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A TANGLED STRAND OF PEARLS

*But perhaps God needs the longing,
wherever else it should dwell,
Which with kisses and tears and sighs
fills mysterious spaces of air –
And perhaps is invisible soil from which
roots of stars grow and swell...*

– Nelly Sachs, Nobel Laureate, from *Israel*

Etienne should have known that calling Katherine after all those years would only lead to trouble. But he wanted that trouble. He wanted to stir up that pot. He wanted it all to unfold just as it did. Even if he didn't know it at the time. In the face of such a grand and daring quest, it was easy to pretend this was not about love.

Back in Oxford and later, in Paris, Etienne measured his days in accordance with Katherine – where she was, what she was doing at the time, what she would think of him. If she was absent, he considered what he would tell her when he saw her next. Etienne gravitated toward Katherine, in his thoughts and in all his waking dreams. He got to wondering if it was a sickness of some sort, or a fickle obsession that would pass, some day, onto someone else.

Etienne came to understand that this was the natural inclination of his spirit to right itself. *All that makes up a man*, he concluded, *raises to the imperative that is caused by an inconsolable longing, the quiet, incessant ache that only one person can calm. A man will lean naturally toward that which makes him right. This is what happens*, thought Etienne when he hung up the telephone, *when a man misses a woman. It is what happens between Katherine and me.*

It wasn't long after Katherine hung up the telephone that she panicked. Nick was going to be furious. Beyond furious. Worse. This madcap scheme was an invitation straight into prison.

But then she thought about Hugo Nelson and his circle of power and influence. Certainly Etienne had been right: when Nelson learned about the magnificent Knife of the Asps, he would move heaven and earth to have it ... and to protect his source in the process. Katherine felt a new wave of confidence rush over her.

She thought back on the unexpected conversation that had changed the course of her plans. She found she was remembering not so much Etienne's words, or his pursuit, but rather his voice. It dismantled the façades of her heart as easily and softly as a wisp of the wind. And it made her lose her rational mind entirely.

Katherine was fiercely loyal to Nick, but she caught herself repeatedly imagining the embrace of her former lover – as though it was just yesterday that they shared coffee in the morning, art and architecture in the day, and their bodies in the night. She tried to remember exactly what it felt like to be kissed by Etienne, and found that she couldn't, and the not-remembering intensified her longing. She wanted freedom, and the Etienne she knew at Oxford, and a wild summer in Paris in 1936.

Maybe it's the me I knew at Oxford that I really long for, mused Katherine. Maybe if I can hold onto a strong enough piece of that time, that place, some forgotten part of me will wake up and everything will be different. Maybe everything will become simple, and clear. I wonder, was it ever clear? Or was it just more irresponsible?

At that time in her life, Katherine couldn't separate Etienne from Nick, or from her brother Ben, or even from her father. They all were, and remained, inextricably linked to each other, and to forces beyond her understanding.

Katherine followed Ben to Oxford. She would have followed her twin brother anywhere. Even though it was ridiculous. Even though it was rare in those days for a woman to attend Oxford. She wasn't going to be stopped. Katherine worshipped Ben. He was more than her closest friend and confidant. He was the only person who understood the things that drove her. It was Ben who watched her shrink and harden after their father left, because it was Ben who paid attention. It was always Ben, with his easy smile, his perfect confidence, and his enviable ability to rise beyond the petty strivings of ordinary mortals. It was always Ben. Katherine's mother was far too busy and distracted by her sorrows.

Katherine's roaming thoughts led her further into the past than she had wished to go. But suddenly she was there, in 1928. She found

herself back in a dark time on a road she longed – and feared – to travel.

Katherine watched her mother wandering through their old house with a dust cloth, as though she could wipe away her husband's memory, and her pain. It never worked of course, and her mother died young and still loving Katherine's father. She suffered his absence every single day of the rest of her life, since the day he backed out of their driveway on his way to somewhere else. She suffered every day she rode the train into the city to type and take dictation.

In one startling moment, Katherine's mother had fallen from a position of social grace to the role of an abandoned, husband-less wife. Her crown was taken from her and she stood alone, deposed, cast out of the Kingdom of Happily-Ever-After. She felt the shame of desertion. She endured the pity she saw in the eyes of the privileged ladies in the Well-Married Society. She resented going to work every day. She refused to feel oh-so-fortunate that she found a position as a secretary instead of a housekeeper. But greater than these sufferings, greater than the humiliation of being held up to the scrutiny of marriage and found lacking, was the great cavern of longing in her heart.

