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Misfortune

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Misfortune

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Film, Theatre and Communication Arts

Creative Writing

by

Kristen van de Biezenbos Gresham

BA, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2000

May, 2007

Dedication

This collection of stories is dedicated to my parents, Mary and Case Biezenbos, to my husband, Jeremy Gresham, and to my best friends, Kathryn Mann and Rebecca Sang.

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and,

the music of Tindersticks, Gustavo A. Santoalalla, Grant Lee Phillips, Cat Power, Tom Waits and The Dirty Three.

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Polly

Her name was Mary Ann, but everyone called her Polly, after the wealthy aunt, the only one in the family with money. Not that it got the old boot's attention. Her life was best when she was a little girl, when the dark was safely outside her window and Mum was still alive. Polly's favorite memory, the one she brought out in dark times so that it wouldn't all seem so bad, was of the time she went with Mum and Dad to the countryside for a few days, and it was the best time she ever had. The sun. Yes it was there, twice as big as it ever was in London, and she never knew that light could come from the sky so golden and soft. For the first time she saw England, country of story and song, her hills and valleys such a bright vivid green that it hurt her eyes to look too long. Mum and Dad had never seemed so happy, and Polly being so young and silly went and spun round and round in the little hotel's foyer until she tripped and fell against an old wingback chair, splitting open the flesh of her forehead. A scar grew there, and until she died Polly had the habit of tracing it with her fingertips at times, trying to remember what it felt like to be warm, inside and out.

She was a sad case, and when she told her story over a few drinks at the public houses, she got many a sympathetic nod. She started out with a husband, a solid man named William Nichols. He liked her well enough when she was quiet and kept things tidy, but he didn't like that every so often she wanted to settle in with a small glass of whiskey by the fire. Polly had aching joints, especially her fingers, and a spot of liquor was the only thing that eased the pain. It was nothing. She did her wifely duty and gave William five bonny children: Edward, Percy,

Alice, Eliza, and Henry. She gave them respectable names, and, for a time, she and William were respectable themselves, though not well off nor well liked. They put on airs, acted above their station and didn't socialize with their neighbors. Still, they were comfortable for a while. The problem was William. He began to see Polly has his bad luck charm, and then he started to take nips from her bottle. Things went to rot, even though Polly was always doing her best for him and after twenty-four years of marriage gone black and full of resentment, they left each other for good. It was 1881.

The truth was that William was gone even before Polly knew it. When she'd gotten pregnant with Henry she'd grown as big as a bloody house. She couldn't clean, and she couldn't cook. She could barely wipe her own arse, and so she asked William to hire a girl, just for a few months. When that sallow nurse arrived on their stoop to be Polly's right hand, William's starved eyes ate her up like a plate of cold beef. Polly caught them together after the birth. Well, they weren't really trying to hide it. And she had a fit of temper as best as she was able, considering that she was nursing and nearly bedridden. Her yelling worked well enough to get her a promise of five pounds a year from William, but he turned her out of the house as soon as she could walk to the piss pot without help. He wanted to start over again, start fresh. From the street, she screamed such terrible things at him as she usually only said when drunk. She hated him. Good riddance! But soon, she realized that she was better off as his wife. Maybe he did get under her skin like no other thing could, but she knew the way of the world. They had been married for twenty-two years, and she had no real skills or references to recommend her for honest work. She was lost, she had nothing. And he wasn't such a bad sort for a man: he rarely hit her and didn't want to crawl under the bedclothes too often.

After all those long years of marriage came the worst of all: the workhouses. She left her little chicks with William and that skinny, pinched nurse who wouldn't show her face when Polly came around for a few extra coins. Polly needed that money, though she seldom got it. She didn't have a place to sleep most nights, since she couldn't put up with her father and his preaching to her all the time, and so she ended up in Lambeth Workhouse, that squatting stone toad that eats up the poor, the old, the crippled, and the unwanted and spits them out again with eyes harder and hands redder. The city said there had to be a place for poor people like Polly to go, but they made the workhouses even worse than prison so that no one would want to stay there and be a financial burden. Go starve on the streets. That was the lesson taught at the workhouse. Lambeth made Polly angry with William and with God too, for God said that a woman is like a field to be sowed, and when a man has put in enough seed, well, shouldn't he move on to richer soil? Lucky thing they rationed out some weak beer at Lambeth. They had to, their water being a sort of gravy brown and in such short supply, although they said it was the best water in all of the workhouses in London. No deaths from cholera in five years! And to be sure, they made it clear that men and women were to be separate at all times. But at night there were too few beds, and if someone curled up on the filthy floor next to Polly, and if that someone drove away the cold, she wasn't so inclined to call the guards. And sometimes, after all, it was the guards themselves whose hands were moving under her thin blanket.

At Lambeth, Polly mostly picked oakum, which is a fancy way of saying that she sat around with dozens of other beaten-down ladies pulling apart old ropes, making hills of loose fiber that was later mixed with tar to seal the cracks between the planks on the sides of ships. She liked to think she was doing a great service, keeping all those nice young sailors from sinking into the salty gray of the sea.

The problem was that picking oakum ripped the flesh from her fingers, made them bleed and made her joints hurt worse than ever, sometimes so badly that her fingers wouldn't move at all, and so she left Lambeth and got nice work with an upright family doing cleaning and cooking and such. Taking the polishing rag to their fine things made her remember being a wife, having a home, and the lady's well-made dresses caused an ache in her that kept her awake at night in her narrow cot. She began to steal. At first it was just a silver spoon, not to keep but to sell for money to get a new bonnet. Polly started to feel more like herself with that bonnet on, or maybe more like who she used to be, and so she started taking more spoons and then candlesticks and delicate china plates. Suddenly she was working in a fine new apron, blazing white, and had new spring-sided boots too. But she forgot what inveterate gossips servants can be, and soon enough she was out on the street, lucky that the mistress of the house had a kind heart and didn't want to take her to debtor's court to get her money back. Polly repaid her kindness by leaving with a suitcase full of stolen underthings.

Deep in her belly, Polly felt the humiliation of being caught, of having lost her one chance of supporting herself honestly, no matter that she lost her position because she indulged her own evil impulses. She blamed Lambeth: that place had ruined her, made her into stone inside. Now before, with William, she never would have even thought about going to a public house. True, she wasn't exactly Lady Nichols, but she had pride, and a sense of what was decent. Decent ladies didn't drink glasses of gin with strange men in those dark buildings that smelled like piss and burned meat. But now she was lower even than a servant, and she had no one. So she found a room on Commercial Street, without admitting to herself what she would have to do to afford the doss, and she went to a place called the Britannia and got so stinking drunk that she forgot all about being sacked, about losing her husband, about hardly seeing her bonny babies,

about everything. She got so drunk she could barely remember her own name, and it was just what she wanted. Finally, she had found a way to sleep without dreams.

So now she moved from room to room on Commercial, Flower and Dean, and Thrawl Streets, those soot-coated roads that West End papers called “the evil quarter mile.” She took up drinking in the public houses as her new profession, and to fund her life’s work she did what she had tried so hard not to do: she let men fuck her for money. At first she thought it was a lost cause anyway, since she wasn’t pretty or young, but then she really looked at the girls lingering on the corners and in the alleys of Whitechapel and Spitalfields, and realized that she wasn’t such a bad spot of quim. Even better, Polly found that she belonged somewhere. She got to know other whores, so many of them discarded wives like herself, as well as the men at the public houses, who weren’t so bad, even if they were just ignorant laborers. Sometimes she’d give one of them a tumble for free: enough whiskey and she didn’t even feel their pricks. That’s how it was with her and Tom Dew, a blacksmith (just like dear Dad) whose fingernails were never clean. Polly and Tom lived together for a while, and he didn’t mind that she earned her money the way she did. Tom was built like a barrel, which was appropriate, Polly often thought, since his brain seemed to be made of wood. Still, he was clever enough to suggest that she should go to the authorities to get more money from William, who had stopped sending her five pence a week.

But it turned out that William had found out what Polly was up to, and when officials went to demand money from him for Polly’s sake, he told them that he wouldn’t give a piece of brass to that whore, and when the officials went to Polly to see for themselves...well, they ended up agreeing with William, and Polly never got anything from him again. She drank like a fish when she found out, not because of the money but because William thought he was so much

better than she was. He thought she should have been able to make it alone. Thank God for Tom Dew, who understood that it didn't make her a bad person, just a person who didn't want to work herself to death in a workhouse or a laundry, especially now that her hands were ruined. What about the fact that William was sticking it to his nurse, the same one who had helped Polly deliver the baby that he got on her? Where was her recompense for that? Did no one care for her at all?

Sometimes the loneliness kept her from sleeping. She kept a bit of broken mirror in her pocket and, at night, when she could afford her own bed in a lodging house, she would stare at her face in the candlelight. When had she become so old, so used up?

And oh, how her father tried to keep up her good name. He told everyone that Polly left the marriage because of Will's infidelity, and he never mentioned how light her skirt had become. He also never mentioned the times that the drink had driven Polly to his door in the dead of the oily London night, demanding money and howling like a bleeding dog when he insisted that he'd given her all he had, that there was no more. When he was angry, he called her Mary Ann and he wouldn't look her in the eye. He told her once that if her Mum could see her now, her tears would have flooded the Thames.

In the summer of 1886, Polly's brother, whom she never really knew, died in a fire when a paraffin lamp exploded, and she went to the funeral in her best dress. Many people complimented her on how fine she looked that day. Not Dad though; he kept his eyes closed through the service and prayed silently. As the cemetery men lowered her brother's pine box into the ground with ropes, she couldn't stop thinking about how awful it would be to burn to death. There had been times when she feared starving, both in the workhouse and in Spitalfields, before she'd begun whoring full time, but to die in such chaos, with so much violence, and to struggle

so for naught, struck Polly as the worst way a person could die. She hoped that somehow her brother had gone quickly.

Then came August 30th, in the deep cold of the autumn of 1889. It was a Thursday. By that time it was well and truly over between Polly and Tom Dew, and she'd tried to go honest a few times since, which had led to her sleeping in the street and being picked up by the police, who sent her back to Lambeth. Early in the evening the deputy of the fetid lodging house where she'd been staying for a few months had thrown her out of her room for not having her doss, but she was in good spirits. "Never you mind," she told him, "I'll soon get my doss money. See what a jolly bonnet I've got now." Black straw with a crimson band it wasn't the sort of bonnet she usually went for, but it looked so nice in the haberdasher's window, and of course there was her weakness for a new bonnet, and she did have ten shiny shillings in her palm that wanted spending. But she wasn't worried about not having a bed that night. True, the hard years were showing, and she was missing five of her front teeth, and that scar on her forehead was still visible, especially when she was drunk and it stood out vividly white in her red face. But for all that, she was not so bad for an East End whore, with soft brown eyes and a husky laugh, and she looked a full ten years younger than her age of forty-four. A sailor or laboring man didn't have to be off his horse drunk to want to take her behind one of the thickly shadowed buildings off Commercial Street.

After she was turned out of the lodging house, Polly went on a stroll through the raw parts of the East End. She stopped at three different pubs and got so drunk that she couldn't walk straight. For Polly, sober could never compare to the wanton joy of being drunk. Come what may, gin could always make the world smaller and easier to manage, even when it was full of the stench of vomit and shit that hung like poison gas in the air of those foul streets. So she got

sauced, as usual, and she was stumbling along the lamp-lit streets when she bumped into old Emily Holland, who owned a lodging house where Polly had stayed for a time. The woman was a mean old cow, and Polly had nearly slapped that tight little grin off of her face when she'd asked for doss and Polly had none. Emily had seemed so gratified to send Polly packing, though it may have had something to do with the fact that she suspected that Mr. Holland had enjoyed Polly's services once or twice. That was one reason that he wasn't allowed to collect doss anymore – he tended to come back with little money but a smile on his face.

But tonight Emily wasn't interested in gloating. She had something more exciting occupying her mind. "There's a fire down the docks," she told Polly, her face burning with the pleasure of seeing a more massive misfortune than her own husband's flaccid cock. "People screaming and jumping and burning up! You should go have a look, Pol. I swear there's at least ten bodies floatin' in the water."

"Can't," Polly slurred. "Ol' Fletcher threw me out of me lodging, so here I am like a good girl, earning me doss so I can catch a bit o' sleep."

Emily couldn't pass up the chance to laugh at that, and Polly's small hope that she'd offer her a bed in her house dissolved.

"You spent all your money on that fancy hat, eh?" Emily asked, eyeing the new bonnet on Polly's graying head.

Polly was pleased that the shriveled crone had noticed it, and she put up an unsteady hand to adjust it, making it tilt forward just so.

Emily rolled her eyes. "Well, I hope that thing is worth a night on the stones behind the Britannia. Didn't you just hear the church bells? It's already two-thirty, and it's wicked cold besides."

Polly considered saying something about how some people are just jealous bints who should mind their own bloody business, but then she remembered that she only had a few more hours of being blistering drunk, and she shouldn't be wasting her good time on a petty cunt like Emily when she had money to make, and easier to get a customer when she was this way, as she was not so jolly when she was sober.

"Don't fret, Ems," she said, waving a hand in the air. "I've made and lost me doss money three times tonight, and it won't be long before I'm back."

Emily snorted, and Polly thought about giving her a good smack, right on the gob, to finally see the woman get what was coming to her. But she really did need to make some shiny before it got so late that the gents became sparse. So she walked away from sour-faced Emily with a "good night, then", and she almost headed for the docks to see the fire and get warm. Instead, she squared her thin shoulders like a soldier going into battle and headed down Whitechapel Street, wincing when the contents of a chamber pot were flung out of a third story window onto the cobblestones and splashed against her skirts. Spitalfields was lively as ever that evening: there were fine gentlemen ducking in and out of questionable houses and theatres with their hats pulled low, old men and women hawking old bread and stinking fish and useless trinkets on the street corners, and so many women like Polly, painted up and gaunt with hunger, laughing and drunk in the arms of men who liked to spend their money on a spot of fun instead of a cake of soap.

There was an infestation of children too, some beggars and some pickpockets, and Polly spotted one ragged girl, with long, dark hair like her little Eliza, take the hand of a man in a houndstooth coat and disappear down an alley between a closed butcher shop and a gin parlor.

That made her glad of William and his nurse for a moment. Her children were better off without her, and though for a long time she wouldn't admit that, now it was a comforting thought.

She hadn't gone far down the road when death found her, came on legs so quick and nimble that she didn't even have time to cry out. She was just one more drunken whore teetering down the street, so none could be blamed for not noticing when she turned her back on a man and he threw her down on the stones. With his quick knife he nearly cut her head clean from her shoulders, there in the narrow dark of an alley called Buck's Row. She was still alive when he left her, and the night seemed to have grown quiet. Polly couldn't move, but behind the glassy lenses of her eyes the black city fell away like pasteboard cut-outs in a puppet show, and then she was back in the country with Mum and Dad, hurtling down flower-carpeted hillsides and spinning, spinning under a fierce sun that she felt like she hadn't seen in more than thirty years.

A carman named Charles Cross was on his way to work, making his way down the Row when he found her, her legs and arms still warm. Mr. Cross called over another man that he saw walking down the row, and the two later testified at that there was not much blood, and in fact, it was so dark that they weren't sure at first that she was dead. Actually, they thought she was just dead drunk, and the other man, whose name was Robert Paul, was certain that he saw her move a little. Her body was located almost directly underneath the window of a Mrs. Green, who claimed to be a light sleeper but had no gruesome story for Scotland Yard. The only thing she heard was Charles Cross yelling.

Polly died as though she were a ghost already.

The police noted the overall condition of her clothing as shabby and stained. She was wearing her new black straw bonnet, a brown linsey dress, black wool stockings, two petticoats with "Lambeth's Workhouse" embroidered at the hems, flannel drawers, and men's spring-sided

boots. In her pocket they found a piece of mirror. The investigators were furious when they came to examine her body, because she was not wearing anything at all when they arrived. The mortuary keeper and his friend, neither of them respectable men, had stripped her without permission. Polly had spent the night in that mortuary cold and naked.

All things considered, she had a rather nice funeral. William, Dad and her son Edward all contributed and she was taken to the City of London Cemetery at Manor Park in a shining elm coffin, although they could not afford a private plot for her and she was interred in a public grave with the rotting remains of others. Over one hundred years after she died, a plaque was finally installed at her burial site, which makes it much easier for tour groups to find her. Where other markers say things like “Beloved Wife”, “Darling Mother”, and “Devoted Daughter”, hers says only “Victim of Jack the Ripper.” Her life forgotten, only her death remains.

Solo for Flute and Knife

Between me and the sky is a weave of branches, belonging mostly to fuzzy pine trees knotted with sap, and I watch the white sketches of clouds through those branches for a long time, maybe hours, trying to stay out of my body and away from the bright burning pain that is sizzling in my belly, between my legs, on the palms of my hands on at the base of my neck. Places where he touched me. But it wasn't really touching, and so I stop thinking of him and his hands, and instead watch the clouds for as long as I can. Until the pain brings me back, and my body begs me to stand up and find help, someplace warm, something soft. My bed. I can see it so clearly and it makes me ache: the quilt Gran made for me with its bright maroons and deep blues, the little girl canopy with ruffled edges that I want to get rid of but also somehow don't. I need to be in my bed, in the cool sheets and the smell of detergent. So I stand up, and it's the worse thing I've ever done. I fall to my knees, my skinned knees that I can't feel now but that look so bad, so mangled, like he chewed on them. My new green skirt from the mall has blood on it. My black T-shirt is ripped at the neck. I stand up again, and I'm shaking all over as though I'm not standing in air but in water, water so cold that I can barely breathe.

I walk toward home. The ground is covered in pine needles and brown leaves that crunch with my steps. I watch one foot move in front of the other. My shoes – blue Vans with black stripes down the sides – still look good, like they belong to someone who is okay, and that makes it easier to keep going. I move between the trees and listen to the crickets and beetles hum. It seems like it should be night, but the sun is bright and the day is warm, and I'm still trembling, my hands curled into fists. The trees are farther apart now, and I can hear the sounds of my

subdivision, the high whoops of kids playing and the splash of pool water. I can hear muffled music, and I concentrate on it, follow it. It takes me a few moments to realize what it is: *Come Monday*, and I know all the words because my Dad used to sing Jimmy Buffet to Molly and me when we were little. I wonder if the song will lead me to Dad, to his strong arms, to his soft flannel shirt and rough beard, to his cologne. Dad.

Now I can see the wooden fence that surrounds the Turners' backyard. I used to baby sit their daughter. My house is just across the street. I have the feeling, for a moment, that I shouldn't let anyone see me, that I should wait until dark to walk into the open because they will know as soon as they see the blood on my skirt what has gone on in the woods. But I keep walking. I see myself like someone peeking through the window of their house might see me: a tall, thin girl with brown hair in snarls around her shoulders, white skin that's scratched and welted, clothes covered in streaks of dirt. And, of course, blood. Somewhere behind me someone is saying my name: "Jessica? Jessica?" It sounds like Mrs. Hanson, who lives at the end of the block. I keep walking. I can see my house, the wide green front lawn and the blue door with brass lamps on either side.

When we moved here three years ago, this was the first house we looked at. "It has brass lamps," Mom had said. "What more do we need?"

Now I'm standing at the door, between the lamps. I reach out and touch the lion's head knocker, and it's warm. My feet are on the thick, coarse mat that says, "Welcome." I press my hand against the door and notice that some of my fingernails are broken and there's black dirt beneath them. I'm returning to myself now, and I know it because I'm suddenly dizzy and I want to throw up and so I do, all over the mat and my okay shoes.

"Jessica?" The woman who might be Mrs. Hanson sounds like she's right behind me.

The man who took me into the woods was right behind me until we reached the clearing, when he grabbed a handful of my hair and wrenched my face around so that we were looking into each other's eyes. "You are a liar," he said, with no expression, no anger, nothing.

There's a horrible wailing sound, like an animal whose bones are being crushed in a trap might make, and it takes me a moment to realize that it is coming from me.

Dad wants to take me to the hospital right away, and at first Mom says no. "She needs to clean up, put on some fresh clothes."

Dad makes a face like he's choking. "She can't clean up, Marie," he says. "They'll need to take evidence. Samples of what's...on her."

When he says that, Mom starts to cry, and from the couch I see Molly watching us from the top of the stairs, her blonde hair tucked behind her ears and her face so white.

The paper gown itches, and Mom is holding my hand so tightly I can feel my blood trying to reach my fingers. A fat nurse in bright pink scrubs cleaned my scratches and made clucking sounds like a hen when she saw the bruises around my neck and wrists. She kept saying "poor thing," as Mom watched quietly. After this we have to go to the police station and I have to talk to detectives, and Dad is there already. Mom keeps glancing at the door, as though she's expecting someone. Maybe she thinks someone's going to come in to tell her that it's all just a joke.

"Are you doing all right, Jessica?" Dr. Rader is looking between my legs, and I can feel the weird tacky glide of his gloves on me. "Let me know if I'm hurting you."

He hasn't looked me in the eye since we got here, and I think he might be doing it for my benefit, like he thinks that I'm ashamed and don't want to be looked at. He's been our family's doctor for years. With his white, cottony hair and runny blue eyes, he looks like a grandfather should look, and when he touches a raw spot that sizzles with hot pain and I can't help but gasp, he shakes his head. I can almost hear what he's thinking: poor thing.

Mom says, "About two hours ago."

Dr. Rader sighs. "There's a lot of damage here. Significant tearing. I'll give you a prescription for something to lessen the pain. There are also some lacerations on your right inner thigh."

There's a swipe of fire as he dabs alcohol on the cuts. I inhale sharply. Dr. Rader looks at me, frowning.

"These cuts look deliberate. Almost like the letter C, or an incomplete circle."

"He cut me with a knife," I tell him.

He nods. Mom strokes my hair and says, "You don't have to talk about this unless you want to, honey."

