

## *The Artists' Colony*

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The children gnashed their pearly teeth, stretched out their arms. They *toddled*. They peered from walls and around corners; they were as plump as angels. They clutched the balustrades of the stairs leading to the mansion's upper stories with tiny dimpled fists still sticky with the barley-sugar from one-hundred-year-old sweetmeats and then peeked — coy or shy? the answer seemed to Lola unknown — from between the faux-scrollwork of the staircase railings.

They crowed and called in turn, as such old-fashioned children would be wont to. *Ready or not, here I come*, one carolled faintly from some far-off upper floor as Lola ventured late, her third night in the house, from her bedroom toward the chilly, white tiled bathroom with its funny little up-and-down steps.

Off somewhere there was a thump, a bare, faint scuffling. It could have been in the walls, could have been the nicker of age-stained Irish linen curtain panel brushed against glass pane, could have been, probably was, mice.



Three days before, Lola had arrived armed with her laptop and with a backpack tightly stuffed with three weeks' worth of clothes; at the bottom of the long curved entrance to the estate she'd stepped from the taxi that had been sent to the bus station in town for her as if she were some naïve under-maid about to shoulder bag and baggage and trudge toward her dreary future.

The driveway to the mansion was, she'd noticed then, flanked by awkwardly-pitched evergreens that leaned forward, dark and close, Germanic. At the end of its last curve had reared Woodlands itself, a suitably Gothic pile of gray stone the matter-of-fact acceptance letter she'd received two months before could not have led her to expect. Turreted and sprawled; not entirely dilapidated yet but slouching its way toward that. There was a cage of bright yellow scaffolding, left hooked into intricate place along one long crumbling lichen-studded wall. An aged Lincoln Town Car listed outside the narrow servants' entrance at the mansion's back, with New Jersey plates (at dinner her first night she'd learned this was the vehicle of a certain very famous poet, too elderly now to walk from his studio in one of the outbuildings to the dining room of the mansion for meals). The house brooded grimly to itself: Lola had arrived before the cocktails that ended every Working Day.

After she deposited her belongings in the bedroom assigned to her, she'd been given a brief hushed tour by a young, rapidly-ascending playwright (even she'd recognized his name), a tour on which she learned that the various likenesses of children so prominently displayed everywhere throughout the mansion had been done by the former lady of the house, who had fancied herself an artist (the current parade of invited artist-residents had her to thank for much, the playwright made clear) — they were figures with carved marble paper hats, and classic ethereal cherubs done in pen-and-ink, and crayon; they were charcoal. They were, Lola discovered as the playwright led her past darkened wooden display cases inset into the corners of the landings and the hallways, miniatures painted delicately on ivory, and tiny stern daguerreotypes tucked into lockets heavy with old gold. They were locks of hair meticulously woven into brooches: the fair intertwined with the dark, the fine straight locks tugged into a braid with the curly, twisting, crimped ones.

On that tour, she'd also been told the one thing she repeated to herself now, as she tiptoed along the almost-threadbare scarlet carpet runner on her way back to her bedroom from the bathroom in the middle of the night. It was impossible for this house to really be haunted. The original Woodlands, the one all those painted and sculpted and *remembered* children had actually had the run of, had burned to the ground in the first year of the previous century, and this ungainly hulk she and her fellow artists now resided in for a few weeks or months was the monument to them that their wealthy, grief-stricken parents had had built on the foundations in its place.

As Lola slipped back into bed, she found herself wondering what that first house might have looked like, designed long before all the children died, in their various ways. The playwright had told her he didn't know *of what*. Of pleurisy, of diphtheria, of a careless groom who let a toddler wander too close to a favorite pony's iron-shod hooves? He'd shrugged: his preferred fictional locale was New York bar-scene. Lola hoped the original house had been at least more comfortable; the one she was staying in for the next three weeks, with the splash and tinkle of its marble fountain placed beneath stained glass and its music room and its baroque swirling staircase (the highly polished newel posts like the tuning-pegs of a cello) felt watchful to her, if not overtly unfriendly; it contained small dusty nooks where tarnished silver cups and buttonhooks and shoehorns were displayed, and musty literary magazines heaped up on all the bookshelves. Her bedroom, small and oddly-shaped and tamped into a bit of space beside a staircase that led down to the enormous kitchen, was surely one where a succession of maids had once laid down on lumpy mattresses, scorning their employers for their excess, their bad taste and their needs. Not even the downstairs parlor where Lola's fellow artists gathered every evening before dinner for drinks could escape the weighty influence of the house's former inhabitants: florid portraits of the original owners of the house still flanked the room's excessive fireplace, as vigilant and straight as andirons and posed in their Victorian regalia, full-length.

But even in the face of all this history and excess, Woodlands' only message was *get down to business*. At least as far as Lola and Woodlands' other current residents were concerned.

It was a message Lola had so far ignored, though she didn't want to admit it to herself. How exactly was she supposed to put her shoulder to the wheel and get down to her business? When off somewhere, in some unnoticed, unpeopled room above her head, there were all these noisy these children? She *heard* them when she lay awake; they whimpered gently, like a nest of puppies.

And what *was* her business, anyway? She'd been awarded 23 prestigious, sought-after days of residence at Woodlands — and had already realized she would have to retire to her bedroom every night at nine, to avoid awkward social interactions (earlier in the evening, outside the porte cochere, the younger writers had been drinking someone's brought-from-New-York single-malt scotch while playing hopscotch).

Somewhere, on the floor above her, a door slapped open. She nudged herself more deeply into the embrace of her iron-headboarded bed, pulled up the comforter, and contemplated the shadowed plaster rosettes medallioning the ceiling. There was an insistent *tick*, coming from somewhere, sounding like water dripping.