She missed her husband's voice, his hands, his face, the smell of him, the warmth of his skin, the quiet confidence that, at the end of the day, he would come home. She missed the man she married, the man she walked to down the isle to greet, pledging a lifetime of love and devotion. She missed the man whose children she bore and raised, and for whom she would always long. She missed him every time she absently walked to the window and stood there looking out at nothing, and every day she cried, and every night she slept alone, and every morning she woke up in a bed that was far too big for one.

Seven years after her husband left, when her children were away at college, Katherine's mother took to her bed and died. The doctor called it tuberculosis, but Katherine knew full well that her mother had simply given up on living.

But not me, thought Katherine. Katherine had suffered on that first day, over what she never could have imagined would happen. She threw herself into her mother's arms to be assured that her daddy would be right back, and that every thing would be okay. But her mother couldn't offer her anything. She just stared over Katherine's shoulder, out the window. They stood there together, in their collective shame, mother and child, both left.

Ben understood, in some deep, unexpected way – in a way that he should not have had to understand – that his mother and sister were now damaged women, and that he was their keeper and their protector. He was eleven. Later that night, when Katherine went to bed, it was Ben who came to the door of her room and said, “Good night, Doll.” Just like her father had said it every night for all the previous eleven years of her life. Katherine turned her face away from the wall, toward Ben, and knew in that moment that he would never desert her.

Until his death, that held true. Ben was the one who taught her things. He bandaged her scraped knees and read her bedtime stories. He cleaned up after her and scolded her for her mistakes. He checked her homework, made sure she ate right, and thoroughly scrutinized all her dates. It was Ben who held her when she lost her dog and her way, when she lost a friend, or lost her mind. It was always Ben.

So Katherine stopped suffering over her absent father, and let her mother do it for all of them. Ben became her hero and her savior. He had always been as close to her as she was to herself. They were two of one mind. They knew each other’s thoughts and joys and fears with few, if any, words passing between them.

In all the ways that they were different, Katherine began to imitate the qualities of her brother, qualities that didn’t come naturally for her. She thought Ben was about the smartest, cleverest kid she knew, so she studied when everyone else was playing, and rose to the top of her class in school. She laughed and played with single-minded vigor, secretly wondering all the while how Ben found such extraordinary delight in ordinary things.

She tried, like her twin, to be resilient, but she never became as self-sufficient or self-contained as her brother. Perhaps she didn’t want to be. Perhaps if she had, he would abandon her too, and leave her to her own resources – to strength and indifference and fortitude. So she muscled her way into Oxford, holding on to Ben, and to a life she was supposed to have grown out of.

Just like that, Katherine’s mind propelled her to 1936, Oxford, and all its wonderful, innocent, mayhem. Like a portrait in her mind, Katherine recalled the pale brick buildings, gothic structures reaching to the skies, announcing to the world that this was a greater, uncommon place to be. In her mind, she crossed the bridges of stone arching over the quiet, meandering Thames.

She saw green, the startling green, of the lush happy springtime. Far away from where she sat, Katherine turned her face to the thick, quiet snow that fell on the college in winters of white,

hushing the land and its inhabitants. These were the places and the seasons that marked her first steps of independence, of separation from her youth.

Looking back at all that happened from the day her father left, to Oxford, to Etienne's phone call, Katherine saw relationships that were so convoluted she could never untangle them. She could never lay them out neatly in her mind like a strand of pearls, each one leading in natural, logical succession to the next. No, her relationships were not that simple. And she was far too close to see where the damage began.

New York City, October 1947

Katherine shivered. The evening was crystal clear and ice cold, with New York's city lights out-dazzling the stars. A breeze swept up for brief, chilling moments, causing all the women in their thin evening gowns and wraps to huddle in close to their escorts. The men all wore black tuxedos and bow ties under their heavy overcoats.

Why does men's clothing always seem so much more reasonable? wondered Katherine. A crowd of closely linked couples moved quickly and with great aplomb up the grand staircase to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *And I'm dressed like all these other ridiculous women,* thought Katherine to no one but herself, *cold to the bone.*

The gala opening of the Louis XIV exhibit – on loan from *The Louvre* in Paris – attracted everybody who was anybody in art, politics and power. Even – it was widely rumored – Hugo Nelson, who rarely subjected himself to the masses, but chose instead to surround himself in small gatherings of the most wealthy, extravagant people he could find. But this night, it was said, there was to be an unveiling. An unveiling that tempted even New York's most reclusive eccentric from his huge, mysterious estate.

