

The Greeley Variations

by

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Abstract

Inspired by the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, European snake folklore, and "wished-for child" fairy tales, *The Greeley Variations* features several generations of women and the Victorian house they live in. The novel explores prospective parenthood, maternal legacy, and repeating patterns (visual, genetic, and psychological) as haunting experiences.

For Suzanne, Marilyn, Sylvia, and B.

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PROLOGUE

2030

These days Esther Greeley lives in the deepest parts of the House. Her daughter's eyes are too sensitive to withstand the tall bay windows on the upper floors; poor Celia winces whenever light falls across her small face. On sunny mornings Esther would make a point of marching around the House and closing all the heavy jacquard curtains with a snap of her wrists, ignoring the chorus of protests that followed in her wake. Over time she has lost patience with the rest of the family's complaints, with their insensitivity towards Celia's wellbeing. In the end, Esther chooses descent.

One bright June day, Esther and Celia move downstairs. Down, down, down from their tower room above the third floor, down all the staircases, down to the dark, cavernous, many-chambered basement. In addition to Celia's sensitivity to light, there is the fact that Esther has come to dread each year's season of wildfire smoke; her daughter's gasps, the hitches in her own chest as she struggles to breathe clearly. And with every winter that passes, it seems, comes a new virus that immobilizes both of them in bed for weeks. The city in springtime is plagued by late ice storms; in summer they suffer intolerable heat, or else are in danger of being washed away by surprise flash floods.

Esther knows that moving into the cool, silent basement apartment with its rusty bathroom faucets and cracked stone floors is not really a solution to her problems, on the surface, but she has also come to understand that, without her ever being fully conscious of it, some far corner of her mind has long considered the basement to be a sanctuary of last resort. A place to disappear for a little while, where no one and nothing will think to look for them.

Esther, please, her aunts implore her. *You can't raise a child in the dark*. She ignores them, and goes about creating their new life underground.

Standing on a ladder, her neck craned back and aching, Esther paints softly glowing stars on the bedroom ceiling with fine-tipped brushes. For the walls of the bedroom she executes a repeating pattern of white moths alighting on night flowers. The wallpaper gleams in the dark, and their surroundings are almost beautiful.

They will live in the basement until Celia is better, Esther tells herself. Or until the outside world grows more bearable. Whichever comes first.

During the day Celia rubs her eyes and complains of being tired. Like the pale flowers her mother put on the walls, she too blooms mainly at night, staying up far too late sitting against the headboard of her small bed to play with dolls. Sometimes, when Esther is falling asleep, she hears Celia telling stories to herself. Her voice bleeds into Esther's dreams.

I knew the House when it was still young and growing bones, Esther thinks she can recall Celia whispering last night. Back then I was small and easily hidden in the garden. I slept among my sisters, curled up in the flowerpots.

Then, the peculiar sound of something sliding heavily from the bed to the floor. A muffled thump, the creak of a door. Silence.

Esther had reached out her hand in the dark, groggily, to make sure that Celia was still in the other bed next to hers. And there—she touched a little arm in its long nightdress sleeve. Reassured, she slipped back under the surface of consciousness.

Hours later, when Esther fully wakes, it's to the perpetual gloom of the basement bedroom. Unless she checks her phone she won't be able to tell if it's properly morning yet or still some gray dawn hour. Sitting next to Esther on the larger bed, Celia is gently patting her mother's face with her small hands. This is what has woken Esther.

What is it? she asks her daughter. Are you all right?

She sits up, and Celia crawls into her lap. Celia has a question: When did you know you were going to be my mother?

Since always, Esther tells her, and begins to sift her fine, corn-silk hair into two thin braids. I always had the strangest feeling that there was someone missing. I felt it years before you were born.

Saying this, Esther thinks of what she has done. She had climbed into herself

almost seven years ago, sinking into her own body as if submerging into clear green water that grew darker and gradually more opaque as she swam further down; down so deep into the warm darkness at the center of herself that she could not have seen her own hand held before her face. Then—her fingers outreached and searching, raking and grasping through murky water until they closed around a small bright gem embedded in the silt: Celia.

I was the someone missing, Celia repeats, dreamily. She yawns.

Indeed you were, Esther tells her. It took me a long time to find you.

Somewhere far above them, a doorbell rings. It must be morning, then, Esther thinks. And a visitor has come to Greeley House.

In the bed the two of them go still and tilt their faces upwards, listening.

Footsteps creak overhead.

*

One day soon, Esther knows, Celia will ask her about the pregnancy. Her daughter has a curious, roving mind. She's always asking about the origins of things, wanting to know where everything comes from, from the hair of Esther's paintbrushes to the wart on Aunt Ness's right thumb.

Where do the earthworms come from, Celia wanted to know yesterday, that live

in the small glass terrarium sitting on the ground next to your drafting table, Mama?

They come from the garden behind the House, Esther answered, and braced herself for the inevitable follow-up question: But why are they down *here*?

Thankfully, it never came.

Celia's questions about her own personal origins are surely overdue, for a six year old girl. There is little that Esther can honestly tell her now, and she wants to spare Celia the technical details for as long as she can.

Esther knows she could lie. Or something a little better than a lie—she could veil the harsh reality in stories that will hint and suggest. She could tell fairy tales that prepare the soil of Celia's mind for planting such truths. Esther recalls now all of the wished-for child tales: Thumbelina; Snow White; Hans My Hedgehog; and oh yes, Esther remembers, the one where the mother is far too greedy and is punished with a snake for a child.

Celia isn't quite ready yet for such stories, she decides. Instead, Esther could stick to the truth for as long as she can and tell Celia a long, meandering tale about the months leading up to her birth. Like all children, Celia is amazed to hear references to a world that preceded her existence; about the woman who dared to live so many years on her own before becoming at last Celia's mother.

The summer before you were born was full of unseasonable rainstorms. Esther

begins to sketch the tale out in her head. *Far too much rain, and my own eyes sore from weeping.*

No lies there, not yet. In the months before the pregnancy, Esther had sat at her drafting table every day but could rarely bring herself to work. She spent hours staring out the rain-streaked window at blurred greenery. The wet grass grew tall and unkempt in the small, neglected yard in the back of the apartment. That was the summer neither she nor Brandon could be bothered to do anything about it after Grandmother Silke's death and in the face of so much unfortunate news from the fertility clinic.

Brandon. Esther will need to decide whether to tell Celia about Brandon.

CHAPTER ONE

One day the Queen went out for a walk by herself, and she met an ugly old woman. The old woman was just like a witch; but she was a nice kind of witch, not the cantankerous sort. She said, “Why do you look so doleful, pretty lady?”

“It’s no use my telling you,” answered the Queen, “Nobody in the world can help me.”

“Oh, you never know,” said the old woman. “Just you let me hear what your trouble is, and maybe I can put things right.”

“My dear woman, how can you?” said the Queen; and she told her, “The King and I have no children; that’s why I’m so distressed.”

“Well, you needn’t be,” said the old witch. “I can set that right in a twinkling, if only you will do exactly as I tell you. Listen . . .”

— “Prince Lindworm,” translated by Kay Nielsen (1914)

There was something wrong with her aunt's hands. Esther kept turning her head over her shoulder to get a better look at Ness, and in doing so missed several cues to stand up and sit back down. Grandmother Silke's funeral was well underway when Aunt Ness finally showed up and sat at a pew in the back of the church. Esther, who was bookended between a softly weeping Cousin Beatrice and Aunt Violet smelling of gin, had made a sharp beckoning motion for Ness to walk up the aisle to join their pew in the front, but Ness didn't move a muscle. Then Esther saw how changed her hands had become—fingers pale and thin and frail-looking. Esther stared.

Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Church had a wooden ceiling with curved beams, giving visitors the feeling of being inside the upside-down hull of a ship. Grandmother Silke had been enormously proud of the beauty of St. Elizabeth's, and well she might have been, considering that she had paid for a good portion of its construction back in the 1950's. In the final years of Silke's life it had grieved her that she was so ill that she could not attend Mass. Esther, who had had a recent falling out with her grandmother, was certain that whatever small amount of savings Silke had when she died was going to be given directly to St. Elizabeth's.

Ness, wearing a long black shawl and sitting in the back pew, was bizarrely clad in large sunglasses. It was a cloudy morning in early May. They were meant to hide her

red eyes, Esther supposed, though she had never known her aunt to care about her looks before. Violet had already warned Esther that Ness had lost her voice and couldn't speak a word. "Laryngitis," Violet said. "From howling with grief over Mother."

"What's wrong with her?" Esther whispered to Violet next to her in the pew. "She looks like she's been sick. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Sick at heart, poor thing," Violet said, not quite whispering. People turned to look at them. "Don't blame me. You stopped visiting us at the House ages ago."

Aunt Violet was tipsy at her mother's funeral, which was surprising. Violet was usually the Greeley who could pass for normal in front of other people, but she was currently hiccuping throughout the funeral and leering at old Father Morris in his long purple silk robes. "Your grandmother *loved* that priest," Violet whispered too loudly in Esther's ear. "And all his fancy dresses."

Poor Brandon was wedged between Beatrice and Uncle Ansel further down on the pew. He had accompanied Esther to St. Elizabeth's looking handsome and a little uncomfortable in a black tie and coat. Esther wasn't sure how they'd gotten separated in the first place, but decided to trust in his ability to fend for himself.

Esther gazed ahead at her grandmother's casket covered in white lilies, and counted to fifty. She turned her head again to look at Ness. Who was gone.

Esther stood up, not caring that it wasn't the right time to do so in the service.

Violet reached up and took hold of her hand, keeping her from leaving the pew.

“Oh, sit down and give her some space,” Violet told Esther. “Let Ness have her dramatic exit from Silke’s clutches. She deserves it more than any of us, doesn’t she?”

“You should have told me there was something wrong with her, Violet. And you, Ansel.” Esther leaned across soft Cousin Beatrice to address her uncle. His eyebrows went up. “Sorry? What’s wrong with Vanessa?” he asked in his dry voice.

“Nothing,” said Violet. “Esther doesn’t like the way she looks, or some nonsense.” Now Father Morris was raising his voice to speak over the remaining members of the Greeley family in the front pew.

“Esther?” whispered Brandon, tugging at her sleeve to get her attention. “The service is almost finished. Should we save this for later?”

“You are all heartless people,” Esther said under her breath, and part of her fervently hoped that Silke could somehow hear her.

But in the end, she did sit back down in the pew.

*

Months after the funeral, Ness had still not answered Esther’s calls to the landline at Greeley House. By August, Esther was more preoccupied with her bouts of uncontrollable weeping in the car on the way home from their visits to the fertility clinic.

Brandon, driving, would always turn his head now and again to gaze at her, his brown eyes warm and so watery that Esther was afraid he would lose control of the car.

Brandon, who was prone to joking during overly emotional displays, never cried of his own accord; had not done so once in all the time that she'd known him. But for some reason the sight of Esther weeping never failed to evoke his own tears.

His tears should have felt like commiseration, Esther thought one rainy evening on the drive back from the clinic. She tried to tamp down the part of her that, selfishly, wished she was alone in the car so she could fully abandon herself to the act of crying. But no, he was still looking at her, and his sympathy deserved some kind of response.

She cleared her throat, intending to say something to acknowledge him, but what came out of her mouth instead was a clipped, "Watch the road." Brandon turned his head to look forward, and drove carefully around a downed tree in their lane. The streets were nearly shallow streams in the downpour.

He parked in the driveway and turned off the car. They sat in silence.

"Would you like to discuss the options the doctor gave us?" Brandon asked Esther, his voice kind. Too kind. It made her skin prickle with irritation, and at the same time, inexplicably, caused her nose to start running again. She opened the car door and got out.

Walking up the sidewalk to their apartment, she finally managed to speak.

“I want to keep trying.” Her voice, she noticed, sounded slightly resentful. As if it was Brandon who had delivered the bad news to her. As if Brandon was the cause of their failure. Childish, Esther told herself. A little girl in disbelief that she wasn’t getting her way, looking around for someone to pin the blame on.

“I thought the doctor was convincing.” Brandon unlocked the front door and turned on the light switch, but the apartment stayed dark. In the last few days there had been power outages that lasted for hours at a time. Yesterday they’d seen a car hydroplane into a utility pole.

Esther took off her green jacket, heavy with rain. “We can’t afford any *alternative solutions*. And anyway I don’t want them. I want to make a child the old-fashioned way, or not at all.”

So they tried again that night in the dark apartment. Dry-lipped kisses, perfunctory, almost chaste. Esther’s long t-shirt rucked up around her waist. At her request, they tried again after breakfast the next morning in the kitchen; the electricity back on and a lightbulb blazing overhead. The slight discomfort of the position filling her with a grim sense of accomplishment. Brandon silent behind her; the spoon in the marmalade jar sitting on the table rattling in tempo. After it was over she stood up, a little too quickly. Thought of big cats mating, the lioness shaking off the male with a snarl at the finish.

