

The background of the entire cover is a close-up photograph of red ivy leaves and thin, brownish stems climbing over a white, textured wall. The leaves are in various stages of red, from bright red to deep magenta, and are scattered across the frame, creating a dense, organic pattern.

“A haunting, sweeping story.”

EDEN ROBINSON

# LITTLE FORTRESS

LAISHA ROSNAU

*a novel*

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Also by Laisha Rosnau

Fiction

*The Sudden Weight of Snow*

Poetry

*Lousy Explorers*

*Notes on Leaving*

*Our Familiar Hunger*

*Pluck*



# LITTLE FORTRESS

LAISHA ROSNAU

*a novel*



A Buckrider Book

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are used fictitiously. All dialogue is drawn from the author's imagination and is not to be construed as real.

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*For Sveva Caetani, Ofelia Fabiani and Inger-Marie Jüüil*



*Canada, 1945*

Could you call that singing? I suppose, though that might be overstatement. Ofelia has tried her voice at opera, to varying success. Once her voice was said to be lovely, but this sound is more like squalling. I try to ignore it, go about my morning. I am in the kitchen, rewashing china and silver, my hands pink and raw in scalding water. The window faces east and a blurred hem of sunlight has begun to saturate the top of the hills along the back of the property.

Ofelia asks that we do this – wash everything after it's been used and once more before we drink or eat from it again. I suppose she wouldn't know if we didn't do so every time, yet I feel as though I should. There are larger things I keep from her. I can be truthful about fulfilling her smaller wishes. When she woke, she sounded so strange. I mean no disrespect to Ofelia. She's still every part a lady, but grief moves through her as feral as a cat. Every few minutes, she lets out a yowl, just as I do when Sveva startles me, suddenly at my shoulder. "Can you not hear that, Miss Jüül?"

I turn from the sink and take a step to the side to give myself some space. I clutch silverware wrapped in a towel between us, the warmth dissolving in the cool morning air.

"Can you not hear her?" Sveva's hair is loose, a mess, her eyes circled in a faint burgundy as though bruised. It is early for her; she was probably still awake until only a few hours ago. Ofelia likes her daughter to sleep beside her



each night, but lately Sveva has been staying up well into the night to read, likely to avoid this. She's twenty-seven years old, after all, and her mother is not a sound sleeper.

"I can." I unwrap the spoons, place one on the tray with the teapot and cups. "I hear her." From the clock in the hall, six round chimes. When I was first up, I let the dogs out of their kennels and I can hear them circling the house, barking. "Be thankful it's not earlier."

Sveva blinks, runs her palms over her hair, then reaches for me. "Oh, my Miss Jüüly-Jüül." She pushes me into her chest as though I am the child. She is so tall and I so small that there I am, against the buttons of her gown. "I'm sorry. When she started I was in the middle of a dream, all these garish spirals and spikes folding in on me. I woke up panicked." Sveva lets me go. "I've been up reading physics again. I know, I know. I shouldn't. I should read dear Austen before I sleep – she leaves me with better dreams."

Upstairs, her mother is still keening, although what began as a howl has lessened to moaning. I pick up the tray. "We should go to her."

"Yes, of course."

By the time we reach the top of the stairs, Ofelia's sounds are more like a kitten's mews, and when I knock on her door, it's silent except for her faint, "Yes, come in," in Italian, always Italian. In my lifetime, I've taught myself English, French, Italian, even a little Arabic. We've lived in Canada for over two decades and Ofelia still will not speak much English.

She sits up in bed, pillows behind her, palms smoothing the white bedding. "Oh, look, you're both here!" I see a slight jump in her hands from her lap. "You are both here," she says again with less enthusiasm.

"Of course we are, Mau." Sveva moves around the room, swaying slightly as though she may begin dancing. I wait with the tray; I don't want to be intercepted by her. Ofelia's head is high on the pillows, her lips a slack line.

Sveva drops her shoulders, rolls her neck slightly. She shivers once, rubs her arms. "And I, for one, do not want to be awake this early – let me into bed!" Sveva leaps onto the bed, a six-foot girl in a too-small gown.

Ofelia puts her hand on Sveva's head. "Oh, my Beo."

"My Mau-Mau." Their terms of endearment have no translation, but they've been calling each other these names for years so it doesn't matter.

Sveva closes her eyes, her head large against her mother's slim shoulder. I stand beside the bed without pouring tea. I don't want it to cool too soon, though it is already losing some heat.

Sveva opens her eyes, tips back her head and lets out one sharp laugh. "Oh, Jüül! How ridiculous we are! Two crazy old ladies and yet you stay with us – she stays with us, Mau! Where did you find her, our blessed Scandinavian Virgin?" This is one of their nicknames for me, as inappropriate as it may be.

Ofelia reaches for her daughter. "You are not old, darling. Don't say or believe that for a moment." She lays her hand on Sveva's forehead as though conferring a blessing.

Sveva stretches her arms, twists her wrists. "I may not be old, not technically, but I can feel old, can't I, Mother?"

