

MADÉLINE SONIK

## The Villa

THE PATH WOUND LIKE AN untidy skein of russet wool through the village, around outlining woods, and up, far up, into the balding hill where the sun spilled sweet liqueur in small certain portions, warming us as we laboured in the fields.

My sister and I, tumbling together in heaps of straw, giddy at days' end, would look always to the large estate jutting sadly alone on the hill crest like a single bead broken from a lace. This place we came to call "The Villa," and nights, after the dusk had extinguished its rosy light, we whispered together in bed about the imagined inhabitants, telling each other stories as surely as if they were facts.

My sister populated The Villa with characters one might find in royal and ancient lineages: a handsome Marquis whose flesh was the colour of cinnamon, his elegant, regal lady wife, and their four beautiful children, all sons, and each blessed by the stars under which he was born.

Her descriptions, filled with such devotion and care, caused my heart sorrow, for we both knew already that these fragile creations of our tired musings must succumb to the greatest suffering so that we, their creators, might be freed from our own.

Yet, still, it was I who first breathed the curse upon them, for no one has a claim to unending bliss, and as I laboured in the fields like a beast I made the lady my first victim, sending a disease so ravishing to her door that, in the end, she would have destroyed her entire family, set her beloved villa into flames, in order to escape the pain of her blackening body and the sympathy of those whose lives would continue long after her own had ended.

Her children grieved her death, taking their first sips of suffering before they had grown strong enough to endure its withering poison, while her husband, the Marquis, himself fell ill with despair.

My sister brought the Marquis a physician from the town over the hill, who summoned him back from the brink of death. And yet, still, I would not let him rise from his bed fully whole as he had fallen, for all resurrections must be paid for, and the cost of his, I determined, must be high.

My sister protested. She refused to proceed with the stories if I would not allow her some salvation. But as the heat of the summer grew more punishing, and sweat rolled from our blistering scalps to our heels, my sister allowed me my way, and the Marquis, never regaining strength of mind, was locked up, his children left to the care of a serving maid who felt no affection for them, and in this way they grew as my sister and I grew from one year to the next, helpless and at the mercy of fate.

Days joined like drops of fresh rain in pools, and my sister and I bent deeply to the earth, assuaging our ravaged hands in mud, gathering stories like stone, for we could cry over the sad lives of the orphans as we toiled and dwelt in the centre of this sweet, flowering compassion.

But too soon the day arrived that my sister was carried from the fields, her body crooked like a willow branch, her cool face plundered with scars.

Alone in bed I spoke to her silent ghost, for it seemed she had taken the stories away with her, leaving me nothing but empty desire. Cold nights hung open and infinite like mute mouths, and the harshness of day snapped unrelenting and heavy with the burden of work never-ending.

The sky sank low upon me, clouds filled my nose and throat. My legs trembled and threatened to snap, for as much as I looked to the villa, my mind created nothing but darkness.

And then, one day, when I could stand the emptiness no longer, I looked up at the villa, and knew I must make a pilgrimage there. I gathered my few belongings, collected small quantities of cheese and bread for the journey and set off before sunrise, walking steadily till dusk.

The road that wound and looped its way toward the villa was like a dream, growing suddenly close, then distant, curving

and eternal, and I thought I might never reach my destination when the first evening fell and the blackness of night claimed my vision.

I slept in a rocky ditch, for I could not see my way to the soft blanket of leaves beyond the roadside, and cold moved deeply into my shivering bones and stopped my heart, it seemed, for all night long I slept as if dead. And when light came again to the sky, I was surprised to wake and find myself still living.

For miles I followed the road, high and low, past villages that sprung up and vanished as if they were all nothing more than illusion, and trees reached out with pointed, wooden fingers, as if they too were eager for me to arrive.

My feet walked and walked, with soles badly torn, carrying my tired body forward into the sun, and so I continued walking through the night and through the day until finally the gates of the villa arose before me, like magical doors leading away from the world.

