

The Dress

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The Dress

★ SOPHIE
★ NICHOLLS
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twenty7

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For Violetta



Prologue

It all began with a dress.

‘As so many things do, *tesora*,’ I can hear Mamma saying now in her rich, slow voice, stirring sugar into her cup. ‘As so many things do . . .’

It was a simple dress, a slip of oyster-coloured silk, made to fall over the body like a sigh of pleasure. On the morning that it appeared in the window of our shop on Grape Lane, I stood in my bedroom window, watching the women stopping to admire it in the street outside, some of them setting down their bags of groceries, folding their arms over their bosoms, cocking their heads to one side, imagining themselves into the swish of its silk, which Mamma had accessorised with a single strand of pearls, looped over the mannequin’s fingers.

The story that I’m about to tell you is not so simple. It has complicated seams and concealed fastenings. It has deep pockets and interfacings that won’t sit quite true. I’ll shape it for you here, as Mamma taught me to do, teasing the stray threads with the lightest touch I can manage.

You’ll have to forgive me if, at times, I’m a little clumsy. Mamma didn’t believe in following a pattern. She taught me to trust the fabric itself, letting the texture and colour of it find its own form on the cutting table. If I asked her what to do next, she’d smile and tell me to close my eyes, while she brushed the edge of a half-made sleeve or the fold of a skirt across my cheek.

‘What do you feel, *carina*?’ she’d say. ‘What do you feel, deep inside you? What does this fabric know? What does it want to be?’



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I wish I had the family gift, the gift of Mamma and Madaar-Bozorg and their mothers and grandmothers before them. Back in The Old Country, they used to say that the Jobrani women could divine a dress from the fragrance of the wind, or the memory of the sun on the sea.

Mamma lives in America now, her America, the New Country of possibility that she always longed for. Without her, I'm learning to make my own story. I'll piece this together for you as best I can from everything that I remember, the things I've guessed at and the things that, no doubt, I've made up myself as I've told and retold this story.

Some of it's difficult to work with. It slips through my fingers like fine jersey or rucks up under my needle like brocade. But some of it, when I smooth it on my lap, is as light and easy as gingham, with straight lines that my thread can follow as I attach one story to another, one word to the next.

Now that I'm older and a mother myself, I can see that what I'm making here – my story, the story of Mamma and me – is a story that belongs to all of us, if it belongs to anyone.

You only need to stop for a moment, lift your arms over your head – there, that's right, just like that – and allow the rustle of it, the soft gatherings of it, to settle over your body, just so.

And now it's your story, yours to make and remake again, in your way, until it's perfect.



***Men's black overcoat. Marks
& Spencer. 2007.***

The man was tall and badly dressed. Ella always noticed other people's clothes and this man wore a shapeless black overcoat, too short for his frame, so that it flapped loosely around his calves as he moved. He held his hat in his hand, kneading its rim between his fingers. From where she stood in the courtyard with Billy, she could see the dark shape of this man as he moved behind the glass. She could not take her eyes off him.

'He's a pain in the backside,' Billy said, nodding towards the shop, his brow furrowing. 'Trouble. The worst kind. Your mum had best watch herself . . .'

'Who is he?'

'Councillor Pike.' Billy's lip curled in dislike. He tilted his head from side to side, as if he were trying to shake something free, one of those thoughts that buzzes round your head like a fly.

They waited in the courtyard. Ella tried not to look, but she couldn't help sneaking sideways glances through the shop window. She didn't want to go inside.

She could see Mamma smiling, nodding, and the back of the man's head, his dark hair and his white neck against the black of his collar.

In the places they'd lived before, there was always a man, sniffing around. But Mamma knew what to do.



‘*Tsk*. They are like *dogs*, these people,’ Ella had once heard her say, making that clicking noise with her tongue. ‘They can smell fear. Look them in the eye. Smile. Don’t let them get a sniff of it.’

She thought of this now as she watched Mamma’s hands parting the air in pretty gestures, her hair bobbing above her shoulders, her lipsticked smile.

And here she was, walking straight towards them, one hand reaching for the door handle, the other taking the Councillor’s hand and shaking it firmly, looking him straight in the eye.

‘Thank you,’ she was saying, ‘Thank you for your welcome. And please excuse the mess. I’m hoping to open next Saturday but, as you can see, there’s still so much to do.’ The shop bell jangled as she swung it wide. ‘Ah. Mr Pike, may I introduce my daughter, Ella . . . And Billy, of course. Hello, Billy. He’s been such a great help to us with all the unpacking. I don’t know what we’d have done without him . . .’

Ella caught the false, bright tinkle in her voice, like the sound of teaspoons against china cups. Mamma’s arm crept around her waist, drawing her in close. She could feel Mamma’s heart pumping under the sprigged silk of her dress.

