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every living and non-living thing is vitally
connected. PADMA VISWANATHAN



LAST HUMMINGBIRD WEST OF CHILE

From Canada's Internationally Acclaimed Author of "The Phosphorescence"

NICHOLAS RUDDOCK

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CHILE

NICHOLAS RUDDOCK

BREAKWATER



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*The fallow deer, the wary fox, the yew,
the spider, the servant girl.*

CONTENTS

1832

CLOVIS OLDHAM, 16

MISS ALBERTSON, 26

CLOVIS OLDHAM, 16

1851 NINETEEN YEARS LATER

QUERCUS ALBA, 251

MISS ALBERTSON, 45

CATHERINE AMBERLEY, 19

GERALD EGERTON, 22

ANDREW AMBERLEY, 19

ZEPHYRAX, 3

THE REEF, 500,000,000

ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19

QUERCUS ALBA, 251

ZEPHYRAX, 3

ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19

MISS ALBERTSON, 45

1852

ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19

GERALD EGERTON, 22

ZEPHYRAX, 3

THE ISLAND, 12,000

ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32

QUERCUS ALBA, 251

ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32

QUERCUS ALBA, 251
ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32
FETU, 8
ZEPHYRAX, 3
CLOVIS CALLAGHAN (NÉE OLDHAM), 35
JAIMIA, 17
ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32
QUERCUS ALBA, 251
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
THE HEADMAN, 41
GERALD EGERTON, 22
MISS ALBERTSON, 45
JAIMIA, 17
QUERCUS ALBA, 251
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32
ZEPHYRAX, 3
FETU, 8
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
THE ISLAND, 12,000
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
CLOVIS CALLAGHAN, 35
ADVISOR TO THE HEADMAN, 32
QUERCUS ALBA, 252
CATHERINE EGERTON, 19
MISS ALBERTSON, 45
JAIMIA, 17
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
QUERCUS ALBA, 252

ZEPHYRAX, 3
CATHERINE EGERTON, 19
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
HERBERT MCWHIRTER, 41
QUERCUS ALBA, 252
JAIMIA, 17
ZEPHYRAX, 3
GERALD EGERTON, 22
HUT CHINOIS, 7
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
JAIMIA, 17
ALMA MCWHIRTER, 38
DOCTOR GEOFFREY BATES, 38
GERALD EGERTON, 22
HERBERT MCWHIRTER, 41
QUERCUS ALBA, 252
ALMA MCWHIRTER, 38
DOCTOR GEOFFREY BATES, 38
JAIMIA, 17
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
QUERCUS ALBA, 252
HERBERT MCWHIRTER, 41
ZEPHYRAX, 3
ALMA MCWHIRTER, 38
HERBERT MCWHIRTER, 41
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 19
CLOVIS CALLAGHAN, 36
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
ZEPHYRAX, 4
ALMA MCWHIRTER, 38

CHAO TANG, 34
MANON BEAUREGARD, 18
HERBERT MCWHIRTER, 41
ZEPHYRAX, 4
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
CAPTAIN WEDDERBURN, 57
MANON BEAUREGARD, 18
ZEPHYRAX, 4
1853
GERALD EGERTON, 23
CLOVIS CALLAGHAN, 37
GERALD EGERTON, 23
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
ZEPHYRAX, 4
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
CAPTAIN WEDDERBURN, 57
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
ZEPHYRAX, 4
MISS ALBERTSON, 46
HARTLAND FIGBY, 38
CAPTAIN WEDDERBURN, 57
ZEPHYRAX, 4
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
JOHN MARTIN, 35
DEATHSTALKER, 18 MONTHS
ZEPHYRAX, 4
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32

UBAID, 9
ZEPHYRAX, 4
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
SHANI, 36
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
UBAID, 9
ZEPHYRAX, 4
GERALD EGERTON, 23
JOHN MARTIN, 35
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
CLOVIS CALLAGHAN, 37
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
JOHN MARTIN, 35
ZEPHYRAX, 4
TULIO QUERINI, 40
JOHN MARTIN, 35
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
ZEPHYRAX, 4
TULIO QUERINI, 40
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
ZEPHYRAX, 4
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
CATHERINE EGERTON, 20
EMERSON CALLAGHAN, 35
GERALD EGERTON, 23
EMERSON CALLAGHAN, 35

