

THE LAST NIGHT ON EARTH
or THE PARTY AT WILLOWFIELD MANOR

I.

EDITH

Are you sure it's here?

DEAN nods, not looking even a moment to the side but continuing his sights forward, his pointed and pale profile bright against the increasingly dark evening sky. His platinum hair is slicked against the sharp ridges of his skull, shining to highlight its bony definition and light up his nonchalant grimace. Just a way out of the village, the pair have come to a gate of dark, wrought iron only visible by the little light its curves reflect off the newly risen moon. The two doors have been swung open, a redundant welcoming gesture when no walls or fence connect to the gate's pillars. It appears a strange unused monument - or apparition - rather than a functioning portal. They continue down the unlit drive a while, EDITH - dressed up in a youthful sky-blue ballgown, a string of pearls around the neck and a huge bow tying her yellow hair up off her plump, heart-shaped face and out of her wide turquoise eyes - walks with her arms crossed in trepidation seemingly unfelt by DEAN, who marches a pace ahead. Noticing this, she scurries with increased speed, not wanting to be left lost on this barely-there road among this gnarled and foreign forestry. Suddenly, on the horizon, is a flash of light and music followed by the appearance of a house standing formidable above the overgrown greenery and surrounding moors of Willowfield. Although tonight alive with yellow glow radiating from every window and noise from every of these windows' lively silhouettes, its pale, grey stone is mottled with age. Tall chimneys grow taller with smoke for the first time in years. EDITH, as she approaches, gasps, taken aback. A group of guests flock around the door from which spirited jazz spills, chattering beneath an ornately carved porch.

DEAN

[seeing EDITH's reaction]

Houses like this, they're dying out. It's a shame, I know. But things are changing, I suppose, and those families that looked after and cared for these houses are kicked out - of their own homes! Onto the streets! And these places, they're just left to rot.

He tuts and shakes his head in disgust.

EDITH

[slightly breathless, still entranced by the house]

No I-- It wasn't that. This house...I know it's strange but Willowfield, I'd heard of it of course, knew of the town, my father would speak of it in passing... [her gaze finally leaves the façade and relocates to her hands, poking at her nails before looking up at DEAN] I've never actually been here, I'm sure of it. I'm sure. But just here, just now, I thought... [she turns back to the house] I know this house, I thought it was just a dream...

She trails off, noticing DEAN is not listening and is instead frowning as he absent-mindedly spins his ring round his little finger.

EDITH (CONT.)

I don't know what I'm talking about. [laughs, timidly] Should we go in?

DEAN grins and takes EDITH's hand, pulling her forward at such a speed that she doesn't get the chance to inspect the detail of the portico she had so admired from afar. As she passes through, she cranes her neck back to

catch sight of a blurred coat of arms emblazoned above a frieze carved with Latin she doesn't understand. Once through the threshold, her head is snapped back into upright position, smacked with the crowds of mingling masses filling the foyer and, behind that, the larger hall, all garlanded with bright balloons and paperchains over doorways, lit fireplace, staircase, columns, and the balcony of the landing above. EDITH stares up to this higher floor where yet more guests carry on, leaning against the balustrade in gossip, unaware of the two new additions to the ever-growing congregation. Before she's got her bearings of the place, DEAN has already weaved them through to the back of the hall where double doors open to the loudest part of the manor and the party's primal cell: the ballroom. Entirely too large for the house, to almost an illogical degree, EDITH attempts to rationalise what she can see of the space above the swarming floor; she could make out at least two levels of balconies (again absolutely crammed) leading up to a massive barrel-vaulted ceiling, curving over a stage at the other end with magnificently gilded gold proscenium again stamped with that familial shield and strange script. Here is housed the band who, from this distance, appear a jumble of shadowy and almost inhuman shapes. The music is now quite deafening as DEAN drags her out onto the dance floor to join the smiling and uninterested masses.

