

IN THE LAP OF THE GODS

I've always been a very guarded person. I am particular when it comes to who I associate with. Not everyone makes the cut. But sure, I can be social. Who can't put on a cheery face, have a few drinks, and engage in conversation? It's easily done. I have steps:

Step 1: Dress to the nines.

- \* Will most likely require assistance.

Step 2: Indulge in some liquid courage.

- \* Not too much, but enough to put some colour on the cheeks and let down some barriers.

Step 3: Think of interesting ideas and interject with witty comments.

- \* While oozing intelligence, mystery and swirling drink.
- \* Maybe gracefully puff a cigarette, if feeling frisky.

You see? Simple. Now, while I have your attention, as I no doubt have, allow me to tell you all a story.

It was January 1923. London's ejaculation of jazz was only a distraction from my dreams—to one day be a published novelist. I was working at a newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, clanking away on a typewriter, finishing a piece on a load of tediousness—either a parliamentary election or a speech in Trafalgar Square. They were both so dull I cannot rightly remember.

My boss was his Holiness, the Archbishop of Cantbearthesightofhim, overseer of everything and doer of absolutely nothing, save pinching the female staff's arses in the lifts. William Bangor was a sight to behold, with a thick mustache and bushy eyebrows, which remained scrunched together until a deadline was met.

“Eleanor, where's my piece on the Archbishop's speech?” You guessed it—his eyebrows were unified by the stress of his employees' lack of urgency.

“Almost finished, Mr. Bangor.”

*Wanker.*

“Good—don’t work too hard now. No man wants a woman with forehead creases.”

*And no woman wants a man with a unibrow.*

“El!” Jeannie whispered over the desk in front of mine. Her oversized glasses were askew, and her expression tied a knot in my gut. A chatty, nervous girl, Eugenia Williams was also impossibly kind to the whole of humanity—the short, golden locks circling her porcelain face served as an ever so appropriate halo.

“What?”

“We’re going out on the town tonight! There’s a flat party in Kensington.”

I was certainly not going to waste precious energy socialising with tipsy morons.

“Eh…”

“It’s gonna be small, and it’s all writers and journalists.”

*So, maybe not as bad as the one two weeks ago at Cabaret City? I highly doubt those men in fake tits and wigs were scholarly.*

The day ended just like any other. I finished my piece, handed it in to the city editor, had my arse pinched by his Holiness in the lift, and walked home to Ealing—yes, quite the scandal back in the day; a single woman living alone in London.

My flat was just as spacious as it was beautiful—not at all. The dying potted plants on the windowsill made the place all the drearier. However, my favourite room was the ‘half bedroom,’ which I had converted into an office. The walls were covered floor to ceiling with pinned notes and the desk was covered with notepaper, concealing my typewriter.

As I laid down my bag and hung up my coat, there was a knock at the door. Well, it was more akin to a thunderous wrapping than a knock.

“El! I know you’re home! I heard you come in! El, you’d better open this bloody door!”

I opened it to find Jeremy, my next-door neighbour and best friend, donning cigarette pants and a brown coat made out of some poor animal. He was doing some moronic, twitchy dance, either signaling his need to use the loo or that something had caught his excitement.

“May I help you, Jer?”

“I heard the most fabulous news. You’ll never guess!”

Total pouf, of course; a master of eloquence and flirter to all. Jer was the first neighbour to welcome me when I first moved in years ago. He had lost all sense of decorum upon learning that the owner before me was a Mr. Hoare, and thus consistently referred to my homestead as “the Hoare House.”

“What is so urgent?” I asked, holding back a laugh.

Jeremy darted towards my kitchen and put the kettle on.

“Fancy a cuppa?” he asked quickly.

“Sure,” I said, suspicion tinging my tone.

“Did Jeannie tell you about tonight?” I nodded in reply. “Well, I have it on very good authority that Benjamin Hearty will be there.”

“On who’s authority?”

“The streets never reveal their sources, darling!”

Benjamin Hearty was a renowned bigwig at Boonen & Saxs Publishing House—daring, ingenious, and famous for saying the word, “no.”

“What’s this to me?”

“Don’t be daft. Get him to read your stuff! Use your... womanly ways,” he said, eyeing me up and down. His expression grew grim when his gaze landed on my tweed skirt and beige blouse.

“I can fix this.”

“You’re not *fixing* anything! And I’m not nor am I ever going to play the part of a tart to get what I want. And I like this skirt, so watch your tongue.”

“Fine. Attempt to impress him—be witty.”

“I am witty,” I said with a frown. Jer laughed and smothered me with a hug. His fur jacket tickled my nose, causing me to sneeze.

