

CHAPTER 1

The Central Blood-red Chamber of the Kingdom of the Heart

THIS STORY concerns three women: Petra, Sylvie and Colette. To avoid any chance of mystification, I want to explain that Sylvie was Colette's mother, and that Petra adopted Colette and renamed her Celeste. Petra was the leader of a religious community of which Celeste was a member from birth. The group marked its singularity by the wearing of red shoes or sandals, like fairyfolk. Sylvie did not belong to the community.

When Petra was a child in the forties living with her large family in a decaying old house in a small town in Tasmania, she liked to spend her time in a room at the back of the house. This was a large dark room where there were old books and magazines left behind by people who had lived in the house before. Petra liked to read and dream and imagine. In one of the magazines Petra found a tinted photograph of a very small and fragile girl. The girl was sitting on a nimble rattan chair which was placed on the leaf of a giant lily pad in the middle of a pool in southern India. The edges of the leaf, which was six feet across, were turned up like the rim of a platter. It was a miracle the way the girl could sit there in a chair on the surface of the water, as if the liquid had turned to ice. Perhaps there was a thin sheet of glass below the surface? Perhaps it was just what it seemed, a marvellous trick of nature where lily leaves were so strong that they could support the weight of a child on a chair. The name of the plant, *Victoria regia*, was supplied with the picture; the child was anonymous. The wonderful image of the child lodged in Petra's heart. Petra carried with her forever a belief that in some

way she was that child, that princess in the frothy white dress, the white stockings, the button boots made from the soft skins of young goats, dyed red. The colours were subtle, faded.

That child, Petra told herself, is me.

Petra imagined herself stepping down from the chair, tripping and skipping and dancing and pirouetting and somersaulting across the lily leaf and leaping like light, moving like air, sailing like a bubble onto the next leaf and the next. Until she had reached into the far distance of the photograph. And was gone.

Day after day, year after year, Petra crept into the dark room where she worked her way through the books and magazines, absorbing in a trance the images and information in the encyclopaedias. She became addicted to the smell of the room, the smell of the books, the stillness, the darkness. The feeling of past time, of no time. The world she entered in that room was separate from everything else she knew; it became the world of her imagination. The princess in the white dress on the lily pad read steadily on subjects from Alchemy to Zoroaster. She loved history and fairytales, loved to feel her heart range from beauty and ecstasy to bitterness, danger, cruelty and despair. She read Dickens, **Tolstoy**, Defoe, Sir Walter Scott. Tennyson, Keats and Shelley. The thought of a magic carpet captivated her, a rich red square of silken carpet with strange symbolic patterns woven into it, magic shapes with occult meaning and the power to fly. She imagined the broken-down old room (where the boxes of books shared the space with crooked bicycles and pieces of rusty farm machinery jumbled up with tattered armchairs and bits of beds) to be the secret room in a palace, a room where the walls were lined with gold and scarlet silk and where the couches were draped in velvet, the tables made from glass. Vast mirrors reflected the glitter of cascades of crystal chandeliers, and over everything there glowed an aureole of crimson rays. It was the central blood-red chamber of the kingdom of the heart. And above her in this kingdom I was always hovering. I am her guardian. I don't mean this in the sense of someone who has been appointed by a court to assume responsibility for Petra's health and financial well-being; I am spirit; I am her guardian angel.

Be not afraid.

There exists a dramatic tension between what is aerial and what is terrestrial.

I exist on a line that defines that tension.

Think lightning.

I am actually more like pure thought than anything else, a kind of pure idea, sometimes represented by light itself and generally invisible to the naked human eye. Angels are sometimes visible to people, clothed in the bodies the human imagination has been programmed to supply, and we usually appear or manifest at times of stress, terror, or ecstasy. Most people have never seen an angel.

The story I tell is best read as a kind of dream, as a mirage, perhaps. If you could read it with your eyes shut, I would strongly suggest you do so, but I know this is not possible. A state of intense relaxation, if you can achieve that, is desirable. I do not present you with what is known as virtual reality, but with virtual dream, virtual imagination, the virtual unconscious mind. All humans dream; see this tale I tell you, if you can, as a dream. Perhaps I am frightening you again. In your dreams you have known terror.

Be not afraid.

I must warn you that I exist—that I think—in the present tense. Time with its past and its future has no real meaning for me, although I have attempted, in the telling of this story, to accommodate the concept of a range of tenses in a bid to come down to earth, to trace a narrative through the lives of Petra (b.1940), Sylvie (b.1952) and Colette (b.1968). Dreams, you know, are tenseless in the way that my view is tenseless. Dreams can give what are seen as timely warnings, but the narrative itself is careless, carefree about the sequences of history.

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern on another. Let visitors trip.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*

The group of people who made up Petra's following were sometimes known as the Red Shoe Cult, for Petra developed a rule that footwear was to be red, or that the bare feet of adults were to be decorated with designs in henna, the feet of children dyed with mercurichrome. The group's real name was the Hill House Brethren, first formed by Dr Irving Clay, of whom more later. Uniform of some kind is nearly always important to distinct groups of people, whether the people are together for religious, sporting, military or other reasons, and Petra decreed that her people would be marked by their red feet. The shoemaker's shop in the grounds of Hill House was always busy making shoes, sandals and ballet slippers. The principal item made was the

scarlet ecclesiastical slipper, as worn by Catholic priests in Latin countries. I was interested in the fact that although Petra went to great lengths to escape from her origins, at Hill House she replicated her father's shoemaking shop.

Of all forms of erotic symbolism the most frequent is that which idealizes the foot and the shoe.

Havelock Ellis

The importance and meaning of shoes had gone so deeply into Petra's spirit, into her heart, that she could not, would not, leave them behind. If you look at the stories of Hans Christian Andersen you will see also that this son of a poor shoemaker in Odense is fascinated by feet and shoes, not least in 'The Little Mermaid' and in 'The Red Shoes'. The evil, nightmarish pain and loss brought to the realm of the foot in these stories is of the darkest, most sadistic, masochistic kind. The sudden castration of the foot with an axe, the sensation of walking on hot knives.