JOHNNIE stands above the ballroom on one of the balconies, hands in pockets, having found a position looking over the side and into the action. He has dressed in his best suit - although he seems to have forgotten to fix his top button as his tie slacks in a slightly loosened knot - and has tried his best to tame his waving, dark hair into a somewhat suitable style. His rounded face rests in usual anxious yet solemn severity as his emerald doe-eyes scan over the room below. For a while he focuses on the musicians as they play on stage; they move and play so perfectly, their music is so intoxicating, he wonders what they were doing here, out in the middle of nowhere. He squints in an attempt to make out a face or two, but they're positioned somehow too far to the back of the stage where the light doesn't quite reach, so any hopes of recognition are dashed. He quickly moves onto other spectacles, noting the grandeur of decoration, especially the golden symbols and mottos above the stage of what he is sure must hold ancestral importance, now draped with multi-coloured paper garlands. On the floor, he watches sparkling gowns of pale blues, creams, teals, yellows, greens, and turquoises spin around suited bodies in a constant, rippling flow. One couple in particular catch his eye towards the centre of the room, dancing so closely and so slowly to the upbeat tune they seem entirely in a world of their own. JOHNNIE observes her long white hair - unusually undone for such a formal event - framing her angelic, heart-shaped face that catches the light of her delicate frock. He is more serious but similarly pale, wearing a washed-out and poorly fitted suit. His hair has gone wild in a curling, nearing chaotic, quiff and his features are more downturned than his female counterpart's, but a sweetness still lingers on in their sadness. They glow so alabaster white JOHNNIE might have mistaken them for ghosts if there weren't so many around inattentive. JOHNNIE watches them a while until finally EDITH walks through the doors. He puts his hands against the balcony, leaning over to get a better look at her only to see her on a near-skeletal, but expensively suited, arm: DEAN's. JOHNNIE's face falls, and he comes away from the side, suddenly nauseous. Balloons are dropped over the crowd as JOHNNIE turns towards an exit, pushing his way through the awe-inspired oohing and aahing crowd until he's back in the hall. In panic, he spins around the hall - the green, spiralling patterns of the wallpaper that covers it doing nothing to help with his dizziness - until people start to look. JOHNNIE's face goes hot and he runs to the nearest out, up the stairs, shutting himself in the first empty room he

finds. The corner bedroom is decorated in yet more leafy designs, illuminated by the fire opposite and earth-toned lamps either side of the mahogany, four-poster bed. A miniature, reptilian-looking creature carved out of what appears to be jade is sat on the mantel beside an ornate carriage clock. JOHNNIE, however, pays no notice to all this, the house that he just minutes earlier found so magical now nothing of the sort. Shutting the door behind him, he walks to the window and looks out over the clear night's landscape as the stars' light speckles down over the viridescent moors north of Willowfield. The green is so intense it seems to be absorbed into JOHNNIE's pink skin...or perhaps his sickness has not quite left him. A single tear drops off his bizarrely grassy cheek. And so it is here in this isolated retreat that JOHNNIE remains while awaiting the party's end, the sound from the band seeming only to increase in volume.

II.

EDITH is growingly uneasy amongst the churning cycles of the dancefloor. She has been waiting for a break in the music to make an escape but, with none apparently coming, she is forced to create her own.

EDITH

[eyes still darting around the room]

I'll just find the powder room; I'll only be a moment.

DEAN doesn't seem to notice, and if he does he doesn't seem to care, plucking another girl from the crowd at random and continuing to dance. EDITH turns and walks back into the hall where she stops for a moment, humming slightly as she glances from door to door, considering her best option before marching forward into the smaller entrance hall, planning on systematically trying doors from the front of the manor to the back. In-keeping with this method, she goes for a door in the corner, directly to the right of someone stepping in the front door. She wasn't overly surprised to find a cloakroom, this being the logical place for one, but did find it slightly amusing the way in which what must be hundreds of near-identical coats were all stacked up without any kind of organisation. She imagines the scenes of drunken guests fighting over their jackets when they eventually try to leave. She shuts the door and takes a few steps over to her left to try the next.

