

VIII. THE HAUNTING

The morning sun burnt away all the mist of the night before. Helena's confusion seemed to dissipate with the vibrant clarity of the new day. She hardly knew Tony. And each encounter had ended badly. She couldn't let the recent upset cloud her vision for her own life. She needed to let the evening before fade into a distant past as the day's promise opened her up to a wondrous future.

The cars drove by Bessborough Gardens with no notice that this had been a place of psychic upheaval. It would have been significant if a driver had even turned to notice. On her way to class, Helena tried not to look in that direction. She crossed the street after winding her way from Pimlico. She kept looking to her left. She didn't want to turn back to the site of her misfortune.

Later that morning, she met with her instructor to go over the design project. He was impressed how she had overcome what seemed like a certain obstacle to its completion.

"You've really mastered the program. Some of the other students couldn't get past a few glitches in it."

"At first, I thought it was me."

He offered Helena a prospect for the summer, "I know a firm that is taking on an intern for the summer. This is going to pay."

"I'd really love to do it. But I have to get out of London. It's been too overwhelming for me."

"That's a shame."

"It is though. I still feel that this is home. But I'm losing myself."

Her decision wasn't just based on Tony. She knew that she'd have to get out if she were going to recover her focus. Tony had just underlined an ill-fated path that she was on.

After her conference, she went to the computer labs. Her teacher had inspired her. She had more ideas to work through. She was working on a vacation brochure. She relished the irony.

In the center of the piece, a waterfront site beckoned with its endless horizon. What an illusion. Its offer was made real once the vacationer stepped into these renewing waters. The immediate effects of this purification only inspired a need for a deeper cleansing of the soul. Just to touch the vanishing point. Helena could feel herself open her arms. The waves rushed over her. This place was not a refuge from Bessborough. It was built on the same aspirations. She couldn't return to cast off the present ghost. She had to progress elsewhere.

With her design expertise, she recognized her power to make one place transform into another. She could take the Gardens of Bessborough and insert them in a scene in Jamaica. The confining space of Millbank could become the expansive countryside of the Caribbean. She could step away from her imprisonment into a place of liberation. Or her excitement would take her back to just the same dilemma. It wasn't Corfu, or Bessborough, or Jamaica.

She was fascinated by the game. Perhaps the layout of the island had been her undoing. She never really escaped Tony. A summer away would be enough to make her conceive of her life without his influence.

It had all been in her mind. Only the absurd designs of a romantic spirit. As she had

created her dilemma, she could easily dissolve its hold. She could let go of her Bessborough for all eternity. She debated whether she would have to return to the scene. Instead, she wanted to get to the source of the disturbance. She was convinced that her possession was not internal. Some superior host had taken hold of her in the Tate galleries. She needed to confront that specter in its abode.

After working all morning in the lab, she headed over for a light lunch in the gallery café. After eating she went back to her favorite room. The Millais hardly seemed that formidable when she looked at a painting. What caused the phantom to emerge from the clusters of paint on the canvas? The culprit was her imagination. She couldn't give in to the phantasm. Her soul was still unsettled from the day before. It was like a blank period in her experience. For the time being, she thought it better to ignore these feelings. She headed in the opposite direction. She needed some new experience for the day, anything to get her away from the place of heartache.

She rode the tube to Lancaster Gate. The expanse of Hyde Park was massive compared to the enclosure at Bessborough. The sun cast a myriad of colors when refracted through the fountain waters. She could even feel the spray on her face. Children were casting their toy boats in the water. This was a welcome contrast from the night before. She had escaped the drone of traffic for a hubbub of natural activity. She turned to watch a sparrow alight on a nearby branch. Where was the life in Bessborough? It had been there but was not choked off by unsatisfied dreams.

Her day was making her feel tired. She almost collapsed in sleep on one of the benches. She returned to her place for a short nap. The nap turned into a couple of hours. When she awoke, the vibrant morning sun had given way to a waning afternoon light. All her fears were at the corners of the room. She needed to cast them off before they again took hold. She needed to preoccupy herself to avoid the effects of her haunting.

