opening extract from

I, Coriander

written by

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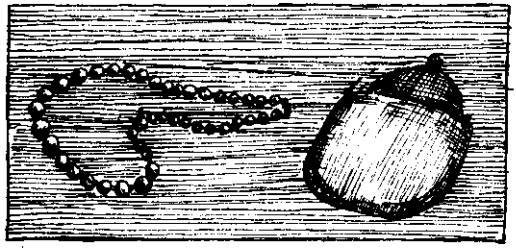
PART ONE



1

A Tale to Tell

It is night, and our old house by the river is finally quiet. The baby has stopped its crying and been soothed back to sleep. Only the gentle lapping of the Thames can be heard outside my window. London is wrapped in a deep sleep, waiting for the watchman to call in the new day.

I have lit the first of seven candles to write my story by. On the table next to me is the silk purse that holds my mother's pearls and beside it is the ebony casket whose treasure I am only now beginning to understand. Next to that, shining nearly as bright as the moon, stands a pair of silver shoes.

I have a great many things to tell, of how I came by the silver shoes and more. And this being my story and a fairy tale besides, I will start once upon a time . . .

My name is Coriander Hobie. I am the only child of Thomas and Eleanor Hobie, being born in this house in the year of Our Lord 1643. It is just a stone's throw from London Bridge, with the river running past the windows

at the back. To the front is my mother's once beautiful walled garden that leads through a wooden door out on to the bustling city street. The garden is all overgrown now; it has been neglected for too long. Once it was full of flowers and herbs of all description whose perfume could make even the Thames smell sweet, but now rosemary and nettles, briar roses and brambles have reclaimed it as their own.

It was this garden, the like of which no neighbours had ever seen, that first set tongues wagging. My father had planted it for my mother, and built her a pretty stillroom that backed on to the wall of the counting house. My mother in her quiet way knew more about herbs and their powers than anyone else, and together with her waiting woman Mary Danes she would spend hours in the stillroom, making all sorts of potions which were distilled and stored in tiny bottles. When I was small I used to hide under my mother's petticoats and listen to friends and neighbours as they brought their ailments to her like posies of sorrows, to be made better by one of her remedies. Later on, when I was too big to hide, they came to ask her other things, for by this time her reputation as a cunning woman with magical powers had spread as thistledown does, blown on the hot winds of gossip.

My first memories are of the garden and of this, my old bedchamber, whose walls my mother painted with fairy places and imaginary beasts. She wrote under each one in her fair script, and for every picture she had a story, as bright in the telling as the colours in which they were painted. When I was small I used to trace the letters with my finger, to feel how the spidery

writing was raised above the wood panelling, and I would say the names to myself like a magic charm to keep harm at bay. All the pictures, like the garden's blooms, are gone now, washed and scrubbed away. Only the faintest trace of the gold letters remains. They still shine through, like the memories.

I used to believe that my mother's life had started with me and that before I made my entrance into this world there was nothing. Nothing, that is, until the midsummer's day when my father, Thomas Hobie, first saw my mother standing under an oak tree in a country lane.

This is the story he told me, and the story I loved the best. When he was a young merchant with a head full of dreams, he put his hard-earned savings, together with what money his father had left him, into a ship bound for Constantinople, banking on her returning with a cargo of silk. Alas, news reached him that she had been lost in a great storm at sea, so that now he owned nothing but the clothes on his back.

In despair, my father walked out of the city and some ten miles into the country, on the chance of being able to borrow money from a distant cousin, a Master Stoop. When he arrived he found that Master Stoop had given up the never-ending struggle to live and had joined the ranks of the dead, leaving a wife and several small Stoops to be looked after.

My father had not the heart to ask for anything. Having paid his last respects, he set out mournfully on the road to London, resigned to his fate.

It was getting late when he met a strange-looking man with

a long beard tied in a knot, holding a lantern as round as the moon. The stranger told him he had been robbed by a highwayman who had taken all he had owned, leaving him just the lantern. My father felt sorry to hear of this misfortune and offered him his cloak to keep the chill off. The stranger accepted it with thanks.

'Young man, to travel with an open and loving heart is worth more than all the gold coins in a treasure chest,' he said. 'Tomorrow your kindness will be rewarded.'

My father wished the fellow well and hoped that nothing more would befall him. Then he set off again, with only the light of the moon to show him the way. As he walked, a wave of tiredness came over him and he lay down to sleep.

Next morning he had not gone far when he thought he might be lost, for in the dawn light everything looked different.