I've poured the tea now, hand them each a cup. Sveva looks at it as though it's foreign to her. She isn't old, the age that I was before I left for Egypt. At that time, though, I was already considered in danger of becoming an old maid.

"Is it your joints again, Beo?" Ofelia asks.

"No, no." Sveva sits up in the bed, holding her cup and saucer in front of her like a ballast. "Well, it is – it's always my joints to a certain extent – but more than that, it's my mind, Mau, my blasted mind!"

"You and your father and your minds."

"Indeed." It's the first thing I've said in minutes. I open the window. With the rub of window against frame, the dogs start up. "I'll go see to Baby and Onyx. They probably need a good long run today. I may even go out with them."

"A run?" Ofelia asks. "You won't let them out of the gate, will you?"

"Oh no," I say. "No." I shouldn't have said anything. I forget myself sometimes. I've spent years trying to forget myself and at times, it works. "I'll just take them round the property while you two get some more rest."

Ofelia's eyes are already closed. "You're too good to us, Miss Jüül." Perhaps I am. I bend to pick up their teacups, mostly full. Sveva is still lying beside her mother. She looks directly at me, half of her face visible on the other side of Ofelia, and holds her stare for a moment before blinking in rapid succession, as though to communicate something to me. What, I don't know – and I could be imagining things. I often am. I turn and carry the tea service out of the room.



When I open the back door, both dogs are there, panting. They are tall and slim, these hounds. They each reach my waist, but then, I am a small person. Their narrow haunches sway from side to side as their tails wag and they circle me, eager to go. When I let them out of the kennel earlier, it was completely dark, stars sharp against the sky. Now, it's beginning to flush with light, though it's still so cold. It's as though winter is hanging on. Spring would be too much to take now, a reminder of how the war goes on regardless of seasons, years. I walk down the drive, the dogs looping around me. First, I will check the mailbox, then I will decide whether or not I will leave the property. I could skirt the trees and then slip out, hoping my movements would be obscured by foliage, although I'm not sure that there's enough this time of year, the branches skeletal and grey.

We planted more trees nearly a decade ago – and by *we* I mean I told the cook, George, by then the only one in our employ, where to plant them. He muttered the entire time, cursing me in Cantonese, I'm sure, but I didn't leave his side, telling him that it was as the ladies wished. Imagine, staff! They once seemed so plentiful. Now even George is gone, though the trees he planted have taken root. They are lovely little things, but not yet big enough to conceal the house entirely. I know that Ofelia wishes they would grow taller faster. Sveva likes the trees as they are; from the house, she can still see to the street.

A large fence with a gate is our concession for gaps in the trees. Near the end of the drive, I see something move between the slats of wood. The dogs are in a different part of the yard. Between their barking, I hear crunching footsteps on the other side of the fence. I whistle for Baby and Onyx, wait for them to circle back before I open the gate. As I wait, I listen. I don't hear the scuff of gravel as I would if someone was walking away. When the dogs are by my side, I ask them to heel and they do their best, though both are unable to do so in any conventional way. Then I open the gate. A man is there, standing beside the mailbox. A soldier, in uniform. He backs away when I come out with the dogs.

“Officer.” I nod my chin toward him.

“Ma’am.” It shouldn’t surprise me anymore, this term, but it does. To those closest to me, I am forever *Miss*. I suppose I am to myself, as well.

An officer at the end of the drive during wartime can’t be bearing good news, though there aren’t any men in our household to lose.

“Is there anything wrong, Officer?” The dogs are twitching, shifting on their haunches, readying to bolt, it seems, but they don’t. I put a hand on each of their heads. They pant, lick and snap their mouths.

“I have a piece of personal correspondence for a Miss Sveva Caetani.” I wonder why an officer would be delivering her mail, but I don’t say anything, wait for him to continue. “I am an old friend of hers from school – well, an acquaintance, really, a school chum – this is the last address I have for her.”

In the first couple of years, people stopped by, but it was easy enough to let them know that the ladies were resting or otherwise occupied. Sometimes, a visitor would jot down a note. More often, they would leave their names and best wishes and carry on. Now, here is a man in uniform with a sealed envelope.

“Do I have the correct address?” he asks. “Does Miss Caetani still reside here?”

I am an honest person. I would prefer to say nothing than to speak a mistruth, but I have figured out how to do both, how to say just enough that I am not lying. “A school chum?”

“Yes, well, not exactly. She was at Crofton House – all young ladies, as you may know.” He pauses here as though to gauge my reaction. “I was at the brother school, Saint George’s. We had the same circle of friends. I –” he stops himself here. “Is she at this address?”

“The girl you knew doesn’t live here anymore.” This answer isn’t completely untrue. “Baby!” I snap at one of the dogs, hold her collar. “Heel.” She does.

The man looks at me then away, runs his fingers up the buttons on his coat, adjusts his collar and clears his throat, all as though he is biding time. “Oh, I see.” He looks back to me. “Do you know her?”

