Opening extract from

I, Coriander

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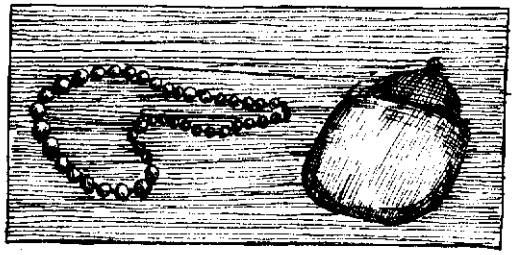
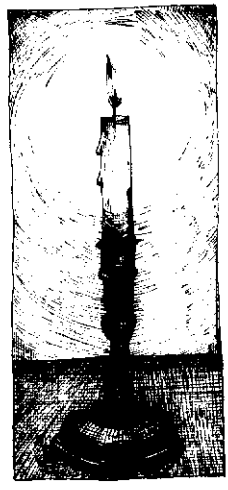
PART ONE





1

A Tale to Tell

It is night, and our old house by the river is finally quiet. The baby has stopped its crying and been soothed back to sleep. Only the gentle lapping of the Thames can be heard outside my window. London is wrapped in a deep sleep, waiting for the watchman to call in the new day.

I have lit the first of seven candles to write my story by. On the table next to me is the silk purse that holds my mother's pearls and beside it is the ebony casket whose treasure I am only now beginning to understand. Next to that, shining nearly as bright as the moon, stands a pair of silver shoes.

I have a great many things to tell, of how I came by the silver shoes and more. And this being my story and a fairy tale besides, I will start once upon a time . . .

My name is Coriander Hobie. I am the only child of Thomas and Eleanor Hobie, being born in this house in the year of Our Lord 1643. It is just a stone's throw from London Bridge, with the river running past the windows

at the back. To the front is my mother's once beautiful walled garden that leads through a wooden door out on to the bustling city street. The garden is all overgrown now; it has been neglected for too long. Once it was full of flowers and herbs of all description whose perfume could make even the Thames smell sweet, but now rosemary and nettles, briar roses and brambles have reclaimed it as their own.

It was this garden, the like of which no neighbours had ever seen, that first set tongues wagging. My father had planted it for my mother, and built her a pretty stillroom that backed on to the wall of the counting house. My mother in her quiet way knew more about herbs and their powers than anyone else, and together with her waiting woman Mary Danes she would spend hours in the stillroom, making all sorts of potions which were distilled and stored in tiny bottles. When I was small I used to hide under my mother's petticoats and listen to friends and neighbours as they brought their ailments to her like posies of sorrows, to be made better by one of her remedies. Later on, when I was too big to hide, they came to ask her other things, for by this time her reputation as a cunning woman with magical powers had spread as thistledown does, blown on the hot winds of gossip.

My first memories are of the garden and of this, my old bedchamber, whose walls my mother painted with fairy places and imaginary beasts. She wrote under each one in her fair script, and for every picture she had a story, as bright in the telling as the colours in which they were painted. When I was small I used to trace the letters with my finger, to feel how the spidery

writing was raised above the wood panelling, and I would say the names to myself like a magic charm to keep harm at bay. All the pictures, like the garden's blooms, are gone now, washed and scrubbed away. Only the faintest trace of the gold letters remains. They still shine through, like the memories.

I used to believe that my mother's life had started with me and that before I made my entrance into this world there was nothing. Nothing, that is, until the midsummer's day when my father, Thomas Hobie, first saw my mother standing under an oak tree in a country lane.

This is the story he told me, and the story I loved the best. When he was a young merchant with a head full of dreams, he put his hard-earned savings, together with what money his father had left him, into a ship bound for Constantinople, banking on her returning with a cargo of silk. Alas, news reached him that she had been lost in a great storm at sea, so that now he owned nothing but the clothes on his back.

In despair, my father walked out of the city and some ten miles into the country, on the chance of being able to borrow money from a distant cousin, a Master Stoop. When he arrived he found that Master Stoop had given up the never-ending struggle to live and had joined the ranks of the dead, leaving a wife and several small Stoops to be looked after.