“Of course you are, dear.”

He then, with his usual dramatic flair, glided onto my couch and let out a heavy sigh of exasperation, whilst taking out a pack of Chesterfields and lighting up.

“You’ll never believe the day I had. Some daft cow called our hats ‘outrageous!’”

Jer and his friend Billy owned a stall in Kensington Market selling second-hand clothes—everything they sold had been previously owned by someone who was either dead, or bankrupt. There is nothing quite like the misfortunes of others to brighten up one’s wardrobe.

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘of course they are!’ I told her that headwear is the first thing a man notices on a woman and to be bold—it’s the 1920’s, for Christ’s sake!”

“And?”

“And then she bought three,” he said, a puff of smoke escaping his grin. “No one can resist my salesmanship or charm.” Jer gave me a wink as I ducked into my room to find a decent frock. I chose one and came back out.

“Oh God, no. El, you’re better than this.”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

“It’s the same colour as that spinster skirt of yours—a brownish shade of tedium.”

Always tongue-in-cheek, that one. His blue eyes and ever-present smirk constantly suggested scheming. Nevertheless, I allowed him to pick out another top and, of course, a statement piece of headwear—let us just say it had a feather and was not too much to my distaste.

There was a knock on the door and Jeannie and her beau, Jack Richards of the *Canterbury Journal*, were let in by Jer.

“El! We brought drinks!”

Jeannie handed me a bottle of champagne and kissed me on the cheek, undoubtedly leaving traces of ruby red lipstick.

“I love England. Getting smackeded in New York is a bit tougher nowadays.”

Jack was a tall, blonde glass of American water, and quite the newborn Anglophile. In complete honesty, having him around really gave us an elevated sense of pride. ‘Oh, tea! How fascinating. And you all just pour the leaves right in? No bag? Amazing.’ He was enamoured by the slightest details. It also helped that we, unlike Puritan America, were not a sober nation.

“I couldn’t imagine anything worse! It’s a wonder that more of you Yanks aren’t expatriates,” said Jer. I took an opportunity to open the bottle in the kitchen and down a glass as they bantered.

“El, did Jer tell you about Benjamin Hearty?” Jeannie asked as she approached.

“Yes, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Don’t be thick. You should talk to him.”

“Please don’t suggest flirtation. Jer already tried that.”

“Oh, love, please. You flirt about as well as Queen Mary likely shags.”

Jeannie’s sharp tongue never failed to shock.

“God, Jeannie.”

“Time to get sloshed,” she said with a goofy smile.

Before departing the Hoare House, Jer and I defeated the bottle of Moët et Chandon and I finished off two cigarettes, which were at the time my anesthesia of choice. Jer called the cabby over and we piled in. Despite the chilly evening air, I let down the window and allowed the foggy London breeze to glide across my unpainted face, blow around my dark curls, and make my hat’s feather dance.

“For Christ’s sake, El! Put up the blasted window or we’ll all catch our deaths!” yelled Jer.

When we arrived at Cranley Gardens it was as if we had traveled through time. The lamps were electric as opposed to the gas lit ones on my street, as were all the lights in the flat. I could see Hyde Park from the sidewalk—this was indeed the realm of London society. And I did not belong there. This was where successful, cultured, posh people lived—the kind of people who summered in the Riviera and owned 12 different tea sets for every occasion.

“E! Snap out of it, dear.” Jer elbowed my in the side as we approached the front door. After being buzzed in, we crammed inside the lift and went up three floors. When we reached number 321, the door was open and Americanesque, bluesy jazz coming from a gramophone was echoing off the high ceilings and large rooms of the elegant penthouse. Indeed, the chandelier was lit with electric bulbs and the rooms were packed with a variety of people—men dressed in tweed jackets, women dressed in outfits that sparkled, some couples dancing by the gramophone, and some sitting on couches, engaged in deep conversations. A man approached us, donning a suit and an unusual accessory—a pink, feathered boa.

“Jeremy! So glad you and your friends could join us. I’m Gregory Hardwick, but please call me Greg.” He seemed nice enough and shook hands with each of us.

“Greg, what is this?” asked Jer, flipping Greg’s boa over his shoulder. “This is not the Ziegfeld Follies!” The two giggling men wandered away towards the kitchen, presumably to make drinks, leaving me as a third wheel to Jeannie and Jack’s bicycle. Jeannie, due to her tendency to chatter when things became awkward, began pointing people out to me.

“So that’s A. J. Smith, international wine merchant—tonnes of money, lacking in personality, so I hear. And over by the cabinet, that’s Diana Leewood—lead vocalist of the Wild Tonics. They’re up-and-coming in the clubs right now.” Diana was elegant, with a golden sequin gown and a matching headband drawn across her forehead, holding back blonde curls. As for Mr. Smith, his only attractive quality was undoubtedly his fortune.

