

OUR MISS ENGEL  
A Vampire Story  
Lauren Scharhag

Our Miss Engel

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Cover art by Lauren Scharhag

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2 September, 1909

I received a letter today from the Ursuline Academy. It seems I have found a job.

When I informed my parents of my decision, my father said, "You watch those papist types, Clara. They're a funny lot." I don't know what he means by that. From her letters, the Reverend Mother seems perfectly kind.

13 September, 1909

We exchanged a few more correspondences before settling on 20 September as my first day of teaching, a Monday. I will take the train to Paola on Saturday morning and should arrive before noon, which will give me just over a day and a half to get settled in.

I myself went to a good Lutheran school, and have nothing but cherished memories of my teacher, Miss Taylor. When I finished my eighth grade primer, she hugged me fiercely and said, "Clara, you just make me so proud." She had tears in her eyes. I knew right then that I was going to become a teacher, like her. We are quite learned here in this part of the world, with a fine theatre and the Carnegie library. Also, Papa is something of an intellectual. He was a teacher back in Germany, so I suppose you could say it is in my blood. My brother and I were brought up to be diligent readers and encouraged to express ourselves through writing and discourse.

As I was studying to get my teacher's certificate, Papa was fond of telling me that many schools in America are based on the Prussian model of teaching. "The German people know something about education, Clara," he would say. "Don't ever forget that."

Behind my book, I would smile. "Yes, Papa."

I must confess my tastes run far more to novels than to the philosophical treatises Papa is always urging me to read. We find something of a compromise in poetry, thank the Muses! Like most of the men in the tri-state area, Papa is a miner. Joplin is known for blackjack and lead. Both my parents have worked very hard for everything we have. When they first came to this country, they spoke very little English. But as their English improved, so did their prospects. Mama worked as a seamstress for a time, and Papa worked his way up from shafting and drilling to become a foreman, and we moved out of our cabin by the mining camp into a proper house off Grey Avenue. They wanted my brother and me to sound like perfect Americans. That was easy enough, as I was born in Joplin. Gunther was born back in Frankfurt, but he was just a little thing when they brought him over, so doesn't really remember any German at all. I suppose that is just as well.

Anyhow, I am very excited about the position. My first school—my first pupils! I wonder what they will be like.

18 September, 1909

I was so excited last night, I could scarcely sleep. My trunk was packed and ready ages ago. I was up at four getting dressed. Then I went around the house, saying my good-byes to the rooms I have lived in since I was three—to the rooms, and everything in them. Good-bye, parlor. Good-bye, settee. Good-bye, mantel clock. Mama will have to wind you now that I won't be here. Today, I will be taking my first train ride alone.

Mama, Papa and Gunther saw me off at the depot. As Mama waved, she dabbed at her eyes a few times with her handkerchief, but I know she is proud of me, as is Papa. They believe that everyone should have the opportunity to see a bit of the world while they're young. They also believe one should make their own way, and here I am, about to do both.

I was wearing my first traveling suit, a going-away gift from Mama, and I was feeling quite the sophisticate. I even made so bold as to smile at a handsome young baggage man who was assisting another passenger with their trunk and didn't he just light up! His smile was as bright as the buttons on my new jacket.

I felt such a thrill as the train started up and we pulled away from the depot. This is what I have often imagined life would be like—this rush of excitement, this point of departure, anticipation of journeys ahead. As we chugged along, I kept my eyes virtually glued to the window. Even though we're nearly into autumn, the humidity clings stubbornly on. In fact, I was starting to perspire in my many layers of clothing, so I opened the window to get some relief. When that was not sufficient, I removed my hat and gloves and gave a deep sigh of contentment as the breeze rushed over my face and hands. Nearly sticking my head out the window, I let the wind fill my lungs, whip across my cheeks. I was sure to be thoroughly mussed by the time we reached our destination, but it felt absolutely wonderful, almost like I was flying.

Riding northwest through Missouri and into Kansas was lovely, especially at this time of year. The sky was the purest blue, the hills and fields to either side of the track lulled into an extended greenness by the sweet promises of Indian summer, with no way of telling when a cold snap might hit. There were fields of corn and alfalfa, patches of sunflowers. Farmhouse gardens were deep with late-season vegetables: beans, cabbage, peas, pumpkins. There were apple and peach trees fragrant with fruit. I counted over a dozen hawks arcing overhead or perched on fence posts. We passed a number of oil pumps standing in fields like enormous grasshoppers, their pistons working with slow, ponderous motions. And, of course, plenty of livestock. It occurs to me that Paola is quite close to Kansas City. Kansas City is said to have many beautiful parks and

streets, not to mention the river, and the stockyards. If I can, I believe I will make a trip up to see them on one of my days off.

