

# **GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT**

By Ben Jolivet

# GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

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*For Nancy, Barbara, and Holly.*

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### **CHARACTERS (2W)**

MITZI 20s. An heiress, new to her money. Anxious and earnest.

FAY Over forty. Her maid. Salty and smart.

Both roles are American. Please avoid doing the stereotypical Irish maid thing—or (worse) the bad “New England” accent. They can be played by cis women, trans femme, and non-binary or other femme people who are comfortable presenting as women. There’s absolutely no reason these roles need to be limited to white actresses but do be thoughtful of any unintended messages your casting might send, given the power dynamics of this time and place.

### **TIME AND PLACES**

September 21, 1938. Newport, RI.

ONE — Mitzi’s bedroom in a moderate mansion outside of the favored estates.

TWO — The dressing room of Mrs. Vermaile’s “cottage” off Bellevue Avenue.

THREE — A large, marble set of stairs outside what used to be Mitzi’s manse.

### **NOTES**

Be creative with the settings. Don’t let opulence be the enemy of finding a way to do this. It’s theatre. Same with any special effects.

A forward slash indicates the point of overlap for the next character. Line breaks in speeches are there to help give shape to a line, to indicate that something is happening as lines transition that we don’t have punctuation for. Shifts, switches, impulses, that kind of thing. Don’t stress about it, though.

### **Just some things about the historical stuff . . . :**

The Hurricane of 1938 is on record as one of the deadliest storms in New England history. Entire neighborhoods disappeared and, in some cases, never reappeared. The play takes liberties with the timeline of the storm,

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but its violence and danger are not understated. *Sudden Sea: The Great Hurricane of 1938* by R.A. Scotti was the primary reference, along with stories told to me over the years.

Faunce Corners is a fabrication; it's a mill town, like my hometown, Fall River, MA. Mrs. Vermaile is a fabrication, as is Crestbreak House. The story Fay tells in the first scene is loosely inspired by Alma Vanderbilt. There's a lot of ridiculousness to be found in real life. Deborah Davis's *Gilded: How Newport Became America's Richest Resort* tells many of them incredibly well. (There was a party the night of that hurricane, and rich people crawled across a roof from an unsafe part of a mansion to a safe part of the mansion, which was what inspired this play.)

*The Anthology of Social Composure*, Mitzi's guidebook, is made up, as are all the instructions. Many of them, though, are riffs on instructions from the 1922 edition of *Etiquette: In Society, In Business, In Politics, and At Home* by Emily Post. Some of the most ridiculous instructions in the play are closer to reality than the stuff I made up.

For all the history, the play is a comedy. The feeling of accuracy is more important than the literalness of accuracy.

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## I. INVITED

*Late morning, September 21, 1938. Mitzi's bedroom. FAY and MITZI stand looking at each other. Fay holds a calling card in her hand. Mitzi looks at it anxiously. A moment. Fay jerks the card in Mitzi's direction.*

**MITZI.** Oh I can't look read it to me!

**FAY.** . . . It's a calling card, Mitzi.

**MITZI.** (*A look.*) We discussed this, didn't we?

**FAY.** (*Wilts just a little.*) . . . what . . . exactly . . . / did we—?

**MITZI.** How you address me.

**FAY.** How did / I address—

**MITZI.** You called me Mitzi!

**FAY.** Did I?

**MITZI.** You did and that's the third time today. And if it were only once, I'd let this go, but this is the third time and we've *talked* about this.

**FAY.** Sorry. *Miss.*

**MITZI.** That's better, Gaylord. / Now read me—

**FAY.** *Speaking* of addressing people, / we talked—

**MITZI.** Gaylord. That's the way it's *done.*

**FAY.** I realize that.

**MITZI.** It says right there in the *Anthology of Social Composure.*

**FAY.** Yes, I know you're very fond of the *Anthology of Social Composting*, / but I happen to—

**MITZI.** It's the *Anthology of Social Composure.*

**FAY.** Right, that's what I said.

**MITZI.** You said *Composting.*

**FAY.** That's nonsense; / I did not.

**MITZI.** Yes, it *is* nonsense, Gaylord, but you said it.

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**FAY.** . . . At any rate I understand that that's the way / it's done.

**MITZI.** I didn't write the *Anthology of Social Composure*. I merely follow it.

**FAY.** And I understand that. *But* . . . being, you know, a human as well as your maid, do you think I might be entitled to some small say in how I'm treated in my work? Given that I happen to dislike my name tremendously, do you think you could perhaps do me the honor of calling me Fay?

**MITZI.** (*Thinks about this. A lot.*) . . . all right, Fay—*but*: only when we're alone. When we're together in public I'm calling you Gaylord, and that'll have to be the end of it.

**FAY.** Transgressive.

**MITZI.** Now read the card to me, Fay, would you *please*.

**FAY.** It's a calling card, miss.

**MITZI.** Fay!

**FAY.** . . . that *says*: "Mrs. Walter Vermaile.<sup>1</sup> Crestbreak House, Newport." (*A beat.*)

**MITZI.** And?

**FAY.** Yes?

**MITZI.** That's a name and address.

**FAY.** Yes it's a *calling card*, miss.

**MITZI.** . . . there must be some *message* on it, / something that explains *why* it's been left.

**FAY.** Miss I'm sorry there're no words of any kind, other than the / name and address.

**MITZI.** Let me see that.

**FAY.** I'm sorry, do you not trust me, miss? Do you think I've somehow missed some kind of important detail on this gigantic piece of card stock? (*Mitzi looks at her. A beat.*) Sorry. (*Fay hands the card over. Mitzi inspects it judiciously.*)

**MITZI.** Ah! Here! Look here! See that there?

**FAY.** A corner.

**MITZI.** A *bent* corner. (*A beat.*)

**FAY.** Are you feeling all right, miss? / Should I fetch a doctor?

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced "VAIR-may."

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**MITZI.** Fay, these calling cards aren't simply slips of paper dropped onto a silver tray at the front door.

**FAY.** They're not.

**MITZI.** Every little mark, every little scratch, every turned-town corner *means* something. These two-and-one-quarter inch by three-and-one-half inch cards are *bursting* with *meaning*.

**FAY.** Like a little Rosetta Stone right there in your purse.

**MITZI.** Honestly, Fay.

**FAY.** All right, well . . . : what does that turned up / corner have to—

**MITZI.** It's a *turned down* / corner, Fay.

**FAY.** What does that *turned down* corner have to say?

**MITZI.** I have no idea.

**FAY.** Well, that's simply ridiculous.

**MITZI.** Well every lady uses these sorts of signals in slightly different and varying ways . . . actually, this sort of communication is a little out of date. It started going out of style forty years ago.

**FAY.** So did Mrs. Vermaile.

**MITZI.** (*Finds that accidentally funny, then recovers:*) . . . this *could* mean that she'd like me to call on her formally, which, Fay, would be . . . *enormous* after *all this time* living here and being shunned by these *ladies* and their athletic *sons* who look so handsome in their tailor-made *suits* and *riding pants* and—

. . . or it could mean I've slighted her somehow and should pack my things and run from Newport as fast as I can.

**FAY.** A clear and sane method of communication.

**MITZI.** Fay, if everyone knew the rules, anyone could play.

**FAY.** If only someone bothered to share the rules with *you*. (*Mitzi is lost in thought, considering the implications of the turned-down corner. Fay goes about her business tidying up the morning things as she gossips.*) Maybe they're toying with you. Those kinds of people do that type of thing. (*Mitzi isn't listening. Fay doesn't notice.*) I heard a story, I think it was . . . about the current Mrs. Vermaile's *grandmother*, or *mother-in-law*, or something, one of—it doesn't matter entirely who, at any rate the mother, one of them, had a daughter whom she'd discovered had fallen in love with a man, which was, he was rich, this man had money, just not *enough*

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money, you know how that is, but rather than fight with the daughter, which she was certain would be a nightmare, she simply said, “all right, darling; you can marry Chappy,” or whatever his name was, I don’t really know. The daughter merrily planned away—*but*: the morning of the wedding she marches down the aisle and she reaches the altar, and she looks at her groom: —And there’s a man she’s never seen before in her life! She tried to run away, but there was an entire congregation of Protestants, and if there’s a group of people you can’t run away from, it’s Protestants, and so she was trapped and had to marry this man who spent ten years *beating* her before suddenly dropping dead of— . . . syphilis, or something, if you can drop dead from that—*and before she could do anything*, the mother barters her off to this rich old man who impregnates her immediately and dies and then, only *then*, did this old woman finally turn to her daughter and say, “you know, darling: I really am sorry . . . after all that, the money your husbands left us is only slightly more than the amount I paid to that young man you loved to run off to Antibes” or somewhere. “I should have just let you be.” That’s the mental facility of the kind of woman who sent you that card, do you know?

