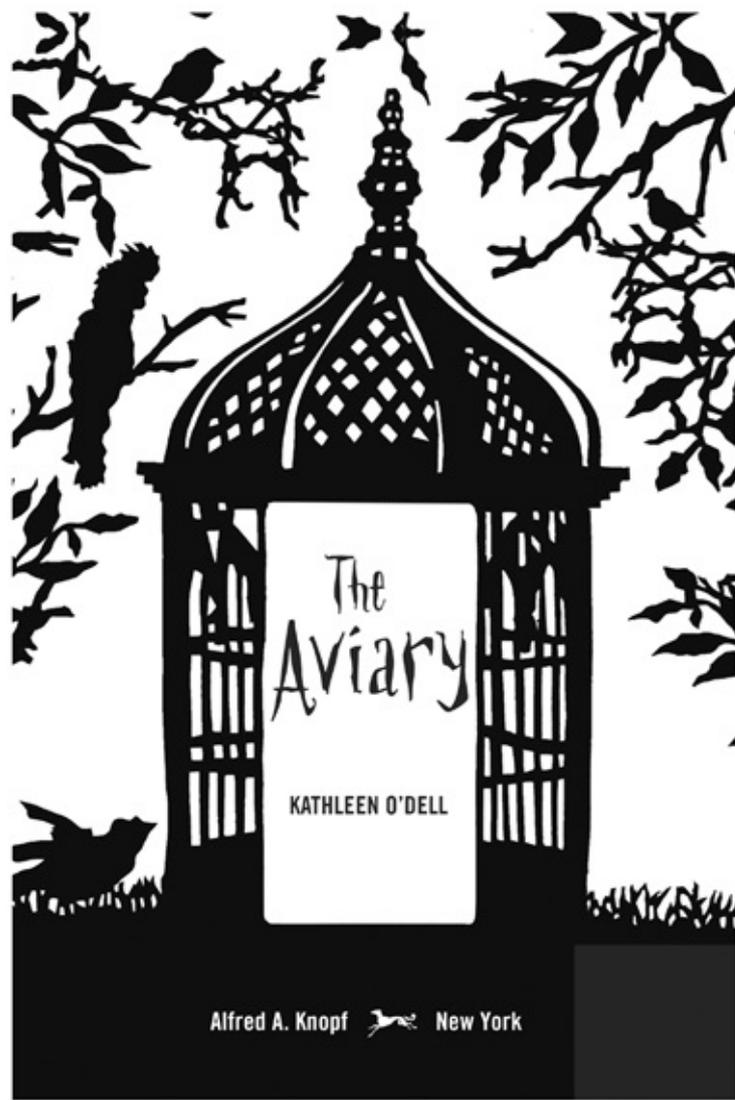




The Aviary

KATHLEEN O'DELL



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**For Alexia Sophia Ramirez Franco,
with love**

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Chapter 1

As a young child, Clara Dooley had felt that the Glendoveer mansion contained the whole world. George Glendoveer had been a famous magician and illusionist, and he and his wife Genelia, filled their home with curiosities from around the globe. Even the construction of the house owed its beauty to the arts and crafts of far-flung places: intricately carved woodwork with birds and flowers from Germany, Italian murals that made the ceilings into night skies scattered with stars, glowing Persian carpets in the shades of peacock feathers.

Clara, however, had never seen the house in its prime. Mr. Glendoveer had long since passed away. Mrs. Glendoveer was aged and frail. Many parts of the house were shuttered and closed. But Clara had lived there so long that she looked past the gloom and decay. Her mother, who cared for Mrs. Glendoveer, and Ruby, who cooked for them all, filled the room with their bustling energy. It was a circumscribed world, but for Clara it had seemed just enough.

Now, at nearly twelve, Clara felt she was outgrowing more than just the small desk that had been set up in Mrs. Glendoveer's bedroom for her studies. The room, with its elegant Chinese paper and French green enamel stove and shelves of foreign bric-a-brac, seemed to tease Clara. Because of her weak heart, she was not allowed to attend school—or run or play or exert herself in any way. And though there was a large rose garden in back where she might take the air, she hated attracting the attention of the birds in the mansion's outdoor aviary.

The enormous black iron cage, almost as big as Clara's own room, was backed up against the corner garden wall and sheltered under a pergola with a tattered roof. At the sight or sound of a human being, the birds inside would flutter and scream as if they were on fire, grasping at the bars with their sharp claws.

Judging from the noise, anyone nearby would have thought there were at least a dozen birds, but Clara knew there were only five—a mynah with a saffron mask surrounding blood-red eyes, a white, sulfur-crested cockatoo, a noisy black grackle, a fearless yellow kiskadee, and a terrified foam-green honeycreeper who pulled at his own feathers. Many times Clara wished for the birds to disappear so that she could roam the garden in peace. But strangely, old Mrs. Glendoveer loved the birds as much as Clara feared them.

This late afternoon when Ruby brought out the birds' feed, their piercing cries snapped Mrs. Glendoveer awake. She wore such a look of anxiety that Clara leapt up and took her hand until the squawking subsided. "Everything's all right," she said, looking into the woman's pale blue eyes. "I'm sorry they gave you a start."

Mrs. Glendoveer's voice quavered. "It's gotten worse since I can't get down to feed them myself. They're lonely, poor things. And they're getting so old too. It's a pity they don't have a Clara of their own to keep them company."

Mrs. Glendoveer talked about the birds to Clara the way a mother might tell stories about her precocious children. The cockatoo, for instance, could pick a lock. The mynah would nest only in the pages of old books and newspapers. Even the common grackle was gifted. "Better than a watchdog," she would say as he screeched to bring down the heavens.

