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opening extract from

Century

written by

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Prologue

The book lay hidden in a wooden crate in the attic over the west wing of the house. The place was undergoing renovation, after decades of standing empty. A few rotten pieces of furniture remained, but the residents were long gone. The old roof tiles had slipped and needed renewing. From the roofspace workmen carried down chests of mouldering rags, tin boxes full of papers, old lampshades, mounds of velvet curtains. Covered in dust, the forgotten things huddled in the great hall. Most would end up at the tip.

An expert prodded the junk, hoping for a valuable find. An oil painting, perhaps. An antique gown free from the ravages of moth larvae and mould. A vase, a collection of jewellery. But he couldn't find anything. Even the papers were dull – faded housekeeping receipts detailing pounds, shillings and pence paid for grocery deliveries.

He opened the wooden crate. It was busy with spiders, and puffed a breath of sour dust.

The expert tugged out the remains of children's clothes, chewed into a mouse's nest.

"Nothing," he said. "Worthless." Then, delving deeper, he found something. "Just a minute," he said, coughing. "What's this?"

He pulled out a book. A cover of faded red leather, worn at the edges. A thick piece of string bound the book like a parcel, knotted and knotted again.

The expert took a penknife from his pocket and cut the string. He opened the book and turned the pages, peering down his nose. He read, briefly, then shut the book with a snap.

"It's a novel," he said. "Some kind of romance. Little value, but maybe you'll find the story of interest. The author's name is written in the front. Here, have a look."

He handed the book to me.

Century

A Novel

by Mercy Galliena Verga

1890

I

A woman under the ice.

A ghost. Mercy could see ghosts, the echoes of people who had died. The dead moved on to another world, to heaven perhaps, or Valhalla if you were a Viking. Sometimes they left threads of themselves behind, like a piece of cloth snagged from a dress, or strands of hair caught on a nail. Only, of course, the ghosts were immaterial, and the snags were places people held onto, where something important had happened. Perhaps, Mercy wondered, you did not even have to be dead to leave a ghost. Perhaps she had already left some of her own.

The woman under the ice. The pond was a black pocket at the end of Distillery Meadow, with trees hunched over. It was the hour before dawn and the sky had paled in the east. Frosty fields spread away.

Mercy was tired. She was a thin, sullen-looking girl with a closed face, given to long hours of brooding. She had thick black hair and a dark coat. She had walked right across the

meadow. Now her legs felt heavy and stiff, and her head ached. It was the end of night – and also, the end of her day. The Verga family always awoke just after sunset, and retired to bed before dawn.

She was sitting on the cold bank by the pond and she prodded the ice with her booted foot. It felt thick. Then she saw her, the ghost woman, face up, in a blur, her hair a dark stream, and her dress a white, watery billow. The woman flowed.

When the ghost's face was under Mercy's feet, her eyes opened – blank holes which reflected the violet in the sky. The ice, imperfectly clear, veiled her features.

Mercy gasped, though she knew the ghost for what it was. The other ghosts – she had seen them so many times. They were familiar, unnoticed, like the old paintings on the wall. Not this one. Mercy wasn't afraid, but the sight was still a shock – this new face. Like jumping into cold water, or tripping over. Her skin seemed to prickle, from the base of her spine to the top of her head.

She stood up and backed away from the pond, but she couldn't tear her eyes from the ghost. The woman's hair undulated in gentle currents. She opened her mouth, and closed it again, like a fish. Perhaps she was trying to say something. Mercy did not wait to find out. She gathered up her skirts and ran across Distillery Meadow. She didn't stop until she reached the house.

The house was called Century. It reared above a ha-ha,

which was a ditch and wall to keep the cattle from the garden. The house overlooked parkland, the meadows and, further away, a huge lake, like a ribbon of mercury.

Mercy ran up the steps to the garden, through the gateway in the high wall around the rose garden and pushed through the door into the kitchens, where Aurelia was stooped over, stoking the fire. Hearing the door bang, she turned round.

"Mercy!" she scolded. "Why are you always so noisy?"

Aurelia was thin, in a tight black dress, with white hair pinned in a bun. When she realised how shocked and breathless Mercy was, her expression changed from annoyance to concern.

"Mercy," she said again, more gently now. "What happened? Mercy my dear, sit down. You're cold – your face is quite blue! Look at your hands – your arms. The blood has stopped in your fingers. Sit down by the fire."

She ushered Mercy to the little wooden chair by the fire, unlaced Mercy's boots, and rubbed her feet to warm them. Mercy recovered her breath and tried to speak but her lips and tongue were too cold. Aurelia warmed milk, and poured it in a cup with cinnamon, for Mercy to drink. Slowly, Mercy recovered. Her hands throbbed and tingled as they warmed.

