

# A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 3

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Cover Image – ‘David’ by Will Heron

Will, also known as Deadly, is a trans artist based in the UK whose work often pays homage to Renaissance classics whilst adding a queer and occasionally macabre twist.

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**Foreword** **Page 4**

**No Room For Misunderstanding by Cinnamaldeide** **Page 6**

*Some men are rather immodest about their romantic interest, even when related to their bashful work colleagues.*

Cinnamaldeide doesn't bite, more like she politely chews with her mouth closed. An amateur photographer and calligrapher in her spare time, she writes for fun and for despair. <https://cinnamaldeide.carrd.co/>

**The Day Steve Irwin Died by Steve Carr** **Page 7**

*A dancer recounts how the influence of the life and death of Steve Irwin is entwined with his own.*

Steve Carr, a gay writer from Richmond, Virginia, has had over 570 short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, reviews and anthologies since June, 2016. He has had seven collections of his short stories published. His paranormal/horror novel Redbird was released in November, 2019. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize twice. His website is <https://www.stevencarr960.com/> He is on Facebook:<https://www.facebook.com/steven.carr.35977>

**Dining Out by Kenneth Pobo** **Page 16**

*A reflection on an argument.*

Kenneth Pobo has a chapbook of micro-fiction from Deadly Chaps called Tiny Torn Maps. His work has appeared in: Ink, Sweat & Tears, Brittle Star, Hawaii Review, and elsewhere.

**The New Coat by Maggie Nerz Iribarne** **Page 17**

*Meryl revisits a place that once held prominence in her narrative about her own marriage.*

Maggie Nerz Iribarne practices writing in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. This year, she won first and finalist prizes from Dead Fern Press, Zizzle, and Honeyguide Literary Magazine. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

**The Historienne's Tale by Amalie N Ingham** **Page 19**

*Josephine, whose only love is historical research, finds her life turned upside down by a handsome woman from the local theatre.*

Amalie N. Ingham has been writing all her life, from short stories and poetry to essays, songs and lately, novels. She is currently working on a YA about the monstrous feminine and corruption in the music industry. She is passionate about history, minority representation (especially queer and neurodiverse), and above all, engaging, character-driven stories.

## Foreword -

As the festive period looms, promising shorter days, longer evenings, fairy lights and Christmas trees, I always find myself filled with mixed emotions. There's something slightly melancholic about this period but also hopeful and a little exciting. As you grow up, Christmas and festive periods become less about brightly wrapped parcels and more about taking stock of what's around you. The new year, with its rushed and soon-forgotten resolutions of losing weight and spending more time with those you love, seems to swirl around us as bright as tinsel glinting on the branches of the tree in our living room. No matter what you celebrate (or even if you don't), beginnings and endings are hard to avoid as the year draws to a close.

This issue, all our wonderful stories seem to be a glimpse into our inner worlds, our inner desires and our memories. Stories of how all the moments of our lives, big or small, make up who we are. How every moment is a potential beginning or a potential ending. It might be a new coat that is only new to you, its pockets containing a message that makes you wonder who gave away this treasure for you to find? Or perhaps you find yourself on a stage dancing to a memory of your childhood. The death, the ending, of someone you admired comes back to you as if it were yesterday, and you wonder if your heart was pierced in the same way as his. Or you overhear a conversation that makes a ghost's ears prick up, and you imagine what they would have to say about all this, the past finding its way to your dinner table, memories meaning the dead never truly die. And then there are beginnings, passions swirling down a drain – wasted, perhaps, but not unnoticed. A mysterious knight in shining armour opening a door for you to run through, history trailing in your wake as bright as the braided ribbon in your hair when you first met.

The art for this month's cover also feels as if it is searching for something new, following a path, a call, a passion, to a new beginning. It gleams with promise and makes me want to follow this beautiful stranger wherever he may lead me.

As the year draws to a close – a strange and unsettling year for many, if not all – and we think about the time which has passed, I wonder if it would help to think of beginnings and endings as a loop, a constant circle. So, as you sip your mulled wine, look for lips to kiss at midnight, linger under the mistletoe, or watch the snow fall on a year lived, think of the owls hooting their song through the snow-laden forest searching for each other, and follow

the call in this issue which might just lead you to someone or something you never realised you needed...

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# No Room for Misunderstanding

## by Cinnamaldehyde

**Content Warnings: Suggestive Content**

Not your thing? Skip to page 7 for the next story.

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Their subpar motel provided limited hot water. Hernell offered to take the second turn to wash, as always. Deceivingly polite.

‘Did you–’ Thomas began, perfectly aware of the answer even before formulating his question. Thomas *knew*. His conflicting emotions mingled in an uneven blend on his flushing face, as Hernell’s pearlescent suds had in water and soap at the bottom of the shower. Between the two of them, an artificial emptiness crafted in practiced hands and unresolved frustration lingered.

‘I did,’ Hernell confirmed, unapologetic, a damp towel wrapped not-quite-so-tightly around his waist. ‘Would you rather get involved next time?’

# The Day Steve Irwin Died

## by Steve Carr

### Content Warnings: Mentions of Steve Irwin's death

Not your thing? Skip to page 16 for the next story.

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*Crikey!* Klein Manhurt loved to hear himself talk. 'Being a male dancer on the theatrical stage brings a lot of assumptions with it, everything from your sexual orientation to questions of if you're capable of doing, or smart enough to do, anything else,' he intoned.

None of the guys sitting on the dance studio floor in a half-circle around the stool he sat on as if it were a throne were new to 'the business.' I had been in as many as a half-dozen shows with a couple of the other dancers. Shows came and went like transit buses carrying a lot of the same dancers with them.

We all sat cross-legged like stage set pieces. My dance belt was too snug, and no attempt to adjust it through my tights did any good.

Klein kept his eyes on me, possibly suspicious of what I was doing with my hands. He was a choreographer, one of the best, and a legend in musical theatre, but he seemed to have lost touch with the woes of being a common chorus line hooper. He was dressed in sweatpants and a hoodie. *Sweatpants and a hoodie!*

His tap shoes were brand new. Most of us wore old ones, taken from the box kept on a closet shelf, dusted off, and shined for each new audition and rehearsals. It was common knowledge among all dancers not to buy new tap shoes until the theatre seats had filled for more than three shows. That meant it might turn out to be a hit, which would mean a steady income for a short while at least.

'I know you all observed the first table read for this show, but I hope you didn't come away with any preconceived notions about how it was going to be choreographed,' Klein droned on. 'If you did, wipe those notions from your mind.' He ran his hand slowly across his forehead to demonstrate how it was done.

The dancer sitting next to me, Marcus Biggs, stifled an obvious giggle.

'Steve Irwin led an exceptional life and was a great human being,' Klein continued,

‘and we are going to dance his life on stage in a way no one has seen before.’

There were only so many ways to tap dance, even if you were one of the greats.

Twenty minutes after beginning his speech, Klein ended it with, ‘Are there any questions?’

Jules Lowery, the most irritating dancer – and human being – on the planet, raised his hand.

