

*The Winners of the
Creative Writing Contest
2023*



Poetic category

"The Heaven, the Hell and the Mind in Between"

Weronika Ignatowicz

You thought you were not alone

when you were with loneliness

Yet you had no idea

how to fill up that emptiness

They had craved your light so badly

that they left you none

And they've sworn to love you madly

but now they're all gone

Did they really think it would hurt you

to be sent into the depths of hell

But why you have never objected

no one could ever tell

Weren't you always too busy

trying to be enough

To notice that the others

did not even have to try

But you still chose to believe

whatever you preferred

And soon enough your mind
turned heaven into hell

And it might seem so easy
to turn it back around

But hell will not be heaven
with nobody near to applaud

I wrote many letters to you
even though they don't feel right

But I think I know how you felt
when your name still meant light

“Two Minds”
Julia Kotodziejska

I see a garden with emerald grass.

A majestic tree in the middle stands.

It's a place in the world meant just for us

Which from anything bad always prevents.

You see some yellow grass under a tree

Which stands between several blocks of flats.

It's weak and ugly and it isn't big.

It's not from some distant place in lowlands.

In my eyes the tree stands in a bright place.

In your eyes the whole scene is rather dark.

What in this view makes us feel the difference?

How can we look at the same tree like that?

What makes it is a thing of its own kind

The only one in the world - our mind.

Prose category

“Juliet’s Troubles”

Katarzyna Janik

It was the night of Juliet’s death. She was walking in the garden, hopeful yet still terrified, her thoughts overwhelmed with possibilities. Would the crazy trick work? Would tomorrow bring her freedom, and her Romeo?

“Why so sad?” asked suddenly a nearby tree, startling her.

“Who is there? This garden is the property of my father, and I demand you show yourself,” she stamped her foot and scrunched her nose in a way a younger child would do.

“The name’s Puck.”

From between the branches came out a human like creature, fascinating and eerie. *Puck* was rather short, with long ears and fingers, his skin just a touch too green to seem normal to the girl. His eyes shined brightly in the dim light. Perhaps most curious of all, he was grinning wildly.

“Young lady, is there a reason you think so hard?” he pressed on, some sinister edge clearly audible in his voice. Although Juliet had to admit her judgement was clouded by her unease.

“What are you, mister Puck?” she tried to remain calm and polite, as she was taught, but her voice trembled.

“A fairy.”

“And what are your intentions?”

“Good, I suppose. At least to myself. Should I ask you as many questions? Will you even answer my first one?”

Puck seemed unable to stand still, but it didn’t appear to be caused by anxiety as much as boredom. The creature was looking for entertainment.

“You’re in my garden,” Juliet tried, with as much confidence as she could muster, to intimidate the stranger.

“Ah,” Puck exclaimed, suddenly turning at least most of his attention to her. “But you said it was your father’s garden. Do you tend to lie a lot?”

“I do not lie,” she instinctively defended herself.

But she knew what she was planning to do the next day. She was going to tell the biggest lie, upset everyone that ever cared for her, all for one Romeo. For one wonderful, selfless Romeo, whom she loved with all her heart. Did she have the right

to do betray her family like that? Was there really no other way for them to be together?

Puck clearly caught on her guilt, and it seemed to make him unbelievably happy.

“There you go again, lying and thinking all too much.”

“My troubles are of no interest to you, mister Puck. Leave this garden, as it is a property of the Capulets, and let me think on my own.”

“But what if Robin can help?” he pouted.

“Who?”

“Robin. Goodfellow. Oberon’s jester.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

He was giving her a headache.

“Myself,” he shrugged. “I often do that. But now I want to talk about you.”

“There is not much to talk about” she said, not humbly but decidedly, trying to get Puck to look for fun somewhere else.

“If there wasn’t much to talk about, there wouldn’t be much to think about. What’s on your mind, Juliet?”

“You know my name,” she stated after a beat of silence.

“I like spending time in this garden.”

