



LINDA ROGERS

# The Empress Letters

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A NOVEL

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*For Sophie, who asked for this story*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*Do not pray for gold and jade and precious things;  
pray that your children and grandchildren may all be good.*

— CHINESE PROVERB

*My candle burns at both ends.  
It will not last the night.*

*But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends —  
It gives a lovely light!*

— EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

LETTER TO HERSELF BY POPPY VON STRONHEIM MANDEVILLE. MAY 12, 1927, 10 AM, ON THE FIRST CLASS DECK, THE *EMPRESS OF ASIA* EN ROUTE TO HONOLULU, YOKOHAMA, SHANGHAI, AND HONG KONG TO RESCUE PRECIOUS.

Once, when I was at a dinner party at a posh London Club, I went to the marble and gold ladies powder room and found a baby in the toilet. It was a foetus curled up like those dried medicinal seahorses they sell at Mah Leung in Chinatown, a little sea creature with its thumb in its mouth. I stood there, forgetting I had to pee. I didn't know whether to flush the nacreous flesh or fish it out. The toilet was running, perhaps broken. Was the porcelain head clearing its throat, preparing to sing its wet requiem for aborted fetuses? What if the abalone child plugged the drain and the water closet with a seat shaped like a seashell overflowed? Where would I hide the tiny body if I removed it?

I couldn't touch the curled flesh, flush it or pee on it. It hurt to look. I decided to leave the little creature. The gentleman's room was empty. I ducked in and locked the door, my heart racing. When I turned on the tap water and sat down, I couldn't go. I felt faint,

leaned forward with my head in my hands. My nose started to bleed. I had to do something. My long absence from the dinner table would be noticed. If another guest found the foetus, she would assume it was mine. When my nosebleed stopped, I washed my face with cold water, dried myself with a towel, put on fresh lip rouge, went back to the ladies and flushed.

The dear little thing went down. I watched the foetus begin its journey back to the sea, where it no doubt encountered other babies from all different parts of the city.

There were twenty of us at dinner in the private dining room. I sat down, remembering to lift my skirt carefully, so I didn't harm the silk pleats, and looked around the table, a blaze of candlelight and diamonds and melting ice. The future king was there and I think he knew the sky was falling, or had already fallen with those of our generation who killed or were killed in the poppy fields of France.

Where I come from, most of the servants are Chinese, with sadness written in every expression and gesture we Occidentals call "inscrutable." I too have striven for inscrutability, and invisibility. My mother's secrets are planted in her garden. My secrets are hidden in the gardens I paint. But, like the foetus in the toilet, they are there to be seen by the right people.



## I

MAY 13, 1927, 10 AM, ON THE FIRST CLASS DECK, THE *EMPRESS OF ASIA*.

My dear Little Shoe,

This letter is for you. Yesterday, I wrote to myself. I think it was practice, although I have been writing letters to myself ever since I was a child. In the first sentence, I used the ship's word "posh" — port out, starboard home. There are so many things we take for granted, and some we cannot change. That is life, ours subject to the same rules of the universe as everyone else's. What is the right way to ask that a positive force might protect you on your unfamiliar journey?

I am writing in the hope that you are safe and well, that Soong Chou has rescued you in Peking and brought you back to Hong Kong, and that we will have a happy reunion. I wish I could will this ship to move faster. Your Uncle Tony, my dear companion, has suggested that I pass the anxious time on board by writing to you.

There is no absolute truth, Precious, but we have lived with too many secrets and lies. I lie awake at night imagining the conversations we might have had. Now I intend to type what I might have told

you. The sound of the keys is a great comfort. Much of what I will write is not for your little ears, grown up as you think you are, but for later. Because you will be a woman by the time you read this, I will not deliberately leave anything out. Tony and I are in disagreement about how much I should divulge but I want you to know all of it, even the parts that embarrass me in retrospect and might shock you. My life as a girl and woman has been based on hypocrisy, the parasite in our garden. Truth and beauty are co-dependent, my sweet. Are flowers ashamed of their thirst? Do flowers lie?

For years I have written to my stepfather, who gave me this typewriter when I was about your age so that I could express my feelings. He was unable to answer. I may not get a reply from you, but I can't think that letters written with so much love are wasted. My stepfather, who was a golfer, told me it was important to keep one's eye on the ball. I am keeping my mind's eye on you and the belief that we will be together soon. *Joy geen*.

Because I paint flowers, I will start with the place life begins. It is curious the words women choose for their intimate room. Some say nothing, as if the uncharted territory below the waist were the South Pole, all snow and ice with no identifiable landmarks. I know women who would rather be stretched on the rack than hear the word *cunt*. Others use it almost endearingly, as if describing the happy landscape of their childhood, where the hills are rosy and warm as cats sleeping at sunset. Then there is *pussy*. My mother said *koo*. The Italians call the round door *sorella*, which means sister. Sister is good. My friend Tallulah called hers *the plum garden*. I liked that. Plum garden. It had the taste of summer. I wanted to bite into the lips of summer, the peaches growing on trees espaliered on garden walls.