‘Yes, Mr Lowery?’ Klein said. He addressed everyone as either Mr or Miss; he hadn’t gotten the message about gender neutrality. I was surprised that no one had taken him to task about it, but Klein Manhurt had a reputation as being impervious to correction about anything.

‘Are there going to be any dance sequences performed in the nude?’ Jules asked.

Marcus let out a loud guffaw and then quickly slapped his hand over his mouth. Filled with restrained air, his cheeks quickly filled like balloons.

‘Nudity was never a part of Steve Irwin’s life,’ Klein replied, ‘except in the privacy of his own bedroom with his lovely wife, Mrs Terri Irwin, but she was too much of a lady to ever mention it.’

Marcus fell backward onto the floor, unable to keep his hilarity in.

\*

‘Loosen your ankles.’

It was the beginning of our second rehearsal.

Klein stood in the middle of the dancers who encircled him. He slowly turned like the second hand on a watch, watching our ankles as we shook our feet rapidly as if they were attached to our legs by well-oiled hinges. We had done this during the auditions and the first rehearsal, not that it did anything than demonstrate that we knew how to prepare our bodies to tap dance. In the first rehearsal, Klein had been on his cell phone while we were loosening our ankles. This rehearsal, having loose ankles seemed of paramount importance to him.

\*

I was six years old when I took my first tap lesson. Loosening my ankles had been the first thing I learned.

\*

‘Freeze!’ he shouted. The only time he didn’t speak in monotone was when he barked orders.

All the dancers froze with one leg raised, their feet pointed to the floor as they should be, preparing for a ball tap.

‘Think of your foot as a snake about to strike Steve Irwin as he climbs through some Australian brush,’ Klein said.

‘What kind of snake?’ Jules asked. ‘I’m scared to death of snakes.’

Marcus giggled.

‘A viper. Something deadly.’

Travis Hedge, a dancer I had been in four shows with who was getting his masters in biology at a local university, said, ‘There are many types of vipers in Australia, but few people ever get bit.’ Most of us who had danced with the incredibly handsome Travis wondered how he managed to make every fact he uttered so extraordinarily dull.

‘That’s nice to know,’ Klein said, ‘but no one gets bit in this show anyway, not even Steve.’

In my peripheral vision, I saw Marcus biting his lower lip. His entire face was a big grin.

‘Okay, dancers,’ Klein said, still turning like a drugged child’s top, ‘lower your foot, very slowly, with complete control. Feel every fibre of your gastrocnemius muscle as you do this.’

‘I forget, which one is that?’ Jules asked.

‘It’s part of your calf muscle and extends to your Achilles tendon,’ Travis said.

‘Take a tap dancer’s natural stance as your foot comes to rest on the floor,’ Klein stated.

We all did that automatically. Keeping our feet spread evenly, not far apart, had been ingrained in us from the moment we put on tap shoes. In position, we stood with our arms lowered at our sides.

Klein stopped moving his body, but his head continued to turn, like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, until his eyes came to rest on Brian Booker’s face. Brian did drag shows, and some of the eyeliner and sparkly gold mascara he wore from a show the night before hadn’t been washed off. Klein slowly turned and then pointed at Brian’s eyes. ‘That will be noticed by everyone in the first three rows of seats.’

The forever-caustic Brian replied, ‘Only if they’re still awake during this snoozer.’

Marcus sputtered, emitting spit like a garden hose.

‘Nothing about Steve Irwin’s life or this musical is a snoozer, Mr Booker, and let’s keep in mind you were hired to dance, not do reviews of this show.’

Jules raised his hand and waved it at Klein. ‘I drank too much coffee before coming to rehearsal. I need to pee, really badly.’

Klein scowled at him. ‘You should know better, Mr Lowery, but if you must go, then go.’

Jules ran from the room.

‘Let us all remember, Steve Irwin would never have let his bodily functions get in the way of his work tracking wild animals,’ Klein said. ‘He would have peed in his pants if he needed to.’

Marcus burst out laughing.

\*

At the start of the next rehearsal, Klein had us stand in a line. ‘Okay, we’re going to pick up from where we left off yesterday with the simple ball heel combination. Dancers, position.’

We all stooped over slightly with our arms out in front of us, our hands shaped into upturned claws. They were meant to represent the jagged, menacing teeth of crocodiles. In the show, we would be wearing crocodile costumes. For the rehearsals, we were *to be the crocodiles*.

Alex Weeks, hired to provide the beat we’d dance to, began to lightly tap his drum. I knew Alex from my gigs doing cabaret shows. He was a decent sort, but so afraid he might have a gay impulse he wouldn’t remain in a bathroom alone with another man, even if the other guy was inside a stall. The only person he was homophobic toward was himself.

‘Together, be the crocodiles,’ Klein said, signalling us to come forward. ‘Remember you’re on the prowl for prey.’

‘I don’t understand, are we in or out of the water?’ Jules asked.

‘Out,’ Klein answered.

‘Crocodiles don’t hunt on land this way,’ Travis said with an air of knowing superiority.

‘Less chatter and more dancing,’ Klein stated, walking backward as we advanced

toward him.

\*

At six years old, I began attending tap classes right after school. I'd been in the first grade.

'It'll give you something to do and keep you out of trouble until I can pick you up after work,' my mother had told me. Dancing classes became my babysitter.

After learning how to loosen my ankles in the first rehearsal, the next thing I'd learned that day was the ball and heel steps. They were simply the downward movement of the heel and the ball of the foot to make the initial tapping sounds. In the next few days, I learned time steps, which required more tapping ability and were part of simple combinations. At night I'd practice them while looking at the poster of Steve Irwin that was on my bedroom wall along with posters of Superman and SpongeBob Squarepants. The tap teacher had told my mother I was born to be a dancer.

\*

When I awoke from daydreaming, the line had moved on while I had stopped and remained in place doing single time steps.

Klein was face to face with me. 'A good crocodile never lets other crocodiles get ahead of him,' he said.

Unable to control himself, Marcus chortled.

\*

Three weeks into rehearsals, we were on the second day of going through the choreography of the dance routine involving kangaroos. We were tap-hopping across the studio, trying to keep from colliding into one another, when Millicent-Veronica walked in. She was the only female cast member in the production. She played Terri Irwin and actually resembled her. The writer of the musical was apparently of the mindset that Steve Irwin had never encountered another female – animal or human – other than his wife.

Millicent-Veronica had one tap number but had been rehearsing it in a separate studio.

Her number wasn't with the kangaroos.

Klein clapped his hands loudly. 'Dancers, Miss Millicent-Veronica has come to say hello.'

We all came to a stop.

'I played her in a show I did in Jersey,' Brian whispered to me and the other two kangaroos near us. 'Even a drag version of her is death warmed over.'

I had never seen her on stage, but the talk among the dancers who had seen her was that she could belt out a song that shook the rafters, a bit like Kristin Chenoweth but without the musical talent or ability to actually sell it. 'She's all about the noise and none of the notes,' was how Brian put it.

She had never tapped on stage before and had no training in it other than what she was now getting. She walked to the middle of the room and curtsied.

At the other end of the room, Marcus howled.

Klein gave him a withering glare.

Unfazed by Marcus' outburst, Millicent-Veronica quickly glanced around the room, and without hesitating, said, 'I hope we all make Steve Irwin proud.' She then turned and left the room.