When all was calm, Clara perched again on the edge of the bed and leafed through an old volume with color pictures of sea animals separated by the thinnest sheaves of tissue paper. She pointed to a scarlet-shelled creature covered with horns. "When I get well," she said, "I'm going down to the sea and gather a bucket of shells just like these. And I'll line them up here so you can see them when you wake up from your nap."

"Dear," said Mrs. Glendoveer, "you'll have to go to Indonesia for those, I'm afraid. It's a prickly sort of urchin that grows only in warm water. Can you imagine what it's like to step on one?"

Clara didn't know what kind of water was in the sea that glittered in Lockhaven Bay. She could catch a glimpse of something that looked like a pool of mercury on the horizon, but she'd never been to the shore. "What lives in our sea, then?" she asked.

"Nothing too colorful," Mrs. Glendoveer said. "The ocean here in Maine is gray and untempered. I'm glad that my window faces south, so I don't have to gaze on it every day..." She shuddered. "I prefer the garden. Thank goodness for all those sturdy old roses George planted. I believe that we have everything here a contented person could possibly need."

Yet Clara was not content. She fervently hoped that there was a doctor right now creating a cure for weak-hearted children so she could go out into the world. In the meantime, she must try to follow the precepts offered in *Advice for Young Ladies*, a pretty little book buried on the reading room's shelf:

Life has many ills, but the mind that views every object in its most cheering aspect bears within itself a powerful and perpetual antidote.

Whenever she felt twinges of envy watching her mother go out the door with a market basket slung over her arm, she reminded herself that her yearning could only cause her own suffering, and redoubled her efforts to become the "antidote" to her own ills. And when she talked about her future, Clara was sure to include the phrase *When I get well*, intent on banishing clouded forecasts from her heart and mind.

The only doubtful habit she still clung to was a twice-daily ritual at the window seat spying on the neighborhood children on their way to and from school. "I'll quit tomorrow," she'd say. But invariably the urge proved irresistible, and Clara permitted herself to fantasize that she was among those children, burdened with their books and overcoats, rushing along with *somewhere* to go.

“Clara!”

She hurried down the hall, looked over the banister, and saw Ruby, red in the face as always, blotting her upper lip with her apron.

“Your ma says come to tea,” Ruby called.

“Four o’clock already?” Clara skipped down the stairs and put her arm through Ruby’s. “You’re so warm, Ruby dear. Too warm.”

“Need to have a sit-down. Your mother! Thank goodness our Harriet has the tea habit, or we’d be on our feet from dawn till dusk.” She shrugged cheerfully. “Could be worse, I guess. Could have a husband. At least I’ve got a free hour or two before bedtime to prop my feet up. Never a night off with a husband.”

Clara had known Ruby since she was a baby, and she loved her. Ruby’s every physical detail—from her graying hair a-frizz at the temples to her small red nose and prim cherub mouth—was endearing as well as soothingly familiar. Clara’s mother, Harriet, was originally hired by Mrs. Glendoveer as a nurse and companion, but she was a worker and a perfectionist and soon gave all her time to the maintenance of the vast, crumbling house, marshaling Ruby into joining her in a disciplined and ceaseless round of chores.

The kitchen smelled of nutmeg and was hot and steamy almost beyond comfort, which to Clara they were to have rice pudding. Her mother had already set the table with sugar and cream, bowls, cups, and a china pot. “You two pour while I fetch more cordwood,” she said.

“Look at the size of these spoons!” said Ruby, shaking her head. “Your ma’s been off to the broker again. She had to choose between the teaspoons and the soup spoons, and it nearly broke my heart.”

“The broker?” said Clara.

“The pawnbroker,” Ruby said. “Twice in the same month too.” She went quiet as Clara’s mother came back in through the kitchen door. Clara made up her mind to look up *pawnbroker* in the dictionary as soon as she finished her tea.

“Great goodness,” Clara’s mother said as she nudged the door closed behind her with her foot. “You could hear a pin drop out there. It’s quite unsettling.”

Ruby rose and looked out the kitchen window. “Sky’s a bit green as well,” she said.

Clara’s mother loaded firewood on the pile by the stove and pushed her hair back from her brow. “Lord, if there’s a storm coming, let it pass us by. This old house won’t stand it.”

“Come sit by me, Mama,” Clara said. “Your tea is getting cold.”

Her mother smiled, took her seat, and gave Clara a pat on the head. “I don’t think I’ve said hello to you since breakfast. So, hello.”

“Hello,” Clara said. She watched her mother relax into her chair and bring the cup to her lips. They never chatted much at tea; but Clara liked the closeness of the women, the lull in the kitchen as they all stared down into their cups, lost in their own thoughts.

Ding-ding-ding-ding!

Clara, her mother, and Ruby snapped to attention.

“It’s Mrs. Glendoveer,” Harriet said, springing to her feet. Clara rose to follow her.

“No, you stay with Ruby,” she warned.

“What do you suppose has happened, Ruby?” asked Clara. “It sounds as if she’s about to pull the bell cord off its hinge.”

“I don’t know, sweet, but look out there.” Ruby pointed to the window. “It’s black as

death, I do declare. And so sudden too.”

Clara ran to the window. The clouds appeared to be coming to a boil.

“Ruby!” cried her mother from down the hall. “Fetch the canvas!”

“I’m on my way,” Ruby answered. “Shall I fill the bathtub with water? The storm could foul the well.”

“We don’t have time!”