"Now, what happened?" Aurelia said, patiently rubbing the soles of Mercy's tiny feet.

"I saw a new one," Mercy said. "I saw a ghost. Under the ice in the little pond at the end of Distillery Meadow."

Aurelia sat up straight. "Why did you do that? Why did you go to the meadow?"

Aurelia was alarmed, because Century's days were endless and unchanging. Nothing new or strange should ever happen. Maybe even the suggestions of dawn and dusk were an illusion and the house was eternally cloaked in darkness.

But Aurelia knew what Mercy could see, and she believed her. At first, when Mercy had told them about the ghosts, everyone had assumed she was making it up. Lots of children have invisible friends. Mercy's invisible friends did not fade away and in any case such talents were not unusual in the family. Trajan, her father, had long ago told Mercy that his maternal great-aunt had also seen ghosts, and everyone came to accept it. Every day, Mercy saw the ghost of a ginger cat in the kitchen. It jumped to the top of the dresser, curled up and fell asleep. Sometimes she could see a man in a gardener's uniform picking apples in the orchard. Like wallpaper, most of them; faded into the background, unremarkable.

Aurelia, housekeeper and nurse, did not like this seeing of ghosts. She pursed her lips and shook her head. Indeed, Mercy thought, she acted as though it were a bad habit, like biting fingernails or whistling, which Mercy should have the firmness of character to give up. As if she could!

"Were you afraid?" Aurelia asked.

"Not afraid, exactly. It's like – having a cold fish dropped down your back. Or suddenly sneezing. A shock!"

"Hmmph," Aurelia said. "You shouldn't be out so close to morning. You never go to the meadow! What were you

thinking of? You haven't the strength to walk so far. Why didn't you stay in the garden? Perhaps your mind was playing tricks."

Mercy frowned. She knew what she had seen. And what had prompted her to take a different walk? After all, it wasn't something she'd done for a long time. For months? How long had it been? It was hard to tell. One day was so much like another in the big house. She rose after sunset, for the long midwinter night. She ate breakfast with her younger sister Charity, and then took their lessons with the governess. After lunch the girls helped in the kitchen, and Mercy took a walk in the garden. It was a moment of pleasure, her usual stroll through the bare rose bushes, beneath the stars.

Today though – something extraordinary. Curious dreams in the night and, on waking, a snowdrop upon her pillow. The crisp, white, vital flower, just inches from her face. Where had it come from? Nothing grew in the gardens and grounds of Century. The earth was frozen, hard as iron. She had picked up the flower from the pillow and marvelled, touching the tender white petals with her fingertips, trying to breathe any faint perfume it might possess. The snowdrop was a mystery. The sight was a jolt.

She had thought about the flower all the long, dark day; keeping it secret and brooding over its origin. Had Charity, Aurelia or her father placed it there, beside her sleeping head, as a surprise? She waited for the culprit to reveal himself.

Then, when she took her usual walk in the garden, she had

remembered that snowdrops used to grow by the pond in Distillery Meadow, so she had turned on her heels and headed off. She had broken the usual pattern.

Mercy couldn't remember the last time she'd seen the little pond. So long, long ago, in the spring that never returned, when the pond was a cool green jewel, floating with the ghostly jelly of frogspawn. But the flower reminded her of Januarys past, when the pond was skirted with crowds of snowdrops. Harbingers of spring in the darkest days. Had the flowers bloomed again? She hadn't found any snowdrops but she now knew the pond held a secret of its own.

Odd thoughts scratched inside her head, like a dream she couldn't catch. She rubbed at her hair. Her feet itched. Aurelia was staring at her.

"Go to bed now," she said. "You look tired."

In Mercy's bedroom a fire burned in the small iron hearth, bordered with blue and white tiles. Aurelia helped Mercy undress and tied the ribbons on her white nightgown, brushed Mercy's long black hair and hung up her faded silk dress.

Mercy jumped into bed, pulling up the covers. "Aurelia, how long have we lived here?" she asked.

"Goodness gracious, I can't remember." Aurelia bustled, drawing the dusty curtains, folding Mercy's shawl.

"Well, about how long?"

"We moved to Century from Italy," Aurelia said quickly. "From Rome. The old country."

"I know. How long ago?"

"A long time. I don't know." Aurelia stood up straight, frowning. "A long time," she said. "Go to sleep."

But Mercy lay awake awhile, conscious of her heart beating against her ribs. She stretched her arms and legs. The ghost drifted in her mind, in the white cloud of her dress. How long had the winter lasted? She hadn't thought to ask before. The endless winter nights stretched behind, in a kind of waking dream. And she had moved through them like a sleep-walker. Something had prompted her to seek out the forgotten pond. The pattern of days was broken.

