The ghost is no longer a metaphor.

Thomas Sharpe takes drastic steps to change his life with Edith, and for the better--but his past can't be left behind so easily. The narrative has changed, but what kind of shape will their story take from now? It's up to Edith to determine their genre by choosing which ending their tortured histories most deserve...

The ghost is no longer a metaphor.

Edith had learned how to conceal her knowledge of the supernatural within her stories. They became imagery, or stories-within-stories, or the subjects of ominous paintings the characters might observe. Her mother's cholera-blackened hand and the whisper beyond the grave—these were folded within pages, slipped within the inky loops of her handwriting. Hidden well.

But the monsters have clawed their way out of the realm of imagination. They stalk Edith's worlds from the shadows. They bay for blood.

She must learn to write in an entirely new way, now that the stories are real.

**
As Edith came to understand it later, Thomas began his rewriting of the narrative on the morning they awoke together in town.

The night before had been her wedding night, in a sense. Yet it seemed to her then that she had known her husband's touch far longer. She had known how his tongue would slip hotly inside her mouth. How his work-roughened hands and soft lips would feel upon her thighs. How hungrily she would writhe and keen for him. Only the inexpressible sensation of his body within hers was new—beyond anything her author's invention had ever conceived.

Thomas had told her once that she knew nothing of real passion. He'd been trying to break her heart, and when Edith had learned that much, she had believed he was lying. But his words had proved true. Their first night together, as the snowstorm swirled around them, he had been her teacher in what passion could truly be.

And yet his surprise was the equal of hers. His intimate knowledge of where to kiss, to stroke, to caress—that might have come to him via some French courtesan or a dusky beauty from an Italian village, but certainly he was no stranger to the act of love. (Edith had wondered, during their unconsummated weeks, whether he was too shy to touch a woman at all.) It didn't matter. Thomas' experience had not shielded his heart from her. His eyes lit up with astonished joy every time she moved beneath him, or cried out her pleasure. His long fingers trembled with emotion as he brushed them against her cheek. Once, as he rolled her beneath him again, she saw the glint of tears in his eyes and knew he wept for joy. To be loved like that—it was all she had ever wanted, save the fulfillment of loving him in return.

He made love to her throughout the night, awakening her again and again, and each time she drifted from her slumber into something far more beautiful than any dream.

That dawn they were wrapped around each other for—the sixth time? The seventh? Edith could no longer be sure where their lovemaking ended or began. As the winter wind howled outside, she glanced at the window; frost had turned the panes opaque, so that the snow upon the sill was merely a shadow against the early light. To think that they would soon have to go back into that wretched weather—to return to Allerdale Hall—

"If only we could stay here," she whispered against Thomas' cheek. The embers of their fire still glowed in the hearth. His broad hands stroked the length of her back, down her thighs where she straddled him. "I wish we could never leave this room, not ever."

"We cannot stay." Thomas buried his face in the curve of her neck. More quietly he added, "One night here. No more."

"Then I will write a story. A story where a—a jinn falls in love with the woman whose wishes he must grant. He thinks his love hopeless, but she comes to love him too." If Edith could turn it into a fairy tale, then perhaps it would hurt less. "With her last wish, she asks that they should never be parted. Instead of setting them both free, she must join him in his lamp. But together they burn bright and warm."

Like their fire last night. Like this cozy room with rough-hewn timbers and handmade quilt. Unlike anything on Crimson Peak.

"I made a jinn for Lucille once." In Thomas' voice echoed sadness from long ago. "A toy, one of my contraptions. She smashed it on the floor."
"How mean of her."

He shook his head. "She said she did not believe in wishes. That only taking action made a thing so."

"My father would have agreed." How shocked her dear papa would have been to think that he agreed with Lady Lucille Sharpe about anything.

Then Thomas took Edith's shoulders in his hands and pulled back to look her in the face. His hungry eyes sought something in hers she could not name. "Do you believe in wishes?"

"I wished for you, didn't I?" A playful answer, and yet she knew it did not fit the question. Thomas was getting at something harder, more dangerous, more true.

"Then I am your jinn," he whispered. They might have been nestled within a golden lamp at that moment, warm and glowing. "Make one wish, right now, and I shall grant it. Whatever your wish might be, Edith. Anything in the world. Command me, and I am yours."

She understood fairy tales well enough to be certain of one thing: Never waste a wish.

One deep breath, and then—"I wish never to return to Allerdale Hall. I wish that we might go far away, to London or Paris or even back to America—oh, it doesn't matter where. As long as we can make it our home, our new home, yours and mine."

Thomas closed his eyes, bent his head so that his forehead touched hers. She expected him to say this was one wish he could not grant. Or to speak again of his family, his heritage, the clay on which he hoped to build his fortune. To say anything other than what he did: "Then it is done."

"...Thomas?"

He lifted his chin to face her anew. His eyes were dangerously bright, like those of a man suffering fever. "We must leave here today, at the first break in the storm. But we can reach Carlisle before the evening, and from there, we will take the train to Southampton. Once we are within sight of the ocean, we could go anywhere. Anywhere on this Earth."

Hope blazed through her, a conflagration of joy. "Today? Really, today?"

"Today."

"But—our clothes, our things—"

"We shall buy new or do without." Thomas traced his long fingers down the center of her bare chest, between her breasts, down to her navel. "We must start over from the very beginning, do you understand? We must leave everything else behind. Everything."

He sounded so intense. So urgent. Edith was innocent enough to believe that he was trying to convince her, though she needed no convincing of something she wanted so much.

Instead of replying with words, she kissed him soundly. The ghosts of Allerdale Hall seemed no more than phantoms. She saw no obstacle but the weather, not then.

As for what lay in Thomas' heart—this remained hidden from her still, buried deep as if by the storm.

But on Crimson Peak, the snow would sink into the red clay to reveal the truth below.
Edith eventually had occasion to read the letter Thomas sent to Lucille that day. Making out the words proved difficult. His hand must have been shaking.

