VINTAGE

MISFORTUNE

WESLEY STACE

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About the Book

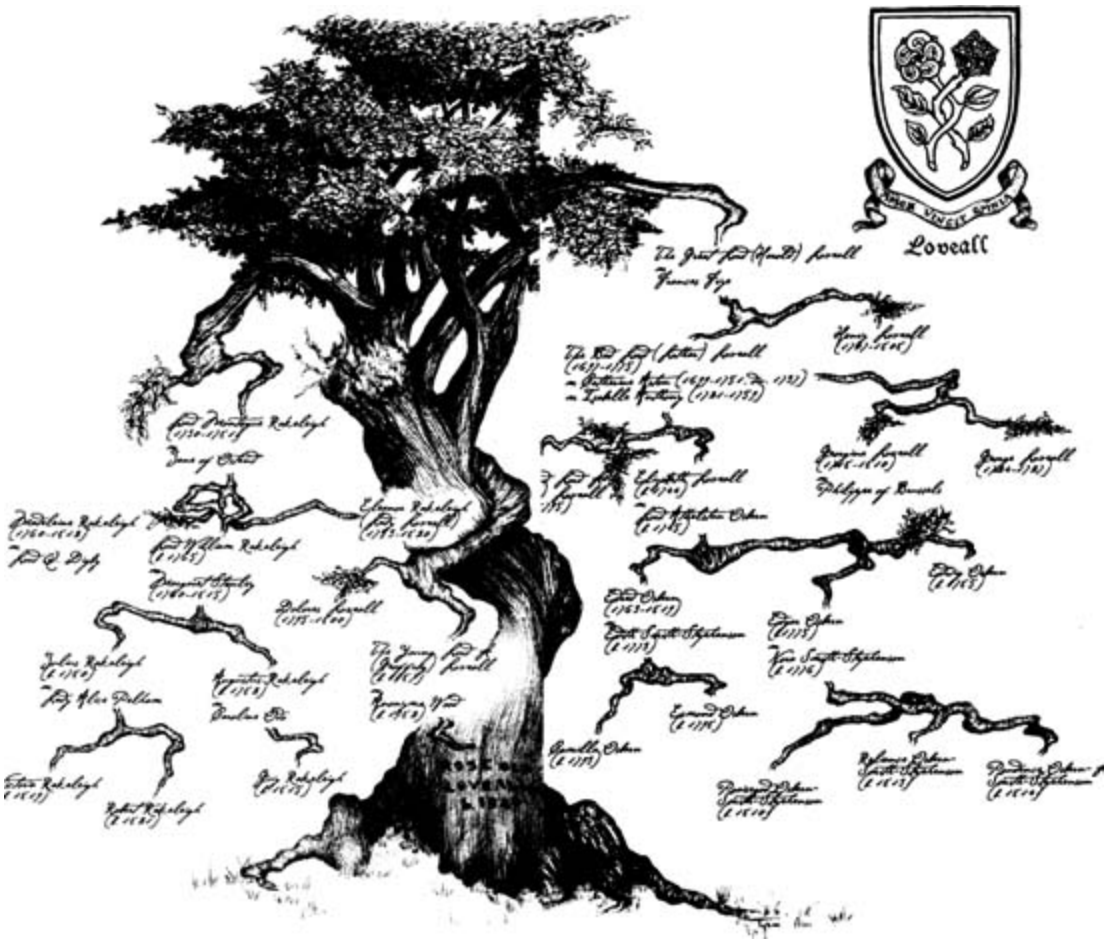
Lord Loveall, heretofore heirless lord of the sprawling Love Hall, is the richest man in England. He arrives home one morning with a most unusual package – a baby that he presents as the inheritor to the family name and fortune. In honour of his beloved sister, who died young, Loveall names the baby Rose. The household, relieved at the continuation of the Loveall line, ignores the fact that this Rose has a thorn . . . that she is, in fact, a boy.

Rose grows up with the two servant children who are her only friends. Rose grows up blissfully unaware of her own gender, casually hitting boundaries at Love Hall's yearly cricket game and learning to shave even as she continues to wear more and more elaborate dresses. Until, of course, the fateful day when Rose's world comes crashing down around her, and she is banished from Love Hall as an impostor by those who would claim her place as heir.