A long, dark dining table projects out from the door, three places set either side and one on each end. A fireplace projects out of the forest wall to the left, the mantel decorated with little carvings of quatrefoils on either end and held up by colonnettes configured to look as though twisted. To the back of the room is a door from which two waiters are moving in and out, carrying out dishes and jugs and platters filled with assorted meats, stews, sauces, fruits, jellies and more to be arranged along a narrow bar of tables collected at the rear wall. At present, they are struggling with a tiered cake the size of a large child and seemingly even heavier, the whole ensemble teetering from side to side and sliding around on the tray as the red-faced waiters try to lift it onto the bar. None of the guests go to help, women in smart but tight-fitting gowns of jewel-toned reds and purples slump and lean in every direction, weighed down by quite an amount of alcohol. Their yellow hair is greying and, for many, coming undone from whatever styles it had once been in. There is only one younger woman in the group, sitting with her back to the south wall and diagonal to the kitchen door with her anomalous dark hair piled up high on her head. In comparison to her peers, she is a regal and refined spectre. While she laughs along with the group, there is one silent party; a man in a tuxedo starched to statuesque degree sits still at the head of the table, facing EDITH as she walks in. She thinks she's seen him before but is not sure where. He looks smart but scarily serious, his ruler-straight mouth mirroring the shape of his thin pencil moustache. She can feel him watching her from behind his circle-framed glasses. Everyone else is listening as intently as they can to one of the women who has managed to commandeer the conversation.

EVELYN

This girl comes up to me - stick-thin thing she was - but beautiful skin and these cheekbones, gorgeous. Her hair was a lovely yellow colour - it looked almost natural. Thought I must ask her who did it for her. [she takes a gulp of wine] Anyway, she's gushing over me, telling me she wants to be just like me when she's my age. 'Well, you've not given yourself a lot of

time!', I said, trying to make a joke, but think it went over her head a bit. After a while she asks me if I could introduce her to Mr. Perkins, he was in charge of all the talent at the time, you see, and I say 'I'm sure if you come back tomorrow before the show I'd be happy to'. Thought best off not doing it now; me and Pat had just had words. So, [taking another drink] she comes back the next day, this time in a sort of [miming it out with both hands] jacket, same colour as the day before, this pretty *periwinkle* thing, but big shoulders and long sleeves. Didn't do anything for her, drowned her. Anyway, she hasn't waited for me, no, she's gone straight to Pat and by the time I'm walking in she's up on stage, auditioning. I mean, don't you think the polite thing to do would be to wait? I was doing her a favour even offering to introduce her. [The waiters are now bringing out a huge hog roast, complete with apple in its mouth] Next thing I know, she's my supporting act for the night. And I have to share my dressing room with her! I was already sharing with those other dreadful girls. She even has the cheek to ask if she could borrow one of my dresses! [tuts] I should have realised then what was going on.

The roast is placed on the table and the woman strains over her plate to take the *red* apple from its mouth. She takes one bite, her mind clearly elsewhere, before casting it into a napkin aside.

ESTHER

[finally noticing EDITH she swivels around in her seat]
Would you like to join us, dear?

EDITH

No I—I'm sorry to interrupt I was looking for a powder room?

The rest of the room have turned to face her.

ESTHER

[with elegant gesturing]
Head back into the main hall, and just before you get to the ballroom turn right into the corridor and you'll find it.

EDITH thanks the woman but the conversation has already resumed. Only the dark-haired girl faces her now and gives EDITH a knowing nod. She turns and walks back out, shutting the door behind her, pausing while still clasping the handle. Releasing a relieved breath, she proceeds to follow her directions.