When I got to the station in Paola, Mr. Cahill was waiting for me on the platform. Mr. Cahill is the convent groundskeeper, and looks every inch the old farmer that he is. At the moment, he was dressed in a work shirt, overalls, scuffed work boots, and an old straw hat. “You Miss Engel?” he asked.

“I am,” I said, holding out my (re-gloved) hand to shake. “You must be Mr. Cahill.”

His whiskered face broke into a broad grin, revealing tobacco-stained teeth. “Glad to meet ya. The girls are so excited about having a new teacher. Just wait’ll they get a look at you. We ain’t never had had anybody so purdy as you up to the convent. Just look at the color in them cheeks!”

I put one hand to my face, self-consciously. “I may be a bit wind-burned.”

“It’s real becoming. I like a gal who ain’t a-scared of a little fresh air and sunshine.” He led me to a horse and buggy, where he loaded my things into the back, and then off we went, heading southeast, to where the Academy is situated on the edge of town.

Mr. Cahill chatted my ear off as we drove, giving me something of an impromptu tour of the town. We even detoured through the square, which is lined with handsome brick buildings, and has a bandstand in the center of it. Working gaslights have been installed around the main streets so it is well-lit at night, and I was excited to see that there is a library under construction. It is nearly done. He also showed me the bank and the courthouse, the general store, some other shops, and a café. Even though Paola is older than Joplin, I must say, things seem newer here. Perhaps it is because they are cleaner. A mining town full of all sorts of rough characters can’t help but be a bit on the dingy side, and one must also consider that we have many saloons. Kansas has much stricter blue laws, and I imagine this to be a dry county.

It really wasn’t far from the train station to the Academy grounds. I could have walked it, if it hadn’t been for my luggage. The grounds themselves are modest, only about eight acres, but Mr. Cahill does them proud. The green lawns, the stone pathways, the gardens, the painted benches, a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, and a great deal of flowering trees, especially redbuds and dogwoods. As it was a Saturday, some of the girls were playing outside. They ranged in age from five to fourteen. Someone had drawn a hopscotch grid on one of the walkways and several of the girls were gathered around that. Others were skipping about in the fields, or awaiting their turn on a swing that dangled from the branches of a hickory. I wondered which of them would be my students. When they saw Mr. Cahill and me pull up in the buggy, many of them stopped and waved. As I climbed down, some of them even started to run up to me, but Mr. Cahill shouted at them in a way that managed to be both rough and good-natured, “Don’t you even think about mobbing this poor woman, she just got here! Go on back to your

playing.” He pointed to the hopscotch grid. “And who did that? How many times have I told you not to be drawing on my sidewalks!” The girls ran off, giggling and shrieking.

I looked around. The buildings are all brick, the largest and grandest of which is the Motherhouse, with wide stone stairs, tall, white columns, and a balcony on the upper level. It is also the newest building, only five years old. The foyer is redolent of lemon oil. From the grounds, I gathered that this could be a very peaceful, tranquil place, even with gaggles of schoolgirls carrying on as they were out on the lawn. Once I stepped inside the Motherhouse, my first impression was one of overwhelming good cheer. The wide windows, the lofty ceilings, and the overall cleanliness convey a sense of rightness, of welcoming.

The Reverend Mother and some of the other sisters were waiting to greet me. They had Mr. Cahill take my things over to the convent. The Reverend Mother looked exactly as I had pictured her, a kindly older woman with faded blue eyes, and a face as weathered and soft as a well-used bar of soap, smelling of clean linens and starch. She did not shake my hand so much as clasp it gently between both of her own. They were warm and dry. “Hello, Miss Engel. We’re so pleased you’re here. I trust you had a good train ride?” Her voice was as soothing as her hands.

I replied, “I did, thank you.”

The Reverend Mother introduced me to the Sisters Fredonia, Virginia, and Caroline. Sister Caroline was the youngest, and I guessed her age to be about forty-five. It’s a good thing I have always gotten on well with my elders.

