

1-Esther

First, a thin whistling, then angry buzzing, then waves came like the tide, washing over black iron fence and surging through parlor walls. Searing, unseen swells washed across marble floors, poured down stairs and seeped everywhere but the pantry and kitchen. Esther clutched her diary to her breast in a fetal curl on the kitchen floor as night sounds, sharp as pins, hissed through the walls and rippled down her spine. She gripped her pen and scratched jagged, trembling words onto the page.

Diary, can a place born of evil itself become evil? I have done nothing more to deserve this than to be born here. The others died with their lives in order, their souls at peace. I have no distinction from them, except that I am the last.

Weeks ago, her cats had left and never returned. Insects swarmed the grounds at sundown, but the nighthawks were gone. Only leathery wings came to feed at dusk. The house creaked and moved around her, timbers shuddering against brittle, wintry night. Huddled on the kitchen floor, she could see the dark outlines of the counters and iron stove above her and, higher up, pinpricks of faint stars that rippled through window glass. She drew a ragged breath and eased her grip on the pot cover held over her head until she heard something move across the floor above her.

In the dim light, she shuffled to the foyer and staircase at the carriage entrance, steadied herself on the banister and tried to fathom the silence. Someone, or something, drew itself up and stood in the shadows of the balcony above, looking down the curved staircase.

“Father?”

There was no answer, only skeletal tree branches tapping against high windows. Something fluttered and fell at her feet. She retreated, slipped, and fell. More fluttering and more impacts on the floor around her. Leather slapped at her and she felt a sharp blow to the top of her head that sent consciousness swirling away to a cold, still blackness.

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Pale sunlight roused her, stabbing at swollen eyes. Torn yellow pages pasted with news clippings held in green leather binders were a sea of green around her. They were *her* notebooks, precious green binders she filled over a lifetime of reading, clipping, and pasting. Pain stabbed her ribs as she tried to stand. She clutched the staircase handrail with both hands, heaved herself up and started up the stairs.

Father?

She hobbled hand-over-hand up the staircase. Toppled stacks of binders blocked passage to the hall. There was no one there. A breeze blew leaves through the doorway of Mother's bedroom and rustled them across the stone floor. She found her elegant oak secretary turned over, its contents dumped out. Amid the clutter were her diary books, writing papers and pens. The checkbook was nowhere to be found, but she would stop payment and let that be that.

One pane was smashed out of the window in Mother's room, near the open sash lock. She closed it and taped a piece of cardboard over the hole. She gathered up the pens, paper, and diaries in her skirt and carried them down to the safety of the tin and copper kitchen.

Esther put water on for tea and warmed herself by the stove. Tea always lifted her chill, loosened the stiffness in her hands and eased the pain behind her eyes. She sipped, gathered her wits, and thought of the cats of her childhood. Tabitha, Thomas, Calypso... she remembered each one so well. How they soothed her as a child. How they brought her

to a peaceful state when she caressed their ears and silky backs.

The mail slot in the front foyer clanked and letters tapped onto the marble floor. The bank's monthly transfer notice was on top. Esther peeled open the flap of the envelope and pulled out a familiar white letterhead.

Dear Miss Brandt,

Per the provisions of the trust established in your name by the estate of your mother, Mary W. Brandt, we have transferred your monthly payment of ten thousand five hundred fifty dollars to your checking account with this bank, to be used at your personal discretion.

If I may be of further assistance to you, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Marcus J. Winther

Trust Officer

She sat at the kitchen table, steadied her hand and penned instructions to Mr. Winther to draft checks against her modest bills, composed a short list for the grocer and renewed orders for flowers on the family graves at Rosewood Cemetery. Seventy-eight hundred dollars would remain until the next transfer when she would have Mr. Winther again divide the surplus between a house account, the Public Library, the Humane Society and the Red Cross. Esther sorted her mail into two small piles, the first to read, the second—unopened—to kindle the fire. Today she received another long white envelope with dark raised printing at the corner and placed it into the second pile.

In the distance, the sweet sound of violin drifted from the music hall. The radio set left playing there made her vaguely uneasy, but it was also a comfort of sorts, filling the lonely corners of the house with classical music and the occasional human voice. A television set had also been there, once—but she could not tolerate its presence. She had them haul it away, those awful men laughing to each other as they carried

it down the walk. *Brandts*. It seemed amusing justice to them, somehow.