We were all stunned into complete silence.

'Every dead diva just rolled over in her grave,' Brian said.

\*

When I was four, my father stormed out of the house one night after an angry row with my mom over something that involved their relationship but had nothing to do with me. He visited me off and on for a while and then stopped coming around at all. He completely vanished from my life before I finished kindergarten.

Steve Irwin took his place. I watched episodes of *The Crocodile Hunter* as if I were watching home movies. It was easy to imagine that the rugged Australian, who seemed fearless but loved animals, even the most dangerous ones, was my father. My mom bought me The Crocodile Hunter Game that I never took out of its box and a Crocodile Hunter puzzle that was too advanced for my age and intelligence, but I stared at the picture on the box cover for hours on end.

\*

When I found out they were auditioning dancers for a new musical about Steve Irwin, especially dancers with a strong tap background, I didn't hesitate to audition. I had also been trained in jazz and modern dance, with some ballet and ballroom, but tap was my bread and butter.

\*

Since we weren't wearing the kangaroo costumes we'd be wearing during the show – they were still in the process of being sewn together – Klein had told us the day before to 'pretend we had pouches.'

This had brought a scream of gleeful laughter from Marcus.

While Klein stood on the sidelines, a little too close to Alex who was eyeing him suspiciously, he shouted into his cell phone. 'How many times do I have to tell you? None of the costumes can have feet. It interferes with the tapping.'

This brought on an instant imitation, with all of us doing soft shoe routines in place of tapping.

Klein looked up from his phone. 'Wait!' he shouted. 'You boys may be on to something.'

'Boys!' Brian cried out as if he had been shot. 'Some of these old hags haven't been boys for years.'

'Speak for yourself,' the usually quiet Ruff Thrower replied.

A few of us believed with a name like that he was secretly a male porn star.

Klein shoved his cell phone into his sweatpants pocket and ran to the middle of the room, where he waved his arms about as if he were on fire. As usual, this was his way of telling us he'd had a brilliant idea. An hour later, we were mixing hopping tap steps with soft-shoe-type glides across the dance floor. It was hideous choreography, especially for tap dancers, and resembled nothing a kangaroo would do.

Travis was the sole outspoken voice of reason. 'Klein, are these wounded kangaroos?'

Marcus, on the other hand, kept breaking out into bouts of guffawing.

By late afternoon Klein gave up on that idea, and we returned to bouncing kangaroo-like across the imagined Australian landscape.

\*

Everyone at the first table read had noticed that the play didn't have a name. There wasn't a title on the playscript, and even now, only weeks from opening, its name didn't appear on the posters or in print or online advertisements. 'A new musical by Lester Craig about the life of Steve Irwin' was all that was given. Lester Craig had created only one previous musical that was successful, running six months off-Broadway. None of the dancers had worked in one of his shows before, and most of us had only laid eyes on him once: during the table read, when we were rushed out of the room as soon as possible. Dancers and cast didn't remain in the same room for very long. It was an unwritten rule.

In the last week before we would begin rehearsing on stage with the full cast, Lester had come to the studio to watch us perform a couple of the fully choreographed routines. He and Klein sat in metal folding chairs, whispering to one another throughout the routines, at times pointing at one of us without actually acknowledging the one they were pointing at. Lester Craig was in his forties and carried his status as a rich bachelor with an aloofness shrouded in mystery. As hard as we tried, we couldn't find out where he was from or whether he was gay or not. He had the dark looks of a Mediterranean but walked and talked like he had been raised among cowboys somewhere in the western plains. He seemed particularly interested in Travis, pointing at him more often than anyone else.

None of the dancers had been singled out to perform a solo routine or play one animal that was more important than any of the others. We knew there was one last number that we hadn't begun rehearsing. We had seen the orchestral music for it but not the choreography or the words to the music. All of us, except Travis, were certain he was being singled out for a reason.

\*

On Monday, September 4th, 2006, I had come home from tap school, riding in the back seat of my mother's car. We stopped at McDonalds and picked up a bag of hamburgers and fries that I held in my lap. As soon as we pulled into the driveway, I leapt out of the car, ran into the house, plopped down on the sofa, and turned on the TV. I opened the bag just as the news came on.

\*

Two days before we were to begin rehearsals on stage, Klein was even more nervous and overbearing than usual. As the dancers rehearsed the tap-dancing koalas routine in groups of three, Klein circled us, complaining that we all danced as if we were wearing cement shoes.

‘No koala on Earth moves this quickly,’ Travis said.

‘No koala on Earth will feel my foot on their ass as you will if you don’t perform the steps as they’re choreographed,’ Klein replied.

‘Are there going to be real or fake eucalyptus plants on stage that the koalas are supposed to be eating?’ Jules intoned.

‘My God, Jules. You are so stupid,’ Marcus declared in one of his rare verbal outbursts.

The rest of us broke into laughter.

Finally fed up with us, or losing patience with holding in what had been on his mind any longer, Klein clapped his hands. We all stopped and looked at him. ‘Dancers, Mr Craig and I have come to a decision about who will dance the solo number of the stingray.’

‘The what?’ a few of the dancers asked in unison.

‘The sea creature, the stingray, that killed Steve Irwin. Mr Craig has decided the name of his play will be *The Day Steve Irwin Died*, and this will be the most important dance of the entire production.’

In that moment, that afternoon when I was six and saw on the news that a stingray had killed Steve Irwin came rushing back to me. His heart had been pierced and, in a different way, so had mine. I had collapsed there on the sofa and woke a few hours later in the hospital emergency room. My mother was standing by the padded table I was lying on with my tap shoes in her hand. I hadn’t even bothered to take them off after the tap lessons. They were as much a part of my physical being as Steve had become part of my psychological being.

The stingray didn’t randomly kill Steve. Steve had offered his heart and soul to it as a sacrifice. It was a hero’s death.

I looked up to see Klein pointing at me. I knew it before he said it out loud. I heard Steve whisper it to my subconscious.

‘I’m thrilled to announce you will dance the part of the stingray.’

# Dining Out

## by Kenneth Pobo

**Content Warnings: None**

Not your thing? Skip to page 17 for the next story.

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Lenny and Keith don't go out much since it's expensive, and it's more fun to stay at home watching any one of eighty Bette Davis movies. They know many of the lines by heart. Lenny's favourite is *The Little Foxes*, where Bette watches her husband die. Keith's favourite is *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, where Bette pushes a planter onto the heads of her two tormentors.

While they enjoy their martinis – Keith's with an olive, Lenny's totally plain – they overhear a spirited conversation in the booth behind them.

'I hear that Eleanor Roosevelt served grim dinners at the White House,' a woman says, rapping the table. 'Mrs. Hoover served great dinners, but that Eleanor, well, well, well.' A man responds that he never liked Eleanor but barely remembers Mrs. Hoover.

Lenny thinks about the last argument he and Keith had – over whether it's better to clip coupons or not. It escalated. Unpleasant things got said. After an hour of the silent treatment, it ended. Like a pop-up summer storm that the weather people hadn't foreseen.