“I’ll do it!” Clara said. She got as far as the foyer when a sheet of white light flared through the transom window and a bone-cracking *BOOM* shook the house. Grabbing the banister, Clara made it only to the landing before the house shook again. The gas lamps flickered and went dark.

She hugged the wall until she reached the bathroom. After getting the drain plug in place, she sat on the edge of the tub and waited impatiently for it to fill.

“Mrs. Glendoveer?” she called. But there was no answer from down the hall. “Hurry!” she said to the tap. When lightning hit again, the tiled room blazed bright as day, and Clara swore the thunder was strong enough to knock Mrs. Glendoveer from her bed. The rain hit the room with a few strong splatters before pelting it with hail.

Clara closed the tap and flew down the hall. “Mrs. Glendoveer!”

There, framed in the open window, stood the old woman, her white hair unpinned and coiling weakly down her back. Rocks of ice were bouncing against the floor. She turned to Clara, her eyes wild. “My babies!” she said. “Did you see? The hail is the size of quail eggs.”

Clara rushed to her side and pulled the window shut. “We must get you back to bed,” she said. “Why, you aren’t even wearing a wrapper.”

“I shan’t go until I know my birds are safe.”

The hail stopped as suddenly as it had started. Clara peered out into the yard, where both her mother and a capless Ruby struggled against the wind with a sail of canvas slapping the birds’ cage.

“Don’t worry,” Clara said. “Look, Mother has already tied down one side. And Ruby is stronger than she looks. There. They’ve got the ceiling covered completely. It’s going to be fine.”

The lightning flashed again, and Clara saw the black shapes of the birds moving in a flurry behind the bars. Their cries were electric and out of rhythm: “Awwwk-AWWWWWK! Skee-skee!”

Ruby slipped on the hail-strewn grass, muddying her knees. The birds took up their cries again as the canvas panel flapped against the cage. Harriet finally caught hold of a corner and tied the canvas down with rope.

Ba-BOOM! With another strike of lightning, the clouds loosed a slanting rain.

“Now aren’t you glad I shut that window?” asked Clara. “Imagine your getting wet.”

Mrs. Glendoveer allowed herself to be led back to bed, where she shivered violently under the blankets. Clara lit a candle and warmed her feet with her hands.

“You’re a dear,” Mrs. Glendoveer said. “I suppose you must think I’m a hysterical old woman.”

“Of course not.”

“I meant to have the old awning replaced on the pergola by now.” She clapped her hands on her cheeks. “If anything had happened to them, I never could have lived with myself. Never

“You do love them very much,” said Clara.

“It was George who loved them,” said Mrs. Glendoveer. “And he had so many birds. We went through flocks of stage-trained doves during his years in the theater. But these meant the world to him, and I can only imagine what he’d say if he found so much as a single feather endangered on any one of them.”

Clara knew the birds were old. George Glendoveer had died at least thirty years ago. She had heard her mother and Ruby wonder just how long these animals were supposed to live, but no one dared bring up the subject with Mrs. Glendoveer.

Clara’s mother came in, soaked to the skin and carrying a lantern. “Ah, Mrs. Glendoveer,” she said. “The rain is still coming down in buckets, but the birds are dry. We’ve got the stove downstairs fired and soup on the boil. Lights are out all over town, though, so I brought you a lamp.”

“Thank you, Harriet, but I must insist that you get out of your wet clothes before you do another thing.” And then to Clara, “Your mother is a treasure, always putting others before herself.”

For the rest of the night, doors slammed randomly with the gusts that blew through the drafty house. Candles extinguished themselves. Branches from the big oak and countless bits of debris scratched outside the walls as the storm heaved.

Although she had slept in her own little room for years, Clara did not refuse her mother’s invitation to share a bed this night. They said their prayers together.

“And may the shingles stay on the roof,” concluded her mother.

And may the roof stay on the house, added Clara silently. She clung to her mother in the dark, her eyes wide open.



Chapter 2

Sometime during the night, the storm quieted enough for Clara and her mother to fall asleep. But as soon as the gray dawn shone through the lace curtains, Clara's mother was wide awake. "I'm almost afraid to look," she said. Her breath came out in clouds. "You put on your coat and slippers and make sure Mrs. Glendoveer has a coal fire."

Clara did as she was told, and saw that shafts of light were penetrating the dark stairwell. The big window at the top of the landing had its shutters open, and the sunrise was just starting to make the sky glow pink. She leaned against the glass, looked down, and gasped.

The old oak had split in half and now lay against the front door of the house. Bricks were scattered in a corner of the hedge. Two shutters had fallen and smashed, and the one that had protected the landing window was hanging at a precarious angle.

Clara's mother stood outside pinching the bridge of her nose, as she always did when a headache was coming on. Ruby, carrying a hatchet, came around the side of the house to join her. As Clara stared, she heard something like a loud bark coming from Mrs. Glendoveer's room.

She found the old woman in bed with her hands at her neck. "I can't speak," she wheezed. Her breath rattled in her throat. "I've caught cold. How has the house held up?"

"I'm not sure," Clara said, stoking the fire. "Mama is outside now."

"And my birds?"

"I'll find out for you," Clara said, "and bring you something for your throat."

"I'm worried," whispered Mrs. Glendoveer. "It is so awfully quiet."

Clara tried to smile reassuringly. She hoped Ruby had already checked the aviary. When she reached the kitchen, however, she saw that the cage out back was still shrouded in canvas, mud-splotched and hung with dead branches but otherwise untouched.

