

Lisa Owens

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My dear Emma,

I apologize for my queer behavior when we were together last, and I hope it didn't put too much of a damp on our otherwise jolly evening, but since you correctly observed my disquiet, allow me to assure you my unrest was not due to any rude gesture on your part; toward this end I shall provide an account to explain my mysterious brooding. It is a story too long and bizarre for recital, and I fear if I were to attempt such utterances, it would gravely upset my equanimity, perhaps permanently. Writing down the words is a great deal easier than speaking them, as it gives me something like a distance from the personal events I will describe. I hope you accept this explanation for my previous reserved sternness. Please understand it was never my intention to withhold personal matters from you, which, in my estimation, would be an offense to our special intimacy.

On that night, you had politely queried into my time at the infamous Winterwood manor, the very name of which pops my knees and chills my eyes, and while I detected in your casual questioning a note of intrigue, you had no reason to suspect my aversion, for to all appearances there was nothing dire about the duties I performed in that great house. The lady of the house, Joanna Winterwood, hired me as a companion. I assumed I was to be employed serving her younger brother, Elliot, but this was not the truth; shortly after my arrival in their ivy-webbed mansion on the Hudson, I discovered my disconcerting position. My charge was indeed incredible.

At the time of my arrival, I had received no clue to prepare me for what would be my singular arrangement, at least none that I detected; in her letters, Ms. Winterwood was curious about my references and the subjects I was adept at teaching, and she was perfectly ordinary and cordial in all her expressions. While she did not specify whom she wished me to tutor, she did mention quite a lot about her family, a younger brother of twelve years, no living parents, and two older brothers enlisted in the Union army. With no proper schooling in the home, I imagined the boy was frequently left to his own meager devices, so I made the natural inference. Over the post, I had agreed to a yearlong position; imagine me, traveling a hundred or so miles, with a year's worth of provisions packed, only to discover Ms. Winterwood did not intend to offer me an ordinary situation.

I trust you are not overly familiar with the practices of this remarkable household. During my time there, I witnessed a select few callers permitted entrance, and those who were granted admission were often unusual. Although secretive, the Winterwoods are not a family with a long, storied aristocracy. Their wealth began two generations ago, after a wise and early investment in toothpaste. The senior Winterwoods oversaw the construction of their own mansion, but the structure would have benefitted from more experienced supervision; it was a hodgepodge perfectly reflecting the oddments and disorder found within. The first story was distinctly in plantation style, with wide windows and yellow Grecian pillars flanking the front door. Curiously, the house gave the impression of narrowing as it rose. It culminated in four tall, filigreed gables topped with finials, and each finial represented a stage of the moon.

Joanna Winterwood met me at the door, wearing a smile of terrific energy. Soon after our introduction, I appreciated the many strange notions and peculiar theories she promoted.

“Let’s begin our tour in the rose garden.” She said. “That’s where Elliot is at the moment”

I felt odd, somehow not there. Ms. Winterwood’s energy was so large it seemed to engulf me. My introduction with Elliot did not improve my overwhelmed impression. He could hardly be bothered with me, busy as he was with identifying and gathering caterpillars. The mites fixed to his fingers, allowing him to peel them off like they were hangnails, and it was Joanna who explained his method to me; he would wash his hands in the juices of crushed leaves, making them close enough to vegetation for the larvae’s attraction, then he would collect them in jars for classification and experimentation. The boy’s manner was rude. I anticipated a challenging year.

“Curiosity can be a virtue if applied correctly,” I gamely said. “I’m sure our lessons shall be quite productive.”

A startled expression flitted through Ms. Winterwood’s face. “Oh dear! I’m sorry, but you are not here to instruct Elliot. Heavens no!”

I was fairly agog. Initially I didn’t know what to say.

“Does he not require a companion?” I asked.

“Not in the least.” Joanna asserted.

I asked if the boy knew his arithmetic, grammar, and history. Ms. Winterwood was confident he would arrive at those subjects in decent time and by his own volition. She said this was the method with which her and her brothers were educated, emphasizing the value of independence and self-direction, but I’m not sure if she was

entirely honest. I cannot be sure if this is truly how her mother oversaw the house. The late Mrs. Winterwood had been two years deceased from an unspoken illness. Her daughter still wore mourning clothes: dreary black dress, grey shawl fringed with a wavy black pattern, and a cameo bearing her mother's image.