CATHERINE EGERTON, 20
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 32
GERALD EGERTON, 23
MISS ALBERTSON, 46
ZEPHYRAX, 4
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 33
CATHERINE EGERTON, 20
ANDREW GOLLIVER, 20
GERALD EGERTON, 23
ZEPHYRAX, 4
RAZAK THE NAVIGATOR, 33
GERALD EGERTON, 23
RAZAK, 33
MANON BEAUREGARD, 19
ZEPHYRAX, 4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1832

CLOVIS OLDHAM, 16

Miss Albertson told me that every baby is born into peril, squeezed earthward by the instinctive contractions of the womb, pushed down into a rigid girdle of bone. The baby's chest cannot expand. The umbilical cord wraps itself as a ligature around the throat. The head might prove too large to pass. "With that in mind, dear girl," she said, "any woman would be wise to measure the circumference of her lover's head before yielding to him, should she wish to live past seventeen."

Such were her cautionary words as she sent me, the youngest of the chambermaids, to the third-floor bedroom of the manor house. There I was to stand motionless, warm blankets in my arms, as Lady Amberley, well advanced in labour, produced her first child.

But those instructions proved impossible to follow. In the first place, the Earl, the father, had been drinking in the library. His excessive laughter filled the stairway, causing visible discomfort to all attending. Secondly, the doctor, on arriving, immediately thrust me front and centre, saying, "Take up the lamp, Clovis—that is your name?—turn the wick up high, stand by my side, shed light upon the vestibule. Do not let your hand shake, no matter the provocation." So there I was, unexpectedly in a position of importance, watching the crowning of the head, the gushing forth of the child's body in a shocking stream of fluid. But then, instead of joy filling the room, desolation ensued. The child was grossly malformed, limp, pale, glistening. Nor did he—I spied the tiny penis—cry out. The Lady, her leg-drapes

having slipped to the floor, began to weep as any mother would, after such a fruitless effort.

The doctor then suggested, motioning with his eyes, that I pick up the child, wrap him in a coverlet and whisk him from the room. I was about to comply when in rushed the Earl to find his firstborn, his heir, moribund. He fell to his knees, tore at his hair, called his wife “a barren field.” Next he rushed past us in a whiskey-driven wind and we heard, from below, the repetitive sound of glass shattering.

Then the doctor whispered, “By heaven, I can see the crowning of a second head!” We jumped to attention. One chambermaid was dispatched to recall the father and another to fetch the family solicitor, whose presence was mandatory, according to the doctor, at the birth of twins. Why, I did not know. Nor could I speculate upon it, for once again I was Lady of the Lamp, and the doctor was spreading a fresh white sheet—“for modesty,” he said, though he was the only man present—over the mother’s thighs. Next he confessed, surveying the tip of the new baby’s head, that he was out of his depth, that perhaps we should send for the midwife, Mrs. Mason, from the village. An admirable decision, I thought, for I had heard of doctors pretending capability when they had none, with unfortunate results.

A man from the stables was therefore dispatched to the village with four of the finest horses and the finest carriage. Such luxury, I thought, for Mrs. Mason, but she was deserving of it, for her years of service. Then Miss Albertson—raising an eyebrow when she spotted my promotion—ushered in a second team of housemaids to carry away the soiled linen, mop the floor, rush back and forth with fresh towels, carry jugs of warm water. Meanwhile, I stood with my lamp, wondering at the marvel of women’s bodies in childbirth, how one indignity after the next was inflicted upon them while men were left to laughter and drinking. Hardly fair, I thought, at the same time joining the others in

a coordinated exhortation to our Lady to “push, push, push!”

But her capabilities in that regard had been exhausted. She seemed no longer to grasp her purpose. Fortunately, we then heard a ruckus on the stairs and Mrs. Mason burst into the room. “Whatever is going on here!” she said, and she ripped away the sheet of modesty, casting it to one side. She washed her hands in a basin of soapy water, made several adroit adjustments at the Lady’s vestibule, hooked her index finger deep within and pulled with force downward, the muscles of her forearm bunching with strain. Out popped, thirty seconds later, a healthy girl-child caught by the midwife and the doctor together as they battled for primacy, jostling against each other. Several of the chambermaids clapped their hands in jubilation. Then, however, as though he were an Australian boomerang, back came the Earl to lean against the door jamb, slurring his words, saying “A girl? Of no account.” So callous were those words that I nearly called out “Sir!” but I was saved from certain dismissal by the appearance of a firm hand on the Earl’s right shoulder, pulling him upright, turning him around, shaking him in a friendly but authoritative manner. The family solicitor had arrived, a tall and handsome man, composed, smiling, and to all of us he announced, “I have brought my materials.”