"Jessica," Dr. Rader says, clearing his throat. "Did the man ejaculate inside you?"

Mom gives a little cry, like someone stepped on her toe.

"I don't know," I said. "I had my eyes closed a lot."

"I'll give you something that will make sure you won't become pregnant," Dr. Rader says, scribbling on a pad. "You'll have to take one today and one tomorrow, okay?"

Mom turns away, and I nod.

Dr. Rader sort of smiles. I don't think I've ever seen him look so uncomfortable, even when I threw up on him during an exam last year. "Okay, Jessica," he says. "I'm going to take

some swabs from your vagina and your inner thighs. It will be quick, but it may hurt a little.” He picks up two long cotton swabs from a tray. “You’re a very brave girl, you know. They’re going to catch the man who did this to you.”

I close my eyes. Mom’s grip on my hand tightens, and I think how strange it is that just a few hours ago, there was nothing different about this day.

On the drive home, I notice that the sun is going down and there is a golden haze over everything. I used to love the way that late afternoon sunlight looks, but now it makes the world seem submerged in formaldehyde, like the fetal pigs in the science room at school.

I hope I never have to go to that station again. The way those fat old men looked at me, like they felt sorry for me and expected me to fall apart. Poor thing, their faces said. Poor thing, poor thing.

“We’re on your side,” one of the detectives told me.

I wanted to ask, how can I have a side? I’ve already lost.

I lean my head against the car window. There’s a raw, scraped feeling between my legs, and I feel like I want to cry, like I should be crying, but nothing comes. I can see Mom’s hair catching the sunlight. Her shoulders are shaking slightly. She’s trying not to make a sound, but I can hear her ragged breathing. I scoot forward in my seat so that I’m sitting on my tailbone and lean back, hoping that the pain that makes me keep thinking about him will go away, if I can just ignore it long enough. The cuts he made to my thigh are burning.

I was in a play once, in school. I wasn’t very good at pretending that strange furniture from Goodwill and badly painted backdrops were the real world, that people I barely knew were

my friends and family. Now I feel like I'm on stage again. I'm standing in my house, and it's just like being in a play. Everything seems unfamiliar, fake and dead. Mom tries to convince me to eat something, but I can't even think of eating, of ever eating again. I just go upstairs and lock the door to the bathroom behind me. I turn on the tap, and the water is scalding hot but I step under the spray and it hurts. I don't mind it. I sit down in the shower stall and let the water plaster my hair to my face, my neck, my shoulders. I touch the cuts on my thigh. After he had finished, he took the knife out of a sheath attached to his belt. I thought he was going to kill me. It felt right that he should want to kill me; it seemed to be the correct ending. I was scared, I remember, but so tired and heavy, like he stuck a giant pin through me, his specimen.

I stay in the shower until the water turns icy. Then I towel myself off and put on a cotton nightgown, an old one that's too short for me. I walk down the hall to my room, expecting someone to be waiting for me anxiously, wanting to see how I'm doing, but no one is there and I'm glad.

Finally I'm lying in bed, the bed I've wanted to be in for so long, and the sheets are soft and cool. I hold my breath until it hurts, then let it go. I am alive. Mom and Dad have turned up their TV to hide their voices, and I can hear the actors talking and laughing. The shadow of the tree outside my window is enormous across the ceiling, and even though it looks like a hand with long fingers reaching out to me, I don't feel like pulling down the shade. All of my feelings have been used up, and I don't know when they might come back. The cuts on my thigh are burning.

The door to my room opens, and Molly is standing there in her pink pajamas. She's only a year younger than me, but she looks like a little girl with her hair in a braid down her back, her bangs almost skimming her dark eyes.

"Can I come in?" she asks.

I don't say anything. It's like I've forgotten how to speak. Molly doesn't seem to take offense, though, because she comes in anyway, sits on the edge of my bed and puts her hand on the lump of my knee under the covers.

"Hey." She smiles at me, the smile of someone who feels sick but is trying to make the best of it. "Just tell me what to do."

I know I look at her funny. I don't have instructions.

Molly swallows. She's crying. "What can I do? What do you need?"

I need a rewind button, I want to tell her, and I need for you to leave me alone. I imagine that I used to look like Molly, fresh and young and sweet. Unbruised fruit, still hanging on the tree. Why hadn't she been there when I got out of band practice? Why did I have to walk home alone this afternoon? Counting mailboxes and stepping over cracks in the sidewalks and then, all of the sudden, in the back of a car feeling sleepy, something that smelled sharp in my nostrils that made me so tired, and then the branches above me, him above me and the knife at my neck, nicking my skin.

"I'm fine," I croak. I try to clear my throat and say it again, but it doesn't sound any better.

Molly crumples like wet paper, her face flushed and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry you were alone," she whispers, and I turn my head away.

"It's okay," I tell her. It's not supposed to be convincing.

"I was with Chris. We were at his house, and I knew you would cover for me."

All I can think to say is, "You missed band practice."

She nods and wipes her running nose with her back of her hand. “Chris said he had a surprise for me. He’s such an idiot! He made me come over, and it was nothing but beer that his brother bought for him.”

No, I won’t let her say that. “He *made* you?”

Molly shivers and wipes her nose again. “He said it was important. But he just wanted to get me...” And she stops, but I know what she was going to say. I could tell her that drinking beer and having sex with Chris is not even close to the same thing as having a man on top of you, ripping into you, his empty eyes holding you still. I don’t know if that would make her feel better or worse. I don’t really care. I just want to sleep, and so I turn away from her and close my eyes.

Molly doesn’t say anything, and after a moment, she gets up and leaves, shutting the door quietly behind her.

I wake up in the middle of the night, and I’ve sweat through my nightgown, the sheets, all the way down to the mattress. I ache everywhere, burn in some places, and I was dreaming of it, and of what he told me when he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out of his car and into the woods.

“No one will believe you,” he’d said. “They’ll see right through you, see all your lies.”

He hadn’t seemed angry, and I thought maybe he had me mistaken for someone else, and I told him so, but he’d shaken his head. He had a beard, and there were silver hairs nestled in the brown ones.

He’d pulled me close and whispered, “You’re the one I want,” and after that I kept my eyes up and away from him.

I've decided that I don't like the lights in my room, so I don't turn them on anymore. Mom says it's too dark, but I keep the curtains open. I like the sunlight and the way it falls through the window in rectangles on the carpet. Before, I couldn't sleep if there was any light in the room at all. Now it's all I can do to stay awake. Days have moved by, and I know Mom and Dad want to ask me about school, but they don't. Mom is taking time off of work to look after me, but since all I can do is sleep, all of her bowls of tomato soup and every wedge of grilled cheese sandwich get cold on the plates she brings to me.

Molly wrote me a letter and put it on my bedside table a few days ago. It's still there. I haven't felt like reading it. We've barely spoken since that first night. My throat is always dry.

Tomorrow is my first day of rape counseling. Mom offered to go with me, but I told her that I'd rather do it alone. She'll be sitting in the lobby of the hospital's psychiatric wing with a romance novel, and maybe there will be other mothers there and they can compare rape stories of their poor daughters.

I spend a lot of time in the bathtub, thinking about a dream I've had a few times now. In it, I wake up in the woods, and he is already gone, but I don't just get up and walk home looking so awful, and Mrs. Hansen doesn't see me or tell the whole neighborhood so that we keep getting condolences cards and phone calls. In my dream I touch my clothes, and the rips and stains magically disappear. I run a hand over my hair, and then it is smooth as glass. I brush my fingers over my belly, my thighs, and the blood is gone, the damage is undone. I pick up my flute and my books. I go home and everything is normal, I can keep the secret and I stay just the same. I wish I wouldn't have this dream, because when I wake up and look in the mirror, I don't see that untouched girl but instead a strange empty thing, her hair snarled and the circles under her eyes

fat and dark. I see this girl, and she looks like she doesn't know how to laugh or be funny or interesting. She looks like she's been underground her whole life.

In the tub I like to tilt my head back and let it slip under the water. I like the warmth around me, everywhere. I wish we had a heated pool so I could stay in this kind of womb all the time. I stay down as long as I can, until my lungs start to burn and I come up through the surface gasping. This is when I notice the cuts on the inside of my thigh. They're growing dark brown scabs.

I think about the names that 'C' could stand for: Christopher, Carl, Calvin, Carter, Cole. But those are names for people, and he's not a person to me. He's like a ghost, or someone I made up. He never existed except to rape me, and now he's gone.

*

"The important thing to remember is that it doesn't make you a bad person. It doesn't make you dirty or wrong." Amy, our counselor, gives us an encouraging smile. "We didn't ask for this burden, but we can overcome it," she says, holding up her hands as though she expects us to give her high fives.

This room we're in is so white it's almost painful to look at, and I guess the few houseplants and cheap striped area rugs are supposed to make it look more comforting, but it still feels like an institution. Hide your dirty girls here. The name of this building doesn't help, either: The Center for Crimes Against Persons. As soon as you go inside, you're a victim.

The girl next to me, Kim, has scars on her wrists. When she's called on by Amy to tell her story, she smiles like kids smile in their birthday pictures, wide and bright.

"For the past five years, I was raped at least once a week by a friend of my father. He was an asshole. At first I was really depressed and didn't want to get out of bed."

Now I'm really listening to her. How can someone be raped every week for years? Wouldn't they disappear? Wouldn't they want to?

"Then, I got really into weed and started hanging out with older guys at school," Kim says, twisting a lock of dirty blonde hair around her finger. She'd be very pretty, but she has acne along her jaw, and it's bright red, like she picks at it. "I got really...I started sleeping with guys for weed, or sometimes just because. I just wanted for things to be easy, you know?"

The other girls nod. There's five of us altogether, seated in a circle like Sunday school. I think I'm the only new girl, although I'm older than at least two of them.

"I even started cutting myself, just to, you know, break through. And it worked for a while." Kim shrugs. "But, you know, nothing lasts forever. So I decided to kill myself."

Amy's whole face engages in looking concerned. Her mouth turns down, her brow knits. It's very good, like she practices in front of the mirror. "You felt like you had no one to talk to, nowhere to turn," she says. "But that wasn't your fault." Then she looks at the rest of us, like she's saying it's not our fault either.

Kim looks annoyed at the interruption. "Yeah. So anyway, I slit my wrists in the shower and fell and hit my head. I woke up in the hospital, my Dad swearing up and down that he was gonna kill that asshole friend of his – because you know, he never really believed me until he found me and read the letter I left for him – and since then I've been better. I'm getting my GED."

"You didn't go back to school?" I ask. I've been thinking about not going back to school. I've been thinking about never leaving my room.

Kim laughs, but it's not a good laugh. "I did at first. Hey, I was the school slut, everyone knew I'd put out."

I feel nauseous. I'm starting to wish Mom was in here with me.

"But I couldn't stay there. People in high school are so fucking small-minded, and everyone finds out what happened. Then you're just the girl who got raped, and no one wants to get near you. Like it's catching. You'll see."

"That's how it was for me," says another girl, a small one with red hair who didn't introduce herself. "My best friend won't even talk to me now."

Amy shakes her head, looking very, very sad. "It's a shame that we can't be judged for who we are, instead of what happens to us. But we can overcome and be stronger."

"Were you raped?" I ask Amy. I don't know why the question came out, but from the way the other girls are looking at me, I get the impression that no one's ever asked her that before. Kim winks at me, but I don't want to be on Kim's side. I don't want to have scars on my wrists.

"We're not here to talk about me," Amy says, her voice cool. "Speaking of which, why don't you tell us what happened to you, Jessica?"

The 'C' on my thigh itches. I think about it all the time (Charlie, Cooper, Cullen, Chuck) I want to scratch it, and it's already criss-crossed with red welts from my fingernails, but I keep my hands in my lap. "I stayed after school for band practice, and I was walking home when a man pulled me into his car and drugged me. He took me to the woods behind my house..."

"Behind your house?" Kim asks. "That's kind of fucked up."

I stare at her, her milky blue eyes, her index finger wrapped in hair and turning purple, the warp of cruelty on her face. "Yeah," I say. "They're big woods. The Brightman Woods."

"Oh," Kim says, smirking. "You live over there. Must be nice being rich."

I hate Kim.

*

The police call to say that they've found my book bag, half-buried in the woods near the clearing where he took me. No prints. They haven't found my flute yet. Mr. Buchanan, the band director, says he's trying to find me a new flute, or maybe an old one that I can use.

Earlier, I took out the sheet music for the solo I supposed to play at the assembly next week and stared at it. I felt like I stared for hours, my eyes burning, but it wouldn't make sense. I know how to read music, and I can usually hear the song just by looking at the play of notes on the page, but now it's like looking at someone else's secret code. I don't hear anything. Instead I imagine my flute in a dark basement, sitting far back on a shelf behind boxes of rat poison and potting soil, taken out only at night when the family is asleep, so that he can put his hands all over it.

The hall is filled with people, people I know but who don't look familiar. They all seem so young, like pet store birds in their bright clothes, and they're laughing and talking so loudly that I can hardly think. I notice Molly farther down the hall by the junior lockers. She and two of her friends are looking at me, talking to each other. I still haven't spoken to Molly, even when she started screaming at me in my room last week and Mom came and slapped her across the face. I'm not trying to punish her, I don't think. It's just that it makes me tired to be around her, she's so vibrant.

I look away from her. School has a particular smell, pencil erasers and bleach, and it's new to me as though it's been years since I've been here, instead of just two weeks. I scratch at

my thigh through my jeans. Locker combination. Can't remember. Do I have it written down somewhere?

"Hey, Jessica."

Alex, second-chair flute, is standing next to me, smiling. Alex is the best friend I have since Laura, my old best friend, moved away. I'm not as good at making friends as Molly. But I've spent the night at Alex's house a few times, and we go see movies at the mall together sometimes. "Oh," I say. "Hey."

Alex smiles, and it's a careful smile, not exactly happy. "I tried to call you. Like, four or five times, but your Mom said you were busy. But you're okay? I mean, you're back now?"

I clear my throat, which suddenly feels thick, and try a combination on my locker that doesn't work. No, I want to say. I'm still in the woods. "Yeah," I say. "Finally."

Alex leans against the lockers. "Right? I mean, I would go completely insane if I had to stay home with my parents for more than like, two days. My mom drives me nuts!"

I try another combination. It works. I swing the metal door of the locker open and look at my books with their construction paper covers that I made, and I remember that blue is Algebra, yellow is Biology, red is English. The rest of the books are in my bag, which is new because my old bag is evidence now. My first period is Biology, so I pull out the yellow book and stuff it into my bag, and when I shut the locker and turn around Alex is still there.

"So," Alex says, looking nervous. "Are you going to play in the assembly on Friday?"

"I can't," I say, swinging my bag onto my shoulder. "The man who raped me stole my flute."

Alex stares at me, her mouth slightly open. My mouth is slightly open too. We must look like two cows struck dumb at the sight of each other, and thinking about that makes me start to

laugh. That's when Alex turns around and walks away, and people are staring but I can't stop laughing. The bell rings. I make my way through the crowded hall to the Biology lab.

Mom suggested that I keep a journal, so I'm in our backyard hammock with this blank book she bought for me in my lap and the tip of my pen resting on the lined pages. I haven't written anything yet. I'm trying to think of something like, 'I'm feeling much better', or, 'Therapy's really helping', because I'm sure Mom's going to tear my room apart to find this thing and read it, so I want to write something uplifting. But what I've written is a C. I didn't mean to. I trace over it and then do it again, pressing the nib of the pen down harder and harder until the C has gone through the page onto the sheet beneath it.

It's like he branded me. When it starts to heal, I scratch the scabs open and the blood comes again.

The glass door leading to the backyard slides open, and Molly walks out and sinks up to her ankles in the spiky green grass. Dad hasn't mowed in a while.

"Dinner," she says, then turns around and goes back inside. I think she's trying to make me feel bad for avoiding her, which is better than when she was trying to get me to tell her what happened, which I know is what she really wants.

"Thanks," I say to no one. I shut the journal. I'll fill it with hope and healing some other time.

There's a room through the kitchen that Mom always calls "the rec room", even though we never use it and there's nothing in there but an old treadmill and some World War II books that Dad collected when he was trying to write his novel about American POWs in Germany.

Lately Dad has been in that room a lot. Sometimes when I walk by I think about going inside and saying something to him, because I imagine that he's in there playing out scenarios in his head where he meets the man who raped me, maybe one day in the grocery store, or walking along the road, and recognizes him because my reflection is on the surface of the man's eyes. Then Dad will take him out to the woods and kill him with his hands, the same hands that held me the day I was born.

I heard Molly tell one of her friends on the phone that she saw Dad come back from the grocery store the other day with a bottle of whiskey that he took into that room. She went looking for it later and couldn't find it. "I think he drank the whole thing by himself," I heard her say.

I'm in last period, my fingers curled on the edge of my desk, and I'm thinking about Kim. I'm wondering if it's better to be like she is, to be scarred instead of healed. If she were here, she wouldn't just be letting her attention wander like I am. She'd be talking back, challenging, heckling, because she knew she'd get away with it. Especially with Mrs. Mintern, our English teacher. She's so soft and shapeless. She once dismissed the class early because she couldn't stop crying after reading "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" aloud in class. And she likes me; she thinks I'm a talented writer, based on a Shakespearean sonnet I wrote as an assignment. Of all my teachers, she's been throwing me the most concerned glances and motherly smiles, especially when I don't have my homework. We have a test coming up, and I have a feeling that I could get every answer wrong and still pass.

"Before you go," Mrs. Mintern says to us, wringing her hands together, "I want you all to promise me that you're going to finish *The Awakening*. It's really a wonderful book, and it will

be on your test, so please make an effort to get through those last few chapters. Okay?” There’s that smile again, and she’s looking right at me. The bell rings and everyone’s up, filling the room with the screech of chairs being pushed back from desks. I close my eyes and wait for everyone to leave before I put my books in my bag and make my way to the door.

“How are you liking the reading?” Mrs. Mintern asks. I’m surprised, because since I’ve been back, she pretends to be marking something in her grade book when I walk past.

“It’s okay,” I answer.

“Good,” she chirps. “I’m glad you enjoy it. It’s always been one of my favorites.” She turns attention back to a stack of papers, and I’m tempted to say something mean, but then I find I don’t want to. I guess I’m not going to be like Kim, after all. But what does Mrs. Mintern think will happen if she talks to me for too long? That I’ll collapse like a soufflé that’s been screamed at? Or maybe she’ll get an invisible mark on her that only rapists can see, and that will mean that she’ll be next.

I walk out into the hallway, and I pass Alex, who doesn’t seem to see me. I almost say something to her, but then I don’t. I decide I don’t care about homework today and walk past my locker and go with the tide of people out of the doors and into the bright yellow afternoon. Usually Mom is parked right in front. Her new philosophy is that if she’s watching me every minute I’m not in school, nothing can happen to me. When I asked her when she was going back to work, she wouldn’t say. But then when she asked me if she should pick me up at 5:15 instead of 3:40 so I could go to band practice, I was the one who said nothing.

“Jessica,” I hear, and when I turn around I see Riley, a boy in my class that has never spoken to me before, walking up to me with a smile on his big, handsome face. “What’s up?” He looks so put together – designer polo shirt, designer jeans, and baseball cap over longish hair. I

feel something like a shiver go through me, and I remember the crush I had on him when I first started going to school here. But Riley has a girlfriend, a really popular one with a shiny new Volkswagen that she's already wrecked twice.

"Uh, nothing," I say, looking at my shoes.

"Totally. This is my favorite part of school – when it's over!" He crows with laughter and I laugh too, but I'm out of practice and it sounds flat. "So, what are you doing tonight? Crazy weekend plans?"

"Um." This is like one of those vivid dreams you fall into right before you're actually asleep. Does he actually think I have 'crazy' plans? "Nothing, I guess."

"Well, there's a movie out that looks cool. I'd like it if you went with me." He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and smiles. "You should say yes."

There are so many people around, and they're knocking into me and making me feel dizzy. Over Riley's shoulder I see three guys leaning against the step railing, three guys that I know Riley hangs out with and who are leaning forward slightly, as though trying to hear us. Did he tell them to stand there? "A movie?"

"Yeah," Riley says, stepping closer to me. "You know. No pressure, just popcorn."

The shiver that was starting to feel good now feels bad, cold, metallic. "Oh," I say. "No pressure." Those guys behind Riley are laughing. What do they have planned? Riley will pick me up, but instead of taking me to the movies, maybe he'll take me to his family's cabin, where his hyena friends will be waiting. I can see them now, standing in a circle around me, waiting their turns. Now I'm broken in, and every guy wants a go. Kim said this would happen, but I thought I was different, that I wasn't like her and that people would see that.

“You don’t have to say anything now,” Riley says. “You can call me.” He pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket and holds it out to me.

I turn away from him and walk down the steps, down to the sidewalk where Mom is waiting, and I get into the car without saying a word, my insides clenched like laces pulled too tight.

At home, I’m in the bath. Riley’s face smiles from my memory, but then the C is burning, and I shake my head because I know there’s no way that he really wants to hang out with me, talk to me. It’s like watching a car accident. He wants to see the blood and guts, but when he’s seen enough, he’ll drive on by.

Another week, and I’m now avoiding Molly, Alex and Riley. It’s not that hard. I just keep my head down. I fail Mrs. Mintern’s test, and she tells me that I should seriously consider withdrawing from this semester, because my work is suffering. My work? How can work suffer? I tell her to fuck off, and she sends me to the office, her face hard as stone. I’m proud of her.

They make me wait outside the principal’s office for a long time, probably discussing how they should handle me. There are pictures on the wall of presidents, and the secretary is looking at me over her glasses.

“Take a picture,” I hiss at her, and then I stop because I can hear Kim echoing me in my head: “Take a picture,” Kim says. “I’m all out of autographed crime scene photos.”

They finally call me into the office, and I’m face to face with Principal Golden and Vice-Principal Haier. I don’t pay that much attention to what they tell me, but I do get the part about taking time off and finishing school in the summer. I need time to heal, they say.

