

The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox

Let us begin with two girls at a dance.

They are at the edge of the room. One sits on a chair, opening and shutting a dance-card with gloved fingers. The other stands beside her, watching the dance unfold: the circling couples, the clasped hands, the drumming shoes, the whirling skirts, the bounce of the floor. It is the last hour of the year and the windows behind them are blank with night. The seated girl is dressed in something pale, Esme forgets what, the other in a dark red frock that doesn't suit her. She has lost her gloves. It begins here.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps it begins earlier, before the party, before they dressed in their new finery, before the candles were lit, before the sand was sprinkled on the boards, before the year whose end they are celebrating began. Who knows? Either way it ends at a grille covering a window with each square exactly two thumbnails wide.

If Esme cares to gaze into the distance – that is to say, at what lies beyond the metal grille – she finds that, after a while, something happens to the focusing mechanism of her eyes. The squares of the grille will blur and, if she concentrates long enough, vanish. There is always a moment before her body reasserts itself, readjusting her eyes to the proper reality of the world, when it is just her and the trees, the road, the beyond. Nothing in between.

The squares at the bottom are worn free of paint and you can see the different layers of colour inside each other, like rings in a tree. Esme is taller than most so can reach the part where the paint is new and thick as tar.

Behind her, a woman makes tea for her dead husband. Is he dead? Or just run off? Esme doesn't recall. Another woman is searching for water to pour on flowers that perished long ago in a seaside town not far from here. It is always the meaningless tasks that endure: the washing, the cooking, the clearing, the cleaning. Never anything majestic or significant, just the tiny rituals that hold together the seams of human life. The girl obsessed with cigarettes has had two warnings already and everyone is thinking she is about to get a third. And Esme is thinking, where does it begin – is it there, is it here, at the dance, in India, before?

She speaks to no one, these days. She wants to concentrate, she doesn't like to muddy things with the distraction of speech. There is a zoetrope inside her head and

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she doesn't like to be caught out when it stops.

Whir, whir. Stop.

In India, then. The garden. Herself aged about four, standing on the back step.

Above her, mimosa trees are shaking their heads at her, powdering the lawn with yellow dust. If she walked across it, she'd leave a trail behind. She wants something. She wants something but she doesn't know what. It's like an itch she can't reach to scratch. A drink? Her *ayah*? A sliver of mango? She rubs at an insect bite on her arm and pokes at the yellow dust with her bare toe. In the distance somewhere she can hear her sister's skipping-rope hitting the ground and the short shuffle of feet in between. Slap shunt slap shunt slap shunt.

She turns her head, listening for other noises. The brrr-cloop-brrr of a bird in the mimosa branches, a hoe in the garden soil – scritch, scritch – and, somewhere, her mother's voice. She can't make out the words but she knows it's her mother talking.

Esme jumps off the step, so that both feet land together, and runs round the side of the bungalow. Beside the lily pond, her mother is bending over the garden table, pouring tea into a cup, her father beside her in a hammock. The edges of their white clothes shimmer in the heat. Esme narrows her eyes until her parents blur into two hazy shapes, her mother a triangle and her father a line.

She counts as she walks over the lawn, giving a short hop every tenth step.

'Oh.' Her mother looks up. 'Aren't you having your nap?'

'I woke up.' Esme balances on one leg, like the birds that come to the pond at night.

'Where's your *ayah*? Where's Jamila?'

'I don't know. May I have some tea?'

Her mother hesitates, unfolding a napkin across her knee. 'Darling, I rather think—'

'Give her some, if she wants it.' Her father says this without opening his eyes.

Her mother pours tea into a saucer and holds it out. Esme ducks under her outstretched hand and clambers on to her lap. She feels the scratch of lace, the heat of a body underneath white cotton. 'You were a triangle and Father was a line.'

Her mother shifts in the seat. 'I beg your pardon?'

