Digging up the Past: Exploring Haunting and Trauma–in and of the Neo-Victorian Novel

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Abstract

This thesis explores haunting in and of the neo-Victorian novel, and representations of female trauma. The thesis consists of two sections: a critical analysis of the way that neo-Victorian texts operate in relationship to their Victorian predecessors to voice historically silenced trauma narratives, which still have relevance in our modern world; and a creative section, the first part of a novel that employs Victorian trauma tropes to tell a story of female suffering and solidarity.

Through a close analysis of neo-Victorian novels and their heroines, including *Alias Grace* and *Fingersmith*, my critical portion explores how trauma is depicted in ways that challenge our perception of the Victorian culture, and that interrogate contemporary culture. Through reference to Victorian texts, such as *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White,* my critical portion will also seek to show how neo-Victorian texts are haunted by their Victorian predecessors, inviting the reader to reimagine the worlds of these originals; but also, to attempt to re-write (or make right) the injustices and traumas that are depicted in these texts.

The creative portion uses Victorian sensation tropes, such as a companion protagonist, a hidden past, and an illegitimacy storyline to explore generational trauma and its impact on the present, and attempts to reinterpret the role and voice of the middle-class Victorian heroine. The story hinges around three women, who have retreated to a solitary cottage for the birth of an illegitimate child. It relates the complex web of relationships between these women and their efforts to step outside of the restraints of a patriarchal system.

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Introduction

This thesis is a response to the "myth of male universality" (Caroline Criado Perez 21), which drowns out female voices and creates a false and one-sided image of the world, and of history–an image which still resonates in modern culture:

> The history of humanity. The history of art, literature and music. The history of evolution itself. All have been presented to us as objective facts. But the reality is, these facts have been lying to us. They have all been distorted by a failure to account for half of humanity–not least by the very words we use to convey our half-truths. This failure has led to gaps in the data. A corruption in what we think we know about ourselves. It has fuelled the myth of male universality. And that *is* a fact. (Criado Perez 21).

Victorian literature was always a significant part of my life, part of the historical narrative of my identity, but also a point of contrast. As a young British woman, there was something delightfully nostalgic about the Victorian era, paired with a mild sense of disdain and condescension over Victorian repression and intolerance. I studied *Jane Eyre* multiple times throughout college and university, and always attention was drawn to the radical and not so radical nature of the novel and its representations of women, the way it rallies against societal limitations on women, while also locking its passionate female voice away in the attic. I was reaching my reading maturity when I discovered female neo-Victorian literature–novels like Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith.* These novels seemed an answer to the patriarchal male perspective that their Victorian predecessors were written from– they exposed the gritty realities of Victorian life and they spoke from an unapologetically female voice. Most

strikingly, the female characters in these novels were not judged by male standards or perspectives, that "myth of male universality". Simultaneously though, their relatable female characters and familiar themes pointed to the impact of female silencing in our world today, the ongoing repercussions of centuries of silence. Without a robust sense of female pasts, they prompted me to ask, how can we really know ourselves today? Through this thesis, I attempt to put female voices and experience at the forefront; to make women not only visible, but central to action, to plot, to character growth.

There are multiple definitions of neo-Victorian literature. For the purpose of this thesis, I am ascribing to the notion that this genre is one that attempts to reimagine and reinterpret the Victorian period. Inevitably, this reinterpretation brings with it ethical considerations, including the attempt to re-right or heal past wrongs, through a process of talking back to Victorian injustices. The novels I discuss in the critical portion of this thesis, and use as a model for my creative portion, can be read as an attempted corrective to the marginalised female voices of Victorian literature. Yet, as my critical portion discusses, what these texts often do, is show the impossibility of ever undoing past wrongs while also emphasising ongoing and prevailing injustices in contemporary society. As Sarah Waters stated about her novels:

> I've sometimes thought that it's (neo-Victorian fiction) a way of addressing issues that are still very, very current in British culture, like class and gender, and submerged sexuality or sexual underworlds. Things that we think we're pretty cool with, and actually we're not, and we keep wanting to go back to the nineteenth century to play these out on a bigger scale, precisely because they're still very current for us (Sarah Waters, in Tuttle, 211).

Through a focus on female experience, the neo-Victorian texts discussed in this thesis have a dual role in exploring, exposing and attempting to correct historical abuses; but also, in casting a mirror on ongoing modern injustices, tracing these ghostly presences back to their Victorian roots.

My initial plan was to explore multiple tropes used in neo-Victorian fiction to depict trauma and haunting, but, as I wrote, it became clear to me that my central interest was in the role of ambiguous female characters. As discussed in the critical section, these characters were a valuable medium for Victorian novels to explore issues around gendered inequality and injustices, and this trope is manipulated by neo-Victorian novels. The protagonists of *Fingersmith*, for example, are both not at all what they seem, and question ongoing modern assumptions about female characteristics. This project consists of a critical discussion comparing the representations of ambiguous female characters in Victorian and neo-Victorian literature to both silence and expose female trauma, as well as my own piece of neo-Victorian fiction, the opening of a novel in which I employ neo-Victorian tropes to construct a story of intergenerational haunting and gendered injustices.

Through a close analysis of Victorian texts, such as *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White,* and of neo–Victorian texts, including *Alias Grace* and *Fingersmith*, the critical section of this thesis shows how neo-Victorian texts are haunted by their Victorian predecessors, inviting the reader to reimagine the worlds of these originals; but also, to attempt to re-write (or make right) the injustices and traumas that are depicted in these novels. Victorian novels, I argue, exclude female voices, or offer these through a male perspective, reflecting Victorian attitudes to women. Laura Fairlie, the heroine of *The Woman in White* is wholly excluded from the narration of her own story, despite it being told from multiple points of

view; while the only female narrator in the novel has her extract edited by a male character. Neo-Victorian literature offers an attempt to redress this situation, to put female experience back in the centre. I explore how trauma is represented by neo-Victorian literature in ways that challenge our perception of Victorian culture and simultaneously interrogate contemporary culture. While neo-Victorian texts construct a strong female voice that is suppressed in Victorian counterparts, this voice draws attention to injustices that still haunt the world of the contemporary reader. Ultimately, I argue, these texts point to the impossibility of ever undoing past trauma and draw the reader's attention to the fact that our society is still haunted by many of the same issues that we see in Victorian texts– particularly regarding the silencing of female voices and experience. Even today, as I edit this introduction, the internet is reverberating with social media posts telling Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has just been released from six years in Iranian jail, separated from her husband and young daughter, to be quiet and be grateful. We do not want female opinions, the suggestion is: we want their gratitude and docility (Hyde).

While the critical portion of this thesis grew out of my interest in feminist theory, the creative aspect grew out of my love of Victorian and neo-Victorian literature. I knew for many years that I would like to attempt a novel with a Victorian setting. That was of course a daunting task, requiring extensive research, reading and dedication, and it was something I began and put aside many times. It was not until beginning my Master's study that I was able to set aside the time that I needed to do justice to the piece. The critical reading honed my focus, so that what I first envisaged as a 'romance-gone-wrong' became centred around the relationships between its female characters and their traumatic experiences as women operating in an oppressive patriarchal society.

My creative portion is the first part of a novel that reconceptualises Victorian sensation tropes, such as a companion protagonist, a hidden past, and an illegitimacy storyline to explore generational trauma and its impact on the present and attempts to reinterpret the role and voice of the middle-class Victorian heroine. The ambiguous heroines explore and probe female traumatic experience. The novel tells the story of three women who have retreated to an isolated country cottage for the birth of an illegitimate child, all with complex secret agendas. Emma, a companion with a hidden background, who has conceived the child as the result of an affair with her employer's aristocratic son, George, believes she will return to raise the child with George. Miranda, George's wife, has other plans: she thinks Emma will be discarded and she will raise the child as her own. Meanwhile, Lady Rowbarton, who has orchestrated the plan, wants only the child, and the continuation of the Rowbarton name. As this first part of the novel reaches its climax it begins to appear she will go to any dark lengths to achieve that goal.

While Miranda is undoubtedly from an aristocratic background, she is morally ambiguous, and experiences a sense of not belonging, not fitting in her position. Emma's social ambiguity (her role as a companion, her secret past, her merchant father and 'mad' mother) enable her to subvert patriarchal social structures, and to expose hypocrisies and injustices inherent in this system. The novel places female characters in the centre of the action, narrating their own story (unlike many earlier sensation heroines, such as Lucy Audley and Laura Fairlie), with male characters side-lined, even marginalised. The novel reflects, however, that ultimately, even in the domestic sphere, female agency was limited and clipped by patriarchal norms. Even for those middle-class women who tried to fight against the system there were few real alternatives to marriage or servitude as a governess

or companion. These women were silenced and their stories untold, sacrificed to that myth of male universality.

Caroline Criado Perez's book, *Invisible Woman*, describes the myth of male universality, and discusses the historical silencing of female perspectives: "…the lives of men have been taken to represent those of humans overall. When it comes to the lives of the other half of humanity, there is often nothing but silence." (XI). Despite my goal to give my female characters a strong voice to speak into this silence, and some agency over their stories, I wanted to be true to the fact that during the Victorian period female lives were ultimately controlled by the men around them. My ending recognises this struggle, giving my characters some control over their actions, but in a limited way, honouring the constrictions under which even very wealthy women were forced to operate. The novel also creates a sense of sisterhood and female solidarity, but again one that is disrupted and challenged by the patriarchal system in which these women lived, and which is still recognisable to women readers today. The process of writing my own neo-Victorian piece brought into focus Atwood's claim that "we cannot help but be contemporary" (Darroch 1) and I was very aware that, as a modern female writer, I was writing from a specific perspective and time period. The Victorian issues that were relevant to me were inevitably those that are relevant in modern culture–for example, issues around inequality in marriage and the continued pathologizing of female emotions.

Through their imprisonment/retreat in an isolated cottage, my female characters are given the opportunity to step outside of patriarchal institutions (mainly the family in this case), and to reflect on the impacts of these on their lives. The Victorian family was the institution which underpinned patriarchal society, and which trapped and constrained women, even while it supported them. For most middle-class and above women, marriage

was a business contract. The cottage gives my characters a female space where they can reflect on this situation, even while they are forced to the horrible realisation that their options are few and limited: Emma ultimately has to give up her baby or live as an unloved kept women, facing the knowledge that she will most likely be discarded; Miranda makes the decision to step away from society, knowing that she will never be able to come back. These dilemmas are still as relevant as they were in the Victorian era, albeit in a much more nuanced and subtle way, when we look at the fact that domestic work is still predominantly left to women, even when they have paid work elsewhere; when we consider the impact of recent covid restrictions and how women's lives have been impacted so much more than men's (Annick Masselot and Maria Hayes).

Miranda's anxieties about her own marriage, as well as Emma's impossible situation (what options does she have to care for her child if she cannot marry?) are echoed in modern narratives around female dependence; modern romance novels and Netflix series still tend to hinge around a female protagonist's search for an elusive partner. These truths are difficult ones to face in a society which likes to think of itself as progressive and enlightened. It is important to note that many Victorians also thought of themselves as progressive and modern, despite their dismissive attitudes to women. Victorian literature is brimming with characters who purport this point. "'Whatever women may be, I thought that men, in the nineteenth century, were above superstition,'" (62) Marian tells Walter in *The Woman in White,* making a sexist statement, and suggesting that male thought is somehow superior–"above"– that of females, even as she proclaims nineteenth century enlightenment. This attitude can blind us to what us is happening around us, to seeing and accepting uncomfortable truths. In providing a space to voice these injustices–both in the

past and in the present–neo-Victorian literature has a role in exposing what is still not working, and that it the first step in making a change.

The ambiguous female: Governesses, companions, and invisible pasts in the neo-Victorian novel

The neo-Victorian novel attempts to reinterpret the Victorian period, often employing self-conscious references to original Victorian texts, reimagining these, and filling in narrative gaps. In this sense it can be understood as more than just a historical novel set in the Victorian era. Frequently, the narrative fills in these novels involve traumatic experiences, often of a sexual or controversial nature, which were veiled or glossed over in their Victorian predecessors. In this essay, I will explore how *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters and *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood construct trauma using Victorian tropes—such as the female villain and historic family secrets—in a way that interrogates its construction in Victorian texts. I will use *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *The Woman in White* (1859) by Wilkie Collins as my main Victorian sources to compare the way that these tropes are used and explore how they change in *Fingersmith* and *Alias Grace*, arguing that self-conscious metafictional references to earlier texts haunt the characters of neo-Victorian texts as much as their own shady pasts. I will argue that the more transparent treatment of trauma in neo-Victorian texts, and the metafictional haunting of their heroines offer an attempt at redemption; to rewrite the wrongs that are so often intrinsic to the originals. However, I will go on to argue, by making such explicit reference to trauma these narratives often suggest a form of "displacement": through exploring contemporary issues in long-ago contexts, neo-Victorian novels take a metaphorical step back from the very issues they attempt to push to the forefront, blurring and softening the impact of their representations of trauma. As Jessica Cox writes, the effect of this is to suggest "possible

parallels between Victorian and contemporary literature and culture in terms of the problems of representation inherent in narratives of sexual trauma from both the past and present" (147). Susanne Gruss (136) suggests that these novels only emphasise the futility of trying to heal personal and political traumas of the past through literature. I will also question the ethics of trying to do so, arguing that the sense of belonging and involvement offered to the reader by intertexts and metafictional references creates "affective entanglements" which Rosa Karl terms "damnable and politically as well as critically incorrect" (39). In its close, self-conscious relationship to the reader, and its preoccupation with spectres and traumas, the neo-Victorian novel is haunted as much by our own modern traumas as those of the past.

Trauma in the Victorian and neo-Victorian novels is often embedded in a plot that revolves around family, particularly in the context of long-buried secrets that are brought to the surface, by virtue of their on-going impact on the younger generation. *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon for example, is a Victorian text in which the plot is driven by a young man's attempts to uncover his aunt's dark secrets–bigamy, hereditary madness and the unwomanly abandonment of her young child. A neo-Victorian example of a plot driven by family-based secrets is *Fingersmith*, which I have chosen for its similar themes of intergenerational deceit and explorations of female villainy, its twists and turns culminating in the discovery that the two protagonists were swapped at birth. Unlike *Lady Audley's Secret*, which villainises and others its female subject with its masculine narrative voice, *Fingersmith* is written from a female perspective, resulting in a narrative that enables the reader to access the inner workings of its heroines' minds, and establishes an element of reader intimacy despite their dark deeds. A central component of both texts is the hunt for identity; family and the recovery of knowledge is shown to be a major aspect of this. Gruss

(124) links the prevalence of family secrets and trauma in the neo-Victorian novel to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's notion of the transgenerational phantom, whereby collective trauma can be perceived in the psychology of the individual and is passed on through generations. Cox (141) explains: "[t]he notion of the past haunting the present is central to both Victorian and neo-Victorian sensation fiction. The reason for this haunting often lies in the traumatic events of the past and their long-lasting effects on those involved. This trauma and its aftereffects take on a variety of forms, but are most persistently focused on the experiences of women, and in particular those of the (neo-)sensation heroine." Through focussing on "haunted" females, particularly their experience within the institution of the family, these novels explore the generational and collective nature of trauma—these characters are victims (or survivors) not only of their own troubled backgrounds, but of a wider society that can be traced back (and forward) through generations.

Cox (147) differentiates the treatment of the phantom in Victorian texts from the way it is handled in neo-Victorian texts, arguing that Victorian texts repress trauma, veiling and glossing over traumatic events and refusing to look back while neo-Victorian novels seek to expose trauma and offer a form of catharsis. This restraint reflects Victorian attitudes to trauma and suffering, as something best left unseen or forgotten and repressed. We see this attempt to hide from uncomfortable details in *The Woman in White,* through its depiction of Laura's marriage to Sir Percival. While we are given hints that Laura is deeply troubled and unhappy, the reader is never given the details as to what takes place between the couple—abuse is suggested, but never actually portrayed. Likewise, these novels seek to put the past to sleep, through the act of forgetting, again displaying a discomfort with difficult subject matter that is at odds with the tell-all nature of modern narratives. At the end of *The Woman in White*, for example, Walter encourages Laura not to

dwell on the difficult subject of her past–her traumatic and possibly abusive marriage to Sir Percival. Likewise, the final chapter of *Lady Audley's Secret* is titled 'At Peace', and the reader is told: "That dark story of the past fades little by little every day, and there may come a time in which the shadow my lady's wickedness has cast upon the young man's life, will utterly vanish away" (355). Narrative gaps and silences like this make these texts inviting to contemporary writers with a desire to fill in and expose the gritty and uncomfortable realities of Victorian life.

On the surface, much neo-Victorian literature emphasises the difference in Victorian and modern attitudes to family trauma through its seemingly unflinching depiction of the troubling or uncomfortable details that are left of their literary predecessors—in doing so these texts differentiate or 'other' themselves, and their readers, from the Victorian. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (John Fowles), written in 1969, is an early example of this othering. With its ironic metafictional narrative, this text pokes fun at Victorian attitudes, assuming an almost smug superiority of the modern, and of our supposed ability to explore difficult or traumatic subject matter without the need to repress; yet at the same time telling a story of a heterosexual romance, whose heroine is only ever narrated from a male perspective, and which, despite a smattering of sexual content, might not seem too radically different from the contemporary Victorian texts the novel seeks to critique. Authentic neo-Victorian texts, on the other hand, seek to expose and bring intergenerational wounds to the surface, working through these as a form of catharsis and healing. In many cases, this catharsis or revelation of secrets leads to the protagonist's reintegration into society. *Fingersmith*, in contrast to Victorian novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*, ends with an acceptance—uncomfortable, yet convincing—of Sue and Maud's troubled past, with Maud turning to writing the pornographic material her uncle forced her

to read as a way of supporting herself: "'Don't pity me,' she said, 'because of *him.* He's dead. But I am still what he made me. I shall always be that'" (546). Such contrasts suggest a stark difference between neo-Victorian texts and Victorian ones–a greater knowing, a superior ability to process and deal with trauma. Yet a deeper reading of neo-Victorian novels shows it is more complex than this. Like *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* which ultimately fails to other itself from the Victorians as much as we might think, many neo-Victorian novels struggle to differentiate themselves from the Victorian in their treatment of traumatic subject matter, simply by their refusal to depict such content in a contemporary setting.

Conventions like ghosts and haunting in the neo-Victorian novel work to remind the modern reader of our links to our Victorian predecessors; a past that has not yet entirely dissolved. Gruss quotes Carla Freccero's statement that "haunting, ghostly apparition, reminds us that the past and the present are neither discrete or sequential. The borderline between then and now wavers, wobbles and does not hold still" (134). This wavering line between then and now emphasises the similarities between our modern lives with the Victorian world. The return of the neo-Victorian novel to themes of family and intergenerational trauma, and its apparently explicit treatment of these, suggests an ongoing social preoccupation with these concerns. The Victorian era is often viewed as a point of origin for contemporary culture: the birthplace of many of our social norms and conventions, including family structure. This notion of the Victorians as the fore-parents of modern society and culture could possibly explain the displacement of existing concerns to a Victorian context, and our desire to look search here for answers and healing around our ongoing family traumas–an effort that Gruss suggests is futile due to "a prevalence of traumatic memory that cannot (and should not) be overwritten by (at best) pseudo-

consoling neo-narratives" (134). The introduction of explicit sexual and family trauma–familiar themes to the modern reader–into neo-Victorian narratives emphasise the similarities between Victorian and contemporary culture and shows a side to Victorian culture that is relatable to the modern reader. Neo-Victorian heroines are haunted by their Victorian predecessors and their experiences, as well as their own traumas. These cultural doppelgangers serve to remind the reader of the text's link to earlier texts, but also remind us of the ongoing generational impact of trauma, and the impossibility of redemption. An obvious example of this doubling are the characters of Maud and Sue in *Fingersmith*, both of whom are haunted by their Victorian predecessors in *The Woman in White*, as much as if they were haunted by their own great grandparents.

Fingersmith is unmistakably penned by modern hand–the book includes graphic lesbian sex scenes, one of the heroines is a petty villain, and the other cruel and knowing (the opposite of a conventional Victorian heroine). Yet the use of Victorian sensation and trauma tropes–mixed identities, the heroines' brush with asylums, and their very physical and negative reactions to male abuse of power–draw attention to the similarities between Victorian women's suffering in a patriarchal system and the struggles women still grapple with today. Likewise, Atwood's Grace is haunted by Victorian representations of the female villain, such as Lady Audley, emphasising the way in which we still attempt to pathologize and other female protest as well as female experiences of abuse and trauma. The discussion of modern themes in a long-ago setting performs a "displacement" (Cox 161), which is indicative of persistent problems of articulation. Neo-Victorian literature then, draws attention to intersections between the worlds of the modern reader and of the characters they read (such as the abuse of male power in family structures), as much as it does to the differences (the way that this abuse is articulated and exposed).

In the following section, I will discuss the tropes used by Victorian novels (predominantly *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*) to explore traumatic experience. In the later sections of this essay, I will compare the way that neo-Victorian novels (*Fingersmith* and *Alias Grace*) exploit these tropes to critique the representation of female trauma in their Victorian predecessors. The four novels I will discuss all explore trauma–personal and political–through a focus on (a) traumatised female protagonist(s). This protagonist is frequently of an ambiguous social position and arouses ambivalent feelings in both the characters that surround them and the novel's reader. The working middle-class woman is a familiar figure in the Victorian literary landscape, often in the form of a governess or a companion. A respectable, unmarried, woman, from good family, yet forced to work by genteel poverty, and still to ascribe to Victorian notions of femininity, she is a figurehead for Victorian ambiguities and anxieties about the changing role of women. This anxiety is famously addressed by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose protagonist makes frequent and passionate statements about the place of middle-class women, calling for their right to equality and to a fulfilling and stimulating life, just as gentlemen were able to have:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, to absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (110-11).

The companion was an even more troubling concept than the governess in the Victorian novel. Essentially a friend and confidant, and, by necessity, a woman of good birth (sometimes equally good as her mistress), the companion was nonetheless paid. Not quite fitting anywhere, the working middle class woman had access to areas that other women of her status might be denied, both physically and psychologically. Victorian novels often feature "invisible" characters like these accessing areas of grand houses that would typically be out of bounds or being confided in by their betters (or their inferiors). In *Jane Eyre*, for example, we see Jane gaining access to her master's bedroom, and eventually even the hidden attic, where Rochester's dark secret (his 'mad' wife) is confided to her, in a traumatic turn of events that ultimately forces Jane to confront the power imbalances in her relationship with Rochester.

Socially ambiguous figures, such as Jane Eyre, were an important and versatile means for Victorian narratives to explore different perspectives and to expose social inequalities. In exploring these inequalities, and in particular the suffering of women as a result of gendered power imbalances, these novels also draw attention to traumas suffered by women — particularly those who did not fit into patriarchal models of dependent, home-bound ladyhood. These women are often haunted—sometimes literally (as in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James)—by shady, troubling and troubled, backgrounds, which they—or others—take great pains to hide or forget, as we see when Lady Audley attempts murder in an effort to hide her history of 'madness'.

To explore and analyse the power imbalances and treatment of ambiguous females in *The Woman in White*, a short summary of the novel is pertinent here. Anne Catherick first appears in *The Woman in White* as a ghostly figure, an "apparition" (24) who emerges before Walter Hartright on the road to London: "the figure of a solitary woman, dressed

from head to foot in white garments" (24). On his later appointment as a drawing instruction for the beautiful aristocratic Laura Fairlie—who looks surprisingly like Anne—Walter grows suspicious of Laura's husband-to-be, Sir Percival Glyde, and falls in love with Laura. In a complicated turn of events, it emerges that Anne has escaped from an asylum where she was wrongfully placed by Sir Percival. Laura marries Sir Percival, despite Anne's efforts to warn her that he is a villain. He then attempts to bully Laura into signing over her marriage settlement. When she refuses, he fakes her death—using Anne's body (Anne has conveniently—for Sir Percival and the plotline—died of natural causes)—and places Laura in an asylum, claiming her to be Anne. Laura is rescued by her half-sister, Marian, and Walter discovers that Glyde is illegitimate, and that Anne was, in fact Laura's half-sister, the result of her mother's affair with Laura's father. Though Anne did not know the details of Glyde's secret, she did know there was a secret, and therefore he had her put in the asylum. Glyde finally dies in a fire trying to hide the evidence from Walter. The novel hinges around themes of identity, female repression and abuses of power—against married women by their husbands, but also against young, unmarried women in a patriarchal society. Through doubling the figures of Anne and Laura, the novel explores the traumatic impact of patriarchal social institutions on women: marriage and the asylum.

From the opening of *The Woman in White*, Anne Catherick is associated with haunting and all its connotations of past trauma: "I have been cruelly used and cruelly wronged," she tells Walter, hinting at past ordeals, without revealing the nature of these (28). Anne is an example of a heroine whose troubled past emphasises the "notion of the past haunting the present" (Cox 141), which, as discussed above, is at the heart of much neo-Victorian fiction, particularly in its exploration of female characters. As Laura's double, Anne is an ambiguous figure—socially and textually (Is Anne 'The Woman in White' of the

title, or is that Laura? Is Anne just a pale ghost of Laura?)—and it is this ambiguity that brings about her suffering: "There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner...not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life" (24), Walter says of Anne, describing her ambiguous position. Despite her apparent working-class background, we learn towards the end of the novel that her father is in fact an aristocrat (though she was illegitimate)—the late Mrs Fairlie's husband. Anne is Laura's half-sister. Anne was at one point cared for by Mrs Fairlie—a lady—and educated at her school, while her own mother worked as a servant. Anne's mother writes later that through Mrs Fairlie, her daughter "was petted and spoiled" and "they put some nonsense into her head about always wearing white" (535). Anne's insistence on wearing white associates her with ladylike purity and innocence, but also signifies her as a ghostly, haunted and haunting figure. Further, her whimsical attachment to Mrs Fairlie, and her reluctance to let go of this, signifies an attempt to be something more than what she is, to break free of the limiting roles ascribed to her by Victorian society. Not a lady, and yet not a commoner, Anne is troubling to the patriarchal society which she is part of, but also to the text. Not quite mad, and not quite sane—a "half-wit"—she is shut away by Glyde because she threatens his inheritance. Her mother fails to protect her, because Anne does not fit in with her ideas of what a daughter should be. She is ultimately killed off by the text so that Laura—who is very much a lady—can survive. "Not a voice was heard; not a soul moved, till those three words, 'Laura, Lady Glyde', had vanished from sight. Then there was a great sigh of relief among the crowd, as if they felt that the last fetters of conspiracy had been struck off Laura herself... One line only was afterwards engraved in its place: 'Anne Catherick, July 25th, 1850.'" Anne is a victim to her trauma, and her refusal to fit in; her death is ultimately

a ‘relief’ because it frees Laura, who is a true lady, to embrace her future as a happy and loved wife to Walter.

