

Take this Message to the Infants' Ward

Stephanie Kain, PhD Candidate
Lancaster University
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ABSTRACT

This practice-based PhD submission comprises a 100,000-word novel, *Take This Message to the Infants' Ward*, plus a 20,000 word exegesis, *Inside Avonhurst*, reflecting on the genesis, research process, and narrative shaping of the novel.

Take This Message to the Infants' Ward explores life in an Idiot Asylum in 1927. Through the point of view of two protagonists—Andria Felwyn (Fel), a selective mute and epileptic inmate of the "moron" class, and Siobhan Rian, an Irish immigrant doctor—the novel illuminates the living, working, and social conditions of a 20th century 'total' institution over the course of one calendar year. This novel was based upon research into the actual archives of the largest institution in Ontario, Canada. The events of the novel are based upon news stories, video footage, and other archived sources from the time of the institution's opening in the late 1860s to its closure in 2009 (Archives of Ontario, 2014).

Through a combination of formal and experimental elements, the reflective thesis attempts to encompass the entire process of the development of the novel—not only the literary progression, but also the personal journey from research to writing; the historical context of mental health colonisation in Ontario; the social conditions that led to the Eugenics movement that gained such a stronghold in Canadian politics and medicine; and the nomenclature of the day that created a key ethical question in the writing of the book—and which ultimately helped develop a framework for the language that was necessary in establishing an authentic setting.

The reader will experience a guided tour of an actual institution, Huronia (formerly the Orillia Asylum for Idiots and Imbeciles), and the graveyard that was the final resting place of more than 2,000 residents. Segments of interpolated text illuminate the writing process from the author's perspective. There follows an examination of the phenomenon of institutionalisation: the geography, the psychology and the human hierarchy of large institutions, and how these informed the making of the novel; the fictional characters of Avonhurst; issues of authenticity, reliability, and narrative voice; an examination of the different iterations that led to the final draft, and a study of sexual identity and expression in large institutions: sterilisation, abuse, queer identity, and the reclaiming of the self

The conclusion discusses the noticeable lack of literature on this subject in the landscape of Canadian fiction and argues for the original contribution that this combined PhD submission makes.

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This thesis is entirely the original work of the author, and no part has been submitted in the same form for an award elsewhere.

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Patient Record:

Name: Felwyn, Andria-

Date of Birth: April 17, 1910

Date of Admission: September 2, 1921

S: Female

Type: Moron (High Grade)

Reason for Admission: Epilepsy, Mutism, Moral Defective

General Health Status: Good

~~Cottage C, Moron Girls~~ *Pavilion, Ward 7B*

Dr. Sattl Goldberg

Dr. Siebhan Rian

Kain

Autumn

September 1927

Fel

Out of the way, girl, can't you see I'm in a hurry?

Matron in her long skirt, steamed and pressed. Swishing, pushing by me. I almost trip but catch myself on the brick wall, hands out. They'll shove you out of the way as they pass, but God help you if you trip over *them*.

Squeaking—a wheelchair behind me, wooden wheels clicking on the floor. I wait until it passes. Watch Matron burst through the doors to my office, sharp elbows out.

Plunks herself down at John's desk. He stands in the corner, eyes on the wall, waiting. I don't want to follow her, but I'm on office duty this morning. Mail's probably piled to the ceiling and a thousand messages waiting. Mondays are the worst. Two days off on the weekend, but the work don't stop, does it?

Matron's got the telephone off the hook. Frowning. Talking fast.

– What do you mean when was he last seen? At roll call this morning, I imagine.

Roll call is at seven. Breakfast is at seven-fifteen. Work duty starts at eight o'clock.

Waiting. Matron adjusts her cap even though it'd barely move in a hurricane.

– In all the usual places, please. The train station, the distillery district. Drag him back by the ear if you have to, and I'll deal with him myself.

It's a week day. Trains run all day long.

Who went and caught one? Who's missing?

Wait by the door until she slams the phone down.

Doctor McHugh is behind me. I move over, melt into the corner near John, but not too close. He hates people too close. Waiting for them to leave. Waiting to start my job. No good calling attention to yourself when they're cross. Dock you clink or send you to punishment, and Alistair and me've got plans this week. Tomorrow is the day we're eloping from here. A carriage into Toronto, hiding in the back, then out at the nearest sign of the city and walking into town to get work at a factory—cars or lamps or clothes, I don't care. My stash of clink is big enough now. Alistair knows when the milk carriage comes.

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And now who's this, sending everyone into a panic the day before we want to leave?
They'll be guarding all the doors and windows after this!

The faster I get out of here and delivering the mail, the faster I can hear the gossip. My mailbag is out of reach. Need to cross Matron to get it.

John sits at his desk. Silent. Sorting mail. Not looking up.

Dr. McHugh puts his hand to his head. Pinches his nose.

– He'll be in the dungeon for a month after this.

Matron breathes out like one of the farm dogs, all hot breath and snorting.

Even just hearing about the dungeon makes my stomach hurt. I been there once.

Alistair's been more than that, before they moved him out of Moron Boys and across the road to the farm. The dungeon's in the basement. Four small rooms, like the closets we had at home, only they're stone and damp, reeking of piss and shit. Rats nattering in the corners, where you can't see them. But they find you while you're sleeping. Eat your ears if you don't leave them any bread. And even if you do sometimes because they like you better. Toes. Fingers. One girl on my old ward had bites all over her face.

Shivers up my back at the thought.

Who is it? Who's going to the dungeon?

Matron turns, hand on hips, face red. I stand still. Don't breathe.

– Don't suppose you've any idea where he's gone?

Eyes bore holes into me so hard my apron should catch fire.

Who?

– You'd think you'd want to help me find your own brother.

My stomach clunks.

Alistair caught a train? Today? *Alistair's* the one who eloped? Why the blazes would he go and catch a train when we were supposed to leave together tomorrow? He passed me a note yesterday at church. *Back of kitchen, milk carriage. 10:00AM Tuesday.* Some big to-do going on in the Administration office, visitors all over the place. We could slip out and be away before anyone seen or cared.

What if I got the day wrong? What if he was waiting and I didn't come? Hells bells.

– Same knack for causing trouble, the pair of you. Twins are always a bad omen.

Matron scowls at me, like it's my fault that Alistair and I were born at the same time. Same as my grandparents used to shoot us daggers for exhausting our poor mother so. Mostly

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Alistair, for his extra finger on each hand. Thought it was the mark of the devil. Probably thought it was our fault, not Dad's, that she ended up in the Looney.

So he's gone and done it today. He's on the outside without me. How will I get to him now?

Matron just rolls her eyes. Sighs. Looks back at Doctor McHugh.

– Didn't report to the farm for work duty this morning. Who knows where he's gone by now?

– You called the police?

– I had to.

He sighs. He loosens his tie and stands up straight. Even taller than normal. Once seen him smack his head on a door frame in one of the children's wings, he's so tall.

– They're checking Union Station?

– That's where they'll start, Doctor. He wasn't caught aboard a train, so he either got off along the way, or he's gone somewhere else.

– Where? Into the woods? Swimming in the lake? We can't afford a repetition of the last time, Matron.

– Well I never asked that one to elope either, now did I? Middle of February, he goes for a stroll.

– Strolls don't normally give you fatal hypothermia.

Matron sighs, but she has to agree.

– Well, luckily it isn't February now.

Not even the nasty nurses can be sarcastic about that one. Byron Bryce died from the cold trying to get out of here. Alistair's smarter than that. He has to be.

Matron clucks and gets up.

– Maybe that's what they had in mind when they built this place miles from anywhere. Doesn't seem to deter the inmates much, does it? If he has frostbite, he'll know it.

– Isn't he the one who jumped on top of a rail car last month?

McHugh sets down in a chair—like they're a Punch and Judy puppet show. One up, one down.

– No, Doctor. That was Nelson. He jumped the back of the train and crouched on the back platform of the caboose until someone saw him. Then he jumped.

– Yes. Two broken ankles. Not bright.

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Matron's face is sour. She gives him a look, like she wants to say something, but rolls her eyes again.

Nelson, Konrad (Kip). Came April 4 1926. Brown hair. Freckles on his crooked nose. Broken a few times, probably. Born March 5 1910. Moron.

Sighs again. Pulls at the knot in his tie like it's choking him and he can't get it loose. He's the boss. Don't know why he just don't make a new rule about ties and then stop wearing them. Stop the attendants wearing them. Everyone could go around in pajamas if he decided.

– It's a problem.

– A problem? No end of trouble, and they just keep piling more of them in here.

Her eyes cut to me. Her in her starched apron, stupid cap. She should just decide to stop wearing that too. Quit having to fuss with it and fix it every time she bends over. Stop swishing around in giant skirts, hems always dirty no matter that she sends her dress to the laundry more than anyone else.

Staff laundry is always done first. Piled as high as the mail. Wash, wrung, pressed, folded, returned. Hour after hour after hour. Laundry rooms run sixteen hours—two shifts. The dirt and the filth of the floors jumps up on clothes. Mop, swish, mop, swish and you're wearing it. Don't ever get clean.

– You, Felwyn, what are you doing standing around? Haven't you any work to do?

Pins prick my neck and I bite my tongue. I hate being called Felwyn. Never have gotten used to it, all six years I've been here. I always want to shout, *Andie! Andie! My name is Andie.* But of course I don't.

– Get to your desk. Mail won't deliver itself.

Matron leaves in a hurry, skirt swishing, feet clacking. The wood floor is noisy. I like it. You always know she's coming. *Clack, clack, stomp.* Bottom of her shoes are like firecrackers.

I wait for a second to see if she's coming back. No clacking.

– Six mail bags are ready for delivery.

John don't look at me. He looks above my head when he talks, always. But I know he's talking to me. Just like he knows I'm listening.

Hair perfect. Shirt perfect. He gets to take his clothes from the top before they get snatched and grabbed by the other boys because he's got to leave the dorm first. Like me. Earliest up. First clothes. Get on time here. We live on small wards anyway, not like on the big wards where half the girls and boys go naked.

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I look at the bags and grab two mailbags for the outer wards. Start far, work my way in. At the door, stick my head out and look both ways. Nobody. Swing down the hall to the end—and then down the stairs.

– Felwyn!

Who's that? Oh, Roland. The old witch.

Scowl at her sharp voice. Screeching through the hall, worse than a bum wheel on a cage cot.

My name is *Andria* Felwyn. Andie. How many Andies are in here anyway? One. One.

But she knows I can't say anything.

Glare at her coming out of the infirmary, thick wrist turning, impatient, thrusting a piece of paper at me.

– Take this back to the administration office for Doctor Braithwaite straightaway.

No please. No candy or clink or even a smile. Just an order.

She rushes back into the Beehive. I read the note. Not urgent then. Nurse Roland probably thinks I can't read. Thinks all of the patients here are feeble-minded, but she's the idiot. Can't see half the reasons some of us got sent away have nothing to do with being stupid.

Ignore her and go down, down, down into the ground.

Just as I am going to turn the corner into the trams there comes a cackle, shuffling and stepping. I stop cold, melt into the wall. Wait, holding my breath. The three witches waiting there. Dull-normals with nothing to do. Shirking their work duties, lazy cows. Just standing around cackling. What are they waiting for? Big broads, on their way to the laundry. They better hurry up or they'll be docked. Bell's already gone.

One versus three is not a good idea so I wait. Hurry up, won't you! Got things to do.

One bellows, her honking echoing off the walls.

Quick footsteps come from the opposite direction and I melt in further, groping for the alcove, slip in and wait.

– You!

His loud voice booming. Makes me shrink back, stomach dropping. But it ain't me he seen.

He charges toward them. Don't recognise him. An attendant by his uniform, looks like. Must be new. At least it's not One-Arm. Never know what you're going to get with that one. A smack and a shove against the wall, probably.

Then sometimes he forgets where he is, halfway. Stands staring. Once in the middle of the tram, he started screaming at ghosts. Nobody there, and him yelling at the wall.

Doctor had to put him in the Beehive, shoot him up with a needle to calm him down. He didn't have spells like that for a while after.

– Don't you have somewhere to be?

– Aw, we're just shootin' the guff, eh?

Tallest one puts a hand on her hip. Marie Gilbert. Been here for yonks. Daughter Rachel's in her ward too. Two of them a right mean pair. Don't get on any side of them but their ass end.

– Yeah, well shoot it on the way to work duty, will ya?

He grabs Rachel by the arm and shoves her off toward the laundry corridor. Her stomach's getting bigger by the day. Soon ready to drop, by the looks of her.

They turn, shuffle off, down the tram, aprons swishing.

Stop. Hands against the wall.

I send my mind up. Up through the ceiling. Up through the pipes. I want to know what's above me. What's sitting on top of this tunnel.

I'm under Ward G, probably. Down to the cross at the end and left, then up is Infants.

But up above is a different world. Down here, it's all lefts and rights and throughs and ups. In the buildings above, it's over and across and dodging and weaving.

You've got to know both around here. The ups and the downs. The light rooms and the dark places.

After all this time, it's hard to get me lost. When you stop talking, you can see more. Hear more. And then people can't spring up on you.

Wait, count to ten, then make a dash for it, taking another turn. Something in the air today. Restlessness, danger. I can feel it. Better not to be underground.

Back up a stairwell and through a door propped open. The outdoor path is better.

Wind bites at my face. Harsh, like the crows in my dreams, but I don't care. I'm outside. Free for a minute. The chatter in the tram, in the halls, too high, too fast today. Seen the police coming up the front drive in their motorcar, helmets on, marching up the front stairs.

Alistair'd better stay hidden. Anyone who brings outsiders to Avonhurst is in for it the worst. He'll be taken to the boiler room first then to the dungeon or Punishment. He'll lose his

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place on the farm for sure, back into work duty and the general ward. Why would he do something so daft?

Reckon he's counting on not getting caught. But that's a gamble. He'd have had a better chance if he'd waited for me.

Heave my mailbag higher and walk faster. I need time to check my clink piles one last time, the ones outside that I hardly ever have time for. Going out to the far wards is a good excuse. Usually I come up the stairs from the bottom, but too bad. Mail's mail and everyone wants it.

Knock, knock on the door.

The nurse cracks it open. Creak. Frown.

– Got a bad case of diarrhoea in here, girl. Best to stay clear.

Step back. No thank you. Don't need any of that.

She grabs the mailbag and takes it. Disappears inside. Stupid cow, taking their mailbag. Now how do they expect to get their mail tomorrow?

She opens a window and calls out.

– Go for a walk, girl. Clear your lungs of this illness you've breathed in. And if you see the new doctor, send him this way.

I wait to see if she's going to give back the bag but she doesn't. Just slams the window shut and that's the end of it. Right mess she's made of things now, hasn't she? It'll be me who's blamed for it, wait and see.

But that's not even the most important thing. There's a new doctor starting. That's what she said. Doctor Goldberg took ill last winter and died in the spring. They took him away to be buried. No idea where. But not in the Backyard here, with all the others with the flat headstones, marked by numbers. To a family plot somewhere, his own headstone.

I need that mailbag back. John will be right cross if there's one missing. But nobody's coming back out. Hells bells, people are stupid sometimes.

Turn and walk, ears buzzing. Maybe they'll bring it back themselves. Take a few days of no mail and they'll wake up. Hey ho, we've got the mailbag here!

Can't stew about it now. Not if I'm going to get out of here. Not often I have extra time, and outside too. Make sure nobody sees me first and duck into the trees, straight to the hollow branch. That's my biggest clink pile. Have to move it inside before the snow comes and I can't get to it, but if all goes to plan, I'll be gone by then.

Take out the cloth, unwrap it. Count quick—fifty clink. That should get us somewhere. Or me now, if Alistair don't get caught. No idea how I'll meet him, but first things first. I'll have to elope now on my own. How will I? Alistair always does the talking. He's quick and good with words. What will I do without him?

The nurse said to go for a walk. Clear my head.

First, get off the path. Anybody else sees you here, you're back inside, quick as a slap.

Some inmates have ground parole. They're fixing cars, going to town. I have ground parole and town parole, but I hardly ever go to town except for Church. What good is it to buy sweets when I been saving my clink for getting out of here?

The day is busy already. Inmates going to work. Marching around the grounds, two by two, in lines. One in helmet, hither and thither until he falls into the grass and rolls. Visitors in the circle. The mail truck out the back. Laundry's getting hung out, even with frost on the lines. The sheets turn stiff as cardboard in the wind coming off the lake. Milk truck rumbles behind the kitchen. Smells terrible.

I miss the horse and buggy and the soft nuzzle of the horse's nose when I gave him an apple. I heard Doctor McHugh talking on the phone this morning. We're getting our own cows next. We already make our own bread. Grow our own vegetables. Cows are cheaper than bottled milk. Milking's just an extra chore. All they need is extra boys, and there are always extra boys the city is clamouring to bring up here. Notes coming across the administrator's desk every day.

How many more will they bring in for that? Have to build another cottage, probably. Go and send in the social workers to the city wards where they picked up Alistair and me. Drag 'em up here, the pickpockets and dull-normals and runaways.

Sent Mam off to the Looney for the electric cure, us to Avonhurst. For a rest, they said to us. *Your Mam needs a quiet place. Doctors will see to her, she'll come around again.*

Don't know how long it's supposed to take to come around but it's been six Christmases in Avonhurst now. No letters from Mam for the past five. Bella-Rose would be seven now if she'd lived.

And if she'd lived, none of us would be anywhere but home, because Mam wouldn't have taken up the drink, even after Alistair's accident. She would have been stronger, if the baby hadn't died. She'd have had a little girl to take care of after Dad left.

Is Alistair home now? Did he get there? Fix himself something to eat and get into bed?

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Anger flashes in my head. How could he leave without me? I'll knock his teeth out when I see him.

Hammering comes from the wood shop. A saw grinding. Fixing beds for Cottage B. John told me.

But nobody is around the campus. No attendants to spy on me. Nosy things. Probably have binoculars in their pockets. Half the things they know and shouldn't.

Whistles. Shouting. Plunge you in the bath if you keep jabbering.

Best to shut up and not say a word.

Better still to avoid them.

Dragging people back inside, jamming them into straightjackets and shoving them against the wall. *There, now try to hit me, why don't you?* Hands crossed over your chest and tied so you can barely breathe. Awful things, suffocate you to death.

I seen it happen once with a violent. Fell face-first onto the floor in a straightjacket, hit his head. Couldn't stop himself falling, nose shoved into his face and bleeding all over the place.

I had to put that one in the Deaths Ledger.

2458, Harrison, Gerald, County: Renfrew, Time in Y:10, M: 2, D: 29; Warrant; Cause of Death, Epilepsy; Mental State: Imbecile, Violent; Type: Epileptic.

Seen him in the morgue too. Snuck down on a dare and waited for the nurse to go for coffee then slipped inside. Pulled open the drawer and there he was, face looking like someone had smacked him with a log.

Still see it sometimes when I have nightmares.

Shake it off, shake it off. Seen worse in here than that, but that one bothers me. Don't know why. Ever after, took care not to get put into a straightjacket. Never have since.

Surprised they ain't found my money, stashed where it is out in the open.

But where else could I keep it?

If I go back to the office early, John will want to know why. His pacing and his questions are something else to avoid.

The nurse told me to take a walk and I'm going to do it. It's nice enough out. Late summer, leaves turning.

Turn right. Back down the path. Walk on the shadows— one step, two step. Keeping close to the forest. Duck into the underbrush. Through the trees, crunching brown leaves under my shoes. Where's the path? I seen it before. Ages ago, maybe not since last year.

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Inmates sneak in here to smoke sometimes. Deep by the hollow tree, there's a cabin. Years ago, boys used to have campouts.

But I ain't interested in that.

In the middle of the forest some of the trees are still green, smell like Christmas did once upon a time. In with the green, out with the grime. Mam used to say that.

Cleansing the lungs, the nurse said.

If I close my eyes tighter, I can imagine the snow falling. Cinnamon and apples. Christmas. I love Christmas. Whenever I can daydream, I dream of Christmas. The sun heats up my face. I wonder if I have any more freckles. Been ages since I seen myself in the mirror. Ones on the ward are all smashed and taken out now. Used to be one on the Pavilion but Susan, stupid girl, broke that last one when she had a fit.

At the far edge of the forest, I creep as far as I can. Nobody's around to see me reach the stairs down to the water. Seven sets of them. I've counted them so many times, imagined just running down from the administration building all the way to the water's edge.

But of course you can't do that. Somebody would catch you and drag you back. You've got to be sneaky. The lake's outright forbidden. Big red X. All because of one person, the way it always is around here. But I'm not going to drown myself in half a foot of water, am I? All I want to do is dip my feet in. Pretend I'm somewhere else.

Shouldn't be anybody around this time of day. Nobody else would dare.

Quick, quick, down the hill, down to the sand. The waves make a quiet whooshing sound as they kiss the shore. Take my shoes off and pull off my socks. Been years since I put my feet in the water.

I run across the beach, the sand sliding between my toes. Squelch. The sand is like slime and the water is freezing, but it's worth it. I turn my face up to the sun, breathing it in, pretending Alistair and me are at the beach, Mam on a chair, parasol in the air.

It's a beautiful day.

– Hello.

I whip around. A lady in a long fancy skirt is sitting on a rock behind me.

What the blazes is she doing here? Who is she?

Scramble to pick up my shoes and socks.

– I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.

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But I don't wait to hear what else she says. Turn and run away, back up the hill, slipping and sliding. My stomach feels sick. No, no, no.

– Wait!

But I keep running. Damn. Why does she have to be here? I'm caught. Sunk. Straight to Punishment for me and I'll lose my chance to elope. Lose my job in the office too. Hells bells, what a terrible day.

Run across the main field, pulling my shoes on. People are looking at me but I don't care. It's too late anyway. I'm already done for. Run, run, run.

– Hey, you, inmate!

But I don't stop.

The side door of the administration building should be closed but it's deliveries today and—yes—someone's stuck a rock in it. I slide through the door, up the stairs and quick down the hall to my desk.

John looks up, surprised. His eyebrows twitch up but he don't say nothing. Even a Moron like John with all his strange ways knows that the worst thing you can do is say something. Anything.

He puts his head down and keeps filling out the ledger.

Siobhan

The bells begin to clang—like church bells in the town square when I was a child. In the city, over the noise of the motorcars and the clattering of hooves all down the stone streets, it's harder to hear them. Now, their clanging drives chills down my legs, sending my heart crossways, until I feel I can't move.

This order to the day, the bells and the rules. The chain of command. Answering to someone else, learning new directions, new methods. Knowing before I even begin that they're likely to disapprove of me. Certain, even. But I haven't time to worry about it now.

Breathe out, count to seven...breathe in, count to seven.

That's what they say: all cycles in life come in threes and sevens. Births, deaths—the happinesses and the sorrows that almost crush you to the ground.

I'm on two.

It's time to go inside and face up to it. Dive in and start swimming my way through this mess.

But somehow, even knowing how late I am, even sensing the glares that are sure to be suppressed beneath smiles of welcome for the new doctor—my tardiness on the first day for God's sake—I can't make my feet move. The clock tower cleaves the front of the red brick monstrosity. Gorgeous, state-of-the-art.

Impenetrable.

I can't be found here, but nor can I easily escape.

That thought might send me mad, so instead I'll concentrate on what I can do—my job.

Seven sets of stairs, flanked on either side with iron railings, cascade from the stone arch over the main entrance and down to the water. An aesthetic pleasantry. Seven. Of course.

Good day. Please come in.

I can only imagine the din and stench on the wards past the gleaming entrance.

Behind me, the waves lap the rough shore, gouging at the sand and scraping it back into the slate grey lake. How long would it take for the lake to claim me as well—if I just walked straight in, past my knees, my waist. By the time I got to my chest, the bitter cold would steal

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my breath. Submerge my head and it would be a matter of minutes in these freezing temperatures. Respiration stops. Cardiac arrest.

Where would my body wash up?

I step away before the water claims my boots. With the damp and the grey, who knows how long it would take the laces to dry. I wave away the instinct to cross myself, which no doubt comes from my mother, still looking over my shoulder, God rest her soul. Worried about my eternal damnation, and compelling every patron saint in the Kingdom to watch over me, I'd imagine.

A girl comes out of the woods and strips off her shoes, her socks. Casts a furtive glance up at the building and moves away again, sticking to the tree line. She's wearing a dingy grey dress and her hair is lobbed off like someone's put a mixing bowl over her head and chopped in line with the rim.

I watch her for a moment as she puts her feet in the water, a slow smile creeping over her face.

– Hello?

She whips around, startled. Then her eyes open wide, like she's been shocked. Before I can say anything else, she grabs her shoes and takes off at a run.

– Wait!

But she doesn't.

Odd little creature.

I didn't mean to startle her. Probably should have known better.

Breathe again. In for seven, out for seven.

It's time to go inside, I know. I've dawdled long enough here, savouring these last few moments before anyone but the stable hands knows I'm even on the grounds.

One more breath—push out the dark thoughts that circle my brain like a constant headache. Straighten the skirt that twists itself against the inner layers. It's impossible to work in these, and I won't after today, but for the first moments, I thought I'd attempt a normal impression.

Though who's to say what will be normal here?

I turn back once more to the lake, where my boots have made deep imprints on the wet sand and watch until the waves erase the evidence that I was here.

Keeping my head down, I crest the top of the stairs, but nobody pays me any attention anyway. A troupe of boys passes by fifty paces away, two not-very-straight lines: a deformed alligator with an attendant at the head and one bringing up the rear with a small boy who limps badly. Left hemiplegic Cerebral Palsy, if I had to guess. Or a stroke.

A boy in the middle—pudgy, with ears that stick out like an elephant’s—drops something on the ground. A book.

The attendant stops to pick it up.

– What’ve you got this for, eh? Supposed to leave it in the schoolhouse, aren’t you? Where’re ya gonna keep this in the dorm?

The boy shifts from foot to foot, his stance too wide, his legs too short. I can’t hear what he says, only that he seems to stutter.

– Quick, run and take it back. We’ll all be late for dinner if you dawdle. Reynolds, go with him.

The boy and his alligator partner pull out of the line and break into a gammy run. The one who’s dropped the book is surprisingly fast, considering his short legs. His taller friend leaps, like a goat who wants to kick his legs in the clover. They exchange a laugh, a giggle almost. Was that the point of taking the book in the first place? To have an excuse to run free?

They’re tearing across the lawn to a smaller stone building: grey, with four walls and a bell on top. A schoolhouse, it looks like. Big enough for perhaps two or three classrooms.

– Get a move on! We’re waiting!

The boys race up the hill, and one darts around a woman carrying a bag, almost knocking her over. I’m not close enough to see what’s in it. Laundry? Flour? Whatever it is, it’s heavy and nearly doubles her over. She throws up one hand but keeps walking toward a large outbuilding in the opposite direction to the schoolhouse.

The autumn leaves have just begun to turn—nothing like August in my childhood in Ireland where everything was still green and fresh. Ontario autumns have a coldness to them. The hint of frost always in the air, the pungent smell of turning leaves reminds me of home. Dry and crunching under one’s boots. The promise of snow around the corner. In the daytime, the air remains warm enough to stroll comfortably, but at night, the cold and damp creeps in, leaving a thin layer of near-ice over the windows and gates. What will my cottage be like to sleep in? Alone, on the edge of the woods there? Candles and firewood for company. My throat feels tight, like my scarf is cinched somewhere.

At home I would be strolling through the woods, pulling weeds from the vegetable garden or painting. Having a cup of tea in my wingback chair by the hearth. There's a spot in the fabric of the armrest that's worn from where my father's elbow constantly grated against it—a chair he cherished enough to bring over on the boat across the Atlantic. Three suitcases, two steam trunks, and a wingback chair.

My mother rowed at him over that.

– What in the name of all that's holy would you want to bring that for? Pain in the arse to drag to the docks and then away again. There's plenty of furniture in Canada, Francis!

But he managed it.

He sat reading books late into the night: poetry, fiction, any new medical textbook that came to light. *The Revised Anatomy of Horses*. *Fowl Disease*.

When I left home after he died, I took the chair, his pipe, and his medical supplies. My mother didn't want any of it.

I can almost feel the fire's heat. The smell of burning wood.

It's sitting back in my house—the house I can no longer go home to; home itself an idea I had to give up the second I packed my suitcase for this place.

I push it from my mind—an almost physical shove. That's the only way I'll survive this year.

A shout from the left and my head snaps around, my body registering a medical crisis before my brain can catch up.

– He's having a fit!

The attendant kneels on the ground next to a young boy who's thrashing in the grass.

I hurry over, then drop to my knees beside him.

– It's okay, miss.

He takes off his jacket and slips it under the boy's head.

– Happens to him at least once a day.

I look at the boy's lips, already cyanotic as his contorted face grows red from the force of blood into his capillaries. A dark stain of urine spreads from his groin. Then begins the smacking sound of his epiglottis covering and uncovering his trachea—like the whirling of a fan, unhinged.

– Let's turn him on his left side, please.

I grab his shoulder and pull him over, tilting his chin up as I manoeuvre him into a better position. The smacking sound stops; no more saliva bouncing off the mouth of the trachea, threatening descent. His lips grow pinker. More oxygen is penetrating. His limbs stop shaking and he takes a huge breath in.

The attendant looks at me curiously, but I reach for my stethoscope in my pocket and listen to his heart, beating furiously. Slowing, slowing. His limbs have stopped convulsing, but his jaw still twitches. A faint sheen of sweat glistens on his face, drained of colour. He grows slack, his mouth falling open. Knackered.

– Straight to the infirmary, please. He'll need to rest and change his clothes.

The attendant's jaw twitches nervously. A young man, I'm noticing now. Seventeen, eighteen years old. In a jacket a starched shirt, a tie, but a flash of acne across his rounded cheeks.

– The infirmary? But he has seizures all the time.

– Well, then they're not well managed, are they? I'll have to see to him later. Tell whoever's down there that Doctor Rian has asked that this patient be put to bed.

The boy attendant's eyebrows shoot up. I've seen that reaction a hundred times and still need to stop myself from rolling my eyes. A female doctor—on par with a talking leopard.

But rank and order obviously mean something to him because he swallows hard and nods at me.

– Yes, Doctor.

And now someone's at my side, smiling. A nurse, by the looks of it, materialized suddenly somewhere over the lawn.

– This way, Doctor. Let me take you to Administration.

I suppress a sigh and follow her up the stairs, which she climbs quickly, not a trace of breathlessness. The building looms over us, the shadow of it immense and sprawling. My stomach clunks again. It's massive. I never could have imagined.

The solid wooden doors are hinged with wrought iron, and the nurse has to struggle with two hands before one gives way, but she manages and I follow her in.

The light in here is artificial. Good grief, a chandelier? I suppose it's for a good cause, making parents and patients feel at ease. *Look, we're sending her to a good place. She'll be fine. Look at the décor. It's better than anything we could give her...*

Some families are understandably attached to their feebleminded children—siblings, particularly. They don't need to see the utilitarian tile and the bars on the windows. Best if they don't imagine the simple children clambering onto the roof, down the ivy.

A nurse stands at the front desk, speaking into a telephone.

I wonder how far into the wards the electricity goes.

Another nurse clips down the hall and nods to me. Behind her, a short, robust gentleman strides forward and extends his hand.

– Good day, Doctor Rian.

I shake it with as firm a grip as I can manage.

– Good day.

I hope I sound pleasant and not curt. One of the lights is flickering, giving the impression of a malfunctioning marquee. An unholy smell prickles my nose, coming from the direction of the door he's just come through. I clear my throat, trying not to gag. Trying to look professional. At least I can make that much of an effort.

– Welcome.

He doesn't smile.

– Doctor McHugh's been called away on an emergency today so I've been asked to greet you. I'm Doctor Braithwaite, Senior Assistant Physician.

He turns before I can ask anything else and I follow him to a smaller inner office. The odour in the hallway follows us, the bowl of potpourri on the desk doing nothing to help.

I set my hat and coat on the rack by the door and look around. Solid desk with a brass placard reading Dr. Benjamin McHugh. Walnut floors. Stained glass transoms above the door. And beyond the doors, a shrieking sound.

– You've settled in to your cottage?

Doctor Braithwaite gestures to the seat opposite him, across the surface of the desk which is large enough to lay out four X-rays.

A howling in the hallway makes me jump, but he doesn't even blink. A loud thumping follows, then the sound of footsteps running and a woman's shrill voice.

– Quit yer bangin' or ye'll be in the straight-jacket faster than you can drop soup down yer dress. Let's go, Percy. Help me, would ya, before she brains 'erself?

I look toward the door, waiting for Doctor Braithwaite to get up and find the cause of the fuss, but he just sits there, waiting.

My legs have gone cold and every instinct in my body is telling me to run. But where would I go?

If there were anywhere else but here, on a hill where nobody would ever think to look for me, I would go there. But I still have to make a living. Still have to eat, despite everything. Here, there's the cottage at least. A layer of trees between me and the view of this place. I can practice medicine—be the person I trained to be. Nobody will be throwing eggs, screaming at me, taunting me as I walk down the street. No sour faces, hate in their eyes as I'm shopping.

I can be useful. Help get this place in stricter order, use my experience. Better society, make amends.

He can't take that away from me.

And even if I'm on the grounds, I can at least pretend to escape every night.

Braithwaite stares at me, expectantly.

– Er. Yes. I have. Just this morning.

The howling in the hall is getting fainter.

– Do you also live on campus?

He leans back and points toward the ceiling.

– I have the flat upstairs, third floor. Tell me about your work.

Dr. Braithwaite steepled his fingers on the desk's wood-and-leather surface and leans back in his chair. I wonder how much time he spends in this chair, pretending this is his office.

He peers at me over round-rimmed spectacles.

– I understand you had your own practice?

My throat tightens and I swallow to clear my voice.

– Yes. For several years. In Harrison.

Before Gerrard made a complete bags of it.

I make sure to look him directly in the eye as I hand over carbon copies of my certification.

At least I had time to grab those. In the one suitcase I packed before they formed a line outside my clinic, shouting.

He looks at them carefully, almost doubtfully. Maybe he's never seen the documents of a female doctor before and wants to make sure they're not forged.

Graduated from *medical school*, yes. *Magna cum laude*, actually. Inwardly I want to roll my eyes, but I just wait as he runs his fingers over my name.

Kain

– And your other work?

I stare at him for a moment. Suddenly, my brain catches up and I realise what he's talking about.

– Yes, I was the chapter president of the Women's League for a Eugenic Society.

– You've published some articles, I understand.

I nod, wondering with some resentment why I'm sitting here reciting my curriculum vitae to someone who will be my colleague.

– And why did you fold up shop?

I know how it looks. That I was incompetent or untrustworthy. Patients had gone to another doctor. I'd been forced to close. An unflattering impression, but not nearly as bad as the truth.

Time to turn the tables.

– Why don't you tell me about your work? I imagine you're quite busy here.

– We are.

He regards me for a moment.

– And you, Doctor Rian? Have you ever worked with idiots and morons before?

– The feeble-minded? Not directly, no. Of course, I've had a few in my office, mostly young children whose parents are looking for help to cure them, but I've never worked in an institution before. Visited, of course. As part of my medical training in Toronto. Nothing as large as Avonhurst.

Dr. Braithwaite smiles, almost a smirk.

– There is nothing as large as Avonhurst. You may find you take some time to adjust to life here, but we're counting on you to dive in as soon as possible. We have a lot of work to do, and an ever-increasing number of patients. It's taken several months to hire a replacement for Doctor Goldberg so there's a backlog, particularly of surgeries.

Surgeries?

That's not quite what I expected. Have they already started, then?

– I'm not sure what the Superintendent has told you, Doctor Braithwaite, but I'm not a surgeon. I'm a paediatrician.

He frowns.

– A what?

– I specialise in the treatment of children.

Kain

He snorts, studying me as if I might be joking.

– Nobody specialises in children.

Not the first time I've heard that. A female doctor specialising in children. Like a nursemaid, almost, or a midwife.

I cross my ankles and take a breath, willing patience.

– It's a relatively new speciality. But I assure you, it exists. And what better place to put my skills to use than an institution for children?

– So you're not a surgeon?

– No.

He lifts his eyebrows.

– Well, no matter. I imagine you can learn.

My skirt is pulling again and I try to shift it without him noticing.

– Do you not send the patients to hospital for serious matters?

– Yes. For serious matters. But not for minor ones. You'll have a full tour of the grounds later, I imagine, but for the moment, suffice it to say that between the laundry, the meat grinder in the kitchen and the farm, we have plenty of injuries. You'll be doing your fair share of stitching up. And we try to avoid the hospital as much as possible. Self-sufficiency is our motto.

I nod.

And, of course, there are the routine appendectomies. Gallstones. Extractions.

– I see.

He goes on.

– We also do quite a lot of medical research here. The infirmary is large and modern.

We devote a lot of our time to studies. I myself am studying hepatitis. Another doctor is studying syphilis.

– I'm surprised you have time for research.

He leans forward, his face almost eager.

– Where else would we have such an opportunity? The result of living in an institution is the propagation of disease and I feel it's our duty to take advantage of the natural conditions to try to learn as much as we can.

– And how do you find the segregation practices? Are they effective?

He cocks his head.

Kain

– There are always exceptions. More breaches than I thought there would be, but the inmates are dealt with severely for any illicit relations. Still, in my opinion, sterilisation is a much more sensible option.

I sit back.

– Well, we're agreed on that. A lifetime in this place seems ridiculous and ludicrously expensive when compared with a simple snipping.

– The superintendent may need a little persuading on that front.

I smile. And that's why I'm here.

A draught catches me at the back and sends a shiver straight up between my shoulder blades. I chafe my arms with the palms of my hands. Braithwaite turns to throw another log on the roaring fire behind him.

– You'll soon be moving about so much you won't notice the temperature in certain areas. Though the cottages and infirmary are a bit newer than some of the other buildings so they tend to be a bit warmer. You've had your shots, Doctor Rian?

– In medical school, yes.

– Make sure you keep them up to date. The prevalence of hepatitis in here is nearly ninety percent.

– Ninety percent?

– So be sure to avoid contamination.

Again, another point to add to my arsenal: long term confinement increases the chances of not only dependency but also disease. Clearly.

Footsteps sound outside the hall again, clipped and quick. The door opens and a tall man strides in.

Braithwaite stands immediately, pushing half a step away from the desk.

– Doctor Rian.

The tall man smiles when he sees me and heads straight toward me, hand extended.

I stand quickly to shake it.

– I'm Ben McHugh, Medical Superintendent. I'm sorry I wasn't here to greet you, but we've had an elopement and I was down at Union looking for the absconder.

– Did you find him?

He shakes his head, shucking his coat as he's speaking. A frown line is etched into his forehead and his eyes are an odd colour of blue. Like cornflowers reflected on a lake's surface.

Kain

Merry and crinkled with laugh lines. Maybe stress lines. Though he can't be more than thirty-five.

– I've a few more places I can try, though. Usually they don't stay gone long.

I've written back and forth with him for a few weeks and noticed his manner. Easy, friendly. But I never imagined he'd be so young. Possibly even younger than me.

– Are you finding your cottage satisfactory? Is there anything else you need?

Small, dark, a little draughty. But it's four walls and a fireplace. Asking for any more than that and I'm sure God himself would laugh.

– Thank you, it's fine.

He nods and claps his hands, stalking over to the desk with a gait that reminds me of an ungainly giraffe. Braithwaite backs up almost into the filing cabinet, but Ben doesn't seem to notice.

– Ah, before I forget—this letter arrived for you yesterday.

My stomach goes cold.

A letter? Who could possibly know I was coming here?

With a smile that I'm sure looks as strained as it feels, I accept the letter. The handwriting doesn't look familiar. I breathe out, noticing the emblem on the corner. Just the Ministry of Health. Probably requesting that I register my new position.

My heart slows.

I tuck it into my waistband as Braithwaite clears his throat.

– You'll need a guide. I'll find you one.

Kain

Fel

Voices in the hall and Doctor Braithwaite comes in. Short nasty man, bad temper.

Round glasses and a frown in between giant grassy eyebrows.

– This is the administration office. These two inmates are part of our work industry program. Andria Felwyn helps with delivering messages and mail, and John McNabb helps with the record keeping. They are overseen by senior staff, including myself and Doctor McHugh.

My heart squeezes. Can't breathe. It's her. The lady by the lake.

What'll she say next? Does she know I'll be canned if she tells on me? Elopement is the worst. Alistair's already in for it, now I will be too and we'll both be watched like hawks all day and night. We'll never get out of here, no matter how much clink we put together between us. They'll stick me on the ward with the Oldies. Toothless, bedridden old goats who've been here since Avonhurst opened.

I hold my breath, waiting, waiting for her to speak. But she just cuts her eyes at me. Curious eyes. Dark green, almost brown. She nods and smiles, then turns with Braithwaite out the door.

I breathe out, my knees knocking, listen to them in the room next door.

– This is the office that you will share with Doctor Wright. He's the other assistant physician here, and he's studying Cretinism. You'll be able to keep your paperwork, your files and your notes here. You can interview new patients and their families, etcetera in this office. The infirmary is where you'll spend most time, though, and you'll have a space there too. Once you decide on your research topic, we can have further discussions.

I'm just about to sit down when Braithwaite comes back in.

– Felwyn.

Stand up straighter.

– Doctor Rian will need a guide.

Doctor Rian? She's the new Doctor? Could it be worse?

I follow Braithwaite into the hall where she's waiting, in her long skirt and polished boots. White blouse frilled and pressed. Long dark hair tied up in a twist. Is that the fashion now? A little rouge on her cheeks, or maybe it's the wind from the lake still in her face.

– Pleased to meet you, Andria.

– She's called Felwyn, Doctor.

I nod to her and look up at Braithwaite.

– She'll be going to the Beehive next. Please deliver her to Nurse Stokes.

Turn once to make sure Doctor Rian ain't heading off but she's close on my heels. On the landing, she stops. Opens the door to the main admin hall.

I shake my head. No. We need to go down into the tramway. But she seems to have something in her head and you can't argue with the doctors. Even the brand-new ones.

She leaves the stairway and I follow her.

– I just want to make sure I know the way out.

I stare at her. Way out? Out to where? She's a doctor, she comes to work and goes home. It's the rest of us who need to know the way out.

But she's looking down the hall at Admissions. Someone's coming in today. John will be busy with her papers later.

A young girl with dark hair and long eyelashes. Wheelchair, two wheels on the edge of the plush carpet. All gleaming floors and electric lights in here. The parents look around and think what a nice place they're leaving her in. She looks like she can't be more than nine or ten—but with the Idiots you never really know. Always look like babies even when they're schlepped up to adult wards. Her head's rolled to one side as her parents talk to Matron, voices low.

– We weren't told we couldn't visit,

The Dad has a white beard but young skin. His mouth turns down.

– We promised Marnie to see her as much as we could.

The Mama sounds French. Quebec French, like my neighbour Mrs. Tremblay.

Matron sighs.

– For the first few months, it's best for the child if she has time to adjust to life here, uninterrupted. It's an easier transition into her new life if she's not reminded too much of her old life.

– But we are her parents.

Kain

The mother leans forward. She clutches her cowl. Even from here I can see her hands shaking.

– We asked only for some help, some relief. We don't want to give her away forever.

Matron straightens up like she always does when she's going to say bad news. Touches the mother's arm.

– Nonetheless, here she is. And I'm afraid all patients must comply with the same rules. It's for the good of the entire institution.

I turn around, back to the stairway. Look once over my shoulder to Doctor Rian.

She looks at me, waiting.

I open the door and wait til she comes through. Then lead her down, down, down, into the tramway.

Lanterns hanging on the wall. The trams are miles long. Too much wall to hang lights up every which way, so you have to take one with you. I pull one off the wall and set off. She'll have to learn her own way, but it takes time. Some never do. And the way her eyes dash, side to side, up and down, she looks as though she don't like dark spaces much.

– Felwyn, is it?

Sigh. Nod.

– How long have you been guiding, Felwyn?

I don't turn around. Just keep walking. Guess nobody bothered to tell her.

– Where do you live in here?

She speaks slowly, big round lips, like she's talking to a half-deaf Oldie.

I wish Braithwaite would've said something to her before sticking us together on a tour. She can dock my clink for not answering her. Send me to Punishment. If he wants me to do her a favour at least he don't have to set me up.

We come to a crossroads and I shine my light on the list on the wall. Arrows mark the way for all the important places. I walk over and point to the sign that says Pavilion.

She follows my finger.

– That's where you live? The Pavilion?

Nod.

– How many girls live there?

Kain

She's still speaking like I've had a stroke. We shouldn't be messing around down here. Turn away, start walking. Another crossroads and I wave my lantern up to the wall. If she can read she'll see clear as day it says Infirmary.

She needs to know where she's going.

– Right.

I turn a corner. She follows.

Three more turns and a double doorway and I stop. Doctor almost crashes into me but rights herself. Puts her hands on her hips. It's always a shock coming up from the tram into the infirmary, all huge windows and electric lights.

– Welcome to the Beehive.

Nurse Stokes chuckles as she comes down the hallway, hand outstretched. Her eyes do a quick scan. So quick you wouldn't even notice if you didn't know Stokes. She smiles.

– The new doctor, I presume.

– Siobhan Rian. Pleased to meet you.

– Hello Fel. Are you guiding?

I nod.

The doctor looks relieved to be passed to her.

– She hasn't uttered a single word the entire time.

Like I ain't standing right there.

– Are you sure it's a good idea to let patients act as guides?

Nurse Stokes guffaws, her enormous bosom jiggling like a gelatine pudding. She shakes her head. Puts a hand on my shoulder, all red and freckled.

– Not to worry, Doctor, you're in good hands. Fel has never lost anyone as far as I know. Are you assigned to the doctor all day, Fel?

I shrug. Braithwaite didn't say.

Stokes frowns.

– Didn't he tell you?

I shake my head.

– Lord, love a duck. Well, John will probably manage without you. As long as you're up in Idiots' in time for ward duty, I think you're probably best to stay with Doctor. I'll write you a note, shall I?

Kain

I nod quickly. I might have ground parole but who knows where I'll end up with this one.

Nurse Stokes grabs a pencil and paper from the nurses' desk and scratches out

Andria Felwyn will be guiding Doctor Rian today. Thank you. With her name in

her lovely loops. *Patricia Stokes.*

–If there's trouble, let me know.

I smile.

Doctor Rian stares from one of us to another, like we're giving her a headache.

– Why is it called the Beehive?

Stokes winks.

– You'll soon see why. I've seen some catacombs that are easier to get around than this is. In any case, if you get lost, just follow the blue line on the wall all the way back to your office. If you're needed, someone will find *you*. Best start at the beginning, then, shall we? We've just had a new admission. Nurse Roland is getting started.

Nurse Stokes leads the way to a large room, where Pisspot has her long-sleeved apron on, squinting down into Marnie's head. Doctor Rian smiles at her.

– Hello.

Pisspot looks up and grunts hello.

Doctor bends down to Marnie's wheelchair.

– And who's this?

Pisspot squints at the page, sounds it out like it tastes bad. La-vee-mo-deer? I have no idea. Why would anybody have a name so hard to pronounce? Nobody'll talk to her if they have to try to say that.

I try not to snort. Pisspot's always rude. One day she'll be docked and I'd like to see it.

Marnie is tiny. Her skin looks like my Mama's one white bone china teacup. Her bones are probably just as delicate. She's twisted in the wheelchair, her knees like knobs of rope. Never used them, it looks like. Been carried around her whole life, probably.

Doctor Rian makes a face.

– Well it hardly suits her anyway, to call her by her last name, does it?

Nurse Stokes raises her eyebrows mildly, flipping her chart.

Kain

– Better than her number. Here it is. Lavimodière, Marnie. Date of birth, September 12, 1915. Lawful heart, she doesn't look twelve, does she?

Pisspot pushes Marnie's head forward, squinting at her neck. Don't know why she's making such a fuss. Marnie's Mama would never let her get nits. But Pisspot's off lecturing and there's no stopping her. She's like a train through the snow—cutting whatever path she likes.

– Doesn't matter what they're called, does it? What matters is identifying them quickly. Who's had her breakfast? Who's had a weekly bath? Who's off to the infirmary? Do you know how many Billys and Johnnys and Janes we have? Inmates are called by their last names, attendants by Miss or Mister, and the nurses by Nurse, or you-there by the Major Deities: the MDs. Don't dare call them by anything but Doctor or you'll have your head handed to you. Now, Lavimodière is nit and vermin free. Would you mind marking my chart?

She looks at Doctor Rian.

Doctor Rian stares back at her, not moving.

Nurse Stokes clears her throat.

– Nurse Roland, I'd like to introduce you to Doctor Siobhan Rian. She'll be starting today.

Pisspot nearly drops her sticks.

– *Doctor* Rian? You're..?

– Indeed.

Nurse Stokes's eyes crinkle. I keep my face blank. Inside I'm laughing, laughing, laughing. Always wanted to see Pisspot dressed down.

– I'm sorry. I thought you were an attendant, obviously. I apologise...

Her face is pink and mottled, like the idiots after a seizure. Eyes wide.

Doctor don't say nothing for a moment—just stares at Pisspot with one eyebrow raised.

– I'll see Marnie when you're finished, please, Roland.

She swallows so hard I can see the lump in her throat move.

– Yes, Doctor.

Still laughing next morning. Following Miss Street down to the Beehive. She has a stop to make then we're going to the mothers' wing. Prenatal checks.

She marches down the hall. Always marching. Soon I'll be taller than her, she's so tiny.

Kain

Stops. Looks up at the door with the wooden sign, tacked on with a piece of twine.

Doctor Braithwaite's is twice that size and brass.

Miss Street looks at me.

– That's him then?

I should probably tell her Doctor's a she, but there ain't time. She's already knocking.

Pushing the door open.

– Excuse me, Doctor Rian.

She stops dead—flashes her eyes back at the door.

Doctor's in riding pants now, standing at the crooked wooden filing cabinet. Never seen such a tan on a woman's hand. Wonder if she lives outside.

– Yes?

Can't tell if she's annoyed or curious—one eyebrow arching, eyes narrowed.

– You're the doctor, then?

Miss Street sounds unsure. Like Doctor Rian might be breaking in or something. Can't blame her really. We've never had a lady doctor before. Ain't never met one except that lady inspector when I lived with Mam. Mac-something.

Doctor sets the file down on her desk. I can get a good look at her now that she's not paying attention to me. Thirty, maybe older, a little taller than most women. Much taller than Miss Street.

– I am. Siobhan Rian. What can I do for you?

There's something about her that's strange. Like she don't take things serious. Wouldn't care if you called her by her Christian name or used curse words. Casual. Warm. Maybe it's the riding pants. And what the hell difference does it make if she's a man or a woman? She's the doctor, and that's all that matters.

– I'm Sera. I've come to talk to you about a patient, Townsley. Rachel Townsley.

Rachel, that cow.

Dr. Rian turns back around and closes the drawer.

– Are you an attendant? A nurse?

– A midwife, actually. But an attendant here.

Doctor shakes her head slightly but beckons us inside.

–Fel, hello.

Just nod back, blending in.

Kain

She has an odd accent but I don't know what it is. Been trying to figure it out since yesterday.

– Would you like to sit down?

Sit down? When does Miss Street ever have time to sit down? Or me neither?

Definitely strange.

Miss Street half-sits on the edge of the wooden chair. Doctor sits in her comfortable chair. It was Doctor Goldberg's favourite. Leather's a bit cracked on the seat, but he never cared. Still has the teeth marks on the arm rest too.

– Shall I wet the tea?

Ha! Irish. Like Mrs. Jamieson down the hall.

The doctor waves her hand at a pot on the small wood stove in the corner.

– Tea?

Miss Street is trying to keep a straight face, but her fingers fidget with her skirt.

Doctor don't seem to notice.

– I've just boiled the water. Afraid I don't have much else except biscuits. Let me check the press.

Doctor pours the water into the teapot, then heads to the narrow cupboard in the corner, roots around.

– I don't really have time for tea. Not that it's usually offered.

Miss Street is making fun of her. But Doctor Rian don't get angry. The corners of her mouth twitch, like something's funny.

– First time for everything?

– Fine, then. Thank-you.

– Good. I'm still getting to know who's all here. I've been here less than a week.

She pours the tea from a chipped pot and looks at Miss Street.

– Oh, just black.

She hands it to her and pours herself a mug, adding sugar.

– How can I help you with this patient?

– It's the baby.

Dr. Rian looks up sharply.

– What baby?

– The baby Townsley's about to have.

Kain

– The patient is pregnant?

She seems surprised.

Miss Street sets down her cup. Stares at the Doctor. From the steam curling up I guess it's too hot anyway.

– Have they not told you anything about this ward?

Miss Street don't usually talk to the doctors like that, but land sakes. Can't blame her.

This one don't know *nothing*.

I hold my breath. Wonder if Miss Street's about to be docked. If Doctor'll write her up for talking back or being rude, but she just sits down at her desk and frowns.

– No, I'm afraid not. I'm still working my way through all the patient files. I just arrived Monday.

–Sorry to bother you already.

She shrugs.

– Might as well get started.

Miss Street takes a deep breath and sips her tea. Probably too hot still, but so's her temper. She's like John. Needs something to help her bite her tongue.

– It's the ward for the girls in trouble. The morons or dull-normals. They're out in the larger cottage by the laundry?

– And Rachel came here while pregnant?

– Well, yes, that's the reason she's here. Moral defective. This is her third baby.

Doctor's eyebrows shoot up.

– But she didn't get pregnant *here*.

– No. Most of these young women come from the city wards. The housing there is... well.

Doctor waves her hand.

– Yes, I've seen the tenement housing. Communal water closets and broken fixtures. Small wonder it's crawling with disease.

Sounds like it's a swamp instead of home for a lot of us. Give her a hard glare. Some people can't afford better. Have to make the best of it.

– Did you work in the city wards, Doctor?

– Yes, for a while. I saw a lot of children with problems that could be prevented if there weren't so damn many of them.

She's true there.

– Half the children were feeble and the other half malnourished. Running around in diapers—or not even that. That was the reason I joined the Eugenics league to start with. Someone needs to do something to help these people.

Mull over the word she said. You-Gen-Icks.

Miss Street frowns a little.

– The girls are sent to us if they fall pregnant. Then they stay after the babies are born. Doctor McHugh finds them jobs here. The laundry or the kitchen. To teach them skills.

– So they don't fall pregnant again.

– Yes.

Doctor looks like she already knows this.

– But then consider this part, Sera. How long do they stay?

Miss Street frowns.

– Well, it depends. Many of them are discharged after the year. If they're moral defectives, well...until they're past childbearing years.

Doctor turns so she's facing out the window, her hands spread on her narrow hips. Such a strange picture she makes. Man's clothes on her woman's body. Slender legs pushed into short boots. Hair dark and curly, rolled and pinned into a bun. I wonder if she'll give in and chop it like Miss Street did.

– So, twenty, thirty years?

– Sometimes.

– And do you think most of them are custodial?

Miss Street sips her tea. Considers for a second.

– Not really, no. Most of them are just poor, Doctor.

Doctor puts her hands up.

– Exactly. Poor, uneducated, and prolific.

Someone outside shouting. Probably old Norris, but Doctor looks up like it's a gunshot she's heard. Jumpy, this one.

Miss Street puts down her tea. Looks up at the clock.

– Anyway, she's close to term, but she's having some bleeding, and the baby's awfully big.

Doctor turns away from the window, her hands still on her hips, which makes her look a bit fierce.

– How often does this happen?

– What?

– Pregnancies in patients.

– I don't know the numbers, exactly...

What did she expect from an asylum?

– But enough that there's a midwife on staff.

– Well, I'm not just a midwife. I'm also an attendant. Actually, I'm an attendant most of the time, it's just that...

Doctor raises her eyebrows.

– Yes, I see.

Ain't that hard to figure out. Girls get into trouble living in places like this. Too much time, not enough staff to keep them apart. Lots of places for them to get together. On work duty, sneaking off at free hour, meeting in the woods, in the tram, in the alcoves. If they want to, they'll do it. And even if people don't want to, sometimes they're forced anyways.

Some of them are already in the family way when they get here. Not just from the city wards, like Doctor Rian thinks, but there's lots from there.

Last baby Miss Street and I delivered was Rose-Ellen Marshall's. Dull-normal girl from the city. Her city boyfriend was sent here days after she was—him to the farm, her to the laundry. Didn't stop a baby coming.

– I'm sorry.

Dr. Rian waves her hand.

– That's not what you came to talk to me about.

Miss Street's tea smells like Earl Grey.

– No. It's not. It's Townsley's laundry duties. The job is too much for her, I'm afraid. She's assigned to ward work half the day, but I believe that if she keeps on, she'll miscarry.

– Right. Of course. So...what would you like me to do? Write her off to bedrest?

Probably would have been faster just to go to Matron and let her deal with the Doctor.

Miss Street takes a deep breath. Lets it out slow. One of her tricks for when she wants to rip somebody's head off.

– If you would, please.

Kain

Doctor looks down at her notebook and scribbles something. A frown line creases her forehead, straight across the top, like she's working out sums. The lines on the page are barely a scrawl. Her penmanship says she's a real doctor, then, even if she don't look a spit like any I've ever seen.

– Anything else?

– No. Thank you.

Miss Street stands to leave. I come away from the wall.

– Oh, wait, can I ask you something?

Doctor turns away and rummages behind her. Picks up an envelope from the desk and jingles it.

–What the hell is this?

Oh, what a thick one she is.

– It's clink, Doctor.

– What's clink?

She can't be serious. Never seen money before?

– It's Avonhurst currency. You can use it in the canteen and other places on the grounds.

She nods, looking like Miss Street's just told her she needs to sing and dance for her supper.

– I need to pay in token money?

– It's more for the patients. They're paid in clink. If an inmate does something for you, like delivers you a message, or folds your laundry, you can pay them in clink. Or sweets. You should always have some sweets on hand.

Siobhan opens her desk and searches for a tin.

– Blackcurrent candy?

Miss Street shrugs.

– Sure. But when in doubt, clink.

– Clink. Great. Thanks.

Nurse Stokes raps once and opens the door.

– You're needed, Doctor. Two young Imbeciles with high fevers. Nurse is bringing them down now.

–Excuse me.

She turns, heads out the door. Miss Street turns to me and rolls her eyes. Waste of half an hour.

Outside, it's dark at half past four and Miss Street blows into her hands.

– Glad to be done early tonight. I'm half starved.

She's off to the stables and I have to trot to keep up.

– You walking me to my horse then?

I just smile. John said there's a new litter of kittens down in the barn. Been waiting two days to see them.

The lamp on the side of the stable tips to one side. Gets a bit worse every week but nobody fixes it. Or nobody notices. Hard to say. The light dances on the surface of the trough and I look close to see...nope, not quite ice. It won't come for another month at least, but I always like to see the first ice.

Ice means skating.

Miss Street says goodnight and I wave and hop into the barn.

– Heya, Miss Fel.

Harold slaps his hat on my head and I scowl. Not really mad, though. He's done that since I was a kid.

– Kittens are in the back, in an apple crate. Mama is a bit prickly, so be careful.

Nod and slip along the row of stalls. Horses reach out, wanting a nuzzle. Stop to pet each one. Velvet noses snuffling my palms.

– Got Bentley all set for you, Miss Street.

– Oh, thank you Harold. You're an angel. It's been a day.

Bentley hates the saddle, but he loves to ride. Usually I saddle Miss Street's horse for her if I have time but not today. Have to slip the leather slowly onto his back so he stays still. Pet him a few times before trying to do it up. He leans on you if you're not careful, like a big dog, puffing out his belly as you cinch the strap. Getting a saddle on him is like delivering a baby with a big head—tiny steps or the whole thing goes to hell.

One of the kittens is out, stumbling around. Scruffy and grey, big eyes and soft ears. I nuzzle him to my face and he pokes his nose at me. Ha. Silly creature.

Set him back in the crate with his Mam and he pushes in.

There's a deep whinny from the back stall in the barn, and I look up, standing on tiptoe to look.

– Whose giant horse is that?

Miss Street's turned to look too.

Giant dark brown eyes and a brown and white nose. I take a step back. Not usually scared of horses, but this one's massive. Fills out the whole stall.

– Is that a Belgian?

– Sure is, says Harold. He's something isn't he?

Miss Street reaches out her hand and the Belgian bunts it a bit.

– I've never seen a Belgian up close. Eighteen hands at least. How does anyone even get on him? They'd need a ladder.

He stomps his foot and makes a purring noise. Seen them apples by Bentley's stall, probably. Miss Street's not getting eaten alive, so I creep out down the row of stalls til I'm close enough to give him an apple. His teeth are enormous, but he looks gentle enough. Hold out the red apple in my open palm, making sure my fingers are nowhere near his chomping mouth. But he's even gentler than Bentley. Nuzzles my hand and neatly takes the apple. No teeth at all.

Reach out slowly and rub his nose.

Bentley snorts and I smile at him, sympathetic. Big jealous beast.

– Who do you belong to?

Miss Street coos at the Belgian.

He lifts my arm, greedy thing. Wants another apple.

– We'd better not feed you too many treats. Your owner might be cross.

Harold laughs.

– You got that right. He's the lady doctor's.

– Doctor Rian's?

– Is that her name then? Well, it's hers. She's got a cottage on the other side of the grounds? Rode this beast in here this morning and asked me to water it like of course we'd have room for an elephant in here.

– She lives here? Why?

– Well, why not, if it's offered? Saves travelling back and forth from the city.

Miss Street eyes Harold as she cinches Bentley up all the way. It's time to get home.

– You know something else.

– Nah. Nothing but rumours.

Kain

– Rumours usually have a root, Harold.

He shrugs. Pitches hay for the Belgian into his feed trough. I give him one last pat. Go back to the kittens, still listening.

– Aye. True enough. Though I like the doctor.

– You just like the horse.

– You have me there. He's a beaut. So's the doctor. Shame she's married.

He clears his throat and looks down.

– She's married but she lives in the cottage here? Alone?

Harold shrugs.

– None of my business. Some married women work. You work.

That nosy kitten's gotten out again. Scoop him up and creep back down the row, sit on a hay bale so I can hear better.

– I have to. And anyway, my marriage doesn't count.

Miss Street's voice is low.

– Maybe she does, too. And yes it does. Anyway, a lady doctor probably isn't all that traditional anyway.

He grins.

Miss Street shakes her head. Leads Bentley outside. I stand up and watch Harold cup his hands to help boost her up into the saddle.

– Thanks.

– Got to get yourself a pony.

– Not in this lifetime.

– Well, at least let me add some holes in the stirrups for you.

– I'm fine, Harold.

– You're short, is what you are.

He guffaws as he comes inside.

– Goodnight. Goodnight Fel!

Wave through the window so she can see me.

–Don't be late to supper!

Siobhan

☞ tuck Merlin safely into his stall next to the cottage and open the front door. As the wind gusts up, I blow into my hands and shake them—fingers tingling with cold. Fall is edging into winter; the nights are chilly now, and getting darker.

It takes me three tries to light a candle in the dark kitchen, and I'm shivering with cold and nerves by the time the wick finally takes. This is home now, and it's high time I started looking at it that way.

Besides relief to be inside, away from the smell and the noise, I feel no affinity for this place. It's cold and damp. Lonely, actually. That came as a surprise to me. I thought after everything that happened with Gerrard, I'd be happy to live alone, but the silence bothers me. The echo of the teaspoon on the plate, the kettle roiling and whistling. Everything makes me jump.

Inside, a grey mist seems to sit over everything. There's no cheerful fire, no warm tea. Just a bare stone hearth in need of tending.

That's one thing he always did—light the fire. When I had a thriving practice and got home late, he'd be sitting there in his armchair, Manhattan in hand, feet up with the morning's newspaper he never had time to read before rushing off to the bank.

Sometimes of course, he wasn't home. Now I know why. Then, I was busy. Purposely, I suppose. Now I wish I'd paid more attention.

But don't we always wish we'd been different? Better?

Unfortunately, this time the price for a few years of peace and quiet may be a lifetime on these wards.

I know I should hate myself instead of him—blame myself for not seeing things sooner, not questioning things. But I still hate him. And no amount of work or busyness drives out that drop in my stomach, like leaping off the rope in the hayloft and flying through the air. Hoping it doesn't hurt to land. And followed in the next breath by the clenching of my hands, imagining always, until I break myself of the thought, they're around his throat while he sleeps, liquor on his breath.

I set to work balancing the kindling into a pyramid, and stuffing in paper. Even the paper seems damp, and at first, it won't catch the spark. I shake my hands out again and light another match. This one catches and the edges of the newspaper curl in, flames licking along their sides, collapsing them. The flame bursts and I can't help a small smile. A ball of light, erupting. I add more paper and the flame expands.

Even though the smoke burns a little, I don't blink, in case I miss the second where it lights the next piece—catching like the spark of a rumour flying from mouth to mouth, not stopping until it's grabbed every partner in the hearth.

Next, the small twigs. Crackling and smoking before lighting up. Along the back, flames flick at the kindling, a ridge of smouldering bark that will catch. Then it's done.

The smell of rotting eggs still lingers in my nose. Maybe I won't ever be able to think of home—my clinic—without seeing it covered in eggs and paint.

The way they lingered on the sidewalk, watching me. Accusing me. Because of him.

It wasn't me! I didn't do it. I didn't know.

But that's not entirely true, is it?

The sun sets soon after I've had my last cup of tea, bringing with it a dark so pitch it's almost frightening. Every night this week, I've watched the sun set with a clunk in my stomach, knowing there's no relief of city lights, no jangle of streetcar bells to interrupt the silence.

I light three candles in the kitchen and stoke the fire, making sure there's more wood there than I could possibly need. It's colder tonight than it's been before, a draught coming under the door. I take a blanket out of the cedar chest at the bottom of the bed and lay it against the door jam. It helps a little.

For the first time since being here, the nerves are getting the better of me. I wrap my shawl around my shoulders tightly and pull the armchair a little closer to the fire. There. That's better.

A few lanterns around the place and I've enough light to read by.

Damn—that letter. Might as well fill it out now and get it sent in the post tomorrow.

Some areas of Avonhurst are surprisingly efficient. Laundry's done and returned within a day. Post comes in and out every weekday, patients fetching and delivering anything you might need. Milk to my doorstep in the morning.

I take the letter opener off the table behind me and slit open the envelope.

Kain

A newspaper clipping flutters to the floor.

I pick it up and stare. For a moment my brain refuses to catch up with my eyes, and arrange the features of the face staring up at me with the memory of the boy. The fact of it—this obituary here.

No.

He can't possibly be dead.

Holding my breath, I read through.

Quinn, Rhys Alexander: September 19, 1910 – September 4, 1927. Suddenly. Survived by...

And I can't read any further. I can't bear to see her name, his mother, and imagine her grief at losing her son after everything else she's been through. There must have been a funeral. A big to-do, a family as prominent as theirs. It would have been in every newspaper.

Ben gets the newspaper.

My thoughts are a jumbled mess and my heartbeat is speeding up so fast I think I might be sick.

Rhys is dead. God.

I force myself to read the rest. Read her name and the lengthy paragraph following. Perhaps there's a clue here about what happened.

Suddenly.

An accident or a suicide. And if it were an accident, they would likely have said, wouldn't they?

I want to go to her. But of course, that's the last thing she would want.

Holding the obituary in my hand, I can't fathom who's sent it to me. Unless it was her. Could it have been? A thrust of her sword in the dark? Is it possible she's guessed? That she knows where I've gone? Would she betray me? She'd have more reason to than anybody. Especially now.

The chill shakes me and I blow air into my lungs, feeling tears pressing hard against the backs of my eyes.

But I won't cry. I don't deserve to cry over him. Or her.

&&&

Three days in and I still feel like I'm walking through Alice's Wonderland, completely unprepared. I've managed to find my way from my cottage to the infirmary and that itself seems a Herculean task.

A sharp rap at my door.

Fel's standing there. She gives me a look like I'm keeping her waiting and I find myself getting up.

– Yes?

She beckons to me like we have plans.

Just then, Matron marches past my door. How does she manage to keep her apron crisp in this place? Behind her tall cap, her tight bun shows streaks of steel grey.

– Can I help you with something?

Matron turns around.

– No, not you, Matron. This girl.

– Andria Felwyn,

– Yes, we're acquainted.

Matron looks at us, a frown in place. I consider Monday's silent tour and pause.

– Fel, what's your job today?

Fel hands her a note and Matron reads it quickly.

– She's your guide, Doctor. She's to show you the grounds and the main cottages.

Orders of Dr. McHugh.

With an attempt at a smile that I'm sure fails, I grab my shawl from behind the chair.

Fel sets off down the hallway, not even bothering to look back.

– You will be joining us, won't you Matron?

If I've learned anything about this place in the past two days, it's that nurses, even Matron, follow orders from the doctors, even the female ones.

She turns back with a quizzical expression.

– If you like, though I don't see why you need two of us.

I stop in the hall and lean toward her.

– Because only one of you speaks.

She fixes her grey eyes on me.

– Doctor, there is more than one way to communicate.

Nevertheless, she accompanies us to the staircase. Two minutes in and I'm already sure I couldn't find my way back. Matron must decide that since she's along for the tour, she may as well act the part of speaking guide.

– Doctor McHugh does Grand Rounds every morning. He'll send the patients down to you if needs be. And of course, if there's an emergency, you'll know about it.

We walk to the end of the hall of the administration building, where Fel opens a door that leads to a narrow staircase. This place is a labyrinth. Underground tunnels and staircases leading to God knows where.

Matron seems to read my thoughts.

– One day you'll learn to find your way around. Until then, you'll need to follow the maps underground. If you find yourself alone in the tunnels and something happens, don't panic. There are bells at every crossway. Just ring and someone will hear you and come to help. But try not to be alone in the tunnels, Doctor. It's just asking for trouble.

I nod. I've yet to go into a tramway unaccompanied, mostly because I have no idea where I'm going.

– Upstairs directly above us are more offices. Outside the centre building, corridors lead to Sections A, B, D and L. Through the breezeway at the end of the main corridor, you'll get to the infants' ward, which is E. Outside, we have Cottages C, G, H, K, M, the Pavilion for high-grade girls and the Lodge for high-grade boys. Over the road is the farm.

I want to ask who lives where, but she's still talking.

– Inside the wards, you will find two staircases leading down to the lower two floors. The youngest patients are kept on the top floor. The oldest on the bottom floor.

– The wards are locked?

Matron stops.

– Not all the time, no. Especially not the Moron wards. Those inmates go to work duties throughout the day. Laundry. Kitchen. Mailroom. Shoemaking. Carpentry. Some inmates go to low-grade wards for washing and cleaning. And some will even come to the infirmary to help you.