The sound of chopping came from the front yard, and Clara knew that Ruby and her mother were taking apart the old oak. Clara made a mixture of honey and lemon, stoked the stove, and put a kettle on, stalling really, in the hope that one of the women would come and check on the birds for her, but the chopping outside continued.

Clara squared her shoulders. "They're only birds in a cage," she said to herself sternly. But as she approached the aviary, her heart filled with dread. No sounds came from inside. The

sun had risen fully—a time when the birds were usually the noisiest. She stared at the dirt-wet rope for a full minute before she dared touch it.

“Hello?” she whispered through the canvas. “Are you all right?”

No answer. For a moment, all sorts of pictures flashed through Clara’s mind: damp feathers like fallen leaves, the black mynah on his back, claws up, red eyes open. She swallowed hard and picked at the knot.

“Please, please, let them be safe,” she said. The knot came undone, and Clara unthreaded the rope from the grommets. She counted to three and threw back the flap.

“AWWWWK! AWWWWWK!”

Clara covered her ears and jumped back as every bird in the cage came to life. The cockatoo angled his way across the bars, screaming and scolding. A blur of feathers crisscrossed inside the aviary. Amid the shrieking, someone called. The voice was garbled, as if a human being were trying to talk with a mouth full of water.

“Who’s speaking?” Clara said. “What do you want?”

“Elliot! Elliot!” called the mynah, canting his masked head to show Clara one red eye and then the other.

As the mynah chanted, the birds took up the rhythm. Each one settled on a perch until all were still and staring directly at Clara.

“Elliot!”

“Skee-skee!”

“Elliot!”

“Awwwwk!”

A chill ran through Clara as she gazed back at the birds. What kind of omen was this?

She turned toward the house, refusing to look back as the birds loudly reproached her. By the time she reached the kitchen, the kettle on the stove was whistling at a high pitch, and it seemed to Clara that the entire house was in a state of alarm.

Trembling, she poured water into the teapot, set a tray, and took it upstairs. The anxious look on Mrs. Glendoveer’s face was transformed when Clara told her the birds had all survived the storm.

“They’re a bit upset, of course,” she added bravely. “But very lively.”

Mrs. Glendoveer smiled and took her cup. “Thank you, my dear,” she rasped.

Clara sat on the edge of the bed in silence before she got the courage to ask. “Mrs. Glendoveer,” she said, “who is Elliot?”

Mrs. Glendoveer nearly dropped her cup and set it down sloshing onto the saucer. “Did you say ‘Elliot’?”

“I did. Or rather, one of the birds did. The mynah. He was quite insistent.”

“Extraordinary,” said Mrs. Glendoveer. She touched her fingers to her lips, and her wide blue eyes grew watery. “He said they might speak, but I had lost all expectation.”

“Who?” Clara asked.

“George. My husband.”

“Has the mynah never spoken before?”

“Never,” said Mrs. Glendoveer. “It almost makes me wonder ...” She trailed off. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” Clara said. “That bird’s eyes look as if they could burn through me. I would

frightened, to tell the truth.”

“Oh, love, don’t be afraid.” She lowered her voice. “Shall I share my story with you?”

Clara nodded as Mrs. Glendoveer reached into the collar of her nightgown and pulled out her gold locket with a lovely green citrine stone in the center. “The latch is so small and my eyes are so dim,” she said. “Could you open this for me, please?”

Clara did, and found inside a tiny key, which she handed to Mrs. Glendoveer. Then the old woman pointed to an alligator chest in the corner of the room. “In that box you’ll find a stamped leather book with a lock. Bring it here and I’ll show you.”

The book was heavy, so Clara was careful to rest it gently on Mrs. Glendoveer’s lap.

“It has been a long time since I’ve opened this,” she said. “If you don’t mind, would you please turn around while I look inside?”

“All right,” Clara said. She could hear the key clicking in the lock and the sound of turning pages.

“Ah, so there he is. My goodness, I’m quite overcome,” Mrs. Glendoveer said. “Please come see, Clara.”

The big leather book was shut, but Mrs. Glendoveer had pulled out a photograph in a paper frame showing a beautiful woman in an old-fashioned gown, seated in a cane chair and holding an infant with bright black eyes.

“Is that you, Mrs. Glendoveer?”

“Yes,” she said. “And the darling baby is my little Elliot.”

“He’s precious. Where is he now?”

Mrs. Glendoveer shook her head. “We didn’t have him very long,” she answered. “I can’t remember him clearly, though. He was a passionate thing with a lusty cry. Curious little boy. Or he would have been had he stayed with us.”

Clara remembered asking her mother once why Mrs. Glendoveer never had any children before she learned that the question was a rude one.

“Don’t be nosy, Clara,” her mother had warned. “If Mrs. Glendoveer wishes to speak of such things, she will be the one to broach the subject.”

Now that Mrs. Glendoveer was telling her about the baby, Clara felt free—almost relieved. “I always knew you must have had a child,” she said. “I felt it.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I can’t tell you why. Maybe because you have always been so understanding of me.” Clara took the picture and studied the baby’s face. “I am glad you told me. I only wish he were still here to be a consolation to you. It’s always seemed a shame that this house wasn’t filled with children.”

Mrs. Glendoveer looked over her spectacles. “And that, I suspect, would be a consolation to you as well.”

Clara blushed. “Oh, I don’t mean to complain.”

“It’s all right. We all get lonely.” Mrs. Glendoveer slipped the photograph back in the book and locked it again. “When you first came here with your mama, you quite reminded me of Elliot. Snappy black eyes, taking everything in. It’s fitting that you know about him.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Clara said, taking the book to put away.