Mercy woke in the evening. Unusually, she drew the curtains. The moon curved like a silver saucer over the trees. She pulled off her nightgown. A bruise flowered on her knee where she had fallen, petals of mauve and red on white skin. She was very thin, with arms like ivory sticks, but her hair was a rich black, and long, right down to her waist. A robe to hide in.

She pulled on her underclothes, fastened the corset and the pink dress. The soft silk wrinkled, like old rose petals.

Charity was sitting at the table in the old nursery parlour. She toyed with a tarnished silver egg-cup. Three soft white-bread soldiers lay upon a plate painted with blue roses. She dipped one soldier in the yolk, and bit off its head. Then she put the bread down.

"Is that all you can eat?" Mercy said. She sat at the other end of the table. Most of the great house had been abandoned to the dust and mice, but here flames crackled on cedar logs in the fireplace.

Charity shrugged. "Well, you haven't eaten anything at all yet," she said.

Charity, a fragile doll, was wrapped in a large wine-coloured dressing gown, the sleeves folded back. Her hair was long, fat with curls, the colour of butter and honey. But her face was thin and pinched, her blue eyes looked too big.

"Something's happening," Charity said. She sat back in her chair.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know exactly. Something about you and the ghost of a girl in a pond. I heard Aurelia talking to Father and Galatea about it, just before breakfast. They said something was happening."

"What do you mean, Charity? Nothing happens. What could be happening?"

Galatea, the governess, was a formidable figure and Mercy feared her displeasure. And she wondered about her father. She hadn't seen him in a long time. She always knew he was nearby, probably working in his study, but he didn't feature in the regular pattern of the day. He was remote, and in the background.

"He sounded worried," Charity said. "What did you do? Aurelia was talking about you."

"I don't know," Mercy repeated. "What exactly did they say?"

What was the reason for the fuss? They were used to her seeing of ghosts. But not a new ghost, no. That was the reason

for worry. She felt it, in a shiver, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet.

Charity, an accomplished eavesdropper, raised her eyebrows, and smirked. She was infuriating. She opened her mouth to speak, but Aurelia marched in, with a tray and a tea service, also adorned with blue roses. Slices of toast were poised on a plate. She greeted Mercy and poured the girls each a cup of jasmine tea. She turned to poke at the fire and Charity stared at the wrinkle of steam rising from her cup.

"Just you wait and see," Charity whispered, lifting her eyes to Mercy. "It's all your fault." She picked up a spoon and tapped out a faint rhythm on the egg. She had her sly smile again. Mercy, pretending not to care, picked up a slice of warm toast and took a bite. Why did Charity have to pretend she knew everything?

Charity picked up the other slice, took one small bite, and put it back on the plate.

Later the girls waited in the library with their books for Galatea and their lesson. The room was very cold, without a fire. Mercy was anxious, expecting some kind of reprimand from the governess. The door opened.

"Father!" Mercy jumped to her feet. Trajan was standing in the doorway. She hadn't seen him for so long.

Charity looked up, and gave him a winning smile.

"Good morning, girls," he said, uncertainly. "I hope you are well."

He looked rather shabby and old. His white shirt and cravat were dingy and stained, and there were dark marks, like fingerprints, on his jacket. His hair hung in untidy black and iron-grey clumps. He sat down and stared at the girls, as though they were strangers, struggling to remember their names.

"Mercy. Charity," he said at last. Galatea stepped in beside him. She was an odd-looking woman. Ugly, maybe. And again, maybe not. Perhaps this was simply Mercy's view because the governess was so strict and unyielding. She had a beaky face. Her skin was dry and stretched, with a strong nose, a tall forehead and chestnut hair pulled back tightly.

Waiting for the scolding, Mercy stared at the sharp tips of Galatea's boots. Slowly she raised her eyes to the hem of the governess's plain black dress. Then the skirt, the tiny waist, her narrow, bony shoulders and, lastly – her face.

"Say good day to your governess, Mercy," Trajan said.

"Good day," Mercy squeaked.

"Good day, Galatea," Charity said sweetly. She tipped her head on one side, and smiled. Mercy twisted on her feet, bursting to speak to her father and not knowing what to say. She felt very shy, especially with Galatea standing over her. But she longed to talk, to find out where he had been and what he was doing. And why had he come to see them today? Galatea, too, stared at Trajan expectantly. He cleared his throat.

"Mercy, Charity," he said. "I have a concern. A worry. I'm

afraid the house faces some disruption, you see. It could be a problem for us." He spoke awkwardly.

"What do you mean, Father?" Charity said brightly.

"A disruption," he said again, struggling for the right word. "I want you to be careful. On your guard."

"On our guard for what?" Mercy said.

"For anything . . . strange. For the unexpected."

