

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This “Sample Chapter” from Incunabula’s new, museum-quality edition of John Crowley’s *Little, Big* is a medium-resolution PDF copy of the InDesign file for Book Six, Chapter Two. While some of the art details found on the following pages appear to be color-tinted (an artifact of the inks and papers used to create prints of Milton’s essentially black-and-shades-of-grey art, as captured in the RGB digital photographs we took in order to reproduce that art here), in the published edition all art will be printed in duotones of black and grey. As for the style of the art layouts in 6.2: taken together, they are not representative of the style of the layouts in any other chapter; our goal has been to interweave art and text in ways that are subtly or significantly different from chapter to chapter, over and above the differences in the content of the art itself. This PDF file and copies printed from it are intended for private use only and are not to be sold or distributed in any form without written permission from the Publisher; that said, we certainly encourage folks to spread the word about its availability as a free download on the littlebig25.com website. Text © 1981 and 2013 by John Crowley. Art © 2013 by Peter Milton. Edition © 2013 by Ron Drummond. Design by John D. Berry and Ron Drummond. All rights reserved.



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To remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation.

— SAMUEL JOHNSON, “CYMBELINE”

SOPHIE TOO had gone to bed early and not to sleep.

What a surprise

In her old figured bed-jacket, with a cardigan over it, she lay huddled close to the candle on the bedside table, two of her fingers only allowed out from the bedclothes to hold open the pages of the second volume of an ancient three-volume novel. When the candle began to gutter, she reached into the table's drawer, took out another, lit it from the first, pressed it down into the candlestick, sighed, and turned the page. She was far, far from the final weddings; only now had the will been secreted in the old cabinet; the bishop's daughter thought of the ball. The door of Sophie's room opened, and a child came in.

She wore only a blue dress, without sleeves or a belt. She came a step through the door, her hand still on its knob, smiling the smile of a child who has a terrific secret to tell — one that might amuse, but might annoy, the grown-up she stands before; and for a time she only stood in the doorway, glowing faintly in the candlelight, her chin lowered and her eyes raised to Sophie turned to stone on the bed.

Then she said: “Hello, Sophie.”

She looked just as Sophie had imagined she would, at the age she would have been when Sophie had been unable to imagine her further. The candle-flame shivered in the draft from the open door,

which cast strange shadows over the child, and Sophie grew for a moment as afraid and struck with strangeness as she had ever in her life been, but this was no ghost. Sophie could tell that by the way the child, having come in, turned to push the heavy door closed behind her. No ghost would have done that.

She came slowly toward the bed, hands clasped behind her, with her secret in her smile. She said to Sophie: "Can you guess my name?"

That she spoke was for some reason harder for Sophie to take in than that she stood there, and Sophie for the first time knew what it was not to believe her ears: they told her that the child had spoken, but Sophie didn't believe it, and couldn't imagine answering. It would have been like speaking to some part of herself, some part that had suddenly and inexplicably become detached from her and then turned to face her, and question her.

The child laughed a small laugh; she was enjoying this. "You don't," she said. "Do you want me to give you a hint?"

A hint! Not a ghost, and not a dream, for Sophie was awake; not her daughter, certainly, for her daughter had been taken from her over twenty-five years ago, and this was a child: yet for sure Sophie knew her name. She had raised her hands to her face, and between them now she said or whispered: "Lilac."

Lilac looked a little disappointed. "Yes," she said. "How did you know?"

Sophie laughed, or sobbed, or both at once. "Lilac," she said.

Lilac laughed, and made to climb up on the bed with her mother, and Sophie perforce had to help her up: she took Lilac's arm, wondering, afraid that perhaps she would herself feel her own touch, and if she did, then – then what? But Lilac was flesh, cool flesh, it was a child's wrist her fingers circled; she drew up Lilac's real solid weight with her strength, and Lilac's knee pressed the bed and made it jounce, and every sense Sophie had was certain now that Lilac was here before her.

"Well," Lilac said, brushing the golden hair from before her eyes with a quick gesture. "Aren't you surprised?" She watched Sophie's

stricken face. "Don't you say hello or kiss me or anything?"

"Lilac," Sophie only said again; for there had been for many, many years one thought forbidden to Sophie, one unimaginable scene, this one, and she was unrehearsed; the moment and the child were just as she would have imagined them to be if she had allowed herself to imagine them at all, but she had not, and now she was unready and undone.

"*You say,*" Lilac said, indicating Sophie – it hadn't been easy memorizing all this, and it should come out right – "*you say, 'Hello, Lilac, what a surprise,'* because you haven't seen me since I was a baby; and then I say, 'I came a long way, to tell you this and this,' and you listen, but *first* before that part you say how much you missed me since I was stolen, and we hug." She flung open her arms, her face pretending to radiant, poignant joy to cue Sophie; and there was nothing then for Sophie to do but to open her arms too, no matter how slowly and tentatively (not fearful now but only deeply shy before the impossibility of it) and take Lilac in them.

"You say, 'What a surprise,'" Lilac reminded her, whispering close to her ear.

Lilac's odor was of snow and self and earth. "What a surprise," Sophie began to say, but couldn't finish it, because tears of grief and wonderment flew up her throat behind the words, bringing with them all that Sophie had been denied and had denied herself all these years. She wept, and Lilac, surprised herself now, thought to draw away, but Sophie held her; and so Lilac patted her back gently to comfort her.

"Yes," she said to her mother, "yes, I came back; I came a long way, a long long way."

She may have come a long, long way; for sure she remembered that this was what she was to say. She remembered no long journey, though; either she had awakened only after most of it had been sleepwalked away, or in fact it had really been quite short...

