

## Under The Exquisite Gaze by Rebecca Lloyd

PEARL

*On the day that I could suffer it no longer, I left as dawn arose and heard no sounds except the mournful baying of a single dog. I cast my eyes upon the horizon as far as they could reach and began my journey in early September of 1857. The gates of Evan's Town are never locked for the leaders do not wish The High One to suppose their faith in his protection is not strong, so I was able to walk straight out and saw no one on the way.*

Harford's dog had stopped baying and there was a weird silence like just before a bad storm. We were sitting behind the rocks at the back of Elliston's garage with the book I found, and Coral was reading it out aloud. The writing was very small and cramped and there was a lot of it I couldn't figure out. You could tell it was written in the old days when people talked outright about souls and things. At first, I wasn't that curious, but I got interested when it looked like the girl who'd written it really had left Evan's Town, because I'd never known anyone who'd done that, and Coral hadn't either.

Finding it was the first thing that had happened to me for months that wasn't boring, since more or less everything *is* boring. The book was in a pretty tin and I got the lid off easily. The way I figured it was if someone had thrown it away, then they wasn't minding what happened to it. They could have dropped it on the road, or anything, nobody could prove I'd been to the dump, which is out of bounds for women and girls.

Coral was really interested in it, and I was mighty proud, because the closer her big day got, the less I saw of her, and she was my best friend.

Elliston's top window was open and I kept looking up at it. I didn't know if anyone was home or not, I couldn't tell. There was no particular reason why Coral and me shouldn't be sitting there, no reason at all, except if someone decided there was.

I'd been thinking about certain things a lot around about that time, and the one thing I didn't like was how adults had secrets, how they acted nonchalant when you came into a room, and once I'd started noticing that, I couldn't stop seeing it. For instance, I knew for a fact that the funny looking woman who kept falling down and speaking in tongues right there on the High Street in front of everyone was going to have a baby, because she was huge. So huge that I felt embarrassed for her, and a bit ashamed that I was going to be a woman some day before too long. I remember thinking she must have a full-grown man in there, and in my mind's eye, I imagined him in pyjamas. Then the baby never did come - least I never saw it with her - and the companions in my house whispered a lot, and kept finding jobs for me to do out of the ordinary because I was hanging around too much.

'Where d'you get this book, Pearl?' Coral asked me after she'd studied it a while. 'See here, it says a barbarous isolation was imposed on her, and I watched her suffering with increasing dismay. My soul swelled with pity for her, and loathing of my own situation grew in proportion to her anguish. That's just how I felt when my sister got engraved last year. Listen to this bit, right on the first page as bold as anything, I, Lucy Blackfen, having thwarted my destiny, vow never to return to the place where I was born and follow The Way.'

‘Don’t talk so loud, Coral. I read that bit three times. I was thinking about it all night.’ I felt very jumpy and twisted some grass between my fingers until it broke. We’d been sitting there about twenty minutes right out in the open, at least for anybody who might look in our direction. The rocks weren’t much cover; you couldn’t hide behind them. The curtain at Elliston’s back window was moving slightly, and it’s hard to tell if someone’s behind a curtain that moves that way. Harford’s dog started baying again like it was a bloodhound. I hate that dog; hate it more than any other dog in town. People say it’s always the first one to reach a person and get them cornered.

‘It’s a diary. Where’d you get it, Pearl?’

‘I found it in an old tin on the dump, by the tumbled down shack, and I reckon I should put it back.’

Coral had stopped going to the dump with me some months gone because she got spooked, though she wouldn’t admit it. She hadn’t changed outright after they said her time had come, it wasn’t like she suddenly got to be a woman, it’s just that she’d got more careful and didn’t make so many jokes, and sometimes I could see she wasn’t listening to me. So I was mighty pleased she was excited by the book.

She turned the pages carefully. ‘I did confess my misery to R.’s six companions, the most recent of whom were strange twins and they bitterly against my inclusion in the household, but I found them all to be like women mesmerised, unable to break the mental fetters that bound them. Hey, that’s just what the companions in my house are like, even my own mother.’

‘And mine,’ I said, ‘I’ve got to go Coral. Give it me back.’

‘Listen. A. Parker had me always in her sight after I described these certain matters to her, and even though she was harsh in her daily treatment of me and spoke roughly, I

fancy she pitied me and thought me too young at thirteen to tolerate the rigours of motherhood. She would not enlighten me or give me advice, and her kindest gesture, a strange one indeed, was to reach out from time to time while we worked together and slap me lightly on the forehead. I wondered if it was her intention to knock sense into my head.

