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Arrangements in White and Red

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'Arrangements in White and Red' reflects on the relationship between Joanna Hiffernan (1839-1886) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) in the 1860s, a relationship that produced two of the most significant paintings of the era: *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1861-63) and *Symphony in White No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1864). Hiffernan's contribution to Whistler's work has undergone a major reassessment in recent years as feminist art scholarship has reappraised the role of the model in the creation of the artwork, bringing to wider attention the physical and aesthetic labour of women (and sometimes men) previously given the romanticized epithet of 'muse'. In 2022, the Royal Academy of Arts London and National Gallery of Art Washington staged an exhibition that, for the first time, put a spotlight on Hiffernan's role. *Whistler's Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan* brought together the overwhelming majority of surviving art associated with the model and showed clearly for the first time the full extent of her contribution to nineteenth-century visual culture. In particular, Margaret F. MacDonald's research, published in the book that accompanied the exhibition, uncovered new facts about her life and dispelled a number of myths.

Hiffernan was, by all accounts, intelligent and knowledgeable about art, and may even have had artistic aspirations herself. If this was the case, however, none of her artwork has survived, and few of her letters or other written documents. Accounts of her by her contemporaries are evocative but brief. Her background as an impoverished Irish immigrant, her lack of formal education and, most significantly, her sexually ambiguous status as an artist's model, meant that despite Whistler's evident reliance on her – she managed his affairs during his trip to Chile in 1865 and at the time he made her the sole beneficiary of his will – she could never fully transcend the demi-monde. When Whistler's mother came to live with him in December 1863, Hiffernan was

exiled to a cottage in Fulham and this no doubt contributed to her semi-visibility among Whistler's peers.

I am indebted to the work of MacDonald and her co-curators, Ann Dumas and Charles Brock, for sparking the idea for the following short story and providing such rich resources to draw on. At the same time, I have been inspired by the gaps and missing information in Hiffernan's narrative, which have enabled me to craft a fiction that attempts, in its own way, to restore Hiffernan's presence in nineteenth-century aesthetic culture. Among these gaps are the tantalizing information that Whistler and Hiffernan attended séances at their neighbour Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house in Chelsea, and that according to a contemporary, Whistler believed Hiffernan to be 'a bit of a medium'.[1] Alex Owen has shown how young women from the working and lower-middle classes with a talent for performance could reap considerable, if precarious, rewards through a career as a spirit medium in the Victorian period.[2] It is not, perhaps, surprising that both Rossetti's model Fanny Cornforth and Hiffernan experimented with mediumship. The role of the medium and that of the artist's model shared many similarities in their ambiguous social position and the way they embodied others while putting their own body on display. Although the content of the séances Whistler and Hiffernan attended is not documented, J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore Beaky have recently thrown light on the Rossettis' involvement in spiritualism with their publication of William Michael Rossetti's séance diaries, dating from slightly later in the 1860s.[3] Whistler's original biographers, the Pennells, also provide a tantalising glimpse of the séances Whistler and Hiffernan attempted to recreate at home.[4] Together, these provide a flavour of the couple's experiences with spiritualism while they were working on *Symphony in White No. 2*.

Whistler's work was puzzling and often controversial to his contemporaries, but is now widely recognized as instrumental in the movement from narrative painting towards abstraction that was beginning to take place in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. *The White Girl* was shown at a private gallery in London and at the Salon des Refusés in Paris after being rejected by both the Royal Academy and the Salon, and was described as 'bizarre' and 'incomplete' by the *Athenaeum*

and 'a piece of bad white-washing' by one Parisian critic.[5] The *Symphony in White* paintings, however, marked a creative breakthrough for Whistler; as biographer Daniel E. Sutherland suggests, *The White Girl* was his 'first tentative step *away* from narrative painting', towards the Aestheticism that would distinguish his later work.[6] One of the challenges of writing ekphrastically about Whistler's art is the way it seems to both invite and resist narrative explanation, to evoke a scene or mood and then allow it to dissolve into an arrangement of colours. In the writing of this story, I have attempted to capture that tension by allowing the narrative to unfold through a series of moments organized through colour, specifically the contrast of red and white.