She rearranged the pillow beneath her head. Which would actually scare her more, the appearance of one of the children she could swear she heard or the sight of one of her fellow artists, making their way through the darkened house? Because *something* pattered down these hallways late at night.

The children, she decided, turning over, were still looking for their mother.

In the morning, she was fully awake by the time dawn lightened the diamond-shaped panes of the bedroom window. Possibly — probably — because she'd gone to sleep at nine o'clock the night before. She watched the window as the sun swung higher, listening as the hallway on the other side of her bedroom door stayed quiet — then finally sat up and got dressed, then shut the door of her room behind her and started inspecting the shelves tucked into the second-story landing for reading material to either take out to her studio or back to bed.

Her examination of the lavishly carved bookcases revealed that not only did they contain a dusty marble bust of a small chubby boy wearing a meticulously-carved, cocked sailor hat, but also a jumble of obscure literary journals, some of which contained stories written, years before, by Lola.

She stood before the journals' tattered spines. The presence of the stories she'd written was comforting proof of *something*. Or at least would serve as a passport giving her safe passage into the dining room where her fellow artists would be congregating for breakfast in little less than an hour. She thumbed through one of the journals, then replaced it in the bookcase.

No matter what stories she'd already heard — of caffeinated novelists who locked themselves into their studios and wrote for months on end, of an entire colony filled with early and productive risers — she realized she had little desire to set foot inside her studio, off somewhere in the woods beyond the house, until after she ate breakfast.

Instead, she slipped up the creaking scallops of the front staircase, past a triptych of stained glassed windows that faced out onto the mansion's sweeping grounds — a quartet of gaudily-stained and headdressed Indians, settlers in moss-green knee-britches, a fountain. There had to be a story to all *that*, she thought, climbing past them. Beneath the windows ran an expanse of seat padded by sun-faded cushions and still indented at one end, as if one of her fellow artists had slept there for at least a portion of the night.

She made her way upward. A residue, a sense *someone had just left* hung in the air in front of her the way early-morning vapor still hung, in misty sheets, outside the clear panes jigsawed into the stained-glass windows. Before the staircase right-angled, she stopped to take in the view: on the other side of the window, dew-muted lawns receded from the house in gloomy terraces, and closer, in a delicate forking of limbs inclined toward the house, some bird had built a nest, one that even from her distance she could see was woven through with grass and tattered bits of plastic shopping bag. Two small sharp-voiced finches flew industriously back and forth in front of the expanse of window.

She remembered from her tour that the third story of the house contained what had once been ballroom, and at least two octagonally-shaped towers. The playwright-tourguide had led her past their doors. Her eyes caught on their sadly tarnished brass keyholes as she went past, but she kept going, turned a corner — and found herself in front of the library.

Which was neatly, chastely empty. She sat down at the wide wooden table in the middle of the room and pulled her notebook and a pen from the leather satchel she'd brought with her.

She'd never figured out how to disentangle herself from her surroundings. And *this* was — had always been — her problem. She sat there, pen and notepad laid neatly in front of her, and stared out the window at the upper branches of the tree she'd spotted from the

stairs, where the same pair of house finches, tiny tatters of red, still tended the bundle that made up their nest.

In the daylight it was less easy to believe in the children who'd seemed so possible at night. She shut her notebook and stood up.

The bookcases downstairs on the landing had contained twice as many airport bookstore paperbacks as they had literary journals, a fact that contained the bare bones of at least one story for anyone detective enough to flesh it out — what famous writer, in these rarified surroundings, had read and then disposed of a trio of well-worn and badly-written mysteries as furtively as if they were tiny corpses? Had *Romantic Getaways of the Adirondacks* been torn in two deliberately, and what had happened to its second half?

The library encompassed another. Hung on the wall was a drab botanical print of a step-like lichen and an obviously amateur watercolor of two small birds similar to the ones flitting back and forth beyond the window. The shelves lining the room contained not only what seemed to be the collected works of every single author who'd ever been invited to Woodlands but treatises on lepidopterology with mottled endpapers and the sonnets of unreadable Edwardian poets: the collected, flyspecked esoteria of the house's original owners.

In the daylight it was less easy to believe in the children who seemed so possible at night.

Although a musty photograph album was tucked into a corner shelf. Lola laid it out on the top of one of the glass-fronted display cases and slowly turned the pages. The photographs inside were coming loose from the black triangular corners meant to hold them in, the pages of the album were foxed with damp, and upon them the children were four, were serious-faced, were grouped upon a set of marble stairs that led down from a portecochere similar to the one that the night before had held an assortment of soda cans and a half-drunk glass of scotch pressed into service as an ashtray.

The album gave off an air of not having been looked at in years, an air that came, Lola knew, because none of this past history really even mattered.

But the children were *there*, and then they were gone. Except not really: the last photograph tucked into the album was of the lady of the house, stiffly arrayed in black crape, superimposing over those earlier pictures of the children an afterimage of mourning.

Not that there was anything to be made from any of this. There was nothing about it Lola could fool herself into thinking was *research*. She set the album back on its dusty shelf. *How did all of them die?* she wondered. *How had their mother borne it?* The sound of a piano being played somewhere in the house wound up the stairs and along the corridor.

That piano was surely being played by one of the composers in residence, but who, so early in the morning? And who would play such rudimentary scales, with such ponderous hesitations?



Even at nine a.m., when sun streamed through the panes of the leaded windows and larded the top of what was known as “the quiet table,” where none of the residents ever chose to sit, the dining room at Woodlands remained age-darkened. Was staid and ornate, its plate rails set with presentation plates that no one had — in decades — looked at.

