

A Pillow of White Roses

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A Pillow of White Roses and other stories

A collection of historical flash fiction

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Part I - 1700s

A Curious Herbal

I study the quince again, then return to the bench and carefully apply ink to paper. Afternoon sunlight bathing the physic garden draws out the golden-yellow of their flesh. I must remember the precise hue to achieve a true likeness, so that every page can be perfect.

Tomorrow, I shall progress; perhaps to the blood-red Love Apple, perhaps the fragrant Camomile. I'm working with the seasons, anticipating when each blooms or produces fruit. But nature's ebb and flow cannot be hurried; I adapt to it, like a bee that waits for pollen, like a bird that plucks worms after rain.

Alexander will be expecting the next sketches. I'm not naïve about the debtors' prison, but I welcome the distraction and purpose of my work. I observe him reach for the paper with a pale, thinning arm, but we avoid the difficult conversations. Last time I showed him my sketch of St. John's Wort. 'It's excellent, dear Elizabeth,' he said. 'I can tell you plenty, such benefits that it has.'

The garden's a pleasure today and my spirits lift as Isaac points out the new species under his cultivation. "From warmer climes across the ocean," he tells me. I'll certainly include the tobacco plant; expect that Alexander will know it.

Greenery spreads before me in every direction like my own botanical paradise. "I'd love to travel to distant places," I say as I watch him take a cutting. "This corner of London's perfect, isn't it, but it ends at the garden walls."

Isaac looks at me and smiles. "God willing, you and your husband will be reunited and your family will be free to."

I observe the fresh cutting in his soiled hands, dare to imagine the days and weeks ahead; as now, yearning for continuing light and warmth. As the sun fades, shadows lengthen across the paths and I sit again, breathing the

familiar floral scents. Isaac's gone; I see his back dip through the hot-house door.

Tomorrow I'll return with my ink and paper, to begin the next page.

On the Navvies' Path

Here at the camp, I've given myself a new name. One that can't trace back, can't lead the plod like bloodhounds to me door. A life now of no identity, as sure as the pissing rain against our backs as we dig.

I'm stood at the top with me barrow of sludge. The planks are slick with shiny clay, stretching like a death slide. "Keep the barr'ers moving!" a foreman shouts from somewhere behind me. His voice only just breaks through the clangs, the turning pulleys, many boots and hooves. Such a ruddy din, but you get used to it.

Last night she didn't ask me name and I, not hers. In me head she was Betty. Long, dark hair like rope-coils that swung against me chest. She'd tossed her head, flicked it away, but it only fell back again. Over and over and over. 'Such strong arms,' she'd murmured, gripping with her warm hands. It won't be Betty next time. Perhaps she'll be copper-haired, me wish above all others.

I start on me downward roll, the weight of the barrow pulling me. There's no stopping once you've begun. A horse on the ridge is restless, whinnying against the ropes. "Steady, boy!" I hear someone call. You can't look back. My feet slip, steady, slip all the way to the bottom.

The camp before had been the worst yet. Leaky shelters like nobody's business. I'd sneaked out with the lads one night and we'd helped ourselves to some bottles of ale. Managed to smash the store-house lock; the noise, too much. The plod 'ad arrived, must only have glimpsed our distant backs in the dark. No one came calling. But they were close; like a cat with half-dead prey, toying with us.

I set the barrow down, straighten me shoulders. If I'd tumbled off the

planks, done myself in, they wouldn't even know who the hell I was. 'Unknown worker.' There's been a few. I ain't the first to cast off his name like a lice-infested shirt.

Our last few days here, then move on. I'll have to find another Betty; maybe that beautiful red-head. Only, I've never seen the like of her. Not yet. Never in one place long enough to keep a girl.

Like a workhorse against its load, always moving along the path. One day, if I stay outta trouble, might keep me name the same.

The Voice of Bees

Behind the panes of their hive, my bees appear languid. Sunlight beats through the glasshouse roof, sweat seeps from my skin. Each long day, as keenly as a physician will, I observe; so much is intangible yet.

'I can't listen to any more about those dreary creatures, John.' Across the dining table her words had stung, not for the first time.

When I'd smeared a bee with honey, it was not silent. How could that be? I was certain the beating wings were its voice. Despite the sweet glue, it was still shrill.

She wanted gifts, pomanders, jewels. Why could a husband not choose well. The colour to harness her heart, the scent to merry her mood. 'I can't abide lavender. It sits heavy on my chest.'

With pincers, I'd held one by its legs, but still a peevish whine. Its wings, motionless. I'd snipped them away; buzz-buzz, again. Such a marvel! Its voice, a constant which cannot be fathomed.

Before they swarmed, I heard a difference. A trumpet-call, a signal perhaps. An overcrowded colony cloaking a restless queen. This so entranced me, I tried to pair it to the piano-forte's notes. 'Oh, do stop plinking that wretched instrument!' My bees, I discovered, matched the lower A of the treble.

Once, I'd tried to impress her by culturing pearls in our pond. 'Such fanciful ideas, John. I doubt I'll ever see one unless I dive the ocean.'

So, bees it is; if I do no other greatness, I'll understand them. Others will try to explain the bees' hum, but their words can be silenced if mine are the truest.

As evening encroaches, I light my candle and settle. Their rising trumpet-call heralds time for the queen to provoke desertion. This much, I do know.

A Loblolly Boy's Lot

I'm emptying a piss-pot again. As I lift it over the rail, a sudden shift unsettles my feet and I nearly spill it back on myself. The sea is angry. Churning and tumbling like it wants to turn us over. This, I'm prepared for. So many days on deck have steadied my legs and hardened my stomach. It took some getting used to, though, I'll say.

Returning to Mr. Roe, I find him preparing to chop some poor fella's blackened foot. The sailor's face is as pale as the sheet he lies upon. I've seen it the same many times. Other boys are here, but I hover, waiting for orders. Mr. Roe glances up. "Master Edward, go and get the men fed. At once!"

A reprieve, of sorts. The limb cuttings are the worst of it. The first few times I helped, I ran out at the end and was sick as could be. Missed the bucket most times, too. Mr. Roe must have known, but said little. I expect he knew I'd grow out of it, just like others before. But it took a while to block men's pained cries from my dreams and still, sometimes, they return.

It was Pa's idea to put me aboard the ships. Being down the docks every day he'd seen an opportunity, like the gleam of a penny underfoot. 'You must start earning your supper, son, just like all men.' There was no choice in the matter, I knew. Mam had a new babe again and there were seven of us. The eldest had always to move on. 'The sea is calling you!' Pa shouted as he waved me off only days after.

The sick-berth reeks of unwashed skin and old wounds. After a time, though, I don't notice it anymore. Maybe my nose shuts down, if that's even possible. I pass bowls of loblolly to each of the men. Some mutter their thanks, most do not. There are always one or two who can't feed themselves. I have to hold the spoon as they suck the thick, lumpy liquid until it's all gone. Mr. Roe insists on empty bowls. 'Patients need food to fight back. Remember that, Master Edward.'

Now and then, I wonder should I try and escape. The next landfall, I could sneak ashore in darkness and hide somewhere. Mr. Roe keeps odd hours, but he has to sleep sometime. I could go then, like a rat scurrying through the hold. You rarely hear them, but afterwards, discover what damage they've done. What could Mr. Roe do if I'd scarpered? But fear edges in. I don't know the places we dock, don't know if I speak the same as the people there. And so, I've never risked it.

I find Mr. Roe in his cabin. It's one of the smartest, with everything neatly stowed. His case sits closed on the desk; surgeries seemingly done for now. "All men are fed, Mr. Roe, Sir!" I report.

He nods. "I already saw that they are."

And I know that I'm stuck, like a cork in a bottle, until someone comes along to pull me out. All of my days on board stretch before me, further than the seabed lies below.

The Truest Blend

As I chop the eel, soft Spring air reaches me from an open window. The flesh, slippery in my fingers, embeds its aqueous scent as though the river itself had gushed over my skin. George's favourite dish. As my husband, it pleases him and it pleases me to prepare it, but not because of that.

