"Stannis Baratheon couldn't help it. He just couldn't. For the first time in longer than he could remember, a bubble of laughter burst unwillingly from his smirking lips. His smile only widened when he saw how very, very disturbed his fellow trustees of the Daemon Blackfyre Home for Orphans and Foundlings were..."

An impertinent essay satirizing the trustees of the Daemon Blackfyre Home should have spelled the end for Sansa Stark, its eldest inmate. Instead a mysterious benefactor on the board funds Sansa’s way through college on three conditions: 1) That she becomes a writer. 2) That she writes letters to her benefactor once a month. 3) That she is to never expect a reply, or to know his identity...

Based on a tumblr prompt from iheartdramas to do a Stansa AU based on Jean Webster’s 1912 epistolary novel Daddy-Long-Legs. Originally this was meant to be a two-shot, but hopefully it should be done in three... This is set in my usual careless mash-up of Westeros and Earth, anachronisms will abound - so apologies in advance for that.

What belongs to George R R Martin belongs to him, what belongs to Jean Webster is hers and I am just playing with their toys (and many of them at that)!

Notes

Sorry this took so long! Stuff happened... More is on its way, as is another prompt, and the
next chapters of As The World Falls Down and Chiaroscuro (in that order).

Sansa may seem a little OOC, but this is a Sansa raised away from the context of wealth, status and family and I was heavily influenced by Jean Webster's Jerusha "Judy" Abbott and Nippon Animation's take on her in the series Watashi no Ashinaga Ojisan, (which you should all totally go and watch, it is the most weirdly addictive thing).

See the end of the work for more notes.
Stannis Baratheon couldn't help it. He just couldn't. For the first time in longer than he could remember, a bubble of laughter burst unwillingly from his smirking lips. His smile only widened when he saw how very, very disturbed his fellow trustees of the Daemon Blackfyre Home for Orphans and Foundlings were. However the essay which had just been read out -“Blue Wednesday” about the monthly visitation from on high by said trustees - was simply too funny. Mrs Lysa Arryn – of the Eyrie Arryns – frowned in disapproval.

“Really, Mr Baratheon! You should not be encouraging such displays of ingratitude. This Stark girl should have left the Daemon Blackfyre Home two years since, and how does she reward our generosity? With sass!”

Stannis scoffed internally. Yes, worked to the bone in exchange for bed, board, and a meagre education at the village High School; truly that was such princely, Seven sent generosity. No wonder Miss Stark's feelings about the board were of a satirical bent.

“Yes, Mrs Arryn, the essay was certainly... Ill-advised,” Miss Mordane pursed her lips. “However, Sansa has been a real help when it comes to controlling the younger children, especially as I am not as young as I once was. I propose that she becomes a full-time employee of the Daemon Blackfyre Home.”

There was a general murmur of approval around the board of trustees. Mrs Arryn's frown deepened before she spoke again:

“And I propose that she be left to make her own way in the world. She is certainly amply qualified to become a typist, or even a secretary in town.” Another murmur stole its way around the table.

“Typist!” Exclaimed Stannis. “A typist! You would strangle that kind of potential with a typewriter's ribbon? Whilst the essay in question was not the most flattering to “the trustee” as a species, it was certainly honest; it was, dare I say it, uncommonly well-crafted for a schoolgirl's rhetoric assignment – if in need of honing.”

“What would you suggest, Mr Baratheon?” Miss Mordane asked, seemingly hypnotised by the man's uncharacteristic loquacity; she wasn't sure if she could remember the last time that he had spoken this much.

“Let her go to college,” he shrugged.

With the uproar this statement caused, one might have thought that he had just proposed that she become a streetwalker.

“Have you gone mad, Baratheon?!” Axell Florent interjected. “If it were a boy, one might see the merit but-”

“‘But” what? I habitually award a college scholarship to a deserving boy of the Daemon Blackfyre Home every so often, why not a deserving girl?”
“But to what end?” Asked Miss Tarly, frowning thoughtfully. “Say you educate the Stark girl in some fine ladies' college and she experiences things and people of which she might otherwise have been ignorant, what then? Is she to have a taste of a lifestyle she can never possibly hope to experience again and lead a life of malcontent?”

“Of course not!” Stannis scoffed. “She ought to be trained with an eye to becoming a professional writer, that's clearly where her talent lies.”

He really ought to have guessed that the room would break out into outraged chaos anew.

After the fractious meeting with his fellow trustees, he ironed out the details of Sansa Stark's immediate future with Miss Mordane. She would attend the Argalia Ladies' College in the Stormlands until graduation, during which time he would pay her academic fees and board at her lodgings directly to the parties concerned, and give her a liberal – but not extravagant – monthly allowance for any other expenses which might arise. Miss Stark was to write to him once a month in letters to be addressed to “Mr Steffon Storm” care of his secretary, Davos Seaworth. She was not to expect a reply, or any further indication of her benefactor's identity; the letters were meant to help Stannis gauge her progress as a writer and to give her a structured exercise to do, not to give either party any meaningful form of correspondance. Stannis couldn't help but scowl a little at Mordane's relieved look when he explained that he had no intention of becoming a pen-pal to a mere slip of a girl, honestly! He was aware that such an undertaking would be considered highly improper, but really! He was hardly his older brother!

“But why do you insist upon remaining anonymous?” The duenna asked him as he rose to leave. “It is no source of shame to be so generous in one's charitable acts. And I am sure Sansa would wish to thank you.”

“It is no source of great personal pride, either.” Sansa Stark's mockery of the self-important hypocrisy of trustees still rang in his mind. “No. Let her be gratitude be to Steffon Storm and no other.”

He raised his hat a little and left.

Sansa Stark was certainly proving to be one of Stannis' most amusing correspondents. She seemed to have a keen eye for the everyday absurdities of life, and an eager, unmalicious way of communicating them. Although, occasionally his young charge's missives verged on impertinent, especially in those first few letters... The first one had read:
Dear Mr Kind-Trustee-Who-Sends-Girls-To-College-In-Spite-of-Caring-Little-For-Them, (He had frowned at that. Where had she got hold of that notion)?

Here I am! After a four hour train ride, I have arrived and have settled into my room at Jonquil. I say that I am settled, but I don't think that I have ever felt more unsettled in my life! A no-name girl from the Daemon Blackfyre Home at Argalia! It's enough to make one feel quite muddled, (then again that might be train ride over rattling my insides out of a recognisable order). I will write to you again on Monday, with a fuller account of the place, when I feel less muddled and lessons have begun. I shall be sure to include lots of description, as – being a gentleman – you probably haven't been in a ladies' college before.

I hope you don't mind if I write to you more than once a month? I have already experienced so many new things and I have to share them with SOMEBODY or I might explode! I have only met my floormates in my tower, (Jonquil is a tower, by the by, and I am at the very top!) and I am already acutely aware of how all these things which I find so new and dazzling are merely old flavours to jaded palates for them. Only... What am I to call you in these letters? I refuse to call you something so obviously invented as Mr Steffon Storm (he thought that he'd done quite well), but I know so little about you. And yet I feel as though I belong you to you a little; not in the sense that your generosity purchased me in any way. Not at all. But you taking an interest in me after so many years of being Sansa Stark, a girl of little name and less future, makes me feel as though I belong somewhere – with someone. Like a family of sorts.

(Her sincerity was so disarming. He had to set the letter down a while to gather himself before continuing).

But I don't know what to picture when I think of you! I believe I know three things about you:

1. You are rich.

2. You (apparently) dislike girls. (One day he really must find out where she got hold of this notion. He suspects Mordane may have something to do with it).

3. You are tall. (How on earth did she know that)!!

I suppose I could send my letters to Mr Rich Man, but it would be insulting to imply that the only thing of note about you is your money; which is a very external quality and doesn't say a lot about you as a person, does it? Equally, I might write to Mr Girl-Hater – only that's just as insulting to me as it is to you. Besides, you might decide that you like girls at some point in the future, or you might lose your money. Clever men get chewed up by Wall Street everyday, from what I hear. (Smart girl). Therefore until you decide to tell me your real name you shall be my dear Daddy-Long-Legs – as you will always be tall! I hope you don't mind, it will just be a private little nickname between us – Miss Mordane doesn't need to know. (Stannis chuckled slightly at that. She would be scandalised)!
I will write again on Monday, after the first day of classes, with a little more detail on Argalia life.

Yours in respectful gratitude,

Sansa Stark.

Her letters continued much in this vein, alternating irreverence and insight with sincerity; he particularly enjoyed her assessment of his niece; he had arranged that they would be roommates in Jonquil partially out of a sense of perverse amusement at the potential clash of personalities.

…Myrcella Lannister Baratheon has finally deigned to notice me, although as she comes from one of the finest families in King’s Landing I suppose the honour is all mine. Although, the way she tells it the Baratheons came over with the Targaeryans, the Lannisters were the children of Hugor of the Hill, etc. etc. etc. Naturally this makes Lannisters and Baratheons both superior sorts of creatures of a better vintage than the rest of us poor mortals. She even refers to the Tyrells – Margaery's family – as “new money,” even though they have been making wine in the Reach for nearly 150 years! Seven knows what she would make of me, if she knew the truth. She would probably consider any wealth I had to my name to be positively pre-natal! (Stannis had snorted into his coffee at that. Hopefully his niece would improve with exposure to the likes of Sansa and away from her mother).

…Once Margaery had brought me to the attention of Myrcella Lannister Baratheon herself, the latter proceeded to interrogate me on my bloodlines; was I a Stark of Winterfell, or a Stark of Skagos? What was my mother's maiden name? Quickly, I seized upon the name “Tully” - thinking a name might placate her, but instead she latched onto that and wanted know if that Tully was the daughter of a Whent? Luckily for me, the bell went for lunchtime and I could excuse myself. What could I tell her? That the Daemon Blackfyre home was my father and that a dustbin was my mother? That my name was provided by a tombstone and the phonebook? Even sweet Margaery Tyrell would be avoiding me within the week...

His heart went out to his charge. Obviously, he would prefer it if she were honest with her friends – but if he were in her place, he wouldn't be so sure either. Although he was sure that the Tyrell girl would stand by her friend. Sansa had presented her as both kind and loyal. From what Stannis could remember of her second letter (the one beginning “Thank you than you thank you thank you so much for sending me here! I love college!”) Margaery had been the one to seek Sansa in a bout of homesickness.

Stannis was happy to see that Margaery's friendship endured over the next few letters, and mildly amused to see his own niece's name to appear increasingly often – even if the air of dismay and disdain that accompanied it didn't entirely disappear.
Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

I'm on the basket-ball team! (Margaery encouraged me to go for it, by-the-by). I have a throbbing bruise the size and color of a large bunch of violets on my left shoulder, (he winced for her) but it was worth it! Myrcella Baratheon tried for the team, but she didn't get in. Hooray!

Sorry, that was terrifically mean. Pettiness is a fault of mine, clearly. (Apparently it was one of his too, as he had laughed. But then again, he never had got on with the rest of the family – his brother's wife in particular).

Meanwhile, college only gets better and better. We have ice cream twice a week, and never eat brown or cornmeal mush! And the other day my English professor said that my composition had “unusual originality”, that made me so very proud Daddy! I suppose praise is ice-cream for the soul; some in moderation is alright, but too much spoils you!...

In spite of the fairly regular praise she appeared to be receiving from her tutors, she seemed forever painfully aware of the disparity in backgrounds between her and the likes of his niece. Early on she had written:

… I hope you don't mind Daddy, but I used some of the money you gave me to buy an encyclopaedia. (He certainly didn't.) A big one. That way every single time someone mentions something or someone I don't know, I can write it down discreetly and look it up later. I imagine I will have to do it several times as I have already found myself to be woefully ignorant on subjects which these girls have been fed since birth. A girl quoted Luwin on my first day and I asked if he was a freshman. She laughed so much and by the end of the day it had gone round the school as a joke of sorts; they thought I was being a wit, when I was only showing how much of a fool I am.

And later on:

I have resolved to never work at night. No matter what is due in the next day, it shall be done before six (he was glad to hear it!) as my evenings shall be given over to reading books. I didn't have much time for reading normal books at the asylum, but now I do I cannot get enough! I keep going back and forth to the library; it bemuses Margaery something terrible – why wouldn't I just buy them? I could hardly tell her it was because I had forgotten that I had an allowance for these sort of things; instead I said that I was merely deciding which ones I was going to buy later. I must admit, Daddy, that I have already started mentally compiling the library which I shall have once I have become a financially solvent author. I have even started thinking on the wallpaper.
I will have a volume of fairy tales and poems; did you know that I had never read Florian and Jonquil or Cinderella before arriving here? They are rather wonderful. Did you know that there is more than one version of the Cinderella story? I wonder how many are in the library... I shall also have some poetry by Kipling, “If” is a glorious piece – I believe I shall read it every time I feel low and need motivating. Mr Thomas Hardy shall also be welcome in my library, even though some of his work makes me feel quite sad, (by-the-by I am about to read Far From the Madding Crowd, I shall let you know how it goes)... 

She had proceeded to fill another half a page with authors she may or may not put in her future imaginary library (Shakespeare, Rhaegar Silverprince, Charlotte Bronte, Tom Sevenstrings, Mance Rayder etc.), adding at the end that she would (of course) have to leave a shelf aside for her own literary endeavours. He wondered if there was a way to let her loose in his own vast library at Dragonstone for a day or two, she would probably like that very much. Then again, she might be equally happy with the improvised library he had at his King’s Landing apartment, but the Storm’s End house had the bulk of his poetry...

She continued to periodically update him on her academic progress, sometimes by simply telling him:

...Today we were informed that \( a^2+b^2=c^2 \) What practical application this has, beyond the correct angling of ladders remains to be seen...

And sometimes in her own... Unique style.

**Report from the front to General Steffon-Daddy-Long-Legs-Storm from Lieutenant Sansa Stark.**

Sir, I can report that Aegon, Visenya and Rhaenys are rapidly approaching the North. King Torrhen is expected to capitulate and bend the knee for the sake of his people. The burning of Harrenhal still lies fresh in everyone's minds.

Yours,

Lt. Sansa Stark, veteran of the Stormlands campaign

He supposed it was one way of remembering your history. It was certainly an effective refresher for him. He was ashamed to say that his memory of Aegon's Conquest was a tad on the rusty side.
In early winter he received a shock when he read his own true name in Sansa's sloping handwriting.

The subject of family came up again today. This time I was prepared for the ambush! I told them that my parents were dead (which for all I know, may be true) and that a benevolent, if distant, man was taking care of my education and upbringing (which is very true). Both Margaery and Myrcella made the appropriate sympathetic noises before moving on to talk about their own families. I already knew about Margaery’s older brothers, but I had no clue that her grandmother lived it them! Apparently, she’s the sharpest old lady that you’ll ever meet and the real brains behind the business. Myrcella took the time to wax lyrical about the long and proud history of the Baratheon and Lannister families. Well eventually, I just exclaimed: “Was there ever a Baratheon that wasn't a noted society somebody!”