Ella’s cheeks flushed with heat as she tried to force them into a smile. *Don’t let them see it. Don’t let them smell your fear.* Would the man notice? She pressed her fingernails into her palms. Her throat had closed up and she found that she couldn’t make a sound.

‘A pleasure,’ the man was purring, ‘and such a lovely little thing, just like her mother.’

She watched his eyes moving up and down, greedy eyes, taking in all of her. She imagined him licking his lips, as if anticipating a delicious meal.





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Then he turned, nodding at Billy who was kicking a pebble from one foot to the other.

'Billy,' he said. 'Don't be making a nuisance of yourself now, will you?' and he walked purposefully out of the courtyard, his black overcoat swirling behind him.

Billy scowled and dug the toe of his trainer into the cobbles. Some of them were loose and bits of moss and grit sprayed up over his socks, but Mamma didn't say anything.

Instead, she waited until the last flick of overcoat disappeared from the courtyard, then she drew a deep breath, pulling her shoulders back, brushing her palms briskly against each other as if she were wiping off something unpleasant.

'You know this man, Billy?' she said quietly.

Billy pulled a face. 'Yeah, worse luck.'

Mamma smiled at him but Ella could see that she was already thinking about something else.

'OK,' she said, clapping her hands together, 'Now, who wants hot chocolate?'

Billy was the only friend that Ella had made in the weeks since they'd moved to this new city, York. None of the girls in her class at St Olave's seemed to like her. In the places where they'd lived before, it had been the same.

She was too dark, too quiet. She didn't speak in the same way as them. Something about her seemed to make them nervous. When she came near, they'd stand on one leg, push their hands in their pockets, fiddle with their hair, look at her with long sideways glances.

'Give it time, *tesora*,' Mamma said. 'Two weeks. *Tsk*. No time at all.'





But Ella knew how these things worked. She could see already that it wasn't going to be much different here, despite everything that Mamma had promised.

There was one good thing – Billy Vickers liked her. Whenever she thought about this, Ella felt a kind of certainty about it, a feeling that spread through her insides like the beginning of one of those highly inconvenient but unstoppable laughs.

'Who'll show our new classmate, Ella, how we do things around here?' Miss Cookson, the form teacher, had asked of the room of bored-looking faces on her first day there, and Billy had sprung straight up from his seat in that funny way of his, his skinny legs unfolding as if on coiled springs, and he'd taken her elbow, grinning at her all the while, steering her, firmly but gently, to the rows of lockers ranged along the back of the classroom.

She'd heard the sniggers, of course, the barely stifled whispers, and the fake wolf-whistle that had made Miss Cookson roll her eyes. But in that moment, Billy had claimed her, like a library book or a lost umbrella. His hand cupped her elbow. His smile showed a row of shiny, white teeth. She felt that ticklish sensation in the bottom of her stomach. Billy was the most interesting boy she'd ever met.

She liked his eyes, which were blue-green-grey and looked right into her without blinking. She liked the way that there was always a half-smile hiding at the corners of his mouth. She liked his mop of curly black hair that sprang out all over his head, and his skinny wrists that stuck out from the cuffs of his school shirt. He was everywhere, all at once. It was as if his long, thin body wasn't big enough to contain him.



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OK, she'd said to herself, watching the crackle of blue and yellow around Billy's head as he turned to flash her one of his grins. If you like me, I could like you back. Neither of them had said anything about it, of course. Not out loud. That wasn't what you were supposed to do, was it? But it had been decided.

Now they were perched together on the fold-out stools behind the counter in the shop, cradling their mugs of hot chocolate, sipping and blowing steam off the top.

To the rest of the world passing by the window, Ella thought, they would look exactly the same as they'd done since they arrived here: that Mrs Moreno, there in that fancy new shop of hers – they say that it's going to be open any day now – with her daughter and that funny Vickers boy, Billy.

But if she tuned in, pressing herself up against the outside of her body, letting a part of herself float upwards, feeling with her mind for those squiggly lines of blue and red and sometimes electric green, she could hear what Mamma was saying to herself, furiously, over and over, inside her mind.

It made her nervous. Which was why she didn't do the tuning in thing very often.

Mamma saw her watching and smiled one of her tight, bright Whatever's-The-Matter-Ella-Everything's-Perfectly-Fine smiles, launched herself off her stool and began folding a newly unpacked tangle of silk scarves. Her hands fluttered above the fuchsia pinks and swirls of blue, tweaking them into new shapes like the petals of origami flowers.

With her back towards them, so that Ella couldn't see her expression, her voice came out too high, too Couldn't-Care-Less. 'So, Billy . . . How do you know this man, this Councillor Pike?'