This isn’t as easy a question to answer. “I did.”

“Do you have a forwarding address for Miss Caetani?”

“No.”

The officer moves the letter from hand to hand, looks toward the dogs, which are still at my side as though they recognize a uniform and have decided to behave. “Well.” He turns and looks down the street, as though he’ll discover where she is. “I’ve nowhere else to send this.”

I wait.

“This may be an imposition, ma’am, but perhaps I could leave this with you. Perhaps Miss Caetani will be back through the area and may stop by.” When he says this, I don’t know whether he is hopeful or whether he has seen through my charade. I’m a terrible liar, I know. H once told me.

“Yes, I can do that.” The officer looks beyond me, toward the house, then hands me the envelope.

“Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate it.”

As though the dogs know that some sort of transaction has taken place, Baby takes off after something down the road, and Onyx follows, barking.

The officer tips his cap, takes a couple of steps then turns around. “I was here for training camp in ’41. I thought I should look up Miss Caetani then, but there wasn’t time. We were deployed so quickly. I rarely left the front – a medic – I was discharged early for service.

“It’s a different world over there.” He pauses. “I am trying to find those I knew before. I know it won’t make a difference, not really, but I am trying.”

I hear the sound of the dogs running back and then they are circling me. *I know*, I think. I want to tell him that I understand what he is talking about – about war and dislocation and trying to find those you used to know – but all I say is, “Good luck.”

The officer smiles weakly, doesn’t tip his hat again, turns and walks away. It isn’t until then that I notice that Baby has a squirrel between her teeth. Onyx pants and jumps a quick little dance around us. The sun has broken over the trees. “Let that go,” I scold. “Come, you two.”



You may think me complicit in our situation, and perhaps I am. After all, what happened to us can’t have been from one person’s will alone.

“You are so good,” a man once told me. “Better than me, stronger.”



When I wrote to him about my body wracked with pain, my mind muddied with grief, he repeated: "Be good. Be strong." The words were clear on the page, between those that had been censored by authorities during the war. Soon, more phrases, then entire sentences were blacked out, until one day the letters stopped. When they did, I lay on a terrace in the lovely sunshine and thought of how easy it would be to die. It was cowardly to think like that. To die is easy; to have the courage to keep living is what is difficult. I promised myself then that I would become good at living.

How good have I been? I'll tell you the story and let you decide. It begins in so many places, at so many times, loops back, repeats itself in infinite patterns. I'll choose a place to begin, yet again.



ONE  
Precinct of False Gods



*each instant we stand on the  
edge of the  
edge of event's  
undecidable future*

– Daphne Marlatt, “harbouring”



## ONE

*Canada, 1921*

In the last days before we reached America, the air was biting with cold. Some nights, after the ladies were asleep, I would put on a coat, hat, scarf and gloves over my evening attire and go out on the deck. The ship's staff told me not to, warned the cold was too much, it was dangerous. I ignored them, minced along the deck. A sharp chill wrapped around the ship, twisted around my ankles, legs, waist. The cold was pocketed in clouds of air I would walk into, a casing covering me until I blundered through to the other side. Eventually, we were so high in the Atlantic that I would watch icebergs calf and moan, float by as if apparitions. The slow movement of the liner against the steady drift of the bergs made it seem everything – water, land, sky, stars – was moving around and against each other, like parts in a clock. I would never last long, the cold slicing into me as mountains of ice lumbered by in dark water.

We'd left England shrouded in fog that obscured the coastline, and Italy's coast burned gold in my mind, blurred with sunlight. On the morning we approached the Atlantic coast of Canada, the light was so clear in the cold air that everything seemed sharply focused – each shadow etched on the rocky coast, every tree against every other tree. That was all I could see – rock and tree, light and shadow stark against each other. The ship steered out of the Atlantic into the Saint Lawrence, the rock gave way and then, aside from an occasional lighthouse and small croppings of tiny wooden houses perched on uncertain shores, there were only trees.



We didn't know for how long we'd be exiled in this country. I travelled as staff of the family – Duke Leone Caetani di Sermoneta, Ofelia and their four-year-old daughter, Sveva. It was she, not her mother, who watched with me as we passed into our new country. “Where are the people, Miss Jüül?” she asked.

“I'm sure they're in the cities, Sveva. We'll meet them soon.”

“Will we like them will they like us what will it all be like?” She spoke in one continual stream, a hybrid between Italian, French and English. I'd become accustomed to the mixed singsong of her speech.

“I'm sure it will all be wonderful,” I told her, though, of course, I was not sure at all.

Did I long for my own home? I thought often of my own family, people I had once known so well that I could recognize the cadence of footsteps, a cleared throat. Now they'd become more of a concept to me, like figures in a photograph, locked in time, fading. I had left them behind so long ago. Since then, I'd become separated from other people who felt more real to me, my desire for them keening just below the surface of my skin. One person in particular, though I would not name him. I had little idea of what my role would be in this new world, but I had grown accustomed to uncertainty, the spaces between, the ways I could slip into them.