Margaery thought that I was being terribly funny, but Myrcella is only just learning how to be teased (bless her), so she frowned and exclaimed: “You would get on very well with my uncle Stannis, for Mother says that he is not a proper Baratheon!” (Well that was certainly rich coming from his sister-in-law!) I did not tell her that I considered that a glowing recommendation, (Davos looked at him strangely as he barked out a laugh) but instead asked her in what way was he not “proper?” According to Madame Baratheon, he has a strange sense of humour, and committed the most grievous of sins in being more interested in preserving the family business than representing “putting on a good show” society (well, somebody had to be); even more scandalous than this he apparently spurned that holiest of things “a society marriage,” apparently giving his younger brother the courage to do the same! (Oh, if only they knew the real reason why Renly didn't wish to marry...) Good for them, I say. Why on earth should you get married just because someone says you should? Surely both parties would be miserable and that would look worse than being happily unmarried?...

It occurred to him that for all Sansa's teasing manner and levity, she was a very sensible young lady. And that was no bad thing.

Time passed and Sevenmas rolled around. He had no clue what young ladies liked for Sevenmas, so he sent her five gold pieces so that she might choose herself and be happier than she would with any of his half-informed efforts. He was rewarded with a grateful missive which gave him a window into his young ward's mind.

Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

Thank you so much for the gold pieces! I honestly wasn’t expecting you to give me anything, when you have already given me so much. But thank you! It’s Sevenmas morning and I shall tell you what you gave me (via the gold pieces):

I. A silver watch on a brown leather strap, so that I might get to my classes on time.

II. Mance Rayder's sonnets
III. A hot water bottle

IV. A steamer rug (my tower is as cold as it is pretty).

V. Five hundred sheets of yellow manuscript paper (I intend to begin my journey as a writer soon).

VI. A thesaurus, (to enlarge said writer's vocabulary).

VII. Much as I dislike to confess the last item, I shall: Silk stockings. (Stannis supposed it an example of his woeful ignorance when he failed to realise that any other kind existed).

I'll admit that the motive behind the silk stockings is not the most noble and can be summed up in three words: Myrcella Lannister Baratheon. (Puzzlement didn't cover his feelings at that particular statement) For you see, Daddy, she will come and sit on my sofa every evening with crossed legs and do her geometry homework – all whilst wearing silk stockings. (Didn't they dislike each other? Sometimes he really didn't understand women). Now when she returns in January, I may go and sit casually on her sofa, cross-legged with my silk stockings.

To recapitulate (a phrase which my English instructor is very fond of), I am very thankful for my gifts. But all the same, indulge me for a moment and let me pretend that they came from my family. The watch was a gift from my father, Eddard, who wished for me to honour my commitment to Argalia in a punctual fashion; the rug was from Catelyn, my mother, who baulked at the thought of her daughter living in a spartan tower bereft of womanly touches. The hot water bottle was from Old Nan, who worries something dreadful for my health; the paper was from little Rickon, my youngest brother, and the Mance Rayder was from Bran - who will always be my little brother, even though he is grown so tall now! Now it was my sister Arya who gave me the silk stockings; even though she cannot see the use of such frippery herself, she appreciates that I might want them. It was my older brother Robb and my cousin Jon, both in their final year at Oldtown themselves, that decided to collaborate and send the thesaurus. Robb would rather have given me chocolates and flowers, but I insisted upon a thesaurus to further me upon my path.

I look out across the courtyard from my tower window and I imagine what my friends are doing now. Margaery, having opened her presents in the bosom of her family, is probably helping her mother prepare for the annual party that they throw the workers in their ballroom each year. I imagine that Myrcella is probably selecting a dress for Sevenmas lunch, and anticipating the next “boring party” (her words, not mine). Where are you, Daddy? Are you doing anything for Sevenmas? Do you have a real family, or are you as alone as I am today?

Sorry, don't mind me. Besides, it is not so very bad here; there are a few girls still here and this afternoon I shall eat a feast the likes of which was never seen at the Daemon Blackfyre Home! There are to be seven courses, can you imagine! Well, you probably can – but you understand my point...

It was a good few days after Sevenmas until that particular letter had landed on his desk. And at the end of it, he honestly didn't know how he felt. In many ways, it was one of her typical letters - one
moment sincere, the next amusing or puzzling, and poignant the moment after that, - but he also felt that he had been granted a glimpse of a side of Sansa that he had never seen before. A lonely one that felt the lack of a family more keenly than she had ever felt poverty.

The next month or so was largely uneventful. Sansa had to retake Valyrian and French (Stannis had found her sheepish confession rather amusing), and had managed to pass both the second time around. Once the stress of re-takes had passed, Sansa took up her earlier half-hearted attempts to divine something about him with new vigour. The matter seemed to be occupying a sizeable chunk of her mind.

… I would be most grateful for a little hint, Daddy. Why, I don’t even know what your hair is like! Are you only a little grey? Do you have a white mane, combed back with violet hair oil behind your ears? Are you bald?

Stannis smiled wryly. She appeared to have decided that he must be some benevolent, eccentric, older man; and he certainly wasn't going to disabuse her of the notion any time soon, no matter how much he enjoyed her letters. Although he was somewhat perturbed to receive a letter that consisted entirely of:

Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

Now this is very important to me, Daddy: ARE YOU BALD? Mr Seaworth can send me a telegram along the lines of: “Mr Storm is as bald as an egg” or “Mr Storm is only a little bald.” You can take the cost out of next month's salary.

Yours curiously,

Sansa Stark

That little missive had sent Stannis Baratheon to his bathroom mirror in a fit of paranoia, to squint at his hairline for five minutes altogether trying to discern if he was “only a little bald.” The impertinence of the child! It really was quite rude to ask a man who wasn't all that older than her in the grand scheme of things if he was bald! So what if his hairline was... Receding. Slightly. It didn't affect his efficiency as her guardian, or a businessman!
He felt slightly foolish later when he realised that the question, whilst hardly tactfully put, was actually a rather reasonable one. Particularly as she had no way of knowing that he wasn't some little old man. All the same, he never directed Davos to send a reply on his behalf.

Not too soon after “Mr Steffon Storm”'s emphatic silence, it became clear to Stannis that something was wrong with his charge. Her letters became shorter. Less full of colour and life. Eventually the tone became positively irritable, culminating in a letter in early February

… Do you know how frustrating it is, Daddy, to forever write and never receive a reply? To have no sign of your approval other than your silence? Don't mistake me, it's not that I'm not grateful – I am that every day. It's that I have absolutely no indication of what you look like, who you are, or if you even care for me beyond being “Sansa Stark, your charitable project.” For all I know, you are a trustee like the rest of them and my letters go on the fire as soon as they arrive and perhaps you don’t care to think of me at all now that your duty to the poor as a species is done! So, Mr Storm, I will write to you once a month and no more often than that, sticking only to matters of study. For it isn't fair to either of us if I insist upon treating you as my friend, or family, when you have no interest in being either to me.

Yours,

Sansa Stark.

If the faintly hysterical edge wasn't enough to peturb Stannis, the splotches of ink where tears had clearly fallen were. Had he been unwittingly playing with her hopes? He had to confess that he had become rather more attached to Sansa than he would have liked to admit, and the thought of her letters being reduced to monthly work bulletins sparked some panic within him. It was almost enough to tempt into writing to her directly. Only the thought of what a highly irregular correspondence with a single man might do Sansa's future reputation stayed his hand. He needed some way to comfort her without revealing himself.

A week later the opportunity presented itself in the form of an explanation for her erratic behaviour.

Dear Daddy,

I AM SO SORRY, I AM SUCH A MONSTER. Please oblige me by burning my previous letter and erasing it from your mind. I was feeling so terribly lonely and ill when I wrote it, I had no business taking my sore throat out on you! Not long after I sent that wretched thing, Margaery and Myrcella found me in my room half passed-out with a terrifically high fever. I have been in the infirmary for the last six days and this is the first time that the (very bossy) head nurse has allowed me to sit up.
long enough to write. They tell me that I have been sickening from tonsillitis, flu, exhaustion and other things, so I am not allowed to do more than scribble a few lines to you before my pen and paper are confiscated again.

However I simply cannot allow myself to even think of getting better until I have your forgiveness. Please forgive me for being such an ungrateful, impertinent wretch. I don't deserve it but I shall endeavour to do better.

I am afraid I can't write any more. My hands just won't stop shaking.

Yours,

Sansa

Her handwriting was near illegible towards the end. Well that certainly explained her recent turn in mood! It sounded like she had been working herself into the ground and only getting ill and depressed for her trouble. He picked up the phone to call the college and queasily hoped that it hadn't been to please him.

The “bossy” head nurse confirmed what Sansa had already said in her letter, but added that her glands were swollen and that, yes, she had seen the doctor a few days previous. There was nothing for Sansa to do but to take her medication and rest, if only her friends would stop invading the ward at every opportunity! He put the phone down, heartened that his Sansa wasn't as friendless as she had believed herself in her darkest moment.

What did one do for ill people? And how could he let his feelings be known without revealing himself? His mother always sent food round for invalids, sometimes fruit or flowers... He smiled to himself. He had the perfect idea. He told Davos that he was taking an early, extended lunch, much to his secretary's bemusement, and set off.

It took several, lengthy phonecalls and an extended consultation with a small, cherished volume of his mother's, but eventually a bouquet and a book were winging their way to Sansa.

************************************

Dear Daddy,
I know the florist's note said I didn't have to reply, but I had to! Thank you so much! Just when I was sitting up in bed, feeling bored with nothing but the dull, dreary rain outside the window to look at, a long white box arrived at the infirmary with my name on it. The most lovely flowers that I have ever seen arrived!

I take back every rotten or impertinent thing I ever said to you. You're nothing like a trustee; you do care about me, you truly do! That knowledge alone was enough to bring a little tear to my eyes. When I used the book to find out the meanings of the flowers, I was in a full on flood of tears – much to Nurse Stone's horror. She thought I was frightfully odd to cry for being happy; but that's her fault for being in the room the day I received my first true present.

Thank you so much Daddy. I am going to do my utmost to make you proud.

Your very own,

Sansa

P.S. I have used the last of my allotted writing time to draw the bouquet on the back. It's a good thing that you didn't send me to college to become an artist, eh?

He flipped the page over. He wouldn't say that it was terrible, per se – but it was definitely fair to say that her talents lay elsewhere. However, her admiration for the subject was obvious and the constituent parts were clear: Pink roses for friendship, grace and admiration, red cardinal flowers for health, sage for esteem, fern for sincerity and white stars of bethlehem for reconciliation.

The language of flowers was something that was a little old-fashioned, but had served his parents well; hopefully it might do the same for him. Even though he was all too aware that he had probably just cemented the image of himself as a kindly old man in her head, but he found he didn't care – as long as she was happy.

Summer came and Stannis' thoughts wandered increasingly towards Argalia. In an effort to get to know his niece a little better (and get her parents off his back about being a terrible uncle) he spontaneously decided to visit. If he got to see Sansa in the flesh, so much the better.
He waited at the gates, just as he had arranged in his letter to Myrcella, with impatience. Where was the girl? He turned around and was met by the most beautiful pair of forget-me-not blue eyes that he had ever seen.

“Mr Baratheon? My name is Sansa Stark. Myrcella’s in a lesson right now, but she sent me to meet you.”

“Call me Stannis, Miss Stark” he blurted out. “I mean, Myrcella talked so much about you over Sevenmas that I feel as though I know you. And when people say “Mr Baratheon” I half expect to see my older brother appear at my shoulder.” Wait, was he joking? And did she just giggle?

“Okay, Stannis.” She said the word carefully, as though testing out its weight on her tongue. He liked the way it sounded. “Then you have to call me Sansa. There’s something about “Miss Stark” which sounds entirely too respectable!” For the second time in as many minutes he found himself smiling; Gods what was wrong with him.

Sansa took him on a tour of the campus, pointing out some of her favourite spots along the way. When they had run out of buildings of historical or educational significance to look at, she gestured down the pine walk:

“And down there is the Crossroads Café, where students traditionally take their visiting relatives. I am reliably informed that it is a fine example of modern Tudorbethan architecture and all that entails, but does a fine afternoon tea in spite of all that.” She finished with a flourish.

“Have you ever been there, Sansa?” He asked.

“No.” A tell-tale flush creeped into her cheeks. “I’ve never had the chance. I keep intending to go on my own, but...” She trailed off uncomfortably.

“It’s no fun sitting in a café on your own, is it?” He finished the sentence for her, his mind flashing back to every awkward meal he had ever had in public. She nodded enthusiastically.

“Exactly! I despise eating alone.”

Stannis filed away this information for later. He supposed that was a side-effect of living in the Daemon Blackfyre Home for so long; he wondered if she had ever eaten alone in her life before coming to Argalia.

“Hm. Well, I must confess to feeling a little weak after our grand tour of the grounds.” Stannis announced. His young companion looked him up and down in an incredulous manner; his ego was more than a little gratified that he didn’t look the part of the little old man that Steffon Storm theoretically was. “I propose that we make our way down there and have afternoon tea to revive ourselves.” He gestured down the pine walk with his cane.

“Oh, that would be marvellous! Should we fetch Myrcella and Margaery?”

“Nonsense, consider this fair payment for an informative tour! Besides, I’m sure my niece has had sufficient tea whilst we traipsing the grounds, and I’m a firm believer in my relatives not monopolizing the local tea trade.” He was not entirely sure what caused him to phrase his sudden desperation to keep her to himself thus; it was entirely too flippant a thought to voice aloud. Nevertheless, it was worth it when she smiled and laughed in that musicbox manner of hers and
started to lead him towards the Crossroads Café.

The café was every bit the piece of modernised historical kitsch that Sansa had promised on the inside, but rather than being vulgar it contributed to the general air of cluttered cosiness that it possessed. As soon as they had entered, Sansa had fallen mysteriously quiet. Stannis didn't know if she was just absorbing the place, or the potential enormity of having unchaperoned tea with an older, single man was sinking in. Whilst they were waiting for the tea things to arrive, Stannis took it upon himself to break the silence:

“So, Sansa. I hear you enjoy reading.” (Myrcella plausibly might have mentioned it over Sevenmas, and he equally plausibly may have overheard it. So he wasn't *really* using their correspondance to his advantage at all...)

“Oh, immensely!” Enthusiasm lit up her pale, oval face as she engaged him in a conversation about the plays of Mance Rayder. She was waxing lyrical on *The Tragedy of Harrenhal* when the tea and two slices of lemon drizzle cake arrived.

“But why would that one be your favourite?” Stannis couldn't help but ask. “It ends horribly for all concerned; wouldn't you rather have a happy ending? Personally, I don't want characters that I'm emotionally invested in to suffer for nothing.”

“But it's being a tragedy that makes Rhaegar and Lyanna's romance all the more meaningful. Their happiness is brief, but beautiful.” Sansa explained as she poured the tea. “And besides, Arthur Dayne's speech at the end always makes me cry. Milk?” She asked abruptly.

“Uh, no. Lemon's fine. I like to keep my tea as bitter as I am.” Something about Sansa kept making him voice his thoughts aloud. He would have to keep an eye on that, even if she did keep rewarding him with dazzling smiles like the one just flashed.