I try to imagine that.

– The violent wards are locked all the time, though. Those inmates stay on site except for occasional visits to the hospital.

– On site. You mean, in their wards?

Kain

– They eat and sleep there, yes.

– They don't go outside?

Matron looks at me.

– And how would you suggest taking a violent inmate outside, Doctor?

Locked into an endless cycle of eating, sleeping and standing against a wall? Perhaps that's why they're violent.

I say nothing, though, just follow Matron to the next door.

She takes out a huge ring of keys and inserts one marked D into the keyhole.

We're standing on the top floor of the Administration building, behind the clock tower.

– Across the hall and through that other door is A. We'll get you your own keys so you can move about as you like.

It seems impossible that I'll ever know my way around.

The key squeaks and the bolt slides back with a clunk.

The rank air hits me in the face, a humid cloud. I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth and clear my throat.

God almighty.

Matron seems not to notice. She leads me inside and turns to relock the door, calling out to the attendants.

Patients mill around the room, which looks the size of the common room I had at school, but bare of furniture except hard wooden benches. Patients sit on the floor or the windowsills, some dressed, some not. A low moaning comes from all directions at once, scraping, shuffling, tinged with low crying.

Why are they rocking like that?

A young patient darts toward us, naked, his nose running.

– Brekkie?

He grins.

He reaches out to grip my sleeve. His fingernail beds are caked brown. The same brown that's smeared all down his legs.

My body recoils before my mind has time. It's wrong, pulling myself away from a patient. My cheeks go hot. Doctor Braithwaite's warning echoes in my memory. *The incidence of hepatitis is nearly ninety percent.*

No bloody wonder.

– They're having breakfast soon.

My mind flashes to Dr. Macmurchy's Little Blue Books, the endless memorandums about hand-washing and the prevention of disease. How many years has it been since she visited here? At least ten since she retired her post as Inspector for the Feebleminded.

I can imagine what she'd say and I resist saying it.

Matron pulls him by the ear and he lets go of me.

– Go back and wait please, Ronaldson.

He scampers away, a half-skip.

– Why doesn't he have any clothes on?

It seems like such a basic thing. Why shouldn't these boys be dressed?

Matron laughs shortly.

– Clothing is a battle nobody has time to fight.

Baths too? What about food? The thought of that boy eating with his hands...

A shudder runs through me and I clench my fists to stop it from making me shiver.

What else is he touching? Who else? I am composing a memo to the staff as we turn the corner. All patients in the infirmary will be washing their hands immediately. Taking full advantage of the indoor plumbing.

Matron travels quickly down the long wooden corridor and through a high door to an open ward. I push my way through the hall, following her closely, even as the nausea accompanies me with every step. The smell never leaves me. Not for a second.

I stop short in the doorway.

Animals in cages, banging the bars.

No.

Children.

Cages for children.

They line the room, no more than two feet apart. Patients lay in them, hunch in them, some rocking on the edges. A puddle has formed beneath one of the beds closest to me, inching closer to my boot.

I want to ask—to say something about the screeching sound of the bars and the children, but I can't. My tongue is stuck.

A young male attendant moves toward the farthest in the row of tall barred cots, and unlatches one side. It crashes down, making the boy inside jump. He crawls quickly to the edge of the mattress and puts his arms out.

The attendant swings him into a wheelchair, then turns and nods to Matron.

– These Idiots belong on the Idiots' ward, Matron. What if there was a fire, eh? How'd we get 'em down in time?

Matron nods. Her eyes betray a certain weariness that surprises me. She doesn't seem the sort of woman to be worn down.

– I'll bring it up again with Doctor McHugh. The new cottage is full up though, Jerome. There just isn't the space.

– Well they need another cottage then, don't they? The Morons and Imbeciles are overrunning the place.

– Yes, but we couldn't do without them, could we?

What the hell does she mean? This place is overrun. They could do with the clearing out of half the patients. She looks at me. Sees the puzzlement in my eyes, as shrewd as she is.

– Consider how all the cooking and laundry gets done. The floors washed and the meals served in a place this size. The ministry could never employ enough staff to keep it running without the inmates pulling their weight.

– And without attendants pulling all the dead weight.

– Settle down, Jerome. It'll do you no good to get excited.

– Alls I'm sayin'...

Jerome heads toward the bathroom door, wheeling the boy ahead of him,

– ...is that if they're gonna stick Idiots on the Imbeciles' ward, then they need to stick more guys in here with 'em. I'm up to my neck in crap from the time I roll in until way past quittin' time.

– As is everyone else.

– But the guys especially. All the take downs and the tie-ups are on me. There used to be three times as many lads in here, but I'm practically the only one left. The gals just ain't strong enough to help on this ward. Getting a thrasher into a straight-jacket alone is damn near impossible. Nearly broke my nose last week. After this place, the Navy will be a picnic.

– That's one way to escape all your problems.

The words are out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop them. Bitter and sour.

Kain

He looks up at me, surprise and anger turning his face ugly.

– What would you know about it?

How easy it is. A short train ride into the city where nobody knows your name. Nobody knows the obligations you're leaving behind. Sign up, don a uniform—instant respect and order. Even if the soul behind the badges will always be a human one—flawed.

He throws me another look, then turns back to Matron.

– And what are you doing here playing nurse's tour guide anyway? You have your hands full yourself.

– Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you had already met Doctor Rian.

Jerome stops.

– You're the new doctor, then?

He bends and ties the inmate into his chair, then turns and pulls his jacket. Seems to take a deep breath to steady himself and offers me his hand.

– Didn't mean any offence, ma'am.

I shake his hand.

As he moves off, I breathe through my mouth and watch two nurses yank a young man to his feet. He gurgles something, his face twisted in protest. With a haul and a drop, they deposit him in a wheelchair.

– Time for breakfast, Harrison.

The name jars me. I'd managed to forget my hometown for approximately ten minutes.

I move away before the puddle under the cot reaches me.

The two nurses move from bed to bed and pull patients into sitting positions. Their sleeves are already rolled up and one's got his vest draped over a bed post.

– He's wet the bed again.

He strips the sheets with lightning efficiency and wrenches a soiled nightshirt off the boy.

A young patient walks by and he thrusts the bundle of linen into his arms.

– Laundry bag.

The child sits naked in the wheelchair, shivering in the draft from the window. No wonder. One full pane of glass is missing, taped up with a facecloth or something.

– Over here.

The nurse gestures to a young inmate carrying a pile of sheets and blankets.

Kain

Grey dingy pants. Hair shaved almost to the scalp.

The boy approaches the next bed, strips off the soaked sheets and tosses them in the bag his companion follows with. A quick swipe of the oilcloth with a rag from a metal bucket. Throws a folded sheet and blanket on top.

– Here.

Another nurse across the room holds up his hand and the boy scurries over with more linen.

– Clothes!

I turn around.

The patients still in the room run to line up in front of a door marked *Closet*, wearing short nightshirts that barely cover their bottoms. They're shivering, shoving one another to get to the front of the line.

The attendant turns. His shirt sleeve is pinned up. Distal-humeral amputation. Scar running up one side of his face. But he's younger than his deformities make him look. Maybe late twenties.

He sees me staring. He has that look: not quite there, not quite absent. Caught halfway between the present and the war. I look away.

– Three lines.

He sounds like he's barking.

The boys shuffle again, seeming to sort themselves according to size.

– You, be my assistant.

The boy he calls to is small, but his eyes are sharp. A deep brown, almost black, and hair that would be raven coloured if it weren't almost shaved.

The attendant ducks into a large room, and I step closer to watch him climb a tall ladder, throwing down clothes into a pile below.

Matron leans toward me.

– That's August. Been with us since he was a young lad, before he was called up. Just mind, Doctor. Sometimes... he has a rough go. You may have to see to him on occasion.

I can imagine.

The child scoops up the clothes.

– Smalls!

August tosses a pile of shirts and trousers into the middle of the room.

Kain

Twenty boys dive at the pile, grabbing clothes away from one another.

Toddlers squabbling over toys. Dogs over food.

– Mediums!

Another pile of clothes is tossed out and more boys dive, including some of the smaller ones who didn't get any from the first pile.

– Mine!

A young boy with large ears wrenches a shirt away from another patient, who clocks him in the face.

I gasp.

It's like the zoo. The jungle.

But in captivity, all primates are the same.

Blood pours from the boy's nose and onto the pair of threadbare pants he holds.

– Don't get it on the clothes! That'll be headed for the fire and not the laundry! You think we have material to waste?

He scurries away, pulling on the pants quickly before she has time to call to him about his nose.

– Large!

The last pile of clothes hits the floor and an all-out brawl ensues as the biggest boys duke it out. Two get only pants, and one gets nothing.

A little boy in a short nightshirt stands on the edge of the scene, shaking, trying to pull the fabric down to cover his bottom.

The closet is empty. The one-armed attendant proceeds down the side hall to a smaller room.

The young boy stands staring at him, his brown eyes unblinking, but the attendant doesn't stop.

– Better luck tomorrow.

Suddenly, a small red-headed boy darts out of a side room, naked and clutching a thin towel in his hand.

– Catch him, would you?

A large attendant with sweat across his ruddy face appears in the doorway the boy's just come from.

– He bolted before I could finish his bath.

Kain

– Come on now, Larson.

August catches hold of the boy with his one arm and swings him up over his shoulder.

– You’ve missed the clothes.

He swings him down again closer to the door and Larson hurries away.

The beds are empty. The boys are lined up, in and out of the washroom, in and out of the clothing line, into the breakfast line. Hair unkempt. Sleep in their eyes. Sweat. Crust.

Has anyone brushed his teeth?

– Roll call!

The attendant strides to the door, holding a large clipboard, and the boys not yet in line scramble to join the queue from the dormitory to the common area. He checks the chart and lets them go, one by one, into the next room.

I try not to think of cattle.

My mind wanders through the bars and out to the courtyard, past the vacant faces and over the smell.

– If we go into every ward, we’ll be touring for hours.

– Let’s not. I doubt I’ll be getting out of the infirmary much anyway.

Matron raises her eyebrows.

– You can say that again. And if you need to get somewhere quickly, there’s always a guide.

I look over to Fel, wonder what she does with her days here, besides taking me around.

Matron moves back down the staircase.

– To the tramways. I’ll take you this way so you know how to get back to the infirmary underground.

I follow her underground into a warm tunnel. Banging and other eerie noises fill my senses.

– What happens when they become adults?

– They’re moved to one of the outdoor cottages. Imbecile boys go to C and work duties like shoemaking or carpentry. Or to the laundry for the heavy work. The higher grade boys go to the farm or the Lodge. Girls move out to the Pavilion if they're high enough or to Cottage G. Women are in M. Men are in A.

Kain

I try to place these cottages on the grounds. How many are inside the main building, and how many outside?

The longest tunnel opens into a hub and we stop next to a board on the wall: a list, with directional arrows posted next to a map of the campus.

I recognise some of the places, but not others.

– What's W?

Matron purses her lips.

– That's the mothers' ward.

– And Cottage K?

– The elderly patients. The ones who've been here since this place opened in the late 'seventies.

I count back. Eighteen seventy-five this place opened. Fifty-two years ago.

Fifty-two years in this place.

Kain

Fel

Little Darcy is waiting in the stairway.

Darcy, Jean Margaret, DOB December 4, 1916.

Type, Mongoloid.

She talks like she's got a mouth full of mashed potatoes all the time, but she always does what she's told.

I shove a mailbag at her and she stumbles a bit. Weak legs, this one, but she shuffles along anyway. Knows I'll give her a good slap if she complains.

– Fel. Fel. Fel. Fel.

Down the corridor two little girls clinging to Nurse Stokes. Bouncing, bouncing. The pinhead twins. Cute little things, but noisy.

Nurse Stokes looks to the ceiling, out of breath from the stairs as usual.

– Fel, can you please take these ones to the dentist? I'm running late.

I make a face but nod. Anyone else I'd give the slip, but Nurse Stokes always does for me when she can. Hitch my mailbag up on my shoulder and grab a twin in each hand. Darcy follows.

Darcy always follows.

Ain't got coats, none of them, so it's down to the tram, little girls snivelling and sniffing.

– Scar'da da dark, Fel.

Sniff.

One talks. The other just grunts.

I roll my eyes but Darcy gives her a pat on the head. When she speaks, it's always slow, and in a voice that sounds like a man, half asleep.

– Don' worry. Fel'll look after ya.

Through the tunnels, up to the Beehive.

I shove Darcy down the corridor and she takes them the rest of the way to the dentist's office. Not too fast. Can't run or she gets out of breath worse than Stokes.

No idea how she can get fat in here, but all the mongoloids are pudgy.

She looks back but I wave her on.

I've just seen Doctor Rian's door ajar. Some poking around I need to do.

Peek up and down the corridor, left, right, just about to duck in...

– Fel!

Somebody's whisper-shouting from across the corridor.

Hells bells, what now?

I turn and glare.

Anna-May. What's she doing down here? Ain't seen her in our room in a few days and figured she'd been moved. Frown at her to make her go away, but she's beckoning, beckoning with her hand. Looks like it'll fall off if I don't see to her.

– I need a favour.

I grab her arm and yank her into a room. Oldie snoring in the bed: wheeze, choke, wheeze, choke.

– I need some sleeping tablets.

This girl knows how to pick her timing. Doctor could come back at any minute and she wants to chat about her beauty sleep?

Why?

She knows me. Can read the question on my face even if I don't say it out loud. My face is probably shouting at her.

–I been down here two days. Have terrible cramps and the nurses keep giving me enemas.

She does look pale. A little shaky. Whitewash is the worst thing.

– Please, Fel?

I dig into my apron and shove one in her hand, just to pass her off. Pay for that later, probably. Can't be giving things away or people will take them from you quick as a blink. Gotta make it hard—but I don't have time for that. I'm in a hurry.

She goes back down the hall—back into her room, I'm guessing—and I slip into Doctor Rian's office...

Have a rummage through her desk. Two drawers open but one's locked. Clink pile there in the open drawer. Dumb one, don't bother to lock up her money. Take five coins and pop them in my apron. She'll never notice. Pop them in my pocket. Be docked and sent to

Kain

Punishment if I'm caught but I need to catch up to Alistair, and I've got to make my own way. Things cost money. That's something I remember from being outside.

Our parents never had enough of it. Mother always sick with worry. Dad down at the shipyard, coming home dead. Pale. Until he never came home at all.

Help myself to a few sweets as well. Quietly open the desk drawer, listening, listening for anyone coming. If I'm caught, I'm dead, but you've got to know something about the new ones around here. Only have one chance to get the upper hand on them and this one's definitely hiding something. Since it's empty, I'll skim a few things while I'm here.

Married, Harold said. Living alone in the cottage.

Strange enough that she's a lady doctor but a lady doctor who's married. Not living with her husband. Dresses in riding breeches, though she could do worse in here.

Nick some stationery. Pens—the ink in mine's almost run out and it's hard to find new ones. Land sakes, scissors? They're huge!

Roll my eyes as I put them in my pocket. Have to hide them somewhere good. They'll be a good trade for something.

A few more clink into my pocket and slip out the door. Down the hall, and up the stairs. Peek left and right. Duck through the door and into the narrow stairwell. Climb up to the attic.

The dust plays with the sunlight up here, dancing in the slats, curling and lifting. Goes on for miles, like the downstairs of the Administration building. But there are no rooms up here, just a giant wooden floor and dusty ceiling. In the main part, old wooden wheelchairs, half broken, boxes, files, an old surgical bed. How they got that up here, I don't know.

In two long rows, the luggage. Valises and carpet bags. The older ones getting shoved down, farther and farther. End of the line is the ones that have been here the longest.

I discovered this little corner years ago, where the roof slants lowest and meets the outside wall. Have to stoop a bit low, so nobody wants to go here. Piles of suitcases, covered in cobwebs. Most from the Oldies, I reckon. Won't never be collected. I've stood them up, made a bit of a wall that I can hide behind. Unpacked a few, borrowed some things.

There's one on the top I been meaning to open, just haven't had the time.

The floorboards are loose up here, easy to take up. One, I've made a thumb hole in so I can lift it easily. That'll do for the sharp scissors and my new stash of clink. Have a few other things in this hidey-hole, besides. My own notebook. Some pencils. A scarf I like that I can't wear downstairs or it'll be nicked.

Kain

Stretch out on my blankets and watch out the tiny window. It gets a bit smudged with grime but I can see the sun going down, red and orange, pink on the horizon. When it dips past the pine tree, I have to skedaddle. Means the dinner bell's about to go.

Watch it sinking. Breathe in and out. Feel darkness pulling on my eyelids.

Sink, sink, sink...

Siobhan

For the past week, it's been the same. Wake up with a start and try to remember where I am in the pitch dark, groping to light a lamp.

As the dim surroundings come into focus, I push my feet into my slippers, shivering in the cool morning air. The fire is always down to embers and I stoke it with a small log while I'm getting dressed. At least for the ablutions portion, in a small basin behind a shabby privacy screen.

I try not to let myself think of the house I've left behind, but this place is like a rustic cabin retreat. Something you think is romantic for a weekend, but in the end, are glad to leave for the safety and luxury of a permanent place.

A place with electricity and plumbing.

Still, I'm lucky they found me a cottage of my own and I don't have to bunk in with the nurses.

This morning I feel a faint cold sweat and bile rising in my throat before my feet even hit the floor, and as the flush escalates, I turn and retch into the sink.

Inevitable, in a new germ pool as rife as this one, that I would end up catching something. Imagining the bacterial infestation in my intestines only makes it worse. I retch again, pain wrenching my abdominal wall.

Saints preserve us.

I wipe my mouth and stand bent over the sink for a moment while the dizziness passes, then pump myself a glass of water and wait to see if the nausea will subside. I don't have time to waste an entire day on this.

When I don't vomit again for ten minutes, then twenty, I decide to try some toast. Half a piece to start. I eat it slowly, knowing I won't dare chance the staff lunch today. I need to report to the infirmary for nine o'clock and it's half-seven now.

But the morning is chill enough to revive me and I wrap my shawl around my shoulders as I mount Merlin, breathing deeply as we ride across the open field to the stables.

I'm sorry to have to go indoors.

Kain

– You're looking a little pale, Doctor.

Nurse Stokes stops me in the hallway on my way to the office.

– Feeling it as well.

– Upset stomach? There's a bit of a diarrhoea going around.

I nod and make my way to the office. No more retching but the chills seem to be lasting with me.

– Let me get you some ginger tea.

I smile and Stokes moves off. She's old enough to be my mother, but still bustles around like she's half my age.

A stack of mail sits on my desk—someone's saved me the trouble of going to the Admin building. I begin to shuffle through the notes.

Patient updates.

Requests for prescription.

Two death certificates to sign.

I stop at a note from Doctor Braithwaite. I've barely been here a week and he's already bothering me about selecting a research topic.

A sharp rap sounds at my door.

– Good morning, Doctor Rian.

Well, it's true then, what my mother always said. Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

– Good morning, Doctor Braithwaite.

– I wonder if you'll be joining us for Grand Rounds this morning?

I look at the clock and jump up.

– Is it that time already? Sorry.

A curt nod and he disappears back into the corridor.

Quickly, I grab my coat and clipboard and follow him out.

– Good morning, Doctor Rian.

Ben grins as he dons his own coat. Still a bit short in the sleeves for him.

– Your tea, Doctor.

Nurse Stokes appears with a large mug, steaming a wonderful fragrance.

– Thank you.

I take it from her gratefully.

– We'll be picking up Doctor Wright on his ward. He's got his hands full this morning with his tubercular patients. Doctor Rian, how are you settling in?

I nod and try to smile, not trusting myself to speak without vomiting again.

He frowns, approaching me as he bends to examine my face.

– You're not ill, are you?

– Just a touch of something. Hardly surprising.

– Ah yes, the year of germ adjustment.

He grins like it's a rite of passage I'm undertaking valiantly. My stomach twists and I breathe slowly. I just need to get through Rounds and then I can sit down.

– Shall we?

Doctor Braithwaite looks at his watch, a hint of irritation in the set of his mouth.

– Ah yes.

Ben claps his hands together and strides away. Three of his enormous paces later and I'm practically running to catch up. His pace doesn't slow as we visit room after room of patients—old, young, acute, malingering and post-operative.

Three turns and we've arrived at a corridor I've yet to see.

I peer down, but Braithwaite's blocking my line of vision.

– What's down this hallway?

– My research laboratory.

It's only a short hallway with one room on either side and a third door at the end.

He clears his throat and I look up at him, feeling a bit sheepish. I hope he doesn't think I'm trying to horn in on his research. In fact, I couldn't care less. Just an added amount of work to something that's barely manageable as it is.

– You have your own to begin, I believe?

Yes, yes, as he's reminded me seventeen times since my arrival.

He turns and leads me away. I can't help thinking of a lion in its lair—half expecting to see discarded bones and tufts of fur littering the floor.

– We'd better catch up with Doctor McHugh.

Braithwaite turns down another corridor I've yet to venture down—this one darker and marked by a sudden drop in temperature. Braithwaite pushes open the double doors and I follow on his heels to see Ben already putting his arms through an isolation gown. Braithwaite follows suit, and hands me a face mask.

Kain

– Twenty-six of our inmates are currently suffering from tuberculosis and we are doing our best to care for them. This is Doctor Wright's area of speciality. Doctor Wright, have you met Doctor Rian?

It's difficult to guess his age behind his enormous glasses, but the sides of his mask twitch and I imagine he's smiled, if perfunctorily.

– Doctor Wright is conducting research on pulmonary tuberculosis. As you know, open air is the best practice. All the patients are quarantined on this ward.

I chafe my arms. All the windows are thrown open. Patients sit on a large porch, in wheelchairs, tucked under layers of quilts and sweaters.

– Sorry to have missed Rounds this morning, gentlemen...er, and Doctor Rian. We've had a complication today, unfortunately.

I can barely concentrate on Doctor Wright's tour because my teeth are chattering so loudly. We're led smartly through a bare-bones dormitory with sixty beds lined up along dark wooden floors, just as freezing as the open-air porch, a large bathroom with tubs and showers, and a common room with a few closed doors at the back.

Mercifully we don't need a full tour and for once I'm glad of Ben's fast pace, because soon we're stripping off our gowns and leaving the Arctic.

Down the final corridor, Ben suddenly slows down and I nearly ram into him. The temperature has surged again and with it, my nausea. Ben stands aside to let Braithwaite into the small anteroom where the lights are dimmed and a nurse attendant stands over a crib.

Ben speaks very softly.

– Any improvement?

The nurse shakes her head.

– None, I'm afraid. She can't even suck milk from a rag anymore.

Ben takes off his stethoscope and breathes hot air onto it before laying it on the chest of the tiny creature lying in the crib. He shakes his head, returning the stethoscope to his neck.

– Come closer, Doctor. You may find this case interesting.

I approach slowly.

– What is her diagnosis?

She looks barely three years old, so tiny and shrunken as to barely dent the mattress. She lies naked except for a nappy and a thin sheet, and her limbs are so badly twisted I know she's never walked or done a thing for herself—probably never even sat up.

Kain

– How old is she?

– Nine years, four months.

I can barely suppress my surprise.

– Doctor Braithwaite can tell you more. She has been his patient.

Braithwaite clears his throat.

– She lived at home for six years but, understandably, became too much of a burden for her poor parents, who had five other healthy children. Until two weeks ago, this patient was eating by bottle but suffered a severe bout of dysentery and is now unable to eat or drink at all.

I lay my hand on her tiny chest, shallow breaths barely moving her rib cage. Agonal breathing—the final stage.

– Marasmus.

– Yes, unfortunately. Nothing we can do.

I tuck the sheet higher on her skin—almost frigid.

Braithwaite nods curtly to the nurse.

– It won't be long.

– Let me know when it's over.

In the end, it's not Braithwaite the nurses come for. Half-two and I'm finishing sutures on the forehead of an elderly patient who's fallen out of his wheelchair.

– Doctor, can you come, please, as soon as you're able? Doctor Braithwaite's engaged.

I finish the final two and set down the instruments. The nurse takes over from me as I wash my hands, cleaning up the patient's face while the other nurse waits for me at the door, face tense.

I follow her down the hall. The little one lies on the cot, fists clenched tight, her eyes closed. I put one hand gently against her nose. Nothing. No rise of the chest. No breath in and out.

With a sigh, I pull the sheet over her face.

– She's gone, then?

I nod, looking at the clock as she hands me the chart to record the time of death.

– I'll put the paperwork on your desk.

– Yes, thank you. And you can take her down to the morgue, please? Doctor Braithwaite will probably want to do a post-mortem exam.

Nurse nods.

I head to Doctor Braithwaite's lab.

Two turns and I can't remember which way to turn for the third. I stop and listen for voices and find the door that leads to the small hallway, which is shut. Quietly, I rap with the back of my knuckles, then push it open.

Braithwaite strides out of one of the two rooms and stops dead when he sees me.

– Oh, hello. I just came to tell you...

His face has hardened, dark eyes piercing me. His gaze flicks from my face to his lab behind me. The faint smell of feces still hangs thick in the air. I wonder how he can stand it. A drain must be blocked somewhere.

– Yes?

– Your patient has died. The little one with Marasmus.

– Yes, no surprise. It happened this afternoon?

I move aside to let a nurse pass.

– She's down in the morgue.

– Right.

The nurse slips into the room beside us, and for a moment, as the door opens and closes, I catch sight of patients, lying in beds.

Eight. Ten.

– You have patients back here?

– Yes, of course. Was there anything else?

– No, that was all.

– Well, I'm sure you're very busy, Doctor. Next time feel free to send a nurse or an attendant to inform me. Deaths are very sad, of course, but unfortunately in an institution of this size, they're quite common.

– Yes, of course.

I shake my head and turn back the way I came, the smell of the drains making my still-weak stomach turn. I grab a basin and vomit.

Kain

Fel

Empty mail bags on my shoulder. Heading back up to the office. Dawdling a little in the sun, even though I've got a stack of mail a mile high. Be lucky to have any free hour at all. More memos from Doctor Rian to deliver all around the place, like it's not hours of my time to tack them up everywhere. Wait for the newsletter, why don't she? But no.

Snuck one out of the bag and read it on the stairs. Doctor Rian's put herself in charge of Institution Improvement. Just invented it, like she needs more work.

Handwashing after every visit to the facilities and extra scrubbing before every meal.

She should hear the nurses snort.

Lucky if they get a bath once a week. Now she wants them to wash their hands seven times a day. Best of luck to her.

I'm tired. Didn't sleep much last night. Anna-May was having nightmares, or terrors, or something where she wakes up screaming. I almost gave her another sleeping tablet just to shut her up but then she'd want one every night.

There are four of us in a room. To answer Doctor Rian's question, thirty in the Pavilion. Not as bad as the giant dorms, packed in, bed upon bed. Spent time in there before I got old enough to be moved up. The sigh and heave and snore was like the laundry machine whirring. So noisy you don't hear it after a while. So noisy it's like company. Helps you sleep.

But in a small dorm you hear everything.

The door opening. The bed creaking.

Anna-May screaming. Crying.

Susan sniffing. Blowing her nose. Sniffing. Sniffing.

Shut up, can't you?

I want to choke her.

Vera sleeps closest to the door. *Thump thump thump* that one time when One-Arm came in, eyes glassy in the moonlight, got into bed with Vera. She was so scared, she just let him do it. Cried, of course, but didn't scream. Then he fell asleep in her bed and woke up, gasping, halfway through the night. No idea where he was, how he got there. Shaking Vera, bouncing

Kain

her on the bed and screaming at her until Anna-May and I grabbed him off her, threw him in the corridor.

Even Susan helped drag the beds in front of the door so he couldn't get back in.

Lights out.

Locked doors.

Too bad they don't lock from the inside.

I seen horses do it. Cows. That's what he sounded like, grunting. A giant bull.

I sleep closest to the window. Away. Next time he does it, I'll hit him with a shoe. Or a book.

He'd hit me back with his one arm, probably.

Scribble scribble the new girl's name in my notebook. Marnie Lavimodière. Pretty girl. Dark hair. Eyelashes big like the elephant picture in the nursery school.

Paste and sticks, white dripping down the jars and pooling on the table, bottoms sticking to the wood. Prying them off, hands sticky after the lessons.

She was put onto Idiots. Seen the paperwork this morning. A back ward—stink and dark. The stink is—oh. It's bad enough to work on that ward, but to live on it?

She can't talk. Pushed in that wheelchair, flung around by the nurses.

She gurgled when her Mama said goodbye to her.

— Goodbye.

I should tell her to stay, not to leave her here. Maybe it's good Marnie can't talk. Her mama wouldn't want to know. I'll see her. Watch for her on my ward duty in the mornings in L. I'll wave. Maybe she can't see, the way her eyes are crossed. Blank.

It's easy to get to her ward. Go through the locked door, down the stairs, ground floor. Don't get stuck in the stairwell. Slide down the railing to the landing. Down three more. I could find my way backwards. Have before.

Daddy kissed her cheek.

— Bye darling.

His arms around the mama. Tears falling into his beard, scratchy, white.

My hands tingled like when I want to touch something but I ain't allowed.

Tingle.

Like when you get the strap.

Wonder if they knew she was going to Idiots'.

Kain

Parents ain't allowed to go. In the hall, *wait here please*, on the polished wooden floor. Smiles and nods. Someone finds a clean dress. Wipes a cold cloth over her face, down her arms. Wrenches the dress over her head. Sits her up straight in the wheelchair. Push to the front. Smile.

– Oh, here for a lovely visit?

But the smell goes through the doors. Comes off the clothes. In the kitchen, in the dorms. The laundry house is the only place you can't smell it. The soap, the lye, the boiling water stamps it out.

But then you come back inside.

They pushed her off to the infirmary for a bath and nit check.

– *Au revoir, ma petite. Je t'aime. Je t'aime.*

I love the sound of French. Musical, lovely, like the woman who ran the bakery near my house. Big smile. Hair curly and golden. *Bonjour. Comment ca-va?*

She taught me French words when I was young. *Pain au chocolat. Tarte au pomme.* It feels like another person learned them words. I hear Marnie's mother speak and I smell bread. Cinnamon. My mouth waters.

Marnie's mama waved. Her rings sparkled. Her hair shone. That's how I knew she wouldn't let Marnie get nits and vermin.

Can't help it once she's here of course.

In the city ward everyone had nits and vermin. Couldn't keep them out of your house when all your brothers and sisters had them and they were snoring right next to you.

At least Marnie's building is new.

It was supposed to be our new building. But Morons can walk and Idiots can't. Open windows and crawl down the ivy, hand over hand over hand and drop— like when the boys elope. If there's a fire, we'd go out the window. So they put the Idiots down on the ground floors.

Nurse Stokes, red hair, curly and sweaty under her cap. Frowning and smiling at the same time. Big hands. Big voice.

Tuck my notebook into my pocket and sneak along the corridor. Step, slide, step slide. Head down. Look busy or Matron will drag me by the ear like she'll do to Alistair when they drag him back in. If they find him. It's been a week.

Get back to the office! No lunch break!

Kain

– Aren't you on the wrong side of the hallway, Fel?

I didn't even see her coming. Miss Street, small and quick, dark brown eyes always looking. Searching. Frown line on her forehead under her wispy blond hair. Always concentrating. Always going fast. The door clangs shut behind her from the tramway.

– Morning, Sera.

Doctor McHugh nods.

Miss Street nods back. She has her bundle with her. The midwife bundle she needs to catch the babies. Whose baby is coming? Mostly they come at night. This one's coming in the middle of the day.

She grabs my hand. The empty mail bags fall off my shoulder.

– Time to go.

I turn. Follow her.

Doctor McHugh moves out of the way. He knows when there's a baby coming.

We stop and I toss the mail bags on the desk.

– I'm borrowing Fel, John. You can make do without her?

John stands up. He is tall when he stands. If he smiled he might be handsome, but he don't smile. He looks over Miss Street's head.

– Yes, Miss Street. If Fel is with you, then my priorities will change. I will sort the mail. Then I will deliver the mail.

– Good man, John.

She pulls me out of the office. I breathe out.

We're hurrying down the hall.

–How are you keeping? All right?

I nod as Miss Street ploughs on down the stairs and into the tram. It's heavy and grey outside, low clouds. From the attic you could see the lake but I don't have time to get up there today. The waves would be dull, crashing against the rocks. Before the bell went this morning, the rain started, fat drops smacking the windows and leaking through the roof at the corner of our room. I stripped my bed and stood the mattress up against the wall so I wouldn't be sleeping in a puddle tonight. The roof at the Pavilion is on the maintenance list. John told me. But it's been leaking since April.

At the crossroads, Miss Street stops. Looks at me. She's pretty good at finding her way but when we're in a hurry, she still waits.

Kain

I know without having to look up in my mind, through the tunnel to the other crossroads, right under the kitchen and laundry and over to the outside cottages. She follows me without speaking, up to G-1 with the senior girls.

– Doctor McHugh says you're getting on well in the office. Good reports from the nurses.

I smile.

– Better than at the Oldies, eh?

Nod again. Much better. Hated it in the Oldies, feeding the ancients from a bucket passed around, one to the other to the other. Half of them never got out of bed. Idiots is better but the office is the best part. Never had a girl in there before me.

– Just you wait, Fel. You'll get out of here one day and you'll have learned something. Sooner than she thinks, I reckon.

I don't look at her in case she can see it in my face. Miss Street is like that. Just turn and lead her up the stairs.

Nurse Archibald is waiting at the door when we come up from the underground. She leads us up another flight of stairs to where the idiots are, right below the Punishment ward.

– She refused to help with the beds. Said her back ached. Thought it was more of her bellyaching.

Nurse Archibald has her fat fists mashed into her hips. Her apron is dirty. Someone in the laundry will have to get that stain out of it.

Miss Street frowns. I know what that frown means. She don't like some of the nurses. Won't say it out loud. Says it sometimes when we're in the tramway underground. Far away. In front of the boiler room, hiss, squeak. And Miss Street cursing.

She knows I won't say nothing. Who would I say it to? Right now she's thinking—*Send her to the Beehive then. Why is she still on ward duty anyway? Get her to me so I don't have to crawl on this filthy floor to deliver this baby.*

– I would have liked to get her away sooner.

Miss Street shakes her head.

See? But she's just an attendant.

Nurse Archibald is fat and mean. You can't argue with her.

– Well if she'd said something to me I could have had someone come and drag her down. But she's just sat there moaning about her back. How was I supposed to know?

Kain

– Yes, I see. I don't suppose you've seen many labours.

I don't laugh even though it's pressing me from the inside. Make my face blank. Look at the wall. Look bored, like it's a chore to be here.

– How long ago did you say her labour started?

– Well I don't know much about babies.

Can barely hear her. The girls in here make such a bloody noise. Rocking, rocking against the walls. Moaning, crying. Nude, half of them. Lying on the floor. One scratching, scratching, scratching at her head. Won't stop til it bleeds. Probably not even then.

Miss Street walks over a girl lying with her face pressed into the floor, her pants down around her knees.

Bernice, crouched in the corner, like she's one of them in here. But she's a Moron on ward duty, not an Idiot on the ward. She's a high-grade. Wears an apron, like me. I know her. She's usually on the laundry after ward duty.

– Can you stand, Bernice?

Can barely see her in the light here. Voices running over us like water, waves crashing on the walls.

The common room is for night time—after work and before bed. Not the middle of the day. Everyone should be gone out to work, to meals, to the farm, to the school. But this ward is busy. Full. They're not even on quarantine. They're just banging their heads, hitting one another. Dr. Mc.Hugh will put them into the boxes on his report.

HABIT TRAINING.

DORMITORY TASKS.

Learning not to piss themselves, and sitting in the dayroom all day.

Girls stand in the door. Walk along the wall. Sit on benches and rock and rock.

– Stay away. Can't you see Miss Street is busy with Bernice?

Nurse Archibald sounds like a seagull—shrill, loud, squawking.

The girl watches us, then picks up her dress and squats down like Bernice. Pisses onto the floor right by my feet.

– For heaven's sake, girl, what in blazes are you doing?

Nurse Archibald grabs her arm and yanks her to the door.

– Get to the washroom.

At least she pulled her skirt up and didn't just piss through her clothes.

– Clean that up.

She looks at me and throws her arm out to the mop in the corner.

Miss Street looks up. She's crouching by Bernice.

– Fel, I need you here, please.

Nurse don't push it. Lets me go.

I squat down and the nurse grabs another inmate, thrusting the mop at her.

She takes it, sops it through the girl's mess, water sloshing everywhere.

–I can't get her to move.

Nurse Archibald snorts.

– Stubborn cow. She can't have it here, that's for certain.

Miss Street nods. Looks at Bernice. Babies come wherever they like. That's just the way it is.

I smell the baby coming. Water breaking. Sweat. And the way she sounds—groaning, panting.

– It would be easier if you could come with us, Bernice. I'd like to get you to lie down.

The infirmary is warm and dry. Can I get you up?

She presses her face on the wall. Can't tell if it's the stone sweating or Bernice crying.

All the girls cry when the baby comes. That sound. The way she's squatting. It's coming now.

Miss Street knows it too. She looks at me and waves at the chair in the corner. I go to get it so she can unwrap the bundle onto something sort of clean. Not the floor.

Bernice is holding the wall. Dress hiked up to her waist, hunched, pushing, wailing. Shit on the floor. Water puddled underneath. Blood. I'll have to clean that up later.

I see the head.

Pick up the blanket, the scissors. Watch Miss Street deliver the head.

– Another push now, Bernice. Let's have the shoulders.

Her eyes, wild, big, hair slicked and straggly. She tips her head back. Cries.

It slides out.

Goosh.

Miss Street catches it and passes it to me. I wrap it in the blanket and look at its face.

It's breathing in and out and in and out. Dark hair. Tiny nose. Yellow skin. A little boy.

Miss Street cuts the cord.

Touches his forehead.

Kain

– Damn.

She says it quietly, probably just to herself.

His nose is sunk in. His forehead sticks out. The thing that happens with their mouths so they can't suck and swallow.

– Syphilis, is it?

Nurse Archibald looks like she's sucking a vinegar rag.

Miss Street nods.

I cuddle him anyway, just for a little while. As long as he's with us. I can tell he's an Idiot just by looking at him. He won't survive.

Finally, they come with the wheelchair and we can take Bernice down to the Beehive. She holds her baby, sniffs his head.

Doctor Rian meets us in the hallway outside her office, forehead pinched.

– What, another one?

Miss Street just sighs.

– Do you have a private room, Doctor? We still have to take care of the afterbirth here.

Doctor Rian looks like she wants to say something else but doesn't. She just takes Miss Street and Bernice down the hall into a room with a door.

Miss Street calls to me.

– Come hold the baby, will you, Fel? We'll check him out in a moment.

I lean down to take the baby from Bernice. She don't want to give him up, I can tell. Holds tighter for a second until Miss Street says, it's all right Bernice. Fel will take good care of him.

She lets go and I pick him up. Not awake, this one. Chest barely rising at all.

No, no, no. No thank you. Don't want to hold a dying baby. My breathing gets fast, sweat pricking my neck.

– Won't be long, all right?

Miss Street puts me down in a chair.

I breathe in and out, concentrate on the sounds I can hear. The creak of the bed, Bernice getting up in it. The groaning and crying as Miss Street pushes on her belly.

– There, there.

Doctor Rian's voice. Sound of running water, Doctor scrubbing her hands.

Kain

Pinch the baby's cheek lightly, stroke his sunken forehead. He don't stir. Blow on his face. Nothing.

I just hope they hurry up and get this done and he don't die while I'm holding him.

Miss Street was right. It's not long. She comes back out, her eyes tired, and holds out her hands.

– I'll take him now. See if he will nurse. Thank you.

Doctor Rian follows her out. She takes off a layer and puts it into the laundry bag. Smooths her hair back. Her hands are red, raw. Probably from her infernal scrubbing. One of the Oldies has a nice jar of hand lotion in an old suitcase. Doubt she'd miss it. Maybe I'll leave it for the Doctor.

She looks at me up and down, at the hem of my dress.

– Fel?

I look up.

– Come get a bath and some new clothes. You have effluvia all over you.

I don't know what she means but I'd love a bath.

Miss Street looks at her, frowning a little.

– Inmates have weekly baths, Doctor.

– Well, be that as it may, I'm not letting this child go back to her ward looking like that. She'll spread contamination and disease with the hem of that dress and Lord knows what she's touched.

At a clip, she marches me to the back of the infirmary. I seen this bathroom before but never used it. Two toilets and two baths and nobody in here.

– You can use the privacy screen over there. I'll have a nurse take care of you.

She leaves and a moment later, Nurse Stokes comes in.

– Well, hello. Having a mid-day bath are we?

She puts the key in and turns on the hot water, smiling.

– How did you wrangle this? Nobody to share with, all the time and hot water you like? I've never had a bath to myself before.

I grin at her and she laughs. Her eyes light up and she reaches into her apron and pulls out a tiny bottle. Adds a bit to the water and suddenly bubbles come up, sweet smelling and popping.

Kain

– My son sent me some of this for my birthday. I keep it on hand in case it's needed.

Hop in.

Don't have to ask me twice. I get in the tub and she fills it high and hot.

– If you promise not to get up to any trouble, I'll leave you alone.

Cross my fingers and hold them up. Promise.

She bangs out and I'm alone in the hot water. Sink down to the bottom, let the water cover me. Warm water is gorgeous. Delicious, like soaking in hot tea. By the time they get to me, the water's always lukewarm at best and it's a quick dunk and out. But this is mine. I hope they forget about me here all night.

Sink low, low, so my ears are covered and my breasts pop out the top of the water like little globes, pink nipples shooting to the sky.

Touch them lightly. A little thrill runs straight through me. Circle my nipples with my fingers. Love that jolt. Never have any time to myself, unless I wake up in the middle of the night and then you still have to worry someone else is awake. Sometimes it aches so much that I do it anyway, turn over on my stomach and rub myself until the heat washes over me and I want to cry and moan at the same time. But I don't. I don't make any noise at all, even then.

Bang! The door hits the wall.

Two nurses rush in, yanking a patient with them.

Sit up fast, hugging my knees.

– Quick, quick, get her on the toilet before she fills her pants again.

Plunk her down, and the toilet bowl rattles. Squirt and fart, the noises bounce off the walls.

The nurses groan and curse.

– God, that stinks.

– Damn, she's got it too. The diarrhoea. How many's that now? Almost all the ward's come down with it. Soon they'll just be locking the door, never mind bringing them down here.

– Ah, damn, it's all up the back of her.

She wrenches the nightgown over the inmate's head and turns to fling it on the floor.

Spots me in the tub.

– There, look. Water's already run. Grab that hose there and let's see what we can do. Hey, you there. Finish lollygagging in the water and get out. Next in line.

Kain

Who'd want to hang around here with that ripe smell anyway? But Nurse Stokes ain't back yet. I ain't got a towel.

The nurses are already stripping her down. Idiot, by the looks of it, short hair grey and frizzy. Arms bent, head lolled to one side. Shuffles when she steps, pigeon-toed. She says something but I don't understand.

Then the water blasts on and hits her on the ass. She yelps, probably cold. Spray hits the tile floor, tile walls. I climb out of the tub, cold air sending goose bumps along my arms.

Door bangs open and there's Stokes.

– Sorry, Fel. It's a madhouse out there.

She stops, wincing from the smell.

– Lord, love a duck.

Two quick steps and she wraps me in a clean towel, fast and neat.

– Come on out here and I'll get you some clean clothes.

I hold my breath and shove my feet into my shoes. Follow her out into the hall, towel wrapped.

She opens a door and I slip inside. She's back in a minute with clothes and she heaps them over the chair.

– Party's over, eh?

I shrug. It was good while it lasted.

– Not the best pick here, but it's all I had to hand.

I just nod to say thank you and she disappears.

Grey dress is too big but it'll do. A pair of stockings. Bloomers. All of it smelling the same, boiled smell. No time to be picky. If it half fits and smells of the laundry instead of the toilet, that's the best you're going to do. Quickly put it all on and squeeze out my hair.

There's Miss Street down the hallway, coming out of Bernice's room. She holds the baby close, but her face is drawn again. Looks like she could sleep for a year.

– You're still here, are you?

I look at the bundle in her arms. Not breathing. I knew it wouldn't live.

– I baptised him. Can you take care of this one, Fel?

Her eyes are heavy and her arms are hanging by her sides like someone's dragged her out of bed.

Kain

I nod and take him from her, then walk through the door to the stairs and down, down, through the trams, holding him close, sticking to the shadows. Must be nearly supper hour, everything's so quiet.

Don't meet anyone underground at all. They're probably all upstairs, in the wards, in the dining rooms.

I smell bread coming from somewhere and my stomach growls. I don't have a coat but there ain't time to get one and I ain't taking a dead baby with me to my ward to grab one.

Hurry down across the lawn to the stable.

In the barn, the lights are still on, just glowing. Harold must still be here. If I gave him the baby, asked him to take it, he would. But he looks so sad around the babies: the live ones and the dead ones. Don't ask him. Just do it myself.

Teeth are chattering, hair getting crisp on the bottom from going out when it's still half wet. I can see my breath. Quick, grab a stable blanket and put it over one shoulder, then move the baby to the other side and shrug into the other side. Still cold, but better.

The wind howls around the side of the barn like a dog on the chase. This path ain't lit and it's darker by the second, no moon tonight.

Down, down to the woodshed. All the boys gone inside for stew and rolls and free hours and time around the fire.

Best not to be caught outside alone. Hands full, can't deck anyone like this. Tiptoe, tiptoe to the woodpile. Wonder which of the boys—or maybe it's the teacher—has made these three boxes lying ready, one in each size.

I take the smallest one and put him inside, gently, gently, laying the head down on the wood. Tiny lips are blue, hands are blue. Cover him up tight with the blanket Miss Street's wrapped him in. Gently shut the lid. So small to be left alone. Open the lid again and look, one more time. Put my fingers under his nose and wait. Count to thirty. Then to sixty.

Ain't breathing. I'm sure.

Put the lid back on and hammer in the narrow nails.

If I leave it on the bench in the cold room, they'll know. But just in case—to tell them—I should mark it. Give this one a decent burial. At least say a prayer over him, boys. There, an apple tree, still with green leaves. Pick a sprig of tiny apples and lay it on top.

Quick sign of the cross over it. Bow my head and whisper, whisper... the prayer for lost souls Miss Street taught me.

Kain

God can hear you when you're praying, right? Even if it's nearly silent?
Close the woodshed door tight and run, run back in.

Kain

October, 1927

Fel

John stands when I come in the room. Tries to be a gentleman. If he'd look people in the eye, they might like him better. Even if he does speak plain and blunt.

He never says hello and don't use my name, but he's very smart in a different sort of way.

Just not smart enough to live outside.

– While you were with Miss Street, I delivered four bags of mail. There are four messages for you. We should also be sorting the mail soon.

I take the messages from him and go back down the hall. Avoiding Admissions in case Matron is there. There's Miss Street in the hallway. She squeezes my arm.

– Hope you're not too backed up today, Fel.

I shake my head.

Who cares? Work is work. It never stops. Don't matter if it's mail or ward duty.

– I appreciate your help.

I smile. I love delivering babies. Love the slip and slide and nuzzle of them. The smell of them. But they're always taken away. I hate that part.

I hate Cottage K too. Bringing mail. Bringing messages. That's where all the Oldies live. No teeth. Rotten breath. Grips like beasts with their long hard nails and grimy fingers.

I knock on the door. The nurse takes a long time to answer. I think I'm going to have to knock again. Can't put messages under the door because some of the patients will pick them up and eat them.

– Yes?

Who's that then? Must've just arrived. Never seen her before. She's young but she's already frowning. Looking impatient.

I hold out the message.

She looks at the script.

– Nurse Baker?

Nurse Baker comes around the corner and sees me.

Kain

– Thank you, Fel.

She takes a humbug from her apron pocket. Old Norris is on the chair there with her greedy eyes following me everywhere. She'll probably try to snatch it up before I can have it. But I'm faster.

I dart into the room to take the candy and Nurse Baker pats me on the head and smiles.

– Doing a right fine job.

I smile, showing all my teeth.

Duck back out.

None of the old ones can get their paws on me.

&&&

Ten twenty-seven a.m. The clock on the wall ticks out the seconds.

John stares at the clock and I watch him counting. His lips move a little, one, two, three. His middle finger drums on his knee like the metronome that Doctor Goldberg used. Set in time with the clock. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. His eyes are closed as his lips move and his finger moves.

He's resetting.

Twenty seconds to reset.

Before when he used to wind up, he would start drumming his hands on his knees and rocking back and forth, back and forth, whining at the back of his throat. It started off quiet but worked up and up and up til he sounded like a screeching rat.

Then they'd take him to the pads.

But he hasn't done that since Doctor Goldberg taught him to do the reset. Nobody bothers John during the reset. Not even Doctor Braithwaite.

He gets to twenty and opens his eyes.

– John, good morning.

Doctor McHugh been waiting by my desk.

John stands up and smiles, which means he pulls his lips out. He looks at Doctor McHugh's forehead. This is as close as he gets to people's eyes. When he's tired or agitated, he looks out the window. At the floor. Then people know to leave him alone to his work.

– Time to go, John.

Kain

– Fel, this morning I have an appointment with the dentist. Please complete this paperwork for the new patient, Marnie Lavimodière.

He nods goodbye and walks out the door and I imagine him going down, down, down to the tram.

I open the ledger—half the size of me and not meant to be moved from the desk. That’s why they made it so heavy. I creak open the cover.

AVONHURST ASYLUM FOR IDIOTS.

Big bold letters. Thumb through. Usually John does this but I done it a few times. Read it as much as I could with the writing in there. Doctors used to do the paperwork probably but they’re too busy now. Just send notes down. We do the rest. First admission 1879. Here we are 1927.

Marnie Lavimodière, write neatly, 2980. Date of birth, September 2, 1915. General health status, good. Nit and vermin free. Reason for Admission. Microcephaly. Seizures, severe. Idiocy. Poor thing.

Copy her name and number onto her patient file and fill out the sheet so that it matches the ledger, then clip it to the inside of the folder. Got a mailbag for the infirmary anyway. I’ll take it all down myself. Probably see her again in there, say hello. She’ll be in isolation still. Another week at least. See if they’ve chopped her hair yet.

Close the door, sling the bag over my shoulder and down the hall. Down the stairs, through the trams. No time to stop today, no exploring. Twice as much office work and still have to get to the wards tonight.

Commotion down the hall, Matron hurrying, her skirts swishing. I hitch my mailbag up and follow her, three paces behind, and melt into the wall. Down the staircase, out the corridor.

Doctor McHugh's coming out too, meeting them at the door.

Bang, bang.

Two policemen standing there. Drag him into the hallway. He’s folded into himself. Looks small, cold.

– Here’s your absconder.

Policeman shoves him and he falls.

Kain

Matron yanks him up by his arm.

– Where on earth have you been, boy?

– Let's go.

Creep forward, forward. Don't want to be seen but want to get a closer look at his face. He's scratched, a big bruise and a black eye over one side. He's limping and Doctor McHugh picks him up.

They all disappear down the hall.

The door slams.

My stomach feels like one of the little ones has rammed me with their head. Their favourite trick, little beasts. I sit down hard on the chair. Alistair looks half dead. Stupid, stupid boy.

Nothing I can do here except get caught and sent to Punishment. Best to keep moving. Take the next staircase and head into the trams, heart hammering. Through the tunnels, up the stairs and the Beehive is as bright as if the sun's shining inside. It's warm in here with yellow walls, splattered with painted flowers—handprints for petals, red and purple. Long coloured lines run along the floor, telling people's feet where to go. Blue for the doctor's office. Red for the hub.

Head straight for the hub to look for Nurse Stokes. Centre desk is busy but I don't see her. All the nurses sitting and writing, frowning. Pushing down the hall, carts clattering. The wheel on one is squeaky, loud. Has been since the last time I stayed in here. Probably pneumonia or tonsillitis. I can't remember.

The noise is the same. Low and dim, lots of people behind lots of doors.

I dump the mail bag on the main desk. Nurse Joseph almost sings when she talks, teeth gleaming white and even behind lips like dark plum juice. Dark skin, smooth, no wrinkles and tight braids in her hair.

– Mail call?

I nod.

– Thank you, Fel.

She pops open the drawer and hands me a caramel. I stuff it down my apron and smile. Trade that for something else useful later. Hold up the file.

– Okay. Go pop it in the door.

Kain

Doctor Rian's on the blue line. Here at the nurses' station is where they all criss-cross. Green, yellow, red, blue. Follow blue around the corner. Office wing. Scan the doors. Left, right, left, right.

S. RIAN.

Nobody's here. All the doctors are out, on the wards, in the hive, striding around, white coats and boards.

I try the knob and it opens. Looks like she's still moving in. Boxes half empty on the floor, a bag on the table. Set down the file on her desk. *Lavimodière, Marnie*. My writing, neat and blocked. I got A's in letters at school.

She has a lot of books. Run my fingers over the spines of them in the box. Mostly brown leather. Some big and thick.

Suddenly, there's the clatter of horses' hooves thumping over the field, getting louder as they reach the road outside the infirmary. Outside the door, nurses running. They hear it too. Harnesses jangling. A wicker and a neigh and the door thrown open.

– Doctor! We need a doctor!

Head laundryman bursts in the door, practically jumping.

Two boys carry in a smaller boy, white-faced, silent. He ain't even crying. Must've fainted.

– Lay him down quickly!

Doctor Rian rushes down the hall. She ain't even got her coat off yet, but she tosses a box on the table and turns. The boys dump the hurt one onto a bed in the hallway, grunting, like they're throwing a flour sack. He must be heavy, dead weight that he is.

Patients crowd into the halls, gawking. Doctor Rian throws her coat at a nurse and bends over the boy.

– Back to bed, everyone.

Nurse Stokes, up and down the hallways, ushering the littlest ones out of sight.

– All of you, back to your rooms.

Now here comes the head laundryman, shaking hands and face tinged grey as his hair.

– Got it mangled.

I creep down the hall, quietly. Not to be seen.

Doctor Rian lifts the boy's arm to see his hand. What a mess he's made. Fingers flattened, blood everywhere. Lucky if he'll ever be able to curl his fingers properly again without them swaying to one side like hay, windblown.

– Get him to the surgery, quickly.

Doctor Rian's voice quiet, tense. She moves down the hall, next to the stretcher.

That'll be it for his laundry duties. He'll probably be coddled here for a good while. Infirmary food's always better and he can laze around. It's not all bad, getting hurt, but I wonder where they'll put him next when he's all patched. Not much use for a one-armed Moron around here.

With all the fuss, I creep away. If Alistair's here, I want to know. And now's a good time to be looking without being seen.

Back out to the mail hall, striding quick like I've got business here. I don't need to look at the chart on the wall, just follow along the yellow line for patients, peep in, peep in. Four doors, five. Three patients in some, four in others. Them doors are closed. Warning signs up. Pneumonia, probably. Flu. Maybe diarrhoea. Hells bells, that's bad.

Take a quick peek down the other hall—all people waiting to go back to the wards. Done being sick. Waiting for attendants, waiting for nurses. Guides to take them through the trams, back up to their beds.

Staff are the worst for getting lost. Need a guide, half of them. Like it's a tour.

Schlep the attendants. Schlep the nurses. Hells bells, even schlep the doctors who have no idea where they're going. Beehive to Administration building. Through the courtyard. Way One. Down the tram. Way two. Up and through the breezeway, then down again. Way Three.

How hard is it?

But I don't complain.

Better to cooperate. Better for me. It's hard for them to give you a whipping or hang you over the toilet if they need you to lead them through the tunnel. Just never know, do they, if you're gonna take 'em to a dead end and take off.

Seventeen. Eighteen.

Sop. It's Marnie.

She's alone in a little two-bed room. Poke my head in, creep up to the bed. She don't look at me. Just looks at her hands, her little head moving back and forth, back and forth. Her eyes blink fast. I come closer. Put my hand on top of hers. She squeezes me a little, head moving

Kain

faster, looking out of the corner of her eyes. Dark, dark brown with big lashes, like a princess or an Egyptian. Move slow so she don't get scared, reaching up to touch her hair. Yes, it's chopped. Rough at the ends. Dark as her eyes and smooth.

– Ya-ya-ya.

Her mouth moves and she makes a noise but it's not talking. Not words, just noises. I wonder if she's trying to say hi. Squeeze her hand again.

– Andie!

Whip around, quick. He's standing in the doorway, striped pyjamas, buttons missing. Hair longer than it's allowed to be. Giant scratch down his face. Crutches. Hand looking even more warped than the last time I seen him. Only gets worse as he gets older. I'm sure he'd curse our father every day for that if he weren't dead.

– Shouldn't you be delivering the mail or something?

I rush over and wrap my arms around him. He laughs, then shoves me. He's alive! He's here. I punch him hard in the shoulder.

– What the hell was that for?

– Left without me.

My voice comes out scatchy and ragged. Hurts. I punch him again.

– I sent you a note. Plans changed. You didn't come. Anyway, it's a good thing you didn't. Peterson was right. Jumping from a train's bloody painful. Broke my ankle, too.

He's bigger every time I see him. Towers over me now. My twin but a full head taller. Face tanned and healthy enough from the food they get over at the farm. Way better than what we get on the ward. Fresh milk and eggs and as much as they want because they're in the field, haying and mucking stalls, mending fences and rolling into bed at night, shoulders aching.

He's half a man now.

He pinches my nipple through my dress and laughs.

– Look at you. Real woman now. Don't they give you a tit-slinger in here?

I shove him. His hands are enormous. Starting to grow a bit of hair on the backs of them. Makes the scars stand out even starker.

– How's life changing diapers?

Laughs, like he's funny, like he's better than me now. Something he learned over with the boys in the farm dorm. Growing taller and stronger and sure of himself. So sure he thought he could jump off a train and be okay.

Kain

– You see that lad that came in?

He looks at me, serious suddenly.

I nod.

– Was it bad?

Clear my throat.

– Yeah. Really bad.

– Damn. Poor fella.

He'd know how much it hurts, having your hands damaged like that. Look down at his clenched fist, rubbing one thumb over the scar of the other hand. Probably don't even know he's doing it.

– Better shove off, sis. I'm supposed to be an invalid.

He ducks out the door. Gone again.

Siobhan

Only noon and I've already repaired a boy's mangled hand, prescribed fourteen lots of medication, and taken glass out of the foot of two little girls from the schoolhouse. Rounds lasted an hour this morning, and the diarrhoea is spreading faster than we can contain it. I still haven't entirely got rid of the quease in my own stomach, though I'm certain that's to do with the constant rank smell as much as any germs.

The jar of lavender hand cream someone's left on my desk has been like a posy on my lapel. It soothes the raw, chafed skin and disguises the smell of dried urine at the same time.

I ring the bell and Nurse Joseph opens the door.

– Do you take dictation?

She looks at me and shakes her head.

– No, I'm sorry.

– Is there a secretary here?

– In the administration office. You'd have your own. You don't need to type out your own memos.

– I don't have time to go up there. I barely have time to use the facilities.

Nurse Joseph just looks at me, grinning.

– Yes, I see.

– Never mind, thank you. I will write it out again and take it up.

She nods, then stops.

– When you're finished, you can just leave it in the Admin slot at the nurses' station. Fel will pick it up for you and bring back the typed copies.

– Fine. Thanks.

A small mercy. If I can avoid Administration altogether, that would be lovely. I close the door to my office and sit down at the desk. A stack of paperwork is already threatening to topple.

It's been years since I've written out a memo long-hand but needs must.

Nurse Joseph was correct. The next morning, I see a folder placed neatly in the slot next to my door, and there it is.

To: All Staff

Re: Containing Contamination

All doorknobs, faucets, handles, and surfaces are to be washed twice daily with a solution of vinegar and water. Rags are to be laundered after each use.

Siobhan Rian, M.D.

I am about to check on the lad with the damaged hand when someone yells at me from down the corridor.

– Doctor Rian!

A young nurse is struggling to support another young woman, who's clutching her throat and wheezing. I rush down to help them and nurses flank us on either side.

– Let's put her here in this treatment room. What's happened?

– She has asthma. Not usually like this, though.

It's then that I recognise Sera, the midwife. She paces around, not letting us sit her down. Her wheezing sounds almost like bagpipes—hollow, thready. Her lips are blue and her eyes bloodshot.

– Loosen her dress at the top. Undo the buttons, quickly.

The keys jangle in my hands—nerves—as I shift through them one by one, trying to find the one to the medicine cabinet. This one. I should mark them with paint.

– You need to sit down, Sera, please.

I wrench a key through the lock and twist. Mercifully it gives way. Stacks of empty boxes, half-filled bottles, labels worn away, tattered. I'll have to organise this so I don't kill someone with the wrong medicine. Where the hell are the mustard plasters?

One of the nurses hovers over me, waiting for instructions.

– Run for some boiling water. Fill a bowl and bring it to me quickly. Sit *down*. Please, Sera. Put your elbows up like this.

Kain

I move to help her raise her arms and cradle them behind her head, like a lazy adolescent lying in a hammock.

– Hold them like this.

Before Sera can move again, I grab a stethoscope and press the cool disc to her white chest. Her airway is nearly completely restricted.

God almighty, where's this girl's chart? Why isn't it hanging on a bulletin board somewhere? Asthma like this is lethal.

The nurse comes dashing in, water sloshing out the bowl.

– Careful, careful, I don't want to treat you for burns as well.

She puts it down on the table and I set to work immediately with the mustard plasters.

– What else do you need, Doctor?

– Muslin cloths? Bedsheets? Get me something—I'm not particular.

She rushes out again.

– Sera, sit forward.

I move her so she's breathing in the mustard vapour, but it's not working fast enough and she's panicking, trying to stand up again.

– I want you to count your breaths in your head. One to ten.

Her shoulder relaxes a little under my hand. The nurse throws me a threadbare towel and I parachute it overtop of Sera's head, creating a tent.

– I know it's hard. Just keep counting. The vapour should start to help in a minute.

I rub her back, feeling the crackling, tight inhalations. Listen with the stethoscope. Wait.

– Was she attending a birth?

Sera's shirt is soaked through with sweat and vapour, but at least her breathing is easing a little.

– Yes. One of the high-grades. She was carrying the infant to its cot when one of the inmates burst through the door and scared her. She almost dropped the baby. She gasped, then she started on with the asthma.

– Keep breathing, Sera. There you are. Let the steam work. Where's the baby now?

– On its way down.

– Baby boy.

My heart slows a bit. Talking's a good sign.

– Never mind wasting your breath.

I press firmly on Sera's back.

– Keep breathing.

The other nurse who brought Sera down is fidgeting by the door.

– You can go, if you need to. I'll take good care of her.

– You're sure?

– Yes. Wouldn't want you to leave your ward short-handed.

– Okay. Thanks.

She hurries off.

I get up and close the door.

– That's how many babies now? Three since I got here?

Sera takes the cloth off her head and looks at me.

I put the cloth back over her head.

– Sorry, it's obviously not your fault. I was just observing.

– It's all right. I suppose. It's difficult to. Wrap your head. Around.

– Yes, it is. The idea of having a midwife in an institution for the feeble-minded when half the point of the asylum is to stop defective women from having babies is absurd.

– And yet, here we are.

She pokes her head out of the cloth.

– I don't suppose you have any ideas?

I loop the stethoscope back around my neck.

– I'm afraid I just don't see one. The only cure is abstinence, and in my experience, that's a poor plan indeed for stopping babies. Healthy red-blooded boys will find healthy red-blooded girls, and intimate relations will occur, whether the couple is feeble-minded or not. So it's an asylum, or better yet, a sterilisation. I know which one I prefer.

Sera's cheeks are flushed as she emerges from the sheet again.

– Most people aren't quite so forthright, Doctor Rian.

– Yes, well.

I shake my head.

– I've seen what happens when you try to deter people's natural proclivities. It's unrealistic and locking them away is just plain cruel.

Sera's eyebrows lift.

– How many babies do you deliver here?

– More than you might think.

I know I should let this go. Sera has her position here for a reason, and I have at least thirty patients waiting in the infirmary. Colds and fevers, broken bones, three cases of vomiting and diarrhoea. But curiosity has the better of me. I sit down on the desk.

– Why do you do it? Why not work elsewhere?

Sera stares back at me steadily for a moment. I've struck a nerve, I think. For a second I consider retracting it, but I don't.

– I could ask the same of you.

I shrug in acknowledgement. I don't know what I'd say if she pressed the point. If she actually asked me. Somehow, I don't feel like lying and that scares me a little.

Why would I ever trust anyone— let alone this girl?

She relents first, luckily.

– I was training to be a midwife, but without a senior midwife, I can't finish my apprenticeship. I haven't got any other skills to earn a living, so I'm stuck in limbo for the time-being.

– Can you find another midwife to train you?

She sighs and looks at me. Straight at me, like she's daring me to hear her story. In for a penny, in for a pound.

How did I manage this, in just a few short minutes? Delving into someone else's life like I've any right at all to ask her questions.

– Not easily.

– But the institution isn't that particular.

– No. They just need someone skilled at baby catching who can be fairly discreet. The outcome of the delivery isn't really of great concern to them. Some of the nurses and attendants would much rather I wasn't here. They don't like the interruption of strangers on the wards.

– Well maybe they should take better care that their patients don't fall pregnant.

Sera smiles.

– The ratios aren't exactly in their favour.

– Do you lose a lot of mothers?

– Not very many more than in the outside world. Feeble-minded women are just as capable of delivering babies as normal women.

– Even more so, it would seem.

Just then, Matron strides past the door to the exam room.

– Seraphine? Are you not well?

Sera stands, then moves toward the door.

– Fine, thank you. Just a touch of asthma.

– Well Doctor Rian is very busy. If you're better now, then please go and attend your patients.

I feel I should defend her, having kept her here.

– She's answering some questions for me.

I gesture for Matron to enter the room.

With a quick look down the hall, Sera ducks out just as Matron comes in.

I stand over Matron by half a head, but her posture is ramrod straight, her apron impeccable, even given everything she must brush up against in a day.

– How many pregnancies have there been here in the past year?

I hold Matron's stare, even as her eyes narrow and her lips twitch.

– I couldn't say.

Doesn't want to, more likely. I wait.

– I don't always know.

– I don't believe that's true.

Matron sighs.

– I'm not looking to blame anyone, Matron. Just to understand what's happening here.

– It shouldn't happen.

Her face gives her away for a second. She's not immune to this. Not at all.

– But they seem to find a way.

I move past her and close my door.

– How many?

Outside a patient screams and running footsteps pound down the hallway, but I focus on Matron's face.

– Twenty-three births.

– And how many abortions?

Matron looks shocked that I'd even say the word out loud.

Kain

– That, I don't know. As far as I'm aware, that's not part of the midwife's duties, and I've never asked.

– And how many girls and women are living here?

– Five hundred and fourteen.

I whistle out loud and shake my head.

– Five hundred and fourteen. Well, we're doing an excellent job then, aren't we?

A nurse approaches, holding a tiny bundle.

– We tried to get him to suckle, but he won't. He's not breathing very well. He's just...I think he's too little.

I reach for the baby. A boy, premature.

The nurse wrings her hands.

– Probably headed straight for the Backyard anyway, but I thought I'd best bring him to see if there was anything you can do.

– What do you mean the Backyard?

The nurse gestures with her chin.

– The cemetery across the street. Next to the farm?

– I've never seen it. Never had the chance to go to the farm. There's a cemetery near here?

– Not near here, Doctor. On the grounds. A cemetery for the patients.

The baby's face has unusually perfect features—tiny, even, with a snub nose and gorgeous almond eyes.

– Damn.

– What?

The nurse looks at me.

I've said it out loud. Bad habit. It's hard to believe this perfect physique is associated with the unfortunate condition he's been born with, but I've seen so many babies who looked just this perfect, just this beautiful, in this same, delicate way. They all develop the slanted, wide-set eyes and slack-jawed expression that will eventually get them committed.

I lay a finger on his chest. Maybe with a little time and encouragement, he'll eat and grow stronger. I saw this method once—

Footsteps fall in the hallway, then a sniff. Dr. Braithwaite looks over my shoulder.

– Mongoloid. Funny how they look so perfect at birth, isn't it?

He's read my mind.

– That's what happens when defectives procreate.

I can't disagree, of course. It's proven that mental defectiveness is hereditary. I've read the journal articles and heard the arguments. Feeble-minded parents are far more likely to give birth to feeble-minded children. This is why the eugenics societies exist. Trying to find a solution to this ever-expanding problem.

Dr. Braithwaite frowns, irritated.

– It doesn't matter. They just keep multiplying.

Asylums like this exist for the very reasons he's just suggested. I know it. Medical professionals know it. The city knows it. But this reasoning is flawed. We're doctors, for God's sake, not wardens. We should do our job, sterilise the patients who don't need custodial care and let them back out to live their lives.

This baby, on the other hand, will probably never leave this hospital. He'll go to the infirmary to the infants' ward, and straight on to a custodial life, unfortunately. But at least he's in the right place. He is what idiot asylums were designed for.

– I still think the system needs a good overhaul. It's unnecessary in many cases, not to mention incredibly expensive.

He turns.

– You're not suggesting letting them out?

– Not all of them, no.

Now he's fired up and I can picture him lecturing to a class of first-year university students.

– Here, segregated from one another and from the larger community, they can't keep breeding like rabbits and degrading the population.

– And yet...

I look down at the Mongoloid baby as proof.

– And yet, the pernicious seed will be sown.

– Is the mother a patient?

– Yes, high-grade.

Braithwaite looks at me as if I've just proven his point, then walks off with the baby.

Kain

Fel

Get a move-on, Felwyn. The breakfast bell will go off any moment, can't you see the time?

Waited ages for the washroom this morning. Susan weeping on the toilet, not moving. No soap left. Barely any water. Only a brown dress in the clothes pile, scratchy and too small. Laundry's held up. Better get here today or tomorrow we'll have no clothes at all.

Rush to the ward.

– You're late. Do it again and you'll be docked.

Nurse Pisspot glares at me and hands me a stack of sheets. Follow her around, strip the pissy beds, wipe down the waterproof surface, turn the mattress, put a new sheet on. Cart the sheets to the laundry collection. Stink rubs off on my hands, my arms, my clothes.

Hand out nighties, take the soiled ones.

Laundry piles up. And up and up. Glad I don't work in the laundry. Never-ending whirring, cranking of the machines. Squeeze. Squeeze. Lift, hang.

Someone's moved the rock from the door, and me without a coat. I run around to the chapel and duck in, running through the tram. Still smell breakfast getting schlepped from the kitchen. Boy's bent down to tie his shoes. Nick two buns off one of the trays and keep going. Don't even notice.