I worship the beautiful female shapes of nature. When the earth turns out to be flat, I will gladly sail off the edge into her perfect oval. I will slip through, head first, arms by my sides, fearless, the way I did the first time — so long as I know you are well and happy.

You are missing, lost, misplaced in China, your dark head floating

in a sea of dark heads on the other side of the world. It was foolish of me to believe you would be safe in China, a country in the middle of a civil war. Because I have given in to people all my life, I acquiesced when you insisted on accepting Soong Chou's invitation to visit his family in Hong Kong. Who in their right mind listens to a child with an irrational request? I thought letting you go would ease the pain of separation, when I make my final journey. Now I have allowed you to be exposed to an even greater danger than my own, which is at least a controlled disaster, a weakness in my own body and not the irrationality of a country at war with itself.



AFTER I WATCHED the foetus swirl down the toilet during that dinner party in London in 1923, I looked for its mother, checked the maids in their black dresses and white organdie aprons for wet spots, checked their stockings for clots of blood, checked the guests for stains on their pale evening dresses, checked the chairs covered in striped silver and white satin for the heartbreaking evidence. Why would a woman leave her unborn child alone like that, unclothed and unshriven?

I have convinced myself that the foetus in the toilet was a girl, her plum garden unknown, un-entered, swollen, blushing with the surfeit of maternal hormones.

When I was a child, I dug holes in the sand with my mother's silver spoons. The other side was China. Nora reclaimed the heirlooms engraved with her family crest, what appears to be an orange tree, its branches symmetrical and laden with fruit. She believed in tree fairies and meadow fairies, our capricious deities. Now the bad fairies have taken you. I stand at the ship's rail and look in our wake for lost children. I see them pink in the foam. Good, I think, at last reconciled with my fear of saltwater. I would rather you were with the shape changers in the sea than with people who would hurt you.

When I say I will throw myself into the water, Tony puts a restraining hand on my arm, “She is not there.” He is right. I am mad, but he says the madness will pass. “When you spill your petals into the ocean, Poppy, they will dissipate like blood. What good would that do?” he has written in the margin. We will find you. The East Wind will lie down and let us sail gently over all the children returned to the sea.

I am lying on a deck chair staring at the horizon, willing China to come into view. I know I will live long enough to get there. My heart still squeezes its blood; one unsteady beat after another — the way a child learns to walk. Each morning and evening on the voyage, I will type out parts of my story and he will save them for you. Hopefully, I will be finished by the time we dock in Hong Kong.

The Buddhists say that if we sit by a river long enough we will see the bodies of all our enemies float by. I am writing this so that you will be able to recognize your friends as well, the ones who have loved you more than you know.

I could paint you a picture, but my paintings fall short of the truth. Flowers dissemble. If I should end up eating with the fishes, Tony promises he will change nothing I have written. “Is this true?” he asks when he reads my words as they come out of the typewriter. Never mind. If I exaggerate the colours, that would be my perspective. Isn’t exaggeration an artist’s prerogative?

The difference between ordinary people and invalids is that invalids have the luxury of time in bed to listen to all the voices in our heads. For me, those voices are shapes and hues. I think of you when you took off your baby shoe, touching my velvet dress with your foot, saying your new word, “soft,” as if it were the key to your sensual universe. I imagine a young bee touching down on its first velvet petal and, in the language of bees, uttering the same cry of delight.

Looking over my life, I would say I have spent more time in bed than out of it. That has given me a lot of time to ask questions.

While sunlight and firelight took turns dancing on the ceiling, I looked to their patterns for the answers. “Capture the light,” our dear Emily said when she began to teach me everything I know about line and form and colour, and that is what I have tried to do.



CASANORA HAS BEEN our family home since we left San Francisco for Victoria in 1907, the year I turned seven. Used to living in hotels, I was at first overwhelmed by the large stone house surrounded by several acres of gardens. My mother's whole energy was devoted to cultivating her outdoor rooms decorated with flowering trees and fragrant blossoms. On the other side of Beach Drive, at the Oak Bay Golf Club, players aimed their balls at little holes in the grass. Sometimes, before Nora built her high stone wall, rogue balls sailed into sand traps and ponds and into her newly established flowerbeds. The gardeners covered my head and cursed and I learned to swear in Chinese.

When I was little, I felt the presence of death in Nanny's obsessive attention to my health and Nora's emotional distance, which I think might have been due to her refusal to bond with a child she might lose.

When I do finally leave this earth, I will have my ashes tossed into the ocean that hungers at the bottom of my mother's gardens. I do believe the sea desires us and, by and large, we don't deserve to live on the land. The land belongs to organisms with roots.