“Clara,” Mrs. Glendoveer said, “I can’t tell you how much it would mean to me if you could report any other things you might hear from the birds. In fact, if you could go and speak to

them, it might bring them out some more.”

Clara told Mrs. Glendoveer that she would pass on anything she heard, but doubted she could bring herself to talk to the birds. “You mustn’t strain your voice any more,” she said. “Today, I can read the rest of my Sir Walter Scott while you rest.”

Books were the one way Clara could wander, so she was more than happy to spend her morning with the Black Knight and legendary outlaws of the forest. But on her way downstairs, she couldn’t help but kneel again at the window seat. All the house’s front windows had been shuttered long ago to discourage stone-throwing children. Thanks to the storm, the view was now wide open, and Lockhaven lay before her in the crystal-clear morning light like a page from a picture book. The tiny Pincushion Islands dotting the bay were green and refreshed by the rain. All the rooftops and carriages appeared doll-size and fit for her to rearrange in any way she’d like.

As her mother and Ruby hacked at the fallen oak below, Clara pressed her nose against the glass and dreamed.

“If I went to school, I would never simply walk down the sidewalk. I would run and skip and never get out of breath. I’d be happy and healthy and in a hurry to take my seat in the classroom’s first row. Because I am smart. But certainly not conceited. Everyone would like me, I’d make sure of it.”

Clara became so immersed in her “made-up” life that she almost began to believe she was the smart, strong, kind girl beloved by classmates who ran here and there boldly and with complete freedom. Then the clock tower struck eight o’clock and broke the spell.

Schoolchildren began to flock down the street. They came waving branches from fallen trees, stomping on the clumps of wet newspaper that had been scattered on the sidewalk by the wind. One little girl picked up an umbrella that had blown inside out and twirled it over her shoulder. Clara marveled at them, celebrating the ruin as they might a carnival.

She put her hand up against the glass and watched a ring of steam form around it, then studied her handprint. “I’m like a ghost in a tower,” Clara murmured. “I might as well be invisible.”

Just then a girl walking alone, with a red cap and ringlets, stopped on the street and turned to look at the house. Clara thought she must be close to her own age but didn’t remember ever seeing her before. “Look at me!” Clara whispered.

The girl held back, distracted by something—the sound of the oak being chopped?—before lifting her eyes to the turret window where Clara knelt.

The girl froze. For some reason, Clara half expected her to scream. But instead, an amazed smile broke out on her face. She raised her arm and waved.

Clara put her hand to the glass again, this time with a yearning in her heart that was almost like pain.

“Hullo!” shouted the girl, waving madly this time.

Before Clara could smile back, she saw her mother striding to the center of the yard. Clara ducked and slid from her perch to the wooden floor, where she wrapped her arms around her knees.

There was a noise in the foyer, a slamming of the door. Her mother was marching up through the house. Clara grabbed her book, ran to Mrs. Glendoveer’s room, and slipped into a chair, but she couldn’t take in the words. All she could see before her eyes was the girl in the

red cap, bouncing on her toes, waving, shouting "Hullo!"



Chapter 3

By late in the day, Mrs. Glendoveer's cough had turned into a persistent rattle. Clara was pressed to work brewing a drink from the boneset plant her mother grew on the windowsill. Making the remedy took time, because the herb had to be steeped in boiling water and then cooled so it would cause an upset stomach.

She fanned the pot and tested the broth with her finger, anxious to get a cup of the stuff quickly to Mrs. Glendoveer before the children came home from school at three o'clock. Only she could catch a second glimpse of the astonishing girl in the red cap before her mother fixed the shutters again. Would she look up? Would she wave?

Finally, it occurred to Clara to speed the cooling with a hunk of ice. She took the brass hammer from its peg on the wall and chipped at the great block in the icebox. Her mother was not fond of anyone chipping at the ice, because the smaller it was, the faster it melted and food would spoil. When a shoe-size hunk fell off the side, Clara winced, knowing she would certainly catch it from her mother later. Nonetheless, she used the entire piece, setting it in the sink with the pan on top of it until all had thoroughly chilled.

As swiftly as she could, Clara carried a mug of the remedy wrapped in a napkin down the hall and up the stairs. "Mrs. Glendoveer," she said, giving the lady a gentle shake.

She barely stirred, and Clara tried again.

Slowly Mrs. Glendoveer opened her eyes. "Ah. Hello, dear," she said. "What time is it?"

"Somewhere near, oh, three o'clock," Clara said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Mrs. Glendoveer coughed and reached for her hankie. She pulled the sleeves of her nightgown up to her elbows, then felt her hair. "I must look a mess," she said.

Clara wished that Mrs. Glendoveer would please hurry and take her medicine. And then she felt guilty for wanting to rush her. "Let's get this down your sore throat where it can do some good, shall we?" she said.

"All right. But I would like to have my glasses first. Can you find them?"

Clara grabbed at the spectacles on the nightstand and unfolded them.

"If you could polish them a bit, I'd be so grateful," said the old woman.

"Of course," said Clara with all the patience she could muster. As she rubbed the lenses vigorously, she began to wonder if the good Lord was trying to test her.

That's when the town's bell chimed the three o'clock hour. Clara felt she could almost cry. She knew that by the time she had Mrs. Glendoveer's spectacles clean and wrapped over her ears, the coverlet pulled up and the pillows propped behind her, and the medicine cup emptied, the children would have passed. She let herself feel the full weight of her disappointment.

When Mrs. Glendoveer finished her cup, she took a tin of peppermints from her bed stand, popped one in her mouth, and offered one to Clara.

"It clears the bitterness," she said.

