

I AM A MUSE

Carya Gish



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TO MATT



I am a muse. I am your inspiration and your desperation. I am your obsession and your poison. I am your guide. I make you see the light and I reveal the darkness in you. I come and go as I please; I travel through time and space. I satisfy your needs and I tolerate your fears. I play with you, I energise you and I exhaust you. I am your muse.

January

PART I

Alda

It has been happening more and more over the past five years. The dread of the morning, the wave of panic flooding in as I open my eyes and guess the irregular bumps and cracks on the yellowing ceiling above our bed.

Only a new day. Another one.

At the same time numb and alert, my mind registers the empty space next to me, wonders at the smoothness of the pillow and sheet and at the absence of any human smell other than mine within the bedding. And then I smile; this kind of indulgent, understanding, tender, possessive, admiring, self-reassuring smile of a woman in love... Yet another sleepless night for him, spent in the vast downstairs studio among the canvases and brushes and pots and dry flowers and hanging drapes. I wonder: what wonderful picture is he going to unveil for me when I go to him?

But then, as it always does, my smile freezes after a few seconds with the realisation that there won't be any unveiling of any picture anymore, ever. The great sadness I know so well comes back so fast, so impatiently. And I lie here, my heart yet again broken into a thousand sharp and cutting shards, turned towards the empty half of the bed, the quilt covering me up to my very, very cold nose. The room smells of cold

fireplace ashes, frozen dust, weak lavender and vaguely damp wood. I lie there, not daring to move, not wanting to leave the refuge of my solitary bed. I lie there, contemplating yet another barren day.

The imperceptible glow of the young morning filters through the thick curtains and plays on the irregular walls of the shadowy bedroom. A few birds have been venturing out in the cold January morning, and I can hear them courageously attempt to sing through the frozen air. The seagulls are not out yet, or at least, I cannot hear their shrieks. The house creaks and whispers as all old houses do, especially in extreme weather. For all the years I've been living here, I have become accustomed to the strange animal-like quality of the house. It has become a character in my story, in *our* history.

By now I have almost shaken the daily mental dread of the morning. I know that getting up is going to hurt and that things will be rather unpleasant until I have managed to light up the fire. I could switch on the large electric radiators we have placed in most rooms, but they can be costly. I only really need to warm up the lounge, as it is the room in which I spend most of my time, these days. The lounge has become the lair in which I spend the long winter hours; it is the only place where I feel safe, nowadays.

Slowly, with resignation and precaution, I emerge from under the multi-layered woollen mass that is my bed. I can feel myself wince, my body protesting as the cold air already tries to penetrate the thick cotton nightdress I am wearing, and I shiver while I pick up the various items of clothing I have left on purpose on the old armchair next to the bed. Every gesture is laboured, as it takes a real effort to get my old bones, rigid muscles and knotted nerves all working satisfactorily, worn out as they are by all those years of living my life. I feel like a translucent ghost struggling in the cold air.

I am completely alone in the house, and it is this acute loneliness I am thinking about just now whilst I wrap myself up in several heavy shawls and put on some additional thick socks to protect my fragile skin against the low temperature. I approach the window and throw the heavy curtains apart, disturbing the dust that I have been incapable of dislodging since the autumn.

The morning light is now stronger if still incredibly pale. The inside of the window is shiny, covered in frost. I can barely see outside, only fractions of the twisted branches of the trees still clutching the last

remains of the night. In the spring, the view from this very window is luxuriant, exploding into various shades of green, the vivid colours of the bushes and the flowers. Then, the house appears to be swallowed up by the trees; it disappears into its own cocoon of greenery.

But there are still so many long, cold, empty weeks to go before any of the first signs of spring manifests itself. Every year, I wonder whether I will ever see the house and the garden in the spring and summer again; every year I think "*This is it, this might be my last spring, my last summer?*" and it renders me incredibly, irrationally sad. Not frightened, only sad, because every year for the past five years, I have been expecting inspiration to come back to me during those long, warmer days of spring and summer. I haven't lost faith in my imagination, I have kept believing in my own ability to create. I know it is still there, after all those years, despite the sorrow, the pain, the hurt, the ageing of the body and the mind, the decaying of the self. But every year, I wait and I wait and relief doesn't come. After 60 years of complete freedom, my creative energy has been taken away from me... It is now buried with his ashes under the majestic willow tree he loved so much.

I have been thinking about all this standing here, immobile and my eyes shut, in front of the icy window, my woollen fingerless glove against the frozen glass. With a start, I open my eyes and quickly move my hand away from the window. Where the woollen palm has been resting, the frost has melted and created a little round porthole through which I can now see my poor naked trees shivering under a pallid winter sun. I can guess the greyness of the sea beyond my gates and vaguely crave the reassuring sound of the crashing waves.