It is not only Anne’s social class which separates her from Laura, but her troubled past, the etchings of trauma on her body, as if she is a damaged version of Laura: “If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie’s face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance” (97), comments Walter, unwittingly foreshadowing the sorrow which Laura is yet to suffer, before he realises that the women are indeed sisters. Cox (142) writes that “trauma is closely associated with the heroine’s marital relations, and more generally with her association with patriarchal culture.” Anne’s traumatic experience—her imprisonment in a mental asylum and being silenced and threatened by Glyde—emphasises these power imbalances in Victorian society. As an illegitimate woman, she is powerless, stripped of autonomy, yet Percival (who turns out to also be illegitimate) is powerful and oppressive. It is no accident that after her marriage to Sir Percival Glyde, Laura begins to mirror Anne in her physical appearance. Marriage is equated with the experience of the asylum in its impact on a woman’s body: “I miss something when I look at her,” writes Marian on Laura’s return from her honeymoon. “There was, in the old times a freshness, a softness, an ever-varying and yet ever-remaining tenderness of beauty in her face...This is gone” (211). ‘Thank God for your poverty,” Laura tells Marian later, discussing her marriage, “it has made you your own mistress and saved you from the lot that has fallen on *me”* (258). Through doubling Laura with Anne, the novel emphasises the abuse of Victorian women within the family, and within marriage. Though Anne’s trauma is her experience with the asylum, this turns out to have its root in intergenerational secrets: her mother’s affair, and her knowledge of Sir Percival’s illegitimacy. Her experience in the asylum was the result of her

mother and her father's transgressions, as well as Sir Percival's, and by the attempts of all three characters to hide their 'shame'. Anne is a victim of repressive and inhibitive family structures, but this is always implicit; the details of exactly what she has suffered are kept from the reader, and, unlike later neo-Victorian characters, Anne is never given the opportunity to voice her own experience or to heal from it; she is sacrificed by the novel so that Laura (a 'true' lady) can thrive. Ultimately then, *The Woman in White* perpetuates Victorian narratives around the female role as passive and powerless.

Even though *The Woman in White* hinges around Anne's secret past, very little page space is given to the actual details of her experience. The novel opens with the sentence: "This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve" (9). This is very much the tone of the novel, with female characters passively enduring unspecified horrors, while the male characters either afflict these horrors, or rescue the women. The action and voice of the novel is resolutely male, so that the female voices are hushed and suppressed–a reflection of the pervasive silencing of the female voice during the Victorian era. The details of what Laura endures in the asylum and throughout her marriage to Sir Percival are never narrated to the reader or to Laura's own family: "...we shall both be happier and easier," she tells Marian, "if we accept my married life for what it is, and say and think as little about it as possible" (212). These gaps around Anne and Laura's traumatic experience are a narrative technique that draws attention to the unspeakable nature of trauma; the silence draws attention to the trauma (Cox, 2019). Simultaneously, however, these gaps and silences suppress and disallow the voices of the women who are so central to the story, in the same way that Sir Percival silences Anne when she threatens to tell his secret: "It ended...in his insisting on securing his own safety by shutting her up" (537). Ultimately, Anne is also silenced by the narrative, which kills her off. The image of the

gravestone at the end of the novel is shrouded in silence. The association of the gravestone and silenced women is prevalent throughout the novel, with Anne often making an appearance in silent graveyards. In Chapter 13 we see Walter find Anne in the quiet night-time graveyard. Though Walter purportedly wants to know Anne's secrets and seeks her confidence, he hushes her when she begins to express her grief and anger: "I only want you to quiet yourself, and, when you are calmer, to think over what I have said," he tells her, putting his own agenda at the centre of the action. Later in the novel, Laura and Walter are reunited beside Anne's grave. Laura's appearance in this section is a shocking revelation; for, like the reader, Walter has believed her dead, and now she appears beside her own tomb (which we later learn is Anne's). Yet, this scene is notable for Laura's lack of voice. She does not say a word: "The woman came on; slowly and silently came on" (410). Laura's silence here adds drama to the scene, but it also emphasises her lack of narrative control throughout the novel. Like, Anne, Laura is given very little opportunity to voice her experience of trauma–her lack of voice in the novel is remarkable given that it is her story. Cox writes that:

> …not only is she (Laura) forbidden from speaking of the past, she is further silenced through the presentation of a narrative consisting of multiple accounts with the notable exception of her own. The image of the happy wife at the conclusion of the novel suggests that either she has suffered no lasting effects from her experiences, or that she has repressed events to such an extent that there is no outward sign of them (152).

At the end of the novel, Laura refers to a 'rule' she shares with Walter that she must not refer to the past: "I am afraid…I can only explain it by breaking through our rule, and referring to the past" (626), she tells Walter when he asks how they came to be at

Limmeridge House. Like Glyde, Walter shows himself confronted and uncomfortable with evidence of female suffering. He considers Anne the less attractive woman, due to the physical manifestations of trauma on her appearance. He shudders when comparing her to Laura. "'To associate that forlorn, friendless, lost woman, even by an accidental likeness only, with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature'" (62), he tells Marian when he recognises the likeness between Anne and Laura. Again, we see trauma presented as something women must hide away and not voice, glossed over by the novel, which thereby demonstrates a Victorian discomfort with traumatic experience that might seem at odds with the tell-all nature of modern trauma discourse.

Lady Audley's Secret is another example of a Victorian sensation novel that employs an ambiguous female protagonist with a hidden background to explore the impact of intergenerational trauma. From the outset, Lady Audley is a suspicious character by virtue of her being an ex-governess who has married above her station. Early in the novel, she is told by Mrs Dawson that she is "lucky" to have the attentions of Sir Michael because of her lowly station. The reader is reminded frequently that Lady Audley is not a real lady: she is childish and spoiled, and described as flashy, dripping in diamonds and perfumes: her rooms (56) contain "glittering toilette apparatus", "rich odours of perfumes", and "Hothouse flowers." There is an underlying whiff of sexuality in these descriptions of Lady Audley, which does not conform to Victorian ideals of modest ladyhood. In contrast, Lady Audley's stepdaughter Alicia, is a 'real lady', born in wedlock to parents of good birth: she is "never familiar with the servants" as Lucy (Lady Audley) is with her lady's maid Phoebe (48), showing Alicia's awareness and conformity to Victorian values around keeping to one's class and station. Alicia describes her stepmother as childish and frivolous and mistrusts her. Her

opinion, as a 'real lady,' counts and undermines Lucy's trustworthiness to the reader. Despite Lucy's appearance as a lady then, which has fooled not only Sir Michael, but the whole of society–she is the "belle of the county"–the reader is constantly reminded that she is not quite what she appears. We see this in Sir Michael's reaction to her acceptance of his proposal: "…neither joy, nor triumph…as if he had carried a corpse in his heart" (12). This imagery links to the description of Audley Court as decaying and crumbling: "…a broken ruin of a wall…and everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy, yellow stonecrop, and dark moss" (3). Lucy has taken advantage of her access to superior social spaces, and her angelic appearance in order to seduce and dupe Sir Michael and trick her way into a position that she does not belong in. The family was seen as being at the heart of Victorian social structure, and the ideal wife was at the very centre of this model–self-sacrificing, and morally irreproachable. Lady Audley's posturing as a lady makes her dangerous, a threat to these Victorian ideals of modest, innocent femininity, and thereby to the very structure of Victorian aristocracy.

By presenting Lucy as dangerous and suspicious, *Lady Audley's Secret* complies with the Victorian convention of silencing female voices in literature. The sense of danger is compounded by the knowledge that Lady Audley has a mysterious past, which is hinted at very early on in the narrative:

> She had come into the neighbourhood as a governess… No one knew anything of her except that she had come in answer to an advertisement which Mr Dawson, the surgeon, had inserted in *The Times*. She came from London; and the only reference she gave was to a lady at a school at Brompton, where she had once been a teacher...Her accomplishments were so brilliant and numerous that it seemed

> strange that she should have answered an advertisement offering such very moderate terms as those named by Mr Dawson (6).

The suggestion is that Lady Audley is a stereotypical femme fatale, manipulating men to achieve her own selfish ends. She even admits to her husband-to-be that she is motivated by financial and social advancement: "I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!" (11). When Lucy goes on to speak of her mother, there is a hint that there is something more troubling at play than mere greed, that there are hidden skeletons in Lucy's family background: "My mother—but do not let me speak of her. Poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations!" (11). Alone in her boudoir, Lady Audley expands on this: "'No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations,' she said; 'every trace of the old life melted away—every clue to identity buried and forgotten…'" (12). These words imply that Lady Audley has suffered considerable hardship in her past, and as such she represents the suffering of the Victorian working woman, suffering that remains "buried and forgotten," even though the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret* revolves around her metaphorical ghosts. The details of Lady Audley's troubled past are overshadowed by the way she uses her suffering to evoke sympathy, so that she comes to seem sly and manipulative, rather than a victim of circumstance. Hoffer states this is a common strategy in sensation novels of this era: "...sympathy is represented as a self-centred strategy for gaining transgressive power, social mobility, romantic attachments, and narrative centrality... the darker side of sympathy became a topic of concern during these mid-century years" (xii). Lucy's manipulation of her plight makes her a figure of suspicion to the reader, rather than of concern. Ultimately her story is played down in favour of the impact her actions have on the male characters around her, and despite

being the novel's central character, Lady Audley is silenced. As in *The Woman in White*, *Lady Audley's Secret* marginalises female trauma, betraying a discomfort with female experience.

Through marginalising female experience *Lady Audley's Secret* reaffirms Victorian stereotypes about women and the dangers of challenging one's class and gender-based position in society. The narrative devotes very little page space to exploring Lucy's motivations; her 'madness' and hysteria takes centre stage, so that the novel can avoid exploring or interrogating in any depth the social conditions that have contributed to her downfall. When the narrative confirms that Lady Audley is indeed a bigamist, Robert's (and the reader's) suspicions about her are confirmed: it appears she is a femme fatale. Cox (143) states that "female transgression in the sensation novel is persistently associated with past trauma". Lady Audley's mention of her mother, as quoted in the previous paragraph, links her suffering to her family background–she is haunted by her family past. When the reader learns then that Lady Audley's secret is essentially that she is mad, it seems an injustice. Rather than exploring Lady Audley/Helen Tallboys as a victim of her family past, and of a patriarchal social structure, the responsibility is firmly placed on her, as a depraved madwoman. Though the reader is told of Lady Audley's drunken father, he is presented as an almost comical figure, and little exploration is given to his impact on Lady Audley's upbringing. Likewise, the trauma Lucy would have experienced growing up with a mentally unstable mother is downplayed, not to mention the "humiliations" she has experienced as a governess, the belief that she has been abandoned by her husband and left alone with no money and a small child to support and an alcoholic father–all this in a patriarchal society which offered very few options for a woman to work. The reader is told of these experiences yet given no detail. The narrative gaps around these experiences seem gaping,

and speak of trauma (Cox, 143). As a modern reader these gaps are frustrating; as a writer of neo-Victorian fiction they call for filling in.

Even though the entire novel is devoted to uncovering Lady Audley's secret, the reader is never shown more than the merest glimpse of the true Lucy Audley/Helen Talboys. She is pathologized, her trauma and its aftereffects explained away as hereditary madness. The narrative describes Lucy/Helen being shut away, "Buried Alive" (as Chapter 6 is entitled) in a madhouse, her voice and her history squished and voiceless, and we are told this is the best possible outcome:

> Whatever secrets she may have will be secrets forever! Whatever crimes she may have committed she will be able to commit no more. If you were to dig a hole for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her away from the world and all worldly associations. But as a physiologist and as an honest man I believe you could do no better service to society than by doing this; for physiology is a lie if the woman I saw ten minutes ago is a woman to be trusted at large (302).

So the doctor tells Robert Audley on shutting Lucy away. Even Lady Audley's own loving husband silences her, refusing to see any hint of her troubles:

> Do you know, Lucy, that once last night, when you looked out through the dark-green bed curtains, with your poor white face, and the purple rims around your hollow eyes, I had almost a difficulty to recognise my little wife in that ghastly, terrified, agonised-looking creature, crying out about the storm… I hope to heaven, Lucy, I shall never see you look as you did last night (62).

The reader is given clues to Lucy's experience, but her voice is frequently drowned out by the judgmental tone of the narrator, and the very male and Victorian voices which surround

her. Like Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, Lucy/Helen is silenced, and her trauma is shut away and contained, leaving unanswered questions around Victorian female experience that we see neo-Victorian texts attempt to answer.

In this section I will discuss the way in which neo-Victorian novels portray trauma, and compare this to the Victorian novels discussed above. *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* demonstrate how Victorian literature denies and silences female experiences of trauma, suggesting it can be contained and repressed. Neo-Victorian fiction can be differentiated by its much more candid exploration of trauma and its impact on the present, emphasising the inherent difficulties of trying to gloss over suffering: "Contemporary trauma narratives, in contrast, suggest the impossibility of this: the past will influence the present, and the future—it will rear its head through bad dreams, flashbacks, and other manifestations" (Cox, 150). These texts provide an opportunity for cathartic working through of trauma for its heroines, which was denied to their Victorian counterparts. Neo-Victorian texts, then, can be viewed as "cultural doppelgangers" for their nineteenth-century predecessors (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2), and act as a "corrective to the Victorian past, to acknowledge the widespread existence of traumas which were all too frequently concealed from public view" (Cox 146). Through employing socially ambiguous figures, which echo the companion and governess figures of earlier fiction, neo-Victorian texts can give these characters a voice that is either not represented, or is drowned out, in earlier texts. In terms of Levinas' writing, these modern heroines have an ethical role in speaking for the other and acknowledging past wrongs against women in a patriarchal society:

> …this form of an ethics of alterity coincides with an ethics of justice, or more specifically an ethics of acknowledging past injustices: the doubled injustices of literal acts of violence that inflicted untold suffering on others, and the subsequent symbolic violence, repeating the offence, of sidelining the trauma or consigning it to outright historical oblivion. (Kohlke and Gutleben 20)

Through 'speaking for the other' these novels attempt to tell stories that have been left untold, and to give a perspective of Victorian life that is often left out of traditional texts–a female perspective. The implication is that in giving voice to these stories and to this suffering, neo-Victorian novels play a role in putting the ghosts of Victorian injustices to rest:

> Since this act of creation concerns not only generalised stories and previously encountered subjectivities but also new individual voices, particularly those of the ex-centric, the marginalised and/or the deviant–that is, voices previously unheard/unheard of rather than an effect of discursive repetition–neo-Victorian fiction manages to perform a labour of regeneration from both an ideological/ethical and stylistic/aesthetic point of view. (Kohlke and Gutleben 31)

Yet, as the following paragraphs discuss, these neo-Victorian heroines are still ambiguous and troubling in their own ways, and neo-Victorian novels continue to raise questions about how much has truly changed for women between nineteenth century and the twenty-first.

Alias Grace tells the story of Grace Marks, a real-life Canadian murderess who was pardoned on the grounds of insanity after serving many years in jail for the murder of her employer and his housekeeper. The novel plays on the competing narratives that have been woven about Grace over the years, and their various versions of her: a dangerous femme fatale; an

innocent girl who was wrongfully blamed; a madwoman. The novel includes quotes from these different versions at the start of each chapter–excerpts from newspapers, letters, court papers, and *Life in the Clearings* (1853), by Susanna Moodie, a nineteenth century text, which portrays Grace in terms of Victorian discourses about working women. In *Life in the Clearings,* Grace is a femme fatale with ideas above her station, employing her looks and sexuality to manipulate an innocent young man to commit murder:

> I looked at her with astonishment. 'Good God!' thought I, 'can this be a woman? A pretty, soft−looking woman too and a mere girl! What a heart she must have!' I felt equally tempted to tell her she was a devil, and that I would have nothing to do with such a horrible piece of business; but she looked so handsome, that somehow or another I yielded to the temptation, though it was not without a struggle; for conscience loudly warned me not to injure one who had never injured me (Moodie 94).

In this (fictional) passage we see Victorian ideals about the 'soft', incorrupt nature of women clashing with Grace's supposed evil nature, as she attempts to convince a young man (a fellow servant) to help her to murder their housekeeper. The idea that a young girl could be capable of committing or instigating a gruesome murder subverts the ideal of the angel in the house, and as such, is dangerous and threatening to the patriarchal social structure.

Alias Grace explores Victorian anxieties about ambiguous women who did not fit within the limited roles assigned to them by patriarchal society in a neo-Victorian context. The novel uses reader expectation based on knowledge of Victorian texts to interrogate these anxieties: "With the gothic novel as a genre that seems to 'infect' the majority of neo-Victorian texts, the strong focus on ghosts and haunting is not only part of the texts

themselves, Victorian intertexts also haunt neo-Victorianism in general" (Gruss 123). When the modern reader meets neo-Victorian female figures then, they bring this knowledge, these preconceptions with them: they are haunted by our knowledge of the slippery/deceitful role of the ambiguous Victorian woman in literature these characters come to us as a type. Grace first appears in *Alias Grace* in her role as a prisoner/servant, yet she also seems, incongruously, like a well-to-do guest in the prison governor's home. Reader knowledge of other female characters who do not quite fit–characters like Lady Audley and Anne Catherick–adds to our understanding that Grace is a character who will challenge and interrogate social norms. Grace Marks, already a complex figure, is never going to be the compliant, truthful, law-abiding companion/maid she now appears to be. Through her ambiguity, Grace personifies Victorian anxieties about ladyhood and the working female. Grace accesses the governor's home through her role as a servant, yet she is confided in by the governor's daughters, her accomplishments are praised, as if she were a lady herself. At the reader's first meeting with Grace, she could—almost—be a lady; we see this in the way she sits as well as in the imagery of smooth, white gloves: "I am sitting on the purple velvet settee in the Governor's parlour...I have my hands folded in my lap in the proper way although I have no gloves. The gloves I would wish to have would be smooth and white, and would fit without a wrinkle" (23). Like Lady Audley and Anne Catherick, the reader sees that Grace does not fit comfortably into patriarchal Victorian notions of womanhood; she sits outside of these, and as such represents a challenge. Grace acquires the privilege of her place in the home through remaining tight lipped about her past, assessing and drip-feeding knowledge of her inner world as she sees will benefit her: "I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble...If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go" (5-6). This shows Grace's awareness of herself as a type; her ability to play to this for her own

ends, and to use reader expectation to shape her own narrative. Grace shows herself very aware of her role as "celebrated murderess" (25), and as an object of fascination, always watched by an audience. Early in the text, Grace comments on Mary Whitney's "crude" way of speaking: "I used to speak that way as well, but I have learnt better manners in prison," she comments, as if prison has gentrified her. The novel ends with Grace living in her own respectable home, "white in colour, and with shutters painted green, but commodious enough for us." (527). She has a respectable husband, a hired man to help on the farm, and has been offered her own servant, which she has declined "as they pry too much" (528). Grace has employed her ambiguity to work to her own ends, and, like Lady Audley, she uses sympathy to acquire favour and power, in an institution and wider society that allows little autonomy for women.

Neo-Victorian texts differ from Victorian texts in the authorial control granted to their female narrators. Grace proves herself a much more complex figure than Lady Audley or Anne Catherick/Laura Fairlie, by virtue of her first-person narrative, and the control this affords her over her own narrative. Christian Gutleben and Marie-Luise Kohlke write that:

> Neo-Victorian literature lends a voice to the voiceless, speaks for the speechless, where historians can only speculate as to what such persons might have said or sounded like, emphasising the purely theoretical nature of their representations. Nor is neo-Victorian fiction obliged to present a measured view or depict both sides of a conflict objectively; with unashamedly partisan outrage, it can denounce the suffering of the forgotten of history – the excluded, the outcast, the downtrodden, the marginalised, the colonised (19).

Like Lady Audley and Anne Catherick, Grace's past is obscured and mysterious. Unlike these women, Grace is given full narrative control over the information she imparts. In contrast to

the protagonists of Victorian novels, Grace narrates much of her own story—to the reader and to Dr Jordan, a nineteenth-century medical man who has determined that he can uncover the truth about Grace, and explain her in scientific language: “I must stick to observation, I must proceed with caution. A valid experiment must have verifiable results. I must resist melodrama and an overheated brain” (69). Yet, as he learns from Grace, truth is not something so easily defined and measured as he would like to believe. In many cases she appears slippery, unreliable—this very slipperiness empowers Grace, gives her full control as to how she is seen and understood:

> While Jordan and the reader are joint "listeners" for most of Grace's story, important aspects are not divulged to him, and the reader is made aware of these omissions in her first-person narration...Cooke argues that the deployment of fictive confessions serves to "implicate the reader in the power politics under discussion" while bestowing "upon him/her both the authority and the responsibility of witness" (225)...The reader comes to occupy the role of Grace's confidante, the role formerly accorded to Mary Whitney (Grace's "alias" and purported alternate personality) and never entirely bestowed on Jordan. (Heidi Darroch 110)

Grace shows herself adept at reading what her audience wants from her, and delivering accordingly, both to the reader and to Dr Jordan: “Because he was so thoughtful to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift for him” (286). Her weaving, back and forward narration, sometimes tragic, sometimes shocking, other times lurid; her constant attempts to remind us/herself of her respectability, contrasted with what we learn of her background, as well as her current imprisonment, only enhance her ambiguity, but it also draws our

attention to the ethics of narrating trauma, the fine line between catharsis, providing a voice for the voiceless, and outright voyeurism.

By giving Grace a voice, the narrative offers Grace the opportunity for healing that is denied to Victorian heroines, such as Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick, and Lady Audley. For Gutleben and Kohlke the very act of narrating trauma is a healing one:

> Narrating trauma is essentially performative, because the trauma – and consequently the possibility of recovery and of the ruptured subject's reintegration – only come into existence with and through the production of speech and/or narrative during the act of witnessing the self's and/or others' suffering...The embedded trauma narrative, then, is not only a verbal exchange; it also constitutes an act of generation, begetting the (however partial) understanding, transmission, and healing of trauma (28).

The act of narration further creates "a community of feeling" within the modern reader, inviting sympathy, and building bridges between nineteenth century traumas and modern experience (Gutleben and Kohlke 28). From this perspective, the act of narrating is also an ethical one, playing an important role in atoning for or re-righting the past wrongs committed against women in fiction, and providing a potentially cathartic voice for marginalised characters. Grace is a haunted figure. Her narrative of her past life is a traumatic one, and her frankness is more striking in comparison to the reticence of her Victorian predecessors. From her troubled childhood to her experiences as a servant, through to the humiliations she has suffered in prison, Grace shows an awareness that much of what she says will not be believed: "A woman like me is always a temptation (to a doctor), if possible to arrange it unobserved; as whatever we may say about it later, we will not be believed" (32). This telling line speaks to Cox's statement that neo-Victorian texts

often offer acknowledgement of "widespread" and "concealed" abuses (146). By taking the narrative back to her childhood, Grace clearly traces for us the intergenerational nature of her suffering. At the opening of Chapter 13, Grace quotes a Verse to Dr Jordan:

> *Needles and pins, needles and pins/When a man marries his trouble begins.* It doesn't say when a woman's trouble begins. Perhaps mine began when I was born, for as they say, Sir, you cannot choose your own parents, and of my own free will I would not have chosen the ones God gave me (118).

With these words, Grace identifies herself as a woman, a representative of her sex and of their troubles; she also clearly links her suffering, her "trouble," to her parents. Grace does not hold back in revealing lurid details of her past to Dr Jordan, giving quite specific details of what she endured as a child: "Already my arms were black and blue, and then when night came he threw me against the wall, as he'd sometimes done with my mother, shouting that I was a slut and a whore, and I fainted" (149). Grace's haunted background acknowledges and gives voice to other women of her time, and their struggles against a repressive society, which gave them little options for autonomy and control.

Grace is also haunted quite literally by the figure of Mary Whitney–a representative of the suffering of women at the hands of men. Mary's suffering is foreshadowed by Grace's mother's own painful death on the voyage to Canada. A woman who appears to passively accept her place in life, the death of Grace's mother is also linked to haunting–she dies from a growth in her stomach, after years of giving birth to unwanted babies—"mouths to feed"—to a man who is unable to take responsibility for his actions and their consequences for his wife and her body: he drinks and beats his family, while his wife turns to needlework to support them financially, and raises the children: "He would say he did not know why God had saddled him with such a litter, the world did not need any more of us, we should all

have been drowned like kittens in a sack" (124). Grace mistakes the growth for another pregnancy –a phantom baby. Grace is not able to open a window when her mother dies and believes her spirit is "trapped in the bottom of the ship...And now she would be caught in there for ever and ever..." (141). These words and images associate Grace's mother with the notion of phantoms and spirits, introducing the idea that female traumatic experience is linked to haunting. Unlike Grace's mother, Mary Whitney rails against her position in life: Grace describes her as a "democrat", and this brings about her downfall. Mary is knowing, she warns Grace about the dangers of gentlemen, yet she succumbs just as Grace's mother did: "...the man had promised to marry her, and given her a ring, and for once in a way she had believed him...but he'd gone back on his promise...and she was in despair…" (200). Mary, in contrast to Grace's passive mother, takes matters into her own hands and succumbs to a botched backstreet abortion. Grace accompanies her, and once again witnesses the agonies of a woman's death, which she describes in detail: "screams, and crying" (203), "groans of agony," (204), "the salty smell of blood." (205). Through her mother and Mary Whitney, Grace learns the lack of power women in her society have over their own bodies. A servant, Grace is powerless to avenge Mary, or even to gain any acknowledgement of the inequalities and abuse that have led to her death, yet her narrative makes it clear that she felt the injustice of it: "...it is my true belief that it was the doctor that killed her with his knife; him and the gentleman between them. For it is not always the one that strikes the blow, that is the actual murderer; and Mary was done to death by that unknown gentleman, as surely as if he'd taken the knife and plunged it into her body himself" (206). Reflecting on the injustice, Grace realises she forgot to open the window, and this is when she first hears Mary's voice: "Let me in" (207). Grace opens the window: "I was hoping Mary's soul would fly out the window now, and not stay inside, whispering

things into my ear. But I wondered whether I was too late" (207). Again, here we see female suffering linked to the idea of haunting. When we finally learn of Grace's possession by Mary towards the end of the novel, it only raises more questions: about Grace's credibility as a narrator, about truth, about fiction, and about our own ability to see and hear only what we want to: "'You see?' wails the voice. 'You're the same, you won't listen to me, you don't believe me, you want it your own way, you won't hear…' It trails off, and there is silence" (468). This appears a direct accusation against the refusal of patriarchal society to see and acknowledge female suffering as it is, without inserting its (society's) own discourses.

Addressed by Mary/Grace, Doctor Jordan represents the implied reader, desperate to pin down the truth, yet unable to ever be objective because of his own experience, his own bias, and his desire to rescue Grace: "How much of her story can he allow himself to believe? Does he need a grain of salt, or two, or three?...He cautions himself against absolutism...The difficulty is that he wants to be convinced...He wanted her to be vindicated" (374). Doctor Jordan is left confused, questioning not only Grace, but himself as well, his most fundamental beliefs: "...he can't state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him. Or rather it's Grace herself who eludes him. She glides ahead of him, just out of grasp, turning her head to see if he's still following" (473). Jordan (and the implied reader) wants to understand Grace, and yet his social conditioning within a patriarchal framework means he can never be certain of what he is hearing (or reading). Grace appears to elude male understanding, speaking to the impossibility of ever truly representing female trauma. In modern terminology, Grace would be described as a trauma survivor: not only has she lived through horrendous abuse and neglect and witnessed the deaths of two women she has loved, she has also been present at and possibly complicit in

the brutal murder of another woman who has been a central influence on her life. Grace claims to have been asleep during the deaths of her mother and Mary Whitney, and not to remember Nancy's death. These gaps in her memory, however, could be explained as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. In the text, Grace's memory lapses are finally explained in Victorian medical terms as "auto-hypnotic somnambulism" and "double consciousness" (501). The result is that Grace is pardoned (unlike Lady Audley), but also that she is pathologized; Grace's story (and those of the other women in her world) remains unheard. There is then, an irony when Verringer writes that: "It moves me to tears to think how this poor woman has been wronged through a lack of scientific understanding" (502). This points to an inability to see a wider truth, to examine the wider cultural and sociological implications of Grace's story. Darroch points out that:

> Atwood relies on the complicated history of hysteria and feminism as an intertext. There is a peculiar pleasure in knowing more than Jordan, the expert, and for post-Freudians perhaps an additional satisfaction in retracing the common narrative trajectory of the ambitious male analyst's misunderstanding of, and overinvolvement in, his female patient's story of seduction, violence, and betrayal (114).