"Sleepwalked?" Sophie asked.

"I've been asleep," Lilac said. "For so long. I didn't know I'd sleep

Walking from there

so long. Longer than the bears even. Oh, I've been asleep ever since a day, since the day I woke you up. Do you remember?"

"No," Sophie said.

"On a day," Lilac said, "I stole your sleep. I shouted 'Wake up!' and pulled your hair."

"Stole my sleep?"

"Because I needed it. I'm sorry," she said gleefully.

"That day," Sophie said, thinking How odd to be so old and full of things, and have your life inverted as a child's can be. . . . That day. And had she slept since then?

"Since then," Lilac said. "Then I came here."

"Here. From where?"

"From there. From sleep. Anyway. . ."

She awoke, anyway, out of the longest dream in the world, forgetting all of it or nearly all of it as she did so, to find herself stepping along a dark road at evening, silent fields of snow on either side and a still cold pink-and-blue sky all around, and a task she'd been prepared for before she slept, and which her long sleep had not forgotten, ahead of her to do. All that was clear enough, and Lilac didn't wonder at it; often enough in her growing up she'd found herself suddenly in strange circumstances, emerging from one enchantment into another like a child carried sleeping from a bed to a celebration and waking, blinking, staring, but accepting it all because familiar hands hold him. So her feet fell one after the other, and she watched a crow, and climbed a hill, and saw the last spark of a red sun go out, and the pink of the sky deepen and the snow turn blue; and only then, as she descended, did she wonder where she was, and how much further she had to go.

There was a cottage at the bottom of the hill, amid dense small evergreens, from whose windows yellow lamplight shone out into the blue evening. When Lilac reached it she pushed open the little white gate in its picket fence – a bell tinkled within the house as she did so – and started up the path. The head of a gnome, his high hat doubled by a hat of snow, looked out over the drifted lawn, as he had been doing for years and years.

"The Junipers," Sophie said.

"What?"

"It was the Junipers," Sophie said. "Their cottage."

There was an old, old woman there, the oldest (except for Mrs. Underhill and her daughters) Lilac had ever seen. She opened her door, held up a lamp, and said in a small old voice, "Friend or Foe? Oh, my," for she saw then that a nearly naked child, barefoot and hatless, stood before her on the path.

Margaret Juniper did nothing foolish; she only opened the door so that Lilac could enter if she liked, and after a moment Lilac decided that she would, and went in and down the tiny hall across the scatter rug and past the knickknack shelf (long undusted, for Marge was afraid of breaking things with her old hands, and couldn't any longer see the dust anyway) and through the arched doorway into the parlor, where a fire was lit in the stove. Marge followed with the lamp, but then at the doorway wasn't sure she wanted to enter; she watched the child sit down in the maple chair with broad paddle arms that had been Jeff's, and put her hands flat on the arms, as though they pleased or amused her. Then she looked up at Marge.

"Can you tell me," she said, "am I on the right road for Edgewood?"

"Yes," Marge said, Somehow not surprised to be asked this.

"Oh," Lilac said. "I have to bring a message there." She held up her hands and feet to the stove, but didn't seem to be chilled through; and Marge didn't wonder at that either. "How far is it?"

"Hours," Marge said.

"Oh. How many?"

"I never walked there," Marge said.

"Oh. Well, I'm a fast walker." She jumped up then, and pointed inquiringly in a direction, and Marge shook her head No, and Lilac laughed and pointed in the opposite direction. Marge nodded Yes. She stood aside for the child to pass her again, and followed her to the door.

"Thank you," Lilac said, her hand on the door. Marge chose, from



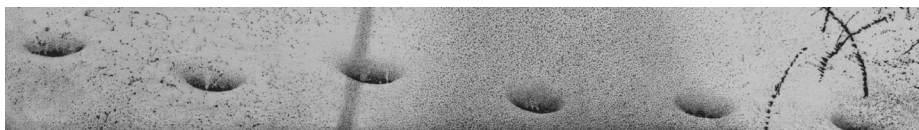
a bowl by the door of mixed dollar bills and candy with which she paid the boys who shoveled her walk and split her wood, a large chocolate, and offered it to Lilac, who took it with a smile, and then rose on tiptoe and kissed Marge's old cheek. Then she went out and down the path, and turned toward Edgewood without looking back.

Marge stood in the door watching her, filled with the odd sensation that it had been only for this tiny visit that she had lived her whole long life, that this cottage by the roadside and this lamp in her hand and the whole chain of events which had caused them to be had always and only had this visit for their point. And Lilac too, walking fast, remembered just then that of *course* she was to have visited that house, and said what she did say to the old woman there – it was the taste of the chocolate that reminded her – and that by next evening, an evening as still and blue as this one or stiller, everyone in the pentacle of five towns around Edgewood would know that Marge Juniper had had a visitor.

“But,” Sophie said, “you can't have walked here since evening....”

“I walk fast,” Lilac said; “or maybe I took a shortcut.”

Whatever way she had taken had led her past a frozen lake and a lake island all glittering in starlight, where a little pillared gazebo stood up, or perhaps it was only snow-shapes that suggested such a place; and through woods, waking a chickadee; and past a place,





a sort of castle iced with snow...

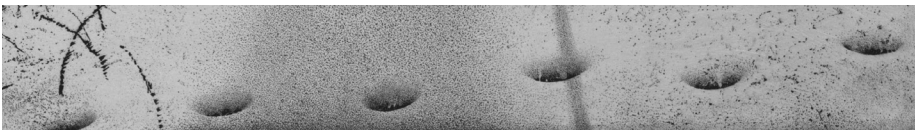
"The Summer House," Sophie said.

