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Sister Noon

Black Glass: Short Fictions

The Sweetheart Season

Sarah Canary

Artificial Things: Stories

Wit's End

Karen Joy Fowler

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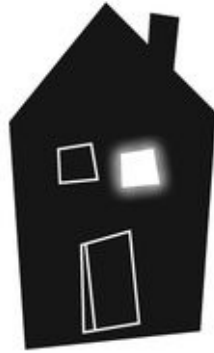
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*To Mike Burke:
mathematician, cook, teacher, backpacker, brother*

It seems only fair that I live with the people I've killed.

—A. B. Early, *interview with Ms. Magazine, June 1983*

Part One



Chapter One

(1)

Miss Time was seated with her feet on the floor and her head on the table. Her neck and back were stiff, but stiffness was her natural condition; perhaps nothing should be made of this. The kitchen curtains were pulled. There were two glasses on the counter. One was empty, the other half so. A wine bottle (red) was beside the glasses; the cork was in the sink.

A tiny clutch purse had fallen to the floor beside Miss Time's leg. Among the contents spilling out were a lipstick, keys, and a pair of reading glasses. Someone had written something on the tablecloth using a faint red ink, or maybe the wine. It might have been a phone number back from the days when phone numbers began with an exchange. A D and an A were clearly legible. Davenport 7, 3, and then maybe a 5 or maybe a 2. Those numbers had spread and the rest were fat and indistinct.

The purse was the size of an aspirin, the lipstick slightly larger than a grain of rice, the kitchen floor about as big as a sheet of typing paper. Poor murdered Miss Time was only three inches tall. And the whole tableau was on the bedside table under the reading light, where Rima would see it first thing every morning and last thing every night.

"I'll have Tilda move that tomorrow," Addison told her. "I guess you don't need it in your bedroom. I'm so used to it I don't even stop and think anymore how it looks to someone else."

Rima already knew about the dollhouses. Of course she did; they were as famous as Addison was. This was the way Addison outlined her mysteries, spending the first few months of each book making a meticulous replica of the murder scene, right down to its tiny clues and tiny gore. "If I can just get the murder scene right," she told *Ms. Magazine* ("A. B. Early Thinks Small," an interview Rima kept for many years in her sock drawer and reread often), "well, then the book practically writes itself."

The interview was accompanied by a picture of Addison making minute adjustments to a pin-size bread knife. She'd aged since then, though not much. In her middle sixties now, she was too thin, but she'd always been too thin, all bone and sharp angles, as if she'd been made from coat hangers. Deep set eyes and Eleanor Roosevelt's teeth.

"I got my first dollhouse when I was four," she'd said, first in an interview with *Ellery Queen*, October 1985, and then in many interviews after. "And a few years later a little man and woman to live in it. Mr. and Mrs. Brown.

"I hated the Browns the second I laid eyes on them. I loved the little furniture. The little people made my skin crawl.

"I didn't want *anyone* to live in it. I wanted it to be *my* house. Or maybe fairies, you know, that you wouldn't ever see, but you'd pour milk into the thimble-teacups and when you came back later the milk would be gone.

"So I rigged a noose from a rubber band and hanged Mr. Brown from the banister. Mother always said that was her first clue about me. He had a name, she always said, as if it wouldn't have been shocking at all if only I hadn't known his name.

"But there was something so creepy about little Mr. Brown. He wore a hat you couldn't take off." All A. B. Early's books begin with a death. This one starts here, with Miss Time's plastic head on

the table in the kitchen on the nightstand in the guest room of the old Victorian house on the cliff over Twin Lakes State Beach in Santa Cruz, California.

The house was called Wit's End. It was a bed-and-breakfast (though with a different name) when Addison bought it, and before that it had been the final home of some woman who'd survived the Donner Party. Rima heard her father say that once to her mother, she was five at the time, and for months she'd anguished over this deadly party the Donners had given. Was it the punch? She became frightened of birthdays, a fear that had never completely gone away.

Rima slept at Wit's End before she saw it. She'd arrived late, even later if you were on Ohio time, and Addison had taken one look and brought her straight up to the guest room—her room now, Addison said, for as long as she liked, Rima was her goddaughter, after all. Which was kind of Addison, because even though Rima was her goddaughter, they didn't know each other well and might not like each other. Rima would have said the odds of that were high. She felt that Addison was trying to make her welcome, and that the operative word there was "trying."

The guest room was on the third floor. It was a beautiful room with ivory walls, dove-colored wainscoting, dark sloping ceilings, a fireplace, a private bath, quilts that smelled like cedar, and candles that smelled like apples. In the bed-and-breakfast days, people paid two hundred fifty dollars a night to sleep in this room. There was no corpse on the nightstand then.

Rima had only two suitcases to unpack, but she was tired enough to leave them till morning. Even so, it took her a long time to fall asleep, and maybe this was because of Miss Time.

But maybe it was Berkeley and Stanford, Addison's matched set of long-haired miniature dachshunds. "They don't know you yet," Addison said. "You should probably hook the door." So the dogs spent the night in the hallway, egging each other on, clicking back and forth on the wood with their claws, and occasionally hurling their little bodies against the guest-room door to see if the hook still held.

Or maybe it was the invocation of Rima's father. "You know I was very fond of your father," Addison had said, which Rima did know, because her father had always said so, though her mother used to say that Addison had a mighty funny way of showing it.

