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THE
INVISIBLE
LIFE OF
ADDIE
LARUE

V.E.

SCHWAB

The
INVISIBLE
LIFE *of*
ADDIE
LARUE

V. E. SCHWAB



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

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*To Patricia—
For never once forgetting.*

The old gods may be great, but they are neither kind nor merciful. They are fickle, unsteady as moonlight on water, or shadows in a storm. If you insist on calling them, take heed: be careful what you ask for, be willing to pay the price. And no matter how desperate or dire, *never* pray to the gods that answer after dark.

Estele Magritte
1642–1719

Villon-sur-Sarthe, France
July 29, 1714

A girl is running for her life.

The summer air burns at her back, but there are no torches, no angry mobs, only the distant lanterns of the wedding party, the reddish glow of the sun as it breaks against the horizon, cracks and spills across the hills, and the girl runs, skirts tangling in the grass as she surges toward the woods, trying to beat the dying light.

Voices carry on the wind, calling her name.

Adeline? Adeline? Adeline!

Her shadow stretches out ahead—too long, its edges already blurring—and small white flowers tumble from her hair, littering the ground like stars. A constellation left in her wake, almost like the one across her cheeks.

Seven freckles. One for every love she'd have, that's what Estele had said, when the girl was still young.

One for every life she'd lead.

One for every god watching over her.

Now, they mock her, those seven marks. Promises. Lies. She's had no loves, she's lived no lives, she's met no gods, and now she is out of time.

But the girl doesn't slow, doesn't look back; she doesn't want to see the life that stands there, waiting. Static as a drawing. Solid as a tomb.

Instead, she runs.

PART ONE

THE GODS THAT ANSWER AFTER DARK



Title of Piece: *Revenir*

Artist: Arlo Miret

Date: 1721–22 AD

Medium: ash wood, marble

Location: On loan from the Musée d'Orsay

Description: A sculptural series of five wooden birds in various postures and stages of pre-flight, mounted on a narrow marble plinth.

Background: A diligent autobiographer, Miret kept journals that provide insight into the artist's mind and process. Regarding the inspiration for *Revenir*, Miret attributed the idea to a figurine found on the streets of Paris in the winter of 1715. The wooden bird, found with a broken wing, is reputedly re-created as the fifth in the sequence (albeit intact), about to take flight.

Estimated Value: \$175,000

New York City
March 10, 2014

I

The girl wakes up in someone else's bed.

She lies there, perfectly still, tries to hold time like a breath in her chest; as if she can keep the clock from ticking forward, keep the boy beside her from waking, keep the memory of their night alive through sheer force of will.

She knows, of course, that she can't. Knows that he'll forget. They always do.

It isn't his fault—it is never their faults.

The boy is still asleep, and she watches the slow rise and fall of his shoulders, the place where his dark hair curls against the nape of his neck, the scar along his ribs. Details long memorized.

His name is Toby.

Last night, she told him hers was Jess. She lied, but only because she can't say her real name—one of the vicious little details tucked like nettles in the grass. Hidden barbs designed to sting. What is a person, if not the marks they leave behind? She has learned to step between the thorny weeds, but there are some cuts that cannot be avoided—a memory, a photograph, a name.

In the last month, she has been Claire, Zoe, Michelle—but two nights ago, when she was Elle, and they were closing down a late-night café after one of his gigs, Toby said that he was in love with a girl named Jess—he simply hadn't met her yet.

So now, she is Jess.

Toby begins to stir, and she feels the old familiar ache in her chest as he stretches, rolls toward her—but doesn't wake, not yet. His face is now inches from her, his lips parted in sleep, black curls shadowing his eyes, dark lashes against fair cheeks.

Once, the darkness teased the girl as they strolled along the Seine, told her that she had a "type," insinuating that most of the men she chose—and even a few of the women—looked an awful lot like *him*.

The same dark hair, the same sharp eyes, the same etched features.

But that wasn't fair.

After all, the darkness only looked the way he did because of *her*. *She'd* given him that shape, chosen what to make of him, what to see.