...a place she'd seen before, from above, in another season long ago. She came toward it through what had been the flower beds that bordered its lawn, gone wild now and with only the tall dead stalks of hollyhock and mullein standing above the snow. There were the grey bones of a canvas sling-chair in the yard. She thought, seeing them: wasn't there some message, or some comfort, she was to deliver here? She stood for a moment, looking at the derelict chair and the squat house where not a single footprint went through the snow up to the half-engulfed door, a summery screen door, and for the first time she shivered in the cold, but couldn't remember what the message was or whom it had been for, if there really had been one at all; and so passed on.

"Auberon," Sophie said.

"No," Lilac said. "Not *Auberon*."

She walked through the graveyard, not knowing it to be such; the plot of ground where John Drinkwater had first been buried and then others beside him or near him, some known to him and some not. Lilac wondered at the big carved stones placed at random here and there, like giant forgotten toys. She studied them awhile, walking from one to another and brushing off their caps of snow to look at sad angels, and deep-incised letters, and granite finials, while



beneath her feet, beneath the snow and black leaves and earth, stiff bones relaxed, and hollow chests would have sighed if they could have, and old attitudes of attention and expectancy undissolved by death were softened; and (as sleepers do when a troublesome dream passes or a bothering noise, the crying of a cat or a lost child, ceases) those asleep there rested more deeply and slept at last truly as Lilac walked above them.

“Violet,” Sophie said, her tears flowing freely and painlessly now, “and John; and Harvey Cloud, and Great-aunt Cloud. Daddy. And Violet’s father too. And Auberon.”

Yes: and Auberon: that Auberon. Standing above him, on the bosom of earth that lay on his bosom, Lilac felt clearer about her message, and her purpose. It was all getting clearer, as though she continued to wake further all the time after waking. “Oh, yes,” she said to herself; “oh, yes...” She turned to see, past black firs, the dark pile of the house with not a light showing, as snow-burdened as the firs, but unmistakable; and soon she found a path to there, and a door to go in by, and steps to go up, and glass-knobbed doors to choose from.

“And then, and now,” she said, kneeling on the bed before Sophie, “I have to tell you what.

“If I can remember it all.”

A Parliament “I was right, then,” Sophie said. A third candle was burning down. Deep midnight was in the room. “Only a few.”

“Fifty-two,” Lilac said. “Counting them all.”

“So few.”

“It’s the War,” Lilac said. “They’ve all gone. And the ones left are old – so old. You can’t imagine.”

“But why?” Sophie said. “Why if they knew they must lose so many?”

Lilac shrugged, looking away. It didn’t seem part of her mission to explain, only to give news, and a summons; she couldn’t explain to Sophie either exactly what had become of her when she had been stolen, or how she had lived: when Sophie questioned her, she

answered as all children do, with hasty references to strangers and events unknown to her hearer, expecting it all to be understood, to be as familiar to the grown-up as to the child: but Lilac was not as other children. “*You* know,” she only said, impatiently, and returned to the news she had come to bring: that the War was to end; that there was to be a peace conference, a Parliament, to which all who could come must come, to resolve this, and end the long sad time.



A Parliament, where all who came would meet face to face. Face to face: when Lilac said it to her, Sophie felt a hum in her head and a pause in her heartbeat, as though Lilac had announced to her her death, or something as final and unimagined.

“So you must come,” Lilac said. “You have to. Because they’re so few now, the War has to end. We have to make a Treaty, for everybody.”

“A Treaty.”

“Or they’ll *all* be lost,” Lilac said. “The winter might go on, and never end. They could do that, they could: the last thing they could do.”

“Oh,” Sophie said. “No. Oh, no.”

“It’s in your hands,” Lilac said, stately, minatory; and then, solemn message done, she threw her arms wide. “So all right?” she said happily. “You’ll come? All of you?”

Sophie put her cold knuckles to her lips. Lilac, smiling, alive and alight in the winter-dusty room: and this news. Sophie felt vacant, disappeared. If there were a ghost here, it was Sophie and not her daughter.

Her daughter!

“But how?” she said. “How are we to go there?”

Lilac looked at her in dismay. “You don’t know that?” she said.

“Once I did,” Sophie said, tears gathering again in her throat. “Once I thought I could find it, once... Oh, why did you wait so *long!*” With a pang she saw, dead, buried within her, the possibilities that Lilac spoke of: dead because Sophie had crushed all possibility that Lilac could ever sit here and speak them. She had lived long with terrible possibilities – Lilac dead, or utterly transformed – and had faced them; but Tacey and Lily’s ancient prediction (though she had counted years, and even studied the cards for a date) she had never allowed herself to believe. The effort had been huge, and had cost her terribly; she had lost, in her effort not to imagine this moment, all her childhood’s certainties, all those commonplace impossibilities; had lost, even, without quite noticing it, every vivid memory she had ever had of those daily impossibilities, of the sweet unreasonable air of wonder she had once lived in. Thus she had protected herself; this moment hadn’t been able to injure her – kill her, for it would have! – in her imagining it; and so she had at least been able to go on from day to day. But too many thin and shadowed years had gone by now, too many. “I can’t,” she said. “I don’t know. I don’t know the way.”

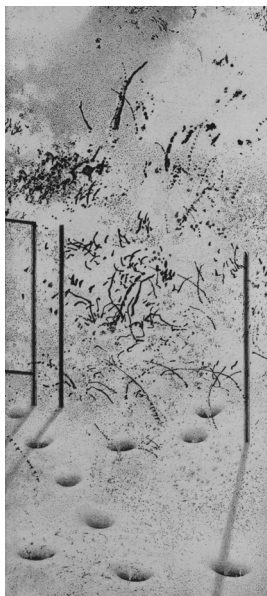
“You must,” Lilac said simply.