Rima had heard once, or maybe read, that when someone important to you dies, they come back in a dream to say good-bye. She was still waiting for the dream about her mother, and her mother had been dead almost fifteen years. (Aneurysm.) Her little brother, Oliver, had died four years ago. (Car crash.) Probably her father (leukemia) was caught in the queue.

The stairs creaked. The window blinds rattled whenever the heat came on. Rima could hear the clock on the landing at the hour and the half-hour, and the tick, tick, tick of the dogs' nails. The pillow was too fat unless she slept on her side, and she had a pinch in her neck from the ghastly plane seat, a clamp in her chest from everything else. There was another incessant sound, a sort of sobbing heartbeat.

After several hours of not sleeping she got up, went to the window, and opened the blinds. As soon as she saw the ocean, she realized it was the ocean she'd been hearing. It was a cloudless, moon-soaked night. There were lights in the distance—a single green one on the top of a very small lighthouse, a white cluster at the yacht harbor, and farther off, a line of lights where the wharf was. To the right of the wharf, less lit, more ghostly, she could just make out the high curves of a roller coaster, a second roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, brightly colored, but all distant and small, like something for Miss Time.

Rima recognized these things though she'd never seen them before; she had stepped into one of Addison's books. And even as she looked right at them—the yachts, the wharf, the boardwalk—they

remained make-believe, the night too bright, the ocean too black, the lighthouse too small.

In fact, wasn't *everything* too small? A mocked-up, scaled-down representation of the real thing? Rima made a little mental list:

the tiny lighthouse the tiny boardwalk, no bigger than the pane of glass in the window

Addison's tiny dogs and their tiny teeth

Addison's tiny dollhouses and their tiny deaths

And Rima was fine with that, relieved—in fact, eager to be little herself, to do and have and feel little things. A little room of her own. A little job for Addison. Someone else's little life that she could just slide inside until all her emotions had shrunk enough to be manageable.

The night Rima arrived at Wit's End she was twenty-nine years old. The list of things she'd lost over those years was long and deep. Her father used to say that when they decided to get rid of Jimmy Hoffa they should just have handed him to her. Among the missing: countless watches, rings, sunglasses, socks, and pens. The keys to the house, the post office box, the car. The car. A book report on Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* plus the library's copy of the book plus her library card. Her mother's dangly turquoise earrings, the phone number of a guy she met playing pool and really, really did want to see again. One passport, one winter coat, four cell phones. One long-term boyfriend. One basically functional family.

The boyfriend left when a lump in Rima's breast turned out to be benign. "I just can't go through this," he said, and when she repeated that there was nothing to go through, that she didn't have cancer or anything else, he said, "But when I thought you might, I saw that I just couldn't go through it."

"You'll always have me," Oliver used to say whenever a boyfriend went missing, but this time he wasn't there to say it. Rima still had her father then, but they both knew about the leukemia and no one was making any promises no one would have believed even if they had.

Rima pulled the quilt from the bed, wrapped herself in it, and sat in a chair at the window. A bright road of moonlight lay on the water. She imagined herself walking it, the warp and dazzle beneath her shoes. She began to dream. It wasn't a big dream, not like her father's last good-bye, but Maxwell Lane was in it and she'd never dreamt of him before. She supposed it made sense that he'd show up here; she supposed, in fact, it's just what you'd expect. Rima remembered that Addison had once called this The House That Maxwell Bought, before she learned that the original name, the name the Donner Party survivor had used, was Wit's End.

In Rima's dream, Maxwell Lane was walking beside her into Ice City. He put his arm around her shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself," he said. "Everyone misplaces stuff," which, of all the things someone could say to you, in or out of a dream, has got to be one of the nicest.

In Ice City, Maxwell Lane is Rima's father's archnemesis.

(2)

There is no Ice City. There is no Maxwell Lane. It was one of the peculiarities of Addison's profession that she, though quite famous in her own right, was considerably less famous than the detective she'd made up. She'd never been in a movie, for one thing, and he'd been in eight, plus three television series, none of which lasted more than a season, but still, there'd been three of them. And a television season was a lot longer back in those days; it lasted most of the year.

Rima had her own colorful history with fictional characters. Her father had been more fictional than you might guess. A character in Addison's seventh book was named after him—Edward Charles Wilson Lanisell—though the name he went by was Bim; even on Rima's birth certificate he was listed as Bim Lanisell. Addison had used every one of these names, and one of her father's verbal tics as well—a habit he had of starting a conversation with “Okay, then.” There could be no mistake about Addison's intentions.

Addison and Rima's father were old pals, unless they were something more. Rima's father was a writer too; for many years, he wrote a newspaper column that appeared in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Once, when their finances had taken a tumble, he went on local TV, shilling for a tire company in a silly voice and a silly tie. He was famous enough. But nowhere near as famous as the made-up man of the same name who killed his wife with her own cat and almost got away with it.

In Rima's case, the character came first and she later. Rima was named after the heroine of *Green Mansions*, and she'd liked her name until some kids at school figured out that you could do dirty things with it if you worked phonetically. Her brother Oliver, who heard some of them, said she should have a name all of her own anyway, and offered her four choices he'd made simply by rearranging the letters she already had. She could be Irma, he said, or Mari or Mira or Rami, and he took it in turns to call her all four, each for a week, so she could test them out. Rima liked Rami best, but she couldn't get people to switch over. Oliver liked Irma—the Irm part made him laugh—and he called her Irma until the day he died, though no one else did, which was so Oliver, that intimacy of a private name. Of all the people who'd died, Oliver was the one she missed the most.