**MITZI.** You know something, Fay? This card: is a test. (*She thumbs through the Anthology.*) Mrs. Vermaile is testing me.

She wants to suss me out; see if I speak the same language.

And if I do speak her language, she’ll consider letting me into her world.

And if I can’t speak her language, then I remain here, languishing here.

That’s what this is; that’s what she’s doing.

**FAY.** Or maybe she’s just an old bitch.<sup>2</sup> (*A beat.*)

**MITZI.** That’s a distinct possibility, too. (*She searches through the book.*)

Calling cards, calling cards, calling cards after an engagement, calling cards after a christening, calling cards after—

. . . Everyday calling cards.

Here: look here:

. . . Are you looking, Fay? (*A beat.*)

**FAY.** . . . no.

**MITZI.** Why not??

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<sup>2</sup> You can replace “bitch” with “hag.”

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FAY. I'm *working*.

MITZI. *Fay*.

FAY. I didn't realize you expected me to care about this, miss, / I'm sorry.

MITZI. This is important, Fay, I expe—I demand that you care about this. Now.

FAY. Fine.

MITZI. You care about this?

FAY. *Boundlessly*.

MITZI. (*Considers Fay*.) . . . is this how you spoke to the last family you worked for?

FAY. The last family I worked for was a weaving loom, conversation was limited.

MITZI. —! You never told me you worked in a *mill*.

FAY. One of your father's. Til he sold it.

Which is how I got here.

He liked my spark.

MITZI. I had no idea.

FAY. If I'd told you that, would you have wanted me?

MITZI. Do you think I'm a snob, Fay?

FAY. *Would you have?*

MITZI. (*Beat. Thinks about this:*) No. —*But*: not because you worked in a mill, because you think I'm a snob.

FAY. What's it say there in the *Nitpickery of Social Com/posure?*

MITZI. The *Anthology / of Social Composure*.

FAY. The *Anthology of Social Composure*, what's it say the cryptic card corners communicate?

MITZI. (*Scans the page looking for an answer. She finds it. She reads:*)  
“The turned-down top-right calling card corner *initially* indicated that the recipient was invited to return the the calling card with a calling card of her own—meaning, in essence, that the leaver deigned the receiver worthy of leaving a calling card on the leaver's (now the receiver's) at-home day; though, of course, this was *not* an indication that the receiver (originally the leaver) deemed the leaver (originally the receiver) worthy of acceptance into best society, or would even be at home *to her on* that day, but rather that a sort of vetting process had begun.” Hmm. (*She thinks*

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*about that. She goes on:)* “With time, the meaning of the down-turned top-right dog-ear began indicating a last-minute *invitation* to a late afternoon luncheon or entertainment, when the leaver and the receiver are not formally acquainted, but when the leaver is considering a more formal invitation at a later time!!”

Fay——!!!

“. . . of course, to some modern matrons, the top-right downward dog-ear means nothing at all, and, indeed, one sees more and more calling cards oragamed into sundry shapes without regard for taste, sanity, or meaning.” (*A beat.*)

**FAY.** Ah-hah. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** “. . . if indeed the intent of the dog-eared top-right calling card corner *is* the informal invitation to a late afternoon luncheon or musicale, the leaver should be paid the compliment of a receiver’s calling card delivered immediately, with either the bottom right corner dog-eared upward, indicating acceptance; a torn bottom left corner, indicating polite refusal due to prior engagement; or merely a *blank* calling card indicating that / the receiver is . . .”

**FAY.** Indicating that the receiver has given up on humanity and has flung herself from the highest point of the cliffs.

**MITZI.** . . . That’s a particular possibility. (*Mitzi thinks . . . She thinks some more . . . She freaks out.*) *Oh, what am I going to do I don’t know what to DO with this what am I going to do how do I RESPOND???* Fay? *How should I respond?*

**FAY.** Carefully?

**MITZI.** *Fay.*

**FAY.** Is all this necessary?

**MITZI.** I don’t need your questions, Fay; I need your advice. If I don’t handle this situation correctly, I’ll be shunned.

**FAY.** Haven’t you *been* shunned since you moved here?

**MITZI.** And here’s my chance to be un . . . shunned. I suppose. And if I handle this *badly* . . .

**FAY.** Well . . . (*Fay doesn’t know what to say. She struggles for an answer and then sees something out the window. She approaches it. Mitzi watches. A moment.*)

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**MITZI.** What? Have you had an idea?

**FAY.** Is it supposed to rain today?

**MITZI.** . . . What's that got to do with anything?

**FAY.** It hasn't got to do with anything other than the weather, miss; I thought it was meant to be sunny all day.

**MITZI.** *I'm about to destroy my chances of acceptance into best society, and you're worried about CLOUDS?*

**FAY.** It's just getting strangely dark out, / suddenly.

**MITZI.** *Faaaaaaayyy!*

**FAY.** I'm sorry miss, I don't know how to help you in situations like this.

**MITZI.** Well, I wish you'd told me that before I hired you!

**FAY.** I had no idea I'd need a degree in enigmatology to press your delicates! (*Mitzi is stumped. A beat.*) It ju—It seems to me that you're looking for hope in what is finally a cruel action.

**MITZI.** How is inviting me to a late afternoon luncheon or musicale a cruel action?

**FAY.** Because you've no idea if you've actually been invited.

**MITZI.** But it's possible I might have!

**FAY.** Then let's get you dressed and ready.

**MITZI.** But what if I haven't and I show up and look like a fool?

**FAY.** And isn't that cruel . . . ? If that old worm woman wanted you at her house, why couldn't she have sent a formal invitation? Or at any rate one that didn't require a cryptographer? It's cruel letting you on this way, / and I think you should forget it.

**MITZI.** Fay, this is the way they've always done things; they've always done things this way, I can't expect them to change for me.

**FAY.** . . . I believe you, miss, I'm simply not equipped to advise you in this situation. If you truly want my advice, I'd say forget it and ring up one of your friends from Faunce Corners.

**MITZI.** Fay, even if I *wanted* to talk to my friends from—(*A quick beat.*) *To hell with Faunce Corners!* This is the life I was meant for! (*A moment.*)

**FAY.** . . . you've got nothing to lose, then, have you? If they don't want you and you arrive looking like a fool, nothing will have changed. They still won't want you. If they *do* want you and you arrive, you've gained access and all you have to do then is not behave like an idiot once you're

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in. *(Silence. Mitzi considers this. She rushes to her purse and removes a calling card. She picks up a pen and starts to write on it—then stops. She dog-ears the bottom right corner.)*

**MITZI.** Have Sullivan take to this Mrs. Vermaile's butler at once. I will attend her late afternoon luncheon or musicale.

**FAY.** Very well, miss. *(She starts out—stops.)* And what time should I tell him to have the car ready? *(A beat. Mitzi's face sinks in frustration. Then she rushes to her book and searches. She finds the page she needs and scans it with her finger.)*

**MITZI.** *(Reading:)* "Late afternoon luncheons and musicales always begin promptly at 3:00 p.m."

**FAY.** Excellent.

**MITZI.** ". . . unless it is the hostess's family custom to serve teas at either two or four. This depending on which customs they observed in their childhoods, or in what part of the country they were raised." *(A moment. Mitzi sits with this and doesn't like it.)* Have him deliver the card, Fay. I will arrive promptly at 3:00 p.m., eastern standard time.

**FAY.** Yes, miss. *(Fay exits with the card. Mitzi doesn't know what to do with the energy inside. She flits around a little. Then something out the window catches her attention. She steps forward to inspect it.)*

**MITZI.** It is getting dark. *(She looks at the sky.)* Ah well, there's New England in the summer for you, now what do I wear . . . ? *(She goes to her armoire and looks for something suitable. Fay returns.)*

**FAY.** Sullivan has left with the card, miss.

**MITZI.** That's fine, Fay, thank you. Is he better today? *(Fay helps Mitzi undress.)*

**FAY.** He said his leg is acting up.

**MITZI.** Has he been drinking again? *(Fay doesn't respond.)* Well, has he spoken to a doctor?

**FAY.** You know how men are.

**MITZI.** Not really. *(A beat.)*

**FAY.** He said it's fine. It acts up this way when the barometer drops as it is.

**MITZI.** I don't know what that means.

**FAY.** You don't know what barometric pressure is?

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**MITZI.** Is it a law that I should?