They tried again and again for the rest of the week. Unbidden, memories sprang to mind of herself as a child holding two naked dolls, the way she smashed their lower halves together relentlessly.

Then it was time for Aidan's visit, and there was a kind of unspoken agreement between them to stop for the duration. She was done ovulating for the month anyway, Esther told herself, but had to admit that the abrupt halt made her feel as though their attempts were something guilty and furtive. No one knew they were trying; it wasn't something you really went around telling other people.

She knew that Brandon wouldn't even consider telling his son that they wanted to give him a sibling. And of course, Esther chided herself, to tell Aidan right now would be completely premature. What Aidan needed was stability and consistency. *Stability and consistency* was Brandon and Marianne's parenting mantra.

The boy's mother hated Esther. Brandon had always denied it, but to Esther it was painfully, insultingly clear. Aidan came to stay with his father at their apartment every other week, and Marianne parked on the street and watched from the car while he waited on the front doorstep. Whenever Brandon came to the door, Marianne got out of the car and the two of them would chat cordially for a few minutes, about homework and food allergies, from what Esther could overhear from inside. Lately when she answered the door for Aidan, however, Marianne drove away the moment Esther appeared.

That afternoon Esther stood and gazed through the rear window of the car at the back of Marianne's head as she disappeared down the street. She couldn't quite pinpoint where the disappointment welling up inside her chest was coming from. What exactly did Esther want from her boyfriend's ex-wife? Acknowledgement? Gratitude? A coffee date with Marianne, maybe, or a dinner party invitation here and there. And if Esther really wanted to fantasize: holidays with all of them together as some kind of unconventional family.

From this distance, the back of Marianne's curly head resembled that of a large poodle, Esther thought, ungenerously.

On the front steps Aidan was fidgeting with his backpack straps. "Hey you," Esther said, wondering if she would get a scowl if she ruffled his hair. She held the door open for him instead, and he ducked under Esther's arm to disappear into the gloom of the apartment. His backpack was illustrated with sharks: great white, hammerhead, tiger. They swam down the hallway away from her, faintly illuminated in the dim light.

She had only met Marianne in person a handful of times in the four years since Esther had started dating Brandon. No meaningful conversation between them had ever occurred; only brief, unsatisfying encounters at drop-offs and pickups when Marianne didn't drive away fast enough.

Esther had only been able to get a good, long look at Marianne in Brandon's

wedding photos, where she was all smiles and bare arms in a lace dress, beaming adoringly up at Brandon for the benefit of the photographer. Her hand rested lightly on his shoulder, the top of her head tucked under his chin. Frankly impressive breasts brushing against his chest. *Figs splitting on the branch, blessed be the fruit of her womb.* Esther could almost see Aidan forming in utero between the two of them, already scowling.

Brandon kept his wedding album hidden in a bookcase in the guest bedroom, cleverly tucked out of sight behind a tall row of true crime novels. It amused Esther to think of Brandon taking the time to scan the bookcase, trying to decide which books were the least likely to draw her attention. She had found the hidden album one insomniac night only a month after she moved in with Brandon. She looked at it every other month or so, on the pretext of giving the guest bedroom a deep clean.

You two were separated when I met him, Esther told the golden Marianne who smiled out at her from the wedding photos. There's no reason for you to go out of your way to be unpleasant. No wonder he left you in the end.

As for how she measured up to Marianne, physically—well, Esther tried not to dwell on that comparison. Esther was a tall, large-framed woman; she could stand in front of Brandon and nearly look him directly in the eyes, and she was almost as flat chested as he was.

She came from a long line of tall Greeley women with narrow, bony faces, colorless blonde hair, no hips to speak of, and complex fertility issues only discussed in whispers. Esther didn't remember her mother—she'd never known either of her parents. Young Stella Greeley had died in a car crash, and Esther's father had been the one driving. Esther's final falling out with Grandmother Silke before she died had been in part about Silke withholding information about her father's current whereabouts.

Esther kept the photos of her mother close at hand by her drafting table, and out of habit she would take them out and study them. They fascinated and puzzled her. On the back of her favorite photo was a single name written in cursive: *Stella*. Esther's own eyes looked back at her, hazel and deep-set. A glimmer of shrewdness in the steady gaze, disconcerting in a young face. Thin lips, pressed together in a half-smile. It could have been Esther's face, Brandon exclaimed when he first saw the photo—it *was* her face. Was she pulling a joke on him?

She'd never worn a blouse like that in her life, Esther had protested, or styled her hair long and feathered. Everyone said the Greeleys shared a resemblance, with the exception of Uncle Ansel and Aunt Violet, the twins, who had been adopted by Grandmother Silke when they were children.

Esther's face next to Aunt Ness's; poor dead Stella, and stern Grandmother Silke. Brandon, gazing at the photographs all laid out in a row on her drafting table, told Esther

that he'd like to take a close-up portrait of each woman. He wanted to capture their faces at the same age and study them all. Once he had pinned each of them down in time, he was sure that he'd find only minor variations in their collective features.

It was not a beautiful face by any means, but it seemed determined to persist, Esther thought. At her age she was resigned to wearing it.

*

Esther's period arrived only a week later. It was early this month, which she thought was especially unfair. She couldn't remember the last time she was late enough to be able to justify using a pregnancy test. In the bathroom Esther swallowed back tears, hiccuping a little, and went straight to bed.

Brandon, who had been hovering around her nervously for the past few days, sat at the foot of the bed and rubbed Esther's knee through the blankets.

"I'm so sorry," Brandon said, his eyes sincere and moist again. He did look sad for her, Esther thought with an interested kind of detachment. It was almost enough, but in the end not quite. Brandon wasn't sad for himself, after all; not in the least bit.

"Don't be sorry." She blew her nose. "There's no practical reason for you and I to biologically bring more children into the world. We both know that. It certainly isn't worth the money for fertility treatments."

“Isn’t wanting something so much a good enough reason?”

“No,” Esther said severely, more to herself than to Brandon. “And maybe, if we’re being very practical, passing down my genes to a child is a terrible idea. I get brain-splitting migraines, panic attacks, and catch viruses at the drop of the hat. I spent nearly half of my own childhood home from school, sick in bed. I’m probably not a great candidate for motherhood, and my body knows it.”

Brandon frowned. “Well, I’m not sure I agree with *that* line of reasoning. What about Aidan? The school counselor said he might have a generalized anxiety disorder. In addition to, you know, some of his behavioral issues. Even if I’d known about those things before he was born, I would *never* have questioned whether or not to have him. It’s definitely not the most ethical way of thinking about this issue . . .”

“Oh lord,” Esther said into the tissue and glared at him over the top of it. “I’m going to think about it however I want in my own bedroom. And don’t you judge me for it. You already have Aidan.”

“Esther,” Brandon said. “If you want to have a child, *we will have another child.*”

He paused, as if gathering his thoughts in order to say something serious. Esther regarded him warily. In her current stage of disappointment, newly bleeding and eyes perpetually swollen with salt, not to mention her confused feelings over dead Grandmother Silke, she was in no mood at the moment to discuss adoption, or fostering,

or any other alternative. Brandon—*wise, judicious Brandon*—must have sensed this, because he silently kissed the side of her head and left the bedroom.

Your reasons for wanting to be pregnant, in this moment, are mainly emotional and hormonal, Esther told herself bracingly. Anyone with a dead mother and a lonely little childhood in the cold, vast Greeley House would probably feel the same way.

Esther had been haphazardly brought up by a strict and often ill grandmother; an uncle who was an indifferent father figure at best; Aunt Ness, who was lovely but undeniably detached at times; and Aunt Violet, who was not sentimental about children, as she had told young Esther so often.

Esther was sentimental about childhood, she found. Esther felt an an empty, howling, likely biologically-endorsed impulse to have a *do-over*. She would give her daughter or son a dream childhood, full of fairy tale books read at bedtime and homemade gingersnaps at Christmas. Warm yellow lamplight thrown onto the bedroom wall, onto which Esther would cast puppet hand shadows.

Brandon had been right about not letting one's anxiety about future hypotheticals guide one's decision, Esther thought. No matter what, no sick or troubled child of hers would ever go to bed lonely or afraid, or be made to feel unwelcome in the first place. She could do so much better than that.

*

Driving herself to the fertility clinic for a new round of tests one morning in early September, Esther took the wrong exit. She was distracted, thinking about health insurance and out of pocket payments. Brandon was a community college instructor in veterinary science, and Esther illustrated textbooks for medical book publishers. Neither of them made any money to speak of.

Absentmindedly, Esther took the exit for the southwest part of the city, an old familiar route she used to drive once a week or more. “Damn it, Ness,” she said aloud, and kept going. Ten minutes later she was parked outside her childhood home—a crumbling Victorian monstrosity complete with tower, the oldest and surely the ugliest house in the Lair Hill neighborhood.

Looming over all the surrounding Edwardians and their tidy post-stamp gardens, Greeley House sprawled on an oversized lot with the ancient linden tree in the back and masses of blackberry bushes growing along the fences, threatening to invade the neighbors’ yards.

For as long as Esther could remember Greeley House had been painted emerald green, but now it was the grayish color of decaying artichokes. The pear orchard looked tangled and surly, and the front lawn was covered in white dandelion globes. Through tall weeds and brambles Esther could barely make out the shingled roof of the old printing studio in the back, the abandoned site of Greeley & Natrix, Patterners.

Her elderly aunts and uncle had not been keeping up Greeley House even to minimal standards during Silke's long and final illness, Esther realized with a pang of guilt.

She climbed up the stairs to the front door and knocked loudly. When there was no answer, she tried the door handle. It was unlocked, and she let herself in.

The house was surprisingly clean inside, at least on the first floor. There were other parts of Greeley House, Esther knew, that had not seen daylight or a duster in decades. She walked down the entrance way and threw her purse on the faded green velvet loveseat in the sitting room. All the lights were off. Damask wallpaper seemed to ripple slightly as she walked, the dark wood of the old familiar furniture gleaming.

Through the murky light, Esther saw a figure stirring at the end of the long hallway.

"Hello?" An old woman came forward a few steps, and hesitated. She reached out a hand to touch the wall next to her, perhaps for balance. After a moment of confusion, Esther understood that this person was Aunt Violet. In a heartbeat the unsteady old woman vanished, and familiarity clicked into place. There was Violet walking towards her, short and buxom as ever, wearing a blue silk dressing gown and long strands of pearls looped over her chest.

"God, Esther. I thought you were from the gas company. I didn't recognize you at

all.”

“Hello, Violet.” Esther bit down on the impulse to tell her aunt that in the last few years she herself had aged almost out of recognition. Esther knew that nothing would disturb Violet more, which made it particularly difficult to hold her tongue. “Sorry to drop by without calling. I wanted to check on Ness. What’s wrong with the gas?”

“We think there might be some kind of *leak*. The cat has been acting strangely these last few days and we all have headaches. Terrifying, isn’t it? I’d make you a cup of tea, but I’m not supposed to use the stove. And Ness still won’t let us get a microwave.”

Esther followed her aunt into the kitchen as she spoke. There were more windows here than in the rest of the house put together, and the walls were newly papered with a vertical pattern of green leaves and bright, cheery lemons. In the watery September light Esther noticed the fine web of wrinkles over Violet’s face as her aunt pushed a silver curl under her headscarf. At the funeral, three months ago, Esther had been distracted by the pomp and circumstance of Silke’s service and too distraught at the sight of Ness’s newly frail appearance to really observe anyone else.

Esther broke her gaze. She turned to touch a lemon on the wallpaper. “This is new. I like it. Better than those hideous cantaloupes the last time I was here.”

“You dyed your hair since I last saw you,” Violet said. “That’s what startled me when you came in all unannounced. Interesting choice of color.”

Esther reached up to touch her short, almost platinum white hair. “I did it on a whim. It’s in honor of Grandmother Silke, I guess.” Silke had worn a snow white braid down the back of her perpetual nightgown, or else wrapped it up in a coronet around her head. Esther decided not to mention to Violet that her blonde hair had started becoming prematurely streaked with silver over the last six months. It was a cover-up job made to look like a fashionable choice.

“That’s a lovely sentiment. Although I didn’t think you were so fond of Silke towards the end,” Violet said. “Not enough to dye your hair for her.”

Before Esther could respond, Violet leaned her head back and shouted up at the kitchen ceiling. “Ansel! Come down and see our visitor.”

