

The Visitors

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To Simon, my rock
and Poppy, my pebble.

I

My name is Adeliza Golding. I am born breech and nearly kill Mother. I hear her muffled screams from within the dark warmth of her belly and kick my feet to rid her of me. I enter the world in a flood of fluid and blood, pulled by the hands of Doctor. When I cry out and open my eyes I see a grey blur. Within it crowds a host of faces; pale and curious, they whisper and nod. This is my first meeting with the Visitors.

Mother has suffered five who died inside her before me. I am the miracle who survived. But my eyes are wrong. I can see something placed before me, but little beyond that. I learn to listen and touch, so well that I can discern Father from Nanny from Doctor from Mother from Stranger by the click of the door and the pressure of heel on rug. The Visitors make no sound in movement, but I hear their voices. I am a good little talker, saying new words as a fish lays eggs.

When I am nearly two, the fever comes. A heat like boiling soup. My ears are inflamed and leak pus. Father's voice. Always Father, always close. Nanny's voice too, and Doctor's, all grow faint and I think they whisper to spare me discomfort. But, fade away they do, to nothingness and nowhere. And never return. My ears are spoiled. Even the Visitors hush and lose their voices, looking in on me from time to time, shaking their solemn heads in pity. I am in my darkling room for months. It is a year before I can walk again without an arm around me.

In the silence, my eyes strain beyond their limits of a foot or two, yet this too begins to fade from me. Feet become

inches and inches dwindle to looming shapes in a wash of dim grey. Before long I have lost all useful sight. I turn my head to the windows during the day or to a lit taper in the evening, but that is all. Much later, I will learn the name of my new affliction: cataracts. Here I am, a girl born with little sight who loses her hearing from the scarlet fever, then cataracts ruin her eyes. By three I am totally deaf and blind. The words I had learned wither like muscles unused. I speak the same words over and over at first. 'Night,' I call out in confusion at the darkness. 'Night. Night.' But I speak less and less, till it is one or two words a day, no more. When the fever passes and I am recovering, Father carries me outside to feel the wind in my hair and the sun on my skin. He takes me to the hop gardens. I pat his face and find tears there. To distract me, he places my finger on a fragile new hop flower, plucks it from the bine and lets me roll it around in my hand and crush it. 'Hop,' I say. 'Hop.' It is the last time I say an intelligible word. Thereafter, I fall quiet. I am a blind deaf-mute.

Mother is taken queer. After all the babies and the blood and the tragedy of me she retires to a quarter-life behind closed curtains. I am permitted to visit once a day before lunch. I enter her bedroom with Nanny, who leads me to Mother's bed where I hold her moist, warm hand. I try to climb into bed with her at first, but I am always pulled away. I want to run my fingers up her arms, her neck, her thick long hair like mine, to caress her face and know her. But I am restrained. I forget what Mother looks like.

My fingers are my eyes. They search and find, they look and see. And I use my sense of smell and its sister sense, taste. I know things your eyes and ears cannot summon. Upon entering a room, it is obvious to me which sex spends most time there by their perfume or aftershave, soap or talcum powder. A man's bodily odours are rich and tangy, sliced with rank cigar breath if he is a smoker. I can always

tell if it is that time of the month for a woman, if she has the curse, yeasty like drying hops. I can discern the age of the books on the shelves by the scent of leather, old and slack or new and taut. If there are flowers in the room, what kind, wild or tame, how fresh or how many days dying. I can smell the dust hidden in the curtains or a dead maybug on the windowsill. I know if the housemaid has skimped on cleaning, and I can even sniff out ampery crumpet crumbs under the sofa. Can your eyes tell you so much? After all, you are a mind connected by nerves to the orbs in the front of your head, and receive the invisible yarn of sound through holes at each side. You call this seeing, hearing. But it is only your brain that makes sense of it all. My stimuli enter through fewer portals yet my mind invents reality for me every second, as it does for you. And we both dream, do we not? When your eyes and ears are largely shut to the outside, we are on equal footing. And we dream of places we have never visited, sights and sounds we have never seen or heard, people we have never met. So we are not so very different, you and me.

Once able to walk unaided, I explore my house tirelessly. I know the shape, weight, density and warmth of every object, every piece of furniture, every texture of carpet, rug or curtain, every bump and line on wallpaper (the flocked design of the dining room is my favourite). I cavort from room to room and seize objects, sniff and handle them, dash them against the wall to see if they are brittle. I am acquainted, too, with the shape of the land in the garden, could build it up in clay from finger memory: the curve of the lawn to the west and the four undulations leading up to the orchards and the steep turn in the ruddy path east to the hop gardens. I go down there and skip along the hop lanes, fluttering my fingertips across the sticky stalks or the new growth soft as eyelashes. But a worker will grab me, fearful of damage being done to the crop; then Nanny pulls

me away, perhaps lets me play house in the hopper huts or climb the hobbly steps to the cooling loft in the oast house and lie down on my back on the slatted floor of the drying room. The other place I prize to go is the herb garden: delicious aromas of rosemary, borage, creeping thyme, lemon mint, hyssop, chives. I know each so personally by bouquet that Cook might send me to fetch particular ones for the kitchen, for I am the swiftest seeker. Or a maid bids me fetch lavender for the linen drawers. Or Nanny dispatches me to pick chamomile to make the tea that soothes my sorely eyes (they weep of themselves from time to time). I love to stand and jump my skippy rope at the four-went way of the triangular herb beds, the sweet and peppery fragrances mingling in the whim of breezes.