My father had not the heart to ask for anything. Having paid his last respects, he set out mournfully on the road to London, resigned to his fate.

It was getting late when he met a strange-looking man with

a long beard tied in a knot, holding a lantern as round as the moon. The stranger told him he had been robbed by a highwayman who had taken all he had owned, leaving him just the lantern. My father felt sorry to hear of this misfortune and offered him his cloak to keep the chill off. The stranger accepted it with thanks.

'Young man, to travel with an open and loving heart is worth more than all the gold coins in a treasure chest,' he said. 'Tomorrow your kindness will be rewarded.'

My father wished the fellow well and hoped that nothing more would befall him. Then he set off again, with only the light of the moon to show him the way. As he walked, a wave of tiredness came over him and he lay down to sleep.

Next morning he had not gone far when he thought he might be lost, for in the dawn light everything looked different.

At this point I, having heard the story so many times that I could repeat it to myself word for word, would interrupt and say, 'But you were on the right road.' He would laugh and reply, 'It was the road that would lead me to your mother, so how could it be wrong?'

To my childish way of thinking, it seemed that he met and married my mother in the space of one day. They arrived back in the city after the wedding to be greeted with the astonishing news that his ship had returned safe and sound with a cargo of fine silk.

From that day forward my father's life had been charmed with love and good fortune. No other merchant's ships fared as

well. Untouched by pirates, wars or tempests, they sailed unmolested in calm seas, bringing back bounty fit for a king. Before long, my father was wealthy enough to be able to build this house for us by the river, where we lived in great luxury, having a cook and servants to look after us as well as Sam, my father's faithful apprentice.

It was no surprise to me that all this should happen so fast. It never entered my head to ask what my mother's family thought of their daughter marrying a young man who was penniless, or even if she had any family to mind. All these questions and many more besides only occurred to me much, much later when there was no one left to ask.

My father had two miniature paintings done of them both shortly after their wedding. My mother's portrait shows her wearing a cream gown beautifully embroidered and oversewn with tiny glimmering pearls. I imagine that this is how she looked when my father first saw her that midsummer's day under the oak tree. Wild flowers are woven into her hair and in her hand she is holding an oak leaf.

The background of this tiny painting always fascinated me. It is as if you are a bird looking down from a great height, seeing the land mapped out below. There, in a forest of oak trees, is a clearing in which there is a grand house with formal gardens. In the distance a tower stands tall over the trees, and I could just make out a figure at the top of the tower watching over the landscape, searching for something or someone. On the edge of the forest is a hunting party with dogs. Compared

to the house and the tower, they look oddly large. A hawk sits on the outstretched arm of one of the riders. Another rider is standing up in his saddle blowing a horn. I looked at this painting many times before I spotted the white horse and the fox hidden in a thicket. For some reason that I cannot explain, their discovery worried me greatly. It gave me an uneasy feeling, as if somehow nothing was safe.

My father's portrait shows him looking young and handsome. He is clean-shaven, wearing breeches and a linen shirt embroidered in the same pattern as my mother's dress. The scene behind him could not be more different. It is a view of a city with the river running through it like an opal green ribbon. You could be forgiven for thinking it a picture of London, except that the houses are brightly painted and mermaids and sea monsters can be seen in the water in amongst a fleet of tall ships with full-blown golden sails.

Even then, these two miniatures looked to me strangely out of time, as if they had been painted long, long ago in another world entirely. I know now what they mean. I know why my mother kept silent and why, at my darkest moment, her past claimed me, leading me back to something that could no longer be denied.

2
The Stuffed Alligator

I remember nothing of the trial of King Charles I. I had no knowledge of what was meant by civil war. Such great affairs in the tides of history passed me by. What I recall is feeling safe and loved, the smell of my mother's perfume, staying up late with my parents while they had their dinner, going to sleep in my mother's arms. Of her kisses I could tell you much. Of what my mother and father talked about I could tell you little, except that it made them sad.

In truth, I did not understand what momentous events were unfolding or how they were to touch upon our lives. My world revolved round smaller things. A stuffed alligator, a drowned barber, a pair of silver shoes seemed to me just as strange as a king losing his head.