In my bowl, onions, nutmeg, and thyme. Mincing the mixture, my elbow flexes like an eel flipping against a trap. The citrus-sting of lemon peel, added, blended. Crushed spices prickle my nose; I twitch to halt the sneeze. "Ruddy pepper!"

The diced fish waits, a pool of sunlight turning silver scales to bronze. I crack three eggs to whisk, then pour the yolks over. Golden bronze, gleaming like a gift of Solomon's temple. The fire's heat is rising, nudging sweat down between my shoulder blades.

I pour the mixture over the yolks, concealing the meat as an eel lurking beneath sand. As I spit the chunks one by one, I slip a bay leaf between each. My hands, stained with aromatic colour, the palette of the indulgent cook. The fresh leaves, green as the dress I wore the day I'd last seen Francis.

We'd met in the square, just as market-day bustle was building. They'd talked briefly of business, he, and George. I'd stood politely with my basket; taken in the cut of his clothes, his neat-kept beard. Then, my husband's attention, abruptly diverted by an acquaintance in the crowd. Always it seemed, his purpose to be moving, like a river's continuous current.

As George strode ahead, I'd paused to bid farewell. It was then, in that barely-breathing moment, when Francis had leaned in and whispered, 'Copper hair does sit so divinely with green.' So close, wisps of his beard almost touched my cheek.

The spit is slung above the flames. I sit a while to watch, not needing to turn it often. The fish cooks slowly, smoky heat seeping into its flesh and swelling flavour. I relish this part, inhale the glorious aroma of marrying ingredients. The empty dish I place below to catch the dripping, released with every hiss of browning flesh. I draw a cloth over my face and neck; need no looking glass to know my skin's as rosy as a virgin's flush.

After, I baste with dripping and sweet butter. I lick a little from my finger and it's like sunbeams on my tongue. No wonder that George likes it so; it's one of my best, after all. But he seeks no difference at our table. I hear talk of new ways and rare ingredients from other wives, but he won't accept it. 'I like everything as now. Don't make it fancy, wife,' he says. And so, I never do.

My last triumph, the sauce. Already perfection, but this, the crown on the head of the King's favourite. It turns the dish into near royalty. I blend a little claret with minced oysters and more sweet butter. Take a sip of wine to cool my throat, parched from the settled heat. Burgundy, the colour of my wedding gown. George had never said so of course, but it didn't favour me. And I think of the green dress again, and the way Francis smiled as he tipped his hat, 'Good day, Madam Holme.'

The roasted eel's ready, the kitchen, pungent from my work. George appears at the doorway, hat in hand, back from wherever. "Ah, your finest dish! Splendid, wife. I've returned with Mr. Caxton and we're both in need of supper."

"Mr. Caxton, George?"

"Yes, Francis Caxton. We've met on sundry occasions. Matters of accounts and such like."

I swallow hard, my knees have become butter. "Very good, husband," but I'm not sure my thoughts are quite safe in my head. "I'll bring it through to the table."

With a nod, he goes. I glance at the tempting dish and wonder if Francis

will like it, appreciate it, appreciate *me*. When his eyes are set to mine, it's like I'm underwater but he still sees me plainly.

If we can find means to be alone, he might whisper to me again; tell of what, beyond my table, he most seeks to cosset.

I'm swimming deeper, but somehow, it's getting brighter, the further away I go.

Three Spokes to the Wheel

I can never tell when a leech bites because Ma doesn't flinch. "'Tis no bother, Bridget. My old skin's tough enough!" She laughs loudly then, but it's not quite real. Hollow, like the little keg that swings at her waist as she wades through the rush-choked ponds.

I have a keg of water too, to be helpful. As I sit and watch, I'm careful not to get too close to the edge. "They can't jump, my love," she says when I peer into the murky water, then start backwards.

Ma's skirt is hitched high, crumpled like washing, and her bare legs are the colour of curds. I love how she bats aside the rushes with her willow-wand. Swish-swish. And then, as her leg rises, I spot one. No; two, three, four. Little black squiggles stuck on Ma's leg. As she moves, the ripples become endless water-circles before my eyes.

I remember the morning Pa left. Listening at the top of the stair, hidden and silent. Most of it low and mumbled, then louder, 'Decide who you want to cling to Nell. I've a fancy it's not me.' The tremble in his voice made the hairs on my arms prickle. The thud of the door, after.

"Will it be much longer, Ma?" The noonday sun is stinging my face. We're always here in summer, just as the fetid stench swells to its worst. Cows graze beside us, the stink of new pats mixing with the boggy haze. I pinch my nose, but it does no good.

"Keep hold of that keg!" Ma calls from the far side. I thought she wasn't watching, but Ma always seems to know what I'm doing even when her back is turned.

I looked really closely at Ma's legs once, when we returned home and she was sponging the bloody streaks away. Three tiny red marks, like wheel-spoke patterns on her skin. The blood kept oozing from the marks long after. I stared

at her, holding questions, but she just stroked my hair. 'It doesn't hurt, honestly.'

Ma unhooks the keg from her waist and gives it to me. A little bung seals it, but I'm still unsure; picture the slimy leeches slithering inside, gorged on Ma's blood. She takes the empty keg from my lap. We always fill more than one in high summer; she won't hear of stopping before. "Good lass. Now run along to Dr. Palmer."

Dr. Palmer gives us shiny coins for our leeches. For years now, always Dr. Palmer. I like going because his parlour is filled with strange jars and urns. Seeing him makes me think of Pa. Dr. Palmer smiles at Ma and she laughs like she used to when Pa was around. Sometimes Ma delivers them on her own and it's like she's forgotten herself when she comes back. I wonder if Dr. Palmer has some secret magic; perhaps he turns leeches into gold. He has a grander house than us, after all.

I set off, my boots slurping through the spongy grass. But then I turn around, shield my eyes from the sun-glare bouncing off the water. "Ma, is Pa coming home one day?" I hesitantly call. Swish-swish. She faces the hills, her back towards me.

It's so still I hear flies darting by my ears. I think she hasn't heard me at all. "He'll be back when all the leeches are gone." There were fewer every summer, I'd spotted that.

"So, if the leeches were gone, we'd not go to Dr. Palmer for coins anymore?"

"Precisely, my love." And Ma wipes her brow. Swish-swish. The ripples continue, and I know, the bites too. My heart swells at the thought of Pa's return. I like kind Dr. Palmer, but he's not a patch on my Pa.

I stride faster, the loaded keg tucked beneath my arm. "Hurry back, Bridget. I'll fill the next while you're gone!" Ma gives her blood willingly, as easily as Dr. Palmer's coins land in our hands. And so we'll gather, keg after keg, until we find no more.

A Pillow of White Roses

Ada's keen eyes don't follow her hands, but the lace. Between her deft fingers the bobbins skim, click-click, click-click. A pattern of roses, so many times the same, but fashionable ladies love them. She knows her lace will sell.

As the evening draws in, a sea-wind builds, taunting the shutters. The fire flairs in sudden drafts. She glances up, listens, resumes.

Ada's life, like the returning grip of winter, is as it will always be. The flowers grow across the pillow beneath her hands. Her exquisite lace is as intricate as a snowflake. Her hearthside warmth, a refuge against the restless skies.

Another day and another night at sea for Owen. Where he's always been. The years have leant kindnesses and pained them with troubles. She's used to the absences, the company of her thoughts as the bobbins busy her. Being reunited, like the swell of the tides, was never assured.

Ada's mother had given her the silver bobbin, had pressed it into Ada's hand by the range one long ago afternoon. Even now, if she closes her eyes she can smell treacle cakes warming in the oven. 'Ada, this was given to me by my Mam. It's as old as the hills.'

The green bobbin, a reminder of the great storm. Lacemaking to fill time as gales buffeted the walls, Ada had noticed it was missing. Fretful, she'd searched by flickering lantern-light. It was lost. Until that is, the day after, when the villagers turned out to inspect the damage. Heading back indoors, she'd spotted it, like an emerald in renewed sunlight. It became her lucky one. For Owen had returned; not lost with the trawlers, like other men.

