

Openings**[Sounds of writing]**

Lenore: We stayed in Paris six days, not counting the half day of travel on either side. Yesterday morning we woke up at the hotel and Radcliffe had the valet carry our luggage down to the car. The clothes and gifts we had bought for the party had already been sent on ahead. We breakfasted at the hotel—the food was excellent and sumptuous throughout our stay—and then drove across northern France, back to Maison d’Aubépine. For the rest of the trip I had had the same feeling I wrote about when I last sat down with this journal, the feeling of being a prisoner. A pampered prisoner, certainly, as nothing I asked for was denied to me. I got to see and experience everything I had earlier complained about missing. The Moulin Rouge, the jazz clubs, the risqué dance halls in the back alleys of the Latin Quarter. We dined and drank and danced across the city. I briefly met Ernest Hemingway in a cafe near Notre Dame (He was nothing to speak of. I have always suspected that writers are not nearly as exciting as their work).

But I knew, implicitly, that I was only seeing these things because Radcliffe allowed it. Because somehow he liked the idea of his innocent young wife glimpsing the scandalous society of the sinful city. I knew that there were rules to what I could ask for, for what I was allowed to do. What I am allowed to be. It is strange to write this, but inside I chafed against it all. I have gotten everything I wished for, and it feels like a trap.

But here is the strangest thing. After the light and tumult of Paris, we returned to Maison d’Aubépine, waiting for me like an expectant suitor, brooding against the trees on its lonely hill above Gévaudan. We pulled up by the stone steps and crossed the lawn and passed under the oak tree. And as I mounted the steps to the veranda, to enter the house which had been my lonely

cage for the first month of my marriage, I felt something that shocked me to my core. I felt...safe.

After all I had seen and experienced, what I felt as I entered the house was a sense of belonging. It had nothing to do with Radcliffe, or even Bella, though I was eager to see my sweet friend again. This was about the house itself.

Standing in the foyer, I felt the fist in my chest open up, and I breathed easily for the first time since we had left for Paris last week.

I had come home.

[Theme music; opening credits]

[Sounds of writing]

I am writing in the morning room, though it is near to noon. This morning Radcliffe left for work, and just like that our regular routine falls back into place. He was warm and solicitous over breakfast, and continued to talk about the party, now only 11 days away. Throughout these past days he has seemed genuinely excited, if not for the party itself then at least for the joy he wants it to bring me. I don't think he senses my growing unease, which at any rate is all vague feelings and conjecture.

Perhaps this is what marriage is? A confusion of pleasure and discomfort, negotiating ways to be yourself while avoiding discovery? Or is this just *my* marriage? I am haunted by Bella's question about love. Why didn't I say that? And when I'm in Radcliffe's arms, why is it Bella I think of? Actually, that one becomes clearer and clearer, not that it matters.

I was thinking these things while still at table, after Radcliffe left this morning. Mrs. Perrault came to pour more coffee and clear away the plates. I felt badly that our last

conversation had ended with me disbelieving her stories. I wanted to say so.

“Mrs. Perrault,” I began, “about last week...”

“I didn’t take anything you said personally, my dear,” she said. “It’s a strange thing to learn. It’s not surprising that you didn’t like to hear it.”

I started to correct her—that wasn’t exactly what had happened—but she smiled so kindly at me I decided to let it lie. And anyway, my mind was elsewhere.

“Mrs. Perrault, you’ve been married, yes? It is *Mrs.* Perrault?”

“I was married, once,” she said.

“Was? What happened?”

“My husband, Charles, had some...antiquated ideas about women,” she said. “It wasn’t the healthiest place for me to be.”

“What happened,” I asked, after waiting for her to continue. I whispered the scandalous possibility: “Did you divorce him?”

She gazed out the window as she spoke, possibly seeing people and events that were no longer there. “Oh no, nothing vulgar like that. I had a friend who helped me escape. Helped me be free of him.”

“How did your friend accomplish that?” This suddenly seemed a very important thing to know.

She blinked and looked away from the window, like waking up from a dream. “Well, I say friend, but that’s not quite the right word. A doctor I met, he helped me.”

“A doctor? Was this before you worked here?”

“It was right as I began. I’ve been at Maison d’Aubépine ever since.”

“I still don’t understand. How did this doctor help you?”

“It’s a complicated situation,” said Mrs. Perrault. “One day I’ll introduce you, and he can explain.”

“I’d like that,” I said. She finished clearing and left me at the table.

I’m going to put my pen down and take a turn in the garden. I may work on my painting. I hated being away from it for so long. I wish I knew how to reach Bella. Perhaps I’ll go door to door in Gévaudan until I find her.

[Sounds of writing]

Good morning, dear journal! I have so much to tell you! Yesterday I had gone into the back garden to breathe the air and greet the ravens, and not five minutes later, Bella appeared at the corner of the house, calling out to me and bending to greet Biscuit. She was wearing a shapeless, loose-sleeved dress, Nile green, that ended just below her knee. Her hair was pulled back in a bun under a cloche hat, and of course the silk choker, but this time with a green gemstone that set off the dress and her eyes. She looked very chic, and very cute. As she stood up she handed me a folded dress.

“I’ve brought back the dress you loaned me for the painting party,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for you to come back to me.”

I took the dress and led her to the patio. “How did you know I was home?” I asked.

“I saw the car yesterday afternoon as you drove through town,” she said. “And I may have stopped by a few times to see if you had returned.”

“A few times?”