You will notice, from time to time, that I have listed the odd word at the foot of a page. By this I mean to suggest to you that you may wish to turn to the section called The Footnote, where I have expanded on these key words in The Narrative. You could try looking up Hans Christian Andersen now.

You get cults that wear flowing robes of only a certain colour—black or red or orange or white or silver—cults that shave their heads; cults that never cut their hair; cults that always cover their heads; cults that wear feather cloaks; cults that dress like flowers or animals. And these are only the uniforms, the clothes that set the cults aside from other people, mark them as special and different and blessed and superior; followers of great and holy leaders by whose word the cult members live or die.

Not so crazy was Petra's fascination with feet, and with dance, for all religious ritual began as dance. And not so mad, either, her use of the title Queen of Sheba, one of the most celebrated foot-queens of history.

Feet are ascribed telltale marks of identity and origin, perhaps through the literal-minded wordplay of the imagination, since they are the lowest part of the body and in touch with the earth as opposed to the heavens.

Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*

The planet is seeded with groups of people who are trying to live according to rules of their own making, who are using the bits of civilisation that appeal to them and inventing the rest. Such people usually come to the attention of the world only when they self-destruct in some way—like at Jonestown or Waco. It takes a charismatic leader with a weirdly strange idea. Petra

was charismatic, I can see that, and from my position I have been able to follow the development of her nutty ideas and her power over other people. It's no use a leader giving the faithful a sane and rational idea to follow—the point is you dream up something crackpot and then sell it to them. And of course when I say 'sell', I mean the leader usually gets rich. I have heard Petra preaching to her followers—who were by no means stupid people—and I tell you, nothing she said made any sense. Now and again I will give you little tastes of this kind of thing. Of course, half the time she and the Brethren were away with the fairies on LSD or mushrooms.

We will enter from time to time (you see how eager I am in my efforts to follow the clock) a series of hallucinations, of swift-shifting kaleidoscopes. The hallucinatory juices of a mushroom may be poisonous or deliciously benign; and the shape of the mushroom is mimicked in the cloud arising from nuclear explosions. It is instructive to compare the shapes things take. (Think, for instance, of how many things in nature resemble the human eye.) Human beings attain visions of timeless ecstasy and bliss when the chemicals from mushrooms, those umbrellas of the fairies, invade their mushroom-shaped brains. And I hear that a vision of the god-of-all has recently appeared to a woman in the form of a great white umbrella surrounded by dazzling flocks of multi-coloured butterflies.

I notice how much language seems to depend on words that acknowledge the presence of time. I, of course, actually have no language to call my own. Angels must borrow what they can where they will.

The highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with the sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to the tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*

The sky, especially the starry sky, opens its umbrella, arches its ribs, over this planet. Petra sometimes preached a doctrine explaining that the Brethren were made from what she called star-stuff, had been chosen by some grand universal selection process to get the really good material for their bodies. I was always amazed that the great minds of the city fell for this—don't they know that everybody is made from the same elements as the stars? Star-stuff. Sounds good, doesn't it?

Multi-coloured butterflies clouding round the great white umbrella

became the visionary woman's personal metaphor for god-of-all-with-angels. Rather nice, in its way. Difficult to sustain and develop as a great myth, but somehow a delicate marrying of natural and domestic things in an attempt to express what is sublime. Think umbrella, think butterfly. I also think of the giant umbrella of the lily leaf on the pond in southern India, the leaf with the Petra-like child in her red boots sitting on a little chair, floating on the surface of the water, staring at the camera.

Think back to that image of strange floating innocence.

Think float, think flight, think wing, think hand.

Think foot.

Think fire, passion. Think red. (Sometimes at this point I say something like: think Massacre of the Innocents; think Saint Bartholomew, Catherine de' Medici.) Red shoes, ruby slippers. Think shoe, think foot.

CHAPTER 2

The Shoe Story

SO THIS is the shoe story, the foot story. If the shoe fits, wear it, as the prince said to Cinderella—but more of Cinderella later. Forget about romance and think sex.

Of all fetish objects sexy shoes are among the oldest and probably most common. They taper the toes. They arch the instep. They lift the calves. They tilt the fanny and bow the back and oil the hips and sashay the gait. Their leathery, animal scents and textures evoke the jungle blood sports braided in our genes.

There you are, a strange mosaic of images—jungle blood sports braided in your genes.

Shoes make the foot look shorter and more precious, and yet add the formidableness of extra height, and often a sort of stiletto menace. A sexy shoe is a masterpiece of concealment and disclosure and so defines the dynamic of lust itself.

This is all from *Esquire* magazine—and as I said, forget about romance, think stiletto menace.

I've been in charge of the shoe story for as far back as anybody can remember. You get people like the Master of the Queen's Stables, Master of

the Mirrors, Post Master, Guardian of the Lungs and Heart—well, I’m Guardian of the Foot (and by implication, the Shoe).

I feel that I should acknowledge the sexist nature of the language here—everybody seems to be a master of some kind or other, don’t they? Well, those are their titles from way back, and I am at a bit of a loss what to do about it. ‘Guardian’ is a nice word, I think, and I’m glad I fall into that category. The other night on television (I should warn you that I rather like these modern inventions) I saw a man who writes novels talking about books and writers in general, and the only writers he talked about were men. I thought that was pretty daring, in this day and age, and I must say I would never do that. But he’s a man who offended some people so much with one of his books that they have sworn to kill him, so I daresay getting up the noses of a bunch of feminists is small beer to him. Maybe he is challenging them to come after him, I can’t say. I have heard he does his best work under pressure. People often do.

