

*O*nce upon a time, before the whole world changed, it was possible to run away from home, disguise who you were, and fit into polite society. The children's mother had done exactly that. Susanna was one of the Boston Owenses, a family so old that the General Society of Mayflower Descendants and the Daughters of the American Revolution were unable to deny them admission to their exclusive organizations, despite the fact that they would have liked to close the door to them, locking it twice. Their original ancestor, Maria Owens, who had arrived in America in 1680, remained a mystery, even to her own family. No one knew who had fathered her child or could fathom how she came to build such a fine house when she was a woman alone with no apparent means of support. The lineage of those who followed Maria was equally dubious. Husbands disappeared without a trace. Daughters begat daughters. Children ran off and were never seen again.

In every generation there were those who fled Massachusetts, and Susanna Owens had done so. She had escaped to Paris as a young woman, then had married and settled in New York, denying her children any knowledge of their heritage for their own good, which left them with nagging suspicions about who

they were. It was clear from the start that they were not like other children, therefore Susanna felt she had no choice but to set down rules. No walking in the moonlight, no Ouija boards, no candles, no red shoes, no wearing black, no going shoeless, no amulets, no night-blooming flowers, no reading novels about magic, no cats, no crows, and no venturing below Fourteenth Street. Yet no matter how Susanna tried to enforce these rules, the children continued to thwart her. They insisted upon being unusual. Eldest was Frances, with skin as pale as milk and blood-red hair, who early on had the ability to commune with birds, which flocked to her window as if called when she was still in her crib. Then came Bridget, called Jet due to her inky black tresses, a girl as shy as she was beautiful, who seemed to know what others were thinking. Last there was Vincent, the adored youngest child, a surprise in every way, the first and only boy to be born into the family, a gifted musician who whistled before he could talk, so charismatic and fearless his worried mother took to keeping him on a leash when he was a toddler, to prevent him from making an escape.

The children grew up quickly in the last years of the 1950s, their odd behavior increasing with time. They had no desire to play games and no interest in other children at the park. They sneaked out the windows of the family's shabby town house on Eighty-Ninth Street on the Upper East Side after their parents went to bed, cavorting on the roof, scurrying down fire escapes, and, as time went on, wandering into Central Park at all hours. They wrote with black ink on the living room walls, read each other's thoughts, and hid in the basement scullery, where their mother could never find them. As if it were their duty, they broke the rules one by one. Franny wore black and grew

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night-blooming jasmine on her windowsill, Jet read every novel written by E. Nesbit and fed stray cats in the alley, and Vincent began to venture downtown by the time he turned ten.

All three had the gray eyes the family was known for, but the sisters were opposites in every way. Frances was sulky and suspicious, while Jet was kindhearted and so sensitive that a negative remark could make her break into hives. Jet was fashionable, following in her mother's stylish footsteps, but Frances was usually rumpled, her hair left uncombed. She was happiest when her boots were muddy as she navigated the park, wandering through Sheep Meadow. Her gift with wild birds allowed her to bring them to her merely by lifting her hand. From a distance, when she ran so fast she was nearly flying, it seemed as if she spoke their language, and was meant for their world more than her own.

As for Vincent, he possessed such an unearthly charm that only hours after his birth a nurse in the maternity ward of Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital had tucked him into her coat in a failed kidnapping attempt. During her trial she'd told the court that the abduction was not her fault. She'd been spellbound, unable to resist him. As time went on, this wasn't an unusual complaint. Vincent was spoiled rotten, treated by Jet as though he were a baby doll and by Frances as if he were a science experiment. If you pinched him, Frances wondered, would he cry? If you offered him a box of cookies, would he make himself sick by eating every one? Yes, it turned out, and yes again. When Vincent misbehaved, which was often, Frances made up stories filled with punishments for little boys who would not do as they were told, not that her cautionary tales stopped him. All the same, she was his protector and remained so even when he was far taller than she.

The school they attended was despised by all three children, though Susanna Owens had worked hard at getting them accepted, throwing cocktail parties for the board of the Starling School at the family's town house. Though their home was ramshackle due to a lack of funds—their father, a psychiatrist, insisted on seeing many of his patients gratis—the place never failed to impress. Susanna staged the parlor for school gatherings with silver trays and silk throw pillows, bought for the event and then returned to Tiffany and Bendel the very next day. Starling was a snobby, clannish establishment with a guard stationed at the front door at Seventy-Eighth Street. Uniforms were required for all students, although Franny regularly hitched up her gray skirt and rolled down the scratchy kneesocks, leaving her freckled legs bare. Her red hair curled in humid weather and her skin burned if she was in the sun for more than fifteen minutes. Franny stood out in a crowd, which irritated her no end. She was tall, and continued to grow until finally in fifth grade she reached the dreaded six-foot mark. She had always had especially long, coltish arms and legs. Because of this her gawky stage lasted for ten years, from the time she was a glum kindergartener, who was taller than any of the boys, until she turned fifteen. Often she wore red boots, bought at a secondhand store. *Strange girl*, was written in her records. *Perhaps psychological testing is needed?*

