

# I

*. . . for our feet would linger where beauty has lived its  
life of sorrow to make us understand that it is not of  
the world.* —William Butler Yeats

The ancient deep river ran noiselessly in its bed in the silent valley below, as candle glow on prisms in the great hall of the noble old house threw rainbow colors on the greying wall. The girandoles on the high dark mantel had an unusual glow about them, as light played from the paired gilt figures at candlesticks' base, from their features of face and folds of drape. Romeo's cape flared, and Juliet, in jeweled gown that flowed, leaned gilded shining face and breast to his. It was dusk into dark and no sound came.

The candles pointed heavenward from their pressed-glass bobèches, clotted with the fall and drip of beeswax the color of straw, their light as blonde as the hair on Juliet's brow. Flames did not dance. No breath stirred. The candles burned straight upward like cylinders, columns of glass. They had long since ceased to gutter and spew.

The dark from the old wavy panes of the windows settled down into ebony squares, and the candlelight lit their surfaces grey and opalescent from within. Shadows grew vertical,

long, and still no movement or sound. Dust motes in air hung suspended and charmed, a levitation awaiting auspicious, august event, as if holding the breath, anticipating in time. It was the still of ancient marble obelisks, of hushed and glassy-deep, rush-lined pools, of gold-encrusted antique crowns, or carven ivory, or statues in stone, in a world growing vertical above the suspended, over the supine.

The child lay ill in the room upstairs, watched by an anxious old crone. Its frail fever-drained body was white as the linen whereon it reclined. Da's own face was so black it had a sheen of the radiant blue like the windows downstairs, or the blue clay her grandchildren dug to freshen her own cabin's hearthstone. The light from the hearth, in front of her now, made mirror in the sheen of her skin. Smoke rose from the tall house chimney in a column made pearl luminescent by winter's full moon, to hold up the roof of the heavens like a giant tent-pole. Around it and the great ancient tree at chimney's own side, the tapestry of sky circled and dipped, centered and spun, while the tree as if in mirrored reflection of the slow rising smoke sank its roots deeper in clay and the stone.

The child did not cry or stir. Its breath came shorter and shorter, slower and slower, weaker and weaker, as life slipped away. Da's mistress sat slumped into silence by the big poster bed, her rocking now frozen beneath frosts of her slumber like the dark fallow fields lying outside. Her head rested against one of the bedposts, whose carved sharp finials swirl-pointed on high. The vigil was long and the days now joined with the nights. Nights blurred into day.

Childbirth and fever had taken the little babe's mother just two nights before, and all in the house now mourned in the presence of death.

The woman in the rocker was called by the name of Miss Julia, whose granddaughter this was, sick in the cradle at kind old Da's knee. It was Julia's own precious daughter who died days ago. She mourned in her sleep, so exhausted was she in her body and soul.

Da likewise dozed and the world fell still: the sad little babe with her life ebbing ever so slow, the sad old woman feeling her loss through her sleep, the sad ancient nurse dipping her head in nods of sorrows and too many deaths. Her nose touched her chin in sharp outline of age and of grief.

The crystal tinkle and jangle of girandole prisms in the parlor below was heard by none. Nor seen were the parti-colored reflections of prisms exploded on the wall, or elongated shadows that moved as the candle flames thawed, shook themselves out, and danced. The dust motes scattered and whirled like leaves in a storm. Someone had passed, but none there saw. Beeswax sputtered to say; the candles guttered their words and intent. Wind from down the giant chimney blew smoke in the room in a circling swirl and crackle of ruby-bright coals. A momentous visitor this, and witness only the dark.

Up the polished walnut stairs now, the long silks trailed. The whispers of skirts against wainscot and wall came in the marble of silence. The house held its breath, as the babe's respiration slowed, and slowed.

Da sat up, eyes bright and round with waking. Miss Julia she roused with a word. Both heard it, the rustling of silks at the door, the whisper of satin, the current of air, and the flare-up of fire. And the babe, she was gone now, her breath ceased entire. Cold chill of the night and the grief settled in, in the dead chill of loss.

The mother had come for her babe, Julia knew. Da knew it as well, and they both kept their peace in a silence like death. Neither spoke nor got up, but waited in time for the something they knew must as talisman come as a sign. And came then it did, from below, in the strains that they knew, that they long loved familiar in life, and craved the sweet hearing again. On the radiant likeness of daughter caught on canvas in beauty of prime of her life, color came once again to her fingertips, shone on her cheeks, and on flush of her throat, as canvas then pulsed and lips grew vibrantly red like the bouquet of roses she held in her hand, lips that then blossomed to song. Julia heard the sweet voice of her daughter in the tune she had taught her as child, now translated to rhyme of a song and a story unheard by mortal before. The music had magic to soothe and sustain. It unlocked all the tears she had as yet been unable to cry. There the two sat, both silently crying, in rivers of cleansing, clear-flowing grief, like the untrammelled great river below.

Golden Romeo leaned again to his golden star-crossed mate, and the dancing candle flames settled back to their quiet and still. The last note from the red canvas lips quavered out, echoed long, then silent fell, as the candles sputtered,

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then guttered and spewed, flickered one last golden time,  
burned down, and then out, as meteors flared through the  
roof tree's bare branches and lit for bright moment the sky  
over grieving, winter dark fields.