Like Lady Audley and Anne Catherick then, Grace is explained and pathologized by the men around her, and yet the suggestion is that she has used this to her advantage. Unlike these earlier figures, the implication is that Grace has manipulated her story to suit her needs. Grace walks free, and lives to tell her own story, maintaining full narrative control of her story, and forcing her listeners and readers to consider questions about the ethics of narrating trauma.

Alias Grace affirms the impossibility of ever healing trauma through literature, and explores the ethics of trying to represent it in novel form. Through exploiting her

relationship with Dr Jordan, Grace raises questions about the relationship between the speaker and listener; one which implicitly mirrors that between the writer and reader. As Dr Jordan listens to Grace's story, he comes to feel like a voyeur: "She was threading the wet end of the thread in her mouth, to make it easier, and this gesture seemed to him all at once completely natural and unbearably intimate. He felt as if he was watching her undress, through a chink in the wall; as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat." (105). For Darroch, this is a "nod to the ethics of narrating traumatic experience" (110). The reader becomes Grace's confidante as much–or perhaps more–than Dr Jordan, and Grace's awareness of her audience's reaction to her story cause her to question our own reactions. At the end of the novel, for example, Grace writes to Dr Jordan that her husband likes to hear stories of her suffering: "...if I add the improper behaviour of Dr. Bannerling towards me, and the cold baths naked and wrapped in a sheet, and the strait-waistcoat in the darkened room, he is almost in ecstasies" (530-31). Her husband becomes sexually excited by these details. Grace shows here her awareness of voyeurism, and her ability to employ this: "I could tell when your interest was slacking," she writes to Dr Jordan, comparing him to her husband, "as your gaze would wander; but it gave me joy every time I managed to come up with something that would interest you" (531). This voyeurism is enacted in the seance scene, the breathless audience watching Grace; their thirst for salacious detail and Jordan's reluctant credulity echoing the reader's: we should know better than to believe in such nonsense, and yet… we want the details, we want to know the truth:

> It's too theatrical, too tawdry, thinks Simon; it reeks of the small-town lecture halls of fifteen years ago, with their audiences of credulous store clerks and laconic farmers, and their drab wives, and the smooth-talking charlatans who used to dole out transcendental nonsense and quack medical advice to them as an excuse for

> lining their pockets. He's striving for derision; nevertheless, the back of his neck creeps (462).

This voyeuristic element to *Alias Grace* is familiar to modern day readers, we see it in the tabloids, on social media, in confessional literature; this prurience emphasises the similarities between modern day culture and Victorian culture. Darroch shares a quote by Margaret Atwood: "we cannot help but be contemporary, and *Alias Grace*, although set in the mid-nineteenth century, is, of course, a very contemporary book" (1). Darroch contextualises *Alias Grace* in terms of 1990's preoccupation with childhood traumas, splintered identities and the (un)reliability of memory. This preoccupation with trauma and crime is not the only theme or concern that the novel shares with contemporary society—the focus on female sexuality and bodily autonomy is one that many readers will recognise (only recently the pop star Britney Spears claimed that she is forced to wear an IUD to prevent her conceiving a baby); and the male characters' attempts to explain Grace to herself smack of 'mansplaining'. Through exploring such themes, the novel critiques both past and present, and to explore persistent inequalities in the way women are treated, and the intergenerational nature of these. As Gutleben and Kohlke point out, "writers (of neo-Victorian literature) clearly intend readers to make crucial connections between the earlier period and our own (11)". This could be seen to draw the reader closer to our Victorian ancestors–to make them seem less 'other'. For Cox the exploration of traumas in a past setting is a form of displacement: "the traumas of the present are obscured, veiled even as they are reimagined within a historical setting" (11). Rather than "healing" past trauma then, neo-Victorian trauma discourses draw attention to our continued discomfort with female suffering, and the associated difficulties in representation.

Like *Alias Grace, Fingersmith* features as its protagonists two women of ambiguous social background, both with secret pasts and struggling to break free of the intergenerational trauma that haunts them. The novel uses a dual narrative to explore the story from two perspectives, but also to relate to the reader in different ways; to hide and impart knowledge in a way that allows unexpected twists and turns in the plot. Sue and Maud are troubling figures, even by the standards of modern readers, and Sarah Waters uses the Victorian trope of the ambiguous traumatised women to raise very modern questions about morality and ethics, identity and hereditary. Both women control and voice their own narrative, and use this in their struggle for freedom against a repressive patriarchal system. Like *Alias Grace,* the use of an intimate first-person narrative manipulates reader expectation, raising questions about identity, female empowerment (or lack of it); and forcing the reader to question their own assumptions about Victorian otherness.

A thief, brought up by a baby farmer, Sue is trained by Gentleman/Rivers to be a lady's maid to Maud in order to help to convince Maud to marry him so he can dupe her of his fortune. Parodying the traditional Lady's Maid, Sue recites her role to Gentleman before leaving for Maud's home, showing her awareness of Victorian anxieties about the intimate and duplicitous nature of the Lady's Maid: "'I must wake her in the mornings,' I said, 'and pour out her tea. I must wash her, and dress her, and brush her hair...I must be her chaperon for her drawing lessons, and not see when she blushes'" (40). Sue's intimate narration draws the reader to feel complicit with Sue; our sense of outside, retrospective knowledge of the class and gender systems she is playing, and knowledge of the sneaky Lady's Maid role (for example, Phoebe in *Lady Audley's Secret)* draw us into her narrative. As in *Alias Grace,* we meet a heroine who is haunted by reader preconceptions and Victorian intertexts. Sue is given a dress to wear for her new post. Seeing her, Gentleman

sums up the two-faced aspect of the Lady's Maid trope in Victorian literature: "It was a plain brown dress, more or less the colour of my hair; and the walls of our kitchen also being brown, when I came downstairs again I could hardly be seen...Gentleman said it was the perfect dress for a sneak or a servant–and all the more perfect for me, who was going to Briar to be both"(38). Sue is confiding in us, we feel eager to see what happens next and we feel knowing when we meet Maud—as knowing as Sue: "...she was a chick, she was a pigeon that knew nothing" (66). When we learn that it is, in fact, Maud who has tricked Sue, we are left confused and bewildered—we feel Sue's anger, for we have been as duped as she was: "You thought her a pigeon. Pigeon, my arse. That bitch knew everything. She had been in on it from the start" (175). Rosa Karl writes of the participatory nature of neo-Victorian fiction, the sense of bonding between the reader and the text:

> …apt neo-Victorian readers can, for example, measure their reading success by the amount of intertexts or historical (mis)representations they are able to identify. The perceived manipulation of cultural capital establishes a state of belonging, a bonding between neo-Victorian text and competent reader (43).

This relationship is manipulated by Waters, as much as Gentleman/Rivers himself has manipulated Maud and Sue. A master manipulator, Gentleman/Rivers compares his role to that of a writer, drawing the reader into a plot: "'She will be distracted by the plot into which I shall draw her. She will be like everyone, putting on the things she sees the constructions she expects to find there. She will look at you, here, knowing nothing about your uncle—who wouldn't, in her place, believe you innocent?'" (227). Our knowledge of Maud's complicity changes our view of her innocence, so that she too becomes an ambiguous figure–we now learn (from Maud) that she is far from the innocent girl she appeared to be—her role as assistant to her uncle is far more troubling than Sue (or the

reader) had been led to believe: Maud is, in fact, kept by her uncle and has been forced to catalogue and recite pornographic material since she was little more than a child:

> 'Sometimes,' I say, not looking up, 'I suppose...that I have been ticketed and noted and shelved—so nearly do I resemble one of my uncle's books...We are not meant for common usage, my fellow books and I. My uncle keeps us separate from the world. He calls us poisons; he says we will hurt unguarded eyes. Then again, he names us his children, his foundlings, that have come to him, from every corner of the world...I believe he likes the gross ones best; for they are the ones that other parents—other bookmen and collectors, I mean—cast out. I was like them, and had a home, and lost it...' (218).

Once again, Waters uses the metaphor of the reading relationship to describe her characters. Here the word 'poison' draws attention to the power of literature to harm 'unguarded eyes,' to influence and mislead. Like Sue, Maud is far from what she seems. As in *Alias Grace* this slippery narration raises questions about the ethics of narrating trauma; the impossibility of ever representing traumatic experience in an objective way, unravelling it from the expectations and social preconceptions of the reader or listener.

Fingersmith links traumatic memory to identity. Sue's background is a traumatic one, and her narrative opens with a memory of watching Oliver Twist at the theatre at the age of five or six: "I remember a drunken woman catching at the ribbons of my dress. I remember the flares, that made the stage very lurid; and the roaring of the actors, the shrieking of the crowd" (4). Sue's strong use of imagery and her fearful reaction invites the reader into her world and encourages a sense of identification with her emotions: "...I became gripped by an awful terror. I thought we should all be killed. I began to scream, and Flora could not quiet me" (4). In this passage we see traumatic memory linked to Sue's sense of self, of

identity (which turns out to be false): “This is the first time I remember thinking about the world and my place in it” (3). Sue believes herself an orphan, raised by Mrs Sucksby after her mother (a thief) was hanged for killing a man during a botched robbery. Like Sue, Maud has no memory of her mother, yet other characters have filled in the gaps for her, along with her imagination. Her vivid description again invites reader sympathy and draws the reader into her mind: “I imagine a table, slick with blood. The blood is my mother’s...My mother is mad. The table has straps upon it to keep her from plunging to the floor...When I am born the straps remain: the women fear she will tear me in two!” (179). This vivid imagery and the intimate, confiding tone creates “an analogous community of feeling”, as discussed by Gutleben and Kohlke:

> The circulation of trauma described within the novel is meant to generate a wider circulation of trauma outside of/beyond the world of the text. This emotional and ethical involvement of contemporary readers of neo-Victorian fiction serves as another means of securing a continuity between nineteenth-century traumas and contemporary experience (28).

Both Sue and Maud are haunted and troubled by their beliefs about their mothers’ backgrounds–their fears are used by other characters to repress and control them: “The madhouse. Do you think very often of your time there? Do you think of your mother, and feel her madness in you?” Rivers/Gentleman asks Maud (219); “...I know what she would feel in her heart—what dread, but also what pride, and the pride part winning—to see you doing it now,” Mrs Sucksby tells Sue when she has qualms about the plot she believes she about to take part in (47). These fears also prey on the unknowing reader. Maud does seem unhinged, slapping her maid, refusing to eat, insisting on wearing gloves–will she, in fact, be driven over the edge? Sue is a thief, and a liar; perhaps she will be caught out, as

her mother was. For all their disguise and the roles they are asked to take on, both women seem trapped by the backgrounds which have made them who they are.

Ultimately, these fears of history repeating itself prove false. Expectation is turned upside down when we learn that it is Sue the Lady's Maid/sneak who is cruelly duped and tricked by her mistress. In a final twist, it turns out that neither woman is at all who she seems; both discover they were switched at birth. This ultimate twist to the tale raises questions around female identity and exposes insecurities around our sense of self. It turns a story of female duplicity into a story of female solidarity and freedom in the face of a repressive patriarchal society. There is a heavy price to pay though, in the form of Mrs Sucksby's life, a woman whom both girls have had cause to call mother. Sue watches her hanging, and hears the cheers go up: "Now I listened as those hurrahs went up, and it seemed to me, even in my grief, that I understood. *She's dead*, they might as well have been calling. The thought was rising, quicker than blood, in every heart. *She's dead— and we're alive*" (525). Mrs Sucksby's death represents the freedom of both characters, yet also their traumatic losses, of their pasts, their histories, their sense of self. Gruss writes that:

> The phantom is ...a personification of the parent generation's traumatic silence that haunts a younger generation who becomes 'the mere vessel for narratives and dramas outside of their control and their time frame' (Berthin 2010, 18). At the same time, the phantom...demands to be heard—it 'underlines a concealed secret which has not come to light as yet, but still has to be acknowledged' (Arias 2009a, 135). (126)

In this sense, Sue and Maud have been haunted by the silences of their own parents, but also by their Victorian counterparts: such as Lady Audley, and Anne Catherick. In finding their voices and their freedom, Sue and Maud speak for all these women. They personify

Freccero's wavering line between past and present, showing how much has changed, and might be seen to have a redemptive role for Victorian literary heroines.

Chapter seventeen begins: "My name in those days was Susan Trinder. Now those days all came to an end" (509). In providing Sue and Maud with the truth about their backgrounds and their heritage, they can break free from these beliefs, and from their own traumatised pasts. Maud turns to writing pornographic texts to support herself. No longer a passive and unwilling consumer, she becomes an active producer. This reflects her changing position in the novel, as she is given narrative control of her story: "They say that ladies don't write such things. But, I am not a lady…" she tells Sue (546). This narrative control exemplifies Gutleben and Kohlke's quote, discussed above in relation to *Alias Grace*, that the act of narration is "performative... an act of generation, begetting the (however partial) understanding, transmission, and healing of trauma" (28). It is no accident that Maud's section of the novel, though first person, is written in the present tense, giving the impression that she is only discovering alongside the reader. She is not with-holding. In contrast, Sue writes in the past tense. The suggestion is that she knows where the story ends–and yet it is Maud's words that the novel ends with: "She (Maud) put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one" (548). This final line, narrated by Sue, brings an equality to the ending of the story, giving Sue and Maud ownership, and bringing a hopefulness to their tragedy. The implication is that they might be free to live their own lives on their own terms, where their neo-Victorian doppelgangers were not able to do so. Unlike Lady Audley who ends up silenced in an asylum, and Anne Catherick in a grave, Sue and Maud walk free, using their (unconventional) words to not only tell their own stories but to give them the freedom to live a life outside of patriarchal society.

Yet even while *Fingersmith* appears to offer its heroines the freedom and voice that is denied their Victorian counterparts, the text also points to disturbing parallels between Victorian and modern culture. Speaking of her neo-Victorian texts, Sarah Waters once stated that:

> I've sometimes thought that it's a way of addressing issues that are still very, very current in British culture, like class and gender, and submerged sexuality or sexual underworlds. Things that we think we're pretty cool with, and actually we're not, and we keep wanting to go back to the nineteenth century to play these out on a bigger scale, precisely because they're still very current for us. (Sarah Waters, in Tuttle, 211).

Through employing morally dubious heroines and inviting the reader to critique their reactions to these characters, *Fingersmith* emphasises continued inequalities in modern gender politics—a persistent refusal to allow women characters to be flawed and self-interested—and points to these as a continuation of Victorian concerns. Neither Sue nor Maud are conventional Victorian heroines. While their histories explain their behaviour, both women are at times unlikeable. Early in the text, Sue brazenly states her motives for participating in the plot against Maud, with no sense of shame: "...here was my fortune, come from nowhere–come, at last. What could I say? I looked again at Gentleman. My heart beat hard, like hammers in my breast. I said: 'All right. I'll do it. But for three thousand pound, not two" (31). Maud is cruel and twisted, as we see when she abuses her maid: "She reminds me of myself, as I once was and ought still to be, and will never be again. I hate her for it. When she is clumsy, when she is slow, I hit her. That makes her clumsier. Then I hit her again. That makes her weep. Her face, behind her tears, keeps still its look of mine. I beat her the harder, the more I fancy the resemblance" (203). This self-centredness is in

stark contrast to the Victorian heroine–Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick are both sweet and gentle characters; even Lady Audley is innocent and childlike on the surface. Her ultimate descent into madness means she must be shut away and punished; Sue and Maud in contrast walk free. In the way *Fingersmith* allows its heroines to embrace their troubled pasts, and their ambiguous positions, it shows itself a very un-Victorian book, but also one that is radical by modern standards:

> …the male antihero has a well-established history. A villain may tell his own story and charm his readers into accepting him as good company, even if they wouldn't want to encounter him in real life… But a female antihero, a true counterpart to the masculine figure, someone who acts entirely out of brazen self-interest, who refuses to be victimised, and doesn't conform to accepted moral standards, is still impossible for many readers to accept (Tuttle 213).

Rather than vindicating Victorian literature and its oppressed heroines, *Fingersmith* and other neo-Victorian texts cast a mirror that shows the many parallels between Victorian and modern culture, forcing the reader to explore the more dubious and unchanging aspects of our own modern world, and our own continued anxieties around traditional Victorian themes, such as hereditary and identity, as well as sexual discrimination, and the continued difficulties for women in a society that has been shaped around the patriarchal conventions that we see so much of the Victorian novel.

Through using difficult, ambiguous, and even unlikeable women as narrators, neo-Victorian literature can explore diverse voices from the past, and to take a subjective "unashamedly partisan" look at history that other texts might not. For Gutleben and Kohlke, this gives neo-Victorian literature an important ethical role:

> In this way, neo-Victorian rewritings of nineteenth-century traumas acquire the capacity "to speak-for-the-other". This opening to and concern for the various forms of the other correspond closely to Levinas's conception of ethics as an ethics of alterity, in which (or through which) the self – in the case of neo-Victorian fiction the contemporary self – is enlarged and enriched by the other and transcends its own egoistic limits. Clearly, this form of an ethics of alterity coincides with an ethics of justice, or more specifically an ethics of acknowledging past injustices: the doubled injustices of literal acts of violence that inflicted untold suffering on others, and the subsequent symbolic violence, repeating the offence, of sidelining the trauma or consigning it to outright historical oblivion (20).

This role is a complicated one though, by virtue of neo-Victorian literature's emphasis of the wavering line between past and present, and of the continued wrongs in modern society; as well as its intrinsic interrogation of the ethics of narrating trauma, and of the difficulties in redeeming past wrongs through literature (Gruss 134). Like *Alias Grace, Fingersmith* shows an awareness of the ethical difficulties of narrating trauma. We see this in the audience watching Mrs Sucksby's hanging, in the lurid details of Gentleman's death, which seems to mirror Sue's theatrical descriptions of her Oliver Twist experience at the start of the novel: "He reached, out of the circle of lamp-light, and began to struggle, as if to raise himself from the chair" (506). Passages such as this demonstrate a self-conscious understanding of the "sensationalism, exhibitionism, garishness, trivialisation, cynicism, coarseness or obscenity" which Gutleben and Kohlke warn "raises the delicate question of the ethical value of the very forms of literature" (23). Yet by presenting trauma in such a way, *Fingersmith* styles itself as a discussion of the ethics and the value of writing trauma and prompts the reader to explore their own responses. As Gutleben and Kohlke continue, perhaps it is more the *way*

that trauma is represented that is problematic. “If ethics can be reduced to a question of style,” they write, “then the ethical problem is necessarily individual to each novel instead of generic. In the last resort, the ethics of representing trauma in neo-Victorian fiction depends on the art of specific practitioners...Thus ethics can also be a question of poetics” (23). Rather than redeeming past wrongs then, perhaps the value of neo-Victorian literature is to provoke questions around the way we represent and understand past traumas in modern society. Likewise, these texts force readers to interrogate the strange dichotomy in the way modern society tends to view the Victorian–either from a smugly superior retrospective, celebrating our more enlightened and progressive attitudes; or from an idealistic nostalgia, mourning a long-lost work ethic and good old fashioned family values. Neo-Victorian texts explore this nostalgia, showing a more ‘real’ and gritty side to Victorian life, at the same time shattering reader allusions of modern social superiority by casting a mirror to injustices and traumas that continue to haunt our world today.

Through reimagining Victorian texts, and filling in narrative gaps around traumatic experience, neo-Victorian novels offer a space where historic abuses can be acknowledged, and a voice for female suffering. As this thesis shows, however, the role of these neo-Victorian texts is more than just to expose a shady hidden past: they also play an important role in tracing back the roots of ongoing abuses in contemporary society, and confront the reader with the persistence of these. Modern readers cannot help but draw parallels between the abuses that have been exposed by the #metoo movement, and the treatment of Grace Marks or of Maud Lilly; while *Fingersmith*’s Sue and Maud confront us with our continued refusal to allow females to be self-centred and self-interested. Though these texts might be said to have a role in demanding justice for these traumas, they point also to the

impossibility of this, to our continued individual and social weaknesses. These texts demand answers more than they give them. As we have seen, it is not only the heroines of these novels who are haunted by their troubled past; it is the whole of modern society, which, these novels tell us reverberates with patriarchal wrongs that can be traced back to the Victorian era.

The Rising River

1863

Emma

There were walls around the garden, high and ivy strewn; the grey stone, though crumbling in patches, was thick, impenetrable as the walls behind which my mother had languished all those years ago. It was the first time I had thought of my mother in months; I imagined a shadowy room, dripping ceilings; rats perhaps, and the wails of the other lunatics. I shook my head, hard, as if to clear my mind of the past, and bring myself back to this pretty cottage garden. It was neat, well-kept, yet there was a sense of wilderness, nature threatening to claim it back. Foxgloves and hemlock peeped in from the other side of the closed iron-wrought gate, as if waiting their chance. The morning light glared into my eyes as I hesitated, my hand on the dew-wet latch. I did not expect it to open, for it looked so heavy and foreboding, and yet, as I pushed, it creaked forward before me, scraping over the stony surface of the lane outside. The previous day seemed hazy and nebulous; no more than a distant memory – leaving Combe Acton House in the bright afternoon sunlight, the lurch of the carriage through the lanes; the heat on my neck, Miranda's hand stroking my hair. I remembered stumbling from the carriage in the moonlight, silent and furtive as if we were committing some crime.

Today, I had risen early, before anyone else had awoken. I dressed myself clumsily for I was not used to it without Sarah's help. Now, I walked with some strange purpose, heading Southeast, as if I followed some thread. High above the sky was grey, and yet there was no sign of rain. The air around me was still and unmoving, and it was already hot. My eyes were dry and heavy from lack of sleep. My head hurt. In my belly, the baby squirmed. I

had new stays, adjustable at the sides to accommodate my expanding waist, but in my attempt to do them for myself I had laced them too tight. I had not known who I might see, and I knew Lady Rowbarton should wish my pregnancy to remain unseen; even in my rebellion, she wielded some strange power over me–a power that went far beyond her reach as my employer. I thought of her, sitting in the dim light of the cottage, knitting, always knitting; that strange and awful need emanating from her, smothering me, like ivy clinging to a tree. Even here, outside in the country, I could feel it.

She had not told me where we were. I knew that she feared I might change my mind, my conscience might get the better of me, and I might flee. But, I think, I knew even then: I could smell it on the soft ocean-tinged air; could see it in the gently rolling hills, the thatch of the cottage roof. I knew we were in Devon; we were close to the village where I had been raised. I needed to be sure though, and so, I kept walking, as the sky grew white and the heat more intense, until on the crest of the hill I saw it in the distance: the sea, stretching silver, far away. I walked on another hour, and then I realised. I knew where I was. If I turned left, I would see a steep hill, which would descend into the foggy valley where my aunt and uncle had brought me up. Midway down, there was a house, and in the house…I hesitated. I feared to let myself remember, to open that part of me that I had thought long dead and buried.

It had rained very little that summer and everything would soon be dried out and withered. I stood there for a moment, breathing it in as far as my constricted chest would allow. The meadows were still green, though the ground was hard beneath my boots. I thought about turning back, but I could not. Just to look, I told myself. I would not speak to anyone.

I turned left, down the hill, walking slowly, dreamily now. It was as if I had walked back in time, as if I were still that girl who thought she could step out of the life she had been given. His cottage had not changed at all: small, grey stone, a neat garden, rows of vegetables. The smell of pigs and chickens. No smoke rose from the chimney. I swayed a little, remembering walking through that gate, wiping the mud from my boots on the stone steps. My hand in his.

My breath came hard now. I should never have come there. Not then, not now. It was all a mistake. I felt myself sink down on the ground. The hot dust. A woman was walking towards me, down that garden path where I had once run laughing through the soft grey rain with him. A young country-woman–neatly braided hair, a simple cotton gown, wiping her hand on her apron. The kind of woman who baked and planted vegetables in her kitchen garden, who smelt of new bread and sweet peas. He was married then. It was all undone. I sank my head in my hands, giving up.

"Emmeline?"

At first, I could not think who she meant, and then it dawned on me, like the sun rising over the grey sea, lighting up a past that I had wanted to keep dark and forgotten. It rushed over me now, and I could not speak. I had to breathe very carefully, in and out, and in and out; to grip my nails to the palms of my hand, that I might hold onto the person I had worked so hard to become. "Sybil." His sister. "I am sorry. I was walking. I felt faint. I should not be here."

"Let me help you. Stand up. How pale you look. You must come into the house. I will give you water."

I shook my head. "No. I cannot see him."

"Ned is not here. He is working. As always. Let me help you."

My heart began to beat a little slower, but still I could not follow her, though her hand pulled at mine. I shook my head again.

“Sit here then, by the gate. I will bring water to you”

I let her lead me to a shady spot beneath an ash tree and I sat there, waiting, remembering how those leaves had circled, red and gold, to the damp earth as we ran beneath them. She was back quickly, bearing water in a plain tumbler that she held up for me to drink from. I sensed her suspicion. She had been my friend once.

“What are you doing here, Emmeline?” she asked me. “We thought you had left with your husband.”

I did not know what to say, how to explain all that happened. “I cannot say, Sybil. I am sorry. I need to get back. I just had to see. I had to know. Ned is… he is well?”

She nodded. “He is quite well. He works a lot.”

“Has he… has he married?”

“No. Though there are many girls who wish he would. But no-one can measure up in his eyes.”

“I must go back.” I stood up, still wobbly.

“Where do you need to go?”

“I cannot say exactly… I found my way here by chance. I know it sounds strange. But I will retrace my footsteps.”

“Is it far?”

I nodded, all at once realising I could never walk back that distance. I put my hand on my stomach not thinking.

She looked at me, up and down and I saw the realisation dawn on her face. “You cannot walk alone. Not in that condition. I will take the gig.”

I had no choice. “You cannot let them see you. Stop before the gate. I wish I could explain to you, Sybil. But I cannot. They must not know that I have come here.”

I saw her face soften, though she was puzzled still.

We did not speak on the journey back, other than for me to give directions. I had been right, I thought: the scent of sweet peas did linger about her; a wistful nostalgic scent that seemed to want to tug me back to a past I had left behind. Sybil stopped the gig in the lane just before the gate, but I saw her peering round the walls to look at the cottage, taking in its size. I had thought it small after my time at Combe Acton House, but I realised now, it was a palace in contrast to her and Ned’s little home.

“I wish I understood what was happening,” she said to me, taking my hand in hers. “You are dressed like a lady and staying in this beautiful house. You have a child on the way and a husband who is a godly man. To the world it must seem you have found enormous success. And yet, I fear you are in trouble.”

I stepped up and descended from the gig. “I am quite alright. Really. Only the past caught up with me. A foolish nostalgia. Do not tell Ned you saw me. It will not help him.”

