

Everyone in their Sunday best for ship day on the wharf, she boards a fishing boat that reeks of diesel and rotting tuna. The slapping waves. Her parents' reluctant blessing. The boat bobs out to meet the *Southampton Castle*—a looming ship of solid metal that reaches from the black depths to the steely sky. She is pulled up the gang plank and lifted aboard by a sympathetic man who pats her arm. *Chin up, lovey.*

For sixteen nights she sleeps fitfully in her berth, the contents of her stomach rolling like the ocean. Always on the harsh edge of seasickness but never turning down the elegant evening feasts of foods so savoury, so sweet and thick, she sometimes weeps, though she isn't sure if it's the delicacies or the sharp memories of her beloved donkey or her stern Mum.

In a homemade cotton dress, a matching crocheted skull cap on her frizzy black curls, billowing panties of flour sacking, and her too tight slip-on shoes, she finds herself on the docks in the country of the new young Queen. Unsteady on her legs, her inner ears sure she is still at sea, she bids farewell to the other young women, each scattering toward waiting cars.

A tall chauffeur with a white moustache calls her by name in an accent she has only heard on the BBC. In one proficient move, he takes her nearly empty canvas satchel from her shoulder while opening the back door to the purring Rolls Royce. Her first car ride.

Embarrassed that she doesn't know how to get in, she crouches to a squat before stepping one foot at a time into the car, kneeling on the floor and raising herself up onto the seat, sliding cautiously backward against the soft leather.

Greenery, tall brick buildings, vehicles of all sizes, pale-faced people with grim expressions. All this whizzes by at a speed she has never known possible. A brooding watercolour painting, a haze, a mist, then darkness.

Hours later, the car slows and turns past a gatehouse with warm yellow lights in the windows. And then, in sudden silence, they float up an impossibly long driveway to a brick mansion and into the glaring brightness of electric bulbs.

Clattering, deafening clattering. Three flights up narrow wooden steps, led by a busty woman with a mouth that moves nonstop, rearranging itself under a bulbous nose. She is finally deposited into a room with a ghostly white iron headboard and a flat feather pillow. Cold white sheets and a lilac counterpane. The smell of a new country, of wind and dampness and strange soap. A slosh of warm tea fills the saucer as she bends her face over the steam and squeezes her eyes shut.



In this house, she will learn the workings of indoor plumbing, Hoovers, and specialized polishes. She is given two maid's uniforms—a day uniform of blue and white gingham and an evening uniform of black and white with a lace-trimmed cap—soft underwear, a pair of sensible black leather shoes that almost fit. Eventually, she will earn a winter coat of Navy blue wool and shiny buttons.

Slowly, she settles in, becomes less homesick, makes friends with the cooks, the governess, another maid, the gardeners, and tries hard to speak as poshly as she can but only when she isn't too tired to remember. She stands out in the village, the only black girl, and at the post office where she buys stamps and mails carefully wrapped brown paper parcels.

She is welcomed into the church, though congregants turn in surprise as she sings with strong faith and conviction from the back pew the familiar hymns and recites the Apostles' Creed in her best articulation.

*I believe in the Holy Spirit
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.*

They remember her birthdays with a leather-bound Bible, pages crisp as onion skins. A box of blue "Avion" writing paper and a heavy Cross pen. And in her third and final year with them, a coveted transistor radio.

She knows her place as a servant yet she marvels at her four pounds a week. Twice as much as her dad earns in the flax mill back home.

The wonder of it. Life. Everlasting. *Amen.*

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