The skin of my face dry and tight over the bones, very much aware of the pervading cold in the room, I switch back to the real world in order to act in a practical manner, an essential tool for survival.

And so I cross the room and go down to the floor below, where I stop for a few seconds in front of the double door leading to his studio; I am not sure why, I probably do not know myself. I have been having these very few seconds of hesitation in front of these wooden panels every single morning for the past five years. What am I expecting, really, deep down? That he would open the door with the usual flourish, having heard the floorboards in the bedroom above his head creak, knowing that I was now awake and on my way to the kitchen, and beg for a pot of very

hot and very sweet tea to be brought to him? As usual, I sadly shake my head and resume hurriedly to the kitchen.

And there starts yet another day which probably will mostly be filled with the mundane tasks of the morning: drinking hot tea, forcing myself to eat something, lighting the fire in the lounge. I'll be trying to keep this old house of mine together, mending things, checking on the cat that is probably asleep somewhere in the not so warm belly of the house. At some point, I might put on my thickest coat and my silly woollen hat and venture on the small path that leads straight to the sea. And I will smell the crisp and salty air and feel invigorated by the strength of Nature and will take comfort in it.

Then I will retreat to my beloved lounge once again, the cat smugly keeping within short distance of the fire. Maybe today I will be released from my curse and my muse will come back to inspire me with images or words, whichever she likes. But she has been more of a traitor these past few years and has never come to my rescue in my hours of need. Maybe this is because *I* was *his* muse for all those years, and when he passed away, the muse I was died off and my own went away with her. But I have never given up on her.

When she is done with her mourning, she will reappear, a lonely shadow in the corner of the lounge, and she will open her arms and we will lock ourselves in an embrace, and we will cry and cry, happy to have found each other again, happy to start creating together again.

I have been gone too far inside my head again. I stare at the tall, sandy-coloured mug in front of me: the tea is now cold and because I have left the tea bag in, it has now acquired a colour close to that of espresso coffee. With a sigh, I get up and go to the sink in which I pour the over-brewed liquid with a grimace of disgust.

Somewhere in the house, the phone starts ringing for the first time in weeks, or is it in months? I stubbornly ignore the alien shrill as it echoes around the building.

PART II

Constance

ONE

*

The Crimson Lady invites you to

THE PLEASURE GARDENS 1ST ANNIVERSARY

«The delight of all persons of reputation and taste!»

Come and experience live music, performance, artistry, literature, high tea and fluffy cakes, cocktails and petit-fours, dressing up and dressing gowns!

We are keeping the spirit of the legendary Pleasure Gardens alive!

*

Constance Blackwell had taken refuge for a while in her beloved red-walled office. Having kicked off her peep-toed high heels, she was reclining in her favourite chair, a battered, second hand old soldier of a thing covered in tattered tartan fabric. Her stocking feet were both propped up on her desk and she was sipping a fragrant, well-deserved cup of tea. She closed her eyes for a moment to savour the silence.

Her office was situated on the first floor of the warehouse building, away from the front door and the busy road. The back street below was quiet enough, devoid of traffic and mainly used by the surrounding shops and residents to go about their business. The premises opposite her window had been empty for a while, but then some new residents had recently taken possession of the place and it had already

proven to be quite entertaining. This being January, darkness would fall way before Constance was out of the office and she would be able to allow herself to get distracted by the life of her new opposite neighbours.

They were very young and probably involved in the fashion industry. They obviously had quite a lot of money too, or at least their parents had. Constance knew that the lofts in the building were quite sought after; not refurbished in the extreme to suit city workers' ostentatious tastes but more adapted to creative types who liked their comfort peppered with a mixture of shabby chic or subtle urban minimalism.

The huge room Constance could see from her window was still bare of any kind of furniture bar some thick, fluffy rugs and piled-up cardboard boxes, and she had seen a willowy, long-haired girl wander around the room carrying boxes, heaps of clothes which probably got thrown onto a pile in a corner. There had been quite a few faceless people around, most sporting the obligatory asymmetrical haircut and skinny jeans of the über-trendy East End-dwelling hipsters. She wondered whether they would be intrigued enough by the flyers she had pushed through their letter box to come and spend the night at The Gardens.

It didn't really matter that much if they turned up or not. They were already serving their purpose, offering Constance a slice of the spectacle of urban life on which she could spy on and get inspiration from. They were young, beautiful and glamorous in their own way; that was all she needed and that was the way she preferred it. She would manage to make their acquaintance one way or the other, and she would charm them into becoming part of her vast network of connections. She might even be able to get them involved in the life of The Hive; they were exactly the type of people she wanted there; they could prove useful, depending on their degree of vacuity.