Angels write in blue ink, in a lovely kind of copperplate that flows like the sea on a Japanese beach. Sometimes people remark that the nuns must have taught us how to write, but it’s the other way round—it was we who taught the nuns to do it, and they passed it on to all the children in their care. One of my brothers, if you could call him that, is actually in charge of fountain pens, and that’s a very big thing which also takes in cigars. Yes, in case you’re wondering, he was appointed guardian to Sigmund Freud—a hell of a job, what with one thing and another.

If Petra knew I was telling you this story she would kill me (well, that’s really nothing but a figure of speech; it is not possible for Petra to kill me because of the nature of my existence, but she would be furious and would make life very difficult). She has the vilest temper of anyone I know, and that’s saying something. I have seen her beat a child around the face with a shoe—a red stiletto. I said this was the shoe story. I have seen her order another woman to tie a child to a chair and apply hot coals to its bare feet to teach the child to walk quietly. That’s just a couple of things. If you thought this was a pretty story, think again. I issued a kind of warning when I said Massacre of the Innocents and drew your attention to **Catherine de’ Medici**—incredible woman. Petra proudly claimed to be related to Catherine, and expressed great interest in her so-called ancestor.

There’s a book Petra had, a small book with a red cover that she pinched from the library one night at King’s College right under the nose of the Master. Under my nose as well, but of course it isn’t my affair if she takes other people’s property. It’s a book about the massacre on **Saint Bartholomew’s**

Day, and she enjoyed it so much she used to read it to people, particularly children, at dinner. She was carried away with the fact that the first modern ballet, *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine*, was staged in Paris on the eve of the massacre, and was written for the occasion by Catherine de' Medici. A light would come into Petra's eyes and she would read out terrible details about the massacre. I used to wonder that her audience didn't realise she was mad, but they accepted everything she said, everything she did. I daresay she is a kind of witch, a fascinating, mesmerising, charismatic witch-woman.

Thirteen little girls with long golden hair, black dresses, black stockings and red shoes sat up to the table, damask napkins tucked under their chins, and while they drank their soup from thick white bowls Petra read to them from the red book. She embellished the text, inventing her own narratives from slender and horrible details, and encouraged the children to illustrate the stories in their drawing books, and to act out sequences in costume. Petra had no particular political or religious line to promote with the stories; her motive in telling them was to thrill and terrify and horrify the little girls, and to reinforce the notion that life outside the walls of their home was very ugly and dangerous. The stories were, in a sense, cautionary tales. And it was not at all clear that these things happened far away and long ago. The massacre on Saint Bartholomew's Day might have been just down the road, just last week, for all the children knew. Although Petra had a grip on time such as I have not, she found it useful to confuse and blur the past-present-future in the minds of the girls.

CHAPTER 3

Massacre of the Innocents

THERE WAS the story of the Huguenot who died in the massacre, strangled by his own necklace made from the ears of priests. Petra told the children how Queen Marguerite retired from the sounds and terrors of the massacre behind the curtains of her four-poster bed, only to be startled by a wounded man pursued by four archers. The wounded man dived into bed with her, and to escape from him she slipped into the space between the bed and the wall, her snow-white linen nightgown drenched in the man's blood. Petra made it clear that this became a sexual encounter and was the begin-

ning of a passionate affair. She enjoyed telling the girls about love, romance, sex.

There was the noble Huguenot woman who tried to escape disguised as a peasant in coarse woollen clothing, and who was recognised when her fashionable coloured silk petticoat showed beneath her skirt. The button maker and the king's dealer in feathers were hacked to pieces along with their wives and children, Petra revelling in her own descriptions of all the different kinds of buttons in a soup of blood and excrement, of all the bundles of wonderful and shimmering feathers splashed **scarlet** and floating down the Seine like grotesque, misshapen swans.

A man, covered in the blood of his victims up to his dark and bushy beard, carried to the river a laughing baby. Then on the bridge the man plunged a dagger into the baby's heart and tossed the body into the water. Children themselves tied belts around the necks of babies and dragged them screaming round the streets like dolls, until they fell silent in death.

One of Petra's favourite characters was the Maker of Gold Thread, whose house was built on a bridge. He kept some of his victims prisoner and then cut their throats and dropped them into the Seine through a trapdoor in his kitchen. He took delight in the months after the massacre in drawing back his sleeve to display the arm that had killed, he said, more than four hundred Huguenots.

The children at the table listened in silence, drinking their soup, as the spellbinding voice of Petra wove the stories deep into their hearts. She liked to end with the Miracle of the Mayflower. The day after the massacre, Paris was a silent city. But at noon in the churchyard of the Holy Innocents a dead and withered hawthorn bush burst into white blossoms and green leaves. Although the red book pointed out that the miracle was organised by the Franciscan who looked after the graves, Petra never said so.

She told the children about the hysterical joy of the people who saw the miracle as a vindication of the massacre, as a sign of God's pleasure, and as a licence to go out killing again. And more miracles followed as a statue of the Virgin Mary wept and a new star appeared in the heavens. A little boy, who would grow up to be the Marshal of France, had lain motionless for hours beneath the bleeding, writhing, dying bodies of his father and brother. He was found by the umpire of a nearby tennis-court who had come to rob the bodies, and his life was spared. Petra might add this story as an exemplary and moral lesson in fortitude.

And sometimes, if the fancy took her, after telling one of these stories, Petra would select a child who had transgressed in some way, who had per-

haps folded her dinner napkin wrongly, and she would summon one of the women from the kitchen and order the woman to hold the child by the ankles, naked over the pit of excrement in the cellar. This pit was where they emptied the chamber pots, and it was known as The Truth, in a gesture towards Aldous Huxley who said that truth lies at the bottom of a very dirty well.