“Of course you are, Mr “I Like Happy Endings.”” She only grinned further as he scowled. “I bet the real reason why you like your tea black is because you're sweet enough as it is!”

He huffed and taken a sip of his tea, with the scowl firmly etched into his face. She had merely smiled, as though being presented with a token of her victory.

In spite of Stannis' many attempts to tell Sansa that he was in fact a misanthrope, by the time he drove away she remained as cheerfully unconvinced as ever. He was curious to know what she made of the afternoon. Was she as strangely happy as he was? He put his own cheer down to his delight in finding his ward to be an intelligent, enchanting young woman, but what about her? Did she genuinely enjoy her afternoon in the company of a crochety eccentric? Or was she only humouring him for Myrcella's sake? He hoped she might have something to say to “Daddy-Long-Legs” on the subject...
Chapter Summary

Okay, ridrunkulously long chapter coming up. Fun fact: This chapter was originally meant to to take us to June. Yeah. It really doesn't now. Thank you all so much for your outrageously awesome comments and the mind-blowing reception this got; I genuinely wasn't expecting it to have that much of an impact!

Presenting: Chapter Two, or the Nile isn't only a river in Egypt!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

Did you ever visit Aragia in high summer? I know that you are not a lady, but perhaps you visited someone here once and said to yourself: “If I ever take charge of a cheeky orphan girl, then this is where I shall send her!” If so, I am very grateful that you did.

The sun has turned the stone around campus the most glorious shade of buttry yellow, the flowers are out in small clusters, and the sky is so blue it feels as though you might look into eternity. The walk between the Sea Star and Clegane buildings is still an all-mighty wind-tunnel, but it would not be Aragia without the wind. (Or the Stormlands, for that matter) There is a kind of lightness in the air, even with exams on the horizon, and I feel so very glad to be here. Where would I be now if not for you, Daddy? A nursemaid, or a typist in some clerk's office, no doubt. (He shuddered a little at the thought) But instead I am here, getting a fine education and meeting all sorts of people.

Take today. Today I met Stannis of the esteemed House Baratheon, Myrcella's uncle. (He could just hear the teasing tone which she might have said that in) He was in the area on business and sprung a visit on her at the last minute, apparently this sort of thing is entirely in keeping with his character, (is it? He thought it entirely unlike himself) and she herself was unable to meet him owing to a lecture she had to attend with Margaery. In spite of knowing that he was not “a proper Baratheon,” I went to meet him with duty to her in my heart – rather than any real joy. (His heart sank a little) After all “not a proper Baratheon” is still some kind of Baratheon! (He barked out a laugh. Davos looked at him queerly through the door before settling back down to work) Myrcella's tales of her family weren't exactly encouraging; her older brother sounds frightful! (She didn't know the half of it...)

So, I went to meet him with my feeting dragging; but by the end of the afternoon it felt as though my feet had barely touched the ground for the rest of the day, it flew by so fast! (A fully-fledged smile
sprang up across his face) I suppose I ought to give you a description of him, so that you have a picture of him in your mind – it's only good authorial practice, after all: He's a rather tall man, almost as tall as you! (And still he had no clue as to how she knew that!)

His hair is a very dark shade of brown with flecks of grey at the temples, (he massaged the area self-consciously) but his eyes remind me of the midnight sky when I look out of my tower window at night. They even have the same sparkle when he does his not-quite-a-full-smile. (He snorted. Now they really were in the realms of fantasy)

He was immensely funny, very quick with a dry sense of wit, and not at all afraid to mock himself along with the rest of society at large. He is much how I imagine you were twenty years ago. (If only she knew... Scratch that. Her knowing was a terrible idea)

At the end of the tour he announced (somewhat facetiously) that all of this walking had weakened him and that he was in need of tea. I asked if I should fetch Margaery and Myrcella and he said nonsense! That afternoon tea would be fair payment, and besides. He didn't believe in his relatives monopolizing the local tea trade! Really I think he was just being kind, because I'd mentioned that I'd never gone to the Crossroads Café before. (Well, it didn't benefit him... I wonder what he would have done if he'd known that I'd never eaten out before, and the idea of doing so for the first time on my own was daunting? (Probably taken her to an Italian eatery he liked in town) It's bad enough to eat alone in the dining hall, surrounded by anyone who might sit down with you – but the idea of somewhere like a café, or a restaurant is downright intimidating with no-one else there. As we stepped through the doors, I suddenly felt terribly unsure of myself. I think Stannis must have sensed my nerves, because he drew me into small talk about books like it was nothing at all – even though Myrcella had warned me that “he doesn't do small talk.” (Note: He should pay more attention to his niece. Her skills of observation do her credit. After all, even his older brother still refused to understand his inability to do “small talk”)

We had tea and the most delicious cake, and soon small talk about books turned into big talk about plays. Did you know that he doesn't like unhappy endings? Apparently he gets frightfully invested in the characters and doesn't much enjoy seeing them suffer. (She was never going to let that go, was she?) Are you like that Daddy? Is that why you took me on? Could you see me nearing an unhappy ending at the Daemon Blackfyre Home, and did you decide to tear up the last page and start again? (The question floored him. He stopped for a minute, before reading on)

Anyway, very soon it was time for him to leave. Myrcella was furious with me for “stealing” her uncle away from under her nose. Apparently he is a peculiarly rich and desirable sort of uncle. (I'm glad he's wealthy, for tea was not cheap!) (He thought it was positively reasonable, himself) Once I explained what happened, she sighed and she supposed that she didn't blame me for getting swept up by him – apparently once he gets an idea into his head, there's no getting it out! I don't know much about men as a species, but in spite of anything Myrcella's mother might say I rather think that I have just met a superior sort of man, - in the best sense of the word. (Oh such a sweet summer's child. There were many men that were far better than him, and in time she would learn that)

Will you come to tea one day, so that I might meet you? Never mind, I'm sure there'll be time for all that after I graduate. (Not if he wants to save face after the tea stunt, there won't!)
Mes sentiments distingués, (see, I have been keeping at my French)! (He really thought they were at the “cordialement” stage, at least, by now)

Sansa

P.S. Three bouquets of flowers just arrived by express for myself, Margaery and Myrcella from Stannis Baratheon. Look at me, receiving flowers from a man! I am beginning to feel quite like a girl and less like a foundling! (He was quite sure the minute she showed her face in society, she would be showered with flowers and admiration) I looked up the meaning of mine in that little book you sent me; lavender roses for enchantment! (He couldn't explain the blush creeping up his neck) Unfortunately, I couldn't identify the little white flowers (circaea...) – but Margaery tells me that the language of flowers is terribly outmoded, so Stannis Baratheon probably wouldn't be using it anyway. (Thank you, Miss Tyrell!) If you're curious, Margaery had deep pink roses (gratitude) (for being a friend to Sansa), and Myrcella had yellow ones (“forgive and forget”). (He had felt rather bad about dumping her).

Good. She had clearly enjoyed the day just as much as him. Additionally, he had even managed to give her a taste of new things – even unwittingly. However, he'd have to find a way to work on her judgement of character; “superior,” indeed...

Not long after their “chance” meeting, Sansa wrote him a letter that was significantly shorter in length and more serious in tone.

Dear Daddy,

Today I received a note from the Daemon Blackfyre Home. Not from little Gendry, or little Mya – but from Miss Mordane. I am cordially invited to spend Argalia’s summer period of closure at the Daemon Blackfyre Home; in exchange for bed and board, I will be expected to resume my old duties.

Please, Daddy, don't make me go. I can't go back to being the Sansa Stark that used to scrub floors and faces at the Daemon Blackfyre Home. I can't return to being the girl who wore ill-fitting clothes from the poorbox, and then had to endure the giggles of the original owners throughout the school day. I know that, thanks to you, I have my own lovely clothes these days - but being a foundling is more than an outward appearance; it’s a state of mind. And I am only just beginning to feel truly like myself, whoever that is. Please, Daddy. Send me anywhere but there. I'll be a kitchen maid in your house – you'll never have to see me. Just don’t let me go back.
Yours,

Sansa

Stannis didn't know which he felt more, guilt – or rage. He felt terrible about forgetting that Argalia would, in fact, close over the summer and not making any arrangements for Sansa beforehand. However that Mordane woman had some nerve! He knew the woman was understaffed, but she no longer had any claim on Sansa's time or goodwill. He would gladly pay for a helper's salary, but he would not allow his charge to go back to a place and a mindset which so obviously distressed her.

“Kitchen maid,” indeed! If she wasn't going to be scrubbing dishes at the Daemon Blackfyre Home, she sure as all seven hells wasn't going to be doing it in his house! He wrote a telegram, to be sent to Proudwing Farm, and wrote a note with a cheque inside – which would arrive there a little later. He made a note to call Miss Susan Mordane later, but first:

“Davos!” He called out.

If he heard a little sigh from his secretary as he came in and saw Sansa's envelope on the desk, he pretended that he hadn't.

Dear Daddy,

Oh thank you so much! You have no idea how much it means to me that I have somewhere to go this summer. Thank you for sending me the train tickets and the instructions. Proudwing Farm! It sounds positively idyllic...

And it was, from what Stannis could remember. He hoped that the Cressens would greet her as warmly as they had him, all those years ago. Although out of the necessity of concealing his hand in Sansa's affairs, he had written to them as Steffon Storm acting on a referral from Stannis Baratheon; hopefully that would be enough to secure her welcome. Although Sansa herself was so charming, he could imagine her worming her way into their affections very quickly.

Any residual twinges of guilt about deceiving the Cressens were wiped away by just how happy she was to be having:

“... a real holiday. On a farm, too! For three whole months! It's certainly incentive to do well on my
last few exams. I only have History and Physiology to go, and then it's off to Proudwing Farm, and to Mr and Mrs Cressen! You know, Daddy, even though “Cressen” sounds like “cross” it still strikes me as a kind name. Maybe I will put it down on my list of interesting names which I can give to characters...”

He put any joy he felt for her down to his apparent investment in happy endings. He had decided that he would act as her fairy godfather, ensuring her transformation from oppressed skivvy to belle of the ball – even if the ball was a literary one, rather than a literal one. (Although if Sansa wanted... Never mind). He simply couldn't have allowed Mordane to set all of his good work back like that. Yes. His feelings were purely of a protective nature, like any self-respecting magical guardian in a story.

It was a long, hot, sticky summer in King's Landing. Even more so than usual for Stannis, as he was stuck almost permanently in his office, thanks to a social blunder of his brother's it was up to him to salvage a deal between Baratheon Shipping Co. and the Dragon Mining Corporation. The idiot had managed to simultaneous insult the Targaryen heiress' Essosi husband, herself, and her unborn child in one stroke. Stannis, as per usual, was saddled with repairing the damage. He took to reading Sansa's letters in his lunch break, although as relaxing as he found them he was glad that he was under no obligation to reply – he couldn't have found the time!

“... where did you get the recommendation for Proudwing Farm, Daddy? I've just found out that this farm used to belong to Mr Stannis Baratheon! He bought it and gave it to the Cressens back when they were tenants. Apparently Mrs Cressen was his nurse, and Mr Cressen was his tutor. Do you know Stannis, Daddy? I hear that Society (note the capital letter) is dreadfully small. Or maybe your secretary talked to his secretary in a secret meeting of the society of secretaries and decided to give him a recommendation whilst grumbling about their respective employers. (To be honest, he thought Davos would be more than justified in seeking out someone to grumble to about him) Apparently, knowing a Baratheon is a great recommendation – and knowing Stannis the best one; I am glad to report that Myrcella belongs to an inferior branch, according to Mrs Cressen! Once she knew that I had met Stannis, she kept telling me stories about “Master Stannie” when he was young. (He felt his face redden. Now that he thought about it, discretion had never been one of Nanny Cressen's strong points...) Apparently he used to come up and stay here during the summer, until he was about fourteen, (his stomach lurched to remember that particular summer) so I shall soon have plenty to tease him about! (Dear Lord of Light, did she not have enough of that already?)

Luckily, his own name didn't come up too often. Nanny Cressen must have wanted to preserve a shred of his dignity in the young lady's eyes; although why, he could not have guessed. The Cressens were a mystery to him, even after all the years that he had known them. Sansa liked to keep him appraised of all the gossip and goings-on in and around Proudwing Farm, as though sensing that he were in dire need of amusement:
...You know, I do believe that Pylos (the hired help) is head over heels for our Betha (the maid). He keeps sending such looks of wide-eyed longing her way, you would think that he was one of the cows! (Stannis snorted. He had noted that look many times over the years) And she keeps so pointedly ignoring him, with a little grin, that I rather think that she might feel the same! (He had seen that too, from both sexes. In truth he didn't understand the logic) Albeit, expressed somewhat differently. It's a bit like cake. One may have lemon cake or, let's say, sponge cake – the recipes and flavours may differ but they are both at their heart, cake. Pylos may yearn, and Betha might... Do whatever it is she's doing, but they are both doing it for the same reason. Does that make sense? (Stannis wondered if she had been hungry at the time of composing this particular letter).

Oh dear, listen to me and all my theoretical wisdom! You wouldn't think that I was a few weeks shy of nineteen! (Wait. Her birthday was soon?) I remain, happily, unexperienced in this area; love affairs rarely seem calm in stories, and I rather hope that I might have really honed my craft by the time I experience the like. That way I might be able to cope with the turmoil by writing some really first-rate material! (His heart lurched slightly. He didn't want her to experience the kind of tragic love that might make for great art).

In other news, I have managed to injure myself in the line of duty for Proudwing Farm. Nothing dramatic, don't worry! I was just balancing on a beam to retrieve some eggs and I managed to fall off; by some kind of miracle, the eggs didn't smash as I kept them close to me in their basket. (He remembered that particular death-trap well) I managed to scrape my knee and my hand a little. Mrs Cressen scolded me so for my lack of attention, as she was dabbing me with witch hazel. She then sighed and said that it felt like yesterday that she was tending to young Master Stannie's knee after doing the same. I don't know if this says more about that beam, or about people with long legs trying to be helpful!

Occasionally her missives were significantly shorter; his disappointment with which he put down to his bored stiff state.

Dear Daddy,

Today is Sunday, so not much is happening. We went to the Sept, as usual. Betha stayed behind on the pretext of tending the roast, in her best dress, as usual. Pylos happened to be missing from the service. As has been usual for the last few weeks. I refrained from discussing religion with the Cressens, as always; they are wonderful people, Daddy, don't get me wrong! But there is a hard-line streak there that I shouldn't like to cross. (He remembered it well. Mr Cressen hadn't taken kindly to his increased blaspheming after his parents' deaths).

I've started writing a new short story. I shall let you know how it goes.

Yours,
Sansa.

Occasionally her musings would make him outright irritable. Honestly, it was very difficult to read someone waxing lyrical about Proudwing Farm and the surrounding area, when he was stuck in an increasingly stuffy office!