“But surely you will want to freshen up, dear,” the Reverend Mother said. “Then we’ll see about giving you a proper tour of the place.”

I said, “That sounds wonderful, Reverend Mother. Thank you.”

Sister Caroline took me to the convent house and showed me my room, which is somewhat separate from the sisters’ living quarters, tucked in a sort of loft space, with a sloped ceiling, and a funny little window. It’s more of a skylight than a window. The room is small and austere, with white-washed walls, and a narrow bed, (a cot really), with a new spring mattress and a quilt. There is a dresser with a pitcher and wash basin, and a mirror. There is a table next to the bed with an oil lamp, and a vase of fresh flowers, very thoughtful of the good sisters. The walls are bare but for a crucifix over the pillow. I like it very much.

Mr. Cahill had already brought my trunk up and set it at the foot of the bed, but unpacking would have to wait for now. I did as the Reverend Mother bade, giving my hands, arms, face and neck a vigorous washing in the basin. I unpinned my hair, combed it out, and re-pinned it. When I was presentable, I went back downstairs where the sisters were waiting.

They took me on a tour of the grounds. The chapel, dormitories, and recreation hall are located in the Motherhouse. I saw girls going in and out of the dormitory rooms, and several more in the recreation hall, where the preferred activities are studying, playing games, sewing, knitting, or reading. There are many outbuildings on the property, some of which I did not enter, such as the chaplain's house. The chaplain is Reverend Father Jean Ardens, a Benedictine. There are twelve sisters living and working here at the Academy. In addition to teaching here, some of them also teach at the Holy Trinity School in town. At the Academy, we have sixty students total, forty of whom are day students. Even though our tuition is modest, the sisters told me, we are often paid in trade, which is to say: chickens, vegetables, and whatever baked or canned goods the ladies of town see fit to send our way. After our tour, the sisters left me to get settled in. They had already eaten their noon meal, so one of them brought me a bit of lunch on a tray.

That evening, I had supper at the dining table. All twelve sisters were present. Their grace is easy enough to remember, but I said my own silently to myself, *Come, Lord Jesus, be our Guest, and let Thy gifts to us be blessed. Amen.* And, of course, I did not make the sign of the cross. They did not seem to mind. Just as I did not mind that they do not say a prayer after the meal, as I have been brought up to do: *O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever. Amen.*

As we ate, the sisters had a lot of questions for me. They wanted to hear all about my family, my upbringing, what Joplin was like, etc.

I inquired of them, "Is there a Lutheran church in town?"

"Yes, there is the Trinity Lutheran," the Reverend Mother answered. "And of course, you are welcome to join us for mass whenever you wish."

"Thank you," I said politely. "I'll bear that in mind."

It was not quite dark when we had finished eating. After supper, two of the sisters immediately leaped up and began to clear the table. I started to help, but the Reverend Mother asked me to join her in the parlor. Sister Wilma brought in some coffee and slices of cake for us. As the Reverend Mother poured the coffee, she said, "I know it's a bit early to tell how you'll be getting on. But I wonder, do you have any sense at all of whether or not you'll like it here?"

"Oh, yes," I said quickly, putting down my coffee cup. "I love it here. It's such a beautiful place."

At that, the Reverend Mother relaxed a great deal. I hadn't realized how tense she was up until that moment. "Good. That is very good to hear. I'm afraid I haven't been entirely forthcoming with you, Miss Engel. I hope that you will hear me out."

Now it was my turn to tense. "What is it?"

“You see, we would like it very much if you could take on a very special role here at the Academy. Specifically, we would like you to handle a group of students who are here under unusual circumstances.”

“What sort of circumstances?”

“Well, we have five girls -- five wonderful little girls -- who suffer from a rare illness. It’s so rare, in fact, that they are the only known extant cases. They were entrusted to our care because we were the only school in the country willing to accommodate their needs.”

“What is the disease?”

The Reverend Mother shook her head. “There is no name for it, Miss Engel. It manifests primarily as extreme photophobia. The girls’ eyes are painfully sensitive to light, as is their skin. Prolonged exposure to direct sunlight causes them excruciating physical discomfort and fatigue. Exposure to direct sunlight can even cause them to break out in lesions. The girls are also anemic, which necessitates some special dietary supplements.”

“The poor things! And the Academy is equipped to deal with their situation?”

