

When I stood back we looked each other eye to eye. What's your proper work, Julie? I would like to be a theatrical escape artist, I think, like Houdini, or a circus owner like Bertram Mills. I want to dazzle people and be applauded for it. I am good at it, and it is thrilling. Walking a tightrope when you've had too much to drink, dangerous and wonderful. So I gave him another kiss, on the mouth this time, and he let me. I could feel his lips moving beneath mine as he responded very gently, just for a moment. Then I felt myself reddening. So I stopped. I really shouldn't have done it. But—but I felt I'd restored both my authority and my feminine charm. How powerful it made me feel. It reminded me, actually, of my very first driving lesson in Mother's sports car—the thrill of holding all that power in my hands, of knowing that my small person was harnessing all that magnificent strength. How I felt now. How quick-witted and alluring and powerful! "You'd better go," he said gently. "So I had." He didn't tell me I shouldn't have done it, though. Our suppers were all cold now unless it was soup or we dined out, because it was so much easier to prepare and tidy up a cold meal ourselves from the distant kitchen. Solange had been doing the running, as the youngest of the grown-ups, but now that I was better I was able to help. In a couple of the overstuffed Queen Anne chairs ruined by jubilant Victorian upholstery, Mémère and Jamie sat tight doing nothing, Mémère because she is the Dowager Countess of Strathfearn, and Jamie because he is a boy. But as the morning room faces east and is dull in the evening, even during the long light of midsummer with the tall windows open, Jamie got up to switch on a lamp. It was just as I was coming back into the room after a trip made to sweep away the remains of our supper. When the light went on as I crossed the threshold, I noticed a corner of brown paper peeping

THE PEARL THIEF

Elizabeth Wein

HYPERION
Los Angeles New York

"We all do, a bit," I said. "Even you. Though I wouldn't want Sandy's job, stuck in a museum all day. I need complicated railroad journeys and people speaking to me in foreign languages to keep me happy. I want to see the world and write stories about everything I see." "Will your folk let you do that?" "I don't know. Nobody ever mentions that I'm almost old enough to be married; but I'll bet other people mention it to them. And maybe my people discuss it behind my back." I realized I would be forced to run away from home if someone tried to arrange a marriage for me. I didn't want to think about it. I pointed at the Sidlaw Hills across the valley. "See King's Seat? Just in front of it is Dunsinane, where Macbeth lived. He's supposed to be one of the old man's forebears." Ellen opened her mouth to speak. I beat her to the post. "Don't you dare call me Sandy Macbeth." She laughed again. "I wasnae going to. I was going to say: we're half the way up Pitbroomie Hill anyway, we may as well walk to the top. The motorcar's all right here for a wee while, aye?" So we got out and walked. It was a steep hike—for the same reason that the Magnette hadn't made it up the hill, we found ourselves so out of breath we were unable to talk (I was, at any rate). But it was lovely when the hillside began to level out. Able to breathe again, I sang: "Now the summer's in its prime / All the flowers sweetly bloomin' / And the wild mountain thyme—" "—All the moorland is perfumed," Ellen joined in. We finished the verse together, and sang the whole thing at the tops of our voices, scaring birds. We walked side by side on the track over the moor that was ours by right of our being there, singing to the sky and the wind. I thought, just then and fleetingly, there wasn't any place I'd rather be or any person I'd rather be with. If I could have chosen one moment of my life to go on forever, just then, it would have been that one. We came over the summit of Pitbroomie

Part 1
WHAT HAPPENED
15-28 JUNE 1938

1. An assortment of things gone missing

“You’re a brave lassie.”

That’s what my grandfather told me as he gave me his shotgun.

“Stand fast and guard me,” he instructed. “If this fellow tries to fight, you give him another dose.”

Granddad turned back to the moaning man he’d just wounded. The villain was lying half-sunk in the mud on the edge of the riverbank, clutching his leg where a cartridgeful of lead pellets had emptied into his thigh. It was a late-summer evening, my last with Granddad before I went off to boarding school for the first time, and we’d not expected to shoot anything bigger than a rabbit. But here I was aiming a shotgun at a living man while Granddad waded into the burn, which is what we called the River Fearn where it flowed through his estate, so he could tie the evildoer’s hands behind his back with the strap of his shotgun.

“Rape a burn, would you!” Granddad railed at him while he worked. “I’ve never seen the like! You’ve destroyed that shell bed completely. Two hundred river mussels round about, piled there like a midden heap! And you’ve not found a single pearl, have you? Because you don’t know a pearl mussel from your own backside!

You're like a bank robber that's never cracked a safe or seen a banknote!"

It was true—the man had torn through dozens of river mussels, methodically splitting the shells open one by one in the hope of finding a rare and beautiful Scottish river pearl. The flat rock at the edge of the riverbank was littered with the broken and dying remains.

Granddad's shotgun was almost too heavy for me to hold steady. I kept it jammed against my shoulder with increasingly aching arms. I swear by my glorious ancestors, that man was twice Granddad's size. Of course, Granddad was not a very big man—none of us Murrays are very big. And he was in his seventies, even though he wasn't yet ill. The villain had a pistol—he'd dropped it when he'd been hurt, but it wasn't out of reach. Without me there to guard Granddad as he bound the other man, they might have ended up in a duel. *Brave!* I felt like William Wallace, Guardian of Scotland.

The wounded man was both pathetic and vengeful. "I'll see you in Sheriff Court," he told my grandfather, whining and groaning. "I'm not after salmon and there's no law against pearl fishing, but it's illegal to shoot a man."

Granddad wasn't scared. "This is a private river."

"Those tinker folk take pearls here all the time. They come in their tents and bide a week like gypsies, and go away with their pockets full!"

"No tinker I know would ever rape a burn like this! And they've the decency to ask permission on my private land! There's laws and laws. Respect for a river and its creatures goes unwritten. And the written law says that I can haul you in for poaching on my beat, whether it's salmon or pearls or anything else."

"I didn't—I wasnae—"

"Whisht. Never mind what you were doing in the water: you pointed your own gun at my wee granddaughter." Granddad now confiscated the pistol that was lying in the mud, and tucked it into his willow-weave fisherman's creel. "That's excuse enough for me. I'm the Earl of Strathfearn. Whose word will the law take, laddie, yours or mine?"

Of course Granddad owned all of Strathfearn then, and the salmon- and trout-fishing rights that went with it. It was a perfect little Scottish estate, with a ruined castle and a baronial manor, nestled in woodland just where the River Fearn meets the River Tay. It's true it's not illegal for anyone to fish for pearls there, but it's still private land. You can't just wade in and destroy someone else's river. I remember how shocking Granddad's accusation sounded: *Rape a burn, would you!*

Was that only three years ago? It feels like Granddad was ill for twice that long. And now he's been dead for months. And the estate was sold and changed hands, even while my poor grandmother was still living in it. Granddad was so *alive* then. We'd worked together.