My dearest sister,

By the time this letter reaches you, Edith and I will be gone. My wife does not wish to return to Allerdale Hall, neither today nor ever again. She senses that she is endangered there; she wishes to feel safe once more, to feel treasured and loved. Can you sympathize with this much, at least? What might we have given all those years ago to have felt safe even for a day?

When you began upon your present course, I swore that I would never abandon you. Never apart, we have always said, and so we have traveled together into the most profound darkness souls can endure. But at last I believe we can find our way back into the light.

This we can only do by separating forever.

Once our bonds sustained us. Now they chain us, weighing us down as we sink into the abyss. Do you not see it? Surely you must. It is my love for you that kept me by your side all these years, and I would have you understand that what I do now is not only for Edith's sake. I also do this out of love for you, Lucille, my sister, my protector, you deserve more of life than our memories and monsters. Let the dead rest in peace. Go forth from Allerdale Hall. Seek new passions, new friends, and new love. Begin again. It is my dearest hope that you will find some measure of happiness—as I believe I have with Edith.

Until then, hate me as you must. God knows I deserve more hatred than I have yet received from the world. Maybe I'm a brute for doing this so suddenly, and only in a letter, yet what method would be kinder? The pain must come, regardless. In time perhaps we can forgive one another.

I shall withdraw none of our paltry common funds from the bank, and shall execute powers of attorney that will allow you to sell the house, mining rights, even the property outright if you so wish. This should be enough for you to live on in reasonable comfort. I take nothing for myself. Edith's inheritance must support us until I can stand on my own two feet. But stand I shall.

You are free, Lucille. We are both finally, truly, free. Perhaps at last we can find peace. I wish you every joy I could never give you, every joy that could possibly exist.

With deepest love,

Thomas

And beneath it, this one postscript:
Did he mean it as a plea or a warning? Either way, his intentions mattered little, because Lucille took it as a challenge.

**

Their departure from Cumberland was indeed the stuff of fairy tales, or so it seemed in Edith's memory later. A carriage to Carlisle was procured in the nick of time, and as Thomas busied himself buying a few necessaries from the store, Findley meandered into town. At the sight of him, Edith tensed—but he had not brought Lucille along. "Just come to inquire after ye," he said as Thomas walked out, pale and drawn. "Her Ladyship worries."

"I should imagine she does." Thomas handed Findley the letter for his sister, thrusting it roughly into the caretaker's fist. "But as you see, there is no need for concern. My wife and I have simply decided to extend our stay."

"As ye like, sir." Findley simply nodded and shuffled back toward the wagon he'd brought into town. It was then that Edith saw the dog, its fan tail wagging brightly, and she laughed with delight to snatch it back into her arms. All the way to Carlisle, she cuddled it close. Thomas' arm rested around her shoulders, and nestled next to him, Edith felt completely warm even as snowflakes dusted her coat and eyelashes.

The rest blurred even more. A handsome inn at Carlisle, where Thomas made love to her with even greater passion than before—almost with desperation. The debate over what to name the little dog, who was in due course dubbed Lord Byron. A long journey by train, from which Edith watched England pass by.

Southampton, and Thomas' quiet, urgent insistence that they choose someplace she had never imagined living before. Somewhere neither of them knew. An entirely new beginning required an entirely new setting. In the end, inspired by one of the myriad posters in the White Star office, Edith chose Barcelona. They boarded with kenneling papers for Lord Byron, the one trunk of clothing they'd hurriedly purchased in Southampton, and no plan beyond the days of the voyage itself. Despite the winter chill and the icy waters, she stood on the deck to watch England slipping away; Thomas, behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist. She thought he was only indulging her, but he would not return to their cabin—not when the land slipped out of sight, nor when the chill turned bitter. He remained there, staring back resolutely at the place they had left behind, until darkness had fallen, concealing the shore forever.

That night, Thomas became sick.

Or so Edith said to the ship's physician. Her husband lay feverish and weak in bed; he could keep down no food and had to be urged to drink water. He twisted and turned beneath the coverlet, sweated and shook. When she spoke to him, sometimes he would answer, but for long hours he would remain silent, blank and staring.

The ship's doctor had come to their cabin prepared to diagnose seasickness, no more. But after his examination, he led Edith out of the cabin and spoke to her in the corridor. "Has he been using
"Morphia? Opium?"

"No, certainly not." At Allerdale Hall, it had been a struggle to obtain even basic food and supplies. Thomas had worn suits and shoes that were a decade old. Even if he could have obtained such substances, he could not have paid for them.

"Those drugs take a desperate hold of a man. Once their claws are sunk in, it's hell itself for anyone to break free." The physician's voice remained calm and understanding. "But it can be done. Wait it out."

Edith had felt only frustration. Why would the doctor not believe her? Why did he persist on believing Thomas enslaved to an addiction?

Later she realized the doctor had been closer to the truth than she.

During their journey to Barcelona, however, she tended to her husband with gentle care. It did not escape her notice that, with every day she spent away from Allerdale Hall, her health improved. By the third night of the voyage, her coughing had stopped entirely. Her spirits would have followed suit —no nightmares here, no ghosts—but for Thomas' condition. At times she thought of the dark bargains fairy tales sometimes required, imagined her husband trading his health for hers.

But Edith was too fine an authoress not to match her tales to their listeners. So she told gentler stories to her husband as he lay in his bed, sweating and insensate with fever.

"The jinn flew from his lamp in a swirl of green smoke, heavier than the air, so that it trailed down to the floor and curled in the corners," she whispered. "He looked about the world for the first time in oh, so many years. And though his new mistress' room was very small, and her possessions so few, and her face so plain, he thought he had never seen such loveliness before. To him, sunlight gleamed as richly as gold, and raindrops glittered as brightly as diamonds. Though his lamp was made of burnished bronze, he had long since ceased to see it as beautiful. To him it could only be a prison, and the true world could only be a marvel, no matter how harsh it might be."

Thomas nodded and licked his cracked lips. "Yes. That is the way of it."