...The moon was wonderfully large and clear last night. It seemed as though there were more stars out there in the middle of the country. I sat with my window open, letting the cool night breeze in as I sat there and wrote. The wind stirred the weeping willow, so that it sounded as though the night itself were sighing. I wonder what it might be like to be a star in the sky? Do stars dance, or do they sing to sparkle as they do? Or do they watch us as we go about our daily lives, as envious of us as we are of them? Or are they content to be children of the moon, as we are children of the sun?

It was almost enough to make him tell Robert to sort out his own Seven-damned mess and take a break at Proudwing Farm himself! At least his insights into this newly-developed philosophical bent to Sansa's mind would be first hand that way, and not frustratingly few and far between.

But soon the summer heat cooled. Stannis managed to resolve the Targaryen issue peaceably (with the promise that Mrs Khal-Targaryen would never have to deal directly with Robert), and it was time for Sansa to make her way towards Argalia once more.

The peculiar bond that existed between his niece and his ward was one that never ceased to give Stannis pause for thought. Was it the Tyrell girl that held them together? Or was their friendship similar to that of men that would mock each other mercilessly, but defend one another to the bitter end against outsiders? Either way, he wondered how on earth it was that Sansa Stark, Margaery Tyrell and Myrcella Lannister Baratheon ended up sharing a suite of rooms in Jonquil tower for their second year.

… Moving in day is such fun! I had my things placed in storage on campus and moved into Jonquil yesterday, so by the time Margaery and Myrcella arrived today all of my things were perfectly arranged. That meant that I was perfectly at liberty to help them with their knick-knacks and furniture. Although the formidable Mrs Baratheon had hired movers, so my help wasn't required on that score! But Myrcella and I did rearrange the living room later once the workmen had left. Margaery brought no help but her brothers, Loras and Willas. Loras was a bit younger than us, but deceptively strong for his age and so very charming. I dare say he will break a few hearts in a few years' time! Willas is Margaery's second eldest brother, about to start his final year at Oldtown. He had a very pronounced limp from a riding accident when he was younger, but that doesn't seemed to
have affected his good looks or his good cheer. He couldn't move as much as Loras, but like me he
did what he could. We had a lovely conversation over a mug of tea; you see his brother Garlan will
probably inherit the vineyard, but he himself is interested in the unique varieties of roses that exist in
the Reach. He wishes to find a way to combine the hardier varieties', well, hardiness with the looks
of some of the more delicate breeds – so that he might sell them all over Westeros. How frightfully
clever that would be!

Stannis stopped reading, feeling inexplicably sickened. If only the Tyrell boy knew that the most
beautiful and the most hardy of roses was already before him. He probably wouldn't hesitate to
snatch her up into his grubby little fist. He didn't quite absorb the rest of the letter, a very large part of
him uninterested in any further praise she might choose to heap upon any Tyrell not named Margaery
or Loras. Another part of him noted that it was the most that she had ever written about a man that
wasn't himself before; he wondered if this is how fathers felt when they noticed that they're daughters
were growing up? He ignored the small voice telling him that he was feeling nothing of the kind.

******************************************************************************

Sansa's world seemed to grow even further in her second year: A girl by the name of “Jeyne Poole”
was named almost as often as Margaery and Myrcella, she took subjects which she had chosen
herself (Politics, 17th Century English Literature, History, and Argumentation and Logic), and got
involved in student politics. Stannis was amused to see her take her role as Margaery's campaign
manager for class presidential elections as deadly seriously as she would have the Westerosi
Presidential race:

…. although the competition is hardly fierce this year, one should not make the mistake of
underestimating one's opponents. Jeyne Westerling may be shy, but she is kind and bright – such
things matter to people more than policy at times. (Renly was much beloved in business circles for
his charm and wit, and certainly not for his business acumen) Now if you'll excuse me Daddy, I need
to go to basketball practice. I may casually make reference to what I believe makes an ideal class
president afterwards in the changing rooms!

Yours,

Sansa.

A few more letters passed, wherein Sansa spoke of her classes, her friends, the books that she had
been reading; apparently Milton, Hobbes and Shakespeare were occupying a lot of her time. The
election was not mentioned again for another two weeks:

Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,
“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers!” (Or sisters in our case)! Today is truly a day of triumphs for our little corner of Jonquil tower! Myrcella has received a role in this term’s production of “Bael the Bard,” Margaery has been elected to the office of class President, and I had my story published right at the front of Arcadia (Argalia’s student journal). We were already giddy with the news of Margaery’s clear victory when we saw that this month’s issue of Arcadia had been delivered. No one under a final year has ever been published there before! And it was right at the front! (Did I mention that)?! 

Anyway, I have sent a copy of Arcadia enclosed. We are going to a bonfire party in Margaery’s honour tonight; Jeyne has managed to get hold of some sweet called “marshmallow” (sic?), which apparently tastes delicious if you roast it on a fire.

Your Sansa.

P.S. It’s starting Daddy! I’m finally becoming a writer at last! I know that Kipling said that triumph and disaster are two imposters that you should treat just the same, but give me just this day. Tonight I will stand alongside my friends and we shall celebrate being more than just students dreaming of what we might be. Let me savour this taste of glory for just one day, and I shall dream again tomorrow.

It was quite professional-looking for an amateur publication produced by students. Some young lady’s picture of a tree in autumn colours decked the front cover. He flipped the pages until Sansa’s name jumped out at him. Or specifically She Walks in Starlight by Sansa Stark.

There were a few errors of grammar and composition. And it wasn’t as polished as he might have hoped. Yet it was beautiful. Heartachingly beautiful. It was the story of a fourteen year-old boy staying at a farm with friends after some unspecified tragedy, who goes walking in the country on a clear summer’s night and witnesses a falling star. He is transfixed as it falls to marshy earth in front of him and blossoms into the most beautiful girl that he has ever seen. She explains that she is tired of watching life from afar and wishes to experience the world and all it has to offer; but being a star, her physical form is temporary and will dissipate with the dawn. The boy is enchanted and swears to do what he can to help her. She smiles and says that she wishes only to speak with him until sunrise and if he feels the same then, they shall see. They talk and it is the happiest that the boy has been in a very long time. Dawn is about to break and he becomes desperate; he offers her his own body to sustain her life. She merges with him and says that she will experience life through him. He grows up and becomes a painter of some renown, with critics saying that his work has “an otherworldly quality.” He never marries, in spite of seeming so very lonely. But every night in his dreams he sees the Star Girl again, until the night he falls asleep for the last time - when she leads him away to become her eternal companion among the stars.
The story was as strange as it was beautiful. The unearthly quality of the story seemed to bleed into his dreams that night; he dreamt that he was, once more, the teenage boy that mourned his parents on Proudwing Farm. A beautiful, glowing girl with eyes like the endless sky, and hair that burnt like the sunset appeared in front of him, like she was born suddenly from the night. “Find me in the future!” She cried as the ground swallowed her whole. But he found her too late. Someone (who looked an awful lot like Mrs Arryn’s new beau) had already taken her as a typist, and forced her to do unspeakable things with her beautiful hands. She looked at him accusingly, her inner-light flickering and dying, and asked why he didn't find her first? Why? Why?! WHY-

He woke feeling deeply unsettled. Stannis had to take a few minutes to remind himself that he had found her first. Sansa was safe and always would be, if he had anything to do with it – come Tyrell or high water.

Dear Uncle Stannis,

I shan’t lie, I was rather surprised to find a letter from you. I rather thought that you had fulfilled your quota of unexpected behaviour for the year with last term’s visit. I am very glad that you have decided to meet with your own niece this time, rather than someone else’s! Apologies, but no matter how many yellow roses you send that will always make me feel rather slighted. I think, Uncle, you are very lucky that Sansa isn’t aware of the Baratheon tradition of flower-speak. Whilst Father may never had much use for it, I have heard him speak fondly of how Grandmama and Grandpapa would use flowers to express themselves. Afterwards, I busied myself with studying Grandpapa’s book on the matter. So, Circaea and lavender roses, eh?

I think perhaps it would be best if we met in town, perhaps for lunch next Saturday? I have no rehearsals scheduled for then, (I am in a production of Bael the Bard, by the way).

Your loving niece,

Myrcella.

Never, as long as he lived, would he underestimate his niece again. He found his nephews to be perfect dullards, ranging from the sweet and inoffensive to the downright disturbing, but she clearly took after her maternal grandfather – up to a point. He shuddered slightly. The old lion at the head of Casterly Investment banking was a formidable man, but one for he had great respect; all the same the idea of Myrcella being a female Tywin was mildly disturbing. Especially when she seemed to know... Something about his connection to Sansa. Even if he wasn't sure what that something was
himself, yet...

He sighed and gave Davos instructions to book a table for two at *La Rosa Azzurroa* in Storm's End for Saturday. At least he had a few days to come up with a plausible explanation.

********************************

Myrcella was enjoying watching him squirm. There was no other explanation for it. From the moment she had turned up in her chic cloche hat and long coat, she had stubbornly refused to address the contents of her letter. He was forced to engage in *small talk*. Talking had been easier than breathing with Sansa, somehow it was like forcing himself to breathe underwater with his own flesh and blood. He was constantly reminded of how young she was and their relative lack of common ground.

“So. I imagine you can take classes of your own choosing this year.” He said in a desperate swipe at conversation. Apparently it was the right thing to say, as her green eyes lit up.

“Oh, I am taking Economics, Philosophy and Politics. It really is nice to have a solid theoretical grounding at last.”

“At last?” He asked, intrigued.

“I wanted to take them at high school.”

“Why didn't you?”

“My mother disapproved. Apparently it wasn't seemly for a future debutante to take such “bookish” subjects. Joffrey, it was fine for him - because he was “the heir” - in spite of his total lack of interest or aptitude. Apparently we women must be content with the fields that men have so graciously allotted us, and excel in nursing, education and the arts - but not too much.” An edge of bitterness tainted her voice.

Stannis wasn't entirely sure what to say to that. He suddenly recognised a lot of himself in his niece, a second child overlooked in favour of their older brother because of circumstances beyond their control.

“You know, Joffrey may not be taking over.” He informed her casually. “These days Baratheon Shipping has a board that would rather promote an unusual successor with support than an unworthy one lacking it.”

“Hm. But how might an unusual candidate go about garnering such support?” She asked, with a gleam in her eye.

“He, or she, may have to be seen to be conspicuously more studious and hard-working than the alternate candidate. He or she may wish to work for a business on either side of their family for the duration of the summer holidays; an opportunity another candidate was seen to reject. Failing that, she may wish to work with a company with a similarly... Unusual leader.” He said slowly, thinking
of Daenerys Khal-Targaryen. “He or she might also wish to accompany her younger uncle to certain societal and business functions and become known as a charming, educated young woman with a mind for commerce. Additionally, she should probably have a spotless reputation and not be seen to be a feckless child with a trust fund. Unlike her older brother.”

“Could she count on her older Uncle for his support, come the revolution?” She said in a teasing manner, belying the serious light in her gaze.

“Only if she proves herself.” He said evenly. “For he would support the worthiest candidate.”

“Would helping you win Sansa's heart prove me worthy of your support?” She grinned.

“Myrcella. I have no interest whatsoever in Sansa Stark's heart.” He stated with a frown.

“Circaea. And lavender roses.” She snorted.

“What on earth makes you think that I used the language of flowers? Just because my parents used it, it doesn't mean I do.” He protested. It sounded weak, even to his ears.

“You're here, aren't you? If my accusations were so baseless, you would have told me so in writing.”

She had him there. He sighed and pinched his nose.

“Look,” he said. “Have you ever heard of Steffon Storm?”

“Sansa's guardian.” She nodded.

“Well, I don't have many friends, but he is one of them. When I learned that his ward was at Argalia, I offered to keep an eye on her for him – because you were there too. That is where my interest in Sansa begins and ends,” he explained – hoping to placate her.

“How sad.” She looked out of the window wistfully. “She seemed so interested by you; she asked me to send her regards when she found out that we were meeting today, by the way.”

“She did?” Hope stabbed treacherously into his heart.

“Naturally.” His niece's smile took on an impish quality. “You seem to have made an impression on her.”

He made a conscious decision to throw anything resembling dignity to the wind.

“What kind of impression?” He sighed, fully aware of the admission he was voicing. Myrcella's smile turned victorious.

“The kind of impression which might give you hope, dear uncle of mine.” Her smile wavered. “I might be proud of being of being a Baratheon, but it doesn't mean that I am blind to my family's faults. Not any more. I know my father hasn't been the most... Faithful of husbands. And that his tastes run rather young these days.” He had no idea that she knew. “I also know what he does when he tires of his mistresses.” The blood drained from his face. A list of young women that had been paid off and pushed aside sprang to mind. “Forgive me, but I must know: What do you intend to do with Sansa?”
“Myrcella. I honestly don’t know what I feel about her, yet. But I can reassure that I would never, ever subject her to that kind of treatment; I'm appalled and insulted that you would ask.” He said quietly.

“Like you, I don't have many friends. I'd quite like to protect the few I have.” She said sternly.

“Especially as she doesn't seem to have any family to do it for her. Now. Enough of dark thoughts for today. I want a tiramisu for dessert, will you have anything?”

Even though he was still somewhat offended that Myrcella could think him capable of being like her father, he found a glimmer of pride coming through.

*************************

After that, the first term seemed to go by in a flash. He enjoyed hearing about his ward's exploits as much as ever, but a growing sense of unease accompanied him when he thought of her. Unease that seemed to increase with the odd irregular note his niece would send his way, complete with winking references to her friend. He was contemplating the question of what to get Sansa for Sevenmas when he opened her latest letter.

Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

Just to let you know that I will be in King's Landing for Sevenmas this year. (His stomach jolted) Myrcella has invited me to stay with her family; she said that it would be frightfully boring without me, as otherwise she would have to attend parties chaperoned by her uncles, or her younger brother. (Apparently Joffrey won’t be there, I can't say she sounded un-pleased at the prospect). If only she knew that she was really doing me a great big favour; (Stannis knew exactly who Myrcella thought she was doing a favour for) I've never been to a proper party before! (Of course. The Daemon Blackfyre Home was hardly known for its cheer, was it?) Will it be like a fairy tale ball? I hope not! Whilst I would like to see beatiful things and people, I am far more interested in witnessing life and all it has to offer. I want to be able to write a variety of people with real authority. (All the same, there were certain people he'd rather she didn't experience first hand at any of these parties)

And the food! (He may have smiled a little at her enthusiasm) Just imagine the food! I know that you are probably rather bored of fine cuisine, but I can hardly understand when I hear girls complain of the food at Argalia. It has always seemed rather luxurious to me. I would like to seem them subsist on the Daemon Blackfyre diet! Give them a week on corn mush and they would complain no longer!

Yours

Sansa.
P.S. Margaery just came in to invite me to her's for Sevenmas! I had to regretfully inform her that Myrcella had beaten her to the punch. Aren't I popular this year?

A short scrawl from his niece was in the same group of post:

Dear Uncle Stannis,

Sansa's coming over for Sevenmas. You may thank me later by introducing me to a few members of the board at one of the many Baratheon Co. events we'll both have to suffer through. (He didn't know if she were a wit or a Machiavelle)

Myrcella

P.S. We have competition. Margaery tried to invite her round for Sevenmas as well. She also keeps extolling the virtues of her older brother Willas. (Oh does she now?!) I think she wants her in her family just as much as I do. (Was that Myrcella's oblique way of telling him to marry Sansa?! Did he have no choice in the matter?) I refuse to lose Sansa to a botanist with a limp!

