

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

by Corinne Hastings

The Belladonnas were the not-so-secret secret society that ruled St. Cecilia's. Everyone who mattered at the school – the editor of the *Circumlocutor*, the class president, the captain of the quiz bowl team, the head trustee's daughter – they were all Belladonnas. They were frequently invited to dine with the headmistress and, when not dining with her, they sat together at the best table, eating the freshest food in the cafeteria below the stained glass window of St. Cecilia herself. Only the Belladonnas were invited to events - rather, the good events, not those holiday mixers - at their brother school, St. Joseph's. It was unspoken, but everyone knew the Belladonnas had extended curfew privileges and the best single rooms.

But the Belladonnas were about more than Power, Popularity, and Prestige. They were about Justice, blind and raw. The Belladonnas published a thorough and intimate evaluation of the entire faculty every May and enforced the plagiarism codes on campus with an uncanny omniscience. It was the Belladonnas who had Saskia Hines' acceptance to Yale rescinded when

they discovered she forged a recommendation letter from the headmistress. And it was the Belladonnas who got Erin Woolworth expelled from the fencing team when they discovered she had sabotaged the rest of the team's épées to win the top spot.

No one knew how they engineered these acts of justice. It was the great mystery of the Belladonnas.

Each year, the senior Belladonnas chose three freshmen to join their ranks. They left in the mailbox of the chosen freshmen a saint card featuring the Belladonna symbol – a sketch of a giant, glaring eye, dark with cross-hatching and shadow, as if plucked from a Renaissance study in chiaroscuro. The name of the saint corresponded to the name of the Belladonna who had selected the freshman and would be her mentor.

Cate stood in front of her mailbox, staring at a laminate card depicting a very stiff-looking St. Gertrude. The large, intricate eye stamped on the card stared back. Greta Gatlin – class-president, already-published, Harvard-bound, and generally-accepted-Queen-of-St. Cecilia's Greta Gatlin – had picked Cate.

This, it dawned on Cate, would probably not end well at all.

Wendy returned to the attic room she and Cate shared with no glaring saint, but a serene expression nonetheless.

"No card?" asked Cate. "I'm sorry."

"Eh." Wendy shrugged as she began to put on her uniform – a run of the mill Catholic-school-girl kit, complete with knee-length tartan skirt and navy blazer. "The Belladonnas are a little too transparent, too clear-cut for my liking. Not deep enough underground."

Cate squinted at her.

“If I were to join a secret society, it’d have to be truly secret. And really subversive. Like, post-post-modern performance art subversive.” Wendy tied her striped necktie around her neck into a knot.

Cate knew Wendy was not serious, because she was never serious, and Cate worried. She left for class worrying and returned worrying, eleven hours later. Wendy, who did not eat long, giggling dinners with a sports team like Cate, was already in the room, splayed across her bed, reading *Faust* and snacking on chocolate covered raisins.

Cate watched Wendy chew the raisins with her mouth wide open, teeth gnashing and chocolate staining her lips. She knew why the Belladonnas had not chosen Wendy. For, while Wendy was smart and inventive, she was flippant in speech and crude in appearance. She was short and plump, with tangled mousy hair and a pointed elfin nose. And though Cate was often dull and monotonous, she was always precise and beautiful. Tall, thin, and dark-haired, she had perennially rosy cheeks and very white teeth. Wendy, compared to Cate, was clever; and Cate, compared to Wendy, was an absolute swan. It was a comparison that left them both feeling the other had the undesirable lot, but admitting this would certainly worsen everything all around. So they kept silent about these disparities.

Cate liked Wendy for all the reasons Cate did not like herself. Wendy was bold. Wendy was unique. Wendy talked in phrases one would find on sardonic refrigerator magnets, phrases that sounded like Oscar Wilde’s rejected epigrams.

Wendy threw down her book. “I hate reading.”

“Remind me again why you want to be a writer.” Cate picked up the book to save the poor dog-eared pages and noticed shapes and arrows scrawled in the margins, occasionally accompanied by words like “what” and “eugh” and “rude.”

Wendy snatched the book from Cate's hands and tossed it on top of the mountain of detritus on her desk. The book landed precariously on top of some crumpled papers, candy wrappers, a flattened felt beret, and a pair of worn tennis shoes "I want to undermine literature from within. Everybody's always using it to try and say something. The purpose of literature is to say nothing at all in as many words as possible."

