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Ursula Smallwell
Daughter of the Bishop of London

by MaryPat Campbell

Ursula walked restlessly across the uneven grey flagstones. She passed by the same inmates she always passed, again and again, round and round. Everyone knew her, and no one knew her. She had been here a long time, longer than she could remember.

“I’ve got to cover this up as soon as I can,” she said outloud to no one in particular. Except there was one person who heard her louder than usual mutterings, the new man who had arrived a few months ago. Tall and bearded, he had dark unruly hair and an unusual quietness about him that was odd in this place of noise and clatter. She didn’t know his name, but noticed that he was handsome. This was what she had to cover up, she must not show any interest in anyone here, she must continue to run about quickly and not make friends with anyone.

Ursula wondered about him, who he was and why he was here. He was curious about her in a similar way. Once, about a month past, she sat down beside him at the south end of the great hall where the morning sun came through the big windows. He was sitting there as if studying the cracks between the floor flags, with a puzzled expression on his face. When she arrived beside him, she felt a twitching excitement, was it nervousness or the prospect of meeting someone new, especially a man. He tried to start up a conversation with her but she was so taken aback that she spat in his face and ran like the wind. Nobody spoke to Ursula unless she first spoke to them.

“When I’d reached the north end of the hall, I looked back, certain I would see him running after me and shouting angrily. But to my surprise, he continued to sit on the bench we had shared, wiping my spit from his face on his sleeve. I felt ashamed then, he did not deserve that.”

Her curiosity was aroused. She tried again a few days later, this time overhearing two inmates' conversation about a nearby place of worship, St. Mary Axe. She saw the new handsome man listening intently to the conversation and immediately went back to her room to make a map for herself, or perhaps for him, she wasn't sure.

Ursula collected bits of parchment and old wrapping paper, charcoal from the fires, ink stolen from the superintendent's office. She could be hard working provided she was not disturbed. If someone asked her what she was doing, more often than not she would fly into a rage, throw everything down, frighten the questioner into silence and leaving her alone again, which was what she wanted.

No one knew her background here and she preferred it that way. She was the third daughter of a wealthy London bishop, Edward Smallwell, who disowned her because she was so strange and put into the asylum when she was twelve years old, where she would be looked after for the rest of her life. No one ever came to see her now, although in the first few years her mother used to visit, and her aunt Mabel.

Ursula had become an institution within the asylum. She was known to everyone by sight, but most people gave her a wide berth because of her quick temper and tendency to spit, a wonderful way to keep people at a distance.

She discovered this before she came here, at home with her siblings. No one wanted to play with her at home, no one wanted to share their secrets with her. She was told she was ugly and needed to behave. In some ways, living at the asylum was better than living at home. She had her own room here, because her father paid for her keep. She didn't have to sleep in a long noisy dormitory like her new friend did, she could study, draw and work to her heart's content in the relative privacy of her own room.