‘Everyone knows Pike, Mrs Moreno,’ Billy said, his lip curling up again at the corner. He was looking at Mamma carefully now. He seemed to be deciding how much he could say. ‘Piece of work, so my dad says. I call him Trouble. With a capital “T”. Whenever that man turns up, things get nasty.’

‘And what does this mean, this expression – this, how do you say it – *piece of work*?’ Mamma asked.

Billy wrinkled his forehead. ‘A right piece of work,’ he said, ‘means, you know, like someone put together all wrong, someone who’s just not quite right.’ He paused, searching around the shop for inspiration. ‘You see, it’s a bit like one of your dresses, Mrs Moreno. You know, someone might want you to take up the hem or shorten the sleeve. And then, when you get down to it, when you look up close, you realise that the dress might look nice on the outside but, really, it’s not very good at all . . . The lining’s a bit squint and the pockets are all cock-eyed, so you have to unpick the entire thing and sew it back together.’

Ella thought of Councillor Pike’s baggy black overcoat, the way it hung off his shoulders and flapped around his legs and the sense she’d had as she looked at him that he was hiding something under his smile.

‘*Squint*,’ Mamma repeated softly to herself, savouring the sound of the words. ‘*Cock-eyed* . . .’

Then her mouth began to twitch at the corners, the dimple appeared in her right cheek and her shoulders started to shake. Laughter burst from her lips and nose and went bouncing and echoing over the floor of the shop and soon Ella and Billy were joining in, slapping their thighs like pantomime dames, their cheeks wet with tears.





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‘Stop now,’ Mamma blurted, between explosions of laughter. ‘Stop now, you two. It’s cruel. We should *not* laugh at this poor man,’ and then she caught Billy’s eye and started to laugh all over again.

Ella felt that warm feeling spreading up through her insides. It was so good to hear Mamma laugh. Because, these days, it didn’t seem to happen all that often.

Mamma. Fabia Moreno. Fabia, which Ella knew meant ‘flame’. She spoke Italian, French and a little Spanish and, of course, the Old Language, the one Ella wasn’t allowed to learn, the language of her mother’s grandmother, Madaar-Bozorg, back in Iran, the Old Country.

No matter how much Ella pleaded, Mamma would never teach her the Old Language.

‘It will only ever bring you bad luck, *tesora*,’ was what she said. ‘If you want to learn languages, start with your father’s. Italian: language of music, of art, of food. Language of love. Very beautiful language. Make you happy. Always.’

Sometimes, Ella would catch Mamma singing to herself in the kitchen, the soft upper notes that seemed to shimmer in the air and the harder sounds that came from somewhere deep in her throat in a way that Ella couldn’t imitate, no matter how much she practised in front of the mirror. Fat, blurred words, and long words with drawn out sounds that mingled with the steam from the saucepans. When Ella swallowed Mamma’s thick stew, the one with beans and garlic, she liked to imagine she was eating the stories of her ancestors.

When Mamma was angry, it was the old words, dark with jagged edges, that would force themselves between her lips.





These words fascinated Ella most of all. They sounded a bit like spitting.

That first week at St Olave's, Billy walked her home every day. He was waiting for her at the school gates and fell in alongside her.

'I'm going your way, I think,' he'd said. 'You're in that shop just off Grape Lane, aren't you? The one that's been boarded up?'

Ella nodded. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she say anything? She fiddled with the strap of her schoolbag, trying to hide the blush that she could already feel crawling over her face.

When she looked up again, Billy was grinning. 'It's great that someone's taking that on. It's a nice old place. Bet there's loads to do, though.'

He talked non-stop, all the way across the bridge and along the river, pointing out landmarks, asking her more about where she was from. He didn't seem to notice that she didn't say very much. He just grinned that lopsided grin and kept walking and chattering.

'Looking good,' he said, when they reached the courtyard, surveying the newly painted lettering, the polished windows. Then he lifted his hand in a half wave. 'Well, I'll see you tomorrow, then.'

'Who was that?' Mamma was already at the shop door. 'Didn't you want to invite him in?'

'Just someone from school,' Ella said, heading straight for the stairs. Why did Mamma always have to know *everything*? But all that evening, she hugged the idea of Billy to her.

At the end of the week, Mamma was waiting for them at the shop door.



‘Come in, come in,’ she called. ‘It’s Friday, after all. And I’ve made hot chocolate.’

Ella’s heart sank. Her cheeks flushed again.

‘Sorry,’ she muttered.

‘What for?’ Billy’s face split in that wide grin. ‘She’s just looking after you. That’s what mums do. And it’s OK, isn’t it? If I come in for a bit?’