Do you remember what Voltaire said about our need to dig in the ground? We must, he said. Like dogs, we bury our bones and our dead. We are compelled to decorate our graves. He would have been astonished by our colonial city built on tunnels and graveyards and coal mines — one for the High Anglicans, one for Catholics and lesser Protestants, one for the Chinese, another for Jews, everything neat and tidy, in its place.

As a child, I believed that I could dig holes that went all the way to China. That is so odd given that we imported Chinese men to do

our digging for us. They must have been exhausted. No wonder they sought the natural comfort of opiates. I am not sure why my parents called me Poppy. I don't regard myself as vibrant and intoxicating, but I have grown in difficult ground, like the volunteer plants that grow through the pavement.

Driven about the city as a child, first in Nora's electric car, and then in her Packard, I absorbed the demographic of gardens: Oriental market gardens planted with snow peas and *bok choy*, the elegant wind-sculpted rock gardens of Oak Bay overflowing with lobelia and succulents, the proud and tidy landscaping of working-class people who escaped the tenements of Europe and Great Britain to claim their small slice of paradise and plant it with dreams, tomatoes, roses and holy shrines. I have painted flowers because from my earliest memories they were my consolation. They say a kind heart experiences pain in order to recognize it in others. In the life and death of a garden, the innocent snowdrops and primroses of spring, summer's achingly sensual roses, fall's desperately flamboyant dahlias and dried leaves in the shape of dying hands, I discovered my life.

My mother, Stanford and I — along with Nanny MacDuff, and Miss Beach — moved to Victoria from San Francisco in 1907, just before the opium laws were passed. Because I was a child who didn't know anything about the adult cures for loneliness, even though I had experienced the opiated cough remedies still given to children in those days, I had my own prescription for night terrors. The first evening in our enormous Maclure house, I lay in bed saying our new address over and over — British Columbia, Victoria, Oak Bay, Beach Drive, Casanora — trying to reverse the frightening vortex of heaven.

I was weary of travel. In San Francisco, the death fairies had taken me to their glass city under the sea and found me wanting. That was a double unhappiness — being abducted and then sent back with a damaged heart. I blamed the God of our Presbyterian nanny. If God were as great as Duffie had said he was, then he

would have cured the fever that made me vulnerable. Well-bred children, I was told, returned things in good condition. When I borrowed books on my visits to the library with Duffie, they went back promptly with no corners turned down, nothing written in the margins. I didn't want a different me with my words underlined. I should have been returned exactly as I had been.

Casanora was our first real home. Up until my father's death, we had visited with relatives and stayed in hotels in Europe and America. My father performed mercantile diplomacy while we moved *en famille*, following the social seasons of two continents. Duffie told me that my father had died of a massive nosebleed in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1905. I believed her because I had seen the blood. I saw, and then Nanny MacDuff took me away. Until I met Tallulah and found out the truth, I accepted Nanny's story. As you know, I also have nosebleeds when I am upset.

When my father died, Stanford accompanied us to San Francisco, where my mother had relatives. We only lived there for a year before she decided to move again, this time to Victoria. My mother intimated that it was the aftershock from the earthquake that devastated San Francisco and my illness that had exiled us to Canada. But that was not the case. The exquisitely carved and elaborately fenestrated doors of Nob Hill had been shut in Mother and Stanford's very surprised faces.

During all our moving around, Duffie had managed to teach me to read, mind my manners and avoid stepping on pavement cracks. I was clever, but that was a liability. It was Duffie's job to make a lady out of me. Ladies had good table manners, were not loud in voice or dress and not overly bright. Smart was the undoing of plain girls. Plain girls could be made attractive, but a plain girl with opinions was an anathema. I assumed I was ordinary, at least by comparison to the maternal butterfly fluttering about me, or, I should say, away from me.

Nora was only occasionally interested in children, but when she did pull me into her limited circle of radiance the experience

was intense and memorable. “Look,” she said when we found a bee’s nest in a hollow in a tree. “Honey!” She stuck in her hand and pulled out a piece of wax dripping golden syrup. “Taste this.” She thrust her finger in my mouth and I sucked.

She was an enthusiast. I believe her provenance, the rich and fragrant citrus groves of Southern California, had made her more vivid than had her brief proximity to café society. Where she had been an elegant cipher in our travels across the Atlantic Ocean, someone I saw drifting like smoke past a porthole, she became nearly real to me in California.

My most intense memories of San Francisco are all of flowers — my mother taking me out of bed to go barefoot into our walled urban garden and smell the night-blooming honeysuckle or inviting me to sit beside her in front of her three-mirrored dressing table while she took the glass stoppers out of crystal bottles, telling me which flowers were magically captured in each perfume.

Her favourites were the white flowers — especially gardenias. There was a hierarchy in the garden, just as there was in life. She loathed the sword-shaped gladiolas and the carnations. They were common, she said, and besides they gave us hay fever. I liked hay fever. Sneezing was pleasant. When I recently made the connection between sneezing and sex, I wondered why Nora had hated carnations so much.