“Oh, this is just awful,” Ofelia leaned into me and whispered. We had disembarked in Montreal and were checking into a hotel.

“The hotel?”

“No, everything – this cold air, their accents, even the calls of the birds. It's all so strange, so shrill somehow.” She spoke to me in Italian. Ofelia did not like the sound of the English language. She had told me this every time we'd visited London, alternating her own speech between Italian and French. Around us in the lobby, we heard more French than English, but both languages seemed flatter, more nasal, coarser. Later, in the hotel restaurant, I overheard a Danish waiter serve a businessman from Copenhagen. It gave me some comfort, hearing my own language so far from home. I could hear

in them my brothers, though I knew that I didn't, not really. Our northern dialect was a blunter, lower Danish.

We were in Montreal for three days to get our official papers sorted before we boarded a train. I didn't sleep much, watched the country outside the window instead. Rock on rock, dense forest, huge stretches of lakes and long tracts that seemed locked in winter, the only variations in the way the cold covered the land – frosted over rock, stunting trees, textured in ice on lakes, flattened by wind or squalls of snow twisting upward before falling like curtains. Then, one day, the skies were saturated with blue pressing down on the pale prairie. Occasionally, a town or village with dirt streets, wooden sidewalks, tiny wooden churches, wooden houses with smoke rising out of thin stone chimneys and settling on the landscape. The cities – Winnipeg, Regina – were unlike those we were used to. There were paved roads and streetcars and buildings made of brick and stone, but on the outskirts of these, more wooden houses, more smoke. Once, I saw what looked like Native Indians – men, women and children – outside a train station, dressed like Europeans but without shoes, pulling wagons and wagons of what appeared to be hay.

While I watched, Ofelia slept, or tried to sleep. I don't know how much she saw from her berth. And I don't know for what I hoped more – for her to see as little as possible, to minimize the shock, or for her to witness some of where we now were so that she could begin to familiarize herself with this place. I had spent my childhood on a farm in northern Denmark, so while Canada looked more vast, rougher, I could comprehend parts of it. For her, it would be completely foreign.

The duke sat down across from me. “The Wild West, would you say?” He raised his eyebrow, looked amused. “Well, it will be an adventure.” He turned his face to the window for a moment, his expression more serious. “I'm not sure how Ofelia will adapt.”

“No, neither am I.”

He opened his cigarette case, slid one out, tapped the tip on his palm. “You'll try to help her adjust?”

“I will do my best.” I always did.

“I'm thankful for that, you do know.”

I nodded.

“It will be an adjustment for all of us, but you and she will have each other.”

Sveva came running down the aisle. “Daddy!” She’d been napping alongside Ofelia. I looked down the train to see if her mother was behind her.

“Wurr-Burr!” He put his unlit cigarette back in his case and picked up Sveva as he stood. “Isn’t it a grand adventure, my girl?”

“Yes!” She squirmed to get out of his hold and stood in front of me, took both of my hands and leaned across my lap, grin stretched as she strained her neck to bring her face close to mine. “A grand adventure, yes, Miss Jüül?”

“Of course it is, sweetheart.” I rarely called her endearments. I was not Sveva’s nanny, though I would often be mistaken as such. I adored her, but she was her parents’ little girl, and I their employee. If nothing else, I had learned to know my place.

“Do you think Mau-Mau is going to like it?” She pushed off from my lap and rebounded against the bench opposite me. “She’s been sleeping the whole time!” Sveva held her arms wide. “The whole time!”

The duke reached for his daughter, one palm on her head, the other on her shoulder to calm her. He laughed. “Slow down, little one. Come.” He guided her into the aisle. “Let’s go see how your mother is doing, shall we?”

She turned to me with her chin raised, a closed-lip smile broad across her face. Sveva looked proud in a way that only a four-year-old can, delighted with herself and her place in the world, secure with her father’s hand around hers.



As we moved west, the snow disappeared from the prairie and I saw instead fields of brown, flattened by weather, pocked with patches of new green. It seemed we had already moved through a continent of climate. We reached the Rocky Mountains, hulks of stone pushing up the sky high above us. We’d been on the train four days. “In that time, we could have crossed the farthest reaches of Russia,” said Ofelia. She was out of the sleeping cabin for the first time since we’d boarded, wearing a watered silk dress, black pearls set against the collar, gloves on as though we were about to disembark to a formal dinner.

“Inspiring, isn’t it?” said the duke. “This much land, this much potential.” He lifted his chest as though he, or those like him, were in some way responsible for the size of this country. Ofelia looked toward me and rolled her eyes, her fingers tracing each pearl around her neck as she looked out the window.

