

Tea Cup House

To find the house at the beginning of the world, you'll need to be an investigative sort. The dreamer who listens to the fairy stories, the fables and myths. You'll need follow the map you found curled up and yellowed in a trunk, in that antique store just down the street that is only open on Wednesday afternoons. You'll need to roll up that map and put it in your pack, the pack that also holds your emergency jam sandwich, and every book you think might be useful. You'll have to actually put on your boots and follow those lines scratched on the yellowy paper. You'll have to walk through the pines, and find the valley entrance. The valley that curves around the house like the arms of a mother's hug. You'll have to accept losing the sky beneath the towering branches. Then you'll have to find the lost path that will lead you to this point, standing before this cliff, looking up at the waterfall, the mist on your face, the pouring water merging with the clouds so far above you. And you'll have to marvel very hard, and then put it aside, because you'll need to be absolutely sure that this can't be the end. You'll have to inspect the rock, the pure black obsidian as glossy as glass, that the waterfall is slowly carving its path through. You'll have to look close to notice the anomaly. There, in the obsidian you'll see an old fashioned door bell. You'll have to believe that your eyes aren't playing tricks on you.

Then you'll have to be the type of person, who cannot leave a button unpressed. The button will be slippery with the water and cold under your finger, the tang of brass sharp in the air. You'll press it, because how could you not? You'll stand and wait, your hair damp from the falls that roar beside you, both in your ears and in your bones. You'll have to be the sort of person who hopes, because it will feel like an age has passed before a bell, tolling like a ship's bell in fog, rings out from behind

the waterfall. And then you'll have to trust a breeze, it will ruffle your hair, you'll feel it kissing along your bare shoulders, you can't possibly be wearing a sensible jumper at this junction. You'll watch in awe as for a heart's breath the water parts, and you'll have to be the sort to have the faith in yourself, to run straight through that gap without looking back. Without fearing what might be on the other side.

You'll have to see well in the dark, because the glow worms that dot the cave aren't enough to see by, but of course you'll have brought a torch. You'll flick it on to see the towering walls of the dripping cave curling around you like a god's hands, cradling you there in the blackness. You'll breathe in the cool, damp air that smells faintly of moss and rain and just a little of chocolate ripple. You'll take a tentative step forward and your torch will glance off the edge of a path, glowing blue and white. You'll scramble over rocks, your rucksack, remember it is full of books, bumping hard against your back. You'll duck under the damp ferns that will trail like a banshee's fingers across your face.

Finally you'll be standing on the path, the sun pouring down on you. You'll look down at the path, blinking in the bright light. It's willow pattern, naturally, the path not the light. And then you'll look up and that's when you'll see it, clinging to the rock like lichen, Tea Cup House. The roof is thatched, if you can thatch with ceramics, and the door is bright red. You will walk down the willow pattern path, until you reach the wooden sign that hangs on a wooden frame. You will lean in to read the weathered and faded writing. *Tea Cup House: There are always biscuits.*

Then you will duck under the sign and make your way to the front door, with the roar of the waterfall still sounding in the back of your brain. Now, because we already know you to be an inquisitive soul, we know you'll knock on that bright red door. But you'll be surprised when, instead of a response, the door swings silently

open and the scratchy sound of a gramophone playing a song you half remember your great grandmother loving, will be swirling out.

Your feet will take you inside before you've really realised what's happening, and you'll follow them. Tea Cup House will be cool against your skin as the door closes softly behind you. The light in the house will be soft, almost like honey. It will drift lazily through the air, catching dust motes like they're creatures in amber. You will move forward, drawn by the music, half registering shelves that line the walls stuffed with books of all ages, paintings that fill the gaps and lie stacked against the floor, the wardrobes with dresses from the centuries spilling out in a wild cacophony of fabric, reaching out to you, spinning tales of candlelight and love, of punch and half remembered orangeries. But the music will be stronger, the cups that hang from the loops in the ceiling will clatter gently, the clicking of ceramics and creak of the ancient floorboards surrounds you as you follow the music.