I think it was difficult for the wild California girl to reconcile her restless intelligence with the expectations of an old world marriage. With Stanford, her second husband, there was no sense of him being in charge. If she had been a boy, I imagine my mother would have managed her family’s farms and the fruit company.

The weather was cold and foggy in San Francisco. I had a sore throat. My tongue was coated with a bitter white substance. I was hot and my nightgown was damp. I cried at night and Duffie stayed with me. I don’t remember seeing my mother during that time, but I was delirious and might have forgotten. Duffie made me an infusion of hollyhock leaves, which Nora believed would cure any

illness caused by bad fairies, until our cook, Mah Lee, talked her into trying his special white tiger tea. The tea was delicious and it brought down my fever.

Nora blamed Mah Lee's tea for the damage to my heart. I now know that was a time of intense paranoia in the kitchens of the American rich. Typhoid Mary had infected her wealthy employers, and the new aristocracy was learning that money was no protection against the illnesses that ravaged the holds of coffin ships and the disease-breeding tenements where unlucky immigrants lived in poverty. Duffie eventually capitulated to my mother's notion that Mah Lee worked for the bad fairies; so he was relieved of the job that supported him and his extended family in China. My mother was wrong. There was no conspiracy. I drank his tea and the fairies brought me back.

I didn't like the damp smell of wood and stone that permeated our new house in Victoria. I feared the wind from the sea that blew rain against the windows. I refused to eat lunch in the children's dining room next to the kitchen. I didn't like creamed chicken and peas and baby carrots in puff pastry anymore, even if they were served on our familiar French pottery dishes with their blue and orange folk designs. My bathroom was too big. My bedroom, painted a blushing ivory with dusty pink silk curtains and matching quilt, was too big. The sea beyond the wildflower garden that bordered the beach was too big. So often, I have heard adults say their childhood memories were diminished when they returned home to find everything smaller.

I didn't want to go out on the balcony and look at the San Juan Islands. I didn't care if the islands were American: my old country just a skip and a hop away. My mother and stepfather had already stolen America. My real father, who ruined the Empire bedroom in his suite at the Waldorf-Astoria when he bled to death, had stolen America. When I looked back over the transom of the ship that brought us to Victoria, I would have jumped in and dog paddled back to my old life if I hadn't been so afraid of the water.

It was dark in my room. Victoria was dark. Canada was dark. I laugh now when I meet people who think Canada is one endless night made of ice and snow and all Canadians sleep in igloos, but my first reaction was to believe we had moved back to the Stone Age. Of course, Stanford didn't help. He told me about madmen who drove teams of dogs in the snow in pursuit of ferocious polar bears.

"They're just stories," he told Duffie when I pulled my blankets up over my face.

"She's nae t' be teased or upset," Nanny said, her Presbyterian lips uncompromising. Duffie had to sleep beside me on a cot while her own little son slept all by himself in a house I never visited.

That first night, Nanny MacDuff was in the kitchen giving Chan Fong, the new cook, her paediatric medicinal recipes. Nora and Stanford were having before-dinner drinks in front of the library fire. I strained to hear the familiar and reassuring sound of ice clinking in their glasses, the snap of the fire in the oak-panelled room. The library was too far away. I prayed Stanford would whistle and reassure me.

Duffie refused to light the fire in my bedroom. Sleepwalkers didn't get to have fires at night. Their nightgowns could catch fire. She knew a girl whose nightgown had caught a spark. No one could save her and she was burned to a crisp. "Och, she was a daftie girl too," Duffie said. I liked the idea of going up in flames. Maybe my mother would notice.

Nanny knew girls who had burned and girls who had tripped on their shoelaces and broken their noses, making them ugly and unmarriageable. She knew children who had crossed their eyes and couldn't uncross them. She knew a boy who had picked his nose and died of a massive nosebleed. She knew boys and girls who had touched their private parts and gone blind and some who went mad. I expected Duffie would soon have cautionary tales to project fear of the Maclure mansion, but she could have saved her breath. I was already terrified.

Nonsense, my stepfather had said when he popped in, wearing his familiar maroon smoking jacket, to say goodnight before going downstairs to join my mother. The bad fairies weren't coming into our new house. They couldn't get passports, and, besides, American fairies didn't like to go where it rained and snowed. They were afraid of the polar bears. Just whistle and they will stay away. My stepfather had a thin moustache. Before he went barking mad, he was a good storyteller.

When the stone wall that separates our house from Beach Drive and the golf course across the road was finished, Stanford took me there and placed a note between the rocks. "There," he said. "I have made a wish that will protect you. It's something your mother's people do." At the time, I thought he meant the fairies but later on I learned it was Jews. That was the beginning of the notes in the wall.

My mother married amusing men. My father had also told tales, old ones from Europe with characters called *nebbishes* and *schlemiels*. I begged Stanford to stay and tell me one more story, even a scary one, but he wouldn't. His drink was poured. The ice was melting. We haven't seen any icebergs on this voyage. Are there no icebergs in the Pacific?