They stepped over the boxes on the floor to where Mamma was waiting with two steaming mugs. She flashed Billy one of her lipsticked smiles.

‘I want you to know that you are very welcome here. Any time you want,’ she said. ‘Any friend of Ella’s is very welcome here.’

‘Mum.’ Ella didn’t bother to keep the annoyance out of her voice. There was something cold and leaden at the bottom of her stomach. Why did Mamma always have to ruin everything?

‘Thank you very much, Mrs Moreno,’ said Billy, taking the mug. ‘Wow. This looks good.’

He grinned again. The air fizzed blue and yellow and silver and Ella had to make herself look down at her shoes.

But that was how Billy started coming round every evening after school.

‘You’re such a help, you two,’ Mamma said, glancing up from the unpacking, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

Gradually, the shop was taking shape around them. The wooden counter was polished to a soft gleam, the walls were freshly painted and the mannequins stood waiting patiently for their first outfits. But there were boxes and boxes still to be opened, skirts and dresses and jackets to be shaken from their layers of tissue, primped and smoothed and hung on the rails.



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‘What’s this?’ Billy would say, examining a wrap belt in turquoise velvet. Or ‘Wow, where did you get this from?’ as he admired a pair of sandals with precipitous perspex heels.

Mamma had a story for everything. Stories of famous actresses fallen on hard times and old ladies with musty attics full of treasures, the jewels discovered in coat pockets or hidden away in the backs of sock drawers. Ella was pretty sure that most of the stories were made up.

‘Tell us about this, then, Mrs Moreno,’ Billy would say, waving a red silk devore scarf.

Mamma would smile. ‘Well, all right then,’ she’d say. ‘Let’s see . . .’

And then she’d begin.

As well as the stories that began with a scarf or a dress or a necklace, there were others too. Tales of woods and deep rivers, of nights filled with owls’ cries and stars. The story of twelve princesses who, while they were sleeping, would take the shape of wild geese and fly from their bedroom window on silent, white wings. The story of the old woman with many faces who travels from town to town, arriving with the autumn wind, leaving again with the spring. The story of the man who steals the precious pelt of the selkie, the seal woman. And then Ella’s favourite of all Mamma’s stories, the story of the red shoes.

For the first time ever, for some reason that she couldn’t really explain, it didn’t bother Ella that Mamma told her stories so freely to someone they didn’t know. Billy listened, sipped from his mug and grinned.

‘It is nice that you are interested in my stories,’ Mamma said, reaching out and tweaking one of Billy’s curls. ‘You are a nice boy, no, Billy Vickers?’



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This time, Billy's cheeks burned red. 'Now don't go telling that to anyone, Mrs Moreno,' he said. 'I've got my reputation to think of.'

But it was true, Ella thought. He did seem nice. And actually, despite what he said, he didn't seem to care what anyone thought about him. Sometimes, he'd even prance around the shop while Mamma told her stories, acting out the different parts, making her howl with laughter. He'd be the princess simpering under a pink hat with a beaded veil at one moment, the merchant striding haughtily in a jewelled Venetian mask at another.

'Go on, then. Do the witch,' Ella would say and he'd lean on a silver-tipped cane with an opera shawl draped over his head and shoulders, rolling his eyes, cackling spells, his face contorted in a way that made tears stream down her face.

'Of course, it's not my stories that he comes for,' Mamma said, shooting Ella one of her I-Wasn't-Born-Yesterday looks. 'But he's a good boy, Billy. A clever boy. It is good that you have made this new friend. Yes, I think that you can trust him. He sees everything, understands everything. We are safe with him, *carissima*.'

Safe. Ella didn't know exactly what that meant. What exactly was there for them to be afraid of? Some days, she could feel this unnamed fear shimmering between them, like the synthetic veil on one of Mamma's hats.



2

Pair of leopard-print shoes, platform heels. Late 1950s. Size 37.

Mamma said that city life would fit them better. Less *chiacchiere*, Ella, less interfering.

‘In a bigger place, no one is interested in other people’s business,’ she said. ‘You’ll see. A new start. So much better for us.’

There was a contact, someone Dad had once known, someone who knew someone else. There was a shop that no one seemed to want – such a very low rent, it had been empty for so long. Yes, a shop in a good location with a flat above it.

Mamma took the big *Atlas of Great Britain* from the drawer and flipped through the pages, her fingernail with its scarlet polish tracing the journey they would take, up from the bottom of the page, along the yellow spine of the country to a large splotch of greeny-brown, right here.

‘York,’ she said, stabbing at a small red spot. ‘Very nice, so people tell me. Four rooms upstairs: sitting room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom. We’ll have to share. Then the shop on the ground floor, of course. I think it’s *good* place for us, Ella-issima. A clean place with no trouble. The kind of place where we can start again, sell beautiful dresses to nice people. Everything much better.’