From an inner pocket of his jacket he produced a tangle of coloured threads, blue, green, and red, cut no doubt from individual skeins of wool. “Return the first-born,” he said, “still-birthed or not,” and the little body, wrapped in muslin, was hurried back from the kitchen. To one of the ankles peeping out, the solicitor applied a blue thread, and then, to the living girl’s kicking foot, he applied a green thread, in two separate and dignified ceremonies that drew an outcry from the Earl, “What a charade! A thread? To distinguish the living from the dead, a boy from a girl?”

I had to agree with him, but the solicitor then spoke up, explaining that first-born males of noble families inherited the name, the land, the fortune, and although such practice was a lamentable remnant of feudal times, nevertheless it was his mandate, as an officer of the court, to ensure that no babies in his jurisdiction were ever shuffled at birth. “He who arrives first,” he said—*he* being the operative word, I noticed—“should never be placed second or third, for if he were, he could be cheated of his inheritance by a dark uncle, a plotting cousin, a mincing priest, as happened recently in Suffolk. With the application of these coloured threads—imagine if there were two lusty boys, one directly on the heels of the other!—I have formally established the birth order of the Amberleys, and, duty done”—he rubbed his hands together—“would the Earl not retire with me downstairs, to settle my account? My own invention, the threads, I should add.”

Barely had they left the room, however, when Mrs. Mason said, calmly, that a third child was on the way. Discretion and modesty having been long since cast to the wind, each and every chambermaid came to my side to peer over my shoulder. “Good Lord,” they said, or variations thereof. Lady Amberley then gathered strength from some distant well of motherhood. She pushed vigorously, and a perfectly formed little boy popped into our world, lively with crying, quick with movement. The solicitor rushed back upstairs and placed a third string, red, upon the ankle. “How wondrous these twins, such beautiful, lovely creatures!” He then went to the mother’s side, bent to her, touched her hand and spoke so softly to her, I could not hear.

His kindness brought tears to my eyes. But then the Earl reappeared at his elbow and became completely unmoored. Pointing a shaky finger at the babies, he claimed that they had deprived his first-born of oxygen and nutrients in the womb. He then rushed silently at them, intending to do

them harm, and surely he would have succeeded had the solicitor not jumped into his path, fragments of threads falling to the floor as they sparred and pushed and danced against each other. Two chambermaids, holding little bundles, ran from the room. Mrs. Mason grasped the Earl's shirt from behind and, as he was not a big man, she swung him in a circle until he fell to the floor. There he sat, unabashed, but lacking coordination to continue.

"Horrible man!" I whispered, hating him for his insensitivity at the moment, and even more for what he had done to me personally. Two weeks in his service and already he had taken liberties slipping his hand up my skirt, probing as I reached for a spider on the leaded windows of the library. Timidly I froze, twisting away when it was far too late. I ran to the kitchen, to Miss Albertson. "Clovis," she said, "whatever is the matter, your cheeks are on fire!" "Oh, nothing," I said, "I just need a drink of water." There he now was, helpless on the floor. I felt like stabbing him with the nearby knife, already used to cut the birth cords. Do it, Clovis, do it, I thought, but I stayed my hand. I feared the hangman. As it was, the solicitor intervened, helping the Earl to his feet, ushering him from the room.

Later, in the kitchen, I confessed my murderous impulse to Miss Albertson. I even asked her, casting shyness aside, "Has he ever put his hand up your skirt, does he treat you as a chattel?" She did not actually say yes, but I think that was her answer for she stood up abruptly, said that she was twenty-six years of age, that she had seen enough.

"Who would discover us anyway, Clovis, if we did kill him?"

"No one," I said, "if we are clever." We opened an upper drawer for the two largest knives at hand—those for dismembering pigs—and together in our slippers we set out for the upper reaches of the manor house, where all were

fast asleep. We stepped quietly, weightlessly, as women of no account must do.