*My, Jeannie. You really have your ear to the grapevine.*

“How about I get you two ladies some drinks?” Jack suggested. Jeannie and I took a seat on a couch by a large window, from which the British Museum could be seen. On the other two couches across from us was a group discussing politics.

*How dull.*

“Well, now that revolutions have swelled over the continent, the monarchs aren’t related to King George anymore. Greece, Russia, Belgium—all have lost genetic ties to England,” said a thin man across from me.

“And let’s not forget George’s refusal to give his cousin the Tsar asylum here. Now the whole family has been brutally murdered and the Bolsheviks reign on high,” said an older gentleman to my left, swirling his brandy.

“And with this rise of socialism, now the Labour Party wants seats in Parliament,” interjected the thin man.

“Ha! That’s not likely to ever happen. The king has always kept the working class a safe distance away from government,” the older man replied. *Twats.*

“Actually,” I began, “I think that will change.” The two men looked at me in disbelief.

“Oh, and why is that, young lady?” the older man asked.

“Well, I believe post-war Europe is quite changed. The war has brought about a trend in which the monarchy seeks popular opinion. I mean, why else would the Anglo-Irish Treaty have taken place last year? The monarchy needs the entire Commonwealth behind them.”

The occupants of the couches as well as the two men were silent. I feared I had said too much or spurred an argument.

“Well said, ma’am,” said a voice from my left, hidden from view. I leaned forward and clapped eyes on a young man with dark hair in a navy-blue suit. He was puffing a cig, leaning back with crossed legs.

“Edmund, you agree, do you?” the older man asked.



“Of course. I fought in the war and found the country I returned to much different than the one I had left.” I felt a wave of relief as it seemed I had not put my foot in my mouth.

“But still, labourers have no clue how to govern—they’re an uneducated class,” said the thin man.

“So, you think knowledge of the needs and wants of average people is useless in government?” I asked. “The majority of this Commonwealth is working class. You think the lack of representation they have in Parliament is beneficial?”

“I never said that,” he replied with a coy smile. Thankfully, Jack emerged from the kitchen just in time to save me from the verbal flagellation which was sure to follow.

“Thanks, hun,” said Jeannie, switching spots in order to sit on Jack’s lap. *Lord*. I quickly gulped down my martini and headed to the back for another, escaping their public display of affection. Once I had my drink and the kitchen had been vacated, I leapt onto the counter and took a seat, reaching into my pocket for a cig. And with my luck, I had forgotten my lighter.

“Need a light?” The dark-haired man from the conversation earlier approached me, holding out a box of matches.

“Thanks. Once again, you’ve come to my rescue,” I said. He chuckled.

“I don’t think those geezers were expecting a counterargument.”

“Well, once I was called “young lady,” I had no choice but to retaliate. Snotty old pricks.” Drink never has failed to loosen my tongue, and that night was obviously no exception. He chuckled again and hopped onto the counter beside me.

“I’m Eddie—former soldier, future whatever, and presently besotted.” Being tipsy as I was, I could not help but blush and turn away.

“You’re very blunt, not to mention sure of yourself.”

“Why waste time being anything else?”

“I’m Eleanor... former nothing, future something, presently...dumbfounded.”

We talked all night long, it seemed. He was intriguing—the way he held himself, the way he covered his mouth when he laughed, and how he leaned in towards me when he spoke. He was currently looking into opening a book shop in Covent Garden.

“You like books, or is it just the business side of things that intrigue you?”

“Well, yes that, but I’ve always enjoyed reading.”

“What’s your favourite one?”

“If I had to choose, *The Iliad*.” A handsome, educated, well-read man. Of course, I was charmed. The night went on, we flirted, drinks and cigarettes were shared, my barriers were down, and I was enjoying myself. At a public gathering. Socialising.

“So El, what are your dreams?”

“Uh, what do you mean?”

“You said “future something.”

“Erm, well I guess I want to be a writer. Instead of just writing what I’m told to. I seem to constantly be the underdog in my own story, but writing about underdogs...I guess that allows me find humour in my own situations. I just love it. Writing’s the one thing I’ll always have.”

“Well, one day I have a hunch you won’t feel like an underdog, El.” Eddie was leaning in and looking at me deeply, and I held my breath.

“El. He’s here,” Jeannie interrupted, approaching the two of us at lightning speed.

“Who?” Eddie asked.

“Benjamin Hearty! Now get your tush out there.” I had forgotten about him, and now I was more drunk than I had planned on being. I ungracefully hopped off the counter.