In my despair, I hoped I could find succour with the older children; it seemed to me that they were wise beyond their years. A. Parker's daughter, Mavis, was nearest me in age, but I was forbidden to engage with her as she was in preparation for engraving herself, and I supposed her mother fancied that were she to associate with me she would be made fearful of what was to come. Besides, I was in the household for only a short time before she was indeed engraved to Wendell, the brother of R., and then removed to the other side of Evan's Town where I had no further cause to venture, but knew well, as I had been servant to all Wendell's companions. There's half a page torn out here.'

'Darn it, Coral, I think Mrs. Elliston's behind the curtain up there. Don't look.'

I could feel my heart beating too fast and I got a sick wavy feeling all over me.

'This is fascinating,' Coral whispered, 'We've got to meet up again. Get up real casual, and walk dead slow back to the road.'

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I lay awake that night and listened to all my brothers and sisters breathing in the stuffy dark. I was excited and scared. I kept pulling the sheet over me and throwing it off again. Uncle had come to the house that evening, but none of the companions knew about it until the last minute. I think he liked catching us unawares. Anyway, the mothers were all fixing their hair and getting out different frocks and we were sent off for a wash, and I had to do all the girls' braids and get the boys' shoes clean. I was

pretty mad because I didn't have time to get fixed up myself, and Uncle noticed it the minute he walked in, even before I curtsied. He didn't say anything, but all through supper I knew he was thinking about me because he wasn't looking at me, and he didn't ask me what I'd done that day; it was like when it came to my turn, I didn't exist. He went round the table starting with the boys and said the usual thing, 'How have you put your talents to good use today for the glory of Lambency?'

Michael said he'd been contemplating the idea of compassion as it was written in The Book, and praying hard that he would come to understand it one day. I knew that wasn't true; before I'd left to meet Coral, he'd been kicking the wall by his bed, trying to make a dent in it. He wasn't praying about anything.

I was already thinking about what I was going to say before Uncle had got to the girls, I was going to say I'd gone to see the old lady on the corner to see if she needed anything from the store. 'How have you made yourself humble and useful beneath The Exquisite Gaze today?' he asked the small little girl who cried all the time. She didn't know what to say, so her sister answered for her. She said, 'Christine has been by my side with willing hands as I set about my chores in the wash room.'

Uncle grunted. I hated the way his eyes moved under his lids, you never knew which way they would go and I always thought he could see straight through his eyelids like they were transparent. I still do.

I slept a bit that night, least I kept sitting up quickly like I'd been asleep without knowing it, and sometime when it was still dark, I decided - vowed - to wake at dawn and try to read the book some more and get to understand it before I met with Coral again.

Sure enough, I woke when the light was creeping in. The only sound outside was Harford's dog; even the big rooster on Mercy Street hadn't started up. I pictured

Lucy in my mind; she was mighty pretty, and real slim like a river reed, and I had her in my mind as tall and her hands as dainty. Her hair was the same as mine in a braid down her back, and the same brown colour. Her feet were tiny, not like mine. She had big old-fashioned boots and a plain green dress right down to the ground.

*I kept close to A. Parker, and it would have been well if I'd heeded her words for I had ample proof of her wisdom soon after my arrival. There came a felon on my finger, and she had little sympathy with me about the matter. She would plunge my finger into boiling water to break it open and urge me not to question what happened to me at night, for felons would be my bane until my curiosity abated. She told me plainly that The High One gave women diseases when they wondered about the activities of men.*

*But I persisted in my questioning as I was crushed to the earth with terror. I could bear it no longer; R.'s fervour frightened me and his hands would not stay away from my body, until I wished I was not within it, for I fancied it was dirtied and would never be clean. A. Parker was found right, for felons persisted on my fingertips for many months and I could neither work nor eat without pain, and I cowered, utterly abject, beneath The Exquisite Gaze.*

I knew just what she was feeling; I didn't like the laying on of hands either when I got sick. It gave me a weird thrill to think someone from the old days was the same as me. A while back when I ate something bad, Eric Rhymes came to lay hands and his fingers were cold and clammy, and I felt like if I didn't get better quick it would be my fault. My mother reckons Eric Rhymes is especially blessed under The Exquisite Gaze and the best healer in Evan's Town. She said if I wasn't careful in my thinking I'd fall into cacophony. I think I already had, but I never told her.

Leastways, I was having some funny thoughts that come out of nowhere and didn't seem to fit in with other things. The trouble was I'd have to tell someone about it to find out if I had fallen, and I, sure as anything, wasn't going to tell my counsellor. I wasn't even sure I should tell Coral, though I thought about it sometimes.