**FAY.** No I'm . . . no / of course not.

**MITZI.** I'm not a longshoreman, Fay. What do I care about barometric pressure?

**FAY.** Of course, miss.

**MITZI.** Oh what, Fay?

**FAY.** Pardon?

**MITZI.** You're *looking* at me again. Not only am I a snob, I'm stupid, too? Is / that it?

**FAY.** You caught me off guard, miss, really—my father was something of an amateur scientist. I forget people weren't raised with dials and barometers and whatnot as I was.

**MITZI.** I was raised with textiles.

**FAY.** (*Kinda quiet:*) With the idea of textiles, anyway.

**MITZI.** What / does that—

**FAY.** Barometric pressure measures the pressure of the air . . . ? Essentially the draw of gravity on air molecules? (*Mitzi shrugs.*) At any rate, high pressure is lovely and sunny; low pressure is stormy and grim.

**MITZI.** Ah-hah.

**FAY.** Sullivan said he's never seen the barometer fall this low this fast in his life.

**MITZI.** Is that meaningful in some way? (*A beat.*)

**FAY.** —Well only in that his leg is acting up badly. And there's a storm coming.

**MITZI.** The perils of living in coastal New England. Storms pass quickly, at least; especially this summer. It's been tropical.

**FAY.** It has, miss.

**MITZI.** I love storms, actually.

**FAY.** Yes?

**MITZI.** Thunder, lightning. It's romantic. I think it's magical, don't you?

**FAY.** Yes.

**MITZI.** Are you lying to me?

**FAY.** Does it matter?

**MITZI.** Does it matter if you're lying to me?

**FAY.** About this?

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**MITZI.** No, . . . I guess it doesn't matter. Though I can't imagine why you would.

**FAY.** That's what I mean.

**MITZI.** Right.

**FAY.** *Yes.*

**MITZI.** *(Beat.)* . . . I'm confused, now. Do you like storms or not?

**FAY.** Honestly?

**MITZI.** That is the goal once in a while, Fay, yes.

**FAY.** They're fine.

**MITZI.** . . . Fay, are you *afraid of storms?*

**FAY.** *(Beat.)* I'm puckish about many things, but not storms.

**MITZI.** Fay Gaylord afraid of something. Imagine that. *(Mitzi relishes that. A beat.)* I really rather wish *I* were a storm, Fay. I'd like you to be afraid of me.

**FAY.** I'm terrified of you.

**MITZI.** You're not.

**FAY.** Quivering in my shoes.

**MITZI.** How did a salty, strapping gal like you wind up scared of storms?

**FAY.** It's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?

**MITZI.** *(Thinks about it.)* No.

**FAY.** Right.

**MITZI.** It's not that I don't care, Fay, I do; you can tell me sometime, I'm sure; I'm just so . . . *(She makes a gesture that indicates nervous and full of energy.)* Do you know?

**FAY.** I do.

**MITZI.** Are you sure you're alright?

**FAY.** Yes, miss. Why?

**MITZI.** You seem different somehow. *(Regards Fay.)* You seem . . . sullen all of a sudden.

**FAY.** I'm not I'm my usual sassy self.

**MITZI.** Sullen isn't the right word, but . . . *something's* different.

**FAY.** Maybe my barometric pressure is dropping, too.

**MITZI.** Well I'd see a doctor, then. You don't want sailors knocking at the door trying to read you.

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**FAY.** Not to read me, no, miss; but they're free to knock on my door.

*(Mitzi looks up at Fay. A beat.)* Yes?

**MITZI.** . . . Nothing. *(Mitzi goes about searching for something to wear.)*

Well wait til you see this house, Fay. When you see this *house* . . . have you ever seen these houses?

**FAY.** I've ridden by.

**MITZI.** When you see this house, it'll cheer you up.

**FAY.** I hope I have the opportunity. *(Holds up a dress.)* What about this one? *(Mitzi shakes her head "no.")*

**MITZI.** What do you mean you hope you'll have the opportunity?

**FAY.** To see the house.

**MITZI.** But you will have the chance today.

**FAY.** *You've* got the chance. *(Holds up another.)* What about / this one?

**MITZI.** Fay, you understand you're coming with me, don't you?

**FAY.** Why in hell would I do that?

**MITZI.** Why in—

. . . Because that's how it's *done*. You'll come with me and stay in the dressing room with the other maids, and— . . . in case I need you to . . . fix something or someth—How is it you don't know these things?

**FAY.** Like yourself, I've only recently become part of this magical new world of satin and entitlement. *(Another dress.)* This one? *(Mitzi shakes her head "no" again.)*

**MITZI.** Seeing the house today will cheer you up, I have no doubt.

**FAY.** Unimaginable luxury always does. How about this one? This one is lovely.

**MITZI.** No it's not, it's—they're all horrible, everything's horrible, I've got nothing to wear!

I can't go.

I can't go—go tell Sullivan I can't go and not to take the card and I'll just set myself on fire and jump into the bay!

**FAY.** . . . if you set yourself on fire and then jump into the bay, won't you defeat the purpose of / setting yourself on—

**MITZI.** *Go tell him, Fay!*

**FAY.** He's gone already, miss; I told him to deliver the card straightaway.

**MITZI.** *Oh this is the worst thing that's ever happened!*

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**FAY.** Yes, that's probably true.

**MITZI.** *Fay!*

**FAY.** Ten seconds ago you were dancing across the room!

**MITZI.** They're going to stare at me, this is—do you have any idea how difficult it is to be simply *introduced* at one of these things? The things you have to remember?

**FAY.** So then don't go.

**MITZI.** You just told me I had to!

**FAY.** I said Sullivan left with the card; I didn't say you had to attend.

**MITZI.** Well but that's the same thing.

**FAY.** In what way?

**MITZI.** In the way that I've already accepted and can't back out now.

**FAY.** Well why not?

**MITZI.** Because if I do I'll never be asked again!

**FAY.** Well then let's hope for the best: you'll arrive and they'll wonder what you're doing there dressed like garbage, and they'll laugh you off the face of society.

**MITZI.** *Get out!*

**FAY.** I don't understand why in hell you want to be around these women who are so obviously making you so anxious.

**MITZI.** No you don't, you can't understand because you're ignorant and mean, now *get out and never come back!* (*Mitzi turns away. After a moment, Fay goes. Around this time, we should start hearing the beginning of the storm. It should pick up dramatically as the scene continues. A beat. Mitzi turns. She recovers a little. She looks around.*)  
Fay? (*Nothing. Mitzi wilts onto the bed. A moment. Fay returns. Mitzi looks up. Fay holds out a handkerchief. Mitzi accepts and blows her nose inelegantly.*)

**FAY.** If you do that in front of those women, they really will laugh you off the face of society.

**MITZI.** Fay I'm sorry / I said that to—

**FAY.** I'm insulted you don't think the green<sup>3</sup> is appropriate. I helped choose that dress and I think you look fetching in it. (*A moment.*)

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<sup>3</sup> Or whatever color you want.

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**MITZI.** Do I?

**FAY.** . . . then again I'm ignorant, so / what do I know about fashion?

**MITZI.** I didn't mean to say that, Fay, I really didn't. (*They start dressing her.*)

**FAY.** Yes, well.

I *am* ignorant. Of why you're putting yourself through this.

**MITZI.** This is the life I was meant to lead.

**FAY.** It doesn't seem worth the effort.

**MITZI.** It's not for everybody.

**FAY.** So you've said.

**MITZI.** Well it's not. I won't apologize for that, Fay, I'm sorry.

**FAY.** All right fine, but . . . you've just apologized.

**MITZI.** I'm not apologizing for—I'm not apolo—you *know what I mean*. Not everything needs to *belong* to everybody.

The whole point of exclusivity *is* exclusivity.

You get to a certain point in life, you've got the means to live a certain way, why shouldn't you? And what's wrong with surrounding yourself with people who live in a similar way? If you had the chance to live a life like that, you would take it; / I know you would.

**FAY.** Well I'm not sure whether I would or not, miss, but I can tell you that even the richest of them can't afford those houses much longer.

They're white elephants.

**MITZI.** "White elephants."

**FAY.** Beautiful, enviable, and so impossible and expensive to take care of, their majesty and uniqueness become a curse.

**MITZI.** Just like me!

**FAY.** . . . yes, miss.

They're closing one after another. The Countess is closing off the Breakers, and I heard a rumor she's going to start allowing public *tours*. The gilded age comes to a tarnished finale. (*A beat. Mitzi looks up at her and smiles.*) What?