"Steady, lass," he'd said, seeing my arms trembling. I held on while Granddad dragged the unfortunate mussel-bed destroyer to his feet and helped him out of the burn and onto the riverbank, trailing forget-me-nots and muck and blood. I flinched out of his way in distaste.

He'd aimed a pistol at me earlier. I'd been ahead of Granddad on the river path and the strange man had snarled at me: *One step closer and you're asking for trouble.* I'd hesitated, not wanting to turn my back on his gun. But Granddad had taken the law into his own hands and fired first.

Now, as the bound, bleeding prisoner struggled past

me so he could pull himself over to the flat rock and rest amid the broken mussel shells, our eyes met for a moment in mutual hatred. I wondered if he really would have shot at me.

“Now see here,” Granddad lectured him, getting out his hip flask and allowing the wounded man to take a taste of the Water of Life. “See the chimneys rising above the birches at the river’s bend? That’s the County Council’s old library on Inverfearnie Island, and there’s a telephone there. You and I are going to wait here while the lassie goes to ring the police.” He turned to me. “Julie, tell them to send the Water Bailiff out here. He’s the one to deal with a poacher. And then I want you to stay there with the librarian until I come and fetch you. Her name is Mary Kinnaird.”

I gave an internal sigh of relief—not a visible one, because being called *brave* by my granddad was the highest praise I’d ever aspired to, but relief nevertheless. Ringing the police from the Inverfearnie Library was a mission I felt much more capable of completing than shooting a trespasser. I gave Granddad back his shotgun ceremoniously. Then I sprinted for the library, stung by nettles on the river path and streaking my shins with mud. I skidded over the mossy stones on the humpbacked bridge that connects Inverfearnie Island to the east bank of the Fearn, and came to a breathless halt before the stout oak door of the seventeenth-century library building, churning up the gravel of the drive with my canvas shoes as if I were the messenger at the Battle of Marathon.

It was past six and the library was closed. I knew that Mary Kinnaird, the new librarian and custodian who lived there all alone, had only just finished university; but

I’d never met her, and it certainly never occurred to me that she wouldn’t be able to hear the bell. When nobody came, not even after I gave a series of pounding kicks to the door, I decided the situation was desperate enough to warrant breaking in and climbing through a window. They were casement windows that opened outward—if I broke a pane near a latch it would be easy to get in. I snatched up a handful of stones from the gravel drive and hurled them hard at one of the leaded windowpanes nearest the ground. The glass smashed explosively, and I could hear the rocks hitting the floor inside like hailstones.

That brought the young librarian running with a shotgun of her own. She threw open the door.

She was bold as a crow. I stared at her openly, not because of the flat, skewed features of her face, but because she was aiming at my head. The library window I’d smashed was public property. Nothing for it but to plunge in: “Miss Kinnaird?” I panted, out of breath after my marathon. “My granddad has caught a poacher and I—I need to use your telephone—to ring the police.”

Her smooth, broad brow crinkled into the tiniest of irritated frowns. She’d sensed the importance of what I’d said, but she hadn’t heard all of it. Now she lowered her gun, and I could see that around her neck hung two items essential to her work: a gold mechanical pencil on a slender rope of braided silk, and a peculiar curled brass horn, about the size of a fist, on a thick gold chain. She’d lowered the gun so she could hold the beautiful horn to her ear.

“Your granddad needs help?” she said tartly. “Speak up, please.”

“STRATHFEARN HAS CAUGHT A THIEF, AND I NEED TO USE YOUR TELEPHONE,” I bellowed into the ear trumpet.

The poor astonished young woman gasped. “Oh! Strathfearn is your grandfather?”

“Aye, Sandy Murray, Earl of Strathfearn,” I said with pride.

“Well, you’d better come in,” she told me briskly. “I’ll ring the police for you.”

I wondered how she managed the telephone if she couldn’t hear, but I didn’t dare to ask.

“Granddad said to send Sergeant Angus Henderson,” I said. “He’s the Water Bailiff for the Strathfearn estate. He polices the riverbank.”

“Oh, aye, I know Angus Henderson.”

She shepherded me past the wood-and-glass display cases on the ground floor and into her study. But I poked my head around the door to watch her sitting at the telephone in its dark little nook of a cupboard under the winding stairs. I listened as she asked the switchboard operator to put her through to the police station in the village at Brig O’Fearn. There was a sort of Bakelite ear trumpet attached to the telephone receiver. So that answered my question.

I went and sat down in the big red leather reading chair in Mary Kinnaird’s study, feeling rather stunned and exhausted, and after a few minutes she came in with a tray of tea and shortbread.

“I expect Granddad will pay for your window,” I told her straightaway. I assumed his wealth was limitless, three years ago. I hoped he wouldn’t be angry, and I wondered how he was getting on, waiting alone with the vicious and

miserable prisoner. “I’m very sorry I had to break the glass.”

“And I am very sorry I pointed my gun at you.” Mary knelt on the floor beside me, there being no other chair but the one behind her desk. She offered the shortbread. I found I was ravenous.

“Oh, I knew you wouldn’t hurt me,” I told her. “You are too bonny.”

“You wee sook!” she scolded. “Bonny?”

“Not beautiful,” I told her truthfully. “Your face is kind. You’re sort of fluttery and quiet, like a pigeon.”

She threw her head back and laughed.

“Prrrrrt,” she said in pigeon-talk, and this made me laugh too. Suddenly I liked her very much.

“What’s your name?” she asked me.

“Lady Julia Lindsay MacKenzie Wallace Beaufort-Stuart,” I reeled off glibly.

“Oh my, that is quite a name. Must I call you Lady Julia?”

“Granddad calls me Julie.”

“I will compromise with Julia. Beaufort and Stuart are both the names of Scottish queens; I can’t quite lower myself to Julie.” She smiled serenely. “Not Murray? Isn’t that your grandfather’s name?”

“Some of my brothers have Murray as a family name.”

“You know the Murrays were in favor with Mary Stuart. There’s a bracelet on display in the library that belonged to her when she was a child. She gave it to your grandfather’s people because she was their patron, four hundred years ago.”

“Scottish river pearls—I know! Granddad showed me when I was little. They’re the only thing I remember about

the display cases. All those dull old books along with this beautiful wee bracelet that belonged to Mary Queen of Scots! And I'm related to her on the Stuart side."