I should tell you that Petra, the great and glorious and shining Petra, is fascinated to the point of obsession by shit. I mean that literally. Shit. This is a little-known fact about her, and I hope I am not putting you off by mentioning it so soon. Perhaps it is natural for a woman whose life is dedicated to things of the spirit to be deeply interested in her own bowels and those of other people, and the products thereof. The great Carl Gustav Jung, after all, had a vision of God depositing a great heap of shit onto the roof of the cathedral in Basle. I think that was how it went. Wrecked the roof. These people and their visions! And on the subject of shit—Petra, who is obsessed by ballet, delights in the way the dancers call cheerfully to each other before a performance, ‘*Merde!*’

That idea rather appeals to me, as many French ideas do. There you have the whitest, airiest, most virginal, pure creatures in satin and tulle, looking as if they are about to take off into the ether, nothing further from a piece of shit was ever seen. And as the orchestra tunes up, what are they saying to each other? Shit, shit, shit. Petra was only a mediocre dancer herself, but she employed a Russian ballet master to teach the children in her care, and saw to it that everyone regularly greeted each other with ‘*Merde!*’ It was as if she wanted to reinforce to the girls that they might give the appearance of beauty and goodness on the outside, but inwardly they were corrupt little bags of tripe and shit. This gave her control over them, but she also believed it to be true. Petra believed wholeheartedly in her own teachings, and this belief, added to the natural light in her lovely eyes, was part of her fascination.

I was appointed Petra’s guardian when she was born, and I know her inside out. She is dead now, but because she made such an impression on me I am inclined to think of her as living, and this false belief can play havoc with my tenses, which are, as I have explained, unstable at the best of times. Bear with me. I was, in a strange way, afraid of Petra. She died by her own hand at the age of fifty-five. (By some curious and swift trick, somewhere along the way, she added ten years to her age, officially dying at sixty-five or sixty-six. Consequently, she appeared to be miraculously younger-looking than her age.) And don’t ask me where she has gone, because it is not my business to know that kind of thing. You may be surprised to learn that it was also none of my business to save her from herself; if there is one thing a

guardian angel can't do, it's intervene in the event of suicide. We hover round saving our charges from accidents and so forth, but if they get into their heads the idea that they want to kill themselves, there's nothing we can do.

She caught on very early to the fact that I was there, and was able to use me to make her way in the world. I recall the first incident.

CHAPTER 4

At the Fountain

PETRA WAS three years old, a strawberry blonde with a high-domed forehead and pale blue eyes. Her eyes, I thought, were actually like Terence Stamp's. She imagined they looked like the eyes of the Grand Duchess Anastasia. A kind of celestial aquamarine, as Petra sometimes described them. There were times, I must say, when I thought they resembled aluminium.

We were in the park. She was sitting on the edge of an ornamental pond, where coloured fish wove about beneath the lily leaves and where the ripples from a central fountain faded out, and she was releasing the petals of a rose onto the surface of the water, petal by petal like little scarlet boats, when a boy of about five came up and swished the flotilla with a stick so that the petals were scattered as if by a violent wind. Petra sat very still, her back to the boy, then she lifted her head, turned her face towards where I was standing and, as if she could see me, she looked straight into my eyes and said, 'Why don't you kill him?'

I can tell you I was completely taken by surprise. It is not my business to go round killing people; all I am supposed to do is keep Petra out of harm's way. But the boy heard her and lost his footing and fell off the rim of the pond into the water. (It seems nobody was really looking after him.) And of course it was none of my concern to try to save him. He sat up, bawling in the shallow water, covered in green slime and weed, with the mud containing the accumulated shit of generations of bright fish, unable to understand what had happened. Petra's dress was splashed, but she simply continued to sit, silent now, on the edge of the pond, her silence backed by the rush of the water from the fountain.

First the boy's mother, and then Petra's mother, came dashing from different corners of the park, scooped their children up and bore them off. From behind a tree a shamefaced guardian appeared and followed the boy. Across

her mother's shoulder Petra looked again into my eyes and smiled. She said nothing at all; she was known for being a quiet child with a strong will and the famous temper I have already mentioned. From a little church across the park the angelus was ringing. I recall that at the sound of the pretty bell Petra swung round in her mother's arms to face the source of the carillon and broke into a truly dazzling smile.

The lifetime bond between Petra and myself, forged at her birth, was changed and strengthened that day, charged with a special kind of electricity and emotion. Petra grew up to be an unusual adult who retained a close relationship with her guardian. And of course she didn't only have me working for her, she was one of those children born with the Halo Effect, the children everybody loves and prefers, the ones who don't seem to have to do anything to get their way. The ones with beauty and charm and talent—call it charisma. Petra was always able to generate an atmosphere favourable to herself, just with—what—her personality I suppose.

As a baby she was so pretty, with large eyes wide apart, broad cheekbones, neat little chin, dazzling smile, and not only did her grandmother and grandfather (she believed they were her parents) dote on her, the whole world wanted to pick her up and cuddle her and run its fingers through her red-gold ringlets. Light, I swear it, emanated from that baby. She was like the sun glistening on fresh honey. People were drawn into the field of the halo that softly radiated from her. I have theories about these things, and I think that before Petra was born, when her real mother tried to abort her with a long steel knitting needle and half a bottle of gin and a hot bath, Petra got the message that she was desperately not wanted and responded to the murderous attack with a super, extra-tenacious hold on life. Having won against the killer knitting needle, she was going to continue to win and win and win.

Petra always called me Beau, addressing me thus on Christmas cards and suchlike, although she later began to spell it 'Beaux', when she discovered Ernest Beaux, the creator of Chanel No. 5. The name, to me, is neither here nor there. And that's an interesting little phrase—neither here nor there. I don't wish to bore you with theology, but I just note in passing that Thomas Aquinas said that angels move in discontinuous time. We can be now here, now there, with no interval of time in between. Neither here nor there; both here *and* there. When we move there are not two instants separated by time; between the beginning and the end of the movement there is no time at all. We are in the perpetual present, the eternal now. We might be, but of course people can't grasp that so well. Michael the Archangel (who is made, by the way, from snow) can be in three of the seven heavens at once. And there's a

woman in Switzerland who is quite well known for entertaining angels and writing down the music they bring her, and she says they take four or five days to come from wherever they live. I'm not sure how she figures that—maybe they have had to tell her that so she will give them some peace. We can move faster than the speed of light if we want to, and this plays up with time and space—it's an Einstein thing.

