

ONCE UPON A
WARDROBE



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HARPER MUSE

Once Upon a Wardrobe

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Götterdämmerung was written by Richard Wagner and translated by Frederick Jameson. Published by Schirmer in 1899.

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” was written by Robert Robinson in 1758.

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ONE

GEORGE MEETS A LION

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WORCESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND

George Henry Devonshire is only eight years old and he already knows the truth. They don't have to tell him: the heart he was born with isn't strong enough, and they've done all they can. And by *they*, he means the doctors and nurses, his parents, and his older sister, Megs. If they could save him, if they could give their own life for him, they would. He knows that too. But they can't.

The December snow outside his bedroom window piles up like wave upon wave of white. George sits up in bed, propped against the forever-plumped-by-his-mum pillows. Next to him is a dark oak table with pill bottles and a glass of water and a gone-cold cup of tea that his mum left behind. Among all of that clutter is a book, just published, called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis.

It has a lion on the cover, and George often looks to this lion as if it might hold the key to all he desires to know.

There is so very much he wants to know.

George once thought that if he lived long enough to be a grown-up, he'd have all the answers. Now he believes adults don't know what's what any more than he does.

But the man who wrote this book—this storybook that transports George out of his bedroom and into Narnia—this man *knows* something. What that *something* might be is a mystery.

“Long ago and far away” often begins the best stories, but this author began his book with just four names—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—and a magic wardrobe.

George is waiting for his Megs to come home for the weekend from university so he can tell her about this remarkable book, about this white land where it is always winter but never Christmas, where animals can talk and the back of a wardrobe opens to another world. He loves Megs more than all the words he has to describe the feeling.

Across George's room is his own ordinary wooden wardrobe. He slides from the bedcovers and slips his feet into his fuzzy lamb's-wool slippers. His breath catches as it always does when he jolts the weak muscle that is his heart. He waits as his heartbeat catches up to his plan and then shuffles across the floor. He places both hands on the thick handles and opens the heavy doors.

There isn't a looking glass on the outside of this wardrobe like there is in the book, just carvings of trees and birds.

The doors creak and George spies his few pieces of clothing hanging there. (A boy who lives mostly in bed doesn't need very many shirts and pants.) He sees the family's wool coats and clothes that don't fit into his parents' overstuffed closet. He knows there is no secret back to this wardrobe, and he can't walk through it to find a snowy forest and a lamppost and a faun that will take him on a great adventure.

What he can do, is sit inside this space and close his eyes and take himself to that imaginary world, where he can have his own adventures, where he can escape the very real world, where his body won't get old, and where his mum doesn't cry in the kitchen. She thinks he can't hear her, but he can.

He pushes aside the coats and shirts and dresses, then slips inside. He's a small boy, not as big as an eight-year-old boy should be, but big enough to need to fold his legs up to his chest as he scoots to the very back of the wardrobe, never pulling the door all the way shut, just as Lucy in the book has taught him one should *never* close a wardrobe door while inside.

Darkness envelops him, and it feels quite fine to be surrounded by the aroma of his mum's rose perfume, along with mothballs (just as in the book) and a faint woody scent hinting of a forest. As he leans into it, he feels the solid back of the wardrobe and lets out a long breath. He closes his eyes and conjures the image of a talking beaver inviting him for tea in a dam made of sticks.

George smiles.

He isn't as scared as his family thinks he is. Nothing hurts, and he doesn't expect it to hurt even when his heart stops beating. He's just tired, and sleep isn't so bad.

He's read enough books (for what else is there to do in bed?) to know Narnia isn't real, or not real in the way that grown-ups call real. (But then, what do they know?) The professor who wrote about this magical place, however, *is* real, and he lives only a train ride away in Oxford, where Megs attends school. This man would know the answers to George's questions.

Where did this land of the lion, a white witch, and fauns and beavers and castles come from?

How did Aslan—as true as any living thing the boy has ever known—come to bound onto the pages of a book?

George feels sleep ease up on him as quiet as a lion on the prowl, and he tumbles into it, his hands wrapped around a mane of fur (really a rabbit coat of his mum's). The ice-cold world of a snowy forest surrounds him in a story written behind his eyelids, sketched onto his mind, emblazoned on his dreams.