Mary laughed. "Those books are first editions of Robert Burns's poems! I don't find them dull. But the pearls are everybody's favorite."

My hidden criminal inner self noted what an idiot the wounded trespasser was, stripping young mussels from the river when this perfect treasure lay in plain sight of the general public every day.

But perhaps the river seemed easier prey than Mary Kinnaird.

She said to me then: "So I'm a Mary and you're a Stuart. And I have the keys to the case. Would you like to try on Mary Queen of Scots' pearl bracelet while you wait for your granddad to come back for you?"

Mary Kinnaird suddenly became my favorite person in the entire world.

I noticed something. "How can you hear me without your trumpet?"

"I'm watching your mouth move. It helps a great deal to see your mouth straight on. I don't like the trumpet much."

"The trumpet is *splendid*."

She twisted her mouth again. It wasn't a smile. "But the trumpet makes me different from everyone else. And I am already a bit different."

"No one's *exactly* alike," I said blithely. "I can find my mother in a candlelit hall full of dancers by the scent she wears. Everybody's different."

It was very easy for me to say, flush with the fear and triumph of my last summer afternoon with my grandfather,

the Earl of Strathfearn. I was safe now eating shortbread in the Inverfearnie Library, and looking forward to trying on pearls that had once been worn by Mary Queen of Scots. *Everybody's different*: it was easy for me to say.

"You're a brave lassie!"

It was a perfect echo of Granddad, but of course now it wasn't Granddad and there wasn't a life at stake. It was only the taxi driver congratulating me.

"A lass like you, taking the train alone across Europe! Times have changed."

"I had my own berth on the Night Ferry," I told him modestly. "Men and women are separated."

I didn't tell him I was coming home from my Swiss *boarding school* for the summer holidays—I'd spent the entire trip carefully trying to disguise myself as being closer to twenty than to sixteen. I'd put my hair up in a chignon and hidden my ridiculously babyish panama school hat in a big paper bag. With my childish socks and school blazer crammed into my overnight case and the collar of my blouse undone, and the help of a lipstick bought in the rail station in Paris, I thought I pulled off a believable imitation of someone old enough to have left school.

"But I did arrange the journey myself," I couldn't help boasting. "My people aren't expecting me for another three days. It may be my own fault I've lost my luggage, though. I think it is having its own little secret holiday in a hidden corner of the port at Dunkirk."

The taxi driver laughed. Now we were on the Perth Road on our way to Strathfearn House. Nearly there—nearly! Scotland, summer, the river, Granddad . . .

And then that moment when I realized all over again that Granddad was gone forever, and this was the *last* summer at Strathfearn.

“My grandfather died earlier this year, and my grandmother’s selling their house,” I told the taxi driver. “My mother and I are going to help her with the packing up.”

“Oh, aye, Strathfearn House—he was a good man, Sandy Murray, Earl of Strathfearn. I saw in the *Perth Mercury* that the Glenfearn School bought the estate. They’ve been working like Trojans to get the house and grounds ready for the students to move in next term. Lucky lads! Your granddad had a nine-hole golf course out there, didn’t he? Good deal of debt, though—”

Bother the *Mercury*. I hoped they hadn’t published an amount, although I supposed they must have printed some number when the estate went up for sale, including the house and everything in it that my grandmother hadn’t brought with her from France in 1885. She must have been so ashamed. Granddad left tens of thousands of pounds’ worth of debt. Originally he lost a great deal of money when the stock market collapsed in 1929, but then he added to it by borrowing to put a new roof on Strathfearn House; then he’d had to sell parts of the estate to pay back the loan; and then he’d been struck with bone cancer. And the treatment, and the visits to specialists in Europe and America, and the alterations to the house so he could go on living in it, and the private nurses—

And suddenly I was longing to be at Strathfearn, even if it wasn’t ours anymore; longing to see my mother and grandmother and my friend Mary Kinnaird, longing for one last summer of childish freedom on the River Fearn; but also full of grown-up excitement about being included as someone sensible enough to help settle the Murray

Estate, when any one of my five big brothers could have done it. I didn’t want the summer to begin. I didn’t want it to end.

The taxi could not go right up to the house because a digger and a steamroller were engaged in widening the drive. I had to put the fare on my mother’s account, but the driver just laughed and said he knew where to find us. I got out to walk the last third of a mile.

The first person I recognized was Sergeant Angus Henderson, the Water Bailiff whom Granddad sent for to take custody of the pearl thief we caught. Henderson was there with his bicycle, with his tall hooked cromach across the bars as if he were about to do a high-wire act and needed a long stick to balance him. He was having a row with the driver of the steamroller.

“I’ve told you before to keep your men off the path by the Fearn when they’re ditch-digging!” the Water Bailiff roared. “Bad enough the place is crawling with those dirty tinker folk camped up in Inchfort Field, in and out the water looking for pearls. That river path to the Inverfearnie Library is off-limits to your men.”

“Those men are digging the pipeline for the new swimming pool—how d’you expect them to stay off the river path?” steamed the roller driver. “All the work is downstream of Inverfearnie. I dinnae want them mixed up with those sleekit tinkers anyway. Bloody light-fingered sneaks. You’d not believe how many tools go missing, spades and whatnot.”

I did not want to get caught in the cross fire of this battle. Sergeant Angus Henderson is a terrifyingly tall and gaunt ex-Black Watch Regiment policeman. Granddad told us that in the heat of the Great War, Henderson allegedly shot one of his own men in the back for running

away from a battle, and then strangled a German officer, an enemy Hun, with his bare hands.

“I’m off down the Fearn path now, and if I catch any of your men there—” Henderson let the threat hang, but gave his cromach a shake.

The Water Bailiff had been known to thrash every single one of my five brothers for some reason or other in the past—guddling for rainbow trout out of the brown trout season, or swimming when the salmon were running, or just for getting in his way as he patrolled the narrow path along the burn on his bicycle.

I stepped back so I was well out of his way as he set off along the drive ahead of me. When he’d become nothing but a dark beetling shape among the bright green beeches, I held tight to my small overnight case and set off after him, considerably more slowly. I was looking forward to getting out of my modified school uniform if I could. But the dark skirt and white blouse did give me a smart official air, like a post office clerk or a prospective stenographer for the Glenfearn School, and the men working on the drive paid no attention to me.

My grandmother’s roses in the French forecourt garden in front of Strathfearn House were blooming in a glorious, blazing riot of June color, oblivious to the chaos throughout the rest of the grounds. There were people all about, hard at work building new dormitories and classrooms and playing fields. None of them were people I recognized. I let myself into the house—the doors were wide open.

The whole of the baronial reception hall had been emptied of its rosewood furniture and stripped of the ancestral paintings. I felt as though I had never been there before in my life.