I spoke coldly as if she were a stranger to me, and I saw the softness drain from her face. “As you wish,” she said. “I never saw you. You are in New Zealand with your husband, as we had believed.”

I walked through the gates, taking in the genteel beauty of the cottage—no smell of pigs here—and reminding myself of George. I carried the child of a titled man. What would I want with a thatcher? In an upstairs window a curtain twitched.

***

Inside, the cottage was dark and shady after the brightness of the morning, and at first, I did not see Lady Rowbarton awaiting me in the hallway.

I started as I recognised her dark figure lurking. “I woke early. I have been exploring the gardens,” I said, like a caught-out child.

“And how do you like them?”

I breathed deeper. She had not seen me enter the gate then. “They are beautiful. Only...I feel so strange that I came back inside before I could see it all.”

“It is the child,” she told me. “You are tired from the journey. Rest now. Later, you might look outside again. Miranda sleeps still. You should too.”

I nodded. “I will. But I should like to look beyond the garden as well, to take some exercise.”

“If you feel well, you might walk out a little. Only promise me you will not speak to anyone or say where we are come from. Our presence must be a secret, remember that.”

I nodded, but I did not meet her eyes. It was to protect my reputation, you might think, not to mention her own: her companion boasting a swollen belly–it would be my ruin, my downfall, and an embarrassment to her. That was not the true reason though. She needed me to stay hidden, and Miranda–her daughter-in-law—too, so that the world would think the baby was her grandchild, her heir. As he was, though not legitimately.

I wanted to get away from that dark hallway; from Lady Rowbarton’s presence, but she was still speaking, and I forced myself to listen. “Humour her,” she reminded me, and I knew she was speaking of Miranda, still sleeping, all unknowing. I imagined her dreaming of my child in her arms.

“She will start to ask you questions now that we are alone here. She will want to be sure that you will give up the child to her. You must reassure her. Do not act like any dreamy mother-to-be, stroking your belly and talking non-stop of your babe.”

I nodded, but I wondered if it would be possible, for as my belly grew larger, my hands seemed to cradle it of their own accord. My mind thought of little else.

I went up the stairs, my hand on the banister for support. It was not the baby I thought of now. It was Ned, as if, despite myself and all that I had to lose, there was a part of me that longed to tread those lanes once more, to return to that cottage, to throw myself on his doorstep and beg him to forgive me for all that had passed. It was not possible, I reminded myself firmly. For even had I not been in love with George–as I surely was–I was too far gone down the path Lady Rowbarton had set me upon. There could be no turning back now. It was a plan as tangled and twisted as the hedges that I had glimpsed beyond the gate, laced with hidden brambles behind the pretty nodding flowers.

Miranda did not know that I would never give up my child: when the baby came, she would be left here, and taken to a hospital so that she might rest. A good place, Lady Rowbarton reassured me, somewhere for oversensitive women of Miranda’s class. I imagined an airy, sunny room, tulips in vases, and Miranda lying peaceful, reading one of her novels.

I had resisted for days: “Surely Miranda will not accept it,” I argued. “Surely, she will never forgive George–or me–when she learns I am carrying his child? You cannot really think she would agree to raise it?”

“Of course, my dear. Miranda would never think you capable of such betrayal, and that is what will save us. We will tell her you were seduced by some visiting gentleman. They have enough house parties, enough bored guests who would think nothing of ruining a

lonely companion. We will win her sympathy and she will believe she is saving the child from you; and saving you from certain ruin."

As if I would be such a fool! I thought of all those nights George had come to my bed, my skin hot and leaping for his touch. I had not thought any man could make me feel that way after Ned. But for those weeks, George had, though his own wife had slept only down the corridor.

I did feel guilt. It crept up on me still, stealthy and sly. When I mentioned it to Lady Rowbarton, she would remind me: Miranda would take the baby from me if she could; she would rip him from my arms and claim him for her own. "Besides," she would tell me, "Miranda is not well. She does not love her husband as a wife should. She needs rest, proper care. And George–dear George–you must agree that he deserves an heir, and the chance to keep his name alive. He has only ever done his best for poor Miranda. Your child will be his heir. He will be given every chance in life, a brilliant future. He will attend the best schools, associate with only the best people." What more could I ask? Of course, I wanted to give my child the very best of this world.

There was a price of course: we would have to say the baby was Miranda's, so that no-one might doubt his place. We would say that his birth had tipped her over the edge once and for all. That I was raising him from the kindness of my heart. A nurse, or governess, Lady Rowbarton had said. But I knew: in time George would divorce Miranda, and he would marry me, and she would be left, peaceful and untroubled, in her flower-laden room.

***

"Where are we?" I asked Miranda that evening, feigning ignorance.

We had eaten our supper, and I could no longer avoid sitting near her in the parlour. It was still light outside, birds rustling in the trees. The window was open, and a breeze blew in. We had lit the lamps for the windows were so small and deeply recessed that we were blessed with little of the midsummer light. The lamplight flickered, and the beams that crossed the whitewashed ceiling seemed close and low.

In the corner, Lady Rowbarton sat upon a red velvet armchair, a black figure, knitting bootie after bootie. She did not look up, but I knew she was listening.

Miranda looked taken aback at my directness, but then she shrugged. “Does it matter? Some dull place in the Westcountry. It is all the same, is it not?”

“I suppose. I just wondered if I might have heard of it.”

She laughed. “What would there be to hear of in such a place as this?”

We were silent again after that, there seemed nothing else to say, though of course there was so much.

I understood. I had my own secrets after all. They did not want me to know where I was, did not want to take any chances that I might change my mind and leave. They need not worry. I had no plans to flee, I reminded myself, no desire to return to my family, to the life I had left so far behind. In fact, it discomforted me, this closeness to my past. I had thought myself well hidden, yet now it seemed pressing in on me. Each day, as my stomach expanded, my secrets also seemed to swell, so many of them, wrapping soft around me, smothering me, so that my breath caught in my throat, and my heart pounded strangely. I imagined it, blooming crimson: a summer rose, a stain.

***

I walked every morning those first weeks at the cottage, making my way to the brook that ambled gently through the fields. It was low now, in the height of summer, water trickling

over stones, slow and dreamy. Sometimes, I would take off my boots, and roll down the fine linen stockings that Lady Rowbarton had ordered for me, and I would wade in the shallow edges, closing my eyes and feeling the coolness rise from my toes and my feet. If I felt well enough, I would go out again in the evening once the warmth had faded from the sun a little. I had determined to never look back to my Devon life when I had left that day four years ago. I would forget it all, I told myself, dropping my wedding ring into the deep treacherous waters of the estuary as I crossed it on the tiny ferry. It had sunk like a stone to the muddy depths. Now, as I walked, as I heard the call of the woodpeckers in the trees, and saw the fuzzy summer grass in the meadows, something like nostalgia washed over me. As if I had never left this place, or as if this place had never left me.

I could not stand to sit there in that little cottage and stare at Miranda's face, see her and her mother-in-law coveting my growing belly, as if they should like to rip the child from my womb. Doubt whispered in my ear even then: could these women really offer my child a good future? Money perhaps, a title. But they would stifle him, that little voice insisted; they would crush his soul so that he would no longer be himself, but just another Lord Rowbarton; one more dusty portrait at the end of the row of paintings staring down on the grand entrance hall at Combe Acton House. There was another doubtful voice, too. I could not bear to be near Miranda; when I saw her unknowing eyes, something in me seemed to soften and shrink against my will, another self to take me over; I feared that self might speak through me, might one day say too much, so that it would all come undone; my dreams in pieces. Those walks hushed the voices; they were all that kept me sane. The brown river, shady trees, the woods and meadows. They slowed my racing heart and relaxed that band around my chest. I could forget Miranda, forget Lady Rowbarton; forget myself.

I never walked back the way I had that first day. I stayed away from my village. From Sybil. From Ned. I tried to keep my thoughts away, also. Yet, as I walked, my mind twisted back along that river, as if tugging me back. I did not want to go back there, I reminded myself. Too much had passed. I was someone else now.

***

"I long for company," Miranda said to me, one afternoon in the cottage garden, beneath the drooping willow tree.

The leaves cascaded around us, a green canopy of shade so that I felt we were cocooned there, protected from the heat, and from the world outside, a world in which we could never be friends. I had spent many hours in Miranda's company before coming to the cottage, but never like this, never alone. At Combe Acton House there were always dinner parties, or teas, to which I accompanied Lady Rowbarton, sitting quietly at her side, pouring tea, and holding yarn; never uttering a word unless one of her acquaintances should condescend to speak to me. Miranda seemed barely to notice me on these occasions, and I had preferred it this way. Now, it was impossible that we should ignore each other as we had done in the past.

"Even one of Mama's endless tea parties would be welcome now," she continued. "How dull it is. You grew up in the countryside. You are used to it, I suppose?"

"Used to what, exactly? We had visitors, we made calls."

"Yes… but no *society.* No dances, no balls."

"It was...quiet, I suppose."

"And having no mother to guide you." She was silent for a moment. "What was she like?"

I flushed. I felt that awful heartbeat in my chest. I knew I had to say something.

“She—she was very beautiful,” I said at last. “She loved to dance and to sing. She laughed a lot. She loved my father very much.” That much was true. It was a strange kind of love between them, but it was love, just the same.

Miranda was looking at me thoughtfully. “Such a tragic loss. Your father and your mother at such a young age. Your father was a clergyman, Mama says?”

I nodded. The less of my father the better. That part was not true. Not at all, but I should never have been given my position as a companion had I told the truth of my past. My father was a merchant, a wealthy one. He met my young mother when his ship docked at our village, and he fell for her beauty, as every man did. He plucked her from the Devon meadows as if she were a wildflower, and he took her to London, against her family’s wishes, where she glowed at first, but finally wilted, a bluebell in a glass jar. I was born to a life of luxury and wealth, a silver spoon in my mouth. But my father was a gambling man, and a drinking man. He died with barely a penny to his name, and I was left a pauper.

“Brought up by a country clergyman! How strange our ways must seem to you, how impious! Why, we barely attend church!”

I thought of my house in London, the memory blurred by the passing of years: bright lights, the smell of fragrance, laughing gentleman, twirling dresses; the scent of fragrance of tobacco. The yelling in the night. My mother’s nails tearing at my father’s face. That racing heartbeat breaking open my chest.

I forced myself to smile. “A change. Yes. I like to think of it as a continued education. I should never have learned of the new schools of Science and Geology; Philosophy and literature had I not come to Combe Acton House, were it not for your husband’s interest in my education.”

“But Combe Acton House is deep in the countryside. Is that not dull to you also?”

I saw the look in her blue eyes, a profound sadness that I wouldn't have thought her capable of, like grey clouds gathering over a placid ocean.

“Perhaps it did seem so at first. Especially when my husband travels as he—as he must so often. For work. But we have company, house parties. And I like to travel now and then, to make visits.”

“Do you see your family? You do not seem to visit them often. They must live very far away?”

“My own mother died when I was a child. Just like yours. My father still lives in our London house, but he is very busy. As men are. And my sisters. Well, they are all married, and busy with their own families.”

“I had not realised.”

There was silence again then. On the terrace, close to the house Lady Rowbarton picked lavender. She was out of earshot, but I felt her watching us, and I wished I could wrap that blanket of leaves right around us, so that we should be safe. I was thinking of my own mother, dying locked away. I imagined her cold, and terrified. Forgotten. Not at all like the mother I imagined for Miranda: loved and cherished and deeply mourned.

Miranda

I should not have asked her such questions about her past. It made her seem too real to think of her mother and father as actual people, and herself an orphaned daughter; it aroused a feeling of sympathy that I did not wish for at all. When I saw her speak of her mother, and saw the wistfulness on her face, something like pity stirred deep in my heart. I had not been prepared for her to ask about my own past, as if I was the fraud.

"Do you really think Emma will be alright? That her family will take her in?" I asked Mama that evening.

"Surely you are not feeling sympathy for the girl?" she asked, as if outraged. "She has taken up with your husband right under your nose. She thinks to walk away with him, to displace you. Why, no doubt, she would be happy to see the back of you!"

I flushed, hot blood and angry words so close to the surface of my skin. Mama was watching me, as if I were a specimen, and she was fascinated by what I would do next.

I had to breathe in deep to keep my voice smooth and even. "I know all those things. And I cannot forgive her, you are right. I feel no love for her. But…what will become of Emma even if her family do agree to help her? She will be quite ruined."

Mama laughed, the strangest sound. "How noble you are, dear Miranda. What high feelings stir your heart. Do you think she is capable of such sentiment? She is a schemer. All we need to do is give her money. Tell her George has tired of her. Give her a good reference, and she will trot away from the child quite happily."

She was looking at me intently, as if to gage my reaction. Her knitting was cast aside. I had never seen her so focussed. And yet, I had the sense that something was wavering, as

if I were not playing my part quite right, not speaking from the script she had written me, and she was unsure how to respond.

"I am not sure," I said. "Perhaps she will not be paid off as we have presumed. I feel responsible. She is so unworldly. And an orphan! We have ruined her!"

For the first time in my life, I heard Mama speak words she had not planned, fast and unmeasured as if she could not help herself: "The girl is married! Her husband is a missionary in India or New South Wales, or some such awful place. She ran away from her aunt and uncle in Devon to come to me. The butler checked her credentials for me. I am not the fool she thinks. I would not just take any wench to birth my heir. Her mother was of good family, and her father was wealthy. Her relatives will help her."

The words rushed in my ears, my chest, my throat. They would not form into a sentence.

Married! Married! It was a drum in my head, striking again and again.

Mama was not finished, as if now she had chosen her path, she should walk all the way down it. "Please don't feel sorry for her. She thinks you are to be sent to the sanatorium. She thinks she will take your place!" She paused, as if to assess my reaction. "You are shocked and that is no surprise. Be at ease. I will let no harm come to you. I did not wish to burden you with my plan, but you will see. I will take care of it all. You will have your child, and Emma will have her money. All will be quite well."

Married. She was married. Something like relief began to rise, as if I were a sinner receiving benediction. That girl did not deserve to be a mother.

***

My own past seemed very close just then, and when I closed my own eyes, the memories flooded over me.

"Do not be like your mother," my father told us girls one day, right in front of her. "Only look at Miss Mabel. She is a real lady."

I obliged. I was not like my mother at all. She left, one sultry day in August. She walked out of the house, wearing nothing but her nightgown, and she never came back. They searched and searched, but it took a week to find her–stuck in a bend of the river, her nightgown stripped away by the current. I dreamed of that nightgown, that I was tangled up in it, water getting into my ears, my lungs, and carrying me away, screaming and kicking, to some far-off savage land. I heard my father telling his friends, as if it were cheap entertainment, how the fishes had nibbled at her feet. I screamed and I screamed when I heard that part, and I would not stop, though my father slapped me, and the governess threw water in my face. I silenced myself eventually: I knew it was not the fishes: it was her hysteria that got her in the end.

***

Mama approached the willow tree one afternoon, as Emma dozed, and I sat, my novel open on my knee. I watched her stooping under the ceiling of leaves as she entered our little refuge. A sense of foreboding chilled me as she drew close, and I pinched the palm of my hand, spiteful at my own weakness.

“How untroubled she looks,” she observed, gesturing to Emma.

I looked at her face, and saw how right she was, the droop of her eyelids, the smoothness of her face.

I had a sudden image of Emma, asleep beside my husband, her hair all loose and spread across his chest, where once my own head had rested, listening to the slowing of his

heartbeat and the quieting of his breath. It struck me like a blow remembering how it had once been; my own breath seemed to stop, the longing rose with an urgency that hurt.

The lavender was wilting in Mama's hands.

"Excuse me," I said, and I rose from my chair, and rushed back to the dark of the cottage where the brightness of the afternoon left spots of light whirling behind my eyes so that I thought that I might fall.

I wanted to punish Emma, I realised that night, lying awake in the thick country darkness. I wanted to make her suffer as I did, for stealing my husband, for bearing the child that I could not. And yet, it was exactly as I had planned it, or as Mama had planned it; I no longer really knew. My memories were confused and tangled, a mass of unruly yarn, so that I no longer knew what was real

It was Mama who had suggested a companion, that much is true: a young female who might be a distraction for George. There was so much talk, you see; he was becoming less and less discreet with his affairs. He needed someone to steady him, someone to hold his attention as I could not. I had feigned unknowing when George mentioned the companion as we prepared to travel back from Paris. We were in our hotel suite, taking tea at the table beside the open French window. In the bedroom next door, the door open, I could see my gowns laid over the elegant bed, as Sarah, my Lady's maid carefully placed them into boxes, her eyes cast down, as if she could not hear us. I pretended I knew nothing; asked why Mama had need of such a thing.

"Mother needs some entertainment," he told me, with a shrug, when I asked. "Someone young and intelligent to keep her amused."

"She has me," I offered, but he shook his head, and laughed as if I amused him, as if I could not possibly be enough.

"You, my darling, are so very busy. And you are my wife, you have duties enough at home."

Through the doorway, Sarah flashed a look my way, as if to see how I would react, then her eyes returned to the gown she was smoothing down. She knew exactly what George meant; exactly how I had failed at my duties, and how I would continue to do so. His words were innocuous–had they been spoken to another lady: a dutiful wife, a proper wife. I placed my teacup down slowly, careful that he should not see how it trembled. His own was held firmly in his hand. My mother-in-law longed for an heir, and we all knew it wouldn't come by me. There was a time when I felt my husband's skin slide against mine, felt myself lit up by the desire in his eyes at the sight of me. Those days were long gone. I ruined it. I had to watch George's enchantment with me evaporate like the morning fog from the gardens. His gaze sliding from me to the other women who seemed always to be present.

That first time I met Emma, I knew that my husband would want her in his bed. Another lady might not have seen it, might have noticed only her thinness, her pointy elbows and her dowdy clothing. I knew my husband well though. I saw her as I knew he would. I saw it in the way she sat there on that garden chair in the spring shade; in the seriousness of her gaze as she watched us walking towards her. There was an undiscovered quality about her, as if she were ready to blossom and burst. She had everything still ahead of her.

Another lady might have tried to stop what came next. I knew how futile that would be, for I remembered my own mother, her desperate attempts to snatch my father's attention back to herself. I remembered leading her away, sobbing, from a garden party when I was only twelve; the smash of the sherry decanter and my father's disdainful

laughter. He was a cruel man, I see that now, though I could not then. He did not grow angry, only ceased to let her exist in his world.

I was afraid of my father and now, I realised, my hands cold, I was afraid of my own husband. Afraid of his scorn, his cruel words. Afraid of his rejection and what it said about me.

I primed Emma for him, though she did not know it. I had Mama pick her out and then we groomed her and finessed her, as if she were a gift. We even brought her gowns. We travelled to Bath in the carriage. It was raining hard, and Emma sat beside Mama, gazing from the window as if there were anything to see. There was nothing though, only mist, and droplets snaking down the windowpanes. I watched and saw her eyes soft and glazed over, that slight smile on her lips. Was she thinking of my husband, I wondered. My palms were stinging, sharp and martyred, by the time we descended the carriage. When I removed my gloves, I saw my nails had worked a hole into the tips.

I watched her closer at the dressmaker's as they span her around like a mannequin, measuring her waist, her hips, even her wrists and the circumference of her head. How dainty she was they declared; how like me! But I was thinking how compliant she was, how doll-like; and yet beneath it there was something dark, something threatening, and that fear threatened to overwhelm me once more.

I saw her face light up as they held out the fabrics. I saw how she would look in those gowns, lit up by my husband's attention. I saw that she would become beautiful.

"How kind Lady Rowbarton is to her companion," the dressmaker's assistant said, all wide-eyed, when it was my turn to be measured (though we all knew my measurements would not have changed since last time. I was just the same.) She was puzzled, I could see; my mother-in-law was not known for her generosity, nor her charity.

I shrugged, as if it was of no consequence. “She is an orphan; we wish her to look the part, as if she were one of us, one of the family. And it amuses Lady Rowbarton.”

I looked over at the two of them, sat in a shadowy corner of the room, as if they were indeed relatives. I shuddered.

“Are you cold?” the assistant asked. “We shall be quick.”

She moved the lamp closer, and I stood there in the pool of light, and now I was the one who was spun and manipulated, my measure taken. I felt exposed then, and it made me awkward. I reminded myself that I wanted to pull her closer, not drive her away, so I tried to be kind, but my voice, my body refused to cooperate. I remember the awkwardness of the tearooms, how she sat tense and upright as if she longed to run. And all the while Mama spoke to us as if we were her children, and there was nothing strange about the situation.

As we sat there sipping our tea and pretending to nibble our buns, I wondered what I could say or do to show my friendship, something I could give to her.

It came to me in the carriage. Of course. My gowns. I had rooms of them, discarded old versions of myself.

“A ballgown!” I blurted. “You must have one of mine.” But even as I spoke the image came to me of her dancing with my husband in one of my gowns, and the strangest feeling washed over me: I was disappearing; I was being replaced. My body felt formless and insubstantial. I was nothing but a ghost. My mother-in-law smiled, and I could hear the click of her needles though she had not brought her knitting. That was the first time I felt it, a coarse thread that ran between Emma and me, pulling tighter, tugging us together.

***

I sat up in my bed, lighting the candle on my bedside table so that the shadows flickered, long and close around me, and the smell of burning dust tickled my nostrils. Why was I doing this, I wondered, bitterly. Would it even matter, I wondered, if I were to get with child myself and then die as the doctor had warned? George's mother would not care, so long as the child lived. And him… a cold thought seized me by the shoulders and would not let go.

All it once it seemed the baby–unborn–was grown larger than life; his presence looming out of the shadows, a dream within my reach. I could not let him go. For to give up on our plan would be to lose it all; to become nothing more than my mother, giving myself up to the pull of the water, letting it sweep me to oblivion.

I remembered why we were here: That I should be a mother. That I should be beloved. But by whom? I felt a great and yearning chasm opened up in me. I longed to cure it, to feel myself complete: a woman, not this half-version of someone I no longer recognised.

It was no longer simple, I realised. Something was stirring in me even then, something dangerous and disruptive, a deep and hidden current. I wanted to punish Emma, yes. I hated her. But I hated my mother-in-law more. And my husband? I ached to hurt him as he had hurt me.

Emma

There was no-one else at the cottage, just the three of us–myself, Miranda and Lady Rowbarton–and Miranda's Lady's Maid, Sarah. A pretty girl, it was clear to me she thought herself above the menial tasks of the house. While our clothes and hair were well-tended, dust began to collect in the gloomy corners of the rooms, and cobwebs hung from the low ceilings. At times, Sarah seemed to disappear, but nobody said a word. Our meals were brought to us each day by a woman from the village who did some cleaning when she came, but only in the downstairs rooms–the dark parlour, with its heavy deep red cushions, and the dining room, with stag heads on the walls; low beams crossing the white-washed ceiling.

Miranda slept late each morning, as if she was the one with child. I would take breakfast in the dining room, at the long oak table, watched by Lady Rowbarton—thick and creamy porridge, eggs and greasy bacon—and always she would check: had I eaten enough, did I not want more? After I had eaten enough to satisfy her that her grandchild must be fed, she would allow me to walk out, but always with a warning: not to go too far, not to overexert myself; to speak to nobody. I would stay out for as long as I could, that I might avoid Miranda. How pale she grew, how thin–as if I were eating her share of breakfast each morning. But more–I could not shake the feeling that, like a vampire, I was feeding off her very existence.

It was the best thing for her, I told myself, again and again. Anyone could see how she was suffering; how unwell she was becoming. She needed to rest; she was not cut out to be a wife. Yet my words rang empty, dark and deceptive. I could never quite shake off the sense that I was committing a terrible crime, or a sin. I was a fraud, I thought, just like my

husband, his hollow words ringing from the pulpit, no more than an echo of someone else's thoughts. Even reminding myself of all that George had told me of Miranda's coldness, her refusal to be a wife I could not shake my unease. She was ill, he said, she did not love him as a wife should. She was little more than a child. Any attempt of his to love her as a wife would send her into hysteria. Poor George. My heart softened, as it always did when I thought of his troubles. He kept my past at bay, my mother's heart stilled and tamed.

Yet, as the days rolled on and I heard not a word from him, a phantom began to gnaw at the corners of my mind; I felt that too familiar beat echo in my chest once more. I had to breathe very slowly to quiet it down. Why had he not written?

I was abandoned. It was the third time. My mother, my husband. Now my lover. There was something very wrong with me. I had known it my whole life; since the day I understood what my mother was; the day I realised her hungry red heart had supplanted my own. It was her fault, I thought. She had made me like herself. I remembered my husband's words that day he had left me, the contempt on his face, as if there were no hope: *Unwomanly*, he had said. *Too high strung, like her mother.* Perhaps George saw it too. I remembered my fingers gripping his back, pulling him close. I could not bear to let him go. I remembered my sobs the day before we left for the cottage, his impatience with me. Perhaps I had been too passionate; I had been too much. Miranda soothed me, reassured me, though she did not know who I really pined for. I told her it was the imaginary gentleman who had fathered my child. She swallowed her shock, pretended to understand some of what I felt, though of course she could not, she who was so cold, unloving. I tried to let her words soothe me, and yet, I lay awake each night, and doubt crept in cold and hard, and I could almost hate George. At the same time desperation rose in me. I had to make him love me again. I could not let him abandon me. The child was like a lifeline. I clung to his

existence. I would give George what his wife could not. A son. Then he would love me always, and I would be safe.

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Miranda was reading one of her racy novels. I watched her face as she read, and I saw something that I had not noticed before, that did not match with what George and his mother had said of her. Her face was glowing and alive, and I could almost see the desire and the longing running beneath her skin. I could almost feel it. She looked up, as if she realised I was watching her. She met me full in the eye.

"What will you do?" she asked. "When the baby is born?"

I could not think, could not form my words. *Convince her*, Mama had said. *Make her think you will give the baby up. Keep her calm. Say you hope that I will take pity on you, that I will help you, and suggest that perhaps you think she will too. Ask her to be the godmother.* But now, I could not bring myself to say it. I could only hold my hand protectively on my stomach. My baby was in danger, I felt. I had to keep him safe.

"I will manage," I said. "I will find a way. Perhaps the father will help me."

"You can tell me," she said, all at once.

"Tell you what?"

"The father? Who is the father? I will not judge, will not tell anyone. But I could help you perhaps."

She was looking at me in a way I did not understand.

I looked at the ground.

"He was a visiting gentleman, as I have said. I can tell you nothing more. Please do not ask me again." I let a tear roll down my cheek, hoping to win her sympathy.

When I looked up though, it was rage I saw, flushing red in her cheeks.

“Very well,” she said, and she pursed her lips. “I will not ask again.” She looked back at her book, and I watched the colour fade from her face, back to that ghastly pale.

***

Should I have told her? I knew what Lady Rowbarton would say, and yet all that evening I paced by the river, the baby kicking at my ribs as if to reprimand me, and a ragged pulse throbbing high in my chest. The ground was hard and cracked, the river a mere trickle. The birdsong that usually soothed me seemed to screech in my ears. I lost all track of time, pacing there, and I was dusty and damp with perspiration when I returned.

“Where have you been?” Lady Rowbarton asked, as I entered the shady hallway, untying my bonnet. “And what have you been doing? You look like a country bumpkin.”

There was a sharp note in her voice that I had not heard before. I automatically smoothed down my hair, which I knew was curling and wild from the heat.

But then, before I could stop myself, I was stamping my foot. “Perhaps I am a country bumpkin! Perhaps I do not belong in this house with you and Miranda. Perhaps I should leave, I should make my own way in the world!”

