

## The Vulture Man

Where do you go at night, once you have turned out the light and snuggled down under the blankets? Do you worry about yesterday and tomorrow, until you are so worn out with worrying that you fall asleep? Do you try to turn your mind into a vacuum, believing that the best sort of rest is blankness?

*Or do you slip away into a world that is all your own?*

When I was small I went to an oak wood with Boris, my bear (he was limp, loose-limbed and already balding). It was a dark place of green-black shadow, though there were clearings where the sunlight or moonlight sometimes crept in. The trees were wider and taller than they are in the Waking World, and one of them was my nighttime home. It looked just like any of the neighbouring oaks, but it was entirely hollow, and underneath it, among the roots, there was a room, where I lived.

The Tree People lived there too, and they lived there always—that is to say, they were not obliged to re-enter the Waking World every morning as Boris and I were. The Tree People were my companions. I expect that you know some of them, or people like them. Their identities chopped and changed depending on where my thoughts were tending at the time, and what I was reading. I remember that a blond-haired boy called Prince Constantine was a great favourite of mine as this story began, and that I had a penchant for fainting gracefully at his feet and observing his concern through half-closed eyelids. There were many others besides him though, and they drifted in and out according to whether I wanted them or not.

There was an owl as well, with a wingspan as wide as a dragon's. He was the guardian of my oak, since he had lived in its shelter all his life, and he was many, many years older than me. His name was Eyes.

The tree was a proper home. Somebody had always made the place comfortable in anticipation of our arrival: the kettle was on the boil, and the fire rustled complacently. Constantine was a clever teller of frightening stories, and once we had settled down with a hot, sweet mug, and maybe a slice of toast, he would regale us with his tales. If the weather was particularly stormy then I would run around the wild, wet wood for a while before settling myself at the hearth. The weather was frequently violent in my nighttime world, because I am the sort of person who likes to batten down the hatches.

I hope you don't think our pleasures were staid. On the contrary, even our most peaceful moments were enlivened by the proximity of danger. You see, we shared the wood with a tribe of giant cannibals. Eyes often saw them as he glided through the trees; the rest of us heard them smashing through the branches and roaring for our flesh. They, in turn, knew of us because they could smell us, and because we left our footprints on the muddy paths.

They caught me once—only once. I was four years old when it happened, but the memory is vivid.

I remember that I was running from them, running through the rain, when I slipped. I tried to scramble to my feet, but a hand closed round my neck and lifted me from the ground. The other cannibals caught up and gathered round in an admiring crush. I kicked and choked, and this amused them. A female leaned over to pinch my plump arms. She shouted her appreciation, and slapped my captor on the back.

He parted from the other hunters and took me home. I remember that his family were very noisy: the children singing tunelessly at the tops of their voices and quarrelling with one another and crying, while their mother—the loudest of all— called for quiet.

There were squeals of appreciation when their father appeared in the clearing, dangling me by my plaits like the tasty morsel I was. The youngest child made a hungry grab at my legs, but I was whisked out of reach, bundled into a wire cage and hung from an oak branch. This cage served as their larder, I presume, for besides me it contained a pile of pungent cheese rinds and a turquoise bird's egg.

As he locked the cage door I saw my captor's face. There was no malice there, as he looked me over, only appetite. He had fat, moist lips and smiling eyes.

I watched as the family began their preparations for dinner. The smoky fire was forced to blaze, and a man-sized saucepan of water placed over the flames. The woman peeled onions and slid them into the pot with a handful of wild garlic. Then she knelt on the grass with a wheel-shaped grindstone and a carving knife. She began sharpening the blade, testing it every now and then against the soft pads of her fingertips. Her husband, in the meantime, laid plates and cutlery on a makeshift wooden table, while the children constructed a posy of primroses and violets, and placed it in a cup at the centre of the table.

The water had come to a rolling boil. The woman was wiping her hands on her apron and advancing purposefully toward me, when rescue came at last. Eyes the owl plummeted through the sky like a meteor. His piercing scream sent the cannibals scurrying for cover, their arms wrapped over their heads. In a trice he had unhooked the cage and he carried it home in his beak. My friends wrenched the door off its hinges and I was freed.