I went straight to my grandmother’s favorite sitting room and discovered it was also in disarray; and my remaining family members were nowhere to be found. Of course I hadn’t told anyone I was coming three days earlier than expected. So like a hunted fox bolting to the safety of its den, I sought out the nursery bathroom high in the back of the east wing, and drew myself a bath because I had been travelling for three days and the hot water seemed to be working as usual.

I didn’t have any clean clothes of my own to change into, but it is a good big bathroom, and in addition to a six-foot-long tub and painted commode there is a tall chest full of children’s cast-offs. I put on a mothly tennis pullover which left my arms daringly bare and a kilt that must have been forgotten some time ago by one of my big brothers (probably Sandy, who was Granddad’s favorite, his namesake and his heir, and who had spent more time there than the rest of us).

I was David Balfour from *Kidnapped* again, the way I’d been the whole summer I was thirteen, to my brothers’ amusement and my nanny Solange’s despair. I plaited my hair and stuffed it up under a shapeless faded wool tam-o’-shanter to get it out of my face, and wove my way through the passages back to the central oak staircase.

The banisters were covered with dust sheets because the walls had just been painted a modern cool, pale blue—not horrible, but so *different* from the heraldic Victorian wallpaper. Light in shades of lemon and sapphire and scarlet spilled through the tall stained-glass window on the landing. As I turned the corner, the telephone in the hall below me started to ring.

I swithered on the landing, wondering if I should answer it. But then I heard footsteps and a click, and

the ringing stopped, and a harassed man's voice said, "Yes, this is he— No, they're not gypsies; they're tinkers. Scottish Travellers. It's tiresome, but they're allowed to stay in that field till the end of this summer—" The voice took a sudden change of tone and continued brightly: "Oh, you've sent the Water Bailiff up there *now*? My foreman thinks they're pretty bold thieves—wants him to check all their gear for missing tools— Jolly good!" His footsteps thumped smartly back the way they'd come.

Goodness, everyone seemed to have it in for the Travelling folk.

This Scottish traveller didn't bother anybody. If the ditch-diggers were all downstream and the Water Bailiff was off bothering the campers at Inchfort Field, I could count on having the river path to the library on Inverfearnie Island all to myself. I thought I would go say hello to Mary Kinnaird, who would not care if I was wearing only a kilt and a tennis pullover.

I crossed the broad lawn, broken by men smoothing earth and digging pits and laying paths. In the distance by the edge of the River Tay, over the tops of the birch trees, I could see the ruinous towers of Aberfearn Castle. The Big House is new by comparison; it was built in 1840, before Granddad was born. Before the railway came through. It was hard to believe that none of this was ours anymore.

I passed into the dapple of sunlight and shade in the birchwood by the river.

An otter slid into the burn as I started along the path, and I saw a kingfisher darting among the low branches trailing in the water on the opposite bank. For a moment I stood still, watching and breathing it in. The smell of the Tay and the Fearn! Oh, how I'd missed it, and how I

would miss it after this last summer! See me, kilted and barefoot on the native soil of my ancestors, declaiming Allan Cunningham in dramatic rhapsody:

*O hame, hame, hame, to my ain countree!
When the flower is i' the bud and the leaf is on the tree,
The larks shall sing me hame in my ain countree!*

I crossed from the west bank of the Fearn to Inverfearnie Island by the footbridge. It is a creaky old iron suspension bridge so narrow you can't pass two abreast, erected in the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. I jumped along its span to make it sway, the way my brothers and I had always done when we were little. The library stood proud on the unnatural mound of Inverfearnie Island, which Granddad always told us might hide a Bronze Age burial site beneath it. The oak front door of the library was locked, just as it had been three years ago.

This time, knowing Mary much better than I used to, I went round to the kitchen door. It was standing ajar.

"MARY?"

I let myself in, hollering, because she can never hear you.

The kitchen was tidy and empty. I went through to her study, yelling my friend's name. She wasn't there, either, and it was also tidy and empty, as if she hadn't been in all day.

I glanced into the telephone cupboard with its red velvet stool, in the dark little nook under the winding stairs. No one. I went through to the library.

The library is two rooms on top of each other, the walls surrounded by shelves and scarcely a single book newer than before the Great War, apart from recent

volumes of antiquarian journals and almanacs. But they still lend books to anglers and Scots-language scholars and farmers trying to solve boundary disputes, and there is almost always someone or other studying in the Upper Reading Room.

I spared a reverent glance for the pearl bracelet. It lay locked under glass on its bed of black velvet, on permanent loan to the Perth and Kinross Council for display in the library here. I couldn't quite believe Mary had let me try those pearls on. They were beautiful fat Tay river pearls, so pale a gray they shone nearly like silver, the size of small marbles. Staring into the glass until it began to get fogged by my own breath, I could remember exactly how they'd felt against my wrist, cool and heavy with the magic of having been worn by Mary Stuart herself, whose surname I shared, as young as me and already Queen of Scotland.

I wiped the glass and turned away to continue the hunt for my own living Mary. I took the narrow winding steps to the Upper Reading Room of the library two at a time.

"AHOY, MARY!"

And the Upper Reading Room was empty, too.

But here was a strange thing. The Upper Reading Room was empty, but unlike the rest of Mary Kinnaird's domain, it was not tidy. The great big chestnut table was covered end to end in ephemera and artifacts. I recognized these as what my brothers and I called "the Murray Hoard": intriguing archaeological finds that our grandfather used to keep on display in the tower room at Strathfearn House. I guessed that this must be a grand sorting job, with Mary called upon to catalog the priceless ancient pieces before they went to auction. Iron and bronze spear tips, all different sizes and shapes, lay in

rows, with more waiting in cigar boxes; I recognized an iridescent Roman glass vial shaped like a leaping fish, which was, Granddad told me, nearly two thousand years old; and the dark polished stone ax heads were eerily three times that.

And there was my favorite item, a small round cup made of blackened wood set in silver filigree. I could picture it sitting in a back corner of a dusty glass case in the tower of the Big House, full to the brim with loose pearls like the ones on the bracelet downstairs. I had never been allowed to touch the cup, but Granddad had let me play with the pearls when I was very small.

My mother's mother's mother's, he'd said they were. I can't remember how many "mothers" back they went. All those pearls were found in Scottish rivers. I'd loved the way that, of all the ancient artifacts in his collection, only the pearls didn't look old. Like the royal pearls downstairs, they were as beautiful and ageless as the rivers where they'd been grown.

Now the cup was empty. The pearls were gone. Another wave of sadness washed over me. I'd felt instinctively that they belonged in that cup. Granddad must have sold them, as he'd sold so many of his heirlooms and so much of his land, to keep the estate going during his illness.