At this point I, having heard the story so many times that I could repeat it to myself word for word, would interrupt and say, 'But you were on the right road.' He would laugh and reply, 'It was the road that would lead me to your mother, so how could it be wrong?'

To my childish way of thinking, it seemed that he met and married my mother in the space of one day. They arrived back in the city after the wedding to be greeted with the astonishing news that his ship had returned safe and sound with a cargo of fine silk.

From that day forward my father's life had been charmed with love and good fortune. No other merchant's ships fared as

well. Untouched by pirates, wars or tempests, they sailed unmolested in calm seas, bringing back bounty fit for a king. Before long, my father was wealthy enough to be able to build this house for us by the river, where we lived in great luxury, having a cook and servants to look after us as well as Sam, my father's faithful apprentice.

It was no surprise to me that all this should happen so fast. It never entered my head to ask what my mother's family thought of their daughter marrying a young man who was penniless, or even if she had any family to mind. All these questions and many more besides only occurred to me much, much later when there was no one left to ask.

My father had two miniature paintings done of them both shortly after their wedding. My mother's portrait shows her wearing a cream gown beautifully embroidered and oversewn with tiny glimmering pearls. I imagine that this is how she looked when my father first saw her that midsummer's day under the oak tree. Wild flowers are woven into her hair and in her hand she is holding an oak leaf.

The background of this tiny painting always fascinated me. It is as if you are a bird looking down from a great height, seeing the land mapped out below. There, in a forest of oak trees, is a clearing in which there is a grand house with formal gardens. In the distance a tower stands tall over the trees, and I could just make out a figure at the top of the tower watching over the landscape, searching for something or someone. On the edge of the forest is a hunting party with dogs. Compared

to the house and the tower, they look oddly large. A hawk sits on the outstretched arm of one of the riders. Another rider is standing up in his saddle blowing a horn. I looked at this painting many times before I spotted the white horse and the fox hidden in a thicket. For some reason that I cannot explain, their discovery worried me greatly. It gave me an uneasy feeling, as if somehow nothing was safe.

My father's portrait shows him looking young and handsome. He is clean-shaven, wearing breeches and a linen shirt embroidered in the same pattern as my mother's dress. The scene behind him could not be more different. It is a view of a city with the river running through it like an opal green ribbon. You could be forgiven for thinking it a picture of London, except that the houses are brightly painted and mermaids and sea monsters can be seen in the water in amongst a fleet of tall ships with full-blown golden sails.

Even then, these two miniatures looked to me strangely out of time, as if they had been painted long, long ago in another world entirely. I know now what they mean. I know why my mother kept silent and why, at my darkest moment, her past claimed me, leading me back to something that could no longer be denied.

2
The Stuffed Alligator

I remember nothing of the trial of King Charles I. I had no knowledge of what was meant by civil war. Such great affairs in the tides of history passed me by. What I recall is feeling safe and loved, the smell of my mother's perfume, staying up late with my parents while they had their dinner, going to sleep in my mother's arms. Of her kisses I could tell you much. Of what my mother and father talked about I could tell you little, except that it made them sad.

In truth, I did not understand what momentous events were unfolding or how they were to touch upon our lives. My world revolved round smaller things. A stuffed alligator, a drowned barber, a pair of silver shoes seemed to me just as strange as a king losing his head.

That January day it was snowing, and the river had begun to freeze over. I went running in great excitement to tell Danes and found her weeping. This in itself was unusual, for Danes was not given to tears.

It was nothing short of murder, she said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

'Who has been murdered?' I asked with interest.

'It is the King,' she replied. 'It is a wicked thing they have done, and no good will come of it.'

'Who has done what?'

'Oliver Cromwell and his axe man,' said Danes. 'Terrible! Who would think we would live to see our very own King have his head chopped off?'

'Did you see it?' I asked.

'No, no, but Master Thankless the tailor was there. He told me it was the saddest sight he had ever had the misfortune to witness. They held the poor King's head up high for all to see, and there was a groan from the crowd, the like of which London has never heard before. We live in dark days, my little sparrow.'

It being winter, I thought she must be right.

Danes blew her nose. 'The King is dead,' she said mournfully. 'Long live the King.'

'How can he be dead and alive at the same time?' I asked. It sounded a very hard thing to do.

'Because,' said Danes, 'his son Prince Charles is alive and well and he will, with God's grace, be the next King.'

It was a bitterly cold winter and snow had covered London in a thick white blanket, so that an eerie hush had descended over the city. The mighty water wheels at each end of the bridge had stopped their thunderous churning and huge

icicles hung from them as the river slowly began freezing over. Old Father Thames looked as if he was growing a long white beard.