Edith thought again of Allerdale Hall and how splendid it must have been in years past, before the paint cracked and the moths claimed their place. "My poor jinn," she murmured, bowing to kiss his forehead. His skin was hot and dry, and she feared for him then.

On the final day of their journey, however, Thomas rose from his bed. He still moved slowly, and sadness haunted his voice, but he rejoined her in her daily tasks, and when they came into port, he walked off the ship by her side and did not look back.

**

The story changed. What had been a ghost story, then a fairy tale, became—an operetta, perhaps. Romantic, lovely, even gently comic. Edith found herself humming music as she went through her days, as though her heart were teaching her the libretto song by song.

In the beginning, they were no more than tourists in Barcelona, not unlike any other young English or American couple in their pensione.
The fellow travelers they met struck Edith as parochial, one and all, overly impressed with either their wealth or their titles, and unwilling to know Spain or Spaniards. She trusted in her own quick mind and felt sure she would master Catalonian and Spanish soon enough. Their new banker spoke English and helped her establish a new account there, one into which they could deposit the remainder and largest portion of her inheritance.

("We could withdraw any funds left over from our accounts in England," she suggested once.

But Thomas sat upright and took her by the shoulders. "That money is gone. Lost to us. You must never write for it, do you hear me?"

In her innocence she thought he had invested it poorly and was ashamed to have lost it. She did not think of Lady Lucille Sharpe in a banker's office, trailing her long fingers down the columns of a ledger in search of a destination.)

Furthermore, in those initial weeks, Edith wanted no company but that of her husband, no words except for those they shared. They strolled together along cobblestone streets, hand in hand, drank good wine and ate fresh fish in cafes with views of the ocean, and refitted themselves for a life near sun and the sea. Edith purchased lovely new dresses, light and airy, all of them in ivory, pale green or gold. Thomas bought what must have been his first new suits in ten years. Although in some ways she missed the romantic, Old-World figure he had once been to her in his dark velvets, she also loved to see him in pale blues, tans and spotless white.

And at night…

At night, Edith's story turned into one from the books kept in the locked cabinet in the Buffalo library, the one labeled Restricted. She had abused the trust shown in her by her old friend the librarian in order to filch the key, and had spent long nights with her eyes open wide as she perused the Kama Sutra, works on Roman erotic art, and other stories that whispered of the acts of love. Knowledge could not be evil in itself, she thought; only the uses that knowledge was put to.

And, oh, she put her learning to good use indeed.

No vestige remained of the restraint her husband had shown during her mourning. Thomas had been reborn—passionate, emotional, uninhibited. Edith delighted in him with all her senses: the taste of his kisses, the sight of him grimacing in his throes, the sound of his moans, the feeling of his body inside hers or his mouth on her breasts, even the scent that clung to the sheets after they had made love.

"Say that you love me," he would whisper as he slid her stockings down her legs. "Tell me again."

"I love you."

"Say that this is real."

"It's not a dream. Not a story. This is real, so very real."

Thomas would kiss her chest, her belly, and then her most secret place, kneeling before her as though in worship, until he made her cry out in bliss. They could have been sculpted by the ancients in India, or painted on the bound edges of books like the work Lucille had so fixated upon: their bodies sinuously wrapped around each other, a physical embodiment of ecstasy carved in ivory or cinnabar.

Yet all the happiness she and Thomas shared in bed could not keep her dreams away.

*The long hall of the bathroom, the strange green cast to the light, gaslamps upon the walls flickering*
as the scarlet, skeletal figure in the tub writhed and turned, to reveal the massive cleaver buried in its skull—

Edith would awaken from her nightmares in as much terror as though she had been back in Allerdale Hall again. Even snuggling against Thomas could not entirely banish her fears…and yet she never heard the odd thumps in the walls, the low terrible moans. The ghosts she had seen were real—she knew this, beyond question—but they did not seem to have followed her to Spain.

Yet the specters were not the only things left behind on Crimson Peak to haunt Edith. She thought often of her lost manuscript, left behind. It was the one thing money could never replace, and oh, the countless hours she had labored over it! She had treasured some of the pages only because they bore the words she had typed in her father's offices. Sometimes she fantasized about writing Lucille and asking her to forward the manuscript…but even then, knowing so little of the truth as she did, Edith understood that the door between their past and their future had to remain locked and barred, forever.

Like any true writer, however, Edith could not set her work aside for long. She began again with ink and pen in their hotel room, making do with a portable writing desk for her lap that she had purchased in Southampton. If sometimes her heart wept for the lost pages, she also knew that she was more an adult woman now, educated in both ecstasy and sorrow. Her book had possessed all the filigree delicacy of anything too finely wrought to bear real weight. Now it was less fragile, more true.

But what was she to do with the ghosts?

That was an author's problem to contend with. Thomas had more trouble, at first. "I wish to prove my ability at some worthy task," he told her late at night, his face buried in her golden hair as he lay by her side. "But I have no talent for anything but my contraptions and automatons."

"You are good with machines," Edith said firmly. "This is an age of machines. Any man with your ability will go far."

"If he knows but where to begin."

During most of those first weeks, neither of them could fathom what sort of beginning Thomas might make. He went to the right clubs to meet influential fellow visitors, all of whom were eager to set him up with investment opportunities—some of them even legitimate. While they did their best with their capital, Edith knew mere interest earned would not satisfy Thomas' hunger to prove himself.

Yet on one day approximately a month after their arrival in Barcelona, as Edith tried to think of synonyms for "liberty" while Lord Byron napped on her feet, Thomas came in, his face alight. "I have met the most extraordinary person. The foremost architect of the city."

Edith had heard murmurs of him before. "Do you mean…the madman?"

"Señor Gaudi is no madman. Or if he is, his madness is one in which I would gladly share." Thomas clutched her hands, paying no heed to the black blot he spilled on her page. "His architecture astounds me. But rather more to the point, he needs ceramics. Vast quantities, in every color the human eye can perceive."

"You mean, he needs a maker of ceramics. One willing to experiment." A smile dawned on her face. "One who has known how to work clay and kiln all his life."