Once, Woodland's original owner-magnate and his wife had labored over roast beef and trifle in this room, but Lola couldn't imagine it as a setting for convivial dinners. Instead, it conjured up formal dress and carving knives set surgically into place against a bloody joint of beef; made her imagine children led downstairs from some spacious nursery, well-behaved sons and daughters who stood on the Persian carpet with their hands clasped and carefully recited poetry for the gathered diners.

But now there was a main table in the dining room, where the carved chairs bulged, throne-like, and a sideboard with a hotplate where a pot of coffee always warmed. There was also that quiet table, off to one side, overlooking an expanse of terraced lawn, where colonists could choose to sit in contemplative silence.

As soon as Lola sat down at the larger table, she realized she might come to prefer breakfast over any of the other formal interactions she'd have with her fellow colonists over the next few weeks: the sun spilling through the windows was doing what it could to lighten the heavy oak panelling and sideboard; there was oatmeal; there were eggs cooked to order by the silent kitchen staff and crisp rashers of bacon; there seemed to be fewer discussions about *work*. At breakfast time, the bottles of wine purchased by various colonists that were marked with their initials and stored on the mantel-piece, to be bestowed, at dinner, upon peers already known or new friends in the process of being made, were kept corked, and there was, since the artists arrived for breakfast sleepily, one by one, less jockeying for position at the long length of the table.

As Lola pulled out her chair, the playwright who'd been her tourguide to the house was telling the table at large that somewhere inside the mansion there was a daybed, where a particular author had once reclined coyly, for a famous author's photo. Here, he continued, a writer long thought chaste might, or might not, have pursued an affair with someone known for his philandering, and a brilliant essayist had actively, heroically, pursued his eventual downfall during each evening's Cocktail Hour.

The present lacked that glamour. The past winter, someone said, dipping a spoon into her bowl of oatmeal, hook-ups at Woodlands had been revealed by intersecting footprints in the snow on the lawn outside the mansion's terrace. The conversation looped back toward the author who'd had his photograph taken on the tower daybed, which led to speculation over other romantic couplings the mansion might've seen.

"Careful," someone — composer or photographer, Lola couldn't remember — warned. "Wouldn't want the spirits of those two to hear us slandering them over *that*."

His inference was that the ghosts of famous writers had hung around Woodlands all this time because the mansion — not their homes, not wherever they might've died — was the place where they'd felt happiest, an idea that depressed Lola, even though she was grateful to be there.

"Last night I heard noises," she offered softly into the lull in the conversation. "Here in the house. Has anyone ever talked about hearing things late at night? Way off in some other room somewhere? Children's voices," she added.

As silence settled over the table, she knew she'd revealed more of herself than she'd intended to while at Woodlands; that with that single question she'd told her fellow artists more about herself than had her answer to the question she'd been asked the night she arrived — *and just what did she write?*

*Domestic fiction*, she'd responded with self-deprecation that could be taken — or not — at face value. "Footsteps," she said now. "Or something."

The elegantly-bearded, well-known novelist seated across the table from her conscientiously studied his hands, and then the ceiling. “Noises?” he repeated, lowering his gaze to look sharply at her.

Woodlands had been off limits to children, to spouses, to anyone who might trespass and disturb its quiet for almost a hundred years. The novelist, whose bedroom — where Lola already realized he smoked illegal cigarettes — was next to hers, was looking at her with an expression of what she could only describe as anxiety on his face.

“I guess just the usual thumpings and bumpings of a place this old,” she said.

It was almost impossible to reconcile this odd, incompatible group brought together for a few weeks or months with the communal ideal she’d imagined after looking at the brochure received in her mailbox at home. She looked down the length of the table. Her peers were sitting close together, were passing salt cellars, either surly or eager to appease, as they made awkward conversation. Like the magnate’s dinner guests before them, they were not a family either, and she was irritated to discover that she’d harbored a tiny, ill-thought-out desire to think of them as such. In other places, they might *have* families, might *be* families, but here they were all —herself included — separate, and well-defended.

Although it was already obvious there were several stories being at least partially played out here — that of the woman painter who’d arrived the past Wednesday only to leave for good two days later because her husband and teenaged daughter missed her; or of the poet Lola had walked past when she left the library on her way to breakfast, who’d been curved conspiratorially toward the payphone in the hallway, clad in black and jeans and weeping; or even of the well-known novelist sitting across the table from her, who, she’d noticed the night before, had carefully avoided every unobservantly-proffered glass of wine.

“Noises?” he said again. “In the walls? Or overhead?”

“Just...off somewhere,” she answered lamely. “But a house with more than 20 people in it, of course there’d be noises.”

Before she’d arrived at Woodlands, she’d planned to renounce thinking about whatever might be called her own story, at least for the duration of her residency, just as she suspected her peers had planned to renounce whatever stories that shaped and moved them. All except the younger artists, who even while they ate breakfast at the other end of the table were flirting and sipping coffee and presenting themselves to each other with gusto.

“If the owners’ children hadn’t died,” the well-known novelist said thoughtfully, “I guess none of us would be here. The owners would’ve had heirs so there wouldn’t have been any reason to turn the house into a oasis for artists.” He buttered his slice of toast.

Lola wondered if it worked for him — to have everything scraped from the day but work.

It wasn’t a question she could ask. Instead, she stood up. The lavishly carved chairs at the dining table’s head and foot were decorated with beaming baby faces, their round heads smoothed by long years of hands laid against the chair arms.

The chairs, like everything else in Woodlands, had been carefully picked out by somebody. She supposed by the generous lady of the house.

*Why?* she found herself wondering. Why had that silly woman filled her house with all these carved and stony children?

And what story — if any — could be made from that?

During the morning hours at least, the walking paths that looped around Woodlands and threaded through the grounds were empty. (*Working*, Lola remembered once she gathered up her thermos full of coffee and the lunchbox with her name on it from the shelf outside the kitchen door and left the house to choose one of the paths that led, fairytale-like, off into the woods, *everybody's already working*.) She set off, swinging her lunchbox back and forth as she walked.

