

London

NOVEMBER 1850

A Painting

When the streets are at their darkest and quietest, a girl settles at a small desk in the cellar of a dollmaker's shop. A bald china head sits in front of her and watches her with a vacant stare. She squeezes red and white watercolours on to an oyster shell, sucks the end of her brush, and adjusts the looking glass before her. The candle hisses. The girl narrows her eyes at the blank paper.

She adds water and mixes up fleshy colours. The first streak of paint on the page is as sharp as a slap. The paper is thick, cold-pressed, and it does not cockle.

In the candlelight, the shadows magnify, and the edges of her hair are one with the blackness. She paints on, a single sweep for her chin, white for her cheekbones where the flame catches. She copies her faults faithfully: her widely spaced eyes, the deformed twist of her collarbone. Her sister and mistress are sleeping upstairs, and even the shushing of her paintbrush seems an intrusion, a deafening rally that will wake them.

She frowns. She has made her face too small. She meant to fill the page with it, but her head floats above a blank expanse. The paper, on which she spent a week's saved wages, is ruined. She should have sketched the outline first, been less hasty to begin.

She sits for a few moments with the light and her picture.

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Her heart skitters; the doll's face watches. She should return to bed before she is discovered.

But the girl leans forward without taking her eyes off the mirror and pulls the candle towards her. It is beeswax not tallow, pilfered from her mistress's secret supply. She dips her fingers into the hot wax and makes a thimble. Then she runs her hand through the flame, seeing how long she can bear the heat, until she hears the downy hairs on her finger sizzle.

Part One

Surely something resides in this heart that is not
perishable, and life is more than a dream.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT,
*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden,
Norway and Denmark* (1796)

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.

JOHN KEATS, *Endymion* (1818)

*Silas Reed's Shop
of Curiosities Antique and New*

Silas is sitting at his desk, a stuffed turtle dove in his palm. The cellar is as still and quiet as a tomb, aside from the slow gusts of his breath which ruffle the bird's plumage.

Silas puckers his lips as he works and, in the lamplight, he is not unhandsome. He has retained a full head of hair in his thirty-eighth year, and it shows no sign of silvering. He looks around him, at the glass jars which line the walls, each labelled and filled with the bloated hulks of pickled specimens. Swollen lambs, snakes, lizards and kittens press against the edges of their confinement.

'Don't wriggle free of me now, you little rascal,' he mutters, picking up the pliers and tightening the wire on the bird's claws.

He likes to talk to his creatures, to make up histories which have landed them on his slab. After considering many imagined scenarios for this dove – disrupting barges on the canal, nesting in a sail of the *Odyssey* – he has settled on one pretence he likes; and so he rebukes this companion often for its invented habit of attacking cress sellers. He releases his hold on the bird, and it sits stiffly on the wooden post.

'There!' he exclaims, leaning back and pushing his hair out of his eyes. 'And perhaps this'll teach you a lesson for knocking that bunch of greens out of that little girl's arms.'

Silas is satisfied with this commission, especially given that

he rushed the final stages to have it ready by the morning. He is sure the artist will find the bird to his liking; as requested, it is frozen as if in mid-flight, its wings forming a perfect 'V'. What's more, Silas has skimmed further profit by adding another dove heart to one of the yellowed jars. Little brown orbs float in preserving fluid, ready to fetch a good price from quacks and apothecaries.

Silas tidies the workshop, wiping and straightening his tools. He is halfway up the ladder rungs, nudging the trapdoor with his shoulder as he cradles the dove, when the consumptive wheeze of the bell sounds below him.

Albie, he hopes, as it is early enough, and he abandons the bird on a cabinet and hurries through the shop, wondering what the child will bring him. The boy's recent hauls have been increasingly paltry – maggoty rats, ageing cats with smashed skulls, even a half run-over pigeon with a stumpy claw. ('But if you knew, sir, how hard it is with the bone grubbers pinching the best of the trade—') If Silas's collection is to stand the test of time, he needs something truly exceptional to complete it. He thinks of the bakery nearby on the Strand, which made a poor living with its bulky wholemeal loaves, good only for doorsteps. Then the baker, on the brink of debtors' prison, started to pickle strawberries in sugar and sell them by the jar. It transformed the shop, made it famous even in tourist pamphlets of the city.

The trouble is, Silas often thinks he has found his special, unique item, but then he finishes the work and finds himself hounded by doubts, by the ache for more. The pathologists and collectors he admires – men of learning and medicine like John Hunter and Astley Cooper – have no shortage of specimens. He has eavesdropped on the conversations of medical men, sat white with jealousy in drinking holes opposite University College London as they've discussed the morning's dissections. He

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might lack their connections, but surely, *surely*, one day Albie will bring him something – his hand trembles – *remarkable*. Then, his name will be etched on a museum entrance, and all of his work, all of his toil, will be recognized. He imagines climbing the stone steps with Flick, his dearest childhood friend, and pausing as they see ‘*Silas Reed*’ engraved in marble. She, unable to contain her pride, her palm resting in the small of his back. He, explaining that he built it all for her.