We stayed for a month at the Banff Springs Hotel, where we watched from the windows as bears tracked dark shapes across the exposed slopes of mountains. One of the animals shambled into the village and was shot and removed quickly by men in hotel uniforms. It was the Wild West, complete with real redskins. We saw them in a performance put on by the hotel – *The Noble Savage*. Indian men with feathered headdresses rode bareback on horses that reared on their hind legs and thrashed their necks as though they might break. Those wild-eyed beasts were as much a part of the show as were the buckskinned, painted men who beat drums and mumbled guttural ditties. I watched the sinewed horses, felt the drums pounding up through my legs. I had become separated from the family during the performance. I saw them across the circle that the guests had formed. The duke had one arm around Ofelia’s waist and she leaned into him. In his other arm, he held Sveva. They were closer together as a family than I’d ever seen them in Europe.

When the performance was over, Ofelia clapped politely, but the duke raised his long arms, applauded loudly, said, “Bravo, bravo!” I watched as Ofelia stepped away from him and reached for Sveva, who was beaming at her father, jumping from foot to foot, joining him in saying, “Bravo, bravo!” No one else did, the other patrons’ applause more subdued. I backed away from the crowd and made my way back to our rooms.

That night in the dining room, I heard the duke talking to other guests. “I commend them. A country really must celebrate its natives. I think of parts of India – Benares, Kashmir – as well as Egypt, Turkey, Syria. Those places where the ancient and the modern meet and are celebrated, I find them to be the most fascinating, enlivening places in the world.”

As he talked, Ofelia leaned toward me. “It’s grown tiresome, all this talk about the fascinating New World. Can we not be enlivened at home, in Italy, where we belong?”

It wasn’t my place to say, either way.



After a month, we came down from the mountains, the train travelling along rivers, a thick white muscle of water below us, sending spray up to mist the windows. The water slowed to languid creeks and eventually the land smoothed into green valleys and what looked like the hills of Italy. We were told that the lakes here were aquamarine jewels between golden slopes, but what we saw as the train pulled into Vernon was one small, swampy lake rimmed with cattails and some sort of camp on the outskirts of town, high wooden fences and smoke rising from the other side.

“This cannot be where we’re stopping.” Ofelia’s voice was sharp and desperate against my ear.

It was.

The duke and Ofelia believed that they were travelling lightly – and, for them, they were. I’d already become accustomed to what they carried with them, but no one in the tiny Western Canadian town could fathom the number of things we had. When all thirty large steamer trunks were set out on the platform, a crowd gathered around us. A young man pushed through it with a camera, a flashbulb going off, each of us wiping at our eyes as we looked around the tiny station. “Well, I hope that doesn’t end up in the daily,” the duke joked with the estate agent who was there to meet us.

“Oh no, sir – I mean, Duke, Your Highness.” Leone waved his hand to indicate that formality wasn’t necessary. “The *Vernon Daily News* respects our citizens’ privacy. Of course, your arrival is news, but we wouldn’t print photographs of your possessions.” He didn’t understand that the duke was joking.

“Good to know.” The duke nodded to him.

A small crowd looked from the luggage to us, staring quite openly, as though we couldn’t see them watching us. I don’t know who was more stunned, the locals who had gathered to view our small group or Ofelia, who stood perfectly still on the platform. I sensed I was not noticed, not really, certainly not as much as the duke, Ofelia and even Sveva, who laughed as she spun circles around us. The man ensured that most of our belongings



would be stored at the station, found a porter for our remaining luggage and ushered us to a waiting Ford. The duke took Sveva's hand and I held my arm out to Ofelia like a thin ballast. She placed her fingers along my forearm, nothing more, though if she needed to steady herself it would be easy enough to wrap her hand into a grip.

The man opened the door to the car with an almost exaggerated movement. "You have many of these in Europe yet?"

"Automobiles? Oh yes, we're not that far behind the times!" The duke lifted Sveva into the car, then helped Ofelia. I kept my hands at my side, nodded at him and got myself into the car before he closed the door. He sat in the front beside the man, who drove us two blocks over pitted dirt roads to a three-storey wooden structure on the main street of town. It was so close to the station that the porter had simply walked from there and was now ready to take our bags to our rooms. "I'm sure you'll be comfortable here."

We looked up at the building, *Royal Hotel* looped in fading paint. Ofelia leaned into me. "He's sure, is he? He's the only one then, I'm afraid."

Sveva ran up and down the boardwalk, delighted at the sound of her boots on the wood. Leone took Ofelia around the waist, smiled up at the building, squinted. When their daughter ran by the next time, I put out my arm to stop her, then knelt to her. "Go to your parents now. Tell them how happy you are to be here." Someone should be. The duke was probably delighted, Ofelia horrified. I convinced myself I was used to being an afterthought, my reactions not entirely worth noting. If they had been, I would claim the territory between optimistic and noncommittal. I tried to convince myself I was still open to new experiences, though that word – *open* – hardly seemed to apply anymore, each move and change blocking off different parts of me, my mind a series of closed doors, storage trunks overfull, locked.



The next day, the estate agent came to pick up the duke to show him some houses for sale. Leone thought we might prefer to stay at the hotel. "Or go for a walk along Main Street, perhaps?"

Ofelia stared at him, tilted her head – and did her eyes narrow, just a bit? “Oh no, we’re coming with you, darling. Who knows what you’ll purchase at this point – a teepee?”