Behind the main house, set into the woods like some sort of jewelry, were four small lakes, almost too small to be considered lakes at all. They necklaced the grounds outside the mansion, they buckled everything together, they marked the way to her studio; and they smelled faintly, when the wind blew from a certain direction, of old meat.

Trees arched and met, overhead; the moist floor of the woods on either side of the path was rent by the earlike furls of dozens of jack-in-the-pulpits. The path climbed until it overlooked a damp ravine. Lola stopped, to catch her breath and to survey it.

Once, shy lady poetesses had leaned against the rustic wall that cut across the clearing below and tumbled toward the lake; just as they had surely posed for photographs here, all dark eyes and serious, compressed lips: now the poet she'd seen before breakfast, crying as she talked on the phone, was jogging deliberately toward her, toiling up the slope of the hill, the length of bare leg exposed below her shorts spattered with mud: she was out of breath, had clearly been looping between, among, the lakes, and there was a single yellowed leaf caught in her hair. As she drew abreast, Lola nodded in what was meant to be a friendly fashion; the jogging poetess nodded back. It was now after ten o'clock and Working Hours had begun. They both hesitated for a fraction of a second, then refrained from exchanging greetings.

When everyone sat down to dinner every night and re-introduced the most pertinent facts of a stay at Woodlands — their names, the medium in which they worked, the location of their studios — Lola realized that every time she gave the name of her studio, she was a little envied for it. Even its location in the woods was deliberately dramatic. Once she passed the last lake's shoreline of cattails and a screening stand of aspen trees, it appeared, pressing itself into the embrace of its reflection in the water like a lover, all picturesque tower, beam and bulging stone.

An offshoot of the path curved past the double-padlocked doors at its base — boat storage, she suspected, only a few barely-gravelled feet from the lake. She scrambled up the rise, then catwalked over the tiny bridge, two feet or so long and also picturesque, that led her to the tower's upper room. At the deliberately-medieval looking door she bent and put her eye to the time-worn indentation of the keyhole. What exactly did she expect to see? Around her, the trees dripped, moistly. Behind her, ferns curled and stretched, giddy and pale green.

Inside the tower was the sound, the sense, of something shifting. She fumbled for her key and pushed the door open. A sheet of paper from the stack she'd neatly arranged on the desk drifted toward the floor.

Because of the envy she'd sensed every night at dinner, she knew she couldn't confess the effect the tower was having upon her ability to work, which was to almost completely squelch it. She sat down at the desk and pulled the stack of manuscript pages toward her.

The tower might have been the destination the family strolled to, on Sunday afternoons. Below its windows, the sawtoothed leaves of strawberries, their white blossoms like the tiny pintucked runching on a bride's trousseau, were something shook out and scattered from the high-up mullioned windows.

And, at the moment, below its windows was the sound of voices — of *a* voice.

"I told you," that voice said loudly. "There's no phone in my room here." There was a pause; a faint splash. The voice continued. "Artists," it said, as if repeating something already gone over. "They've all come here to finish projects. Like me. I'm here — working."

Lola stood up, walked over to the window and peered down. Below her, on the tiny pebbled beach she'd imagined boats had once been launched from, stood the well-known novelist, a cell phone pressed to his ear.

"No, just work," he said. "Not even TV here." He seemed to be attempting to explain Woodlands to a child, or to someone who was hard of hearing.

Or to someone who found the concept of Woodlands so foreign — a house painter, a salesman, a harried office manager not unlike the one Lola had had to petition for three weeks' leave, a normal person, *anyone from the real world* — that they required a second, or even a third or fourth explanation of its purpose.

"Okay, yeah, put her on now," the well-known novelist said. He stooped for a stone and skipped it across the surface of the lake — two, three, four times before it sank. Lola counted, then sat back down at the desk. She really was trying not to overhear him.

"Sorry," he said. "Out here in the middle of the fucking woods is the only place I can get any reception."

The four small lakes, the playwright had told Lola when he'd showed her the way to her studio, had been named after the children.

"Yeah," the well-known novelist's voice said, growing fainter. "I'm going up the hill now. Better? Yeah. Yeah. Yes, of course I'm staying out of trouble."

Lola had seen the four names given the four lakes in the photograph album in the library: Robert, Elaine, Lenora, William. The four names of the children, who had died. She looked out the window at the nearest lake — she didn't know if it was Lake William or Lake Lenora — and imagined the family, bundled up in winter, tucked into a sleigh behind sealskin and buffalo robe, muffed and gloved and hatted. Roasting chestnuts over a fire built by the perspiring coachman; skating across the black glossy lick of lake, keeping to the edges, the Father leaning forward, arms folded behind his back for balance, skating in long easy strides, taking soundings from the ice, which shifted and ominously cracked.

Inside the mansion the father's ivory straight-razor was on display in a glass case, as was the darkened leather strop.



The tower, Lola felt certain, was folly. Was *her* folly.

It was also the height of fin-de-siecle luxury: the window seats with their faded violet cushions, the empty chiseled fireplace big enough to smoke an ox on. Outside the windows, the woods rustled, thick and William Morriseque.

Here, then, was folly. A rich man's folly, built to be a stopping point on Sunday afternoon walks. Lola laid kindling in the fireplace and set a match against it, then sat back on her heels in front of the small fire, imagining those walks as some royal progress. After all, the tower was only five minutes' brisk walking from the house. The coachman with the wicker case containing the supplies for tea (a British affectation, of course, imported); the women — mother, nanny, cousin, ladies' maid — with busty silhouettes like swan-necked vases; the parasols; the children with their knickers. The sturdy but impractical shoes, the smell of wood smoke and starch and sweated-into linsey-woolsey.