The *Green Mansions* Rima was the last survivor of a doomed people, a fact that, in retrospect, her parents might have paid more attention to.

Even Oliver was an orphan's name.

(3)

But the names were only the beginning, and arguably the least of it. Sometime when Rima wasn't watching, sometime after her mother died and she was kept busy being both motherless and adolescent, Rima's father's writing changed. Bim Lanisell had been a political journalist. When he became a columnist, his work turned personal. He was struggling to learn how to be a father and a mother both, he wrote, and he was sharing his struggle with the entire population of Cleveland, Ohio. And its environs. A few international subscribers.

Rima found this out one day after he'd been actively soliciting confidences. She remembered it later with outrage, how she'd offered up her biggest secret so that he could feel like a good parent. She'd told him about a boy she liked in her world history class; she told him that this boy didn't know she was alive. She asked her father how to get a boy to notice her, even though she knew this wasn't a problem he could help with. It was all about him, this generous pretending that it was all about her.

The whole conversation was the topic of his next column, a musing on how you didn't really grow up until you watched your children grow up. He stopped short of discussing the boy, but not his daughter's—he actually used these words—budding sexuality. The next day when Rima went to school, there was no one there who didn't know she was alive.

Rima was particularly incensed at how well her father had come off in his own column. Not

stammering and useless, the way he had actually been, but awash in midwestern profundities. Every woman in Cleveland was in love with him—the number of women who wished to date him was directly inverse to the number of boys who wished to date Rima, if negative numbers could be applied and Rima felt they could. And he wasn't even completely real. (But when has that ever stopped a woman in love?)

Rima herself loved the useless, real father so much more than the wise, revised one. "I was very fond of your father," Addison said when she called to insist that Rima come stay with her, and of course it was Addison who'd added the third Bim Lanisell, the entirely fictional one.

And why, Rima's mother had asked Rima's father from time to time, make you a wife-killer? And once or twice, why the sort of wife who would be (though wasn't) played by Kathy Bates in the movie version?

The entirely fictional Bim had actually killed three people, but the wife was the only one Rima's mother ever seemed to talk about. Granted it was the murder with the most panache, the murder Addison had clearly put her heart into. Surely this was the murder in the original dollhouse.

Rima had her own questions for Addison. If Addison thought it was fun going through the Shaker Heights public schools with a famous murderer for a father, she could think again. Addison might technically be Rima's godmother, but it was a decision long regretted, at least by the women in the family. Addison had never really risen to the role anyway.

None of Rima's friends had thought that going to Santa Cruz was a good idea. It seemed like a dangerous place, they'd told Rima, and they didn't know the half of it. They didn't know about sharks or the undertow. They didn't know that at the same time the sea cliffs were eroding, the ocean was rising—at least two millimeters, maybe more, every year. They didn't know there was a disease you could catch from sea-lion urine that no doctor knew anything about, and if you were infected, you'd be sent to a veterinarian, who wouldn't know much about it either. They didn't know that the mountains were dotted with meth labs or that Highway 17, the route in from San Jose, was one of the deadliest stretches of road in the whole gigantic state, and was commonly referred to as Blood Alley, at least until the highway dividers went in. They didn't know that a clown stalked the downtown like something from a Fellini film.

What they knew was earthquakes and vampires. Some of them had been watching the World Series with their families all those years before, when the Loma Prieta quake hit. They remembered how the television went black, and then came on again briefly to show the stadium rocking, and then went black for good. They remembered that Santa Cruz had been near the epicenter, though what they really remembered was the collapsed freeway in Oakland and the car that went off the Bay Bridge. Anyway, it was all California, wasn't it? California had earthquakes.

All of them had seen the movie *The Lost Boys*. When they pictured the boardwalk, they pictured it infested with vampires. Of course, they didn't suppose it was really infested with vampires; they thought that "Murder Capital of the World" stuff was just made up for the movie, not based on an actual, dreadful period in the seventies when Santa Cruz had been home to two serial killers and one mass murderer. They didn't know how hard (and unsuccessfully) the city had tried to be known as Surf City instead.

They just said that Santa Cruz seemed to have a sort of dark energy. And then they dropped the subject, having cleared their consciences by speaking up. Honestly, they were relieved to have Rima going. They loved her, and they hoped she'd come back, and it wasn't her fault that she was in a dark space, but she was kind of bringing everyone down.

So when I tell you that she woke up on that first morning at Wit's End with the sun floating over the

house like a big, bright pie and a sense of peace in her heart just because of what Maxwell Lane had said in her dream, you will understand how unexpected, inappropriate, and downright miraculous the feeling was.

Chapter Two

(1)

That first morning Rima was slow to get up. Getting up would mean getting started, as company or hired help or goddaughter or whatever it was she was going to be here. Getting up would very likely involve chatting; her good mood was too baseless to survive a chat. Better to stay in bed, watch an ocean medallion of light slide slowly down the wall, smell the cedar on the quilt, listen to the sound the ocean made, like a distant washing machine. Better to note, as if from that same distant place, that she had taken comfort from her father's archnemeses and shelter from her mother's. If her parents found that objectionable, then they should have stuck around to prevent it.