'I said, you were a triangle—'

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‘Mmm.’ Her mother’s hands grip Esme’s arms. ‘It’s really too hot for cuddles today.’ Esme is set down on the grass again. ‘Why not go and find Kitty? See what she’s up to.’

‘She’s skipping.’

‘Couldn’t you join in?’

‘No.’ Esme reaches out and touches the frosted icing on a bun. ‘She’s too—’

‘Esme,’ her mother lifts her wrist clear of the table, ‘a lady waits to be offered.’

‘I just wanted to see what it felt like.’

‘Well, please don’t.’ Her mother leans back in the chair and shuts her eyes.

Esme watches her for a moment. Is she asleep? A blue vein pulses in her neck and her eyes move under the lids. Tiny globes of water, no bigger than pinheads, are pushing out from the skin above her lip. Where her shoe straps end and skin begins, her mother’s feet bloom red marks. Her stomach is distended, pushed out with another baby. Esme has felt it, wriggling like a caught fish. Jamila says she thinks this one is lucky, that this one will live.

Esme looks up at the sky, at the flies circling the lily flowers on the pond, at the way her father’s clothes protrude from the underside of the hammock in diamonds of loose cloth. In the distance, she can still hear Kitty’s skipping-rope, the scritch, scritch of the hoe – or is it a different one? Then she hears the drone of an insect. She turns her head to see it but it’s gone, behind her, to the left of her. She turns again but it’s closer, the buzz louder, and she feels the catch of its feet in her hair.

Esme springs up, shaking and shaking her head but the buzzing is louder still and suddenly she feels the crawling flutter of wings on her ear. She shrieks, flailing at her head with her hands but the buzzing is deafening now, blocking out all other sounds, and she feels the insect edging inside the narrow passage of her ear – and what will happen, will it eat through her eardrum and into her brain and will she be deaf like the girl in Kitty’s book? Or will she die? Or will it live in her head and she will have this noise inside her for ever?

She lets out another piercing shriek, still shaking her hair, staggering about the lawn, and the shriek turns to sobs and just as the buzzing starts to lift and the insect backs out of her ear, she hears her father saying, ‘What is the matter with the child?’ and her mother calling across the lawn for Jamila.

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Could this be her earliest memory? It might be. A beginning of sorts – the only one she remembers.

Or it might be the time Jamila painted a lacework of henna across her palm. She saw her lifeline, her heartline interrupted by a new pattern. Or Kitty falling into the pond and having to be fished out and taken into the house in a towel. Playing jacks with the cook's children outside the garden's perimeter. Watching the earth around the muscular trunk of the banyan tree boiling with ants. It could just as easily have been these.

Perhaps it was this. A lunch when she was strapped to a chair, the binding tight across her middle. Because, as her mother announced to the room, Esme must learn to behave. Which, Esme knew, meant not getting out of her chair until the meal was finished. She loved the space under the table, you see, they couldn't keep her from it, the illicit privacy under the cloth. There is something peculiarly touching about people's feet. Their shoes, worn down in odd places, the idiosyncrasies in lace-tying, blisters, calluses, who crossed their ankles, who crossed their knees, whose stockings had holes, who wore mismatched socks, who sat with a hand in whose lap – she knew it all. She would slip from her chair, lithe as a cat, and they couldn't reach to hook her out.

The binding is a scarf that belongs to her mother. It has a pattern Esme likes: repeating swirls in purple, red and blue. Paisley, her mother says it is called, which Esme knows is a place in Scotland.

The room is full. Kitty is there, her mother, her father and some guests – several couples, a girl with scandalously short hair, whom her mother has placed opposite a young engineer, an elderly woman and her son, and a lone man, seated next to Esme's father. Esme thinks, but she's not entirely sure, that they are all eating soup. She seems to recall the lift and dip of spoons, the clash of metal on china, the discreet suck and swallow.