She had walked too much already. That would only want her sleep some more. She didn't want to give in to the merriment of the night. All that seemed premature. She needed another distraction. Perhaps a movie.

After looking through the film listings, she saw one that she had been looking forward to seeing. She made her way on the tube to the theater for a late afternoon showing. As Helena looked at the posters, she felt dissuaded by their romantic appeal. She knew how the film would end even before she had opened the door to the lobby. She didn't want to see it.

Across the street she found a café with a large glass window. From inside, she could watch the couples lining up for tickets. Did they realized what they were in for? They all seemed to accept the big lie.

She was taken aback by her cynicism. She couldn't give up on love. Not now! Tony was simply self-centered. This challenge had at first been appealing. It ended up being her undoing. She had fallen for her own trap.

Helena was hungry, She hadn't had a good meal in days, she thought that she'd treat herself for lunch. There was a café bar that she had often passed. She was told that they served good food. She ordered a grilled salmon fillet on a bed of lettuce. She drank a soft drink while she was waiting for the meal.

When she got the food, the sight of it excited her. As she prepared to eat she let the lemon juice spray everywhere. There was such a sense of liberation in this moment. While she

cut her piece of salmon, she felt on the verge of satisfaction. Why had she denied herself something so immediate. The taste was exquisite. It had been cooked in butter, and the juices melted in her mouth. This was what she had needed to remind herself of who she was. A good meal. Relaxation. To forget about it all!

She noticed that someone was watching her as she ate. She turned over to see a man in a suit sitting at the bar. She quickly looked away. But it was too late. He had taken her glance as a cue to come over.

He had all the charm of a wet blanket. But he had been getting away with this thing all his life.

“Hi, my name’s Rich. I was just admiring you from the other side of the bar.”

She tried to ignore him.

“You’re the most beautiful girl in here.”

He needed to get his story straight. There were only three other women in here. Helena pretended to appreciate his comment,

“Thanks, Rich. I really appreciate this. But I’m waiting for someone.”

“You don’t look like you’re waiting. You’ve almost finished your meal.”

“He’s coming. But he’s late. He just told me to start without him.”

“You don’t mind if I sit down. You’ve made my afternoon.”

Helena didn’t have much to say. She smiled.

“It’s not often that an example of true loveliness graces my life.”

She wondered why. After all he had the appeal of a rhinoceros.

“You’re an American.”

“Yes, I am. But I consider London my home now.”

“World traveler. Wow, posh!”

“You could say that.”

“Let me get you a drink.

“I really don’t like to start drinking so early in the day.”

“But you definitely have a reason. A lovely creature like yourself getting stood up.”

“I’m not really being stood up.”

“What do you call it? A bloke agrees to meet you. And then he leaves you to fend for yourself with wild man like me.”

She liked his deprecatory humor.

“And what do you do?”

“I was studying the law. But I had a wandering eye that was my undoing.”

“So what do you do now?”

“I get by with a little this, and a little that.”

She imagined Rich homeless on the street.

“I’ve got an inheritance. A nice BMW. I get by.”

She should have thought twice before eating near Pimlico.

“And you’re a baron as well.”

“I almost won that one too in the sweepstakes. But I couldn’t find my ticket.”

She found him funny. She needed a little cheering up.

“Well, if you don’t want one, I’m going to order a drink for myself.”

He ordered himself another beer. He smiled at himself for the accomplishment.

“I don’t want you to think that I’m a lush.”

“I don’t really think that.”

“But I like to think of this as my office.”

“I’ll grant you that one wish.”

There was something handsome about Rich. He had a life of pleasing women. But it had all come too easy. Now he was teetering over his apparent successes. If he was a little more carefully put together, he’d have her going. But his seams were showing and it only made it easier to shut him out.

“How about that drink?”

“I’m almost finished my meal. But I will have a glass of wine.”

For the time being she was giving in.

“I may have not become the lawyer of my destiny. But I can surely win any argument in this bar.”

“I didn’t know that you were in an argument.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying that if there was a fire I could put it out.”

She gave him the strangest look.

“You could put it out. Just throw your drink at it.”

“I’m drinking alcohol. Like you are. That only adds fuel to the fire.”

