a bit of earth

by shuofthewind

Summary

Sybil makes an unexpected friend. A story in seven parts. Because what is freedom, anyway?.

[A Downton Abbey/Secret Garden crossover. All those big Yorkshire families really ought to know each other better.]

Notes

Unbeta’ed. Sorry.

See the end of the work for more notes

i

Sybil is newly sixteen and in her first really grown-up gown when she meets Mary Lennox.

In the grand scheme of things, the manor at Misselthwaite is altogether too far away from
Downton for the Cravens to visit terribly often. Besides that, she’s heard a number of terribly odd things about Lord Craven, all sorts of strange and horrible rumors. He killed his wife, some people say. His son is a cripple, say others. He’s a hunchback. He has a club foot. He is Quasimodo, and his Esmeralda was a London socialite who lost her life in a lover’s quarrel. He only speaks in broad Yorkshire. He only speaks in German. He’s a cannibal who gobbled up his only child, and that’s why no one has seen the boy in going on ten years.

When she walks into the sitting room to greet Papa’s guest, she only finds a spindly gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and a worn face, who leans rather heavily on his cane but otherwise has no visible deformity. His accent is neat and Londonish, even though his hair is a bit shaggier than Granny can ever approve of, and the cut of his suit is quite fashionable. He also smiles, just a little bit, when Sybil insists on shaking his hand instead of letting him bend over it like he does with Mary and Edith. She refuses to be pampered, first of all, and secondly it looks like it hurts his poor back quite terribly.

“My daughters,” says Papa, and Lord Craven inclines his head. “Mary is twenty, or thereabouts. Sybil turned sixteen last month.”

“A good collection of girls,” says Lord Craven in his funny husky voice, and Sybil decides then that she likes him. “My thanks to you, ladies, for allowing us to be here for Christmas.”

“Us?” says Sybil, but before Lord Craven can answer, an imperious little female voice pipes up from behind the door.

“Us,” she says. The girl is the sort of lanky awkward that thirteen brings about. Just behind her is a boy who is as blonde as she is, with an upward tilt to his nose that makes her think of Little Lord Faultenroy. “I am Miss Mary Lennox,” says the girl, and peers at Sybil through narrowed eyes as if she’s searching for something. “And this is my cousin, Colin Craven.”

“Craven?” repeats Papa.

“My son,” says Lord Craven. Sybil blinks and then takes a closer look at the boy who is supposed to be crippled. He looks quite well to her, flushed cheeks and straight limbs and all. She’s heard nothing of a girl called Mary Lennox, though. Miss Mary Lennox gives Papa a blistering look, and then leads the way into the sitting room. Colin Craven quickly overtakes her, though, and offers his hand to Papa to shake.

“Charmed,” he says, in a voice newly cracking. “I’m sure.”

On the other side of Mama, she can see Edith biting back a smile.

“Indeed,” says Papa, and shakes Colin Craven’s hand. Mary Lennox is still peering at Sybil and Edith and Mary as if they’re each of them tigers, waiting to leap forward and bite off the heads of the Cravens. “Very nice to meet you, Colin.”

“I didn’t know you had a niece,” says Mama, smiling at Mary Lennox. The girl seems to think it over quite seriously before returning the smile, and in that instant Sybil decides she wants to like this Mary Lennox, and the boy Colin. The pair of them seem almost like half-tamed animals, slinking through the world of silks and satins of Society with a look that says I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care. “How long have you been staying with your uncle, Mary?”

“Almost three years.” Mary Lennox locks her hands behind her back. “After my parents died in India.”

“Oh, goodness, I’m so sorry,” says Mama.
“Don’t be,” says Mary Lennox. “I didn’t like them very much.”

Mama has no idea what to say to this. Mary and Edith exchange one of their Looks. Sybil bites her tongue to keep from laughing at the look on Papa’s face. It’s really quite a horrid thing to say, but it’s honest. Mary Lennox catches her eye, and her eyebrows—they’re quite bushy, for a girl’s—snap together like magnets. They stare at each other for a long moment.

“I saw you have gardens,” says Mary Lennox. “Can we see them?”

