

**Excerpt from *Firefly*
by Philippa Dowding**



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One: The Corseted Lady

“What’ll it be, Fifi?”

“It’s *Firefly*.” I say this slowly.

“*Formerly* Fifi,” I add, to be kind.

There are pancakes on the stove. Real pancakes. Aunt Gayle waves the spatula in the air.

Spatula. Weird word.

“Sorry. What’ll it be, *Firefly*? Syrup or jam on your pancakes?”

Aunt Gayle dumps a plate of pancakes in front of me, and my mouth waters. Hard. I clamp my lips shut.

I am not a dog.

But really, when was the last time I had pancakes?

“Can I have both?” Aunt Gayle opens the fridge door and pulls out two bottles, maple syrup and strawberry jam, and plunks them on the table in front of me.

I swallow. I pour syrup and spoon out jam. I hope she doesn’t notice my hand shaking.

I eat.

Aunt Gayle sits across the table, lights a cigarette, takes a deep drag. Watches me, squinting through the smoke.

I slow down. Close my eyes. Chew.

Food.

I open my eyes. A last ray of October early-evening light pierces through the kitchen window and lands on my plate of pancakes. It lights my hands, falls across my face. Like a sign. Aunt Gayle takes another long drag of her cigarette and looks at me.

I chew. I swallow. I don’t eat like a dog, although I could.

“Hungry, huh?” she says in a careful way. I shrug, nod, notice a full glass of orange juice in front of me, and drain it in one long chug. I draw the back of my hand across my mouth.

ORANGE JUICE. I can't remember the last time I had all I wanted of that, either. The case workers and therapists at the Jennie Smillie Robertson Women's Centre (but everyone just calls it Jennie's) kept the orange juice locked in the fridge, along with the methadone.

I reach for the carton and pour another glass.

This one, I sip.

I can't possibly answer her question. Hungry? That's not really the word. Empty. Diminished. Shriveled. Distorted. I finally settle on Dangerous. I'm *dangerous* with hunger. Aunt Gayle sits patiently, her cigarette burning slowly, smoke unwavering, straight up to the ceiling. That's how still she sits.

No questions yet. I guess that'll come.

I finish my plate of pancakes and try not to belch. Something reminds me that it isn't particularly polite to belch after you eat, although no one has told me that for a while. When it's clear I've finished, my aunt stubs out her cigarette, leaves the kitchen, and heads out into the darkness of the shop.

I hear industrial lights buzz to life in the shop ceiling.

"Come on, I'll show you your room. It's upstairs in the apartment," she says. "Do you want me to carry that?" she asks, pointing to the garbage bag of clean clothes at my feet, courtesy of Jennie's. I grab it, clutch it to me.

"No, that's okay," I say. It's my garbage bag full of clean clothes, thank you Aunt Gayle. I follow my aunt out of the kitchen.

We step into The Corseted Lady.

It's one of Canada's oldest film costume shops, but it's a warehouse. Not a little shop. It has two stories of costumes, floor to ceiling. The stupid social worker kept babbling on about it in the car on the way over: seven million pieces, established in 1984, costumers to the stars.

It is impressive, though. I shuffle after my aunt, and take quick looks at the costumes in racks, all around me.

Bright orange, hand-made signs hang at the end of every rack.

We swing past the first row of costumes.

Police Uniforms, 20th Century.

Jack Boots, sizes 8-12.

19th Century Smoking Jackets.

Victorian Era, Girl's Clothes.

Women's Bloomers, 1920.

Clowns & Harlequins, 18th Century Players.

Dickens-era, flower girls & street urchins, 1880s.

I look away.

Aunt Gayle leads me up a set of old wooden stairs to the second floor.

“Is this ... is this where you live?” It’s kind of weird to say good-bye to the kitchen, then walk through racks and racks of clothes to head upstairs to an apartment. What is this place?

Aunt Gayle nods. “I know, it’s a little strange until you get used to it. The whole building is the costume shop, the kitchen is downstairs but the apartment is up here on the second floor. It was once a horse stables and carriage turnaround, so it’s a bit eccentric.”

At the top of the stairs, I have to stop.

The second floor is just wall-to-wall costumes.

“Do you remember this place, Firefly?” she asks as she leads me through the racks of costumes. Seven million pieces really is a lot. Costumes vanish in the distance, all the way to the windows on the far wall of the warehouse.

“Not really. Well, barely.” I’m really not sure if I do or I don’t.

Wedding Dresses, 1930s

Wedding Dresses, 1940s

Party Dresses, (Cocktail and Formal), 1950s

“The apartment is back here.” We stop at a heavy, old, wooden door, and Aunt Gayle pushes it open. More lights buzz on.

And we step into a large, bright apartment. The walls are brick, and Aunt Gayle has art, very interesting art, hanging all over. At the far end is a living room with a gas fireplace, chunky chairs, and floor-to-ceiling windows looking over the neighborhood. Closer, there’s a bathroom and three shut doors in a narrow hall.

“Here’s your room,” Aunt Gayle says, pushing open the first door. “It’s the guest room. Or ... it was.” She looks at me, awkward for a moment.

“Hot bath sound good?” she adds, brightening, and disappears down the hall.

I nod. A *hot* bath? Jennie’s had showers, but they were cold. I add the word to the growing list of “Things I’ve Almost Forgotten.”

Pancakes. Hot bath.

I stand alone in what is to be my bedroom.

There’s a bed. A chest of drawers. A closet. A small window over a tiny desk with a chair. I snap the reading light on, then off. I peer out the window for a second, get a glimpse of the neighborhood: trees, roofs, backyards, laneway. In the middle distance toward the setting sun, the pointy CN Tower.

Good to know the lay of the land, as Joanne-the-mother always said. No, says, I guess. She’s still alive.

It’s just a normal room. Light blue.

There’s a mirror. Over the chest of drawers.

I peek at myself, really fast.

Look away.

I hear my aunt turning on the faucets in the bathroom down the hall. She hums quietly, bustling around. Hot water is filling the deep, old-fashioned tub.

I clutch my garbage bag of clothes. I can’t sit anywhere. It’s all

too clean.

I stretch out on the bench, pull my AC/DC hoodie over my face. I peek across the park. The lights are on at Joanne-the-mother's house: the upstairs hall light, the light in the front room. My bedroom window is dark, though. I check Moss Cart's watch: 1:45 a.m. Joanne-the-mother lurches past the downstairs window. Still awake.

A spectacular CRASH comes from inside the house ...

A tap on the door. "Your bath's ready, Firefly."

I stand, blinking. It takes a minute. Who's that? Bath?

Oh yeah.

That's Aunt Gayle. I'm in the apartment on the second floor of The Corseted Lady costume shop, with seven million costumes in the warehouse around me. There's a bed. A bathroom.

I know where I am. I'm in my aunt's costume shop.

But ... what exactly am I doing here?