**MITZI.** So you do pay attention to this kind of thing. And why shouldn't you? What little girl doesn't dream of being a princess? (*Fay laughs—or snorts.*) You've never dreamed of that?

**FAY.** It never occurred to me to dream that.

GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** Well what did you fantasize about when you were a little girl?

**FAY.** I didn't

**MITZI.** Fay, that's so sad.<sup>4</sup>

**FAY.** Never had much of an imagination.

**MITZI.** You never daydream? Not even now?

**FAY.** I mean . . . sometimes I do. Yes . . . / someti—

**MITZI.** . . . *you dooooo?*

**FAY.** *Yeeees.*

**MITZI.** What do you daydream *abooout?* (*Fay laughs.*) Tell me!

**FAY.** Let's get your shoes / sorted out—

**MITZI.** No, let's not get my shoes sorted out quite yet, let's tell Mitzi what you daydream about. (*A moment. Fay decides whether or not to confess.*)

**FAY.** . . . I daydream . . . that I'm Daphne Du Maurier, or someone. That I spin tales everyone can't put down and that everyone talks about, that sell out and that people devour.

**MITZI.** Fay! You want to be a writer? . . . that's an astounding thing for someone who claims they have no imagination.

**FAY.** See? I knew you'd tease me / about it.

**MITZI.** I'm not teasing you; I'm surprised. And delighted. I've learned all sorts of new things about you: You're afraid of storms. You want to write *Rebecca* . . . This is fascinating.

**FAY.** Well. And there it is.

**MITZI.** No but that's wonderful! Fay, I think you should do it!

**FAY.** Do what?

**MITZI.** Write something! / Write a nov—

**FAY.** But you just said I have no imagination, / so there you go.

**MITZI.** *I* didn't say you have no imagination, you said that!

**FAY.** And you agreed.

**MITZI.** I did not, you're so mean.

**FAY.** I'm not sure that you can get away with those flesh-toned shoes / with that dress.

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<sup>4</sup> Mitzi genuinely means this.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** I think you *should* write something. Why not? Then when it's published, I can tell everyone, "That woman used to be my maid, and now David O. Selznik is making a movie out of her book."

—Just don't base it on me!

Oh, can you imagine someone basing a character on you? That would be so embarrassing. You wouldn't do that, Fay, would you? Base a character on me?

**FAY.** Well, seeing as how I have no plans of doing any of these things, then, yes, I can make you that promise.

**MITZI.** That's sad, Fay. I'd be so happy for you if you became a famous novelist.

**FAY.** Well, that's . . . sweet of you, miss, thank you, but in the / *meantime* we've got to—

**MITZI.** You should *do* something in life. That's what my father says.

**FAY.** That's a funny thing for a man to say who's been on vacation since June.

**MITZI.** Well, he can afford not to do things now after twenty-five years running three mills.

**FAY.** Collecting all the income from those factories must've been exhausting. (*Mitzi stops and looks at her.*)

**MITZI.** Sometimes I can't tell if you're joking or not.

**FAY.** Of course I'm joking. *Someone* has to own everything.

**MITZI.** The way you *say* things. He worked hard to run those mills . . . And when he sold them, half of what he made went to taxes. No wonder people can't afford their cottages anymore.

**FAY.** Yes. Their "cottages."

**MITZI.** You don't agree?

**FAY.** Certainly.

**MITZI.** All right, well what do you agree with?

**FAY.** You.

**MITZI.** . . . You don't agree that it's a shame half his money went to taxes when he sold those mills? You don't agree that a man's money should be his own?

**FAY.** I was thinking for your hair we should / do something like—

GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** Fay: you don't believe a man should own the money he makes?  
(*A moment.*)

**FAY.** These kinds of conversations make me uncomfortable, miss.

**MITZI.** I'm interested in your answer.

**FAY.** I believe a man's money is his own.

**MITZI.** I'm not sure I believe you.

**FAY.** We really should get your hair sorted, miss.

**MITZI.** If you weren't lying you wouldn't try to change the subject.

You can tell me what you think, Fay, I'm not going to sack if you if you don't agree with me. If I didn't want to know what you think, I wouldn't have asked.

**FAY.** A French twist?

**MITZI.** *Fay.*

**FAY.** I believe a man's money is his own.

I believe . . . that . . . a French twist would look beautiful on you and I believe that a man should keep in mind that his money doesn't come out of thin air and that there's something to be said for thinking about the people who labored for you and if you prefer we could do a chignon, they're very stylish right now. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** Fay?

**FAY.** Which do you prefer?

**MITZI.** Fay, look at me.

**FAY.** I can't decide. The chignon might be a bit severe for an afternoon / luncheon or musicale.

**MITZI.** Fay I want you to look at me right now, look me in the eye. (*Fay obeys.*) Fay Gaylord . . . : are you a *socialist*?

**FAY.** These kinds of conversations make / me uncomf . . . .

**MITZI.** Oh my Lord my maid is a socialist.

**FAY.** I'm a maid, / I'm not a—

**MITZI.** *This is so exciting!* This is the kind of thing that Mrs. Vermaile is going to love / hearing about!

**FAY.** Miss, I'm not a socialist, I'm not political, you asked me what I thought.

**MITZI.** . . . oh. . . . well can I tell people you're a socialist?

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**FAY.** I'd rather you didn't. Let's do a French twist shall we? They're *very* capitalist right now. (*A beat. Mitzi regards Fay. At the same time, we can hear it's getting really nasty out.*)

**MITZI.** A French twist.<sup>5</sup> (*A beat. She looks out the window.*) It's getting really nasty out, isn't it?

**FAY.** It is. (*Mitzi sits and they start in on her hair. Silence. Mitzi flips through the Anthology. A beat.*)

**MITZI.** So if you're not a socialist, may I assume that you like working here?

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** I'm not cruel to you. I'm not terrible. —Aside from earlier, I mean. We have fun together, don't we?

**FAY.** I think so.

**MITZI.** I know I was unspeakably rude to you before, and I really do want you to know how sorry I am. Really. I don't want you hating me. You don't hate me, do you?

**FAY.** Of course not, miss. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** I like having a maid.

**FAY.** I imagine you would.

**MITZI.** No, not—not because you do things for me, though that part is lovely. But I always wanted a sister, do you know? Mother is so . . .

. . . well, she's so *her*. Do you know?

. . . I begged for a sister when I was younger, but my parents couldn't have anymore.

—And isn't this better than working in a mill?

**FAY.** It's. Yes. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** Did you like working for my father?

**FAY.** I had very few interactions with him.

**MITZI.** Oh. (*A beat.*) But didn't you say he liked your spirit, or something? (*A quick beat.*)

**FAY.** I had *few* interactions with him; that's not to say we didn't interact.

**MITZI.** And you like him?

**FAY.** Yes, I did. (*A beat. Mitzi looks up at her.*)

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<sup>5</sup> Adjust as needed.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** Did?

**FAY.** I mean I do. I thought you meant at the mill. (*Silence as Fay works on Mitzi's hair. Mitzi flips through the book.*)

**MITZI.** This is the part that gets me.

**FAY.** What is?

**MITZI.** The introductions. (*Reading:*) “Visitors to a private tea or formal dinner must greet new acquaintances with a simple ‘How do you do?’ It is never acceptable to ask anything else ever. ‘How are you?’ reads as informal and quaint; a sure sign of a rube. ‘Hello’ reads as exceptionally curt. ‘Lovely to meet you’ should be implied, as any well-bred person is always a pleasure to meet. Pointing out that someone is a pleasure to meet implies that you’ve heard otherwise and are surprised to discover the lie.”

**FAY.** *Well.*

**MITZI.** I get so nervous thinking about it I mix them all up.

**FAY.** You know what would be terrible? If that book had been written and published by some mean old rich lady to teach people the wrong way to behave purely for sport. (*Fay was joking, but Mitzi suddenly considers that potentiality. Fay looks down at Mitzi.*) What? (*Mitzi is horrified.*) —I was joking, that’s . . . clearly that’s not what this is, nobody would do that kind of thing. —Probably. (*Mitzi is about to freak out again.*) Don’t listen to me that was nonsense . . . It just *occurred* to me, / and I said it, I—

**MITZI.** If it occurred to you it could have occurred to someone else, too. Now the whole time I’m there I’ll be thinking “what if / all of this was made up?”

**FAY.** I’m sorry, I really was teasing you, / it really was just a joke.

**MITZI.** Don’t you have any sympathy for me, Fay? / I mean *really*.

**FAY.** I do I *do* have sympathy for you, miss; I do, / I’m sorry I said—

**MITZI.** There’s a part of me, Fay, the slightest part of me that wonders if you’re mean enough to *want* me to fail at this.