Mama lunges at this altogether far more suitable topic. “Of course you may. Sybil, will you take them? Edith, Mary, perhaps you could call for Barrow, a pre-dinner drink seems in order—”

Sybil ignores her. Mary Lennox and Colin Craven come to join her, their blonde heads close together. She thinks they might be twins, they look so similar. She wonders what their mothers were like. “The gardens are this way,” she says. “Do you want to see the nice ones or the messy ones?”

“Messy ones,” says Mary Lennox promptly, without looking at Colin. “Messy gardens have more magic in them.”

Colin Craven nods, solemn. “Messy is just another word grown-ups use for things that aren’t controlled. But gardens aren’t meant to be controlled. They’re meant to grow, and be wild. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t think anyone’s meant to be controlled,” says Sybil, as they slip through one of the servant’s doors and start down the stairs. Gwen catches sight of them, and tips into a curtsy, nearly dropping her load of sheets. Sybil drops her a wink, and leads the Craven children down the stairs. “People are supposed to be able to do what they like, I think, as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody else. I’m reading Marx, and he says all men are equal. Well, men and women, obviously, because women are just as important as men, you know.”

Mary Lennox looks as though she’s bit into sunshine. “Who’s Marx?”

They spend a good hour in the gardens, talking about politics and roses. When they come back, it’s to find that Mama—bless you, Mama—has invited Lord Craven, his son, and his ward to stay through the New Year.

Sybil loans Mary Lennox her copy of Marx when they leave, with strict instructions as to who to read next. She gives Colin Craven A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, just to make his mouth pucker.

“What do you think about getting married?” Mary asks one afternoon, as they sit reading in the Cravens’ library. It’s spring, and spring means visiting friends. Mama, Papa, and her sisters have gone off to meet with the Hollingbrooks, fifteen kilometers and a million miles away, but Sybil—and Mary, and Colin, who are both quite good at getting their way—had bullied everyone else into letting her stay at Misselthwaite for another week or two.

Sybil likes Misselthwiate. She likes the moors, all shadow and sunlight, so different from the land
around Downton. She likes the people here, and the plants. She likes Lord Archibald (he winces every time she calls him Lord Craven) and she likes Colin, for all he can be infuriating. She likes Mary quite a bit, for all that Mary’s younger than her and tends to boss people about. But Misselthwaite…oh. Sybil looks at Misselthwaite and she thinks of what Mary said to her, back in the rose gardens, that wild things are meant to be wild and should never be tame. Misselthwaite reminds her of that, of a great prowling wolf that paused for just a moment in the thistles, eyes closed, waiting for the sun to come out again. It’s so different from Downton that it makes her heart swell and pound and ache.

She’s so deep in thought that when Mary clears her throat, Sybil almost jumps. “Hm?”

“Uncle Archie was talking about marriage,” Mary says impatiently, snapping her copy of *Wuthering Heights* closed and pulling her legs up onto the couch, crossing them at the ankle. It’ll send Mrs. Medlock into hysterics if she sees. Sybil copies her. “Not getting married again or anything, I don’t think he’ll ever get married again, but—what it means, you know. For people to get married.”

“So?”

“Do you plan on getting married?” Mary Lennox asks, quite solemnly, as if the world depends on her answer. Sybil sits and thinks for a long time, and then shrugs.

“I don’t know. Maybe. If I find someone who won’t tell me what to do. What about you?”

“No.” Mary shakes her head. Her straw-colored hair is falling out of the plaits that Martha set them in this morning, fraying around her face. “I don’t want to get married. I want to live here, with the garden, and stay that way forever and ever. The world can grow up without me. I like things the way they are now.”

“Things don’t stay the same, though.” Sybil closes her own book, and sets it aside. “They can’t stay the same, otherwise everything will fall apart. Could you imagine if nothing changed? It would be like—it would be like spring never coming. Flowers would never bloom.” That’s always the way to get Mary to understand something, to talk about it as if it’s alive, as if it thinks. “There’d be no new foals, and no rainstorms, and no new books. Everything would be just the same.”

Mary pinches her lower lip between her teeth. “But people won’t leave,” she says. “Martha’s getting married in a year or two, and then she won’t be able to work as a maid anymore.”

“Does she like him?” Sybil props her head in her hands. “This person she’s marrying.”

