Fortune's Rocks

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Extract

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Fortune's Rocks

In the time it takes for her to walk from the bathhouse at the seawall of Fortune's Rocks, where she has left her boots and has discreetly pulled off her stockings, to the waterline along which the sea continually licks the pink and silver sand, she learns about desire. Desire that slows the breath, that causes a preoccupied pause in the midst of uttering a sentence, that focuses the gaze absolutely on the progress of naked feet walking toward the water. This first brief awareness of desire — and of being the object of desire, a state of which she has had no previous hint — comes to her as a kind of slow seizure, as of air compressing itself all around her, and causes what seems to be the first faint shudder of her adult life.

She touches the linen brim of her hat, as she would not have done a summer earlier, nor even a day earlier. Perhaps she fingers the hat's long tulle sash as well. Around her and behind her, there are men in bathing costumes or in white shirts and waistcoats; and if she lifts her eyes, she can see their faces: pale, wintry visages that seem to breathe in the ocean air as if it were smelling salts, relieving the pinched torpor of long months shut indoors. The men are older or younger, some quite tall, a few boys, and though they speak to one another, they watch her.

Her gait along the shallow shell of a beach alters. Her feet, as she makes slow progress, create slight and scandalous indentations in the sand. Her dress, which is a peach silk, turns, when she steps into the water, a translucent sepia. The air is hot, but the water on her skin is frigid; and the contrast makes her shiver.

She takes off her hat and kicks up small splashes amongst the waves. She inhales long breaths of the sea air, which clear her head. Possibly the men observing her speculate then about the manner in which delight seems suddenly to overtake her and to fill her with the joy of anticipation. And are as surprised as she is by her acceptance of her fate. For in the space of time it has taken to walk from the seawall to the sea, perhaps a distance of a hundred yards, she has passed from being a girl, with a child's pent-up and nearly frenzied need to sweep away the rooms and cobwebs of her winter, to being a woman.

It is the twentieth day of June in the last year of the century, and she is fifteen years old.

Olympia's father, in his white suit, his hair a fading ginger and blowing upward from his brow, is calling to her from the rocks at the northern end of the beach. The rocks upon which it has been the fate of many sailors to founder, thus lending the beach and the adjacent land the name of Fortune. He cups his mouth with his hands, but she is deaf from the surf. A white shape amidst the gray, her father is a gentle and loving man, unblemished in his actions toward her, although he believes himself in possession of both her body and her soul, as if they were his and not hers to squander or bestow.

Earlier this day, Olympia and her father and her mother journeyed north from Boston by train to a cottage that, when they entered, was white with sheets and oddly without dust. Olympia wished when she saw the sheets that her mother would not ask

Josiah, who is her father's manservant, to take them off the furniture, because they made fantastical abstract shapes against the six pairs of floor-to-ceiling windows of the long front room. Beyond the glass and the thin glaze of salt spray lay the Atlantic with its cap of brilliant haze. In the distance there were small islands that seemed to hover above the horizon.

The cottage is a modest one by some standards, although Olympia's father is a wealthy man. But it is unique in its proportions, and she thinks it lovely beyond words. White with dark blue shutters, the house stands two stories high and is surrounded by several graceful porches. It is constructed in the style of the grand hotels along Fortune's Rocks, and in Rye and Hampton to the south: that is to say, its roof curves shallowly and is inset with evenly spaced dormer windows. The house has never been a hotel, but rather was once a convent, the home of the Order of Saint Jean Baptiste de Bienfaisance, twenty sisters who took vows of poverty and married themselves to Jesus. Indeed, an oddity of the structure is its many cell-like bedrooms, two of which Olympia and her father occupy and three of which have been connected for her mother's use. Attached to the ground floor of the house is a small chapel; and although it has been deconsecrated, Olympia's family still cannot bring themselves to place their own secular belongings within its wooden walls. Except for a dozen neat wooden benches and a wide marble stone that once served as an altar, the chapel remains empty.