The blue bobbin was a gift for their first and only child, born on a dappled September morning. Sweet Eveline had led a simple life, had drifted with her

moods, not against them. Eventually, had left one day with a travelling mason and never returned. Another absence; a quiet cove in Ada's heart which can't be filled, no matter with what.

As the bobbins move, click-click, click-click, Ada fends aside the whispers of fear. Her task, a defence against the resident knot in her belly. She listens to the rain thrashing, the shutters rattling their hinges, the rising wind pushing against the door.

Ada lifts the green bobbin to her lips and kisses it, just in case, then resumes her lace. The roses are spreading their petals, leaves and thorns, ever wider. She decides to finish it the next day, when Owen returns safely once more.

Clove, Ceruse and Cochineal

My gaze slides past the dressing-table mirror to sweeping greenery beyond. As Esther applies ceruse layer by layer, I seek distraction. This, an accustomed performance, a rich palette adorning my youth. But as a flourishing debutante, I crave more. The illumination of centre stage.

My waxed, powdered hair rises in a perfectly arranged crown. Monsieur Le Saux commands a high price for the best styling in the county. My first portrait, hanging in the long gallery, is the finest seen. Sapphire eyes cast down others; ladies who cannot afford Le Saux.

"Nearly finished ceruse, my Lady." All trace of flesh-tint gone; my shapely lips deepen against seamless ice. "Please be still for brows." I sigh. She begins delicate strokes of burnt clove, protruding my brows like two taut bows.

My thoughts slip to last season when a winter flurry coated the blossoms. The first time I'd seen him. A fan-flick had caught his attention, a returning glance to his flawless features. We'd talked, I'd played a little. Had hoped for chance as the candlelit evening meandered. But her peach-gloved hand, proffered, had been taken. Like a snowy owl tracking a hare, I'd watched them dance. Opportunity gliding away with each swish-step-swish of Arabella's shoes.

I adjust the fall of my skirts, sip a little Manzanilla. My agitated mind loops. Esther presses Spanish wool to my cheeks, daubing cochineal-colour into equal coral globes. "My Lady, this shade becomes you well."

I study the effect, fear that Arabella's cheeks will be rosier, her brows more arched. So much time served, yet I twitch with dissatisfaction. "Would my Lady like a patch also?"

"No, Esther, this'll do well enough." My neck aches in its pose. As I

arrange my cloak, my speeding pulse tells that it's not enough. The powder, clove, ceruse, and cochineal. I need yet more. Arabella confined to the wings; her twirling feet stilled.

I call Esther back, breath catching in my stays. "I'd like a patch after all. Quickly, a heart!" She gums the shape to my left cheekbone, a clear signal to any bachelor. It stands prominent, coal on alabaster. Arabella, no doubt, would not stoop to such a show.

An image alights; the man who commands all attention amidst even the liveliest soirées. It's my hand that he takes, my heels tripping across the floor to the spirited rhythm. He may be Arabella's desire, but with another fan-flick and a flash of my black heart, he'll become mine first.

This night, the owl will trap the hare, and end it.

The Making of 'Madam Geneva'

She slaps down a grubby coin onto the polished counter. Mr. Snell swipes it at once, adds it to the bulging pocket of his apron. "There you go, ma'am." The jug's put before her, another one. Her eyes try to fix on it. Eyes already red-rimmed, hand already shaking as she lifts it to her mouth.

Mr. Snell had taken a delivery late, from a new chap down the way. This batch was a bit cheaper, but only just a bit. He doesn't know why and he didn't ask. Perhaps a little more acid, perhaps a little turpentine. "It's good stuff, make no mistake," the man had said, grinning like a victorious bounty-hunter. He'd tapped a barrel and nodded purposefully to prove its worth.

She drains the jug, wipes her mouth on her sleeve. "I ain't fit for 'em. What little 'uns deserve a Ma like me?" Mr. Snell doesn't answer. Has heard it all a hundred times over.

"Can I get you another?" The new stuff's gone down well. Mr. Snell knew it would. No one who came in expected more, cared for more. Always a penny and it worked the same. Scorched your throat, filled your belly, lightened your head. An elixir for escape; who wouldn't want it.

"I shouldn't..." Her head lolls, a gin-tear trickles down one ruddy cheek. She scavenges in her pocket, finds another coin. "It's me last," she says, flipping it across.

At nightfall most of Mr. Snell's regulars leave, but a few always stay. A gin-soaked smoke cloud floats between them, settles on hair and cloth. Permeates cloth to skin beneath. If you leave, you always take some away. Carry it home, settle against your pillow with the stain of Madam Geneva still upon you.

"Last orders, ladies and gents!" Mr. Snell's apron is heavy with the weight of fortunes lost.

She doesn't look up; her head, lying on folded arms. The half-drained jug is at her elbow. As her eyelids droop, her lips fail to trap a dribble of saliva.

As Mr. Snell bolts the shop's door, darkness has settled like a magician's cloak over the alley. Those left inside can hide until dawn reveals their whereabouts. "Off to the back with you, folks," he says, collecting the last empties.

Mr. Snell's back room, a mere step up from a stable, awaits the dead drunk. She staggers through in a juniper-scented haze, legs unsteady as a barely-grown urchin. "Thanks… Mister, for the bed." And she guffaws, makes a grab for his arm. He watches her collapse gracelessly onto the straw. "Won't ya… join me?" she calls, but he's already gone.

As Mr. Snell heads upstairs to his lodgings, the takings chink pleasingly within their pouch. His wife will ask if there's enough for a nice dinner on Sunday and he'll tell her there is. He'll ruffle his sleeping son's hair, as every night. Lastly, he'll wash the gin-and-smoke stink away and pull on a clean nightshirt.

When Mr. Snell's tired head settles against the pillow, all trace of Madam Geneva will fade away.

Part II - 1800s

Flakes of Gold

When I first lay down my pickaxe in the shadow of the mountains, my heart leapt. Anyone would have thought they were cut through with gold. Rumour and promise had brought me. A rush of hope through my jaded veins. I had my tools, my sturdy back, and my taut, young muscles. More, I had Louisa.

I'd persuaded her to come with me and to this day, I'm not sure how. 'Are you sayin' there's somethin' out there for me, Mick?' she'd asked, chin tilted in defiance. Until that point, we'd been following the same path, moving together like leaves on a stream.

I'd pushed a little more. 'This is our chance, darlin'. Everybody's talking about it. Nuggets as big as your palms, there for the takin'.'

Since the early days at the camp, I've tried a few tricks to bring me luck. Every night, I kiss the same cent and push it under my pillow. In the morning I pull up my braces with the left first, then the right. I place my hat backwards and twist it round. Louisa just huffs. 'I don't hold no store with all that,' she quips.

It's funny how everything seems to be worth a shot out here. You wouldn't have believed it in your old life, whatever that was. Back east, Louisa had spent her days serving a well-to-do family and I'd hustled for opportunities. Some days loading the boats; others, labouring in town.

It's a morning of unending drizzle that never wholly turns to rain. The sky, a full sweep of grey, hangs low over us as we work. My shovel is slippery as I tip load after load into the chute. The gravel, churning and rattling on its hypnotic path, bears the weight of all our hopes.

We break for lunch, sheltered by the spruce. Louisa has sent with me some cloth-wrapped bread and cold beef. The meat is paper thin, but she'd

remembered a little pepper. ‘Can I top you up, Mick?’ The camp’s kettle has boiled, thank the Lord. Everything washed down with earth-coloured coffee that makes your lips curl.

As the sun dips behind the ridge, we wind down. Shovels and chutes will be stilled until sun up. My hands are stiff and I flex against weary limbs, but the laden river will flow beneath the stars, waiting for us.

Heading to the cabins, yellow warmth from the windows greets me. A murmur of voices as the men trudge home; looking forward, perhaps, to a scalding bath before the fire. Hot food, company, then slumber. I sleep well out here. Our old dockside apartment had never been quiet, not even in darkness when rats foraged and lone men returned from illicit dealings. On the worst nights, the shouts and scuffles of gangs had jolted us awake.

Now, as I listen to the gentle stir of the pines and the distant water, I slip away like a bear to deep rest.

