Opening extract from

The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows

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They died with empty bellies, their eyes vacant of both dreams and expression.

Maman fed her family meals of low-quality meat and limp carrots because this was what they could afford—barely. She inspected the children every time they returned home—searching the crevices behind their knees and elbows, the soft places in between toes, behind ears, and under tongues for the mark of a pox or a tick.

Beauregard hardly shared his wife's concerns. At night, as the couple lay in bed, their children asleep in the bed across the room and cramped under the kitchen table and tucked into a bureau drawer, Maman tried to persuade her husband to leave the city so that they might raise their children in the light French air of their former home.

"Oh, *mon cœur*, my heart," he answered lightly, "you worry much too much." Then he rolled over and fell into a deep sleep while Maman fretted the night into morning.

Then one otherwise unremarkable evening in the spring of 1915, garishly handsome Beauregard Roux did not return home to his wife and their four children. Nor did he arrive the next night or in a month's time. A year later the only tangible memory of Beauregard Roux was in the person of René, who had a penchant for carrying the couch around the apartment balanced on his forearms.

It was rumored that Beauregard left his family for a Germanic woman blessed with infertility and a convex along the back of her head, which, as every good phrenologist knew, meant Beauregard had found himself a

complaisant woman, one who was likely to give him loud affection any night he pleased. It was a tale so creative that even Maman believed it. This belief later led to the development of a small hole in the top chamber of her heart, which her doctors falsely ascribed to her diet and her unknown ancestry.

In truth, the disappearance of Beauregard Roux was a case of mistaken identity. Beauregard, for all his rugged beauty, was also the very image of another man caught sleeping with the wife of a local butcher. How unfortunate for Beauregard that the butcher's thugs found him first. The discovery of his body, found floating in bloated and unidentifiable pieces along the Hudson River, was briefly mentioned in a side column of the *New York Times*. This unfortunate mix-up had its own ironies: Beauregard Roux had loved his wife immensely; he found her quiet tendencies refreshing and never strayed from her once in all the time they were married.

Upon realizing that her husband had performed a permanent disappearing act, Maman took to her bed and spent the next three months wrapped in the sheets that still retained her husband's pungent scent. The children were cared for by their neighbor, a pygmy named Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo whom they called Notre Petit Poulet, Our Little Chicken, due to a habit the tiny woman had of clucking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. It was a nickname Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo found most agreeable.

Eventually Maman pulled herself from her bed and

took a job as a bookkeeper at the dry cleaner's down the street. In time she made enough money to serve the lowest quality of horsemeat to her family three times a week. She also moved Pierette out of the drawer.

All the while, it grew apparent that Maman was slowly making her own disappearance. Emilienne was the first to notice this when, on a busy street corner, she reached out to take hold of her mother's hand. Her fingers slipped right through, as if passing through a wisp of steam.

In 1917 Emilienne was thirteen years old and living with her three siblings and Maman in a crowded city block of apartment buildings. Each tenement came with its own problems of sanitation, crowding, and desiccated stairwells. The Roux children were so accustomed to their neighbors' voices permeating the thin walls that each child could eventually speak in several languages—all four in French and English, Emilienne in Italian, René in Dutch and German, and Margaux in Spanish. The youngest, Pierette, spoke only in what was later identified as Greek until her seventh birthday, when in perfect French she declared, *"Mon dieu! Où est mon gâteau?"* which meant "My God! Where is my cake?" and made them all suspect that Pierette had many tricks up her sleeve.

It was on this city block that my grandmother met the first love of her life. His name was Levi Blythe, a runt of a boy with black hair and ill-fitting shoes. A gang of boys

from the next block repeatedly called Levi a faggot before pelting his forehead with rocks. He was the first boy Emilienne ever saw cry, not counting her brother, René, who had a surprisingly low tolerance for pain.

After a particularly gruesome beating, an event to which most of the neighborhood children were witness, Emilienne and her younger sister Margaux followed Levi Blythe to a back alley, where they watched him bleed until Levi turned to them and yelled, "Get lost!"

So they did. Momentarily.

Emilienne climbed the stairs to her family's apartment, shadowed closely, as always, by Margaux. She tore a triangle out of the bottom sheet of the bed she shared with her sister, took the bottle of iodine from her mother's drawer, and ran back to where Levi sat slumped against the alley wall. After watching him wince from the sting of iodine against his cuts, Emilienne let him touch her bare bottom. It was an offering she rationalized later to Margaux, saying with a sigh, "Love can make us such fools."

Emilienne never saw Levi Blythe after that day, nor did anyone else. Many believed that the sordid affairs that regularly took place in his mother's apartment had finally caught up to her, and that perhaps Levi and his two sisters had become wards of the state. But then again, no one was ever really sure—in those days, many people disappeared for lesser reasons; it was difficult to keep track of them all.