“I don’t,” Sophie said, shaking her head. “I don’t, and even if I did I’d be afraid.” Afraid! That was the worst: afraid to take steps away from this dark old house, as afraid as any ghost. “Too long,” she said, wiping her wet nose on the sleeve of her cardigan, “too long.”

“But the house is the door!” Lilac said. “Everybody knows that. It’s marked on all their maps.”

“It is?”

“Yes. So.”



“And from here?”

Lilac looked at her blankly. “Well,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Lilac,” Sophie said. “I’ve had a sad life, you see...”

“Oh? Oh, *I* know,” Lilac said, brightening. “Those cards! Where are they?”

“There,” Sophie said, pointing to where the box of different woods from the Crystal Palace lay on the night table. Lilac reached for them, and pulled open the box. “Why did you have a sad life?” she asked, extracting the cards.

“Why?” Sophie said. “Because you were stolen, partly, mostly...”

“Oh, *that*. Well, that doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?” Sophie laughed, weeping.

“No, that was just the beginning.” She was shuffling the big cards awkwardly in her small hands. “Didn’t you know that?”

“No. No, I thought... I think I thought it was the end.”

“Oh, that’s silly. If I hadn’t been stolen, I couldn’t have had my Education, and if I hadn’t had my Education I couldn’t have brought this news now, that it’s *really* beginning; so that was all right, don’t you see?”

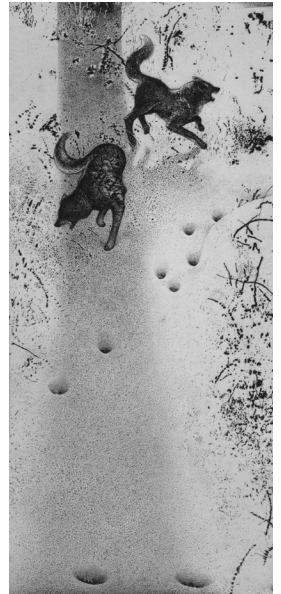
Sophie watched her shuffle the cards, dropping some and sticking them back in the deck, in a sort of parody of careful arrangement. She tried to imagine the life Lilac had led, and couldn’t. “Did you,” she asked, “ever miss me, Lilac?”

Lilac shrugged one shoulder, busy.

“There,” she said, and gave the deck to Sophie. “Follow that.” Sophie slowly took the cards from her, and just for a moment Lilac seemed to see her – to see her truly, for the first time since she had entered. “Sophie,” she said. “Don’t be sad. It’s all so much larger than you think.” She put her hand over Sophie’s. “Oh, there’s a fountain there – or a waterfall, I forget – and you can wash there – oh it’s so clear and icy cold and – oh, it’s all, it’s all so much bigger than you think!”

She climbed down from the bed. “You sleep now,” she said. “I have to go.”

“Go where? I won’t sleep, Lilac.”





“You will,” Lilac said. “You can, now; because I’m awake.”

“Oh?” She lay back slowly on the pillows that Lilac reached to plump up for her.

“Because,” Lilac said, with the secret in her smile again, “because I stole your sleep; but now I’m awake, and you can sleep.”

Sophie, exhausted, clasped the cards. “Where,” she said, “will you go? It’s dark and cold.”

Lilac shuddered, but she only said, “You sleep.” She raised herself on tiptoe beside the tall bed and, brushing the pale curls from Sophie’s cheek, kissed her lightly. “Sleep.”

She stepped noiselessly across the floor, opened the door, and with a glance back at her mother, went out into the still, cold hall. She closed the door behind her.

Sophie lay staring at the blankness of the door. The third candle guttered out with a hiss and a pop. Still holding the cards, Sophie wiggled slowly down within the quilts and coverlets, thinking – or perhaps not thinking, not thinking at all but feeling certain – that Lilac had, in some regard, been lying to her; in some regard misleading her at least; but in what regard?

Sleep.

In what regard? She was thinking, like a mental breathing: in what regard? She was breathing this when she knew, with a gasp of delight in her soul that almost woke her, that she was asleep.

Not all over Auberon, yawning, glanced first through the mail that Fred Savage had brought the night before from uptown.

“Dear World Elsewhere,” a lady with peacock-green ink wrote, “I am writing now to ask you a question I have long pondered. I would like to know, if at all possible, *where is that house where the Mac-Reynolds and the others live?* I must say that it is very important to me personally to know this. Its exact location. I wouldn’t bother you by writing except that I find it impossible to imagine. When they used to live at Shady Acres (way back when!) well, I could imagine that easily enough, but I cannot imagine this other place they’ve ended up. Please give me some kind of hint. I can hardly think of anything

else.” She signed herself his hopefully, and added a postscript: “I sincerely promise not to *bother* anybody.” Auberon glanced at the postmark – way out West – and tossed it in the woodbox.

Now what the hell, he wondered, was he doing awake so early? Not to read mail. He glanced at Doc’s old square-faced wristwatch on the mantelpiece. Oh, yes: milking. All this week. He roughly pulled the covers of the bed in place, put a hand under the footboard, said “*Up* we go,” and magicked it into a mirror-fronted old wardrobe. The click of its locking into upright place he always found satisfying.

He pulled on tall boots and a heavy sweater, looking out the window at a light snow falling. Yawning again (would George have coffee? Yours hopefully) he pushed his hat on his head and went out clumping, locking the Folding Bedroom’s doors behind him and making his way down the stairs, out the window, down the fire escape, into the hall, through the wall and out onto the stairs that led down to the Mouse kitchen.