“I think she does,” Mary wrinkles her nose. “She talks about him an awful lot. But Mrs. Medlock’s angry because she says that Martha’s the only one who has enough brains to take over housekeeper, when she’s gone, and what if the next maid’s not as nice as Martha is? The next maid might not let us go out into the garden when we like, or she might try to throw Dickon out, or—”

“—or she might be really lovely. You don’t know it yet.”

“She won’t be as lovely as Martha,” says Mary.

Sybil considers this. Then she stands, leaving her book behind. “Come on,” she says. “The moor’s nice today. We can go walking and look at how spring changes things.”

For a moment Mary looks terribly thirteen, with red eyes and a swollen nose, but she nods. Later, when they return covered in mud and with flower crowns behind their ears (one of the moor-boys,
the one that Mary calls Dickon, helped them weave them) Mary throws her arms around Sybil and squeezes her until her ribs hurt.

“Write to me,” she says. “When you leave. Write to me. Please?”

Sybil nods, her throat suddenly tight. Then the front door opens, and Colin—he’s been away all day with Lord Archibald, taking a tour of the village—asks what’s going on. Mary tugs away and pulls his hair, calling him a rajah, and Sybil slips off to take a bath. She thinks this might be what Mary and Edith feel, when Sybil asks them for help. She thinks this might be what a big sister feels like.

It’s nice.

“What I don’t understand,” says Sybil, sitting in the passenger’s seat, “is why Mary is even saying she doesn’t like him.”

Mary, with her head under the bonnet, knocks her fist against something sharp, and swears. On the other side of the garage, Branson lifts his head, hound-like. “Don’t hurt yourself, Miss. Your cousin’ll have my head.”

“Blast and damn Colin Craven,” says Mary, and brushes a strand of hair out of her eyes. It leaves a streak of oil over her forehead. “He can bite a donkey’s tail.”

“That’s not fair to the donkey, Miss.” Branson smirks. “Your cousin has sharp teeth.”

Sybil thinks Mary might throw a wrench at him. Instead, she fumes, and leans around to scowl at Sybil sitting in the auto. Sybil’s already bullied Branson out of her turn with the Renault’s engine—it’s ostensibly out of commission so Branson can fix up the motor, anyway—and now she’s just waiting for Mary to finish so she can go clean her hands of the evidence. “We might have the same name, Sybil Crawley, but I don’t understand a blasted thing your sister does. She’s not very honest about things.”

This is probably the most understated description of Mary’s character to have ever existed. “I suppose,” Sybil says slowly. “But Cousin Matthew likes her quite a lot. And he’s nice. There are worse people she could be married to.”

“Like Larry Grey,” says Mary, and together they shudder. Branson, who hasn’t had the trauma of meeting Larry Grey, simply shakes out his newspaper and hides behind it again. Mary had her birthday three days ago, on the lawns at Downton Abbey, and had dumped a pitcher of lemonade over Larry Grey’s head. Sybil is never going to forget it. “But she shouldn’t have to marry anybody she doesn’t want to. Nobody should. We should always be able to choose.”

“You think I’d say something like that?” Sybil hooks her hand over the roof of the car, heaving herself out. Her old riding boots are pinching at her toes, but they’re perfect for engine work. They’re so cracked and smeared with old mud that nobody will notice a bit of grease. “Honestly, Mary.”

“I don’t think that of you,” Mary says darkly, and sets to under the bonnet again. “I think that of
other people, but I don’t think that of you.”

There’s something there, something off, but she doesn’t think Mary will talk about it right now. Sybil frowns over Mary’s shoulder at the engine, and then crosses the room to steal Branson’s old newspaper. Branson makes a noise like she’s just stepped on his feet, but he lets her do it. The topic dies quietly under the bonnet of the Renault.

In the papers, the War is many things. The War is Ypres, and Verdun, and Gallipoli. The War is Germany, and the Lusitania, and the Ottomans. The War is numbers and figures and names of places the generals have never seen.

To Sybil it’s different. To Sybil, the War is nightmares. The War is men screaming in the middle of the night, pissing themselves in their beds. The War is scars and shell-torn fields, blood under her fingernails. The War is Lavinia, and Mary’s tears in the depth of night. The War is made of bullies and lies.