The couple behind them leave. They look like rowboats about to tip over. Lenny tells Keith he hopes the ghost of Eleanor Roosevelt is resting easy and eating whatever she likes in whatever heaven she prefers. Keith plays footsie under the table until the main course comes – roast duck, something at which Eleanor would flinch if she saw it.

# The New Coat

## by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

**Content Warnings: Infidelity**

Not your thing? Skip to page 19 for the next story.

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Meryl slid the hangers along a rack, one by one, perusing the hodgepodge of thrift-store duds. She came upon a thin coat, pulled it out to take a closer look – Wedgewood blue with a sort of a raised print. She shrugged it on and looked in the mirror. Admiring its large buttons and swingy cut, she turned this way and that. She felt like an artist, thinking a beret would be a nice addition to the look.

‘That’ll hide a multitude of sins,’ the old man at the cash register commented.

At one point, this probably would have bothered her.

‘I think I’ll take it,’ she said.

She considered the multitude of her husband’s sins.

All the clichéd signs had been there. She was forbidden from knowing his password, he’d told her, in no uncertain terms, never to touch his phone. He repeated excuses – *I’ve got a work thing this weekend* – saying them too quickly, right before switching out the light and rolling to his side in their bed. Night after night, Meryl laid awake, staring off into the darkness, feeling a numb self-hatred.

She had known, but had tried not to know. Now, somehow it seemed if she had figured it out, confronted him first, it would have been better. She wouldn’t have been the stricken woman, screaming into the face of her husband, left sobbing on the bathroom floor, a cliché...

The register rang, the cash drawer slamming shut. Meryl, thrift-store coat still on, shoved her navy polar fleece jacket into her tote bag and headed to lunch.

\*

‘What can I get you?’ the bartender said.

Of course, that night, the engagement night, in this same restaurant, there had been expensive champagne. Dom Perignon. That July night, the one she had always considered the best one of her life, it had rained, a downpour. They'd run through it, holding hands, laughing, kissing. Also clichés; nice ones, she thought.

Now, ten years later – March, cold, sunny, windy – things couldn't have been more different. Meryl ordered a glass of sauvignon blanc, no bubbles this time.

She slid her hand into one of the pockets of her new old coat to check for her purse tucked inside. Pulling it out, a small piece of paper with writing scribbled across it clung to the outside. *You'll need more than this to keep you warm.* She choked a little, almost laughed, laid the paper by her glass, tried to imagine the author. A hunky body builder? Another woman? Someone too shy to approach, relying on a note. Meryl sipped her drink, wishing she still smoked. *Who wore this coat before? What kind of woman attracted this note?*

The wine did its warm work, easing its way down her throat, spreading a buzz through her head and heart. Meryl ripped up the note, tearing it into separate words and phrases. She exacted each word away from its neighbour, moving the pieces around on the bar. Sorrow welled up, the tidal wave she had invited by taking this trip to this place.

Like a homemade (non-)magnetic poetry kit, she slid the pieces around, moving fingers across the wooden bar.

You Need More Warm Than This Keep  
Than this To keep you To keep You  
Need more than this Than this This More Need  
You need more than this To keep you  
You need more

Sitting in this restaurant felt a bit like stalking her husband's girlfriends on the internet. Fairly typical spurned wife behaviour, she knew. Another cliché, not a nice one. Not healthy. Not healing, as her therapist would say. Her eyes moved to the front windows where she saw blinding spring sunlight illuminating a flapping sign. Passers-by leaned into the wind, pushed through.

'Will you be having lunch?' The bartender had appeared again.

Meryl forced a smile, knocked back the rest of her wine and shook her head no. She wrapped her new coat around her, headed out the door, into the wind, into the light.

# The Historienne's Tale

## by Amalie N Ingham

**Content Warnings: None**

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

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Brightly painted canvas stands had been erected in the meadow, and Josephine was glad she'd have a canopy over her head when it inevitably started raining. The jousting carousel had been marked in the grass with flags on pegs, and the maypole in the centre had its rings dangling by light paper strips. The delicate paper made them all the easier to pull away when the jousters caught them on their lances, but also just begged for the rain to come and soak it and ruin the whole thing.

Josephine was fairly sure this was not how things had been done in the real medieval times, but it was better than people actually stabbing each other. Marginally. There had been a great renaissance (ha) for such events of late, in which young ladies would wear fancy dress a little like that of Arthurian times and drink historical beverages, and young men would wear replica armour and pretend to duel over them, and everyone would play pipes and dance silly old dances no one would ever dance seriously in 1873.

Josephine had done a fine job of doing herself up, if she might say so without vanity, with a cloth roll around her head, crossed with ribbons, her ashy-brown hair piled in the centre with a few curls allowed to escape over one side of the headdress. Her kirtle was decorated with modern machine-woven ribbon, of course, though she'd made it up into a five-strand braid to mimic an illustration of Tristran and Isolde, and she certainly wasn't about to go uncorseted – she'd tried, once or twice, and ended up with aching shoulders halfway through the day. She'd taken an old corset of her mother's that no longer fit and had altered it a bit to achieve the proper low-waisted silhouette without making herself too uncomfortable. She still felt a bit guilty about wearing one at all, as it wasn't strictly accurate to do so, but her sleeves were voluminous shoulder to wrist, drawn in by a few ribbons, her skirt was held out only by petticoats, with nary a cage *nor* bustle, and she'd chosen a palette

of soft blues very like the painting of Lady Guinevere that had hung in the parlour all her childhood.

Her sister, by contrast, had worn her usual fancy dress, which was not remotely medieval but rather inspired by a deck of playing cards, with a different suit appliquéd onto each panel of the skirt and little cards at the crest of each ruffle. It was a lovely dress, and Janie looked very fine in it, but Josephine couldn't help but wish she'd at least come to her to ask for help, as she'd have gladly altered an old dress into something mediaeval for her. Pursuing historical accuracy was a hobby of hers, and if it gave her an excuse to sew something more interesting than a sampler or her mending, then all the better.

Honestly, she liked the preparation more than the festival. She'd make sketches from the books of Arthurian legend in the study, note down any reference to garb and copy the illustrations, then put them together into a functional design. She'd also read about what people ate and drank and read in that time, preparing for small talk she knew she'd hate having when it actually came around.

Janie was quite the opposite; she didn't want to think about the festival for a single moment before it happened, but once the time came, she'd be bustling around in her little black boots, making grandiose and faux-old-fashioned curtseys at every gentleman she saw, handing out flowers picked from the hedge with abandon. Everyone said Janie would be a heartbreaker when she got older, but Josephine was of the opinion that Janie was just enjoying the brightness of her own pleasant nature, and if others broke their hearts on her, that was their own affair.

Josephine couldn't have got away with giving anyone flowers from a hedge, even if she'd wanted to. When you were an innocent, you could, but from a girl of Josephine's age they'd seem like a quiet judgment, damning with faint praise. No matter how lovely she thought wildflowers were, she wasn't supposed to. She was expected to prefer neat florists' roses, so everyone assumed she did.