At the bottom he came on George.

“You’re not going to believe this,” George said.

Auberon stopped. George said nothing more. He looked like he’d seen a ghost: Auberon at once recognized the look, though he’d never before seen anyone who’d seen a ghost. Or like a ghost himself, if ghosts can look stricken, overcome by conflicting emotions, and amazed out of their wits. “What?”

“You are *not*. Gonna believe this.” He was in socks of great antiquity and a quilted boxer’s dressing gown. He took Auberon’s hand and began to lead him down the hall toward the door of the kitchen. “What,” Auberon said again. The back of George’s dressing gown said it belonged to the Yonkers A.C.

At the door – which stood ajar – George turned again to Auberon. “Now just for God’s sake,” he whispered urgently, “don’t say a word about, you know, that story. That story I told you, about – you know –” he glanced at the open door – “about Lilac,” he said, or rather did not say, he only moved his lips around the name silently, exaggeratedly, and winked a frightened warning wink. Then he pushed open the door.





“Look,” he said. “Look, look,” as though Auberon were capable of not looking. “My kid.”

The child sat on the edge of the table, swinging her crossed bare legs back and forth.

“Hello, Auberon,” she said. “You got big.”

Auberon, feeling a feeling like crossed eyes in his soul but looking steadily at the child, touched the place in his heart where his imaginary Lilac was kept. She was there.

Then this was —

“Lilac,” he said.

“My kid. Lilac,” George said.

“But how?”

“Don’t ask me how,” George said.

“It’s a long story,” Lilac said. “The longest story I know.”

“There’s this meeting on,” George said.

“A Parliament,” Lilac said. “I came to tell you.”

“She came to tell us.”

“A Parliament,” Auberon said. “What on earth.”

“Listen, man,” George said. “Don’t ask me. I came down to brew a little coffee, and there’s a knocking at the door...”

“But why,” Auberon asked, “is she so young?”





“You’re asking me? So I peeked out, and here’s this kid in the snow...”

“She should be a lot older.”

“She was asleep. Or some damn thing. What do I know. So I open the door...”

“This is all kind of hard to believe,” Auberon said.

Lilac had been looking from one to the other of them, hands clasped in her lap, smiling a smile of cheerful love for her father, and of sly complicity at Auberon. The two stopped talking then, and only looked at her. George came closer. The look he wore was an anxious, joyful wonderment, as though he’d just hatched Lilac himself. “Milk,” he said, snapping his fingers. “How about a glass of milk? Kids like milk, right?”

“I can’t,” Lilac said, laughing at his solicitude. “I can’t, here.”

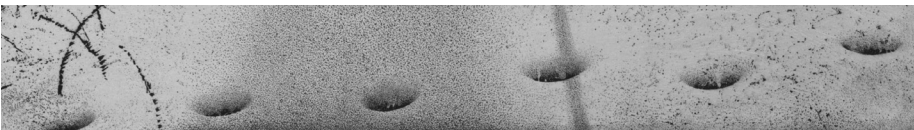
But George was already bustling with a jelly jar and a canister of goat’s milk from the refrigerator. “Sure,” he said. “Milk.”

“Lilac,” Auberon said. “Where is it you want us to go?”

“To where the meeting is,” Lilac said. “The Parliament.”

“But where? Why? What...”

“Oh, Auberon,” Lilac said, impatient, “they’ll explain all that when you get there. You just have to come.”



“They?”

Lilac turned up her eyes in mock-stupefaction. “Oh, come *on*,” she said. “You just have to hurry, that’s all, so as not to be late...”

“Nobody’s going anywhere now,” George said, putting the milk in Lilac’s hands. She looked at it curiously, and put it down. “Now you’re back, and that’s great, I don’t know from where or how, but you’re here and safe, and we’re staying here.”

“Oh, but you *must* come,” Lilac said, taking the sleeve of his dressing gown. “You have to. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise?” George asked.

“It won’t come out right,” Lilac said softly. “The Tale,” she said, even more softly.

“Oho,” George said. “Oho, the Tale. Well.” He stood before her arms akimbo, nodding a skeptical nod but lost for an answer.

Auberon watched them, father and daughter, thinking: *It’s not all over, then*. That had been the thought he had begun to think as soon as he entered the old kitchen, or rather not to think but to know, to know by the rising of the hair on his nape and the weird swarm of feeling, the feeling that his eyes were crossing and yet seeing more clearly than before. Not all over: he had lived long in a small room, a folding bedroom, and had explored its every corner, had come to know it as he knew his own bowels, and had decided: this is all right, this will do, a sort of life can be lived here, here’s a chair by the fire and a bed to sleep in and a window to look out of; if it was constricted, that was made up for by how much simple sense it made. And now it was as though he had lowered the front of the mirrored wardrobe and found not a bed clothed in patched sheets and an old quilt but a portal, a ship in full sail raising anchor, a windy dawn and an avenue beneath tall trees disappearing far out of sight.

He shut it up, fearful. He’d had his adventure. He’d followed outlandish paths, and hadn’t for no good reason given them up. He got up, and clumped to the window in his rubber boots. Unmilked, the goats bewailed in their apartments.

“No,” he said. “I’m not going, Lilac.”



"But you haven't even heard the *reasons*," Lilac said.

"I don't care."

"The War! The Peace!" Lilac said.

"Don't care." He'd stick. He wouldn't miss the whole world if it passed him by on the way there, and it probably would; or perhaps he would miss it, but he'd rather that than take his life in his teeth and pass into that sea again, that sea Desire, now that he'd escaped it, and found a shore. Never.

"Auberon," Lilac said softly. "Sylvie will be there."

Never. Never never never.