The sisters were outsiders at school, with Jet an especially easy target. Her classmates could make her cry with a nasty note or a well-aimed shove. When she began hiding in the girls' bathroom for most of the day, Franny swiftly interceded. Soon enough the other students knew not to irritate the Owens sisters, not if they didn't want to trip over their own shoes or find

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themselves stuttering when called upon to give a report. There was something about the sisters that felt dangerous, even when all they were doing was eating tomato sandwiches in the lunchroom or searching for novels in the library. Cross them and you came down with the flu or the measles. Rile them and you'd likely be called to the principal's office, accused of cutting classes or cheating. Frankly, it was best to leave the Owens sisters alone.

Franny's only friend was Haylin Walker, who was taller than she by three inches and equally antisocial. He was a legacy doomed to be a Starling student from the moment of his birth. His grandparents had donated the athletic building, Walker Hall, dubbed Hell Hall by Franny, who despised sports. In sixth grade Hay had staged a notorious protest, chaining himself to the dessert rack in the lunchroom to demand better wages for workers in the cafeteria. Franny admired his grit even though the other students simply watched wide-eyed, refusing to join in when Haylin began chanting "Equality for all!"

After the janitor apologetically cut through the chains with a hacksaw, Haylin was given a good talking-to by the headmaster and made to write a paper about workers' rights, which he considered a privilege rather than a punishment. He was obligated to write ten pages, and handed in a tome of nearly fifty pages instead, duly footnoted, quoting from Thomas Paine and FDR. He couldn't wait for the next decade. Everything would change in the sixties, he told Franny. And, if they were lucky, they would then be free.

Haylin despised his background of wealth and privilege and wore torn, threadbare clothes and boots so old there were holes in the soles. All he wanted was a dog and permission to attend

public school. His parents denied him both of these wishes. His father was the largest shareholder in a global bank that had been based in Manhattan since 1824, which was a great cause of shame for Hay. By the time they were in high school, he had considered legally changing his name to Jones or Smith so no one could connect him with his family and their infamous greed. One of the reasons he trusted Franny was because she was utterly unimpressed by externals. She didn't care if he lived in a penthouse on Fifth Avenue, or that his father had a butler who had been to Oxford and wore a morning coat and polished boots.

"What a lot of bother," Franny always said.

Most important, they had science in common. Haylin was currently studying the effects of cannabis on his calorie intake. So far he'd gained five pounds in less than a month, becoming addicted not to marijuana but to jelly doughnuts. He seemed easygoing, except when he talked about biology or injustice or his dedication to Franny. He trailed after her, not seeming to care if he made a fool of himself. When they were together, he had an intense gleam in his eye that Franny found disconcerting. It was as if there was a whole other part of him, a hidden self that was fueled by emotions neither he nor Franny was ready to confront.

"Tell me everything about you," Haylin often asked her.

"You already know me," Franny answered. He knew her better than anyone. Better, she sometimes feared, than she knew herself.

Unlike Franny and Jet, Vincent made his way through school with ease. He had taken up the guitar and in no time had surpassed his teacher, and soon enough packs of infatuated

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girls followed him through the school hallways. His interest in magic began early on. He pulled quarters from classmates' ears and lit matches with a puff of breath. In time, his talents increased. With a single look he could make the electricity in the Owenses' house go haywire, with lights flickering, then fizzing out entirely. Locked doors unlatched when they hadn't been touched, windows opened and closed when he was near. When Franny asked how he accomplished such things, he refused to divulge his methods.

"Figure it out," he said with a grin.

Vincent had posted a sign on his bedroom door, enter at your own peril, but Franny walked right in to search the place. There was nothing interesting in the desk drawers or the closet, but when she reached into the cobwebby space beneath her brother's bed she discovered an occult handbook called *The Magus*. Franny knew its history, for it was on their mother's list of forbidden books. It had been so popular when it was published, in 1801, that not enough texts could be printed. People committed robbery in their desire to own it, and many devotees kept it hidden under the floorboards. Vincent's well-worn copy was still just as potent as ever. It smelled like sulfur, and as soon as Franny saw it, she had a sneezing fit. If she wasn't mistaken, she was allergic to the thing.

The Magus was so hot to the touch she burned her fingers on its binding as she plucked it from its hiding place. It was not the sort of item a person picked up on a whim. You had to know what you were looking for, and you had to have the courage to handle it.