Although she's finally found the powder room, it wasn't the escape she's been hoping for. The smell hit first: lemon, but it wasn't a fresh scent, it was as though every inch of surface had been drenched and scrubbed with a sickening citrus stench. The maximalist approach continues in the décor: *yellow* lampshades hurl warm *yellow* light down onto the *yellow* floor below, on which a round *yellow* mat sits central underneath three oval sinks each with their own oval mirror above. Either side of these is a symmetrical arrangement of similarly shiny *yellow* cabinets topped with *yellow* clock and tissue box and little novelty soaps, all flanked by *yellow* towels hanging on *yellow* tiling underneath wallpaper patterned with *yellow* illustrations of fables or fairy tales that EDITH can't make out. A small circular table stands in one corner topped with a bowl of daisies so fresh they look almost artificial resting on a lace doily. And, eeriest of all,

two *yellow*-haired women dressed in gowns not dissimilar to EDITH's own — although (of course) in *yellow* fabric — facing the mirrors either side of the one directly opposite EDITH as she rushes in. Having swung the door open with such great force, she anticipated some kind of flinch or turn of the head or at least a flick of the eye in the mirror, but they stay completely still, oblivious to the movement behind them. EDITH nervously takes a slow step or two forward to get a better look at the two women. The woman on her left is poised sharply upright, her hair neatly styled, her dress sitting smoothly over her slender figure, her face pulled into a tight, thin-lipped smile. In a white-knuckled fist she clasps a tube of bright *red* lipstick, which she applies in increasingly ferocious circles around the mouth as she pushes the pigment into the skin, crumbling and breaking to none of the YOUNG WOMAN'S attention.

She maintains eye contact with her own reflection as EDITH looks her up and down. Turning to the mirror, EDITH notices that behind the woman is not an image of the powder room, as one would expect, but an image of slightly peachy clouds against a perfect *blue* sky. Confused, EDITH turns away, looking to her right to see an older woman with the same fair skin sagging, the same dress crumpled and pulling over different bumps on her body, the same *yellow* hair come loose with grey quietly invading at the roots. She is devoid of emotion but still staring, although not at herself in the clouds. Her gaze avoids the mirror all together, fixed down instead on the sink below. The tap is on and a steady stream of *blue* water is filling up the bowl. EDITH raises her eyes back to the mirror, crinkling her brow as she muses on how the clouds may have appeared. Her own mirror is functioning perfectly normally, the reflection being exactly what was in the room. Just as EDITH is becoming lost in thought, THE YOUNG WOMAN'S nose begins to bleed, trickling and then flooding out of her nostrils into a thick stream. It mixes with her *scarlet* lipstick like tributaries forming a river. The occasional drip splatters onto her dress, staining the immaculate *yellow red*. EDITH stares into the clouds a little longer before she realises she must look as odd as the two women she stands trapped between and, sensing increasing discomfort with her own predicament, heads back out the door in the same hurried pace at which she'd entered. She rubs her eyes as she goes.

Finally growing tired, DEAN notices that EDITH has disappeared. He scans the room and shrugs, not seeing her, before heading outside for a smoke. We find him standing with hand in pocket beneath the fancy stonework of the porch, staring out between the columns into the pitch-black night. He stays a while manipulating the plumes of smoke leaving his lips into curling spirals. After some time, EDITH stumbles out the door.

EDITH

Oh, it's you.

DEAN

[having turned to her]
Yeah, it's me. I've been looking all over for you.

EDITH

Sorry, I got lost. You've been around the house? It's so strange, isn't it? I just met, well I say met I'm not really sure that's suitable—

DEAN

What's wrong with your eyes?

EDITH

What?

EDITH quickly finds her compact and begins to prod at the skin around her eyes to see her blue irises have turned milky, as though steam has risen over them. She thought it odd but, not being in any real pain or discomfort, shrugged and shut the mirror. DEAN was staring at her, though not with concern, more a mild curiosity. He continues to flick ash onto the steps every so often.

EDITH (CONT.)

I don't know what's wrong with them. [she returns the compact to her purse] It'll be fine, I'm sure they'll be back to normal tomorrow.

DEAN

Or you'll wake up blind.

EDITH

[looking up from her bag, the contents of which she is still inspecting]

A wonderful attitude. I didn't realise I was speaking with an eye doctor.

DEAN

[glancing again down at his cigarette]

I think you just need to readjust your outlook on some things.

EDITH

Oh really. Like what?

