The Portrait

As the carriage rumbled through early evening, I watched as the clouds turned from fluffy white to a thick grey. The wind had been a gentle breeze, blowing my hair over my shoulder playfully, but now it hurled itself against the window, threatening to break in. I pulled my shawl tighter around me and tried to picture what would happen when I reached Uncle’s house. Perhaps I would be able to trace my father’s infectious grin on his lips, or my mother’s twinkling eyes in his gaze. I paused to think why I had never met him. But then a thought occurred to me. Treachery. Ferocity. *Penelope.* That was why.

“We’re here, my child.’’ grumbled the driver, not unkindly.

“Thank you, sir,’’ I whispered.

I stepped out of the carriage and followed the driver’s pointing finger towards a golden rectangle of light. The next thing I remembered was a looming door closing - no - slamming behind me. Then I looked into the merciless eyes of Uncle.

‘“You sleep ‘ere,” he snarled.

“Thank you, sir,” I murmured.

“Breakfast will be at eight. Don’t be curi-ous.” he coughed.

“Yes, sir.”

“Bed.”

I crept in. Then I gasped, ‘“I forgot to bring my nightgown!’’

‘“I’ve a spare.’’

He handed me a pale pink nightgown. “Goodnight.”

“Thank you. And … goodnight, sir.’’

He turned to leave.

“Sir?”

“Yes?” he asked.

“Whose nightgown was this?”

There was a long pause before he replied.

“That nightgown was originally my daughter, Clementine’s. But she disappeared. As did many after her. Every time the girl has to pick away the last one’s name so she can embroider her own. Goodnight.”

I unfolded the nightgown after he left and stifled a scream. The word read: ***Penelope*.**

I lay in bed. The door had creaked when he left. I knew he was listening for another creak. But there are other ways to escape, I thought.

I wriggled out of bed. I am small and thin, so I am a good escaper. I checked each floor board until one gave a quiet judder. I made haste, carefully bending it back. I peeked down. It was perfect. Carefully, I lowered myself into the hole, as narrow as my uncle’s eyes, and then fell into darkness, spinning and flailing.

I landed on my side. I rubbed it, and noticed I was in the hallway where I came in.

‘’Which room should I be curi-ous in first?’’ I wondered.

Then I saw the room. The door was part open and light spilled out. I removed my borrowed nightdress and placed it outside Uncle's room. In my petticoat and stockings I crept in, taking ballerina steps. And then I saw the curtains. Rich vermillion red curtains, draped over a wall. I stepped closer and pushed one side away. The fabric fell and landed on me like a trap. I stood up and tried to scream.

In front of me was a huge portrait of two women. One was tall, in a beautiful white gown, with long blonde hair and crystal blue eyes. She would have been beautiful, but she locked eyes on me, and she smirked like she had found the key to unlock my secrets. Her eyes had the same malevolent, merciless look as Uncle’s. She seemed to point at her chest.

Quickly, I glanced away only to lock eyes onto a terrifying thing. A girl. In a white petticoat and stockings, with dark curls cascading over her shoulder. And a locket engraved with the name I had never truly trusted: ***Penelope*.**

She laughed, evilly, and motioned to the other woman. They reached out and grabbed me. I was pulled, screaming into Penelope’s choking hand, dragging me into the frame. Then she stepped back. I was trapped. Finally, I screamed. Penelope waved at me then turned to dust. Then, I froze.

Uncle woke up many hours later. He went outside his room and stopped. A nightgown. A nightgown with the name: ***Elizabeth***. Embroidered with a single thread.

Hester Bertram, aged 11