That January day it was snowing, and the river had begun to freeze over. I went running in great excitement to tell Danes and found her weeping. This in itself was unusual, for Danes was not given to tears.

It was nothing short of murder, she said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

'Who has been murdered?' I asked with interest.

'It is the King,' she replied. 'It is a wicked thing they have done, and no good will come of it.'

'Who has done what?'

'Oliver Cromwell and his axe man,' said Danes. 'Terrible! Who would think we would live to see our very own King have his head chopped off?'

'Did you see it?' I asked.

'No, no, but Master Thankless the tailor was there. He told me it was the saddest sight he had ever had the misfortune to witness. They held the poor King's head up high for all to see, and there was a groan from the crowd, the like of which London has never heard before. We live in dark days, my little sparrow.'

It being winter, I thought she must be right.

Danes blew her nose. 'The King is dead,' she said mournfully. 'Long live the King.'

'How can he be dead and alive at the same time?' I asked. It sounded a very hard thing to do.

'Because,' said Danes, 'his son Prince Charles is alive and well and he will, with God's grace, be the next King.'

It was a bitterly cold winter and snow had covered London in a thick white blanket, so that an eerie hush had descended over the city. The mighty water wheels at each end of the bridge had stopped their thunderous churning and huge

icicles hung from them as the river slowly began freezing over. Old Father Thames looked as if he was growing a long white beard.

A Frost Fair was soon set up on the frozen river, with tented stalls selling all manner of wonderful things: gloves, hats, lace, pots, pans, needles, marbles, poppet dolls, spinning tops, spiced gingerbread, roasted chestnuts. The taverns did a roaring trade with food and ale, and late into the night I could hear singing and shouting outside my window, and smell hot pies tempting passers-by on to the ice.

Master Mullins the barber, who lived near us in Cheapside, was amongst the first to venture out on to the ice. He set up his small red-and-white-striped tent for business and called to his customers, promising them the closest shave in London. People watched the barber from the safety of the riverbank with awe, wondering if the frozen surface was to be trusted.

'Come!' shouted Master Mullins. 'It is as solid as a rock and could take the weight of the Devil himself.'

To prove his point he jumped up and down on the glassy surface.

'Master Mullins is a nincompoop,' said my mother as the Thames began to crack, and we watched all the other stallholders take to the shore. Master Mullins refused to leave. When no customers would venture on to the ice to join him, he shouted to them from his tent, 'What are you waiting for? I have the best ointments in the whole city for thinning hair.'

Master Mullins became the talk of our street, not because of his ointments for thinning hair but for the way he plummeted through the ice, taking all his basins and razors with him.

I asked Danes what would become of him.

'The meddling old fool,' she said. 'He has most probably set up his tent at the bottom of the river and is already open for business and the spreading of gossip.'

After that I took to imagining Master Mullins cutting mermen's hair and trimming the whiskers of sea monsters. With that thought firmly in my head I worried no more about the barber, and my only regret was that he had not taken the stuffed alligator with him.

The alligator had been given to my father by a Captain Bailey, who had brought it back from China. He stood menacingly on top of the ebony cabinet in the study, the key kept safe in creamy white jaws with needle-sharp teeth.

I had always been fascinated by the treasures the cabinet held, shells in which you could hear the sea, a tiny turtle shell, butterflies with wings of brilliant blue. But the moment I saw the alligator I burst into tears, believing it to be real. It looked very angry and not at all pleased to be stuffed.

'It is only a baby alligator,' said my father, holding it for me to see. 'It will not bite.'

I would not go near it. I knew it was secretly waiting until we had left the room and then it would come alive.

This thought terrified me so much and gave me such nightmares that Danes would light all the candles to make sure that

the alligator would not come in. She never said I was being a ninny, not once, and secretly I felt she was as scared of that alligator as I.

Winter finally departed and spring arrived, catching everyone by surprise. Windows were thrown wide open and carpets were taken outside and beaten, as if our house were a great blanket being shaken free of its fleas. Everything was washed and polished until the house smelt of lavender and beeswax, with bunches of fresh flowers filling the rooms. All our clothes were aired, our linens were cleaned and Master Thankless the tailor was sent for. New gowns were ordered and old gowns altered.