*

“We’re going to sell the house,” Mom announces at dinner, a bite of London broil on her fork and that everything’s-okay look that I’m learning to hate on her face. “Dad has found a new job in Nashville.”

Like a bolt of lightning, Molly is out of her chair and standing up, her hands on her hips. “This is bullshit,” she declares. “That’s not going to make anything better.”

“Hon,” Dad starts, but Molly cuts him off.

“No, Dad. I understand that what happened to Jessica was horrible, but what about me? I’m still here, Mom. I’m still breathing, and I still have friends, and you can’t do this!”

“Sit down, young lady,” Mom barks, throwing her napkin down.

“I won’t go,” Molly says. “You can’t punish me because of Jessica. She’s the one who won’t talk to me, she’s the one who’s ruining my life by acting like a freak at school everyday!”

Mom stands up, and now the two of them are towering over Dad and me, glaring at each other like boxers. “You sit down, Molly Elizabeth,” Mom says, her voice dangerously even. “Sit down and finish your dinner.”

Molly shakes her head. “I can’t take it any more,” she wails. “She walks around the house like a zombie! Mom, you quit your job, and Dad, you don’t do anything but drink, and none of us say anything because we’re all so afraid that Jessica’s going to fall apart if we even mention the ‘r’ word. But look at her! She’s already fallen apart! So what’s the point?”

“Go to your room,” Mom roars. “Get out of my sight!”

Molly stumbles away from the table, and I can hear her stomp up the stairs. A moment later the door to her room slams shut. I can't hear her crying, but I know she is. Mom knows it too. She lets her head fall forward, and she stands like that, like a doll with a broken neck.

"Jessica," Dad says, covering my hand with his. "Leave us alone, please."

I get up from the table, and as I walk out of the room I hear Mom start to moan, and Dad is speaking to her so gently and quietly, the way he used to talk to me when I would wake up with nightmares. I go up the stairs, and when I reach the top, I walk to Molly's door instead of mine. The weeping is muffled, and I can see her in my mind lying on her bed, face buried in her pillow. I reach for the doorknob, then stop.

I can't talk to her yet. I need to be Jessica again before I can talk to Jessica's family, to the people who sit next to Jessica in class, to Jessica's teachers, to the girls in Jessica's therapy group. I feel like he left a pouch of black oil in my stomach, liquid filth, and when I try to force it out, it only anchors itself more.

So I go to the bathroom, and I turn on the taps and kick off my shoes. I stand barefoot on the tiles. I've always liked the sounds of the bath: the water escaping the pipes, colliding with porcelain, filling the empty space and then the silvery sound of a body slipping into the water, under it. I take off my clothes. I go to the medicine cabinet. Mom took away everything with a blade at first, but then put them back a few days ago. I take a sharp, skinny pair of scissors that Dad uses to trim his beard, and then I sit at the edge of the tub. I lower my feet into the rising water, and the steam moves around me like fog.

I press the shining lip of the knife into the flesh of my thigh, next to where he cut me. I press down until I see blood, then drag the blade over the almost-healed C, through it, and now it's not a C anymore. Not his name anymore. Not Cameron or Chip or Caleb or Colin. It hurts,

and tears are running down my face, and the water is turning pink, and it makes me dizzy. I cut around the C, across it, under it, above it, until it's nothing, obliterated, just a maze of cuts. I'm lightheaded, nauseous, and I grab a towel from the rack on the wall and press it to the wound. There's screaming, and it's coming from inside me. It moves from my belly into my throat and then explodes from my mouth like a siren, rolling along the steam from the hot water to fill the room, and then the house, and then beyond the house to the neighborhood, the school, the hospital.

I hear pounding; Mom, Dad, and Molly are outside, throwing themselves against the door, clawing at the knob. I can hear that man saying, "you're a liar," but I shake, shake, shake my head until the voice is gone, lost behind the sound of my family trying to reach me. Blood runs down my leg, and I nearly slip and fall, but I right myself. I walk toward the door. The pain is almost gone. I reach for the knob. I'm going to let them in.

Annie

Things started poorly from the beginning for Annie, who was born only six months after her parents were married. She wasn't exactly welcome. She was, in fact, the reason that her parents had to wed, and although they didn't start out with any ill feelings towards her, their ill feelings toward each other soon found a convenient scapegoat in their quiet daughter. They were good enough parents aside from blaming her for their lot, and her childhood, while not full of riches and splendor, was comfortable enough. She didn't have to find domestic work to get by as poor daughters did, and her hands were soft and white as petals. But the easy life took its toll: Annie was a pudgy girl, and even pulling the corset strings tight couldn't disguise the soft mantle of fat at her neck or her sausage-like fingers. No one ever wanted to dance with poor, potato-faced Annie.

She had given up hope. Or, more correctly, she had remained content in her solitude while her parents had given up hope of getting rid of their shy girl, who preferred to stay indoors, daydreaming and eating biscuits slathered in jam, and who would hide in her room when guests came to call. But then, miracle of miracles, she met John Chapman, one of her mother's relatives who wasn't too particular and thought that Annie had a certain charm, even though she was an old maid of twenty-eight. Despite the fact that they weren't too closely related, she and John looked a bit alike – they had matching squashed noses. Three months after they met, they were married.

And so the clouds seemed to have broken for both Annie and John, each of whom had expected to live and die alone. The two of them started out well as a couple, and they even lived

in respectable West London for a while. John found work as a valet for a wealthy man of standing and prestige, and likewise Annie found that she had a good place among the wives of gentlemen's servants. She joined a sewing circle with a woman whose husband was a footman, another woman whose husband was a porter, and another woman, a grand old dame, whose husband was the chief steward for a very wealthy banker. She discovered that a little nip of brandy eased her shyness away, and at first she enjoyed the company of these other women, though their conversations did tend to be rather boring. Annie wasn't a gardener and her sewing was only passable, and after awhile she began to feel rather resentful of the fact that the women seemed to talk of nothing else.

Aside from that, the other thing that started to get under Annie's skin was money. Specifically, that they seemed to have so much less of it than the other ladies in the sewing circle. Of all the husbands, John had the lowest position, and that didn't fit in with Annie's vision of the two of them as being well-off, privileged and envied. John accused her of having read too many novels, of wanting to be a lady instead of a servant's wife. He took her by the hand and told her as gently as he could that they had many things to be grateful for, and that she shouldn't let the dreams of youth poison her life now that she was a woman grown. Annie couldn't say why she was suddenly seized by anger at having less than the other women, or why she couldn't sleep at night, imagining John's employer beating him, calling him worthless. She began drinking more than just a sip of brandy before meeting with the sewing circle, and would rail at the other ladies about the injustice of servitude, the hypocrisy of lords and ladies parading around as though they never took a piss or shit in their lives. The other ladies, shocked at Annie's vehemence, stopped inviting her to their meetings. Annie was furious about being cast aside and raved to John about what awful harpies those women were. When she became pregnant, she

insisted to John that they ought to leave London, that she needed a change of scenery. Being alone in their flat was making her miserable.

To please Annie, John found employment as a coachman for a farm bailiff in Windsor. Annie found life especially sweet in the country, and that faraway look that she wore so often became a true, rosy-cheeked grin. The outdoors agreed with her, and she put away her brandy and diligently kept up the bright little cottage she shared with John. She began humming to herself, and when in bed sometimes it was she whose hands would begin to wander. She gave birth to her first daughter, Annie Georgina, whom they all called Georgie, and then, less than a year later, she had Emily. She was delighted with her children and gave spoonfuls of marmalade to her sweet girls when they cried. She sang to them, made crowns of flowers for them. She was sober, clean and churchgoing. Finally, she was beginning to feel that her life wasn't so far behind all of the wondrous things she'd read as a girl. Perhaps they'd never be rich, but she was beginning to believe that they could be happy.

Then, when her girls were three and four years old, she gave birth to a son with legs twisted like winter branches and a head full of gruel. She and John had to send him away to a home for cripples. But that was for the best, and he was so well taken care of there. At least, she honestly believed he was well taken care of. She only went to visit him a handful times, as she was unsettled by hospitals. But then her beautiful Emily got sick. Em had always taken after her mother and preferred to be inside with a book, or to sit under a tree and simply watch while Georgie and other town children played capture the castle in the fields. But Annie wasn't worried, until she went into Emily's room one morning with a bowl of weak broth and found her daughter stiff and cold.

After that, Annie soured on the country. The sunshine, the scent of trees and the enormity of the sky had lied to her and stolen the daughter whom she had secretly loved best. John began to find half-empty bottles of rum tucked under the bed, but what could he say? He had started drinking after their son's bloody birth. Annie convinced him that they had to go back to the city to protect their one remaining healthy child and to be close to Annie's parents. John liked being a coachman better than a valet, as it was one thing to drive horses, another thing to wait on an arrogant bastard hand and foot. But he wanted to please his wife, who tended to fly into rages when she was refused what she wanted.

John found another job as a valet for a nobleman who lived on Bond Street, back in London's West End, and Annie had the thoughtful idea of bringing her husband a spot of lunch each the day. At first the other servants were impressed. What a devoted wife! But Annie had different reasons for coming to the nobleman's house. The rent for their tiny flat in the city was so expensive that John's wage barely kept food on the table, much less provided pretty clothes for sad-eyed Georgie, who missed her sister terribly. And ever since returning to London, Annie had had horrible visions of running into the women from the sewing circle in her thrice-mended maternity dresses. So after she brought a grateful John his lunch at the manor, Annie dipped into the nobleman's silver, stuffed a few squares of lace into her sleeve, and then lied when the lady of the house happened upon her, telling the woman that the lace belonged to her mother or friend or maybe she bought it last week at the market. That rich lady, who had a house full of healthy babies and all the money in the world to care for them, told her husband what his new valet's fat wife was up to, and John was fired without delay. When he finally found another position, he ordered his wife to stay home. He would eat in the kitchens with the other servants, thank you very much.

At bedtime, Annie would tell her daughter about the daydreams she'd had as a child, the ones that had driven her parents to despair of ever ridding themselves of her. She told them as stories, and filled Georgie's head full of magical realms, princesses, evil queens and poisoned dancing shoes. The little girl drank in her mother's stories, while her mother simply drank. It wore on the girl, trying to live in a world of beauty and magic when her parents were such trolls, so fat and slow and sour with rum. Annie would get drunk and become loud and boisterous, while John would get drunk and weep quietly for his dead daughter and lost son. But Georgie was different from her glum parents, and at fourteen years old, when she was long-limbed and lovely, Annie and John took her to see a traveling circus. She watched the trapeze artists with wide blue eyes, tracking their lithe figures as they swung to and fro, seeming to exist beyond the drab world below them. Two nights later, she was gone, having run off to join that circus. She left a note, and Annie found herself seized with jealousy when she read it. That little brat, how dare she go off and leave her sweet mother alone in that two-room house in Windsor?

Georgie, who became the high-wire wonder Lady Dubrovski, never invited her parents to a show, even when that circus came back to London years later and it was just the thing to have tickets. Oh, how Annie would have loved to sit in the stands and eat flavored ice and watch her daughter fly through the air. Now that she was famous, she could have repaid her mother by allowing her to share in some of her daughter's fame. But no, selfish Georgie told everyone her mother was dead. She never ended a show by coming into the audience, taking her poor mother's hand and saying, "Thanks for everything, Mum." Annie imagined it though, a thousand times at least.

Now alone except for John, Annie drank with total abandon. She threatened her husband's job again when she went out into Piccadilly Circus and sang at the top of her lungs

until the police were called. Then, even worse, Annie engaged those same police in a game of hide and seek around a statue of her majesty Queen Victoria, which landed her in a cell for the night, and John had to come the next morning to collect her. He didn't speak to his unrepentant wife for almost a week, until he sat down across from her during supper one night and told her that they should try being apart for a while. They brought out the worst in each other, he told her, and if things went on they way they had, it would end poorly for both of them. Annie was so angry that he would even suggest this that she insisted, right then and there, that they divorce.

Let's see him take care of himself, she thought to herself as she packed up her small wardrobe into a valise.

Annie's reputation in Windsor was such that she could obtain no domestic work, and so she instead sold a few pieces of jewelry to obtain a small cart, from which she began hawking her reasonably well-made crochet work, as well as flowers that she stole from the graves of the recently buried. She started out in Trafalgar Square, but the competition was murder and twice she saw ladies that she had once known socially. One looked at her with pity, the other with glee. So she gave up on the Square and trudged through the city, down streets that were once cow paths and still smelled like it, until she reached Spitalfields, the blackest part of London. Here she didn't have to sell much to be able to pay for a night in a lodging house, even though walking the streets of the East End was like living in a penny dreadful: everywhere you turned there was fighting, fucking, and generally untrustworthy people about.

Luckily, Annie was no innocent babe, and she got on well selling her wares on Commercial Street, that awful lumpy spine that ran through the rotten flanks of the East End. Of course, there were times when other girls got to the cemetery's flowers first and the crochet work just wasn't attracting much interest, and it shouldn't be forgotten that though Annie was a good

deal more sober now than she had been with John, she still liked a good glass of rum and a plate of beef by the fire. So, after she'd had enough to drink, Annie would occasionally take men back to her room at the lodging house for a few pennies. She wasn't worth much, and she knew it, but she liked the feel of a man when she was drunk, so much so that if she was in the swing of it, she would let a chap get under he skirts in an alley or against the wall of a deserted square. Still, this was not how Annie made most of her money. She was, in the main, a respectable woman – if not by the standards of the West End, then most certainly by the standards of the East.

There was no other man for her than John, though. Fought like cats they did, but Annie never could open her heart to another. She lived with a sieve-maker for a while, just for company. He said nice things to her, called her beautiful, though he himself was a bit of a blank slate, so much so that people just called him 'Sivvy', because it was only thing memorable about the man. His favorite thing about Annie? Her ten pounds a month from John, who, despite being habitually drunk beyond reason, almost never forgot to send the money. Until, of course, he died. Annie found out from a woman who knew them both, and when she did, a part of her seemed to give up, right then and there. She still walked around and drank and ate and shat and sold her corpse bouquets, but all those who knew her well agreed that she was never the same after she learned that John was gone. He was the only person she had left. Now she was truly alone. Even Sivvy left her as soon as he discovered that the money had ceased, and he moved to Notting Hill with another woman.

Around this time the tuberculosis set in, and Annie began drinking more rum to ease the coughing fits that fell upon her. She also started ducking into shadows with men more often, as it gave her a title: whore. She wasn't a mother anymore, she wasn't a wife, she was too old be called a flower girl. Whore would have to do. But among the many, many whores who

frequented the Ten Bells and the Britannia, Annie was seen as being of a higher caliber. She spoke the Queen's English, and her teeth were mostly intact. Her clothes were always clean, and she could be generous to the other girls when she felt like it – most often when she saw a plain girl who reminded her of herself, or when she saw a lovely girl who reminded her of Annie Georgina. She also found a new admirer.

His name was Edward Stanley, and he was a handsome devil. He walked into the Ten Bells one merry evening, mortar still in the creases of his hands from laying brick, and right off bought Annie a drink. She was flattered that he was so much younger than she. Fate finally seemed to be turning a fond eye towards Annie, or "Dark Annie" as the blokes called her, on account of the fact that she dyed her hair black to cover the gray that was creeping in. And goodness, Edward had clever hands. He was much more accomplished than John with a particular instrument, though Annie couldn't fault her poor dead husband for anything. Considering his gifts, Annie was surprised that she wasn't more upset when she discovered how many other ladies benefited from Edward's calluses. She was simply grateful to him, and he in turn remained fond of Annie long past the usual duration of his affection.

Having seen so many loved ones slip through her fingers, Annie was loyal to those she counted close. Three nights before her forty-seventh birthday, she was with a clutch of whores and Edward at a long table by the fire at the Britannia, drinking and laughing through her cough, which had grown worse as the weather grew colder. There was another one of Edward's favorites there, a sneaky thing named Eliza Cooper, though that wasn't her real last name. Cooper was a word that Annie had learned since coming to Spitalfields, and it meant worn-out and useless. It was a good name for the woman, as she was a low thing in every sense, broken into the trade by her own father, foul-mouthed and possessed of the most awful orange hair that

she regularly hennaed. Annie had never liked Eliza, and between sips of rum she saw that bold bitch palm a florin from Edward, only to laugh and hand him back a copper.

She'd never done it before in her life, but she couldn't stop the pain in her lungs, and the medicine she'd bought for the headaches that had grown worse in the last few weeks, and she was tired of holding her tongue. So she started a row with Eliza, calling her a thief, and when Eliza didn't back down, Annie punched her right in her sharp little nose. Eliza responded with her own bony fists, and poor Annie, not in such good health to begin with, got herself good and battered. A few blows to the ribs particularly hurt, and afterwards, when she coughed, it felt like being jabbed over and over again with the point of a sword. She went home that night barely able to stand under the weight of the pain and dreamt all night of the house in the country, of John laughing and watching Emily and Georgie twining ribbon around a may pole, and of little John running through the tall grass on sturdy legs.

The next morning Annie looked a fright, and it felt as though Eliza had delivered twice the beating that Annie remembered taking. A glass of rum was in order, but she found that it didn't sit well at all, and she told a few of the girls in the Ten Bells that she was going to leave off whoring for a bit. She wanted to visit her younger sister in Vauxhall. This sister was six years younger than Annie, and she frequently told people that Annie had died at birth. This meant she could be counted on for a pair of boots to get Annie off her doorstep. Then she could go hop picking for the breweries to earn a few shillings. To get on the right side of the drink, that's what she wanted. Leave Spitalfields and walk in the sunshine for a while. True, she hadn't been able to save a red cent, but perhaps she'd start being more frugal and working on her crochet more. Stop drinking, start getting on with that snooty sister and convince her to give Annie a small loan

to buy a new cart. Maybe she'd move back to Windsor, get out of the shit pile of Spitalfields and perhaps find a nice old man to share a bed with.

But none of those things happened. She couldn't get herself to Vauxhall because she couldn't take more than a few steps before having to sit down on a stoop and wait for the pain to calm a bit, and she felt a fierce pounding behind her eye where Eliza had hit her. The day was slipping away, and Annie realized that her plans would have to wait until she mended. She also knew that no matter how wretched she felt, if she didn't go out for customers she wouldn't have her doss money, and she'd have to sleep on the street. Amelia Palmer, another prostitute and a good friend of Annie's, saw the old girl walking along Dorset Street near the end of the afternoon, pale as a shade. She asked Annie if she was still going to work – that is, to work the lads – and she said she was too ill to do anything. Amelia nodded, feeling sorry for her, and walked away. She returned a few minutes later with a flask of rum to find Annie still standing there, arms wrapped around her stomach.

“Ah, it's no use my giving up,” Annie said to her. She had to earn some money, and that was just the way of it. So she took a nip from Amelia's flask and went to get a pint at Crossingham's, and one pint became four, and the pain started to lessen, but no matter how much she drank, the pain wouldn't go away altogether, and so she plucked up her resolve and left the warm fire of the pub to go down to the hospital's casual ward to get medicine. They gave her little white pills, and she took too many and went back to the pub to wash down the bitter taste of them with more beer. Finally, seeing double and ready to earn her doss, she staggered out of the door and into the very end of the evening. A bit of steel-colored morning light was beginning to creep over the roofs of buildings. It was September 8th, 1889.

At five-thirty in the morning, another whore named Elizabeth Long was hurrying home, shawl wrapped tight against the cold dawn, and though she usually kept her eyes on the ground when she wasn't looking for a customer, she happened to see Annie standing with a man by the shutters of 29 Hanbury Street, a man she would later describe to Scotland Yard as having a dark complexion and wearing a deerstalker hat. He looked, she said, "shabby genteel." She said she that heard him ask, "Will you?" and that she heard Annie answer, "yes." A few moments later, a man came by the same spot to take a piss and heard a woman say "No!" It never occurred to him to come to the woman's aid. Often times prostitutes would pretend to guard their "honor" if they thought their customer might like the game.

In the end, nothing that Annie had ever done or said or stolen or drank mattered at all. She went up and away like coal smoke, like the warp in the air made by candlelight. People heard her speak to her murderer, perhaps even heard her die, as it was full morning by then and she was done to death in the yard of a building where seventeen people lived. But just like those days when she was young and brimming with dreams and had a face like Christmas pudding, no one wanted to hold out a hand for her, no one wanted to walk home with plain Annie Chapman. The only ones who insisted on her company at the last were the knife and the hard ground beneath her.

At the inquest into her death, doctors testified that that the same blade was used to cut into her throat and her abdomen. This knife, her final suitor, was very long and sharp, and it may have been a sword or bayonet, or a surgical instrument, or of a type sometimes used by butchers. This was not an ordinary knife. Her intestines had removed and arranged neatly by her shoulder, while certain parts of her (the uterus, the upper area of the vagina, two-thirds of the bladder) were missing altogether. Maybe the knife had opened her up and seen how defective they were,

seen her crippled son and her dead daughter and decided to have out with them. Weeks later, Lady Dubrovski read about the outrage committed upon her mother in the Parisian paper *Le Monde*, and though she did lock herself in the water closet for half an hour to weep, she went on to perform perfectly that evening before a thrilled crowd.

No one came to Annie's funeral but whores, Edward Stanley, and gawkers who expected the madman to appear upon Annie's coffin to drag her body back to hell with him. Years later, another woman was buried on top of Annie, and it is her marker that juts up from the dirt.

Glass Coffin

For a while it was on the inside of my eyelids, waiting for me to blink or to try to sleep. It was in the milk in my cereal bowl, between the blue lines of my notebook paper. She used to sit behind me in English class, but I didn't really know her. You never really notice who's sitting behind you.