That was a rather worrying idea. This strange creature with unclear intentions, snooping around her house and listening in on her conversations since who knows when. Was he there when she prayed? When she told the stars her deepest secrets? When Romeo visited her?

“And so, do you think you know what’s on my mind?”

“I believe I can easily guess.”

Juliet waited. What exactly did Puck know?

“How could you help me?” she prompted him after a minute.

“Advice or magic, it’s up to you,” he grinned. “When it comes to love, I’ve personally tried both.”

“Neither is of interest to me.”

“Then you must not be as in love as I’d thought. Yet another lie you’ve told, even bigger than the other.”

“I’ve never told you-”

“But you’ve told him.”

“I do love him,” she finally lost her temper. “Tomorrow I am to marry, but I’m already a wife. I refuse to smirch my marriage with betrayal. I refuse, for Romeo,

for Paris, and for myself. I'm choosing an uncertain faith, a trick that only *might* bring me and Romeo together. I'm scared, but I will do it. Is it not love?"

"Depends on who you ask," Puck simply shrugged. "But if you already have a plan, what else is there to think about? Surely if you love him, you're not having second thoughts?"

"No," she lied again. "The plan is just not all that certain. Like I said, I'm really just quite scared to do it. You were offering help, now I'm listening. What can you do?"

"Make him fall in love with you?"

"He already loves me," she said without hesitation.

"Make you both fall in love with someone else?"

"I don't believe that's possible."

"Then you're foolish."

"I don't want you to do it, then."

"Then you're naive."

Juliet held her breath. She wanted to believe Puck could help her, but was that really how little he thought of true love?

"I know," Puck startled her again. "I have a new plan for you."

Despite her rational mind, her heart skipped a beat.

"We can lay you down in your bed, and by sunlight your nanny will find you dead. Your family will mourn you, and put you in a tomb. You escape, find your boy, and leave happily ever after as long as your love will prevail."

Juliet felt her heart drop into her stomach. Her last, extremely irrational, hope for a different outcome to the night was just crushed.

"That is exactly what my current plan is," she cried out. Was Puck mocking her?

"Really?" he seemed genuinely surprised. "And did *you* come up with it?"

Juliet shook her head.

"I feel like I really should get to know the crazy mind behind it," Puck's smile grew impossibly wider.

Juliet reached into her nightgown's pocket for the small vial that had felt like the heaviest stone the whole evening.

"I'm afraid I have to leave you soon, Puck. Unless you have some other advice for me?"

"You'll be fine, as long as your love for each other lasts."

And although Juliet couldn't tell if the answer was genuine, she felt like she'd made one last friend before her new life. Another person, even if not quite human, that knew the truth.

“Do You Have the Time?”

Ada Kamińska

The longer hand of their watch raced along the numbers peeking behind the teathy jaws of the Paw Patrol dog adorning their wrist. It had been a constant companion of theirs since the previous summer, when they'd found themselves stranded in the middle of Moroni, Utah with no phone and four dollars and thirty-seven cents to their name. Getting the Paw Patrol watch was objectively the most hilarious choice they could have made at the moment, and it made them feel a little better about the whole thing, even though it didn't fit them properly and they had to poke a new hole right at the very end of the strap with a plastic fork they found discarded behind a 7-eleven. But, hey, armed with its blue and yellow plastic face, they had a chance to make it in time to catch the train for Salt Lake City, no problem. It was a trophy they could show off to friends and colleagues when recounting the story, a light-hearted symbol of their perseverance.