No time to eat them now—shove them in my apron and sneak through the door.

Hell of a shrieking and commotion this morning, worse than usual. Someone's in a foul temper.

– Get up, ya bleedin' imbecile.

Nurse drags Marcia from her bed. Nurse Miller maybe? Don't know her.

Marcia yells and the Nurse shoves her. As wide as she is tall, this one.

– Yer too old to be wetting the bed. Get in the corner.

Nurse turns around, spots me. Can tell by my apron that I'm on ward duty.

– Get me them sheets.

My stomach turns. Sheets are soggy and cold, reek of piss.

– Put it on her.

Marcia's up to my shoulder now. Remember her when she was a little thing in the infants' ward. One of them with the crooked spine and big head. Can't hardly speak, all mumbling and gurgling, but she can do her numbers all right. Liked the clay and the paints. Used to get tired on the walks, though, and want to be carried. Once sat down on a tree root by the lake and shrieked until the nurse slapped her and dragged her back to the alligator.

I feel bad about it but the nurses get into their mood sometimes and it's just best to ride it out. Marcia knows it as well as I do, but she still cries when I drape the sheets on her and tie them at the front. Don't know how long they'll make her stand in the corner wearing pissy sheets but I reckon she'll miss her breakfast.

– No liquids after lunch for this one.

Nurse hollers across the room to the attendant who scribbles it into her notebook.

Marnie's lying in bed there. Again. I don't understand why they don't get her up.

Marnie. Are you in there?

I bring her a hairbrush. She leans toward me, drool dripping onto her pillow. I pull the brush through her hair. She mewls like a barn kitten. One of the littlest ones who's not going to live.

I pull her nightie off. She's skinny—you can count her ribs, but she has a nice belly on her at least. Little paunch. That won't improve much in here. Half a minute each for eating. Shovel it in, who cares if it drips down her chin? Her hair is beautiful, though. Soft.

I help Nurse Stokes change her diaper—roll her to one side, then the other.

– You're going to make the staff meeting?

Pisspot calls to Nurse Stokes.

– Tonight? After shift

– Supposed to provide some sort of refreshment. Probably tea and stale cookies.

– What's it for?

Nurse Stokes gestures to the clean nightie and I pass it to her, help put it over Marnie's head.

– Count of three, Fel.

I hold Marnie under the legs and Nurse Stokes grabs her under the arms.

– One, two, three.

We plop her in her wheelchair.

– Elopement.

Kain

Pisspot is still talking.

– Third one this month or something. They should just build a higher fence. Stick some barbed wire along the top and call it a day.

– They'd find a way to escape in the car then. Or walking straight through the gates, brazen as you please.

Nurse Stokes sounds tired. Like it's her that's chasing after us.

– You'd think the Dungeon'd deter them, but no.

– Well, that lad that's run off's going to know about it, isn't he?

– Sure will.

– Oh, that's right. Your husband's out at the farm then, isn't he? How'd that turn out?

Pisspot has a chuckle.

– Well he's been chucked out of farm work. Put back on the wards. Mr. Sullivan said he's got enough to do without chasing after boys who're intent on running away. He's got twenty new head of cattle and thirty pigs to deal with, not to mention the chickens, the harvest and all the butchering. The farm's full and busy and he can only have ones who're willing and able.

Nurse Stokes stops talking and looks at me. Looks guilty, almost.

– Felwyn.

I stare at her. She's never called me that before. But she's saying it differently, like she's trying it on her tongue.

– Alistair Felwyn. Your brother then, is it?

I nod.

– Sorry, Fel.

She mutters it low. Shakes her head.

– I'm sure he'll be all right.

Alistair'll be sorry about that, probably. Loves the animals, that boy. And the outdoors. Can't imagine what he'll do in the wards. Cleaning up the younger boys, probably. Changing pissy beds. They'll have him mopping, I'll bet. It was hard for him on the farm, I know, with his hands being the way they were, but the fresh air always done him good.

Why can't he just learn to do what he's told?

I push Marnie over to the window. Her head moves back and forth, back and forth, and her hand moves from side to side like she's searching. Nobody's looking so I let her hold my hand for a second. Her head stops moving. A slow smile creeps onto her mouth.

– Ya-ya-ya.

Stokes creeps up. Never hear her coming. She's like a panther.

– Never known you to have a charge before, Fel.

I shrug and let Marnie's hand go. She's like a doll, so tiny and perfect. Her hair shines and I put my hand to it. Make a face at Nurse Stokes.

– You're right. She could do with a better haircut.

Stokes hands me a pair of scissors from her giant nurse's pocket. Has more in there than my Mam's purse.

I take the scissors. It has to be the sharp ones and Stokes knows it, because the dull ones just butcher your hair. Pinch a bunch between my fingers like I learned in hair dressing. Squint hard, line it up. Cut. Round the back, chop, chop. She vibrates a little, can't stop moving. The way she is. But she's trying to sit still. I can tell. Dust off her neck.

– What do you think, Marnie?

Look up at Stokes, surprised.

– I just can't say La-vee-da-more or whatever the heck it is. We'll just call her Marnie. And don't bother telling Nurse Roland.

Just grin.

Stokes turns Marnie around.

– That's better. Looks like a proper little girl now.

Marnie's hand is resting in mine again, like she slipped it in there when I wasn't looking.

– Do you want her, Fel?

Don't know what makes me say yes but I nod. As if I ain't got enough to do, guiding and delivering messages, ward duty and everything else that comes along, but she needs somebody and I ain't never had nobody neither.

– You can have her then. She's yours to care for.

Wipe her face with the towel. Pat her head.

– Good morning, all.

There's Doctor Rian in the ward. And Doctor McHugh.

Kain

Stand up straight next to Marnie. Both of us neat and tidy. She's got a spot of drool on her dress now. Swipe it quick with the bottom of my apron.

– Miss Felwyn, good morning.

Doctor McHugh has a loud voice but he always smiles. He ain't bad looking neither.

– Making out all right?

I nod.

– And I see you've taken charge of our new patient. Good morning, Miss Lavimodière.

He's strange. Always calling us Miss and Mister when he knows we're not attendants. We're nothing.

There he goes, walking down the ward. Good morning, how are you? Good morning, nice day? Good morning, any complaints today? No. No complaints. Even if he smiles all day long, you don't complain to the doctor. That's the nurses' job.

There's the line-up.

Nurses holding charts. Doctor standing by the window. See you one at a time, one at a time. Frowning, nodding, signing. Marking things.

Patients see him, one by one. Nurses stand guard.

– She's wet the bed again.

– She's been up three times last night.

– She's got a cough.

– This one's had a fever.

– Take her down to the infirmary, please, nurse. She'll wait for Doctor Rian.

We wait out rounds. Nurse Stokes looks at me.

– All well with Marnie, Fel?

I nod. Better make sure Marnie ain't got no complaints.

Siobhan

Sera sinks into the chair opposite my desk while I plug the electric kettle in.

– How do you like that?

She eyes it curiously.

– It's pretty damned convenient, I have to say.

– I've never tried one.

– Neither had I before I got here. Now boiling the water on the woodstove at home seems to take ages.

– There's no electricity out there, is there?

– No, unfortunately.

– We haven't got it either.

We? I glance at her finger. No ring.

– I didn't think I'd miss it as much as I do. But it's dark out there at night. Pitch dark, really. Sometimes I'd love to be able to just switch on a light.

Sera nods.

– You came from the city then?

– Yes. Toronto area.

– You're far enough from home, aren't you?

I smile. The kettle starts rumbling and I get up to pour the boiling water into the pot.

– Tell me about Fel first, and then we'll get to the other thing.

Sera leans back, crossing her legs at the ankles. It seems like she's assessing me for a moment. I could be imagining it, of course, but her face is very expressive and she doesn't make much effort to conceal her thoughts. They play, like music, across her features.

– I don't know the whole story, of course, but I know her better than anybody, I reckon, and she has never spoken to me.

– At all?

– No. I honestly don't think there's much wrong with her upstairs, but it's hard to say for certain when she hasn't uttered a word in years.

Kain

– Years? How long has she been here exactly?

Sera shrugs.

– Since before I got here. Probably six or seven years. She was probably eleven or so.

– Is that unusual?

– No. Some of the patients come as young as five or six years old, but she just...she doesn't seem to belong here. That's what's always puzzled me about her.

– How do you mean?

– Well, it seems she attended school in her community– at least long enough to have learned her basic numbers and letters. She attended school here, too, for the first few years. Did quite well.

I think about that as I wet the tea.

– She's definitely not stupid.

I go to the filing cabinet and scan for F. Doesn't take much riffling through to find her file.

–It says here she's epileptic. Did you know?

–Really?

Sera looks incredulous.

–I've never seen her have a seizure.

I shrug.

–Maybe the enema treatment and routine has been effective for her?

Sera shrugs back.

– Maybe. But that doesn't explain why she doesn't speak, does it?

– No.

I have to concede that. Those seem to be unrelated.

– At first they didn't want to let her go to school, because she didn't participate at all.

– Small wonder for a mute.

Sera rolls her eyes.

– That's what I said. Luckily for Fel, one of the nurses in there realised that she was brighter than she seemed and insisted on her being sent.

– But not anymore?

– No. The school only goes up to end of elementary.

– Well, I suppose that's all they feel the students will achieve, isn't it?

Kain

– And honestly, Doctor Rian, most of them don't. Then it's off to trades.

I remember the tea I've poured and go to pick it up.

– You can call me Siobhan.

She takes the cup.

– I couldn't. The staff are very particular here. Respect and hierarchy and all that.

– Well, the door is closed, so we can do what we like. In the hallway you can pick it up again if you need to.

Sera shakes her head, but she's smiling as she glances down at my riding pants.

– I don't suppose you care much for tradition.

– Not really, no.

She sets the tea down to cool.

– When I got here, they had Fel in Idiots' doing feeding and dressing, and then in the Elderly cottage, but she's terrified of the old people so I asked Matron to see about getting her a job in the office.

– And now she delivers messages and such?

– Yes. Still on the ward in the mornings, though, but at least she gets a break from it all day.

– I have to say I'm surprised they trust her with as much as they do.

She looks at me.

– Why?

– Guiding people around, taking down important information.

Sera shrugs.

– Not everything here is as you'd expect, Doctor. And anyway, every hand is needed.

– Where does she live?

– The Pavilion. She's a high-grade Moron, and they have the most privileges. An open common room and such.

And swimming privileges?

Something tells me I shouldn't ask that outright.

– Tell me one more thing.

– Of course.

– When patients are—

– Inmates, Doctor.

Kain

– I hate that term. This isn't a jail.

– I suppose. But, well... Fine, yes, your patients?

– When they're on ground *parole*–

I give her a pointed look.

– Are they allowed to go anywhere they like?

– Within reason, I suppose so. They're not allowed to go past the gates unless they have town parole. And not into the forest unless it's for an activity like camping or archery. And certainly not to the lake. An inmate drowned herself there one day and it's completely off-limits unless attendants are present.

Oh. So *that's* it.

– Can I ask you something?

She looks at me.

– Of course.

– If you don't believe the patients should be here, why did you come?

I wait for a moment before answering.

– I came to put a much simpler programme in place. It's already widely successful in the States, and it would ensure more of the patients can be released without being a danger to the germplasm. They needn't be committed all their lives. They need only be sterilised. A simple operation, and then they can be released.

Sera falls quiet.

– What's the germ—what did you call it?

– Germplasm?

– Yes.

– The stock. The population. What I mean is, if they can't reproduce, they can't propagate more feeble-minded babies. And there's no reason that they can't carry out jobs and live out their lives with family.

– You'd sterilise everyone then?

– No, no. Clearly some of the patients need to be here on a custodial basis. The idiots and imbeciles, certainly. They're far too much of a burden on their families to be sent home, but the morons—like Fel, for instance—can quite easily work in laundries and domestic service, particularly if we take care that they can't get into trouble. Think about it, Sera. Wouldn't it be better to stop the pregnancy than to have to deal with its aftermath?

She thinks for a long moment.

– Is that why so many of them die, Doctor?

– What do you mean?

– The germplasm? Is that why so many of them are sickly? I've worked in communities and other places and it's true, sometimes babies die, but not half the time. Is that germplasm you're talking about... is that the reason? We deliver them straight to the infirmary and yet half of them end up in the Backyard. Why?

I sit down on the edge of my desk.

– You know most defective babies don't live long, Sera.

– But not all these babies *are* defective. Some of them are and you can tell right away. They're deformed or they're Mongoloids or other things. And sometimes the babies are born sick. Syphillis, low birth weight, premature, but not always. Not half the time.

– What are you saying?

– I'm saying, I deliver the babies, they're living and breathing when I leave them, and then for some reason—this germplasm, or something else—they don't survive.

– Is it possible they're adopted? Placed on the Infants' ward and you're not told?

–No. I've seen the coffins. I've seen where they're buried.

Tears start down her face and I quickly hand her a handkerchief.

Something sparks in my memory.

– That baby. The Mongoloid that was brought down the day you had that terrible asthma attack. Is he on the Infants ward?

– No. I think he died.

– Died?

I frown. He was a perfect birth weight. No cleft palate.

– Ask the boys at the woodshop if they made a coffin for him, but I'm fairly sure, Doctor. Fel would know. She takes them for burial a lot of the time.

– He died? He shouldn't have.

Kain

Fel

Miss Street is Roman Catholic and she chaperones the RCs to the church in town on Sundays. Alistair and I can sit across the aisle. The one place we see each other.

Miss Street sits on my other side. She knows all the words to all the prayers, every single hymn by heart. And things I bet even the priest don't know.

I kneel beside her as she prays the Lord's Prayer.

Alistair has to stick his leg out in the aisle when he's praying. He looks pale, like his cheeks had all the colour sucked out of them. They let him out of punishment to go to church but it's straight back in when he gets home. I don't ask what they do to him but I can see the bruise on his face and the way he's cradling his arm.

After service, he tries to look at me but he's shaking.

I pass him a note.

Is it bad in there?

He just nods but don't meet my eyes.

Next time I won't let them drag me back, Fel. I'll be gone and away, so help me God.

He don't say we. I want to punch him again but he looks so miserable I don't bother.

It's raining so the buggies come to get us. Boys from the farm drive them up and we pile in. Alistair gets taken right from the buggy at the Administration building back to punishment. He don't even get to eat with us.

– You're lucky to be let out of the dungeon at all.

By the ear, down the hall. He's stopped flailing by now. Too proud to bother making any noise at all when they beat him. But his eyes have changed. His anger is deep, deep inside now.

Brunch is in the main dining room for all the church-goers. My favourite part of the week. Today I can't even taste it. Miss Street sits at my table and passes me the apples.

Sunday afternoons are free. Anna-May wants me to go to the art studio with her but I give her the slip and go up the canteen first. Only place you can get hot coffee.

Billy grins when he sees me. When he smiles, one side of his face lifts and the other side stays flat. But both eyes smile. Especially for the littlest kids. He likes the littlest kids. Gives them penny sweets sometimes even if they can't pay for them.

Two girls are in front of me.

– Wha'll oo 'ave?

He stretches his mouth wide and talks slowly. Uses his tongue like Doctor Goldberg taught him.

– What did you say?

One of the girls leans forward. She's in a dress. A real one. Got a baby on her hip. From the mothers' wing then. Her hair is done and she's got nice laced boots on.

– Wha'll. Oo. 'Ave?

Billy says each word slowly, loudly. His arms come out like he wants to fly, but that's just so he can make the words sound big.

The girls giggle.

– I think he's asking what we want to have.

One turns to the other and snickers.

The shorter one shouts *We're not quite ready yet*, like Billy's deaf.

I fix my hand on my hip. Butt in between them and the counter. I don't have time for dawdling today. They've got nothing to do but feed their babies and play with their toes. Some of us have got chores.

Billy don't help himself, moving as slow as he does. Sometimes I want to smack him myself, but he's one of us and these girls are just passing through. Just here until their babies don't need their milk anymore and then it's back to their lives in the city wards, full and crowded and stinking, but not as stinking as it is here.

Every time a car comes for one, I think of getting in right beside the girl who's leaving. Taking my suitcase and just slipping right in the back seat. Back to my old room in the city over the bridge.

But you need papers for that and I don't have any.

One girl gives me the stink eye for butting in but I give it right back to her.

Billy grins at me.

He don't even have to ask me. He knows what I want.

– Hee's or coffee wiv miwk and shuga. An' ee's a cookie.'

Kain

I hand over my clink and he counts them out carefully into the till.

I point to the sweets carousel and he looks over.

– Somfin else?

He shuffles over. One leg drags a bit but so what? He spins the carousel and I point to a cherry lollipop.

He takes it out and hands it to me.

I hold out my hand with the coins and he picks one out. His fingers don't close properly. It takes three tries.

The girls giggle.

I give them a huge stink eye. Grit my teeth.

One holds her stomach and caws.

– Watch out. That one bites.

They laugh. Two crows. My fists ball up without me telling them to. Hard and tight, itching to deck them.

– What's this?

Nurse Stokes comes around the corner. Sees my face. Sees the girls.

– There's plenty of work to be done for idle patients.

Her stink eye is way better than mine.

The girls stop giggling.

– MacDonald is busy here at his post. Order something or go back to your ward.

– Cookie, please.

– Tea, please.

They mutter their words, looking down at the ground as they hand over their clink. Must be overflowing there on the mothers' ward. They should try real ward work. Make them think twice about opening their legs.

Billy fills their orders. I take my lollipop. Push it down in my apron pocket.

– See 'ou tomorrow, Fel.

He waves and smiles but I don't smile back. He can't help it. He can't. But he makes us all look stupid.

There's a new one coming in today, John told me this morning. Appointment is at ten o'clock.

At nine fifty-five, I get my mailbags and take the stack of messages. Head down the main hall and down the stairs, peeking through the double doors. There's a noise above and I melt into the wall but nobody comes out and I look back.

An Idiot, by the looks of him. His father carries him through the doors, heels stomp-stomp-stomp on the wooden floor. Stops at the front desk.

– Good morning.

– Hello.

– You must be Mr. Williams.

– Yes. I'm here with my son, Bernard Williams.

Sounds like the Dad has a cold or a headache. His voice is muffled.

– We've been expecting you. Welcome to Avonhurst.

The nurse gets up from the desk. Waves to the attendant.

– Can you please get a wheelchair for this new inmate?

Jerome comes back, pushing a wheelchair.

The Dad kisses Bernard on the head and sets him down in the chair—gentle, soft, like he's going to break if he bangs him down.

Bernard turns his face up. His mouth moves like Billy's, wide, slow. He tries to cling to the Dad's jacket, but his hands don't close when he wants. Arms only jerk. His legs kick out, banging the foot rest.

The Dad waves and goes to the front door.

Jerome turns Bernard around in the chair. Damn, I hope he don't come this way. He'll fob the kid off on me and I'll be taking him down for his nit check.

Nope, he turns to the hallway across from me and down the hall he goes, wheels clacking on the floor. Poor kid is bawling but nobody's listening now. Down to the trams and the Beehive.

– Fel!

Nurse beckons me. Better do as I'm told.

– Here's the paperwork for the office. Take it up to Mrs. Ellis.

Back upstairs I suppose, like I ain't got nothing else to do. Take the file and head upstairs to Doctor McHugh's secretary. She's on the phone and waves me away. So I put it down on John's desk.

Where is John? It's late in the day for him not to be here.

Mail's waiting.

I could do it for him. If I concentrated hard enough, I could do it.

Sit down, mind the clock. Where is he?

It's a new page too. No room for a mistake. Take up the pen and put in Bernard Williams in my best letters. Turn the page back. When you're reading a giant column all the way down, it's easy to count. But Marnie took up the last line. I have to hold the numbers in my head and turn to the new page. Stare hard at it so I remember where the numbers go. Hold them in my head in boxes, and the boxes in order, just like Mrs. Rampton taught me at the schoolhouse. 2980. The first three stay the same. The last one counts up by one for the new patient.

Flip the page over like a giant sail. It crackles on its way down. Crease it. Creamy white and sparkling clean. 2980.

– Good morning, Miss Felwyn.

Doctor McHugh comes in.

– I have a package that needs to go to the infirmary when you're finished.

I smile and he looks pleased.

I take up the pen and put the patient number in before I can forget the numbers I'm holding in my head. 2980.

Then go back to the start of the line.

Bernard Williams, Imbecile.

Reason for Admission: Cerebral Palsy.

Maybe one day I'll just start making things up.

Bernard Williams, Alien.

Reason for Admission: His mother had to go back to her spaceship and his father has to work on a boat. He's been disguised as an imbecile so he don't have to pay for his upkeep.

See?

Set the marker in the new place and put the pen back in its holder.

Dash to McHugh's office. Mail will have to wait.

The day goes fast. Barely have time for lunch but that's the way I like it. Busy—too busy to care. Then the bell's ringing again and it's time for ward duty.

Almost forget all about the lollipop but remember when I see Marnie. She's in the dayroom, in the chair by the window. She's already up. I'm glad she got the nice chair. Not that she can see out anyway.

She squeezes my hand and moves her head to look at me. Her eyes never meet my eyes. Like John, only different. John hates looking you in the eye. It hurts him. It makes his toes curl up and his fists clench into balls.

Marnie wants to, but her eyelids are too heavy. Her head shakes a little back and forth. She gets really quiet and still.

Slowly, like it's no big deal, I turn her chair around so the others can't see, then unwrap the candy. Hold it up to her lips to get it wet so she can smell that it's cherry.

Her tongue comes out. Like the kittens drinking milk from the bowl—a tiny taste. She pulls her tongue back in quick, stained pink. Her lips smack, smack again, and she makes a moaning noise. Sort of a laugh. Sort of a question. Put the lollipop back on her tongue. She pulls it back. Giggle.

I think she's saying *more*.

Hold it in her mouth. Pink drool drips onto her nightie. Smear it off with my hand.

Giggle again. Louder.

Now her arms come up. Her eyes flutter. Back. Back. Lips clamp. Teeth bite down. Arms twitch. Legs twitch. Back arches up. Down. Up. Down. Legs kick and kick and kick. Teeth stuck on the lollipop.

It's a seizure. She's having a fit.

The lollipop's stuck in her mouth. What if she bites it off. Chokes? Swallows it?

Start to panic. Heart racing, hands shaking. It's got to come out. Can't kill her with a cherry lollipop.

Push down on her chin and she twists. Cries.

Push down again.

– What's happening Fel?

Nurse Stokes coming around the corner. Second time today.

Marnie's mouth opens. Quick, pull out the lollipop and jam it in my apron.

Stokes looks at the clock.

Kain

– How long?

I point to where it started.

– Thirty seconds?

Nod.

– Oh dear, she's bitten her tongue. She's bleeding.

It's the cherry. The red is dripping out of her mouth.

– Get me something, please, Fel.

Run to the linen cupboard. Grab a facecloth. Knock over a towel but don't stop to pick it up. Later.

Marnie's feet *thwack thwack thwack* against the chair, kicking the table leg, her voice lifting up, up, higher and higher until she's screeching, crying.

Kicking, kicking. Slumping down, down, down, in the chair.

Hand Nurse Stokes the facecloth.

– Fel, grab her other arm, please. Pull her up with me before she slides right out of this chair.

She's heavy and strong. You'd never guess. Put my arm around her back, holding her up, jerking against my chest, my shoulder pulled out trying to hold her.

– Somebody help with this chair!

Pisspot rushing over, red face and blustery, stands behind the chair, pushes the pedal. The chair tips back, back.

– One, two, three.

We pull Marnie back, up.

– God, that'll kill yer back.

Bum onto the seat, head onto the back.

Pisspot tips the chair back down.

– All right now?

Nurse Stokes puts a hand on my shoulder.

– Thanks. Good work, Fel.

Pisspot gawks at me, sneering.

– Look at her face. Lordy, you'd think she'd never seen a patient have a seizure before. You think you look much different when you're having one, do you?

Nurse Stokes turns from strapping Marnie in.

Kain

– Did it scare you, Fel? She's all right.

Just shrug like I don't care. What's Pisspot on about anyway? I never do that. Arms and legs flailing all over the place, drooling, screaming. Stupid cow.

The bell goes and I'm glad. Time for my supper. Leave this stinking ward.

Siobhan

☞ dream I've crawled down into a cave between two sheets of ice. Down, down, like a seal in the arctic escaping a polar bear. The space opens into a yawning mouth with stone walls—a labyrinth—dark, except for lanterns on the wall, every few feet. I take one down and shine it this way and that, but there are endless tunnels. Endless choices. I have no idea which way to go.

And when I wake up, I still can't move. A weight is holding me supine on the bed. I haven't woken like this for years. Not since I was about to get married. The morning of my wedding was the last time.

Now, at least, the sky is starting to lighten to a grey streaked with orange. I stare out the window, force myself to swallow. Breathe. He's gone. I'm here.

And nobody can know.

Slowly, the sun starts to rise higher, bringing pinks and blues to the top of the treeline in the distance. I move my toes, my knees. Stretch my cramped muscles and put a hand outside the blankets.

Damn, it's cold.

But my bladder won't hold out anymore and my stomach is still sensitive. I've washed and washed and washed my hands, but I've had diarrhoea, a cold, vomiting, chills, a rash, and perpetual nausea from the smell of the place. Every minute of the day I'm worried I've caught hepatitis, and every morning when I wake up feeling terrible, I'm more certain I have.

I grab a shawl and push my feet into slippers. Grab the bowl on my night table and vomit bile.

Good morning, good morning, Avonhurst.

The Beehive is blessedly quiet at this hour. I manage to get directly to my office, unmolested, greeted by a stack of charts. When Ben said I would have my work cut out for me, I didn't expect it to arrive by the barrow full.

Kain

One thousand, three hundred patients. I plug in my kettle and wait for it to begin to rumble.

Sera knocks a few moments later.

– Hello. You're here early.

She wipes a hand across her forehead.

Late, actually. I'm just getting off. What are you up to?

– Oh, just cataloguing all the patients in the place, trying to make appointments to see everyone, assess their seizures, organise a research study and find out if I can cure any of them. Then trying to boot some of them out of here.

She grins.

– So just a little light reading then? Starting your day off slowly?

– Yes, exactly. After lunch, if there's time, I think I'll run for parliament.

She laughs.

– Well, of course you can now. There's already one in. Shouldn't be hard.

– An Irish immigrant woman like me? No trouble at all. Have you a patient down here, then?

– Yes, just settled her in. Labour was long and she tore a fair bit.

My stomach clenches. Another baby.

– Who is it?

Sera gets down two mugs from the press and pours the water in to the pot while we're talking. I'm grateful not to have to get up.

– Alicia from the Mother's wing.

– I'll look in on her soon. Baby?

– Healthy boy. Nearly nine pounds and her first.

– Ah. I see. Any stigmata?

– None.

– Is he defective?

– I don't think so. He's alert. Bright eyed. No deformities as far as I can tell.

My stomach relaxes.

She slides my cup across the desk.

– She'll be staying the usual year-long term, then returning home.

– Where is she from?

Kain

– Toronto. Cabbagetown. But she's got a widowed aunt in the country. I think they're planning to send her out there to work after all this.

– And the baby?

– Nursing well. They stay with their mothers for the first year. Then...

I make a note on my ever-growing list. The babies. That's something the league certainly hasn't considered—out of sight, out of mind. But the babies have got to be going somewhere. What the hell good is segregation if we're just shipping the feeble-minded offspring *back* to the city?

The tea Sera's given me is strong and I feel my senses coming awake, the feeling of dread, being down in the caves, receding.

– So you've decided to study epilepsy then?

I shrug.

– Seems as good a topic as any in here. The patients have far too many seizures in my estimation and there are a growing number of treatments.

The gong sounds in the hallway.

Sera stands.

– Have to be going.

– I'll just be here, buried in my paperwork.

She stops for a second, hand on the door.

– Have you thought about asking the psychometrist for help?

– No. I'd completely forgotten about her. What's her name again?

– Miss Jenkins. Eugenia Jenkins.

– I think we've met once, for less than half a minute. I've never seen her since.

Sera snorts.

– I'm not surprised. They call her the troll in Administration. She works next to Doctor McHugh's secretary. Has tea and a sandwich delivered once a day. But she must be able to help you. The woman lives and breathes data. She probably has lists and files you've never even dreamed of.

– Sera, you are brilliant.

She laughs and waves as she swings out the door.

After scribbling a hasty note, I ring the bell and a nurse comes in.

– Can you please get this delivered to Miss Jenkins?

Kain

– Yes, Doctor. Is it urgent or shall I put it in the messages pile? Fel usually comes down after breakfast.

– Yes, yes, that's fine.

My mind is already leaping ahead and I wave her away.

She smiles tightly and shuts the door.

I feel energised like I haven't since I arrived here. If I'm going to be forced into this, the least I can do is make the best of it and get as many of these patients sorted as I can.

Kain

Fel

Saturday. I get up before the gong even sounds. My stomach hurts. Way down low, into my back. Damn, damn, damn. Push my feet in my slippers. Hole on the bottom's getting bigger. Can feel the floor in the one side. Don't dare tell, though. They'll feed the slippers to the fire. Who knows if I'll get another pair?

Head to the bathroom before anyone's there.

Damn. It is that. Again. Hate this bleeding. I stand on the toilet, reach up and feel along the bricks. The outside wall is crumbling from the heave and push of the frost. Easier for me, bricks coming out left and right. I picked one for a hidey-hole when I first moved in here.

Reach inside for the rag and belt. It's a job getting it on and three people come in and out while I'm doing it.

No doors on the stalls of course.

The sink is streaked with something. Anna-May's turn to clean this week and she's not doing it. Splash water around the edge of the sink but it don't come off. No soap. Again.

Water's cold. Scrub anyway. Scrape under my fingernails.

Half a mirror left in here. If I wipe off the grime I can just see myself. They'll be cutting my hair, I just know it. Getting almost to the shoulders. Even with the ribbon Miss Street gave me to tie it back so they don't notice as much, they'll still notice.

Scrub my face. Dry on the hem of my dress.

Shuffle into the common room. Stomach drops and I put my hand on it. Susan's always moaning about her cramps. Half the time ends up bleeding all over her bed, stupid girl.

– Morning, Felwyn. You're up early.

I just smile at Nurse Webb. She's the only charge nurse I know who gets here before the others.

– Cuppa tea?

She's alone so it's fine for her to ask me.

I nod and wait while she pours me one.

– Sugar?

I nod and smile and she plops in two cubes. I take it and sit down by the window.

– You're looking pale, Felwyn. You feeling all right?

I swallow and look at the floor. Hold up two fingers.

– Oh. That's rotten, isn't it?

She gets up and goes to the nurse's cupboard. Unlocks the door. Shift, clack. Wish I had a key to that. I could get my own rags and medicines and flush that whitewash down the toilet.

She hands me two rags and a belt. Only get one belt, which is why I hide the other one.

I nod thank you and she sits back down.

The bell goes and Nurse Nicolas comes on.

– Bath day, is it?

They both groan, like it's such a chore. They're not the ones getting dunked in cold water and stared at.

Alphabetical order. Last name. I'm F, so it'll be another hour at least before they get to me. And Susan's ahead of me. Girl always puts up such a bloody fuss. It'll take them fifteen minutes just to get her soaped down. Idiot.

I take out my notebook and fill it in with this week's figures: people coming in, people dying, people getting released. One day, it will be my name in here.

Released.

– Felwyn! Bath!

Nurse Nicolas is leaning against the window. Sweating under her arms. Dotting her forehead.

– You can manage, can you?

I nod.

She puts the knob on and turns the key for the hot water. Streams a little more into it for me. I strip off, hang the clothes on the hook. Take off the belt and rag.

Nurse looks at me. Her eyes widen.

– Bad luck, that time of the month.

I walk over to the sink and rinse it out. Wring it. Hang it on the radiator to dry while I'm in the bath.

She watches me. Hells bells. Ain't she a woman? Don't she need rags too? Bet she don't have to hold up her hand in the nurses' dining hall to get them.

I step in. Boiler clanks and rattles through the pipes in this bathroom, but it's warm in here. Quiet, almost. Water's thick. How many girls before me? They won't change it after me neither, lazy cows. Bleeding all in the bathwater and Anna May's getting in after. Oh, how I wish I could have the bath to myself like that day in the infirmary. Not likely to ever happen again so I'll just have to imagine it.

Nurse stands by the window. Cracks it open and takes out a cigarette.

– You won't say anything, will you?

To who? Nurse Webb? Not bloody likely. She's new. Young. Nice enough. And better on my side than not. I just shake my head and she smiles. She's dumb enough to carry matches, that's her problem.

She lights one. Sucks in the cigarette like it's water. Huge sigh. Sinks against the window. Smells like Dr. Goldberg and his cigars.

I sit down in the tub. The water's freezing. Hold my breath and wiggle my toes to stop my teeth chattering. Take the bar of soap and scrub. Everywhere, behind my knees, armpits, down there where it's been itching for two days now.

Scrub under the fingernails.

– Give you a hand with your hair?

Nurse Nicolas finishes her cigarette. Stubs it out on the windowsill. Chucks the butt in the hopper, then comes at me with the soap for my hair. Scrubs it in, not too harsh, but hard enough I can feel the dirt scraping off.

– Dunk backwards.

I slide under the water and shake my head. Get rid of all the soap.

It's so quiet underwater that I stay down for a while. Everything shuts up. Just for a second.

Nurse grabs my wrist. Yanks me up.

– What're you trying to do, drown yourself?

She frowns at me. Pulls me so I'm standing. She frowns at me again and hands me a towel. Damp and dirty. Always damp. Just once I'd like to be first. Dry towel, warm water. Maybe one day I'll get a wish. They'll call me Andria, not Felwyn, and I'd line up with the A's for bath.

Nurse wraps the towel around me and I push into my slippers.

Kain

She gives me a weekend dress. Used to be dark grey probably but now's the same colour as everything else.

Rag on the radiator's not quite dry, but it'll do. Belt up, get dressed.

– Hair's getting long, eh?

Nurse smiles at me. I just look at her.

– Want me to put you down for a nice cut? A few spots open still for this afternoon, I think.

I shake my head and she shrugs. Next one won't ask. She'll just shove me down to hairdressing.

– Got plans to go to town, is that it?

I shake my head.

– Don't you have town parole?

I do. But you can only go on Saturdays.

– There's a film on tonight, isn't there?

Probably. But who can go sit in a hall when you've got to run to the bathroom every five minutes?

I put on the underslip. The dress.

Nurse Nicolas holds open the door. Want to be long gone before she notices I've nicked her matches.

– Next!

Slip them into my apron and duck out.

Meds!

Straight out of the bathroom to the line at the Nurses' station where Nurse Webb is waiting, doling out the whitewash.

I put it in my mouth. Better just get it over with. Swallow it. Show her my empty mouth.

Susan elbows me from behind and I turn around and give her the biggest Stink Eye. She steps back. Hugs her arms. For once don't argue. Probably she can feel it. Probably she knows today I'd deck her. Bleeding and itchy and about to have the runs. She don't want to get close to me.

&&&

Monday morning's barely started and I'm already behind. Messages left and right from Admin. My shoulder bag is going to burst. Rush, rush to the Beehive. One, two, three steps and turn.

– We've got lots for you this morning, Fel.

Nurse Joseph gives me a smile. Big white teeth. Square like the bottom of the paste sticks.

I hand her a big stack and she laughs.

– Guess we're not getting ahead, are we? This one's important, I think. You know Miss Jenkins, don't you?

Miss Jenkins? Troll in the back room by Doctor McHugh's office. Tiny woman with a tight bun. Brown dress, looks like it belonged to her grandmother. Big cameo brooch. Yes, I know her. Works with numbers, numbers, numbers, all the livelong day.

I nod.

Doctor Rian comes down the hall, quick-step. She's got her shawl and her bag. Sees me and smiles.

– Fel, can I borrow you?

Hells bells. Does it look like I have time for guiding? Three days' worth of mail and fifteen messages.

Nurse Joseph grins at me and goes back to her charts.

– I need to get to J.

Of course she does. Couldn't be farther from here.

– You can just sketch me a map if it's easier.

A month into this place and she's still lost half the time. Most of them are. Can hardly blame them. It's not just how to get there but how best to get there. So many choices. Inside? Outside? Up and across? Down and over? The best route now is as far out as the trams go, then up to an outer cottage, through the breezeway to J.

Quick, dump my mailbag on the nursing desk and pick up a paper and pen. Draw a map. Even use arrows. Doctor takes it from me and looks at it.

Frowns.

Land sakes. Probably faster just to take her.

Kain

If we're going that far, may'swell bring my mail bag and get it done. I turn and head for the trams. She walks next to me, fast and straight, like she knows where she's going. But at the crossroads, she stops.

I point down at the paper and she spins, trying to decide.

She sighs, frustrated.

I point to the third tunnel on the left. It's a long walk. Takes ten minutes just to get to the door we need.

She knocks on it. Footsteps on the wooden floor and the door flung open.

Doctor steps inside.

– I'm looking for Matron.

It's Nurse Baird. I squint at her for a second to make sure. She's lost weight. Used to be rounder. Now her breasts are sagging lower and her face looks like a cow's teat after it's been milked.

– I'm afraid she's out to one of cottages, Doctor Rian. Can I help?

– Do you know which?

Not that she'd know how to get there anyway.

– She said something about one of the nursing students having trouble with some boys, but I don't know if it's the children's ward or the adolescents.

Nurse Baird turns to me. She was a nurse in the children's dorm when I was there.

– Are you finding your way around all right, Doctor?

She's smiling about it. Kindly. But Doctor Rian's cheeks have gone pink. She gestures to me.

– Evidently not.

– Don't worry about it. It takes time.

– Well, I had a general tour, but the place is massive.

– Did you know the central hallway is exactly half a mile?

– I'm not surprised.

Nurse turns to me.

– Take her to D. You can use the outside path.

I nod.

– Do you want a note for your return trip?

Doctor Rian pipes up.

– Oh. I can give her a note.

What? Will she even know what to write?

– Wonderful. If not D, then H, Fel, is my best guess.

Sure. Why not? Nothing else to do today.

Doctor marches on. Stops suddenly.

– I'm sorry you still have to schlep me everywhere.

I just shrug. What difference does it make? Marking time, no matter how I spend it. At least if I'm guiding, I can go outside. Back down the stairs, through the administration building and out the side door.

– Gorgeous day.

I breathe in deep. Try to get the sun in my lungs.

– You've got no colour at all in your cheeks, Fel. Do you spend enough time outside?

I just stare at her. Does she suppose I've got time for sunbathing? Even if it was allowed.

I start down the path and she follows me. She takes out the map and looks at it. Turns it. I turn it back for her and point to D.

– What's this? Over here?

The Farm. I point out, along the skyline, across the road and to the farmers' fields.

Where Alistair should be.

She reads out the words and points, like a twirling compass.

– Laundry. Woodworking. School. Nurses' residence. Which one is that?

I point to a building over at the edge of the campus.

– Superintendent's house. Yes, I know that one.

I been there once before, before Doctor McHugh was the superintendent. I know girls who been in there. Dressing the old doctor's wife for fancy events. Domestic service. One day I'll do that too.

She squints across the open grass.

– The plant, over there?

I nod.

She spins around and points to the other side, behind the Oldies' cottage, near the trees.

– And I'm there. Down that path.

She points to an empty spot on the map. I didn't know. She takes the pencil from around her neck and draws in a little cottage. I look back in my memory. Where is that cottage? Have I ever seen it? Down the path through the woods towards the lake? It must be quite a piece. That's probably why she rides her horse.

Doctor Goldberg didn't live here. He lived in town. And before Doctor Goldberg, I didn't know the other doctor.

– Did you want to ask me something, Fel?

My face is probably a giant question mark. That's what Nurse Stokes told me when I was young. Then I learned how to make it flat. No question. No nothing. Then people don't bother talking to you. But now I want to know about that cottage. Wonder if I can explore on my way home.

Shake my head.

– All right. So, Cottage D? Children's dorm?

Start walking again and she follows, looking at the map.

– I'll try, shall I?

Why not? If she gets lost, it's easy to find the right way outside. It's the trams that'll give you trouble.

Dank and musty, the boiler screeching. Covering the sound of boys and girls screaming, beaten for misbehaving. Worse. The jangling of belts dropping, buckles hitting the floor. Keys clinking in a quiet, awful rhythm. Footsteps echoing in the tunnels. Boys being whipped.

I don't say nothing. Just let Doctor lead the way. She's got the right path, wrong direction.

– Am I close?

Sigh. Stand beside her and take the map. Rotate. Give it back.

She rolls her eyes.

– Fel, I'm never going to find my way around here.

I shrug. Oh well. There'll always be another inmate to show her around.

– How do you do it?

She ain't learned not to ask me so many questions neither, I suppose. I just look at her.

– I'm sorry, I keep forgetting you don't speak.

Just sigh and turn to lead her in the right direction.

Kain

This ward's a stinker. All the boys' wards are, but this one's one of the worst. Old building, old floors, sour boys too old to not have a bath and too young to want to get clean.

I press my tongue against the roof of my mouth. A trick I learned from Miss Street. Doctor looks pale enough too. See her swallowing hard.

Have a hanky dipped in lavender in my apron. Skimmed it from one of the Mothers who was leaving.

Hand it to the Doctor.

She takes it from me and sniffs it. Face relieved.

– Thank you.

Most of the boys are at work duty but a few of them ain't. Lounging around in the common room. Maybe they're working later. Maybe they're just lazy. One is pissing into a corner. Across the hall, another one's on ward duty, mopping up. Catches sight of the pissing one.

– Hey!

Runs at him with the mop up, about to clock him. I would too if I'd just mopped the floor and someone pissed on it.

The attendant grabs the one with the mop and stands right in front of him so he can't get anywhere.

– Never mind. Just finish your own chores.

Nurse comes out.

– Doctor Rian, I'm glad to see you.

– We're looking for Matron. Is she here?

– No. I'm sorry. I thought you were here for Bernard Williams? I'm afraid he's not improving.

She's young. Round face and freckles. Probably just got her cap.

Doctor frowns.

– Bernard?

– Williams. Our new patient. I'm sorry I couldn't bring him down to the infirmary, but he's not able to walk.

– What's the matter?

– Probably best you see him yourself. I can get an attendant to help you take him to the infirmary. It's got much worse overnight.

She turns and leads us through the dorm. Into a back room. The back rooms are bad. Closets, they used to be, until the dorms got too full and they started putting beds in them. No windows in this one. Dark as night without the lamp on.

– Hang on Doctor, I'll grab a lantern.

It's dark back here but my eyes switch over quickly, just like plunging into the tram. You have to be quick about it. Doctor stands still. Her eyes ain't used to the change. I see him first. Recognise him from his admission day—that little boy in the wheelchair. Tiny for his age, like most idiots. And he is an idiot. Why is he on an imbecile ward? Barely speaks. Lying on a mattress in the corner. A heavy, metal smell in the air like after a girl gives birth, when the placenta is delivered. But this is sharper, harsh. Like shit on the wall mixed with blood.

Doctor approaches and I follow her. The smell is coming from him.

– Hold the light up closer, please.

She kneels down beside the bed. Gentle hands on his shoulders. She turns him like a fragile doll. Shushes him.

– Fel, hand me my bag.

I pass it to her and watch while she puts on a pair of black rubber gloves. Fine, thin. Never seen them before. Then she parts Bernard's bum cheeks to look closer. A crimson rope hangs out of him, like he shat out his guts. She takes his hand and moves it away. He's been picking at it. Blood and shit under his nails, blood from the tissue. I push my tongue against my teeth.

– What is it?

Nurse with the freckles crouches down next to Doctor.

– A prolapsed bowel.

Doctor's voice sounds cracked.

– Very serious. We must move him somewhere clean to get this looked at. Get Matron. Now. I don't care where she is or what she's doing. Get her in here.

Doctor's face is white. I seen this once before in another little boy. He died.

Before Doctor can ask, I rush to the linen pile, pick a soft cloth and a sheet and bring them back. She takes them from me. Meets my eyes for a second, eyes wide.

When she goes to touch him, he yells and hits her.

– I won't hurt you, I promise. I'm taking you somewhere to help you.

He screeches. *No no no no no.*

Kain

– Fel, help me roll him over. Her voice is low, like she don't want him to know she's speaking.

When she rolls him all the way to get the cloth under him, she breathes out, like the bellows.

– Good Christ.

She wraps his bum in the cloth, gently, gently, then rolls him into the sheet.

– He can't go in a wheelchair. Someone will have to carry him.

A click and a clack. Matron. She must have been on another floor of this cottage already, unless she can fly. Always thought she could. On a broomstick, probably.

– I got an urgent message to come here. What's happening?

Doctor looks up. Kneeling on the floor, face tight.

– Have you seen this patient?

– Not since he arrived, no. What's the problem?

Matron kneels next to Doctor and I shine the light for her.

Breath sucked in over teeth.

– Oh dear. Dear.

She turns around.

– Get Jerome.

Nurse hurries off. Doctor and Matron look at each other. Matron's jaw twitches. She knows what happened to him. I know what happened to him.

Doctor Rian reaches out and touches his head, softly.

– He's very young to be in here, isn't he? The other boys look eleven, twelve. This child looks barely six.

Matron sighs.

– He's ten. His parents insisted he go to the school room, but Idiots don't attend school, so they've put him with the Imbeciles instead.

– So why is he here in this closet?

– There aren't enough beds, Doctor. Surely you've seen for yourself.

– Yes, I have. But stuck here by himself, we've made him a sitting duck.

Doctor Rian knows what happened to him too.

– I can't fix this here, Matron. You need to telephone an ambulance.

An ambulance?

Matron looks at her.

– We don't take patients to the hospital as a general rule, Doctor. We have a first-rate infirmary here and Doctor McHugh prefers that we handle our own affairs.

– If Doctor McHugh saw this child, he would agree with me.

– Unfortunately, he's not here.

– He needs surgery. Immediately.

– Braithwaite will do the surgery if you're not able to.

Matron looks at her and she looks back, her face whiter than before.

– You'd rather this child die than be seen in a hospital?

Matron looks like the doctor's decked her one.

– You underestimate our capabilities here, Doctor. Do you think this is the first prolapsed bowel we've had to treat?

Jerome rushes in. Slacks wrinkled at the knee, starched shirt creased. Probably done five baths already today. Glad it's not One-Arm they've called. Jerome takes off his vest and pocket watch, hands them to the nurse.

– He can't sit in a wheelchair, of course, Jerome.

– Right, Auntie. I see.

She hands him a towel and helps him tuck it all around his shirt before he lifts Bernard.

He howls.

– Easy now, Williams.

Jerome grunts, struggling to keep hold.

Auntie. I didn't know. Probably should have guessed, the way he never gets docked for sass the way everyone else does. Will have to put that in my notebook later.

Doctor stands and puts a hand on the boy's shoulder.

– Relax, please, he's only trying to help you. We need to go to the infirmary so I can see about your problem.

He groans and whines, not using any words.

– Lead the way, please.

Matron sweeps out of the room.

– We'll take the underground. Keep him out of sight. Felwyn, take Doctor along the footpath.

Kain

Doctor wipes her hands on a towel and follows me. Bet she's glad she don't wear a dress.

Tight lipped, pale face, all the way back to the Beehive. Soon as she's down, I'm out of there.

Kain

Siobhan

Excuse me, Doctor McHugh.

– Doctor Rian, come in. How are you?

He jumps up from his desk and extends his hand to shake mine.

I notice him looking at me.

– Do you always wear riding pants?

He's curious, not critical. His head tilts like a dog after an interesting smell.

I shrug.

– I find it easier to move around. And easier to wash.

He laughs, his eyebrows lifting.

– Yes, I can see that. Lots of crawling around on the floor, isn't there?

– Yes. And a lot of laundry.

– You send that out, don't you? You've been given a staff laundry bag? The inmates will do it for you. Your clothes, your sheets.

He stutters a bit over *sheets* and I can't help but smile.

– Yes, thanks. Everything's in order.

– So you're here to talk about your research?

I clear my throat, wondering exactly how I'm going to bring this up.

– No, actually, though I have decided on epilepsy. I'm here to talk to you about a patient.

– Oh.

He sits back down and looks at me directly. It's rare not to find him half-distracted and his gaze is a bit unsettling, frank and open.

– I should mention that I prefer first names, if you don't mind. Call me Ben.

– All right.

– Good.

He stares at me again.

– You seem troubled, Siobhan. What's happening?

I suppose there's no point in mincing words.

– You're aware that Bernard Williams is being kept on an imbecile ward? He is clearly an idiot, Ben.

He frowns.

– I don't believe I know that patient.

– He's not been here long. He was admitted soon after I arrived. He's on the infirmary with me until further notice. In fact, I may suggest he lives there permanently.

Ben's face drops into seriousness.

– He's that ill?

– He's that taken advantage of.

A deep frown line creases his forehead.

– Ah. He's a small boy?

– Quite. And younger than the others.

Ben breathes out a long sigh.

– This happens from time to time.

– I'd say it happens a fair bit more than time to time, Ben, and I don't think it's all that discouraged.

With a long exhale that borders on a growl, he pushes himself up from his chair.

– It's been a long time since I was on the wards, but...

– Were you? On the wards?

– Yes. As an attendant. Helped me work my way through medical school. It's one of the reasons I wanted an appointment here. I thought. I don't know...

He looks down, almost bashful.

– What?

– I suppose I thought I'd make a difference, somehow. Change things for the better. There's so much progress to be made. So many programmes to introduce. Therapies and research to be overseen and implemented, and then...

I wait.

– And then?

Kain

– It's just, you can't escape human nature, can you? No matter what we try to teach the boys in the daytime. Even the most educable Moron will still be subject to the animal lust that we cannot control.

– Well, perhaps if there were more nighttime supervision...

– We'd all like that. We'd all like more funding. But we're massively underfunded, and there just isn't any more money for more staff.

– Also, if masturbation weren't so strictly opposed...

His eyes widen.

I stare back at him. For God's sake, we're both doctors.

He clears his throat as if to try to respond, but I go on.

– Boys and girls will have natural sexual desires and since they're segregated and can't, except under exceptional circumstances, engage in sexual activity with members of the opposite sex, they will naturally turn to one another.

His cheeks are pink, but he nods seriously.

– So what are you suggesting?

– I'm suggesting that segregation is an unsustainable solution that's not only failing to solve the problem it's designed to but is actually causing further problems.

To his credit, he doesn't interrupt me.

– Girls are still coming here from the city, having their babies, and then being sent away to God knows where. Perhaps to have more babies, perhaps to end up back in the city wards, or even in workhouses. Sera has her hands full with midwife duties—far more than I would ever have believed. And, perhaps worst, this hospital is at twice capacity. Inmates are stacked like sardines on overcrowded, stinking wards. The stench is enough to make you gag. And this young lad—this six-year-old child—was kept in a secluded closet, and he was *still* raped.

He flinches at the word.

– So what do you suggest?

He's gone deadly quiet. For the first time, I wonder if I've misjudged his affable front. If perhaps I've managed to offend him after all. But I've gone too far to stop now.

– How many asylums will have to be built to segregate them all until they stop breeding? How many casualties will there be of this unholy mess? Sterilise them and be done

with it. Send them back out to the workforce. They're not a threat if they can't procreate. A brief stay, some vocational training, a quick operation, and we're off to the races.

Ben runs a hand through his hair.

– The public support isn't there, Siobhan.

– Maybe not yet, but it's getting there. The hue and cry over the pox of the feeble-minded is all that's talked about at every medical convention and meeting I've been to the past ten years. But it's absolutely impractical to put them all away. All over the States, sterilisation is mandatory now. Alberta is about to pass an act—just wait. It's coming. From an economic standpoint if nothing else. Institutionalising this number of people just isn't bearable. Consider a test programme, maybe.

– A test programme?

– Yes. In fact, I have one in mind. We'd start with the girls.

He looks mildly intrigued. Of course the idea of sterilisation on men is harder on the men to consider. They squeeze their legs together just thinking about it. With effort, I keep my gaze level and don't roll my eyes.

– Mrs. McNestry runs a home for girls downtown Toronto. She's looking to take on new domestic workers. Helps to find them positions. Puts them in domestic service, trains them properly to get a life away from here.

– And gets paid how?

– Well, that'll be up to you. Your department, not mine. I imagine she gets a percentage of their wages to keep them. But getting the girls off the wards and back to being useful members of society can't be a bad plan.

– Well, except for the outside temptations and dangers.

Ben looks at me like he already knows what I'm going to say.

– It's not a problem if they're sterilised. Salpingectomy is a simple enough procedure. A quick incision, much like an appendectomy.

He's massaging his forehead like it hurts, but I press on.

– It has to be kinder than keeping them here. We need to focus our attention on the ones who are truly custodial: the idiots, the low-grade imbeciles, the mongoloids, the infirm and the elderly who'd never adjust if they were released. And, of course, the epileptics.

– So you're proposing to sterilise the Morons, then?

I shrug.

– To start. The high-grade sexually active patients of child-bearing years, specifically. Then enrol as many of them as possible in training programmes and have them reintegrated into useful roles. Why keep them here if they can be sterilised, educated, and released?

Ben takes a deep breath.

– Get in touch with Mrs. McNestry at least. Hear what she has to say.

– And what do we do about the problem on the wards then?

I stare at him.

– It's easy. Stop telling the boys not to masturbate.

My frankness surprises him, obviously, but I'm well used to that.

His face turns pink and he stammers.

– Well... it's just... you see, if we let them...

– What? They'll just do it all the time?

He stands up, raking a hand through his hair.

– Better to nip it in the bud, isn't it?

I stand too.

– And how's that working out? They're bored, Ben. Get them all out of the wards. *All* of them. Dormitory tasks and habit training or whatever else they're supposed to be doing just isn't enough. We need more staff, fewer patients, more activities, fewer idle moments. Trust me, they won't sit around diddling themselves if you put something else in their hands.

His face is scarlet. He breathes out a sigh. Defeat, it sounds like to me.

I decide to rein it in. Deliberately make my voice calmer, more soothing.

– Rather than turn a blind eye when the bigger boys abuse the younger ones, we should perhaps instead be allowing all the patients the privacy to satisfy their own urges. We could consider doors on the lavatories for a start.

He clears his throat.

– Perhaps you're right.

He hesitates a moment, his fingers up in the air like he's about to play a silent piano.

– Something the matter?

He presses his tongue into his cheek.

– No, not really. I was just considering how to word that particular note to the staff.

I laugh.

– Perhaps we'll bring it up at the next meeting instead, shall we?

Kain

Ben nods.

– Probably best to tackle that in person, yes.

He strides to the door, leaving me alone in his office. I wait for a moment to see if he will return, but he doesn't.

– I'll just see myself out then.

November, 1927

Fel

Back to your hour off, are you Fel?

Nurse Stokes hands me a clink. I take it and try to smile. My stash is getting bigger. Does it even matter? Alistair ain't going nowhere with all them hawk eyes on him.

– Everything all right, Fel?

Nurse Stokes looks down at me. Through me.

I shrug.

– Well, off with you then. Go get some reading done or something before dinner.

There's some new adventure books down in the library. Someone's parents brought them today.

My eyes go up.

– Gertrude Warner. I know you like her.

Nobody else bothers to read, hardly. Except John. He'll like them books. I'll get one for me and one for him. Have to get to them fast, though, before someone nicks them. Susan'll take them. Even though she can't read. Mess up the pages. Rip things out. Shouldn't be allowed in the library. Idiot.

Wonder if they're in order.

By the time I make it down to the library, there's Susan, thumbing all the books. Picking her nose at the same time, disgusting girl. She takes the last one. Sticks it under her arm. She'll sleep on it, stupid cow. Lord knows she can't read it. She can't even read at all. She'll just wreck it.

I go over and snatch it from her hands.

– What're you doin'? Thas mine!

Screeches like a bloody parrot.

– Thas miiiiine!

Librarian stands up. Susan keeps screeching. Such a baby.

– She took my book!

Librarian stands over us.

– Felwyn?

I glare at her.

– Give it back, if she had it first.

I shove the book back at Susan's stupid face. Too hard because it falls to the floor. She wails. Never knew such a girl for wailing. God almighty. Makes a big show of trying to bend over. Pick it up with her useless hand.

– Felwyn, pick it up for her.

She don't bloody need me to pick it up for her. I seen her get candy from the floor with her toes. She's just being stupid.

– I caaaaaan't.

Susan hiccups. Soon she'll manage to squeeze out real tears. Hate her.

– Pick it up now, or you're docked a clink.

I glare at both of them.

– Felwyn! Docked two.

Librarian's fuming. Holds out her hand.

I hand over two clink then turn and walk out. Hells bells. See the Librarian pick up the book herself. Give it to Susan. She can't even *read*.

Hate this place. I hate Susan. Hate the librarian. Even hate Nurse Stokes for telling me about the books in the first place. And there's the bell going for supper. Stupid grating, gonging sound. I run down the hall, down into the tram.

Nobody cares if you eat or if you starve and I'd rather starve. Won't look at their faces and jump up and down and stick my hand up for rags.

Gong goes again and I stay put.

Keep staying put, crammed into the alcove. John's alcove. Slam my hands against the brick, over and over and over. Stamp my feet against it. My elbows. My head. Bang, bang, bang, bang. It hurts but the buzzing in my head is worse.

Shut up.

Shut up.

I hate it here.

Kain

Smell the bread coming through the trams, hear the squeak and shake of the trolleys going to the outbuildings. People shouting to each other, laughing. Trolleys and trolleys of food. Wonder what the staff are getting tonight?

Just once I'd like to have theirs.

Makes me so mad I slam my head back again, slump down in the corner of the alcove and rock.

Time passes.

Things get quiet.

Too quiet.

It's past common hour. Past ward duty. I've missed it all and I don't care.

Finally my legs are too cramped to stay here. It's getting late. Trams are dangerous at night—dangerous now, probably and it's pitch black in this section with no lantern. Not even light from the ends. Must be black outside too.

I come up by the boiler room and listen hard before going through that tunnel. I hear the steam released and wait for the clanging to stop so I can tell if there's anyone there.

Quiet.

So many buildings, so many alleys and alcoves and nooks. I know them all.

Creep through the mouth of the tunnel, sticking near the shadows. There's hiding places in the walls. People can squeeze in there. John likes to hide down in the alcoves sometimes. When he's tired of people talking talking talking in his face. He squeezes himself in and rocks and rocks. Sometimes he does that groaning noise in the back of his throat, the one that fills up his head with noise so he stops hearing everything else. He gets louder and louder and louder down here. Even bangs his head on the wall sometimes. On the ward, he'd get put in a straightjacket. Dunked in the baths. Soaked, freezing, until he had a full out screaming fit just to get them off him. Swinging at them, screaming as loud as he could.

But down here he just squeezes himself into the alcove and screams and nobody makes him stop. Tells him to stop making that noise. He calms himself down and goes back to work.

I'm the only one who knows he comes down here. And it was a secret. He was angry that I found out but now he knows I won't tell anyone.

Other people hide too and mostly it's best not to find them.

The first alcove is empty. I creep to the next one, quiet, quiet. Got to stick to the shadows in the tram, and the light on the ward.

Kain

Three more alcoves to go.

The boiler takes up one whole open room. It's practically alive, breathing and steaming. This is the darkest, loudest room on the grounds. Nothing good goes on in here. Best to get by at a run if you can. Sneak past, tiptoe, tiptoe...

It's so loud you can't tell if it's the boiler or a person. Heavy breathing. That's a person. The boiler don't giggle.

Trousers dropped, bunched at the knees. Black pants. Attendants wear black pants. Inmates wear brown or grey.

The giggle again. Who is it?

Curly hair. White skin. A grey dress yanked up to the waist, bare ass. The dress gets wrenched over her head. Flash of tits and more giggles. Then a grunt. Nervous high-pitched sighing.

Press myself against the wall. Can't be seen, but I want to watch. More sighing, moaning. Not the head-banging moaning of the wards, but the good kind. The kind like when you put your hand between your legs and touch yourself and you can't help the sounds that come out of your mouth because it feels so good.

He's touching her like that and she likes it. He likes it. And they're not supposed to be doing it. Men and women live apart. Boys and girls live apart. What they're doing makes babies, and babies aren't allowed. Their noises are making my body shiver. Think of who I'd like to bring into an alcove.

Another noise, down the tunnel I've just come from. Pull away from the wall and keep walking.

I creep on, fast through the rest of the tunnel. Left. Door. Stairs.

As soon as I get to the Pavilion, the heat goes back into my stomach. Susan's sitting there on the radiator, acting like she's reading. Books is upside down, the *stupid cow*. Want to punch her.

Won't sleep here tonight. I'll smother her with a pillow, probably.

March straight past her and shove her off the radiator. Don't even stop. Takes her so long to start wailing that I'm gone. Nobody can prove nothing.

Grab my pillow and notebook and head straight out to the nurse's station. A new one on tonight. Just graduated nursing school. And here she's got the night shift.

– Felwyn? Where have you been? You missed roll call.

Kain

Put my hand on my stomach and make a face.

– Been sick, have you?

Nod.

– Do you want to go to the infirmary?

She unlocks the door and comes out of her station. Puts a hand to my forehead. See Susan stumbling over, face stretched. Ugly. She's crying so hard she can't talk. Good.

– Hmm. Can't tell whether or not you've got a fever. Can't really leave my post here. Can you go on your own?

Nod quickly. She opens the door to the ward and lets me off. Susan following, clutching at her apron. Pointing at me.

– You know your way?

Daft question. But she don't know. Probably been here three days. Never seen her before.

I smile so she won't worry then pad down the corridor, going slow and keeping my hand on my tummy til I turn the corner.

Susan howls.

Ignore her.

Slip out the door to the courtyard and run across the path. Don't stop until I hit the door. The outside door nobody uses. Where I've put a pebble to stop it closing tight. Slip inside, then up, up, up the abandoned stairwell, past the entrance from the second floor, past the walls to Doctor Braithwaite's apartment. Up another flight to the attic.

Only start breathing when I get to my corner. Flop down on the blankets next to the tiny window. Watch the moon rise over the forest—black and starless out there, fog covering the moon so it's nothing but a dull haze. But at least it's there.

I take my clothes off and stretch naked on the mat. So goddamn itchy. Can't really scratch. Too delicate there. Push my fingers between my legs, rubbing out the itch, rubbing until the itch is gone and it just feels good. Rub and rub, where the nub is swelling, aching. Rub just that until I'm panting and moaning like the girl in the alcove. Nobody can hear me up here. Push the blankets off, see the moon glinting off my breasts, rub and rub. Push my face in the pillow and cry out.

&&&

At the office when I come in, John stands up. He looks over my head and I notice he's had a haircut. Short at the back now, not scraggly like it was getting before. His shirt is pressed. His vest neat and straight.

– Good morning, Fel. How are you today?

He has been practicing greetings in speech correction. I think he's getting really good. Usually he don't like to say hello and how are you. Miss Street calls it small talk. John hates small talk but other people like it. So he's learning it. It's too bad. Billy, in the canteen, would love to make small talk. He loves to talk at all, and can't. His mouth won't let him. Struggles for every word. Every sentence. John can talk as easily as he likes and won't.

I nod and smile.

He nods back.

– I'm pleased to hear that.

His speech sounds like wooden blocks clunking. But at least he's trying.

I wish I could tell him about my night. About Susan stealing the books. He can read. I could write it down, but we have so much to do. So much work always. Letters. Messages. Packages.

– I have a gift for you.

I look up as John comes over.

– A parent brought a stack of books yesterday. I brought you books one and two of *The Boxcar Children*. I have already read the first two so I took three and four and you can have them when I'm finished.

He hands me the books. Can't hardly believe it. How did he get there before Susan?

– Susan from your ward already had number five. But by the time we are finished with the first four she should also be finished with hers.

I smile at him, then grab a pen and a paper.

THANK YOU.

Write in big letters so he knows how much I mean it.

He nods. Smiles the way he practises. Quick, like it hurts his face.

– You're welcome.

I'll have to stash them somewhere. Probably in the attic.

– We have a new patient. I have filled out his paperwork. Can you please deliver the file to Doctor Rian in the infirmary? I have noticed she does not use her office here in admissions and she has a stack of mail waiting at her door.

Who's got time to come to admissions for paperwork? All the runny noses and fevers and diarrhoea and flat-out complaining she's got down in the Beehive. It's a wonder she ever gets up here at all. Plus, she'd have to put on a skirt probably to go with the mahogany desk in there. No riding breeches I guess. Course she stays down in the muck pit. She don't have to deal with the other doctors out there. Smart.

Grab the mail sack and sling it over my shoulder. Grab the messages too and the stack of paperwork for Doctor Rian. It's a nice day out. I'd rather not come back. Being a pack mule's better than taking the stairs back up here three different times.

John looks at me but don't say anything. We're used to each other.

Figure they should give me extra dessert for schlepping all across the grounds every day. Takes almost two hours to deliver mail and messages. Lucky for me John does the farm otherwise I'd be walking all bloody day. He's smart about it. Gets the mail package to the kitchen just as the farm boys are coming to deliver the vegetables and makes them take their own mail back over the road. Saves himself a trip.

Me? It's nearly lunch before I'm finished.

Halfway to the Beehive with the last of it and there's Miss Street.

– Fel! Where are you off to?

I hold up the paperwork and she looks at it.

– Doctor Rian? It's her day off today. Come with me anyway. She wanted to see you.

Go to the doctor's house? No thank you.

But Miss Street's already streaking across the path, quick step that she does.

Wish I could tell her about the itching but my hands are too full to write a note.

Honk honk.

We both jump. One of the boys is driving the car too fast. Laughing.

Can't help smiling back. Reminds me of Alistair. If he'd behaved himself he could have been driving a car by now too.

Tsk. Miss Street shakes her head and keeps going. Don't feel like taking these empty mailbags with me if Doctor Rian lives as far as I think she does. But Darcy's coming across the lawn, skipping to and fro in her wobbly way.

Kain

I beckon her over.

– Hi Fel.

I thrust the empty mailbags at her and she sighs like I've handed her a bag of manure, but I glare at her and she nods.

– Fine. I'll take 'em back for ya.

It's chilly now. Chillier than I thought.

Heading down the road, something hits my nose. Look up. Around.

Snow is starting to fall.

– That's early, isn't it?

Miss Street wraps her shawl around her shoulders a bit tighter and walks even faster. I have to practically run to keep up.

We're through the woods, down the path and over the hill. I hear her before I see her—the thwacking of metal on wood.

Don't know any doctor who splits their own firewood—man or woman—but there she is, riding breeches and someone's lumber jacket, bringing an axe down on a log. The wood cracks.

Miss Street waves.

– Careful you don't amputate your hand.

Doctor stands up and smiles. Got pink cheeks from the wind. Usually looks all pale and sallow but not today. Fall air smells like leaves.

– You're handy with minor injuries, aren't you?

Miss Street laughs and Doctor Rian turns to me.

– Hello, Fel.

Nod.

Miss Street puts down her bundle. Guess we're taking a break. Fine with me, paper stacked to the ceiling in the office. I could use a sit-down. Kindling scattered along the front garden bugs me, though. Edges of it dig into the dirt, getting firm now with the weather. Move to pick it up.

– Thank you, Fel. There's a basket there if you like.

Follow her eyes and take the basket. Start stocking it.

– Shouldn't you be done with this? It's nearly winter.

– Well, they did half finish for me.

Kain

Doctor waves her hand to the side of the cottage. Bigger pieces of firewood are stacked to my head.

– They left you enough to do though, didn't they?

You'd need a roaring bonfire for half them logs. Need to be cut down by four.

– I've got a few more weeks of decent weather. I'll get it all into manageable pieces by then.

Jam the last few pieces into the basket and carry it inside. Leave the door open for the other two. They'll have their hands full.

Miss Street says something but I don't catch it.

Doctor speaks louder, though. And the window's open a crack. Drop down to the floor under the window, stacking kindling as quiet as I can.

– You're right. That girl doesn't belong in an institution.

Stop stacking. Stop breathing.

– From what I can tell, that intelligence test was inconclusive at best and possibly even falsified. If she's been mute for some time, it's likely she didn't even participate. That's the only way to account for her low score. They should have just thrown it out.

– Any medical reason that she wouldn't be able to speak?

Crack of wood. Can't hear what happens next.

–... raging case of tonsillitis at the age of twelve. Her medical records don't show much in the way of anything. She's never even broken a bone. I could examine her, I suppose. Though I'm not sure what I'd find.

Door creaks open and Doctor Rian dumps her pile next to the hearth. I finish stacking the kindling, acting like I ain't heard a thing. Doctor Rian crawls into the space next to the fire, making such a racket it almost makes me laugh. Like she tries to hit the stone wall with each piece. *Punt. Clatter. Crash.*

Miss Street ploughs through next, dropping pieces left and right.

I pick up what they've dropped. Hand them over as they stack three more armloads of split wood. That looks like some big, comfy fires to me.

Doctor stands up and dusts off her hands.

– Cup of tea?

She moves to the stove.

I glance at the clock on the wall. Twenty minutes past lunch.

Kain

Miss Street does the same thing.

– Quick one, thanks. I've got to get home.

– Charlotte, is it?

Miss Street looks up quickly. Surprised, I think.

Casts a side-eye at me. I get busy picking up the pieces that have bounced back, act like I ain't listening.

– Mmm hmm.

Miss Street's voice cracks a little. Has to clear her throat.

– How long have you lived with her?

Looks at me again. I can feel her eyes on my face but I'm looking out the window like I'm bored. Lost in my own thoughts.

– A few years.

– You've jumped the broom with her?

Miss Street don't answer right away. I open the door and step into the garden, leave it open a crack. Privates are on fire again. What in blazes is wrong? Reach up and scratch through my bloomers, listening. I'd be right ticked if it were me. All these questions. Doctor don't seem to know that there are things you don't ask people. Just goes ahead and asks anyway.

Charlie's lovely. Pretty and kind. Always glad to see me when Miss Street brings me home for a cup of tea. Happens sometimes. Gives me cookies if she can.

Duck under the open window, grab a few pieces of kindling I missed. Just to look like I'm doing something.

– We have a little cottage of our own, on the edge of a farmer's property. Charlotte helps milk the cows.

Kettle bangs down on the stove.

Surprised Miss Street's still talking, but there she is, sitting in the chair opposite to the doctor, having a biscuit.

– It's tiny, but that doesn't matter. At least not to me, because I barely have time to make a cup of tea before I have to go again. Charlie's home more, of course. All the time, actually.

Sound of a match striking. Lid of the stove moving over and back.

– Damn.

– Did you burn yourself?

– Minor injury.