Outside the house and below the porches are massive tangles of hydrangea bushes. A front lawn spills down to the seawall, which is little more than a rocky barricade against the ocean and which is covered at this time of year with masses of beach roses. Thus, the view from the porch is one of emerald leaves with blots of pink against a blue so sparkling that it is not so much a color as the experience of light. To the west of the lawn are orchards of Sheepnose

and Black Gilliflower apples, and to the north is the beach, which stretches two miles along the coast. Fortune's Rocks is the name not only for the crescent of land that cradles this beach but also for the gathering of summer houses, of which the Biddefords' is but one, on its dunes and rocks.

From the rocks, her father waves to her yet again. "Olympia, I called to you," he says when she, with her wet hem, climbs up to the rock on which he is standing. She expects him to be cross with her. In her impatience to feel the sea on her feet, she inadvertently went to the beach during the men's bathing hours, an activity that might be acceptable in a girl but is not in a young woman. Olympia explains as best she can that she is sorry; she simply forgot about the men's bathing hours, and she was not able to hear him call to her because of the wind. But as she draws nearer to her father and looks up at his face and observes the manner in which he glances quickly away from her — this is not like him — she realizes that he must have witnessed her bare-legged walk from the seawall to the ocean's edge. His eyes are watering some in the wind, and he seems momentarily puzzled, even bewildered, by her physical presence.

"Josiah has prepared a tray of bread and pastes," her father says, turning back to her and recovering from the slight loss of his composure. "He has taken it to your mother's room so that you both might have something to eat after the long journey." He blinks once and bends to his watch. "My God, Olympia, what a shambles," he adds.

He means, of course, the house.

"Josiah seems to be handling the crisis well enough," she offers.

"Everything should have been prepared for our arrival. We should have had the cook by now."

Her father wears his frock coat still. His boots are heavy and black and covered with dust, and she thinks he must be extraordinarily hot and uncomfortable. Clearly, he dressed this day with some

indecision — trailing Boston behind him even as he was anticipating the sea.

In the bright sunlight, Olympia can see her father's face more clearly than she has all winter. It is a strong face, full of character, a face he inherited from his father before him and then later, through his own behavior, has come to deserve. His most striking feature is the navy of his eyes, a blue so vivid that his eyes alone, even with the flecks of rust in the irises, suggest moral rectitude. A fan of wrinkles, however, as well as folds of skin at the lids, soften the suggested righteousness. His hair is graying at the sides and thinning at the front, but he has high color and has not yet begun to grow pale, as is so often the fate of ginger-haired men in their middle age. Olympia is not sure if she has ever thought about her father's height, nor can she accurately say how tall he is — only that he is taller than her mother and her, which seems in keeping with the proper order of the universe. His face is elongated, as Olympia's will one day be, although neither of them is precisely thin.

"When you have finished your tea, I should like to see you in my study," her father says in the ordinary manner in which he is accustomed to speak to her, though even she can see that something between them has changed. The sun etches imperfections in his skin, and there are, in that unforgiving light, tiny glints of silver and ginger spread along his jawline. He squints in the glare.

"I have some matters I need to discuss with you. Matters relating to your summer study and so forth," he adds.

Her heart falls at the mention of summer study, since she is eager to have a respite from her singular, yet intense, schooling. Her father, having lost faith in the academies, has taken her education upon himself. Thus she is his sole pupil and he her sole teacher. He remains convinced that this education is progressing at a pace not dreamt of in the academies and seminaries, and that its breadth is

unsurpassed anywhere in New England, which is to say, the United States. Possibly this is true, Olympia thinks, but she cannot say: It has been four years since she last attended classes with other girls.

"Of course," she answers.

He looks at her once and then lets his eyes drift over her right shoulder and out to sea. He turns and begins to walk back to the cottage. As she gazes at his slightly hunched posture, a physical characteristic she has not ever noticed before, she feels suddenly sad for her father, for the thing that he is losing, which is the guardianship of her childhood.