Then someone knocked on the door. Cate opened it to find Greta Gatlin – tall, sharp-profiled, and thick-browed – clutching a small Pekingese.

The two faces standing before Cate were perhaps the most recognizable on the St. Cecilia's campus. Greta was known throughout the school - perhaps throughout the state- for her striking appearance, commanding presence, and superior intellect. Essentially, for her perfection. The small dog was perhaps even more well-known than Greta, but for rather different reasons.

This Pekingese was the headmistress' treasured Ruby, her heart's delight and her life's joy. When outside or in informal settings, Mother Agnes carried the dog around with the delicacy one would use to carry a Fabergé egg or a baby. When not in the headmistress' arms, Ruby sat on a well-cushioned wicker chair on the porch of the rectory, lording over the campus with thunderous sniffs. Cate was sure she had never seen the dog's paws touch the ground.

There they were standing in the threshold of the small attic room. Cate considered closing the door before the whole adventure could progress and get out of hand, but before she reached a decision, Greta stepped in and sat on Cate's desk chair. "What a cozy space you have here." Greta's spine was so straight, her back did not touch the chair. "I'm sure Ruby will thoroughly enjoy spending the night."

"Excuse me?" Wendy, still sprawled, but more rigidly so, looked in askance at the intruders.

Greta kept her gaze on Cate. “Mother Agnes has been ever so unfortunately detained on her way back from the Catholic Educators’ Conference. She called to confirm someone would be caring for dear Ruby in her absence. I assured her you were just the girl for the job.”

“Um,” said Cate.

“Ruby eats grilled chicken breast and wild rice, exclusively. The head cook prepares some for her every day. She should be taken for a brief stroll every hour, at half past. Do not let her sleep more than eight hours or any less than six.” Greta placed the precious bundle in Cate’s arms and promptly exited the room.

Wendy sat up. “Oho, the first test.”

“It shouldn’t be so bad,” Cate said, looking at Ruby’s placid face.

Wendy’s smirk said it all.

“I don’t think Greta likes me very much,” said Cate.

Wendy nodded as she scratched Ruby’s ears. “Yeah, I gathered that as well. But, I mean, you had to be chosen for the Belladonnas. If they didn’t pick you, after you writing that poem – what did you call it? *I See Straight?* - and winning the International Young Poets’ contest, they would’ve seemed absurd.”

“*I See Narrow*,” Cate mumbled. The worrying weight in her chest tightened to despair. “And just the National Young Poets’ contest.” Cate had hoped everyone would forget about *See Narrow* and that stupid contest. She had only entered because her English teacher had promised extra credit to anyone in the class who submitted a poem. The thought that *I See Narrow* would win had never crossed Cate’s mind. And then Mother Agnes had insisted on presenting Cate with the plaque in a school-wide assembly...It had been a terrible ordeal.

“Not to say they aren’t absurd,” Wendy continued as if she hadn’t heard Cate, “because I still think they are. But still. You know, Cate, even I was impressed with that poem. No offense, but you never struck me as the poetic type.”

Cate shrugged. It was true. She wasn’t the poetic type. And it was only a matter of time before the Belladonnas found out. Cate felt goosebumps raise on her arms as a sudden chill passed over her.

Every Tuesday and Thursday evening at eight, Cate trotted over to the library to tutor Olivia Price in algebra. The tutoring session never lasted over an hour and it looked excellent on her résumé. Plus, Cate actually enjoyed algebra – its infallible formulas and the neat squares of her quad ruled notebook pleased her.

She would have cancelled the session that evening, except Olivia had come running up to her in the cafeteria at dinner, practically in tears. They had a test tomorrow and Olivia was sure polynomials were conspiring against her. Cate had assured her they’d be extra thorough in tonight’s session; the test would be absolutely no problem.

Now it was 7:50. Cate looked at Wendy, whose head was bent towards *Faust* though her eyes appeared to be closed. She was snoring softly. Cate looked at Ruby, who sat snuffling on Wendy’s bed eyeing the raisins greedily. And Cate thought there might be a problem.

“Wendy.”

Wendy startled awake.

Cate continued, “Are you sure you’re ok with Ruby while I’m gone? I could figure out a way to bring her --”

Wendy waved her off. “The dog doesn’t do anything. I haven’t seen her move for two semesters. It’ll be no problem.”

Cate very much doubted this. She left anyway, closing the door of their attic room reluctantly.