I was surprised that Mary would have gone out leaving a door open with all this valuable stuff lying about. She takes her job as the Inverfearnie Library custodian very seriously.

I poked my nose into the other rooms, her bedroom and the bathroom, but Mary was nowhere to be found.

I decided to leave her a note. I went back up to where she'd been working. There was paper everywhere, but all

covered with lists and descriptions of artifacts. Finally I settled on an empty brown envelope addressed to my grandfather and postmarked “Oxford” from two years ago. The back was engraved with the name of a scholar I’d never heard of from the Ashmolean Museum. The envelope had been slit open with a knife or letter opener long ago, and whatever message it had once contained was not lying about in an obvious place. It didn’t seem important in any way, so I wrote to Mary on the back quickly to say that I was home in Scotland and staying at Strathfearn House for the next few weeks, and that I would stop in again to visit.

Here was another odd thing. When I went to prop my message against a chipped clay pot of unknown origin, in front of the pushed-back chair where Mary would be sure to see it when she came back, a pearl fell out of the envelope.

I thought it dropped off *me* at first—as if I’d been wearing it in my hair, or as an earring! It was the palest rose-petal pink, the size of a barley grain and perfectly round. It hit the green baize table cover with a sound like *pip* and lay still. It was intact and beautiful.

I picked it up—it was so round I had to wedge it beneath my fingernail to get hold of it. It must have been part of the collection. I thought of dropping it into the black wooden cup. But sensibly afraid of disturbing the cataloging system, I put it back inside the envelope it had fallen out of. I folded the envelope over so the pearl couldn’t fall out again and propped it against one of the jam jars.

I went back outside, leaving the kitchen door a little open behind me the way I’d found it. The hammering and drilling and tractoring going on at the Big House

and farther downstream was no more than a faint hum. I didn’t feel like going back to the Big House. I thought I’d go look at the Drookit Stane and the Salmon Stane, the standing stones in the river and Inchfort Field, just to make sure the builders hadn’t knocked them down to make an access road or boat ramp or something. Maybe I’d just peek at the one in Inchfort Field without leaving the birchwood. I didn’t want to get mixed up with the Water Bailiff.

I went down the gravel driveway and crossed the humped bridge of moss-covered stone, as old as the seventeenth-century library itself, that leads to the opposite bank of the Fearn. Then I continued along the path on the other side of the river.

Where the burn bends it has scooped out a little shingle beach on one bank where we used to swim. There was a heron standing midstream near the tall Drookit Stane, absolutely still, fixed on fishing. Its shadow was dark against the stone and its reflection rippled in the water. I stopped still, too—but not still enough. It heard me and lifted off awkwardly, heading downstream with long, slow wingbeats.

I sat down on the flat sun-dappled rock slab where the wounded poacher had rested, and where Granddad had taught me and my brothers to guddle for trout. I wondered if I could still catch a fish using only my hands. No one was about, not even the heron, and I was overcome with a wave of sadness over my grandfather and his house and his things that weren’t ours anymore, and all the summers that would never come back.

So I lay down and slid my bare arm into the clear brown water.

There. I was minding my own business, waiting for a fish to tickle. I suppose I didn't really have any right to fish there, because it wasn't our land any longer. Julie the poacher!

I thought about the pearls that I'd never see again, and all my grandmother had lost. I thought about picking an armful of her own roses for her. The plan improved: I'd have to dig some up so she could take them with her when she had to leave the house for good.

I'd not slept well on the trains across Europe. I'd been travelling for three days. I was lying in the sun and lulled by the sound of running water, and I fell asleep thinking about roses.

I remember what it looked like when my head exploded with light and darkness, but I didn't remember anything else until the moment I found myself in St. John's Infirmary in Perth three days later.

z. No modesty at all

I don't think I am capable of describing the headache with which I woke up.

For a long time I lay very still, not daring to move and wishing I would lose consciousness again. When it became clear that this was not going to happen, I opened my eyes.

My friend Mary Kinnaird was sitting beside me, reading a book.

She was wearing her usual tweed skirt and a powder-blue blouse and a dreadful prickly cardigan like the sheepskin in the story of Jacob and Esau. I had no idea where I was or how I'd got there. But if Mary Kinnaird was sitting next to me calmly reading, I knew I was perfectly safe. I said, "Hullo, Mary."

She didn't hear me. I waved.

She was so startled she dropped the book. Her smooth, broad brow crinkled with distress. Then she leaped out of her chair and landed on her knees next to me by the bed in which I'd been laid out, and grabbed my hands and exclaimed, "Oh, *Julia!* Julia, do you know me?"

"Of course I know you, Mary," I said peevishly.

"I'm sorry, darling, you're speaking into my bad ear—" Flustered, she dropped my hands to hold up the beautiful

brass horn. “Can you see? Can you hear me properly? What *happened*? Oh dear, now that you’re awake I really should go ring your mother. Julia—can you speak? How do you feel?”

I wanted to tell her to shut up or her blethering was going to kill me. I wanted to tell her it didn’t matter whether I could see or speak and that I didn’t care if she wanted to go and ring the King. I couldn’t possibly tell her what had happened because not only did I not know, due to my fearsome headache I never wanted even to find out.

I knew she could read my lips if I was facing her. I turned toward her on the pillow and said clearly, gazing into her eyes, “Please cut my head off.”

“Oh, *darling*,” Mary Kinnaird said, and kissed me. “I don’t think anyone but me knows you’re here! The ward sister was rather run off her feet when I came in, and I haven’t had a chance to explain to her who you are. You were brought in here to the hospital two days ago by a family of travelling tinker folk, and they didn’t know who you were, either. Everyone thought you were one of them! There was a story about it on the front page of the *Perth Mercury*—‘Tinker Lass Left for Dead on Riverbank’! Why aren’t your people worried about you?”

“I came home early without telling them. . . . I’m not supposed to get here till Saturday. Two days, you said? It’s *Friday*?”

“Saturday. The tinkers kept you with them overnight when they found you. They brought you here the next day.”

“*Saturday!*” I gasped in disbelief.

I’d been unconscious since *Wednesday*.

It was the most tremendous thing that had ever happened to me.

“But how did you know the person in the *Mercury* was me?”

“Of course you’d left me a note, darling. Only I didn’t find it till this morning. The library’s shut all day on Wednesdays, so I can get the shopping in the morning before early closing in the village, and I was out when you came in. And then when I found your note I guessed that the girl left unconscious on the riverbank might be you, and I was *dreadfully* worried—especially as it was a lad that found you, lying at the edge of Inchfort Field with a great dunt on your head. Did he—did he *do something* to you, darling?”