They arrived at the beginning of a new year. A cold blast of wind caught at the hem of Ella’s coat and blew her from the train steps and across the platform.





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She hurried, her bag banging against her bare legs, following the splash of crimson that was Mamma as she expertly steered the trolley, piled high with their cases and boxes, through the crowd.

The wind blew through the station portico, whipping up scraps of paper and petals from the flower stall, sending them skittering over the stones.

A man with a briefcase tipped his hat at them and smiled.

‘Welcome to Yorkshire,’ he said and the sound of his voice was surprising, flat and wide, with a kind of hum to it, like what happens when you pinch your nose and try to sing at the same time.

Ella watched him following Mamma with his eyes. Mamma was wearing the red suit, ’40s style, with the fitted skirt and nipped-in waist, a wide belt of patent leather, a red hat with a little black half-veil, and her very high leopard-print shoes.

Ella wished, not for the first time, that Mamma could be more like other mums, her hair less done, her lipstick less red, that she’d dress in normal clothes, jeans and sweatshirts, draw less attention to herself. Who, Ella thought, glancing around her, wore red with leopard-print? Who wore a hat and gloves anymore?

But Mamma had already reached the front of the station where another man waited for them, leaning against the wall, a cigarette drooping from the side of his mouth. His hands gripped a piece of cardboard scrawled with Mamma’s name, bracing it like a shield against the cold wind.

He looked Mamma up and down, an eyebrow half-raised. He’s laughing at her, Ella thought. The black misspelled letters – ‘*Mrs F. Murreno*’ – flapped and shuddered in his hands.

‘Good afternoon,’ Mamma said to the man, with careful precision. ‘I’m Mrs Moreno.’ She pronounced the name crisply,





rolling the 'r' a little more than usual. 'Thank you so much for meeting us.' She extended a gloved hand.

The man took a final drag of his cigarette and then ground it under his heel. He didn't take Mamma's hand. Instead, he fished a phone from his pocket and shouted into it.

'Yeah, mate. That pick-up for Jack. I'm gonna need the van.'

Mamma's hand hovered in the air, then came to rest on the strap of her handbag, which she pushed higher up her arm. Ella saw that she was nervous. A single bead of sweat was trembling on her top lip and she was surreptitiously checking that the clasp of her bag was firmly closed.

Half an hour later, a rusty van pulled up outside the main entrance, the doors tied shut with bits of rope and the bumpers hanging half-off.

Mamma's lips tightened as the man and the van driver began to toss all their carefully packed boxes into the back, one on top of the other. She saw the men smirk at one another as Mamma negotiated the van step in her tightly fitted skirt and high heels, flicking her glove over the grimy back seat before gesturing for Ella to climb up beside her.

The van jolted and wheezed over a wide bridge, the river flowing fast and brown below. Through the spattered window, Ella caught glimpses of high stone walls, brooding clouds, a throng of afternoon shoppers shouldering their way towards the station, their heads angled against the wind. She pulled her parka closer around her.

The van bumped down a cobbled side street and sputtered to a stop. Mamma sat up straighter in her seat, craning her neck impatiently over the backs of the men's heads.





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What she saw made her gasp out loud, her hand flying up to her mouth to stifle the sound.

‘But it’s perfect,’ she said, her eyes welling with tears of relief.

And although, Ella thought with new irritation, this response was just a touch on the dramatic side, she saw that it was true.

Their new home stood in its own secluded courtyard. To enter the yard, you had to walk under a low archway of old wooden beams. The noise of the street faded away and you could feel the buildings draw closer around you, as if cradling you in their arms.

There were no other shops facing into the courtyard, only a café with a few chairs and tables outside and three or four customers staring into their cups.

They looked back at Ella with glazed expressions. One of them fed flakes of croissant from his fingers to a little dog that he’d tethered to the back of his chair by its lead. No one seemed the least bit interested in the van or their arrival.

Ella let her mind soften into a small, still point, then imagined herself floating upwards and outwards, flying across the courtyard and into Mamma’s head. From here, she could see the shop as Fabia Moreno was seeing it right now, windows polished to a bright gleam, a smart sign in gilt lettering, a mannequin in the window in a red crepe dress, and scrolls of silk and velvet spilling over the counter.

‘Where do you want these, then, love?’ one of the men shouted, throwing a box in the air and catching it with a fake flourish. Ella snapped back into herself.

She watched as the men stacked their boxes in a clumsy pyramid on the shop floor.





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‘Please, no need . . . No, *really*.’ Mamma’s lips tightened again.

