

Worm

She approached while I was waiting for the bus. I had my legs crossed so that my right foot, not intentionally, was sticking right in her face, which she put there of her own doing. She was short, not short for her age, I suppose, but short in comparison to grown-ups. Her forehead was wide and expansive; the thin black hair around it, by comparison, looked finer than thread.

“Do you always wear those kinds of shoes?” she asked into the sole of my worn leather wing tip.

“That’s an excellent question,” I replied, swiveling the appendage for a clean view of the girl’s face. It was not an ordinary face, not at all. The lines carved in it from thought were precocious, almost haunting. The white complexion glowed feverishly, as if slightly damp. I was distracted from her inquiry. “Are you lost?” I asked. “Did you get separated from your parents?”

“Several times,” the girl said, “and then they died. It didn’t happen all at once. I understand if you might think so.”

“I think nothing of the sort,” I reassured her.

“I was wondering about your shoes,” she reminded me, pointing down, for now without knowing it I had uncrossed my legs.

“Ah, the shoes,” I remembered, hatching a playful tale. “I wear *this kind* of shoe,” I explained, reiterating the girl’s words, “on only the most

special occasions when I know something unusual is going to happen.” I raised my hand to my temple and tapped my index finger there, accenting my especial shrewdness.

The girl processed my remarks in momentary silence. The lines of her face deepened and her eyes filled with thought. “But how can what happens be unusual,” she suddenly objected, “if you know it’s going to happen? Unusual things are the ones you don’t know will happen. You *don’t* know,” she emphasized, utterly present again, as if an ounce of analysis clarified everything.

“But I do know,” I corrected, my head sweetly inclined. “I was only seventeen when my first bout of clairvoyance took place. At that time I was working on an orchard and a worm in an apple told me my girlfriend would leave me. I took the apple to my room immediately and carefully cut it open, but the worm was not inside. That evening my girlfriend told me she was leaving the orchard, that another boy who worked there was taking her far, far away, and that I’d never see her again. She had hardly finished talking when I realized I was more concerned about seeing the worm again than her; it was such a mystery to me.”

“Did you find the worm?”

“I never did. I spent the rest of the summer looking for it, digging through bushels of apples before they went into the cider press, examining other worms, which were never quite the one. Then I decided to leave the orchard too. I put on my city clothes, including these shoes,

which you noticed. I was lacing them up when I first understood about the worm. It had never existed. It was an outgrowth of my powers, which express themselves to me through hallucinated creatures.”

“Is that right?” teased the girl.

“You’re not real,” I understood.

The girl smiled and all the deep lines disappeared from her face. She glanced at my shoes and shook her head regretfully. “On the bus,” she explained, “you’re going to slip in those shoes and break your left wrist. It’s a pity,” she said, as if sorry for the shoes, not for me. I rebuked her insensitivity, but she was already gone. The bus pulled up and I stumbled up the steps.