"The workshops badly need modernization, and while the materials they are using are adequate, I think he can do far better. And he has not availed himself of modern dyes and paints, not to the
extent he could. He is eager for someone to oversee this part of the work, someone willing to dedicate years to it. It is—" Thomas breathed out. "—the work of a lifetime."

In her delight, Edith had assumed Thomas spoke metaphorically. She of all people should have known better than to ignore the truth behind a metaphor.

Because if any task could require a man's entire life—all his hours, all his years, stretching centuries ahead—it was the building of a cathedral.

The first time Edith saw La Sagrada Familia, or what there was of it, she thought it looked less like a church of the Lord and more like a monument to one man's madness. Although a partial foundation had been laid, only seven spires reached toward the sky, hinting at the grandeur to come. And these spires were unlike anything else she had ever beheld, either in church or anywhere else. They did not rise proudly, but twisted upward as though they were vines growing toward the sun. Rather than smooth, polished columns, they were rough and intricate, inlaid with brilliant ceramic mosaics and strange little carvings that were half gargoyle, half cherubim.

"It will be marvelous." Thomas stood by her side in his waistcoat and white shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbow. He smiled up at the stonework, relishing the heat of the sun, as the workers now under his management sorted different colors of ceramic into buckets for the workmen to haul to the tops of the spires. "Miraculous, even."

"Yes, it will be a masterpiece." Edith could see that, even if it were no form of beauty she had previously imagined. "But what has it to do with God?"

Her husband considered her question for a long time. This was one of the things she had loved first about Thomas: his capacity to listen, and question himself, and wonder. Finally he said, "The cathedral makes me think of the angel Lucifer, forgiven by God and returned to heaven. As glorious as paradise, but twisted by…by the memory of pain. The knowledge of hell. And that makes his reaching back for the Lord even more beautiful."

The poetry of the metaphor stirred her, as did the emotion in Thomas' voice. She took his hand. "But God has not forgiven Lucifer."

"That we know of. Sometimes—" Thomas looked down at her with tender, liquid eyes. "Sometimes I wonder."

The work for Gaudi at both the cathedral and the new Park Guell kept him very busy, but did not pay particularly well, at least not by the standards both Thomas and Edith had grown up with. Even with the additional income from her investments, the difference in their fortunes was palpable. Edith cared nothing for minor deprivations of silk and satin, china and silver; she would sooner have lived in a hut than return to the opulent, decaying grandeur of Allerdale Hall. Besides, the apartment they found near the Barri Gotic was hardly a hovel: inlaid wood floors, delicate Victorian scrollwork moldings, two bedrooms and even a library. However, Edith worried that Thomas' pride might chafe at a more modest way of life.

She had underestimated her husband. "I know how to make toast and cook eggs," he teasingly chided her on their first night in their new home. He had an apron tied around his waist, and yet he did not look ridiculous, not even when he bent to give Lord Byron a bit of ham. "Remember, we had only Findley at the house for years. We learned to shift for ourselves."

Then Thomas' expression clouded. It always did when he slipped and said we, meaning himself and his sister. Edith could not tell whether he missed Lucille terribly or hated being reminded of her existence.
Or, perhaps, both.

But within another minute Thomas had turned back to the stove, and she tied on her own apron and promised to tell him how to make divinity, a sticky-sweet pursuit that had them both giddy and smudged with sugar within the hour. When the last creamy dollop had landed on the wax paper, Thomas picked her up and carried her to bed, where they could lick the sugar from each other's skin.

What other life could be more joyful than this? Had I a real jinn granting wishes, he could have done no better, Edith thought.

But her familiarity with mythology informed her that a jinn is no mere magical handservant, dispensing desires at the rub of a lamp. A jinn is a form of demon. He may have sympathy on you and grant you kindness. Or he may whisper temptations into your ear day and night, suggesting sins until he finds the one that will turn you into a lower beast than he. A jinn sends the stars themselves shooting across the skies, as a warning to man.

**

Three months into their life in Barcelona, Edith received a letter from back home. She knew Alan McMichael's handwriting on the envelope on sight, even though he had not written her since they were both young and she had thought…

That path had not come to pass. Alan had been distracted by his medical studies abroad, and she had fallen in love with Thomas.

So what call would Alan have to write her? Perhaps he, too, was engaged now. Edith could speculate about this without a pang of jealousy; Alan's future happiness pleased her far more than any selfish pride about owning the heart of a man when she had no use for it. As she slid her finger beneath the seal on the envelope, she even imagined writing him back and telling him more about the ghosts of Allerdale Hall. If no one else believed her about the spirits, Alan would. They might be friends, correspondents and fellow investigations into the paranormal.

But such thoughts vanished when she read Alan's words:

My dear Edith—

*Please know that I take no pleasure in writing you this letter. I'd give anything if it meant I had no cause to write you. On your wedding day, I sincerely hoped your marriage would be happy, and that Lord Thomas Sharpe would prove to be a man good enough to deserve such a wife.*

*However, I have been speaking with a Mr. Holly, an investigator your late father hired in the days before his death. Mr. Holly's task was to look into the history of Thomas and Lucille Sharpe—and what he found should have prevented your marriage, and would have, but for your father's untimely death.*

*You should hear this news for yourself, back here in Buffalo. Forgive me, but I could not shock you so terribly as to deliver this news by letter. I first thought to travel to England and tell you personally, but then your banker informed me the two of you had moved to the continent. He seemed uncertain whether or not you would settle in Spain, so I've resorted to this note. If you haven't ripped it up and thrown it in the furnace by now, that is.*
I'd give anything to be able to protect you, but if I know anything, it's this: You're good at taking care of yourself. So you'll know it's time to come home. Hear the truth. And we'll see this thing through together.

Your friend always,

Alan McMichael

Edith had never been fond of novels told in epistolary form. The power of prose is not entirely the same as the power of conversation, and to tell a story through letters, an author must embrace the first to the point of sacrificing the second. But never had she loathed the epistolary form more than that moment, when Alan's letter sat in her hand, whispering dark portents but not one useful fact.