“We have made accommodations. Chiefly, we have given the girls rooms separate from the other students so they can sleep undisturbed during the day, and hold classes at night.”

“Ah.”

“In fact, the other students are not aware of our special class. We felt it was better. Children can be so cruel. They wouldn’t understand.”

“Then what are we to tell them about me? What do they think my capacity is here?” I asked.

“Why, that’s easy enough. They think that you are here to be an assistant of sorts to me and the other sisters, and, when necessary, to Father Ardens.”

“I see.”

“You will help keep it that way, won’t you? No need to upset anyone.”

For a moment, neither of us said anything, but the Reverend Mother watched me closely as I absorbed this information. I supposed I could see her point about children being cruel, but shouldn’t children have as normal an upbringing as possible?

“They are precious children,” the Reverend Mother said. “They are as happy as their situation allows for them to be, and are, in every other respect, bright, normal young ladies. They deserve every chance at a proper education. They are simply in need of a caring individual, someone who is willing to be an instrument of God’s mercy. I believe that you are that individual, Miss Engel.”



At that point, there was a rustling sound from behind a drape, and as I glanced over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of a little white face and a pair of big eyes, followed by the scampering of little feet. The Reverend Mother smiled and said, "Excuse me." She rose and disappeared into the adjoining room.

That clinched it. Any doubts I may have had, (although, to be perfectly honest, I can't recall what they might have been) instantly evaporated, and I couldn't help but smile.

When the Reverend Mother returned, she went on, "We would understand if this would prove difficult for you. Not just anyone could take to those sorts of hours. We hope very much that you'll stay on all the same."

I said it would be no trouble, no trouble at all.

19 September, 1909

I walked to town this morning for church. I like the minister, Pastor Weber. There was a picnic lunch on the lawn afterwards. Everyone is eager to enjoy the good weather while it lasts. There were sandwiches, cold chicken, salads, cakes, pies, and lemonade. I made a great number of acquaintances. Then I enjoyed a stroll around town—a bit more than a stroll, actually. I must have walked the whole length of town and back! It is such a fine place. The people are so friendly—many of them came right up, shook my hand, and said hello there, how do you do. I would like to write more, but I am quite sleepy. I will hold my first class tomorrow evening. It is strange to think of teaching at night, but I expect I will become accustomed to it. I should really try to stay up all night tonight, but I was up so early for services, my eyes are already closing. Oh, dear. How will I ever manage, shifting back and forth from a night schedule during the week to a day schedule on the weekends? Surely that cannot be healthy? Papa says a body can adjust to almost anything. I will adjust. Those poor little girls need me.

21 September, 1909

Last night was my first night of class. How strange it was. I rose and had supper with the sisters, then the Reverend Mother took me over to the Motherhouse. The girls basically have the third floor to themselves, with a private dormitory and classroom.

I went up the stairs first with an oil lamp. There are light fixtures on the landings, but it still helped to have the additional light, being that the Reverend Mother's eyesight is not what it once was, though she seems quite spry in my estimation. She was hardly winded at all by the time we got to the top floor.

As we approached the door to the classroom, I couldn't help but think of bedtime stories, five fairy tale princesses locked away in their enchanted bower. The Reverend Mother started to turn the knob and we heard a great deal of shuffling about on the other side of the door, followed by whispers and giggles. One of them shushed the others, loudly and with great authority. The Reverend Mother shook her head and opened the door.

The room was utterly dark, and as I stepped over the threshold, somehow, my oil lamp guttered and went out. There was more giggling at that.

"Very well, girls," the Reverend Mother said firmly. "Let's get some light in here, please."

There were footsteps and the sound of a match being struck. A candle that stood on the teacher's desk at the front of the room was lit, the match brought to a set of tiny pursed lips to be blown out. The little girl was about seven years old, dressed in a dark pinafore and stockings. In the semi-darkness, I couldn't make out her hair or eye color, but I was able to perceive that she was very pretty, though even in the candlelight, (or perhaps because of it), she looked very white, white and somehow translucent, like a paper lantern. It gave off a peculiar luminescence. There were half-circles under her eyes as dark as bruises, and you could see the tracery of veins at her temples. She smiled at me.

I said, "Hello."

Her smile widened. "Hello." Her eyes went from me to the nun. "Hello, Reverend Mother."

The Reverend Mother nodded. "Finish up and take your seat, please."