In amongst all this excitement a very strange thing happened. A parcel was left outside our garden gate. No name was written on it and there was no indication of where it was from. The mysterious package was brought inside and left on the hall table to be claimed. Every time I saw it sitting there I would feel a tingle of excitement.

Finally my mother opened it, carefully looking for any clues as to who might have sent it. Inside was the most beautiful pair of child-size silver shoes. They had tiny silver stitches on them and the letter C embroidered on their soles. I knew they were meant for me.

'Can I put them on?' I said, jumping up and down with joy.

My mother said nothing, but took the silver shoes over to the window to examine them. They shimmered and glimmered as

if they were made out of glass. They whispered to me, 'Slip us on your dainty feet.'

'Please,' I said, pulling at my mother's skirts, 'let me.'

'I think not,' said my mother quietly. She took them back to the table and much to my surprise wrapped them up again.

Seeing them disappear like that was almost too much to bear. I felt my heart would surely break if they could not be mine.

'They are meant for me,' I said desperately. 'They have the letter C sewn on their soles. C is for Coriander.'

'I said no,' said my mother. Her voice had a sharpness to it that I had never heard before. It alarmed me, for I could not understand why such a wonderful present should make her so out of humour.

'I am sorry, Coriander,' she said, softening, 'but these shoes are not for you. Let that be an end to it.'

An end it was not. It was the beginning.

I felt the loss of the shoes like a hunger that would not go away. I knew they were still in the house. I was sure I could sometimes hear them calling me, and when I followed the sound it always led me to the door of my father's study.

As it turned out, it was not the alligator that I should have been scared of, but the silver shoes. They came from a land no ship can sail to, a place that is not marked on any map of the world. Only those who belong there can ever find it.

3
The Silver Shoes

Something changed in my mother after the silver shoes arrived. She seemed worried and would not let me out of her sight. Then another strange thing happened. I was playing in the garden. The Roundheads were trying to catch me so I had hidden out of sight under the garden bench: I had to, because I was a royal prince disguised as a girl. It was a good place to hide. No one knew I was there, not even the Roundheads, and this way I got to listen to all sorts of grown-up conversations, my mother having many friends and visitors who came to ask her for advice and remedies.

Honestly, I had no idea that the heart could cause such trouble and strife. It could be broken and still mend. It could be wounded and still heal. It could be given away and still returned, lost and still found. It could do all that and still you lived, though according to some, only just.

Mistress Patience Tofton was one of the visitors. I had not been listening that much until I heard the name Robert Bedwell. Then my ears pricked up, because I often played with his

sons. They lived just down the river from us in Thames Street. He must, I supposed, have had a wife once and the boys a mother, but I had no memory of her.

Patience Tofton was all words and tears.

'He will be wanting a wife of letters,' she wept bitterly, 'a younger wife than me. I am too long a spinster.'

That was the silliest thing to say. Why, Master Bedwell was no spring chicken himself. He would be pleased to know that Patience Tofton, who was pretty, with fair hair and all her own teeth, should like him at all.

I peeped out from under the bench. My mother was talking to her kindly and softly, her words lost to me, and she kissed Patience on both cheeks.

'It will be all right, then?' asked Patience, getting up to leave.

I leapt out from my hiding place and said, 'Of course he will marry you! Do not take too long about it. Your two children are keen to be born.'

After I said it I thought perhaps I should not have. It took Patience Tofton by surprise, I can tell you. She went a greenish white, then fainted, falling like a bush that has been chopped down.

I went into the house, thinking it best to disappear until I heard the click of the garden gate. Then I looked out of my bedchamber window to see Master Bedwell helping Mistress Tofton home.

Later that day my mother came and sat on my bed.

'What made you say that to Patience?' she asked.

'I know not,' I said, for in truth I did not. 'I just know that she will marry Master Bedwell on Midsummer's Day and they will have a son and a daughter.'

'That is all?'

