

THE WOLLSTONECRAFT DETECTIVE AGENCY



The CASE of the
MISSING MOONSTONE

by JORDAN STRATFORD art by KELLY MURPHY

CHAPTER SAMPLER



THE
**WOLLSTONECRAFT
DETECTIVE AGENCY**

№1

The CASE of the
MISSING MOONSTONE

JORDAN STRATFORD

ILLUSTRATED BY KELLY MURPHY

ALFRED A. KNOPF

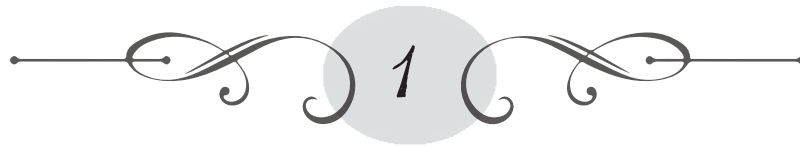


NEW YORK

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .



THE RIDICULOUS HAT



“Force . . . equals . . . mass . . . times . . . acceleration,” muttered Ada as she wrote in her notebook. Ada pondered that if you drop a hammer on your foot, it hurts more than dropping, say, a sock on your foot. The acceleration, or speeding up, is the same, but the mass, the solid *oomph* of a thing, is different. *Oomph* times *zoom* equals *kaboom*!

Ada and her pondering were cocooned in a square wicker box that resembled a giant picnic basket, just tall enough for her to stand up in and long enough for her to lie down in. Light entered through round,

brass-ringed windows and lit up stacks of books, rolls of paper, the odd screwdriver, and a bundle of pencils. The basket hung from thick ropes beneath a vast patchwork balloon that often swayed savagely in the wind, and the whole contraption was tethered with more ropes to the roof of Ada's Marylebone house in the heart of London.

The balloon was one of Ada's best inventions. It was filled with hot air from the house's many chimneys, which Ada funneled to it via numerous pipes bolted together. Taken as a whole—pipes, ropes, basket, and balloon—it gave the impression that the stately house was wearing a sort of ridiculous hat.

Ada lay stretched out on the gondola's floor in her favorite cherry velvet dress, which stopped a full inch above her ankles and showed wear and the odd black grease stain. Her hair was dark brown, almost black, and pulled back into a bun, with little wisps here and there trying to make a run for it.

What if, Ada wondered in her wicker box, you could accelerate a sock? What if the sock were moving so fast that it could have the same force as a hammer? Would it hurt the same? How fast would the sock have to go, and how could you make a sock go that fast?

Ada thought like this all the time. And to capture her thoughts, she made drawings—little sketches in notebooks or on scraps of paper or on table linens or, once (at a very dull picnic and much to the displeasure of her recently former governess, Miss Coverlet), on Ada’s new dress. The drawing of the moment was a sock cannon of Ada’s invention.

The sock cannon was taking shape on paper and in between Ada’s ears. But as busy as her ears were containing the sock-cannon plans, she could make out the sound of a carriage approaching the Marylebone house.

Grabbing a brass telescope that had been rolling about on the floor with the swaying of the basket, she stood and flipped open the hatch. She climbed up the three-step rope ladder to the balloon’s short deck, from which she could see as far as Oxford Street. She could see down Wimpole and Welbeck, Wesley and Westmoreland, down Weymouth and Cavendish and Queen Anne and even the little lanes off Baker Street. Only she and the crows knew her neighborhood in this way, from above.

Her stomach tightened. Walking across busy Marylebone Road, carpetbags in hand, went Miss

Coverlet for the last time, leaving Ada alone for good.

Ada had to admit that “alone” was not entirely accurate. The house in London was staffed by two women whose names she could never quite remember: Misses Cabbage and Cummerbund, or possibly Arugula and Aubergine—she honestly had no idea. When food arrived—with the exception of the bread and butter she’d help herself to in the upstairs kitchen—it was at the hands of Miss Coverlet, or Ada’s very tall and entirely silent butler, Mr. Franklin. And then the dishes went away, seemingly by themselves, to a place where she supposed something or other must happen to them.

But as far as Ada was concerned, without Miss Coverlet, whom Ada had known all her life, who had comforted her scrapes and answered her questions and fetched her favorite books and made sure her stockings weren’t scratchy—something Ada hated rather desperately—yes, Ada would feel utterly alone.