"If I'm not to instruct the boy, then pray tell me who am I to instruct?" I asked, a little too bothered I'm afraid.

"Shall we proceed with the tour?" Joanna said. "It will be easier if you met him in person before I explained."

I acquiesced. She led me inside, where I had a frightful shock in their cluttered parlor. Among the chaos of instruments, dioramas, and pickled specimens, there was the figure of a man, his dark face shining in a smiling grimace, his breast open and spilling, and he lurched over a chessboard like a drunkard preparing to empty his stomach. Joanna ignored my emotive reaction, coolly explaining her creation, a replica of the chess-playing automaton known as the Turk, perhaps you have read of it, a supposed clockwork device from sixty or so years ago, believed able to play chess entirely by its own impressive mechanism; it was such a masterful player it bested our nation's own Benjamin Franklin, but it was later revealed to be controlled by a hidden operator. Well, that's the official story; Ms. Winterwood didn't believe it was a hoax, and she was determined to construct the authentic article.

From the parlour, she directly led me to a vaulted study in the house's west corner gable. "This is where you shall complete your lessons," she said.

And it was here I met my charge. A little monkey fidgeted and craned in the confines of a child's desk, facing a chalkboard installed for my assistance, and behind him, a wiry structure for his climbs and playful exercise. The monkey's name was Simos.

I did not immediately understand what I was meant to do. I asked if a child would be joining us, to which Ms. Winterwood squinted, kind and confused, wondering what on earth a child had to do with anything. No, what she required was an educational companion for Simos. She was convinced he had the capacity to mature into an intellect comparable with that of a man. Her inspiration was Mr. Darwin's theory that humans descended from monkeys, or rather, to phrase it less vulgarly, primates. She treated my objections as an affront to the newest wonders of science.

I made it no secret how little faith I had in this concept. I protested the blasphemy of comparing bestial apes with man, as we were created in God's image, and though I am not strictly dogmatic, as you are well aware, the accusation was a convenient expression of my disgust. Ms. Winterwood, or Joanna, as she had insisted we refer to each other by our first names, detected, I think, my lack of spiritual fortitude: she asked me to supply a relevant biblical passage, looking rather amused with herself. I could not oblige. I proceeded to protest on the grounds of my inadequacy. If this was the first monkey I had ever seen, how could I possibly be expected to care for it? But Joanna responded with an indignant air, as if the solution for this contention were obvious. Servants cared for Simos, just like they cared for the other members of the household. My duties toward my charge would be the same as any human child; I need only concern myself with his instruction, manners and lessons, for he was also well-trained, understanding his name and basic commands, such as "stay put, Simos" or "Simos, come."

I accepted my position with bitter reluctance. I fear I behaved foolishly in doing so, heaping flummeries on Joanna's home to poorly disguise my resentment. I believed I was intentionally misled; surely, she understood the awkwardness of my position.

Having plotted and prepared my occupation for a year's time, it would be a beastly inconvenience if I resigned, so I accepted the inconvenient beast.

Of course, my lessons were unfit for a monkey pupil. Good instruction depends on interaction. I have learned from experience that a young mind must dispel its questions and comments if it is to free any more room for new information. Simos could not interact with me, for no matter what I said or did the creature stared back with a plaintive, hungry face, full of frustration and weariness, pining for, I imagined, its natural habitat, although perhaps I saw in it what I felt in myself; indeed it was frustrating and wearying to ask a brute animal if it remembered the year our nation was born, if it knew the purpose of the presidency and Congress, if it understood the significance of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and sometimes I lost my sense of purpose, drawing out sums on the chalkboard but pausing to stare at the monkey's fur, mesmerized by the way it caught the sunlight, a beautiful soft yellow. I fancied the monkey's down was something like a spider web and sunlight was a fly; it must have been a powerful web, because everything, even light, even my attention, was caught in it. Sometimes Simos stared back at me like it was transfixed in a similar manner, delighted by how the sunlight glowed on my flesh and glistened my own soft arm fur. Joanna sometimes caught me at these idle reveries, reprimanding my weak focus and encouraging me to set the best example for humanity. How else, she wondered, could Simos ever hope to learn?