Immediately, I noticed the rose bushes just inside the gates. They were overgrown, untended, and I thought how the lady had cared for these bushes before her death. How she had selected them, planted them, nurtured them, and once long ago now had cut their magnificent blooms to wear in her hair and set in the most elegant crystal vases.

In the distance, I could see a man. His hair was the colour of rosewood, and though young, he walked with a limp, as if time had burrowed deeply into his bones; and I wondered who he might be, for in our story the servants all had vanished, and the boys, but for the youngest who was still just a child, had succumbed to sorrow and illness, and no one else lived there.

The man approached the gate brusquely, making no secret that my presence displeased him, and then I explained I had been walking many days, and he saw I was exhausted and that my feet bled, and he led me through the courtyard where statues once whole and regal stood, and then down a long pathway of jagged stone until we reached the threshold of his home.

The surroundings, with the exception of the rose bushes at the gate, looked completely unfamiliar to me. The house itself, it seemed, had undergone renovation in more prosperous times. Perhaps just before the lady's death, I thought. But now it was no longer new. The roof needed repair. The chimney, I could see, had lost several bricks, and the man confided to me that he had shut

down an entire wing of the house because he could not afford its upkeep.

He gave me food and a place to rest, and when the following morning arrived, his manner toward me had undergone such a transformation that he asked if I wished to spend another night, for he was a lonely man and rarely had company.

So often, throughout that first day, I wanted to ask him about his history, if he had known the people who had lived here before him, how he had come to be the possessor of this estate; but these questions seemed somehow unspeakable, and so instead I listened to his soothing voice present pictures of lands he had been to and places I would never see.

And then that night he came to my bed, his face hot and brilliant with tears and sweat, and when his mouth touched mine, I knew immediately everything, for the taste of grief on his lips was as fresh as the day I had painted it there, and though tragedy had so rapidly aged him and his surroundings, there was no doubt this man was the youngest orphan son of the unfortunate couple who had once lived so blissfully here.

I allowed myself to become his lover, feeding upon the certain knowledge of my creation, and containing within myself all the poignant barbs of melancholy I could hold.

We lived together for a year in a slow, soundless dream until my lover, ridden with guilt, unkindly sent me back to my home.

The fields had become graves, and those who had survived the plague had become strangers. I walked through the dusty abandoned roads like a ghost, slept near the bones of my sister. The villa blazed above the village, the sun igniting every window, and all the stories of its history that once had filled me vanished into nothing, and the world grew painfully grey.

The disease which had claimed so many came to sit upon my shoulder, and I welcomed it. But it left me living, though barely alive.

I traveled to the villa again, this time hoping in my weakness I would not arrive there, but the path moved like quick, rushing lava under my hot feet, and the wind at my back propelled me so that it seemed my frail body flew.

I needed no one to open the crumbling gate, as the tired lock had rusted to nothing, and the heavy hinges collapsed into ashes of red.

The rose bushes no longer existed, but patches of wild grass jutted between the cracks and fissures of stone, and I crept toward the old estate feeling small and hungry, wondering if the orphaned son who once had been my lover possibly still might live.

The house itself was now a ruin. Broken bricks bordered its walls, and in many places the roof had given way to the punishing elements.

I stood surveying the property, recalling my sister and happier times when the estate was filled with joy and the promise of future, how we made the lady gaily dance with her husband in the moonlight, the children cheerfully play.

Vague noises rang from within the house now. Sounds as wild as a storm, and plaintive. Then I saw him, my lonely lover, the orphaned son, rushing towards me, faster than an arrow. I opened my arms to receive his embrace, believing only there could I hold the exquisite human suffering I had made of him, but when he reached my arms, it was no longer him. His flesh had turned coarse, his face grown twisted, nails had transformed to claws, teeth to daggers.

Inside the ruins of the villa, I found a corner where my wounded body sank and the moaning world beyond could no longer reach me. A place where I could rest and sleep, where grey stone walls could crumble to dust, blow free in the wind, without cause or consequence, and the stories of my youth would no longer plague me.