'Yes,' I said, giving it some thought. 'Well, that much I feel certain about.'

'Coriander,' said my mother, looking into my eyes, 'you are like me. But remember, you must keep your thoughts away from your tongue.'

'I will never say another word about any of the thoughts I have tumbling in my head,' I said apologetically.

'That would be a pity,' laughed my mother. 'Let us agree that you can tell them to me and your father and Danes, but no one else.'

'So can I have the silver shoes?'

'No, Coriander. Believe me, they are not the right shoes for you.' She sounded so sad. 'I had shoes like those once. I walked in them for seventeen years. I want you to have different shoes, shoes of your own choosing, not shoes that will take you where you should not be going.'

'But they are of my choosing,' I cried. 'I want them.'

'Oh Coriander, you are not old enough to understand,' said my mother. 'You must trust me. I know what is best for you.'

But what could be better than the silver shoes?

In our family much was made of the anniversary of my birth, and I was given presents to mark the day. This year

my mother had arranged for us to take our barge upriver. I woke early on the day and lay in bed as the sunlight reflected watery shadows round my chamber, listening to the street criers as they made their way to the bridge. As soon as the watchman called the hour I ran down the corridor towards my mother and father's bedchamber. I felt like a top spinning with excitement.

'Today is my day! Wake up!' I cried. I pulled back the drapes on the huge oak four-poster bed and jumped into the middle of it.

'I know it,' laughed my father. 'And the street knows it too.' He leant down and brought out a box from under the bed.

I opened the box with trembling fingers. I was sure I knew what was in it. And there they were: plain, dead, heavy silver leather shoes. A sad imitation, a hopeless copy. Nothing like the silver shoes that had been left by the garden gate.

I felt tears welling up in my eyes and a lump in my throat.

'I am sorry, poppet,' said my father. 'You cannot have those shoes. We hoped you would be happy with these instead.'

I climbed out of bed, all the excitement of the day gone, fighting back tears of disappointment.

'Try them on,' said my mother.

I did. They hurt and pinched my toes. I turned to leave, feeling miserable.

'Coriander,' called my mother. I looked back into the bedchamber. The floor had become a sea and the bed a ship, seen from a great distance. I could hear their voices calling me from far away. It lasted a minute or less. Maybe I dreamt it. Maybe I

did not. It was an image that came to haunt me, and I have often wondered what would have happened if I had done as I was told and left the silver shoes alone. Would everything then have been all right?

I made my way slowly and sadly back to my bedchamber, where Danes was waiting to dress me.

'Ah, what is the long face for, my little sparrow?' she said. 'Do you not like your new shoes?'

I said nothing.

'Oh well, you will not be wanting your present from me, then,' said Danes, taking out from her apron pocket a parcel tied up with silk ribbon. Inside was a sewing box in the shape of a frog, beautifully embroidered, with needles, a thimble and a tiny pair of scissors as well as a fabric book of all the different stitches. So thrilled was I that for a moment I forgot my grief over the shoes.

I was left alone with my little parcel while Danes went to attend to my mother. I could hear my father calling for hot water, and the silver shoes calling for me. For a moment I thought I must have imagined it, yet I could see where the call was coming from as if it were a wisp of smoke from my father's pipe. I got up and followed it down the stairs to the study.

'Coriander, Coriander, slip us on your dainty feet.
We are waiting, soft and silver, we will dance you down the street.'

I stood there listening, and finally I took my trembling courage in both hands and opened the door.

The study was dark. The alligator stood unmoving and all-seeing, king of the ebony cabinet, the key on its ribbon hanging out invitingly over his teeth.

I closed the door and stood with my back against it, my hand still on the handle, my heart beating like a drum. Quietness filled the room. There I stood. A decision had to be made. Did I have the courage to do this? I told myself that I did. I just wanted to see the shoes one more time, that was all.

I tried to move a chair over to the cabinet so that I could climb up and reach the key. The chair was far too heavy so I dragged it instead, as quietly as a chair can be dragged, then waited to make sure no one had heard me. I climbed up. Standing on tiptoe I was faced with the alligator. He looked more frightening close up, as if at any minute he would spring into action.