Recent forensic research into Whistler's technique has shown, however, that colour is never quite what it seems in his work. While he used lead white in both paintings, the source of the 'painter's colic' both he and Hiffernan suffered from (one of the likely effects of which was miscarriage), one of his achievements in the *Symphony in White* paintings is the complexity of his rendition of white through a range of unexpected oil pigments. This technique, according to MacDonald, Dunn, and Townsend, 'anticipated the colour harmonies he used in portraits from the 1870s, where every white contains black and every apparently pure touch of color contains traces of yellow, green, and blue pigment, carefully chosen for that composition'.[7] The white dress depicted in *Symphony in White No. 2* specifically contains additions of red ochre and red lake.[8] As Joanna acknowledges in my story: 'That is the painting's secret: white is not one colour; at its heart, is red.'

'Arrangements in White and Red' has been written concurrently with research for an academic monograph on the white dress in Gothic literature and culture. It uses fiction as an alternative means of thinking through cultural constructions of whiteness, by embedding them in specific points of view and moments of emotional affect, not readily accounted for in academic writing. It also explores Hiffernan's artistry with dress; Aileen Ribeiro considers that she was 'advanced in her ideas' in her adoption of the aesthetic dress she encountered through Whistler's 'cosmopolitan' circles and her unconventional style informs both paintings.[9] The story positions

dress and the acts of designing, making, laundering, choosing, and wearing clothes as central to nineteenth-century women's embodiment, labour, creative expression and desire. In doing so it aims to restore Hiffernan's imagined perspective to the account of the painting's creation, drawing connections between modelling, and the séance, as kinds of performance.

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[1] Margaret F. MacDonald, ed., *Whistler and the Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2020), p. 23.
[2] Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), *passim.*
[3] See J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky (eds), *Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World: The Séance Diary of William Michael Rossetti* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022).
[4] Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, revised sixth edition (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott Company; London: William Heinemann, 1919), p. 84.
[5] Cited in Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 71, p. 79.
[6] Ibid., p. 69. Italics in original.
[7] Margaret F. MacDonald, Joanna Dunn, and Joyce H. Townsend, 'Painting Joanna Hiffernan', in *Whistler and the Woman in White*, pp. 33-45 (p. 41).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Aileen Ribeiro, 'White Muslin: Joanna Hiffernan and the 1860s', in Margaret F. MacDonald, Susan Grace Galassi, Aileen Ribeiro and Patricia De Montfort, *Whistler, Women and Fashion* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 76-91, p. 85.

Arrangements in White and Red

> Art thou the ghost, my sister,
> White sister there,
> Am I the ghost, who knows?
>
> A. C. Swinburne, 'Before the Mirror' (1864)

It's a bright June morning, too bright. Joanna turns her head away from the sun trickling in through the cracks between the curtains. The sounds of Fulham jostle outside: clerks closing doors as they leave for work, servants banging out grates, sparrows squabbling in the areas. She has a feeling something's wrong but can't place it. Her head aches and the joints in her legs and shoulders. She gradually registers the wetness between her legs, the ball of pain like a wadded-up dish cloth in the pit of her stomach. She pulls herself up and on the white bed linen there is a bright, shiny circle of red the size of a bronze penny.

She swings her legs out of the bed, feet hesitating on the rug. She pulls the chamber pot from beneath and squats, holding on to the iron bedstead to steady herself. A glob of red slides into the pot. She doesn't look at it too closely. She's seen something like this before: a thing that could be her monthly courses come late and heavy or could be something else. Either way, it doesn't bear looking at. She lets herself focus on the leaden ache in her lower belly and not on what it means. Sweating, she stands and pours cold water from the ewer into a bowl. She takes a cloth from the washstand and mops at herself, then squeezes out the cloth. A skein of red runs through the water, unravelling into a faint tint of copper, then with each mop and squeeze a deeper, denser red. The water forms a perfect red circle in the china basin. Where it catches the fragments of sunlight it glows like polished carnelian. Even as she thinks this, she knows she is thinking what he would think. There are two Joannas: one whose stomach is cramping and who is swabbing her thighs with a dirty towel and one who observes the light reflecting on a basin of blood and thinks of how he would paint it.

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Joanna dresses for the sitting when she reaches Lindsey Row, so that her skirts will not be soiled in the streets. Jimmy is particular about such things. The white gown is where she left it, in the dressing room that used to be hers, laid carefully over a chair to prevent it from creasing. As she enters the room, it looks as if someone is sitting there, a headless version of herself. For a moment, she thinks it is her sister Catherine, waiting for her. She has a fleeting sensation of dizziness, as if she is about to fall from a great height. It passes as quickly as it comes and she feels foolish. Catherine was much smaller, and now is gone.