At eleven, Ada was deemed too old for a governess, and was now to have a tutor instead. A tutor! Ada knew it was impossible for any living person to educate her. For that, she had her books. Books for

learning, books for distraction, books for company, books for making sense of things. Ada's books were full of facts and figures, diagrams and calculations. Books that were not to be argued with. Books that stayed put when you needed them to and didn't run off to get married, as Miss Coverlet was off to do, which seemed to Ada like the stupidest idea ever.

In most matters, Ada was a genius. Once the facts and figures and charts and calculations from her books wandered into her head, they never left it. Even when she was a baby, Ada had loved number games and puzzles. She fixed things that were broken, and then began fixing things that weren't broken, or broke things so they could be fixed in ways no one else understood or found particularly convenient. But the one puzzle she couldn't solve was *people*. To Ada, they all seemed to be broken in ways she couldn't make sense of, and couldn't fix.

Right now there was the puzzle of her heart, which was breaking as Miss Coverlet stepped aboard the carriage.

"I'm going to my balloon," Ada had said when informed of Miss Coverlet's departure that morning. She supposed that Miss Coverlet might have

mentioned getting married before, but Ada hadn't realized that meant she'd be *leaving* and that *leaving* meant *alone*. And she certainly hadn't known Miss Coverlet would be leaving *today*.

Ada knew that if she was to be alone, then the drawing room, with its grand wallpaper and curlicued gilt frames, its lush Indian carpet and scattering of delicate china, was not where "alone" was going to happen.

Miss Coverlet had watched Ada turn and leave, stomping just a little bit for show. Miss Coverlet had seen some very expert stomping from Ada over the years, and this stomping seemed halfhearted.

Indeed, as Ada now watched Miss Coverlet leave in the carriage, she felt that she had only half a heart left.

Ada had barely returned to her sock-cannon plans when she heard the great black lion's-head knocker strike the front door.

Whoever it was had best go away. She wanted to be left alone—alone as Miss Coverlet had left her, here in her safe wicker fort beneath her balloon, tethered with strong nautical rope to the topmost peak of her house. While she knew she should slide down

the rope to the widow's walk and swing into the attic window as she'd done a hundred times before, she felt safest here, basket swaying, with her inventions and her books and her drawings. No, she would not come down.

Not ever.

AWKWARD AND UNCOMFORTABLE



Clinging for dear life to a rope atop the Byron house, Percy could not believe that he had missed this from the street. He looked up and contemplated the hot-air balloon with the large, square wicker box attached beneath it. It was a bit windy, and he was not really wearing the right sort of shoes for roof climbing, and certainly not for rope climbing. The whole situation was not only markedly unusual but also awkward and uncomfortable. He decided to call up to the balloon.

“Lady Byron?” Percy called. “Lady Ada?”

“Go away,” said a small but determined voice from the wicker box.

“I’m . . . please do allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr. . . . er . . . Snagsby, your new tutor.”

“Go. Away,” said the voice, this time with even more determination.

“I’m to be your new tutor,” he shouted over the wind. “I have a letter here from the Baroness Wentworth, um, your mother. . . .”

“Are you daft or are you just deaf?” inquired the voice from beneath the hot-air balloon.

“Well, I’m afraid it is a bit windy up here, which can make it a bit difficult to hear exact words, particularly as you’re speaking from within what appears to be a gondola of sorts. A gondola is what you call the basket under a hot-air balloon—”

“I *know* what a gondola is. I have one,” said the voice.

