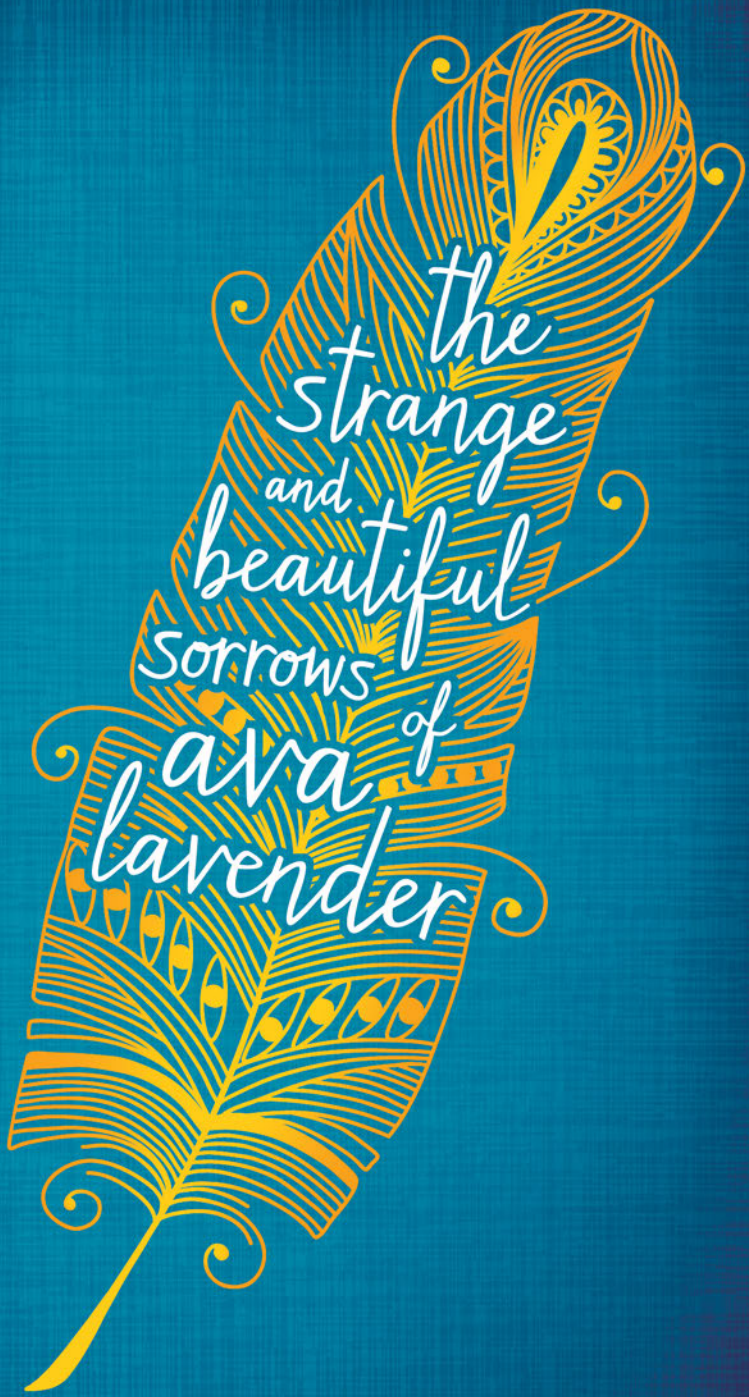


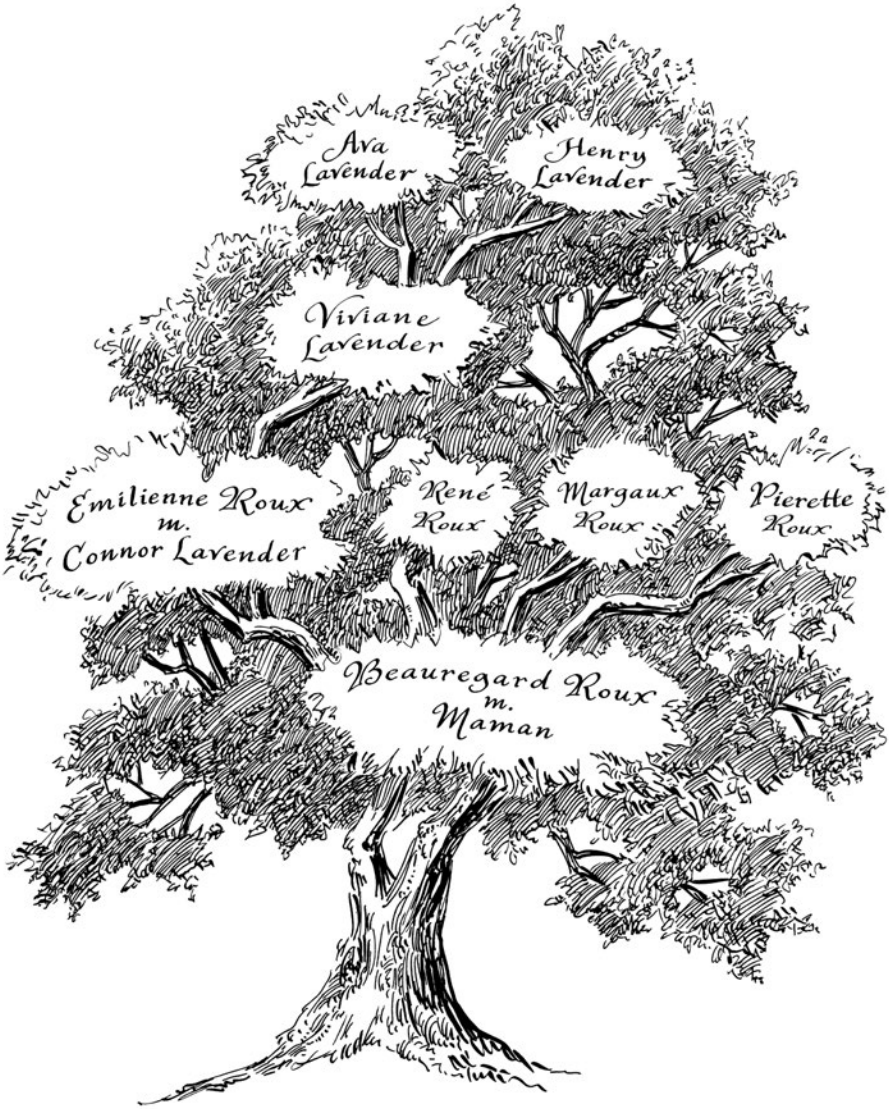
the strange and beautiful sorrows of ava lavender

LESLYE WALTON

The Strange & Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender

Leslye J. Walton

Candlewick Press


Ava Lavender
Henry Lavender
Viviane Lavender
Emilienne Roux m. Connor Lavender
René Roux
Margaux Roux
Pierette Roux
Beauregard Roux m. Maman

Prologue

TO MANY, I WAS MYTH INCARNATE, the embodiment of a most superb legend, a fairy tale. Some considered me a monster, a mutation. To my great misfortune, I was once mistaken for an angel. To my mother, I was everything. To my father, nothing at all. To my grandmother, I was a daily reminder of loves long lost. But I knew the truth—deep down, I always did.

I was just a girl.

I was born Ava Wilhelmina Lavender on a remarkably clear Seattle night on the first of March in 1944. My birth was later remembered for the effect it had on the birds on the street where I lived, the auspiciously named Pinnacle Lane. During the day, as my young mother began

experiencing labor pains, the crows collected mounds of tiny cherry pits in their beaks and tossed them at the house windows. Sparrows perched on women's heads and stole loose strands of hair to weave into their nests. At night nocturnal birds gathered on the lawns to eat noisily, the screams of their prey sounding much like my own mother in hard labor. Just before slipping into a deep twilight sleep—relief granted by a nurse and a cold syringe—my mother opened her eyes and saw giant feathers fall from the ceiling. Their silky edges brushed her face.

As soon as I was born, the nurses whisked me away from the delivery room to explore a matter that was later described on an anonymous medical report only as *a slight physical abnormality.* It wasn't long before the devout gathered in the light from the hospital windows, carrying candles and singing hymns in praise and fear. All because when I was born, I opened my eyes, then unfolded the pair of speckled wings that wrapped around me like a feathery cocoon.

Or so the story goes.

Where the wings came from, no doctor could ever determine. My twin (for there was a twin, Henry) had surely been born without them. Until then, no human being on record had ever been born with animal parts—avian or otherwise. For many in the medical field, the case of Ava Lavender produced the first time science had failed them. When the religious masses gathered below my mother's hospital room window with their fevered prayers

and flickering candles, for once the doctors considered the devout with jealousy, rather than with pity or disdain.

"Imagine," said one young intern to another, "believing the child is divine." It was a musing he uttered only once. Then he wiped his tired eyes and went back to his medical books before returning to my mother and claiming what every other specialist had already concluded—there was nothing they could do. Not medically, at least.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said, shaking his head to show my family that he sympathized. It was a practice he would master in time.