The little girl did as she was told, going around the room and lighting other candles and oil lamps, ending with the one I had in my hand. She walked right up to me without a hint of shyness or self-consciousness and pointed to it. I held it steady as she re-lit the wick. Up close, I could see that she had straight, ash-blond hair and gray eyes. Then the girl took her seat with the other four, who watched the proceedings with great interest and a sort of anticipation that seemed unusual to me, but then, one had to admit, these were unusual circumstances. Standing there in a classroom lit by candles and oil lamps, with the crescent moon smiling in through the window at us was like something out of a dream.

The five girls were all very different from each other, each remarkably pretty in her own way, though they all have that sickly pale luster to their skin, the same shadows beneath their eyes. Now they all sat up straight in their chairs, hands folded on their desks, and turned expectantly to the Reverend Mother and me, on their best behavior.

The Reverend Mother said, "Girls, this is your new teacher, Miss Clara Engel."

"Hello, Miss Engel," they chorused.

"Hello, class," I responded pleasantly.

The Reverend Mother called each of their names. They stood up, and, at her behest, told me a bit about themselves, which I thought was an excellent way for us all to get acquainted.

The first was Leticia Hamilton, or Letty for short, age eight. She is the oldest, with green eyes and the most beautiful golden ringlets. Her favorite thing in the world is to wear pretty dresses. The other girls laughed. “Well, it’s true,” Letty pouted. “I just like to look my best, is all.”

“That will do, Letty,” the Reverend Mother shook her head. “It seems we will have to have another talk about vanity.”

The next girl she introduced was Frances McCready, also age eight, with red hair and freckles that stood out like spots on a mackerel, shockingly vivid against the whiteness of her skin. Yet she had quick brown eyes and an easy confidence that I liked very much. She said, “I like to be outside. I like to run and climb and ride horses.” Her voice was low and husky for a girl’s.

One of the other girls rolled her eyes. “That’s four things, Frankie.”

“Well, maybe if I were as boring as the rest of you, I could keep to just one thing,” she returned.

Anne-Marie Flaherty was the girl who had lit the candles. She is, indeed, seven years old, with ash blond hair, a lighter dusting of freckles, and a very grave manner. She did not smile as she stood. “I like to read, ma’am.”

Tess Cavanaugh is six years old, and, quite simply, the most beautiful child I have ever set eyes on. She looks like a perfect little doll, with sleek black hair held back with a bit of purple ribbon. Her eyes are so blue they appear almost violet, framed by the longest, darkest lashes I have ever seen. She stood and said in a sweet little voice, “I like animals, miss.”

Finally, the last girl, Eva Barton, is five years old. She is also a very striking child, with rich chestnut hair and deep brown eyes. Like Anne-Marie, she did not smile as she said, “I like games.” She did not sit down immediately afterwards, but gazed levelly at me and said, “Now you.”

“Pardon?”

“We’ve told you about ourselves,” she said patiently. “Now you tell us something.”

“Well, I suppose that is fair,” I agreed. “As Reverend Mother said, my name is Clara Engel. I come from Joplin, Missouri. And I like many of the same things the rest of you like.” I smiled at Letty. “My mother was a seamstress, so I like pretty clothes. I have an older brother who used to play with me a lot, so I like being out of doors. My father was a teacher, so I like to read. I love animals. And I enjoy playing games, though I’m not much good at most of them.”

All the girls smiled except little Eva, who peered at me skeptically. But she took her seat, like the others. Clapping my hands together, I turned to the Reverend Mother. "Well, I think we're off to a very good start. Shall I take it from here?"

The nun inclined her head at that and took her leave.

25 September, 1909

This week has positively flown by. There is so much to write about, so much to think about, I am actually having trouble separating my thoughts. I am grateful to have been given this situation, with only five students to whom I can utterly devote my attention, though teaching at night is every bit as strange as one might imagine. Sometimes, as I am giving lessons, I am seized with the queerest feeling, as if there were no one else in the wide world but the girls and me. I look around the room and my heart just goes out to those poor children, who have no choice but to sit in a dismal, candlelit room, night after night.