About the Author

Born in Hastings, educated at Cambridge, Wesley Stace is also known as the musician John Wesley Harding. He is currently working on his second novel and his fourteenth album. He lives in Brooklyn.

For my mother and father


Loveall

Misfortune

A Novel

Wesley Stace

VINTAGE

I hope my Poeme is so lively writ,
That thou wilt turne halfe-mayd with reading it.

Beaumont: Paraphrase of Ovid's
Salmacis and Hermaphroditus
(1602)

1

Anonymous

1

BY NOW, PHARAOH had reached his destination. A dirty young man of no more than fifteen years, he stood at the door of a crooked house in an alley, out of breath, gasping for air and wondering what to do. On one foot he wore an oversized woman's boot he'd found while scavenging for nails at low tide. On the other was a tattered derby tied together with string that bit viciously into his instep, though he barely noticed. On his head flopped a ragged cloth, with little shape or apparent purpose, and in between his top and his toes, his costume comprised a patchwork of tears and mends in at least three materials from many more pieces of previously worn clothing.

Pharaoh was so relieved to have arrived in time that he had stopped his singing. Suddenly the world lost all clarity. His instructions: hear tip-off, run like lightning to Mother's, give the warning . . . But the door was locked. The door was never locked, and he couldn't work out what to do. They hadn't told him. Pharaoh's concentration was a fragile thing and his mind was now too muddled to remember a tune. It was as though he'd never heard one before, and with no song to help him focus, all was lost. He stared down at the top edge of a silver twopenny bit that glinted in the mud, but couldn't even recognize it as something worth having.

Above him, out of his view, a woman was hanging a white dress on the railing of the balcony, from which hung a sign above the locked door: SHAVING AND BLEEDING AT A TOUCH. A placard for the adjacent NEW BAGNIO: MEN FOR SPORT swung close by, and from the bagnio's window a chubby female

hand emerged to splash the contents of a chamber pot into the street.

For a moment, the laundress was unaware that there was anyone beneath. She began to sing as she worked, and this is what finally breathed life into Pharaoh again. It was one of the old songs, his favorite of the many she sang: the story of Lambkin the builder who tortures Lord Murray's family when his note is refused. The purity of Annie's voice contrasted starkly with the words of her song and the street below:

"'Where is the heir of this house?' said Lambkin:
'Asleep in his cradle,' the false nurse said to him.
And he pricked that baby all over with a pin,
While the nurse held a basin for the blood to run in."

She had sung it so many times as a lullaby that the horror of the story was somehow soothing. Pharaoh joined in, slowly remembered what he was about, and began to bang on the front door with all his might. She looked below and her singing trailed off.

"Are you looking up my skirt, Pharaoh?" she called down. "Lucky I'm not in it!"

But his mind was too full to answer and he shouted up at her: "Where's Mother? Mother!" He kept up his frantic banging.

"Stop it, Pharaoh! You'll have that door down!"

"Where's Mother Maynard?" he pleaded, close to tears and barely able to get the words out of his mouth. "Mother!"

"Mother is otherwise engaged at the moment," Annie hissed from above, with a quick glance around to see who could hear. "She cannot see anyone, Pharaoh, not even you." Then something dawned on her, crossing her face like a black cloud over the sun. "You're early. What are you doing here now anyway?"

“They’re coming! They’re coming!” His frantic look over his shoulder told her everything. Annie dropped the dress, which floated down toward the street, opening up as it did and swaying from side to side before it completed its gentle descent. She disappeared inside and Pharaoh listened to her progress as she ran downstairs.

“Mother!” Annie was shouting. “They’re coming! They’re coming!” There was a scream from within and the door was flung open. Pharaoh fell inwards on top of her.

“Good boy,” she said as she pinched his cheek. “How far away?”

“Now!” he yelped.

“How many?”

“Two police and another man. And they mean business, Sailor said.”

“Stay,” she commanded, as you order a dog that understands only five words. Annie bolted the front door and ran into a back room. Pharaoh tried to follow but was stopped at the door, which was closed decisively in his face. He tried to catch his breath as he rested his forehead upon the frame. A cat sniffed suspiciously at one of the dishes of what appeared to be red milk that lay at the door. Two buckets stood nearby as if to catch rain dripping from the ceiling. Flies buzzed around, and the atmosphere was as thick as glue and damp with sweat.