My entire muscular, skeletal, and circulatory systems were irrevocably dependent on my wings. The option of removing them was quickly deemed out of the question. I would lose too much blood. I could end up paralyzed. Or dead. It seemed there was no separating the girl from the wings. One could not survive without the other.

Later the young intern wished himself audacious enough to interview the family. But what does one ask? *Is there a history of winged beings populating the family tree?* In the end, the intern instead made his rounds to other patients with ailments that did not evoke such complex questions. But let's pause and imagine if he had. What might have happened if he had turned to the sullen young mother with the unnaturally red lips, or to the stern but beautiful grandmother with the strange accent, and asked them the two questions that haunt my every winged step:

Where did I come from?

And even more importantly: *What would the world do with a girl such as I am?*

Perhaps my mother or my grandmother would have had an answer.

And perhaps then my life would have turned out much differently. For the sake of the intern, it was probably best that he convinced himself that there was nothing he could do and left it at that. For what could he have done? Foreseeing the future, I would later learn, means nothing if there is nothing to be done to prevent it. Which just proves that my story is much more complicated than just the story of my birth. Or even the story of my life. In fact, my story, like everyone's, begins with the past and a family tree.

The following is the story of my young life as I lived it. What started out as a simple personal research project as a young woman—a weekend in 1974 spent at the Seattle Central Library compiling information about my birth—led me down a road that took me from one coast to the other. I have traveled through continents, languages, and time trying to understand all that I am and all that has made me such.

I will be the first to admit that certain facts may have been omitted, long forgotten over time by myself or by other involved parties. My research has been scattered, dropped, neglected, then picked up, shuffled, and reorganized time and again. It cannot be considered a holistic document. Nor is it unbiased.

The following is the story of my young life as I remember it. It is the truth as I know it. Of the stories and the myths that surrounded my family and my life—some of them thoughtfully scattered by you perhaps—let it be said that, in the end, I found all of them to be strangely, even beautifully true.

A. Lavender

March 2014

Chapter One

MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, Emilienne Adou Solange Roux, fell in love three times before the eve of her nineteenth birthday.

Born on March first in 1904, my *grand-mère* was the first of four children, all born on the first day of the third month, with René following Emilienne in 1905, Margaux in 1906, and ending with Pierette in 1907. Since each child was born under the sign of the fish, it would be to assume that the Roux family was full of rather sensitive and remarkably foolhardy individuals.

Their father, Beauregard Roux, was a well-known phrenologist whose greatest contributions to his field were said to be the curls of goldenrod hair atop his head and

on the backs of his hands—and the manner in which his French was laced with just a hint of a Breton accent. Thick and large, Beauregard Roux could easily carry all four of his children dangling from one arm, with the family goat tucked under the other.

My great-grandmother was quite the opposite of her husband. While Beauregard was large, grandiose, mountainous even, his wife was small, indistinct, and walked with the blades of her shoulders in a permanent hunch. Her complexion was olive where his was rosy, her hair dark where his was light, and while every head turned when Beauregard Roux stepped into a room, his wife was best known for her capacity to take up no capacity at all.

On nights they made love, their neighbors were kept awake by the growls Beauregard made upon climax—his wife, however, hardly made any noise at all. She rarely did. In fact, the doctor in the small village of Trouville-sur-Mer who delivered their first child, my grandmother, spent the length of the delivery looking up from his duties just to be sure the mother had not perished during the act. The silence in the room was so disturbing that when it came time for the birth of their next child—my great uncle René—the doctor refused at the last minute, leaving Beauregard to run the seventeen kilometers in his stocking feet to the town of Honfleur in a rush to find the nearest midwife.

There remains no known history of my great-grandmother before her marriage to Beauregard Roux. Her only proof of existence lay in the faces of her two

oldest daughters, Emilienne and Margaux, each with her dark hair, olive complexion, and pale green eyes. René, the only boy, resembled his father. Pierette, the youngest, had Beauregard's rich yellow curls. Not one of the children ever knew their mother's first name, each believing it was Maman until it was too late for them to even consider it could be anything else.

Whether or not it had anything to do with his large size, by the dawn of 1912 the small French village had proven much too petit for Beauregard Roux. He dreamed of places full of automobiles and buildings so tall they blocked the sun; all Trouville-sur-Mer had to offer was a fish market and Beauregard's own phrenology practice, kept afloat by his female neighbors. His fingers ached for skulls whose bumps he hadn't read time and time again! So, on the first of March of that year—which was eldest daughter Emilienne's eighth birthday, son René's seventh, Margaux's sixth, and Pierette's fifth—Beauregard began to talk of a place he called Manhatine.

