

Come to the Tower, My Lovely

It was pink, the tower. Pink and wobbling in the heat shimmer like some absurdly gargantuan blanchette. So this is it. This is home. This is the end.

It was ludicrous. It was incongruous out here in the wilderness. To build a child's fairytale castle, a post-Victorian folly out here, out in the vicious no man's land which was the heart of nature, red in tooth and claw. No man's land.

A shudder shook the length of her spine and a distinct chill enveloped her in her flimsy summer dress. Now cold in the most improbable of climates, she tightened her grip on his arm. He looked down, smiling, taking this as a sign of affection. Which it was - he was here to help her, to love her.

'It's beautiful' she murmured.

'It's our paradise, our little piece of England,' he agreed, gazing admiringly at the candy-floss coloured building.

And she thought of the red, of the sun and of the soil, of nature and of heat, of the claws.

* * *

At first. In the beginning. His word was right.

She enjoyed making home in this inhospitable land. The natives made marmalade at her instruction and dropped curtsies at her bidding. But she was not regal, not at first; and her regality when it took hold, had little to do with humans who roamed her domain; she was kind and patient - tolerance itself. She learned the secrets of the witch doctor whilst sharing the truths of the gospel. She was as caring and beneficent as the Twin-She who reigned in his heart.

She learned of that Twin-She too early, but accustomed herself to the household deity just as the natives did the sacraments.

The Twin-She greeted her on her very first night of her indenture, and threw down the gauntlet before her evening bath. And God help her she took it up, she took it up.

He eagerly showed her the apartments that were to be her home. The spacious hall with its imposing staircase winding its way to the tower. The drawing room with its oak furniture and Persian rugs. And the first manifestation of the Twin-She. This deity's shrine was located over the marble fireplace with its peacock fan of dried flowers in the grate and the two gilt candlesticks already lit despite the evening sun slashing in at the bay windows.

She could ignore the Aunt's influence in England. She had been an eccentric old beauty with a cloying fondness for the aged nephew, who was now her husband.

But she could not afford to here; here her presence soaked the air like the wet heat rising from the nearby swamps.

The Twin-She, or 'Auntie', smiled graciously down from her peach and gold altar. A woman, older in years than she had ever cared to be, yet ageless as the hills and beautiful as the sea. The woman of indeterminate age made her feel as young as a babe in arms and as ancient as old bones. Dressed in glowing orange hues and sparkling green eyes. Auburn hair and soft cheeks, moist lips and long fingers.

This was the Twin-She. This was his aunt.

'Mother,' she whispered in the face of such obvious holiness.

'I commissioned this when I first came here... Although I did not bring it out right at the start of course, what with the midges and the swamp. Living in a tent is not right for such a masterpiece, what?' He grinned, pleased with his forethought.

'Indeed,' she uttered, she choked. But regaining herself commendably she grinned too and held out her slender arm to be led away from the beautiful terror adorning the wall. Her mother had taught her well, to be sensible in the face of emotion, to remain calm when hysteria clamoured.

How was she to know she held an adder to her breast?

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Back to the very beginning, the very start of this union. A black and grey day in Vauxhall, tears streaming like rivers from her own emerald eyes. A black, crushing rock where her heart had been and no mother to crumble it. For this was mother's funeral, this was the worst day of her life.

She did not see him at first, at her back. Indeed, she did not see anything. Twenty-two and an orphan, not unusual but cruel nonetheless. Mama had stolen herself away with a sigh, and now she was more alone than ever before. Her mother would not see her wedding - if she ever did wed of course.

And then she turned, the hole where they had assigned her dear mother's soft and yielding flesh was too alien for this broken-hearted daughter. It would haunt her dreams and waking moment for the rest of her life, only to dissolve in a mist of tears. So she turned and met his soft grey eyes, her limp heart jumping at the echo of maternal tenderness in the otherwise upright, mature gentleman before her.

And then he clinched the deal, even before she stopped bleeding. He spoke those four gently binding words which forever tied her destiny to his,

'I knew your mother,' in tones of hushed agony and strong comfort.

Bursting forth anew, she gushed out grief against his hard manly shoulder and allowed herself to be swept into a carriage whose final destination was Africa and the tower.

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At the start. In the beginning. His word was good.

In the still salt lake forty miles from Avalon, she eased her pale pink body into the warm lapping waters and shut her eyes against the red-hot sun burning in the sky. Such sensual pleasures were not the done thing in the foggy isle of her birth. Nor should they be for him, but he took to the exotic like a sport. English but with good grace. She felt her limbs dissolve in the liquid, her mind melt into the tendrils of her hair, leaving only the swelling mound of other life at the centre, in her belly. That continued tight and compact, resisting the rush to oblivion as she welcomed it. She let it abide there and submerged herself in green-blue depths, the rise of her womb being the only wet-white beacon of her existence on the surface.