Her shoes clopped over the marble floor and their echo within the house reminded her of her loneliness, of her diminishing ability to hold on alone. She found the scissors and what remained of the current pot of white paste. Items clipped from newspapers, magazines, fliers, handbills, anything printed, formed the sifted tapestry she wove from carefully chosen facts, layered one upon another. But, up is now down. White is now black. Light has become darkness, Good is now evil. Life is death. In a single lifetime, the doors of the world had been blown open. Time itself had changed. Country clock towers had once set the standard within each village and town, varying by as much as fifteen or twenty minutes from one to the next. What happened beneath each one was all that mattered. Should larger events impose their will from elsewhere—wars, the deaths of presidents—the people beneath this village clock would decide what import it had to them. But asphalt covered the cobblestone roads and clock towers eventually stopped and were left frozen in time for lack of people who knew how to fix them. Wrought iron was no longer the brink of this world, when news of worldwide events from across the state, the nation, indeed the world now poured in unchecked, detailing humanity's triumphs and achievements, yet also unrelentingly documenting its daily brutalities. Too many choices, too much information, too little knowledge from messengers who sat in distant, sterile, air-cooled rooms with blue carpet, glass desks, and swirling colored backgrounds, assaulting unassuming unbelievers with each new detail, each new, deeper horror.

Her shoes fell silent on the dining room oriental, then rang again as she entered the Music room, with new entries in fresh new pages. Esther stacked them on a table to dry.

There was a day when the pain first came, she recalled, rippling like rolling pins across washboards. The cats had

understood, as they always somehow did, and Mother accepted that without the need of further evidence, for her cats took young Esther to a peaceful state.

"She reads like a sixth-grade boy," the sniveling Principal Arnold Parsons had said about her—God rest his soul—an insult nestled in a compliment like a rock in a raisin cookie. "Yes, Madam, an exceptional mind for a young lady," he would coo. "She'll make a fine and cultured wife one day when she develops sociability."

As if that little man would have the slightest idea about any of that.

Children of the town were rough and vulgar, not at all like Mother, Jensen, Woods or Millie. Father would have caned them within an inch of their lives had they been Brandts. Children ran, hollered, threw snowballs against the windows, played stickball in the street, scared the daylights out of Mother and one Sunday in June fulfilled her most dire prediction with the fateful smashing of a rose-tinted Tiffany window.

The servants planted maple saplings and thick evergreen hedges between the house and the street. Dirty, sweaty men with stinking, smoking horse-drawn carts forged a black iron fence around the grounds. The city poured an oily, black cover over the hopscotch wheel ruts in the road.

Esther worked at the Library after school, returning each night, disappearing behind the burgeoning greenery along Hemlock and Pine.

The town's children had children. Some left. None returned.

The city packed the street with blue-black asphalt and the noisy charge of autos drove horses from the roadway. Mother was taken ill and a doctor came. Two men carried her down the marble staircase and out into the world, never to return.

The town's children grew old and died, forgotten in their passing by all but the obituary page of the now extinct

Leitrim Champion, their lives terse paragraphs before the names of the funeral parlors that paid for the listing. Esther read more newspapers, magazines, and books. She clipped and saved, pasted, and rebound the words and pictures, taking the measure of the world outside by its paper replica, constructed of clean, volumes bound in green leather. She piled them around her desk, her room, out into the hallway against the wall, down the corridor, and over the years down both sides of the halls, deep into the house. She felt comfort from the nearness of her green books, and, yes, comfort from the organizing and sorting of such an untidy world. They became her proof of the world, nothing less.

Esther sealed her envelopes, stamped and placed them in the slot for her mailman Gerry to take next morning. At the kitchen table, she sipped her tea, took up her green and gray Waterman fountain pen and scratched another entry into her diary.

This house grows larger by the day, shooting new branches and wings like wisteria vine in the spring, as though some critical ballast was lost when Mother died. It fairly breathes now, adding rooms and doors I do not recall passing through before. Tricks of an aging mind, I know, but some corners, some rooms, some halls are so foreign to me that I have come to fear them, fear what lies behind them as if were again a child. I am the last, a lonely childless old woman and it has come to me these few months how suited I am to this unhappy task. While the others so greatly surpassed me with each of their personal gifts I have taken on a bit of each of them in myself, living through their lives, through their deaths, to remain the pale distillation of that which came before.

Last night the waves were stronger, and I believe I heard Father in the house. There have always been things about this place that frightened me—though I know each stone, each board, as I know my own hands.

What has been my crime? My punishment is clear.

I am condemned to life—