The ceilings and floors were the most thin in this section of Greeley House, a newer addition constructed sometime after 1945. Directly above their heads was Ansel’s study. Listening, Esther and Violet heard the slow scrape of a chair. After a minute or two, Ansel came into the kitchen with an absent-minded air, buttoning up his burgundy cardigan and looking more thin and gray than Esther had ever seen him. When he saw Esther sitting at the kitchen table he stopped short, blinking in astonishment.

“Esther! But this is remarkable. Just last night I decided to call you this week and tell you to come to the House right away to look over what I’ve been working on. And here you are, ready to lend me a hand.” Her uncle clapped his palms together and rubbed

them with relish.

Here's one person who will never change with age, not until the day he dies, thought Esther. Ansel was incurably vain about his artistic talent and totally oblivious to the fact that people existed for any purpose other than to serve his vision. For Esther's whole childhood she'd watched Ness cook Ansel's midnight meals when he took a fancy to nibble on something, sew buttons back onto his shirts, and dust the light fixtures in his study. He never thanked Ness or took any notice of her unceasing domestic services—probably believing that those little necessities took care of themselves, like the work completed in the dead of night by shoemaker's elves.

Ansel watched Esther expectantly, waiting for her to say that she'd be delighted to go upstairs and look at his latest pattern designs. "I've missed you too, Uncle Ansel," Esther told him. "Shall we go out for lunch at the bistro and catch up?"

He made a disgusted sound. "Don't be ridiculous. *Lunch*. Come up to the study at once, I need your eyes." And he turned and walked out, leaving Violet and Esther alone again in the kitchen.

"Is he eating?" Esther asked her aunt. "He looks gaunt."

"He lives on cold tea and peppermints, like always. Sometimes Ness can get him to join us for dinner if she stands right behind him while he's working and blocks the light. She doesn't budge until Ansel comes downstairs in a fury. She's like a boulder

when she wants to be. *You* know. But we try to save that tactic for when he's looking especially peaky."

Uncle Ansel called himself a pattern artist. This meant, in Esther's opinion, that he had sacrificed his vision, his health, and his family's sanity in order to design exquisitely detailed tiles of repeating images. These sample tiles were made into wallpaper patterns and sold to customers with pretensions of preserving historical houses, like the Greeley House. Customers who had money to burn, like Esther's family used to have before the business collapsed and Grandmother Silke became ill.

"What a prima donna he always is," Esther said to Violet, and stood up. "I'm just going to say hello to Ness, and then I'm leaving."

"Oh, go upstairs and say something nice about your uncle's new project. He always valued your opinion on the work more than anyone else's."

"He valued me as a lab assistant," Esther said. She belatedly smiled in order to soften the edge in her words. "Where can I find Ness?"

"One is either a lab assistant or a lab experiment where Ansel is concerned, dear." Violet tugged on a strand of pearls and flashed her little front teeth up at Esther. "Haven't seen Vanessa all morning. Check the garden."

A DIARY OF ASTER GREELEY

1892

September 7:

Now I am ten!

Mother gave me this little album to use as a Diary. It has a black velvet cover with gold letters embossed upon it & a metal clasp that snaps closed.

Mother says to keep it daily. When I asked her what I should write about she said:

That is up to you, Little Star. But write every day & practice your penmanship.

She said this because I prefer sewing to reading & writing. Reading makes my head ache even more than it usually does & hurts my poor eyes.

Mother says that my Grandmother Oda could hardly write at all & that we Greeley women must strive to better ourselves. I would rather keep this Diary sewn in thread & cloth than with a pen. I do not know why it should

be so but sewing does not hurt my eyes nearly as much as reading.

September 9:

I believe I could sew a straight line of stitches in my sleep. Already I am keeping two Diaries. This one & now another one that is a kind of scrap album with mementos sewn together & embroidered upon. Below is a list of the pieces of fabric I have collected for it so far:

- 5 scraps of blue & gold calico from my favorite summer dress I outgrew one year ago.

- 4 inches of rose colored ribbon taken from the hat that fell into the mud when Pug's little brother Henry knocked into me at church.

- 1 scrap of cotton from an old nightgown that Mother says belonged to one of her sisters back in New York. She cannot remember which sister because she had so many. Anna, Mary, Rosa, Kate, Elizabeth, Estelle.

Mother says I should embroider the name Estelle onto the piece of cotton because she was her true sister and not step-sister like the others.

My hand grows tired already from pressing the pen down on the page. I

will stop & rest for a moment.

Later:

- Lots of pieces taken from some red flannel I found in the attic. I cut it up on the spot with my little scissors because it came from a man's undergarment. I don't know Whose but I do know I should not have touched it. But it was such a nice red color that I had to do it.

November 20:

Today I am cutting up fabric from Mother's old green gingham dress. She has given it to me to use for my scrap album. She wore it when she was a girl traveling from New York to Oregon. When she talks about that journey Mother says she wishes she had instead gotten on a ship & gone back to Norway where my grandmother Oda came from.

The last time Mother said this I said: What about me?

She said: What about you my love?

I said: Where would I be now if you had sailed to Grandmother Oda's country instead of going Overland to Oregon?

Mother said: With me of course. I carried you with me wherever I went.

Much of the dress is spoiled & split but I think I can rescue about three quarter pieces without stains. I will embroider onto them Mother's initials & the date she arrived in Portland: H.S.G, 1863. She was nineteen years old & her hair was as fine & long as mine she says.

My hair is a color that Pug calls corn floss yellow. Pug's hair is red but I am supposed to call it auburn. Mother's hair is now silver white all over.

I want a piece from Mother's gold velvet shawl with the long fringe but she is not finished wearing it she says. She tells me to stop looking at the shawl with such greedy eyes. I hope it wears out soon.

February 17, 1893:

I have not kept this Diary for months but I'm not sorry. I knocked over one of the big flowerpots in the greenhouse & Mother scolded me sharply.

There was nothing growing in it at all. There was only soil & earthworms inside. She picked up the worms with her bare hands & put them back inside the flowerpot. I did not want to touch them so I did not offer to help.

She did not need to lose her temper so.

I am upstairs in the attic & I am going to look through some old wooden chests I have not opened before. When I am grown I will own all of the dresses & curtains & shawls & undergarments in Greeley House & I will cut up as many as I please.

February 18:

Here below I have pasted a note from Mother that she left on my pillow.

It is written on her best stationary.

Little Star,

Good morning, dear girl. Wasn't yesterday afternoon awful? My head was aching badly, but I spoke far too harshly to my Aster.

I am glad for the talk we had afterwards last night, and thankful for the promise you made to me to be very careful when playing in the greenhouse, especially next to the flowerpots. You are a good girl who is becoming very thoughtful and grown up indeed. And such a comfort to me.

Do you know—the greenhouse is the place where I first knew that I would have a little girl and name her Aster? I was looking down at the star-shaped purple flowers when I chose your name, overcome at the thought of you. I believe there is nothing in the world like a mother's happiness.

A stanza by a favorite author:

*“Then, when the child comes, lovely as a star,
She, in the peace of primal motherhood,
Nurses her baby with unceasing joy,
With milk of human kindness, human health,
Bright human beauty, and immortal love.
And then? Ah! here is the New Motherhood—
The motherhood of the fair new-made world . . .”*

— Charlotte Perkins Stetson

One day you too will know such joy.

Your Loving Mother

Mother's note cheered me but I didn't understand the poem very well. I'm
in the library now & here I have the book of poetry it came from.

There's more of the poem that Mother did not copy out, and it is the most
interesting part:

“Motherhood: First mere laying of an egg,
With blind foreseeing of the wisest place,
And blind provision of the proper food
For unseen larva to grow fat upon
After the instinct-guided mother died—
Posthumous motherhood, no love, no joy.”

Tell me about when you were a little girl, Celia says to Esther.

Celia is supposed to be eating one of the bowls of soup Aunt Ness brought down for them, but she's using her spoon as a conductor's baton and humming loudly along to the record player.

Esther puts down her paintbrush and stretches her arms over her head. Whenever Celia is asleep or playing on her own, Esther works on a book of illustrated fairy tales that she intends to finish by the time Celia finally starts reading. On the wall above her drafting table are sketches and first attempts, the colors blurry and dream-like. The squares of watercolor and gouache paints glow in their cases like appealing gems. When Celia was a little younger than she is now, she would try to put them in her mouth when Esther wasn't looking.

What was the House like when you were small? Celia asks. Did it ever talk to you?

When I was a little girl, Esther tells Celia, I looked exactly like you. We could have been twins.

Celia laughs at the thought of being someone's twin, and Esther remembers a game she used to play with herself sometimes, alone in her childhood bedroom in the tower. After Ness's soup, Esther and Celia sit on the stone floor of the basement

apartment with a stack of old photo albums in their laps. Esther points to various little girls in the photos, and asks, Who is that, Celia? Me or you? Or is that person someone else entirely?

Celia touches all the photographed faces with awe: faded color, black and white, daguerreotype.

Me, she whispers. They're all me.

*

The basement of Greeley House seems to go on forever. It gives the sensation of being somehow wider than the rest of the house. Esther and Celia live in a group of rooms they call their apartment, but here are many more rooms in the basement—rooms within rooms, some boarded up and nailed shut. The smell of the basement is earthy, cold, slightly damp. All is made of old stone beneath the house. The floors, the walls. The damp underground scent settles into their hair, their clothes. On the rare occasions when Esther leaves the basement she can smell it on herself.

Esther leaves the basement only when absolutely necessary, preferably while Celia is asleep in the afternoon. She shops for food when Ness is ill, for instance. She consults trusted acquaintances in the medical field about Celia's health, without revealing anything specific, and considers at length arranging visits for them to examine her. Esther buys clothing when she's tired of darning holes and sewing simple shift dresses. She

doesn't bother buying new shoes. Even on rare ventures to the upper floors of Greeley House, her daughter walks about in socks and bare feet.

If Esther leaves the basement while her daughter is awake, Celia will sob inconsolably until her mother returns. Ness sits with her, patting her on the back. She's long given up trying to distract Celia with songs or stories, Ness says. Celia only weeps through them.

That child is determined to be brokenhearted, Ness tells Esther one day. You and I were never so sensitive, Esther.

I just hid it better than Celia does, Esther says, irritated. I went around with my heart in pieces most of the time. Didn't you?

Goodness, certainly not, says Ness. What sort of life would that be? Mother raised me to endure the outside world.

Ness looks pointedly around the underground apartment. No matter how Esther tries to dress it up with Persian rugs, tasseled pillows, lanterns softly glowing with candles, strings of fairy lights hung along the ceiling, Joni Mitchell and Child Ballads on the record player, delicately painted murals on the walls—their surroundings are cramped, damp, isolated. Esther burns white-hot with anger at her aunt for a long moment. Swallows it down.

Aren't you lucky, Ness, she says coldly. The world is a very different place now.

*

Violet stayed with Celia once while Esther went out, a year ago, and Celia cried

so hard that she vomited. Violet has made vague but inflexible excuses when asked to babysit ever since. Uncle Ansel is equally useless in this regard. He pokes his head downstairs once every few weeks or so, usually to talk to Esther about the latest pattern work, or more often now, to try and get a glimpse at what she's painting for her book of fairy tales. He always blinks in surprise at the sight of his grand-niece.

Celia, Ansel says after a pause one afternoon, looking as if he had to search his memory for her name. How are you, my dear?

Down on the rug where she's lying on her stomach, playing with her dolls, Celia freezes. She never speaks to anyone but Esther and Ness. Only a few minutes ago she was giving Peach and Critter a spirited treatise on the differences between slugs and snails, but now Celia stares silently up at the adults in the room, eyes round and owlish. She seems to have the endearing but misguided notion that if she stays perfectly still, no one can see her. There is a long pause in which no one speaks.

Charming, Ansel finally says, eyebrows raised, and begins talking to Esther about patterns.

CHAPTER TWO

At a cotter's place in Seljord a long time ago, there lived a woman who knew all kinds of witchcraft . . . Once she found a white snake. It was a rare stroke of good luck to find that kind of snake; it has the power to heal all manner of sickness. When you boil a white snake, three stars appear in the brine. The first makes you wise and the second gives you second sight, but the third makes you mad, and it spins around like a wheel.

The woman boiled the snake in the usual manner. Then she went out to the cow shed to take care of her animals. But her daughter Margit was alone in the house. She saw the pot sitting there, and being a child, she thought that it was broth . . .

— “The White Snake,” told by Anlaug Torsdatter Syftestad (1904)

The kitchen garden behind the Greeley House was a wilderness of late summer tomato bushes, tangled and overgrown, but no Ness standing in their midst wearing a wide brimmed hat and gardening apron. The sunflowers were going extravagantly to seed, heavy heads bobbing on slender necks. In the orchard, branches were bowed and laden with hard, little green pears. Esther picked one and tossed it underhand at the boarded-up windows of the old printing studio. This was where the hours of her apprenticeship under Greeley & Natrrix had dragged on and on.