MISS ALBERTSON, 26

We held our knives reversed in our grips, blades resting against our forearms wrist to elbow, tucked into the sleeves of our nightgowns. Dawn was hours away. The night was moonless, only owls could be peering within. We proceeded cautiously upon the carpeted floor towards the suite of five guest bedrooms, in one of which, we were certain, we would find the Earl. It was his habit to collapse there on nights of inebriation, to flop fully clothed upon one bedspread or another, to snore, to urinate upon himself, to walk out unashamed in the morning.

After opening the third door, we found him lying face-down, fallen to the floor. We knelt to his side. Vapours of sour brandy rose to us like a pestilence. To breathe, we turned our heads aside but then returned to our task, taking our knives from our sleeves in unison, sharing a glance. As the elder, my turn came first. "Exemplar," I whispered, "do your duty." But rather than stab frantically, I pressed the tip of my blade first to his clothing, to feel for the space between his ribs. Then I pushed more firmly, penetrating layers one by one, first linen then wool then linen again. Finally the elastic resistance of flesh announced itself. "Now," I said, and I advanced the tip forcefully with a quick thrust to the hilt, hoping to strike the heart or major vessel. Strangely, he did not move, nor alter his breathing. I withdrew the blade. Clovis then inserted her knife from her side, though more quickly, with the same result. "Abandon caution?" I suggested. She answered by striking down firmly mid-thorax, and I followed suit until at least a dozen penetrations had been made. Finally he took notice, gasping, trying to rise, spinning like a bug in a quarter-circle on the carpet. It was then that we realized that our victim

was not the Earl but the Friar, a man of similar build, portly, who must have been called to the manor, unbeknownst to us, to pray for the stillborn.

Realizing our mistake, yet knowing we must finish, we accelerated our aggression with a sequence of rapid thrusts to the front of his chest. By then he was sitting up, eyes rolling like marbles. "Mercy!" he cried out once, but a hemorrhage rushed from his lips and spilled down his cloak, choking him. Our fingers by then were as slippery as eels. Clovis lost her grip upon her weapon, retrieved it, struck him again, until finally he uttered a wracking sigh and tumbled to his final rest, supine, arms and legs akimbo.

The stink of brandy was even stronger upon us. Clovis said we should open a window. "Yes," I said, "that one, Clovis, for it will provide access for a murderer." "I hope he has not suffered unduly," she said. "Don't worry your pretty head about that," I said, "he is as bad as the Earl. He has fathered four children with his housekeeper, only to deliver them to the orphanage." We wiped the blades of our knives against his garments. We rose to our feet. A spatter of rain lashed against the window frame. One of the babies cried from the distant nursery. We tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen, and there we submerged our weapons in soapy water, dried them, aligned them neatly in their drawer. Then we removed our bloodstained gowns, bundled them, watched them catch fire upon the coals of the stove. Naked, averting our eyes, we scrubbed our hands and arms, thighs and ankles, covered ourselves next with clean tablecloths from the pantry. Pale as ghosts, we swore fealty to each other, promising to tell the same lie. We were fast asleep in our beds, we heard nothing. "Good night, Clovis," I said, clasping her in my arms, feeling her heart beat against mine.

CLOVIS OLDHAM, 16

Early the next morning came the expected drama. The local constable arrived at noon hour, asking that all residents of the manor be brought together at the scene of the crime. The Friar was still there, lying in a pool of blood thickened to the consistency of custard. Several of the staff had already fainted and were being revived by salts. Miss Albertson and I, however, were clear-headed, expressing our amazement, saying, "Heavens!" The constable asked if anyone knew where the Earl was. "Perhaps he is the murderer," I suggested, "absconded." Miss Albertson was about to wholeheartedly agree when the young footman, Emerson Callaghan—with whom, by the way, I had taken several walks on Sunday afternoons, to the verge of the forest—said that he had personally placed the Earl upon a horse shortly after the birth of the third child. He had watched him canter away to the southeast, barely keeping to the saddle. So, a perfect alibi. The investigator then surveyed the room and said confidently that the killer must be present. The window had been open, the drainpipe was sturdy enough to support a grown man, but there were no footprints in the soil below. In his experience, even master criminals could not fly. "He has died of multiple stabbings, and I have found large knives in the kitchen. Could they be the weapons? Miss Albertson?" He looked directly at her and she replied, giving not an inch, "Pig knives, Sir, for disarticulating pigs, and yes, we keep them in the kitchen, in the top drawer." "Bring them to me," he commanded, and Miss Albertson did so, taking no longer than a minute away. He examined each blade with a magnifying glass. Then he bent and inserted, gruesomely, the largest knife into a major wound in the Friar's right side, through the clothing. He inserted a smaller blade into a cut at the base of the throat. I felt warm, vertiginous. Another of the chambermaids fainted. Miss Albertson, however, remained bright as a daisy, and she spoke up to say that a cat-burglar must have gained access to the manor by the front door, come upon the Friar on the