I couldn't stop thinking about it after it happened, and I realized that even though we went to the same middle school and high school, I only heard her talk, I don't know, maybe five times. Except for attendance. She would say "here" like the rest of us, but she wasn't really there, you know? She was a face and a body, she walked and she moved in and out of sight, but she didn't seem like a person, not like a thinking, dreaming, feeling girl. Like backdrop, a mural or something. I never wondered what kind of dreams she would have had. Maybe ones where Paul St. Amant, the hottest guy in school, asked her to the prom and stood up for her and called her beautiful when the rest of us laughed. I used to dream that sometimes. But we were nothing alike. I had friends. Maybe not tons of friends, but good friends, and I was in a few clubs, too. Like yearbook and drama. Not her. She never did things with anyone that I ever saw. She used to sit in the cafeteria by herself, eating alone from a little kid's lunchbox. She always had strange things spread out on the table in front of her – soggy tofu, bean sprouts, soy milk - the stuff her mom made for her. Maybe I used to say bad things about her, just to make people laugh, but not as bad as the things that other people said, I'm sure. You can't blame people for pointing out what's obvious.

Also, it's not like she wanted to be anyone's friend. She never talked to anyone. I guess she did talk to me once, when we were freshman. It was in the hallway, and she totally snuck up on me, just came out of nowhere.

She looked at me, and she said, "I like your shirt, Melinda."

I knew her mom made everything for her, but I told her anyway, because I wanted to help her out, tell her what regular people did. "I got it at the mall, I think." She'd probably never even been in the mall, and I suspected that her parents would never let her get anywhere near a normal store. They were vegan, and they didn't believe in cotton, or something like that. I walked away then, because I knew she was just asking to start a conversation, and I didn't want to talk. I had to get to class. I was in a hurry.

*

At first I wanted to tell her parents about how I found her, because I thought they might want to know, but then I thought about it and realized that her parents were kind of the cause of everything. They're so weird, and it's like they do it on purpose, just to drive people crazy. Some people in this town really hate them, and I've heard people talking about doing something bad to that family, just to get them to cut it out. I'm used to them. They live two blocks away from us, and I've seen their house every morning and afternoon from the window of the bus since I was a kid. It's an old Victorian, like most of the houses on that street. It's red, and it has a steeped roof with a round stained glass window at the top of it, like a little bit of church peeking out. The front yard is wild, overflowing with spiky weeds and spots of bright color where some plastic toy is lying, half buried. There were at least five other kids besides her, all younger, and one of them was always playing in the yard, cheeks dark with dirt and dressed in some shabby homemade dress or overalls that fit so badly that you could just tell that their parents couldn't care less about

them. They were like pigs, but they were worse than pigs, because they wouldn't stay in their pens. No, as soon as they could walk they would come around door to door with their parents, handing out pamphlets on natural childbirth, organic foods, Zen Buddhism. Since it happened though, I haven't seen any of them, not in front of the house. I don't think they're doing those pamphlets anymore, either. So at I guess there's at least there's one good thing that's come of all this.

*

The night I found her, I was coming home from Dean Correl's party. I was a little drunk, but I knew my way through the woods, and the path is tattooed into the ground. I was a little sad too, because Dean hadn't been nice to me at all, telling me that I was a prude and that he hadn't invited over me just to talk. The moon was high and full, and its light pushed pale fingers through the trees, and even though I'd had too much beer I thought everything looked beautiful, cold and eerie. I never told anyone that I used to have nightmares almost every night when I was five years old. Those nightmares lasted almost a whole year. I would creep out of my bedroom and fall asleep on the floor beside my parents' bed. I saw monsters in the dark.

*

I was helping Mom make dinner when Mr. Wells knocked on our door. This was a while ago, before any of the other things happened. Mom and I stayed in the kitchen, pretending to be chopping and peeling, but we were listening to what he was saying to Dad.

"Peter," Dad said, "I appreciate your coming by, but really, I'm not interested."

"Think about it, Ted," Mr. Wells insisted, and I was surprised that he and my Dad knew each other's first names. "These things could save your life. Meditation reduces stress. A vegan

diet improves your health, cleanses your blood and clears your mind. All of our children do yoga every morning, and because of it they are uncommonly well-adjusted and grounded.”

I thought of her then, with her snarled, twig-colored hair and her thick calves. I saw her lumbering down the halls, her head down. She smelled musky and dank because the family didn’t believe in using deodorant or any other beauty products, and she had shiny red pimples all over her forehead. She was hard to look at.

After Mr. Wells left, Dad came into the kitchen shaking his head. “I worry about him,” he said to Mom. “I don’t know why he stays here. He should move to San Francisco or someplace like that. And I know there are some who aren’t as polite to him and his family as we are.”

I dumped minced celery into a bowl and put the knife down on the counter, harder than I meant to. “How do you know him?” I asked.

Mom shrugged. “We all went to high school together. Mr. Wells was a hippie back then, the real thing. While we were sitting around talking about wanting to go to Woodstock, he hitchhiked up to New York and actually saw it. Nearly got expelled for it, too. He seemed so brave back then.”

Dad just stared at the door. “How soon till dinner’s ready?” he asked. “It sure smells good.”

*

When the police came to tell Mr. Wells about his daughter, they found a whole bunch of pot plants in a back room, under special lights. Mr. Wells told them about it as soon as they came in. He thought that they’d come to bust him for it. No, they told him. Your daughter’s dead. They didn’t arrest him, since I guess they felt sorry for him. But everyone knew about it, and Mr. Wells lost his job at the post office because it was all on TV. I don’t think that’s so bad, though.

Everyone knows that people who work at the post office are crazies, and it's only a matter of time before they start slipping anthrax into birthday cards or something.

*

I never thought of myself as one of the really popular kids. I mean, sort of medium popular. I wasn't hanging out with the cheerleaders or anything, although I did have some friends in the Spirit Squad, which was kind of the same thing. I did have a boyfriend, although we broke up sophomore year and are still friends. She always thought I was really cool, I could tell. She was always looking at me, always kind of following me around. I used to think it was because we lived so near to each other, and that made me the closest thing she had to a friend. The thing is, I'm sure I wouldn't have minded if she had tried, even just a little bit, to be more normal. If I was mean to her, or called her a fucking cow or something, I don't think that it's all my fault. Especially since I wasn't the only one. All my friends made fun of her too. You had to. It was protection, because if you were too nice and she started hanging out with you, showing up at parties with you and telling people what a good friend you were, then no one cool would ever talk to you again. People would think you were just as much of a freak as she was. I know that sounds terrible, but that's the way it is.

*

Finding her that way really messed with me, but I realize now that it was almost meant to be. It seems too strange that I would be the one to be walking in the woods that night. If it had been anyone else, they probably wouldn't have recognized her. It still would have been an awful sight, but not as awful for someone else as it was for me.

*

They're saying now in school that it was Bobby Jeffery and Chris Patterson who did it. Supposedly, Bobby got drunk and started crying and told his girlfriend, Hayden Maxwell, about how he and Chris were loaded after Dale's party and found her in the woods alone. They told her to take her top off, and she did it. She started giggling, and they figured she was into it. Then they told her to take her pants off, and she tried to run, and that's when Chris hit her in the head with a branch and Bobby climbed on top of her. They didn't mean for it to get out of hand. They just wanted to get her to calm down so that she could relax and enjoy it a little. They thought they were doing her a favor. How else was she going to lose her virginity? And Bobby and Chris are both on the basketball team.

I can sort of see Bobby doing something like that. He's such an idiot. He got so drunk at a party at Ben Carson's lake house last summer that he threw up in my hair. But Chris has always seemed nice. And he's so good-looking. I don't really buy this story, anyway. Everyone says knows that Hayden was super pissed when Bobby left her for Sophie Wilhoit.

I also heard someone say that she was in the woods trying to cast a spell on someone and it backfired, or that she was summoning the devil and he came up and killed her. Other people said that she must have had a secret boyfriend in another town who killed her because he was in a cult or worshipped the devil, and everyone knows that the woods are where all those vampire-wanna-be people do their weird rituals. Someone once painted inverted pentagrams all over the trees bordering the highway. Other people say that it was a game of Dungeons & Dragons that got out of hand or something.

A lot of people are scared of the woods. They think the woods are creepy because they're so dense and dark, and no one believes that she could have gone to the woods for no reason, or just because. But I think she was probably in the woods because they're so close to our houses,

and when you've lived next to them so long there's really nothing scary about them anymore. I used to play in the woods alone all the time, before I made real friends. I used to pretend that I was a fairy princess, and that my father was King of the Woods and lived in an old oak tree covered in gray moss.

There was one time, when I was too young to really know what I was doing, that I was in the woods, playing in the massive roots of a live oak, and when I looked up she was there, her hair a snarl and her dress stained. She asked me what I was doing, or maybe I'm making that up because it was so long ago, but somehow we ended up playing together. I was still the princess, and I let her be the prince, and I sent her off to find the magical potion that would wake me from my enchanted sleep. She went deeper into the trees while I pretended to be sleeping in my glass coffin, my still face so lovely that even the birds were enchanted, singing only to me. She asked me to be her best friend. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember seeing her a few days later. I walked over to her house, and just as her yard came into view, I saw two boys throwing rocks at the front of the house. They were older, maybe nine or ten, and they were shouting her name and calling her ugly, smelly, stupid. She was standing in the tall grass, crying. Her mother came storming out of the house, thin and pointed as a witch, shrieking at them about calling the police. I'll never forget that. Her mom scared me so bad that I never went back to her house, and once school started later that year, I saw everyone ignore her, and I learned that she wasn't anyone that I wanted to be hanging out with. Even then, even in the very beginning, people hated her.

Anyway, the psychologist my parents sent me to after it happened told me that I shouldn't feel any personal responsibility. He said that she was an easy target because she was so

solitary. If she'd had friends she might have been okay. But she never tried to make friends besides me. She didn't try hard as I did, anyway.

*

Lying in the woods, she looked like she was made of wax. At first I thought her hair was a wig because it was so matted, and it was coming off of her scalp in places. Bruises covered her like dark blots of paint. I stood there for a long time, just looking, before I realized what it was. Who she was. In the moonlight her blood seemed black; it didn't reflect the light but covered her like tar, thick and awful. Leaves and twigs were stuck to her skin, and there were long scratches across her wrists and cheeks. One of her hands was resting on her chest, over her heart, and all of the fingernails were broken. Later the police said that she was bound and beaten unconscious, raped and finally strangled. But she didn't look like someone had done something to her – she looked like something that belonged on the ground, as if the woods had grown her in a dark place like a poisonous mushroom.

When I found her, I didn't scream. Later, after I had spoken to the police and had gone home, I had a nightmare. I was in the woods, looking for her. I came upon a clearing, and there she was, in her glass coffin. But the coffin had been smashed, and the shards had cut her to pieces. I woke up sweaty and went to the bathroom. For a split second, I thought I saw her face in the mirror, and then I started to scream.

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I know some people thought that I was getting kind of stuck up because, after I was on the news, I started hanging around with the popular kids, but it wasn't like that. They just wanted to hear about it, like everyone else, and once they had it down in their heads they dismissed me. Just like Dean dismissed me from his stupid party. It did hurt a little. Jill Shannon took me aside

after gym class and told me to stop trying to eat lunch with her. She said that she and her friends didn't want me to get the wrong idea, but that I was kind of weird and that what happened to me was weird, and they would prefer it if I'd stop talking to them in the halls. I told her I understood, because I did. I do. I get it. And if my friends think that I was trying to get in with that crowd, they're wrong. I was just different after it happened. It was post-traumatic stress disorder or something. I just kept thinking about her and her strange parents, and all those grubby brothers and sisters, and the look on her face when she talked to me that time in the hall, and all together it seemed like a weight too much to stand up under.

Anyway, I've stopped dreaming about it every night. It hardly crosses my mind. I watch TV, I go to the mall, and I still hang out with my friends, even though they turn away if I bring it up, which I almost never do anymore. I used to feel people's eyes on me during class and in the cafeteria but not so much anymore. I look out of my bedroom window and see the woods, and there's no blood seeping out of the shadows of the trees anymore. The most important thing is to try to get things back to normal, and I feel like I'm almost there. One day, I won't even remember her name or look at her house every time I ride past on the bus. Then I'll know that I've moved on.

Liz

Sweden can be as cold and barren as its open, frost-covered plains. In the coastal district of Torslanda, as far back as anyone can remember, the people have farmed the rocky soil and set sail on the iron gray sea, their skin whipped red and raw by biting winds. Liz – Elisabeth – never liked farm life, nor did she want to end up as dour and pinched as her parents. Her mother, Beata, was tall and stocky like a plow mule, and her cooking was dismal. Her skin had the look of broken leather, mottled and rough, and her hands were always chapped. She tried to soften them with a yogurt made from goat's milk, and the sour smell of it made Liz's stomach churn. Liz's father, Gustaf, was also tall and just as plain as his wife, though he seemed to be as repelled by Beata as Liz was and took every opportunity to take out his frustrated desires on his slender daughter, who, though not exactly pretty, was not without her charms. On her sixteenth birthday, Liz told her father an awful secret: her flow had stopped three months before. Being a practical man, Gustaf solved this sticky problem by taking Liz to the stable and kicking her in the stomach until their baby was nothing but blood on the straw.

It took Liz almost two months to fully recover, though her belly was touchy ever afterwards and, as time would prove, she had lost the ability to bear a living child. She stayed abed and plotted her escape to the nearby city of Gothenburg, where she was sure she could find a way to make some money until a nice blacksmith or innkeep decided to take her as his wife. Liz had always imagined that she would have a home that was full of brightness and warmth, unlike the cold distance between her mother and father. They barely looked at each other, and Liz wanted more than that. She imagined many things: love, babies with tinkling laughs, a

marriage bed full of soft touches and sweet whispers. These were things she knew she would never find on her parents' farm. So, once she had healed, Liz bundled together a comb, a mirror, a chunk of bread, half a sausage, and two pairs of underthings in an old feed sack and set out for Gothenburg, the city. It took her three days walking before she arrived. It was the autumn of 1860, and the trees were already bare.

Unaware that she looked like a beggar in her brown wool farm dress and wooden shoes, bold young Liz went door to door at fine houses in the Carl Johan district, offering her services as a domestic. After all, she had been cleaning out stables and chicken coops since she was old enough to walk, and she took instructions fairly well, though she tended to cut corners. Many doors closed in Liz's face, and she was forced to spend the night in the carriage house of a wealthy family, hiding under the wheels of a hansom. She awoke full of despair and doubt, afraid that she would have to go home in shame to face her father's wrath. But, like a gift from heaven, the very first house she called upon the next morning hired her on the spot, and the head cook took her to the kitchen for bread, honey and weak tea. The fire was warm and the other servants were polite and kind, even if they did look at Liz with pity. Liz didn't mind pity. It brought her attention and charity, two things she desperately needed, and she literally shook with happiness when one of the scullery maids, as tall and thin as Liz herself, offered her a slightly used uniform so that she could begin work directly.

Her job in the fine house, her first and last job in a fine house, lasted barely a year. Liz felt lost and alone in the cavernous rooms, dusting between the strange statues and busts, the carved pieces of furniture with talons for feet, the crystal decanters and the enormous, gilt-framed portraits of people long dead (in that respect, the house reminded her of church). Jora, one of the older maids, frequently nicked the cooking sherry from the kitchen and took swigs

while polishing the silver. Liz, as eager to please as a kicked dog, agreed instantly to a quietly offered sip from the bottle and proceeded to become the woman's co-conspirator in getting drunk as often as possible. To Liz it seemed a grand game, and she thought that she was very clever at hiding her slurs and staggers from the rest of the staff. She and Jora grew quite bold, serving the master and mistress of the house their morning toast with sherry on their breaths, and Liz finally did herself in at a grand dinner party. It was an imminently elegant affair, with the French ambassador and a bevy of sparkling Swedish aristocrats sitting in the velvet-upholstered dinner chairs and laughing gaily at bits of gossip passed round the table like a plate of herring. Liz, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, set a platter of creamed cinnamon gratins studded with cloudberry on the table and promptly puked sour red vomit all over the lace-edged table linen. She was fired in short order and put out with no reference.

Word seemed to spread quickly. Liz tried her door-to-door method again, this time in the wool coat and straw bonnet she'd bought with her earnings, but even her proper garb couldn't garner her an interview. Not only had everyone seemingly learned of her mishap, but without the drink Liz had begun to shake and sweat, and a pounding headache forced her to try her old trick of hiding in a stable, but this time she was discovered and thrown out. She needed a drink. Just one drink and she'd be able to think straight and walk without being hunched over. She began to make her way toward the heart of Gothenburg, and as the houses grew smaller and closer together, and then gave way to crumbling brick buildings, Liz found herself standing in front of a small tavern with a pig's head painted on the door. Inside, the last coins in her apron pocket bought her a bowl of sliced herring, potatoes and onions baked in cream, and a mug of mulled wine. The first bite – ecstasy! She chewed slowly to make the food last as long as possible, but the wine disappeared so quickly that she checked the bottom of the mug for a hole.

When she came to the end of her meal she found that she was not too proud to use her fingers to wipe every last morsel from the bowl, and when a gaunt man with watery blue eyes and straw hair touched her elbow and softly asked if she'd like more food, more wine, she said yes with a sigh of deep relief, convinced then and there that the man was an angel, and that as long as she stayed by his side she would be safe.

That night, the man took her home to his three-room house and pushed up her skirts in the children's room while his wife slept. Liz turned her head away from his ugly face and his hot, foul breath and found herself looking into the eyes of a girl no more than six, sucking her thumb and watching her father pump into Liz.

She worked for that man, Lars Olofsson, for two years. Olofsson's wife, Agata, was lame and needed help with the cooking and cleaning, as well as with the four children, the youngest of whom was two and the oldest, twelve. Agata didn't like to leave the little house, so Liz would go to the market for her every morning. She saw the women working the alleys, the street corners, wearing their skirts belted to show their ankles and hanging on the arms of sailors. She got to know some of the girls too, as she would often stop at different taverns for a mug or two of wine before she made her way back to the cramped little house. Almost every night, Lars would creep into the children's room, where she had a cot on the floor, and fumble in her petticoats until he collapsed, heaving, on top of her. On the first of every month, she drank pennyroyal tea to keep her belly small, but nothing could hide the truth from Agata when she returned early from a visit to her mother's to find Lars and Liz, naked in the marriage bed, the four children in the next room with their hands clapped over their ears.

The next six years saw Liz joining those gay girls she'd gotten to know in the taverns. She became a friend to any man with more than two coins to clink together and managed for a

while to keep herself in a small apartment in the run-down Cathedral parish that she kept neat and clean. She couldn't keep herself in such good order, though; many times over those six years she found weeping sores on her genitals, or woke up to find that it burned so badly between her legs that she couldn't do anything but limp to the charity hospital and wait hours for creams that stank like turned meat but brought some relief. She also bore two dead babies. She knew that they were dead as soon as her belly began to grow but wasn't brave enough to let one of the doctors she'd heard about pull them out with metal hooks. She liked to pretend that they might live, that her father might not have ruined her forever. She liked the attention her belly won her, and for a time during both pregnancies, she gave up whoring for sewing and charring. But she returned to the streets soon after bearing those little bodies, barely formed and covered in black blood.

Liz began to feel that her father had put a curse on her that would keep her from ever finding a husband, ever having a child of her own. If she could leave Sweden, surely his spell couldn't follow her across the water. When one of the girls that had helped her through her last pregnancy told her that applications were being taken for relocation to the Swedish parish in London, Liz woke up especially early one morning and applied for the move. When asked questions about the Bible, Liz could only give vague answers, and she became even more evasive when asked what sort of work she did. Feeling that the loss of Liz would, in fact, be beneficial for the country, Swedish immigration officials immediately approved her application, and Liz boarded an English vessel called *Gallant Jim* with her few belongings just two weeks later. Along the voyage she told fellow travelers that her husband, a soldier named Edvard, had died of hypothermia after trying, unsuccessfully, to save their young daughter from drowning in the Baltic. Everyone was very sympathetic.

London was very much like Gothenburg – gray, dirty, and crawling with whores and men in need of their services. Liz tried to make contact with supposed relatives but found no one who would own to being her kin. She was completely alone, once again. As was her custom, she went to the pubs – there were so many here! – and quickly found both men, to give her money, and drink, on which to spend it. English wine was awful, and she developed a taste for beer instead. She stayed at lodging houses around Spitalfields and St. George-in-the-East, and when people asked why she had come to godforsaken England, Liz told them that she had come with a wealthy family as their servant. She told them that Sweden was beautiful and that she missed her mother and father, a fine and handsome couple who had loved her immoderately. As her English improved, Liz found more and more sewing work, as Englishwomen seemed to think that a seamstress with an accent did higher quality work than one of their countrywomen. By the time Liz met John Thomas Stride, a carpenter, she had lived in London for thirty years and felt that she was past her prime. She was missing several teeth and, worst of all, seemed to look more and more like her mother with each passing year. Liz had given up on her girlhood dreams when, over supper and drinks in the Queen’s Head pub, Stride asked her to marry him. In that moment, Liz imagined that across the sea in Torslanda, her father had just dropped dead.

Liz didn’t adjust well to married life. John expected her to be obedient and do as she was told, but Liz was a woman grown and then some, and she’d been on her own so long that submitting to her husband’s will didn’t come naturally, as she was used to doing whatever she pleased. She was also a terrible cook, although she made passable pastries and, being Swedish, excellent coffee. The Swedes, Liz pointed out to John, love coffee. Her skills at brewing were good enough that Stride happened on the idea of a coffee room, which he and Liz opened in Poplar, near the docks, in 1870. It was modestly successful, and for a time Liz was able to lay off

the drink and sleep well at night, curled next to her husband who, though he could be a nag, was a gentle lover and did seem to be truly fond of Liz.