So long as we stayed inside the tree we were safe, though we had to keep our voices down. The cannibals were not imaginative and it would never have occurred to them to investigate the interior of a hollow tree. Besides, the entrance was protected by magic. Anyone wishing to enter had to murmur an unguessable mantra, like Ali Baba and his "Open sesame". No, it was only while we explored the woods that we were in danger of meeting the man-eaters. Often (at least once a night) the ground quivered and swathes of foliage crashed nearby and then, if we were outside, we knew we must race back to our tree like lightning. Those cannibals gave our happiness just the edge it needed.

I would never have described all this to you in my secretive childhood, but it is easy and even pleasant to talk about it now that I am old.

Now I will tell you about the night when my adventures began.

I remember that it was a winter night in my imaginary world; that there was a fine mist suspended from the trees and that the wood was cold, dank and still. Our fire threatened to die out during one of Constantine's chilling tales and though we were reluctant to venture into the murk, we were agreed that a blazing fire was an essential accompaniment to the story. After a short squabble, Boris the bear and I volunteered to venture outside in search of fresh firewood.

My tree stood at the edge of a clearing and it was across this crackling carpet that we began our quest. Sticks were plentiful here, even dry, grey sticks, if you kicked aside the covering layers of forest debris. So here we were, in the clearing, stooping and shushing our way around the edges, when (and the sensation came upon us gradually) we began to feel a faint, rhythmic drumming along the forest floor, and to hear dead leaves swish-swish-swishing beneath the beat. We looked at one another questioningly, because we had never heard sounds like these in our wood. I was sure that they were too light and fast for a cannibal's footsteps. Yet how could I be perplexed by the identity of a presence in my own imaginary land? Curiosity and a vague, thrilling hope of something wonderful overcame our fear, and instead of scrambling back to the tree we lurked in the shadows to see what it might be.

As the sounds drew nearer I finally recognised them for the rushing hooves of a horse. Immediately a rider galloped out of the mist and the silhouetted trees and reared to a halt in the centre of the clearing. Boris and I gasped and clung to one another. Boris's golden fur gleamed in the leafy moonlight, so I hid him beneath the folds of my green cloak and backed into the shadows as noiselessly as I could.

The horse was as sleek as a wet, black stone. I am no judge of horses, but I know that I have never seen such an imperious animal in the Waking World. I have met ponies, whom I have patted and fed and sat on. They were always either submissive or else sweetly stubborn. This stallion, with its tossing head and fiery yellow eyes, seemed arrogant and sneering. Its body was all bone and quivering muscle and it was very tall—its shoulders the height of a man's head. It was never still, but shifted about perpetually from hoof to hoof and blew great clouds of steam from its nostrils. It seemed to eye me through the shadows and, when it drew its lips back to whinny, I could have sworn that it was laughing.

Still, it was the rider, not the horse, that frightened me most. When I chose them for my world I thought that giant cannibals were the most horrible creatures imaginable, roaring, lumbering and slaving for flesh. Now I realised that a thing could be still and silent, yet too malign for my immature imagination.

The rider was male—I knew by his square shoulders—and like me he wore a cloak, only his was hooded and very full (it covered him from head to foot and draped itself over the horse's rump). It was made of black velvet. Embroidered onto the cloak, across his chest, there was a curling, silver crest. He kept his reins in one gloved hand; in the other he held an empty net that dangled down among the leaves. I could see little of his face, but what I saw made my soul shrivel. For a bird's beak protruded from his hood, yellow and cruelly curved, like a vulture's.



Still, it was the rider, not the horse, that frightened me most.

Perhaps you think the idea of a bird-man comical? But imagine that he is towering near you, breathing hard after his gallop, and turning that hooked blade this way and that, as his hidden eyes search and search. I could hear blood banging between my ears, and my breaths shuddered as though I too had been racing through the night.

All of a sudden his gaze jolted against me. Surely I was invisible, crouched so small and green and silent among the low leaves and branches?

But: "Come here," he rasped, and I saw the glint of eyes, as black as coals, from deep inside the velvet hood.