It took three years for my grandmother to forget poor

Levi Blythe. At sixteen, she fell hopelessly for a boy she knew only as Dublin, a nickname derived from the place of his birth. Dublin taught her how to smoke cigarettes and once told her she was beautiful.

"Beautiful," he said with a laugh, "but strange, like everyone in your family." He then gave Emilienne her first kiss before running off with Carmelita Hermosa, who was just as lovely as her name implied. And quite unfairly so.

In 1922, when Emilienne was eighteen, the Roux family underwent a number of transformations that confirmed they were, indeed, a little strange. Pierette, who did in fact have many tricks up her sleeve, was now fifteen years old and had fallen in love with an older gentleman with a fondness for bird watching. After failing every other attempt to get the ornithologist to notice her — including a rather disastrous event where she appeared on the stoop of his apartment building wearing nothing but a few feathers plastered to an indiscreet place — Pierette took the extreme step of turning herself into a canary.

The bird-watcher never noticed Pierette's drastic attempt at gaining his affection and instead moved to Louisiana, drawn by its large population of *Pelecanus occidentalis*. Which only goes to show, some sacrifices aren't worth the cost. Even, or perhaps most especially, those made out of love. The family gradually became accustomed to Pierette's cheery morning songs and to the tiny yellow feathers that gathered in the corners of the rooms and stuck to their clothes.

René, the only boy in the Roux family, had surpassed his father's good looks at the tender age of fourteen. By seventeen, he was considered a god among mortals. With simple phrases like *Could you please?* and *Would you like?* René caused young girls' faces to flush with hysteria. On the street, otherwise reputable women walked into walls at the passing by of René Roux, distracted by the way the sun moved through the hair on his knuckles. This was a frightening phenomenon in and of itself, but René found it most upsetting because, unlike Levi Blythe, René *was* in fact fonder of the boys on his street than the girls and took to sharing his bare bottom with some of them, though certainly not while any of his sisters were around.

Aside from Pierette, Emilienne was considered the strangest Roux of them all. It was rumored that she possessed certain unlikely gifts: the ability to read minds, walk through walls, and move things using only the power of her thoughts. But my grandmother hadn't any powers; she wasn't clairvoyant or telepathic. Simply put, Emilienne was merely more sensitive to the outside world than other people. As such, she was able to catch on to things that others missed. While to some a dropped spoon might indicate a need to retrieve a clean one, to Emilienne it meant that her mother should put the kettle on for tea—someone was coming to visit. An owl hoot was an omen of impending unhappiness. A peculiar noise heard three times at night meant death was near. To receive a bouquet was a tricky one since it depended on the flowers—blue violets said,

I'll always be true, but a striped carnation, *Sorry, I can't be with you.* And while this gift proved useful at times, it could also make things quite confusing for young Emilienne. She struggled to distinguish between signs she received from the universe and those she conjured up in her head.

She took up the harpsichord for this very reason—when she pressed her hands to the keys, its complex voice drowned out everything else. She played nightly renditions of Italian love sonnets, which some later attributed to a correlating rise in the neighboring population. Many children were conceived under the amorous music of Emilienne Roux, accompanied by the harmonious voices of her siblings—René's soft tenor, Pierette's sharp chirp, and Margaux's haunting alto. Margaux wasn't strange, but she wasn't beautiful like the others either. This made her strange in her own way. And Maman continued to grow more transparent, enough so that her children could reach right through her to place a milk bottle in the icebox, often without thinking much about it.

Around this time a man called Satin by his friends and Monsieur Lush by everyone else was seen carousing through the streets of lower Manhattan in a silk-lined jacket and wearing rich cologne. They said that he came from somewhere up north—Quebec or Montreal—for his French was impeccable, though oddly accented, and that Manhattan was a usual stop in a circular trek he made every few months. The reason for his visits wasn't apparent,

but it was easy to assume that it was nothing good based on the rough sort of men with whom he kept company and the way his left leg clinked from the flask he wore in his trouser leg.

The day Emilienne met Satin Lush, she was wearing her cloche hat, newly painted with red poppies. Her hair was curled and peeked lightly out from under the hat to cup the curve of her chin. There was a rip in her stocking. It was May and heavy wet lines of spring rain streamed down the windows of the café where Emilienne had just spent her day serving black coffee and sticky buns to dreamless Irishmen. The smell of glazed sugar and folded pride still lingered on her clothes. As she waited for the rain to let up, the bells of Saint Peter's chimed five times and the water fell only harder upon the awning over her head.

She was thinking of the loveliness of such moments, admiring the rain and the graying sky the way one might admire the painting of an up-and-coming artist, one whose celebrity seems presaged by the swirls of his brush marks. It was while she was in the midst of such thoughts that Satin Lush walked out of the café, the clink of his leg disturbing the rhythm of the rain against the awning. Emilienne was immediately transfixed by the circle of light green in one of his eyes, the way it deliciously clashed with the cerulean blue of the other. She found that she did not mind losing the previous moment, for this one was just as lovely.