**FAY.** Miss, that’s . . .

. . . I’m speechless.

**MITZI.** Well I am, too. (*A moment.*)

**FAY.** Let’s practice.

**MITZI.** I’m sorry?

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**FAY.** Your introd—your *introductions*, lets practice so you won't be nervous and mix them up.

**MITZI.** . . . really?

**FAY.** Yes.

**MITZI.** . . . you're not . . . you're not doing this to embarrass me / somehow?

**FAY.** I'm not a terrible person, Mitzi.

**MITZI.** Is that *really* true?

**FAY.** *Miss.*

**MITZI.** (*A beat. Mitzi considers the offer.*) All right let's rehearse, *but please don't do anything cruel.* All right? I don't think I could handle it.

**FAY.** Yes, miss. (*Mitzi stands and makes herself ready. Fay watches. When she's ready, Mitzi nods at Fay.*) Mitzi La France, please meet Hal Astor Herringbone the third.

**MITZI.** How are / you—

**FAY.** *Mm!*

**MITZI.** What'd I—*Oh.* See? I'll never get—(*Fay indicates she could calm down.*)

Right. (*Experiments:*)

*How do you do.*

How do you do.

*How do you do.*

How *do* you do.

How do *you* do.

How do you *do.* How do—which one of those sounded better?

**FAY.** Uhhm. the . . . third one?

**MITZI.** The third one?

**FAY.** I think so?

**MITZI.** Which was the third / one?

**FAY.** Uuuuhhm . . . : "*How do you do.*"

**MITZI.** (*Trying it:*) *How do you do?* —That doesn't sound too British?

**FAY.** Would anyone but the British care about nonsense like this?

**MITZI.** All right, Fay. Introduce us again.

**FAY.** Mitzi La France, please meet Walter Mustardstain-Ipana the third.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** *How do you do? How do you do?* That was good, right? That sounded all right?

**FAY.** *I felt bowled over by your charm and grace. (Mitzi gives Fay a look then returns to her book.)*

**MITZI.** Right. Next: *(Reading:)* “Under no circumstances are you to ask anyone’s name ever. If you did not hear or understand the name during your hostess’s introduction, you must discover it at a later time. Asking implies your hostess is poor at her task or that you are an ineffective listener, and she will be insulted in either case. You may ask a trusted acquaintance if you must or listen carefully for another use of the missing name.” *(She runs down her mental checklist:)* Say “*how do you do?*” Don’t ask the name.

Don’t say “it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Don’t— . . . what was the other thing??

What wa—*dammit.* *(She searches frantically through the pages:)*

Don’t . . . say the name—*don’t ASK the name.*

Don’t say “it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Don’t say “hello,” / . . . what was the other *thing?*

**FAY.** Don’t enjoy yourself, don’t smile, don’t laugh too loudly, don’t not laugh ever, don’t not smile; do smile, but not too broadly, and do laugh always, but never so much that anyone will know you’re enjoying yourself, lest you be considered ill-bred and insult the delicate sensibilities of your hostess, who is so delicate that a “hello” would kill her on the spot, but not so delicate that she feels no pain from the ritual broomstick inserted into her / during her—

**MITZI.** *FAY!*

**FAY.** I’m sorry, miss.

**MITZI.** *Really. (A moment.)*

**FAY.** Tell me, really: you *enjoy* all this bowing and / whatnot.

**MITZI.** Yes.

**FAY.** All right.

**MITZI.** This is how people were meant to behave.

Yes. I enjoy this.

This is the way *civilized* people behave.

**FAY.** All right.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** When all the white elephants have been destroyed, when all our money is taxed into oblivion by the socialists, there will at least be people behaving this way.

**FAY.** I understand calling cards and afternoon musicales are very popular on breadlines.

**MITZI.** *Fay, you are a socialist!*

**FAY.** That was a joke!

**MITZI.** You keep *saying* that . . .

. . . and anyway I can't help it anyway that people are jobless, can I? That's got nothing to do with me, does it? (*She waits for an answer.*) Fay? (*A moment.*) Oh Fay now do you think I've something to do with unemployment in this country? (*A beat.*) I'm not taking a job away from anybody; in fact, I employ *you*. (*A beat.*) Fay. Don't I? (*A moment.*) Fay, I might be about to become unspeakably rude again.

**FAY.** In polite society a sure sign of being ill-bred is being rude to servants.

**MITZI.** In polite society servants who behave as you do are offered a spot on the breadlines, aren't they? Hm? Now explain to me please why you think I have something to do with *breadlines*. (*Silence.*) Fay.

**FAY.** It was just a joke.

**MITZI.** I think you're trying to make me upset / somehow.

**FAY.** I'm trying to finish your hair. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** You know, Fay, if you're unhappy here, for some reason, you understand you're free to join the ranks of the unemployed and I could give this job to someone who actually wants it.

**FAY.** Maybe one of your friends from Faunce Corners? (*Whoops. A moment. They consider each other.*)

**MITZI.** Fay.

**FAY.** I meant / that I was—I mean—

**MITZI.** *I was joking then, but if you really are unhappy we can take care of that right now.*

**FAY.** *Your anxiety in attempting to please these women upsets me.* Miss. I'm worried. about you. All right? I don't like admitting that, I don't, I'd much rather . . . not care what you do I'm embarrassed that I worry but I

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do. (*A quick beat.*) I've come to think of you as a . . . as a sister and. That's why I'm . . . behaving the way I am. today. (*Silence. Mitzi considers Fay.*)

**MITZI.** Fay, is that really true? (*A beat.*)

**FAY.** Yes. (*A moment. Mitzi continues studying Fay. Then:*)

**MITZI.** *Fay, you're such a dear!* . . . Granted, I wish you could show your affection in less terrorizing ways.

**FAY.** I've always had a cutting sense of humor.

**MITZI.** Yes but even *knives* dull with use.

**FAY.** *Well.*

**MITZI.** Anything worth having in life *is* worth the anxiety; it's worth a lot *more*. Maybe I'll have to give everything to have it, but when I'm ensconced in my own white elephant, I'll be suffering luxury problems. If forced to suffer something, I'd rather suffer luxury problems than anything else.

**FAY.** That's hard to argue with.

**MITZI.** Yes, it is.

**FAY.** Well. I think I'm done. With your hair. Do you like it? (*Mitzi inspects it. And inspects it. And inspects it. Finally:*)

**MITZI.** Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii do. I do; I like it. Now just the—(*She's interrupted by the sound of something banging outside. They both rush to the window.*)

**FAY.** Oh God.

**MITZI.** The wind just ripped that weathervane right off the Slocums' roof!

**FAY.** The sky's gone purple. That wind. This is more than a storm.

**MITZI.** I hope it doesn't impale anyone.

**FAY.** Miss, are you sure you want to go out in this weather?

**MITZI.** Haven't we already had enough unpleasantness today?

**FAY.** Allow me to make the case, miss, that perhaps a large and heavy weathervane flying off a roof and across the neighbor's lawn is a sign it's best to stay in.

**MITZI.** . . . or perhaps it's a sign the Slocums have bad taste. Hm?

**FAY.** Miss.

**MITZI.** The Lord works in mysterious ways, Fay.

**FAY.** Miss.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** I think I'm ready / to go.

**FAY.** Miss, please, / simply consider—

**MITZI.** You've made your opinion clear, Fay, thank you. I may be a snob, but I'm not stupid.

**FAY.** It's not safe.

**MITZI.** It's a passing shower. (*More banging and clanging.*)

**FAY.** Passing showers don't rip iron structures off roofs.

**MITZI.** A gust of wind caught it just the right way, / these things happen.

**FAY.** Miss: we'll *explain* to Mrs. Vermaile. She'll understand, and I have no doubt you'll receive / another invitation soon.

**MITZI.** Mrs. Vermaile will not understand; she's earned the right not to understand, and she most certainly will never invite me again. You manage one chance. One. I'm not risking it.

**FAY.** I'll plead your case myself, then; / I'll speak to—

**MITZI.** Ah yes, Fay, I'm certain she'll welcome my *maid* into her sitting room, pour you some tea, and listen to anything you have to say.

**FAY.** I know storms.

**MITZI.** So you know they're a foolish thing to fear.

**FAY.** May I point out then miss that it's not only your safety you're risking. Sullivan and I have to venture out with you.

**MITZI.** Yes, which is your *job*, which is what you're *employed to do*. And you may be certain, Fay, that there are policeman and doctors and fireman and nurses not complaining that they have to go out into the drizzle right now, because they understand that they have responsibilities.