There was alarm on her face now, clear and unhidden in a way I had never seen before. “My dear! You are quite wild. It is the heat. The child. You must rest. You do not know what you are saying. To bed with you, at once!” She was hustling me up the stairs, as if I were a child, and then Sarah came and helped me out of my clothes, and I was lying on my bed alone. It was dim, the curtains closed, but still it was hot, and I could not sleep.

A memory tugged at the corner of my mind; my husband, holding my hand tight in his so that I could not tear it away. “She is wild,” he was saying. “Quite wild! She is going the way of her mother, I fear.”

My heart was pounding, fast and strange and I squeezed my eyes shut, but I did not sleep for many hours and when I finally did, it was Lady Rowbarton I dreamt of, my child in her arms, held too tight. We were in an empty room, with no doors. Only walls, bare grey stone that seemed to rise too high to see where they ended. I wanted to get out, and I scratched at them and kicked and screamed, but it was futile. And when I turned back to the room, Lady Rowbarton was gone, and my child as well.

***

They took me from my mother when I was very small. I remembered it, though: myself kicking and screaming, pulling at her skirts. There was a man snatching me from her arms, and another man holding her back. He seemed to have no face, only a long body, clad in black. I remembered my mother's face though, all puffed up and terrified, and the sharp smell of fear that had filled my nostrils, my lungs; and the rapid thud thud of her heart, which seemed to race in my own chest. The rest was only a blur, those earlier days– fragrance and laughter, and the whirl of her skirts. And happiness, strangely, though they told me she treated me most neglectfully. After my father died, she was taken to an institution for her own safety, and my aunt–a plain-faced country woman with a child ever strapped to her chest–kindly raised me as one of her own, a simple girl, sensible and prim, far from the London of my childhood. It was a grey place, they told me, yet in the blur of my dreams and my distant memories all was lights, bright and dazzling, smiling lady's faces and tickly gentlemen's whiskers.

My mother was reckless, they reminded me often: I must not be like her. A couple of years after our separation they told me she had died, and it seemed of very little consequence. Yet, every now and again as I grew into a young woman, I would wake in the

night and I could feel it still: her heart beating deep in my chest, blooming red and angry, like a stain at the very core of me.

Miranda

That cottage was so gloomy, the country so dull. I grew dull as well, the sharpness of my mind seemed to fade. I wondered what George was doing. I thought I knew well enough. I remembered our last trip together, only last autumn. A hunting party.

We had travelled on a misty rainy October day. The trees were bright, their leaves making a final show of red and gold, before they faded to brown and fluttered to the ground. My heart felt light, as it always did when we left Combe Action House behind us, that disappointment that trailed me through the corridors, over the grounds; a tiny ghost that would not let me be. And Mama with her clicking needles, the constant unspoken reproofs. I was giddy, a smile never far from my lips. George was quiet, almost sullen, yet even that did not dampen my spirits. He would change, I knew, when we arrived at the lodge, when he was surrounded by fine people, fine food, fine wine. Emma would fade, just as surely as the leaves on the trees; she would flutter from his memory, drifting silently away. And when we got back, surely Mama would whisper in my ear that she was in a delicate condition, and then George need have no more to do with her.

The sky was darkening when we arrived at last, but the clouds were clearing, the horizon tinged with red. Tomorrow would be fine, I thought. I could smell the air, damp and smoky, as the coachman opened the door, and George helped me to alight. His hand in mine was warm and strong. I gripped tight, like a child; then smoothed my skirts and patted my hair, feeling the braids still tight and neat at the back of my head. I felt rumpled and weary, and yet I must appear unruffled, as if I had not spent the whole day being jolted around in a stuffy carriage. I remembered my own mother after such journeys: how she

would always smooth her hair, straighten her bonnet and set her shoulders, as if silently reminding herself to stand up straight like a lady; as if she was afraid and did not wish to show it. As a young woman I had scorned my mother for her insecurity, I had wished for a strong mother. Now, I understood how it must have felt, arriving at such parties, knowing that her husband's affairs were known by all society; that he would likely flirt loudly with some young lady all weekend; and that it would be my mother who was whispered about, judged, as if she were responsible for her husband's indiscretion. She must be terribly flawed for her husband to cavort as openly as he did: she drank too much; she spoke too loudly, danced with too much energy. These were the thoughts that lingered in my mind as I walked across the gravel on my husband's arm, looking every inch the beloved wife: treasured and cherished, a success.

At dinner that evening, I sat smiling and talking, my heart swelling too large for my corset as I watched my own husband deep in conversation with a beautiful young widow. It was not the first time he had flirted so publicly, far from it, and yet this time it cut me more than ever. Was it for Emma I was so enraged, I wondered. It was as if she had ceased to exist in my husband's world; he had cast her aside, and in doing so, had rejected me once again. And yet, when we all decided, on a whim, to dance that evening, he did not dance with her more than was proper; he did not pant over her, as my father might have done. And he saw that I was comfortable, that I had partners; he brought me refreshments.

The lodge was not large and there were many guests, and so we shared a room. How strange it felt to lie beside him, to hear the rhythm of his breath as he slept; to reach out and touch the warm hardness of his sleeping chest, the tickle of hair beneath my palm. And how strange that his body was so alien to me; that I could not touch him this way in his

wakefulness. In the darkness he rolled towards me, as if it were perfectly natural, and I fell to sleep, lulled by his sleeping breath, by the warmth of him, by his presence.

***

We ladies rode out next morning to see the gentlemen off on their hunt. I wore my new habit, and I knew I looked well, yet I felt faded into insignificance beside the widow, Mrs Sutherland. I saw George's eyes follow her, the neat curve of her waist and the swell of her bosom. She was tall, and well-built, yet soft and pliable. She was dark. So unlike myself. So unlike Emma. I felt as if the both of us became small and plain; that we were shrinking within George's thoughts.

I watched the men canter off. We ladies were like a flock of birds, feathers dancing in our caps as the horses pranced and snorted, mist streaming from their nostrils on the bright cold air. My habit had no crinoline, no petticoats. I felt bare and exposed, the warm body of the horse under my legs; the narrowness of my hips revealed, despite the careful cut of my skirts. I knew what they all whispered. I was not built to be a mother; not made to carry a child. I was all wrong. Mrs Sutherland was everything a woman should be. She had managed to produce three living sons before her husband had died. It would not be long before she should marry again and produce more. In the meantime, she would chase other women's husbands.

The morning sun was bright and low in my eyes. All at once my cap felt too tight and heavy. It was pinned too fast to my head. The feathers kept bobbing before my eyes, clouding my vision, making me dizzy. I was alone with Mrs Sutherland. I wanted to join the others, walking back to the lodge, but she was speaking, and my training as a lady prevailed. I stayed where I was, trying to keep the vacant social smile on my lips.

“How fine they look,” she said. She had lifted her hand, gloved in black leather, from the reins, to shield her eyes from the sun as she gazed after the men, but her horse, a sleek chestnut, began to caper and she placed it back, pulling sharply so the mare calmed. I followed her gaze, but I could make out little in the brightness, only a hazy fuzz of figures: horses, dogs. What would the fox see, I wondered, as they bore down on him. Not grandeur, I was sure. I imagined his blind terror as his killers cornered him.

“I always find hunting so romantic,” she was saying. “So chivalrous. Like the stories of old. Knights, and fair ladies. You know the thing.”

I nodded. I murmured assent. But I could not stop thinking of the fox. He would be ripped apart by those dogs. Did he have a family? Never had I thought of such things before.

She kicked her horse and she cantered to catch up with the others, a blaze of chestnut to match the trees. I thought of fire. The leaves flickered in the breeze, the sun rising higher, a ball of flames in a calm blue sky.

***

“You are quite breath-taking,” George told me that evening as I exited our dressing room, in my berry gown, wreathed in leaves. “Every gentleman shall wish to dance with you.”

“If only it were acceptable to dance with my own husband at these events,” I said very quietly.

I did not expect what happened next. He took my hands in his, then placed one hand on my waist, and he spun me around the room, as if there were a band playing.

Then he laughed, and I thought how handsome he looked. “There, my lady. But do not worry. You will have no shortage of dances tonight.”

Then he took me by the arm, and we descended the great stairway, and I thought how it was all nothing but a game to him.

George did not come to bed that night. I woke early; it was still dark, the fires unlit, and it was cold, all silent after the laughter and music of last night. I fell into strange and troubled dreams. My mother's nightgown floating empty, a baby on a wide grey sea. George laughing, his mother joining him, a chorus of mocking cackles. I woke once more to a nagging sense of unease. I remembered George's words in the summer: he had told me I was growing high-strung; that I needed a place to rest. Peace. Blank white walls. Perhaps he was right.

He returned to our room as the maid was lighting the fire. She looked intently at her task, as if concentrating on not seeing him.

"Where have you been?" I asked him.

"I did not mean to wake you," he said. "Some of us stayed up to play cards after you ladies had retreated. I won nothing, as you can see." He spread his bare hands, a gesture of innocence.

The maid bobbed and left the room, and I thought I saw a smirk on her face so that I wanted to grab her and shake it from her.

George began to strip his clothes, casting them carelessly to the floor. His manservant should tidy them later. How it hurt me; that he could behave with such careless inhibition in my presence, and yet this intimate act made me feel further than ever from him. He pulled his nightgown over his head and climbed into the bed beside me. I could smell her. Fragrance and champagne, and a hot musky scent.

"Sleep now," he murmured.

"I am unwell," I said. "I want to go home." But he was already asleep.

I lay there, still and cold, despite the flames that now leapt in the hearth. The fire that had burned in my chest extinguished; a charred and ruined heart.

***

I knew what Emma was feeling. I knew how my husband could break hearts. How he took what he wanted, then went on his way, not a care in the world, but for himself. He would lift you onto a pedestal only to knock you off, so that you would be left to feel like less than nothing, questioning all that you thought you knew about yourself.

It was thinking of this, perhaps, that prompted me to ask Emma about the father; to give her a chance to confess, to name my husband as the father, to bring it all out into the open. And she did not take it. Her face grew red, and her eyes filled with tears, and that heavy silence descended once more. Had she told me then, would it have changed things? Might we have left together, walked away from this plot, or were we already too far knitted up in my mother in laws schemes?

I will never know, for she said nothing, and that resentment seemed to fester in my heart. Emma walked each day, and it kept a flush in her cheek, but I could not seem to bring myself to even wander through the gardens; my body felt heavy as if I was the one carrying the child. I longed for something to happen, a party; even one of Mama's boring afternoon teas that I might gossip and hear the scandals of London.

***

It was Sarah who distracted me in the end, who made things begin to change.

"Your maid is becoming a nature enthusiast," Mama commented to me one day. Already, the grass looked ragged and unkempt.

“Is she?” I asked sleepily, staring at the patches of blue sky through the leaves of the willow tree. ‘It is as well for her, I suppose. She must be bored here, with no-one of her own kind to associate with.”

I had thought little of what I was asking of Sarah when I brought her here. Though I loved her, in a way, she existed to me solely in terms of her service to me. Our relationship revolved around her pleasing me–and she did.

“I think you are quite right,” Mama said. “I think her desire to explore the countryside might stem more from a need to mix with her own kind than from a sudden deep interest in wildlife.”

“What can you mean?”

“I have a feeling that dear Sarah might be seeking company. She is a lovely looking girl. She will be missing the male attention she is accustomed to.”

I sat straight up in my chair, looking at Mama. Through my sun-struck eyes, she was no more than a dark figure, her face shadowed by her black bonnet. “But surely there is no-one else around for miles. And Sarah is a good girl. She would not misbehave.” Still, I could not help but think of the way she looked demurely at the ground when my husband was near, as if entirely aware of the way his eyes lingered over her.

“There are always people to be found. Farmers and farm hands. Country labourers. Dear Sarah would seem quite a find to such men, I am sure.”

I gasped, though, even then, some part of me was aware how amiss it was for me to judge Sarah in such a way, when we had plotted the seduction of another innocent girl.

“Why could we not have chosen Sarah? Why couldn’t she have had George’s child?” I asked all at once. “It would have been easier, I am sure.”

Mama shook her head. “She is far too knowing. There would have been bribery, resistance. Emma will flee in shame once she realises George has abandoned her. She will give us no trouble.”

I thought of Emma’s hand stroking her belly.

Before I could think how to explain this to Mama, she continued. “And I could not have a servant’s child for my heir! It had to be someone of good family. Emma’s father was wealthy, and her mother was of respectable stock, though poor.”

It was no use to argue now, I realised. She was right about that at least: A servant’s child might carry coarseness in its blood. It was why we could not adopt an unwanted child from the orphanage as I had once suggested to George, only to be met with horrified silence.

I returned to the subject at hand. “Sarah has been talking with the locals perhaps, or met a young lady to befriend. Surely you are not suggesting that she might be…cavorting with someone?”

“That is my suggestion entirely. But surely you see it is not the cavorting–as you so discreetly put it–that concerns me. Young women are easily replaced.” She looked at me in a way that chilled me. “But should she talk. About us…word carries, you know. All would be lost. Young girls are most forthcoming with their lovers, I think. They give far too much away.”

For a moment I did not get the full meaning of her words. I could only think of that one utterance: Replaceable, she had said, staring into me, as if she knew exactly what I feared. Possessed. And then cast aside. I was just like Sarah, I thought.

Only gradually did the meaning of her other words sink in.

“Sarah would not talk,” I countered. “She is loyal. She has been with me since I was a young girl.”

It was true. My mother had employed Sarah at our London home, as a maid for me and my sisters. On my marriage she had come with me to Combe Acton House. She had been there through it all. She knew me better than anyone, I thought, even my own husband. All my shameful secrets. The thought that she might speak filled me with horror.

“I would not be so sure,” Mama was saying. “Girls like her would do anything for money. Or love. It makes a woman foolish. That is why I avoid it.”

I stood up. It was too hot. My cheeks burned with shame to think of all that Sarah could speak of me if she chose. My failure: A daughter who could not be loved by her father, nor give her mother reason to live; a wife who could not please her husband; a mother who could not even bring her child safely into the world. And now: A liar, a traitor; a woman who would steal a child from out of its mother’s arms.

“No!” I said. “No! We cannot let her speak. I will talk with her. I will forbid these liaisons.”

***

I was not the wife they intended for George, though my father had a title, and I a generous dowry. It was my mother, you see: she only had daughters, and her mother before her as well. They doubted that I might bring them the boy they needed so desperately, for he was the last male left with the Rowbarton name, and they longed to keep it alive. He married me because of a lie. We had known each other since childhood, but one weekend at a house party it had all changed. He had kissed me. In the woods, in the orangery; stolen moments, when I had felt the fire leap in my belly. I had no doubt he was in love with me, and so when

he came to my room one night, I did not tell him no. I had no doubt a proposal would follow–and yet it never came.

I had an aunt who stayed with us for weeks at a time, to help my father with us girls, since the day my mother had given herself up to the water. When not staying with us, she lived a life of laughter and indulgence at her house in the Swiss mountains. I had visited once and I remembered it well: the chime of goat bells, the pretty pink flowers, snow-capped peaks. My aunt had never married, and yet she did well enough, for she was the eldest daughter, and she had inherited all her father's wealth for herself, though her sisters–my own mother included–had all been given generous dowries.

It was her that I confided in. I told her everything. She was unflappable, so unlike my mother. I knew she would think of something. I told her in the orangery, leaves trailing from large glossy plants, the scent of warm damp earth.

"You silly fool," my aunt had told me. "A man who wishes to marry you will not take liberties before the wedding night. You have made yourself his plaything. And besides, that family want a girl who can bring them boys. You have ruined yourself. Unless…"

And so, the lie came about. I told him I was with child. And being a decent man, as I thought then, he had married me, and his family had given in. Still, my aunt had come to my chamber the night before my wedding and set beside me on my bed. I had felt a moment of sadness then, to think this was the last time I should be a child, in my girlish room with its frilly curtains, and my dolls still watching me from a chair in the corner; the last time I should be able to sit with my aunt this way, a child confiding in an adult.

"You must marry, of course, for you will not have an inheritance as I did," she told me, her face serious. "You have no choice. But do not expect it to bring you the happiness

you are told it will. Take this so you will at least have something of you own. If you need me, ever, you can come to my house in Switzerland."

She had pressed a purse full of coins into my smooth white hand. Giddy and in love, I had giggled at her anxious words, but I took the purse, and I never told George I had it.

He opened up the world for me. I saw Paris in Spring, walked beside the Arno, and saw Pompeii. Those first months were happy. We would lie together, the shutters of our villa open to the starry sky, and I would fall asleep in his arms. But a lie never pays off, as my sour-faced governess told me when I was young, and I did not get with child those first weeks, as my aunt had promised I should.

George noticed. My stomach did not grow, my breasts remained small as a girl's.

I will never forget that confrontation, the words he spoke to me, the look in his eyes.

He came to my bed only rarely after that, and only when he was bored and had no other diversion for himself, or if he felt driven to try one more time for a child. It was changed entirely. There was no love left. Sometimes he was cruel to me, he would humiliate me.

One night, while we were hosting a weekend house party to welcome the new year, he had come to my room, late. I had retired early, unable to bear watching him sitting beside one of our guests, a pretty, young heiress. So attentive was he, it was as if I disappeared. I had not expected he would come to me, not with her here. Now, my heart seemed to melt, to think that it was me he cared for after all. What a fool I was to be so jealous. He was just being a good host after all.

He climbed into bed beside me, and I turned to welcome him, nestling my body to his, but he did not hold me as I expected, nor kiss me. His body was hard and tense. He was angry, I realised.

I reached out to stroke his hair, to soothe him. “My love,” I whispered, but he pushed my hand away.

“This is not love!” he said, and I did not understand why, despite his words, he was positioning his body over mine as if indeed he was feeling amorous. ‘It is nothing but a lie! You tricked me. To think that I could have married a woman like Miss Dryden. But she will have nothing to do with me, because of you. She will give her husband a fine load of sons one day, no doubt about it.”

That was the first time I realised the marital bed could be filled with something other than love and tenderness, something other than indifference, even. My body, usually so soft, so pliant to him, seemed to recoil against my will. This would not possibly make a child, I thought to myself, for it was as if my own body had no part in it. I was useless, I realised, worse than nothing.

Still, a child grew at last, and I thought myself saved. I thought surely now he would love me as he once had. I lost her. In my memory I see her still, my rosebud: her tiny blue lips. How cold she was.

“How could it be?” George asked the doctor.

“There was no chance the girl could survive,” the doctor said. “It was far too early.”

“A *girl*,” George said, and I heard the disgust in his voice, and it was my own father I thought of.

Everything was ruined. My own body wrecked and broken. I must have no more children. He would not come near me any longer; he almost hated me, I thought.

On the surface all was the same. We went to parties, dinners, balls. I made no mention of his indiscretions. We reached an unspoken compromise that I should travel with him each spring if I would let him do the season alone. I came to almost wish he would leave me behind though. It was lonelier than ever, those long nights, my stomach filled with yearning for his body close to mine, as I had known him those few short months. It was almost a madness. I would wake from feverish dreams, and for a moment it would seem the taste of him lingered on my tongue, his scent in my nostrils, and as the dream began to fade, I would sob. I would creep through hotel corridors in the dead of night, listening at doors that I might hear him. How unseemly I was, how shameful.

And sometimes, only briefly, I might get a glimpse of the George he had once been, a breadcrumb tossed, a hint of love, and it would leave me panting, eager to please. He might pull me close, and kiss me slowly, like a promise, only for night to come and me lying cold and lonely with nothing but my memories of those precious weeks when he had been mine.

There was only one way I could bring him back to me, and that was to give him a child.

***

"She must not be upset," he said urgently to me before we left. "The baby must not be harmed. You must keep her calm. Once it is born, we can convince her to give it up. She will realise she cannot care for it alone. When you come home, we will tell the world the doctors were wrong… We had a second opinion, and now we have a child, a healthy one. But just for now, let's indulge her little fantasy. Pretend that it is one of your novels."

I would have done anything to have him kiss me again, and so I went along with their plan.

***

That evening after the warning from Mama, Sarah brushed my hair as she always did: slowly, gently, so that I felt loved and cherished.

"How are you finding this place?" I asked her, choosing my words carefully. "It must be very dull for you?"

I felt the hesitation in the strokes of the brush, an interruption in that rhythmic caress. I looked up in the mirror and saw surprise on her pretty face. I spoke so often of myself, yet I rarely asked about her life.

She met my gaze, making her grey eyes, wide. Beside her, in the candlelight, I looked as deep and shadowy as Mama, all colour seeped from my golden hair, so that it might be grey.

"Oh no, My Lady," she said. 'I have been kept so busy caring for you two ladies – and Miss Emma as well. And no other servants to help. I have no time to find it dull."

"You have had some spare time, I think? Mama saw you walking, she says?"

There was almost a challenge in her expression now. "That is true, My Lady. I have been taking the air when I can. For exercise."

"This is new, Sarah! You have not enjoyed walking before, though there were many beautiful sights at Combe Acton House." I sounded accusatory, though I had tried so hard not to.

She was looking down at my hair now, her brush strokes faster, no longer soothing. Instead, they seemed to arouse in me a disquiet; a current running through me that might sweep everything away. "I would walk with you, My Lady. But you do not walk while we are here. And this place is all new. It is very pretty." She glanced up, and I could not miss the light that shone out of her. Beneath her, my reflection was pallid.

“And have you met anyone on these walks?” I fiddled with the ribbons at the high neck of my nightgown, trying to loosen them a little. “Made some new acquaintances perhaps?”

The brushing stopped. “No. I walk quite alone.”

Her cheeks were pink. She was biting her plump lips. She was as deceitful as Emma and she was laughing at me, I thought. I gave these girls the chance to be honest and they lied to my very face! I wanted nothing more than to strike her, to beat that impertinent look from her face. “Go now!” I clenched my fist, unseen, on my lap, and she scurried away.

There was only myself in the mirror now, faded as a wraith. I moved the candle closer, that it might bring the light back to my own face, but that was even worse. My face became grotesque, distorted. I blew out the candle and flung it to the floor, and I stumbled to my bed.

***

I followed Sarah the next evening, like a spy. It was the first time I had left the cottage grounds, and my body felt heavy and slow. Sarah moved quickly through the hot dusty lanes, and I struggled to keep my footsteps light enough that she wouldn’t hear me, and yet to walk fast enough that I could keep up. In my focus on this, I barely noticed my surroundings, though I was aware of thick hedgerows, buzzing with insects. I felt trapped, hemmed in. I wondered if I might meet Emma, and I felt a vague sense of horror at the thought of being alone with her. As much as I could, I tried to walk in the long shadows cast by the evening sun. At last, the lane descended steeply into a valley, and I saw Sarah’s figure enter a gateway. I approached cautiously and, peeping around the hedge, I saw her cross a meadow, her feet light. I could follow no further without the fear of being seen, for the meadow was treeless and open. There was a stream running through the grass, and as

Sarah approached, I saw a figure emerge from a copse of trees opposite. Sarah waved; I imagined her dimpled smile, her rosy cheeks, though I could not see her expression from that distance. I saw her wobbling across the steppingstones, and the figure–a man–caught her in his arms. He was a young man, I thought from the way he moved, dressed in the nondescript colours of the country, though he did not look like a farm hand. He kissed Sarah, and I heard her giggle. I turned away. I had seen enough.

I walked slowly back up the lane. I could not banish the picture from my mind: the trickling water, the summer trees, the wildflowers; and the easy way the man had pulled Sarah to him–almost innocent in its shamelessness. And Sarah, looking up into his face, loosening the blue ribbons of her bonnet so that it fell back from her head, the evening sun in her hair; taking what she wanted–no thought for the consequences. No care for her duty, not a thought for me.

***

"I have decided," I said to Sarah when she brought me my breakfast the next morning. "You must not walk alone anymore. It is not safe for a young girl like you. There are uncouth young men in the country. I would not wish to see you compromised."

Sarah stood very still, and then she went to the window, and pulled back the drapes abruptly so that light beamed in and made me blink.

"As you wish, My Lady."

"You might walk with Miss Emma perhaps. You both seem to have found a taste for the countryside. You could share it with one another."

She left, flashing a look that cut straight through me, as if I was the one who should be reprimanded. It was as well, I thought. There was no love between Emma and Sarah.

Together they could be trusted, for they would each know that the other would tell me if they should misbehave. They could chaperone one another.

I pushed my tray away. I was not hungry.

Emma

Mistrust was growing, like the ivy over the walls; I could feel it clinging at my throat, wrapping around my breast, so that I began to long for nothing more than escape. Each day, when I entered the cottage after my walk, I felt Lady Rowbarton watching me, as if to assess where I had been. A few weeks ago, I would have done anything to prove to her I could be trusted, to win her favour. It seemed that now the balance was shifting. For I carried the child she so desperately longed for. And now I began to wonder if I wanted this bitter old woman to have any part in raising my child. She wanted to curb me, I realised, to keep me close. But at the same time, she did not wish to upset things. Now I felt reckless, as they told me my mother had been. What would happen–I began to wonder–if things did not go the way she planned. If I decided to keep my baby for myself? To take my chances and go back to my family? To be just a mother, and to let my child grow up just as he was, no duty to a name and a dusty old lineage. It was the heat, perhaps, or the boredom.

I was stepping out into the lane one morning, ready to head towards the river, when Sarah rushed up to me.

"The ladies say I must join you. They say they worry you might need assistance; it is not safe for you alone." She did not look at me, only stepped in line beside me. She looked pale, as if she had not slept.

"Surely that is not necessary? I have walked many times alone, with no harm. And I do not venture far from the cottage. I never see a soul."

She still did not look at me, but I could feel resentment emanate from her. She wanted to walk with me even less than I wanted her here. "It is not for us to question," she told me, resolutely. "You and I must both do as they say."

“You talk as if I were a servant!”

She looked up at me, her eyes piercing through the shadows cast by her bonnet. “They pay for your services, don’t they?”

I held my breath. “You talk nonsense, Sarah. You and I are both with the Rowbartons of our own free will. We could walk away if we chose. Any time. We are free beings.”

“Free? I could leave perhaps and find work for another family who would treat me just the same. But you? With that child in your belly? You must be careful if that is what you think. They would never let you go. Not until what they have what they want from you, at least.”

It was the first time anyone beside George or his mother had referred to the true parentage of the baby. I should not have been shocked – I knew that servants saw all. And Lady Rowbarton must trust Sarah, or she would not be here with us.

I could not think of a reply. It did not seem right to acknowledge her assumption about the father, but I could not bring myself to deny it. For the first time, I questioned whether this baby would really bring me power. Sarah was right. I was stuck.

But I would not allow it. Would not allow my dreams to be shattered by her jealousy. George loved me, I remembered. I would write to him again, I decided. I would write and tell him how I missed him, how I desired him. Perhaps he had not received my previous letters. Perhaps he was travelling. On business. He was an important man. This time, I told myself, this time he would reply and then I could feel safe once more; I could feel loved.

We reached a fork in the road, and I automatically headed to the right, towards the river, away from the village, but Sarah stopped. I looked at her and saw a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I think we should go this way,” she said, after a pause, as if she had made her mind up to something.

I followed, too absorbed in my thoughts to question her.

***

We had not walked far, before we approached a cottage. I recognised it vaguely from my past, but this was not a direction I had had call to travel in often, being not on the main route to any villages that I had had call to visit.