He didn't want to lose her either. However, he didn't know what he did want from her instead. All he knew was that the thought of losing Sansa the minute she graduated was... Highly distressing. He didn't know if that said more about how lonely he had clearly been, or how Sansa could inspire affection even in the most mummified of hearts.

Dear Myrcella,

Mr Storm has opened up an account at Van Houten's in King's Landing so that Sansa might be properly attired for any festivities in King's Landing. He would be most grateful if you could accompany her and see that she gets anything she needs. In thanks, he is prepared to gift you one gown that you may put on Sansa's account.

Stannis
It was plain to see that Sansa was pleased as punch with her Sevenmas present:

...Oh Daddy, thank you! You didn't have to, but thank you so much! I was so frightfully worried that I would stick out like a sore thumb at all of these parties, but you really have thought of everything. I mentioned to Myrcella that I would have to visit Van Houten's early on in my visit and she offered to help me pick the right dresses; she knows I've never really been exposed to high society as such. I can only hope to be Baratheon-worthy!

Speaking of Myrcella, she and Margaery appear to be having a falling-out. Well. It seems more like a private war. I honestly don't want to know what they're arguing about, but do I hope that they have resolved it before Myrcella's play at the end of term. I don't much fancy the idea of being pulled between two warring factions...

The party moved smoothly like a perfect, glittering, music box – with the artificial smiles of the players betraying its inherently false nature. Ordinarily Stannis would only be at the Baratheon Shipping Co's official Sevenmas party under sufferance, leaving as soon as was polite – or possible; whichever came first.

He milled around and grabbed an amuse-bouche from a wandering waiter. He knew Robert's party would be arriving soon enough; it was merely a question of killing time until then. He chewed on the little piece of pastry and beetroot-topped blue cheese. He swallowed appreciatively; Sansa might enjoy that. He told himself that he was merely assuring Sansa's well-being and seeing that his niece was introduced to the right people. The subtle “pop” of his mouth as his jaw dropped, said otherwise.

Sansa was stood on the fringes of the party with her arm on Renly's as they entered all at once, doubtless a manoeuvre by Cersei to avoid being eclipsed. Needless to say, the exercise was a resounding failure; his sister-in-law might have decked out like the sun, but Stannis found himself blinded by the moon. She was bedecked in dark blue velvet cinched in at the waist, her arms bare and her neckline low. She turned to to comment excitedly to Renly, and Stannis could see her dress was practically backless! Her hair was swept up into a chic, low chignon, with a few tendrils of fiery hair swinging free. The picture was completed by elbow-length black gloves and some jewellery he recognised as belonging to Myrcella, chief of which being a diamond and onyx choker which he himself had picked out for her last birthday. She looked like the Queen of the Moon come to earth.

Robert made some boorish, dull speech that Stannis wished would end almost as soon as it had begun. Why, oh why, had Robert chosen this year to make a proper speech rather than rattling off his customary: “Good beer, good sherry – let's make merry!”? He watched as his niece extracated
herself from her mother's twin's grasp and looped her arm around Sansa's with a reassuring smile. As soon as the speech was over, she made as though to steer her friend's towards the drinks table.

“Uncle Stannis!” She cried. “I'm so glad that you could make it this year!” His niece was terrifying. She truly was.

“Well, someone has to make sure the business doesn't sink without a trace,” he replied without a thought. Sansa giggled. He looked at her sharply.

“I'm sorry.” She apologised immediately, a blush spreading across her cheeks. “Shipping. Sinking without a trace. It would be a rather ironic way to go.”

“Indeed it would,” he said with something approaching a smile. “I'm glad to see that the intervening months haven't blunted your sense of humour. Sansa.”

“Nor have they yours. Stannis.”

Their eyes locked for a moment, dark blue on sky. Myrcella cleared her throat.

“Well!” She exclaimed. “The band are about to start. Sadly I promised the first dance to Uncle Renly. Sansa, would you be a dear and partner Stannis? It will be just like we practiced.”

“Oh um... Okay...” Myrcella had disappeared before the reply was fully out of her friend's lips. Her blush seemed to intensify as she turned to him.

“If you would care to take my hand, mademoiselle.” He offered her his hand with a slight bow in a gesture of supplication.

Her hand hesitated in mid-air for a moment that seemed to stretch out into eternity. Much to his relief, her hand came to rest in his. He lead her over to the dance-floor and swept her up in the appropriate hold for a waltz. It occurred to him that were he not wearing his small, white gloves, his fingers would pressed onto the bare skin between her shoulder-blades. The same thought appeared to occur to her at the same time, as her body tensed up and colour rose to her cheeks once again.

“Apologies in advance Stannis,” she said with a cheeky smile. “I'm afraid I'm not a seasoned dancer.”

“Well that's certainly clear.” He retorted. “Otherwise you would know that it's all in the leading.” He cocked an eyebrow. The tension seemed to seep out of her body.

“Oh really? With a statement like that, you really don't have any excuse for putting in a poor performance – least of all me!”

He harrumphed and made a point of making a perfect curve with his body as the music started. In spite of the occasional stumble on Sansa's part the dance went exceptionally well. They seemed to twirl in a perfect storm of grace and power, anchored together by touch and scandalously pressed close to one another as the dance demanded. The last chord of the song played and Stannis found
himself strangely disappointed as they separated, his body suddenly cold with her absence.

He fell into a sort of routine during the social events that he invariably found himself at that Sevenmas. He would arrive, mill around for a bit talking business with a few people, and take the first dance with Sansa. The second time this had happened, Robert had given him a very queer look indeed; according to Myrcella, he thought he was trying to seduce her, whereas her mother was under the impression that her daughter's friend was “taking a bullet” and freeing up Myrcella to dance with whoever she wished. “Seduce her,” indeed! He simply wanted to know her better, was that such a crime? He would then find Myrcella at some point in the evening and introduce her to various members of the board and prominent businessmen in glowing terms. (The first time he had done this, she was shocked into near-silence). During or after food, he would find himself confronted by Sansa again and they would enjoy a conversation about history or literature on a sofa somewhere, with Sansa saying her feet needed a rest from all of this dancing. Having said that, she would often find herself in his arms again for the final dance of the night.

Sometimes he felt guilty for monopolizing her time in King's Landing, but he reassured himself that he was providing a safe and familiar path to enjoying these new delights; he was protecting her from the real wolves in the room. Stannis didn't care how successful young Harry Hardyng was at the bonds and shares game, he wasn't going anywhere near Sansa after Stannis caught him staring at her in a manner that fell many fathoms below respectful. He put that down to having become Sansa's friend as “Stannis”; he would protect her as any self-respecting friend would. Because that's what friends do.

The final party of Sansa's visit fell at New Year. Robert wasn't actually there, as it was hosted by Daenerys Khal-Targaryen at her estate just outside King's Landing. He hadn't put up a fuss when Stannis had informed him that there was no way in seven hells that he was going after all the work that he had put in over the summer to prevent her from breaking off the contract. He had shrugged before telling him that he would probably spend it at Chataya's. He winked as he told his younger brother: “Don't do anything I wouldn't do,” before ambling away.

The party was the grandest that Stannis had seen in a while; his first thought was that if it seemed magnificent to his jaded eyes, imagine what Sansa would make of it! An enormous ice sculpture of a dragon dominated the room, with red lamps lighting it up from underneath. He watched her expression of dazzled wonder light up her face as she came through the double doors into the ballroom. Something around his heart tightened to see her so happy. Something he desperately didn't wish to think about. He turned around to go in search of a lime and tonic, only to be confronted by the party's host.

“Ah, Mr Baratheon! How wonderful it is to see you here.” Stannis was always fascinated by the slightly Pentoshi edge to her accent.
“I am very glad to be here tonight, Mrs Khal-Targaryen.” He acknowledged awkwardly. “I hear you gave birth. Congratulations.” He winced at how blunt that sounded.

“Thank you. Rhaego is doing very well; he takes after his father more than I.”

He glanced at the hulking Essosi nearby, laughing convivially with a group of guests. He made Robert look like Tyrion Lannister. He winced.

“Ouch,” he muttered – thinking of the pain of birthing a baby so potentially huge.

Mrs Khal-Targaryen laughed. Stannis was taken aback. The woman that he'd dealt with over the summer had been unyielding and unscrupulous – a shrew; although perhaps it was part of a larger trend of underestimating the women in his life that he was only just beginning to notice.

“Quite!” She agreed with a smile. “Although I must say that you are the first to imply so to my face! Do you have a family?”

“Outside of my brothers? No. It's just me and I am more than content for it to stay that way.”

“Reminds of me how I was after Viserys died.” Everyone knew that her feckless brother had got himself blown up trying to find gold seams and glory in Essos. No-one thought that he had died before his time. If anything, Stannis thought that it was a miracle that he'd lasted as long as he did. “Family had brought me nothing but trouble, so I had no interest in finding a new one.”

“Try having Robert as a brother, if you want trouble.” He said without so much as a smile. He was deadly serious.

“My condolences.” She raised her glass. She excused herself as the band leader gave her a signal. As if on cue, Sansa appeared before him.

“Stannis,” she raised an eyebrow.

“Sansa,” he offered his hand.

They walked over to the dance floor without another word.

She was wearing white this time. Her exposed shoulders gave way to short, bell-shaped sleeves and opera gloves made of pearly satin; her long skirts swished satisfyingly as they twirled around the room. He took the time to admire how much her dancing had improved in the short time she had been at King’s Landing; and he was most certainly admiring her form and not her neck, exposed by the hair piled on top of her head, nor the way the rope of pearls that “Steffon Storm” had given her for Christmas was wrapped around her throat.

He bowed to Sansa at the end of the dance and watched as she took Tommen's proffered arm. He was slightly bemused to find Mrs Khal-Targaryen waiting for him as he walked away, and not Myrcella. She looked... Amused. Great. If the sight of him dancing with Sansa was so laughable,
then Myrcella's scheme to have her best friend as an aunt was doomed to failure! Not that he wanted to marry. Ever.

“So. Perhaps a family might be on the cards for you, after all?” She pronounced archly.

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said sharply. “I am merely keeping an eye on her for her guardian.”

“Well, you can't deny that you are certainly keeping a close eye.”

“I neither see why you care, nor why its your business,” he ground through his teeth. That seemed to invigorate her further.

“I happen to rather like you Mr Baratheon. I also happen to think that you're rather miserable, and I personally prefer that my friends are happy.”

“Friends?” He echoed incredulously. They had spent weeks re-negotiating a contract based on his idiot brother and her damned injured pride! If that was how she made friends, he would hate see how her courtship with her husband began.

“Yes,” she replied mildly. “And it's rather painful to see a friend suffer so needlessly.”

“You're bold. I'll give you that. But I'll thank you not to interfere in my affairs.”

“No, but you can thank me later” she said airily as she spotted Sansa and Myrcella coming over. He barely had time to utter a noise of disbelief before they were upon him.

“Uncle, who's this?” Myrcella asked. Stannis sighed.

“Mrs Khal-Targaryen -”

“Please. Call me Daenerys,” the lady in question interrupted. “We're friends now.”

*Daenerys Khal-Targaryen, meet my niece – Myrcella Baratheon – and her friend – Sansa Stark. They are both in their second year at Argalia Ladies' College. Sansa, Myrcella – meet the head of the Dragon Mining Corporation.” He finished reluctantly.

Myrcella's eyes went as wide as saucers:

“Ohmygosh, I love what you've done to revolutionise the company structure in such a short space of time!” She gushed. “It was so brave to completely overhaul your sourcing and employment process unilaterally like you did.”

“I wasn't aware that was a matter of public knowledge outside of the business pages.” Daenerys cocked her head to the side in inquiry.

“It isn't. Myrcella is an avid reader of the business pages herself; I hear she also topped her economics class before the Sevenmas break.” Stannis interjected, aware that Myrcella's best chances at finding a mentor lay with this woman. Even if she was an insufferable meddler.

“Really?” Daenerys raised an eyebrow. “Now that is impressive.”

Myrcella blushed furiously. Stannis became intensely aware that at some point in the conversation,
Sansa had placed her arm through his. She smiled up at him in greeting. He patted her hand and let go of her arm. He ignored her crestfallen face. It wouldn't do for people to say they were in love. (Anymore than they were already, at any route).

“Not so impressive,” he was aware of his niece babbling slightly. “I had to work very, very hard and I was up all night getting some assignments done because rehearsals were eating up so much of my time.”

“You were in a play at the same time?” A small amount of admiration bled through into the question and Myrcella blushed even more.

“Just a small role in Bael the Bard. It's not like I ran front of house or anything.”

“Nonsense, my dear girl. I have learned that it is important to have something to do away from business, otherwise you will go insane. I myself am a patron of the Westerosi National Theatre Company. Sadly I'm not a talented actress myself, but it's rather nice to be able to go and watch a play in my box whenever I want.”

“You have a box!” Sansa exclaimed.

“Why yes. I do. One of the perks of being a patron, I suppose. You really must go; it a beautiful building – if nothing else.”

“You must get the most marvellous view of everything! I've never gone to a real theatre before, do you think there's time to go before we leave?” She asked Myrcella enthusiastically.

“There are so many things that you've never done before that I sometimes wonder if you grew up in a shack up a mountain!” Myrcella laughed.

Sansa's smile grew strangely hollow. He wondered if anyone else noticed.

“Something like that,” she replied lightly, Stannis wondered how much she still feared her friends discovering the truth. His niece seemed to know that she'd stepped on some kind of land mine, but was damned if she knew the nature of it. As though sensing a tectonic shift in the conversation, Daenerys blithely drew attention away from the momentary awkwardness:

“It's probably slightly too late to book for this season. However Catelyn Tully will be headlining Florian and Jonquil in March...” The (marginally) older woman tapped her chin thoughtfully. “I'll tell you what, why don't you girls come down for the day some weekend in March and see the show from my box? I probably shan't be able to join you for the performance, I like to see Rhaego when I can,” she explained. “However, we should be able to get a table at Belwas' for later; it's so rare that one meets another businesswoman, I should definitely like to speak further with you.” She patted Myrcella on the hand. Stannis thought that his niece might faint. “However, I don't suppose Araglia will let you out for the day unchaperoned...”

Stannis saw exactly where this was going. All he needed to do was say he wouldn't be free. He was booked every single day of March. And April. Renly could -

Daenerys clicked her fingers, as though coming to a conclusion:
“Ah! Stannis! Surely you wouldn't object to escorting these lovely ladies in my absence?”

“Please Uncle Stannis... It would be such a fascinating experience.” Myrcella simultaneously begged and threatened. Stannis got the message.

“Well, but surely you want to bring your friend Miss Tyrell along as well?”

“Thank you Uncle Stannis!” He was bemused to find Myrcella had launched herself into his arms. He froze before giving her an awkward pat on the back.