Return, now, to the park and you will see that although we are in rural Australia in the forties, the design of the park is European, some compromise between English and French. A high fence of fancy iron pickets surrounds a rectangle which is cut diagonally from each corner by gravel paths, between which are planted lawns and flower beds and European trees.

Green wooden benches beneath the trees; in the centre of it all a wide and shallow pond, circular, with water lilies and goldfish, and in the very heart a piece of large bronze statuary complete with nymphs, mermen, trumpets, vigorous acanthus leaves and gushing fountains. The semi-nakedness of the figures is both welcomed and ignored, it seems, by adults; whereas alert and knowing children such as Petra are fascinated, entranced by breasts and other suggestive bulges in the group. Larger than life these people, these creatures, recline, entwined, gesturing, waving, smiling, promising loud ecstasies from the middle of the pond.

The fountain is the most elaborate public object in the town, and there is a legend that it was sent here by mistake, that a factory in France muddled its orders, and this little town ended up with a fountain destined for somewhere very grand. The people of the town were so impressed, quite overwhelmed by the sight of such a glorious bronze scene of lust, desire and sexual frolic that they raised the funds to keep it. I don't know how much truth there is in the story.

The boy twisted his ankle when he fell in the water. I've hurt my foot! he yelled. I've hurt my foot!

I said the mothers came running to the pond and gathered up the children, and that is certainly how it looked at that moment. I have no reason to suppose that the woman who claimed the boy was not his mother. And I know for a fact that Wanda, the young woman, you might almost say *girl*, who collected Petra, was Petra's mother. However, Petra did not know this. To all intents and purposes, Wanda was Petra's sister, and Lydia was the mother of both of them, as well as of a number of other children.

In the part of this story that I call The Footnote you will find my comments about some of this stuff, if you're interested. The universe is full of things to think about, if one can find the time. You will also get a fair bit of informa-

tion about many a thing under the sun—try the story of [‘The Snow Queen’](#) for starters. I figure that if I want you to think of Petra as some sort of Snow Queen, you will need to have a look at the text of that story, and I want to save you the time of running about like a frantic rodent from one library to another only to be told by tired, bored or arrogant librarians that the book is out, lost, untraceable, being repaired, being processed. (When they say ‘processed, being processed’, I imagine they are turning books into cheese.) This library run would drive you mad, and the thought of it brings me out in a rash. Fortunately they have invented hypertext and interactivity just in the nick of time and so you can load the CD-ROM and click on ‘The Snow Queen’ and go for your life if that’s what you want to do. Make links. Go-go-go. Hot spot!

Years ago, between jobs, I was staying at the beach and I read *Sons and Lovers*, and I kept wishing there was a way I could get a picture and some information every time there was a reference to a flower. That book has more flowers than Kew Gardens. If only, I thought, I could look over at the wall and see some sort of coloured projection of crimson roses or dahlias sodden with rain—‘wet-black crimson balls’. I imagined how it would be if I could gradually add the pictures of the flowers, one after another, until the whole room—walls, ceiling, floor—was covered with them. Just a space in one wall for a window onto the sky, and a space in another for the door. And there I am, lost in the conservatory, one off-duty guardian angel reclining on some oriental sofa arrangement, reading a book. I first became interested in D.H. Lawrence because of all the stockings in the text, even elastic stockings and wooden legs, and then I discovered the flowers as well. Tall white lilies reeling in the moonlight—I liked that. Anyhow, my point is that these days you can switch to the image of the flower and back again with just a nibble of the mouse.

I think The Footnote is rather nice in its own way, by that I mean the good old-fashioned print version of The Footnote. If you don’t want to use the CD-ROM, don’t want to sit down at the PC and choof around the screen with a mouse, you don’t have to worry. I’ve organised things so you can lie on the [couch](#) propped on silken cushions and idly move around in the book itself, choosing a hot spot and flicking over to the references in The Footnote. Not so 21st-century an approach as the CD-ROM—probably closer to [Scheherazade](#), depending a bit on the nature of your cushions.

You will probably have your own mental version of ‘The Snow Queen’ and the other stories in The Footnote, but I want you to have the chance to read my versions. Here you have my Narrative, and if all you have time to

do is read The Narrative, that's okay. But you will discover that certain words in The Narrative have long entries in The Footnote, and at any time you can wander off into The Footnote and back again.

I imagine The Footnote as if it were the mud and slush at the bottom of a pond. On the surface of the water are the leaves and blooms of the lilies, in the form of The Narrative. Try going to water lilies or lotus in The Footnote.

And don't forget that you can always get into your gladrags and park the car in the basement of the theatre and go see whole performances of ballets about Snow White and Cinderella and so forth, some time. Or park the car in the car park next to the video shop and take out the video—well, there are plenty of things you can do. If you do go to the theatre, you might look up to the ceiling and catch a glimpse of me, or at least some of my colleagues. We like to get out. There are usually dozens of us drifting around the ceiling of the Paris Opera. And another place we like to go—we sing in the choirs of all the great cathedrals, in major basilicas and in minor basilicas. I actually enjoy going off to tiny country churches and joining in the singing. Once I started singing at the Windmill Hill Methodist Church, but Petra was so embarrassed I had to stop.

