

# The Last Specimen

Joan Aiken

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Her hair had a greenish tint, and her horse had claws. Still, the minister felt there was no harm in her.

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**T**he Reverend Matthew Pentecost, aged seventy, had a regular monthly habit. On his way to conduct Evensong<sup>1</sup> in the tiny church of St.-Anthony-under-the-Downs, he invariably parked his aged Rover for ten minutes by the side of a small patch of woodland about ten minutes' drive from the church.

Services at St. Anthony's took place only once a month; for the rest of the time the isolated building with its Saxon stonework, Douai font,<sup>2</sup> willful hand organ, and two massive yew trees, drowsed undisturbed, save by casual tourists who occasionally wandered in, looked around, dropped a ten-pence piece<sup>3</sup> into the box that begged help for the fabric of the roof, and inspected the small overgrown churchyard with its nineteen graves.

At the monthly services the congregation seldom exceeded half a dozen, and in wet

weather or snow Mr. Pentecost and Miss Sedom, who played the organ, had the place to themselves. St. Anthony's lay three quarters of a mile from any house; the mild slopes of the Berkshire downs enfolded it as sometimes after a falling tide a cup of sand will hold a single pebble.

One of the rector's favorite views was that of the church's swaybacked stone roof, bracketed between its two majestic dark yew trees, with the leisurely gray-green of the hill-sides beyond. This was one reason for his

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Aiken (ä'kən).

1. *Evensong*, vespers; an evening prayer, hymn, or service.
2. *Saxon stonework, Douai font*, the Saxons ruled England in A.D. 400s and 500s. Douai (dü'ā), a town in northern France, was a prosperous trading center in the Middle Ages. This description suggests the age and the history of the chapel.
3. *ten-pence piece*, a British coin.

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pre-Evensong period of meditation beside the little wood. The second reason was the tactful desire to allow his parishioners time to assemble, sit down, and rest from their cross-country walk for a few minutes before he appeared among them. Except for the trees on his left, the countryside thereabouts lay bare as an open hand, so that the members of the congregation could be seen from a great distance, making their way along the footpath that led to the church from Compton Druce, the nearest hamlet.

On this evening in mid-April Mr. Pentecost sat in his rusty Rover with an especially happy and benign expression on his face. After a rainy afternoon the sky had cleared: thrushes, larks, and blackbirds were singing in fervent appreciation of the sun's last rays, which turned the greenish-white pearls of the budding hawthorn to a silvery dazzle. In this light the down grass and the young wheat shone with an almost luminous intensity of color.

"Interesting," mused Mr. Pentecost, "how these early greens of the year, dog's mercury and elder leaves, and the green of bluebells, contain such a strong mixture of blue in their color."

Mr. Pentecost's hobby was painting delicate watercolor landscapes, and he was minutely observant of such niceties.

"Then, later in the spring, in May and June, the brighter, more yellowish greens appear: young beech and oak leaves with their buttery rich color; doubtless the extra degree of light from the sun has something to do with it."

Mr. Pentecost watched fondly as Ben Tracey, the farmer who owned the enormous

pasture on his right, arrived in a Land-Rover with sacks of feed for the sheep. The spring had been an unusually cold one, and the grass remained unseasonably scanty. Sighting Ben, the sheep and lambs, well acquainted with the object of his daily visit, began purposefully making toward him from all corners of the vast field, lambs following their mothers like iron filings drawn to a magnet in regular converging lines, only broken at one point by the presence of a massive oak tree covered with reddish buds that grew toward the middle of the field. Mr. Pentecost eyed the tree thoughtfully. Was it not unusually advanced in its growth for such a cold season? And why had he not noticed it last month?

Farmer and rector waved to one another, then Mr. Pentecost, observing the last of his congregation pass through the churchyard and enter St. Anthony's porch, was about to start his motor again, when, in the rearview mirror, he noticed a girl, who had been slowly riding her pony along the road behind the car. At this moment she dismounted, tethered the pony to a tree, and vanished through a gate into the little wood.

Normally such a sight would have aroused no particular curiosity in Mr. Pentecost, but two unusual factors here caught his attention. First, neither girl nor mount were familiar to him; yet Mr. Pentecost was certain that he knew every girl and every pony within a ten-mile radius. So where had she come from? Second, the girl carried a trowel and a basket.

Without apparent haste, yet acting with remarkable calm and dispatch for a man of his age, Mr. Pentecost backed the Rover a hundred yards to the point where the pony stood tethered to a young ash tree. The rector

got out of his car, studied the pony thoughtfully for a moment, then walked into the wood. The gate stood open: another factor worthy of note. Slightly compressing his lips, Mr. Pentecost closed it behind him and took the path that bisected the wood. The girl ahead of him was easily visible because of her bright-blue anorak; she was, in any case, walking slowly, glancing from side to side as if in search of something.

