

Inside Out

The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox

Maggie O'Farrell (Review: Rebecca Atherton)

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It is the 1930s, an era where women are expected to conform, to blend in rather than stand out. Daughters are prized objects, possessions through which to elevate the family status. They are supposed to be meek and mild, preoccupied with acquiring certain skills – predominantly those required for attracting a suitable husband. Their only passions, if they must have any at all, ought to lie in needlework, beautification, domesticity and the desire, above all else, to be a good wife and mother and seek to dedicate their entire life to this.

Born in India and raised there until a family tragedy results in an unwelcome move to Edinburgh and her grandmother's imposing house and rules, Esme Lennox is nothing like this. Outspoken, confrontational and unconventional; it is almost as if she goes out of her way to embarrass her family. She will not consent to courting men, as her mother and grandmother desire. Instead, she insists on staying on at school longer than is deemed natural or necessary, she shows far too much of an interest in acquiring an education that might eventually lead to a career, and, above all else, claims she wants to live her own life. Her family is mortified. She is a disgrace, a danger to their good name. Refusing to put up with her disobedience, drastic measures are sought, and at the age of sixteen, she finds herself packed off to a mental institute to learn. What should have been a brief stay, somehow turns into the rest of her life.

Sixty years later, Iris Lockhart, a shop owner living in Scotland, receives a letter from a local mental hospital. It informs her that they have her great aunt, that she is her only living dependant, and that, because of budget cuts, they would like to release her to her. Never having heard of this woman, Iris is indignant that there has been some mistake. She is close to her grandmother and has never once heard her mention having had a sister. Surely something as important to that would not have been omitted from her family history.

Eventually, curiosity drives her to visit this woman, if only to find out who she is and why the hospital files claim they are related. Still uncertain about the truth, compassion compels her to bring the woman home, if only to save her from being incarcerated again somewhere even worse. Something about this woman's tragic life touches her and, despite those close to her warning her away, she finds herself unable to do so. If not her, there is no one else.

What follows is the slow revealing of a past secret, told through the eyes of several narrators. With patience, we come to learn why Iris's grandmother has covered up the existence of this sister, and why it is that Esme has been locked up for so many years.

Tragic and horrifying, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* tells the story of a time in our not so very distant past when women were all too often condemned to a life of imprisonment for crimes no worse than trying to speak up for themselves. A time when parents locked their daughters up for refusing to obey them, and husbands abused their power when their wives tried to exert theirs. Although fictional, it speaks for the plight of many women, reminding us of a past that should not be forgotten.