But the men were fast, deft, efficient. The van moved off in a cloud of exhaust fumes and Ella watched as Mamma removed her hat, twisting it in both hands.

She picked her way between the puddles, poking at the shop’s splintering shutters, testing the footboards with the toe of her shoe, then stepped inside, peeling off her glove and running her hand over the surfaces.

‘So much dust. It must have been empty a very long time.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘And a bit musty.’ She hugged her arms around her. ‘But we will be OK here, *tesora*. No?’

Ella saw only how the white plaster seemed to glow in the half-light. She looked up at the graceful arches of the window-panes and the wrought ironwork above the shop door where the face of a woman smiled down at her. The woman’s hair, unravelling over the lintel, was so realistic that Ella could almost imagine her winking.

Licking the tip of her finger, she wrote on the dirty window, ‘Fabia Moreno’, and beneath that ‘Ella Moreno’, making the ‘b’ and ‘l’s as loopy and extravagant as she could. And beneath that, she drew the shape of a heart.



3

Baby's blanket. White merino wool. Hand-knitted.

Ella had always been different from other children. Fabia knew this from the moment she took the newborn bundle in her arms, gathering the soft bird-bones of her, feeling the tiny heart beating fast and strong against her own.

The baby was strangely quiet and calm and looked at her with wide eyes that were not-quite-green and not-quite-blue, but perfectly focused in a way that made Fabia wonder what she was thinking.

She was born just before midnight on the night that people in England call All Hallows' Eve. Halloween. Samhain.

The Day of the Dead is what Madaar-Bozorg would have said, the Thin Time, when the worlds of the living and the ancestors overlap for a while.

A lozenge of moonlight fell through the window of the third-floor hospital room and spread itself across the sheets. The baby seemed to reach for it, her little rosebud fists opening and closing as if trying to hold the light in her hands.

Her name came easily. Fabia saw the shape of it very clearly in her mind – or was it that she heard it, blown in on the autumn wind, like an eddy of leaves or the smoke from the first fires? Isabella, for Isis, Brilliant One, Great Lady of the Moon and Magic, protector of the dead, queen of beginnings in all the old stories.





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But she would always call her Ella, in honour of that first night, years ago already now, when she'd first met Enzo. The smell of jasmine and honeysuckle, the chink of glasses, the sounds drifting on the heavy air to the balcony where he stood waiting for her.

'Do you like, jazz, *bellissima*? Billie Holliday? Nina Simone? Listen, this is my favourite. Ella Fitzgerald. *Magnifica*. What a goddess . . .'

He'd put his hand on the small of her back, his hips swinging gently to the rhythms snaking around them and between them.

'Don't you love how you feel it all through you, like . . . like . . .'

He'd lifted his hand as if to pluck the right word out of the air. 'Like *e-lec-tricity*?'

The high notes tangled with his words, breaking against her in shivers of green, red, gold.

That night, the night of Ella's birth, she let herself remember all of that, testing herself, fingering the still-fresh wound of it all.

The nurse wrestled with the window latch, slamming it shut against the wind. But the baby, Ella, lay perfectly quiet, seeming to take in everything with her calm, clear gaze.

'This one's been here before,' said the nurse, stroking Ella's cheek, letting her tiny fist close fast over her finger. 'She's not going to let go.'

Yes, Fabia thought, turning the words over in her mind, this was true. She'd been thinking about nothing else but this moment for months now, wondering what it would feel like, to go through it all alone. She'd expected to feel so small, not up to the task, so afraid. Because Enzo wasn't here with her, to





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stroke her hair or play her compilations of his all-time favourite jazz tracks or distract her by laughing at his own terrible jokes.

But when the moment had arrived, she hadn't felt any of those things.

Now, she flexed her feet under the white sheets, wiggled her toes. Exhausted, yes. Every muscle in her body ached and throbbed. But as she looked down at this baby in her arms, *her* baby, hers and Enzo's, something inside her seemed to soften. She didn't really know how to put it into words. Except that it had a colour, this feeling, the softest blue, spreading through her stomach, reaching up towards her heart, turning purplish at the edges and opening into a velvety pink, like the petals of the orchids that grew in Madaar-Bozorg's garden.

For a moment, the colours filled the black gap that had opened up in her since Enzo's death. They shone through all the dark spaces.

The baby kicked her feet and made a small mewling sound. Her eyes searched Fabia's face. I wonder what I look like to her, right now, Fabia thought. An enormous moon-face, blurry, all out-of-focus.

'You're safe,' she whispered. 'We don't need to worry about anything anymore.'

But she knew it was herself she was trying to convince.

