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Portraits in Sepia

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Introduction

Sepia is the color of memory and of concealment, a tint that softens edges while preserving what must be faced. In the mid-century rooms where cameras were still capricious machines, the air smelled of ether and ambition. Letters were written by gaslight and reputations by daylight, and in the quiet between the two the shutter fell. This novel opens in that quiet. It follows three women who step into rooms where the lens claims honesty and the print offers disguise, where posing is a bargain and a dare.

Eliza Hart is a seamstress with quick fingers and a slower rent. She knows how fabric can make a figure behave, how a line can flatter or refuse. Constance Whitby, newly widowed, is heir to debts and stories she never asked to keep; she discovers in stillness a new kind of speech. Saira Dutta has crossed oceans with a suitcase and a language that shifts as needed; in the studio she meets another vocabulary: light, angle, grain. Each woman chooses to stand before a pioneering photographer, not as a single muse but as an author of her own likeness.

The man behind the camera—one of those Victorian shuttermen whose name might anchor a studio advertisement—is not the subject of these pages so much as their instrument. He is a technician and a tradesman, a negotiator of exposures and of expectations. He offers them the chemistry of visibility: collodion poured to a glassy shine, silver bath quick as a heartbeat, the alchemy of emulsion and desire. But the decisions that matter most are made on the other side of the lens. What the prints show—what they cannot help but show—is the quiet choreography of consent, refusal, and reinvention.

“Erotic” was a word muttered, coded, sometimes prosecuted. Images circulated in brown paper and within private clubs, discussed in lectures with euphemisms and in back alleys with prices. Yet the commerce of desire was only part of the transaction. For Eliza, Constance, and Saira, the camera becomes a device that measures not simply bodies but thresholds: between needing and wanting, between performing and being seen, between being arranged and arranging oneself. Their poses carry the ordinary rebellions that slip beneath moral panic: a turned wrist, a direct gaze, the hint of a smile that declines to explain itself.

This is also a book about work—about the labor of holding still. Wet plates demand speed from the operator and patience from the subject; the slightest tremor becomes a ghost. Headrests bite, breath is rationed, eyes water. In that tension a kind of artistry emerges that belongs to the women as much as to the man with the bulb. The plate remembers what the sitter resolves to endure and, sometimes, what she has

determined to refuse.

Around the studio, the century changes. Laws are drafted to police obscenity; exhibitions court respectability with velvet ropes and Latin titles; newspapers alternate between outrage and appetite. A photograph slips from private album to public scandal, and reputation follows like a shadow untied from its wearer. The markets of image and intimacy expand, stitched to empire and industry, and Saira's presence makes plain what surfaces often conceal: that looking is never neutral in a world organized by distance and power.

Portraits in Sepia is told in braided strands—scenes, letters, advertisements, ledger entries—because the truth of a likeness is never simple. It does not argue for virtue or vice so much as for attention. If you read with care, you may notice how an arm relaxes across chapters, how a price is named and then renamed, how the same print means one thing to a collector and another to the woman it depicts. The photographs in these pages do not fix their subjects; the subjects fix the photographs. And in that inversion lies the story: not of what was taken, but of what was claimed.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Smell of Ether and Egg Whites

The morning air in Bloomsbury was already thick with the coal smoke of breakfast fires and the damp scent of horse manure, but inside Mr. Silas Engstrom's studio, the atmosphere was distinctly chemical. Eliza Hart wrinkled her nose discreetly as she waited on the leather chaise long, trying to keep her black merino shawl from slipping onto the floor. The main room, which Engstrom grandly called the 'Salon of Light,' was surprisingly narrow, tucked between a solicitor's office and a printer's press, but the glass roof and northern exposure did their work, spilling a harsh, unforgiving white light onto the velvet drapes and stuffed props.

Eliza wasn't meant to be in the Salon. She was meant to be stitching buttonholes on a dozen flannel petticoats for Mrs. Bellamy of Kensington, a task that required far less bravery and certainly less potent fumes. Yet the rent book lay heavy in her mind, a tally of arrears that flannel alone could never clear. She had seen the small, coded advertisement—*Wanted: Models for Artistic Studies. Discretion Assured. Generous Terms.*—in the back pages of a theatrical gazette slipped to her by a friendly stagehand.