For more than a decade Ansel Greeley and his partner Elias Natrrix had not only designed wallpaper but manufactured test samples in the printing studio behind the house. The business of Greeley & Natrrix, Patterners, had kept a small staff of poorly trained and underpaid family members and friends. This included Esther throughout highschool, until she quit on her eighteenth birthday and moved out of the House riding Leon Natrrix's stolen moped.

Housing the family wallpaper company in the back garden of Greeley House had always struck her as dangerous and unnecessary, as well as possibly illegal when it came to the small matter of business permits and zoning laws. Whenever Esther brought this up, her uncle had held one long finger in the air and quoted the Victorians of the Arts and Crafts movement: "Production should never be divorced from creation, Esther. The

artist's responsibility to the work does *not* end at the drafting table.”

Now the wallpaper business was defunct, Elias Natrix was dead, and his son Leon had dropped out of touch with Esther ages ago. As Ansel neared and then passed retirement age, he continued working as a freelance artist for interior design companies. His patterns weren't as much in demand as they were in the heyday of Greeley & Natrix, but he still retained a small pool of loyal clients who liked an old-fashioned, ornate touch.

The garden was suffused with sunlight, the air clean from the rain the night before. Esther remembered suddenly that Aidan was starting school in a week. There would be things to buy, wouldn't there? Pencil cases, notebooks, new clothes. That was something to look forward to, shopping for his school things.

More likely that Brandon and Aidan would go by themselves and forget to invite her, Esther mused, picking yellow petals off a giant sunflower head. Or maybe Marianne had already taken care of it.

The swirl of dark seeds seemed to move under her gaze, like the backs of honeybees marching in formation. She tossed the sunflower away.

Ness was nowhere to be found in the garden, so Esther went back into the House and steeled herself to visit the third floor.

*

The third floor of Greeley House was Grandmother Silke's domain, and she had rarely left it. Esther never knew a time when this had not been true, though Violet had assured her that in the distant, dismal past, Grandmother Silke had roamed freely about the House, turning her imperious head to and fro, frowning a thin-lipped frown, and giving orders to the rest of the family like a general.

"Ah, you were born into happier times," Violet had sighed and smiled at young Esther. "Now the old monster is trapped in bed. I don't envy you having to pass by her to get into the tower, though! Forced to say good morning and good night and give a report of all your doings . . . Ugh, it gives me shudders to remember it all."

The tower room was for the children of Greeley House. Grandmother Silke said it had always been so, and as far as Esther knew Leon Natrix was the only child in many years to have escaped this rule. The reason for this was that the tower already belonged to Esther, by the time Leon showed up, although it was certainly big enough for more than one person. And there was also the fact that in order to get to the tower, one had to enter Grandmother Silke's oddly shaped, hexagonal bedroom. In the bedroom was a tall ladder that took you to the square ceiling entrance, where a child could hoist themselves into the tower with its golden walls and cupola ceiling.

Aunt Ness's bedroom was on the third floor, where she had been able to hear Silke's calls and rush to her mother's side at a moment's notice. Esther turned the

doorknob, but for some reason Ness's room was locked. It was silent when Esther pushed her ear against the door. She didn't think her aunt was inside—Ness would have responded to Esther's voice when she called for her.

It was almost impossible to find someone in the maze of rooms and corridors that was Greeley House. Your best chance was to walk up and down the staircase that ran like an artery from the basement to the tower, shouting the missing person's name. This method was usually saved for emergencies and couldn't truly be relied on.

Reluctantly, almost dragging her feet, Esther went down to the second floor to her uncle's study. Ansel sat illuminated behind a desk lamp. He was gazing closely at something, almost bent over in half, his nose about three inches away from the surface of his drafting table. The light caught his round spectacles and flashed when he looked up at her, turning the lenses opaque for a moment.

When Esther was a small child she'd spent hours in Ansel's study, perched on a tall wooden stool, very silent and still, peering over her uncle's shoulder as he worked at the drafting table. At his elbow was a large black lacquer tray holding an array of implements: three magnifying glasses of differing sizes and strengths, a clutch of exquisitely fine paintbrushes made of sable and bristle, a shallow dish of water, a blotting rag that smelled of turpentine, tweezers, a flat, thin-bladed knife. And the bright tubes of paint; pungent gobs of oil and gouache.

Ansel Greeley would be hunched over the table, humming tunelessly as he sketched and dabbed. In the past his tastes ran towards the gently sylvan, the idyllic—a sea of layered golden wheat stalks that appeared to sway under your gaze, dotted with crimson poppies. That was a bestseller when Esther was seven. Then it was Ansel’s famous fish scales the year she was nine. Order after order came for Greeley and Natrix’s latest innovation: overlapping scales of pearly gold, delicate silver, or dusky-purple. The scales ran textured, shiny, and rigid under her fingertips, and the walls of all four of the Greeley House’s bathrooms seem to breathe like the sides of giant, land-bound carp.

The fish scale wallpaper was followed by a six-month period devoted to perfecting the art of painting feathers. Ansel spent long days mumbling about flues and barbs, and filled his study with iridescent rooster tails and the golden down feathers of turkeys. The family never made very much money during Ansel’s research periods.

When Esther asked him why he didn’t just do variations on the old leaf-scroll and fleur-de-lis like everyone else, he would say to her with unnecessary reproach, “We cannot improve upon nature, Esther. We must immerse ourselves in the primal source, and pay our dues.”

“Took you long enough!” Ansel said, and beckoned her to come forward. “Sit. Sit here.”

Esther sat in the old leather armchair he pointed to. It had a high back and a

cracked seat, bits of white stuffing pushing out of it. “I can only stay for an hour, at the most,” she said. “Aidan needs to be dropped off at my apartment at three.”

“Who?” said her uncle, voice muffled. He was digging through a pile of thickly bound albums with his back to her.

“Just my child,” Esther said. “Aidan.”

Ansel straightened up and looked over at her with surprise.

“Stepchild,” Esther amended. “With Brandon Carmichael. Remember Brandon?”

“Ah,” Ansel said, returning to his stack. “I didn’t know that the two of you had married. Congratulations and all that.”

“We didn’t get married. We don’t intend to get married. That doesn’t mean I’m not a stepparent to the child I’ve helped raise for the last four years.”

Ansel shrugged, pulling up a chair across from Esther’s with a book under his arm. “I wouldn’t know. Now!” He opened the enormous book of pattern samples with a creak of the covers. “If you would be so kind as to examine these.”

Esther took the album. “What feedback do you want?”

“I’d rather not say just yet. Just sit with the designs, give general impressions. I’ll be quiet and observe.”

To her annoyance, he discreetly pulled out a pen and a small notebook from his cardigan pocket. Esther opened the album to the first page and looked down at the pattern

tile.

Cream-white background, floral motif, spray of leaves and stems, budding flowers, pomegranates. A balanced symmetry, movement going upwards, slightly angled to the right. There was a nicely executed detail of six tiny honey bees—three in mid-flight, the others hidden among the foliage. “Mm,” Esther said, noncommittally. “Pretty.”

“It is, isn’t it?” said her uncle, sounding pleased.

Esther shifted in her chair. The crack in the leather seat was starting to scratch her leg through her jeans. The wallpaper tile was perfectly standard Greeley & Natrix work, nothing extraordinary. Except—she leaned closer to the page to make sure. Something was off with the pomegranates.

They were unpleasantly bulbous, painted with far too much texture. There were dimples and puckers on the skin, and tiny brush lines reminiscent of fuzzy hair. And there—a pomegranate in the bottom left corner, and another one in the middle of the tile were both splitting open, clusters of red seeds glistening inside—

Esther felt herself grimacing. “Ansel,” she said, looking up. “These pomegranates—”

“Yes?” said Ansel. He had his notebook open, pen hovering.

She looked at them again. They somehow seemed less repugnant than they had

a moment ago. In the graceful context of the rest of the tile, they merely looked a little clumsy. “More stylized than your usual work.”

Esther turned the page to the next tile sample. White flowers, overlapping lily pads, lotus pods. The subject matter was predictable, but the colors were lush, almost burning. Water lilies opened and closed their petals across the tile, revealing golden hearts. Only the round lotus pods were painted without vivid colors—they were gray-brown husks, chambered like deformed honeycombs. The textures were again too exaggerated; even the flower stamens had a fleshy, sea-anemone quality to them.

“You don’t like it?” Ansel was looking at her closely. “You’re frowning.”

“I don’t *not* like it. It’s a little overly-gorgeous for my tastes.” Esther could feel one of her headaches coming on, and the air in the study had become too warm. She looked around and saw an electric heater burning merrily away under the drafting table. “Excuse me. I need to go down to the kitchen for some water.” She half stood, and Ansel stopped her.

“No, no, I’ll go. You stay here and look at the rest of the samples.” He left the room in a hurry, almost sprinting.

Esther sat back down and turned the page. The next sample was abstract, she was relieved to see. Curving gold lines on a dark green background, creating heavy, interlocking ovals that reminded her of—onions? Shallots? Some kind of bulb. The

pattern was so uniform and seamless as to almost have a 3D effect. She let her eyes unfocus slightly, the way Leon had taught her when they were kids, with his books of autostereograms. Now under Esther's gaze the wallpaper bulbs drifted lazily across the page. Her skin prickled, starting at her scalp and running down the back of her neck.

By the time her uncle came back upstairs with two glasses of water, she had already flipped quickly through the rest of the pattern samples: Tangled nasturtium vines and orange flowers, tiny snakes with jewel-like scales twisting between leaves. A closeup pattern of gray-white tree bark, cracked and covered in spots of black mold and light green lichen. Ferns and fiddleheads on a black background, pieces of honeycomb interspersed, the undersides of the fronds heavy with large golden spores.

Esther closed the album with a snap and hurriedly took the glass of water from Ansel. He sat back down, and she drank the whole glass in one go.

"How are you feeling?" Ansel said. "Shall we continue?"

"No," Esther said, touching her forehead. It was warm and damp. "I have a headache." The inside of her mouth tasted oddly coppery, like she'd been sucking on pennies. Esther watched Ansel write something down, feeling as if she were gazing at her uncle from a far distance.

"What do you think of the patterns?"

"I hate them." The words left her mouth before she could stop them. Once they

were out, Esther felt a little better. So much so, that, for good measure, she picked up the sample book from her lap and tossed it down with a thud onto the floor.

Inexplicably, her uncle didn't seem offended by this. He was watching everything she did with a fascinated expression. "What don't you like about the sample tiles? Aren't they aesthetically pleasing? Well balanced?"

Esther struggled to find an explanation. "They're too ... organic."

"All of my designs are *organic*, Esther. After all, we cannot improve upon—"

"No, these are different. Too crowded. Oppressive. I don't like the new exaggerated style you're using." She sounded almost angry, she realized, but didn't care. She began looking around her for her coat, before remembering it was hanging on the back of a chair in the kitchen downstairs. Esther shook her head, trying to clear it.

"Another minute, another minute." Ansel paused, consulting his notepad. "To recapitulate: You found the first pattern *pretty*, the second *overly-gorgeous*. You frowned frequently, needed water, appeared restless, started visibly sweating, got a headache, remarked that you hated the designs, and finally threw the sample book on the floor. According to you, the designs are too organic, exaggerated, even oppressive. But you cannot give any further specific reasons as to why the pattern samples make you uncomfortable. You would very much like to leave the room. Is all this correct?"

In the long silence that followed, Esther closed her eyes and took long steadying

breaths through her nose.

“Could I trouble you to feel for your heart rate and tell me if it seems elevated? Or perhaps it should actually be low. Let me see, I’ll just check my notes here . . .”

Esther shook her head. “What is all of this?” she said, when she could speak again. “What have you done?”

“Groundbreaking research, thank you for noticing,” Ansel said, visibly pleased with himself. “I was commissioned for a highly specialized project. It’s quite unlike anything I’ve ever attempted before in my life.” Here Ansel paused to see if she had anything to say, then continued on. “You’ve been enormously helpful, Esther, as always. But the hour of assistance you promised me isn’t up yet—wait a moment and I’ll fetch you the next round of concepts in the series.”

He got up and began looking through stacks of notebooks and sketch pads. Esther waited until his back was turned, then quietly stood and left, closing the study door behind her with a click.

As she walked slowly down the stairs to the first floor, she thought to herself that it really wasn’t the slightest bit surprising that Uncle Ansel had tried to poison Esther within an hour of her visiting the Greeley House. She hadn’t come home in almost two years; he would have wanted to make up for lost time.