“See—what did I tell you.”

“What did you tell me?”

He looked deeply into her eyes, “You’re the most beautiful creature that has ever graced this establishment.”

She felt as if he meant something real. She wanted it to mean something. She imagined that Tony’s enchantment had been transported to this other body. He would do. She wanted him to wrap himself around her. Their embrace would make up for his shortcomings. But if she went along, she’d never be able to escape her loss.

“It looks like he’s not coming.”

“I myself have to get going.”

“Thanks for the drink, Rich.”

“You know where to find me.”

This really wasn’t a good time to go back to school. It wasn’t as if she was putting anything off. She was caught up on all her work.

Her indecision had led into this. So she kept going. If she thought it through, it might make more sense. Perhaps, she had always been attracted to guys who had that facility with woman, maybe a little too smooth. But it made her feel challenged. That was what turned her on. Tony had seemed to be her match. Other girls loved him. It made her feel more desirable. As a lover, he shared his knowing touch with her. It brought her to life. She seemed to take some pleasure in his ignoring her. It made her seem more wanted. After all, he was only biding his time until he found her.

How could he ever find her if he wanted to? She was forgetting about Bertie’s rather severe announcement. She was again living the same nightmare. Up to this point she had avoided the supreme truth of it all. He was not going to come back to her. He was going to be

married to another girl.

She might have taken some respite from the belief that he didn't love this girl. But if Tony felt this way, why did he send Bertie to do his bidding. This was a fate worse than death. The cold brush off of the sister had been particularly unnerving. It convinced Helena that the family was massed against her.

She had been walking for miles. Her body had taken the brunt of her doubts. Now she needed to rest. She caught the train back to her place. As her head hit the pillow, she went out like a light. She hadn't really slept the night before. This was the needed subtraction from her maelstrom.

The daylight absorbed her in its embrace. It worked away a night of troubles. She sunk into its luxury. The waves of fading light washed over her. If cooling waters had created her distress, these same waters now proved her rescue.

She awakened at five in the afternoon. She had no plans. She was still confused by it all. Her school life was so well planned. This was the knife that had been plunged in its midst. And it was threatening her security. The rest had given her added strength. But it hadn't resolved her quandary. She felt like she had an appointment to make when there was none at all.

It would have been good to look in on Rachel, but she was out of town. The other girls would probably make fun of her. There was no one else in London who could help. She had to work her own way through it all.

Not only had Helena avoided her beloved Gardens, she had also stayed away from her Ophelia. But once a spirit possesses, you can simply ask it to leave. What infernal soul had really inhabited Millais's canvas? She could hardly be too sure. But there was no doubt. This demon had achieved its span and now enclosed her with no sign of release. Her calm had simply been the lead up to her visitor who had her full grips on Helena's being. If she had tried to avoid her return to Millbank, the spirit had other ideas. As dusk settled in, Helena could feel the awful transformation. Everything that had propped her up that day now crumbled before the horrid weight of her oppressor. It was not the persecution of Tony and his harpy in wait, Bertie. This force was completely supernatural.

Her disarray had been a long time coming. It wasn't just the mess with Tony that pushed her over the edge. She was hanging on and trying not to give in. Her whole life had been about her independence. She never wanted to be one of those girls who'd crawl and beg some guy. But she had gambled all her security for this. She felt helpless.

Even if she had been upset, sleep always gave her the chance to put it all away. But Tony seemed special to her. He had unlocked a world of magic and frivolity. She had been holding her passions inside. On the beaches of Corfu, she had opened up the dam. And everything had flowed out of her. Only Tony could get that back for her. She hated him for making her this way.

What was she telling herself? This was all something over which she had no control. Her feelings were racing on past her and carrying her with them. This was just crazy. She was looking for somewhere to hang on. Something to rescue her from the morass. She felt faint. She was barely there. She wanted to pass out. To sleep forever. But she was sentenced to this sleepwalk.

Worse than her curse was the attendant isolation. No one could share in her dilemma.