He came by her. Strong masterly strokes cutting the water, his tawny back glittering in the heat. He spoke - something about fish for dinner. She hummed - approvingly enough - and he left her to her own unravelling.

Paradise, unthinking and unfeeling; sensual and soporific seeped through her young body and claimed all but its resident infant. It kicked, viciously. Reminding her that nature must not be denied. Groaning, she slipped over and made for the shore.

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In the middle. Not as at the start. Her word was whispered.

The Twin-She could not go silent for long. Her shrine could be shunned by the handmaiden enrolled to administer to her needs, but her tangible power rolling off the walls of Avalon like the early morning dew could not be thwarted long.

And now that she knew the identity of the Twin-She, the gloves were off, the teeth were bared and the claws were out.

And she was fighting a ghost in her dreams and spectre in her waking moments.

The letters had started early, but letters smelling of smog and coal could be side-stepped in the bright white and black green jungle of Avalon. At first. At first.

Of course the letters from his enchanting aunt to herself were always pleasant, always instructive. But in the wilds under the honey-eyed moon they read as threats, as warnings.

You are so young and brave that I find myself at a loss as to how to express my admiration of one such as yourself taking on the responsibilities of a home, a husband, a child and children - for that they are under the eyes of our Lord - on that uncivilised soil. I can only congratulate you on your wealth of strength and patience, and in so doing praise your dear departed mother. Henry, as I am sure you are well aware, was deeply fond of that dear lady and has had the good fortune to find such a treasure twice in your sweet self.

Twice, yes twice he has found *her dear departed mother* in her own green eyes, *her own sweet self*. Yes the Twin-She, under the fiery eye of the midday sun, let herself be known. Henry, dear Henry, was fettered to the wrong Laura. She had already been consigned the dark wet vaults of Vauxhall, and the living aunt, her ambassador, her emissary from the other side wrote letters from the North to keep her spirit alive.

It was not her imagination. He would turn, call her name, and mean her of thirty years ago. And then sigh. Or would recall an event she was to have known from before her own birth. And he would grin sheepishly and mutter something about the folly of the old, and leave.

So she left too. She went to the one place she could purvey at her own pleasure. Leaving her child in the depths, where it fed on native milk and mildewed memories, she climbed to the heights and surveyed nature in its bloody beauty under a honeyed moon in the tower.

Flute in hand and hyenas for accompaniment, she went through her entire repertoire of Beethoven and Liszt, Debussy and Fauré whilst the moon waxed, the jungle crashed like an ocean against the pink stone of Avalon, and the animals yammered meaningless tokens against the empty heavens. The music too meant nothing and everything all at once, she was submerged and floating in and on the air of rhapsody. And the babe in black arms cried, the white man in shackles howled and the queen of the night pierced the loneliness of life in the throbbing stillness of the jungle swamp. She sank, sank to her knees in that exalted place, but like a princess, like a goddess. She may be one, not a twin, but she was her own in the tower. All her own. All alone.

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At the end. As in the beginning. His words were right.

He came for her. All the way from Avalon to Oxford. He came to take her back to the tower, to the baby left with his black 'mama', to her rightful place.

Tired of waiting for her in her lodgings, he decided on visiting the latest modern craze, that of the silver screen. In the smoke filled auditorium he felt ill at ease, worse than all the time he spent sleeping with the fear of tigers tearing at his canvas tent. This was England, but not his England. His was part of the glorious tapestry of heritage was now tacked on to the omnibus shelter whilst couples clenched in the cold moonlight. Nevertheless, he had grace; he was game for anything, a real pioneer, as his darling Auntie would have said.

Who should be in that dank red place but his own tower-bound princess? But gone was the pale face turned to the wall when he visited each morning to plead in that high chamber. Now a colour-tinted silver-screen-sized goddess smiled beneath glossy dark curls. But not at him, not at him. Glossy glamour dripped from this once swamped queen. Her brilliance was not now that of the civilised lily in the barbaric, it now lay in the scarlet claws of nature manicured to perfection on her young soldier's sleeve.

She turned, to seek out with those emerald chips who gazed upon her. Her smile changed, softened and back he was in Vauxhall with a sweet young innocent, or in Avalon with his hopeful healthy bride. She softened and dropped her escort with a whisper, and came to him. For the last time.

They walked in silence, to her lodgings in the damp wet streets of Oxford. She let herself be led and yet each step was a loosening, a dissolution from him.

There, at the door, he whispered,
'I love you Laura.'

And he was right. His four words were right. But the Twin-She had won.

Kissing with cold lips on a hard dry cheek, she murmured,
'Yes I know...but she is gone.'