“Tell Mother!” Pharaoh pleaded to no one, and slumped down on the floor, expecting the front door to open (or be pushed down) at any moment. He had played his part, he thought, and now it felt that all the life had been sucked out of him, that it was his blood in the dishes and buckets, his sweat in the air, and his mess on his shoes. There was no song left in his head. Pharaoh had run as though his life depended on it because he owed that life to Mother, and his loyalty was all he could give in return. She was his “mother,” as she was everyone’s, and he had no other. Pharaoh occupied a place far down the hierarchy of her

house, but he was a vital member, and during his tenure as the tipper there had been no trouble, because what trouble there might have been had been easily averted. Today was the first great crisis, and Sailor's warning had come woefully late. Pharaoh knew what Mother did, that she helped girls, that she bled them, at a touch, and he knew that some of the bleeding was illegal, but above all he knew this: no one else must see. Even he never ventured into the back room.

The interior door opened and a skeletal hand reached through as from the coffin of a child's toy money-box. The noise from beyond was fearful, just as the churchman described the sounds of hell: the endless howling of souls in torment, damned in the lake of fire. He looked over, too dulled to move. The hand grabbed the dishes, slopping blood on the floor and dousing the cat, which mewled and ran off. The bucket was next to disappear. The boy began to mop up the blood with a rag, not knowing why or if it was required.

The screaming suddenly stopped. Pharaoh stood at the door, not breathing, not thinking, not singing.

"They must be 'ere by now. They must be," he whispered as the door to the annex opened. This time he found himself pulled through. The room was teeming with people, but he saw Mother and, looking around, he gulped. Blood. He was sick in the back of his mouth and he swallowed it down. There was a bed that had a canopy with burn marks up its visible side, and on a central table, a girl in a grimy white nightgown, a dark stain around her thighs and belly. A Passover cake, coated with treacle to mire flies, dangled from the ceiling. Everybody ran around him, but he stood as still as he could and looked down at the ground. Suddenly Annie stopped in front of him and handed him a package wrapped in black tarp and rags.

"Pharaoh, you take this. Put it under your jacket. It's poisonous, mind, so don't you look at it. Walk for three hours and then throw it on the rubbish or toss it in the river.

If someone asks you what it is, you tell them it’s none of their business and then run away. But don’t look at it or touch it, it’s poison.”

Pharaoh didn’t ask questions, because he wanted so badly to leave. He knew to do exactly what she said and he knew where he’d take it. If someone asked, which nobody would, he’d say it was his lunch. That made him laugh, but he didn’t dare look up. He stared at the little bundle and then shoved it up inside his clothes, but this, too, made him laugh. He looked like Annie when she was pregnant. He was so nervous that everything seemed funny.

Mother looked down at the girl with the stain and said grimly, “She’s gone.” Annie turned back to Mother and then, remembering Pharaoh, looked around at him.

“Go! Now!” He turned to leave by the front door, but she grabbed him by the collar. He’d never before heard her in such a fury. “No! The other door. Over there!”

And Annie showed him a door he’d never seen before just beyond the bloody girl. As he went toward it, he tried not to look around or notice the gurgling from her body like water spitting from a loose pipe. He opened the door (“Go, and we don’t want to see you till night!” snarled after him), and the outside world shone in its brightness. He looked up at the sky and exhaled, biting his lower lip until it hurt. He breathed in as though he had been submerged for the past ten minutes, drowning in thick paste, and as he did so, he heard the front door banging and the cry: “In the name of the law and His Majesty King George!”

Pharaoh closed the back door behind him. He was out in time. And off he sauntered, catching his breath, the little actor. He was invisible when he wanted to be. He was fascinated to have found this new door in a house he thought he knew so well, but he didn’t want to use it ever again. They’d kept him out of the back room for his own sake, he saw that now. He looked back for one last time to see a small red stream running from the bottom of the door

into the drain. No wonder he didn’t know about it. It wasn’t important. It’s my lunch, thank you very much. He’d got there first and he’d done what he was told. This was his lunch. And he’d get his supper, too, back at Mother’s later.

He was looking forward to supper. Tonight there would be something good, without doubt.