Liz couldn't give up the drink altogether. For years, she kept herself sober most of the time, but, at least once every few months, she would go on a magnificent tear and get drunk as a lout. On those occasions, to avoid the back of John's hand, Liz wouldn't come home for days. Her return was always quiet, meek and penitent, but it wore on John's nerves. He was no fool. He knew what Liz had done to keep herself from starving before they met, and he couldn't help but think that when she didn't come home, it was because she was in another man's bed. No matter how many times Liz told him that she was done with that life, that he had saved her and that she was only for him now, there was a part of him that couldn't believe it. He saw the way that the sailors and dockworkers looked at Liz when they came in for coffee and hot pastries. She was, in his eyes, still a handsome woman. When, in 1875, a merchant offered to buy the coffee room for a tidy sum, John jumped at the chance. He wanted Liz where he could keep an eye on her.

The money they made from the sale lasted a while, but after so long away from the trade, John found it difficult to find steady carpentry work, and though she took up sewing again, Liz didn't make enough money for the two of them to get by. They moved from Poplar back to a tiny room in Whitechapel, and John became more and more critical of Liz, of her awful fish stews and her buying new boots when they had no money to spend on luxuries. Liz began drinking more often, staying away from home and laughing her cares away in the company of whores and of johnnies who would whisper propositions in her ear. Liz resisted at first. She was married; she had broken the curse and she couldn't just throw it all away. But John was becoming unbearable, accusing her of incessantly flirting with customers, and finally one

afternoon, while John was away on a job, Liz bundled up her few belongings, as she had so many times before, and set off on her own.

She found a room at a lodging house on Commercial Street and began whoring again, spending what she made in the public houses in the evenings. After a few weeks, Liz found herself with a new admirer in Michael Kidney, whom she had first met years ago at the coffee room. He was a rough and ready man seven years her junior who worked at the docks. When she met him again by chance in Whitechapel and he asked her, that very night, to live with him, Liz said yes. She had forgotten how hard it was to be a woman alone in London, and she no longer had the stomach for lifting her skirts every night. Even the gin didn't seem to ease her aches and pains they way it used to, not the way a sweet man to call her own could. But after they had been living together for two months and Kidney asked her to marry him, Liz said no. She told him that she needed her freedom, and that she wasn't a very good wife, but that she would stay with him as long as they both wanted it, and that would have to be good enough. And it was, for a while. But money was still a problem. Liz tried to fool a customer by lifting coins from his pocket while he was doing her against a slime-covered wall in Stepney, but he caught her at it and punched her in the face, splitting her lip. Liz, trying to make the best of the situation, went to the Swedish Church in Whitechapel and told them that she, poor Liz Stride, had lost her three precious babies and her beloved husband in the *Princess Alice* tragedy. Everyone knew about that, of course. The *Princess Alice* was a passenger vessel that had collided with a steamer on the Thames, killing almost seven hundred people. How did you survive? The church officials wanted to know. "Sirs," said Liz, "I climbed a mast and hung on by the grace of God. I were kicked in the face by another man on the mast too, as he were trying to get farther up it." Liz pointed to her scabbed lip. "He done cracked the top of my mouth too," she said, opening her mouth and pointing to her

hard palate. None of the church officials dared get close enough to verify that claim. Liz was missing several teeth, and the remaining were stained brown. They gave Liz money, and she brought it home to Michael, and they had a fine evening out together.

From the first day they lived together, Michael would get drunk and, sometimes, turn mean and hit Liz. At first, he would cry afterwards and beg her forgiveness, but more and more often, he didn't seem to care if he blacked her eye or left a welt on her cheek. Liz told the other girls in the pubs about it, and they told her she had two choices: stop complaining and be thankful for having a man, or leave him and take her chances alone, with a killer on the streets who was ripping up whores like he hated them. "No one cares," Liz told another whore. "We sin every day, and no one cares if he kills us, if we die." Still, a few days later, Liz left Michael and took a bed at a lodging house 32 Flower and Dean Street in Spitalfields, where the proprietress let her clean rooms in return for lodging.

On Sunday, September 30th, 1888, the wind and the freezing rain tore through London and sent the whores inside, Liz included. She spent the afternoon sweeping the floors of her lodging house, dusting the rickety side tables and vanities in the bedrooms with an old rag, and refilling the oil lamps in the kitchen. When she was finished, she sat down to a bowl of greasy beef stew with a few other ladies of her acquaintance who were staying there as well. The four of them all whored from time to time to make ends meet. They tried to talk about other things: the weather, the upcoming Lord Mayor's Show, their menfolk and children. But the murderer made his way into every conversation, and Liz decided to use the money she'd made cleaning on a few glasses of gin at the Queen's Head, just to shake that hunted feeling that talking about the killings gave her.

The pubs were full of whores, every one of them. Huddled by the fires, half-hidden in shadows, terrified, drunk. Liz drank until well past midnight, and she felt right as rain by the time she stepped outside. She picked up a customer, a short, fat man with sandy hair who wanted to call her Bertha, the name of his brother's pretty wife. Finished with that, Liz began to walk down Commercial Road, a good jaunt for picking up customers, although she was feeling a bit tired, and having made some money wasn't all that interested in more work. The Ten Bells on Commercial Street, however, was one of her favorite pubs, and she did fancy a warming drink or two, as it was so bloody cold. So she stopped and had some whiskey, which wasn't her usual sauce, but a nice young sailor offered it to her, and so she felt obliged to accept.

She stumbled on her skirts leaving the Ten Bells and laughed aloud, finally feeling merry and ready, at last, to go back to the lodging house. She walked again down Commercial Street, but as she was about to pass Berner Street she saw that there was a man up ahead of her, standing in the middle of the walk with his arms crossed. She recognized him instantly as bad news. There was something about the way he was standing, trying to look casual but looking weasely instead. She kept walking, though, because she knew she was too old and ugly to concern the pimps, and it was clear from her shabby clothes and worn boots that she didn't have much for stealing, if the man was a thief.

As she tried to pass him, the man snarled and pushed her to the ground, where her head hit the stones with a thud and tiny points of light flickered across her field of vision.

"You been missin' yer payments, Fanny," he hissed.

Liz groaned. "I'm not fuckin' Fanny. I'm an old seamstress, ye git." She then swore impressively in Swedish, causing the man to cross himself against the devil, just in case she was cursing him.

From across the street, Liz heard someone call, “Lipski!” When she turned her head she saw a man across the street, pointing at another man rounding the corner, a man with the side curls of a Hasid. “Let’s go, Jenks!” the first man barked.

The man, Jenks, slapped Liz across the face. “That’s fer trickin’ me, ye foreign slut,” he said, and then he was gone. Liz sat up. She felt sick, her head pounded, and she noticed that young Jewish man was gone as well. Apparently he didn’t feel the need to lend a poor woman a hand.

“No, don’t help an old girl in need,” she muttered. “Fuckin’ pimps and Jews.”

“Are you all right, madam?” The voice was gentle, solicitous, and Liz held out her hand to the speaker without thinking. He wasn’t very tall, nor very thin or very fat. He had the look of a sailor, with his pilot coat and peaked cap, and a funny look on his face – was it admiration? Liz smiled.

“Yes, yes,” she said, rubbing at a smear of mud on her apron. “Thanks to you. Yer a prince, sir.”

“Not at all,” the man said, pulling her to her feet. “Any self-respecting man would have done the same.”

Liz shrugged. “As you say, sir. Experience tells me otherwise.”

“Dear lady,” the man said, tugging at his neckerchief. “Do you know where a lonely man like myself might find some company tonight?”

Liz shrugged; she wasn’t in the mood to entertain any more gentlemen this evening, and her head was pounding fiercely. “I expect you could just walk in any direction. Whitechapel ain’t exactly Covent Garden, ye know?”

The man smiled, ducking his face downward in a way that seemed almost shy. “I should clarify. Where might I find some company tonight...” He looked up, meeting Liz’s eyes. His were palest gray. “Company as charming as you?”

Liz stared at the man a moment, then laughed. It certainly wasn’t the first time a man had tried flattery to get under her skirts, but this man sounded uncommonly sincere. The cold night seemed to grow warmer, and Liz felt a rush of charitable spirit. “Oh, ye devil,” she said, holding out the crook of her arm, which the man took. “Lucky for you, I got a bit of a soft spot for sailors. And I happen to know a quiet spot where we won’t be bothered.”

Liz led the man down Berner Street to the small yard between Dutfield’s cart makers and a worker’s club where, one could tell from the sound of voices, laughter and fiddling, some sort of party was in full swing. “This is a cheery spot, innit?” Liz asked, nodding toward the club as she walked into the long shadows of the yard. “Does the noise bother you?”

Then the strangest thing happened. When she turned to look at the man – and she only caught his face for a moment, in a flicker of lamplight, before it faded back into the shadows – she would have sworn on her Bible (if she had had one), that it was Father standing there, his face bright and shining with hate. He had finally found her. Liz sucked in a great gulp of air to scream, but he threw her on the ground and pinned her there, his knees on her chest. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t make a sound, and when she felt the cold swipe of the knife across her throat her hands flew to Father’s face, and she felt him grimacing, concentrating. She wanted to say something to appease him, to make his anger wane just a little, but there was blood in her mouth. She braced for pain, expecting his knife to slip into her, rip her to pieces, but he seemed to have vanished. She had been right, and he had been a ghost after all. She heard laughter, and it seemed far away. Then she heard nothing at all.

The Five Stages of Amelia's Death

5.

Her body is lying in front of the bedroom door, one foot in the hallway. Her dress is in ribbons. Her eyes are open. Her hair is a tangled with cooling blood, bone and brains mixed up in the shadows cast by the weak moonlight. Her hands are empty and the palms are up as though she is saying *please*. Downstairs in the living room, two speckled Mollies swim in their aquarium. They are the only things alive in this small, dark house.

4.

She tries to call for help, but no sound comes out. Or maybe a sound does come out and she can't hear it through the roaring in her ears, a sound like angry, churning surf battering the shore. He's gone, isn't he? She tries to turn her head to look, to catch sight of his boots moving around her, but she can't move and, she realizes suddenly, she can't see either. Everything is a bruise of black and angry red. The pounding behind her eyes is growing, and now it's synching with her heartbeat, and the whole world is nothing but thump-thump-thump, louder and louder. She remembers her grandmother's beach house and the taste of vanilla ice cream on her tongue. She remembers how good it felt to shower after a day of pickling herself in the ocean, how the sand from her hair circled the drain, and how the water tasted sweet. It feels as though her body is going to split down the center like a rotten fruit, and when the pressure builds until she feels like she'd going to explode, she slips right through her skin like a hand leaving a glove.

3.

Daniel's face is so close that she can see the lines unfurling at the corners of his mouth. There are stray hairs between his eyebrows. He leans forward, as if to kiss her, and she thinks, isn't that why I brought him here? Haven't I wanted a man in my room again, a man standing next to my bed, tumbling into it and into me? She reaches up to touch his shaven cheek, and his eyes seem darting and nervous. He is breathing quickly, like a little boy on a diving board, and so she laughs a little to show him that he shouldn't be afraid of her, that she won't hurt him.

He puts his hand on her breast. "Do you like that?" he asks. She doesn't know what to say, and she doesn't like the way he's looking at her now. It's not romantic; it's almost detached. Like he's waiting for something. For her to screw up? Say something stupid? But she's probably imagining it. Thomas trained her to expect ridicule.

She takes a deep breath and presses her lips against his. This, she reminds herself, is not Thomas, this is Daniel, and he is here because I brought him here. I decided to let him in, and I have decided to let him touch me.

But he doesn't return the kiss, and when she meets his cold, bright gaze her confidence is gone, and she feels like an idiot. She can practically hear her brother laughing at her. She can hear Thomas laughing too.

"I think you should leave," she says.

Daniel takes a step towards her, and without thinking, she takes a step back. "You don't like me?" he asks, and there's something ugly in the way he twists his mouth when he talks. "You think I'm not good enough? Stupid delivery guy, right? You fucking women are all the same. No man can make you happy."

“No, no,” she says, and he keeps coming closer to her and she keeps moving away from him until her back hits the wall. “Listen, I think I’ve rushed things. I’m not ready for this, I’ve only been divorced a year, and I think I had something to prove. I made you a part of that, and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have picked you to feed my ego.”

He reaches out and touches her hair, but though his touch is gentle, the shadows on his face are a tangle of hate. “You didn’t pick me,” he tells her. Amelia closes her eyes, hoping that when she opens them, he’ll be gone. “I picked you,” he whispers.

2.

“I want you to tell me something about yourself that no one would never guess.” Amelia takes a sip of her wine, feeling dizzy and wonderful and clever as hell for coming up with that question. Thomas hated it when she tried to be clever, said she was embarrassing herself. But this man, so quiet and polite, seemed almost in awe of her. He certainly seemed as though he couldn’t believe his luck, especially when she asked him if he wanted to see where she lived. That’s not such a surprise, Amelia thinks. To a delivery guy I must seem really successful, a hot commodity.

She’s already given him the tour of the house, including the awkward moment when she showed him the bedroom. She hoped that he didn’t notice the romance novel or the sleeping pills on her night table. She wasn’t embarrassed, exactly. They’re in the kitchen now, and Daniel looks at her for a moment, then goes back to staring at his drink on the counter. He seems so uncomfortable. He laughs, and it’s surprisingly high-pitched for such a big man. “Great,” he says. “Now I have to think of something interesting or funny, and there really isn’t that much to say.”

“Oh, come on,” Amelia says. She gives him a smile and puts her hand on his knee in what she tries to make a very casual gesture. “There must be something underneath that cool exterior of yours.”

“Cool exterior?” Daniel sounds flattered.

Amelia waves her hand and takes another sip of wine. “Oh, you’re always so business-like when you’re delivering things at work. You’re the strong, silent type. You’re intimidating. Haven’t you noticed that all the secretaries check you out?”

“Intimidating?”

Amelia cocks her head and half-smiles, knowing that she’s being flirtatious and not caring that she’s rushing into all this. It’s true that she doesn’t know Daniel really, that she’s only talked to him a few times in the past two years that he’s been delivering packages to the firm. But then again, she knew everything about Thomas, and he cut her to pieces with his sly words and his dismissive looks before throwing her away altogether. She likes the way Daniel squirms in his seat when she leans forward. She likes the way his eyes dart from her breasts to her eyes, then back again. He’s shy. She likes that. It makes her feel more like the predator, less like the prey.

1.

Amelia is sitting at the bar in the dress that she bought yesterday at that expensive boutique store in the mall. It is short, blue, and she found it on the clearance rack for half-off. It’s a little tight, but answering phones for a living doesn’t give her the luxury paying full price. “It’s like my whole life,” she’d said at the time, watching the cashier ring up the dress. “I can’t have what I really want, so I end up with something that’s close, but not quite right. Go figure, huh?”

The cashier had shrugged, said nothing, which was too bad, because Amelia had been in the mood to talk. Lately she'd been thinking a lot about her dreams, shuffling through them like a stack of old postcards. Marriage, kids, promotion, money. Wish you were here.

She turned thirty-seven last month. When her brother Rick had called to wish her happy birthday, he'd asked if she had started dating again yet.

"Come on," she'd said, trying to sound like she didn't care. "I just became a free woman a year ago. Give me some time to enjoy it."

"Amelia, don't be stupid," Rick had replied. "It's one thing to be a single guy at your age, but for a woman it's just looks bad. You're not getting any younger."

"You want another?" the young bartender asks her. He's handsome enough, but he barely looks at her. Amelia knows his type: he's the kind of man who flatters women until they fall into bed with him, and then makes fun of their cellulite or their sagging breasts to his friends. And then, when those poor women call him, wanting so much to see him again, he makes up excuses so flimsy that he knows they see through him, but he doesn't care because hurting them makes him feel good. Yes, she knows this man, and yet there's a part of her that wants his approval. He's making her feel desperate, washed up, and she wants to change his mind.

"Sure," she says, and he puts another glass of white wine in front of her. "I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh, yeah?" He still doesn't look at her.

"Yes," Amelia says, then laughs. "It's funny, actually. He's the delivery guy for my firm. I've seen him a million times, you know. He's handed me a hundred packages, but today I really saw him for the first time, and I thought, you know...what the hell." As soon as she says it, Amelia knows she shouldn't have. Now the bartender really thinks she's a loser.

The bartender is finally looking at her, but Amelia doesn't like the expression on his face. Thomas used to look at her like that when she'd talk about a new friend at the office. Like she was crazy for thinking people would really want to spend time with her. But her friends had told her that was because Thomas elevated himself by bringing her down. He had wanted her to feel small so that she would never leave him. But how could that be right? After all, he had left her, not the other way around. Amelia suspected her friends simply hadn't wanted to tell her the truth, that Thomas had married her thinking that he'd landed a prize, and when she turned out to be too ordinary, he'd moved on to someone more promising, more intelligent, more beautiful. Someone better. Someone younger.

"You asked out a delivery guy?"

"No," Amelia says, then takes a long drink of her wine, trying not to wince at its sourness. "He asked me. I mean, I suggested that we should get coffee or something sometime, but then he asked me to come have a drink with him here. He says it's his favorite bar."

"What's his name?"

"Daniel."

"Daniel what?"

Amelia takes another drink. "Um, I'm not sure."

The bartender appears to think about it for a moment, then shakes his head. "Doesn't sound familiar."

"Oh." Secretly, Amelia had wondered if Daniel had been trying to show off when he named this place, since it was pretty nice with all of its wood-paneling and top-shelf liquors, and it seemed pricey for a guy on an hourly wage.

"Amanda?"

The voice is familiar. Amelia turns around in her stool to see Daniel, looking sunburned and freshly showered, standing behind her.

“Amelia,” she corrects him, embarrassed because she can feel the bartender watching.

Daniel’s face turns redder. “Shit. Sorry. I’m really bad with names.”

She’s tempted to leave now. After all, she’s the one doing him a favor. She’s a successful legal assistant, working for the biggest firm in the city, with a nice house decorated with lots of tasteful pieces from Crate & Barrel, most noticeably the enormous mahogany veneered coffee table that dominates the living room. Her life is up to snuff, no matter what Thomas thought. Still, the bartender is watching, and she doesn’t want to go home yet. The wine has made her talkative.

“Would you like to sit down?” Amelia asks, gesturing to the stool beside her.

Daniel’s eyes, which she hadn’t noticed until now, are a flat, watery blue surrounded by pale lashes. “Yes,” he says. “I would.”

She could have sent him away. Amelia smiles and takes a sip of her wine. She’s going to dazzle him, and when he goes home and talks to his friends about her, they’ll say, “Man, it sounds like you’ve got it bad for this girl.”

And he’ll say, “I think I’m in love.”

Kate

Kate was born at the edge of a crowd, always trying to claw her way through, hoping to be noticed. She was one of twelve children, and half of the time Mum and Dad didn't even call her by her Christian name, which made her suspect that, by and large, they had trouble remembering it. She was just one of many scrabbling for bread at the table, crawling through London's muck looking for dropped coins, clinging to the hem of Mum's skirts hoping for a sweet word, and sharing a narrow bed with her brothers and sisters, fighting to stay in the warm center and not be pushed out into the cold. Kate worked hard to stand out, to be loved. Her two oldest sisters, already domestics and living away from home by the time Kate was five or so, had liked to take care of her when their mother had the cough and had to stay abed for days on end. Their little sister was always good for a laugh, and she sang like an angel. And, when the day came that Mum went to bed with the cough and didn't get up, Kate was the only one of the lot to be taken in by her Aunt Abigail, on the recommendation of Kate's sisters, instead of shipped off to the workhouse at Bermondsey.

Aunt Abigail lived off of her dead husband's pension and painted portraits for moderately well-off people who thought that they had reached such social status as demanded that portraits be made. Kate loved to sit in those nice houses while her Aunt's brush coaxed flattering likenesses onto stretched canvas. It was magical, wandering through the parlors of those fine houses and pretending to be rich and betrothed to a handsome man who would keep her in style. Except on the occasions when there were children in the house, who would take one look at

Kate's gray pinafore and darned wool stockings and begin to giggle behind their white, soft hands. That wasn't much fun at all. When Auntie found Kate crying in their neat little flat one afternoon because one such child had called her a filthy urchin, she offered to draw Kate's portrait. Only a proper lady, she told her red-faced niece, would have a portrait of herself, no matter what some stupid little toff might say.

Kate tried to rise above her station at the encouragement of her aunt. She learned to read but found few books at her disposal from which to recite, so she began to write her own poetry, to Auntie's delight. She had her singing, but she couldn't afford singing lessons, and knew no one with a pianoforte. She danced when she was alone, but she didn't know actual steps. She just pretended that a handsome man was leading her around a ballroom lit with a hundred flickering candles. Kate would have been happy spending the rest of her life being her aunt's companion, marrying only for love if she should find it, but the older woman began to lose her eyesight when Kate was nineteen, and the extra income her paintings brought in disappeared with her vision. Kate tried to learn how to paint herself, but she was hopeless at it, with no eye for color and no sense of proportion. She was passably good as a poet though, and tried to convince some of Auntie's customers that having one's own poem was just as distinguished as having a portrait, to no avail. It looked like Kate would have to go to the workhouse after all.

Before that unhappy move happened, however, Kate had a stroke of luck, or so it had seemed then. She fell in love with a charming but utterly untalented former soldier, Thomas Conway. In secret, she had his initials tattooed on the inside of her left forearm, and she would idly write his name at the edges of the scraps of paper she wrote poetry on. They began living together, but his pension money wasn't enough for the two of them, and when he realized that his pretty, auburn-haired lover was a better writer than most men of her station, he came up with

the idea for her to write biographies (under his name, of course), which the two of them proceeded to sell from the back of a wagon as they traveled the countryside. Thomas' contribution was to come up with catchy titles, like *The Lives of Lord Downey's Ten Bastard Sons* and *The Holy Goat: Randy Priests of Warwickshire*. All non-fiction, of course. Thomas also happened on the idea of writing gallows ballads, songs that people would buy in commemoration of notorious characters, after attending a hanging in Winslow and seeing what a killing the ballad sellers made there. It took a bit of persuading, but Thomas had a silver tongue and even more eloquent hands, and soon enough, the two of them were regular fixtures at executions. On a cold, gray day in Strafford, Kate even wrote a ballad for the execution of her own cousin Christopher, and upon seeing him fall through the trap door without his head, which had remained in the noose, she vowed never to write again.