I remember that first night I’d returned and Louisa had made the cabin all neat. She’d stoked the fire, had even managed to find us a little supper. I’d come through the door, sodden, and she’d reached up and pulled me towards her. “Oh darlin’, you’re drenched,” she’d murmured. Her hair, and her skin, had smelt of woodsmoke and resin.

Now Louisa sits beside the crib, rocking it with her foot as she peels carrots in a bowl on her lap. For a moment, I listen from the doorway to her soft humming. It’s been harder for her since Faye arrived and now, she works all the more. Washes laundry for the men with the babe strapped on her back. ‘We can’t afford for me to sit idle, that’s plain,’ she’d said when Faye was only weeks old. I’d stroked her downy head as she lay against Louisa’s shoulder and knew it was so. My strived for dollar was not enough. Unless the flakes of gold turned into boulders, it was never going to be.

I go closer, see Faye sleeping. “So, how much today?” Louisa quietly asks in a tone that already knows the answer.

“Enough flakes for a dollar.” I reach out and brush Faye’s cheek with my fingertips. How I long to say something different, just this one time.

Louisa looks up at me with weighted eyes. “Oh, Mick. I wish I’d never come.”

“Tomorrow could be when I strike big…” I begin, already knowing I’ve missed it. Like Midas, missed an opportunity I may have had to hold everything. A distant gleam which is already tarnishing.

She sighs. “There have been too many tomorrows.”

“But you’d never want to… leave?” My body feels as stone as I sit beside her.

A pause. “I have been thinking. I’ll write to my sister, ask if she’ll take us in. But Lord knows she could do without it.”

“Oh, Louisa, no.” I swallow against tightness in my throat, parched from toil.

And I wonder what I’d do without them, alone here beneath the shadow of the mountains. Anyone would have thought they were cut through with gold. If you’d heard the tales and read the promises of glory. If you’d talked to the men in the dapper jackets who’d said, ‘There’s nothin’ to lose! Head for the golden hills!’ A land of plenty. The gilded rocks, the rivers running with dollar bills, the fortunes waiting if only you’d take that chance.

Louisa stares at the crib. “It was only ever your dream, Mick.”

But now, I know, there won’t be enough. As I gaze at Faye, feel Louisa beside me, hope leaches from my veins. Everything feels base.

One dollar a day for a few flakes of gold. I have far more than I arrived with, but even that is seeping through my fingers.

A Climmer's Chance

A sharp salt wind whips at my back as I prepare the ropes. The dizzying rocks below, taunting the edge of my vision. Hidden, revealed, hidden by the stirring waves. Asking the same of me each day. It does get easier; it is getting easier. The first time, like jumping into the promise of death.

But I'm still here. "If you find yourself flush, Henry, I'll be waiting. Not a fortune, mind, just enough to see us wed," Amelia declared one morning as we parted ways at the church-gate. Not really the place for talk of wages, but it had to be said. As sure as the Kittiwakes circled the foam, I believed she'd wait.

As I fasten my armguard the lads prepare to lower me over. The eggs sit ready, nestling in nooks like delicate treasure. They may not shine, but they gleam as gems in our eyes. I test the rope's anchorage, it holds strong. Nearly there, check my helmet-strap one last time. Tales of loose rock tumbling onto climmers and cracking bone, enough for caution in the toughest. "Ready, Henry?"

"Yes. Let me down."

The cliffs are as white as the lace on Amelia's best frock. Like the pendulum of a crazed clock, I begin to bounce to and fro. My practised legs spring me out, weight carries me back. I pluck the eggs one by one, place them in my bag. Shut out the raucous cries of the Guillemots as I intrude. "We make a shilling a dozen," I once told her, lifting my chin with pride.

My young knees are robust enough, but the twinge of impact still hits. As the rope chafes my salt-stung palms, I reach for the last batch. Amelia had taken my hands once, touched the soreness with her soft fingers. "I've a balm that could soothe those," she'd said, kindly. I think I'd welcome a little caring

now. My first lass had found another fella; I didn't want to give Amelia time to do the same. The bag bulges with bounty; ascent beckons.

The chaps are leaning into it like a tug o' war as I meet the cliff top. "Greetings, Henry!" Morris exclaims, puffing from the effort.

"Good to be back, lads."

I unload my haul into the waiting baskets. "Nice work. You'll have a gold watch in your pocket yet!" Morris says, cuffing my arm. "Time to go again?"

Checking my helmet and armguard, I pause. The north wind is lurching, the clouds thickening behind us. For a moment, I consider it. The baskets are not yet full. I listen to the waves beating below. "Ah, not today. Weather's turning."

The gulls will lay more, as plainly as I'll return tomorrow. I offer Morris a wry grin. "I'm better use to her alive, gold watch or no."

"Aye. As sure as eggs is eggs!" And Morris laughs, just as the rising wind whips his cap away to the blue.

Strewing the Herbs

Ma always tells me it's hopeless. 'You can't conjure a man like that. Not with perfumes or dewy cheeks. Only with yourself, Clara.' I'd look at her then, eyebrows raised. 'Well, any man worthy of you,' she'd add.

I scatter some Pennyroyal. My broom sweeps back and to, back and to, pressing it into the boards. A minty fragrance prickles my nose. This one reminds me of Grand-mama. She'd insisted upon it. 'Why Pennyroyal?' I'd asked, bare grown enough to reach Ma's apron.

'It's the best for bugs, our Clara!' And she'd laughed, scurrying her fingers along my arm.

As I sweep, I wonder what he'd think if he ever came here. Would we stand beside the window looking across the garden to the woods. Would he catch my waist and nuzzle my hair, and whisper, 'We'll be in our own place one day.'

"Here, Clara. A bit of Tansy." Ma has shuffled in without me noticing. Her knees aren't as steady these days, her skin translucent as Honesty. Latent sadness swells a little more. Without me, she'd be alone. "Thinking about that young chap again, eh?" Her eyes have lost none of their spark.

I feel my cheeks bloom. "Thanks, Ma." A mother sees far more than what is plainly visible. As I work the herbal Tansy into the floor, I try to focus. It seems that I cannot escape it, whether awake or no. My yearning, like a shoot pushing forth for sunlight. "And Camomile should finish it off nicely."

"I leave it up to you, Clara. My nose is not what it once was." She pauses and sniffs. "A pleasant enough blend, I think." And then she's gone again.

I strew the Camomile., thoughts drifting as wind-blown seeds. Every time I think of him, it's hard. Every time I don't think of him, it's harder. I crush the flowers with my broom, releasing the familiar apple-scent.

Ma appears once more. “A letter just came for you, dear.”

I don’t recognise the hand, but I slice it open. The words stop me; a sunburst to my soul. “He’s invited me to dine with him, Ma.” As I breathe it in, anticipation swells like a rain-soaked bud.

Her eyes widen; she nods. “Well, there’s a thing.”

My mind rushes ahead, leaping to the time and place I wish to be. I shall bathe in rose petals. A Ma can’t know everything, after all.

“I’ll wear my best gown to the wedding!” she calls through the open doorway. I hear laughter receding down the hall. She still surprises me, even now.

Putting the broom away, I consider my work. The parlour brims with fragrance; a pungent blend of all the herbs I know best. Of the herbs that Grand-mama knew and Ma knows best.

If I were to live somewhere else, with him, it would surely be the same. I smile then, and new joy takes root.

Bread or Blood, 1830

Hayricks burn up the night from our anger. Many such nights have passed but I'm here again, my stomach a hollow. "To the next!" a comrade calls out. His eyes reflect the leaping flames. The wheeled foe threatens to force us aside for good.

We set our torches to carts and barn-roofs, fuelled by defiance; without me, without us all, we've lost. I see our sparse larder, see Rosina's efforts to fill the children's bellies. "When will it be over, Jonas?" she asks, wringing her apron with wan hands.

An orange-glow pattern spreads against the darkness. Wary onlookers gather. Their eyes reflect the mob. "Join us for another night?" my friend asks. He has a wife, like me. Nippers, like me. Zeal scorching through his gut, like me.

The few coins that chink in my pocket, a daily sign. "Yes," I say, heat searing my chest.