Now they mindlessly counted seconds between each tick, lightly shifting from one leg to the other every time the minute hand moved. The truck was late and Sybil, who arranged the move, because the driver worked with her cousin's boyfriend, wouldn't answer her phone. So they were stuck in front of their old apartment building with two trash bags containing everything they owned and an armchair they found three months ago behind the dumpsters and dragged up the stairs (the elevator in the building worked only once in all the time they'd been here, and it was such a big deal that the downstairs neighbours threw an impromptu barbeque on the roof to celebrate) all the way up into their 6th floor flat. No way were they leaving it behind. Somewhat exasperated, they kicked an orange rock and watched it skip along the sidewalk before stopping right before a crack in the concrete, as if it was a fence with a sign warning the potential trespassers that they will be shot the moment their foot steps inside the property. Not that signs like this mean all that much if you really want to trespass, they mused, thinking about all the stupid decisions they made with their friends in the past. The thrill of adrenaline fuelled by an alarm going off was certainly one of the unforgettable experiences of youth.

Apparently, the orange rock held a similar sentiment, because instead of politely staying behind the crack, it first started to bounce again, and then resolutely

hopped over the crevice and further down the street. They looked around to find the source of this transgression and saw a delapidated truck loudly making its way to where they were perched on the side of the road, before coming to a halt, mere inches shy of turning their lovely armchair into a mattress. A bald head poked out of the window and gestured for them to load all their worldly possessions inside.

The drive was fairly calm, if slightly monotonous; the driver never said a word, and instead played a kidz bop version of some rap song they vaguely recognised from the radio on repeat. By the end, they believed they could quote it verbatim, if a need ever arose. Having dumped the bags and the chair out of the truck, the driver nodded goodbye in their general direction and drove off immediately. They did not know what his name was and were actually fairly certain that neither did Sybil. They shook their head, slowly getting accustomed to not having the words 'u don't work u don't get dessert' beamed directly into their brain, and looked around in search of the destination of their exodus (they spared a thought to wondering whether all of their neighbours were able to find a new place by now; the information that the apartment building will be sold to a large firm and the prices will be going up and up and up was very sudden and they all had little time to make a choice whether they wanted to stay or leave). They were quite lucky, actually; almost immediately after getting the news, they got a message from their father (he was fairly alright as far as fathers went, but he still wouldn't oppose their mother in any way, so nowadays they only talked sporadically over the phone) forwarding a craigslist link to an affordable dump somewhere not too far away, so they wasted no time in calling Lola no-last-name, the landlady, and filling out all the necessary formalities. The place was supposed to be quite old, sturdy, and ready to move in. All the pictures in the listing were of the inside, so they expected that they might end up having trouble recognising the place, but the idea that there would be literally nothing waiting for them at the location never even crossed their mind, and yet that is what they found waiting in the meeting spot. A cartoonish tumbleweed danced leisurely across the landscape. Serves them right, they supposed, for trusting a random person on the internet and not even asking to meet before committing to rent a flat from them. Unnerved, they mused for a little longer (allowing themselves a brief self-pitying scenario where they starve to death right there in the desert and Lola-The-Landlady mails their emaciated corpse to their mother who, realizing the error of her ways, throws herself at them and cries in regret), before realizing that the manhole they

were standing on top of was moving ever so slowly, and that if they didn't fancy falling into whatever sewer lay underneath, they should probably step aside.

Curious, they observed the manhole, which, now that they were paying attention, did not actually resemble a manhole that much, but rather some kind of a round metal door, and from within, they could see not a sewer, but a long dimly lit tunnel leading downwards. What sort of idiot, they thought, looking inside, would someone have to be to climb down there, in the middle of nowhere, with no one except for the silent truck driver knowing where exactly they were? What sort of idiot, they continued, climbing down the ladder, would they have to be to not only leave all their stuff out in the open, but also fail to call their friends to let them know what was going on? But they were a curious creature by nature, and not very prone to making sound decisions, so down the suspicious tunnel they went. The longer they climbed, the fainter the lights grew, and a strange musty smell filled their nostrils. Will they now be climbing forever, in a Sisyphean parody of sorts, left only with their own thoughts, flickering lights, and the comforting ticking of their Paw Patrol watch? Will they die climbing and condemn their restless spirit to never see the light of day again? Just as they finished that thought, the ladder abruptly ended and they found themselves in a concrete lobby, reminiscent of something they'd seen in a movie a long time ago. On a desk, which they now noticed standing in the centre of the room, was a single service bell. For whom the bell tolls, I wonder, they thought absentmindedly, and rung it. The sound of the bell was crisp and melodic; it wasn't like the school bell, shrill and anxiety-inducing. No, it was a nice bell, they thought, and rung it again. The sound of the bell was surprisingly deep and hollow, a little like the St. Jude church bell back home. They always liked the smell of churches, the sickening sweetness of frankincense made them feel a little dizzy, but in a pleasant way. They rung the bell again.

