

Back to the Old House

The stiff gust that now pervaded the field brought him back to his boyhood. He was running, cutting through the air, the wind whipping his cheeks and pulling water from his eyes. His shoes pounded hard and left defined imprints where they connected with the soil. He dashed through trees, zigzagged between brambles, leapt over rocks, and struggled to correct his balance when a particularly rough landing on wet earth caused him to slip and nearly fall. Twice he reacted a moment too late and landed with a muted *thud* on the mud and moss, but in each instance he was down no more than a few seconds before he scrambled up off his back and continued his chase. Panting hard, he finally spotted the wrought iron gates standing between stone columns encircled by vines and moss. The gates were ajar, and their meticulous metalwork was bent and misshapen in several places. He slowed just enough to slip between them without pushing them further open.

“Chassie?” He twisted round and round, his eyes darting back and forth between trees, ferns, and the iron fence. The only sounds now were his hard breathing and the rustling leaves overhead. He lifted his hands to his cheeks, still flushed, and tried to calm himself. He scrunched his eyes closed.

A force suddenly shoved him from behind, and he stumbled forward. “I got you!” Chassie shrieked, clapping gleefully. “I told you last time. You wouldn’t see me coming at all.”

He spun toward her and stabbed his finger toward her dress. "You were wearing pink last week! Of course I wouldn't see you!"

She held her dark green skirts in her fists and danced around him, smiling smugly. "You didn't say anything about what color I had to be wearing. I won and you lost."

He reached out and pushed her by the shoulders, and she landed unceremoniously in the damp earth, yelping as she fell. She sat up and stilled, running her hands over the fabric on her back. Her smile faded as she brought one hand back into her vision, revealing a palm coated in mud. "Mother bought me this dress yesterday. I'm supposed to wear it tonight to dinner with the Beaumonts."

The pair were silent for a moment. Then she fastened her deep blue eyes on his, her mischievous grin back afresh. "You had better watch out!"

He squealed as she shot up and made to grab him. He began running once more, this time with a grin splitting his face and Chassie following a few steps behind. He ran parallel to the iron fence, reaching out to skim his fingers over the metal. Behind him, she did the same. They shot past thick trees with gnarled trunks, past cracked and grimy stones bearing names and dates, past bushes hung with vibrant red berries. The sun peeked through into the scene, spotlighting patches of grass through the canopy. The breeze had ceased, and dust motes in the sweet August air were tossed into commotion wherever the children passed through them.

By the time they finally both tired of the chase and stopped to catch their breath, they had reached the other end of the garden where the trees were sparser and the stones were newer. Chassie squatted in front of the nearest one and brushed back the weeds that obscured the text.

“Dorothy Brown.”

He hesitated for a second to consider the name. “A nurse, with a little dog.”

Chassie shook her head. “I think she had a cat. Girls like cats more.”

“Okay,” he returned, reading the words of another stone. “Thomas Bell.”

“A musician. He played the piano with his wife.”

“And they had a dog.”

She laughed. “Why does everyone have a dog today?”

He shrugged. “I like dogs. I think more people ought to have dogs.”

“People *do* have dogs. Just not every person.”

“Okay, now do Gladys.”

“No last name?”

“I can’t tell.”

“She wanted to be a singer. But she wasn’t very good. So she became a writer instead, and wrote a hundred books and was very famous.”

He frowned. “A famous writer? That doesn’t seem very likely.”

“There are tons of famous writers! Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Keats.” Her brow furrowed. “Others.”

“What do you know about Shakespeare?”

“Loads. What do you know about Shakespeare?”

“Nothing. Never read any of it. Never will.”

Her pleased smile reappeared. “I’ve read some. My favorite is ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ It’s so romantic.”

“Well, I don’t know about Shakespeare. But I do know about games and fun. I bet Shakespeare never had any fun.” He stood upright and surveyed the yard, finally pointing to a particularly tall oak. “I’m climbing that one.”

“Yes, because the last one you climbed was so easy.”

“Be quiet. I’m going to make it to the top this time.”

“I suppose we’ll find out.”

* * *

Chassie lay on her back at the base of the tree, her legs bent upward and resting against the trunk. She absentmindedly picked bits of bark from her white stockings and fingered the little holes where brambles had snagged them. A squirrel ran past, on its way to stash an acorn. Small bugs flew here and there, and Chassie occasionally swatted her hand at them.

“How much longer will you be up there?”

“Until I’m at the top!” He wasn’t all that far off the ground, and he had been climbing for half an hour now. He reached ambitiously for the next branch,

extending his arm as far as it would go. When he realized he was still short of touching it, he sighed.

“That seems awfully optimistic.” Chassie tapped her once-polished shoes together. A small cloud of dust erupted from the soles’ dried mud and rained down. She halfheartedly swept it off her torso. “How did you get away this time?”

He tried for a different bough. “I told them I felt sick and that I wanted to sleep, then I went out the kitchen door. How about you?”