Threshing machines, the wheeled foe, in ever larger numbers. We see mechanical parts in place of muscles and flails, grain flowing from a chute like golden water. We are but the chaff, swept away. The land, our livelihood; the wheat harvests, our bounty.

This night, I'm more afraid. I watch the destruction with smoke-stung eyes. Rumours of men rounded up for jail or one-way passage to wild corners of the world. Letters, signed Captain Swing, pushed under doors in the quiet before dawn. 'Bread or Blood' we declare, but will the landlords yield as fires alight around. Empty pockets, empty trenchers, for them not ever known.

I return to Rosina. "Is it over now, Jonas?" Her eyes reflect my ash-flecked face. I kiss her in place of reply.

Exhaustion bites and I fall against my pillow. Forcing aside the burn of hunger, pray that I wake to an answer.

Trailing Through the Mist

"Show me where you found him," she demands, chin tilted to the sky.

The squire points with his cane. "Just there, by that tree." She steps closer, stares at the unblemished ground. A quiet place, stirred only by the sweeping valley winds.

"They said you overlooked it." Her voice does not falter, despite this man's bearing. The cut of his jacket and the glint of his fob-watch. All of it, unreal as dough which fails to rise. "You discovered my husband but the day after."

He shifts in his boots, polished like a millpond. "That is so, madam, but simply because I was entirely unaware. I assure you of my regret."

"Tell me how it was."

He hesitates, adjusts his gloves. "My carriage followed a trail of spilt flour. The mist was so dense that it served to keep us on the road. My driver saw and heard no one until we arrived home."

"Did you not wonder about the flour, why it was there?"

"There was no reason to question. The road was empty of anyone but us," he replies, both hands on the silver pommel.

Her face is as a statue; unreadable to him. "So, it leaked from the sack, like an endless white rope?" she presses.

"Well, yes, I suppose you could deduce that." He wonders why this matters. All traces had long disappeared in the morning rain.

She's silent for a moment. "I want you to cut this tree down."

"But madam…" As he speaks, the hairs at his nape prickle. Her eyes appear to have changed from blue to green. Or were they green before? A chill spreads downwards to his gut; his boots are dead-weighted.

"Cut it down, sir."

He considers her mind, pummelled as it must be, by shock. Warily, "I do

not think that will serve any purpose."

"You killed my husband. Your carriage swerved this tree and struck him. Is that not so?"

His throat is tightening. "We did swerve around the tree, but…"

"And the next day, there he lay. And his flour-sack beside him, yes?"

"There was a sack, I think. We could not help that it was misty, madam."

She straightens, lifts her face to his. "If you don't cut it down, I'll do it myself. Then I shall cut down every tree on your land. And worse shall follow."

"Do not threaten me." He swallows hard, blinks against sudden blurred vision. He's heard of the wise women; that they dwell all around, keeping themselves hidden. How they appear a sudden at times of death.

As his sight clears, she's already far into the distance. He thinks he can hear a voice, still. 'Worse shall follow, for all your days.' But the wind is building, and perhaps it is that.

His legs are shaking as he glances at the tree. The accident, the night before, still muddled in his mind. She seemed clearer than he, almost as if she'd seen it. 'For all your days,' whispers again in his ear.

He whips around. But she's gone, and the horizon is empty.

Somehow, the squire knows that he'll see her green eyes again; and the miller who died beneath the carriage-wheels won't ever be forgotten.

Pit Brow Lass

Beneath my shawl, my hair's tidy and clean. Dark too, but not as pitch as the coal dust embedded under my nails. My lips are pressed closed, but I can still taste ash.

When he came home after a shift, he'd circle me with his arms and kiss my forehead, leaving a sooty smudge like a priest's mark. It made me smile as I washed; I always needed to soap that patch over again.

My face is dirtier now. Me and the girls use clear jelly on our lashes to ease the rinsing, but even after a bath it's still in the corners of our eyes. Little globs of inkiness. I wonder, if they tipped us up and shook us, would particles descend unceasingly, settling like a smoke stain.

I'd worried about him being down the pit. All the colliers' wives knew how men had been taken before. The dark belly of the earth was an unknown world where we wouldn't feel the sun on our faces. 'Don't thee fret, lass,' he'd say, 'I'm not going off to war.'

Annie's making us laugh again. Chatting's not permitted, but you can get away with joking a little. She's even chancing her luck by softly singing; strumming along on her shovel like it's a banjo. But we're all back to it before the last note; sifting with our bare hands through the coal-laden belt, deftly extracting dirt like flotsam in a black sea.

As I remove my shawl at day's end, my glance falls upon his cap on the peg, still just where it's been since then. My soot-stained fingers caress the coarse cloth. It's something I won't come to clean, in case the scent of him is forever washed away.

Beyond Bearing

The horse-drawn cart trundles closer and I watch the rush-bearers approaching. As they parade beside the cart, their white shirts are stark in the sunlight. My giddy heart thuds with the drums, my limbs tremble. Near holding my breath, I peer over the crowd in front of me, searching.

Will he be here?

The previous day, for many of us girls, had been spent in the decorating. My knife had flicked through rushes and flowers; the barn-floor, strewn with scented offcuts. We'd gossiped and giggled. Anticipation had swelled like the onset of .

Most of us now have sore hands to show for it. But the fragrance reaches me on the breeze and colourful petals burst in the sunlight, repaying all our efforts. The rush-cart towers over the villagers, resplendent.

I seek only Matthew. So many young men uniformly dressed; garlands upon their heads, flags in hand, ribbons about their sleeves. Their high-spirited shouts mingle with music from the accompanying band of players.

Ladies and children beside me jostle for a better view. I plant my feet firmly, square my shoulders. And then he's here. Walking before the cart, smiling and waving. My stomach folds in on itself. I resist a response which threatens to burst into the summer air. Perhaps he will see through me to where my desperate heart beats a double rhythm.

All too soon, the cart has passed and the crowds' attention diverts. The Morris-dancers, with their ankle bells, prompting us to join them. I propel upwards on my toes; try to spot him beyond the cart. But the rush-bearers have all disappeared from view.

Matthew's betrothed to a girl from one of the hillside cottages. It's common

knowledge all around. I've seen her. Clenched my nails into my palms at the sight of them together. Shed angry tears at the thought of their embrace. Cursed at his imagined sweet words in her ear.

I don't care to speak her name; if I did, it would be spat forth like poison.

Weaving through the crowd, I follow the cart up the street so that I may glimpse him one more time. The snatches I have are never enough; my bereft soul needs more, ever more.

I imagine her face; radiant and proud. My stomach folds in on itself with sickness. The image begins to swirl and morph.

And I see the knife again, shiny and green-stained from the stems. Only now, it's poised in my clenched fist; raised high, to strike.

Silver-Pockets Pete

Pete's so used to the stench that he smells nothing. Not tanners' muck, butchers' muck, people's muck. In his world, down in the night-time sewers, every sense is alert but his deadened nostrils. For a practised Tosher, the finds await the taking. At moonrise he scours for the gleam of metal, or flashes of colour amongst sludge-brown filth. The treasures of rich folk cast aside.

The other Toshers call him Silver-Pockets; Pete's luck had held since he was a young man first tipped into the grime. This night, desperation sits on his shoulders. Pete's youngest child, Betsy, was weak with sickness. He'd left Georgia frantic, trying to settle Betsy beside her with only watery soup in their bellies again. As he'd faced the bedroom door, Georgia had grabbed his arm. 'Please, Pete, find us something tonight.'

If only it were that simple. He knows the likely places after all the years, delves his arm elbow-deep in stinking water, hoping to feel a solid shape between his fingertips. Coins wedge in familiar places, like seeds stuck between teeth. All the best Toshers know where to find them, it was just a matter of being the first.

Sometimes, Pete's loyal gang-mate divvied up the finds. 'You take the next; the one after's mine, no funny ideas.' And he'd fix Pete with hollow eyes, death-black in the lantern light.