The duke rubbed his chin, looked above our heads as he said, “The Indians of this valley don’t live in teepees but in structures built into hills and mounds of earth. They’re called, depending on the area, *quichis* or *kekulis*.” When he looked back at us, his expression was earnest, as though he were quoting from an anthropological text, which he may well have been.

“Fine, I also do not want to live in a mound of earth. Come, Sveva, Miss Jüül, we’re all going.”

The man drove us around what there was of a town. We passed a large structure – an open-air factory, it seemed – stacked with large wooden crates. “The fruit-packing plant,” he explained.

The duke turned to us and smiled. He put his hand on Ofelia’s. “See, darling – it really is warm enough here to grow fruit.” Ofelia nodded, something like a smile pulled tight across her mouth.

“Oh yes, all sorts of fruit in this valley – perfect conditions, they say. We even have a fruit growers’ association now, a kind of union.” He let out a ragged laugh then cleared his throat. “Though I suppose you wouldn’t know much about unions, sir.”

“Here you’re mistaken. I actually consider myself a union man.”

“Oh?”

“Being born a duke held me back in Italy, but I did help those on our family’s holdings to form union-like groups, to take more ownership of the land.” He looked from Ofelia to me, nodding, as though looking for our confirmation. “It’s one of the reasons I’ve moved my family to Canada, a free country as they say, one in which we can be free of the narrow strictures of a culture based on blood, not merit.”

Leone said all this in English and the man nodded along, though it seemed heavy conversation for a morning drive.

We were passing the high wooden fencing we’d seen as we’d entered Vernon. “What is that?” asked Ofelia, also in English, perhaps the first I’d heard her speak the language since we arrived.

“An internment camp left over from the war. Enemy aliens, Ukrainians and other Slavs – a precautionary measure, I’m afraid.”

“Well, let’s hope we stay on the right side of the good Canadians!” Leone turned to us and laughed, though neither Ofelia nor I smiled in response. “Of course, I have a fair amount of Slavic blood myself. As does my daughter – you be careful, Sveva!” he called back to her.

Sveva smiled as though she understood the joke, looked wide-eyed and blinking first toward her mother, then me. I reached out for her hand, gave it a squeeze and winked at her as though she and I were in on the same joke. Sveva beamed back at me.

“But the war is over,” Ofelia said to me quietly in Italian.

The war was over, and I knew we should all be relieved. It wasn’t right that I pined for the first years of war, when my role within a household had become as indispensable as sleep. But I’d been wrong about that. I was sent away before peace was declared and now, here I was with another family, touring a tiny town in Western Canada.

As if in answer to Ofelia’s Italian, the man said, “The camp is officially closed. It’s been standing vacant for two years. We do need to dismantle it – it’s getting taken over by vagrants and Indians. They go and set up their own tents in there, build fires. It’s a public danger, I keep telling council.”

Leone turned to the estate agent, then away, clearing his throat. “The Indians, I’m given to understand, don’t live in teepees here.”

The man laughed. “No, not teepees, exactly! Canvas tents or, mostly, shacks. There aren’t many in town, though. They aren’t really supposed to leave the reserve out on Okanagan Lake, need a pass to do so – though some always find a way. Occasionally, their fires get out of control on the hillside by Long Lake, but don’t worry, they won’t bother you. You’ll be living in town.”

“The lakes!” Leone clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “I’ve heard so much about these lakes!” He looked over the seat toward us, raised his eyebrows.

Ofelia and I sat in silence as the men talked. I pictured roaming Indians, the abandoned imprisonment camp, fires out of control. I couldn’t imagine who would choose to live in such a place.



The house the duke and Ofelia chose was a three-storey wooden home on Pleasant Valley Road. “Quite spacious. Stately,” the estate agent said when we first saw it.

I nearly sputtered a laugh.

“You all right then, Miss Jüül?” Leone winked at me.

I looked toward Ofelia, who was using her cane to walk that day. She held her small frame completely straight, as though she didn’t need assistance, but I saw how her thin hand was clenched around the cane, tendons tight against her skin.

Sveva ran circles in the parlour, leaping around the edge of the room through dust motes lit in lines of diluted sunlight. “Second owner was a dance instructor,” the agent said. “He built the addition so that this room could be used for dancing.”

Later, Ofelia said to me, “Imagine, holding a dance in that tiny parlour! This is what they believe is a grand home, Miss Jüül.”

It was much bigger than the one in which I’d grown up on the farm, and that one had been considered a big home in our district. “Think of it as your country retreat.” I repeated what I’d heard the duke say.

“I don’t want a country retreat.” Neither did I, really.

## Two

Four years earlier, when I'd first been in the Caetani's employ in Rome, I'd rarely left the walls and courtyards of Villa Miraggio. The duke was having it built for Ofelia and it wasn't yet finished when I arrived, weeks before baby Sveva's birth. Laddered in scaffolding, partially draped in canvas, the villa rose like a large, tiered cake from the highest hill in the city. "Windows on every level, every side. When it's complete, no view of Rome will be obscured," the duke had told me. This was their first home as a couple, away from the official palace residence where the duke's parents, his siblings and their spouses all occupied different wings. The staff in Villa Miraggio, of which I was one, seemed modest to them in comparison, plentiful to me.