If only it could, Clara thought. She took the cup and glanced through the turret window on the way back down to the kitchen. Nobody was out there. She trod heavily down the stairs until an unexpected sight stopped her in the foyer. There, in the stained-glass sidelights by the front door, was someone's shadow. Her heart caught in her throat as she watched the mail slot flip open and an envelope fall to the floor.

Clara rushed forward and grabbed it. There on the front, written in violet ink, were the words:

For the Weary Sufferer

She slumped, assuming now that this letter was meant for Mrs. Glendoveer. But then again there was no specific addressee. She turned the letter over in her hand and noted that it was not sealed. Couldn't she just peek at it and return it to the envelope at the first sign it was intended for someone else?

Trembling, she slid out the letter and unfolded it. The paper smelled of violets too. Tucking herself behind the parlor door, she read:

A Poem for Thee

*How thy soul must seeketh,
Shut away from view,
Comforts, small, from friendship!
May I visit you?
I hope to ease thy burden.
Though lonely and enclosed,
You may teach me patience,
For you know how the rose
Is thorned as well as fragrant...
In this world of care,
Those who suffer deeply,
The angels stoop to hear.*

Oh dear. That is an AWFUL last line. I did want to say something about "prayers," which would rhyme so much better with "care," but I had to finish this poem between eating my bread and cheese sandwich and pulling bits of paper from my hair flung at me by a horrible boy (Gilroy something or other? Awful, rude, miserable ...). So you must take the verse in the spirit in which it was intended, which was to lift your spirits and introduce myself, your new neighbor (two doors down, actually), because although haste and verse are not good friends, I was hoping that we two might be. I've asked around about you (pretty, mysterious girl with braids standing in tower window), but no one

seems to know anything except that there is someone ill living at your house. And it made me wonder, frankly, about this town, Lockhaven. Are there no CHRISTIANS living here? My goodness, in my old town, someone from the church would have sent you a covered basket by now, at the very least!

I tend to blurt. If I haven't frightened you off, wave at me tomorrow. I shall be looking for you.

Daphne Aspinal

Clara clutched the note to her chest. *Pretty, mysterious girl with braids ...* The depiction thrilled her. To be seen, to be described—it was as if the plain girl she always saw in the mirror might be magically transformed by the simple act of being observed by others. *Pretty Mysterious? What else might Clara be?*

“It’s tea, Clara!” called Ruby.

Clara hastily stuck the envelope under her pinafore and hurried to the kitchen. Her mother stopped in her tracks and put down the shortbread she had just pulled from the oven.

“Are you feverish?” she asked, feeling Clara’s forehead.

“No,” Clara answered, holding very still.

“You’re a bit clammy,” her mother said. “But you’re red as a beet. Have you been running in the house? You know you mustn’t.”

Clara shook her head no. Her mother looked at her skeptically, so she turned away and joined Ruby at the table.

As soon as Clara was seated, she felt a jab below her ribs. When no one was looking, she reached to her waistband and adjusted the offending envelope. Even if she never heard from Daphne again, she would keep this note forever. It would be her only secret.

“I’m concerned about Mrs. Glendoveer’s cough,” said her mother. “If it doesn’t clear by morning, I’m thinking of calling in Dr. Post.”

Ruby’s eyes rounded. “Dear,” she said.

“I know, but we can’t skimp on her care because we’re short on funds. Maybe he’ll barter. He doesn’t have a wife. Perhaps he has mending?”

Clara roused. “But I gave Mrs. Glendoveer the boneset. It’s always worked before.”

Harriet looked to Ruby and then to her daughter. “It is never a small thing when an elderly person develops a rattle in the lungs. The downhill can be swift. Even among the young, pneumonia can be ...” She lowered her head and fussed with her napkin, but Clara caught the expression her mother was trying to hide.

“You’ve seen it happen before, then,” Clara ventured.

“Yes,” her mother said.

“Before we came to live with Mrs. Glendoveer?”

Clara’s mother began to answer and halted. “No use going over that while we’re all here and well,” she said. “Drink your tea.”

Clara was used to being diverted from any talk of her mother’s past. Between her mother and Mrs. Glendoveer, Clara’s experience of family was so limited that it wasn’t until she began to read that it occurred to her that she too must have a father like the children in storybooks. But when she asked about him, her mother only said, “Everyone has a father, and you are no different. But since he isn’t here, we mustn’t dwell on what we don’t have.”

“But I’d like to know just the small things. What was his name? What were the things he liked? Anything little. You know, did he have a mustache?”

She softened for a moment. "I have my reasons, Clara. Please don't think me cruel. I can say more."

"All right," Clara said. But it was hard to swallow these questions once she started.

Her mother turned to leave her but stopped at the doorway. Her eyes shone, and her smile was sad. "No. He had no mustache," she said.

Clara stood stunned, because she had learned the answer to the question that she most wanted to know but hadn't dared to ask. Her mother had loved her father and missed him still. At that moment, his warm presence flickered between them. How sad it was for Clara to see her mother turn her back and let the moment fade.

Part of what made Daphne Aspinall so fascinating to Clara was her curiosity and her complete freedom to satisfy it. Imagine being like that, walking into a new town and shoving poetry through strangers' mail slots! Would she be hurt if Clara wasn't there at the window? She must have a wide-open heart to care enough to want to ease Clara's burden. Maybe she was extremely sensitive. Clara went on conjecturing until the thought of not replying seemed unthinkably rude.