Mr. Pentecost could easily guess at the object of her quest. He caught up with her just as she had reached it: a patch of delicate spindly plants, each of them nine inches to a foot high, growing in a small sunny clearing. They had bell-shaped flowers the size of small, upside-down tulips—odd, elegant, mysterious flowers, white, with a pinkish-purple tracery over the fluted petals.

The girl knelt beside them and took her trowel from the basket.

“No, no. You mustn’t,” said Mr. Pentecost gently behind her. The girl gasped and spun around, gazing up at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“My dear child, believe me, you *mustn’t*,” repeated the rector, the seriousness of his tone mitigated to some degree by the mild expression in his blue eyes. The girl gazed at him, nonplussed, embarrassed, temporarily speechless, it seemed.

She was, he noticed, a very pretty girl, about seventeen, perhaps, in the accustomed uniform of jeans and T-shirt and riding boots. On her head, though, she sported a slightly absurd and certainly unusual article of headgear—not a crash helmet, but a strapped furry hat with a cylindrical top, like the shako<sup>4</sup>es worn by cavalry in the Crimean

War. Could she have inherited it from some great-great-grandfather? Or perhaps, thought the vicar indulgently, it was a prop borrowed from some local theatrical venture; the young loved to dress up in fancy dress. But, now that he saw her close to, he was certain that he did not know this girl; she was a total stranger. Her eyes were a clear beautiful greenish gold—like the color of the young oak leaves he had been thinking about a few minutes earlier. Her hair, what could be seen of it under the shako, was the same color, with a decided greenish tint; punk, no doubt, thought Mr. Pentecost knowledgeably. The children nowadays dyed their hair extraordinary colors; green was nothing out of the common. He had seen pink, orange, and lilac.

The girl continued to gaze at him in silence, abashed and nervous, grasping her trowel.

“Wild fritillaries are so rare, so very rare,” Mr. Pentecost mildly explained to her, “that it is wrong, it is most dreadfully wrong to dig them up; besides, of course, being against the law. Did you not know that? And why, do you suppose, are they so rare?” he went on, considerably giving her time to recover her composure. “Why, because of people like yourself, my dear, finding out about where they grow and coming to dig up specimens. I know the temptation—believe me, I know it!—but you really must *not*, you know.”

“Oh, dear,” murmured the girl, finding her voice at last, it seemed. “I’m—I’m very sorry. I—I didn’t know.”

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4. *shako*es, high, stiff military hats with plumes or other ornament.

"No? You really didn't know? Where are you from?" he inquired, gently veiling his disbelief. "You are certainly not from anywhere around here, or I should have known you. And your steed," he added thoughtfully.

"No, I—I come from—from quite a long way away. I was sent"—she hesitated, looking sheepish and contrite—"sent to—to collect a specimen, as you say. It is the last, you see—we already have one of everything else."

Good gracious, thought Mr. Pentecost, in surprise and a certain amount of disapproval. *Everything* else? Aloud he said,

"It is for a school project, I conclude? Well, I am sorry to disappoint you, but you really must *not* remove the flowers from this precious patch. I will tell you what you can do, though—" as her face fell. "If you care to accompany me to Evensong in St. Anthony's—or, of course, wait outside the church if you prefer," he added kindly, "you may then come with me to my rectory in Chilton Parsley. I am fortunate enough to have quite a large number of fritillaries growing in my flower border, and I shall be happy to give you a specimen for your collection. How about that, my dear?"

"Why," said the girl slowly, "that—that is very kind of Your Reverence. I am indeed greatly obliged to you." She spoke with considerable formality; although English enough in appearance, she could, judging from her accent, have been a foreigner who had learned the language very correctly from some aristocratic old lady with nineteenth-century intonations. "I have instructions to be back though"—she glanced at the sky,

then at the watch on her wrist—"by seven. Will that—?"

"Plenty of time," he assured her, smiling. "The evening service is never a long one. . . . Strict about that sort of thing, are they, at your school?"

She blushed.

Mr. Pentecost began walking back toward the gate, anxious, without making it too obvious that he was in a hurry, to join his patient parishioners, but also wishful to be certain that the girl accompanied him. She, however, showed no sign of intending to disobey his prohibition and came with him docilely enough. Once outside the copse gate—"You must *always* close gates, you know," Mr. Pentecost reminded her amiably but firmly—she remounted, and he got into his car. "Just follow behind," he told her, poking his white-haired head out of the window. She nodded, kicking the shaggy pony into a walk; perhaps it was the late light filtered through the young hawthorns, but the pony, too, Mr. Pentecost thought, showed a decided touch of green in its rough coat. "Only a very short way to the church," he called, swerving his car erratically across the road as he put his head out again to impart this information.