"In Manhatine," he'd say to his neighbors while pumping water from the well outside his home, "whenever you need to take a bath or wash your face, you just turn the faucet, and there it is—not just water, *mes camarades,* my friends, but *hot* water. Can you imagine? Like being greeted by a little miracle every morning right there in your own bathtub." And then he'd laugh gaily, making them suspect that Beauregard Roux was perhaps a little more unstable than they might have wished for someone so large.

It was to the dismay of the women in Trouville-sur-Mer—and the men, for there was no other character they liked better to discuss—that Beauregard sold his phrenology practice only one month later. He secured six third-class tickets aboard the maiden voyage of the SS *France*—one for each of his family members, with the exception of the family goat, of course. He taught his children the English words for the numbers one through ten and, in his enthusiasm, once told them that the streets in America were unlike anything they'd ever seen before—not covered in dirt like the ones in Trouville-sur-Mer, but paved in cobblestones made of bronze.

"Gold," my young grandmother, Emilienne, interrupted. If America was really the impressive place her father thought it was, then certainly the streets would be lined in something better than bronze.

"Don't be foolish," Beauregard chided gently. "Even the Americans know better than to pave their streets in gold."

The SS *France,* as I've come to learn in my research, was a marvel of French engineering. Over twice the size of any ship in the French merchant fleet, she would set a new precedent for speed, luxury, service, and cuisine for the French Line. Her maiden voyage departed from the bustling port of Le HaHavre, forty-two kilometers from Trouville-sur-Mer.

Le Havre of 1912 was a place clearly marked by the distinctions of class. Surrounded on the east by the villages of Montivilliers, Harfleur, and Gonfreville-l'Orcher, the Seine

River separated the city from Honfleur. In the late eighteen hundreds when the neighboring villages of Sanvic and Bléville were incorporated into Le Havre, an upper city developed above the ancient lower city with two parts linked by a complex network of eighty-nine stairs and a funicular. The hillside mansions of rich merchants and ship owners, all of whom had made their fortunes from Le Havre's expansive port in the early nineteenth century, occupied the upper part. In the city's center were the town hall, the Sous-Préfecture, the courthouse, Le Havre Athletic Club, and the Turkish baths. There were museums and casinos and a number of lavish and expensive hotels. It was this Le Havre that gave birth to the impressionist movement; it was where Claude Monet was inspired to paint *Impression, soleil levant*.

Meanwhile, the suburbs and old districts of Le Havre where the working-class families lived, and the flat quarters near the port where the sailors, dockworkers, and laborers worked, were neglected. Here dwelt the effects of grueling and unreliable employment, poor sewer systems, and unsanitary living conditions. Here the cemeteries were overwhelmed with the dead from the cholera outbreak of 1832. It was where consumption found its victims. Here were the bohemians, the red-light district, the cabaret with the effeminate master of ceremonies where a man could pay for a drink and a little entertainment without having to take off his hat. And while the rich Havrais in the upper part of the city raised a toast to many more blissful and successful years, those living in the slums rotted away in a toxic

smelly mess of insalubrity, shit, promiscuity, and infant mortality.

To the Roux children, the dock where the ship was moored was a melody of interesting sights, smells, and sounds, an unsettling concoction of the exotic and the mundane: the oceanic air, the sharp bite of coffee beans mixed with the acidic tang of fish blood, mounds of exotic fruits and burlap bags of cotton from the surrounding cargo ships, stray cats and dogs scratching their ribs for mange, and heavy trunks and suitcases marked with American addresses.

Among the crowd of news reporters, a photographer stood documenting the grand ship's maiden voyage with his imposing folding camera. As the first-class passengers made their way to their private cabins, the Roux family waited with the rest of steerage to be inspected for lice. Beauregard lifted Emilienne onto his tall shoulders. From her perch, the cheering onlookers looked like a sea of broad-brimmed boater hats. A photograph printed in the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro* showed the grand ship at this moment—by squinting, a reader could just make out the shadowy shape of a girl balanced eerily above the crowd.

Embarking only one week after the implausible sinking of Britain's Unsinkable Ship, the *Titanic,* the passengers abroad the SS *France* were keenly aware of the cold waters below as they gravely waved good-bye to the crowd on the distant dock. Only Beauregard Roux ran

to the other side of the ship, wanting to be the first to greet the land of opportunities, bronze streets and indoor plumbing.