“Yes. Um. Well...” He scowled at Daenerys' smugly triumphant face over her shoulder. However his harsh expression melted away when he saw Sansa. Sweet Sansa looking so cautiously hopeful and happy, as though happiness were a flickering candle she held in her hands. She smiled at him. His lips twitched into an approximation of the same.

“A few minutes to midnight found Stannis on the balcony, tired and feeling somewhat belligerent. He had no clue as to how he had found himself absorbed into the Targaryen girl's court, but somehow it was so. A group seemed to follow her wherever she went, as though under a spell; all he knew was that he had been swept into it's slipstream along with his niece. And Sansa. At least becoming part of the group had allowed him to chat a little with Sansa. Even if she did keep getting whisked away to dance and converse with others.

Having exceeded his quota of sociability for the week, Stannis found himself in dire need of some alone time – hence the balcony. It was so calm and peaceful out here, if a little chilly. It was a pity that his thoughts weren't as calm as the night.

He could never. He should never. He was her guardian. He didn't know who he was, not really! And yet he felt like a better version of himself with her – surely Steffon Storm was separate..? He hardened his heart. No. No matter how fascinated he was by her, he couldn't pursue this infatuation further. It would be the most unconsciable abuse of power. Having just come to this resolution, Sansa herself stumbled through the French windows – as though sent by the Gods to test his willpower She started.

“Oh thank the Gods it's you!” She exclaimed as she joined him by the railing. “Everyone appears to be arranging themselves for some nonsesne involving kissing. I thought it best to make myself scarce.” He noticed that her glove was rumpled down her arm, as though someone had tried to grab her. He bristled before calming himself. She had clearly escaped unharmed. He would not be doing her any favours by exploding. It wasn't his business, anyway.

“Oh, I had no idea. I thought it might have been Dany's idea of fun.” She looked out over the nightscape. He snorted.
“It does seem like something she might do, doesn't it?” He agreed.

“All the same. I'm very grateful to her. It's been a wonderful party and I'm looking forward to seeing a real play with proper actors in a real theatre.” Even in profile, her glee was evident. “Someone was telling me back there that Catelyn Tully is considered the finest actress of her generation.”

“So they say.” He'd never seen the appeal himself.

“You know, sometimes I look at myself and I wonder at my luck. How lucky I am to be alive, how lucky I am to have the friends and opportunities I do. It could all have been so different...” She trailed off and tilted her head up to look at the moon, drinking in its rays. She hypnotised him by merely being in his very presence. Stannis wondered if there was any use in fighting anymore? Perhaps he should just embrace it, so he might at least be in some semblance of control...

“You're a very unique young lady, Sansa. Few appreciate what they have until it is too late.”

“So I hear,” she muttered. Regret must have seemed so foreign to her who had so little until recently.

The voices of the other partygoers interrupted their individual musings:

“Five... Four... THREE... TWO... ONE! HAPPY NEW YEAR!” Through the window they could see couples throwing themselves at each other; Stannis could see Daenerys in a very improper pose with her husband. He heard Sansa giggle.

“I adore people as a species,” she declared. “But I don't think that I could ever hope to understand them.”

“I detest them as a whole, and I'm not sure I want to!” He retorted with a half-smile quirking up.

She laughed. And a dangerous impulse ceased him, one which he was surely likely to regret on the morrow. But maybe, just maybe...

“Having said that...” He took Sansa's hand, and slowly rolled the glove down her arm, She watched, transfixed, as he pulled each finger and eventually tugged the entire glove off her hand. He deposited the garment on the railing, without letting go of her bare hand. He locked eyes with her. He wished the light were a little better, so that he might see their colour properly. No matter... He brought the bare back of her hand up to his lips without looking away. “Happy New Year. Sansa.” He said in a low voice.

He let go of her hand and stepped back. Her face was unreadable. He bowed and made an exit into the ballroom.

Circaea means “fascination” in the language of flowers. Perhaps he had been telling the truth back in the summer, when he had sent her flowers carrying twin messages of enchantment and fascination. All he knew now was that it had surpassed that a long time ago. Into what - he wouldn't say.
Stannis was certainly interested in what she would have to say to “Daddy,” when he went back to the office. He was equally interested in what his own conscience might have to say in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Stannis, Stannis, Stannis... Tsk tsk, you naughty boy...
Peach Blossom

Chapter Summary

A shout out to fans of The Grand Budapest Hotel, Phantom of the Opera, and Molière. The phrase “ce n'est pas la faute de ceux qui flattent, mais de ceux qui veulent être flattés,” is a quote of the latter which translates roughly as: "It's not the fault of those who flatter, but of those who wish to be flattered."

For reasons that have *absolutely nothing to do with hunger* I decided that Mereenese cuisine was basically Malaysian.

The Dornish Rebellion is entirely my own invention, but it very much strikes me as something Dorne would try and do at some point.

Blackwater Jumbles are based on a kind of biscuit called Bosworth Jumbles, the recipe for which was reputedly torn from the cold dead fingers of Richard III's cook after the battle of Bosworth.

This is a very long chapter, hopefully it will make up for how long it has been since my last update!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3: Peach Blossom

Stannis didn't think that he had ever been more frustrated in his entire life. Looking through all of the letters that she had sent to him over the Sevenmas period, not one made mention of what happened on Daenerys Targaryen's balcony on New Year's Eve. Not. One. Solitary. Word. She had never kept anything from him before, not as Steffon Storm.

… All in all, it was the most magnificent party! I don't think I've ever seen the year in in such style before, nor shall I ever again. Nor do I think that any party will end with me being invited to see a performance from the finest actress in Westeros in the box of the richest woman in Westeros!

Yours (dancing the night away),

Sansa Stark.
P.S. I realised something today, as I passed a mirror and caught myself smiling, after we got back from the ball: I'm pretty, Daddy. I never realised that before. (It was a sad world when Cinderella didn't realise that she was the belle of the ball)

Her letter from Sevenmas day itself was definitely addressed towards Steffon Storm and had very little to do with Stannis Baratheon.

… Thank you so much for my lovely pearls, Daddy! Myrcella declared that she had never seen a finer necklace of pearls in her life; I'm not sure if that's true, but the lie is appreciated all the same. (He was more than a little dismayed that his sweet Sansa was so cynical. Wait, His?) Mrs Baratheon made some very odd comments when she heard that they were from my Daddy. I rather wonder what she was getting at. (His face reddened. Oh didn't he know all too well what she was getting at!)

I get the impression that Myrcella's family is what one might call “dysfunctional.” (Oh, if only she knew...) Her father seems to be rarely here, and when he is he seems to be talking constantly of where else he would rather be and with whom. (That certainly sounded like Robert; the number of times that he had bewailed the absence of Ned Wolfe must be in the thousands by now) This makes Myrcella's mother twist her mouth in a most unpleasant manner and pour (yet another) drink. You don't drink, do you Daddy? (He suddenly felt inexplicably proud of himself for a decision that he had made many years ago) We learned about it in first year and it does the most terrible things to your liver! Of course, the odd drink is apparently fine – but I think that the only times I've seen Mrs Baratheon without a glass or decanter nearby has been when we are travelling to or from somewhere. (A wry half-smile suddenly bloomed across his mouth) I feel terrifically rude for writing so ill of my hosts, but it is the truth. (Good girl) And it's not as if you are intimately acquainted with them. (Ah well, yes. About that...)

But still very few notes about himself. Of course, there would be the odd appearance of “Master Stannie” at a party, but nothing which gave away how she felt towards him. Although if Stannis had been paying attention he would have noticed that any teasing references to “Master Stannie” gradually disappeared in favour of “Stannis;” and that whilst “Stannis” appearances were brief, they were frequent. It would take him over a year to realise this. It would take him even longer to recognise the lack of her usual colourful commentary and come to the conclusion that there were some things that a young woman simply did not tell her guardian.

With Sansa back at Argalia, life continued much as it had before for Stannis in King's Landing. He slid back into his hard-working solitude like an old suit. Sadly, it was a bad fit these days; as if he had grown or gained spiritual weight over the festive period. He found himself seeking out people more. He took great pains to talk to Davos about things other than work; he hadn't known that his secretary had named one of his children after him. Apparently giving a convicted thief a second chance had meant the world to him and his wife, especially as it came at a time that it had looked as
though he and Marya might have to give up the two children that they had already had for their own good.

The conversation had left Stannis more than a little shaken. He had been a trustee of the Daemon Blackfyre Home for Orphans and Foundlings for years, but he had never once thought about the parents. He had taken it for granted that they were dead, that was the “orphan” part – after all; but what of the foundlings? He knew that some surrendered their children up to the Home willingly, turning up in person to give up their child – he had often heard Mrs Arryn complaining of the irresponsible poor having children they could ill afford. Then there were those who had been quite literally abandoned on the doorstep of the Home, or at Septs, or police station doors. How desperate does one have to be to risk that the child might die of exposure before they are found? That the Daemon Blackfyre Home is preferable to the life that their poor parent could provide? Sansa often referred to herself as an orphan, but he wondered just how true that was. She could have a real family out there.

When he had formally taken guardianship of Sansa Miss Mordane had given him her file; now for the first time, he found himself opening it.

Name: Sansa Stark  Sex: Female  Hair: Red  Eyes: Blue

Age: Est. 4 months, probably born between mid and late July

Notes: Child is a little under-weight, but otherwise conspicuously well-cared for. Was found in a basket on the doorstep of Edmyn’s Sept wrapped in a knitted white wool blanket with a wolf/dog design on it. Was discovered by Brother Meribald in the wee hours of the morning, who in turn called us. Child has formally been named Sansa Stark and accepted into the Daemon Blackfyre Home. It is unknown if the child has been blessed in the light of the Seven yet, so the event will take place as soon as is practically possible with myself standing for godmother.

Signed,

Susan. C. Mordane

Matron of the Daemon Blackyre Home for Orphans and Foundlings

The words “conspicuously well-cared for” rang through his mind like the ominous tolling of bells. They had loved her. Whoever they were, they had loved her. They had loved her and had been forced to give her up. He didn't know if he wanted to throw up or cry.
His dreams were plagued by a red-haired woman with no face. He watched her place a basket on the steps of a Sept and struggle to turn from her sleeping daughter; her muffled sobs echoed through the dark early morning streets as she hurried away. He watched this play out at least three times, before he realised that he could intervene. He stepped out and caught her as she rushed from the Sept. A pair of astonishingly blue eyes met his before he woke up.

Dear Daddy,

Three tickets for Florian and Jonquil arrived from Dany today and I think I might faint from the excitement of it all! A proper play in a proper theatre, and one of my favourite plays at that! Margaery doesn’t understand why I’m quite so excited and Myrcella is more interested in seeing Dany again, but Willas understands. (What?) He says he’s seen Catelyn Tully before (in The Tragedy of Harrenhal) and that she is quite worth the excitement on her own. (What was the boy doing there?)

Willas Tyrell came today on a visit from Oldtown, to see Margaery. She said we may as well come along since we were all free. (How convenient) We met him outside of the college for a daytrip out into the countryside in his car. We took a picnic, but we had to eat it in the car – since it’s still February after all! (What kind of imbecile tries to picnic at the tail end of winter?) Willas said it felt as though we were in a portable greenhouse. (Sorry, was that meant to be witty?) It was a perfectly pleasant day – if a little chilly.

Yours,

Sansa Stark

Dear Myrcella,

I have the sudden urge to visit you at Argalia in order to finalise travel arrangements for March. Chalk it up to my apparent eccentricities. If you would be so kind as to supply tea, sandwiches and the presence of Misses Stark and Tyrell, I am sure that I can bring a cake to the proceedings.

I will write to your dorm mistress to procure permission, if you are amenable to the idea.
Dear Daddy,

Stannis, that's Myrcella's desirable uncle, dropped in on us for a visit today. I confess we had left tidying the living area a little late; so Myrcella was perfectly vexed when Stannis turned up ten minutes early. I said she really ought to have known that would happen, as that was so like him to do that. She responded by banishing us both to the kitchen to get sandwiches. That is, Stannis and I were banished. Together.

When he had asked for afternoon tea, he had assumed that it would be a well-managed, genteel affair. Weren't women supposed to be good at these kinds of things? Instead he found things in a state of refined chaos. No sooner had he knocked on the door, Myrcella had taken the Mendl's cake box from his hands, barked something about needing time to tidy up and sandwiches and practically pushed Sansa out of the door.

“Um... I think she needs a little time to finish up in there. Shall we go down and cut some sandwiches?” She blushed. No doubt she was embarrassed for her friend.

“Let’s.” He agreed.

...He helped me make brown bread Swiss cheese sandwiches; I say “help” but he seemed to eat as many as he made, citing his missed lunch on the train down. I told him that he was spoiling his afternoon tea...

“It is my right as a self-governing adult to ruin a meal if I want to,” he pointed out as he took a bite out of the dainty bread and cheese triangle in his hand.

“And with that statement you have never sounded more childish to me!” Sansa laughed as she spread more butter.

“You know, I was never very good at being childish when I was younger.” He said ruefully. “Even before our parents died, I was on the solemn side. Robert was the boisterous one, and I'm fairly sure that Renly inherited all the charm.” He only sounded a little bitter.

She stopped spreading. She turned to him, her eyes wide:
“You're an orphan too?”

This was it. This was his chance to tell her that he was Steffon Storm. That she wasn't alone in the world – not if he could help it. His courage failed him.

“Yes. Yes I am. Myrcella tells me that you have a guardian.” He might not have been lying, per se – but the omission of the truth stuck in his gullet.

“Yes... Mr Steffon Storm. I... Never knew my parents. They died when I was very young.” She was suddenly very busy making sandwiches again. “Mr Storm is a very kind man. I owe him a lot.”

“I'm sure he doesn't see it as a debt.”

… It felt so awful, not telling Stannis the truth. He has never been anything but truthful, decent and kind with me; but I can't take the risk. Would he look at me differently if he knew about the Daemon Blackfyre Home? I am certain that he wouldn't hate me on principle, but he might hate me for lying. Or worse, he might pity me. I might never be able to make him see “Sansa Stark – young lady and aspirant writer” ever again; he might look at me and be blinded by gingham smocks, corn mush and the stigma of the poor box...

“I was fourteen when my parents died.” Stannis offered. “They went out sailing on our yacht and the weather turned suddenly. It looked as though they were going to make it back into port, but...” He swallowed. “There was a sudden wave and they were dashed upon the rocks. My brothers and I were watching.”

“That's horrible!” Her hands flew up to her mouth.

“Yes.” There was no denying that. “It took me nearly a year to get over seeing it and longer to stomach the fact that they were gone.” Her eyes were wide with compassion and unshed tears he felt he didn't deserve. “Don't be sad for me, Sansa. I am... Content that I knew them at all. I have a gallery of memories to fall back on, - of them and all the people who helped me after.”

“The Cressens...” She whispered. “They said that you spent a long time there when you were fourteen.”

“Ah yes, they told me that you had come to stay for the summer.” He lied through his teeth. “Tell me, do they still keep Blackwater Jumbles in the blue jar on the shelf?”

She smiled. He infinitely preferred that she smiled for his sake, rather than shedding tears for him.