In fact Wit's End was empty, as Rima would have known if she'd gone down to the kitchen, read the note Addison had left on the counter for her.

It was an opportunity lost. Rima would have liked having the whole house to herself, would have explored a bit, maybe seen if she could find the dollhouse for *Ice City*, the book in which her murderous cat-wielding father starred. Sometime last night she'd wondered whether Addison would mind if she moved that one into her bedroom in place of *The Murder of Miss Time*, and then she'd wondered what was wrong with her that she would even think such a thing.

Rima," the unread note said. "The dogs are being walked, I'm working in the studio, and Tilda has gone out. Help yourself to breakfast. Eggs and tomatoes in the fridge. Bread in the breadbox. See you at lunch. A"

Here is the long version:

1. Berkeley and Stanford were down on the beach, ecstatic and leashless, chasing gulls the size of beach balls and getting sand on their bellies, between their toes, inside their ears. They would quarrel over a dead fish, have to be forcibly separated, and come home in disgrace. Addison referred to each and all of their frequent fights as The Big Game.

2. Addison was out in her studio, and no one knew what she was doing anymore. She hadn't finished a book in three years, and two had passed since anyone who knew her well had asked how the new one was coming.

The studio had been added after Addison bought the house. She called it her outback, though it was really to the side of the main building. You walked on a paved pathway to get there, through a Spanish courtyard, past a trellis of roses, a clay birdbath, and a sticky, sweet-smelling fig tree.

The studio was a modern room with wireless broadband. Addison had a Norwegian recliner for napping, a desk, and a craft table. The ocean-side wall was made of five glass doors, each of which slid inside the next like a telescope, so that in good weather the room could be opened to the sea. A

mobile of murder weapons, made by a reader in New Hampshire, hung from the ceiling, and when the breeze came off the ocean, the dangling knives and blunt objects struck against one another with a sound like wind chimes.

And who knew what else? No one was allowed in during the dollhouse phase of a book, which meant that no one but Addison had been inside the studio for three years now, with the exception of one much-loved computer technician, Ved Yamagata, who also worked for the university. Ved kept Addison's gear upgraded, and his silence apparently could and had been bought, though on the subject of Japanese *manga* he was chatty enough.

You would have had to scramble up the rocks at the cliff base and then scale the face just to look inside, which you could hardly then claim to have done by accident. Even so, Addison closed the shutters whenever she left.

For some writers three years isn't a long time to work on a book. For Addison it was unprecedented. Perhaps there was no new one, her friends said to one another, but only when she wasn't around. Why should there be? How many books could one woman write?

Addison was a national treasure. She didn't have to write another word to collect lifetime achievement awards for the rest of her life. The reviews of her last two books had been chilly. They mentioned the earlier work with the sort of conventional courtesies people adopted when speaking of the dead; no one wanted to be in the room with Addison when she read them. There was no shame in knowing when to quit.

Still, Addison went to her studio, without fail or interruption, from eight every morning until lunchtime, so usually this was when Tilda vacuumed up the sand and dog hair, but today

3. Tilda was over in Soquel attending her twelve-step meeting at the Land of Medicine Buddha. Since the weather was so good—no season warmer and sunnier in Santa Cruz than the glorious fall—she would stay after and do the forty-minute hike through the sequoias up to the red-gold temple. Two acolytes worked full-time painting the temple. Like housekeeping, this was a job acknowledged to be endless, red and gold paint until the heat death of the universe. Tilda might or might not be home for lunch, depending on what they were serving at the Land of Medicine Buddha.

Tilda was a tall, athletic woman in her mid-forties. Her hair was shiny, dark, and short; there was a tattoo of a snake, coiled, head down, around her left biceps. She took yoga at the Santa Cruz veterans center, where her headstand was rock steady. She was Addison's housekeeper unless she was something more, had lived with Addison for nearly three years. Sometime before that she'd been homeless, and while she was fond of Addison, her real love was Wit's End. She loved the house the way a captain loves a ship. She listened for plumbing problems, sniffed for bad wiring, kept the wood oiled, the glass polished.

Her affection did not extend to the dollhouses. They were nests of constant dust, requiring constant dusting. Before the earthquake, Addison had told her, there'd been four more, but they'd been crushed when some bookcases fell. Tilda tried to remember this whenever she was thinking that there were way too many. Not only did they all have to be dusted, but they all had to be dusted so as not to disturb the crime scene. She had to use toothpicks on some parts.

Tilda hadn't been living in Santa Cruz at the time of the quake, but she was retroactively proud of how little damage Wit's End had taken. Such a good house! One crack in one bedroom wall, some china and four dollhouses lost. When the cliff beneath gave way, as all Santa Cruz cliffs eventually would, Tilda pictured Wit's End sliding into the ocean, floating on the water like an ark.

This, then, was the household: Tilda on the first floor, with a bedroom off the kitchen and a private door out to the garden. Addison on the second floor, with the large master suite, an even larger library

and a small room for watching television. And Rima on the third floor, with two bedrooms besides hers, ~~which Addison sometimes offered to artists she knew but which were empty at the moment.~~

“You’ll have the whole floor to yourself,” Addison had promised Rima when she suggested the visit, so when Rima did finally get out of bed, she felt free to check out that part of the house.