Tony says that I am unbelievably stupid and now I am typing his words — unbelievably stupid. I love the way the English are able to be so rude and yet so polite at the same time.

A Chinese herbalist on Fisgard Street gave me the White Tiger Tea recipe. I recognized the taste right away. Afterward, I took my first cup to a psychic to have the leaves and petals read. She said I had once escaped a fire but that I would eventually die in one. As it turned out, she was more or less right. My sore throat turned out to be rheumatic fever. The valves in my heart had been damaged. I had no idea they were related.

With no siblings with whom to compare myself, I developed an interest in bodies that first year in Victoria. I wanted to know how they were shaped and how they worked. I was especially curious about boys. Duffie, who dressed and undressed in the darkness of

early morning and late evening, hid herself with elaborate stratagems. As far as I knew, the only difference between boys and girls was the cut of our hair and our clothes. I often wondered what it would take to change me into a boy. Perhaps, since opposites attract, a principle of physics I unconsciously absorbed, my mother might fall in love with me.

That summer, I decided I would transform myself. I did this in steps. When we took possession of the house, it had an English garden with large oak trees and acres of lawn sloping to the rocky beach. My mother, whose creativity had languished in our vertical domiciles, the hotels where we had perched like birds living in tall trees, began reorganizing the park. First she planted a fragrant kitchen garden surrounded by a neat boxwood hedge that smelled like cat pee. Further from the house, she oversaw the building of what is now the Japanese garden, with raked gravel, iris and grasses, bonsai maples and cherry trees, grasses nudging contemplative ponds with waterfalls, water lilies and the glass balls Japanese fishermen used to float their nets.

I only truly understood this maternal flourishing years later, when I saw a cartoon of an apartment-bound uniformed maid watering a floral-patterned carpet. How frustrated Nora must have been before she cultivated the gardens that allowed her to release her passionate and contemplative natures. No wonder she despised the religion that inevitably resolves in the human incapacity for tolerance and compassion. Her redemption was in the garden where, if the soil is nurtured, the soul is fed. Without it, my mother would have been like one of those neurotic apartment cats. A child like me would use up her air.

My mother's cultural concession to Oak Bay, the most British neighbourhood between London and Singapore, was her wild tea garden with a gazebo circled by perennials. Every summer afternoon at four, rain or shine — in the fashion of our new community populated by the more delicate second and third sons of the British aristocracy who hadn't been banished to ranches in the Chilcotin

and the Cariboo to play cowboy — we had tea and scones with jam in the gazebo. Then as now, Miss Beach changed from her blue lady's maid uniform with white cap and apron into her pearl grey uniform with white lace trim to serve us.

After drinking Nora's special blend of Earl Grey without slurping or clattering our cups, we walked around the park to investigate the progress of her expanding gardens. She took special pleasure in knocking the dead blooms off the lilies and rhododendrons and snipping the faded roses.

"Here," she said, handing me her secateurs. "Off with their heads."

Her enthusiasm for deadheading the plants frightened me. I liked the look of dying flowers. Their colours are exceptional, especially the pinks and peaches shaded by decay.

"No!" I said.

"I thought you'd enjoy helping, Poppy. You will learn from me."

"I don't want to hurt the flowers."

"It isn't hurting them. If you don't deadhead the roses, they will stop flowering and go to seed."

I knew that I was an imperfect flower. Was I being given the same ruthless treatment as her plants? I defended imperfection, and I still do. She required balance.

Following her instructions, the flock of Coolie gardeners using shovels and their bare hands interrupted the lawn with plantings of asters, and blowsy columbine in the graceful beds that meander on the slope to the ocean. Like light-deprived miners coming out of the ground with their tools, the gardeners emerged at daybreak from a tunnel under the house. Because Stanford had told me I could dig a hole all the way to China if I persevered in my excavation of the beach, I thought the workers had passed through the centre of the earth each morning. Only the head gardener, Guan Sing, spoke pidgin English with my mother. The rest, I was told, spoke Cantonese. They were crows in black pyjamas with straw sunhats shaped like the limpets we pulled off rocks in the sea.

I was in no hurry, but, one evening when Duffie was distracted by her barley water, I intended to follow the men home and find out what their underground life was all about. Nanny liked a little taste of her homeland after supper, a time when Nora would be unlikely to smell it on her breath. There was a bottle of something with a tartan label in the back of my toilet and a carefully washed teacup she kept in the medicine cupboard. Duffie had no idea that I knew, but I have a strong sense of smell.

Like a child conditioned to praising a favoured sibling, I soon learned that complimenting my mother's garden was the way to curry her favour. If she'd had the gift for raising children as self-confident as her plants, my life would have been very different. In the beginning, I had no friends but Stanford and had to content myself with playing in my make-believe world. I made secret potions with the petals I gathered in the rose garden. I played marooned sailor at the beach, raiding the vegetable garden on the eastern border of our seven acres for provisions.