I realised Sarah had slowed down, yet I walked on ahead of her. I did not want to stop, as if by walking I might calm my mind, my heart. But then I realised she was no longer beside me and I turned back, she was leaning over the cottage gate, talking to a man, evidently a worker, a tradesman of some sort, for he had his tools in his hands. She looked at me and I saw her lean over to him brazenly, stroking his face. You see, she seemed to be telling me. I am free. To cavort, to have lovers. But you. You have sold yourself to them

It was not her brazenness that made me freeze. Despite myself, my legs seemed to walk towards the couple. The man was looking at Sarah, a wide smile on his face, but as I drew close once more, he looked at me, and the smile died. He stepped back from Sarah; he grew pale.

It was him. It was my Ned.

Sarah looked from him to me, and in that moment, I knew that all was lost. But still, I tried. I collected myself, I drew up straight, and despite the flush on my cheeks and the tears in my eyes, I said. “Who is this man, Sarah? Will you introduce me to your friend?”

She looked hard at me, but then she turned back to him.

“Ned, this is Miss Morton. She is the companion to my employer. Miss Morton, this is Mr Bowden.”

He understood me, as he always had. He feigned ignorance with me. “Miss Morton.” There was puzzlement in his eyes, and I hoped Sarah, watching carefully, did not notice.

“Mr Bowden.” I nodded back faintly. “Sarah. We must be getting back. I feel a little faint. It is the heat.”

“Indeed, Miss,” she said. “In your condition.”

I saw Ned look at my middle and take another half step back. Sarah lent back over the gate and trailed her gloved fingers in his. She whispered something to him, and then approached me. I nodded once more and then turned back the way we had come, Sarah quiet beside me. She said not a word. But she knew, I realised. She knew.

“He is a handsome man, don’t you think?” she asked me as we drew closer to home. “I have taken quite a fancy to these parts. He needs a wife, I think. Not many girls to choose from in these parts I don’t suppose. Not available ones, at least.”

How wrong she was! He was not hers. He never would be. He was mine. My Ned. Hot lights flashed behind my eyes. To think of him in another woman’s arms, his lips on another woman’s skin. I remembered, with a sudden urgency, the warm scent of his body, his hands on the small of my back, pulling me closer to him. I could not let Sarah have him.

And yet, I deflated. She was right, after-all. Another man’s baby kicked in my belly, and his price was my freedom.

How did I make it back to the cottage that day? I barely remember the walk. Once back at the cottage I stumbled up the stairs to my bed. I stayed there all that afternoon and evening, stunned, weak; the past that I thought long gone so close I could reach out and grab it. Did I want to?

***

My resolve weakened after seeing Ned, and one morning I crept out early. I needed to explain, I thought. But as I drew close the crest of the hill above his little cottage, something in me seemed to tighten and stop me in my tracks; I feared what might happen if I spoke to him, if I told him the truth of who I had become. I walked for hours instead, confused, and alone. My lies were catching up with me. I was tangled up, as if Lady Rowbarton were knitting me up in her plans.

"Call me Mama," she had said to me one day. "We are virtually family now. And you are the mother of my grandchild".

I obliged, but the platitude never came easily from my lips. She never felt like family.

I had no family, no-one to advise me, no-one I could trust.

I walked and walked, and finally I turned back to Mama's cottage, where I collapsed in a heap by the gate. It was Miranda who helped me; Miranda who led me inside, who sat beside my bed as I drifted sleep; Miranda's hand which stroked my hair, as if I was precious, as if I was loved. I slept for two days, and I woke, confused.

I could not stop thinking of Ned. I wrestled with the feeling. I forced myself to think of George, the beauty of his body, the way he kissed me, spoke to me. The luxury of my life as it should be with him. Lady Rowbarton came to my room and fed me her promises: Miranda gone, a baby in the nursery, my silver spoon restored. But still George did not write, and in my mind, it seemed his face was replaced by Ned's.

For days, I rested in bed, my head spinning with thoughts. A rest, Lady Rowbarton—Mama—said Miranda needed. A hospital. I tried to find my vision of the sunny white walls, the flowers, the nurses with their kind faces. But, I knew, all of that was only I lie that I told myself to soothe my own guilt. My own mother rested in an asylum. There would be no

coming back. Every night I dreamt of my mother's terrified face, her lips contorted in terror, the scent of her fear as they pulled me from her skirts. My little hands grabbing at the Indian cabinet, the Turkish rug, and coming away. Empty. Empty. I began to feel that if I could just see Ned, I might make sense of it all. For he knew me as no-one else did. He knew me as Emmeline, who I had always hidden from George. Perhaps, Emmeline whispered in my mind, if I just went for a walk one afternoon, I might see him, or his sister at least. This time, I told myself, I should do it. I should not change my mind as I had done before.

By the end of ten days, I felt well enough to walk once more. I dressed carefully that morning, with the help of Sarah. She assisted me in silence, as ever, resentful that she must do so. But there was something more now. I had not fooled her, I suspected. She had recognised that look which passed between me and Ned. I ignored her sullen looks and tried to give the impression that nothing unusual was afoot, but though I told her to lace my corset tight, it would not do. I had grown as I lay there doing nothing. There was no hiding the growing evidence of my pregnancy. I dressed in a let-out dove grey silk that Lady Rowbarton had had made for me when she was trying to get her son to notice me. Now I wore it for another man.

It still had not rained, and from my window I could see the fields turning gold. In the garden, trees drooped. The grass grew long, the lack of gardener beginning to show. I waited until late in the afternoon, when Miranda went to her room to rest, and Mama retreated to her room to hide from the heat. I was not sneaking out, I told myself, and yet I felt like a prisoner, as I tiptoed down the stairs, and along the corridor to the front door. A door opened and my heart sunk. It was her. It was Mama. I raged inside, for she was never left her room at this time of day.

“Good afternoon,” I smiled in answer to her greeting. ‘It is such a lovely day, and I feel so rested. I thought I would try a walk. It has been so long.”

She smiled back, and yet there was something ghastly in the way she looked at me; something that made me want to back away.

“How tired you look. I think it is time for your confinement to begin proper.”

‘I am quite well, I assure you. I have been resting all these days. A walk will refresh me, I think. It is weeks until I need to be confined.”

“It is early, I know, but it seems clear to me that you are struggling. You are not well built you see. And besides, who knows who you might bump into in those lanes. It is not safe.”

Through the open door, I glimpsed Sarah in the parlour. She had known, I realised. She had told her I planned to walk out. More than that: she had told them I was meeting someone, and now there was no way I could tell them of her own dalliances for it would sound like I was just bluffing. She wanted to make sure I did not see Ned again.

“As you wish, “I said, quietly. “I will rest today. But I am sure that then I will feel quite well. I love to walk. I should not like to be shut away yet.”

She nodded. “We will see. The gardens are large enough. You can walk there. You will be safe then, where we can see you.”

Now the gates stayed closed and there was no escape from Miranda, Lady Rowbarton. From my mother’s crimson heart.

***

George still had not written, not one word. How I missed him. But it was not only him who danced in my mind as I circled round the gardens each day. Ned kept appearing, and he was never alone. He brought with him my father, my mother. They laughed at George, they

chased him away, so that his memory became flimsy and unreal, and my past grew very large.

The asylum terrified me. My aunt and my uncle knew it. Bringing me up, each time I transgressed they would refer to it. I imagined reaching hands, ghostly figures, scream and wails. When I grew older, I read gothic novels, and in my imagination, my mother's fate only grew worse. I should not be like her I swore. I would carve a life for myself where I should be quite safe, and quite loved.

I stopped eating when Mama bade me, refused to rest in the afternoons, but paced the gardens. I could no longer bear to sit beside Miranda, and to think of the cruel trick that I must play upon her. To steal her husband, her home, her identity. To cause her to disappear into the asylum as my own mother had done.

But what choice did I have now? Could I demand that they let me go? I doubted it. And what chance did I possibly have of raising this child alone? I was stuck, tangled up. There was no way out. Still, it seemed as if seeing Ned had awoken some part of me that had been in a dream. I could not help but compare Ned to George, and the more I did, the more it seemed to me that George was not real; he was only a fantasy; and Ned… Ned became more solid, grounded in reality. I began to wonder: what would a life with George look like really? Men like him did not marry companions. It did not happen. Besides, he had promised no such thing, only that I should live with him and have care of the child as a nurse. Would that really be enough? A mistress and a nurse. Still, no better than a servant. And then what if he should one day wish to remarry?

The gardens grew more bedraggled and wilted with each day that dragged wearily by. I might have given back in, I might have returned to my seat beside Miranda under the parched willow tree, might have let myself sink back into their plan. If Ned had not

appeared that day. Perhaps then I might even now be sitting at George's side in Combe Acton House, my baby nursing from my breast, Miranda resting in the sanatorium. Or more likely, myself weeping, George whoring, and Miranda — who knows?

One morning as I paced, Miranda still sleeping, Mama inside knitting, I looked towards the gate and there he was, a shadow in the glare of the sun, but I knew him. My legs felt very strange, and yet my heart beat slow and sure for the first time in months. My own heart in my own body.

I approached the gate. The sun was in my eyes, but I saw him take in my belly, no longer hidden. We had given up on that, for there was no-one to see anyway. Until now.

I looked back at the house. The sunlight bounced off the windows, the drapes still tightly closed. It might not be long though I knew, before someone stirred.

He took my hand, through the gate, and for a long moment neither of us spoke. It seemed there was too much to say, and yet, not enough. How could words explain all that had passed? The skin of his hand was warm, rough; familiar. I closed my eyes. The thoughts that came over me were many, varied, a jumbled mess. How unlike George he was. How unrefined. A thatcher. His clothes were worn, the garments of a country tradesman–not coarse at all, and yet a world away from the fashionable items George wore and then discarded with such ease. And yet. I remembered. His body, the hard lines of his muscle, the deep brown of the back of his neck, and his hands. The way he had courted me, with such earnestness, such a contrast to George's knowing ways. There was a solidity about him; I felt a steadiness that I did not feel with George; when I was with him it was always dreamlike, I felt myself ethereal and floating.

"You should not have come," I said at last.

“I only want to talk to you. To make sure you are safe. I told Sybil I saw you, and she said you had come by the cottage; she was worried about you. She said I should check on you. Come outside. Walk with me.” I noticed the lilt of his country accent.

I pulled my hand back. “I cannot.”

He frowned. “How can you not? After all this time, after all that passed. When you disappeared with not a word. Surely you can trust me.”

“No, Ned. you do not understand. I want to. I cannot. The gate… it is locked.”

He tugged it as if he did not believe me. It did not budge. “Can you get the key?”

I shook my head.

“You are a prisoner here?”

“No. It’s not...you do not understand. It is not what it seems. I am here through my own choice. It is to keep me safe, that is all.”

“That makes me more worried. That you must be locked away to keep you safe. Can I come in then?”

“No. Ned. You cannot stay. They must not see you here.”

“This makes no sense. You are not a prisoner, but you cannot come out and I cannot come in. They tell me the servants were all sent away from this place. Even the gardener, it seems. The old lady who owns it came back with two young women, yet nobody can say who they are. What is happening, Emmeline. Where is your husband? Has he abandoned you to bear his child all alone?”

“My husband abandoned me two years ago! After all that happened between us. He is in New Zealand as far as I know. I have never heard from him.”

“They told me you went with him.”

“Of course they did. They could not stand to have a scandal. They would have shut me away, like my mother, but I left before they had a chance. I became a companion to a wealthy family. I have made a new start for myself. Once I have had the child it will all be assured. I will be safe. But, Ned, you did not come then. Why come now? Do not ruin it for me. Go – before they see you. And you must not tell anyone in the village that I am here.”

“Emmy… I did not know, I promise. I thought you had left. I would have come for you. I have come now. But the baby…”

I softened hearing him call me by that name, fondly, as he had so long ago. Then, I looked back at the house, still sleeping, silent, but for how much longer. I had to make him leave. “It belongs to a gentleman, Ned. A good man. He will take care of me. The child will be his heir. I will have everything I could want. I will never have to go back to that tiny village, to live that life again.”

It would hurt his pride, I knew, to be reminded that he could not provide for me as a gentleman could; could only offer me a humble life. But it was not just his pride, I saw, when he looked at me. “As you wish, Emmeline. But it does not seem right. Why shut you away here if he cares for you so? Why not show the world how he loves you if that is true? I fear you are being made a fool of, there is something they want from you.”

I shook my head, hard, but my hands crept protectively over my belly. “That is not true, Ned. You would not understand. It is complicated. Please go. Please.” I bit my lip to stop it trembling, blinked hard to hold the tears.

He bowed. “As you wish. But first there is something I must tell you…”

I shook my head and pushed him away from me. He hesitated as if unsure how to proceed, then his shoulders slumped, he seemed to change his mind. He was gone.

I turned back to the cottage, the stone walls almost white in the sunlight. I thought of the river, the cool brown water, the slow trickle over the stones.

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My marriage was arranged with almost no involvement on my part. I was eighteen then and I knew my aunt and uncle were eager to see me safely wed to a respectable man that I would not disgrace them as my mother had. The reverend was an obvious choice, widowed, childless. He had moved to the village not long after I had arrived and had always shown an interest in my welfare. Out of charity, I supposed. He had dreams of being a missionary in some far-off place. Still, my relatives thought a life amongst the savages should be safer for me than the dangerous temptations of the London life, which had undone my mother. “Had she stayed,” my uncle told me, sternly, “she should not have been tempted to such excesses as she was. Her mind should not have been overexerted, and she should have stayed quite well.”

Before I knew it, I was walking down the church pathway on a chilly autumn day. A swirl of brown leaves fell from the steel sky: a grotesque confetti smashed beneath my feet as I made my way through the graveyard. Inside, the church was cold and unadorned, the grey stone on the exterior flayed to smoothness by centuries of weather. I remembered William's marble face, gazing at the stained-glass Jesus in the window as I approached down the aisle, a young bride-to-be: only I wasn't blossoming, as I had hoped, I was wilting. And then, the awful night-time. I had waited for him, shivering in the draughts of the vicarage, yet expectant. We country girls were not known for our purity, and I knew from the other village girls what to expect. I knew that I might feel things I had not felt before. That it might change me entirely and might bring me a child. But none of that came about. He could not. Our marriage was loveless, childless. I never did know why. I felt it must be me, for it was an

uncontrollable urge in men, I had been told. I believed I must have some terrible flaw that made me unlovable, undesirable.

Ned arrived in the village not many months after my marriage. By then I had already given up hope of ever making my husband love me. I met him at my aunt's house, the new thatcher. He had moved into the cottage up the hill with his sister. When he looked at me, I realised at once what the village girls had meant, and everything within me lit up to be looked at that way. I thought I might not be so flawed after all.

My aunt noticed. "You must be getting back to your husband," she told me, and I saw Ned's face fall.

He was a handsome man, and his business grew successful, for the old thatcher had left, losing everything to drink. I heard much of his dalliances with the girls, and my heart grew heavy at what I might have had. But somehow I could not feel like I was married, with my husband spurning me each night as he did. And in the end, it was I who reached out to Ned.

We met on the cliffs beneath the spring leaves of the hedgerows, the grey sea stretching flat and endless below; and, later, at his cottage. His sister, Sybil, did not approve, but she knew she could not stop this, and in time she came to care for me. When we realised there was to be a child, we thought we might be a family. My husband clearly did not want me. I should go and live with Ned and Sybil. How foolish we were, how naive.

I told my husband carelessly. I was sure he would not care. How wrong I was. He demanded that we must leave at once; go to the other side of the world and minister to the savages. He had no doubt I would be cured of my passions if I was far from all I knew, no luxuries to mollycoddle me. I refused of course:

"It is not as if you want me," I had shouted. "You cannot even love me as your wife."

But the angrier I became, the calmer and more contemptuous he grew, so that I began to feel I was arguing with a statue. My heart raced, my cheeks were red. There was a knife on the table, a bread knife, for we were about to eat lunch. I grabbed it in my hand and in my rage, I waved it at him. It was only an instant before I realised what I was doing. I remember still, the sound of the knife clattering on the stone floor, myself sinking down beside it.

My husband marched me to my aunt and uncle. “Wild,” he told them. “Like her mother. We must leave this place, take her far from temptation, yet she refuses to see sense. I will have to leave her to you. I think you know what must be done if she refuses to come with me.” He left only days later, and not much later I was told he was to be a missionary.

I wanted to go to Ned, but they would not hear of it. My door was locked. Within days, I was carted to Exeter, to a doctor. I cannot describe what happened there. The pain and the blood, and the tears. When I came back to my uncle’s house, another doctor was awaiting me. I saw his black bag, the cane. I remembered the man at my mother’s house in London, the carriage waiting outside.

“Hereditary,” I heard him murmur to my aunt and uncle, as I listened through the parlour door. “It is often the way. It lies quiet until some occurrence sets it off –often marital relations, or the birth of a child.”

“She says her husband could not perform the act,” I could almost hear my uncle shake his head. “And yet she has just lost a child, as if she did not know how such things came about.”

“All too common in these cases of hysteria,” said the doctor, nodding wisely.

I knew what they planned. I knew what would happen if I stayed. But I knew I must be quiet; any show of emotion would have them tighten their hold. So, I held my tongue, and one spring morning, they agreed that I might take a walk.

I never did go back. I travelled across the estuary by ferry. Sunlight leapt off the water, so that I had to shade my eyes, and the wind, still cold, stroked my cheek so that I shivered; it tugged at my bonnet, ribbons streaming out behind me. I pulled my wedding ring from my finger, and I dropped it over the side. I watched as it sat for the briefest moment on the rippling surface, then sank down to the bottom, my past drowned and forgotten, no longer dragging behind me like a rusty old anchor, tethering me to a decaying old port. I looked down the estuary to where it met the expanse of the sea. I was free. I was leaving. Still, as I staggered onto the stagecoach, and we began to pull away from town, into the lanes, and the estuary vanished behind a leafy corner, I felt a great sadness. It had been there most of my life, that water, flowing in and out. It was a weightlessness that made me almost dizzy, as if I no longer knew who was.

Miranda

I did my best to dispel my sense that we were imprisoning Emma. It was for her good. And yet, there was something else now, brewing beneath the surface; a strange concoction of guilt, and rage: rising now, rising. And as those floodwaters rose, they began to change course, no longer rushing towards Emma. I could not deny all I knew of her–her duplicity, how she thought to steal my life. But I knew what it was to love my husband. I had known that all along, I realised now.

Emma took to sitting beside the gate, sobbing and begging to be allowed to walk beside the river. Mama stayed composed, she said it was just the pregnancy; but she realised something was very wrong. She needed to keep me calm; it would not do for her to lose my acquiescence also, for then her plan would be quite lost.

It did not surprise me then when I received at last a letter from my husband announcing that he should visit. Mama had summoned him, I knew.

He arrived one day while Emma slept. It was mid-afternoon, and I had retreated inside to escape from the heat. A thin drizzle had arrived that morning, and yet now it had burned away to nothing; a promise broken, a lie. I did not hear him arrive in the lane outside, absorbed as I was in my book, and his approach startled me, his hand on my shoulder.

I looked up. How handsome he was, his dark eyes were smiling, his hat in his hand for there was no servant to take it for him. He knelt before me and placed it in the floor, taking both my hands in his. This was unusual, for his greetings to me were usually cool, polite. A strange feeling crawled down my spine.

“My dear Emma! How well you look!”

There was not a hint of mocking on his face. Was I dreaming? Was this real? “I am not Emma, what are you speaking of?”

“What do you mean, not Emma? Why, I would know this face anywhere!” He cupped my face in his hands and he kissed me, and though I had longed for this kiss I twisted away, terrified.

“Stop it! Stop it! I am not Emma.” But in my mind, something was coming undone. What was happening?

Then he laughed. “I am only fooling,” he said. “How white you are turned, my dear wife! But I must say, walking into this room in the dim light, I could not help but realise how alike the two of you are, especially now you are grown so thin.”

He reached out to me again, and kissed me once more, slowly this time, tender. I began to relax, to let myself lean into him, to reach out and pull him closer.

He stood up. “Really, my dear. I am not sure this place agrees with you. How on edge you seem. I thought it might be a rest for you, but you seem more agitated than ever. Perhaps we could visit the mountains. You could stay there while I travel. There are some lovely places for ladies to rest and regain their strength.”

I knew what he meant and so I did not berate him. I was afraid of my husband, I realised once again, and I hated myself for that. I was cold with fear that I should lose him, that he would go from me and never come back; he would lock me away and I would never see the world again.

***

He left me not much later, having made the most perfunctory of enquiries after my health. I told him how bored I was, how lonely, but he barely seemed to me hear me. He went to see Emma and I was left alone. I could not forget how in that briefest of moments I had

wondered who I was. It was not that he had fooled me, not exactly. Yet, I had doubted myself that was for sure. Was I really so unhinged? And did my husband really hold such sway over me that he could make me question my very identity?

At the same time though, I was changed. I was no longer who I had thought I was, and yet I did not know who I was to become. It was as if I floated, unformed, a kind of intermediate state, neither here nor there. Perhaps, I did need to rest, I thought.

George stayed for only two days, yet I could see both he and Mama thought it was enough. I could see it in the way they smiled at one another, satisfied that Emma should be placid and obedient once more. I did not see him much during his stay, for he was by her side so often. She did not leave her room, and I supposed that was indeed an improvement to sobbing by the gate. But still, I wondered, could she really be reassured so easily. How confident my husband was: arrogant, perhaps.

Something in me, a spectral part, which seemed to linger in the corners of my eyes, kept remembering her: sobbing and broken, and then strange images floated in my mind. Blood, I thought of, fever and loss. When I closed my eyes, I saw Mama, a figure in black looming over a prostrate Emma, snatching the baby from her breast.

Emma

I was in bed when he came. Not sleeping, for it seemed that sleep was lost to me now. I feared for my baby in my current distressed state. I longed for rain. I longed to step outside the gates. I knew the garden was hotter still, but I could not help feeling that maybe the river it would be cooler, softer. Each day, I woke from a troubled sleep with my head pounding and a sense of dread high in my throat.

When he entered my room, I was restlessly trying to find a comfortable position for the baby seemed to weigh down on my lungs. For the smallest of moments as the door creaked open, and I saw the figure of a man, a lightness came into my heart, for I thought it must be Ned. I could not understand the feeling of alarm, almost repulsion, when I recognised George. He was all that I wanted, I reminded myself as I struggled to sit up.

He laughed, and that jarred at me. “How marooned you look,” he commented, “in a sea of pillows and blankets. But let me look closer: How my child grows! He does well, Mother says?” He sat on the bed beside me.

I nodded, trying not to give away my confusion, my unexpected desire to draw back from him. “He grows larger every day. As do I. He will not stop moving. He is very healthy, I think. But George…why are you here? And surely you should not be in my room? Miranda…she will be suspicious? What will she think if she knows that you are here?”

“Do not worry yourself about Miranda. Mother will take care of her. She will remain as unknowing as ever. But let us not worry about her. She is getting the rest she needs, and a break from the pressures of being a wife. The child… he does well you say. And yourself, how well you look.”

I did not look well, I knew. I recoiled at the easiness of his lies. But now, his hand was caressing my belly through the thin fabric of my nightgown. I felt myself begin to soften at his touch, and my memories of Ned began to subside at last.

"I have missed you," he was saying. "I have thought of nothing else."

"And yet you have not written, though I have sent you page after page."

He looked surprised, and rightfully too, for there was a time when I would not have dared to question him, out of blind respect for his position, and then out of pure adoration and fear of ever losing him. I had changed, I realised, as I would not have thought possible, shut away in this place. I could not say though–was it that I was returning to the self I had once been–Emmeline–or becoming someone else entirely? I only knew I felt a world away from the woman I had tried so hard to become. I thought of the girl I had been, crossing the estuary, as I fled my relatives and the shadow of my mother's past, the sun in my eyes before me. I would become a success, I had thought, I would make myself a lady, I would be loved and wanted. I would give anything to make it so.

Now, George leaned forward, and he kissed me, and his hand moved upwards to my breast, and I sank backwards, despite myself.

"You know I hate to write," he reminded me. "I spend so much time writing for business. And words…they seem so useless, when all I long for is to touch you, to be by your side… they remind me how far I am from you."

I felt the tears well up in my eyes, and I saw him notice this; his kisses grew more demanding, moved down to my throat, and he began to pull at my nightgown.

"But…the baby," I gasped, even as I felt myself begin to drown in his presence, felt the memory of Ned begin to fade.

"It will not harm him," he told me, and I decided to trust him; I let myself kiss him back, helped him pull my nightgown up over my belly, tugged at his trousers and his drawers. I closed my eyes and Ned was gone.

It was not until later that I wondered why, if relations would not harm the baby, had George not visited my bed before? Not since I had announced my pregnancy to him, and seen his eyes light up, and he had gone straight to tell his mother.

I forced that thought away. I felt I was dissolving; I was further from myself than I had ever been. His kisses, his touch, it seemed that nothing mattered any longer, that I forgot all those selves, forgot Miranda. Forgot the child.

***

The first time he kissed me we were in the woods. I had known him for months by then, had sat beside him for long hours, reading, talking. I could not sleep; I could not eat. I was at a loss. It was wrong to want him as I did, I knew, and yet I could not help it. I knew his wife was not a wife by then, and it was as if knowing his story, the sad loneliness and lovelessness of his marriage, gave me permission to recognise my longing for him. It almost seemed to me he was a bachelor. I would find myself daydreaming of waking in his bed, dancing with him, sitting beside him in public, greeting our friends; of being his wife. Sometimes it almost felt I was his wife for he would spend so much time by my side. Yet even then, he would disappear when there were guests, as if I had ceased to exist.

That day it was only us. There had been a picnic and now we walked, just the two of us. Miranda slept beneath a beech tree, leafy shadows flickering across her smooth cheeks; Lady Rowbarton had refused to join us, only smiled knowingly as we walked off. He walked beside me, though the path was narrow. I could sense his wish to hurry but he slowed himself for me. I felt his body pressing into my skirts, my crinoline pushing against my legs; I

realised that I wanted to feel his legs pressing against mine. I wanted to stop, to pull him close to me, to feel his hair under my fingers. Still, we kept walking.

It was easy in the end. I stumbled, and at last I was in his arms. It was not planned, exactly. I would not say that. And yet, I made it happen. It was a choice I made. He looked at me, and it felt like a long time passed, and I feared that he would let this chance go. But then, wordlessly, he kissed me. I let him, though I did not press myself against him, did not entangle my fingers in his hair as I longed to. I had enough presence to remember my assumed innocence; to recognise that he must be my teacher. I wanted it to last, and yet I knew I must play my part. Almost as if against my will, I drew back. I pressed my hands to my face. A distressed maiden.

Through my fingers, I could see his gaze, as ardent as I could have wished.

"Emma," he said. "I have offended you. If only I could make you believe my true, sincere feelings for you."

I let him gently take my hands from my eyes, but I placed my gaze on the ground. I did not have to pretend the pirouette of my mother's heart; nor the flush of my cheeks, her hot blood rising up in me.

"Emma," he said again, more quietly this time. "You will think me a terrible fraud. An untrue husband. But if only you knew the truth of it. How my wife is only that in name. How my feelings are all for you…"

I looked at him, let my eyes meet his, and felt the blaze between us. "You can tell me," I said. "There must be no secrets between us."

And so, I heard it all again, only this time a more emotive, more piteous version: how long suffering he was; how cold his wife; how his heart craved true love and companionship, and yet all that was denied by his wife's cruel illness. And still he kept her by his side,

despite her constant spurns. He did the decent thing. So, should he not have love, the warm touch of a woman? Was it not his right, as much as that of any other man?

