

*Dear Martha,*

*Today I did the most forbidden thing in the world, and being the most forbidden, it was something I'd wanted to do for a long time.*

*Mother went into the city, Boston I mean, to visit her friend Leslie Croft, who is unwell. When one hears such news, it is difficult to know what weight to attach to it: a slight cold may have worsened, or turned to something more serious, or perhaps cleared up entirely. Even concern is difficult to gauge. I knew she would have spent the night away because, although the return trip to Boston is not a long one, she planned to use the visit as an opportunity to drop in on our grandparents, which she only ever does when she is alone or with us. The Jameson grandparents, I'm not sure if I've told you this, were disinclined to accept her marriage to Father, and have still not come around. I rather miss them, Grandfather in particular. He would take me to the Exposition when I was young, to see the paintings, then afterwards to drink hot chocolate in Faneuil Hall where he would point to the grasshopper weather vane on top and we would laugh, suggesting it had jumped too high and was unable to get down because grasshoppers are scared of heights, too!*

*In short, Mother was away and Father thought he would take advantage of her absence to visit the Fine Gentleman with the whole gang in tow, including Oblong and April who brought up the rear with the same solemnity and silence they always seem to show these days when they are near. I saw them set off all together, with their baskets full of pears and apples, three small marrows, two bottles of our latest cider and the pancakes Mother made before she left for Boston. A veritable banquet. I had to stay at home because June's nose is blocked and she is extremely*

*ill-tempered. But it did not displease me because it gave me an opportunity to put my plan into action.*

*It all went smoothly. I got June off to sleep, lay her in her cot with her favourite blanket and her doll Nodo, and very quietly closed the door. Then I slipped into Mother and Father's bedroom: not that such stealth was necessary, given that I was alone, but I didn't want to risk June waking up right away, and furtiveness was also part of the plan.*

*It's such an austere room, Martha. The comforter on the bed has star and moon patterns made from a lifetime, two or three even, of fabric remnants. Mother didn't make it herself, she has no patience for this kind of pursuit: it was a gift from one of her poor guests when we arrived here. It is very dear to Mother as it is the only thing of value Mrs Dillard ever owned and she gave it to Mother with all her heart, in exchange for the help she'd received. Frankly speaking, it's much more suited to this place than the blue velvet bedspread we used to have in the house in Boston, and which, for unfathomable reasons, has since disappeared along with several other pretty things — the gilded wood side tables, the floral ceramic lamps, the soft chairs — when we came to Concord. We appear to have mislaid many things in our relocations and may actually end up like the Fine Gentleman, owners of no more than three saucepans, two jackets and a spoon, and perfect masters of ourselves. Or one hopes this would be the benefit.*

*There is a chest at the foot of the bed, on top of which are three cushions that I embroidered, with much pricking of fingers. The cushions are imbrued with my blood but you can't see it as the leaf pattern is a very dark colour. Just as well. On the small writing desk there is a lamp with no floral decoration, Mother's writing paper, ink and a pen. A bookcase stands on Father's side, containing his favourite books, or rather, the ones he prefers not to lend to us. But that is not what interested me.*

*I went straight to the chest between the two windows, I lifted up the very, very heavy lid and knelt down. Mother never locks it, she trusting is she. I knew I was awful, in doing what I was about to do, but I couldn't resist it. It must be the want of other amusements.*

*On top of everything were two dresses, lying flat like empty young women. One in dark pink silk, a dusty pink, the other green like glass bottles. I lifted them and laid them on the bed so as not to disturb their slumber. Below them was a very light bundle: I unwrapped it and found myself looking at a pearl purse with a pattern of green, yellow, white and black branches, and fine chain to hang it from the wrist. The brass clip had dulled over time but opened nevertheless when I pushed it gently. Inside was a tiny notepad bearing a date from many years ago and a small pencil in a silver holder, hanging from an ivory-coloured satin ribbon. I knew what it was: it was a dance card. In mother's handwriting, made tiny to fit onto the pages, were the names of unknown men beside each of the listed dances. Father's name did not appear. Even when he was young he didn't dance.*

*A fan had been placed under the bundle. I opened it — it was as fragile as a dry leaf and almost the same colour. I closed it at once, careful not to damage it. Beside it lay a white kid glove, only one, the age-worn leather wrinkled and dry. It looked like the tiny hand of a ghost. What purpose can a single glove possibly serve? Where can its companion have gone? Of course, I know, it is hidden beneath the vest of a distinguished gentleman who rides the prairies out west. He keeps it close to his heart, imagining Mother's slim hand holding his heart tightly in its grip, because he has been hopelessly in love with her since the night of the ball, unable to forget her. When she left at the end of the night, he tried to stop her, reached out for her hand, but only the empty glove remained in his fingers, the warmth of her skin still lingering on it. She couldn't love him,*

*it was out of the question, because a voice in her head told her she had still to meet the love of her life, and thank goodness she waited. I may never have been born otherwise, or I would have been different: a blond May, small and round, with green eyes. Likewise, my name would not have been May, I might have been Hortensia or Fiona, and I might live in San Francisco or New Orleans, how can one know?*

*Do you even wonder, Martha, about the lives we might have had? How easily they could have been different, or how easily they could still change? I think about it all the time. I like to imagine the many other me's in the world, travelling on trains, in carriages, on ships, climbing up onto elephants' backs, strolling through the ruins of cities like Athens and Rome. It's all very far removed but not impossible, I think.*

*Anyway, I put it all away, glanced quickly at the famous mirror, a spectacularly bizarre object, from Venice, a faraway place in Italy built entirely on water, with a glass frame cut with the shapes of roses, leaves, flowers and branches. You can tell it's very fragile. I wonder how many people have looked into it, so far away, over so many seas: perhaps the daughter of the glassmaker, perhaps a princess, perhaps a fisherwoman. With so much water, the city must be full of people making a livelihood from fishing. Amid the fragile flowers I saw a long, pale face, a large mouth, like a gash, wild eyes, a freckled nose. It was me, and I'm not sure I liked me.*

*Nevertheless, I returned it to the chest right way, afraid of breaking it.*

*I had barely relaid the dresses on top when I heard June whimper in the next room. I went to her and realized she had a fever. I spent the rest of the day caring for her.*

She reread it and was amazed at how expert she had become at conflating, on paper, the truth and that which was not the truth. It's so easy, like a game. Up to the clothes, the pearl purse, the dance card, the fan, the wrinkled glove, it had all been true. They had been necessary to reinvent a Mother before there had ever been a Mother, to imagine her as a girl — there had even been a miniature version of her, among the objects in the chest, and who knows what it was doing there: Father should have it, girls make them to give to their beaux, so they can think about and adore them even when they are apart. Parents are a mystery, so little is known about their lives. In their life now, at Paradise House, it is easy to keep watch over them: but back then, when they lived in Boston, Mother was always out looking after her poor guests, Father taught at The Temple School, while May and April would stay at home with Tammy. It could be strange, taking a stroll and bumping into them on their way home from their various occupations or on their way from one engagement to another. They were like strangers, so serious, so deep in thought, surrounded by yet more strangers. It was only on returning within the inner sanctum of the home and waiting for them to return that you could be certain it really was them.