In fact, Ella had never been a moment's trouble. Whenever Fabia thought about those first difficult years, which she tried hard not to do, she saw herself as a small figure in a flimsy coat and worn shoes with Ella tucked under her arm, traipsing from one town to another, one life to another; and she saw how Ella





had simply looked out at everything around her with those clear blue-green eyes, as if perfectly resigned to whatever might happen next.

Fabia had placed her carefully in her Moses basket in the middle of all those other women's kitchen floors while she scrubbed and polished, tidied away, scraped stale food from stacks of dishes, loaded and unloaded dishwashers, ironed and folded clothes. And all the time, Ella had lain quietly, clasping and unclasping her little pink fists, opening and closing her eyes and murmuring to herself from time to time.

And now they were here in York – the final destination, Fabia hoped, at the end of their long journey. Just three weeks ago, she'd watched her daughter, fifteen years old now, half-child, half-woman, with wild brown hair and that steady gaze, standing in the middle of the courtyard as the men lugged the boxes and shouted to one another and a little dog yapped.

She'd seen how Ella stood observing with her usual calm and serious expression, as if a part of her were somewhere else, somewhere far away and completely unreachable.

Fabia Moreno felt, and not for the first time, a stab of fear for her daughter. She wished that she would giggle and shriek and fidget and get impatient, even stamp her feet and complain, making unreasonable demands in the way that she saw other teenage girls doing.

There was always a part of Ella that seemed unreachable somehow, even to Fabia. You never knew quite what she was thinking. Always with her nose in a book.

And then, of course, there was the other thing, all the signs that Fabia knew to watch for in a daughter. The gift that all the women of her family had been born with, one way or another.





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Seeing things, hearing things, feeling things. Tasting sounds and sensing shapes or the sudden crackle in the air, the colours a person made around them. Knowing who was arriving at the door before they were even there. Feeling your way into another's thoughts. Ella had this, she knew. But she wondered if Ella herself was aware of it yet.

Now she looked down at the top of Ella's head, her hair a wiry halo that blazed in the sunlight.

'You *are* holding on to this ladder, aren't you, *carina*?' she said, preparing to balance on one leg and reach her arms above her head to drive the last screw into the ceiling fixture.

Ella turned from gazing out of the window and grasped the stepladder with new determination.

'I didn't know you could do all this stuff, Mum,' she said.

'Neither did I.' Fabia laughed as the chandelier in her hands sent rainbows bouncing over the white walls. 'But what is it they say here? That funny thing. Don't tell me. Let me remember . . . *Sink . . . or swim?*'

Even now, almost sixteen years after arriving in England, she was still grappling with the language. She missed things out, forgot the correct sequence of the words. The vowels never seemed to feel quite right in her mouth somehow. And here in the North, she felt even clumsier. People here spoke in such a different way. Sometimes her head ached from concentrating so hard just to keep up with what they were saying.

It was so frustrating. She was an educated person, an intelligent person and yet she couldn't always make herself understood.

'Ooh, yes. We do need a new dress shop, something a bit different.' The pink-cheeked girl at Braithwaite's Fruit & Veg had





smiled. It was the first shop in their new neighbourhood that Fabia had visited, just around the corner on Petergate. White tiled walls, swept floors, the produce stacked in crates lined with green baize or arranged in wicker baskets. Fabia had smiled approvingly and this girl had smiled back.

‘Here on your holidays, then?’ she’d said. ‘Or something more permanent, like?’

‘Oh, permanent. Most definitely.’ These words had felt good in her mouth. And the girl herself reminded Fabia of a ripe fruit – a peach or perhaps a rosy apple – her bosom looking as if it might burst the stiff sheath of her green nylon overalls at any moment. She would look very lovely in something with a bit of corseting, Fabia thought. A sweetheart neckline. A full skirt. Something ’50s style. Cotton. Perhaps blue or primrose yellow.

‘Vintage, you say?’ The girl was counting coins into her hand now. ‘I do like all that old stuff. It’s in all the magazines now, innit? I might have to pop in and ’ave a look.’

She’d slipped an extra peach into the brown paper bag and winked.

Fabia liked the hum and lilt of her talk, the ease of her body as she reached up to drop apples onto the scales suspended from the beam above her head, sending the silver dish bobbing and swaying.

‘I make some of the dresses myself too,’ said Fabia, ‘and alterations. Because, well, perhaps you know that vintage is very hard to size. We also have shoes, handbags, scarves, jewellery, perfume . . .’

She stopped and felt herself blush at the sales pitch tripping out of her mouth. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Listen to me . . . Please. Come. See for yourself.’





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She tried to hide her embarrassment, burrowing to the bottom of her canvas shopper, fishing out a flyer from the bundle and propping it against a pineapple. 'We have little opening. Not a party, exactly. Glass of wine, yes? And . . . how do you say it here? *Canapés*?'