She could only relate to other ghosts who felt the same way. There had always been this chasm inside her. She had tried to ignore it and pretend that she was whole. She wasn't. At her worse moments, she could feel it tug at her. It was now ripping her apart.

Even as the sky seemed to fall in around her, there was an unconquerable element that pervaded her spirit. Her art had contained the precarious balance inside her. On the island, she had lived the rich manifestation of this symmetry. She could look down at her hands and notice the source of this harmony. She could create her world in her likeness. But the fragility of the creation became more apparent. Its interlacing had always been based on a belief, a fairy tale that she could escape the influence of her mother. That Helena was a chosen princess, not a rejected cast off.

Once she had encountered her own phantom, she thought that she had tapped her well of creativity. However, she realized that her energy had all resulted from a desire to escape herself. She had gone as far as she possibly could. Now the world seemed to close in on her.

This was not of her own doing. Or even her own mother's curse. This was some awful female entity that occupied her body. The shock was too much to absorb. She welcomed the coming of night. She ran towards the dusk. She cast off the chains of the daytime.

There was an incredible stillness in Bessborough Gardens. There was something of a funerary air. A lone visitor kept watch. She could sense all the energy that brewed in this damned place. It was still too warm for a winter breeze, but her soul felt the frost that descends over a lover ungrateful. She welcomed the kisses of the mist. She let herself be conquered by the hollow light.

The streetlights showered Bessborough Gardens. But for Helena, these lights flickered and went out. Her eyes strained in the darkness. She looked for some other poor soul who might accept the curse and allow Helena to leave this place.

How would this other woman feel when she felt the touch of one so deathly? Even if she was not here, she knew that cold breeze would still inhabit the ground. As the dew started to form on the flowers, the night bell tolled. The heart froze in futility.

The marriage with the night was something that she had tried to avoid. She did not want to admit to an eternity of loneliness. Who else could appreciate the magnificence that she had been shown? Who else could bear the subsequent curse that gripped Bessborough Gardens. Her gift left her more isolated. Even if Tony had shown up on this following night, he could not have extracted her from her watch. The ghost assumed her permanent pose with her back to Vauxhall Bridge Road.

She would wait all night. In the morning, there would be no traces of her as she would attain perfect union with the darkness. The melodrama entertained. It fed her. Her bodily hunger could be fed. But this deeper hunger had no remedy except deeper meditation. She had come here to allow her soul to pass to the other side.

The atmosphere only played into the dismal feeling. She didn't want to think that she was feeling sorry for herself. But the pale here could suffocate all that was human and just leave the venom. The night could be her revenge. Lovers would not find each other after dark. They would recognize the rift that separated. She was becoming drunk on her realization. It only made her feel that there was a reason for her abandonment.

A sense of resignation now filled Bessborough Gardens. It had become a solemn place.

No bird call, no baby scream, no scurrying squirrel could disturb the gravity. The Gardens was being restored to the ancients. The melancholic wail was the only sound that could pierce the incredible silence.

Since moderns didn't give in to the supernatural, a healthy dose of skepticism could send the ghosts back to their haunting place. But they would continue to find a dwelling in her tears, She would try to hold back, but she could not.

She told herself that this was just her tempest in a tea cup. She tried to will away her heartache. But she could not. She strained to hear a jubilant choir amidst this doom. She had read about people collapsing in the snow. First their extremities went numb. Then they were filled with a general warmth. This was followed by them seeing an enormous glow.

She was not losing her life. She was crossing over to the other side.

She awoke the next day in her bed as if nothing had happened. As she started to get up, she remembered how he had touched her just below her left breast. And his caress still burned on her skin. She longer for him. She ached for his touch. She yearned for his embrace.

The strictures of his family now seemed more determined than ever.

"Your family never gave me a chance."

"I should have never let them interfere."

"But they did."

"You needed to show up for me. For me. For yourself. This was never about your family. It was about me and you. You needed to take me away from this cursed ground."

Tony contradicted his promise to her, "I had other commitments. I had a duty to my family."

He held back the worst condemnation until she would not yield.

"Helena, I don't love you. I never could. I've always loved Vanessa."

Helena tried to bring up the image of Vanessa. What marvels did she possess that now held his interest?