When he most needs a find, it's even harder. The rats are having a better night. In his sieve Pete sees fish bones, globules of fat, and lumps of ash. Everything the well-dressed folk above don't want; spat out and washed away. Move on, try another spot. The lantern-light flickers against the tunnel, casting ghostly patterns. Dead Toshers of years past. "Got ya!" A plain hatpin which might yield some coin. Not much, but something. He recalls

Georgia's colourless face pleading for reassurance, Betsy's cries into the pillow. The city's rubbish was their bounty, but she was not proud. When it came to the nippers, Georgia was above nothing. As was he.

And then, somewhere further up, sluices open. Rushing water is upon Pete before he can prepare, the thundering force topples him. His sieve is washed from his hands, the lantern goes out. Darkness. He fights to stand against it, but rising water, and coldness, engulf him.

The space fills quickly. Pete's head slams against the roof-curve. His final sense, of foul water drenching his face, filling his nostrils. Has no choice but to breathe the stench of filth again, after so long. The single hatpin in his pocket, the only sliver of wealth carried with him. Just one more man to join the Toshers' graveyard, one more soul to flicker across the dark tunnel walls.

Between the Green Aisles

Pulled hops are falling from the bines towering around me. As I gather them, I'm warmed by a high sun piercing the leaves. Sheltered in a golden-green tunnel, bustling with workers.

I run my wrist across my brow, stretch my back; gather again. It'll take all the day and more to strip the bines, but I came keenly to it. Left the leaden streets of home behind, as I do each time harvest beckons.

Gathering hops absorbs me entirely. Here, I forget the curling, coal-fog and the matchstick kids. The bony cat from the tenement above, pressing against my skirts and purring like machine thrum. 'Out of my kitchen with ya,' I'd say. There'd be no scraps, and the purr would rumble on.

At night in my lodgings, I listen to rain rolling off the barn roof. My skin twitches against fresh straw. In the stillness, my thoughts drift backwards. Our thin-mattress bed, mine, and Eddie's, with me lay against the wall. Dampness; smutty air seeping into the bedroom through a split pane. The cold, touching my face like winter's fingertips, even in Spring.

It's waiting for me at harvest end; my other realm, my other self. The old pie-cart with its worn wheels that catch in ruts. Me, shouting at the same lass who stuffs two in her pocket each week, then runs. 'Oi, that's tuppence!' But my voice is lost to the drifting smog.

And at sundown, pushing my cart home with oniony hands. Cold suppers with Eddie at our little table overlooking the yard. I miss that. The way he smiled; face heat-blasted from toil at the foundry. 'They really aren't bad, darlin',' he'd say as we'd finish the limp-pie leftovers.

Here, in the fading light, the hop baskets are swelling, spilling. 'Pull no more poles!' comes the foreman's call. Early evening drizzle is muting colour. I breathe deeply, unclog my sooty lungs. Pine and resin? Earth and citrus?

The air feels like nothing else I know.

Back at the barn, my limbs are spent, but I venture outside again. Under the harvest moon, the aisles of bines are a silver-green tunnel, quiet as a nave. I listen to the settling birdsong and watch the sky fade.

The road back to home waits. Like the ripening of the hops each summer, pulls me to it. The leaden streets, the curling coal-fog. And Eddie; most of all, Eddie.

When I finally lie upon the straw and close my eyes, green turns to grey, blends to black. Pine-citrus fades from the base of my throat as I taste old smoke. But the chimneys of my mind, the chimneys of home, are not yet here. I breathe deeply, yet more deeply, and fall away.

Part III - 1900s

Forging the Links

I began making chains as a mere rod of a girl. My young hands, soft and pliable, worked the glowing links from sunup to twilight. Youthful muscles, not broad enough then to pump the bellows as now. After, Ma dunked us, me, and my sisters. She doused our smoky hair. 'I'll never wash the forge out of you girls!' she'd laughed. I'd scrubbed my nails and held them up for inspection as the water deepened to night.

And now I have my chance, my time. The call to strike for fair wages is uniting us, women one and all. Our voices are finding strength. My roughened hands are idle for the first time in years, my hair is slick with rain. The soles of my boots aren't thick with ash, but puddle drenched. We sing as we walk home from the meeting hall. Striding side-by-side, elbows joined, it's like nothing will ever be as before. My voice adds to the echo of our rallying song, my laughter alloys with theirs.

The village air is clearer without the forge fires. When Ma hung out the laundry all those days ago, I'd watch it swing in the breeze like sails. 'While the wind blows the other way, the linens won't stink!' she'd grin, tucking unruly hair beneath her cap. 'You can fetch it in, Bessie, it's your turn.' It always seemed to be my turn. I was the eldest, trying to help my sisters learn.

Behind Ma's smile lay burden. I see that now more plainly. Of day-long toil, of trying to keep the hearth bright in winter, of filling our plates enough to quell simmering hunger. Pa, up at the town forge from dawn to sundown, we barely saw. I'd glance at the low-lit lines of his face, see the rawness of his palms; he was all sinew and bone. He seemed sturdy to me, as solid as the iron we all knew so well, but eventually he weakened, and was gone. Ten winters ago, ten years of memories alone. And then Ma, beaten down to a whisper of herself, left us too.

Pausing in the doorway of our empty forge, I check that all is well for the night. Hear the clink-clink of hammers, the puff of the bellows, boot-heels over stone. Absorbed by the absence of it, listen only to the wind murmuring down the cold chimney.

We've marched on a path untrodden; women of the forges out on the streets, so many of us, together. The song in my heart is pounding louder. If we persist, if we can win, new links in the chains can start. The coin I dream of in my work-heavy hands would weigh like nuggets of gold.

Another Sarsaparilla Day

As I pour molten sugar onto the bench, steam swells back at me. I picture expectant, bonny faces peering over the counter-top, hands scrabbling in pockets for a penny. And I never tire; not of the making, nor of opening the shop door to a rush of excitement.

The sugar-lava spreads and settles, waiting for my magic. This time, it's got to be Sarsaparilla. And red colouring, as bright as new blood. My spatula blends and sweeps, transforming the plain glucose. Vanilla notes from the Sarsaparilla steam envelop me; I glory in it, know that the children would love this part.

If only they could see me at work. They find us behind the counter every day, me and my Walter, to sell them their wishes. But out of hours, I am but a secret sorceress. My creations appear in ever more fanciful colours and flavours from some mysterious place beyond the shop. 'Mrs. Gregson, how do you make it blue?' 'Mrs. Gregson, how do you make them star-shaped?'

I dip my gloves in powdered sugar and begin to knead the mixture. Glossy and tactile, like a soft, stretchy muscle. In the early days my arms would ache, but now I fold and refold with ease. Pop-pop-pop. As I press the bubbles out, I smile at the thought of them hearing it. 'Your sweets are really noisy, Mrs. Gregson!' But of course, it won't ever be. Sounds that fill the workshop, but float no further; never as far as our empty rooms.

I've made Sarsaparilla bullets many times. But there's always the child who's never tried them. Of all the jars in our shop, too many perhaps, there'll be something new to one of them. As the years pass, I see siblings arrive, older ones move on. My new sweets have willing tasters; my old ones are a comfort. 'What's your favourite?' I'm often asked.

And I say, 'These, that I made this very morning.' Because sun-up is my

favourite time of day.

As I feed the mixture through the cutter, I glance at the clock. Still an hour until opening. A few children always arrive at once; sometimes they're waiting, noses to the glass, as I flip the 'open' sign. My skilled arm works the handle; the bullets emerge like hundreds of ruby jewels.

Once I've filled the waiting jars and arranged them on the shelf, all is done. The workshop sits quiet; the house beyond, too. Walter, long gone on his daily round to collect supplies. Word of a new flavouring has sparked our interest, as it often does.

Our smallest upstairs room, overlooking the yard, is the quietest of all. The cradle that was passed to me, by my own dear mother, still lies empty. And it may always be so, as my heart oft tells me. A question that not even a true sorceress, should she be out there, could answer.

Mr. Hobson's Choice

"Mr. Hobson?" the doctor calls. With only a clinical towel about my waist, I'm unflinchingly aware of my naked skin. Thin and insipid, like a skein of hot milk. As I undress behind the screen, the whitewashed walls of the medical room glare in afternoon sunlight. The posters reappear in my mind: 'Your Country Needs You.' My hands are clumsy as I untie laces, unfasten buttons.