Don't you remember, she told him then, *when you were nothing but shadow and smoke?*

Darling, he'd said in his soft, rich way, *I was the night itself*.

Now it is morning, in another city, another century, the bright sunlight cutting through the curtains, and Toby shifts again, rising up through the surface of sleep. And the girl who is—was—Jess holds her breath again as she tries to imagine a version of this day where he wakes, and sees her, and *remembers*.

Where he smiles, and strokes her cheek, and says, "Good morning."

But it won't happen like that, and she doesn't want to see the familiar vacant expression, doesn't want to watch as the boy tries to fill in the gaps where memories of her *should* be, witness as he pulls together his composure into practiced nonchalance. The girl has seen that performance often enough, knows the motions by heart, so instead she slides from the bed and pads barefoot out into the living room.

She catches her reflection in the hall mirror and notices what everyone notices: the seven freckles, scattered like a band of stars across her nose and cheeks.

Her own private constellation.

She leans forward and fogs the glass with her breath. Draws her fingertip through the cloud as she tries to write her name. *A—d—*

But she only gets as far as that before the letters dissolve. It's not the medium—no matter how she tries to say her name, no matter how she tries to tell her story. And she *has* tried, in pencil, in ink, in paint, in blood.

Adeline.

Addie.

LaRue.

It is no use.

The letters crumble, or fade. The sounds die in her throat.

Her fingers fall away from the glass and she turns, surveying the living room.

Toby is a musician, and the signs of his art are everywhere.

In the instruments that lean against the walls. In the scribbled lines and notes scattered on tables—bars of half-remembered melodies mixed in with grocery lists and weekly to-do's. But here and there, another hand—the flowers he's started keeping on the kitchen sill, though he can't remember when the habit started. The book on Rilke he doesn't remember buying. The things that last, even when memories don't.

Toby is a slow riser, so Addie makes herself tea—he doesn't drink it, but it's already there, in his cupboard, a tin of loose Ceylon, and a box of silk pouches. A relic of a late-night trip to the grocery store, a boy and a girl wandering the aisles, hand in hand, because they couldn't sleep. Because she hadn't been willing to let the night end. Wasn't ready to let go.

She lifts the mug, inhales the scent as memories waft up to meet it.

A park in London. A patio in Prague. A team room in Edinburgh.

The past drawn like a silk sheet over the present.

It's a cold morning in New York, the windows fogged with frost, so she pulls a blanket from the back of the couch and wraps it around her shoulders. A guitar case takes up one end of the sofa, and Toby's cat takes up the other, so she perches on the piano bench instead.

The cat, *also* named Toby ("So I can talk to myself without it being weird...") he explained) looks at her as she blows on her tea.

She wonders if the cat remembers.

Her hands are warmer now, and she sets the mug on top of the piano and slides the cover up off the keys, stretches her fingers, and starts to play as softly as possible. In the bedroom, she can hear Toby-the-human stirring, and every inch of her, from skeleton to skin, tightens in dread.

This is the hardest part.

Addie could have left—*should* have left—slipped out when he was still asleep, when their morning was still an extension of their night, a moment trapped in amber. But it is too late now, so she closes her eyes and continues to play, keeps her head down as she hears his footsteps underneath the notes, keeps her fingers moving when she feels him in the doorway. He'll stand there, taking in the scene, trying to piece together the timeline of last night, how it could have gone astray, when he could have met a girl and then taken her home, if he could have had too much drink, why he doesn't remember any of it.

But she knows that Toby won't interrupt her as long as she's playing, so she savors the music for several more seconds before forcing herself to trail off, look up, pretend she doesn't notice the confusion on his face.

"Morning," she says, her voice cheerful, and her accent, once country French, now so faint that she hardly hears it.

"Uh, good morning," he says, running a hand through his loose black curls, and to his credit, Toby looks the way he always does—a little dazed, and surprised to see a pretty girl sitting in his living room wearing nothing but a pair of underwear and his favorite band T-shirt beneath the blanket.

"Jess," she says, supplying the name he can't find, because it isn't there. "It's okay," she says, "if you don't remember."

