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The story starts in St. Pancras, although maybe it's King's Cross because she could never remember exactly how she got there from the airport. Yes, St. Pancras, out past the food, with a glance over at the police in flak jackets watching everyone who went near the Eurostar waiting area. Somehow she'd crossed the street to the other station. One time she emerged from St. Pancras with her suitcase, the wheels racketing over the pavement, and was completely lost, looking around hopelessly. A kind English woman pointed her across the street to King's Cross.

Inside, a visit to the toilets was essential. It cost 20p then, or was it 30p? She never seemed to have the right change, but usually the gate had been propped open by someone anyway. Through the big lobby where people took photos at Platform 9 3/4 (my goodness how that had expanded into a Disney-style attraction) then out to where other people, real people, stood with their necks craning toward the train boards, waiting to rush onto their train to get a proper seat. Then past the Boots on the corner, where she'd buy codeine pills on her way back, because you couldn't get them in America.

Sometimes in dreams, when she imagined she was in the country, she'd see villages and towns and rivers, but first the station. She always seemed to arrive here, even when trying to avoid it, tired and jet-lagged and hungry. Each time the solution was the Pret out in the courtyard, with the taxi queue always

longer and further away than it seemed. The concrete blocks where she ate her smoked salmon sandwich and fruit were always the same, with so many kinds of people sitting or lying on them while a continual river of people passed by, traveling between Gilbert's Victorian monstrosity (now a hotel) and the corner leading up the road. Last time, the path to the corner had been blocked by roadworks, and people didn't like the narrowing of the human river. They did strange things as they got nearer to the corner, yelling out at friends or twisting their bodies so no one would touch them. She saw one man pirouette into the air, an angry pirouette, like a hostile bird. Everyone had to jam up at the crossing rather than the corner, and they moved uneasily, discontented that their normal path was disrupted.

Eventually she joined them, heading up the Pentonville Road to what she hoped was the flat she'd tried to find on Google Maps. Avoiding the temptation to pay hotel prices or rent more space than she needed, she'd paid for a room in someone else's flat, a professional couple. The flat was in a newer building, or refurbished anyway, and had a lot of security. Part of the security, she supposed, was the hidden number on the building, well off the main road. She rang the buzzer.

There was a pause, then "Hi, take the lift, the code is 330, it won't bring you up without the code," then silence. Following instructions, she found the lift and alighted on a dark floor at the top of the stairs, with two doors. Neither had a number. She noticed the door on the left was latched open, and peeked in.

"Hello? It's Katherine."

"Hello," said a young woman. Asian heritage, Katherine thought, but with a London voice. Spotting the rows of shoes blocking the hall, she quickly added hers to the collection. No problem, she thought — this is what we do at home, and it means the floor will be cleaner. Instantly forgetting her hostess's name, she was shown round the flat, to her very small bedroom and bathroom across the hall ("ours is in our room"). Then the main

room, flooded with light although it looked out only onto other modern flats. “I work in here all day,” said the woman, “but you can put your food in the fridge and come and go as you like — here’s the keys.” Then she smiled briefly and returned to her desk, which looked out on the huge windows. The woman began, or resumed really, working on her computer.

Unperturbed that this would obviously not be a comfy welcome with a cup of tea, Katherine took a shower, squeezed her suitcase into the small bedroom, and opened it enough to get out her loafers (so much easier for off and on), laptop and papers. Unsure whether she should interrupt, she called out, “I’m off to the library — see you later” and heard a quiet “ok see you” from the main room.

Back on the street. Back through the crush of people at the corner, her feet rejoicing at the change of shoes after 24 straight hours in her Dr. Scholl’s. Passing the Victorian monstrosity and the exits from the Underground spewing out the frantic commuters, she remembered to turn right before the Library. I’ll go down this alley to the side entrance, she thought — that’s quicker. But on entering the courtyard, she saw a queue. At first there seemed to be just a dozen people, but then looking across the courtyard she noticed the line snaked through, just with more spacing than an American line. Following along the queue, she ended up out the other gate and a ways down the road. Funny, the walk had seemed much closer on the computer.

The queue to get in was long, thin, and quiet. Almost everyone in it was a single person, with a knapsack or tote bag. Silent, patient, shuffling until the entrance. Then security, opening the knapsacks and tote bags, everyone saying thank you for a ritual that was a bit reassuring and a bit invasive. Just like last time, she forgot about the lockers and went up to the Reading Room, only to remember and go down the stairs. Oh, yes, the lockers are tricky. Not all of them work. Some that are open won’t close. Many that are closed won’t open. And you have to put in the code

twice, then take a photo of the locker because there are hundreds. However aware you are when you go in, you won't be after four hours of research.

One time she had forgotten to put in the code twice, and came back hours later to find the locker, but it wouldn't open. She'd had to seek out a young man in a lanyard helping someone else, wait, then beg for help.

Up the two flights of stairs and press the door button. The Reading Room guards often had different accents, seeming to come from other parts of the Commonwealth. They were pleasant but spoke only to each other in between checking everyone's bags carefully, regardless of how many times you went in and out. She'd smile and greet them, but they never smiled back.

She took notes on the article, with Bertie reading over her shoulder. You don't think I was serious when I wrote that, do you?

How would I know? she said. You certainly seem angry here. Kind of sensitive to criticism, if you ask me.

Well, of course I was sensitive, he whispered. I was young, but very well-read, very smart. Had my fill of all those Oxbridge types telling me I wasn't good enough, when I knew more than they did.

Summer 1872

The back garden was terrible, but it was all he knew. It was really more of a yard, with the necessary outbuilding for necessary biological activities. About half the yard was bricked, and half bare ground. The bare ground was soaked with kitchen water and outbuilding overflow. But there was an enormous dustbin. Or it seemed enormous when one was six.