The smell came from the inner chamber, the developing room, a territory as mysterious and important as any bank vault. It was primarily the acrid, sweet aroma of ether, used to dissolve the guncotton that formed the collodion base for Engstrom's glass plates. Mixed in were faint notes of ammonia and, more intriguingly, beaten egg whites. Albumen, used to give photographic paper a crisp, glossy finish, was a costly refinement, suggesting that Mr. Engstrom was not an ordinary street photographer offering cheap *cartes de visite*.

A young man, perhaps nineteen, with silver nitrate stains on his fingers and a perpetually nervous twitch, emerged from the dark chamber. He was Engstrom's assistant, Charlie, and he carried a silver tray of chemicals and a sense of exhausted urgency.

"Mr. Engstrom will be with you presently, Miss," Charlie mumbled, avoiding her eyes. He was clearly accustomed to seeing women in the studio, yet his awkwardness suggested that they were not always wives or respectable clientele requesting family portraits.

Eliza adjusted the high collar of her dress, a faded blue cotton that she had meticulously mended. She possessed a neat, compact figure, well-suited to the precision of a seamstress, and features that were regular but not striking—until she truly looked at something. Her eyes, a clear, sharp green, seemed to take inventory of

the room: the dusty plaster bust of Diana, the heavy velvet curtain draped over an unseen backdrop, the tripod that looked like a brass-and-mahogany spider waiting patiently.

She thought about the 'Generous Terms.' The advertisement hadn't specified the nature of the artistic studies, but Eliza was under no illusions. She had worked enough for private dressmakers to understand the language of 'fitting' and 'display,' and the way men looked at women who were simply standing still. What she needed was not respectability, which was already tenuous, but capital.

When Silas Engstrom finally appeared, he was shorter than she had imagined, though powerfully built, with a thick beard meticulously trimmed and eyes that held the focused, slightly manic intensity of a man obsessed with his own process. He wore a heavy wool waistcoat that smelled faintly of cigar smoke and, despite the heat of the gas burner in the darkroom, his forehead was coolly dry.

"Miss Hart, I presume. Welcome to the crucible," he said, his voice a low, resonant rumble. He did not offer a hand but gestured around the salon with a theatrical sweep. "Do sit up straight. Light favors the vertical line."

Eliza didn't need instruction on posture; she spent her days ensuring that the fabric of a garment fell perfectly. She stood up instead, wanting to meet his eye level. "Mr. Engstrom. The notice mentioned artistic studies. I require clarity on the arrangement before we proceed."

Engstrom permitted a thin smile that barely moved his beard. "Prudent. Excellent. We deal in visibility here, Miss Hart, and visibility demands precision. I am seeking subjects for a portfolio. Studies of the unadorned form, celebrating Nature's finest geometry. Art, Miss Hart, high art."

He circled her slowly, not quite touching, yet making her intensely aware of his scrutiny. "You have, I note, a very fine neck. Long and tensile. And your collarbones are exceptional. A clean architecture. This is important. My work demands integrity of line, not simply... fleshy chaos."

Eliza felt a flicker of annoyance at being reduced to 'architecture' but recognized the technical language. She pressed the point. "And the clothes?"

Engstrom stopped before the tripod, patting the camera's dark mahogany box almost affectionately. "Clothing is deception. We are interested in truth. Or at least, the truth that silver nitrate can capture. Some pieces are for the French market—they appreciate a classical approach, nymphs and such nonsense. Others are for more... dedicated collectors."

He named a figure. It was three times what she could earn in a week of fourteen-hour days bent over a needle. The rent could be settled, the pawnbroker paid, and she might even afford a new pair of boots before winter.

"Per sitting, or per image taken?" Eliza asked, forcing herself to sound purely businesslike.

Engstrom chuckled, a dry, papery sound. "Ah, the seamstress's precision. Per finished sitting, Miss Hart. The payment covers your time, your patience, and the necessary discretion. The ownership of the images, naturally, rests solely with me. They are my creation. You are the pigment, I am the brush."