I am coming to learn all of their dispositions. It was immediately clear to me upon our first meeting that they are all very strong personalities, which makes their company most enjoyable in many respects. I imagine it stems from the fact that they are virtually sequestered in that attic-like space. That sort of isolation lends itself to exaggerating what is already present. Teaching them has posed some difficulties, I confess, and I expect I will run into more as time goes on. Of course, they squabble amongst themselves, like sisters. It seems to me the girls rather gang up on Letty a great deal of the time. For all that she is the oldest, Letty is easily cowed. She is not as quick-witted as the others, and is often unaware that the joke is on her, in fact. But she is very sweet, and despite what the Reverend Mother says, I do not see vanity in her, but a genuine love of beautiful things. I brought up some flowers I had cut from the convent garden, and Letty was simply overjoyed. I imagine she cries easily, though she has not cried yet. Anne-Marie always leaps to her defense. So far, I have not had to intervene, but I imagine at some point, I will.

I have learned Anne-Marie is something of an artist. She has a notepad filled with pencil sketches, most of which are copied out of books. She is very shy about showing them to me, however, but the few pages I have glimpsed are quite remarkable. Tess can sing like an angel. And then there is Frankie. Poor dear, it must be hardest on her to be cooped up all the time. I asked the Reverend Mother if I can take the girls out for short recesses on the grounds. Fresh air is still fresh air, even if it is at night. She said it was out of the question as they are liable to wake the other children. Such a shame! But that just means we have to be a little more inventive when it comes to finding ways for the girls to get up and stretch their limbs. It doesn't do for young bodies to be so sedentary. So I have started to lead them in some very basic isometrics that can be performed in-doors, jumping jacks, touching their toes, skipping, marching around the room, that sort of thing. They seem to enjoy it, even Eva, who at first seemed to think

it was beneath her dignity. In fact, when I first suggested it, she just gaped at me. “I am *not* going to stomp around the room like some sort of a—”

“I think it’ll be fun,” Anne-Marie interrupted, tugging at her hand. “Come on, Eva!”

As the others chimed in, Eva had no choice but to give in. She sighed, “Oh, all right.”

And before you could say Jack Robinson, she was running and skipping right alongside the rest of them, waving scarves or a toy tambourine that I found downstairs. When they finish their exercises, their eyes are bright, and their cheeks even have a little bit of color. As for fresh air, I take them out on the balcony for story hour. Already, the air is quite brisk at night, but we bring candles and blankets and bundle up together, and it is quite cozy under the stars. The girls gather around as I read to them, or we take turns reading. They are all quite remarkable readers. I had suggested we read some of the tales of Beatrix Potter, or perhaps L. Frank Baum, but they requested *Jane Eyre*.

I do not mean to imply that the girls have not been well taken care of. Quite the contrary. Aside from being so frightfully pale, they seem quite healthy, sturdy even. We break for a meal at midnight. I escort them down to the dining hall where Sister Fredonia attends them, and I dash back over to the convent house for my own ‘luncheon.’ As for their studies, they are attentive, grasp the lessons easily, and complete their assignments. I never have to deduct marks for sloppiness or poor penmanship. Again, I believe their life has uniquely predisposed them to studiousness—they are unable to play as other children do, so reading and schoolwork are rather ideal pastimes, and they seem to have retained a great deal of knowledge. All in all, the Reverend Mother is correct. They seem as happy as it possible to be in their situation.

I am planning to talk to Mr. Cahill about bringing some animals up for Tess—a rabbit would be perfect, or a songbird. I think the class should have its own pet. The girls could take turns caring for it. I will continue to try and think of other ways to engage them, to bring the world to them. They are so bright, so eager. Eva, strangely, is the most inscrutable. She is the youngest, the smallest, but the most self-possessed. I must come up with a way to draw her out.

Meanwhile, I forgot to mention—I did not wake up today until two in the afternoon. I had hoped to get up earlier and go into town, but I just slept right on, despite the light pouring in through the skylight. (I hang a cloth over it during the week when I absolutely must sleep during the day, but I didn’t today, hoping that the daylight would rouse me.) Tomorrow, I shall have to set an alarm if I intend to make it to church.

26 September, 1909

The alarm clock did the trick. I was yawning at breakfast this morning, but I made it. After church, I ran into Mr. Cahill in town, and asked him about the rabbit. He acted very uneasy, and said that I must talk to the Reverend Mother about it. It was very odd.