– Good thing those are my speciality.

Titter, giggle. Like the girls in the yard at the schoolhouse.

Cupboard door opening. Tea cups clattering down on the counter.

– Does Charlotte have a vocation?

Silence. One. Two. Three. Four.

I barely catch what Miss Street says.

– She’s a midwife, too.

– Does she not practise?

Miss Street sighs. Holding my breath now. My leg is starting to get a cramp, crouching here.

– We both lost our place on our apprenticeship. I took the job here. Charlie is still adjusting. I work and she... well... she tries her best.

– You had to choose between her and your apprenticeship?

– Well, it's frowned on, you know.

– Well, Sapphism is frowned on anywhere, Sera. It doesn't make it wrong. Biologically speaking, a certain proportion of the population is homosexual. It's a natural aberration and there's nothing a person can do to change that.

I roll the word over and over. Sapphism. Sapphism.

– Reverend Mother called us in to talk about particular friends.

– Were you living at the convent?

– Yes. As a novice.

– You were a *nun*?

I stop and crouch down, listening hard. Miss Street was a *nun*? In a convent?

– Sister Sera?

– Sister Seraphina, actually. But yes.

– I can't picture it, honestly. You don't seem the sort to take orders quietly.

She shrugs.

– Well, I wanted a vocation so it wasn't a big leap for me into convent life. The order was fairly liberal, and I liked it there. But no...I'm not sure I would ever have taken my vows.

– Well, you are certainly full of surprises.

Kain

– Don't know if that's a compliment or not.

– Oh, I think it is. So you were kicked out of the convent and from midwifery. Rebel, aren't you?

Miss Street laughs a little.

Biscuit packet crackling. Water pouring into the teapot.

Creep back toward the door and walk through with the kindling.

They both look up.

– Fel!

Doctor's voice is too bright. Too cheerful. Like she's going to offer me a trip to the candy store and it'll turn out to be the manure pile.

– I'd like you to visit me at my office tomorrow afternoon, would you? I'm trying to lay eyes and hands on all my patients. Give them a thorough check.

No way. No thank you.

She laughs at me.

– Just want to give you a good once over. You won't be the only one. Don't fret.

All day, I hope she'll forget, but during my free hour, a Beehive nurse barges into the common area.

– Felwyn! Down to see the doctor, please. Time for checks.

She's bellowing out a few more names but I don't hear her. Roaring in my ears makes me deaf. Heart thud-thud-thud. Hate seeing the doctor.

Nurse Joseph is waiting at the door to the exam room.

– Quickly, chile. Doctor don't have all dey.

She's holding a clipboard, hurries me in.

– Up on the table now, come along. Anna-May, next room.

I climb up. Fold my arms over my chest.

– What a face. Looks like someone's gonna poke you wit' an iron. Sit up straight, Fel. Doctor ain't gonna hurt ya.

Second later, Doctor Rian comes through the door.

– Hiya. How are you?

I don't answer but she don't care. Too busy looking at her tray. Metal pieces galore. She hooks something in her ears. Comes at me, at my chest.

I put my arms up.

– Just relax, Fel. Just listen to your chest. See?

Nurse Joseph throws her hands up.

– Lawd, girl. Never know you t'be so squeamish. Sit still and let Doctor do her job.

That disc. What can that disc hear? She puts it on my chest. Don't hurt like I expected.

– A few deep breaths, please.

In and out, in and out. The disc presses into me. Cold.

She turns her face away and frowns, bends closer, listening, then takes it away.

– Normal lung function.

Nurse Joseph scribbles on her notepad.

– I'm going to hold your wrist now, okay?

That disc hears a lot. Something on my chest. Something on my arm. She looks at her wristwatch. Minding the time? She's a strange person.

– Heart rate is a little high, but I expect it's nerves.

Nurse Joseph rolls her eyes at me.

– She travel da trams in da dark but won't have a stethoscope put to her chest. Always said this chile was strange.

– Open your mouth please? I want to have a look at your tonsils.

Hells bells. Searching for creepy crawlies in my mouth?

She puts a stick in my mouth and presses down on my tongue. Her fingers press on my jaw, gently, pushing me back.

– It shouldn't hurt. Just a little pressure, all right? Say *ahh* for me, please.

– Ahh.

My throat vibrates. I cough.

Doctor looks down at me. Frowns a little.

Nurse Joseph's eyebrows shoot up. Straight for the ceiling.

I pull away. That was a mean trick. Making my voice speak on its own. How did she do that?

– Tonsils are clear.

She takes out a tiny mirror next. All around my mouth. Now she frowns a lot.

– Jesus, Mary and...look at the state o' you!

I frown.

– Complete hames, your teeth. They're going to fall out if you're not careful.

Kain

She has a way of looking right at you. Through you. Into your guts, almost.

I swallow hard. Fall out? I'll have a black mouth too. Gaping for soup. Rotten and hollow.

– Cavities. One tooth totally rotting at the back. The plaque along the gums is very thick. Haven't you got a toothbrush?

I shake my head.

– There's tooth powder and spit buckets on the wards, Doctor. But ain't nobody got time to be brushing all their teeth.

– Well, we're going to fix that today.

Doctor goes to her desk. Giant box there, big painty symbols on the side.

– Straight from Japan. Mind you put your name on it.

She holds out a thin white stick with bristles.

– Use this.

Hands me a tube that says Colgate Dental Cream. Has a whole box of them on the chair next to the box with the weird symbols.

– Twice a day. Once in the morning, once at night. I'd tell you three times but I doubt you can even manage twice without something getting nicked.

She's got it right. Girls elbowing, grabbing things. Someone'll skim my toothbrush quick as lightning. Maybe I'll sharpen the end. Drive it into any hand that grabs it.

– Scrub them well, Fel. In all the cracks. On the backs and fronts. I'll get you into the dentist soon to have that back one pulled, but for now, that'll help.

Pulled! No way!

Nurse Joseph is in front of the door or I'd spring right out of here. Voice speaking on its own again. It doesn't.

She must be a witch doctor. That's how she knew I was down at the lake. She probably knows I want to escape. That I'm planning it.

– Are you washing your hands, Fel?

I nod. Line up, line up at the sink. Pass the towel, hand to hand.

I shift my bum. The itching makes me want to cry.

I'll have to hurry up now. Her and the angels. Everyone knows too much.

I snatch the toothbrush. Hop down from the table.

Hop because I'm young. Spry.

– Not quite yet, please. I'm not finished. I need to examine you.

I stare at her.

– Can you strip down to your undergarments, please? And lie down on the table.

Look at Nurse Joseph.

She nods at me.

– You'll be fine. I'll get the next patient ready, Doctor.

Then she leaves!

I take off my dress. Shirt. Lie down in my underwear and slip. Shift around. So bloody itchy.

Doctor presses my tummy. Listens to things.

– Is anything bothering you, Fel?

Can she see the itching?

I stare at the ceiling, tears burning my eyes.

– Anything?

Shake my head and sit up.

– Fel? If there's something, you've got to tell me or I can't help you.

I slowly look down and she follows my eyes. I can't help shifting on the table. I want to reach down and scratch so bad but that's rude. I try to stand up again but she's looking at me.

Puts her hand on my shoulder.

– Tell me. Is it a private problem?

I nod.

– Something I should know?

I shrug.

– Something's burning?

Shake my head.

– Itching?

I look up.

– Yes?

Yes.

– I'll take a look, shall I?

I bite my lip. Eyes burning.

Kain

– Fel, I'm not going to force you, but if there's something the matter, you can trust me to help you.

My insides twitch. Flip. Never let people see your weak spots. They'll knife you there. I know it. But I don't think she'll hurt me.

I nod.

– Take off your bloomers, please.

I do and she takes a light out of the drawer. Shines it on me.

– Hmm.

I look down.

– Don't worry. It's all right. I'm going to use an instrument here okay? Just to get a better look.

Something cold, hard against me.

– Hold still, just a second longer. I need a closer look. Breathe out to ten, all right?

I count backwards, breathe out.

She straightens up.

– All done. You can get dressed, Fel.

I scramble into my bloomers, dress.

– You've got thrush. An infection of yeast. A pretty bad one. Guessing you've had it awhile.

Swallow hard. Look at her. Wonder if you can die from that. Nobody gives a toss anyway. What the hell good is it to mention it? If it's not this, it'll be something else.

– I've got something that'll clear that up. But you'll have to come back and see me every day for a few days, all right?

Nod.

She sits down on the exam table. Close to me, but not too close.

– This is exactly what I'm here for. Understand? For problems like this, you come to me.

Look at her close.

She knows it's her job to punish us, right? Come up before the senior doctor, have your clink snatched. Have your parole swiped. Have your visits taken. Mouth off, see the doctor. Tardy for the ward, see the doctor. Got itching in your privates, see the doctor.

Rather just not see the doctor.

Kain

– I'm wondering something, Fel. You don't have to answer me, but just think about it. I just eyeball her, wondering if she's making fun of me because of I don't talk much but she's just looking down at her notes.

– School.

She says it like it explains itself.

I give her slit eye. School's over. I graduated. Got a paper that I keep under the floorboard in the office—that's hideout number five.

I shrug like what's it to you?

– You know there's an upper school as well as a lower school?

Yeah. Trades for the boys and laundry and ironing for the girls. No thanks. I'd rather work in the office.

She's the only one I've met except for Miss Street who talks back to what my face says even when I don't use words. It's like she guesses my thinking.

– There's a reason I'm raising this point. And this is confidential. You know what that means?

Yeah. Like don't blab it to the girls on the ward. Who am I gonna tell exactly?

– There's going to be a special programme starting soon for girls who are trained in domestic science.

Like I said, laundry and ironing.

– The programme at the upper school includes home economics, sewing, basic home help. Dr. McHugh is going to be sending several girls to a lady in the city. They'll live with her in her house and she'll find them work with families who need servants.

Out. In the city. In a house.

My jaw unhinges itself. Not a real house? Outside of here? A room with a window maybe.

– The girls who get sent have to be exemplary. High marks in domestic science and well behaved. They have to listen to directions well and keep their living space tidy. They have to be neat and clean and respectful.

I look at her. Hope for once that she can read my face so she can see I want to do it.

She comes around the desk, but not too close. Just sits on the corner of it, so her neck snake's far enough away.

– You should enrol in school, Fel.

Kain

Her voice is soft.

Yeah. Course I should if that's what it'll get me. But how? I can't just take off from work duty and show up in the schoolhouse. Don't she know there's lists for everything? Not on the list, not allowed in. And punishment if you're somewhere you're not supposed to be.

– If you agree, I'll bring it up at the next faculty meeting. Miss Street will give you a second recommendation. She's already said so.

Miss Street's the one got me into the office in the first place. Wonder if I'll have to give it up to go to school.

– Do you want to think about it?

I shake my head.

She frowns.

– Do you want to decline?

What?

– Sorry. Do you want to say no?

I shake my head harder.

She smiles.

– So yes then?

I smile back. Can't help it. My body talks around her whether I want it to or not.

She gets down from the desk. Breeches swish as she goes to the filing cabinet. Takes out my folder, makes a note.

How I'd love to see inside that. What everyone's said about me, written about me. It's thick after all this time. All these years in here. Hate that it's there—anyone can see it, read it, know about me. Except me.

She scribbles something, then looks up. Puts the file back. I pay attention. Watch closely to where she puts it. The lock clicks.

Turns back to me. Smiles.

– One more thing, Fel. It's not pleasant but it has to be done. Your appendix needs to come out. Causing you all sorts of problems and we can't have you getting sick if you're going to go to domestic service.

Appendix?

– It's just a minor surgery.

A surgery?

Kain

Look at her, waiting.

– I've done several and I'll be doing yours. Less than an hour under the ether and then a few days recovering. Once I'm sure you're all better, you can start classes. Is that all right with you?

I shrug. Don't know what an appendix is for anyway.

– Good. Let's get it done on Monday.

Winter

December, 1927

Siobhan

Two short raps and the door to my office swings open.

– Ben, hi.

His eyes light on Sera.

– Miss Street, hello.

She stands up.

– Doctor McHugh.

– Oh, please don't leave. I'm sorry to interrupt. I see you're having a patient meeting.

– I just came to discuss something with you, Doctor Rian. It can wait.

– I really can come back another time.

Sera sits back down, uncertainly. Aside from Grand Rounds, Ben doesn't visit the Beehive much. None of the doctors do, really, if they can help it. Braithwaite practically lives in his lab. Wright is either cloistered on the freezing TB wing, or up in his office at Admin scribbling notes and dissecting data. Ben is a doctor in name only, as far as I can tell. I can't remember the last time I saw him suturing anything. The Beehive is constantly overrun with patients and the nurses have their hands full, no doubt. And I've spent ten hours this week dissecting data on seizures. Nobody mentioned this when I agreed to the job, of course. But Miss Jenkins has been a great help with the psychometrics, so it's not a total loss.

– No, no. It's no big matter. Just that...

He turns, smiling, but he looks nervous, his toes tapping on the floor in his great loafers. They're not what I would have expected from him, with his casual rolled-up shirtsleeves and blue slacks. Brown Italian leather, pristine.

– The patients are having a Christmas dance in a few weeks.

– Yes?

First I've heard of it. And probably the last thought I'll give to it too. The holidays are something I'd like to forget as far as possible, thank you. I'll be down here where I can forget completely that Christmas ever existed.

Kain

– It's a tradition.

McHugh rushes to explain.

– The higher-grade patients decorate the hall and make special desserts. It's really quite the spread. Both the male side and the female side attend. Together.

I try not to look incredulous. What kind of dance would it be if they didn't attend together? And more to the point, how many babies does he expect to be conceived in the dark corners of this dance, exactly? I'm beginning to see the problem here.

– As the director, it falls to me to do certain ceremonial things. Gift distribution. Toasts. Keeping the boys away from the girls when they're not on the dance floor.

Right, so he does understand the idea of sexual segregation, then.

– I was hoping I'd be able to count on you to chaperone with me?

– Chaperone? You mean, attend the dance? I can't possibly. Who will run the Beehive?

– Oh, it's skeleton crew on holidays anyway. All the patients miraculously improve in time for parties, you'll find. Believe me, you won't be busy.

He looks so cheerful. Expectant. Like a boy anticipating a train set. With effort, I smile.

– That's fine. I'd be happy to. Do I have to wear anything in particular?

McHugh shakes his head.

– Oh no. Your...um...your breeches are fine.

I look down at my apron, stained with chloral hydrate from this morning's distillation. He's trying so hard to be polite.

– I do own a dress. I've even worn it once or twice since I've been here.

I wink and grab a pen. When I look at him, the tips of his ears are pink. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, why are men so awkward?

– Date?

– Er. Christmas Eve. At six o'clock.

– Great. I'll be there. Dancing shoes on.

He smiles. Awkwardly. Lopes out of the room. The door closes and I shoot Sera a look, which she ignores by turning to plug in the electric kettle.

– He likes you.

– What?

She turns around, her brow furrowed, like she's smelling something odd.

– He finds you attractive. He was flirting with you.

– No he wasn't. He was talking about hospital business for heaven's sake.

– He asked you to the dance, Siobhan.

She gives me a pointed look while I stop to let the conversation replay in my head.

– He asked me to chaperone.

– Yes. With him.

She gathers two mugs and sets them on the table, which is good because I suddenly feel like I have to sit down. The chair clacks in protest.

– Have I just accepted a date?

She nods, her eyebrows dancing.

– Yes. Well done. Welcome to our conversation.

My face feels hot.

– I can't, Sera. I can't date him. He has the wrong idea.

– Well, yes, if his idea is to court you.

Tears start pricking my eyes. Right idiot, what's wrong with me? I turn away before she can see, but it's too late. She puts down the mugs and puts a hand on my arm, which only makes things worse.

– Siobhan, what is it? What's the matter?

The shame feels like an iron poker in my stomach. Why, after everything he did, should I feel ashamed? He was the one who undid us.

– Sera, I'm married.

She looks at me curiously. But not, somehow, surprised. Is it possible she's known this all along? How could she have?

– Does Doctor McHugh not know?

I stare at her.

– I hardly made a point of it at my interview. People already have a difficult time with female doctors. Let alone female doctors who may be married.

I breathe out, blowing the hair out of my face.

– Well, I didn't suppose you'd actually agree to court McHugh, Siobhan. You can just say no and correct his impression. But at some point... I mean, at some point it's all right to move on, isn't it? You're officially separated from...your husband, are you not?

– Yes, for some time now.

I gesture around the room. As if I'd have chosen this, had I had any better options.

Kain

– But I am still legally married.

Her lips quirk a little, like she's amused. And why shouldn't she be? It's a shockingly traditional point of view, even to me.

– Don't judge me, please.

She sits down across from me.

– Judge you? For what?

– I can't get a divorce. And I can't...I just can't be involved with anyone right now. Ever, really. Or at least for a very long time. But certainly not right now.

The kettle starts shrieking and Sera moves to get it, but I rise first and go to the trolley.

– Doctor, I hate to have to tell you this, but you seem a bit naïve about the desires of men.

I can't even answer her. I thought I was the only one with secrets. We sat by the fire, me reading, him doing puzzles and smoking. I thought it was only me who was hiding in our marriage.

Day after day after day.

I thought we had a normal life.

Until, suddenly, the police were at the door and sitting at my table and I realised Gerrard had left.

The charges left me speechless. But something else, something darker, eating away at the edges of my consciousness—because somehow... I wasn't entirely surprised.

And I knew then that what they were saying must have been true. Had to be.

Sera sits still for a moment, and she meets my eye as if about to say something. Then at the last minute, changes her mind and just reaches for the pot, swirling it around before pouring a steady stream into my cup. It's still a bit weak, but around here, nobody has time to wait for anything to brew.

I accept the cup and stir in sugar, silently.

She does the same.

Doctor Rian, have you seen your front door?

Red paint smearing obscenities.

I painted it over once.

When it happened again, I closed shop.

Kain

Fel

*M*ake it up to Marnie's ward just in time for her checks. Nurses standing with their clipboards. Stokes asks the questions and writes the answers down. Anyone who feels like it calls out.

Pooped, did she?

Yesterday morning!

Hate it.

– Bath?

– Yes. Tuesday.

– Checked for nits and vermin?

– Felwyn did. Last weekend, when she cut her hair.

– Clean, Fel?

Nod.

– Eating, drinking, sleeping?

– Yes.

– Menstruation?

Nurse Stokes shakes her head.

– Mother said yes, she does, but it's been three months and there's nothing marked on her chart.

Pisspot scoffs.

– Parents. Unreliable. Half of them have got no idea of what their children are even up to, let alone what's good for them.

I scowl. Marnie's parents look after her. They didn't even want her to come here. Told they had to, probably. Doctors are always telling people that. Throwing them in here. Putting parents away, children away. Open a file, stick someone inside. One day you're playing with your brother in the street, Mam's at home making tea, next day, you're all split up and moved out.

– Voiding regularly.

– Yes.

Kain

– Enema?

– Wednesday.

I make a face. Marnie's whitewash day is Wednesday. Mine's Saturday. But she still has seizures. Hers must not be working.

– Right, we're done then.

I grab Marnie and push her to the door.

– You've got *visitors*, Felwyn?

Pisspot stares at me like I grew another head.

– Never known you to have anyone before.

Don't answer. Just look down at Marnie.

– You're bringing her, are you? Your very own little doll?

Hate her singsong voice. Hate her beady eyes.

– Wait over there by the window. Parents will be in shortly.

Marnie's eyes go to the garlands around the window. Paper snowflakes hanging from the walls. Tree in the corner. The little ones made the decorations in the schoolhouse. Seen them last week with their glue and their felt. Lopsided Santas and angels with crooked haloes sit on the branches. Not a bad job.

Marnie looks out the sides of her eyes, always. Little slit eye like I give the nurses when they're not looking. Or Susan. Idiot.

We're first, of course. To pass the time, I take a bell off the tree and let Marnie hold it. Jangles against her wrist. Otherwise we'd just sit around and wait. Not like they'll let the visitors in early. Hours are two to four. Two-oh-one to three-fifty-nine, really.

Bell rings at the end and everyone clears out. Everyone who's still there. Who can make it the two hours. Some can't. Been on the bus once, the one that goes from the train station up here, everybody staring at their shoes, out the window. Nobody talking to each other. Nobody looking at anybody else. Like they're all ashamed of being seen coming here.

The gong's going now. Footsteps clacking down the wooden hall.

My stomach turns like I'm going to puke. So many people all at once, all strangers. Surging in like the sheep on the farm, through the gates.

I see them coming. The fur-trimmed coat, nice hat, long white gloves that the Mama peels off, quickly. She's shaking.

Kain

Her hands are all over Marnie's hair, her face, even behind her ears, like she's tracing her with her fingers.

– *Ma petite, bonjour, bonjour. Joyeux Noel!*

Marnie's lips move, like she's singing but no sound is coming out.

The Mama undoes Marnie's belt. Her hands shake, shake, like she can't move fast enough, and pulls Marnie into her lap, hugs her, hugs her. Tears fall on Marnie's hair. The Mama's nose is red, eyes red. She holds Marnie so tight. So tight. Kisses her face, her hair. Rocks her, rocks her, cooing in her ear.

Marnie melts. Cooing back.

Never seen her look like that, smile like that.

– Aaaah

She talks. God. Listen to that. She says something.

The Mama squeezes her again. Folds her into her lap.

– *Tu me manqué beaucoup.* Oh, hello.

Marnie puts her face closer, looking for kisses. Little weasel. Hugs, kisses. She coos and smiles.

Nurse Pisspot comes over. Scowling face.

– Mrs. Lavimodière, please remember that patients are to remain in their chairs during visiting hour. Coddling just creates problems.

The Mama stares at her for a second.

– But we haven't seen her for three months. They make us wait for her to...

She looks at her husband.

– *Comment dit-on?*

– Settle in.

The Dad's voice is low. So low. Sad and heavy. Almost a growl. His eyes are the same colour as Marnie's, dark, dark brown. Like the chocolate chips in the cookies.

– That's the policy, I'm afraid. If visits undermine hospital routines, they must be suspended for the good of the patient.

Glare at the back of her head. Stupid cow. Like Marnie's going to throw a fuss wanting to be held. Who'd hold her anyway? Certainly not Pisspot. Why can't she be held? Two hours a month won't spoil her.

Kain

The Dad takes Marnie from the Mama and puts her back in her chair, but he holds on for a second. Whispers something in her ear before he sets her down.

Marnie whines. Her head moves faster, like she's looking for them.

I put my hand in her hand and she squeezes it. Can't see that her parents are still here. Don't know a thing unless you're touching her.

– Marnie, *comment ca-va, ma petite?* We brought you your teddy. We forgot it before. Can't imagine.

The Mama's crying, but trying to hold it in. Probably good. If she cries, Pisspot might throw her out. Seen it once a long time ago. Susan's parents came and had a fight, yelling in the middle of the visiting room. They were talking louder and louder, and then the Dad said a word that made the room go quiet.

Pisspot and Doctor McHugh had to make them go out.

The Mama tucks the teddy bear in her arm and Marnie smiles.

– She doesn't smell right.

The Mama's almost whispering.

The Dad nods once.

– She smells like a barnyard.

His face is flat, like his voice. But his eyebrows are knit together, frowning. Mouth set.

They won't let her keep that teddy bear. It'll be nicked sooner than she knows, or thrown out, or pissed on, or lost in a day.

Marnie's eyes go wide. She's searching them, searching them. She's going to cry soon. I can tell. She's making that mewling sound. Like a kitten calling for milk. Her Mama's face is all crunched up and she puts a hand to her mouth. Sobs and chokes it back.

I remember when Marnie came. How her Mama didn't want to leave her. How long she's waited, probably. Thought about her every night, probably. Maybe she's even slept in her bed or cuddled her teddy bear.

I move beside Marnie. In between her and her Mama so Pisspot can't see. Take the Mama's hand and put it in Marnie's.

– Aaahh

Marnie smiles. Moves her head back and forth. Takes in a big deep breath like she's laughing.

The Mama looks up at me. Tears on her face.

Kain

I stay where I am, looking out the window.

Pisspot is busy with someone else. Scolding them. *Cookies are supposed to come up to the ward, please, so they can be properly administered. We don't want to spoil his supper.*

The Dad looks at me. I roll my eyes. He laughs a little. Covers it with a cough.

The Mama strokes Marnie's hand, over and over. She rolls her head. Laps it up.

Wonder if my mother ever done that. Loved me like that. Hands all over me, drinking me like I was—

That's stupid.

Never mind.

Probably she didn't.

Ain't seen her in years anyway.

I feel tears in my throat and choke them down quick. Ain't cried in ages. Don't even know what I'm crying for. God sake.

– Felwyn, don't you have somewhere to be?

Pisspot takes my arm. I see the Mama unfold her hand from Marnie's gently. Slowly. Like it was never there.

– Does this young lady have any visitors today?

The Dad is polite, stands to speak to Nurse Pisspot.

– Felwyn? Not likely.

The Dad frowns. Looks like he wants to say something else. He looks at me and I seen it before. He's sorry for me. Christmas time and no family. He opens his mouth to say something—

But I run. Tears filling up my eyes, spilling down my face. I swipe at them. What a baby. Crying over no visitors. Ain't had visitors in as long as I can remember. What difference does it make today?

Out the lounge, down the staircase, down, down, down to the tram.

Down to the boiler room. Who cares if anyone's there?

Still crying. Can't stop. Why, why, why does it matter?

Most of the people here have never had a visitor. I'm no different. Marnie needs people. Look at her. Helpless like she is. Can't do a thing for herself. Parents like that who love her. I can do everything for myself. Don't need nobody. Don't need to cry about it.

Hells bells, girl, pull it together.

Kain

Duck into the alcove and cry. Sob against the wall. Just a second and I'll clear it all out of me. Won't cry again for months. Sobbing, sobbing. Have to be stronger in here. Can't be a weakling. Pisspot can smell it on you.

I hate it here. Hate it here.

I want to go home.

But ain't nobody there no more.

I hear at least twenty people go past the alcove before I move. Visiting hour must be up now.

There's the gong.

Could go up to the attic and stay there. Let them search the whole place and never find me. But Marnie. She'll be sad when her parents leave. When she's got nobody.

She's sitting there by the window. Alone. Still got that teddy. Miracle in here. It's small enough, tucked in her arm. Fur missing around the face. One arm missing half the stuffing. Maybe it's as old as she is, that's why. Twelve. You'd hardly believe she could be, looks so tiny. But she is.

I tap her on the shoulder to let her know we're going. So she don't just lurch along
- Maaah

Moves her head around to look at me but we don't have no time to stop now.

Down the ramp to the tram. Through the underground hall, up the ramp to L.

Open the door.

- And here's the last one.

Nurse Stokes checks off the chart. Smiles.

- Nice visit, Marnie?

Marnie's eyes flutter.

- She's due for the toilet, Fel, please.

I push Marnie to the bathroom, through the doorway and Nurse Stokes follows us in.

Girl on the plank. Two girls on the toilets. Don't even look up as we come in. Pisspot sends a diaper flying past my face. Hits the hopper.

- Ring that out, Felwyn.

Go to the hopper and turn on the water, full blast. Rinse out the shit. The piss. Down the hopper. Chuck the wet diaper in the dirty bin.

– Wash your hands.

Pisspot barking. Like I need to be told. Shit caked on your hands then go to dinner?

Nurse Stokes is red in the face. All that lifting.

– Marnie's next for the plinth, please Fel.

She's looking at me, side-eye. They'll take that teddy bear. I lean down and pull it away from her. She whines.

Sorry. Sorry.

Shove it in my apron and push her over to the plinth.

One of the pinhead twins gets off the toilet, yanking on my arm. I shove her off but she yanks again.

– Fel. Bwush my hair.

– No. Me. Mine.

– Leave Fel alone, please. She's busy.

Hear a scream, then, like a bird crying. There's Marnie, winding up. Face so red it's almost purple, twisted into the head of the plinth. Legs jerking and kicking. Gonna be a doozy.

Pisspot just rolls her eyes.

Marnie's shrieking gets worse and worse, arms flailing. Head stiff as a plank.

The others see me. Swarm me. Grab my arms and legs.

Nurse Stokes makes a path for me. I jump up and look back at Marnie. She's stopped shrieking. Now's just twitching, crying.

Go and hold her hand. Touch her hair.

– Jaysus, Mary and Joseph, she's leaked through the nappy. Felwyn, get me another one.

Pisspot strips the dress off Marnie and chucks the whole bundle at me.

Mind feels like a tornado, whirling, whirling around. Can't breathe. The angel sits on the windowsill, black wings outstretched.

I throw the laundry at one of the pinhead twins and point to the laundry bag. She shakes her head but I give her a stink eye and shove her so she goes. Dumps it next to the bag in the pile that's growing, growing. Stinking.

I get a new nappy. New pins.

There ain't no dresses in the cupboard. No bloomers neither. Guess laundry is backed up again.

Pisspot just straps her into a nappy and leaves her, shivering.

Kain

My head feels funny. The angel's dark wings are flapping around my ears and I want to lie down. Tears leak out of my eyes again.

– Finished blowing your nose, Felwyn?

Sees someone crying and thinks it's funny. Stupid cow.

Push Marnie's wheelchair to the plinth. Move regular, even though I want to run. Away from her horrible face.

Nurse Stokes takes the bottom. Pisspot takes the top.

– One, two, three.

Heave Marnie into the chair.

I push her through the doors, into the dayroom.

Pisspot calls at my back.

– You want visitors yourself, you might try talking to people!

Something snaps in my chest. Like a rubber band busting, white hot and sharp.

Turn around and rush at her. Tears blinding my eyes. Swing my fists at her and pummel her chest. I'd like to knock her flat, but she's strong. Fights back. Get in one good whack to her jaw before she shoves me against the wall, but I bounce off and fly at her again.

– Fel! Fel!

Hear Nurse Stokes yelling at me. Pulling me off.

And I'm sobbing, sobbing against her chest. Puts her arms around me while Pisspot's screaming.

– Get a jacket. She's a bloody lunatic, this one.

Hear the clinking of the belts. The angel is closer, closer, her black wings almost on top of me.

– Never mind that. It'll just make her wild.

Stokes pushes me to the door. Her face is white, voice low.

– Go on to your dormitory now. *Now.*

I run out the door, down the hall. But I don't make it to the Pavilion. Not by half. Lie down in the alcove in the tram and let the angel come.

Not an hour later, called down to Matron. Of course I am. Even Nurse Stokes don't look me in the eye when I pass her in the hall.

Disgraced.

Kain

– I must say I'm surprised at you, Felwyn. I thought you liked it in the children's dorm.
I did. I do.

My eyes slide off hers. They can't stay looking at her hawk eyes.

– You've been doing so well there. So well at your post. You have ground parole. Even town parole, if you wanted to use it. You're going to the domestic science programme after Christmas. So why? Why did you do it?

I stare at her. My jaw hurts from closing it so tight.

I look at the floor. Wait for her to finish. But instead she sits down. On my side of the desk.

My knees sink slowly and my bum hits the chair. Just the edge. Not to stay.

– Did something happen, Andria?

Why's she forcing me? She knows. She knows I can't.

– You may not have another chance. There will be consequences. Do you understand?

I nod. Keep looking at the ground.

– Unfortunately, you've been dismissed from ward duty.

She looks at me. Searches me. But I can't answer.

– Did you really fly at Nurse Roland?

She would too, if Pisspot said half to her what she does to me. I wish she'd just tell me where I'm going. Get it over with.

She stands up. Sighs. Smooths out her skirt.

– Cottage K.

Her voice is crisp. Like when she's on the phone in the office.

My stomach twists. Drops. Puke comes up my throat.

I look up at her. Almost say something. I can feel the words coming up my throat.

But I can't.

– Nothing to say, Fel? Nothing at all?

The Oldies ward.

The old ones. Dark toothless mouths. Claws like dragons. Ladling soup from a pot, one to the other.

No.

I shake my head.

Matron sighs. Pulls her mouth in.

Kain

– You start tomorrow. Best of luck.

Rush out of the room, hate filling my body. Pisspot ruins everything. Dismissed from ward duty. She'll probably ruin The Nest for me, too. Never mind waiting. Should've known it was too good to happen. Need to check my clink, pile everything together. Time to leave this place.

Where the hell is Alistair when I need him?

Out in the corridor, slip behind the curtain at the window seat and stand there, still.

Next thing I know, rustle and shove.

Alistair crams in.

God, it's like it used to be when we were little and shared thoughts.

– Heard you almost killed a nurse. Good work. Hope you broke something.

Trust him to hear the gossip.

He reaches into my apron.

– Got anything good?

I shove him away but he pins my arms to my sides, giant that he is now. I kick his shin and he laughs.

– I'm sorry, all right? I have it all worked out, getting us out of here. I've learned some things since the last time.

– I want to leave now. Today!

– Whoa, whoa, sister. I want to leave, too, but no way I'm gettin' dragged back here like last time. This time, I'm doing it proper.

– Ain't got time to wait.

– What happened?

He looks at me, eyes worried.

– They do something to you?

– They're putting me back on the oldies.

– Ugh, that's shitty.

He looks sympathetic, but his eyes are darting to the hallway.

He puts a hand on me.

– Just wait a little longer, a'right? Can you stick it a few days?

I shoot fire at him out my eyes but he's not asking the world and he knows it.

Kain

– Make sure to come to the Christmas Dance. We'll sneak off and make our plan then.

Nobody will notice we're missing.

I sigh. Nod.

– C'mon. Anything to light my cigarettes?

Roll my eyes so he'll know what I think of him smelling of stinky tobacco but hand over the matches I swiped.

– Ho-ho!

He holds them up like I've given him a real Christmas morning.

– Thanks, Andie. Just what I need. I'll see you soon. Wear something nice to the dance.

We'll be celebrating.

And then he's gone. Before I can even ask him where his work duty is now.

Don't sleep all night, wondering what else is going to happen to me.

Who Pisspot's going to fire off to? Complain about me. Doctors always listen to the staff. Never to the inmates. Is Doctor Rian going to change her mind about the school programme?

Don't really matter if I could talk. They wouldn't listen anyway.

Bad enough I'm on Cottage K for the ward duty but if Doctor McHugh listens to Pisspot, I'll be fired from the office too. Sacked. Back in the day room, staring at walls. Sewing stupid stockings. First Punishment, though. Scrubbing the shit off the floors in my nightie.

No more delivering babies.

No more nothing.

Couldn't stand that. Things are bad enough here as it is, but being stuck on a ward?

Nothing worse.

I want to leave now. Tonight. Right this second. But I ain't ready by half. Need to have more money.

And Marnie. Marnie. Who's going to look after her?

Look up and down the hall. Not there. Inmates, inmates, inmates. Dinner bell gonging. Inmates brush past me, going for supper. Shuffling off to the dining hall, the ones who can get there. Eat. Clean up their own trays.

Trolleys *clatter clatter clatter* to the wards.

Billy pushes a cart of trays, down the ramp, underground. Maurice has a bucket of soup.

That's for the Oldies.

That'll be my job tomorrow night.

I fight the tide past the staff dining hall.

There's Miss Street, sitting down to dinner. If only I could have a word.

I try to catch her eye. Wave. The door closes and she don't see me. Don't even look up. She's frowning, worried, maybe, but she's always frowning now. Frowns when she's concentrating. Frowns when the baby's coming. Her eyebrows thread together—an invisible string that gets pulled. They're tight like the top of a drawstring purse.

I'll have to find her later.

But for now, gotta get to dinner on time or I'll be docked.

Keep my head down, eat without looking at anyone. Boiled potatoes. Mutton stew. Chew up the stuff while I still have teeth, even the dessert. Fish eyeballs swimming in warm custard. But I eat it all. Watch the older girls stuff bread in their aprons.

Hoarding food is not allowed.

Rats and mice. Ants and roaches.

Who gives a toss? The creatures come anyway. Breadcrumbs don't make a lick of difference. I do it myself as often as I can get away with it.

But not tonight. Tonight I'm being good. Nothing's happened. Why not? Something should have happened. Makes me wonder. Makes me uneasy, not knowing.

Tomorrow's Christmas Eve. Maybe I'll get a holy miracle.

Kain

Christmas Eve, 1927

Fel

Merry Christmas, Fel.

Miss Street pops her head into the day room. Has a Santa hat on, lighting up her blond hair.

She hands me a little package. Wrapped in paper.

I take it. Feel shy about it, but turn it over in my hands, wondering.

– Just a little treat. Put it in your pocket and don't tell anyone.

I shove it deep in my apron. Take out a card for her. Made it on free hour last night.

Someone put out a box of coloured paper and ribbons in the common room.

– Oh, thank you.

Miss Street hugs me quickly. She smells like hay. Probably out feeding her horse.

– I heard you had a bit of trouble with Nurse Roland.

I scowl.

– Don't let that old bat ruin your holiday, you hear? No matter what happens, keep your chin up.

I nod. She would know. Plenty of things happen to her and she stays strong. Don't get beaten by nothing.

Square up my shoulders like hers.

– You're going to the dance tonight?

I nod. If they don't stick me on Punishment. Still don't know what's going to happen to me. Been waiting and waiting.

– I hear there's going to be apple cider and pumpkin tarts.

Yum. That'll be a nice change. If I can get any before greedy Susan swipes them all. I smile at her.

– I'll be on Cottage G tonight. Covering off.

She makes a face and I make it back.

Punishment. Who wants to spend their Christmas there?

– Hopefully not too many there tonight.

She reads my mind. Hope I'm not one of them, neither.

– Their sins may be forgiven in time for them to go to the party.

She turns to go.

– Have a good day, Fel. Enjoy yourself tonight.

I smile.

– Oh hey, did you get a nice dress?

I nod.

I got up early. Sneaked out before Susan when Nurse Evans was going off to bring out the good dresses. I helped her carry the box for our ward. Then she let me pick first.

– What's it look like?

I give her a mysterious look and she laughs.

– Oh, I'll have to see tonight, is that it? If I ever make it down from Punishment.

I wrinkle my nose. Cottage G's the worst. Hate it on that ward. Down on your knees, scrub, scrub, scrub the floor. People yowling, trying to climb out windows. Only the crazies get put in there. I've only been in once, when I ran off that one time with Alistair. When we first got here. Stuck me on G for a week. Felt like a year.

Scrub, scrub, scrub, in my nightgown all bloody day. Toast for breakfast. Stale.

This time when I run away, I'll be long gone and clear. Not ever going back to G. Horrid place.

Miss Street moves to the door. We both see it, out the window, smoke curling up. She stands on tiptoe.

– What on earth...? Something's on fire.

Over the road, the farm. Can't see from here.

Bells clanging down the road. Faint at first. We listen harder. Yes, they're coming closer. The fire brigade.

– Probably a bonfire got out of control. Strong winds today.

Bells keep clanging, though. Smoke billows up black, thicker and thicker. In a few moments, it starts to die down and the bells stop.

It'll be all the talk at the dance tonight.



In the auditorium, the children's band squeaking out *O Holy Night*. The red curtains are closed and they look like a Christmas backdrop. Tree's going up. The little ones are decorating it. Boy's up a ladder, reaching, reaching to put on an angel. Paper snowflakes, candy canes. Looks right pretty.

– Check the lights, will you?

Doctor McHugh bends to jiggle the plug. Tree flickers and lights up.

Gorgeous.

Wish I could enjoy it but my stomach's in knots, waiting for someone to spring out. Shove me off to the pads.

– Yes, works fine.

He unplugs it and the tree is dark again, waiting for tonight's tree lighting. The part I like the best.

There's the band again. They could do with some more practice.

See Darcy in there, dinging a triangle. Grinning. Makes me smile a bit. Can't help myself. Some of the little ones have maracas. John isn't terrible on the trumpet.

I know it's getting late but I listen anyway. Remembering when I tried to learn the flute, spitting rice. But in the end it was too much like talking. Too much attention. I left it.

Darcy sees me and waves.

Wave back and look again at the clock. Damn.

Have to finish my jobs or I'll be late for the party.

It takes me half an hour to finish deliveries. Rush back to the office, empty mail bag. Last package delivered. And no more until after Christmas.

Here's John now. Cheeks pink from playing. He looks happy, tired. He's lost weight. Gotten taller. No wonder. Carting the mail bags, all over the place extra heavy at Christmas time. Trudging up to the third storeys and out to the men's cottages, like I go to the women's cottages.

Have to wear a coat now going outside. Boots. It all adds extra weight. And it's hot as Hades down through the trams, bags bulging. Out to the nurses' residence is the worst. Boxes of chocolates and perfumes. Attendants' almost as bad—socks and ties. One got a pair of shoes.

Kain

Got to be from his mother. Some patients get presents and share them on the ward whether they like it or not. Tins of cookies, sweets. Nurses take the most.

John lines up the pens on his desk next to the ledger. Straight line. See the row of check marks. Each ward accounted for.

He looks at mine. Not as neat as his, but almost.

– I hope to see you at the dance. Will you be going?

I nod. It'll be fun to see John dressed up, hair done. Wonder what he looks like in a tie.

Gong chimes four and I head for the door. Got to dash. Have to help the oldies on the ward. Hells bells, why do I have to start on Christmas Eve?

– Fel!

Nurse Stokes yelling at me down the hall.

Turn around, quick march to her.

– Never mind going to K. I need you with me.

Heart skips. It's a Holy Miracle.

– Nurse Roland isn't in today and I need your help with the little girls. Have sixty of them to dress for the dance and Nurse Annette is slower than maple taffy.

Follow her quick to the children's dorm before anyone catches us or pulls me out to the toothless ones. They ain't going to the dance anyway, but the little ones are. Dresses are piled on the table, girls all over, in the day rooms, in the dormitory, bouncing, excited. One's on the table, stark naked.

– Lord, love a duck. Nothing quite like Christmas, is there?

Nurse Stokes blows hair off her forehead. Can see from here the sweat stains spreading under her arms, and she huffs.

– Let's get started with the smallest girls. You take Marnie and the group in the back room. Everyone gets her hair brushed. Teeth brushed. Visit the washroom. Sunday dress. All right?

I nod and grab a pile of dresses, head through the doorway into the dormitory and can still hear Nurse Stokes bellowing:

– Everybody down to her bloomers!

She grabs the nearest girl and wrenches a dress over her head.

Nurse Annette is still rounding up kids left and right.

Marnie's going to look nice tonight if I have a say about it. Sift quick through the pile. Find a pretty red dress, lace trim, nice bow. Get it over to Marnie before anyone else swipes it.

She's there, waiting in the corner, eyes slitting at me. She smiles when I pull her up and give her a bit of a tickle.

Get the dress over her head, wiggle it down over her pudgy middle. She sighs, rocks her head back and forth. There. Tie up the bow nice and pretty at the front.

The squabbling's started in the common room. Girls are grabbing the dresses, yelling and crying. Down on the floor, a tug of war over an old green thing. Rip and wrench, the sash comes off.

– Land sakes!

Nurse Stokes grabs the dress and pulls the girls to their feet.

– Make a line!

But they're like goats in the field, squabbling, bleating.

– Now, or nobody gets a dress and you all go in your bloomers!

Stokes is fierce when she's mad. Eyebrows knit together, fiery hair springing out from her cap.

The girls line up, shoving and squealing. And there's Nurse Annette, boxing a few of their ears.

– Quietly! High-grade girls first. Go choose your dresses.

Stampede to the table, and some of the beasts almost knock me over. Hold the pile over my head and wait til they shove off. Then hand out one, two, three, to the girls who can dress themselves.

The little ones are still standing there in their bloomers. And the idiots.

Nurse Stokes holds up a dress.

– Hands up.

Stokes pulls a dress down onto one of the little girls.

Nurse Annette ties it up and points her to the closet.

– Go get a pair of shoes on.

One of the kids runs full-tilt for the shoe closet, smack into Nurse Annette.

– Jumping Jehoshaphat, child, watch where you're going!

Line up, line up. They could do it in their sleep. Line up.

Head to the back room.

Line up the girls. One, two, three.

Hair brushed, one, two three.

Lace, button, tie.

– Help?

Little Alice holds up a foot for me to see her boots. Black and dull with laces for miles. Never knew a Mongoloid who could tie shoes. No wonder she's always in slippers. I bend down, tie them up quick, then shove her into the line at the door.

Two idiots still need to get into wheelchairs.

I wave to Nurse Stokes, but she's busy.

– You need help Fel?

Nurse Annette comes over. She's so young. Skin perfect. Wonder how long she's had her cap for.

– Can you lift?

I'm all healed now. No problems with my appendix scar anymore. I nod.

– You're supposed to say Yes, Nurse Annette.

She stands up taller, frowning at me.

I look at her.

– Well?

I stare. My feet have gone cold.

She taps her foot.

– I don't have time for games, inmate.

Sometimes the youngest ones are the worst. Land sakes. High and mighty. Doling out punishments. Taking clink left and right.

– You'll use manners with me or you'll be docked.

I reach into my pocket and grab my notebook. Write **MUTE** in big letters. Hold it up.

She stares at me.

– Well, if you can write, why can't you speak?

What business is it of hers? But I just wait. Looking her in the eye, waiting.

She sighs.

– Let's get the last one done, then. Into her dress, into the chair.

Kain

God, these girls are heavy. At least the nurse is strong. She takes the top half. Knows how to dress the kids too, over the head first, start with the spastic arm, then the other. Ain't stupid.

She looks at me for a moment when we're done, like she's sorry.

– I didn't mean to make you feel badly. I didn't realise.

I shrug. She's new. Wouldn't be the first time. Won't be the last.

– What're you wearing tonight?

She smiles. Changes her whole face. Has a dimple in her perfect skin. Straight, even teeth. Sort of pretty, really, if she were nicer.

I take out my notebook again.

Blue dress. Satin hem.

She reads it.

– Sounds pretty.

I nod.

– Have fun then.

Marnie looks special. Her skin is glowing and her hair shines so bright. Dark and glossy, like a horse's mane. She even smiles a little.

I push her to the door. Wheelchairs and strollers, walkers and canes, crutches and little girls in their alligators, holding strings.

Ready. Lined up. This is as good as we get.

Nurse Stokes stands by the door of the common room that leads to the hallway. She takes two little girls by their hands. Plops them down on the bench.

– There's two more ready to go down.

She counts over my head. Probably counting the wheelchairs, then counting the staff. Knowing there ain't enough hands. Wonder if she'll ask me to stay. Then I'll really be late.

She frowns.

– All right, Fel. Thanks for all your help. Off you go now. You've got just enough time to get dressed before things get started.

She reaches into her apron and hands me a little orange.

I take it and roll it in my hands. Ain't seen one of them since last year. Smells lovely. Little bursts of juice.

– Eat it before someone snitches it.

Nurse Stokes winks at me and I dash through the door.

Scoot down the hall and into the tram—land sakes—plough right into One-Arm.

Dumb, stupid girl. Dangerous thing to do, running pell-mell. Heart thumps.

– Where's the fire?

He's in the way. Can't squeeze by him. Wait.

– I have a delivery to be made.

Heart slows down.

I wait. Foot to foot. Nod. If he'd be quick about it, I'd be on my way.

Passes me a note. Creamy stationery, like silk in my hand.

– For Doctor Rian. Guess one of the parents knows her?

No return address. Loopy scrawl.

I shrug.

– Kid's on my ward. The mother asked to have it delivered to her personally. Can you do it?

Siobhan Rian. Squint at it. Is that her name? See-ob-han? Try to remember if I've ever heard anyone say her name. Yes. Yes. It's Shiv-on.

– Get going, will you? I said I'd do my best.

Maybe I am an idiot after all. Can't even read the doctor's name for God's sake.

Take the letter and rush away, back the way I came, and take the opposite fork. Not far to the infirmary. Quick stop. And then I'll take the outside track. Don't want to be stopped by One-Arm again. Once was close enough.

Infirmary's dead. Hardly anyone here except one nurse, older than dirt. So old she's been here since the place opened, I'll bet. She might even be a ghost.

I knock at her office door. Dr. S Rian. Even though she's probably not here. S stands for Siobhan, which you say Shiv-on.

Nobody answers. Knock again and try the door. It's locked.

Must be gone for the night. Can't I just stick it in the door? My luck, one of the picas will come by and stuff it in their gob. It's happened before. Cigarettes. Newspapers. Scissors. What a holy mess that was.

Hells bells, I'll have to find her later. I have things to do tonight. Mainly, finding Alistair. It's time to get out of this place. Might've been spared the Oldies for now but who

Kain

knows when Pisspot will be back? Who knows what they'll cook up for me next? It's time to be moving.

Stuff the note back in my apron and rush outside, across the snowy path.

It's magic tonight. White fluff coming down in front of the moon. Stars out, white and winking against the black sky.

I remember when snow used to make us both laugh. Catching it with our tongues. Alistair when he was little, dancing and making snow angels. Me, down on the lawn, thick black stockings and a dress. A real one. Mine. Wool coat, hat.

When we were kids.

Before everything. Before Dad came home drunk that one night. Decided he couldn't stand Alistair's hands no more. That he'd do something about them once and for all.

I used to love snow.

Try not to think about that night and mostly I don't, but snow makes me remember it.

We were six, almost seven.

He'd been dark. Growling, frowning for weeks, ever since baby Bella-Rose had died and he'd lost his job. Said he was in a black streak. That something wicked had given him the evil eye. The devil was looking at him.

It was the mark of the devil, he'd been saying—Alistair's extra finger. Unnatural.

Mam tried to distract him. Kept me and Alistair away from him, but then one night, there he was, staggering in the door with an axe. Took Alistair's right hand while he was sleeping. Always slept so soundly, he did. Probably never even heard what was coming.

Mam tried to stop him but he shoved her out of the way. Hit her head on the side of the dresser, crumpled on the floor. I ran over to her. I should've ran to him instead. Maybe I could have gotten in the way, but I didn't.

Alistair didn't wake up until the axe chopped through, then he sat up, screaming bloody murder, hand spurting blood. That one was a clean cut—extra finger lobbed off in one go—and it healed pretty well. Good thing, because he was right-handed.

But the other one was bad. Father grabbed Alistair's left hand, but by then Alistair was wild, hitting him and shrieking, hand bleeding into the sheets. I flew at him, but he shook me off. Went at Alistair's other finger. He missed, of course. Made a real hack job of it, took off two fingers and part of his hand.

Alistair dropped like a log and Mama crawled over to him. Staunched the bleeding with her apron. Somebody called the ambulance, I think. Probably one of the neighbours. Great bloody racket we were all making. Can't remember who it was now, only a woman's skirts, and lots of blood.

Drops in the snow, arcs of red all the way to the path where the ambulance picked him up. He almost died, but didn't. He was so small. Got a huge infection too. Rusty axe, doctor said. I wasn't allowed to visit. Too young.

He had a fever for weeks and the smell of it was something, even after he come home, but he didn't lose his hands. Well... except the parts Father lobbed off.

Father left. Never came home. Didn't even take a suitcase, nothing. Just a horse and his coat and, rode off. We never seen him again.

I heard some of the ladies in the town talking about it once. I was in the general store, getting something for Mam. They didn't see me, hiding behind the shelves.

– He's lucky he's not in jail, doing something like that to a child.

– Well he was out of his mind with drink, I take it.

– He was out of his mind, period. Have you seen that poor child? It's butchery, is what it is.

Left behind all his liquor though, which Mam took up. Needed it, she said. Any mother would, having to look at her kid's ruined hands all the time. Angry red scars for the longest time, then pink. But even after his hands healed up, they never looked right. Even after the infection went away and the doctors went in and cleaned them up with Alistair asleep. He could use them, though. He could still work. Probably what saves him in here.

The door to the Pavilion is open—miracle—and I slip in.

Common room is a right mess of cards, ribbons. Shoes and stockings. Rollers and rags. Land sakes.

– There you are, Felwyn. I'd almost lost hope. Be quick about it or you'll be left behind.

Nurse Evans bustles around. Counting heads, marking charts.

– You and Sanders are the only two left. Don't know what's keeping her.

Checks Anna-May's meds. Marks her clipboard.

Rush, rush, rush. All day I ain't even had time to pee.

But it will all be worth it tonight. Alistair and me'll make a plan and finally be free of this place. That thought is like a fire in my feet, rising up to my belly, keeping me warm until I want to burst into tears or sing, I can't decide.

In our room, Susan's still in her underthings, her dress half hanging off her. Tears roll down her face.

I stop.

She looks at me and looks away, sniffing. Lets out a giant sob.

The dress drips off her shoulder, showing her slip—dingy and grey like everything else here.

I shuck down to my underthings and pull my dress out from under my mattress. Susan watches me. Still sniffing. Baby. I pull on my stockings, gentle, gentle and put my feet straight into the slippers Miss Street lent me.

Susan's eyes fill again.

Can't help but feel a bit sorry for her. The dress is miles too big with buttons up the back. Probably the only one left this morning. She can't do it up neither with her hand like that, all twisted. She just stands there, sobbing—big, giant tears. Real, for once. And I know how she feels. That was me the first few years before I learned to get a dress first thing.

– Get a move on!

Nurse Evans bellowing down the hall. I should just leave Susan here to her moaning and whining. Always ruining things for everyone. But it's miserable on the ward alone when there's a party going on.

Besides, I'm going to be out of here soon. Won't never have to listen to her whining again.

I flip my hand, showing her she should turn around. Quick. Impatient.

She don't even see me through her tears, so I spin her. Half-naked, she's tiny and twisted. Her spine's all crooked, like a giant S, shoulder blade cutting into it. Must hurt, really.

Maybe that's why she's so miserable.

She stands still enough while I button up the row of tiny buttons. One, two, three all the way to twenty, like I'm dressing Marnie. Tie the sash quick in the back.

Still too big.

– I can't dance in this. I look stupid.

Kain

She starts crying again. But not wailing, bawling like she normally does. For attention. For the sake of it. Giant pain that she is. Real tears now, like she's been looking forward to this and now it's wasted.

I bend down and wrench the sash right off the dress. She just stares at me like I've gone crazy. But the thing's so old, who's ever going to notice? I rip it in half so there's twice as much of it, then wrap it around her waist. Frail skinny thing, it goes around her three times. Tie with a big bow.

Still not quite right.

Undo the top two buttons at the back and pull it down over her shoulders like the magazine in Doctor Rian's office. Like it's supposed to be like that. Fashionable, even.

She looks down. Almost smiles. Ain't too bad now.

– Thanks.

She sits on the edge of the bed while I step into my own dress.

Dark blue, almost black, with satin hem. Don't know where it came from. Never seen it before. But it swishes. Like my knees are dancing inside. Do it up quick along the side and tie the ribbon.

Susan stares at me.

– You look pretty.

I smile. First nice thing I've ever heard her say.

– Are you two just about finished?

Nurse Evans barges in, frowning.

– Get a move on, or you'll miss the punch.

Quickly put my hair up and shove Susan out the door. Hurry into line. Can't miss tonight. My last night here. Might as well make the most of it.

Hells bells!

That letter. I forgot it. Damn.

Run back into my room. Pick it out of the pocket. Stuff it down my dress. Now it'll bother me all night until I find Doctor Rian.

Siobhan

Well, Doctor Rian, you're looking well tonight.

He's wearing a new necktie but already has his sleeves rolled up, like he's been stuffing the turkeys himself.

– As do you.

Do I smile back at him? Will he think I'm glad eyed? Sera's words play over in my mind. Naïve in the desires of men. Coming from her! But she's not wrong. If only she knew exactly how naïve I am. Was. Continue to be, obviously.

– I heard we had some burns come into the infirmary earlier.

When in doubt, stick to business.

– Yes. Fire over at the farm. Doctor Braithwaite saw to them quickly enough. It was the farmer who got the worst of it, unfortunately.

– Oh no. Was it serious?

He sighs.

– Be glad you weren't on duty today. The smell of charred flesh is not something you want to be remembering over your Christmas dinner.

I shudder.

– I'll be heading over to see his family in the morning. Bring them a Christmas basket.

He shudders a bit and I touch his arm.

– Maybe you should put it out of your mind until tomorrow.

– Thanks.

Ben is staring at the pile, his tongue stuck into the side of his cheek.

– I wish I'd thought to count them before I began stacking.

He frowns at the pile like he expects a howling cat to come leaping out.

– Here's the last one, Doctor McHugh.

The gardener points two boys toward the tree and they push two more trolleys of gifts up to the base.

– Thank you. Just stack them here and I'll arrange them under the tree.

I can't help but smile. Dr. McHugh making neat piles of wrapped boxes. I begin stacking and arranging. There must be a thousand gifts here. Each one representing a patient. It's a bit startling, seeing them all together, stacked like this.

I wonder which class has wrapped them.

Ben's frowning again, worse than before.

– There's something missing. There was a pile with blue paper. I'm sure I saw it in the Admin building this morning. For the high-grade girls.

– Shall I go look?

I don't mind getting out of this recreation hall. The room is already getting warm and the patients haven't even come in yet.

– You won't be able to carry them all yourself. I'll come with you.

We exit through a back door I've never seen, up the staircase toward Admin. Ben knows his way around better than I do, certainly. We arrive in the main hallway in seconds, and see the patients start to flood into the atrium.

The crush in the hallway is something that still makes me catch my breath. Just when I think the hall is packed enough, more come in. The boys swarm from one end, the girls from the other.

– We're getting there first!

They come barrelling down the hallway, two young boys. One pushing the other much too fast for that wheelchair. It's clattering

The boy being pushed giggles and howls, his spastic fist raised in the air in salute. Grinning ear to ear.

– Slow down, please,

They smile at me and slow down a fraction. I can't really be cross with them. The smell of cinnamon and apples is thick in the air and they're racing toward the treats. Hardly surprising, given the watery rice pudding that's usually served. I'd be rushing too.

The crowd is close behind them and I move into a doorway, out of the path of the rising tide. Something hits my foot and I jump back.

A young man is face-down on the floor at my feet. His legs twitch and he's moaning. A seizure, probably.

I stand over him as his attendant comes around the chair.

– I belted him in, too.

It's Jerome. His face is serious and chagrined.

– How did he come out of those straps? I need some help here!

Ben pushes through the crowd. He bends down and assesses the patient. More patients swarm through, but Ben holds them off.

– Move back. Stand away.

His voice is loud– booming, almost, in the hallway. But he clears me a space. Enough room to turn the patient over.

He's soiled himself, of course, but he's not injured. No blood anywhere. I check his pulse, his breathing. Wait until the convulsions subside and his face relaxes.

His face.

Good God, it can't be him. What the hell is he doing here, of all places?

My stomach clenches, my heart pounding so hard I feel sick.

– All right, Doctor?

Jerome looks at me, concerned.

The patient is moaning, struggling to sit up. His spastic arms flail and Jerome moves to help him into a wheelchair.

He looks as though he's had a stroke. Or a bad fall from a high cliff. Significant brain damage.

For a second, his eye rolls over to me and rests. I stare at him. It *is* him. Does he recognise me? His hand flails out and he knocks me in the cheekbone. I put my hand to my face and he grabs my wrist.

– Careful there, lad, you're hurting Doctor Rian.

Ben grabs his arm and takes his hand off me.

– *Doc. Tor. Ri. An.* He slurs, still staring at me.

I can't believe it.

–Yes, you've hit Doctor Rian, Rhys.

Ben looks at him.

–You've had a seizure.

He keeps staring at me. Yes, he does recognise me. Of course he does.

– To the infirmary, please.

Jerome nods.

I know my voice is shaking but I hope they won't notice.

Kain

– Ask the nurses there to give him a bath and a change of clothes. Monitor him overnight, just in case.

Ben gets to his feet and helps Jerome lift Rhys into the wheelchair.

– I'll accompany him.

– Are you sure?

– He got you in the face, Siobhan. Go ahead and wash up. I'll catch up with you later.

My heart is pounding so hard that I feel like I'm going to be sick. How can he be here?

What the hell has happened to him?

– Ben.

My voice comes out as a harsh whisper, and he turns around.

– How long has he been here?

– Not long. A few days, actually.

– Who brought him?

He thinks for a second.

– His mother. Lillian. Lovely woman.

My stomach turns over and I'm afraid I'll vomit right here on his shoes. Lillian was here? At Avonhurst?

He squints, remembering something.

– She asked me to pass on her regards. I forgot entirely, so sorry.

I manage a nod, barely.

Turn and rush down the hall, tasting blood.

Kain

Fel

Look around in the half dark. The overheads are off but the string lights glow around the windows. On the tree. Pretty. Susan takes off, her dress slipping down her shoulder.

Boys stand on one side, girls on the other. One of the girls in the mothers' wing talked about dance halls. Reckon they look like this in the real world. The room is crowded with decorations, smells. Susan beelines to the table, scoops herself some punch one-handed without spilling a drop. See the things she can do when she wants to?

Stand on tiptoe and scan the room for Alistair. Don't want to miss him, stuffing my face with tarts. Don't see him anywhere. My heart's thud-thud-thudding in my chest, waiting for him. Waiting to hear the plan and then run out of here and grab my bag from the attic. It's all packed—all my clink, all my secret hidey holes emptied, poured into the suitcase.

Trust him to be late on the day we need to get away and talk. The only day we can go somewhere proper with nobody watching.

Watching the door will make me crazy so I head to the table myself. Better get a pumpkin tart before someone snitches them all.

Search the table.

There, the plate that should hold the pumpkin tarts. Empty. Party's only just started, and they're gone!

Cider. Cookies. Lots of treats. But the one thing I wanted has nothing but crumbs now. Should just have dressed myself and let Susan sob.

Speak of the devil, she's back beside me. Glued to my side tonight. Just to be a pain, probably, listening in on my business.

She holds out her hand.

– Here.

Lo! Hands me a tart.

– I swiped them all. Had to whack an imbecile.

Kain

She laughs a little. Never heard her laugh before. Almost laugh myself, looking down at her sash and seeing it stuffed with tarts. She gives me another one—one for each hand.

Her spastic grip's crushed it a bit. Thumb print in the top of the pumpkin. Oh well. Tastes the same, probably. I bite in. Taste explodes in my mouth. I could eat a thousand of these.

I nod to her. Thanks.

She nods back. She knows.

Scan the room again. Boys coming in the other side. Look about his age. Fourteen. Fifteen. No Alistair.

What if he don't come?

Look one more time, but don't see him. My stomach's fluttering. Fingers dancing by themselves.

– Mmm.

Susan bites into another tart. She's got crumbs all down her dress, not that she cares. Takes a third one from her sash. Have to admire her for that.

– I've never had one'a these before.

I'm onto my second now. Oh yum. Take another big bite. Savour it. The best part of Christmas here. Reminds me of pumpkin pie back at home.

Susan's grinning. Crumbs in her hair, even. She laughs and I can't help it. I laugh. Laugh out loud.

She looks at me.

– Didn't know you could laugh.

She's not mean about it. Just saying it.

Who wants to laugh around here? That's why I don't bother. Just glare at her. Don't want her to think she can make remarks. Don't care how sad she is about her stupid dress. Or Christmas. Tired of people and their thoughts.

Take another bite to stuff my mouth in case I laugh again.

She don't say nothing. Just stands there cramming tarts between her crooked teeth, getting crumbs on the floor.

They're good to eat while I'm waiting. Always waiting around here. Either that or rushing. Two choices: rush or wait.

Now I'm waiting on Alistair. Waiting on Doctor Rian. Don't see neither of them.

Kain

– Hello, Fel.

Whip around and there's John. Hair slicked back, combed, tie perfect, he looks handsome. Even smells good. Wonder if an attendant let him have some cologne. Maybe it's his hair cream?

I smile.

– I have been practicing dancing for tonight's party. Will you be my partner?

I stare at him. Dance? I can't dance.

I shake my head. Backing away.

– You don't need to worry if you are not as familiar with dancing as I am. It is the job of the gentleman to lead the lady.

Swallow hard. Won't kill me to try. He's been working hard at it, probably. Just like his speech lessons. Would hate to disappoint him. Know what that's like. This whole week's been a giant disappointment.

He holds out his hand and I take it. Christmas carols blaring on the gramophone. I don't know this one, but John thinks it's a good choice, I guess. He picked this time to ask me.

His hand is solid, like him. He pulls me to the middle of the floor.

Nurse Stokes sees us. Smiles. As we pass her, she stops me and straightens out my hair bow.

– Just relax, Fel. You'll enjoy a good dance, I think. Young man, make sure you're a real gentleman.

– Yes, Nurse.

He puts his hand across my back, holding me to his chest, but not too close. He knows I wouldn't like that. And he wouldn't neither. Together, but not stuck together. His hand in my hand, we spin.

His feet go quickly, but he's pulling me along. Not hard, not pushy, but guiding me, like we do with the younger kids. Not letting them take off down the hall when they're walking. Showing them what to do. How to go.

Spin. And shuffle. Spin again.

The music stops.

– Ten pigs were killed this afternoon at the fire on the farm. Two boys were also burned. The head farmer was burned badly. He had to go to the hospital in the city.

I raise my eyebrows. Ten pigs!

Kain

Even in the dark room, I can see John's cheeks are pink. Mine are too. Hot. I put my hands to my face.

– There's a room behind the stage. I found it one day. They keep the props there but they aren't going to be used tonight. Sometimes I go there when I want to be alone.

I nod. Know exactly what he means.

– Would you like to go with me?

This dance hall is hot and loud and Alistair is taking his sweet time, ain't he? Maybe he'd like to wait for me for once.

I nod to John and he leads me behind the stage and down the stairs to the room underneath. He's right. It's quiet back here. He's put something in the door to stop it locking.

Wonder how many people have hidey-holes in this place. Places I ain't even thought of.

This one is has a settee and loads of costumes. Shelves and shelves of props. Even candles. John lights the candles on the top shelf.

– Must be sure to blow this out when you leave. You can come here any time you like.

He sits down on the settee and I sit next to him. His eyes are big and dark in the candle light. I don't mind when he puts his lips on mine. Kisses me gentle, then pushes his tongue in my mouth. Never had a boy's tongue in my mouth before, don't know if I'm kissing him back right but I do it.

We kiss some more and I like it. Like when he puts his hands on my shoulders and on my face. Never thought John would want to get close to anyone and I'm glad it's me.

He pulls away and I'm sorry.

But he's not leaving.

He's pulling at my dress, and his shirt and wiggling out of his nice trousers. I lift my hands over my head and he helps me out of my dress. I want more. Closer.

The air shivers over me, goosebumps flashing out over my skin.

He lies on me, touching my breasts and my face.

Then he tries to push inside me but I stop him.

Remember Mam's face, yanking Alistair off me. Smacking him, smacking me.

– Don't *ever* let him do that to you. Ever. Don't let *anyone* do that to you.

Get scared suddenly and shake my head. Push John off me.

He stops. Looks confused, but he don't get mad. Lies down beside me instead of on top of me. Feel his hardness pushing against my leg.

Kain

– I have read that there are alternatives to sexual intercourse that girls might like better.

Where has he read that?

– But I have never had anyone to ask. Is it true? Do girls like to be touched?

I'm aching, aching between my legs and I think it would be nice to have him touch me there, nice to feel the heat rush up and burst open like I do to myself.

I shrug and he puts his fingers between my legs, finds the nub. He rubs a bit too fast and I jump. But I put my hand on his hand and slow him down and he listens. Slower, slower, the heat is coming, my toes curl down and up and my head arches back. It feels good. Good. I don't want him to stop.

But he's breathing harder too. And I don't stop him when he moves so he's on top of me.

We shuffle, scoot, so I'm on my back and he's between my knees. Then he lies down on me so he's rubbing himself on me—between my legs, against my nub. His chest on me, his hands, rough but gentle. Squeezing my breast.

Oh God. Here comes the heat. My hips are moving on their own, and I put my arms around him, pull him closer, closer. Exploding.

Almost before I'm finished, he moves again, and pushes into me. I don't stop him. I want him there.

It hurts but I open myself wider, wider, because it feels good, too, and I like the way he closes his eyes and moans on me. Like the look on his face, the way he strains and kisses me. He stretches me and I feel that aching on the inside too.

And the heat washes up from my toes again, but I don't make a sound.

Even when he splashes inside me and it runs down my legs.

He lets out a huge breath. Kissing me, kissing me.

Until something thumps up above and he looks up, startled.

We both giggle.

It thumps again, like someone's falling on the stage.

– We'd probably better go back.

He helps me into my dress and climbs into his own pants. Suspenders, tie. He looks handsome.

Do up my sash, quick and follow him back out to the dance, straight to the punch table. Scanning for Alistair. Still not here. I'm thirsty, suddenly. Maybe all that heat downstairs.

Kids are hauling their instruments up on stage, chairs dragging across the floor. Warming up clarinets, trumpets. There's going to be a sing-a-long. The Christmas tree has no candles on it. Wonder if they're skipping it this year. Too much danger.

John is looking strange. His hands are shaking a bit. Can hardly hold his punch.

I look at him, frowning.

– This will be my last party. I am glad I got to spend it with you.

Why? Is he moving to the men's ward? To the farm?

– I wanted you to be the f-first to know that I'll be l-leaving.

Leaving?

Step away from him. He jiggles his middle finger against the punch glass. Ain't heard him stutter in ages, but he does now.

– M...m...my uncle has had a stroke. He needs help in his printing office. Now that I have training, I'm leaving to go work for him. M...m...my family thinks I'm ready to come home. Now that I've learned a few things.

Speech lessons. And resetting. And his ledger work.

Leaving is what we all want. Getting out. Going home. He's my friend and I am happy for him. So why do I feel like I want to cry? Great big gobs of tears that he's getting out and I'm still here, waiting for Alistair?

Hells bells, boy. Where are you? Messing up our plans.

I take out my notebook and open a new page. Print **CONGRATULATIONS** in big letters and tear out the page. I want him to keep it.

He smiles. Gives me a salute.

I smile back. Then turn to run to the door. I need to find my brother. If John's leaving, me and Alistair are going to beat him to it.

Siobhan

Will you be joining us in the dance hall, Doctor?

Nurse Stokes passes me as I round the corner. She waits as inmates push past us on either side, decked out and grinning in their dresses and suits.

– Yes, I was there already. Going to get some fresh air.

I try to smile, but I feel weak and hot at the same time and know my face must show my feelings in some part.

– Something wrong? You look worried.

Trust her to know.

– Just... a bit hot in there.

– Oh yes. They'll need to open the windows before much longer. The inmates have done a wonderful job with the food, haven't they?

I nod. If only she knew what I see in the exam rooms. Some of the patients' fingernail beds are so contaminated that not even a bath in turpentine could satisfy me. It's a running joke with the staff, I know, that I survive on air, but I can only imagine what goes into the food here, and how it's prepared. It's been three months and I've so far managed to avoid the staff dining hall the entire time.