stairway, killed him out of fright, dragged him to the bedroom. The investigator, smiling, said that in his experience cat-burglars set out with their own weapons at hand. "And look," he said, "the fit of these pig knives is astoundingly perfect, not only in wound A"—he pointed to it—"but also in wound B, down to the very characteristic whorl on this handle, imprinted on this patch of dried blood, above the clavicle." So what, I thought. Miss Albertson and I had nothing to fear. Unless we broke rank and confessed, he would never know.

He would never know unless walls and floors and the night itself could talk, and only my grandfather believed that possible. "I have heard the trees whispering to each other a thousand times, Clovis," he said, "and never do they sound the same."

1851 NINETEEN YEARS LATER

QUERCUS ALBA, 251

I was a tree, a white oak, one of a countless number in the Adirondack Mountains. We were integral members of the Carolinian forest, stretching as far as we could see. Perhaps, for all we knew, we went on forever. At any rate, there we were, rolling in dark green over the dips and valleys of the earth in all directions, covering the longest hills in undulations unbroken but for the odd cliff face or waterfall. In autumn our green changed to yellow-red, and then we were bare and black in winter, presenting a more sombre, windswept landscape. Pockets of conifers stood out as daub-slashes of blue-green or, if weighted down with snow, they were white. I burst to life, presumably, from a single acorn planted by a squirrel, a morsel of intended food. But, as chance would have it, my squirrel forgot me, as squirrels are prone to do. They are good at planting, but are even better at forgetting.

My taproot took hold. It burrowed into sandy loam and was incubated under layers of bent grass and fallen leaves. I grew three inches in my first year. Then, for two hundred years, I added annually a growth ring to my heartwood and became—speaking modestly—a straight and solid adult member of the forest, a *Quercus alba* of impressive, unmeasurable mass, my height one hundred and twenty feet, my circumference at base sixteen feet. I was surrounded by similar trees, hundreds of us. My squirrel must have had a legion of friends planting and forgetting, planting and forgetting, until there we were, fully grown,

majestic, magical, a breathing forest impervious to storms, lightning strikes, hurricanes, drought, the ravages of insects. Our roots locked themselves into earth, intertwined. Raindrops from the canopy nourished us, trickling to the river that glittered in the sun and bent to the southeast, its water as clear as air, its source fifty miles north, a lake known as Tear of the Clouds. Decade after decade, we bore witness to the choral voices of insects, birds, animals, vines, flowers, stones. We heard rustlings and buzzings, woodpeckering, chip-chipping, scuttering. We knew the habits of chipmunks, the canny fox, the jay, the falcon, the skunk, the porcupine, the snake, the toad, the trout, the dragonfly. With humans, we coexisted. They built cooking fires at our feet. They cut smaller trees for longhouses. They identified themselves by various names, such as Haudenosaunee, Abenaki, Mohegan. But for the odd arrow gone awry, or one of our branches falling, we inflicted no injuries on each other.

Then came the English. Self-doubt was not in their nature. Using firearms and disease, they waged war against the native people. They committed skullduggery too, treaties made and broken until all the land was theirs. Still they were unsatisfied. They turned their eyes to us, calculating our worth in pounds sterling. They sharpened their tools, and one autumnal afternoon, shortly after the first frost, two hundred of them arrived in carts and wagons, built a camp by the river, and set upon us with the same frenzied rapacity as they had upon the Haudenosaunee and the fur-bearing beaver, the marten, the muskrat, the mink.