Unlike Auntie, Kate never married her pensioner, though they had two sons, George and Thomas, and one daughter, Annie. People asked, though not to Kate's face of course, why they didn't get right before God. The truth was, Thomas was mean as an adder when he was drunk, which was any time they had money. One drink and he'd make her laugh 'til her sides hurt, but by the fifth or sixth drink he'd start kicking her in the ribs or punching her in the stomach. Not the sort of blows that people could see, but ones that hurt when she put on her underthings, when she picked up one of her babies, when it rained. One night Thomas ran through so many glasses of whiskey that Kate lost count, and he beat her so badly that she ever after had a bit of a limp. To get through the pain, and to be able to put up with Thomas when he was on a tear, Kate began drinking too. It turned out that drink gave her a fierce temper she didn't know she had. Enough gin and she started to hear those awful rich children again, laughing at her and pointing at her shabby clothes and her tangled hair. Eventually, she started hitting Thomas back, and after she

had blacked his eye one evening, he threw Kate out of their dismal little house in Wolverhampton, the town where they had settled after ending their writing career.

She thought he would take her back. He didn't. By this time they'd been together almost twenty years, though things had been sour for at least the last five, and when Kate saw her face reflected in shop windows, she thought that whatever prettiness she might have once had was gone, put out like a candle. What was she to do, a woman alone? And hadn't it been her skill with the pen that had put food on the table all these years? Annie tried to ambush her children on the streets to make her case to them, to persuade them to tell Thomas to take her back, but it seemed that Thomas had already turned their hearts against her. It was one thing for a man to have a drink or two, and if he wanted to beat his wife, he was within his rights to do so. But Kate, a drunk who lowered herself to scraping at her own children's feet...well, she was a step beyond pathetic. The children took to telling people that their mother was dead.

After discovering how difficult it was to keep three children and himself clothed and fed on his pension alone, Thomas decided to lighten his load and move into an even smaller house on the other side of town, and so he gave Kate their crumbling shack and pretty little Annie, much to Annie's dismay. By this time, Kate had taken up begging in the streets for money, alongside one-armed children and shriveled old grannies. Annie hated her mother for that, though she did deign to eat the bread that Kate's begging brought in, and refused to talk to her for weeks at a time. That silence, and the hateful glares that came with it, made Kate afraid to go home to their tiny house, and she began to spend her nights in the pubs. People there didn't think she was shit on their shoes. They thought she was a jolly good time and would often buy her drinks, especially if they could convince her to sing.

Living in the country began to kill Kate. Everyone was poor, and she couldn't get enough money from begging, and her side had started to hurt badly. Sometimes she pissed pink blood that burned like a torch between her legs. All Kate could think of was that if she went back to London, Auntie would surely take her and Annie in and give them a bit of shelter until Kate could get back on her feet. She convinced Annie easily, as the young woman had always dreamed of escaping the dismal poverty of the countryside for the excitement of the city, and for the first time in years, Kate saw Annie happy and excited, which in turn made her more confident of her plan. So, after packing up their meager belongings, Kate and Annie hitched a ride to London on a produce wagon. But when they arrived at that small flat where Kate had grown, Auntie wouldn't let her in the door. She'd gone almost completely blind and was more than a little mad, and she seemed to have no memory of her niece at all.

Kate was determined to make things work in London, especially since they had no money to get back to Wolverhampton, and she'd be buggered before she'd let Thomas see her return in shame. Kate and Annie shuttled around common lodging houses for a time, sometimes able to share a bed, sometimes able to afford only space on the benches, where they'd be tied down with rope next to a half dozen others. Kate found sporadic work as a washwoman, a vocation she abhorred, and Annie found a decent position as a charwoman. After only six months in London, Annie met Louis Phillips, a lamp packer fifteen years her senior who made a good living. It seemed that Kate's mumbled prayers had been answered: she lived with Annie and assisted at the birth of her first grandson, and for the first time in years she had room, board, and hot meals every night, although her persistent unemployment and lamentable drinking habits were met with disapproving looks from her new son-in-law.

The pain in her side grew worse. Despite what Louis thought, Kate did try to find work in the laundries, and even made a go at selling tin jewelry from a doorway on Commercial Street, but she pissed blood more and more often, and couldn't stay upright for long. Once in a while, maybe twice a month, Kate would get drunk down at the pub and let sailor take her for a tumble, just to make a little money. It was a bad habit, sure enough, and she planned to quit as soon as the pain subsided a bit and she could go back to honest work. Given time, she felt that everything was going to work out for the best, and she and Annie and Louis and baby Sarah would be happy as clams.

But then, one cold April morning, Thomas and the boys arrived in London, bags in hand. Kate herself answered the door of Annie's house to find her lads standing there, looking tired and not at all pleased to see her. Buzzing with the hope that they might all be a family again, Kate volunteered to go out to the Spitalfields Market for fresh fish, potatoes and greens for a lovely supper. When she came back to the house, no one answered her knock. She pressed her ear to the window and distinctly heard low voices. Thinking that they simply hadn't heard her, she pounded her small fists against the door, a hundred times it seemed, but still no one came. After an hour or so, she left the groceries on the doorstep and went out to get drunk. In the days that followed she waited outside the house for Annie, Louis and her sons and tried to get them to talk to her, to explain why they wouldn't let her in, but they just walked right past her, pretending to be deaf. They even called the police on her once because she was making a scene by hurling the most awful language at the house from the street. Finally, one evening while Kate was shivering on a bench in a lodging house, the whole family moved and left no word as to where they were going.

So she was alone for the first time in her life. She didn't take to it at all. She spent a good bit of time in a jail cell for public drunkenness, and the threat of being in jail more permanently got her back out and into the market, where she jobbed around a bit, doing errands for the produce sellers. She stayed away from the meat carts, as she didn't like the smell. But the best thing about the market was that it was where she met him: John Kelly. A fruit seller's helper, John was a quiet man, and Kate thought him a bit slow, but he had fine features and gentle manners, and he genuinely enjoyed being with Kate. He liked to hear her sing too, lullabies and religious songs in particular. She found, in turn, that his calm helped ease her own desperate nerves, and she began drinking less and less. The pain in her side seemed to subside a bit. Starting the first year that they were together, she and John went out to Kent every September to pick hops for the breweries. It paid all right, and at the end of a long day in the field, Kate and John would sit in the soft grass and listen to the autumn wind shaking the leaves in the trees. It didn't matter so much then that her own family hid from her. At those times, Kate found herself grateful and content.

The last time she and John went to Kent, the rains had too much affected the hops, and they found them rotten and black at the roots. Since the money that they made was dependent upon the haul that they brought in each day, John and Kate realized quickly that they wouldn't be making enough to pay for their lodging, and they decided to go back. On the road to London, they ran into another couple that they regularly saw in the fields, and they shared a bit of whiskey together. The woman, Agnes, told them about the reward being offered by the diligent gentleman of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee for the apprehension of the murderer who'd cut up those two poor whores last month.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Kate mused to John. “Two hundred pounds. Bless me, but I wish I’d seen the man, so we could collect on it!”

The journey to London took a week, as they had no money for passage and had to beg rides from passing wagons, but Kate kept in good spirits and sang John to sleep every night.

Their first day back in Spitalfields, John returned to work at the fruit stall and made six shillings, which wasn’t enough to buy both of them a night in a lodging house, especially after they spent some of it on breakfast and bitter coffee. Kate, so jolly and full of good spirits from her brief dose of country sunshine, told her man that he should get a bed for himself, and she’d stay at the hospital’s casual ward, where the nurses knew her well from the days when her side was plaguing her almost daily. When she arrived, the staff was surprised; they hadn’t seen her in a long while.

“Though you’d got yourself together, Miss Eddowes,” the superintendent said when he saw her. “Didn’t you tell us all that you’d never be back here again?”

Now this did burn Kate a bit, as she’d done well for herself in her own mind, or as well as could be expected, at any rate. “I been hoppin’ in Kent with me husband,” she snapped. “But I come back to get the reward offered for the Whitechapel murderer. I think I know ‘im.” This made her an instant celebrity in the ward, and everyone began asking her questions about who it was, what he looked like. Kate basked in the attention. The superintendent, unconvinced and irritated that this boisterous woman was using his ward as a hotel, shook his head at Kate’s descriptions of the murderer (six feet if he’s an inch, the devil’s black hair, looks a right gentleman).

“Aren’t you afraid of him and what he could do to you?” he asked her. “Especially if he finds out that you’re the one who turned him in.”

Kate laughed and tossed her graying auburn braid over her shoulder. “Oh, no fear of that, guv.”

The superintendent let her stay a few hours but turned her out early the next morning when a group of sailors who’d eaten some rotten fish came in. Kate met up with John at the market, where he gave her a pair of boots to pawn, and they fetched two shillings, which Kate used to buy tea and sugar and breakfast for the two of them at John’s lodging house. Dry sausage and runny eggs, but by God did it taste good. By the afternoon the money was gone, and Kate told John that she’d get more from Annie. “Getting’ on well with her now, are ye?” he asked her, and Kate shrugged and walked away toward Whitechapel. In truth, she had no idea where her daughter was, but she’d been acting otherwise to John for the last few weeks so that she wouldn’t have to talk about why her family had left her like a stray dog. It ruined her good mood, thinking about her children. Wandering around Aldgate High Street, Kate pondered whether or not she should make herself available. Unbeknownst to John, she’d been earning some extra money for the past few months by lifting her skirts. She didn’t start out to do it, but, just as when she’d been staying with Annie and Louis, it just seemed to happen. On the occasions that she went into the pubs alone, lonely men would sometimes buy her a few drinks and slip her a few coins for her company. And if they wanted a quick taking care of in some dark spot nearby, well, after all of those drinks, it hardly seemed an unreasonable request.

So she went to the Bull Inn to try her luck, and sure enough after a few hours and a bit of business against a fence behind the pub, Kate found herself jolly and piss drunk with a few pennies in her pocket. By eight in the evening, her good humor had overtaken her, and she proceeded to attract a crowd by doing impressions of a fire engine in the middle of Aldgate High Street. Some laughed, but at least one citizen sent for the police, and by the time they showed up,

Kate had passed out in the rain gutter, drooling and splashed with mud. They shook Kate awake, and she was surly indeed. When they asked her name for booking, she told them that her name was “Nothing.” It was true, wasn’t it? No one gave a damn about her, no one but John, and he was slow-witted. That hardly seemed a coincidence.

Kate fell asleep in her cell and stunk of drink so badly that the other drunks complained. By fifteen past midnight, Kate was awake again, sitting in her cell and singing quietly. She was remembering the feel of babies in her arms, the blue sky of the countryside, and those few times when people would read something she had written for a condemned man and begin to weep, for it was beautiful. She ought not to have thought badly of John. He was a good man, and she was fortunate to have him. How many other poor girls in East London could say that?

She was smiling when they discharged her. She felt like a new woman. When the sergeant on duty asked her name, she said, “Mary Kelly.” Lying was a habit. “What time is it, guv?”

“Too late for you to get another drink, missus,” the sergeant said, his smooth young face set in a stern frown. “You have no right to let yourself go that way, making a fool of yourself.”

“Aye, I know it,” Kate said. “I shall get a damn fine hiding when I get home.” It wasn’t true, but she knew it would satisfy the sergeant, whose mother was probably very respectable, with a husband who would slap her soundly if she ever dared to get drunk in public.

When she left the station, though, she didn’t walk toward Flower and Dean Street, where John’s lodging house was. She’d spent nearly all of her money on gin and didn’t have enough left for a bed of her own. If she could just earn a bit more, her story about seeing Annie and being on good terms with her would hold up. So instead of going to John, she went down Houndsditch Road toward the Bull’s Inn, where she’d had such luck earlier. The first thing that

Kate noticed about the man standing in a pool of yellow light cast from a street lamp, was that he was wearing a red neckerchief, which made it look like someone had pulled a knife across his throat. As she neared him, he spoke to her

“Madam?”

“No time for a chat, dear,” Kate said and made to walk past him, but he laid a hand on her arm and she stopped. There was a moment, just a moment, of fear. But he looked so ordinary, just a sailor.

“I am sorry,” he said. “Please pardon me. I’m a bit lost, and I was looking for quality companionship, but I haven’t seen a one I’ve fancied until you.”

Kate snorted. “Aye, well said, sir. What do you take me for?”

The man looked shame-faced. “I’m sorry if I’ve given offence. I’ve been at sea for months, and I’ve been saving up for this.” He opened his hand to show her a pound note. “I believe in paying for quality, madam.”

Kate swayed a bit on her feet and put a hand on the man’s chest to steady herself. “Guv,” she breathed. A pound! Good God, that was two weeks wages at the market. The man smiled, and Kate noticed that his cheeks were flushed red. He must be embarrassed, poor bloke. He couldn’t have too much experience if he was willing to part with so much for a bit of quim. She looked around. There was a man watching them from across the street, but what of it? Probably thought he’d get a glimpse of Kate’s white thighs if he stuck around. Kate took her sailor’s hand and pulled him down Duke Street. “Come with me, lovey,” she said quietly. “I know a secret place.” At the end of the dark street was Church Passage, which led to the utter darkness of Mitre Sqaure, an enclosed yard over which the façade of the Great Synagogue loomed. Kate hadn’t walked ten paces into the inky shadows of the square when her sailor turned her about and threw

her to the ground with such force that the wind was knocked out of her. He put one knee on her chest and cut her throat from left to right, severing the lobe of her right ear when she tried to turn her head away from him. Everything he did to her, she felt. It was pain unimaginable, but she had no breath, no voice, and when everything went dark and cold, she was grateful.

In ten minutes, this man whom Kate had thought a bit innocent in the way of things had cut her open like a fish at the market and pulled her intestines out and arranged them next to her right shoulder. Her face was cut to pieces. Her eyelids were nearly detached, and he made a long slice that ran over her nose to her right cheek that divides all the structures, which is to say that were it not for the mouth, which he left alone, Kate's face would have slid completely off of her skull. The end of her nose was severed, and a cut split her upper lip. He went mad all over Kate's tired face, obliterating her and making her unrecognizable. All that would identify her later was that old blue tattoo: 'TC', from when she was young and beloved by Thomas and the children.

Kate had suffered more at the hands of her killer than the previous poor girls. Her abdomen was cut down the center to the navel, where the cut veered to the left and then plunged down into her vagina. Another knife trail started at her right thigh and sliced through her labium. Two feet of her colon were cut away, her pancreas was cut in two, and one kidney was missing altogether, while the other was found to be badly afflicted with Bright's Disease. Her womb, where her three children had slumbered before their birth, was completely detached. All of this was done in ten minutes. Kate's body was discovered by a young constable named Watkins, who was heard afterwards to remark that Kate had been cut open like a pig at the market.

A few days after Kate's death, half of a kidney that was found to have signs of Bright's Disease was mailed to the head of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, George Lusk; it was

accompanied by a note that said that the other piece had been fried and eaten. It was signed, “Catch me if you can.”

John Kelly was beside himself, and could barely look at meat for months afterwards, especially since people would come up and ask him, bold as you please, if he weren’t the man cuckolded by ‘Kidney Kate’. “She weren’t no whore!” he yelled at those people, but they shook their heads at him. Everyone knew it was lightskirts that the Ripper was after. Some people thought he had the right idea, getting rid of those morally vacant women. But John knew the truth of his Kat. She wasn’t a whore, and she didn’t deserve to be done in like she was.

At her funeral, John was there with Annie and four of Kate’s sisters. He had never met any of these women before. They were driven in a black mourning carriage behind the coffin, and John looked out of the windows and nearly wept in front of Kate’s family, for there were so many people around them that the carriage was having to inch along for fear of crushing someone. Kate would have loved to see that crowd, shouting her name and damning her killer to hottest hell. It would have hurt her only a little, John was sure, to know that neither Thomas Conway nor any of their sons had shown up to watch their mother put into the earth. No, Kate’s real family, the people of the East End, had come to see her off in grand style, and that was good enough. Of course, along with the mourners and the curious, there were also a few in the mass of people who were there to make a bit of coin, seeing as how there were so potential customers about. Some of them might want to remember this sad occasion with a memento. From his position in the carriage, John couldn’t see these men weaving their way through the crowds, selling “The Ballad of Kidney Kate” for three pence a sheet, words and music.

Grasshopper

Richie Waters is fucking me in the back of his little white Chevy Cavalier, and I'm hoping he'll finish soon because my knee is rubbing against the upholstery and I think it might be bleeding by now. I keep my eyes closed not just because I don't want to look at Richie's pimples or his baby-fine moustache, but because I can feel a dream coming on, and that's what I'm here for. Every thrust makes it clearer, sharper, farther away from this. I'm traveling, moving, and then I'm on the beach in California, and it's nighttime, and the stars are so bright that their reflections splatter on the waves. I'm sitting in front of a bonfire that's sending orange sparks high into the air, and I'm sharing a blanket with a shy, sandy-haired boy who won't look me in the eye but keeps touching my hand with his. He's nervous. I make him nervous.

"Why don't you just kiss me?" I ask, and he smiles.

"Give it to me, you bitch," Richie says, and that makes me open my eyes, and he's coming, his face and neck are bright red and sweat is dripping off of his forehead onto my cheek. "Yeah, yeah, oh God," he moans and lowers his head into the crook of my neck, and I can smell the Tastee Dogs that rotate in their heated display case at the gas station in his hair, and it makes me gag. Richie is breathing hot on my collarbone and he goes completely dead weight on top of me. Now I'm distracted from my throbbing knee by the fact that I can't fucking breathe. I try to move, but he's too heavy and this piece of shit car is too small.

"Get off me," I say, and he raises his head and looks right at me, into my eyes, which I don't like. It's better when they just look at my tits.

“I didn’t mean it when I called you a bitch, Kim,” he says between breaths. “I was just into it, you know? In the moment.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not the first time I’ve been called a bitch. I just want you to get the fuck off of me, okay?”

He looks at me and he actually frowns, just like my bratty little cousin who spends most of his day pouting when he doesn’t get to stuff his face with ice cream and play video games. Poor thing.

“But I thought we could go see a movie later. I’ll pay.”

I say the words slowly so he’ll know I mean business: “Get off of me.” And he finally gets the point and peels himself away. It’s not easy to get my dress back down in this miniscule backseat, but I’m a pro and am sitting up and covered in seconds flat. I don’t look at Richie, even though I can feel him staring at me. He’s getting on my nerves. “Are you a virgin, Richie?” I ask. “You act like you’ve never seen a girl before. And you can’t fuck for shit, but that’s no surprise.”

After a long silence, during which I think about my sandy-haired boy while Richie tries to come up with some great insult, he finally hits me with: “You really are a bitch.”

There’s nothing he can say that will hurt me. There’s a whole other league of assholes who’ve stomped all over me like I was shit on their shoes, and this guy doesn’t even come close to them. He doesn’t even rate. “If I were really a bitch,” I say, “I would have told you that you stink and you’re pathetic, instead of screwing you out of pity.” I look at him then, to see if I’ve hit a bulls-eye, and I have. He’s gone nearly white, except for a bright patch of acne on his forehead. “Come to think of it, that’s what I should have done. It wasn’t fair to lead you on this way.”

Richie looks away, and I'm kind of interested to see whether he's going to cry, but then I decide that if he cries, I'll regret having sex with him even more that I already do. I open the door and step out into the parking lot behind the gas station, and I notice two teenage boys are crouched next to the dumpster. I give them the finger.

"Slut!" one of them yells. I want to turn around and tell him that maybe they should be grateful to me for showing them what sex looks like, since I know for a fact that punks like them know a lot about internet porn and not much else, but I slam the car door shut instead and start walking toward home. I'm never going back to this gas station again. I don't care how close to home it is or how cheap the cigarettes are. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of the crickets. It lets me concentrate and see the sandy-haired boy's face more clearly. A few weeks ago, I discovered that sometimes when I'm fucking some guy, especially if it's in the dark, I can actually make out the color of the sandy-haired boy's eyes. They're green, with a yellow ring around the pupil. That was such a revelation, because I was beginning to get tired of how short the moments with him are, but seeing him like that just made me want to spend more time by his side on the dream beach, under the dream stars. But Richie Waters, of all fucking guys. Not only a genuine bona fide loser for being twenty-two and working at the Gas N' Sip, but he was also a senior when I was a freshman at Woodbury, and I remember that once a bunch of guys stripped him naked, wrapped him in duct tape, and left him on the football field in the middle of the night to be found the next morning by the janitor. That's pathetic. But I can't say no. I'm a slut.

I turn right off of Patterson onto Walls Road. Home's still a few miles away, but I like to walk home from my stupid retail job. The walk's kind of an escape too, because there are no people – I'm convinced that the world is basically a wonderful place until you introduce people into the mix, and it's the ones who get close to you who really wreck your life, make you crazy.

When I walk along the road it's just me and the birds, the trees, the squirrels, and the white noise of outside. I pretend that the cars going by are robots, with no one behind the wheel. I could be on my way to a thousand other places. Places that aren't the old ranch house that I've lived in my whole life with the peeling yellow clapboard and my Dad's junked Chevy in the driveway. Places less depressing than the fluorescent-lit mall I work in, which always feels to me like an overcrowded, underground bunker. I have an escape plan. Next August I want to enroll at the community college and get a degree in accounting so I can get away from this place, but I know Dad would just wither away if I left him. I used to wonder how he'd get along without Mom, and once she died I had my answer.

I feel a little nauseous – the smell of Tastee dogs – so I try to focus on the trees along either side of the blacktop. They're enormous oaks with fat trunks, and when I was little, I used to climb them and play jungle queen. I would summon the animals of the wild to my tree with my special war cry, and they would come by the thousands to hear me issue proclamations and death sentences. Then, when I got older, I would sit on the branches and watch the cars pass beneath me and wonder whether or not I could jump down just in time to be hit by one of them. I tried to imagine what the driver would think. I tried to imagine my Dad missing me. For all that I practically have to dress him in the mornings, he usually acts like I'm not even there.