I heard Miss Beach whisper to Duffie that my mother kept Stanford on a short leash. Luckily that leash extended as far as the shoreline and my stepfather and I spent some happy times collecting shells and stones on the beach. I particularly liked the blue glass worn smooth by the waves. Stanford said I should not keep those but throw them back because they were water. The blue glass was tears, he said, shed for lost souls. The sea smoothed their edges to make grief more bearable.

The fairy glen was my private kingdom. The sea was dangerous for children, Stanford told me, and the garden was risky for fairies, where they could be disbelieved or caught playing naughty tricks. In the meadow that separates the garden from the sea, he told me, small things, the wildflowers, the children and the fairies, were safe. The adults were amused when I insisted they pay a toll before they were allowed to step past the clipped lawn into the wild grasses where I was the queen.

I still have the box of magical payments drawn from adult pockets — a tiny silver notebook and attached pen with an art-nouveau fairy engraved on the cover, a cat's-eye marble, an ivory toothpick, a miniature card deck, a small opium bottle with painted chrysanthemums and a jade stopper, coins stamped with the head of Queen Victoria, and other treasures. Sometimes I exchanged passage through my fiefdom for a story or a song or permission to go to the library after adult dinner, to beg a puff on a cigar and the privilege of wearing the ring around it. No one could get to the beach by land without passing me, not even Stanford — especially not Stanford because his pockets were deep and filled with delights.

The fairy glen was a carpet of lilies in spring, small California poppies in the summer. My favourites were the chocolate coloured fritillaries. When I brought a handful to the children's dining room, Duffie told me there was a terrible punishment for picking the lilies and I believed her. She said the same thing about dogwood, the tree to which her Lord had been nailed. If I picked dogwood, which grew all around our house, I would bleed as Jesus bled, from the hands and the feet, and in my case, the nose as well. Even though the Christian religion was banned from our house, Duffie took her chances because she had told me that her Lord would make communion wafers out of my ground-up bones if I told.

My mother instructed me to respect plants the way some parents teach their children to handle animals with care, or books. I know the lengths that children will go to when they want attention. I once saw a little boy who was old enough to know better throw a handful of sand at his mother's oil painting when she was mesmerized by waves. My paintings of flowers and floral arrangements pleased my mother but I wanted to arouse stronger emotions, rage and delight.

The best way to test my mother's patience would have been to do damage to her beloved plants. I could have decapitated the purple orchids, whose stamens rested like placidly bonneted babies on lavender pillows. That would have been an offence as serious as

infanticide in our household. Stomping the virginal calla lilies would get a reaction beyond the power of my childish imagination. What punishment short of sending me to be crushed with the grapes in her friend's California vineyard would suffice?

But, preferring appeasement to opposition in deference to my lonely muscle, I eschewed violence. Rather than directly oppose my garden-obsessed mother, I chose quieter strategies.

While I lay awake one winter evening, wishing my mother would come and tell me a bedtime story while she pored over her seed and bulb catalogues as usual, I made a decision that would please and displease her. I would steal packets of seeds when they came in the mail and plant my own garden in the fairy glen. She would question me and other members of our household. She would send complaining letters to the growers. Time would pass. My mother would fret, and I would comfort her.

That is exactly what happened. My mother fussed. I cultivated my small piece of the earth, carried seaweed up from the beach and stole compost from the large bin near the kitchen garden. I planted my seeds and watered them as they grew, carrying my sand pail back and forth from the house. Soon my rectangle of stolen flowers would bloom like an impressionist painting.

My mother's temperature rose from glacial to tepid. The gardeners were interrogated. Her annoyance was fertilizer to my little plantation. With every hour of sunshine and every tin bucket of water, the plants flourished. When the summer flowers opened their faces to the sun, I would show her what I had done. I would defeat her and show her how much I loved her all at once.

That was what was supposed to happen. One night in June, I dreamed I slept in a tiny open grave in the middle of my secret garden. There was only a thin fingernail of moon. In my dream, I heard munching and squirting, the sound of deer eating and eliminating.

In the real morning, all my plants had been eaten and trampled. Only the creamy *Romnea* poppy, which hadn't yet flowered, was saved. Now that one plant is the mother and grandmother of

many. If my mother figured out what had happened to her seeds, she didn't mention it.

Slowly, in the summer of my conversion to the son she might adore, I gathered the paraphernalia I would need for my boyhood. In a metal box like the one where I kept my treasures, I hid a kitchen knife, a compass, a pair of sandals, an undershirt, a pair of men's shorts I had stolen from Stanford's drawer, and a woven belt with red and green stripes to hold up the shorts, which were much too big for me. Because Duffie was under orders to accompany me anywhere near the beach, I had to promise I wouldn't go there by myself.