She takes the dress in her hands, smoothing the fabric. They had talked about it and Jimmy had sketched it: her ideas, his pen moving fast over the paper, the lines somehow capturing her posture although the sketch was only intended to show the depth of the neckline and where the sleeves should sit so that the dressmaker could copy it. It's just how she wanted it. The structure is in the fabric, with no need for stays or cage. It's how all the women in Jimmy's set are wearing their dresses. She thinks it was Lizzie's idea first, Gabriel's dead wife. That was long before Joanna knew Jimmy or Gabriel, when she was still prinking up cast-offs from Monmouth Street, fancying herself fine enough because she knew the trick of dressing a third-hand hat to make it look fresh from the milliner's. She has adapted Lizzie's artistic style to make it more fashionable, more French, without losing the long lines that flatter the body and create the painterly effect. And the advantage of not wearing a cage, of course, is that the skirt doesn't swing up over her calves every time she sits down, and she can manoeuvre swiftly in and out of doorways and cabs. The skirt is

soft and full and the sleeves translucent: thick creamy ruches springing out from her shoulders and narrowing to her wrists. There are faint traces of starch still clinging to the muslin and the layers rustle satisfyingly over her skin as she pulls them on.

It's chilly, despite the fire; her arms are freckled with gooseflesh. She pins the artificial pearls in her ears, smooths her rioting hair with a padded brush and gathers it loosely at the back of her head. A single hair is caught on her bodice like an erratic red thread. It is almost blue at the roots, like the blue at the base of a candle flame. She picks the hair up and runs it between her fingers, enjoying the way they snag on the kinks and bumps of the curl. There are some hairs that never brush straight. She drops it into the fire and savours the brief acrid smell.

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Jimmy stands Joanna in front of the mirror, leaning on the mantelpiece, where he has placed two of his treasures: a blue and white china vase, and a Chinese lacquered box, a marvellous trinket that has another box just like it, but smaller, nested inside. She is twinned with her reflection, another self just like her but smaller, shrunk in the mirror's perspective. It is tiring, looking at oneself for hours on end. If you look too long into your own eyes in the mirror, they become strange, as if they belong to someone else. She is uneasy and keeps shifting her focus. 'Look at the box, Jo!' Jimmy says. The box is scarlet, chosen to harmonize with the blush tones on her skin and the red accents of the fan. It is easier now she has found a focus point and can come back to it, but uncomfortable to gaze at the same object for so long. Its reds melt and shift and when she looks away, its shape is burned green into her retinas.

He keeps changing the position of her head, painting it and then painting it out. It's difficult to stand at exactly the same angle each time. Today her stomach is still cramping and heavy, and she's worried that her rags are sodden and need changing, so she can't get it right and he is irritable. He has a way of pulling at his moustache when his bad mood is coming on, so she is always prepared for it. 'Goddamn thing!' he says under his breath, or occasionally 'Damn you, Jo!', throwing down his brushes and stamping over to the window to rest his eyes on the grey waters of the river. She knows it will blow over once he gets the composition right and she waits it out, using each squall of temper as an opportunity to stretch or, if the intervals are longer, to run to the dressing room and check her rags are still in place and the gown is still pristine and unmarked. When it's going well, he stands back from the canvas, darting forward to add a single brush stroke and then back again in a way that reminds her of a dragonfly, not looking at her but at the play of light on fabric, absorbed in the shifting colours of her dress. She knows the oil colours off by heart: Mars yellow, ultramarine, bone black, red ochre, red lake. That is the painting's secret: white is not one colour; at its heart, is red.

When the light is altogether wrong, they spend the afternoons tumbled on Jimmy's bed, not bothering to change the sheets. She's not above doing laundry, but there is a luxury in leaving them, a small means of marking her territory while his mother is gone. She lies on the rucked linen in her chemise, eating soft, sticky Chelsea buns thick with lemon peel and cinnamon and reading the newspapers he gets delivered for his mother and has forgotten to cancel. But nights are best, when they stay up late drinking the Irish whisky she likes and playing cards, gambling for ha'pennies or cigarettes. She's a better gambler than he is and often cleans him out of coppers, which he never ceases to be surprised by no matter how many times it happens. She teases him about it, putting on the voices of his drinking partners and pretending to be calling in his debts, and he always laughs and says she's wasted as a model, she could go on the stage.