“How do I look?” I asked

“Not bad,” said Jeannie, who proceeded to straighten my skirt and pat down my crimped, brunette hair. “Now go get him.”

“Sorry, I’ll see you later?” I asked Eddie.

“Of course.” I was not absolutely sure, but I thought I had seen a wave of disappointment flash across his face, but it left just as fast as it had come.

Jeannie and I took a seat on the couches from before, and Mr. Hearty was sitting across from me. I attempted to gauge where the conversation was headed.

“And now that we have all these ex-soldiers back with no jobs for them, crime is up. Since the war, some boroughs have become quite dodgy. Why just last week I heard there were 13 robberies in Hounslow. I guess soon, the government will be issuing us all arms to protect our own property, rather than them trying and failing to establish order,” said a tall man standing behind the couch to my left. The crowded living room responded to his remark with a bellow of laughter. I joined in, though unsure what had been so amusing about that statement. The tall man met my gaze and I had a feeling I was trapped.

“What do you think, young lady? Where might you live?”

“Erm—”

“Who, El? Why the *Hoare House* of course!” yelled a sloshed Jeremy from across the room. Bollocks. I felt a hot blush overtake my pale countenance.

*Jer, you are going to pay for—*

“El? Don’t you have to get back?” Eddie said as he approached.

“Oh, erm, yes. Excuse me.” I scurried out of the room, feeling quizzical eyes trailing me.

Eddie and I grabbed our hats and coats and proceeded to the lift. It was silent between us as we descended down the building. When we were on the walkway he broke the silence as I grabbed his matchbox and lit a cig.

“Fun party, right?” I awarded him a slight chuckle, followed by a frustrated groan.

“I’m done. I’ll never get published.”

“It happens. It’s in the past.”

“I already don’t have much going for me. I’m not the prettiest girl in the room, I dress like a spinster, and I have no guts. Plus, now my best friend has gone off his rocker and drunkenly humiliated me in front of the biggest names in publishing this side of the Atlantic.”

“That’s not what I witnessed tonight—the humiliation, yes, but not the ‘no guts’ thing.” I laughed and sighed deeply. “Forget them. Don’t worry about what they think of you. Whatever happens, will happen—but only if you forget them and do your best. As Homer said, ‘it’s in the lap of the gods.’”

“You’re right.” Being swilled as I was, I did not realise that I was walking the streets of London alone with a man. Quite scandalous at the time, I must say.

We meandered back to my flat, not taking a taxi, but slowly walking and talking. In the war he had flown bombers in both reconnaissance and strategic missions—and thankfully he explained the difference to me. The way his gaze tended to shift towards me set my skin on fire. And his reactions to jokes and banter—it was as if he could make those dark eyes smile.

“I had a great time tonight. It’s funny—I usually dread those things, the parties I’m dragged to,” he said.

“I do, too. I hate having to pretend to find everyone interesting. It was nice to actually be interested in someone for once.”

I could not believe the words that had just escaped my lips. He looked at the cobblestone below before elevating his gaze from my unfortunate clothing choices to my flushed face.

Before I could protest, I was enveloped in a warm embrace, and my lips were pressed against his. His hands held my face to his. I could feel our misty breath mingling and his cold hands tracing my jaw. When he released me, I was in a trance, and despite the cold my face was flushed, although the booze had most likely played a part as well.

“May I call on you sometime?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah, that’d be nice. I’m...gonna head in now.”

“Goodnight, El. And don’t let those prats get to you.” I flashed him a smile as I closed the door behind me. The smile refused to leave my face—in fact, it remained until the next day.

With an achy head and less than enthusiastic attitude, I strolled into the *Daily Herald*, but no matter how miserable I felt in my head or gut, my brain was afire with the memory of last night. As I approached my desk, Jeannie shuffled her way towards me, carrying in her arms a large bouquet of white roses.

“El! These just came for you. And there’s a note.” Confused and skeptical, I took the note from her. It read:

*Utterly smitten and equally sleepless.*

*Yours affectionately, E.*

Sitting at my desk, gazing upon the beautiful flowers, my hands traced my neck and lips where the feel of his touch lingered on my skin. His breath on my neck as he had pulled away was still sending shivers up my spine. The way my mouth had opened against his—

“Eleanor, where’s the piece on the Scots?” asked a looming figure towering over my desk, casting a shadow on my blissful daydream.

“Uh, yes. I will get right on it, sir.”

“You’d better, Ms. Devonshire, or it will be your arse on the line.”

*Prick.*

Another memory of last night resurfaced—when Eddie told me to “not let the prats get to me.”