Franny flung the text on the kitchen table as Vincent was having his lunch. There went the potato salad and the cole-

slaw, splattering across the tabletop. The spine of the book was black and gold, cracked with age. When it hit the table the book groaned.

“Where did this come from?” she asked.

Vincent stared at her and didn’t flinch. “A used book kiosk outside the park.”

“That is not true,” Franny said firmly. “You’ve never been to a bookstall in your life!”

Vincent could flimflam other people, even Jet could be fooled by his charm, but Franny harbored an instinct for such things. Truth felt light and green, but a lie sunk to the floor, heavy as metal, a substance she always avoided for it made her feel as though she was trapped behind bars. Still, Vincent was the most appealing of liars and Franny felt a swell of love for her brother when he shrugged and told the truth.

“You’re right. They couldn’t sell it in a bookstall,” he confided. “It’s still illegal.”

Any copies that had been unearthed at the turn of the century had been burned on a bonfire in Washington Square and there was a little-known law forbidding the book to be kept in libraries in New York City or sold in bookstores. Inside the book now splayed upon the table Franny spied images of witches led to a gallows hill. The date printed below the illustration was 1693. A chill of recognition ran through her. She’d recently written a report for history class on the Salem trials and therefore knew this to be the year when many of those set to be tried escaped from New England in search of a more tolerant place, which they found in Manhattan. While the antiwitchcraft mania raged in New England, spurred on by politics, greed, and religion, ignited by Cotton Mather and the infamous and cruel judge John

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Hathorne, in New York only two witch trials had taken place, in 1658 and again in 1665, one in Queens, the other on Long Island, then called Yorkshire, in the town of Setauket, both involving residents who had ties to Boston. In New York, Franny had discovered, it was possible to be free.

“Why would you want this thing?” Franny’s fingertips had turned sooty and she had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Of course it *would* be like Vincent to be interested in the occult, rather than something ordinary, like soccer or track and field. He was suspended from school on a regular basis for general mischief, pails of water tumbling down, cans of pepper spray going off. His ongoing behavior was a great embarrassment to their father, who had recently published a book titled *A Stranger in the House*, an analysis of troubled adolescents dedicated to the children, none of whom had any intention of reading it, though it was something of a bestseller.

Franny could guess where *The Magus* had come from. The place on their mother’s list they were never to go. Downtown. It was rumored that what was outlawed in other parts of Manhattan could be found there. Hearts of beasts, blood of men, enchantments that could prove to be lethal. The chief reason their mother did not allow them to journey to Greenwich Village was that it was viewed as a society of bohemians, drug addicts, homosexuals, and practitioners of black magic. Yet Vincent had managed to find his way there.

“Trust me, it’s nothing to worry about,” he muttered, quickly retrieving *The Magus*. “Really, Franny, it’s just a lousy book.”

“Be careful,” Franny admonished him.

Perhaps she was also speaking to herself, for she was often

alarmed by her own abilities. It wasn't only that birds were drawn to her or that she'd discovered she could melt icicles with the touch of her hand. There was some scientific logic behind both of those reactions. She was calm and unafraid when birds flapped about, and her body temperature was above average, therefore it was logical for ice to melt. But one night, while standing on the fire escape outside her bedroom, she'd thought so hard about flying that for a moment her feet had lifted and she'd hung in the air. That, she knew, was empirically impossible.

"We don't really know what we're dealing with," she murmured to her brother.

"But it's something, isn't it?" Vincent said. "Something inside of us. I know our mother wants us to pretend we're like everyone else, but you know that we're not."

They both considered this. The girls had their talents, as did Vincent. He could, for instance, see shadowy bits of the future. He'd known that Franny would come across *The Magus* today and that they would have this conversation. In fact, he'd written it down on his skin with blue ink. He now held up his arm to show her. *Franny finds the book.*

"Coincidence," Franny was quick to say. There was no other justifiable cause.

"Are you sure? Who's to say it's not more?" Vincent lowered his voice. "We could try to find out."

They sat together, side by side, pulling their kitchen chairs close, unsure of what bloomed inside them. As they concentrated, the table rose up, hovering an inch off the floor. Franny was so startled she hit the tabletop with the palms of her hands to stop the rising. Immediately it returned to the floor with a clatter.

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“Let’s wait,” she said, flushed with the heat of this strange moment.

“Why wait? The sooner we know what this is, the better. We want to control it, not have it control us.”

“There is no *it*,” Franny insisted, logical as always, well aware that her brother was referring to magic. “There’s a rational explanation for every action and reaction.”

After the incident in the kitchen, the table was always tilted, with plates and glasses tending to slide off the top, as if to remind them that whoever they were, whatever their history might be, Vincent had been correct. They were not like anyone else.