Cate returned from her tutoring session, far more exhausted than she felt algebra should make her, to a scene of utter destruction.

Cate’s sheets were stretched out on the floor and smeared with chocolate. Her favorite throw pillow was torn to bits. Not a single paperclip was left in her paperclip jar - they all sat, like an industrial anthill, at the foot of her desk. Wendy was apparently undisturbed and fast asleep with *Faust* resting on her face. Ruby was nowhere to be seen.

“Ruby?” Cate picked up the now-empty and shredded bag of chocolate covered raisins. “Wendy!”

“Mmm?” Wendy sat up and wiped a bit of drool from her mouth.

Cate began picking up objects and tossing them away in a highly frantic manner. “*Where* is Ruby?”

“Who?”

“Ruby! Ruby! *The dog!*” Cate stopped throwing things and started to wring her hands instead - it seemed the appropriate action.

“Oh,” said Wendy. Then, with wider eyes, “Oh! Shit! I fell asleep.”

Cate sank onto her chair. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“Oh crap. I’m so sorry, Cate.”

“Did you leave this room at all? Was the door ever open?”

Wendy shook her head. "I was on my bed the entire time. I--"

Cate held out a hand. "Wait. Listen."

Wendy was silent for a half second, then said, "I don't hear anything."

"Shhh!"

A minute passed. "I still don't hear anything."

"That is not good. If Ruby was in here, we'd be able to hear her breathing."

"Snuffling, you mean. And only if she was in here and alive."

Cate leaped up. "What? How could you say that? Dead hadn't even crossed my mind!"

She got on her hands and knees and lifted the bed skirt so she could see under her bed.

Wendy followed suit and looked under her own. "Crap. Shit. Fuck. Jesus." She got on her stomach and slid all the way under the bed.

"What? What! Wendy!" Cate turned around as Wendy struggled to scoot backwards. She finally emerged from under the bed with a limp Pekingese in her arms. Cate's hand flew to her mouth. "Ohnoohnoohno. Is she dead?"

"All I know is that there is definitely some dog puke under there." Wendy raised Ruby closer to Cate, but she shied away.

"Did you check her pulse?"

"I don't know how to check a human pulse, let alone a dog's." Wendy gently placed the canine body on the ruined throw pillow. "Shit. This is my fault, Cate."

Cate sat on her bed, head in hands. "No, it's mine. I should've known— Oh God. Not only are the Belladonnas going to kick me out, but Mother Agnes will expel me."

“She can’t expel you for accidentally killing her dog.” Wendy saw from Cate’s expression that her reassurance did not have the desired effect. “Or maybe she can. But you wrote that poem! She wouldn’t expel someone who brought the school that much attention.”

With a heavy sigh, Cate’s head fell back in her hands.

“I have an idea!” Wendy stood up, index finger extended in a ‘Eureka!’ pose. “We can bring Ruby to Lauren Koh. She’ll be able to fix her up.”

“An assistant athletic trainer? She wraps ankles for the soccer team. She’s not exactly Dr. Frankenstein.”

“Exactly, a medical expert.” Wendy scooped up the dog and headed towards the door. Cate reluctantly followed.

“I’ve never seen you this cheeky, Cate. I’m kind of impressed.”

Lauren Koh lived downstairs. She was one of those quiet, mousy, but highly useful girls whom people only remembered in moments like these. Cate knocked on her door. Lauren greeted them with a puzzled expression. Wendy held the dog up like an offering.

“Can you fix this?”

Lauren took the very scientific approach of poking at Ruby’s prostrate body. “No.”

Wendy turned to leave.

“Wait! You could try the Veterinary Society! They meet tonight in Walters 204. Or,” Lauren lowered her voice and giggled, “You could try the Occult Society. They meet tonight too.”

They thanked Lauren and left. As Lauren’s door closed behind them, Cate turned to Wendy and asked, “We have an Occult Society?”

“Of course, this is a Catholic school. More importantly, we have a veterinary society?”

Cate shrugged and they set off – two girls and a comatose Pekingese.

The Virginia Walters Building housed all science, math, and history classes. It was a long, squat, brick building guarded by a very alarming statue of the school’s first headmistress Mother Mary Assumpta. The statue depicted Mary Assumpta in a pose reminiscent of Achilles leading the Achaeans to battle. She was stepping forward on her right foot and her habit billowed out behind her. She held her cross as one might hold a broadsword. Her bulging eyes glared out across campus. Cate felt the pressure of her righteous frown as they entered the building.