The Roux family's quarters contained two tiny bunk beds built into the cabin walls and a washbasin in the center. If Beauregard inhaled too deeply, he could suck all the air out of the room. Maman claimed that the ship's ceaseless vibrations gave her palpitations. The children, however, loved the tiny cabin, even when Beauregard's snoring left them with little oxygen some nights. The SS *France* opened up a world they'd never imagined. They spent their evenings waiting for the sound of a lone fiddle or set of bagpipes that announced the start of that night's impromptu celebration in steerage. Later still, they waited in hushed anticipation for the sounds of their neighbors making their own entertainment. The children spent hours listening to the noises resounding through the walls, stifling their wild laughter into scratchy pillows. Days were spent exploring the lower decks and trying to sneak their way into the first-class sections of the boat, which were strictly off-limits to third-class passengers.

When American soil could be seen from the ship, the passengers breathed a collective sigh of relief so strong, it caused a change of direction in the winds, which added a day to their trip, but no matter. They had made it—forever squelching the fear that the *Titanic*'s fatal end was a harbinger of their own disastrous fate.

As the SS *France* approached the dock in west Manhattan, my grandmother received her first glimpse of the United States. Emilienne, who had no idea that *La liberté éclairant le monde*—the Statue of Liberty—was as French as she was, thought, *Well, if this is America, then it is certainly very ugly indeed.*

The Roux family was quickly declared lice-free and so set off to begin their new lives of prosperity and delight—the likes of which only America could provide. By the time Germany declared war on France, they were finally settled in a squalid two-room apartment in Manhatine. At night, Emilienne and Margaux slept in one bed, Beauregard and Maman in the other, René under the kitchen table, and tiny Pierette in a bureau drawer.

It didn't take long for Beauregard to learn how difficult it would be to sell himself as a skillful phrenologist—especially since the phrenology craze in America had died with the Victorian period. How was a French immigrant with a thick rolling accent and no skill but reading skulls expected to support his family? *It's hard enough for the Irish micks down at the docks to get a decent pay,* my great-grandfather confided in no one, *and they speak perfect English. Or so they claim.*

Beauregard's own neighbors had no use for his skills. They already knew their own dismal futures. So instead he took to the streets in Yorkville and Carnegie Hill, where many prominent German immigrants lived in country

estates and lush town houses. Toting his rolled-up charts, metal calipers, and his china phrenology head, Beauregard was soon invited into the parlors of these villas to run his fingertips and palms over the skulls of the *Frauen und Fräuleins* of the house, proving yet again that Beauregard Roux was destined to serve women, regardless of what country he was in.

New York, in all of its fast-paced glory, did nothing to dissuade Beauregard from his belief that it was the most magnificent place in the world. Maman, however, found her husband's beloved Manhatine most disagreeable. The tenement where they lived was small and cramped; it smelled distinctly of cat urine regardless of how many washings of lye soap she applied to the floors and walls. The streets were a slew of slaughterhouse and sweatshops, and were not paved in bronze but lined with garbage and piles of horse dung awaiting the unsuspecting foot. She thought the English language harsh and ugly, and the American women shameless, marching through the streets in their white dresses and sashes, demanding the ridiculous right to vote. To Maman, America was hardly the land of opportunities. Rather, it seemed to be the place where children were brought to die. Maman watched in horror as her neighbors lost their children, one after the other. They died with the pallor and fever of consumption, the coughing fits of pertussis. They died from mild bouts of the flu, a singular encounter with a cup of sour milk. They died from low birth weight, often taking their mothers along with them.

They died with empty bellies, their eyes vacant of both dreams and expression.

Maman fed her family meals of low-quality meat and limp carrots because this was what they could afford—barely. She inspected the children every time they returned home—searching the crevices behind their knees and elbows, the soft places in between toes, behind ears, and under tongues for the mark of a pox or a tick.

Beauregard hardly shared his wife's concerns. At night, as the couple lay in bed, their children asleep in the bed across the room and cramped under the kitchen table and tucked into a bureau drawer, Maman tried to persuade her husband to leave the city so that they might raise their children in the light French air of their former home.

"Oh, *mon cœur,* my heart," he answered lightly, "you worry much too much." Then he rolled over and fell into a deep sleep while Maman fretted the night into morning.

Then one otherwise unremarkable evening in the spring of 1915, garishly handsome Beauregard Roux did not return home to his wife and their four children. Nor did he arrive the next night or in a month's time. A year later the only tangible memory of Beauregard Roux was in the person of René, who had a penchant for carrying the couch around the apartment balanced on his forearms.

It was rumored that Beauregard left his family for a Germanic woman blessed with infertility and a convex along the back of her head, which, as every good phrenologist knew, meant Beauregard had found himself a

complaisant woman, one who was likely to give him loud affection any night he pleased. It was a tale so creative that even Maman believed it. This belief later led to the development of a small hole in the top chamber of her heart, which her doctors falsely ascribed to her diet and her unknown ancestry.