TWO

MEGS FALLS INTO A STORY

There was once, and is even now, a city on the banks of the River Cherwell, a city as abundant with timeless tales as any city in the world. The slow river begins its journey in Hellidon and meets its destiny in the Thames at Oxford, a city of stone towers and gleaming spires where this story and many others begin. Some stories imagined in this ancient place rise above the others; they ascend from the towers, from the quiet libraries and single rooms, from the museums and the cobblestone streets. Some of those stories become legends.

Myths.

Tales that are as much a part of us as our bones.

But I, Margaret Louise Devonshire, called Megs by all who know me, honestly don't care about that. My heart belongs to numbers and equations, my head to thoughts of solving the greatest mysteries of physics.

It is the first Friday in December, and I ride the train

from the Oxford to Foregate station in Worcester, only a mile from my house along the London Road. I've been leaving university on the weekends more often than my fellow students at Somerville College, one of the only colleges at Oxford to have women students, but none of them have a little brother like George, and they seem more than happy to be free of their homes and towns and cities. I call them my fellow students and not my friends, because so far, that's all they are. Maybe because I leave Oxford the minute there is a moment of free time while the others gather in pubs drinking pints, debating politics, playing draughts, and flirting with each other as if that is the easiest thing in the world.

I wouldn't dare tell any of them the truth. I miss everything about my Worcester: the way it straddles the silver snake of the River Severn; the clangs of its Royal Worcester porcelain factory; Worcester Bridge arching over the river, its stone glimmering in the sun; the heath-covered hills; and Worcester Cathedral, sitting proudly in the middle of it all, its spires straight to heaven.

Not that I'm sad to be at university—I'm not! I have worked all my life to get here. All my remembered life, I've aimed my arrow straight at the bull's-eye of Oxford. I'm seventeen, the first woman in my family to go to college, and I'm proud to have received a scholarship for my marks. It seems a bit unfair that I would get such a scholarship and residence rooms fully furnished, with a bedroom and a little sitting room, for something that comes so easily to me, something I love so much.

But of course not as much as I love George.

Home is our Devonshire house, a stone cottage surrounded by the hand-hewn fences of aged alder. Between the low wooden gate and the front door, a wild garden of rambling purple fumitory and thick moonwort fern rests hidden beneath snow. The window boxes Dad once made Mum for her birthday hang from the two side windows, sad and empty in the winter barrenness.

Last autumn, as the earth moved toward rest, Mum worked in the garden with a fervor I hadn't seen in years, and I believe I know why: she can't keep George alive, but she can keep the flowers and vegetables growing under her care.

Today when I arrive at the house, where I'd lived all my life until I departed for Oxford, the chimney smoke curls upward from a cap at the far-right end of the cottage. I walk carefully along the stone pathway that is covered with snow and glinting with swords of sunlight. I hesitate before placing my hand on the knob of our blue-painted front door.

No matter how I feel, I must appear cheerful for George.

I open the door, and a rush of heat flows toward me with a fireplace scent so reminiscent of my early childhood that my knees almost buckle.

But I can't fold.

I must be strong.

I shut the front door, slip off my jacket and mittens, set them on the bench, and kick off my wellies. I move slowly

through the house I know as well as anything in my life. I can walk through it quick as lightning with my eyes fast shut and never hit an edge of counter, a kitchen table, or Dad's large leather chair. In a single minute and blindfolded, I could find my bedroom and crawl beneath its worn-thin sheets with a warm water bottle and be ten years old again.

I reach the stone-walled kitchen to find it empty. The kettle sits on the blue countertop next to an empty teacup. On the small dark wooden table, a mystery novel by Dorothy L. Sayers is facedown, the spine of it cracked. Mum is halfway through a Lord Peter Wimsey story. I like thinking about how the author also went to Somerville, how her book connects us through my mum.

I take two rights to George's bedroom. He has the room with the largest windows so he can see outside when the weakness of his heart keeps him from rising. At times he loses his breath so desperately that his lips turn a strange shade of blue. This window is his door to the world.