I did not move. Then he thrust his beak toward me and screamed a harsh, piercing scream, which brought me to my feet. He beckoned me nearer. Slowly, slowly I approached the restless horse.

"What are you doing in this wood?" he demanded.

"I live here," I stuttered.

"You live here?"

"Yes. At night. In the day I live... somewhere else."

"Do you live here alone?"

"Yes." I lied quickly, as Boris clung to my cloak's lining.

"I have permission to kill trespassers," he continued mildly. "But I will let you go on condition that you never set foot in this forest, or in any part of Traumund, ever again. It does not belong to you and you are not welcome here."

"But... surely... this wood can't belong to anybody," I said, my voice trembling like a violinist's vibrato, "because I made it up in my head."

"This forest belongs to the King of Traumund."

"The... who?"

The beak almost touched my nose. The air between us was unbreathably acrid. "You heard me, little insolence. Scurry off home to your Waking World and stay there. Return to Traumund, and the king will have you eliminated." He lowered his voice to a hiss, and I could not help smelling the stale meat on his breath. "We will find you." He drew himself up to his full height. "Do I have your word?"

I knew I would say "yes," and that my "yes" would be a lie. I wondered whether he would see through my "yes." The possibility made me hesitate. The hooded body took my hesitation for defiance. It stiffened and stooped once again. The net twitched.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Abigail Crabtree," I answered.

He changed at once: lightened and loosened and excited. "Ah!" he wailed, as though gratified by a flash of comprehension. "Indeed? Abigail Crabtree! How strange! How... odd. I'm afraid you will have to come with me after all. The king will be delighted."

As he blurted that last word he made a grab at me, and to my horror I felt gloved talons pricking my forearm.

At the same instant I forced my leaden legs to move. They leapt through the undergrowth and hurled me, tripping and tumbling, at the hollow tree. The Vulture Man whipped up his horse, but the foliage was too dense for the animal and it made little progress. I heard a whistle and a slap against my ears and glimpsed the rider's net falling slackly over a clump of ferns, just inches from my feet. Then—bruised and gasping—I touched my tree. I breathed the magic words into its kind bark, and it folded me into itself. Boris tumbled from my cloak and we lay amongst our friends, speechless.

We all froze as the horse and its rider thrust through snapping branches and brackens and passed by our home. In my mind I saw the horse's nostrils flicker as it came close to us, and I saw the roll of its fretful, yellow eye. But the Vulture Man urged it forward into an unfathomed woody darkness.

Boris and I told our tale in cautious whispers. We asked one another, uselessly, how, or where, the Vulture Man had entered the wood. What was Traumund? Who was its king, and why did he want to possess my imaginary land? We speculated, but to no avail, since none of us had the least glimmer of understanding. For much of the night we sat still in troubled, broken silence. Constantine never resumed his tale and the fire cooled to a dusty white.

As waking time approached Boris said, "Abigail...I'm sorry...you didn't make it all up, did you?"

"No! Honestly, no."

"Then how, in heaven's name, could he have been here, in your imaginary wood?"

"Boris, truly, I don't know!"

One of the Tree People—an Edwardian girl—poked at the dead fire with a stick. She wore blue ribbons in her hair. "Will you come back again?" she asked timidly.

I drew shapes on the dusty floor with my finger and made no reply.

"It would be better, perhaps—safer—if you didn't."

I looked at Boris and we glowered lovingly at one another. "Of course we will come back," I said.

We made our way up the trunk and into the Waking World. The morning light was gleaming safely round the edges of our curtains. I lay in my pyjamas, a mute bear in my arms, and I wondered.

## The Institute

It was summer in the Waking World: a hot, purple-skied August. I remember lying on my stomach in the garden at home, three or four weeks after the Vulture Man had appeared in my wood. I was sweltering and enjoying my idleness with such enthusiasm that it was no longer idleness, but energetic joy. I watched the hypnotic scurrings of ants among the short grasses of our lawn, and thought what a spindly, sky-scraping city they lived in. I thought, too, that the sun on my neck felt blood-red and that the tree shade across my legs was a pale, soapy lilac. I wondered how these physical feelings could have become colours in my head. I felt inspired, but by too many things and with too much dizzy glee to be able to create any meaningful response.