In truth, the disappearance of Beauregard Roux was a case of mistaken identity. Beauregard, for all his rugged beauty, was also the very image of another man caught sleeping with the wife of a local butcher. How unfortunate for Beauregard that the butcher's thugs found him first. The discovery of his body, found floating in bloated and unidentifiable pieces along the Hudson River, was briefly mentioned in a side column of The *New York Times*. This unfortunate mix-up had its own ironies: Beauregard Roux had loved his wife immensely; he found her quiet tendencies refreshing and never strayed from her once in all the time they were married.

Upon realizing that her husband had performed a permanent disappearing act, Maman took to her bed and spent the next three months wrapped in the sheets that still retained her husband's pungent scent. The children were cared for by their neighbor, a pygmy named Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo whom they called Notre Petit Poulet, Our Little Chicken, due to a habit the tiny woman had of clucking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. It was a nickname Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo found most agreeable.

Eventually Maman pulled herself from her bed and

took a job as a bookkeeper at the dry cleaner's down the street. In time she made enough money to serve the lowest quality of horsemeat to her family three times a week. She also moved Pierette out of the drawer.

All the while, it grew apparent that Maman was slowly making her own disappearance. Emilienne was the first to notice this when, on a busy street corner, she reached out to take hold of her mother's hand. Her fingers slipped right through, as if passing through a wisp of steam.

In 1917 Emilienne was thirteen years old and living with her three siblings and Maman in a crowded city block of apartment buildings. Each tenement came with its own problems of sanitation, crowding, and desiccated stairwells. The Roux children were so accustomed to their neighbors' voices permeating the thin walls that each child could eventually speak several languages—all four in French and English, Emilienne in Italian, René in Dutch and German, and Margaux in Spanish. The youngest, Pierette, only spoke in what was later identified as Greek until her seventh birthday, when in perfect French she declared, "*Mon dieu! Où est mon gâteau?* My God, where is my cake?" Which made them all suspect that Pierette had many tricks up her sleeve.

It was on this city block that my grandmother met the first love of her life. His name was Levi Blythe, a runt of a boy with black hair and ill-fitting shoes. A gang of boys

from the next block repeatedly called Levi a faggot before pelting his forehead with rocks. He was the first boy Emilienne ever saw cry, not counting her brother, René, who had a surprisingly low tolerance for pain.

After a particularly gruesome beating, an event to which most of the neighborhood children were witness, Emilienne and her younger sister Margaux followed Levi Blythe to a back alley, where they watched him bleed until Levi turned to them and yelled, "Get lost!"

So they did. Momentarily.

Emilienne climbed the stairs to her family's apartment, shadowed closely, as always, by Margaux. She tore a triangle out of the bottom sheet of the bed she shared with her sister, took the bottle of iodine from her mother's drawer, and ran back to where Levi sat slumped against the alley wall. After watching him wince from the sting of iodine against his cuts, Emilienne let him touch her bare bottom. It was an offering she rationalized later to Margaux, saying with a sigh, "Love can make us such fools."

Emilienne never saw Levi Blythe after that day, nor did anyone else. Many believed that the sordid affairs that regularly took place in his mother's apartment had finally caught up to her, and that perhaps Levi and his two sisters had become wards of the state. But then again, no one was ever really sure—in those days, many people disappeared for lesser reasons; it was difficult to keep track of them all.

It took three years for my grandmother to forget poor

Levi Blythe. At sixteen, she fell hopelessly for a boy she knew only as Dublin, a nickname derived from the place of his birth. Dublin taught her how to smoke cigarettes and once told her she was beautiful.

"Beautiful," he said with a laugh, "but strange, like everyone in your family." He then gave Emilienne her first kiss before running off with Carmelita Hermosa, who was just as lovely as her name implied. And quite unfairly so.

In 1922, when Emilienne was eighteen, the Roux family underwent a number of transformations that confirmed they were, indeed, a little strange. Pierette, who did in fact have many tricks up her sleeves, was now fifteen years old and had fallen in love with an older gentleman with a fondness for bird watching. After failing every other attempt to get the ornithologist to notice her—including a rather disastrous event where she appeared on the stoop of his apartment building wearing nothing but a few feathers plastered to an indiscreet place—Pierette took the extreme step of turning herself into a canary.

The bird-watcher never noticed Pierette's drastic attempt at gaining his affection and instead moved to Louisiana, drawn by its large population of *Pelecanus occidentalis*. Which only goes to show, some sacrifices aren't worth the cost. Even, or perhaps most especially, those done out of love. The family gradually became accustomed to Pierette's cheery morning songs and to the tiny yellow feathers that gathered in the corners of the rooms and stuck to their clothes.