“What kind of something?”

“Oh—well—*anything*. You know. *Any thing*.”

I was still too dazed to be alarmed at this subtle innuendo, though obviously I’d nearly had my head smashed in. Surely not by the same person who said he’d found me unconscious? Who’d be stupid enough to ambush someone and then deliver her to the hospital?

I began to take an inventory of my working parts as Mary spoke. Impossible to move my head without being sick. Crikey! Did someone actually hit me, or did I somehow crack my skull on the slab of rock I’d been sitting on? My tongue caught on the jagged edge of a tooth—it was chipped. I poked gingerly at the snaggly enamel with a fingertip, then moved my hand so my friend could see my mouth shape these words:

“Oh, Mary! Do I look like a hag?”

She answered a little briskly: “You’re quite as lovely as ever.”

It was probably the most thoughtless thing I’d ever said to her.

I wished I’d never woken up. I wished I could start

all over again and never have let her see vain, coquettish Julie, whose first thought in the *world* is always for the way people see her. Mary Kinnaird lives like a hermit most of the time because people who don't treat her like a cretin are *scared* of her. She has the kindest face in the world, but it is not a face like everyone else's.

When you say something that hurtful it only draws attention to it if you try to take it back. So I didn't. I reached farther up my head to explore the bump and the bandages, and discovered what was left of my hair.

I am ashamed to put down here what happened next, but I shall, as a sort of penance for being so utterly shallow.

"Oh, Mary, how *could* you! 'Quite as lovely as ever.' Oh, what *happened*, who did this to me, *why*?"

I sobbed pitifully. You could say like a three-year-old, except that I would not have howled about my hair when I was three.

It was *all gone*.

I could feel the different lengths all around my head—much shorter near the great big bump than on the sides. I think the doctor sawed it off tidily at the back of my head first, to get at the wound, and then that—that *witch* of a nurse took the rest off to even it up.

"What will everyone say when I go back to school?" I wailed. "That cat Nancy Brooke will laugh her head off. And *just* when I'm *finally* old enough to wear it up for dances—and my sixteenth birthday coming—"

Well, I am embarrassed. But that is what I said, and more besides.

"Darling, don't cry over your hair, for goodness' sake," Mary scolded. "That's not the brave lassie I know at all!"

Her voice was warmer now. I think she must have attributed my excess of vanity to the dunt on my head, because she hastened on to more important things.

"Now, I'll say it again, because I'm afraid you're a bit woozy—you said your people are expecting you back today, but they've no idea you're here, so I must tell them now. I suppose I should have rung someone *before* I came to see if it was really you, but the papers this morning said you hadn't woken up yet and I thought, if it *was* you, it was more important someone should be with you when you *did* wake up. . . ."

She trailed off. I think it is lack of company in general that makes her so loquacious with people she trusts. Just now it left me rather breathless with emotion and confusion.

"Anyway, I *must* go tell your lady mother!" she finished with great purpose.

"Please warn my mother's companion, Solange, about my hair," I said selflessly. "She was my nanny and she will be just as upset as I am."

Mary Kinnaird got up and hurried off back to Strathfearn.

I managed to roll over on my side and was able to get a better view of the rest of the ward. The explosive headache began to subside, and I grew increasingly aware that my mouth felt like it was full of sandpaper. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything for three days—apparently I'd been given fluid injections while I was unconscious, but I was desperate for a glass of water. I had no idea how to get anyone's attention, and I thought I could help myself to a drink from the jug on the trolley at the end of the bed next to mine.

Gravity helped me to topple out of my own bed. They had dressed me in a hospital gown that felt like it was made out of newspaper, tied at the neck and waist and otherwise completely open to the elements. It did not cover my backside as I crawled to the trolley.

It all took a lot longer than I expected it to, and when I got there I couldn't stand up or lift the jug.

Defeated, I crawled indecently back to my own bed—getting into it was like scaling Mont Blanc. All the exercise combined to set upon my skewed equilibrium as if I were at sea in a Tay coble in a tempest. I had to stop and close my eyes and take some deep breaths before I attempted the battle to get back under the covers.

I heard somebody say, “Dirty wee besom. You saw that? Bold as brass. Asking for trouble.”

And a voice that answered, “That's their kind. *No modesty at all.*”

I seem to be good at asking for trouble.

I was not so successful at asking for water. Although I finally had the attention of the nurse on the ward and spoke politely, she downright refused me.

“Not if you put on airs, you sleekit Lady Muck,” she told me in tones of Cairngorm mountain granite. “I'll not be mocked by your kind.” She actually took hold of the trolley that held the water jug and wheeled it away.

I was left gaping. What had I *done*? How could she think I was mocking her? Was it because I'd said please? Surely I was *expected* to say please.

She passed me twice more in the next hour, and both times I asked her again, taking care to keep it simple and polite:

“Please may I have a glass of water?”

How could I be putting on airs? I'd never felt so

pathetic in my life. It is true you can hear Landed Gentry in my ordinary accent, but I'd never had anybody take *offense* at it before.

That's their kind, the horrid woman had sneered at my lack of discretion on the floor. *I'll not be mocked by your kind*. Whose kind? Truant finishing-school girls home for the summer? Did she somehow scent my grandmother's French blood in me? Had I raved in my sleep about the unchaperoned skiing holiday last winter? Who did she think I was? One of the *tinker folk* whom Mary said had brought me in?

Of course. The headline Mary had quoted from the front page of the *Mercury* explained it all—“Tinker Lass Left for Dead.” The adjectives the nurse had used on me already—*dirty, bold, sleekit*—were all implied in that one damning word, *tinker. Their kind*. Angus Henderson, and the steamroller driver, and the man on the telephone in the hall at Strathfearn House had all used the same words.

The nurse thought I was a Traveller, like the people who brought me here. That's why she thought I was dirty. That's why she thought I was indiscreet. That's why she thought I was making fun of her by putting on airs.

I suppose my bare feet and bare arms and cast-off clothes hadn't helped my case much when I first arrived.

Whoever they were, the folk who brought me here had gone out of their way to *help* me. They were charitable. They were good and decent people. No one should be sneering at them.

It made me mad.

At which point I was sitting there seething quite helplessly, when two more visitors came in to see me.

They were a girl and a boy, about my own age. They appeared to be twins. The boy was fully one foot taller

than me, and they both had glorious ginger hair like Mary Queen of Scots (or how I imagine Mary Queen of Scots, anyway), and the pale, clear skin to match. The girl walked like the goddess Athena, head high, looking neither left nor right. The boy came in furtively behind her, moving in absolute silence, as though with every step he was expecting to be shouted at to leave. There were curtained screens at the foot of some of the beds in the ward, and he stepped cautiously between them, not daring to catch the eye of any of the other patients. Both the girl and the boy wore much-mended clothes, patched at the elbows and let down at the hems. The girl had a small closed basket like Granddad's fisherman's creel slung on a strap over her shoulder.