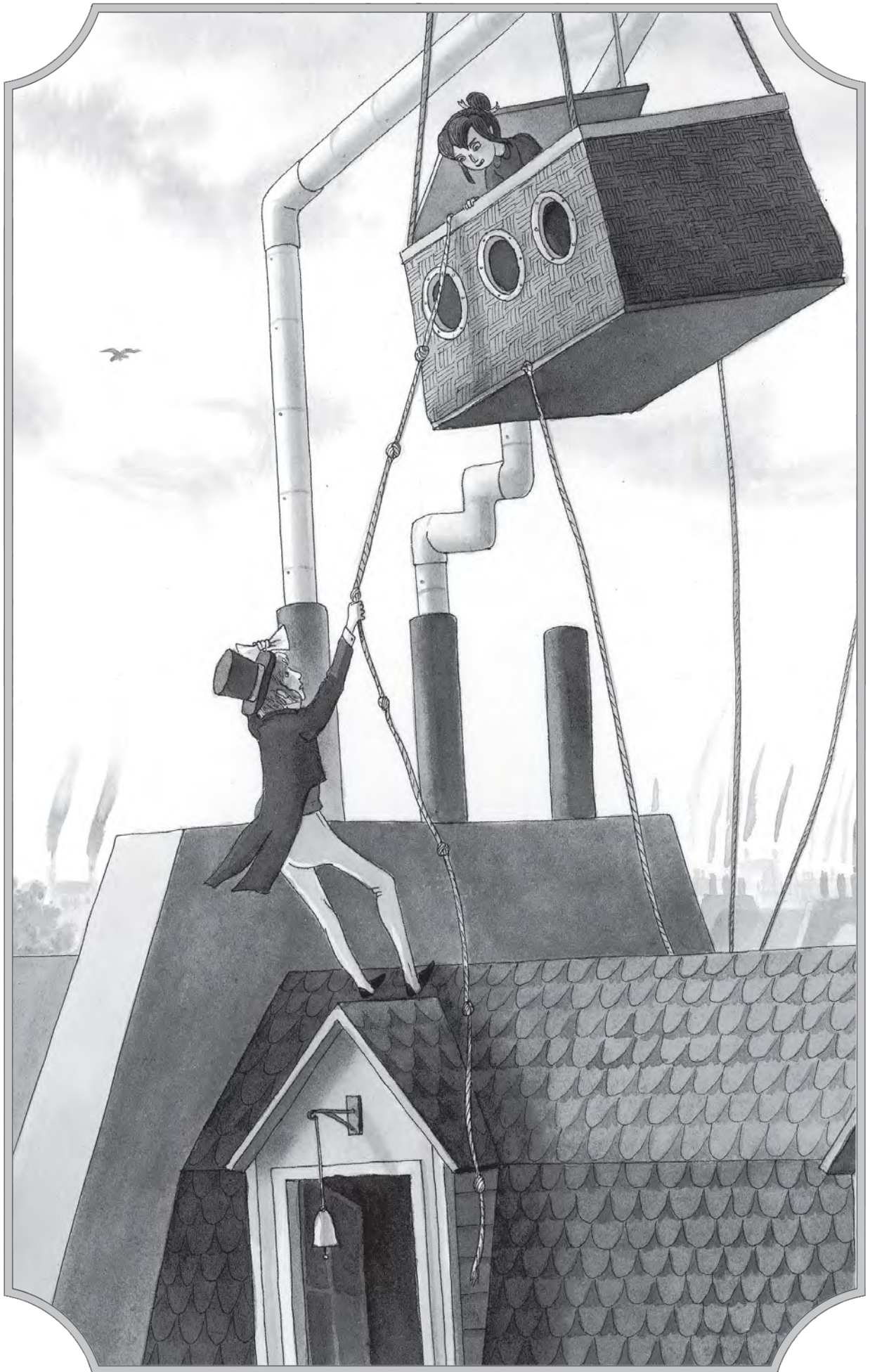
Percy continued, only slightly deterred, “Well, what I could make out were the words ‘go’ and ‘away.’”

“Ah, so not deaf, then.”

“No. No, I’m afraid not.”

“So just daft, then,” deduced the voice.

“I say, that’s not terribly fair,” huffed Percy.



“Not fair? Not FAIR?” roared the voice from the box. The hatch popped open and Ada’s head appeared, her hair even more disheveled than usual. “I’ll tell you what’s not fair! It’s not *fair* that Miss Coverlet had to go marry stupid Cecil. It’s not *fair* that she’s not here and you are! It’s not *fair* that my mother has gone to live in the country. It’s not *fair* that I can’t just be left alone!”

“Lady Ada, if I’m to be your tutor . . .”

“You’re not. Go away. There’s no one for you to tute.”

“I’m quite certain that’s not a word,” offered Percy.

“Why not? Plumbers plumb. Waiters wait. Butlers buttle. Tutors tute.”

“Butlers don’t—”

“You’re IMPOSSIBLE!” yelled Ada, who disappeared back into the wicker fort and slammed the hatch.

Percy was not, in fact, daft. But he did feel rather daft at that moment, his shoes slipping on the roof tiles as he clung to a knotted rope and stared up at his pupil, who was firmly shut in a large wicker box.