Today, when he's finished for the day, she crosses to the window, and opens it to let the paint fumes dissipate. The light has gone; the outlines of the factories over the water are dim and hazy. Shouts of men steering empty coal barges down the river filter into the room. A hansom cab pulls up two doors down and she watches a woman she doesn't recognize step out, holding several large parcels of shopping tied up in brown paper. New tenants must have moved in since she

moved to Fulham. Jimmy comes back from the scullery where he's been cleaning his brushes and closes the door behind him, but she doesn't turn round. She already knows the way the flesh pools in soft pouches around his eyes, the quizzical lift in his left brow, how the light falls on his cheekbones. He lifts the auburn masses of her hair away from her neck and kisses her nape. In the creases of his hands, she smells linseed and turpentine.

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In the first painting, the famous one, it wasn't clear if the rug she was standing on was a wolf or a bear, and they laughed about that, afterwards. Animals never really interested him. He was interested only in the texture of the fur and the way the creature's white teeth fringed the carmine strawberry of its mouth. She knew it was a bear, though, because she had gone out to buy it, and bearskin was more expensive. They couldn't really afford it, so she had to haggle, in her bad French, at the flea market. *Je voudrais un tapis en peau d'ours. Non, c'est trop cher. Non, ça doit être blanc.* Jimmy was fluent and she wished he had just done it himself, although he was right that she was much better at beating down the price than he was. The rug had to be a bear, because it was supposed to be white, although the mangy, badly cured thing she had brought back to the studio was more *beige* than *blanc*. He was cross with it, at first, but then as he discovered the blue of the carpet brought out its peachy tones, he relaxed and became absorbed in his brush-strokes, scratching ochre back and forth on his palette, while she warmed her stiffening limbs and sipped dark, bitter chocolate from their tiny, chipped, blue-and-white china cups.

It snowed in Paris, that winter, and the studio was cold. In the mornings while the stove warmed up, Jimmy made pancakes for them the American way, thick buttery pillows spread lavishly with treacle. He insisted treacle was inferior to the molasses he had at home, but licked the spoon from the pot nonetheless. She wore a loose wrap so the white dress didn't get sticky, and changed when he was ready. It was her first gown made by a French dressmaker and it started a craving in her no pancakes could fill. They went to a small shop one of Jimmy's former models had recommended, in a featureless back street a few blocks from the main bustle of le Sentier. The paint on the shutters was flaking and they had to step over a wall-eyed pug sprawled in the doorway that snapped at them peevishly. The woman in the shop tutted over the design, which she dubbed *à l'anglaise*, although Joanna was not English and it would have been just as outlandish back in London. She worried it would not come out right, but Jimmy shrugged off her anxieties, telling her to wait and see. And when it was delivered, wrapped in pale rose tissue paper, she saw it had been made with exquisite precision, like nothing she had ever owned before. It was just as she had envisaged it, only refined and made more elegant: simple and high-waisted with the vertical pin-tucks on the bodice that made her look taller, and the puffs of muslin like small clouds that lengthened the shoulders. Her only hesitation was that the dressmaker had not been able to resist adding a tiny bow to the waist, but Jimmy just laughed and said it was *chic*.

After that, she begged Jimmy for other dresses, to rival the Parisiennes dressed electrically in mauves and magentas, crowding the Grands Boulevards and the cafés of Place Pigalle. She went back to the same dressmaker, who continued to comment disapprovingly on her taste in the French way but who was cheap and efficient. None of the other dresses had the same magic as that first gown, though, and the feeling she had when she put it on, that for the first time, someone had listened to what she really wanted.

Still, the cambric was thin, for the time of year, and she missed the layer of warmth that stays would have added. The lead fumes from the paint seemed to infuse the light in the studio, somehow. The muslin curtain strained the light like cheesecloth strains curds, so it fell whey-coloured on her skin. She had a headache through most of the sittings. It started under her eyes, a tightness beneath the bridge of her nose, and spread like a tight metal band entrapping her skull. As she stood by the window in the white gown with the light falling through the curtain behind her, and the snow falling behind that, she felt as if she was wrapped in a series of veils and might

suffocate beneath them. Then the painter's colic, like an iron ball in the gut. After long days of standing in front of the curtain, she would lie flat on the bed, her fingers kneading her lower belly, as if they could dislodge the heaviness settled there.