So I did, this evening at supper. I was quite taken aback when she said no. She said that the girls are very delicate, and that animals bring germs. Oh dear, now I am concerned about the flowers. Letty will be absolutely heartbroken if I take them away. I noticed the other night that Anne-Marie kept looking longingly at them as well, and I just know she was thinking of her sketch pad. Perhaps I should just leave them until they start to wilt and simply not replace them? All the same, I would feel just dreadful if any of the girls took sick.

Something else happened today. As I was returning from town, I saw a family leaving Holy Trinity. They appeared to be a farm family, but very well-to-do. They had a fine wagon that seated all of them comfortably. It was drawn by a pair of beautiful chestnut horses. Well, naturally, I stood there gaping like a fool. The family has several children, one of which is a girl about my age. She saw me and smiled. The older boy looked to be about nineteen or twenty, regarding me with a milder but no less curious expression.

I moved to the side of the road, and the man driving the horses pulled up on the reins. "Afternoon," he called out. "You must be the new assistant."

I nodded. "Yes, sir. That's me."

He is a burly, older man with graying black hair, a beard, and laughing blue eyes. He touched the brim of his hat. "I'm Gus Shaw. This here's my wife, Rebecca."

Mrs. Shaw was a plump, pretty lady, round and brown as a fritter. She wore a beautiful crepe bonnet hat decorated with pink blossoms, her thick dark hair rolled in a bun at the nape of her neck. A little dark-haired boy sat in her lap, and she smiled at me over his head. She said, "The sisters speak very highly of you."

They introduced me to their children. They have six all told, four boys and the two girls. The daughter my age is named Georgina. The young man is Theo. The rest are Matthew, James, Andrew, and Katherine.

Mr. Shaw offered to give me a ride back to the Academy.

I demurred, "It's really not that far."

"Oh, get on up here," he growled. "Any friend of the sisters is a friend of ours."

Theo stood and held his hand out to help me up, and they drove me back to the convent house, delivering me right up to the doorstep. They stayed for a while, passing the time, chatting with the sisters, watching the little ones play and chase each other around the grounds. Mrs. Shaw talked about her orchard and promised to bring us a few jars of her best apple butter.

I have been so busy, I haven't had time to feel much homesickness, but spending time with the Shaws this afternoon has made me miss Mama, Papa and Gunther so terribly. As soon as I got back to my room, I wrote a letter to them, telling them all about the girls, about the sisters and the Academy, about Paola. I'm sure they are anxious to hear from me, as I am from them. This feeling is so poignant, so bittersweet. On one hand, I am so glad to be here, so glad to have met the Shaws, who are such a lovely family. But this nice family has inspired such an ache in me. All the same, I hope to see them again.

3 October, 1909

I am settling into a routine of sorts. I rise every afternoon at 3:30, dress, eat a very light meal, and prepare lessons. I eat supper with the sisters at six. We start class promptly at seven with the Lord's Prayer, and the girls say a Hail Mary. We have history and geography lessons first, then exercise, and arithmetic. I do not even bother with the first grade primers, as Eva and Tess are well beyond that. We break at midnight. Then, after another brief exercise session, class resumes, and we do grammar, spelling, and reading. We finish at 2:30, and then the girls have free time to do as they wish, so long as they are quiet.

I have noticed that the girls, despite their vastly different temperaments, have certain striking similarities of manner. At first, I assumed that because they suffered the same ailment, their confinement has affected them in the same way. Eva and Anne-Marie, of course, have a natural inclination to be serious. But even Tess who can be a bit dreamy and Frankie who can be very rambunctious are equally capable of lapsing into a solemnity that, I think, is rather uncommon in little girls. Their sense of humor is bizarre. As we read *Jane Eyre*, they laughed hysterically to hear that Thornfield Hall was ruined, and Mr. Rochester burned. Regular children's games seem to bore them. Adult games hold their attention for a time—chess, Halma, Monopoly, whist, that sort of thing. But they vastly prefer games they have made up on their own, games with rules which only they understand. One of them involves a deck of cards that they call, 'Fives.' Eva will hold up a card and exclaim triumphantly, "Five of clubs!" And the others groan. Another game they play is called, 'Grimoire,' in which they draw a series of dots on a piece of paper. Two players take turns drawing a single line until the paper is covered in strange designs. I can't make heads nor tails of it, couldn't even tell you what the purpose of that game is. But I will tell you this: I have opted to leave the flowers in the classroom.