Ofelia wasn't well after Sveva's birth, but when she was healthy enough to join the duke's family at Palazzo Caetani, she invited me along. "Oh, I'll stay here," I told her. "I'm used to dining on my own." Not that I would be. I'd likely be joined by any number of the senior staff at the villa.

"Well, stop being used to it! I won't always be an invalid, and if you are to be my companion, you are to be treated like one, not like one of the house girls. Come on then, let's get dressed for dinner." She took my hands and opened my arms, as though we might start waltzing. "Though Duchess Ada is as likely to turn up at the table in her pajamas as she is to get dressed for dinner, we should dress in semi-formal wear. Do you have something, Miss Jüül? If not, I can –"

“Oh yes, certainly, I do.” I must have seemed so provincial standing in Ofelia’s drawing room, wearing one of the plain, dark dresses I wore daily. There had been a time, not that long before, when I’d chosen my clothes for dinner carefully each evening, dressed with only my body and pleasure in mind. Time could shift in a moment, become a scent both smoky and sweet, a jump in my rib cage, a turn in my stomach, then be gone again.



We entered the walls of the palazzo, which didn’t open into courtyards or gardens but dark passageways climbing with as much scaffolding as did the villa. The duke led us down halls lined with stacks of paint cans, hammers and tools leaning against stone walls. I whispered to Ofelia, “Is the palazzo under construction, as well?”

The duke heard. “When isn’t the palazzo under construction?” He turned and winked. “It’s perpetual, has been since I was a child – one wing is finished and then another begins to crumble, but none has ever actually been completed to my knowledge!” He laughed at this. “Designed by one of Michelangelo’s pupils. It’s too bad we didn’t have the master himself, as it will always be a work in progress, never a masterpiece.” The duke seemed genuinely amused rather than bothered by this. I’d assumed that the villa would be completed soon, but now I wasn’t as sure.

Ofelia had told me that there was no set hour for dinner and that we would be expected to remain at the table until the last of the family had eaten. We were among the first to arrive, though a brother sat at one end of the long table, a newspaper open and obscuring his face like a screen. “Miche, show some manners,” the duke said. “Say a proper hello to the ladies.”

The man folded one side of the paper and peered over it. “A proper hello to you both.” He snapped the newspaper up around him again. As he did, an enormous man appeared in a coat decorated with medals of some sort.

I nearly stood in respect, but Ofelia held onto my arm and leaned to me, whispered, “The old footman.” I noticed then that his arm was cocked, a cloth draped over it, a bottle of wine in one hand. The man said something,

but even though it must have been in Italian, I didn't understand him. Ofelia simply smiled at him in response.

The duke said, "Yes, please, Pagolo," and the man poured us wine.

When the man left the room, the brother put down his paper. "Poor Pag's got such a speech impediment that only a Caetani can understand him, and then only half the time, yes, Leone?"

"Half at best, I'd say."

The brother stood up and rounded the table. "Excuse my rudeness, ladies. Caught up in war propaganda, I'm afraid." We both stood as he made his way toward us. He bowed to Ofelia, kissed her hand and then turned to me. "Another young thing you're keeping in the villa, Leo?" More than ten years older than Ofelia, I was hardly young.

"Please excuse his utter deficiency of civility, Miss Jüül. This is my brother, Michelangelo, the youngest as I'm afraid you can tell." Indeed, he looked younger than me. "Michelangelo, this is Miss Jüül, Ofelia's companion."

His brother flicked his eyes up and down my body, then turned and began circling the table, hands slapping against the tops of each chair as he went by. "This war, it's interminable."

"Most seem as though they are." The duke leaned against the high-backed chair, took a sip of wine. "Let's not get into this with the ladies here."

Michelangelo was pacing, making rounds of the table. "I suppose you still think we would have been best to abstain, remain neutral, as though such a thing were possible, Leo?" He clutched the top of a chair opposite us.

Leone put down his wineglass and adjusted his collar. "I'll remind you that I fought on the front last year."

His brother pulled out a chair, slumped into it. "I thought we weren't getting into this with the ladies here." He raised an eyebrow.

"We're not."

Two more family members came into the room – a brother, Roffredo, and his wife, Marguerite – nodding through brief introductions as they sat down. Around each family member's setting were varying arrays of small pots of pickles and spices, as well as vials and jars of what appeared to be medication around some. When his wine came, Roffredo opened a narrow jar and threw a pill into his mouth before taking a drink.

Marguerite leaned forward. "Miss Jüül, is it?" She spoke to me in English.

I was surprised to be spoken to directly, felt my neck and chest spark with the quick heat of nerves. "Yes."

"Not Italian." This was neither a question nor quite a statement. Her voice had the round lilt of an American.