Esther remembered a story that Grandmother Silke had told her when she was a

child. Silke had caught young Ansel holding a handful of black pepper over baby Ness in her little crib. He had been about to blow it into Ness's infant eyes, according to an indignant Grandmother Silke. "He wanted to find out if Vanessa would sneeze. *Like in the cartoons,*" she'd said, with a shake of her regal head. "I had no choice but to lock the boy down in the basement until I believed he could be trusted again. But of course Violet let him out after a while, when I wasn't paying attention."

When Esther asked Silke how old Ansel had been at the time of his sneeze-inducing experiment on Ness, she'd expected that he'd been a curious toddler, or perhaps in kindergarten. Silke had paused and mentally counted, frowning a little. "Fifteen," she said at last.

Esther wasn't sure how or why Ansel was creating nauseating, sweat-inducing wallpaper patterns for a *highly specialized project*, but it was no longer her job as "Greeley & Natrix Patterner, apprentice" to find out. Violet met her on the landing of the first floor, gripping the bannister pole lightly with two bejeweled hands and looking up at Esther curiously. "How'd it go? Happy artist reunion?"

Esther shook her head and tried to sound icily calm. "You could have warned me. It was stupid of me to go up to the study in the first place, but you egged me on."

Violet laughed. "Don't be a martyr, Esther. These days I send every single visitor we get up to Ansel and his nasty wallpaper samples. When the gas company person

finally gets here and fixes the leak, I'll do the same to them.”

“Violet, that’s completely insane.”

“Well, it saves Ness and I from being experimented on for the project day in and day out. We still have to live in the House, you know.”

Esther chose to ignore this barb and continued walking to the kitchen. Violet trailed behind her. She meant to get her coat and leave, but her stomach was roiling. Her aunt patted her briskly on the shoulder, and pulled up a chair for Esther to sit in. She sank into it, then jumped at the sight of the citrus wallpaper on the wall behind her. Violet followed her gaze.

“Oh, the kitchen walls are safe now. The old cantaloupe-skin pattern you remembered here earlier wasn’t, though. A very early incarnation of Ansel’s special project. Clumsy. More obviously off-putting.”

“What the hell is the point of wallpaper that is *off-putting*?” Esther asked the surface of the kitchen table. She didn’t want to look at Violet.

“It’s unbelievably useful if you want to get rid of someone in a hurry, I’ll tell you that much. Cousin Beatrice, for example, or one of those missionaries that knock on the front door and won’t take no for an answer. You just bring them in to look at one of Ansel’s experimental rooms on the third floor and wait a few minutes. They want to bolt out of the House as soon as they physically can. It’s marvelous in that regard. Of course I

wouldn't have let him put you into a whole room papered in that stuff, dear."

Violet's voice went high and too-sweet, and she reached over to pat Esther's hand.

Esther moved it away.

"I had to put my foot down about which rooms Ansel could use for research. The first floor of the house is generally untampered with, and my bedroom of course. But I can't speak for anywhere else, so be on your guard if you go exploring."

Esther didn't trust herself to say anything, but she couldn't control her expression.

"Goodness, you look about fourteen years old again when you make that face."

Violet said, and shuddered a little. "Brings back some *very* unpleasant memories."

"Don't worry, I'll be leaving as soon as I physically can."

Violet leaned against the kitchen counter, small face turning inquisitive. "Why did you come back home in the first place?"

To make sure you two haven't murdered Ness was on the tip of Esther's tongue, but what came out instead was the truth: "Brandon and I are trying to have a baby."

Violet clicked her tongue. "Ah."

"It isn't going well." It came out as such an understatement that a fresh wave of misery washed over her.

"No, I expect it isn't." Violet's voice was surprisingly gentle. "What's wrong?"

The newest tests indicated that there was something wrong with Esther's immune

system. Her antibodies attacked Brandon's sperm as invaders. And of course it was Esther's body that was at the heart of their problems. "The doctor says I need to consider something called immunosuppressive therapy, but it's far too expensive to even think about. Brandon wants to adopt, and that's expensive too. I don't know what to do." As if on cue, tears sprang to her eyes. Esther was almost used to it, this constant release of water and salt.

"Oh dear," Violet said, and craned her head to peer out of the kitchen door.

"Where's Ness? Did you tell her any of this?"

"I don't have time to look for Ness any longer," Esther said damply, rising to her feet. "I have to be home when Aidan arrives. It's going to be his first week of second grade, and it's our turn to—"

"Listen now," Violet interrupted. "Adoption can be a wonderful thing, when done right." She paused, her mouth pursing like she'd sucked on a lemon, then went on in a rush. "Look at your Grandmother Silke! Didn't she raise Ansel and I like we were her very own children?"

"I can remember you calling Grandmother the evil witch from Rapunzel at least ten separate times."

"And I'm sure I would have said the very same thing to my biological mother, if she hadn't left us in the arms of the Ursuline Sisters." This sounded like it was supposed

to be a joke, but Esther saw that a troubled look passed briefly over Violet's face. Her aunt continued on in a hurry. "You need to leave now, Esther. Go home and think about adoption. Talk it over with Brandon."

Esther shrugged on her coat and nodded, worn out.

"I don't—I wouldn't put my faith in doctors, sweetheart. Greeley women never had any luck with them." Here Violet launched into a long and detailed obstetrics history of Grandmother Silke's terrible experience with doctors during her late-in-life pregnancies with Stella and Ness, but Esther was in her car before Violet could finish.

Violet stood on the front steps of Greeley House and watched as Esther pulled away from the curb. She waved goodbye to her aunt from the car window. Violet didn't wave back.

1894

August 12:

Mother's wedding dress is wrapped in paper & kept in a cedar chest in her bedroom. It is made of ivory silk & puffed white satin & I fear that it is yellowing with age. I first saw the wedding dress when I was eight years old. I remember that I held my breath when Mother lifted it out of the chest to show it to me. I am sure it wasn't so yellow then. It may grow more yellow every year & then what? It will not be enjoyed by anyone ever again.

Mother was married to a man named Mr. Edward T. Ditteau who died on the river. He was my father but I don't have his surname. My name is Aster Greeley. Pug says that this might mean something scandalous, but she cannot be certain.

I think it may be the reason why people treat Mother oddly & why the servants are always whispering to each other. Pug says that people treat us oddly because we are odd & our surname is only part of it.

Pug asked me: Why don't you go to school like everyone else?

& then she said: Your mother thinks you are much too delicate to sit in a classroom with other children. I wish she could see how hard you step on my toes when I tease you. She wouldn't think you were so delicate then.

I was visiting Pug's house for tea & it was a treat to be sure, but this made me so cross that I went home straight away.

I will not tell Mother what Pug said, or that I left early from my visit. I cannot risk it. Mother has only just started letting me leave the House, now that I'm not so ill as I once was.

I snipped the smallest piece from the skirt of the wedding dress & a tiny sliver from the lace handkerchief that lay in the bottom of the chest. I will sew these onto a page of my scrap album & hope that Mother does not recognize them.

December 4:

I finally asked Mother about our surname. The subject has weighed heavily on my mind since Pug brought it up. At first Mother didn't attend to my question & she changed the subject to speak on the Mass she

attended yesterday. Then Mother noticed that I was near tears & she said
Oh Aster & put her arm around me.

Mother explained that our surname Greeley is her maiden name. It comes
from her father William Greeley who came over on the boat from Ireland.

I already know all about the Greeleys in Ireland so I asked her why we
don't use my dead father's surname. Which was Ditteau.

Mother said: I didn't like the way it sounded. Hesper & Aster Ditteau.

It had a nonsensical air. It was too French for my tastes. Hesper Greeley
was simple & plain, far more commonplace. I missed using Greeley
when I was married.

I didn't know what to think about this. I didn't know that people could
pick their own names. Pug says that they can't.

I told Mother that I want to be like other people & have my father's name
& Mother looked impatient with me & said: These male surnames are a
false inheritance, Aster. Greeley is my father's name & only a placeholder.
It is no more our real name than Ditteau. Just as the facade of our House
faces the street & shields you & I within its walls, so does the name

Greeley disguise us.

I asked her what our real name is but she only smiled.

I asked if our true surname was her mother's maiden name. Mother laughed & looked like she was proud of me for guessing. But then she said that my grandmother's name was Oda Nilsdatter & that Nilsdatter was not at all our true name either. Not in the least. She told me my grandmother Oda came from a village called Seljord where there is an old old linden tree there. It was planted next to a lake by Oda's grandmother and my great-great-grandmother.

She was a pious woman who dedicated the tree & the shrine next to it to our Virgin Mother the Queen of Heaven. And my great-great-grandmother did this all in secret because all her neighbors and all the rest of the village & even the whole country of Norway was Protestant & not Catholic.

I wanted to interrupt her then because Mother will sometimes be in the mood to keep on speaking about religion for a long while. So I begged Mother again to tell me what our true name is but she shook her head & said: It isn't time to speak of it, Little Star.

I became irritated & asked her when the right time would be. Perhaps I'll tell you everything the night before your wedding day. But Mother's voice was teasing now & I knew she was no longer speaking seriously. So I ran away upstairs to the tower to write all this down.

Later:

I have decided that if Pug says another word about the name Greeley or my dead drowned father I will tell her why people call her Pug. She thinks it is because her initials are P.U.G (for Pauline Una Grover) but the truth is that it is also because of her unfortunate nose.

Celia has two dolls. One is a fox named Critter with a long pointed face, dangling cloth arms and legs. One day Esther embroidered two little gold flowers onto the fox's blue dress, and Celia was so delighted with the result that she tried to take a needle and thread to the doll herself. Esther came upon her child sobbing and trying to cut the dress off the doll's body with a pair of scissors.

My hands couldn't make the stitches look nice, Celia cried, flung face down on her bed. I ruined her.

The fox stared up at Esther as she pulled long crooked stitches out of its torso. The scissors had half dismembered the arm from the shoulder. Esther sewed up the gash quickly, but Celia wouldn't play with Critter for a week; could only cast guilty glances at the corner of the room where the doll lay sprawled and discarded on the floor.

Celia's second doll is a musty relic of the 1930s—her head made of hard, shiny plaster, covered in a fine web of cracks. The face is cherubic and fleshy, with smiling Cupid's bow lips falling slightly open to reveal pearly little teeth. Esther remembers it from her own childhood, sitting upright in an ancient black pram in a corner of the attic and staring creepily at everyone who walked by. Her name used to be Odalinde, but Celia changed it to Peach.

Ness asks Esther if she would like to find the ancient pram for Celia to play with. She thinks she remembers seeing it tipped onto its side somewhere.

Esther imagines Celia pushing a smiling Peach in the black pram in circles around their basement apartment, slowly at first, then running outright, faster and faster.

Don't bother, Esther tells Ness.

*

Her daughter is six years old and she cannot read. Not a word. Celia can chant all seven verses of “Jabberwocky” to herself, however, and does so frequently, even when Esther asks for a break during one of her headaches. But whenever they sit down and try to go over the alphabet together Celia squirms and rubs her eyes, complaining that the letters wobble and float across the page. Esther worries, but decides not to force the issue.

They sleep now with their two narrow beds pushed together. Celia's is a little white wooden cot, Esther's a creaky thing of iron and old springs. A crazy quilt on each bed, one big and one small. Both hand sewn in the early 1900s by Esther's great-grandmother Aster, who was said to have been a mad genius with thread and needle. Ness found them in an undiscovered trunk pushed into the depths of a forgotten basement room, and pulled the quilts out one by one reeking of moth balls.

They lie in bed and Esther reads to Celia for hours. She reads from almost all the books in Greeley House, and not just the children's books. Celia listens to heavily abridged and censored excerpts of the works of Tennyson, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Arundhati Roy, Virginia Woolf, Octavia Butler. They even read some of the childhood diary of Aster Greeley, found in the same cedar trunk as the quilts. Celia listens intently to dry guidebooks on keeping bees, pruning fruit trees, breeding domestic pigeons. Books on polar expeditions, Russian folk designs, marine biology, mushroom hunting, Jungian psychology.

Whenever Esther allows herself to sink into a daydream, it's of squares of sunlight thrown across wooden floors. The garden outside in September, tangled and overgrown. Birdsong. A yellow ginkgo tree trembling in the wind, storm clouds piling in the sky above. Wood smoke from neighboring chimneys. A book under Esther's arm and her jacket buttoned to the chin against the cold, walking alone to a cafe, to a pub. Getting in the car and driving to wherever Brandon Carmichael is living now.

This is not at all what Esther would have wished for her child in the beginning, she thinks. It is not what she originally planned, this underground bunker, this pale little mouse of a daughter, both of them often frightened and ill. But Celia is alive—a little flicker of light beneath the house. They are together and no one will ever part them. Esther will fight tooth and nail to keep it so.