That was the first time she had seen the clot of red in the chamber pot, and she had cried, but after a day or two it hadn't seemed important, and Jimmy had bought her a new nightdress trimmed with *broderie anglaise* and red ribbons.

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Joanna dresses in plain blue crape for the evening, in the loose artistic style she favours. She leaves the artificial pearls in her ears. Gabriel's house is just a little further down the street and she and Jimmy walk there by the side of the river, the moored boats creaking slightly on the shifting tide. The house is larger and grander than Jimmy's and crammed with pictures from the floor to the ceiling like in a gallery. There are new ones since last time she was here. Gabriel notices her looking and says kindly, 'Come back and pay Fanny a visit some time; she'll show you my new acquisitions.'

Gabriel invites them into his downstairs sitting room. The room is painted dark green and hung with dozens of mirrors, which catch the setting sun and make the room look like a forest with glimpses of daylight flashing through the branches. Fanny, Gabriel's housekeeper, has her thick, honey-coloured hair piled up in masses on the back of her head, showing off her luxuriant white neck. There's Gabriel's brother, William, with his balding crown making him look oddly monkish; and his friend Algy, who talks frenetically over everybody else. The round mahogany table has been unfolded and brought into the centre of the room, with chairs for them all placed around it. Gabriel offers brandy in Italian glasses with curious twisted stems while Fanny draws the shutters and sets candles on the table. Everyone sits down and looks at one another, the candlelight picked up and repeated in the mirrors like glow-worms winking in the dusk.

They chatter for a while, circling around the reason they are there, and then William takes charge. 'We must all hold hands,' he says. Joanna takes Jimmy's hand in her right, its familiar grasp settling comfortably into hers. Algy is sitting to her left and she takes his hand reluctantly. His hands are small and slender with long, manicured nails and they tremble slightly; she briefly imagines the nails scraping her thigh and suppresses a shiver.

There is some talk, which she only half-listens to, and then Fanny snuffs the candles. In the darkened room, sensation is magnified: Jimmy's skin is dry and a little rough from scrubbing brushes, but Algy's is damp and sticky like a child's. There is a smell of hot wax and a dense, sweet aroma from a vase of white lilies on the mantelpiece; the smoke from the snuffed candles makes shadowy shapes in the mirrors. Tired from the long day standing, she feels her mind drifting almost immediately.

After a few minutes, Fanny's head droops as if she is in a slumber. 'Is there someone with us?' asks William.

There is a pause, and Joanna can hear the clock ticking in the hallway. William clears his throat and asks the question again.

'Yes', says Fanny, in a voice that has somehow lost her Cockney inflections.

'Are you a man or a woman?'

'A woman', says Fanny. Joanna thinks that Fanny is not really asleep and that she has the playful note in her voice that she uses when she teases Gabriel and his friends behind their back, but her heart beats faster nonetheless. The warmth of the room and the overpowering stench of the lilies are making her light-headed. In the darkness, the red coral beads Fanny is wearing stand out like ellipses from the whiteness of her neck. Out of the corner of Joanna's eye, a shape starts to emerge in one of the mirrors.

'Oh! It is a woman! A woman in a white dress, with red hair!' she exclaims, before she can stop herself. Jimmy's hand jumps in hers and Algy's fingers quiver. As if in response, the table jolts and shudders.

'Lizzie! It is Lizzie!' exclaims Gabriel.

Joanna turns to look at Gabriel and the shape vanishes. She knows it is not Lizzie, but Catherine. However, she cannot say anything. His face is too nakedly hopeful. She lets her eyes drop.

Fanny takes up the theme. 'Yes dearest, it is Lizzie who speaks.'

Joanna feels nauseous. She knows it is not Lizzie, although she is grateful to Fanny for deflecting the group's attention. Jimmy's hand presses hers and she returns the pressure. A vivid memory of Catherine's face returns to her, tiny and gaunt, her eyes glassy with fever, her skin stretched almost translucent over the bones. Her red hair hangs loose over her pale nightgown, like a fire unleashed and consuming her, burning away the little energy she has left.

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In the garden behind Gabriel's house, Fanny is throwing grain to the peacocks. She offers some to Joanna as she comes through the garden door but she declines, so Fanny throws the last handfuls, wipes her hands on her apron and invites her to sit beside her on the ironwork garden chairs. The birds have been moulting, or perhaps fighting, and their tails are shabby and full of holes. 'Gabriel calls 'em Omberto and Oderisi', she says. 'I've no idea how he knows which is which. I call 'em both Algy. They think of themselves as fine fellows, but they don't 'alf get into scraps.'