'You're a tad late, aren't you? I bet it was the traffic, huh? Oh, it's gonna drive us all insane one day, isn't it?', said the smiling woman at the counter. Was this Lola? She'd have a pleasant face, they decided, if not for that smile. She smiled like someone whose only reference for the action were pictures of chimpanzees in the wild. Nonetheless, they nodded long-sufferingly; traffic's gonna drive them insane one day, they thought. 'Well, no matter, here's your keys- your door's the seventh one counting from this one here. The restroom is down there, at the bottom', she pointed, 'but I'm afraid the elevator needs a little bit of love, so you better take the

stairs. Don't you worry about nothin', if you need me, just remember to ring the bell- oh I'm so very sorry, sunshine, seems like I'm needed elsewhere', she said and left them alone. They let out a breath and rolled up their sleeves. They got a bit warm all of a sudden.

The room wasn't bad, as far as rooms went. God knows they've slept in worse places. They laid down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. Considering that they were underground, its height was impressive, they thought. Everything was large in the room, actually, and had they not been so tired from the move, they might have found it disconcerting. They stretched their legs as far as possible and found the bed long enough to do so comfortably, without touching the end with their toes. It reminded them of the time when, as a small child, they'd lie across the couch and reach with all their might with their arms and legs, trying to touch both ends at the same time, to no avail. Sleepily, they let their mind wonder and thought of clocks, and teeth, and bells, and closed their eyes to gladly greet the darkness overcoming them.

It was the bell ringing that woke them in the morning. There were no windows in the bunker (as that's what they assumed the place must be; maybe built for the war?), so there was no sun in the sky to look at to judge the time. They squinted at their Paw Patrol watch to see the hands helpfully pointing at 07:17. Yawning, they got dressed and left the room, eagerly looking forward to exploring the expanse of the tunnel systems and meeting their fellow bunkerees. They wondered if their new neighbours had a similar story of needing cheap accommodations fast, or if they were here because they just liked the idea of living underground. There are all sorts of people out there, after all. The door locked behind them on its own and they found themselves in a long straight corridor with so many doors on both sides, they briefly wondered if the tunnel were alive, would it feel overwhelmed. All of them looked alike, massive and grey, and none were open. They didn't remember if they noticed that the previous night. There must be so many others living down here. They walked and walked and walked, and hadn't met a single person. Might've been because it was early, they thought, and everyone was still asleep, or it was already late enough for them to all be at work. Maybe they all had to carpool. They felt their stomach twist and rumble and realized that in all the chaos of yesterday, they forgot to have dinner. They checked their watch and saw that they've been wondering aimlessly for over two hours; before they made it back to the lobby and the service bell they will

surely have starved to death, they thought grimly and turned to brave the journey, and unexpectedly found themselves right in the middle of the lobby. It must've been closer than they thought, or maybe the bunker was round, and they were walking in circles all day, without realizing. It was probably the hunger. They rung the bell and once again marvelled at its elegant resonance.

'Oh, you missed breakfast, sunshine, could you not find the kitchen? Or do you not have a watch? you can always ring me up to ask for the time, you know', they shivered and frowned a little, absentmindedly counting the teeth bared in her smile; no way was their Paw Patrol watch running late, they always made sure of that, 'see, the way we do it here, you can use our communal canteen, no worries, but it's a bit of a drain on my resources, feeding everyone, so you'll be doing the washing-up for now, and we can call it a deal', the proposition wasn't half bad, they thought, and, god, they were so hungry. The unsettling hollowness tugged at their insides. They followed where Lola's finger was pointing towards the kitchen.