She thought she could guess the impediment this Mr. Holly had unearthed. The Sharpe family had been even closer to poverty than she had first imagined; her father could well have objected upon finding that out. Carter Cushing had disliked Thomas on sight, due to his prejudices as a self-made man an American, so it would not have taken much to persuade him to forbid the match.

A very solid, logical explanation. One that belonged in a modern novel that strove for truth and rationality.

Yet Edith's theory did not entirely satisfy.

She tucked the letter into one of the tiny cubbies in her portable writing desk and reread it from time to time. Once, when she looked at it, she realized it had been folded differently—that Thomas must have read it.

He would not have been snooping. She kept the ink and sealing wax they both used in her desk, and so it would have been natural for him to search within. Edith could not reckon why she had not thought of this herself, before. Perhaps the answer was psychological, part of the provocative new theories about the human mind beginning to circulate from Paris and Vienna. These psychologists would say that Edith had wanted Thomas to find the letter, to bring it to her, and reveal its secrets—his secrets—to her.

Instead her husband had put Alan's note back where he found it. Thomas seemed unlikely to answer a question Edith did not ask in her own voice.

And she had already decided not to ask. Her happiness here was too great. Thomas was as fine a husband as she could ever have wished; their life in Barcelona fulfilled her in every sense. Whatever impediment the mysterious Mr. Holly had shown to her father and Alan...well, it had proved to be no impediment at all. Edith was content to leave her fears behind as resolutely as she had left Allerdale Hall, without ever looking back.

**

One of the distinguishing features of the epistolary form is the delay between knowledge and revelation. Characters may act and learn a great deal before informing their correspondents of the results.

And so it was that Edith had no idea Alan had sent a letter to Allerdale Hall as well. Her lawyer, after all, had not been certain they would settle in Spain.
Lady Lucille Sharpe opened that letter instead, and discovered her next destination.

**

The summer brought three pieces of news. The first two enchanted Edith; the third nearly destroyed her.

She sold her first story, and to *Collier's Weekly*, no less! The payment was no fortune, but it was money enough for a month's rent. Edith and Thomas treated themselves to a night at a very fine restaurant and toasts with fine wine.

But even that accomplishment was eclipsed by her increasing hopes as the weeks drew on. Thomas guessed too—she could see his hesitation, the moments when he wanted to ask—but he never spoke. No doubt, like most men, he wanted to allow his wife to disclose this precious secret. After a trip to her new physician, she returned home and blushed happily as she told Thomas he was to be a father.

He did not smile. He did not weep with joy. He did not gasp or reveal any other sign of shock. Instead he stared at her with his haunted eyes, paler and more drawn than she had seen him since Allerdale Hall.

"But—I thought you knew—" She stumbled, unable even in her forthrightness to say why Thomas had to know. Even a husband and wife did not speak of her courses, not openly, but the patterns of their lovemaking should have been enough to tell him that hers had not come in three months. If he had feared fatherhood, surely he would not have made love to her night and day with such complete abandon. Perhaps the idea had appealed to him more than the reality. She ventured, "Do you not want a child?"

"Oh, Edith." Thomas' voice broke. "A child with you—a new beginning, a new life—if only I could deserve such redemption."

Edith began to smile. "Don't be silly. Of course you deserve to be a father."

"You don't know." He got to his feet and walked toward her, his tread heavy. Lord Byron curled into a tiny furry ball on the sofa, hiding his head beneath one of the pillows as he did during lightning storms. Thomas continued, "I cannot let you do this, not knowing."

"Do what?"

"Bring a child into the world without knowing its father." Thomas' voice gained force, like that of a judge pronouncing sentence. "You must understand whose child you carry."

During the next hour, memories of fairy tales would sometimes flash through Edith's mind—but they were not the comforting stories told to small children, but the older ones, macabre and strange. She remembered the water spirit Melusine, who forbade her love to watch her in her bath, or while birthing her children; he broke that promise and saw his wife as the scaly, tailed creature she really was. The magical thing.

The monster.
"I did not think Lucille had murdered Margaret." Thomas paced in front of their fireplace, ashen and unnecessary in the summer heat, as the horrors poured from him. Lucille swore Margaret had done herself harm, and she had been so sad—so lonely, so angry—it seemed that she might have at the point of suicide—"

"But you married her and never made love to her. You didn't even care for her, really. You had to have plotted against her from the beginning!"

"You don't understand. I married Margaret, but—but she was not for me, she was for Lucille. It was she Margaret loved, and I married her only to allow them to be together in Allerdale Hall. If Lucille were happy, I thought, then everything could change… but it did not. Lucille would not let go of me to have Margaret; she would have us both, or nothing. Only after Pamela did I realize what had truly been done."

*She would have us both.* Edith's gut clenched at the thought of her husband in his sister's arms. In her bed. In her body. To think of him doing to Lucille what he had done to Edith. How could anyone even speak of such a shame?

Thomas did speak of it now, though, in words so unknowing they broke her heart all over again. "We had no one else in the world—no one, Edith, not a servant, not our parents—and can we be blamed for taking comfort in each other? For not comprehending that the one kind of love we ever had was such poison? Lucille came to me for tenderness. She told me what to do, from the time I was a very young boy, and I only wanted to see her happy. I obeyed, always, even when—when she led us to sin."

"She does not own you!"

"She does not any longer," Thomas said miserably. "But she did. Oh, she did. When I returned from school, and she had been released from the home, she made it very clear that I owed her everything. She murdered our mother for me, Edith. She did that for me. Could anyone sacrifice more? How could I deny Lucille what she asked, even if it were…"

"Killing your mother was no sacrifice for your sister." Edith had heard the cut-glass sharpness in Lucille's voice when speaking of the late Lady Beatrice Sharpe. Thomas' eyes widened, revealing that he had never truly considered that Lucille took pleasure in the act she portrayed as a service to him.