I think it is worth setting down some of the bare, plain facts about Petra's past, as Petra herself had a habit of offering only what can charitably be called romantic versions of these things. Since she died I have been looking for work and so I have had the perfect opportunity to write all this up, get straight some of the facts (insofar as I know them). Petra was not in truth the youngest child of Lydia and Stephen Penfold, bootmakers, but their grandchild, offspring of red-haired Wanda and a mysterious stranger. Petra gets the mysterious stranger part right, conjuring up for herself a fabulous heritage. I have heard her tell people she was adopted by Lydia and Stephen, that she was the child of, for example, a Russian nobleman, a Spanish count, a wandering musician, a Swedish scientist, a gypsy dancer, according to her mood and her audience. The story that was current for about the last thirty years of her life was that she was descended from French royalty, in a line from Catherine de' Medici, a nasty piece of work to choose for an ancestor.

Wanda died young, without ever revealing the identity of Petra's father; perhaps it's just as well. It has crossed my mind that Wanda's father was also Petra's father, but then I have seen so much of that kind of thing in my time that I have an over-suspicious mind. And I believe Petra died without ever knowing for sure that the people she thought were her parents were in fact her grandparents, and that Wanda was not her mad sister, but her mother. It was not my job to tell Petra these things.

CHAPTER 5

Mad Wanda

ON THAT DAY in the park, after the incident at the pond, Wanda put Petra in the pusher—this was a striped canvas affair and was actually designed for a doll, so that it was a bit on the small side for a three-year-old girl. Petra accepted it, knowing no better, and she enjoyed being pushed around the streets by Wanda. She adored Wanda. Wanda didn't think much of Petra, believe me. When Wanda would have liked to loiter on street corners talking to young men on bicycles, she had to be Petra's nursemaid instead. She was very angry and frustrated, and on more than one occasion she took her hand off the pusher and let it roll down the hill. Of course I was there to intervene and so the child came to no real harm. Then Wanda started to turn her rage upon herself; she became fixated on her hair, which was a long, shining, red-gold mane. First she chopped at it with blunt scissors; then she took to tearing it out; then she had a phase of striking a match and seeing how close she could get to it without setting it on fire—and it did catch alight a few times. Wanda would scream and grab a towel or a blanket or rush to the nearest tap.

You may wonder where her guardian had got to: Wanda's guardian was one of those careless ones who leave at the first sign of trouble and hang out with others of their kind in disused factories and warehouses and so forth, sitting around playing cards and smoking and waiting for their person to die so they can get on with some other more cushy and interesting assignment. I have even heard rumours of guardian angels who have gone feral and who inhabit the wild extremities of the planet, snarling and spitting and generally behaving in a most uncharacteristic and unbecoming way. And I have known guardians who, instead of pulling children back from the edges of cliffs, will quietly tip them over. If you look carefully at paintings of children with their guardians, you can sometimes tell that the angel is about to push the baby into the river. Personally I prefer to work; the harder the job, the better, perhaps. I never abandoned Petra, even though she was the most difficult case I have ever had, and that's saying something.

The Footnote

ANDERSEN, HANS CHRISTIAN (1805–1875): Hans Christian Andersen wrote an autobiography which turned out to be largely a fictitious account of his life, but it makes lively reading. He once described himself as a ‘swamp plant’ and this is a very interesting way of looking at him. He was born in Odense to a very poor family, and yet by the power of his imagination he was able to create items, stories, of such charm and beauty that he grew up to mingle with the nobility.

His grandfather was insane, yet a woodcarver of entrancing and strange toys which he sold from a basket as he went about the countryside. He sang madly as he went along, and would return from the woods decorated with beech leaves and wild garlands of flowers. Hans would tell other children that he himself was visited by angels who came to talk to him.

He slept with his parents in the one-room shop where his father was a shoemaker. His mother was a washerwoman who became addicted to alcohol, and Hans tried to forget his early life and his family as he aspired to move in much higher circles. However, he often harked back to incidents and motifs lodged in his memory, and many of his stories refer to cripples, feet, shoes, reminding the reader of the writer’s childhood in the shoemaker’s shop. Hans Christian Andersen wrote dozens of tales of fantasy and wonder, including ‘The Little Mermaid’, ‘The Snow Queen’ and ‘The Red Shoes’. A writer who inspired him early on was E.T.A. Hoffmann, and in one of Andersen’s first stories, ‘Journey on Foot to Amager’, the main character hears Hoffmann’s book *Elixir des Teufels* telling its own story.

He visited the Brothers Grimm and also Charles Dickens. He was hopelessly in love with the Swedish Nightingale, singer Jenny Lind. A statue of Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid sits in the harbour at Copenhagen and is a constant reminder of Hans Christian Andersen.

SEE ALSO E.T.A. HOFFMANN, MERMAID, SHOEMAKER, THE RED SHOES, THE SNOW QUEEN

BUTTERFLIES: A cloud of white butterflies accompanied the coffin of the dancer Emma Livry, and a similar cloud fluttered and swirled around the standard of Joan of Arc.

SEE ALSO EMMA LIVRY

CATHERINE DE’ MEDICI (1519–1589): Catherine, born in Florence, was the granddaughter of Lorenzo the Magnificent. She married Henri II, King of France. When she was born her parents con-

sulted astrologers, who predicted a life of sorrow, trouble and storms, and said that she would be the cause, if she lived, of very great calamities and finally the total ruin of the house into which she married. It was suggested that she be put in a basket and hung from the city wall in the hope that a cannon-ball would kill her, or that she be placed in an enclosed order of nuns, or that she be put in a bordello. Instead, however, she was married to Henri, whose father was Francis I of France, as part of an elaborate bargain between the French and Catherine's uncle, Pope Clement VII. The pope assured the king that this marriage would strengthen the French and Italian alliance against Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, while he promised Charles V that Catherine would weaken and even destroy the French state. Catherine's husband said she was the greatest trouble-maker in the world, and warned that she would wreak havoc if she ever got into government.