The girl nodded and kicked her pony again. For its diminutive size—a Shetland cross, perhaps?—the pony certainly showed a remarkable turn of speed.

Mr. Pentecost had not expected that the girl would be prepared to attend his service, but she quietly tied her pony to the lych-gate, murmured some exhortation into its ear, and followed him through the churchyard, glancing about her with interest. Then a doubt seemed to overtake her: "Am I dressed suita-

bly to come inside?" she asked in a low, worried tone, pausing at the church door.

"Perfectly," he assured her, smiling at the glossy shako. "Our congregation at St. Anthony is quite informal."

So she slipped in after him and demurely took her place in a pew at the back.

After the service—which, as he had promised, lasted no longer than twenty-five minutes—the rector exchanged a few friendly words with the six members of his congregation, stood waving good-bye to them as they set off on their return walk across the fields, and then said to the girl, who had remounted and was waiting by the gate:

"Now, if you will follow me again, my dear, I will drive slowly and I do not think the journey should take more than about fifteen minutes for that excellent little animal of yours."

She nodded, and they proceeded as before, the vicar driving at twenty miles an hour, not much less than his normal speed, while horse and rider followed with apparent ease.

As he drove, Mr. Pentecost reflected. During Evensong his mind, as always, had been entirely given over to the service, but he had, with some part of it, heard the girl's voice now and then, particularly in the hymn, Miss Sedom's favorite, "Glory to Thee My God This Night." So the girl was, at least, familiar with Christian ritual. Or was a remarkably speedy learner. Or was it conceivable that she could be coached, as it were, continuously by—whatever agency had sent her? There were so many things wrong with her—and yet, mused the rector, he could swear that there was no harm about her, not an atom.

When they reached the damp and crumbling laurel-girt rectory, Mr. Pentecost drove around, as was his habit, to the mossy yard at the rear, and parked there.

"You can tie your pony to the mounting block—" He gestured to the old stable. "Now, I will just leave my cassock inside the back door—so—and fetch a trowel—ah, no, of course there is no need for that, you already have one." It was a bricklayer's trowel, but no matter. "Follow me, then."

The rectory garden, beyond the overgrown laurel hedge, was a wonderful wilderness of old-fashioned flowers and shrubs that had grown, proliferated, and battled for mastery during the last hundred years. Smaller and more delicate plants had, on the whole, fared badly; but Mr. Pentecost adored his fritillaries and had cherished them as carefully as he was able: frail and beautiful, both speckled and white, they drooped their magic bells among a drift of pale blue anemones and a fringe of darker blue grape hyacinths.

"Aren't they extraordinary?" he said, fondly looking down at them. "It is so easy to believe in a benevolent Creator when one considers these and the anemones—which, I believe, are the lilies of the field referred to in St. Matthew. Now, this little clump, still in bud, would, I think, transfer without too much harm, my dear—er—what did you say your name was?"

She hesitated. Then: "My name is Anjla," she answered, with a slight, uneasy tremor of her voice. And she knelt to dig up the clump of plants he had indicated. The rector fetched her a grimy plastic bag from the toolshed, but she shook her head.

"Thank you, but I can't take it. Only the flowers. This is—this is truly very kind of you."

A faint warning hum sounded in the air—like that of a clock before it strikes.

The vicar glanced across the wide meadow that lay alongside his garden. A large oak, leafless still, covered with reddish buds, grew in the middle of the grassy space. Mr. Pentecost eyed it thoughtfully. Beyond it, pale and clear, shone the evening star.

Mr. Pentecost said, "My dear—where do you really come from?"

The girl stood, tucking the plants into her basket. She followed the direction of his glance, but said defensively, "You would not know the name of the place."

It was, however, remarkably hard to evade Mr. Pentecost when he became as serious as he was now.

"Forgive my curiosity," he said, "but I do think it important that I should know—precisely why are you collecting specimens?"

She was silent for a moment; for too long. Mr. Pentecost went on, "You see—I am an absentminded, vague old man, but even I could not help noticing that your pony has claws on its hoofs. *Moropus!* A prehistoric horse not seen in these parts for thirty million years! And, well, there were various other things—"

She blushed furiously.

"That was the trouble!" she burst out. "For such a small errand—just one flower—they wouldn't allocate enough research staff. I knew there were details they had skimped on—"

"But why," he persisted mildly, "why are you collecting?"

