled with the suitcase, he muttered half to himself and half to Mary.

“If I’d known what a pain you’d be, I never would have burdened myself with you.”

He lifted it and flipped it over, causing Mary’s childhood clothes to spill out. Kjell sifted through her belongings, searching for anything of value. His hand brushed against a sweater. Folded inside was something heavy. He handed it to Mary, who took it carefully and unwrapped it. Inside was a black-and-white photograph of her mother as a young woman. She wore a dress and a small, enigmatic smile. Mary sighed softly.

“Ahh...”

Kjell took a half-head of cabbage from a pocket inside his coat and gave it to Mary. From another inside pocket, he took a couple of potatoes. These, too, he placed in front of her.

“Stay here. I’ll return once I have secured a better place for you.”

Kjell stood up, and Mary followed him. She held her mother’s picture and the cabbage and potatoes bundled in the sweater. Once they were in the lobby, she carefully unlocked the door to let him out. But before he stepped into the night, he gently said,

“At least you have your mother now.”

Mary locked the door behind him. She set down the sweater and picked up the cabbage; she took a large bite without washing it. She took bite after bite. She swallowed dryly but kept going. Once it was gone, she picked any remaining bits from her face and added them to her mouth. She looked at the potatoes but decided to wait and boil them. Mary gathered what was left of her mother, the potatoes, and her suitcase, and started to make her way out of the lobby when she heard a shot and men shouting in the distance. Then she heard,

“Mary!”

She ducked behind the golden counter. She heard pounding on the glass. She heard Kjell pleading.

“Mary, let me in! Damn it! Let me in!”

Kjell shook the door and pounded on the windows.

“You’re there! I saw you!”

Mary slithered to the floor, scared the oaf would break the glass. She understood he had brought the terror that was pursuing them both. A dog yelped in the near distance.

Outside, the air erupted in a cacophony of barking, squealing, and shouting men!

Another shot, closer...!

A whimper...

A moment of silence...

Men shouting...!

Another shot and more shouting!

Kjell continued pleading, “Open the fucking door, you whore! For God’s sake, let me in! Let me in you bitch!”

Mary wrapped her arms around her knees and huddled on the floor. Her heart fluttered, stopped, beat wildly again, fluttered, stopped, and then beat wildly.

“Mary!”

“Crack!”

Wood splintered and shattered against the windows. She heard a heavy thud. Mary counted the seconds. One-two-three-four... There were shouts and heavy footsteps. She listened as they retreated. They grew fainter and then fainter still. She heard another,

Shot!

His blond head sat on his short neck; his body the shape of a slender cylinder. There was something shiny about him, and to Mary, deadly. She never saw Kjell again.

The church parlor was empty except for her lonely figure. Across from her was an empty fireplace. It was old and lovely and appeared to have been recently cleaned. On the wall, a new clock kept time. Its plain, utilitarian look detracted from the parlor’s polished and refined décor.

Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick...

Mary found the persistent ticking aggravating as she sat in a chair waiting for her father. She had no idea how he’d located her. It was a miracle that he was alive. She looked at the little suitcase on the floor beside her as she fingered the rosary. She knew the beads had saved her life, but truthfully, it pained her. She didn’t want her father to learn about Kjell. It felt like a betrayal. She glanced down and studied the chair before swiftly deciding. Mary stuffed the rosary between the chair’s seat cushion and arm. She folded her hands in her lap, trying to look innocent, hoping no one would notice her sin.

“Mary?”

Her father, Eliot, whispered her name as he entered the parlor. He wore a worn coat and held a crumpled hat in his hands. She watched as his eyes softened and tears began to flow down his thin, weathered cheeks.

“Mary...”

She stood, bowed her head, and walked silently toward him. When her forehead rested against his chest, Eliot wrapped his arms around his daughter and wept.

“I am so proud of you. You were named after Mary Pickford. Did you know that? You have the same spirit. The same moxie. The same plucky resolve. You made it! You’re alive! Oh God, my daughter!”

Mary attempted to smile. She sensed her father’s love for her, but recognized that the war had defeated her in some irreversible way. She knew she should feel glad, relieved, loved, or something, yet she felt nothing. Finally, she asked,

“Where’s mother?”

Her father bit his lower lip and said,

“Let’s go to the United States, Los Angeles, California. You can grow up around sunshine and movie stars; I’ll buy you a convertible. What do you say?”

Her answer was hard; it was cynical, it sounded like Mildred.

“Why not?”

Eliot knew his daughter was damaged. Hell, he was damaged, too. Therefore, as a way to move forward, he chose to interpret her flippant answer as a yes.

It took all his money to buy two tickets across the Atlantic. Once in New York, he looked for an engineering position or professorship but had no contacts; the applications were lengthy and in English, and his credentials didn’t seem to carry weight in America. The long and short of it was that Mary’s father had to work as a cab driver in New York. He told Mary not to worry, saying he would save money and that they would head west soon. They found an affordable apartment to live in. Mary attended public school, and Eliot took the only available schedule, the night shift.