There wasn't much room to play inside the house. The ground floor, facing Bromley High Street, was occupied by the shop. Bertie's father Joseph sold china, pots and pans, and cricket

equipment. This was not his original trade, and he had no training for it. He had been a gardener at Uppark, the estate home of the family Fetherstonhaugh (pronounced "Fanshaw") in West Sussex. It was there he had fallen in love with the housemaid, Sarah. They both had dreams above their station, although Sarah was the more pragmatic, pious, and practical.

Joseph was also a cricketer for the Sussex team. Ten years before, against their arch-enemy Kent, he had taken four Sussex wickets in four balls, and altogether nine wickets for forty-two. This extraordinary achievement was frequently mentioned by visitors to the shop. He was astute enough to start stocking cricket equipment in response. Because the shop was small, the living area was stuffed with such equipment, as well as pots and crockery.

Broken pots, crockery, and wickets also piled up in the yard. But the dustbin was usually just full of ashes. These ashes could be arranged into hills and valleys, and a dribble of water could make rivers. Entire wars could take place in the dustbin. Armies on the march, towns under siege, burials of the dead.

If one tried very hard, one could ignore the activities surrounding the yard. The tailor next door, with the chunking sound of the one sewing machine. The haberdasher on the other side, emitting a strong smell of horse manure from his mushroom greenhouse. And the cries of the pigs and sheep awaiting slaughter at the butchers behind the wall. One could, especially if one were six, be miles away, campaigning among the ashes.

She supposed the diagnosis had something to do with it, or maybe it was the return afterward. She'd thought she would die soon, and never see England again, that time she returned. Actually cried on the plane, quietly of course. But then she hadn't died, although the surgery made her tired for years. Death followed her, a continual reminder, a traveling companion. He seemed further away when

she came here, or perhaps he was just more content when she was on the move.

She had cleverly invented a research project that required her to come, something with resources unavailable in America. Not wanting to be a tourist (she was born here, after all), she'd focused on getting into the great libraries. The British Library, the Bodleian in Oxford. She'd become a reader, requesting 19th century sources. Writing articles. Writing a book. Investigating.

Shall I tell you how I started a life of autodidacticism? he said.

I have read your autobiography, but I'd certainly rather hear it from you, she said. Something about you breaking your leg?

Yes! Some boy at school picked me up and put me down too firmly. So I had to stay home on the sofa. And my father brought me books from the Bromley Institute.

Your house isn't there anymore, she said.

Oh? Yes, well it wasn't much of a house. Very dark downstairs. Spooky garden. What is there now?

A Primark, she said. A shop with cheap clothes made by children in poor countries.

That, he said, doesn't sound like an improvement. I always said the railway would ruin the place.

Bertie described the many authors he'd read from the books his father had brought him. He seemed quite proud about his father. A great cricketer in his younger days. Took four wickets in four balls. Until he broke his leg, pruning the grapevine in the back garden. Put the whole family in destitution.

Mother had to go back to work. She went back to Uppark, where she had been a maid, to be the new housekeeper. It was so hard on her.

Should I tell you, she said, how your father may really have broken his leg? I found a statement from an interview with one of your neighbors. She said your father was quite the ladies' man. You

know how he rarely went to church? He had one of his women over on a Sunday, while your mother went to church with you and your brothers. Something happened and you all returned early. He managed to get his lady friend over the back garden wall, but when he tried to climb up he fell and broke his leg.

Really? he said. We had no idea. Where on earth did you read that?

It was in the Bromley Library catalog of your work. So really, your way with women comes to you honestly.

Wonder who the neighbor was, he said. Must not have liked us very much.

"I won't do it," she said.

"You'll have to. They're going to install a computer on your desk, and they'll all be connected, and you'll get electronic mail."

It was 1995.

"I won't do email unless they take away something else, either regular mail or my telephone. I won't answer three bells."

But she did, of course, three bells all the time. She tried checking her mailbox less, but it didn't help.

Then later. "But I don't know what the internet is," she said.

"Look," her colleague said somewhat impatiently, "it's like all the computers connected together."

"In the world? How? How would that even happen?"

He tried to draw her a picture, little boxes connected together. "I don't understand," she said. "You can't link all the computers in the world together."

Then a few years later, listening to the dial-up tones on the modem, getting her work email from home, it was easy. Then a workshop. The workshop. Not optional, required. The World Wide Web. How to Make a Web Page.

She was hooked. <h1>Welcome to my web page</h1> to make a heading. Then a <p> to make a paragraph. And when you were

done, you saw what you'd created on the screen. Like magic. Like all the typewriters and word processing machines she'd ever used, like the Apple IIe she'd written her thesis on. Only better.

And you could add pictures. Little, tiny pictures you had to scan, then compress. Don't let the page take too long to load!

1998. The first three classes she offered "online" over the internet. It's just like our TV courses, the college admins said, but interactive. Instead of mailing papers, students can send them to you by email, and you can send them back.

Things started to go more quickly after that. Discussion boards. Chat rooms. The Read-Write Web. Learning Management Systems. She became an expert at all of them. Late nights chatting with strangers about sex. Daytime workshops, everyone learning how to teach online. A few people exchanging tips while everyone else said it's a fad, it's pulling from real teaching, who wanted to take classes on a computer?

I suppose it was like when I started with William Briggs, Bertie said. No one knew what he was doing either. Started small, just tutoring his students by post. Expanded it into a major enterprise, enough to support his family. Correspondence courses to prepare students for London University exams, and civil service exams. Then the residential program in Cambridge, just to be able to put "Cambridge" on the stationery. That's a Yorkshireman for you. I'm from the south, myself.

I know, she said. I've been to your house.