She floats through the house, appreciating the sculptures made by the white sheets strewn over the furnishings. A coatrack becomes a maiden ghost; a long dining room table, an operating theater; a set of chairs piled one on top of the other and shrouded in white becomes a throne. She climbs the stairs in the front hall to her mother's rooms.

Her mother is resting unperturbed on a peacock chaise that has been uncovered and looks directly out to sea. She seems not to notice the man perched on a ladder just outside her window. He has in one hand a bottle of vinegar and in the other a crumpled wad of newsprint. Josiah wears an overall for this task, although he also has on a waistcoat and a formal collar underneath. Later, when the windows have been cleaned, he will take off the overall, put his suit coat back on, adjust his cuffs under the sleeves, and walk into the study, where he will ask Olympia's father if he wishes his customary glass of London porter. And then Josiah, a man who has been with her father for seventeen years, before her father's marriage and her birth, and who has without complaint taken upon himself the washing of the windows in her mother's rooms because he does not want her view of the ocean to be obscured on this, the first day of her summer visit (even though such a task is thoroughly beneath him), will walk

down the long pebbled drive and onto Hampton Street to lay into the new man who was to have had the house prepared before Olympia's family arrived.

Since Olympia's mother is partial to hues of blue, even in the summer months, she has on this day a wisteria crepe blouse with mother-of-pearl buttons and long deep cuffs that hide her wrist-bones and flatter her hands. At her waist is a sash of Persian silk. This preference for blue is to be seen as well in the fabrics of her room — the pale beryl sateen puff on the bed, the peacock silk brocade of the chaise, the powder velvet drapes at the windows. Her mother's rooms, Olympia thinks, suggest excessive femininity: They form a boudoir, separate, cut off from the rest of the house, the excess not to be condoned, not to be seen by others, not echoed anywhere else in the austere furnishings of the cottage.

Her mother lifts a cup to her lips.

"Your skin is pink," she says to Olympia lightly, but not without a suggestion of parental admonition. Olympia has been told often to wear a hat to protect her face from the sun. But she was unable to forgo for those few happy moments at the water's edge the sensation of heat at the top of her head. She knows that her mother does not seriously begrudge her this small pleasure, despite her inordinate regard for beauty.

Beauty, Olympia has come to understand, has incapacitated her mother and ruined her life, for it has made her dependent upon people who are desirous of seeing her and of serving her: her own father, her husband, her physician, and her servants. Indeed, the preservation of beauty seems to be all that remains of her mother's life, as though the other limbs of the spirit — industriousness, curiosity, and philanthropy — have atrophied, and only this one appendage has survived. Her mother's hair, which has been hennaed so that it has taken on the color of a roan, is caught with combs at the sides and rolled into a complex series of knots that Olympia herself

has yet to master. Her mother has pale, pearl-gray eyes. Her face, which is both handsome and strong, belies her spirit, which is uniquely fragile — so fragile that Olympia herself has often seen it splinter into glittering bits.

"Josiah has prepared a tray," her mother says, gesturing to the display of paste sandwiches.

Olympia sits at the edge of the chaise. Her mother's knees make small hillocks in the indigo landscape of her skirt. "I am not hungry," Olympia says, which is true.

"You must eat something. Dinner will not be for hours yet."

To please her mother, Olympia takes a sandwich from the tray. For the moment, she avoids her mother's acute gaze and studies her room. They do not have their best furnishings at Fortune's Rocks, because the sea air and the damp are ruinous to their shape and surface. But Olympia does like particularly her mother's skirted dressing table with its many glass and silver boxes, which contain her combs and her perfumes and the fine white powder she uses in the evenings. Also on the dresser are her mother's many medicines and tonics. Olympia can see, from where she sits, the pigeon milk, the pennyroyal pills, and the ginger tonic.