When I reach his room, I see that his bed holds only squashed pillows and rumpled covers.

My heartbeat thunders inside my ears. Has there been a rush to hospital and no one had time to tell me? It has happened before.

Mum's voice brings her to the doorway. She hugs me as tight as a vise. "You're home!"

"Where's George?"

I point to his empty bed. Mum's gaze leaves mine to scan the room. She startles, calls out his name. I do the

same. He doesn't answer. Together we rush through the small house, which takes no more time than it does to call his name thrice more.

Mum flings open the front door and pokes her head out. "I see only your footprints in the snow," she says, and I hear relief in her words.

I rush back to George's room and look under his bed. Then I notice the wardrobe door is slightly ajar.

"Mum, look!" I call out as I yank open the door. There's George, his knees drawn up to his chest, his blue eyes looking straight at us.

"Megs!" He scurries out. I hug him as tightly as I can without fearing I will break the little bones in his chest and shoulders.

"Georgie Porgie."

I lift him and he throws his arms around my neck. He carries the aroma of the rose sachets in the closet and I breathe it in. Slight and frail, he clings to me. And I to him. I place him gently in bed, and he holds to my neck until I laugh and kiss his cheek. I draw the covers to his chin while Mum watches with a look of pure relief.

I sit on the edge of George's bed and it slants toward me. "I received your letter. It was so beautiful the way you told me the story about Dad and the sheep he chased through the garden. When did you learn to write so well?"

George grins, and that hair of his is so blond it appears like cotton. Twilight rests against the windows as if it wants to join us in the bedroom, and I flick on his bedside light.

“George,” I say quietly, “why were you hiding in there?”

“I’m not hiding, I’m dreaming,” he says, looking out the window as if he can see something we can’t. “Imagining.”

Mum looks at me and nods her head for me to follow her to the kitchen.

“I’ll be right back.” I kiss George on his cheek, and he closes his eyes.

Mum sets the kettle to the stove’s fire and watches it in silence for a few heartbeats, until she turns to me with tears in her eyes. “It’s because of that book that he goes and hides in the wardrobe. He reads that story over and over. He wants to read nothing else. Not even his favorites, *Peter Rabbit* and *Squirrel Nutkin*. Now it’s all about Narnia and the lion and the four children who are living apart from their parents during the war. It’s about magic and witches and talking animals. It’s all he wants to talk about.”

“Have you read it?”

“No, I haven’t yet. Aunt Dottie dropped it off days ago. It’s a new book for children by that author who teaches at your university.”

“C. S. Lewis, yes,” I say. “One of his other books, *The Screwtape Letters*, was all the chatter. There’re more books to come from him, I’ve heard.”

“Well, he best hurry. I doubt your brother will be . . .” Tears gather in her eyes, and she brushes them away with the back of her hand.

“Mum, don’t say such things. Please.”

“It’s true.”

“You don’t know that.”

The teakettle screams, and Mum pours boiling water into the cup over the tea leaves nestled in the silver strainer and watches the steam rise. “Go on now. Take your cuppa and visit with your brother.”

She pulls her worn gray sweater tighter around her and buttons it near the neck as if she’s holding herself together with the Shetland wool of her father’s old farm lambs. I kiss her red cheek and she takes a linen handkerchief and wipes her eyes, then blows her nose into it with a resonating sound. We both laugh.

“Go on now,” she says.

His room is warm. During the day it’s the sunniest part of the house—intolerable for a few weeks every summer and favored in winter. It’s shaped like a perfect square (and I know a perfect square) with plaster walls painted an ivory color. The single bed is handmade by our Grandfather Devonshire, fashioned of oak with four posters squiring up like the tower at Magdalen. The hand-hewn oak floors are covered with a sheep’s-wool rug, fluffy in the places not often trod and flattened where our feet walk again and again. The blanket on his bed is striped, alternating blue and green, pulled high over the crisp white linen sheets that Mum irons smooth. The wardrobe across from the bed and between the windows, once belonging to Mum’s sister, Dottie, has the trees and birds of a forest glade carved into its wooden doors. I think how each of these things is a part of our family, each made or passed

down through a Devonshire or MacAllister line that reaches us now.