“Better on the line than between your fingers,” I replied.

“Excuse me?”

“I believe you heard me. If you touch me or any staff here inappropriately again, I will be taking it up with *your* boss.” The fury was building up in my throat and I felt the ire radiate from

beneath my skin. His Holiness' eyebrows again merged together, and I knew I had pinched a nerve. He simply turned and stormed away.

"El, I cannot believe you just did that," Jeannie whispered.

For the next few days, I was careful around the boss man. Do not misunderstand me—I was in no way backing down from my strong stance about his Holiness' tendency to take liberties with the female staff. However, I could not afford unemployment. Looking back, I was lucky to not have been sacked on the spot. But, no—I most definitely did not get off easy. He would be looking closely for any mistake or tardiness from me for the remainder of my time at the *Herald*.

Later that same day, I raced the setting sun over to Bonnet & Tubbs Tavern on Piccadilly, which was my favourite spot to sit down, have a pint and write in my leather-bound notebook. But before I had a chance to push through the heavy oak doors, I heard a *honk!* from behind, and saw Eddie bound out of a cab, waving me down.

"El!" He was cheery and energetic, wearing a leering smile and a bright pair of eyes, reflecting the golden light of a hazy sunset.

"What're you doing here?"

"I was on my way home. Did you get my roses?"

"Yes, I loved them. How've you been?"

"Great. Listen, I want to take you out tonight. Are you free?"

Punctually and eagerly, Eddie rolled up to the Hoare House at eight 'o'clock sharp that evening. Jeannie had lent me an emerald green dress which shimmered against the street lamps and headlights of the sleepless city and had matched it with a green headband holding back my brown curls.

"You look smashing," said Eddie.

"So do you." My God, he wore that charcoal suit and black fedora ever-so well.

The taxi sprung towards Haymarket, stopping outside an establishment from which music and laughter were flooding out. The Kit Kat Club was alit with electric chandeliers and dozens of couples dancing and a band tucked into a corner. Pressed along the walls were two levels, each with tables and couches and fabulous people leaning into intriguing conversations, saving space for a large ballroom in the center of the joint.

“Let’s dance,” said Eddie. He knew my distaste for these kinds of outings, yet he was convinced he could change my mind. Nevertheless, I gave him a chance. We danced, very poorly, but very happily. He seemed to know what he was doing, whereas I just did what I was told to. Eddie’s toes, I feared, would never quite recover from the night. I felt a lock of my carefully sculpted hair slip out from under my headband. Eventually, we streamed away from the dancing floor and tucked into booth in a corner. Eddie bought us drinks and we shared a cig.

“El, you’re an amazing woman.” I coughed, almost choking on my Manhattan.

*I mean, I know I am. But how were you clever enough to figure that out?*

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like for us to see more of each other.” I took a moment to ponder this. All false humility aside, what was so interesting about me?

“Why?”

“I’m not quite sure, to be honest. You’re just...different. You’re never trying hard to impress, but perfectly lovely as you are.”

*Good Lord.*

Although uncertain as to whether this was impromptu poetry or a more calculated line, my vanity would not allow me to refuse him.

“Alright.”

Despite my language thus far, I am a lady, and therefore refuse to disclose what happened after we departed the club. However, I will say that the next day his touch lingered somewhere a bit south of my lips.

We became inseparable. He would come and cook at the Hoare House for Jeannie, Jack, Jeremy, Billy and myself. He would host small parties at his flat, at which he would introduce me to his multitude of friends as his ‘lady.’ On Sundays, our only days off, I would sleep in and Eddie would make breakfast, which usually consisted of a can of beans in tomato sauce, toast, sausage and coffee. I detested coffee—nasty stuff that always made me sort of tingly.

Sunday’s were my favourite days. It was always a lazy occasion. When we weren’t in the bedroom, I would clank on my typewriter and Eddie would attempt to introduce me to new music on a gramophone he had bought me for St. Valentine’s Day. He was always too generous—it worried me a bit. I knew his income couldn’t have been anything splendid at the time. Not only was Eddie overly benevolent, but also very quick to temper. Eventually, I attempted to confront him about the expensive gift.

“For Christ’s sake, El! Can’t a bloke just spoil his girl every once in a while? Most women would just be grateful and shag their beaus—but not *you*! Oh, no. You’ve always felt yourself a cut above the company!” Eddie rarely raised his voice, but in the event that he did, he would storm out of the flat and a short period of silence between us would follow. That is, until he would send a bouquet of white roses to the Hoare House or to the *Herald*. I would jump his bones and all the ugliness between us would be forgotten.