A Frost Fair was soon set up on the frozen river, with tented stalls selling all manner of wonderful things: gloves, hats, lace, pots, pans, needles, marbles, poppet dolls, spinning tops, spiced gingerbread, roasted chestnuts. The taverns did a roaring trade with food and ale, and late into the night I could hear singing and shouting outside my window, and smell hot pies tempting passers-by on to the ice.

Master Mullins the barber, who lived near us in Cheapside, was amongst the first to venture out on to the ice. He set up his small red-and-white-striped tent for business and called to his customers, promising them the closest shave in London. People watched the barber from the safety of the riverbank with awe, wondering if the frozen surface was to be trusted.

'Come!' shouted Master Mullins. 'It is as solid as a rock and could take the weight of the Devil himself.'

To prove his point he jumped up and down on the glassy surface.

'Master Mullins is a nincompoop,' said my mother as the Thames began to crack, and we watched all the other stallholders take to the shore. Master Mullins refused to leave. When no customers would venture on to the ice to join him, he shouted to them from his tent, 'What are you waiting for? I have the best ointments in the whole city for thinning hair.'

Master Mullins became the talk of our street, not because of his ointments for thinning hair but for the way he plummeted through the ice, taking all his basins and razors with him.

I asked Danes what would become of him.

'The meddling old fool,' she said. 'He has most probably set up his tent at the bottom of the river and is already open for business and the spreading of gossip.'

After that I took to imagining Master Mullins cutting mermen's hair and trimming the whiskers of sea monsters. With that thought firmly in my head I worried no more about the barber, and my only regret was that he had not taken the stuffed alligator with him.

The alligator had been given to my father by a Captain Bailey, who had brought it back from China. He stood menacingly on top of the ebony cabinet in the study, the key kept safe in creamy white jaws with needle-sharp teeth.

I had always been fascinated by the treasures the cabinet held, shells in which you could hear the sea, a tiny turtle shell, butterflies with wings of brilliant blue. But the moment I saw the alligator I burst into tears, believing it to be real. It looked very angry and not at all pleased to be stuffed.

'It is only a baby alligator,' said my father, holding it for me to see. 'It will not bite.'

I would not go near it. I knew it was secretly waiting until we had left the room and then it would come alive.

This thought terrified me so much and gave me such nightmares that Danes would light all the candles to make sure that

the alligator would not come in. She never said I was being a ninny, not once, and secretly I felt she was as scared of that alligator as I.

Winter finally departed and spring arrived, catching everyone by surprise. Windows were thrown wide open and carpets were taken outside and beaten, as if our house were a great blanket being shaken free of its fleas. Everything was washed and polished until the house smelt of lavender and beeswax, with bunches of fresh flowers filling the rooms. All our clothes were aired, our linens were cleaned and Master Thankless the tailor was sent for. New gowns were ordered and old gowns altered.

In amongst all this excitement a very strange thing happened. A parcel was left outside our garden gate. No name was written on it and there was no indication of where it was from. The mysterious package was brought inside and left on the hall table to be claimed. Every time I saw it sitting there I would feel a tingle of excitement.

Finally my mother opened it, carefully looking for any clues as to who might have sent it. Inside was the most beautiful pair of child-size silver shoes. They had tiny silver stitches on them and the letter C embroidered on their soles. I knew they were meant for me.

'Can I put them on?' I said, jumping up and down with joy.

My mother said nothing, but took the silver shoes over to the window to examine them. They shimmered and glimmered as

if they were made out of glass. They whispered to me, 'Slip us on your dainty feet.'

'Please,' I said, pulling at my mother's skirts, 'let me.'

'I think not,' said my mother quietly. She took them back to the table and much to my surprise wrapped them up again.

Seeing them disappear like that was almost too much to bear. I felt my heart would surely break if they could not be mine.

'They are meant for me,' I said desperately. 'They have the letter C sewn on their soles. C is for Coriander.'

'I said no,' said my mother. Her voice had a sharpness to it that I had never heard before. It alarmed me, for I could not understand why such a wonderful present should make her so out of humour.

'I am sorry, Coriander,' she said, softening, 'but these shoes are not for you. Let that be an end to it.'

An end it was not. It was the beginning.

I felt the loss of the shoes like a hunger that would not go away. I knew they were still in the house. I was sure I could sometimes hear them calling me, and when I followed the sound it always led me to the door of my father's study.

As it turned out, it was not the alligator that I should have been scared of, but the silver shoes. They came from a land no ship can sail to, a place that is not marked on any map of the world. Only those who belong there can ever find it.