In the meantime, Fay, I'm a New Englander. Eh? We both are. No amount of . . . *mist* is going to stop me taking tea with Lydia Vermaile, I don't care how many tacky accessories are ripped from their fastenings, do you understand me, Fay? (*A beat.*)

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** Excellent, Fay. I sincerely hope that's true. (*A moment.*) Now: Tell Sullivan to pull the car around. I will be right down.

(*A moment. Fay goes. Mitzi takes one last look in the mirror and starts to exit. She's stopped by another crash. She runs to the window to see the source. Whatever it is, it's grim. Should she go? She pulls herself together. Of course she should. She sweeps out.*)

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

### II. WELCOME TO IT

*An hour or so later. The dressing room at Crestbreak House, off Bellevue. Fay sits alone, watching the storm through a window. She doesn't like what she sees. She clutches her bag tightly. She hasn't moved in a while. She's not the same person she was in the last scene; she's rigid and anxious. Mitzi appears and sees Fay. Fay doesn't see her. Mitzi watches for a moment, then moves to a mirror and checks her hair. It's mussed from the wind. She attempts to fix it.*

**MITZI.** If nothing else, I can take stock in the fact that I arrived on time when all the other guests are late. That has to mean something, no? *(A beat.)*

I think that surprised her. In a good way. And I think she likes my dress, too, Fay, so . . . you were right about that. And I was wrong.

I was *wrong*, Fay. Hear that? . . . *(She laughs, attempting a casual air. A moment. Fay doesn't appear to be listening.)*

Either way, she was much pleasanter than I'd imagined and has to be a good sign, too, right? *(A beat.)* . . . unless of course she's just being polite and is normally different with everyone.

Either way I'll find out soon.

. . . To be honest I'm still not sure I've actually been invited, if you can imagine that, Fay. *(Beat. She turns to Fay.)* Anyway, Fay. Can we just . . . ? *(She indicates the luxury.)* Isn't this the most exceptional research . . . ? For your piece, I mean. Your novel. This is the story you could tell. That tale you told me of the young woman so wronged by her mother and tricked in two desperate marriages? Against her *will* . . . ? Fay, this is the setting for your novel. Are you absorbing it all? *(She waits for Fay to respond . . .)* Fay? *(A beat.)* Fine. *(Returns to the mirror.)*

Anyway, if I were you, I'd be inhaling all the atmosphere here, and really I would like you to write that story as a book because, honestly, I think that's a book that would sell.

—OH! Fay!!! If you dedicated it to *me* . . . ?

. . . I mean you don't have to, obviously, but if you *did* . . .

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“Dedicated to my dear friend and companion, my muse and friend, Mitzi La France . . . ” Everyone at home would eat their—*(Realizes she’s being ignored, she turns to Fay.)* You know, Fay, if you’re angry with me, the least you could do is engage. I don’t love it when you yell at me, but the silent treatment is worse. And isn’t it just a little bit peevish? Hm? A tiny bit immature? We’re past that, after all these months, aren’t we? . . . After all, I’m giving you the chance to do research on your book! *(Studies Fay. Waits.) (Waits more.) (Gives up. Sinks little.)* Anyway. If I were a writer in aspiration, I think I’d be—*(There’s a bang or a gust of wind—something loud from outside.)*

**FAY.** *I’d like to tender my resignation.*

**MITZI.** I’m sorry?

**FAY.** I was—*(A moment.)* . . . I was just—thinking about what you, what you said before and you’re right, I’ve been—I’m being—I’m incredibly bad at my job and I think you would be better with someone else, and I’d like to tender my resignation. *(A moment. Mitzi is stunned.)* So . . . there. *(Beat.)*

**MITZI.** What are you saying, Fay?

**FAY.** That . . . wasn’t clear? / I’m—

**MITZI.** Is that really what you want? *(A tiny, tiny beat.)*

**FAY.** Yes.

**MITZI.** . . . oh. *(A moment. Mitzi is bowled over.)*

**FAY.** Do you accept?

**MITZI.** . . . I . . . do I have any other choice?

**FAY.** Then I’ll be going now, / miss. Thank—

**MITZI.** *No but I—*No but you can’t not yet we’re in the middle of a—we’re in the—you can’t no you can’t leave until—I don’t accept your resignation until after / this engagement.

**FAY.** But that’s not how it works you accept it / or not.

**MITZI.** But I’m, Fay I’m— . . . Fay, look at me. *(Fay doesn’t look at her.)*

Fay, look at me. *(A beat. Fay turns to her.)* Do you really want to leave?

Or do you want to leave because of the storm? *(Silence.)* Fay, we’re safe here. We couldn’t be any safer than here, this place is a fortress. *(Fay watches her for a moment. She decides:)*

**FAY.** Sullivan hasn’t made it back to the house, miss.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** I'm sorry?

**FAY.** Mrs. Linsky called Mrs. Vermaile's housekeeper. They gave me the message. He hasn't returned and he should have more than forty-five minutes ago.

**MITZI.** . . . well what else did she say?

**FAY.** The line cut out before she could say more. Or anyway that's what the maid said she said.

**MITZI.** Well, all right he's . . . had car trouble certainly, or . . . —Or what's more likely, Fay, hm? Is that he stopped to buy a bottle of something, in which case my father will be having yet another serious conversation with him as well.

**FAY.** Or he's been swept off the road and into the sea.

**MITZI.** Fay you're being ridiculous / with this—

**FAY.** It doesn't take forty-five minutes to buy a bottle, miss. *(A beat.)*

**MITZI.** Then it's car trouble.

**FAY.** *Mitzi.*

**MITZI.** *(Bristles at the use of her first name, but recognizes she's got no leverage here.)* He's fine. People are fine. Everyone's fine, he'll be fine.

**FAY.** I beg you to / let me—

**MITZI.** Things like what you're suggesting only happen in . . . *Rebecca.* *(Tiny beat.)* Now, / I need you to . . .

**FAY.** *(Going.)* I'm leaving miss, whether you accept my / resignation or not.

**MITZI.** *Well but Fay you can't. (A moment. FAY looks at MITZI and waits for a reason to stay. MITZI can't think of one.)* It's . . . a marble fortress, these walls, you're safer here than out there and anyway I . . . *(Fay looks at her, like "what?")* . . . I need you to fix my hair . . . *(Fay starts out.)* You're safer here than anywhere, Fay; that part is true, you can't deny that part. *(A moment. FAY glances out the window.)* Please, Fay. After this anything you—I'll give you whatever you need, whatever, you can never see me again, but . . . *(A moment. Fay is torn. Mitzi looks at her. "Please." A very long moment. Fay goes to Mitzi and works on her hair. A long silence.)* . . . I botched my introduction. I said "how are you" instead of "how do you do."

**FAY.** Well . . .

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** She didn't seem to notice.

Then again she'd never let on, would she?

They're so well-trained, these women. You know?

It stuns me the amount of discipline they've achieved in a lifetime.

They betray nothing with their faces and voices.

Not surprise, not irritation . . .

**FAY.** . . . not joy.

**MITZI.** No, not that either. (*Considers.*) I can't imagine I'll ever master it. I'm far too short-tempered.

**FAY.** You're young yet, miss. After a time, all women are capable of it.

**MITZI.** I suppose. (*Silence as Fay finishes Mitzi's hair. Eventually:*) I'm sorry I was—I'm sorry I said what I said the way I said it at the house, Fay. All right?

**FAY.** That's not what / I'm resigning—

**MITZI.** You do need to adjust your priorities, that's all I'm trying to explain to you.

**FAY.** I understand that's / what you think, miss.

**MITZI.** What I'm what I'm *saying*: or *trying* to: And this isn't *easy*: Is that I enjoy your opinions, and (you may not believe this) I value them. I do. My problem is not that you have opinions, or that you express them, my problem is that once I've made up my mind on something you continue to challenge me. You talk to me like I'm a child; like I'm a fool, do you—can you see that that might frustrate me if I did something like that to you?

**FAY.** (*Quick beat.*) Yes, that would be frustrating, miss; that's true.

**MITZI.** My point is, make whatever suggestions you wish, Fay, but if I dismiss them, they're dismissed. I'm not a simp. Do you understand?