She saw immediately that the other two bedrooms were smaller than hers and that they shared a bath. One had a view of the ocean, the other of the lake (though no one in Cleveland would have called that a lake—it was a pond in a good mood, or a puddle in a bad), but only Rima’s windows overlooked it all, and the boardwalk too. Addison was being so good to her!

Something else was pleasing Rima; she felt this long before she was able to tease out what it was. She had to do with the woman who’d lived here once, the woman who’d survived the Donner Party, and it had to do with the rooms, with the house. Finally Rima got to it—that later in her life, the woman had had so many people around her she needed a big place like this in which to keep them all. Who doesn’t like a happy ending? Even Addison wrote one occasionally.

The bedrooms were all similarly decorated—brass bedsteads, shadow quilts, glassed-in bookcases (sometimes containing Addison’s own books), pile rugs, and murders. On various shelves and tabletops, Rima quickly found: *Our Better Angels* (young woman stabbed in the backseat of a blue convertible); *Absolution Way* (old woman drowned in her bathtub); and *It Happened to Somebody Else* (old man beaten to death with the Annu-Baltic volume of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

There was no sign of the dogs. This puzzled Rima until she looked out a window and saw them climbing the stone stairs up from the beach. Tall stairs, short legs, they hopped from step to step like Slinkys, only upward and all tired out. A man with a bandanna over his head and a woman with red hair were holding their leashes. By the time Rima got downstairs, all four were in the kitchen, finishing off what seemed to have been a breakfast of poached eggs and toast. The dogs looked up from their bowls briefly when Rima came in, and then back down, as if now that she was actually in reach, the prospect of ripping her open with their bare teeth had become tedious to them. The kitchen smelled of melted butter, dead fish, and exhausted dog.

The couple looked to be about college age. (Were college age, as it turned out. Junior and senior at UC Santa Cruz.) The young woman was talking. “So she goes, ‘Excuse me. Your hair is touching me. And I say I’m sorry, because I always say I’m sorry, it’s like a reflex, you know, I just can’t help myself, sometimes I say I’m sorry for saying I’m sorry. So I push my hair down and five minutes later she’s tapping me on the shoulder, going, ‘Your hair is touching me again,’ like she’s really losing patience with me now. I can’t hear the music, I’m so busy trying to figure out how to make my hair stop doing that. And it’s not like I have big hair.”

“Maybe you have rude hair,” said the young man. He was reading the paper, mopping up the last of his egg with the last of his toast. It was possible that he himself had no hair, though with the bandanna it was hard to be sure. “Maybe you’re a rude-head.”

“So funny.” The young woman looked at Rima. “Do I have big hair?”

“No,” said Rima. It was very red, though. Except for the short bits right around her face, which were pink, it was very red, but not red like red hair, red like strawberry Jell-O. The woman was wearing camouflage pants, which seemed pointless with such unstealthy hair, unless the only thing she didn’t want looked at was her legs, because then the hair was diversionary. But no one would have said big.

“See?” the young woman told the young man. And then, “You must be Rima. I’m Scorch. I walk the dogs in the morning and pick up the mail. This is Cody. He thinks he’s my boyfriend. Addison said you were to help yourself to breakfast. She left you a note. She’s out in the studio and can’t be disturbed, on pain of death. Do you want a piece of toast? We made one too many. How do

you know Addison?”

“She’s my godmother.”

Scorch took a moment to process this. “I don’t have a godmother.” Her tone was aggrieved, as if everyone had a godmother but her. “My family doesn’t go in for that.”

“Water’s hot if you want some tea.” Cody didn’t look up from the paper.

“I’m sorry,” Scorch said. “I should have said. Water’s on the stove and the tea is over there.” She pointed to the window above the sink, where several canisters were wedged on the sill between the potted ferns and ivy. Rima went to look.

Someone in the household had a powerful faith in tea. There were fruit teas, green teas, black teas; cleansing teas, fortifying teas; teas that sweetened your thoughts, improved your rest; teas for longevity, teas for celebration, teas for contemplation.

Wisdom, fortune, health, or happiness? What kind of a monster would make a person choose only one? Rima went back to the table and took the spare piece of toast instead.

One of the dogs came to sit beside her. It was Berkeley, the female, though Rima didn’t know it; she couldn’t tell them apart yet. Berkeley looked up at her with brown, brown eyes, sighing in a smitten sort of way. She hardly seemed to notice the toast, just the shadow of a blink when it moved to and from Rima’s mouth.

But when Scorch began to gather her things—backpack, coat, car keys—Berkeley lost interest in Rima. She joined Stanford at the door, tail wagging hopelessly. Scorch knelt to say good-bye, and the dogs collapsed like deflated balloons. Rima wouldn’t have thought they could get smaller. “Don’t look at me like that,” Scorch told them. “I’m sorry. I’ll be back soon.”

And then to Rima—“Tell Addison that Maxwell Lane got a letter. Just junk. He can get a credit card or something. It’s on the table in the entry with the rest of the mail.”

“He’s in the ether again,” Cody said. “They’re rerunning the television show. The eighties one. With the moustache.”

Scorch coughed suddenly. It was a painful sound. “My throat is killing me.” She wiped one hand across her eyes. “I think I’m getting a cold.”