For as long as Olympia can remember, her mother has been referred to, within her hearing and without, as an invalid — an appellation that does not seem to distress her mother and indeed appears to be one she herself cultivates. Her ailments are vague and unspecific, and Olympia is not certain she has ever been properly diagnosed. She is said to have sustained an injury to her hip as a girl, and Olympia has heard the phrase *heart ailment* tossed about from time to time. There is, in Boston, a physician who visits her frequently, and perhaps he is not the charlatan Olympia's father thinks him. Although even as a girl, Olympia was certain that Dr. Ulysses Branch visited her mother for her company rather than for her rehabilitation. Her mother never seems actually to be unwell, and Olympia

sometimes thinks about the term *invalid* as it is applied to her mother: invalid, *in valid,* not valid, as though, in addition to physical strength, her mother lacked a certain authenticity.

As a result of these vague disabilities, Olympia's mother is not the caretaker in the family, but rather the one cared for. Olympia has decided that this must suit both of her parents well enough, for neither of them has ever taken great pains to amend the situation. And as time has gone on, perhaps as a result of actual atrophy, her mother has become something of a valid invalid. She seldom leaves the house, except to have her husband walk her at dusk to the seawall, where she will sit and sing to him. For years, her mother has maintained that the sea air has a salubrious effect on both her spirits and her vocal cords. Despite the humidity, she keeps a piano at Fortune's Rocks as well and will occasionally leave her rooms and play with some accomplishment. Olympia's mother has wonderful bones, but Olympia will not inherit her face or the shape of her body or, thankfully, the brittleness of her spirit.

Olympia's mother, who met her father in Boston at a dinner arranged by her own father when she was twenty-three, did not marry until she was twenty-eight. Although she was considered a handsome woman, it was said that her nerves, which were self-effacing to a degree of near annihilation, rendered her too delicate for marriage. Olympia's father, ever one for a challenge and captivated by those very characteristics that frightened other men away — that is to say, her mother's alternating fuguelike states of intense quiet and imaginative flights of fancy — pursued her with an ardor that he himself seldom admits to. Olympia does not know what to make of her parents' married life, for her mother appears to be, though sensitive to a fault, the least physical of all women and oftentimes, if surprised, can be seen to flinch at her husband's touch. Olympia's thoughts balk, however, at crossing the veil to that forbidden place where she might be able to imagine in detail her parents' marriage.

For it is a marriage that has seemed to thin as it has endured, until it appears to Olympia, by the summer of her fifteenth year, that there is only the one child and the vaguest and most formal of connections between them.

"You are quiet, Olympia," her mother says, eyeing her carefully. Though fragile, her mother can be astute, and it is always difficult to hide from her one's true thoughts. Olympia has been, indeed, thinking about her walk along the beach, viewing it as if from beside herself, seeing the somewhat blurry and vague figure of a young woman in peach silk conveying herself to the water's edge under the scrutiny of several dozen men and boys. And in her mother's room she blushes suddenly, as if she has been caught out.

Her mother shifts slightly on the chaise. "I fear I may already be too . . . too tardy in this discussion," she begins diffidently, "but I cannot help but notice — indeed, I think I am quite struck by this — that is to say, I am very mindful today of certain physical characteristics of your person, and I think we must soon have a talk about possible future occurrences, about necessary and delicate dilemmas all women have to bear."

Though the sentence cannot be parsed, her meaning can be; and Olympia shakes her head quickly or waves her hand, as though to tell her she need not go on. For she has relied heavily upon Lisette, her mother's maid, for information on matters of the body. Her mother looks startled for a moment, in the manner of someone who has hastily prepared a lengthy speech and has been stopped midsentence. But then, as she sits there, Olympia observes that relief overtakes her mother and flatters her features.

"Someone has discussed this with you?" her mother asks.

"Lisette," Olympia says, wishing the conversation over.

"When was this?"

"Some time ago."

"Oh. I have wondered."

And Olympia wonders, too, at the silence of Lisette regarding the daughter of her mistress. She hopes the woman will not receive a scolding for this confidence.