He was startled by the loud clang of a ship’s bell

right outside the attic window. He hadn't noticed the bell before, but he certainly had noticed Mr. Franklin, the house's extraordinarily tall and curiously silent butler, who now struck the bell once more.

A window popped open on the side of the basket, and the lens of a clicking brass telescope emerged. Ada clearly wanted to see what the bell heralded without having to address Percy. Mr. Franklin extended both hands out the window, one palm up as if to offer something, the other making a winding motion, as though turning a crank.

"It's Mr. Babbage!" Ada cried with delight from within the basket. The hatch flew open, and Ada tossed out a rope ladder, scrambled down, and nearly knocked Percy off the roof into the street. Percy slid and clutched desperately at his knotted rope, recovering in time to see a rather worn, stained, and outgrown dress clamber over the windowsill and slip into the attic. With no further reason to remain on the roof (although the view was extraordinary), Percy followed, taking it rather personally that clearly not *all* of Lady Ada's visitors were met with such disdain.

Once he was over the windowsill, he fully expected to find himself alone in the attic. It was dusty, as

attics ought to be, for mysterious atticky reasons. There were other things one would expect: furniture in ghost costumes of big white sheets, a hobbyhorse long outgrown, large steamer trunks bearing unknown treasures. It also held both Mr. Franklin and Ada, who had momentarily suspended her excitement over Mr. Babbage's arrival to examine the leather case Percy had left there before heading out onto the roof.

"What's in here?" asked Ada.

"Books," Percy replied.

"What sorts of books?"

"All sorts. History. Language. Poetry . . ."

"I hate poetry," Ada insisted.

"You are not to."

"Not to what?" she asked.

"Not to hate poetry." He was quite emphatic about this point, which got Ada's attention. "But there are other books. Chemistry. Mathematics . . ."

"Mathematics! By whom? What do you have in there?" With that, Ada sat on the floor and began fiddling with the case's brass clasp, finding it locked. "What's this?" she asked, pointing to the small brass plate by the handle. "*PBS*. What's it mean?"

“That’s my monogram. My initials. Percy B.—er, Snagsby. It’s my name.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“Why did I put my monogram on my case? To make it more . . . mine, I suppose.”

“Huh,” said Ada. It was hard to determine, but it seemed to Percy a rather approving “huh,” as far as “huhs” go.

“All right, Peebs. You may show me your books. After.”

“Peebs?” asked Percy.

“*PBS*. Peebs. That’s your name. Anyway, it shall have to wait until after.”

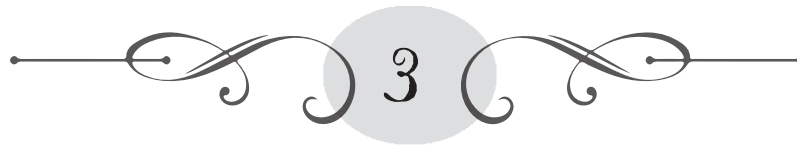
“I’m sorry? After what, Lady Ada?”

“After Mr. Babbage, of course! He only comes once a week, so you’ll just have to wait.” And with a cheerfulness that nearly knocked Percy off his feet, Ada ran to the door and down the stairs.

Percy looked at the looming butler. “Odd,” he said. “I was under the impression the young lady was not fond of visitors.”

Mr. Franklin raised an eyebrow, which silenced Percy completely.

STOWAWAY



Pitter clop splosh badunk? Clop splosh badunk pitter.

Mary listened to this conversation between the coach, the horse, the cobblestones, and the rain, but felt she had little to add. Instead, she observed the unexpected stranger seated opposite her. As far as she could tell, it was a boy of about her age (fourteen), but all she could see of him were knees and feet, clean fingers, and an open book. No matter, she liked him immediately.

Several things were unusual about this carriage ride, and Mary was extremely fond of the unusual.

It smacked of adventure and possibility and mystery, and these things intrigued Mary most of all.

For instance, it was unusual for her to be in a carriage without her sisters or her father. It was also unusual for her to be in a carriage with someone who wasn't any of those people, and unusual indeed for there to be someone already in the carriage when she got in. It was unusual that the boy behind the book had said nothing, but Mary surmised that the boy must be unusually immersed in the book. She decided at once that she and the boy were cut from the same bookish cloth, and could quite possibly become co-conspirators. The thought of this was tremendously exciting, and it inspired Mary to begin a conversation unrelated to the *splosh badunk pitter clop* that was already under way around her.