“We’re all going to die of the bird flu,” Cody said. He folded up the paper with a shake and a snap. “I got to get to class.”

(2)

The breakfast table was in an alcove overlooking the courtyard. Fig leaves pressed like hands against the windowpanes; sunlight rippled on the table, softening the butter in its wake. There was a hutch built into one corner with china on the top shelves and a dollhouse on the bottom: *Spook Juice*—man in a tux, brained in the atrium with an unopened bottle of Brut Impérial Champagne. Rima thought she remembered that the fact that it was unopened had been a major clue. Or maybe that had been another book, an Agatha Christie or an Elizabeth George.

The china was painted with poppies, a replication of the pattern once used in the dining car on the Santa Fe Railway. Rima knew this about the dishes, and she wondered how. There were many things Rima inexplicably knew, the residue, presumably, of lost conversations, books, classes, television shows, crossword puzzles. Like her mother before her, Rima was a devotee of the *Nation* crossword

puzzle, and as a result, she had a surprising store of slang circa World War II, much of it British.

She looked at the paper Cody had left, a thin magazine-style weekly called *Good Times*, which said fifty-one people had been arrested on Halloween, two for stabbings, and an unspecified number for public urination. The paper said this was a vast improvement over last year.

Rima made herself another piece of toast and considered the possibility that she was going to die of bird flu. She couldn't make herself think so. But everyone else probably would, Rima could easily picture that.

Next she thought about Maxwell Lane's letter. She should go get it, apply for that credit card. Buy something. That's what Oliver would have done. (Don't start thinking about Oliver.) Oliver would have done that, just to see what happened next.

She was still in the kitchen when Addison arrived, hungry for lunch after a hard morning of whatever it was she'd been up to. Rima considered escaping to her room, but it would have been rude. Sooner or later she and Addison were going to have to get to know each other. Sooner or later they would have a couple of drinks together and Rima would find herself feeling oddly comfortable, or maybe drunk, and against all her better instincts, she would suddenly say, "Okay, then. What was it exactly that went on between you and my father?" Even though, right now, drinking nothing but orange juice, Rima truly believed it was all so long ago, who cared?

This regrettable conversation could occur only after an initial extended period of politeness. So Rima stayed put, getting on with the politeness part, and Addison fixed herself a lunch, slicing, salting, and eating tomatoes while making a sandwich with many tomatoes in it, because this was California and the use of the word "autumn" here was no more accurate than the use of the word "lake." Eventually Rima remembered to mention Maxwell's letter.

Addison told her that Maxwell Lane got a surprising amount of mail. He was on any number of charitable lists, and not a single nonprofit had ever been discouraged by the fact that he never responded. It was an inspiring testament, Addison often noted (though not on this occasion), to the tenacity of the world's dogooders.

In addition to charitable requests, there were the political. Maxwell seemed to have been identified as both a leftist and a white supremacist. You could understand the latter, but it was a sad misreading or else the white supremacists didn't read her at all, which was the explanation Addison preferred. White supremacists, she was fond of saying, were the living refutations of their own theories. In point of fact, Addison had a lot of readers of whom she did not approve. Most of them, if you really want to know.

Anyway, Maxwell received special introductory offers from *The Skeptic* and *Mother Jones*, but also from *White Hope*, *White Heart* and some group called the New Thules. One unsolicited news-letter kept him updated on the schemes of the mongrel races, another tracked Big Pharm, Big Oil, and Big Brother.

Only very rarely did he get a personal letter. Sometimes these contained proposals more suited to a younger man. At least that was Addison's opinion. A silence followed this statement, broken only by the sound of the knife on the cutting board.

Rima would have liked to hear more about those proposals, but not if Addison was going to make her ask. "How old is Maxwell?" she asked instead.

Rima genuinely wanted to know the answer. Addison had been careless with her details; greater minds than Rima's had struggled to put together a coherent timeline that worked over the many books and failed. It simply couldn't be done, not with any math yet invented.

"Eight years older than I am. Seventy-two."

This Rima seriously doubted. She didn't suppose even Addison believed it. Fictional characters don't age at the same rate as the rest of us. Some don't age at all. Rima's father, to give just one example: Rima's father was dead, but the murderer with his name was fleeing east in a green Rambler station wagon on Interstate 80 and always would be.

And then there was the man in Rima's dream. There was no proposal he would have been too old for. Rima felt the ghost of his dream hand on her dream shoulder.

So how about this math instead? Addison was twenty-eight when she published her first Maxwell Lane book. Ergo, instead of being eight years older than Addison, Maxwell must be twenty-eight years younger. Strange to think that back when Addison first met Rima's father, Maxwell Lane didn't even exist.

Twenty-eight years younger than Addison was a perfectly plausible and entirely suitable age. Mid-thirties. His whole life ahead of him. Rima had a peculiar sense of satisfaction. She'd just given Maxwell Lane an additional thirty-six years in which to solve all sorts of crimes, and she'd done it with only simple arithmetic.

Addison finished making her sandwich and came to sit with Rima. Addison's hair was flattened on one side, as if she'd been sleeping on it. She looked more fragile by daylight, her elbows sharp enough to shatter on contact. Countless interviews had remarked on the paradox that the author of such chilly books could be this pale, frail woman with the friendly smile. Rima wondered briefly if "friendly smile" was magazine code for big teeth. Not that Addison didn't have a lovely smile. Probably. Rima had hardly seen it so far, but it was probably very nice.