A sweat sheen glimmers across the doctor's forehead. I stand tall, step on and off the scales. Weight, height, and chest precisely noted. "All the Hobson men 'ave been strapping five-foot sixers," Pa once said as we sat side by side at the Saturday match. I hope my scrawny frame will pass muster, have not built muscle like Pa did down at the stable-yard.

I walk the length of the room, then hop on each foot. "Smartly, but neatly!" he instructs like an officious teacher. He circles me slowly, studying the expanse of sallow skin with his all-knowing eyes. "Lower your arms."

"A fit young man like you son, it'll be no concern at all," Pa had said, exhaling smoke from behind his paper. I try not to let eagerness take me over. The doctor examines me beneath the towel while I stare at a chart above the desk; even my masculinity won't escape scrutiny.

"Deep breath in." I exaggerate it as he records my youthful lungs. He places the cool stethoscope on my front, on my back. "Deep breath out." The contained heat presses: I almost sense my heartbeat booming into his ears. "Again, Mr. Hobson."

I flex my feet, ankles, and knees. The doctor loosens his necktie, over and over, like a nervous tick. I imagine the sweat trapped beneath his starched coat, how he must surely want to finish as much as I.

"Are you subject to fits of any nature?" As I sit again, the towel feels more

inadequate. Coming close, he examines my head, eyes, ears, mouth, and teeth. I wince inwardly, hope my morning bath was sufficient.

It appears to be over. He sits at his desk while I stand like a man awaiting orders. “You have indications of a squint in your right eye, Mr. Hobson. You are unfit for active service.” He scribbles a signature. Upside down, it looks like an inky cobweb. My mind circles failure, frustration simmers in the hollow of my stomach.

As I reclothe, self-pity lurks like a dead weight. I try not to picture Pa throwing down his paper, his face taut with shame. Rather than bury rejection, I’ll have to hold my head up; will have to recount what the doctor learned through the bareness of my skin. And the very worst of it, I’m not needed at all.

Across Belgian Fields

Stretcher-bearers stumble in the gloom of open country, not fully knowing what lies beneath upon the watery earth. The women and men striving to save half-lost lives know it will not be enough, just as endless weeks before. In the low morning light, another ambulance departs for the field hospital. Beyond, dozens of men lie still among turnips blown out by shellfire.

Beside her, one of the soldiers is trying to speak as the ambulance judders. As a front-line nurse this is her norm. Arriving at the hospital, she prepares. Into her hand from his blackened one, he presses a cigarette tin, patterned like the one Peter always carries. The one she bought for him at the store on Hampton Road.

She works swiftly as casualties are transferred, each man feeling heavier than the last. Wind thrashing against the tent-walls does not muffle agonised moans. She tends methodically; cleans, bandages, soothes. Crimson splashes on her uniform will never wash out, like memories absorbed.

As rain seeps in, the mud outside thickens to ankle deep. After the first bombardments, her hands shook as the stretchers went down; now they hold steady. In this confinement she transforms, becomes immune to unendurable sights. She blinks against flashes of Peter's face in the half-lit features of wounded men. As practicalities overcome, the clock-hands have switched to slow motion.

In calm moments, she imagines stepping out on Peter's arm again, wearing her finest green coat. He liked to take her to the theatre, would pay for the best seats he could afford on a clerk's wage. Betty was the last performance they saw. At the closing scene, she leant her head against his shoulder in the darkness and breathed in Woodbines and cologne.

“Are you there?” A man’s calling against the background hum. Standing close to the bed, she gauges that he is not yet twenty. She gently holds his clammy hand. By his glazed eyes, she senses either shock or morphine. Perhaps both. In minutes, his eyes flicker closed.

She pulls the tin out of her damp pocket. When Peter took out a cigarette, he always winked at her secretively. Then, he would offer one to her. In the lamp-glow of the tent, this tin shines like silver, but her heart is leaden. She squeezes it like a talisman and returns it to her pocket.

“Are you still there?” His voice is weaker. His hair looks familiar, she almost reaches out to touch it. For the briefest moment she believes it is him but knows it cannot be. They are far distant from Peter’s base. Her breath catches: it is dark as mahogany, not like Peter’s. His eyes remain closed, but she leans closer.

“Yes,” she replies. Here, she will remain. When finally, she can sleep, she’ll rush outside into dream-hour rain, take flight, and go to him. Hundreds of miles across Belgian fields to find him safe, until she wakes.

Canary Girl, 1916

When I return home from the factory, my mirrored face is yellow. It's still yellow after I flannel-scrub it, still yellow at dawn, still yellow when morning rain washes over it. If I could magnify my pores, I would surely see infinitesimal yellow pools. Is it soaking into my veins, a TNT-laced infusion. Pulsing through my heart. Red, to orange, to toxic yellow blood.

Beneath my scarf, my hair is tinged ginger-blonde with only a crown of brown. My sunshine hands, steady but charged, move from casing to casing. Lined up in rows of hundreds; a metallic shell-army. All of us performing duties which nobody would want, but there's no one else to do it. If the young men had not gone, we'd never have been asked. The call of the shell crisis came, and we were here on fledgling wings.

One of the girls is waiting for her first child. "D'you think my baby will have canary colours like us, Sylvia?" she asks, her hands cradling the swell beneath her overall. "Try not to worry, Joan." My reply is lost to the cacophonous noise, my hope for her drowned like acid in the tempering milk we're told to drink.

I fill the casing with powder, place the detonator in the top, pat it down. Tap, tap, tap. Each tap, a hair's breadth from blinding reverberation. With sickly dread in my gut, try not to pat too hard. Gulp it down, move to the next.

If I make it through today, I'll still bear the yellow. It cannot be extracted: like the fear, the fatigue, the friendship. Me and the girls, we're all canaries now. When the men return home, the ones that do, we'll have the chance to fly.

Potato-bread and Elephants

I'm making potato-bread again by the pale light from the kitchen window. The wheat supply's gone down with the ships. Sunk by u-boats, so the papers tell us. At least we've got potatoes, loads of 'em. As much potato-bread as any family round here could need.

With all the practice, I'm getting better. Always leave the skin on to keep the goodness, like the booklet says. No peeling. I boil them up, then mash 'em to a pulp like creamy clouds. The muscles in my forearm pull and pinch, but never tire. I focus on nothing, just working those clumps and the soft squidgy sound beneath my masher.

The clatter of cart-wheels passes by out front. It could be the elephant hauling munitions to the dockside again. So many horses taken away to France that we've none left to work for us. Such a sight, like you've never seen. The lady next door said she's called Lizzie, said she put her trunk through a window and pinched someone's supper. A circus elephant, I ask you. Lord knows what's coming next.

I close the oven door with a satisfactory 'clang' and wipe down the table-top as the heat begins to warm the room. The day's brightening and promises something more than the endless rain of late. Perhaps I'll walk into town later, before teatime, when my Gregory finishes his shift. The young lads might be going, but if it wasn't for the older chaps, the place would've closed its gates. We might not have horses, but we've still got steelworkers, thanks be given.

It's only been seven weeks since our David left, but I need to fill time. He looked so young in his uniform and it seemed too bulky for him. And I need to fill spaces; the physical ones around me and more so, the shadowy ones in my mind. They lurk insidiously. I don't want to see what fills them, when it's

quiet and dark. In the night hours I can reach out and curl my arm around Gregory, but in the days I find nothing.

Savoury and comforting, I smell the fresh potato-bread. I peep at it, but it's not quite ready. The kitchen's clean and neat, so I could go out when it's done. I should buy more potatoes. I might even see Lizzie, I think, with a rare wry smile. The strangeness of these times feels as usual now as anything ever has. I don't mind most of it, not really. Only his absence, his distance, and the anguished need for it to end with his safe return.

After the Curtain Falls

I toss down my feather-boa and sink onto the stool. In the light of the mirror's glaring bulbs, my stage face appears garish, askew. I sigh, begin to wipe the layers away. Every night like this. Same words, same steps, same slicked-on smile.