"I could give you more than she could. You've said as much yourself."

She could cover his body with her kisses. She could give him everything that she lacked. But her kisses seemed like such a meager present. Even if they were wrapped in ribbons and bows, they offered him none of the riches to which he was accustomed.

Her imaginary Tony disappeared as she felt the depths of her folly. Tony was part of a world that she could only observe. She would never have what it took to be accepted among nobility. She would always be seen as an intruder in this world of privilege. Even if they made money, even if they appeared to labor to increase their prestige, their idle moments were still worth more than her sweat and toil. She could never measure up to that standard. Even her zeal was to her detriment. She wanted it too much.

That was part of Tony's appeal. He could foreswear his riches and title. But at the end of the day, these things were in his blood. Even if he cast them off, they would all return to him. If he gave in to the fantasy that he lived in Corfu, he would jeopardize these things that were his. It would be suicidal for him to be led astray by his base emotions. He had been well taught. He could offer a girl all the treasures of his world. But he could never deliver on his pledge as such extravagance would bankrupt his reserve.

His wonderful smile said it all. It show a lover of the world. Someone with no fear of

failure. He had been created this way. He could lose a kingdom and another would be waiting for him. She had to know that their time on Corfu was just an indulgence for him. He now suffered for his splurging. That was why he could never return for her. It was his prescribed remedy to what could only be thought of as an aberration for him. The arms of Vanessa could return him to the reality to which he was entitled.

The visits to Bessborough were becoming a regular affair. She couldn't help it. Even as she distanced herself from the place and made high spirits the order, as each day wound itself down, she could feel a force take her over. She was drawn to the Gardens. She tried to resist, but the pull worked its effect deep inside her.

Tonight's rest was unlike the night before. It was sleepless. She lay on her bed in a half-awake state. She was troubled that her independence had been reduced to this lowly servitude. She was unable to liberate herself from the hold of the Garden. There was no longer anything poetic about the place. She was now its prisoner.

She tossed and turned in the hope that her body would just give in to the heaviness of her fatigue. But she could feel her tiredness flow through the body. The more that she felt this way, the harder it was to get to sleep. Even if she tried to hold still, she could not give in to a much needed peace. Even if she wanted to rid herself of the attraction to Tony, something in her body held on.

Her insomnia threatened her serenity. Where she could formerly dismiss the effects of the haunting, the disruption of her daytime activity were a brunt too much to bear. She wondered what event would finally release her from these chains. His eyes. He could bless her and help her escape from the curse.

Her romantic illusion still pervaded her spirit. She had seen the ill-effects. But she could not let go. The resources that she used to break the spell only reinforced her allegiance. Her vocation as the guardian of Bessborough would crowd out any other dream that might come her way. Why does heartache take the soul to these forbidden places.

The city continued as if nothing had ever happened. No one could share her plight. Even if they saw her comings and goings, they would only marvel at her impending purpose. But they could not penetrate its source. Even she did not understand what drove her to this devotion. No future lover could appreciate this side of her. It set her isolation in stone. The same stone that bordered Bessborough Gardens.

Rachel's return to London appeared to be her sole hope.

"What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been working. School work."

"All work and no play makes Kate a dull jay."

"What?"

"You need to get out and live. When was the last time that you went shopping? What was the last thing that you bought yourself?"

"I haven't had time."

"You've been moping around the house. Helena, you need to get out."

"I don't know."

"We need to buy you a belt. A new skirt. I've seen some great ones. Camden or Soho, oh where do we go ho?"

Helena wanted to avoid shopping, “I really can’t”

“Have you picked out your head stone yet. Young girl killed by love. You’re being totally silly.”

She realized that she was. So she took Rachel up on her offer. They packed up their troubles and headed for the stores.

“Helena, doesn’t this make you feel so much better.”

She was finally being distracted from the Gardens. Nothing could take her back tonight.

After some crazy shopping, they headed for drinks. Rachel needed to perk her friend up. She could tell that something deep was going on. She had reacted slowly. But she was coming around.

The alcohol and the frenzied pace was what her body needed to take her down. There was no Bessborough Gardens that night. She collapse in her clothes. Rachel found her the next morning.