The small kitchen at the cottage is the biggest blessing the place provides. Amazing all the things the tiny kitchen can hold. For breakfast, Muffets or toast, with the milk delivered to my door. Oranges and apples. Biscuits and tea for lunch, if that, because who has time to eat? Ben's invited me for dinner but I'm sure the patients cook for him as well, so I've politely declined as much as I can and he's all but stopped asking. I'd rather have tinned spaghetti at home.

I realise that Stokes is still watching me.

– I'm not feeling quite myself.

The waist of my dress pulls awkwardly and I shift it.

– First time I've seen you out of your riding breeches, Doctor.

Stokes is smiling, though she looks puzzled.

– Well, it's Christmas. Thought I'd have a go at fitting in.

– You're sure you're all right?

– I'm not feeling well, suddenly.

It seems easier to confess that than to lie.

Stokes frowns.

– Go have a lie-down, then. You're probably coming down with the cold or 'flu the inmates have been tossing about. Head home. Nobody will miss you, and if they do, I'll tell them you've got a patient.

I meet her eyes as I turn toward the main hallway. She has a kindness about her. A genuine warmth that surprises me from time to time. I would expect it to have been used up, almost, by all her years on the wards.

– I will. Enjoy your evening. I hear the punch is quite good.

My head feels heavy and my eyes swim a little as I cross the lawn to the dirt footpath that will lead to my cottage. Rhys's face keeps flashing into my memory: how he was then, trying to reconcile it with the face of the boy I just saw.

Snow has started to fall and fat flakes land on my face, melting instantly. Despite this gut feeling, pulling me toward my cottage, I want to stop for a moment and look up at the sky.

The white swirls coming down are reflected by the glowing crescent moon. Starkly white in the nearly-black sky. Winter here is beautiful. Even if it is cold and damp indoors.

The fatigue is worse than the nausea. Constantly sitting on me, like a gong on the chest.

A small twinge in my back slows me down. I wonder if I tweaked it when I turned him over.

I'm moving through the path, but I barely see my way. His face clouds my whole consciousness. What he looked like as a boy. An adolescent.

God almighty, what happened to land him in here? After everything else... How? Why?

By my front door, I hang up my coat and bend to remove my boots. Another cramp—this one low and sluggish in my belly—makes me gasp.

The past month has brought a few twinges—to be expected, probably, if you're fascinated with yourself and keeping track of all the inevitable physical changes. I've been aiming for a clinical detachment, which I'm not sure I've achieved at all.

On a scale of one to ten, this is a three, maybe a four. The others were ones and twos.

I press my hand to my lower back to counterpoint the pain in my abdomen. Definitely a four. Another cramp seizes my belly, making me gasp out loud. It's happening. Now, of all times.

Fear grips me in its frigid teeth, sending a wave of ice down my whole body. It's months too early. Water gushes out between my legs and I know, with a sickening thud and a cry that seems to come from somewhere outside me, that it's too late to stop it.

It's happening now.

Of course it is. Of course that's how this will go.

Why shouldn't he find one more way to wreck me?

Another wave comes and I grasp the corner of the table. I knew it would hurt—I've delivered enough babies to understand exactly how and why it does—but I thought I had more time to prepare.

Four months' more time.

A break in the pain flashes over me and for a moment, I can stand up straighter. That's better. Almost normal.

Could I go back to the main building? Get someone to help me? Find Sera.

I should have told her myself. Would have. Might have. I don't know why the thought of her questions, her eyes and fingers probing me as she concentrated, pored over me like any other expectant mother, made me ashamed. Frightened. Ashamed of feeling frightened.

I should have told her.

Another contraction grabs my abdomen in its vice grip. God. They're fast, aren't they? Shouldn't I have more time in between? It's barely been a minute since the last one.

Breathe.

Mentally, I count backwards, breathing through the pain. How many weeks exactly? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?

The fluttering of the baby's tiny feet happened weeks ago—like bubbles popping. Arms and legs and heart and lungs.

The pain comes again and I clench my teeth.

After everything, he left me with a child—a child who will likely die.

Such a pity it couldn't have been him instead.

I close my eyes.

Kain

Fel

Spot Billy at the door, looking left, right. Frowning, which he hardly ever does.

Makes me stare for a moment, stop, even though I'm still looking for Alistair.

Sees me, eyes locking on mine over the crowd. But he don't smile like normal. Frowns more, heading toward me.

I wait, watching him lope, one foot dragging, scissoring together every time the slow one catches up with the normal one. Scissor, hop, scissor, hop, across the floor. It's a wonder he don't trip more often, but he's used to his own jerking, I guess.

Give him a wave. He keeps moving, into a corner. Music ain't so loud over here.

– I—ave—a—meshage—for—oo.

Nod, listening carefully. I'm used to Billy by now, but it's still loud in here and he's still hard sometimes.

– Abou—you—bruva.

Well, what is it? I know my face is impatient because Billy gets nervous, hands coming out like he's going to fly. His mouth works round and round and I force myself to wait. His whole body works to make words, and he's almost on tiptoes as he finally spits it out.

– In. Pun-ish-mint.

Punishment. Why?

I just look at Billy, waiting. He's got more to say, I know it. I put a hand on his shoulder so he don't fall over.

– Eee—sed—a—fiya.

A fire? Alistair set a fire?

My hands go cold. The fire at the farm. Alistair did it? He set it on purpose? No, no, no, no.

– Punish. Mint. Free. Mumfs.

Three months?

My chest hurts. Knees feel weak. Three months. Three months. He killed the pigs, poor things. And that boy got burned. He deserves three months in Punishment. I'd put him there myself. Not least for wrecking our plans again!

Kain

Until I can even see him. Until I can talk to him. To make a plan.

I feel sick. My knees start to shake and I have to sit down. Right on the floor there, my dress probably in all sorts of spilled punch and crumbs and boot prints, but I don't care. I feel like I'm going to scream.

How could he do it? Why would he?

I could kill him if I wasn't so tired. So tired. I don't want to see anybody, or listen to this stupid music. I just want to go to bed. Take off this stupid dress and throw it in the fire. Three months!

Billy moves off and I put my head down on my knees. I hate everybody right now.

Idiot Alistair. Getting punished on the party night. Never knew such a boy for trouble. More trouble than he's worth.

God.

Shove my notebook into my pocket. And hells bells, I still have the letter for Doctor Rian. Never had a chance to give it to her.

My hands itch to rip it up. Set fire to it and stomp on the ashes. I'm sick of delivering messages. Running around. Up stairs and down stairs.

Three more months!

Imagine tearing it to shreds.

Like a big breath let out.

The office is work but it's not like the wards. Anything's better than that.

Should've delivered it earlier instead of wasting time on Alistair. I could be on the Pavilion now. I'd have the room to myself, or better, I could leave alone instead of waiting around to go back to the Oldies. I won't go.

Idiot. Gets himself punished and wrecks my escape.

Stupid party. Crowded and hot.

Damn this letter. No place to hide it on the ward, and if it's on me, they'll think I'm trying to steal it. Wish I could just give it to her and be done and go to bed before anyone else gets in. Sleep without listening to snoring for once.

I get up and slam my fist into the wall. Hurts, God. But it smashes my anger for a second. Helps me think.

Duck my head, fight against the crowd until I get to the door. Lights sparkle. Tinsel and balls. Tree lit up and pretty.

Kain

Just want to look at it for a second. Smell the branches. Christmas smell.

Turns my stomach, thinking of home. That's enough of that now. Get out of here, quick.
Stupid Christmas season. Home is for normal people. Not Morons.

Look around the dance. Can't see her. Walk around the outside. Not here.

Nurse Stokes, looking right pretty in a real dress. I reach out and touch her sleeve.
Fabric ruffles between my fingers, light as baby's hair.

– Hi Fel. Having a good time?

I smile a little. Not any worse than a normal day, just more crowded.

– The choir's going to lead some Christmas carols in a few moments. You'll like that.

I nod. Would if I had time to sit and listen. Who's got time for parties?

Take out my note pad and scribble *Doctor Rian?*

– Oh, she wasn't feeling well, love. She turned in for the night. You can see her
tomorrow at the Beehive if you need to.

Tomorrow I'll be gone.

But I just nod thank you and duck out the door.

The outside route to her cottage will be faster, as long as nobody catches me. And who's
looking? Too busy singing Silent bloody Night. Barge out the door to the courtyard. Don't
even care who sees me. Don't care if I get docked or sent to Punishment. Maybe I'd even like it.
Then I could break Alistair's arm myself.

But he'd be on a different Punishment ward now. One for the older boys. Maybe even in
the Pads. Good. Serves him right. I hope they keep him there for the three months!

I jam a rock into the bottom of the door and test it to make sure it holds. The metal
door chinks on it, making a little chip in the paint at the bottom. But who cares? Everything
around here is chipped and rusted anyway.

Snowing. I stop. Look up at the moon. So bright. Beautiful. Snow falls on my shoulders,
my face.

Noise in the courtyard makes me look up. Some boys climbing the statue. Older boys.
What're they up to?

– Hey!

One spots me.

Trouble. All boys are trouble. That's why they keep them in their own ward. Even John.

Kain

He runs toward me and I take off, across the lawn and down the forest path. Duck behind some trees. He stops at the edge of the forest.

I wait. He leaves.

Kain

Siobhan

Sweat breaks out along my hairline— an unwelcome stream down my cheeks and the back of my neck. I haven't even lit the fire. Can't see in the dark and can't bend down to do it anyway. Why am I so hot?

I grab a towel. Between contractions, strip out of my clothes and pull a flannel nightgown over my head. God. God. That hurts.

A clamp bites down on my back and my knees shake as I grab the back of a chair.

All these years— the babies I've brought into the world— breathe, breathe through it, I tell the mothers. Calmly. Watching their struggle, their determination. Watching with faint curiosity as the cervix dilates and expands to its breaking point, wondering, more for the trouble of having to stitch it up, if the perineum is going to rip.

The moaning and writhing seem to come from someone else— a possession, almost.

I've seen it so many times.

And now I'm the one possessed.

Possessed and alone.

For the first time since I've arrived here, I feel really afraid. Having a baby is one thing— early another— but without a midwife could be dangerous. Fatal.

God. Fuck. That hurts.

Another wave hits.

I'm wiping tears with sweat. My body wants to curl in on itself, but I can't lie down. The longer I can stay on my feet, the faster it will be over.

One. Two. Three. Four candles lit.

A contraction jumps me, full force. A sound comes out of me—a bellow, like a cow.

What is happening to me?

Five, six, seven candles lit.

I need help. I need someone—

— *Ohhhh, God.*

The mothers, they say they feel like they're being ripped in half.

Kain

It's not the muscles pushing the baby down—though that's part of it—it's the cervix stretching, opening a channel out. The skin thinning and widening, wrenched apart like God's hands are pulling it.

Incredible.

How women survive this at all.

It feels good to moan out loud. Scream, almost, when it goes on so long.

Slam. Slam. Slam.

A break. Just for a second. I whimper with relief.

Almost crawl to the kitchen.

I pump a kettle full of water and bang it down on the stove. Pain claws me from the inside. Another warm gush down my legs— blood and water.

Now it will really start.

At the next contraction, hot and sharp, I feel my stomach turn over.

I vomit into the sink, a sour, bilious dump. The baby moves further down. Down. Following the amniotic fluid through the path between my pubic bones. The pressure grows. My abdominal muscles push the head down, down, until it feels like a towel shoved between my legs.

That moaning animal is me.

If I prayed, would God even hear me? Does He even listen to prayers from women like me?

Let it be swift. And don't let me bleed to death. Please.

Kain

Fel

Duck out and run to Doctor Rian's cottage. She'll have her letter. A weight off me.

And I'll be free to go with no unfinished business.

One, two, three steps and I'm there. Lift my hand to knock.

At her cottage door, a groaning noise.

I freeze.

I've heard it before. On the ward late at night. In the back rooms of the infirmary. As soon as a girl starts making that noise, the baby's on its way.

Who's the doctor got in her cottage? Why's she giving birth here and not in the Beehive? Peer through the window but can't see much in the dark.

No low, soothing voices or swaying bodies. No blankets or towels. No bowls of steaming water, though it sounds like the kettle's whistling.

Another groan—louder this time. She's crying, whoever she is. Doctor Rian is a doctor, but she ain't doing a good job. That mother is scared. I can tell. She should be talking to her. Like Miss Street talks them through the pain. Talks so they don't scream.

Miss Street ain't here.

She should be. Whoever Doctor Rian has in her cottage needs a midwife.

Knock on the door. No answer, just the screaming kettle.

That would drive John crazy. He'd throw something.

Someone should turn it off.

I knock again, louder. Turn the knob. The hinges squeak.

Doctor Rian leans against the sink. Her legs are shaking. Candles drip on the counter. Lantern overturned on the floor, not lit. Her hair is coming out of its bun, sticking to her forehead. Sweat like steam on her face. She looks at me, face twisted.

This can't be right.

I grab her arm. She squeezes me. Tight. Tight.

Pull her over to the bed.

– No. I don't want to lie down.

Kain

She's panting hard.

Pull her again.

Her eyes. Her sounds. It's time and she don't know. She pulls back on my hands.

Resisting. But she's got to go down willing or she'll faint.

I clear my throat.

– Listen to me.

She looks at me, stunned.

I clear my throat. Try to speak again, but I can't. I can't. It's stuck up again.

I know what it feels like. Someone making you do something you don't want to. I wish I could tell her.

She stares at me again. Her face is white. She's losing strength. Eyes red.

She goes down on her knees by the bed. That's good enough. I move the shrieking kettle off the heat, then leave her and run.

Through the woods, past the statue, so fast they don't see me coming. I know short cuts. I know places to hide. The boys holler but I keep running, back through the chapel door, down the tramway and through the passage by the boiler room.

Doctor Rian is having a baby.

My head rings, thinking that.

But questions ain't important when a baby's coming. Nobody asks questions until later. Not even then.

Miss Street told me where she'd be tonight. She wasn't going to the party. She was helping. Helping on the punishment ward. Cottage G. Girls. The farthest away possible. Of course.

Run up the stairs to the third floor, through the breezeway, down to the end of the end of the end and bang on the door to Cottage G.

One Cottage over is boys' Punishment. Somewhere in there Alistair is scrubbing a floor. I'll bet.

Don't feel sorry for him at all. Idiot.

A nurse comes to the door.

I duck around her for Miss Street. She's in the far corner, arms around a young patient. Holding her while she flails around. Arms out and head thrashing. The other nurse wrestles a

Kain

straight-jacket onto her. The girl lunges, teeth out. Her elbow goes flying, hitting Miss Street in the face.

The strapping nurse grabs her and pulls the straps tight. Lets her go. The girl takes a few steps, then falls against the wall. Howling.

– Fel?

Miss Street comes toward me, rubbing her jaw.

I grab her arm and pull her.

– Now?

I nod quickly to show her it's urgent.

– Is it a baby?

I nod hard.

She knows the routine. So do the nurses on her ward. She only waves to one, then points to me and the nurse nods.

I run down the hallway to the stairs. She follows.

Back through the breezeway. The halls. Down, down, down, through the administration building.

– Where are we going? Mother's ward?

She pants. Stops to catch her breath.

But I shake my head and pull her. Keep running, leading her to the front door.

– Fel, stop. Stop.

She grabs my shoulder.

– Where are we going? Where's the patient?

I point across the field.

She looks down. Her brow knits, puzzled.

Try to make my mouth work again, but no sound comes out. *Doctor.*

She looks at my mouth moving with no sound.

– Doctor Rian?

She grabs my shoulders. Looks at me like she wants to see straight inside– make sure this isn't a trick.

I nod. We both turn and run down the stairs.

It's pitch dark except for the moon. Miss Street trips over a rock and crashes into me. Curses, keeping close. At the treeline, the moon don't follow. Quick, quick, along the path. Over the hill and there it is.

A candle burns on the windowsill. A soft glow. It would be pretty except for the noise coming out of the cottage. Miss Street hurries toward it.

Opens the door without knocking.

– Siobhan?

A few candles burn along the countertop, the nightstand. Have to blink to find her, where I left her, kneeling on the side of the bed. Face splotched red, sweat running down her temples. Never did cut her hair and now long strands are sticking to her forehead.

Miss Street kneels down beside her and she starts crying. Relief at seeing her, I think. Then presses her face into the bedclothes and moans.

Miss Street will need water. Kettle's been boiled, I remember. Quick, quick, it won't be long now til the baby comes. Pour half the boiled water into a bowl and dump in a few cups from the pump to cool it down.

Soap. There. In the dish. Not surprised she has a lifetime supply, the way she carries on about germs.

Carry everything to Miss Street so she don't have to move. She barely looks. Plunges her hands in and scrubs.

– When did it start?

I pass her a towel from the shelf.

– I don't know.

Breathing is hoarse, ragged, like a horse after it's run too fast.

– I've lost. Track of. The time.

Doctor lays her head down on the bed, groaning.

– Fel, could you start a—?

She turns around. I'm already stacking kindling in the hearth. Turns back to her patient, kneeling beside her.

– What on earth were you thinking? Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant? I watched you split firewood, land sakes alive.

A tree branch smacks against the window. I jump, but Miss Street don't seem to notice.

– Watch me now. Breathe like this. Like you're panting.

Doctor Rian mimics her, breathing and keening. Contraction seems to pass because she slumps back down.

– I thought. It was. Impossible. I can't get. Pregnant. I tried for years.

A drop of sweat drips down the side of her nose.

– The irony. The one time in my life. I hoped. I wouldn't. Conceive. And all because. He had something. To prove.

– Who?

Sounds raving mad to me, but birth is like death. You get all the confessions you could ask for. Women shouting their secrets out. Making deals with God.

– I thought. I can't possibly. Be pregnant. I'm thirty-five. Years old. But last month. I knew. I knew...but I thought. I had time.

– Time for what?

Miss Street lowers her voice, leans in.

– Did you want to get rid?

– No. No. I meant...

– Time to tell me?

– I didn't know what to say...

– Sera, I'm pregnant. That's all you had to say.

– Don't scold me, please.

Miss Street feels bad. I know she does. Her eyes go soft and she puts a hand on Doctor Rian's back.

Feels bad for her words, sure, but also for not noticing, probably. I didn't notice neither. Never thought to look. Usually it stares you in the face, but if you're not expecting it, babies can be tricky.

The fire's hot enough now. Take the warming brick and stick it into the fire with the tongs. It'll heat up nice.

– How far along are you exactly?

Her face twists again.

– Breathe out with the pain. Count with me, one, two, three.

– Christ almighty. God. Twenty-six weeks.

I feel sorry for her. Baby hasn't got a chance. And she's a doctor, so she knows it.

Miss Street puts a hand to Doctor's head. Smooths her hair back.

Kain

Tears leak out of her eyes. Splash with the sweat onto the covers. Feel tears in my own eyes.

Brick must be hot enough now. Grab a towel to wrap it in and take it out of the fire.

– You know what that means, yes?

She nods. Contraction slams into her. She winces like she's been caned.

– All right. So we have some work ahead of us, I think.

– I had hoped. Just for a second. When I got to two months, then three...

She arches back, crying out.

– Fel, come help me here.

Can't think of her as a doctor now. Only as a mother. And she's suffering more than most, I reckon. Knowing she don't even get to keep it after all this.

– God, that hurts.

I kneel behind her. Press the hot brick into her lower back. Helps with the pain for some people.

– I tried. To think ahead. To plan. But I never could imagine it. The bassinet, feedings. My mind never could get. That far ahead.

Her legs are shaking now. Baby's coming down.

Miss Street takes the brick from me and I strip the bed, quick. Try to save the coverlet if we can. There's a stack of newspaper by the fire. Grab that and start laying it out. Mattress might be ruined anyway, but I'll try.

Heap a few towels on. They can be burned.

Miss Street is tiny but strong. Doesn't really need my help to move the patient onto the bed but I help anyway. Blood and water stream onto the floor.

Candle light barely lets us see. I take the one from the window sill and hold it up for Miss Street. She's got two fingers to Doctor's wrist.

– Pulse is weak and fast.

Don't know if she knows she's said it out loud. Her eyes look worried. Dark. She puts her hands on Doctor Rian's shoulders.

– You're going to be all right. This won't be pleasant, but you will survive it.

Her eyes widen and I push the basin in front of her, quick. Retching and coughing. Bile splashes up the side of the bowl.

– Sorry.

She wipes her mouth.

– Don't know how. I have anything. To throw up.

Miss Street goes for a washcloth and washes the doctor's face. Clears the sweat from her forehead.

Would be easier without her hair sticking everywhere.

I move behind her, pull loose the bun that's falling apart.

Doctor's shoulders tighten, and I move back, but Miss Street squeezes her hand.

– It's all right. She's only going to braid your hair so it isn't in your face.

Got to be deft, but gentle, like on the little girls. Fast, so they don't catch on, and soft, so they don't scream. Weave and twist, weave and twist.

She's moaning a lot now. Almost steady. I've heard it so many times before. But this is different. I won't forget this one.

– Don't let me see it. Please.

Miss Street is moving to the bottom of the bed. She tucks her hair up into her cap where it's come loose. Beckons me to bring the light closer.

– You tell me what you want and we'll do it, but right now, let's have a look, please.

Pulls Doctor's white nightgown up to her knees. Blood splashes everywhere. Her inner thighs right down to her ankles. The newspaper is not going to help this mattress.

– It feels like it's falling out of me.

Probably would if she were standing. Even lying down it won't take much effort.

– Gently now, not too hard.

Doctor starts crying and I go to take her hand. She squeezes tight, tight, pushing.

Almost as soon as she starts pushing, it's born. A tiny baby girl. Never seen eyes so giant on a baby. Her skin is almost like a window. Clear through, veins standing out blue on her chest.

Perfect doll's toes.

Miss Street cuts the cord. No sound. Wraps her in the towel. Everything's quiet. It's so sad when they're born quiet like that. She hands her to me. Another dead baby. My stomach clunks at the thought. How many dead babies have I held? How many have I put in the Backyard?

I put my pinkie finger on her chin. So small. Half the size of a normal baby.

Her chin quivers under my finger. So slight. So fast. I pull open the towel. No. Baby's chest is rising and falling. Quick, barely moving. I can almost see her heartbeat. Skin so clear and thin.

God. She's breathing. She's breathing.

Touch Miss Street on the arm. She turns around and gasps.

– Oh my word. Oh.

Babies this young can't live. How is this baby alive?

Miss Street sees my face. Her own face looks so sad. Like she's going to burst into tears. She leans close to me. Whispers.

– It won't last long. A few minutes at most, probably.

Doctor ain't seen yet. She turns away, curling her knees up to her chest.

Miss Street takes the baby gently, so gently.

– Siobhan, I know you didn't want to see her. I know.

– Please just take her away. I can't.

Tears spill out of Miss Street's eyes. Never seen her cry at a birth before.

– She's not going to live very long.

– What?

Turns and sits up.

– She can't be alive.

I swallow hard, eyes on the bundle. So small and so still.

– Just for a few moments, I think.

Is God kind to give this to her? Or is it even more cruel? I can't decide if I hate Him or not.

Doctor reaches out like every new mother I've ever seen. Scoops the baby toward her breast. Natural as breathing.

Miss Street tucks the baby into Doctor's arms. I hold my breath. I think we're all holding our breath. Her chest pumps like a bellows, and Doctor Rian just stares. Not blinking at all.

It's hard to tell now if the baby's breathing.

Ain't time to get a priest.

Miss Street reaches into her dress. I know what she keeps there. Vial of holy water for emergencies. She dips it onto her finger. Makes a swift sign of the cross on the baby's forehead.

Kain

Doctor is staring down so hard she don't notice. Not the religious sort, probably. But just in case, it's better to bless her. That way she'll know. If ever she gets to wondering later... The baby was blessed. She didn't go to limbo.

– She needs a name.

Miss Street's whispering.

Lips are tinged blue.

Doctor hesitates a moment.

– Fiona. After my mother.

– Fiona.

There. She has a name and a blessing. Miss Street looks at me, worried still.

I know what she's thinking. A bedside blessing isn't the same as a baptism from a priest. And then I remember. Like God has hit me with lightning. Father's here, in the chapel, to do a Christmas blessing.

Turn quick and bolt for the door.

Siobhan

Hold the baby for a long time—breaths coming so slowly, I keep thinking each one is her last. I touch the fair down on her forehead, kiss her nose and her fragile toes. Drink in the smell of her—committing that smell to the deepest part of my memory—the one that not even the dementia of old age can touch.

I want her with me. Carried in every cell of me.

As the moon rises high through the window, I stare at Fiona's delicate face—looking for all the world like she's dozing.

Something twists in my belly and I gasp. It's an unexpected pain. Dull. Almost an afterthought of my body. But of course, I should have expected it. I just got lost, watching.

Sera reaches out her arms slowly.

No. I don't want to let go.

But the pain comes again and I know I have to obey.

Sera gently takes the baby.

Is that Fel at the door?

Someone with her?

—Do you want him to bless the baby, Siobhan?

—Who?

—Father Gracy? He's here.

—Bless her? I don't know.

He's waiting in the doorway, patiently, his eyes sad. I recognise him. He lives in the rectory bordering the property. Sometimes says Mass at the chapel.

—I didn't know if you were Catholic. It's just, your name...

—Yes, you're right. Irish Catholic. It's just. I haven't been practising in years.

I can hardly wrap my mind around her voice, let alone her questions.

—Last rites, of course.

The pulling of my belly, insisting on finishing this.

Sera looks down at me, her forehead creased like she's in pain.

– She’s still alive. Let him baptise her, if you can’t decide.

I nod and Sera strokes her thumb once over Fiona’s forehead, almost as if by habit. She hands her to the priest, who carries her into the kitchen with Fel. Such a surprising delicateness in his touch. His large hands.

God, why does this hurt so much? I had no idea.

– It’s all right.

Sera closes the door to the bedroom, shielding me from the priest, but the pain of not seeing Fiona is more overwhelming than the pain of afterbirth.

– Just leave it open a crack. Please?

Sera re-opens the door, hesitating just a second, like she’s checking on them. She whispers *Amen* and positions herself at the foot of the bed. Pulls my knees up again.

– This part doesn’t take long. It will be over soon.

I shake my head, closing my eyes.

–I hate him. I hate him.

I’ve said it out loud. Sera looks at me quizzically but doesn’t say anything.

His face flashes into my mind, searing me like a slap.

Veins throbbing in his forehead and jawline. Pulling off his shirt, fumbling with his belt and trousers.

My stomach drops and my limbs go heavy and cold.

Is it the blood loss?

The memory?

Something wrenches at my lower abdomen and I feel my body pushing even though I don’t ask it to.

I didn’t do it. I’m telling you.

But, of course, he had. I knew he had, just as I knew he’d been picturing his face in all the moments he’d touched me, willing himself to be aroused. Willing himself to come inside me so that I could have a child— proof of his virility.

Something I couldn’t give him.

I don’t want to cry, but the sound comes out of me anyway.

Sera grabs my hand.

– It’s almost done. Just one more thing we have to get through. Push for me— just gently.

Kain

How long have I been praying that it was all a lie?

The priest has to bless her. For the sins of her parents, but most especially mine.

– Has he done it?

Sera nods.

– He’s just praying the rosary now.

– Am I finished? Can I have her back?

She puts Fiona back in my arms. Her chest moves once more. One breath, like a leaf fluttering.

I hold her until everything is still.

Kain

Fel

Clock on the mantle chimes midnight. Drum. Drum. Drum. Too loud in the hush. The dark. Take a quilt and put it overtop. Drowning the sound. Baby's stopped breathing. Doctor has stopped crying. Miss Street is on the bed beside her. Cradled together like sisters. Two children waiting for their mam.

Miss Street looks down at the baby.

No words, of course. Just looks at me and I know what's my job. Same as always.

She gives me the baby. Gentle, gentle. Wrapped in a blanket. It's cold out.

Slip out the front door to the garden and lean against the stone wall. Cold air feels good on my face. Everything in there is too hot. Too close. Can't help but feel sad for the doctor. Even if she is a doctor. Sad when a baby don't make it.

Full moon over the trees now, smiling down on us. Makes me mad. Look again over the road to the Backyard. So many infants buried there.

But not this one. Can't bury this one there. She needs to be close to her Mam.

I seen a shovel over by the horse stall.

Gentle, gentle, lay the baby down in the small trough on the gate. Water in it's frozen anyway. Tuck her blanket in. Might be too cold for a burial, but in the flower garden maybe not.

Stamp the shovel into the soil, deep as I can. Not as hard as I thought. Again, again, piling earth, digging deep. My hands hurt but I don't care. Keep going. Deeper, bigger. Needs to go deep so the animals don't get her.

Snot runs down my face and I swipe it. Swipe the tears. Sure I have mud over my face too but I keep going.

That's deep enough. Don't have a box. Can't leave the baby in the trough to go get one neither.

Look around. Look around. Pick up the kindling basket and lay her in it. Tuck the blankets around her tight and put her into the hole. Say a silent prayer for her soul.

Shovel in the earth.



Next morning I wake up, crick in my neck. Don't know where I am for a minute, on the floor, light shining full through a window.

Sit up and look over at the bed. Still wrapped up together, them two. Doctor moans in her sleep.

I get up and stretch out the cricks. Look for the clock on the mantle. Seven thirty already. What day is it? Sunday, I think. Christmas morning. No ward duty today.

And then everything from last night rushes back at me and I feel the tears coming up my nose. Alistair in Punishment. John leaving. The baby dying.

But at least I don't have to go to the Oldies. I won't be going. I'll be leaving.

I need the toilet. Doctor has her own washroom but I ain't never used it. Never even looked in. Keep an eye on them, make sure they're still sleeping and quietly open the door. Yep, toilet, sink. All hers.

Ain't peed since last night with all the commotion. Have to squeeze my legs to make it back to the Pavilion and then I'd be really late. Could squat in the snow, but it's damn cold for that.

One last look.

Duck into the bathroom and close the door.

Can't help smiling sitting there on the doctor's throne. All mine.

Her hand soap is lovely too.

When I come out, Miss Street is putting the kettle on the stove.

She raises her eyebrows but don't scold me.

– We'll have to stay here with her for a few days. She can't be on her own. I'll excuse you from wherever you were supposed to be.

I breathe out, big breath. Guess I can wait a few days to get out of here. It's cold anyway.

Just nod.

– Can you send a message to the Beehive? And pick up some medicines for me?

She scribbles out a note and I read it. Not really a lie, saying Doctor Rian has a fever. Needs to be looked after.

Kain

It's dead quiet in the Beehive, Christmas morning and all. Nurse Joseph tuts as she gets up. Starts filling a basket for me. Aspirin and compresses.

– This place is too damn hot. Spreads the germs. Need to get the bleach out. You're staying to help Miss Street, I suppose.

Nod.

– Good girl. Hope they're feeding you.

She gives me the basket and I carry it up to the canteen. Hand the note to Billy.

– Mewwy Cwismiss.

Give him a big smile. Ain't with the Oldies and that's a start.

– Big owda today.

He don't ask nothing else. Just packs me cookies and sandwiches. Tea bags, coffee, milk. That'll hold us.

Sun is like summer butter in the sky. Pale, creamy.

Knock once and go inside the cottage. Miss Street smiles as she unpacks my basket.

– Good. There's not a crumb in the house. She needs to eat something.

Open the icebox and put everything away.

– Let's have something to eat and then you can help me fill the tub.

While Miss Street makes the toast, I pump water into the kettle to boil. Out here you can't turn a key and have it streaming from the taps. Never thought I'd say the Pavilion was better than the Doctor's residence. But in this one way it is.

First time the kettle boils, I take Doctor Rian a cup of tea and set it down next to the bed. She don't look up.

Half an hour later, the bath is ready.

Miss Street brings clean sheets and I help Doctor out of bed and into the half tub. She's covered in blood and effluvia. Learned that word since she said it to me. Sore and tired from the way she's walking. Pale as death too.

Warm water turns on her milk because suddenly she's shivering, shivering, and Miss Street has to explain it to her.

– Just the let down. Take some deep breaths and it'll pass.

When she comes out, we give her a clean nightie and I pack some rags for her. Tuck her back into bed.

Falls asleep for hours, tea standing cold on the table.

– Do you want to go back, Fel? There are some games going on for Christmas Day.
Shake my head.

Miss Street digs into her apron pocket.

– Here. Why don't you make us all a treat?

She hands me a bar of chocolate.

– There's plenty of milk in the ice box. Just heat it up and melt this into it. It's lovely.

I smile and set to work lighting the woodstove. Ain't had hot chocolate in years.

Doctor wakes up while I'm setting out the sauce pan.

She sits up while Miss Street checks her breasts for blockages. Happens when mothers lose babies. Their creamy skin gets blotched with red and it's bad news.

– Arm up like this, please.

Miss Street moves Doctor's hand behind her head, elbow at an angle. She frowns a bit and turns to me.

– Can you make some hot compresses, please?

I pump water into the kettle and set it on the stove. Stir, stir, the milk. Carefully. Add the chocolate, piece by piece.

Stir, stir. Take it off the heat.

In a bowl, set the cloths, add a little cold water. Wait for the kettle to almost rumble, pour it in.

Take down three mugs and pour the hot chocolate into each of them.

Carry over Doctor's hot chocolate and the hot compresses.

Miss Street takes them from me.

– Drape them over the breast like this. Then, just keep compressing with hot water and expressing by hand. Soon it will dry up.

– How much longer for the bleeding?

– Three or four weeks.

Her eyebrows lift but she don't say nothing.

I sit down at the table and drink my hot chocolate. Sweet and creamy. Savour every bit.

It's nearing New Year's Eve and Doctor is still in her cottage. Miss Street checks on her in the mornings—makes her get out of bed at least. And I come out in the afternoons. I've been excused from everything to help Miss Street look after her. Don't know what they've told everybody but I been sleeping on the settee here most nights.

She's been sitting in the chair or on the window seat nearly all the time. Just sits and stares outside at the snow. Don't say much. Usually have to dump the tea and throw out the sandwiches Miss Street's left.

Today, when I bring the food back from the canteen, Doctor McHugh's standing on the step, knocking, knocking. I wait by the trees. Out of sight. Knocks one more time, frowning.

Tapes something to her door and walks away, putting on his hat.

When he's down the path, I slip around the trees and into the cottage.

– What's this?

Doctor turns around, face still ghastly white. She's been in that nightie the past four days. Wet cloths piled on the table and a bowl of breast milk on the nightstand.

I put on the kettle, even though it's probably useless. Wash out the bandages and hang them up. Dump the milk into the flower bed.

I hand her the letter and she takes a long breath.

– I found the other letter you left me. Did you read it?

I shake my head. I was curious but I didn't read it. Silky envelope, loopy handwriting. Perfume. Doctor Rian's first name.

– I shouldn't have either.

This time when I give her the tea, she takes it from me. At least holds it in her lap.

– Doctor McHugh would like to know if I'm coming back to work anytime this week. Or if he should hire a replacement. Or take me to the hospital. I think I'll tell him I don't give a fuck which of those options he chooses.

She takes her tea to bed and climbs in. If I were her, I'd never go back neither. But thanks to Alistair and his fire-setting, I'm stuck here three more months.

Unless I just leave without him. Maybe I will.

My stomach flops, thinking about it. All the way back to the Pavilion, I think of going alone. Giving him the slip. Stupid boy, ruining everything. Bells are already going. *Gong gong*. Back up to the dorm.

I'm the first. Hardly ever happens.

Kain

Ain't looking around me. Lost in my own head. I should've heard them coming. Footsteps getting closer and closer, and then pounding. And that's when they snatch me. Bag over the head, me, kicking and screaming. They're strong, the lot of them. Drag me down the hallway. Even when I pull my feet up, they've got hold of me. Drag, march, drag, march.

Hear the water running. Sounds of it, it's deep, and I'm thrashing even harder but they've got me tight.

– Dunk her! Dunk her!

Inmates chanting. Banging the broom on the floor. It's tile. We're in the baths, of course. Should have known this was coming. Pisspot would never let it go.

– Dunk her!

There's three of them got a hold of me at least.

– Now maybe you'll think twice before ramming someone, will you, Felwyn?

Pisspot.

Don't know who the others are but I know it's going to be bad.

They lift me up and plunge. Water's freezing. I hold my breath, thrashing, thrashing. Don't breathe in the water, then you're done for. But I can't see. Can't breathe. Heart hammering so hard I feel like I'm going to die.

Kick and punch and hit, blind. Get one of them in the jaw.

Crack.

She lets go and I get my arm free. Rip the sack off my head and hit until I'm standing.

Take a huge breath. Look around, quick, while they try to grab me again.

Inmates crowded around, clapping. Darcy's at the front, wide eyes. Looks terrified. The rest of them dancing, gleeful. Love watching someone getting the dunk. Howl, stomp.

Pisspot hunched over, rubbing her jaw. Good, it's her I've thwacked.

Miss Street. I need Miss Street. She'll stop them. I look at Darcy, right at her. She understands. She runs.

Then Pisspot rushes at me. Holds me down under the water until I see stars swimming above me. Lights flashing. Black. Black.

A shock to your chest, like ice.

Can't breathe. Can't breathe.

Kick and hit, but I'm barely moving. Can't breathe.

Black.



– Fel!

Someone's thwacking my chest and I'm heaving. Vomiting water, food, onto the floor. Drenched and freezing. Shaking, shaking.

Cough and cough. Head hits the floor again.

– Fel! Wake up. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, get me a towel, and some blankets. What the blazes were you trying to do? Kill her?

Doctor Rian's hands on my head. Vomit again and again, choking.

Pisspot is silent. Watching. She looks scared.

Miss Street drops down beside me.

– Found more towels. What do you want me to do?

I heave and cough, can't take in air.

– Easy, Fel. Sit up and try to breathe. Get everyone get out of here, will you, Sera? Poor child can't breathe.

Feel like I'm drowning still. Can't catch a breath in.

Doctor holds me to her chest. My eyes are hazy but I see her white nightie. She's got a stethoscope to my chest.

– Keep coughing, child. Cough it all out. Kneel up, there you go.

Lungs on fire. Throat burning. Kneeling on the tile floor hurts and I'm reaching for Doctor Rian. Holding her shoulders like she can save me. Grab fists full of her lumberjacket that's falling off her shoulders. She don't tell me to stop. Just holds my hands as I'm grabbing her.

– It's all right. Just try to breathe. There you go. Bigger breaths.

Struggle. Still can't get in enough air.

Doctor Rian undoes my dress and pulls it off me. Freezing, shivering. Vomit again, onto the floor.

She puts a towel around me, tight.

– Relax, relax.

A knock at the door and a nurse opens it, hands in some dry clothes. Doctor Rian throws my wet ones at her.

– Get me a hot water bottle and a wheelchair. And at least two blankets.

Still coughing, sputtering. It takes over in spurts and I can't breathe again.

– Calm your breathing, Fel. In for three, out for three.

Another fit of coughing. Then the blankets come in. Doctor Rian puts a water bottle to my chest. Warm, like a kitten in my arms. I clear my throat, over and over. Take a cup of water from her. Sip it slow.

– Again.

Reminds me of what she says to Miss Street when she takes an asthma attack. Wonder if this is how it feels. Bloody awful for her if it is.

Hold the water bottle closer.

– Drink.

My head is pounding, pounding, but at least I can breathe.

She helps me into the wheelchair and puts blankets around me.

Miss Street. Where is she? She was here.

Out in the common room, silence. Nurses stand in a line by the window. Inmates sit at the tables. Nobody talking. Nobody moving. Darcy jumps up but the girl beside her yanks her back down again.

Doctor Rian stops.

– You, Darcy. Push this child to the infirmary.

Darcy grabs the handles and starts pushing me out the door. Doctor Rian walks beside me. Looks like she needs a wheelchair too, pale as she is. Her nightie's wet and she's shivering in her lumberjacket. No socks on.

My chest hurts.

The wheelchair moves faster.

– Clear the operating room.

People hurrying left and right. Equipment rattling. I close my eyes but I can still hear it, still feel it.

– Doctor, you're soaked. Let me get you some new clothes.

– I'm fine.

– No, you're not fine. Come and get dressed.

Miss Street's voice, gentle. Her hands are on my head. I fall asleep with her fingers in my hair.



Wake up and there's nurses over me. A strange smell. Something going up over my head. *Crinkle, clap.*

– Fel, we're setting up the oxygen tent for you. Don't be alarmed.

Can hear Doctor Rian but can't see her. It's hot in here but I can see out the side into the room.

– Try to lie still. I know it's hot in there but we've sent for some ice.

Feel the black closing in again.

Hear someone humming and I open my eyes. Sweat's running down my forehead. Under my arms. So hot in here. Put my hands up but touch something strange. Crinkly. The tent.

– She's awake.

It's Miss Street. She puts her face in the window of the tent.

– Are you okay in there?

I push on the crinkly side. So hot.

– Good. Okay, Fel. Just a few more minutes. We've got the ice.

Doctor Rian. Her face comes into the window. She's pulled her hair back and she's got on a sweater now. How long have I been here? A few minutes? Overnight?

Something crinkles. Air flows in. Cold. A cool cloth on my face. Coughing, coughing. Miss Street's voice saying something. Can't hear her.

–I need that fan.

–Doctor Braithwaite has them all. Shall I go?

–No. I'll go myself.

Siobhan

The sign on Braithwaite's door reads "Do Not Enter" but I'm cut to the onions with men and their orders. This is a hospital, not his private laboratory. I push open the door, startling a nurse who jumps up.

I ignore her and search the hallway for the fan. Not here.

The drains are still backed up, the stink coming halfway down the hall.

– This stench is unsanitary.

The nurse has got a puss on her but I glare at her until she looks away.

– I want it reported. Wherever the contamination is, it's going to lead to more sickness.

Get me a maintenance crew in here.

She nods.

– Yes, Doctor.

The rear door swings open and Braithwaite comes out.

– Doctor Rian.

Alarm registers on his face.

– I thought you were off. Ill.

– I've recovered.

Hardly. My breasts are rock hard and seeping milk, I still feel kicked and booted, but at least the nausea's receded, and the anger in my stomach is fuelling me now, straight to the door of his inner sanctum.

– I don't know how you abide this smell, Doctor Braithwaite, but I must insist you have it investigated.

He clears his throat.

– The drains.

– Yes, well, drains can be cleared. There's no reason your nurses, nor the rest of the staff in this wing, should need to suffer this holy show. I'm reporting it today.

– No need. I can do it myself.

Kain

– If that were the case, it wouldn't have gone on for donkey's. Now, excuse me. I need a fan. I have a patient with secondary drowning.

He blocks my path, but I push past him impatiently and open the door to his recovery ward.

Patients line the ward in single beds. Five, ten. Fourteen altogether. Three fans are whirring in the back of the room.

Doctor Braithwaite follows me in.

– I thought this was a research lab.

– It is.

– No, it's a sick room.

– Doctor Rian, I must insist you leave this ward. These patients are critically ill.

– I can see that.

I move between the beds, examining the patients up close.

One of them isn't going to last the day. Her eyes are tinged so yellow that it's obvious to even a first-year medical student that her liver has given up.

In the farthest bed, ashen and moaning, lies Rhys. My heart clenches painfully at his colour. Quickly, I cross the room to his bed and put a hand to his forehead. He's scorched with fever. A nurse stands in the doorway, holding a cup of water.

– Is that for this patient?

She nods.

I take off my stethoscope and listen to his lungs. Sweat beads across his forehead, down his neck. He looks ghastly. Pale with a tinge of yellow that could be temporary or fatal—it's impossible to say.

Peering closer at him, I see the marks around his neck like ugly snakes: twisted and faded.

Goddamn you, Gerrard.

Braithwaite motions to a nurse and she comes to my side.

– Why don't you come with me, Doctor Rian? I can help you find what you need.

I pull away from her, wrench the plug for the fan out of the wall, and haul it to the door. Something isn't right here. After the cleanliness initiative, the rate of infection should have gone down considerably. Rhys should never have contracted this disease.

I leave the fan on the floor and barge into the next room. It's far bigger a laboratory than it looks from the outside and the smell in here is the strongest.

Two young nurses look up from their stations, eyes questioning over their masks. One is using a beaker to mix brown sludge into what looks like ice cream. The second one is mixing the concoction with a whisk.

I stride over and grab the beaker of brown sludge.

The smell of it makes me gag, then go cold. Everything falls into place and suddenly I understand the smell in this hallway is not drains, or faulty pipes.

– What the hell are you doing? That is excrement.

– Doctor Rian.

Braithwaite grabs my elbow, his voice low and furious.

– Kindly leave my lab.

– I want an explanation for this. You are making a...a feces milkshake.

That's...disgusting. It's...it's beyond words.

– It's an experiment.

He ushers me to the door and closes it firmly behind us.

– I'm studying the effects of the virus. Potentially leading to a vaccine.

– You're *feeding* that to patients? Giving it to them on purpose?

– It's the only way I can control the variables.

– You... you... you're making them sick. Purposely sick. One of those patients is going to die today, do you realise that?

– It happens. Not very often. But imagine how many will be cured if I can come up with the vaccine.

I'm speechless. The words have abandoned me and I'm left stuttering.

– You're experimenting on living patients.

– No. I'm controlling a disease. They would have contracted it anyway. At least this way I can monitor them, make sure they get as much help as we can give them, as fast as possible.

– You don't know what would have happened. They might never have contracted it.

He sighs.

– They always contract it.

– They could *die*.

Kain

– Yes. I'm aware. And while you're busy sending endless memos, telling everyone to wash their hands, I'm finding a cure.

The image of the patients in that room, lined in rows, has been burned into my mind. It's all I can see.

Someone needs to stop him. He's not the full shilling. I turn around and practically run through the door.

Sera is hurrying down the hall toward me.

– I was just coming to find out what was keeping you.

I thrust the fan at her.

– Take care of this, please? Sorry. I have something I need to do.

She looks at me like she's afraid I've gone a bit mad but doesn't say anything.

Nurse Joseph is watching us from the desk.

– Send an urgent note to Doctor McHugh, please. Call him if you have to but get him down here. And get Nurse Roland off duty immediately. I have to tend to the patient she almost killed.

Nurse Joseph's eyes widen until they look like they'll burst out of her head.

– I'm in with Andria Felwyn. Fetch me the second Ben arrives.

Sera's disappeared with the fan, and I hurry down the hall to Fel's room where the oxygen tent is crinkling.

– All functioning in here?

– Yes, Doctor.

The youngest nurse looks like she's afraid I'll eat the head off her.

– What is it?

– Well, it's just that I've never seen one of these before. I...I wouldn't know what to do if something went wrong.

I bring her with me to check the openings, the connections, and show her where to put the fan. We peek into the window.

– You're surviving?

Fel nods, but her eyes are closed. She looks almost as ghastly as Rhys.

I turn back to the nurse.

– You're not going to be alone here. There will be two people with this patient day and night. I'll train you all how to use this device.

She swallows hard, but nods.

– She'll have to stay here awhile. At least until her breathing gets a bit better. Call me if she needs to get up. But it's the bedpan for now, at least until I can make sure she's not going to die.

Sera meets my eyes over Fel's feet, her face nearly as white as the sheets.

– You might as well sit down, both of you. It's going to be a long night.



When Ben doesn't come down the first hour, then the first day, I realise he's not coming at all. It's three days before I can leave the infirmary and I head straight to the Administration building before even going home. When I march through his door, he turns and smiles—looking harassed, more than anything.

– Well?

– Why don't you sit down? You look exhausted.

– It's all the lifesaving measures. Takes a toll on a person. My mistake, I thought nurses were here to take care of the patients, not kill them.

Ben steeples his fingers.

– Nurse Roland has been disciplined.

– Disciplined? Dunked in a tub, you mean? Or pilloried?

He pushes his tongue into his cheek.

– I'd be satisfied either way. But if I ever see her face again on my service, I will throw a bucket of ice water over her. So just mind I don't see her.

Ben doesn't reply.

– I want to know about Braithwaite. What's being done about his—

– The research was sanctioned.

I sit down hard on the chair opposite his desk.

– On live patients? With live virus? You can't be serious, Ben.

– He submitted a proposal. The board approved it. I didn't know the...er...details.

– The shit milkshakes, you mean?

He winces.

– Quite.

– There have been fatalities. It has to be discontinued.

He puts his hands up.

– I understand your concerns.

– My concerns? I'm more than concerned. We've all taken the same Oath, and he is most certainly doing harm.

– Well, I think we'd all like to see an end to viruses like this. And the rate of death and infection here is high. Doctor Braithwaite gets his own grants and funding. Imagine how wonderful it would be if the cure came from this very research lab.

I stare at him.

– And imagine what kind of hellfire you'll unleash if word of this gets out.

Ben sighs.

– I can't very well tell him that he can't continue his research. But I'll... I'll see if I can get him to amend his methods.

– Oh, well that would be a decent start, wouldn't it? You don't want to sterilise the patients because the public support isn't there, but you'll allow them to be infected with live viruses, as long as the research is funded. What else has been funded here?

He looks at me like I've grown another head.

– A number of things.

I can't even begin to imagine.

– On second thought, don't tell me.

I roll my eyes and walk away. To hell with all of them.

A nurse flags me from down the next corridor.

– Doctor? Your patient's up. She wants to get out of the oxygen tent.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

– Tell her I'll be right there.

&&&

Grand rounds went on for ages this morning. At my insistence, Doctor Braithwaite's wards is now part of it. He stood next to me, smouldering, as Doctor McHugh opened the door to his ward. I took my time going over every patient, their health and vital statistics.

Doctor Wright looked uncomfortable—probably worried he'll be scrutinised next.

Kain

I fixed Braithwaite with a hard stare.

– Doctor Braithwaite, isn't it true that exposing patients to hepatitis can put them at greater risk for other infections like tuberculosis and encephalitis?

He cleared his throat.

– Patients who have a virus that compromises their immune system are always at greater risk for other diseases, yes. But the same could be said for a common cold.

– This is not a common cold, though, is it?

He looked at me. Daggers.

– No.

I checked Rhys's temperature. Still high. He looked considerably worse.

At the nurse's desk, I left written orders.

If Rhys Alexander develops any further complications, notify Doctor Rian immediately.

When the knock comes at my office door, I half expect it to be a nurse giving me bad news, but it's Sera, yawning. She covers her mouth with her hand as I beckon her inside. Looks right shattered.

– You need a nap.

– I've been in with Fel.

– She's improving enough. I'm not as worried as I was.

– No, but I still didn't want to take my eye off her. Nurse Stokes has taken over for me now.

– Good, now you can sleep until your next shift.

– Home's a long way. Unless you're offering your chesterfield.

– Of course. Help yourself. Do you have a bed on campus?

She nods through another yawn.

– When the weather's terrible or I'm not sure about a patient delivery, I stay over in the nurses' residence. They have spare rooms in there. Well, spare closets, more like.

– Just as crowded in there, is it?

– Oh, good grief, it's cramped. Some wards are almost as bad as the patients'. Though the nurses can at least keep their lavatory more-or-less clean. Even Matron's room is tiny. I think her old quarters were made into a dorm for younger nurses.

– No wonder she's a bit cross.

– A bit? The girls turn green when she comes around the corner.

– What everybody needs is more space.

Sera sits down on the sofa and it creaks against the wooden floor. She puts her feet up and leans against the arm, closing her eyes.

– I'm exhausted. And starving.

– So, just another day at the office then?

– And the construction noise is making my head pound.

I throw her a packet of biscuits and it lands on her apron. Without opening her eyes, she takes three out of the packet and begins munching.

– Before you ask, yes, I washed my hands. There's going to be another cottage getting built in the spring, too. But as fast as they build new housing, the city shoves in more patients. We'll never keep up. I'm surprised they found you a place.

– I am too, actually.

My tiny cottage with its small fireplace and table missing a leg. What a hovel I used to think that place was. How far removed from my own home. My own bedroom, living room with its piano and warm hearth. A cook and maid. Now, only months later, it seems practically palatial. A room of my own, away from the smell and the noise. A chair. A fire. A kettle. And best of all—a door on the lav.

Sera's looking into the fire, her eyes glazed over. She's shattered.

– When was the last time you took a day off?

She snorts.

– I can't afford it. I work my shifts and all the overtime I can get.

– But why? Why doesn't Charlie help you?

She shakes her head.

– Charlie's... she's just not able to... she has trouble leaving the house.

I consider asking more but decide just to leave it. It's none of my business.

Kain

– You're welcome to stay with me sometimes, you know, if you don't have time to go home. If you can't find space at the residence, or if you just don't want to be there. I imagine it can get quite tiresome.

– Thank you. I don't know that Charlie would be very pleased about it, but I think there isn't much that pleases her these days.

She looks down again, her cheeks getting pink.

Chains. Wrapped up in domestic security. How well I know the feeling.

I watch the smouldering coals and try not to slip too far into the past.

Restored from her biscuits, she sits up.

–What are you reading?

I laugh.

– Not so much reading as researching. Just looking into some alternative methods for seizures.

She looks past me at the desk to where Gray's Anatomy lies open. I can't read her face as easily as she reads mine. But it seems like she's looking at an old friend with whom she had a bitter parting.

– You've seen it before?

– Yes. My foster father was a doctor.

She moves around the side of the desk, her uniform making a soft swishing noise against the wood.

– Well, that makes sense.

– Why?

– Well, I should say it clarifies things for me. How much you know. More than a midwife's training would give you.

Her face is closed now, but she fingers the pages with something close to reverence.

– And I did wonder, too, with Street as your surname.

The corners of her mouth tick up.

– They were wonderful, my foster parents, but they didn't adopt me.

– It's not a bad name. Though a bit of an odd custom.

I grin at her.

– I suppose I always thought I'd change it when I got married and stop being named after the street corner where I was found, but it didn't turn out like that.

She laughs.

– For obvious reasons.

– Exactly. I used to help Doctor Matthews, my foster father, at his clinic. Assist with medicines and equipment. See the patients in and out, that sort of thing.

– Did you ever consider becoming a doctor yourself?

– How? I could never have gone through medical school, Siobhan. Especially after he died. Who would have trained me?

– There's always a way, if you want it.

– No there isn't. Not for everyone. For you, maybe, with parents who stood behind you and money to pay your tuition. I didn't have any of that.

– I'm sorry. I didn't mean offense.

She shakes her head.

– Of course you didn't. I'm sorry.

– And what about now?

– Now? I'd barely know where to start. Between patients and babies and travelling back and forth, I'm not exactly swimming in free time. I've thought about nursing. Joining the class here. But I just don't see how I could manage to work on the wards and study, and go to classes.

I sit down in the chair she usually sits in while she continues to look at the book.

– I have to be content with the way things are and stop trying to make them different.

This is my life now. This is my lot. I don't get any more. God has been pretty clear about that.

It sounds like she's thought about it more than a little.

– Why would God want you to settle for less?

– I'm not settling.

Her cheeks blush pink.

– That's not what I meant, Sera. I'm sorry. It's just...you can't work on the wards all your life. You're too damn smart to be up to your elbows in this. You can't be a midwife until you're trained, so fine, we'll either find you a midwife apprentice or you'll switch paths. You want to be a nurse? Join the class here and I'll train you. You can ask Matron to give you the time off to sit the exams. You can be a maternity nurse, even.

She looks incredulous.

– I could never afford it.

Kain

– Well, you have to start somewhere. Take the first step, even if you can't see the destination. You're stuck, and I can help you. At least get you started.

She sits down in my chair. Her breathing is starting to get wheezy. I purposely make my voice calmer.

– The days will pass anyway, Sera. Why not fill them with new things? Learning, living?

– Learning can be. Dangerous. You're never. Satisfied. To go back.

The wheezing is getting worse.

I take off my stethoscope and go around the desk. She leans forward so I can press it to her back.

– In and out slowly. There we go.

There it comes again, that rattle. I don't like it. I put my stethoscope back around my neck and take down stramonium from the cabinet.

– Let's try this. I think it will help. Is it something to do with Charlotte?

She looks up, surprised.

– I'm sorry. I know it's not for me to say, but who else is going to say it to you? You're working for the both of you, and you're not happy.

– So what? Maybe it's not my right to be happy. Maybe it's my duty to care for these patients and deliver babies nobody wants and to serve God that way.

I stand up too.

– Or maybe God threw you on my path so that I could help you change course. Did you think of that? You think I would ever have survived medical school if I hadn't had mentors? Let me be yours.

She bites her lip.

– You need to do more with your skills.

She nods slowly, looking somewhere over my shoulder as she drops my hand.

– I have to get back to the ward. They're short-handed today.

– Fine. But think about what I said.

– I will.

January, 1928

Fel

Finally up and about, are you, Felwyn? You've been lazing around for nearly a week.

Turn around quick, still tying my apron. Nurse Webb at the door. Meds in her hand.

She's smiling a bit.

– Glad to see you're feeling better. Making your way to school now?

School?

I shake my head. No, that's supposed to start next week.

She hands me the cup and I take the meds. Swallow some water.

– Classes started yesterday. Doctor Rian wanted to make sure you get there today. Nine o'clock. Trade school for the domestic science class. You know your way there?

I nod.

– You're excused from ward duty from now on. And you're being moved this afternoon from the Pavilion down into the Beehive.

I stare at her.

– Don't look at me like that. Doctor's orders. Wants to keep an eye on your heart and lungs. Your things will come down. You've not got much in the Pavilion, do you?

Only everything in my hidey-holes. Can't exactly say that though, can I?

Drat Doctor's orders. I don't mind sleeping in the Beehive—this room's been quieter than anything I can remember in years—but I'll have to find a way to get my clink and other things.

Looks at her chart.

– You're in the back, room 37B in the blue hallway.

What about the office? Have they told the office I ain't coming? Will I get docked?

– Quick now, before you're late.

Then she's gone. Clip, march, clip, march.

Kain

Get dressed quick in my school clothes and lace up the black boots. They fit nice, for once.

Down into the tram and out to the schoolhouse.

Just passing the alcove and—*wham*—someone yanks me hard. Hand clapped over my mouth.

Heart thudding, thudding.

Until I spin around and it's Alistair.

I whack him.

– Sorry. I'm sorry, Andie.

I whack him again.

– Setting a fire?

My voice is hoarse in the alcove. Hurts to speak. But being around Alistair is just like opening a door to when we were kids. Back when I talked all the time. I see him and my voice works, just like that.

– What is wrong with you?

Clear my throat. Wish I had some water. Voice ain't used to being used.

– I didn't mean for it to get so big. I was just trying to teach that asshole a lesson.

– Mr Sullivan?

– Yeah, for firing me. Just because I eloped. Now I'm stuck on fucking ward duty with the idiots. Fire got out of control, that's all.

– You've got three months in Punishment! How are you even out?

– Had an appointment with the dentist. Tooth rotting. Hurt like hell so they let me out for the day to get it fixed.

He opens his mouth. Great big gaping hole at the back.

– Feels a helluva lot better now.

I whack him again. Not taking anything serious.

– When are you going to be done, eh? When can we get the hell out of here? I almost got put on the Oldies again. Took nearly drowning to get me out of it.

He whistles.

– That's shit. They've put me on wards for three months and then I might get to go up to shoe making.

– But the farm's out?

Kain

– Yeah.

He looks mad. Like he didn't deserve it. Which he did.

– I have to go.

– Yeah.

His face is a sneer.

– I heard. You got school.

– That's right. Domestic science. Gotta find my own way out of here. I've almost got enough now.

I dig into my apron and take out the handkerchief full of clink. He stares at it for a second. I think he's impressed. His eyes are wide. Then he laughs. But it has an edge to it. Like Susan scraping her nails along the chalkboard just to make the teacher scream.

– With that? You're going to leave with that?

I look down at the coins. Maybe it's not enough.

– You really are a Moron, you know that?

It's like a slap. My face burns.

– You've been in here too long, Andie. Even if they let you out, you'll never belong out there. They've got you. You're an institution girl.

He turns and lopes away. Head shaking, shaking. Laughing.

I turn and run the other way.

Late this morning, so I'm last. Everyone turns around.

– Andria Felwyn?

Teacher at the front is dressed in a long skirt. White blouse. Hair pulled back in a grey bun.

I nod.

–Good. Come take your seat, please. Andria is joining us a little late, ladies. Please help her catch up.

Wonder if she knows I been in the Beehive. Wonder if she knows why. Everyone knows everything, even things they shouldn't.

Look around. Some girls from the Pavilion. Some from other wards. Know most of them.

Put my head down and start to read.

Kain

Spring

April, 1928

Fel

-

Life's different now. School in the morning. Free time and rest in the afternoon. No ward duty. Sleeping in the Beehive. Helping Doctor Rian. Ain't seen Miss Street for a week. No babies being delivered. Ain't seen Pisspot neither. Heard she got a strike but not the sack. Came back yesterday. Wonder if they stuck *her* with the Oldies. John left the week after Christmas. Still miss him. Wonder who they'll get instead of us in the office. I miss it, too. But I want to go to school. I want to get a place. I want out of here.

Sewing buttons. Check.

Sewing dresses. Check.

Ironing. Steaming. Folding.

Washing. Waxing. Polishing. Sweeping.

Scrubbing. Blacking. Carrying. Fetching. Not-complaining.

– A chicken soup today. Make sure to dice the vegetables small enough for bite-sized pieces. Good work.

Taste the soup, put the tasting spoon in the sink. Needs more salt. Add a pinch. Stir with the wooden spoon. Use another spoon to taste again, like Teacher says.

– Well done, Andria. You've made yourself a nice lunch. Once you've all finished, you may sit and eat. Class is over.

Sit with the rest of the girls to eat. Two have made the bread. The one from the other ward made a pie. Not bad by half.

The kitchen is clean and the girls all followed the rules. I watched. There's lots left over and I get an idea.

Pass a note to Teacher and she nods with a wink.

– Definitely. Go ahead.

She helps me load up a tray and I carry it across the path to the Beehive. Back carefully through the door and down the hall. Lid on the soup keeps it warm.

Doctor looks up from her desk.

– What's this?

I smile. Give her the note from Teacher.

The girls all wash their hands very well before preparing the food. Enjoy.

Doctor laughs and sits down.

– Thank you, Fel. It smells lovely.

She eats it all—even the dessert.

&&&

The fever started in H, now it's all over the place. Two old ladies this morning. One of the young kids this afternoon. This evening, one of the pinhead twins. That makes seven.

Walking through the tram to infants when I seen Darcy leaning against the wall. Moaning about her head.

– Darcy?

– Head hurts, Fel. Head hurts.

I take her quick step up to the infirmary. Straight to the nursing station.

Nurse Joseph's away and it's Nurse Granger behind the desk. Ain't seen her in ages.

– Not another one?

She takes Darcy from me and puts her in a bed. And there's Doctor Rian flying out of one room, into another.

– Is that you, Fel? Good. All hands on deck.

She throws an apron at me.

By the time I've got my hands washed, and hair pulled into a cap, there's two more come down. Fevers, sweating, headaches—lying there moaning, holding their heads.

Doctor McHugh is even here, scrubbed up in doctor clothes, working with Doctor Rian. Never seen him acting the doctor before. All paperwork and handshakes, that one.

– Fetch that basin, please. More cold water. And for God's sake, wash your hands as much as you can. The last thing you need is to catch it.

Bed to bed to bed, washing the faces, stripping the sheets. Sweat and the stink and the shit. Their skin is sizzling. Fry an egg hot. I try not to touch them. Pour the water into the cups. Lift cups to lips. Wonder how many are going down the chute today.

– What's your conclusion? Meningitis?

Kain

Doctor McHugh looks at Doctor Rian.

She shakes her head.

– No. I thought it was, but look at the sores around their mouths. Look at the rash. It's encephalitis.

Doctor McHugh shakes his head, wiping sweat from his forehead with the bottom of his shirt. All the doctors' coats are flung over chairs, sleeves rolled up and collars undone. It's like mid-summer in here and the stink is unholy.

– Encephalitis? God.

– Any idea how that interacts with hepatitis? Because we're about to have a huge crisis on our hands.

For a second neither of them says anything. Then Doctor McHugh yells down the hall.

– Anyone seen Braithwaite?

Doctor Rian snorts.

– I wondered the same thing. If anything in his research would tell us what the hell to do with a comorbidity like that.

– No idea.

– Wonderful. The only thing we can do is keep them hydrated, try to keep their fevers down, and give them something for the pain.

Door opens and two more come in. Young lads, looks like. Probably from C. Which means it's spread to another cottage.

– Fel, find rooms for them, please. And can someone please do something about the windows before we all suffocate in here!

– Soup!

Cart rattles in the doorway and three girls from the kitchen come in. I seen them making it this morning. Giant vats.

I push them quick through the doors to the ward where the regular patients are staying. Get them out of the way.

Doctors go from room to room here on the Encephalitis wing. Checking eyes, mouths, chests. Calling the attendants who hoist and toss, stuff pillows down behind backs. Clean up after the hacking.

Groaning everywhere.

Kain

Doctor hasn't slept in the three days since it started, by the looks of her. Hair plastered to her forehead. Face pale. Dotted with sweat.

– This place is full, ready to burst. I haven't got a single bed left.

Nurse Stokes is panting.

– Three more with fever in the elderly ward.

Bet your arse one'll be dead by tomorrow.

Doctor swipes her arm across her forehead. Points to the room next door.

– We're running out of space here. The patients are stacked. If it gets much worse, we'll have to evacuate the other wing. For now, just find a spot for them, please. Anywhere. I'll be there directly. And somebody please fetch more water. We need to keep these patients hydrated.

Nurse Stokes leans on the door, face red. Sweat dots the top of her forehead. Patches of damp at her armpits.

– Oh, it's ghastly in here. It's worse than the kitchens.

Doctor Rian strides over, wiping the crook of her elbow across her nose.

– We need some crews just to clean the floors every hour. Or less. Can you get some of the boys in from the farm? We need strong people who can help and who aren't going to catch this.

Nurse Stokes nods and moves away. All the nurses at the nursing station rushing, pushing people and carts down the hall. See Nurse Stokes on the telephone, looking at the outside door.

She gestures to me and I run down and open it full.

Not too long before there's footsteps in the hall. Clip, clap, big strides.

– I want all the windows open in this place. Wide.

Doctor Wright, it looks like. Hardly know him. Always squirrelled away on the tubercular ward, studying this, peering at that. Obsession with windows and doors open. Freeze your arse off all winter in there.

– Where is Matron?

Doctor Rian comes out of a room, wiping her hands. Throws the rag onto a pile of laundry, growing, growing, in the corner.

– Down in K. Trying to get the bodies moved into the morgue but they've run out of room.

– Everybody quiet, please.

Hush falls while she takes down the aspirin. Begins mixing it. Holds up her hand while she thinks out the measurement and puts the ingredients together. Hands them to me.

– Mix well.

Noise starts up again.

– Fel, see what you can do about this laundry, will you?

Nurse Stokes comes back in, knocks into a side table.

– All right, Patricia?

She sits down on a wooden chair. Heavy, like she's just climbed three flights of stairs.

– Feeling a bit faint. It's hot as Hades in here.

Someone's shouting over the noise of cracking wood.

– What did I say? All the windows open!

Doctor Wright pushes his way past and yanks open the window in our room. It gives way with a creak and a groan.

Nurse Stokes sighs, relieved.

– Thank you.

She's gone white now and her eyes are half closed. Pulls at her collar, loosening it.

Doctor Rian frowns.

– Patricia, you don't look that well, I have to say. Go lie down in my office. On the sofa.

Stokes waves her hand, but then closes her eyes again and puts her head down on the side table.

– I think it's probably just a hot flush.

– Can't be too careful. Off you go.

Stokes does as she's told for once and walks off down the hall.

Doctor Rian watches her go out the door, and I see that look on her face again. The same one as she had when that kid from Imbeciles got his bowel all tied up outside his body. She's scared.

Outside, someone's up a ladder. Doctor Wright's yelling out the window.

– Unbolt all of them. Take them off if you have to. I want this whole place aired out.

Big racket of metal and wood. Hammering. Splintering. Groaning. The windows are opened one by one. Hear the sound moving down the hallway. All along the top. All along the

Kain

bottom. The wind gusts in, and some of the nurses breathe out. Big sighs. Even Doctor Rian looks happy.

– Thank God.

She wipes her hands on a towel. Goes into the hallway.

– Is that all of them?

– That's all of them. The lads are coming in to help now.

– Good. Let's get the water in. Everything washed down.

I watch for Alistair, but I don't see him as the lads tromp down the hallway. Buckets and mops appear. Hot water and soap swashed along the floor.

Wring out. Pushed again.

Back in the hallway, nearly trip on the wet floor. Never seen so much water and activity. Scrubbing, scrubbing. Wind whipping around. People on chairs, reaching up the walls. Lights on full.

– Wipe down everything! The doors. The handles. Everything.

Doctor McHugh strides down the hallway. Takes three steps to the end on his giant legs.

– Get a bonfire going out back.

In a few minutes, I see them. The girls coming in from the laundry with carts. Bags and bags of sheets going out the door. Piles disappearing from the hallway.

Doctor Rian calls out.

– Boil them well.

Then she's down the hallway, rushing to the medical cupboard.

– We're almost out of aspirin. Let's hope it's in the mail today.

And there's Pisspot, bellowing.

– We've got one more.

– Who is it, Roland?

She stops. See the lump in her throat move while she swallows hard. Even wringing her hands.

– It's Doctor Braithwaite. They've just found him in his office.

Everyone stops.

Doctor Rian takes a deep breath.

– Let me know when he gets here.

She hands me a sack of spoons and the last of the aspirin.

– Can you administer to everyone along the blue line?

– Yes.

– And when Matron returns, I need her to sort out some more nurses and attendants. I must have half the patients from the wards on this infirmary and no nurses to change the sheets.

Nurse Joseph comes in. What a day to come back to work.

– 'Fraid we've lost anotha', Doctah.

Doctor Rian puts her hands on her hips and leans back.

– Who this time?

– One of the violent. Mackey. What we doin' with the bodies?

– Matron's trying to get it sorted right now. For the moment, go down to the end of the infirmary hallway, and take the ramp to the tramway. I'm afraid we've had to turn the delivery tunnel into a body chute. Ben, this isn't working. We need Matron back up here treating patients.

Doctor McHugh's mouth goes grim. A line.

– We need a crematorium. I've said it for years.

– Well, go sort it then. The morgue only holds five. There are at least ten in the chute.

McHugh strides off.

– I'll deal with it.

For a moment, there's a lull. The floors are clean. The windows are open. The laundry's gone from the hall. The phone has stopped ringing. The medicine is all given. The latest body disappears down into the tram.

And then one nurse hurries down the hall.

– They're bringing Braithwaite down now.

Doctor turns around.

She looks down at her chart and shakes her head.

– We don't have any more rooms. He'll have to go in the hallway.