As he walked, Pharaoh sang, always, his life a long song cycle of his own devising. He didn’t always know whether he was singing aloud or not, nor was he particularly aware that he was singing at all: each morning he awoke with a song in his head, and each night he sang himself to sleep. He sang for want of singing and fear of silence. Sometimes when he wasn’t moving, there was no song. Then his gaping face drained of character and, tongue lolling out of his mouth, he looked like a tired dog desperate for water.

From time to time he would abruptly start a new song, and the previous one was entirely forgotten, sometimes gone forever. He made them up as he walked along, mumbling rhymes, words tumbling over one another, sometimes refining into sense, sometimes remaining nonsense. His eyes wrote on his behalf from the world in front of him, and he filled in whatever he couldn’t see with stock phrases from older favorites. He made up most of the melodies, too.

Sometimes the less he thought about the outside world the better, for the more he tried to understand it, the less he did. But he knew his job well, and his songs kept him calm — the ones he made up and the old ones that he embellished. They kept the world at bay and stopped real thoughts and worries from entering his head, even now.

As he headed down the back street behind Mother’s, Pharaoh stood on tiptoe for a moment to peer between the roofs of the houses and catch a glimpse of his favorite clock, above St. Cuthbert’s at Marble-gate. The dial was beneath a small stone statue of a man with wings, an angel possibly, Pharaoh thought. This fat little being wanted nothing to do

with time and flapped his arms in defiance, as though he were trying to escape but couldn’t drag himself away. His feet were attached to a motto: *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi.* Annie had told him what this meant, but hers had been a markedly different translation from the vicar’s during one of his lengthy sermons, and Pharaoh hadn’t known which one of them to believe.

The hands on the clock were equally hard to interpret, and though Pharaoh knew that he had to let the larger of the two hands do something before he was to stop and turn back, that wasn’t why he looked at clocks. That was just one of the many things that he *knew* but didn’t really understand.

People he loved and trusted told him things that he knew were true (if only because of the source), and he often said he understood when he didn’t, even though he could repeat it with confidence. No, he looked at clocks because church clocks turn up six an hour in the city, and he knew that meant he would have to see eighteen before he turned around and went back again. This was something that he understood because he’d worked it out himself. It very rarely let him down and he was never late for anything. It meant that he spent a lot of his life waiting for other people, but these were among the most peaceful times, sitting on a wall, making up a song or trying to improve the older ones when he could remember them. He couldn’t read and he could barely write his name, so there wasn’t much more he could be doing as he waited, apart from singing. Sailor had taught him to tell the time by the sun and the length of his own shadow, but that would be of no use to him on this trip. The shadows were off with the sun somewhere far from the city. Today everything was gray.

Their part of town was a maze and Pharaoh had learned to use this to his advantage. As a linkboy, he knew practically every way to get everywhere, and though he hadn’t known exactly where he was headed when he left Mother’s, he

knew where to avoid: wherever he was known and might be approached. He steered clear of the Lane and, of course, the Coffee House, which were both on his normal route. There was always the crowd of chaunters, and they'd be looking for the opportunity of some work as the afternoon wore on. So, at Resurrection Gate, he had left the main thoroughfares and ducked into the alleys of Little Dublin, where he could travel secretly. The backs of the houses seemed particularly dismal today, and he had kept his eyes to his feet as he shuffled along through the mud. He passed the stocks at Ash Square, on which someone had daubed the words "Christ Is Good" in paint, with, it had been explained to him, one of the armholes as the extra *O* in *God*. He started to sing:

"Christ is God
But where's his body
Remov-ed from yonder grave
Christ is God
Let's drink a toddy
Every man will too be saved."

He wasn't happy with "Let's drink a toddy," but it didn't stop him from refining the six lines until it was the only line that remained. That took three clocks.

He was two hours away from Mother's. He hadn't stopped to eat or drink. The urgency of Annie's voice had stayed with him, hurrying him along, and he was taking the task of depositing the bundle very seriously. Eight clocks to go.

He kept the small bundle tight under his shirt, covered by his coat. He saw no one he knew until a ballad seller of his acquaintance, named Bellman, stopped him on his way.

"Pharaoh! Pharaoh!" Bellman called.

Pharaoh hadn't known whether to stop or continue on as though he hadn't noticed. But while he had been weighing these options he had been looking directly at Bellman, and

he realized that it would be ridiculous to do anything other than walk toward him. Bellman had known him for years, ever since Pharaoh's father, an operator at one of the Covent Garden gaming shops where he worked the faro tables, had been murdered for feeding information to the law. Then the newly orphaned boy had begun to work for Mother, and after that he had always been known either as Mother's Boy, or simply Pharaoh, for his father's profession. Bellman couldn't recall the father having any music in him.