Later that evening, after putting an iron kettle on Mrs. Glendoveer's stove to moisten the room's air, Clara retreated to the kitchen and cut herself a length of string. Next she took an old butter knife from the sideboard. Then she slipped out the back door to the herb bed that her mother had edged with stones. She was on her own secret assignment and squinted in the dark, hoping to find a rock just the right size.

"Elliot!" screeched the mynah from the corner of the yard.

"Shhhh," Clara said. "Hush now." She was surprised that the birds could see her at that distance at this time of night. Never before had she attracted their attention from as far as the kitchen garden.

"*Appropinquo!*" said the bird.

"What did you say?" asked Clara under her breath.

"*Statim!*"

The hair stood up on Clara's arms. "Are you speaking Latin?"

"*Appropinquo!*" repeated the bird. "Elliot!" As the mynah screeched, he tore at his nest of newspaper and flung the bits like confetti.

Clara tucked a stone in her pocket and walked backward slowly as the mynah continued to shout commands. She had only the slightest idea of what the bird was saying. Whatever he wanted Clara to do, he was demanding that she act quickly.

"I don't understand," she said. And when she reached the back porch, she ran in, slammed the door, whirled around, and found Ruby standing there with a mason jar and a garden fork. "What are you doing outside at this hour?" she asked.

"They're speaking to me," Clara said. "The birds. In Latin."

Ruby cocked an eyebrow. "Sounds like you've been doing a bit of moon bathing, to me."

"I'm telling the truth. Oh, Ruby, have they ever spoken to you?"

"No, Clara. And if they should want to chat with a human being, you can be sure I'd be the first in line. After all the bugs and crawly things I've bent my back fetching for them." She held up her jar. "I'm just about to go out for earthworms. Let's see if they have anything to say."

Clara waited by the back door as Ruby went forth into the garden. The birds were silent as statues, and as still.

“How are you enjoying this spring evening?” Ruby asked them all. “I’m getting dinner for you, Mr. Kiskadee. Any preferences?” The birds stayed quiet. Ruby turned toward Clara. “I think that means he’ll have the usual,” she said in all seriousness.

“Don’t tease me,” Clara said. “I swear, the mynah said the word *statim*, plain as day. That means ‘hurry,’ Ruby.”

Ruby shooed her inside, chuckling. “Now, now. You’re not the only little girl to get the phantasms when out alone in the dark.”

There was no use trying to convince Ruby, but Clara would tell Mrs. Glendoveer about the Latin tomorrow. In the meantime, she made her way to her bedroom, where she took out her writing paper and pencil.

Dear Daphne:

Your letter made me happy, and yet so sad. Because I am not allowed to have friends at my house, I cannot have you visit. My mother wishes me always to keep still, and this is a difficulty for me. However, I did not want to let your kind letter go without acknowledgment. And so I send you this note in return, though I know I cannot continue a correspondence.

Please don’t speak of me to the children at school.

I don’t want to attract the curious, especially since we have had trouble on our property with some of them before. And the nice old woman who owns the house needs her peace and quiet.

In the meantime, I will cherish your letter. No one has ever written a poem for me before. You must be the kindest girl. I will think of you always and look for you whenever I find a window open to the street.

With deep affection,

Clara Dooley

Clara paused and put the pencil to her lips. Was it proper to express deep affection to someone she had only waved to on the street? In the end, she decided that it was more important to tell the truth—and she wanted Daphne to know she regarded her with a special fondness.

After folding the page into a narrow strip, she wrote “FOR DAPHNE” in her best script, wrapped the note around the stone from the garden, tied it with the string, and placed it under her pillow with the butter knife for safekeeping until the morning.



Chapter 4

Before anyone in the house had stirred, Clara woke, put on her robe, and climbed to the turret window. She took the butter knife and worked it hard between the casements, putting all her weight against the handle. She was sure she felt a promising creak in the hinges until all of a sudden, the knife bowed in her hand as if it were soft as lead.

“Stubborn old thing,” she said, and gave the glass an angry shove.

It opened. Not far—just about eight inches—but that might be enough. Clara was reaching for the stone with the note in her pocket when she heard footsteps on the stairs. She quickly gathered up the crumbs of dirt and chipped paint that littered the sill and threw them down into the yard, then lightly closed the window without securing the latch.

Her mother was at Clara’s door by the time she got downstairs. She was carrying a pail of warmed water. “Up with the sun, I see,” she said.

“Yes, I am,” Clara said, hiding her dirty hands in her pockets.

“Good,” she said, pouring the water into Clara’s bedside basin. “I could use some extra help this morning. I’d like you to wash up quickly and make tea and toast for Mrs. Glendoveer while I go check on her, please.”

“Of course!” Clara said brightly. She washed, dressed, rebraided her hair, and headed for the kitchen. As she set the kettle on the stove and put the bread in tongs to toast it, Clara’s heart pounded with the thought of the stone in her apron pocket, the note wrapped around it.

“I’m not doing a bad thing, exactly,” she told herself. “I’m only letting Daphne know that I can’t see her. If you look at it a certain way, I’m really doing what Mama wants.” But inside she heard another voice making plans. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to wave to Daphne each morning? What if, after a while, her mother saw that the friendship was harmless and allowed the girls to exchange letters, like pen friends?

Filled with anticipation, Clara readied the tray and went along, humming, to Mrs. Glendoveer’s room.

“Please, Clara, help!” her mother said. She was leaning Mrs. Glendoveer forward over doubled pillows as she slapped her pink, bare back.

“What’s happened?”

“Her lungs are congested. We need to help her cough it up. Please get her handkerchief and

her bed jacket.”

Clara set down the tea tray and got her mother a hankie.

“Cough, Mrs. Glendoveer,” she said. “Don’t be shy.”