DEAN

You know, my mother wanted to be an actress. Lived in the city, five or six girls in the same flat all going to the same auditions, all going for the same parts, all convinced they were going to be the next big thing. For eighteen months it was background work, doing stand-ins, even the occasional line in an ad or a daytime episode. Until, finally, she was up for a lead part, and it was to be in a picture from one of the big studios as well. The sort of part where fame is unavoidable. And who got it? Some someone or other who, although had never acted before, just had a 'spark'. [he flicks his cigarette on the ground and stamps it out] Nothing to do with her being the wife of one of the producers, I'm sure. But guess what; my mum met my dad, they got married, got a house in the country and go to the club at weekends and eat in restaurants where it's hard to get a table. Most dreams are just delusions, Edie. A misguided way to pass the time. Fame doesn't work if everyone who wants it gets it; we couldn't survive with so many actors.

EDITH

[voice raised]

So what, I should just resign to a life of domesticity? Sitting at home planning lunches and dinners for some husband who may not want to talk to me but at least he has a membership at the club! Just because your mother wasn't good enough doesn't mean I won't be.

DEAN

[matching EDITH's volume]

All I'm saying is things don't necessarily have to be hard before they get easy. Happiness doesn't have to be so complex.

EDITH hisses out a long breath. She shakes her head in disbelief before starting for the stairs. DEAN grabs her at the elbow, quickly releasing as soon as she stops.

DEAN

[threateningly]

What I'm offering doesn't come around often.

He fumbles at his little finger, yanking at the ring that he then thrusts out at EDITH. She looks at it a moment before raising her eyes to his and slapping him swiftly across the face. He reaches for her necklace to balance himself only for it to snap in his fingers, his ring flying from his hand in amongst the explosion of pearls.

DEAN

My-You idiot!

EDITH is apparently forgotten now, DEAN chasing the gold ring as it tumbles down the steps and rolls off into the overgrowth and darkness. The piece glints just feet ahead of him, hurtling ahead without losing speed. He runs after it in desperation but never seems to get any closer. Flustered and alone, EDITH turns to take one last look at the house, tilting her head up at the entablature she didn't get to have a proper look at before. A shield adorned with a cross of thin but leafy branches framing a simple 'O' above a sternly carved phrase:

'SEMPERVIRENS ET AETERNUM'.

She frowns and turns her back, lifting her skirt as she calmly walks away into the darkness. She doesn't turn back again.

III.

The **yellow**-haired ladies' stories of the 'old days' are beginning to grow tiresome, JANE thinks, as she sits with chin leant against palm and forced smile, feigning interest. All the food has barely been touched, left to go cold, the women either claiming lack of hunger or too consumed by their soliloquising to consume anything else. She hopes it won't go all to waste. It is at this moment, as JANE absent-mindedly loops one of her dark hairs around her finger, zoned out and staring beyond the women sat opposite with glazed eyes into the fire, that she notices strange things happening within the flames. She thinks she is imagining it at first, when wisps overlap in limb-like apparitions, like curled legs or claws, but then comes pointed ears, nose, an orb or a head, facial features and a body climbing out of the fireplace. Despite the growing fire, JANE has turned a sudden cold, sat bolt upright in her chair as this molten creature clambers upright into standing position. The **ruby**-coloured animal shakes itself off, sparks flying, then turns to the side, watching as waiters collect up some of the neglected food and dirty dishes before going to the kitchen, where it follows, sliding out the door as it swings shut. JANE – without thinking – stands up with a jolt, knocking her chair almost to the floor and rattling the table and all its contents in such a way that all its sitters suddenly go silent, staring up at her with judging eyes.

JANE

I – I'm sorry. I suddenly don't feel well at all. If you'd please excuse me.

JANE leaves at pace, making for the door the mysterious animal had just disappeared behind.

EVELYN

I don't think that's where you mean to be going–

But JANE is already out the door, and none of the **yellow**-haired women follow. They have likely already returned to their conversation. No one looks her direction – they were clearly very busy preparing the extravagant and endless courses being ignored next door. She did, however, notice the two servers who had been working in the dining room heading out the back door. Not wanting to distract any of the kitchen staff, JANE decides instead to go after them. The cold immediately hits her, grabbing her arms in attempt to shield them as scans the unlit gardens.