Pharaoh felt the bundle underneath his overcoat. It was his lunch.

"What have you got there?" said Bellman as he beckoned him over.

"It's my lunch."

"Rather a *late* lunch, isn't it?" said the ballad man, hopping from one foot to the other to keep the warmth circulating. He had a stick to one side of him that was somewhat taller than he was and from the top hung a few long sheets of paper. He kept the bottoms from trailing on the ground, holding them like the train of a lady's dress. Each song was a yard long, but they were sold three abreast, and his usual cry was "Three yards of song! Three yards a penny!"

"It's my dinner," said Pharaoh, turning to leave.

"Pharaoh! Don't go. Have you got anything for me?" He referred to himself as a balladeer, but the police knew him as a pinner-up and a nuisance. "Have you got any songs? I'm off to the printer and p'raps I can suggest another one to him like the last time."

"I heard that one about Mary Arnold, the Female Monster," replied Pharaoh, who wasn't really thinking about the songs but was remembering the two pennies he'd been given the last time he'd sung to Bellman.

It had happened by chance: Bellman was drinking with him one night when Pharaoh had started to sing. The song, a ghost story, unrolled in almost perfect rhyme, as though it

were already written by the time he sang it. Bellman, used to the boy's aimless singing, thought at first it was some sort of popular novelty that he might crib and started scribbling in shorthand. But it was unknown to everyone Bellman mentioned it to — and nicely poetical, to boot. Bellman kept Pharaoh's tune, changed the words around somewhat to improve upon the whole, and made himself a tidy profit, from which he had bought the very sheets he was now attempting to sell, bestowing the pennies on the boy from his own pocket. The sheets cost him one pence a dozen, and for taking down just that one song, Bellman had been able to buy enough stock for three or four months.

Pharaoh liked Bellman because Bellman liked songs. Pharaoh loved all songs, but most especially ballads: he adored a lamentation, when the "soon-to-be no more" reflected upon his own guilt and succumbed to the urge to detail most minutely the horrors of his crimes and the devilish instruments with which these crimes were committed. Pharaoh had stood beneath the gallows with Bellman and set up stall with "The Lamentation of Trilby the Highwayman" even as Trilby was being hanged above them. Seconds after the deathly hush, the bolt was drawn and the first copy had gone.

"Don't give me yer Mary Arnold. We know all about her! What were you singing when you came along here?" Bellman asked. "I seen you. Was it something you made up?"

"I can't remember. I was singing about what I was doing." Pharaoh kicked his feet out of awkwardness.

"What were you doing?"

"I was singing."

"Oh, go on. I've got no time for you today. But if you think up another song like that other one, then you come and tell Bellman first and he'll go to the printers, see. They're going to print up that first one on a piece of paper just like this." It

was getting dark and the ballad man was ready to give up for the day. He had sold no songs at all.

"With a picture?" asked Pharaoh with growing interest.

"Just like this one," said Bellman with a laugh, showing him an engraving of a man strangling a prostrate woman with a large length of string. "A good picture that'll *illustriate* the story. Go on, Pharaoh, give us another. You've got the knack, and it's no small gift."

"I have to go now."

"What's your business down beyond?" asked Bellman as he folded up the sheets and shoved them somewhere deep inside the cavernous depths of his coat and then telescoped the pole into a stick that he leaned upon.

"To the clock seven after this one," said Pharaoh, and he walked away, leaving Bellman scratching his head for lice.

By the twelfth clock, Pharaoh was far outside his normal patch: everything was as unfamiliar and unreadable to him as the tunes on the sheets. The clocks were unusually far apart and he now found himself in a place where he no longer had to be mindful of avoiding people, where he would be grateful to see anyone to avoid. It was getting dark and he held the bundle tight, tucked down the front of his trousers now, and he sang to cheer himself up.

He passed a tavern called The World's End. He knew because of the sign: a globe with flames spouting from its core, burning right through the earth, exploding from the surface into the atmosphere.

"When forth in my ramble, intending to gamble
To an alehouse I ambled most freely
In The World's End far from town, I did spend near a pound
Until I became fuddled most really."