Probably she was relieved to be left in her room under the eaves in the attic to read her *Nanny* magazine or write a letter to her ten-year-old son, Alec, whom she was only allowed to visit on Sunday afternoon and every second Thursday evening. Alec was the stuttering shadow that had followed us from Scotland to America and finally to Canada. Because he was not allowed to live with us, Duffie had to find a family to care for him each time we moved. When I was a child, I accepted that reality. Now, I am appalled.

On Christmas Eve, when Duffie brought Alec to the staff party and dressed him up in his scratchy new sweater, the twin to the one in a chastely wrapped parcel under the tree that was addressed to me, he stood self-consciously apart. Perhaps he was afraid to speak because of his stutter. There was no evidence of Alec's father, who, we were told, had died in a war.

When I came to know Alec better, we spent hours conjuring our ideal fathers, his and mine. Mine I could vaguely remember. His was fantasy. We imagined a Celt with black hair. Alec was much swarthier than his mother. If he resented me for taking Duffie from him, he didn't say; and I was too obtuse to think of the possibility. I think we both accepted our strange social orphanhood. Duffie didn't talk about Alec and, when I asked about him, she went stiff with sorrow. I wondered if my mother grieved over the mysterious social barricade between children and adults that kept us apart.

It didn't occur to me then that she might have had a choice where Duffie didn't.

All summer long, I hung my dresses like flags from the arbutus trees. Freed from satin bows and fragile cloth, I swaggered in my shorts and enjoyed my bare chest with nipples pleasantly erect in the wind. I built forts and climbed trees without fear of punishment from Duffie, whose personal mission and professional mandate was keeping me in box condition. When I returned to the house in my summer dresses, there were no tears or stains to betray my life as a boy.

I had to decide what to do with my hair, which was long and curled at the ends — the colour of corn silk Stanford said when he petted it. To his credit, he didn't make me feel awkward and unlovely the way my mother and Duffie did.

“How can we make her pretty?” my mother asked once, holding her ebony cigarette holder and blowing the smoke out the nursery window while Duffie struggled with untangling the fine knots in my hair with my ivory-backed brush. I now know there was nothing wrong with my looks. I just wasn't my mother, polished and manicured to perfection by her lady's maid. Nora was stunning, a glamorous gathering of light, one of those blue-eyed, black-haired Oriental-looking Jewish women, with skin as pale as beleek china. My mother understood about breeding hybrids. I was a mouse-coloured being, an irritating reminder of the failure of genetic planning.

I had the choice of hiding it under a hat, slowly trimming it with the knife in my tin box, or hacking it all off at once. I chose the latter. The cutting took place on a hot July afternoon while the adults rested after lunch. Wearing my khaki shorts and no shirt, I sawed with the blade. My hair fell to the ground and I gathered it up and made a nest with twigs, which I placed on a branch in an arbutus tree. I had the purse mirror I used to send unanswered messages to my mother on the other side of the garden. When I looked in it, I saw what I wanted, her boy.

Duffie didn't see it that way at all. When she was confronted with the new me, she saw her own reflection, a jobless nanny in disgrace. For the rest of the summer, she kept me under house arrest. She even arranged to take me on her days off, which must have been convenient for my mother, who did not protest this new arrangement. I wore a hat at all times — “for the sun” — even in the house. Nanny produced some gathered gingham and organdie bonnets, which she passed off as a whim of my own. I complied because, added to my crime of depriving Alec of his mother was the possibility that — were I discovered and Duffie sacked — she assured me he would starve to death or be taken to an orphanage where he would eat gruel and be beaten by sadistic priests. It wouldn't matter if I had cut my hair in one of my sleepwalking episodes while Duffie was snoring in her own attic bed. Nanny was supposed to be on duty day and night. Because I refused to go there with Duffie, enforcer of the laws of ladylike behaviour, the fairy glen was verboten. My wilding time was over.

My mother let the summer of hats pass without comment. I did catch her looking at me once with a strange smile. Perhaps I had satisfied the repressed anarchist in her with my small rebellion. I wish she had reacted with anger because I was tired of my pale invisibility in her life. Stanford, who was determined to improve his golf swing, spent hours each day knocking light balls with holes in them across the lawn. I was required to fetch them without trampling flowers. He said my straw hat was fetching.

Duffie was not about to give up her pleasures because of my selfishness. The time she had spent reading and writing in her room she now spent in my room, reclining on my *toile de Jouy* day bed while I read aloud or made neat copies of gothic stories about lost children fed by my memories of febrile delirium. If the friends my mother made in Victoria had children, they were a mystery to me. Before Dola came into my life, none were invited for tea and my mother didn't take me with her when she went calling in her new electric car. I wanted so badly to be asked. I was good. I knew

which fork to use. I could make my nervous hands be still in my lap. Nora ignored my silent pleas. When she waved goodbye, I honestly couldn't tell if the gesture was for me or if she was simply shaking the pollen out of her gloves.