Room 204 was a moderately large classroom on the second floor, seemingly ill-suited for the Veterinary Society’s use. The four girls who constituted the society had pushed all the desks up against the wall and sat in a circle on the floor, dissecting a frog. All four heads snapped in their direction when Cate and Wendy opened the door.

“We have a, uh, case study. For veterinary experts,” Wendy said, presenting Ruby.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” said the redheaded girl holding the scalpel. She appeared to be in charge – she was the only one wearing a lab coat. The other three girls were documenting the dissection with notebooks and cameras. “I’m Sally Bibb. You’re lucky; we just finished our unit on canines. Take a seat.” She nodded to the desks pushed against the wall.

Sally took Ruby from Wendy’s arms and placed her on the teacher’s desk at the front of the room. The four members of the society circled around her. The blonde lifted one of Ruby’s stubby legs and let it flop back down. The pudgy girl snapped some pictures. Sally opened Ruby’s mouth and peered down it, then sniffed.

“Has this dog eaten any chocolate today?” she asked Cate and Wendy with a clinically bland expression.

Cate turned to Wendy.

“Uh.” Wendy offered Cate a sheepish grin. “Do Raisinets count?”

Sally continued. “My guess is this dog expired from theobromine poisoning.”

“Expired?” squeaked Cate, who no longer seemed able to modulate the tone of her voice.

“Theobromine?” said Wendy.

The pudgy girl answered, “Canines metabolize theobromine much slower than humans, as they do not--”

“That’s nice.” Cate grabbed Ruby from the desk and began to back out of the classroom. “Thank you very much.” She turned and sprinted from the room, Wendy a few steps behind her. “Where do you think the Occult Society meets?”

Wendy stopped running. “You’re not serious. Am I going to have to be the logical one?”

Cate stopped and turned to face Wendy. “Yes. No. Just help me find this meeting!”

They found themselves outside under the omnipotent gaze of Mother Mary Assumpta. The small square of grass between Walters, the library, and Brecker Hall of Language and Arts was empty, as it had been for hours, but at that moment Cate saw the emptiness as part of the whole campus’s conspiracy against her. The Belladonnas, the Veterinary Society, Ruby, and even Lauren Koh – they knew what she had done and were finally punishing her for it. She would just—

“What the hell?” asked Wendy.

Cate followed her gaze to see a group of caped girls parading from behind the library towards a large cedar tree. Each girl carried a candle and they were swaying in sync hypnotically.

“Well that’s fortuitous. C’mon, Cate.”

They made their way towards the group and joined on to the end of the line of girls. Cate could see no one’s face in the dark and under their hoods. They circled the cedar tree and at once, as if obeying a silent command, the hooded girls blew out their candles.

A voice spoke. “Who trespasses amongst us?”

Wendy flung herself onto her knees and pulled Cate down beside her. “We’ve come to ask for your help,” she intoned in a grandiose voice. She nudged Cate.

“We, uh, we need you to perform a resurrection.”

The voice spoke again. “We’ve never done a resurrection before.” A murmur passed through the circle of hoods. “But it might be fun. We’ll try it.”

Cate thought the voice sounded familiar, but the girl had affected a slight British accent that prevented Cate from placing it. A hooded figure took Ruby from her arms. A blindfold was thrown over Cate’s eyes and tied forcefully around her head.

“We cannot let you witness our sacred methods,” the voice said.

An atonal humming began, reminding Cate of her grandmother’s broken central air unit.

“Place the offering at the altar! Light the incense!” The voice commanded. “I call upon Ba’al! Osiris! Astarte! Hear our prayer!”

The humming grew louder. Cate felt the slight breeze of figures moving about her.

“*Cinis ad cinerem, pulvis ad pulverem,*” said the voice. The other girls echoed her words.

“*Cinis ad cinerem, pulvis ad pulverem,*” repeated the voice. This time, the echo was accompanied by stomping of feet.

“*Cinis ad cinerem, pulvis ad pulverem,*” cried the voice, “*Surge!*”

Then silence. Cate strained her ears for some noise, but the stamping and humming had stopped. Someone ripped off her blindfold.

“Sorry,” said the voice. Cate saw the figure shrug. “It didn’t work.” The girl lowered her hood. It was Lauren Koh, the athletic trainer. “We tried our best.”

Wendy snorted.