The other night, at supper, I asked the Reverend Mother, "Where are their parents?"

She said, "They are our wards."

Mystified, I asked, "They are orphans? All of them?"

She put her fork down. “Well, you must understand what a tremendous strain it can be, caring for a child with such unusual physical debilities.”

“You mean that their parents abandoned them because they are sick?”

“I think that is simplifying the matter. People have reasons for behaving as they do. It is not for us to judge.”

I just can't understand it. I would never give up my child—not ever. I said as much to the Reverend Mother, who just smiled and said, “I believe you.” I suppose if I were so old, and had taken care of so many people as the Reverend Mother has, I could be so detached. But I do not and I am not.

4 October, 1909

This afternoon, I was in my room with my sewing box, trying to repair a torn pocket on my dark blue skirt. I will never be the seamstress my mother is. Papa jokes that when it comes to seams, I take after him—my hands would do better holding a pickaxe and a stick of dynamite than a needle and thread. My fingers seemed even clumsier than usual, and I was just about to give up when Sister Caroline knocked on the door.

She came in, smiling rather shyly. “You have a visitor.”

“I have?” I asked, and my heart leapt, thinking that perhaps Mama and Papa had taken the train to see me.

Looking for all the world like she was just twenty years old again herself, Sister Caroline leaned forward and whispered, “It's Theo Shaw.”

I was so surprised, I didn't know what to think. I went downstairs, and there he was in the parlor, standing next to the fireplace. When I came into the room, he stood up, very tall and straight. “Miss Engel,” he said, hat in hand.

“Mr. Shaw,” I said. “How nice to see you again.”

“I'm sorry to come unannounced. Mama asked me to bring those jars of apple butter she promised.”

I nodded. “Well, that was kind of her.”

He smiled. “Mama knew I'd be wanting an excuse to come around here more often. I suppose it'll be a pie next.”



I laughed. I covered my mouth with both hands, trying to keep it in, but I don't remember when I've been so delighted. When I'd recovered my wherewithal, I invited him to sit. The two of us faced each other across the low table. At first, I just gazed at him, and he looked right back. There was no denying that Theo Shaw is one of the finest-looking young men anywhere. He is clean-shaven, with a shock of black hair, and eyes as bright and blue as an acetylene torch. He was still dressed in his Sunday finery. I, on the other hand, had already changed back into one of my plainer skirts and blouses after church, and nervously, I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

Sister Fredonia rescued me at that moment by bringing in coffee and cake from the kitchen. Say what you will about Catholics, but the nuns were excellent hostesses, graciously knowing when to participate in the conversation and when not, and under their watchful eyes, Theo Shaw and I had our visit. It turns out that he is twenty-one, four years older than I. He told me all about his family's farm outside of town. They have 150 acres. There are crops and livestock, his mother's orchards with apple, peach and cherry trees. Some years ago, they'd struck oil on the property, so they had several pumps. He stays very busy assisting his father, though he did go away for two years to study agriculture at the university in Lawrence. When he had to take his leave, we shook hands again. His hands are beautiful, long-fingered, strong and clean, but rough, rougher than you'd expect on someone so young and pretty. But of course, he'd grown up roping cattle and baling hay, he would have his share of calluses. He held my hand for a heartbeat or two longer than the good sisters may have deemed completely proper, and for just a second, it seemed he leaned in, very near to me. Not quite close enough to kiss, but still close enough. I could see him draw in a deep breath, catching my scent. He drew it in, closed his eyes. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before, and I felt my own breath stop, my face flush scarlet. The Reverend Mother cleared her throat.

Hastily, we let go of each other's hands. The Reverend Mother and I saw him to the door. He departed with the understanding that he would return next Sunday to visit with me again.

I don't know how I made it back up to my room, but somehow I did. As soon as I reached the bed, it seemed that my legs just gave out from under me. I am so warm, my skin feels damp inside my clothes, the material of my blouse clinging at the small of my back and under my arms, the nape of my neck hot under my hair. I keep seeing the way his expression changed, the slight flaring of his nostrils, the dilation of the pupils in those blue, blue eyes just before he closed them. I had never seen anything so . . . so naked, so primal. My hand is shaking as I write this. I should stop.

5 October, 1909

I woke up around noon today feeling groggy and generally out of sorts, when I realized that my sheets and my nightgown were spotted with blood. My flows are often quite heavy on the first

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