Eddie really was better than I deserved. My life changed when I met him. I was more confident, more adventurous and learned to find the fun in situations I normally dreaded. We would go to clubs every weekend, and Jer would get just sloshed enough to tell everyone in the joint how much he loved each of them while the rest of us would pretend that we were not acquainted with him. I was simply enjoying life—I would even find myself looking forward to work.

Suddenly and unbeknownst to me, I was in love. Totally and unequivocally in love, in lust and in a general feeling of longing when we were apart. And soon, I would find that my feelings were reciprocated.



It was a rainy autumn morning—the kind of day when all of London was grey above and grey below. Wearing only a slip, I pulled a robe out of the loo. As I emerged and wandered into the sitting room, Eddie looked up from his book to me, smiling, and said simply, “I love you, you know?” I did now. And I showed him I loved him, too.

A few weeks later, we were at his flat. He was cooking (he had found that the Hoare House’s single-burner stove simply would not do anymore) and I was reading the *Iliad*—he had forced me to. To be truthful, I was bored out of my skull. Wars and omens and superstitious generals? Not my bag.

Looking down from the book I noticed a piece of paper sticking out from behind a settee cushion. Pulling it out, it was a letter from Scholastic Corporation, 557 Broadway, New York City. I do not consider myself a nosy person, however I could not help myself—it should be noted that the envelop was already opened.

Dear Mr. Whittington,

We are delighted to inform you that your application has been processed and we would be pleased to welcome you into the Scholastic family. If you choose to accept, the start date would be January 4<sup>th</sup>. Please reach out with any questions.

Respectfully,

*R. C. Robinson*

President and Chairman

So, Eddie was planning to move to America. The letter was dated two weeks ago, yet I had heard nothing about it. I didn’t even know that Eddie wanted to work for a publishing house. What about his book store?

At first, the only feeling I could identify was sadness—Eddie had not shared his aspirations with me. Secondly, and more strongly, I felt anger—white-hot, steaming anger. However, I decided to do the cliché, feminine thing and ignore the letter and simply keep him at a distance until he confessed—instead of letting my anger take the reins, I have always been one to use it strategically. That night I pretended like I hadn’t seen it and went about finishing that God-awful book.

We began to drift apart. He would ring or come over, and I would pretend to not be home. Yes, it was petty. Yes, I could have simply confronted him. But both my pride and my feelings were hurt, and I allowed pettiness to take command. A few days later Jeremy, in his usual fashion, dramatically flew into my flat and laid like a nude French model sitting for a portrait on my settee.

“Do you know how many times Edmund has phoned me asking after you? Nine, just since yesterday. And that’s not including his surprise visits to my stall this week. You mind telling me what’s going on between you two?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Jer.”

“Whatever it is I’m sure it’s nothing too serious that you can’t work—”

“He’s taking a job in America.” His expression changed from confused to shocked.

“How do you know?”

We discussed the topic at length, and Jer’s suggestion was that I talk to him. What unusually sound advice from a man who once suggested I lend him my corset.

And so, I did just that. Darkness had consumed the city long before I departed the Hoare House en route to Eddie’s. Before long, and quite to my revulsion, I was seeing the glow of the street lamps and lights in passing windows through a veil of a pouring shower. As cars passed by, an icy spray of water would follow, splashing through my stockings and pooling in my shoes. Was it an omen?

Before I could answer my own question, I found myself in front of Eddie’s. A gentleman departing the building held the door for me, and I sauntered into the warm lift, leaving behind a trail of dirty street water. I was shaking, but whether it was due to my sappy clothes or the encounter awaiting me, I could not tell.

Three seconds after my knock echoed through the dimly lit hall, Eddie opened the door, a wave of astonishment painted across his face.

“What’re you doing here? And why are you soaked?”

“Rain tends to do that, Eddie.”

“I’m not in the mood for cheekiness. Why have you been avoiding me?” I brushed passed him into the sitting room. Eddie remained standing by the open door, hands on hips.

“If anyone gets to be cross tonight, it’s me,” I said.

“And why might that be?”

“Because you didn’t tell me you were moving to America.” Eddie froze for a moment, then slowly closed the door. When he turned around, he was wearing the expression I had hoped for—guilty.

“I was going to tell you.”

“When?”

“When I had made up my mind.”

“Oh.” I stood there shivering, wishing I could take back those last five seconds.

“You’re shaking,” he said, and moved to take my wet coat off. I waved his hands away.

“But you didn’t tell me. Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s...that’s not good enough.”

“What do you want me to say, El? That I’ll stay here with you? That I won’t take it?” His hands were on his hips again.

“No. If you want this job, take it. But we are supposed to share these things with each other!” Did he really think that little of me? That I would want him to give up the opportunity in front of him just to stay here with me?