And then we reach today, right now in this moment. We speed to catch up, to skip through all the wills and hopes, like a child in a meadow of flowers. Because it is right now, in this moment right here, that you push open the door, carved with tessellated sugar spoons, and a vast ball room opens up in front of you. It is mirrored with glass so old it is silvered, refracting itself back into the glow of a thousand candles. The gold of the walls, winds through the rock in heavy veins glowing against the obsidian, like threads of memory in a summer's evening. The floor is cracked and lumped, tea plates woven through the marble.

But none of that matters to the two figures in the middle of the floor. They hold each other like they're made of sugar spun caramel, and their feet tread a path clearly worn smooth as they move together seamlessly, to the music that spills over

the balcony, the silver thread in their gowns catches the light as does the silver of their hair.

They dance like it's all they've ever known, together, as familiar as the palms of their wrinkled hands. They are fabulously aged, glorious in their antiquity as they lean into each other, here at the beginning of the world. One in a dress of red velvet, a head taller than her lover, a golden circlet on her brow, the other dressed in green washed blue silk, her silver hair braided on her head like a crown. They move as if they've never been apart.

They have not seen you, or if they have then they do not acknowledge you. They have each other and it is clear that is enough. You sit on one of the dusty red plush armchairs, the new dust motes are captured by the light from the candles. You can feel that this is a story aeons in the making, so you settle back and wait, the music running through your bones, dragging at your memories, to see what your part of it is...

Lottie is in Tilde's arms, as she has been, one way or another, since they met longer ago that she can remember. Lottie looks up at her, her eyes still that same clear blue from that half-forgotten summer's afternoon. Her smile has the same crooked tilt of amusement, the laugh that even then was just for her. The barest Scottish lilt clings, like the moss on a cliff top monolith. "Did you put the gramophone scratch on the Bluetooth Mo ghrá?"

Tilde sniffs, knowing Lottie won't take the anger seriously. "Of course, this is our anniversary. Bluetooth wasn't there then so it shouldn't be here now, I thought gramophone was more appropriate."

Lottie twirls under Tilde's outstretched arm, silver slippers following the path unerringly, as she folds back against Tilde's chest and together they lean back, letting the swell of the music take them, she laughs. "Neither was the gramophone in all fairness."

Tilde feels her familiar weight against her, as her gold slippered foot sweeps out, carving an arc between the rising of the floor. "I know, but still the gramophone is closer." She sneaks a kiss as Lottie spins back past her, hand clasped tightly in hers. She means it as a fleeting tender gesture, but Lottie catches her close, pulling her down and capturing Tilde's hand between them. The music moves on as they stay there, together, the honeyed candlelight soaking into their skin. Lottie's heart thumps against her, Tilde can feel it deep in her bones, a sound she knows as well as, well, her own heartbeat.

They break apart and Tilde tucks a curl back into Lottie's plaited crown. "You are so lovely." Her words are little more than a breath, but Lottie hears, as she always does.

"As the day we met?" She steps back, running her hands down her own body. "There's a lot more of me now, and." Her hands trace the lines caved deep into her face. "And well I'm not exactly full of youthful bloom."

Tilde captures one of the gesturing hands, placing it on her own weathered cheek. "Neither am I Mein Liebling. They are maps, of our lives, together, written close on our skins."

Lottie places Tilde's hand over her own, the familiar pattern of phrases falling from her lips. A story told over and over again. "Like this house, it has become us. And there is no memory I would lose, we are our stories."

Tilde pulls her close then, as the music crescendos again, she spins her out. "And our stories are us."

Lottie's eyes are bright in the candlelight, her smile wide and fearless. Tilde's breath catches in her throat. It's the look that was on Lottie's face when she suggested they leapt off

the cliff into the loch to escape those she had called family. “We are us. Leap with me Mo ghrá.”

The words are the same, but this time there is no loch. Tilde nearly catches her foot. This isn’t the pattern, this isn’t the story. “Leap where Lottie? Mein Liebling, leap where? We are home, at the beginning and the end, where do we leap?”

Lottie tugs her hand, pulling her out of the rhythm of the dance. “Where we’ve never leapt before.”

Tilde follows her, as she has every moment since she first danced across to her in front of the fire so long ago. Lottie tugs her over to one of the mirrored walls. Even in the refracted, silvered, surface, Tilde can see the two of them reflected there. If she stares hard enough she can almost imagine the years peeling back in the flickering light, Lottie’s bright red curls bouncing in lost sunshine, her own long sun browned limbs, lithe and strong.