The coachman clumsy with the mother's easel as he set it up to best capture the view and buttery afternoon light.

The main thing, Lola thought as she sat back down at the desk, had been their wealth and sense of purpose. As if everyone should have some miniature tower to store his rowboat in, as if everyone should be allowed the leisure to paint away their Sunday afternoons, as if nature needed not be natural at all. It was just something that wanted molding, like hardwood forests chopped down to become a set of monstrous dining room chairs and an elaborate plate rail.

Just as *her* nature only wanted molding. Like the children of the house before they'd been transformed into little serious adults with dark unfathomable eyes and high-topped, jet-buttoned shoes, Lola lacked discipline. Her character, she knew, was weak. The tower was where something was meant to happen; or someone taken prisoner.

In the other studios that studded the grounds of the estate — the stables, the garage, the greenhouse, the gardener's quarters — painters were stretching canvases and filing their nails (things they lacked time for in the City). The video artists were tapping at the keyboards of their computers.

If Lola could get her hands on a dustpan and a broom, she'd sweep up the sprinkling of pine needles she'd tracked in across the tower floor. She'd already unpacked, inspected, and eaten the contents of her lunchbox — a nursery meal of pimiento cheese sandwich, carrot sticks stubby as fingers, and an oatmeal cookie she'd planned to keep from eating until midafternoon. She'd already shaken the last drop of coffee from her thermos into its leaky plastic cup. She locked the tower door behind her, and began, once more, to walk the woods.

She hadn't written anything since she arrived.



Woodlands was rimmed by interstate: every night, Lola could hear the wavelike slop-and-ebb of traffic scuttling toward the mountains from her room inside the mansion. But she knew that it did not, would not, do, to voice her recognition that the much-heralded woods surrounding the house were just a pie-shaped wedge of land, not even wild, just as it would not do to mention the ceaseless sound of cars, for that would serve mostly just to remind everyone how closely the real world — where one might punch a time clock, or have to purchase cigarettes or groceries — actually encroached.

And in any case, there were certain stretches of path that mimicked wildness well enough — an abrupt curve traversing the soggy heel of one of the lakes; a less-travelled spur

of dirt road that meandered uphill and, she quickly discovered as she followed it, dead-ended in chainlink and an unarguable barrier of divided four-lane and a pile of empty beer cans.

She turned around. It was hard to know if the sudden silence was a trick of wind or time of day — it wasn't quite five o'clock yet, and it was possible that the town on the other side of Woodlands' borders didn't have population enough for an afternoon rush hour. Off somewhere, a squirrel chattered. Closer, just behind her, there was a sudden scuffle in the leaves.

She whirled around.

The poet, she of the weeping phone call before breakfast, she of the early-morning jog, was coming down the path, a leaf, surely not the same one Lola'd seen earlier, caught up in her hair. She was coming down the dead-end path that Lola had just come down herself.

"Hi," Lola said, surprised. She had no idea if it was still Working Hours, if conversation would be taken with the friendliness it was intended.

"Hi," the poet replied. She kept walking; caught up to Lola.

"Hope I didn't interrupt you," Lola said.

The poet turned and looked at her. "No," she said, and resumed walking. She strode past Lola, headed downward toward the lakes. A dark smudge angled across the back of her sweatshirt.

What did Lola know about poetry, or of poets? Maybe *this* was what it took — solitary rambles in the woods, an afternoon spent leaning back against some fallen log to contemplate the sky. What were fiction writers, really, but the accountants of the artistic world, with their concerns about chapters and pacing and *how to wrap things up*?

This offshoot of path was really more of a road, and lacked the picturesqueness of the main one. She knew that down there at the bottom of the hill the view was all deliberate artifice: the way the tower leaned into its reflection in the water, the arc of bridge over the largest lake, the splash of orange lichen against its cobblestone. Here, though, the woods were utilitarian, had probably once been thinned by the gardener and his assistants, each winter's deadfalls fuel for the kitchen's fires and dragged down the snowy road toward the mansion on a sledge. She'd leave them to the poet.

But even here the lake was visible, just barely, from between the trees. Which one was it? *Robert, William, Elaine, Lorena*. Elaine and Leonora were similar enough names — it must have been difficult to call both of them, one after the other, it must've sounded like an echo. Lola imagined the call spilling from the high-up windows of the tower, where their mother sat painting her little ladylike miniatures, her watercolors, her pale anemic pastels. Diminutive; diminished. Of birds. Of jack-in-the-pulpits.

*Robert William Elaine Lorena* — to be called from the window of the tower.

Though it would have been the nanny's job, of course, to keep the children occupied, to keep their muslin collars crisp, to keep them away from the lake.

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It looked all of a piece with the trees and the water, looked like it had always been there, the bridge that cinched the midsection of the lake and pointed the way up to the house. Though the bridge was actually unnecessary, Lola realized as soon as she stepped off the path and started across it — it would've been just as easy to position the road leading to

Woodlands along the shore, or not to have hollowed out the land until it cupped up the original watery spring and stored it and made a lake at all.

But back then travelers had time to linger on their journeys; once this bridge had laid itself down for the quick-step of the matched bays of the owner's carriage. Now its presence kept the taxis whose main job was to ferry Woodlands' colonists back and forth from the bus station in town from slipping into mud.

The bridge also apparently lured locals from town into trespassing, giving them a perfect spot for fishing. A figure wearing a bright blue windbreaker was making himself at home on the left side of the bridge with an array of propped-up poles and a bait bucket. Lola smiled and kept to the right.

The water below was filled with faint flickers of nondescript fish, and ringed by cattails. A single heron foraged on the opposite bank; something scuttled up a tree. She stopped and leaned against the wide stone railing.