He had seen so little, to the point that Edith would have thought him disingenuous were his voice any less broken, his countenance less pale. "Pamela was too ill and fragile to have a husband in any but name—I thought, she will be no threat to Lucille, this will suit us all, but then it turned. Lucille had been poisoning her tea, and Pamela realized it, and Lucille strangled her—for me, she did that for me, because we would both have gone to jail, don't you see?—and then we *needed* Enola. Both of us. We needed someone for the world to think of as our child's mother."

Nothing galled Edith more than the knowledge that Lucille had borne Thomas a son. Yet even in her horror, she could hear the pain and love in Thomas' voice as he spoke of his dead little boy, the sufferings of this ill-formed child who was not strong enough to live. He had been a good father. He *would be* a good father. Except that he was a monster.

"With them, you didn't know." Her voice sounded like that of an old woman's: cracked and thin. "But when you married me, you knew Lucille would kill me." Had had slid that red ring onto her finger imagining how he would slip it off her corpse?

"I thought—I thought maybe you were the one she would let me keep."
Lucille's control over Thomas' mind remained so damnably strong. Edith would have shaken him by the shoulders if she could've borne touching him. "She's not your master! Not your boss! You can't blame her for all of it, Thomas, no matter what she did to you. Even if she's the one who killed your other wives, you should've realized what she was doing—how much she hated anyone else who came near you."

"Edith—"

She didn't even pause. She couldn't stop until she'd said it all. "Perhaps, as a child, you couldn't have guessed what Lucille would do to your mother, but from that time on, you knew your sister was a murderer. As an adult man, you could've refused to return to her bed. But you did not refuse, and you would not see, and three women died for it. I might well have been the fourth. So I stand for the other wives, the ones you led to the slaughter, and tell you to take some responsibility!"

"You're right. In every way, in every word. I sinned through cowardice, through inaction. Only after I met you did I realize that people could be so courageous and free. You gave me that courage, but too late to save the others, or to keep my poor dead boy from being born."

Again, mention of that other child, the one Lucille bore him, the one whose existence could never be erased. Edith wanted to scream. "You lied to me!"

"I did."

"You poisoned me!"

"I did."

"You said you loved me!"

"I do."

And God help her, she knew he meant it. Thomas' love was twisted and misshapen, bent upon itself to fit into his caged heart—but it was still love.

 Tears welled in Edith's eyes, and she choked back a sob. Thomas knelt before her as she sat on the sofa, his head bowed. "If you wish to be free of me, then I grant that wish. If divorce is too great a scandal, then simply go as you will and tell the world you are a widow."

"I'm tired of lies."

"It will not be a lie."

She slapped him. "Don't you dare do that to me. Are you trying to hold me captive by threatening to take your own life? Can't you see how cruel that is?"

Thomas shook his head. Her handprint burned red on his cheek. "I did not mean—Edith, no. I do not say this to imprison you. I say it to liberate you. My only atonement can be to give you a good life. I had hoped to do so here in Barcelona, as we have done until now, but if I can now only protect you by granting you your freedom, then I do so. Absolutely. Completely."

"You cannot free me with your death."

"No. Nothing would free you except knowing that justice has been done." Thomas sounded steadier, more reasonable. It reminded her that he truly understood her in ways others never had. "Neither of us can deny that my death would be justice. Margaret, Pamela and Enola—they deserve that, don't
they?"

She shook her head, not denying his statement but refusing to consider it. Even if she accepted that the hangman was only doing his job, it was another to imagine holding out the noose, particularly for her own husband.

He continued, "It's like you said about your characters. They alone decide what kind of people they shall be. Villain or hero? Sinner or saint? I'm branded a sinner forever. But with you—with you, I thought, perhaps I didn't have to be a villain any longer."

Another twist of the plot, one more than she could bear.

"Beware of Crimson Peak," Edith whispered through her tears. "Oh, mother, mother, you tried to warn me."

Thomas could not have understood any of this, nor did he try. "Do you wish me to leave? To pack your things, that you might go?"

"I don't know what I want any longer. But tell me this much. Did you murder my father?"

"No. That was Lucille as well. I didn't anticipate that she'd go so far. She simply told me to wait while she put things right. I'm such a fool—I thought she had, until the moment we saw the officers come to tell us."

Edith pushed him away. "They didn't come to tell you. They came to tell me." She would not allow Thomas the privilege and honor of mourning Carter Cushing. This was only one of the many sorrows she now had to bear alone.

In the end Thomas slept on the divan. Edith locked her bedroom door and curled up in bed with Lord Byron, her tears dampening his fur. How she had always loathed heroines who reacted to terrible news only by crying…but she had been young and callow then. Happy, undamaged. As yet unaware that some truths demanded tears even of the bravest.

**

A gothic novel. She is in a gothic novel. Those horrors from a century ago are now mostly remembered to be mocked; Edith had laughed at Udolpho and Melmoth along with Jane Austen upon reading *Northanger Abbey*, and otherwise had little use for the genre. But here she is, married to an incestuous bride-murderer in a country not her own, a plight Catherine Earnshaw would have sympathized with long before Elizabeth Bennet.

Hang it all, her ghosts had been metaphors. Edith had always believed in ghosts, ever since her mother's macabre final visitation, but she had known better than to assert such a thing with *Collier's Weekly*. Now the plot has gone windblown and candlelit, and Edith knows only one thing: Gothic novels rarely end well.

There is a point of no moral return, one dark Gothic heroes never cross. They kill, but in self-defense. They make excuses for other, blacker villains, but they do not love them. They indulge in forbidden passions, but—well, sometimes there are hints that they make love to siblings, or aunts and uncles. But in such tales, the siblings die together, the sinking into the mire along with the House of Usher. Edith cannot think of one character like Thomas, who walked so far into the darkness and
walked out again. She would never have allowed that, as a writer…

But it's like she told Thomas on their first night together in town. Characters make their own choices. They alone decide whether they are heroes or villains.

Edith can't chart Thomas' course from here. It's her own story she must take charge of. Where does it go from here? How does it end?

**

Thomas sleeps in the parlor. He rises and departs for work before Edith leaves her bedroom. She shuts herself back in just after dark, before he comes home. They go days like this, not seeing each other, Thomas asking the question only through his continued presence in their flat. Edith is not ready to give any answer.