I could not help myself: I wondered: And if there was no wife? What then? If she grew ill, and then died; if she was sent away to an asylum? There might be a child, he might have another chance at happiness.

All this he told me, as I listened wordless. I told him nothing of my own husband, the reverend in his black frock coat, how he had cast me aside for a dream of saving savages in some far-off land.

***

I woke, the sun low. I had dreamt I remembered, but grasp as I might, I could not recall the dream, only reaching hands, sobbing, and Miranda's face, terrified, anguished. I was too warm beneath the covers. I struggled to sit up, propping my heavy body on my pillows, and pushing back the counterpane to feel the cool air on my skin. George was there still, sat on the end of my bed, in his shirt once more, pulling on his boots. He grinned at me, that smile I had never been able to resist. "How glad I am I came," he said. "I am hungry. I will send my man out to find us some good food from the village. Surely there is an inn, or something nearby? You must have some decent food–for my boy, for my heir."

I shook my head. "He leaves no space for food. I eat only little now."

"That will not do. We need you to bring me a good strapping heir. A healthy boy. Do not worry, I will see to it. Rest now."

I lay back, confused, my feelings all a whir. And all I could think: *my boy*, he had said, *my heir*. As if this child that kicked and squirmed in my belly were nothing more than a possession for him, and I no more than a temporary vessel for its production.

Still, when he came back late that evening, as the light began to fade, with berries and cream, and he stroked my hair, I ate as he bade me, and I grew placid once more, like the pools in the river, untroubled and still. It seemed my mind had grown blank, and when he embraced me now, there was nothing but this; myself lying back, unprotesting on the softness of my mattress, George's fingers on my skin, his body on mine, the bright glare of my desire. Ned was gone, and I was too sun-struck to feel sad. And even as George lay with me and I felt my body respond, I knew: this was nothing more than a dream.

***

He stayed for two days, and I did not see Miranda in that time. I stayed in my room, and was fed and watered, like a breeding mare. I slept often, long dark, dreamless sleeps. He brought me cakes and pies and apples. He sat beside me watching me eat, and I felt myself grow soft and dreamy, and languid. It was the heat, I told myself, and the late stage of my pregnancy.

He left late one morning, stroking my hair as he bade me farewell. "Promise me you will be good," he whispered in my ear. "You will do as Mother bids you. She only wishes you to be well, and the child. My son."

The door softly closed behind him, and only then did I whisper back, "My son." But even as I spoke, sleepiness overtook me and I lay back, the dream over.

Miranda

George left with barely a thought for me. He did not even look back as I waved at the gate.

"Look after her," he had told me as he alighted the carriage. "Keep her calm. There is not long to go now. Then we can walk away with our child, as if none of this ever happened."

It seemed that I was disappearing as I watched the carriage round the leafy corner. That sensation made me shiver, a premonition. As if I were the one discarded, not Emma. And then I felt it again, that thread between us. For a moment I almost felt I must be her. For it was her bed my husband had just vacated, though I must pretend not to notice, and I must not say a word. And it was my husband's child she carried in her belly. It should be me.

It would be me, I reminded myself. Come autumn, I would be holding the child in my arms. My son. I pictured myself, back at Combe Acton House. The ash trees fire-red and orange, as I strolled beneath them, carrying the boy all swaddled in white, his blanket trailing over the bell-shape of my dress, which was also white. And beside me walked George, his hand on the small of my back, a slight pressure on my corset, a smile on my lips. I was chosen, I was wanted, I was loved.

But then Emma strode into the picture and her eyes were red and terrible. She wore a dress as fiery as the trees, no hat, and her hair hung loose around her like a madwoman. She reached out her hands and she grabbed at the child, and she pulled him from me. She beckoned to George, and he followed her beneath an archway of burning trees, and my arms were left empty and ruined as my heart.

***

It had been spring when my own girl was born and then died. I had waited in my bed, wrapped warm from the chill April winds that still blew. Outside the trees were in blossom, and I could hear birdsong, never ending. When George had learned there was to be a baby, he had changed towards me once more; had grown warm and kind, had sat beside me watching me eat, had lain his head on my belly; had treated me as if I were made of porcelain, so careful and considerate. He no longer visited my bed, but that was to protect the unborn child, I thought. I had known I was bringing my husband the only gift he wanted. That was it though, that was where everything went wrong. For it was not me that he wanted, of course. It was only what I contained. I did not realise that at the time, nor did I realise what I must endure to give him the child he so longed for. I had been completely unaware of what was to come. I knew nothing of childbirth, had been shielded from such matters entirely; no-one had warned me. Women died having babies, I knew that. But not the beloved ones, not the wealthy ones.

The memory haunted me. The birth of my child. My own screams rang in my ears, the pain ripped my body apart. I was sure so sure I must die. I would leave my child motherless, at the hands of Mama–even then I had been afraid of her, I sensed the bottomless need in her, that greed. The doctor came and went, and came and went, and all the time Mama was there, standing beside me, as if eager to snatch the child the moment it was born, but never did she speak one word of comfort; it was as if I had become a machine, like the ones in the factories my father's wealthy industrialist friends owned, churning out newspapers or soap.

When at last the child entered the world there was only silence. At first, I did not register, but then that silence seemed to grow larger and larger so that it swallowed us all up.

“Can I see him?” I asked.

Mama left a room with not a word and my whole world collapsed.

The doctor handed me the child, blue, lifeless. “A girl,” he told me, as if I could not see that. So very very small. I held the little body to my chest as if I could make her come alive. It was no use of course.

“Rose,” I whispered. “Rose. Rose. Rose.” I had always known I should have a girl one day, after my son. I had always known she should be my Rose.

George came, but he did not stay, and I was left alone in that great silence. It was Sarah who coaxed the little body from my arms; Sarah who comforted me, who nursed me, who begged me to eat, until my aunt arrived and folded me in her arms.

I hated George at first, for the way he had looked at my girl as if he were disgusted by her. But then months passed with him ignoring me, and disdaining me, and it began to fade, and all that was left was the knowledge that I was a failure, and a growing urge to feel loved; it grew and it grew, until it was all that was left, a hard and desperate self that would do anything to feel wanted.

***

Emma saw it, I realised, Mama’s obsessive need. She began to shrink from her, as if she sensed danger. After George left, she began to shrink from me too. He had been poisoning her against me, I thought. Who knew the lies he had been feeding her? I had Sarah take her water, soup, though she ate little despite Mama’s protests. I thought of that way she had of holding her hands over her belly: protective. Doubt grew in me again, but this time it was not just about her willingness. It was about my own liability. Did I really want to take a child who was so wanted by another woman? My own baby seemed to haunt me, my Rose, a little blue ghost at the corner of my eye. She lurked in dark cobwebby corners, behind the

crimson curtains, in the dusty shadowy recesses. *Would you really do that?* She seemed to ask me. *Would you really put another woman through that?* And beneath that need for love, I became aware of something else welling up from the darkness: my grief, my despair. I felt it rising in my body, saturating me, eroding all the hard knots that had grown around the core of me, so that I myself became like water. If I closed my eyes, I felt myself drifting as if carried on some current, far beyond my own control. I no longer knew what I would do, how this story would end for me. I could only float, carried on my own long-forgotten sadness.

Emma

As my time grew closer, I became afraid. The pain, the blood. Would I even survive? I remembered the women in the village, those who did not make it, their haggard husbands and wretched wide-eyed children in the days that followed, until inevitably the husband would find another wife to take her place. And she would bring more children and suffer for herself. I remembered that feeling–the sense of being no more than a vessel. Replaceable. Like Miranda.

In those days, after George had left, I could no longer stay in my room. It was too small, too hot. I needed to be outside, beneath the tree. I would sit for long hours, gazing at the leaves, unmoving in the hot air. I tried not to look to the gate, and yet I could not help myself. Once I thought I saw someone, a figure looking in through the wrought iron bars. Yet when I blinked it was gone, only trails of ivy cascaded down from the walls around. I was left with a strange sensation, as if I could not quite tell if I was the prisoner, or the figure on the other side.

Miranda came and sat with me often. At first, she was silent, and I was too. It felt awkward to speak with her after those days with her husband, but she seemed as unaware as he had promised she would be.

But then one evening, the sun hot and low behind us, long shadows stretching over the lawns, she spoke as if in dream. “Are you afraid?” She asked me.

I looked up at her. She sat in the shadows cast by the tree, and her eyes looked dark, her face grey and ghostly. She was growing thin I realised, wraithlike. I realised that she was afraid, she could have been talking to herself. In that moment, I wanted to tell her: *Of*

course. I am afraid of everything. Afraid even of myself. Afraid of how far I will go, the terrible lengths I will go to for this child.

Instead, I asked, "Of what?" as if I could have nothing to be afraid of.

She seemed to look through me, as if her eyes saw another place, another time. "The birth," she whispered. "The pain. Do you fear for your baby's life? For your own life?"

A shiver ran through me then, and my fear made me angry. "I am not afraid," I told her. "I am quite healthy. And I shall be cared for, I am sure." But even as I spoke, uncertainty ran through me. For Lady Rowbarton had said nothing of a doctor of a midwife. Yet surely…for her own grandchild.

I could not say this to Miranda, yet it seemed she read my thoughts. "They will look after you, yes. Of course. I remember. My child, my time."

Her voice trailed off. She was looking past me to the window, as if I were not even there. It seemed she was reliving some long-ago event.

"What do you mean? You have no child!" I spoke sharply, for something in the vacancy of her eyes made me afraid.

She laughed, but it was a tragic sound. "No child…no…no more…"

I shook my head, but she did not, could not see me. "They sent for the best doctor," she went on, "but it wasn't enough. There was too much blood. And my little girl. She was so blue, so cold. They had to pull her out of my arms. My girl. My Rose. George never forgave me."

I could not reply, I could barely think. A child. George's child. She lied, surely? For George had told me of her failings. And yet, even as I looked at her, I knew she spoke the truth, for it was as if she were reliving it at this very moment, the agony written over her face, her body taut.

“Hours and hours, I laboured,” she was saying. “Hours. For nothing. I thought I would die. I wish I had died.”

I put my hands over my ears. “Stop!” I said. “Please stop.”

“I thought my body would snap in two. The pain was *hot*, it was like fire inside me. For nothing. She was so small…”

She was ranting, I realised. I wished she would stop, for it seemed the pain got inside of me. I had known it was painful, I had heard talk. But not like this. And what if my child too… what if? And myself?

I began to sob, but still Miranda went on, until at last, Lady Rowbarton came darkly over the gardens, Sarah behind her.

“What is this commotion?”

Miranda was ushered away, and Mama sat beside me, while I calmed myself. “That poor child,” she told me. “You see why she needs rest?”

“But I did not realise… I had thought…I had thought she could not be a wife, could not have children. I had not realised…there was a *baby?*”

Mama shook her head. “It is the truth. George did not wish to burden you with this knowledge. But you see, it was after the child. She became quite hysterical. She refused any longer to perform her wifely duties. Became like a child. As you see.”

I looked to the cottage, where Sarah ushered Miranda through the door, sobbing, and shaking, indeed like a child as Mama said.

I let her soothe me, I felt my body begin to relax. But still, I could not help thinking of her words. Birth was painful, it was deadly. What if I died? If my child were left in the hands of Lady Rowbarton? I imagined my boy in the arms of that dark figure, and it chilled me.

More than that. George had lied to me. He had told me Miranda had not been a wife to him, and now it seemed she had.

And then another thought grew to haunt me, that feeling I had when George left, of being nothing more than a vessel to bring his child into the world: Did Miranda feel it too? Replaceable, expendable. Each time the child kicked, I could not help but think: once Miranda felt this also, George's child squirming in her belly.

***

The drizzle was cool on my skin. I turned up my face to the grey sky, letting it stroke my cheeks, my neck. The grass was long now, around my ankles, drooping. The earth so dry and warm that the water barely touched it, just evaporating in the hot air. The smell of rain on hot earth lingered, seemed to be thrown up by my footsteps as I crossed the lawn to the gate. I walked slowly, heavy with the baby and the heat. The smooth metal of the gate was warm as I brushed my hands over it. I looked out to the lane beyond, masses of brambles, leaves, wildflowers nodding, opening thirstily to the rain. Nobody in sight. I rattled the gate gently. It did not budge. It was locked and I was trapped, as I had known.

Inside Miranda rested. I had not seen her since that day last week when she had told me of her child. I could not bear to. Mama was kinder to me than ever now. She spoke to me as if I were Miranda, as if already I was her daughter-in-law. She continued to feed me stories, my life as George's mistress, Miranda gone. I should have all the gowns I wished for, all the books. Conversation, travel. I should be treated like a lady. But that thought was at the forefront of my mind once more: I did not care. I wanted only my child, safe in my belly.

"You must eat," Lady Rowbarton told me, a hot evening, sultry.

I did not want the pie in front of me. I felt nauseous and my head ached. I told her so.

"That is irrelevant," she told me. "Our child needs sustenance to grow."

Our child. A shiver passed through me, despite the warmth. I forced myself to take a bite. I could not even taste it. She was watching me, watching me, and fear welled up. And yet something had changed in me. I could not trust her as I once had. And I could not hate nor disdain Miranda as I had tried so hard to do. And that made it so much harder for me to deceive her as I must. Were it not for the child, I would tell her everything, I thought. But I could not stand to think of what would become of us were all to be exposed.

A hand on my arm made me start. It was Sarah, looking at me in that cold way of hers.

"Lady Rowbarton says you are to come inside," she told me. "She says you will catch a chill in this rain. It is getting harder."

She was right. Water was beginning to pool on the hard ground, finding its way into cracks and crevices in the dirt.

"Wait," I said. "About Ned. What is between you?"

"Turns out he is just like all the rest," she was looking at me, her eyes hard. "I thought he might be different. I might stay here with him, be a married woman. But he will have nothing to do with me."

"I am sorry. Perhaps he must work?"

She was silent for a moment. "It is since he saw you that day."

"What do you mean?"

"You know him."

"No! He is a stranger to me."

"I saw him here, the other day. I saw you talk to him. Through the gate. He held your hand. I am not a fool, Emmeline."

She said the name very deliberate, and my breath caught in my throat. She had heard us talking. No-one else knew me by that name.

She turned away from me. “It is not my business,” she said. “If you tell no-one about me, I will tell no-one about you.”

“I did not plan any of this. There is a history, you see. But it was over long ago.”

She turned back and her face was red and angry. “I told you. I do not wish to know. And you did not take him from me. You think you are so special with your baby and Lady Rowbarton fawning all over you. Every knows what you have done. Everyone knows you are just a whore. Do you think I would take your leavings? You are welcome to him. When Mr lordship casts you out, as he will surely do. He only wants your baby; you must know that.”

“That is not true.” I thought of him in my room those days, his tender kisses. I forgot myself. “He loves me. He will take care of me.” But my words sounded weak, even in my own ears.

There was scorn on her face now. “Love? He does not know what that word means. Though he uses it lightly enough. Do you not think he said the same to her,” she gestured to the house, where Miranda rested, “when he thought she would give him what he wanted?”

That feeling came back. That I could be discarded, cast aside. I felt strange and unhinged. What was becoming of me?

I took a breath to try to calm myself. “You love your mistress, I know. I do not wish to hurt her.”

She laughed. “Do you really think she is the one who will be hurt by all this? Do you think she does not know whose child you are carrying? Do you think she does not know what you are doing? You are nobody. It is just your child that they want.”

I could not help myself. I slapped her hard, so that her head snapped back. She put her hand to her cheek, and she laughed again. “Not such a lady after all”

I picked up my skirts and I ran–clumsy and panting–back into the darkness of the cottage. Inside the air was heavy and dark so that I could not get my breath. I ached all over. I slowly climbed the stairs, and I lay on my bed sobbing, as the aching in my back grew worse.

It was true. I would be George’s mistress perhaps, but I would never be his wife. Sarah did not lie. I thought of those little glances, the jealous way Miranda watched my stomach grow. I thought of the way Mama–Lady Rowbarton –knitted so obsessively, tiny bootees and miniature hats. George’s coming and going with such ease. The empty nursery at Combe Acton House. I put my hand on my belly. I had to get out of here. I had to get away.

All afternoon, the rain got harder, and the air grew heavier so that I felt that I would suffocate. And then I heard it. A drip drip drip in the corner of my room. There was a leak in the thatch and the rain was coming in.

Miranda

I crept across the carpeted floor of my room, and opened the door, peeping out. No-one to be seen, no-one to be heard. I kept walking, softly, my bare feet noiseless on the strip of carpet that lined the stairs. I was wearing only my nightgown, but that did not matter. There was nobody about, and the soft grey outside seemed to call to me. I could hear the early evening birdsong, a chorus, a poem; beautiful as any sonnet I had read, or choir I had heard.

In the centre of the lawn, I stopped, wriggling my toes into the wet earth, the long grass cold around my ankles. Water dripped from the willow tree, made puddles on the unraked gravel path. I turned my face up to the sky and I stood there, arms outstretched, feeling the rain gushing over my cheeks, into my eyes. It washed my tears, like a fast-rising river, over my neck and my shoulders; down my chest, down my back. I stood like that a long time, as if I were myself a tree, reaching up to the pure grey light of the sky, sucking water into my roots. I felt the relief of it, something within me quenched and calmed.

Gradually, I came back to myself. I realised who I was, and where I was. I lowered my hands to my side, felt the wetness of my nightgown, how it clung to me. I looked about me, as if I were coming out of a trance. I looked back across the lawn to the cottage, and there she was in the doorway, a dark figure, watching me. How I hated her in that moment, realising how she hung over me always. And now, that such a moment must be spoiled, for I knew how I must look in her eyes: hysterical. I looked like a madwoman.

I crossed the lawn back towards her, as if she had summoned me, my arms crossed over my chest, for I knew I looked indecent.

She did not berate me, as I had expected, only called for Sarah.

“Sarah, your poor mistress will take a cold. See that she is dried up. Give her some warm broth. And some rest. Miranda, dear, you must take care of yourself. Your constitution is delicate, we all know that. “

“I was only…”

“Never mind. You do not have to explain. I know you are…overwrought. Sarah, once you have seen to Miranda, I need your assistance. There is a leak in Miss Emma’s room. We must get it seen to. Perhaps you could speak with Mrs Brown when she brings our supper things, have her fetch a man.”

Sarah nodded. “I hear there is a thatcher in the village. A good one,” she spoke quickly, I noticed, even in my shamed state.

“Very well,” Mama said. “Have her fetch him.”

***

Sarah patted my hair, slowly, with a towel. I was dressed now in a light day-gown, my feet bathed clean in a bucket of warm water. I refused to go back to bed, like a naughty child. On the dressing table before me a bowl of broth steamed, untouched. It was too hot. I longed for the cool of the rain again. I could see in the mirror that Sarah’s cheeks were pink, and her face vacant. She was not thinking of me, or how foolish I was, but there was something on her mind, that was certain.

“Do you trust them?” she said at last.

“Trust who?”

“The Lady. And Miss Emma. “

“Lady Rowbarton is like a mother to me. And Emma just a poor girl who depends on our charity. Why should you ask such a question?”

"No reason." But her eyes said otherwise, and there was a look on her face that made me angry. I snatched the towel from her.

"I will do it myself. You may go."

She bobbed a curtsy, but there was something in her manner I did not like, something that made me think she knew more than she let on.

***

My hair was still damp as I walked along the corridor. I had left it loose, streaming down my back, and the coolness was a relief. I did not knock on Emma's door, only pushed it open with not a word. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, wringing her hands, a piteous figure. In the corner, water dripped from the ceiling into a bucket, regular as a heartbeat. She looked up at me and seemed to shrink away, her hands moved to her belly, and I realised then that she knew. I realised she was afraid. I remembered that last week of my own pregnancy, how I had lain there, fat like a cow: happy, and filled with hope. What a fool I had been. I understood: she loved that child as I had loved my little Rose. She would never let him go. I would have to prise him from her arms as Sarah had prised the dead little body away from me. I remembered in vivid, tortuous detail that massive emptiness. It had been a weight on my chest, squeezing the very life from me. I could not breathe. My heart turned cold and hard.

The room spun. I could not do it, I realised all at once. Though she thought to take my husband from me, though I hated her, I could not take her child.

Emma winced, and I saw her bite her lip, and she turned her body from me.

I went to her side, and I reached for her hand, but she pulled it from me.

"I am quite well," she said. "It is nothing. Why are you here? I am resting."

Why was I there? I could not think. “The leak,” I said all at once. “Mama said I must tell you. The thatcher has been summoned. He will come soon, I think. I thought you might wish to make yourself scarce.”

She looked at me and her eyes seemed to burn. “The thatcher?” she asked. “He is coming here?”

“Yes. Mama thought we should make sure you are comfortable. The baby could come any day now. We do not want your room flooded. But do not worry. You can sit downstairs while he looks at the leak. You do not need to see him.”

She shrugged, and yet I had the feeling that it took a great effort. “It is no matter. I do not care. It is not as if I am a virtuous woman after all.”

Something had changed. She had never spoken to me in such a manner before. I did not know what to say and so I was silent, only nodded my head and left.

I went and sat in the drawing room, my novel open on my knee, but it did not pull me in as was usual, that world of romance and melodrama. My own world had my own full and complete attention, and yet it was not love, nor passion that awoke me at last. It was something more than that, something more raw and more complex. Something deep and dark as the river that pulled my mother under.

I saw the thatcher arrive, late that afternoon. I watched through the window as Sarah met him at the gate. They seemed to talk for longer than was normal, and somewhere in me recognition stirred, but I paid that little heed at the time. I wanted to get Emma’s room fixed and comfortable. I planned to show her she could trust me. Perhaps, I was thinking, it was not too late. There must be a way that we could help each other; that she could have her child, and I could have... What? My husband? He was no husband. There was nothing left for me at Combe Acton House. And yet what choice did I have. Where else

could I go? All at once that image came back to me: the mountains, a warm breeze; the chime of goat's bells, and delicate flowers blooming in the meadows; a hint of spring, a chance.

Emma

I saw Sarah walk down the path to meet him, and I went to the front door. And all at once I wondered if I should do this–if I should have fled, hidden in the parlour, as Miranda had offered me the chance to do. But how could I? It was Ned, and it seemed the world had offered me one last chance. I went to the front door to meet them, forcing myself to breathe as deep as I could, though it was hard now, the weight of the baby pressing on my lungs like water. I had dressed and tied back my hair, but the advanced state of my pregnancy was impossible to hide. It would drive him away I feared.

And yet, when he saw me at the door, he did not even look at my belly; his eyes only searched my face.

"I will show you to her room," Sarah said. Her face was dark, sullen. Something had passed between them, I could tell.

"No," I said, and my voice sounded firm and strong though that was not how I felt. Not at all. "I will show him."

I did not wait for her to protest, only turned and headed along the hallway. As I ascended the stairs the pain gripped me once more, deep in my back. I paused, but then I kept walking. Not now, I told myself. Not yet.

Ned was close behind me; I could feel his presence.

He followed me into my room, and I closed the door. Briefly, I wondered what Mama would think, and Miranda, but then I realised I no longer cared. In my chest, my heart beat hard but slow and regular as the drip of the water in the bucket. I was no longer Emma, but I was not Emmeline either. I had become somebody new, myself. All at once, I knew what I

must do. I would not take Miranda's husband, would not give up myself for that deceitful man; but nor should they have my child.

He reached out to me, and I collapsed into his chest, sobbing, as I had longed to do since that day when they had dragged me to the doctor's office. It seemed very close all at once. I remembered scratching at my bedroom door, trying to get to Ned. I remembered the bleeding and the pain. So many dreams all bleeding from my body.

"Emmy…listen. There is something I must tell you," he was saying, but I paid no heed and I kept sobbing.

"Not now, Ned. Later. We can talk later. I need you to help me."

"But…"

I pulled back from him, and I grasped his hands. "You must get me away from this place," I told him.

His face was pale, troubled. "Where is your gentleman now? You told me he would take care of you."

"Ned…I…I cannot explain now. But I was wrong. I was terribly wrong. They have tricked me, deceived me. They will take my child from me. You must help me escape."

He nodded, slowly. "And then what? Where will you go? Will you expect me to take you back with this child? Who will help you birth it?"

I shook my head. "No. I would not ask it of you. I cannot stay in the village. My aunt and uncle. They would have me locked away if they knew. Only let me stay with you until the baby comes. Sybil will help me. Then I will leave. Please!"

"And what of the baby? How will you manage alone with a child? Think about it, Emmeline. What would become of you?"

I put my hands to my ears. “I cannot think of these things now. I will work it out. I promise. Only help me. Tell Sarah to meet you at the gate tonight. She will have the key; she will know where to find it. Do not tell her I will be there, just say you need to talk to her. I will follow her.”

“You want me to lie to her?”

In that moment, rage seized me, I could have struck him for his simplicity. How easy his life was, how straightforward. But he was a man. He had always been able to choose his own path, to make his own choices.

“It is just a small lie, Ned! She will understand. Once she realises how they have deceived me.”

“Wear a cloak,” he told me. “There is a storm coming tonight.” My eyes filled up again and he pulled me to him. He kissed my cheeks. But even then, as I felt my body lean into him, I thought of what he had said. The baby. Another man’s child.

“I will come with you,” he was saying. “We will leave together. I will raise the child as my own. I will take care of you.”

I nodded and smiled, but the tears fell faster than ever. It could not be. He would realise that in time.

***

I pulled my cloak over my head. Outside the first crash of thunder was sounding, and the rain was falling harder. It had not stopped all day, and I thought of the river, how it must be rising higher, the water turning muddy and brown. The corridors were dark. I did not dare light a candle and I could not see a thing. I groped my way along the walls. My back ached, but the gripping pains from earlier seemed to have stopped. At the bottom of the stairs I stumbled, and I grasped tight to the banister, fear freezing me. For a moment I saw in the

light of my own mind, myself curled up on the bottom of the stairs, a stain of blood, a blue and breathless baby. I forced myself to walk on. The door opened easily and quietly; no need to lock it, for the gate kept all outsiders out and all insiders in. I had not seen or heard Sarah, but I was sure she would be there. Her vanity would not resist an invitation from Ned.

The ground was soft now, my boots sank into it, and I had to steady myself to stop from slipping. Even outside there was barely any light, the moon hidden behind thick dark clouds. The rain beat on my hood, soaking me through. A flash of lightning lit the way ahead. I saw the willow tree for an instant, and before it the gate, looming black and forbidding. Something with in me faltered, but I forced myself to keep walking.

I felt the bars of the gate beneath my hands, cold, wet. It was closed. I pushed it. It did not budge.

"Ned?" I whispered.

There was no reply.

"Ned?" louder this time.

Still nothing. I leant against the gate, and I waited there, my stomach constricting. It would not be long now, I realised. The baby would be here soon. Ned would come, I told myself. He must.

I heard voices at last and saw the light of the lantern and it made me start, for I felt myself now in a kind of doze. But how was Ned already in the garden, I wondered. They drew closer and it was Sarah I saw in the circle of lamplight. Sarah and Ned. I was so relieved that I barely even noticed Sarah.

"You came," I sobbed. "We must leave soon. The baby will not be long now." Even as I spoke, I had to wrap my arms around my tightening belly, and bite my lip.

But it was Sarah who spoke. “You can go back inside. He wants nothing to do with you. I told him. About you. About your plans. Your deceit. He knows who you really are.”