Much like everyone assumed her general miasma of unfulfilled sadness had to do with her age. Twenty-seven, unmarried, and not terribly enthusiastic about the prospect of a husband, Josephine felt she'd be entirely happy as a spinster if only she had a Cause. If she could find something to truly care about, she wouldn't at all mind being unmarried forever, but all she really enjoyed was historical research, and charities didn't tend to need that.

She liked people – she even liked men; she just tended not to like them for long. Flirting, laughing, dancing was thrilling; the prospect of *being kissed* and *becoming a wife* approaching like a runaway train was terrifying. She didn't like making a scene, she was

dreadfully shy, and yet when she saw a way something should work, a way to make someone smile, she tended to act without thinking. It was part of why she so loved these fairs; if people were in the proper mood of courtly love, she could indulge in friendliness and poetry without anyone trying to get her behind a bush later.

Josephine found her sister wandering the grounds and coaxed her back to the stands with a cup of hot cider, trying to move and sit like an Arthurian maiden. The makeshift knights were emerging from the stables, preparing for the joust. She couldn't tell who was who – even if she'd been any good at remembering the names of the lads in town, which she wasn't, they all had helmets on that obscured their faces. It was too big of a town for her to have met everyone, despite having lived there all her life, but not so big that people didn't talk about those who made particular impressions, and if she had been any good with names and faces, she might have suspected which of the most gossiped about lads were likely to be riding.

Most of them had done a decent job of putting something together that resembled armour – the one with what looked like a real suit was probably Earl Halbert's son – with a few wearing loose grey knit masquerading as chain mail. It was a good effect, honestly, though it probably would have worked better if the audience were a little farther back.

Most of the helmets were papier-mâché, going by the way they moved. A slightly tighter strap could have kept them from shifting so much, helped with the illusion. Yes, papier-mâché indeed; there were the hints of newsprint on the interiors as the lads swept their helmets off to pay respect to the ladies. One knight kept his helmet on, though, merely flipping up the visor. Josephine wasn't sure if she appreciated his attention to detail in making a visor that actually hinged or felt offended by his not removing his helmet.

He cut a striking figure, that one, with his papier-mâché breastplate painted to a fantastic shine, astride a mouse-grey mare, standing high in the saddle. The armour obscured too much for her to tell anything about his personal appearance besides dark eyes that crooked up in a smile when they landed on her, but that was enough for her to decide entirely on who she was rooting for.

Without thinking, she untied one of the ribbons from her sleeves and leant forward out of the stands, holding it out to him, hand outstretched. He took it and bent forward, touching his paper helmet to her hand in facsimile of a kiss, and tied her ribbon carefully to the armour fastening at his shoulder. She could see that he'd used little tin brads to hold the visor to the helmet – smart.

Janie was giggling at her, so she sat back down, flushed through the cheeks. Stupid, stupid. Whoever that man was, he'd remember this – just because she couldn't see his face didn't mean he couldn't see hers. She'd let herself get swept up as though she were truly masked and had flirted.

She liked flirting, honestly, she just hated it when people came back and had more to say to her about it later. It would be all right, probably – everything was a little removed from reality at a fair or a masquerade, and she didn't need to worry so much about expectations. Knights didn't require anything of their ladies, and it was freeing; she wasn't expected to marry anyone or kiss anyone or be alone with anyone here, she could just make them smile for a moment. She breathed deeply, reminding herself not to be so afraid.

Well, at least the joust was beginning now. Her knight's lance was striped in blue and silver, and they were all to make the full loop and have one go at the maypole per round, to be taken whenever they reached it. Slowing down too much for the thrust was looked down upon by the reigning court – played this afternoon by Fenniman, who ran the textile factory up on the hill, and his daughters, as he'd mostly financed the thing. Josephine's own family, who were all in banking, had contributed as well, but more out of a desire to get their daughters out of the house than any particular affection for the Arthurian period.

Presumably-Lord-Halbert was making a good go of it, having four rings lined up on his lance after four rounds. They were all different colours, though – ideally, each knight would aim for the rings wrapped in their own coloured paper, and only one of his was in the scarlet and gold he wore. The knight on the mouse-grey mare, though, had only three rings but all of his own colour and was coming up on a fifth round at the head of the pack.

Josephine realized she had half-risen out of her seat to watch properly. He was aiming, carefully, standing up straight in the saddle, before catching another silver and blue ring on the end of the lance, the paper ripping with a barely-audible sound almost like a sigh. Josephine bit back a thrilled crow. She didn't usually care this much about a game that resembled a living merry-go-round.

She discovered she was leaning forward enough to be out from under the canopy when a raindrop landed, cold and sudden, right in the parting of her hair. She squeaked and dropped back into her seat, embarrassed and worried for the game – as the rain started to fall in earnest, the paper holding up the rings sagged, ready to melt into pulp.

Probably-Halbert had caught another ring – a blue and silver one – and the blue-and-silver knight caught one of Halbert's colours, probably on purpose. The rings started falling from the maypole, dropping into the mud, and Josephine realized several of the

knights' breastplates and helmets were also starting to droop. The mystery knight's was holding up fairly well – varnished, perhaps? The sturdier papier-mâché people made japed furniture from was waterproof – but the costumes in general were going to suffer dramatically in the rain. Fenniman stood and called an end to the joust, awarding the win to Lord Halbert without really checking, and reminded everyone that there was plenty of hot cider and pasties in the pavilion.

Janie was tugging at Josephine's belt, so she let herself be led back to the main tent, fancifully called 'the pavilion.' She snuck up to the urn and refilled both her and Janie's mugs of hot cider – generally, women weren't meant to get their own, but she didn't want to bother with asking someone – and looked around at the turn-out. The differing amounts of trouble people had gone to with their costumes fascinated her. Fenniman's daughters, recognisable by their matching gold curls, always looked stunning at these things, but she couldn't really give them that much credit because she knew they had a seamstress of their own, along with easy access to the finest fabrics their father's mill produced.

Some of the girls in town had really put in the effort, though. A fair-haired girl of about twelve – Josephine wracked her brain and only managed to remember that her name probably started with an 'M' – had altered an old apron to make her day dress look like it had panelling, and draped a scarf around her waist, buckled together in a V shape. Others, though, had either just wrapped scarves around their hair or not dressed up at all. A few had worn their usual clothes but used Arthurian fashions as an excuse to go without their foundational garments; far more had gone in the opposite direction and pasted medieval frippery on top of the fashionable silhouette. Josephine mentally compared the one to the other, the unlaced women from town versus the Fenniman sisters' insistence on making their otherwise medieval gowns fit the current mode, and wasn't sure which bothered her more.

Not that she'd tell anyone it bothered her; making fun of people's costumes was never appropriate. She just quietly seethed and complimented the people who did well.

The knights were starting to filter back in, most of them having stripped out of their soggy papier-mâché. It was a shame, all that work gone to waste. Josephine hurried over to congratulate twelve-year-old Miss M on her costume before her knight noticed her there. The last thing she wanted was for her mysterious, handsome knight to turn into a real boy, who'd laugh at her books and talk over her if she ever got comfortable enough to talk at all.

Miss M – who Josephine learnt was named Mary – appreciated her comments and practically tripped over herself curtsying and asking if she knew Sir Gawain. Josephine laughed and asked if she could take a message for him from lovely Miss Mary.