They are talking, on and on. What can there be to say? So many things, it seems. Esme can never think of anything, not one thing, she would wish to impart to these people. She is pushing her spoon to one side of the bowl, then back, seeing how the soup swirls and eddies around the silver. She is not listening, or at least not to the words, but tuning her hearing to the collective noise of them. It is like that of

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parrots in high trees, or a gathering of frogs at dusk. The same grrp-grrp-grrp sound.

Suddenly and without warning, they all get up. They put down their spoons, leap from their chairs and rush from the room. Esme, daydreaming, thinking about soup eddies, about frogs, has missed something. Everyone is talking excitedly as they go and Kitty jostles against their father to get out of the door first. Their mother, in her eagerness, has forgotten about Esme, tethered to her chair.

She watches, spoon in hand, mouth open. The doorway swallows them, the engineer guest last, and she hears their feet disappear down the passageway. She turns back in astonishment to the empty room. Lilies stand, proud and impassive, in a glass vase; the clock counts down seconds, a napkin slips to a chair. She thinks about yelling, about opening her lungs and shouting. But she doesn't. She looks at the curtains, trembling at the open window, a fly settling on a plate. She holds out her arm and uncurls her fingers, just to see what will happen. The spoon drops in a straight line, bounces once off its curved end, does a somersault in the air, then slides along the carpet and comes to rest under the sideboard.

Iris walks along the street, keys in one hand, coffee in the other. The dog is just behind her, claws tick-ticking on the concrete. Ladders of sun drop down through the gaps in the high buildings and the night's rain is vanishing in patches from the pavement.

She crosses the road, the dog following close behind. She aims a kick at a beer can left on the doorstep but instead of rolling across the pavement, as she'd hoped it would, it tips sideways, spraying beer over the shop entrance.

'Damn you,' Iris says. 'Damn you, damn you.'

She kicks it again in fury and, empty now, it clatters into the gutter. Then she casts a glance over her shoulder. Impassive stone tenements rear up, glittering with rows of unblinking windows. She looks down at the dog. He waves his tail and gives a faint whine.

'It's all right for you,' she says.

She yanks at the shutter over the door, so that it retracts back into its roller with a shocked rattle. She steps over the puddle of beer on the threshold, pulling a pile

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of letters from the sprung trap of the letterbox. She shuffles through them as she crosses the shop. Bills, bills, bank statement, postcard, bills, and a brown envelope, sealed down in a V.

The typeface on the front makes her pause, half-way to the counter. It is small, cramped, each letter heavy with ink, the semi-circular heart of the *e* obliterated. Iris holds the envelope close to her face and sees that the shapes have been pressed into the grain of the manila paper. She is running her fingertips over them, feeling the indentations, realising that it has been done on a typewriter.

A draught of cold air snakes in, curling about her ankles. She lifts her head and looks around the shop. The blank, featureless heads of the hatstands stare down at her, a silk coat hung from the ceiling sways slightly in the breeze. She lifts the flap and the seal gives easily. She unfolds the single white sheet, glances down it. Her mind is still running on the beer, on how she's going to clean it up, how she must learn not to kick cans in the street, but she catches the words *case* and *meeting* and the name *Euphemia Lennox*. At the bottom, an illegible signature.

She is about to start again at the beginning when she remembers that she has some detergent in the tiny kitchen at the back of the shop. She crams the letter and the rest of the post into a drawer and disappears through a heavy velvet curtain.

She emerges on to the pavement with a mop and a bucket of soapy water. She starts with the outside of the door, sluicing water towards the street. She turns her face up to the sky. A van passes on the road, close enough so that her hair is lifted by the backdraught. Somewhere out of sight a child is crying. The dog stands in the doorway, watching the tiny figures of people walking along the bridge high above them. Sometimes this street feels so deep cut into the city it's as if Iris is leading a subterranean existence. She leans on the mop handle and surveys her doorstep. The name *Euphemia Lennox* resurfaces in her mind. She thinks, it's probably an order of some sort. She thinks, lucky I kept that bucket. She thinks, it looks like rain.