Further afield, I range around with Nanny, when she can keep up with me. But she is getting old and tired and at times, even as young as three or four, I settle her down beneath a tree and stroke her hand until I sense her rumbling snore. Then I throw off my boots and stockings, as I hate to imprison my feet. I feel with them almost as much as I do with my hands. I paddle in the beck and plash the bubbling water with my toes. I climb trees and search for nesties, swing from the branches and run pell-mell as fast as my feet can find the ground, prance through tall grass and clouds of dandelion seeds or pick up a stone and heave it into the air. At least once the missile falls down on my own head and wounds me. I have a natural fear of pain, but no love of caution. Besides, knocks and scratches are bright shards in a dull existence. I fall and bump and crash while Nanny dozes. She puts iodine on after and the sting makes me cry. I do not know how she explains my injuries, but Father keeps her on, so she must come up with some ruse.

I am no less reckless with people. I grab at a tweenie maid and she pushes me away so I fall against the coarse stone of the scullery wall and my ear bleeds. I poke my finger into the

stream of blood and savour it. Father's hands wash it away. Those who love me are patient with me, but those who are paid to work in Father's house find me unsettling and do not want to be alone with me. I rock my body and sway my head from side to side. I press my fingers into my eyes to make stars. I bite at my clothes and flap my hands before my face to fan it. I bang my head on the bedpost (though when tranquil I like to fondle the runnels and knots of carven wood on my headboard, which tell a sylvan story of their own). I am an idiotic creature. Maids and cooks and gardeners come and go. Only Nanny stays, and Mother in her room. And Father. But there is his land, his precious crop, his staff, his work; he cannot be my prisoner.

I become such a trial to others that I am often seized and frog-marched to my bedroom. I am a particular nuisance in the kitchen. I like the fire, always alight, which welcomes me but not the damp reek of wet woollen clothes hanging to dry before it. Once I grab at the pot used to scald the milk as I like to taste the skin on top, and burn my hand badly. I learn to spend every afternoon locked alone in my chamber with knitting or needlework to occupy me, while the household enjoys the freedom of my absence. I, too, enjoy the peace, brushing my hair a thousand times and braiding it into elaborate styles which later shake out crimped. Or sewing for hours in straight lines and curves and random shapes, using a variety of stitches, all of which I know by feel, from blanket to cross-stitch, zigzag to daisy. I might make clothes-peg dolls and dress them in rags, or knit woollen garments for my favourite cloth doll. She is as long as my forearm and stuffed plump with sawdust. She has buttons for eyes, and when I am older and understand my blindness I pull off her button eyes so we are blind together. She has no name, because I do not yet understand names. Nanny is not Nanny, simply the one always there, leading me and showing me, and sometimes using me roughly; Father is the mellow one

with the bristly chin and kind arms, who embraces me too briefly then goes away for too long; Mother is the hand on the body that never stirs in the forbidden room. And I am the one with the hot cheeks and the tummy and thick long hair like Mother's down my back and the secret places and dozens of buttons on my underclothes and the starchy layers of dress and the stiff boots, dressed every morning by other hands, the one whose body I cannot escape from alone in my room so that it must be Me.

But I am not forlorn. You have forgotten the Visitors. They are with me often. They come and go. I can sense them when my eyes are open. But the moment I drop my eyelids, their presence dissolves. I have no visual memories to understand the sight of them. But the Visitors are there. I cannot pet them as I do a person in the outer domain, but I am always aware of their company. With my family, I know their mood by touch, the tension in Father's brow or the impatience of Nanny's fingers. Yet I know if a Visitor feels melancholy, nervous, calm or cordial by an inner sense, a vibration that creeps into my brain as warmth or cold spreads through the skin; your body reacts without your control, but you feel it all the same. I cannot converse with the Visitors because I have no words. Yet I know they want to tell me things. They are waiting for me to act, to do something for them, though I have no idea what purpose this may be. They seem to reside in my mind and so my childish self believes they are actually living inside the bones of my head. In my isolated afternoons I hold my handiwork up to my forehead to please them; play with dolly and rub her against my hair so they can reach out as if to touch her. If I am mournful I close my eyes to make them go away. Sometimes a person needs to be wintry.

Some days I tire of my comfortable gaol. I kick the door and batter the walls and caterwaul. I get into rare trouble over

that. Nanny might come; I know her entrance by her churlish manner of swinging open the door and its unique jar sends me dashing behind the ten-foot velvet curtains to escape a beating with her slipper. If Father comes he treats me tenderly and strokes my face. This is my favourite punishment. I love Father with a ferocious jealousy and fight against his efforts to escape me. Mother never comes.

