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“This is the season,” Bridget’s grandfather said as he held up his box of individually wrapped Honeybell oranges. The family was not allowed to give presents to each other for Christmas, except in secret. Instead, her grandfather gave everyone an orange from a specialty shop in Portland on the opening night of his Nutcracker performance at The Chocolate Church Arts Center in Bath. In recent years of the production he’d freely adapted from the ballet, he had played Herr Stahlbaum. Tonight he was already costumed in his black tails.

As he made his way around the room, handing out oranges, he reminded his family that in the absence of any evidence for Christ’s birthday, the holiday had started with a papal whim tailored to the nouveau vin and the yearly slaughtering of cattle. Voilà! Christmas.

When her grandfather came to Bridget, he tilted the orange box so she could see: aside from crumpled paper, it was empty. Everyone else was holding an orange, not counting the one next to her grandfather’s chair. Eight oranges for nine family members gathered in the parlor.

At thirteen, Bridget was the youngest of the cousins and used to being last. She didn’t want an orange anyway. What she wanted—more, she suspected, than anyone else in the family—was not to sit through another premier of her grandfather’s Nutcracker play.

“This is easily solved,” her grandfather said. “We’ll split my orange.” He opened the pocket knife he used to clean out his pipes and ran the blade over the circumference of the rind. When he was finished bisecting his offering, he set his half on top of his tobacco pouch and cupped hers in his upturned hand. From the woodpile, to cleaning out the ash from the woodstove, to the kitchen, to the bathroom, her grandfather rarely washed his hands because he was afraid of the well going dry. He crossed the room to where Bridget sat, lowered to one knee, and turned the palm full of dripping pulp upside down. She had no choice but to catch it in two hands to keep it from landing on her dress.

Back in his chair, her grandfather looked over the family. A bit of orange stuck to his upper lip. “This is my last year as Herr Stahlbaum,” he announced.

Bridget wasn’t surprised. He was quitting the Chocolate Church Theater, just as he had quit everything else over the last few years—the volunteer fire department, the vestry of St. Cuthbert. He had continued coaching the baseball team after he stopped teaching, but this year he had quit that, too.

“All because of Peter Reynolds?” Aunt Sandra said. “Because he didn’t get the role he wanted?”

According to Bridget’s grandfather, Petey’s recent acceptance to Bowdoin College had failed to blunt the considerable disappointment of his failure to get the role of the Prince, played this year by a boy from
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Portland named Steve, whose mother was a friend of the director.

“Petey earned that role,” her grandfather said, flicking his hand in the air. “Then this abecedarian Beau Brummell from Portland swoops in with his salmon tights!”

When he used words other people probably didn’t know, her grandfather often raised his chin slightly, which he was doing right now. Aunt Sandra had once said that he had the kind of face that gave people the finger.

“You shouldn’t have promised Petey the role of the Prince,” Grandma said.

“I did no such thing,” Grandpa said.

“And I told him—what I’ve always said—the Mouse King is the most important character. The catalyst, the prime mover of the whole drama.”

They arrived late and parked in the lot for the Chocolate Church, a decommissioned Presbyterian church converted to an arts venue many years before. Grandma told them to sit while she checked on Grandpa. As usual, Grandma had found them seats in the middle of the theater six rows back from the stage, close enough to feel the heat from the stage lights. The curtain was open because it was broken, and they could see the set, the same as last year: a fireplace of wood painted to look like bricks, a cardboard grandfather clock, Salvation Army furniture.

“It’s Petey, he’s late,” Grandma said when she sat. “But Petey will be here. He wouldn’t do this to your grandfather.”

Bridget knew Petey wasn’t going to show his face. Just like that, Petey was finished with all of them. But no one here in the theater would believe that. They would keep sitting here until they starved to death. Bridget’s temples were suddenly pounding with one of the headaches she sometimes had to endure on nights when she couldn’t sleep.

She said she had to go to the bathroom and edged her way back to the aisle. She didn’t actually have to go to the bathroom, but she couldn’t sit for another second. To avoid a group of students at the front entrance she shuffled down the side hall and ducked into the changing room. The actors had left their regular clothes strewn over the tables and chairs. All the costumes were gone. All except one. There, in the middle of the table, lay the crumpled grey suit and upside down whiskered head. The lifeless eyes.

She stepped into the legs and pulled on
The arms. Petey was short for his age and she was tall for her age, but the costume was still baggy. Her dress bunched up around her thighs. A tail somehow suspended from the back of the neck area. Though she cinched the belt with its plastic sword and scabbard to the smallest size, it sagged on her hips. The mouse head—with its long snout, tall ears and large eyes—was twice the size of her head, but when she lowered it onto her shoulders and tightened the chin strap, she could see through the slits. She could see out, but no one could see in.

Boiling in the fur costume, she continued down the hall toward the side entrance and was about to step outside to fill her lungs with fresh air when she saw her grandfather on the landing with his back to her. His black tails rode too high. The wispy strands of hair circling his crown seemed to have been painted on with a shaky hand.

He turned and she saw the confusion in his face—Petey would have parked on the street or in the front parking lot and come through the side entrance like all the other actors. Her grandfather leaned toward her. He seemed to know something was wrong but didn’t seem to understand what it was.

A red fire alarm hung just inside the door. As Bridget reached over and rested her fingers on the white handle, her grandfather followed the length of her arm to the wall. She pulled on the handle, the ringing blasted, and her grandfather’s eyes watered as if they had been whipped by the wind. For the first time he looked the way she had always felt.

The cast from backstage—Clara, the sugar plum fairies, the mouse soldiers, and all the others—rushed through the door, sweeping Bridget with them. She hurried down the steps, around the corner, and across the street where she took off the mouse head and breathed in the cold.

By the time she turned around, the sidewalk and parking lot had filled with families from the audience mixed with the cast. Some of the kids in costume stood with their parents, Clara leaned on her boyfriend’s shoulder. Bridget’s grandfather craned his neck to search the crowd.

Bridget unzipped the costume, which fell to the ground like a wet towel after a bath. Though she was surrounded by people, no one noticed her. She looked where they were looking, at the dark point of the steeple, and she waited to see if flames would rise into the sky. ■
MetaMorphosis: a celebration honoring young visionary leaders making change for Portland youth.

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