The food was okay. A bowl of thick greenish soup with a few slices of toasted bread awaited them in the canteen and, starving, they devoured it not paying any attention to the flavour or texture. Only when they were finished did they notice that they were, once again, all alone in the room. It was starting to make their skin itch uncomfortably, this aloneness, there must be so many people in the bunker, after all. Were there other canteens? Other corridors with doors and doors and doors all around them? They didn't know. Shuffling their feet to the sink, they noticed the neat piles of bowls and utensils waiting for them on a counter. So there were others here before them. They checked their watch. It was 05:25. A perfectly reasonable time to have dinner. Why there was no one here was beyond them, they mused while scrubbing the dried soup off of an enamel dish. Tired from all the walking and washing, they stumbled to their room and into the bed. The ceiling felt a tiny bit further away than yesterday, but they paid it no mind, closing their eyes and drifting off to sleep, instead.

The next day was similar. And the next and the one after that. They still had yet to meet any of their neighbours, besides Lola, and, frankly, it was wearing on them a little. They understood that people had their own lives and problems, and they weren't entitled to others' free time, but how could it be possible that no one seemed to ever spend any time in the communal spaces of the bunker? That no one was ever passing through the corridor at the same time? They needed to talk to

someone- anyone, really. They had a feeling that Lola might not be too keen on this idea, since any time they expressed their doubts or showed weariness, her smile would turn the slightest bit more toothy, leaving them feeling colder and emptier. Making sure to set their feet lightly on the concrete floor, they tip-toed to one of the doors, far from their own. It was just as grey and menacingly large. Raising their fist to knock, they felt a shiver run down their spine and their palms have suddenly grown cold. For heaven's sake, they knocked on doors before, and even entered unannounced on a few occasions, so their sudden apprehension was startling. Was there anyone watching them? Was Lola? Maybe it would be better to just get back to their own room- but the rising dread that was slowly filling their lungs felt so lead-heavy they were anchored to the floor. They looked around and spotted no one. Their trembling fist was still raised in the air. It was now or never, they thought, and loudly thumped at the slab of concrete again and again and again, until their knuckles felt raw and the breath failed to catch up to them in their throat. Only when they stopped, had they realised that the door was already ajar and a familiar face was staring at them. The person's eyes were wide open and they were breathing heavily and their face matched their own. The hand raised in a knock was theirs, and so was the hair, choppy cut with the kitchen scissors. They stared, and so did their mirror image. No oxygen could fit inside their lungs as long as they were staring into their own eyes and the buzzing that started to fill their ears was growing unbearable. They shouldn't have knocked, they knew now. It was not their place. The door closed and the penetrating cold they never even noticed dissipated; they could breathe again. The only room that should be of interest to them was their own, they thought firmly. They shouldn't spoil the opportunity that was granted to them, so cheap and convenient. Shakily, they looked around and wondered what time it was. Perhaps they will finally make it in time for dinner. Perhaps only to wash the dishes. They turned towards the desk in the lobby and reached for the bell to ask Lola.

Distinction
“The Portrait of Daria Gray”
Tad Olejniczak

Daria let the fan unfold in front of her face. The hand-embroidered flowers complemented her pale face, framing the delicate features beautifully as she, unmoved like a painting, scrutinised the people currently occupying the sitting room - all of them hissing and scoffing at each other like animals trapped under ornate tapestries and high ceilings. The topic of recent female protestants, the so-called ‘suffrage movement’, once again triggered a heated discussion.

“Now, now, Petunia, do not get carried away,” purred Lady Helen, who as the host of the tea-party was always first to soothe the woman and appease the men. “Here, have some pudding...”