‘You really know him?’ the girl asked.

‘I should say so,’ came a soft, amused, feminine voice. ‘You can’t tell that before you stands none other than Queen Guinevere herself? No one else is so lovely.’

Josephine turned to see who the mystery woman was, only to come face to face with the dark-eyed knight from before, armour removed but still wearing a painted tabard over trousers, blouse, and boots, Josephine’s ribbon in her hand. Out of the papier-mâché, her figure was unmistakable, and Josephine blinked repeatedly, trying not to say anything about the knight being a woman.

‘I wondered if I might give you a gift,’ she said, ‘in return for your favour.’

She held up the ribbon Josephine had given her, now tied in a pretty bow around six jousting rings – five blue and silver, one scarlet and gold.

‘I also have a scone from the refreshments table for you,’ she added, producing it from a pocket, wrapped neatly against crumbs in a clean, waxed paper. ‘So I’m not just giving back *your* present.’

Josephine took both ribbon-bow and scone in stunned wonder, vaguely aware that Mary was watching them suspiciously.

‘What is your name, Knight?’ she asked, once she’d regained her tongue.

‘I suppose it’s Otto today. Otto Acker.’ At Josephine’s blink, she added, ‘Usually it’s Otilie, but we were low on knights today, and I offered to step in.’

‘Josephine Sidney,’ Josephine said, still a bit thrown.

‘All right, my Queen, I’ll keep your secret,’ Miss Acker said with a wink. ‘If you are Josephine Sidney today, you are Josephine Sidney today.’

Josephine giggled a little, surprising herself, and Mary scuttled off to fetch Janie from where Josephine had left her by the refreshments. Mary was *that* Mary, Janie’s friend! Josephine mentally scolded herself for forgetting, but she’d never been good with faces, and Janie kept her school friends away from her shy, serious-eyed sister anyway.

‘Well,’ she said, regaining her composure, ‘Sir Acker, I thank you very much for this gift.’ She affixed the bow to the breast of her gown with a pin appropriated from her hair and had a delicate bite of the scone. Miss Acker grinned, and it was a very good grin, full of teeth, making dramatic dimples appear in her cheeks. She swept another bow, an elegant, deep one, and then must have heard something from across the tent because she grimaced, made her apologies, and scurried away.

As though in a trance, Josephine turned to meet up with Janie and Mary, taking small bites of a stunningly wonderful orange currant scone that at any other time would have been

astoundingly average. The jousting rings clacked ostentatiously as she shifted, but Josephine found that for once, she didn't mind.

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That evening, Josephine had great trouble keeping still and calm through dinner. Her parents wanted to know about the fair, and she told them about the canopy and the costumes while directing most questions to Janie. Partly it was to avert attention from herself, and partly to indulge Janie, who was still so excited to be eating dinner at table and not in the nursery. Josephine didn't want to be at dinner, she wanted to be alone with her notebook.

It was a great secret of hers, the small book bound in cotton calico that she kept on her person at all times; on the rare occasion she'd admitted that names slipped her mind easily, people had taken her to be aloof or uncaring. She cared about people, very much; it was only that connecting a name to her mental library of someone's history and then those to the image of their face was often difficult. Sometimes she could manage two, usually the latter two, but rarely all three at once.

She could manage for people she'd known well for a long time, like Janie or their parents, but it took so much longer to commit such things to memory than it seemed to for other people, and organizing information was satisfying anyway. Perhaps it had contributed to her shyness growing up; people were hurt when she stammered over their names, so she'd stopped talking much at all.

The book helped, though she couldn't consult it when anyone was watching, which was why she needed to be alone to update it. She kept notes on people, what they liked and disliked – she remembered these things, but having them on the page next to someone's full name and her own unskilled sketch of their face helped to connect the separate aspects of the individual.

She added a sketch to the page about Mary, having previously only had notes on her from what Janie had said. She made comments beside the drawings, too, in case her artistic skill failed her – for Mary, she noted her fair hair, the slight gap between her front teeth, and her oversized hands, though she also reminded herself these things might change as she aged.

She added a new page, too, for Miss Otilie Acker. There was a great deal of blank space on the page because she did not know much about Miss Acker yet, but on an instinct, she wrote small and noted that she'd leave several pages free for Miss Acker. She was somehow certain she'd fill them up.

Miss Acker's dark eyes she made particular note of, knowing she'd recognize them and the way they crinkled at the corners when she smiled. Her smattering of freckles, too, across her cheeks, and the edges of her dark curls that she'd seen despite them being pinned up very flat to fit under a helmet. Her charming nature, too, got a mention – 'she seems to ever be looking for an opportunity to compliment. This comes across as joyful, not as presumptuous, and I am not certain how.'

She spent longer than usual on the sketch, and it was when she realized she was trying to remember the positions of her individual freckles rather than just *giving her some freckles* that Josephine decided she needed to meet Miss Acker again sooner rather than later.

She had errands to run in town anyway, and so it was only a few days after the festival that she found herself casually asking each shopkeeper and acquaintance she encountered if they'd met a Miss Ottilie Acker. Shopkeepers were better about it than acquaintances – those who knew her reputation as being desperately shy and bookish all somehow thought it was a good idea to *tease* the shy and bookish girl for 'coming out of her shell,' as though that wasn't exactly what they'd all wanted her to do in the first place.

It was easier to talk to shopkeepers anyway because she had a script for herself. She knew what she was there to do, she knew how to make polite small talk, and her presence in their place of business made it much easier to recall their families and histories and what things it was and wasn't kind to ask them about. Acquaintances were awful because you ran into them unexpectedly, and then they wanted to talk to you, and you weren't ready. But she had a mission, so she kept asking.

No one did seem to know Miss Acker – not at the grocer, not at the bookseller, and not at the florist – until she went to buy a pretty ribbon for Janie, and the woman who ran the milliner's knew her quite well.

'Ottilie? Ottilie's a darling. She comes in here for bits and bobs, notions, trims, you know, for the costumes. She says it's always better to refit than to remake, and then you can spend the money you've saved on a couple of really impressive things.'

'She's a seamstress, then – for her own sake alone, or as a profession?' Josephine asked, wondering if her estimation of this woman would ever stop rising – to sew for yourself was one thing, everyone could do that, but to have the skill in details one needed in order to fit others?

'She's with the theatre, Josie,' the milliner said, and Josephine couldn't even be cross with her for the nickname or for how she put a pretty blue picot-edged ribbon in Josephine's hands, cooing over how it would suit her eyes. She took it without thinking.

‘She’s with the theatre,’ she repeated, baffled.

‘The Lion and Lily, down on Seawright. Fancy you met her and didn’t know; she talks my ear off about whatever production they’re putting on.’

‘It sounded like a comedy of love,’ Josephine said, still reeling, ‘I saw a posted bill on my way here. “*Nearly An Hundred Years Ago, Love Blooms in Pauper’s Eye, Lady’s Kiss.*”’

‘Sounds dreadful,’ the milliner said cheerfully, ‘but they always do, and they usually aren’t. If your parents wouldn’t mind, you should go see the show; it’s a very respectable place, the Lion and Lily, you could meet some handsome and sensitive souls there. I imagine your family could afford a box, now and then, no trouble.’