My mum came out of the kitchen with a letter in her hand.

“Abigail,” she said, “Come inside. Your dad and I want to ask you about something.” I hauled myself up and traipsed into the house.

Green spots floated before my eyes in the relative darkness. I sat down at the kitchen table and yawned. Dad leant against the sideboard, frowning at the letter that my mum had handed back to him. Mum sat down and began shelling peas into a bowl. They didn't speak, so eventually I said,

“What, then?”

“Well,” replied Dad slowly, turning the letter over, reading it to the end and finally looking up at me, “we've had a letter from your godfather, Ludovick Montefiore.”

I had heard of Ludovick Montefiore, but I had only seen him once and that was at my christening when I was two months old. I knew nothing about him, except that he was a friend of my mother's family. I also knew that I liked his name.

“He wants you to go to St. John's School...The Institute, I should say,” said Mum. “He's a governor there and he says he'll easily be able to wangle you a place.”

“But I can't go away,” I answered anxiously. I was loath to leave home. “You always said that boarding school would be too expensive.”

“Well, but Ludovick wants to pay your fees. He insists. In fact, he's already paid next term's,” said my dad.

“What I can't work out,” mused Mum, as she vacantly nibbled on an empty pea pod, “is why he seems so anxious for her to go? I mean, he writes...persuasively”

Dad shrugged. “He is her godfather. Perhaps he feels it's only fair, with Dominic having had the opportunity, and so on.”

My elder brother Dominic had won a scholarship to St. John's School. He had excelled in art and now he taught drawing and painting in Paris. Since his time (he was seven years my senior) St.

John's School had become *The Institute of Social and Personal Advancement*. The head teacher and most of the staff had been replaced. This did not bode well. But my parents wanted the best for me, and Ludovick Montefiore had written persuasively.

"What do you think?" asked Mum, her eyes searching my face for doubt.

I looked at the table and chewed my hair thoughtfully.

"Dominic loved it there," she added. We all thought, *Yes, but it wasn't called The Institute of Social and Personal Advancement then*, though none of us said that.

Dad piped up, "Your godfather seems to think it has an excellent reputation—well, everyone says the same, don't they? He seems to think it'll suit Abigail down to the ground." We all thought, *But the last time he set eyes on her she was two months old*, though none of us said that either.

"If I go to school," I asked eventually, and weightily, "will I be able to learn French?" Learning French was the great goal of my life at the moment, since Catherine Lorimer, who used to live a few doors away and personified everything I ever wished to be, had read French at Edinburgh University.

"I would imagine so." Dad shrugged.

"Well in that case," I said, and a rush of courage straightened my spine as I spoke, "perhaps I'll give it a go. I can always change my mind later on."

So my parents wrote back to Ludovick Montefiore, informing him that I accepted his offer with thanks.

On an overcast afternoon in September I stood before the main entrance to The Institute of Social and Personal Advancement. I clutched a small green suitcase in one hand and Boris the Bear in the other. I suppose I looked childish for my age, but I did not know it—yet. My courage had wilted long ago; I felt utterly bereft. My parents were gone because I had begged them not to prolong their goodbyes and now I wanted them with a depth of wretchedness such as I had never known before. To make matters worse, the people who streamed in and out of the front door all seemed to me—miserable me—loudly and self-lovingly happy. In (it seemed) deliberately cruel contrast to my crushed state, they exuded cleverness, poise and impossible glamour. One girl bumped into me; she was chatting on her mobile and failed to notice me. She stopped for a second and peered into my face from beyond layers of make-up and clouds of expensive perfume. "Ugh!" She shrieked at the sight of my faded coat and wan, streaky cheeks. She drew back and laughed sharply. "Oh my God!" She flashed past.

I tucked Boris into my inside breast pocket (he was a compact bear) and wiped my nose across the back of my hand, leaving a snail trail over my knuckles. I had read enough to harbour vague preconceptions about boarding school: there would be foggy lacrosse matches, I thought, and forbidden midnight feasts and dingy wooden desks. I expected the details of my preconceptions



to be incorrect, but the girl with the mobile made me feel that the spirit of my ideas were not misplaced.