Toby blushes, and nudges Toby-the-cat out of the way as he sinks onto the couch cushions. “I’m sorry ... this isn’t like me. I’m not that kind of guy.”

She smiles. “I’m not that kind of girl.”

He smiles, too, then, and it’s a line of light breaking the shadows of his face. He nods at the piano, and she wants him to say something like, “I didn’t know you could play,” but instead Toby says, “You’re really good,” and she is—it’s amazing what you can learn when you have the time.

“Thanks,” she says, running her fingertips across the keys.

Toby is restless now, escaping to the kitchen. “Coffee?” he asks, shuffling through the cupboards.

“I found tea.”

She starts to play a different song. Nothing intricate, just a strain of notes. The beginnings of something. She finds the melody, takes it up, lets it slip between her fingers as Toby ducks back into the room, a steaming cup in his hands.

“What was that?” he asks, eyes brightening in that way unique to artists—writers, painters, musicians, anyone prone to moments of inspiration. “It sounded familiar...”

A shrug. “You played it for me last night.”

It isn’t a lie, not exactly. He did play it for her. After she showed him.

“I did?” he says, brow furrowing. He’s already setting the coffee aside, reaching for a pencil and a notepad off the nearest table. “God—I must have been drunk.”

He shakes his head as he says it; Toby’s never been one of those songwriters who prefer to work under the influence.

“Do you remember more?” he asks, turning through the pad. She starts playing again, leading him through the notes. He doesn’t know it, but he’s been working on this song for weeks. Well, *they* have.

Together.

She smiles a little as she plays on. This is the grass between the nettles. A safe place to step. She can’t leave her own mark, but if she’s careful, she can give the mark to someone else. Nothing concrete, of course, but inspiration rarely is.

Toby’s got the guitar up now, balanced on one knee, and he follows her lead, murmuring to himself. That this is good, this is different, this is *something*. She stops playing, gets to her feet.

“I should go.”

The melody falls apart on the strings as Toby looks up. “What? But I don’t even know you.”

“Exactly,” she says, heading for the bedroom to collect her clothes.

“But I *want* to know you,” Toby says, setting down the guitar and trailing her through the apartment, and this is the moment when none of it feels fair, the only

time she feels the wave of frustration threatening to break. Because she has spent *weeks* getting to know him. And he has spent hours forgetting her. “Slow down.”

She hates this part. She shouldn’t have lingered. Should have been out of sight as well as out of mind, but there’s always that nagging hope that this time, it will be different, that this time, they will remember.

I remember, says the darkness in her ear.

She shakes her head, forcing the voice away.

“Where’s the rush?” asks Toby. “At least let me make you breakfast.”

But she’s too tired to play the game again so soon, and so she lies instead, says there’s something she has to do, and doesn’t let herself stop moving, because if she does, she knows she won’t have the strength to start again, and the cycle will spin on, the affair beginning in the morning instead of at night. But it won’t be any easier when it ends, and if she has to start over, she’d rather be a meet-cute at a bar than the unremembered aftermath of a one-night stand.

It won’t matter, in a moment, anyways.

“Jess, wait,” Toby says, catching her hand. He fumbles for the right words, and then gives up, starts again. “I have a gig tonight, at the Alloway. You should come. It’s over...”

She knows where it is, of course. That is where they met for the first time, and the fifth, and the ninth. And when she agrees to come, his smile is dazzling. It always is.

“Promise?” he asks.

“Promise.”

“I’ll see you there,” he says, the words full of hope as she turns and steps through the door. She looks back, and says, “Don’t forget me in the meantime.”

An old habit. A superstition. A plea.

Toby shakes his head. “How could I?”

She smiles, as if it’s just a joke.

But Addie knows, as she forces herself down the stairs, that it’s already happening—knows that by the time he closes the door, she’ll be gone.

II

March is such a fickle month.

It is the seam between winter and spring—though *seam* suggests an even hem, and March is more like a rough line of stitches sewn by an unsteady hand, swinging wildly between January gusts and June greens. You don't know what you'll find, until you step outside.