“Not quite every day.” She looked down while smiling up, a very pretty move. “Not

quite. Were you in Paris?”

“I was,” I said, and I took her hand. “Come in and I’ll show you what I got!”

We went inside and up to the scarlet room. As much as I had looked forward to seeing her, I had expected to feel awkward when we were together again. I had after all dreamed of Bella nearly every night, and the dreams were not at all platonic. But as before, I felt more at ease with Bella than I did even when alone.

I put the dress back in the wardrobe, and then I showed her the ones I had bought in Paris. She exclaimed over them in a most satisfying way, and then we sat on the bed and I told of all I had seen and done in the city. She was particularly interested in Josephine Baker, and wanted to know if it was true that she danced in a skirt made only of bananas. (It was true).

As before, we laughed and talked for more than an hour. We raided the kitchen for wine and cheese, and then retreated back to the scarlet room. I showed her the painting, still half-done, that I had hidden in my wardrobe. She squealed over it and said she couldn’t believe how glamorous I had made her look. I told her I planned to reveal it at the party, and that I hoped she would be there to see it. She promised she would.

I also told her about my terrifying walk home through the woods after our last meeting—it seems so far away now—and she said she had no problems getting back to Gévaudan.

“I did hear the howling though,” she said. “It was a chilling sound. I’m so glad you had Talbot to help you home!”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever thought to be grateful for Talbot,” I said. “But I suppose I should be. He’s so gruff and disagreeable.”

“All men are, really,” she said. “Maybe not the grand Monsieur Thorne. But all the men I’ve known.”

Eventually, I remembered to tell her about the ghost. She was sitting propped against the headboard, and I was laying with my legs drawn up and my head in her lap. Her fingers idly twisted in my hair as I talked. Bella listened without interrupting as I described the woman in the white dress, the bloodstains and the locked door and the little brass key. When I finished, she was quiet for almost a minute, and I wondered if I had made a mistake by sharing it.

Finally, she said, almost to herself, “So the stories are true.”

I sat up and faced her. “You believe me, then?” I was so relieved.

“Of course I believe you,” she said. “You must have been so scared.”

“I wasn’t, strangely,” I told her. “I felt like she was there to help me. To, I don’t know, warn me?”

“Warn you about what?” She looked so expectant, so earnest. Her face was very close to mine.

I thought of the howling in the woods, and of feeling a prisoner in Paris. I thought of Radcliffe’s tight mouthed refusal to discuss the locked room.

“I...can’t imagine,” I said. I don’t know why my answer disappointed her, but her face fell and I wished I had been honest.

Bella watched my face for a moment longer, and then said, “You must trust ghosts.”

“I do trust her, I think,” I told her. “She is so quiet and purposeful, but she also seems very sad.”

Bella laughed. “Of course she’s sad. She’s had her throat torn open.”

I did not laugh. I said, “I know I should open the door. I nearly did before we left for Paris.”

“What do you think is in there?” Bella asked. She slid further up the bed and lit a

cigarette. There was a small stain on her collar where a drop of wine had spilled. I remembered her in my dream, hooking her fingers underneath the choker, pulling. The light of the sunset on her skin. She drew on the cigarette and blew the smoke out through the corner of her mouth, twisted up in one of her mischievous little smiles.

I don't know what came over me. That's not true. I do know what came over me; I just don't know why I didn't try harder to resist it.

Okay, that's a lie as well. I know exactly why. And I want to write down here that I was not drunk, and I was wide awake. I wasn't overcome or swooning or out of my head. I looked at her mouth, and I made a conscious decision. Then I leaned forward on the bed, cupped my hands on either side of her face, and kissed her. I could taste the cigarette and the wine, though whether from her or me I couldn't tell. I felt her smile beneath the kiss, and when I drew back she was still smiling.

She said, "Whatever will Radcliffe say?" And I blushed with guilt.

But only for a moment.

[Sounds of writing]

And here is where the strangeness comes fully, and I leave all rationality behind. I need to write this down, here in the morning sunlight, so that I know it's real. So that last night's phantoms don't get explained away.

After Bella left, I worked on the painting for a while, making sure to put it safely away before Radcliffe arrived home. We ate in the dining room, as it was too overcast for the patio, and Radcliffe regaled me with stories of his friends in other parts of Europe. He was funny and smart and attentive, continually refilling my glass and calling for more of Mrs. Perrault's chocolate mousse as we retired to the parlor to sit by the fireplace. Again, it should have been

romantic and perfect, but there is a discordant note beneath everything for me now. When he kissed me, I thought of Bella.

He wanted, I could tell, to make love in front of the fire, something we have been in the habit of, but I pled a headache. We went to bed, he a little surly at being rebuffed, and eventually he slept.

Once I was certain Radcliffe was truly asleep, I left the bed and wrapped myself in the floral print kimono I had bought in Paris. I went directly down the stairs and through the moonlit shadows to the sitting room with the hunting prints and the locked door.

The house was silent. No howling in the woods, no ravens at the window. I had not seen the woman in white since before Paris. The wooden floor was cold under my bare feet, but the brass key was even colder as I slid it into the lock.

It fit perfectly. No resistance, no struggle. I heard the grandfather clock in the foyer strike two, and I turned the key decisively to the right. There was a faint “click,” and the handle turned easily under my hand. The door swung smoothly toward me on oiled hinges, revealing a darkened archway and a smell of mothballs and pennies.

I could feel the house waiting. I glanced back once at the empty hallway outside the room, took a deep breath, and then stepped forward into the dark.

[Theme music; end credits]