As they made their way through the borough, Satin holding an umbrella over their heads and the lip of

Emilienne's cloche hat periodically hitting Satin's right ear, the lovers were unaware of the worsening weather. They didn't notice how the clouds gathered and the rain fell in such torrents that the rats of the city flipped the cockroaches onto their backs, stepped aboard, and floated down the streets on tiny arthropod rafts.

That night Emilienne introduced Satin to her family as her *betrothed*, and he spent the evening praising the half-moons of Emilienne's fingernails. Satin quickly became a favorite in the Roux apartment. Emilienne would often return home from work to find Maman and Satin locked deep in discussion, a fast procession of vivid French spilling from their lips. And when René disappeared for three days, it was Satin who knew where to find him. The two returned, René with a chip in one of his front teeth and Satin missing his right earlobe. When asked, the only response given was a vague *You shoulda seen the other guy* and a look between men when one has a secret the other is willing to protect.

The strangest development during this time, however, was the remarkable transformation of unlovely Margaux. After months of living in strained denial, the Roux family could no longer hide from the fact that sixteen-year-old Margaux was pregnant.

This was a particularly confusing time for Emilienne. Until then each of the two sisters had stuck to her predestined role—Emilienne was beautiful, mysterious. A tad strange at times, yes. But Margaux? Margaux was only

a pale shadow of the art form that was Emilienne. There was a time when it was Emilienne with the secrets and Margaux who ached to learn the reason behind the devilish smile and lovely arched eyebrow. But, now, now it was Emilienne who ached. And how she did! Especially when it was no longer Emilienne but Margaux—what with that glowing complexion, those rosy cheeks, that effervescent twinkle in her eyes—that everyone considered the beauty of the family.

Margaux never spoke the father's name. Only once, in a moment of weakness—after a particularly grueling interrogation by her older sister—Margaux ran a finger over her own lovely arched eyebrow and said, "Love can make us such fools," sending a chill up Emilienne's neck. She left the room to fetch a sweater. That was the last time anyone asked Margaux about the father of her child. Instead, her siblings took to playing the "Is that the rat fink?" game while watching men pass by on the street.

The day the child was born, Emilienne was walking home from some errand no one remembered in the end, Pierette perched on her collarbone. The thing remembered was Emilienne's cloche hat—the one painted with red poppies—blowing into the street and being retrieved by an exuberant boy of ten. Emilienne dug a penny out of her purse to reward the boy. As she placed the shiny coin in the child's outstretched hand, she looked up into his dirt-smudged face and noticed his eyes were different colors. One was green, the other blue. On impulse, Emilienne

asked the child who his father was, to which the boy answered with a shrug and ran off, holding his penny to the light.

Making their way through the street, Emilienne paid closer attention to the children in their path and came across another child with mismatched eyes, another child who didn't know his father. On the next block over, they came across another one. And another. Racing from one block to the next, Emilienne counted seventeen such children in twelve blocks.

By the time they made their way back to the family apartment, Pierette was in such a twitter that Emilienne had to stuff her poor sister-bird into the pocket of her jacket. In her haste to get inside, Emilienne knocked over Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo, who, after she'd been helped back onto her feet, announced that Margaux had given birth.

"It's a boy," Notre Petit Poulet said, her tiny fingers fluttering with excitement, "with black hair. But his eyes! One's blue, and the other? The other's green!"

Emilienne walked into the apartment and found Satin Lush, the man she would never call her *betrothed* again, sitting on the sill of an open window, smoking a cigarette. He shrugged when he saw her. "You know how it goes," he said.

In disgust, Emilienne charged toward him and, with an angry shove, pushed him out the window as she screamed, "Eighteen children!"

Satin Lush bounced off the pavement, sprang to his feet, and ran away, never to be seen again.

Whether it was the arrival of Margaux's child or Satin Lush's betrayal that led to the downfall of the Roux family remains unresolved. But it was only a few hours later that young Margaux was found in the community bathroom down the hall. She'd carved out her own heart using a silver knife and laid it with care on the floor by the bathtub. Below the red mass of sinew and blood was a note addressed to Emilienne:

Mon cœur entier pendant ma vie entière.

My whole heart for my entire life.

The child died soon after. Margaux was a mother for approximately six hours. The date was March 1, 1923.

Love, as most know, follows its own timeline, disregarding our intentions or well-rehearsed plans. Soon after his sister's demise, René fell in love with an older married man. William Peyton wept the day he met René Roux. It was in a rather compromising embrace that William's wife caught René and her husband in the bed where she herself had been turned away night after night for two decades. In his haste to flee the unpleasant scene, René ran out into the street, forgetting to take his clothes with him.

As he ran through the shop-lined blocks toward his family's apartment, he was followed by a growing crowd of women (and a few men), all wrought with hysteria over the sight of René Roux's naked buttocks. The frenzy quickly