

Eyes of a Statue

By Lily Castledine

She sat in front of the dresser, arranging her blonde curls. William watched her sleepily under the flickering fire and saw the creases and purple shadows under her eyes as if she spent her nights awake, rather than sleeping. He adored his mother. He thought she was as beautiful as the broken doll on the dresser. She wore only her corset and lace undergarments as she dabbed touches of rouge to her lips and cheeks. Those delicate eyes turned to William, beckoning. "Come here, sweetie. I've to go to work, but you can put yourself to bed, can't you?" William's moon-shaped head bobbed, and she said, "that's my boy" in her soft voice. Then, she pulled her lips into one last smile before plunging into the obsidian night.

William's mouth was frozen in a smile when he awoke onboard the *Sobraon*. His eyes opened and he blinked several times as he forced away thoughts of last night's dream. His hammock swayed in time with the waves. Cockatoo Island was just visible through the circular window near his head. Around him, other boys began stirring in their hammocks, abandoning similar memories of happiness. William's brows creased as he listened to the new boys sobbing under their blankets. William didn't cry anymore. Over the years since 1891, when the government officials took him from his mother, he'd grown stronger. Tougher. Better. There was no place for weakness amongst the unforgiving steel and concrete. 'Boys go in and men come out', he'd been taught. His cheeks swelled with irritation as the boys' wailing persisted. "Hey there!" William hissed, "pipe down now, will you? You're with the *Sobraon* now, the brothers of every man here, so you better stop actin' like boys and start actin' like men".

Footsteps funnelled into the dormitory and Captain Neitenstein might have been mistaken for a statue as he stood atop the platform in the dormitory. The captain's unforeseen presence piqued a flood of curious whispers. He cleared his throat and William jumped to attention, a stiffening toy figurine. The captain's voice, much like the sound of a metal pot scraping along rusted prison bars, rasped out, "Boys, today you will disembark into the city to see *Pygmalion and Galatea* at Her Majesty's Theatre. You should consider this an honour and an opportunity to show your maturity and interest in the arts. Accompanying you will be Lieutenant Mason and four of our best seamen. Should I hear of any mishaps or any of you behaving like boys, there will be severe consequences of the highest order. Do not let this institution be disgraced." His eyes roamed around the room and met William's stare, nodding once before ascending the steps to the main deck. William's chest puffed out like a cockatoo's headdress and he waited for a moment with great effort before he stood atop the platform and yelled out, "Quickly, hang up your hammocks boys!" and "Chuck on the gas-pipes lads, we're headed for a day out! Quickly now! C'mon hurry!". Boys stared at him in confusion and looked around for assurance. Unfazed, William continued, "If you don't hurry you'll miss breakfast!" Driven by growling bellies, boys hung up their hammocks and raced up the stairs to the mess room. Satisfied with his work, William jumped off the bench and clambered up after them. In the corner of the room, his hammock still hung, swinging with the waves and forgotten in the rush.

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Pitt Street was still crawling with men in morning suits and top hats and women in fashionable bustle dresses by the time the boys emerged from the theatre in the evening. Although the sky was turning a bruised greenish-yellow, buggies and carriages continued sailing past, the rich men and women inside, bouncing on their seats. Scantly clad women now began dotting the streets, smiling and laughing loudly at men passing by. William shrank away from their boldness and stench of desperation. He asked one of the seamen if they could pick up the pace, feeling as though walking down Pitt Street was like reading a long-forgotten bedtime story.

As the half-naked women continued to arrive, the boys snickered and nudged each other, pointing their arms. They shouted insults and laughed and made faces and all the while William remembered a crackling fire and heard the sound of her laughter. Individual voices melted into one as the boys' grew rowdier and William became enveloped in their chaos. "C'mon mate, join in the fun. I mean, just look at 'em!" joked a boy. William huffed a laugh with the boy and forced his arm up to point at a woman. When he looked at the woman, he stopped laughing. She was just as he remembered. Her blonde curls were arranged the same way, only slightly longer, her cheeks bright in the cold, her eyes gently sloping upwards, still burdened by half-moons hanging underneath. He stepped towards her, but the seamen shouted orders to keep walking and the distance between them grew larger as he walked away, though his eyes stayed fixated on her figure. "Watch it", snapped a boy as William trod on his ankles. He turned away from his mother and focused on the walk, but as he and the Sobraon boys neared the corner, William glanced behind him once more. She was standing on the gutter, her eyes wide as he met her stare. "William?" she shouted. He looked around at his brothers, finding their eyes rimmed with doubt as they watched him. Looking back at his mother, he stared at her desperate face, and once again thought of the doll, the spray of her perfume, the warmth of the fire. He turned away from his mother.

Lieutenant Mason ordered the boys to keep moving, and they disappeared around the corner. As they walked, they reached a lone statue of a man, his face cold and lifeless. In the reflection, William could see himself staring back through the unmoving eyes.