Nurse Roland looks at her, her mouth opening. Shutting. Like a seagull. But she don't say nothing.

Gurney comes down the hall, pushed by two of the farm boys.

Kain

Braithwaite looks like he's been dunked. Hair damp, clothes soaked through with sweat. Holding his head and groaning.

– Park him right there. Next to the door.

The lads push the gurney against the wall. Lope away to the outside doors. Probably off for a fag or a snack.

– Leave that door open. Wide open!

Doctor Wright, back down the hall. Won't be happy til we've turned the Beehive into the great outdoors. Marches through the halls like a train. Think he'd like to take the walls off if he could.

Tall inmate comes down the hall, fast, carrying a big mail bag.

Doctor Rain hurries out of the room.

– Thank God. Set it down there on the desk.

Braithwaite moans on his cot, shivering, shivering.

Doctor McHugh moves across the hall, one room to another. Only takes him two steps, wiping his hands as he's going. He's got the regular patients to look after. Doctor Wright's back to his tuberculars and Doctor Rian's not going to help him anytime soon.

May, 1928

Fel

*M*atron stacks papers and folds something into an envelope.

–This is for you. You’ll take it to Mrs. McNestry today. She’s sending a driver to collect you and the three other girls in your domestic science class.

She turns behind her and hands me a stack: a dress, a pinafore, a cap.

No time for nothing else. The day's here. All the time I've spent planning to get out of this place, and hells bells, they're doing it for me. Schleppling me back to the city. Cap and apron and the whole works.

I ride in a car. Pulls up to a home, all brick and porch, with a short lady in a pretty dress. Hair waved and neat. Small smile. What Doctor Rian calls conservative. I think she'd approve. Hope so, since she put me here.

– Hello, I’m Mrs. McNestry. Welcome to Meredith House.

She's still talking but I ain't listening. Trying, trying hard, but the glasses and the lights are making my eyes dance. Shining wood floors. Pillows and a couch with flowers. More flowers in the hall. A real home here.

– There are eight of you in total. Some of the more experienced girls are going to service in the daytime but the rest of you are with me. Andria?

Head snaps back.

– You're sharing a room with Florence.

My room. I have a room.

Curtsy and Mrs. McNestry turns. Follow her up the stairs, higher and higher, to the top floor. My mind makes a map of the stairs, the window, the other staircase, so I know where I am. Can’t get lost here.

She raps once on the closed door then opens it.

– Florence started a few months ago and can help you. Though mind you take her advice with a little bit of salt, Andria. She’s a trickster if she makes up her mind to be.

Nod. Won’t be asking any questions.

– Here’s your closet, your washstand. And your uniform. One to start, and you’ll have another next week if your post goes well. Mind you keep everything clean and pressed. And shine your shoes. I suggest you have a wash while you can. We start training bright and early tomorrow. I’ll see you in the kitchen for supper.

Then she’s out. Down the stairs.

After cleaning up, follow the smell down, down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Everyone’s sitting already. Didn’t hear no bell.

Nobody says nothing, though. Slip in to the seat on the end. Wait. Hot bread. A dish of butter, white and creamy. Comes down the line, Mrs. McNestry to me.

Girl beside me gives me a look. Scoots over slightly.

– Who’s she, anyway?

Rudely. Reminds me of Pisspot with her scowl.

Mrs. McNestry frowns.

– This is Andria. She’s new.

– Idiot asylum, no doubt. She smells like she’s just come off a ward.

My cheeks burn. I had a wash, all the way up to my neck, my toes.

Can barely swallow, looking down at my plate.

– Don’t be unkind, Doris. We all have to start somewhere.

– Yes, but does it have to be here?

Doris rolls her eyes and scoots farther away from me.

Another girl bursts through the door. Careens over to the table and almost crashes into me as she sits down.

– Sorry.

Giggling.

– You must be Andria, my roommate. I’m Florence.

Sits down and grabs the butter Mrs. McNestry is passing me.

Drops a big glob on her plate then shoves the dish back.

I look to see what Mrs. McNestry and the housekeeper done. Take the same as them.

See how they use their forks, their knives.

Copy, copy.

Break the bread. Smear on the butter.

Heaven in a bite. Salt and warm, beautiful bread.

– Hungry, are you?

I look at Mrs. McNestry's face. See if she's making fun of me, but she's smiling.

– Have some stew then.

She passes me the tureen and I pour a ladle into my bowl.

– You can have more than that, you know.

Half a ladle more. Don't want to be sick or greedy.

Pick up the spoon but it's heavier than I thought. Real silver. And the stew is hot. Hot!

Hells bells. I drop the spoon in the bowl and the soup splatters.

– Look, it's down your dress!

Doris is shrieking. Lunatic that she is.

Face flaming.

What do I do? New uniform splattered with sauce. Hot, burning lips. Shame.

Get up from the table and run, run, up to my room. Why is the soup so hot? Never had anything that could burn you before. Food on the ward is stone cold by the time it gets up from the kitchen. Even if it's the first served. Never burned my lips before.

What a mess.

Feel tears pricking my eyes but I won't cry. Won't let that cow Doris see my snivelling. My first day in a real home and she's wrecking it.

Look quick in the jug and see it's filled with water. Just like that, standing there.

Quick, quick, pour the water into the bowl. Strip off my dress and plunge it in. Scrub, scrub, the splattered stew. Scrub, scrub.

It's coming out! Scrub again til it's gone. Wring it tight like the girls in the laundry. Strangling the fabric. Squeezing out every last drop.

Shake it and hang it. In the morning it will be dry. Iron, press, put it on again.

Deep breath out.

Ain't ruined my new uniform.

Sitting here in my slip. Hungry. Tired. But I won't go back down. Can't face them all again. Don't belong here at all.

Loud footsteps thump down the hall like someone's stomping along in work boots. Door bursts open and Florence bursts in. Jumps on my bed.

Kain

– Never mind that old cow Doris. She has a stick up her rear end as far as it'll go just because she's Mrs. McNestry's niece. Thinks she's better than all of us. Come on back down. There's date squares for dessert tonight.

She looks at me in my slip. Looks at the wet uniform hanging up.

– Gee, you're quick. Not a spot on it.

I shrug.

– Just put on something else. Whatever you brought with you. Doesn't matter just for tonight.

What I brought with me? Horrid old Avonhurst uniform? No. NO.

Shake my head again.

– Don't you talk at all?

– No, she doesn't.

There's Mrs. McNestry standing in the doorway.

– Andria, you can come back down to dinner, please. Doris is sorry for being so unkind. She doesn't know where you've come from, what you've been through. Her own employer wouldn't be pleased to hear she's been nasty and I've reminded her about that. We're here to help you, so never mind all that now.

Florence grabs a dress from her own wardrobe and shoves it at me.

– Here. You obviously know how to wash, so borrow mine.

She wrenches it over my head. Reminds me of that night I dressed Susan for the dance. Seems so long ago. Never thought I'd give her a second thought once I was out of there.

– Come on. Have a good tuck in. Then we have free hour after supper. Mrs. McNestry plays the piano. I'll help you tomorrow. You're at Mrs. Parry's with me.

She slips her hand into mine and pulls me close to her. Mrs. McNestry leads the way back down to the dining room. Florence squeezes me as we come through the door.

– The soup is always scalding. Hardly your fault.

Florence says it real loud and everyone looks at each other. Down at their bowls, back at me out of the corner of their eyes.

But nobody says nothing.

I sit down and finish eating.

It's cooled down now, enough.



Bell goes off in the morning, not as loud as on the wards, but loud enough that Florence groans.

– Lawful heart. Enough to make you deaf for life.

I get up and cough, cough, like I do every morning now. Racking, heaving til it stops as sudden as it starts. Have another wash in the small bathtub in the corner. So much water here. And the soap, just for me. Nobody else.

Florence finally rolls out of bed and stands up. Startles a bit.

– Oh, well you're not shy, are you?

I just stare at her.

– Never knew a girl who'd just strip down naked. That's what the screen's for, don't you know?

She moves a folding screen out from behind the door and puts it down in front of the bath. Hands me a towel and I get out.

– See? There now you can have your own little room to get changed. Not that I mind looking. You're awfully pretty, really. Minus the dreadful haircut.

She touches my hair. Fingers through the knots.

– Plunk a bowl on your head, trim around the bottom. Idiots. Mine took ages to remember how to grow. Don't worry. Yours will too. Then we'll put in a Marcel wave.

Smile. Wouldn't that be something?

She ducks out. Back on her own side.

I hear her nightgown landing on the bed with a whoosh and the water splashing into her own bowl.

– Hurry up now. Gong's about to go.

She's dressed in seconds and yanks the folding screen away. Grinning at me again. Her hair is so curly her cap won't stay on, just bounces on top of her head. She's my age, I reckon. A little older maybe. Eyes too bright, smile too wide. Like something rocking, rocking, about to tip.

She bolts her breakfast and jostles me along. I want to take my time. Hot porridge with sugar. Bread and jam besides. Never had so much food in my life and all of it good.

– Driver's waiting, let's go.

My toast will have to come with me. Florence is taking my plate. Barely have my shoes on and she's shoving me into a strange car, shiny and bright. Scoot over on the back seat, Florence's leg snug against mine as the driver jolts off.

– You'll like it. The house is clean already and the cook is first-rate. Mrs. Parry lives alone so basically she just likes the company. And having two maids. Appearances and all that. Right. Two institution girls.

The drive across town is a rush of green and the whooshing of air against the window. Someone honks and the driver honks back.

– When we get there, just follow me. We go in the back door, head straight to the room off the back of the kitchen. That's where the cleaning things are kept. Don't talk to the cook. Her food is good but she's a cross old thing.

The driver lets us out and I stand for a minute, just gaping at the house. Never seen something so big belonging to just one person. All red bricks and white lace around the top like a gingerbread house at Christmas. Flower beds upon flower beds, and a gardener bent over his shovel.

Florence grabs my hand and leads me in.

– Good morning, Florence.

She ducks and curtsies.

– Good morning, Mrs. Suffolk. This is Andria. She doesn't speak.

– Good morning, Andria. I'm Mrs. Suffolk, the housekeeper.

I nod and curtsy, trying to smile.

– You can show Andria around the house. I've left a list in the pantry of what needs doing.

– Yes, Mrs. Suffolk.

Florence nods again, so I do the same.

As soon as she's out of sight, Florence is off like a shot. I almost run to keep up.

– Kitchen. Parlour. Front hall—keep it dusted and swept. Mrs. Parry hates any dirt showing. Main stairs. You can only take these if you're cleaning something, otherwise use the back ones off the kitchen.

I follow her up, holding onto the polished wooden railing. So smooth.

– Come here. I've gotta show you something.

She sprints up the stairs like a cat in ballet shoes. So quiet you'd never even hear her feet hit the carpet. Follow her quiet as I can, across the landing to Mrs. Parry's grand double doors. She opens them and slips inside.

I shake my head.

No! We can't go in there. We'll both get the sack!

But she's like a wildfire—burns anywhere she pleases. Grins again, rocking, rocking—then yanks me inside. Closes the door tight behind us, bursting with laughter.

I try to duck around but she holds my arm.

– Wait. You've got to see this.

Quick as a flash, she's opening Mrs. Parry's side drawer. Plugging something into the wall.

I peer over, curious. Creep closer.

She grabs my hand and puts it on top of the thing—a long rod that buzzes. I yank my hand away.

– It's a percussor.

Giggling.

– It's supposed to be for hysteria. Seen them a lot at St. Augustus. The doctor used to hand them out to all the ladies. Keeps them calm.

How?

She presses the head of it against my stomach, then straight down.

I leap back. Hells bells. *That's* where it goes?

She's giggling hysterically now, tears streaming down her face.

– Isn't it fantastic? I wish I had one. She rolls her eyes to the back of her head and makes moaning noises.

If anybody hears her, we'll be thrown out so fast...

Jingling, jingling from downstairs.

Florence's eyes widen.

– That'll be Mrs. Parry for you. Go. Living room.

I run out of the room, closing the door gently behind me. Hope she puts that back where she found it and gets out. Fired on the first day! Imagine.

Kain

Everything downstairs smells beautiful. Bread is baking somewhere down in the kitchen. Something with apples and cinnamon, too. Like Christmas at Avonhurst—spices and pastry. Deep breath in.

Jingle jingle again, just through the double doors. I push them open, curtsy. Mrs. Parry sitting on a wingback chair, dark blue dress glowing in the fire.

– Andria, hello. How are you settling in?

I smile and nod politely.

– Good. I see they've outfitted you with a proper uniform. I'll need to dress for dinner tonight. Is this something you've done before?

We practiced in domestic science. The lesson on girdles and corsets, buttons and hooks. Her clothes look more complicated than the ones I had to help with, though.

Still, I nod.

– Good. I'll ring for you around five, just before you and Florence leave.

The fire is dying a little. I look at Mrs. Parry and gesture with my hand.

– The fire? Yes, add another log. Thank you.

She looks at me curiously, like she might ask another question, but doesn't. I turn and take another log for the top. Stoke the embers until they lick the new log.

– Thank you, Andria.

I curtsy and duck out.

Florence is waiting for me outside the door. Face a giant giggle.

Already I know she's up to something. But I don't mind. I've never had a friend before and she's fun.

First day through. I'm still breathing. But all the thoughts in my head crowd out the sleep.

Bell tolls and I count.

Eleven. Eleven o'clock.

Can't hear it that clearly from the Pavilion. Above the girls snoring. The shuffling and shrieking from the hallway. Even in the middle of the night when everyone should be sleeping, the asylum moves like a beast. In, out, in, out. Too many people to ever be fully quiet.

Here, it's only two.

Remember the pinhead twins. Scared of the dark. I never was. Now, maybe I am.

Listen hard for Florence's breathing.

Still get the pressure in my lungs. The coughing, coughing, that steals my breath. Sudden, like I'm drowning. Feel like coughing now but I don't want to wake up Florence.

– Trouble sleeping?

Her voice is clear as the tolling bells. Not sleepy at all.

I cough instead of answering, and it turns into hacking and wheezing. Then it's gone.

Wide awake and no chance of nodding off in this strange place.

– At St. Augustus Asylum, that's where I'm from, we used to have to share beds.

St. Augustus. Now I know it. In the next town over. Lunatic Asylum. No wonder she looks half mad. Maybe she thinks the same about me, being from Avonhurst. Probably thinks I'm totally daft. Wouldn't blame her.

Sheets rustle and she sinks into my bed, freezing toes touching mine. I flinch away. She laughs.

– If that bothers you, you should see what the girls used to do to each other as pranks. Creepy crawlies in the bed. Ice water over your head in the morning if you didn't get up. Never mind what the staff pulled when you got out of line.

She slips her arm around my waist. Rests her chin on my shoulder. My heart slows down so I don't feel it thumping anymore. Warm and close, another person. I remember sharing a bed with my Mama before Avonhurst. Before Alistair's hands got destroyed and Father left and Bella-Rose died.

Florence rubs one hand down my arm.

– All the girls slept together at St. Augustus. Did they do that at Avonhurst?

Some of the bigger dorms were that crowded before the new cottages were built. I heard of them doubling up or putting some of the smaller girls on the floor. But not on the Pavilion.

– One of the older girls and I used to... you know. Pass the time. Have a little fun. You can't get pregnant like that so there's no worry.

I seen that before too. Two girls sleeping together, touching each other. In my old room at the Pavilion, there were a few Toms. One more boyish than the other. Of course, they thought the rest of us were asleep, but we weren't.

Still, we never told the staff. Why bother, with half the things that go on at night? Kids trying to climb out the window, waking up screaming their bloody heads off. Oldies who can't sleep, pacing around and around and around until the nurses finally tie them to the bed. Some

cry and howl all night long. Sometimes they die—in the dark witching hours between midnight and dawn. The smallest, darkest hours. The scariest ones to be awake because shadows creep around. Nobody hears you. That's when people pass through and you find them cold and stiff in the morning.

Two girls touching each other is the least of the problems.

Those two on the Pavilion: one of them got released and the other moved into the women's ward.

– I have something for you.

I feel something buzzing on my stomach and yank back the blanket.

Oh, hells bells, that's Mrs. Parry's percussor.

Florence puts it on my thigh, buzzing against the inside skin that's soft. Gentle so I don't even mind. Higher, higher, like a giant, gentle bee. Not like her at all, all bouncy and boisterous. I'd expect her to pin me down and tickle me. Ram me in the head with a pillow. Wrestle. Laugh. Not this.

– You like it?

I don't know. Do I?

She pushes me down on the pillow.

– Close your eyes. Just give it a chance.

And then she moves the covers and disappears. I look down, across. Suddenly feel my nightie lifted up, up over my hips. I almost yank it down again, but she giggles.

– Just hold still. I promise you'll like it.

And now it's buzzing, rubbing between my legs and I squirm but she keeps going. And she's right. I like it. My legs relax and fall open. I want to push it away and pull it closer at the same time.

Her voice comes from under the covers.

– Lie down. Just breathe.

The buzzing starts again and I feel my breath get faster, hips moving even though I don't move them on purpose. She's right. I do like it. Is this what that Tom and the other girl were doing? No wonder they used to moan and go on.

A groan creeps up my throat but I clamp it down. Put my wrist in my mouth instead to stop the sounds. I feel like I'm stretching, pulsing out of my skin, but she keeps going. And

Kain

then the buzzing slips inside me. In and out, like John did, only so much better. And I can't help it. Gasping out loud.

My body arches up, up, off the pillow, my nipples pushing against the nightie, stretched tight. One pops out of the top and I roll it between my fingers. My voice is loud, so loud in the tiny, silent room.

My body feels like it's climbing, climbing, about to fall off a cliff. In and out of me, that buzzing thing. I bite my wrist but it's not enough. I'm crying and laughing and then it's over.

– See?

Florence puts her arm around me.

– Told you you'd like it. And I knew you could talk. See if you can't sleep now!

Like it? I don't know if I'd say like. Hells bells, that was strange.

– You've got a hell of a scar, don't you?

I reach down and stroke the raw pink worm on my tummy. Still itchy sometimes.

Florence puts her fingers on it, squints down. Sighs.

– You got done too. Guess you don't have to worry about babies in any case, do you?

Babies?

She pulls up her nightie and shows me hers. Same.

I want to ask her what she means but my eyes feel heavy. Foggy. I close my eyes...

The gong sounds.

Siobhan

There's another letter waiting for me in Lillian's loopy scrawl. My heart starts hammering. I'm almost afraid to open it. Especially after the last one.

It's short, to the point. Just like her.

I found the rat. Holed up in a public house in Toronto. If you want your divorce, now's the time.

I put the letter face down, trying to think. So she meant it then. She has been tracking him down. I can't blame her—especially after seeing poor Rhys's neck. The anguish he must have faced. The rumours, the gossip.

She can't know yet. Rhys only died yesterday. A febrile seizure in the middle of the night, complicated, no doubt, by his battle with hepatitis.

She'll get the notice today, if she hasn't already. She'll know he's died, but what will they tell her? Will they go to her door?

Standing in my office, I feel like I've been jolted with adrenaline. She's found Gerrard. She knows where he is. What's she going to do? I could get there in half a day. It wouldn't be that difficult to sneak up on a man who's likely got his face buried in a glass of something strong.

I need to be free of him. Enough hiding, enough blame. I'll make him sign the papers and then I can sell the house and move on. Leave him to his life. What I wouldn't give never to have to see him again. Lillian knows me. She knows I'll never forgive myself until she does.

If you want your divorce, now's the time.

We're conspirators—always have been.

I send a quick note to Sera and then call to arrange a ride at the administration office. It occurs to me that it might be faster to ride Merlin, but I need to maintain the façade of a civilized trip to town to collect some medicines.

As I'm packing my medical bag with the papers, Sera knocks.

– On a trip, are you?

She looks at me strangely.

– Let's say that, yes.

- Where are you going, really?
 - I have some personal business.
- She just nods.
- What do you need me to do?
- I close the door.



He's not hard to find, sitting at the bar—not in uniform, I note. Wouldn't surprise me if he's defected already. Gerrard never did have much of a stomach for hard things. For a moment more, I lurk by the door, watching him. He's five steps away, maybe six, and my heart is pounding harder with every second I wait.

He takes another swig of his ale. I've never known him to drink the stuff, but maybe his tastes have cheapened with his budget.

Bastard.

I slip into the seat beside him, addressing the bartender.

- Glass of Claret, please.
- Coming right up.

Gerrard looks at me, stunned. I reach into my purse.

- I've brought my own pen.
- Jesus, woman. You know how to sneak up on somebody. Not even a hello for your husband?

– I'd rather not waste time on pleasantries. God knows our parting wasn't exactly pleasant.

The bar isn't as loud as I would have liked. The floor is hard wood, shiny, and the stools have been polished. Bottles of liquor gleam like jewels in the electric light. I focus on the Jack Daniels, hanging upside down.

- How did you find me?

He looks genuinely perplexed, like he's expected he's magically become invisible.

I don't answer. Why should I? Instead, I push the papers across the bar.

- This is the only thing I've come for.
 - I heard you disappeared from town.
- Could he really be so stupid?

Kain

– Of course I did. How could I stay there after what you did?

He looks around, and ducks a little, like someone might be listening over his shoulder.

Glares at me.

– Oh, I'm sorry. Is that a secret now? After the town threw eggs at our house, painted obscenities on our door? You think there are people left who don't know?

He looks out the window. Bangs a fist lightly on the table, like he's squashing the tiniest of ants.

– I never meant... for that to happen.

– What's done is done. All that's left now is to finish it.

He drains his glass and thwacks it down on the counter with more force than is needed. Almost drops it, actually.

– Come back tomorrow.

With effort, I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. Or leap at him and claw his out.

– I don't have time for this, Gerrard.

– Ten years of marriage, Siobhan. Ten years and you want to just throw it away because I made a mistake?

His words are slurring. Apparently even cheap beer can make him drunk.

– A mistake? You made a mistake? You committed a *crime*, Gerrard. Do they know that? In the army? Do they?

– Fuckin' hate the army.

His bitterness is palpable, and it sends an involuntary shiver up my arms, the way he says it. But I shake it off. I'm finished bowing to his moods, his lies.

– What did you expect, a picnic in the country?

– Do this, do that. I had a nice home. A nice job. Then you had to bring that boy into our life.

I can't believe this.

– He was my patient.

– You were sleeping with his mother.

The room tilts. My throat closes. He won't look at me but I know he sees me. He sees more than I ever gave him credit for.

– He's dead. Did you know that?

He looks at me, gaping.

Kain

– Dead?

– He tried to hang himself after what you did to him. They put him in an asylum for the feeble-minded, and he died.

– No.

– Yes.

I lock eyes with him, wanting to punish him.

– He's dead. And so is our marriage. I want out of it. I want you out of my life.

– We're both responsible, Siobhan. We both wrecked our marriage. Now we both have to live with it.

– Yes, but we don't have to live together.

I want to wring his neck at the same time as I want to sit down on the floor and weep until I'm dry and hoarse. But I don't do either. Courage. Strength. These are the things that will move mountains. He's always been a logical man.

And mulish, obtuse.

– I won't lose our marriage on top of everything else.

– Why?

He turns, shocked, like he can't believe I could ask. And I can't believe there's anything between us he wants to hold on to. He won't answer.

– It's not your choice.

He jerks back.

– I want out. Now sign the goddamned papers.

Outside, it's begun to rain, washing the city in a dark, steady drizzle. The streetlights are on, and the marquee from the theatre across the road blazes into the blackness. All around me, umbrellas come up, and people rush by, their boots sending sprays of water over my toes.

I leave the bar and hail a cab. It stops at the curb, with a splash.

Saying her address makes me sick, but I have to do it. She needs to know what happened.

I pray that he's still at the office, that I don't have to face both of them.

The window sticks *thwump, thwump*, across the glass. Pedestrians cut across the path of the car, dodging the rain, with newspapers over their heads. The driver curses. Brakes.

– Next one?

Kain

– No, this is it here.

The driver pulls into their circular drive and I steady myself, feeling my throat closing tighter.

The driver turns around in his seat.

– Shall I wait for you?

I consider for a moment. I can't imagine I'll want to stay.

– Yes. Thanks.

It seems interminable, the wait between ringing the doorbell and the time she answers.

It's late—she's in a silk dressing gown, and she's cut her hair.

She stands back from the door but doesn't look surprised. Her short auburn curls glint in the light of the fireplace and cast a shadow over her face. New lines surround her eyes, but she still looks the same. Still my Lillian. Still far too young to have a son Rhys's age. She doesn't even say hello—just stands aside, like she's been expecting me for hours.

– They sent me a letter today.

It's then that I smell the alcohol. She wobbles on her feet, just slightly.

– He's died.

I close the door and take off my shoes, setting my hat on the table. She turns and leads me to the living room where she picks up a glass of something—sherry, maybe. More probably whiskey.

– He has, yes. I'm very sorry, Lillian.

Even as I say it, I know how inadequate it is. Sorry. There is no word for the depth of my regret—nor my shame.

– I don't know if it's a tragedy or a blessing.

She takes a long sip.

Without asking, she pours me a tumbler full.

– I have a cab waiting outside.

– Well, tell it to go away.

She lurches back down the hallway, snatching money from a bowl on the hall table as she goes, then throws open the door.

I hear her voice like it's in a tunnel, slurring and too loud.

– You can leave. She doesn't need you.

The wind follows her back in, and her hair is drenched from the rain. I take a blanket from the back of the couch and wrap it around her.

– Come, sit down. You've had a shock.

She sits next to me, holding my hand and sniffing.

– He would never have been the same.

She folds herself onto the couch, a flush of pink across her cheeks.

– He should have died that day, the way he was left. If I'd known, I never would have called an ambulance. Sending him away like that.

I wonder if she's been drunk ever since. I wouldn't blame her.

She shakes her head, her eyes half closed.

– Better yet, Gerrard should have died instead.

Stunning, I've had the same thought more than once.

Her dark eyes are full of fire when she looks at me.

– I'd dearly love to kill him.

She drains her glass.

– So would I. As it is, I'll have to settle for divorce. Where's Richard?

She laughs harshly.

– I have no idea. Cook makes supper for him every night, but I always end up eating alone. Far too late, if at all...

She trails off, like she's lost her train of thought.

– I sent you the obituary.

– I saw it.

– He's been dead to Richard since...since the barn. But now we have to bury him.

– I'm sorry.

– It's me who's to blame, if anything. I didn't see it. Now I'm getting what I deserve.

She's half asleep, words blending like cassis slipping to the bottom of a glass of champagne...

– Have you eaten?

She looks up, glassy-eyed.

– No, have you? How rude of me.

Hospitality is the last thing on my mind, but I don't object when she rings the bell. Anything to soak up the liquor in her stomach.

Kain

– Doctor Rian and I will dine.

That imperious air of hers hasn't faded at all. It makes me smile a little.

Her staff must be used to it—soup is on the table in under a minute. Cream of pea with a duck confit garnish.

She spoons it slowly, across from me. When she pours wine for both of us, I say nothing. After a few silent moments, she glances at me.

– Doctor MacMurchy has been asking after you.

– Really? How is she?

– Missing you. You are the heir apparent, after all. Word is that a new Eugenics Society is going to form, officially.

I wonder if they'll be touring Avonhurst. I'd have a few things to point out.

– No doubt she'll run it herself.

Lillian scoffs.

– She is rather getting on in years, Siobhan. I imagined you'd be a front-line contender.

– I can hardly imagine that's the case now. Gossip does spread faster than the 'flu.

– Oh please. Everyone's moved on by now, surely, from your disgrace of a husband.

Toronto has its fair share of scandal. You don't have to stay in your self-imposed ring of hell forever. Besides, it's not you who's the deviant. Well...

She takes another sip.

I forgive her because she's drunk and because her son has died. But her words still sting.

– And if you can divorce him, so much the better. You can move back into your house, get yourself some decent clothes again and start enjoying electricity and city plumbing. Not to mention other delicacies.

She holds up her glass.

– Like me.

I let out a short breath.

– You're finally going to leave Richard for me, are you?

She grins, sloshing the wine as she sets down the glass.

– God knows you're a lot better in bed than he is. But can you give me this palace? This lovely crystal?

Her house, her servants, her status.

Kain

With me, she'd have had to settle for obscurity and discretion and Lillian is anything but discreet.

– I'll have to make do with our beautiful boudoir shots and picturing your face when I come.

Silently. Just a ripple across her stomach and an exhale so quiet you'd miss it if you didn't know what it meant.

– You said you got rid of those.

She touches my cheek.

– I could never stamp you out, love.

– God, I was drunk that night.

– I know.

She grins wickedly. Then her face crumples and she takes another sip of wine.

– You'd never have agreed to pose for me sober.

She stands up, abruptly, wobbling on her feet.

– We can take our coffee in the sitting room. Or in my bedroom, better yet. I'm feeling tired.

– I should go.

– No. Don't. Please.

Her eyes have filled with tears again and she holds out her hand to me.

– Please. Stay with me. It's been a horrible day.

I help her up the stairs and into her bed. She pats the duvet beside her and I sit down.

– Hold me, please. Just until I fall asleep.

I stroke her hair, her forehead.

Seconds later, her mouth has fallen slack. I tuck her in and collect my things.

From the hallway, I use the telephone to call Avonhurst, holding the black and brass receiver in my hand. It's exactly like the one that used to sit on my own desk. Before I had inmates to carry messages back and forth all over the place for me. When I still ran my own life.

This. This is what my life used to be.

Ben answers in his office, even though it's late. He doesn't question me--only says he'll arrange for a ride for me from the station up to the asylum.

– Thank you.

Kain

As I'm getting into the taxi, Richard pulls up beside us in the circular driveway. I pause, trying to think of what to say.

What is there to say?

But he just stares at me, mouth set. Then walks right past, into the house. The door slams.

Right. Of course.

At Union Station, I wait, pacing up and down the tile hallways until Ben comes in the car.

Walking quickly to get out of the rain that's suddenly coming down, again, I duck into the passenger seat.

– Welcome back.

– Thank you for collecting me.

– No trouble at all.

He smiles and turns onto the main road.

I'm relieved to be going home. To my cottage. It's exactly as I left it—sparse and dark. But for once I'm glad of its seclusion. True asylum. So far from the outside world.

In the morning, before I'm properly awake, there's a sharp rap on my door.

Sera's face, normally bright, is tense and pale as she hops from foot to foot on my threshold.

I'm already slipping into my clothes, reaching for my shawl.

She holds the door open, her fingers trembling slightly against the wood.

I pause to lock the door, and even this brief delay seems to agitate Sera.

– Get your horse.

I don't ask. Just slip a bridle on Merlin and jump up bareback.

Sera takes off across the field on Bentley and I follow her at a trot.

At the administration building, she descends, then flags one of the patients walking past.

– Take these horses down to the stables, please. Give them to Harold.

The boy doesn't object, just grabs the reins and leads the animals away.

– Are you going to tell me what the emergency is?

Sera's heels on the stairs to the trams click sharply, softening as we cross onto the packed-dirt floors.

A wheeze on the edge of her breathing makes me pause and take hold of her wrist to slow her down.

– Mind you don't overexert yourself. I don't have any medicine with me if your asthma kicks up.

She grabs a lantern from the wall and we walk down a tunnel I don't recognise. I don't say anything more—talking will be worse for her—so we stride in silence down the long dark tunnel, ducking low in some spots where the rough-hewn ceiling barely accommodates our height.

I want to force her to slow down, but her anger gives her a formidable energy, and I'm afraid to interrupt her. The air turns warm—almost stifling—as we pass the cage with the boiler and pipes. Steam releases into the air, shrieking from the metal vents. At least, it sounds like steam.

I know I flinch because Sera takes my sleeve. White fabric brushes my leg as a young girl runs by, crying. I stare after her, wanting to stop her, but Sera marches on. I have to stop seeing ghosts everywhere I look.

– She can look after herself. Marnie can't.

– Marnie? Marnie Lavimodière? What's happened to her?

Sera doesn't answer.

Down two more damp tunnels, along a brick corridor and up another flight of narrow stairs. We pass the hand-painted signs at each intersection in a whirl, and by the time we make the third turn, I've no idea where I am.

This labyrinth is infuriating.

Sera grasps me by the elbow and draws me through the hall to the door of a large, locked ward. She bangs three times and the slat across the peephole slides back. Blue eyes peep out—the brim of a nurse's cap.

Wordlessly, the nurse opens the door.

– I swear I had no idea.

She looks scared. More than scared—terrified.

Sera squeezes her shoulder quickly.

– I have to bring the doctor to see her.

The attendant nods quickly, but swallows hard, unable to look us in the eye as she darts back to her post. She turns around, voice hushed.

– Have you told Matron?

– Not yet. I want to be sure we're right.

– What the hell is going on here?

They both look at me, but neither of them answers.

Sera picks her way through the common area, the empty tables still bearing stains from tonight's supper. She slides open the door to the dormitory and I almost gag.

Unfair, of course, but I always expect the girls' wards to be slightly more decent. They aren't. Above the usual smell of unwashed bodies close together, the metallic tinge of menstrual fluid and urine clings to the blankets and mattresses like an invisible steam.

That smell.

It took me weeks to get rid of it in my own cottage. The old wooden floors sopped it in thirsty pores and clung to it. If I'd been able to burn the place down, I would have.

Sometimes at night, I can still smell it.

And now, here.

The dormitory is lined all along the edges with cage-cots and beds crammed head-to-head. Patients in wheelchairs wait, wedged in spaces barely wide enough to push them through.

All around us, a noise like the warming up of an orchestra: moans and crying, the scraping of chairs, the squeaking and groaning of metal bars, and the 'one, two, three' of nurses hefting girls from their wheelchairs into beds.

One young girl lies in the cot-cage closest to me, her feet sticking out between the bars—a subversive declaration of freedom. Her toes are out. Her ankles following suit. In her mind, I wonder if she's able to imagine melting through the metal rungs, sliding out, like a tiger slipping out of its enclosure and through the door.

Another patient rocks back and forth on her bed, her nightgown slipping further down her shoulders with each movement. One breast pops out of the scooped neckline—her areolae the pink mine used to be before Fiona was born. Before they turned this freckled brown.

My face gets hot. Remembering Sera's hands on me. Her touch, so sure and deft and...effective.

She's not looking at me. Purposely, probably.

I reach over and pull the girl's nightgown up, tying it quickly at the back while she pushes my hand away. Her fingers are delicate, gentle in their resistance, as if she might be reaching to hold me but doesn't know how. The flesh and colour of a normal body is always such a surprise in this place. A slapping reminder that these girls are fecund and the boys are virile—exactly the reason most of them were sent away in the first place.

– Hurry up. Lights out in one minute.

A nurse strides up and down the aisles between the dormitory beds, chivvying the patients along.

One young girl with badly twisted limbs sits down on her bed, shivering as she struggles to get her arms through the sleeves of her thin nightgown.

– Hurry up!

She shakes her head. Or has an involuntary shiver, it's hard to say.

– Now!

The nurse whacks her across the shoulder with a book, and she starts to cry.

Sera must feel me lurch forward. I should know better. I do, but for God's sake, what's the bloody rush?

– Let's go.

Sera pulls me through a small anteroom with more beds, and then into a tiny space at the very back.

Six white beds stand crammed into two rows with barely enough room to walk between them.

Sera picks her way past four children, all staring at her with looks edged with fear and curiosity.

I follow her, my pants scraping the wood on either side.

– It used to be a closet, but they ran out of room in the dorm, so they lifted the cupboards up above and moved some more beds in here.

I look up and see that giant cubbies line the walls from seven feet off the ground all the way to the ceiling. I'm about to question how anybody got to the clothes when my glance falls on the twelve-foot ladder propped in the corner.

I hardly recognise Marnie. She's so pale. Her hair has been cropped into a bowl cut, and her dark brown eyes are huge in her sunken cheeks. She clutches the blanket tightly in her

Kain

twisted hands. When Sera speaks to her, her dark red mouth moves as if in response, blowing little bubbles of spit into the air as she rocks her head gently from side to side.

– How are you, Marnie?

Sera touches the child's arm.

Vacant eyes stare at the ceiling.

I lean in and shine my lantern near Marnie's face. Her glassy pupils shrink. Interesting. Cortical visual impairment then, not ocular.

– I'm going to move the blanket now, Marnie. Can you let go?

The girl blinks her long dark lashes as Sera gently pries the blanket out of her hands and moves it down.

A rounded belly protrudes under her thin nightgown. I stare at her for a moment, then lean down. I've seen this on children with malnutrition—a severe bloating.

– Is she not getting enough to eat? Malnutrition?

Sera shakes her head.

– Feel it.

– I'm just going to have a feel on your tummy, Marnie.

I blow on my hands and cup them around the top. Sera waits. I can feel the tension in her body, like a cat ready to spring.

This isn't malnutrition. Nor parasites. My stomach goes cold.

– Have you listened?

She nods.

I take out my stethoscope and move it along her belly until I hear it. A heartbeat, steady and thrumming.

– No.

Sera sinks down on the bed, her knees seeming to give out.

I can't believe it. There must be some other explanation. I push against the top ridge. A foot pushes back.

I pull my hand away.

– Jesus, Mary and Joseph. She's what? Thirteen at most.

– Twelve.

Twelve. Twelve.

The number chants in my brain of its own accord. Twelve. Twelve. Twelve years old and pregnant. A child with cerebral palsy, cortical blindness, epilepsy.

Urinary incontinence.

Wearing nappies.

I imagine hands unwrapping her diaper. A single-minded goal.

Why? How?

I swallow down the bile that's churning in my gut, up my esophagus.

Sera meets my eyes.

I feel a shadow crossing the doorway and look up. The nurse slips in.

– Well?

Sera nods.

– God.

The nurse slumps against the doorway.

– How did it happen? I don't understand.

In the muddle, I barely notice her accent, but it's there. Irish. Later, when there's time, I'll have to ask her where she's from. When she got here.

– Has nobody noticed before now?

The nurse looks chagrined. Blushes a bit pink.

– Well, I thought she was getting a wee bit round, but honestly, Doctor, it didn't occur to me to think—*that*. Then tonight as I was giving her a bath, I was looking at her and it suddenly clicked. Thought I'd best ask Sera.

– Who's on this ward at night?

– Women. Only women. And this child is on habit training, dormitory tasks. She eats here, sleeps here. There's just no... opportunity.

Sera looks at me again.

I stand up.

– Well, it's not an immaculate conception. It must be the usual explanation.

– Well what are we going to do? She can't stay here.

Sera's hand is on Marnie's head, protectively.

– She's coming with us. Down to the infirmary where I can keep an eye on her.

The nurse bobs.

– Yes, Doctor.

Kain

Moments later, she reappears with a wheelchair. I put my arm around Marnie, bending to scoop her up. Sera tries to stop me.

– Don't, Siobhan. She'll be too heavy for you. Let one of the staff do it.

I ignore her and lift Marnie up myself. She's tiny. Fragile. Eighty pounds at most, including the new weight around her middle.

Sera sighs but helps me get her out—walking backwards and guiding me through the beds.

At the doorway, I turn back to the nurse.

– I want a message sent to Doctor McHugh and Matron to meet me at my office in half an hour. I don't care if they're both in bed or drinking in front of a fire somewhere.

The nurse bobs again.

Fel

Doris thumps on the door.

– You're late, both of you. Breakfast is already on the table and it won't wait for you. Stupid cow. She's not a bit sorry for last night. Still a nasty tongue in her head. I can hear it through the door.

Florence puts her cap on and shoves her feet in her shoes.

Grins at me, so much cheek, before she swings out the door. Bet she thinks she's really something, knowing how to do that. She's gone. Out the door before I'm even washed.

Not even early compared to Avonhurst but I'm tired. Feel like I could just crawl back in bed and sleep all day. Wouldn't that be something, just lounging around? Covers up to your neck, sipping tea? Mrs. Parry could do it, sure.

Coughing, coughing on the drive over. Barely in the door and the housekeeper is bustling.

– Out to the carriage, Andria. Hurry up, will you? The mistress is leaving. You're supposed to accompany her shopping.

Pull on my coat. Shabby and faded, but it will have to do. No money yet for a good one.

My head feels so fuzzy, so strange. Mrs. Parry is clacking her toe on the step.

– Really, Andria, I've never had to wait for my maid before!

Bob my head and run to the car. Try to smile but it feels like I'm walking through molasses. Never seen anything like it. It's a beautiful car. Deep red, shiny and perfect. No time to stare, we're getting in, but hells bells, it's gorgeous.

A few streets in and I feel queer again. Want to lean my head against the window of the motorcar but know that's not allowed. Heat creeps up, up, up my throat.

At last we stop and the chauffer opens the door. Mrs. Parry gets out first. I scoot over and stand up. Cold air hits me in the face and I breathe in a big breath.

Shopping all day, I can't even imagine, but here we are. Mrs Parry to look in every shop, pick up all the shiny, heavy things, me to carry her bags. Just wish this damn feeling in my head would go away so I could enjoy it.

– Come along, Andria. Lots to do today.

I smile and try to keep up.

– I must say, it's a change to have no backtalk from my domestic help.

Smile again. No backtalk here. Perfect manners. That's what Miss Winterbottom said.

– We'll start at Simpson's.

Follow her, half a pace behind.

– What are you staring at?

So many clothes, all hanging there, exactly the same, rows and rows of blouses.

Brassieres. Lace and shimmer.

– It's a clothing store. Haven't you ever been to one?

I shake my head.

She smiles.

– Why don't you go look around for a moment?

She goes into a room to the side with a velvet curtain and a lady follows her with a measuring tape.

Could stare and stare, but I need to sit down. There's a settee outside the curtains.

Ladies go in and out, carrying clothes. Handing them to the lady. Measure, turn, try this, try that.

Amazing.

Try to imagine telling this to Darcy.

Stomach growling but Mrs. Parry ain't finished.

Lean against the wall. Waiting, waiting.

Finally, she comes.

I take her bags and follow her out.

Get into the car. Bone tired, eyes half closed already. Mrs. Parry beside me, in her new stole. Car rocking, rocking and then Mrs. Parry prodding me.

– Wake up, Andria. We're home.

Open my eyes, barely.

– What's the matter with you, child? Really, falling asleep in a car!

I try to look at her but my eyes keep closing.

– Oh, my, you don't look at all well.

A blast of cold air as the door opens.

– Quickly, go and phone Mrs. McNestry. I think this girl is ill.

Cold cloths, Florence's hands in my hair, soup on my lips. I wish Miss Street was here.

Funny that I miss her. And Doctor Rian. The way they talk, fast and sure with laughter. Darting here, fixing this, treating that. Miss Street, patient and frowning at the same time. *Big push, darling. That's it. That's it.*

Coughing, coughing. Sweat on my forehead, under my arms.

Something else, on the edge of my thoughts. Something darker. What is it? Something Florence said. Something about my scar.

Doctor Rian lied to me.

I think we'd better ring the doctor.

Dusting and mopping. Who will do it?

Who's catching the babies?

There's a flap of wings in the corner of my eye. Great, dark feathers.

The angel's followed me here. How? Why?

She sits on the edge of my bed, hovering.

Shrieking. Crying.

Mrs. McNestry running, her feet clacking on the hallway. Blue eyes, concerned.

Andria, Andria, can you hear me?

What's wrong with her? What's happening?

Voices rising.

Oh dear, she's had an accident.

Call the ambulance. Hurry up.

Siobhan

A week later, to the day, Marnie's contractions start. Late at night, when the staff has mostly gone and the patients are in bed, I do my final rounds, and hear her crying.

Sera meets me in her room and checks her.

– Three centimetres already.

Marnie whines and Sera puts her hand on the girl's belly as it tightens. I can see her thoughts churning. Measuring the pelvic floor, the probable size of this baby's head. I've done the same a dozen times in the past hour.

– You poor thing.

Marnie's jaw locks and her eyes roll back.

– Damn. Siobhan, she's having a seizure.

She looks over. Takes Marnie's hand.

– It doesn't necessarily mean eclampsia. It could be the stress and the pain.

– Do you have a chart for her?

I shake my head. No need for it. I've looked over it every day for the past week, waiting for this labour to start. I've even put together a special tray of equipment, in case we need to do a Caesarean.

Sera's looking at me curiously and I snap back.

– She's had a history of epilepsy since birth. She's been on valproic acid for years. What I don't know is what that medication might do to an infant. If it could survive... I've done a bit of research, but I'm still not sure how this will go.

Marnie twitches on the bed in a slow, rocking rhythm.

– It's not a bad one.

I hold her wrist, counting silently and looking at the wall clock.

Two nurses walk by and peek in. One of them takes in a sharp breath, then peers back again. Would it be too much to ask that someone give a thought to the patients' privacy? No doors in the lavs. No curtains in the infirmaries. I've seen barns with more decency.

Nurse Stokes knocks once and comes in. She's unusually quiet tonight.

– Any luck finding McHugh?

She shakes her head, a frown deepening between her brows.

– No luck at all. I've sent messages in every direction. But I wanted to tell you the nurses are getting the room ready at the back that you asked for, in the likelihood that...

She doesn't finish.

We've asked for Marnie to be moved to the hospital.

The minutes tick by while sweat breaks out on Marnie's upper lip. She cries and arches her back.

Finally, heavy footsteps sound in the hallway.

– Doctor Rian, can I see you out here, please?

It's Braithwaite.

He's not even going to come in. Coward.

– Where's Ben?

– He's... not available right now.

I roll my eyes but walk over to the door, leaving it open a crack so they can listen. So I can have witnesses to what he's going to say. I don't even listen to his words—my mind is already three paces ahead, trying to figure out how I'm going to deliver this baby.

Sera squeezes my arm as I sit back down.

– I'm sorry.

– How do you know what happened?

– I've been here longer than you.

– He won't even consider taking her in. He says birthing is as old as man and can be handled by our capable midwife.

She snorts.

– Never knew he had such faith in my talents.

– He's just a cowardly old fool.

– Cowardly, perhaps, but not a fool. Really, Siobhan, how would they explain it?

– That's not my concern.

– No. It's his. And McHugh's. Which is probably why he's hiding right now. The authorities turn a blind eye to a lot of what goes on here, but even they have their limits. What would happen if we brought a pregnant twelve-year-old girl into the hospital? The police would barge in here. The whole place would collapse under the weight of something like that.

– So we let this child suffer and probably die.

Sera pales.

– I'll do my best, I promise, but...

– I know. She's so small.

Marnie cries again. I wonder how long til she starts wailing.

Sera meets my eyes.

– Let's move her while we can.

– Where are we going?

I swing Marnie's legs over the side of the bed and lift her carefully into a wheelchair.

– Somewhere with a door.

&&&

We've tucked Marnie into bed in the nurse's common room at the far end of the Beehive. I've never even been in here and am surprised to find it has a fireplace and chairs. Mostly the student nurses use it to study. Stokes has had a fire lit for us and every half hour, one of the nurses comes to check if we need anything. They're subdued, all of them. Reminds me of Christmas Eve.

The contractions seem to have lulled for now, like she's gearing up for the next phase. Perhaps she can sleep a few hours before the hard part comes. If prayers alone could sustain her, we'd both have lifted her up to heaven for the past few hours. A running Hail Mary reverberates in the back of my head. Funny what gets left over from your youth. It's been years since I was in a church.

Decades since I've prayed of my own accord.

But for Marnie, I would say the rosary a hundred times.

– Here.

Sera returns from my office and hands me a tumbler with an inch of brandy.

– Still have some in your cupboard.

I don't bother to correct her. There have been several bottles between the last time and now.

The brandy stings my palate and heats my throat, all the way down to my belly, which still feels hollow and cold. That ache never leaves, no matter how much I eat or drink or sleep. I

feel that I eat far more than I used to, but my riding pants have room under the waistband for two hands

As she rests, I sit on the couch. Suddenly, I'm freezing and pull the knit blanket higher over my shoulders, tucking my feet up. Night has truly darkened the sky and the embers of the fire glow in an almost otherworldly light. Volcanic.

Sera kneels by the fireplace and adds a log. I watch the flames lick the bricks and find my eyes growing heavy. I should try to sleep but know I can't. Even if I could manage to fall asleep, I know I'd be on edge, listening for every sound. The wind whipping through cracks by the windows, and my muscles twitch as I try not to jump at the sounds. My body's protest to the frigid temperatures.

Sera lifts the blanket and feels along Marnie's belly.

– Still slow. I can't believe she's progressed this far without any help. Maybe she really can deliver it.

I drain the glass and don't answer. The chances of this baby being born alive are slim and we both know it. She could haemorrhage trying to push it out. It could be starved of oxygen, born blue. It could get lodged. I could have to cut her open.

So many possibilities—none of them good.

For now, all I can do for her is to give her a sedative and hope for the best.

Miraculously, she begins to snore.

Sera tucks the blankets around her and comes to sit opposite me on the couch. She puts her feet up, and taps my arm with her toe.

– Your feet are freezing.

– It's cold out.

I have the anaesthesia ready, the surgical tools. I have everything I need here except the hospital.

Marnie doesn't even know what's going on, let alone how to push or pant or do anything, really, to help herself or her baby. If she survives the delivery herself, it will be a miracle.

– Who do you think did it?

I sigh and close my eyes. In the past month, I've suspected every single man and boy on the grounds.

Kain

– There are so many choices, aren't there? An attendant, a nurse. Could have been a patient. A doctor. Who knows?

Sera clenches her teeth.

– They're left alone too often, and for too long.

I set my glass down on the table.

– Could have even happened right under our noses, Sera, you never know. Nine months ago, where was she? At an appointment? At therapy? Hell, she could even have been in the infirmary. It's amazing what can happen in your own backyard. And you have absolutely no idea.

Sera looks at me and takes a sip of her own drink. I've never seen her touch the stuff, but lately she's been odd. She has an edge of restlessness about her.

– Are you going to tell me what happened?

I take another drink.

– I'd rather not. I'd rather it hadn't happened, actually. How much do you already know?

She doesn't say anything. But she won't lie. I know that about her. Honesty is almost a compulsion with her. I don't think she's even capable of deception.

– I might have heard something. But I don't usually listen unless I know the whole story.

My laugh sounds bitter, even to me.

– Well, good luck finding it. Even I don't know what it is.

The fire crackles as another piece of coal burns out. Sera gets up and adds two logs. They ignite with a flash of orange as the flames lick the bark.

– Where did he go? Your husband?

I sniff. Somehow I don't mind answering her questions. I might even be relieved in a way.

– Into the army. Perfect way to escape your problems. Travel to a different city and join up. No one would know him. Or of his...indiscretions. Leave your wife to clean up the mess with her patient's family.

Sera whistles under her breath.

I wish I could take a tumbler of chloral and go to sleep. Stamp it all out. But I need to keep a clear head in case I have to perform surgery on this girl.

The ticking of the clock sounds harsh. Like it's ticking me off.

I look at her. I used to think she could bear the weight of the world—her life and my secrets too—but now I'm not so sure. Her life is fractured, and I wonder sometimes if, underneath all her bravado, her mind is too. I've never met anyone like this. Her eyes widen and a slow understanding lights her face.

– That boy. The one who came just before Christmas.

I nod.

– Rhys, is it? The one who tried to hang himself?

That fact still makes me sick.

– Yes.

Sera falls silent. Only her eyes betray her.

– Just heard the rumours on the wards. Who knows if it's true? His father found him.

Too late, obviously.

I take a sip of my cognac. Too many intersections converging. Too many things to process.

– Thank God it wasn't Lillian.

She looks at me.

– Who's Lillian? His mother?

I lift my chin.

– Yes. He is her only son.

– You knew her?

– Yes.

– Well?

I can't answer.

– Never mind. I can guess.

Of course she can. She can fill in the blanks faster than anyone else and with half the information. One of the things I most appreciate about her is how much she knows without my ever having to say it. Her intuition. Her kindness. And her sharp tongue.

– I should have paid attention. Should have known what was happening and put a stop to it. But I was just relieved he never... turned to me. I suspected he was having an affair, but I didn't... I never imagined. With a boy.

– How old was he when it started?

– Fourteen.

Sera looks at the fire. I can see her working it all out. An affair with an older man. The family finding out, beating him and coming for Gerrard. The news leaking out all over town. The mob. Gerrard running away. Eggs and paint and hate thrown at my door. Lillian's face, across the street.

And then Rhys.

The barn loft.

The brain damage he obviously suffered.

And finally, Avonhurst.

And I tell her the whole sordid, bloody thing. By the time I'm finished, I feel like I could sleep for a week.

The brandy has dulled the beast in my stomach.

Gently, Sera squeezes my hand, then turns my face to her.

– You've been very brave. We can't all do everything right.

Then Marnie wakes with a wail and Sera wipes her nose, rising quickly.

– Time to check you again, my love.

She reaches under the sheets and I can't see around her.

– Has she come any further?

– Hardly anything at all. Maybe half an inch.

She wipes her hands off on a wet cloth.

Marnie's jaw tightens and her legs constrict in a spasm.

– Another seizure.

I look down. Marnie clings to Sera's hand.

Another contraction clenches the young girl's belly and she whines: a kitten mewling.

Hot anger washes over me, starting in my chest and radiating out until I feel like I have to unbutton my collar.

– I'll kill him if I find him.

– Not if I get to him first.

The conviction in her voice takes me by surprise. What is happening to her?

In moments, Marnie falls back asleep and Sera is sitting next to me again. I must doze off because suddenly the clock strikes three. A heavy frost has formed on the window panes, circling each square with ice that creeps inward inch by inch until only a little hole remains to

Kain

see the falling snow. How many nights have I sat in my own cottage, watching the moon through those tiny holes? Stoking the fire once more before falling asleep for the night. Telling myself that this is the night I'll return to the bed. Lay my head down properly on a pillow instead of curled up on that small sofa.

A nurse comes in, bringing another bucket of firewood, and adds more to the glowing embers.

– Anything you need, Doctor?

I shake my head. Beside me, Sera is sleeping too.

– Slow going. But thank you.

She smiles wanly and leaves.

I wake up to the sound of Marnie's piercing cry. She arches back, her mouth wide open. I throw off the blanket and stumble over to lift the sheet.

– Sera, wake up, she's crowning.

But Sera's already by my side, leaning down as I press my stethoscope on Marnie's belly.

– Still a strong heartbeat.

Miracle, really.

I prop Marnie's legs up. Cervix fully dilated. A dark patch of the baby's head glistens between her legs. Adrenaline surges through me, chasing away the last threads of fatigue.

I force Marnie's spastic knees open wider and a shudder runs through me. My hands on her, compelling her limbs to do what I want. Like he must have.

Marnie cries and strains. Her body is pushing this baby out on its own. I can't coach her. Can't ask her to take deliberate action. But miraculously, or biologically, I don't know which—she's doing it.

It's dark in here. Too dark to see properly, even with all the lanterns and candles lit.

I quickly grab a lantern and shine it directly where Sera needs it.

– Thanks.

She holds her breath for the next part—probably doesn't even realise—as she gently pulls back the straining tissue. And slowly, miraculously, the baby's head slips out.

Thank God.

The baby slides the rest of the way, and Sera grabs the wee thing, massaging her feet to get her to breathe. She trembles in Sera's hands and begins to squall. A big lusty sound. She's small. Thank God she's small, otherwise she'd never have been born. Five pounds, at most. Is she early, possibly?

Sera thrusts the baby into my arms and picks up the scissors, gently clamps the umbilical cord and cuts it. With a clang, the instruments fall back into the basin. We're moving quickly, too quickly, against the cold and the impossibility of this birth. With a few deft folds, Sera's wrapped the baby up tight and warm. Snug. She's rooting already.

– I can't believe she's alive.

I look her over, checking her breathing, her muscle tone. Perfect. Count her toes. Count her fingers—

Sera's voice startles me out of my dream like state, staring at this tiny, perfect face.

– Seizure, Siobhan.

Mentally, I count the seconds, and feel my heart speeding up with every second that ticks by with her in convulsions. Marnie's lips turn blue and her face darkens—the blood compressed under her pale skin.

– Come on, love.

I squeeze her hand.

Sera's kneeling down, ready to catch the placenta being forced out by the strength of the seizure. With a gushing sound, it slides out into her hands. Too hard, too fast.

A deep crimson stain spreads out from under Marnie's hips, seeping through the sheets and the towels.

Her teeth clatter and a shrieking scream starts from deep in her throat, growing louder.

Damn, damn, damn.

Her scream cracks, turning into a gasping, broken noise.

Two nurses come rushing in, and I thrust the baby at the first one, then turn to the medical tray, set out with everything I thought I could possibly need.

As quickly as I can with shaking hands, I draw a needle full of chloral hydrate, then turn back to Marnie. I stick it in her leg and plunge. Wait five seconds. Ten. But the seizure is a catastrophe in her body, going on and on relentlessly.

The nurses look at each other, then at me.

– Run and get me another vial.

The nurse sprints out of the room, but I know it's too late. I know she can't be saved.

Marnie arcs up, the blood stain growing wider and darker under her. Her breathing is jagged, harsh, and she's arched like a demon has possessed her, trying to break her spine from the inside.

She shrieks, flailing.

And falls still.

Sera's knees collapse, the emesis basin thudding down in her lap as she hits the floor.

After a moment, I reach over and close Marnie's eyes, gently brushing her warm, flushed cheek with my fingers.

The nurse is watching me.

– Go tell her that it's too late. I don't need the chloral.

The nurse hands me the baby and leaves. I curl the wee thing into my chest and sit at one end of the sofa. She's asleep, the pink hue high on her tiny face. Peaceful. Almost smiling. I can't turn my back on Marnie, but Sera gets up off the floor, kisses her forehead once, then pulls a sheet over her.

We both sit on the couch, silent, until the clock chimes four.

Sera takes a blanket and drapes it over us.

I feel queer suddenly. Like all the blood has drained out of me. Like I've walked into an ice bath.

– Siobhan?

Sera touches my wrist.

– You're awfully pale. What's the matter? You look like you're going to faint.

The room begins to tilt and I lay my head against the chair. Sera takes the baby gently from my arms.

– I don't know. I feel so strange.

Suddenly a glass presses against my palms. More brandy.

I take a sip, careful not to splash it.

A squalling sound makes me jump. Such a tiny face, wrinkled like an old apple, and she's hungry. Of course she is. Newborn hunger—so sudden, so intense.

– What are we going to feed her?

The icy feeling gets worse. And then the front of my blouse is wet. Soaking wet. Not again—I thought it had finally stopped. For the past few weeks it's been so little that I'd hoped...

– She's rooting on you.

I breathe out, shaky. No. I don't want to.

– You're shaking. Let me help you.

But I have to.

These blasted buttons won't open. My fingers feel stiff, frozen. The baby's squalls get louder. Panic begins to overwhelm me and suddenly I'm babbling.

– I don't know how to nurse an infant, Sera. I've never had to.

She lays a hand on my shoulder and gently takes over. Under her nimble fingers, the buttons open. She moves behind me and pushes one of my breasts into the baby's mouth. The infant latches with a pinch: sharp and sweet. For a moment, Sera holds us both, until my arms move on their own, cradling her.

– Lean back. There you go.

Who knew it was so painful to feed a tiny creature?

– It feels like ice water is running through me.

– That's all right. It's only the let-down of the milk. It will get better.

She realises what she's said.

The baby's arms relax, melt, and she cups her hands around my breast.

– Sera.

I look down. There's something strange about her fingers.

Sera frowns a little.

– I haven't seen that before. Do you suppose she's feeble?

I look down at the baby. Her bright eyes already staring up and around.

Shake my head.

– I don't think so, no.

– So it's just...

I fold her tiny hand between my finger and thumb.

– It's just... this.

Kain

Summer

Kain

June, 1928

Fel

Eyes open. Too much trouble.

Feel the light on my face. Struggle, struggle to open my eyes.

I know the smell. The clang of the meal trays. Nurse Joseph's voice.

I'm back on the Beehive. My stomach clunks.

No.

Close my eyes.

Why bother?

Why isn't she marked down for active seizures?

Nobody's seen her have one. I looked at her charts myself and it's nil, nil, nil for the past four years.

Night, the next time. Dark sky, the moon a tiny slit. Last time I seen it, it was half waning. Pull the blankets up. Bury myself in them. Wish I was buried in the ground. Close my eyes.

The gong sounds.

Sit staring, staring, staring.

Door opens. Footsteps.

Click, thump. Recognise that step anywhere.

I wait until she's standing next to my bed, riding breeches inches from my nose. And then I shove her. Shove her so hard she falls to the ground.

Scrambles up.

– What the hell was that for?

I'm ready. I have my note. I shove it at her.

YOU LIED.

– Lied? How? When?

YOU DONE WOMB SURGERY ON ME.

I hate her. She made it so I can't have babies. When all I want is a baby of my own.

Snuggle and squeeze, rock it to sleep.

There, I'm crying again. Stupid, stupid. Why am I always crying now?

– How did you know?

Point again to the note.

YOU LIED.

Telling me I had an appendix. Taking out my womb.

She folds her hands, breathing out like she's trying to catch her breath.

– We'll talk about this later. Along with why you didn't mention you still have seizures.

Three days of this and my fingers are itching for a pen. A message. Anything.

Doctor Rian brings me books, but I don't touch them.

Darcy gets me other ones from the library and I sit reading them. Drinking tea. Feeling like a queen, all tucked up in bed, lounging. But I'm not happy about it like I thought. Feel terrible being back here. Hateful nightdresses. Hateful food. Screaming and wailing. The boiler screeching.

Nurse Joseph comes in.

– How's da patient?

I scowl.

– It's not all bad, is it? I'll see about some more ice cream latah. Hear you had a bad time.

She comes over with a tray of things.

– How's da coughin'?

Shrug. Ain't noticed much.

– Well, your fevah's broken eniwey. You just sit tight a few more deys. Doctor will be in soon. Has to sort out paperwork for dat patient dat die.

What? She sees the surprise in my face. I ain't heard. News always comes into the office and I always got it first. But now I ain't there.

– Bernard Williams. Imbeciles.

The boy with his bowels on the outside.

Not surprised, really.

– Back to sleep. You've had a bad few weeks too, I think.

As soon as she leaves, I get up and slip into the hall. I'm about to make a break for the attic when I see Miss Street coming down the hall.

– Fel.

She stops. I stand up. Wonder if I can finally get going. Maybe a baby's coming.

But her face is white. Her shoulders slump. Tired, like I've never seen her.

I look at her closely. Waiting. She's not moving. Not rushing.

I wait, wait for her to speak. She don't.

She knows I'm waiting for her to talk because she says,

– I can't find the words, Fel.

Something's the matter with her. Tears in her voice, in her eyes. She takes a deep breath, again and again. She hiccups. Like she's holding it in. Her face pulls in.

– Fel, I have something to tell you and it's very hard.

Drops off. Chokes. She's looking over my head, not at me. Can't look at me. Like Doctor McHugh when he said we wouldn't be going home for Christmas. That first year, then after that we just knew we wouldn't.

Alistair? Is it Alistair? He's run off again? He's eloped on a train? Probably died, the idiot.

Take out my notepad.

Alistair?

Shakes her head.

– No, it's not Alistair. It's Marnie.

Marnie?

Turn toward the infirmary.

Sick?

Miss Street breathes in, out, in, out.

– No. No, Fel. She died.

She breathes in and out again. Can't say nothing else.

Died?

I feel punched. My legs weak, suddenly.

Kain

Miss Street catches me. Puts me down on the bench. Sinks down, like her legs ain't strong neither.

How?

Miss Street shakes her head.

– I can't tell you everything, Fel. I'm sorry. I wish I could. You deserve to know, if anyone does. Marnie. And the babies. All the babies.

Miss Street puts her hands over her face.

I put my hand on her shoulder. Squeeze lightly. Not allowed to touch her. Docked for that, but she's sad. So sad.

– I did everything I could. I promise. Siobhan did too. But Marnie was so young. Too young to have to give birth.

She stops talking. Catches her breath.

Squeezes my hand back. Quick. Back up on her feet.

A baby? Marnie had a baby? How?

– I'm so sorry, Fel. I know she was special to you.

She walks away and I feel my heart racing, racing, like I should see it pumping under my dress...Marnie's dead. And she had a baby.

Little Darcy shuffles out from a doorway. I knew she was hiding there. She puts her hand on my shoulder and pats my head.

– Sorry, Fel. Sorry, Fel.

Can't help it, I'm crying again. Sobbing, sobbing. Darcy puts her chubby arms around me and I let her. Squeezes me tight. I don't care if anyone is watching. They can all go to hell.

And hells bells, there's Pisspot coming toward me. Still working here? I stop dead. If she comes for me again, I'll deck her hard.

Expect her to walk right by. Make rude remarks. But she stops me instead. Face is serious. No cocky smile today.

– I'm sorry, Felwyn. I heard about Marnie.

I look away. Can't look at her face. Her beady eyes. Taunting me about my doll. Hateful cow.

– Look at me, Felwyn, please.

Please? Never heard her say please. Didn't know she knew the word.

Kain

Turn to her. Full on in the face. That satisfy you, old bitch? You didn't drown me. I'm still alive.

She hands me a candle. Short and white.

– I know you like to go to church. Long time til Sunday, now. So go light this in the chapel. Say a prayer for her.

Take the candle. Nod. Can't say thank you. Can't say nothing. Tears are choking me. What's happening to me? Better off, Marnie is probably. Backyard's got to be better than the ward. At least she has some fresh air out there.

Pisspot walks away.

I hate to listen to her but I have a candle now and Marnie deserves one, don't she? Tired, tired, on my way to the door, but I do it anyway. Eyes glazing. Feet slow. But I know my way in the dark and I go, one step in front of the other.

Not taking the tram today. Can't risk getting stopped, roughed up. Go instead the long way, down the main corridor. Down the stairs to the administration building. Peek through the door.

Stop.

Long fur coat. White gloves. Nice hat.

Marnie's Mama.

Marnie's Dad.

Doctor McHugh, leading them.

The Mama is white. Whiter than Miss Street. She leans on the Dad. He holds her arm, her hand. She's thin. Much thinner than before. I remember she's been sick. The Dad looks old. The lines on his forehead are deep. His eyes are dark.

Quick, sprint back up the stairs to the attic, across the floor to the back where my hidey hole is. Dig around until I find what I need and then run back. Down, down, through the door.

Doctor McHugh looks up. He's frowning, but not angry. Sad. Mouth pulled down.

– Fel, something I can do for you?

Marnie. The sad hits me again so hard.

Stand in front of the Mama. Hand her the teddy.

She puts a hand to her mouth. Cries out. The Dad catches her. Holds her up.

– Can I get you a chair?

Doctor McHugh guides her other side. To a bench. Sits down.

Kain

– Thank you.

The Mama holds my arm. Her fingers are cold. Fragile, like Marnie's. They look the same. So much the same.

– I know you looked after her here. I know she was *plus contente* because of you.

The Mama stops talking and starts crying.

– I can't believe it. I didn't see her the last two... three. *Les derniers trois*.

– She was ill, darling.

The Dad is frowning. Touching the Mama's shoulder, her face.

– And you were ill. It couldn't be helped. It was nobody's fault.

Can't look at them. Their sad leaks out. Nobody's fault? They have no idea. I want to cry. Can't cry here.

– You made her life better. I know.

The Mama is still looking at me. Her eyes huge.

Just nod. Quick. Thrust the teddy at the Mama. Make her take it.

In the chapel, I light the candle.

And I sit and watch it burn and melt. Behind it, a row of candles licks upwards, shadows dancing on the wall. I sit in the front row. Say all the prayers I know inside my head—everything Miss Street has taught me. Everything I learned in church.

The dinner bell goes.

The bedtime bell goes.

I curl up on the pew and watch the candle burn, all the way until it dies.

Later, when everything is dark, I realise.

She must be here—the baby. Or he. Miss Street didn't say it died. It must be on the Infants ward. They don't even know, probably. Nobody will tell them it's Marnie's.

Will go first thing in the morning.

Before breakfast even, I'm up to E. Knock, but nobody answers so I push the door open. It's not closed tight today.

Nurses pace up and down the ward. They look worried about something. Don't pay me any attention hardly, though I never come inside.

Creep over to the beds. A tiny ward, this one. Like a proper nursery with blue paint and a cheerful border. A bit tattered on the edges and smelling like poo, like everywhere else, but at least there's sunlight. Happens on the top floors.

There. In the crib. A little, little one. The only newborn. Can tell right away she's a girl by how pretty she is. She should be in someone's arms. She's wriggling, trying to get free of her swaddling. Dark brown hair, dark, chocolate eyes, long, long lashes.

Marnie's baby. I have no doubts at all.

– Hello? Can I help you?

One of the nurses finally notices me, comes striding over, hands on hips. Don't recognise this one.

– I know you, don't I?

The other one's Nurse Annette. Seen her in the infirmary and in junior morons before I moved to the pavilion. Used to work nights but now she's days, I guess.

– That's Felwyn. Here to help, Fel, or are you delivering messages?

Don't have to answer because the nurse gets called away.

– Eugenie, will you come?

Junior nurse comes out of the back room, wringing her hands.

– He's getting worse, I think.

Marnie's baby starts making a fuss, mewling, but nobody pays her any mind. The two of them are clustered into the other room. I pick her up and rock her for a second, then pace around, bouncing her a little. She stops fussing.

Carrying her, I creep to the door of the anteroom to see what's going on.

Better than the oldies, but the babies are still stinky. Noisy. Fussy. One of them's old enough to stand in his crib and he's shaking the bars. Mostly they're older—three, four. Probably born here, some of them. Maybe one or two are from the mother's wing—the ones who weren't adopted out. The ones you can't tell right away are feeble. Or the ones who're hard to adopt out because of their black hair or dark skin.

You can see right away they need a dogsbody in here. Bottle for one, refill, bottle for the next. Some of their mothers at work duty—the ones who had the babies here. Coming in to feed them, play with them in the afternoon. But one nurse and one attendant ain't enough.

I know that kid. He's Heath. Seen him down at the infirmary last year. Two years old, almost three.

Got a big head, that one, growing bigger by the day. Last year he could still sit up, hold his head up on his neck. Don't look like he can now, the way he's lying in the crib not moving. God, his head is big. It's half the size of him. Shiny too, like a balloon stretched so tight you can see your reflection in it.

Gotta be carried around, crooked in someone's arm. But he stares at you. Big eyes, blue. Smiles a bit sometimes when you tickle him. Rolls on his side, sometimes. Have to help him.

Not today, though. Today he's sleeping. Pale looking, really, like when the moon shines on him at night—a little blue. A little ghostly. But it's daytime now and even his lips are blue.

I look closer. Babies shouldn't have blue lips, that much I know. That bothers me, Heath's blue lips. Nurse Annette turns around and sees me. I freeze but she don't look angry.