Her pregnancy has yet to affect her in any way besides stilling her courses and making her oddly, overpoweringly disgusted by the smell of cheese. Edith sleeps a lot as well, but she doesn't know whether that's the baby or her brain offering her respite from the bleak truths she must think upon in her waking hours.

Even though she is unsure what she still feels for Thomas, her emotions toward her child have not changed. She remains enchanted by the thought of holding this baby, raising it up through childhood to independence, and hopefully being the kind of parent her father had been—strong and dear and good.

Carter Cushing taught her that one parent could be enough. Is that the choice she must make?

But Edith's mother returned once, whispering and black, loving yet frightening. Parents do not leave their children so easily, not even after death. It is hard to imagine that Thomas will not haunt her in turn.

Some chains are forged too strong to ever be broken.

**

Edith walks near the shore, golden skirt brushing lightly against the pathway, wide-brimmed hat shielding her from the summer glare. She takes little notice of those strolling nearby, a mix of Catalan women and expats in their bright, warm-weather dresses. Only distantly, in the corner of her mind, does she take in a spot of incongruous dark red velvet against the blue sea—a bloodstain on the ocean.

Yet instinct nudges her to lift her head just in time to recognize Lady Lucille Sharpe.

Edith freezes mid-step, as though she were Daphne with her feet sinking into the earth to become roots, holding her fast. Only with difficulty does she resist the urge to lay her hand upon her stomach; the best way to protect her unborn baby is to keep Lucille from ever knowing of its existence.
Still, Lucille has ways of learning things. How else could she be here in Barcelona?

"Edith." Lucille cocks her head like a small hungry bird as she stands only a few steps away. "You're looking well. I daresay the Spanish weather agrees with you more than our cold northern climes."

_Not being poisoned agrees with me._ Edith doesn't start that argument, but nor does she intend to make believe that nothing is wrong. This is no time for the fantasists; only harsh reality will do. "How did you find us?"

"Are you so sure Thomas didn't summon me?"

"Yes."

Her flat certainty does more to wound Lucille than anything else Edith could've said. Lucille draws up her sharp chin, the better to look down her nose at what she must consider to be her rival. "Certain letters intended for you came to me," she says. "After that, the deductions were simple enough."

"Then why have you come where you're not wanted?"

"It is not yours to decide when and where I'm wanted."

"Thomas doesn't want you here. If he had, he would've told you where he was. Or he wouldn't have left in the first place." Edith isn't sure whether she can ever be alone in the same room with Thomas again, but she will fight Lucille for him. She has no idea what her own victory would look like, only that Lucille cannot, _must not_ win.

Lucille's eyes narrow as if she were attempting to thread a needle. Sweat stains are forming at the throat and armpits of her gown; Lucille's garb isn't made for warmth and sunshine. "You don't understand my brother. You've never known him at all, really—"

"I know everything."

That catches Lucille off-guard, but she only puts one hand to her velvet bodice. A bystander might think Edith had told a slightly off-color joke. They stand there, face to face, as they behold each other honestly for the first time.

Edith had not thought Lucille's carved-alabaster face could blush, but there is warmth on her cheeks now. Is she ashamed of her murders, of seducing her younger brother and forbidding him any other love?

No. Only angry.

"If you know everything, then you should know better than to come between me and Thomas."

Lucille enunciates each word, every syllable clipped and sharp. "You've done enough damage. Had your fun. But you can't keep him from me forever."

"Only Thomas can do that," Edith agrees.

Lucille shakes her head. "All barriers fall, my dear, given time."

And Edith remembers that Lucille has always had methods far more direct than poisoned tea.

Upon seeing that realization in Edith's eyes, Lucille smiles slightly and sweeps off as if in triumph.
Really she's going to look for Thomas. Perhaps, to Lucille, there is no difference.

**

Hours go by. The sun sets. Edith doesn't dare return to the flat—poor little Lord Byron will have ruined one of the rugs by now, but better than exposing them both to Lucille's murderous rage. She passes time in cafes, pretending to read the slim volume she had carried in her handbag—a new Ruritanian adventure, something called Graustark. That's not her sort of thing; it's merely something she can pretend to look at. Really she keeps taking out her watch to stare at the crawl of the hands. How can they be going so slow? How long can she bear to wait while Lucille pursues Thomas like a cat with a mouse?

Though his sister toyed with him in a far more barbarous fashion…

Suddenly it hits Edith—the feel of her book's cloth cover, the roughness of the edges, the close-set font. She is acting like a reader. Not like a character, not like the protagonist of her own story. Less still is she acting as an authoress.

Her time at Allerdale Hall was the only time in her life she could consider herself passive. She will never return, either in body or in spirit.

Edith rises from the table, puts her coins near her saucer, and nods politely at the proprietress as she goes out. Hopefully the woman will never notice that one of her knives is missing, one just big enough to fit in a lady's handbag.

She goes home. No one lurks in the nearby alleys or the stairwell; nobody springs out from any shady corners. Hand shaking, she turns on the lights in the pitch black apartment to find Lord Byron, alive and well if somewhat abashed by the mess he has made in the corner. Edith strokes his fur and searches the apartment carefully, although she knows from the dog's survival alone that Lucille has not come here. Or if she did, she didn't get through the front door, which means she didn't find Thomas.

Where else might Thomas be?

He's been so quiet, since he revealed the truth. So shamefaced. She doubts he's spent a single hour with one of their friends in the past few weeks. He's been too miserable for anything but work.

"The cathedral," she whispers.

Edith runs through the darkening city streets, heedless of propriety, until she finds a carriage to hail. They rattle along the cobblestone streets until, at last, they reach the grounds of La Sagrada Familia. Although the driver protests at leaving a woman alone at such an hour, Edith presses enough coins in his hand to make him hurry off, lest she change her mind about the size of his tip. Her breaths come fast and shallow as she walks toward the cathedral site.