“Time to take up where we left off.”

“Rachel, my body is sore all over.”

“That’s the best time to hit back. We need to get you to the gym.

The exercise routine knocked her out. But she settled back for a massage. The masseuse worked out all the tension that had been built up in her muscles. The night chill had only made Helena a mass of problems. Once these knots in her body were smoothed out, she felt a world of difference.

Rachel’s constant interference was doing the trick. As her psyche started to revert to Bessborough Gardens, Rachel would interrupt that infernal tendency. She was the devil to the devil. If Helena thought that she was becoming a bit of a playgirl so be it. It was better than being a ghost.

Her sun kissed skin now shone. It had only been a week since her return from the islands. All the benefits of the trip had been lost on her gloomy demeanor. Rachel brought back the glow to her smile.

“I don’t know what came over me. It was like a bad meal that stays with you for days.”

Helena was now convinced that her time with Tony had been this terrible exception to what had been a pleasant life. The paradise that she experienced was only an illusion so that the haunting of Bessborough could take hold. Now she needed to put all of it away. The highs and the lows. She felt that she was letting go of this all-encompassing addiction. She breathed easier. What had led her astray? How had she lost her compass? Who had she become?

The time with Rachel convince her that she needed to do more to fend off the evil thoughts.

“Helena, I never let a guy affect me that deeply.”

“It wasn’t just him. It was something about my whole life. I could feel myself sliding down. I was down in a well with no way to get out. If you hadn’t have come back, I don’t know where I would have ended up.”

“In a loveless marriage like every other girl I know.”

They both laughed. But her wonder did not cease. How could Vanessa gain happiness while she was left to fight for herself in the outside world. If she could just discover the answer.

The curse had dissipated but its after effects remained. She still was loveless. And her

time with Tony had only made her more caution. With caution came a worse susceptibility. Her next lover would only break her heart permanently.

“Helena, you can’t think like that. You need to have fun. Really have fun. Do what you did in Corfu more often. You have to live for the pleasure not for the pain.”

But she didn’t know how to really let go like Rachel. Each kiss marked her personally. She wanted to hold on to its hope. She didn’t want a good time. She hungered for love.

“Am I old-fashioned?” Helena asked

“Love is something that comes later on. When you’re with someone that shares your dreams. Someone who is already fun. But if you put the carriage before the horse, you’re going to go nowhere.”

“And if you get in the carriage, you’re really going to go nowhere.”

They both laughed.

You could tell where Rachel was taking her. It had always been Rachel’s way out of heartache. Another man. Another couple of men. Helena didn’t want to lose perspective. Even if she had been wrong about Tony, he had taught her something about herself. She could turn her back on this lesson.

Rachel could flirt with the boy in a bar, but this would never be enough for Helena. She could accept the distraction, but she didn’t need to be reminded of her own worth. She was too good for this.

“I’m not going to pick up a boy and take him home that night.”

“Helena, I’m not saying that. But you have a beautiful body. You have to use it.”

She thought that Rachel was helping her hone her social skills, but Tony had erred in just this way. He had used his charms to get a girl while he held back his heart. She didn’t want to become hard like that.

Rachel forced Helena to look at that rift in her soul between what she wanted and what she had to settle for. As long as that gulf was so wide, she would always be subject to a curse. The answer was starting to seem more and more obvious.

Helena had made a life for herself in London. Her art had been tied to this place. She lived for the pace. She threw herself into the whirlwind. London had always appealed to her because it allowed her to live outside of herself. She was always taking risks. She was giving in to these forces that brewed deep inside of her. They had made her into the creative spirit that she was.

But her trip to Corfu had sidetracked her from her true mission. And she needed to rethink her life. Even with Rachel’s help, she couldn’t stay here anymore. Maybe after some time away, the haunting would dissipate. For a while she wondered if she would take the Gardens with her. In the corridors of her grandmother’s house, would these ghost sing their plaintive song?

Her answer was evident. She would need to gone from this place. She could not bear another night that saw her drift down to the Millbank. Her watch would have to give way to some other dismal soul.