Then a low voice near my ear said, "Are you all right?" and I turned to find a fellow mismatch standing beside me. He wore thick glasses and an exquisitely tailored suit that he pulled and picked at in relentless discomfort. He was glaring at his shoes and scuffing them on the gravel. I was neither afraid nor ashamed to answer him, at any rate.

"No," I moaned with a gurgling sniff. "I'm not all right. I'm going to go home. I'm going to walk home now, on my own." Home was two hundred miles away.

At this he looked up. He stopped fidgeting and studied my snotty pallor intently.

"You really don't like the Institute, do you?"

I had not even entered the door yet, but I replied without hesitation, "I hate it. I'm not staying here."

He made a vicious grab at my arm and then, to my astonishment, embarked upon a rapturous, whispered plea: "Please don't go. Please stay. You've no idea how much I need the company of someone like you: somebody scruffy and ungainly, whose nose runs and whose hair doesn't stay in place. It's so lonely here."

I frowned and pulled my arm away. "I'm not ungainly."

"I know you think I'm being rude," he went on. "I don't mean to be...But it's so hard...What I mean to say is that you look as though you're still real."

A gang of teenagers (I noticed later on that almost everyone survived within gangs here) jostled the boy. "Ooh, Four-Eyes has got himself a girlfriend!" they screamed in unison, then one of them made a swipe at his glasses and dropped them into a muddy puddle. They swaggered away, crowing. Three adults—teachers, as I presently discovered—were loitering in the doorway and saw what happened, but they shrugged at one another, smiling. I retrieved the boy's spectacles; the lenses were intact. He snatched them hastily and polished them against his expensive suit. He affected to be unmoved by the incident, though he couldn't help blushing.



I turned to find a fellow mismatch standing beside me.

“My name is Joachim Larrouse,” he continued in his peculiarly intense manner. He held out his hand and I shook it formally. “I am very pleased to meet you, Miss...?”

“Abigail Crabtree,” I smiled, despite myself.

“Miss Crabtree. And I really would appreciate it if you didn’t run away from school...not just yet anyway.”

"I don't know...all right."

A tremulous grin almost broke across his face. Then he frowned and shrugged self-consciously. "I suppose you'd better go and see Anna. You may as well get it over with."

"Who's Anna?"

"It's my name for the headmistress, Miss Konder. Sometimes I think of her as Anna, and sometimes just The Snake."

"Hello, Darling," hissed Miss Konder, and made as though to kiss me on either cheek. Her flesh never actually touched mine, but I felt as though cold water were trickling down my neck when she came close to me. "We don't need you, thank you very much Larrouse," she added, and Joachim slunk away. I sat down before her stainless steel desk and glanced around at the whitewashed, breeze-block walls. Like the corridors through which Joachim and I had passed to reach her office, the room was bare and uninteresting. There were no books or pictures; even the blinds and the wastepaper bins were sleek and bland. Besides the desk and two chairs, The Snake's office contained a metal cupboard and a shelf piled high with glossy magazines.

"Well darling, and you are...?" she asked, glancing down at her register.

"Abigail Crabtree."

"Oh yes. Mr. Montefiore's protégé." There was a pause as she looked me up and down. She was tall, thin and crisp, with short hair, long nails and not a trace of physical softness. "Well, well, we are in a mess, n'est pas?" she smiled brightly. "You didn't think to spruce yourself up for day one?"

"Um..."

"Never mind. You're not the first. Now then." She swung my little suitcase onto her desk and clicked it open. I protested with a murmur of shy alarm. She glanced blankly at my forehead and my protest withered away.

I watched as she rifled through my precious possessions. First a much-mended woolly jumper. I used to wear it when I was climbing trees at home. Mum had packed it saying, "You'll need something rough for playtime."

"My goodness me, Abigail Crabtree!" Miss Konder exclaimed. "That will have to go!" She dropped it into a black bin bag. I did not protest, because I had no courage in my indignation, as my mum would have done. What were my feelings beside Miss Konder's expertise?