It was from the English that I learned the name *Quercus alba*, or *white oak*, but Latin nomenclature was no help for any of us against crosscut saw and wedge, against the fires they set to our roots to sap our strength, against the thousand further strikes that transformed us into board-feet of lumber. We shook the earth when we fell, conscious of

bedrock shifting beneath us to accommodate our weight, but it too had been torn to pieces, large stones upturned, soil and undergrowth ripped asunder, squirrels on the run, snakes a-slither for their lives. We lay crisscrossed, helpless, night stars that much farther away. Next came the humiliation of our branches being stripped. We were floated downriver as logs. The English—some French—danced with hooks and poles upon us, singing songs about the pleasures of their lives. Then came Albany, and then New York, where a gauntlet of ripping saws reduced us in half an hour to rough-cut planks two feet by twelve, two inches thick. We were piled with others on a pier. The first snow came, bringing a brief familiarity but precious little comfort, and then it was farewell America! We were lifted by heavy cranes and dropped into the hold of a ship of weathered pine, with whom we commiserated. We crossed an interminable body of water, hoping for shipwreck, imagining a long deserted beach where we could find freedom of a sort. But no such luck. Instead we arrived at the town of Bristol, in England, shipwrights pouncing upon us, building with their hammers a man-of-war they christened *Formidable*, a frigate, a ship of the line. By chance of carpentry, I formed the entire stern section of *Formidable* and realized, ironically, that once again I was standing straight, vertical, but my feet were planted in the shifting sea rather than in solid earth.

Thus did we, an entire forest, pass from majesty to servitude. For the next forty years—until 1850—we sailed the sea for England. Rarely were we caught up in battle. More often we rested in harbours or sailed off the coast of France and Spain, flying the flag, firing our cannons for sport at the spouts of whales until finally it occurred to the Admiralty that *Formidable* was old and creaking. I did not feel that way myself, just straitjacketed, as though my arms had been pinned to my sides forever. The ship was

decommissioned and sold for a song to private business, to a man who rechristened us in his own name, *John Roberts*. Those letters were written in cursive script directly on my back. The christening bottle smashed across our bow one Bristol foggy morning, 1851. The owner, fancying himself an orator, stood upon our foredeck before the gathered crew and said that he intended to make a salubrious trade in dry goods to and from Chile, in South America. We would be a force for good on the high seas by virtue of our strength in armaments. The newly hired sailors shouted *hip-hip-hooray*, and some of them threw hats in the air. Who were they, these men, these sailors, I wondered. Many were old, some were barely grown. Either way, the officers would treat them as scum, laying on the lash. In the absence of women, men would lie with men. Rum and blood would be spilled in equal measure.

If *Quercus alba* meant *white oak*, which apparently it did, in Latin, then *homo sapiens alba* would be *white man*. Would that I could remove that *alba* from my name, disassociate myself from such a selfish race.

MISS ALBERTSON, 45

Nineteen years have passed. Clovis and I have grown closer and closer. She is married, with three children. I am on my own, and will be forever. You would think that we have little in common but in fact, since the Friar, we sit together many evenings over tea. We muse, philosophically, about manor life. Well, *muse* is far too gentle a word. Often we rage.

Last night, for the hundredth time, we dwelt on the continuing maltreatment of the two Amberley children. We could not avoid it, for we had eyes to see and hearts to cry out. Clovis reached far back in time to their birth, reminding me how ludicrous it was that the stillborn child was buried with pomp and circumstance in a closed casket of silk and

mahogany while the two living children were ignored completely. Well, they had been given names, Catherine and Andrew. That was it. They rested fair-haired and blue-eyed in bassinets a foot apart in the nursery. And also ludicrous, Clovis said, was the obituary for "Little Harry"—so the misshapen baby was called, by his father—published in all the London and Dorset newspapers. "Little Harry Amberley, sweet and brave, heir to the Amberley fortune," etc., etc. Not a mention of the twins. Two hundred guests came to the funeral, trumpets were played sombrely over a few shovelfuls of grave. Such hypocrisy, and the twins did not see their callous father again at close quarters for eight more years. Eight years! And their mother was of no help. She entirely lost the maternal spark. She withdrew physically and emotionally from marriage, from motherhood, sitting for hours in her darkened salon, novels unopened on her lap. We who came to love the abandoned waifs, as we called them, wondered about their future. Yes, they had been provided for in clothing and in food, but emotionally they had been cast adrift. What would be the repercussions, we wondered.