“I simply left. Father was in his study, and Mother was preparing for dinner with the Beaumonts. She wasn’t paying much attention. She hasn’t paid me much attention recently.”

“Rat!”

She heard the shaking of leaves, the breaking of wood, and a significant *thump* as he tumbled to the ground a short distance to her left. He winced and rubbed at the inevitably burgeoning bruises on his back and side but remained on the ground with splintered sticks twisted in his hair, staring up at the intricate cross hatching of branches.

“Jacob?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever think about how all these people here had real lives? They loved things and hated things just like we do. But it’s all over now. Isn’t it unfair?”

He shrugged as best he could while still lying on the grass. "It's like you say. They had their lives. Don't see what's unfair about that."

"Hmm."

"Chassie?"

"Yes?"

"This place is nice and all, but . . . could I ever come to your house sometime? We've been friends almost a year and I've never been."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

For a minute, the only sounds were the soft wind and the chittering of insects. He shifted his position to get a better view of her face. Chassie was still gazing upward with a blank expression, her sharp blue eyes trained on the sight above. Her hair, like his, spread over the ground and engulfed leaves and twigs. The freckles dusting her cheeks were more apparent now in summer than they had been many months ago, when they first planned to meet at the cemetery gates. He now felt as though he had been much younger then, that he was ages older now and had seen the world.

He twisted blades of grass between his two front fingers. "I'm going to try again. I said I would get to the top, and that's just what I'll do."

"I don't think that's very safe. You've already fallen once."

He groaned. "But I said I would do it."

"Won't you give up? We can go play Royals."

“Will you be Queen again?”

“Of course.”

He paused. “And I’ll be your knight?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then.”

* * *

She picked up another flower out of her pile, this one a deep orange, and began threading it in with the others. “Are there any purple ones?”

“I don’t see any.” He continued searching near the shaded iron fence, tromping through weeds that passed over his knees. “There’s yellow, red, orange, some pink. Can’t you make do with those?”

She huffed where she sat in the grass. “It’s not a proper flower crown if there’s no purple in it. Don’t you know that the emperors wore purple?”

“Where’d you learn that?”

“One of Father’s books. Keep looking.”

The weeds were nearly swallowing him now, obstructing his path and hiding the shorter flowers that dappled the edge of the cemetery. Some particularly tall stalks jabbed at his shirt and scratched his arms. The soil became darker and damper under the shade of the trees, and his boots began to stick where he stepped. “Chassie!”

“What!” she called back.

“Can’t I come back? I think I touched poison oak earlier.”

“Fine. But you won’t make a very good knight if poison oak is enough to make you stop.”

He exhaled forcefully and resumed his hunt. Poppies and dog roses and oxeye daisies dotted the earth, and he brushed past all of them. Snowdrops and honeysuckle littered the field beside the fence, and bunches of brilliant yellow tulips stood appealingly a few steps ahead. These he stopped a moment to inspect; he kneeled and inhaled their syrupy perfume and, after issuing a satisfied nod, plucked four of them at the base of their stalks. Another few steps before him lay a peculiar stick double the length of his arm, with a smaller perpendicular offshoot of wood on either side. He bent down and snatched it from the dirt.

“Have you found any?”

“Give me another minute!”

Tulips in hand, he proceeded until a deep hue materialized in the corner of his vision. A wild sprawl of cornflowers peeked through the weeds. He eagerly picked as many as he could hold with the tulips, then held them over his head triumphantly. “Purple!”

Chassie grinned at him as he returned hastily, waving his handful of tulips and cornflowers. He placed the flowers cautiously in her waiting hands, and she immediately placed them beside her, picked the unfinished crown off her lap, and began weaving a cornflower into the other stems.

While she worked, he took up his heavy stick. "Look, it's my knightly sword." He stabbed it at the open air and swung it in a wide arc around him. He announced to his invisible foe, "You cannot have the queen, foul beast!" and made another thrust forward.

"What are you battling?" Chassie inquired, eyes still downcast on her project.

He huffed with effort, wielding his stick like a rapier. "A dragon, most cruel and large and . . . foul. It spits fire and hoards treasure, and that treasure will be mine today!"

"I thought you were defending your queen?"

"Yes, that too."

The sword soon became too heavy for his young arms, and he loosened his grip on it, allowing its point to fall into the soil while his fingers wrapped gently around its hilt. "Is your crown almost finished?"

"It's a tiara." Her enterprise concluded, Chassie placed the ring upon her hair and rose, fanning out her skirts and twirling in a tight circle.

"Looks like a crown to me. I think tiaras are smaller."

"It's done anyway. Aren't you going to save me from the dragon now?"

Arms aching, he answered, "It's gone now. I've vanquished it. You can have some of its treasure, though. For your kingdom."

"And what treasure is that? Gold?"

His eyes frantically raked over the scene, then he abruptly bent and grabbed the last two unincorporated tulips still in the flower pile. “Yes, gold tulips! For your palace.”

