

The
Ghost of
Gosswater
Lucy
Strange

Chicken
House

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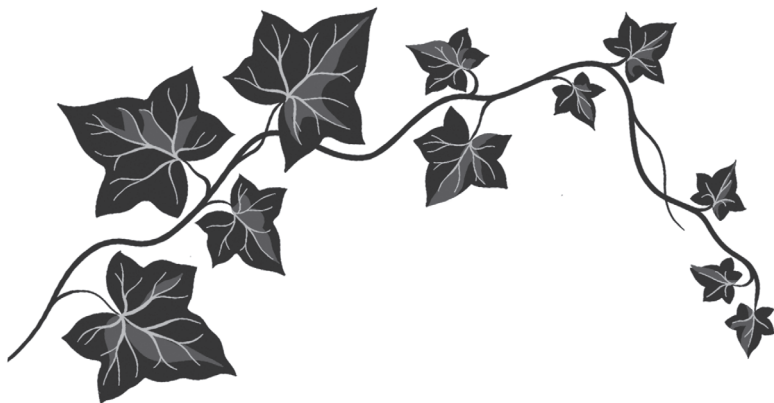
For Fred



*We know what we are,
but know not what we may be.*

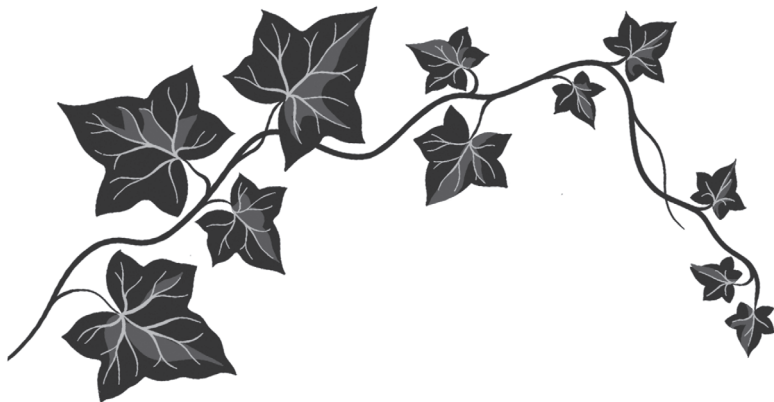
Ophelia

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*



The Lake District, England
1899





I

A cold, wet morning – 21st December 1899

Father died last night, and now here we are, eating breakfast as if everything were perfectly normal.

‘Pass me the butter will you, dearest Agatha?’
Cousin Clarence asks.

I look at him for a moment, then I stand up and walk the length of the dining table and deposit the butter dish with a clatter. My cousin doesn’t flinch, but his enormous dog growls at me from beneath the tablecloth.

‘Good boy, Brutus,’ Clarence chuckles, slipping a sausage under the table. I try to ignore the monstrous snapping and gobbling sound.

Clarence waits for me to walk all the way back to my chair and sit down again before he adds, ‘And the salt?’

Wilson, the butler, is hovering by the door. He shuffles towards the table, but Clarence waves him away. ‘Don’t worry, Wilkins.’

‘Wilson, sir.’

‘My young cousin likes to make herself useful. Don’t you, Agatha? No need for you to hang about, Wilkins.’

Wilson sniffs and leaves the room, and I take Clarence the salt. I make sure my face is blank, giving no hint of the hot hatred stirring within me. I refuse to give him the satisfaction. Clarence has been like this since he arrived at Gosswater Hall two weeks ago – playful, cruel – like a cat with a sparrow between its paws. No sooner had the doctor declared that Father was ‘nearing the end’ than Cousin Clarence appeared at the door, with his slobbering dog and his crocodile smile. Clarence is the heir to the Gosswater estate. He has reminded me of this every single day he has been here. And now that Father has died, Cousin Clarence is the new Earl of Gosswater.

He doesn’t look anything like an earl.

I watch him tossing the blond forelock from his eyes, spearing a sausage and stuffing it into his loose-lipped mouth. There is nothing even vaguely noble about Clarence’s posture, his manner. He’s more animal than aristocrat.