Constance Blackwell had been spending the last few weeks preparing The Pleasure Gardens' first anniversary and, to her annoyance, she was now feeling utterly exhausted by the proceedings. Performers had been booked months in advance, the décor had been completely redone to make sure that the celebration of The Gardens' first year of existence reflected its uniqueness.

One year, already! And a complete, astonishing success! Who could have known that she would be so good at it? She had never, ever done anything remotely like it. So then, why was it that she was feeling

oddly unsociable, almost dreading having to go downstairs to check on her crowded, noisy, theatrical, fabulous creature? She even found that a funny kind of heaviness in her throat was preventing her from swallowing her tea properly.

She sighed and finished her cup nonetheless, putting the saucer and cup on her desk which was covered with piles of files, books, notebooks and pens.

Oh dear, she thought, I am due a good sorting out, very soon...

Constance got up, picked up her make-up bag and walked to the small en-suite bathroom. After having turned the light on, she then proceeded to brush her teeth and adjust her make-up: checking on the curved line of the eyeliner, the thickness of the mascara on her eyelashes; re-powdering her luminescent face, adding a layer of crimson lipstick to her already aggressively red lips. Her red hair was shining like silk; the steely determination was restored to her green eyes – undermined by the slight redness of the white. She tugged at her red dress to make sure that the fabric was falling properly and topped up her spicy perfume.

Only then, she felt ready. She was once again the Crimson Lady, the host of one of London's most successful secrets. She liked playing her role as a mysterious, secretive Femme Fatale, efficient and untouchable, a side of her personality she completely indulged in, effortlessly. That's what she had always wanted to be and tonight, she had once again the opportunity to play...

She picked up her coat, as she knew she would at some point go and stand outside for a while to have a chat with the doormen and to greet a few of the guests.

The landing felt slightly chilly – the heating system would slow down between 8pm and 6am as the offices, shops and studios that occupied The Hive building were mostly empty between those times, and the industrial strip tube lights made the whitewashed brick walls of the corridor look a bit grim, cold and unfriendly, the complete opposite of the office Constance had just left.

She made her way downstairs, passing the doors she knew opened on now empty magazine offices, photographer and design studios, multi-media consultancies, fashion workshops... During the day, the place was a beehive of activity – hence its name – and the corridors had been made wide enough to sustain the constant comings and goings of the people who made The Hive building one of the most exciting

privately run new centre of creative activity in the area. But towards the end of the day, it turned into an inhospitable monster whose beating heart and source of human warmth was Constance's red office.

On the ground floor, she took the corridor leading to the front of the building and crossed the reception area, saluting the security guard on her way, and got out into the street. The freezing air caught her by surprise, as she had been secluded inside the building since eight that morning. She breathed in the evening air, distinguishing petrol fumes emanating from the traffic, cigarette smoke and a vague whiff of fried food coming from the take-away shops round the corner. Constance made a face, tightened the collar of her coat around her neck and turned left into the street to get to the side of the building where the red double door marked the entrance to the fantasy world she had created.

The road was bustling with Friday evening activity. The night was still young, and people were walking around huddled in groups or couples, braving the bitter cold in search of urban adventures. There was such a high level of energy all around that Constance started feeling better, shredding her weariness and injecting some much needed adrenaline into her tired being.

TWO

HEY! Good evening, Miss Blackwell, how are you doin'?" Jermaine Allen looked enormous in his well-cut black suit. He smiled warmly at Constance who returned his smile. She had now composed herself and was in charge. She was the boss. Patrick Goodwin bowed slightly. He was not as bulky as Jermaine, but still very muscular, if more distinguished. He somehow looked like a cross between a security guard and a butler.

'Hi, there, Jermaine, hello Patrick," she said, shaking hands with the two doormen.

She nodded towards the queue of very cold people outside the door, waiting to be ushered in.

'Busy yet?'

'Yes, it's been a steady stream of people, it's still early though!'

'Fantastic. I just *know* we will have a full house tonight. The first band will be onstage in about 40mn and it is cold, so please, try to get people in as quickly as you can.' She had said this as much for the benefit of the two doormen as for that of Una, who was working at the ticket office tonight.

Una was a natural Pre-Raphaelite creature, all cascading light copper-coloured curls and porcelain white skin. She only had to add, as she had done tonight, a few pearls and flowers to her hair and a flowing, ethereal white gown and she looked like a painting. She was always greatly admired at The Pleasure Gardens, as she genuinely looked like she had just stepped out of a time machine... Shame about the somewhat irritating cocaine habit that she had developed since arriving in London. It sometimes would turn her into an erratic rag doll in need of restraint and Constance had lost count of the amount of times she or Una's trusted

cousin Kittie had had to take her home in a taxi and nurse her back to sanity after a heavy evening. Una seemed to be on the mend though and tonight looked perfectly clear-eyed, lady-like and serene. Constance made a mental note to check on her at least once or twice during the evening.