We sipped our tea and shared a biscuit. We remembered their eighth birthday party, when at last the Earl deigned to see them. They were holding hands, unsure of themselves, abashed. Surely he will warm to them once he knows them better, we thought, for look, they are straight in stature, tall and slim and well-spoken, fair-haired, athletic at play, whereas the Earl is relatively short and dark, verging on obesity, a stumbler at sports. Who should arrive then but the family solicitor, he of the coloured threads. We had not seen him for years. He was holding in his arms a wriggling present for each child, a puppy. "Happy Birthday to the two of you!" he said, and it was then that Clovis and I were struck by the same thunderbolt, so to speak, for the solicitor was tall and handsome and fair-haired, and his eyes were as

blue as the children's, and their three noses, in profile, were much the same, even to a slight upturn at the tip. What fools we have been, we thought. The Earl's cold and unforgiving nature made sense at last. The more we watched the children play with their puppies, the more we noticed the solicitor's fond glances, and the Earl's continued glowering. The birthday party, such as it was, petered out, but Clovis and I decided to visit Mrs. Mason on our next shared Sunday off-duty.

She was as feisty as ever but had patience with us as we asked our simplistic questions. "How, Mrs. Mason, do children inherit height and weight and eye colour? Can spermatozoa from two different sources interact with female eggs, thus forming twins or triplets from separate sources?" She laughed knowingly. "Clovis, Beulah," she said, "a fertile woman can take two lovers, five or six for that matter, on the same night, and such a woman can deliver, nine months later, a dark and wizened stillborn from the first union and, close behind, during the same parturition, fair and living twins from the secret dalliance. Children never come stamped with their father's name, but time has its way of revealing, by physiognomy, the truth." She then asked us if we remembered how the solicitor had fought for the two babies at the manor, scattering threads, pushing at the Earl, even throwing a punch that she could only describe as a double-windmill. "Who in the world would do that but a father?" she said.

Shortly after that discovery—which we certainly kept to ourselves—the Earl hired an Italian landscape engineer, a Signor Balestra, from Firenze, to create a maze just to the west of the manor house. I was present in the library during the Italian's introduction, dusting cabinets, and I heard the Earl demand that his maze be the largest in Britain, extending over three acres, featuring abrupt endings and false turnings, and straight runs that would give an illusion

of progress. Its obstructions would need to be so thick and heavy and tangled that a mouse could not pass without dewhiskering. Ever the foolish optimist, I found it quite enchanting that the Earl had conceived a lighthearted project until it became clear, two years later, that the ultimate purpose of his maze was to provide a training ground in terror for the solicitor's offspring.

Clovis and I walked the maze upon its completion. We found it built as the Earl had wished, solidly. No glimmer of light penetrated its foliage. In fact, it was another world, divorced from reality, so much so that I turned to Clovis in the privacy of the hedges and kissed her, surprising her. I kissed her directly on the lips. No one could see us but for hawks and jackdaws. To my pleasure and surprise, she responded. She did not pull away, and we might have continued had not footsteps from some other explorer approached. We adjusted our bonnets. We found our way out after another quarter-hour, fully able to testify to the maze's disorienting influence.

It was the next Sunday that we heard the Italian gardener's creation would have its first official event. Innocently, we took a position at an upper window to watch as the Earl took Andrew and Catherine by the hands. He bent to them and spoke. Clovis and I thought we were witnessing a tender rapprochement until he abruptly pushed at them and shouted for them to run. Understandably, they stood puzzled, and did not move. He cracked a whip over their heads and off the twins ran, dutifully, slowly, looking back until they turned the first corner. We could still see them from our vantage point. We could see the Earl too, unleashing his clutch of wolf hounds, setting them out upon the same path but at ten times the speed, scrambling, with a wild baying. The children by then had come to a closed corridor, mid-maze. They were pressing themselves against the hedge, against sharp tips and tangles, and it was there

the dogs found them, leaping at them, and we heard such cries that we flew downstairs without touching a step, then outside to the first long stretch of maze. There we were met by the Earl returning, dogs leashed, pulling the children roughly along, faces scratched and bleeding. Clovis reached for Catherine but she was pushed away by the handle of his whip. Laughing, he said, "Look, tender hearts, fools!" Grasping the nearest hound, he pulled back the upper and lower lips. "I have rendered them toothless, at the blacksmith's, they are as harmless as rabbits! These craven snivellers, clean them up!" That evening, in the kitchen, I drew up a roster of servants, all volunteers, resolving never to leave Andrew or Catherine alone with that man again.