As time goes on, I learn some basic manners and a sense of politeness, but only in the way a chimpanzee can be taught to wield a fork, with no comprehension of why this is better than his fingers. I will wear the prickly starched lace collar without wriggling. I take my dose of castor oil weekly without protest and eat the fat on my meat. I love mealtimes and am fed well, preferring contrasts like cold meat and hot gravy or hot jammy pudding and cold custard. I learn to keep my elbows from the table and not to gulp down cocoa or grunt when devouring seedy cake. I am permitted to help in the kitchen, to stone cherries or top and tail gooseberries with Cook's tiny scissors. Nanny taps on my hand or my back to reprove me. If I am good, I am given locust beans whose odour is horrid but their flavour delectable. If I transgress out of reach, Nanny stamps on the floor. The jolt travels to my feet and makes me stop. When Father is out, Nanny hits and shakes me. Not hard. Enough to shock. Nanny is a proper martinet, but for my own good. I am a wild animal kept in a tame house.

My desires drive me: hunger and thirst, the need for comfort and closeness, a wish to move and explore, a spirit of enquiry into what I can feel and smell and taste, never quenched. I ask all the questions my mind can conceive without words, by grasping and probing and sniffing and tasting, by applying to my nose and tongue or thrusting at Nanny or Father, a need within my flexing fingers to have it explained, to understand. But I have no words to express it and no mechanism

of mind to receive it. I understand routine, that the aroma of food from the kitchen means luncheon soon, or a flannel in my hand means bath time next. Eventually, I come upon a sign or two to assuage needs: tap my lips for hunger or stroke my eyes for fatigue. But these are not calculated, only the mimetic gestures that bring satisfaction, as a cat learns to wheedle its desires from humans.

I follow my senses because they are all I have. I have to fathom the world for myself. A normal child grows and learns by listening and watching, trying out tasks and asking questions through her eyes and her early sounds. They are not yet words, but their inflection imitates the adults around her and she is understood by those dearest. I have none of this. My mind fights to escape its confines, to race and leap, but the silence and the greyness smother it. My outlet is anger, clear, ice-blue rage. My throat brings forth great shouts of hatred and I am chastised for these sounds, any sounds, in fact. I quickly learn that the noises I make – which I know only as a throbbing in my throat, a tickling in my mouth – are abhorrent to others. By touching the lips and throats of those around me, I learn that people throw messages at each other I cannot catch. I clutch at Nanny's skirt or Father's sleeve as they pace with purpose around the house and garden. And I know very early, I do not recall exactly when or how, that I am singular. I do not think my animal mind perceives that I am blind and deaf. I know there is a land that surrounds me, but always lies just beyond my grasp. I feel its constant presence through everything everyone else can do and I cannot.

I find Father holding a book and when I try to take it, I tear the pages and he stops me. Later, I return and find him there, the book still stuck in his fist. Why does he clutch this lifeless object in his lap for such long periods? And Nanny, why does she stand before a frame on the wall and primp her hair? She wears strange appendages on her nose, circles of

glass surrounded by wire. And the box – a sacred object I am only allowed to toy with under direct supervision from Father – the box containing a ridged disc. When the box is working, it pulses with life. I lay my palm against its side to detect the vibrations. But no one can explain these mysteries to me yet: books and mirrors, spectacles and gramophones. Or gas lamps, candles, clocks and paintings, the Christmas tree, the chessboard, the piano or Father's bugle, which hangs from a nail on the parlour wall. I only know that the others use them for some misty purpose of their own, from which I am eternally barred.

When the slow realisation settles that I am alone in my ways, I have no words to bemoan my fate. Only my fists, with which I can punch myself on the nose or pull out fat handfuls of my hair. Such self-violence produces the most spectacular results, chiefly the wonderful sensation of Father holding me down on the settee with his whole body and constraining me so tightly I can barely breathe. This makes me crow with delight. Yet afterwards, Father is always dreadfully puffed and puts a hand against his chest. Then I am sorry for my tricks. If Father is not at home, Nanny sometimes ties me to a chair. This is displeasing, but does not happen every day. Only when the madness grips me.

I know emotions as you do: boredom, disappointment, curiosity, pride. I know the house and garden where I reside. I know comfort and routine. But I do not know the meaning of home or family. My daily life is not thick with memories and understandings and connections as is yours, but rather it is thin and splintery, broken in places which let in the chaos of the unknown. I truly believe I do not know happiness. I cannot perceive of joy versus sadness, only the difference between loss and gain. I do not know myself or society or my place within it. I can enjoy or dislike a sensation, but not discern its relative importance; say, between a sour apple or the death of a bird. What thoughts I have, if any, are

unremembered. I have the tools of a mind, but not the method by which to use them.

A sad little shadow my soul casts. These are the years 1883 to 1889. This is the Time Before.