To his left there was a derelict church tower with a clock face that had no hands on it at all. A marsh stretched out to

his right beyond a bleached graveyard.

As the houses and the pubs dwindled to rubble and the nature on the outskirts of town ate its way back into the city, Pharaoh realized that it was later than he thought, that he had walked much farther than he had intended, lost in his mind's song. The moon cast shadows around him, and to his right he saw a mountain towering above him. There seemed to be no way around it, and no alternative but to climb up for a better view.

It was the end of his journey, the end of the line, where the city oozed what it had no more use for and couldn't burn. All the avenues of excrement and urine made their way here and Pharaoh knew the stench was what came after the smell of life, after the sweat and the bodies, the rooms and their contents. It was what happened when things were left to die, when there was no more hope. It reminded him of the back room at Mother's. And he knew this was where he would turn around. It was time to complete his task, to go home again.

The foulness was magnificent, an acrid bilious smell of waste, the sweet rottenness of which worked its way to the back of his mouth and made him salivate. As he climbed, he could barely make out the bags and sacks around him that were his floor, walls, and, when he slipped, his ceiling. But he could hear the crunching underneath (eggshells and glass, bones and old china) and he could hear the seagulls above, cawing insolently. He fell onto his face and found his nose pressed against a sediment of muck, as though the earth were lying on her back bleeding toward him, purging her illness. And finally he gave up, lay on his back, and looked up through the early-evening sky at the stars, the bright stars so far away that he was rarely able to see above the chimneys of the city.

He felt for the bundle under his shirt and laid it beneath his head as a pillow. He stared up at the expanse of the night sky, and the eye of the silver moon returned his gaze.

No one would ever find him here. Above him he saw the belt and the twins, the plows big and small, and he ceased to notice the stink just for a moment and sang a song, an apostrophe to the stars and the moon. It was a lullaby for himself, for the city at night and for the dead among the rubbish.

“Oh stars in the night sky
Look down on the me.”

His body was at rest for the first time since he had spoken to Sailor. Just as he was on the point of sleep, he felt the stars reach down for him and kiss him, wet and sticky, breathing on his face to keep it warm. He woke with a start to find a large dog licking his cheek. The dog, on a nighttime scavenge among the leftovers, thought he had discovered food, but then identified his find, more correctly, as a playmate. Pharaoh, after the initial shock at his tumble from the heavens, pulled the dog toward him and laughed as they wrestled together, the dog sneezing with excitement, blowing out a drizzle of snot over the boy’s chin.

There was a bone cruelly tied to her tail with a piece of string. Pharaoh undid the knot and put the bone in the dog’s mouth. She immediately dropped it on Pharaoh’s chest. She was crouching before him with her front paws extended, begging for the bone to be thrown, so Pharaoh hurled it as far as he could from his supine position and the dog ran off somewhere into the black. Pharaoh could hear nothing more than an excited scrabbling, until the dog suddenly bounded up to his right with the bone between her teeth as though having it thrown again would be the most novel thing in the world.

Each determined to tire the other out. Finally they crashed down in a heap as the boy tried to prize the bone from the dog’s mouth one last time, and they started to slide down through the rubbish. The dog yelped and Pharaoh, laughing,

reached out to catch her, cutting his arm on a shard as he did. They landed at the bottom of the rubbish slide in a mess of limbs. The dog shook herself with dignity and proceeded to lick Pharaoh, who was easily tickled. He sung the dog a song through his laughter.

“A dog there was, I’ll have it be known
A pile of dust the place she called home
As happy as a Queen’ll be
If Pharaoh throws this bone for she.”

Pharaoh could see the glow of streetlamps in the city in the distance, and he knew that it was past time to head back to Mother’s. The baggage had been underneath his head, but he had lost any idea of its whereabouts when their game of catch had caused them to stray from the spot. But he wasn’t worried. It was poison, to be got rid of, and now it was another piece of rubbish in a whole world of rubbish.

The dog watched him as he walked off, and it seemed to Pharaoh that she wanted to follow him away from the dustheap but couldn’t allow herself to leave. Pharaoh said good-bye and heard the dog growl at him without anger.

“I’ll take you with me,” Pharaoh imagined himself saying, and the dog answering: “I can’t come. I live here. I have work to do.” Neither of them mentioned the little bundle of poison.