WAITER 1

[leaning against the wall with newly lit cigarette dangling in hand and speaking with a tinge of aggravation]

Can we help you?

JANE pivots to the right.

JANE

I'm sorry to bother you on your break. I was wondering whether you might have seen something. I could have sworn I just saw some creature – I don't know what it was. I can't even describe it, other than it was very...**red**.

WAITER 1 darts his eyes to the side, to his companion, who continues his gaze towards JANE as though already aware of what his friend was attempting to imply.

WAITER 2

Ah yes, we know what you mean. You'd better follow us.

He flicks out his cigarette.

JANE

Oh no, please, it's really okay. If you could just tell me where to go?

But the two men are already heading back inside, so JANE stumbles after. The pair mutter between themselves as they ascend to the higher floor and to a room at the front of the house.

WAITER 1

It's in here.

JANE takes a step forward, towards the door.

JANE

But I don't understand. What is 'it'?

She turns around, but her two guides have already vanished. They must have had to get back to work, she thinks, moving back to the door and, without another thought, into the room. It's completely black in here, but the little light let in by the open door made it clear this was a bedroom. She takes another few steps forward when a gush of wind strikes her, followed by a slam. JANE spins to see the door behind her shut, but the room was no longer dark. She pivots again to see the fire lit...had it always been? Perhaps she has drunk more than she thought. She brings her hand to her head and shuts her eyes a moment to recollect before opening them again and walking over to inspect the fireplace. Kneeling in front of it, she watches the flames a little, seeing if anything might appear to her again. It doesn't. She sighs, returning to her feet, and looking over the contents of the mantel. Aside from the usual trinkets, nothing catches her eye, until it reaches the left end of the shelf. The green wallpaper seems to have lifted a bit at the corner, so JANE - unable to resist - reaches to pick at it and slowly peels it back. As it comes away, her eyes widen. Behind the paper she is shocked to find not plaster or stone or brick, but nothing. Not blank wall - absolutely nothing. She lifts her arm to it and tries to press against it, only to watch her hand disappear into the void. JANE jumps back with a cry, unable to comprehend what is happening. It is now she looks upward to see - in a painting that looks to have been there a long while - herself, looking at a painting. And in that painting is herself, looking at a painting. And the paintings within paintings follow this pattern as they shrink tinier and tinier, disappearing towards infinity. Just when she thinks her panic cannot escalate any higher, a bark summons her attention to a window at her left, which was now swung open, or maybe it always has been, or maybe it was blown open by the door, or maybe she is asleep and this is all a dream. On the sill sits the smug red fox, grinning at JANE in her hysteria. Her anxiety turns to rage that bubbles over, running and leaping for the animal only for it to hop out of the way. JANE hurtles out into the night and falls to the ground. Even with all the weeds, it is not enough to break her fall.

It could always be coincidence - the grounds of Willowfield being left to their own devices - but that spot that JANE fell to would come to spawn a little seedling. Eventually that seedling would grow tall and bud, magnificent red flowers emerging to disrupt the otherwise green gardens.

ALTERNATE ENDING

*It's funny how things work out.
It's funny how things work out as they should be.
It's funny how things should work out as they should be.
Should it be funny how things should work out as they should be?
Everything is as it should be.*

Willowfield's ballroom has emptied out. The floor is speckled with deflating balloons, puddles of spilt drinks, bits of broken glass, the odd lost shoe, forgotten purses, crumbs, napkins, cigarette stubs. Up on the stage, the band plays on with aching and dragging fatigue. The garlands tied around the room's perimeter sag and droop, falling in places like confetti over the other debris. None of this disturbs the young couple at the floor's centre, her with yellow hair and light blue dress holding tight onto him, face leant down to hers and only millimetres away, pieces of his dark, curling hair hanging over his eyes as they gaze towards his partner. They continue to dance for the rest of the night, which may as well be eternity.

Everything is as it should be.