She stopped next to my bed. She fixed me with stony eyes the dark blue of descending storm clouds, and continued to hold my gaze while she beckoned her brother with a toss of her head. He came to stand next to her, saw consciousness in my face, and smiled.

"Well now, Davie Balfour!" he said warmly.

Even if I did once spend three months demanding that everyone in the household call me Davie (they might have been more indulgent if it had not also been my oldest brother's name), I don't expect to be recognized when I'm in drag as one of my favorite literary obsessions. Astonishment and joy made me want to laugh, only I couldn't because my head still felt like it was being gently but methodically drubbed with a mallet. I tried weakly to manage a responsive grin.

"You're awake," the girl observed.

"Only just," I said.

The boy padded silently to my side and knelt there. "Better than you were. We came again later after we

brought you, the first day, to see if you'd wakened yet. We came yesterday, too, and you were still away wi' the fairies."

"What happened to me? Do you know what happened to me?"

He shook his head.

"Do you not know yourself?" the girl asked coolly from the foot of my bed.

"Who are you?" I asked. She was so self-assured, so *queenly*, that I thought I ought to recognize her, and I was worried she would be offended that I didn't.

"We found you," she answered.

They were the dirty, bold, sleekit tinkers.

They were not dirty, did not appear to be all that bold, and it remained to be seen how sneaky they were. In fact I was floored by the girl's beauty. She was quite Mary Kinnaird's opposite: no kindness in her face at all, but, oh, what loveliness of form in everything about her—tall and lithe with the long legs of a ballet dancer, a tiny *v* of ivory showing between her collarbones just above the top button of her blue-and-green gingham blouse, and her long hair like a flaming cloud spilling down her shoulders. Could possibly Mary feel like this, looking at *me*, this mixture of worship and envy?

"I found you lying on the path that leads from the burn up to Inchfort Field, wearing a lad's kilt, your hair and tam all matted with blood," said the boy. "You started up and told me your name was Davie Balfour, then tumbled over out cold on your face at my feet. So I carried you to our camping place. When you slept on, my mam tucked you in with my sister for the night. And then the next day when you *still* didn't wake we brought you here in our cousin's van."

I couldn't believe I'd spent a night sleeping beside that goddess-like creature and didn't remember her.

She was still gazing down at me with the cold stare of an intrigued scientist. "What's your real name?" she asked.

I was faintly, irrationally disappointed.

"You don't believe I'm David Balfour?"

The boy gave a comical grimace and shook his head. "Nor did I believe you the first time, either," he said. "But then you fell over before you could change your story."

I decided to change my story a *little*. I was wary of being accused again of putting on airs and really didn't want to make the wrong impression.

"I'm Julie Stuart."

Julie Stuart *is* my name. Just not all of it.

"How are you the day?" the boy asked, with genuine concern.

"Shipshape, I suppose," I said. "I would sell my soul for a glass of water."

"*Whisht!*" he said, frowning. "What a way to speak! You would never."

His imperial sister eyed me coolly. "You talk like gentry," she accused.

Her tone rang alarm bells in my head. She sounded like the miserable nurse. I'd never had anyone hold my accent against me before that day.

"I'm a filthy sleekit tinker lass who doesnae deserve a glass of water," I told her.

Neither of them answered right away. The girl and I stared at each other in sudden hostility, like cats about to fight.

Then: "Who says?" she challenged.

"Everyone on this floor says!" I glanced at the lump

in the next bed—every fiber of her being and all her bedclothes appeared to be listening.

And then, with a deep breath and in spite of the villainous headache, I changed how I was talking. Because I can.

I grew up sharing my summers with Travellers. The Perthshire Stewarts, when they are up in Aberdeenshire, are old friends of my father's, who is a Stuart . . . likely we are all related regardless of the Gallic spelling of our name. They come every year to Craig Castle, my real home, and camp there. They come in July to thin the turnips, and they come back in October for the tatties. I can give you an earful in the peculiar patois code they call "cant." The Stewarts laugh at me for trying, but it makes them think twice about me.

I said to my visitors now, "If you brought me here, I'm likely one of *your kind*, aye? If I'm bingin' wi' nawkens, I am no barry scaldy dilly."

For the first time, the girl at the foot of my bed looked away from me. She and her brother exchanged sharp, unspoken glances of warning and caution. I'd shaken her. I felt better.

The boy said abruptly, "Now you do sound like a Stewart."

My turn to be shaken. That was canny.

"I *am* a Stuart," I said rebelliously.

The girl made a dismissive little sigh, as if she were growing bored. "You're not one of those Highland Gaelic-speaking folk—who are you really?"

I was still mad. I was a bit mad at everything, now. I rubbed my temples. I countered fiercely, "I told you my name! I told you *two* names. Who are *you*?"

"My real name?" The boy grinned.

“Any old name!”

The girl spoke for him. “He’s called Euan McEwen.”

“She’s Ellen,” Euan said.

Ellen suddenly gasped and laughed. “I ken who you are! You’re Strathfearn’s granddaughter. Julie Stuart, is it? Och aye, Lady Julia! Well then, Lady Julia, tell me—why don’t you deserve a glass of water?”

It was like playing tennis, and we’d each won a point. We stared hard at each other. She wasn’t angry with me. She really wanted to know.

“The nurses don’t know who I am,” I said. “They think I’m one of you because you brought me here. One of them thought I was poking fun at her because of the way I talk.”

Euan stood up. He padded silently to the foot of my bed, where he peered up and down the ward as if he expected the police to come along and arrest him. Finally he crept deliberately to the other end of the floor. Ellen and I watched, she standing with her arms folded and me leaning up on my elbows against my pillow. Euan picked up a glass from a tray next to someone’s bed—I saw him nodding in a friendly way as he spoke a quiet word or two to the bed’s occupant, and nobody seemed to object. Then he went to the back wall where there were worktops and a basin with running water, and he came back with the glass full.

It was such a simple kindness.

I drank like a person rescued from dying in a desert. I was absolutely parched. When I’d finished he took the glass and went to fill it up again.

He filled it three times for me, but I couldn’t drink the third. Ellen watched indifferently. Euan sat back on his heels by my bed, holding the glass. “Better?” he asked.

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Nae bother.”