The journey home already seemed shorter, but he couldn’t stop thinking about his new companion and, despite his hunger, turned back, thinking that he could persuade the dog to come, and, more unlikely, persuade Mother to take her in. He would at least finish his song about the dog that guarded the rubbish for a living.

To his surprise, he saw that the dog had made her way down the pile to the side of the road. She had somehow found the bundle, which she was licking with her long,

slobbering tongue. Pharaoh watched with pleasure until a horrible thought struck him.

“Poison!”

His heart started to beat faster and things became obscure. He had to stop the dog, this he knew, but just as he was on the point of shouting and running over, a coach came up behind him and he ducked down. Lost in panic, he hadn’t noticed until it was upon him, and he wondered at its incongruous splendor as it trundled by. The dog, which seemed none the worse for licking the bundle, also heard the carriage and picked up the parcel in her mouth protectively. The coach made its cautious way down the uneven road until it got to the dustheap, where it abruptly stopped. Pharaoh kept his head as low as he could.

The moon glinted on the shining side of the coach, and one of the two men in the driver’s seat, after consultation with the passenger, finally dismounted. Pharaoh watched as the man, to the great curiosity of the driver, who got down and patted his horses, approached the dog. Conceivably it was their dog and they wanted her to come home? No — the man put out his hand and carefully exchanged the bundle for what was probably food, though Pharaoh couldn’t quite see. He strained his neck as he tried to gain a firmer foothold in the subsiding matter beneath. The man lifted up the package, started to unwrap it, and, from what Pharaoh could make out and to his astonishment, slapped it. There was a cry. A cry? The dog? No, the dog growled, and in the boy’s mind, everything started to happen very quickly.

A baby? A poisonous baby? This was bad. Should he let them know, or should he run? His first loyalty was always to Mother, but he soon ceased to be able to make sense of anything and closed his eyes to try and focus his thoughts. He started to sing,

“And into that carriage they handed the babe
And may nobody call me a liar,”

but it did him no good. There was shouting in incomprehensible accents, and Pharaoh, knowing only that he must not be seen, turned and slid down in the opposite direction as quietly as he could, determined to keep going even if he was spotted. This was nothing to do with him any more.

As he left, he heard two quick flicks of the whip and the distant snort of horses before the carriage went on its way. Pharaoh started to sing something soothing, anything, but his mind kept trying to make sense of what he had seen. A baby? It could hardly matter. The bundle was gone. It was important only that he get as far away from the dustheap as he could. But what would Mother say? He knew too much, but what did he know? He didn’t even want to know. A song would help him. Best not to tell her, all the same. Pharaoh sang quietly to himself, and before long, his heart beating slower and his feet dragging, he was once more lost in song.

He kept to the wider roads, but there were only a few people around and no one noticed him. There were men, the kind who come out only at night like cats, parading beneath the streetlights, spitting and sneezing in turn, bristling in silhouette; and women, moths gathering around the gaslight. They were interested only in each other. And there was the sound of the night around them, a steady quavering monotone. He missed his new friend.

As he got nearer home, he had the impression that someone was following him. Perhaps it was just his fancy, but he took a couple of odd turns when he found himself back in the refuge of the familiar maze. Here, he could lose anyone.

To his surprise, he ran into a man coming around a corner, a well-dressed gent in a dark brown cape who seemed, by his clothes and bearing, too rich for roaming the streets on his own at night. Pharaoh went one way to get past him and, by chance, the man did the same. Pharaoh moved again and the man anticipated him. They were at an odd

stalemate, and Pharaoh’s only option, his teeth chattering while he was not moving, was to wait for the man to make his move. Pharaoh held his patched clothes together with one hand as the man stared at him. The boy snapped at the man, but the man unexpectedly reached out his hand and put it on his shoulder: to detain him or to give him money. Pharaoh decided it was the former, turned around in an instant, and ran off, twisting out of his ragged jacket as he did so. In his hurry, it was left in the man’s hand. He didn’t turn around as he ran off back toward his patch. No one likes a busybody, and as Mother had told him many times: “Nobody wants to help.”