"Sylvie?" George said.

"Sylvie," Lilac said.

When there had been no further word from either of them for some time, Lilac said, "She told me to tell you..."

"She didn't!" Auberon said, turning on her. "She didn't, it's a lie! No! I don't know why you want to fool us, I don't know why or for what you came, but you'll say anything, won't you, won't you? Anything but the truth! Just like all of them, because it doesn't *matter* to you. No, no, you're just as bad as they are, I know it, just as bad as that Lilac that George blew up, that fake one. No different."

"Oh, *great*," George said, casting his eyes upward. "That's just great."

"Blew up?" Lilac said, looking at George.

"It was *not my fault*," George said, rifling a furious look at Auberon.

"So *that's* what happened to it," Lilac said thoughtfully. Then she laughed. "Oh, they were mad! When the ashes drifted down. It was hundreds of years old, and the last one they had." She climbed down from the table, her blue skirt riding up. "I have to go now," she said, and started toward the door.

"No," Auberon said. "Wait."

"Go! No," George said, and reached out as though to take her arm.

"There's so much to do," Lilac said. "And this is all settled here, so... Oh," she said. "I forgot. *Your* way is mostly in the forest, so it would be best if you had a guide. Somebody who knows the woods, and can help you along. Bring a coin, for the ferryman; dress warm.



There are lots of doors, but some are quicker than others. Don't be too long, or you'll miss the banquet!" She was at the door, but rushed back to leap into George's arms. She circled his neck in her thin golden arms, kissed his lean cheeks, and scrambled down again. "It's going to be so much fun," she said; she glanced once at them, smiling a smile of simple sweet wickedness and pleasure, and was gone. They heard the pat of her bare feet on the old linoleum outside, but didn't hear the street door open, or shut.

George took from a leaning hatrack his overalls and coat, pulled them on, and then his boots; he went to the door, but when he reached it he seemed to forget what he was about, or why he hurried. He looked around himself, found no clue, and went to sit at the table.

Auberon slowly took the chair opposite him, and for a long time they sat silent, sometimes starting but seeing nothing, while a certain light or meaning was subtracted from the room, returning it to ordinariness, turning it to a kitchen where porridge was made and goat's milk drunk and two bachelors sat rubber-boot to rubber-boot at the table, with chores still to be done.

And a journey to go: that was left.

"Okay," George said. "What?" He looked up, but Auberon hadn't spoken.

"No," Auberon said.

"She said," George said, but then couldn't exactly say what; couldn't forget what she had said but (what with the goats bawling, what with the snow outside, what with his own heart emptying and filling) couldn't remember it either.

"Sylvie," Auberon said.

"A guide," George said, snapping his fingers.

There were footsteps in the hall.

"A guide," George said. "She said we'd need a guide."

They both turned to look at the door, which just then opened.

Fred Savage came in, wearing *his* rubber boots, and ready for his breakfast.

"Guide?" he said. "Somebody goan someplace?"



“Is it her?” Sophie asked. She pushed aside the window’s drape further to look.

“It must be,” Alice said.

Not often enough now did headlights turn in at the stone gateposts for it to be very likely anyone else. The long, low car, black in the twilight, swept the house with its brilliant eyes as it bounced up the rutty drive; it pulled around in front of the porch, its lights went out but its impatient burble went on for a while. Then it fell silent.

“George?” Sophie asked. “Auberon?”

“I don’t see them. No one but her.”

“Oh dear.”

“All right,” Alice said. “Her at least.” They turned away from the window to the expectant faces of those gathered in the double drawing room. “She’s here,” Alice said. “We’ll start soon.”

Ariel Hawksquill, after stilling the car’s motor, sat for a moment listening to the new silence. Then she worked her way out of the seat’s grasp. She took from the seat next to her an alligator shoulder bag, and stood in the slight drizzle that was falling; she breathed deeply of the evening air, and thought: Spring.

For the second time she had driven north to Edgewood, this time over the ruts and potholes of a degenerated road system, and passing

*Lady with the
Alligator Purse*



this time checkpoints where passes and visas had to be shown, a thing that would have been unthinkable five years before when she had come here. She supposed that she had been followed, at least partway, but no tail could have kept up with her through the tangle of rainy roads that led from the highway to here. She came alone. The letter from Sophie had been odd but urgent: urgent enough, she hoped, to justify sending it (Hawksquill had insisted her cousins never write to her at the Capital, she knew her mail was scanned) and to justify a journey and a long absence from the Government at a critical time.

“Hello, Sophie,” she said, when the two tall sisters came out on the porch. There was no welcoming light lit there. “Hello, Alice.”

“Hello,” Alice said. “Where’s Auberon? Where’s George? We asked...”

Hawksquill mounted the steps. “I went to the address,” she said, “and knocked a long time. The place looked abandoned...”

“It always does,” Sophie said.

“...and no one answered. I thought I heard someone behind the door; I called their names. Someone, someone with an accent, called back that they had gone.”

“Gone?” Sophie said.

“Gone away. I asked where, for how long; but no one answered. I didn’t dare stay too long.”

“Didn’t dare?” Alice said.

“May we go in?” Hawksquill said. “It’s a lovely night, but damp.” Her cousins didn’t know, and, Hawksquill supposed, couldn’t really imagine the danger they might put themselves in by association with her. Deep desires reached out toward this house, not knowing of its existence, yet sniffing closer all the time. But there was no need (she hoped) to alarm them.

There was no light in the hall but a dull candle, making the place shadowy and vast; Hawksquill followed her cousins down, around, up through the impossible insides of the house into a set of two big rooms where a fire burned, lights were lit, and many faces looked up interested and expectant at her arrival.