Anjla looked at him sorrowfully. Then she said, "Well—as you seem to have spotted us, and it is so very late, in any case, I suppose it won't matter now if I tell you—"

"Yes, my dear?"

"This planet"—she glanced round at the stable yard—"is due to blow up—oh, very, very soon. Our scientists have calculated it to within the next three chronims—"

"Chronims?"

"Under one hundred of your hours, I think. Naturally, therefore, we were checking the contents of our own Terrestrial Museum—"

"Ah, I see." He stood thinking for a few minutes, then inquired with the liveliest interest, "And you really do have one of everything? Even—for instance—a rector of the Church of England?"

"I'm afraid so." Her tone was full of regret. "I wish I could take you with me. You have been so kind. But we have a vicar, a dean, a bishop, a canon—we have them all. Even an archbishop."

"My dear child! You mistook my meaning. I would not, not for one moment, consider leaving. My question was prompted by—by a simple wish to know."

The low hum was audible again. Anjla glanced at the sky.

"I'm afraid that now I really have to go."

"Of course you must, my dear. Of course."

They crossed the yard and found the shaggy Moropus demolishing, with apparent relish, the last of a bunch of carrots that had

been laid on the mounting block for Mr. Pentecost's supper.

Anjla checked and stared, aghast. "Sphim! What have you *done*?"

She burst into a torrent of expostulation, couched in a language wholly unlike any earthly tongue; it appeared to have no consonants at all, to consist of pure sound, like the breathy note of an ocarina.

The Moropus guiltily hung its head and shuffled its long-clawed feet.

Mr. Pentecost stood looking at the pair in sympathy and perplexity.

The warning hum sounded in the air again.

"Do I understand that your—um—companion has invalidated his chance of departure by the consumption of those carrots?"

"I don't know what *can* have come over him—we were briefed so carefully—told to touch nothing, to take in nothing except—over and over again they told us—'"

"Perhaps it was a touch of Method,"<sup>5</sup> suggested Mr. Pentecost. "He was really getting into the skin of his part." And he added something about Dis and Persephone<sup>6</sup> that the girl received with the blankness of noncomprehension. She had placed her hands on either side of the pony's hairy cheekbones; she bent forward until her forehead touched the other's. Thus she stood for a couple of moments in silence. Then she straightened and walked across the yard in the direction of the meadow. Her eyes swam with tears. Following her, interested and touched, Mr. Pentecost murmured,

"I will, of course, be glad to take care of your friend. During what little time remains."

"I am sure that you will. Thank you. I—I am glad to have met you."

"You could not—I suppose—show me what you both really look like?" he asked with a touch of wistfulness.

"I'm afraid that would be quite impossible. Your eyes simply aren't adapted, you see—'"

He nodded, accepting this. Just the same, for a single instant he did receive an impression of hugeness, brightness, speed. Then the girl vaulted the fence and, carefully carrying her basket, crossed the meadow to the large oak tree in the center.

"Good-bye," called Mr. Pentecost. The Moropus lifted up its head and let out a soft groaning sound.

Beside the oak tree, Anjla turned and raised her hand with a grave, formal gesture. Then she stepped among the low-growing branches of the tree, which immediately folded like an umbrella, and with a swift flash of no-colored brilliance, shot upward, disintegrating into light.

Mr. Pentecost remained for a few moments, leaning with his forearms on the wooden fence, gazing pensively at the star Hesperus, which, now that the tree was gone, could be seen gleaming in radiance above the horizon.

The rector murmured:

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5. *Method*, Method Acting, theory and technique of acting in which actors identify as closely as they can with the characters they are portraying in order to better create the illusion of reality.

6. *Dis and Persephone*. Dis (dis) is the Roman god of the lower world, or Hades. Persephone (*pər sef'ə nē*) in Greek mythology was made queen of Hades but was allowed to spend part of each year on the earth.

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou, Who changest not, abide with me.

Then, pulling a juicy tussock of grass from beside one of the fence posts, he carried it back to the disconsolate Moropus.

"Here, my poor friend; if we are to wait for

Armageddon together, we may as well do so in comfort. Just excuse me for a moment while I fetch a deck chair and a steamer rug from the house. And do, pray, finish those carrots. I will be with you again directly."

He stepped inside the back door. The Moropus, with a carrot top and a hank of juicy grass dangling from its hairy lips, gazed after him sadly but trustfully.



These are Imperial fritillaries, much brighter in color than those the Reverend Pentecost protects. Vincent Van Gogh, "Still Life, Fritillaires in Copper Vase," *Musee D'Orsay, Paris*