



Joseph

Valley of the Moon, California

1906

The smell of buttered toast was a time machine. I stepped inside it and traveled back to 1871. Back to London. Back to my childhood kitchen, to the lap-bounced, sweets-chunky, much-loved seven-year-old boy I once was, sitting on a stool while Polly and Charlotte flew around me.

Whipping cream. Beating eggs. Chopping parsley and thyme. Oh, their merry gossiping! Their pink cheeks. Nothing scared them, not mice, spiders, nothing. Shoo. All the scary things gone.

"More biscuits, please," I said, holding out my empty plate.

"No," said my mother, working the bread dough. She wiped her damp forehead with the heel of her hand. "You've had enough."

If you'd walked into the kitchen at that moment, you'd have had no idea she was the lady of the house, working right alongside the servants. My mother, Imogene Widger Bell, was the only daughter of a knocker-upper. Her father had made his living by rising at three in the morning to knock on the windows of his customers, waking them like a human timepiece. My mother herself had entered service on her twelfth birthday. She was cheerful, hardworking, and smart and ascended quickly through the ranks. From laundry maid to scullery maid. From kitchen maid to under cook. When she was sixteen, she met my father, Edward Bell (the son of the gardener), by a stone wall. She, enjoying a break, the sun beating down upon her face, the smell of apple blossoms in the air, an afternoon of polishing silver in front of her. He, an assistant groundskeeper, coiled tight, knee-deep in brambles, and desperate to rise above his class.

Besotted with my mother, he presented a lighthearted façade to woo her, carefully hiding the anger and bitterness that fueled his ambition. His only mistake as he saw it? To have been born into the wrong family. My mother did not see things that way. Her belly was full every night. She worked alongside honest people. Her employers gave her a bonus at Christmas. What more could one ask?

They were terribly ill matched. They never should have married, but they did. And though it took many years, my father eventually did what he'd set out to do: he made a fortune in textiles. He bought a mansion in Belgravia. He hired staff. A lady's maid and a cook for my mother. A valet for him. They attended concerts and the opera. They became patrons of the arts. They threw parties, they hosted salons, they acquired Persian rugs for every room.

And in the end, none of it mattered: they remained outsiders in the class that my father had hoped to infiltrate. His new "friends" were polite to his face, but behind his back referred to him as "that vulgar little man." He'd earned his

fortune, it was not passed down to him—they would never forgive him for it. All the bespoke shirts in the world couldn't hide the fact he was new money.

"Joseph, five minutes and then back upstairs to your schoolwork," said my mother. "Did you finish your sums?"

"Yes," I lied.

"No," said Madeline, the governess, who had appeared in the doorway and was holding out her hand to me. How long had she been standing there?

I groaned and slid off the stool.

"Don't you want to go to university one day?" asked Madeline.

I should have been in school already. That my mother had convinced my father to allow my sister's governess to give me lessons at home was a miracle. My father consistently reminded me this would come to an end and I would soon be sent away to a proper school.

If only he knew what really happened at 22 Willoughby Square once he left the house every morning. My mother sailed us out of the sea of oligarchy and into the safe harbor of egalitarianism. We became a community of equals. Titles evaporated. Young Master, Little Miss, Cook, Girl, Mistress, Governess. Poof, gone. Polly, Madeline, even Charlotte, the lowliest kitchen maid, called my mother Imogene.

As a result my education was broad. I was taught not only how to multiply and divide, to read and recite, but how to blacken a stove, how to get candle wax out of a tablecloth, and how to build a fence. Some of the lessons I disliked more than others. Egg gathering, for instance: the chickens terrified me. They'd run after me, pecking at my feet.

"I hate the chickens," I said to my mother. "Why do you make me go out there?"

“How else will you learn what you love to do?” she said. “You don’t have to like everything, but you must try.”

What my mother loved was greengage plums.

The most sublime-tasting plum in the world, she always said, but the tree had a fickle temperament and was notoriously difficult to grow. She had a small orchard in the back of our garden. I had never tasted one of her greengage plums, or if I had I couldn’t remember. The last time her trees had fruited, I was a baby. Every July I’d ask if this was the year the plums would come.

“You must be patient,” she told me. “Everything good takes time.”

I was a greedy boy. I stamped my foot. I wanted a plum now.

“How to wait,” she said, looking down at me with pity. “It’s the hardest thing to learn.”

I was always waiting for my mother to come home. Most afternoons she left the house to attend one meeting or another. She was devoted to many causes. Education. Women’s rights. Land reform and the struggles of the working class. She made signs. She marched in the streets. Once she even went to jail with a group of her fellow suffragettes. Much aggrieved, my father went to retrieve her, paying the exorbitant two-pound bail to set her free. When they walked in the door, my mother looked shy and triumphant. My father was enraged.