She lived at the French court first as princess, then as dauphine, as queen, and as regent to her son. The first ten years of her marriage were barren, but with the apparent help of drugs, astrology and sorcery, she later had children, among them three who became kings: Francis II, Charles IX, and Henri III. Her husband's most famous mistress was Diane de Poitiers, whose nose Catherine once considered having chopped off.

One of Catherine's nicknames was Jezabel.

The first step in Catherine's French political career was to arrange for the death by poisoning of her brother-in-law, François, heir to the throne, and she is noted for the use of poison as a device, administering lethal fish sauces and offering decorated apples full of poisonous vapours. She, unattractive, even ugly, surrounded herself with a flying squad of beautiful women who could trick and charm her enemies.

She became regent when Charles came to the throne at the age of eleven. This was the time of the Wars of Religion, and Catherine hatched plots in all directions, now against Protestants, now against Catholics. On the death of Charles, she realised her ultimate ambition of holding complete power. She is most vividly remembered as the force behind the Massacre of the Innocents on Saint Bartholomew's Day.

August in Paris is usually hot and sultry, and so it was on the eve of the 24th, 1572. Aristocratic leaders of every kind were gathered in Paris to celebrate the marriage, on the 18th of August, of Catherine's sister Marguerite to Henri, King of Navarre, a Protestant. People were relaxing with games such as tennis, and with tournaments, banquets and masked balls. Catherine's new palace at the Tuileries was now complete and contained a menagerie, an aviary, fishponds, an orangery and a warren for breeding game. On the eve of the massacre, all the visitors were invited to see a new kind of performance, a story-ballet, *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine*. This was presented at a banquet, and Catherine had written the story herself, assisted by the designer Beaujoyeulx. Part of the plot told how Henri, the bridegroom, was attacked and beaten to death by members of the French royal family, and how his soul was consigned to hell.

The surface story of the ballet was that of Circe the enchantress. The performance cost over three million francs, lasted six hours, and displayed brilliant costumes, fountains, airborne figures and a range of music and song, as well as dance and mime and masquerade. Queen Catherine, who was well known as a gifted dancer, and her women posed as naiads on golden steps, and there were chariots, magic gardens, sea horses, and a heaven from which Jupiter came down. The choreography was worked out on geometric principles.

Paris then was a city of 210 000 inhabitants, contained by gates and divided in two by the Seine. It could be used as a trap. And it was.

The key victim of the massacre was Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, the most powerful military and political Huguenot and a central enemy to Catherine's cause. Catherine had been trying to get rid of

him for ten years, poison and assassination plots having failed during that time. Two days before the massacre, Catherine had arranged to have Coligny shot, but that too failed. The shot was fired in broad daylight when the admiral was walking with a group of Huguenots. He was studying a report and he suddenly stooped to adjust his slipper. The bullet hit his arm and hand.

On the eve of Saint Bartholomew the city gates were locked, boats were chained up to the riverbank, arms were assembled, and the attacking murderers tied white shirt sleeves to their left arms and decorated their hats with white crosses. The houses of Huguenots had been marked with a cross.

At around two in the morning, Catherine ordered the tocsin to be rung, beginning with the great bell of St Germain l'Auxerrois which had never before been sounded except for royal masses. Assassins stormed the house where Coligny was recovering, killed all in their way and broke into the admiral's room wielding swords, daggers, lances and muskets. When Coligny was dead they threw him out the window. The tocsin rang from all the belltowers of Paris, torches were lighted, and there began a night of murderous rampage, looting and burning all over the city. People were massacred in their beds, or else pursued to the tops of houses and hurled onto the cobbles; bodies were dragged along the streets by ropes to be dumped in the Seine by ferrymen who took them out midstream and tipped them in. Heaps of bodies were collected outside the Louvre Palace. On bridges victims were stabbed and then forced to walk the plank so that billowing streams of blood followed the bodies as they settled in the water. People who survived and began to swim were stoned to death. Little children were tipped from baskets into the water to drown, women dragged naked along the cobbles until they died.

A pack of hounds was loosed, thirsty for the blood that ran in the streets, and the king responded to the slaughter with gruesome and repulsive glee, revelling in seeing the corpses of Huguenot noblemen delivered to him at the Palace. Catherine and the flying squad and others at the Louvre ran from window to window enjoying the spectacle below.

It was not long before looting began in earnest, and before people were killing purely for the purpose of robbing the dead. Jewellers, lapidaries, money-changers, silversmiths and goldsmiths were slaughtered in this wave of killings. Then ordinary shopkeepers—shoemakers, hatters, silk merchants—and children were butchered with their parents. Valuable libraries were looted. A bookbinder was roasted alive on top of a pyre of his books. And of course personal vendettas were settled, members of families killed in hatred.

By midday the Palace had issued an official cease-fire, but the slaughter continued to some degree and spread to other cities of France, where it continued throughout September and October. Catherine had succeeded in her plan, which was to gain power over her son the king and to put in place mechanisms that would eventually overthrow the rival house of Guise. On 2 September a horseman arrived in Rome from Paris with the news of the success of the massacre. Pope Gregory XIII was delighted and gave the messenger a hundred crowns as a reward. A medal was struck bearing the pope's head on one side and on the other the angel of doom.

SEE ALSO SAINT BARTHOLOMEW, SHOEMAKER, SLIPPER

SAINT BARTHOLOMEW: Bartholomew was one of the Apostles, sometimes known as Nathanael, and was martyred by being flayed alive and then beheaded. In the eleventh century Canterbury Cathedral acquired his arm, a very valuable relic. His emblem is the flaying knife, and he is the patron of tanners, taxidermists and plastic surgeons. His feast day is on 24 August.

SCARLET: Red dye was first used on leather in about 2300BC by people in Syria. It was made from the dried bodies of the wingless females of the cochineal beetle.