Joanna laughs. 'You could call one Jimmy', she says. 'He's been known to lose a few feathers now and then.'

'He do like a scrap, don't he?' Fanny grins at her and shouts for the maid to bring tea. The two women sit chatting companionably, enjoying the light breeze which stirs the blossoms on the plum and wild cherry, sending fitful drifts of white petals across the lawn and teasing loose threads of their hair, Joanna's deep red and Fanny's rich coppery gold.

'Do you mind about Lizzie?' Joanna asks.

Fanny shrugs. 'She couldn't keep up with him. Which of the two of us is with him now?'

'Does she really speak through you?' says Joanna.

Fanny laughs. 'She do and she don't. Not in the way that Gabriel thinks, perhaps. But we 'ave an alliance, she and I. We know what he needs to hear.'

'It was not Lizzie I saw,' Joanna says. 'It was my sister.'

Fanny looks at her appraisingly. 'Did you now.' She seems on the verge of saying something else, but stalls. 'Did you lose her long ago?' she asks.

'Just before I met Jimmy. She was always sickly. We were all living hand to mouth then.'

Fanny puts her big, soft hand over hers. 'Oh sweetheart, we've all been there. There's only so much you can do.'

The faint Irish inflection in Joanna's accent thickens. 'You couldn't give 'em cash because Da would always drink it off, you know? And I was scratching a living meself.'

'I know, ducks,' Fanny says. 'And you need a certain outlay to attract the next meal ticket. You did well for yourself, sweetheart. Look what you 'ave now. There ain't nothing you could've done for her.'

Joanna takes out a white cambric handkerchief and wipes her eyes. She is disarmed by Fanny's kindness. Fanny, only three or four years older than herself, already an overblown rose, who Gabriel will never marry. She thinks of the gold ring Jimmy put on her own finger for the painting, so casually she couldn't tell if it was merely a prop, like the fan, or whether he meant something by it. Mrs Abbott, she calls herself, but it's a fiction, of course, another mirror self peeling off, a drift of white petals and peacock feathers on a lawn, on a street she doesn't live on any more.

As if reading her thoughts, Fanny asks, 'How are things with Jimmy's mother?'

'It's easy enough while she's away', Joanna says. 'Almost like old times. But when she's here, I'm in exile. I'm *the model*. I need to be *guided back to the path of virtue*.' She makes a face that is so uncannily like Jimmy's godly and respectable mother that Fanny bursts out laughing. 'She's always trying to give me tracts. I keep them and use them for Jimmy's cigarette papers.'

'Use 'em to wipe your bum, more like!' says Fanny. Joanna claps her hand to her mouth but can't prevent a snort of laughter. Fanny catches her eye with an expression of feigned outrage and that sets them both off, giggling like children and trying to compose themselves, then looking up at one another and starting again.

Fanny takes a deep breath and straightens up. 'Look, Jo, love. You ain't never going to win that battle. She was there first and she ain't going to let him go. You need to find yourself a few more tricks if you want to 'ang on to him. You could be a medium. You got natural talent. Why not try it yourself next time?'

Joanna thinks of Catherine's face swimming out of the dark. She doesn't know if she wants to turn that stone. But the painting is nearly finished and Jimmy's mother is due home soon. She needs to think of something.

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'Can we try it again, Jo?' Jimmy says, holding her hand gently. 'Just the two of us?'

She looks away, out of the window where the Thames runs thick and yellow just like in the painting. There's a young couple walking past the moorings, heads bent towards one another as if no one else in the world exists for them. The woman has on a pale green pelisse that doesn't suit her, but she is smiling.

Joanna looks back at Jimmy, quickly. 'Why?' she says.

'Because you can do it', he says. 'Because I want to know if it can be done.'

'What if I don't want to know?' she says.

'Don't you?' he says.

She looks at her hands, the finger without a ring on it. She thinks of the white dress, on the chair in the dressing room, and of Catherine's pale face floating in the smoky mirrors.

'Come with me,' she says. She leads him into the sitting room that used to be hers, before she was removed to Fulham. She had thought of the things in it as belonging to her, as she had chosen them or Jimmy had bought them to please her, but of course they are not hers, they belong to Jimmy. She lets her hand trail against the mantelpiece, enjoys the coolness of the marble against her fingers. She picks up the red box that is in the painting; it seems to vibrate in her fingers, and she fancies for a second that it is hot to the touch.