She giggled and accepted the meager bouquet. “Then here, we shall split the spoils. Half the gold for my brave Sir Jacob.” Smiling, she offered one of the yellow tulips to her compatriot. The boy gladly took it.

“Will my knight accompany me to pick some berries?”

“Sure.”

He dropped his sword and followed her to the nearest thicket. A thorny bush’s branches dripped with clusters of raspberries, some yet too pale and others a vibrant red. Chassie separated the outermost layer of her skirts, now crusted with several splotches of dried mud, from the rest and lifted it to form a kind of apron. She mulled over the fruit and selected only the brightest to pick off the bunch while he pointed out which bushels looked ripe enough, once or twice plucking a berry and eating it directly. When her makeshift cloth basket was weighed to her liking with fruit, she pointed to a sunny portion of the garden and carefully lowered herself onto the ground so as not to spill her bounty. He sat beside her, and they snacked on the berries, the sun shining down on them both. A few deceptively unripe raspberries had snuck in with the rest, and their lips occasionally pursed with the bitter flavor.

Chassie read off the closest headstone. "Here's Henry Evans. What do you think he did?"

He munched on a handful of berries and spoke between bites. "He was a teacher. He liked his students very much, and gave them lunches when they were hungry."

"How about William Smythe?"

"I think he was probably a farmer. Like me."

"Can you really call yourself a farmer?"

"I live on a farm."

"But your *parents* are the farmers. You're a farm boy." Chassie ate the last of the raspberries and moved on to the next stone, squinting to make out the words. "Caroline Wright. Maybe she went to balls and parties and banquets."

"And that's all she did, like you."

She scowled. "That's not all I do. Do you think that's all I do?"

"Well, isn't it? You go to school, and go to the market with your mother, and go to fancy dinners."

"Of course I do more than that. I . . . read. Father gives me his books sometimes. His history books, and poetry. I like to read poetry."

"You read your father's books. Caroline probably read her father's books too. But that's not *doing* something. What do you both *do*?"

"What in the world do you mean?"

“I feed the animals and take care of the dogs and help plant things. And you wear fancy clothes to eat your fancy food. Don’t you ever do anything useful?” He hadn’t meant it to sound harsh, but Chassie’s expression was enough to tell him that’s how it came off. Her pink mouth thinned into a stiff line across her face. She watched him for a moment, then rose and shook the leaves from her skirts.

“I don’t like this game anymore. I’m going to the pond.”

“Chassie?” He sprung up and began to follow her.

“Shove off, Jacob.”

“Chassie?”

They trod in silence to the small pound just beyond the iron fence, slipping again between the gates on the way. She finally sat down at the edge of the water, pulling her knees against her chest, snapping blades of grass and tossing them into the pond, watching the ripples emerge and gradually dissolve. He stilled behind her, standing, feeling the warm air blowing gently on his neck. It ruffled her hair and the lace trim on her collar.

He sucked in a breath and prepared to break the silence—but something about the way she had one arm wrapped around her knees gave him pause. He stayed standing another minute, then slowly joined her on the bed of moss. Her back quickly became rigid. Then she settled into comfort, even leaned toward him a bit. The seconds passed sluggishly, a delicate tension riding the breeze.

“Sorry. I’m not mad.” She didn’t look at him, just continued to flip leaves, twigs, and grass into the water. “Not really.”

“You seemed mad. I didn’t mean anything by it, I swear. I just meant . . . I don’t know what I meant.”

She sighed. “I know what you meant. I just suppose . . . we’re different, that’s all.”

“Nothing bad about that. And we’re not all that different.”

She didn’t respond.

Suddenly a voice rang out distantly in the woods. The one word it spoke was faint, but just barely intelligible: “Chastity?”

Chassie froze and clutched her skirts.

The calling was persistent, approaching closer by the second. Finally a well-dressed woman of imposing stature appeared across the pond and, after spotting the pair, marched imperiously to where they sat. Upon recognizing the state of Chassie’s clothes, she gasped.

“Your dress! Your stockings!”

Chassie flinched.

“Young lady, do you know your father and I have been searching for you for the better part of the afternoon, and here you are, in an overgrown cemetery, of all places!” She glared at the two, as if she hadn’t decided at whom she was more upset.

“And who is this boy!”

Chassie's brows pinched together in anxiety. "Just a boy, Mother, I don't—"

"I'm Chassie's friend, madam."

"'Chassie!' You do not associate with people like him, do you hear me, young girl? Your father and I gave you a name and a family and status and that will not be squandered on petty acquaintances with *farm* boys."

She snatched Chassie's hand, yanked her up, and dragged her through the trees, toward the town. Chassie glanced back once before trudging obediently beside her mother into the woods.

Twelve days later, Jacob saw Chassie at the outdoor market. She was dressed in a white sundress, standing at a stall with her parents, and he was alone. He thought she noticed him, but she turned away. She must have thought he was someone else.