**FAY.** I do.

**MITZI.** Is that better?

**FAY.** Your hair?

**MITZI.** Us. Fay.

I'm asking / will you—

**FAY.** I was worried about our safety—*your* safety. Miss.

**MITZI.** And I appreciate that. And we're safe.

**FAY.** Not Sullivan.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** *Sullivan is fine, he's fine, why do you—(A moment.)* I wish you wouldn't resign. Is my point. *(A moment.)*

**FAY.** Hair alright? *(A moment. Mitzi waits for Fay to respond to her, but Fay indicates Mitzi's hair. A beat. Mitzi looks at it.)*

**MITZI.** It is, yes. Thank you, Fay. *(A moment. Mitzi doesn't move.)*

**FAY.** Did you need something else? *(A beat.)*

**MITZI.** . . . Mrs. Vermaile and I were having a riveting discussion about the new preservation society, but she begged my pardon and asked if I'd mind if she went to phone those of her guests who are late and I said I wanted to fix my hair anyway, so . . . I've got a bit of time.

**FAY.** I see. *(Silence.)*

**MITZI.** She hates lateness.

**FAY.** I'm told. *(Silence.)*

**MITZI.** Do you know. . . : she once made her butler send people home for arriving more than three minutes after the time on her invitation?

**FAY.** Punctilious.

**MITZI.** . . . yes. *(Beat.)* You've been talking to her maids?

**FAY.** Yes.

**MITZI.** Well and I think that's good. You should have some contact with them, they may teach you quite a lot.

**FAY.** They already have.

**MITZI.** And what have they taught you so far, Fay Gaylord?

**FAY.** . . . . Hostesses hate lateness. *(A beat.)*

**MITZI.** Yes. *(A moment)* . . . I appreciate your fears, Fay, I do. Truly. I need you to understand that. But everything is fine; everyone's fine. And it's for me to worry about everyone's safety, not you. And my employees should trust that I have their well-being in mind. Yes? And Sullivan is fine, Fay. I know that, Fay, and deep down? You do, too. We all are fine. Yes? *(She waits for a response. None comes.)* Well. Whether you'll ever believe me or not, I did have your well-being in mind. Now. I should see if Mrs. Vermaile is finished. *(She goes. A moment.)*

**FAY.** You have only yourself in mind, just like Mrs. Vermaile.

**MITZI.** *(Returning.)* What did you say?

**FAY.** Hm?

**MITZI.** What did you / say to—

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**FAY.** I said / “you have—”

**MITZI.** I’m not gone five seconds before you insult me? And behind my back that way?

**FAY.** I was playing with you.

**MITZI.** In what game does a player leave the room to overhear herself insulted?

**FAY.** (*Tiny beat.*) Bridge.

**MITZI.** *Fay!*

**FAY.** When you were a little girl and your father brought you into the mills, you had such a sense of humor, you laughed, you played jokes. I’m sorry to see you’ve lost that.

**MITZI.** Fay, I’ve never set foot inside a mill.

**FAY.** Of course you have, I remember it.

**MITZI.** Well, I don’t.

**FAY.** Maybe you got clocked on the head and forgot about it.

**MITZI.** Fay I’m worried you’re losing your grip.

**FAY.** You used to be able to joke.

**MITZI.** I can joke, Fay, when jokes are appropriate and when jokes are funny, but these things you poke at me aren’t jokes, they’re accusations.

**FAY.** You’re reading me incorrectly.

**MITZI.** Oh, because I’m stupid?

**FAY.** I can’t guess the reason miss, but you’re reading me incorrectly. (*A beat.*)

**MITZI.** You’re riling me because you want me to let you go / and that’s the reason for—

**FAY.** I told you earlier when I’m anxious my . . . things spill out in weird ways.

**MITZI.** So you’re not trying to hurt me?

**FAY.** . . . No.

**MITZI.** Fay . . . (*A long moment.*) Do you like me, Fay?

**FAY.** Pardon?

**MITZI.** Do you like me?

**FAY.** That’s ridiculous, of course I like / you miss.

**MITZI.** No but I mean . . . do you *like* me. —Suppose you met me at a social gathering, for example, if we were introduced, would you like me?

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**FAY.** Why are you asking me that?

**MITZI.** Would you? *(A moment.)*

**FAY.** I don't like hypotheticals, miss. It's like sinning with nothing to show for it.

**MITZI.** Answer me.

**FAY.** I . . . I mean I assume I would . . .

Providing of course you remembered to say "how do you do" instead / of something else, which would—

**MITZI.** *Fay, can't you take anything seriously?*

**FAY.** I think I've made it clear I take many things / seriously.

**MITZI.** If we met socially, would we be friends? *(A moment. Mitzi reads Fay's inability to respond.)* I see.

**FAY.** Oh, of course we would.

**MITZI.** . . . You really do dislike me.

**FAY.** I do not.

**MITZI.** You, but you rile me and accuse me of putting my concern for my status over the safety of my employees / and then you . . .

**FAY.** That's because you did, whatever you think your motives are, you did. *(Mitzi is stumped. Silence as she attempts to reconcile this. Mitzi is still trying to regain her footing. It takes some time.)*

**MITZI.** . . . When we get back to the house this evening, we will be having, I assure you, a long conversation about what I will and won't allow from my servants, how I will and will not be spoken do.

It's my fault, Fay. I've been too lax. I've been too permissible. Father said so and I was—but now I agree. You need to learn your place. *(She starts out.)*

**FAY.** *(Almost, almost not meant to be heard—but meant to be heard:)* Yes, miss. Enjoy your last-resort replacement lunch. *(A beat. Mitzi returns.)*

**MITZI.** What?

What did / you just—

**FAY.** Oh, didn't I share that lesson, too? That was the other thing I learned from the maids. See, Mrs. Vermaile originally invited Sylvia Bartlett to tea, but she had to decline because she'd left for the city. Madame V needed someone to fill that chair, but the season's over and the desirable

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

girls are back in New York, and Mrs. Vermaile was desperate. She called Betsy Welch, but she's back at school. So, Mrs. Vermaile asked you. She didn't really want to, but as it's off-season she imagined she could settle. As you know from *The Anthology of Social Composure*, a lady needs an even number to tea. *(The storm intensifies.)*

**MITZI.** *(This is a dare.)* You're saying that to hurt me.

**FAY.** *(This is, too.)* Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** You admit it.

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** I don-I don't . . . unders—And it's a lie, isn't it? Fay? A lie you made up to hurt me.

**FAY.** No miss.

**MITZI.** No?

**FAY.** Yes.

**MITZI.** No it's a lie?

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** Then it's a lie.

**FAY.** No, miss.

**MITZI.** *Which is it?*

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** —Fay don't think I won't slap your face.

**FAY.** I've no doubt you would, miss.

**MITZI.** You said that to hurt me.

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** And it was a lie.

**FAY.** *(Tiny beat.)* No, miss.

**MITZI.** *(Tiny beat.)* You're lying.

**FAY.** Whatever you wish, miss.

**MITZI.** *Are you lying, or aren't you?*

**FAY.** Does it matter?

**MITZI.** You, I . . . *(Silence. Mitzi doesn't know what to do. She starts to storm out, but she turns back.)* Well, I don't care if I am a fill-in, because that's the way it works. That's the way it—she wouldn't have invited me otherwise and this is an opportunity I wouldn't have gotten and when I demonstrate to her how ready I am then she'll have me back every day!

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**FAY.** She told her maid you're a contemptible little climber, exactly the kind she hates, but desperate times call for desperate invitations.

**MITZI.** You're lying.

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** You're making that up.

**FAY.** Yes, miss.

**MITZI.** She'd never say something like that even if she thought it; she's far too trained. These kinds of women don't betray things like that to anyone other than their own kind.

**FAY.** As you wish, miss.

Though as you demonstrated today, people behave differently when they're alone with their servants than when they're in public.

**MITZI.** How did I demonstrate that?

**FAY.** The way you treat me—and you told me today you'd break the rules of polite society by calling me Fay when we're alone.

**MITZI.** That's a there's a there's a difference between what one calls a—*that's an entirely different thing!* And, let's—

. . . Let's not forget how I brought you here to do research for your novel! I was . . . Right? Fay? I was . . . thinking of *your* future, *your* well-being, *your* dreams . . .

Wasn't I, Fay? (*Beat.*) Wasn't I, Fay? (*A test . . .*)

**FAY.** As you wish, miss.

**MITZI.** *I cared enough to ask about what you want and who you are to bring you to this place to give you what you don't even know you need!* (*Silence.*) Fay! (*Silence.*) (*Silence . . . Oh, God . . .*)—And anyway I'm not Mrs. Vermaile. She's lived this life far longer than I have.