“All I’m saying is,” Lady Petunia smoothed her afternoon dress and ignored the jelly-like dessert. “Girls should stay at home and make it seem like they’re simply *not there*. Clean after themselves, cease to speak... And for Heaven’s sake, not try to *think!*”

“And how should one amuse herself, Penny?” The hostess smiled, batting her eyelashes at everyone. “Surely even a lady needs something entertaining in her life... Poetry, games...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” The woman, red in the face and breathless, turned her head away. “You’re worsening my migraine.”

Knowing that this is how her old friend always ended arguments, Lady Helen beamed brightly and sat up straight, her posture graceful and elegant in a muted apricot gown. The warm candlelight coloured her cheeks, still smooth and rosy despite her turning over forty years of age. It was time for her ending monologue, one each guest always awaited at the end of every gathering. All the visitors - the aunts, the uncles, the nieces- looked at Lady Helen with carefully studied expressions of boredom and barely masked fascination. Daria let the fan rest on her cheek, leaning in closer to listen.

“Life isn’t easy on us, women... We have to look appetising all the time, we cannot age and show any discontent whatsoever. Men, while naturally tireless and hard-working, will never quite grasp the pain of decay, of losing your youth, seeing those chocolate curls fade, feeling your garments no longer fit as properly as before... You turn twenty-two and suddenly you are relevant no more. Once you have been

deflowered, you will never blossom again. Your scent won't invite anyone else to your garden.

“Thus, to all the young girls, all the yet unblemished lilies, I want to emphasise this: youth, in all of its beauty and indulgence, is the only thing worth having and the sole virtue that matters.”

At this moment, Daria's and Lady Helen's gazes locked. Sky-blue, shaking, emotional met with the unwavering hazel of life experience. This connection, strengthened by seventeen years of friendship and mentoring - it was Helen who supervised her favourite niece while the parents were away - was what ultimately led Daria to, later that day, in this very drawing room, do something she'll regret with her whole heart.

“All this to say,” Lady Helen looked around once more, finishing up her speech. “That in this day and age, the most valuable and virtuous thing a woman can do is, I believe, to stay as pretty as a picture.

“That will be all, my dear friends, thank you.”

The guests clapped politely, standing up from their seats. Diana cast her eyes down and promised one thing to herself:

She will never be irrelevant. Even if it meant making a deal with the Devil.

But that was over a decade ago. She's a changed woman now.

Diana sprayed some of the Violet de Parme scented water on her wrists as she examined her reflection in the hand mirror. Clear, blue eyes and the subtle pink on her Cupid's bow, she knew this image like nothing else in the entire world, that's how much time she spent looking at it. Her face, fair and spotless, with dainty features, was her most precious possession. Her body, slim and graceful, was her greatest weapon and the key to every social situation. She was the most beautiful thing in London, wandering through its busy streets like a Nymph in a magic forest. With her high-heeled boots barely touching the ground, she made everyone turn their heads to look, man and woman, barons, clerks and beggars alike. It seemed like she cherished nothing as much as being admired. But her heart was never in it. The more years passed after she uttered those unforgivable words - encouraged by Lady Helen - of always wanting to be young and pretty, just to be worth something, the more revolting she felt. Her soul deformed from the vanity and she couldn't stand herself. And yet she looked, to the point of feeling sick, at her seventeen-year-old-looking face. The middle-aged woman inside of her was utterly drained.

Still, that woman had a date tonight. Despite being asked for many Hyde Park strolls and theatre dates, she never said no to a meeting with yet another dewy-eyed gentleman who'd add more conceit to her ego, who she could fool pretending to be young and naive and inexperienced, just to leave him in intellectual ruins when it turned out she actually has a working, functioning mind and isn't afraid to speak it. Today however, she will be seeing someone special. Someone different. A potential husband, Aunt Helen had implied. But most importantly, an actor. Diana hoped he might be able to see right through her, and then... She wasn't sure what would happen next. As she applied some more perfume on her neck, she wondered, curious...

How ugly her soul would have to be for a man not to be completely enamoured by her looks?

"Aren't you quite the Prince Charming?" Diana tilted her head in that specific way which made her golden curls fall attractively.