"This is our cousin," Daily Alice said to them. "Long-lost, sort of; her name is Ariel. This is the family," she said to Ariel, "you know them; and some others.

"So, I guess everybody's here," she said. "Everybody who can come. I'll go get Smoky."

Sophie went to a drum-table where a brass, green-glass-shaded lamp shone, and where the cards lay. Ariel Hawksquill felt her heart rise or sink to see them. Whatever other fates they held or did not hold, Hawksquill knew at that moment that hers was surely in them: was them.

"Hello," she said, nodding briefly to the assembly. She took a straight-backed chair between a very, a remarkably old and bright-eyed lady and two look-alike children, boy and girl, who shared an armchair.

"And how," said Marge Juniper to her, "do you come to be a cousin?"

"As nearly as I can tell," Hawksquill said, "I'm not, really. The father of the Auberon who was Violet Drinkwater's son was my grandfather by a later marriage."

"Oh," Marge said. "That side of the family."

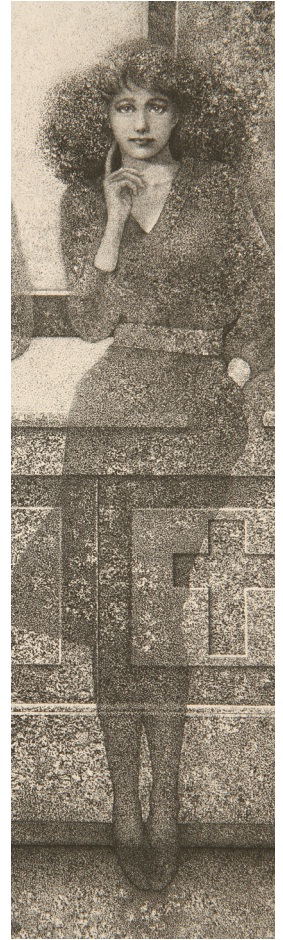
Hawksquill felt eyes on her, and gave a quick glance and a smile at the two children in the armchair, who were staring at her with uncertain curiosity. Rarely see strangers, Hawksquill supposed; but what Bud and Blossom were seeing, in the flesh, with wonder and a little trepidation, was that enigmatic and somewhat fearsome figure who in a song they often sang comes at the crux of the story: the Lady with the Alligator Purse.

Alice climbed quickly up through the house, negotiating dark stairways with the skill of a blind man.

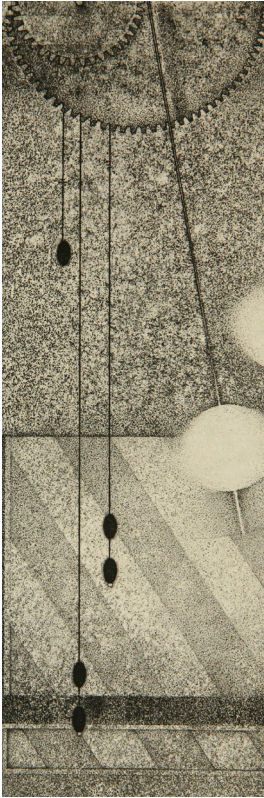
"Smoky?" she called when she stood at the bottom of a narrow curl of steep stairs that led up into the orrery. No one answered, but a light burned up there.

"Smoky?"

She didn't like to go up; the small stairs, the small arched door,



Still unstolen



the cramped cold cupola stuffed with machinery, gave her the willies, it wasn't designed to amuse someone as big as she was.

"Everyone's here," she said. "We can start."

She waited, hugging herself. The damp was palpable on this neglected floor; and brown stains spread over the wallpaper. Smoky said, "All right," but she heard no movement.

"George and Auberon didn't come," she said. "They're gone." She waited more, and then – hearing neither noise of work nor preparations to come down – climbed up the stairs and put her head through the little door.

Smoky sat on a small stool, like a petitioner or penitent before his idol, staring at the mechanism inside the black steel case. Alice felt somewhat shy, or intrusive into a privacy, seeing him there and it exposed.

"Okay," Smoky said again, but when he rose, it was only to take a steel ball the size of a croquet ball from a rack of them in the back of the case. This he placed in the cup or hand of one of the extended jointed arms of the wheel that the case contained and sheltered. He let go, and the weight of the ball spun the arm downward. As it moved, the other jointed arms moved too; another, clack-clack-clack, extended itself to receive the next ball.

"See how it works?" Smoky said, sadly.

"No," Alice said.

"An overbalancing wheel," Smoky said. "These jointed arms, see, are held out stiff on this side, because of the joints; but when an arm comes around to this side, its joints fold up, and the arm lies along the wheel. So. This side of the wheel, where the arms stick out, will always be heavier, and will always fall down, that is, around; so when you put the ball in the cup, the wheel falls around, and that brings the next arm into place. And a ball falls into the cup of *that* arm, and bears it down and around, and so on."

"Oh." He was telling all this flatly, like an old, old story or a grammar lesson too often repeated. It occurred to Alice that he'd eaten no dinner.

"Then," he went on, "the weight of the balls falling into the cups

of the arms on *this* side carries the arms far enough up on *this* side so that they fold up, and the cup tips, and the ball rolls out” – he turned the wheel by hand to demonstrate – “and goes back into the rack, and rolls down and falls into the cup of the arm that just extended itself over on *this* side, and that carries that arm around, and so it goes on endlessly.” The slack arm did deposit its ball; the ball did roll into the arm that extended itself, clack-clack-clack, out from the wheel. The arm was borne down to the bottom of the wheel’s cycle. Then it stopped.

“Amazing,” Alice said mildly.