"You are settled?" her mother asks quickly, eager now as well to change the subject. "You are happy here?"

"Quite happy," Olympia answers, which is true and is what her mother wants to hear. It is essential that her mother's placidity not be disturbed.

At the window, Josiah moves on the ladder, causing both of them to look up in his direction.

"I wonder . . . ," her mother says, musing to herself. "Do you think Josiah a handsome man?"

Olympia looks at the figure framed seemingly in midair. He has light-brown hair that waves back from a high forehead and a narrow face that seems in keeping with the length of his slim build. Mildly astonished as Olympia always is by any sudden and surprising crack in her mother's long-practiced poise, she cannot think of how to answer her.

"Do you imagine that he keeps a mistress in Ely Falls?" her mother asks, pretending to wickedness. But then, after a brief heartbeat of silence, during which Olympia imagines she hears her mother's longing for (and immediate dismissal of) another life, she answers herself: "No, I suppose not," she says.

Altogether, it is a day on which everyone around Olympia seems to be behaving oddly. She does not know whether this is a consequence of truly altered behavior on their part, or of her perception of herself, which she thinks she must be giving off like a scent. How else to explain the uncharacteristic inarticulateness of her father, or the forays of her mother into subjects she normally avoids?

"I should like you to take the tray with you when you go. To help Josiah, who is quite overwhelmed, I fear."

Olympia is not as surprised by this non sequitur as she might be,

since her mother has a gift for abandoning subjects she has suddenly decided she does not wish to discuss further. Olympia stands up from the chaise and bends to lift the silver tray, happy to help Josiah, whom she likes. She is relieved to be dismissed.

"You must be more protective of yourself," her mother says as Olympia leaves the room.

After Olympia has returned the tray to the kitchen, she walks into her father's study, where he sits, in an oversize mahogany captain's chair, reading, she can see, *The Shores of Saco Bay* by John Staples Locke, the first of the many volumes he will devour during the summer. Her father is, both by profession and by inclination, a disciplined and learned man, discipline being, in his belief, a necessary hedge against dissolution; therefore, he does not like to change his routine even on this first day of vacation, despite the lack of preparation for their arrival and the resulting chaos.

During this summer, as in past summers, her father will invite to their cottage a succession of guests whom he has met largely through his position as president of the Atlantic Literary Club or as editor of *The Bay Quarterly,* a periodical of no small literary reputation. He will hold lengthy discussions with these people, who are most often poets or essayists or artists, in a kind of continuous salon. During the day, he will oversee the recreation of the visitors, which will be bathing at the beach or tennis at the Ely Tennis Club or boating through the pink-tinged marshes of the bay at sunset. Evening meals will be long and will last well into the night, even though his wife will excuse herself early. The women who will come to these dinners will wear white linen dresses and shawls of woven silk. Olympia has always been fascinated by the clothing and accessories of their female guests.

Her father glances down at the hem of her dress, which is still damp. She asks him what he recommends that she read first this summer. He removes his spectacles and sets them on the green marble table beside his chair, which is a replica of the table he has in his library in Boston. Around them, the windows are thrown open, and the room is flooded with the peculiar salt musk of the outgoing tide.

"I should like you to read the essays of John Warren Haskell," he says, reaching for a volume and handing it to her. "And then you and I will discuss its contents, for the author is here at Fortune's Rocks and is coming to stay with us for the weekend."

And this is the first time she hears John Haskell's name.

"Haskell is bringing his wife and children with him," her father adds, "and I hope you will help to entertain them."

"Of course," she says, smoothing her palm across the book's brown silk cover and fingering its gilt-embossed title, "but as to these essays, I do not know the author."

"Haskell is a man of medicine, and lectures occasionally at the college, which is where I originally met him; but his true calling, in my estimation, is as an essayist, and I have published several of his best. Haskell's interests lie with labor, and he seems most particularly keen on improving living and working conditions for mill girls. Hence his further interest in Ely Falls."