I notice I am confusing my pronouns in reference to Simos, switching between "he" and "it." Please excuse this laxity in prose, for in my mind he altered between the two. Shaded by Joanna's ideas, sometimes I saw him as the prototype of man, but usually I saw him as a brute, yearning for a wild, animal existence.

My first two months passed without mishap, relative to the situation. I was content with my guest room, mercifully a plain room, devoid of the mangle-mangle strewn about the other spaces; everywhere else inside that house was covered in art and garish purple wallpaper, but my room was plain white plaster, a shelter from the storm of décor. There were many books to occupy my interest. In this period, I rarely interacted with Joanna and Elliot, and I was pleased with solitude.

But on the first of May, a maid, her voice hushed, informed me that the lady of the house requested my presence at dinner. Joanna was hosting an old friend of her mother's, the local Catholic pastor, Father Rainfield, and the man wished to meet me. However, our hostess was discomfited with the meeting, clearly eager throughout for the engagement's conclusion. Shortly after our introduction, Father Rainfield remarked on my plain white dress, and I thought it a vulgar comment, intended to ridicule, although he claimed it was a compliment, a plain dress befitting a humble soul of the Lord. After quizzing me for my history, far too suspicious for my liking, he detailed his association with Joanna's parents, devout Catholics, and their beliefs, something about the holy ghost. There was something soporific in the heavily scented candles, or in the abundance of warm tea and soup, causing me to nod off during his long-winded recital, a reaction noticed by Joanna, who regarded my sleepy state with amusement. Rainfield, however, became irritated and embarrassed. Blushing, he altered the subject into something more interesting. He asked if I knew of the Winterwood manor's reputation.

Joanna immediately implored me to dismiss the gossip, and to Rainfield she said, "I am surprised you brought up such a common topic. Tell me, is this what you and your parishioners discuss together?"

“There might be people employed by the house who are seeking guidance, or there might be concerned neighbors, but to anyone who seeks it, I am always ready to give advice and prayers.” He turned to me, and I did not like his questioning eyes. “Have you seen any demons or evil spirits?”

I jeered at the very idea. “I don’t believe in them.”

He said, “Nonetheless I fear there may be demons at work in this house. Bless her soul, Joanna’s mother suffered from the same fears. I was there on her deathbed, and as Joanna can tell you her final request was to rid her house of all evil spirits. Perhaps we should offer a prayer. What do you say Joanna? For your mother?”

Joanna glared at the man, who, in return, smiled at her, rather like he had played the winning stroke in a chess match. I found myself looking at Elliot, and I wished I could be his companion: the boy’s manners were dire, working his soup spoon in circles and admiring his artificial and untidy whirlpool, behavior more fitting to an infant than a young man, or, dare I say, behavior more fitting to a monkey.

Joanna, sulking, agreed to the prayer. We indulged Father Rainfield by joining our hands in a circle while he sang in Latin, and although I was ignorant of the song’s meaning and intent, the performance did not settle well with me. It too closely resembled the casting of a spell. I believe decent prayers are simply spoken in plain words everyone can understand.

After Rainfield’s departure, and before I could return to my quarters, Joanna confided in me. “This is why I generally decline invitations, but if I snubbed him he’d be far more dangerous. He’s a malicious gossip.”

I was too shy to formulate significant discussion, a little scandalized she was treating me with such frankness, as if I were a close friend, something like I consider

you, dear Emma. I wish I could have been more for her in this moment, but I escaped to my solitude with empty, obsequious gestures.

Life continued as usual for a month, except the horrible Catholic's stories had annihilated my imagination, spinning me into mild frenzies on the windy nights. I thought I heard an odd droning hum coming from the hallways, and on one stormy night I even checked, expecting some kind of brilliant, supernatural presence, but promptly feeling embarrassed with myself.