CHAPTER THREE

An orphan child was sitting on the town walls spinning, when she saw a snake coming out of a hole low down in the wall. Swiftly she spread out beside this one of the blue silk handkerchiefs which snakes have such a strong liking for, and which are the only things they will creep on. As soon as the snake saw it, it went back, then returned, bringing with it a small golden crown, laid it on the handkerchief, and then went away again.

The girl took up the crown; it glittered and was of delicate golden filagree work. It was not long before the snake came back for the second time, but when it no longer saw the crown, it crept up to the wall, and in its grief smote its little head against it as long as it had strength to do so, until at last it lay there dead. If the girl had but left the crown where it was, the snake would certainly have brought still more of its treasures out of the hole.

— “Grimm’s Household Tales” (1884)

Aidan was not really a difficult child, only somewhat distant. He didn't speak very much; almost never directly to Esther. If Aidan needed something and Brandon wasn't around, he would scribble notes in large letters for Esther to find on the kitchen counter: *Ester we need peanut butter* and *WHERE'S MY LEGOS*.

What Aidan liked most of all was playing video games. He and his father had been obsessed over the same one for the last couple of weeks. Lately they would run to work on *Komodo Island* as soon as Brandon got home from work. Players could choose to be either a hungry komodo dragon or an elderly but spry Swiss tourist. Without fail, Aidan elected to be the giant lizard and Brandon played as Baron Rudolf.

From what Esther could gather as she paced the apartment, worked on a portfolio of illustrated vertebrae discs, and avoided researching fertility treatment, the mission of the video game was for the sole human and the sole komodo dragon to populate the island with their own kind. For Aidan this meant guarding a nest full of eggs and hunting down the Swiss gentleman. For Brandon it meant escaping the island unscathed and returning with a boat full of new tourists, now armed with rifles.

It wasn't that Esther didn't care for Aidan, she thought as she leaned against the door frame of the living room, gazing at their backs. Esther cared very much, but there was only so much *room* for her.

Once, when Aidan was three, Esther had bought him some new sneakers. She'd spotted them at the store; so heart-breakingly small, with little red dinosaurs on them. Esther's chest had filled with a warm glow while Aidan put them on. But by the next time Aidan visited their apartment, the sneakers had vanished. When Esther pressed the issue Marianne had said in an indifferent voice over the phone that Aidan must have lost them somewhere.

At the time Brandon had looked uncomfortable and changed the subject, Esther recalled, watching the screen over his head. A six-foot long komodo dragon was crawling down the face of a cliff in pursuit of a silver-haired man in khakis below.

"Die!" said Aidan, pushing buttons furiously. "Why won't you *die!*" The mother dragon launched herself at Baron Rudolf, attempting to bite his arm off.

Esther thought of the little girl and her mother she'd seen at the coffee shop that morning. People were bustling in a rush through the doors, complaining loudly about a prolonged hailstorm outside. Esther sat with her coffee, sketchbook, and laptop, watching a small child with curly brown hair and a green knitted sweater looking out the shop window, swinging her legs and watching the hailstones rattle against the glass. Her mother read a book and divided a poppyseed scone to share between them. The woman had silver nail polish and blunt auburn bangs. She had to be younger than Esther. Most of the mothers in the neighborhood were.

“Son of a bitch,” Brandon said. The two figures on the screen were locked in a death embrace, skidding and tumbling across a pink beach. “Esther, do you want to take a turn getting murdered by Aidan over here?”

The woman and her daughter had worn matching yellow rubber galoshes, Esther recalled. They had left the cafe holding one another’s hands, the little girl jumping with relish into a puddle on the sidewalk and splashing her mother. The mother, laughing. BARON VS DRAGON, flashed the screen. DRAGON WINS. Aidan cheered as the nest of prehistoric eggs hatched into baby komodos.

*

That night in bed, Brandon asked about the results of her previous antibodies tests at the clinic. “Do you want me to come along next time? I could do a mid-afternoon appointment, after my noon class—”

“I didn’t go. I went to Greeley House instead and saw my family.” Esther was scrolling through her phone, turned away from him, trying to navigate the labyrinth of information online about adoption in Oregon.

There was a surprised silence. Brandon had only met her uncle and aunts a very limited handful of times. Really only when it couldn’t be avoided, like Silke’s funeral.

“Wow,” said Brandon in bed, after a pause. “How was that?”

“Basically fine,” Esther said, still scrolling. “Well, Ansel was horrible, as expected, and Violet still enables him. I might go back and check on Ness—I couldn’t find her anywhere.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No,” Esther said shortly. “They’ve only gotten weirder since Grandmother died. I don’t want to expose you to that.”

When Silke was alive, Greeley House and everyone who lived within its walls had revolved around the old woman, spinning in an orbit of routine and purpose. Judging by what Esther had seen today, the family was beginning to fly off the hinges without her. Violet luring strangers upstairs, Ansel poisoning them, and Ness hiding in some hidden compartment of the House doing God knows what.

“Got it,” said Brandon. And then, quickly, “Be careful, will you? You always get, I don’t know, kind of depressed after you see them.”

Esther looked up. “I’m just going to talk to Ness. She’s not as bad as the other two, I promise. You’d like her.”

“She seemed a little off at the funeral.”

Esther shook her head. “I don’t know what that was all about, but it worries me.”

Aunt Ness was the person she’d always been closest to; in age something between a mother and an older sister to her. Vanessa was only seventeen years old when Esther

was born, and she was much younger than the Greeley twins, Violet and Ansel. She was the dutiful youngest daughter of the family, Grandmother Silke's miracle baby. Ness never spoke to people outside the family very much, and she only left their immediate neighborhood to take the bus to St. Elizabeth's Church and the library.

Whenever Esther and Ness went anywhere together, people assumed they were mother and daughter, which never failed to surprise Esther. Esther knew that in theory that they looked alike—the same blonde, colorless hair (Ness's chopped short at her chin in a no-nonsense fashion), tall stature, large hands and feet. On the other hand, this assumption from people who didn't know them pleased her. Their connection to one another was written plainly for anyone to see.

To Esther, Ness was utterly distinct from herself, and certainly from the rest of the family. Mistress of the pantry and commander of the vegetable garden, she resembled a person from another time, with her long linen skirts and aprons. She kept an old fashioned iron ring of skeleton keys on a hook in her bedroom, and young Esther believed that the ring of keys must secretly long to be hung at Ness's waist, where they would jingle and clang as she walked to announce Ness's authority.

“Why are you always going out of your way to help Ansel?” Esther had asked Ness once when she was a teenager. She was watching her aunt stand at the kitchen sink, carefully dabbing a cloth on the multi-colored paint stains splattered across a pair of

Ansel's black trousers. Ness was quiet for a moment, thinking over Esther's question.

Then she looked up and said, very simply, "I love this House."

Esther shrugged. "Okay. So what?"

"So, cleaning these—" Here Ness held up the trousers, now filling the kitchen with fumes of the white vinegar Ness was using on the paint. "—is probably the best thing I can do in this moment to help the House and everyone in it."

"I seriously doubt that," said Esther.

"Your Aunt Violet brings in surprisingly little money from her job at the pharmacy," Ness said, as if this piece of information was relevant to anything being discussed. "Sometimes I think she squirrels away more than half of what she makes in a savings account somewhere. I can't really blame her. I'd probably do the same if I could. Your Uncle Ansel, though ... the wallpaper makes a decent amount. Though I doubt he's written or deposited a single check in the last five years. I handle all of the business's books for him."

"Because he's lazy."

Ness gave Esther a long, level look, holding the dripping dishcloth in her hand.

"Every penny he earns from selling wallpaper goes straight back into the house.

Wallpaper keeps the electricity on, bread baking in the oven, and new shingles on the roof when we need them."

This was quite a speech coming from taciturn Ness.

“Ansel’s income allows Mother a little peace of mind,” Ness continued. “She’s no longer rich. It’s difficult for her.”

“I could get a job,” Esther said. “A real job, I mean. Not the patterner apprentice bullshit. *You* could get a job, Ness.” She stopped short there, a little breathless with the audacity of what she’d just said.

Ness’s face was blank, and in the silence that followed Esther wondered if she had offended her. Then her aunt looked down at the soapy water, now a muddy blue-green from Ansel’s clothes and laughed. “Good lord, Esther. I’d rather stick my head in a sink full of Ansel’s dirty socks.”

“No, it’s true. You really could get a job, if you wanted one.”

Ness just shook her head and smiled a little, to Esther’s irritation. She knew her aunt was shy and silent around other people, but it wasn’t too late for her to join the world outside Greeley House. Ness was only thirty-four years old. It bothered Esther deeply, for some reason she couldn’t quite articulate, Ness’s quiet refusal to behave like other adults.

If she would only get a job, Esther thought, then we wouldn’t need Ansel so much any more. Ness wouldn’t have to wait on him hand and foot.

Later that day, helping Ness laboriously pick slugs off the tomato plants in the

back garden, Esther saw with sudden clarity what a silly thing it had been to ask of Ness; to put on an ironed pantsuit and drive to an office downtown every day from nine to five . . . to do what? Ness couldn't even drive, in the first place. She claimed that she had no interest in it, but Esther thought it might have more to do with the fact that her older sister and Esther's mother, Stella, had died in a car crash on Ross Island Bridge in 1988.

When it had come time for Esther to get her learner's permit, Violet had been the one to teach her to drive stick in Ansel's rusty old yellow Volkswagen Beetle, though the lessons had been so ineffectual that it all ended with Esther accidentally reversing into Violet's shiny Vespa, which she had refused to let Esther practice on in the first place.

If Ness went out and got a job, Esther thought, who would take the time to rub the wood floors with beeswax until they were gleaming? And Ness was the only person in the family who remembered to return all the forgotten library books before they collected fines. Her large, capable hands, tanned from her work in the garden, combed and braided Grandmother's coronet of white hair every morning. Ness made Violet gin and tonics on the evenings she came home from the pharmacy in a bad mood. She grew French breakfast radishes just for Esther in the spring, and served them to her niece sliced with butter and salt on a pretty china plate.

Ness cut flowers and put them in buckets until they could be made into altar arrangements at St. Elizabeth's. She hung test wallpaper for Ansel, and cared for

Grandmother Silke in her illness when Silke refused to have a nurse and wouldn't tolerate even the mention of the word *hospital*. Ness patched up Esther's scrapes and combed her snarled hair with business-like competence. She had tolerated Esther's hugs and sticky childhood kisses on her cheek the way no one else did, and if Esther was honest with herself, she adored Ness for it.

*

A week later, bright and early one morning, Ansel called. Esther's phone rang while she was staring out the apartment window, fretting, and she jumped. "Esther," her uncle said crisply into her ear. "You left the other day before I could tell you my business proposal."

"God, no," she said, and hung up. She ignored the next few rings, turned off her phone, went out for coffee for an hour and worked on some drafts of optic nerves, then walked back to the house. The sixth time her phone rang after she turned it back on, Esther seriously considered blocking her uncle, but at the last moment she impulsively picked up.

"I will put you in the worst nursing home I can find," Esther said, "if you don't stop calling. You know I will."

"Just hear the project proposal," Ansel said, unruffled. "Hear it out, and then make your decision."

“You can just assume that I will say no. Now and forever, to whatever it is.”

“Well then, it won’t hurt to hear what you’ll be missing out on. Now—” Ansel launched into a long, detailed explanation of his latest wallpaper designs, funded by some mysterious client (“They must remain anonymous, you understand, so don’t take offense if I don’t use any names ...”), aided by scientific research of the “disgust emotion” in humans.

“I don’t care,” Esther said, whenever he took a breath. “I don’t care. Explain to me why I should care.”

“*Money*, my dear,” he said with satisfaction. Esther could almost hear him smiling. “It’s valuable research, and I need a partner. My client is willing to pay quite a large amount to fund the project.”

“No amount of money is worth working for Greeley & Natrix again,” Esther said automatically, but her mind was starting to race ahead to a future in which she was flush with cash, suddenly able to consider *alternatives*.

“Are you sure?” he said, and named a rate. It was a large number.

“Per month?” Esther asked, impressed despite herself.

“Good lord, no. Per *design concept*.”

They were both silent for a moment, while this sank in. Then Esther rallied. “How do I know you haven’t made up a conveniently wealthy client with an unlikely research

component? Who would want wallpaper that makes people sick? What's the point of *that?*”

“I can think of a few scenarios in which it would come in useful, can't you? Use your imagination. As for the rest—well, you've always had a healthy faculty for skepticism,” Ansel said with a sigh. “The client is real, Esther. I didn't invent them. Once you're on board, after you sign the necessary paperwork, the client will ask to meet with you. You can question them then to your heart's content.”