"It's a wonder we've got any cream left in here!" Rhoda sits at the table beside me; her laugh, a balm.

"Well, you can't borrow mine," I say, working the cloth across my forehead. "I need all I can get." Smears of kohl below my eyes like black tears. Bright, rouged cheeks, glistening with dancing sweat. Pillar-box lips, smudged from an evening of song.

I'm aching and tired. So tired; but alive, like my veins are wired to the white bulbs. As I peel off my shoes, the telephone in the corridor rings. "Hey, Lily! It's for you."

Picking it up, I lean my back against the wall. "Hullo?"

"Lily? How marvellous. It's Stuart here."

I pause, purse my not-so-pillar-box lips. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet. I watch your show every week. Must have seen it nigh on five times." He rambles on. "I must tell you; I think you're divine in this show. I'd love to meet you. I'd love to talk about it. Can we meet? I could get you noticed, get you out of there. I know a great bar…"

I find myself laughing. "I don't need rescuing, sir."

"No, think about it, Lily…"

Clunk. I hang up the receiver. "Who was that, Lil?" Rhoda calls through the open door.

"Just some guy. Thinks he can wine and dine me. Save me from a lifetime at The Pavilion."

"Ha!" But as I return to the dressing-room, she doesn't say anything more.

I finish changing. Costume, tap-shoes, stockings. My face is bare and simple again; a palette rinsed of paint. I've replaced the reds, pinks and golds for a simple frock and utilitarian shoes. 'Which is more me?' I mused to Rhoda once.

'A woman can be many things, Lil,' was her response. Maybe she was just more relaxed. About everything.

Someone flicks on the wireless, but it's near drowned out by chatter. Perhaps for the best. More snatches of news we don't really want to hear; is Germany about to show its hand.

Rhoda, like some of the others, is wearing only her brassiere. The small room, now strewn with crumpled cast-offs. But her waist is more nipped in than theirs. "Fancy a bite of supper?" she asks.

"Sure." One of the best times of the week, when Rhoda and I headed out. Had become a routine of sorts. Sometimes, other girls joined us. They were a good bunch, but it wasn't the same.

"Just give me five to make myself decent, Lil."

The outside air is bracing, stark against my skin. The theatre, a cocoon of busyness; sweat and breath, movement and music. I feel the calm; embrace it. "So good to be out."

"Isn't it. And I muffed up the final chorus." She chuckles.

We pass another news board, tomorrow's headline already chalked up. We both know that the other will read it.

I say nothing for a while, but then, "If war is coming, I'd like to do something useful."

"Ah. Entertaining the men would be helpful, no?"

I'd never really thought of life beyond here. The stage, the golden curtain, the poky dressing room with its deep-pile carpet. Me, and my decorated face. My tap shoes with worn out soles. My straggly boa, which Rhoda says reminds

her of a grand old dame. ‘One who’s lost all taste!’

“Besides, if you stay in the show, you’ll get to spend more time with me.” And she hooks her arm through mine. My heart lights brighter than a bulb.

“Now, the cafe on the corner, or the one on the square?”

“You choose. You have impeccable taste.” She smiles. And as we walk together beneath the street lamps, she holds my arm a little tighter.

Where the Sap Flows

A light rain ting-tings on the corrugated roof as Anita and the Lumber Jills work. Sawdust floats in the air, settling on cuffs, scarves, and boots. Only weeks into it, their skills are becoming fine-honed. Cutting and slotting shed sections, like giant jigsaw pieces, repetitive machine noise buzzing in their ears.

"Get the trucks loaded, ladies, preferably before nightfall!" Mr. Bowers shouts, wiping his hands on a rag.

"Ah, shut your ruddy mouth," Doris quietly curses beside Anita, who daren't respond. Anita glances at Mr. Bowers as he patrols the loading area. Pointing, shouting instructions, gesticulating in ever expanding loops. His all-absorbing efficiency spilling into impatience; she knows the signs.

Anita hesitates, her green eyes assessing. No greater weight than usual, but still, several solid loads. She has spoken to no one, but the twinges have niggled for a few days. Just twinges, nothing more. Beneath her brown overalls, a new, hidden life that only she knows of.

It's even too early to tell Bertram, though she anticipated it would be soon. She imagined he'd be pleased, but his work leant him other worries. A bittersweet surprise, perhaps. Her work was a necessary burden too, though she had come to enjoy cycling to the yard, the outdoor space, tea breaks shared over a slice of walnut loaf.

Anita assembles with the others to load the lorries. She knows no other option, her arms straining as the sections are transferred. Trying to hold firm, her legs wobble as the wood bears down, her back sweats beneath its heavy cloth.

"Good work, ladies. Almost done!" Mr. Bowers is animated, his impenetrable gaze doesn't falter.

Anita moves away and sits a sudden, renewed cramps unseen by them all. She hugs herself, wildfire pain spreading across her lower belly. Feels the warm dampness just beginning, embarrassment and panic grappling her into inaction. “Please, help me, Doris.”

As Doris hooks Anita’s arm and gently leads her away, the dark red stain begins to appear on Anita’s overalls. She wishes in that moment that she could go backwards; knows it’s already impossible to repair. Just as a felled tree that crashes to the forest floor, the breaking has been done.

He Who Sees First Lives Longest

On the overcrowded ship, Adam leaves the other men to it on the mess-deck and heads below. His hammock on the lower deck proves comfortable. Encased in his warm rope-leaf, his ears are alert to the Atlantic night. As he dozes, the clunking of loose ice against the ship's sides nudges his semi-consciousness.

His thoughts drift to home, to Mam. She'd written a few weeks ago; Aunt Carol was staying in his vacant room. Odd to imagine her tucked in his sagging bed, listening to the street noises winding down. He wonders if Mam can sleep with the blackouts shrouding her. Before the war, always had a low-lit lamp at her bedside. 'I'll write to you, son!' she'd called, stood on the step to watch his kit-bagged back disappear out of the gate. He'd turned one last time, blown her a kiss, was gone.

Adam sinks further. He sees Mam again, but he's there as well. She's crying, shouting, crying 'til her eyes are as red as embers, but his father doesn't respond and he's taller than Adam remembers, his unshaven cheeks as sharp as barbs. Mam is thinner, frailer, paler. She hunkers as his father's fury descends on them and Adam hears his own voice yelling back, but he doesn't hear the words and the balled-up agony in his chest threatens to burst out like a wave of unspent pain.

He's bolt upright to the alert; the hammock and blankets are just as they were. His brow's dotted with sweat, despite the cold. Action Stations, slamming on him like always; move instantly every time, a near-robotic man.

Must guard his night eyes, keep to the red lights all the way to the upper deck. 'At night he who sees first lives longest.' Soon after you join the crew; now engrained. Adam follows his practised route, hears the ice crashing again as he heads out. All men moving to their stations, the slumbering ship veering

abruptly to life again.

The red lights run out for a stretch; he covers one blue eye with his hand. Keep the night vision. Keep it. White light to red again, look with both eyes. He's climbing higher, nearing his station. Adam's heart is drumming; must focus. Sees his post, must be there, ready. Know what you're facing. His Commander's giving orders; Adam trains his accustomed eyes on him and listens.

As he prepares for whatever has lurched upon them in the dark heart of dawn, Adam thinks of Mam again. In his next letter he'll tell her that he rests well, sleeps every night to the hushing of the waves. That when he closes his eyes, then he can see home.

This collection represents a flash fiction writer at the top of their game. It's extremely polished but there is still variety in the voice and tone. Every story has such beautiful and precise language, such carefully thought out imagery and details, and I enjoyed reading every piece.

Gaynor Jones, author of *Among These Animals*

Christine Collinson's historical flash fiction illuminates corners of English history that we thought we knew. Her well-researched attention to detail is always in service of character and plot, so you can lose yourself in an England that once was.

Sundial Magazine

Christine Collinson's historical flash fiction is beautifully crafted, with not a detail out of place. Her stories have authenticity that is so hard to get right but is achieved effortlessly. Her writing will capture your head and your heart.

Emily Devane, founding editor of FlashBack Fiction