Constance stayed outside the door for a while, chatting with Jermaine and Patrick, greeting the punters, a few of whom were actually on the very restricted guest list. Nobody so far had to be turned away; the bouncers had received detailed instructions but didn't often need to be forceful. You didn't go to The Pleasure Gardens to get a tourist experience of London clubbing, as would happen so much at clubs in the West End, for example. No, The Gardens had remained a well-kept if popular secret since its inception the previous year.

Constance had decided that it was time to go in and have a look around when a laughing, noisy bunch of girls wearing enormous, colourful faux-fur coats turned up and took their place in the queue. The four of them were Japanese, with smooth, shiny straight hair that had been dyed respectively purple, bright pink, fluorescent green and sky blue. They almost disappeared within the fluffy, voluminous coats that covered them entirely and were all carrying cumbersome *Hello Kitty* bags.

While the one with the bright pink pigtails was yelping into a tiny phone of exactly the same colour as her hair, the three others were attempting to take pictures of themselves on their mobiles. They kept pushing each other and being generally over-excited. They arrived in front of the two doormen and Constance, who imperceptibly exchanged amused looks. The girl with the bright pink hair had to abruptly stop her conversation as she had been pushed to the front by her three giggling companions. She turned to her friends who gestured to her to speak – she was probably the only one who could speak English in the group – and shoved what looked like tickets into her hand. Jermaine gave them his most devastatingly smooth white smile and started.

‘Goood Eeeeniiiiing, Ladies, welcome to The Pleasure Gardens, get your tickets and your bags ready for inspection please!’

The girl with the bright pink hair blinked, then nodded vigorously.

‘Yes, yes, yes?’ she yelped, then turned towards the other three and seemingly ordered them to open their bags. Jermaine and Patrick peeked inside, and frowned. Jermaine lifted what looked like a rubber mask, while Patrick had fished out some impressively chunky multi-coloured hair falls made of entangled foams, wires and wool. Excitedly, the girls started

getting their newly purchased, spanking new fetish gear out of their bags, thinking that their splendidly adorned vertiginously high platform boots would impress the two doormen and guarantee them immediate access to the promised land within. They even opened their coats, proudly revealing their elaborate PVC outfits, all naughty smiles and thrilled exclamations.

What Jermaine and Patrick thought of it, they didn't say, but the people in the queue behind them and some passers-by round the corner looked highly entertained by the good-natured enthusiasm of the four girls.

Constance, who had witnessed the scene with raised eyebrows, suddenly snapped into action.

'Excuse me, ladies. May I see your tickets, please?'

The girl with the bright pink hair hurriedly put the tickets into Constance's hand. Constance looked at the four red tickets, sighed, and shoved them under the girl's nose.

'I am really sorry, but I think you've made a mistake.' She gestured to them to step out of the queue, so Jermaine, Patrick and Una could deal with the rest of the customers. 'These are tickets for *Torture Garden* and not for *The Pleasure Gardens*... We are not a fetish club... Look, it's THE PLEASURE GARDENS,' she repeated while pointing at the poster behind her, 'I'm really sorry, but you've got the wrong place entirely...'

The four girls had now stopped fidgeting and were staring at Constance, three of them trying to figure out what this poised, elegant woman with the husky voice was telling them. The English speaking one gawped at her for a moment, looking in turn at the poster and her tickets, her facial features slowly changing from incomprehension to goggled-eye horror.

'Ooooh, no! Wrong place? This not,' she read the name on her ticket, '*Torture Garden*? Oh, no, how stupid, stupid, stupid! I am so, so sorry!'

She turned to her companions and proceeded to quickly explain the situation to them. Exclamations and looks of horror accompanied her account, leading to a lot of head shaking and multi-coloured nail biting. Constance was standing patiently, waiting for them to end their little meeting.

Finally, after a good five minutes of consultation, the pink-haired girl turned to Constance, full of determination.

'Right! So, we need to get to Torture Garden quick! We are meeting friends there! My friends are in London especially for this night!' She gestured towards the other three girls.

Constance gave her her most reassuring smile and put her hand on the girl's arm.

'Don't worry. Come with me to the reception desk round the corner. We're going to get this sorted for you. Follow me!'

The girl nodded and quickly translated to her friends.

Constance called out to Jermaine and Patrick that she would come back as quickly as possible, and walked off followed by the motley crew of Japanese fetishistas on her heels.

She suddenly realised that she was absolutely frozen, especially her feet, exposed in her peep-toed shoes.