“Let's say, very hypothetically, that I consider your proposal. I assume I'd be able to work on the commission here at home, scan my drafts, and email them to you?”

“Of course not.” Ansel always tried his best to ignore the existence of the internet, and hated to go near a computer unless forced. Esther knew this, but felt she had to go through the motions of resistance.

“Then I'll mail the drafts to you through the post. Or drop them off at the house.”

“That would eat up too much valuable work time,” Ansel said irritably. “You'll simply have to come work at Greeley House. All the materials are already here, and there's the old printing studio for manufacturing test samples. Then we can continue testing the efficacy of the patterns on the third floor walls. I've been using Mother's old rooms.”

Considering that Silke had only been dead a few months and remembering what

Violet had said about luring unsuspecting visitors up to the third floor, Esther almost hung up on him then. But the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall caught her eye, with all the fertility clinic appointments written down in red ink.

“Listen, Ansel,” Esther said. “This can’t be a revival of Greeley & Natrix. Or even Greeley & Greeley. If I do this project with you, it will be for a very short amount of time. A week or two at the most.”

“I suggest you work day and night on it, if you want to make any kind of decent pay. If you need real money, though, you should stay at Greeley House for the rest of the year and put your nose to the grindstone.”

Esther laughed. “The rest of the year? That’s a very unlikely scenario.” She imagined herself climbing the ladder to her childhood bedroom in the tower, unpacking a suitcase full of grown up clothes. At night she would stretch out on the little bed covered with an old blue and yellow quilt. The record player might still work, and perhaps the treasured stack of comic books stolen from Leon would still be there. In the mornings she would run down to the citrus-papered kitchen, and Ness might be there wearing her huge red apron, making coffee and buttering toast.

“How’s Ness?” Esther asked her uncle.

“Vanessa?” Ansel repeated in a thoughtful voice. “How funny. I don’t believe I’ve seen her in days.”

*

“I don’t understand,” Brandon said a few hours later. “Why can’t you stay at home and work on the commission here?”

Esther was gathering up pencils, pens, tracing paper, a sketchbook filled with drawings of corneas, retinas, optic nerves, drainage canals, glaucoma diagrams. There was a large overnight bag open on the bed with clothes inside. Her art supplies needed their own suitcase. She had decided to bring as many of her own materials to Greeley House as she could—gone were the days of enduring her uncle’s lectures over the proper cleaning of his expensive paint brushes.

Brandon’s forehead was furrowed and she could see that under his beard his mouth was pulling downward. Esther stopped and turned to him. “Okay,” she said. “It’s like this. My uncle’s client wants gorgeous, ornate wallpaper. Creepy nature motifs, decaying splendor, arabesque scrolls and tendrils—the works. The only place in the world where I can possibly create something like that is at Greeley House.”

“I don’t know what any of that means,” said Brandon. “You always do all of your commissions here at home, all the time.”

“No, this is my process, remember? When I need to illustrate tendons, I go to the butcher and I ask for tendons. I put on scrubs and visit surgeries and laboratories at the

hospital whenever they let me. If I'm going to create late-Victorian gothic wallpaper, then I need to stay somewhere with the proper atmosphere. Which is Greeley House."

"I wouldn't know," said Brandon pointedly. "I've never been invited there."

"You can visit now, whenever you want. We can have sex in the tower."

He didn't smile. "Why does Ansel need you at all? He's been making designs on his own for decades."

"This is a big commission, Brandon. He's getting older, you know. He lost a lot of money when Greeley & Natrix went bankrupt ten years ago." Esther had already decided not to mention the ethically questionable research component to Brandon—at least not until she fully understood the project.

"Also, I'm worried about Ness," Esther said. She'd saved this as a final bargaining chip, but as she spoke she was flooded with the absolute truth of the words. "There was a gas leak at the House a few days ago and I'm beginning to think she might be really sick. You saw her at the funeral; she's grieving her heart out over Silke's death."

Brandon sat down on the bed and spoke to his knees. "You could go check on her and come back."

"Violet and Ansel are useless in a crisis. If Ness dropped in front of them, they'd probably just step over her body and go about their business." Only a slight exaggeration, she told herself.

“I just feel like it’s not really great timing, you know? You and I are trying to have a baby. I thought we were going to consult an adoption agency—”

“Actually,” Esther interrupted. “It’s fantastic timing, monetarily speaking. If I finish this commission we could have enough money to adopt *next year*. Without the commission, it could take us what, three years minimum to save up?”

Brandon was silent.

“I’m doing what I have to do,” Esther said. “For our future child.”

“What about the child we already have?” he said, voice curt. “Aidan’s already having a hard time at school and the year’s only just started. He’s in a sensitive place. Marianne says he needs extra stability in his home environments.”

Esther smothered a grimace at the mention of Marianne. “He’ll barely notice I’m gone.”

“Of course he’ll notice. He likes you, Esther.”

“Right,” she said, voice light. “He likes me.”

“His teachers say he’s slow to warm up to people. Other children are like that too, you know. It’s not only Aidan.”

“I know,” Esther said, and Brandon shook his head, clearly annoyed with her.

“What am I supposed to tell him? That his stepmother decided to fuck off for a month? What do I tell *Marianne*?”

Something inside her warmed a little at the sound of Brandon saying the word “stepmother.” Esther went over to where he sat and put her arms around his neck. “Tell her it’s for work,” she said. “It might be less than a month. I’ll come home on weekends.”

Brandon stood and pulled her close. “You better,” he said, and kissed her.

*

When Esther went to say goodbye to Aidan, he was playing a game on Brandon’s phone. He looked up at her with with a confused expression as she told him she was leaving for a little while for work. “Where are you going?” He listened while she explained, thumbs frozen and suspended over the phone’s screen.

“But when will you be back?” Aidan asked in a small voice. He burst into tears when she told him she’d try to be home on weekends, to Esther’s complete astonishment. Brandon went to sit next to his son on the couch, putting his arm around Aidan and giving Esther a look that spoke volumes. *See?*

This was the moment where she almost stayed, Esther thought years later. She almost told Ansel that she’d changed her mind. Unpacked her bags and said to Brandon, *We don’t need the money all that badly.* Instead, Esther got into her car and drove to Lair Hill.

1895

March 10:

I am angry & puzzled about something. Mostly angry at Pug. I cannot decide whether to stay friends with her or not. I believe writing it all out may help me decide.

This afternoon after lunch Pug & her little brother Henry came over to the House. My garden is the largest in the neighborhood & we meant to play Robbers & Racketeers in the pear orchard. But then it began to rain & we had to go indoors.

I don't know why it should be the case but Mother & I don't often have visitors to the House. I have the feeling that Mother prefers not to have strangers inside. But Pug & Henry & I were only playing for ten minutes when it started to pour, so I brought them indoors & took them up to the tower to play there instead.

I didn't ask Mother if it was all right because she was busy in the kitchen telling our cook something about the butcher shop. Pug & her brother walked quietly up all the stairs behind me without saying a word. Pug is a

little frightened of my mother I think. It amuses me to watch Pug fidget in her presence but today I thought it best not to bother Mother because she had one of her headaches at breakfast.

To get to my tower we had to walk through Mother's bedroom. Pug made several comments about the odd shape of her bedroom & Henry wanted to stop & count the walls, but I told him to hurry & climb up into the tower.

We tried to play our game in the tower but it wasn't wide enough to have a proper chase between policemen & bank robbers. Then Henry wanted to play Squeak Piggy Squeak but instead I brought out my scrap album to show Pug.

I explained each piece of fabric & its significance & Pug said that my scrap album was dull but she liked the idea of cutting things up. We decided to go up to the attic with a pair of scissors but Henry complained of having nothing to do. Pug told him to be quiet & he began kicking his foot against the wall of the tower.

His shoe left dark muddy marks on the wooden panels so I told him that I would give him some money to go & get himself a pickle from the

Oyster House. This is Henry's favorite place, but he said that he wasn't permitted to walk by himself around our neighborhood because he might fall into one of the steep ravines or canyons where so many little boys & horses have fallen lately. I told him I could give him money for the trolley but then Pug piped up & said he wasn't allowed to take the trolley by himself. I asked why not & she said that Henry was liable to lean out too far & fall under the wheels & be crushed to death. This is all according to their mother Mrs. Grover.

Henry told me that I should give him the money anyway since I was so rich, & I said I wouldn't give him money for standing there & kicking my tower wall. Before he could start kicking it again I suddenly thought of something for him to do.

I took Henry by the hand & we climbed down the ladder & went out to the staircase leading up to the third floor. I showed him the two wooden posts that held up the staircase handrail. Look closely at the carvings in the post's panel, I told him. He shrugged & said that there was nothing special there, only flowers & leaves. I pointed to the little honey bee on one post & then to the scarab beetle cleverly hidden among the leaves on the other.

I explained to him that when I was younger my health was often too poor to allow me to leave the House. One afternoon, when I was feeling better but still not well enough to go outdoors to play, Mother made a game for me counting all the honey bees inside our home. The bees were hidden in all kinds of clever places both high & low, carved into wood, plaster, & stone by the artisans & carpenters.

While I was counting them I discovered a dozen or so beetles that looked like the ones in my book Manual of Egyptian Archaeology translated by the lady explorer Amelia B. Edwards. I showed them to Mother & she agreed that they were scarab beetles & said I was v. clever for spotting them.

When I wanted to know why we had so many scarab beetles in the House, she told me that the scarab beetle was a symbol of rebirth & resurrection. When I asked how a beetle could be a symbol of all that, she pointed to a place in my book & asked me to read it & think about what it said there. I have the book here & I will copy out now what Mother asked me to read:

“We all know the old story of how this beetle lays its eggs by the river's brink; encloses them in a ball of moist clay; rolls the ball to a safe place on the edge of the desert; buries it in the sand; and when his time comes, dies content, having provided for the safety of his successors . . . they regarded this little black scarab not only as an emblem of the creative and preserving power, but perhaps also of the immortality of the soul. As a type, no insect has ever had so much greatness thrust upon him. He became a hieroglyph, and stood for a word signifying both To Be and To Transform. His portrait was multiplied a million-fold; sculptured over the portals of temples; fitted to the shoulders of a God; engraved on gems; moulded in pottery; painted on sarcophagi and the walls of tombs; worn by the living and buried with the dead.”

I told Henry that I alone know the exact number of honey bees & scarab beetles in the House. (This was a small falsehood, as I don't recall how many I counted before.)

Then I said that if he counted every honey bee & scarab beetle & came back & reported the correct number of each I would give him the pickle & trolley money to keep. Of course I was just going to give him the

money no matter what number he counted.

Nell has just knocked & told me to come down to dinner & I will have
to wait to write down the rest of what happened.

Celia sleeps restlessly, murmuring. Pale eyelashes fluttering. One night Esther wakes to her daughter clutching her hand in a paroxysm of fear. There's a woman over there, Celia whispers. Look, Mama. She's moving around the room.

Esther sits up. Within the darkness of their bedroom are even deeper shadows. The square bulk of the dresser; the dim outline of Celia's rocking horse, with a long fringed mane and tail. The large wooden toy chest big enough for Celia to climb into. On impulse Esther gets out of bed and opens the chest's lid, but there are only toys inside.

No one's here, Esther says, and puts her arm around her daughter. Celia's little body is cold and rigid. She keeps her face turned to look at the door, which is slightly ajar.

She's right outside, Celia says, barely moving her lips.

Esther opens the door. The living room outside their bedroom is empty. For good measure she goes out into the corridor. The basement here is rough and unfinished, with bare rock walls and cracked boards she and Ness nailed over holes in the walls wide enough for Celia to creep into. Cold stone floors under Esther's bare feet. The sound of water dripping somewhere nearby.

Esther walks back to their bedroom. Celia's little face is framed by tousled hair, the quilt pulled up to her chin.

All safe, she tells Celia, and climbs back under the blankets.

The woman walked around and around the room, Celia says. She looked just like you, Mama.

This comes as a relief. It was only Aunt Ness, Esther tells her. In the dark she and I look almost the same, remember? Esther reaches over and tugs gently on the sleeve of her nightdress. Go back to sleep.

Celia shakes her head, but lays back down. She had long, long hair, all loose, she whispers drowsily. Not like Aunt Ness. She came over to our beds to look at us.

Celia falls asleep again almost at once. Esther waits a few minutes, then slips out of bed and slides the back of a chair under the doorknob.

*

I'm a baby snake now, Celia announces to Esther this morning. She wiggles across the rug on her stomach, tongue tasting the air. This doesn't come as a surprise—she has lately began talking to an imaginary, mysterious “Odelia.” Over the last few months Esther has gathered that this personage is an old white snake about three feet long and very thin. Odelia speaks in a creaky grandmother voice, which Celia demonstrates for her mother at length.

