

Freedom

Saturday 13th November 1880

I am currently hiding away in the library. I can hear the soft footsteps of Clara as she giggles at her inability to find me. Hide and seek has been her favourite game for as long as I can remember but she's still as bad at it as she ever was; even though I always hide in the same place. I smile to myself as she asks Robert if he's seen me. He knows where I'll be but he draws out the hunt, building up the anticipation. Suddenly she catches sight of me and the joy on her face sparks delight inside my chest as I congratulate her and she runs off, her footsteps pairing with the sound of my counting.

Monday 17th July 1882

I could live this day over and over again. The weather was heavenly so we ate in the garden, scattered on the perfectly checkered rug in between plates teeming with food. We ate, laughed, relaxed and played. The sun, a cheerful backdrop that acted as a mirror for the joy of our own perfect afternoon.

Friday 1st February 1884

This has been such a disappointment. I'm so upset. When Mother and Father told me they were going to be throwing me a proper grown up Birthday party I was astonished and so pleased. I had such high hopes for it. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe it was due to the expectation I had for it that it hurt so much when it turned into a way of Mother and Father trying to get me together with one of the many boys they had invited.

Sunday 4th April 1886

I'm fed up with this. I always try to convince myself that I can go to these parties and enjoy myself. That they will somehow be different from the last. But they never are. I have managed to escape into the garden this time, in need of a moment to breathe. I can see the sun in the distance, its warm haze still prevalent even as it takes its turn in the background. I can see the party still going on inside, the glass of the windows framing the scene inside. Everything looks glamorous and fancy from here. With women in beautiful dresses - that most young girls can only dream of - and men in smart sophisticated suits dancing together around the ballroom. This is the thing of fantasies, it's a page in a children's fairytale. This should be magical, but it's different when you are actually living it. When you understand there is always a hidden meaning to these things that everyone knows about but are too polite to proclaim. Where parents are attempting to force romance on girls like me with boys they deem fit.

Saturday 2nd June 1888

That's it. I'm done. I'm leaving. This evening Mother and Father invited me to dine with them once again and I was overjoyed, unknowing that my whole life was going to be flipped upside down. They told me that I'm getting married. Next Saturday, to a boy I've never met but they assure me is 'perfect'. Who gave them the right to plan my life like this? This is not their decision to make! I tried to protest but they said it's already arranged and that there's nothing I can do to change their mind. But there is. I need to do something. I can't just sit back and watch my life being arranged for me. So, I'm running away. They can't have their wedding without their bride. I don't want it to be like this but there's no other way. This is my choice, I won't let my life be dictated for me.

Sunday 2nd June 1889

I told myself that this would be the best choice to make, that this life would be so much better, but I am doubting my past self's decisions. I've been here a year and it's still just as hard as ever. Maybe I should never have left.

Thursday 25th December 1890

It's cold today. Really cold. I didn't notice it too much at work but now that I'm home it seems to have finally caught up with me. I wrap the blanket tighter as I bring my knees up to my chest. The cold swirls round, brought in through the gap between the window and the wall but for a moment the blanket halts it, protecting me. But then its powers fade, the wind's frostbitten fingers enveloping me in its grasp. It helps to be wrapped up like this though, like one of the presents that would be hiding under the tree at this time years ago. I don't have any presents under the tree this year. Or even a tree. My mind flashes back, an image of Christmas years ago pops into my head, from when I was still too young to understand the difficulties of life, when everything was simply perfect. It pains me to compare that to where I am right now. By now I expected to be the one putting the presents under the tree, watching the joy on my *own* children's faces as they saw what was beneath the paper.

This mirage of what could have been seems to be haunting me, teasing me. That life is not mine to have anymore. But maybe it could be. Maybe I could go back to the life of glamour, and privilege and ease. But to go back to that would mean to return to the world of invisibility, uselessness and manipulation. That would be better than here though, where I have to suffer through fear, desperation and hopelessness. Wouldn't it? This is not the first time since I left that I have pondered going back, but something has always stopped me, the same thing that is stopping me right now. This way of life may be far from my past but at least here I have purpose, independence and freedom.