"Then I must insist on a specific condition." Eliza swallowed, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks, but she held his gaze. "The images must not be circulated in London. Overseas only. And they must not display my face clearly enough for immediate recognition."

Engstrom stroked his beard thoughtfully. This was a common demand, though often neglected by photographers keen to prove the beauty of their local models. For Eliza, it was essential. Recognition was ruin.

"A fair arrangement, though facial expression often adds to the narrative," he conceded. "I can work with profiles, dramatic shadows, or perhaps a suggestion of a drape. A mask, if you insist, but they tend to look theatrical."

"Shadows will suffice," she said quickly. "And the payment must be made in full, in cash, before the plate is exposed."

The corner of Engstrom's mouth twitched. "You are a shrewd businesswoman, Miss Hart. I prefer it. Now, we must discuss the poses. Have you experience with posing for artists?"

"I have experience holding still," Eliza countered. "And I understand composition. My trade demands it."

Engstrom seemed genuinely intrigued by this assertion. "Indeed? Tell me what you see when you look at that—that plaster idiot." He pointed to the bust of Diana.

"It's bad composition," Eliza stated immediately. "The line of the neck is stiff, suggesting defiance, but the tilt of the head is seeking approval. The sculptor couldn't decide if she was a goddess or a society hostess. It lacks intention."

A genuine smile finally broke through Engstrom's reserve. "By Jove, you might do.

Intention. Yes, that is precisely what is missing in most of my usual subjects, bless their vapid hearts. They think their bodies are enough. They are wrong. It is the narrative we sell. The story of the pose.”

He gestured towards a small, heavy trunk tucked into the corner, filled with various lengths of fabric, ribbons, and cheap costume jewellery. “We will start simply. A Greek study. Charlie!”

Charlie reappeared, carrying a clean, dry glass plate nestled in a dark wooden frame. Engstrom began to explain the technical necessity of the wet plate collodion process—the speed required, the need for stillness, the unforgiving nature of the lens. Eliza listened, absorbing the mechanics of the transaction. She was selling not just her image, but her time and her absolute immobility.

The most difficult part was shedding the layers of her respectable existence. Engstrom was not cruel, but detached, instructing her to unfasten her dress with the same focus he might use to focus the lens. Eliza turned her back to him as she unlaced the stays and let the heavy cotton fall to the floor. The air felt cold against her skin, a sudden, alarming vulnerability.

The ‘costume’ was nothing more than a length of heavy silk, cream-coloured and slightly yellowed with age. Engstrom directed her how to wrap it, insisting on specific folds to catch the northern light. He wanted the classical drapery to suggest volume while revealing the structure beneath.

“Now, the light,” Engstrom commanded. He moved the velvet curtain back an inch, then adjusted the mirror, bouncing a concentrated beam across the room. “We are working with perhaps twenty seconds of exposure. You must breathe through your diaphragm, not your chest. Any movement is ruinous. Imagine you are carved from marble, Miss Hart. A slightly weary marble.”

Eliza was positioned near the backdrop—a dark, painted canvas depicting a vague Italianate garden. She was told to lean slightly against a faux-marble column, one arm raised to hold the silk, the other resting near her waist. The pose was awkward, pulling muscles she didn't realize she possessed, but it achieved the desired effect: a line of tension running from her ankle to her shoulder.

Charlie positioned the headrest, a brass clamp attached to a heavy stand, just behind her neck. It was cold and strangely medieval.

“This is your partner, Miss Hart,” Engstrom said, noticing her distaste. “The headrest. Embrace it. It will hold your rebellion in check.”

The tension in the room was palpable. Engstrom focused the camera under the heavy

black cloth, his breathing audible and shallow. The light filtering through the glass roof seemed to intensify, burning away all detail except the stark lines of her body and the heavy folds of the silk. Eliza focused on a dark knot in the wood grain of the floorboards, counting seconds.

One. The debt is paid.

Two. The boots are bought.

Three. It is only light and glass.

Engstrom emerged from beneath the cloth, his eyes shining with feverish focus. "Ready, Miss Hart. Hold. The plate is sensitive."

Charlie slid the prepared collodion plate into the back of the camera. The glass was cool and slick. Engstrom removed the lens cap. The sudden silence was absolute, broken only by the sound of her own shallow breath.