Her date for tonight - the actor - was a dandy young man with short black hair and sharp jawline. He was handsome, but not exceptional enough to overshadow Diana, sporting a mint-cream evening gown with a fitted bodice. As they entered the charity event, all eyes were on her.

His name was James and oddly enough, he didn't react to her flirtations. Instead, he smiled through clenched teeth, gently pushing her forwards so that they could look around and be seen by the *société*. It threw her off her usual game of wrapping a man around her finger at first opportunity. She continued to play a dumb doll, smiling and giggling for the entire evening while James kept on brooding silently, always by her side, sealing glances when he thought she wasn't looking.

Daria was used to men undressing her with their eyes - her innocence was long gone and they were never subtle enough to fake decency - but James made her feel naked in a different way. And so when the date came to an end and he was walking her to Lady Helen's mansion, she felt more nervous than usual and less in control. It was setting her nerves on edge and she was clutching her purse tightly. Finally, they stopped by the riverside and he turned to her with a clouded expression.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Miss," He began, his deep voice serious. "I don't think this... is going to work. I'm sorry. You... look taken aback."

"No, no, not at all," Daria tried to regain composure. "This is... absolutely understandable. I probably am too young, too... inexperienced for you. And you'd be bored with me, I don't care about politics, or... literature..."

“My apologies, but I actually think the opposite,” James took off his hat and sighed. He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. “I’ve been... Observing you, respectfully of course, for the entire evening. You are... breathtakingly beautiful, Miss, but... The thing is... At the very, very core... Again, I’m sorry, yet I find myself at a loss here... How can one be so lovely on the outside, but so broken within?”

Daria’s breath got caught in her tightly corseted dress. The river, the trees, the stars above her all spun. It surprised her just how right she was in assuming he will be the one to see right through the years of sins and falsity - but all that was left in her after the initial shock was pure, untamed rage.

“How... how dare you-”

“It’s just that, Miss, I think you must be a great actress,” He continued, burying his dark eyes into her. “Much better at pretending than me, when I stand on the stage. What are you hiding? A scandal? What could possibly ruin your reputation? If you truly are as pure as you look then you must be an angel. But if you are hiding something, Miss, then it must be as ugly as Hell.”

She couldn’t control herself any longer. Her worst nightmare came true. Somebody saw the thing she hated herself for. As tears streamed down her pearl-like cheeks, she struggled to open her purse.

“You don’t know me!” She cried, her voice cracking. “You are lying and I wish you were gone! I wish you were dead!”

James said something then, but she couldn’t hear anymore. She only saw his hands raising and his eyes widening at the sight of a pistol in her pink handkerchief. The next second his body fell, a heavy pile of bones and secrets. She pushed and pulled, until it fell into the dark coldness of the Thames.

Her dress was covered in blood and mud. The intoxicating mixture of satisfaction and hatred made her feel alive again. Daria couldn’t think of a better ending to this sensational play.

Back in the mansion, she rushed to her room and undressed hastily. She had to cut the boning of her corset with a paper knife as it was impossible to take it off without the help of the maidservant. Finally freed of the garments’ restraints, she buried all of her stained clothes under her bed and put on her sleeping gown.

Downstairs, Aunt Helen was reading a book wrapped in yellow paper. Hearing footsteps approaching, she looked up at her niece and smiled distractedly.

“How was the date, darling? Did it go well?”

“No, not really,” Diana sat down nearby, picking up on her embroidery work. After two calming breaths, she went on. “He killed himself. Because of me.”

“I see,” Lady Helen exhaled slowly. “Don’t worry about it, dove. Men will always want to die for you, or because of you. You’re too beautiful for them to have you. Drink some chamomile tea before bed to calm your nerves.”