All my clothes went in the bin bag, and, to my horror, two new notebooks, a pencil case and a pocket English dictionary. Then she picked up my battered copy of *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Oh no! Please let me keep that!" I cried as she studied the cover with uncomprehending disdain.

“What, *this*?” she said, dangling the book in front of my anguished gaze. “What do you want this for? We don’t read books at the Institute—especially not old, messy ones like this.”

“No books?” I was astounded.

“Oh no,” she replied breezily as *The Wizard of Oz* flopped into her rubbish bag. I winced to see the cover bend back against the sides of the bag and the pages crease under their own weight. “This is a forward-thinking institution. You will only study things that are relevant and useful. You want to be able to leave school as a presentable money-earner, don’t you? That’s why Mr. Montefiore is paying for you to have such an excellent education. Well then! How exactly is a story book going to contribute, do you think?”

I didn’t answer, because I was busy thinking what a hateful man my godfather must be. Miss Konder took my silence for submission, so she patted my cheek with her cold-blooded fingers and murmured, “Good girl!”

“Will I learn French?” I asked hopelessly.

Miss Konder was writing something on her clipboard against my name. She wrote slowly and with a great effort of concentration, which surprised me and made me fear her a little less. She answered absently,

“Oh yes, you’ll do a bit of French.”

I felt so deprived of good news that her welcome words excited me to volubility. I said, quietly and quickly, “Oh good! Oh, I really want to learn French! You see at home I have— used to have—a baby-sitter called Catherine Lorimer and she babysat when my parents went out, and she did French at university and she wrote a sort of thesis or something on this French poet called Verhaeren, although actually I think he’s Belgian but he writes in French. And she told me about this poem called *The Mill*, only in French it’s called *Moole-Anne* I think...”

“Abigail, Abigail, Abigail!” Miss Konder was shaking her head and smiling thinly, with her lips. There were no smiling creases around her eyes. “You have a very great deal to learn!”

“I know,” I replied timidly. “I know, I was just saying...”

“You won’t be learning frivolous things like poetry while I’m in charge of your education. What practical purpose would that have? Mmm? I meant that if you were very good and very clever, you might learn a little bit of social French. When you’re entertaining, for example, it’s useful to know words like *vol-au-vent* and *hors d’oeuvre*.”

I stared at her stonily.

Miss Konder caught my eye and bent to write something vehement against my name. Then she looked up with that same loveless smile. “Now, have I seen all your possessions? No toys, I presume?”

I could feel Boris's friendly bulk against my chest. Thank God I had thought to put him inside my coat. "No!" I squeaked with a desperate sort of carelessness.

She focussed her suspicious snake-eyes on my lying face and paused before saying, "Good. Money?"

"Oh, yes!" I said eagerly, glad to divert her attention. "In the side pocket of my suitcase. Dad gave me twenty pounds pocket money."

"Is that all?" she sneered, as she extracted my twenty-pound note and fastened it to her clipboard. "Try and bring a bit more than that next term. Especially if your parents are expecting the school to kit you out with clothes and make-up."

She stood up and unlocked the metal cupboard. I could see that it was piled high with small plastic boxes and cellophane packages. Miss Konder mused, rummaging for a while before turning to me with an armful of clothes and a pink box.

"This will do to start with," she said. "One pair of high-heeled shoes. One pin-striped trouser suit. Two silk tops. Three sets of underwear. Inside this box you'll find hair brushes and straighteners, foundation, eyeshadow, mascara, blusher, lipsticks...anything vital that I've forgotten?" I did not reply. "Ah! Nail varnish!" She returned to the cupboard and produced a vibrant red bottle. "We'll sort you out properly in a few days time, as I say—but this will keep you going in the meantime."

I stared at the pile in my arms and my scruffy, ungainly, real self quailed. You might think there was nothing so terrible in Miss Konder's determination to smarten me up; to dress me in pinstripes and mascara. But you would be wrong. This was no giggly dressing-up game—it was a serious, permanent imposition, so I felt crushed and ashamed. My real self was to be obliterated and I had no will to resist. I could not even be sure that the obliteration was wrong. I only knew that, daubed with lipstick and tottering about on high heels, I would feel an incommunicable loneliness. I would look ridiculous to anybody whom I loved and since they could only see my made-up body, they would assume that my mind and soul were ridiculous too. For a nightmarish moment I imagined my parents staring at me without comprehension, then laughing at me.