She held the pose, enduring the slight ache in her shoulder and the pressure of the cold brass against the base of her skull. It was not a physical endurance test so much as a psychological one—to be so utterly exposed, yet required to perform a perfect, absolute stillness. She was selling her control.

After what felt like an eternity but was perhaps twenty-two seconds, Engstrom replaced the lens cap with a gentle click. "Magnificent. A faint trace of defiance in the lip. Excellent. Do not move yet, we need to ensure the plate is sound."

The two men retreated into the darkroom. Eliza slowly allowed her muscles to relax, leaning heavily on the cold column. The silk slipped slightly, revealing more than intended, but she did not bother to adjust it. She listened to the distant, muffled sounds of sloshing chemicals and quiet cursing.

When Engstrom returned, he carried a small, square piece of glass, wet and shining. He held it up carefully, almost reverently, to the light. On it, reversed and ghostly, was her image. It was a faint negative, pale whites against dark browns, a mirror of the moment she had just lived.

"Successful," he pronounced, a note of triumph in his voice. "The development is good. Now, Miss Hart, your payment."

He handed her a small, folded packet of bank notes. Eliza tucked it immediately into the bodice of her remaining garments, beneath the collar of her chemise. It felt heavy and solid, the most real thing in the room.

"One more study, I think, to justify the session," Engstrom suggested, his eyes bright with possibility. "Less classical. More domestic. A pose suggesting the intimate life of a woman, perhaps reading a letter. And this time, we try a torso study—let the silk fall completely away from the waist, focus on the curve of the abdomen."

The second pose was harder. It required her to sit on the chaise long, a pose meant to appear languid but demanding rigorous control of the core muscles to maintain stillness. The camera was moved closer, and the focus shifted, magnifying the texture of her skin and the slight dampness of her hairline.

This time, as the lens cap came off, Eliza did not count seconds. She closed her eyes briefly, imagining the money transforming into food, warmth, and time—time not spent sewing for others. When she opened them, she looked directly towards the camera, a gaze that was not defiant, but simply assessing, neutral. It was the look of a woman who had weighed her situation and made a choice.

The second sitting passed without incident, and the payment was made. Engstrom offered her a cup of tea, which she declined, eager to leave the ether-scented confines of the studio.

"I shall see you next Thursday, then, Miss Hart," Engstrom confirmed, his satisfaction clear. "You have a unique ability to convey stillness without deadness. It is rare. Remember, we are creating a permanent record of fleeting beauty."

Eliza pulled her shawl tightly around her, buttoning her dress with quick, practiced movements. "I remember, Mr. Engstrom. And I also remember the arrangement regarding the circulation of the image."

"Overseas only," he confirmed, waving a hand dismissively. "You have my word."

Eliza nodded, knowing that in the commerce of images, a shutterman's word was as reliable as the shifting light of the London sky. But she had the money, and she had survived the exposure. As she left the studio and stepped back into the ordinary clamour of Bloomsbury, the packet of notes pressing against her ribs, she realized she had not merely posed for a photographer. She had begun to take an inventory of her own worth, measured in silver and time. The chemical smell of the studio clung to her clothes, a subtle, forbidden perfume. She walked quickly, eager to convert the abstract promise of the cash into the concrete reality of a settled debt.

Meanwhile, across the city in a drawing-room on the edge of Belgravia, Constance Whitby was arranging herself for a very different kind of reckoning. She sat stiffly, draped in the heavy black crepe of mourning, watching her solicitor calculate the remains of her late husband's estate. She had inherited a grand house, a mountainous

collection of antique weaponry, and a ledger of liabilities that threatened to sink her entirely. Constance, unlike Eliza, was accustomed to wealth, but not to the vulnerability that financial ruin brought. She was about to discover that visibility, even under the guise of anonymity, offered a curious form of leverage. She was already anticipating the next morning's appointment, scheduled under the alias 'Mrs. C.'—an appointment at a less discreet establishment than Engstrom's, one where the artistic pretext was thinner than the finest tissue paper. Her motive was not survival, but leverage, and the cold calculation in her heart felt far more dangerous than the ether-scented air Eliza had breathed.

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