One morning, shortly after he returned home from his shift, Mary was pouring each of them a cup of tea when he turned to her and tenderly said,

“I miss your mother every day.”

Mary remained silent. So, he asked,

“Don’t you?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...” And Mary couldn’t stop, “Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...” The glee erupted from her mouth like a wild animal.

Her father’s face flushed until it resembled one of those Italian red peppers Mary had seen in the market. Beads of sweat gathered above his temples. Mary knew she should tell him she was sorry, but instead, she whispered,

“You don’t understand.”

“Selfish and spoiled! You are!”

He grabbed his worn coat and bumped his knee against the table leg. The pain made him curse. He limped around the room until he was no longer Mary’s father but an engineer with the grim expression of a cab driver. The air was thick with his anger and her silence. He flung open the door.

“I can’t bring her back! I wish I could, but I can’t! Furthermore, you will never convince me that Kjell Thorman was anything but a mentsh, a mentsh!”

Mary listened as his shoes drummed down the hallway. She heard them stomp down every single stair.

Stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp...

The door shut behind him with a cold click. He didn’t understand, and how could she explain? His love for her wasn’t enough. Her father was building a new life. He had moved past Mary’s mother, past Mary; he had moved beyond them both. She felt both stuck and adrift in a sea of negated worth. Her feelings of worthlessness were acute, and Mary poured all her hatred into Kjell because she couldn’t hate her father. It wasn’t that Kjell wasn’t a good person, but because he was. Kjell had expected her to be someone she wasn’t. She’d tried to explain this to her father, but he wouldn’t have any of it.

Mary would wake up in silence. Go to school in silence. Return home. Her father would be awake by then, and they would eat dinner silently. Her father would then go to work. He would not come home again until after she had gone to school. It wasn’t until her father discovered Mrs. Songmao Zheng that Mary saw a smile form on his thin face, and he again came home in time to chat and have tea with her in the morning.

Her first name was Jing-Li, but her father called her Vivian. She lived in the basement of the brownstone below them. Having lost her husband in the war, she was now a widow. She was thin boned with straight black hair. Her dress lay about her like ripples in water when she sat on the steps shucking peas. She invited Mr. Edersheim and his daughter to dinner. She made lemon-ginger chicken, but Mary knew the dish was mainly old bok choy.

Mary had heard the neighborhood gossip and agreed that Vivian smelled of monkey skin, fennel, Sichuan peppercorns, and garlic. She agreed that the petite Asian feared ghosts because Mary had seen the red lanterns in every corner of her small flat. Mary had heard the neighbors

whisper that Mrs. Songmao Zheng kept an old Chinese pot hidden in one of the many wooden chests that filled her bedroom. The pot had a lid, and the little woman kept a fetus in the pot, its mouth stuffed with lemon grass and its eyes covered with two small coins held in place by a strand of purple silk. The neighbors whispered other things, too. They suspected Mrs. Songmao Zheng kept her dead husband's finger in another pot along with the shrunken head of a white crane. Mary often shuddered when she passed Jing-Li on the tenement steps. Besides, she knew that if her father fell in love with the Asian basement, they would never escape the grime of New York and reach the clear blue skies of California.

As the months turned into years, much to Mary's relief, Mrs. Songmao Zheng remained a widow, while her father stayed in love with a bright star named Pickford. Mary would come home from school and complain to him that she was starving, and Eliot would tell his daughter that soon they'd be eating oranges, drinking lemonade, and cooking hamburgers on a barbecue in the City of Angels. He'd tell her, "Just a little longer."

That was before he died from a sudden freeze, black ice, a double shift, and lack of sleep.

That night, Mary realized how much she hated that spunky little Pickford. Mary despised her plucky resolve. She knew that whatever adversity Pickford faced was nothing compared to her life. Pickford had no idea what true evil was. Had she ever counted the seconds to make them last longer? Had she ever mistaken a lifeless baby for a bundle of grain? Had the crazy thought of her mother, being alive among a heap of the dead, ever kept Mary Pickford awake? Had her father survived the Nazis only to perish in a New York car crash?

Mary lay in the hospital bed, contemplating how nice it would be if he would stop talking. She needed silence, not this constant chatter from her middle child, with his Buddha t-shirt, grey ponytail, and judgment. He would not stop criticizing her selfishness (when he was the selfish one), her victim-like qualities (he'd been claiming to be a victim of her all his life), and her weakness (let's be honest; he was a big fat baby). He was at the hospital at seven-thirty in the morning, ready to take her home. She didn't want to go home. Once she was home, he would never visit her again, take her anywhere, or call (none of her children did; she was always the one who called, invited, and fussed). He kept telling her she had a choice. She could embrace life, look for the good in people, make herself useful, join committees, and volunteer. He would help.