René, the only boy in the Roux family, had surpassed his father's good looks at the tender age of fourteen. By seventeen, he was considered a god among mortals. With simple phrases like, *Could you please* and *Would you like?* René caused young girls' faces to flush with hysteria. On the street, otherwise reputable women walked into walls at the passing by of René Roux, distracted by the way the sun moved through the hair on his knuckles. A frightening phenomenon in and of itself, René found it most upsetting because, unlike Levi Blythe, René *was* in fact fonder of the boys on his street than the girls and took to sharing his bare bottom with some of them, though certainly not while any of his sisters were around.

Aside from Pierette, Emilienne was considered the strangest Roux of them all. It was rumored that she possessed certain unlikely gifts: the ability to read minds, walk through walls, and move things using only the power of her thoughts. But my grandmother hadn't any powers; she wasn't clairvoyant or telepathic. Simply put, Emilienne was merely more sensitive to the outside world than other people. As such, she was able to catch on to things that others missed. While to some a dropped spoon might indicate a need to retrieve a clean one, to Emilienne it meant that her mother should put the kettle on for tea—someone was coming to visit. An owl hoot was an omen of impending unhappiness. A peculiar noise heard three times at night meant death was near. To receive a bouquet was a tricky one since it depended on the flowers—blue violets said,

I'll always be true, but a striped carnation, *Sorry, I can't be with you.* And while this gift proved useful at times, it could also make things quite confusing for young Emilienne. She struggled to distinguish between signs she received from the universe and those she conjured up in her head.

She took up the harpsichord for this very reason—when she pressed her hands to the keys, its complex voice drowned out everything else. She played nightly renditions of Italian love sonnets, which some later attributed to a correlating rise in the neighboring population. Many children were conceived under the amorous music of Emilienne Roux, accompanied by the harmonious voices of her siblings—René's soft tenor, Pierette's sharp chirp, and Margaux's haunting alto. Margaux wasn't strange, but she wasn't beautiful like the others either. This made her strange in her own way. And Maman continued to grow more transparent, enough so that her children could reach right through her to place a milk bottle in the icebox, often without thinking much about it.

Around this time a man called Satin by his friends and Monsieur Lush by everyone else was seen carousing through the streets of lower Manhattan in a silk-lined jacket and wearing rich cologne. They said that he came from somewhere up north—Quebec or Montreal—for his French was impeccable, though oddly accented, and that Manhattan was a usual stop in a circular trek he made every few months. The reason for his visits wasn't apparent,

but it was easy to assume that it was nothing good based on the rough sort of men with whom he kept company and the way his left leg clinked from the flask he wore in his trouser leg.

The day Emilienne met Satin Lush she was wearing her cloche hat, newly painted with red poppies. Her hair was curled and peeked lightly out from under the hat to cup the curve of her chin. There was a rip in her stocking. It was May and heavy wet lines of spring rain streamed down the windows of the café where Emilienne had just spent her day serving black coffee and sticky buns to dreamless Irishmen. The smell of glazed sugar and folded pride still lingered on her clothes. As she waited for the rain to let up, the bells of Saint Peter's chimed five times and the water fell only harder upon the awning over her head.

She was thinking of the loveliness of such moments, admiring the rain and the graying sky the way one might admire the painting of an up-and-coming artist, one whose celebrity seems presaged by the swirls of his brush marks. It was while she was in the midst of such thoughts that Satin Lush walked out of the café, the clink of his leg disturbing the rhythm of the rain against the awning. Emilienne was immediately transfixed by the circle of light green in one of his eyes, the way it deliciously clashed with the cerulean blue of the other. She found that she did not mind losing the previous moment, for this one was just as lovely.

As they made their way through the borough, Satin holding an umbrella over their heads and the lip of

Emilienne's cloche hat periodically hitting Satin's right ear, the lovers were unaware of the worsening weather. They didn't notice how the clouds gathered and the rain fell in such torrents that the rats of the city flipped the cockroaches onto their backs, stepped aboard, and floated down the streets on tiny arthropod rafts.

That night Emilienne introduced Satin to her family as her *betrothed,* and he spent the evening praising the half-moons of Emilienne's fingernails. Satin quickly became a favorite in the Roux apartment. Emilienne would often return home from work to find Maman and Satin locked deep in discussion, a fast procession of vivid French spilling from their lips. And when René disappeared for three days, it was Satin who knew where to find him. The two returned, René with a chip in one of his front teeth and Satin missing his right earlobe. When asked, the only response given was a vague, *You shoulda seen the other guy* and a look between men when one has a secret the other is willing to protect.