She turns back and talks to the other nurses in a low voice. Frowning. Serious. Keeps looking over here at Marnie's baby in my arms. At me. I creep closer. Nobody says nothing, still.

His fingernails dark.

Toes dark.

This ain't good at all.

Nurse Annette turns to me again. I didn't notice the stripe on her collar before. Must be a supervisor now. She's young for that, but smart enough. She's happy having her job in here, probably. Bossing people around. Getting lots of money. A nice room in the nurses' building. Eating the good food. Lots of raisins and apples and cheese for her meals. Fancy lights and only sharing a toilet with three other people, not thirty.

– Go and fetch one of the doctors up here, would you? Doctor Braithwaite or Doctor Rian should be there now.

Hells bells, call Doctor Rian up to see a dying baby? I don't think so.

– You can take the outer path if you need to.

Wait while she unpins a button pass from her shirt and hands it to me. One for rules, this one. Ain't needed a button pass for years. Nurses, attendants, even Matron sees me come and go and know I'm delivering messages or delivering babies.

But I take it from her anyway. Better to be patient for a few minutes than be punished all day. She holds her hands out and I give her Marnie's baby. The outer path would be nice. Cold, probably, but fresh air and I could smell the bread baking from here.

But the tramway's faster from this building and Heath ain't looking good.

Kain

Hurry down the hall, through the breezeway, down, down, down the stairs, through the tunnels— up the ramp and through the hall to Doctor Braithwaite's office. Knock. Wait. Wait. No answer.

Nurse Joseph sees me.

– Looking for Doctor Braithwaite, are you Fel?

I nod.

She frowns.

– Urgent, is it? Which ward?

I nod again. Make a rocking motion with my arms.

– Infants? It'll have to be Doctor Rian, then.

No help for it. That baby needs a doctor and Doctor Rian's all there is.

Siobhan

Footsteps sound outside the door and a nurse knocks.

– You're needed in E, please.

I spring up from the desk and grab my bag. I'm trying to remember what E is but I don't think I've ever been there.

Fel's here, outside my door.

– Come to deck me one, have you?

She shakes her head but she doesn't move. Just waiting for me, no sass in her face at all. She looks very still just now.

And I suddenly realise what E must be.

– What's going on?

Her dark eyes are serious, and she swallows hard.

– What's the problem up there?

Fel just starts walking. She'll know the fastest way, which is never the way I'm going. Down the stairs, around the bend in the tramway, up another flight. Up, up, up to the top floor. Through a breezeway, curved like a bend in the road, lit with glinting windows.

I've never been up this way before.

To the infants' cottage.

Crying and mewling reaches my ears before we even crest the final doors. There are only seven babies on this ward but the noise is devastating...

Maybe it's not so much the level of the noise as it is the quality of it. Something primal flips over in me. My stomach clenches and my throat constricts. All that crying. Those wee babies in cots, staring up at us.

I look down—wait for the lactation I'm sure is coming. But no wet patches leak through, even with all this crying.

Maybe the herbs are finally working.

Fel moves away from me as the nurse in charge comes around the corner, holding a listless toddler.

Kain

– Doctor Rian. Thanks for coming up. I didn't think I should try to bring him down.

His head is so large she has to support it with the whole of her forearm— no easy task in a child of his age. I'm surprised she's holding him at all, really, in his condition.

– I keep having to bounce him.

I peer closer at him. The pale face, tinged blue.

– His breathing is very poor.

I take out my stethoscope. He barely startles when I put it to his chest. No crackling. No wheezing. But his lips are dusky and his eyes have a hollow quality.

–Why is his oxygen so low?

I move the stethoscope to his heart. Listen to the faint thrumming. It's slow. Too slow.

– Put him down, please, nurse. I want to see what happens when he's flat.

She lays him gently down on the table, guiding her hand out inch by inch until his huge head is supported by the sturdy wood.

She's right. His breathing is so shallow it's barely appreciable.

Something about the position. The angle. His brain is drowning in fluid. It must be pressing on the brainstem.

I help to roll him back into her arms. The weight of him shows in the trembling of her biceps.

I breathe out steadily to calm my stomach.

– Is there somewhere you can sit?

– I've been in the rocking chair half the morning, but that's not very practical. There are six other babies here.

Only one other nurse is on the ward, plus Fel. And she's not supposed to be.

The other young nurse attendant is going from one cot to the next, changing diapers while two toddlers roll a ball at one another. One, a boy of three or four, Mongoloid, has a running nose that could use a good wiping. The other child, a little girl, stops to scratch her knee, her tongue lolling to the side as she bends over. Her truncated legs bow as she tries to bend to take the ball. Hydrocephalus, certainly, and probably spina bifida.

I think this is the first time I've ever seen boys and girls playing together since I arrived here. Playing at all, actually. I don't believe I've ever seen a toy in this place. Where would they put them on the larger wards? They'd probably get broken or fought over, or tripped on in the night.

And there obviously aren't enough infants to bother with segregating them.

– I'm afraid there's not much I can do for you except take him to the infirmary if you'd rather not keep him here.

– You can't treat him?

– Nothing except keep him comfortable, I'm afraid. He has to be kept upright as much as possible, but I should warn you...

– He's not going to survive, is that right?

I shake my head, sorry to have to tell her.

– Not much longer, no. I'm afraid the pressure on his head is just too great. His brain is beginning to lose the basic functions. He'll just stop breathing soon.

The young nurse plops a younger baby down on the floor and she holds the bars of the cot as she bounces up and down on uncoordinated legs. Her scissored movements seem to give her some pleasure though, because she smiles.

God, what a beautiful thing to see her smiling. Her wide eyes, lighting up as she propels herself up and down, up and down.

– That's a girl, Katie. Get your exercise then.

The nurse obviously dotes on her, handing her a teddy and a rattle.

Katie plunks down on the floor, a toy in each hand.

The Mongoloid boy drops the ball and ambles over. He snatches the rattle from her and she shrieks.

The tears well in her eyes and she wails.

Without thinking I march over and snatch the toy away from him, then gently hand it back over to the tiny girl.

The young nurse eyes me but doesn't say anything.

Doctor's privilege, I suppose.

Fel passes me a note.

Tuberculosis wing?

I look at her.

– The Tuberculosis wing? What do you mean?

She looks at the senior nurse who says in a hushed voice,

– That's where they put the babies who are feeble. When they're not going to survive. There's a special room for them in there.

I shake my head. The open wing? There's no intensive care wing on the Tubercular ward. It's all open air.

Things all coming together suddenly.

The Tuberculosis wing. The open air.

Sera's vehemence that more babies are dying than should be.

She's right.

That's what this nurse is saying and probably doesn't even know it.

– No. Keep him here.

Nurse Annette rocks little Heath gently as he dozes in her arms.

– That's no trouble, Doctor. He'll be more comfortable here than in the infirmary, I imagine.

The baby in Fel's arms wiggles some more, rooting, mewling. Marnie's baby. She's got a tiny head, but perfect eyes and nose. Nothing wrong with her, save that one deformity. Six fingers on each hand—a rare condition I've only ever seen once before.

The baby wriggles her hands free and reaches out to Fel, who grasps her tiny little hand.

You wouldn't notice at first, probably.

Fel holds the baby's hand gently, touching each of her digits: five fingers and a thumb.

She checks her other hand and something in her face clouds. She looks up at me, almost a glare.

– It's called Hexadactyly. She's perfectly healthy otherwise.

She holds the baby up, searching her face—as if she's seen a demon lurking. She has Marnie's chocolate eyes, her dimple, her hair. And six fingers.

Suddenly, Fel thrusts the baby at me and runs out the door.

What the hell that was about?

Kain

Fel

I'm going to kill him.

Run across the lawn, out to the workshops behind the kitchen. Shoes, he said. He should be there by now. Sun is going down, blood red between the trees, and the wind is harsh today. Whistles, screams around my ears, even though the trees are budding and the grass is growing long.

– Alistair!

I'm screaming his name and the boys run out of the barn to see the racket.

– Alistair!

One grabs me, yanks me to the side, out of the way.

– Hush, Fel. What are you doing, hollering like that? You want to get thrown in the dungeon? What are you doing here at all?

– Where's my brother?

My voice sounds like a saw on wet wood, scratchy and screeching, but I don't care.

Clear my throat, try again.

– Where the hell is Alistair?

– He ain't here.

Recognise Goldman. He's grown tall now too, like Alistair. Wonder if they're all the same, fucking every single girl they can get their hands on. Was it a dare? Moral defectives, all of them. Taking advantage of a girl like Marnie. Beautiful and fragile and never going to speak or shout.

I shake him off. Grab a hammer from the table beside him.

– Where's my *brother*?

He jumps back, hands out.

– I'm telling you, he ain't here. Go back to your dorm, Fel, before you get into trouble.

Okay? I'll tell him you came by.

– The hell is going on?

Kain

Another boy comes around the side, then stops when he sees me.

– She's looking for Alistair.

Goldman backs up another step.

– Over on your side, by the woodshed. He's making coffins today. Carrying wood.

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Alistair helping to make the coffins. He probably made the one Marnie's buried in.

I drop the saw. All the anger in me turns into tears and I'm crying, crying.

Goldberg holds out his hands and comes closer.

– C'mon, Fel. Give that to me, would ya? Gimme the saw. You go on back now, and we won't say nothing, okay?

Kick it at him and run.

Run.

Can't punch them all, can I? Chop their balls off.

Run hard. Past the farm, onto the road. Sun is almost set now and I see the Backyard. Grass grown high, a bare field. You'd never know there were bodies buried there.

Stone upon stone in rows under the leaves in the fall. Grass grows higher, higher, until one of the boys has time to mow it. No headstones. Just numbers in blocks like bricks, hammered in the shop. 101. 356. 888. 2980.

She's there, somewhere: 2980.

Stop, turn.

I never got to say goodbye.

She's buried here. If Alistair's making more coffins, they're doing the spring burial.

Toe kick through the graveyard, pick, pick, pick. The fresh graves are on the side. Don't know how many there are, stored through the winter.

2980. 2980.

There it is. Kneel down.

2980. 2980. Side by side.

Why are there two? Only one number per patient. Only one patient per number. Number 2980 was Marnie's. Why are there two gravestones?

Kain

Peer closer. Maybe one was a mistake? But there are two plots. Two coffins. Two bricks: 2980.

How can I not know which one is hers?

Tears come up again and I swat them away, sobbing, sobbing over her grave. Or not hers. The one beside hers. I don't know. And that makes it worse, so I'm crying harder, harder. What is wrong with me? Never cried so much in my whole life and now I can't stop.

Is she the left one or the right one?

Marnie, an unmarked grave, and I don't even know which one.

The angel is flying toward me. I see her wings in the corner of my eye. Have to go in. Go up. But I need to say goodbye first.

If I close my eyes. Put my hands on each bed. Can I feel which one is hers?

The world tilts in my head when my eyes are closed but I do it anyway. Wait. Feel to see if her spirit will lift out. Travel up my arm.

That one. The one on the left.

She's in that one.

The angel is getting closer. Wings spread. Blocking what I can see.

I put my hands over my ears and *hum, hum, hum...* the buzzing in my head makes her go away. She flies off a little. *Hum, hum, hum* some more..

Pick the early spring flowers and lay it on the grave. Marnie.

The angel follows me all the way back to the Pavilion.

I'll follow her now. Why shouldn't I?

Out the side door, in the side door of the admin building and then straight up. Five flights and the ladder.

I see her wings at the corners of my eye. Bouncing light, beating slowly.

Up, up, up to the attic, crawl through the door. Open, beautiful sunlight and a breeze where the window's cracked and nobody knows about it enough to repair it. She's here, flying toward me. Her wings beat against my face and my mouth opens wider, wider. My arms start to twitch, to move. The wind from her wings makes my hair stand up, my knees knock.

She's so beautiful.

Here she comes. Bright wings outstretched, flapping toward me. Envelops me in black.

Always fall asleep up here and always piss myself. That's what happens when the angel visits. She puts me to sleep. So deep, so deep, I always wake up in wet clothes.

I open my suitcase and pull out a dress. Take the other one over to the bowl in the corner where the rainwater collects. Rinse, rinse, and hang it out on the rafters for next time.

Up here, there's no one to see, no one to care what I look like in just a shift, threadbare with holes under the arms.

Catch sight of myself in the glass. Stupid haircut. Stupid stockings, one long, one short.

Take it all off and throw it in the corner. Scream and scream and scream. Bang my arms on the walls, bruised and denting, scream some more. Want to throw the suitcases through the windows, one by one, smashing down along the roof and splitting open on the front lawn, everything spilling out, everything we're not allowed to have. A shaving kit from this one. A pair of pumps from that one. This person's fancy dress. That child's wind-up toy.

Smash it all on the lawn then see who comes to scoop it up. See how long it takes them to climb up to the attic and get me.

Stand naked in the window and push my breasts against the glass. Let them see me. Let them look up from their lawn bowling and promenading. There, that one, none the wiser, walking the idiots around the lawn in their alligators. Nurses shuffling the oldies, step, halt, step, halt. Attendants, one on either side of the violent, marching, marching. Some in straightjackets. Some in helmets. That one over there, stopping and banging his head in his hands.

Lord love a duck. Land sakes alive. Jesus fucking Christ. Why won't anyone stop and look around and see what place we've come to? But they don't. Nobody will wonder who that naked girl is in the dirty glass window. Fuck them all.

My head hurts and I feel hungry. Tired. Mostly tired.

Old mattresses, stacked one on top of the other. Why ain't they been burned? Rats are probably making their homes in them.

Pull one down. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

There's enough stuff in all these suitcases to make a real home here. Nobody's getting their stuff back anyway. We're all here for life, Pisspot said.

Think you're ever getting out of here? Keep dreaming.

Fuck the old bag.

Night falls, dark and sudden. The moon lights the way to dinner in the winter months but nobody goes outside to see it. Tonight I watch it rise higher and higher. I'm hungry. The angel hovers over my shoulder, wings beating around my face.

I don't want to be caught but I don't want to starve up here neither.

Leave my new bed and pull on a dress, then creep, creep down the stairs.

The canteen is closed for supper hour, door closed. Smell the staff dinner, something with gravy. The clanking of the plates and knives, murmur of a hundred voices, never told to be quiet. Stuffing their gobs.

For once I'd like to have what they're having. Meat with salt. Proper bread and real dessert. Imagine that, waltzing straight in there and taking up a plate. Pouring a big helping of cheese sauce, sitting myself down next to Doctor McHugh and saying 'pass the pepper, please Doctor.' Seconds of cake. All the hot tea I like.

I'm going to have it.

I am.

They're all seated. Dinner's half served.

There it is, round the side, the entrance for the kitchen help. Slip in the door. They look at me, gobsmacked. Wonder for a second if the taller one's going to say anything, but I fix her with a glare and she just raises her eyebrows straight up into her forehead. She knows me. Knows what she's in for if she rats me out. No favours.

I keep looking at her while I take down a plate. Hold it out.

The smaller one looks from her to me, her to me.

I thrust it at her and she fills it up. Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Vegetables. Bread besides. She holds up a ladle of gravy and looks at me. I nod. She pours it on the dinner, hot and thick. My mouth waters.

More?

I nod.

She hands me back the plate and I stick a knife and fork in my pocket. Real ones. Silver. Then point to the cake.

The taller one cuts off a slice, wraps it up in a cloth.

Kain

I stick it in my apron next to the forks and back out the door.

Don't care who sees me now. But nobody even gives me second look. Nurses, inmates, pass, gawking as one of the boys is dragged down to the pads. Shouting. The perfect cover. I just keep walking, walking to the stairwell.

Let them think I'm delivering someone their supper.

Felwyn!

My stomach drops. Pisspot.

I turn to look at her, but she don't snatch the food out of my hand.

–I hope that's for Miss Street.

I nod quickly.

– She hasn't been at a single meal today. She's overworked, if you ask me. Give her this letter too, please. I've been looking for her for an hour.

She don't wait for an answer.

I take it in my free hand and she goes back to slop up her dinner.

I stuff the stupid letter down my front. Sick of carrying their stupid messages. I'll sit on the ward and rock all day rather than do anything more for them.

Head straight back up to the attic.

Maybe I'll live here.

That gravy is something good. Something good. I lick the plate and stare at it, empty, a real china plate. They never give them to us, of course, afraid we'll break them.

So I lift it high over my head and throw it.

It smashes against the rafters.

&&&

The whole day after I wake up, I read. One book after another. Eat my cake. Read some more. Wonder if they're looking for me. Don't give a toss.

Siobhan

“Is she here?”

Sera wraps a shawl tighter around her shoulders as I cross the threshold.

– Is who here?

– Fel. She's missing.

– What?

– I thought she might have come here. She's angry with me. She... she knows about the salpingectomy.

Sera shakes her head.

– She's not here.

A young woman with chestnut curls and a smattering of freckles stands behind Sera.

She gestures to me.

– Invite the doctor in.

– No.

Sera blocks the door.

I stand on the threshold, looking from one to the other. It's been three days since I've seen her. Since I took her to the tuberculosis wing and ripped the door off the closet in the back, the one with the big window, always left open. Since we went and said a prayer in the Backyard over in the corner where the tiny wooden coffins are buried under the grass.

Charlotte pushes gently past her and takes my arm.

– Come in.

Sera relents and lets me pass.

Charlotte watches us.

– She's...not herself.

Her voice trembles.

Sera turns to me, her expression flat. When Charlotte moves into the kitchen, I wrap my arms around Sera and she stands still in my arms for a long moment before putting her arms around my waist, hugging back.

Kain

– You're not responsible for what happened.

And that's when she cries, finally. Great sobs that I'm afraid might set off her asthma. Across the room, Charlotte is crying, too. She tries to come to Sera, but Sera waves her off.

– I'm sorry, Sera. I'm so sorry.

– It's nothing to do with you!

She's yelling. Her face blotched red.

– You're not the one who delivered all those babies, are you? Let them go unbaptized into the ground? It's not you who has any responsibility at all, is it?

Charlie's face crumples and she sits down.

– Sera.

I take her hand.

– When was the last time you slept?

She shakes her head.

– She hasn't been.

Charlie's voice is barely a whisper.

Out the window, I see Bentley in the pasture, pawing at his stomach, and at the ground. He was doing that when I came in, too.

Frowning, I take Sera's coat down from the peg and thrust it at her.

– Let's go.

– What? Where?

– Your horse is off. We need to go look at him. And you need some fresh air.

Sera puts on her boots and coat and follows me outside.

Bentley's lips are curling up over his teeth. He doesn't object when I slip a bridle over his head and clip a lead line on. But then he buckles and tries to roll. I jam my knee into his side and pull him.

– Let's go.

Sera looks at us, frightened.

– What's happening to him?

– Let's walk him and see if he starts feeling better. You too.

The wind coming off the lake is damn cold for this time of year. It's harsh, too, whipping my hair into my eyes and making it hard to see.

Kain

– You think it's colic?

– Yes, but what kind, I'm not sure. I don't want to let him roll. Might not get him back up.

Sera takes the lead and walks along. I don't have my stethoscope but I can hear the gurgling of his belly from here.

– Probably gas. Let's bring him over to the trough and see if he'll drink. Can you get some fresh water?

Sera runs ahead and pumps out some cold water from the well.

But Bentley turns away.

– All right there, sir. Let's keep walking.

Sera keeps pace with us.

We walk in silence around the paddock a few times before Sera speaks again.

– How long has Fel been missing?

– Since yesterday. Place has been turned upside down. Ben's been to Union Station twice. Her brother is still there so we know she's not with him.

– She's probably hiding, Siobhan. How could she leave? How could she buy a train ticket, or take a taxi? How could she find somewhere to stay? She's probably on the grounds somewhere.

– And what if she's not and she's had a seizure?

Sera shakes her head.

– I don't know.

Bentley pulls against the lead, trying again to lie down. Sera walks faster.

The wind picks up, even colder and fiercer than before.

I shove my hair out of my face.

Sera looks done in. She stumbles a little as she walks, but keeps hold of Bentley's bridle and keeps marching. When she stumbles again, I stop her. Take over.

– You can go inside. Get some rest. Have a drink.

She shakes her head.

– I could never sleep.

Her voice is like broken glass. I want to put my arms around her and shake her at the same time.

She lets me take the bridle but keeps walking.

Kain

– Have you talked to anyone?

I try to keep my voice gentle.

– No. It's too awful. Everything. I just...

– It might help, you know, to talk about it.

– To who, exactly? And what would I say? I deliver babies at the asylum and then they're exposed. Killed. What kind of purpose is this in life? What would Reverend Mother say to me? Sister Wendell? And what happened to Marnie...

Her voice cracks. She's barely walking.

Bentley rears, but I bring him down, urge him on. He snuffs and plods after me, head down.

– Sera, please. Go inside and rest. You've had a bad shock. I'm worried about you.

– I can't lose my horse, too.

– He's not going to die. It's just colic. We just have to keep him walking until he can drink something.

She stops and nuzzles him. His thick winter coat hides her face and he pushes back with his nose, bunting her. Reminds me of a pony I had as a child.

– How do you know so much about horses?

Horses are in my blood. Under my skin. I probably rode before I walked. Just being around them, the smell of their manes and the hay takes me back to my childhood instantly. I held a stethoscope to a horse long before I ever heard a human heartbeat.

– My father was a veterinarian.

Walk. Turn. Pull. Walk. Walk. Slow. Listen.

– How do you know when it's over? The colic?

I try to think of how to explain the shift. The change in sound and urgency. The lifting. But I can only listen. Not yet. The sound of the wind makes it even harder to hear. Just as the sky starts to darken, I feel the shift coming. His breathing is calmer, and he nuzzles me. I listen to his stomach, offer him some water. He drinks and I listen again. Wait to hear the gurgle of a clear tract. Yes. There.

Then he lets go an avalanche of turds, and I jump out of the way.

Sera looks at me wryly.

– I guess he's feeling better.

– Thank God. I'm half frozen in this wind.

Sera pulls his lead and he goes gently into his stall. She has to stand on tiptoe to throw a blanket over him.

– We'll check him again in half an hour.

– Okay.

She sighs.

The sadness leaks out of her but her face is serious as she looks at me. And I know this isn't like her. There's something happening. Something serious.

– What's happening with Charlie, Sera?

She bites her lip and shakes her head.

– I don't know.

– Do you love her?

She ducks her head and squeezes my hands.

– I don't know.

– Come in and have some tea.

She's frowning again and I know she's thinking about Fel. She shakes her head.

– Where could she have gone?

– No idea. We've looked everywhere we can think of.

– She's probably grieving about Marnie. She wants to be left alone. There's nowhere to be alone in that place.

She sits down hard on a bale of hay, like her legs have gone numb suddenly. She leans her head against the boards.

– I know how she feels. I can't face it either.

I sit down next to her and lean back, the scent of fresh manure enveloping us and reminding me of the wards. A smell we'd all like to escape.

– You had no part in what they did. You did your job, you did your best. Sometimes, you just don't know. And now that we do, we'll prevent it.

She looks up. Maybe I'm the last person in the world who can convince her of this. And maybe I don't believe it myself.

– I knew there was something.

– You just never imagined it was...

– No. Something that bad. Siobhan, they're all dead. Buried like that, with no care... and it's me who delivered them. Who took them down to the infirmary. I knew the death rate was too high. But I didn't know... I...

– And that's exactly the point, Sera. You didn't know. You did your job, you didn't ask enough questions. And when you did, you felt it was too late.

She bites her lip.

– I was too scared of losing my job. Of letting. Letting Charlie down.

She hiccups, tears streaming down her face.

I cup her face in my hands. Her cheeks are pink and cold and there's something dull in her eyes that I'm not used to seeing. But she's not defeated yet. I can feel it, like the wave that comes before an epidemic. She's still got a spark in there somewhere.

– There's a young man who's dead because of things I didn't know, Sera. What I didn't want to see, because I was too busy avoiding something. Too busy doing something I knew I shouldn't. Sometimes our best just isn't good enough.

She stares at me for a minute, like she's trying to read my thoughts.

– All we can do is push on another day.

I hold out my hand.

– C'mon.

Finally, she follows me.

Kain

Fel

Halfway through a romance novel and there's a thumping sound.

Footsteps on the stairs.

Freeze.

They stop.

Someone's walking around up here.

Peek out between the suitcases but I can't see.

Footsteps coming closer. Closer.

My heart is thumping, so hard. I'm caught. Done for. I hold my breath and close my eyes, try to melt into the mattress.

– Love the bathrobe. Never seen one of those on the wards.

Open my eyes and there's Doctor Rian, one eyebrow cocked at me.

– So, this is your hideout, is it?

I let out a deep breath. Heart slowing down.

– Do you mind if I come in?

Just shrug, put down my book. She wipes off the top of a suitcase pile and sits on it. For a minute, she just looks around. Taking it in.

– This is where they keep the luggage, is it? I did wonder.

She looks around and I follow her eyes. The pile of mattresses to the dusty old chair in the corner where I've dumped my Institution dress. The bookshelf of books and toys.

– Where did those paintings come from?

She's looking at Old Mr. Zurich's paintings I've propped up. One on the window sill, two against the wall. She stands up and goes closer, picks one up.

– These are beautiful.

I get up and show her the suitcase they came from and she bends to read the label.

– Hans Zurich. Zurich.

Thinks to herself.

– I don't know him.

She wouldn't. He died last year.

– Do you mind me looking?

I don't, really. Now that she's here.

Shrug.

She moves slow, just having a poke around, not like she's angry with me for taking anything. I ain't taken it—just using it for a while.

Watch her go over to the little shelf I put up last summer to hold some pretty things. Silver hair brush and mirror. Someone's old mantle clock. Don't tell time no more, but it's nice.

She touches the clothes rack with the extra dresses. The scarves. The shoes. Then she looks around at the rows and rows of suitcases, stacked one, two, three shelves high.

Shakes her head slowly.

– What else have you found in here?

Sigh. Might as well show her. She's here now.

Take her around the other side of the suitcase wall, to the rafters. She has to crouch a little, but she comes in. Dusty sunlight in here, but enough to see by. Best time of day to see the postcards, probably. Morning light.

She stares at the wall where I've tacked them all up. One of the Oldies had about ten of them. All interesting places.

– Are these photo albums?

She picks one up. Lots of people bring their photo albums. Never see them again, usually.

I've got a row of them. Look at them sometimes—reminds me of life outside. Families and churches. Travelling places. Boats and cars.

She flips through them carefully.

I leave her to it and go back to the bigger room. Take off the silk robe and the scarf and hang them up. Put my old dress and ward shoes back on.

– It's a lovely place.

She's back in the doorway, smiling a little. Her hair's been chopped, finally. Her curls are set into a Marcel wave. She looks pretty.

– Is there a back way out of here?

Nod. There's a back way out of everywhere.

Kain

– I want you to go to Miss Street's cottage and stay there with her for a while. Can you do that?

Cross my arms and stare at her. Has a way of pulling at your heart, making you care about people who lie to you. Trick you.

– Listen. I know you're angry with me. And you've every right to be.

I turn away but she pulls me back.

– You realise what happened to Marnie, don't you?

I blink. My throat won't swallow.

– You do. I know you do. You know everything that goes on here.

I nod.

– Fine. Well then you know what you were up against. Girls like you are taken advantage of everywhere they go. Never mind the possibility of making more feeble-minded babies. But if you'd fallen pregnant out in the work world, there would have been nobody to help you. You could have died, become a prostitute, or worse. So I'm sorry. I am. More than I can say. But we have to get you sorted somehow, and you running away isn't going to help you. So either forgive me, or tell me to go jump off a bridge, but make a decision. Choose.

Her words hurt. Like little glass pieces at my skin.

No babies. No family. No chance of getting out of here. My own little house, my own fire and pram.

– It's a loss. I know it is. Believe me.

She holds my shoulders.

– I know what it's like to not be able to have a baby. I'm sorry I took that from you. I honestly thought it was for the best. Please forgive me.

Finally. Finally, I can look at her. Remember her own little Fiona, breathing in and out for those few minutes. The way she looked down at her. Love. So much love.

But she might have another baby someday. Me, never.

– I will do everything I can to help you.

I clear my throat again, trying to make it unstick. My voice still sounds hoarse and rusty.

– Will you help me get out of here? That's what I want. I want out.

She sits back down on the suitcases, like her legs have stopped working. Just stares at me, eyebrows shot to the ceiling, like Nurse Joseph's when my voice said *ahhh* by itself.

– So. You're in there.

Don't say nothing.

She leans against the luggage shelf. Winds the scarf around her hands.

– What would you do? If you could leave this kip for good, what would you do? Where would you go?

Not what I expected. Thought she'd lock me up in the pads for thinking it. But I'm tired. Too tired to lie. Instead, sit down on the broken wooden chair.

– Try to get Mam out of the Loony. Take domestic service like you said.

She leans forward, elbows on the wooden desk that holds all them secrets.

– Fel...your seizures. They're pretty bad, you know.

I shake my head, harder, harder.

– I don't—

– Yes, you do. You do have seizures. I don't know how you've managed to hide them all this time, but you do.

– The angel...

She takes a deep breath and lets it out, nodding.

– All right. The angel. Is that what you see? What happens when the angel comes?

She's been my biggest secret. Never thought I'd tell anyone, leastways a staff. But I do. I tell her about the black wings, and falling asleep, and waking up, having to change my clothes. Headache, usually. The shakes.

– What that means, Fel...

– I don't like that.

I don't even mean to say it but it shoots out of my mouth like it's been burning my tongue.

– What don't you like?

– My name is Andria.

She takes a breath.

– Right. Of course. What it means, Andria, is that it will be very difficult for you to leave this place, particularly to go into domestic service. What if you were carrying a tray of hot tea? Or even just cleaning something up a ladder? Your seizures need to be monitored and treated. Probably in a hospital like this.

– I'm not moving back there. Hate the stinking wards. Hate their stinking clothes.

She leans back against the shelf.

– Yes. I see. It would be hard to go back after being out.

– I'm not living my whole life in this place. And it ain't just me I have to get out of here.

Voice cracks. It's clamming up again. Getting tight.

She picks up a glass of water and hands it to me.

– Take your time. Your voice isn't used to working. Try not to strain it.

Just nod. It's hurting now.

– The baby. Marnie's baby.

– Yes?

– She has six fingers.

– Yes, I know.

She leans forward, careful, slow, like she's afraid I'm going to explode. Or maybe that she is. My voice is catching again. Sticky. Have to clear my throat over and over.

– I want you to fix her hands.

Doctor Rian frowns.

– It's not harmful, hexadactyly. It won't inhibit her motor skills or anything.

I frown at her.

– But it makes her a freak. I don't want her growing up like that. That's why she's still here, ain't it?

She steeples her fingers on the desk, drumming her finger tips together. But she don't ask me how I know.

– That condition she has. It's hereditary, did you know that?

I shake my head. Clear my throat again.

– Hereditary. It means she got it from one of her parents. And since Marnie didn't have it, the father must have. I've been looking into it, but none of the workers here, none of the boys, have six fingers.

I look at her carefully. Up and down. Heart hammers in my chest, so painful. So loud. But I can't protect him anymore. Not if he's the one people are gonna need protecting from.

– Alistair did.

– Alistair, your brother?

– Dad cut off the extra when he was a kid.

– Cut it off? With what?

She sounds like someone's strangling her.

– An axe.

She puts her hand to her mouth.

– Good Lord.

We're silent for a few minutes. She's probably imagining it. I don't need to imagine it. But I still can't wrap my head around it. Alistair being Rosalie's father.

– Alistair's too big now, Doctor. I can't do nothin' to him no more. He's taller than me and stronger and he don't care about me now. We were supposed to leave together, him and me, but he went without me the one time. Keeps trying to ditch me now. And...and this.

She don't say nothing. Just waits.

– You can't escape with your brother either. It's not safe for you. If he's done this to Marnie, he's not safe for you to be around. In fact, you'd better stay dog wide of him.

She waits but I don't want to tell her the rest. It's too much. Too embarrassing.

Don't you ever tell anyone. Anyone.

Next day, next week, I can't remember, she was carted off to the Loony.

Him and me shipped to Avonhurst.

Didn't say nothing, but we were shipped off anyway.

– What's going to happen to him?

She frowns.

– Castration?

She mutters it, but I hear anyway.

She sighs.

– We'll think of something.

She gets up and walks down the rows of suitcases. See her touching them, looking at the labels. Mostly junk in those ones—old shoes and papers and shaving kits. I took out some of the razors and the mugs, the sewing kits. Anything useful.

– There's talk of getting the boys at the farm some wages, and some of the other skilled trades too. I think I might be able to put you forward for wages, as a medical assistant. You'd have a bit more freedom.

Take a deep breath and look for forgiveness, somewhere. I think, maybe, she's right. Even if I don't want to say. Babies can kill you more ways than one. And maybe she thought she was sparing me. Maybe she did.

Kain

Slowly I pull on my coat. Gesture to her to follow me. My throat's sore now. No more talking.

After showing her the back tramway to the Beehive, I go back outside, down to the stable.

The lights are on still.

Doctor Rian said I could ride her horse. If I can even get up on the damn thing. He don't fight me too much getting his saddle on. Chomps down on the bit a little but takes it. Probably all them apples I've gave him. Knows what's good for him, he'll go with me.

Nights are cold now. Still don't feel well enough but too bad. Got to be better than staying there. They'll keep dragging me back. I'll keep running away.

To hell with them.

Still, it would be different if I had wages. Wages are real money. Not clink.

No wonder Alistair laughed at me. Such an idiot. Florence explained it to me, laughing the whole time. Calling me daft. But she wasn't mean about it, really.

Could use money to buy a horse of my own, or some nicer clothes. Really nice boots. A Marcel wave. Maybe I'd even buy tickets to the cinema and sweets. And more toothbrushes so I don't lose my teeth.

Smile, thinking that.

See the lantern in the window as we're coming over the hill. Horse knows its own way here. Leads me straight into the barn where Bentley's already tucked in cozy. Looks clean enough. Maybe I'll sleep here tonight. Knock tomorrow.

But someone shines a lantern outside.

– Who's there?

It's Charlotte. Peering out. I come around the side.

– Fel? Is that you?

I hang up the horse's saddle on the hook and go up to the door. She's not surprised to see me. Doctor probably told her the plan already.

I should be mad about it. Moving me around here and there and everywhere they like. But I'm too tired.

– Fel's here.

Charlotte's voice is bright. Why, I don't know.

She lets me in and I see Miss Street sitting on the couch—that old brocade thing, ripped at the arm. She's wrapped up, cup of tea in her lap. Afghan around her shoulders. She don't say hello. Just looks out the window.

– Come and eat some supper, Fel. I'm afraid it isn't much tonight. Just some cabbage soup and half a loaf.

My mouth waters.

Charlotte sets out the food.

– No butter left, I'm afraid.

I take a bowl of soup to Miss Street and set it on the table beside her.

– Not sure she'll eat much yet.

– What's wrong with her?

Charlotte drops her spoon. Stares at me carefully like I've turned into a ghost.

– I don't think I've ever heard you speak.

Shrug. Cheeks getting hot again.

She just pats my shoulder.

I sit down and eat, trying not to go too fast. Don't know why I'm so hungry but I am and I wish there was more.

Charlotte pushes her bread over to me.

I shake my head.

– Go on. I'm not hungry tonight.

I take it and run it through my bowl.

We both look over at Miss Street. Her soup's standing there. Hasn't even tried to eat it.

– There are a few biscuits left if you like.

Charlotte gets up and pumps water into the kettle.

Tea and cookies. Wish I could enjoy it but all I can think of is crying and sleeping. And Miss Street looks strange, too. Barely looked at me since I been here.

– Doctor Rian thinks it's better if she has company when I'm out.

Out? When does Charlotte ever go out?

I take a cup of tea in to Miss Street. The one in her lap is cold. I trade it and she reaches out to take the new one.

– I'm sorry, Fel.

Her voice sounds like rusty nails. Cracked, harsh.

Kain

I just shake my head. Sit down next to her, hold her hand.

– Is it the babies? The ones who died? Is that why you're sad?

She puts a hand on my cheek, then on my throat like she don't believe my voice is coming from there. Her eyes are teary, red. But she looks at me closely.

Then she nods.

I squeeze her hand and she leans her head on my shoulder. Not allowed to touch her at Avonhurst, but here at her own house nobody can dock me. Put my arms around her shoulders and she cries.

In the morning, rustling in the kitchen wakes me up but I don't move. Lie still and pretend to sleep. I don't feel like talking or explaining or thinking. Make my breathing soft and slow, like the girls in the dorm when they're truly out. Not just faking it. I slit my eyes and watch as Miss Street climbs down from the loft. Slow. Shaky.

Charlotte stirs oatmeal on the stove. Her skirt swishes against the wooden table. She runs the back of her hand across her forehead.

– That's the last of it.

Miss Street takes her bowl and plunks it on the table. Looks like she wants to throw it against the wall. But she's silent.

Charlotte ladles out another bowl of porridge and puts it on the table for me.

– I have an errand to do. Fel is going to stay with you.

Charlie's face is flushed, pinched. Her hands are shaking too as she does up the buttons on her coat, and she almost drops the basket she's carrying. But she pulls back her shoulders like Miss Street does and opens the door.

I don't tell Miss Street that she goes up and down the stairs three times before finally getting on the horse. I watch her from the window, while I'm washing up. Wondering what she's doing. But she gets on Bentley in the end and goes.

At noon, Doctor Rian knocks.

She hands me a basket of food and I take it. Turn around and go into the kitchen.

She goes to the couch to see Miss Street.

– How did you sleep?

She shrugs.

I put out the sandwiches from the food she brought and in a minute Doctor Rian comes back into the kitchen.

– I've spoken to Doctor McHugh and Matron about putting you in the infirmary as an assistant and getting you some wages. They've agreed to consider it. And it's fine for you to stay here with Miss Street for the time being. Nurse Stokes is finding you somewhere to sleep so I can keep an eye on your seizures and try some new treatments to see if we can stop them. If you like, we can also get you some speech therapy.

Miss Street's looking at me. Doctor Rian too.

Can't hardly stand it, being stared at like that.

Doctor Rian hands me a package.

– I got you these. I've always found them more comfortable than dresses. Avonhurst's are dingy and horrid and I can't abide seeing you in them anymore. If you're going to do medical work, you need to be free to move around.

I take it and open it. Pants. Real riding pants.

The kettle whistles. I think back to the night I heard it outside her door. Screaming and shrieking, her moaning on the floor. She looks at me. Straight into my eyes like she's having the same memory.

I go and move it off the stove. Take a moment to think, think. But it's not long because Doctor Rian's talking again.

– Now that we're all here, we can make a plan. And the first thing we need to do is to get Andria a bath.

This is what she wants to do with her day off?

Miss Street smiles and squeezes my arm.

With a screech, Doctor Rian begins pumping water into a jug. Carries it behind a screen and dumps it. I peek around the screen. A copper bathtub. Small, old. But a bathtub.

Miss Street carries over the kettle and pours it in as Doctor Rian keeps on with the cold.

– Can you manage on your own?

She hands me a bar of soap. Lavender, it smells like.

She puts the screen into place and I take off my clothes.

– Take your time and have a good wash. We'll get you properly done up after.

I wrap the towel around me. Smells pretty, not at all like the laundry house. Wonder what Charlie uses on it. It takes me a long time to make my throat work, but finally it does. Easier when nobody can see me.

– What about Alistair?

I hear Doctor sigh. Hesitate. Something rustles.

– There's a contingent of workers being sent up North to work on the railways. It's a three-year project.

Three years. Out in the bush. Away from the animals. He'll hate it.

– I asked Doctor McHugh to consider sending him there and he's agreed.

Sit back in the bathtub and swallow hard. The railway. Far up North. Well, he's made his own bed and he can lie in it as far as I care.

The bath's gone cold and I stand up. Grab the towel from the back of the chair and duck out from behind the screen.

Miss Street's waiting there, scissors in hand.

– Come sit. We're going to do something about this hair.

– What are you going to do exactly?

Voice is still tight when I use it, but it's getting easier.

I sit down on the chair. No. Not another haircut.

She takes a magazine off the table. Hands it to me.

– Like this? What do you think? It's called a bob.

It's short, short. But pretty. Like in Florence's magazine.

Clear my throat. Words are stuck. Clear it again.

– Yes.

Miss Street grins and begins to cut.

I look in the mirror. Hair in a style. New clothes.

Doctor Rian looks me up and down.

– Certainly better than a bowl on the head and trim around the bottom, isn't it?

The sound of footsteps on the gravel outside makes me look up. Door opens and Charlie comes in, wearing a hat.

– Well, don't you look smart!

She's smiling.

– Just picked these up for you in town.

Kain

Charlie went to town?

Miss Street looks at her like she's just landed from the moon but Doctor Rian is smiling, too.

– Thank you.

She passes me the package and I open it up. Underclothes. White, soft. I ain't never seen nothing like them. Run my fingers over the material. Lace trim. Everything.

Jumping Jehosephat, they're beautiful.

– To go under your new clothes.

I take them and duck behind the screen.

The underskirt is no trouble, but I've never had a brassiere like this before. Soft, with buttons on the shoulders.

Miss Street taps on the screen.

– Need some help with the new things?

I nod and she slips behind to fit me into it.

– Just over the head here and then adjust it there.

I watch what she's doing and it seems easy.

– You'll get the hang of it soon.

She slips the blouse over my head and I pull on the breeches.

Doctor Rian grins at me.

– Well, look at you, togged to the bricks!

We look down at the pile of old clothes and Miss Street makes a face.

Doctor Rian points to the flames.

– Put that raggedy dress in the fire. They should burn the lot of them.

I take it out and stuff the grey cloth into the hearth. The flames lick the hem and burn holes into the fabric. Turns to dust in minutes.

Miss Street reheats the kettle and pours the tea. I'd forgotten about it. And we all sit down around the table. Silent.

Siobhan

After the baby's surgery, I sleep as soundly as I have since I got here. In the morning, I'm up with the sun, having tea on the settee in my cottage. I've put out some things I'd never bothered to unpack—a few postcards, a vase. Even a painting that was locked away in the attic. It looks like the French countryside.

I've arranged my books on a shelf and set out my good china mugs. Looks much more like home now than it did before.

The latch lifts on the door and Sera stands in my doorway.

– Looks nice in here.

– Thanks.

– That painting is beautiful.

– Isn't it? I was thinking we could start an art therapy programme. The patients might like that.

She doesn't answer.

I catch sight of her dress—a plain grey shift.

– You're not dressed in your uniform.

She sits down on the settee, hands clasped in her lap.

– I gave my notice.

– You're leaving? You can't.

The bed catches the corner of my eye—the armchair, the sofa—so many things in here hold memories.

Ghosts.

Somehow when I'm alone, I don't think of them as much. But Sera's face reminds me of all the secrets soaked into every surface of this room. Her voice reflects snatches of every conversation, everything that's happened since I got here.

The labour that almost killed me.

Fiona born in the bed, buried in the backyard.

Marnie seizing, dying, her spirit filling every nook and cranny— the whisper of her hands on my throat as I fight sleep, thrashing on the bed half the night.

Sera's hands on my body.

Nursing that baby in the rocking chair. Ice running through my breasts, freezing me from the inside—numbing me so that the pain feels like something happening beyond the surface—skating over me instead of piercing through.

The chloral takes the edges of those thoughts and blends them into the background, like diluting blood in water, swirling. Lately, with a shot of brandy, and even then, sleep often eludes me.

Ghostly fingers brush my hair and I reach out to steady myself on the table. Am I going mad, finally, after all this? My head is buzzing, fuzzy.

I shake it to clear the cobwebs.

– Siobhan?

Sera looks at me carefully.

I straighten up. Turn my back to her so she can't see the shaking in my hands. Another side effect, I think.

– I need a change. Something radical.

I can't answer. The idea of her leaving is radical enough.

– You know, I ran once.

She looks up, her eyebrows quirking.

– Still couldn't outrun myself.

– It's not the same.

– No? I think it is.

– I can't stay on the wards. I have to find some way to move on from this. And I have to let Charlotte find her own way.

She knows I'll never understand that. Tying yourself to an anchor that could drown you beneath the rising tide of your own life. But she's set on it, I see. I put a hand to her face.

– May the road rise to meet you, then.

Sera steps in and hugs me tightly, the wisps of her blond hair brushing my face. The linseed oil on her hands still cling to my clean apron long after she's let go, stepped away...opened the door and waved.

Kain

My legs feel like steel, but still I can't move, even to sink into a chair. I just stand for a long time and stare at the closed door. Try to imagine this place without Sera.

Instead, I reach for the choral and take a spoonful. Just to calm my nerves. Numb the feeling of dread that's running through me all the time now.

Kain

Fel

*S*ome home with me tonight.

We walk Bentley all the way to Miss Street's house. It takes twice as long, but we don't care. Miss Street stops a lot.

I want to ask her so many things.

Somehow I figure it has to do with what Florence said.

Hope. The most important one of these is hope.

The light is on in the kitchen when we arrive, and I hope, hope, hope Doctor Rian did it. Stomp, stomp the mud off our boots and leave them against the doorway. Push open the door to the smell of soup and the glow of candles.

And Charlotte, sitting in a rocking chair, holding a bundle.

Yes.

Charlotte's voice whispers through the dark kitchen.

– Isn't she lovely?

– Isn't who lovely?

Miss Street freezes and stares.

Charlotte nestles the baby.

Her hands are out of the gauze. She's smiling, her cheeks are fat. Charlie's eyes are wet and shining. Glowing, almost, in the dull light.

I'm smiling, smiling.

She looks so much like Marnie.

– How in heaven's name did she get here?

Miss Street dumps her things right in the middle of the floor and goes over. Turns around and looks at me.

– Did you know about this?

Nod my head.

– They were going to transfer her to the Infants' home. Can't have her growing up there, Miss Street. We agreed. You and Charlie should have her.

– Who agreed?

– Doctor Rian and me.

Charlotte looks up.

– But she's not ours.

I touch Miss Street's arm.

– She's mine.

They both turn to look at me.

– She's my niece. My brother's daughter. And my Marnie's. She's mine and I'm deciding.

Miss Street grabs my shoulders.

– She has grandparents somewhere, Fel.

Remember the last time I seen Marnie's mother, after they came to collect her things. How she could barely stand, her legs were so weak. How I overheard Doctor McHugh last week, saying they'd taken her away.

– She doesn't. My Mam's in the Looney. Marnie's Mama's in a sanatorium now.

They look at me. Look at her.

– They're sending her away. Doctor Rian seen the papers in the office. Don't want her there. She'll just end up back at Avonhurst.

Charlotte snuggles her tighter.

– How can we keep this baby, Charlie? How?

With a shrug, Charlotte kisses the baby's head.

– She doesn't take much. Just a little milk, I think, for now.

– I don't make enough money to keep you and me and this creature.

Anger bubbles up and over her words. She's almost shouting, banging her fist on the table.

– I'm exhausted. I have nothing left to keep fighting with and now you want to keep an infant.

– Sera.

She puts a hand over Miss Street's.

Miss Street sits down. Crying.

Kain

– You think I don't want a baby? Of course I do. But we can't, Charlie. We're barely making it.

Charlie bows her head.

– It's not your fault, I know. I know you try.

– Not hard enough.

Charlie bites her lip.

– I haven't been trying hard enough. I've been frightened of the world. Of what people say. And I've been hiding here and letting you carry the weight for both of us. And then the longer it went on, the more of a...a habit it was. But, I... I'm sorry.

Miss Street pulls her knees up to her chest, shaking her head.

– I've been trying to figure out something so you could enrol in the nursing class. I...I asked Wendell to help me.

– When?

– She was here a few days ago. She's found me an apprentice in our new neighbourhood. I'm going to go meet the midwife tomorrow. I'll be working soon too, same as you. So you can enrol. In September.

– I'm getting wages too.

Miss Street looks at me, surprised.

– From the clinic. Not a lot, but I can help with what she needs. And look after her too.

Miss Street opens her mouth and then closes it.

Charlie puts a hand on her arm.

– You don't have to say anything right now. Just...just eat something. And hold the baby for a few minutes.

Charlie gestures toward the soup tureen.

– I saved you some stew.

I ladle out a spoonful for Miss Street. She wraps her hands around the bowl. Looks back at me.

I take Rosalie from Charlie and hand her to Miss Street, careful, slow. She snuggles her and kisses her head.

– You are perfect, aren't you?

She laughs, and then tears start falling down her face. And she's laughing and crying at the same time.

Kain

Rosalie reaches her hand up and coos and Miss Street buries her face in the baby's tummy.

Miss Street gives me side-eye, just like Marnie used to do.

I hold my breath. Stare for a long moment at both of them. The looks going from one to the other.

Miss Street sighs, blowing her hair out of her face. She squares her shoulders again.

– Andria's going to stay here then, as often as she likes. Rosalie should know her auntie.

Charlotte laughs.

– Right. Good. Okay. That will be handy.

Charlotte hands me a bowl of soup and some bread and I sit down to eat. It's hot and full of veg. I'm starving.

– Andria, is there anything you need tonight? Anything you want to go back for?

I look around. Down at my breeches from Doctor Rian, Rosalie in Miss Street's arms, dozing, the soup in front of me, the hot tea ready to pour. In the living room, books on the shelf, midwifery and medicine. Think of the Pavilion, the whitewash. Ward duty. Nappies and laundry and the gaping toothless mouths on the Oldies ward that aren't mine to worry about anymore.

Then think of my new room, small and hot, but mine, with all my things, out in the open now instead of stuffed in hidey holes.

Shake my head and keep eating.

– No. Nothing.

The End

STEPHANIE KAIN

Master of Arts: Lancaster University (2010)

Baccalaureate of Arts (Hons): University of Ottawa (2002)

INSIDE AVONHURST

A critical reflection on the making of a novel.

PhD Submission, Lancaster University

2020

PREFACE

"[Obsession] is the mother of invention."

(Proverb)

A book lurks in the shadows of your office, behind the bookshelf, creeping out onto the desk and chair, or even the daybed, depending on the direction of the sun.

It's been lurking for years, unformed, but every time you read another news story about the lawsuits, or talk to another person about That Place, it grows a little bigger. A little stronger. When it finally starts knocking, you ignore it. It's rude. Constantly interrupting. It shouts at you when you're writing, or paying bills, or even just trying to take a nap, for God's sake, but you don't want to be responsible for it. It's just a cover without content and it's not your job to fill its endless needs.

No. Go away.

You imagine the undertaking. What would be involved in writing a book like that. How much work it will be, how much research, how much time. But the cover comes closer, into the full light, and you see what's on it—that old red-brick asylum on the hill. The one with the huge clock tower reaching skyward from the main staircase. The outdoor cottages with lead windows, barred like a prison's.

Its empty insides yawn open, begging to be filled. But you refuse.

No. I said go away. I don't want to write it.

Too many stories happened within those walls; you could never write them all. You could never even make a dent. The thousands of people who lived there. The medical files that must be stacked up to the ceilings in the archives. The death records. The scandals. The news is full of it—allegations and compensation and reconciliation.

Nobody wants to know.

And that's what stops you short.

Nobody wants to know. But they ought to know.

They might turn off the news or flip the page of the newspaper, the horrors of that place too off-putting to digest over morning coffee and toast.

But maybe you could open a window. Provide a choice. People have always learned best through stories. You know this to be true: narrative provides an avenue for things people find truly impossible to reconcile any other way.

If you only take the first step, maybe you will find a way to take the rest of the journey. Maybe.

The setting is chosen for you. Step one.

You have written books before. But a mystery series is different. Driven by plot and action. This will be slower, steeped in character, more like your first book—but nothing like it at the same time. You would be time-travelling to write this. Something you've never done. Entering the world of historical fiction. There is something perverse about the words they used. The way they flung around the words *Idiot*, *Moron*, *Imbecile*. The way *retarded* wasn't even thought of yet—before the time it was used, and abandoned, considered pejorative. Back farther, when people were locked away for life. A time that mirrors the political upheaval of today: the stew of fear and hate that people think is new but is really imbued into the very blood of who we are as a species.

Take them back to that time. When we were even more afraid of immigrants and refugees than we are now. As illustrated in Thelma Wheatley's (2013) book, *And Neither Have I Wings to Fly*, when immigrants were coming over by the boatload, settling into the wards of Toronto: Cabbagetown, Little Italy, Chinatown, overflowing, rife with disease, poverty, illiteracy. When the entire country clamoured for a cure for the sullyng of the stock—that sacred pool of DNA that nobody even understood properly, but, in the name of which so many people were put behind walls. Some for a lifetime.

Colonisation. Sterilisation. When Eugenics had gripped Canada so firmly in its hold that wealthy, educated, genteel women staunchly supported its efficacy.

That's where you want to begin.

Good. That's a start.

You glare at it. You never said it could speak to you. It's already interrupting your life at every opportunity. Now it wants to have a conversation?

You turn your back on it, glaring.

Go away and let me think. You've got me this far, now for God's sake, be quiet.

You have to choose the year carefully because you don't want to invent anything. If you start inventing things, it's pointless. The idea is to remember, revive, reconstruct, and most of all, relive. Later, you'll hear Margaret Atwood's Masterclass and her words will make you shout out loud. *Yes! That's what I meant! It has to be more than plausible—it has to be true.*

[N]othing went into it that had not happened in real life, somewhere at some time. The reason I made that rule is because I didn't want anybody saying 'You certainly have an evil imagination—you made up all these bad things.' I didn't make them up (2019).

Find the stories, like found poetry. Interweave them, voices clamouring together, the old ones and the youngest children: four, five, six years old. All the inmates who were buried there, in the graveyard, under the shadow of that tower. Listen carefully, like you're on a ghost hunt, and wait to hear if they speak to you.

They are dead. Their stories were buried with them—in unmarked graves—and if you don't listen, if you don't write it down, who will?

But if you get it wrong. If you take their voices and make your own story, if you steal their pain and turn it into a purple psychodrama, they will haunt you.

They say that in a new relationship, the first fight you have with your partner will be the same one you have, over and over, in all its iterations, for the rest of the relationship.

Pay attention, because this is the fight you will have with this book for the next five years:

You will want to bury yourself in research and detail it, like a calligrapher bent over the Dead Sea Scrolls—meticulous, correct. It will want to burst through your research and burn a trail like fire seeking oxygen. It will defy you, wrestle with you, and fight to explode, full and whole and real.

For the book to be successful, you must both have your way. But there is one thing you always must remember. That is, you must be transparent about who you are, where you have been, what you have seen. To avoid stealing their voices, you must constantly look in the mirror and check yourself.

And so, next, begin collecting. There, that shoe box will do. Print them out, those newspaper stories you can't believe are true. Save them. Take out your journal, and scribble down the notes you hear. The things your residents have said about the place where they spent most of their lives.

The lady who doesn't speak, but sings perfect hymns? Listen to her voice. Listen to what she chooses to sing.

Then sings my soul, my saviour God to thee.

Her perfect pitch and soft soprano voice. Her unintelligible words. The words don't matter—but the song does.

The man whose voices visit him constantly. All day. Listen as he stops in the middle of the hallway. What is he remembering? Are the voices in his head real people, or have they been his companions, invented and benevolent? How long ago did they start coming?

They lived there thirty, forty, fifty years. On a special ward for people with a certain cocktail of disabilities: blind, developmentally disabled, psychiatric problems. Now they're in three group homes, five per home instead of on a ward of twenty, but they all know each other.

Go to the home that scares you. The one with the violent patients. The woman who's punched out her own eyes. The man who puts his caregivers in a chokehold and shoves people in line at the coffee shop so he has to be restrained.

Go and listen. Hear the stories passed from mouth to ear, the complaints and the grudges, and the old, bitter rivalries. Write them down. Put them in the background of the place you are creating.

Listen to the staff preparing breakfast—the way they move, the way they sing, the way they speak to the clients. Imagine them in uniforms and caps. Because the leaves may fall and the years may pass, but the baseline of life doesn't change. Gossip remains. People talk about marriage, death, separation, grief, birth, loneliness. In 1927 or 2017, people talk.

While you're cleaning out the fridge and filling the coffee maker, listen. Listen as they talk to one another, the things they say, the things they stop before saying.

When your mind begins to form a ghost of an idea, ignore it. Let it form. Leave it alone and don't try to put it down. Instead, imagine the people that lived there, worked there, died there.

She's here, in your mind—the doctor who escaped to the asylum, and there, in the shadows, still waiting, the girl who doesn't speak, but who has so much to say. Maybe you've picked her because she could just as easily have been you. Or your mother. Or your grandmother. Any of the women in your family who were too intelligent, too forthright, too hysterical. You've read the history of lunatic asylums with interest and horror and more than a

little gratitude that you were born in 1983 and not half a century earlier. Because they locked up sapphists back then.

And certainly you, with your therapeutic anti-anxiety meds and bouts of lethargy followed by weeks of charged activity, would have been diagnosed with something akin to melancholia at the very least. They would have put you in a locked room somewhere and sent you to the baths. And likely you would have scratched their eyes out and been restrained, because how else do people react when they're locked up in cells for being lesbian writers?

You know you're going to pick her, so just go ahead and call her out of the shadows. You can only have one, because you have to get it right: this one voice. This one person. You have to become her, like method actors slip into the skin of their characters and walk around for days, not breaking concentration. You have to speak as she would, from the city wards in 1920, coherent but not educated. Literate—a rarity. And you mustn't forget—not even for a moment—that she belongs there. They all said so. She is a Moron. Mute. Dumb. Seizures come on the black wings of an angel and swoop over her, knocking her to the floor while she fits and gasps, often soaking her clothes, and waking up, forgetting where she is.

She belongs in the Idiot asylum just as you would have belonged in the Lunatic asylum.

She is you.

Never forget, you could have been her.

Introduction

Experiential education is a teaching philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities (Association for Experiential Education, 2019).

There is a large homeschooling movement in Canada focusing on experiential education and which favours learning based in the natural environment, innovation, the exploration and expansion of available technology, and self-directed projects (Hanscom, 2016; Pickert, 2012). This modern movement ironically hearkens back to a regional, practice-based form of education associated with an era long gone—apprenticeship. Learners are encouraged to pursue a topic of interest as deeply and for as long as they like, incorporating experiments, research trips and field studies—even art and science projects. In this holistic way, learners study under experts, but pursue their own direction and interests, eventually producing a major body of work. This is known as project-based homeschooling, or, experiential learning.

Lancaster's core value of writing-as-research holds many of these same theories and ensures that students are responsible for directing their own innovation and experimentation, under the tutelage of supervisors. Rather than a large theoretical research project which accompanies (or stands in for) a creative writing project in the discipline of Creative Writing, Lancaster values writing *as* research, with the inherent trials, errors, successes and failures of other types of experimentation. Just as a scientist does not merely study a theory—s/he performs experiments to prove or disprove it—a writer does not simply study the work or ideas of another person, writing theoretical papers, but instead should, at the highest level, undertake significant literary experimentation and *write*. As both an experiential educator and a homeschool teacher, I was interested only in a PhD programme that considered the creative product to be the pinnacle of the portfolio: something that encouraged the drafting and redrafting as the research itself.

Accompanying this innovative and labour-intensive research on the Lancaster PhD is the reflective thesis: a critical piece that examines the process and assumptions in the writing itself, and which draws to the fore the research questions that the author has addressed with the novel.

A full novel plus a critical reflection demands a rigorous project, and in my case, this project was an historical novel with an innovative narrative structure. I sought to delve into a

little-known aspect of Canada's history, interweaving practical, traditional research with Lancaster's innovative practice of writing as research, and a collaborative supervision process.

The formal research questions quantified and contextualised the experiential research process and helped focus the work, thus preventing many potential distractions from being pursued. The reflective thesis—accounting for approximately 20% of the entire portfolio—allows an avenue of explanation and summation of the work and becomes a place to share the process and the discovery with the people who ultimately evaluate it. It also serves as a guide for the author, a checkpoint against the challenges of voice-appropriation and ethics, which were of particular concern in this project. The anecdotal segments provide transparency, as well as insight into the process of attempting to write in the voice of the other without 'othering'.

This submission is the culmination of five years of creative research and stands as a unique contribution to the field of creative writing in Canadian literature.

CHAPTER ONE: DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY IN ONTARIO—A HISTORY

Research Question 1: What are the ethical consequences of choosing to be historically accurate in representing the way the patients (inmates) are categorised and spoken about? How will this nomenclature impact the modern reader's experience of the novel?

Mental Health Colonisation

Just over the hill of a sleepy bedroom town in Ontario lies a sprawling institution: one of sixteen in the province. Opened first in 1861 as the Convalescent Lunatic Asylum, the three-storied, red-brick building became the Administration pavilion for the Hospital for Idiots and Imbeciles in 1876. Over the 150 years it was open, the institution underwent several name changes: The Orillia Hospital for the Feeble-minded; The Ontario Hospital, Orillia; Huronia Regional Centre—and continued to expand through the decades until it reached its peak population in the 1960s. As with the other two main institutions in Ontario, Huronia was almost a city unto itself (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2019).

Outdoor cottages, each a rectangular three-storey red-brick structure that matched the architecture of the administration building, housed the inmates that the main building couldn't. To accommodate the needs of a growing population, and to support the financial burden, the institution functioned as its own small town, boasting an industrial kitchen, laundry building, power plant, cemetery, doctors' houses, nurses' quarters, mill, blacksmith shop, workshop, and fully-functioning farm. In later decades, the institution began to shrink as its population was moved into community accommodation, and finally,

On March 31, 2009, the government officially closed the last remaining institution, keeping a promise to end the era of institutionalization for people with a developmental disability and welcoming former residents into communities throughout Ontario (MCSS, 2019).

The fact that these institutions still lived and breathed during the time of my Master's degree in 2008 was something that always gave me a sense of profound shame as a Canadian. Why did Canada still have these fossilised institutions? And why did we have so many, when the population of Canada is relatively small compared to the rest of the world?

I imagined the people who lived and worked there, and the length of time Huronia had existed, and slowly, two fictional characters came to mind: a female physician escaping the humiliation of her husband's scandal, taking refuge behind the walls of a closed community, and a young female inmate who had been sent to the asylum for not speaking. I also suspected that the novel was well suited to the rigours of a PhD programme: it had huge potential for a layered story, a deeply emotional and political history and hundreds of potential characters.

At first I wanted to present a novel of “epic fiction” –something in excess of 120,000 words, similar in form and shape to Ken Follet's (1990) *The Pillars of the Earth*, where the cathedral acted as a central character. Within a few months, though, I came to realise that even an epic novel could not tackle the entire scope of the institution's lifespan. Better to pick a decade and tell one full, cohesive story. Later, if I wanted, I could confront different decades within the same institution. A series could do the work that a single novel couldn't, but first I had to write the introductory book in that series.

My research began with a visit to Rideau Regional Centre in Smiths Falls, Ontario—approximately an hour from where I live in Ottawa. At one time, a rotation at Rideau was required for all graduates of the college Developmental Services Worker programme, so my wife, Nancy, had done a rotation there, and she became an important source of knowledge for me. By the time I visited Rideau, it had closed as a functioning institution. The buildings remained intact, but they were empty and I had never had the opportunity to see it in operation.

The first fifteen years of my working life were dedicated to working with children with developmental disabilities: beginning when I was sixteen and a camp counsellor for children with special needs. In my twenties, as a means of funding my undergraduate degree in psychology, I worked at a private group home, with former residents of the Rideau Regional Centre. The Therapeutic and Educational Living Centres Incorporated (TELICI) group owned three group homes, each with five or six residents, all of whom had lived together on the ward at Rideau Regional. These residents were all moved into the community before the institution closed, in the late 1990s.

I ran programmes through the City of Ottawa for medically fragile children, at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario for autistic children and later, I fostered children with developmental disabilities in my home and worked as a special-needs teacher in the school board. The knowledge that in a different time, even a few decades earlier, most of these children

would have spent their lives in huge and mysterious institutions ate away at me, fuelling my interest in writing this book.

And finally I decided to do it.

The Evolution of Language and Ethical Representation

In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, individuals with a developmental disability were often called "feeble-minded". Based on perceived ability, they would also be categorized as "high grades" or "low grades". By the mid-1900s, the term "mentally retarded" was used and individuals were labelled "educable", "trainable" or "custodial". From our perspective today, these terms seem harsh, even derogatory. At the time, however, it was accepted medical terminology (MCSS, 20014).

Flash forward one hundred years to 2019 and we find a world that's nearly unrecognisable for people with developmental disabilities. Group homes and day programmes have replaced custodial care. Specialised college courses and workplace equity initiatives have made it possible for people with developmental disabilities to achieve milestones in education and employment.

At the time that this novel was set, however, the expectation was that people with a developmental disability would be institutionalised. The huge structures that were erected to house the vulnerable population were well-intentioned and beautifully constructed—but the language reflects a different attitude inside the wards that often contradicted harshly with those ideals.

Idiot.

Imbecile.

Moron.

Subnormal.

Feeble.

Moral Defective.

Unfit.

In the early part of the twentieth century, when IQ testing was becoming popular (if not always accurate), the labels Idiot, Imbecile and Moron were used to designate certain strata of intelligence. The labels, used in institutions throughout the country, were scientific in name, but

were rather vague in practice. Two prominent social scientists, Alfred Binet and Henry Goddard, were primarily responsible for developing this system of intelligence testing, and the labels within.

Binet's original scale of mental measurement had included two gradations of deficiency: the "idiot," who had a mental age of 2 or younger, and the "imbecile," who had a mental age of 3 to 7 years. However, Goddard [...] believed the greatest threat to civilization's advance lay with those who demonstrated a mental age of 8 to 12 years[...] Even the highest grade of the feebleminded could never become normal, he argued, though they could pass for normal, making them the most likely culprits for spreading the defect to future generations[...] Goddard needed a word that would carry scientific legitimacy and arouse public concern, for as Goddard stressed, physicians needed public assistance in hunting out individuals with high-grade deficiencies. Yet there was no word in the English language which adequately expressed the distinctiveness and urgency of their condition. Goddard, therefore, constructed his own term from the Greek word for foolish, moronia and the result was the diagnostic label of the "moron" for those who exhibited a mental age of 8 to 12 years (Kline, 2014).

Institutions like Avonhurst used these terms to classify their patients, which decided everything: work placement, room assignment, privileges. The institutions themselves have closed but they cast a very long shadow over the history of our country, and their closure is so recent that it cannot properly be called the past yet. The closure itself is a divisive topic. Group homes cannot care for all the former patients and many are living on the street or in halfway houses. TELCI, the house that was meant to accommodate the visually-impaired residents of Rideau Regional, closed in 2012 due to lack of funding, and, according to the Carleton Place Gazette (2012), the residents were separated into other institutions—most of them designed for sighted people and lacking the special accommodations for blind residents.

Although the community culture has changed, and words like Mongoloid have disappeared, the medical terms of 1920 have persisted and become common insults of our generation which still reflect an attitude of disdain, even fear toward those with developmental disabilities. These words now carry a century of history with them and the connotations and modern usages are difficult to separate for the reader in the present day.

When I first began writing, I looked at the research from a purely historic point of view: those words were used—clinically, deliberately, and commonly. In order to create a realistic picture of an institution like Avonhurst, there needed to be an agreed-upon lexicon, and that included the terms Idiot, Moron, Imbecile and Feebleminded. And yet, this added another layer

of insult and denigration to the nomenclature of the time that the reader may subconsciously, or even outwardly, react to while reading a work of fiction.

This was an ethical dilemma, because, on one hand, to be accurate to the time period and provide a true reflection of what life in Avonhurst would have been like, accuracy and authenticity was key. On the other hand, my aim was to illuminate life on the inside in an empathetic way, to promote more understanding, not more judgement and disdain.

Over the course of its 150-year existence, the Orillia Hospital for Idiots and Imbeciles itself would undergo many name changes. From the Convalescent Home for Lunatics to the Hospital for Idiots and Imbeciles, to The Ontario Hospital, and finally, to the Huronia Regional Centre (MCSS, 2014).

In my own research, expanded upon in a later chapter, I encountered several oversized ledgers that were in use at the institution, but bore several different iterations of the name:

Register of Applications:
Ontario Idiot Asylum,
Orillia.

Record of Deaths:
Hospital for Feeble-Minded,
Orillia

It seems that a consistent effort was made, over the decades, to transform the image of the institution in step with the sensibilities of the public and the advancing understanding of people with disabilities. But in 1927, the reality was a far cry from where we stand in 2019.

Ultimately, I decided that in order to be true to the time period, the lexicon had to stand, but that I would need to find ways to demonstrate the many areas of grey that existed in the institution, the many personalities and kindnesses that existed alongside the often brutal conditions and words used.

The Eugenics Movement in Canada

Eugenics in Canada had a complicated history that impacted the colonisation of “Subnormals”. Not only could people with developmental disabilities be put away in institutions,

they could also be deemed custodial (never allowed out). But, as Kline (2014) points out in her overview of this historic turning point:

This new [moron]category essentially blurred the distinction between what behaviour was unmistakably “normal” and what was “pathological,” allowing for new social “symptoms,” such as unwed motherhood or prostitution, to permit a diagnosis of “feble-mindedness” (n.p.)

This led to situations such as the famous case of Leilani Muir, who was sterilised by an Alberta institution in the 1950s, and later successfully sued the government for wrongful sterilization under the Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta (Whiting, 1996).

Although the Eugenics Society of Canada was not officially formed until 1930, in 1927, the Eugenics movement was well underway in most of North America and sexual sterilisation laws had been put into effect in many states and provinces (McLaren, 2014).

One of the biggest champions of Eugenics in Ontario was Doctor Helen MacMurphy, who "was the best-known Canadian defender of the argument that sterilization was 'perhaps better' than segregation as a way of dealing with the 'menace' of feble-mindedness..."(McLaren, 2014, p. 42)

The Backdrop of Abuse

The allegations of abuse from all types of institutions in Canada are wide-spread and similar in context. The same types of allegations can be found across decades and across geographical borders. In writing about this part of Canada's history, keeping in mind that the former residents from this time period were dead, and the more recent residents often lacked the education or ability to write their own experiences, or the agency to tell their own stories, I felt a pressing responsibility not to white-wash the past. And, at the same time, realised that for people to engage with the history and the content, the book must cause them to experience all the joys and tension of a well-told story.

It was important to allow Fel to reveal these realities of her existence in a way that demonstrated that they were, in fact, part of everyday life, but also to allow the “whole” of the story to develop: all the failures and the triumphs; the hardships and the friendships; the wins and the losses. In other words, if Fel’s story was one of unending abuse and neglect, darkness and

horror, oppression and injury, I worried that the reader would psychologically distance themselves from the work rather than immersing themselves in it. In order to do true justice to the characters, and in order to engage the reader in a meaningful way to make sure the stories were heard, the narrators needed to strike a critical balance and engage the reader.