Brutus emerges from beneath the table, his huge head and shoulders dragging at the tablecloth and

jangling the china. He is disgusting – all lolling tongue and dripping jowls. Father always said that animals belong outdoors – so the only dogs I have ever seen are sheepdogs and hunting hounds, and always at a distance. Brutus lumbers towards me, and I freeze.

‘Don’t worry, little cousin,’ Clarence grins. ‘He’s just after your breakfast.’

‘Well, he can’t have it.’ I shove the last bit of buttered crumpet in my mouth.

Brutus stops and growls.

I growl back.

He snarls, his quivering lip lifting to reveal a set of pointed yellow fangs. He steps forward and I feel a quick dart of fear in my stomach. I force myself to look away from the hideous beast and fix my gaze on my hideous cousin instead. I chew my cold crumpet. I hope Clarence can tell how much I hate him.

He meets my gaze and smiles slowly. He’s building up to an announcement – I can see it in the smug arrangement of his face. ‘You can’t stay here, I’m afraid, Agatha,’ he declares.

At first I think he means here at the table, but after a moment I realize he means here at Gosswater Hall. I put down my teacup. ‘*I can’t stay here?*’

Clarence devours a forkful of sausage. Brutus goes back to sit by his master’s side and is rewarded with a slice of black pudding. Clarence fusses the horrid creature’s floppy ears.

He has not answered my question. He is taking his time. He is enjoying this.

‘What do you *mean*, I can’t stay here, Clarence?’

He looks up again, that smile still on his face. ‘Gosswater Hall is mine now, Agatha. You’ll be leaving tomorrow.’

Leaving?

‘What are you talking about, Clarence? This is my *home*. I thought . . .’

‘What did you *think*?’ He waves his fork about. ‘That I would want my twelve-year-old cousin living here with me, like some sort of annoying pet?’

Brutus snaps his slobbery jaws – *that* position is already taken.

Leave Gosswater Hall? I don’t know what to say. Something inside me is unravelling like wool. First Father’s death and now this . . . Gosswater Hall is the only home I have ever known, and I can count on my fingers and toes the number of times I’ve gone beyond the walls of the estate; Mother and Father rarely allowed it.

Clarence hunches like a vulture, and grins at me from beneath his hooded eyes: there is no kindness there, no mercy. ‘I’m sorry to have to break this to you, Cousin Agatha . . .’

He doesn’t look sorry at all.

‘But there’s another bit of bad news.’ He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out an important-looking

document. The wax seal has been broken. As Clarence unfolds the papers – deliberately slowly – I glimpse the Asquith family crest at the top of the first page.

Father's will – it has to be . . .

Clarence licks his lips as they twitch into another smile. 'It turns out, Agatha, that the earl and countess were *not* actually your real parents. We already knew, of course, that the Gosswater estate would be passing to me, as the rightful male heir, but this news – *this* news – means that you, my dearest cousin, are not legally entitled to anything *at all!* Nothing in trust, no annuity, not a penny!'

He waits for me to say something, but my voice has stopped working. My throat is dry and tight. I can feel my heart beating in the tips of my fingers.

He holds the paper up for me to see – as if I can read it from this distance. 'Just to be clear, dear Agatha – this document declares that you are illegitimate. You are nobody.' He grins. 'And you're leaving tomorrow. As a matter of fact . . .' He pauses again, relishing the drama of the moment. 'I have arranged for you to be collected from Gosswater Hall by your real father.'

The shock is so great that, at first, I just stare at him dumbly. It is as if he has shot me with a pistol: BANG. At first – nothing – but then, very slowly, the pain spreads. *My real father? What is he talking about?*

Clarence wipes his greasy face with his napkin, flourishes the will triumphantly as he stands up, and

then tucks it back safely in his jacket pocket. He slaps his leg to summon Brutus, and the pair of them leave the room in a sort of gloating, prancing parade.

If I could, I would hurl the silver pepper pot after them, but the impulse gets stuck somewhere inside me and my arm doesn't move. I am left alone at the table, with the empty plates and the cold tea, and the knowledge that I am no longer Lady Agatha Asquith of Gosswater – and I never really have been. According to Cousin Clarence, I now have no home, no family, no money, no title . . .

And tomorrow, I am to be given away to a perfect stranger.