*I don’t need him to stay. I am as independent as he—maybe even more so.*

“Don’t try to make me feel guilty,” he said.

“I’m not.”

“Just because you’re too scared to pursue your dream doesn’t mean that I am.”

“I am not!”

“Oh, please. You clank away for hours on end. And how many times have you submitted any of it? Zero.”

“You wanker! I let you read my stuff, but you’re the one who told me it wasn’t good enough!”

“So, you’re just letting critique stop you? You’re a coward.”

“Says the bloke who couldn’t find the courage to tell his girl he was moving across the Atlantic!”

“You’re the one who snooped through my things!”

“You can’t even drink in America! What’s so great about it?!”

The night ended on bad terms, obviously—vicious things were said, insults were exchanged, and as the door was slammed in my face, I saw the life I had subconsciously planned for myself slowly blow away like smoke.

It was usually on those lazy Sunday afternoons when these imaginings would come to me. Eddie would be tinkering with my stove or watching my reaction to a new record he was playing, and suddenly I’d be transported to a fictional future. I saw two little boys tackle Eddie in a park, the bright green grass contrasting with their dark colourings. Sunlight was peeking through the leaves of the trees above, so I knew it was a fantasy—it’s hardly ever sunny in London. Eddie would call me over, plant a kiss on my cheek and seize me by the waist, bringing me to the ground, allowing the two boys to tackle me as well. He would lean over and whisper something lovely in my ear. I would giggle and hope the children hadn’t heard.

That was all gone as soon as I heard the click of the lock and the thud of the deadbolt, signifying the end of a wonderful dream. I exited the building, gliding into the downpour drenching all of London. With only my melancholy thoughts and the sound of the torrential deluge for company, I ducked into Bennet & Hardy’s liquor store across the street.

So, there I was, with a bottle of my favourite champagne, clothes drenched to my knickers, and my head spinning with the night's events. The sound of droplets hitting my hat and the cobblestone below me was comforting. I began sipping my bottle, hugging myself with a free arm for warmth.

*What a self-righteous prick.*

I took another swig of Moët et Chandon and continued the silent conversation with myself.

*He does not deserve me—that malicious, melodramatic, menstruating man. God, I love a good alliteration.*

Soon the dark, blurry streets were replaced by bright lights and blasting music. I was standing in front of The Kit Kat Club.

*What an idiotic name.*

I caught a glimpse of couples dancing cheek to cheek, happily swaying to the shmaltzy, sickening sound of a love song.

“Let’s go,” I said to my bottle.

Making it to the Hoare House, Jeremy was waiting for me by my door.

“How was it?” Upon seeing the bottle, Jer feared the worst. “Ah, El. I’m so sorry.”

I ignored him and darted past his long, feathered coat, shutting the door behind me. Moët and I stumbled to my office and plopped down at the desk. A confused Jeremy followed.

“El, what’s going on?”

“I’m busy, Jer,” I slurred.

“Doing what? It’s well past midnight.”

“Writing.”

“Darling, your writing is great, but why don’t we save that for tomorrow?”

“Being ‘great’ isn’t good enough. I’m going to be absolutely marvelous.”

After that conversation, the rest of the night became a blur. Sprawled on top of my sheets, I awoke to a bright ray of light peeping through my blinds and a gentle knocking at my door. As I rolled out of my warm bed I passed my typewriter and saw a stack of papers beside it. I rubbed my achy head, strolled towards the door and opened it.

“Hey, El.” Eddie was standing before me, eyes sorrowful and hands clasping a bouquet of white roses.

“Hi, Eddie.”

“I’m so sorry for our row last night.”

“I’m not.”

“What do you mean?”

“We each showed our true colours.”

“I didn’t mean any of it! Honest, El. May I come in?”

“No.” I hesitated for a moment. He was back, apologising, equipped with flowers and a regretful demeanour. He was utterly perfect. *Why should I not forgive and forget?* But I remembered those things we said last night. I meant everything, and he most likely did as well. We both deserved better.

“Eddie, we aren’t right for each other. We need to find where we’re both going in life before we find someone right for us.”

“That’s ridiculous. I want you. I’m right for you.”

“I’m not sure you are. And I know now I’m not right for you, either.”

“El, please.”

“I wish you every success in life—in America. Goodbye, Eddie.” He looked down at the floor before his grim expression met mine.

“I want that for you, too, El.”

I slowly shut the door and leaned against its peeling paint until I heard the patter of Eddie's feet slowly retreat, a hot tear rolling slowly down my cheek. After the squeaking of the lift withdrew, I pushed back the tears which threatened to flow, swallowed that painful lump in my throat, and put the kettle on, taking a seat by my typewriter.