The darkest literature, the ones that have endured most in my mind as a reader, include techniques that balance critical elements. In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt (1996) uses both a developing insight (an inherent mystery) and outright humour to keep the reader engaged through the abject poverty and sorrow and neglect in which the story is steeped. As the narrator grows older as the story unfolds, the perspective of the reader sharpens too. In *Grace Williams Says it Loud*, the darkness of the institution and the rather shocking ending are balanced by a secondary romantic storyline (Henderson, 2010).

My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry by Fredrik Backman (2013) contains devastating moments, but also instances where the reader (at least this reader) laughed out loud. Here, the extremes of one axis are necessarily and expertly balanced by the extremes of the other to create a memorable, deep, experiential read.

The Girls by Lori Lansens (2005) is about conjoined craniopagus twins, and unfolds mostly from the perspective of one twin, but is then interrupted by narrative from the second twin who reveals that the first twin is lying. Their story is dark and horrifying in many ways, but is also a revelation and a mystery, speckled with humour and designed to elicit outright indignation from the reader when they find out they've been led down the garden path.

Reflecting on the successful points of dark storylines gave me a way forward. To achieve investment from the reader, I needed to include love, empathy, humour, mystery, strength, tenderness... and some good twists.

Defining these goals and collecting this research and allowed me to move into the uncharted territory of adopting the voice of a character I knew nothing about, and creating a novel of historical fiction. Ron Hansen (2007) of Santa Clara university sums up the experience well in his article *The Ethics of Fiction Writing*:

Of course, there is a certain arrogance in writing historical fiction at all since one can't really say he understands his friends, let alone a person he's never met, in a historical period that precedes his own. But that arrogance is mitigated by extensive research, and it seems to me the rules of the game require the boundaries of good guesses about what was earlier said and done, without varying from the factual or probable (n.p.).

CHAPTER TWO: INSIDE THE ASYLUM—THE AVONHURST HOSPITAL FOR THE FEEBLEMINDED

Research Question 2. How has restricted access to records of this period influenced the authenticity of this novel? How has "real information" impacted its creative strategies?

Touring the Orillia Hospital for Idiots and Imbeciles

The day has come and we have driven to Orillia, five hours from our home in Ottawa, to take the final tour of this asylum that will be allowed before it is given over to the Provincial Police for training purposes.

We join the line. I had expected other scholars or students, but instead I am surrounded by former residents. One older man is obviously emotional, and he's brought his wife and young teenage daughter for the tour. I hear snippets of their conversation, retellings of things he remembers, like flashbacks, now that he's confronted with this visceral immersion into his past.

He wipes tears away. He's anxious to get going.

The woman who's organised the tour tells me I can go along with that family—that the man, the former resident, will be a good source of information for my project. But I feel tone deaf. I didn't expect a haunted walk, and I'm intruding on this private memory. The abuses and suffering he's obviously endured. He says something about the boiler room, the sound of the boiler covering the screams and shouts of the boys being beaten—or raped.

My wife, Nancy, and daughter, Emlyn, are with me. Emlyn, aged, one, will have limited patience for this tour and it's best if we keep moving.

I smile and say thank you, we'll go on our own. Without a guided tour, we can only guess at the functions of some of the rooms, but the suffering these people have endured is private. Something that they deserve to have closure on in their own way, without an audience.

Later, I wonder at this missed opportunity. What if I'd gone alone? What if I'd agreed to the guided tour, as uncomfortable and inappropriate as it may have been?

Others join: two women, missing teeth, their hair greasy and stringy. I remember my foster son returning from the care home his mother sent him to for respite. Terrified when the bath water ran. Screaming and thrashing, holding his breath until he had a seizure. It took him days, even a week to get over it after he came home.

I look at these women, prematurely aged, with eyes glazed from years of medication and haunted by something invisible but palpable. They shuffle, and when they speak, it's with a fury I can't even begin to fathom. I give them space. I don't ask questions. I just wait to get moving through the wards.

Maybe I'm more comfortable with the staff tour. The other side, where I've always been. The side of the carers, the administrators, the overseers.

But the former patients spread out. They know exactly where they're going, what they want to see. We follow the guided tour, knowing we'll never see everything in three hours. The grounds are too huge. There are too many buildings, too many paths and tramways. The main building itself is nearly a kilometre from end to end.

We move through the wards, pushing Emlyn in her stroller, through wards with painted concrete floors, tiled walls. Some things are perplexing: bathrooms missing doors and plumbing in the middle of the floor. I wonder what things looked like when this was a living, breathing institution. When beds were crowded side by side for the entire length of the floor. What purpose was served by the cupboards lifted to the ceiling, and the ladder leaning against the wall?

I've been on a tour like this before, at Rideau Regional, where my wife, Nancy had a field placement as a student. Rideau had closed the year before Huronia and as we knew someone involved in reconstructing the institution into apartments for seniors, we were granted access.

After leaving Rideau Regional, I'd marvelled to myself at the rapid urban decay that had taken place: paint peeling off the walls, gaping holes in the concrete, the rust and the smell. Days later, I realised, of course, that this decay hadn't occurred in the few years since the place had closed. It had occurred over decades, while people were still living there... when the money and social support no longer sustained these gargantuan institutions.

The same is true here at Huronia. We follow the tour guide down to an outbuilding and take a rickety elevator down to a basement storage area where relics of the past are hung and displayed.

There's a tussle between a visitor and a security guard. She doesn't have clearance to be here. She's crashing the tour and taking photos, making a stand, forcing them to carry her off. She takes more photos of the bedpans, the chamber pots.

"You can't be here, ma'am."

"Why isn't this a matter of public record? Why am I being asked to leave? What do you people have to hide?" You get the feeling she's expecting a news crew to leap out of the racks of old nurses' uniforms and begin filming, but it's just her and her loud indignation. Everyone pretends not to notice her—it's the Canadian way—and goes about browsing through the items while security deals with the interloper.

I stand and photograph the cage cots—metal cribs on wheels with a collapsible side, but bars across the top, like something you'd find at a circus, holding the star lion or tiger. I try to imagine an era where these would have been allowed: commonplace, even. An era where men wore suits to work in this place—pocket watches and pressed shirts. Where women wore long skirts and nurses wore caps. It's hard to think that far back, to before the turn of the last century.

There's plumbing everywhere here. Was it always here? In 1876? Was there always electricity? I doubt it, but then again, I have no idea how it would have been added later, with the giant pipes and hoppers and bathtubs. I imagine giving patients candles—live fire on the wards.

I imagine being locked up for life because I refused to speak.

Two hours later, our tour has ended. We run into the family of the former resident. He has gone off somewhere, alone. His daughter looks sad, but resigned. She and her mother have a quiet dignity about them, like this is something they endure on a daily basis: when the ghosts that haunt their husband and father come to visit.

They politely ask if we've learned a lot and I say that we have. And that we hope they got what they came for, too.

"There's a cemetery across the road," someone says. "You should see it while you're here."

We get in the car and drive past the front gates, over the street and down another dirt road. I look at an empty field, covered in leaves.

"Is this it?" I ask my wife.

She shrugs. “It has to be. Look, there’s the monument.”

My daughter, aged one, toddles across the field. The fall leaves have covered the ground and her boots kick up a crunch of ochre and crimson and chestnut. I watch her bend and toss the leaves, giggling. And I look around, confused. I don’t see any evidence of a cemetery except this monument.

This Monument has been erected
In memory of those developmentally
Handicapped people who lived
And died within the community
Of the Ontario Hospital School,
Orillia, from 1887-1971.
More than 2000 people were
Laid to rest here.

After 1971, patients were laid to rest in private cemeteries, with families, not here in the shadow of the institution (Alamenciak, 2013-1). Maybe because this gravesite was full. But it doesn’t look full. It looks bare. In the distance, I see two headstones: one black, one white, their bases covered by the autumn leaves.

Emlyn throws the leaves and calls to me. I pick her up and kiss her tummy—and I play with her for a few minutes, scattering leaves over her head, then releasing her to run off some of her energy. And the corner of a flat stone catches my toe. I bend down, clear the leaves from it. It’s rectangular and flush with the ground, perhaps twelve inches wide, eight inches high. A flat gravestone.

Jane Harris
1888—1971

I scoop Emlyn up, horrified that we’ve been tramping on graves. I begin to clear the leaves along the row. Nancy helps me, one by one, unearthing the engravings. The two thousand people who are, indeed, beneath the soil we’re standing on.

The Archives of Ontario

Citing research for my PhD, I requested access to the records of the Huronia Regional Centre, which were housed at York University in Toronto, and were not available for inter-library loan. I was required to fill out a stack of paperwork, including a non-disclosure form, and wait the requisite two-to-eight weeks.

After a great deal of back-and-forth, a special library card arrived in the mail that would give me access to these records for one year. This would be the ongoing theme of my research for this project: given grudgingly, with much paperwork required, and only for a brief period of time. Because of the sheer amount of effort it took to gain access to the relevant research, I began to debate the merits of it, and this debate actually informed one of my fundamental research questions. Is it not the job of the writer to create a world? Who would know if I didn't get everything 100% correct? Who would even care if it were made up?

But just thinking about inventing something that important felt fundamentally wrong. Already, the people locked up in Canada's institutions have faced more violations and degradation than most of us will ever understand. Taking liberties with their history felt like another violation. Another shortcut. So I decided instead to commit to the process, immerse myself in the reality of the past, and see where it led.

For one full day, after driving the five hours from Ottawa to Toronto, I locked myself in the library at York.

I'd been promised a reel of photographs and I was expecting to find a series of snapshots of the institution, something that would give me a jumping-off point. A field of reference. Something to begin assembling the stories in my mind that only ever came like whispers of a song. I needed to ground my characters somewhere: see and understand where they stood and walked and ate and worked.

But the pictures were missing.

—I'm sorry. They must not have arrived.

—But I can only come once. The email confirmed that everything was here.

The clerk shrugged helplessly.

—Sorry.

A big breath out, and a slightly panicky feeling as I looked at the boxes upon boxes the Archives had sent down for me. It was far too much information for one day. I'd never be able to read it all. Maybe I could negotiate for more time, or another trip.

Donning white cotton gloves, I began to peruse the information, feeling all the time that I was only seeing a fraction of what I would need. After a few hours, I asked if I could take photographs and the librarian agreed. So instead of going through the records on the spot, I photographed as much as I could to read thoroughly later.

The giant ledgers were of particular interest: admission records that dated back to the re-opening of the institution in 1876, and contained handwritten entries on the name, date, condition and age of the patient (Appendix 1). The death records were similarly interesting, if nearly indecipherable—but the causes of death were things I'd never heard of. Marasmus, in particular, became a theme that echoed in my head—the slow wasting of a body from malnutrition.

After mulling it over, it became obvious to me why this was so common. Prior to the practice of life-long tube-feeding, many children with spasticity or other forms of brain damage would have suffered essential starvation due to the inability of the damaged brain to properly conduct the processes of mastication, peristalsis and digestion.

During this research trip, the characters' personal crises began to develop as the setting and the historical context became clearer. It was important to me that the era be an essential part of the story—not just an interesting component. Although originally I was interested in the influenza epidemic of 1918, the unavoidable tie-ins with WWI became an obstacle. The character of Ben McHugh, a young superintendent, would have been implausible, as would many of the other male characters, given that they would almost certainly have been away at War. Further, although a dedicated children's hospital had opened in 1909 in Manitoba, the field of pediatrics didn't open until the 1920s, which presented a complication to Siobhan's history as a pediatrician (University of Manitoba, 2019).

On the flip side, the hospital's ability to keep records seems to have blossomed around 1925, because, although there was relatively little to review from 1910-1919, there was a great deal of information from the 1920s on. Some of that included a series of letters between the medical superintendent and a woman who ran a sort of halfway house that took girls from the institution and placed them in domestic service (Appendix 1).

The ghost in my mind began to materialise.

Moving the time horizon forward from the original 1917 to 1927 would provide answers to all the problems I'd been struggling with thus far:

- 1.) Siobhan's experience as pediatrician would make sense.
- 2.) The domestic service programme outside the hospital would provide a lot of narrative possibilities for Fel.
- 3.) An encephalitis outbreak could replace the Spanish Flu.
- 4.) The cast of characters could contain a better balance of men and women on the wards.

Thus, the timeline of the story was moved to open in September 1927.

Another critical element of this research trip was finally understanding the "who's who" of the asylum. The training manuals gave a very detailed overview of life in the asylum at the time, including the jobs available for each class of inmate, the number of inmates of each type kept at the asylum, and the total numbers of males and females, as well as the number and names of staff (Appendix 2). This was invaluable in constructing a fictional asylum. I could discern a lot of information from the names of the staff: their gender, age, and ethnic background, which coloured in a lot of the outlines. From the job lists and titles/numbers of the staff assigned to each, I could imagine the proportion of those jobs to the whole.

Farm

Woodshop

Laundry

Kitchen

Administration Building

Cottages

Pavilion

Infirmery

School house

Plant

Doctor's house

Doctor's cottage

Nurses' residence

Attendants' residence

The Geography of Avonhurst

Institutions like Avonhurst were cities unto themselves, and one of the many challenges in writing this novel was the creation of setting—trying to reference the vastness and intricacies of the place in a way that didn't feel like a guided tour in a historic monument.

The twofold narration became as much a necessity of setting as it was about plot:

First, Siobhan as a new person could legitimately be given a guided tour and could ask the questions the readers wanted to ask.

Fel, even as an 'old hand,' might not be well-versed in the routes and the outbuildings—but if she were a guide, and a trusty, she would have certain privileges and access that could give a reader a clue about the vastness of the place. The construction of Fel's character became an interesting exercise in creating within limitations, because there were certain things I wanted her to be able to 'do', but she was also a character in her own right and I felt a keen ethical and literary responsibility to make her authentic, memorable, and individual rather than a proxy narrator.

Choosing the first-person point of view was a necessity in terms of voice appropriation—something I felt strongly about as an 'outsider' in the community of people with developmental disabilities. This narrative choice provided significant challenges in terms of continuity across the novel, but that it was necessary given the historical colonisation of people with developmental disabilities in my country.

Fel, with her specific role and privilege within the institution, was equally necessary in the construction of the book. A patient who stayed on a ward, or someone who worked only in the laundry or kitchen, for example, would not have had the scope that Fel did in terms of access to the space. Emotionally, and because of her elective muteness, Fel has unprecedented access to people as well, making her an ideal 'voyeur'—someone who could witness events taking place in both the realms of patient and staff—a bridge between the levels of hierarchy.

Later, in the final iteration of the book that contained a two-person narrative instead of a three-person narrative, Fel could take on the voice of Sera without losing much of the storyline, and actually adding a layer of mystery to it.

The disadvantage was that someone who had lived in Avonhurst for the majority of her life wouldn't necessarily appreciate the marvel of it. In the end, the offhand way she refers to

things: the Backyard (the cemetery across the street), the Beehive (the infirmary, with its many twists and turns); the Trams—the labyrinthine tunnels and tramways), and the Palace (the Superintendent's residence) gives her cheeky interpretation to her home environment at the same time as letting the reader follow along as she walks from place to place and sees what she's seeing.

The geography of Avonhurst is something that's breathed into every scene in the book, like a bellows constantly working. The physical aspect of the place is unavoidable: the smell, the sounds, the regime, all envelop the story and Fel's life. The influence is felt for everyone, even the doctors, as Siobhan finds out, and as Fel has already discovered. This is particularly evident when Siobhan is trying to discover Dr. Braithwaite's illicit activities regarding his hepatitis milkshakes and finds that his nurses and staff are enshrouded in loyalty and secrecy as strong as the stench of feces in his lab. A scene like this is so dependent upon a hierarchy like that which existed at Avonhurst that in fact, it could not have happened without it. A perfect recipe is needed: a huge, impersonal space filled with humans viewed as subjects, and doctors with inalienable authority.

Everything that happens in the novel—every main plot point, every scandal, every loss—was dependent upon the institution itself: the geography, the size, the hierarchy, and the inhabitants.

The Psychology and Hierarchy of Total Institutions

Research Question 3: How does the geography of the asylum impact the psychology of the characters and the hierarchy of the institution, and how are the psychological effects of institutionalisation related or separate from the physical restrictions?

In total institutions there is a basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff. Inmates typically live in the institution and have restricted contact with the world outside the walls; staff often operate on an eight-hour day and are socially integrated into the outside world. Each group tends to conceive of the other in terms of narrow hostile stereotypes, staff often seeing inmates as bitter, secretive, and untrustworthy, while inmates often see staff as condescending, highhanded, and mean. Staff

tends to feel superior and righteous; inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy, and guilty (Goffman, 1961, p. 7).

This strict hierarchy was interesting to write about, because the more I read about total institutions, the more it seemed that there were just as many exceptions to the hierarchy and the rules as there were rules themselves. These cross-border relationships, transactions and privileges deepened the complexity of the plot and the relationships within Avonhurst.

On my various tours of institutions, I also a peculiar trend in the geography: the closer one works to the centre of the institution (the administration), the more they influence the official status of the institution. The farther away they live, the farther one is from the administrative rules.

The superintendents and doctors work at the very hub of the administration building (high influence) and live at the farthest reaches of the campus (low supervision). Highest influence, fewest restrictions. Nurses work in the inner wards, and live in the outer nurses' quarters. Some influence, some restrictions. Inmates work in the back wards and live in the central pavilion. No influence, high restrictions (also, little protection).

Doctors and nurses lived as far away from the main wards as possible: the doctors' cottages are on the outskirts, the nurses' residence is in the back. The farm hands—those most closely resembling 'normal' workers—live almost off the facility, across the road, and those who had died and had escaped altogether were the very farthest away: across the main road and down the lane at the cemetery.

The punishment ward at Avonhurst mirrors the accounts from other institutions: it's one of the farthest and most removed places from the main hub of activity.

The hierarchy and the geography: the higher up you go, the higher up you are...

In his seminal book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Patients and Other Inmates*, Erving Goffman (1961) discusses at length the concept and practice of *Secondary Adjustments*: unofficial rules or strategies that residents of any institution use to circumvent the official rules to make life easier or better for themselves. Whether it's pocketing extra bread in the mess hall to use for sandwiches later, or using commissary ingredients to make contraband baked goods, or trading cigarettes for favours or privileges, each institution has a system of barter, trade, and black-market goods that react with, undermine, or enhance the official system.

Fel is a thief. She is also a voyeur, a hoarder, and a mule for contraband goods. As a young, mute woman in an asylum that's segregated by sex, but still a dangerous place, Fel must use the limited opportunities she has to get ahead in her environment. Her position and living quarters afford her certain advantages, but she needs protection from staff as well as other inmates, and she has to have something valuable to offer if ever she gets in a fix. She's also determined to get out of the asylum, and thus needs supplies and money, which she doesn't mind stealing. More importantly though, as Goffman points out, her behaviour is a way of retaining her sense of self in a highly impersonal environment.

The practice of reserving something for oneself from the clutch of an institution is very visible in mental institutions [and]...is not an incidental mechanism of defense but rather an essential constituent of the self (p. 319).

Not only does Fel preserve her own identity through the items she chooses to store in her various hidey-holes, she also preserves the identity of the other residents through her art display in the attic, made from the contents of their suitcases, and, in particular, makes an effort to help Marnie preserve an important piece of home: her teddy.

Fel's perpetual climbing toward the attic represents her journey toward eventual freedom; the tramways and underground tunnels in the hospital reflect the behind-doors activities there. The hierarchy of the inmates and staff are even reflected in the building itself.

Fel's lack of speaking is not only a metaphor for the lost voices of children with developmental disabilities who were committed to asylums, but also integral to her privileges and her character. Fel's mutism allows her to see and observe things without the distraction of engaging in any dialogue; it also situates her as a character of trust because she never repeats what she sees or hears. She is allowed to accompany Sera, the midwife, on rounds delivering babies, because she does not object or raise questions, or even bring up the births. She has the job of burying the dead infants because she can be trusted to do it, and not to talk about it. She is also privy to the relationship Sera has with her partner Charlie and has visited her at home—again, because she is trusted never to reveal anything.

Her position is both a privilege and a burden, because she is allowed to do more than the average inmate, but she is still treated as an inmate, and actually, has more expectations placed on her than most others do. Her silence makes her a vault for sometimes terrible secrets.

Fel's occupation of space throughout the book is illustrative of her dual roles: she plunges into the bowels, the trams, as part of her duties as messenger; she lives in the Pavilion—a ward apart from the main building, for those with higher status. And when she's trying to escape her illness (her epilepsy), she climbs to the attic—she follows the angel up the stairs, as far away from the asylum as she can get. Similarly, when she's trying to 'run away', she climbs higher and higher, into the racks of suitcases that, to her, represent the final escape.

Fel is very cognizant of the attic and what it represents, particularly the suitcases where she's set up her hidden fort. Subversively, she hides in plain sight. The attic she escapes to is directly above the administration building—a floor above the superintendent's office, right next to the bell tower. But still, she goes there. She can't help but go there. She's drawn to the racks of suitcases as she's drawn to the angel she follows.

A suitcase to an inmate represented escape. Once the suitcase was brought down from storage, outside items were returned and the inmate was released. Conversely, and perhaps more commonly, as seen in *The Lives They Left Behind, Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* the suitcases outlived the patients who never got to take them home (Darby & Stastny, 2008).

The title itself demonstrates this power imbalance in the book. It is a command—an expectation—that a member of staff might have issued to Fel. That Siobhan, possibly, might even have demanded.

Fel is a messenger and is indentured to the powers that be: the nurses, the doctors, the Matron, the institution itself. She is charged with the birth and burial of infants, the very existence of whom was secret and forbidden.

On the other hand, Siobhan, as a doctor in the institution, is accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed. But does that mean she has all the power? No. Hierarchy is one thing; rights and dignities another; power and influence another still.

In the first iteration of this novel, when I was attempting epic fiction, I had in mind *The Pillars of the Earth* (Follet, 1990). I wanted Avonhurst to be a central character: something that informed every aspect of the book. Even scaling back the novel, this was a primary concern for me.

Fel, perhaps, knows Avonhurst the best. She is both a participant in and a victim of the hierarchy. She knows every inch of it geographically, and from a social standpoint, she is the

Kain

expert on the relations between staff and inmates, inmates with one another, and, thanks to her privileged status, the inner-workings of the staff.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHARACTERS OF AVONHURST—STAFF AND INMATES

Research Question 4: How can a character appear true to her time, holding attitudes and opinions that might be incompatible with current social sentiment, and still be a relatable, authentic character?

Writing from the perspective of Dr. Siobhan Rian, a privileged, educated, white woman in 1927, did not pose much of an ethical dilemma, but writing from the perspective of Fel—someone whose voice had been deliberately silenced by history—did.

How dare you write something you haven't lived? You haven't been in a hospital like that. You can't even dream of sleeping on a ward with fifty other people, sharing one bathroom with a broken tap and listening to the howling and screaming through the night. The slog of waking up in a cold bed, finding something to wear from a pile of communal clothing, watching behind you every step, in case someone springs out and attacks you, or hangs you over a toilet, or rapes you while you've fallen into an exhausted sleep.

There's a word for it, you know: appropriation.

Like when people make "lesbian porn" movies and your eyes roll so far back into your head they almost disappear, because those women—with their lacquered nails and balayage, perfectly trimmed bushes, and silver pink lip-gloss—are no more lesbians than the Pope is. F/F fiction: books meant to thrill and titillate, but never to represent. Female on Female! Get your tickets! But there's a culture here, a sisterhood—something outsiders will never understand. Is it too much to ask that somebody with actual experience being gay, and actual experience with love and life, write a halfway decent book?

Yeah. That's how they feel too. The patients who survived it.

You're F/F-ing their life.

ap·pro·pri·a·tion

/əˌprɒprēˈāSH(ə)n

noun: **appropriation**; plural noun: **appropriations**

1. 1.

the action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission. (Which may result in an entire colonised group coming after you with pitchforks)

"the appropriation of parish funds"

- the artistic practice or technique of reworking images from well-known paintings, photographs, (or stories from lesser-known people) etc., in one's own work.

2. 2.

a sum of money or total of assets devoted to a special purpose (Dictionary.com, 2019).

col·o·ni·za·tion

/kālənə'zāSH(ə)n

noun: **colonisation**

1. the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area.

"Africa boasts a tradition of higher education institutions that predate Western colonization"

- the action of appropriating a place or domain for one's own use.

"the complete colonization of television entertainment by reality shows"

- **ECOLOGY**

the action by a plant or animal of establishing itself in an area.

"lower airway bacterial colonization" (Dictionary.com, 2019)

-Deciding a group of people is "unfit" and sending them to colonies "in the fresh air."

The mental onslaught continued. I learned to ignore it and press on, because one key thought kept occurring to me: people with developmental disabilities faced barriers that were too great to overcome in order to write down their experience for themselves. Illiteracy, institutionalisation, disability, and lack of education combined to create a force that ensured their silence. Now, time is running out for that generation who lived there, and before there's nobody else to hear, to observe, to consult, it's time to crack on. It is not my experience, but I need to write it for those who couldn't. Kit de Waal reflected on exactly this problem in her essay 'Don't dip your pen in someone else's blood: writers and 'the other'. She provides a way to see the line in the sand that's ever-changing, always blurring: how do you write as the other without 'othering'?

We have to ask ourselves who we are and what we are trying to say in speaking as "the other". What are we trying to accomplish in our writing that needs that perspective? Are we the best person to say it? Have we examined our privilege and our attitudes sufficiently to give us the necessary perspective to be authentic, sympathetic and true? Are we sure that we are not dabbling in exotica, in that fascination with the other that prevents us portraying a rounded, rich culture with all its nuances, diversity and reality? By writing our story are we taking the place of someone better placed to tell it? Our aim should be not only to write well but to do no harm along the way (de Waal, 2018).

The choice was between risking appropriation and risking the permanent silencing of that experience. I chose to risk writing.

Being in Avonhurst was about so much more than epilepsy. Or intelligence tests. Or who you were forced to appease, and in what way. There are stories there that will never be told. Be transparent, and get the job done.

A Modern Doctor: A Study in Conflict

In looking for a way to make Doctor Siobhan Rian a realistic character of her time, an association with Eugenics made perfect sense: some of the biggest proponents of eugenics, including Dr. Helen MacMurchy and Dr. Madge Thurlow Macklin, were highly educated women of the era. In fact, doctors 'formed the single largest group within the Eugenics Society of Canada and could count on the support of many of their colleagues' (McLaren, 2014, p. 119).

I began to envision how a female doctor who strongly supported sterilization and a young epileptic 'moron' could possibly find common ground in an institution like Avonhurst—and this became the basis for the central storyline.

During my 2018 confirmation panel, Dr. Eoghan Wells commented that Siobhan, a doctor who would have been born in the 1890s, held too modern a view for her time. I had at first attempted to demonstrate her forward-thinking by making her views more compatible with current readers. In earlier drafts of the novel, Siobhan notably cringed at the nomenclature of the asylum and chafed against referring to her patients as inmates. After this anachronism was pointed out, I realised I had fallen into a seemingly common trap of historical dramas and books—the lead characters being perhaps unrealistically liberal in their views: Doctor Michaela Quinn from *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman* (Sullivan, 1993-8); Claire Randall from *Outlander* (Gabaldon, 2002); Phryne Fisher from *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* (Cox, 2012). This sets them apart from their historical counterparts, but must also, in some part, be an artistic device that allows a mental resonance with the current audience.

This led to one of my key research areas in terms of characterisation. In the case of Siobhan, this was a tricky balance that informed the narrative decision of the dual point of view. Having an inside look at Siobhan's thought process was vital to making her a relatable character,

particularly as she's championing something that is so contrary to the sensibilities of liberal society today.

For the sake of historical accuracy, Siobhan had to 'join the ranks' of the institution. This included using the terminology that would have been used back then, without imbuing her with a too-modern incredulity. This goal of this total immersion was to let the reader experience life in the asylum as it would have been—as Fel would have experienced it, and as Siobhan would have been introduced to it—without the added mental gymnastics of railing against the derogatory words. The words 'idiot', 'imbecile', and 'moron' were medical terms at the time, and they were used as such. After a few pages, the reader adjusts. They need to rely on other clues to discern the character traits.

In later drafts, Siobhan had become a more realistic figure of her time in another way: championing Eugenics. The challenge was to increase the authenticity of the character while making her better rounded and providing insight as to how a woman of her time would have made the decisions and held the opinions that she did.

While researching, it was interesting to note that Ontario was somewhat paradoxical in its treatment of people with developmental disabilities: on one hand, Canada dedicated sixteen institutions to the confinement of this population; on the other, Ontario, unlike the United States, parts of Europe, and even other Canadian provinces, never mandated sterilisation. Alberta and British Columbia were the only provinces in which the government actually sterilized mentally ill men and women without their consent. (Clement, 2018).

This provided an interesting tension in the book as Siobhan argued strongly in favour of sterilisation, preferring it for the patients than a lifetime of incarceration. To twentieth-century eugenicists, the feeble-minded proved an obvious threat to society, and as a doctor, Siobhan would certainly have been indoctrinated to this ideology.

One way to demonstrate Siobhan's compassion while also ensuring she retained the pervasive opinions of her era, was to have her take a different approach, one that was not shared by her colleagues, but which the reader could understand (if not agree with) as a plausible alternative in the circumstances. It's difficult to imagine a modern-day doctor arguing with any success or understanding for the sterilisation of her patients—but in 1927, this was just slightly more radical than the norm.

Alberta's 1928 [Sexual Sterilization Act](#) created a Eugenics Board that was empowered to recommend sterilization as a condition for release from a mental health institution... Between 1928 and 1972, the Alberta Eugenics Board approved 99 percent of its 4,785 cases. Over time, increasing numbers of its decisions involved people who did not give their consent. And it was clearly biased against young adults (twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds. Even in cases where agreement was obtained, it is impossible to know how many people were coerced into consenting (Clement, 2018).

Later, both sides of the issue are more clearly understood: the desire of the doctor to have her patients live a full life outside the institution, as well as the heartbreaking consequence of many thousands of people—many of whom were mislabelled as 'subnormal'—denied the right to bear children.

Epilepsy and Mutism: A Subnormal Girl

Fifty-thousand people were locked away in institutions in Ontario during the 19th and 20th centuries. They were termed Idiots, Imbeciles, Morons, and Feeble-minded (MCSS, 20014). Although some intrepid writers such as Nelly Bly (1887) broke barriers and snuck into institutions to report their findings, not much was written from the inside. As Angus McLaren (2014) points out in his book *Our Own Master Race*, the patients in these institutions were massively over-represented by minorities such as immigrants, aboriginals, and working-class people.

To put into writing the things they experienced, the patients would have had to overcome barriers, any one of which might have been too daunting, but taken together, has assured that almost nothing has been disclosed about what happened behind closed doors.

Were patients able to express themselves verbally or in writing?

Assuming they were able to write, would they be understood?

Assuming they were understood, would they be believed?

Assuming they were believed, would anyone care?

These are all questions I had to consider when writing from the perspective of a narrator who is an inmate of a hospital for the feeble-minded. When coupled with issues of narrative, these questions become:

Is the character reliable or not?

If the character is not reliable, will the reader invest in reading the book?

If the narrator is reliable, and the reader believes he or she does not actually belong in an asylum, then does that narrator really belong in the role of narrator?

Is a reliable narrator who doesn't really belong there not automatically a narrative device, convenient for the author?

Hasn't it already been done?

Fingersmith, by Sarah Waters (2002), demonstrates the frightening world where a woman could be locked up against her will for an indeterminate amount of time with only the signatures of two medical professionals. Her protagonist does not belong in an asylum.

Girl, Interrupted sounds a similar note: a vaguely depressed young woman is locked up at Bellevue where she meets people who 'really' belong there (Kaysen, 1994). Kaysen, in her memoir, recalls the other patients as separate from herself—somehow worse than she was:

And this way we all passed through a month or two, Lisa and the catatonics in the TV room, Polly walking like a motorized corpse, Cynthia crying after electroshock ("I'm not sad," she explained to me, "but I can't help crying"), and me and Georgina in our double suite. We were considered the healthiest (p. 23).

But writing a character like a secret agent would undermine the very idea of bringing to light the history of a place like Avonhurst. I wanted a narrator who was committed for reasons deemed rational at the time (not a mistake, or an exceptional circumstance), and I also, contrarily, wanted her to speak for herself.

Fel's diagnosis of epilepsy and mutism would give her custodial status, which was important in establishing how she was sent to live at Avonhurst. Her encounters with other residents in different areas of the hospital, many with more severe diagnoses than hers, also give a patient's perspective into the residents on various wards. Fel has epilepsy, but she hides her seizures by escaping every time she senses one approaching. After a lot of trial and error, eventually I came to the conclusion that the best way to let the reader experience Fel's seizures was to immerse them, through language, in her physical experience: an aura in the form of an angel—and then falling, seizing, sleeping.

In my fourth year, I read Ray Robinson's (2014) book *Electricity* which takes the reader on an extremely intimate journey into a seizure. From there, I was able to translate the clinical experience I'd had of watching children seizing (an observer) into Fel's experience of having her brain taken over by electrical impulses, and what this would look and feel like. Because Fel hides

her seizures, and because she does not view herself as an epileptic, this creates a vulnerability that is like her Achilles heel. Her nemesis, Nurse Pisspot, likes to remind her that she has seizures—a fact that brands her clearly as a patient, a 'subnormal', and eventually thwarts her ability to leave the institution.

Fel walks a fine line at Avonhurst. Although she is an inmate, she is of an echelon that allows her certain privileges: freedom of movement and trusted positions. She lives in a fairly liberal part of the hospital, as opposed to being on a general ward. On the other hand, her mutism and her seizures are serious black marks against her in normal society—something that's not fully realised until later in the novel. This, of course, was precisely the problem. Just as Siobhan in early iterations had been too modern in her views, Fel was too aloof and disconnected to be seen as a genuine patient. She was too clean. Too set above the others. She wasn't down in the muck enough, swinging it out.

In terms of historical and even modern literature, I encountered very few examples to use as research into a female protagonist with a disability. Historical examples of narrators with disabilities are traditionally male, and include Hoban's (1998) *Riddley Walker*, Faulkner's (2014) *Benjy Compson*, and Keyes's (1975) *Charlie Gordon*. Although these were evidently trailblazing books of their time, there were some obvious and stark problems with using them as a jumping-off point for Fel.

Enter *Grace Williams Says it Loud* (Henderson, 2010), and I suddenly saw a way forward. This was a book about a young woman with multiple disabilities, including Cerebral Palsy and a speech disorder, for whom being put in an institution was no error—it was the path determined best to suit her condition. It had at its centre a character who, in her own voice, narrates her experience: a rare gem for a population vastly underrepresented in literature. Late in the book, there is a pivotal scene in which Grace is locked in a school room by a nurse. Although the reader is aware that Grace lives in an institution and has various disabilities, before this scene, she seems a bit apart from it, above it, almost, as Fel was in earlier drafts of *Take This Message to the Infants' Ward*.

In this scene, though, Grace reacts against her environment in a way that is a bit shocking for the reader, but consistent with behaviour observed in institutionalised people. She smears feces in her hair and on the walls, strips naked and soils her teacher's chair.

When creating the character of Fel, I came back again and again to this scene in my mind, realising that Fel would have to, at some point, act 'in character'.

Professor Mort seemed to pick up on this missing element as well:

I think [Fel] needs to be traumatised in some way to convince us of her withdrawal from society. I don't think she can be without vulnerabilities and psychological triggers that tip her towards the less rational (Mort, Report 8, 2015).

Because she is the narrator of a large portion of the novel, much of her behaviour is normalised to the reader, so an outside point of view is needed at times to really see the truth of her situation. Narrating, Fel allows the reader to eavesdrop through her narrative medium, so her mutism is not illustrated to the same degree that it would be to the residents and staff at Avonhurst.

Fel, as a child who was taken from her mother and thrust into an institution for most of her life, wants nothing more than to escape Avonhurst, and have children of her own. Her breakdown in the novel is an understandable culmination of betrayals, disappointments, rejections and ultimately, the realisation that she can't survive outside the institution. Had Fel dealt with everything with her customary nonchalance and silence, she would not have been authentic as a character.

Seraphine Street: Conflict, personified

If there is one character in the book who embodies the central conflicts of this historical time period, it's Seraphine Street. Born in 1902 and placed immediately in the Infants' Home, her very name is evidence of her abandonment. In their book *In the Children's Aid*, Jones & Rutman (1981) discuss the custom of naming babies after the street where they were found, which would have given Sera the surname "Street", forever branding her to those who knew the practice.

Later evicted from both the convent where she was living, and forced to leave her apprenticeship as a midwife for her relationship with partner Charlotte, Sera eventually makes a living in an institution for the feeble-minded, delivering babies who aren't supposed to be born. Sera's fierceness is matched only by her compassion, and although her circumstances have never been abundant, she cares for Fel and trains her as she herself was denied training—attempting to help Fel elevate herself above a station where, Sera recognises, she doesn't belong.

The ground-breaking book *Lesbian Nuns, Breaking Silence* shocked many in the religious community when it was published in 1985 (Manahan & Curb). Thirty years later, when I read it, the stories of the nuns who had been cloistered and who left religious life during the 1960s and 1970s, began to spark a character in my mind—a young woman who loses everything when her relationship with another novice is discovered. In this book, these disparate historical trends, customs, and hardships intersected to result in the birth of the character of Seraphine Street.

Marnie Lavimodiere and Bernard Williams: A Case of Mistaken Identity

In the fall of 2013, a journalist named Tim Alamenciak at the Toronto Star published a series of articles surrounding the mistaken identity of two patients at Huronia: Maurice Middlestadt and Lena Potts. The children had been admitted to Huronia within days of each other in January, 1919. By coincidence, they both died within a month of one another in 1921. Maurice, aged eight, died of tuberculosis. Lena Potts, aged 15, died of “Purpura Hemorrhagica,” according to the Star, a potential complication of leukemia, meningitis, or a genetic abnormality (Alamenciak, Sept. 2013; Oct. 2013).

To protect the identity of the families, the graves were marked by number rather than by name: in the case of Huronia, the number corresponded to the number of total deaths that had occurred at the institution. In the case of Maurice and Lena, each was issued the number 1751, by some clerical mistake. The grave 1751 could have held the body of either child.

Worse, decades later, the grave markers were taken up and used to make a path for a nearby group home that had been erected near the facility. When people objected to this desecration, sometime around 1990, the stones were removed and reassembled into the concrete pad we saw at the cemetery.

This case of mistaken identity seemed to me a crucial illustration of life in the asylum. The anonymity, the rote action, the age of the children, the institution in the background of their final resting place, the years it took to discover the mistake—and the fact that nobody had discovered it until now. Nobody had been looking for these children. This piece of history belonged in my story.

This, I think, was finally the moment when I began to see the essence of the story beyond the historical facts. When I realised that the research was important as a basis for the story, but that the story itself had the power to move people toward an understanding of our history and a

deeper compassion toward those with developmental disabilities. An ownership of our past decisions, the horror of what we had done as a society. And a way to move forward.

The process of accessing the research material was daunting in the beginning, but in the end, a gift. It benefited the characters, the setting, the storylines, the authenticity, and the plausibility of the language. 'Making it up' would never have satisfied me.

Doctor Braithwaite and The Hepatitis Milkshake

One of the more horrific stories to come out of my research was the history of a doctor from Willowbrook State School who used his patients as a subject pool for medical research on the Hepatitis B virus. Since patients lived in such close quarters, the incidence of contagion was already extremely high. But in the case of 'The Willowbrook Experiments', as they came to be called, the extremely high incidence of contagion was not by chance. Doctor Krugman had purposely infected this group with the virus, by mixing feces of an infected patient into milkshakes and giving the concoction to new patients (Robinson & Unruh, 2016).

When I began working at the group home in Ottawa, the residents in this home had lived together on the same ward at Rideau Regional Centre. Every one of them had Hep B.

In this story, Doctor Braithwaite is inspired by Doctor Krugman from New York and undertakes a similar scheme.

In an institution of thousands, every character has his or her own complicated story, and choosing which stories to tell was a difficult and painstaking task, but ultimately, each character was chosen for a reason—and everything that happens to the patients in this book happened to someone, somewhere, in the records.

CHAPTER FOUR: A LONG JOURNEY TOWARD AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE VOICE

Research Question 5: What narrative strategies can be used to relate a cohesive and compelling story, while remaining authentic to the experience of an inmate in an institution?

Scenes from Call the Midwife flicker on the screen. Downton Abbey, with its hierarchy and roles so clearly delineated you could almost slot them into an Excel file—everyone to his place, everybody in her costume. American Horror Story, Asylum, helps you take the concrete walls with their blue curls of peeling paint and faded wall murals, and translate them into reality. Living colour, as they would have been. But you don't have a camera, following the characters, panning out to take in the entire scene, zeroing in on someone in a corner, furtively stuffing something behind a brick.

A book must have a protagonist and that protagonist must have an authentic narrative voice. Whom will you follow with your pen? Whose voice will be heard above the din of the eight-hundred bowls banging on the long, cracking tables in the dining halls? Whose story will be told? And how will you make it fair?

One decision that I made early on, and which stuck consistently throughout all versions of the book, was the upstairs/downstairs approach to Avonhurst. The asylum was experienced so differently by the patients versus the staff that it almost seemed to be two separate places. To examine this stark difference, it was necessary to have a character narrating from each angle.

DRAFT ONE—YEAR ONE (2014)

Timeframe: The year 1917

Point of View: Third-person limited POV, Siobhan and Sera; First-person POV, Andie

Genre: Epic Fiction meets Historical Fiction

In this draft, the staff voices were established as third-person limited point-of-view: Siobhan, the new physician at Avonhurst, and Seraphine Street, the midwife who works on the wards. The wards were viewed from an outside perspective: the new person arriving. This made

sense from a practical perspective—a natural way to tour the place and a familiar position (outsider) with which to be immersed in the environment. This seemed to be the best way to handle a potentially large cast of characters—the possibilities were essentially endless in third-person POV...

Siobhan smelled the ward before stepped over the threshold into the common room. She pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth and tried to breathe shallowly. Could the floors never get clean? This smell of urine was so strong it burned her eyes. Boys lounged on dilapidated furniture and old mattresses. One was peeing a steady stream into the corner while another mopped the floor with a wet mop—likely spreading the filth around.

Unfortunately, this decision also presented many problems. The first, and biggest problem, was that I was quite conscious of not wanting to appropriate the voice of the patient. I very much wanted the patients to speak for themselves. And so when the character of Andie (later called Fel) was developed, I instinctively used first-person. This was made more complicated but also more interesting by the fact that Andie was a selective mute. My intention was to partially conceal this fact from the reader by using the first-person, present tense, where Andie speaks directly to the reader in a conversational tone. I wanted the reader to get to know Andie as a character—possibly even to wonder what on earth she was doing in an asylum for idiots—before they were made aware of the depth to which her disability affected her. I was also aware, after a few initial exchanges with my supervisor, Professor Mort, that using a conventional indicator of dialogue didn't make sense for Andie.

What I'm driving at here is the deliberate inclusion of the self in the actions that are being described. That creates a deliberate sense of narration, but is it too deliberate? Is the character taking on the authorial task of narration too knowingly and self-consciously? An alternative method would be one of more impressionistic registration of events – and I say this because that staccato effect is evident in places, as if you're making your way towards it (Mort, Report 3, 2015).

Of course, Andie was immersed in the asylum. Words and sounds and experiences would meld together for her, inevitably. So organising her thoughts and experiences into neat dialogue tags was not a realistic representation.

My first attempt in tackling the issue of how the reader would experience the page was using font enhancements. I wanted a useful visual tool for demonstrating the power dynamic of staff and inmates and tried out bold text to denote staff persons.

I tuck my notebook into my pocket and sneak along the corridor. If
Matron catches me in the hallway, she'll bundle me back off to the office
and I'll lose my lunch break.

Aren't you on the wrong side of the hallway, Andie?

Miss Street comes through at the end of the hall. She must've been in the
tramway. She's called Sera by the other attendants, and she's the midwife
too, for the girls who get into trouble while they're here.

I liked the idea of taking a contemporary stylistic approach to this historical novel, which would serve to remind the reader that these events could have happened in their lifetime. Even though these asylums opened in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the last three closed in 2009, which was practically yesterday—so I wondered if adopting a very modern style might serve a subconscious purpose here.

Siobhan and Fel were both, for very different reasons, shaped by their situations and place in society. They became the eyes through which readers would experience the upstairs/downstairs life of an institution, and understand the causes and consequences of an era that believed that dealing with "subnormals" could be done in one of two ways: incarceration or sterilization.

The problem of mixing of the third-person point of view for staff and Andie's very strong first-person narrative was that the book began to feel very off-balance, and exploring different reactions to and experiences of the text was far easier in Andie's perspective.

Siobhan's began to feel very wooden and formal by contrast.

*Just put it away, for God's sake. You'll never get anywhere staring at the page like that.
Do something else!*

THE INTERRUPTION:

During my MA thesis between 2008 and 2010, when I was blocked with the creative nonfiction novel, I detoured and wrote a mystery novel. Sara Maitland, my tutor at the time, commented that it seemed like a clever diversionary tactic on the part of my subconscious to grasp something plot-driven to balance my WIP, which was entirely character-led and stylistic.

Right. Of course.

After a difficult first year, I spent the summer penning a long free-verse poem (in 200 sections), shaking my head the entire time because *what on earth will this ever have to do with your book?* My book that I was clearly avoiding. But this poem was squarely in my road and interrupted me every morning, so I just took the four months off and wrote it.

In the fall, of course, I had no pages to give to Professor Mort, except 200 sections of a poem, so I apologised and sent those in. Then closed my eyes and waited.

Why are you sending me this?

Where is your novel?

What have you been doing with your life, Steph?

But he didn't say that. Instead:

I was really struck by the way you're writing outside your 'comfort zone' if I may use a cliché. You're not used to writing poetry, yet you've used it as a particular analytical and expressive tool, I think. I found the first draft of the novel chapters rather conventional in style and tone when I first saw them (though there has been considerable experimentation since) – and when the emotions in the novel ran high, the prose seemed overwrought and took on a purple hue in places.

In this poem, we clearly have a situation that is much closer to your personal experience, but you don't allow the emotional tension to dissipate. There are iterations of pain and loss and reiterations that might well overwhelm any writing technique, but you keep everything very tight and the language remains spare and purposeful. Of course, the use of white space – the spaciousness of poetic form and lineation – helps

to reinforce this. But space is also time and that seems to open out the text:

*The shadow from the frame
eclipses us now.
It can only be seen in
full light
which is so rare between us.*

I was also drawn to your use of non-grammatical constructions – the stabbing sense impressions that are both inward thoughts and outward observations: ‘Dark in the car,/the tail lights and city glow/reflecting, receding as we got/further away’ or ‘Speak./Your smile. Tone./She’s nothing. So why?/What is it about her?’ where dialogue, thought, narration are all conflated, but meaning is clear.

I hope we can bring these newly flexed muscles to the labour of the novel.

I briefly considered abandoning the entire novel in favour of pursuing this work, which came so much more easily than the novel ever had.

Professor Mort tactfully convinced me that this would be a bad idea.

I went back to work on the book...

DRAFT TWO—YEAR TWO, 2015-2016

- Timeline moved to 1927
- Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918 has been replaced by an encephalitis outbreak
- First-person POV for Siobhan, Sera and Andie

In this iteration, all the characters' points of view have switched to first person. At this stage, I still have three narrators: Siobhan, the doctor; Sera, the midwife, and Andie, the inmate. I wanted three levels of perspective: the patient, the lowly attendant, and the doctor.

Andie:

“Move over, girl, can’t you see I’m in a hurry?”
Matron in her long skirt. Swishing. Shoving by me. I almost trip. Catch myself on the brick wall, hands out. Squeaking—a wheelchair. I wait until it passes. Watch Matron burst through the doors, into the office.
My office. I don’t want to follow her. But that’s where I’m going.
Telephone off the hook. Frowning. Talking fast. “What do you mean when was he last seen? At roll call this morning. It’s two in the afternoon.”
Roll call is at seven. Breakfast is at seven-fifteen. Work duty starts at eight o’clock.
Waiting. Matron adjusts her cap. Smooths her hair.
“In all the usual places, please. The train station, the distillery district. Drag him back by the ear if you have to, and I’ll deal with him myself.”

Siobhan:

The bells begin to clang. But somehow, even knowing how late I am, even sensing the disapproval, my tardiness on the first day for God’s sake, I can’t make my feet move. The clock tower cleaves the front of the red brick monstrosity. Gorgeous, state-of-the-art.
Impenetrable. A quality I’m both grateful for and terrified of.
I’ve talked myself into this move and out of it half a dozen times this morning already. Once the doors close behind me, then what? And if this is the best decision for this moment, what does that say about the rest of my life?

The end result here was that even though I, as the writer, perceived three levels of hierarchy, from the inmates' perspective, all staff were staff, so I'd unfairly stacked the deck 2:1.

Criticism of the book indicated that while Siobhan's and Andie's voices were quite distinct, Sera's blended too much with Siobhan's, which only added to the unfair 'weighting.'

I struggled to define Sera's voice as separate and relevant, and in the end, decided to cut it entirely.

Year Two brought an end-of-year panel, and although the feedback was generally positive, the supervisors also shone a direct light on some of the misgivings I'd had about the work—particularly about Takaani, a character I'd introduced then struggled to develop.

Canada's history of institutionalisation includes Residential Schools, which were set up specifically for Indigenous Canadians. Children were taken en masse from their land up North and brought down to the mainland. The history of colonisation is perhaps at its worst, with the attempted eradication of the Indigenous culture and identity.

Although Takaani represented a legitimate part of the Canadian history, and in many ways belonged thematically, one panelist was critical of his inclusion in the novel, and cited a specific need for sensitive treatment of the issue. Because 1927 was not a particularly sensitive time, and the public sentiment about this issue in present day was so raw, I decided that Takaani was a step too far. The issue of Native residential schools really deserved its own space, and even though it was possible for an Inuit boy to have been placed in a general asylum, this felt like something best left for a different book.

DRAFT THREE—THE TWIN NOVELS

After reading over the expectations for the Confirmation Panel (paying particular attention to the part about *innovation*) I was jolted with sudden and intense 'creativity'...

In the month before the panel, I decided (unwisely, as it turns out) to attempt an avant-garde approach and deconstruct the novel so I would instead have two connected (twin) novels that took place during the same year—one from Siobhan's perspective and one from Andie's. I rationalised that this would elevate the upstairs/downstairs approach to another, more drastic level and highlight the fact that a year in an institution could have a thousand different stories, each unfolding parallel to one another. I envisioned a boxed set of two books, perhaps written front to back or in another creative format that allowed the reader to experience things in a more disjointed way, always filling in the blanks.

The one main problem that I didn't have time to solve before the panel was the question of narrative tension: how could I sustain sufficient surprise and mystery in the second novel after

someone had read the first? Would I need to suggest a reading order, or could I leave it up to the reader?

If I had considered this technique at the beginning, before the lives of the two main characters became so intertwined, it might have worked better—but because they were so involved in each other's lives, it became difficult to separate out the stories sufficiently to make the technique work.

In the end, the Panel considered that the narrative arc of the story would be too difficult to sustain and suggested interweaving them again.

So, after much back-and-forth with the text, I made some major structural decisions and ended up with one novel, two protagonists, and a name change. I also realised that a major theme was emerging that I had not anticipated at the beginning of the process but which was starting to take over the book: sex in the asylum.

CHAPTER FIVE: SEX AND SELFHOOD

Research Question 6: How is sex in large institutions a demonstration of a subversion of authority, an assertion of power, or an expression of self?

You remember coming out to your grandparents in university—explaining a few days before coming home for the holiday that you'd be bringing someone new. Your grandmother already knew, of course, long before you did—and now, in between bites of toast and coffee, tells you mildly, "Fine, dear. But I just don't want to see you in a parade on TV, waving your panties."

*No clutching of pearls. No threats of being ousted from the family—disowned, shunned. This is Canada in the 2000s, and your grandparents have lived through enough history so as really not to bat an eye upon discovering that their eldest grandchild is a lesbian. Born in 1929 and 1930, their experience of queer identity spans many more decades than the Patience and Sarah, followed by the 80s G.R.I.D. hysteria (Miller, 1969). They lived full lives before the advent of Pride parades and escalation of vitriolic partisan politics where the Bible was used to bludgeon people into heteronormativity. Hell, maybe they even came across some pictures like you saw in *The Invisibles*—taken during their parents' era, and their grandparents' (Lifshitz, 2013). Homosexuality isn't new, but you're starting to suspect that the hatred might be worse now than one hundred years ago.*

You remember finding friends from high school on social media, years later—girls you hung out with in the common room or on weekends. Girls who weren't allowed to date, or had no interest. Girls who were studious like you. You're shocked to find out that the South African beauty has married a woman in the UK. The one who came out in final year is presumably still gay but is now married to a man, thanks to her strict Jewish family. Your former head girl is living in a gender-fluid role and has joined a commune. You weren't gay in high school either, so maybe they've had the same revelation about you over the years, creeping Facebook.

And you wonder, suddenly, how you found each other and connected, and stayed friends, when the one thing that tied you together was never said aloud? If the myth of Gaydar is perhaps not a myth at all. If it's just another way of saying something you already know it instinctually—some people just vibe queer.

The characters in your book will find each other too—the marginalised within the marginalised. They will form a merry sapphic bande. Because they would have, of course.

SEX IN THE TUNNELS:

Sex happens everywhere in Avonhurst, as it did throughout the institutions on which it was based. Although sex was the very thing the inmates were locked up to prevent—the very thing that had brought many of them to the institution in the first place—still, people were able to achieve it on the inside.

Fel and John find a secret place under the stage.

Staff find secret places in the tunnels.

And somehow, even under the watchful eye of the staff at the infirmary, Marnie Lavimodiere is raped by another inmate and impregnated.

In 2006, a patient in the UK requiring total care was impregnated in a nursing home and her rape was only discovered when she was more than six months' pregnant (Narain, 2006). A similar incident occurred in Arizona in 2018 to a patient who had been comatose for a decade (Sidner & Allen, 2019). The idea that these sexual acts had occurred to people who were so severely disabled struck a chord with me, because not only could the sexual act not possibly be consensual—but it also crossed another serious boundary, violating people who were more vulnerable than any other in society.

Researchers Groth, Burgess and Holmstrom (1977) published a study entitled "Rape: power, anger and sexuality", in which they ranked accounts of rape from 133 offenders and 92 victims.

Accounts from both offenders and victims of what occurs during a rape suggest that issues of power, anger, and sexuality are important in understanding the rapist's behavior. All three issues seem to operate in every rape, but the proportion varies and one issue seems to dominate in each instance. The authors [. . .] found that the offenses could be categorized as power rape (sexuality used primarily to express power) or anger rape (use of sexuality to express anger). There were no rapes in which sex was the dominant issue; sexuality was always in the service of other, nonsexual needs.

This caused me to wonder—what kind of person would harbour such anger, or need to assert power over someone so disabled that they couldn't move unassisted?

Staff members, as Goffman discusses, were always in a clear position of power, which was necessary to maintain order in the wards (p. 52). This inevitably led to abuses of that power, by both men and women. It's evident from the plethora of testimony from former residents that sexual abuse was a near-daily occurrence in institutions like Avonhurst. As Steve Reh, a former resident of Southwestern Regional Centre near Windsor, Ontario, recalls:

A morning wake-up call could be a cold bucket of water splashed in your face [...] and brutal beatings and electric shocks were common during the day. And when you went to bed – some nights without dinner – you found you weren't always alone under your blanket [...] as that was often the time when sexual abusers would strike (Wright, 2013).

But the topic of sexuality in institutions goes much further than the abuse of the vulnerable by the powerful. There is also the issue of the abuse of the vulnerable by the vulnerable. This was a realisation that eventually informed the plot line of Marnie being raped by another inmate.

As also highlighted in the case of the character Bernard Williams, boys who were forbidden from interacting with girls, and also from seeking any sort of auto-gratification, often abused younger, or weaker boys on their ward (Wheatley, p. 266-67). So, given the choice between abusing a younger boy or abusing a low-grade girl, Alistair, Fel's brother and Marnie's rapist, chooses the latter.

As was common at the time, the female population bore the brunt of the sexual abuse in ways the male population did not: pregnancy, tubal ligation (or salpingectomy), custodial care, and in Marnie's case, death.

Sterilisation

Fel—a young 'high-grade moron' would have been the ideal candidate for sterilisation had she lived in another part of Canada, or anywhere in the United States during the 1920s. As it was, because this story was based in Ontario, I had to research further about the official versus unofficial occurrences of covert salpingectomies. Officially, Ontario did not perform systematic sterilisation, but it became obvious through the literature that it was entirely plausible that individuals could indeed have been sterilised in an Ontario institution.

Because this practice is so much part of the history of Eugenics, particularly in neighbouring provinces, the spectre of the practice would have loomed large at all North American institutions, even those who didn't officially engage, so I felt strongly that sterilisation should be represented in the story—in a way that really reflected the attitude of the time.

For Siobhan, who would have been performing the surgery, this actually wasn't a matter of cold-hearted prejudice against people with disabilities. This was an act of compassion. The better option, when faced with a lifetime in an institution, was to sterilise the patient so she could leave, go to a work placement, and live as normal a life as possible without violating the aim of the eugenics movement: to stop the breeding of the 'unfit' and ensure the proliferation of 'superior stock.'

To understand the eugenics movement better, I went down another rabbit hole of research, and was perhaps naively surprised by the extent to which it had taken hold in Canada. Of course, government schooling heavily emphasizes the role of Hitler and Germany in WWII, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing and sterilisation—but I had never been educated on the roots of eugenics in North America, nor the extent to which this shaped Canada's cultural past: the installation of the Residential Schools for Indigenous youth, and the vast colonies for people with developmental disabilities—not to mention the mental hospitals, which served a different population (McLaren, 2014; Black, 2003).

In the late 1920s in Ontario, changes in institutional care came into effect that supported more integration of 'high-grade morons' into the work force (Huronian Letters, 1927). Through supervision into a sort of halfway house, patients from the institution (Huronian) would be given work placements and taught domestic science as an avenue toward life in paid domestic service. For Fel, a young woman in custodial care with no outside family interested in supporting her, this may have been her only route out of the asylum.

Choosing to develop this storyline also created a method of contrast I was keen to pursue. The institution and the degree of institutionalisation of the inmates could only be measured against a control—normal life. The backdrop of Toronto in the 1920s with its lights and noises and dropped hemlines provided a stark contrast to the life inside Avonhurst and allowed the reader to see Fel's life from a different perspective: not immersed in it, as the reader is for most of the novel, but as an outsider when Fel goes to the Haven and realises how far removed Avonhurst really is from the outside world.

Another scene when Siobhan travels to the city demonstrates what normal life would have been like for her, as a doctor and a member of high society in Toronto, and also provides an intimate look at her past relationship with Lillian—another society woman.

Queer Identity in 1927

This relationship between Lillian and Siobhan is quite different from the relationship Siobhan has with Sera—which is charged with a sexual undercurrent, but moreover, a kinship and a shared understanding of what it meant to be a sapphist in the 1920s. Because Sera lives with Charlotte and has been subjected to the consequences of that relationship—being evicted from the convent for having a 'particular friend', being forced to take on the traditionally masculine role of wage-earning, even as she works in the exclusively female field of midwifery, facing roadblocks in her profession and personal life—she is circumspect, discreet, and even secretive.

Siobhan's relationship with Lillian is more flagrant, even including boudoir photographs as evidence of their long-term affair. Lillian almost demands a more open attitude from Sera about her situation—though only when they are ostensibly alone. Contrary to what might be expected from the time period, and as seen in *The Invisibles: Vintage Portraits of Love and Pride*, homosexual relationships of the time were often documented, depicting the relationships with surprising candidness (Lifshitz, 2013).

Many of the lead characters identify as queer in some way: Sera is entirely lesbian; Siobhan is married to a man but has had relationships with both men and women; Fel is just beginning to discover her own sexuality and isn't really committed either way. Just as *Lesbian Nuns, Breaking Silence* (Manahan & Curb, 1985) shone a light on the tendency of lesbians to congregate in convents, *Take this Message to the Infants' Ward* attempts to highlight a full spectrum of sexual behaviour, because this is representative of real life—and in a way that contributes to well-rounded characters with many different aspects and traits, queer-identity being just one of the many, and not even the most obvious.

For Fel, her first sexual experience is incestual and shrouded in such severe shame and embarrassment that it causes her to stop speaking. Put into an institution in which sex is forbidden and even punished severely means that all sexual encounters—even solo ones—must be done in hiding. Later, her sexual encounter with John begins to open up her world to the

possibility of sex being an enjoyable experience, though still totally secret, and still forbidden. Later, when she meets Florence, her roommate at her placement outside Avonhurst, she has her first sexual encounter with a girl—but this has more to do with Florence's experience in the manipulation of their employer's percussor than it does with Fel's queer tendencies—and in the end, it's really about Fel taking control of her own sexuality and recapturing her voice.

Sex, it seems, in a place designed to prevent sexual activity between people, must have been the ultimate subversion of authority and reclaiming of the self.

CONCLUSION:

Now that the novel is finally finished, the words of Pierre Berton, the journalist who investigated the Orillia Asylum years after the novel ended, take on a new resonance—because he was talking about what would happen to these characters after the final pages...

Remember this: After Hitler fell, and the horrors of the slave camps were exposed, many Germans excused themselves because they said they did not know what went on behind those walls: no one had told them. Well, you have been told about Orillia (1960; 2013).

The Huronia Regional Centre would stay open for another fifty years after this damning report was published in newspapers across Canada. Thousands of children would grow up in Huronia and other institutions like it. Some would spend their whole lives there. The cast of fictional characters represents, and is based upon, a real staff complement of the time—and each area of the Avonhurst campus was modelled after campuses that actually existed. Yet, so many voices are left unheard.

This novel lends a voice to a character who represents thousands of young girls just like her who faced the option of sterilisation or incarceration—and who were rendered mute through the decisions enacted on their behalf. This is a rare thing to find in literature—and I am proud of Fel's existence. And yet, being able to focus only *one* cross-section of *one* life during *one* year at *one* institution seems so minor an accomplishment.

Still, every time I was tempted to give up this project and move on to something easier, I would remember that there is no collection of books like this that people could read instead. Anybody who was of age to remember the 1920s is nearing one hundred years old and we will soon lose their recollections as well. There are only the records at the Archives, a few texts, and this novel.

Taking on this subject, this history which was not my own, was a daunting task. The subject matter was heavy; the research was difficult to access; the writing process was often a struggle. Even writing a traditional critical essay was not enough to access the heart of this research, which required the mix of academic focus and affective prose. History happened

between the walls of these massive institutions and the reader must be submerged in it to understand it.

From start to finish, *Take This Message to the Infants' Ward* had a difficult birth. It has included four drafts, underpinned with research hours equal to writing hours, and has been reworked, scrapped, then picked back up, edited, polished, and held out for critique at every juncture. No sentence has been left unexamined.

I often wonder if I've even made a dent in revealing some of the vast history I've read about. If people will relate to the characters and the story enough to pass the book from hand to hand with passages underlined, or notes stuck to the front: *read this!* If anyone will notice it.

One hundred and sixty years have passed since Huronia opened. Only ten years have passed since it closed. Everyone who will read this book was alive during the tenure of an institution like this, within driving distance of their homes—most completely unaware, except for some vague rumours, or half-whispered family secrets.

It has been said that those who are ignorant of the past are doomed to repeat it, and with the most vulnerable members of our society, we cannot afford to repeat the past. But neither can we afford not to learn from, and improve upon, our current situation. Institutions like Avonhurst, now nearly extinct in Canada, provided something that is now lacking entirely for parents of severely disabled children: an option for mothers and fathers who felt they could not cope with the realities of raising a child with extreme physical, emotional, and intellectual deficits, and who required round-the-clock care. The move to community-based programmes has placed the burden of care back on the shoulders of parents with very few options to relieve themselves of it.

The content of this thesis demonstrates the historical context of our past ideas and how we as a society have regarded developmental disability. This immersion allows us to also revisit our historical context and redefine our ideas, perhaps finding a more balanced view.

Take This Message to the Infants' Ward reflects upon a long period in Canada's history when people were locked away in institutions and removed from society—but it also offers the reader a chance to re-examine that past with more complex information, creating a deeper understanding of the complicated factors at play. We often look back upon our country's history with condemnation and disbelief—how could our parents, our grandparents, allow such atrocities as the Holocaust and the Eugenics movement to bubble right beneath them? But as we learn

through being immersed in this historical context and environment, these societal ideologies had many complex branches.

My original contribution to the world of literature is a book that will provide a window into the secret lives of these institutions. The reflective essay, a hybrid of affective prose and academic style, aims to demonstrate the result of practice-based research but also its effect on the reader. In the end, I've written a book that gives back a voice to the people who lost theirs.

As writers we have to be the other – without it we would have no literature, no great stories, no murder mysteries, no great romances, no historical novels, no science fiction, no fantasy – but when we become the other we need always to act with respect and recognise the value of what we discover, show by our attitudes and our acknowledgements that we aren't just appropriating but are seeking to understand (de Waal, 2018).

My objective is that readers will not only understand this history but *experience* it. That through these pages, the readers will smell the wards, feel the drafts through the windows, hear the cries of the patients in straightjackets and the clacking of nurses' heels on the wooden floors. I hope they will feel immersed in the setting—smelling the food, hearing the Christmas concerts, tasting the pumpkin tarts, witnessing the seizures, the fevers. And after it's done, I want them to understand and accept this—own this—as part of our country's history. Above all, I want to humanise the people of all the Avonhursts in Canada and to create an unshakable empathy in the reader for both the staff and the inmates, allowing that understanding to carry forward into our present understanding of our past.

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APPENDICES

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Protagonists:

Andria Felwyn (Moron, High-Grade)

Siobhan Rian (Assistant Physician)

MEDICAL STAFF:

Assistant Superintendent & Medical Director— Dr. Benjamin McHugh

Senior Assistant Physician, Director of Male Service and Surgeon—Dr. Morris Braithwaite

Assistant Physician—Dr. Clarence Wright

NURSING STAFF:

Superintendent of Nurses (Matron): Phyllis Miller

Nursing Supervisors

-Nurse Patricia Stokes (Junior, Female)

Nurses:

-Nurse (Pisspot) Rolands, (Junior Idiots)

-Nurse Evans (Pavilion)

-Nurse Joseph (Infirmary)

-Nurse Archibald (Senior Idiot Girls)

-Nurse Baker (Elderly)

-Nurse Webb (Pavilion)

-Nurse Baird (Cottage J)

-Nurse Miller (Junior Idiots)

-Nurse Annette (Junior Idiots)

NURSE ATTENDANTS

Seraphine Street (Attendant, Midwife)

-Adeline Bracey

ATTENDANTS

August (One-arm)

Jerome Robinson

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PATIENTS

Marnie Lavimodiere (Idiots, Dormitory Tasks)
Susan McKay (Pavilion)
Anna-May Smith (Pavilion)
John McNabb (Moron, Office Help)
Bernard Williams (Imbeciles)

ADMINISTRATIVE, ACADEMIC, GROUNDS

PSYCHOLOGY & EDUCATION

Consultant in Psychology: Dr. William (Billy) Sandford
Psychological intern/s (2) Paul Allen & Francis Powell
School Principal: Miss Hazel Edwards
Psychometrist/Secretary Eugenia Jenkins

ACADEMIC SCHOOL

Lower:

Sense Training—Miss Rosie Tyndall
Kindergarten—Miss Marian Rampton
Muscular Co-ordination—Mr. Antonio Gottardo
Language—Miss Madeline Nickel
Physical Training—Mr. Jacques Tremblay

Upper School:

English—Miss Bertha Hicks
Spelling—Miss Josephine Graham, Miss Lucille Friend
Arithmetic (2) Miss Caroline Brophy
Social Science & Nature Study—Miss Wilma Berka
Music—Miss Stella Quirt
Sewing—Miss Ella Wentworth
Household Science—Miss (2) Carrie Winterbottom
Manual Training—Mr. Gordon Brazier
Physical Training—Mr. Frederick Gladman

TRADE SCHOOL

Sewing—Miss. Vera Allinson
Tailoring—Mr. Cecil Hansen
Shoemaking—Mr. T. Nguyen
Painting—Mr. Virgil Thompson

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Landscape Gardening—Mr. Alvin Dodds

TRADES

Mason: Mr White

Plumber: Mr. Campbell

Electrician: Mr. Baker

Painter: Mr. Sanchez

Carpenter: Mr. Ortiz

Farmer: Mr. Sullivan

-Dairymen and assistant: Mr. King and Joseph Brown (inmate)

-Gardener and assistant: Mr. Harris and Kenneth Peterson (inmate)

-Landscape gardener: Mr. Floyd Lee and Oscar Lopez (inmate)

-Butcher: Mr. Thomas Richards and Eugene Murphy (inmate)

-Poultryman: Mr. Anthony Smith and Daniel Taylor (inmate)

-Teamster/s Leonard Martin (inmate)

Laundryman

Head Laundress (3 assistants)

Storekeeper (two assistants)

-reception, commissary

-recording equipment/replacement

-supervision of material output from industrial classes

DEMOGRAPHICS, INMATES: 1927

Age	Male	Female	Total
0-5	5	2	7
5-10	79	46	125
10-15	160	92	252
15-20	139	105	244
20-25	93	70	163
25-35	137	129	266
35-45	63	86	149
45-55	47	63	110
55-65	18	30	48
65-75	10	12	22
	751	635	1386

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MALE WARDS

Cottage D (Children's Dorm Boys): 79

Cottage H: Boys 10-15

-Idiots (main floor)

-Imbeciles (middle floor)

+Punishment Rooms

The Lodge: Boys 15-20

Cottage C : Young Men + Farm boys (20)

(Farm): Farm Hands

Cottage A: Men (20-35)

Cottage B: Elderly Male (bottom floor); men (top two floors)

FEMALE WARDS

Wing E (Infants) – Breezeway off Administration Building

Cottage L: Children's Dorm – Girls 5-10

Cottage G: Girls aged 10-15

-Idiots, Imbeciles

+Punishment Rooms

Pavilion (40), Moron Girls, aged 15-20 (four per room, ten rooms per ward)

Mothers Ward

Cottage M: Women

Cottage K: Elderly Female

+ Morgue (below)