… I felt like an horrific human being. I made a joke about sinking ships at Sevenmas to him – he must have thought me horribly insensitive! I wouldn't have blamed him if he had boxed my ears, only he is far too well-bred. Oh, Daddy I really must learn to watch my mouth!
After that we went back upstairs, gossiping all the way like old women about Proudwing Farm. He was terrifically amused that so little had changed, even if he did groan upon finding out that “Master Stannie” was now public knowledge. We had to stop gossiping once tea was poured, because Margaery and Myrcella couldn’t join in and it would have been awful manners to continue regardless.

We finalised the travel and accommodation arrangements for Florian and Jonquil, but to be perfectly honest I was far more interested in the glorious cake that Stannis had brought with him! According to Margaery, Mendl's is a patisserie of some renown and I can’t say that I'm surprised. It was layers of fluffy lemon sponge with light vanilla icing and lemon curd, and the most attractive swirling design in yellow icing on top of the white. It was almost a shame to eat it. Almost.

Stannis remembered the audible hum of pleasure that had come from her as she had taken her first bite from her slice. It made asking Renly for recommendations worth it.

“I hear that their Courtisanes au Chocolat are really quite something,” Miss Tyrell interrupted his train of thought. She was looking at him with that unnervingly cat-like stare. “Although I would have thought that you were a little old to be indulging in sweet things, Mr Baratheon.” She said pointedly. Ah yes. She who had a stake in seeing Willas triumph. Age difference was a low blow, even if it was prettily put in a cryptic manner.

“Well I’ve never liked sweets before, but I'm told that taste refines with age.” He replied carefully.

“It's not really taste as such as long as one is indiscriminate.” She said before sipping from her teacup. He narrowed his eyes: Who did she take him for? Robert?

“It is if I like a rare dessert, rather than sugary things as a whole. I leave that to the young.” Check. “I've rather found that age makes me rather more appreciative of certain... Flavours that a younger man might take for granted.” Checkmate.

Miss Tyrell hummed and seamlessly inserted herself into Sansa and Myrcella's dialogue on basketball team politics. Stannis took this as a minor victory.

… It was such a nice afternoon that it really was a shame when Stannis had to leave. If only we could figured out some way of smuggling him out much later! But March is only next month, and I am so looking forward to our trip together.

Yours,

Sansa Stark.
He was ridiculously nervous. Davos said that he was being a fool, but then Davos always said that when he needed to. Why should the arrival of three teenage girls in the city make him nervous? Scratch that. Why shouldn’t it make him nervous? He was so skittish that his own secretary eventually banished him from the office to go home and get changed.

He picked up the nosegays that he had got for each young lady, went home and changed into white-tie and tails before hailing a taxi to pick up his charges from the Baratheon's King's Landing residence. As the bundled into the car, he handed each excited woman their flowers to do with as they pleased. To Margaery, decked in lilac, he gave a sprig of white yarrow for war, and a fuchsia ragged robin for wit (Myrcella raised her eyebrows). To his niece, dressed in dark blue, he gave a red primrose for an unpatronising acknowledgement of her merit, with a delicate white and pink pencilled geranium for her ingenuity. She took her flowers with a quiet thank you and a small, but unmistakeable smile of pride. Sansa wore her white gown and gloves from New Year with Steffon Storm's pearls, and Stannis found her just as captivating at that moment as she had been then, coat or no.

He coughed and gathered himself enough to gruffly present her with white violets (for candour) tied with a sprig of peach blossom, which according to the small book that once belonged to his mother signified... Well. Apparently it meant “I am your captive.” If he could not yet say the truth aloud, he would try and convey it in other ways. She blushed prettily upon receiving the gift and twisted it into the side of her bun. If he noticed her touch it at points during in the evening he would put it down to her checking that it hadn't fallen out; but in his heart of hearts a flicker of something like hope began to burn.

Box five of the Westerosi National Theatre was exceptionally well-situated. One had a perfect view of the stage and the main theatre as a whole. If propriety and decorum hadn't dictated otherwise, he could have watched Sansa all evening. She looked here, there and everywhere with small, bird-like movements – the widest smile that he had ever seen plastered across her face. She alternated between admiration of the the theatre, talking to her friends and himself in excited tones, and looking through one of the programmes that Stannis had bought from the usher. Stannis himself was rather looking forward to hearing what she made of it all much later.

He snapped his attention to the stage as the lights darkened and the curtain rose. He though Florian and his friend were nothing to write home about, but then the first Jonquil scene happened. Six women in shifts sat on the fake rocks already on stage as lengths of gauzy blue and green material were waved gently up and down to signify a bathing pool. He took vague note of Jonquil's red hair, but he recalled that Catelyn Tully was famous for it. It was only when Jonquil's sisters had run off screaming, having realised that they were being spied on, that she herself stepped to the front of the
stage (ostensibly wading in the shallows).

“You are no knight.” She declared boldly. “I know you. You are Florian the Fool.” There was something in the way that she held herself...

“I am, my lady, as great a fool as ever lived – and as great a knight too.” Florian knelt in the scarves.

“A fool and a knight?” The great lady scoffed. “I have never heard of such a thing.” She still looked so familiar...

“Sweet lady all men are fools, and all men are knights, where women are concerned.”

Catelyn Tully replied with a mocking, half-smile and suddenly Stannis knew. He looked at Sansa, and then returned his eyes to the stage. Turn back the clock twenty years and (barring some minor differences) there would be two Sansas in the room. Or should that be two Catelyns?

******************************************************************************

The fact that Catelyn Tully was a dead ringer for Sansa refused to be forgotten throughout the entirety of the play. It niggled at Stannis' mind like an insistent maggot. Of course it could just be a coincidence... But how likely was that? Maybe Ms Tully had a wayward brother or... Or it was her that had been wayward. He did some quick calculations. Sansa would have been amongst the first children born after peace was made with the Dornish, about twenty years ago-ish. What if Sansa had been the result of a war time affair, a relationship that was deemed... Inadvisable once peace had come and passions had cooled. Perhaps the father had died..?

Sansa herself seemed blithely unaware of anything odd as he watched her from the corner of his eye. She had the appearance of being utterly enthralled the performance; the mummery was made magic through her eyes. And so Stannis didn't think about the whys are wherefores of her first four months until the curtain call.

He looked at Catelyn Tully's radiant smile as she curteyed. If she wasn't related to Sansa in some way, then he was Baelor the Blessed. But, the mystery of Sansa's parentage would have to wait for a while; first there was dinner to survive.

******************************************************************************

True to her word, Daenerys had secured a table at Belwas', a Mereenese-style restaurant that was as sumptuous as it was unusual and all the rage at King's Landing, although Stannis rather thought that that might be down to the patronage of Daenerys herself. Their hostess was waiting at the table for them.
“Stannis, my friend!” She greeted him with outstretched arms. She pecked him on the cheeks before he had a chance to object to such a thing. “Myrcella, Sansa – my dears! Come here.” She pulled them into her all-encompassing embrace. If Stannis wasn't mistaken he saw Myrcella blush pink with pleasure before straightening the flowers that she had pinned to her front. “Now you simply must introduce me to your lovely friend here.”

“Daenerys Khal-Targaryen, Margaery Tyrell.” Myrcella said promptly – years of hosting parties kicking in. “Margaery's family produce wine in the reach. Daenerys is head of the Dragon Mining Corporation.”

Stannis wouldn't have noticed the smooth way in which Daenerys manoeuvred his niece and her friend into sitting by her, if he hadn't suddenly noticed that he was sat opposite Sansa. He caught his self-proclaimed “friend” smirking at him from the corner of his eye. He turned to glare at her. She actually giggled before turning to ask Miss Tyrell about her brothers. He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes and gave Sansa his full attention.

“So. What did you think of the play?” He asked her.

“I think it was one of the most marvellous things that I've seen in my life so far. I truly forgot myself.” She admitted.

“What did you think of Catelyn Tully?” He asked, wondering if she was at all aware of the resemblance.

“Oh, I think that she was the best thing of all! I never thought that she was acting for one second, it all just seemed so real for her in that moment. As though her face was a canvas and emotions were her paint.” She looked horrified. “Sorry, you must think me horrifically pretentious. That's kind of thing I should normally write in a letter, not say aloud!”

“Sansa.” He cut her off before she could prattle on any further. “I've known you for a while now, yes?”

“Yes.?” She replied hesitantly, as though unsure of where this was going.

“If I thought your manner of speaking was anything less than perfectly suited to you, do you think that I am enough of a crochety eccentric to have said something by now?” Her quiet smirk was all the reply he needed. “Good. Now never attempt to censor yourself in front of me, or anyone else, ever again. Anyone who doesn't like what you have to say and how you say it isn't worth a solid silver second of your time.”

She smiled and played with the flowers in her hair again.

“Have you ever considered writing, Stannis?” She asked with an impish sort of grin playing about her features. “Because you have quite a way with words when you want to.”
… I'm not sure you I could even name half of what I had to eat that night, but I am sure that I wish to try it all again! Everything was so fragrant and highly flavoured! (If Stannis was lucky, he might get to take her back there one day) I think my favourite was a spiced, creamy chicken stew of some kind called a Laksaar/Laksa/Laksar (??!), but I still loved it all. It was a perfect end to a perfect evening. Dany apologised to me at the end of the night for not spending as much time speaking to me as she might; but I told her that it was perfectly fine, since Stannis and I are well-acquainted. 

Friends, even – I dare say. (Is that what they were?)

Is it presumptuous of me to believe that? I mean, I'm a no-name of no birth from nowhere in particular and he's... A Baratheon. The best one of the entire bunch, but a Baratheon nonetheless. (He failed to see what that had to do with anything) He can't be seen in public with anyone, willy-nilly. Even as a friend. And what if his family hire a detective to find out all about me, because they don't trust my intentions? (Why wouldn't they trust a friend's intentions? Actually, it sounded like the kind of poisonous behaviour his sister-in-law would indulge in) They will surely hate me. Mrs Baratheon will despise me because I am poor and an orphaned nobody, Myrcella will hate me for lying to her for so long and being a fraud and Stannis... Well. Stannis must never know, Daddy. I couldn't bear for him to find out.

“But I know!” He wanted to scream. “I know everything!” He wanted her to know that it changed nothing between them. Friend, lover, guide or guardian he would be anything she wanted him to be to her, and the Seven-be-damned Daemon Blackfyre Home would have no say in the matter. But he could say nothing without revealing both his hand and his heart.

Phew! Sorry about that! We women ought to be allowed our moments of hysteria from time to time; actually men should be too. They might be happier for it. Are you an expressive sort of person, my Daddy-Long-Legs? (He snorted) I hear it's very good for you. Is that why Miss Mordane described you as “eccentric”? Was it not enough that you save orphan girls, but that you have the gall to be happy about it too? I hope you're happy about it, Daddy, because I am.

Yours,

Sansa

P.S. I really can't stress how much you ought to see a Catelyn Tully play if you can, she was marvellous!

Was he happy that he had plucked this impertinent young woman from an uncertain future and dropped her into his life? Yes. In fact, he wasn't sure if he could remember anything making him happier.
Life, as ever, had the annoying habit of carrying on regardless. As much as Stannis would have loved to have dedicated his time to looking into Catelyn Tully's background, or making unplanned visits to Argalia, Baratheon Shipping Co. was beginning to require an awful lot of time and attention. Really, one of these days he was going to have to persuade one of his brothers to become more active in the business. Or he could draft in Myrcella. He wondered if threatening to promote Myrcella over him would make Robert sit up and listen.

Robert... He had indulged Robert too long, he could see that. His older brother had needed time to recover after the war, time to heal physically and emotionally, and Stannis had been glad to grant him that time. Stannis himself had been too young to fight at the beginning of the war and it was almost over by the time he was of age. Besides, shipping was a protected occupation – an excuse that Robert could have used if he wished to avoid conscription, but no. Killing rebellious Dornishmen when called upon to do so was apparently the honourable thing to do. Robert had entered the war as an officer, along with his best friend from his days at the Vale Academy, and had treated the entire enterprise as a game. Until he came back.

When Robert came back, he was hollow. Ned Wolfe had been among the last to die before the armistice had been signed, and his sister Lyanna (Robert's fiancee) had died of Lyseni Influenza not long afterwards. There seemed to be a gaping void in Robert that could only be filled by drink and women – Stannis often wondered if that self-same void would exist if he or Cersei were to die.

Stannis had hoped that his older brother might become more dutiful and upstanding in the face of marriage and children. But his children's blonde hair seemed to drive him further into his cups, and Cersei's air of betrayed scorn sent him running into the arms of every woman with dark hair that could stomach being called “Lyanna” in bed. Stannis didn't exactly like his sister-in-law, but he could sympathise. She had thought she was marrying a charismatic, handsome shipping king; but she ended up with a cheating drunkard in love with a ghost. She was still a tipsy harridan at best, though.

Sansa's cares remained far, far removed from the fallout of the past. Her letters seemed to look firmly towards the present and the future – and Stannis would be lying if he said that he didn't appreciate that.

… Margaery, Myrcella and I went into town today. Myrcella needed a new hat for some reason, and I found myself quite stunned by the shop. Beautiful, colourful hats adorned the walls like so many exotic birds on so many branches; I could quite imagine myself in an exotic forest of some kind. Still, I had no clue that so many kinds of hats existed; I only own two which I wear with everything, a summer hat and a winter one. Margaery looked at me as though I had renounced the Seven in favour of R'hllor when I said that!...
Stannis had enclosed a postal order for twenty dragons with a note from Davos instructing her to spend it on hats after reading that.

Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

My comments in my last letter weren't a hint! Your generosity is very much appreciated, but I am perfectly content with my two hats. Similarly, I have every intention of paying you back almost every penny that you spent on my tuition and board when I become a published author – so I'll thank you not to add to my debt!

I have enclosed your postal order in this letter along with a photo that we had taken of all three of us whilst we were in town the other day. I am the one standing up on the left trying to look dignified and (failing miserably), Myrcella is the blonde one sitting down, and Margaery is the one on the right who is succeeding at looking dignified.

Yours,

Sansa the Happily Hatless Heathen

The photo mollified his ruffled sense of outrage (Sansa would only pay him back when all Seven Hells froze over). It was black and white and the size of a large-ish postcard. Myrcella looked like a Queen sitting down in her (presumably) new hat in the photographer's studio; Miss Tyrell certainly looked dignified, but there was a certain, scheming light in her eyes (but then again, he might have been biased); Sansa had a certain air of mischief about her, a smile that refused to die at the corner of her lips. Fine. He would accept the return of the postal order. But he was keeping the photo, - even if she asked for it back.