I shook my head. I reached out for Ned, but the lamplight seemed to keep moving so that I could not find him. “No. You surely did not listen to her? You know me already, Ned. Like nobody else.”

The lamplight shifted and in it I saw his face, pale and ghastly. “So, it is not true? You deny it? That you deceived your mistress, seduced her husband? That you planned to have her incarcerated in an asylum? All so you could steal her place at her husband’s side?”

“I cannot deny it. But Ned…you must listen to me. You must let me explain. It is not as Sarah would have told it to you.” I leaned into him, but he put his hand out, as if to ward me off, and the lamplight shifted again.

“I thought you must have been forced, or deceived, or seduced. Tricked in some way. And now I learn that you lured this gentleman from his good wife that you might steal her place. I trusted you,” he told me. “I believed you when your relatives warned me of you.” He appeared once more, and this time I saw Sarah reach her hand out and stroke his arm. He ignored her, but he did not resist her as he had me.

“You did!” I said. “And you were right to. You must believe me. I had no choice. Let me explain, please!”

“They were right. You are going the way of your mother. I should have seen it then. After what happened with your husband that day. It was lies, wasn’t it? All lies?”

I closed my eyes and I felt it: the knife in my hand that day; my husband’s cruel words. I had thought myself capable of anything.

“No Ned! No!”

But he was leaving, and Sarah was following behind him. Before the gate closed in my face, I heard a whisper close to my ear. It was Sarah. “Do not come after him,” she told me. “I know it all. I will tell your aunt and uncle where you are if you try to ruin this for me. I will have you shut away.”

Miranda

I could not sleep that night. I lay there with visions marching across my mind. I tried to find that place again, the waving grass, the sun on my face, but it was gone.

I heard her stumble up the stairs. I heard her sob, then a knock on my door. I helped her into her nightgown myself. I dried her hair.

She lay down on the bed, but I saw her wince and sit up; she could not get comfortable.

"The baby is coming!" I said. I had thought to feel elation, but now I only felt terror. I was not ready for this.

"Your husband's baby," she whispered. "He will be here soon. At last."

I looked at her, her face was so white, but her eyes met mine, urgent.

"I know," she told me. "I know you are aware of the father. I know you plan to keep him for yourself."

"And you," I said. "What do you plan? To take my place, to be rid of me? To bring up your child as a Rowbarton?"

"We both know it will be me who comes off the worst."

I could not meet her eye. It was true. I was George's wife. I had the law behind me. I had money, privilege, family. But still… "Sometimes," I said, my voice quiet, "I wonder. I feel I am nothing more than a vessel to provide an heir–and a failed one at that. Perhaps they really do want to be rid of me. Perhaps that is Mama's plan after all. An asylum, I suppose they told you. A rest."

I saw from her face that it was true.

“I have long suspected it was their plan eventually,” I had to sit down, tears blurred my eyes. “They have made many suggestions to me that I am unwell. I have long felt myself nothing more than a burden. And yet I hoped…I hoped…”

“That he would love you?” She looked at me, a long look, as if she were trying to work me out, to decide. “I cannot let them have him,” she said at last. “Will you help me, Miranda? Please? You are my only chance.”

I shook my head, but my eyes were filling with tears. “What can I do? How can I help? I have nothing of my own. I belong to them, just as you do. And the child too. Perhaps though… perhaps if we say we agree… you could come back with us, and we could all live together. George could have his heir and you could be the nurse. I would let you care for the child. He would be mine only in name…”

She reached forward and grabbed my hand hard in hers, and then she moaned in pain. “No! Don’t be a fool. You could not make a sacrifice like that. It would kill you; your heart should grow filled with resentment and hatred. And you know what they are like! They would not dare to risk it. Besides…how could I sit by and watch that façade, now I know what kind of man he is. To see him raise my child. And her! She is a devil, a madwoman! She would crush the very spirit out of my boy! I want them to have nothing to do with him! But what can I do? How can I raise a child?”

I had never heard her speak in such a way before. She was becoming frantic. I knew I had to calm her, or the baby might suffer.

I lay her back on the bed. “Hush,” I told her. “We will work this out. You must stay calm. Focus only on this.”

I stroked her hair, and in time she slept. I watched her face in the candlelight. Even in sleep she looked troubled, her hands never leaving her belly. I sat there wakeful all through

the night, wondering what I could do. And how could I give up this baby now that he was so close. My only chance, my only hope. And the more I watched her, the more I gazed at her face, I knew I had to let her go. I knew I had to let the child go. There was no hope. George would never love me; he could love nobody but himself.

I tiptoed to my own room where I crossed to my dressing table, and I opened a drawer. Inside was the pouch of coins that my aunt had given me that day. *This is yours*, she told me. *Yours alone. It will not be your husband's, like your dowry. Do not let your husband know of it. Keep it close. You might need it one day.* I had laughed then, and yet some little part of me had followed her advice, had kept it close, as if I thought it bad luck not to.

The thunder rolled on and the river kept rising.

***

Dawn brought a lull in the weather, a still grey sky. Emma woke with a start, and I saw her double up. The pains were growing stronger.

"I will have to get Mama. We must send for the doctor," I told her. Then a thought struck me. "Sarah is gone though! I will have to go myself."

Her hand grasped mine. "No!" she cried. "No! Do not leave me with her. Do not go to her. We will do it alone, the two of us. You will help me. I do not want her near me! Lock the door!"

"But… I do not know."

"Nonsense," she said. "You birthed a baby. You remember what they did. And I have seen my aunt birth one of her many brats. It is easy." She gritted her teeth, as if she might force herself to believe the lie.

I locked the door, as she wished. Light was sneaking through the drapes. There was a change in the atmosphere, a charge. I felt I was still in a dream, and yet, for the first time in

my life a sense of purpose consumed me; I knew I was where I belonged. I wiped Emma's brow and held cups of water to her dry lips. Emma writhed and then slept, and then writhed again. I sat with her; I held her hand. I felt the aches in my own womb, as surely as if the child were mine.

I began to wonder if she could do this. If the child would make it into the world alive. She told me stories as she dreamed: her flamboyant father; dances in London, twirling skirts; gripping her mother's hand as she was pulled from her. I wondered if she was hallucinating. She spoke of George, she told me she was sorry. She had never spoken his name to me before. She said that he looked at her and she came alive. I wanted to laugh, to tell her not to believe in that look: he would take his gaze from her one day and she would be left dull and lifeless as I was.

I knew she did not wish to alert Mama. She turned into the pillow and sobbed and screamed, muffled, but there was no avoiding it of course.

A knock on the door. Mama was there, calling, asking if all was well.

"Ignore her!" Emma's face was red, dripping, her eyes shot with blood.

I nodded, I obeyed, even as Mama's knocks become more insistent; she began to hammer on the door.

Towards midday, there was a change. Emma seemed to forget where she was, to forget Mama, who seemed to have left us for now. It was with one almighty scream that the baby slithered into the world. I held the baby to my chest, as if it were my own.

Then Emma's voice came, clear and loud: "Give him to me." Her presence took up all the room, and I thought: She is a mother now. She took him to her chest, and she held him like she would never let go. In that moment I ceased to exist, and I knew that all our plans were in vain.

“A girl,” she sobbed.

***

The doorknob turned again.

“What is happening?” Mama called, though she knew, of course she knew.

I looked to Emma, but she was wrapped up in her child. I could not bear to let Mama in on that scene. “All is well,” I called. “I will have news for you soon.”

“My boy!” she cried.

I looked at Emma and met her eyes.

“We will have to tell her,” I said.

She shook her head, and it was fear I saw. “No!” she protested. “It will drive her insane. She will do something…something foolish. I am afraid! I must think!”

She clutched the baby to her breast.

I waited as she bade me. I cut the cord, as she instructed. Then I wrapped the baby in towels. I went to hand the bundle back to Emma, but she pushed it back to me. Her face was very white.

“Take her to Mama,” she told me. “Tell her she is a boy. Keep her wrapped up. Say she is sick; that you must bring her back to me.”

I shook my head. “But Emma… she will come around. Surely, she will love the girl. She is her granddaughter. And George…he will love her. He will be so proud.”

Even as I spoke, I thought of my own father. I thought of my own little Rose, all blue and breathless, the disgust on George’s face: “A *girl!*”

I took the baby to Mama. She looked at the bundle in my arms and then she almost snatched the child from my arms, and her laughter crowed through the room, as if she had

won some battle. I did not even have to lie. In her mind, there could be no question. I shivered despite the heat.

Emma

Miranda brought the little girl back to me, still wrapped up, and it seemed that I breathed for the first time since she had taken my baby to Mama. Could I trust her? I thought I had no choice.

I snatched the baby back to me and I held her to my breast, as I had seen my aunt do. And yet the child did not suckle; she turned her head frantically, this way and that, snuffled, and then nestled into my chest, sleeping. She did not want me, I thought. It had looked so simple when my aunt had nursed her infants.

I looked up at Miranda who was watching all of this, a strange look on her face.

"You need to get the child away from this house. You need to get her away from Mama. You must take her to the village. To Sybil. I will tell you where to go. We will tell Lady Rowbarton she has died."

Miranda shook her head. "How can I? This is my husband's child. How can I do such a thing to him? To Mama?"

"Because they would lock you away forever more if they got the chance!"

Rage lit up her eyes. "No! I will not let them do that. We must tell them the truth about the baby. You can come back with us, like I said. Be George's mistress. There will be another child. A boy next time."

"No, Miranda. You must let us go. Take the child. Tell Mama it has died. I cannot go back to the village myself. It is not safe, but I will go for her when I am recovered. I will take her with me, and we will go far away. You need not see us again. You can find another girl for your plans. Maybe you will have your boy."

She was sobbing, she would not look at me. “I cannot,” she said quietly, and she left the room.

Later the baby woke crying, and at last I managed to attach her to my breast, but she fed only weakly. This child was never meant for me, I thought once more, as I drifted to sleep, but there was no peace for me there.

***

My nightmares had caught up with me, and I could not escape. I tried and I tried but I could not awaken, thought I was aware of the damp tangle of my sheets, the airlessness of the room.

It was my mother in my dreams, and my father. Her face that day, the terror of it choking me up. And my father as I had never seen him, his expression dark and terrible, my mother falling back from him; and then the blood so much blood. It swirled on the floor like a river in flood. It took everything, that river. It was not my mother’s blood I saw as I crouched cowering behind the bannisters. A knife in my mother’s hand. She pulled me close to her and I felt her shaking, and when I looked down there was blood on my pink frock, soaking into the lace. I wanted to scream but no sound was coming, and my mother was begging me to hush, and patting my hair mechanically.

They took her away. That man with no face, that awful man. He would hurt her, I thought, as he dragged her from me. Was it the next day? Or later? I did not know. There was no blood left at least. They told me not to worry, they would look after her. Still, I clung to her skirts until they prised me away, and my last impression of her was that awful face and the feeling of her heart beating red and terrible in my chest.

Her insanity saved her from the noose, they told me, weeks later; was not that a lucky thing? She was given a reprieve and taken to a nice hospital. Still, I never saw her

again, and in time I learned to hate her, for her passion, for her hysteria. I would never be like her, I thought.

This was no dream, I realised, and I was stuck there in my past, unable to break out, though I writhed, and I screamed. Sometimes my father's face would be replaced by George's, and the man who took my mother looked like William. Sometimes I was my mother, the knife in my hand; sometimes she became Miranda. But always, always this scene played out in my mind, a repeating cycle that would never end.

Miranda

The fever started the next day, sudden and ferocious. Emma could barely lift her head, let alone feed the child, who mewled weakly by her side. The room smelt: blood and sweat, hot and airless. Sarah had never come back. I had to change the sheets myself, finding fresh ones in the cupboard, and doing my best to wrestle these on to the ruined mattress. Already they were crumpled and twisted, sliding away from the bed at the corners. A pile of bloody sheets and towels lay crumpled in the corner. We would have the burn them, I supposed. I could not think what else to do.

But right now, I needed to think of Emma. I felt lost without her firm advice, her new motherly confidence.

I went to Mama, who held the child dreamily in her wasted arms. Looking at her, I wondered: would she really be so callous should she discover the child was a girl. Maybe I should tell her?

"Emma is unwell," I said. “She needs a doctor.”

"She is young," Mama said. "And strong. I am sure there is no need." Her eyes met mine and, in that instant, there was a knowing and I filled with horror.

She would let her die here, I realised. She was capable of anything. But still, I hesitated. How much can cross our minds in the space of a mere second: My mother's feet, blue and nibbled; that first still-born child, breathless and terrible; the baby snuggled at Emma's chest, my self disappearing –nothing.

I shook my head. “She needs a doctor.”

Mama's eyes were hard. "As you wish," she told me. "But the child only needs one mother you realise. You seem harassed, my dear. I think the birth must have been the last straw for you. A rest would do you the world of good."

That was when I knew. It could be either of us. My horror was not just for Emma, lying there helpless; not just the knowledge that failing to call the doctor was as good as murder. At that moment I realised: it could have been me lying there. Mama did not care. We were nothing more than puppets in her play. Replaceable. I wanted to shout and to scream, but I knew how to keep my feelings down.

It was not virtue that drove me to help Emma that day. Not only that at least. My motives were darker. It was revenge I wanted. Against my mother-in-law. I would help Emma, as she wished. Mama's plan had already failed. I would make sure she did not toy with us again. We would no longer be her pawns, not Emma, not me, not the child.

Emma

I felt a hand on my head, gentle caresses of my hair, as if I were a child. Still half in my dreams, I could feel the cold hard metal of the knife in my hand, then I heard a voice whispering softly. My mother, I thought, but then I realised she was gone at last. I let go, and the knife clattered onto the floor as it had that day with my husband. George, was here, I thought, confused. But it was not him. It was Miranda.

"Come," she was saying. "You must get up. We must get you somewhere safe."

I felt her pulling me to a seat, my nightgown stripped from my head, some other garment pulled over me, a cloak wrapped around me. Someone tried to pull me to my feet. I was hot, but at the same time a chill rushed through me, and I wanted to wrap myself back in the folds of my bed.

"I cannot," I sobbed. "I can't walk."

"You must," the voice said. "It is not safe for you. Mama would let you die here. And your baby."

"But George… he would not allow it. Surely. His own child."

"George would do exactly as his mother tells him. They told you he loved you so he could have an heir. You must have seen how she longed for nothing else in this world. You must understand how she would do anything–*anything*–to get one."

"No. No. It is not true. It was you they tricked. I will go to live with George. They will send you to an asylum."

"I do not doubt it," she said, and now Miranda's face came into focus, and I could see her eyes, blue as my mother's. "But if they would do that to me, do you not think they would hesitate to do the same to you? They could find another girl. Try again."

I remembered then, slowly, all that had passed since that day long ago when I had been taken from London. She spoke the truth. I knew then. I knew from her eyes. I trusted her.

I staggered to my feet.

"Help me," she was saying, and together we tied the baby to my chest with a towel as I had seen my aunt do.

She was stronger than I had realised, she dragged me through dark corridors, as if we were being followed by a demon. Outside the rain had stopped, but still the river roared, louder than anything. The gate opened easily; had it ever been locked? My feet stumbled and shuffled over wet ground, stones, mud. On and on we struggled, until at last I found myself laid down on a bed beside a fire, the baby gently removed from my chest, and a man was listening to my heart. He must hear it, I thought. My mother's red heart, beating, beating.

I tried to speak, but I heard a shush, and when I looked up, Sybil was there, my baby sleeping in her arms. Ned's sister.

"Ned?" I asked. "Is he here? I must see him."

"Emmeline," Sybil said, her voice gentle but grave. "Ned is not here. He…"

Miranda stepped forward and raised a hand to silence her. "Do not distress her yet," she was saying. "Her heart is not strong enough to withstand any more upset."

"Not my heart," I told them. "My mother's"

But it was broken, and it could never be fixed.

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My sleep was dreamless this time, deep and dark, and safe. I did not want to come out of it when at last I found myself rising back into the daylight. I was only too aware this time where I was, what had happened, and I longed to bury myself again.

But I needed to see my baby. I needed to know that she was safe, and so I made myself open my eyes to the dim light of an autumn morning. It was cooler at last, as if the storm had cleared that untidy summer away. I breathed deep and I looked around me.

In the corner, a woman, dressed in country clothes was feeding my baby. I gasped and sat up straight, but then Sybil was beside me, her hand on my arm.

"Do not worry," she said gently. "The child was hungry. We needed her to be fed."

I blinked and sat back. How easily that woman fed my child. And my daughter, so content; not a sign that she missed me at all.

I began to sob.

"Ned is not coming back, is he?"

Sybil looked at me. "Miranda did not want me to talk to you about it yet."

"I must know. Where is he?"

"He has gone to stay with family. He does not want me to tell you where. He will come back when you have left. I am sorry, Emmy. I am angry with him if you must know the truth. He was cruel to you. He knows you better than to listen to some hussy. He should have listened to you."

"Is he with Sarah now?"

She shook her head. "The maid? No. She is in the village. Sobbing like you. But listen, Emmy. There is something Ned wanted me to tell you."

Her face was very serious, and my breath came short. I leaned forward and she took my hand.

"Are you well enough? It will be a shock, I think. It is about your mother."

"My mother?" My heart was beating very fast in my chest. Was it mine or hers?

"They lied to you, Emmy. She is not dead."

"What? It cannot be. She died years ago!"

Sybil shook her head. "I saw her with my own eyes. Not long after you disappeared, she came here. She was looking for you. Someone must have told her about you and Ned for she came to the cottage and asked for him particularly. She was afraid. She did not want to be seen by your aunt and uncle. We told her you had left with your husband, and she left, quite wild."

"But…how can you be sure it was my mother? You had never seen her."

"She was your mother, Emmy. Ned asked her questions. She knew everything about you, even the birthmark on your little toe. She gave him this…"

Sybil held out her hand and in it was a ring; it sparkled gold, and diamond and sapphire. I gasped. I had forgotten the ring; how entranced I had been with it as a little girl; how I had loved to watch the light dance from my mother's finger when she wore it. She promised it would be mine one day.

"She wanted you to have it if you ever came back. She asked us to keep it safe. Ned told me I must give it to you."

Ned. At the thought of him that pain rose up in me sharp once more. But I could not think of him now. My mother living. It changed everything. I had thought I hated her, yet all at once my memories shifted: her smile, like sunshine rising on a misty morning; her ringing laughter, her warm fragrance.

And then…something else came to me. The day they took me; the man holding back my mother, his long black frockcoat. I saw his face, so stern, so disapproving. I knew that

look, that face: William. I must be wrong. But now, for the first time I pulled that memory close, and I could see him clear as day and something seemed to clunk into place, like the cogs I had loved to watch on the clock in my father's library.

I tried to stand, but my legs would not hold me, and I collapsed back in my chair.

"I must leave this place, Sybil. I must find her."

She shook her head. "Not long after your mother was here a man came through looking for her. To take her back to the asylum, he said. He would have found her, Emmy, I am sure of it. He would have locked her back up. Even if you find where she is, they will not let you see her."

"I must try though. I must find out…why…why did they tell me she had died?" I paused. "My aunt and my uncle."

"You know what will happen if you go to them. You will end up with your mother! We must get you well. Strong," she told me. "Wait a few days. You need strength to care for your child."

I shook my head. "No." But she was right I knew.

All night, I lay awake thinking, the little girl held to my breast. I knew I should sleep, but I could not stop gazing at her. How small she was, how unknowing. I had nothing to offer her. Nothing. Even Ned had abandoned me now. I had no family, no friends, no money; I had no future, could no longer even understand my own past. But I had to keep her safe. My brain turned and turned, searching for an answer. There was only one person who could help me.

It was mid-morning when Sybil knocked frantically on my door. She burst in, before I had a chance to bid her do so.

"They know you are here," she said. "Your relatives. They asked if I had seen you."

I sat up straight, the child held tighter to my breast than ever.

"You did not tell them?"

"Of course not. But someone has told them you are nearby, and of course they know of your history with Ned. They will not give up, I think. They will come here."

"Sarah." I said, no doubt in my mind, but there was not time to think on her treachery now. "Sybil, you must bring me Miranda. Fetch her here as quickly as you can."

She nodded. "Do not open the door to anyone."

As soon as she was gone, I staggered from my bed, and gathered up my few belongings. I had brought nothing from the cottage but there was no time for that now. I would have to manage as I was.

I sat back down, and I waited. The baby whimpered and I held her to my breast once more; felt the milk, a thin trickle that did not seem to satisfy her. I was not enough, I thought. I closed my eyes. I saw my husband, his cold pale face, that last day of our marriage, the way he had grown more condescending the angrier I had become. He had called me such terrible names, and all in that sermonising voice, as if he were speaking to his congregation. *I will leave. I will go to save the poor heathens. Earlier than intended, but it was always my plan. Come with me,* he had told me. *Away from all you know, where you will be safe from temptation. Come with me, or I will have you shut away. For your own safety.* We were in the kitchen. There was a knife on the table. It was just for a second, but in my rage, and fear, I had grabbed it in my hand and waved it towards him. Just an instant and then I had dropped it to the floor, trembling. Just a second, but it was enough. I was just like my mother, he had told me. I should be careful, or I would succumb to my hysteria just as she had. He had thought to give me a chance, to save me. He should have known. He had handed me back to relatives as if I were an unwanted gift.

He had tricked me. He had known all along. It was not my mother's heart, I realised now, beating in my chest all those years: it was my very own: bruised and battered, but not hysterical after all; not evil. I had dropped the knife. I was not like my mother at all. I did not even know who she was. And if I could not know her, then how could I ever know myself?

Miranda

The nightgown was a crumpled heap in the corner of Emma's bedchamber. For a moment, the clouds parted, and moonlight slithered through the window, and I could see the stains spreading dark like guilt across the whiteness of the fabric. Back in the village, Emma would be sleeping. Unwell still, but safe. Sybil would keep her and the baby close, and when she was well enough, we would help her to leave.

Somewhere beyond the end of the gardens I heard the river raging its way to the oceans. I used to walk by a different river with my mother, following the bends and curves through the meadow, the sun in my hair, my mother's hand holding mine, and the trickle of water a lullaby in my ear. It snatched her from me in the end; no hand left to steady me, to anchor me in this world. I was left adrift.

I gathered the nightgown in my arms. It smelt foul, like death, yet I held it to my chest. I knew what I must do.

It was cold outside, and the wind slapped my cheeks, as if to chastise me. The trees were black and frantic against the moonlit sky. I took the nightgown through the grounds, moving faster and faster as if I could outpace those memories. The ground was wet and slippery, and the roar of the water did not cease. I stumbled over the stones to the river's edge. I held up the garment, letting the wind take it and I watched it billowing out, deathly white in the moonlight; I watched it sink under the river, and slip beneath the surface. I imagined it was her, hair spread out behind her, eyes closing at last, the water washing out

her shame, and mine. The current took her from me so fast. Emma was gone, she was no more. Still, the baby's wails ring in my ears, they wrapped themselves around me, heavy as a water-soaked gown, and somewhere in my mind my mother shrieked foul words. I put my hands to my ears, and I closed my eyes and there it was again: that white figure swept away by the water in a cloud of blood and dirt, and rage.

I can no longer tell who she was.

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Early the next morning, I went to see Mama. “She has gone!” I told her. “And the child too. I cannot be sure, but I think her intentions were dark, for she left wearing only her nightgown.”

I left Mama wailing on her knees in her room, and I paced through the overgrown garden, the willow tree now drooping, and sad; the roses shedding their petals, and the sky grey and cool. Even the hedgerows seemed lifeless, no bees buzzing; the birdsong muted and weary.

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In the lane outside I saw Sybil; she beckoned me alight beside her in the gig, and I did, thinking how unsteady I felt without a footman’s hand to guide me.

“Her aunt and uncle have been looking for her. She says she must leave now, but she does not seem well enough. She is terrified, I think.”

“What of? I will take care of my mother-in-law.”

Sybil paused. “There was an incident, long ago. She held a knife to her husband. They said she was insane. Her own mother killed her father. They were going to lock her away, but then she left suddenly.”

I shivered. I remembered Emma arriving, floating over the garden. That sense I had had of threat, of her ethereality. But then I thought of all those other moments; the hurt when she had realised George's deceit; the way she had held her baby that first day.

"What do you think?" I asked Sybil.

"It is nonsense. I saw her in love with my brother, as in love as any healthy right-minded girl, though she made some foolish choices. And there were always stories about her husband…about his …incapacities. He was not a husband to her. And as for her own father, he was a fiend from what I have heard. He beat her mother, and spent all her money, and her family had her locked away as the lesser damage to their reputation than a murderess."

I thought of my own mother, her high emotions. Hysterical, they had said. But nothing was said of my father, his womanising, his cruel words. Was she hysterical before that?

I approached Emma's bed and she grabbed my arm. Her eyes were wild, and yet it was not madness, only fear.

"I have to leave," she told me.

"But where can you go?"

She looked at me a long time. "I do not know, exactly. There are some things I need to find out. Some answers from my past."

"But the child? Surely you cannot mean to take her?"

There was silence again, then she took my hand in hers. She was shaking, I realised, distraught. "You must take her for me, Miranda. I cannot give her a life. Not yet. I have nothing of my own; no-one who can help her. But you–you could find her a good home. Just for a short while. I will come back for her." She looked at the baby, and murmured, "I

promise," then back into my eyes. "You are the only one I trust… Find a safe place for her. Just until I come back."

She pushed the baby into my arms. "She is called Mirabelle," she told me. "For my mother." I held the child close and felt her nuzzle into me. The smell of her little head.

"Promise me," Emma said, and she was weeping so that she could barely speak. "You will make sure she is cared for."

I nodded. "I promise." I already knew what to do.

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That night, we helped Emma into a carriage that would take her to meet the stagecoach to London. I gave her the address of a kind lady who might help her, a philanthropist. On no account must she mention my name. It would be too dangerous; Mama and George would be looking for her.

As she stepped into the carriage, I pressed her hand, and she looked down. In the palm of her glove were those coins given to me by my aunt. Half for me, and half for her. Enough for a new start. She would not be coming back, I thought.

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Back at the cottage, the child slept. I took her in my arms, and she nestled into my chest, as if she knew me for her true mother. This child was mine, only mine

"Rose," I whispered. "My Rose."

I thought of my aunt once more. "Any time you need me," she had said. I closed my eyes, and there it was once more: the mountains and the sunshine, the clean breeze and the wavy grass. My baby cradled to my chest. Nobody else in the world.

Novel Synopsis

This thesis is the first section of a two or three part novel. The remainder will tell the story of Emma's struggle to reclaim her past, and Miranda's efforts to live with her guilt, and to mother to a child that is not her own.

Emma's part of the story will take her to the asylum to discover the truth about her mother, and ultimately to New Zealand where she will confront her husband. For many middle-class women, life in the colonies was liberating, and allowed them to step away from the stifling limits of life in English society. This will be reflected in Emma's experiences, as she uncovers truths about her husband, and faces challenges that help her to discover her own courage. All the while, Emma will be aching to get back to her child and find a way to provide her with a bright future.

Unknown to Emma, Miranda will have declared herself the child's mother, and will be striving to live up to this name. Hiding with her aunt in Switzerland, Miranda will learn that life as a social outcast is not what she has dreamed of. Plagued by guilt and resentment, Miranda will face her own trials and will have to face uncomfortable realizations about herself as a mother, as a wife, and as a woman.

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