Cate felt the bottom fall out from her stomach. “Oh FUCK. Fuck fuck fuck fuck.” She started tearing at the grass around her, pulling up big tufts then grinding them back down.

“Cate.” Wendy began rubbing her back. “It’ll be ok. I’m sure Mother Agnes will forgive us. She is, you know, a nun. And the Belladonnas won’t care. You still have the poem--”

“I DIDN’T WRITE THE POEM!” Cate threw off Wendy’s comforting hand. Wendy backed away, her expression a mixture of shock and awe. Lauren Koh pushed Ruby’s body into Wendy’s arms.

“What did you say?” A hooded figure stepped forward towards Cate.

“I DIDN’T WRITE THAT FUCKING POEM. My grandmother wrote it when she was 17 and I just copied it from her diary. I’m not a poet.”

The girl threw back her hood. This time, Greta Gatlin’s face was revealed. She stood in front of Cate. “That is not good news. Not good news at all.” Cate watched her draw her hand back – was she holding something in her fist?

Then, just black.

It was very dark. Abnormally dark, in a comforting way. Cate was rather cold. She opened her eyes. She found herself sitting at a desk facing nine well-coifed girls in pajamas. Apparently, the Belladonnas were having a slumber party. She blinked a few times and her vision cleared. She realized suddenly she was quite naked.

Greta Gatlin loomed toward her. “You were so promising, Cate. So, so promising. But you have disappointed us dreadfully.”

“So, you took my clothes?” Cate crossed her arms – more for warmth than any sense of decency.

“Cate, Cate, Cate.” Greta Gatlin shook her head.

Another Belladonna stepped forward. “While you were unconscious, we tried you and found you guilty of the horrendous crime of plagiarism. This is your sentencing.”

“My sentence is nudity?” Cate heard some strange noises behind her, but when she turned to look, Greta grabbed her chin and pulled her face forward again.

“We shall deliberate.” The Belladonnas bowed their heads together and whispered at top speed. Two minutes passed. Cate spent the time feeling the large bump forming on her forehead. Finally, the Belladonnas separated and Greta cleared her throat. “You have stripped another of her intellectual property,” she said. “So we shall strip you of yours.”

Cate glanced down. “I don’t think clothes count as intellectual property.”

“Oh no. We just took those because it’s funny,” said one of the Belladonnas.

Cate’s heart was beating fast. She felt strange. She felt – the word suddenly dawned on her – frustrated. The strange noises continued behind her. It sounded like someone was retching. All the Belladonnas’ attention was focused somewhere over Cate’s shoulder. She turned. There in the corner sat Wendy and, next to her, copiously vomiting, a very much alive Ruby.

“I fixed the dog,” Wendy said brightly. “Can we go now?”

“Fine,” said Greta. “Just know, retribution will be swift and thorough.”

Wendy kissed Ruby on the head, stood up, and gave Cate her jacket. “This has been a swell time. Let’s do it again sometime real soon. Farewell, friends!”

Wendy and Cate walked arm-in-arm from the classroom back to their dorm. As they climbed the stairs to the attic, Cate asked Wendy, “So, how did you revive Ruby?”

Wendy shrugged. “I tried a doggy Heimlich. It worked shockingly well.”

Cate slept until 7:45 that Friday. She spent a moment lying in quiet contemplation before getting up and rushing into her uniform. Wendy was nowhere to be found. Cate didn’t have sports on Fridays, so after classes she hurried back to the attic room and found Wendy sitting on her bed, studying a card depicting St. Gertrude with one large eye scrawled over her face.

“Well,” said Cate.

“Well,” said Wendy.

“It’s ok.” Cate sat down on the bed. “I don’t mind. You can join them.” It was fitting, really. Wendy was the bold one, the loyal one. Her original poetry was probably much more brilliant than Cate’s grandmother’s. And really, Wendy was the only feasible replacement for Greta Gatlin. She was of that extraordinary breed.

“Join them? Shut that noble face of yours, Cate. How could I join them after they knocked you out? And stole your clothes? And wiped your hard drive?” Wendy gestured to the blank screen of Cate’s open laptop, which had a sticky-note with the eye insignia stuck to it.

“Oh dear.”

Wendy looked at the saint card. “I’m just trying to figure out how to return this so they get the message loud and clear: ‘You are a bunch of self-righteous shits. Suck an egg.’”

Cate smiled and pulled Wendy off the bed so she could begin making it. A crisp breeze flew through the attic room and the curtain tassels danced merrily.