Did I really want to see the shoes that much? Oh yes, I did, and more. I half shut my eyes. Shaking with fear, I reached into the alligator's mouth and grabbed the key. If the alligator snapped his jaw shut I did not feel it, I did not see it.

I climbed down and opened the cabinet. Inside were many tiny drawers beautifully inlaid with cedarwood. I was not sure which one to choose.

I stood very still holding my breath and then I heard it again, this time no more than a whisper.

'Coriander, Coriander.'

I pulled open a drawer at the bottom and there they were, the most magical pair of shoes in the world. They were like glass. They were like diamonds. They were like stars.

Oh, I thought, what harm if I just tried them on?

The shoes fitted as if they were made for me. I stood marvelling at their beauty. How long I stood like that, I do not know. It must have been some time because to my alarm I heard my name being called, and not in a whisper.

'Coriander, Coriander! Where is the child?'

I quickly tried to take the shoes off, but they would not leave my feet. It was as if they were attached to me. In a panic of getting found out, I managed to close the drawer and put the key back into the alligator's mouth just before Danes opened the door.

'Coriander, what are you doing here, you ninny?' she said. 'We have been looking high and low for you. Come, the barge is about to leave.'

The good thing about living by the river was that we had our very own water gate and mooring, so that there were proper steps down to our barge. Therefore there was no need to lift my skirt too high, and my shoes went unnoticed. I told myself that in the evening I would take them off and put them back, but just for today they would be mine.

We were rowed upriver past Whitehall, where the city gives way to open fields and pastures, the water losing its look of mercury and becoming clearer like the air. There in a meadow

full of flowers our bargemen pulled the boat out of the river up on to the bank. Everyone then set to the task of making a day of doing nothing as comfortable as could be. Baskets of food were put under the trees, bottles of wine left to chill in the water and fishing lines set up for those in need of some sport.

While all this was going on I slipped away out of sight and sat down on a grassy bank, hoping that this time the shoes would come off. I pulled at them, and they slipped off with no trouble at all. I thought that I must have imagined they would not come off. I put them safely under some leaves where I knew no one would find them.

My mother too took off her shoes and stockings and, lifting her skirts, chased me round the meadow, her hair coming down, my cap flying off as we ran round and round until we fell in a heap of giggles. I made her daisy chains and found flowers for her hair. I paddled in the river, watched little fishes swim over my toes, was twirled like a windmill in my father's arms.

The day drifted past. It was time to retrieve my silver shoes. I was careful to keep my skirt well pulled down as we lay under the oak tree on an array of rugs and cushions like Roman emperors, eating our feast with dappled sunshine for our candles. My father had even arranged for three musicians to play sweet songs to us. In all this enjoyment I forgot what I had done until much later, when we were once more homeward bound.

The night rolled in over the river and stole the day away. The

watermen lit lanterns on their boats so that the river twinkled and danced with lights. I was sleepy after such a wonderful day of fresh air and food.

My mother said suddenly and sharply, 'Coriander, where did you get those shoes?'

I was immediately wide awake and realised to my horror that my shoes were showing.

'I . . .' I stammered. I knew I was in trouble. 'I am sorry, but the other shoes pinched.'

'That was naughty,' said my mother, looking disappointed.

'You mean to say,' said my father, who had his arm round me, 'that you got up on a chair and put your hand in the alligator's mouth to get the key?'

I nodded.

'Well, well. I am impressed. Quite a brave thing to do for someone as scared of that alligator as you.'

My mother said nothing and looked away. I knew she was not pleased.

'Oh, Eleanor my love,' said my father, 'I know she should not have done it, but it is Coriander's day. Why not let her have the shoes and be done with it? I think she has earned them.'

'They are the best pair of shoes I have ever worn,' I said. I felt so excited that I hardly dared move in case he should change his mind.

My mother turned and stared at the shoes. 'They came off easily?' she asked me.

'Yes, they did,' I replied. I was not telling the truth.

'There. Perhaps we are just making too much of it,' said my father. 'What harm can come from a pair of shoes?'

My mother said, 'Plenty, and you know it, Thomas.'