Years passed. The children matured. The Earl began to go through the motions of fatherhood by appearing for dinners. Nevertheless we felt storm clouds gathering. Their mother turned to knitting tiny imperfect blankets for dolls, or she sat gazing into the fire, mumbling. The unread novels fell to the floor. Andrew was preternaturally quiet, day after day. Courtiers came for Catherine. They listened as she played the pianoforte, but whom did she eventually choose? The worst of them, a clearly insincere schemer infatuated more by her fortune than by her beauty or character. Scion of a bankrupt family from the north of England, one Gerald Egerton. Had she been properly raised, with even a modicum of attention, she would never have given him a second glance. She would have thrown him out like peelings from the kitchen, like scrap food for a dog.

A comment referencing our kiss, in the maze. Clovis is happily married to Emerson Callaghan, but sometimes we lie together fully clothed, breast to breast, and we kiss. It is our secret, and, to me, more than a comfort.

CATHERINE AMBERLEY, 19

Andrew warned me that he was reaching a breaking point with our father. He hated him entirely. He hated his politics. He hated his sneering sense of entitlement. He hated how he treated us as afterthoughts, how we had even been held back, after the age of fourteen, from formal schooling. When I conquered my brother in chess, as often I did—I applied myself more to books of strategy, leaving him at a disadvantage—he would topple his king quietly to one side, smile, concede, walk to the window and say that his life too was toppling. Not that he was gloomy. “Cheerfully oppressed,” he called it. “What do you see in Gerald, by the way,” he asked me once, “I would like to know.” “A way out,” I wanted to say, “and you have to admit he is spirited.” Instead I reset the board and offered to play black. “Catherine, he is not your match in any way. He loses his Queen in ten moves, he is incapable of planning.” That was as close as we came to sharing our emotional lives, in metaphors of chess. Twins have no need to talk, some say, they are like tuning forks set to A, vibrating at the same frequency since birth.

It was still a shock when the rupture came. We had settled, as a family, into a routine at dinnertime during which we pretended normalcy. It was a *détente* of sorts that an outsider might consider cowardly, but in our defence—Andrew’s and mine—we had learned to suppress spontaneity, just to survive. To question Father was to brook battle royal. He would make his point and, if challenged, he would overturn dishes, leave the room, Mother would whisper “tut-tut, tut-tut,” and my fiancé would throw his napkin down and rush away to mollify Father. That meant drinking and playing billiards to all hours. As for the servants, I felt for them, I was embarrassed, but they were trained to carry on under all circumstance. Surely they despised us, plentiful food sitting before us, turning cold.

The night in question. Roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, Father pouring himself a third glass of wine, a danger sign. It loosened his tongue. He started up on the touchiest of subjects, saying, "I have heard from our agent in County Galway, Mr. Burke, and he informs me that our tenants have managed just one-quarter of their rents for the past six months. And, as if that insult were not enough, we have been presented with a bill from the local authorities for the disposal of bodies." "Bodies?" I asked, startled, breaking protocol, hoping Andrew would not speak up. "Why yes, Catherine, bodies. Once dead, they cannot move on their own." I plunged ahead, saying, "Father, I have read that starvation threatens the west of Ireland, from the potato blight." He ignored me. Gerald, attempting wit, said, "Do you mean, Sir, that the Irish authorities have actually managed to send a bill to this address, all the way to England?" Father raised his glass in a toast. "Not only did they manage," he said, "but they peppered it with farcical details. We are being asked to pay for the burial of several individuals from the town itself, with no direct connection to our land other than supplying us with seed and building materials." "An overreach, that," said my fiancé, "but of course they are the great exaggerators, the Irish. They spy one faerie under a toadstool, there will be a dozen in the retelling." "How true, my boy, how true," Father replied, "but there was also good news. Our cattle are in excellent health, growing fat upon the land. How could there be a blight in the air if that were true? Anyway, I have drafted my reply. I will not pay for bodies or burial. They can rot in their hovels."

The conversation was taking a predictable turn. Gerald clapped his hands and said, "Good! A formal burial would mean coins for the digging, coins for the priest, coins for the wake." "You have an admirable grasp of Irish economics," Father said. "Thank you," said Gerald, "and is it true, Sir,