"No." Few would mistake me for being Italian. My hair was a dull brown, and though I'd seen several fair-skinned and light-eyed Italians since I'd been in the country, my skin was what betrayed me, never burnishing, going from white to pink to red under a dusting of freckles that might spread if exposed to direct sunlight too long. "I'm Danish."

"Oh yes." She turned to the duke. "Is this –"

He interrupted her, switching to English as well. "Miss Jüül's joined us from a household in Cairo." He looked pointedly at his sister-in-law.

"Yes, of course." Marguerite nodded.

The patriarch, Duke Onorato, came to dinner an hour or more after we'd arrived. He was bent over a cane, but even then, I could tell that at one point he would have been taller than the duke, himself well over six feet tall. Everyone stood and said, "Father," then resumed what they'd been doing. Ofelia had told me that the senior duke had once challenged Buffalo Bill to a horse-wrangling contest when the American cowboy had a show in Rome – and that he had won. I looked at the old, stooped man. With his height, his long, white beard and his cane, he looked like a prophet.

Leone's mother, Duchess Ada, arrived a few minutes after her husband. Her hair was set with a wave and held up with jewelled pins, and she had emerald drop earrings, but she was dressed in a violet dressing gown. "Oh, look at you all!" She came first to Leone, who stood and then bent so his mother could put her hands on his face to kiss his cheeks. She then held Ofelia's hand in both of hers. "You look so well, dear – you're better?" When Ofelia said she was, the duchess asked, "And Sveva? How is that little beauty? Where is my darling little granddaughter?"

"We hope she's sleeping," the duke said and raised a wineglass at this thought. "If not, God bless those who are tasked with caring for her – the girl has quite the lungs. We can hear her clear across the villa from the nursemaid's quarters."



“Oh, you should have brought her! None of us mind a little noise, and you know how I adore babies.” She turned, looked directly at me. “And who’s this?”

“Mother, this is Ofelia’s companion, Miss Jüül.”

The duchess took my hand as she had Ofelia’s. “Lovely to meet you. I do hope that you enjoy your time with my family.” The duchess spoke in English the entire time, her accent the king’s own, Received Pronunciation. I knew already that she was English aristocracy, her marriage one of both political union and what anyone who spoke of it agreed was genuine love between her and Duke Onorato. He didn’t speak at all that evening and, at one point, appeared to be asleep. The duchess and her sons joked and sparred, moving between English, Italian and, at times, French. The meal, if one could call it that, was random dishes set down now and again by the incomprehensible giant footman, and the food, too, seemed to alternate between English, Italian and French.

“You know Gelasio has plans to blow up a mountain on the northern front, don’t you, Leone?” their mother asked at one point, as though this were the stuff of chit-chat.

“He mentioned something about that when we spoke, yes. If anyone has the bombast, it’s him, isn’t that right, Roff?”

Instead of answering his brother, Roffredo asked the duke, “Are you finding you have any time for your research these days?”

“Oh, it’s coming along. The war has slowed things down, certainly.”

Ofelia turned to me. “Leone is compiling a multi-volume account of Islamic history and culture.”

I looked at her for a moment in response, blinked. I wasn’t always sure I’d understood what she’d said – both my English and French were stronger than my Italian then. “He is?”

Marguerite laughed. “That was exactly my response! It does make perfect sense, really, but what these Caetani men will take on – while Roff composes his symphonies, Leone compiles a history of one of the world’s great religions.”

“Great?” Michelangelo said from the other end of the table. “Some would beg to differ. Regardless, the entire Western world is at war and my

big brother is writing about the Middle East, which, after this war, will no longer exist.”

“Oh, it won’t, will it?” Leone took a drink, then seemed to study the liquid in his glass before putting it down.

As though to change the subject, Margeurite turned to me, “Are you familiar with the work of Marie Bregendahl? If you’ve not yet read *A Night of Death*, you must.”

“*A Night of Death*? Why that sounds cheery.” Her husband was spooning various condiments onto his plate, dragging shapes through them with his spoon as though he were a child.

“Roff!” She batted at him. Her husband recoiled in mock alarm, shrugged dramatically toward Ofelia and me.

“I do adore literature.” My voice sounded stiff and put-on, like a precocious child, even to me. “But I’ve not lived in Denmark for some time, so I’m a bit out of step with the current authors.”

“This came out – when? – maybe 1912, 1913? I’d say probably no more than four or five years ago.”

Roffredo said, “I’m surprised you don’t know the exact publication date.” He looked toward me. “Marguerite has a mind for not only books but publishing – hopes to go into it herself one day.”

I smiled and nodded at some comments to seem both amiable and intelligent. The Caetanis were generous to me, treating me as though I belonged at the table with them. In my time away from Denmark, my language skills had improved – French, English and then Italian. By the time we left Italy, I felt as though I could move fluidly between both languages and worlds alike, but I wondered how much slipped between gaps as my mind shifted between them. I couldn’t know how much of my experience would be locked in memory to be shaken loose years later.