Thinking about Dad makes me jumpy, and I start doing this skipping thing that he used to make fun of. He used to call me grasshopper, and I never told him that he was the reason that my nerves are strung so tight that yeah, sometimes I skip and it looks stupid, but it's his fault, and he should have to share some of the stupidity of it. You know – like father, like daughter. My feet skip, his brain skips. One of my crisis counselors told me that I have too much anger directed towards Dad, and that I'm having trouble getting over my issues because I seem to get some kind

of perverse pleasure out of being damaged. That counselor wanted to fix me up quick, and she ended up giving me to group counseling because, as she put it, you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. Sociology grad students and wanna-be earth mothers, every week I have to sit in the circle with them and all of other girls who got too drunk at a party or who, like me, have assholes for fathers who kept on inviting their asshole friends over, no matter what their daughters said. I sit in those circles, and every time I hear the words "try to heal" or "find yourself" or "rise above" I just want to pounce on our group leader like a cat and claw her eyes out, howling and screaming, and then maybe we can begin again without the calming music and the soothing tones of voice and talk about what's real. Pain is real. And humiliation. Why can't we talk about those things? Why can't we talk about my fantasies of finding Jack, Dad's best fishing buddy, and beating him down to nothing but a bag of flesh and broken bones and then throwing him into the lake where Dad can find him on the end of his hook? How about the one where I kill myself, actually manage to die this time, and Dad finds me and this time there's no way anyone can save me, and he realizes that he ruined my whole life and swallows both barrels of a shotgun? Why can't we talk about that, Miss Let's Join Hands, Miss Find Your Strength?

I kick a rock, and it skids off the pavement into the grass. I hear a car approaching, and when I turn around I see a black Lexus slowing down beside me. The window rolls down, but I know who it is before I see his face. He's the only guy in town with a Lexus: Martin Giller. I fucked him once, sure, but I called it off after the first time, when he grabbed my hair and forced me to go down on him, all the time calling me a bitch and a cunt and a whore. I've seen his girlfriend, Allie Lewis, at the bath and body store where I work. She used to come in for exfoliating face wash, and I would see the dark round bruises peeking out from beneath the

collar of her blouse. But I also saw her Fendi bag and her boob job, and something tells me that she didn't pay for those things herself. And people call me a whore.

"Jaretsky!" Martin yells, and I can smell the weed reeking from inside his car. He's alone, looking for trouble, and I'm at least another quarter mile from home. Isn't it funny how my shitty little house and his mansion are at opposite ends of the same street, Emerald Hills Road? Sounds like fucking Oz, doesn't it? "Nice dress, baby!"

"Piss off," I say and keep walking. This dress is short as all hell and makes me look like a five-dollar hooker, but it's because I've had it since middle school, and I've grown at least two inches since then. I can't afford to buy new things anyway, and I'm used to showing a little skin. People expect it of me. Slut, right? Of course now, with Martin goddamn Giller gaping at me, I wish I'd burned this dress and wore a sweat suit.

"Come on," he says, "why do you have to be such a bitch all the time? Don't you want to have fun?"

Fun. Getting drunk and stoned with Martin, thinking everything's great and he's really not such a bad guy until he pops me in the mouth and tells me to suck or he'll make me sorry. Sounds great. "My Dad's waiting for me," I say, and I guess that's when he notices that I'm skipping, because he says:

"What the fuck are you doing? Are you hopping like a bunny rabbit, Jaretsky? Are you hopping through the fucking forest? You wanna get bopped on the head?" He laughs, and his car takes a swerve toward me. He howls with laughter, showing his flawless dental work. "I better be careful not to hit the bunny!"

He stops his car, but I don't stop walking. Actually, now I'm kind of running. I'm not looking at him, but I hear his car door open and close and his footsteps on the pavement. Why

hasn't anyone come down the street yet? This may be the boonies, but it's not no man's land. I start to fade out a little, thinking about the beach and the bonfire and the sandy-haired boy. If Martin gets his hands on me I'm gonna need that boy, I'm gonna need him bad.

"Wait a minute," Martin says as he runs up beside me and grabs me above the elbow. "Will you stop for one second? Christ, I just want to talk to you."

He pulls me around so that we're face to face. He's really good looking, actually. I'll bet his girlfriend watches him sleep and is just fucking amazed at how black and rotten he is under that evenly tanned skin.

"Leave me alone before I start screaming my head off."

He laughs at me and grabs my wrist with his other hand, turning it towards me so I can see the scars there. "Scream," he says, his eyes hard and shining. "No one cares about you, Jaretsky. You don't even care about yourself."

I don't know what to say. That's not true. Maybe it's a little bit true. My mouth is open, but the poison won't come out.

Martin leans in closer. When Jack used to lie on top of me, after Dad had passed out in his armchair in the living room from one too many whiskeys, he would lean in close like that and put his hand over my mouth. "Good girls keep secrets," he would say, his breath hot and sour from liquor and his hands under my nightgown, clamped on my small breasts. "Good girls like it when men are nice to them."

"It was good that time," Martin whispers. "You know you liked it. You nearly cried you came so hard."

He must be thinking of a different girl.

“Just get in with me, let me take you back to my place. Unless you’re chicken. You’re not chicken, are you? Everyone says that Kim Jaretsky’s bold as fucking brass. Maybe they’re wrong.”

He thinks I’m going to do it, that I’m going to smile and fling my hair around and climb into his fancy car. “I am a chicken,” I say. I might have just fucked the Gas N’ Sip guy, and I may have taken up a razor blade in the shower, when the water was pouring over me and it felt so good that I thought that maybe if being dead was just like being warm all the time that it wouldn’t be so bad, but I’m not an idiot. I don’t like pain.

Martin puts his hand at the back of my head and smashes his chapped lips into mine. My teeth scrape against my mouth, and I taste blood. When I manage to wrench myself free of him I spit the blood at him. I like the way it looks foamed with spit and running down his face.

“You bitch!” he roars and slaps me so hard that I fall down onto the street, and now I know I’m saved because there’s another car coming, and I start laughing, laughing so hard that I’m crying.

“Yeah, I’m a bitch,” I say. “I’m a bitch and a chicken and a stupid fucking grasshopper. What are you?” I point at him, and he starts backing up. “You’re a pig, that’s what you are! Pig! Pig!” I start making loud oinking noises and do my little skip-skip too.

He turns around and practically leaps into his car, and I’m still laughing and my sides are aching like I’ve been caught up in a crushing bear hug.

“You crazy slut!” He screams at me and starts his car. “Go home and crawl into bed with daddy! Cunt!”

He tears away down the road, and the car that has saved me slows to a stop next to me. It's a shiny new green Jetta, and behind the wheel is Missy what's-her-name, from my latest crisis group. Thank God for small fucking towns.

Her window comes down. "Are you okay?" she calls out. I remember that she said it was her boyfriend who did it to her, after they broke up. Even when she told him no he wouldn't stop, and he told her to shut up because she wanted it as much as he did. She said that to this day that she regrets not fighting him, that she just let him win.

I want to tell her: you've probably saved my life. And by the way, I just told a guy no. Shout it from the rooftops!

"I'm super." I'm smiling like an idiot, and I stand up and try to smack some of the dirt off of my dress.

"Do you need a ride?" Missy asks, and I appreciate the offer even more because she looks like she's afraid I might bite her.

"Sure," I say and open the passenger door. I settle into the seat and notice that it smells like flowers in here. I almost say something about how stupid it is to drive around in a car that smells like a bouquet with a little Jesus card hanging from your rear view mirror, because it's real easy to get your ass kicked when you let everyone know how sweet you are, but for the first time in a while, I stop myself. Instead, I just lean back, close my eyes and when the face of the sandy-haired boy pops up, I push it back down. For now, I think I'll try not to drift away.

Mary

Mary Jane Kelly's earliest memory was of the rocks in Limerick, great gray rocks bursting through a carpet of wet green grass. Sometimes she dreamed about them and the angry expanse of the Irish Sea, and of Ma and Da and how much they used to laugh in those days. But that was when it was just Mary and her two older brothers. Then more came, every year a new baby, and the family moved to Wales, where Da found work in the mines of Carmarthenshire. On the rare occasions that Mary spoke about her family she would mention, of all her seven siblings, only her oldest brother Henry, who was a soldier in the Scots Guard and the only one of the lot of them who'd done a damn thing with his life, according to dear old Da. She never spoke of her beautiful but careworn mother, who always seemed to have babies hanging from her tits and her apron strings, and who Mary would often see weeping as she stirred the soup pot. She brightened when talking about her glamorous cousin, also named Mary, who became an actress on the London stage and who once got an excellent notice in the *Evening Standard*. They had been such great friends growing up, those two Marys, playing pretend in the old horse barn and hide and seek in the house, which drove poor Ma mad.

Oh yes, young Mary was a bit of a wild thing, frequently barefoot and her hair always in a snarl. Her mother despaired of her ever being a good wife: "That girl's got a fire in her," she'd say to her husband as she watched Mary twirling about with flowers in her hands through the grimy kitchen window. "No man will be able to put it out." But they certainly wanted to try. Starting when Mary was as young as twelve, men from the village began to take notice and

approach her father about that golden girl with the dark blue eyes. Even though he was tempted, as lord knew it would have been a blessing to have one less mouth to feed, Mary's Da just couldn't send her off to those men that he worked with in the mines, with their rotten teeth and rattling coughs. He heard those men talking in the shafts: about how much they drank, about how they beat their wives and got them pregnant as soon as possible so that they could start visiting the town whores without fear of rebuke. He pictured his Mary wedded to one of them, tiny but for her huge belly, bruises fading on her neck and arms, her spirit put out, her smile a memory, and he couldn't stomach it.

In spite of Da's worry, Mary was determined to grow up and fall in love as soon as possible. At sixteen she met and married Ioan Davies, a miner, yes, but a prince among miners, so handsome and charming. He was as big as life, always drinking and laughing and dancing, but he never raised a hand to his young wife, and he made Mary so jolly, so content. She told Mum that she was one of the lucky ones, that she'd found a man who didn't want to put out her spark, who in fact loved that his wife was bold as brass and liked to tumble in the bedclothes all night. Ma warned Mary not to speak of her happiness aloud. The Irish knew that to revel in one's good fortune only attracted the stinking winds of bad luck, and sure enough, Ioan died in an explosion only two years into their marriage. He left a bit of himself though: a bonny baby named Alice, and Mary took all of the passion she'd had for her husband and channeled it into adoring her daughter. Ma warned against this too. Love must be hidden, lest it be destroyed.

Ioan's death left Mary penniless, and her parents could not help her, having still too many children of their own in the house to take on more. So Mary went to Cardiff with baby Alice and began working with her cousin Emma as a scullery maid. The money wasn't much, and she couldn't bring Alice to work with her. Every coin that dropped in her purse came out

again to the nurse who watched Alice, until one evening Mary came back to the small flat she shared with Emma to find that Alice and her nurse were nowhere to be found. Mary waited for them. Days and nights passed, and still she waited. She grew gaunt and full of shadows, but they didn't come back. Emma's excuse for her cousin's absence from work, that baby Annie had died from the cough, began to fray, and Mary lost her position. Mary stopped speaking altogether, and Emma, at her wit's end with a mute cousin who no longer helped with rent, took Mary to a sanitarium, telling the doctors there that Mary's mind had gone quite suddenly, that there had never been a baby Alice, and that Mary had become a danger to herself.

For almost a year, Mary slept in that dark room, one of a hundred girls struck dumb in their narrow beds, coiled in their dreams. One of the doctors sometimes pulled up her gown and did things that only Ioan had done before, things that made her think of him burning to death under the ground in a narrow mine shaft, of Alice growing up with his smile, his bright blue eyes, neither of which she would ever see again. She couldn't say what made her want to get up and leave the sanitarium one day, but when she did it, in the dress she'd been wearing when Emma had brought her in, she knew she couldn't go home to Ma and Da. She had to strike out on her own, be the captain of her own ship. No more babies, no more husbands.

Cardiff was full of bad memories and Ireland was nothing to her anymore, so Mary decided to try her luck in London. She could reinvent there, become a new Mary, a strong and powerful one who never thought of things she'd lost. And when she came to London, in 1884, she landed straight away in the most unlikely and wondrous of places: La Rose, a high class brothel on Sloane Street, in Chelsea. The madam, Mrs. Wolcott, was a fantastically pale woman with impeccable taste in hats and a towering wig of burgundy curls that she wore in elaborate designs. Mary had no idea how old the woman was, but she was tougher than any street pimp or

any dock worker. She was steel in lace, and she had Mary scrubbed, painted and packaged beautifully, hiding a vial of pig's blood in the table by her bed so that when the man who had paid richly for Mary's "virginity" had slaked his lust, evidence of his virility and her innocence would be plentiful.

Early on in her time at La Rose, Mary learned from the other girls that selling oneself was much easier after a glass or two of gin. As time went on, Mary began to drink ferociously in that house of pleasures, just so that she would be able to relax around the refined customers, who ranged from well-to-do merchants to dukes and even, though she never saw him herself, Prince Albert himself (although he supposedly preferred the velvet-cheeked boys that Mrs. Wolcott had ensconced in another part of the brothel). One of her regular customers, a Frenchman who called her "Marie Jeanette", became so enraptured by Mary's sparkling eyes and clever tongue that he began to pay extra so that no other customers could share Mary's bed. This, Mrs. Wolcott informed Mary, was counter-productive to the good of the house and the other girls, as it created an allure about Mary that distracted the customers, especially since the now-monogamous Mary celebrated her kept status by singing loudly in the parlor by the pianoforte, naked as a jaybird but for her silk stockings and Brittany lace garters. Mrs. Wolcott threatened to ban the Frenchman to get Mary back to work, and so Mary convinced her monsieur that he must run away with her, or never see her again.

She had always wanted to see Paris, but it she quickly discovered that the Frenchman was a jealous wastrel, who spent almost every night out at card clubs and left her locked up in his lavish house on Boulevard St. Germaine des Pres. In the beginning it was like playing princess, and Mary drifted through the house, flopped on velvet chaises, leafed through books she couldn't read and brushed her hair with an ivory-handled boar bristle brush. But then she began to grow

bored, and she began to think about things and once she had gone through a crystal decanter of fine brandy, the Frenchman ordered his sour-faced servants to keep the liquor away from his petite amour. From the windows she could see the sun shivering on the surface of the Seine and, in the mornings especially, the smells of the cafes wiggled through the casements and got her out of bed with a howling stomach, only to find a silver serving tray of cold dry beef and old bread. Her Frenchman, ever thoughtful, did not like his little dove to over-indulge. After a month or so of being kept like an old dress in a wardrobe, Mary was seriously considering making an escape via a ladder made of bed sheets, when her situation was resolved by the sudden but explosive return from the country of Madame Wife, who flew into a mighty rage upon finding Mary in her bedchamber, and though she did sustain a few scratches and a sore scalp from having her hair yanked by the furious woman, Mary sailed back across the English Channel with a smile on her face, willing to face an uncertain future as long as she could do it in the open air.

Mary expected Mrs. Wolcott to take her back, but found that she was no longer welcome at La Rose, her place as the willful Welsh blonde having been taken by a Swansea girl with a jaw full of wooden teeth named Bronwyn. Mary sold the contents of her valise (four fine dresses, three cotton petticoats, three silk chemises, one whalebone corset with re-enforced silk ties, one pair of white opera gloves, two pairs of kid day gloves, a pair of green suede boots with jet buttons, and a silver button-hook) to a seamstress in Marylebone, and promptly dropped a third of her earnings on gin. Nearly insensibly drunk, she wandered the streets of London until she found a lodging house with an empty bed, and when she woke the next morning, she found that she had landed in Whitechapel. She intended to leave that morning, but somehow, she never did. She became a common street whore, but one with uncommonly loyal clients, and she tried to save up money to go back to Wales, but the coins she collected always seemed to disappear.

For the last two years, Mary had been living in a fetid little room at 13 Miller's Court with Joe Barnett, a pleasant enough sort of man who worked at the Millwall docks and sold fish on the weekends. He reminded her a bit of her father, truth be told, but not at all of her sweet Ioan, and though he must have asked her to be his wife a dozen times, Mary couldn't say yes to Joe. A person couldn't afford to bring their heart out of hiding unless the love was worth the pain that inevitably followed, and she simply didn't feel that way about Joe. There was no fire between them. She didn't tell him that, though. Instead she told him that the one thing she had learned in her twenty-five years of being alive was that to seek out joy was to discover sadness, and to try to hold on to love was to lose it forever. It was the truth, even if it wasn't whole truth, and just saying those things aloud gave Mary a powerful thirst for gin. She didn't consider herself a drunk, but sometimes she woke up after a dream about Ioan and Alice, and it was either get sauced or spend the whole day weeping, which Mary could not afford.

After the murders started, Mary stopped whoring for a while, and she started taking in other working girls who couldn't afford to give up their customers, letting them sleep on her floor. She and Joe had a terrible row over that. He felt that the company of those soiled doves had a corrupting effect on Mary, and he also chafed at the way those skinny, ragged girls always seemed to start snoring more loudly than a hold full of sailors when he wanted to get friendly with her. He gave her a choice: they went or he went. Mary couldn't find it in her heart to turn her friends away, seeing as how there was a madman on the loose, and so she packed up Joe's few belongings neatly and left them outside the door for him.

Being an honest woman was a nice enough idea, but Mary found out very quickly that there wasn't much she could do to make money. With no woman wanting to be out on the streets with the murderer, it seemed that every cleaning and charring post in the city was filled. Her

landlord at Miller's Court was a chandler, and she worked in his shop for a few weeks, selling candles and sometimes helping to make them, which she greatly enjoyed. Still, it was not enough to live on, especially since she was behind on rent and the chandler took all of her wages earned to pay for her room. Her friend Maria was a laundress and had long tried to persuade Mary to give that line of work a go, but Mary saw the way that the boiling water ate up Maria's fingers, the way the lye turned her skin yellow and, ever so slowly, took away her eyesight. Add that to it being backbreaking work, and Mary just couldn't find it in herself to go down that path. She did try selling flowers at the market, and her pretty face earned her some business, but there were so many girls selling flowers, and it was difficult to make enough in a day even for a lump of coal, much less for meat and bread. So, when all of October passed with no murder, no blood, Mary began seeing the gents again, although now she only went for the nicely dressed ones, and she brought them back to her room instead of doing it out in the open, which is how all the other poor ducks had been killed. She got less business that way, but better safe than sorry.

It was Friday, November 8th, and Mary was at the Queen's Head, sitting near the fire with Joe. The two of them were talking again, and he'd bought her a plate of fish and potatoes, which was right nice of him, but she wasn't ready to bring him home yet, and she couldn't bring herself to tell him that she was using her room for business. It was wicked cold outside, and Mary went up to the bar and ordered another glass of gin. It was her fourth. She'd had another dream about her husband and daughter the night before, and the heaviness in her heart just wouldn't go away. Joe could tell she was in one of her melancholy moods, and he remembered how sometimes she would let him hold her when she was gloomy like this. He knew that she didn't love him the way he loved her, but he didn't care. He'd never find another like her, and he hadn't given up hope that he could turn her away from selling herself and convince her to marry him.

When she sat down again, Joe put a hand on her arm. "Come on, Mary," he said. "Let's get a place together, you and me. I'm soon to have my own fish cart at the market, and I'll be making enough money for us to get a nice room, something more flash. Say yes, will you?"

Mary smiled fondly at Joe. "Maybe," she said.

Joe touched her pale cheek. "Why are you so bloody stubborn? Other women would jump at the chance for an honest life."

"I know," Mary said, and took a long drink of gin. "And I'm tellin' you that I'm black luck. You marry me, you'll be dead in a year."

"You don't really believe that," Joe said.

Mary smiled, her eyes sad. "Sometimes I think it's the only thing I do believe." She took another drink and for a moment, Joe thought she was going to tell him something, finally reveal a bit of herself, but instead she smiled at him. "I best be on, Joe. I'm not feelin' myself, and I think sleep's the thing right now."

"You want me to walk you home, then?" Joe offered his arm, hoping she'd take it and he could convince her to let him spend the night. It had been a month since he'd been in her bed. But she shook her head.

"No indeed," she said. "It's not so far and I'm feeling like I need to be alone for a bit. Just a bit." She put on her bonnet, and Joe tried to keep his face neutral. When Mary said she wanted to be alone, what she meant was that she was going to go make money off the gents. God have mercy on him for falling in love with a whore.

Mary kissed Joe's cheek, then wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and walked out of the pub, waving at some of the girls she knew as she went. Joe stared after her, not sure what to do with himself. Another drink seemed to be in order.

Outside it was beginning to snow, and Mary pulled her threadbare shawl tight around her shoulders and walked down Commercial Street toward home. To lighten her mood and take her mind off the cold, she began to sing. The first song that came to mind was “A Violet from Mother’s Grave”, a song that Ma used to sing when Mary was little, and that made Mary remember Ma’s warm, rough hands and her corn cakes with honey, melting away in her mouth while Ma laughed and Da smiled. Mary’s voice grew stronger as her spirit grew lighter. All was not so bad, after all. She had been in a tight spot like this before, when she’d spent every cent she’d made off of selling her nice clothes from Paris. And back then, she had known no one in London who gave a fig for her, and now at least she had many friends and Joe besides, who would marry her if she wished it. And maybe she would marry him, after all. True, they would have no money, and if they had babies...no, Mary wouldn’t think of those things now. Instead, she sang louder.

