

Misfortune

—
A Novel
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*A*nonymous



Y NOW, PHARAOH HAD REACHED his destination. A dirty young man of no more than fifteen years, he stood at the door of a crooked house in an alley, out of breath, gasping for air and wondering what to do. On one foot, he wore an oversized woman's boot he'd found while scavenging for nails at low tide. On the other was a tattered derby tied together with string that bit viciously into his instep, though he barely noticed. On his head flopped a ragged cloth, with little shape or apparent purpose, and in between his top and his toes, his costume comprised a patchwork of tears and mends in at least three materials from many more pieces of previously worn clothing.

Pharaoh was so relieved to have arrived in time that he had stopped his singing. Suddenly the world lost all clarity. His instructions: hear tip-off, run like lightning to Mother's, give the warning. . . . But the door was locked. The door was never locked, and he couldn't work out what to do. They hadn't told him. Pharaoh's concentration was a fragile thing and his mind was now too muddled to remember a tune. It was as though he'd never heard one before, and with no song to help him focus, all was lost. He stared down at the top edge of a silver

inheriting the entire Loveall fortune. It was I, this sole legatee, who would be the focus of their finagling from now on. Every morsel of the energy they had spent on Lady Loveall, hoping that she would disinherit her useless son or that he would simply dwindle away without issue, would be redoubled and concentrated on my father and me. Now they were left to coo over my cot — watching for the first sign of the dementia inevitable in any child of my father's or, failing that, counting the days until they could begin proposing matches.

It is no surprise that of all the family it was the Osberns who arrived at our house first to survey the new landscape. They were the family of my father's aunt, the Good Lord Loveall's sister, Elizabeth. My grandmother had always despised this high-and-mighty fool, not to mention her husband, Athelstan, the idiotic old booby who had squandered their entire fortune. My mother, as a servant of the household, had never had the opportunity to observe this side of the family at such close quarters, though she had sat in her library and worked to the distant accompaniment of their bickering during the annual visit. Now that she was the lady of the house, she saw them in all their brutal splendor, as her journal entry shows.

The first relatives arrived today en masse. A strange selection. An entire list of the dramatis personae follows:

Athelstan and Elizabeth Osbern

Edwig Osbern, their youngest son (unmarried)

Edith Osbern, the widow of their eldest, and her two children: *Camilla and Esmond Osbern*

Edgar Osbern and Nora Osbern-Smith-Stephenson

and their children: *Praisegod, Reliance, and Prudence.*

I thought it most unfortunate that the seating was arranged as though we were meeting for battle. We presented them the tableau "Loving Parents and Child":

“To the clock seven after this one,” said Pharaoh, and he walked away, leaving Bellman scratching his head for lice.

By the twelfth clock, Pharaoh was far outside his normal patch: everything was as unfamiliar and unreadable to him as the tunes on the sheets. The clocks were unusually far apart and he now found himself in a place where he no longer had to be mindful of avoiding people, where he would be grateful to see anyone to avoid. It was getting dark and he held the bundle tight, tucked down the front of his trousers now, and he sang to cheer himself up.

He passed a tavern called The World’s End. He knew because of the sign: a globe with flames spouting from its core, burning right through the earth, exploding from the surface into the atmosphere.

*“When forth in my ramble, intending to gamble
To an alehouse I ambled most freely
In The World’s End far from town, I did spend near a pound
Until I became fuddled most really.”*

To his left there was a derelict church tower with a clock face that had no hands on it at all. A marsh stretched out to his right beyond a bleached graveyard.

As the houses and the pubs dwindled to rubble and the nature on the outskirts of town ate its way back into the city, Pharaoh realized that it was later than he thought, that he had walked much farther than he had intended, lost in his mind’s song. The moon cast shadows around him, and to his right he saw a mountain towering above him. There seemed to be no way around it, and no alternative but to climb up for a better view.

It was the end of his journey, the end of the line, where the city oozed what it had no more use for and couldn’t burn. All the avenues of excrement and urine made their way here and Pharaoh knew the stench was what came after the smell of life, after the sweat and the