SCHEHERAZADE: Scheherazade was the daughter of the Grand Vizier of the Indies, and she begged to become the wife of the Sultan Schahriah so that she could save the lives of other women whom the sultan was determined to murder. The reason for his killings was that he had discovered his sultana had been unfaithful, and he swore to take a fresh wife every night and have her put to the sword at day-break so that she could never betray him. Scheherazade's plan was that she would become his wife, and would so entrance him with the stories she told him that he would be unable to resist letting her live in order to continue the tales. She sustained this ruse for a thousand and one nights and so saved the lives of a thousand women. After the thousand and one nights the sultan revoked the decree.

SNOW QUEEN, THE: This story, which Hans Christian Andersen published in 1844 and which is retold here by me, follows the lives of a girl and a boy, Gerda and Kay, and tells how their happiness was first disrupted by the agency of an evil magic mirror, and then by Kay's capture by the Snow Queen. The loyalty of Gerda in her search for Kay is an example of love and fortitude in the face of great difficulty and despair:

A wicked magician constructed a mirror which distorted all things it reflected, making good evil. This mirror was carried from place to place, carried so high that it fragmented into millions of shards, and these fell to earth, each fragment, no matter how tiny, having the power to pervert and corrupt. A splinter in the heart, and the heart became as cold as ice.

Kay was playing with his friend Gerda when he received in the eye a splinter of the mirror, and also one in the heart. His character was utterly changed by this, and he became harsh and cruel. Then one day when he was playing in the frozen square, he decided to tie his sledge to the sledge of a stranger and be pulled along. But the strange sledge took Kay far out of the town, travelling faster and faster through the snow.

Finally the sledge stopped and the driver stood up to reveal herself as the Snow Queen, wearing a cap and coat entirely made from snow, and she was tall and slender and dazzlingly white. She sat him next to her under her bearskin, and he felt as if he were sinking into a drift of snow. She kissed him, and her kiss was as cold as ice and went straight to his heart. He thought he would die, but soon he lost all feeling of the cold and saw that the Snow Queen was the most beautiful woman he could ever imagine.

They flew into the sky, into a black stormcloud, over woods and lakes and sea and land; and beneath them the cold wind whistled, the wolves howled, the snow glittered, and the black crow flew cawing over the plain, while up above the moon shone, clear and tranquil.

Gerda set out in search of Kay, putting on her new red shoes and going down to the river.

'Is it true,' she said to the waves of the river, 'that you have taken Kay away from me? If you will only restore him to me, I will give you my new red shoes.' She stepped into a boat and tossed the shoes out into the water, and the waves received them, and Gerda floated away in the boat, the shoes floating behind her on the water. But the boat moved faster than the shoes, and soon the shoes were left far behind.

Gerda asked the flowers, the birds, the trees and the winds if they had seen Kay, and some thought they had, and some led her in false directions. She came to the palace of a prince and princess, who were kind to her, and fed her and dressed her in fine clothes of silk and velvet and sent her out on her search in a golden carriage. But robbers saw the gleaming carriage and they seized the horses, stabbed the coachman and the footmen to death, and dragged Gerda from the carriage.

The robber-woman was about to stab Gerda also, when her daughter jumped on her mother's back and bit her on the ear, saying she wished to have Gerda as a playmate. The robber-maiden drove

Gerda in the golden carriage to the robbers' half-ruined castle where they had supper of soup from a cauldron and hare from a spit. They slept in the maiden's bed, surrounded by a hundred woodpigeons and a reindeer. The robber-maiden kept a dagger by her side. Gerda talked to the woodpigeons, asking them for news of Kay, but the robber-maiden said if she would not be quiet she would feel the dagger in her heart.

Kay, said the woodpigeons, could be found in Lapland, and so the robber-maiden, who could be kind as well as cruel, gave Gerda her reindeer for transport, gave her some food, and sent her on her way to follow the red and blue of the Northern Lights. The Wise-woman at Finmark whispered to the reindeer that Kay was with the Snow Queen, and that the only power that could save him from her spell was the power of Gerda's innocent love.

Gerda lost her boots and her gloves, and the reindeer brought her finally to the gate of the Snow Queen's palace, where she would find Kay, and the reindeer returned to the bush of red berries where he would wait for Gerda.

The walls of the palace were formed of the driven snow; there were over a hundred halls, the largest of them many miles wide, all illuminated by the Northern Lights; all vast, empty, icily cold and dazzlingly white. No sounds of mirth ever resounded through these dreary spaces. In the midst of the empty, interminable snow-saloon lay a frozen lake, and when the Snow Queen was at home she sat in the centre of this lake. Kay played among the sharp fragments of ice, putting together a puzzle, trying to form the word Eternity from pieces of ice. For the Snow Queen had promised him that if he could form the word Eternity from slivers of ice, she would give him the whole world, and a new pair of skates as well. But he could not do it.

The Snow Queen had left her palace to visit other countries, and Kay was alone playing with his Eternity puzzle. Gerda entered the hall, saw Kay and ran to him and flung her arms around him. He sat cold and motionless, while Gerda wept hot tears which fell on his face and then upon his heart. He wept, and the splinter of evil glass floated from his eye and fell with his tears. And they laughed, and suddenly they were able to form the letters of Eternity with the sharp fragments of ice.

And they ran through the ice palace and out into the snow, and ran until they found the reindeer who took them back to the Wise-woman. Then, travelling now with Kay, Gerda retraced her journey and came finally to the town where they had lived, and where they would live in joy and happiness forever after.

(Something that has always worried me about this story is whatever happened when the Snow Queen came back home to her palace and found that Kay had not only solved the puzzle of Eternity, but had cleared out with Gerda? She stands there in the cold, staring at the word Eternity written in ice, and then what? Weird.)

TOLSTOY, LEO (1828–1910): Next to his study Tolstoy had a workshop where he took regular lessons in shoemaking. He made a pair of boots for one of his friends, Sukhotin, who is said to have stood the shoes in his bookcase next to the first twelve volumes of War and Peace, labelling the boots 'Volume 13'.