One after the other, the dog days of summer rolled over moments as uniform and unremarkable as the grey pebbles in our circular driveway. I was awakened by Duffie at six and, still wearing my nightgown and nightcap, taken out on my balcony to watch the sun rise over the San Juan Islands. Then I was bathed and dressed in a cotton smock with matching bonnet. For breakfast, I was given freshly-squeezed orange juice, porridge, and an egg with two pieces of Melba toast and jam. Since Stanford had alleged that he was allergic to eggs, I claimed allergy by association. If I ate the porridge very quickly, gulping air with each bite, I could manage to vomit all over the egg, but not until I had secreted the toast, jam sides facing, in the pocket of my dress.

Duffie cottoned on very quickly. She was, as she often told me, “nae Scottish fool.” There was no such thing. All the Scots I knew — Nanny, our doctor, mother's bridge partner — were smart as foxes. My two-course breakfast became three courses. I was not given toast and jam until the egg had been eaten.

After breakfast, I was taken to say good morning to Nora, who had her meal in bed, on a painted wicker tray, a privilege only accorded to me when I had a fever. I watched her take tiny sips of tea and nibbles of toast. She ate so little. I still feel sad when I eat dry toast. Food was discipline. Life was discipline. When my mother dismissed me with a wave of her hand, Duffie and I would walk to Oak Bay Village where she bought meat for Guan Sing, our new cook. The rest of the morning was spent in my room doing schoolwork. After lunch, we rested.

I lay on my bed listening to seagulls and the curious tongues of water exploring the caves and crevices along the shoreline, wondering what miracles were occurring in the fairy glen that I was missing, what butterflies the grass had released from its side of the

radiant line that divided my mother's gardens from the land of make believe, what birds called their young, which blossoms were opening their hungry mouths. Duffie would turn a few pages of the latest ladies magazine passed on by my mother or her own copy of *Nanny* and nod off. I waited for that.

Although Nora's sitting room is adjacent to my bedroom, I could not clearly hear the voices coming through the wall. As you know, the two rooms share a linen closet with a door at each end. While Duffie slept, I crouched in the closet and allowed myself to inhale the gardenia scent of Nora's linens and neatly folded lingerie. Sometimes Stanford would visit. I could see the tip of one well-polished boot swinging like a metronome over his crossed knees, punctuating his gossip.

One very hot afternoon, while I was sitting on the floor of the linen closet with a nightgown from my mother's laundry hamper pressed to my face, I heard female voices, my mother and Miss Beach. They were both laughing. I hadn't heard Miss Beach laugh before. Very carefully, I opened the door a crack, as I had so many times before. *Your mother is quite helpless*, I remembered Stanford saying. *She can't even tie her own shoelaces*. But she wasn't helpless in the garden, was she? No, she ruled her garden with a porcelain fist. And yet, looking beyond the French doors that separate my mother's sitting room from her boudoir, I could see her sitting on her satin quilt waiting for Miss Beach, who was kneeling on the floor in front of her, to untie her shoes. The shoes came off, one at a time. Miss Beach leaned lower. I could have sworn she kissed my mother's silk-shod feet.

Nora stood up and Miss Beach turned her around to undo the buttons on her dress. When this was done, I watched the maid's hands move over her shoulders and down her chest. I saw her bare shoulders and the plump arcs of her breasts as Miss Beach slipped the straps on her chemise over her arms and rested her hands on her bosom. My mother smiled as her nipples changed from pink to a darker colour and I felt an alarming current between my legs.

Miss Beach turned down the bed for my mother's nap and arranged her clothing over a chair. Nora got in, sighing approval of the coolness of her bed and lay exposed with the top sheet folded back. Miss Beach closed the curtains and the room darkened to a warm peach colour. My mother asked Miss Beach to rub her shoulders. She had been arranging flowers all morning, she said, and they ached.

Miss Beach rubbed and I watched her competent hands move in circles on Nora's back. Observing this intimate act, I was fascinated and repelled at once. Miss Beach's hands made smaller and smaller circles as they moved down her spine and caressed the small of her back and her bottom. One hand moved between her legs and circled and circled. I took the two damp fingers I had been sucking out of my mouth and touched myself in the same place. My mother moaned, her voice as dark as echoes in the caves along our shore. I moaned too, as my insides opened like a flower. I shuddered and wept into my mother's nightgown.

Nora's body relaxed in sleep as Miss Beach covered her with the top sheet, picked up the dress she had been wearing and hung it on a hanger. I held my breath when she gathered the discarded lingerie, walked slowly toward the linen cupboard and opened the door.

Miss Beach looked straight at me and said nothing. Perhaps she had heard my small cry of pleasure. I pretended I was asleep, but I could feel her disbelieving glance through my eyelids. She closed the door firmly and walked away and, after a few minutes, I tiptoed out of the cupboard past the snoring Duffie to my own bed. Neither Miss Beach nor my mother acknowledged they knew I had been in the closet, but the next time I went to spy on them, the door was locked on the other side.