'Here,' she says. 'Let's sit.' She seats herself on the divan, meaning to place the box on the table between them, but he pushes the table aside and kneels before her, with his hands resting on her skirt. They hold the box gently together, so it rests on their upturned fingers. Its lacquered sides shine as if it is wet.

'Let your mind go clear', she says. She rests her eyes on the surface of the box, the shadows reflected in its polished curves. 'Is there anyone there?' she says. 'Would anyone like to speak?'

She is quiet for a few minutes, concentrating on the colours that hover on the edge of her awareness. *Mars yellow, ultramarine, bone black, red ochre, red lake*. She waits until the colours start to form into patterns and then into faces. Some of them are unfamiliar, people she has never seen; others are faces she has longed for and half forgotten. Her mother, her poor sister. She sees the face of a baby and cannot help giving a small mewing cry, like a cat.

'What is it?' he asks.

'It is one who cannot speak,' she whispers. She hesitates. She doesn't know whether this might take them to a place to which they have not yet been and from which there is no return. 'He has no words because he was never born.'

She can feel him shift his weight towards her, uneasy but unwilling to break the circle. The baby's face shivers and dissolves into a mess of pigments. She tries to follow it, but it has gone. A fellow with long mustachios appears in his place. 'A man', she says. 'I don't know him. He has dark hair and a long moustache. He is wearing a smoking jacket and carrying a cigar.'

'Oh, it is my cousin Eric!' Jimmy says with evident relief. 'From Georgia!'

She grasps at this snippet. She has heard him parody his southern cousins before. 'Yes, he has an American accent', she says. 'A southern accent', she adds carefully. She remembers details, gleaned from conversations when she poured the tea and no one paid attention to her. 'He still has an eye for the ladies', she says. 'He still enjoys a cigar.'

Jimmy's eyes light up, and she knows she has him, for this moment at least.

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Jimmy puts the flowers in afterwards. They come into season when the painting is almost done, and Joanna gets up early and fetches an armful from Covent Garden Market; she is the only one he trusts to buy the exact kind he needs. A huge spray of pink azaleas, awkward to carry in the cab; every time it jolts, she clutches nervously at the long stems. His brushstrokes are fast, fluid, blooming directly on the canvas. Rose madder for the petals; ultramarine, viridian, cadmium, and zinc yellow for the leaves. The flowers don't reflect in the mirror, although everything else does. It's not noticeable to anyone who didn't know they weren't really there at the time. There's something about the lack of reflection that appeals to her; it counteracts the flowers' ephemerality. The flowers are resolutely material, they refuse to be translated into the mirror world.

In the mirror world, there's one of Jimmy's paintings of the river behind her head, the yellowish waters enriched by the gilded frame. It's a window within a window, bisected by the fold of the mirror. The version of her outside the mirror looks towards it, and the one in the reflection looks away. These two selves look like different women to her, and she's not sure which one she recognizes. The mirror self looks younger, but also sadder, the light catching on her brow and cheekbones like a Renaissance Madonna, carrying the sorrows of the world. She imagines her being the one who lived here, before Jimmy's mother's arrival. The other one, the one leaning on the mantelpiece and holding the fan, is the one who now lives at the house in Fulham. One of the women is outside looking in, but she is not sure which. She wonders if he can tell the difference, and which is the one he wants.

Jimmy's mother is coming home soon, and he has re-engaged a second housemaid and is cleaning out the house on Lindsey Row, ridding it of her smell on the sheets and the loose hairs fallen from her brush onto the dressing table. 'We'll go back to Paris for a while', he promises. 'We'll go back to the French coast. We'll find some time for ourselves.' He is already planning another White Girl picture, even as he is varnishing the painting to display at the Royal Academy.

The more she sits with the painting, the more her eyes are drawn to the lacquered box, a detail you might miss on a cursory glance, distracted by the drama of the woman confronting her mirror self. But if you follow both women's eyes across the canvas, you will see they are connected by the taut thread of their gaze. It might appear they are both looking at the gold band on their wedding finger, but she knows they are both looking at the box, glowing lucky Mandarin red and gold against pale marble and muslin. The more she looks, the angrier and more insistent that redness is, like a cold sore blooming on the corner of a mouth. Even now, she feels it burning, a live coal against her wrist.