"Now, finally, your timetable."

Miss Konder handed me a sheet of paper and I took it dazedly.

"We rise at eight-ish; there's a bell at eight o'clock. Lessons begin at around nine-thirty tomorrow morning. I see that your first class is Hair Care, so try and get yours straightened before you turn up. You've got Relationships in the afternoon and a bit of preparatory reading won't go amiss, so I'll give you the June copy of *Hey, Guys!*— there's a really good article in there by Candy Feckle who was, I am proud to say, one of our own...there you go, can you manage?" She placed a colourful magazine on top of my cellophane pile. "Now, off you go, sweetie!"

Joachim lurked outside. I think he had been listening at the door. He smiled conspiratorially as I emerged, and this encouraged me. I was about to speak, but The Snake marched into the corridor, smacked him hard over the back of his head and rasped, "Get...out...of...my...sight...Larrouse." We were obliged to leave in opposite directions, and I did not see Joachim again that evening.

Boris and I made our way to the imaginary wood that night. I felt I would rather face ten thousand Vulture Men and Kings of Traumund than suffer another moment at the Institute.

"What will you do?" asked Prince Constantine as he folded a roomy quilt round my shoulders. A girl called Dorothea stirred a pan of cocoa over the fire; I watched the flickering of her plaits and her faded gingham dress with a yearning watchfulness, as though she might fade from my sight in a moment.

"They'll run away, of course," she answered scornfully. "Why wouldn't they? What's there to stay for?" She turned to me. "Just tie some bedsheets together, climb out of the window and walk home. Only, make sure you walk at night—you've to hide in woods and behind hedges in the daytime, in case Anna Konder has a search party out."

Boris slurped his cocoa and glanced at me. I looked into the fire. Eyes the owl sighed moodily.

"What?" demanded Dorothea.

"The boy, Joachim," Eyes intoned.

I beat my fist against the floor. Tears sprang to my eyes.

"I don't even know him! I hadn't even entered the building before he made me say I'd stay! I'm not beholden to him! Well, I'm not, am I?"

"I don't know," murmured Prince Constantine and Dorothea in tones of quiet distress.

Eyes the owl and Boris the bear were silent.

I spent the rest of the night wondering, crying, resolving to stay and resolving to go. My friends did their best to comfort me, and I was thankful, but their kindness made it even harder to tolerate the prospect of an imminent return to the Institute. We returned nonetheless, Boris and I, at dawn. Radiators hummed around the room and the air might have been insufferably hot, only the window over my bed was ajar.

I knew I must hide Boris from Miss Konder and her staff. I thought of putting him inside my pillowcase, so I felt cautiously (for the surrounding beds were occupied by potentially hostile girls) for the opening. There was something already there, inside the pillowcase: a hard, rectangular object, like a book. It had not been there yesterday evening. I knew that because I had, very incompetently, made up the bed myself.

Montefiore's Goddaughter by Elizabeth Brooks

It was a book. I drew it out surreptitiously. It was my *Wizard of Oz* —bent, injured but intact.

A slip of paper floated onto the mattress as I turned its beloved pages. I read a pencilled message by the feeble light from the window.

*“Dear Abigail—I retrieved your book as a token of my friendship for you. I know this is your bed because I saw you struggling with sheets and pillowcases when I was taking a stroll in the “garden” earlier. Do you have a bear, or something of that sort? I know you told Anna you didn’t, but maybe you do. If so, then loose floorboards are good hiding places. I could come and loosen one in your dormitory at an opportune moment, should you so wish. Will you meet me at lunch break tomorrow? We could talk then. I know French— I could try and teach you. Please don’t run away. I’d run with you, only my parents will send me straight back. Your friend Joachim Larrouse.”*

I sighed and closed my eyes. Moist air drifted through the window and cooled my flushed face. I lay wide awake and waited for the eight o’clock bell.