She hadn’t gone far when a stout man with a blotchy face and an orange moustache passed her on the street and tipped his hat. Mary made to walk past him, but he put his hand on her arm. She noticed that he carried a pail of beer, and she smiled. “Give me a few of those,” she said, nodding at the beer. “I’ll give ye a fair trade for ‘em.” She offered her arm to the man, and he took it. These days, owing to the cold and also, of course, to the madman, Mary chose to take her customers to her room, rather than any of the crannies in Spitalfields, which was why she hadn’t asked Joe to move in with her again. She had to be somewhat discreet, however, as McCarthy didn’t like his renters bringing men home with them, even if he was perfectly willing to visit Mary in her room himself. Walking into the Court, they passed another whore who lived just above Mary. She said goodnight to them, and Mary gaily responded in kind. Now the gin was well and truly working, and she finished off the man with the orange moustache quickly

enough, cleaning between her legs with boric acid to make sure there would be no surprises in nine months.

Alone again, Mary quickly drank down the two bottles of beer the man had left with her, and managed to sleep a bit before the bitter cold brought her out of bed. She went to the fireplace, but there wasn't a speck of coal left in the ashes, which meant that Mary would have to go back out and find money for more, or else spend a sleepless night shivering under the blankets. She had done the latter enough times in the past month, and she was heartily sick of it. Resolved and still tipsy, Mary got up and left the Court, heading back up Dorset Street toward Commercial, where she knew she could find customers.

On her way through the darkness, Mary passed George Hutchinson near Flower and Dean Street. Hutchinson was a friend of Joe's, and so even though he'd made it abundantly clear that he would like to know Mary very well, Mary wasn't willing to confirm Joe's suspicions about how she was making her way.

"Good mornin', Mr. Hutchinson," Mary called. "Got sixpence for a poor girl?"

"I may," George replied. "What have you got for me?"

Mary laughed, wanting to hit the man. "Nothin' but a song, Georgie."

George shook his head. "Songs I got aplenty."

Mary walked away from him with a nod, her stomach churning with anger. That scab, trying to get under her skirts but unwilling to help her out with even a farthing!

Mary turned onto Commercial and began walking toward the Britannia, when a man stepped out of the shadows, nearly causing Mary to jump out of her skin.

"Jesus and Mary!" Mary yelped, and the man held up his hands. In his left, he held a small package.

“Pardon, miss,” the man said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

With a whore’s eye, Mary summed up the man in a single look: he had a bit of money, but not as much as he was trying to appear to have. White spats over black shoes, heavy gold watch chain, black astrakhan cloak, and a gold horseshoe pin stabbed into a black cravat. Why the finery, when no respectable man would be caught wandering the Evil Mile of the East End at this hour, at least not without other wealthy men intent on slumming? Usually, if a rich man decided to go cheap, he went to a whorehouse, where at least he could be assured of selection, if not quality.

“Fine sir,” Mary gasped, putting a hand to her cheek in mock surprise. “You nearly scared the life out of me! Oh, but you must be lost indeed, a gentleman like yourself.”

The man bowed his head. “Well, in a manner of speaking. I’m looking for a special lady.”

Mary cocked an eyebrow.

“You see,” the man went on, “I lost my wife three years ago this day, and I find that I do not wish to be alone. I know it is a foolish, but I do miss her so.”

Mary nearly laughed aloud. This man certainly was trying a bit too hard, but if it meant so much to him to play this game, Mary was willing to play along. She’d just got a glimpse of a glittering garnet on his watch fob, and the thrilling possibility of having enough coal to warm her room for the next week was making her giddy. “Well, sir,” she said in a tone she hoped was demure. “I know I make for poor company, but I’d be more than happy to entertain you, if you’re agreeable.”

The man nodded. “I am agreeable. I think you’ll be all right.”

“All right?” Mary did laugh now, throwing her head back. “Come along my dear, you will be comfortable in my room.” She took the man’s arm, but he didn’t move.

“Your room?” He seemed surprised by that.

“Do you mind?” Mary lowered her lashes and gazed up at him. “It’s just so cold tonight, and this way we won’t be interrupted.”

“Interrupted,” the man echoed. He looked at Mary in wonderment. “No. We don’t want that.”

The two of them began walking back toward Dorset Street, and Mary noticed that the man seemed to be breathing heavily, and that he seemed agitated, excited. She knew she could wrap this one around her finger, and if she went about this the right way, she wouldn’t have to ‘entertain’ anyone else for a spell. The two of them stopped in at the Wandering Horse for a drink and a pail of coal. A whole pail! she thought. That was enough for two weeks, if she was savvy.

What a prize find this man was. Mary could hardly believe her good fortune. Clinging to his arm, she began singing Ma’s song again, and when she noticed that George was following them across the street, she didn’t mind too much. If he told Joe, so be it. She’d buy him some dinner and some tobacco, and he’d forgive her soon enough, just as he always did. When they reached Miller’s Court, Mary didn’t try to quiet down, but rather sang at the top of her lungs, knowing that it would disturb some of her more puritan neighbors, who loved to put on airs around her. They thought she was such a low creature, but did they know that she had been worshipped by some of the poshest men in England, or that she’d once been draped in diamonds and had feasted off of golden plates? Mary knew that one day, somehow, things would be

different for her. She'd always been prettier and smarter than other whores, and she felt that on the inside, even if the dregs of the East End couldn't see it, she was special.

Inside her room, the man started a fire.

"You picked the right girl, luv," said Mary, untying her apron. "I daresay there ain't a nicer girl in Whitechapel."

The man watched her undress in silence, and when she stood in front of him in nothing but her shift and thrice-mended stockings, she told him about how she used to think she was a princess, about how Ioan's death had made her a whore, and then, for some reason she couldn't name, she told him about her daughter, and how she'd been having a recurring nightmare in which she was searching Spitalfields Market for Alice, only to find her all grown up and selling herself for farthings behind a butcher's cart. Feeling strangely light after having said so much, Mary smoothed her hair back and sat down on the bed. She asked him if he was ready.

The police descriptions of what he did to her took up six pages. Mary's death transformed her killer from a London madman to an international monster, the stuff of nightmares, something more than human. Her funeral was postponed several times because of crowds so large that the funeral carriage could not get through. Finally, her body was taken to St. Patrick's Catholic Cemetery in Leytonstone, and because there was no announcement prior, virtually no one came to watch the procession. Joe was one of ten people who watched as Mary's remains were lowered into a public grave. No family could be found to attend the service, and though her grave would later be lost, she would be resurrected a hundred times in stories and in films, only to be murdered over and over again, a victim of the audience's curiosity, a symbol of its greatest fears.

The Doctor

The Doctor stood on a lip of rock overlooking the gritty bank of the Thames, thinking about what was hidden under the brown water. Gold coins, pieces of jewelry, pieces of people. Few men thought about what was just beyond the surface of things, what was obscured by the monotony of the every day. That's how he knew that he was different, special. Not just because he thought about these things, but because he had the unique ability to actually see through the skin of reality, to penetrate the spectacle of the moving props that surrounded him: the buildings, the gas lamps, the shadows that stitched the city together, and the men and women who walked the cobblestones, their faces concealed under hats and bonnets, their hearts trapped under wool and whalebone. He could see their hopes, their dreams and desires. He could see their sins, perched like gargoyles on their shoulders, whispering foul things in their ears.

Sometimes he heard whispers too, but it was different for him. It wasn't the mutterings of demons he heard, but the glass-sharp words of the angels, the ones whose voices were drowned out by the churn of the factories, the clang of the blacksmith's hammer, and the voices of all of those people, those doll-eyed people, tramping about the cobblestones and shouting at each other. He could see, in the theatre of his mind, the dirty children palming pennies, the drunks sleeping under oxcarts, the whores picking up their skirts in the alleys. The whores. Their hands were covered in blood, the blood of a million aborted babies. Their flesh was infested with warts and boils and scabs, their hair was alive with lice, and their children, the ones they didn't flush out, were starving at their skirt hems, fatherless and feral. There was nothing more twisted and black at its heart than a whore. And what did the leaders of men do about this perversion, the

lords and peers of English morality? Nothing. They built workhouses to support poverty, and while they might rail against wickedness in public, the doctor had often enough seen men of every caliber with loose women, sometimes in fancy houses, sometimes in full view of the public in dark corners and yards.

He couldn't help but think of his mother when he saw those whores on the streets, their skirts around their waists, their eyes turned up toward the gray sky. When he was a boy, growing up in a two-room apartment in Whitechapel, he had cried every time his mother had left him alone to go to work. She told him that she was a nurse at the hospital, that she helped cure sick people. Every day she tied a red handkerchief around her neck, saying it was her nurses' badge. How he had worshipped his mother, imagining what an angelic sight she must have been for those poor invalids. At night, after she came home, she would put him to sleep with stories about the brilliant doctors at the hospital and the miracles they performed. It was just the two of them, but he never minded. His father had left when he was just a baby, abandoning them for another woman and another son. As he got older, his respect for his mother's sacrifice had grown. She'd worked every day and many nights so that she could put him in a real school, instead of sending him to the workhouse like the other boys who lived around them. He learned to read quickly, and would recite the juiciest newspaper stories to her, while she listened with her eyes closed and laughed or shook her head at the folly of rich people.

He'd found out, at the age of twelve, what Mother was really up to, what her true vocation was. He'd left school early on a warm afternoon and had been wandering along through the hamlets of the East End, from Poplar to Wapping, from Stepney to Spitalfields. He'd followed the river to the Isle of Dogs, where he watched men at the Millwall Dock use pulleys to unload great crates of fish that stank to high heaven. He then walked over to the great East India

Docks and saw exotic teas and spices being carefully transferred from the ships to special wagons that would take the precious cargo to purveyors in the West End. Those wagons bore the seal of the East India Company, and he'd found himself wondering if he'd ever taste those spices or drink those teas. Then and there he'd promised himself that, one day, he and his mother would do both.

He'd stayed at the docks until the day had begun to draw to a close, and then he'd walked back to Thames Road and followed it into Whitechapel, where it became Commercial. Before he'd even reached the center of that seething district, he could hear the raucous music and drunken laughter streaming out from the public houses, and the lingering stench of fish from the river became instead the overwhelming reek of unwashed bodies, of piss and shit and vomit and death. How he'd hated Whitechapel in that moment, and hated the people who lived there even more. As he got close to Flower and Dean Street, where his flat was, he'd spied a young girl standing near the entrance to a shabby building. She had looked no more than six years old, and was wearing a dirty pinafore, snot trickling from her nose. She only had one arm. Behind her, a very drunk young woman came out of the building with a skinny sailor on her arm. "It'll be two pennies for me," the woman had slurred, "but if ye want the freak, it'll cost ye more." And then the little girl, with her one hand, had lifted her pinafore for the sailor.

Sickened, he had turned away, intending to go home, put the kettle on the fire and tell mother what he'd seen when she got home. Surely she would see now that they should leave this place, perhaps even leave London altogether. He turned the corner onto Flower and Dead, and that was when he'd seen her. His mother. It was the red handkerchief that had caught his eye first, and then he'd seen the rest of her, pushed up against the wall of a pub with an enormously fat man heaving against her, his face purple, straining. At first he'd been frozen, rooted to the

spot, and then he'd had a moment of madness, of confusion in which he thought that his mother's customer was attacking her, and though he was just a boy, and small for his age besides, he ran at the man, fists flying, howling like an angry ghost. The man had punched him in the face, and Mother had vanished, leaving her son to take the beating of his life. He had limped home, blood spattered and every bone aching, and had waited for her to come home. He sat at the table for two days and nights, not moving except to take a piss in the chamber pot, not making a sound. He didn't change clothes because he wanted her to see every bruise, every cut. He wanted her to see what her whoring had done to him, what she had wrought with her lies.

She'd come home stinking drunk, and walked right to him. He'd thought she was going to apologize. Instead, she slapped him across the face. "Ye fucking ingrate," she had spat at him. "Ye like the money well enough, so ye can damn well shut yer mouth as to how I earn it."

He had been speechless, and indeed, he'd remained unable to speak for days, causing his teachers great concern. But his mother had ignored him, refusing to repent or explain herself, and she'd laughed at him when he'd had to abandon his hunger strike after four days (he'd sworn never to indulge in the fruits of her whoring) and eat some cold meat. All the love he'd had for her turned to hate and disgust, such that the very sight of her, with her graying hair and her eyes the same shade of brown as his own, made him ill. How could he make her understand what she'd done to him? He bought a butcher's knife at the market and stared at it for hours while she was gone. He read the Bible incessantly, searching for an answer, and he found it in the New Testament. Redemption, it told him, may only be attained through sacrifice. He also realized that, as his mother was defiant, he would have to carry out the deed himself. And who better than he? Hadn't he remained sinless, even though he was surrounded by evil? So he cut out one of his trouser pockets and kept the knife strapped against his thigh when he was at home, waiting for a

sign to tell him when to strike. It finally came one afternoon before school, while he was sitting at the rickety dinner table, eating a heel of bread. His mother had come in. She had refused to look at him, had even turned her back on him as she'd tied the red neckerchief on. He hadn't seen that scrap of fabric since the day he'd caught her about her foul business, and he'd known as soon she pulled it out that it was the signal he'd been waiting for. He had stood up behind her and pulled her head back with one hand, running the blade of the butcher's knife across her neck with the other.

That was what he had meant to do, at least. In reality he had had botched it, stabbing her in the neck instead of cutting cleanly through it. And she hadn't gone quietly with an angelic expression, as she had when he'd played out the scenario in his imagination so many times, but had screamed and screamed until he'd clapped his hands over his ears. It was the only time in his life that he'd been grateful that he'd grown up in the East End, where screaming attracted no more attention than a light drizzle of rain in the evening.

He'd spent years thinking of how she'd died, of all the blood that had been on her, on him, everywhere. He thought of how he'd hesitantly opened her up after she'd stopped moving. He'd thrown up all over the floor after the first cut. Her liver, kidneys and heart had been so hot in his hands that they almost burned. He'd been looking for sin, for some black, slime-covered thing that he could throw into the fire to undo all of her bad deeds, but he'd found nothing. Later, during medical school, he became convinced that his mistake had been to go inside after she'd died. Because he hadn't reached the heart while it was still beating, it had kept its sin in death, sending the undelivered soul to hell. Yes, he knew it was true. His mother was in hell.

It was strange how the sun never seemed to reflect off of the river at midday. It was a pity that this was the only time he could steal away to collect his thoughts, as nature seemed to mock

him by denying him a beautiful, sparkling vista and providing only dull, lifeless water, sluggish and uninspiring.

But he had memory to inspire him. His hands had been shaking for over a week now. It had been so bad at first that he hadn't been able to work, as he couldn't hold a scalpel steady, and he'd had to plead illness and retire to his home. What glorious days those had been, sitting in his quiet, dark study, reliving every movement of his knife over and over. Today it was no more than a slight tremor, hardly noticeable.

"You look like you're feeling better, doctor," Nurse Wallace had said to him this morning as he was preparing for surgery.

"Yes, thank you," he had replied. "I'm much more myself today."

"May I get you anything?"

Oh, the hope in her voice. She was such a plain woman, Nurse Wallace. Young, to be sure, no more than nineteen, but with a dull, round face and a slow mind to go with her good heart. Such women bored him to tears, and yet he was not averse to marrying and having a few children. Sons. What a tremendous father he would be! And so many of his friends and colleagues had remarked upon his lack of a romantic life. But the niceties of the company of fine ladies had never appealed to him. They were vapid and nonsensical, and none of their singing or sewing or giggling engaged him at all. It was a shame that he needed a woman to have offspring in the first place, but he had before considered marrying someone simple like Nurse Wallace, getting a few boys on her, then dispatching her quietly with poison. No need to make a fuss over it, really. She would simply go to sleep one night after checking on the children and tucking them into their beds. When she didn't wake up the next morning, he and his sons would be brought closer by their loss. Yes, this was an idea that warranted further exploration.

But for now, it was the recollections of a week ago that he wanted to explore. He took in a lungful of sooty London air and exhaled slowly. In his mind's eye he saw her, his masterpiece. She had stood in front of him, naked in the firelight. She had spoken to him, but he had heard nothing, so compelled by her beauty was he. She was a gift from God, as was the privacy of her tiny room, and sitting there, watching her, he'd seen the faint trace of veins across her pale belly and breasts, and in those veins he'd detected the shadow of corruption. He'd known that he would have to dig that corruption out in order to save her, but for a moment, when she had asked him if he was ready, he had been unsure. Was he up to this task? He knew by instinct that she was far more important than the others. They had been dried up old husks, barely worth his time, but they had served their purpose and prepared him for this sweet creature, whose lovely face was evidence of her underlying divinity. If he faltered, she would be lost, and so he had gathered himself, as a man of resolve must, and when the edge of his knife had gone across her throat and the blood had bloomed there like a ring of poppies, he had seen his mother against that pub wall, her red neckerchief blazing in the pearly London mist, and he had known then that inside this pretty whore lay the path to not only her salvation, but to his own as well.

Beneath his overcoat, he kept his knife in a special holster he'd designed himself. It was a step up from the crude obfuscation he'd come up with as a boy, and certainly more elaborate. He'd initially resented having to hide his weapon, his flaming sword, in such a manner, but he'd hardly had a choice. After he'd done the first two whores, every light skirt in London had gotten skittish, and he'd found concealment necessary. The benefit of this was that the blade was with him always now, and he could feel its presence through his surgeon's coat, through his vest, his shirt, his skin. He was always at the ready, should God present him with a new vessel to cleanse.

“Got a bit o’ brass to spare, guv?”

Startled from his reverie by the voice, the Doctor turned to find a young man standing on the rocks behind him. He looked like a guttersnipe, and was covered in what looked like coal dust, his greasy blonde hair sticking out from under a newsboy cap that looked too small for him. His hands were in his trouser pockets. In the East, you can never trust a man whose hands you can't see.

"No, sir. I regret that I do not." His voice was steady, calm. He wasn't some stuffed peacock who'd never seen anything more violent than a military parade. No, he grew up in these shit-coated streets, and he'd been pinned by criminals a lot slicker than this one in his day. It was best to show them that you wouldn't be bullied, for men of this sort were like bloodhounds, and if they caught the scent of a coward, they'd harass you into an early grave. "Be off before I summon a constable."

The thief smiled, showing brown teeth. "Yer a magician, then? 'Cause I don't see no coppers around." He took his hands out of his pockets, and sure enough he had a blunt dagger clutched in his right fist. "Just give us what ye got. By the looks o' ye, ye got plenty to spare, and I don't want to hurt ye unless I got to."

"Hurt me?" Can a hyena hurt a tiger? Oh, but there was something familiar about this dirty scrap of a man. The Doctor imagined that, had he not the benefits of education and a deeply rational mind, he might have ended up something like this creature, prowling the streets for purse strings to cut, pockets to pick. This thing probably sat in public houses with whores, bought them glasses of gin and laughed at their bawdy jokes. Perhaps he even fancied himself a small-time pimp, holding that dagger to the necks of frightened old women and prying pennies from their dirty fingers. Still, he was a man. There must be a way for the two of them to reach an understanding.

“I haven’t any money on me, sir,” the Doctor said. It was the truth, and he smiled ruefully. “I am a doctor at the hospital up the road, and all of my personal effects, including my money, are there. I am just taking a walk, you see.” There. That should make sense, even to this bottom feeder.

The thief seemed to consider this. “I think yer lyin’,” he said finally.

“Lying?” This was swiftly becoming tiresome. “Sir, I do not lie. I have no money with me, and I would like to be on my way. Lives depend upon me, sir. Do you understand that?”

“Oh yeah? God ‘imself, are ye?”

That rankled the Doctor. “Certainly I’m the closest thing to Him that you’re ever likely to see, you dog.”

“Dog?” the thief laughed. “Oh, have I offended yer lordship? I do ‘pologize. ‘Course, we ain’t so different, are we? To Him, I wager we both look like a couple of whoresons, eh? Come on, then. Spare a sixpence for a fellow child o’ God.”

“How dare you?” the Doctor thundered, his hand going to the hilt of his knife. This creature had gone too far, and though there was no glory in it, the need to punish him was overwhelming. Pulling out his blade, the Doctor launched himself at the thief, intending to knock the wind out of him and cut his throat before he had time to utter one more foul word. But something strange happened. The man didn’t fall down. He was, under those greasy clothes, all muscle and bone, and he knocked the Doctor aside easily.

When the Doctor hit the ground, the knife fell out of his hand.

“Yer just full o’ surprises, aren’t ye?” The thief squatted over him, his proximity revealing a face pitted with pox scars. “Well, I got a surprise for you, guv.”

He felt the dagger punch into his belly. Amazing what a fragile barrier skin really is. And at first, there was no pain. Then, like lightning, his wound began to hurt. No, it wasn't hurting. It was *screaming*. He opened his mouth and something like a moan slithered out. The thief brought the dagger down again, this time into the Doctor's chest. It was like having a boulder dropped down on him. He wondered if young Nurse Wallace was looking for him at the hospital. Has anyone seen the Doctor? Does anyone know where he went? Perhaps if he yelled loudly enough she would hear him, never mind the distance, and so he opened his mouth to cry out, but he coughed up salty bloody that burned his throat instead. He couldn't catch his breath. He noticed how dark the sky was for daytime. The sun seemed to have disappeared.

"Don't be afraid, now," the thief said, hoisting him up by his armpits and dragging him to the shoreline. "Even fancy rich blokes like ye got to die sometime." The thief let go of the Doctor, and he fell slowly, so slowly, toward the water.

No. The Thames closed around him like a fist. No, not me.

The water was freezing, and points of light punctured his vision. The agony was unbearable, and his mind was turning against it, shutting down. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, figures rippled like mermaids in the dark water surrounding him. Had they come to guide him to paradise? He could hear angels singing, angels screeching, and he wanted to cover his ears but he couldn't move. Everything was getting smaller. He decided to hold himself very still, so that he wouldn't frighten the mermaids away. Any minute now he would feel their cold hands on him, and they would lead him to heaven, to the fields of the righteous. The women he had saved would be waiting for him, and his mother too. Together, they would comfort him, and help him finally put his heavy burden down.

Vita

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