'Oooh. Very nice,' said the girl, her cheeks dimpling again. 'Cana-what's its. Those snacky things, innit? Want to give me a few of your leaflets, then, luvvie? I'll put 'em on the counter.'

And as she left the shop, Fabia had felt a kind of fizz and crackle returning to her body after all the years of sadness. It was like throwing off a heavy blanket after a long illness and stretching her arms wide.

She'd done it. She was here. She and Ella. Finally, they could make their new beginning. She could almost believe that it was going to be all right.

She put back her head and laughed, opening her mouth and swallowing big lungfuls of the chilly air.

'Mum! What are you doing?' Ella was hanging about in the street, looking in a shop window at a mechanised life-size model of a man stirring a bowlful of fudge.

'Breathing it in, *carina*. Breathing it all in . . .'

Ella scowled. 'Well, all I can smell is this fudge. It's disgusting. I bet it's only the tourists that buy it.'

She glanced around her self-consciously, pushing her hands deeper into her pockets. But then she looked at Fabia and smiled, in the way that you might indulge a small child playing.

She feels it too, thought Fabia. She's relaxing a bit. She's going to be happy here.

Because, above all, Fabia wanted Ella to be happy.





All that first week, she'd busied herself, unpacking boxes for the shop and the flat, finding furniture, hanging curtains, cleaning, painting and tweaking.

She'd discovered that she could sand the old varnish from a table and paint it in smooth creamy strokes of duck-egg blue. She could glue the broken spindles of a chair or improvise a headboard from a piece of wood and a length of flowered fabric.

But she wished she could do more, spin a circle around them both, keep the happiness in and any badness out.

She watched Ella carefully, feeling relief on the days when she lost that far-off look, when she smiled or laughed or even put aside the book she'd buried herself in to help with painting a wall or emptying a box.

And then when Billy appeared in the shop, hovering in Ella's wake, his face splitting into that wide smile, Fabia felt her heart lift. At last, Ella had a friend. And so soon after they'd got here. This was a good sign. Perhaps this meant that she'd meet more nice young people. This friendly woman in the grocers, for example. Was she old enough to have a daughter? Someone around Ella's age?

She'd begun to believe that they were safe here. People were kind.

Stupid, Fabia. So naive. To trust. To relax in this way.

Because then, just a couple of days later, that awful man had come sniffing around, with his black coat, all grubby at the hem, and his eyes, tiny eyes, too deep-set in his face – never trust a man with too-small eyes, Madaar-Bozorg always said – looking into everything, picking up a handkerchief or a hat with the tips of his long white fingers, replacing each item with a look of distaste as if it were contaminated.





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She'd felt her hand in her skirt pocket itching to leap out and grab his hands, to make those horrible probing fingers go still and quiet.

She'd had an almost overwhelming urge to pick up an embroidered cushion or a silk scarf and hold it up in front of his face so that she wouldn't have to look at that expression in his eyes for one minute longer.

But instead she'd smiled and smiled and laid her hand gently on his arm – he'd certainly liked that, hadn't he? – and she'd gestured towards the doorway, carefully, quietly, so that he wouldn't feel pressured, so that he wouldn't know, even for a second, that she was ushering him away, across the floor and out of the door. Away. Please. Leave us now. Watching as the last flick of his black coat disappeared around the corner like a rat's tail.

Fabia Moreno knew how to make a shop. She knew how to make a high waist and a concealed seam, how to drape a neckline or cut on the bias, how to sew stretch jersey, remove the scuff marks from a 1920s evening slipper or restore the nap of a blush-pink leather glove.

But she didn't know how to keep Ella safe, how to shield her from the prying fingers, the hard faces, the questions and looks, the words half-whispered behind the back of a hand or tossed over a shoulder, words made to cut you or hook you in.

Wherever they went, there was no getting away from those words, it seemed.

Foreigner. Dirty Arab. Osama Bin Laden. Terrorist cell. Excuse me, madam, may I see your papers? Passport? How long do you intend to stay here? Taking our jobs. Why don't you just go home?





SOPHIE NICHOLLS

What had this man said as he stood, holding her flyer between his long, wormy fingers? She tried to remember.

‘I take it you have a permit for this little opening party. If you’re going to serve alcohol, Mrs Moreno, well, you’ll need certain permissions from my office. But I’m sure that can all be arranged . . .’

Fabia knew exactly what that meant.

‘Oh,’ she’d said, offering him her best smile. ‘Thank you so much for advising me. I wouldn’t want to cause your office any extra trouble, Councillor. In that case, I will offer my guests some very nice homemade lemonade.’