George's face is placid, and he rests on his pillow lightly, as if he hasn't enough weight to dent the down feathers inside. His eyes are closed, and I watch him sleep. His easy breaths go in and out.

"George," I whisper.

He opens his eyes, and his grin is wide. "I knew you would come home if I asked. I told Mum so."

"Why wouldn't I?" I take his hand.

"Mum says you are too busy with school. Mathematics exams are very hard, she says."

"They are, but I'm right here."

"I need you to do something for me." He sounds like an old man, or if not old, then just like Dad.

"Anything." I drop into the hard, wooden chair next to his bed.

"Have you ever seen him?" he asks.

"Seen who?"

"The man who wrote about Narnia. The man who wrote the book."

"C. S. Lewis. Yes, I do see him quite often. He walks quickly with his pipe and his walking stick along High Street and Parks Road, as if he's always late for something."

"I need you to ask him a question."

"George, I don't really know him. I've just seen him about. He teaches at Magdalen, and they don't allow

women students there. I'm at Somerville. They are a mile and worlds apart."

"It's the same. It's Oxford University."

I can't argue that point. And I'm not one for arguing as it is. "What do you want me to ask him?"

"Where did Narnia come from?"

"I don't understand."

"Have you read it?" He asks as if his question is the answer.

I shake my head. "It's a book for children. I'm consumed with physics and the way numbers hold together the universe. I'm learning about Einstein's theories and . . . I haven't had time to read some children's book."

"You're rarely wrong, sister, but you are now. It's not a children's book. It might look like it on the cover, but it's a book for everyone. Please, Megs. I need to know if Narnia is *real*."

"Of course it's not real. It's a story, like *Squirrel Nutkin* and that book you like about the girl who dropped into a hole in the ground."

"Alice," he says. "This is different. I know you think the whole world is held together by some math formula." His voice has an unaccustomed annoyance in it. "But I've thought about this a lot, and I think the world is held together by stories, not all those equations you stare at." He's rarely angry, and this might not even be anger but something sparks up like a quick flame.

“My, my, I see.” I feel my eyebrows lifting. “You’ve definitely given this some serious thought.”

“Please. Just ask Professor Lewis, Megs. This book of his is different. It’s as real as Dad’s apple tree outside, as real as Mum’s flowers, surely as real as this house. I need to know where it came from.”

George doesn’t have to say any more, because I realize the answer he wants means life and death to him. If my little brother needs to know where Narnia came from, I will find out.

“I will ask him. I promise.”

From that moment, the weekend slips through my fingers like I’m trying to hold on to morning fog. I stay with George, and I study until my eyes burn. I flop around the house in an old wool sweater and fuzzy slippers. I think sometimes of the others at university who are having a chat in groups, and I feel so disconnected from them. It’s not that I don’t want to wear the latest fashion of pleated skirts and cute cardigans and have a smart exchange with a handsome boy in a waistcoat, but I just wasn’t made that way. It’s all so uncomfortable. I don’t understand how girls get their hair in sleek ponytails or wear it in bouffant while my dark curls spring wild in the wind about my round face. Their skin is smooth and porcelain while the freckles on my cheeks and nose will not be covered with powder. They call me cute; I’ve heard them. But not beautiful, never that.

Mathematics doesn’t care what I look like or what I wear, and that’s what I’ve been focused on all weekend. On

Sunday, right before I prepare to leave, I sit down and open the book that has consumed my little brother, that has him hiding in the wardrobe and telling me about fauns and beavers and winters where Christmas never comes.

“I can read to you before I go to the train station,” I tell him. “Would you like that?”

He smiles. “Yes.”

“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy . . .”

I mean to read for just a few minutes, to show him I’m not such a prig about math, that I can read a fairy tale as well as anyone else. A few minutes, I said.

Just a few.

But when I look up hours later, having missed the train, and the final pages resonant in the room with my tears blurring the last lines, I understand my brother. I understand it all.

We must, absolutely must, find out where Narnia came from.