But it is not Albie, each knock and ring of the bell yields more disappointment. A maid calls on behalf of her mistress who wants a stuffed hummingbird for her hat. A boy in a velvet jacket browses endlessly and finally buys a butterfly brooch, which Silas sells with a quiver of disdain. All the while, Silas moves only to place their coins in a dogskin purse. In the quiet between times, his thumb tracks a single sentence in *The Lancet*. “Tu-mour separ-at-ing the os-oss- ossa navi.” The ringing of the bell and the raps on the door are the only beats of his life. Upstairs, an attic bedroom; downstairs his dark cellar.

It is exasperating, Silas thinks as he stares around the pokey shop, that the dullest items are those which pay his rent. There is no accounting for the poor taste of the masses. Most of his customers will overlook the real marvels – the skull of a century-old lion, the fan made of a whale’s lung tissue; the taxidermy monkey in a bell jar – and head straight for the Lepidoptera cabinet at the back. It contains vermilion butterfly wings which he traps between two small panes of glass; some are necklace baubles, others for mere display. Foolish knick-knacks which they could make themselves if they had the imagination, he thinks. It is only the painters and the apothecaries who pay for his real interests.

And then, as the clock sings out the eleventh hour, he hears a light tapping, and the faint stutter of the bell in the cellar.

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He hurries to the door. It will be a silly child with only tuppence to spend, or if it is Albie, he'll have another damned bat, a mangy dog good for nothing but a stew – and yet, Silas's heart quickens.

'Ah, Albie,' Silas says, opening the door and trying to keep his voice steady. Thames fog snakes in.

The ten-year-old child grins back at him. ('Ten, I knows, sir, because I was born on the day the Queen married Albert.') A single yellow tooth is planted in the middle of his upper gums like a gallows.

'Got a fine fresh creature for you today,' Albie says.

Silas glances down the dead-end alley, at its empty ramshackle houses like a row of drunks, each tottering further forward than the last.

'Out with it, child,' he says, tweaking the boy under the chin to assert his superiority. 'What is it, then? The foreleg of a Megalosaurus, or perhaps the head of a mermaid?'

'A bit chilly for mermaids in Regent Canal at this time of year, sir, but that other creature – Mega-what-sumfink – says he'll leave you a knee when he snuffs it.'

'Kind of him.'

Albie blows into his sleeve. 'I got you a right jewel, which I won't part with for less than two bob. But I'm warning you now, it ain't red like you like 'em.'

The boy unravels the cord of his sack. Silas's eyes follow his fingers. A pocket of air escapes, gamey, sweet and putrid, and Silas raises a hand to his nose. He can never stand the smells of the dead; the shop is as clean as a chemist's, and each day he battles the coal smoke, the fur-dust, and the *stink*. He would like to uncork the miniature glass bottle of lavender oil that he stores in his waistcoat, to dab it on his upper lip, but he does

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not want to distract the boy – Albie has the attention span of a shrew on his finest days.

The boy winks, grappling with the sack, pretending it is alive.

Silas summons a smirk that feels hollow on his lips. He hates to see this urchin, this bricky street brat, tease him. It makes him draw back into himself, to recall himself at Albie's age, running heavy sacks of wet porcelain across the pottery yard, his arms aching from his mother's fists. It makes him wonder if he's ever truly left that life – even now he'll let himself be taunted by a single-toothed imp.

But Silas says nothing. He feigns a yawn, but watches through a sideways crocodile eye that betrays his interest by not blinking.

Albie grins, and unmask the sacking to present two dead puppies.

At least, Silas thinks it is two puppies, but when he grabs hold of the limbs, he notices only one scruff. One neck. One head. The skull is segmented.

Silas gasps, smiles. He runs his fingers along the seam of the crown to check it isn't a trick. He wouldn't put it past Albie to join two dogs with a needle and thread if it fetched him a few more pennies. He holds them up, sees their silhouette against his lamp, squeezes their eight legs, the stones of their vertebrae.

'This is more like it, eh,' he breathes. 'Oh, yes.'

'Two bob for't,' Albie says. 'No less than that.'

Silas laughs, pulls out his purse. 'A shilling, that's all. And you can come in, visit my workshop.' Albie shakes his head, steps further into the alley and looks around him. A look almost like fear passes over the boy's face, but it soon vanishes when Silas tips the coin into his palm. Albie hawks and spits his disdain on to the cobbles.

'A mere bob? Would you have a lad starve?'

ELIZABETH MACNEAL

But Silas closes the door, and ignores the hammering which follows.

He steadies himself on the cabinet. He glances down to check the pups are still there, and they are, clasped against his chest as a child would hold a doll. Their eight furred legs dangle, as soft as moles. They look like they did not even live to take their first breath.

He has it at last. His pickled strawberry.