2

FROM THE RELATIVE safety of his carriage, Lord Loveall pulled the curtain aside and peered into the wilderness. He had no curiosity about his surroundings, but he knew to keep half an eye on the passing world to soothe the queasiness induced by the tottering of his carriage. Though this relieved one kind of nausea, it exacerbated another: it reminded him how far he was from home, and this very distance made the desolation around him more threatening, even from the opulent womb of the state chariot.

Despite his thirty-three years, Geoffroy Loveall looked like a small child peeking through the opening of a laundry basket during a game of hide-and-seek. He held a filter of lilac silk to his nose and mouth, and this hid a thin, perfectly elegant mustache. The kerchief was one small element in a complex and time-honored routine meant to improve, by tiny degrees, his infrequent trips to the city — the soft comfort of the silk on his lips, salts to revive him at a moment's notice, a flask of sherry strapped firmly in a recess beneath the window. His hand was poised constantly by the sash — one pull would get him the attention of his man above.

The vehicle was ideally suited for a gentle turn around the park on a Sunday afternoon, and it groaned reluctantly through the no-man's-land at the very edge of civilization. As it made its way back to the country seat of its owner, Loveall anticipated with delight his return to the warm reassurance of Love Hall.

"His lordship is invisible," his gentleman Hood had been known to inform the understaff: no one should notice him at

all. Within the walls of Love Hall, Lord Loveall could command this kind of respect. But Hood could not stage-manage the rest of the country or direct its players in acceptable etiquette, so anybody was free to gaze upon his master (his odd dress, his otherworldly manners) as long and as insolently as he pleased. These rare excursions were almost too much for Loveall: the distance, the dark, the sporadic movement of the carriage as it lurched to and fro, the ominous cries of creatures unknown — all combined to terrify. The alternative, however, was a night away from home, and that was worse, far worse. How would Dolores manage without him?

The slough of despond spread out all around, unmanageable, unstoppable. Who knew where it ended? When did the houses begin again? Where were the people and their servants?

It was not the first time that Geoffroy had journeyed to the city in order to arrange his mother's papers before the final end was upon her. Lady Loveall's death had been monotonously close for the past three years, and as she was confined to her bed, her sole remaining pleasure seemed to be to keep her heir occupied with tedious tasks. Though dull in themselves, these tasks represented terrifying labors of love to her son, and she knew it. In her opinion, he wasn't yet fit for the world at large. She was trying to break him in gently before she died.

The master in chancery, in chambers bisected by shafts of light where the dust from the books played around him like tiny insects, had scratched his cheek beards continuously for two hours as he scrutinized the documents in question. Loveall sat in a corner, an orange-silk-gloved finger to his mouth in a perpetual gesture of surprise, communicating only through his man, Hood. It was agreed, yet again, that there was no cause for concern: Loveall had long since inherited and there was no doubt to whom the dowager was leaving her possessions. There were no rival claims. It was

when his lordship himself died, if he died without issue — Merciful God preserve him for a long and happy life — that such problems would begin.

The carriage lurched suddenly to the right and Loveall coughed like a discomfited cat trying to rid itself of a hair ball. On a small traveling table in front of him, his man had laid out some morsels of food, which bobbed up and down with every seasickening heave. He picked at the cheddar, first smelling it and then taking but the smallest mouthfuls, biting only between his two front teeth.

Nausea overpowered him once more. He lifted the curtain again, to be confronted by a dirty tavern — he knew what it was but could barely bring himself to imagine what went on inside. Beyond, he was appalled to see a mountain of rubbish. The moon shone down on the mass of waste and broken glass, which glinted its reflection. At the foot of the heap, Loveall saw a stray dog pawing at something vigorously. She was holding a bundle between her jaws, and either it was a trick of the moonlight or her mouthful seemed to be . . . With unusual curiosity, Loveall looked closer.

“Hood!”

He pulled the sash and then, in case this wasn’t quite sufficient, rapped a silver cane on the ceiling of the carriage. The curtain on the door whipped up with a twang of the drawstring.

“Yes, sir?” Hood had not expected this sudden summons but was at his master’s side within seconds. He looked down at Loveall through the window, his jowls dripping like wax from a candle.

“Stop if you will,” said Loveall, his soft murmur making it a legato sigh. “That dog . . . in its mouth?” And, as though it were an everyday occurrence, Hood issued an order and, when the carriage stopped, readied himself, dismounted, and approached the dog. She growled, but Hood, picking his way through the rubbish, had come prepared. He took a