In June, the house again had company. Thankfully, they were charming guests, a ladies society of five fashionable women. I was glad Joanna insisted on my attendance; I had never been to a society meeting like this. They were such interesting people, all of them women in a similar situation as Joanna, unmarried and from wealthy families, some of them educated, some of them self-taught. Their discussion was fascinating, covering topics like medicinal botany and classical mythology. In comparison, my own intellect seemed ill equipped to contribute, though everyone was interested to know how well I was getting on with Simos, and Joanna laughed along with the group at my understated honesty. "Not well," was about all I said. "I'm not sure if it understands me at all. Whenever I speak, it's like nothing I say ever penetrates its skull."

"Rather like all men," Joanna said. "I think that is a point toward my theory."

We laughed. We were giddy from wine, and our merriment was loud. We discussed the war, and Joanna shared a startling opinion. She was in favor of the war's continuation, indeed she wished the war a long and happy life; she enjoyed her position as master of the house and sadly anticipated the return of her brothers, who would necessarily supplant her. I was the only one who didn't express amusement, because I

didn't know how to feel about these bold sentiments. My immediate reaction was disagreement, but I caught myself reflecting on the matter with increasing ambivalence.

To close out the night, Joanna played us a song on her dusty harp, remarkably off-key, but I thought it was lovely all the same, her shaky voice endearing because of its mistakes. One of her friends was more musically talented, and she performed technically perfect waltzes on the piano. We managed to dance among the pell-mell of the parlor, and, yes, I danced, though I did not know how to waltz at this time. Joanna taught me.

Maybe what happened that night can be attributed to the thoughts I had when Joanna held me, directing the proper placement for my feet and teaching me how to glide across the floor. No, not glide, it was rather like swimming, all of my motions reduced to the essential, smooth, fast, and clean.

However, my giddiness did not last the night.

Long after the party, when I was in bed and nearly asleep, my door creaked open, only I couldn't see anyone in the doorway. I was about to rise and investigate, when something small and shadowed crawled onto the end of my bed, its motions jiggering and unnatural. I could feel its weight sink the mattress near my feet. It appeared to be a clump of darkness. Though it did not produce a sound, I knew it was alive, and I knew it was watching me. Its form and proportions were much like Simos, and, like Simos, it had a pale face, almost discernable in the dark; I assumed it was him, and fearing to startle it, I did not move. It was deeper than fear; it was conviction. I knew if I should move the creature, too, would move, and I did not want to see it move. Eventually, sleep overcame me.

That week, I took my lunches with Joanna at her request, ostensibly to provide updates on the stagnant development of Simos. During these conversations, I was

trapped in a strained repression. I did not tell her of its peculiar visits to my room, which had persisted every night throughout the week; somehow, I had the feeling Joanna knew about it, for she was not her normal self during our meals. She was haunted and solemn. One day, she said, "I'm so sorry, Lisa," but she would not explain the reason for her apology. As soon as our friendship began, it began to dissipate, like a snowflake immediately melting on contact with the ground.

We did not know how limited our time together was. Simos became ill one day, unable to move from his tiny bed in the study, wheezing, a nasty sound, revoltingly human, though I suppose most creatures sound a little similar in their final moments. When Joanna sent for a doctor he refused to see a monkey, and Simos died that very afternoon. At dusk, Joanna and I buried him in the rose garden.

Whatever came back to my bed that night, I could not pretend it was Simos, and it was dreadfully expected, the door creaking open and the weight pressing the foot of my bed with an inevitability like clockwork. Sleep did not easily reach me. Awake I remained, gazing at the lump of darkness, seeing in it strange, red shapes, like the splotches you see when you close your eyes, and searching for an expression in its faded, pale face, nearly sure I teased out a horribly neutral, impassive frown. It never moved.

The next morning, I was too tired to offer Joanna a proper goodbye, and I think she was in a comparable state. When I later reflected on it, I became sure she was experiencing a similar visitation.

I do not want to get tangled in superstition, and I hope you will not accuse me of such, but in my soul I attribute the sinister visitor to Father Rainfield; I believe he installed a force in that house to separate Joanna and I. To whatever God there is, I pray nothing like that ever comes between us.