“You’ve made me a laughingstock in front of my friends,” he spat at her.

“They are not your friends,” she said, taking off her gloves.

“You have forgotten your place.”

“And you have forgotten where you came from.”

“That is exactly the point!” he bellowed.

They slept in different bedrooms that night and every night thereafter. My father had done everything he could to erase his history and pull the ladder he'd climbed up behind him. He forbade my mother to join any more organizations. She agreed, and instead began holding meetings at the house while he was at work. In her mind, everybody deserved a better life and it was her responsibility as a woman of means to help them achieve it. Unmarried women with children, spinsters, laundresses, jakesmen, beggars, and drunks all traipsed through our doorway and were led into the parlor to discuss their futures.

When I was eight, my mother left. She told me she was going on a painting trip to Provence. She'd been unable to bring herself to tell me the truth: my father was admitting her to an institution. He did it without her consent. He needed only two signatures to have her committed, his and his lawyer's. Her diagnosis: unstable due to overwork and the inability to handle domestic responsibilities. She was gone for four months.

She returned fifteen pounds lighter and the color of curdled cream. She used the same light, cheery voice she always had with me, but I wasn't fooled. There was no joy in it anymore. She spoke as if she were standing on the roof of a building in which somebody had forgotten to build the stairs. She'd fight to sustain eye contact when we spoke, but as soon as we stopped our conversation, her gaze would fall to the floor.

It was Charlotte, the kitchen maid, who finally took pity on me and told me the truth. "Painting, my arse. She got locked up by your father. Sent away to the loony bin."

I didn't believe her, but the governess corroborated the story. Polly, the cook, too.

"Don't tell her you know," said Polly.

"But what do I do?"

“Treat her exactly the way you’ve always treated her,” she said.

“But—she’s different,” I whined. I wanted my real mother back. The playful, optimistic, bread-making, injustice-fighting, eye-glinting woman who called everybody by their first names no matter what their stations.

“She’ll come back,” said Polly. “You just have to be patient. Sit with her. That’s all you have to do.”

It was easy to sit with my mother. She rarely left the house anymore. Most days, after breakfast and a bath, she retired to the parlor.

“I’ve taken up some lovely new pursuits,” she said. No longer did she work in the kitchen alongside Polly and Charlotte. Instead she sat on the chaise and embroidered, the curtains drawn, the lamp lit, her head bent studiously over her work.

“Shall I read to you?” I asked.

“No, thank you. I prefer the silence.”

“Shall I open the curtains? It’s a beautiful day.”

“I don’t think so. The light is too bright for me.”

“Then I’ll just sit here with you.”

“Wonderful,” she murmured.

I lived on that “wonderful.” A crumb, but I swallowed it down, pretending it was a four-course meal.

She would come back. Polly said she would. I just had to be patient.

Over the next year she stopped leaving the house altogether. Twilights were especially difficult. Once my mother was a sunflower, her petals spread open

to the sky. Now, one by one, her seeds fell out of their pod.

It was a cold day in November that she told me she would be wintering in Spain. She'd developed arthritis, she said. A warmer climate would suit her.

I'd overheard my father talking to his lawyer, making the arrangements, so I knew she was lying—he was sending her back to the asylum. He'd institutionalized her because he wanted an obedient wife who was satisfied living a quiet, domestic life. Instead she'd been returned to him a ghost. He didn't know what else to do.

I didn't know what to do either, but even though I was only nine, I knew locking her away again was not the solution. I threw my arms around her and begged her not to go.

"I'm sorry, I don't have a choice." She looked down at me as if I were an inanimate object—a book or a shawl.

"You're lying. You're not going to Spain."

"Don't be silly, of course I am." She pushed me away. "And you're far too old to be acting this way."

"Mama," I whimpered.

For a split second her expression softened and I saw my old mother gazing back at me with empathy and love. But a moment later the light drained out of her eyes.

"Take care of your sister," she said.

"You must run away," I cried, desperate. "Someplace he won't be able to find you. Leave tonight."

She pursed her lips. "And where would I go?"

"Anywhere."

"There is nowhere else," she said.

I wept silently.

A week later, the night before she was due to leave, her bags already packed, my mother lay down on her bed in a long dress like the Lady of Shalott, drank an entire bottle of nervine, and took her last breath. In an instant everything changed. Polly became Cook. Charlotte became Cook's Girl. Madeline became Governess. I reverted back to Young Master; my sister, Little Miss. And my father packed me off to boarding school.

I would never see the greengage trees fruit again.

My toast had grown hard. The butter congealed. The consequences of time travel.

"A girl," reported Martha, walking into the kitchen. "Ridiculously long lashes. Dark hair. Looks just like her mother."

My American wife was an herbalist and midwife, as were her mother and grandmother before her. She carried soiled linens into the scullery.

"Are they still planning on leaving?"

"I assume so."