**FAY.** That's true, miss. (*Silence.*)

**MITZI.** Do you know, as hurtful as you're being, Fay, I'm glad I've discovered this side of you.

**FAY.** Which side is that, miss?

**MITZI.** The selfish side.

**FAY.** Selfish, miss?

**MITZI.** And cruel.

**FAY.** And how am I selfish and cruel, miss?

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**MITZI.** . . . By hurting me enough to force me to give you what you want.

**FAY.** And is that more or less selfish than endangering all of us to get what *you* want?

**MITZI.** You know you—

You—

Fay, if it weren't for me, Fay, you'd still be weaving fabric in a sweaty, humid mill, / for only—

**FAY.** No, I wouldn't because your father sold his mills and closed them and moved them south and like everyone else in Faunce Corners I lost my job at precisely the moment your father made the fortune that allows you this brilliant opportunity. (*A beat.*)

**MITZI.** Without me you'd be on the street.

**FAY.** Without your *father* I'd be on the street.

**MITZI.** I hired you.

**FAY.** Your father hired me.

**MITZI.** That's nonsense, / I'm the one—

**FAY.** He allowed you to think you had a choice because he knew you'd pitch a fit if you didn't, but you didn't have a choice, he brought in those other women to make me more desirable to you. Your father hired me; your father pays my wages.

You are a useless child who is at best *third* in line to fill in for better women at off-season luncheons. (*A beat. Mitzi suddenly slaps Fay in the face.*) And you're ill-bred. (*Long, long, heated silence.*) You'd better get out there. You don't want to keep your hostess waiting.

**MITZI.** I'm not going out there. I could never go out there now.

**FAY.** You risked our lives to get here; you'd better enjoy it.

**MITZI.** How *dare* you speak to me like this, / how dare—

**FAY.** I don't work for you anymore.

**MITZI.** You'll never work for anyone again if I / can help it.

**FAY.** Go eat your lunch.

**MITZI.** I can't go out there, she thinks I'm a fool! She's upstairs laughing at me right now.

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**FAY.** No, she's not laughing at you, Mitzi. Her face would crack if she laughed, and anyway you said it was worth anything to live the life you want.

**MITZI.** Tell the butler to have Sullivan bring the car around.

**FAY.** I don't *work* for you anymore, miss.

And Sullivan is off spending your father's money getting drunk, remember? (*A moment.*) You wanted to be here, you're having lunch with that old worm woman whether you like it or not. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** . . . Tell me you're lying, Fay. (*Waits.*) Tell me you're lying and I'll go out there.

**FAY.** I can't do that, miss.

**MITZI.** *Why?*

**FAY.** Because you wouldn't believe me.

**MITZI.** Tell me you're lying even if you lie just so I can face that woman again. Fay it's the least you could do!

**FAY.** The least I could do is nothing, which is what / I'm doing instead.

**MITZI.** *Please Fay tell me you're lying! (A moment.)*

**FAY.** I'm lying. (*A beat.*)

**MITZI.** About which part?

**FAY.** Mitzi / this is ridi—

**MITZI.** I need you to tell me which part, Fay, please I have go out there and *face* her now, and you've *wrecked* me.

**FAY.** You should have thought of that before, miss.

**MITZI.** *Please lie to me, Fay! (A moment. Fay looks at her. A moment.)*

**FAY.** She didn't say those things about you. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** No?

**FAY.** In fact she finds you charming.

**MITZI.** She does. (?)

**FAY.** She's amazed given your upbringing that you're so well-bred and capable of handling the pressures of a social gathering such as this. (*A moment.*)

**MITZI.** Yes she does. Yes. Because all of those things are true.

Now: I'm going to meet my hostess for lunch. (*A moment. She can't make herself believe any of it.*) She said those terrible things about me, didn't she? (*A moment.*)

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**MITZI.** . . . Why did you take this job, Fay? Hm?

You've hated it from the start, and you clearly detest me.

Was it revenge?

Did you want to destroy me because my father destroyed your fairy tale life working in a mill?

Was that it, Fay, or something else?

Because honestly I can't begin to imagine.

**FAY.** Well, you just did.

**MITZI.** Well, which is it?

**FAY.** Which do you think?

**MITZI.** If I had to guess I'd say, it's revenge.

**FAY.** Yes?

**MITZI.** If my father's fathers hadn't built those mills there would've been no jobs for you at all. You want to make us pay. Because you're angry, you're ungrateful and jealous. *Nobody would have jobs if it weren't for men like my father.*

**FAY.** Nobody would *need* jobs if it weren't for men / like your father.

**MITZI.** You're spiteful, Fay, not because of the storm, not because of—but because now you've seen it, you want this life and you will never have it.

**FAY.** I already have it, you silly child.

**MITZI.** What you—what?

**FAY.** Being taken advantage of? Told what to say and how to say it, when to bow and when not to? That's my life. And now it's yours. You and me are the same, Mitzi.

**MITZI.** That is not what I am.

**FAY.** That's exactly what you are. You bow, you curtsy, you follow the rules. You beg for approval behave as you should you defer. You don't laugh too loud, don't say too much, don't speak unless you're spoke to.

That's exactly my life at the mill; that's exactly what I do for you.

But at least I got paid for it; you don't even get that. *(A beat. MITZI dissolves onto the divan.)* Oh get up, this isn't *Gone With the Wind*.

**MITZI.** You're loving this, you're heartless! I am not my father!

**FAY.** No but you're well on your way.

**MITZI.** And how am I like that?

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**FAY.** The ocean is swallowing us whole, but you can't be bothered with that. You dismissed me, dismissed the storm, and told me I should be ashamed of myself for suggesting we stay home when police and doctors and fireman and nurses are braving the storm . . . Those people are out saving lives, Mitzi; not attending some old lady's *lunch*.

You think your needs are as valuable as the needs of a dying man.

No, you're not your father; not quite your father, not *yet*.

And by the way in terms of my cruelty and heartlessness, if you'd taken my advice this morning you never would have wound up in this position. When I said I was worried for you I meant it; I was worried about all of us, you included, but this luncheon was more important. And I'm cruel to you; I'm the heartless one. (*Silence.*) (*The dinner gong goes.*) The bell tolls for you, Mitzi. (*A moment.*) Miss, that's the dinner gong; luncheon is served. (*Mitzi doesn't move.*) Get up. (*Fay advances at Mitzi and pulls her up. It's a struggle, as Mitzi makes herself limp and rag-like.*) Get up! (*More struggle.*) Get up you stupid girl! (*Fay slaps Mitzi in the face. Mitzi, shocked, stands and backs away from Fay. She starts to run in the other direction, but Fay grabs her.*)

You are having lunch with that old woman, Mitzi. You're eating her food and making small talk and bowing and kissing her wrinkled ass all afternoon, because if you really want this life, then this is what you do.

*That's the life you wanted; that's the life these women lead.*

That's why they betray so little.

They've led lives of cheating husbands and sons killed in wars and dinner parties during which they could confess nothing eating them inside. Two husbands left Mrs. Vermaile for younger girls; *all* she has is this house, this white elephant, and her *judgments*.

You wanted this life, Mitzi? Welcome to it.

Stand up, plaster on that pleasant face, stuff your face with salmon cakes and cucumber roulades and *get used to it*, society girl. Welcome to your own white elephant. (*Silence.*) (*The gong goes again.*) Don't keep her waiting. Mrs. Vermaile doesn't take kindly to lateness. (*Mitzi stands silently for a moment, and then snaps herself out. She goes to the mirror and looks at herself. She slaps the cheek Fay didn't slap, so it's also red.*)

**MITZI.** Am I even?

## GIRL ON A WHITE ELEPHANT

**FAY.** Like a virgin bride.

**MITZI.** Well then. Here I go. *(And she does. A moment. Fay allows herself to dissolve onto the divan, now. She wrestles with her actions. A banging from the storm outside. She goes to the window.)*

**FAY.** Oh God. *(She watches the storm, it's at its height. A moment. Mitzi returns.)*

**MITZI.** Mrs. Vermaile believes that the storm has gotten too dangerous and has cancelled this afternoon's luncheon. She would like to offer us a place, but all the guest rooms and visiting servants quarters have been closed for the season, but she's happy to have the butler tell Sullivan to bring the car around. *(Silence . . . And then Fay starts laughing . . . She laughs and laughs . . . She goes over and collects her bag.)* Fay? *(Fay doesn't respond. She puts on her coat and exits, laughing.)* Fay, where are you—*Fay where are you going get back here this instant. (Fay doesn't look back.)* Fay?! *Fay please! (Mitzi is alone. There's another crash outside—it would be cool if the window could blow in, but if not, something should happen that terrifies Mitzi. She jumps. A moment. She's very alone . . .)*

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