Hugo Nelson could buy, trade, borrow, or steal just about anything on earth he wanted. Except the love of one woman. Patrice LaMere was a fiery, young actress who Hugo had first seen in the early days, after the war, on an Off-Off-Broadway stage. He had fallen instantly in love with the red-haired siren, though she entirely rejected him. He could have easily handed her all her star-struck hopes and dreams with the snap of his fingers. He could offer her jewelry,

prestige, clothing, world travel, a beautiful home, and servants catering to all her whims. And still she would have none of him. The more he pursued her, the more cruel she became in her rebuffs. The crueller she behaved, the more incessant became his pursuit.

It was Patrice LaMere who would be unveiled this night at the Met. Hugo could see every detail in his mind's eye: her handsome, young escort, with his slicked back hair, his tailored tuxedo, and his dashing smile, sliding the black stole from her shoulders. Her creamy white skin, warm beneath her mink stole, shivering for just a moment at the rush of cool air on her bare skin.

Hugo would see this, if it drew him out of his home, if it made him endure the mindless chitchat and stares of the nameless, faceless throngs, if it killed him with jealousy. He would see Patrice LaMere that night.

At least that was the story on the street.

Nick and Katherine made their way through the crowds, sipping champagne while Katherine stopped to show Nick all the details that he would have missed without her: the use of light and shadow in the baroque paintings, the elaborate carvings in the gilded furniture, the silk and beadwork in the royal clothing.

Nick was paying more attention to finding Hugo Nelson than to anything that concerned a dead French king. He had promised Katherine a reintroduction, and wasn't entirely sure he could negotiate it. He wasn't sure if Nelson would even be there.

"Nick, relax," said Katherine, taking another glass of champagne from a passing waiter. "You look so unhappy."

"I'll relax after we've met with Nelson."

"We'll find him." Katherine reassured her husband with a squeeze of his arm. "But let's get to it, shall we? I know you won't be able to enjoy yourself until we get this over with."

"I already regret getting involved in this scheme," said Nick. "Etienne is not trustworthy, you know." As every seasoned husband and wife would, they let that comment pass without elaboration. "Katherine, you could go to prison for this. Forever. There's nothing I could do to help you, if you get caught."

"I won't get caught," whispered Katherine.

“There isn’t a jury in the world that wouldn’t send you straight to Sing Sing. I couldn’t defend you against smuggling, not at this point. The country is still too tender from the war. Secrets and proprietorship are matters of state security. Nothing could save you.”

“Not even you, Nick Spencer, brilliant attorney at law, savior of the persecuted and the downtrodden?” Katherine beamed at her husband.

“I could perhaps offer you up as guilty by reason of insanity,” he offered. “Besides I defend the rich and the sinful, not the persecuted and downtrodden. But I can also think of a hundred other people I’d rather have you dealing with than Etienne Desonia.”

“So, tell me Nick, if this is all so distasteful to you, why *did* you get involved? Why didn’t you just let me trot off by myself to this gala, and track down Hugo Nelson on my own?”

“For one thing, you’re my responsibility.” Katherine scowled at him over her shoulder as they stood before a painting of the King Louis that reached nearly fifteen feet high. “For two,” continued Nick in his typical, British, self-deprecating tone, “something always draws me straight into my own undoing. I can see it coming. I can tell myself all the things I *should* do. I know perfectly well what’s right and what’s wrong.

“Then something happens. A tumbler clicks over in my head and I can no longer hear the voice of reason. I march straight away from my own good judgement toward ... you.” He smiled at his wife. Nick was making fun, but he also knew that this sort of self-sabotage was true, and had cost him dearly before. And, for certain, it would again.

“You just can’t help yourself can you?” Katherine laid her head on his shoulder for a moment and let him kiss the top of her head. He smelled good. And she felt safe, and excited.

“Look, Nick, there’s Hugo Nelson, over there.” She pointed across the room with a slight nod of her head. Gazing through the elegant entourage that swirled nearby, Nick eventually caught Nelson’s eye. Nick also caught notice of two inconspicuous, but formidable, bodyguards hovering in the background. They were dressed perfectly for the occasion: dark, subtle, silent. *It’s the look on their faces that always gives them away*, thought Nick, *that serious expression, ready for anything, anxious for a kill*. Nick smiled and ushered Katherine smoothly in Nelson’s direction.