"I've had the same postman for almost twenty years," Addison said. "Kenny. Sullivan. Kenny Sullivan." She took a bite of sandwich.

When Rima looked next, there was a little tomato on her cheek, and a seed and a smear of skin the color of blood in the deep crease beside her mouth. Funny what a difference one tiny bloody smear made on an otherwise friendly face.

Rima's mother had thought there was something vampiric about the mere act of writing murder mysteries; Rima heard her say so once at a dinner party. How it had come up, she didn't remember. In a gesture of daughterly solidarity, she decided not to tell Addison about the tomato skin.

Anyway, Addison had a napkin; it might well get taken care of without anyone's saying a word.

And anyway again, only Rima was there to see. She wasn't making a decision as much as removing herself from the outcome. Leaving things to fate.

When Rima began to listen again, Addison was still talking about Kenny Sullivan. Kenny Sullivan was a famous postman,

Addison was saying, because he had once delivered the mail to a bank right smack in the middle of a robbery. He hadn't even noticed that the tellers were all facedown on the floor, just walked in, put the mail on the counter, walked out again. He'd always been the sort of postman who lived mostly in his own head. He'd been on *Letterman* after.

But reliable, certainly, neither sleet nor snow nor armed robbery, et cetera, and Kenny could be counted on to bring any mail for Maxwell straight to Wit's End no matter how it was addressed. When there was a substitute postman, Maxwell's mail might go to a rug shop on Cooper Street that was owned by a widow from Portugal. She had Addison's number; she would give Addison a call, so no harm done. The widow's rugs were beautiful. There were two of them in the living room.

"We need to tell Kenny that you're staying here now," Addison said, just as calmly as if she weren't a really famous person with bits of tomato all over her face. "Is your mail being forwarded?"

There had been some discussion of Rima's handling light secretarial work for Addison—keeping

her calendar, answering her phone. It would have been nice, therefore, to demonstrate a bit of organizational competence. "I didn't think to do that," Rima said.

"Who writes letters today?" Addison shook her head, embarrassed to have brought it up. She herself was guilty as anyone! It was all e-mail now. She wiped her eyes with her napkin. Her eyes were nowhere near the tomato skin. "I pity social historians." Addison wiped her hands. "A hundred years from now, we'll know more about daily life in 1806 than in 2006." She wiped her chin.

"What about novels?" Rima asked.

"Unreliable. No one in novels watches TV," Addison said. "Would you be interested in Maxwell's old letters? I think I have some up in the attic."

Rima heard boots on the brick walkway outside the kitchen door. Addison heard them too, because she was saying she'd have Tilda get the letters down for Rima at the very same moment that Rima was telling Addison there was tomato on her face, pointing to her own cheek—key in the keyhole—her own mouth—doorknob turning—so when Tilda came in, stamping her feet and saying what a beautiful day it was, she'd seen an osprey at the Land of Medicine Buddha (surely not, Addison said, maybe a hawk, maybe a redtail, when even Rima knew that an osprey looks absolutely nothing like a red-tailed hawk) and first thought there was a mouse in its talons, but later seen it was a ragged old tennis shoe. Addison's face was perfectly clean.

What happened next was that they all went up to the *Our Better Angels* bedroom on the third floor, where Addison made Tilda pull some stairs out of the ceiling. The stairs didn't come easily—Tilda had to wrap the rope around her hands and hang from it with her feet braced and the coiled snake swelling on her biceps. They didn't come quietly—wood ground against wood, hinges squealed and popped. The noise brought Berkeley and Stanford racing in from wherever they'd been, both of them barking frantically.

"There was a mouse in the attic once," Addison said. She raised her voice to be heard over the dogs she was shouting. "Maybe four, five years ago. Ever since, it's their favorite place in the world. Better let them go first. You'll trip over them if you don't."

Tilda returned to the osprey and the tennis shoe, a sighting she thought had all the earmarks of portent. "What could it mean?" she shouted. It was one thing to get a message from the universe. It was entirely another to successfully decode it.

The steps landed and the dogs swarmed up them. The barking rose in pitch and excitement. "Static on the radio," Addison said. She was too focused on the probable misidentification of the bird to think deeply about the tennis shoe.

Chapter Three

(1)

The attic was a disappointment to Rima. It wasn't a romantic attic with rocking horses, birdcages, and bridal veils. It wasn't a spooky attic with taxidermy, dress dummies, and bridal veils. Mostly it was filled with boxes, some of which contained Addison's published books and had never even been opened. There were first editions, foreign editions, large print, book club, hardcover, trade paper, and mass market.

Light sifted in through two screened vents, just enough for Rima to make out the general terrain. Addison had brought a flashlight. She flicked it on, and gave it to Tilda, who began to move through the stacks, tipping the top boxes to the side so she could read the labels of those beneath. Dust rose and spun in the beam of light. The dogs were quieter now, snuffling in an efficient, disciplined fashion. They wormed their way under a heap of old dining room chairs, making them rock briefly.