I shuffled through the stack of papers before me and found that none of what I had written last night made any sense, at least to humans. Wrapping a blanket around me and setting my cup down, my fingers met the cold steel of keys, and I began typing, writing anything that came to mind. A few words, a sentence, a paragraph, a page, and so on. The hours swept by and my fingers grew stiff.

"El? You home, dear?" As I heard Jer's words echo through the corridor outside, the sound of street carolers below also resonated through my small, pathetic flat. It was already Christmas. With a blanket still wrapped around me, I shuffled to the door, opening it to find my best friend holding an enormous pine tree with the help of Billy.

"What is this?"

"It's your Christmas tree, you nitwit," Jer replied.

"It'll never fit."

"Oh, yee of little faith," said Billy. The next hour was dedicated to shaving the tree centimeter by centimeter until it fit between my floor and ceiling. Pine needles were everywhere, and I made it clear who would be responsible for the tidying up. After the tree was situated and Billy had gone, Jer joined me on the couch.

"El, I love you, you know?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"I will be. I'm going to be better than okay."

"Good." Jer leaned in and hugged me tightly.

A couple weeks later Billy, Jeremy, Jeannie and Jack all came over for Christmas supper. I needed a distraction and thus had volunteered to cook for everyone. Not surprisingly, Jer had the flat decked out with holly, streamers and mistletoe and had even made paper crackers for each of us. As I set down the plate of Yorkshire puddings and bottle of brandy, Jer handed each of us our crackers. A symphony of snaps, pops and merriment followed. Jer had filled them with papier-mâché crowns and bits of sweets.

“Well put them on, dears!”

Jeannie’s crown read “Four-Eyes,” Jack’s said “Yank,” Billy’s was the Prime Minister “Stanley Baldwin,” Jer’s was fittingly “Coco Chanel,” and mine read “Authoress.” The flat erupted in fits of laughter and jeering.

“El, no offense, dear—but these mince pies remind me of the stomach flu I had last spring, but without all the fun bits,” said Jer.

“Shut it, you!” added Jeannie. “They’re really not that bad.”

“That’s alright. I’m good at other things,” I said.

On Boxing Day, Jeannie surprised me with a trip to Carnaby Street, where my eyes fell upon a new love interest—well, technically I suppose it was a love triangle. E. Remington, his sons and I were to have a beautiful love affair. I returned to the Hoare House that day with a shiny new typewriter under my arm and a refreshed attitude up my sleeve.

The following year was riddled with note-taking, drafts, rewrites and more rewrites. Juggling my job and finding time to write was near impossible, and I became quite a shut-in. But finally, as the first snowfall stuck to the London rooftops, I had created something I was proud to lay on the desk of Mr. Benjamin Hearty.

That’s right—my pride was castrated and my soul open to criticism. My folder of rejection letters was tucked away in a drawer and continued to grow thicker. But eventually, after many lonely nights at my typewriter, I had my first book deal, which fortunately sold very well throughout the



Commonwealth and the continent. Soon after, I turned in my notice at the *Herald*, citing my reasons for leaving as the following: villainous boss and dull subject-matter. And in the years that followed, other books overshadowed the first one, and so on and so forth.

And that, darlings, brings us to today—the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1947, London. Donning a few more forehead creases, a pair of thick spectacles, and my usual beige skirt ensemble, I approached a podium in Foyles bookshop on Charing Cross Way, meeting the gaze of a large crowd packed into the crammed shop. Jeannie and Jack, now married with a couple kids in the mix sat towards the front, along with Billy and Jer. They all smiled warmly up to me, and Jer shot me a wink. As their chatter diminished I began reading. No matter how many readings I give, I still have to pinch myself to remember that this is all real.

“...and so, as the sea consumed her, and its waves erased all signs of her presence, Anna felt nothing but bliss. Now, all that was left to do was to allow fate to envelop her in its arms and trust that all would end the way it had begun: in the lap of the gods.”

At that, the audience clapped. I took a small bow and quickly ducked away into the back room, surrounded by dozens of stacks of books reaching up to the ceiling. Mr. Harding, the shop manager, brought me tea, which I thanked him for, and then set a large bouquet of white roses down on the oak table beside me.

“What are these?”

“Dunno, some bloke just told me to get them to you.”

“Was there a message?”

“Erm, yeah.” Mr. Harding reached into his jacket pocket. “Here.” I quickly opened the envelope, pulling out a small piece of paper. It read:

*I knew you could do it. It was never in the lap of the gods. You made it happen for yourself. Be proud.*

-E