……………………………………………………………………………………………

… Willas sent me an Oldtown banner today and I have no idea why. (Stannis frowned) I don't go to Oldtown, nor do I feel any particular ancestral tug in its direction. I don't know what I should do with it either. It's huge. Margaery and Myrcella refuse to have it in the living area on the grounds that it clashes horribly with our current colour scheme in there, and I'm not sure if I want it dominating my bedroom. Would it be terribly disrespectful to make it into a dressing gown? (What?) Mine shrank last week and the banner is made from good quality felt, it would be a shame to waste it. Thoughts? (Oh so many of them, and each and every one was underscored by the uneasy dislike of having a gift of the Tyrell boy's on her skin)
We've been studying George Etheridge's “Man of Mode” in 17th Century Literature. It's not as profound as Shakespeare, or as tragic as Silverprince, or as universal as Rayder, but it has a few things to recommend it. For one thing, it is very funny. The other is a line which makes me think of one of Myrcella's Lannister uncles. Tyrion? (I only met him the once, he was perfectly charming until his sister started an argument with him). “There's truth in ale and history.” (He had snorted at that. Tyrion certainly knew his way around a tankard) I can't quite get it out of my head. I haven't much experience with ale, but I know there is much truth to be found in history. An experiment for another day, perhaps...

Over. His. Dead. Body would Sansa experiment with ale anywhere near Tyrion “Seven Whores a Week” Lannister.

Spring came around and Stannis finally had the time to make some tentative enquiries as to where Catelyn Tully had been around about the time of Sansa's enrollment into the Daemon Blackfyre Home. So far, all he had managed to glean from old newspaper reports was that she had started touring with the Harrenhal Players in the January immediately afterwards. There was no mention of any husband or child anywhere, but he supposed that there wouldn't be. Then again, he couldn't find any mention of what she had been up during the previous two years either. That would be ideal window to disappear from the public eye to have an illegitimate child. If she had had one, that is.

He felt that he had really hit paydirt when he found an old profile of her in a ladies' magazine from five years' previous. “Like so many who went to war during The Dornish Rebellion, her sweetheart never came back. Miss Tully has been known to swear repeatedly that she will dedicate her life to her art and forswear love, making her somewhat of a poster-child for the generation of “spare women” that followed the Rebellion...” It was a step, but it was still pretty far-fetched to leap from having a dead lover to mothering a child.

Sansa's life carried on regardless of any incremental steps Stannis might have made tracking her birth mother down.

… Thought for the day, Daddy, now that I have to do French again: “Ce n'est pas la faute de ceux qui flattent, mais de ceux qui veulent être flattés.”

Second thought for the day: Why does it always look so nice outside when one must force oneself to do grammar revision to make sure that one does not fail French again!

Although in one letter from early April, it appeared as though Stannis’ increasing obsession with finding out something about Sansa’s birth family appeared to have been communicated to the lady herself:
Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

Do you think that I might be a princess lost at birth? That some cruel soul kidnapped me and left me for dead outside a sept, hoping the cold would do what they couldn’t? Perhaps I am secretly the last of the line of the old Kings of Winter from the North, or the lost Lady Paramount of the Riverlands. Maybe I’m an exceptionally pale Dornishwoman? Or maybe I’m a child from northern Spain, (I hear that’s where the pale Spaniards are), or a Celtic sort?

Is it possible that you ever had a little girl, Daddy? And that you lost sight of her somehow? And when you found her again she was an impertinent orphan brat with a pen in her fist? Yet you still put her through college for the love you bore her mother? I confess that some days I pray that is the case. (He sure as Seven Hells didn’t)

One thing’s for sure: I'm certainly not French!)

Yours (wrestling with the subjunctive),

Sansa.

Not too soon afterwards, a thicker envelope than usual arrived from Argalia.

My one and only Daddy-Long-Legs,

I’ve won! I’ve won! I submitted a short story into a story-writing competition that Argalia run every year in Arcadia and I won! No second year has ever won before, it’s usually a final year or a Masters student that gets it. I am now the proud owner of 30 gold dragons (!) and a fair amount of prestige.

Excuse me, I simply have to go and scream.

Yours writerly,
Sansa Stark, Authoress-In-Training

P.S. I've sent you a copy of this month's Arcadia, so that you might see that your money is going to good use.

Stannis didn't stop long enough to note the cover art this time around; he immediately tore open the journal to the contents page before speeding straight to The Lost Child by Sansa Stark. He skipped over the paragraph explaining the award, how good the story was, blah, blah, blah... He would read it and make up his own mind, damnit!

The story this time was about a girl of about nine years-old in an orphanage, (he wondered where she'd got the inspiration for that from). One day the hungry little girl is tasked with cleaning up the pantry; naturally she does what all hungry children do and eats a few biscuits from the jar next to her. The matron notices the crumbs on the disobedient child's smock and boxes the poor unfortunate's ears, and later denounces her as a glutton and a thief in front of her peers before dismissing her from the dinner table in tears. The girl waits until nightfall and runs away, straight into the woods. She grows increasingly lost and hungry, until she stops to sit down by a tree and cries. A beautiful woman appears in the clearing and asks her why she is crying.

"I am hungry, I am lost, and I am alone."

"Why are you any of those things, child?"

"I have no-one to love me. Are you lost too?" The child feels in her pocket and finds a forgotten biscuit from her earlier misadventures. "Here," she offers the woman her only food. "Are you hungry?"

Touched, the woman starts glowing and her clothes change to magical raiment made of dewdrops and dreams.

"Sweet child, I am neither lost nor hungry. I am the Keeper of the Forest, a fae sworn to protect all who dwell here and to judge fair from foul. I judge your heart to be among the fairest I've seen. Tell me, sweet child: Have you a wish?"

The child considers this carefully. After all, it is no small matter to be offered your heart's desire on a platter.

"Would you like riches?" The Keeper of the Forest prompts. "I know that your kind are enamoured of the shining stones of the earth, and that your life might become easier for having them. Or would you like a feast to soothe your hunger? Perhaps a light to show you the way home every time you are lost?"

"No thank you," the child said slowly. "Matron shall surely confiscate any riches I bring home when
she finds me, and I should feel guilty about eating a feast without my friends. A light to show me the path home wouldn't help me, for I have nowhere I wish to truly call home."

“What will you have, then?” The Keeper asked her. The child hesitated.

“If you please: Will you be my mother?”

The Keeper is shocked, but happy – for she has grown attached to this child. She tells the child that she would be honoured to look after and protect her, but that the price for following a fae is high; for a fae must go and do things a normal human cannot. The child affirms that she will pay any price for a family, and for love.

In the morning, the staff from the orphanage find the child's body underneath a tree in the forest, clutching a biscuit. When they return, they find the children sitting down to a wonderful feast full of everything a child could hope to dream of eating. When asked where the feast came from, they say a beautiful lady and her daughter came by and took it out of a magic satchel. They say the daughter wished them farewell and disappeared in front of their eyes into the land of make-believe.

Stannis didn't realise that tears were rolling down his face until he tasted salty water on his lips. How long had it been since he had cried?

Dear Daddy,

I am so perfectly angry right now, that I'm afraid that you shan't find me very good company today. (He felt a little bad for hoping that the Tyrell boy had finally crossed a line, but only a little) Before Politics, Jeyne Westerling had the perfect cheek to tell me that she didn't think that orphanages were really all that bad and that my story was too melodramatic on the subject. I (oh-so-sweetly) enquired just what made her such an expert? She disliked that and said that her father was a trustee of one, and just who did I think I was anyway? “Someone who can speak on the subject with a great deal more authority than you,” I replied coolly before going to take my seat. (He mentally shook his ward by the hand)

I am terrified, Daddy. She might figure out who I am and I only have myself to blame. She might tell everyone and they might all denounce me as a fraud, and take away all their prizes and friendship. (Or they could say nothing and respect the person that they've come to know?) But I couldn't be silent, Daddy – I just couldn't! You see, I did get punished for stealing biscuits when I was hungry and scraping knives in the pantry; I did run away and I did get caught (I only got four miles away). Do you know what my punishment was, Daddy? I was tied to a post outside, like a dog, during every play time for a week. It's in the book at the home, if you want to check. I nearly put that in the
story, but I thought it too unbelievable! (Mordane had better be retiring soon, if not – well...) Frankly I doubt that a trustee-in-waiting like Jeyne would recognise the truth if it danced in front of her.

I went away to basketball practice after writing the above, and I have cooled down considerably now. Nobody looked at me oddly, or accused me of being a charlatan – so I suppose I'm in the clear. I'm not going to scratch it out, because it was honest – if a little dramatically put. And friend of mine told me recently that I should never censor myself, and so voila! Your very own impertinent orphan on paper. (Stannis wasn't sure if he'd ever been prouder of her)

Yours in perfect tranquility (and need of a bath),

Sansa

However, much to his dismay, soon enough Stannis found himself on the receiving end of Sansa’s ire. It began when he sent Sansa the train tickets for Proudwing Farm and instructions to use the time to write a few months earlier that strictly necessary. He didn't want to risk being caught unprepared, like the year before.

… thank you so much, but Margaery has invited me boating in the Riverlands with her family this summer. They have a house there and it sounds perfectly idyllic, I'm sure I could get some writing done there. Please will you let me go?

Yes. He was sure that she would get plenty of writing done with the Tyrell boy flirting with her. The fact that he was planning on going down to Proudwing Farm himself this year was completely irrelevant. Completely. He instructed Davos to send the following note:

Dear Miss Stark,

Mr Storm would appreciate it if you would proceed to Proudwing Farm, as arranged, during the summer holidays and focus on developing your writing skills.

Yours sincerely,

Davos Seaworth,

Secretary to Steffon Storm
He had expected that Sansa would acknowledge the note and then fall quietly into line. Not so, apparently:

Dear Daddy-Long-Legs,

Well, I must say that I was a little surprised to read Mr Seaworth's note informing me that I was “to proceed to Proudwing Farm as arranged.” I appreciate your concern for me and my writing, Daddy, but I really do want to go to the Riverlands this summer! Willas is going to teach me how to paddle a kayak, wouldn't it be marvellous for you to hear about all the ways I'm inevitably going to make a fool of myself?

Please say that I can go, Daddy.

Sansa

Humph. He certainly wasn't going to sanction the possibility that Sansa might drown because the Tyrell boy was too busy trying to canoodle to pay attention to her safety. No. She was still going to Proudwing Farm.

Dear Mr Storm,

I assume by your silence that you do not mean to capitulate in this matter. Might I know what is quite so objectionable about my going to the Riverlands? It's all very well to be concerned about my writing, but it's not as though I can't do that anywhere in the country; surely it would be beneficial for me to spend time in a variety of locations with a variety of people?

Yours,

Sansa Stark

She had a point. A point which he was stubbornly going to ignore. Would a handsome Rose Prince appear in her next story? Besides, he sincerely doubted that much writing would get done with so many distractions about.
Dear Miss Stark,

Mr Storm remains adamant that you should go to Proudwing Farm. You are on no account to go to the Riverlands this summer. If you do so without Mr Storm's permission, your allowance for the remainder of the term may be docked.

Yours sincerely,

Davos Seaworth,
Secretary to Steffon Storm

It was drastic, but for her own good. Besides, if he had to follow through on his threat it would most likely be a purely symbolic amount; but Sansa obviously didn't know that.

Dear Mr Storm,

That was a low blow. You know how much I rely on your money so you use it to bend me to your will. Frankly, I am utterly disgusted with you right now. Although I suppose I must thank you for the lesson; I was a fool to think that I might rely on your unconditional support.

Excuse me, I must now go and inform Margaery that my guardian has emphatically denied my request.

Yours sincerely,

Sansa Stark

P.S. Send my regards to Mr Seaworth. I feel like we have become quite well-acquainted and would otherwise get on tremendously well.

He should have just punched himself in the gut. His actions had had much the same effect and the damage would have been far less long-lasting.
Stannis found having Robert in his office desperately disconcerting. It was odd enough when he turned up at the Baratheon Building at all, never mind when he was sat opposite Stannis in his own territory. He returned to the matter at hand.

“If Myrcella wants to give up her summer to work with the Targaryen woman, I honestly don't see the problem,” he told his older brother with more than a touch of exasperation.

“Why does she want to have anything to do with work, anyway? In my experience women don't earn money, they spend it!”

Stannis stared at his brother for a moment.

“You don't know your daughter particularly well, do you?” Robert reddened.

“Well... No. But isn't it always “like mother, like daughter”? I mean... What would the point even be?”

“I think that “the point” is that your daughter has one of the sharpest minds for business that I have ever seen in a person of her age.” He said slowly. “Let her test her strength.”

“What? So she can become a bitter old spinster when Joff succeeds me?” Robert snorted. “Or are you going to get her to topple her own brother, like you wish you could get rid of me?”

“Robert. If I wanted rid of you, I would have done it years ago.” He said blandly.

Robert stared blankly at him for a moment. He burst out laughing and made his way around the desk to slap Stannis on the back, - much to the latter's annoyance.

“Isn't that the truth! It's lucky for me that you're such a loyal little brother then, isn't it! Hel-lo...” His attention was caught by the photo on the desk. “What do we have here? A photo of dear old Catelyn Tully? I never took you for a fan, Stannie! Oh wait.” He squinted at the photo. “That's Myrcella. And her redhead friend from Sevenmas. The nose isn't right for Catelyn, but what a doppelganger eh? I was a bit on the merry side the few times I saw her at Sevenmas.”

“You knew Catelyn Tully?” The bottom of Stannis' stomach fell out the moment he heard her referred to as “Catelyn” by his womanising brother. Please, no. If there was any justice in the world...


He didn't know if it was the arrogant smirk that did it, or the fact that Sansa hadn't sent a letter in weeks, or the suddenly very real and very frightening possibility that he was in love with his niece, or a combination of all three, but Stannis stood up and held Robert by the lapels and shoved him against the wall.
“Was she one of your lovers back in the day?” Stannis all but snarled.

“What the fuck in Seven Hells does it matter to you? Thought you had a crush on Myrcella's little redhead friend, or have you moved on to a more mature model?” Robert sneered.

“It means everything to me! That little redhead is in all likelihood Catelyn Tully's daughter, I need to know if she's yours too!”

Robert pushed Stannis off and straightened his shirt.

“Catelyn was a good girl, far too good for the likes of me. Sweet and smart and a child of the Faith, through and through; she thoroughly disapproved of me.” Robert looked at the photo on the desk and a particular kind of sadness painted his features. “I might not be a moral man, but even I would never sleep with my best friend's wife.”

“What..?” Realisation dawned on Stannis, even as he said it.

Robert picked up the photo, frame and all and stood by the window. He examined it in the light. Stannis was alarmed to see tears roll down his older brother's face, as he extended a pudgy finger to touch the glass.

“If you're right,” Robert said eventually. “Then this girl is Ned Wolfe's daughter. And I've let her down.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew! I solemnly swear that there will be no more fairy tale-shaped detours next chapter - we won't have time!

Yes, I am aware that it is possible for someone to look after their child but to still be a bad, or emotionally abusive parent. But I feel like Stannis would see care as a symptom
of love in this case, particularly as he is still readjusting his ideas about orphans, foundlings and those that had to give them up. Very few people have cared for Stannis over his life (in this iteration) so for him care = love.

In other news, I'm thinking of setting up a website for my own work; maybe publishing a short story one month, and a chapter of an ongoing story the next? Possibly with a Patreon linked to it (a girl has to eat and pay rent). I would still do all my fanfic! What do you all think?

End Notes

I wonder if she might....

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!