Mary glanced at the photograph of her mother on the bedside table as her son droned on about different volunteering opportunities. She knew the picture had been taken on May 27th, 1931. She knew because her mother's handwriting had scrawled the date on the back. Her mother stood shyly and mysteriously in the black-and-white photo. She wore an ivory dress with a sash that cinched her tiny waist; her petite breasts were covered by a white bodice underneath. Her shoulders were wrapped in a lacy bolero, and her arms were pulled slightly back. The garden behind her was lit by sunlight. A large trellis loomed overhead. Mary's mother wore a double-strand necklace of pearls; her dark, shiny hair was curly and parted in the middle, and her eyes were soft and grey. They seemed to be taking the measure of the photographer, Mary's father. They seemed to be asking: Do you find me pretty? Do you love me?

"Mom!"

Mary glanced at her son. He used to be her silent child, the one who unnerved her with his stoic, quiet presence. Now he wouldn't stop talking.

"Mom, you aren't sick. Get dressed."

She gazed through the hospital's grim window, adorned with faded blue drapes and security bars.

"I'm taking you home."

Mary pulled the hospital sheet's covers up over her nose. Her violet eyes silently peered at the talking mouth and gesturing arms. What was he now, around forty-eight, still wearing that awful Buddha T-shirt? Mary observed him shift his focus to her untouched breakfast. The applesauce had pooled and soaked into the toast, and the coffee was lukewarm. Disgusted, he pressed the red button near her head.

"Mom, you can't stay here."

Her voice sounded rumpled and muffled. "Yes, I can."

"The insurance won't cover it."

There were several awkward moments between mother and son as Mary felt herself shrink. She felt herself shrivel before his eyes. Mary knew she didn't have the money to pay for the room. She was dependent on the insurance her husband, Ira, had purchased for her before he died. She could feel herself getting angry. She could feel the heat of it. A nurse appeared. Her plumpness filled the room.

"Is everything alright? Do you need more pillows?"

The nurse's cheerfulness made Mary's fury peak. She spat out the following,

"I prefer hot coffee, not cold!"

"I'm sorry; I'll bring..."

"Get out! And take this, I don't eat breakfast."

The stunned woman quietly took away the tray. Her son was finally left speechless. Mary listened as the nurse's sturdy shoes squeaked down the hallway.

Squeak-squeak-squeak-squeak...

Mary sighed and listened to the silence for a moment. Then she heard a jingle as her son took his car keys out of his pocket.

"I'm leaving."

"Good."

Mary could feel her son's pain and added, "You have a job, Julie, and the children, don't worry about me." Mary waited; she knew he would say he'd be back in the afternoon.

"I'll be back this afternoon to take you home."

He left.

Mary listened, wanting to hear his sneakers squeak down the hallway. A squeak or two would calm her. Squeak? Squeak? Mary thought she heard a squeak, but maybe not. She listened. She listened until it no longer mattered. He was gone.

The doctor said he would take care of it. Yesterday, she had confided in him that the hospital was a castle, the nurses were her servants, and he was her advisor. He listened closely and then told her this was a coping mechanism. She believed him. All he needed to do was check some boxes on the paperwork, sign it, and send it in. She could remain. She was remaining. Maybe.

Mary needed a distraction, so she pushed the button by her head and kept it pressed until a nurse appeared. This nurse was younger and shorter than the other one.

"I would like hot, and I mean hot coffee, black."

"Yes, Madame."

"And hurry."

"Yes, Madame."

Mary lay in bed, staring at the blue walls. She counted the seconds into minutes and the minutes into eleven. She continued counting. Eleven minutes and thirteen seconds passed. The nurse returned.

“They just put on a fresh pot; it will be here momentarily. Let’s get you cleaned up, shall we?”

The short nurse washed Mary’s face and hands. She combed her hair and pinned it back. Another servant entered with hot coffee and a fresh cinnamon bun. Mary turned on the TV. She ate the bun and drank the coffee. The servants cleaned the room and then left. Mary turned off the TV and felt better.

Mary recognized that her relationships with everyone were complicated. She held America responsible for this. It was because of America that her children no longer spoke to her, attended temple, or observed Passover, and three of her five children had married non-Jews. Mary gazed again at her mother’s photograph, the last one ever taken of her. She believed her mother understood. Her mother, in her princess dress, stood in her princess garden. Mary felt deep in her soul that her mother knew she was sick. Her mother had endured the same illness. There was no cure—only coping, not coping, and death. Mary was familiar with death.

Mary remembered her Buddhist son told her one time that she was Holocaust ruined, but what he failed to understand, what her father never knew, what her husband was unable to grasp, was that for Mary, the abyss went deeper than the Holocaust; it was wider, more complete, and more final.

Mary felt her soul convulse, for she knew that under the Nazis and the blue baby was the goodness of Kjell and the wicked and love-filled laughter of Madame. Mary’s hand swung up involuntarily and covered her mouth to keep the giggle from coming out. She bit her tongue. She swallowed hard and pushed down. Mary thought hard; she conjured gowns, gardens, servants, and then she gazed out the prison window with her violet eyes and wished with all her might, more than anything else, for her Mother.