‘You imagine we could afford a lot of things,’ Josephine said, pointedly putting the picot-edged ribbon back on the shelf and only getting the one she’d already picked for Janie.

But she did go to the theatre. She hadn’t bought anything perishable at the grocer’s, having decided what to go back for on her way out of town, so she snuck into the theatre through the side door like a woman possessed, hands trembling on her basket. Inside was ribbon, some dried currants for the pudding Janie wanted to make, a new set of charcoals so she wouldn’t be caught without when the nub she was drawing with crumbled, a cluster of multi-coloured lupins. She draped her cloak over this last, not wanting to catch the light in the darkened theatre, though her pale face was inescapable.

It didn’t stay dark for long. Once she’d wound her way out of the side corridor and into the audience, she found that the stage lights were on. It was strange to be in a dark place in the middle of the day, with only artificial light and no windows; it felt like she was a little bit outside the world. She was on the balcony level – she realized that the main audience must go down a set of stairs, as she’d come in on the ground floor. This end of town was hilly, after all; perhaps the theatre took advantage of the receding ground for its basements and mysterious traps.

Josephine realized she was ruminating on architecture in order not to think about what she was doing, which was trespassing. She hunkered down in the balcony, a little ways back; there were no lights on this level, so she was probably fairly invisible from the stage. A couple of young men were chattering on stage, in perfectly ordinary clothes except for their shoes, which had heels higher than any man wore these days and looked vaguely jester-like, with oversized bows at the insteps. Josephine wondered why they’d choose that particular part of their costumes to keep on.

Ottolie emerged, and Josephine’s breath caught when she saw that she was still dressed as a man. Well, not as a man, not quite – her hair was in a simple braided bun on top

of her head, revealing that either she was wearing pin-ons or there was quite a lot of it when it wasn't mashed down for a helmet, and her blouse was inescapably feminine, but she was in trousers and the same silly shoes as the men, and she was carrying three swords.

The swords were passed out. Each of the players mashed a palm against the rubber tips, apparently checking they were indeed not deadly, and the three of them slung on what Josephine had thought were a pile of sandbags in the corner but was apparently thin canvas armour just in case. It would probably be worn under their costumes for the show, Josephine thought, but was on top for rehearsal.

'*Pret!*' Otilie announced, not making any attempt to sound French. The men faced each other from halfway across the stage, one in the centre and the other at one end. Otilie was pacing, deeper upstage, watching.

The men declaimed their lines but weren't projecting properly, so Josephine didn't really catch them. Something about a duel for the honour of a girl called Emma. Otilie made calls – *parry, thrust, feint, three steps back, fumble, yes, thrust and disarm, backwards tumble* – and the men followed her every word. The battle was at half-speed, it seemed, with Otilie clapping a steady rhythm, sword tucked into her belt. It was as much a dance as a duel, with rounded steps and attacks carefully choreographed to move the pair across the entire stage. When the hero's sword tucked between the villain's arm and chest, and he fell to the floor from this fatal stabbing, Otilie called scene, and the three of them burst into joyous laughter. Josephine could swear she could see Otilie's dimples from all the way in the balcony.

'Better, better,' she said, 'but the final balestra didn't have the punch it needs. Sniffy, aside, let me run it with Ed from two bars before.' Her voice carried like she was projecting, even though both the people she was talking to were on the stage with her, the hero having calmly headed upstage to sit on a crate and watch. Otilie whipped out her own sword, heading to insert herself where Sniffy had been, as Ed took his position where he had been two bars before whatever a balestra was. Otilie raised her sword, Ed took a defensive position, and Sniffy called action.

Otilie took three sharp steps forward, moving faster than Josephine had expected. Sniffy was clapping time now, at a greater tempo than before, and Otilie was moving like a great cat, subtle and quick even in those ridiculous shoes. She parried Ed's attack, then as he scurried backwards, she leapt, making the next thrust while still in the air, landing low with her knees bent and the rubber tip of her rapier in the centre of Ed's chest.

‘There we go,’ she said. ‘I knew it was something. We’ll have the collapsible one for the show; I’ll be done fixing it by then, so go for the chest instead of the armpit.’

‘No, no,’ Ed said, ‘just because you can pull back and leave me without a bruise doesn’t mean Sniffy can.’

Sniffy stuck his tongue out at him.

‘But we’ll have the collapsible one for the show, so he’ll need to practice aiming properly... Keep doing it as you are for now, but I’ll make sure to fix the trick sword soon enough you’ll have a couple rehearsals with it. We don’t want to bruise that concave chest.’

It was Ed’s turn to stick out his tongue. These theatre people were certainly fond of that gesture.

‘Anyway,’ Otilie said, ‘it’s not just that. Your landing doesn’t have enough impact, Sniffy, you’re too worried about letting your heels clack, so you wobble. Instead of focusing on keeping your heels off the ground, focus on getting the balls of your feet *on* the ground, then drop your heels as your knees bend. Let’s try it from the same spot, but I’ll stand in for Ed this time.’

And she did, and Josephine watched. Easily, Otilie became the dashing hero or the nefarious cad, twirling an imaginary moustache or doffing a non-existent cap. The joy she had, apparently vibrating through her whole body, was nearly as impressive as her skill with the blade, her footwork quick and balletic as she sank into either role wherever she was needed.

Eventually, she clapped both the men on the back and headed off into the wings as another cluster of actors filled the stage to rehearse their scene. Josephine slunk back out of the theatre with a general feeling that the moment was over.

She was halfway down the street before she turned around, scrawled ‘for Miss Acker’ on the back of a calling card, and handed it to the lad at the stage door with one of the lupins – a blue one, like her jousting tabard.

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Two days later, Miss Otilie Acker came to call. When Janie tumbled up the stairs to tell Josephine she had a visitor, she nearly tripped over her own slippers getting up from her chair. She reached for the bundle of jousting rings hanging from the knob at the side of her mirror but restrained herself – to wear it now would probably be presumptuous or make her seem foolish. She wracked her brain for the Arthurian etiquette regarding favours. She had

given the ribbon to Otilie, who had obliged her by wearing it to joust; Otilie had given her the rings, which she had worn proudly for the rest of the day.

Did it matter? The fair was over; chivalric notions had to be put away. Otilie was a woman again and likely wouldn't take well to Josephine's dotting.

But she had come to call.

Josephine tucked the jousting rings into her pocket, fluffed her skirt, and scurried downstairs.

Otilie stood in the parlour, hat in her hands like a man, although for the first time in their admittedly brief acquaintance, she was in a gown. The bodice, Josephine was uncommonly delighted to note, had lapels like a man's jacket, crisply tailored with shiny brass buttons. She was wearing the lupin in her buttonhole, still crisp and bright blue after those two days, looking strangely saturated in colour against her grey gown and dark hair.

'Guinevere,' Otilie said, beaming with those dimples out in full force. 'I'm glad to see you! It seemed a bit unfair since you saw me not so long ago.'

Josephine went white.

'You knew I came by?'

'Not until after. One of the lads saw you come in the side door and told me when I got off stage that my Guinevere had snuck in.'