Mary Lennox is a superb bully. She bullies Dr. Clarkson until he lets her sit at officer’s bedsides, and she bullies Mama and Papa until they let her stay in Downton for the majority of the year. She even bullies Colin Craven into going back to school, because he’s ranting and raving and spending his nights awake because they’re both so worried about Dickon, a private on the lines. Not all bullies are bad, Sybil thinks, when Mary herds Anna out of the room and sets to with the soap, scraping her nails along Sybil’s scalp until it stings. Bullies can make sure you eat and sleep and bathe often enough to pretend that you don’t have blood on your hands.

“Dunk your head,” Mary says, and Sybil obeys without question. Her hair is tangled, a mass of knots. She’s supposed to keep it out of the way as best she can, nestled under her cap, but she’s considering just chopping all of it off. It’s constantly in her face, falling out of its pins, too heavy, too stubborn. She wants it gone. She doesn’t say that, though. When she surfaces, Mary has collected one of the combs, and she starts picking through it with the sort of gentleness she uses with baby robins or just-furling crocuses. Her straw-blonde hair is bound back in a braid, and she’s in her nightgown. For once, neither of them have the night shift.

“One of the captain’s pinched my bum today,” says Mary, when Sybil doesn’t speak. “I think he left a bruise. I’d ask you to check, but I think you’d blush.”

Sybil hums. That’s what happens, she thinks, when men are raised to think of women as property. They think that female bodies are something to be pinched, and touched, and fondled. They think they have the right to treat her like a cow at a market stall, running their hands over her flanks as if to test the firmness of her muscles. She wants to punch them—and she could; Colin’s taught both her and Mary how to knock a man down with a swift clip to the jaw—but she’s a nurse. She thinks it’s wrong, somehow, for nurses to want to cause pain.

Mary finishes with one section of Sybil’s hair, shifts it aside, and begins on the next knot. She’s humming a song that Sybil recognizes from Misselthwaite, a tune that Dickon would whistle on their way into the garden. Where ‘ast tha been sin’ ah saw thee, ah saw thee? On Ilkla Moor baht ‘at. It’s only once Mary’s half done, and the water’s begun to cool, that she slows, stops. “Tom was watching you again.”
Sybil’s skin prickles. She’d sworn not to tell anyone what Tom had asked her, but she’s certain that anyone didn’t include Mary. Mary’s been with her for longer than Tom has. She sinks deeper into the water to hide the way her neck is turning red. “Don’t tell me that.” She tries to make herself sound angry, and fails. “I’m angry with him.”

“Good,” says Mary. “Because he was an ass.” She says it as if it’s a fact of nature. The sun rises every morning. Robin Redbreast rules the Secret Garden. Tom Branson is an ass. “I would have hit him, if I were you.”

“I’m not you, Mistress Mary.” Sybil turns just a little, so that Mary can see the smile on her lips and know she’s just joking. “When did you start calling him Tom?”

“When he asked you to marry him,” says Mary. “When did you?”

Sybil opens her mouth, and then closes it again. “Technically,” she says, “I haven’t.”

Mary says nothing, but Sybil can feel her preening. She sighs, and then blows bubbles in the bathwater.

“Do you like him?” Mary asks. Mary Lennox has no concept of court double-talk, not like Edith and Mary do. Mary simply says what she thinks, and let the consequences be damned. “Even though he’s an ass.”

“I never thought about it, before I went to York.” Sybil closes her eyes, trying to think. “I thought he was my friend.”

“Is he not your friend now?”

Sybil wonders. She thinks, sometimes, that he might not have ever been her friend. What if he only liked me because he was in love with me? Sometimes she thinks Tom Branson may never have been in love with her at all—but if that’s true, then he wouldn’t have asked her to marry him, would he? Her head is going in circles, a carousel that never stops. “He thinks I told him no because he’s—because he’s poorer than me. But that’s not it. I just—I never—”

She stammers, and stops. She can’t say she never thought of Tom Branson like that. She can’t say she never noticed him, the breadth of his shoulders, the way light caught in his hair. She’s just not sure if that means she’s in love with him. She can’t turn her back on everything for something that might not even be love.

“I think you’re right to have told him no.” Mary sorts through a tangle, the comb scraping like bones against Sybil’s scalp. “So long as the war’s on, and he could be called up at any minute. Maybe they’ll start enlisting men with heart conditions.” Her voice hardens. “If they run out of the rest.”