As Rima's eyes adjusted, she found more to interest her. She almost stepped on a lamp with a sphinx for a base. It had no shade, no bulb, and no place to plug into. The sphinx's nose was chipped, and Rima couldn't decide whether it was supposed to be that way, eroded and faux ancient, or whether someone more recent had broken it. What Rima didn't know was that the lamp was actually a trophy for a literary award called the Riddle Prize. As such, it had a complicated iconography involving the sphinx and a light going on. Addison had won any number of awards over the years, including this one in 1979 for *Average Mean*. She preferred trophies that could be eaten, but there weren't so many of those.

A couple of posters were draped over one of the tallest stacks of boxes. The one on top was of Harrison Ford, rugged in a blue work shirt, a book by his knee. Rima couldn't see well enough to determine its title. She tried to guess what Harrison Ford might read, but really had no idea. In any case, he wasn't reading it. She slid him aside to look at the poster underneath. This turned out to be Addison, the mobile of murder weapons dangling over her head with a balloon crayoned around them like a thought in a comic strip. She was reading *Gaudy Night*, which Rima knew only because she'd seen this poster before. It announced the American Library Association's Celebrity READ series and had hung in Rima's college library during her freshman year. Eventually it was replaced by Antonio Banderas holding *Don Quixote*, and it was hard not to see this as an improvement, even if Addison was your godmother, at least when it suited your purposes to say so.

Most arresting by far was a row of plastic Santas, each about four feet tall, and strangely numerous. Rima counted eight of them, all lined up against one wall as if they were about to be shot.

The dogs had given up the mouse hunt. Rima thought they were playing together until it became clear something less palatable was going on. Addison leaned over to brush the top one (Berkeley) aside and pick the bottom one (Stanford) up. "They're brother and sister," she told Rima. "Fixed, of course. No consequences. Beyond the sheer horror of it."

Stanford shuffled in Addison's arms until his muzzle was on her shoulder. He stared morosely at Rima from under the fringe of Addison's hair. "Do you think he's gaining weight again?" Addison asked Tilda.

“Last time we were in, Dr. Sanchez said he was down a pound,” Tilda said. “Celebrations all around.”

“Dachshunds love to eat,” Addison told Rima. “Never happier than when you’re feeding them. But their backs can’t handle the weight. We have to be cold and cruel.” Rima remembered the breakfast of eggs and toast she’d witnessed. Some of us were colder and crueler than others.

Tilda moved along the front of the attic. The stacks were higher here, so Rima joined her, taking the flashlight and letting Tilda wrestle the bigger boxes with both hands. Rima could smell the morning hike on her. Not sweat so much as trees and dirt and underneath all that an almond-scented soap.

Tilda read the labels aloud as Rima illuminated them. “ ‘Reviews and Interviews, 1982-85.’ ‘Maps and Floor Plans.’ ‘1962 Gubernatorial Race.’ ‘False Starts.’ ‘Correspondence slash Letters to the Editor’?”

“Mine, not Maxwell’s,” Addison said. “Unless otherwise specified.”

The dust was beginning to get to Rima. She sneezed and the ball of light jumped. “Bless you,” said Addison.

The attic was beginning to get to Rima. The boxes seemed to her sad remnants of things much larger, a book, a cause, a life. Santa Claus. Here is what we can keep, Rima thought. Here is all that remains. And what did it accomplish, this hanging on to leftovers? If you make a lamp shaped like a sphinx, is the real sphinx made larger or smaller by that? If a bird takes a shoe, is it more than a shoe or less?

“ ‘Palo Alto,’ ” said Tilda. “ ‘Interviews, 1990-92.’ ‘Photos slash Ventura.’ ‘Receipts, 1974-84.’ Christmas cards . . . Datebook 1989.”

She realigned the boxes and moved to the next stack. The box on the top here was small—a shoe box with one crushed corner, the lid bound on with twine. When Rima shone the light on the label, she saw the single word “Bim.”

Tilda did not read this aloud. She took the flashlight back from Rima, since the stacks had narrowed and now there wasn’t room for them both. It was possible the label meant nothing to Tilda. Rima couldn’t see her face, just the black, unblinking eyes of the snake tattoo.

The label was probably about the character Bim and not her father anyway. Or maybe she’d misread it. It could have been Bin. Or Ben. BIM. Bank of Inner Mongolia. Bureau of Interstellar Management.

“I had a phone call from Martin.” Tilda’s head was down. She straightened and turned to Rima, dust and dog hair swimming in the flashlight beam between them. “My son,” she said. “Not that I was much of a mother, his dad raised him. Did a great job, he’s a great kid. Well. Not really a kid anymore. Twenty-six.”

Oliver would have been twenty-six if he’d lived. Rima felt an instant dislike for Martin, who got to be twenty-six years old and probably didn’t even appreciate it. It was such an unfair feeling that having it made her sneeze again. “Bless you,” Addison said, which Rima didn’t deserve; it only added to the guilt.

“He’s coming over Friday after work. Okay if I give him a bedroom? I hate him to be on the Seventeen after dark.”

“Martin’s always welcome.” Addison glanced at Rima.

Here is what the glance meant: Don’t worry. No way will Martin stay the night. Here’s what Rima thought it meant: I know I said you’d have the whole floor to yourself, and now I’m sorry I said so.

“ ‘Letters slash Maxwell’?” Tilda asked.

“Bingo,” Addison said.

The box was large enough that Tilda needed two hands to pick it up. She handed the flashlight to

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