And then drew back. She had put her hand into something wet. The top of the railing was covered with small, irregular drips of water and — this was what she had leaned into — a broad sodden brushstroke of rotted leaves.

Each drip of water had a similar shape. There seemed to be a pattern to the way they'd fallen along the stone. She leaned over to look at them.

Little handprints. Little hands, splayed out like stars, to pat pat pat along the mansion's wooden floors, to pull at legs and knees and yank at skirts while you were sewing, while you were trying to paint.

Although that was Lola's imagination, surely. That the drips looked anything like little alternating hand and kneeprints. She looked over at the fisherman on the other side of the bridge, who was casting out his line serenely.

Little hand and kneeprints. No child would ever have reason to crawl across this bridge. Lola kept her eyes on the lake, but it gave back no information. Only the sound, half thump, half splash, of a turtle sunning on a fallen tree trunk as it propelled itself into the water. She started walking.

As she made her way up the steep rise of road, Woodlands once more began to reveal itself, with its crenellated tower a half-sibling to the studio she'd turned her back on and porches jutting crazily from the roofline.

From here, the house's stained glass picture window was gloomily opaque —no story could be deciphered from this side, the dull side, of its leaded grandeur. But when Lola walked closer, she saw that the two birds she'd noticed in the morning were still hard at work on their nest in the tree that leaned toward the window.

A bench was set into the stonework to one side of the looming entry, out of the way enough to make it a tempting spot to wait out the last few minutes before the dinner bell rang.

Over her head, the birds squeaked, anxious nursemaids. Out of her sight, around the corner of the house, the smokers were beginning to gather underneath the porte cochere.

"How was your day?" a voice asked. "You get much work done?" She sat down on the bench and watched the birds swoop toward the lawn and up again.

Woodlands' long-dead benefactors had been so much more patient than any of the artists who stayed at their house now — the tree in front of Lola had been a sapling in their time, and the woods lapping up against the lawn gone gray in the half-dusk had just been well-groomed plantings. How could they have known how beautiful these tree limbs would someday look? Or how deep these manufactured woods would come to seem, the way darkness would collect along their fringes like ice against a shoreline? The trees wanted to draw you into their embrace, or perhaps it was the lakes that pulled just like an unseen magnet. Lola found herself measuring the shadows with her eyes.

“A *wonderful* day,” a second voice replied from beneath the porte cochere. “I worked my way through the trickiest section of my novel. It’s going great!”

Lola watched a figure emerge, not from path or road, but from the thickest, darkest stretch of woods. The well-known novelist came toward her, walking briskly.

“Hiding?” he asked.

“Walking?” she said.

He shrugged and brushed at the dirt ground into one sleeve of his jacket.

“Just watching the birds,” she said, pointing to the tree.

“Rose finches,” he agreed, looking upward.

It was exactly the sort of thing she’d expected him to know. The well-known novelist’s problem was simply that — that he was so well-known. There’d been so many interviews, so many novels, those slender books of personal essays extolling the simple pleasures of home and hearth, and wife and child. Though she knew it wasn’t true, Lola couldn’t help feeling as if she knew something personal about him, as if he were a story she had furtively been dipping into for the past few years.

*Do you miss your family*, she found herself wanting to ask. The child who was by now probably around seven years old, who’d been difficult, who’d had colic as a baby, the wife who’d — too docilely, in Lola’s opinion, when she read that particular book — taken care of middle-of-the-night awakenings so the well-known novelist would be rested enough to write in the mornings? The man who was standing in front of her, still carefully brushing dirt off his jacket, seemed entirely self-contained in a way the writer of the books she’d read had not.

“Domestic fiction,” he said, squinting at her. He grinned and sat down on the bench beside her. “It’s not exactly how I would’ve described your book.” He laughed abruptly.

“Have you been up to the library yet?” she asked him, her eyes on the birds. “There’s an old sketchbook up there, full of watercolors of the local flora and fauna.”

“Left behind by some artist-in-resident?”

“I doubt it. Not good enough. My guess is Lady Bountiful’s work.”

The pictures had been of birds, and ground squirrels, and gracefully-toppled tree trunks. Until the last few pages of the book, where she’d found a set of drawings, done in pencil, badly executed. Drawings that contained the same cheeky robins, the same sleek caps of mushrooms pushing through leaf-mold as the previous pages, except that these drawings, unlike the ones that came before them, also contained imps scampering along the mottled bark of each downed tree limb and nymphs peering slyly from behind the blowsy roses nodding on their trellis. Fairies that rocked a quartet of babies to sleep in cradles of leaves spun between two woody plant stems.

“They’re just ... odd,” she said. It wasn’t a word she normally used, but here at Woodlands, as the two of them sat staring out at the woods, it fit.

All day the sounds she’d heard in the night had nibbled at her, but now something — the hour, the approach of dinner-time, this brief conversation that had suddenly veered toward being about work but then shied away — had swallowed them up.

“DO you see how those two birds have used what looks like an entire plastic bag to make that nest?” she asked the well-known novelist.

“Protective coloration?” he suggested.

The poet Lola had seen earlier emerged from the woods and began to make her way across the lawn toward the side of the house.

“Protective coloration,” the well-known novelist repeated. Lola was looking off at the woods, but she had the momentary sense that something had just flickered past her, just beyond the reaches of her vision. It might have been the well-known novelist turning his head to watch the poet as she walked past. Or it might have been the birds swooping above their heads, on their anxious, last-minute mission to finish up their nest.



After dinner was over and Lola was safely tucked into the solitude of her own bedroom, she told herself the look she and the well-known novelist had exchanged across the table must have been her imagination, just as it must have been her imagination that he’d deliberately positioned himself across the table from her to avoid sitting beside someone in particular.