“Spencer, how are you, old fellow?” Hugo extended his hand to Nick as the couple approached. “It’s always good to see you. Reminds me of old times.”

Nick shifted slightly, but looked toward Katherine. “Nelson, you remember my wife, Katherine.”

Katherine extended her hand. Nelson shook it with casual disinterest. “I believe we ran into each other recently in the lobby of the Shubert Theatre... a few months ago, didn’t we?” said Katherine.

“Yes, didn’t we,” replied Nelson with a cool indifference.

“It was a presentation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I believe,” added Nick. Nelson glared at Nick, angry to be reminded of another of Patrice LaMere’s performances, from which his exotic gift of tropical flowers, imported for the occasion from Polynesia, was returned. “I don’t believe I’ve seen that particular play,” replied Nelson. “The theatre typically bores me to tears.”

“Is that right?” said Nick. “My mistake, then. Perhaps it was at the opera we last met.”

“Now that is possible,” said Nelson. “But only if it was Verdi. American composers are entirely too provincial for my taste.”

“And just when the Americans are gloating about their military prowess over the Italians,” replied Nick.

Katherine wasn’t at all pleased with the conversation. Mostly because she wasn’t part of it. Clearing her throat, she gazed at Nelson over her champagne flute. Her long black glove led his eyes from the glass to her décolletage as she sipped her drink. “Mr. Nelson.” She spoke very softly, to get his undivided attention. “I have something you want.”

Nelson cocked an eyebrow at her, revealing his surprise and his curiosity.

Katherine cast a brilliant smile at him. “You just don’t know it yet.” Then she turned and walked away. Katherine’s gown was cut to a deep V in the back and the long strand of pearls she wore grazed her bare skin as she walked away.

Nelson watched Katherine approach a distinguished gentleman in a perfectly-tailored, designer tuxedo. When she caught the man’s eye, just by moving across the room, he moved to her immediately and embraced her in his arms. That left Nick to explain to Nelson that

Katherine's was a call he should take in the morning; that what she had to offer was something no one else in the world could.

Nelson watched Katherine, who was chatting happily with Robert Wagner, the powerful New York senator, as if she had nothing more important on her mind than the bubbles in her champagne.

Wagner was an old friend of Katherine's father. He'd held every important post in the Democratic party in New York, and was raising a son – just older than Katherine – to follow in his illustrious footsteps. Senator Wagner was a good Catholic, an extraordinary civil servant, a champion of the children and the arts, and was approaching 70. He doted on Katherine like the favorite godchild she was.

Wagner had helped Katherine's mother secure a good position in a government office when she needed a job. He continued to stay close to the shattered family, providing an epoxy of sorts, and a window into the world of happy families. He also provided a vague, perhaps unwilling, link to Katherine's father. Katherine's mother had held desperately to that link, that connection of mostly static and dead air, listening intently for any scrap of news, while trying to appear nonchalant.

In her own mask of nonchalance, Katherine looked over only once at Nelson to return his gaze. They looked at each other across the room as people dashed around, lofting champagne flutes, making conversation they intended to be titillating.

In that moment, through a constantly moving sea of people, Katherine and Nelson recognized something in each other, something intangible and elusive, something compelling, something bordering, perhaps, on desperate.

The defining difference between Katherine and Hugo Nelson was that Nelson was rich. Not just rich, but rich-rich. He had been driven from birth, from a time when he was dirt-poor and growing up in the streets. He succeeded through his wits, his audacity, a sort of mania, and an abundance of man-made luck. Over the years Nelson had become powerful, eccentric, used to having his way unquestioningly, and, perhaps, evil.

But Katherine had no idea about all that. She grew up in a working middle class family, reading *Life Magazine*, *The Evening Post* and newspaper stories about the glamorous lives of people like Hugo Nelson. The kind of life she wanted. This deal was more to her than money. It was more to her than helping Etienne, even. It was her invitation to the Table of The Successful.

This deal would make her a player, in the eyes of Hugo Nelson, society, and the New York's high-end business community. This would be the realization of a dream for Katherine, an accomplishment, a ratification of all her efforts in life. Katherine was born – or came to it early in life by circumstance – to have a hunger in her.