Hiss hiss, she says, wiggling her way to the door. My daughters will dance at your wedding. Hiss.

Oh, am I getting married? Esther asks absently, stepping over the girl on her way to the sink with the tea kettle. On this occasion her daughter's imagination pleases her. The fact that Odelia is a snake who is wise and kind is an unexpected boon. Esther's mind at once goes to her illustrated book of fairy tales in progress, and she wonders whether she can write Odelia into one of the stories.

Odelia says that you don't need to marry if you don't want to. Males not required, hiss hiss. But I told her I'll probably want you to have a wedding anyway, so I can wear a long dress.

Celia sits up and looks at Esther. Mama, she says in a thoughtful tone of voice, if something has just occurred to her. Who is my father?

Esther sets down the kettle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Once upon a time there was a man who had three daughters. The youngest one was named Oda.

One day the father wanted to go the market, and he asked his daughters what he should bring back to them. The oldest asked for a golden spinning wheel, the second for a golden ring, but Oda said, "Bring me that which runs away from beneath your carriage when you are about to return."

At the market the father bought what the older girls had wished for themselves, then set off toward home, and behold, a snake ran from beneath his carriage. The man caught it and brought it along for Oda. He threw it into the bottom of his carriage, then afterward in front of the house door, and left it lying there . . .

— "Oda and the Snake," by Ludwig Bechstein (1853)

The Greeleys had lived in Lair Hill and made enemies of their neighbors since 1882, the year Esther's great-great-grandmother Hesper built Greeley House. Hesper was the childless widow of a wealthy banker; a notable Portland man who died in a gruesome ferry boat accident on the river. Less than two weeks after his death, Hesper reclaimed her maiden name, purchased land on a hill with her dead husband's money, and began construction on a new house for herself.

Seven months later it became apparent that Greeley House wasn't the only thing Hesper was growing. Under the black mourning dress, she was just beginning to show. She worked in the large greenhouse in the back garden with her prized potted flowers while she waited for the house to be finished, giving birth to her daughter Aster just as the tower was completed.

People talked, of course. She had long stopped going to Mass, but her Lair Hill neighbors found opportunities to watch her anyway. They speculated and whispered about Aster Greeley's paternity while gazing after the lone woman in the black dress pushing a pram.

*

Greeley House was empty and quiet when Esther arrived, bags in hand. There was

a hush as she walked through the house, thick Persian rugs muffling the sound of her steps. In the end, she couldn't bring herself to climb up the stairs to the tower and Silke's hexagon-shaped bedroom below.

Instead, she chose one of the two unused guest rooms on the second floor. It had been either Elias's or Leon's room, long ago when the Natrices used to spend summers at Greeley House. Esther looked closely at the thumbtack holes in the old cornflower wallpaper. She was almost certain that the room had been Leon's—he had hung up new music posters every year.

Esther stood in the doorway and imagined teenage Leon Natrix and her own fifteen year-old self sitting crossed-legged side by side on the rug of the bedroom floor. Their shoulders pushed together companionably, arguing over the merits of studying French versus Spanish at school, or whether it was pretentious or not to collect vinyl. They had argued over anything and everything they could think of, with Leon shouting over Esther in order to make his deliberately stupid points, voice mock-outraged, shoving his arm against Esther's for emphasis.

It occurred to Esther now how strangely lit up she'd always felt in his presence. At the beginning of every summer vacation after their disastrous initial meeting when they were young children, Leon would arrive and demand to know what she'd been listening to, reading, thinking, and drawing all year. It was funny, Esther thought, how

with certain people you could feel so at ease in your own skin. At ease, and somehow also significant. Whenever she'd been in the same room with Leon, it was like there was a spotlight shining down upon her—illuminating but not blinding—and in that spotlight every gesture and remark she made were both fascinating and worthy of his contemplation.

Esther lingered in the room a little longer, and finally took her suitcases from the hall and placed them on the ground next to the bed. Then Esther set out once more to search for Ness.

Esther found her aunt out in the garden, ten minutes later. The sun was beginning to go down. Ness, wearing cotton gardening gloves, was surrounded by three large bags of potting soil, a mesh strainer from the kitchen, and a square glass terrarium at her feet. She looked wonderfully well.

“Violet and Ansel said you might come back,” Ness said, smiling. There was no trace of the frailty Esther had seen at the funeral. “Hello, Little Star. What’s happened to your hair?”

“Hello, Ness,” Esther said, breathless with relief at the sight of her. “I dyed it. What in the world are you doing?”

Her aunt looked down at the quantities of loose dirt on the ground. “Reviving an old tradition, sort of. Would you like to help?”

Ness presented Esther with a bag of potting soil. She half-listened to her aunt's instructions, studying Ness for signs of ill health. Her forehead was more lined and she wore a new pair of glasses with thick lenses, but these things aside, Ness seemed almost the same. The only exception was the fact that her hair was now completely white.

Unlike Esther's, this was genuine, despite Ness only being fifty years old.

"Are you listening?" Ness asked Esther. "You have to scoop soil from the bag and shake it through the strainer, like so." Little white pebbles and bits of bark remained after the soil fell out, which Ness told her to dump on the ground.

"Are we panning for gold?" Esther asked after a minute or two of this.

Ness, elbows deep in her own bag, didn't answer right away. She seemed to be searching for something. "That used to be a greenhouse, you know," she told Esther abruptly, gesturing to the boarded up printing studio across the garden. "Grandmother Aster's husband tore all the glass out and sold it piece by piece."

"Oh," Esther said, looking into her strainer. "A worm."

"Excellent," said Ness. "Let me see her."

The worm was very thin, shiny, and an odd blue-gray color. It wiggled frantically in the bottom of the strainer, using the tip of its tail to push itself up. To Esther's surprise, Ness removed her cotton glove, picked it up, and examined it closely. Her hands were what Esther had remembered—the backs of the hands broad, skin lightly lined, a healthy

color from being outside all summer, small calluses on the palms. The fingers were thick and strong, very like Esther's own. Esther frowned, remembering the thin pale fingers emerging from the long black shawl in the back pew of St. Elizabeth's.

Ness held out the creature for Esther to look at. "Do you see the tiny scales?"

She squinted. "I think so. Should I put it on the ground somewhere?"

"No," Ness said, and placed the creature in the glass terrarium. It burrowed into the soil and out of sight. "We're going to look for more. We'll bring them inside for the winter."

In response to Esther's questioning look, Ness turned her attention from the worm and said, "Violet tells me you want to have a baby."

1895

March 11:

I am less angry today but still puzzled, so I will continue this account.

Henry wanted to set off at once to go count & I remembered just in time to tell him not to linger in Mother's bedroom below. How will I count the bees & beetles inside? he said & looked as though I were trying to trick him. There are three of each in that room, I lied. I took some paper & drew a tally in pencil & handed it to him. Now you go & count the rest.

Henry was gone for a v. long time, at least two hours. At first I counted this as a great success. Pug & I cut up some pretty shirtwaists we took from the bottom of a pile of linens in the attic. Then I showed her how I stitch the pieces onto a square of muslin. She yawned & wondered when Henry would return so they could go home. I gave Pug a choice of my favorite books to read from & she turned her nose up at Louisa May Alcott in favor of the book of Danish fairy tales. I sewed away & was privately pleased with how I had conducted myself as a hostess in entertaining my two guests.

An hour went by like this & I believe Pug fell asleep with the book of fairy tales on her lap, because all of a sudden she sat up with a jerk & asked if Henry was back yet. When I said he wasn't, Pug demanded that we go & look for him. I told her we could if she liked but that there was no use in searching for one small boy in the House. Pug frowned at me & asked what I meant by that. I explained that it was an odd thing but one can never find another person in our House if one goes around searching for them.

Isn't it the same at your house, Pug? I asked her. She lives on the street across from us in a new house as large if not larger than ours.

No, not at all, Pug said. Mother doesn't like us to shout but if we are calling for someone of course they will probably hear it.

If we go looking for Henry now he will just come back to the tower while we are gone, I said, & returned to my work. Then he'll go looking for us, & we'll come back here without finding him, & so on & so on for hours. If we just sit still for another while it will all be so much easier.

Pug stood up & said that she was going to find her brother in the House

before my Mother did. I asked her what in the world that meant, & Pug looked angry & frightened at the same time.

Pug said: She doesn't know you asked us to come indoors! What will she do if she comes across Henry peering into closets & bedrooms?

I laughed & said that Pug made my mother out to be v. fearsome. She did not reply. Then I happened to look down at the open pages of the book of fairy tales where she had dropped it on the floor. There was an illustration of an old woman with a lot of flyaway white hair under a cap who was cackling at a young woman wearing a crown. It was the witch from the story King Lindworm.

I grew hot & then cold. My mother is not a witch, I said loudly.

I never said she was, Pug said, but she looked silly & sly.

I told Pug I would like for her to leave now, & she said that she would be very happy to leave, but she couldn't go home without Henry. I stood up & marched down the staircase, Pug following behind me. Henry, I shouted while going down the steps, even though I knew it was all useless. Pug joined in shouting & we went down all the stairs to the

basement & back up again, the House ringing with the sound of Henrys.

Thankfully Mother must have been out in the greenhouse because only a maid & the cook came out to see why we were yelling. Our maid Nell said she had seen a little boy with dark hair & freckles disappear behind some curtains in the second floor parlor, but she thought it was just the House playing more tricks on her.

From behind me I could hear Pug muttering, What kind of place is this?

But I ignored her.

Quite suddenly, Henry jumped out from behind the green loveseat not three feet away from where we were standing & talking to Nell. He seemed to spring up from the rug itself, which gave me a start. Nell screamed & grabbed her chest, & Pug yelled & ran over to him. Henry was covered from head to foot in dust & grime & his clothes were all gray, but he was grinning & waving his tally sheet around in the air.

Pug started to shake him by the shoulders but he pushed past her to stand before me. Here, he said & shoved the paper into my hand. I looked down at it. It was covered front & back with tally marks & numbers,

some crossed off, with the final scores circled at the end. I have the paper here with me now & I will copy out what it says:

Bee: 33	Beetle: 32
Lioness with cubs: 3	Crocodile (maybe dragon): 3
Greek Lady: 3	Sea serpent: 1
Bible Lady: 6	Tree: 10
Round fruit: 18 (pomegranate, Mother told me later)	
Arrow: 27	Star: 108
Tiny snake: 75	Snake wearing a little gold crown: 5
Big snake: 10	

I stared down at the sheet & Henry said to me, You owe me twenty-five cents. I counted all the bees & beetles plus twelve more things.

Nobody asked you to count extra categories, I said. And even if I had asked you to count all these, I wouldn't give you more than ten cents to do it.

Henry said that he was charging me extra because of all the stars & snakes he had to count. That's when Pug got ahold of the tally list & screeched:

Snakes? Your house is full of snakes?

I told her that Henry must be mistaken because I had been living in Greeley House since I was born & I had never noticed a single carved snake before.

Oh ho! said Henry. The house is full of snakes all right. Not just carved. They're on tiles & wallpaper & furniture & windows & rugs & brass & iron. So are the stars. There's so many stars I'm not sure I found them all.

The argument ended with us following Henry while he marched over to the staircase. Look, he said & pointed at some vines & sunflowers running down the base of a railing post. Pug & I crouched & looked.

I didn't see any snakes but after I blinked I could see for a moment why Henry thought there were. The vine branches were twisting & had the appearance of movement. Henry saw my doubtful face & shouted, Snake! He pointed at the tip of one of the long, thin vine branches. It was slightly round at the end & there was a v. small carved dot where an eye on a serpent would be.

I don't know, Henry, said Pug. At the most it looks a little like a worm. She made a face & said, Aster lives in a Worm House. I stepped on her toes.

There are scales! said Henry. When I put my face so close as to almost touch the wood with my nose, I saw that there were the faintest lines criss-crossing over the back of the "snake". But they were barely there. Henry looked disgusted with us but he cheered up when I offered him a quarter to go home with Pug immediately.

As I walked them through the corridors, Pug looked nervously all around for Mother. Henry talked & talked about his exploration in the basement. I guess that's where he got so covered in dust & dirt. Just as I was closing the front door on them Henry turned around & asked me when he could come back to the House to finish exploring the basement.

Now I am sitting upstairs in the tower & it's odd to say, but I have become nervous about going downstairs. No matter where I go in the House or what I'm doing, I cannot stop turning my eyes to the rugs, the walls, the wood panels of all the rooms. I'm afraid to see the snakes, but I cannot stop looking for them either.