But she still couldn’t help wondering if the expression she’d caught on his face as the entire elder half of the dinner table eavesdropped on their younger, more jovial counterparts might have been intended to convey this— *oh yeah, those first few stories are so easy, the ones that are yours without working at them. But once you’ve used up your misspent youth—well, what then?* Although she also knew that thinking so could just as easily be hindsight, brought about by the stack of literary magazines she’d grabbed from the bookcase in the hallway on her way upstairs to her room after dinner.

The rest of the house was Victorian in its stinginess with lighting, but the lamp on the table beside her bed contained a 75-watt bulb, perfect for reading. The bed was so high-up and sturdy and overpillowed that it had already lured her from the room’s single chair.

There were no demands put on her while she was at Woodlands other than those she placed there herself. Here at Woodlands, she could stay up all night reading, if that was what she wanted. No one would know, or care; in the middle of the night there’d be no one who would *need* her. But she was already beginning to be able to guess why the paperback mysteries she’d found hidden behind the more high-flown offerings on the landing shelf might have been left there: it would take more than these literary journals to keep anyone up reading past midnight.

Above her head, on the third floor, there was a tiny room that had been converted from linen closet to TV room, ostensibly for showing the videos made by resident artists but infiltrated by more popular fare. And at dinner, she’d overheard one of the hopscotch-

playing younger artists trying to drum up warm bodies for a game of charades set to begin at midnight.

Maybe *that* was why Woodlands always in the end succeeded, why the library contained shelves groaning with books begun or finished here, why it had the reputation that it did. Given the alternatives, Lola discovered she'd rather make her way out to her studio to work. She'd be at Woodlands three more weeks — and there was no way that the cache of *People* magazines left behind in the bathroom could serve as entertainment that long.

And besides, for the past hour she had been deliberately ignoring noises out in the corridor she couldn't completely explain away as a late-night kitchen raid. Scuffling; a sudden whisper, too muffled to be deciphered. The tap-tap-tap of water dripping. Her only options were either to lie here all night listening to them or to give up and go out and run through their gauntlet.

She climbed out of bed and put her coat over her pajamas and slipped on her shoes; patted down its pockets to make of sure of the flashlight she'd left there.



Once she locked the door of her room behind her, she realized she had no real sense that there was anyone else in the house, no feeling that there was *anybody*, whether asleep or working, behind any of the closed doors she was walking past. Every single resident of Woodlands could have gone to town, or summoned taxis to take them home — wherever home might be. All that was left behind was her, the house, and *something*. She walked faster, her flashlight weighing down one jacket pocket. She might as well be walking the halls of some hotel that'd seen better days; she might as well be strolling the decks of some luxury liner before it was jolted awake by its collision with iceberg. The house's domesticity, become institutional, had suffered some peculiar sea change that made her glad to escape it, even though she would have to go through the pitch-dark woods to get to her studio.

The mansion was just an old house converted to something other than its original use, and done so on the cheap, but after she made her way down to the first floor, not even the sight of the modern kitchen, empty, scoured, brightly illuminated by fluorescent tubes in its ceiling, could erase the unease that kept her looking behind her all the way down the hall. She hurried down its length and stepped through the door that led out to the porte cochere. The long dusty porch than ran along the back of the house was quiet, emptied of hopscotch, and cocktails, and artistic hijinks. She stopped to let her eyes adjust to the dark, to look out at the woods, then switched on her flashlight in a gesture so recognizable, so easily-imagined, that for a second she stopped being Lola at all. The woods beyond the circle of her flashlight beam were inky, the moon was a bright wafer swinging up above their evergreen tips, and somewhere out there was her studio. She plunged from the safety of the steps and started down the path that led into the woods, feeling like the ghost of the famous girl detective clad in a coral-colored cashmere twinset, casting about for clues.



If there was a story to be told about Woodlands, then it had to be a very female one, for the house Lola had just left behind felt like a very female house (those chairs carved with their ugly little cherubs; the chintz-patterned wallpaper sealing up each bedroom; the hallway she had just escaped from, all dim light and dark velvet, like a womb).

Even the woods she was walking through felt female. She stuck to the path, conscious of the avid, held breath of the ferns and vines on either side. They embroidered the woods like looping, fussy handwork, they were woven tight, and dense enough that she could swear she almost heard them growing.

Or was the noise the woods kept making just the shift and settle of the trees?

She was almost to the tower. *Sssbbb*, she swore she heard a voice say, up ahead and to the left. There was a splash.

If there were ghosts roaming the grounds of Woodlands, they certainly weren't afraid of the woods or lake — but Lola was. There was no way she was going to direct her flashlight beam toward the lake.

*Sssbbb*, she swore she heard a voice say.

She told herself it was just the sound of reeds along the lake's edge. Although it didn't take much to move from thinking that to imagining she could hear the slip of oars through water, the slip of boat keel dragged through the grass. Ahead of her, the tower was outlined by light gray brushstrokes. Shadows pooled at its base where she knew the rowboats had once been stored, as if the door there'd been jimmied open.

Who knew if there was any truth to it — the story she'd decided she was beginning to uncover. The tower could just as easily have been the domain of the house's owner-magnate, his retreat from the domestic crises of the mansion. The house itself was so clearly his wife's: the social rate of exchange might've demanded that he have a sanctuary of his own, a place to keep his port, and his cigars, a place where he could peruse the esoteric photographs he'd collected in his youth, while abroad on his Grand Tour.

But it wasn't exactly that the house was the wife's, Lola realized, it was that *she* was the house's. Was it marriage, or motherhood, that had swallowed her up? No one who came to Woodlands now even cared enough to wonder what she'd spent all those Sundays painting. It was so much more interesting to think of the mansion's more recent residents, to dwell on suicide attempts or drunken parties held on the tennis court at midnight. If the story of Woodlands was nothing more than one of the people who'd resided there, which group would it be better to belong to? A fellowship of artists, larger than life, up for the Pulitzer in odd years at least; or the company of some wealthy, dabbling woman who had had money enough to delude herself into thinking she had talent?