Mary was most interested in what the boy was reading, which even in the carriage's gloom she could make out was *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, by Henry Fielding, a novel she herself had not read. So instead of *Good morning*, which would have been the expected opening conversational gambit from a young lady of manners when placed in the unusual position of being alone, unchaperoned, in the confined space

of a carriage with an unrelated and indeed unfamiliar boy, Mary instead said, "Good book?" which she felt would do quite nicely.

"Mmm," said the boy behind the book.

"I'm afraid I haven't read anything by Fielding. Should I?"

"Mmm-nnn," came the reply, which could have meant *I don't know* or *If you like* or even *Not if you want to be left alone with a book when you're in the unusual position of being alone, unchaperoned, in the confined space of a carriage with an unrelated and indeed unfamiliar girl.*

After an awkward pause, Mary replied with an "Ah." But that seemed to do the trick, so far as breaking the awkward pause went. So she continued.

"This is an unusual position in which to be placed, isn't it? Sharing the carriage, I mean."

"Not to be rude," replied the boy. "But it would be greatly appreciated if you could pretend that I'm not here. I'm not supposed to be."

"Whyever not?" asked Mary.

"I haven't money for a carriage. So I'm not supposed to be here. Also, it's the only time today I'll be able to read."



“Good heavens!” exclaimed Mary in hushed, conspiratorial tones. “Are you a stowaway?”

“No, no. It’s nothing like that. It’s an exchange. I trade with the coachman. I help him, and he lets me read in the mornings in the carriage, so long as I pretend I’m not here and nobody minds.”

“Oh, I see. And how do you help him?” Mary found this new world of secrets and stowaways terribly adventurous. *Romantic*, even, though not in a smoochy way.

“He gets letters. From his mum. And he likes to send word back. So I read and write his letters for him.”

“The coachman is unable to read or write?”

“He never went to school, and nobody taught him. It’s not his fault.”

“No, of course not. It’s very kind of you to help him.”

“It’s very kind of *him* to drive me to work in the rain and give me a moment to read.”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is,” admitted Mary.

The boy put the book down, revealing that there was a perfectly normal boy behind it. She had begun to harbor a sneaking suspicion—and Mary was

inordinately fond of sneaking suspicions—that he might be hideously disfigured, or possibly a very famous young prince or duke in hiding, afraid to show his face. But he was neither hideous nor recognizably famous. Just a boy, with a book.

“You won’t tell, will you?” he asked.

“I’m terribly good at keeping secrets,” Mary assured him.

The boy squeezed out a small smile and returned behind *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, by Henry Fielding. Unfortunately, this created for Mary another awkward pause.

“Mary Godwin,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Charles,” said the boy, who stuck out his hand without putting the book down. This left Mary the task of coordinating the handshake in the gloom of the carriage.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Charles. My baby brother bears the same name.”

“Mmm,” Charles replied, having descended once more into his story.

Pitter clop clop badunk splosh whoa! said the horse, and the road, and the rain, and the coachman, indicating that this was Mary’s destination.

“Enjoy your day, and I do hope I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mary departed the carriage without waiting for an additional “Mmm” from her new friend, stepping into Marylebone Road.

In that half a heartbeat between descending from the carriage and touching down onto the cobblestones, Mary struggled to remember the name of a butterfly. She knew it was the largest in the world, the width of both her hands splayed out, and that it had deep brown eyes painted on soft pink velvet wings. She knew too, from her reading, that it was only found in the remotest jungles of Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific Ocean, half the world away. She was surprised, therefore, to discover that such a thing was flying between her stomach and her heart, its wings brushing against her ribs and pushing the air out of her with each beat.

Riding in a carriage unchaperoned was a brave and arguably rebellious act for a fourteen-year-old girl. Discovering a stowaway was another sort of adventure altogether. But arriving at the house of the great, mad, dead poet Lord Byron, to be tutored alongside

an actual Lady, was almost too much to bear. Or so the giant butterfly whispered to her stomach.

But this was not a storybook adventure like the ones Mary read and reread by lantern light until the dim of each night overtook her. This was a real adventure, with herself in a starring role. It was this, or the dreaded, confining, dull gray horror of “school,” about which Mary had only heard from cousins. Still, in that half a heartbeat, Mary put down the need to name the butterfly and blew it out of her chest like puffing out a candle. The toe of her shoe touched the earth, and her adventure would be what it would be.

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