Estele used to call these the restless days, when the warmer-blooded gods began to stir, and the cold ones began to settle. When dreamers were most prone to bad ideas, and wanderers were likely to get lost.

Addie has always been predisposed to both.

It makes sense then, that she was born on the 10th of March, right along the ragged seam, though it has been so long since Addie felt like celebrating.

For twenty-three years, she dreaded the marker of time, what it meant: that she was growing up, growing old. And then, for centuries, a birthday was a rather useless thing, far less important than the night she signed away her soul.

That date a death, and a rebirth, rolled into one.

Still, it is her birthday, and a birthday deserves a gift.

She pauses in front of a boutique, her reflection ghosted in the glass.

In the broad window, a mannequin poses mid-stride, its head tilted ever so slightly to one side, as if listening to some private song. Its long torso is wrapped in a broad-striped sweater, a pair of oil-slick leggings vanishing into knee-high boots. One hand up, fingers hooked in the collar of the jacket that hangs over one shoulder. As Addie studies the mannequin, she finds herself mimicking the pose, shifting her stance, tilting her head. And maybe it's the day, or the promise of spring in the air, or maybe she's simply in the mood for something new.

Inside, the boutique smells of unlit candles and unworn clothes, and Addie runs her fingers over cotton and silk before finding the striped knit sweater, which turns

out to be cashmere. She throws it over one arm, along with the featured leggings. She knows her sizes.

They haven't changed.

"Hi there!" The cheerful clerk is a girl in her early twenties, like Addie herself, though one is real and aging and the other is an image trapped in amber. "Can I get a room started for you?"

"Oh, that's okay," she says, plucking a pair of boots from a display. "I've got everything I need." She follows the girl to the three curtained stalls at the rear of the shop.

"Just give me a shout if I can help," says the girl, turning away before the curtain swings shut, and Addie is alone with a pillowed bench, and a full-length mirror, and herself.

She kicks off her boots, and shrugs out of her jacket, tossing it onto the seat. Change rattles in the pocket as it lands, and something tumbles out. It hits the floor with a dull clack and rolls across the narrow changing room, stopping only when it meets the baseboard.

It is a ring.

A small circle carved of ash-gray wood. A familiar band, once loved, now loathsome.

Addie stares at the thing a moment. Her fingers twitch, traitorous, but she doesn't reach for the ring, doesn't pick it up, just turns her back on the small wooden circle and continues undressing. She pulls on the sweater, shimmies into the leggings, zips up the boots. The mannequin was thinner, taller, but Addie likes the way the outfit hangs on her, the warmth of the cashmere, the weight of the leggings, the soft embrace of the lining in the boots.

She plucks the price tags off one by one, ignoring the zeroes.

Joyeux anniversaire, she thinks, meeting her reflection. Inclining her head, as if she too hears some private song. The picture of a modern Manhattan woman, even if the face in the mirror is the same one she's had for centuries.

Addie leaves her old clothes strewn like a shadow across the dressing room floor. The ring, a scorned child in the corner. The only thing she reclaims is the discarded jacket.

It's soft, made of black leather and worn practically to silk, the kind of thing people pay a fortune for these days and call it vintage. It is the only thing Addie refused to leave behind and feed to the flames in New Orleans, though the smell of him clung to it like smoke, his stain forever on everything. She does not care. She loves the jacket.

It was new then, but it is broken in now, shows its wear in all the ways she can't. It reminds her of Dorian Gray, time reflected in cowhide instead of human

skin.

Addie steps out of the little curtained booth.

Across the boutique, the clerk startles, flustered at the sight of her. “Everything fit?” she asks, too polite to admit she doesn’t remember letting someone into the back. God bless customer service.

Addie shakes her head ruefully. “Some days you’re stuck with what you’ve got,” she says, heading for the door.

By the time the clerk finds the clothes, a ghost of a girl on the changing room floor, she won’t remember whose they are, and Addie will be gone, from sight and mind and memory.

She tosses the jacket over her shoulder, one finger hooked in the collar, and steps out into the sun.