Lottie’s voice is soft against her neck. “Tilde, my heart, what do you see?”

Tilde leans in. “Us. Always us.”

Lottie smiles, Tilde watches as her reflected hand traces the outline of the two of them. “And how do we look?”

Tilde can’t help her own smile. “Old.”

Lottie’s arm is tight around her waist. “Positively ancient in fact.”

Tilde’s thoughts surge as the words from long ago ring between them. An autumn evening, in a cabin a thousand miles and years beyond years away. Snuggled up in front of the open fire. Tilde looking down. “We are forever aren’t we?” Her anxiety spilling into her words like ink in water.

Lottie looking up. “Of course Mo ghrá. Until we are positively ancient.” The next day they’d found themselves on the edge of what became their mountain range.

Tilde’s thoughts tumble over and over. Until, until, until.

Lottie squeezes her hand hard. “No, not like that Tilde.”

Tilde can’t help her smile. Sometimes she thinks Lottie knows her thoughts better than she does herself.

Lottie squeezes her hand. “Never that. Clotilde Schmidt, you are mine, we are us, that never ends. But.” She gestures around. “But, I think something must end.”

Tilde looks around, at the silvered glass, the floor rising in lumps, the light that can’t decide how light should behave. Her thoughts slip out to the open cupboards, the fire in the kitchen that will never go out, but always burns too hot. She suddenly feels like the house is her bones, creaking, old, positively ancient in fact. She turns from the reflected Lottie to meet the eyes of the incredible woman standing next to her, where she has always been. Her breath is tight in her chest. “We’ve reached the end haven’t we.” It’s not really a question.

Lottie takes her hand. “I think so. Whatever has given us this incredible life –“

“Faith,”

“Hope”

“A forgotten bargain with the devil.”

“Or that witch we met in Prague.”

They both laugh. Lottie continues. “However we have had this extraordinary life, this gift, I am beyond honoured to have walked, danced, it with you Clotilde Schmit, my Tilde, my heart Mo ghrá .”

Tilde’s voice is tight in her chest, she can feel the tears bright in her eyes. Her bones creaking, she pulls Lottie into her arms. “As am I Charlotte McKenzie. I would have leapt into a thousand lochs with you. And it all has led us here, to the house that has grown with us, a refuge for the lost, as we were then.”

“From everyone but each other.”

“As you say. But we stayed, and it has become us. You’re right.” She takes a deep breath and she can feel the house creaking around her. “It needs new guardians. So it can grow with another life, so it can wake again.”

Lottie wipes the tears off Tilde’s cheek with her fingers. “Do you think it’ll keep the dresses?”

Tilde smiles damply. “I’d like to think so. We put so much effort into them, and the books and the pictures. Though maybe in the attics, like the memories of those before us we found?”

Lottie smiles back and pulls her lips down to hers.

As they break apart Tilde says. “Who will be next do you think?”

Lottie gently turns them both so Tilde can see the figure on the plush red chair in the corner. “I think they’re here already.”

“What are they running from do you think?”

“I don’t suppose we’ll ever know.”

Together they move back to the middle of the floor. The music swells and they dance like they are young again. Following the pattern worn on the floor.

Lottie’s voice is for Tilde alone. “We need to leap. Like we did all those years ago.”

Tilde pulls Lottie close to her and as the music builds, they waltz to a different song, one no one living will ever hear.

Clasped together they whisper. “We are the Story.”

And then they are gone.

You sit on your chair barely daring to breathe as the music slowly dies out. The candles begin to flicker out one by one. The whole house shudders, like a dog

shaking off water. Daylight, threads of it, begin to waver in from the glass ceiling, the floor trembles and then stretches and settles. You stand, tentatively, seeing your wide eyed face reflected again and again in the clean mirrors, the walls around them gleaming bright. The floor is smooth under your feet, polished marble with inlaid plates, but a path winds through it of the brightest gold, a path danced for eons. Their story writ in stone.

You kneel in the middle of the ballroom and put your palm against the marble. You aren't entirely sure what you are running from either, but you know you have found refuge, found home. The floor is oddly warm beneath your fingers. The words come unbidden. "I am the Story. The Story is me." Then, a breath. "What shall I call you?"