Mercy frowned. She remembered the snowdrop and the ghost. Presumably these were the unexpected things her father was talking about. How could they be dangerous?

The governess and the two girls waited for Trajan to speak again, but he coughed instead and thrust his hands into his pockets, already turning away.

"Remember what I told you," he said. "If anything concerns you, come and tell me." He was already reaching for the door.

"Where shall we find you?" Mercy called.

Trajan frowned. "Oh, here and there," he said, a vague gesture with his hand. "In the house." Then he was gone.

The girls and the governess stood for a moment in silence, Mercy puzzled by the warning.

"Well," Galatea said at last. "It's very cold in here today. Shall we find somewhere warmer to work?"

"The nursery parlour," Charity piped up. "Or the kitchen."

"The nursery parlour will be suitable," Galatea said. "We shall leave the kitchen to Aurelia, I think. Charity, will you lead the way?"

They studied Latin verbs and afterwards, Galatea taught them Italian, which Mercy could read well and speak poorly. Later they dined on venison pie with leeks and cabbage, and fresh bread still hot from the oven. Charity ate heartily, for once, but Mercy was haunted by strange thoughts, about her father and the snowdrop and the ghost in the pond. She wanted life to resume as it had been, before the intrusion.

As soon as the meal was over, Mercy went for her usual stroll in the gardens and then read with Charity by the fire. Then the girls ate supper with Galatea and Aurelia in the kitchen, and when the meal was finished Mercy went to her room, drew the curtains and shut the door. She curled up in bed with her favourite book, a fairy tale called *The Enchanter's Daughter.* On the title page her own name was inscribed beneath another name, her mother's. Thecla Arcadius Verga. Arcadius was her mother's maiden name. Her father said they had chosen English names for their daughters so they shouldn't feel out of place. This consideration seemed a little strange now.

The Enchanter's Daughter stood on a high balcony, above the snow, on a page edged with gold. Mercy mused, stroking the picture with her finger. The past was so far away. Today had been very strange. The winter had gone on and on. The weeks had flown by, one like another, but now everything was changing. A walk, a ghost, a father.

Just before dawn Aurelia helped her undress for bed and Mercy fell asleep, until Century's reverse morning, when Aurelia woke her up again.

"Mercy, dear, get up," Aurelia said. "Come on. Galatea wants to begin early today."

Mercy swung her legs out of bed and shook the hair from her eyes. Her head was heavy with dreams of brighter places. She dressed and ate her breakfast of boiled egg and toast with Charity. She took her cup to the kitchen, where Aurelia was baking bread. Mercy looked around, at the swags of dried herbs tied in bundles to the beams. Copper pans gleamed. The glass-fronted dresser was crammed with a huge dinner service, now never used. The familiar room seemed oddly new – if only because she was taking the time to look. When had she stopped noticing things?

Galatea collected them promptly. Charity was playing her usual role of diligent pupil. They studied Latin verbs, the governess picking up Mercy on every mistake, making her repeat her declensions time and again. Later, when Mercy was about to take her usual solitary stroll in the garden, Galatea decided they should all go together. Charity groaned, but Mercy was horrified.

"I want to go by myself – that's what I always do," Mercy said. "You can't come with me."

"You are not to be alone," Galatea said firmly. "I am following your father's orders. He said I should accompany you."

Mercy's heart was heavy. She had no pleasure so great as the walk on her own in the cold air and the moonlight. Galatea would crush her enjoyment. Mercy pursed her lips, choked with resentment.

Outside, the fields were sealed with frost, so they wrapped up in fur mittens, heavy coats and hats.

"Come along," Galatea said. They left through the kitchen, and headed out into the night. Moonlight glittered on the frozen grass. The glare burned in Mercy's face. So cold – even wrapped up. Charity grasped her sister's hand.

They walked through the rose garden and across the top of Distillery Meadow. Then Galatea led them through a gateway, and along a lane towards the tiny church at the top of the slope, just before the woods. Mercy had forgotten it was there. The family chapel. It was so quiet. Now and then a creature stirred in the icy undergrowth, disturbed by the tapping of three pairs of boots.

"Now, girls," Galatea said. "I think we should always walk out together after lessons. You both need some healthy exercise. It is too cold for sketching, but I wish you both to study the church, so we might recreate it in our drawings on our return to the house. You may choose any aspect you please."

She wore a pair of soft leather gloves, and a fox fur draped around her shoulders. The fox's mask was still intact, with sad amber eyes. Charity smiled at her, and skipped off at once, to the south side, studying the rounded yew trees, and the turrets. Mercy, who hated drawing, ambled reluctantly after her sister. Then – from a niche in the chapel wall – a barn owl floated, like a ghost. White and cream, soundless, the bird dropped from the night sky, and rose again, above the trees.