Smoky, hands behind his back, looked glumly at the unmoving wheel. “It’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” he said.

“Oh.”

“This guy Cloud must have been just about the stupidest inventor or genius who ever...” He could think of no conclusion, and bowed his head. “It never worked, Alice; this thing couldn’t turn anything. It’s not going to work.”

She moved carefully among the tools and oily disassembled works and took his arm. “Smoky,” she said. “Everybody’s downstairs. Ariel Hawksquill came.”

He looked at her, and laughed, a frustrated laugh at a defeat absurdly complete; then he grimaced, and put his hand quickly to his chest.

“Oh,” Alice said. “You should have eaten.”

“It’s better when I don’t,” Smoky said. “I think.”

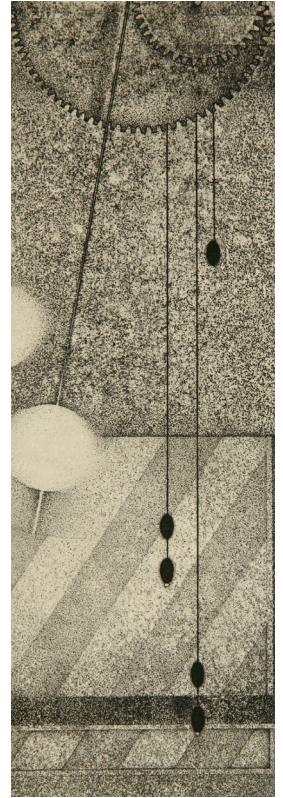
“Come on,” Alice said. “You’ll figure this out, I bet. Maybe you can ask Ariel.” She kissed his brow, and went before him out the arched door and then down the steps, feeling released.

“Alice,” Smoky said to her. “Is this it? Tonight, I mean. Is this it?”

“Is this what?”

“It is, isn’t it?” he said.

She said nothing while they went along the hall and down the stairs toward the second floor. She held Smoky’s arm, and thought of more than one thing to say; but at last (there wasn’t any point any



longer in riddling, she knew too much, and so did he) she only said, “I guess. Close.”

Smoky’s hand, pressed to his chest beneath his breastbone, began to tingle, and he said “Oh-oh,” and stopped.

They were at the top of the stairs. Faintly, below, he could see the drawing-room lights, and hear voices. Then the voices went out in a hum of silence.

Close. If it were close, then he had lost; for he was far behind, he had work to do he could not even conceive of, much less begin. He had lost.

An enormous hollow seemed to open up in his chest, a hollow larger than himself. Pain gathered on its perimeter, and Smoky knew that after a moment, an endless moment, the pain would rush in and fill the hollow: but for that moment there was nothing, nothing but a terrible premonition, and an incipient revelation, both vacant, contesting in his empty heart. The premonition was black, and the incipient revelation would be white. He stopped stock still, trying not to panic because he couldn’t breathe; there was no air within the hollow for him to breathe; he could only experience the battle between Premonition and Revelation and listen to the long loud hum in his ears that seemed to be a voice saying Now you see, you didn’t ask to see and this is not the moment in which you would anyway have expected sight to come, here on this stair in this dark, but Now: and even then it was gone. His heart, with two slow awful thuds like blows, began to pound fiercely and steadily as though in rage, and pain, familiar and releasing, filled him up. The contest was over. He could breathe the pain. In a moment, he would breathe air.

“Oh,” he heard Alice saying, “oh, oh, a bad one”; he saw her pressing her own bosom in sympathy, and felt her grip on his left arm.

“Yeah, wow,” he said, finding voice. “Oh, boy.”

“Gone?”

“Almost.” Pain ran down the left arm she held, diminishing to a thread that continued down into his ring finger, on which there was no ring, but from which, it felt, a ring was being torn, pulled off,

a ring worn so long that it couldn't be removed without severing nerve and tendon. "Quit it, quit it," he said, and it did quit, or diminish further anyway.

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

"Oh, Smoky," Alice said. "Okay?"

"Gone," he said. He took steps downward toward the lights of the drawing room. Alice held him, supported him, but he wasn't weak; he wasn't even ill, Dr. Fish and Doc Drinkwater's old medical books agreed that what he suffered from wasn't a disease but a condition, compatible with long life, even with otherwise good health.

A condition, something to live with. Then why should it appear to be revelation, revelation that never quite came, and couldn't be remembered afterwards? "Yes," old Fish had said, "premonition of death, that's a common feeling with angina, nothing to worry about." But was it of death? Would that be what the revelation was, when it came, if it came?

"It hurt," Alice said.

"Well," Smoky said, laughing or panting, "I think I would have preferred it not to happen, yes."

"Maybe that's the last," Alice said. She seemed to think of his attacks on the model of sneezes, one big last one might clear the system.

"Oh, I bet not," Smoky said mildly. "I don't think we want the last one. No."

They went down the stairs, holding each other, and then into the drawing room where the others waited.

"Here we are," said Alice. "Here's Smoky."

"Hi, hi," he said. Sophie looked up from her table, and his daughters from their knitting, and he saw his pain reflected in their faces. His finger still tingled, but he was whole; his long-worn ring was for a time yet unstolen.

A condition: but like revelation. And did theirs, he wondered for the first time, hurt like his did?

"All right," Sophie said. "We'll start." She looked around at the circle of faces that looked at her, Drinkwaters and Barnables, Birds,

Flowers, Stones, and Weeds, her cousins, neighbors, and relatives. The brightness of the brass lamp on the table made the rest of the room obscure to her, as though she sat by a campfire looking at the faces of animals in the surrounding dark, whom by her words she must charm into consciousness, and into purpose.

“Well,” she said. “I had a visitor.”