Those seven lonely spires are black against black, claw marks against the night sky. Edith had never realized how haunting the skeletal cathedral would appear at night. She finds herself remembering the last touch of her mother's hand, dried, dead fingers attempting to caress her daughter's arm.

That memory had always horrified Edith. Only now, on the verge of motherhood herself, does she realize how much love must have been behind that gesture. What will it must have taken to return
from the grave with a warning. How hard it must have been to want to care for your child one more
time and have that child only recoil in fear.

Even the grotesque can be a metaphor for love.

The workmen have gone home. All is silent as Edith walks forward, and at first she thinks she
guessed wrong. Maybe Lucille has dragged Thomas to some alehouse—or to her own hotel—where
she will try to convince him to return to their shared pleasures and sins. But just when her steps
become uncertain, she hears a woman's voice from below: "Never apart. We swore it. Never apart."

"We swore that as children. As prisoners, and as victims. That promise cannot bind us forever."

"But it can, and it must."

Edith tiptoes forward, to the very edge of the cathedral. She sees, now, the glow of two lanterns.
Thomas and Lucille stand in the pit dug for the next part of the church's foundation, next to one of
the deeper holes for a critical support. They are several paces apart, each of them in chiaroscuro.
Even at this distance she can see how stricken Thomas looks. How…afraid. It is not the fear of a
grown man who has proven weak, but that of a child. This was how he looked when his father beat
him, when his mother locked him away, or when his older sister first climbed into his bed and
demanded that he prove his love.

Edith looks at the scaffolding nearest her. A bucket laden with stone dangles from a rope, just above
where Lucille stands. The rope is thick and strong, but the knife in her bag could cut through.

Her story can now have three endings, and only the true ending can say what kind of narrative this
will be.

One—she slinks away from here this moment, without even waiting to see how Thomas and Lucille
end their argument. She packs her things, tucks Lord Byron under one arm, and leaves Barcelona on
the next ship. Then she returns to Buffalo older, sadder and wiser, to see the pleased contempt in
Eunice's eyes and the pity in Alan's. She says she is a widow; Thomas would never appear to
challenge her. This narrative is a tragedy. It might appear in a ladies' magazine, a warning to young
women to always marry the nice local boys of whom their fathers approve.

Two—she fights for Thomas, twisted and dark as he is, because she believes in the tormented soul
inside. With the stroke of a knife, she cuts the stone, lets it fall, and murders Lucille, thus avenging
Thomas' first three brides. He returns to her and they live whatever love story can survive such
horrors. This narrative will seal her forever in the Gothic.

Three—she waits. Thomas and Lucille are each moving slowly, gradually circling each other. There
would be a point where Edith could cut the rope and kill them both, brother and sister Sharpe alike.
In this version she becomes more than an avenging angel; she also repudiates her own ignorance and
sin by sacrificing her love. This narrative is a morality play.

Edith has never cared for morality plays. Lucille remains beneath her, and she grabs the rope.

It takes a few strokes. As she struggles, she hears Lucille cry out, "You promised you would never
love anyone else!"

"But it happened," Thomas says.

Lucille reaches for something in her own handbag—her own knife, not so different than Edith's.
"You promised," she repeats, and this time her tone has changed. She means for these to be the last
words Thomas will ever hear.
With one final hacking blow, Edith slices through the rope.

She doesn't quite see what happens next, for which she is grateful. The blur of the falling stone obscures Lucille's form, and the roar and clatter masks all but the highest pitch of her scream. Thomas staggers back in horror, but he makes no more to shield Lucille nor to die with her. Perhaps that is only because he's in shock. Edith will never ask.

In the aftermath, he looks up and sees Edith. She braces herself for anger—if he is ever to turn on her, to prove that the poison Lucille poured into him will never work its way out, it will be now.

Instead, after a few long moments, he kneels and finishes the work of pushing Lucille, or what is left of her, into the deep hole for the cathedral's supports. Then he pushes the broken stone in after her. Tomorrow, the foundation will be laid and Lucille Sharpe will be hidden forever.

Edith decides this shouldn't surprise her. Thomas has experience in hiding bodies.

He is weeping as he climbs the ladder up to her level, but as much in relief as in sorrow. When he holds his arms out to her, she rushes into them and embraces him tightly.

She whispers against his chest, "A Gothic, then."

He doesn't hear. Wouldn't understand. It doesn't matter. The author's decision is final.

**

With her last decision, Edith has set her jinn free.

"You forgive me?" Thomas says to her that night, as they finally lie in bed together again.

"I forgive you for what was done to me. What became of Margaret, Pamela and Enola—your relationship with Lucille—those are beyond my power to forgive. You have to live with what you've done." Edith sighs. "And so do I."

Gothic novels may be overblown and melodramatic, she thinks, but they understand that all actions have consequences. The price of Mr. Rochester's reunion with Jane Eyre is his eyesight and his left hand; he can have her, but not see her, nor ever touch her in the ways he had once dreamed.

She and Thomas have each other, but they have bought that togetherness at a very steep cost. Edith is willing to pay it.

**

When the time comes, Thomas is indeed a good father to baby Isabel. When he holds her or sings his little nonsense songs to her in her crib—then and only then do the shadows fall away from him. Their child doesn't have to suffer for her parents' sins.

The local priest—who believes, in defiance of all evidence, that two such lovely people as the Sharps must be good Catholics—suggests baptizing the infant at La Sagrada Familia. Edith turns
down his offer gently and never tells Thomas of it. They have few secrets from each other any
longer, but that one she will keep. The cathedral's twisted spires continue to claw at the Spanish sky,
and in them Edith imagines Lucille reaching forever for Thomas, or for revenge, or perhaps even for
redemption. Thomas must see that too, must look upon his work as both the concealment of and
monument to his sister, but he never speaks of it. That is one of the secrets he keeps in turn. If those
are their worst secrets from now on, Edith thinks they will do very well.

She tells baby Isabel stories. Fairy tales both bright and dark, every one Edith can think of. Girls
need to hear these stories so that they can learn to tell—and shape—their own.

THE END

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