Even Lola, deliberately giving this setting the high-gloss of story, had done her benefactor a disservice, imagining her work as little more than the sort of coy and cloying Victoriana that was in the end less useful to anyone than the knitting the woman probably spent a great deal more of her time at.

*Odd*, Lola'd called the drawings she'd found in the library.

Out here in the dark, she found that she believed in them. The mosses that licked up and down the lengths of the trees might easily be gathered up into a bed for some wandering child to nestle down on. The springy fallen leaves could make the stuffing for a pillow; the jack-in-the-pulpits could be sewn into a silky blanket, using needles from the trees. Somewhere out there, there might be fairies who would tuck you into bed, and in the morning the robins would bring your breakfast.

She stopped and stood still on the path. Laid there under everything else was still the sound of water, like a baby's gurgle.

The four children must have planned for it for weeks, their prank that would go awry. *Robert, Elaine, Lenora, William*. The lakes had been named for them, after all, which gave

them certain proprietary interests in them that weren't easily explained to nursemaids who preferred not to walk the grounds if it meant getting feet wet, to a Father who only requested their presence once or twice a month. Certainly not to a Mother who often forgot to lean from her tower window every so often to make sure they were safe. Mother, who sometimes looked right at them but didn't really seem to *see* them; Mother, who — if the truth were known — had spent each of their infancies desperately wishing they would sleep more.

The four children of Woodlands must have planned it for weeks, must've huddled beneath their bedclothes, whispering, after lights-out. They'd take the largest rowboat out; or they would sneak their clashing skates out of the house beneath their coats. There was no way for Lola to know if it had been summer or winter, and besides, the specifics didn't matter. All that mattered was the sound she'd mistaken for the trees, such an aching shift and sigh.

It was the sound of the oak planks of a rowboat, parting to greet water; or the groan of ice set foot on too early in the season.

The important thing was that their mother never heard them as they slipped beneath the surface.



Lola imagined a single shriek, cut short, a bright red woolen hood the only thing left floating on the surface of the water. She'd read an image like that somewhere, she suspected, or seen it in a movie.

But the truth had probably been that the children just — just slipped away, and that *that* became the burden their mother'd always carry with her. That once she'd wanted to slip away herself. That once, for just a few short hours out of what would turn out to be such a very long life, she'd wanted just to dodge them.

Ahead of Lola, in the brush between the lake and path, there was a rustling, loud enough that if she intended to ignore it she'd have to consciously keep the flashlight's beam away.

She pointedly played the light along the trail in front of her. A lumbering shape suddenly disengaged itself from the shadows and became two silhouettes. Became — because as soon as it moved toward her Lola couldn't help but spear it with the flashlight's beam — the figures of the well-known novelist and the no-longer weeping poet, the humpbacked ridge of a rowboat lying on the pebbled beach behind them.

What was there to say? She politely moved the flashlight beam from their startled faces to their shoes.

The well-known novelist's teeth flashed in the darkness. "Ummm," he said. "You headed out to your studio to work?" Beneath the social brightness of the question, his voice sounded appalled.

"Well..." she answered. "Not *really*." She realized it was the truth.

"We decided to take one of the rowboats out," the well-known novelist explained, as if he and the poet were guests at a resort. The poet gave him a single sharp look and started walking up the path toward the house.

"Of course," Lola said.

“Well, then,” he said. “Guess we’ll see you in the morning. At breakfast?”

Lola watched him continue along the trail, hurrying to catch up to the poet. They didn’t even have a *flashlight*. She stooped and started wrestling the boat back toward the boathouse.

It was as heavy and cumbersome as a body. So *that* was what all that scuffling and noise up at the house had come to. She felt oddly disappointed. She straightened up and left the boathouse, pulling its door closed. Every single thing she’d supposed about Woodlands had just been explained away.

But the water still kept up that sound like laughing — *lapping*, she corrected herself as she walked up the path — against the shoreline of the lake. She let herself into her tower.

When she stepped inside, it could still almost be mistaken for someplace where somebody lived, what with the daybed in one corner and its cozy self-containment. But at the same time there was something *off* about it, the way it lacked kitchen or shower or any other petty details. There wasn’t even a broom or dustpan to sweep up with.

So this was all that came of telling oneself stories. She walked over to the casement windows and leaned against the crank. As the window opened, the dank lake air slid in.

But there was still a creak, such an awful rending, to the rubbing of the branches of the trees. She leaned further out the window. As well as some faint call-and-response coming from someplace far off.

What else had that long-ago lady of the house been permitted to think of besides her children and how much she loved them? And just what artistic constraints did having children force upon one, but sentimentality and its inverse, some wry jocularly equally as removed from the intricate business of life?

Beyond the flat, imprisoning glare of the window, the darkness continued to knit itself together without any indication that it would ever unravel with daylight. Even now, there were things out there busily going about their business — finches who kept watch over the practical symmetry of their nests, beetles tidily turning death into dirt, fashioning homes out of leaf-mould. Fish hunkered down in the shallows, who for fish-generations immemorial had laid their eggs in the shadows cast by a slowly-rotting boat keel.

Lola could hear the well-known novelist, calling to his brand-new beloved. Although from up here, the sound could just as easily be something else entirely, the call of a child still outside a few minutes past dusk, summoning his companions in from a long game of hide-and-go-seek.

*Ollie, Ollie, all-in-free* the voice sang out, full of longing and abandon.

They were always such feverish games, carried on as darkness pooled among the trees.