'You had told them we met?'

'I couldn't stop telling them about you. The braid on your kirtle was stunning, not to mention your impeccable manner.'

Josephine gasped softly, somehow even more moved by the compliment to her costume than she had been by the one to her personal beauty at the fair.

'I braided it myself,' she stammered, 'from ribbon I bought in town. From the milliner on Firwood; she said she knows you.'

'Oh, she's a darling,' Otilie said, and Josephine giggled.

'She said the same about you.'

'I'm glad my reputation precedes me,' Otilie said with a wink. 'What did you think of our rehearsal?'

'I'm not sure why the other actors are there,' Josephine said, emboldened suddenly, 'when you could play all the roles so well yourself.'

Otilie laughed, a sudden, strong bark of a laugh, surprised.

'Miss Sidney, you flatter me,' she said. 'I could hardly play everyone, however. I must confess: no one would believe me to be the fair maiden.'

‘To me, you seem most fair.’

‘You shall have to come to our performance Thursday night,’ Otilie said, ‘and our lead actress will remind you what a fair maid is, distracting you entirely from me.’

‘I doubt that,’ Josephine said, offering Otilie a seat. ‘I saw the brads holding your helmet together at the joust, lightweight enough not to tear the papier-mâché, with the appearance of rivets from the outside. Genius. I don’t think I could be distracted from you by the whole world.’

They sat opposite each other, Otilie’s hat on her lap.

‘I was glad you came to the theatre,’ Otilie said after a moment. ‘I hadn’t been quite sure how to find you, and I’d wanted to ask you about that costume of yours. I spoke to Mrs Galwell, apparently after you did, and she told me you read a great deal and care particularly for history. Is that true?’

‘It is,’ Josephine said. ‘Did she also tell you I’m shy and dull and bad with faces?’

She wasn’t sure why she’d said it; some kind of self-defeat, perhaps, or fear, or a need to get it over with. Maybe it was just embarrassment borne of not having remembered Mrs Galwell’s name. Otilie just smiled, a little sadly.

‘She was very complimentary, in fact. A requisite jab at your age, but she fusses at me for the same.’

‘She does?’

‘I’m thirty in June.’

‘You don’t look it.’

‘Oh, I do. I just don’t look like a Punch drawing of a spinster. Neither do you. How did you convince your kirtle to lie so smoothly over your gown?’

Josephine blinked. ‘The gown was of a thinner fabric, and I folded it up a bit before tying the kirtle on top. I cheated, though, with an old pair of stays I altered to hold the proper silhouette. I know a medieval lady wouldn’t wear them, her dress itself would be fitted enough, but I—’

She cut herself off, mortified at almost mentioning her own need for proper support, and yet more so when she realized her hand had risen to her breast. She returned it to her lap so quickly she nearly slapped herself in the skirt. Even mentioning stays themselves had probably been a mistake with such a new acquaintance, but because she was answering a question about costume, the words had just spilled out. She wanted to make Otilie happy, she realized, more than any stranger she’d ever smiled at or danced with before. She wanted to

answer her questions and see her dimples, and it wasn't quite the same as having a real Cause, a real purpose, but it was close.

'Of course,' Otilie said. 'But altering stays, that's fiddly work. The boning, the layers of coutil; making them in the first place is specialized enough, but you changed the overall silhouette yourself?'

'Jack of all trades,' Josephine said, flustered, 'master of none. I can do a bit of most things, so long as those things have come up regarding something I researched.'

Otilie smiled, impressed, and it was a little more crooked than her grins before, bringing out only one dimple, the one on the left side.

'You're a wonder, Miss Sidney.'

'You can sword fight.'

'You can research.'

'Why were the men on the stage wearing those funny shoes? You were too.'

As soon as it came out of her mouth, Josephine realized it was apropos nothing in their conversation. In her mind, discussion of their respective abilities had led to the moment she admired those abilities most markedly, and the odd footwear Miss Acker and the actors had worn at the time, but she hadn't articulated that process, so—

'Shoes are terribly important,' Otilie said, unbothered. 'They change the whole way you carry yourself. Picking shoes early so the actors can rehearse in them is always important. Especially for something like the stage fight. You wouldn't ask a ballerina to dance in a workman's boots, would you?'

Josephine nodded, slowly. 'But the bill on the wall said the play was set "*Nearly An Hundred Years Ago*." Men hardly wore heels at all by 1750, much less 1770; the French Revolution in '89 stopped it altogether apart from riding boots. I read about it when my father was spending time with a gentleman who had what he said were original Revolutionary *tricolore cockades* in his safe box at the bank. I don't think they were real.'

Otilie was staring, but it was a thrilled stare, like a pteridomaniac who had just spotted a new and rare fern.

'I am devastated by my error and fascinated by your knowledge, Miss Sidney. We need you at the theatre.'

'You do what?'

'We need you at the theatre, Miss Sidney. Consider it. Come by once a week to start, talk with my director, maybe you can get some sense into the old man. You notice things everyone forgets, don't you?'

‘I just like to read.’

‘You like to read and you remember,’ Otilie said. ‘And you put things together. What are the standard parts of a medieval woman’s gown?’

‘Chemise, stockings, at least one kirtle, belt, mantle, and wimple or cap.’

‘Who did Sir Gawain marry?’

‘Dame Ragnell, the loathly lady.’

‘Who first built Westminster Abbey?’

‘Edward the Confessor.’

‘What would one drink with breakfast in Prussia?’

‘What period? Frederick the Great banned coffee in the 1770s.’

‘We need you, Miss Sidney,’ Otilie repeated. ‘I came here to satisfy my own curiosity and because I found you wonderfully engaging. I much desire us to be better friends, Miss Sidney.’

Otilie kept saying her name, and it was dizzying and exciting.

‘Your theatre would hardly want me fussing at them about historical minutiae,’ Josephine said.

‘That is precisely what we do want,’ Otilie said. ‘Better to know before the curtain goes up than to read about it in the review! At the same time – though I speak only for myself in this – to hear you speak is wonderful. It enlivens the room, how thoroughly you have command of your subject.’

‘You’ve hardly heard me,’ Josephine began, but Otilie shook her head.

‘I heard you talking to Miss Mary about her dress and about Sir Gawain. It was effortless. All the facts were at your command. Do you know what a dramaturg is, Miss Sidney?’

‘On that, you have stumped me.’

‘A dramaturg researches. A dramaturg reads the play before it’s put on, she looks up all the little things, ensures it is accurate in history and place. A dramaturg is a historian of the stage, and we desperately need one. We need a dramaturg, and I, as a woman longing for like-minded company, would like it to be you.’

The thought of research being her Cause made Josephine’s heart race, in a way not at all unlike looking at Otilie did. Once a week, she thought, to start, like she’d said. She could come, talk through what she needed to learn about, and then go ahead and learn it, and they would want her to. They would want to know everything she could tell them.

As Otilie awaited her answer, a curtain seemed to rise. Josephine felt rather like all the air had gone out of the room from the way those dark eyes fixed on her, the smile that narrowed them, made little lines at the corners.

‘Please come, Miss Sidney.’

‘Happily, Miss Acker.’