Sybil is quiet for a time. “Dickon’s all right, Mary,” she says. She thinks of the boy she remembers from Misselthwaite, growing in all directions at once, his hair a thatch of red curls, a gap between his two front teeth. He has a wide mouth, she thinks, and blue eyes. He’s wick. “You’d’ve heard from Martha by now if he wasn’t.”

Mary’s hands go still for a split second. “I’m not in love with him, you know,” she says. And then, it’s not a lie. “I just want him to come back safely.”

Mary finishes with her hair. Sybil clambers up out of the bath, wrapping herself in a robe. Then she wraps her arms around Mary, still perched on the stool, rings deep under her eyes and her nightgown overlong. She looks so much older and so much younger than fifteen. “I know,” she
says, and Mary stiffens and relaxes and leans her head into Sybil’s ribs, her breath catching. “I know.”

Mary stays with her that night, the way Sybil used to crawl into Edith’s bed when she had a nightmare. They lay awake for a while, not speaking, simply looking at the ceiling. Mary’s like a coal furnace shoved into the bed. Sybil has to kick off some of her blankets just to get comfortable again. She’s nearly asleep when she hears Mary shift, and turn onto her side.

“Uncle Archie wants me to marry Colin.”

Sybil’s awake in an instant. Mary looks at her with eyes that have seen cholera, dead and dying things; hollow, gleaming darkly in the moonlight. She presses her lips together. She’s not going to cry, Sybil thinks. No. This is Mistress Mary, Quite Contrary. This is Mary with nothing to lose. “I won’t,” Mary snaps. “I love Colin, but I won’t marry him. I won’t do what anyone tells me to do. It has to be mine. My choice,” she says, fiercely. “So don’t you let anyone bully you, either.”

She doesn’t say that Lord Archibald would never force Colin or Mary to do anything. She doesn’t say that she sees Mrs. Medlock’s hand in this more than anyone’s. Sybil doesn’t say anything. She rolls over and slips her hand into Mary’s. Mary squeezes tight, and that’s how they sleep, silent in the dark.

“I think you should make a secret garden here at Downton,” says Mary, as they’re cleaning out the library where the officers used to sleep.

Sybil looks up from the window. Branson is talking with Acting Sergeant Barrow—Thomas, she reminds herself; the War is over, she must call him Thomas again. She can make out his gestures, but not his words. Then she realizes Mary’s noticed, and turns away before Mary Lennox can see her blush. “Oh?”

“You’re blushing,” says Mary, a wicked glint in her eye, but then she snaps out a pillowcase and says nothing more about it. “Edith was talking about maybe reorganizing the gardens around Downton. You should have one built. A secret garden.”

“It won’t be secret, though,” says Sybil. “Not if everybody knows about it.”

“But the magic will be there.” There’s something lovely in how Mary (and Colin, and Dickon) still believe so deeply in The Magic. Sybil thinks she might, too. She might not like churches and ministers and fathers and the Bible, but she does like the idea of the world as a holy place. She loves it. That, she thinks, is The Magic—the truth of growing things, the importance of life. After the War, she doesn’t think she’ll ever believe in anything different. “That’s what matters.”

“I suppose.” She sighs. “Mama won’t like it. She likes things neat.”

“It doesn’t have to be a very big garden.” Mary tosses one of the stained sheets to the side, into the pile they’re going to remake into stuffing for rag dolls. “It just has to be wick. There’s wick things down here, surely, even so far south as you are.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard anyone call this part of Yorkshire down south.”
“Nawt o’tha soart,” says Mary, wiggling her eyebrows. “Tha’s as southron as tha gets, here.”

“I’ll hit you.”

“Oh, you won’t.”

Mary’s right. She won’t. Sybil tugs a sheet free of one of the empty beds. “If I’m going to build a garden, I need someplace I can grow.”

“You can’t grow at Downton?”

Downton, where everyone seems willing to forget the war ever happened. Downton, where the atmosphere suffocates her. Downton, where she keeps her secrets and her peace, her blood bubbling under her skin. “I don’t think so.”

Mary gives her a long look. Then she nods. “You could always come to Misselthwaite. The Secret Garden has room.”