"I see," she says to her father as she riffles through the pages of the modest book. And though she is already slightly bored with this topic, later she will sift and resift through the memory of this conversation for any tiny morsel she might have missed and thus might savor.

"Haskell keeps a clinic in east Cambridge," her father says. "He is offering his services at Ely Falls for the season, as he is replacing one of the staff physicians who is taking a leave." Her father clears his throat. "Haskell regards this as the most fortunate of circumstances,

for not only will it allow him to remain close by while his own cottage is being constructed farther down the beach, but he should be able to study firsthand the conditions that interest him so. And as for me, I also regard his visit as a fortunate circumstance, for I do enjoy the man's wit and company. I think you will be charmed by Catherine, who is Haskell's wife, as well as by the children."

"Am I to be a governess then?" Olympia asks, mostly in jest, but her father takes the question seriously and looks appalled.

"My dear, certainly not," he says. "The Haskells are our guests for the weekend only, after which Haskell shall stay on, as he has been doing, at the Highland Hotel until their cottage is finished, which should be by the end of July. Catherine and the children will stay in York with her family until then. Heavens, Olympia, how could you have imagined I would exploit you in such a manner?"

Her father's study is dark, though the windows are open; and his books, which have been partially unpacked by Josiah, are already beginning to warp in the damp air. Each Monday throughout the summer, Josiah will place the books in tall stacks and weight these stacks with heavy irons to help return them, for a few hours, to their original shape and thickness.

Olympia moves about the room, touching various familiar objects that her father has collected through the years and keeps at Fortune's Rocks: a malachite paperweight from East Africa; a bejeweled cross her father purchased in Prague when he was nineteen; a stained ivory letter opener from Madagascar; the silver box that contains all of her mother's letters written when her father was in London for a year before they were married; and a stained-glass desk lamp fringed with amber crystals at the edges that once belonged to Olympia's grandmother. Her father also collects shells, as a small boy might, and when they walk together at the beach, he is never without a container in which to put them. On his shelves are delicately edged scallop shells, the darkly iridescent casings of lowly mussels, and

encrusted white oyster shells. When her father smokes, he uses the shells for ashtrays.

He watches her move about his study.

"You enjoyed your first visit to the beach?" he asks her carefully.

She picks up the malachite paperweight. She is not certain she could describe her walk along the beach even if she wanted to.

"It was excellent, after so long a winter, to feel the sea and the sea air," she answers. But when she looks up at him, she sees that he has put on his spectacles in a mild gesture of dismissal.

From her father's study, she walks out onto the porch. She has the book her father gave her, but she is too distracted to open it. During the winter, she attained her full height, so that when she sits on a chair on the porch, she can now see over the railing and down the lawn, which needs cutting. A blossom she cannot identify is sending a luscious scent into the air, and that scent, combined with the sea, is creating an intoxicating and soporific cloud all about her.

She unfastens the top two buttons of her dress and fans her neck with the cloth. She takes off her hat and lays it down, whereupon it immediately skitters along the porch floor until it wedges itself on the bottom rung of the railing. She slips her hands under her dress and removes her stockings from her garters as she did earlier at the bathhouse before walking down to the sea. She rolls the stockings into a ball and sits on them, and then lifts the hem of her dress, which has now grown stiff from the seawater, to her knees. She stretches out her legs, startled by the whiteness of her skin, which she has hardly ever in her life given any thought to. The coolish moist breeze tickles the back of her knees and the calves of her legs. She imagines the shocked face of Josiah or her father or her mother were any of them to come around the corner and catch her in her dishabille; but she decides the exquisite pleasure of the air against

her limbs worth the later mortgage of the consequences. Her eyes relax at the horizon, the place where the sea meets the sky, where it appears that all movement has been suspended. And indeed, it seems this day that she herself hovers in a state of suspension — that she is waiting for something she can hardly imagine and is only beginning to be prepared for.