As if nothing happened, she looked down at her book again. It was clear, however, that she was rather thrilled about yet another romantic tragedy, much better than the ones in her novels. Diana, suddenly disgusted, wanted to erase that smirk from her aunt’s face. Violence, sour, poisonous hate was starting to crawl just under her skin, threatening to come to its surface. But when she peeked at the mirror next to her, convinced to see a wrinkled, menopausal monstrosity, it was still her girlish, faultless face that looked back. It wasn’t the mirrors who told the truth, after all. It was her portrait, the keeper of secrets, hidden in the attic behind tight-lipped, white covers.

After a moment of sitting in silence, a familiar sensation started creeping into Diana’s heart. Today, like everyday for the past months, the temptation was so strong she could do nothing but yield to it. Just like in a hypnotic trance, she stood up abruptly and - without even wishing a good night to Lady Helen - made her way upstairs, where the dreadful thing was waiting for her.

The attic was dark, only illuminated by a single candle she brought with her. The woman promptly began her ritual of undressing the portrait, exposing the sinister figure that once, in its original form, was the definition of pure youth and beauty. But now, contaminated by her hedonistic lifestyle, the canvas changed dramatically. It was still her face, her figure, but the whole thing was so strikingly ugly she had to pause for a second. Diana forced herself to see it all - the wrinkles, the lines and creases of age, worms and other bugs feeding on her body, hunched back, her pitiful silhouette dressed in a torn, bloody dress. It repulsed her, but she couldn’t stop hurting herself by looking. She wanted to know exactly how sinful her life was. How many times did she lie, deceive all these men? How many times did she take advantage of her youthful looks? How mean was she to the older women, dismissive to anyone who, unlike her, aged in a natural, sophisticated way? And just today she killed a man. The picture was the only proof of that, crimson splattered all over it. Diana caressed its red with her finger, fascinated and terrified.

Without warning, somebody came into the room, startling her.

“Darling, go to bed,” Aunt Helen came closer with a concerned look on her face.

Diana jumped to hide the portrait, but it was already too late. Lady Helen approached it.

“So it worked,” She let out, relieved. “I knew it.”

“Yes, it did,” Diana replied with a shaking voice, taking a step back. “But I’m not sure I like it. I’d sooner you didn’t make me sit for it.”

“Nonsense. With a face like yours, you can have every man in England. Your dresses fit you perfectly and your feet are soft and petite. You’re still girly and pure...”

“Not in the least am I pure, Aunt Helen,” She interrupted, tone grim. “I have sinned. I’ve been sinning everyday since you’d told me to drink carelessly from the cup of life. You tricked me into this. I feel like a little girl, like a witless doll...”

“As you should!” The woman burst out. “In the end, you *are just a girl*. You’d never be more than just a pretty face. But isn’t that *enough*? Look at the fun you’re having! I wish I was you. I wish I had what you have. So stop complaining, you foolish thing...”

“I can’t *sleep at night*! I can’t even look at myself, I don’t recognize myself in the mirror anymore. All I see is my seventeen year-old self and it’s sick, it’s wrong...”

“What *is* wrong is your lack of gratitude. All women want what you have.”

“They all hate me,” Diana hugged herself protectively, feeling worse with each second.

“They all want to be you. And all men want to be *with* you. Now, go to bed, and stop the nonsense.”

She took a step towards her niece and hugged her tightly. It wasn’t affectionate, but forceful - a way to stop the discussion from progressing.

“I don’t want this anymore,” Diana whispered. “I hate all of it. I hate myself.”

With one hand around her aunt’s shoulders and the other still balancing the candelabrum, she braced herself and pushed Lady Helen away.

“And I hate you,” When the words left her mouth, she suddenly ran out of the room, dropping the candle on the way.

She heard a panicked scream as the heat hit her back, flames spreading quickly on the wooden floors and furniture. Diana locked the attic doors behind her and flew, flew downstairs, through the hall, out of the mansion.

The entire roof was on fire. It burnt victoriously, destroying the entire house and everything inside of it. Aunt Helen, books, memories, the ill-fated portrait.

Diana looked up for the last time, as she felt something tugging at her heart strings. Maybe it was Death.

Or maybe it was freedom.