Ellen beckoned her brother with another nod of her head. “We’d best be off. You’ll have everyone’s attention the now, Euan, after parading up and down the ward like a soldier. And that librarian might come back.”

I found I didn’t want them to leave. “Oh, at least do stay until she comes! Mary won’t mind if you’re here—”

“You think?” Ellen gave a quiet little snort of scorn. “I’m not staying for the librarian.”

“But—”

I’d somehow managed to tap into a wellspring of intolerance I hadn’t at all expected from the McEwens.

“I hate that librarian!” Ellen vowed vehemently. “*Shaness!* She doesn’t speak to you if you greet her. She stares and then she turns her back. You always feel she’s laying a curse on you.”

Euan picked up where Ellen left off. “She carries a gun. She shoots into the night if she hears so much as a twig snap!”

“She can’t hear a twig snap,” I said. “She’s mostly deaf. It would have to be a thundering great tree limb falling before she’d hear it! I bet that’s why she doesn’t return your greeting, either. If you were a young lady living all by yourself on an island in a burn in the middle of a wood, I bet you’d carry a gun, too!”

“She’s skittery as a haunt,” said Ellen. “She looks like a goblin. God pity her.”

Now this was making me cross.

“She has a medical thing. She was born with it. It’s called—” My brain stretched. Yes, it still worked. “*Treacher Collins syndrome,*” I pronounced triumphantly. My elder brother Sandy had explained it to me.

“The bones in her head didn’t get made properly before she was born. That’s why her face is so peculiar. And why she can’t hear. She is the kindest person I know.”

“Not to ‘filthy tinker folk’ she isn’t,” said Ellen. “*Every year* when she sees Dad fishing in the burn for pearls she calls out the river watcher after him. She doesn’t even speak to Dad, just rings for the law straightaway. She knows full well he’s not after salmon and that he has a right to be there. Sergeant Henderson puts up with him because they were both in the Black Watch together during the war, but *every year* when we come back she makes out like she’s never seen our dad before. Last year he thought he’d knock at the library door, polite, to warn her, and she told him it was Council land and he’d no right of way to cross the Inverfearnie Island bridges. She threatened him with her shotgun! *And—*”

Euan took over the story. “And this year, Ellen went and borrowed a book from the library. She wore a tweed skirt and the librarian thought she was country hantle from Brig O’Fearn village. But when the librarian realized after a bit that Ellen was a Traveller lass, didn’t she ring the hornies straightaway *again!* She sent a policeman out to us to collect a *library book.*”

“What was the book?” I asked.

Ellen was silent for a moment.

“Last year’s *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.*”

Somehow even *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* sounded like a challenge when those words got spat out by Ellen McEwen.

My brother Sandy, who is a curator at the British Museum in London, has got an article published in that volume. I wondered what Ellen wanted it for.

At this dreadful moment the officious nurse came back.

“*What* is going on here?” she thundered.

And then she asked me what the blazes I thought I was doing, helping myself to the King’s own medical equipment, and how dare I. I told her the King didn’t own the city’s supply of drinking water, which I am not sure is technically true, but it is the principle of the thing—you can’t expect public infirmary patients not to drink. She accused me of cheek and of putting on airs again. Then she directed her venomous gaze on my visitors.

Euan, still holding the drinking glass, turned magenta and shrank into his brown garments in fear and embarrassment under her blazing ire; Ellen blanched and stood fast with her arms crossed over her chest, gripping her sleeves.

“*And what do you mean by bringing these creatures into the women’s ward?*” the nurse bellowed at me. “*How dare you keep your meetings here, you dirty fast wee midden!*”

With that, she seized the glass from the quivering hand of Euan McEwen and dashed the last unconsumed stolen King’s water straight into his blushing face. For a moment he knelt by my bedside absolutely and damply astonished.

“*Get out!*” the nurse raged at him. She swung round to face Ellen, who was holding herself so tightly she’d torn a hole in the thin fabric of one sleeve. I thought Ellen was going to explode with rage.

But she didn’t. She stepped past the nurse without a word, and wiped Euan’s face with the back of one hand. He stood up. Together they walked with dignity back the way they’d come in, with every patient watching the show. Euan held the door for his sister.

She hesitated. Then she turned around and called to

me defiantly, “We’re away to Blairgowrie for the berry picking. We’ll be back at the Strathfearn estate for the flax at Bridge Farm. Get well and come see us at Inchfort Field!”

“*I will!*” I vowed to her from across the ward.

My mother arrived eventually, but I was asleep again by then and she did not want to waken me. She arranged for my discharge the following morning, and I was assigned a different nurse for the duration of my stay. The ward sister in charge was extremely grovelly and apologetic for her subordinate’s behavior, concerned when I couldn’t bear to finish my breakfast porridge and calling me “Lady Julia.” I used my newfound power to demand coffee, but couldn’t finish that, either.

I left St. John’s on a spring tide of obsequious kowtowing. The noted surgeon who had last year coaxed an extra five months of life out of my dying and bedridden grandfather came out to the car to see me off.

(It was my mother’s little two-seater Magnette which she drives herself—Granddad’s landaulet had already been sold and the driver dismissed. Mother’s car is a cracking red sporty thing with glittering chrome knobs all over, and it is utterly impractical, apart from her occasionally giving me a driving lesson in it when she is in one of her more Bolshevik moods. Driving like a man is one of her few foibles.)

The surgeon held the door while Mother tucked me in with pillows and a blanket, as the car has no top. “Lady Craigie, I do apologize your daughter wasn’t given a private room.”

“Of course you couldn’t have known who she was!” Mother said. “How lucky we are that the Travellers were

so kind to her. That was Jean McEwen and her folk, wasn’t it? To think Jean and I used to play together along the Fearn! It’s my own fault she’s never met my daughter and couldn’t recognize her!”

She didn’t say, *You can’t be blamed for the occasional small-minded pigheaded idiot turning up on your nursing staff—it is hard to cure people of ingrained cultural platitudes.* But I knew that, like me, she was thinking it hard.

And like her, I didn’t say anything. I was sheerly grateful that the headache had subsided, and that I was out of the newspaper nightgown. Mother had brought me sensible clothes of her own (my trunk *still* had not arrived). I dared to ask, “Can I drive?”

“Do not be *ridiculous*, Julia.” But she laughed.

As we headed out of Perth on the Edinburgh Road I shook off the blanket and managed to kneel backward on the seat sticking half my body out of the car like a dog, enjoying the fingers of wind rumpling the tufts of left-over hair.

“Darling, I cannot bear to watch,” Mother shouted.

“Slow down, then, Mummy! You’re supposed to be watching the road, not me.”

The concentration it took to hold myself up made me seasick again, however, so I was forced to behave myself and sit properly.