She nearly drops the sheets. Sybil’s eyes burn. She swallows once, and then again. “Mary.”

“It’s true,” says Mary, as if she hasn’t just dropped the world into Sybil’s lap. “The garden likes you, I think. The robin does, I know. But you should have a part of it, because then you’ll always have a place where you can be free. No matter what.”


Mary’s ears turn pink. She smiles.

“Mary.”

They both stop. Mary’s white, as white as a soldier Sybil once saw bleed out. Her lips part. Sybil turns. There’s a soldier standing in the doorway—leaning against it, almost, one crutch tucked under his arm. He’s thin and terrible, a ghost of a boy, but she knows that wide mouth. Sybil glances back at Mary, but it seems as if Mary Lennox has finally met a tiger, because she’s frozen stiff to the floor. Sybil’s an intruder, here. She knows it. She collects her things.

“Dickon,” says Mary, before Sybil can escape. There are bruises under Dickon’s eyes and a healing gash beside his mouth, quite neat considering what shrapnel can do. It’ll be barely a scar in five years, barely a mark. Right now, it’s a terrible thing, stitched with thick black thread and uncovered. It must itch terribly. Sybil glances back at Mary.

“Sit down,” she says to Dickon. “Before you fall over.”

“Thank you,” says Dickon. There’s a strange burr of London English under his Yorkshire, now. She wonders who he was stationed with. Sybil helps him to a chair, or tries to. The moment she reaches out, Mary surges forward. She very nearly knocks Dickon off his feet, but then he catches himself. His head dips, burnished copper against her gold. Sybil thinks Mary might be crying.

She leaves through the back way, and when Mary emerges from the library hand in hand with Dickon Sowerby, looking freshly kissed, Sybil Crawley says nothing at all.
When Sybil Crawley runs away with Tom Branson, she doesn’t head for Gretna Green. At least, not right away.

She knows that’s where her sisters will think she’s going. If, by some terrible happenstance, they discover that Sybil is gone before tomorrow morning, they’ll go straight along the road to Scotland. Sybil and Tom take the northeastern road instead, passing through villages that have been halved by the war. Tom drives for a while, and then trades with Sybil, silent, watchful. She loves him, she thinks. She can’t name what she feels for him, quite, but it’s enormous—it makes her chest swell and hurt and explode, makes her want and hope and dream, and if that’s not love, she’s not certain what is. He’s her second chance, outside of Downton, outside of the War, in a new country where things are freer. She loves him because of that, and she loves him because he’s Tom, but she knows that nobody else in Downton will understand.

Lord Craven is away in London when they knock on the door. Mrs. Medlock lets them in, looking confused. Mary, though—Mary comes down and clasps them both in her arms, holds them tight, smiling. Tom flushes awkwardly and pats her on the back, not sure what else to do. Mary’s a tiger that’s been tempered, but she’s still a tiger; she doesn’t hug just anyone.

“I knew you’d figure it out,” Mary says into her ear, and Sybil holds her tight and wonders when contrary, half-wild Mary Lennox became so bloody wise.

Sybil Branson has a thousand different definitions of freedom.

Freedom is the way birds catch the wind over the bay in Dublin, arcing up and away from the ships and the city, high, the sky open to them, and limitless.

Freedom is nursing, learning, being. Freedom is the clinic of lady doctors she’s found, where she can be as tart as she likes, as strange as she likes, and nobody bothers her.

Freedom is fighting with Tom Branson, loving him. It’s the mornings when she wakes up and he’s already made coffee, when she has to do her own laundry and make her own meals. It’s when they talk about books in the evening, and she reads over his articles, making marks in red ink. Freedom is when she submits a letter to the editor under the name Matthew Eyre, and she’s hired to write as a political correspondent.

Freedom is her mother’s secret letters, the news of her father’s stiffening back, the mutterings about Edith and the gossip from the servant’s hall. Freedom is notes from Gwen and from Misselthwaite, the click of a camera as it flashes on Mary Lennox’s wedding day.

Freedom is her child, growing inside her.

Sybil is grown up, and everything is different. But she is free. She’s happy, and she’s free, and that, she thinks, is the most important thing.
End Notes

I don’t even know what this was. *Yami Bakura voice* But I liked it.

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