The strangest development during this time, however, was the remarkable transformation of unlovely Margaux. After months of living in strained denial, the Roux family could no longer hide from the fact that sixteen-year-old Margaux was pregnant.

This was a particularly confusing time for Emilienne. Until then each of the two sisters had stuck to her predestined role—Emilienne was beautiful, mysterious. A tad strange at times, yes. But Margaux? Margaux was only a

pale shadow of the art form that was Emilienne. There was a time when it was Emilienne with the secrets and Margaux who ached to learn the reason behind the devilish smile and lovely arched eyebrow. But, now, now it was Emilienne who ached. And how she did! Especially when it was no longer Emilienne, but Margaux—what with that glowing complexion, those rosy cheeks, that effervescent twinkle in her eyes—that everyone considered the beauty of the family.

Margaux never spoke the father's name. Only once, in a moment of weakness—after a particularly grueling interrogation by her older sister—Margaux ran a finger over her own lovely arched eyebrow and said, "Love can make us all such fools," sending a chill up Emilienne's neck. She left the room to fetch a sweater. That was the last time anyone asked Margaux about the father of her child. Instead, her siblings took to playing the "Is that the rat fink?" game while watching men pass by on the street.

The day the child was born, Emilienne was walking home from some errand no one remembered in the end, Pierette perched snuggly on her collarbone. The thing remembered was Emilienne's cloche hat—the one painted with red poppies—blowing into the street and being retrieved by an exuberant boy of ten. Emilienne dug a penny out of her purse to reward the boy. As she placed the shiny coin in the child's outstretched hand, she looked up into his dirt-smudged face and noticed his eyes were different colors. One was green, the other blue. On impulse,

Emilienne asked the child who his father was, to which the boy answered with a shrug and ran off, holding his penny to the light.

Making their way through the street, Emilienne paid closer attention to the children in their path and came across another child with mismatched eyes, another child who didn't know his father. On the next block over, they came across another one. And another. Racing from one block to the next, Emilienne counted seventeen such children in twelve blocks.

By the time they made their way back to the family apartment, Pierette was in such a twitter that Emilienne had to stuff her poor sister-bird into the pocket of her jacket. In her haste to get inside, Emilienne knocked over Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo who, after she'd been helped back onto her feet, announced that Margaux had given birth.

"It's a boy," Notre Petit Poulet said, her tiny fingers fluttering with excitement, "with black hair. But his eyes! One's blue, and the other? The other's green!"

Emilienne walked into the apartment and found Satin Lush, the man she would never call her *betrothed* again, sitting on the sill of an open window, smoking a cigarette. He shrugged when he saw her. "You know how it goes," he said.

In disgust, Emilienne charged toward him and, with an angry shove, pushed him out the window as she screamed, "Eighteen children!"

Satin Lush bounced off the pavement, sprang to his feet, and ran away, never to be seen again.

Whether it was the arrival of Margaux's child or Satin Lush's betrayal that led to the downfall of the Roux family remains unresolved. But it was only a few hours later that young Margaux was found in the community bathroom down the hall. She'd carved out her own heart using a silver knife and laid it with care on the floor by the bathtub. Below the red mass of sinew and blood was a note addressed to Emilienne:

Mon cœur entier pendant ma vie entière.

My whole heart for my entire life.

The child died soon after. Margaux was a mother for approximately six hours. The date was March 1, 1923.

Love, as most know, follows its own timeline, disregarding our intentions or well-rehearsed plans. Soon after his sister's demise, René fell in love with an older married man. William Peyton wept the day he met René Roux. It was in a rather compromising embrace that William's wife caught René and her husband in the bed where she herself had been turned away night after night for two decades. In his haste to flee the unpleasant scene, René ran out into the street, forgetting to take his clothes with him.

As he ran through the shop-lined blocks toward his family's apartment, he was followed by a growing crowd of women (and a few men), all wrought with hysteria over the sight of René Roux's naked buttocks. The frenzy quickly

escalated into a full-fledged riot that lasted four and a half days. Several kosher businesses were burned to the ground and three people were trampled to death, including tiny Mrs. Barnaby Callahoo. *Bonsoir, Notre Petit Poulet*.

Once the panic finally subsided, René's lover sent a message to the Roux apartment, begging René to meet him at the docks along the Hudson River that night. The next morning the Roux family — what was left of them — awoke to find René's body on their doorstep, a handkerchief covering the place where William Peyton had shot him in his handsome face.

The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender

Leslye Walton

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