She did, and the ragged wheeze that followed disquieted Clara.

“Again, dear,” said Harriet, wiping Mrs. Glendoveer’s mouth.

“It’s painful,” rasped Mrs. Glendoveer. “Here in my back.”

“And it doesn’t help, me beating on you,” Clara’s mother said sympathetically. “I promise you, we’re nearly done.”

Clara almost couldn’t bear to watch. The sharp bones of the old woman’s spine seemed ready to break through the skin. And her lovely white hair was damp and stringy, showing her naked scalp.

After Mrs. Glendoveer coughed into the hankie one last time, Harriet motioned for Clara to bring the bed jacket. She clothed Mrs. Glendoveer and laid her back gently, propping her upright with pillows.

“I’m going to call Dr. Post,” she said.

Shivering, Mrs. Glendoveer waved her hand as if she wanted no part of it.

“Please, Mrs. Glendoveer,” Clara said.

“There’s nothing he can do for me that you girls can’t,” she said.

Harriet put her hands on her hips. “I will give you this morning,” she said. “If your temperature rises or your pain worsens, I *will* call him.”

The patient fell back into the pillows without another word.

“I am going to brush your hair, Mrs. Glendoveer,” Clara said, “and put a cool cloth on your forehead.”

“Would you?” asked her mother.

“Whatever Mrs. Glendoveer wants,” Clara said. “Then I’ll leave her in your hands for now. But I’ll be back.”

Clara took the pearl-backed brush and some hairpins from the vanity, but when she approached the bed, Mrs. Glendoveer laid her hand on Clara’s arm.

“Clara Dooley,” she said, “I would like to speak to you.”

There was nothing playful about Mrs. Glendoveer’s demeanor, and Clara listened carefully.

“Shall I tell you something about what it’s like turning twelve years old?”

“That’s not until July.”

“Doesn’t matter. You may think I don’t remember. But I do. I don’t know what your mother has said to you, but—” Mrs. Glendoveer held up a hand. She coughed lightly, then more hoarsely. When she began to speak again, the coughing came back worse than ever.

“Mrs. Glendoveer, you mustn’t try to talk now,” Clara said.

Catching her breath, the sick woman shook her head. “It’s now or never,” she said.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Mrs. Glendoveer’s blue eyes focused on her with riveting directness. “You don’t know what’s ahead. But I can warn you now: at your age, it is not uncommon to be seized with frightful restlessness. If you haven’t felt it yet, you will soon, I promise.”

Clara was speechless. How could she know?

“So many things become a source of dissatisfaction. Your heart can pull you in different directions, and you must decide the right way to go.”

“What did you do,” Clara asked, “when you were my age?”

Mrs. Glendoveer took a deep breath. “I started planning my escape. Oh, I didn’t run until I was seventeen, but I believe it all started around age twelve. I went to every carnival every traveling show. And when the caravans left, I cried as if I’d been abandoned. Twice, I saw the young magician George Glendoveer, and on the third time, I convinced him to let me assist him onstage. I was very pretty,” she said. “Like you.”

Clara blushed. This was the second time in two days she had been called pretty. “If you are warning me against joining the carnival, you needn’t worry,” Clara said. “I don’t have the strength to keep up, even if I wanted to.”

“No, I’m telling you something else: a mother needs to have her loved ones close. I broke my mother’s heart, and in turn mine was broken. Don’t do it to Harriet.”

Clara shook her head. “I would never, ever.”

“This is advice for your mother as well as you. No happiness built on another’s pain can come to a good end. I wish someone had told me this when I was young.”

“I understand,” Clara said.

Mrs. Glendoveer clapped her hands together softly. “Good. That’s done.”

Clara then took the hairbrush and ran it back from Mrs. Glendoveer’s brow. The old woman closed her eyes. “Aah,” she said, “I’m so very tired.”

When Clara finished smoothing Mrs. Glendoveer’s hair into a topknot, she found that the tea had turned cold. “I’ll get you a fresh cup,” she said.

Clara stood outside the bedroom door for a moment with her hand over the apron pocket holding the letter to Daphne. She had to wonder how Mrs. Glendoveer had chosen the moment to warn her about inner restlessness and bad behavior.

She walked down the hall deep in thought, until a sight in the turret window startled her. There on the other side of the glass was her mother, standing on a ladder, wielding the claw end of a hammer. Clara could make out the squeak of a rusty nail being pulled from the clapboard. She approached the window seat and knocked gently on the glass.

“What are you doing, Mama?”

“I’m rehangng the shutters,” she called. “But I’m going to need some larger nails.” She held up a bent penny nail. “These are worthless!”

As Clara watched her mother descend the ladder, the clock tower struck seven. Soon the shutters would be hammered back into place. She closed her eyes and imagined Daphne Aspinall staring up at those closed shutters. In time, Clara supposed, the girl would become absorbed in her new life in Lockhaven, find real friends, and stop looking up at the old Glendoveer house altogether.

And then what?

Clara threw the window open. With all her might, she heaved the letter-wrapped rock, hoping to arc it over the yard and box hedge, down onto the sidewalk where Daphne would soon be walking. But she could feel the weakness in her arm as the stone left her grasp and watched it fly high in the air and drop smack into the bushes.

The air left her lungs. Who would ever find that note now? She closed the window and walked slowly down to the kitchen, dabbing her eyes as the terrible hammering began.

Clara fixed tea and brought it up to Mrs. Glendoveer, who had managed to fall asleep despite the banging. She clasped the old woman’s hand. It was dry and hot, and she kissed it

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