

The House of Darkness

‘It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation.’ (Chapter 42, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James)

A puff of air ventured through the cracked, leaded window. No hearts beat in these undressed rooms; even the kitchen mice had starved for want of crumbs. A gust thrust its way through a hole in the glass; then a palm-sized pane fell in. The wind took a deep breath, as if it were going to blow out all the birthday candles that were never lit, and the dead letters on the mat shrugged and fluttered, and burst their envelopes, and read their stories aloud. The unquiet moths rose like white smoke from the carpets, singing canticles of brightness, and the closed bedroom doors sprang open with a jocund Jubilate. The ghosts of the children who never were cavorted in a dance all over the forbidden parquet flooring, and still the wind blew, scattering the clumps of sluts-wool from behind the radiators, and stringing the cobwebs into bright tiaras. Up, up it blew, the bright breath of noise, and did not stop even when the roof tiles rattled and clattered to the ground. Then the house stood open, breathing deeply, arms spread wide in *orans* pose, and the sunlight poured its merciful beams into every crevice.

Forty Four Days

Mind you, when Jesus of Nazareth spent forty days in the wilderness, he didn't have the backing of 180,000 old codgers in Amersham and all points west of Waitrose – just the conviction that he was the One, the anointed Son of God, the chosen one from among the chosen race. Oh, and a raggle-taggle mob of horny-handed sons of toil, taken from hard-working families; plenty of honest sweat-of-the-brow and not so much of the fore-lock-tugging, gov'nor. And despite his possible delusions of grandeur, his brief rise and fall didn't crash the nation's economy. There was talk of his casting demons into a herd of swine, who plummeted over a cliff, like the lemming bankers of Lombard Street, diving onto the tracks of the Central line tube tracks. Whereas today, in Albion, we have the purveyors of porkies, squealing all the way to their piggy banks. Come to think of it, if a democratic process came to pass, who would make a better leader of the people; a carpenter's son executed for preaching love and forgiveness, or a wet lettuce who lies about her bourgeois roots, and gives her cronies the power to bring us to our knees? Is that John the Baptist I hear, crunching along in his vegan sandals, soliciting repentance, or it it a slew of spin-doctors, holding aloft like riot shields the tools of their trade – a straight-jacket, tailored on Saville Row, and a large syringe of oblivion, Premier Cru?